

# A Rancher for Jessica

MARLENE BIERWORTH

# **A Rancher for Jessica**



**Marlene Bierworth**

**Mail-Order Papa**

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## About this Book

Cunning men bent on exploiting small land owners drive Samuel Parker from his homestead with the law on his heels. By the time he arrives at the Miller spread, he is ready for a fresh start. The idea of responding to the ‘mail -order-papa’ advertisement—written by a young lad around the same age as the brother he buried—appeals to him.

How is Sam to know that Jessica Carrington—now Miller—has been singled out as his intended? If she knows Sam’s past, he will have no hope of winning her affections, but by using an anonymous approach, as the youngster in charge of the matchmaking instructed, perhaps his happily ever after is a possibility.

Jessica is still reeling from Curtis’s sudden death and is not interested in replacing him despite her step-son’s persistence. Can the second chance at love prevail against the new ranch-hand’s deception? Return to the Miller Ranch and rediscover the fire of love that burns deeply within these troubled souls.

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About this Series/My Books

## Introduction

Jessica Carrington Miller, is the same character you met in the mail-order mama series, who arrived in Wyoming to become a mother to Danny and a wife to Curtis Miller. She came to them tainted by her past but love healed her and the couple have enjoyed their happy-ever-after for eight years now. Jess has many memories to cherish of their times together as she mourns her husband who has died in an accident, leaving her as a widow with three boys. (Please, don't hate me, readers—the Old West is full of second chance love.)

<https://www.amazon.com/Cowgirl-Curtis-Mail-Order-Mama-Book-ebook/dp/B08PDL9VJ3>

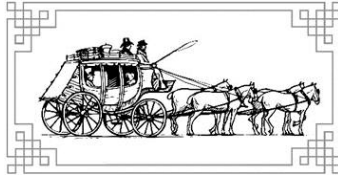
That brings us to the book you are reading, '*A Rancher for Jessica*,' because we could not leave the woman to run the Miller Ranch and raise three children on her own. Samuel Parker steps up to the plate, answering the plea of the now, fourteen-year-old Danny, who writes a similar matrimonial ad to attract a mail-order papa for his grieving stepmother.

Samuel is mourning the loss of his family, but not the life they had endured under the strong hand of ranch-lords, who demanded neighbors surrender to their supremacy.

Take overs were happening everywhere, and marshals daring to stand in the way, received a bullet for their efforts. Cunning men with devious plans to dominate in the cattle business found judges willing to validate their unlawful practices. Those of their victims who fought back were stopped in their tracks, their cruelty too much for the easy-going homesteaders to handle.

Samuel's departure from Montana was not due to the one deadly bullet he'd fired against his enemies, but the result of a false accusation that ruined his reputation and sent him running for his life.

**Both books are standalone, but Jessica's first and second chance love stories are the thread that ties Marlene's mail order mama and papa contributions together.**



## Chapter 1

News of Slick Parker—the notorious label given to Samuel by journalists who loved to embellish the facts—raced ahead of his every move, affording him no peace from his newfound infamy. He had roamed the countryside for a full year without a place to call home. The trip from Montana to Wyoming had been lonely and disheartening, his future unfolding differently to the fanciful dreams he had envisioned as a young man. He hated the solitaire life on the trail, void of anyone to converse with or share a few laughs over a meal.

The early morning sun shone new life to the dreary but quaint town at the bottom of the hill—a perfect welcome mat for the overly cautious traveller.

Samuel pulled the brim of his hat lower over his eyes and lifted the collar of his trench coat to help shield his neck and face. During his *time-on-the-run*, he watched for opportunities where he wouldn't have to stoop to thievery and lower himself to the corrupt level of the men who chased him, but at the same time, a man needed supplies to survive on the trail. When towns bustled with activity, he'd resort to sneaking into farmers chicken coops, smokehouses, and field crops in the middle of the night. It wasn't his preference, but it was, at times, a necessity.

Inching his horse forward, he passed the welcome sign to Berrington, Wyoming, without generating as much as a glance from the few shopkeepers opening their businesses on the main street.

He slipped into the mercantile unnoticed. The storekeeper was jovial and obliging, taking Samuel's list and filling it without question while bellowing a hearty tune. The man's preoccupation with an order delivered to the back door kept him jumping between his first customer of the day and his supplier. Samuel stayed a total of five minutes.

On his way out, he lifted a newspaper from the table by the door. "How much is this?"

"Last week's news? Take it." The elderly man motioned for him to move on.

Sam nodded and left the store. While tying the cloth bag containing his purchases onto his saddle pack, his eyes scanned the area. Down the boardwalk, Samuel noted the location of the jailhouse at the far end of the street—a good direction for him to avoid.

He suspected the posse had long since abandoned his pursuit, the accusation of his involvement in a stagecoach heist merely a front to the real reason the bandits wanted him out of the area. The loss of women's jewelry and a meager thousand stolen dollars had no doubt, become a nuisance and waste of time, hardly worth the company's effort to chase the alleged criminal across the border. His reputation as a thief died as fast as the lie had sprung to life, and Slick Parker—Samuel's pseudonym—was a name rarely printed in the paper anymore.

Still, it was worth the extra time to be cautious. Running had turned into drifting, fear of discovery replaced by an intensifying loneliness that ate at his soul. He hated it equally.

He mounted his steed and rode slowly out of Berrington unnoticed, much the same as the rest of his life these days. Sam breathed in the freedom of the open range, attempting to convince himself for the hundredth time that he felt satisfied living the life of a wanderer.

Still, he secretly desired what he would never obtain—retribution—often chastising himself for his cowardly



departure from Montana, knowing at the same time, that confrontation was a futile endeavor. One man against countless hired guns without the law on his side was pure suicide. The empty homestead made it easier for him to ride away from his family's grave sites, and now it seemed that those who had run him off with false accusations, had tired from the chase, and moved on to their next victim.

That evening, he chose a secluded spot to make camp.

His only source of anxiety now came from the possibility of bounty hunters trailing him, but he doubted that a one-time stagecoach robbery would bring in enough reward to make it worth their while. He had no idea if his *wanted* status pinned to bulletin boards in sheriff's office had been withdrawn or covered up by names of more serious outlaws on the loose. The many months of traveling had likely put him in the clear, no one caring whether he lived or died.

Samuel spotted the newspaper he'd picked up at the general store, and after filling his cup with coffee from the pot simmering over the fire, he settled down to read it. Local news about a social held the previous week, along with a couple of pictures, headlined the front page. He read it for lack of anything pressing to do. When he reached page three, there was a list of deaths, and sure enough, the names of wanted criminals. He scanned the list, pleased not to see Slick Parker there. He breathed a little easier.

Sam's eyes took in another column. There were two positions for hire at the livery and telegraph office, and several ranches were looking for seasonal help. Further down the page, he spotted an article advertising for a mail-order-papa and he chuckled. The man had heard of wives traveling west to warm a frontier man's beds, but a mail order husband? That seemed ludicrous. The chance of strangers making a go of it in a land filled with danger was slim to nil. No part of the ad appealed to his good senses, but curiosity urged him to read on.

Mail Order Papa: Position available for a skilled cattleman to assist in the operations of the Miller Ranch. The position comes with the possibility of marriage, should the proper man be able to win the heart of the widow Jessica, and her children. Show up in Jelling on the noon stage. Ask for Danny.

“Danny?” he said this aloud, wondering who might be compelled to go to such lengths to see a woman wed. The reference to the stagecoach’s arrival seemed odd. It hit close to home, considering the robbery of which he’d been accused, and would not be *his* chosen mode of transportation.

Samuel mused as he sipped the coffee from his tin cup. A child might find it entertaining to watch people arrive by stagecoach and he wondered if that was the writer of the ad—one of the widows maybe? It made sense that a candidate could be turned away at the depot before they reached the ranch.

His thoughts turned to his younger brother Freddie, buried in Montana with their father and mother, and whose companionship Sam missed every day. The young wore compassion on their sleeves, causing Sam to further speculate that a lad might have written the ad, understandably one not wanting to burden his mother with the drudgeries of running a spread alone; boys instinctively knew women were not made for such hardship.

He downed the last of his coffee. A ranch job would be a quiet place to rest after his hard trek since leaving home. Jelling was a day’s ride away. Sam could make it by sundown tomorrow and go to see this Danny fellow first thing the next morning. The instructions about the noonday stage stumped him; he couldn’t take a chance using that means of transportation. Maybe he could follow the coach a safe distance in the rear and ride into town behind it in case the writer of the ad was watching.

That seemed absurd. Surely people had better things to do than come and watch passengers disembark from the daily stage. It would also take him another day before arriving for the interview. With no address given to forward a message as to the day of his arrival, what guarantee was there that Danny would even be at the depot?

Samuel debated his options. There was a widow to gain, one already established in a business. Most cowboys—without such noble intentions—would jump at the deal. *If* the invitation came from a youngster—which was only speculation on his part—the lad could be opening a can of worms by welcoming strangers to his family’s ranch. For someone not given to taking advantage of a situation he did not earn, the ad sounded like the best mail order opportunity he’d ever read. Take her or leave her sounded too good to be true, but leaving was his only choice. He’d do it discreetly so as not to hurt the family involved. Obviously, Danny—or his helper who had aided with the words for the ad for the underhanded business of finding a man for the woman of the house—cared for the widow and was looking out for her well-being.

Unfortunately for Danny, Samuel did not have a good history with the ladies, and he doubted if another opportunity would come his way. He had missed his chance, having already jumped the hurdle of youthful infatuation. Samuel had never met a girl he fancied after Abigail Stenwick. His first love and manipulation by others had ruined him for trying again, but he was still in his prime, and the notion of spending the rest of his life alone hurt more than he cared to admit.

The newspaper ad mentioned children. Denying that yearning would require all the strength he could muster.

He missed his brother, and he longed for a family.

Samuel sighed, thankful for the words, “possibility of marriage,” meaning he could come or go when it suited him or before he brought his troubles to the Miller ranch. For now, he needed a place to spend the winter and pad his wallet until he

could figure out what came next. He was built for working, not roaming the countryside, so if by answering the advertisement his labor could help maintain the spread, the arrangement would serve to benefit them both. Samuel felt a twinge of guilt in misleading Danny, giving him false hope that if Samuel should gain the position as the new rancher, he might also be the one to marry the lady of the house. Sam doubted marriage was in his future.

He tucked the paper into his sack and stretched out on his bedroll on the hard ground. The sun had disappeared behind the horizon, and the moon and stars had started to take their places in the night sky.

Before he nodded off, he thanked the Lord for getting him thus far unscathed and asked for guidance on the new leg of his journey.



Jessica wiped Darian's nose and handed him his tin lunch box. "Hurry up now, or your brothers will leave for school without you."

"Let them go. I want to stay and play with Sparky."

"Your dog will be waiting at the end of the laneway when you come home this afternoon."

"Aw, Ma, I already know my letters and numbers—why do I need an education when I know all about cows already?"

"Stop arguing, young man, and get your shoes on. Danny wants to get there early to chop firewood for Miss Peterson."

"He's the teacher's pet. That's why he gets such good marks." That remark earned Darian a swat up the back of his head from his mother. "Enough. Your brother is a smart boy; he does not need to be shown special favors."

The boy took the lunch box his mother held out to him and stood awkwardly, tapping his toe in place while she kissed the top of his head. He groaned and dragged his feet to the door.

When the screen slammed shut, Jess flew into action.

Sloan caught her as she started to clear the table of breakfast dishes. “You never mind that, girl. I know you are eager to get out to the barn and see how the new mother is doing with her calf.”

“Angus bloodline. This calf is strong and will be added to our ever-growing bunch of prime-producing ladies.”

“You have a glow when you talk about the livestock.” The cook relieved her of the soiled dishes in her hands. “You go on now and leave the kitchen to me.”

“Will you tell Betty I’m sorry that Darian left another pile of dirt on his bedroom floor? That boy always forgets to take off his boots before charging to his room. He certainly never did that when his father was alive.” She felt the predictable sadness cover her face at the mention of Curtis, her deceased husband of one year, three months, and six days. She could probably tell you the hours if her mind wasn’t chock full of never-ending details for operating a thriving ranch alone while trying to mother three boys.

Jess turned from Sloan’s watchful eye and headed for the door. She plopped a worn hat on her head and fastened her pistols around her hips. The day’s labor would not get done reminiscing about days gone by.

She had enjoyed eight wonderful years with Curtis, and she ought to be thankful for that and stop wallowing in the time that had been taken from them. It hurt as bad that day as it had when they found him lying face down in the river with a cracked skull. The team of horses had slid uncontrollably on the narrow, icy bridge, and the fatal accident had been over in one short minute. Her heart had ached. Often, in the days that followed, she had wished herself dead as well.

Sloan and Betty filled in the gaps with the youngest boys' care for months afterward, and Danny—Curtis's son from his first marriage—attempted to keep on top of the ranching business by shadowing Strickland, the lead hand. The hired men had given her ample room to grieve, and they carried out their duties efficiently, being the great team they were. For that, Jess would be forever grateful. The men also listened respectfully to the fourteen-year-old's recommendations, making the lad feel as if his contributions held merit and his future leadership was as valuable as his parents had been before the accident.

It had been tough, but the Millers had survived. Still, the dull ache of loss never left her for long, and she wondered sadly if it would ever go away. It made her better understand Curtis's depression when she'd first arrived as *his* mail-order bride, and mama for Danny. Her husband had known the suffering involved in losing a spouse, his grief compounded by a physical injury that tried to steal his mind as well as his leg.

Jess had filled the immediate void by running the ranch for him and tending to his son, a little callously at the time, she had to admit, now that she understood more the emotional stress he'd been under. The relationship had worked out in the end, and the two had fallen madly in love. It was an unexpected pleasure for both of them.

Now it was her turn to grieve the loss of a partner, and in the beginning, she did not handle her emotions well. The days blurred into each other as she drifted from task to task. If she were to be honest, it was getting easier. Jess could actually smile when recalling Curtis's antics as they'd worked the ranch together. She missed the comradery and sharing of dreams with her man. Running the ranch and raising children alone was a lonely experience, but she was determined to move forward, inch by inch, when necessary.

Jess was busy recording some results in the barn log when she heard a horse ride up. The men were all gone, either working the fence line or on the range, rounding up strays who

had escaped the cattlemen's eyes while driving the first group of animals back to the barnyard.

When a stranger's head popped inside the open barn door, she stood and went to meet him. "Can I help you?"

He started at the sight of her, and muttered, "I was told to talk to Danny—is he around?"

"No." She couldn't help but smile at the respect the townsfolk gave her son. "He is at school."

The man's brow raised. "School?"

"Yes. Danny just turned fourteen years old. He's a good boy, my son."

He removed his hat and seemed to stammer when his gaze took her in. As he observed her, she also studied him. The man was likely in his thirties, with brilliant blue eyes that shone with awareness. His hair was short and neat with a bit of a wave in it, but it was greasy and in need of a good scrubbing. A layer of whiskers darkened his chin, giving him an unkempt appearance, and she concluded that he'd been on the trail for a while. He stood tall, draped in self-assurance with a hint of humor toying at the corners of his lips.

"Who told you to ask for Danny?"

"Someone from town thought he might be hiring." A slight tremble in his voice put Jess on guard.

"I don't recall telling anyone I was looking to hire help."

"I was the one who initiated the conversation. I'm looking for some work and asked about it at the barber shop."

"I see you never stayed to get a shave while you were there." Jess figured she would take the strain out of the conversation. Who cared how he heard the ranch might need help? She had been thinking the same thing of late but hadn't followed through with the idea.

“No, ma’am. I suppose I was eager to snag a position in case others were lining up for the job.”

“As you can see, there is no line here. Most fellows have found their winter bunks elsewhere.” She needed to get back to work. “So, what is your name, and do you have any experience?”

His fingers toyed with the rim of his hat, making her wonder if and why he might be nervous. “Sam Barker, and I grew up on a ranch. Not as big as yours, but we had cattle, horses, pigs...everything a small-time farmer needs to survive. We planted and harvested fifty acres of crops every year. I know my way around the barn. Broke many a wild stallion in my day.”

“Why aren’t you still at home, helping your family?”

Sam appeared hesitant to answer but finally spat it out, getting straight to the heart of the matter. “Family is gone, and so is the spread. I didn’t see any reason to stick around.” Some depth of pain in his voice triggered old memories of the reason she had fled her home years before—her family had been murdered in cold blood, and her home burned to the ground. Jess instantly felt a connection to the man, compassion ruling her decision.

“This is your lucky day, mister. I do need extra help around here. The hired hands are spread thin these days, and jobs around the house and barn are stacking up. Winter will be coming soon—part of the reason you’re looking for cover, no doubt. Are you hoping for a place to hold out for a while, or are you a splash-in-the-pond kind of cattleman?”

“I figured I’d take it one day at a time, but with the cold weather coming, a bunkhouse sounds as good a place as any to hang my hat.”

“I expect a certain level of commitment. We’ll see how you get on with the fellows and take it from there. Pay comes once a month—fifty dollars for the new man.”

“That sounds fair to me.”



“Take your bags to the bunkhouse. There are a few spare beds. Pick a stall in the small barn over there for your horse and rigging. You can set your animal loose in the corral behind it. Come back after you’ve settled in, and I’ll put you to work.”

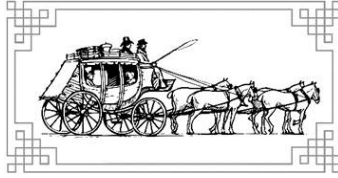
“Are you the boss lady, or does the youngster I heard about run things around here?”

“Danny lost his father a while back and has set his hand to learning a lot of jobs. The hired hands admire the lad’s efforts, so follow suit and don’t backtalk him. He is a smart boy, always looking for the next revolutionary idea to make our lives easier. The men experiment with his unorthodox concepts, and they all seem to get along.” Jess smiled at him, hoping to build a solid footing for their working relationship. “I’m the boss, and I pull my weight around here, Mister Barker; you can bank on that.”

He nodded and saluted, military style. “Yes, ma’am. I have no problem with a woman boss who knows her way around a spread. I’ll be sure to say howdy to your son when he comes home from school.”

Jess watched the newly hired man walk to his horse and lead the steed toward the bunkie to unload his bedroll and personal belongings. He looked strong enough, and God knew they could use an extra set of hands after their neighbor Cranks, had stolen a few employees out from under her when she was grieving and not on top of her game.

She murmured a low and grateful “Thank you, Lord,” and headed back to the rear of the barn to the small office, ready to tackle the mound of paperwork on her desk.



## Chapter 2

Sam was finishing up patching the roof on the cow barn when he spotted three children turning into the lane and heading for the house. They must have been Mrs. Miller's children, and he wagered a guess that the tallest youngster was the one he needed to check in with. It seemed strange keeping a secret from a grown woman as to the motives for bringing him to her doorstep. Sam felt certain the woman was unaware of her son's husband-shopping behind her back and even stranger, knowing that if he accepted Danny's mail order papa terms—one that casually mentioned a bridegroom—he'd be in cahoots with a youngster. He hated deceiving the boy, especially if he was as good as she bragged him up to be, but Sam had no intention of marrying his mother—not that the proposition didn't have its appeal after meeting the lady.

He collected his tools and made his way off his high perch to stand back on solid ground. Sam wondered how he and the boy would pull off their undisclosed alliance. The boss was bright and wouldn't be easy to keep secrets from, let alone cast aside come spring when he vowed to leave there a single man. Sam was glad the deal with the lad had given him the final choice.

An hour later, the youngster leaned over the rail of the corral where Sam was filling the water trough for the grazing animals.

“Howdy, mister. Understand you were asking after me?”

Sam ambled over to the fence and handed him the ad he had cut out of the paper. “Came as soon as I saw it.”

Danny glanced quickly over his shoulder. His mother was headed in the direction of the house, and that seemed to satisfy him. “I can’t believe you came today, the only day I never made it to the depot to see the stage come in.”

“You got a thing about stagecoaches?”

“Yeah. I have since I was a wee lad. Helps that it comes during the lunch hour on school days. Mama came in on a coach eight years ago, and I figured that if we were lucky once with a bride and a mama, we might get lucky a second time with a groom and a papa.”

Sam needed to nip that idea in the bud. “My luck has worn thin. Might not do to count on me for that.”

“Luck is not something I depend on. You are a godsend, and I believe He sent you our way for a reason. Local fellows have come calling, but Ma has turned them all away. Just a bunch of money-hungry vultures, she says, but she’s a winner, for sure. Pa tried to fight the attraction when she first came to us, but she won him over without even trying.”

“Interesting that Mrs. Miller was a mail-order bride?”

“Sure was. I lured her here, the same as I did you. I figure, why change the approach if it has a history of success?”

“You are a smart boy, just like your mother said. I sure hope your little deception doesn’t put a burr in her saddle and make her mad at you.”

“She will understand better when the mourning is replaced with joy. Love does that to a woman, you know.”

“Ah, a man of the world, and in knee-high pants to boot.”

Danny thrust out his hand. “The name is Danny Miller, and I can see you and me are going to hit it off just fine, Mister...”

“Barker. Sam Barker.” He hated the lie of his surname already, but reasoned it was for their own good—should trouble come looking for him in the days to come.

“Thanks for coming, Mister Sam. I suppose you think it’s strange, my asking for a ranch hand while hoping for a papa for the young’uns and a husband for Ma. As you can see, the Miller Ranch is growing and Mama is swamped with running it and raising my little brothers. I do my best to help, but school takes me off the spread too many hours of the day.”

“A boy with such ambition needs a strong dose of education—how long has your father been gone?”

“It’s been over a year since Pa died, and the mama I knew hasn’t come back to us yet. I’m banking that you will be the answer to both problems.”

“What about you? Are you hankering for a new father in your life?”

“I have lots of men in the bunkhouse that take me under their wings, but Darian and Grant need a different role—one only a good, honest man who loves their mother can fill. I won’t settle for anything less.”

“You seem to know what everyone needs.”

“Years ago, my father was in the same situation. He’d lost his wife, and after he suffered a terrible accident, he distanced himself from everyone, me included, so, I sent for a mail-order mama. Jessica arrived, and the two settled on a business agreement between them, but it blossomed into love, which surprised everyone except for me. I knew that God was in the matchmaking.”

“So, you’re expecting a repeat performance with me?” Sam would hate to kill the hope in his eyes by walking away, but his mother would be better off without him. Danny would just have to trust Sam on that.

“I figure the good Lord will have his way with stubborn hearts.”

“You’re a believer?”

“Yes, sir. Ma never misses a Sunday service.” He cast Sam a worrisome look. “You don’t have anything against God, do you?”

“Not particularly.”

“Good. That’ll put you in the boss’s good books straight off.”

“One thing we need to clarify here and now. In the ad, it said a *possibility* of winning a wife and family. If the Lord doesn’t wave his approval over the two of us, I’m free to slip away with your mother none the wiser, right?”

“I did say that, but I don’t know any man who wouldn’t want to take up housekeeping with Ma. She’s a great catch.”

“She seems like a fine woman.”

“Not too hard to look at, right, mister?”

“Easy on the eyes, for sure, son.”

“See? You’re catching on to the idea right quick.”

Sam was baffled for a minute, then he recalled having addressed Danny as ‘son.’ He’d have to watch that slip of the tongue in the future. There was no sense in building up false hopes.

He reached his hand out to the boy to seal the deal. “It’s nice to meet you, Danny Miller. I will enjoy helping your mother around the ranch. You have a first-rate operation here.”

“It’s all Ma’s doing. The place was failing when she arrived. With Pa sick, the neighbors figured they could try a takeover, but they never counted on Jess Miller, best shot in the territory.”

Sam smiled. Apparently, the boy worshiped the ground his stepmother walked on. He cuffed the hair on top of the boy's head playfully with his fist. "I see a bunch of riders headed our way. Want to introduce me to the fellows at the bunkhouse before we part company?"

"Sure, Mister Sam. You'll get on fine with the guys. They let me play cards with them sometimes."

"Sound like right hospitable chaps to me."

Sam set out for the bunkie, listening to Danny as he chatted about the games he had learned from the hired hands and the tricks that helped him win.

Before the horses pulled up to the hitching post, Danny leaned in and said, "You won't tell the fellows my tricks, will you?"

"Just one more secret between us. You can count on me, young Miller."



Jess heard the front door slam shut, as she placed the last bowl of hot food on the supper table. "You're late, Danny," she said when he came into the dining room.

"Sorry, Ma. I wanted Sam to feel at home at the bunkie before I left. The boys can be tough on strangers."

"They are all grown men and able to build their own friendships."

"Just wanted them to know you hired him, and he has a place on the Miller spread now."

"How did Strickland take to him?"

"Seemed friendly enough. Guess we will hear tomorrow if he has any misgivings."

"Misgivings? Now that is a new word—did Miss Peterson teach you that one?"

“It’s on the spelling list this week.”

“It sounds like the new teacher will prove a sight better than the last one.”

