

LORI WICK

*Jessie*



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## JESSIE

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Token Creek Townsfolk

1873

Jessie Wheeler—owns and operates Wheeler’s Mercantile  
Seth Redding—stranded in Token Creek  
Jeb Dorn—Jessie’s cousin  
Patience Dorn—Jeb’s wife  
Pastor Larry English—Jeb and Patience’s pastor  
Brad and Trace Holden—ranch owners who live outside of town  
Jeanette Fulbright—Brad and Trace’s aunt  
Theta Holden—Jeanette’s sister and Brad and Trace’s ill mother  
Becky—lives with and cooks for Jeanette

1884

Nate Kaderly—Token Creek’s sheriff  
Rylan Jarvik—pastor of the church  
Bri and Danny Jarvik—Rylan’s wife and son  
Cassidy and Joey Holden—Trace’s wife and son  
Meg, Savanna, and Cathryn Holden—Brad’s wife and daughters  
Heather Wales—lives with and works for Jeanette Fulbright  
Hannah and Clancy Wheeler—Jessie’s daughters

*From Texas*

Eliot McDermott—Seth’s brother  
Cassy—Eliot’s wife  
Nate and Lindy—Eliot and Cassy’s children

**Part One**



*June 1873*





## Chapter One

*Token Creek, Montana Territory*

JESSIE WHEELER CAME SLOWLY downstairs from her apartment into the mercantile below, the familiar sights and aromas a comfort and a distraction all at the same time. She shifted a stack of heavy cotton pants on a shelf and then fronted a few cans in one aisle before heading to the front counter, behind which sat rows of mailboxes.

Jessie was alone these days. Her father had been gone for more than a year, and her mother had been dead for three. She had grown up in this store so taking over had come naturally, but running it alone, ordering supplies, and keeping the books was sometimes a burden. She could find help for the backbreaking tasks of unloading and loading in the storeroom, and she had a cousin whom she trusted to run the register and help in any way needed, but the decisions were all hers. Some days the responsibility was a weighty one.

A customer was waiting when Jessie opened the store, and that suited her fine. It did no good to think about things that weren't going to change, and she knew getting busy was the best cure.

“What can I help you with today, Mrs. Carlisle?”

“I’ve got quite a list, Jessie. I think we’ll start with lard and beans.”

“Will do,” Jessie said congenially, doing what she did best, knowing her own store and seeing to customers’ needs.

Marty Carlisle’s husband, Bart, was a rancher outside of Token Creek. Marty didn’t get into town very often, and when she did, the list could be significant. Today was no exception. The two worked together for the better part of an hour, putting the order together and then transferring it to Marty’s wagon.

Marty paid in cash and also settled the bill for the ranch, always nice for when Jessie needed to order items that had to be paid for in advance. After seeing Marty off, Jessie took a moment to right the register and grab the broom. Someone had come past the front of her store in muddy boots, and the boardwalk out front needed attention.

She swept for a time in peace, heading back inside only when Kaleb Heydorn, the train stationmaster, delivered a small sack of mail. He explained that it had been on the late train the day before. Jessie set to sorting it. She was still in the midst of this when a stranger walked in.

“Hello,” Jessie greeted.

“Good morning,” a man said, his voice deep.

Jessie set the mail aside.

“Can I help you?”

“Actually, I was hoping I could help you.”

Jessie looked at this tall, self-assured man and waited.

“I was hoping the owner might want to hire me,” the man continued.

Jessie knew she would do no such thing but asked, “Are you new in town?”

“Just passing through,” the man said.

Jessie’s brows rose. It wasn’t normal for someone looking for a job to admit such a thing.

“I woke up when the train stopped here,” the stranger went on, “and found my money gone from my pocket. I have to find work because I’m broke.”

Jessie wasn't sure she believed this but asked, "Where are you headed?"

"Texas."

"It's early on your journey to be stranded."

"My thoughts exactly."

The words were spoken so dryly Jessie smiled. The stranger smiled too, and Jessie had to admit that he was very good-looking.

"I'm Seth Redding, by the way," he said as he put his hand out.

"Jessie Wheeler," she offered, shaking the hand.

"Your family owns this store?"

Jessie nodded, not willing to admit to this stranger that she was the only Wheeler left.

"Do you think your family can use me?" Seth tried again.

"Do you have any experience in mercantile work?"

"As a matter of fact, I've done a little bit of everything. I worked at a general store in Kingdon for about two months."

Jessie nodded and decided to lay her cards on the table.

"What guarantee do I have that you won't come in here and steal everything you can lay your hands on?"

Seth looked thoughtful for a moment and then lifted the large satchel he was holding and put it on the counter.

"This is everything I own in the world. You're welcome to look inside and then put it anywhere you like. I won't leave town without it."

