



COURTING MISFORTUNE

THE JOPLIN
CHRONICLES

* 1 *

REGINA JENNINGS



COURTING MISFORTUNE

REGINA
JENNINGS



BETHANYHOUSE
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2020 by Regina Jennings

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jennings, Regina (Regina Lea), author.

Title: Courting misfortune / Regina Jennings.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2020] | Series: The Joplin chronicles ; 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2020029205 | ISBN 9780764235344 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780764237898 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493428267 (ebook)

Subjects: GSAFD: Historical fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3610.E5614 C68 2020 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020029205>

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Cover design by Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Kristy, Ann, and N’Lisa.
I’ll never forget how you made the fort feel like home.

For TREL.
I’ll never forget how you turned our home into a fort.

The Kentworth Family



Albert & Laura Kentworth

Children

— Bill -m June

┌───────────────────┐
| Finn | Amos | Maisie |

— Oscar -m Myra

┌───────────┐
| Willow | Olive |

— Pauline (Polly) -m Richard York

┌───────────────────┐
| Corban | Calista | Evangelina |

Calbert Kentworth -m Gretchen

(Grandpa Albert's Twin Brother)

┌───────────┐
| Hannah | Hilda | Hank |

CHAPTER
1

1898

CHICAGO

“You want me to work for Jinxy Seaton?” Calista York dropped her handbag onto her desk and reached up to remove her hatpin from her heavy swirl of brown curls. “The last I heard, we had scruples against helping criminal gangsters who corrupt Chicago with their nefarious—”

She was interrupted by the clatter of a letter opener skittering across the desk and landing on the floor. Calista froze, hands above her head, gripping her hatpin in case it was needed for defense. One look showed her that her boss, Robert Pinkerton, was the offender, and it wasn’t advisable to poke him with a hatpin, no matter the provocation.

“I’m talking about Mr. Jinxy Seaton,” Mr. Pinkerton said, his voice a growled whisper. “The man who risked his life to double-cross the unions for this agency and who is now sitting in my office.” With a jerk of his grayed head, he motioned to the open door.

Calista leaned to peer around the doorframe. While she couldn’t

exactly see Mr. Seaton, she did get the definite sense of a dark mass in the chair opposite Mr. Pinkerton's desk. She was paid to be observant, but she'd missed that?

Sorry, she mouthed as she lifted her hat off her bouffant and deposited it next to her bag.

"What I was telling you is that our good friend Mr. Seaton is requesting our help." This time Mr. Pinkerton's voice echoed through the office as if he were giving another speech to the Railroad Loss Prevention Board. "Why don't you join us in my office, Miss York?" He widened his eyes to emphasize the importance of her cooperation.

Bending, Calista swept her hand beneath the desk until her fingers hit cold metal. "You seem to have misplaced your letter opener," she said and dropped the utensil into his palm as she walked past him.

Jinxy stood when she entered. Two hundred and fifty pounds of sausage and cannelloni stuffed into a striped suit. She dipped her head to avoid a handshake and took a station in the corner behind Mr. Pinkerton's desk.

Calista had worked undercover for five months. When she applied for the job as a Pinkerton agent, she'd understood there would be danger and intrigue. She'd anticipated that there would be distasteful assignments, or at the very least, ones that required her to don a wardrobe that was particularly loathsome. If she was going to enter Jinxy's world, she had to prepare herself for even greater indignities. But seeing a wrong righted would always be worth it.

"Miss Calista York has joined our staff since your earlier association with our company." Mr. Pinkerton pushed his chair to one side so he could view both Calista and his client as Jinxy took a seat. "She is our youngest female operative and has just returned from Emporia, Kansas, where she helped bust a smuggling ring on Mr. Buchanan's railroad. Before that she was instrumental in

obtaining a confession from an embezzler, but she has no experience with kidnappers.”

Calista shot a sideways glance at Pinkerton. Despite her success in her last case, Pinkerton still expressed misgivings over her skills. He thought she was overconfident and naive. Her partners worried that she wasn’t discreet enough. She had to convince them that she could do better if she wanted a permanent spot with the agency.

“I’m not interested in stopping any smuggling or embezzlement,” Jinxy said. “A man’s got to earn a living. All I’m interested in is finding Lila. Just knowing she’s alive . . .” He pulled out a crisp handkerchief and blew into it like a foghorn. “Ever since Florence was killed, we’ve kept an eye on Lila. Somehow even that wasn’t enough.”