“Yes, ma’am. She’s a fine replacement for sure.” All three boys loved the young woman who had arrived in the summer to replace Miss Beesley—the only school instructor Danny had ever known until then.

“Well, hurry up and wash. I will dish out the food for your brothers while we wait.”

Darian turned up his nose at every additional scoop of vegetables Jess put on his plate. He was old enough to perform the task himself, but if she left it to him, the portions would be unbalanced; all meat and no potatoes or corn. She passed the bowls to Grant, and he took a double measure of everything offered to him. Her youngest had a big appetite, much like his late father, but that was where the comparison ended. The boy had little interest in the goings-on of the barn and preferred to help Sloan in the kitchen, asking plenty of food-related questions.

When Danny slid into his seat at the table and the cook joined them as had become their practice, they bowed their heads for Jess to give thanks for the Lord’s provision.

“Sam did a good job on the barn roof, Ma.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

He chewed hard and double-time before swallowing. “Sorry. Just wondering how you liked the new man’s skills, is all.”

“His work looks fine to me. I suppose we’ll see how skilled he is the first time it rains.”

“Suppose.” Danny looked at the only man at the table, their cook and friend for many years. “Maybe with Sam on the payroll, Ma will be able to relax a little, huh, Sloan?”

“Your mother is a hard worker. She would not know what to do with herself hanging around the house all day.”

Sloan's eyes shone with pride. He'd been at the ranch, serving both of Curtis's wives, but he did not hide the fact that he preferred Jessica, the latter of the two women.

"You've never had holes in your britches, have you, boy?" Jess grinned at Danny. "But I do appreciate Betty's contribution to cleaning the house. Housekeeping was never my favorite task."

"I'm surprised you can keep your eyes open late enough to get the sewing done, Ma. I hear you up sometimes in the middle of the night, pacing the floor and sniffing."

"Danny, that is enough. I don't need my son fretting about me. I am blessed when it comes to business and family, so drop your version of the nighttime wanderings."

"Grant, tell us what you learned in school today?" Sloan said, diverting the conversation, and releasing the tension in the room.

Jessica appreciated the cook's efforts. It was always the same when Danny got on the subject of Jess's welfare. She supposed it triggered memories of his emotional journey when his birth mother had died, and his father had taken to bed due to injuries, vowing never to get up again. That's when Jess had arrived on the scene and that was why she'd excused Danny's well-meaning but never-ending interference in her grief.

"At recess, Jeffrey pushed me down, and the teacher had to come to pull him off of me. Why do the Cranks hate us, Ma?"

Jess pushed away her troublesome thoughts to rejoin the conversation. "Our neighbors have always wanted our land, and when Angus went over to their side, their efforts doubled. They haven't made a push for years with your dad and I running the place, but greedy men like to create an undertow. Now that it's only me running the show, the Cranks might think they can intimidate my family. Children imitate their parents—the Cranks included—and if bullying peers will further their cause, they'd likely practice it."



Sloan chuckled. “That scheme never worked from day one with the Millers, so don’t you let them bully you, Grant. Your mother can provide her own brand of intimidation when push comes to shove, and *you* are cut from the same cloth.”

His confidence warmed Jess’s heart. He had always supported her, but this past year he’d been a pillar on which she counted daily. Now that she felt stronger, it was high time she took back the reins of her life and tended to both her roles as mother and boss lady. Strickland was getting on in years, and didn’t welcome added responsibility. It was enough to keep the men in line, dish out the jobs, and see that it all got done. Strenuous labor caused excruciating pain that kept him awake at night and grumpy the next day. Jess would not push him; she owed him a lot and would not forget the support he’d given her from the start.

“How about you boys and I go for a ride after supper? The pasture by the creek is the picture of beauty with the colored leaves scattered on the ground like a carpet.”

Grant and Darian squealed, and Danny beamed in delight. Jess realized it had been far too long since she had suggested an outing with her sons. Motherhood was important to her, and she had let it slip by dwelling far too long on the boys’ father, who would never ride the land with his family again.

The group voted to leave the cake and milk for a bedtime snack when they returned, and Sloan shuffled them out the doorway. At the barn, she helped the young’uns saddle their ponies while Danny finished his and started to work on Jess’s.

The combined effort had them all ready to ride in fifteen minutes. The evening air was cool, but they’d worn jackets, and the gentle breeze blowing at their backs seemed to push them toward their destination. It was a favorite spot, one where the Millers had spent many relaxing hours.

At the river, Jess pulled her horse to a halt when she saw a figure standing there with his back to them, staring at

the water trickling over the stones.

“It’s Sam, Ma.” Danny yelled out to the surprised man, waving as if they’d been friends forever. “Hey! Over here.” Danny was a trusting sort. Jess hoped the newly hired man would appreciate that characteristic. She knew there were many folks who might take advantage of his vulnerability.

The man smiled and waved back, inching his way from the riverbank to where they sat, straddling their mounts. He removed his hat and nodded in her direction. “Evening, boss. Just taking some pleasure from nature before I bunk in for the night.”

She slid out of her saddle and covered the distance between them, leading her horse. “You are free to spend your evenings as you please, Mister Barker.”

“Just call me Sam.”

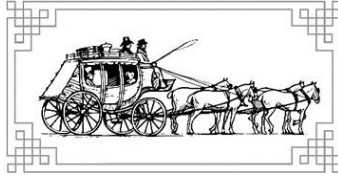
“Well, Sam, you have excellent taste. This is my family’s favorite spot to escape the day and unwind with nature and one another.”

“I’ll leave you to it then, ma’am.” He put his hat back on his head, and she recognized the peacefulness on his face as a result of being in the tiny piece of paradise on the Miller property.

“Ma, tell him he can stay. There’s lots of room for everyone on God’s green earth.”

She glanced at her son and saw the shine in his eyes deepen. He liked the man. He barely knew the stranger, but he had already passed judgment as to his credibility. Jess had not seen him look at a man like that since his father had died.

Jess sighed. If Sam’s presence helped speed up the boy’s healing, so be it. Truth be told she could use all the help she could get. Raising three boys was a difficult task, but with Sloan and Sam in her corner, she just might survive the challenge.



## Chapter 3

Sam woke up the next morning to find Strickland standing over his cot. His eyes shot open wide, and he sat up. “What? The sun’s not up yet.”

“The boss needs you.”

“Me?” Sam couldn’t cover his surprise.

“Trouble in the barn. She says if you’re going to be the homeboy, responsible for working close to the house, she could use your muscles.”

“Is it Gandy? Is the cow ready to deliver?”

“I have no idea. I’m just the one Gertie, our ranch’s guardian angel, delivered the message to.”

“Gertie? I haven’t met her.”

“You will, and I’ll leave you to make up your own mind about that gal. Don’t want to ruin the surprise.”

Sam shook the sleep cobwebs from his head and swung his legs over the side of the bed. The floor was cool, and his feet danced while reaching for his socks.

As he dressed, he watched Strickland stoke the fire. The nights were colder, warning them that winter would soon be arriving. On the way out the door, he nodded at Strickland as he settled back under the covers.

He caught his breath sharply at the brisk air that greeted him outside. He drew the collar up around his ears, and hurried toward the cow barn to see what was up. Funny how she'd call on him when she knew so many of the other men better. And what had Strickland said—something about him being the homeboy? After only one day of employment, he wondered how he'd gotten that privileged assignment. Worse still, he wondered how the hired hands might take it. Homeboy was commonly known as a cushy job coveted by fellows, especially in the winter months.

He wondered how much pull young Danny had in the placement of employees, and if he'd had a hand in the decision to keep Sam close to his mother. He supposed it would hinder his plan if the new employee was out riding fences or bringing in strays. The lad expected wedding bells and there seemed to be no diminishing his hope where that was concerned.

There were new horses to break, and he was skilled at that. His father had spent days giving patient instructions on taming animals for specific jobs, and Sam had learned his lessons well. He'd earn his right to be the homeboy in the ring. Now, cows—they were a different story. They were ornery and unpredictable creatures, but he'd mastered some disciplinary tactics that worked to manage them.

About the same time that the barn came into sight, Danny's image took form in his mind. The lad had taken a liking to him, and if he were completely honest, the boy reminded him of days gone by spent with his brother Freddie. Those treasured memories were buried in his heart, and Sam would need to be careful not to get lost in the emotional warfare and risk leaving Danny disappointed in the spring.

The Miller family showing up at the river last night had been a shock, though a delightful one, he reluctantly admitted. He had not expected to enjoy time spent with the lady and her children, but the fun erupted once everyone had relaxed, and he'd tagged along on the family outing. Sam had laughed and played like the carefree kid he remembered on the

Parker farm. Even after a sound, half-night's sleep, his response to their acceptance baffled him somewhat.

The deception was the only thing nagging at his conscience—his boss's total unawareness that she'd been set up by her eldest son. To add to the embarrassment, Sam, a grown man, had agreed to the lad's terms of taking or leaving her in the end, the latter being his sole objective.

Sam vowed to watch his heart as it could not survive any more cracks.

Two lanterns shone in a stall close to the back; it was Gandy. He hurried over to where he saw two women bent over the exhausted animal.

Jess glanced up, concern etched on her face. "Do you know much about birthing, Sam Barker? Gandy is having trouble—I think the calf is facing the wrong way. She lost one last year that way, but we hoped it was just a fluke."

"I've delivered breech. We need to get her on her feet. Are you and..." he looked at the other girl, whose eyes bugged out with fear at the sight of him.

"This is Gertie. She's a friend, but she doesn't take kindly to strangers. I'm hoping that after tonight, it will no longer be an issue."

"Howdy, Gertie. If you're feeling strong tonight, I'd appreciate you and the boss holding the new mother still. Maybe sing one of those soothing melodies to calm her while I check her out."

The woman did not respond verbally, but she shifted cautiously to help Jessica get the animal back on her feet. Together, they sandwiched the cow in the corner between two beams. Gertie gently stroked the frenzied animal, filling the air with a sweet melody that was low and comforting.

Sam removed his jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves. It was a messy job, but it was better him than either of the ladies.

His hands and arms disappeared inside the animal to the elbows, causing her to bawl in objection.

Gertie's tune took on a haunting melody.

The boss calmed the girl's agitated hand as it dug into the cow's hide. A friendly glance passed between them, and Jess guided Gertie's hand to return to a slow, tender rub.

Jess leaned over and whispered something in the cow's ear.

"You talk to animals?" Sam asked.

"They're smarter than you think, even cows." She managed a grin, and he looked away from her captivating eyes before it numbed his good senses.

Concentrating on his task, Sam reached in again and turned the calf slowly until the head was facing in the right direction. This made her roar, and the women had full-time jobs holding the animal still. With the shift in the womb complete, the mother relaxed, and soon, the calf dropped and the normal birthing process began. One hour later, an exhausted calf and mother were both alive to face a new day.

Jess closed her eyes and leaned her head against the barn pole. "That was horrid, but they survived." A smile came to her lips and she fluttered her lids open to stare at Sam. "You are a life saver, and in your honor, we will name the calf Samantha."

"We never named animals back home."

"It's definitely not a good practice, but my boys are relentless dreamers and believe that every one of God's creatures needs a name to identify itself."

"Wouldn't know much about appeasing youngsters, ma'am."

"Did you not have siblings?"

"Had a brother once, but he's gone, ma'am. It was just me and Dad at the end, but he's buried on the hill with the rest

of the family.”

“Ma’am definitely needs to go. The hands call me Boss or Jess. You have earned your keep in a very short time here, Sam Barker. Welcome to Miller Ranch.”

Gertie spoke up. “I’ll sleep here the rest of the night, Jess. You go on back to bed, and take the man out of here, too.”

“Now, Gertie, we need to show proper thanks to the man who helped us tonight.”

The disheveled girl looked sheepishly at Sam. “Suppose he’ll do in a pinch.”

“Go and get some blankets from the tack room. I won’t have you freezing in my barn.” Jess looked his way. “And you come with me. You need some water to wash up.”

At the well outside, she filled an old pail with cool water and handed him soap and a towel she’d taken from the barn. “Sorry about the chilly temperature.”

Sam cleaned up while the sun crept over the horizon. Smoke billowed from the house’s chimney, and in the distance, he noted the same at the cookhouse attached to the bunkie. “Looks like the world is waking up,” he said.

“Feel free to rest a while before you show up to tackle the new day.”

“No need. I can do emergencies day or night. Don’t be afraid to send for me.”

“Thank you for your willingness to be at my beck and call. I appreciate that. I hate disturbing the hired hands with ranch business after hours, tasks my husband used to do around the place.” Her voice petered out and a faraway look came to her eyes.

“It’s hard readjusting after losing someone you love.”

“Have you lost at love?”

“Yeah, I guess I have.” Sam knew his loss brought its own brand of regret. Whereas her eyes remained soft and mournful, he knew his had grown hard and resentful. He supposed their reminiscence of loss was not at all the same.

“I am sorry. The pastor says one day, my mourning will be replaced with joy. I feel the sadness lessening. I suppose that’s progress.”

“In His time, all things will be made new.”

Jess smiled. “You are a Christian man?”

“I know the scriptures. The Good Lord and me are on a break at the moment.” Sam intended to throw her off his scent by being an impossible suitor for the religious lady. No church-going widow would partner up with a man who was alienated from God. A strange yearning welled up suddenly within him, and he regretted cutting her off so quickly. “But I’m sure He’ll win me back in the end.”

“My advice is to give in. I turned my heart from Him for three long months after Curtis died. It was the loneliest period of my entire life.”

“I’ll give that some thought.” He put on his jacket to leave.

She took the damp towel Sam handed her. “Rest well. We have some horses to break today.”

“We?”

“Well, you actually. I tried it a couple of times but spent more time on the ground than I care to admit.”

“And here I thought, after your conversation with the cow, you had a special bond with animals?” Sam grinned, and watched a pink flush rush to her face.

“Only Gandy. She’s special.”

“Will the Gertie girl be all right in the barn alone?” Sam fished for information concerning the only other person who might be able to blow his cover. In putting bits of



conversation together, he had a sneaky suspicion Jess Miller was the one and the same Jessica Carrington he'd refused to court long ago, and if so, Gertie was the daughter who Fiona Fentlope had cast away. Although he'd never met Jessica face to face, Sam recognized Gertie as the shadowy figure that snuck around the neighborhood long after the Carrington fire, but managed to stay aloof. Sam might have landed himself into a prickly situation but determined to see it through this time, at least until spring.

“Gertie is very independent. She lives a private life, coming and going as she pleases. She resides in a cabin on the property. It's off limits to the men.”

“I'll remember that, should I happen to stumble upon it.”

Jess moved toward the house. “I'd best get myself inside. It's a school day and Darian usually gives me a hard time.”

Sam brought his fingers to the rim of his hat and headed for the bunkhouse. He smelled fried bacon in the air and heard his stomach grumble in response. He liked the Miller ranch. It revived all of the feelings he'd tried to stifle after his family's death. Now, if he could manage to separate those instincts from the more than desirable boss lady, his plan to leave there refreshed and renewed in the spring would stay intact.



Jess was out of breath when she reached the house. She closed the door tightly behind her, resisting the urge to look at the newly hired man's retreating figure. She leaned against it and shut her eyes warding off the emotions threatening to overtake her. This was Curtis's home. It did not seem proper to Jess to succumb to any sort of feelings for anyone other than her husband. The fact that he was deceased didn't matter—the Miller house was *his* shrine. She sighed, exhausted by the

conflict between her heart and her mind. When would she break free of love's bond?

She chided herself, and straightened her posture.

For goodness' sake—she had just met the man and knew little of his life before arriving on her doorstep. Jess was not some wide-eyed teenager looking for romance. She had her sons, Sloan, and the Lord, and that was enough.

“Tough morning, Jess?”

She looked in the direction of the kitchen and saw Sloan leaning against the casing. “Gandy's calf got stuck, and she couldn't deliver. I sent for the new man, and between the three of us, we saved the calf.”

“Three?”

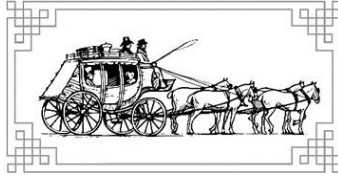
“Gertie was the one who alerted me. The old throw-the-stone-at-my-window routine.”

“She's a good woman.” Sloan's voice sang her praises. It warmed Jess's heart that her strange, life-long friend had been accepted by the Wyoming cook along with the rest of the Miller family and the workers on the ranch. “It sounds like the new fellow might fit in here just fine.”

“If the good Lord had only sent the cattleman our way to deliver Gandy's calf, I'd be satisfied. We shall watch and see just how irreplaceable Sam Barker will prove in future endeavors.” She headed for the stairs. “I'm going to freshen up and rouse the boys. Time to get the day started.”

On her way upstairs, she faced the truth confronting her. Despite her casual remarks, Jess already counted Sam among her irreplaceable employees. Gandy had been Curtis's favorite in the barn, and Sam had saved her life and that of her calf. Jess wouldn't forget that anytime soon.

A drizzle of healing washed over her, and Jess felt what seemed to be Curtis's gratitude trickling down from heaven above.



## Chapter 4

“Are you and I going to do this dance all day?”

Sam was talking to the horse, who exhibited defiance at every turn; he hadn't gotten past stage one when it came to breaking in the proud stallion. He noticed Jess approaching in the corner of his eye. She climbed onto the fence railing and watched his failing efforts.

He whispered in the animal's ear, “Now, look—you've gone and drawn the boss's attention. You know she's evaluating both of us, me as either a stableman or qualified buster, and you as either a profitable addition to her herd or meat for some man's table.”

The horse whinnied and stomped his foot, disturbing the ground beneath it. His nostrils softened, and his breathing relaxed after he completed his little exhibition. A tail swished and slapped Sam's lower back before the animal sidled up next to the man, bumping him off balance. He studied the animal staring at him, noticing a twinkle in his eye that hadn't been there before.

The stallion was taunting him.

“Really? Now you say that my getting tossed to the ground is all fun and games? I'll have you know, it hurts.”

The animal lifted his head and gave a loud neigh as if laughing at him.

“Fine. Since naming critters is the norm around here, I’m going to call you Jokester. How do you like that?”

The stallion bobbed his head up and down.

Sam laughed. The horse was, indeed, a smart animal. Thinking they might have bonded, he grabbed the leather lead line and walked in a tight circle. When that worked, Sam went for the gold.

“You bored yet? You seem like the type wanting to kick up your heels. We’re going to ride now, but just remember; I’m up top, and I want to stay there.”

The animal stood in place and allowed Sam to climb into the saddle with little fuss. The man felt the nervous quiver underneath him and continued to speak soothing words to the beast until he obeyed his command, and the two trotted off. At first, they moved at an awkward pace, but it settled into a smoother rhythm the second time around the corral. When Jokester kicked into high gear, Sam felt pleasure oozing from him; the high-spirited animal apparently loved to run.

He saw Jess clapping as the man and horse whizzed by her, her face lighting up like a child on Christmas morning. One more time around, and he slowed as he approached his boss.

“Bravo, Sam. I see you talk to animals as well.” She said it lightheartedly, and he grinned, recalling a similar comment he’d made to her earlier.

“It worked; that’s all I can say. And by the way, his name is Jokester if that suits you. It seems to fit the animal perfectly.”

“Jokester, it is, then. When he’s ready, you can take him riding anytime you want.”

“Thanks. He is a spitfire but he and I have an agreement; he doesn’t buck me off, and we’ll keep him clear of the meat market.”

Jess laughed. The outburst seemed to relax her, bringing life into her expression. “He’s the first of many horses you will be adding to the Miller stock, Sam Barker, and I know first-hand that to a man, every victory is special.”

He studied her. That nostalgic stare was back; the woman was thinking about her dead husband again. Sam wondered how someone could love that hard and long. He’d give anything for such commitment, but it was an experience she’d obviously known.

She jumped off the fence. “I’ll leave you to brush him down. I’m grateful the weather is holding for the animals to graze. I’d like to move Gandy and her new calf out of the barn for some fresh air as soon as possible.”

“Good plan, Boss. I’ll check on her when I’m done with Jokester here.”



Jess went straight to the barn, eager to let Gertie off the watch. The woman was sound asleep with her head on a straw pillow in the corner. The calf was suckling while mama stood strong on her feet.

“Afternoon, girl. You’ve had a tough night, but look at that beautiful new life you brought into the world. Enjoy her, it’s the last one for you. I won’t have our favorite cow dying on us.” She corrected her statement. “It’s not *us* anymore, Gandy, but you know that, right? Do you miss Curtis as much as I do?” She sighed and forced her mind not to dwell there. “You met the new man last night. Hope you liked him. You should. I think he saved your life and the little one’s too.”

“We would have figured it out eventually.” Gertie whispered in a sleepy voice as she moved slowly in Jess’s direction.

“Maybe yes, maybe no, but God had other ideas and sent Mister Barker our way. Give him a chance. I think you will like him.”

“The fellow has an uncanny likeness to someone you don’t want to know.”

“What are you on about this morning?” Jess was confused.

“The eyes, missy. A man’s character shows through his eyes. Men have tried, but they can’t hide the good or the bad from me.” She lowered her head, alerting Jess to the fact she was hiding something.

“Cough it up, girl. You can’t keep secrets from me either. I know you too well.”

Gertie seemed to study the woman whose family had taken her in after her mother had rejected her. She had done it a second time, when the lost girl traveled to Wyoming to find the only surviving member of the Carrington family. When Jess’s new husband had opened his home and property to the displaced girl, Gertie had moved into a small nearby cabin and had lived there ever since.

“It’s a shadow from my past, is all, but the man’s known some pain, like you and me before Mister Miller took us in.”

“Quite possible, Gertie. I have sensed the man’s inner battle. All the same, I think he’s trustworthy. Any past hurts will fade away in time.”

“Will he stay on, missy?” Gertie had that guarded look on her face again, and Jess wondered what she might be holding back.

“Who knows a cowboy’s mind? One day at a time is good fishing.”

A male voice sounded from the open stall. “Who’s going fishing?”

Jess spun around to see Sam leaning against the post. “Oh, just us girls talking here.”

“You’ll have to show me where your fishing hole is. I’d like to try my luck with a rod on my day off.”

“A fisherman, too? Is there no limit to your skills?” Jess said this playfully, but Gertie stared at her with the strangest expression. “What—do you think the lake is going to run dry of fish if Sam catches a few?”

Gertie scrunched up her brows until they met in the middle, giving Jess a back-off glare. Still none the wiser as to what was going on inside the girl’s head, she turned her attention back to Sam. “Gandy says she is ready to go outside.”

Jess walked on one side and Sam on the other, guiding the new family to the fenced-in field behind the barn, still brimming with nutritious hay waiting to be cut for winter feed.

Glancing back, she saw Gertie leaning against the barn, her arms crossed and staring after the procession. Now, what was wrong with her? Jess knew that prying anything from the cloistered woman was near impossible. She would have to wait for Gertie to spill the beans herself.

The animals marched in. Gandy found the nearest green patch and started to eat. The calf took a few comforting sucks and then gazed around at her new world. It must be a marvel to see the grandness of her surroundings after resting so long in her mother’s cozy womb.

Jess closed the gate, leaned on it, and gazed at the new addition to the Miller Ranch. “Welcoming a new arrival never gets old, Sam.”

“Hope you feel that way about those of us with two feet as well as the four-legged kind.”

Jess glanced at him and saw the teasing smile. “I already said I appreciate your work so far. You won’t be hearing praise on a regular basis—I pay men to do a job, and I expect them to perform it to the best of their ability.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He saluted, and she smiled, hoping to regain the easy atmosphere between them that her brisk comment interrupted.

“I need to go to town to pick up supplies. Will you be all right alone?”

“I don’t need minute-by-minute instruction, Boss. I’ll find something to keep me busy. I happened to notice some repairs to the smokehouse that needed doing.”

“Oh, yes. That totally slipped my mind and must be fixed. A few of the men will be leaving in a week to go hunting for winter meat. You are very observant.”

“I try. Safe travels to you, then.” He turned to notice Gertie still at the door, staring at them. “Does that girl have a bone to pick with me?”

Jess followed his gaze across the yard. “No figuring that one. Just go about your business, and don’t mind Gertie. She can be moody at times. Probably didn’t get enough sleep last night.”

“I’ll take your word that she’s harmless, although those piercing eyes tell another story.”

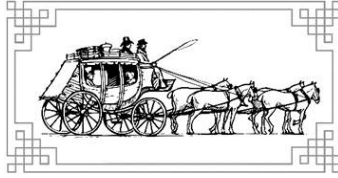
“Harmless? Did I say Gertie was harmless?” Jess laughed and started to move toward the house. The whole courthouse scene of years ago rushed back into her memory. Wouldn’t Sam be surprised to know the woman had killed a man to protect her friend? She stopped in her tracks and spun around to view the barn, suddenly identifying the look the girl had given her when leaving with Sam and the animals. If she thought the new man was a threat to Jess, would she succumb to her old ways?

