

The Rancher and The Bad Girl

By

Kira Barcelo

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Chapter One

About the only thing he knew about Melanie Cranford was that she was pretty—if the picture in the magazine advertisement, in fact, was to be believed. Reeve Larson wasn't certain what was guaranteed in those ads, including the young lady's willingness to make her home with him on his ranch, thousands of miles away from everything she knew.

She was pretty... and from Maryland. One of those Eastern women, and from Baltimore, a city, no less. He recalled as he hopped off his wagon that she was twenty-three years old. He was thirty-two, but a woman who hadn't found a husband by her age gave him pause.

Usually, more often than not, that woman could be counted on to be trouble. Particularly a good-looking one like that.

Don't be so quick to write the girl off. Mae's words echoed in his head like a child's game chant. *I'm older and wise than you are, Reeve Larson. You might find your one true love stepping off that train.*

Reeve grinned and stepped onto the train platform. That advice coming from a lady who claimed not to believe in, as she said, romance and all those other fairytales. Evidently, she did believe in it, at least a small sliver of it, when it came to her friend, the young rancher, finding a suitable wife.

The train, having traveled from the Northeastern half of the country, was due to come in at any minute. That didn't matter. Everybody in Garner Falls knew the trains were notoriously late, especially, oddly enough, those delivering mail order brides.

He didn't like having his time wasted, and he liked it even less when he had work to do. Albeit, that was always. When *didn't* Reeve have work to do?

But there was more than that going on. He was functioning on a very small amount of sleep and almost as much food, since he'd barely slept or eaten in the past day or so. With the minutes ticking closer to Melanie's arrival, he felt more and more jittery, like a kid looking forward to getting a present.

From a distance, he heard the familiar wail of an approaching train. The sound tugged a deep breath out of him, the pretense of being calm and cool, despite the agitated rhythm of his heart.

What are you getting so excited about, he chided himself.

Melanie Cranford was a woman. Just a woman. He'd paid for her to come all that way. He'd as good as purchased her from that ad. She knew he had land and a ranch to run. She was coming to find a husband and a home. It was a business arrangement, nothing more.

Still, he found himself adjusting his hat on his head, and fixing the collar of his checkered shirt. Reeve looked down at his boots, which he'd cleaned some and polished the best he could.

Presentable, I suppose. Not great, but he'd make a good impression. Or so he hoped.

She had to make a good impression on him, as well. Didn't she? He could very well find her to be ornery and impossible, at which point he would send her on the first train headed right back to her hometown, let her family deal with her.

Or... the woman who stepped off that train could turn out to be a good wife. They would both find out soon enough.

Watching the train slow down along its tracks, chugging and spewing out puffs of white smoke, he licked his lips. The Montana sun sure was beating down that afternoon, hotter than usual for a spring day. Reeve was looking forward to the end of the day, to the cool of the evening, and to sleeping next to the soft, warm body of a woman.

Something that wouldn't be happening right away, not until after the wedding. *If* there was one. It wouldn't be proper until he put a ring on the lady's finger and she promised to love and obey, and all that.

Both men and women stepped down from the train once it came to a grinding stop. Reeve had noticed a slow but steady influx of women coming to Garner Falls. The ranchers, sheepherders, farmers, and the men employed by them all, had begun bringing prospective brides in from the east, both the Northern and Southern states. Basically, wherever there were available females, unlike Garner Falls, which had a sparse population of women. It seemed the majority of them worked for Mae.

Maybe she'd decided against coming. Maybe, at the last moment, Melanie had chosen to stay in Baltimore. Occasionally, that happened, or so he'd heard. Fear of the unknown, of traveling thousands of miles to the West—a world unto itself—kept some women from venturing out and keeping their end of the bargain. Reeve swallowed, tasting dust and grime off the train and his own impending disappointment.

But then his bride appeared. Reeve blinked, asking himself if that was the same girl, but sure enough, that was. The picture published in the ad hadn't done her justice. Wearing a dress the palest shade of pink, she looked daintier and more petite than he'd pictured her. Her blondish-brown hair peeked out from under her bonnet and her mouth was pert, the lips full.

The tightening in his belly was back. So was his dry throat, back with a vengeance. Squaring his shoulders, he approached his prospective bride.

"I think you're looking for me." He was making a statement, not posing a question. And he'd asked it brusquely, just so he would appear to her in control of himself, courteous but stern.

All that bravado nearly flew out the window when she whirled around and faced him. Those greenish-hazel eyes made a beeline to meet his gaze.

