



# PROPOSING MISCHIEF

THE JOPLIN  
CHRONICLES

\* 2 \*

# REGINA JENNINGS



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REGINA  
JENNINGS



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To Shanna Lewis  
For all the years of friendship,  
but particularly for the day you  
immediately said *yes* when I asked if you'd  
drive me to the hospital to check on my husband—  
eight hundred and seventy-four miles away.

# 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

“When I told Pa I wanted to go to town, I didn’t mean the feedstore.” Maisie Kentworth reached over the side of the wagon bed and let the elm leaves swish against her hand as they passed. “That feedstore doesn’t sell any phosphate drinks, and I aim to have me one of those today.”

Her brother Amos pulled one rein tight, swerving to make the sharp turn into the feedstore’s lot. “Welp, we gotta get feed, that’s a fact, and ever since that Silas Marsh business, Pa wants to keep you on a short leash. So if you want to set foot off the ranch, it’s church or the feedstore, or else you’ll be tied to Granny’s apron strings. Them’s the only options.”

Maisie grabbed the supple end of a branch and held it tight so that all the leaves were stripped away as it ran through her hand. Silas Marsh. She wished she’d never lit eyes on that man. She’d been staying in town with her cousin Calista when Silas entered her world. Charming, attentive, and romantic, the young miner seemed just what Maisie wanted in a man, but evidently she wasn’t the only lady to feel that way.

Turning around on the bench and throwing her leg over the

seat back, she planted her sturdy boot in the middle of her cousin Hank's back and jostled him until he groaned and rolled over.

"Wake up. We're here." Maisie tidied her chestnut hair behind her ears and wiggled her freckled nose at the sweet scent of the feed.

Hank lifted his straw hat from his face and squinted at the sun. "What do you need me for? I thought we brought you to do the toting."

With a boot to his shoulder, Maisie shoved harder. "Get on your feet, Hank. It's time to work."

"Hank ain't afraid of hard work," Amos cheerfully put in. "He'll curl up right against it and sleep like a baby."

"What's your hurry?" Hank groaned. "I was out hunting all night. Give me a minute."

"If we have time to spare, we might could drive on into town to the soda fountain," Maisie said.

Hank bolted upright. "I do admire myself a phosphate cherry root drink." The flat, immovable planes of Hank's face gave his every pronouncement the weight of the granite tablets from Mount Sinai.

"There ain't no way." Amos set the wagon brake and wrapped the reins around the handle. "I have strict orders not to let Maisie anywhere near town." Even when Amos was serious, the sparks of merriment in his eyes didn't allow one to believe him.

"Now that it's settled," Maisie said, hopping out of the wagon, "how many bags of feed are we getting? I'll go sign for them, and you'uns start loading."

Despite their protests, Amos and Hank loaded the feed up with no lollygagging. By the time Maisie had the receipt tucked into her waistband, Amos and Hank were waiting in the wagon. From the anxious tapping of Amos's foot, it was clear that Hank had brought him around to Maisie's suggestion.

Maisie climbed into the back of the bed, and without another word, Amos slapped the reins and the team pulled them toward town instead of back to the ranch.

Maisie wasn't a troublemaker, but she needed adventure like a cornfield needed sunlight. Speaking of sunlight, she snagged the sunbonnet hanging by its ties around her neck and pulled it over her head. No use in making more of those freckles. When she was younger, running around in the sun, unconcerned about a smattering of freckles, she found ample adventure on her family ranch with her multitude of cousins. She'd grown up as independent and as free as her brothers or any of the boy cousins. But as she matured, she realized that adventure came in many forms, and a young lady could find better amusements than wrestling matches and throwing competitions.

Just outside her family's ranch was enough excitement to flip a corpse. Joplin had it all—society, music, and wealth. Unfortunately, it also contained a former beau of hers, and her family was determined that she not see him again.

Maisie wholeheartedly agreed.

"I ain't taking you all the way to the soda fountain," Amos said. "There's stretching the rules, and then there's pure stupidity."

"Then where are we headed?" Hank asked, then answered his own question. "We can go to Daniel's Drug and Miscellany. They've got shaved ice."

