

Sharon Flesch

Montana

MORNING

A Novel of the “Real” West

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One

A golden glow surrounded the billowing clouds above Pineridge Mountain, as Adrianna curled up on the wicker settee in the breakfast nook. Sipping hot chocolate as she scanned the headlines of the morning paper, she turned back to the window and gazed at the snow-covered fields in the distance. The sun peeked out through the clouds for the first time since Christmas day. It seemed like an eternity, but in truth had only been two weeks since Chad and Amy had been home for the holidays. Maggie had known how empty this first Christmas without Jed would seem to Adrianna and her children, and had done everything in her power to make it a carefree time for her brother's family. Adrianna had decided just last night to invite her to dinner this evening. With Maggie's divorce looming on the horizon, Adrianna was sure that she could use a bit of tender loving care.

How many times had she sat in the early morning before dawn and looked to the mountains in the east, planning for the coming day and dreaming of days past. She had come to this cozy house on the edge of town as a bride, spent over twenty years here, raising her children, and building a life with Jed. Then four years ago, life had suddenly changed with a single word, "Alzheimers."

At first they had gone on as normally as possible, but slowly there were changes. The business was sold and

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Adrianna began to manage the parts of their life Jed had always handled. Decisions had to be made and she made them—good, bad or indifferent—she made them and went on living. Jed lost contact with this world, his memories, his sense of self, and she lost him. Long before the night last February, when he had died in his sleep, she had lost him.

Chad came back from the air base in Germany, Amy drove home from college, they laid Jed to rest, and life went on. She still played the organ at church every Sunday and attended to all her civic and volunteer obligations, but something was missing. The kitchen was spotless as always, the living room was cluttered with just enough projects to look homey, but Adrianna no longer felt alive and at home here.

Suddenly Chester stirred at her feet, and yipped to be let outside. “What a sweetie you are!” She murmured, bending down to pet the little dog softly. “I honestly don’t know what I’d do without you.” It felt good to be needed, even if it was only by a little, white, fluffy mop of a dog.

The hot chocolate was no longer hot, and the paper was unread. How long she had spent with the memories of the recent past, she didn’t know. One thing was for sure; sitting here feeling sorry for herself wasn’t going to do any good. As a matter of fact, keeping so busy she didn’t have time to think didn’t work either. She had tried that too. *If I can just get through playing the organ for Max Watson’s funeral service this morning, she told herself, then I’m going to sit down and figure out what to do with the rest of my life.*

Adrianna sorted through the closet a dozen times seeking something appropriate to wear. Not many things fit her slender figure except her sweaters and jeans. Cooking for one was definitely not any fun, and she was much thinner now. She decided not to fret about how she looked. She would be sitting behind the organ and no one would notice the frumpy dress.

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Thankfully, the services had been short and Mark's sermon uplifting, focusing on new life and renewed courage. If she hadn't known better, it would have seemed aimed directly at her. "Max Watson lived each day of his life as if it were the first day of the rest of his life. He was the first to admit he'd made plenty of mistakes but never looked back, only ahead," Mark had told them.

Adrianna couldn't help but notice all the smiling faces along the drive home; perhaps, it was because she was truly smiling for the first time in a very long time. The sun was shining on the new-fallen snow, and the ugly slush of the previous week was now lying under a carpet of white. *What a perfect day for a new beginning!* Suddenly the dull ache in the back of her head was feeling much better.

Pausing in the living room only long enough to phone Maggie, she went down the hall to the bedroom, braided her hair and threw on her old sweats. Adrianna rinsed off the makeup she disliked, but had always felt compelled to wear in public, pulled on her coat and boots and headed for the park. Chester romped beside her as she walked, and at times only his little black nose and brown eyes were visible. The wind was all but gone and in its place, the fresh clean scent of winter. The snow crunched beneath her feet, and the sun shone like diamonds on the fields as she passed.