"Reeve Larson?" she asked.

Was *that* her voice? He'd expected something chirpier coming from that slender, little woman, rather than the smoky, lilting voice that reminded him again of his bedroom.

"Yep. That's me. And you're Melanie Cranford." He allowed himself a half smile, remembering his manners and respectfully removing his hat. "Nice to have you home."

"Thank you. Nice to *be* home."

Her smile seemed sincere enough. He noticed her stare raked over him from head to foot. Was she inspecting him? As discreetly as possible, he also permitted himself to take in the view, as much as he could fit into that stolen moment, before he reached for her bag.

"I'll take that. That all you have, Melanie?"

"That's it. I didn't bring very much with me."

"Oh. Well, all right. Come this way, with me."

Turning on his heel, Reeve replaced his hat onto his head and led the way stiffly through the crowd. Now what was that unwritten list Mae had given him again? Those

things he could bring up to converse with his betrothed? Lord knows he wasn't comfortable with casual chatter. What could a man talk about with a woman he'd just met?

"So how was your trip from Maryland?" That seemed like a good conversation-starter.

"Oh, not too bad." She smiled up at him shyly. "I never traveled out of Baltimore, so this is as far as I've ever been."

"Uh, well. Farthest I've ever been is when I came here from Texas."

"For land out here?"

"For land. For cattle. I could've stayed in Texas for those things, but I also just wanted to come out here, too, mostly." The gal was traveling light. He hoisted her bag effortlessly into the rear of the wagon. "Taking you to Mae's."

"Mae's?"

"Yes. Good lady. She has some spare rooms over the saloon. I paid her for the next couple of days, so it's already taken care of." He frowned at the surprised expression on her face.

"I'm not staying with you?" That smoky voice suddenly sounded much smaller.

"Our wedding is on Saturday. Wouldn't be proper for you to stay with me right now." His voice had trailed off. As a lady, shouldn't she have known that?

"That's true. You're right." Melanie didn't sound too convinced of her own words.

"Gives me time to court you, too. Not proper-like, but we have two days." Hooking his thumbs in his belt, he added, "And if you like me enough then, I can make you my wife. Got the preacher all ready to go."

"Well... good. I..." she looked down at her shoes. "I like you enough already, Reeve."

Well, this is going to be some adventure! He suppressed a chuckle. "I like you enough, too. But we need to do this right." Reeve bent slightly, closer to her, his voice a whisper.

"You'll be safe at Mae's, Melanie. I wouldn't let you stay anywhere where you'd be endangered. If I was taught anything, it was how to treat a lady."

Melanie nodded. "All right, Reeve."

That wasn't so bad after all, he told himself. A minor riff, and probably something he should have made clear. He helped her onto the wagon before loosening the horse's reins from the post, and then climbed aboard beside her.

She liked him well enough. She'd said so. That coaxed a smile from him.

"I'll take you by later to see your new home," he promised. "Thought I'd let you get settled in your room. Rest up after your long trip."

"I'd like that."

* * * * *

Melanie primly folded her hands on her lap. Was she being sweet enough? Docile enough? Just the right amount of honey in her smile?

She was worrying—actually worried for some time—for nothing. Reeve Larson didn't suspect a thing, nor did he have any cause to believe she wasn't exactly the woman he'd bargained for when he agreed to pay her expenses to come from Maryland. He had no way of knowing the gritty truth about her.

And she aimed to keep it that way.

Although she had to admit, the stay with the saloonkeeper had thrown her for a loop. Even with that, was this Mae person a fortuneteller? Unless she was, she wouldn't know the truth, either. Melanie's secret was safe.

She was free to start her new life. Really, she wasn't hurting anyone. As long as she stuck to her story, no one would ever find out, and that included her husband-to-be.

Her very handsome husband-to-be. What a pleasant surprise! She'd expected some old, wrinkly, cranky, bearded cowboy. What had been waiting for her instead was this tall, dark, and attractive cowboy.

Who also didn't talk much and came across as rather stern and brooding. Yet she was sure she could get him to warm up to her.

"Here we are, wife. Well...." Laughing softly, Reeve brought the horse to a halt. "*Future* wife. Let's go in so you can meet Mae."

Do I have to? Melanie wanted so badly to demand he take her to the ranch instead. She looked at the saloon as he helped her down from the wagon, masking her sullen look with a forced smile.

