



# SUSAN MAY WARREN

## RECLAIMING NICK



NOBLE  
LEGACY

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*Reclaiming Nick*

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*I am certain that God, who began the good work  
within you, will continue his work until it is finally  
finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.*

PHILIPPIANS 1:6



 CHAPTER I

WHEN THE LANKY form of Saul Lovell walked into the Watering Hole Café, dragging with him the remnants of the late April chill, Nick Noble knew that his last hope of redemption had died.

Nick didn't have time to deal with the arrival of his father's lawyer. Not with one fist wrapped in the collar of Jake's duster and a forearm pinning his cohort Rusty to the wall.

"We were simply offering to buy her lunch," Rusty snarled.

"I'm not stupid. I know exactly what you were offering." Nick motioned for the girl to move away from the pair as he upped his pressure against Rusty's Adam's apple. "It's okay, honey. They're just fresh from riding fence. You go home now and say hi to your folks from me."

He didn't comment on her low-cut shirt or the way it seemed to have material missing at the waistline too. And a run into Miles City three hours south for looser-fitting pants might be in order. He'd have to swing by her parents' place after closing tonight to warn them of their daughter's recent bent toward trouble.

Only that wasn't his job anymore, was it? He had to stop thinking like a cop before it landed him in more hot water.

The girl glanced at Rusty, as if hurt, then turned on her boot heel and flounced toward the door, followed by her blonde best friend.

Nick didn't like the way Jake watched them leave. "If I see you within ten feet of them, I'll run you all the way back to the border."

Jake shoved him away, and Nick let go, not interested in swallowing one more whiff of day-old whiskey breath.

"You stay away from those two girls," Nick repeated as the door jangled shut behind the ladies. He noted the petite brunette who had entered during the tussle and now waited by the door. Tourist, waiting to be seated.

"I ain't interested in nuthin' she ain't already advertisin'." Jake dusted himself off.

"Don't make me hurt you." Nick watched a flash of memory cross Jake's face.

Clearly it wasn't enough to deter his mouth. "There you go again, Noble. Jumpin' to conclusions. You've already got us tried and hung. Same as ole Jimmy."

Nick turned back toward the counter, quelling a flare of anger. "Take a seat. I'll get you boys a pile of beans."

Rusty, however, wasn't ready to move on. Nick saw the swing coming out of his peripheral vision and stepped back, letting the kid's fist breeze by. He rounded on Rusty, warning in his tone. "Don't start."

"You're not the law around here anymore, Noble."

"In here, I am. And if I need to follow you home to make sure you don't detour toward the girl's place, then I'll get my keys."

“A man can’t even be friendly no more round you.” Jake pushed past him and found a stool at the counter, a wolfish grin on his face.

Nick kept his stare pinned on Rusty. The cowpoke’s off-kilter Stetson, his five o’clock shadow and padded jean jacket gave him the look of Billy the Kid. All he needed was a six-shooter and a wanted poster.

“Sit down, Rusty. I know all you’ve eaten for three days is oatmeal and coffee. There’s a pot of chili and beans in the kitchen that’ll make you forget all about high winds and Herefords.”

Rusty gave him a tight glare and reached into his pocket for a pack of smokes.

Nick shook his head, pointed to the No Smoking sign, and headed behind the bar, calling in the order to the cook. His eyes flickered over to Saul. The attorney still wore the flat-topped black Stetson like Adam Cartwright out of *Bonanza* and had dressed for the drive out to nowhere in eastern Montana in a pair of boots and a wool-lined leather jacket. He met Nick’s glance with a curt nod from his place at the end of the counter.

Yep, this was exactly the moment Nick had dreaded. He grabbed a cup, plunked it down in front of Saul, filled it, and walked away. They’d get around to the topic of his visit. Meanwhile, Nick had two surly cowboys at the counter, a rancher and his wife at table three, the hardware-store owner and his assistant hiding out at the table in back, the tourist waiting for a seat, and a redhead in a ten-gallon hat at the end of the bar, watching him with a frown.