Amos grunted his approval, and Maisie propped her boot up on the side of the wagon bed to tighten a shoelace that had worked loose. She'd always thought Granny Laura was exaggerating when she talked about how Joplin could turn a girl's head plumb backward. Maisie had never believed her, but when her cousin Calista came from Kansas City, Maisie was sent to stay with her in town as a chaperone. Some chaperone she'd turned out to be. Before she'd gotten her bearings, she'd fallen as love-sick as a turtledove with measles and had decided that she'd be Silas's wife someday. If Calista hadn't overheard a young lady at the Children's Home, Maisie might never have known that Silas had sired children around the county.

She tugged on the shoelace, then whipped it into a tight bow.



Maisie had always thought of herself as tough and savvy, but it turned out she was neither. Silas's deception had shown her that her faith in him was misplaced, but so was her faith in her own discernment.

If only she could be like Calista—get herself an exciting job with the Pinkertons and travel the country hunting down crooks and no-accounts. 'Course, Calista had stopped that when she'd realized she was hunting with the wrong dogs, but Maisie still envied her adventures.

The mercantile appeared as they rounded the bend. The three Kentworths scanned the premises before rolling any closer, getting a feel for who they might encounter at the store. Not that they were worried about being tattled on—they were adults, after all—but sometimes life was easier if news of certain decisions they made didn't travel back to the Kentworth ranch.

"It's clear," Maisie said. "Prissy Jones is out of town, and I don't see sign of any of the Grosgrain family. No one else would bother to snitch."

"It's you that has to worry," said Amos. "Nothing wrong with Hank and me coming to town."

"Except you brought me," she said. "That makes you complicit."

"How do you figure?" Hank asked, his voice as level as his gaze.

"Because they've already determined that I have no sense. You're supposed to watch over me."

"If they're looking for someone responsible to keep an eye on you, they're barking up the wrong tree." Hank nodded toward Amos. "I say they get what they deserve."

Easy for Hank to say. Granny Laura was only his aunt and not likely to tan his hide.

Amid a debate over who should pony up for the ices, Hank and Amos got distracted by a weak bleating from behind the store.

"What do you reckon that's Wheeler's two-headed lamb?" Amos grinned so big that his dimples drilled into his cheeks. "I heard he was bringing it to town."

Even Hank seemed to light up. “Now that would be something to see,” he allowed. “Let’s go.” He followed Amos around the outside of the drugstore.

“Hurry,” Maisie called. “If we’re gone too long, the folks are going to suspicion us.”

She had seen enough carnival acts that she was hard to impress. The pity she felt for the animals wasn’t worth the curiosity. Besides, she’d been hankering for a fancy treat ever since she’d gotten a pass to town. She’d contemplated how odd it was that a drink on the inside could feel as good as jumping into a spring did on the outside. She’d mulled over the merits of an ice drink versus a phosphate, but here she was, and nothing stood between her and this delight.

Except Silas Marsh.

As she entered the store, she saw him standing in front of a shelf filled with personal goods, no doubt buying more of that hair elixir that smelled like fresh lavender and potential.

“Is that you, Maisie Kentworth?” He sauntered across the drugstore while Maisie’s stomach tried to push its contents back up her throat.

“What are you doing on this side of town?” Maisie growled. “You ain’t supposed to come this way.”

“I’ve made it a habit of mine. When I have a spare afternoon, I wander over here, hoping to see you. Looks like today my efforts were finally rewarded.” He swept off his hat and ruffled his hair.

Maisie remembered ruffling that hair herself. That was before she knew.

“I’ve already said everything I have to say to you. If you’re looking for soft words from me—”

“I’m not looking for anything from you besides reassurance. When we parted, you were displeased with me, and I understand why, but you were also discouraged and hurt. Knowing that I hurt you has weighed heavily on my conscience.”

“As heavily as your illegitimate children?” Just saying the words made Maisie’s gut twist. How could she have cared about him?

“I heard that your family blamed you—that they won’t let you out of their sight—and that isn’t fair. You’re a smart woman, Maisie-girl. You shouldn’t be treated like a child. You deserve freedom.”

