

THE RANCHER'S  
UNEXPECTED BRIDE

SECOND CHANCES IN HARMONY SPRINGS ~  
BOOK ONE



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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, Kings James Version.

ISBN-13: 978-1-963212-22-8

*To Christine: thank you for always being a sounding board and encouraging me in this writing journey. It's always fun talking story with you!*



## CHAPTER 1



*FEBRUARY 1887*

*A*riella Mountbatten's heart pounded in her chest as she hurried through the dark streets of Boston, her sister at her side. Sludgy gray snow covered the boardwalk. Cold wet seeped into the skirt of her navy traveling dress. The added weight slowed her down, a reality that only heightened her anxiety. She had to get away before anyone noticed her absence. Under the layers of clothing, her body pulsed with pain, a reminder of the reason she needed to flee. Shivers shook her, a combination of cold and nerves.

"They've likely noticed we're gone by now." Tori's voice stayed low. "Hopefully, no one thinks to check the train station at this hour."

Ella gripped her sister's hand. "I worry about you going back home alone."

Determination lifted Tori's chin. Her brown eyes glittered. "I've hailed carriages at night before. I'll be fine."

Ella's hold tightened. "Are you sure you don't want to come with me?"

“You know I need to finish my schooling. If things get bad, I’ll stay with a friend.” She squeezed Ella’s hand. “Don’t worry about me. Let me worry about you for once.”

Tori was stubborn. Mother said it was a product of her fiery red hair. Right now, Ella was thankful she possessed that quality.

The two of them hastened along in silence. Ella had chosen to pack a single carpetbag and to walk rather than use a carriage, knowing the servants would alert Father and Mother if she asked for it.

They arrived at their destination minutes before the midnight train was to depart. Relief poured over her. *No one will be able to stop the train.* Ella paid for her ticket, receiving a cursory glance from the sleepy ticket master as he shoved a ticket across the counter. She took a deep breath. Her fingers trembled as she picked it up. She turned to Tori, fighting tears. “This is the only way,” she said, more to herself than anything.

Tori wrapped her in a fierce embrace. “I will miss you.” The whispered words hung heavy in the air. “Godspeed, Ella. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Ella kissed Tori’s cheek, her throat so tight it hurt.

“Go.” Tori gave her a firm push, the word a mere whisper above the train’s whistle.

Ella hugged her sister once more, then hurried to the train before she could change her mind. As she boarded, the train lurched forward. Ella rocked on her feet, gaining a tentative balance.

A conductor shuffled toward her. “Ticket, miss?”

After she gave him her boarding pass, he showed her to her seat. She threw her bag on the space beside her, then pressed her nose to the window to find Tori. The younger woman caught Ella’s gaze and waved. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Only eighteen months apart in age, they had never been

separated for more than a day. How was Ella to bear life without her sister? She had no plans to return home. Tori was the only one who knew she was leaving, but even she didn't know where Ella was going. It was safer that way.

A sharp pain pierced her heart. She watched Tori until the train turned a bend. Ella trembled with the gravity of what she'd done. Her hands clenched. She stared out the window as everything familiar slowly vanished from sight. Tears poured from her eyes. Scared and alone, she muffled her sobs with a handkerchief as the train picked up speed and carried her away from Boston.



HARMONY SPRINGS, MONTANA TERRITORY

A shrill scream split the air. Cody Brooks jerked awake. Another cry sounded, this one softer but no less painful.

*Addie.*

He threw the covers aside. As his feet hit the floor, he sucked in a sharp breath. The chill that seeped into his feet bit hard.

Addie wailed again. Cody hurried out of his room and down the hall. Pushing open the door to the children's room, he strode in. His six-month-old charge flailed in her crib. Blankets tangled around her body in disarray. The dim light of dawn illuminated the tears streaking her face. Poor girl.

He reached into the crib and picked her up. She cried harder. He held her to his chest, at a loss what to do. *I'm no father.*

Just three weeks ago, his best friend died in a riding accident along with his wife. Their children passed to Cody. *Why'd Jake and Harriet choose a gruff, unmarried rancher like me to be*

*their kids' guardian?* He couldn't puzzle that out. He had no experience caring for children. Little ones made him nervous. Yet he now found himself in possession of three, all under the age of six.

Addie's breaths came in hard gasps. He shifted her, hoping the position was a comfortable one. How, exactly, was one supposed to hold a baby? Not for the first time, he wished he'd accepted one of Harriet's many offers for him to hold Addie when he visited their home.

The little girl screamed again. All at once, her breathing hitched. Her mouth remained open, but no air passed in or out.

Panic slammed into Cody. "No!" He laid her over his arm and slapped her back. "Breathe!"

She lay rigid. He hit her back again, desperately praying she'd take a breath. Amid his hazy focus, a small, angry voice sounded from the bed.

"What are you doing to my sister?"

He only had time to register Isaiah's voice before he slapped Addie's back once more. An angry growl sounded behind him just as the baby gasped, inhaling precious air. Seconds later, she wailed.

Releasing a sigh of relief, Cody lifted her upright. His relief was short lived as little fists pummeled his legs.