“Remind us about Florence. Was your daughter’s killer ever found?” Pinkerton asked.

“No, but my gut tells me the same people took Lila. I didn’t think we’d ever see her again, but now, eight months after she disappeared, someone spotted her six hundred miles away.” Jinxy wadded his handkerchief and shoved it into his vest’s inner pocket. “But who has her? What are they doing with her? She was at a place . . . a place she shouldn’t be. My own flesh and blood being exploited. I can’t bear it.”

Mr. Pinkerton rubbed his brow. “I wish you would reconsider and use one of our male operatives. Mr. Sampson is available, and he’s got a strong record of—”

“Absolutely not. Lila’s barely twenty years old, and just think what she’s been through in the last eight months. The thought of a man going after her . . . absolutely not.” His jowls quivered, and he swung his arm in Calista’s direction. “This gal will do. She looks like a reassuring sort.”

Pinkerton looked anything but reassured. “You say we have a witness who saw her, and with that information, we have every hope that this case will be resolved speedily and your daughter

will be returned to you soon, even without the assistance of Mr. Sampson.”

“I sincerely hope so.” Jinxy leaned over the desk, his fists clenched. “Those goons with the union know I helped you. My life and my business have been wrecked since then. At the very least, you can do this for me. If I don’t get my daughter back, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Beneath the veiled threat, Calista sensed a father genuinely concerned about his daughter. She leaned against the wall and studied him. If knowledge of his double-crossing the union had gotten out, that was incentive enough to murder his family. Florence was already one innocent casualty, but it sounded like Lila’s suffering had just begun.

“Do you have a photo?” she asked.

Mr. Pinkerton raised an eyebrow at her interruption but remained silent as Jinxy shoved his hand into his vest and produced a bent photograph. Calista stepped up to the desk as he dropped it in front of them.

“That’s her a year ago. Her mother had that dress made special for the Spring Ball. I couldn’t believe how grown-up she looked.”

Lila was striking, posed as she looked over her shoulder, her thick dark hair pulled back from her high forehead and arranged like a cloud. And although one had to ignore the hand-tinting on the photograph, the rosy cheeks didn’t seem out of place with her porcelain complexion. *Beautiful* wasn’t the right word . . . maybe *haunting*. Haunted. Calista leaned forward for a better look. Yes, there was fear in her eyes.

“Someone saw her?” Calista asked. “They’re sure it was her?”

“Yes, ma’am.” His nose wrinkled as he spat out the words. “It was a brothel in Joplin, Missouri. The House of Lords.”

At the name of the city, Calista’s attention snapped to Mr. Pinkerton. Her Granny Laura lived outside Joplin. Joplin was practically Calista’s second home. Mr. Pinkerton knew that, but

his ever-so-slight movement toward his letter opener warned her to keep that information to herself.

Calista backed away from the desk until she felt the wall behind her. Work in Joplin? Was it possible? She'd assumed that secrecy was required with all cases. Although she'd grown up in Kansas City, which was one hundred and fifty miles from Joplin, her family's presence would make it impossible for her to work there incognito. On the other hand, she'd have connections available that she'd never had before. Working in Joplin would change the game.

As Mr. Seaton elaborated on the events that led him to them, Calista couldn't tear her eyes from the picture of Lila. According to her father, Miss Seaton had gone on a shopping excursion with her mother and an aunt. One minute she was trying on hats in a crowded haberdashery, the next she'd vanished. For weeks the Chicago police had taken notes, patrolled neighborhoods, and questioned Jinxy's foes, but they hadn't found anything. It wasn't until a business associate—Calista knew not to inquire as to what kind of business—told Jinxy that he'd seen Lila inside a Joplin brothel that they knew she'd survived and was still in danger.

"Who was this witness?" Mr. Pinkerton leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers over his chest. "Can we interview him?"

"He's not keen on talking to detectives. Besides, he's currently unavailable." Jinxy lowered his eyes.

Calista shot a glance at her boss before asking, "If she's alive, why doesn't she contact you?"

"She's kept captive," Jinxy replied. "What else?"

