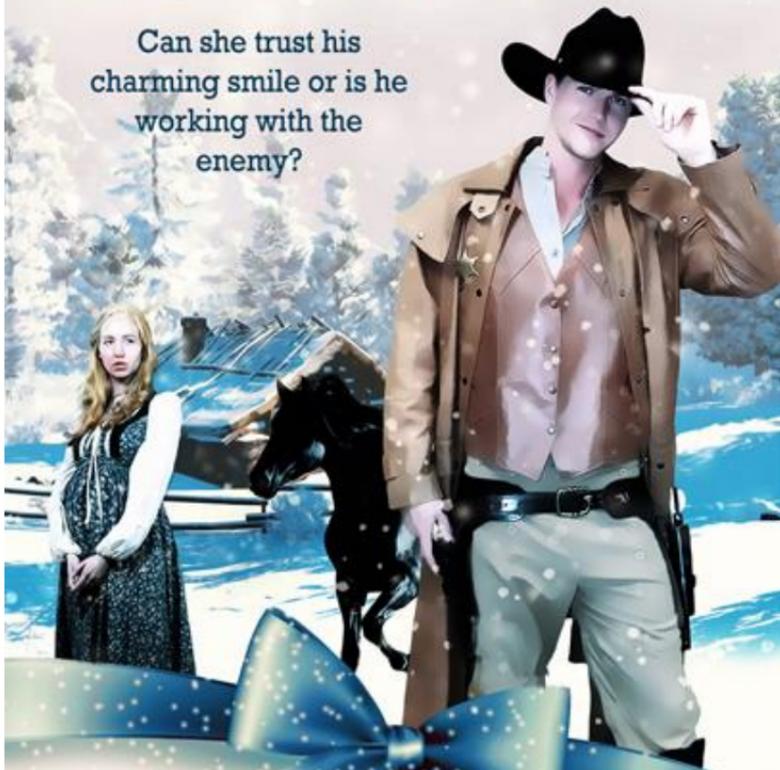


MALLARY MITCHELL

Can she trust his
charming smile or is he
working with the
enemy?



A LAW MAN
FOR *Christmas*

A Lawman for Christmas

Mallary Mitchell

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A Lawman for Christmas

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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Publishing History

The Wild Rose Press, 2010, as: Down the Chimney

Prism Edition, 2019

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0257-5

Published in the United States of America

Author's Note

A Visit from St. Nicholas was first published in 1823.

1

December 1868

“And then, in a twinkling I heard on the roof, the prancing and pawing of each little hoof. As I drew in my head and was turning around, down the chimney Saint Nicholas came with a bound. He was dressed...” Odessa Courtland paused as her daughter tugged on her skirt.

“Ma, ma, ma.” Leah was insistent. Dessa hoped that if ignored, Leah would forget the question...and there was always a question.

Odessa’s daughters loved the poem, but today Dessa hoped to make *A Visit from Saint Nicholas* as succinct as possible. Today Blake Henry waited and watched. It was his third visit in as many weeks. The outlaw, in his snappy blank suit replete with string tie, looked the part of a dapper gentleman, but appearances were often deceptive. Blake was no gentleman.

Heat scorched her face. Was it the outlaw’s unnerving stare or the close proximity of her only working fireplace? She moved her chair back a bit in case it was the latter. Leah moved in this time and tugged as Dessa tried to add the rest of the sentence. “...all in fur...”

“Ma.” Leah’s voice was louder this time. Usually, Hannah was much more outspoken than her sister, but

Hannah seemed to sense the danger. Leah's head cocked to one side with that same look of stubborn persistence Dessa had often seen in the mirror. The child's bobbed blonde hair that barely reached her chin was an ever-present reminder of a not-too-distant bought with scarlet fever. The town doctor had shorn both her daughters' curling locks in a desperate effort to reduce the fever.

"What is it, Leah?" Dessa shifted in her rocker trying to find a comfortable position for her aching back. The child in her belly moved as if greatly inconvenienced by her motions. She couldn't help but pat her stomach in an effort to soothe the little one.

"Ma?"

Leah always seemed to add one more "Ma" for good measure, and Dessa couldn't keep her mouth from inching up on either end.

"What is a *bound*? Saint Nicholas has a bound. Is that a little reindeer?"

"Maybe it's a toy?" Hannah's wide eyes sparkled, and she spoke barely above a whisper.

