



Inspirational  
Western Historical

JANIS JAKES

The Outcast's  
Bride

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Janis Jakes

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**The Outcasts Bride**  
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## *Dedication*

To my brother, Greg, a wild west hero in his own right  
and a man who faces life with a heart of courage and  
compassion.





# 1

Thumping feet barreled down the boardwalk. Susannah looked up in stunned silence as two long-legged, teenage boys charged toward her—both red-faced as one chased the other. Too late, she leaped sideways with a fearful gasp.

The first youth's foot caught on one of her traveling bags. He tumbled into her, slamming into her shoulder. Susannah fell forward, landing on her side. She yelped in pain as she smacked the dirt. The boy scrambled to his feet and then continued running.

The second youth stopped, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He bent over, one palm resting on his knee and the other extended toward her. "Are you all right, lady?"

Dust covered the side of her dress. This was not how she envisioned the day starting and certainly not the first impression she'd hoped to make on her future employer. Thankful for a helping hand, she pushed herself upward and straightened her bonnet. Her wrist still stung from the impact. "I'm not sure," she muttered, more annoyed than hurt.

The boy's brown hair lay unkempt, and his clothing appeared two sizes too small. Bony ankles

jutted out from underneath un-hemmed britches. He helped brush the dust off her sleeve, apologizing in the process.

“Why are you running?” she asked.

“I caught my brother pickpocketing,” the lad said with a shrug of his shoulders. “Thought I’d grab him by the collar and make him give back the money, but he took off before I could snatch him.”

“Pickpocketing?” Susannah exclaimed before steadying her tone. “What a horrible thing to do.”

“Since our ma died, we haven’t had much to eat.” His eyes brimmed with tears. “That don’t make stealing right, but I can’t be too mad at him. Not sure how many days it’s been since we had a real meal.”

Susannah’s heart winced. Perhaps she’d behaved a little too harsh. This young man was not to blame. She reached for her drawstring bag, fumbling past several coins until she pulled out the last bill she had to her name. Her heart would not allow her to turn a deaf ear to such need. “I don’t have much but—”

The young man’s face froze. His stare locked on a buckboard as it rolled to a stop next to where they stood. She watched in silence as the driver’s stare darkened—an intimidating hardness overtaking the man’s handsome features.

“Is this thief bothering you?” the driver asked.

“Thief?” Her eyes widened. “He’s no thief. He was helping—” She turned to watch the youth take off running without a single glance backward.

The driver shook his head in slow motion. “Can’t believe you fell for that trick.”

A raw mixture of irritation and disbelief nestled itself within her bosom. Who was this man, and did she even want to know? Already, she found herself wondering if she'd made a mistake coming to Eureka Springs. Within five minutes of arriving, she'd been knocked to the ground, encountered a couple of thieves, and now insults by a total stranger. Not a good start for a woman who only wanted a new beginning in life.

"I'm guessing you're Susannah Clark." Then, before she could answer, the man continued. "Freddy couldn't make it. He twisted his ankle right before he left. Billie asked if I'd pick you up instead."

The man stepped from the buggy. He was tall, taut, and fiercely attractive in a commanding sort of way. His dark eyes, high cheekbones, angular jaw, and bronze skin spoke of a native heritage. A duster, trousers, and leather boots made him look more like a Texas rancher. A black Stetson hat topped short, raven-hued hair.

She sensed he was a man of contradictions—an unsettling image of two worlds clashing upon one canvas.

"And you are?" she asked.

"My name is *Kwihmai*," he said, patting his horses and checking their bits. "Most folks call me Kwi."

Kwi? An unusual name. Definitely native.

He walked back around toward her and held out his hand to help her into the buckboard. She stared at the leather glove, not sure why she hesitated but feeling a strange tightness in the pit of her stomach.

Her gaze passed over a faint scar running from his left cheekbone to his jaw. Part of her wondered what had happened, but the smarter part warned her not to ask.

“Well...” He looked at her with open impatience. “Are you coming or staying?”

“Oh, sorry,” she said, taking his hand and stepping into the contraption. It swayed ever so slightly as she found her seat. She spread her skirt about her legs, careful to allow plenty of room for her testy driver.