"In Joplin, Missouri?" Pinkerton raised an eyebrow. "Compared to Chicago, that seems as wholesome—"

"You don't know Joplin," Calista interrupted. Joplin was a mining town that had sprung up out of the dirt. The quick money had attracted the most unsavory of characters and industries, creating a wild reputation in the region. Now, decades after the first zinc

was discovered, the newly wealthy were trying to create a society out of rough parts, yet many of the homes considered respectable were funded by others' miseries.

As a child, Calista had spent every summer at Granny Laura's ranch, but when they went to town, Granny Laura guarded them like a mother hen marching her chicks through a snake pit. Calista would admit that her head got turned by the luxurious clothing the fancy women wore as they paraded right down Main Street, but she would never forget the girls tucked away in darker alleys. No one would voluntarily submit to the anguish she saw on their faces. If someone was going to profit from Lila's capture, Joplin was the logical place to take her.

"You know it will take time," Mr. Pinkerton said. "Our operatives have to create their characters. They have to integrate into society. Miss York won't walk into town, announce that she's a detective, and pass your daughter's photo around. Our methods yield results, but you must be patient."

"When I think of what she's enduring . . ." Mr. Seaton reached for the photo but stopped short, resting his hand on the desk. "I'll be as patient as I'm able. I just want her to know that no matter what she's done, or what's been done to her, we love her and want her to come home."

An admirable sentiment from a despicable character. But Lila was no gangster. She was an innocent girl, and she needed help.

And despite Mr. Pinkerton's misgivings, Calista considered herself the perfect person to rescue her.



JOPLIN, MISSOURI

If a young lady had been forced into a life of depravity and bondage, she wouldn't be staying at the Keystone Hotel. The six-story luxury hotel at Fourth and Main was respectable, which meant

Calista had to get away from her apartment to search for Lila. But she didn't have to go far.

In the shadow of the great hotel was the most notorious establishment in town. The House of Lords purported to be a café. That was what was on the ground floor, but everyone knew what went on upstairs. Calista had only arrived yesterday, but she was ready to storm the castle. She'd never heard of a case where they'd gotten such specific information about a missing person. If Lila was being held at the House of Lords, that was where Calista would start looking, albeit carefully. If the people holding her got spooked, the girl could disappear again, never to be found.

Calista cruised by the brothel's building again, wondering how to proceed. Before she'd left Chicago, Pinkerton had extracted a promise from her that she wouldn't pose as a soiled dove to get inside, that she wouldn't overestimate her skills, and that she would tell no one about her mission. If she didn't succeed within the month, he would insist that Jinxy replace Calista with a more experienced operative. In fact, Pinkerton was already making arrangements for her failure.

One month. If she couldn't find Lila Seaton by then, Calista would be recalled in disgrace, and her probation period with the agency would come to an end. She held her head high as she passed the shoeshine boy for the third time. Perhaps she should have thought up a strategy before leaving her apartment that morning.

Since this was only her third case and her first as the primary operative, her briefing with Pinkerton had been thorough. Together they pondered the inconsistencies of Jinxy's story. How could Lila be held in plain sight? Why hadn't she asked anyone for help? The kidnappers must hold some power over her. Maybe they'd drugged her until she was reliant on them, or perhaps mere threats against her family were enough to keep her compliant—her sister's recent murder made such threats believable. Whatever the situation, Calista would be dealing with dangerous men, but she had

faith. God had called her on this path. Whatever she faced, it was better than her pointless existence as a debutante in Kansas City.

She needed to do the job and find Lila before Pinkerton talked Jinxy Seaton into replacing her.

But she couldn't bring herself to cross the threshold of that demon's lair. Once, when she was young, she'd asked to eat at the restaurant, and Granny Laura had said she'd rather Calista eat cold beans out of a tin can than give Rahn's House of Lords a dime of her honest money. Now that she understood, Calista wholeheartedly agreed with Granny Laura, but her personal preferences had to be set aside for the greater good. If she wanted to keep her job, she had to swallow her disgust and play the role.

On her sixth pass, Calista had started for the door of the café when she saw a small bag fall to the ground. It looked like a money sack—wrinkled and mostly empty, but valuable to someone, and that someone was probably the miner sauntering by.

"Excuse me," she called. She stood over the bag. "Sir, you dropped this."

He turned, but before he could react, a woman swooped down, snatched the bag off the ground, and made to flee.

"Hold up, sister." Calista grabbed a handful of tattered skirt, stopping the woman's escape.