Both Leah and Hannah had been more than intrigued at this tale of Saint Nicholas. It was a good thing, too. Dessa had managed to construct and squirrel away two rag dolls, but there would be no trip to town for candy sticks and fruit, their usual Christmas frivolity. She had no money to spend, and because of her late husband's shady business practices and partners, no one would allow her to have an account which would be payable at a later date. The dolls and this story were all her daughters would get this Christmas.

"Hmmm, let's see, it's kind of like a hop," she explained.

“More like a sudden movement.” One of those shady partners, Blake Henry, spoke from his corner chair where he watched her with pale blue eyes. His baritone voice washed over her like a cold, drenching rain that sapped the body of all warmth. His very presence shrouded them like a thick, dense fog. Blake Henry crossed his arms and cocked a brow as if expecting her rebuttal.

It was his demeanor and not his intrusion into the conversation that gripped her with cold tingles of fear.

“Yes.” She just smiled as best she could back into his icy eyes. “That is an excellent description.”

“Do continue.” His words were an imperious order.

Continue? Where was she? What had Leah asked? *A bound.* Yes, that was it. Her heart pulsed in her ears as she went through the poem to try to find her place, an unnerving and iffy prospect with the outlaw studying her every move. Oh, yes. “*He was dressed all in fur from his head to his foot, and his clothes were all covered with ashes and soot.*” She paused. Last time she had recited this, Hannah had asked why Santa had only one foot, not two feet. While she tried to explain the nuances of rhyming, Hannah with her childlike wisdom had completely ignored the fact that this was a poem. She decided he must have a peg leg like old Bob who liked to whittle on the front porch of the mercantile.

The girls, however, merely sat a little closer to the edge of their stools as if urging her on—or perhaps by instinct they were moving closer to their mother.

Dessa went through Santa’s appearance, apparel, and his deeds. The girls listened with rapt attention until he sprang into his sleigh and sped into the air.

"Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!" She finished.

Her girls clapped, but their childish pattering was overshadowed by the deep sound of leather-gloved hands meeting. How could mere applause seem so ominous? After several long and lazy claps, Blake Henry stopped. "What an enthralling tale." The sneer on his face contradicted his words.

"Bedtime girls."

"Ma!" Hannah began and then stopped, eyeing Dessa's pointing index finger.

The girls didn't ask for much, and, yes, she knew she was sending them to the loft early, but she needed to speak with Blake Henry without any distractions.

Maybe Hannah sensed her mood, because she conceded after her lone protest, climbed the ladder to her bed, and urged Leah along as well.

"Good night, Mr. Henry," the younger of her two daughters called over her shoulder and smiled at the black-hearted devil.

He returned Leah's expression. "Good night to you as well." He walked to the loft ladder and ruffled Leah's hair. Dessa stiffened. How dare he touch her child.

She stilled her protest. One didn't disagree with Blake Henry and live. Her late husband was a case in point. What a year it had been. In the wake of Orion Courtland's death, she'd nearly lost both her daughters to scarlet fever.

She'd been so distracted with her fight to save her daughters that nothing else had been clear in her brain. Once they were well, it became starkly apparent she was carrying a child. She hadn't had time to grieve for her husband. Sometimes it occurred to Dessa that

maybe the distractions were just an excuse for why she hadn't grieved.

Now Blake Henry had come to close some unfinished business with Orion. She eyed him as the girls finished their slow ascent up the ladder.

"Say your prayers." She reminded as she did each night. "No playing. Get to sleep, the both of you." The girls were good, obedient children. Both would grow to be strong women, perhaps a bit too strong in Hannah's case. Dessa wanted to protect them as much as she could, but reality wouldn't allow that. Already, she'd had them practicing for the upcoming birth. Leah would put the old quilts on the bed and tie the rope to the headboard so Dessa would have something to pull on. Hannah would fetch water, stoke up the fire, and get a basin of clean warm water to bathe the baby. The string and scissors to cut and tie the baby's cord were already by her bed. Her last two births were attended by a doctor. This time there was no one to get the doctor, neither funds to pay one.

Odessa swept her hand to the door. "Shall we speak outside?"

Blake Henry inclined his head and held out his hand in a flourish, indicating she should lead the way. Odessa checked her fire. It would be safe to step out a moment with the girls unattended. She grabbed her shawl and threw it across her shoulders before stepping into the cold night. When the outlaw followed, she pulled the rope latch and shut the hand-hewn door.