The thought presented a whole new risk for *any* man showing a friendly interest in the widowed Mrs. Miller. Hopefully that was not the direction in which Gertie’s mind wandered. Regardless, Jess would have to speak to the woman. If not Sam, a man might eventually come along to steal what was left of Jess’s heart and she needed to know he would be safe while they courted.

Yes, she must speak to Gertie as soon as possible, and create new personal boundaries if she were to continue living



on the Miller property.



## Chapter 5

The next two weeks left Jess's emotions in a muddled mess. Her boys took to the new man as if he had been there forever, and she often had to shoo them away so he could continue with his work. She caught him several times explaining the steps for a particular task, like how to smoke meat, repair a thatched roof, or groom a horse until it purred like a kitten. The list of how to do everything under the sun expanded every day. Jess knew the boys shadowed the man, and considered Sam Barker next to perfection.

Jess found Darian listening intently as Sam taught him how to find the perfect place to cut a maple log for firewood. The boy hated school, but he devoured every word the cowboy teacher spoke.

"I'm going to town today. Sam, would you care to ride along?"

"Come on, Mister Sam—it'll be fun," Darian shouted.

Jess watched him squirm and shy slightly away from the boy. "After the wood, I was going to clean up the mess this week's birthing made in the barn."

"We sure have had a good crop of calves this fall," Darian said with great enthusiasm.

"The calving season is such a rewarding time for ranchers building their herds."

“Most folks breed cows in the spring so they can graze the young’uns longer, avoiding the chance of disease falling on calves from being locked up inside the barn all winter.”

She laughed. “We do it two times a year, Sam. Seems the animals like to mate, and who am I to dissuade growth in the Miller stock?”

He laughed. “Thanks for the invite, but with the fellows not back from the range, I’ll stick around to protect the place from prowlers.” Something in his stance suggested that was not the reason at all. He hadn’t been off the property since he’d arrived weeks ago. Still, she safeguarded his privacy and chose not to pursue the invitation.

“No problem. You tackling the dirty work in the barn will save me the trouble. Sloan will come to town with me and the boys. He can haul the big order of kitchen supplies. They are mostly all his purchases anyway.”

“He’d be your better choice.”

Jess glanced back as the wagon left the laneway, to notice Sam carrying an armload of wood toward the mounting pile on the kitchen side of the house. The boys sang a ditty between wrestling matches in the back, Danny seemingly unable to keep them under control.

She turned around, and in her firmest voice, said, “If you two youngsters do not settle down this very minute, you will stay in the wagon the entire time we shop at the general store...and no candy.” Her threat connected with Darian and Grant, and the rest of the trip was completed in magnificent silence.

After the last of the supplies had been loaded into the wagon, Jess left the boys licking their stick candy by the wagon and hurried to the post office to get the mail.

The bell jangled as she opened the door, and the elderly man behind the counter looked up from writing in his ledger.

“Mrs. Miller—you just walking through the doorway has brightened my day.”

Jess smiled. The old man loved to flirt, but he was harmless enough, and he'd been a good friend to Curtis. “Good afternoon, Gerald. Is there any mail worth reading in my box today?”

“Three—one for young Danny.” He chuckled. “I hear there is a sweet filly stalking your son. Maybe it's from her.”

“A girl is interested in Danny? He hasn't done anything in town here that I don't know about, has he?”

“No, ma'am. It's a romantic kind of interest. Girls tend to get the itch sooner than boys.”

Jess stared in horror. “He's only fourteen and not the least bit interested in piquing a girl's fancy.”

“A boy's mama never sees it coming. He's not too young to dream—a lot of fellows' hand pick their future wives while still in school.”

She took the mail from Gerald and frowned, but when she glanced at the inscription addressed to her son, she laughed. “The note is from his Grandma Miller out East, so you can stop the gossip about romance right here and now.”

“How about you, Mrs. Miller? Been a long time since we buried your man.”

“Stop meddling and stick to handing out the U.S. Mail.” Jess announced firmly, but she hoped her eyes would soften the rebuke with kindness.

Jess shifted to the better light coming through the window to examine the rest of her mail.

The bell over top of the door jangled again, and she watched a nicely dressed woman walk inside. She smiled politely at Gerald but did not look in his direction before heading to the right side of the building, where Bill Satire ran the telegraph office. The two shared the same space, both of

them being in the business of delivering or sending news to folks.

Her voice rang out strong. "I'd like to send a message to Montana."

Jess gasped and covered her mouth.

Bill looked up. "Do you have it written down?"

"It's quite simple: 'Fiona: The trail ends here. Will put plan in motion tomorrow.'"

"Is that it, ma'am?" Bill said when he'd finished ticking on his machine.

"Yes. How much do I owe you?"

"Seven dollars and ten cents for ten words."

She fumbled in her drawstring purse and counted out the change for the man. Without another word, she left the building, and the two men shrugged their shoulders as they were not used to such formality. Jelling was a small town that boasted of its friendliness. The stranger who had just walked out did not fall into that category, and her abrupt manner baffled the two seniors behind the counters.

"Thanks, Gerald. See you next time." Jess waved at Bill. "Have a good day."

The bright sunshine caught her unawares and she blinked hard to focus. When her vision cleared, Jess saw the woman cross the road and disappear into the hotel. She shrugged. Lots of people had contacts in Montana. She wondered when she would stop jumping at every mention of her home state and there could be hundreds of Fiona's living there. Jess had been cleared of any wrongdoing with the Fentlope family in court ages ago, but Gertie's rescue from the penitentiary for her part in the man's demise had only come because of her child-like mind and the Millers willingness to become her guardians.

Her over-protective tendencies were acting up again. The overheard conversation probably didn't concern them at

all. She needed to relax and enjoy her life in Wyoming. Let the town and whoever might fall prey to the stranger's plan on the morrow deal with it.

She turned to the right and headed back to the mercantile, where Sloan and the boys were waiting with the supplies packed and ready for transport to the ranch.

"All set, Mrs. Miller?" Sloan asked as she climbed onto the bench beside the driver.

"I am." She was distracted by the name the woman had mentioned at the telegraph office. Its familiarity did not sit well in her stomach.

"You not listening to the boys, Jess?"

"What?" She forced her attention back to the carrying-on in the back of the wagon. The children were at it again. Sloan seldom disciplined her boys when she was present, always honoring her place as their mother.

Jess turned to the back. "Boys! I will think twice before I invite you to town with me again. You're giving poor Sloan a headache."

"It's the sugar candy kicking in, Ma." Danny offered the information matter-of-factly as if he were an expert in food reactions. "They always get crazy after treats."

"I believe you're right, Danny. We'll have to remedy that. Darian, Grant—there will be no sugar in your diet for one week. Maybe next time you will act like the good boys I know you can be."

"A whole week?" Grant yelled. "That doesn't include pie and cake, right, Sloan?"

"What your mom says goes. No sweet desserts for you at the table until next Saturday."

Loud groans came from the back of the wagon. The punishment managed to dampen their overcharged mood and they quieted.

After a few minutes, Sloan broke the silence. “Something bothering you besides the young’uns? You seem preoccupied.”

“A woman sent a telegram to someone in Montana whose name I’d hoped to forget forever.”

“From your old life?”

“Yes. A name that nearly sent me to prison. The old man is dead, but his wife still lives, and he had sons who would be grown by now. What do you think they want with me?”

“Did she say anything about you in the message?”

“Not directly. Just that the trail ended here, and she’d put the plan into action tomorrow.”

“She could have been talking about anyone,” Sloan said, no doubt in an attempt to reassure her. “You swore to Curtis that you’d keep the horror of what you suffered in the past behind you.”

“And I thought I had—The incident just hit me strong—I have a bad feeling is all.”

“I’m sure the greedy man who executed your family has many enemies that his children inherited and have long since given up trying to revenge his no-good reputation in your case. You rest easy now. The Jelling court cleared your name of the old man’s murder, so no one has a bone to pick with you.”

“But Gertie, the one who did pull the trigger still roams free.”

“If someone wanted retribution from that girl, they’d have come for it long before now.”

Jess sighed. “You’re right, of course. It just brought back all those painful memories.” She brushed away the wetness gathering in the corners of her eyes. It seemed as if her emotions were released in a steady flow of tears whenever

they pleased since Curtis's passing. "I really need to get a grip."

"It is time to move on, Jess. Curtis wouldn't want you wallowing in the past, bad or good." He chuckled. "I remember when you first came to the ranch. You were all business and out to prove yourself. Poor Mister Miller didn't have a chance with a spitfire like you."

She smiled. "Who would have suspected we'd fall in love so deeply that the well of tears won't dry up?"

"Ranching is a hard business, and life out here in Cut Throat County is a continual challenge. You need to resurrect that whipper-snapper your husband fell in love with. The boys need a full-time mom, and the place needs to feel the hand of iron that made the Miller Ranch so prosperous these many years."

"I realize that everything you say is needful, and sometimes, I think I see that spitfire within me peek out from hiding," Jess said with a grin.

"Especially around Sam, the new man." Sloan laughed outright. "You act tough around him, just like you did with Curtis, but I see signs of weakening. It's only a matter of time."

"Between me and Mister Barker?" Her voice nearly shrieked the name.

Sloan laughed harder. "Ah, so it's *Mister* Barker you're calling him now? Interesting line of defense."

Danny leaned in between the two seated up front. "I like Mister Sam—I wouldn't mind if you courted the fellow."

"Bite your tongue, Danny Miller. I'll not be courting Sam Barker. I am far too busy for that nonsense."

"Aw, Ma."

Something in the recesses of her mind clicked, and she gawked at Danny and then Sloan. "You two are not in cahoots again, sending for another mail order match, are you?" She did



not wait for an answer before rambling on. “Because I won’t have it. Curtis needed me to care for him and mind the ranch while he recovered from his injury. Neither Mister Barker nor I need anything from one another; let me be clear on that point.”

“I’m innocent, Ma,” Danny’s face reddened. “Not into that mushy stuff.”

She grimaced. “And when did that change? You were into matchmaking when you were a very young lad. Recall the ad I answered?”

“It turned out good in the end, right?”

“I hear rumors you might have an eye on some gal at school—is that true?”

“MaryJo is hunting me, Ma, not the other way around.”

“Good. You are far too young.”

Jess wondered about the twist of his mouth that usually meant he was holding something back—was it MaryJo or the subject of mail-order spouses that had triggered it? She’d give the lad a break and not pursue the subjects with him any longer.

Instead, Jess looked at Sloan. “And how about you?”

“I reckon you can find your own man when the time is right.” His eyes never left the road ahead.

“And you keep thinking that way, hear?”

“I hear.” Sloan jabbed Danny, who was hanging off his arm. “You hear that, boy? Your Ma has spoken.”

“I hear.” Danny shrunk back rather gloomily and stared at the passing scenery on the sides of the wagon the rest of the way to the ranch.

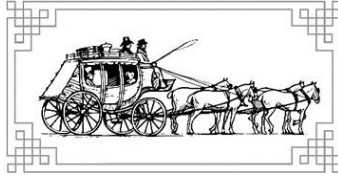
Jess wondered if her moving on meant that much to Curtis’s son from another mother. He was a passionate child with wild ideas he regularly put into motion. Danny inspired Jess in many ways. He was a boy of fine character that would

make some lucky lady a devoted and dependable husband someday, but she hoped not for many more years. She wanted him all to herself for as long as possible.

Sharing him with Sloan, their family friend, seemed natural, but the bond growing between Danny and Sam Barker of late made her cautious and jealous to some degree. What she envisioned his presence might bring, helping her flailing parental responsibilities, suddenly felt like a security threat, and Jess questioned what triggered the change in her thoughts where Sam was concerned.

She felt a headache coming on. It hurt her brain to ponder along these lines for too long. Give her a full day of physical labor, and she could handle it easily, but toss in the emotional surges of unrest affecting her entire being, and exhaustion pulled her under. Jess refused to let it happen this time, and she felt her determination kick in. Suddenly, it seemed feasible that defeating her depression once and for all was just around the corner, and she rejoiced in that.

The headache eased, and Jess smiled, turning her concentration to the vast land surrounding her that she'd grown to love.



## Chapter 6

The next day, Jess was leaving the homestead when a carriage drew up. She gasped when she saw the passenger and debated whether she should run and hide or confront the enemy and get it over with. Her past had no claims on her—the property had long ago been sold off to a reputable buyer, and Gertie was living peacefully on the Miller ranch. The Fentlopes had no reason to interfere in her life again.

Her heart quickened, and all the raging thoughts of the previous day returned. Perhaps someone wanted to contact the estranged girl, that half-grown child who had been rejected and turned out when her mother had wed the prestigious Charles Fentlope and the girl the Carrington family had taken under its wing. Even back then, Gertie had chosen to live separate from the hospitable family, and Jess's parents respected her privacy, permitting her to live in a shanty on their property. Could the sons born from Gertie's mother and the merciless tyrant she married have grown a heart after the trial? Perhaps it was not restitution for their father's death they sought but the desire to bring their estranged half-sister back to Montana. That seemed doubtful considering the girl's own mother's rejection at the court hearing. Most likely, the Fentlopes were out for revenge. Bad blood ran deep in that family, and it was only by the grace of God and the Savior's blood that their eternal destiny would change.

She swallowed hard, a new sense of courage overtaking her. Jess had sworn to protect Gertie after the trial when she moved onto the Miller property to start life anew. The grown woman showed no further signs of violence after murdering her arrogant step-father, taking revenge for her neighboring friends and Jess's family after he'd slaughtered them in cold blood. The impulsive act seemed to have left the woman's mind, leaving behind a more docile adult female in its wake. The act had strengthened the childhood bond between the two girls, Gertie's protective aggression of old seemingly equal to Jess's pledge to remain friends forever.

The two ladies were as different as day and night, but heaven help the person who tried to separate them.

Jess walked out of the shadows into the bright sunshine, acknowledging the stranger—the same outsider she'd seen in the telegraph office the day before, wanting to contact someone named Fiona—as she approached.

“May I help you?” Jess asked in the most hospitable tone she could muster.

“I do hope so. I am searching for someone, and I was directed to this ranch.”

“Does your *someone* have a name?” Jess held her breath.

“Samuel Parker.” She chuckled in a nervous, girly-style unbecoming for a woman her age. “I let the man slip through my fingers and had to chase him across the countryside to find him.”

Jess inhaled deeply. The lady—whom she'd imagined was connected to her arch enemy, Fiona Fentlope—did not seek Gertie or Jessica Carrington-Miller. She chided herself for jumping to conclusions.

“There is no one here by that name.” It was the truth. Sam Barker was close to Samuel Parker, but again, it was likely a popular name all over the country. The woman was barking up the wrong tree.

“Who’s asking?”

“My name is Abigail, and I am most eager to make amends. Are you sure?”

“I don’t know anyone named Parker. Where are you staying?”

“At Quint’s Hotel in town.” The lady’s upturned lips curved downward, revealing her annoyance. She was obviously a woman who did not like to be put off.

“If I hear anything, I will send him your way.”

“I think you’re lying.” The woman’s face dissolved into a cloud of gloom. “Call for him now, please. I won’t be put off another minute after traveling all this distance.” She sniffled into an embroidered hankie and dabbed her eyes. It was a late coming façade if she intended to arouse Jess’s compassion.

“Like I said, if I hear anything, I will direct him to the hotel. It seems as if you will have to wait.” As far as she knew, her Sam Barker—should he be the man in question, simply having changed his name to avoid Abigail when she came calling—could be nearby listening to the conversation. The man moved about the place like a bee in a bonnet, finding jobs that needed doing and never expecting praise for going the extra mile.

If the disguise applied in Sam’s case, Jess couldn’t fault the man for switching his identity—for she’d come to the Miller ranch with secrets of her own, and she refused to rat on the new man who might *possibly* be the lost love for which this woman searched. In fact, Jess dared to hope that the beautiful stranger had been misinformed and came hunting at the wrong spread. At any rate, Jess sensed the need to warn him—if he was employed under a false name—and she chose to heed her instincts, allowing him the time to prepare for the confrontation.

She cast aside the raw emotions eating mercilessly at her. That the given possibility grieved her tender heart, it

caused her to reason that she might be harboring feelings for the new man after all.

The woman scanned the yard, and when her gaze landed back on Jess, she said, "I'd rather come back here and surprise him...when you locate him." Her voice was peppered with accusation, but in a heartbeat, it mellowed, and she pleaded, "You will keep my coming a secret, won't you? Perhaps *you* could bring the news personally to the hotel, after you find him, of course."

"Why would I do that?" Jess's guard was up now.

"Because I asked you to."

"I have better things to do with my time."

"I don't know why you are protecting Samuel, but I assure you, he will be glad to see me." Her face contorted in thought. "Unless, of course, you are attracted to my man, because if you are..." Her voice piqued. Jess grinning thinking she squeaked rather comically, especially when the tone aligned with her expression.

"I have no reason to hide your Mister Parker from you, and have no more time available to discuss the issue. Good day, Abigail. Have a pleasant stay in Jelling."

The woman's eyes bulged as if Jess had somehow slapped her stunned face with her words. Jess figured the woman in her yard had missed her calling—the stage would have been better suited to her than chasing a rancher across the countryside. Still, anyone who might be involved with Fiona in Montana—should, by a bizarre chance, Jess's Fiona Fentlope was also Abigail's contact—was a threat to any hard-working community of settlers. She would not allow bullies—even those disguised in pretty dresses—to harass her hired men. Experience had strengthened her grit, and she was determined never to bow to greed targeted to monopolize rural communities.

Jess pushed past the stunned woman—who thought more of herself than she ought—and headed for the barn.

She'd seen Sam go in there a while ago and figured she might as well get the questioning over and done with.

At the door to the barn, she turned to see the woman's carriage leave the yard. She slipped inside to find the newly-hired man leaning against the casing, chewing on a hay-stem, watching the entire performance at the house.

"Did you enjoy the show, Mister Barker?"

"I don't know what you're talking about unless you mean the pretty lady visitor at your front door. She is a looker." He moved from the door to pick up the shovel. "Myself, I was headed in to clean the stalls."

"The lady was looking for a Samuel Parker, a name very close to yours, don't you think?"

"Both are pretty common."

She stared at him, unsure if he was stringing her along or not. "Well, it's none of my business, but if you happen to run into a fellow with a similar name, the lady would like to meet him at Quint's Hotel in town. She seems very eager to make amends. Seems the two had a romantic tiff, and she is most sorrowful."

"Is that the story she tells?" Sam appeared to have picked up interest.

"Abigail—she didn't leave her last name—seems mighty eager to reconnect. Came all the way from Montana." She watched the blood drain from his tanned face, and his complexion turn gray.

"I'll keep an eye out for the chap. Wouldn't want the gal to die of a broken heart." Sam almost hissed when he said this, and she sensed his anger rising.

"Fine. Get on with your work, then. I have some paperwork to finish in the back office."

"Why don't you have an office in your house instead of working in a stinky barn?"

“I do, but rarely use it. I prefer to make myself accessible to the ranch hands and keep my personal life as separate as possible from business.”

“Your boys love the farm.”

“Yes, Danny and Darian will be my cowboys. Grant? He prefers to mess around in the kitchen with Sloan.”

“Best let them find their own paths in life. Can’t force a child to live our dreams.”

“Wisely said, Mister Barker. You will make a good father someday. Perhaps sweet Abigail knows that.” She snickered and left him standing there, knowing full well she had not swallowed his story. At the same time, Jess wondered what might make him run from home and feel forced to lie about his name to his boss. Then again, she’d lied before to save her own skin and had no right to judge another.

Disappointment overwhelmed Jess, unsure whether the feelings originated from her heart or the children’s loss as they all liked the new man. Enduring the raw emotions while climbing out of grief’s hole was complicated.

Jess sighed and decided, for the boys’ sake, that she would allow Sam the opportunity to make things right in his own time. Meanwhile, she needed help to prepare the spread for winter, and she would watch Sam carefully. She hated the idea of any sort of trouble visiting the Miller ranch, the one area of her life that was running fairly smooth of late.

Jess was standing by her bedroom window in the dark when she saw Sam Barker ride out. She supposed that answered her question as to his real identity and where she and the boys stood with the man who was already spoken for.

Relief flooded her from deep within, for her attraction to the man had come upon her rather unexpectedly, catching her off guard. Now, in light of Abigail’s coming into the picture and his bald-faced lie that he refused to deny even when given the opportunity, that feeling had been quenched.



Jess dismissed it as none of her business. She would get on with healing her heart at a slow, comfortable pace.



Sam pushed his horse all the way to town. He was exhausted from the full day at work and waiting to sneak out until after the last lantern was blown out at the big house. He did not want the boss to see him leave, but at the same time, had no idea how to deal with the threat awaiting him at the hotel.

Abigail, the seeker of city life in the fast lanes, were all the things Samuel had no desire for his future. She was Fiona Fentlope's niece, and barely old enough to know right from wrong, when she came from Boston to comfort her aunt after Charles's death. The girl's adventure was cut short by her parents, not lasting long enough for her to fall in love with Montana, ranching, or him, but she had toyed carelessly with Sam's equally naïve heart. He'd fallen hard, barely recognizing when she sucked every moral from his life that mattered. Abigail had left town without so much as a glance behind her, the stagecoach wheels stirring dust in his face as he watched his *first love* hurry home to her sophisticated world in the east to attend finishing school. They both knew Abigail had no plans to return and it had broken his heart.

After she left, Sam buried himself in his work. More relatives arrived at the main house, willing to take up the dynasty torch, and the troublesome Fentlopes continued their attacks on anyone who got in the way of building their empire. It relieved him that the tenderfoot Abigail, had not stayed to witness the further cruelty of her aunt's family.

He felt equally certain that the young woman had not come to Jelling to pick up the romance where they'd left off.

The streets were lively with cowboys. Merchants unwound at the saloon. He passed it by slowly, concentrating on the glow of the lanterns surrounding the Quint Hotel. It

held a welcoming aura for boarders, but for him, the modern decorative building reminded him that she fit in there and his life did not. If only that realization remained strong enough to rule his heart when he was standing face to face with his heartbreak.

He walked inside, inquired as to the lady's room number, and trudged up the stairs. Sam inhaled deeply, raised a hand to knock, lifted a quick prayer for help, and rapped firmly. Showing a strong front would win him the day and send her packing.

The door swung open, and she wrapped the silken robe closer around her body. "Samuel, it is late to come calling."

"I work long hours, but I didn't want to prolong your visit to Jelling a day longer than necessary."

"I can't very well go downstairs dressed like this." She glanced behind her into the empty room. "I will invite you in if you promise never to tell Daddy, or anyone else for that matter. After all, we do have a romantic history, and I've always felt safe with you." She glanced down the vacant hallway before beckoning him to enter. "Hurry up, then, before someone sees us."

Abigail took a step back, and when he was fully inside, she shut the door and breathed a sigh of relief. "The instructors at school would be horrified to see what I've become."

"And what have you become, Abigail?"

"Why...I'm not sure anymore. I returned to Auntie's to find her alone and lonely with her young sons all grown up. She told me of the crime you were accused of, and I couldn't believe it. I had to search you out for myself to see the man you've become before...well, you know, before we settled our wee argument."

"Wee argument? Is that what you think happened to us?"

"It was only meant to be a summer vacation to help poor Auntie adjust. Father expected me home to complete my

studies. He had a string of men lined up to court me when I graduated, but I truly wanted you and your little farm.”

“You hated that I owned nothing and worked on your relative’s land.”

“It was all part of the family holdings. Besides, I’ve mellowed, Samuel,” she moved in and reached for the collar of his shirt to pull him closer.

She smelled of lilacs and starch. He took a giant step back. “Mind your reputation now, Abigail. Daddy would never approve.”

Abigail hissed and he saw a glimpse of the same temper that always simmered close to the edge of her tongue. “Do you want me to beg you to come home and start over? Fiona regrets the part her family played in your departure and wants to make it up to you...for my sake.”

“How did you find me? The posse has been off the trail of this innocent man for a long time now.”

“Oh, Cain knew where you stopped running. He had a man on your tail to make sure you didn’t hightail it back and point fingers at the Fentlopes—that’s all they care about, not retribution. Everyone is terribly sorry about the entire incident.”

“You forget that I know you, Abigail. That nervous finger twisting your curls is a dead giveaway. I don’t believe a word you say.”

She stomped her feet. “I won’t let you cozy up to that Miller lady!”

“Jealousy? That seems even more ridiculous. The woman is merely my boss and not my sweetheart.”

“Now, I don’t believe you. Why in all the country did you land in Jessica Carrington’s backyard.”

“Jessica?” His heart plummeted, knowing his earlier suspicions were true.

“You know full well who she is.”

“I’m afraid you are one up on me there.” He would let her take the lead.

“The marriage deal Uncle gave to your father as a last-ditch effort to pull you over to his side. You told me about it, so don’t play dumb.”