Maggie laughed softly to herself as she hung up the phone. Adrianna always seemed to know when she needed a pick-me-up. This was going to be a particularly rough day. She was not looking forward to seeing the first client at her employment agency this morning. Jack Kilbourne had called her office several weeks ago, asking that she find a housekeeper/ tutor/ nurse for his grandson. Even under ordinary circumstances this would be a tough bill to fill, but these were extraordinary circumstances.

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Kilbourne Ranch was on the eastern side of Pineridge Mountain, forty-five miles from town on a mountain road. Finding a woman with the qualifications for the job would have been tough enough, but finding one willing to sign a year's contract in such a remote location had turned out to be impossible. She dreaded telling Mr. Kilbourne she had been unsuccessful. She had a feeling this man was not used to taking no for an answer.

Jack looked around as he brushed the snowflakes from his jacket. The office was neat, well organized and professional looking.

"Mr. Kilbourne?" Maggie offered her hand while rounding the big desk, piled high with folders.

"Mrs. Banks." The man standing before her had a strong handshake, was all of six feet tall and muscular. His skin was dark with weathering common to men who worked outdoors. He removed the black western hat, revealing the curly salt and pepper hair that matched his beard.

"Most folks call me Jack," he said, as he settled into the high-backed chair opposite her desk. Maggie Banks sat down at her desk, leaned forward with her hands folded in front of her, and looked him right in the eye. She struck him at once as an honest and caring woman.

"Most folks call me Maggie," she replied, feeling him study her from across the desk. "I wished I had better news for you. I have searched high and low for a suitable employee for you, but haven't found anyone I would recommend." She paused for a moment, shaking her head in regret. "I found several qualified applicants who were unwilling or unable to work in such a remote location. I also found several unqualified persons who were willing to move to the 'country', but I doubt that they would work. I think they looked at this as a glorious vacation opportunity."

Jack nodded with a knowing half-smile and looked

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down at the floor. How was he going to convince a judge to give him custody of his grandson, if he couldn't find someone to care for him? "Damnation," he swore softly under his breath. "Mrs. Banks, Maggie; the California courts and Montana Child Protective Services say I can have custody of my grandson—providing I can make arrangements for home schooling and physical therapy. Do you have any suggestions at all?" he asked, settling back further into the chair.

"Well now," Maggie said grinning, "The position you wish to fill requires either a wife or an angel, both somewhat hard to come by on short notice. In fact, the only woman I know who comes close to fitting the bill is my sister-in-law, Adrianna, and she's definitely not in the market for a job."

"I suppose she has a family to care for or a full time job already."

"Actually neither, she is a widow with two grown children, but I'm quite sure she wouldn't want to apply." Maggie had to suppress a grin at the strange twist this conversation had taken.

Jack studied the woman across from him. He sensed she was beginning to wish she had not mentioned this Adrianna, whoever she was.

"Did you ask her?"

"No, of course not! I'm sorry; I never should have brought her up. I was kidding, trying to take some of the tension out of the air, I guess." Maggie sighed, realizing again just how serious this man's situation was. "Look, Adrianna is a lovely lady and I've always said there was nothing she couldn't handle, but it's out of the question." Maggie tried to sound very firm and regain control of the situation. *Me and my big mouth.*

"Would you mind if I talked with her?" Jack asked, watching her reaction carefully.

Suddenly Maggie Banks looked and sounded like a mother bear protecting her cub. "Adrianna is a member

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of my family, not a perspective employee. Now let's forget this nonsense, and get back to finding you some help."

Maggie began describing the process she would now use to expand the search. She promised she would deliver someone to meet Jack's requirements in the near future. He appeared to be listening and nodded in most of the right places, but his mind was elsewhere. The time had come to do some searching on his own. As he left the employment agency office, he crossed the snow-filled street and found a phone booth in the next block. This Adrianna person had to have a last name, and with any luck it was Banks.