"Do have a seat, Mr. Henry." She motioned to one of the rockers that graced the wide porch. She'd thought it strange when Orion had dug out the side of a hill and covered it with plaster to make the house's

back wall. The front and sides of the home looked like any split log cabin; even the floor and ceiling were the same split logs. The roof pitched higher on one end where the girls had their loft bed, but on the outside, the house fit into the hill. The roof, which Orion had covered with dirt and seeded with vegetation, blended with the landscape.

Once, it had worried her that the children could climb the hill and fall off the front, but she had trained them with great care to avoid the roof of the house.

Blake Henry shook his head. "You'll understand if I decline your offer. Under the circumstances, I greatly prefer standing."

She crossed her arms, bringing the shawl tighter around her chilled body. Steeling her frame, she met his frosty gaze. "State your business. I know these aren't social visits."

"You have something of mine, and I want it back. I will have it back." He brushed off his clothing and picked at lint on his jacket as if he'd become unclean merely by standing on her porch. The gesture rankled, but his words stung even more. *He would have it back.*

"What would that be?" The fog of dread and doubt settled more firmly around her.

"You know very well. Your husband took a strong box full of cash and coins containing nearly ten-thousand dollars. I want it—now."

Her hand flew to her chest. "You think I have it?" Forgetting who he was, she laughed. "Do you think I'd give my children nothing but cornmeal mush, dandelion greens, and the occasional rabbit and squirrel if I had a strong box containing ten-thousand dollars? Ha. Some smart outlaw you are, Blake Henry.

You've been fooled. Ori may have taken that money and spent it somewhere, but it sure wasn't here."

Henry moved in closer. He smiled and took her in his arms. Dessa was grateful for the huge bulk of baby between them. "You are a cool-headed woman. I admire that." He wound her hair around his hand like a rope drawing her head back to look him in the eyes. "Ori claimed you to be the brains."

He tilted his head, and for a second, Dessa thought it sad that such a handsome man had such a cruel heart. His eyes narrowed, and he peered at her as if searching her soul and reading her thoughts. His gaze raked her up and down, and it was her turn to feel unclean.

"After dealing with Ori and realizing his shortcomings, I think he was truthful." Blake smirked. "Ori sure wasn't the brightest nugget in the pan. You're playing me, Dessa. *Dessa*, that's what he called you, isn't it? Pretty Dessa." His face was inches from hers. He moved even closer. His minty breath brushed her lips. Tears pricked at her eyes.

A sickening wave of fear rushed through her body. Her heart quivered in her chest. Was there no end to Orion's lies? How long would she have to pay? "Mr. Henry, I was never part of any of my husband's business ventures. I keep the house and tend the children."

"The consummate actress." He raked his gaze over her like an enamored suitor. "Don't make me force your hand. Get the strong box, and we'll call it even."

"I don't have it. I promise you. I would gladly give you his ill-gotten gains. I just don't have it."

"Well, that's too bad." He wound her hair by one more length. "I guess I'll have to force it out of you."

His grip on her hair brought tears to her eyes, but she didn't cry out; that would bring the children. "You are an interesting woman. I don't think I'll kill you first. I'll start with your children."

A gasp came unbidden from her throat. "No."

"Or maybe I can just sell them." He smiled, revealing perfect pearly teeth. His voice dropped to a low, seductive tone. "Pretty little girls like that ought to—"

"No!" She lifted her knee to his groin and made contact. He released her hair as he doubled over. Thank God for cousins who'd taught her to fight. She didn't think Grandma would be so angry with them now.

"Smart girl, aren't you?" He tilted his head to the side again as he looked up at her, still doubled over in pain. "Who showed you that trick?"

She smoothed her hair and glared his way. "I don't have your money. Now get off my land."

"Oh, but you do. You have it, and I will get it. Here's a little deal for you. You give me the money by Christmas Eve, and no questions asked. I like you Dessa. But...if you don't have that money, I will kill all three of you."

He spoke the words without menace or anger. It was that cool tone of his, those emotionless eyes, that chilled her to the bone. Blake Henry gave her large stomach a desultory glance and raised his brows. "Well, by then it may be four."

He turned and sauntered off the porch.

"I don't have it." She rasped after him. He turned around and closed the distance between them.

"Then, my dear,"—he took her chin in his hand and leaned in so close that his whispered words once

again brushed her face—"you best find it."

