

## Jessie and James by Jennifer Beckstrand

James Kelsey reined in his horse, took off his hat, and swiped his bandanna at the beads of sweat that trickled down the back of his neck. It was only early May, but the five hour ride from Santaquin had been unseasonably warm. And dry.

He breathed in the fresh desert air. This land of big sky and bigger dreams felt like home. He'd been away a very long time, but he'd never forgotten.

James dismounted, fed the horse a carrot from his saddlebag, and squinted into the afternoon sun. A jagged outcropping of rocks in the distance told him he was getting close to gold country. From what he'd been told, there was enough gold, silver, and copper in those hills to make a hundred men richer than kings. James was going to find it. And finally make Father proud.

Staked in the ground, hiding behind a juniper, a road marker leaned precariously to right. "Eureka 2 miles," it said. James mounted his patient horse. The hard part of the journey was over. He clicked his tongue and prodded his horse forward. The promise of a hot meal and a soft bed was all he needed to keep going.

It wasn't long before he saw more signs of civilization. A weathered log cabin stood just outside of town, next to a house built of stone. Homes got closer together. Several tents—permanent housing for miners—crouched along both sides of the road.

In the distance, James could make out the massive timberworks of a mine, with stairs and chutes and lumber clinging to the hillside on a framework of timber that looked as if it would easily topple in the face of a stiff wind. Higher up, a single

headframe stood sentinel over the town, a monument to men's unrelenting hunger for gold.

A two-story hotel and a livery stable were sure signs that James had reached his destination. New mining towns like Eureka were nothing compared to cities like Boston or Chicago, but James counted three hotels, a saloon, a barbershop, a blacksmith shop, and several modest homes along the main street. A hard rain some time in the past had carved a gully out of the dirt down the center of the street. At almost a foot deep, the gully would give a teamster trouble if he was ever unfortunate enough to get a wheel stuck in it.

James scanned the main street for the boarding house where he was supposed to be staying, but he didn't see it. He'd have to ask directions. Spying a water trough, James guided his horse to the west side of the mercantile. After dismounting, he tied up his horse so she could drink. James had bought the mare in Provo, so he didn't know her personally yet, but so far, she seemed as mild-mannered and gentle as a nun—just the kind of horse he needed. They'd be spending the next few weeks together roaming the foothills of Eureka. There wouldn't be any excitement for a horse that wanted to run.

James walked around the corner to the front of the mercantile just as a loud crash came from inside. A loud crash, a clatter, and a shout. James jumped as a miner, who looked like he'd just emerged from below ground, shot out of the store, both hands pulling at the hat on his head as if he was trying to keep it from blowing away in the wind. And maybe he was, because a purple whirlwind blew out the door behind him. A young woman, with a shotgun hanging over her shoulder by a strap

and murder in her eyes, stormed out of the mercantile with a flour sack clutched in one arm like a baby. Her chestnut hair tumbled around her shoulders like the unruly branches of a juniper bush, and her brown eyes flashed like two hot coals in the fire. James had never seen anyone look quite so fierce.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, Miss Jessie,” the miner said, backing away from the woman as if she was a mother bear and he’d gotten in the way of her cubs. It didn’t take a keen observer to see that the man was two sheets to the wind and that Miss Jessie would have no mercy.

Miss Jessie dropped her flour sack, pulled her shotgun off her shoulder, and pointed it at the drunken miner, who backpedaled so fast he lost his balance and fell to the ground. “You meant it, sure enough,” Miss Jessie said. “Just like the last four times you meant it. I should shoot you just for being thickheaded.”

James didn’t know if he should help the miner off the ground, stand between the poor man and that shotgun, or give him a swift right hook to the jaw. But whatever the miner had done to earn the wrath of Miss Jessie, James was pretty sure he didn’t deserve to get shot for it.

“I can’t resist, Miss Jessie. Your hair is like my Abilene’s, and I miss her so much.”

Miss Jessie showed no signs of relaxing her grip on that shotgun. “Your Abilene left because you take liberties with other women. You have no one to blame but yourself.”

The miner knew better than to be anything but contrite. "I know it. I know it, Miss Jessie. But you should feel sorry for me instead of trying to kill me. They'll send you to prison."

Miss Jessie grunted her disgust, but the barrel of the shotgun drooped to a forty-five degree angle. "They'll give me a medal for ridding the town of a menace."

By this time, a small crowd of men had gathered to watch the spectacle. Two men poked their heads out from the mercantile door. Two more stood at the opposite corner of the mercantile, probably so they could duck behind the building if there was any shooting. Another man watched from across the street, leaning against the wall of the barbershop and smiling as if this was the most entertainment he'd had in months. It probably was. None but James was close enough to actually get shot.

"Miss Jessie, let old Petty be," said one of the men standing inside the mercantile door. "You can see how regretful he is."

Miss Jessie's gaze flicked in the direction of the mercantile, but she made no other sign she'd heard the man. She motioned to her right with the barrel of the shotgun. "Go home, Petty."

Petty jumped to his feet and ran down the road so fast, he could have outrun a horse. Miss Jessie lowered her shotgun, propped the barrel on her forearm, and huffed out an exasperated breath. "Everyone can quit staring," she said to no one in particular. "It's nothing you ain't seen before."

James cocked an eyebrow. How many times had Miss Jessie tried to shoot someone at the mercantile?

He bent over and picked up Miss Jessie's flour sack and flung it over his shoulder. It was heavy. He should probably offer to carry it home for her. As he stood up straight, he found himself staring down the barrel of Miss Jessie's shotgun, and unlike Petty, James had nowhere to run. His heart leapt into his throat.

