

Claiming Mariah

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Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois

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Cover and title page designed by Jennifer Ghionzoli

Edited by Erin E. Smith

Published in association with the literary agency of The Steve Laube Agency.

Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Claiming Mariah is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

ISBN 978-1-4143-8097-1 (Apple); ISBN 978-1-4143-8096-4 (ePub);
ISBN 978-1-4143-8095-7 (Mobi)

I'd like to dedicate Claiming Mariah to my husband, Iran.

*I originally wrote Slade to be larger than life,
but first readers scoffed at his amazingly broad shoulders,
six-foot-four frame, gorgeous green eyes,
and large hands that can soothe a small child,
manhandle an ornery cow,
or bring a newborn calf into the world.
But I know the truth. That man does exist.
I married him.*

CHAPTER ONE

WISDOM, WYOMING TERRITORY
LATE SPRING, 1882

Dust swirled as the two riders approached the house.

They stopped a few feet shy of the steps, and Mariah Malone eyed the men from the shadowy recesses of the porch. Both were sun-bronzed and looked weary but tough, as if they made their living punching cows and riding fences.

One man hung back; the other rode closer and touched his thumb and forefinger to the brim of his hat. "Afternoon, ma'am."

"Afternoon." Wavy brown hair brushed the frayed collar of his work shirt. A film of dust covered his faded jeans, and the stubble on his jaw hinted at a long, hard trip. "May I help you?"

"I'm here to see Seth Malone." His voice sounded husky as if he needed a drink of water to clear the trail dust from his throat.

At the mention of her father, a pang of sorrow mixed with longing swept over her. "I'm sorry; he passed away in January. I'm his daughter. Mariah Malone."

The cowboy swung down from his horse and sauntered toward the porch. He rested one worn boot on the bottom step before tilting his hat back, revealing fathomless dark-blue eyes.

"I'm Slade Donovan. And that's my brother, Buck." He jerked his head in the direction of the other man. His intense gaze bored into hers. "Jack Donovan was our father."

Oh no, Jack Donovan's sons.

A shaft of apprehension shot through her, and Mariah grasped the railing for support. Unable to look Mr. Donovan in the eye, she focused on his shadowed jaw. A muscle jumped in his cheek, keeping time with her thudding heart.

When her father died, she hadn't given another thought to the letter she'd sent Jack Donovan. She'd been too worried about her grandmother, her sister, and the ranch to think about the consequences of the past.

"Where is . . . your father?" Mariah asked.

"He died from broken dreams and whiskey."

"I'm sorry for your loss," she murmured, knowing her own father's sins had contributed to Jack Donovan's troubles, maybe even to his death. How much sorrow had her father's greed caused? How much heartache? And how much did his son know of their fathers' shared past?

The accusation on Slade Donovan's face told her, and the heat of fresh shame flooded her cheeks.

"My pa wanted what was rightfully his," he ground out. "I promised him I would find the man who took that gold and make him pay."

Tension filled the air, and she found it difficult to breathe.

"Take it easy, Slade." His brother's soft voice wafted between them.

Mariah caught a glimpse of Cookie hovering at the edge of the bunkhouse. "Miss Mariah, you need any help?"

Her attention swung between Cookie and the Donovan brothers, the taste of fear mounting in the back of her throat. An old man past his prime, Cookie would be no match for them. "No," she said, swallowing her apprehension. "No thank you, Cookie. Mr. Donovan is here to talk business."

She turned back to the man before her. Hard eyes searched her face, and she looked away, praying for guidance. "Mr. Donovan, I think we need to continue this discussion in my father's office."

She moistened her lips, her gaze drawn to the clenched tightness of his jaw. After a tense moment, he nodded.

* * *

Malone was dead?

Leaving Buck to care for the horses, Slade followed the daughter into the house. She'd swept her golden-brown hair to the top of her head and twisted it into a serene coil. A few curls escaped the loose bun and flirted with the stand-up lace

of her white shirtwaist. She sure looked dressed up out here in the middle of nowhere.

Then he remembered the empty streets and the handful of wagons still gathered around the church when they'd passed through Wisdom at noon. He snorted under his breath. Under other circumstances, a woman like Mariah Malone wouldn't even deem him worthy to wipe her dainty boots on, let alone agree to talk to him in private. He couldn't count the times the girls from the "right" side of town had snubbed their noses at him, their starched pinafores in sharp contrast to his torn, patched clothes. At least his younger brother and sisters hadn't been treated like outcasts. He'd made sure of that.

He trailed the Malone woman down the hall, catching a glimpse of a sitting room with worn but polished furniture on his right, a tidy kitchen on his left. A water stain from a leaky roof marred the faded wallpaper at the end of the wide hallway. While neat and clean, the house and outbuildings looked run-down. He scowled. Surely Seth Malone could have kept the place in better repair with his ill-gotten gain.

