

# Male Order Bride

By

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# Chapter I

“Can you believe this? And it’s just a classified, too. Why he didn’t bother to just sign up for eHarmony or Match.com, I’ll never know – except that he seems to be a Neanderthal when it comes to women and maybe he thought he’d get booted by outraged feminists or something. Must be a creep of the highest order.” Kenni – short for Kendall, Jayne’s best friend and co-worker, slapped the newspaper down in front of her on her desk, pointing to the ad in question which had been circled several times in an angry red.

Jayne barely gave it a glance, but did raise her eyebrow. “I’m more surprised to see that you were reading a newspaper than I am to hear about some pathetic, lonely guy who’s looking for love in all the wrong places. I think either of you would be considered pretty retro nowadays.”

Of course, Kenni completely ignored the fact that Jayne was still working – indeed, had barely raised her head in acknowledgement of her friend’s presence in her office. It would take a bulldozer to stop the blithely oblivious girl from thinking that the world pretty much revolved around her – and her romantic problems, of course.

“How could he possibly think that any woman in her right mind was going to respond to something like this? All he’s going to get are losers and women who are too cray-cray for words. Cooking, cleaning and fucking is all he wants out of them, apparently – and that ‘no-nonsense’ line! That takes the cake – he must be a throwback to the seventies, or something . . .”

Jayne managed – barely – not to smile at Kenni’s incorrect reference to how men were in the era of the now defunct Equal Rights Amendment, when they were just beginning to know what it was like to live in fear of a sexual harassment suit -especially since the younger woman wasn’t even a twinkle in her old man’s eye at that point, while she, on the other hand, was born in the middle of that decade – not that she was paying much attention to men’s attitudes towards women at that point. She thought Kendall probably meant the fifties, but to someone that young, it was all ancient history anyway.

Whereas that particular phrase turned Kenni completely off, it piqued Jayne's curiosity – despite the chauvinistic rhetoric that accompanied it – so strongly she found herself abandoning her work in favor of reading the deceptively simple, seemingly straightforward ad, and as she read it, she felt her lower body contract at the sheer potential she saw there:

*“Healthy, clean, sane, NO-NONSENSE man seeks potential wife who is same to live on remote ranch. Must want children. No hippies, druggies, or those afraid of hard work – cooking and cleaning - need apply. This is not a scam or a joke. Serious replies only, please. Your picture will get mine.”*

The ad listed a P.O. Box somewhere in Montana. Not website, a Facebook account or even a cell phone number.

Maybe Kendall was right, and he did hale from the fifties. In which case, he was getting a bit long in the tooth to want children, and would probably only attract women with uncontrollable Daddy issues.

“He even said he was sane!” Kenni giggled. “He’s definitely one of those religious fanatics who believes women are subordinate to men, or a prepper or something equally as scary.”

She might have been a decade – or more – older than Kendall, but Jayne's mind definitely didn't go immediately to the possibility that Mr. John Q. Rancher was a bulb short of a pack, but rather it fixated on the idea that had drawn her to look at the ad in the first place rather than shoving the paper into the circular file, where it probably belonged.

“No nonsense” was in all caps.

And that just so happened to be a bit of a trigger for Jayne. She knew she was a throwback – that she'd been born well after her time – but she loved to cook – especially for someone else – and had never had a problem doing housework, and would love to do so in her own house. And she'd been looking for this type of man – one who didn't really know the meaning of the word “metrosexual”, who was a man's man and didn't apologize for it, who did the right thing even if it was the harder choice . . .

Her pulse was racing and she was practically panting in reaction – not at all her usual response to any man, especially one she'd never seen and knew nothing about.

One who wouldn't hesitate to, perhaps, if she was lucky – or maybe not so lucky - spank his woman if he deemed it necessary.

It was a gamble, a big one in a lot of ways, but staid, dependable, responsible, reliable Jayne had a feeling in the pit of her gut she'd never had before, and she nearly snatched the paper away from Kenni as the younger woman tried to take it back from her desk.

“I want to keep this,” she said, not letting go as her friend tugged on the other end.

“Why?” she asked suspiciously.

Jayne decided that telling her the truth – or some of it anyway – was the best way to go. “I want to write to the lonely rancher.”

The look on Kendall's face was priceless, frozen in a rictus of naked surprise – with a tinge of out and out horror – as it was. “You've *got* to be kidding me!”

“Nope. I want to hear what he has to say.”

Jayne knew exactly how Kenni's mind worked, and wasn't sure whether she was relieved or sad when it went right where she'd expected it to. She watched her friend's expression relax slowly as she relinquished her hold on the other end of the folded paper. “Oh, I get it. You're going to string him along – see just how deep the crazy goes.”