He tossed her two bags in the back of the buckboard on top of sacks filled with flour, sugar, and other supplies. With a quick tug and strong arm, Kwi pulled himself up into the driver’s seat. He took the reins and held them loose in his fingers. With a click of his tongue, the horses moved at a deliberate pace about the crowded streets.

A strange mixture of people roamed about—most looking as poor as a church mouse while others appeared dressed to dine with the queen. It was different than the more established town of Little Rock. There was rawness and excitement about the place she’d not experienced before—as if seeing a town birthed right before her eyes.

As they left the stagecoach station, they passed a general store, fabric shop, cigar store, cobbler, blacksmith, livery stable, and postal office. Almost every building looked new and had patrons strolling in and out or loungers waiting outside to small talk the day away.

Several hotels and boarding houses appeared to erupt from the ground with craftsmen scurrying about carrying hammers, saws, and lumber. Bath houses lined multiple corners. She wondered how many more buildings they'd be able to fit inside the expanding town before it burst through its boundaries.

"Why so many bath houses?" she asked. "I've never seen people lined up out the door just to take a bath."

Kwi slowed the buckboard to allow a group of pedestrians to cross the street. "You mean you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"I figured that was why you came." When she only stared, he added, "People think the waters in Eureka Springs are magical. They think if they bathe in them, whatever ails them will vanish."

"Is it true?" she asked, wide-eyed with wonder.

He cut a quick glance in her direction before turning his full attention back to the busy streets. "There is only One who heals." He drew the horses to a stop in front of the bank. "I've got to make a deposit for the ranch. I'll be back in a minute or two."

Her thoughts lingered on his words: *Only One who heals.*

The phrase stirred her spirit. Seemed as if she'd heard similar words once before. A distant memory, but it was there, lingering in the back of her mind until he'd brought the recollection to the forefront. But the healing had not come, and the pain of such loss remained to this day.

Kwi reappeared and swept himself back into the seat. "All done."

Susannah nodded and then looked back over her shoulder. She scanned the crowded streets once more. It seemed as if she'd chosen the right town. It would be easy to get lost in such orchestrated chaos. It would be easy to disappear—easy to hide. She'd found her safe place. Finally.

## 2

The woman smelled nice—a little like raspberry jam. She was pretty, too. Hair the color of dark, rich earth after a deep rain and eyes the golden-brown hue of a newborn fawn.

Hopefully, a pretty face wouldn't bring trouble to a boy's ranch. The young men needed to keep their mind on work—not on impressing a female.

He looked her way, and she smiled again, but the friendly gesture couldn't hide the nervousness as it flitted across her lips. She glanced back over her shoulder as if wishing she could stay. Probably half-afraid because he was a native. Even his clothes couldn't hide that fact. The scar on his face didn't help matters. In time, she'd see she was wrong about him.

A faint breeze sifted about their shoulders before dropping downward to stir the hem of her skirt. He pushed his hat down harder upon his head to make sure it stayed put.

Susannah shivered. A blue cotton day dress and a light-weight shawl would not be enough for the winds whipping about the Ozark Mountains—especially as winter moved in.

He drew the buggy to a stop, taking off his duster.

“Winters are not the same here as they are in Little Rock.” Without asking her permission, he draped his heavy duster across her shoulders. “Looks as though you came unprepared. This’ll help until we get you to the ranch.”

Her gaze lowered. “I came with what I owned.”

He hadn’t meant to embarrass her. “Billie probably has clothes you can wear for now.”

It was a good fifteen minutes down the road before either spoke again. The town had disappeared, and the trees grew dense on either side of the rutted path. Scarlet, gold, and fiery orange leaves softened the ground they traveled and decorated the trees in magnificent splendor.

While he typically enjoyed the silence, today it felt obtrusive—as though an uninvited friend insisted upon tagging along.

Susannah’s neck craned upward toward the colorful canopy. “It is so beautiful here,” she said, almost as if breathing the words rather than speaking. “I’ve never seen anything like this...”

“I thought the same thing the first time I laid eyes on the land,” he said, relieved for the break in silence.

“So, you work on the ranch, too?” she asked, glancing back over her shoulder before looking him in the eye.