"You trying to steal my flour?" Miss Jessie said, staring down the barrel of the shotgun like a seasoned killer.

James wasn't one to get easily rattled, but being mere inches from death made him a little bit testy. In a lightning swift motion, he shot out his free hand, wrapped his fingers around the barrel of the gun, and shoved it upward so the shotgun was pointing at the sky. Miss Jessie gasped as the movement wrenched her arm and the butt of the shotgun dug into her shoulder, but she didn't release her grip or disintegrate like a pile of sand. "I apologize for hurting you, ma'am, but I rather not get shot today. This is a new shirt."

Scowling, she leaned back, straining to pull the barrel of the gun from his grasp, but she couldn't have known how useless she was against him. "We hang thieves around here."

He held strong to the barrel of the gun. He didn't want to fight her, but he also didn't want to get shot. "I'm not trying to steal your flour, ma'am. I was picking it up for you. I might even offer to carry it home for you if promise not to shoot me."

"I don't need your help," she said, still struggling for the gun. With her tight grip, it was a wonder it hadn't already gone off.

He pulled the gun closer, and since she wasn't about to relax her grip, she came with it. That close, her cheeks looked as smooth and as soft as new leather, and

she smelled faintly of vanilla and cherry blossoms. James' stomach clenched. Her smell, her tumbling hair, her reckless determination attacked his reason and sent him reeling like a drunk. Fortunately, he had enough of his wits about him to keep tight hold on that gun. His grip was the only thing between him and certain death.

The man at the mercantile door must have been used to coming to the defense of Miss Jessie's victims. "Jessie, leave the fellow be."

Jessie glared at James with all the rage of forest fire. "Let go of my gun," she hissed.

"I'll let go if you promise not to shoot me."

"I'll promise not to shoot you right now, but that doesn't mean I won't shoot you later."

"If I ever touch your hair, like that Petty fellow, or take liberties or do anything to disrespect you, ma'am, you have my permission to shoot me."

A ghost of a smile tugged at her mouth, but it was gone so fast, he might have imagined it. "I don't need your permission."

"I suppose you don't." He slowly relaxed his grip on the gun barrel, because if he let go while she pulled so hard, he send her toppling to the ground, and he'd rather not cause more trouble.

As soon as he let go, Miss Jessie gave him the evil eye, slung her shotgun over her shoulder, and snatched the flour sack from his grasp. She winced when she moved her arm, and James felt sorry that she'd probably have a bruise, but he couldn't regret trying to keep her from putting a hole in his chest.

"I meant what I said, ma'am. I'd be honored to carry the flour to your house."

She narrowed her eyes. "You're not from around here."

"But I'd still be happy to help, even though you recently tried to kill me."

Glaring at him, she hoisted the flour sack more securely into her arms. "I don't need your help and neither does this town. You can just go right back to wherever it is you came from and leave us alone."

James wasn't quite sure how to respond to such a welcome. Miss Jessie stepped around him and disappeared around the corner of the mercantile. A few seconds later, she emerged at the reins of a flatbed wagon pulled by two horses.

"I'll put it on your tab," the man at the door of the mercantile called.

Miss Jessie didn't acknowledge that she'd heard him. She turned onto the road and drove away, her flour sack the only load in her wagon. James didn't know whether to feel relief that she hadn't shot him or regret that they'd parted on bad terms. For better or worse, Miss Jessie was the most fascinating woman he'd ever encountered.

The two men stood at the door of the mercantile watching Miss Jessie's wagon, as if to make absolutely certain she wouldn't change her mind and come back. James stuck out his hand. "I'm James Kelsey," he said, shaking hands with the older man, then the younger.

The older man had a shock of white hair that floated about his head with the aid of static electricity. The younger man's black hair was slicked back so not a strand was out of place, making it look like his hair was painted onto his head instead of combed there.

"I'm Lou Johns," the older man said. "This is my son Hubert. We own the place and live upstairs. I'm sorry our Jessie didn't give you a warmer welcome. She's usually real sweet."

Hubert let out a high-pitched laugh. "About as sweet as a rattler."

Lou shook his head. "It ain't easy being pretty and single in a town of slommacky miners. Petty come in here and pulled the pins out of her hair. Of course she got mad. That's why she carries her shotgun wherever she goes. She's got a right to defend herself."

"Yes, she does," James said, suddenly feeling protective of the woman who'd just tried to kill him. Miners could be a rough sort, and Miss Jessie didn't deserve to be accosted every time she went out.

And she wasn't married.

James bit down on his tongue and tamped down his sudden enthusiasm. He was already on her bad side. He should definitely steer clear. Steering clear wouldn't be too hard. He wouldn't be in town long, and most of the time he'd be roaming the hills looking for promising veins of ore.

"You sound like you're from parts east," Lou said. "You looking for gold?"

"I'm here looking for a claim for the London Mining and Ore Company. Silver, gold, copper, it doesn't matter which. I hope I'm not unwelcome."

Lou swiped his hand across his mouth. "Nah, a new mine means more money and work for everybody. Jessie's just wary of new folks, and she doesn't much like the mining business to begin with. Too many shysters looking for easy money and too many hard men who don't know how to behave themselves." Lou studied James'



face. "You need a different hat, but you have an honest face. Now, that Frank Roberts, I don't trust him as far as I can throw him, but I reckon time will tell with you."

Hubert pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hands. "You got a place to stay, Mister Kelsey?"

James nodded, wondering what was wrong with his hat. "I'm expected at the Madsen Hotel. Can you tell me how to get there?"

Hubert threw back his head and laughed. "Well, if that ain't the best joke I've heard all day."