

WE DO NOT SUIT



EMMA GREENFIELD

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



A city gentleman of good character, aged 29, desires a charming, pretty lady between the ages of 18 and 22 to immediately marry and join him on his journey westward. Must be small of stature, no more than 5'2", unfearful of the traveling lifestyle, inclined towards adventure and be able to cook over a fire. Of obedient nature a must. Address Eli Todd Post Office D, Chicago.

Lacy realized how desperate she was when she sat back to think about the last advertisement she'd just read three times. That she was small and twenty years old meant she met part of the description, but the city gentleman was looking for a pretty, charming, and obedient lady, which she was not. It spoke to how badly she wanted a solution to her problems that she was wondering how she could make herself pretty. Perhaps he didn't really mean that part, perhaps he would overlook her badly cropped hair, tan skin, and ordinary face. After all, everyone wanted to marry a handsome or pretty spouse, but not everyone got what they wanted. Plenty of people had to settle. Would city gentleman Eli settle for her?

She read through the rest of the marriage ads but saw none that

fit her. She needed a man who was in Chicago, not a fellow who lived in the west already. A man in Chicago could provide her with a meal *now*, not sometime later when he received her telegram. She sat on the stoop of a store while the city passed in front of her, ignoring the girl who was dressed as a boy and looking more like an urchin than anything else. She touched her hair, but it had still not grown back since the last time she'd checked. How long did it take hair to grow? When would she get her long hair back? It had taken ten years to grow it out after it had been shaved at the orphanage when an outbreak of lice got all the children looking like bald little dolls. She didn't want to wait ten years.

She shook the newspaper and stared at it intently, but no other ad suited just for her miraculously appeared. She carefully tore out Eli's ad, then folded the newspaper and stuffed it down her shirt. She'd need it for insulation if it got cold again tonight.



ELI TODD TOOK the letter from the runner boy and tipped him half a penny. He shut the front door and walked back to his study before looking at the letter's front. The writing was elegant and had no return address. He slid his letter opener along its edge, then plucked out the note.

When he realized it was a response to his advertisement, he checked over his shoulder, then closed the door with a quick shove of his shoe. He took a deep breath, settled himself into his leather chair that had once belonged to his father, and unfolded the note.

DEAR ELI TODD,

I do hope this letter finds you well. I have read and considered the advertisement you posted, and I gladly say I hope to be the lady you choose. I am no more than 5'1" and 20 years of age. I am new to Chicago and find the city rowdy and crowded. I often find myself wishing to see the

open frontier which is why your advertisement spoke to me so deeply. I was raised on a farm some 50 miles away from Chicago, so I know how to live simply and can indeed cook over a camp fire.

If you find this letter pleasing, you may leave your reply at Post Office D, Chicago.

*Sincerely yours,
Lacy Yates*

ELI STUDIED EACH WORD, his imagination beginning to form the makings of a pretty little lady who wanted an adventure. That she was the only lady who had replied to his ad did not matter. She was perfect.

He left a letter at the post office saying he'd like to meet and walked home full of eagerness. Even his brother and his brother's wife noticed that he was smiling, which was a rare occurrence for Eli. He brushed off the comments, for he had not told his family of his plans to move to Oregon. He had already found a new man to do the accounts for the family business and he didn't think he would be missed in the already crowded house. His little Lacy didn't like how crowded Chicago was either. They had so much in common.



LACY WENT to the post office early and picked up the letter she hadn't been sure would be there. The lady who had written her first letter wasn't present, so Lacy hurried outside where she wouldn't be scolded for dallying as she read the letter.

Oh Lord, he wanted to meet her.

She suddenly broke into a cold sweat. This was good. No, this was bad. She looked terrible. She needed a wash. She needed long hair. Oh Lord, she needed a dress.

She had one day to prepare herself and no money to do it with.

She pressed herself against the brick side of the post office, then slid to the ground. That the ground was dirty mattered not when her shirt and trousers were already dusty and sweaty. She watched the legs pass by and on the street horses clopped while pulling wagons and carriages, leaving behind their dung in little round boulders. She spied a boy shoveling the dung and she all at once knew what to do.

After a day of work, she collected the pittance of her wages from a large man who glowered at her. Did she feel offended that he hadn't given her a second glance, jumping to the assumption that she was a boy and not a girl? No, for she had money now. Did she care she'd nearly got run over three separate times while scooping dung as the boy she'd spotted earlier had laughed to see her fear? No, because she had just taken her first step to being a female again and soon would be married. All would be well, she told herself as she used the crumpled-up newspaper to pack against her skin. The sun had gone down and taken its warmth with it. All would be well.



ELI USED his height to look over the crowd's heads. Why had he foolishly chosen such a busy location to meet Lacy? Because he had always found this park to be romantic. Well, he wasn't the only one, as made obvious by the lovers courting each other on benches and the lawn. Her letter had not stated the color of her hair or what color dress he should expect her in, so he looked for a woman who was twenty years old and little more than five feet tall. He ignored a short lady who was too old, a young lady who was on a man's arm, a dirty lady who was too poor, and an old lady who looked on the verge of death.

His shiny shoe tapped impatiently. He had written in his letter that he would likely be the tallest man around, that he had brown

hair that looked almost black, and that he would pin a green ribbon to his jacket.

Where was the girl?

“Eli Todd?” a delicate voice said from behind him.

He let himself, for a split second before he turned, smile and imagine how she must look. He knew his imagination could never compare to his real little Lacy.

He turned around, spotted the dirty lady who was in a dress of poor quality and looked over her head for his Lacy.

“Are you Eli Todd?” the little pauper asked.

