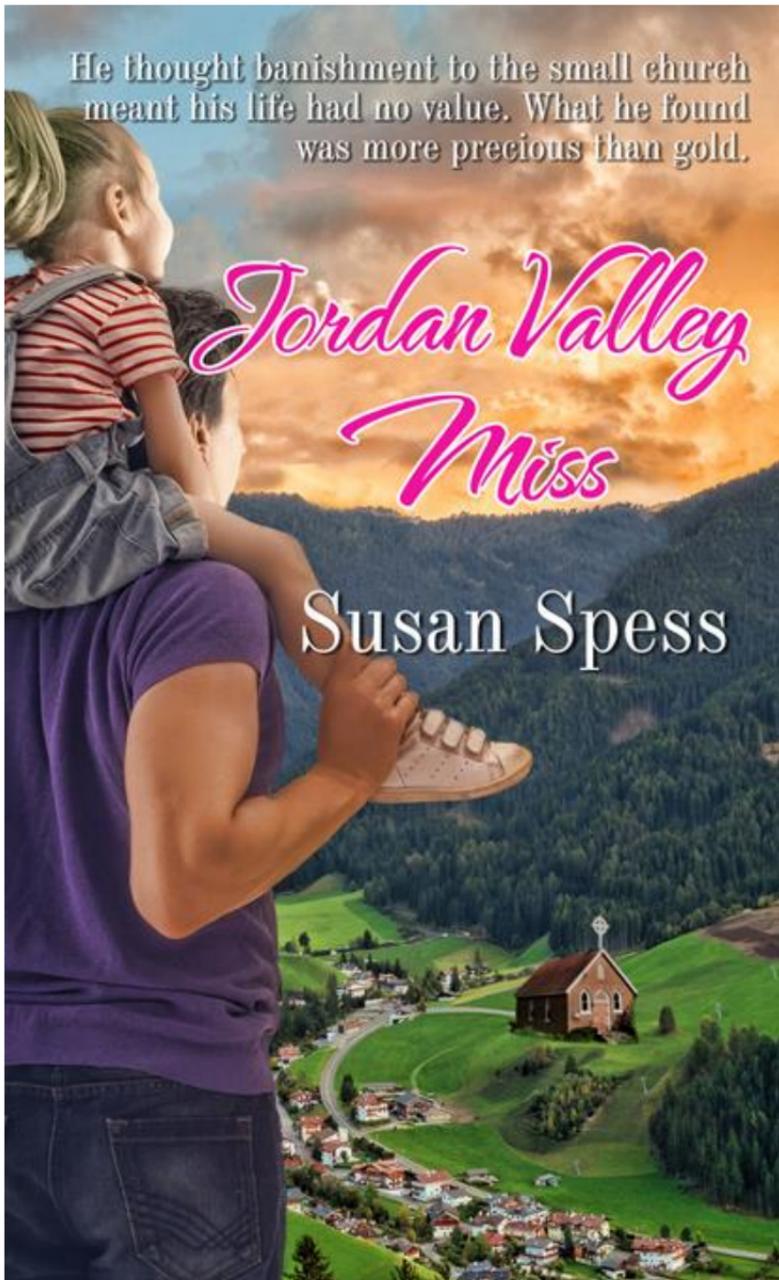


He thought banishment to the small church
meant his life had no value. What he found
was more precious than gold.

*Jordan Valley
Miss*

Susan Spess



Jordan Valley
Miss

Susan Spess

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Jordan Valley Miss
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Dedication

To all the ministers and their wives who've been a part of my Christian walk--from Roy Blizzard, Ronnie Epps, Tom Moll, through Rusty Westerfield, Bruce DeLay, and Joe Ray Reeves, and now David Logsdon, our current pastor at FC3.

Thank you! I love you all.

1

The lights blinked out, flashed on, and then went out again.

Really? A little snow and ice, and bam! No electricity? Eli Daniels clenched his jaw to muffle the exasperation before it could escape. *What am I doing in Jordan Valley, Oklahoma?* As if he didn't know the answer to that one. "You OK, Brandi baby?"