The bizarre arrangement had been suggested by Charles, the senior Fentlope, years ago, thinking such a union might win him control over both families. The Parkers sacrificing their son Samuel, to marry the Carrington girl would have accomplished that take-over without the bloodshed that eventually followed. But Samuel refused to become the pawn in the power-hungry man’s game, never considering the deal or agreeing to meet Carrington’s daughter. He stayed clear of the family across the lake, declining the devious plan to wed and later betray them. In response to his denial, the scheming Fentlopes’ turned against both families, shedding innocent blood to achieve his goals. Sam grieved for a long time following the brutal slaughter that ensued. At the peak of his regrets, Abigail had swept in and awakened yet another emotional calamity, which ultimately turned sour. The younger Fentlope sons finished off his resilience by setting Samuel up with the stagecoach robbery to rid them of the last uncooperative kin left standing.

“It was blackmail, and I wouldn’t have any part of it. Your uncle was a ruthless, arrogant control-freak and I wanted no part of him, thankful that my father’s wife was not my birth mother, and no Fentlope blood coursed through my veins. The man’s cold heart showed in his lack of allegiance to his own kin and good neighbors he couldn’t buy out, don’t you see that?”

“I do not. Jessica is a murderer!”

“The court acquitted her of the murder.”

“All lies. She and that disgraceful half-wit Auntie Fiona conceived with a drifter killed my Uncle Charles.”

“You have your facts mixed up. Besides, what does any of that have to do with us?”

“Well, I won’t let your so-called boss stand in my way, and I certainly can’t marry a stagecoach robber. If you return to Montana, Cain assured me he will fix it with the sheriff to have the charges dropped.”

“Not interested in going back. My direction is forward, and my future does not include you. Return to Boston and marry some rich dude who will bow to your fancy.”

“I don’t want one! The mess with the Carringtons all happened way before us. You didn’t want her then and she can’t have you now.” Abigail paced, then turned to face him. “Your boss doesn’t know who you are, right?”

“I suspect she doesn’t. The woman is only interested in a good day’s work. I assure you; that is the sole basis of our relationship.”

“But in coming here, you now know who she might have been if you hadn’t been so stubborn. Does that change things for you?”

“I haven’t figured that out yet, but regardless, I see no need to hurt the woman and her family by bringing up the past.”

“My idea exactly. It is clear your best solution is to come back to Montana. Auntie says we can live in the new house they built on the Carrington property.”

“He doesn’t own that spread.”

“Wrong. The Fentlopes purchased it from the poor fellow Jessica sold it to. He couldn’t make a go of ranching.”

I’ll bet, Sam fumed, sure the ‘poor fellow’ wasn’t given a choice in the matter. “Jess wouldn’t be pleased to hear that.”

“She’s gone from the area and has no say.” Abigail exhaled slowly, and he could see her mind working overtime. “You called her Jess. You *said* she was only your boss and

now you are calling her Jess,” she exclaimed with exasperation.

“She doesn’t like a lot of formality.”

“If you refuse to leave with me, I will tell her you are a liar and a part of the mess she ran away from years ago. How would you like that on your conscience when she slaps your face and orders you off the Miller property?”

“You’ve learned your lessons well from the Fentlope’s.”

“They are successful, and you can be, too, by my side, or I can tell the local sheriff you are a thief who is wanted back in Montana.”

“The claws have come out.” He shook his head in disbelief. “And you still think, with all this baggage between us, that we could live happily ever after?”

Tears fell on demand and she crumbled into the chair. “Oh, Samuel, I hate to ruin your little setup here, but I must. We will be happy; you wait and see.”

Samuel needed time to figure out a plan. “Give me a couple of days to set my affairs in order.”

“You want me to hole up in this hotel until you pack your bags and buy two stagecoach tickets out of here? That’s absurd—I want to leave tomorrow.”

“Love is all about meeting in the middle. It can’t always be about you or me. I owe my boss some notice—she depends on me.”

She stood and moved in closer. “Now, that’s the sensible young man I remember falling in love with.”

“Did you ever truly love me, Abigail?”

“Of course. Why else would I be here?”

“That remains to be seen.” He squeezed her hand, hoping she took the gesture for affection—although it was far

from it. “We have a deal, right? Lay low, and I’ll be in touch in a couple of days.”

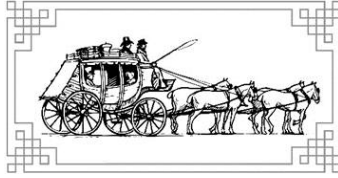
“Are you thinking you can swindle the Millers out of some money?”

Sam was shocked, but he managed a grin to match hers. What had become of the innocent young Abigail he knew? That’s what he wanted to know.

“Make it quick, Samuel. I’m not very patient.”

He reached for the door handle, but she rushed to intercept him, preventing him from leaving, and planted a kiss on his lips. “Something to remember me by.”

Sam couldn’t wait to get outside and breathe in fresh air. He had no idea where to go from there, but the Miller family would not fall prey to another attack from the Fentlopes—not if he could help it.



## Chapter 7

The next morning, Jess found Sam gathering tools from the utility shed. “Where are you off to?”

He glanced at her, pulled down a clawed bar from a nail on the wall, and piled it along with the rest of his tools. “The roof on the bunkhouse sprung a leak last night. A couple of fellas got rained on.”

“I must have slept soundly. I didn’t realize it had rained.”

“Just a sprinkle.” He himself had gotten wet returning from town.

“I’m surprised the boys didn’t have you out there in the middle of the night fixing it.”

“Nope. Just moved their cots over and stuck a pail under the drips.”

He was not behaving like his usual jovial self, and she hoped her mentioning his mood might spur an update on his late-night trip off the property. “I thought that maybe *you* were under the drip. You seem a little tired this morning. Not your playful self.”

“I stayed dry as a bone.” He lifted the crate he had filled with tools and nodded. “Have a good day, Boss.”



Jess was shocked by his abruptness and watched him leave. Was he just going to ignore the whole Abigail thing? It annoyed her to think he did not consider honesty a trait worthy of their relationship. She sighed, knowing that many drifters hid something from their past, but they had not mattered to her. The admission that she actually cared one iota when it came to the ranch hand's interests irritated her even more.

Seemed that these days, her emotions were chock full of surprises, but she did not like what this one implied one tiny bit.

An hour later she had worked herself into a frenzy, without accomplishing anything of value. Jess headed for the house, poured two glasses of lemonade, grabbed a handful of cookies from the jar, and placed them on a tray. With her bait in tow, she tripped off to the bunkhouse. His planned deception needed settling, or she would go insane trying to figure it out. What a mother does for her children, she reasoned, then she dismissed the notion that she was playing martyr, knowing full well it was she who sought the answers for a totally different reason than protecting her boys.

Jess called up to the man on the roof. "I have lemonade and a cookie if you need a break."

He looked down, and the initial excitement she'd witnessed in his expression evaporated into a blank stare. "Thanks, Boss. You can leave it there, and I'll get it later."

"The drink is cold *now*, and I thought we could share our break time together."

She did not wait to hear another excuse for his dodging her, but sat on one of the porch chairs. She heard him coming down the ladder a few minutes later. He wiped his hands down his pants legs before sitting on the chair next to her, a small table separating them.

"Thanks again, but you don't have to babysit me. I'm sure you have lots to do."

Jess decided to get straight to the point; the man was infuriating. “I do, and one of those things is confronting my newest employee about the lies he’s told to get a position on my spread.”

His sigh was heavy, and his eyes were contemplative as he whittled away at the cookie unconsciously, popping crumbs into his mouth. “My name is Samuel Parker—Sam, for short—not Barker as I said. I was accused of a crime in Montana, which I did not commit, but the law is twisted there, and they’d sentence me anyway. The sheriff is in cahoots with the real robbers, so the blame will fall on me.”

“That was not what I expected, but I thank you for your honesty. I understand the so-called law in Montana. I’m from there myself and was hunted down for a murder I did not carry out so, you see, there was no need to keep that from me.”

“What did you expect me to admit?”

“I figured it might have something to do with our lady visitor yesterday.”

“Abigail? On the romance scale, she is history, but I’m fairly sure love is not the reason she came all this way to find me. Her appearance has me wondering what’s festering behind the scenes.” He swallowed down his lemonade. “I might have to leave Jelling sooner than I’d hoped. I won’t be bringing trouble to your door. She has connections with that uppity lawless bunch in Montana I mentioned.”

“Years ago, when I finally told my husband I would rather leave than share my troubles, he asked me if I planned to run forever. He wanted to know if this was not a good place to dig in my heels and put the past behind me.”

He stared at her as if looking through her. “He was family; I’m not.”

“True, but we support one another around here as if we were.”

“You don’t want me; take my word for it.”

“Maybe my boys do.” Why had she used them to quell the feelings gnawing at her stomach as a result of his leaving? She was a coward—worse than Curtis had been, for at least he had a physical handicap to go along with his grief. Jess was strong in body and mind, and it was time she acted like it.

“I’ve learned that most people caught in our trap have low self-esteem and are not qualified to make statements that imply someone else does not want you around.”

“I must admit, I am a bit of a mess.”

She attempted to lighten the mood. “What part of Montana are you from? Maybe we were neighbors and never met—the bunch in my area were nasty too.”

“We lost our crops for two years running in the north country and couldn’t pay the mortgage. The bank took everything we owned, and when wealthy relatives of my stepmother offered to bail us out, my dad jumped on it. They were not what my ma called the ‘good side of her family,’ which we found out the hard way.” He stood. “If that’s all, I’d like to finish the roof now. Got a lot of thinking to do.”

“Of course, Sam, but please consider digging your heels in. We would miss you if you left the Miller ranch.”



From the rooftop, Sam watched the woman walk toward the house. Every time she opened her mouth to speak, he was awed by the grace and confidence of the words spouting out as if it were second nature. She even walked with poise, not allowing her past to dictate the woman into which she’d matured. Sam knew about her past, but so did Abigail. She knew the whole sickening proposition her uncle had concocted to save the Parker family’s skin and corral the neighbors into the Fentlope monopoly at the same time. The Montanan tyrants had not counted on kin from the north having a conscience.

How was Sam to know his past would collide with his present? Worse yet, how was he to know that the one who'd broken his heart had the key to destroy his future?

In spite of his initial hesitation surrounding the mail-order papa idea, he often thought of the Miller boys as his own, and the boss lady as his wife. It was a far-fetched dream, no doubt, but at the same time, it felt very real, as if it somehow had the potential to happen.

He pounded harder on the board, and hit his finger with the hammer. He shook out his hand to stop the pain and glanced in the direction of the house.

What would Jess say if she knew he'd been a part of a plan to hoodwink her homestead? True, she had lost the ranch in the end, after her entire family had been slaughtered by the gunslingers Charles Fentlope had hired. That same day, in revenge, the big man himself was shot by Gertie.

Sam's mother never shed a tear for the loss of her estranged relative who had used people for his own greedy purposes and disposed of them when it suited his fancy. That is what happened in the Parker case. Samuel had refused to mislead the Carringtons, still of the old-school thought that one should marry for love and not entrapment.

Would Jess Miller understand his predicament and forgive his family for being related to her worst enemies? If Abigail had anything to do with it, the woman would know the truth he'd left out of his explanation, and before the night was over. *If* he stayed—a big *if*—he would need to tell Jess the missing parts before Abigail related her twisted version of the truth.



“Hey, Mister Sam—can I come for a ride?”

He glanced sideways and saw young Danny leaning against a nearby post. Sam carried his saddle, quickly searching his mind for an excuse as to why the lad should not

come along. “You probably have homework. Your ma wouldn’t cotton to my taking you away from your lessons.”

He proceeded to saddle his horse, hoping it would end the pleading. “Ma is busy tonight, or I’d have brought her along. You’re not even trying to win her.”

“Why do you say that?”

“When she was wiping dishes, I heard her telling Sloan that you were already thinking about leaving. It ain’t true, right?”

“Isn’t true. I think you need to address the homework, especially the grammar part.”

“Ah, I know it’s not proper English, but doggone-it, Mister Sam—I expected more effort from you.”

“I thought you were leaving it up to God. He hasn’t shown any romantic prompting on my front. Maybe another gentleman will answer the ad and be along to sweep your mother off her feet. She deserves better than a ranch hand.”

“I took the ad down, and I don’t want any other gentleman callers. She needs a rancher.”

“I gather you don’t think the hired help are gentlemen?”

“There you go, twisting my words. That’s what gentlemen folks do, so I suppose you ain’t the right fella after all.”

Sam could tell it was the lad’s disappointment lashing out. “I’m sorry, Danny. Got some things on my mind. Didn’t mean to push you aside. Do you want to go to the fishing hole for a while?”

“Yeah!” Danny squealed as if the previous conversation had never taken place. “I’ll go get my pole.”

“Ask your mother’s permission while you’re in there,” Sam yelled after the fleeing boy. The last thing Sam needed

was to strain their relationship any further by assuming she was still all right with him hanging out with Danny.

Then again, what did it matter unless he stayed like she suggested, defying the ones wanting to take him down? He had been wrong to think they'd forgotten about him, that regaining the Parker's cabin by the water was enough; but the Miller ranch? Of all the places he *could* have stopped for the winter—let alone answer the ad to become Danny's mail-order papa—who would have dreamed he'd come face to face with Jessica Carrington? Living on the other side of the lake, and being new to the area, Sam had never met the young bride Fentlope hoped he would marry and manipulate the rest of her life. Samuel was a man of integrity, emphatically refusing to go along with the *gentleman's* bizarre schemes.

Yes, Danny had the *gents* of the world all figured out, and Samuel Parker was not one of his kind, then or now. Still, his heart had betrayed him, and he wanted more than anything to stay, wed the woman, and help raise her children. Maybe have a pack of his own little Parkers, too.

“Are you ready to go, Mister Sam?”

He jolted back to the present. “Sure. Best go saddle up your horse. It's just about the time of day the fish start nibbling.”

“Ma expects trout, or if you're lucky, some whitefish. Lots of them. And she says for you to come to supper tomorrow night.”

“She said that?”

“Sure. And Sloan's doing spicy potatoes in the oven and fresh vegetables we just dug up from the garden today. It's going to be a feast.”

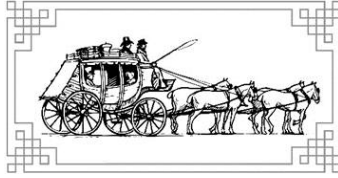
“Then we'd best get a move on and hook us some fish for the cook's pan. Hurry and saddle up.”

The two of them set up in Danny's favorite spot and fell silent. Sam wondered what was going through the lad's mind. He hadn't dwelled on the news of Sam's leaving or

nagged about him abandoning his mail-order papa request. At fourteen, Danny was mature, probably resulting from losing his father at a vulnerable age and luring in a new mother to replace his. He was likeable, and Sam knew it would be hard to walk away from Danny. Jess's other two sons had found a place in his heart as well.

Their mother and father had raised their sons to be fine lads, and Sam wondered if he could be half the father Curtis Miller had been. A young family needed a strong head sitting at its table, and of late, all Sam knew was running. Still, for him to travel all that distance to be offered a second chance with Jessica Carrington-Miller seemed mind-boggling. This time around, there would be no guilty conscience in the way or someone else pulling the strings. The idea of staying was worth considering, if he could just be sure the family would not be put in harm's way.

Maybe Danny was right, and God was directing their paths.



## Chapter 8

“Have you seen Danny today?” Jess asked Sam when he arrived at the door for supper the following evening.

“No, not since we caught all those fish last night.”

“I saw him this morning. He went off to school alone, Grant and Darian were feeling under the weather. Those two spent most of the day in bed,” Sloan said.

“They are a conniving twosome, Sloan. It seems you’ve been hoodwinked by the best as they are fine now and getting dressed for supper. Said a fish dinner was just what the doctor ordered.”

“Sorry if I went over your head, Jess. You left early for the hill country and...”

“And you were lonely; I get it.” Jess chuckled, bringing a smile to her cook’s face. “Did Grant have a miraculous healing and lend a hand in the meal preparation?”

“Now, Jess, you know I can’t keep him out of the kitchen.”

The boys walked into the room, rubbing their bellies. “Smells good, Sloan.”

“You two didn’t happen to see Danny today, did you?”

“No, ma’am,” they said simultaneously, then took the stance of staring at their shoes.



“Neither of you are good liars. What are you not telling us? Danny should be here. He was looking forward to company coming.” She looked at Sam and he sensed that her smile was friendly.

“Nothing important,” Darian said, “but he should be back by now.”

“Let me be the judge of what is important, Darian,” Jess said.

“Danny said he wanted to visit some lady in town. He was going to sneak away at lunch time and be back in school when it let in again. Said it was important to our future. I didn’t understand what he meant, but then Danny talks about stuff I don’t understand all the time.”

“He went to see a lady? Like Mrs. Frost at the store? Maybe he’s shopping for someone’s birthday,” Jess winked at Grant.

“Ah, Ma, Danny apologized for not having any money to buy me a present after spending his savings at the newspaper office.”

“At the newspaper office?” Jess frowned at the cook. “Sloan, what are you up to?”

“We’re getting off track,” Sam interrupted. “Boys, do you recall Danny giving you the name of the lady he wanted to visit?”

Grant put a finger on his chin and contorted his face. “It was something like Abby—maybe one of those black-hooded sisters from the cloister. Do you think Danny is changing religions?”

“I do not. Could the name have been Abigail?” Jess continued speaking to her boys but stared openly at Sam with a look fit to kill.

“That was it!” Darian said. “You know her, Ma?”

“She visited here briefly, but Danny wasn’t home.” She turned to face Sam. “Did you mention the lady to my son?”

“I wouldn’t do that, Jess; I think you know that.”

Sloan interrupted. “He came to me after you left the kitchen last night, fishing for information about our conversation while we cleaned up the dishes.”

“He overheard our discussion?” Jess appeared horrified.

“I believe he did,” Sam intervened. “He accused me of leaving, just before we left to go fishing, but I didn’t give him any reasons; I swear.”

“That I believe. You are the most shut-off man I’ve met in a long time. It’s frustrating. I can see where Danny might have gone to speak to your Abigail.”

Sam put his hat back on top of his head. “I’ll ride into town and ask her.”

“Not alone you won’t. He is my son, and I won’t have him trying to fix everyone’s messes.”

“I’ll saddle our horses.” Sam fled out the door and heard it slam behind him. Jess had every right to be angry.

Danny did not need to know about Sam’s past, especially the part concerning the woman he knew to tell half-truths and was in cahoots with his arch enemy—and Jess’s too, he reminded himself.

Jess seethed all the way to Jelling, and Sam could not think of any way to console her. Finally, when he could bear her silence no longer, he said, “Even if he went to see Abigail, that wouldn’t explain his going missing. She may be spiteful toward me, but she has no reason to hold Danny there.”

“Possibly, but she might have been the last one to see him, and that’s why I need to confront her. If she doesn’t know, I’ll ask everyone in the entire town. Danny is far too trusting, and so am I, it seems.” Her voice cracked at her last remark.

Sam cringed. “When we find Danny, I’ll leave. You won’t need to put up with me anymore.”

“Did I say that?” she screamed, but then she sobered. “Let’s just find Danny. His fish dinner won’t stay fresh for long.”

Sam knew she could have cared less about the boy’s supper. Her mother’s heart was working overtime, and he was to blame. Why would the lad go to Abigail, and what, exactly, had he overheard in that kitchen conversation? That was a question he could ask. It might help when they met with Abigail.

“If you don’t mind my asking, what might Danny have overheard you talking about in the kitchen?”

The look she cast his way had turned to contempt. “Pretty much everything I knew. Sloan has been my listening ear ever since Curtis passed away. He is a loyal friend and always has our backs. He promised my husband he’d look after us if anything ever happened to him. No one expected he’d have a reason to, but Curtis’s name was called up yonder; there’s no denying that God gives life, and He takes it away in His time.”

“So Danny knows Abigail was my sweetheart from the past?”

“That was mentioned.”

Sam knew that tidbit would concern Danny since he hoped his mother would be the next Mrs. Parker—or Barker. “Did he hear about my name being Parker?”

“He did. I’m not surprised he’s hiding out, embarrassed at being your friend when you lied about your name, the simplest of things.”

“The name of a wanted man,” Sam reminded Jess.

“He’s just a boy,” Jess said. “You went fishing with him after that—did he not bring anything up then?”

“Nothing about Abigail or my name. Just the leaving part about which he was disappointed.”

“No doubt. All the boys have taken a liking to you.”

“Danny is strong, like his mother—all your sons are—but your eldest has a good head on his shoulders; he won’t do anything dumb.”

“Going to see your woman was dumb!” She kicked her horse and sprinted toward the “Welcome to Jelling” sign.

“She is not *my* woman,” Sam shouted after Jess, but she didn’t turn back around.

Sam was more confused than ever, the decision to stay or go changing by the hour. Jess hated him, and he deserved it. His initial intention of spending the winter and leaving guilt-free in the spring stuck in his craw. When this mess was over, he’d be gone from the ranch, leaving another chunk of his heart with the Miller family. Would the running never stop?

He cleared his head of yesterday’s skeletons. For now, he would need all his wits about him to deal with Danny’s situation. The boy needed to let his mother find her own love in her own time. There was no rushing a grieving heart.

At the Quint Hotel, they secured their horses to the hitching post and went inside. The fellow at the desk was reading, and he jumped when they approached.

“Can I help you?” He took a closer look and added, “Hey, weren’t you here a couple of nights ago?”

“I was. Is the lady in her room?”

“Saw her come back about an hour ago.”

“Did you see a boy come in around noon?” Sam asked.

The clerk ignored his question when he spotted a familiar face. “Why, it’s Missus Miller—what brings you to town?”

“I am looking for my son. Have you seen Danny today?”

“At the hotel? What would a youngster want here?”

“Forget it, Jess. Let’s just go see Abigail.” He grabbed her hand and led her to the stairs.

When out of the clerk's view, she jerked her hand free. "Wouldn't be fitting for your sweetheart to see you holding my hand. Might make her disagreeable to help us."

"It might, at that." Sam recalled the jealousy in Abigail's eyes; whether it was an act or not didn't matter at the moment. What *did* matter was that he had *not* returned to tell her that he was packed and ready to return to Montana as she expected. It was the furthest thing from Sam's mind and that might set her off.

His head told him to run from the women. The first being young love, carefree and non-committal, and the second, the one who had claimed his heart and who Sam could never have.

Sam stopped at the door of her room, inhaled deeply, and let the air escape slowly to calm his nerves. He lifted his hand and knocked, three times before it opened. Abigail brought a hand to her throat in mock surprise, her gaze softened, and she almost purred. Then she noticed Jess and the fire returned to her eyes.

"What's she doing here?"

"Can we come in? We have a few questions."

"That wasn't part of my bargain, Samuel. Don't test me."

Jess pushed herself in front of Sam. "My son is missing, and we were told he was coming to visit you around noon today. Was he here?"

"Your son? Why would he come here?"

"He has befriended Sam and most likely wanted to plead with you to leave him alone and go back to Montana."

Abigail pushed Jess to the side and thumped on Sam's chest. "What have you been telling these people to make a boy come pleading in your defense? You know that won't cut it if Cain comes. It also won't cut it with the local sheriff if he knows what you're accused of."

“We didn’t send the boy. He came on his own. We need to find Danny, and then you and I can talk. The boy’s welfare is the first concern here.”

“Well, no boy came calling on me today, Samuel. I’m saving my best for you—the only boy I care about.” She spoke in a coy manner, sprinkled with familiarity, as if Sam might actually be jealous of a fourteen-year-old boy calling on her. There was no end to how low she would stoop to get him to return to Montana, and somehow, Sam had discerned it was not long-lost love that motivated her.

He glanced under the table just inside the door to see Danny’s rabbit foot. The boy had told Sam it was his good luck charm, and he carried it everywhere with him.

Sam laid a hand on Jess’s arm. “We’ll leave you alone, then, Abigail. If he comes later, be sure to let us know. We’ll be searching the town.”

Jess glared at Sam, but he pushed her gently ahead and led her stiff-armed down the hallway. When the door of Abigail’s room closed, she turned to face him. “Why are we leaving? I had more questions to ask that might have triggered her to open up.”

“I don’t need her confession. I know Danny was there.”

“And how did I miss that bit of information?”

“His lucky rabbit foot was on the floor. She must have missed picking it up when he came calling, which means she is lying, and that concerns me.”

“Why would she lie about Danny’s visit?”

“Not sure, but I plan on watching her from the shadows. See where she leads me.”

“What part of this picture am I missing?”

“She wants me back in Montana, to go to their kangaroo court and see me sentenced to time in the penitentiary—leastways that’s what will happen whether she

plans it that way or not. I suspect her kind is all about the payback, and her mother is related to the young man who committed the crime I am accused of.”

“You need to take that to the sheriff, but—how does any of that concern Danny?”

“Ransom? She might stoop to that.”

“You think someone kidnapped my son? Samuel Parker, I will never forgive you for this.”

Sam took her arm, pulled her the rest of the way down the hall to the stairwell, shut the door, and pinned her to the wall. “I wouldn’t blame you for never forgiving me, but knowing how you like honesty I needed to tell you my conclusions so far.”

“And what am I supposed to do? Hide in the shadows with you until your girl meets up with whoever helped her pull this off?”

