



Daniel'S Bride

By Linda Lael Miller

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And for Jolie McKibben, about to pay by hanging for a terrible crime she didn't commit, salvation by marriage couldn't come a moment too soon. Housekeeping for Daniel Beckham, a widower who invoked the town's wedding ordinance to rescue Jolie from the gallows, is better than the alternative...but understanding the silent stranger who is now her husband might just about kill her.

Daniel doesn't believe in Jolie's innocence. And despite his willingness to marry the pretty, defiant "outlaw" on the spot, the prosperous farmer had little to say to her after "I do." But for Jolie, their arrangement of convenience soon deepens into a rich and vibrant attraction that sets her trembling with desire in Daniel's presence. Somehow, she would win his love, body and soul. Unless the desperados on her trail shatter the fragile, trusting bond of husband and wife....

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Editorial Review

Review

Affaire de Coeur Wildly romantic.

About the Author

The daughter of a town marshal, Linda Lael Miller is the author of more than a hundred historical and contemporary novels. Now living in Spokane, Washington, the "First Lady of the West" hit a career high when all three of her 2011 *Creed Cowboy* books debuted at #1 on the *New York Times* list. In 2007, the Romance Writers of America presented her their Lifetime Achievement Award. Visit her at LindaLaelMiller.com.

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Chapter One

Prosperity, Washington Territory

August 2, 1877

The noose lay heavy around Jolie McKibben's neck, smelling of sweat and horseflesh and hemp. Frantic protests of innocence had long since rendered her throat too raw to speak, and she felt nothing except a certain defiant numbness as she stared back at those who had gathered to see her hanged. Her blue-green eyes were dry and hot, but a tiny stream of perspiration trickled between her breasts, like a tear gone astray.

She stood in the bed of Hobb Jackson's hay wagon, her fair hair sticking to her scalp under the dusty bowler hat she wore, her wrists bound tightly behind her back, her chin at the most obstinate angle possible. She could hear the team of horses behind her, neighing and blowing impatiently in the slow heat of a summer morning. In another few moments, the marshal would give the signal, the horses would pull the rig from beneath her feet, and she would be left to dangle and choke at the end of that dirty rope.

All because she'd had the bad judgment to fall in with Blake Kingston. It didn't seem just that she had to die for what he'd done, but then, Jolie had never known life to be fair. For her, it had been a struggle, right from the very first.

The undertaker, a heavy man sweating in a dark suit, dried his brow with a handkerchief and raised his round face to look into Jolie's eyes. "Let's get this over with," he said. "Miss McKibben's been duly tried and sentenced and there's no sense in dragging things out."

Jolie felt her knees go weak and tried to put the starch back into them by sheer force of will. "I didn't rob the bank," she croaked out, needing to say the words one last time even though they'd been falling on deaf ears for a month. "And I didn't shoot anybody, either."

"Just hang her," someone called from the crowd.

It was then that a big man came out of the mercantile, a flour sack over one thick shoulder, his face hidden by the brim of a large, stained hat. He wore plain brown trousers, a rough-spun shirt the color of buttery cream, and an old buckskin vest. He silenced the yammering spectators just by sweeping them up in a single scathing glance, then set the bag on the wooden sidewalk with an unhurried motion and came down the

steps. He crossed a street paved in mud, manure, and sawdust and stood at the rear of the wagon.

"Now, Dan'l," fretted the wizened old marshal, "don't you go interferin' in this here hangin'. We done tried this woman right and proper, and we found her guilty."

Daniel. Jolie's heart gave a surging thump, but she couldn't afford to hope for rescue. The disappointment would be another burden, and the load she carried was already crushing.

The farmer swept off his hat, revealing a head of wheat gold hair, and gazed up at her with eyes the same shade of blue as a summer sky in the early morning. He was not handsome, this man, and yet something wrenched painfully inside Jolie as she regarded him.

"This the lady bank robber?" he asked, his low voice revealing none of the agitation that raised an invisible charge from the small mob gathered to view the proceedings.

Jolie ran the tip of her tongue over dry, cracked lips. For reasons she couldn't begin to sort through, it was crucial that this particular man not walk away believing she was guilty of robbery and murder. She took a step forward, and the rope chafed the delicate skin of her throat.

"Doesn't look like the type to me," Daniel reflected, raising one brawny hand to rub a clean-shaven chin. Desperate to find something to focus on other than the grim realities, Jolie took note of the fact that he was the only male present who didn't sport a mustache, a beard, or both.

The corpulent undertaker -- his wagon stood waiting nearby, with the name *Philias Pribbenow* stenciled on the side-waddled forward, mopping his nape with the kerchief. "If you were interested in the proceedings, Daniel," he said, "you should have shown it before now. The time for arguments and consideration is past."

Judge Chilver, a man with red-rimmed eyes and skin that seemed too loose for his face, stepped forward, a little smirk curving his lips. "Course, there is the weddin' ordinance," he said, pushing back his coat to tuck his thumbs into the pockets of a food-spotted brocade vest. He scanned the impatient lookers-on before fixing another unctuous smile on Daniel and cocking a thumb toward Jolie. "You marry the lady and we'll call off the hangin'. Have no choice but to string her up if she breaks the law again, o' course."