He was an uncommonly handsome man, full of confidence and charm. The fine creases around his mouth used to hold traces of black dust at the end of his workday. Maisie could never get him to stop smiling long enough to wipe them clean.

“I’m fine. Don’t be troubled on my account.” She cast a glance at the mercantile door, unsure what Amos and Hank would do if they saw Silas, but pretty sure it wouldn’t benefit her.

“What troubles you, troubles me.” He stepped closer. “I wish you’d let me explain to your family. Who are they to judge you? You’re a good person.”

Was she? She sure hadn’t acted like it of late. All her sense had flown out the window when Silas came around. Thank the Lord she had a second chance. It was up to her never to get hornswoggled again.

“If you want to help me, then keep your distance.” She stepped sideways, putting a barrel of brooms between them. “You’re going to bring me nothing but trouble.”

“I don’t want to cause you trouble. I only want happiness for you—our happiness. There’s nothing wrong with being happy, is there?”

“I’m not happy right now, Silas Marsh. Not one bit. Whatever this feeling is, it is not happiness.”

His face crumpled into a sympathetic pout. “What can I do for you, darling? What will make you happy?”

“Cricket’s wings! I told you: leave me alone.” So adamant was she that she didn’t notice the figures in the doorway until it was too late.

“What are you doing here?” Amos growled. “I thought we’d got rid of you.”

“I’m having a conversation with your sister. It doesn’t concern you.” Silas spread his stance when he should’ve been cowering.

Maisie started for the door. “Let’s go home.”

But Amos was having none of it. That dangerous glint to his eyes was setting in. “Seeing how she’s my sister, it sure as shootin’ concerns me.”

Poor Silas. He was keeping his eyes on Amos. He hadn’t even noticed Hank working his way around the shop to get in his blind spot. Maisie shot Hank a silent warning. He waved her off and moved closer.

“I told you if you came within spitting distance of any of my kin, there’d be trouble,” Amos said.

Mr. Daniel stepped out from behind the counter. “I don’t want any trouble from you Kentworths.” He marched between Amos and Silas and drew a pickax out of the barrel. “Whatever you’ve a mind to do, don’t do it here in my store.”

Amos reached into a bushel basket near the door and removed an orange. He squared up, blocking the door and any chance Silas had of escaping. “This coward can leave first.” After tossing the orange and catching it, he perched it on his shoulder. “Just make sure you don’t knock this off my shoulder.”

For crying aloud, that orange was no better balanced than a tipsy field hand who’d just gotten off a barn swing.

Silas straightened, not one to back down from a fight. He turned to Maisie and, with a slight bow, dropped his hat on his head, then began whistling a tune as he tried to get past Amos.

Maisie held her breath. The orange rocked. Amos stared at Silas, waiting for the signal. Silas stepped around him and had nearly cleared the danger when a mighty crash sounded. It was Hank. With pot lids in both hands, he crashed them together like God’s own thunder.

Amos flinched. The orange tottered. Silas paused and watched as it tumbled off Amos’s shoulder.

“That’s not fair, Amos,” Maisie started, but it was too late.

Amos drew back and swung at Silas. Silas, quick as a flea, jumped to the side and swiped a tin labeled *Camphorated Dentifrice*. While Amos was readjusting his swing, Silas opened the tooth powder and flung it in Amos's face.

Amos roared from inside the white cloud of tooth powder, making Maisie think that the peppermint flavor wasn't as refreshing in the eyes as on the teeth.

"Get!" she yelled at Silas, but before he could skedaddle out the door, Hank caught him by the collar, jerking him back to crash into a stack of ebony-black coach paint cans.

Maisie covered her ears at the cacophony as Silas tried to squirm his way out of Hank's grasp.

"Get out of this store!" Mr. Daniel yelled. He brandished the pickax but didn't seem eager to join the fray. If he wasn't going to intervene, then Maisie would have to.

"Stop it!" she yelled. "Stop it, right now!" But they weren't paying her any mind. She spotted a painted panel propped against the door. With a grunt, she lifted it above her head and smashed the *Teeth Carefully Extracted* sign against Hank's back.