His four-year-old daughter stared at him wide-eyed from her spot near, but not *too* near, the blazing fireplace. Her little mouth turned down.

He gave her what he hoped was a confident smile. "The storm knocked out the electricity. It's OK."

She stared at him for another moment before going back to playing with her dolls in the only bright spot in the room. He probably should sit on the floor and play with her—he'd learned how to in the last six months—but he had to finish his sermon. With only four days left to get it ready, he'd already put it off for too long.

Eli made his way through the dimness to his study. Without firelight, the room was shadowed in semi-darkness. He opened the second drawer on the right side of his desk to get the LED headband he knew would be there. He hadn't been able to control other things in his life—well, people—but he could control

objects, and depend on them to be where he put them. He checked to see if the batteries still worked, put on headband, and made his way back to the living room.

Brandi didn't seem to realize he'd left the room.

He picked his way past her to his chair and opened his Bible. "What does the LORD require of you? To ac—" The intense light from the headband washed Micah's words right off the page. Eli adjusted the beam, so the brilliance was off center of the Scripture. "Act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with yo—" Frustration burned in Eli's chest. He slammed the Bible closed with a smack.

He glanced at his daughter, and his stomach clenched. He probably didn't need the child guard gate to keep her from getting near the raised hearth, but it helped his peace of mind. "Why did you take your dolls' clothes off, Brandi?" he asked. He put a little tease in his voice and hoped for a smile from her.

His four-year-old daughter blinked in the brightness of the headlamp aimed her direction. His wife had told him when they'd bought Brandi her first doll, *That's what little girls do*. His gut tightened as he remembered that happy day. It seemed like yesterday, a thousand painful years ago. And he still didn't understand naked dolls or much about females.

Brandi glanced at him, her big eyes sad, just as they'd been for the past half-year, and shrugged.

Come on, Brandi. Talk to me. "What's that doll's name?"

Another shrug.

Maybe later. Next week. Or next month. "Want to watch it snow? We might be able to go sledding tomorrow if it's not too cold." *And if I can find a hill that low, and slow, and safe enough.*

Her face brightened and, abandoning her still naked dolls, she hopped up, ran to him and jumped into his lap.

He carried her to the window that looked out onto the side yard and pushed back the curtains. The huge flakes were much bigger than the snow that had fallen when they'd lived in Dallas. Of course, Jordan Valley, Oklahoma, was several hundred miles north of Dallas, but a long way south of Kansas City, where he'd grown up.

They call this part of Oklahoma Green Country? Nothing green about it today. He pointed to the place where a bush grew in the V of the porch and steps. "See that white hump right there? That's the bush that scratched you yesterday."

She nodded, but of course, didn't answer.

When would she answer? *When she's ready*, more than one doctor had told him. *Be patient*. But patience wasn't something they taught at the seminary. At least, he hadn't learned it. What the doc hadn't said was, *It's your fault she's not talking*. But Eli knew it was his fault.

Eli started to shift Brandi so she could see the other direction, but she held tight to his neck. "What's wrong?" He followed her gaze. Snow was falling so hard and fast that looking out was like trying to see through Grandmother's heavy lace curtains. "What in the world?" Bright colors peeked through the flurry. *Children? Out in some of the worst weather in Oklahoma history?*

Frowning, he set Brandi on the floor, went to the door, and stepped onto the porch to squint through the storm. There was at least one adult, carrying a child and dragging more up the slight incline between the parsonage and the daycare next door. He dashed onto

the steps.

The cold bit hard, causing his entire body to clench. Sleet mixed with the snow, the wind driving it like needles into his exposed skin. Why hadn't he grabbed his coat like most sane people would have? Too late now. He needed to help the woman and kids before frostbite set in for them or him. Back in KC, he'd seen that happen more than once, and the result wasn't pretty.

"Shut the door, Brandi, and keep out the cold. I'll be right back!"

