

Where can a girl go to escape the worst life in
the world and find . . . everything?

*Jordan Valley
Rescue*

Susan
Spess



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Dedication

To my husband, Gary Shay. I'll love you for eternity,
and miss you every day I'm alive.

1

Drenched in sweat and covered in a layer of chaff, Cutter Matthews slammed the hay hooks into the square bale, pulled it off the trailer, took three steps, and bucked the hay onto the nearest stack. If he got another cutting at the end of the summer, there should be enough hay for the entire winter. Maybe. He wasn't sure how much the flock of sheep he'd adopted would eat. Maybe he could search on the Internet when he got back to town.

He just hoped the critters would pay for themselves.

Spying a corner of the barn that needed to be filled, he pulled off a bale and lift-walked the hay over.

"Please, don't." The voice was soft, almost wistful.

Startled, he froze, bale against his knee. Irritation straightened his spine as he glanced around. He'd warned all the kids not to play in the barn. Between the danger of his unsteady stacks tumbling on them and the dry alfalfa catching fire, it was anything but a safe playground—even though it looked as though it could be fun. He hadn't heard of anyone missing a child, but he'd been hauling hay for a while.

"Who's there?" He took another long look around

the dusty dimness. "Answer me! Who's there?" Nothing. Was he imagining things? Maybe he needed something to drink. Dehydration caused hallucinations sometimes, didn't it? He started once more to place the bale.

"Please?"

Setting down the bale, he stepped into the narrow space. There, wedged back into a corner, was a girl with long, tousled hair, huge brown eyes, and freckles. But when he focused on her eyes, he saw anything but youth. There was experience, the wrong kind, and grief, and something else that made her look as if inside she was ancient. "Who are you?"

"Gypsy. We met in New Orleans last year. Remember?"

His heart dropped to his stomach as his mind flashed back to the time he'd gone to New Orleans on vacation and stayed much longer than he'd intended, when he'd discovered a dark world too horrible to believe and too alarming to ignore. His understanding of life had been changed so radically that if he hadn't been able to give it to God, he never would have slept another wink. To this day, his family claimed he'd run away from home.

They were safer believing that.

But if Gypsy had found him, how long would it be before the others tracked her here?

Others. He nearly snorted at the euphemism. Human traffickers. Murderers of young souls. "How did you find me?"

"You mentioned your town." She shrugged. "I just

had to ask a couple of questions when I got to town.”

He didn't remember mentioning Jordan Valley, but he might have. He hadn't had a reason not to. Not then, anyway. And people in Jordan Valley were always happy to help out. "I'm not on any of the escape routes we set up. Why did you come here?"

She ducked her head as she tugged at her shirt, which was intended to make her look younger than she was. With her small stature and wide-eyed look, it was easy to mistake her for a child. But he'd learned she was older in years and, unhappily, much older in experience. "I couldn't stay any longer. Really, I couldn't, Cutter. I helped some girls escape and some others avoid getting lured in and forced into the life, but they were on to me. Every time I talked to one of the psychos, every time they looked at me, I just knew they were thinking, 'She's the one. It's Gypsy who's hurting our business. Cutting into our profits.'"

This girl was dangerous to herself and anyone who helped her. If the psychos who'd "owned" her truly were on to her, they wouldn't hesitate to tear apart the entire southwest United States to find her.

Should he call the sheriff? He thought about the man in that office. He hadn't been in the job very long, and he was from another part of the county, so Cutter wasn't very well acquainted with him. Could they depend on him? "How long ago did you get away?"

"I've been on the road over two weeks."

His insides felt heavy just thinking about that ugly business, just as they had when he was in New Orleans. Her owners had to know she was gone by

now. Had to put the word out, have people looking for her. And Jordan Valley, the town he loved with his entire being, was in grave danger.

"I walked a whole lot, and I didn't hitch many rides, so I didn't have to talk much. I did slip into the back of trucks when they looked as though they were heading the right way."

"Did you go to safe houses on any of the underground railroad escape routes I set up?"

"No. I knew if I hadn't really managed to escape unnoticed, if they were just waiting, messing with me like a cat I saw messing with a rat once before he ate it, everyone involved would be dead. I couldn't do that."

Maybe she'd been smart. Maybe she had escaped without being noticed. But that didn't mean they couldn't find her.

But first things first. He put the hay bale back on the truck. "Are you hungry?"

She closed her eyes a moment. "I'm starving."

He went to the cab and got her the chicken salad sandwich and the bag of veggies Halle had fixed for him and watched as Gypsy curled her legs under her, right there on the barn floor.

"Sorry, I don't have chips. They're trying to healthy me up, so all I've got are carrot and celery sticks."

