



Chapter One

Friday, September 14, 1894

Mt. Hope, Oregon

Natalie jumped down from the saddle and hit the ground with both feet. A small puff of dust rose up around her pointed-toed cowboy boots there in the street where she'd stopped in front of the local assayer's office. Reaching into her saddlebags, she pulled out the relatively small wad of cash she had saved just for this purpose, and headed for the front door. She was a woman with a plan, and nothing would get in her way.

She'd waited too long and had worked too hard to let this dream go in the same way that all her other dreams had gone. She was here to buy some land, and to make a new life. Others had done it; she would too. The fact that she was a woman, alone, didn't daunt her. She'd faced up to many adversaries on this westward journey, and no way was she going to quit now that she'd gotten this far.

Regardless of what that rude little man at the train station in Portland had told her. She still remembered his whiny, oily voice, "Do

rethink your plan, Miss Michaelson. A woman, alone...? It's simply not a wise decision..."

Natalie didn't care what he thought. She'd heard of this little town called Mt. Hope in the far western state of Oregon, and it had given *her* hope for a new life.

She'd lived on her own for the past three years, since her father had passed on, and she had done it without anyone's help. Except for God's, she tacked on to her thought. Coming to Oregon from Pennsylvania had seemed a long trip, but if it was all she hoped it would be, she could get the fresh start that she'd been dreaming of for so long.

She had no illusions about whether or not she would be able to find a husband; she was pretty sure that the men out west were no different than the ones back east. They would take one look at her and decide that curly, mouse-brown hair, a freckled face and muddy gray eyes weren't their idea of beauty. Add to that her scrawny little body, and the picture was even clearer. She was no man's prize.

But she had a good mind. And she was physically strong, even if she was skinny. And she didn't get sick. Ever.

That had to account for something, surely.

"*Okay, Lord, this is it. If I ever needed help, it's now.*" She caught sight of a woman across the street who was staring at her. *Probably figures I'm talking to myself*, Natalie thought, chagrined. She had to stop praying out loud. Her father had always told her that it would make folks uncomfortable if they ever overheard her.

Making her way into the assayer's building, she saw a man behind a wooden counter, flipping through some papers there. Of course, she'd expected nothing less than to find a man working there. Women almost never held such jobs, she knew. She sighed at her predicament. It was just so much harder to tell a man about her plans. They always seemed to

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expect her to fail, right from the beginning, and she was getting heartily sick of trying to defend herself and her decisions.

She wanted a farm. She wanted to raise animals. And she mostly wanted to be left alone to do it.

“Hello,” said the youngish-looking man standing behind the counter. He had very dark hair—nearly black—and the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. His little boy grin cocked up on one side, and one of his front teeth was slightly crooked. “How may I assist you?” His voice was cultured and soft, and Natalie didn’t sense any sort of animosity coming from him. She smiled inwardly. Just wait until he heard her plans. Then he’d show his true colors.

“My name is Natalie Rose Michaelson, and I’m here to buy a piece of land.” The words fell from her mouth by rote, for she had been planning them for weeks. Ever since she’d begun this long journey, in fact, she’d been planning for this very moment.

“Well, Miss Michaelson,” he said, leaning forward slightly with his hands braced on the edge of the aged oak counter, “you’ve come to the right place.”

Natalie thought her ears were deceiving her. Surely it couldn’t be this easy?

“I... uh...” She found herself trying to find more words. This wasn’t exactly what she’d expected. She looked up into the man’s eyes and saw a twinkle in the blue depths, the smile that she’d seen earlier still in place. His lips twitched a little, as if he had a secret he wasn’t telling anyone, and Natalie began to wonder what the smile was all about. Maybe he was just teasing her, and not intending to help her get her land after all! Anger burned in her heart, making her tone brusquer than she intended. “And I hope you’re not planning on giving me a big speech about how I can’t possibly buy land without a husband beside me, because if you are, I’m here to tell you that—”

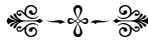
He held up a hand, stopping her, mid-sentence. “I am most certainly not planning any such thing.” He held out that same hand, towards her. “My name is Lucas Crawford. My friends all call me Luke.” She took his hand, briefly, but dropped it as if it were on fire. “You’re not from around here, are you?” he asked.

“No. I’m from back east. Pennsylvania, actually.”

“Well, welcome to Mt. Hope. It’s always good to see new faces in town. Little towns like ours always need new blood. So, you’re planning to buy some land here?”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” she said cautiously.

“Well, let me see what I can do to help you out.”



The bell in the church spire rang the hour. Ten times, it rang. Natalie had thought it was much later than ten in the morning. She’d been working since sunup, trying to make this cabin she’d just bought habitable after having spent a restless night listening to the strange noises of small creatures that were obviously living there.

She was just thankful that it wasn’t raining yet. She’d heard that it rained a lot in Oregon, but that didn’t worry her. She didn’t mind the rain. She just wanted to have a dry place to live. If she could get the roof patched and the varmints out before she had to live in this little home full time, she’d be happy.

Not that varmints bothered her that much. She just didn’t want to share living space with them.

The broom she’d scrounged up from a dark corner of the little cabin wasn’t much use, but it was better than nothing. She stood in the middle of the room and turned in a slow circle, taking in her surroundings.