



Montana Dreams (Love Inspired)

By Jillian Hart

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Millie can't blame Hunter for his anger upon learning he's a father. He's never gotten over opening his heart, only to have it broken. Yet Millie senses a new goodness in Hunter. Finding their lost dreams now seems possible—if forgiveness and trust can find a place in this fresh start.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Jillian Hart grew up on the original homestead where her family still lives, went to high school where *Twin Peaks* was filmed, earned an English degree, and has travelled extensively. When Jillian's not writing her stories, she reads, stops for café mochas, and hikes through the pine forests near her home in Washington State.

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"You always were good for nothing, girl." Her father's bitter voice grumbled through the small, unkempt house. "Get the lead out of your lazy butt and fetch me something to eat. I'm gettin' hungry."

Millie Wilson straightened up, mop handle clutched in one hand, closed her eyes and prayed for strength. The Lord had to help her because she wasn't sure she could do this without Him. The call in the middle of the night, a doctor's voice on the other end of the line, her father's collapse and terminal prognosis. If only there had been anyone—anyone at all—to take over his care. "I have to go to the market, Dad."

"You should have thought of that earlier," he barked from the other room.

And I came back, why? She swished the mop into the sudsy bucket, wrung it out and scoured the last patch of kitchen floor. Marginally better, but it was going to take more than one pass over. She didn't want to think how long it had been since the floor had a proper cleaning—it would take a scrub brush and a lot of elbow grease to get out the dirt ground into the texture of the linoleum—a job for another time. Her back ached just thinking of it.

"Millie?" A knock echoed above the hum of the air conditioner. A familiar face smiled in at her, visible through the pane of glass in the door. The foreman tipped his Stetson and rolled the tobacco around to his other cheek while he waited for her to open the door.

"Hi, Milton. What's up?" She squinted in the bright summer sun.

"We got problems. Paychecks bounced. Again." Milton paused a moment to gather his spit, turn aside and spew a stream of tobacco juice into the barren flower bed. "The boys aren't going to stand for this. They've got rent due and mouths to feed."

"I know." Why didn't this surprise her either? She rubbed her forehead, which was beginning to pound. "I'm overwhelmed here. I haven't even thought about Dad's finances."

"They're a shambles, that's what." Milton shook his head, his weathered face lined with a mixture of grief and disgust. "Work is scarce in this part of the county. No one wants to walk away from a job right now. I know Whip is sick, but if he doesn't take care of his workers, then we can't work for free. Those cows need to be milked no matter what."

"Give me a day to problem solve. Can you ask everyone to wait? I'm here now, I've been here for two hours. Let me figure out what's what, and I'll do everything I can to make good on those checks."

"We appreciate that, Millie. I know you'll do your best by us, but I don't know what the boys will go for." Milton tipped his hat in a combination of thanks and farewell before he ambled toward the steps. "Keep in

mind that if things don't get better..."

"I hear you." Someone had to do the work, and it took a team of men to do it. As Milton headed off back down the driveway, Millie wondered if she remembered how to run a milking parlor. That part of her life seemed a world away, nearly forgotten. Probably intentionally.

"Put ice cream on that list, girl, and get a move on." In his room, Pa must have hit the remote because the soundtrack from a spaghetti Western drowned out every other noise in the house and kept her from arguing. The pop of gunfire and the drum of galloping horses accompanied her while she upended her mop bucket over the sink, stowed the meager cleaning supplies and made a mental grocery list.

Time to blow this place. She grabbed her purse and the big ring of farm keys. She called out to her dad, not sure if he could hear her over the blaring television and hopped out the front door.

"Mom." Simon looked up, pushed his round glasses higher on his nose with a thumb and held out a handful of wildflowers. "I picked them for you."

"You did?" Just what she needed. One look at her nine-year-old son eased the strain of the tough last couple of hours. Love filled her heart like a tidal wave as the black-haired boy with deep blue eyes ran across a lawn that had gone wild. Blossoms danced in his fist as he held them up to her.

Better than roses any day. "Thank you. They're wonderful. I love them."

"I thought you needed something, you know, to make you smile." He shrugged his shoulders, his button face puckered up with worry. "You've frowned the whole time, ever since you said we had to come here."

"Really? Oh, I didn't mean to. Sorry about that, kiddo." She took a moment to admire her bouquet of yellow sunflowers, snowy daisies, purple coneflowers and cheerful buttercups. "These certainly should do the trick. Am I smiling?"