"They're perfect," she said around a mouth full of chicken. He handed her the fruit jar of ice water he carried with him. She gulped down about half of it.

"You know, you don't have to stay back in there between the bales. We could go outside in the sunshine

and sit in my pickup. Or sit in the grass near the sheep.”

She shook her head. “Your sheep are awfully cute, though.”

“They’re stupid. I had no idea when I got them, but they really aren’t bright at all.” He glanced through the doors to see the woolly critters all huddled in one corner of the corral. “When the Bible refers to us as sheep, it’s anything but a compliment.”

She did something with her mouth, tried to smile maybe? Her lips trembled until she bit the lower one. Finally, she nodded. She set what was left of the sandwich down and sighed, looking up at him. “I have to tell you something else.”

From her look, it wasn’t good news. His stomach tensed even more. “All right.”

“Cutter, the real reason I ran...” She took a long, slow breath. “is—”

“Hey, Cutter! Where are you, guy?” Halle Kennedy called from the front of the barn, sending his heart into the Fancy Dance it did whenever she was around.

Gypsy jumped as if she’d been shot and scuttled back crab-like until she’d jammed herself between the hay bales and the barn wall.

“It’s OK,” Cutter whispered as he stood. He raised his voice. “Over here, Halle. Just taking a little break.”

She found her way in, squeezed past the nearly empty trailer, and grinned a beautiful smile. She had her blonde hair pulled back in a braid with a few curls hanging loose around her face, and there was a little

dirt on her perfect, slightly upturned nose, but she was still the prettiest girl he'd ever seen in his life. Bar none. Funny, though, she'd never figured out just how gorgeous she was, which made her that much prettier in his eyes. "I brought you something. Figured you'd need a little extra since you're hauling by yourself."

She handed him a plastic container with a large square of pineapple upside down cake in it. Opening the lid, he closed his eyes and took a long sniff. "Oh, man. My favorite."

"You said that last week when you had my double dutch chocolate, and the week before when you had three pieces of fresh apple cake," she teased, warming him all over. "Which is it? Do you know?"

She tossed her head back as she laughed—pretty and happy and carefree—while Gypsy hid in a corner, her face toward the ground, looking as though she bore the weight of every care in the world on her shoulders.

He took a long breath and tried to remember how to sound normal. "Cake is my favorite, Halle. Just about any flavor, shape, or color." *Especially when you bake it.*

"Kind of the way you like girls? Any flavor, shape, or color?" Halle added her usual jibe. She couldn't know he'd dated so many girls because the only one he truly wanted was the one he couldn't have. Because she would never have him. She laughed again and as she did, a quiet sneeze came from back in the hay. He stiffened, afraid Halle had heard it, too. *This isn't the time to develop hay fever, Gypsy.*

He turned Halle back toward the door, laughing with her, hoping she'd missed the sneeze and didn't recognize how phony his laughter was. And for the first time in his life, he wished Halle would go away.

But she didn't. He could tell by the way her brown eyes flashed to the opening that she'd heard something. Maybe he could convince her she hadn't.

"Get a new cat, Cutter?"

He just hoped the girl wouldn't try to meow. "No, no. Why do you ask?"

"Because I just heard someone sneeze."

~*~

Halle slipped between the stacks into the shadowy recess. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she saw a girl who'd wedged herself between the hay and the barn wall. "Hello. I'm Halle." She put on her practiced be-nice-to-the-shy-kid-in-Sunday-school smile and then blinked hard, trying to clear her vision. Maybe her eyes hadn't adjusted to the dim light, because tucked back in that corner with a layer of dirt on her face, sat the prettiest girl—no, the prettiest woman—she'd ever seen. The woman wasn't very tall; she was very slender with small breasts. Her dark hair hung down her back, nearly to her waist. Her age was hard to guess—maybe late teens to early twenties—because huge, luminous eyes, a pert nose, and cupid's bow mouth made her look younger than she really was.

As Halle smiled, a bolt of jealousy flashed through her—the same bolt that singed her every time Cutter

had brought home a new girl when he was in college. It was a wonder her hair wasn't crispy from the possessive flame she'd experienced with all the girls he'd dated over the years. But that feeling was quickly displaced. What was it?

The emotion growing inside her was familiar and very uncomfortable. Oh, yeah. She'd felt it when she was eight years old, just before Mom told her she and Dad were separating. Her stomach hurt, the world settled on her shoulders, and it was impossible to draw a free breath. Somehow, she'd known things were changing, and her life would never be the same again.

And she'd been right. Dad's bags had already been packed, and he'd left right after. She'd seen him only a few time after that. And then things had been completely different for her and her mother. And Mom had never looked truly happy since.