If she complained, she would be perceived as difficult and whining, both perfectly good reasons for him to send her packing. She knew better than that. She knew she couldn't ever go back to Maryland. A naughty and disobedient wife wasn't worth her weight in gold

to a rancher. Besides, one of the girls back east had warned her about cowboys spanking their willful and misbehaving wives.

Melanie had broken into laughter when Glenda told her that. That had prompted Glenda to tell her that she wouldn't find it the least bit funny when she found her bottom being bared and soundly paddled by one of those strict cowboys.

Hurrying to keep up with the strides of Reeve's long legs, she wondered if he subscribed to that view. Just the thought of being spanked by those big hands made her tremble. She'd never been spanked, not even as a child, though more recently she had endured much more after her family had lost everything.

For now, she couldn't dwell on the past. The only thing that mattered was surviving. Going on with her life, which thanks to her husband-to-be, had brought her to a new place and new adventures.

None of which would be starting, unfortunately, until after their wedding. She tried to hide her chagrin as he held one of the swinging wooden doors open for her and they walked straight into a whiskey-scented saloon.

A woman in her early fifties stood behind the bar. A "painted woman" her father would have called her... not that Melanie was in any position to judge. It was easy to see that this painted woman had been a beauty in her youth. That is, several years and about thirty pounds ago.

She wasn't just a saloon owner. Melanie knew what she was. She resisted the urge to stamp her foot and demand that Reeve take her home instead. To the ranch, with him, where she belonged.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Larson!" The buxom blonde leaned across the counter to kiss his cheek. "And this must be your bride. They sure do make 'em pretty out there in the city."

At the end of the bar sat a girl of no older than twenty or so. Skinny. Sort of pretty. She eyed Melanie curiously. Another painted lady, only younger.

That left no doubt in Melanie's mind. Mae was in fact running a bordello.

What if he's leaving you here? The thought terrified her, despite the forced smile she gave the madam. Would he do that? Pay her way from home just to hand her over to a bordello?

"You take good care of her for me now, Mae," Reeve said, leaning against the bar with his arm on the counter.

"You know I will, Reeve, honey." Mae turned to Melanie. "You see your ranch yet, Miss Melanie?"

"No, not yet." She smiled as demurely as possible.

"Tonight. I'm coming back for her tonight. We'll be having dinner. She'll get to see her new home then," he explained. "But we won't take up a lot of your time, Mae."

"Oh, now, honey, I always got time for a gentleman. You know that." She winked saucily at him.

Really, now? Didn't she realize she was an old woman of fifty or more? Melanie bit back a retort.

Mae motioned to the skinny whore who'd been looking on. "Janie, would you be a good girl and take Reeve's bride to her room? We're a long way from Maryland and I'm sure she'd like to rest."

"Sure will, ma'am." Grinning shyly, Janie hopped off her stool and hooked her arm through Melanie's. "This way."

Please don't leave me here, she wanted to cry and plead. She'd had her fill of people like Mae and Janie and places like that.

Looking down at her was that handsome face. The tender, kind expression in those eyes comforted her.

"You rest, all right?" He spoke softly. "And I'll be back tonight for you at seven for supper."

Miles and miles away from home. Not a soul there in that town, other than Reeve Larson, to depend on. She had no choice but to trust him.

"Fine. I'll see you tonight," she agreed reluctantly.

* * * * *

"This is the biggest room in the house, the one Mae keeps for guests and friends. Bigger than the ones us girls use. I love this bed, don't you?"

Janie certainly was a chatty little thing. She also seemed pleased with the fact that Mae had entrusted her with the task of showing Reeve Larson's bride to her room.

Melanie was polite but tired. Sighing, she looked out through the window to the street below. People were walking along the boardwalk and men rode by on horseback or on wagons, like the one Reeve had brought with him.

"It's very nice," she murmured. "I think I'm going to take a nap."

"Are you hungry, too? Because Mae said she'd also send up something for you to eat, if you want."

"Maybe in a little while."

Janie folded her hands behind her back and rocked her weight from foot to foot. "So you're from Baltimore?"

"Yes, that's right."

"That's the city." The girl sounded proud of herself for knowing that.

"Right again. Ever been there, Janie?"

"Never. Never been nowhere outside of here and Texas. Ever been to the ocean?"

Obviously, this young painted lady wanted to talk. Warily, Melanie sat herself on the bed and dabbed at her neck with a handkerchief.

"Yes. It's beautiful," she replied.

"I've never been to the ocean. But I'd love to see it someday. You're very lucky to be marrying Mr. Larson. He's a good man. I don't know him, personally, but Mae always talks nice about him." Janie also sat on the bed, tugging a piece of candy from her skirt pocket.