He felt some solace in the fact that his father couldn’t see him now. However, having Saul here seemed nearly as humiliating.

He took the rancher’s and his wife’s orders, served the redhead

some water and a menu, gave the hardware-store owner his bill, and gestured toward a booth for the brunette.

Saul drank his coffee, eyes on Nick, saying nothing.

Outside, the wind chased paper along the cracked pavement of Main Street, a chill whistling through the cracks of the plate-glass windows. The etching from the Watering Hole Café now read Welciino Hclc, but like everything in the tiny town of Wellesley, Montana, signs were irrelevant. People either knew their way around town in their sleep or they were passing through. Quickly. Being right off U.S. Highway 2 on a straight shot between Minot and the Pacific Ocean helped some with the desperate economy. But over the last five years the harsh winters and drought had driven off all but the hardiest of cowmen and women. Even Nick would have left if he'd had anywhere else to go.

That anywhere had arrived on his doorstep today.

He served Jake and Rusty their beans and filled their coffees before heading to the redhead for her order.

"Steak and eggs," she said, closing her menu.

Filling a water glass, he stuck a menu under his arm and shook his head, watching the brunette at the booth clean the table with a wet wipe. He forced a smile as he approached her. Maybe she was one of those obsessive-compulsive types he'd read about in school. Or worse, one with a schizophrenic edge. He set down the glass quietly. "Would you like some disinfectant?"

When she glanced up, he saw a blush. "Oh no. There was some . . . ketchup." She took the menu. "What's good here?"

"The beef." He gave her a lazy smile, hoping she caught the joke. *Cattle country, honey, get it?*

She frowned. "Do you have a Caesar salad?"

He quirked an eyebrow that broadcast his answer.

She sighed, and he recognized fatigue around her blue eyes. “How about a house salad?”

“We’re short on the lettuce and tomatoes right now. Can I interest you in a cheeseburger?” He glanced at Saul. The man watched him with a half smirk, probably remembering the time Nick had worked at Lolly’s Diner. That had lasted all of one day and ended when his father had dragged him home by the scruff of his collar. The second time he’d left home, however, it took.

How he wished now he’d returned.

“All right then, I’ll have . . . a bowl of chili beans.” She closed the menu and smiled at him, tucking her dark hair behind her ear. For a second he wondered where she came from and if he should make sure she left town okay.

Especially after the article in last week’s *Sheridan News* about Jimmy McPhee’s release.

According to the newspaper, Jimmy was innocent. Nick didn’t know what to believe. He hadn’t exactly turned over every stone searching for Jenny Butler’s killer. No, he’d bitten when they’d arrested Jimmy McPhee—hungover and smelling of guilt—for her murder. He’d bitten because Jimmy had pushed the law too far this time.

Nick should have listened to his gut, been the man his father had taught him to be, the one who protected the innocent and stood up for the truth. Clearly he’d left that man back at the Silver Buckle Ranch.

Thankfully, a drifter’s testimony had exonerated Jimmy McPhee and set him free. Five years too late.

“Very good,” Nick said to the woman as he took her menu. “You in town long?”

“Visiting family,” she said. “Near Scobey.”

“That’s about thirty miles north of here. Roads are clear—you’ll get there by bedtime.” He resisted the urge to encourage her to stay the night in town. But the only beds open this time of year were the hunting cabins, and he wouldn’t even send his sister there, even though Stefanie spent half her life camped out on the open trail. “Better leave before the sun hits the horizon,” he said, surrendering to the ex-cop inside him as he turned away.

The cook had the steak and eggs under the heat rings, and Nick served them to the redhead. “You here for the rodeo camp?” he asked as he poured her a cup of coffee. Twice a year, a rodeo camp for barrel racers, bronc busters, and bareback riders was held right outside Wellesley.

Nick remembered his brother, Rafe, attending once—and coming home with more bruises than a truckload of apples. He’d figured out how to stay on a bronc by now.

“Nope. Just passin’ through.” The redhead covered her eggs with ketchup.

