



A Love Letter to the Editor

A Novella from FOUR WEDDINGS AND A KISS

Dear Editor:

Do you think there are men in this world who can value a well-educated woman with a mind of her own and the courage to speak it? Is it possible for a man and a woman to have an equal partnership in marriage, seeing each other as God intended them to be? After thirty-five years on this earth, I have begun to doubt it.

*Sincerely,
Wishful in Wyoming*

Chapter 1

*Killdeer, Wyoming
August 1879*

Molly Everton flung open the door to her father's office in the *Killdeer Sentinel*, not caring that it hit the wall with a loud crack. "Is it true, Father?"

Roland Everton looked up from the papers on his desk. "Is what true?"

"You know good and well what I mean. Have you hired someone else as editor of the paper?"

Her father removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. A familiar delaying tactic. She'd seen it many times in her thirty-five years.

Molly closed the door and then stepped closer to his desk, trying to check her temper. "It isn't fair. You know it isn't fair."

"My dear, you should know by now that many things in life are not fair. Far from it."

"Why did you send me to college if you didn't want me to put the knowledge I gained to good use? I have all of the qualifications needed to serve as the paper's editor. I have worked beside you. I know what needs done."

Her father released a sigh. "Oh, Molly. Speaking your mind freely has its consequences. We must do business with the merchants here in town. We can't afford to offend them or their wives. I need someone in charge of the paper who understands the delicate balance required."

Molly's anger evaporated, leaving behind a desire to weep.

"Sit down, Molly."

She obeyed.

"I was wrong not to tell you sooner," her father said, his voice gentle. "I suppose it was this precise scene I was hoping to avoid. It seems all I did was delay it a little."

Molly stared at her hands, clasped tightly in her lap. "What is his name?"

"The new editor? Jack Ludgrove."

"Where is he from?"

"Iowa."

"And when does he arrive?"

Her father didn't answer at once.

Molly lifted her gaze to meet his.

"This afternoon. I expect him on today's stagecoach."

She sat a little straighter. "He'll be here today?"

"Yes."

There was no hope then. No hope of changing her father's mind. No hope of helping him see that this was her turn, her right.

"Molly—"

"No. Don't say anything more, Father. Not now." She rose to her feet. "You have made your decision." She moved to the door and opened it, slowly this time. "I will see you at supper." She left her father's office and moved toward the front door of the newspaper, holding her head high.

She stopped on the boardwalk and looked to her right, down Main Street toward the Wells, Fargo office. The stagecoach from Green River usually came through Killdeer at about four o'clock in the afternoon. That was a good two hours from now.

Molly turned in the opposite direction and walked toward home. She nodded to a couple of women she passed on the boardwalk outside of the mercantile. She waved at Reverend Lynch, standing at the top of the church steps at the corner of Main and Elm.

Offend the advertisers, her father had said. Whom had she offended? It wasn't fair of Father to say that without giving her any specifics.

Fair. There was that word again. And her father was right about life not being fair. Especially for a woman. Especially for a woman who valued independence and learning above men and marriage.

Not that she had any objection to the institution of marriage itself. There were numerous examples of good marriages right here in her own town. Her parents, for one. But few men seemed to want a wife with the courage to speak her mind openly. At least, no men she'd met. Even her father preferred that she keep most of her opinions to herself.

When she'd turned thirty-five earlier this year, she'd accepted that she was—and would remain—an old maid. Being unmarried wasn't the worst fate in the world. But she did want to be useful. She would like to feel as if the work she did was valued by others.

What would she do when her father sold the newspaper? Something he'd begun to talk about more and more often. Would a new owner employ a woman reporter? Or a female editor? Her father wouldn't even make her the editor. Why would someone else?

But if she was already the editor when her father chose to sell the *Sentinel*, that might make a difference to the new owner. If she could prove herself capable. More than capable, invaluable. If she could do that, then she might be able to stay on.

Only Mr. Ludgrove stood in her way.

She stopped walking. Mr. Ludgrove might not like living in Killdeer. He might not stay. And if he didn't...

I'll make him want to leave. A smile played across her lips. *It can't be that hard to make him want to go back to where he came from.*

"True hope is swift and flies with swallow's wings," she whispered, quoting Shakespeare. "Kings it makes gods, and meaner creatures kings."

Feeling a great deal better than she had moments before, Molly hurried on toward home.