Deputy Deke Elliot rifled through the old stack of wanted posters, weeding out the ones that needed to go, keeping those still current. So far, he had quite a collection on the wall of the back cell which was now converted into an office. Ironically, this cell had been his cell—the first and only time he'd been arrested. His boss thought it fitting he have it now as his own private office. In Deke's younger days, his father had been a gambler and often on the wrong side of the law, but that had all changed when his sister was shot and nearly died. His dad changed his ways then and there. Pa had bought a hotel and now was a respected man.

"Deacon." Sheriff Jonah Beckett's voice boomed throughout the jailhouse. "Get your guns."

Deke strapped on his gun belt and walked to the front room, but not before a second, resounding, "Deke, you got lead in your backside? My eighty-year-old grandma moves faster than you."

Deke emerged to catch Jonah holding his lever-action rifle. Jonah barely looked up but managed to throw him one as well.

"You get loaded and quick. Blake Henry's been spotted up in Angel's Landing, three miles east of here."

Deke frowned. He'd known this day would come but had hoped it would be later rather than sooner. Blake was his uncle, his father's half-brother. Blake was bad. Even Pa and Grandma knew that. "Does my father know?" Those were the only words he managed

to form.

"Yeah, your pa knows. He also knows his brother has pushed too far. During that last robbery, Blake killed three people. We talked about this when you hired on. You knowing these outlaws is an asset; you can identify them, but it's also a liability. It's hard bringing in someone you know." Jonah paused. "Even harder when it's kin. You able to do this?"

His one childhood memory of Blake had been when he'd beaten up one of the "ladies" at Magnolia Saloon. Saloon girl or not, Blake had no right to hit a woman. Deke fitted his hat on his head. The memory of the young woman's face, battered and bruised by his uncle, was as fresh today as the day he'd first seen it.

Yeah, he was ready, willing, and able to do this. "I'm fine." Deke nodded.

Jonah gave a grim smile and slapped Deke's back. "If it makes you feel any better, your pa's riding with us. He hopes if he's along, his brother might surrender."

It did help. Deke liked a good fight now and again to get the blood to flowing. But bullets and crazy didn't mix, and Blake was crazy. If anyone could reason their way out of a bad situation, it was Pa, a man who had always lived by his wits and not his guns. Deke swallowed hard and loaded his rifle.

"Come on, kid." Jonah jerked his head and walked out the jail's front door. Deke stopped and whistled to his horse. In the fading light, Flapjack heard the call and trotted up from the side of the jail.

Jonah shook his head "That animal's as smart as a whip."

Deke put his forehead to Flapjack's and was rewarded with a whinny. "I beg to differ. Flapjack's

smarter than a whip.”

Dessa prayed for a miracle as she struggled uphill in the darkness. She needed to search the hayloft. Her oil lantern swayed with her waddling steps. Her husband had been reared a Quaker; and while, sadly, he hadn't followed their beliefs, he had constructed his barn in their style. It was built into a hill like the house, but the barn was two stories. No stairs or ladders were needed inside; one had only to walk up and down the hill. The lower half housed the animals and, at one time, had been home to a team of horses, a sturdy mule, and two cows. Only one cow remained, and Suki was sleeping. The upper half of the structure held the hay as well as the wagon, a sleigh, and various plows and tools Ori had used when he'd farmed and tanned hides for trade—the honest living he'd earned before drink had taken him, and he'd turned to schemes and lawlessness.

After his death, all the animals and equipment had been sold or traded to pay his debts. Other than Suki, Dessa retained only the sleigh, the ramshackle wagon, and a plow.

Could Ori have secreted a fortune here?

She opened the barn door and slipped inside. Only a sparse layer of hay remained in the hayloft. She scanned the walls for something, anything.

She thought back to the fateful day when Ori'd returned home, shot and bleeding. He'd been gone over a year, but she'd nursed his wounds like the faithful wife she had always been. He'd revealed

precious little about the origin of his injuries or the reason he'd returned. Dessa had decided right then and there, that the moment he was well, she would return home to Kentucky. By the time Ori started improving, she'd already sent her cousin, JJ, a telegraph to come and get her and her children.

But Ori's wound had suddenly blackened as gangrene set in. The doctor gave her laudanum to ease his pain. When JJ arrived, instead of carting her home, he'd dug a grave.