"You hurt her! You hurt Addie!" Isaiah screamed and pounded harder.

Addie cried louder.

Worried that he might drop the baby, Cody gripped both of the boy's hands in one of his. "Enough!" The single word, unintentionally snarled, made Isaiah glare back at him.

The little boy struggled for his freedom. He kicked with everything in him, his foot connecting hard with Cody's shin. Sucking in a breath, Cody struggled for control of his own temper. Anger burned in his chest. He couldn't give these chil-

dren what they needed. The last three weeks proved that depressing fact.

A sound of dismay hit his ears. Amidst the kicks and screams, Jonah huddled in the bed, tears streaming down his cheeks. The three-year-old hadn't spoken since his parents died, but his face revealed his emotions better than words could. Cody's heart clenched. For a child that small to wear such a desperate look of pain...it smote him more than anything else.

Despair consumed him. He couldn't do this. There was a reason two people shared the responsibilities of parenting. To try it alone felt insurmountable.

He sank into the rocking chair beside the crib. Addie's cries mixed with Isaiah's sobs. When did he start crying? The boy finally stopped kicking him, and he buried his little face into his hands. Cody rested one hand on Isaiah's back. With the other, he bounced Addie up and down as gently as he could. She hiccupped as her cries faded. Jonah remained in bed, silent tears making twin trails down his cheeks.

Cody's stomach turned. *I'm a failure.* How could he give these grieving children the life they needed? He couldn't even provide enough comfort to stop their tears.

Isaiah sniffled, lowering his hands. "You hurt her."

"She couldn't breathe. I had to do something." He turned Addie toward her brother, voice rough. "She's fine."

The boy's lower lip trembled.

Cody raked a hand through his hair. "Do you want to hold her?"

"Yeah." Isaiah took Addie, holding her close. He eyed Cody as he rocked the baby in his arms, looking far too old for his five years.

The sun crept over the horizon, lighting the room. Cody pushed himself up. "You kids want pancakes?"

Jonah climbed out of bed. He rubbed his brown eyes before nodding.

Isaiah shrugged, face impassive. "Guess so."

"Then let's rustle up some pancakes."

At least he could manage that.



Four days after she escaped Boston, the train pulled into Ella's destination. She glanced out the window. A large sign hung by the platform, welcoming travelers to the town of Harmony Springs. People bustled about, wrapped in warm coats as they trekked through a layer of fresh snow. Wooden buildings lined the main street. Bold signs proclaimed the services of each business. She made out a mercantile, bank, and blacksmith near the station.

Ella picked up her bag, ignoring the ache in her ribs. Drawing in a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders. "I can do this."

The words sounded flat. She stifled a sigh, then shuffled her way to the exit. Anxiety crawled through her gut. She'd come here on a whim. What if her plan backfired?

A humorless chuckle left her lips. *Plan? What plan?* Reaction motivated her flight from Boston. Nothing had been set except her destination. She didn't even have a trunk with personal belongings. Her only possessions in the world were stuffed in the carpetbag she clutched close to her side.

Ella stepped from the train onto solid ground. Cold air nipped at her cheeks. She shivered, her nerves fraught.

Upon exiting the train station, she glanced around. As in other towns they had passed through, the building appeared to be located at the edge of town. The main street stretched before her, long and welcoming, but unknown. Her vision grew hazy

and her head began to pound. Dark spots danced in her line of sight.

Her back stiffened. She might be in a strange place, but she would not faint. Never in her life had she resorted to the ridiculous tactic employed by many young ladies in society. She wasn't about to start now. Head held high, she marched down the street. Her gaze swung from building to building, reading the signs and looking for the one she needed.

The morning sun provided a bit of relief against the winter chill. With a start, Ella realized she had forgotten to bring a hat. Her mother's stringent voice echoed in her head.

*A young lady never goes about in the sun with her head uncovered. Especially not with your coloring. You will gain horrid, unsightly freckles.*

Ella tugged at a strand of her auburn waves, then turned her face to the sun, eyes closed, in direct defiance of her mother's vain demands. Maybe a few freckles would give her face character.

"You all right, lady?"

She opened her eyes with a start. A young man stared at her, brows raised. Ella cleared her throat. Her cheeks burned. "Yes, thank you."

He shot her a dubious look but nodded and continued down the road. Ella stifled a sigh. People were going to think her addled in the mind if she wasn't careful.

A happy squeal made her turn in time to see a young woman launch herself at another lady. Ella's breath caught. *They look like sisters.*

All the emotions she'd suppressed over the last four days overwhelmed her. Tori's face flashed through her mind. Her heart squeezed in her chest. Loneliness gripped her stomach. The one person she'd been able to count on for love and support was hundreds of miles away.

Tears spilled from Ella's eyes. Unable to stop them, she

hurried into a small alleyway between two buildings. She ducked deep into the shadows, away from curious eyes.

Once the tears began, they flowed in torrents. Her throat constricted painfully. Deep sobs wrenched from her belly. Her entire body hurt with the physical pain of loss. She sank to her knees, heedless of the snow that soaked into her dress. Doubts crept in, whispering that she'd made a big mistake.

*What have I done?*