Now, her stomach hurt and just like before, the world was trying to land on her shoulders and the air was almost as heavy. Gazing at the young woman made her want to sit down and cry. *What's making me so sad?*

Halle reinforced her smile. Stiffening her back, she drew a breath, fortified herself, and prepared to put on a good act. At least she was good at pretending because she had so much experience. She'd made believe she didn't love Cutter for a long time, and he'd never figured her out. She held out her hand. "Why don't you come out of there? It can't be comfortable."

The girl bit her lip, lowered her gaze, and tucked her chin against her chest.

Halle glanced back at Cutter, who stared at her, surprise brightening his face. "Do you know who she is?"

Closing his mouth, he gazed at the girl for a long moment as he furrowed his brow. "Her name's Gypsy."

"Gypsy...? She waited, but when he didn't go on, she asked, "What's her last name?"

He lowered his voice as if afraid the sheep might hear. "I don't think she has one."

How do you not have a last name? "So, what's she doing in your barn?"

Without meeting her gaze, he shifted uncomfortably. "I, uh, met her in New Orleans."

"You mean that time you were supposed to be gone for a week and you stayed a whole lot longer and didn't call or write or e-mail?" she asked in her best imitation of his mother. "I remember."

He'd been gone for so long, she'd worried that he might have met someone smarter, prettier, or funnier than her and had fallen in love. Maybe even eloped.

And she realized now, he really might have. Her throat nearly closed with the thought. She didn't know because he didn't talk about it. Hadn't told anybody anything much about that trip except that he'd decided to drop in on a few old friends.

He'd never even told his sisters, her best friends who shared everything with her, or his mother, who shared everything with everyone. Who he'd visited and where he'd gone was still a deep, dark secret. The thing she knew about him from the time they'd been

kids was that he could keep a secret.

He took a long breath. Trying to decide what to tell her? Finally, he blew the air out in a rush. He leaned on one elbow against a stack of hay, tipped his head to one side, and adjusted his gaze, but he wasn't looking straight at her. "I met her there."

"You said that." Halle waited, but he didn't volunteer more. "And she's returning the visit?"

"No." The word was little more than a whisper. The sadness she felt was on his face now. Without warning, he pressed through the opening, past Halle, and took the girl by the wrist. "Come out of there. No one will hurt you. I promise."

Gypsy yelped, alarm cresting her face as, for a moment, she resisted before going limp as wet laundry—her shoulders curved, and her hips tucked—the human equivalent of an abused dog. It seemed as if he could have positioned her any way he wanted—standing on one foot, on her head or even with both hands in the air—and she'd have complied. Outwardly, anyway.

Tears clouded Halle's vision. What had happened to this poor girl? Where was her family? Her friends?

When he released Gypsy, whose head wasn't as high as his shoulder, she sank to the floor, pulled her knees to her chest, wrapped both arms around them and hid her face—the human imitation of an armadillo taking cover.

Heart aching, Halle dropped to the hay covered floor and put her arm around the girl's shoulders. Funny, there was no change in her demeanor. The girl

didn't tense or relax, she didn't lean in or pull away. It was as if she were almost disconnected, poor thing. What had happened to her?

Halle cleared her throat, trying to disguise the pity she was feeling. "It's OK. You're safe here, isn't she, Cutter?" One thing she knew was that Cutter always took up for the underdog. Even if the dog had bitten him in the past, he couldn't stand to see it mistreated.

Slowly, Gypsy raised her head and looked at her. Halle expected crying, but she'd misjudged the girl. There wasn't a tear on her face—a total lack of trust, a ton of fear in her expression, and a lot of wariness in her gaze that constantly darted around the room, but her cheeks weren't wet. Her eyelashes weren't clumpy, and her nose hadn't taken on that florescent red hue like Halle's did any time even one tear escaped.

"Safe?" Gypsy sounded much more mature than she looked. With a smile, she shook her head in answer to her own question. "There's no such thing."

"No, really, you're safe here in Jordan Valley. Cutter's whole family lives here—his sisters, his mom, even his aunt. His family's been here since before statehood. We've never had anything really bad happen." Why didn't Cutter help her tell Gypsy what a great place Jordan Valley was? How nice the people were?

Cutter sat on Gypsy's other side, quirked one eyebrow, and gave his shoulders a miniscule lift.

She'd known him a long time—forever, maybe—and she'd loved him since he'd rescued her from the schoolyard be-mean-to-the-new-girl bully right after

her mom moved her into their tiny house there in town. She'd tried ever since to keep her feelings for him a secret, even though her best friends suspected it.