“Something like that,” Jayne murmured, tucking the paper into her desk drawer.

“Cool, well, you have to let me see what he says. But be careful!”

She bounced happily out of the office, and Jayne released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, taking out the paper to read the ad one more time, deliberately inciting her body with the possibilities until she had to tuck it away again and return to work in self-defense.

That night, alone in her nicely appointed, cozy two bedroom apartment, Jayne pulled it out of her LL Bean canvas bag and read it again – but only once she'd finished up the work she'd brought home, had some of the crockpotted chicken parmesan casserole she'd thrown in this morning, and paid her bills.

She was in her comfy, warm pajamas and a well worn housecoat she just didn't have the heart – or the will – yet to get rid of, despite its dilapidated appearance – when she put the paper to one side of her laptop and began her response to him.

Her fingers were shaking as they touched the keys, so there was a mistake in nearly every word at first. She didn't know what it was about this situation that had her on edge like this. She'd never been the type to have such a violent reaction to much of anything – especially not something that was likely to put her in danger. Everything about this ad screamed exactly what Kendall had been harping on, and the two possibilities she'd mentioned – fanatical religiosity or preparing for the end of the world were on the mild end of the insanity spectrum. Cannibalistic serial killer was flashing in red neon at the other end of that scale, with more than enough room for a wide range of crazy in the middle.

But Jayne couldn't get her own – admittedly idealized - picture of the man who had written the ad out of her mind, and she hoped that perhaps writing a response to him might help her exorcize him out of her life – and her dirty, dirty mind. She wasn't going to send it, after all. It was just to help her work through whatever was sticking in her . . . craw about what she'd read.

She wrote and wrote and wrote – the project taking up the majority of her evening as her favorite TV shows played unheeded in the background, ignored in favor of getting just the right tone to her response, one that conveyed neither the desperation of a woman in her almost late thirties who hadn't yet married nor the insanity inherent in responding to an ad like this, which she hadn't really dismissed in him for writing it in the first place.

Instead, she strived to sound like the solid, mature, independent and successful – well, relatively – woman she thought of herself as, although by the time she needed to head for bed in order to be somewhat functional at work tomorrow she still wasn't quite sure it was right.

*Dear Sir:*

*A friend pointed out your ad to me*

No, that wasn't right. It made her sound like she was incapable of getting a man herself and had to enlist her friends to help her. And was 'Dear Sir' too formal? It certainly got to her – living in the same place where his unusual choice of words had, making her squirm in her seat as she typed.

*Dear Sir:*

*I noticed your ad in our local paper and was intrigued.*

*First let me state that I have never indulged in recreational drugs, nor do I drink alcohol except in social situations and then never to excess (the first few months of college cured me of that permanently ☺).*

*I am in my mid-thirties, single, and work at a well-paid but boring office job. I'm relatively healthy (hay fever in August and the occasional cold or flu, but nothing more than that medically), am as sane as the next person (although I believe my friends would question that, since I'm responding to what appears to be a marriage proposal made by a man I don't know, who published it in who knows how many papers all over the world), and I've never been afraid of hard work, although, granted, I've not been required to do much in the way of physical work in my life.*

*I have a degree in English History, which meant I had to take a real job in order to, you know, eat. ☺ I don't think it would be much help in ranching, either, unfortunately, but I have to admit that I've always wanted to see that area of the country. I understand it's amazingly beautiful.*

*I'm neither a neat freak, nor particularly messy, but fall somewhere in between on that scale. I don't mind housework, and I'm a fairly good cook, if I do say so myself. I make my own spaghetti sauce, I love to bake all kinds of cookies and desserts, and I can bake bread from scratch – not cheating and using a bread maker, in other words.*

*I have also always wanted children, and in lieu of that I currently have two cats and a dog. Are you allergic?*

*I have included a recent picture that was taken at the annual awards ceremony for my job where I was celebrating my twelfth year with them.*

*Please feel free to ask me any questions you might have, as surprisingly, I find myself quite interested in the prospect of life on a ranch.*

*Thank you for your time.*

*Jayne Clarkson*

Even though she had spent the evening telling herself that she was never going to be stupid enough to actually *send* the letter, she nonetheless harkened back to the keyboarding classes she'd had in high school about how to write a business letter,



addressing it with absolute correctness and spell checking the body of it to within an inch of its life for some reason.

She hoped it sounded friendly but not too, mildly interested but definitely not overeager. As she compulsively read and re-read it, she had to wonder why this man hadn't simply gone through one of the zillion online dating services.

