

Virtues
AND **VICES**
OF THE
OLD WEST
BOOK 3



A NOVEL

MAGGIE BRENDAN


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Maggie Brendan, *Trusting Grace*
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For those who suffer with CIDP—may you always
keep the faith and look forward to your new,
imperishable body that awaits you in heaven.





Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous:
love does not brag and is not arrogant.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4 NASB



1

Gallatin Valley
Montana Territory
Spring 1866

Grace Bidwell pushed her way through the busy mercantile store in the bustling town of Bozeman, certain that it would be the most beneficial place to post a HIRED HELP sign for everyone to see. She had no choice in the matter—if Bidwell Farms was to remain in operation, then she must have help. Otherwise they'd lose the small potato farm. On her way to find Eli, the store owner, several men moved aside to allow her room, grinning at her like young schoolboys. She felt her face burn with their obvious stares and the tipping of their hats, mindful that other ladies in the store also turned to look at her. But she marched past, giving a brief nod to the ladies, most of whom she didn't really know. Grace hadn't much time to entertain or be involved with the ladies' social circle, or anything else for that matter, since her father had fallen ill.

The mercantile was filled with everything anyone could need, from farm implements and pots and pans to ready-to-

wear clothing, fabric, and household staples. Grace savored the mingling smells of the various items—neatly stacked or in barrels—and the scent of burning wood from the stove.

On her way to the counter, she couldn't help but notice a band of three grubby children standing near the glass case and peering at the delectable candy displayed inside. They looked to be ranging in age from four to eleven, if she had to guess, but since she had no children of her own—a huge void that pained her sorely—she wasn't the best judge of ages. The smallest one, a petite girl, wore a faded, dirty plaid dress, her hair a mat of tangled, golden curls.

Grace held her reticule tightly, along with the notice she'd written, and watched the children. The middle child, a slightly older girl, didn't look much better. Her worn dress barely covered her calves and her shoes revealed cracked leather and dried mud around the edges. The boy—maybe the girls' older brother—yanked on their arms in frustration while tucking a package beneath his thin arm. “Come on! We've got to leave now.” His dark hair covered most of his eyes and was badly in need of a haircut, and his pants, supported by suspenders, were extremely short. He wore no socks with his brogans.

“Please, can't we get at least one peppermint stick to share?” the littlest one whined.

The older girl shrugged her thin shoulders. “Sarah, you already know that we don't have any money left, so not unless you intend to stay and sweep the floor for the owner of this establishment,” she said wryly, pulling her arm from the boy's grip.

“Maybe next time, Sarah, I promise—but not today.” The boy clamped his jaw tight, dropping Sarah's arm.

“You have your package now, so you kids run along,” the clerk said, and shooed them in the direction of the door, nearly pushing Grace to the side and sending her rocking in her sturdy pumps.

Grace quickly steadied herself and felt compelled to step in. “Please, let me buy the children each a stick of peppermint.” The three stood motionless, staring at her with large, disbelieving eyes.

The clerk paused, turning toward her. “Mrs. Bidwell, I . . . uh, didn’t see you there. I’m sorry—”

His weak apology was completely dismissed by Grace, who reached into her reticule and handed him a few coins. Turning, she smiled at the children.

“We can’t let you do that,” the young lad protested through narrowed eyes. From his shoulder bones poking up through his shirt, it looked as though he could stand to gain some weight.

“Why not?” the youngest one asked innocently.

He looked over at her. “Because, we don’t take money from strangers.”

“Well then.” Grace drew in a quick breath. “My name is Grace Bidwell, so now we’re not strangers. It’s only a small gift for you to enjoy this sparkling, spring day. Tell your mama I meant no harm.”

“We ain’t got no mama,” he huffed, casting his expressionless eyes away from Grace.

“I’m sorry.” Grace nearly took it upon herself to correct the lad’s grammar but thought better of it.

The clerk returned, handing them each a stick of candy. With a nod to Grace, he went back to his work.

Grace frowned, noticing the older girl watching her closely.

She was about to ask them their names when the lad turned to gather the girls and all three of them clomped down the steps in an obvious hurry, disappearing from Grace's view.

Grace stared after them, thinking.

Eli strode over, tapping her on the shoulder. "Is there anything wrong, Grace?"

Grace turned around and looked into Eli's kindly, older face. "Oh, no. Not at all. I was wondering about those children just now. I don't believe I've seen them around."

"Seems like I've seen the boy before, but then we have such an influx of folks in Bozeman, a man my age can barely keep up." He chuckled.

Grace waved a gloved hand. "Oh fiddlesticks! You're not old and still have plenty of vigor. I wish my father did." Tears misted her vision, but she took a shaky breath and tried to put the situation out of her mind.

"I'm really sorry about your father," Eli said, his face softening. "What can I help you with today? Did you get your field ready for planting?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid I haven't, and that's exactly why I'm here." She handed him the piece of paper. "I've written a notice to hire a helper with the farm. It's just becoming too much for me." Grace thought about how her back ached from helping her father in and out of bed, and the thought of bending in the field all day made her wince. "Do you know of someone needing work, or could I post this on your bulletin board? I'd be glad to pay you a fee."