Eli struggled up the slight rise as the snow grew deeper. He gave himself a mental forehead smack as he slid, caught himself, and jump-stepped across his yard into the open space between their house and the daycare.

All he could hear was the faint click of falling flakes as they accumulated on the ground. He hurried faster as the woman and children worked to stay on their feet. As he reached the group, he could see that the last person was also an adult, wearing what looked like camo coveralls. Concern reverberated through him. He took the little girl the first woman had on her hip, startling both of them as he lifted the girl from her arms. "Taking a stroll?"

— "Wha—" Her gaze met his from between her knitted cap and the scarf, wrapped so high on her face it covered her nose. Her eyes were a dark hazel. Recognition flared. "No elllllec—"

"How about we talk about it inside? Come on." Eli took the next child, who looked exhausted, and put her on his shoulders, then grabbed the woman's snow-encrusted mitten. He waited until they'd all held hands again and then took off for the house. He kept his gaze

on the porch to be sure Brandi didn't come out.

The group slowed him—short people, short legs, short steps. The other kid was a little boy, whose legs weren't long enough to clear the snow. Eli stopped and dragged the boy to him. "If I put you on my back, can you hang on?"

The boy nodded hard, relief in his eyes.

Eli lifted him. The kid found a place to hold on and clung like a tick on a dog. The kids' combined weight was probably at least a hundred pounds. In his powerlifting days, one hundred pounds of dead weight had been one of his goals. But this was different. Because the weights had been a lump of steel or because now he was too numb to feel it? Or maybe it was the adrenalin caused by the fear for all of them.

After what seemed like eternity, but couldn't have been more than several long, freezing minutes, with his leg muscles burning while the rest of him felt as if he were covered with a layer of ice, he finally got them to the house. He let the girl slide from his hip, swung the boy off his back and finally lifted the girl from his shoulders.

The woman in camo herded them onto the porch where they kicked off boots.

He turned to the woman he'd towed for forty or so yards. "Can you climb those stairs?" he yelled over the wind.

She nodded and shuffled to the first step, where she tripped. Eli grabbed the back of her coat and pulled her upright. She stood for a minute as if unable to remember how her legs worked. Bending his rapidly freezing knees, he grabbed her around her waist and lifted her. Three steps later, they were on the porch. He walked to the door before setting her down.

Once in the house, the woman in camo dropped her coveralls and helped the children out of their snowsuits. "Come on, kids. Let's warm up by the fire."

The first woman had defrosted enough to shake her head. "Nice, Star. Just throw all the snowsuits and jackets on the floor."

"The kids were freezing, Glory," Camo woman snapped. "Besides, Brandi needed some company, didn't you, Brandi?"

"And *your* big sister just loves to pick up after you," the first woman answered. Bending stiffly, she gathered their things. "All right if I take these to the mudroom?" she asked through chattering teeth. Unlike the others, she didn't have a snowsuit—just a jacket.

"Sure. It's where I'm heading, too. Do you think they'll get the electricity back on soon?"

"Depends on what's wrong, but I doubt it." In the dim light, her eyes looked huge. "The kids' mom is stuck in the city. The expressway is closed, so she can't get home. The power is out, we don't have any way to keep warm next door, and since this is *our* church's parsonage," — her eyes twinkled as if she were teasing just a little— "we belong here. You might be stuck with us for several days."

Kids for Brandi to play with as she did before? Kids she might have so much fun with that she'll forget to be silent and say something?

"Well, in that case, welcome."

"Thank you."

They stopped in the door of the mudroom, where he'd just finished installing a row of hooks on one side and a row of shelves on the other.

She stared. "Been doing a little work in here, have we?"

"Yeah. Now the mudroom is actually useable." Eli thought about the hours it had taken him to install the "easy to use" shelving and was tired all over again. He tugged off his now wet shirt. When the fabric cleared his face, he saw her frown again, but this time she aimed her glare at him. Probably the tattoo encircling his biceps. Couldn't be his muscle tone. *Me, vain? Meh, could be.* "They're tribal bands," he told her as if she'd asked.