But then, if she was reading between the lines correctly, he didn't sound like the type of man who would go for that kind of thing. She wondered if he could even *get* an internet connection, considering that he'd said his ranch was remote. The more she thought about him and what his life must be like, and – most importantly to her – what his demeanor was, the harder it became to stick to her idea of just writing the letter, but not sending it. After all of that effort, she began to lean much more towards the idea of saying “what the hell” and dropping it into the mail, just to see what happened. She was sure he would be inundated by women who were much better qualified than she was, who had experience with farming or ranching, could ride and rope and do whatever else would make them much more valuable in his eyes than someone who could list from memory the kings and queens of England.

And, just in case the crazy was strong in him, she would take every possible precaution to protect her personal safety.

She even went so far as to drag out an old box of stationery and actually handwrite her response, rather than sending him the print out of what she'd written in Word, wanting to add a bit of personality to her reply, along with reactivating an old throwaway Tracfone she had in a drawer for emergencies, just in case something went wrong with her smart phone, and adding its number just below her name, never expecting him to use it.

Before she posted the letter to his P.O. box, she rented one of her own, several towns away, in the biggest city Vermont owned – Burlington – figuring that she would still be pretty safe because he wouldn't really know where she lived.

She bought a book of stamps for the first time in a very long time, since she did ninety-nine percent of her bill paying online now, feeling both agog and depressed at how much it cost, then drove up to a mailbox and, after hesitating for only a few seconds,

dropped her letter in it and headed for work, figuring that that was that and hoping against hope she'd somehow magically gotten him out of her system.

But she realized only a few minutes later that, having made such an uncharacteristically bold move, she didn't find her mind – or her body – eased in the least. If anything, her fantasies about this mysterious rancher increased to the point where she was having trouble thinking at work, and sleep seemed to be out of the question.

All of her dreams – which could be quite steamy without the additional titillation of waiting for his reply – seemed to revolve around a tall, broad, faceless stranger who swung down from his horse, threw his hat on the ground, and took her into his arms, holding her against a body that had been toughened and strengthened by manual labor – not hours spent in spinning classes or on a treadmill. He would smell of sweat and horse and she would love every minute of it, breathing deeply when he lifted his head long enough to lift her into his arms and stomp his big, cowboy booted feet up the stairs of his expansive ranch house, across the country veranda that spread out around the front of the house, and up the Tara-esque staircase to make love to her in the large master suite his housekeeper kept scrupulously tidy . . .

It wasn't quite a picturesque veranda that Retrieve Jensen stomped across as he carried the mail he'd picked up in Heartbreak - the nearest town to his small spread - into his house. Oh, it was a beautiful porch – or had been at one time – but it was a minefield now; one had to be very careful where one stepped for fear of rotting planks giving way beneath one's feet.

He shrugged the meager bags of groceries and mail onto a counter that was already buried with remainders of other such trips and leaned back against it, knowing he should be out fixing fence posts, but he'd seen very feminine handwriting on an envelope amongst all of the usual bills – the majority of which were labeled “past due” in big red letters – and – uncharacteristically, his curiosity got the best of him.

It was very pretty handwriting, indeed, neat and very flowery and curvy, but not overdone and still quite easy to read. He was impressed that she'd taken the time to actually *write* it rather than just printing it off her computer. And it was on actual stationery that smelled a bit like roses, and had lacy accents at the top and bottom,

although, contrarily, it was addressed very formally, as if his had been an ad for employment rather than an advertisement for a wife.

As he read, he reached into the fridge for a bottle of milk and one of the plain peanut butter sandwiches he made every week then kept in the fridge for when he was hungry, washing it absently down with enormous gulps of milk as he perused his way through her chatty letter, then reached for the picture she'd enclosed, and was thunderstruck.

His knees went weak, his heart began to pound in his chest, and he thought – for the briefest of moments – that he might faint, but, of course, he would never let that actually happen.

Trieve didn't find himself attracted to very many women – especially not lately, since he hadn't had a social life in . . . well, awful close to a decade or longer. He made no excuses for it – his priority had been to get the ranch back on its feet, and he didn't have time for all of the social crap that accompanied wooing a woman.

Wooing a woman well, the way he wanted to, anyway, given the time, money, and inclination, of which the latter was usually the least likely, since his general opinion of women had been negatively affected early in his life.

And, thanks to dear old Mom, he didn't have the money to do it, either, so it had been firmly shunted to the back burner.