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Jack Ludgrove stepped down from the coach. After moving aside for two other passengers to disembark, he stopped and looked down the main street of Killdeer, Wyoming.

By George! Wyoming Territory! He was here at last.

Ever since he was a boy, Jack had longed for adventures in the West. Stories of fur trappers. Tales of the Oregon Trail. Accounts of the California gold rush. They'd all fueled his childhood imagination.

He might have come west right out of college, if not for four bloody years of civil war. He'd joined the Union Army at the age of twenty-one, soon after the hostilities began. He fought for his country and survived unscathed to the bitter end. But those years exacted a heavy toll on his family. His two brothers died in the conflict. Then his father seemed to give out from the grief. Jack was needed to stay in Iowa to care for him, so that was what he did. But his heart had never stopped yearning for the West of his dreams, and with his father's passing had come his freedom.

Jack Ludgrove, managing editor of the *Killdeer Sentinel*, Killdeer, Wyoming. Sounded good to him.

He took up his bags that had been removed from the rear of the coach, then started walking.

Killdeer was laid out in a square on the high desert land. Beyond it to the north rose the rugged Rocky Mountains. As soon as he owned a horse and had the time, he meant to ride up closer to those mountains and do some exploring.

Roland Everton, the owner and publisher of the *Sentinel*, had written in his letter that their offices were in the center of town on Main Street. It couldn't be hard to find. Killdeer was not exactly a thriving metropolis. However, it looked exactly as Jack had hoped it would. Whitewashed buildings. False storefronts. At least one church. A large livery stables. Wide, dusty streets. Horses hitched to posts. Cowboys in wide-brimmed hats standing in the shade.

He could smell the adventure.

At his age, he supposed he shouldn't find it all as exciting as he did. By thirty-nine, most men were settled. Job. Home. Wife. Children. Most men knew what their future looked like. The same as their past.

Jack saw the newspaper then. *Killdeer Sentinel* was painted across the large plate glass window. The name was also on a sign up high on the storefront. He crossed the street and opened the front door. Newspaper smells greeted him.

A man appeared from the back of the building. He had a bad leg and leaned heavily on the cane in his left hand as he approached. "Mr. Ludgrove?"

Jack nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Welcome to Killdeer. I'm Mr. Everton."

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

They shook hands.

Roland Everton motioned toward a door off to the right. "Let's go into my office." He moved in that direction. "I apologize for not meeting the stage, but as you can see, walking is a bit difficult for me. Especially the constant on and off of the boardwalks."

"Don't give it a thought. I liked getting a look at the town."

The publisher's office was small—and made smaller by the books and stacks of paper and newsprint on every available surface. Roland Everton went around to sit in his own chair. Jack took the one opposite him.

"Mr. Ludgrove, I have arranged for a room for you at Mrs. Simpson's boardinghouse. It's clean and reasonably priced, and I'm told she is a very fine cook."

"Sounds good. I imagine I'll spend much of my time at the newspaper, so I don't need anything fancy."

"I thought you should have a few days to get your bearings. You can begin work here on Monday."

"That's very generous of you, sir, but I am willing to begin at once if I am needed."

Roland waved away the comment. "Not necessary, Mr. Ludgrove. Monday will be soon enough."

Jack nodded.

"As I'm sure I told you in my letters, the running of the *Sentinel* has been mostly a family affair these past ten years. My daughter, Molly, writes a regular column, and she usually chooses what letters to the editor are published, depending upon topic and what space is available. She's a capable reporter as well."

Oh, great. Jack hadn't known about the daughter. That was the last thing he needed to deal with. Nepotism in the newspaper business seldom served the best interests of the readership. That must be as true for a small town's weekly as it was for a city's daily.

"And, of course," Roland continued, "I have served as the managing editor from the beginning. Hank Morrison is our typesetter. He's fast and efficient. You will see that for yourself."

Jack nodded, thinking it best not to say much about the staff until he'd met them. He would judge their qualifications by his own standards.

Roland got to his feet. "If you'll come with me, I will take you to the boardinghouse. Though my wife is expecting you to be our guest for supper your first night in Killdeer."

"I wouldn't want to put her out, Mr. Everton." Jack stood.

"Nonsense. She would never forgive me if we didn't show you the proper hospitality. First impressions are important, and we want your impression of Killdeer to be a positive one. Now come along."