“No, I was hoping you’d continue asking around—the stores, the church, his teacher—anywhere you think Danny might have gone.”

“But his lucky rabbit foot proves he went to see that woman—why should I waste my time?”

“Good Christian folks will pray and keep an eye out for Danny, neither of which will hurt our cause, and it will keep you out of the mess I created. I am sorry for bringing this on you and your boy.”

“Why would she take your boss’s son to get back at you? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Jealousy never does.”

Jess looked confused. “I don’t understand—jealous of your relationship with a child?”

“And his mother. It’s always about another woman.”

He could see the puzzle come together in her eyes. “Danny—is he hoping that you and I get hitched? Would he

tell that to the woman?”

“He just might have.”

Jess’s shoulders sagged. “Oh, Sam, I’m not ready for this. I’m not as strong as you think I am.”

“No one expects you to be. I’ll rescue the lad, and then ride out of your life. I already told Danny that a lady needs to find her own fellow in her own time. He needs to understand that ordering a husband is not the way to solve his mother’s grief.”

“I knew it! He wrote an ad for...let me guess—a mail order papa?”

“He did, and I answered, but it won’t work between us, Jess, so I’ll leave you to raise your family alone with Sloan—right after we find Danny. I hope I’m wrong about Abigail’s involvement, but the rabbit’s foot doesn’t make her denial any easier to swallow. I just can’t imagine she’d have the nerve to do a kidnapping alone, which makes me think Cain and his cohorts are here in Jelling. He wouldn’t hesitate to use the boy as bait to draw me out.”

“It sounds so dangerous.”

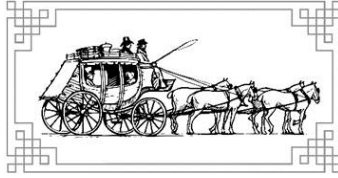
“All you need to know is that Danny will be safe, even if I have to go back to Montana with the enemy.”

“No! We need to talk to the sheriff. I won’t have your sacrifice hanging over our heads. You could use help.”

“You can tell him everything if you trust him as much as you claim. I’ll be watching the entrance of the Quint Hotel for Abigail to come out.”

“Come on, now. Let’s go downstairs and get this investigation rolling.”





## Chapter 9

Jess walked down through the main street and any side roads that might have a store Danny might have browsed. The shops were closing, but the owners came to the door to talk to Jess. She was well known and respected in Jelling, and there were few people who would ignore her presence.

Still, no one claimed having seen the boy that day, and Jess grew more concerned with each negative response. Her son never stayed out that late, and Sloan would have come to town to tell her if Danny had returned to the ranch.

Miss Peterson lived in a small cabin close to the schoolhouse, and Jess headed in that direction. There was a lantern lit inside when Jess tapped on the door.

The spinster answered almost immediately. “Mrs. Miller? You’re out late. Come on in for a cup of tea if you have time.”

Jess stepped inside the immaculately clean kitchen and dropped into a chair. Exhaustion from her full day had started to wear her down. “Don’t mind if I do, thank you. I missed supper and it’s starting to catch up to me now.”

The teacher grabbed a cup from a shelf over the counter before taking the pot off the cookstove. She set it in front of her guest and filled it to the brim. “Missed the young’uns in class today. Hope they’re feeling better.”

“Yes, the boys are much better this evening. They should be back in their seats next time you open the school doors.”

“Danny is passing all his lessons at the top of the class. You can surely be proud of that boy.”

“I am. In fact, he is why I am out this late.”

The woman uncovered a plate of cookies and motioned toward them. “Help yourself while we visit. It’s not a great supper, but it will keep the tummy from grumbling until you get back home.” She helped herself to one, and before she bit off an edge, said, “What was that about Danny?”

“He didn’t show up for supper, and I wondered if he left class with the rest of the children at the end of the day.”

“Danny? Why, no. He was with us in the morning, but he never came back in the afternoon. I figured he’d gone home to help nurse his siblings; he is such a caring lad.”

That solidified Darian’s story about Danny’s sneaking away during the lunch recess, but it did not help tell her where he might have gone afterwards. “His brother mentioned something about an errand he wanted to do at lunch, but to his knowledge, Danny planned to return to class in the afternoon.”

“Sorry. I realize no mother wants to hear that her son has skipped school, but the errand must have taken him elsewhere.” She brought the cup to her lips but stopped short of drinking from it. “Are you saying Danny never came home at all?”

“Yes, Miss Peterson, and I have been everywhere around town asking after him, but no one recalls seeing Danny today. It’s getting dark and I am very concerned.”

“Of course you are. That is not like your Danny at all. He’s the most responsible lad in school this year and would never behave so inconsiderately.”

“Did the children say anything? Maybe Danny mentioned his errand to someone.”

Miss Peterson took a long sip, and her brows scrunched together thoughtfully. “Now, come to think of it, I asked the boys at the back just for fun if they’d beat Danny at the ball game, and if that’s what sent him home pouting.

His friend Truman, told me that he didn’t play ball in the yard at all. He went to the hotel to visit a lady, if you can believe that. The boys teased him mercilessly, but Danny stood firm, stating that his future depended on the visit, and they’d best keep their thoughts to themselves.”

Jess sighed. Danny had wanted the girl to leave town without Sam—that had been his purpose in going there; to carry out what she had failed to do.

“Years ago, Danny made a match in our family, bringing me to his father Curtis, after his wife died, by putting an ad in the paper. It seems the lad can’t stand by and watch someone he loves wallow in sadness. I fear I’ve let my grief go on far too long, and I believe the boy is up to matchmaking again.”

“I heard that you came as a mail-order mama, and are hailed as rescuing that family from near ruin.”

“Well, unbeknownst to me, Danny is up to his old tricks, inviting our newest ranch hand to Jelling to marry his mother and save the family. You’re right, my son always thinks of others.”

“Ah, so there *is* a new man at the Miller ranch.”

“Yes, but it’s complicated. Danny had no idea of the baggage that would follow the man here.”

“I’ve been told that trouble followed *you* here, and all was not paradise between you and Curtis Miller at the beginning.”

“The grapevine never fails,” Jess’s chuckle was strained. “This rancher comes from Montana, too. Seems I can’t rid myself of the place.”

“A love story in the making, if you ask me. Two lonely hearts from the home state are coming together on the Wyoming Miller ranch. Best watch it—people will think Danny has some magical romantic wand he waves to make people fall in love.”

Jess stood. “Enough about that. I need to find Danny. That is all that matters tonight.”

Miss Peterson led her to the door and hugged her. “Don’t you fret. That boy has a way with people, and God listens to his prayers. Someone will find him, and all will be well. Watch and see.”

“Thank you for the tea, and the encouragement. If you remember anything else, please report it to the sheriff’s office. He is my next stop. Time to call in the big guns.”

When Jess arrived at Sheriff Brice’s office, the man was just returning to relieve his deputy for the evening. When he spotted Jess, he laughed. “Seems I’m more popular than you, Deputy Crox. Look who’s come to visit me.” He turned his attention to Jess. “What brings you to town besides my delightful company?”

She smiled. The Millers and the lawman had cultivated a friendly relationship after her victory in the court years ago, one she treasured and respected. “I wish it were a social call, Brice, but Danny is missing, and it’s not like the lad.”

“You’re right there. Come in and tell me about it. Two heads are better than one.”

“I’m afraid it might be complicated.”

“Then let me pour us some coffee. If Crox brewed it, it’ll be strong.”

She sat on a chair opposite him behind the desk.

The deputy updated the sheriff on the afternoon’s happenings. Jess eavesdropped, but heard no mention of Danny. Before he left the office for home, he turned to Jess

and said, "Sorry, but I never saw your lad when I was out on my rounds, ma'am. Hope you find him soon."

"Thank you," she called after the man, taking the cup Brice offered her. Coffee would keep her awake and alert to face whatever the evening might bring.

The sheriff settled into his seat and nodded. "I'm listening."

Jess began to unload, telling her tale in detail, explaining everything surrounding Samuel Parker and how his situation might be the reason for Danny's disappearance. "I can't imagine a woman orchestrating such a bizarre kidnapping, but Sam recognized Danny's rabbit foot under a table by the door. Maybe he planted it there as a clue, hoping we'd find it."

"You never confronted her?" the sheriff inquired. "This Abigail doesn't suspect you know she lied about Danny's being there today and that no one has seen him since?"

"Sam thought it best. He is hiding out in the dark with his eyes on the hotel. When she comes out, he plans to follow her."

"Which may have happened already. How about I take a stroll over there to check it out? She may have the lad tied and muffed in the other room so you wouldn't see. My badge will get me in there."

"I want to go. I can't just sit here while my son is missing."

"It won't hurt your tagging along at this point. The woman knows you are searching for your son and wouldn't have just given up and gone home, but stay close. She might have help up there."

Jess feared that might be the case. "Sam's arch-enemy from Montana might already be in Jelling, determined to take Sam back to do jail time for a crime he did not commit. It's such a trivial chase for a wealthy man who has all the land and power he needs. Sam's been drifting for a while; it seems all

wrong that they would go to this trouble and travel the distance to bring Sam to Montana. To use his past sweetheart to lure him back adds another element altogether. There must be more to it but I have no idea what.”

“One step at a time. Finding Danny might reveal some of the answers you seek.”

The man set a hat on top of his head, checked the pistols hanging at his hips for bullets, and opened the door. Jess went out ahead of him, and they started what he labeled *doing the rounds*.



Sam yawned and rubbed his eyes. He knew every architectural detail of the grand building across the street by then, not to mention the guests going in and out through the front doors. None of them looked familiar or sparked memories of any Montanans' he knew. Abigail had not yet appeared, which disappointed him and threw some opposition into what he had considered a tight case. Surely, if she had help—and he felt certain she did—they would have come calling or sent news by then, anything to further their plan and get rid of the boy.

He recalled viewing the street from the window across the room when he and Jess had stood in Abigail's doorway, questioning the woman about Danny. Sam counted the floors and windows according to her room number. His gaze stopped, and he sucked in a ragged breath when he saw Abigail peeking outside through a half-closed curtain. Her expression did not look nearly as arrogant as the one she'd shown earlier thinking she had control of the situation. The Fentlopes were a disloyal bunch, and if she thought they cared about a distant relative willing to do their bidding, she was in store for a sad awakening.

Sam noticed a couple walking up the boardwalk toward him. He sighed with relief when he saw it was Jess

chin-wagging with the sheriff as if they had nothing else on their minds, but Sam knew better, for Danny was not yet at her side, and the mother was likely sick with worry.

As they drew nearer, Sam noted some activity across the road—Abigail had come outside, hugging a shawl close around her shoulders as she looked up the road. A quick glance sideways indicated that the sheriff and Jess had also seen the woman standing under the street lantern and the duo took cover between two buildings to avoid being spotted.

A couple of minutes later, a tall, slim man in a long trench coat and hat with guns swinging at his hips moseyed up alongside Abigail and pulled her into the shadows. Sam peered hard enough to see a paper pass between them, and he planted a quick kiss on her cheek.

It was an interesting angle to the romantic twist she'd spun for him. She didn't want him back at all. It seemed he played no part in her happily ever after. Stupid woman. She'd swallowed their lies; hook, line, and sinker. She should have stayed in the east, and married some rich gent, never returning to Montana to settle for an outlaw. It wasn't Cain delivering the message, but he'd bet the fellow who kissed her was on the Fentlope's payroll, having been hired for this out-of-state revenge or whatever it was.

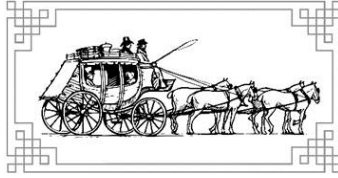
Abigail went inside, and the man moved toward a horse tied up a few feet away. Sam went for his steed at the back of the alley and prepared to follow the man to his camp, where he would hopefully find Danny.

Sam noticed the sheriff appear on the back street behind the row of buildings, probably anticipating that Sam would be there ready to ride. Sam motioned for him to go to interrogate the girl, and he would follow the stranger. The lawman appeared to understand his gestures, tipped his hat, and retraced his steps to the main street.

Sam circled the buildings and caught sight of his prey riding across the flatland to the south. He had been on the run for so long, watching for posses tailing him, that it made

following the chap an easy task. Sam kept his distance, grateful for the full moon's exposing the fleeing horseman, and the man's cockiness that no one dared pursue him.





## Chapter 10

Jess and Sheriff Brice hurried inside the Quint Hotel, taking the stairs two at a time. When they reached Abigail's room, they knocked... hard. She opened it, purse in hand, her shawl still wrapped around her.

"Going somewhere this time of night?" the sheriff asked.

"Oh, my, I was just on my way to the jailhouse to see you, but you showing up will save me the trip. I see you've brought Jessica." She turned her pudgy eyes toward the concerned mother. "Someone dropped this note off at the desk and gave my room number—I have no idea why except that maybe they needed an unbiased recipient—and I wanted to get it to your office as quickly as possible."

"Another lie. We saw the man give it to you outside a few minutes ago," Brice said.

"It would have been an easy lie to trace simply by asking the night clerk. You are sliding down a slippery slope." Jess skirted around the woman and stooped to pick up the lucky rabbit's foot. "It's a shame you don't clean your room. This belongs to my son, proving he was here earlier."

The sheriff plucked the note from the shocked woman's fingers and read it. "You realize this puts you right in the middle of a kidnapping. There is a strong penalty for aiding in such a heartless deed."

Her face contorted. “They made me do it! You have no idea what it’s like to be related to a Fentlope.”

“Fentlope!” Jess shrieked. “What do they have to do with this?”

“Why everything, dear. Did you think my Uncle Charlie’s boys wouldn’t have wanted to even the score for their father’s death when they grew up?”

“So, this is all about me and not Sam?”

“He was a bonus. Sam was young and even more naïve than me, but it was a mistake for him to go against my uncle’s plan for monopoly. The Fentlope’s goal was to own every strip of land, every blade of grass around that lake, and when the Parkers and Carrington’s wouldn’t bow to him, he knocked it all out from under you.” Abigail turned to the sheriff. “So, you see the terrible people I have to answer to. I’m sure they are more than capable of killing me in a heartbeat or setting me up for some bizarre robbery like they did with Sam. I am fighting for my life here.”

“Yeah. That man’s kiss showed just how hard you are fighting to uphold the law.” Brice walked further into the room and glanced around. “Leastways you don’t have the boy here—that detail will go in your favor.”

“Here? Of course he’s not here,” she said, her voice cracking under the stress.

“I see you’re ready for a walk—let’s go. A nice warm jail cell awaits you.”

“Jail? Surely not. I am Abigail Stenwick from Boston. My father is highly respected and will fight for my freedom.”

“Maybe you should have stayed home under his protection. The law in Jelling, Wyoming, does not show favor to the elite. Justice for all is our motto, Miss Stenwick—are you ready to go?”

The woman broke into tears and pleaded with Jess. “I was going to bring the note. I wouldn’t let them hurt your

son.”

“Save your tears for the judge, although I don’t think they’re strong enough to wear *him* down. Your aunt tried that approach during my hearing, and it didn’t work. The judge depends on facts to determine the outcome of his cases, and your involvement at the moment won’t help your chances of staying a free woman.”

Abigail screamed and lunged for Jess. “Don’t think you’ll be happy with Samuel. He tossed you away once, and he’ll do it again.”

The sheriff pulled her off of Jess and led her through the open door. “Come on—let’s get moving. I have a boy to rescue.”

Jess stared after the woman, who dragged her feet down the hallway, making Brice’s job of escorting her to jail a difficult task.

She was mystified concerning the last comment the desperate woman had flung at Jess in her anger; Sam had tossed her away once and would do it again. She didn’t understand. The new ranch hand had said he was leaving after Danny’s safe return, so maybe none of it mattered anyway—at least that’s what her head declared, but it felt as if a knife stabbed a hole in her freshly healed heart all the same. She cared for Samuel Parker more than she realized, and the notion that he did not want her stung deeply.

Her tender emotions closed up and returned to their place of protection. Finding Danny was all that mattered.



Sam kept the delivery boy’s profile in sight. He did not seem to be in a hurry, and his pace irritated Sam, who simply wanted to reassure Danny’s mother and know that the lad was safe.

He wondered what excuses Abigail had come up with when the sheriff and Jess stopped in at the hotel. That piece of girl fluff was in way over her head. She was a daddy's girl, always wanting to please the man. Sam wondered if her fixation had transferred to all men in general. She should have stayed in Boston with her own kind. Whatever possessed her to come to go to Montana a second time? It certainly was not him. The realization of this pacified Sam to no end. There would be no satisfying a woman like Abigail. He thanked the Lord she had slipped from his life when she did. At the time, he'd suffered heartbreak, during which just breathing was a laborious chore, but he knew better now. The feelings he'd experienced when Abigail departed Montana were nothing compared to the agony of him leaving Jess and the boys. It would crush his heart, causing a lifetime injury from which he could never bounce back, no matter how far he ran.

The tree line came into view and Sam watched as the man moved beyond it and out of sight. Sam quickened his pace and slipped in behind the fellow, stopping to scan the thinly forested area. The reflection of the moonlight bounced off of the chap's shiny pistols, showed that the man was moving westward. Off in a thicket, Sam spotted smoke from a campfire or a chimney; either way, it was most likely the man's destination.

When he heard voices, Sam slid off his horse, tied the animal to a thick branch, inched his way toward the gathering, and peered into their camp. Three men sat around the fire, but there was no Danny in sight. He scoured the area, looking under every tree for the captive boy to no avail.

Could Sam have been wrong by following the fellow who'd delivered the note to Abigail? He should have waited to see what the woman had to say for herself, but the sheriff and Jess were on it. Sam wasn't used to being part of a team, he'd had no one to answer to or do his bidding over the past few years.

The men were passing a bottle around the fire, chasing the booze with coffee. They'd soon be half-cut, and men

tended to become belligerent and dangerous when lit by the firewater. He continued to watch patiently, and it soon paid off.

“Bring the boy some grub. Can’t have him starved half to death when we make the trade.”

A trade? For Sam, no doubt. Could it be that easy? He’d gladly give himself up if he thought they were honorable men, but Sam knew otherwise. The blokes had killed youngsters, same as old folks. As long as it got them the results they wanted, everyone was expendable.

One of the men scooped some mush from a pot into a bowl and dropped a spoon into it. “Don’t drink all the whiskey before I get back,” he said, grumbling.

“Go on. We have a bit of a wait. The exchange isn’t until tomorrow.”

“Too bad your old lady lost her touch; and couldn’t persuade Samuel to come peacefully. We wouldn’t have to play nursemaid for the bait if she’d done her job,” the one with the bowl said.

“Leave Abigail out of this. Her cousin wants her back in one piece. A sweet trick like that will come in handy again.”

“What—you’re just going to walk away from her?”

He laughed. “You think I want to be saddled down with one woman, especially a mouthy one?” said the one who had kissed Abigail.

“Heartbreaker Tetter—the man needs to live up to his nickname.”

“Go feed the kid or I will have the bottle downed. I’m getting thirsty.”

The tall lanky man left with the bowl, and Sam noticed that he was without his holster. It meant they didn’t expect any immediate trouble.

Sam circled the campfire silently. Neither of the men remaining were alerted to his presence. He moved slowly to his right, not wanting to unexpectedly come upon the fellow who'd gone on the errand. He dropped to his knees when he saw the lean-to shed—the sagging roof the only useful part of the structure, providing shelter from the rain. The man approached Danny.

“Are you hungry, kid?” He took off the gag and thrust the bowl into Danny’s lap. You’d best gobble it down quickly because I’m not sticking around for long. It’s the last food you’ll see tonight, so eat up.” He untied Danny and sat on the ground across from him, cleaning beneath his nails with his knife.

Danny spooned the food into his mouth. With every bite, his expression contorted worse.

“What’s that face about? Made that concoction myself, and it didn’t kill us boys. Your mama should have taught you to be more grateful.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“That depends on your friend Samuel. The paper started calling him Slick because he is famous for robbing and running just as slick as any outlaw there ever was. The nickname stuck with me, though most have forgotten it. Maybe *you’d* rather call him that; Samuel is too sophisticated for the likes of him.”

“Sam isn’t an outlaw.”

“Did he tell you that? You shouldn’t believe everything you hear. The law doesn’t lie when they put up wanted posters.”

“I still don’t believe it.”

“You are as gullible as your mother and even Abigail, but don’t tell her latest sweetie out there by the fire I said that. He’s an unpredictable sort.” The man roared with laughter. “If only Abigail knew she was one of many that fellow has tied to

his pant leg.” He kicked at Danny’s foot. “Hurry up. I want out of here.”

“How come you shoved me back here alone?”

“Me and my buddies hate kids. You should be grateful you’re out of harm’s way.”

“I suppose, but it’s pretty dark.”

“I’ll be back later to sleep right there beside you, wuss, so don’t take up the whole shed.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir—why, isn’t that nice? Might have to take it back about your ma not teaching you no manners.”

It was too easy. They were leaving the boy unattended, which would make for an easy rescue. When his sleep mate showed up later, Danny would already be safely back in town with his mother.

The man retied his ropes and gagged him before walking off.

Sam counted to ten before starting to edge his body into the clearing. Five steps in, Danny noticed him and shook his head violently. Something was wrong. Sam flattened himself out behind a rock about the same time as the kidnapper reappeared.

“Why didn’t you remind me about the dishes? Someone’s got to clean up, and I’m the low man on the totem pole. The boys wouldn’t take kindly to dirty dishes come breakfast.” He chuckled. “Of course, you couldn’t remind me all gagged up the way you are. You can breathe all right, can’t you, boy?”

Danny nodded, and the man ruffled the top of the youngster’s hair. “See you later.”

Sam took a deep breath and let it out slowly while he began the countdown to make his safe reappearance. Hopefully, the man was done, and he would settle in around

the fire and get drunk. It would give him and Danny plenty of time to escape.

This time, Danny's eyes danced at the sight of Sam crawling out from behind the rock. He knelt beside the boy, removed the gag, and untied his hands and feet. Sam brought a finger to his lips and pulled the boy up. "Follow me," he whispered.

Sam began a slow and steady trek away from the camp toward his mount when what he really wanted to do was run full out to get the boy to safety. A few minutes later, he sidled up beside his horse, lifted the boy on top, and led the animal quietly through the wooded area. He didn't join Danny in the saddle until they'd hit the clearing. There, he kicked the animal into high speed, and the two of them raced off toward the town's lights.

The trip back to Jelling was swift and steady. Sam's departure from the vengeful bunch at the enemy camp provided all the motivation necessary to accelerate the previous pace the kissing-man had set.

At the sheriff's office, he dismounted and helped Danny to the ground. "You all right, son?"

Why did he call him son? It was an endearing role Sam did not deserve and would only make the leaving harder.

"My legs feel cramped from sitting all afternoon, and my hands are rubbed raw after trying to get free of that rope, but other than that, I'm all right."

"You are a brave boy. I am so sorry this happened to you. I promise that it won't happen again."

"Why—are you going to run away?"

"I gave it some thought, but no, I think I will stand my ground and fight for my innocence as your mother suggested." The boy's face lit up, and Sam felt the need to set him straight. "I'm leaving after that, Danny. Sorry the mail-order papa thing didn't work out. It seemed good there for a while."



Danny started to object, but Sam shushed him. “I think your mother is inside with the sheriff, waiting for the morning to make the switch with the kidnappers. She’ll be glad to see there won’t be one.”

When the boy reached the door, Sam called after him, “Send the sheriff out, will you?”

“How come you’re not coming in?”

“Your ma is angry with me, and I don’t blame her one bit.” Sam attempted to make his voice sound firm so as not to give the boy hope. “Go on in now and stay safe and out of sight until this mess is over.”

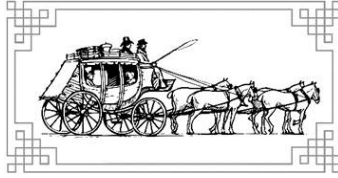
The boy grinned. “Can I sleep in a jail cell tonight?”

He laughed. “That would be your mother’s decision, but it might be the safest place. Although, Abigail might be there, and I don’t think the sight of you will make her good company.”

“That woman sure is mixed up. One minute she is as sweet as pie, and the next, as rude as a pig in dirt.”

“That is a good observation, Danny. Now, off you go. I want to be at the campsite when the fellows find you missing.”

“I’ll fetch the sheriff, Mister Sam.”



## Chapter 11

The sheriff came outside and shut the door. He reached out a hand. “Sam, right? I’m Sheriff Brice. Heard a lot about you tonight—not all of it favorable, but you bringing Danny home is about as good as good gets in my book.”

Sam shook the sheriff’s hand. “Is Jess in there with the boy?”

“She sure is, and she promises to stay put with the deputy until I return. Hear you have an expedition in mind for us tonight?”

“Figured we could wrap this thing up before the rendezvous in the morning. There’s only three of them, and the boys are getting so liquored up, they won’t even notice Danny’s missing until they go to bed.”