“I’m a visitor.” He repositioned himself to stretch his legs. “Billie Lancaster runs the boys’ home. She’s my sister-in-law. My brother, Luke Lancaster, oversees the ranching part of the business.”

“I see...” She appeared more interested in what

lay behind them than what lay ahead.

"Are you all right?" he asked, not bothering to hide the defensiveness from his tone. "You keep looking back. Billie wouldn't have sent me to get you if she didn't trust me."

Pink slapped her cheeks. "No, it's not that. I'm sorry." She swished her hand through the air as if erasing his words. "It's not you. Truly. It's—"

"Then, what?"

Entwined fingers tightened in her lap. "Guess I'm still rattled after what happened with those young men."

"Mickey and Marty Denver," he said. "I've heard they target at least one new person a day. Mikey knocks 'em down and grabs their bag. If he misses for any reason, Marty is right behind him, giving the target a sob story about starving and their dead mother. Bleeding hearts fall for it every time."

"Maybe they're not bleeding hearts." Her words held a clipped tone they hadn't had before. "Maybe they're honest people who expect others to be the same."

He grinned. "Sounds as if I got to you in the nick of time."

She did not return his humor. "If they're such a nuisance, why doesn't the law do something about them?"

He shrugged. "Too busy dealing with saloon fights, gun slingers, and horse-thieving to worry about troublesome youths."

"Troublesome youths grow up to be lawless men."

Couldn't argue with the woman's logic. "From what I've heard, the sheriff is overworked. He needs another deputy, or two, just to keep order. As soon as word spread about the healing springs, desperate people piled into town. With more people comes more trouble—such as Mickey and Marty."

A bald eagle lifted its wings and swept about the gray sky with a powerful grace that held their rapt attention.

For a moment, Kwi could think of nothing else. In the eagle's wings, he saw freedom, and a familiar longing stirred within his heart. He yearned to sleep under the stars while listening to an owl hoot and coyotes call from distant hills. As much as he found beauty in his temporary Arkansas home, he longed to return to Texas—where sunsets seared the sky in sweeping flames, mustangs raced wild across the open plains, and buffalo hooves sounded like thunder upon the wide plateaus.

"Isn't that what the ranch does?" Susannah asked. "Don't they take wayward or orphaned boys and turn them into responsible men?"

Her question pulled his thoughts back to the moment. "When they can," Kwi said. "Some prefer to make their living lying and thieving. The ranch is not a prison, but a place of refuge for the willing."

It was several miles down the road before Kwi spoke again. "Why'd you take a job so far from home? Couldn't find a job cooking in Little Rock?"

"I wanted to live somewhere different," she said. "I've lived in Little Rock almost my entire life. Thought

I'd give Eureka Springs a try."

His stare focused on the path, but he could sense a shift in her demeanor—a wall that came out of nowhere. Her answer was a partial truth but he didn't want to pry too hard. He had enough secrets of his own without trying to uncover the secrets of others. "Billie said you used to cook at an orphanage?"

"I cooked and lived there, too," Susannah said. The guard fell from her features as fast as it had appeared. "It was the same orphanage where I spent most of my life. I have fond memories of my life there. Good people ran the place at one time."

"At one time?"

Pink lips tightened but still she spoke. "Yes, at one time."

Had he found the tender spot? Unspoken sorrow appeared trapped within the woman's soul. His gaze dropped to her hand. No sign of a ring or a hint there'd ever been one. In that instant, he knew he was seeing a small part of Susannah Clark—a shadow of the woman hidden within. A somber warning sounded within his mind—reminding him that a wise man would keep his curiosity in check. Another voice stirred within him, speaking louder than his logic: *A man's heart devises his way but the Lord directs his steps*. Kwi frowned. His jaw tightened.

That could not be God. He'd already talked to Him about his plans and not heard a contrary word. Everything was settled. He'd not allow his own mind, the enemy of his soul, or a woman he'd met an hour ago, to derail what he still had to do.

### 3

“This will be your cabin.” Billie Lancaster’s calm demeanor and kindness settled Susannah’s tumultuous soul. “The boys finished building it last week. I was worried they wouldn’t have it done in time, but they surprised me once again.”