There was no missing the earnestness in his face and voice, but that didn't mean he wasn't acting. Jessie took the liberty of looking inside the satchel and thought that if he was lying, he was very good. She noticed the clothing certainly, but also two family daguerreotypes and some legal documents.

"And you're really going to let me tuck this bag away until the end of the day?"

"Yes, ma'am," Seth said. "I'm broke, and I'll be visiting Token Creek until that changes."

Jessie couldn't help herself. She was drawn to the man and the way he said things. He was also easy to look at, very tall with broad shoulders

and wavy, dark hair. His chin looked a bit stubborn, but his gray eyes were warm and friendly.

“I don’t know if I can use you more than today,” the mercantile owner tried next.

Seth shrugged. “I’ll take any work you can give me.”

Jessie nodded and said, “That door back there leads to the storeroom. You’ll find some crates of canned goods in front of the shelves they go on.”

“I’ll get to it,” Seth said and started that way.

Jessie stared after him and knew the exact moment he stopped and looked back at her.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. He then turned and went through the store, disappearing into the storeroom.

Jessie stood for a moment and thought about the exchange. She dearly hoped she would not regret hiring him and in truth didn’t think she would. Just to be sure, however, she did tuck the satchel away in a spot where he wasn’t likely to find it.



“I made you some dinner,” Jessie said several hours later, finding Seth in the storeroom, working on the fifth task she’d given him.

“Thank you,” the man said in genuine appreciation, stopping his work on the large crocks that Jessie wanted cleaned and rearranged and taking the plate she offered him.

“You can use the table there, and don’t feel like you have to rush.”

Seth thanked his employer again and did indeed turn for the worktable that sat near the rear of the storeroom. Fresh air and light came from the two windows behind him. He sat down in the only chair available and looked at the plate of food she’d prepared, impressed with the amount. He tucked into beef and biscuits covered in gravy and thought about his employer.

So far he’d not seen anyone else working. He didn’t think she owned the store on her own but knew if she did, he would be the last to hear

about it. And she was clearly no stranger to the business. There was no hesitation in her as he finished each job. She knew exactly what she wanted him to do next and took no time in telling him. She didn't check on him constantly, but he was fairly certain it would take hours of searching to find his bag.

Seth heard her just then, clearly helping a customer, and realized he liked the sound of her voice. It was deep and little bit husky and suited her. He'd not met a woman so attractive in a long time, and never one so unaware of it. She moved with grace and unconscious ease as she walked or spoke, and she didn't seem the least aware of herself. Seth did a lot of looking when she was in the room, but if Jessie noticed, she hid it very nicely.

While he was still thinking of her, she appeared.

"I don't want to rush you, but I've a big order I'm working on out here. When you're finished, you could load it for me."

"Certainly. I'll be right there."

Jessie thanked him without ceremony and slipped from the room. Seth, watching all the while, smiled after her. He hadn't planned to spend more time in Token Creek than he had to, but if he could spend it in the company of Jessie Wheeler, it might be worth sticking around.



"Well, Pastor English," Jessie greeted the older man who had come in a few hours before closing, "how are you today?"

"Doing well, Jessie. How about you?"

"I'm fine."

"Busy today?"

"About normal for a Wednesday," Jessie said with a smile. "What can I get you?"

"Just my mail today, thank you."

Jessie thought he looked a little tired but didn't comment. She was reaching for his mail when Seth came to the front with a question.

He was gone again before Jessie could introduce the two men, but the pastor asked about him.

“New worker?”

“Today, anyway,” Jessie said before going on to explain the situation.

“Stranded, did you say?”

“Yes. He says someone took his money while he slept on the train.”

“Does he need a place to stay?”

“He probably does. He’s working in the storeroom. Feel free to talk to him.”

The older man nodded and went that way. Jessie had no idea how long he was in the store because she ended up with an indecisive customer who required all her attention in the clothing aisle. The woman could not decide if the blue serge was going to hide stains better than the black, and each time Jessie tried to leave the woman to look at the fabrics on her own, she had another question. At last she decided on the blue serge, but she took so long that by the time Jessie had seen her off, Seth was standing by, waiting for more work.

“All done in the back,” Seth said.

“Good. Did Pastor English find you?”

“He did. He invited me to stay with him.”

“Will you?”

Before Seth could answer, a man showed up, carrying a large piece of luggage that told Jessie he was selling something. Jessie didn’t know him personally, but she did know what to expect.

“Hello.” Jessie greeted him cordially, but if the man had known her, he would have noted that her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Hello, young lady. Is the owner around or perhaps the manager?”

“I’m the manager.”

“Well now, you’re a young one, but that doesn’t bother me if it doesn’t bother you! Cal Worth at your service,” the man added, putting his hand out.