The address Jack found in the phone book, led him to the outskirts of town. Most homes here had small pastures and were well kept. Folks in this part of town appeared to be well off. *So much for hoping this gal is desperate for work*, he grimaced.

The white house with red trim at the end of the cull de sac was 705 Dalecort, the address listed for A. Banks. Jack ran his hand over his beard. This was a crazy idea. Never in all his fifty years had he gone on such a wild goose chase. *She's going to slam the door right in my face!* The question was what to say *if* she didn't slam the door.

Jack pulled his truck into the driveway, turned off the ignition and waited. Questions flew through his mind. *How do I approach her? How much do I tell her? What if she's too old for the job?*

After gathering his courage, Jack pulled on his hat, buttoned his Levi jacket, got out of the pickup and started up the walkway. With hat in hand, he rang the doorbell. As he stood waiting and listening for signs of life, he found himself half-hoping there would be no answer. Feeling very awkward and suddenly sure this was the dumbest idea he'd ever had, Jack rang the bell once more. When there was no answer, he sighed in a combination of frustration and relief. He turned back to the truck, de-

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feated and exhausted.

Adrianna heard the doorbell as she came in the back door. *Who could be here at this time of day?* She left Chester in the fenced yard and hurriedly removed her parka.

"I'm coming, just a minute," she called, as she struggled with her boot strings. *Darn things will not stay tied and then won't come untied. Next time I buy ones with Velcro.* Adrianna was hopping on one foot, yanking on the offending lace of the other boot, when she opened the front door. She found herself gazing at the back of a stranger. Still tugging at her boot, she stepped into the doorway.

"Wait! Can I help you?" she yelled to the man, just as he opened the door of the big green pickup in the drive. He looked up in her direction and paused. If this man was a salesman of some sort, he did not look the part. She was certain, judging by his clothes and the way he walked, he was from one of the local ranches. The stubborn boot finally released its hold and Adrianna stepped onto the porch. As the man came closer she could see the deep brown eyes, weathered face and strong mouth. He walked like a man on a mission, determination in each step.

Jack could sense the woman on the porch studying him as he approached. *Probably wondering what a hick cowpoke is doing in this neighborhood.* Jack had no idea what he was going to say to her or what he had expected, but the gal standing waiting on the porch wasn't it. He had come prepared to meet a little, old, gray-haired lady with her hair in a bun. This gal was blonde, green-eyed, petite, and much younger than him. She also had the longest braid hanging over her shoulder he'd ever seen. He had the right address but obviously the wrong woman.

"Sorry to bother you, ma'am, I was looking for Adrianna Banks," he spoke with a deep voice that matched his smile.

"You've found her," she said, smiling up at the man standing at her door, hat in hand.

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Jack stood studying the woman looking up at him. “If you’re the gal I’m looking for you must have had your kids when you were in grade school,” he said with a grin.

Adrianna looked as astonished as she felt, and could not help laughing. “Who in the world are you and what brings you here?” This fellow wasn’t dressed like a salesman, but he sure had a line.

Jack grinned sheepishly at the floor and brought his eyes back up to look at the woman studying him in confusion. “Sorry about that. I’ve got a nasty habit of saying what I’m thinking,” he said, nervously clinching his hat. “Can we start over? My name is Jackson Kilbourne, and I just came from the Banks Placement Agency. I talked to your sister, Maggie.”

“Sister-in law. Please come in out of the cold. I was about to have a cup of coffee. Why don’t you join me?” She moved aside and ushered him into the large living room. The room was light and airy with large windows and greenery everywhere. Jack felt as if he had just stepped into a spring day.

“Do you always invite total strangers into your house?” he asked, as he hung his hat on the back of a chair and Adrianna helped him out of his coat.