"You'd do that to your own kin?" Amos looked a fright covered in white dental powder.

"When my kin are making fools of themselves."

"Traitor!" he yelled, then made a dive toward Silas.

Silas dodged and chucked a can of paint at Amos. It bounced off his shoulder before thudding against the floor.

"Woo-hoo!" Hank's mouth twitched. "Now we're in the thick of it." He swiped a ceramic jar off the countertop and hefted it to his shoulder.

"No!" Maisie and Mr. Daniel chorused, but it was too late. Hank chucked the crockery at Silas. Silas ducked, and the jar flew past him, toothbrushes slinging in its wake, and hit the wall of medicinal spirits opposite.

"I didn't do that. You can't blame me," Silas yelled, but Hank and Amos weren't dissuaded.

Amos dove for Silas again, but Mr. Daniel managed to slow him down by hooking the pickax through his suspender strap. He yanked Amos backward, knocking Hank off his feet as well.

Seeing his opportunity to escape, Silas jumped up on the countertop and ran the length of it, leaving white footprints with every step and bumping against the electric lamp bulbs with his head. He bounded off the countertop and grabbed Maisie by the shoulders.

“Don’t forget, I never meant to hurt you,” he said. One eye was blackened, and his lip was swollen, but it didn’t keep him from stealing a kiss.

Maisie was furious. Reaching behind her, she grabbed the first thing that came to hand—a bottle of Phoenix Bitters Blood Purifiers—and smashed it against Silas’s skull.

“Because of you, I’ll never get to come to town again!” she yelled. She nearly crumpled trying to hold Silas’s weight as he got his legs back under him.

“When you’re ready to run away with me, that won’t be a problem,” he slurred. He looked again at her lips, then thought better of it and loped out the door.

Finally pulling free of Mr. Daniel, Amos trotted over the toothbrushes to watch Silas disappear down the road. He punched Maisie in the arm. “We showed him, huh?” he boasted.

“You’ve annihilated my store, destroyed my stock.” Mr. Daniel clutched his head as he surveyed the damage. “You Kentworths are going to pay for this.”

Glass crunched beneath Hank’s boots as he turned to get a look at the carnage. He scratched the back of his neck as if he were seeing the mess for the first time. “Welp, if that cad Marsh wasn’t here, this wouldn’t have happened. You can’t expect me to just stand back and let him insult my cousin.”

“An insult?” Mr. Daniel could barely shake the words out of his mouth. Yanking a wide broom from against the wall, he swept up a pile of broken glass, dental powder, and toothbrushes. “You did this to my store over an insult?”

“Family looks out for its own.” Amos stuck out his chest. “It was a good deed that was done today.”

Maisie covered her eyes. She’d thought she could sneak away from the consequences of her actions for just half an hour, but consequences and bad decisions weren’t finished with her yet. She’d have no end to the trouble this day had brought. The piper’s price would be high, indeed.



“This looks like a fair offer on the mine, especially considering we hit water.” Boone Bragg tapped his finger at each line of Darin Caine’s proposal as he ran down it for the third time.

“I think I can get a little profit out of it before it’s finished.” Caine crossed one leg over the other and rested his hat on his knee. “Besides, if it’s helping the son of my old friend Wallace . . .”

With Boone’s father out of town, Mr. Caine had proven himself generous with his guidance and advice. Even before his father had left town, the payout in the Curious Bear Mine had been dwindling. In shaft after shaft, the ore had dried up, and when they’d gone deeper, they’d hit water. Boone had some experience with dewatering a mine. He knew to cut a sough in to let gravity do its work, making use of adits if the mine was in a hillside, but this was another matter. The opening shaft of the Curious Bear was low-lying. The mine had nowhere to drain the runoff. Pumps would be needed, and according to Caine, Boone couldn’t afford the expense. It’d be better to purchase rights on a new prospect and keep his men employed.

“I don’t think he’s heard a word I’ve said. *Quel fromage.*”

Boone lifted his head at Justina Caine’s tight, high-pitched voice. Her eyes were slanted like a cat’s, and when she was around, he felt like a mouse.