It had been while JJ was with them that the girls had come down with scarlet fever. Thank God, he'd been there to help. He'd fetched the doctor and even paid the fees.

After they knew the girls would live, but were too weak to move, JJ plowed and planted a small garden. He'd given her enough money to get by and made her promise to let him know if she needed help again. He'd said he'd come back before the baby came. So far, she had seen neither hide nor hair of him. Silently, she willed him to her. More like her brother than her cousin, JJ had always been there for her.

If she could get to town, she'd send him a telegram.

Hefting the large pitchfork, she strained to move remaining hay from the bin. She hadn't looked in the small hole dug into the earth and hidden by a wooden bottom and hay. She crawled inside and broke her nails as she hastily pried open the flat wooden top.

If a strong box had been here at one time, it was long gone. There was nothing left now but an empty liquor bottle and a web-filled hole. A hiccough became a sob that dissolved into bitter tears. Her grief shook through her, stirring her child from its slumber. The

infant protested with several kicks that brought Dessa back from her despair. She straightened her back and squared her shoulders. She had to find a way out for her children. This child deserved a chance, as did her two sleeping daughters. She didn't know how, but she would find a way. She had to.

The sound of a rider approaching alerted Dessa to danger. She dried her tears and grabbed her pitchfork just before there was a knock on the barn door.

"It's mighty late for a social call." She spoke loudly hoping whoever it was would go on their merry way.

She recognized Sheriff Jonah Beckett more from his lanky form than anything else. She relaxed a little.

"Mrs. Courtland." He tipped his hat. "It's mighty late to be feeding the animals."

Tell him; tell him everything. But she couldn't. Even if Blake were captured, there were three more brothers.

"I wasn't feeding the animals. I was out here getting old feed sacks. I make them into pinafores for the girls." That was kind of true, but mostly not.

"Mrs. Courtland, we know Blake Henry was here earlier in the evening. And know you've been keeping time with him." The sheriff's gaze dropped to her belly.

Dessa stiffened with pride. She put her free left hand over the baby. "And?" She could see what he was thinking.

"I hate to ask, but is that Blake Henry's child?" His voice softened as if in regret.

"My husband died in April. This is his child." She choked out the words.

"There's a lot of talk back in town about you and Henry." Jonah prodded. "You should know not all of it's good."

She snorted. "You mean none of it's good." She laid down the pitchfork and walked into the light. The lawman's eyes narrowed.

"You been crying?" Nothing got past Beckett.

"Yes." She crossed her arms. "I'm ready to deliver. I have two young daughters. I barely have enough to feed them. I'm unable to go to town and unable to hunt for game. It's Christmas. It sure would be nice if someone would offer a hand, but no, all people can do is point a finger... and gossip. The not-good kind."

The sheriff let out a heavy sigh. "And Blake Henry? Isn't he helping?"

"He was my husband's business associate. Not mine." She sniffed back her frustration. "He sure isn't helping. Nor would I want him to."

"Let me escort you back to the house. Tomorrow morning, I'll make sure my deputy, Deke, brings you and your girls some food and finds someone to look in on you."

"Thank you, Sheriff, but ain't nobody going to want to look in on me. Truth or not, a lot of them believe the tales. As to those who don't, I was Ori Courtland's wife. He swindled most of our neighbors. Nobody's going to help me."

2

Deke packed as Jonah Beckett paced back and forth like a wild animal cornered and injured. Blake had eluded them, but talk was Blake had a woman hence the frequent trips to Angel's Landing. Jonah was sending him to watch her. Deke stuffed his clothes in with a little more force than needed.

"...And you send me a telegram as soon as you get to there. Get some food and hightail it out to the widow's. Don't let her know you're staying or why."

"I will, boss."

Jonah patted him on the shoulder. "I know this is a lot to ask Deke, but ain't no one else going to help that woman if she's on her own. And if she isn't, let me know."

Deke walked out to the covered porch at the front of the jailhouse with Jonah in his wake.

"I would go if I could." Jonah didn't need to say anymore. Jonah had to be *here*. This was his town, and he was responsible for the well-being of its citizens.

Their posse hadn't been without merit. They had information. His uncle had definitely been spending time with Odessa Courtland. It was well known that her late husband had been one of the Henry gang. Deke had heard the talk. Pretty woman, dead husband, baby on the way. Blake had been to see her several times according to the town's folk, and talk was the kid