She was heading for the kitchen when she turned in his direction and tilted her head as she pondered his question, “There’s a first time for everything, I guess. I’ll get us some coffee and then you can tell me what brings you here.” Adrianna poured the coffee into mugs, watching the man out of the corner of her eye as he stood looking out the window towards the mountains, lost in thought. Was it only her imagination or was there a lot of sadness behind his easy smile?

“Would you like your coffee in there or at the kitchen table?”

Jack sensed she was going out of her way to make him comfortable. “The kitchen table will be fine,” he replied as he sat down facing the window.

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Adrianna handed him a mug. "Black?"

"Yeah, thanks." Jack sipped the hot coffee and plunged into his explanation. "I wish I could think of a better way to approach this, Mrs. Banks."

"Please call me Adrianna," she smiled across the top of her coffee cup. Whatever this man had come to tell her or ask of her, it was not coming easily to him.

"Adrianna then. As I said, my name is Jack Kilbourne. I run the Kilbourne Cattle Company on the other side of Pineridge Mountain," he said, pointing out the mountain range she looked at every morning. "I had an appointment with your sister-in-law this morning, and she mentioned your name."

Adrianna looked at him incredulously. "Maggie runs an employment agency. Why on earth would she give you my name, Mr. Kilbourne?" The man across the table was giving her that sheepish grin again.

"My friends call me Jack . . . anyway, she didn't exactly mean to give me your name. It just kind of slipped out."

"Slipped out how?" Adrianna was becoming more confused with each passing minute. "Maybe you should start at the beginning."

Jack took a deep breath and studied the table top for what seemed like hours, when he looked up again, Adrianna saw the tears brimming in his eyes. "I suppose you read in the paper, around Thanksgiving, about the plane crash west of town?"

She nodded. "The pilot and his wife were killed, leaving behind a badly injured little boy." She saw the pain flash across the rugged face and bury itself deep in his eyes.

"That woman was my daughter and the boy is my only grandson." He stared out at mountains without really seeing them.

"Scott is a nice boy," she replied, as she resisted reaching out to touch the fist clenched on her table.

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He looked up at her in amazement. "How . . . how did you meet Scotty?"

"I volunteer twice a week at the hospital. I read to him in the evenings when I'm there. I'm surprised I haven't run into you."

The eyes looking back at her were now black with anger. "I've been there as much as I could. I had to take care of funeral arrangements, custody papers . . ."

"Whoa," she whispered, softly touching his big hard hand. "I wasn't criticizing you. I understand you can't be there every minute."

"I wonder if Scott understands that."

"I'm sure he does." She wondered if the man understood just how badly Scott was hurt, and how much love he needed. "I guess I still don't understand why you've come here."

"No, I guess you don't." He knew he had to tell her. Putting it off was not going to make it easier, and so taking a deep breath, he plunged in. "We need help taking care of Scotty when I take him home. I came here to offer you a job." Jack looked at the mountains, and then turned back to see Adrianna shaking her head in disbelief.

"But Mr. Kilbourne, Jack, I'm not looking for a job. I don't even know what you'd need or if I'd be qualified," she rambled, as she tried to make some kind of sense of the situation.

Jack grinned across the table. "Apparently you are perfectly qualified. Mrs. Banks said what I was looking for was an angel, and you were the only one she knew."

"So she sent you to see me?" Adrianna couldn't help but sound shocked. Maggie just wouldn't do such a thing, not without warning her first.

"Well . . . not exactly." Jack looked as guilty as he felt.

"What do you mean, not exactly?"

"She mentioned you in passing and I decided to meet you for myself. She'll probably be furious when she finds out I came here." Jack was looking down at his hands,

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cradling the now cold coffee, not wanting to see her face. He was certain she would throw him out the front door any minute. The silence was killing him and he looked up to discover she was grinning.

Tilting her head to the side and laughing, she said, "You are one brave man, Jackson Kilbourne. Have you ever seen Maggie in a rage?"

"No, I haven't." He had no doubt he soon would, and it occurred to him that any hope of Mrs. Banks helping him was now gone.