Jake and Rusty finished their meal, threw down a few bills, and left without a word.

Glancing at the rancher and his wife, still deep in conversation and not needing him, Nick knew he’d whittled his procrastination down to a nub. “Howdy, Saul,” he said, a sigh at the end of his greeting as he faced his father’s oldest friend and attorney.

“Good to see you, son.”

Only Nick knew how well Saul delivered that lie. “You too, sir.” Nick picked up the coffeepot and a cup and headed around the counter to an empty booth.

Saul followed him, sliding into the opposite bench. “I guess

you're expecting me," he said, reaching for a toothpick. "No reason to pussyfoot."

Nick nodded, poured himself a cup of coffee. "How did it happen?"

"In his sleep. Your father went peacefully. Stefanie was there. And Rafe had been by not long before that."

Nick ran his thumb and forefinger along the handle of his mug. His mouth felt tinny. "When?"

Saul looked past Nick. "Near a month ago. We tried to find you, but the army still had you listed in Miles City. Newspaper in Sheridan had an article about that fella Jimmy McPhee last week. Tracked you down from there."

Something inside Nick had died when he'd seen that article. What was worse, however, was that he should have made it home years ago. He didn't exactly have anything in Wellesley holding him back.

Except shame, of course.

Saul chewed a toothpick.

"How's Stefanie?" *And Cole? And Maggie?* But he couldn't—no, *wouldn't*—ask about them.

"I can't lie to you, Nick. The Silver Buckle's in trouble. The drought has been bad. And one out of every three cows didn't conceive last year. The herd is dwindling, and Stefanie's only one woman. The Buckle is in debt over its head, and she's thinking of turning the ranch into a dude operation." Saul shook his head. "Your father would have my hide, but I can't stop her."

Nick stared into his coffee, cringing at the image of city slickers from Seattle or Denver or even California stomping on the silver

sage and black-eyed Susans as they tried ranch life on for size. He closed his eyes. "I should have been there."

Saul said nothing.

Nick opened his eyes, taking a good look at his surroundings. From the kitchen the cook sang an old hymn. The rich smells of coffee, French fries, and baked apples filled the café. Late-afternoon shadows cast a somber glow across the dingy linoleum.

"There's something else, Nick." Saul drummed his fingers on the table for a moment, then reached inside his jacket pocket. "There's been an offer made on the ranch." He slid a packet of papers toward Nick.

Nick looked at the packet, uncomprehending. "An offer?"

"To buy you out."

Nick refused to touch it, feeling it a betrayal suddenly of everything his family had built. "I can't . . . I'm not . . . why would you bring this to me?" Surely Stefanie wasn't in on this. She loved the land.

Saul removed his toothpick and twirled it between two weathered fingers. Nick wondered if Saul still ran his own herd, falling back on his law degree as a sideline. Most people in their hometown of Phillips ranched first and fed their families with a second job.

"With the chunk of land your mother left you and your father's bequest, you own the biggest section of the remaining Noble property. Of course, you'll have to wait until the land officially becomes yours, but as your father's lawyer, I'm obliged to convey the offer to you. You can sign the purchase agreement today contingent on—"

"Wait—go back to the word *remaining*. I don't understand. Was some of it sold?" Nick pushed the folded papers back toward Saul.

Saul hesitated a moment. "It was divided into four sections."

Nick stared at him. "Last count I had, there are only three of us in the Noble family—Stefanie, Rafe, and me."

"Actually, you and your siblings are entitled to only half of the Silver Buckle land. Your father deeded the other half to Colton St. John."

*Half?* Nick stared at Saul, nearly choking on the word. "Half?" Nick felt something hot and heavy punch through his chest. "The Silver Buckle has been in the Noble family for three generations! How could my father—?" Words vanished, and Nick found himself on his feet, stalking back to the counter, coffeepot in hand.