"It's mine. I found it." The woman tried to tuck the money bag into the bosom of her dress, but as it was already full, there wasn't room.

The miner patted his empty pockets. "That's my money," he said. "It's all I have left until Saturday."

Calista tried to wrestle the bag from the woman's hand. "It isn't yours. I saw it fall, and you were nowhere near it." If she'd meant to stay inconspicuous in Joplin, she was failing, but she couldn't help herself. "Give it back to him."

With timely intervention, the miner pried the money bag free

with blackened hands. “I did an honest day’s work,” he said to the bedraggled woman. “Go on and earn your own.”

“If I had honest work available, I would,” she huffed. Then, with a sneer toward Calista, she stalked away.

The miner paused only for a grateful nod before ambling off in the other direction.

Calista dusted off her white gloves. That had been gratifying. Equally gratifying was that her dress hadn’t been mussed in the unexpected tussle, but she couldn’t delay any longer. It was time to confront the House of Lords.

Through the windows, a shiny soda bar was visible along one wall, with electric lights reflecting in the mirrors behind it. Ladies and gentlemen crowded around the square tables, and it looked as proper as the Harvey House restaurant her cousin Willow had worked in. If one didn’t know the owner’s association with the activity upstairs, they wouldn’t find anything untoward with the café.

Calista reached for the long brass door handle, but a hand appeared from behind her, pressing the door closed and blocking her path.

“I beg your pardon!” She fumed at the young man who positioned himself between her and the door. “I did not request your assistance.”

He stood coiled, shoulders tense like he was prepared for battle. “You don’t belong in this restaurant. It’d be better for you if you kept on moving.”

She did a quick assessment of his plain workman’s clothing. His eyes were clear, and his jaw was thrust forward as if expecting a strike. A glance from him to the three suit-clad men waiting to enter showed that he wasn’t likely to be a customer. What, then? Some kind of tough hired to watch for trouble?

Excusing himself, he allowed the men to pass but didn’t offer Calista the same courtesy.

“Don’t be concerned for me,” she said. “I was deciding whether

to shop first and eat second, or eat first and shop second. Picking out a button hook for my boots is a serious matter. I wouldn't want to do it when I'm hungry, and I've heard the chicken salad at this restaurant is superb. On the other hand, a full meal often makes me drowsy, and making such an important decision should only be done when one is alert." According to Calista's experience, talking about shopping was guaranteed to lull the masculine mind into a stupor. She could only hope the stupor would be deep enough that he would forget about her.

Sliding his hand beneath his broad-brimmed hat, he brushed his sandy-brown hair out of his eyes. His glance did a swift sweep from the top of her plumed bonnet to the double-ribboned hem of her skirt. "Whatever instinct is keeping you away from this place, you should heed it."

Was that a threat? Calista's eyes glinted. Thus far, her youth had served her well in her profession. She'd never been challenged this early in an investigation. People found it easy to believe she was a feckless young girl who had stumbled unintentionally into whatever trouble they caught her in. She'd have to play it out, especially if this man was connected to the House of Lords.

"I'm very hungry, and being hungry makes me cantankerous, I'm afraid. Now, I'm determined to eat here, especially since you're teasing me like this." She braved a generous smile at the unsmiling man. "So if you'd excuse me . . ."

He tilted his head as if listening for a signal, then grimaced like he'd been stabbed in the gut. "I reckon I have to go in with you."

"What?" Calista felt a zap of anxiety rush through her. What had she done wrong? Did they know she was coming? Had someone followed her from Chicago? She gripped her handbag. Was this how Lila Seaton had felt when someone approached her at the haberdashery before she disappeared? "I'm not accustomed to eating with strangers," she said.

“If you’re entering this establishment, I’m going to insist that you do so under my watch.”

Part of her wanted to turn and run—this was a dangerous and unexpected complication—but she would hold to her role of a young lady coming to Joplin to look for work. Not a particularly wise young lady, nor a particularly respectable young lady. A young lady who might just think it an adventure to eat with a good-looking stranger, no matter how stern his expression.

Calista tried another smile. “If you insist, although you shouldn’t think this gives you leave to be familiar.”

If she’d thought her flirtation would win him over, she was mistaken. He dipped his chin and gave her a dour look that would be more at home on the face of a bloodhound.