But she loved her town, too. And to be honest, her love for her town was kind of mixed up with her love for him. He was straightforward, helpful, kind, and good, so much like Jordan Valley, she often wondered if he'd learned that trait from it or if their town reflected him. That might have been one of the reasons she was so troubled—a bit depressed, really—when he'd taken that extended vacation.

What if he decided he liked someplace better than Jordan Valley? If he decided to move, packed up his things and left her behind, how would she ever survive?

From all indication, though, he thought of her just like one of his sisters. Grief returned suddenly, nearly swamping her. Maybe she should think about something else. "So how did you get here, Gypsy? Did you fly or drive from New Orleans?"

The girl stretched out one leg in front of her. "I walked probably half the way, but some of the time, I got a ride."

"Really? Half the way?" Why?

When the girl nodded, Halle's heart ached for her. She must have been running from something. Violent parents? Abusive husband? And why had she come all that way to find Cutter? What was he to her? Or she to him? She swallowed back the questions. "You must be exhausted. Are you OK?"

Gypsy slid the other leg out to join the first and

crossed them at the ankle. "I really need a shower and plenty of soap. I lost the bag that I carried my stuff in, and I really stink."

"Where will she stay while she's here, Cutter?" She'd make him answer if it gave the governor's goat a hernia. "She could probably stay with Mrs. J and Miss Charlotte."

"No!" The speed of his answer made her think he didn't even want their names mentioned around Gypsy. "I've, uh, got it handled."

"Really? So, where's she staying? With you?"

The idea made her heart pang. They used to be best buddies, and he told her most everything. Or she'd thought he did, but not so much lately. He hadn't told her about the New Orleans trip or what he'd been up to while he was gone.

Did he have an affair with Gypsy while in Louisiana? She waited, but he just shifted his gaze and didn't answer. Jealousy hit deep, sending an angry burn through her. She should be used to other girls and Cutter, but her heart just wasn't able to get around it.

A ding from her phone drew her attention. She glanced at the message from Darian, her assistant. *Hey, I've got to get going. Are you coming back soon, or should I lock up?*

She texted back, *Don't go. I'll be there in a few.*

When she looked up, Cutter and Gypsy were both watching her. It didn't look as if he would tell her anything else. "Is there anything I can do, Gypsy? Cutter? I'll help in any way I can."

Gypsy didn't answer, but Cutter shook his head. "I can't think of anything right now. I'll call you if I do. Wait, wasn't I supposed to help you with something tonight?"

"Yes. It won't take very long. Gypsy can come, too, if she wants."

"OK." He combed his fingers through his hair. "Eight o'clock?"

"We decided on six thirty, but if eight is better f—"

"No. Six thirty is fine. Better, in fact." He closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them to look at her, a frown puckering his forehead. "I'll see you then."

Watching the two of them together, she really didn't want to leave. Cutter looked a little confused, but she could tell by the stubborn set of his mouth, he wouldn't tell her what was going on. At least not yet. With his sisters' help, though, they might pry more out of him.

And Gypsy looked as if she'd rather crawl back into the barn corner than to sit there.

As Cutter's sisters often told her, she might be able to fix any piece of furniture, but she couldn't fix people. At least not all the time. With lead weights slowing her movements, Halle stood, brushed off the hay, and with a wave, headed for her pickup.

~*~

When Halle got back to the shop, Darian, a few inches taller than her with blond hair and an

understated way of dressing, was waiting for her. "Well, that took you long enough."

"I know, and I'm sorry. But you can go now. I'll close up."

"Not yet." He crossed the store to stand near her, his dark eyes practically drilling a hole in her. He lifted one eyebrow. "I want to hear everything."

No way. For some reason, Cutter doesn't want the fact that the girl showed up here to be widely known, so I'll keep my mouth shut. "He didn't have much to say. Hauling hay's a lot of work."

"I thought you looked a little grubby." He shook his head with mock disapproval. "Alone with Cutter Matthews in a barn filled with all that soft, welcoming hay, and all you could do is help him with grunt work? I don't get it."

"Ever been in a barn?"

He started rearranging a display of corn husk dolls so he wouldn't have to look at her while he answered. "Can't say I have."

"Well, whoever made up the expression *roll in the hay* apparently hadn't either. Hay, at least in Oklahoma, isn't soft or welcoming. It's full of sticks, stickers, spiders, ticks, and anything else that grows or crawls in the field being baled."

"That doesn't sound like much fun."

"Nope. Anyway, I told you I'm saving it." Should being a virgin at the advanced age of twenty-nine embarrass her? Just because her mother taught her anyone who wasn't married by the time they were twenty had failed as a woman didn't mean *she'd* failed.