“I’m Jessie. What did you need?”

"I've got some very fine pocket watches to show you today, and I know you're going to want to carry these in your store."

The man proceeded to open his case and pull out the timepieces. Jessie took time to look, but when the man started quoting prices, she put her hand up.

"I can't make a profit with those types of prices. I'm sorry. I'm not interested."

"Oh, but if you buy ten or more, I can give you a rate."

"I can't sell ten," Jessie said, this time on the move. "Thank you, Mr. Worth," she said as she walked away from the man.

"If I could see the owner," Cal Worth said, continuing to try to speak to her, but Jessie disappeared into the storeroom and found something to do. Thankfully the man took the hint and left without following her. Seth found her in the back, dusting a shelf.

"How often does that happen?"

"It varies. Sometimes off and on all month, and sometimes not at all."

Seth nodded, his eyes still watching her. Jessie looked back for a few moments, their eyes catching briefly.

"Do you want me to do anything else today?"

"No, but thanks for the offer. I'll get your pay."

"Is that what you usually do, pay by the day?"

"No, but I didn't assume you'd be back."

"Can you use me tomorrow?"

"Sure," Jessie said, but at the moment she wasn't certain what he would do. The thought of never seeing him again bothered her, and if he was telling the truth, he genuinely needed the work.

"What time?" Seth asked.

"I open the doors at eight o'clock."

"I'll be here."

Seth started away but came swiftly back. Jessie looked at him, not sure what he was about until he said, "It would be nice to have my bag."

Jessie had to smile, and Seth knew he liked that smile more than

a little. He took his bag and left with few words, planning to find the pastor's house, but in his heart he thought he could easily spend the evening in the company of Jessie Wheeler.



"Hello, Jeb," Jessie greeted her cousin midmorning on Thursday. "How are you?"

"Fine. Yourself?"

"Can't complain," Jessie said, smiling at the man who was old enough to be her father. Jeb had been her father's first cousin, and he and Jessie had always been close and especially fond of each other.

"What is Patience doing today?" Jessie asked of Jeb's wife.

"She's making pie fillings that have to be done for a church social this weekend, and she's run out of cinnamon."

Before Jessie could grab the item from the shelf, Seth came from the back. He did not interrupt, but Jessie naturally introduced him to Jeb Dorn.

"It's good to meet you," Jeb said, thinking about the different folks Jessie and her parents had hired over the years. The list was long. "Are you in town long?"

"I think just passing through, but right now my plans are unsettled."

Jessie's brows rose on that bit of information. Just the day before he had planned to go to Texas.

"Well, maybe we'll see you around," Jeb said. He waited until Seth had asked Jessie a question and returned to his work before speaking again to his cousin. "Do you need me Saturday?"

"I do, Jeb. Is that going to work?"

"I'll plan on it. All day, do you think?"

"If I have to pick, I'll take you earlier over later."

"I'll be here, Jess. Can you put the cinnamon on my bill?" Jeb asked as he left.

Jessie smiled and said yes, but they both knew she wouldn't. She

paid her cousin when he worked, but unless he or Patience came in with a large order, single items were never accounted for.

Jessie suddenly remembered she'd not made any plans for dinner. For a moment she stood and wondered at herself. Normally she woke up with the day's events and needs on her mind, but this morning her first thoughts had been for Seth Redding.

*Well, it's too late now,* Jessie thought. She knew she would probably end up asking Seth to head to the hotel and bring them something. She preferred her own cooking, but the choice had been taken from her hands. Going back to work on an order she needed to place for more tinware and some iron pots and pans, Jessie told herself it was time to get her mind back on the job.



Thursday and Friday went by with plenty to do and plenty of customers and orders to see to. Seth worked with the stock, making two trips to the train station for orders and unloading them and carrying customers' purchases to their wagons, his demeanor calm and pleasant. He was good-looking and confident, but it was more than that. Something about Seth Redding was comforting and trustworthy. In fact Jessie had watched more than one woman take a second look, and Seth, very much a man, was not above flirting or complimenting the pretty women he helped.

On Saturday, however, Jessie had no time to notice such things. This was always the store's busiest day, and from the moment she opened her door, she and Jeb were on the run. Seth helped out and filled in wherever he could. He had not yet worked out front at all, but being on hand to find things in the storeroom or wrap, box, and carry orders left Jeb and Jessie free to see to the next customer.

Jeb stayed until midafternoon, and then Jessie was on her own. There was a lull about four o'clock. With only an hour to closing, Jessie slipped into the back to find some tin funnels they were out of in the front. She was tired—there had been no time for dinner—and she misjudged her

steps and backed into a shelf. Without warning a can resting on the edge fell on the top of her head. The corner cut into her scalp.