"Want a piece?"

"No, thank you."

"One of the men from Mr. Larson's ranch gave it to me. Arnie always brings me candy." Without breaking off a piece, she stuck the top of the stick into her mouth.

"Is Reeve's ranch far from here?" Melanie asked.

"Not too far, I don't think. Never been there, neither. Arnie says it's big, though. He's the boy who brings me candy. He bought me this, too." Removing the candy from her lips, Janie displayed a necklace with a locket. "Pretty, isn't it?"

"Very pretty."

"I think so, too. It ain't real, but Arnie gave it to me, so I always wear it. He's nicer than a lot of men. Not that Mae would ever let anybody hurt us, but you know." Janie licked

her sticky lips, then inserted the candy back into her mouth and flounced off the bed. "I'd better let you rest. Don't want to get in trouble, either, in case Mae needs me."

Melanie smiled with relief. "Oh, well, if you must be going anyway...."

"I do. But I'll be back to check on you later. If you decide before that you do want something to eat, you know where to find me."

"Thank you, Janie. That's very nice of you."

Finally, she was able to close the door behind the young prostitute. Melanie leaned with her back against the door before tossing herself onto the bed, her skirt and underskirts rustling against the mattress. She rested for a few moments before pulling a blank, folded piece of paper from her travel bag. On the table near the window was set a plume, the tip tucked into an ink well. She would nap, but now that she had some time to herself, she quickly composed the letter she had been meaning to write.

June 2, 1871

My dear sister, Olivia,

I wanted you to know I arrived here in Garner Falls safely. As promised, Mr. Larson met me at the train. For propriety's sake, I will be staying with a lady friend of his for the next two days. We will be wed this Saturday.

"We will be wed this Saturday," she said that statement out loud.

Wed. She would be married. A bride. A wife. Her husband-to-be believed she was twenty-three. In actuality, she was twenty-six. Something else to hide, though it was minor in comparison to other things. Three silly, stupid years. Twenty-three just seemed to her, at least at the time, to make her more desirable and less problematic than an unmarried woman closer to thirty. So on Saturday, she would be taken as a wife by a man to whom she was lying to about her age.

And something that was nowhere near as trivial as that. On the other hand, why was she concerned about it? He wouldn't find out. There was no possible way he would find out. She was very, very sure of that.

Still, it was a *lie*. For those moments, she dwelled on the fact that Reeve was marrying a woman that she was portraying, like an actress, rather than the person she truly was. Her stomach tightened uncomfortably.

Melanie dipped the plume's tip into the well and, taking a deep breath, resolutely continued composing her letter.

So, my sweet sister, please don't worry about me anymore. You have enough to worry about right now. I don't know when I'll see you again, but I hope it will be sometime in this lifetime. Please know that I am excited and I am really looking forward to starting my new life with this man who is going to be my husband. He's much more handsome than I thought he would be. Already, I've been told he's a good man. Something in my heart tells me he is, too. He's trying to guard my reputation by not having me stay with him until we are married. There's something sweet and gentle in his eyes that I haven't seen in any man in a long time.

And he doesn't know about my life back there in Baltimore, the sort of woman that I was. If I can help it, he will never know. He doesn't love me right now—I would be silly to think that he does—but if Reeve does come to love me, it will be the Melanie Cranford that I want him to see.

I hope to write again after the wedding. Be patient with me, because I may be very busy with my wifely duties, and I can only imagine the challenges waiting for me on a ranch! Please send me a letter when you can.

All my love and devotion,

Melanie

She didn't know when, or if, she would ever see her older sister, Olivia, again. Melanie found an envelope in the desk, blinked back tears as she folded and inserted the letter, and then wrote her sister's address on the front. She lit the candle on the desk to seal the envelope shut with the melting wax.

After her nap, she would return to the saloon and ask Mae if she would see to it that the letter reached the mail carriers. Back in Baltimore, there were mail collection boxes.

She had no idea how things worked there in Garner Falls. For now, so tired from the train ride that her body ached, she eased herself back onto the mattress.

He's much more handsome than I thought he would be. Already, I've been told he's a good man. Something in my heart tells me he is, too.

Melanie smiled. Truth be told, her blood quickened when she thought about seeing Reeve again that evening. Seven o'clock couldn't come soon enough for her. Even with her blood quickening from the excitement, she fell into a deep and luxurious sleep as soon as her head hit that soft pillow.