Susannah walked into the center of the room, turning about in a circle. Her heart danced as she thought of making it her own. She closed her eyes and then opened them again to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. “It is lovely.”

She’d quickly learned that Billie and her husband, Luke, owned the entire Schumann Ranch Boy’s Home—an inheritance from her deceased aunt and uncle. Together they oversaw thousands of acres, pastures of livestock, a garden larger than any she’d ever seen, and more than twenty-five orphaned boys.

Billie was older, but not by much—a small-framed, pretty woman with strawberry-blonde hair, scant freckles across the bridge of her nose, and intelligent-looking eyes. There was a silent strength about her. Already, Susannah felt drawn to her and hoped they’d become friends over time.

“Glad you like it,” she said. “I know it’s small,

but—”

Burlap curtains hung over the single window beside the front door. A small cook stove nestled in the corner with a rocking chair and a rug nearby. A patchwork quilt covered the half bed and an opened wardrobe stood in another corner. That's where she'd keep her few belongings. It was simple and more than she'd dared to hope. "It's perfect," Susannah said.

"This evening you'll eat with us in the dining room." Billie's tone turned business-like. "From then on, your job will be to prepare daily meals, ensure everything is served in a timely manner, and keep the kitchen and dining areas clean. As I mentioned in my letter, you'll feed all our boys plus several of my family members. You'll also gather food supplies for the meal from the property and from the general store in town. I know it's a big job—"

"I've done it before," Susannah said with confidence. She didn't want to sound too braggy, but she'd fed twice that many children at the orphanage in Little Rock. "I can't sew a straight stitch if my life depends upon it, but put me in a kitchen, and I'm at home."

"Glad to hear it." Billie smiled.

Susannah could almost see the relief rolling off her shoulders.

"Thanksgiving isn't far away, and then Christmas will follow," Billie continued. "Since the boys don't have family, we try to make those days special for them."

Susannah listened with focused intent, knowing

she wasn't expected to comment. As much as she sensed Billie's kindness and strength, she also sensed her passion for the ranch and its mission. Instinctively she knew her employer would be a no-nonsense type who expected results, not excuses, and she was fine with that.

"I'm sure you'll do well here." Billie leaned against the wall, arms crossed about her ribs. "Now that we've got that settled..." Blue eyes probed into brown. "Want to tell me your story?"

Susannah blinked. "My story?"

"We all have a story," Billie said with a shrug. "Why'd you want to come here? I know it was a long journey for you. It couldn't have been easy leaving your home."

*Easier than you know.*

"I needed a job," Susannah said, knowing her words were partial truth. "A friend of mine mentioned your advertisement, and, well, here I am."

Billie's gaze lowered for several seconds before she looked back up with a knowing stare. "I think you'll find the ranch is good for your heart. It's as if the Lord Himself meets you on this hilltop. He certainly touched my heart here. This ranch has changed my life, and all for the better. I pray it'll do the same for you."

Yearning burned within Susannah's being. Oh, how she needed such hope! Heat came to her eyes along with barely contained tears. There was so much she wanted to blurt out, and part of her thought Billie would be the perfect listener. But if life had taught her anything, it had trained her to get to know people

before trusting them with the secrets of her soul. She pulled her emotions back into place. "I'm thankful I'm here." Her gaze moved about the cabin once more. "More than you know."

"God has goodness in store for you, Susannah. I'm sure of it." Billie reached out, taking her hand. "Come and let me introduce you to my husband and our ranch foreman, Freddy."

~\*~

The dining hall overflowed with young men of all shapes, sizes, and colors curious to get a peek at the newest arrival. The youngest looked around seven- or eight-years-old with most in their late teens.

Billie introduced her to each young man, pretending she didn't notice their tied-tongues and lingering stares, and then she led Susannah toward a table several feet away from where they assembled.

Voices and laughter continued to bounce about the walls—the sound an endless drone broken by a second or two of silence before starting all over again. Chairs scraped against wooden floors and boots scuttled about.

It was noisy, but oh, so pleasant. An undercurrent of joy filled the air, a feeling Susannah could not explain but knew existed as surely as her own skin. In some ways, she'd joined a large family, and the thought warmed her to the core.

A tall, lanky young man with a wrapped ankle hobbled forward. He bobbed his head at Billie and