Miss Malone led the way into a small office that smelled of leather, ink, and turpentine. She turned, and he caught a glimpse of eyes the color of deep-brown leather polished to a shine. The state of affairs around the house slid into the dark recesses of his mind as he regarded the slender young woman before him.

"Mr. Donovan," she began, "I take it you received my letter."

He nodded but kept silent. Uneasiness wormed its way into his gut. Did Miss Malone have brothers or other family to turn to? Who was in charge of the ranch?

"I'm sorry for what my father did. I wish it had never happened." She toyed with a granite paperweight, the distress on her face tugging at his conscience.

He wished it had never happened too. Would his father have given up if Seth Malone hadn't taken off with all the gold? Would they have had a better life—a ranch of their own maybe, instead of a dilapidated shack on the edge of Galveston—if his father hadn't needed to fight the demons from the bullet lodged in his head?

He wanted to ask all the questions that had plagued him over the years, questions his father had shouted during his drunken rages. Instead, he asked another question, one he'd asked himself many times over the last several months. "Why did you send that letter?"

Pain turned her eyes to ebony. "My father wanted to ask forgiveness for what he had done, but by that time he was unable to write the letter himself. I didn't know Mr. Donovan had a family or that he'd died." She shrugged, the pity on her face unmistakable.

Slade clenched his jaw. He didn't want her pity. He'd had enough of that to last a lifetime.

She strolled to the window, arms hugging her waist. She looked too slight to have ever done a day's work. She'd probably been pampered all her life, while his own mother and sisters struggled for survival.

"I hoped Mr. Donovan might write while my father was still alive, and they could resolve their differences." Her soft voice wafted on the still air. "I prayed he might forgive Papa. And that Papa could forgive himself."

"Forgiveness is too little, too late," Slade gritted out, satisfaction welling within him when her back stiffened and her shoulders squared.

She turned, regarding him with caution. "I'm willing to make restitution for what my father did."

"Restitution?"

"A few hundred head of cattle should be sufficient."

"A few hundred?" Surely she didn't think a handful of cattle would make up for what her father had done.

"What more do you want? I've already apologized. What good will it do to keep the bitterness alive?"

"It's not bitterness I want, Miss Malone. It's the land."

"The land?" Her eyes widened.

He nodded, a stiff, curt jerk of his head. "All of it."

"Only a portion of the land should go to your family, if any. Half of that gold belonged to my father." Two spots of angry color bloomed in her cheeks, and her eyes sparked like sun off brown bottle glass. "And besides, he worked the land all these years and made this ranch into something."

Slade frowned. What did she mean, half of the gold belonged to her father? Disgust filled him. Either the woman was a good actress, or Malone had lied to his family even on his deathbed.

"All of it."

She blinked, and for a moment, he thought she might give in. Then she lifted her chin. "And if I refuse?"

"One trip to the sheriff with your letter and the wanted poster from twenty-five years ago would convince any law-abiding judge that this ranch belongs to me and my family." He paused. "As well as the deed to the gold mine in California that has my father's name on it—not your father's."

"What deed?" She glared at him, suspicion glinting in her eyes. "And what wanted poster?"

Did she really not know the truth? Slade pulled out the papers and handed them to her, watching as she read the proof that gave him the right to the land they stood on.

All color left her face as she read, and Slade braced himself in case she fainted clean away. If he'd had any doubt that she didn't know the full story, her reaction to the wanted poster proved otherwise.

"It says . . ." Her voice wavered. "It says Papa shot your father. Left him for dead. I don't believe it. It . . . it's a mistake." She sank into the nearest chair, the starch wilted out of her. The condemning poster fluttered to the floor.

A sudden desire to give in swept over him. He could accept her offer of a few hundred head, walk out the door, and ride away, leaving her on the land that legally, morally, belonged to him. To his mother.

No! He wanted Seth Malone to pay for turning his father into a drunk and making his mother old before her time. But Seth Malone was dead, and this woman wouldn't cheat him of his revenge.

No matter how innocent she looked, no matter how her eyes filled with tears as she begged for forgiveness, he wouldn't give it to her. Forgiveness wouldn't put food on the table or clothes on his mother's and sisters' backs.

"No mistake." He hunkered down so he could see her face. "You have a right to defend your father's memory, I reckon. But I'll stick by what I said. The deed is legal. And that letter will stand up in court as well. You've got a decision to make, ma'am. Either you sign this ranch over to me, or I'll go to the sheriff."

Silence hung heavy between them until a faint noise drew Slade's attention to the doorway.

An old woman stood there, a walking stick clasped in her right hand. Her piercing dark gaze swung from Mariah to him. He stood to his full height.

"Grandma." Mariah launched herself from the chair and hurried to the woman's side.

The frail-looking woman's penetrating stare never left Slade's face.

He held out his hand for the deed. Silence reigned as Mariah handed it over.

"I'll give you an hour to decide." He gave them a curt nod and strode from the room.