

Virtues
AND **VICES**
OF THE
OLD WEST
BOOK 2

A SWEET
Misfortune

A NOVEL

MAGGIE BRENDAN


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For Bruce and his support,
but most of all for his love.





[Jesus] said to them, “Watch out!
Be on your guard against all kinds of greed;
life does not consist
in an abundance of possessions.”

LUKE 12:15



1

Paradise Valley
Cottonwood, Montana Territory
September 1862

John McIntyre reined in his horse along the ridge above Cottonwood Creek overlooking Paradise Valley below. The vista before him never failed to impress him, and this perfect fall day with its cloudless sky was no exception. He fished inside his leather vest pocket for a piece of paper and read it for the third time.

I need your help, John. After I left Paradise Valley, I received a letter from my sister, Rachel, that has me very disturbed. She is now working in a saloon called the Wild Horse as a dance hall girl. You have to get her out of that situation until I can return. I'm begging you, do what needs to be done—horse-tie her if you have to. And knowing her fiery disposition, you might have to. Get her out of there before it's too late to save her

reputation. With all your connections, maybe you can find her a decent job.

*Your friend,
Preston Matthews*

John sighed, wishing he didn't have to get tangled up in a situation not of his own doing, and he stuffed the letter back into his vest pocket. He'd known Preston a long time and didn't want to let his friend down. A saloon was no place for Preston's sister. John hadn't seen Rachel since she was a gangly adolescent and he'd already graduated from high school. Would he even recognize her now? He remembered a time when they'd argued at a church picnic after he didn't want to enter the potato sack race with a girl. She could never take no for an answer.

With a gentle tug of the reins, he turned Cutter in the direction of the trail into Cottonwood. He wanted to get this done and get back to his ranch on the outskirts of town as quickly as possible—and he only knew of one way to do it.

John made his way through dust-filled Main Street, hearing piano music coming from the saloon long before he reached the hitching post. He dismounted, then stepped aside to let two drunks stagger through the swinging café doors. They dissolved into laughter and slapped one another on the back. The odor of liquor was strong, and he wondered how on earth a man could derive any pleasure from imbibing and losing control. He preferred to stay in control . . . most of the time.

He strode into the Wild Horse, his senses assaulted with the buzz of activity and music. There were girls dancing on a small stage, twirling about in scanty satin outfits, their bare legs kicking high into the air while they kept time with the

beat of the banged-out notes of the piano. He scanned the room quickly, noticing men oblivious to the dance hall girls while they concentrated on their cards. He was surprised it was crowded this early—it wasn't even dark yet.

John looked from left to right at the young dancers' faces until he spotted Rachel. He strode to the stage and in one leap was in the middle of them, ignoring someone who yelled for him to get down. After lifting a strawberry blonde off her feet, he moved down to the floor again.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" The young girl thrashed about and pushed against his chest.

"Rachel, you need to come with me NOW!" he ordered.

"I'm not Rachel, you fool! Let go of me." She twisted away. "I doubt Rachel's gonna let you manhandle her either!" She giggled, covering her mouth in an attempt to hide the gap between her teeth.

"Beggin' your pardon, ma'am," he said, stepping back before swinging his line of vision across the stage floor to peer at each painted face.

Some of the ladies were still dancing, but one stopped—placing her hands on her hips and glaring at him. *That's Rachel!* In two strides he was up the steps on the stage and lifting her unceremoniously to his shoulder, despite the pounding of her fists on his back and unintelligible mutters under her breath. The music stopped and the piano player stood up. "Where do you think you're going with Rachel?"

"Move aside, man," he said, pushing his way through the crowd who stood by watching. "Don't get in the way of a lovers' quarrel."

"I ain't never seed you here 'afore," a snaggletoothed patron sputtered.

“Let me go, you brute!” the lady yelled, kicking her heels in the air.

John ignored her protest, continuing on past the café doors and straight to his horse. He straddled Cutter and, holding tightly to Rachel, settled her on his saddle. One swift kick in the side of his horse, and they galloped off—leaving bystanders in a cloud of thick dust.

Rachel had no choice but to hang on for dear life while she considered her options: jump off and risk a broken neck, or wait until the crazed cowboy came to his senses—which she hoped would be any moment now. He smelled of sunshine and the outdoors mixed with the peculiar smell of his worn leather vest, and despite her predicament, she found herself mystified by this man.

There was something vaguely familiar about his tall, dark looks and penetrating eyes that held hers briefly before he’d reached for her. Had she met him before? Perhaps he’d been to the saloon before. Why couldn’t she remember? *Lord, help me get away!* Her heart thumped hard against her ribs.