The sheriff chuckled. “Yeah, Danny says they kept him off from the main camp by himself. Not a smart plan for keeping an eye on a captive.”

“They hate kids and didn’t expect trouble, but one is returning to sleep with Danny in the shelter. That is, if he doesn’t pass out drunk first.”

“Let me go get my rifle and tell the deputy what we’re up to. We should be able to bring in the three of them on our own.”

Sheriff Brice turned back, his hand on the doorknob. “Got your girlfriend locked in a cell. Tells a mighty pretty story.” The man chuckled before going inside.

A pretty story? What was pretty about the anguish she’d put him and the Miller family through? The sheriff appeared to have an odd sense of humor.

The lawman returned momentarily, and as he loaded his saddle bag with the items he felt they might need during the capture, Sam saw Jess standing at the door, watching their departure. She waved at him silently, her eyes teary and soft, and his heart flip-flopped. Saying goodbye was getting harder by the minute. Why did she have to be the one who was offered to him so long ago? She’d hate him when she found out, and with Abigail inside, he suspected that she’d learn the grievous details of their shared past that night.

Once the men mounted and headed out of town, Sam spoke. “What exactly did you learn from Abigail?”

“That the switch, you for Danny, was supposed to happen at nine tomorrow at the Miller Ranch. Getting a sworn statement from these men might be all you need to clear your name in both messes and, at the same time, condemn her in the kidnapping. She’s not too smart when it comes to this outlaw game.”

“I think her relatives are using her like they do everyone who crosses their path. Loyalty is not in their vocabulary.” He pointed to the clearing at the edge of town. “This way. And Sheriff, if I stay in Jelling and am tried in a fair court for the stagecoach robbery that I did *not* commit in Montana, would my name be cleared?”

“There’s a good chance, if we can keep at least one of these boys who know the truth breathing, and Abigail doesn’t clam up.”

“She’ll spill everything she knows when she discovers her new love is playing her and has no intentions of making an honorable woman out of her.”

“Such a shame. The lady is a beauty who comes from a fine upstanding family in the East.”

“Yeah, too bad she didn’t stay there.”

“I sent a wire to her father. I imagine he’ll show up here in Jelling for her hearing.”

“Or disown her. They don’t have a good record of standing by their family when push comes to shove. Maybe that’s why she keeps leaving home for the Wild West.”

“Another pity. I sure wish money and happiness went hand in hand.”

“It does at the Miller Ranch. They’re like family, and the spread is thriving.”

“Do you like our Jess?”

“She’s a fine lady.”

“Seems she’s taken a shine to you, too. Be good to hear wedding bells in the future. She’s been through a lot.”

“There won’t be a wedding, Sheriff. She doesn’t know the entire story yet.”

“Oh, the man has secrets—”

“Unfortunately. It all links back to the horrible time she suffered in Montana. I doubt there’ll be any forgiveness for my negligence when it came to helping her family out when they needed it.”

“Wait—the Fentlopes? He was the cause of her mess years ago—I remember that now. Surely, you didn’t fit in with that bunch if that’s what all this is about; revenge for a sudden change of heart on your part.”

Sam sighed. “The trees are coming up. We won’t talk going through there. Don’t want to alert the good old boys.”

Not far into the forested area, they heard the singing, loud and off-key. The men were all drunk and still awake, likely oblivious to the fact their captive had escaped.

The sheriff rolled his eyes and grinned. He undoubtedly thought the men were easy pickings. Sam never underestimated gunslingers, especially the brand Fentlope money could buy. They were hired men who could hold their whiskey better than most and still shoot straight enough to down a man.

Sam stopped at the same tree as earlier and tethered his horse. The sheriff followed suit. The moon shining through the sparse trees from above was still their friend, keeping them from tripping over branches on the ground. They approached the area silently and crouched low behind a stand of huge rocks to view the camp.

The men were sprawled on the ground, having graduated to a second whiskey bottle. They were far more intoxicated than he'd anticipated. The words to the chirpy song they bellowed were slurred, and the tune dragged. The boys were near collapse.

When the last one standing stumbled and fell in a heap on the ground, the sheriff nodded—it was time to move in. Sam motioned that he would circle around and come in from the back. No sense taking chances. It only took him a few minutes to position himself across from the campsite where the lawman waited.

When he signaled that he was ready, the sheriff moved in, gun in hand.

Two frantic faces cursed and fumbled on the ground in search of the holsters they'd taken off and laid to the side, while one man was out cold.

“Steady to your feet, boys, and hands in the air. You won't be needing those pistols tonight.”

“What do you want?” one of them shouted.

“Come to bring in the fellows who kidnapped and held a young boy for ransom.”

“I don't see no kid. I hate brats!”

“Danny is safe now with his mother, and you are coming to jail to answer the charges the Miller family has laid against you,” Sam said from behind them, aiming his gun at the men.

The kissing-gent glared at Sam with poisonous venom, and the stouter fellow dropped back to the ground to pick up his pistol.

The sheriff aimed, and the man whose fingers suffered from his perfect shot, wailed and brought his bloody hand to his chest, cradling it with the other. “That’s my gun hand you shot.”

“You won’t be need it working where you’re going.”

“Don’t be too sure. We got an army and enough money behind us to buy off every person in this pitiful town.”

“You may be surprised. Jelling is a tightknit community that protects its own.”

“He ain’t their own!” The comment was addressed to Sam.

“Got nothing more to say to you boys. I’ll take your statements back at the jailhouse and put you in a cozy cell right beside your lady love.”

“Abigail?”

“I believe that’s the name she gave.” He looked at Sam. “I got them covered—why don’t you get the rope from my saddle and tie them up before we bring them into town?”

Sam stood face to face with the kissing machine and smiled. “You’re Pistol-Slinging-Joe, aren’t you?”

“I am, and I always remember a face. You’d best watch your back.”

“You hired on with the wrong family. They won’t support you here in Jelling. Your reputation as a traitor and loner precedes you. Too bad Abigail didn’t know your true character before your charms conned her.”

Sam left and returned a few minutes later with the rope, tying the mouthy one up first, and yanking on the knot to tighten it.

The man spat on the ground and said, “Dumb chick that Abigail is. Easy prey for a womanizer like me.”

His reaction was immediate. Sam slapped the man’s arrogant mouth with the back of his hand, drawing blood. “It’s people like you that change a woman.”

He moved to the next man and bound his hands and then to the third, who sat groggily on the ground, scratching his head, trying to figure out what had happened. “You won’t be sleeping with the lad tonight, but there is a soft cot waiting for you at the jail.”

“I fed the kid,” the man slurred his words. “That should count for something.”

“Tell the good Lord when you meet him at the pearly gates. Can’t see the judge giving you credit for that humane gesture.”

The sheriff and Sam boosted the outlaws into their saddles, the men sitting precariously atop their mounts, or flattening out to avoid vomiting. The lines were linked between the sheriff at the start who dragged the first rider behind him, and Sam joining the line-up by hooking to the second man and pulling up the third from the rear. It was getting late, and between fatigue and drunkenness, the men didn’t put up much of a fight. Sam figured they were still convinced the Fentlope’s would be along to bail them out; which would be a first. What Sam remembered of Charles Fentlope’s sons was that they had big mouths and liked ordering people around, but they usually stayed out of harm’s way, letting others do the dirty work for them.

The procession to Jelling took an hour. When they finally lined up the horses at the jailhouse, Sam was pleased to see the crisis come to an end. He helped escort the tied prisoners inside and locked them up in a cell beside Abigail.

She shouted out to him, “Samuel, surely you won’t let the sheriff keep me locked up. I am a victim, same as the boy.”

“You’ll have to plead your case to the judge. Maybe he’ll be lenient, or maybe he’ll see through your façade. Besides, I hear your father might come to rescue you.”

She groaned. “Don’t count on that. He hates it when his schedule is interrupted by family issues.”

“Try to get some sleep.”

Instead, she ran to the bars separating her from the men just brought in. “Are you going to let them keep me locked up?” she said to the man she’d kissed earlier.

“Shut up, woman, and go to sleep.”

Sam noticed silent tears slipping down her cheeks unchecked, and he felt a twinge of sorrow for his first love. Abigail hated her life in Boston enough to take a chance with one of the dredges of the Wild West. It appeared the woman knew only the worst of both worlds.

Sam was the first one back in the main office. Jess lifted Danny’s head from her lap and hurried over to the stove. “I kept a fresh pot of coffee brewing.”

He took the drink from her. Sam peered at her over the rim of the cup, their eyes holding each other’s for a long moment. “Where’s the deputy?” Sam asked, in an attempt to break the connection.

“There was a ruckus at the saloon and someone came yelling for the law to intervene.”

“Busy night.”

“Did things go all right at the camp where the hooligans were holding Danny?”

“They were drunk and not in the mood for a gun fight, so we were lucky. It was like scooping up butterflies in a net, bringing that lot into jail.”



The sheriff came in and plopped into the seat behind his desk. Everyone is tucked in for the night back there.”

“What about me? You know I’m wanted in Montana—do you have a cell for me?”

He heard Jess gasp, and it warmed his heart, thinking she might care.

“Full house.” Brice looked at Jess. “Sam has agreed to go through the system here in Jelling to clear his name—can he stay out at the ranch until the judge comes next week?”

“Well...” She looked at Danny and sighed. “The man doesn’t deserve to be here, locked up with the likes of that bunch. I’ll keep him so busy working the spread, he’ll be too tired to run if he gets cold feet.”

“I appreciate that, Jess. He won’t run. I see the same yearning for justice in your ranchman that I witnessed in your eyes when you came in here years ago to confess to murdering a man.” He chuckled. “At least Sam is only *accused* of robbing a stagecoach.”



Jess allowed Sam to pick up Danny from where he slept stretched out on the bench and hoist him in front of him on his horse. The rancher had such good instincts when it came to the boys; that was why they loved him. Yes, Danny had told her his feelings flat out when she tried to convince him to guard his heart. He did not like the idea that Sam was planning to leave them now that he’d been rescued, and even going so far as to say that he wished he was still tied up in the woods if it meant Sam would stay. The lad had not cried, but Jess feared what might happen when he awoke and Sam’s departure drew near.

Sloan opened the door before they’d reached it and took Danny from Sam’s arms. “I’ll settle the boy in, Jess. I left a plate in the warming tray if you don’t think it’s too late for soggy fish and mushy vegetables.”

Sam shook his head no. “I’m done for the night,” he said, and he turned to leave.

“Sam, we need to talk,” Jess said.

“An innocent man doesn’t run off and ruin a woman’s good reputation with the sheriff. Seems you’re stuck with me until after the hearing, but not to worry—I’ll stay out of your way.”

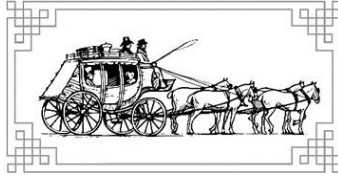
“Samuel Parker! We *will* talk—*tomorrow*—and clear the air, you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am. You are the boss.” Sam touched the rim of his hat, his solemn face never lifting to give her a ray of hope. “Good night.” And then he was gone.

She watched him stroll toward the bunkhouse, not seeming to be in any great hurry despite the late hour. He must be exhausted; she certainly was. Their talk was probably better left postponed. After the day’s events, Jess was not ready to tackle any more disappointments, knowing that when the puzzle pieces of hers, and Sam’s backgrounds came to light, nothing would be the same between them.

Of all the men God could have sent to the Miller ranch, why had he come from Montana and had dealings with the Fentlopes, her mortal enemies? It wasn’t fair. She’d let her guard down and was more of an emotional mess than before he’d come. Living through the grief of a deceased husband or surviving the abandonment of one still breathing, appeared to hover over her on the same level of depression she’d fought so hard to overcome.

“Jess!” Sloan called from Danny’s room. “Come up here. The boy is not himself.”



## Chapter 12

Despite his retiring in the middle of the night, Sam awoke early with a hearty appetite. He downed his breakfast of eggs and bacon in the dining and card-playing room attached to the bunkhouse while attempting to downplay his heroic efforts of the night before. Soon his involvement in the boss's past would be public knowledge, and the hired hands might not be as eager to call him their buddy.

He finally escaped their chatter and made his way to the barn. Chores waited for no man, and the cows moored angrily when they spotted him. "I know; don't curdle your milk with all your fussing, ladies."

Sam scooped some feed and water in front of them, preoccupying the animals while he grabbed the stool to get this morning's supply of milk for the cooks whose job it was to feed those living on the spread and in the house. He was just about to sit when he glanced up to see Gertie, her face flustered, red, and angry.

"Gertie, girl—how can I help you?"

"Don't need no help from the likes of you!"

"Whoa there. What's gotten into your craw?"

"I know who you are. It came to me when I was praying for young Danny last night."

“My name is Sam Parker. Sorry if the name-change bothers you.”

“You are related to my birth mother; some distant cousins her wicked husband called in to exploit the Carrington’s. I overheard the boys calling you the lucky sucker who got to slither in on Miss Jessica and take control.”

“You might have heard it, but has it come to pass? No, Gertie. I could not stoop to their level of depravity, and my family was not *called in* to do the Fentlope bidding.”

“I killed Charles Fentlope, and if you cause trouble here, I can pull the trigger again.”

“Gertie!” a voice yelled from the door. Jess came running to the stall door, where she grabbed her by the shoulders. “We talked about this. It is not your responsibility to protect me anymore. We live in peace here, and no one needs to think you are crashing emotionally, on the brink of murdering again—do you understand how dangerous that is?”

“I remember what you said, but that was before this bloke came along. He’s trouble, missy, and I can’t stand by and watch another family ruined.”

Sam stood and went to join the ladies. “Gertie, that will never happen. I’m only here another week or so, and then I’ll be gone. You won’t have to worry about my causing trouble.”

“You’re leaving?”

“It is not your concern whether he stays or goes, Gertie. You’d best check that attitude right now.”

The girl bowed her head, seemingly defeated for the time being. “Run along, now. Danny is alone in his room and can stand to see a happy face. He loves Mister Sam, so don’t you go upsetting him.”

“No, missy. I’ll go now to sit with Danny. I got jokes to tell him. That should make him laugh.”

“That’s your mission. Go make Danny laugh while I have a word with Mister Parker.”

The girl's eyes darkened at the mention of Sam's name, but she turned and left without further disruption.

"I'm sorry for that. When Gertie is stressed, she often blows up like a sensitive bomb."

"No problem. She was right, but I hope it's not a killing offense, not of the body anyway. I hope to ride out in one piece." The heart was another matter altogether.

"The distraught girl must know something I do not because I'm baffled by your determination to leave the Miller ranch. If you clear your name, why do you have to keep running? There's still more work for you to do, and winter is coming on. It's not a great time to be on the trail without a roof over your head."

"I've spent many a cold night on the trail; I can survive more."

"But you don't *need* to. I don't know why I care, but I do, and we need to discuss this openly like two grown adults."

He looked away from her searching eyes, drawn by the confusion in them but unwilling to discuss the one thing still standing between them. "Maybe I do."

"Here goes, for better or worse." Jess inhaled deeply before blurting out her thoughts. "Abigail mentioned something before the sheriff toted her off to jail, and I was too much of a chicken to ask her while she fumed in her cell. It's better coming from you, anyway."

He swallowed hard; God only knew what lies the woman might have spouted in her shock at being taken to jail. Sam did not encourage Jess to continue. He reached for the stool to sit and milk the cow instead. Keeping busy was his outlet.

"She can wait!"

He glanced Jess's way to see the determination on her face. "Sure, Boss," he said, remaining on his feet.

What did it matter if she hated him anyway? He was leaving, and she'd get over it when the next mail-order papa arrived to sweep her off her feet. It sounded logical in Sam's head, but he felt his heart crack just a little more whenever he tried to picture that scene in his mind.

“Abigail told me I would never find happiness with you. Her exact words were, ‘he tossed you away once, and he’ll do it again.’”

There it was; the last of the puzzle Jess needed if she were going to hate him for life. He seemed at a loss for words—owning up to his demise was a hard thing to do.

“Well, I’m waiting.”

He removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair before sitting on the stool. “You probably never heard of me back in Montana. We lived across the lake, renting a section of land from my stepmother’s relative. Pa knew he’d never sell, that he just wanted someone to work it for him, because, at the time, the man was swallowing up all the land in the area, especially the lakefront spreads.”

Jess pushed against the door frame, staring at him. It was all coming together in her mind—he could see her expression churning with disbelief.

“Yeah, we were distant neighbors. The far side of the lake,” he said. “Not too long after our arrival, we began to view Uncle Charles as a heartless vulture—” He heard her gasp and thought she might be sick where she stood. “I did know the Fentlopes as landlords, but thankfully I did not share the connecting bloodline that pumped through my stepmother’s veins.”

Sam stood and brought Jess the stool—she needed it more than him. She sat, looking expectantly at him as she waited for the rest of his story.

“Things were going south over at your place. When your father refused the Fentlopes offer to buy your land, the

bullying and violence increased. Mr. Carrington dug in his feet, refusing to budge.”

Her voice croaked. “I don’t want to know if you were one of the men who slaughtered my family. I couldn’t live with that.”

“No, Jess.” He dropped his knee on the floor in front of her, taking her shaky hands in his. “The Parkers had a conscience and refused to ride on his takeover missions. My scruples were fully intact when I was approached about a subtle new plan to get your Pa’s land. Maybe if I’d have known it was his last-ditch effort at human kindness, I might have responded differently.”

Jess remained silent. Her eyes pooled with tears that did not fall.

“My uncle, by marriage only, thought I should court you—you were coming of age and might be taken by a fellow rancher who didn’t bow to the Fentlope dynasty, but I knew it would just be a matter of time before he blackmailed my family to gain my cooperation. I never laid eyes on you, but I said *‘No, go find yourself another errand boy.’* I never dreamed he would wipe your branch of the Carrington clan off the face of the earth.” His voice cracked remembering the horror of that day. “And after you ran, the only survivor, his wife came and declared it was all my fault for not succumbing to a more peaceful solution.”

Jess stared at him as if seeing him for the first time. “And you say you never saw me? That you didn’t come to Wyoming to the Miller ranch as an errand boy for Charles Fentlope’s sons?”

“I swear, but I reckon they followed me for different reasons.

“See, I wasn’t in their good graces after that. My mom died of a fever, and that ended their blood tie obligation with the Parker family. If I’d taken you as my wife, they’d have had

me positioned where they wanted—force me to use my influence to do the Fentlopes’ bidding.

“They were angry after I refused and started to pressure Pa. He could have just kicked us off his land, but he was playing the noble bully he liked to portray. My brother and father both died in a *farming accident* and when I accused his men of setting it up, things went south for me.

“Charles Fentlope passed down his hate for me to his wife and sons, mostly for having a backbone. The nightmare continued throughout the area by family who seemed to come out of the wood work to help the widow grow the Fentlope dream. Abigail showed up long after you left Montana and we seemed to connect, but committing to a man was the furthest thing from her mind, which in retrospect, saved me from making the worst decision of my life.

“When they returned from Wyoming after losing the case against you, Abigail—whom the lady of the house had taken a liking to in a house filled with men—had hightailed it home to her daddy. The equally devious, Mrs. Fentlope had a new plan to rid the family of me for good. She ordered her sons to rob the stagecoach and pin the job on me. That’s what started me running, but I swear I had no idea when I saw the mail-order papa ad in the paper, that the widow Miller was the girl Carrington, who’d lost her family and escaped to Wyoming.”

“And you never recognized me because you never came courting.”

“Sounds dumb for a man not to check out the young lady that was being pushed on him, but to be honest, I never wanted your face to haunt my dreams, and things happened quickly at that point.”

She stood. “It’s a lot to take in, Sam Parker. You came when I was ready to move on, and now, I’ve been thrust back to the safety net Curtis provided for me here. Call me a coward, but I’m thinking we have too much history to create a future the way Danny wants.”



His heart ached, for he also wanted to marry the woman and father her children. Should he say it—one last pitch for possible happiness?

Why not? He was leaving—she might as well know what she was throwing away.

“Seems I’ve taken on Danny’s wish as my own. Nothing would please me more than having a second chance with you, Jessica Carrington-Miller. I’m fully aware I don’t deserve it. I just want you to know that being your husband and a daddy for your boys would make me stay, but I won’t, knowing my very presence would bring you sorrow. I wish I could shelve the past for you, but I can see that’s not going to happen.”

Sam grabbed the cow stool she had abandoned. “I’ll get back to work now and be gone the day after the trial.”

She did not argue one way or the other, but turned back toward the house with a blank expression. After she was gone, Sam recalled something said about Danny’s being bedridden and chided himself that he hadn’t asked after him—fine father he’d be for the boy. Probably just the aftermath of the ordeal he’d suffered at the hands of the kidnappers—a day in bed would do him good.

He sighed and turned to Gandy. “Well, girl, you’ve been patient long enough. Time to empty that udder of yours; make you more comfortable. Glad I can at least make *you* feel good about the day.”



Jess pushed the door closed, leaned against it, and closed her eyes. How could it be God’s plan to bring the past knocking on the door of her heart, making her sons love the man she could never be with? Visions of Sam’s remorse haunted her.

Gertie came into the entranceway, saw her tears flowing, and said, “Did that man hurt you?”

“No, Gertie. Life has hurt all of us, but us girls will rise stronger than ever, just you wait and see.” She planted a kiss on the woman’s cheek. “How’s our boy?”

“He won’t talk to me. Won’t play any games. Even when I told him where I remembered that rancher man from, he still stood by his hero, but not the way he usually does. That boy is getting lost on the inside, just like you said his father was when you first came to the Miller ranch.”

“Oh, I do hope you are wrong. I surely could not draw a second Miller from the edge of insanity and back to reality. I’ll bring Danny a treat since he declined breakfast. You run along now, and don’t bother Mister Parker, you hear?”

“Yes, missy. Going fishing. They need to hear the end of my story.”

“Have fun.” Jess loved Gertie, but that grown woman with a childlike mind often needed a strong reprimand to keep her in line. Jess thanked God that the backward woman she had known since childhood, heeded her advice when spoken to.

Armed with a tray consisting of two morning glory muffins and glasses of milk, Jess made her way to her son’s room to find him sitting up, staring out the window.

“Danny, my boy, you are missing a fine fall day outside. The animals are kicking up their heels in the corral, and the laying hens are pecking at your mother’s ankles. You are much better at collecting eggs than I am.”

He looked at her and smiled, but it was weak. His eyes did, however, take in the tray she held.

“Thought I’d come and have an early morning treat with you.”

“Not hungry, Ma.”

“Of course you are. After yesterday’s ordeal, missing supper and breakfast with no exercise to boot, you’ve probably

lost five pounds. Keep that up, and I won't be able to find you under that blanket.”

His slight smile encouraged her. She took her portion off the tray and plunked the bed table on his lap. “Eat, Mama's orders.”

Danny lifted the muffin, and set about shredding it crumb by crumb. The sudden vision of his father doing the same thing eight long years ago, angered her.

“Now, you listen here, Danny. I don't need to remind you of the state your father was in when I first came to the ranch. It was *you* who recognized the man needed help and did something about it. Now, here you are, falling into the same old pattern just because things aren't going your way. The Millers have adapted in the past, and they will again.”

She plodded on despite his not lifting his eyes to meet her stern scolding. “Your father tried to ignore me too, but I am persistent, Danny Miller, and you will not succumb to whatever fate you see in your future under my watch. You don't even have a physical ailment to keep you in bed except maybe fatigue.”

This time he looked at her and held her gaze.

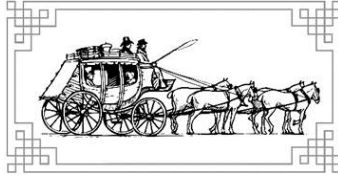
“I realize you had a bad experience yesterday, and I am willing to work with you through that trauma, but if this is about Sam, then—”

“Then what, Ma?” Danny's voice came to life. “I brought you here to bring Pa out of his doldrums, same as I brought Sam to make you smile again. And you were smiling, happier than I saw you in a long time.”

“There are things separating us you can't possibly understand.”

“Like what, Ma? You want to talk? That suits me fine. Sam is the topic of choice. His going and leaving you to curl up and cry alone at night will keep me in this bed. I won't stand by and watch you die on the inside until the undertaker comes to carry you off to join Pa in the graveyard.”

“Danny Miller,” a voice from the doorway spoke,  
“don’t you be talking to your mother like that.”



## Chapter 13

The lad's face brightened while Jess jumped to her feet and stammered, "Who let you in?"

"Sloan. Said I could come in to visit with the sick boy, but any lad who has the voice to yell at his mother like that is not sick in my eyes."

"Fine," Jess shouted back. "You're the one determined to leave—you explain it to the boy so we can all get on with our lives." She went and parked herself on the window bench and stared outside. Let the man clean up the dirty mess he'd created. Her anger at not being able to right the wrong in Danny's life bothered her, for they had always known a good rapport. Turning him over to the rancher hurt her pride and she decided to fume in her own personal bucket of pig-swill for a little while longer.