Another man, this one young and darkly handsome, wearing black trousers, a matching vest, and a gambler's ruffled white shirt, called a suggestion from the porch of the Lone Wolf Saloon. "I think *Beckham* should cover what Jolie *McKibben* stole from the bank, too, if she's going to be his wife."

There was a general murmur of agreement at this, and Jolie didn't dare breathe as she watched Daniel's jaw tighten. He muttered a curse and slapped his dusty hat against a solid thigh. "It wouldn't be right," he said, narrowing his eyes as he gave the prisoner a swift inspection, "hanging a woman. You'd better send her on up to Spokane and let the territorial court handle the trial."

Until moments before, Jolie would have sworn she'd cried out all her tears. Now, moisture was pooling in her lower lashes, and her vision was bluffed. She was only twenty years old and she'd never known a man or held a baby of her own, and she didn't want to die.

Chilver got out his pocket watch and flicked open the case with a brisk movement of his thumb. His eyebrows arched as he checked the hour. "Time's a wastin', Dan'l," he said.

"I'll marry her," Daniel said, and it was as though the words were dragged out of him. He plopped the hat back onto his head, vaulted into the rear of the wagon with surprising agility for someone of his size, and

lifted the rope from around Jolie's neck. She came near to sagging against him in relief but caught herself at the last moment.

He undid the rawhide ties that were cutting into her wrists, hooked his hands under her arms, and lowered her easily to the ground. Then he was towering beside her, as hard and substantial as a tamarack tree.

Jolie swayed slightly, and he caught her briefly against his side. She was tall for a woman, nearly five feet nine inches, but her chin reached only as high as Daniel's shirt pocket. She heard the murmurs and mutterings of the townspeople as if through a wall of water, and saw Hobb Jackson scramble into the wagon bed and pull down the rope he'd slung over the tree branch earlier.

The judge was peering into her face, his breath ripe with whiskey and a general lack of hygiene. "How about you, little lady? You want to marry Dan Beckham?"

Jolie swallowed. She'd never seen Mr. Beckham before and, for all she knew, he was a Republican, a drunkard, and a woman-beater, but it seemed to her that her choices were severely limited -- at least, for the moment. "I'll marry him," she rasped. Now that she was fairly certain she wouldn't swoon, bile was stinging the back of her throat and her stomach was jumping.

"You sure about this, Dan'l?" the old politician inquired, rocking back on his heels, cocky as a bantam rooster.

The muscle in Daniel's jaw flexed again. "I'm sure," he said, avoiding Jolie's gaze this time. "Let's get on with the marrying. I'll draw up a draft for the money later."

Jolie's surroundings undulated around her as she struggled to absorb the shock of unexpected salvation. All the while, she was praying she wouldn't throw up on the farmer's boots and convince him to withdraw his offer. The throng moved in closer, as curious to see a wedding as they had been to witness a hanging, and Jolie made herself meet one pair of eyes, then another and another.

I'm alive, she challenged them silently, and damn you to hell for wanting to watch me die.

"I've got a license on my desk," Mr. Chilver said brightly. "It's just a matter of saying the words."

The irony of being married by the same judge who had sentenced her to hang by the neck until dead was not lost on Jolie, but she was still too shaken to grasp all the nuances of the situation. She was going to live to see another sun blaze over the ripening wheat and the timbered foothills, and that was all that mattered.

Judge Chilver provided the necessary paper, and Daniel and Jolie stood under the oak tree that would have been her gallows. The townspeople pressed close, paying avid attention, elbowing each other and snickering.

Jolie made the responses that were required of her, unaware of the tears that were making pale tracks in the mask of dust that covered her face. When it was over, she and Daniel both signed the ornately decorated document, then her new husband took her elbow and ushered her toward a battered wagon waiting in the alleyway between the mercantile and the feed and grain. Only when she saw the man's signature on the appropriate line did she realize that her name was no longer McKibben, but Beckham.

Mr. Beckham handed her into the box in an offhandedly solicitous way, then went back to pick up the burgeoning sack he'd set down when he came out of the feed store. After loading this into the back of the wagon, he climbed up into the seat beside Jolie, who sat ramrod straight with her hands folded in her lap, reached for the reins, and released the brake lever with one boot heel.

He favored the population of Prosperity with a cool nod and set the team of two sturdy brown mules in motion with a flick of one wrist.

Jolie's thumbs twiddled, and she bit her lip, her eyes narrowed under the brim of her hat as she watched the weathered facades of the town's main street fall behind. "Why did you do it?" she finally asked, when the wagon wheels were jostling over two hard-packed ruts and spring wheat waved on either side of them. "Why did you marry a woman you don't even know?"

Daniel waited so long to speak that Jolie was beginning to think he didn't plan on responding, but then he looked squarely into...

Users Review

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