She pulled the door open, surprised when he followed her in silence. The *maitre d’* showed them to a table. Calista noticed that the café host was careful not to acknowledge any connection to the stranger.

She picked up a menu and hid her face behind it while trying to think how a normal, sane woman would act in this circumstance. Flattered? Annoyed? Shocked? She’d set the gauge at eighty percent annoyed and fifteen percent inconvenienced. She might as well leave five percent available for *flattered*, just in case she found a weakness to exploit in him.

Calista perused the listings of soups and beef cuts before remembering that she’d already committed to chicken salad. At least she hadn’t previously expressed a preference for dessert. That would allow her some choice. She lowered the menu as the waiter approached and turned to her fuming companion for their order.

“I’m not buying anything,” he said. “Only the lady will be eating.”

“Yes, sir. And what will she be having?” Every stitch of the waiter’s uniform was perfection, showing that the management here let no detail go unchallenged.

This rube hadn't been to many fine dining establishments, because he should've known that the gentleman always ordered for the lady. He squirmed in his seat as Calista and the waiter both stared at him. "How would I know what she wants to eat?" he said.

Calista cleared her throat. "I'll have the chicken salad plate and an iced tea, please. That's all for now."

The waiter smiled in sympathy as he took the menus and carried her order to the kitchen. Calista folded her hands in her lap. The situation wasn't a total loss. If she was searching for unusual activity that might point to criminality, she'd certainly found it. This man might be the first string to unravel in the mystery. It was up to her to do some picking if she wanted to find a loose end.

"We haven't been properly introduced," she said. "My name is Calista York."

He grunted. His eyes never stopped roving the room. "Matthew Cook."

"You've already had dinner, Mr. Cook?" She spread her napkin on her lap and tipped her face up to look at him.

"No, but I'm not going to eat right now. Not while I'm working."

"What exactly is your purpose at the House of Lords?"

"That depends on you." His gaze landed sharply on hers.

She chuckled lightly, but beneath the table she gripped the side of her chair. "I don't understand how my actions could influence your job." Taking stock of the ladies next to them, Calista decided they were respectable, wealthy, and unconcerned with the implications of where they were. More than likely, they had just concluded their charity meeting and were coming to eat. The fact that this establishment profited off the exploitation of girls didn't seem to bother them in the least. God forgive them. And Calista had to pretend to be just like them.

"You aren't here for the chicken salad," Mr. Cook said.

“What other possible reason could I have for sitting down to dinner?” she asked, wondering why he had to be so insightful.

“I don’t know, and that’s why I’m keeping an eye on you.”

Prying her fingers off her chair, she touched the dark curls that had been caught in an upsweep. Since her eyelashes shared the same abundance as her hair, she performed a copious amount of fluttering as she lowered her eyes to her plate. He was demanding an explanation.

“It seems you are correct,” she said at last. “I have another purpose for being here. I’m looking for employment, and I thought this place might need my services.”

He flopped back in his chair as if the distance gave him a better view of her. “Exactly what kind of services do you offer?”

She wouldn’t disappear like Lila. Robert Pinkerton knew where she was and expected her to check in regularly. She had the security of the Pinkerton Agency behind her. And if they failed, the entire Kentworth family would come to her aid. But she still felt chilled by his tone.

“I’m a designer,” she said, surprised, as always, how easy it was to slip into character once she determined it was necessary. “I’ve heard that the rooms upstairs are in need of updating, and I’d like to offer my services.”

If she’d thought he looked stern before, his face was a thundercloud now. “What exactly do you know about what goes on upstairs?”

“I’m no prude, I assure you. But my interest is in providing for myself, not in passing judgment on anyone.” A bigger lie she’d never told. Calista was intensely judging all the customers in the café as a trio of ladies walked into the building and toward the staircase in the back. If it weren’t for the addition of rouge and ostrich-plumed hats, they wouldn’t have looked any different from the society ladies at the next table. Calista searched each face, looking for the missing girl, but found nothing.

Mr. Cook's demeanor toward her had changed. He didn't look as threatening—just sad. He took his hat from the table. "I misjudged the situation," he said. "You aren't who I thought you were."

Why was he disappointed? And how dare he make her feel guilty? His own conscience had to be as black as coal. "Who exactly were you looking for?" she asked.

"Someone I could help." He stood, pulled his hat low over his sorrowful eyes, and strode away, leaving Calista unsettled and wary.