"Yeah. Much better." When he grinned, deep dimples cut into his cheeks, so like his father's that it drove straight to her heart.

It was one pain that would never fade. She'd stopped trying to make it disappear years ago. There was just no use. Once, she'd loved Simon's father with all the depth of her being. Losing him had shattered her. Ten years later and she still hadn't found a way to make her heart whole.

Being back home in this little corner of Montana made her wonder. Just how much would she remember—things she couldn't hold back? She sighed, thinking of how young she'd been, of how truly she'd loved the man and, yes, it hurt to remember. She ran a hand along her son's cheek—such a sweet boy—and kept the smile on her face.

Simon was what mattered now.

"Guess what?" she asked. "I need a copilot."

"I'm on it." Simon leaped ahead, dashing toward the old Ford pickup. "Where're we goin'?"

"To the grocery store, unless you want to eat stale crackers and dried-up peanut butter for supper."

"Not so much. Can we have pizza?" He yanked open the black truck's door. The rusty old thing squeaked and groaned as he scrambled behind the steering wheel and across the ripped bench seat. "It could be the on-sale

kind. Want me to see if we got a coupon?"

"That would be a big help."

She eyed the truck warily. It had been a long time since she'd driven a pickup. Totally different from her compact car and she had to adjust the seat, the mirrors and dig for the seat belt—it was buried in the crumbs, hayseed and grain bits that had accumulated in the crack of the seat over what had to be decades.

"I'm on it." Simon slipped his hand into the outside pocket of her handbag, extracted an envelope and began sorting through her coupon collection. His forehead furrowed in concentration. His cowlick stood up straight from the crown of his head in a lazy swirl.

Just like his father's.

Stop thinking about that man. She had enough to contend with without borrowing heartache. She refused to wonder what had happened to the man. The love she had for him was long dead and buried. Did he still live around here or had he moved?

It wasn't as if she'd kept in touch with anyone in the valley, so she'd never heard a scrap of the news since her father had thrown her out of the house when she was nineteen.

"Found it!" Simon's triumph was drowned out by the roar of the badly timed engine. He waved the coupon while she dug out his seat belt, too. "I hope they have the pepperoni kind at the store."

"Me, too." She couldn't help trying to smooth down the ruffle of hair, but his cowlick stayed up stubbornly.

"Mom?"

"What?" She wrestled the truck into Drive, which shouldn't be so hard with an automatic, and nosed the pickup down the driveway.

"How long do we gotta stay here?" He tucked the coupon in the front of the fat envelope.

"I don't know. I wish I did, believe me." Gravel crunched beneath the tires as she fought the pickup around a curve. "I want to go home just as much as you do."

"I miss my friends."

"Me, too."

They smiled together as the pickup bumped down the last stretch of driveway. Cows grazed behind sagging fences. Across the county road, moss glinted on the barn's roof, which happened to be missing more than a few shingles. As she cranked the steering wheel to the right hard, manhandling the rattling truck onto the pavement, she wondered just how long Dad had been letting things slide and why no one had looked her up to tell her. She may have moved out of state, but she wasn't that hard to find.

Amber fields whipped by, grass bronzing in the hot summer sun.

"How come Grandpa doesn't share his TV?"

"That's just the way he is." Her mother had a small set in the kitchen, but it was not there now. She had no idea where it went or what had gone on around here in the last ten years. One thing was for certain, a lot of

things had changed. The farm was no longer top-notch, money was apparently wanting and her father? The robust man he'd once been had withered away.

"I know we've got to get by and you're not working or anything." Simon took a deep breath. "But how am I gonna watch my shows?"

"That's a good question. I'll try and figure something out, okay?"

"Okay." He stared off down the road. "Maybe we won't be here long."

"Maybe." Simon didn't know that they would be leaving only after her father died. Sorrow burned behind her eyes, which was unexpected considering how she'd once loathed her dad with every fiber of her being. She checked her rearview mirror for traffic out of habit—of course, there was none, not on this rural road—and flicked her gaze to the pavement ahead. Farmland spread around her like a patchwork quilt in irrigated greens, dried ambers and barn roofs glinting in the sun.

One more corner and they zipped past the little row of rental houses, bright with new paint, where her one-and-only love had lived. Was he still there or had he ...

Users Review

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Olga Andres:

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James Esparza:

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Carl Johnson:

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