Lately, though, he had begun to realize that, poor or not, he was just past forty and, if he was going have anyone to leave the ranch he'd been pouring his blood and sweat into for years to, he'd better start looking for a wife.

True to form, he'd done it as quickly and efficiently as possible. If things had been different in his past, he would have been able to wine and dine pretty much any woman he wanted to. The ranch had been quite a prosperous concern at one point. He wasn't Brad Pitt, but he wasn't Quasimodo, either, and, even if he had been, he would have had a bank account that – in his experience – would have encouraged the majority of females to look past any chinks in his looks or character.

But those days were long gone, and he did his best not to mourn them, since it was a waste of the energy he needed to devote to the project and plans he had to restore

the ranch to its former glory, which had been his one and only goal for longer than he cared to remember.

Since after his mother had left when he was twelve or so, and his father had died of a broken heart.

That was not going to happen to him, he'd already vowed. He'd meant every word he'd said in the ad, exactly how he'd said it. He knew it sounded sterile and dour almost to the extreme, but that was what he'd wanted. He wasn't going to play games, he wasn't going to pretty up his life or be anything other than what he was.

And he most definitely *wasn't* going to fall in love with whoever it was that he chose. He would tell her that upfront, right from the start. He wanted a practical arrangement that would result in a cleaner house, a fuller belly, and children – not necessarily in that order. No more, no less. She could take it or leave it.

And Miss Jayne Clarkson, of . . . Burlington, Vermont definitely did not fit the bill. He tried to remember what he knew about that state – besides that they produced a lot of maple syrup and got a fair amount of snow, but he couldn't come up with much beyond that.

Trieve's face darkened. He'd've loved to bring her to the best restaurant in Billings, get them two gourmet meals and maybe take in a movie – he couldn't remember the last time he saw one - then go back to a palatial suite in the best hotel in town to make sweet, fine love to her. But that would be as far as it could go. He wasn't in the market for a fling or a lover, unfortunately, because she looked as if she'd fit the bill for either perfectly, if his physical, visceral reaction was anything to judge by.

This was not a life for a tenderfoot. He needed a strong, sturdy woman who could work alongside him occasionally, when he needed her to. A second pair of hands out here could sometimes be the difference between life and death – especially in the winter on an operation as small as this - and she looked as if a strong breeze would knock her over.

But damn if she didn't have gorgeous, wavy long golden blonde hair – an admitted weakness of his – bright, smart eyes and a beautiful smile, not to mention breasts he would give his eye teeth cup in his palms, a trim waist and almost too slim hips.

He could feel himself getting harder every second he stared at the photo, until he put it down on the counter, trying to force himself to walk away from it, but he couldn't. He flat out couldn't. He felt caught, and almost angry that she could make him want her so much from afar, when there was no way he could have her.

*Absolutely no way.*

Disgusted, he dragged himself away from her picture, leaving it and the letter on the counter and willing himself out the door to pick up the backbreaking work where he'd left it. But all that long afternoon, he wasn't thinking about what needed to be done next – fixing the holes in the barn roof, getting the cattle vetted and culled, repairing the water tank . . . the list was quite literally endless.

Instead, visions of her danced before his eyes – she'd been beaming happily, cutting a cake, surrounded by a gaggle of what he assumed were friends and coworkers. There'd be none of that here, of course. If she had cake, it would be because she'd made it herself, and it would pretty much just be the two of them, twenty-four-seven.

Her dress was a rose pink, body hugging number that was quite modest by today's standards, but which was, nonetheless, cut a bit deep in the cleavage department, for which he was eternally grateful, although perpetually tortured by throughout the day. He would give his left nut in order to pull her into his arms and kiss her, just once, but he knew that wasn't possible, and the longer the day stretched, the surlier he got, until he nearly got gored by a bull because he was aching for her so badly that he wasn't paying attention to what he was doing.

With his erection perpetually throbbing behind the zipper of his worn jeans, he finally quit for the day, a bit earlier than usual, taking his peanut butter sandwich supper into the living room to sink down into his disreputably worn recliner and stare at her picture again – the one he'd memorized every detail of from the moment he'd first laid eyes on it – then at the phone that sat on the end table next to him – then back at her picture again, and back and forth for the longest time.

He dearly wished she hadn't included her phone number, for his own sanity, but for her safety, too. He hoped she was smart enough about her personal, physical security as a woman in a world filled with men who were even more royally screwed up than he was, that it was a throwaway number and not her real one – and his gut and privates

clenched even more painfully as he realized that – if she became his by some miracle - he would make damned certain she always thought of things like that first.

And when he'd finished what there was of his dinner, it was the thought of her over his lap that had his hand on the phone.