The landscape rushed past, and she closed her eyes to keep from getting dizzy until the horse began slowing. She opened her eyes to see they were at someone’s home. Before her sprawled a two-story Victorian ranch house, smoke curling from its chimney. Nearby were a large barn and corrals—some with horses and cattle being tended by ranch hands. A sheepdog rushed up to greet them as the cowboy slid off the horse’s back. *Well, at least he didn’t take me to a deserted hideout to be his slave!*

“Stay back, Winchester.” The dog sat next to his master with his tail curled, and the cowboy turned to stare up at her

briefly, holding out his hands to assist her down. Instead of accepting his help, Rachel abruptly slid forward onto the saddle, grabbed the reins, then slapped the horse's flanks and raced out of the front yard in the direction they'd come. She barely glanced back but saw the cowboy with his jaw dropped.

Teach him to snatch a lady! she thought with a chuckle. Suddenly there was a whistle from behind her and the horse came to a screeching halt. Despite her pull on the reins and another swift kick in his ribs, the horse wouldn't budge. She muttered under her breath when she observed two ranch hands on horseback approaching her. There was no way out—the horse obediently turned around, trotting straight back to his master, who stood with hands on his hips and a dark look directed right at her.

John sighed and looked up at Rachel's face, which was red with anger. He knew Cutter would listen to his commands, but he had to admire her—she had tried—and he supposed if it were him, he would've done the same thing. He walked over, taking the reins and giving Cutter an affectionate pat on his head. "Good boy."

"Why don't you let me help you down and then we'll talk."

"*WE* have *nothing* to talk about!" she spat out. When she turned her nose up in the air like she was the queen of England, he laughed out loud.

"Suit yourself, but you're going to get mighty tired sittin' up there, and I believe supper is being held for us." By now, more than a few of the ranch hands had sauntered over to see what was taking place, and stared at the pretty lady in her satin outfit.

"Meet Rachel Matthews, men. She'll be staying with us for a while—"

“I will not!” Rachel sputtered, sliding off the horse to confront him, feet apart, her thin arms akimbo. She looked rather ridiculous in the frilly purple satin can-can skirt, high-top heels, and messy hair. “You had no right to bring me here and I demand that you find a horse to take me back to Cottonwood.” A snicker filtered out through the small bunch of hands, and she glared at them.

One bowlegged cowboy swept off his hat and bowed slightly. “Pardon me, ma’am, but I don’t think you’re gonna fit in with the bunch here lessin’ you know how to rope a steer!” The others guffawed and slapped their thighs.

“No thanks to you loggerheads—none of you are even man enough to stop this brute from kidnapping me!”

“Never interfere with a man and his lady when they’re in a spat, is my motto,” another cowpuncher added.

The cowhand’s comment seemed to infuriate her even more. “I’m *not* his lady!”

John watched as Rachel rolled her eyes, then folded her arms across her chest. He could tell she was not in the least bit flattered by their attention, and he hadn’t wanted to embarrass her. His eyes flicked over her willowy form and the pretty face underneath all the paint and powder. It was hard to believe she’d grown into such a beautiful young woman. *Wonder why Preston never told me what a pretty young lady she’s become?* He shifted his weight from one hip to the other. “You men go on about your business now.” The punchers shuffled out of the yard leaving the two of them to battle it out.

He stepped forward to take Rachel’s hand but she snatched it away. “Rachel, if you’ll step inside, I’ll explain everything to you.”

“How do you know my name?” She tapped her foot in the dirt. “And what do you want from me?” Her eyes snapped in anger. “I demand to know your name and why you’ve kidnapped me!”

“I choose to call it a *rescue*. My name is John McIntyre, and I own this ranch. Your brother, Preston, wrote and asked me to rescue you from the Wild Horse to protect you from that unscrupulous lifestyle.”

Her head thrust upward in surprise. “Preston? You’ve heard from Preston?” It was almost a whisper. For a moment her face softened and she seemed to forget her anger at him.

“Yes. Now, will you please come inside and we’ll have supper and talk?” He was pleading with her, which was against his nature. What had he gotten himself mixed up with? On any ordinary evening he would have been long finished with supper and sitting by the fire with a good book, or planning the next day with Estelle, his grandmother, or discussing ranch work with Curtis, his foreman. He was beginning to get impatient with this painted lady from the Wild Horse.

Reluctantly, Rachel nodded. “I don’t plan on being here for longer than I must, so you’d better explain what *you* have to do with my brother.”

“Fair enough.” John motioned for her to go ahead of him up the steps to the front door, then reached over and opened it for her. A light scent of rosewater tickled his nostrils as she walked past him, and he wondered how many men had held her in their arms . . . He shook himself, clearing away the thought. What she’d done in the past didn’t involve him one bit!