"You need a refill?" Nick bit out the words to the redhead, filling her coffee before she answered. The order of beans sat baking under the heat lights; he grabbed the bowl without a tray, burning his hands. He plunked it down before the brunette, dropping a spoon on the table next to the bowl. It clattered and nearly fell on the floor. He noticed Saul watching him with pursed lips as he turned away.

Cole St. John. Nick still had a scar on his hand where they'd mixed blood so many years ago. Blood brothers, through thick and thin.

Cole St. John, wide receiver to his being quarterback, bulldogging partner, coconspirator in the case of the missing school mascot.

Cole St. John, son of the woman who'd stolen his father, Bishop Noble.

Nick swallowed as he sidled close to Saul's booth. He kept his voice low and tight. "What did he do to make my father deed him our land?"

Saul shook his head.

Nick looked out at the bullet gray sky and its refusal to grant a glimmer of cheer. This morning from his apartment above the café he'd seen a line of black clouds piled up against the far-off mountains. He'd hoped it meant rain, but apparently it only meant high winds and trouble.

"I may not have been the son I should have over the past ten years, Mr. Lovell, but I can promise my father this: I'll make sure that St. John never sets one foot onto Silver Buckle land."



It took Piper Sullivan about 2.3 seconds to confirm that everything she'd assumed about Nick Noble hit the mark. Underneath that six-foot-one-inch frame, dark eyes, and muscular alpha-male exterior lurked a bona fide bully. A man whose world revolved around one focal point—himself.

Case in point, his chest-thumping attack on the two tired cowboys making small talk with some pretty locals. What did he think would happen—that they'd buy the girls one too many milk shakes? maybe ask them to go for a stroll along the muddy street? She hadn't spotted even a hint of a saloon in this no-stoplight town, and they looked like two post-high school girls stuck in a one-horse smudge on the map. And Protector of the Weak had just eliminated two of their very few options for escape.

And if his barroom-bouncer act didn't confirm her reporter's instincts, his low-toned vow to the lanky man at the booth said it all.

Nick Noble was trouble.

"I'll leave first thing tomorrow," Noble growled as he moved away from the booth. Clearly the man had delivered some dark

news, because Noble's expression went from sizzling to downright hostile. And the way he poured her coffee made her want to don protective gear.

"Thank you," she mumbled, not wanting to add to his mood. Thanks to her father she knew how quickly a bad mood accelerated to danger, pain, and sirens. And this time, thanks to Noble, Jimmy wasn't here to protect her.

"You okay, miss?"

The voice, full of more concern than she expected, jerked her from her thoughts. She looked up, frowning. Noble stood over her, coffeepot in his hand.

"You're hurt." He gestured to her bandaged wrist.

She realized she'd been rubbing it again. Even bandaged, the scar still felt funny, nearly numb. Wouldn't it be nice if all wounds eventually went numb?

She found a different voice. Not that he would recognize her, but she hoped to smear beyond recognition any associations for the next time they met. "It's healing. I'll be fine."

She watched as Noble filled the other woman's coffee, then dug out her guest check. The redhead at the counter paid him, and he didn't even look as she slipped out the door, obviously hoping for his attention. Apparently he didn't bend easily to feminine wiles. Perfect. Piper didn't want him assuming anything the next time she showed up with an innocent smile.

She could do this. She could. They didn't award her the Silver Pen for investigative journalism two years running for buckling under pressure. After going undercover at a stockyard to expose a ring of mad-cow beef smugglers and wheedling her way into a lumber company to confirm illegal clear-cutting of a national forest,

she could easily fake her way onto the Silver Buckle Ranch. And hopefully into Nick Noble's confidence.

She owed it to Jimmy. To her mother. To herself.

She ate slowly, gathering information, listening, plotting. Piper remembered the headline she'd read on the Internet: "Convicted Murderer Exonerated." She wondered where Jimmy had spent his first night out of jail. By the time she'd read the news, it had been too late to travel down to Colorado to greet him. She didn't know what to say, anyway. Especially after she hadn't visited him even once during his five-year prison term. She felt sick that she'd actually been *relieved* when he'd bargained for a lesser sentence and she didn't have to appear in court. She'd been able to hide from all of it while her half brother lived his nightmare out in the open.