She just nodded while she took off her mittens and tried to unzip her coat.

"I got them years ago before I met God."

She fiddled ineffectively with her zipper. With only knit gloves on, she probably had numb fingers.

"Want some help?" At her nod, he reached up and took hold of the zipper with one hand and the surrounding fabric with the other. The metal teeth were stuck or, more likely, frozen. A drip of icy water caught him on the back of the neck as he forced the zipper. Thank goodness, he was still tingly numb, so it didn't matter. Finally, he worked it free. As the zipper moved down, his hand bumped into something hard, stopping him. Couldn't be her body, no one froze that hard and lived to tell about it. His mind raced. Pacemaker? Old fashioned hearing aid? Concealed weapon? "What's that?"

She frowned slightly, as if surprised by his question. "It's my camera."

"You brought a camera? Why?"

She shrugged.

For some reason, that shrug tickled him. "Because of the dangerously low temperatures, you dragged three kids through a blizzard in the hope that I'd be home, and you remembered to grab your camera?" He

tried to conceal his grin. "What if we hadn't been here?"

"I saw smoke coming from your chimney, so I knew someone had to be here, and besides"—she dug in her pocket—"I have a key."

That hit him in the gut. With a key, anyone could walk into his house anytime they wanted and do anything they wanted, and he couldn't control a thing. They could even kidnap the only person he cared about in this world. Maybe, hopefully, he'd misunderstood. "Did you say you have a key to my house?"

"I have a key to my neighbor's house *and* my church's parsonage." She lifted her chin. "And if you hadn't been here, I'd have come in and built a fire myself."

Fear bit deep at the idea of anyone having access to his house. "Who all has keys to the parsonage?"

"Only us. Since we're next door, it only makes sense—"

He snatched the key from between her fingers.

Reaching out, she gently covered his fingers with her small, frigid hands and took back the key. "You have a key to our place, too, in your cupboard. It's just in case we ever lock ourselves out. Neighbors do that for each other here."

Small towns. He'd let her keep the key. If they used it without his permission, he'd forget about asking the church board and what neighbors do for each other, and change all the locks. "Better get that scarf and hat off, or you'll get colder and wetter."

She dragged off the dripping wraps.

"I've met you before, haven't I?"

"I'm Glory Matthews. I played the piano at church

on Sunday," she answered, raising an eyebrow. "And I was on the pulpit committee that hired you."

"You're one up on most of the membership, then. You've heard two of my sermons now."

Apparently she didn't get his lame joke, because she stared at him, her mouth flat.

He changed the subject. "Is that your sister in there with the kids?"

"Yes. That's Star."

Glory and Star. He hid another smile. Names like that, he'd remember. "Glory and Star. Nice names. Do you have any other siblings?"

"A brother named Cutter." She shivered.

Which reminded Eli how wet her clothes were. "I'll be right back. Do any of the others need dry clothes?"

"No. The kids all had snowsuits and Star had coveralls, so they should be all right."

He took the stairs two at a time. In his bedroom, he found a pair of sweats that had shrunk over the years and dropped them down the staircase to her along with a towel.

Back in his room, he untied his slush-covered shoestrings, shoved his joggers from his feet and stripped off the soggy jeans. He padded to the bathroom, draped them over the tub and grabbed another towel. After a brisk rub, he put on a faded gray sweatsuit. He kept forgetting there was no electricity. Each time he entered a room, he flicked on the light switch, then immediately turned it off again.

When he went back downstairs, Brandi and the other girls were playing with her naked dolls.

Star was doing something with a circle of string and the little boy.

Glory wore his faded-out sweats, and even though they'd shrunk, they were so big, the top kept slipping off her shoulder.

She gave him a thankful grin from where she knelt near the fire. Her face, which had seemed kind of ordinary, look beautiful with that smile.