Still, just because she had exited the conversation did not mean she would shut off her eyes or ears. Jess watched from the corner of her eye, clinging to every word without interrupting the conversation. Maybe Sam would snap the boy loose of his pending depression.

Sam sat on the edge of the bed. "Did the men hurt you anywhere?"

"No."

"Did they tease you or say bad things?"

“No, not much.”

“Did you have a good sleep in your own bed when you got home last night—no nightmares about the ordeal?”

“No, the bed is not the trouble.”

“But I am, right?”

“We had us a deal. You were supposed to work the ranch and win Ma’s heart.”

“As I recall, it was that *if* I won your mother’s heart before the spring, I’d become your mail-order papa. Otherwise, I was free to go.”

“Do you see spring outside that window, Mister Sam? You’re running out on the deal, pure and simple.”

“Danny, you knew it might not work from the start, and now that all this trouble has brought up a past neither of us is prepared to confront when looking into each other’s eyes every day for the rest of our lives, it’s best we end the facade sooner than later.”

Jess saw Sam’s head turn in her direction as he spoke. She turned quickly away from his searching gaze to stare out the window. Could she look at him for the rest of her life and not recall the anguish of losing her entire family at the Fentlopes’ hands? How would they persuade the boy, who had blossomed over the years she’d been there, that some memories were too much to bear and impossible to live with?

“I just don’t get it. One girl from your past has Ma running for cover—what pull does that Abigail have over you two?”

Sam sighed. “I understand you were man enough to stand by your mother when she was convicted of something she didn’t do. That was a grand gesture for a young boy. Now, it’s my turn for the law to clear my name, and because the Fentlopes are the common link between your mother’s troubles and mine, it might just be too much for me to stay on. You will understand when you’re older.”

“I’m older now! Don’t treat me like a baby.”

“I’m trying not to.”

“Then stay on until spring like we agreed and see if Ma’s heart softens and the bad memories are replaced with lots of fun new ones. Those are the ones that count, not the ones that pull us down.” Danny turned to lure Jess into the conversation. “You taught me that, right, Ma?”

“I did teach you to stay positive and that it would bring you joy on the inside despite the troubles.” Jess managed to look at Sam and saw the pain in his face. “We have at least a couple of weeks before the trial ends. If Mister Sam agrees, we can concentrate on making some fun memories and see where that leads.”

The boy’s eyes pivoted to Sam. “Are you in agreement to at least two weeks and a family discussion at the end? No slipping out the back door, never to be seen again.”

“I would never leave without saying goodbye, Danny. Jess and her family mean a lot to me.”

Jess stood and came to stand at the foot of the bed. “I believe we’ve just been hoodwinked by a fourteen-year-old boy, Sam Parker.”

He joined her, and they stared down at the boy, who could not hide his grin. “I reckon you’re right, Missus Miller.”

The boy gobbled down what remained of the muffin and swallowed the milk. “Ma, would you tell Sloan I’m powerful hungry, and wouldn’t push away a king-sized lunch?” He looked at Sam. “And why don’t you ask Mister Sam to join us? This time I will try not to get kidnapped.”

They all laughed. “Get dressed, Danny. I’ll expect you outside in the barn in thirty minutes, hear?” his mother warned.

“Yes, ma’am,” Danny said, throwing off the covers while his mother and the rancher he hoped would become his mail-order papa left the room.

After Sam returned to work, Jess went to the kitchen where Sloan was sprinkling sugar on the crust of an apple pie.

“Looks yummy.”

“Thought I’d fill the house with the aroma of apples and cinnamon to entice the boy to come for lunch.”

“No need. He is getting dressed as we speak, and says he is powerful hungry. We also invited Sam to lunch. Sorry I didn’t run that by you first—will an extra mouth to feed be a problem?”

“Never at my table, Jess, you know that. Besides, the least we can do is to feed the hero, and he did miss last night’s fish supper.”

“We all did, and you worked so hard to make it perfect.” Jess offered him an appreciative gaze. “What would I do without you?”

“No need to find out; got no plans of leaving.” He placed the pie into the oven and turned to study Jess. “Heard rumors our new ranch hand is thinking of pulling out—how do you feel about that?”

“It’s his business what he does. Why—” She stopped short when she saw the grin hiding behind his concerned expression. “Don’t you go siding with Danny. Sam and I are adults and have minds of our own.”

“No doubt about that, Jess.” He winked and grabbed a wet cloth to wipe up the floury mess on his work counter.

She sat on a chair and sighed. “How did life get so complicated?”

“The family’s wagon has been sitting at the crossroads too long. I think the lead horse has lost her way and is floundering as to which path to take.”

Jess scrunched up her brow and smiled. “Oh, so you are likening me to a horse now?”



“My mistake. More like a stubborn mule if you don’t mind my saying.” Only Sloan could get away with chastising her like a child. She respected the man and sometimes wondered if she didn’t see her Pa’s ways in him.

“I am attracted to the man if you must know, but he has a past I can’t get around.”

“You had a past Master Curtis welcomed into his family.”

“Danny thinks Sam was sent by the good Lord Himself and won’t budge on that inclination, but why would the Almighty send someone whose extended family is the source of my sorrowful past? The more I discover about his involvement in my family’s demise, the more my heart shuts down. How could I stare into that face for the rest of my days?”

“Maybe your loving Curtis put a shield of protection up, but now that he’s gone to his eternal home, the haunting is coming back.”

“And you think Sam is here so I can face it all again?”

“Could be. The Lord works in mysterious ways, but I reckon he doesn’t like grief hiding under a basket. Sort of stunts the growth of His children.”

“Sounds like I have some soul-searching to do. I probably wouldn’t be good for a man anyway with all that grief accumulating under that gigantic basket you referred to.”

“Might be a good place to start, Jess. Yep, the Lord’s healing is always a good place to start.”

She stood. “I think I will take the morning off. Go into the wash room and soak in a hot tub. Will you pour the water, Sloan? I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“My pleasure. Anything to relax my best friend and boss.”

“You are my best friend, Sloan, and I thank God for you every day when I pray.” She kissed him on the cheek.

A crimson flush seeped up his neck, and he turned away. “You go on now. Lunch will be the best midday meal we’ve had for a while. Go make yourself pretty for the new ranch hand.”

She protested. “That’s not it at all—.”

“Tell it to someone who doesn’t know any better.” Sloan stacked the dirty utensils in the basin.

“Why didn’t you ever marry, Sloan?”

“Me? Aw, I am a loner. A born bachelor. Knew it as a young lad and was content to love on Curtis’s family, but now, the future of the Miller ranch is in your hands, and however you grow, it is fine with me.”

“Will you still like Samuel Parker when the truth of his past is broadcast to our community at the trial?”

“I see the man the way his maker does. We all make mistakes. God forgives those who bow their knee, and I’d be a fool to question His wisdom.”

“It sounds so simple when you say it.”

“Most things are. It’s us that muddles it all up in our head until we near bust and miss out on the joy that is ours to claim.”

“Thanks for telling me straight, Sloan. I’ve always appreciated that about you.” Jess turned and left the kitchen.

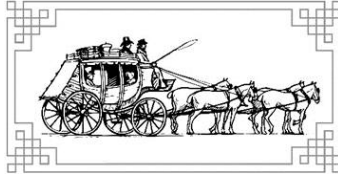
Once inside the privacy of her bedroom, she closed her eyes and tried to envision a future without the vivid remembrances of the bloody past that tortured her mind. Might it be true that in resurrecting it all for a second time, in living through it again at Sam’s trial, a final healing could result, and not just a cover-up that might get one through life?

From her wardrobe, she took out an autumn housedress. It would be nice to take off the work clothes that made her blend in with the men on the ranch as she worked alongside them. Sam hadn’t seen her dressed like a woman as

of yet, and it might be nice to let him know she possessed a feminine side.

She pinned up her hair and laid out a change of clothes before grabbing some towels and soap and heading for the bathing room. There, she sunk into the hot, fragrant bubbles and rested her head against the cushion she'd sewn to hang over the side of the tub.

Jess inhaled deeply, and let the air escape in a long, contented sigh. She felt her flesh and bones relax into the tepid water inside the barrel. Her son was home, safe and sound, and his hero was coming to lunch—what could be better than that?



## Chapter 14

When Jess made her appearance in the dining room at noon, Sam was already seated with the family. The younger boys were eager to help welcome their brother home after his mishap, so all three boys were sitting in their spots. Sloan hovered nearby, speaking to Sam, but all of them hushed when Jess paused in the doorway.

Her gaze gravitated toward Sam, and he closed his gaping mouth before starting to drool. They held each other's gazes for a long moment, and then he saw a slight grin peeking out from behind her expression. Was the get-up staged to appease Danny, or dare Sam believe he might be the one she was trying to impress?

A stylish dress had replaced the split skirt that passed as leggings while working on the ranch. The dark tresses gathered on top of her head, held with a decorative comb, made him want to sweep her into his arms and dance the afternoon away. The woman's beauty had been hidden beneath soiled dungarees and ranch sweat since they had met.

The way her eyes twinkled at the stir her appearance triggered for those seated around the table caused Sam to believe it had been a while since Jess had dressed up for lunch on the Miller ranch.

Oh, Danny—you have no idea what you unleashed today, Sam mused while hurrying to pull the chair out for her.

“You look lovely, Missus Miller.”

“Jess is still here under all these layers, Sam, but thank you for the compliment.”

“And you don’t smell like the barn, Ma,” Darian said, sniffing the sweet fragrance in the air.

Danny poked his brother’s side, and the boy straightened and looked in his direction. “Mind your manners. It’s not like you haven’t seen Ma in a dress before. She wears one every Sunday.”

Sam retook his seat, and Jess said, “In light of everything that’s happened of late, I think it’s high time you join us in town tomorrow for the church service?”

“I suppose it is Sunday, and I have missed quite a few in my travels.”

“Everyone was disappointed the last couple of weeks, knowing you had started work here but not seeing Ma’s new ranch man in the pew.”

“Danny, that is not true. You are exaggerating, which is the same as a lie,” his mother firmly stated.

“I suppose I am lying a teeny bit.” Danny turned to Sloan. “Maybe you should pray for me, too, when you bless the food.”

“How about we let our guest do the praying?” The cook looked toward Sam.

“I’d be proud to.”

Sloan sat down on his chair and bowed his head along with those seated at the table. Everyone had drifted easily into a thankful mood, and Sam’s hungry heart wrenched at the unity he felt in the room. He might be able to get used to that.

“Father, we gather at your bountiful table with gratefulness in our hearts for your provision. For the rain and the sun, which we do not take for granted, and the strength you give us to do your will daily. Bless this feast I pray. And thank

you for the safe return of Danny and the justice that will be served by the county judge. Fair sentencing is a hard thing to find these days and almost nonexistent in many towns throughout our great land, so we thank you for the Jelling sheriff and his lawmen who have held in place the fine line of neutrality. Bless the lady of this house, her boys, and their friend Sloan, who keeps watch over their safety. Amen.”

“That was a long prayer, Mister Sam,” Danny said, grabbing the bowl of mashed potatoes sitting nearest to him.

“A very good prayer, Danny. A grateful heart shows a lot about a man and the Lord’s praises should be voiced whenever possible.”

Jess’s admonishment made Danny grin, probably reading his version of what his mother’s statement might entail. “Good thinking, Ma. A woman needs to weigh all those things in her mind when she’s courting a fella.”

Darian and Grant squealed in harmony, “Are you courtin’ Mister Sam, Ma?”

“Your brother is talking from a loose hat.” She cast her eldest son a silent reprimand. “I don’t recall such a label being put on Sam and me. We are getting to know one another; no commitment required whether he stays or goes, so guard your tongues, boys, and mind your own business.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the three youngsters mumbled.

Sam regarded Jess, encouraged by the warm smile she cast his way.

“Help yourself to the food, Sam. Sloan has been working hard to make sure no one starves at this table today and to make up for the fish meal we missed.”

“Thank you for the invitation. The grub looks mighty fine; good enough to eat, Sloan.”

The boys at the table chuckled at Sam’s off-handed remark.

Sam lifted his glass. “To the Miller family and the safe return of Danny. We celebrate God’s blessings this day.”

Everyone lifted their goblets into the air, but before the clinking of glasses, the lad added, “And to my hero, Sam, who saved my life and brought me home to this feast.”

“Hear, hear,” the group chorused. Sam noticed the thankfulness in Jess’s eyes as she studied him over the rim of her glass. At that moment, Sam realized he’d fallen in love with the widow—no turning back. Healing filled his cracked heart and seeped into every fiber of his being. The superficial attraction he had mistaken for the real thing with Abigail years ago, held no parallel to the emotions sweeping over him now. Sam felt humbled, not nearly good enough for the girl who had suffered such loss in Montana and then again after her husband’s death at the Miller ranch. The woman was strong in character and leadership. It would be an ongoing battle to defeat his mindset of being unworthy of such a match, but an unforeseen urge to rise above his weaknesses overwhelmed him.

Danny had it right the whole time—well, he and the Lord. Sam pondered; maybe a closer walk with the Almighty would bring back the childlike faith he had once known while on his mother’s knee, listening to her read the scriptures. It would surely bring peace to his conscience, set him on the path to his future; and maybe, if he was lucky, a communion of souls between Jess and himself. Could the love filling him now be sufficient to convince Jess its strength was mighty enough to conquer the hurt and pain of their mutual past?

He had two weeks to see if the match was meant to be.

Those sitting around the table dug into the ample dishes placed down the middle of the table; ham, scalloped potatoes, green bean casserole, glazed carrots, and a side of warm apple sauce. A bowl of freshly baked golden-brown rolls and salted butter was passed around. Indeed, it was a feast for a noon meal.

“Jess, I was wondering if you’d like to go for a walk. See if the afternoon sun can sparkle any brighter than your eyes?”

“Flattery, Mister Parker?”

“Just the honest-to-God truth.”

She smiled. “I would enjoy that. I’ve taken the entire morning off, so I might as well keep up my slacker’s-pace a bit longer.”

“It’d be a shame to mess up that dress, Ma. You do know it’s Saturday, right? I hear there’s a dance at the town center tonight.”

“I did not hear that, Danny. Thank you for bringing that to my attention.” Sam shrugged his shoulders at the equally surprised woman and said, “What do you say, Jess? Are you game for getting stomped on by the world’s worst dancer?”

She laughed. “Second only by me, sir.” Jess frowned at her son. “How is it you’re all up-to-date on Jelling’s social activities?”

“Aw, MaryJo from school never fails to share the news. Her father joined the band with his guitar, and she says the sound they make comes clear from heaven.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Jess laughed. “I tell you what, Danny Miller—if you come with Sam and me, we will go to your dance tonight. I sure would like to see this boy-chaser from school I hear so much about.”

“Aw, Ma—she doesn’t chase all the boys, just me. If I show up, she’ll want to slow dance, and I couldn’t bear being that close.” He scrunched up his nose in disgust, and the adults laughed.

“Have you given it a try?” Sam asked. “Gals smell mighty fine when you get up close.”

Danny looked at Sam and then at Jess, who raised her brows and asked, “Are you game?”



“You two have managed to trap me now,” Danny said.

“How does it feel to have a dose of your own medicine, Danny Miller?” his mother said playfully.

“I’m game if only to watch the dance floor to make sure you two give our deal a fair chance.”

“We’re going for a walk, and a dance, and all on day one of your two-week plan. If that’s not giving romance a fair chance, I don’t know what is.”

Danny clapped his hand on his knee. “Fine, then. The dance is a go! It’ll be worth cozying up to MaryJo just to witness my mail-order papa winning his bride’s heart.”

“Mail order papa?” Darian yelled. “What’s that?”

“Nothing you need to know,” Sloan said. “Eat up, boy.”



The walk around the property after lunch was enjoyable, with Sam taking in every detail she brought to his attention and every memory associated with it. He even prompted her to talk about the former owner Curtis, not once expressing an ounce of threat or jealousy in her recollections of the happy years she shared with her husband. Jess respected his apparent acceptance of that part of her past and reveled in the easy communication.

They cut their walk short to prepare for the evening together. Sam would bring the carriage around at six, and Danny grumbled all afternoon about being strong-armed into attending the dance.

Jess decided to wear the one and only fancy gown she owned. It had been pushed to the back of the wardrobe, not having seen the light of day for a long time. If she’d been given more notice, she would have hung it out to air, but the town’s event had only come to light a few hours prior. A date

with a man she was sort-of courting was an occasion she hadn't anticipated.

She laid the full-skirted green dress on the bed and stared at it. It had been Curtis's favorite. Then again, he didn't have any other outfit to compare it with, given her overbalanced wardrobe of work clothes. Maybe a shopping trip was in order. A woman should look her best when seen with a suitor. She groaned as the word penetrated her mind, almost feeling a betrayal to her late husband's memory, which was foolish. Many a frontier widow remarried almost immediately. The west was a hard place for a lady alone.

Jess realigned her thoughts, focusing on the future and her family. That was what mattered now. Curtis would have been the first to agree, not to mention, chasten her for the delay. He would not have wanted Jess to suffer the same grief he had at the loss of his first wife, Danny's mother. It was a hurt he would not have wished on his worst enemy, let alone the second-chance woman he had grown to love.

The outfit required undergarments—ones she'd stashed in the chest due to their lack of use—to make the skirt swirl on the dance floor. Putting on all the layers was tedious, but when she gazed at herself in the mirror when done, it was well worth it. Jess gaped at the image staring back at her. How long had it been since she'd felt like a real woman? Too long, the answer mocked her. An inner glow broke through the surface, spreading across her face, and it felt good to remember being loved at a time when she still cared that a man might find her attractive.

Danny would be impressed at how far she'd come, concluding his ultimate matchmaking plan was well underway.

Jess had to admit that Sam had the potential to be that man. He was certainly attractive, a hard and skilled worker, kind, funny at times, and trustworthy, no matter what charges their mutual enemy had stacked against him. She even glimpsed fatherly attributes waiting to burst forth upon her lonely sons. Still, an uncomfortable regret filled her in sharing

a past with him they both desired to forget. She wondered—and not for the first time—if his constant presence would be too much to face every day.

The realization of how deep the Fentlopes' stronghold was ingrained in her life hit her square between the eyes, holding her captive for a second time, the only difference being that no bloodshed accompanied it. In grasping the magnitude of her prison, she straightened her shoulders, and curtsied to the image in the mirror of the woman whose spirit she longed to resurrect. If Jess did not at least try for this second chance at life, the Fentlopes would walk away the victors again, regardless of sentencing in a court of law.

Jess determined, that *if* the Lord was involved in the selection of the mail-order papa just as He had been when she'd come to Jelling as a mail-order mama, who was she to cast it aside and live out her miserable days alone and unloved? She wondered if Sam was coming to the same conclusion, and together, they could erase the horrible pictures of the past from their memories forever.

She twirled and grinned at the growing happiness emerging from the woman in the mirror. Yes, she had done everything she could to make her outside appearance appealing and hoped that Sam would be proud to swing her on the dance floor in his arms. She would not even mind that Danny might gloat—in a premature victory she reminded herself—to see his mother had returned to the land of the living.



When Sam pulled the team into the front yard, he set the brake and jumped out to wait for his passengers to exit the homestead. Jess appeared first, and a choking breath lodged in his throat. She was gorgeous, having even topped the image she'd portrayed on their walk earlier. Her tanned complexion glowed in the late afternoon sun, and her eyes picked up the hues from her dress and shone. The gown was not the latest

fashion trend, but it was perfectly suitable for her figure. It ignited his sense of manliness, counting it as an undeserved privilege to be her escort for the evening.

Danny wore his Sunday best. Sam cuffed the top of his perfectly groomed hair as the lad jumped onto the seat. “Looking good. MaryJo will be impressed,” he teased. The boy grumbled in response but lifted a hand to straighten the hair Sam had mussed.

Sam turned his attention to Danny’s mother, taking her hand and kissing the back of it. “There are no words in my vocabulary to express your beauty, Jess. You take my breath away.”

“I believe those words are quite sufficient, and besides, your eyes declare it all. May I be so bold to say, you look rather handsome yourself, all cleaned up and ready to party?”

Sam grinned. “This is the best Saturday I have spent in a very long time. It appears your Danny has some pretty good ideas.”

“He can shine when he wants to,” she said, casting a sideways wink at Danny.

“Come on, you two. The music won’t wait on us,” Danny said.

“Look who’s eager to go dancing now. Must have been bitten by the love-bug.” Jess laughed as she took the hand Sam offered.

He assisted Jess into the carriage, hoping all the while that if there were such a bug, he and Jess would be bitten beyond curing. Sam was ready to settle down if the judge gave him a chance when the stagecoach robbery case went before him. The evidence was stacked in his favor and looked promising, but still, Sam had known far too many law officials who were bought-off by wealthy monopolies, and his faith in the justice system was sadly lacking. His outing with the town’s sheriff to rescue Danny from the kidnappers had shown the lawman’s dedication to serve his community, which

brought hope to the man's heart that Jelling, Wyoming would be different.

The cool autumn evening reminded them of winter's fury just around the corner. Sam drank in the smells of the season's end. He passed a woolen blanket to the passengers behind him, which Jess used to cover her legs. Sam would have loved for her to be seated alongside him, enjoying the heat of his body, but not that night. Danny was with them, making it a semi-family event. Sam planned to make up for their separation on the dance floor.

Buggies, wagons, and horses stood hitched in the lot surrounding the town hall. An adjacent building was lit up, and streams of music filtered into the streets from the party room. Sam settled the horses and went to retrieve his passengers.

"Where is Danny?" Sam asked, noticing the boy's vacant seat.

"Off to find his misery, or so he claims," Jess laughed. "But I think it's more his plan not to get in *our* way this evening, and the sacrifice is a fair trade."

Sam grinned. "Smart boy, if you don't mind my saying."

"You read my mind," Jess said as his hands circled her waist, and her feet settled gently on the ground, their faces barely a foot apart. He felt the heat where his hands were still touching her and withdrew them, not because he wanted to break contact, but out of concern she might become a target for gossipers.

Jess touched his arm. "I plan on giving this my best effort, Samuel Parker, and hope you will play along."

"Play? As in put on a show to please the boy? Is that what all this is about?"

"No, you misunderstood. Two weeks of the emotions you are stirring in me, sir, will be more than I can bear."

He smiled. “Speak your mind, woman—I like it.”

“And I like honesty, as well. I hope we can tackle this *courting* Danny’s forced upon us with the grace and merit it deserves.”

“I’m all in, but if it’s honesty you want, I need to say it like it is. As much as my heart wants to fall in love with the most remarkable frontier woman I have ever encountered, my head says there is the possibility of a prison sentence coming, and I won’t have you shamed in your community.”

“You let me worry about that, Sam. I’ve stood at that doorway, and Curtis supported me unconditionally. I believe in you, too, and plan to back you up every step of the way.”

“We’re not married. You don’t have to.”

“I want to.” Jess reached for his arm. “And if that doesn’t tickle your he-man fancy, I have no trump card up my sleeve to top it.”

As soon as they stepped inside the building, the party already in full swing, people swarmed around the pair. Her neighbors were pleased to see her come out of hiding to enjoy the social function, and they were most curious about the fact that she was being escorted by a ranch hand. From casual drops in conversations, Sam put together that there were some reputable businessmen who had called on the lady, but she’d apparently turned them away. Sam hoped that meant God was waiting for him to arrive in Jelling to sweep the widow off her feet.

The musicians led in a slower tune, and when she reached for Sam’s arm, pleading to be rescued from the onslaught of well-wishers, he broke into the mayor’s non-stop dialog. “Will you excuse us, sir? This is Jess’s favorite song.”

Sam led her onto the dance floor, took up a waltzing stance the best he could recall, and pulled her close to him.

She whispered in his ear, “How do you know this is my favorite song?”

“If not before, I’m hoping it will be now,” Sam said. “After all, it’s our first dance on the first day of courting, and I love what the words declare.”

“Mm.” She became quiet for a few seconds before continuing. “The forever love part or the standing beside one another in the good and the bad?”

“I’d say both apply to our case, but I’m leaning toward love. Forever and together does sound perfect to me.”

She pulled slightly apart, and he felt the heat of her breath blowing on his lips. “You do realize we are beating around the bush, while playing the courting game without a somewhat clear destination in mind.”

“I thought stretching it out might be more fun for you, not to mention keeping Danny guessing longer. Wouldn’t it be grand to actually tie the knot knowing love reigns instead of hoping it develops?”

“Like I did the first time around?” Jess’s face softened, and her dark eyes bore into his. “Love before the vows is definitely more pleasing for a woman who has a family to consider and memories to put to rest.”

“If you are referring to memories of your deceased husband, I never want you to forget them. God has created lots of room in your heart. He has a brand-new future planned for you the second time around. Whether with me or someone else, it should never erase the memories from your beginnings. Love will make room for two men in your life.”

Jess sighed. “You are more than I bargained for, Sam.”