*I'm sorry I didn't believe you, Jimmy. I'm sorry I failed you.*

Her way would be better for both of them—proving that Noble had lied, had purposely framed her brother for murder. And proving that her brother could have never been a killer would be a thousand times better than any apology, regardless of how heartfelt. Payback. Justice. Healing.

If Piper played her cards right, her ploy would net them both a new future.

Noble slipped her a guest check, and she peeled off the bills and left the café. For now she knew enough.

Noble was guilty. And she planned not only to prove it but to destroy his life. Just like he had Jimmy's.



There were times when Maggy St. John felt like the land might consume her whole. It poured over her senses—all of them. The

sharp smell of sagebrush, the squeak of prairie dogs in the warm afternoon sun, and the wind, tasting of spring and new life, throwing tumbleweeds from one horizon to the next. The sight of the morning sun rising over the east, gold like syrup running over the bluffs and draws, and in the afternoon, kissing her face with warmth. She loved this land. And she hoped it loved her back.

She tugged her beaten hat over her auburn braids, tightened the string under her chin, and gauged the clouds for rain. Cumulus had been gathering in the east, over Silver Buckle land all day, but they refused to unload their burden on any of their lands, greedy for the western mountains. *Please, Lord, let it be a fertile summer.* Growing up on the range, Maggy had seen many a drought but none like the last five years. The ground seemed dead, and the billows of dust in the wake of passing vehicles this early in the season set her jaw tight.

“Ma, should I catch Suds for you?” CJ closed the door to the house behind him and met her at the edge of the porch. “Or do you want to ride my horse this afternoon?”

Maggy smiled down at her ten-year-old, reaching out to wipe a smear of ketchup from his mouth.

He jerked away. “Mom!”

“I can’t believe you can even move after four hot dogs.”

CJ laughed as he buckled the straps to his leather chaps. Thankfully, he had the energy of ten cowhands because she and her husband, Cole, counted on their son more than they ought. Especially now.

Tugging on his hat, CJ stared out at the sky with the wisdom of a seasoned cowhand. His reddish brown hair stuck out the bottom of the hat, curling around his ears. Sometimes CJ looked more like Cole than she’d ever imagined he would.

“We gotta get those heifers into the barn before the storm hits or they’ll panic and drop their babies out in the field.” He glanced at her as he tugged on his worn work gloves. “I’ll take Suds if you want.”

“No, I’ll ride him. He’s just mad because I didn’t put him in with his girlfriend last night. They have a little thing going. He won’t buck me off again.” Her hip still hurt from the animal’s last temper tantrum.

“What about riding Pecos?” CJ glanced at the paint that stood in the corral. The horse lifted his nose to smell the wind, as if longing for home.

“Not yet.” *Maybe never.* She still couldn’t believe that Bishop Noble had gifted her the horse. Trying to repair the broken bridges. But they weren’t his bridges to repair, and well, sometimes things were better left broken.

Maggy zipped her jacket tight against her chin, feeling the chill seep into her body. Today she wore her long johns under her jeans and three layers—a thermal shirt, a flannel shirt, and her wool-lined jacket. Sometimes she felt ninety instead of twenty-eight. And stiff and crabby to boot. But thirty minutes on the back of her horse would have her limber and sweating, and the cool air would revive her youth as she hunted down the heifers—soon-to-be new mothers—hidden in the draws of the winter pasture.

For an unchecked second, she wished for the days when Cole rode Suds. How many times had she watched him from this porch, riding in from the range, with their collie at his heels? With his wide shoulders, a white smile against his tanned face, hat-tousled dusty brown hair, and lazy dark brown eyes, Cole conjured up every image of an Old West hero. His patience and strength had drawn her

in, and every minute beside him had made her a grateful woman. If only she could somehow still make him believe that.

They'd made a good team back then, when the alfalfa rippled like waves under the wind and their love felt young and forever. When their dreams felt within their grasp.