Focus on the children. Make them feel at home. But how? He'd been in a church where he had a youth minister and an army of volunteers to deal with the children. He really didn't know how to relate to any kids except Brandi. He thought back to the preacher he'd had when he was growing up. The man had been their only minister—no youth pastors, no associates—and Eli had loved him. The man who had introduced him to God and made him want to go into the ministry. Maybe Eli should give him a call so he could help him remember...

Maybe Eli could try to act like his mentor while dealing with other peoples' children. "You haven't introduced me to these fine-looking kids yet, Miss Glory and Miss Star."

"These are the Emorys," Star answered as she held the string for the boy to stick his hand through. "This is Liam tangled in my string." She leaned toward the child and laughed as if she'd taken lessons from a wicked witch.

"And the girls are Sophie and Zoey." Glory went on as if she and Star were a verbal a tag team. "Sophie's oldest, then Liam, and Zoey is the baby."

"I am not a baby," the little girl replied, arms folded, her pointy chin in the air. "I'm a big girl."

"Yes, you are. A big, three-year-old girl." Glory pulled the girl to her. "When I said you were the baby, I meant you were the last one born. The baby of your

family, like Star's the baby of our family."

"Oh." Zoey's eyes grew round with wonder. "Miss Star is the baby, too?"

"I am not a baby," Star teased.

The kids laughed, and his heart pounded. Could one of the chuckles be Brandi's?

"I'm really glad you have a fireplace here and not just a woodstove. We can cook dinner over the fire if you have wienies and we can find sticks."

His laughter surprised him, he'd not laughed in ages. "I have wienies, but I'm afraid our sticks were buried under all that ice."

She frowned and looked at her sister, who shrugged and went back to her game. He could almost see Glory's mind working as she tried to think of a way to prepare them.

"But the kitchen has a gas stove, so we won't starve," he said to save her the trouble.

Her smile was broad, and just a little crooked. "Good. I wish we had one next door."

"You really don't have a way to warm the daycare when the electricity is off?"

Glory shook her head. "No open flames at all. Our place is all electric—"

"Thanks to Mom." Star interrupted.

"*And* the electric co-op," Glory said. "Mom is very safety-conscious, so when she built the daycare on the front of the house, she made us all electric." She shook her head as she rolled her eyes. "All."

"Your parents are still living?"

"Well, our mother is." Glory shrugged, her gaze shifting slightly from his face. "We haven't seen or heard from our father since the day he left when I was nearly three."

Ouch. That sounded painful. He changed the subject slightly. "Where's your mother?"

"On a cruise"—she made quotation marks with her fingers—"with Aunt Rosemary. They have a sixth sense about the best time to be gone."

"Why did you say it like that?" He lowered his voice. "Aren't they really on a cruise?"

Glory shrugged, her shoulder slipping out of the sweatshirt again. She pulled the cloth back into place. "Oh, I don't know where they are. They might be on a cruise, but what they're doing is working on another children's book. When they get back, they'll help out in the daycare long enough to test the book on the kids."

Curiosity got to him. "And the book?"

"After they test it on the daycare kids, they'll tweak it and send it to their publisher. In a few months, we'll have a new *Sistry Mystery* on the shelf."

"*Sistry Mysteries*, by Beany and Sam?" He'd heard of the books since becoming a single parent, but Brandi was a little young for them yet. Miranda had wanted to write children's books, too. Back in the day, she'd told Brandi lots of stories. He swallowed past the thickening in his throat brought on by reminders of how he'd failed Miranda. And how his brother, Jeremiah, hadn't. Clenching his jaw, he forced the thought away. *Not now.*

"Beany and Sam is their pen name. The books are really by Ginger and Rosemary Matthews."

"I'll have to read them one of these days."

"Brandi will probably like them." She glanced over her shoulder at the kids playing near the fire. "Got enough to feed this whole gang?"

"Yeah. We—I—learned the first year out of seminary to always to have plenty of something on

hand. We can have wienies or spaghetti. Your choice." He listened to the little girls' giggles, his heart beating faster. *Please God, was one Brandi?*

When dinner was ready, they spread a plastic tablecloth on the floor in front of the fireplace and told the kids they were having a picnic.