Eli slapped his thigh. "I don't charge a thing for my board. I consider it a service to the community until we get a newspaper going." He smiled, his hands on his hips. "I can't think of a soul at the moment, but let's go nail it up right now

and see what happens. There's always drifters and the like passing through."

"Well, as long as they're reliable. I need someone who's not afraid to work."

"Or someone who *has* to work and will work hard." Eli grunted.

"That's true. You are so kind, Eli, to me and Pop. Please stop over to see him soon. He misses you but hasn't felt well enough to take the ride into town like he used to. It's not easy for him," she said, following him to where the bulletin board hung next to the service counter.

"I'll be sure and ride over with the missus soon." He pinned the paper at eye level where it was noticeable. "Is there anything else today?"

"No, Eli. I appreciate this, but I'd better be getting back to the farm."

"You can repay me with some of that delicious huckleberry pie you make when I stop over." He grinned down at her.

"I certainly shall. See you soon, and thanks again." Grace waved to the clerk as she left, hope springing in her heart.

Before returning to the farm, she decided to stop by and say hello to her friend Ginny. Avoiding the deep ruts in the road, she crossed the street in her buggy, took a left, and stopped. She hopped out and looped the horse's reins around the gatepost, stepped through the wrought-iron gate, and walked up to the sprawling porch to ring the bell. As she waited, Grace admired the potted plants and wicker furniture where she and Ginny had enjoyed much conversation and tea. Virginia, a Southern transplant after the Civil War, had married well. Frank was a successful attorney, but she was down-to-earth with all her Southern charm, and once she and Grace met

at church, a fast friendship began. She insisted that Grace call her Ginny.

The door swung open and Ginny's smiling face greeted her. "Grace, I'm so glad to see you. Please come in," she said in her Southern drawl.

As Grace made her way through the door she said, "Are you sure? Is this a bad time?"

Ginny laughed. "It's never a bad time to see my friend." She led the way to the parlor, beautifully furnished in colorful tapestry with heavy Persian rugs and comfortable chairs flanking the fireplace.

Grace took a seat on the brocade settee and Ginny asked, "Shall I ask Nell to make us some tea?"

Grace shook her head. "I can't stay long. I just needed to see another human face besides my pop or I shall go mad! I get so lonely sometimes," she murmured while staring at the fire in the hearth.

"My dear friend, I wish you'd come to dinner soon and meet Warren, Frank's new business partner."

"I know you mean well, Ginny, but I've seen him at church. I don't believe he has any interest in knowing a widow."

Ginny nodded. "He does seem to have a flock of ladies around him, I'll agree, but he doesn't know what he's missing."

Grace tittered. "You are so biased, Ginny! But I love you for it. Now let's change the subject if you don't mind. What have you been doing since I last saw you?"

Ginny frowned at her. "I'm on to you, Grace. You must put the widow weeds behind you now. Life is too short to spend all your time only taking care of your father. He can stay alone for a few hours. You simply must find a way to

do something for yourself, and that should include meeting eligible men. You *could* marry again.”

Grace chewed her lip and looked into her friend’s eyes filled with genuine concern. “Maybe . . . I’m not sure I could ever love again. Losing Victor was the hardest thing I’ve experienced in my life.”

Ginny reached over, patting her hand briefly. “I know, and I’m very sorry. But trust me, you need to get out a bit more—”

The sound of voices in the hallway floated within hearing. Ginny turned in the direction of the doorway. “Looks like you’ll get to meet Warren after all,” she whispered.

Grace started to reply but Ginny put a finger to her lips. “Shh, here they come.”

Grace’s protest caught in her throat as the footsteps drew closer. She should’ve gone on home instead of stopping after leaving the mercantile. She wasn’t in the mood to meet a man of Ginny’s choosing—or anyone else’s, for that matter. To be truthful, she wasn’t sure what she wanted.

Ginny rose from her chair as her husband approached. “My dear Frank, you’re home early. Hello, Warren,” she said to the gentleman next to her husband. He nodded hello and gallantly bent to kiss her hand.

“You’re spoiling my wife and she’s going to come to expect more attention from me.” Frank chuckled, then kissed his wife’s brow. “Grace,” he said, suddenly spotting her on the settee, “it’s good to see you. You must meet Warren Sullivan, my new business partner.” He turned to Warren. “This is *Miss* Grace Bidwell.”

“It’s very nice to meet you,” he said and stepped over to where Grace stood, taking a brief bow. His dark hair, shiny from applied pomade, fell across his forehead as he bowed,

and a whiff of spicy cologne hung in the air. His pin-striped suit was impeccable.

Grace murmured hello with a slight tilt of her head, mindful as his piercing dark eyes that held a promise of mystery swept over her. She wasn't sure if his was a look of appraisal or something else.

"I've heard lots about you—all good." He grinned.

"I was just telling her that we should all get together. How about dinner Saturday? Are you free?" Ginny asked.

"Great idea," Frank said, touching his wife's arm.

Warren turned to smile at Ginny. "Why, yes, I believe I am, but maybe you should ask Grace first."

Grace felt put on the spot. "Well, I'm not certain. I'll have to let you know, Ginny." She rose, clutching her reticule. "I really must be going now. I can't leave my father for too long."

"I'll walk you to the door," Ginny said, flashing her a conspiratorial smile.