



A Matter of Character

Book #3, The Sisters of Bethlehem Springs series

Prologue

St. Louis, Missouri
August 1918

Propelled by a white hot fury, Joshua Crawford pushed open the door to Gregory Halifax's office so hard it hit the wall with a loud wham. Startled, Gregory looked up a split second before Joshua slapped the newspaper onto the desk.

"What is this garbage?" Joshua demanded.

Gregory's expression changed from one of surprise to a smirk. "So you read it."

"Of course I read it, and I'm here to demand a retraction."

"A retraction? For what?"

"For what you wrote about my grandfather."

Gregory laughed softly. "You must be joking. The article is about dime novelists. The part about Richard Terrell were the words of the author, not mine."

"But you made what Mr. Morgan wrote in his novels sound as if it was fact rather than fiction. It's not."

"How do you know it's not? Tell me. What do you know about your grandfather before he settled in St. Louis? Nothing, that's what. You've said so yourself."

"Did you contact anyone in Idaho to try to confirm that the character in Morgan's books is based on the real Richard Terrell?"

“I didn’t need to. I interviewed the publishers for my story. And again, the focus of my article is the men who write dime novels, not on the characters found in their books.”

“But in the process you’ve dragged my grandfather’s good name through the mud. I want a retraction.”

Gregory pushed back his chair and stood, the smile gone from his face. “When you prove anything I wrote is in error, then come see me again, and we’ll have this discussion. Until then, get out.”

For one moment, Joshua thought he might be able to control his temper. For one very brief moment—just before he caught Gregory’s jaw with a right hook followed by a left jab to the gut. Gregory flew backward into the wall. The glass in the office door rattled again. Joshua readied himself for Gregory to fight back. To his dissatisfaction, it didn’t happen. Gregory’s eyes were still unfocused when other men poured into the office and grabbed Joshua by the arms, hauling him away. One of the men was Joshua’s boss, Langston Lee.

“You’re fired, Crawford. Collect your things and get out. I won’t have my reporters brawling. You hear me. Get out or I’ll call the police.”

Joshua longed to turn his rage onto his boss, to give Langston Lee a little of what he’d already given Gregory Halifax. But he had enough good sense left to resist the urge. He was already out of a job. He didn’t want to spend time in a jail cell besides.

But so help him, he would get a retraction out of this newspaper. He would prove Gregory Halifax was a shoddy reporter and see that he was fired. He would hear Langston Lee apologize. And he would make certain D. B. Morgan never again maligned his grandfather in print.

This wasn’t over yet.

Chapter One

Bethlehem Springs, Idaho
October 1918

Maybe it was time to kill Rawhide Rick. He’d served his purpose, the old rascal. He’d hunted buffalo and fought Indians and stolen gold from hardworking miners and sent men to the gallows. Now might be the time for him to meet his Maker. The trick was deciding how to kill him.

Daphne McKinley rose from her desk and walked into the parlor where she pushed aside the curtains at the window.

A golden haze blanketed Bethlehem Springs. It had been a beautiful autumn. The prettiest one yet in her three years in this serene Idaho mountain town. The trees had been the brightest of

golds, the most fiery of reds, the deepest of greens. Daphne had spent many a mild afternoon walking trails through the forest, enjoying the colors and the smells.

If Rawhide Rick—who by this point in the series of books had become the infamous Judge Richard Terrell—was dead, what would become of the dashing Bill McFarland, hero of the McFarland Chronicles? Without his arch enemy, his life might become rather dull. Or perhaps it was Daphne who would find life dull without Rawhide Rick. Wicked he was, but he certainly kept things interesting whenever he was around.

She rubbed her eyelids with the tips of her fingers, and when she pulled them away, she noticed ink stains on her right hand. Her fountain pen was leaking. Perhaps it was time for her to buy a typewriter. But would writing on a machine feel the same?

Daphne turned from the window, her gaze sweeping the parlor. She'd come to love this small house on Wallula Street. Since moving into it soon after Gwen—its previous owner—married Daphne's brother, she'd delighted in making it her home, decorating and furnishing it in ways that pleased her. Daphne's childhood homes had been large and filled with servants waiting to attend to her slightest wish. But she had often been forced to live by the timetables of others. Now she could do as she willed, when she willed. The freedom she enjoyed was intoxicating.

The best part was, when she wanted to be with family, she got into her motorcar—her very own, quite wonderful McLaughlin-Buick automobile—and drove to her brother's home to play with her young nephew and infant niece. She was completely dotty over the two of them. She loved to crawl around on the floor with Andy—he would turn two at the end of November—the both of them squealing and giggling. And there was nothing like cuddling three-month-old Ellie. Daphne thought the baby girl smelled like sunshine.

A sigh escaped her. She hadn't time for daydreaming about Morgan and Gwen's darling children. She must decide what to do. If she was going to kill the judge, she needed to notify Elwood Shriver at once. Wavering in indecisiveness served no good purpose.

She returned to her small office. The floor around her desk was littered with wadded sheets of paper. It was always thus when words frustrated her. "So wasteful," she scolded softly.

As she sat down, she took up the five-day-old newspaper. News of the war half a world away was splashed across the front page. More than a million American men—just boys, many of them—were now fighting in Europe alongside the Allied Powers. The end was near, some said. She prayed to God they were right. Too many had died already. Others, like Woody Statham, would wear the scars from their war wounds for the remainder of their lives—if not on their bodies then in their souls.

She flipped through several more pages of the newspaper, but nothing she read captured her imagination or sparked her creativity. Besides, she'd read every article before, some of them several times.

Maybe her problem wasn't with Rawhide Rick. Maybe the problem was Bill McFarland. Maybe she was tired of him. Maybe he should die.

“Maybe the whole lot of them should perish,” she muttered as she laid the newspaper aside.

She spun her chair toward the bookcase beneath the office window. There, on the bottom row, were copies of the McFarland Chronicles by D. B. Morgan, all ten volumes. And if she didn't decide soon what to do about Rawhide Rick, ten volumes would be all there were.

There was no question that Daphne loved writing stories of adventure and danger in the West of fifty years ago. And while she would concede that her books were not great literature, they were entertaining, for readers and for herself. But there were days like today when she was tempted to contact her editor in New York City and tell him that she (D. B. McKinley, whom Elwood Shriver thought to be a man) was retiring and thus so must D. B. Morgan (the pseudonym used on her books). However, she knew she would miss the storytelling were she to give it up. After all, it didn't take much effort to clean her small house or cook the occasional meal for herself. Without her writing pursuits, what would she do with her time?

It would be nice if she could discuss her feelings with someone, but there wasn't another person, in Bethlehem Springs or elsewhere, who knew she was the author of dime novels. She wasn't sure her brother would believe her if she told him. The only soul who might suspect anything was Dedrik Finster, the Bethlehem Springs postmaster, because of the mail she sent and received, but his English wasn't the best and he probably had no idea that Shriver & Sons was a publishing company. Why would he?

Maybe what she needed more than anything was a drive out to the Arlington ranch and a long visit with Griff Arlington, Gwen and Cleo's father. That man had given her more story ideas in the last three years than she could ever hope to put on paper. It was Griff who had told her about the escapades of the real life Richard Terrell, every bit as much a scoundrel as her fictional character, although perhaps in different ways. Yes, a visit with Griff was just what the doctor ordered.

Her mind made up, she rose and went in search of hat, gloves, and coat.

© 2010 Robin Lee Hatcher
— All rights reserve