Jessie stood still, her hand gripping a nearby shelf, her eyes closing as she willed herself to breathe. The pain was intense for a few minutes and then settled into a persistent throb. Jessie wished Jeb were still out there seeing to folks, but with only Seth in the store to help, she knew she had to stay on the job.

A very subdued Jessie made her way back to the store aisles, carrying the extra funnels. She placed them on the shelf with the rest of the tinware and went to the front counter. It was in pretty good order, so for the moment Jessie just stood.

She was still just standing when Seth came in from sweeping the front walk and found her doing nothing. Not that he would have criticized. He'd never seen a woman put in the day of work she had today. He assumed her store was closed on Sunday and also that she looked forward all week to that day off.

"Anything specific you need right now?" Seth asked, having just noticed she was frowning a little.

"I don't think so. What time is it?"

"Four-twenty."

Jessie did not need to answer or even nod because Ingrid Stillwell came in. Her husband, Pete, owned the livery. She had a sizeable list, but all pretty basic, and Jessie had her out the door with a minimum of effort. The moment she left, however, Seth faced her across the counter. He leaned his arms on the wood surface until their faces were on the same level.

"There is blood in your hair," he said quietly.

"I figured there might be. A can fell from a shelf and hit me."

"And you didn't feel a need to say anything?"

Jessie shrugged, looking very tired. "I have a store to run, Seth. I didn't see I had a choice."

Seth didn't comment, but neither did he agree. He certainly hadn't had much of a look at her head, but he felt it needed attention over the store.

“We close soon,” Jessie said, ignoring his look. “I’ll see to it then.”

“And if you need a doctor?”

“I’ll go find him,” Jessie said pragmatically, wishing she could lie down and sleep for a while.

Disapproval radiated from Seth’s entire being, but he said nothing. No other customers joined them, and right on time Jessie paid Seth, thanked him as he left, and locked up for the night.

She was tired and hungry and desperate to lie down, but realized what she must do. Slipping out the rear door of the storeroom and locking it behind her, she went to the Dorns’. Patience cleaned the wound, put something on it, and forced Jessie to eat a little supper.

Less than an hour later, the mercantile proprietress made her way home, enough food in her to let her sleep. Doing little more than slip from her clothing and wash her face, she climbed into bed and slept all night. Not even the noise from the Saturday night crowd in the bars on Main Street disturbed her.



Jessie did not sleep in. Though she was naturally an early riser, she did lie around on this Sunday, her head paining her a bit. It was not miserable, but the missed dinner and small supper from the day before had worn on her. Headache or not, she knew she needed food.

Sunday was her day to cook and enjoy. She cooked most other days as well, but this was the day she could relax and savor what she’d made. This meal was no different. She had planned to keep it simple—a few eggs and some toasted bread—but once she got going, she made herself a feast. She added bacon and potatoes to the menu, and brewed extra coffee to enjoy.

She wasn’t two bites into the meal when she knew it had been worth it. Putting her feet up and opening the weekly newspaper she didn’t have time or energy to read during the week, Jessie began to enjoy her day off.



Pastor English had made the offer in total sincerity, but he was not surprised when Seth did not show any interest in joining him in church. The young man was polite and kind, but his interest in spiritual things was not just greatly lacking, it was nonexistent.

The pastor even invited him to the pie social they were planning for that afternoon, but knew with a fair amount of certainty that he would not see Seth Redding. Seth helped him with the dishes, but even before the pastor left for the church building, the younger man was on his way out the door. He didn't take his bag so Pastor English knew he would still be spending another night, but he strongly doubted he would see him the rest of the day.



Jessie's head felt fine by late morning, but the apartment was growing a little warm. Not moving very fast, she cleaned the kitchen and put her shoes on. After putting the apartment in order, she headed downstairs and through the storeroom. She was outside and had locked the door before she turned and spotted Seth Redding sitting under a tree watching her. Jessie stared at him a moment and then started that way.

"I wondered if you were ever going to come out that door," he said, pushing to his feet as she neared.

"Is that what you're doing here, waiting for me?"

"You're surprised?"

"I didn't know if I would see you again so, yes, I'm surprised."

"Meaning you don't need me to work, or you thought I would be leaving town?"

"The latter, but I just remembered you told Jeb you might be sticking around."

"At the moment I don't know what I'm doing," Seth admitted, and then added, "How's your head?"

“It’s doing all right. Patience checked it for me.”

“Patience?”

“Jeb’s wife.”

“Are they family?”

“Jeb and my father were cousins.”

Seth nodded, his eyes watching her. Jessie looked right back.

“Would you care to walk along Token Creek, Miss Wheeler?”

Jessie, simply liking him and the way he said things, smiled. Seth took that smile for a yes.