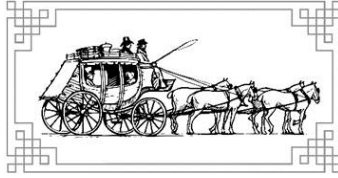
Sam grabbed Jess by the waist with two hands and spun her around. When he stopped, he gazed into her eyes, feeling her posture relax under his hands. “I do hope that is a positive observation on your part, Jess Miller, as I never want to be totally predictable. Where would the fun be in that?”

She laughed aloud, throwing her head back. “I need a drink of punch, Samuel Parker.” She leaned in to whisper in

his ear. “I am feeling rather flushed—must be that I’m not used to dancing.”

He grinned a tell-tale grin and squeezed her hand as he led her to the refreshment table.





## Chapter 15

Sunday morning worship was an emotional ride for Sam. Not only was he back under the power of the written word, but he was sitting in the second row with the Miller family, on the outer aisle beside Jess.

He could feel the congregation's penetrating eyes on his back. The parishioners likely wondered why a ranch hand was sitting beside the widowed Miller—his boss. Of course, no one knew about the mail-order papa ad inviting him to the ranch to enjoy such privileges with the lady. The tightly-knit community likely *did* know about the upcoming trial and his involvement there, both good and bad. Maybe they'd surmised that the compassions the Millers were known for had returned to the cowboy who was down on his luck. Besides, the entire ranch population seemed to be a family in its own right.

Whatever their musings, Sam shook it off. He had come to church to reconnect with his Creator, the one his mother had shared with him until her death. At what point that confirmation occurred, he wasn't sure, but he became aware of a peace overtaking him, squelching all fears of the unknown direction his life was taking, be it prison or marriage. Sam walked out of the building a spiritually free man as confident as Danny that God was in control.

Again, Sam ate in the Millers' dining room, and afterwards, he and Jess rode their horses around the property. They raced through the freshly harvested hay field, picked

their way along the wooded trails, and stopped to drink in the breathtaking view of the lake as the westerly sun played with the cresting ripples, making them glisten like jewels.

When they could not withstand another magical twist from the aura of romance enveloping them, Sam cupped her face between his hands and kissed her mouth, slowly and tenderly. When he felt her response, he was overjoyed and fearful at the same time, praying that God knew what he was doing by stirring things up to the next level of their relationship.

Jess smiled reassuringly when they parted. “All will go well, Sam. You just watch and see the Lord’s hand at work.”

That was all she said as she took his hand and headed for the horses.

Sam marveled at her discernment. Her ability to feel beyond his passion to his inner cry for help meant that the new attraction between them would, indeed, become a reality. Recalling his mother’s unconditional and abiding love for her husband made him a believer that—women could read minds—the tender heart of a woman had the power to see deeply into the soul of her man.

Her man—could he be so blessed?



On Thursday, Sam got a visit from the sheriff. The lawman leaned on the cedar gate and waved. Sam walked the injured horse he was exercising over to where Brice stood. “Howdy, Sheriff—what can I do for you?”

“You can make our Jess a happy lady by clearing your name at the hearing tomorrow. Must say, you both looked pretty cozy at the dance Saturday,” Brice teased. “Besides, folks hereabouts have taken a liking to you. Most are rooting for your acquittal and hoping you will stay and become a permanent resident of Jelling.”

“Tomorrow, you say?”

“The judge is coming in on the noon stage. He needs time to review the case, so the court will convene at two. You ready for this?”

“I’m innocent and shouldn’t have anything to worry about. That’s what me and the family here have committed to the Lord.”

“Amen,” the sheriff agreed. “Still, I’ll be glad to have it done and be rid of my cell guests. They are getting crankier by the minute. Even that poor little Miss Abigail Stenwick has had her fill of the man she thought might be *the one*.”

“Yeah, that is sad. I wonder if Abigail will ever know what she wants in life.”

“Don’t worry; her father is here to tell her.”

“He is?”

“Arrived today, looking haggard and as grouchy from traveling as the blokes stuck behind bars.”

“Was Abigail surprised?”

“She claims never to be surprised at what her father will or will not do.”

“And what of Cain Fentlope? Any sign of him coming to break his comrades out of jail or provide proof of their innocence and my guilt?”

“None. Unless he’s into surprise appearances.”

“Not if his backside is in danger of sentencing. No, I doubt he’ll come—the Fentlope boys are useless alone. They need to have their armies of paid guns to back them up.” Sam heaved a heavy sigh. “Right, so I’ll be there. Tomorrow at two.”

“I knew you would be. One bit of forewarning; we identified one of the boys in the jailhouse as Scars—Charles Fentlopes brother, one that just got out of jail for good behavior after his conviction at Jess Carrington’s trial.”

Sam removed his hat and ran his fingers through his sweat-drenched hair. “Hate how my and Jess’s past interact. She shouldn’t have to face that family ever again after what they put her through.”

“I hear that your ma is a distant relative too, putting you in the same basket.”

“Stepmother, but the Parkers never bowed to their ugly takeovers. That’s why they hate us—well, me; I’m all that’s left.” Sam sighed. “It’s been a thorn in Jess’s flesh since she found out, but despite the pain, she appears to have a heap of forgiveness in her heart for me.”

“Well, I’m off, then. There’s a prayer vigil at the church tomorrow while court is in session. Folks are eager to bend the Lord’s ear on your behalf.”

“You tell them how much I appreciate that and to add Jess to their prayers. She’ll need comforting if things go sour for me.”

The sheriff clapped Sam’s shoulder. “Keep the chin up. Only the guilty need to fear the arm of the law in Jelling, Wyoming.”



From the jail, Jess and Sam watched two deputies escort the prisoners to the courthouse. He turned to Jess and kissed her lightly on the cheek. “Whatever happens, know that I love you and want more than anything to come out of that building a free man so you can stand proud when we recite our vows.”

“Is that your idea of a marriage proposal, Sam Parker?”

He looked surprised, but then caught the tease in her expression. “I can do better later if that one didn’t meet your criteria.”

“You just come back to me, hear? I’d say yes any which way you ask.”

“And you remember our agreement, right? If the verdict doesn’t go my way, you’ll forget about us and move on with your life. I won’t have you sitting around waiting for a jailbird to do his time.”

“I choose not to consider that alternative until I must. You cannot turn love on and off that easily, so my suggestion is that you go in there with your head held high and proclaim your innocence. If you need encouragement, just look my way.”

The sheriff cleared his throat. “Are you two finished with your chattering? The judge won’t want to be kept waiting.”

The lawman led his prisoner out of the jailhouse and walked up the street. Sam heard the swish of Jess’s skirts behind him and turned to smile in her direction.

He gasped. A short distance down the road stood the crazy son of the deceased Charles Fentlope, his gun pointed at Jess’s back.

“Duck!” he yelled as he attempted to race back the few steps and pull her to the ground. All to no avail.

Jess twisted instinctively toward the direction of Sam’s gaze as he stared behind her in disbelief. The shot rang out in the afternoon air, the speed of the bullet faster than Sam’s floundering moves. The woman’s face froze in shock, her knees buckled, and she dropped to the ground, her new peach dress sucking up the stain of the red blood.

The sheriff responded instantly with a shot from his gun, and the vengeful man fell likewise in a heap on the hard dirt.

Sam fell to his knees and gazed upon Jess. She did not open her eyes, but when he bent down low, he felt the heat of her breath on his face. “She’s still breathing. Someone get the doc!”

The next few minutes were a blur.

The doctor arrived as if he'd been hanging out around the corner all along. Two businessmen rolled out a gurney, put Jess on it, and headed for the infirmary.

“Who was that gunman?” the sheriff asked Sam.

“Cain, the more daring one of Fentlopes' sons, coming for vengeance, I expect—but on Jess and not on me! If he wasn't dead, I'd kill him myself and gladly rot in prison for it.”

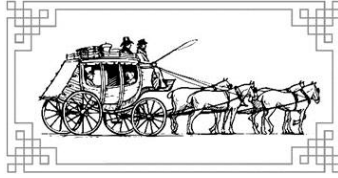
“Go see that Jess has settled in,” the sheriff said, “then come to the courthouse. This final action just might be your ticket to freedom, and Jess will need to hear that when she regains consciousness.”

Sam nodded and raced to catch up to the stretcher. Inside the doctor's office, he watched them roll her onto a cot and the doctor uncover his medical tools, all clean and ready to go.

“Out—all of you. This woman needs attention.”

The three men left the inner room. Sam was the last to leave, closing the door reluctantly behind him. Nowhere in his wildest imaginings had he pictured this event happening. Sam did not want his freedom in exchange for the price of his beloved's life. She was the heartbeat that kept him breathing and everything he wanted for his future.

Surely this could not be God's answer to the day folks at the church spent mired in prayer.



## Chapter 16

Jess lay far too quiet for Sam's liking. He had no more words remaining in his vocabulary to beg the Lord for His healing touch. The vigil at the church continued, its doors open for concerned friends and prayer warriors to come and kneel at the altar on Jess's behalf.

The hearing was over. It lasted all of twenty minutes, following the outlandish attack on Jess in the middle of the street. With the Montanan boss dead, one of the prisoners ranted on about the whole devious plan on the witness stand, in the hope of a lighter sentence, which did not happen.

Judge Tinnie's verdict had all three male kidnapers headed for the nearest penitentiary, and the vindictive Cain Fentlope laid out in a pine box destined for the graveyard on the hill. Abigail wailed for her pardon in the courtroom until the judge couldn't bear the racket another minute. No one seemed able to prove her guilt, and with no previous record, her claim that she had been a pawn from the beginning softened the official's sentencing and he gave her a second chance. The judge placed the distraught woman in the custody of her father, with a hefty fine of which the Stenwick man counted his bills out grudgingly, and a warning for instant arrest should Abigail ever step foot in Wyoming again.

Sam's acquittal came without his ever having to swear on the Bible or defend himself on the stand, with one of the real burglars—who had accompanied the Fentlope boys in the

stagecoach robbery—confessing to the setup, being under so-called pressure from his deceased boss. Samuel Parker's record was wiped clean, and the wanted posters would be removed from sheriff's offices across both Wyoming and Montana.

Every detail was legally documented, and the gift of freedom was wrapped up in a fancy red bow and handed to Sam, but the victory lost its thrill in the fact that Jess wasn't there to share in his joy.

Sloan and Danny watched the whole thing unfold from their seats at the back of the courtroom and came over to shake Sam's hand when the session had ended.

Danny was full of questions concerning Jess. "Where's Ma? Is she all right?"

"You heard about the shooting in the testimony. The doctor was tending to her wound when I had to leave to come here, but he should have news now. Let's go to the infirmary."

The three of them hurried from the courthouse, with Sam dodging eager men wanting to congratulate him. His judgment had given Sam a new future, but it all meant nothing without Jess. He pleaded with God as his feet covered the distance to the doctor's office that Jess would live.

Doctor Chiles was washing up in a basin when they went inside. He glanced in their direction, then lowered his head to continue scrubbing his hands. When done, he grabbed a towel from a hook before turning to face them. "Afternoon, boys. How did the trial go?"

"Fine, but we're more concerned as to how the surgery went. How is Jess?"

"She's a strong one. The bullet lodged in a safe place, missing any main arteries or organs. She will recover and be as good as new in no time."

Sam let out his anxious breath and hugged Danny. "Sounds good, huh, boy? We can be thankful the man is a lousy shot."



“Or God directed the bullet to where He wanted it to go,” Danny said.

“I never met a boy so full of faith—are you sure you don’t want to be a preacher instead of a rancher?”

“Maybe I can be both,” Danny chuckled. “We’ll see what God has in store for the future, but right now, I’m just glad to have my mother in one piece, and her beau a free man. We can’t be guilty of overworking the good Lord today.”

The men laughed.

“Can we go in?” Sam was eager to see her condition for himself.

“Jess might be resting, but I know she will be eager to see you all.” His gaze zeroed in on Sam. “The patient cried out *your* name while under anesthesia. I think she’s got it bad for you, mate.”

Sam rejoiced in the doctor’s report and hurried into the other room and over to where she lay on the bed. He reached for the hand on top of the sheet, and brought it to his lips with a sigh. “Oh, Jess...”

Her eyes fluttered a few times but finally remained open. When she saw him, she smiled. “No handcuffs, Mister Parker?”

“None. I am a free man, but I am more grateful that you will recover.”

“Takes more than a stray bullet from a shaky hand to put me under.”

“Cain had every right to be nervous. If anything had of happened to you...”

“Then it would have been my time to go to my eternal home, Sam. You can’t protect me from His hand when my day comes.”

“Half the town is praying for you, so I reckon that even if He’d wanted you in His home as much as I do mine, He’d

extend your time here on earth just because of his great compassion.”

“And for that, we are especially grateful,” Sloan said as he stepped forward. “Nice to see your smile, Jess.”

Her eyes took in Danny, and she held out her arms. “Come and give me a hug, boy, before you drown in those tears.”

Danny hugged her gently, careful not to put too much pressure on her body. “They’re tears of joy, Ma. Today worked out just fine. My prayers weren’t answered quite the way I’d have done it, but He answered nonetheless. The Millers will return home victorious over a misguided bullet, and the tyrants are headed for jail.”

“I love you, Danny Miller.”

The boy’s face reddened. “Aw, Ma, don’t get all mushy in front of the fellows.” He pulled away from her grasp and went to stand beside Sam.

“Will the doc let me go home tonight?” Jess asked, attempting to sit straighter in the bed.

“I’ll run and ask,” Sloan offered, and he headed for the outer room. All too soon, he came back shaking his head. “Nope. He wants to keep an eye on you overnight. Keep the wound clean and watch for infection.”

Jess groaned but settled obediently back into her pillow. She looked at Sam. “Can you stay for a while?”

“Figured I’d keep you company, and when you fall asleep, I’ll curl up in that comfy chair over there by the window.”

“And miss out on the soft mattress a free man deserves?”

“Are you talking about that lumpy mattress in the bunkhouse?”

“Is it bad? The hands have never complained, and I never go in there.”

“Better than sleeping on the hard ground outside. They’ll do.”

Sloan spoke up; “Are you ready, Danny? We need to pick up the boys at the church and let the pastor know the good news on both fronts of the prayer requests.”

When the door closed behind Sloan and Danny, Sam pulled a chair over beside her bed. “Are you hurting, Jess?”

“I think Doctor Chiles gave me some medicine to dull the pain. The right side is tender, but I’ve hurt worse.”

Sam lifted the half empty whiskey bottle sitting on the side table and raised his brow in a tease. “Or maybe the liquor dulled the pain,” A comment to which got him a swat from the patient. Sam replaced the bottle, parked himself on the chair, and reached for her hand. “You are a sight for sore eyes, woman. When the judge said I was free, all I could think of was that life without you would be a jail sentence I wouldn’t survive.”

“I recall thinking something similar as I tumbled to the ground after taking the bullet. Heaven would lose its appeal, if I missed the opportunity to be your wife.”

“Cain won’t be bothering you again, Jess. The sheriff put him down.”

“Poor Fiona Fentlope. It’s ironic the foolish mother traded off Gertie—a loyal friend—as a half-wit, married for money, and gained at least one son as violent as her husband had been. No doubt she has cried many tears on her satin pillows.”

“Only you would care about the woman and the family who caused you such grief.”

“It’s sad to think about how random choices have the power to determine life’s path. We both got lost in ours for a while, but God has given us a victory. I suppose it is serving

Him that makes the difference.” She yawned, covering her open mouth with her hand. “Would you mind if I closed my eyes for a while?”

“Not at all. Healing is why we’re here.” Sam stood. “How about I go to the diner and order some food for us on a tray—something light—and we’ll snack when you wake up?”

“Sounds good.” Her eyes fluttered shut.

Sam crept quietly from the room, told the doctor he’d be back later with Jess’s supper, and went out into the bright late afternoon. With the good report about Jess’s expected recovery, he could savor the fact that his days of running had finally ended. He debated going to the sheriff’s office to check on the prisoners, but he cast that impulse aside, determined to look to his future instead.

The church. Yes, he would go there to thank God for His favor on this day of miracles. He opened the door and found the pastor picking up prayer books off the pews.

“Samuel Parker—what brings you to the house of the Lord?”

“Thought I’d offer some thanks to God for answered prayers. Jess will heal, and she is eager to be my wife. I feel very blessed to have my freedom today and a great woman looming in my future.”

“Sounds like a wedding might be coming our way,” Pastor Storm said.

“Yes, but I’ll leave Jess to make those arrangements when she’s up and about. Don’t want to rush her into anything that might still require some adjustment time.”

“Maybe the missus and I will walk over to the Doc’s after supper and drop a few hints. We haven’t had a wedding in Jelling for months.” He chuckled and dropped his pile of books on the front pew. “I’ll leave you to your praying now. Got some chores at the parsonage that have been piling up.”

Alone in the sanctuary, Sam moved to the altar and dropped to his knees. No spoken words escaped his lips, but his heart filled to overflowing, and he felt the Lord's presence as clearly as if He were parked right beside him. He soaked up the peace the moments offered, and devoid of all the baggage he'd carried for so long, he reconnected with himself and surrendered to the plans God had in store for him.

Sam felt like a new man when he arose and walked away from the church that day, and he vowed to repeat many more of these solitary visits with God.

On his way to the diner, he ran into Sheriff Brice, who was doing his rounds. "How is the patient?"

"Recovering. She's going to be fine."

"Mm... and do I hear wedding bells in the near future?" Brice chuckled.

"I'm going to let Jess pick the day. I don't mind courting a fine woman like her a while longer." Sam nodded toward the jailhouse. "Got the villains all packed and ready to go?"

"Tomorrow the jail wagon from the pen is coming to relieve me of their obnoxious presence. The jailhouse will seem peaceful with them gone."

"And Abigail?"

"Leaving on tomorrow's coach with her father cuffed to her for life." Brice chuckled. "Never met such a feather-brained woman."

"Her father will find her a good husband, and she'll settle in the east where she belongs."

"Glad to hear that. I prefer a solid frontier woman with a head on her shoulders and grit in her teeth. A lot like your Jess, yes?"

"Definitely. I'm on my way to the diner to pick us up a picnic supper to share at the infirmary."

“Sounds like the perfect romantic setting to me.” Sheriff Brice laughed and clapped Sam on the shoulder, buddy-style. “Best get back to my rounds. See you later.”

The cook at the diner packed two suppers in a box for himself and the patient. Sam hoped she’d had a good rest in his absence and was ready to eat and regain her strength. When he walked into Jess’s room, the doctor was just finishing up with her.

“Evening, Sam. Our patient appears to be mending fine. I’ll leave you two alone.” On his way past Sam, the doctor sniffed the air. “Smells mighty fine. That should help speed up the healing.”

Jess smiled at Sam. “It does smell good.”

“The cook said he made it especially for you. Planned on sending it over himself if I hadn’t shown up. His soup is his best-known antidote for the sickly, filled with just the right vegetables and spice blend designed to tickle your tastebuds.”

Jess chuckled.

“His precise words—I swear,” Sam said.

“Sounds wonderful. Doc suggested I sit at the table over there, if you’ll help me up, kind sir.”

Sam put the box down and hurried to her bedside. “My pleasure.”

She slipped her legs out from under the covers and sat on the edge of the bed. When she saw his face, she grinned. “Don’t you laugh, Sam Parker. This hospital gown covers me fully and is far more comfortable than my new tight-fitting dress, which I, no doubt, have wasted my money on; the stains will never come out.”

“Comfort is all that matters right now. I will hightail it out to the ranch first thing tomorrow and get Danny to pick out a homecoming dress for you to wear.”

“Make sure he knows to choose one of my simple work dresses. Nothing tight or cumbersome. The trip in the

wagon will be jarring enough without the binds of fashion cutting into me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Sam reached for her hand, and when she stood, he held her steadily against him as they shuffled across the room to the small table by the window. He situated her gently on the cushioned chair and went to get their supper. From the box, he took out two bowls of soup, biscuits, and cheese.

“Looks yummy. Thank you so much for doing this. I am starving, and the doctor says it’s a sure sign the healing is in full swing.”

He reached for her hand. “I am so sorry you had to undergo this injury trying to support me.”

“Nonsense. The man hated me as much as you. The bloke probably figured he’d get to you by downing me in case the judge set you free.”

“To be honest, I have a hard time imagining that man thinks at all. Seems to work on adrenalin and bitterness, unlike his father, who was the king of pre-planned deception.”

She smiled as she took the napkin he offered and set it on her lap. “And you were never tempted to look across the lake at the girl your relatives were trying to set you up with?”

“It happened so fast. From the moment we arrived there, it was non-stop work trying to bring the land back to its potential after being neglected by the owners. Violence aimed at the Carringtons’ was well underway before the ultimatum of marrying you was given to me. I said no to being used, and shortly afterward you were gone. It didn’t cross my mind that he’d kill an entire family to gain property. I never did stare into those gorgeous eyes of yours; if I had, I might have weakened and accepted being a pawn in his takeover plan.”

“I don’t believe that. You have scruples, Sam Parker, whereas Charles Fentlope, Senior did not.”

“Still, we must have been God’s plan all along, because He brought me to where you lived in His time. That was not a

coincidence.”

“It seems like between the good Lord and Danny, we never had a chance to balk at our second chance,” Jess said in an accepting tone that warmed his heart.

“I will never tire of that joyful expression. It captivates me every time, and that spark in your eye will brighten my day for the rest of my life, if I can wrap my brain around the reality of it.” He chuckled and bowed his head, offering a short prayer of thanks for the food.

“Amen.”

“I talked to the preacher earlier. He said he and the missus might drop by to visit you later. The town has prayed up a storm for us today, and they are rejoicing in the outcome.”

“Yes, we have much to be grateful for.” Jess sipped some soup from her spoon. “Oh, this is delicious. Did you just *happen* to see the pastor in passing or did you make a special trip to the church?”

He noted the glint in her eye and knew she was fishing for information. “I wanted to thank them for their support today and spend some time with the Lord—pure and simple.”

“That was a nice gesture.”

“It was Pastor Storm who brought up the wedding, but I told him you’d be setting the date. Wasn’t sure how long you wanted to go through the courting routine.”

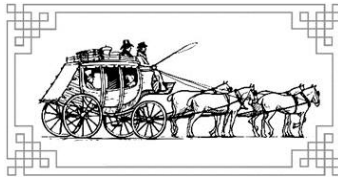
“It is rather fun. I never had a chance to court the first time around.”

“Then courting, we’ll do, but maybe we’ll steer clear of any more suppers in the infirmary.”

“Agreed. Although I suspect it’s not the location that matters but the company.”

“Hear, hear.” The two clinked glasses and smiled over the rim; newfound love gleaming from their eyes.





The wedding was planned for December.

Besides the Christmas aura filling the air due to the yearly celebration of the Savior's birth, it seemed the perfect time to usher in the next era of newlyweds at the Miller/Parker ranch.

Festivity bloomed in everyone's heart. Despite the cold of Wyoming in December and the snowy blanket that covered the land, the church was packed to overflowing with well-wishers. The bride wore an elegant gown of white, trimmed with crimson and green lace as a nod to the season. Her winter woolen cloak was red, with a furry hood to block the wind when they shifted from the church to the town hall for the after party. The groom wore his full cowboy attire at the bride's request, and Danny stood next to him, glowing with pride at having witnessed the happily-ever-after resulting from his mail-order papa ad.

All had ended well. Sloan and the entire Miller family were ecstatic to welcome Samuel Parker up to the big house, as his presence had awakened new life in the mistress of the house, whom they loved dearly.

The business side of the ranch was already showing signs of growth under Sam's watchful eye and expertise. He and Jess worked together as a team, dedicated to its success and the family legacy the sons would inherit someday. No one from Montana bothered them again, which made it easier to leave the past in the past where it belonged.

On their first anniversary, Jess announced she was with child, and the new family rejoiced at the news. Another baby was on the way, the first of the Parker bloodline, and as excited as he was, Sam knew he could not love that child any more than he did the three Miller boys. They were a family, united in love, which was deeper than blood.

**THE END!**

**If you enjoyed this story, I would appreciate it if you would leave a review on the sales page where you purchased the book. Your comments help readers find books from authors writing the content they love.**

**<https://www.amazon.com/Rancher-Jessica-Marlene-Bierworth-ebook/dp/B0C5N8R9JW>**

## **About the Series and my books**

My Mail-Order Papa book carries on from the successful series, Mail Order Mama, primarily taking place on the Miller ranch. Both of the main characters in my books (Jessica and Samuel) come to Wyoming from Montana, and both respond to an ad written by a son who desires a complete family.

My books, and the other contributions in this multi-author series, are standalones, but they have this in common: the person sending for the “mama” or “papa” is neither the bride nor the groom.

Here is where to find the rest of the books from all of the great authors involved:

**Mail-Order Mama.**

**<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B08QV9DPSL>**

**Mail Order Papa**

**<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0C5F246HT>**

We also invite you to join us on our series **Reader Group, Lovely Romance Clean Sweet Readers** where you can find updates on a number of exciting series and authors, plus fun, games, and puzzles.

**<https://www.facebook.com/groups/38264675940828>**