Brandi loved it. Eli could tell because the sadness left her eyes and they sparkled, almost as if she might laugh. But of course, she didn't.

After dinner, the other children looked a little droopy. He grabbed pillows and quilts for everyone from the linen closet, which the church had stocked well. When all the kids had a place to sleep, he took down the antique popcorn popper. He threw in a handful of kernels, grasped the long handle and held it over the hot coals in the fireplace. Shaking it, he waited for the corn to pop.

Eli scrambled to think of ways to keep the kids from missing their mom or worse, start crying. His mind crept back to Miranda and her storytelling. "Do you know about the little boy who saved a nation?" he asked, trying to keep his voice light. "His name was David. His big brothers were in the army fighting another nation, called the Philistines. Now the 'Stines had a great warrior, a giant of a man, named Goliath!"

By the time the kids had finished the popcorn, and he'd finished the story, they were snuggled down on their pallets, too sleepy to be homesick. Soon, they dropped off.

He thought he heard the click of a camera as he went out to the service porch, but he didn't see a flash. He carried in a big armload of wood, stacked it where he could easily reach it, and sat on the floor between Brandi and the fireplace so he could feed the fire

through the night. Before he lay down to sleep, he glanced around the room one last time and mentally ticked off responsibilities, looking for anything he'd failed to do. Kids warm, dry, and fed. Everyone with a place to sleep. Windows locked, doors locked, everyone happy, filled, and satisfied. *What else? Am I forgetting anything?*

The room looked golden because of the flames. The furniture, floor, kids, Star in his recliner and Glory, lying on the sofa, all looked as if they had been coated with gilt. The fire glinted in Glory's eyes, giving him the strangest feeling she was watching him.

~*~

Glory came aware slowly, keeping her eyes tightly shut. If she opened them, she'd never get back to sleep. As she lay there, her insides buzzed as if she'd swallowed a blowfly. Wiggling her hips, she tried to get comfortable as she flung out her left arm. It didn't go anywhere. In her bed, she had all kinds of room for sprawling. Where was she? She finally remembered yesterday.

It hadn't just snowed. It had rained, froze, and sleeted, too. They'd lost power and still had the Emory kids with them. Janyce was stuck in the city. And their new minister had all of them in his house. He wasn't overly thrilled about it, either.

But no one in Jordan Valley had electricity or phone service. People who didn't have cell phones didn't have a way to contact anyone.

On that thought, the blowfly turned into a bumblebee. She had things to do. People to check on. She made her list of things to do in her head.

First: Feed kiddos.

No, wait. Probably ought to get the kids dressed and their borrowed nightwear back to the minister and then feed them. What was there to eat? Maybe she should wake the preacher—she remembered his dark, intense gaze, his gorgeous mouth, and the way his smile slowly bloomed a little at a time as if it were sneaking up on him. The bumblebee inside her exploded into a whole colony.

So much for being a mature thirty-three-year-old woman of the world. Well, she had lived on her own in Oklahoma City for almost a year, so she was at least a woman of the state. *Back to my list.*

One: Get the kids dressed.

Two: Breakfast.

Three: Check on Miss Charlotte and Mrs. Jackson. Two octogenarians discovered as frozen as popsicles in Jordan Valley would probably make national news, and not in a good way. Oh, and Halle. Of course, knowing Halle, she'd worked through the storm and didn't know anything had happened except that she didn't have electricity. But in her normal Halle-esque manner, she'd probably built herself a generator with junk from one of the auctions she frequented, and then worked through the storm.

Glory decided to check on her anyway. First, though, she needed to get up. She felt for the blanket covering her and remembered the quilt. Last night, Eli had handed her a hand-made quilt in shades of blue and yellow and white that was so perfectly beautiful, she'd wanted to frame it. The pattern was a Lone Star. Not an easy one to piece, yet the center of the star had been precise, and the hand quilting was tiny, even stitches. It was so soft, when she wrapped up in it,