“I’m sorry. The numbers . . .” Boone pointed to the proposal in front of him as an excuse. What was Caine thinking, bringing his daughter to a business meeting? Yet there she was, perched on the

edge of her seat with that indulgent look, as if she were forgiving him for an offense.

“Then you didn’t hear me say that your mother was surprised you’re treating me to brunch,” she said.

“My mother is surprised . . . ?” Boone darted a look at her father, then back at her. “So am I. When was this decided?”

Mr. Caine laughed. “Your inattentiveness is going to get you in trouble, young man. But of course you’re escorting Justina. She thinks you need a break from work, and I took your vague answer yesterday as approval.”

Boone had had no intention of eating a brunch, much less escorting Justina and her boiler-whistle voice. Why couldn’t the ladies leave him alone? Besides, it wasn’t that he was inattentive. He paid attention to the things that mattered, and a brunch with Justina didn’t.

But doing right by his miners mattered very much, and Darin Caine was a part of that solution.

Expecting their sons to learn to manage their finances, Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Bragg had given them their inheritance while they were still young. Boone’s brother, Grady, had taken his funds and invested in the mines of Indian Territory. Boone had kept his investments local, but the Curious Bear’s failure could threaten his other ventures. There’d be no more money coming from his parents, even if they could afford it. They’d promised what was left of their substantial estate to charity. This was the only help he’d get, and it was more than most people made in a lifetime. It’d be a shame if he lost it.

“When is this brunch?” he asked. If Justina had taken the time to telephone his mother in Florida, the damage was already done. Mother would rake him over the coals for getting trapped into this obligation.

“Tomorrow morning. Ten o’clock.” Caine leaned back in his chair and cracked his knuckles. “Afterwards, I could go with you to Oronogo, if you’d like. I hear they have some promising samples



coming up there. I know you've had your eye on those fields for months."

The money from Caine would give him the capital to keep his other mine, the Spook Light, going while starting afresh. Standing around looking at watery tunnels wouldn't solve anything. Boone had to get producing again, hauling out more of the ugly gray chat, as if Joplin didn't have enough piles of it already.

What would it be like to create beauty instead of dragging the unsightly guts out of the belly of the earth? Mining was dirty business. Like his father and older brother, Boone showed promise of being good at it, but he wished all that work produced something more pleasant than the zinc and lead ore that was shipped across the world. He wished he could discover something of beauty beyond the ladies who coveted the reward of his labor.

"I'm not ready to look at Oronogo yet," Boone said. "Give me time to go to the Curious Bear, gather our equipment, and get it cleaned out. If nothing changes, I'll have the paperwork ready, and you can take it over by the end of the month."

"Or there's another option. You could bring Bragg Mining into our collective. I'm firmly convinced that the future of Joplin rests on our abilities to consolidate. If we partnered together, we'd be able to bid our ore collectively. It'd decrease the competition and increase the profits."

"I've already told you, I'm not interested in consolidating," Boone said. "I'm just getting started. If the Curious Bear fails, I'd rather free up my capital to try another independent venture."

"So you've said, and I'm happy to help," said Mr. Caine. "It might be that you want to make an offer of your own someday soon."

Boone wrinkled his nose. "An offer on what? Are you selling rights on your mines? There's nothing else I'm interested . . ." His eyes flew to Justina before he realized that was the last place he should look.

Her eyelids fluttered, and her mouth stretched into an expansive

smile. In his head, Boone heard the boiler whistle pitching higher and higher, warning of an impending explosion. Maybe it was time for his mother to come back. With her sharp eyes and sharper tongue, she'd protected him from the bloodthirsty machinations of the society mothers with single daughters. Now even the fathers were getting involved.

"Ten o'clock." Boone would mark the time like a condemned man going to the gallows. "I'll pick you up at a quarter till."

"Sounds good." Mr. Caine stood and held out his hand. "It's always a pleasure visiting with you, Boone. I know you'll do the right thing."

And according to Caine, the right thing for Boone to do was admit he couldn't manage water pumps himself and take Justina to brunch. Boone was worried that selling the Curious Bear might be a mistake, but taking Justina to brunch would be a disaster.