Those easy days had slipped away from them right before their eyes. And Maggy hadn't the first clue how to keep from losing them completely.

But now everything would change. With Bishop's death, regardless of the grief, they'd find a new season of forever. A new season of hope. *Please, Lord.*

Maggy followed CJ to the barn and watched while her son roped her horse, then his horse, Coyote. He had a natural throw, so like another man she'd once admired.

"Where do we start?" CJ asked after he'd saddled his horse.

Maggy kned Suds in the gut. He let out his air, and she quickly cinched the saddle tight. "Your father said he saw the heifers bunching up near the south draw. He went out to see if he could locate Old Nellie. She still thinks she's some sort of midwife."

Maggy had learned, first by watching her father poke cows as a cowboy for hire and then by working shoulder to shoulder with Cole, that cows weren't unlike human mothers. The first baby scared them and usually threw them off. More often than not it took an experienced mother to come alongside and show them the ropes. Old Nellie mothered the first timers like a grandmother, earning her keep every year for nearly a decade.

Maggy wished her own mother had done the same for her. But they'd been too busy trying to start over. After watching her parents pack up their lives and move to Arizona hoping for an easier life,

Maggy swore to herself that by the time she got too old to run a ranch, she'd have land, a home, and enough cash to hire the help she'd need. And someday CJ would own his father's land.

*His father's land.* Bishop Noble had kept his word. She could hardly believe that the land might be theirs. She'd said more than one prayer over the past month that Saul Lovell wouldn't be able to track down Nick Noble. Or rather that Nick's anger had cooled, and he might be willing to forgive for all their sakes. Now *that* would be a miracle from the Lord.

CJ led the horses through the gate before Maggy closed it, then swung into the saddle. She had thought that by now she'd have at least one more son to help with the work. If Cole's health didn't improve, they might have to take on a hand come summer.

The clouds shadowed the trampled grass. Only the creak of the saddle and the occasional lowing of cattle passed for conversation as they climbed the ridge that overlooked the winter pasture. They brought the cattle in close during the cold months to keep an eye on them and make it easier to distribute the hay. Sometimes Maggy hiked out here to stand at the ridge and check on the herd, heavy with calves, their black bodies huddled nose to nose for warmth. She loved the sight of a contented Angus.

Today, however, the herd seemed loud and agitated. Maggy and CJ reined their horses, scanning the horizon.

"What is it, Mom?"

"I don't know. I don't see your dad. And something has the cows spooked."

"Is it a wolf?"

Maggy shook her head, not sure. It drove her to fury when the government had kept the predator on the endangered-species list.

Ranchers had little protection against wolves stalking and destroying thousands of dollars of precious beef. She'd called her senator's office so many times, she practically had his telephone number imprinted on her fingers.

"Maybe it's a coyote. Or the weather." Although large animals, cows were easily spooked, and the looming storm might have them on edge. She urged her horse forward, watching for prairie-dog holes as they descended into the valley.

The sound of nervous mooing came from a tangle of cottonwoods that sheltered the still-frozen creek.

"C'mon," CJ said to Coyote, breaking out in front of Maggy.

For a second, she heard Cole's words: "*CJ's cowboy enough to handle a .22. It's men who kill, not weapons.*" Still, Maggy couldn't help wanting to hold CJ close, especially now. He'd have to fill Cole's shoes soon enough.

She urged her horse to a canter. Overhead, a hawk screamed, slicing through the brisk air, right into her soul.

CJ disappeared over the edge of the wash.

Spotting Maggy's horse, a cow ran from her path, its eyes bulging in fear.

"Mom! Come quick!" CJ's voice carried the edge of panic she'd come to fear. A tone that drove their hopes and dreams one more step out of reach.

*No, Lord, please—*

Maggy topped the ridge and her heart caught.

Along the shore of the creek, in a pocket of mud and trampled cheat grass, his hat lost and his leg crumpled beneath him at an ugly angle, Cole St. John lay unmoving, bleeding into the earth.