He glowered down at her. Had his Lacy sent this person on her behalf? What game was she playing at?

“Yes,” he snapped, trying to spot if Lacy was hiding behind a tree to spy on them.

“I’m Lacy Yates.” She held out her hand to shake.

Dear Lord.

He looked her up and down. Her dress was rumpled and sun worn, her hat over-large and fraying, her fingernails dirty around the edges, and worse yet, she was rather plain. He was unable to form words at having his Lacy turn into *this* Lacy. She had not lied in her letter, but she certainly had neglected to tell him the whole truth. How would a lady such as herself have framed it? *I haven't bathed since last summer, my clothes are second-hand and do not fit me, I like to lie to respectable gentlemen and I probably spit and curse like a sailor.*

“Yes,” he said slowly, a grimace he hoped she’d take for a grin on his face.

Lacy thought he was marvelous. He was tidy and *very* tall. His hair was combed to the side, the lines from the comb having left perfect rows like a freshly plowed field. Even his eyebrows were neat. He was clearly wealthy, which she had not expected since she had assumed that wealthy men didn’t have a single adventurous bone in their bodies.

But she would have to be blind to not see how he was looking

down his nose at her. She had bathed, so she knew she didn't smell of manure any longer, and she had thought this dress was rather nice with its little flower pattern. The hat could have been better, but she needed to hide the state of her hair. Overall, she was now female again and she didn't like the way he was looking at her. It offended her femininity.

"Pardon me, but am I not what you expected?" she said, her own nose going up. Pride cometh before the fall, she reminded herself. Yet for the last month, all she'd had was her pride to fill her quickly emptying purse. She clung to her pride like to a sinking ship.

Eli mulled over a few things to say, but he was a gentleman before all else, so he went with something simple. "I apologize, but I do not think we suit each other."

Was he dismissing her already? He was walking away now, stepping around her as if all the trouble she'd gone to meant nothing.

She hurriedly placed herself in his path and held up her hands. "Wait. I can cook and clean, I can hunt and shoot a gun." She backpedaled to focus more on the womanly arts. "I'm kind and I've been told I have childbearing hips—"

"Enough," he said. He glanced around, hoping no one had heard that last part. "We simply do not suit," he repeated more firmly.

"But I'm of the right height and I'm only twenty," she pleaded.

"Please, Lacy, you are embarrassing yourself."

She started ticking off her attributes on her fingers. "I can sew right quick, I don't ever complain, I don't need to be told anything twice, I'm not the crying sort." She paused on her pinky. "I'm not the crying sort," she repeated as she tried to come up with something more to add. "Oh, I like adventure."

She was looking up at him hopefully.

Finally, he said, "Yes, those are very admirable traits."

"Well? I'd make a fine wife, I swear it." She looked abashed. "I don't swear."

For lack of anything better to say, he said, "A lady should never swear."

"That's right, I don't. Not ever."

They shared an awkward silence.

"Well, I must be on my way," he said, tipping his hat to her and quickly spinning on his heel.

"Wait," she hurried along at his side. "I want to go west. Very much. I do hate this city. See, I was raised on a farm like I said in my letter."

"Uh huh."

"I want to ride in a covered wagon, see wild Indians and kill a bear. No, not kill a bear, not myself I mean, just see a bear killed is all. They got some big bears out west, I hear."

Eli huffed, then stopped short, but before he could make her go away she went on.

"Are you heading out with a wagon train from Fort Gunther? I hear that's where all the good trail masters are. Do you have a wagon yet? I suppose that's a silly question, as where would you fit one in the city? See, if I had my own wagon I'd-"

"Lacy," he said sharply and was rewarded with silence. "We do not suit." He stared hard at her, begging her to understand.

Lacy's heart dropped. She'd been counting on Eli to help her out of her bind, but he didn't want her.

"Fine," she said, trying to hide her unhappiness. "I don't find you suitable either."

Eli watched the little farm girl stride away. He let out a gust of breath, relieved now that he was alone again. The lady he was looking for would be gentle, innocent, and biddable. A delicate flower whose complexion was as light as the moonlight. Her laughter would be like little bells. She'd be the sort who dreamed of adventure while looking out her bedroom window and sighing. He'd be the man to fulfill all her dreams.

Two weeks had passed and the only other reply to his ad had come from a fifty-year-old woman wondering if he could introduce her to his father.

Where was his beauty with a passion for adventure?

He was slumped in his study, the accounting books open on the desk untouched. The man he'd hired to replace him was eager to begin his duties. Eli was eager to start his journey. In fact, he didn't have much more time before he had to leave Chicago. Wagon trains had to leave early in the year to avoid being caught in the clutch of winter. He simply couldn't delay any longer.

Damn it! He thumped his fist on the armrest. He very much disliked having his plans fall apart. Could he go on without a wife and find a suitable woman later? Of course, but he had wanted to share the wagon trip with another, not go alone.

Fine, he'd just have to compromise. He'd go alone and once he had settled in Oregon he'd send out another advertisement.

That settled, he had plans to make.



LACY HAD PLANS TO MAKE. So, she wasn't good enough for Eli, that didn't bother her. So, she had to go back to being a boy and work shoveling dung, that didn't matter. She had a goal now: to show Mister Tall and Snooty that she didn't need him to be her husband.

Of course, being angry at a total stranger might be making her days of dung-shoveling go faster, but the truth was she was excited about her decision to go west. She saved all her money as best as she could, hiding it from the gangs of boys who might want to steal from her, and she collected abandoned newspapers to stuff her shirt and pant legs at night. She spent her money on food and nothing else.

She was going to go west!