

# HOME AGAIN

PLEASANT VALLEY BOOK THREE



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

## CHAPTER 1



WYOMING TERRITORY, OCTOBER 1899

The sun was just coming up when Abigail Martha Harper welcomed the glorious late-autumn morning by kicking off her covers and stretching her arms above her head. On most mornings—whenever she could get away with it, anyway—seventeen-year-old (*eighteen* in a few short days) Abby rarely emerged from her bedroom before eight-thirty, a seriously tardy hour to be rising for someone living on a working cattle ranch, and a habit only tolerated due to the young Miss Harper's privileged status as the only offspring of the owners of the ranch—her loving and far too indulgent parents.

This *particular* morning was different, though. There were simply too many things she had to get done to make sleeping late an option for Abby. She had read late into the previous night, and awakened nervous and already excited after very little sleep. In twelve short hours, in the unlikely event the train from Kansas actually got in on time, this beautiful day would be made even

more beautiful by the arrival of Jacob Goodspeed—the man Abby adored, and had made her mind up to have as her husband.

Abby's Sunday school teachers had always insisted that the deliciously improper kind of thoughts she so often enjoyed about Jacob were precisely the sort that could send a person straight to Hell, and for a while, those dire warnings had made her a bit uneasy. Recently, though, she had made a conscious decision to stop worrying about such things. After all, she reasoned, she had idled away a *lot* of very pleasant afternoons enjoying exactly those kind of thoughts, and nothing bad had happened to her—so far, anyway. Which had led her to believe that maybe her musings weren't so terrible after all. Who knew, really? Maybe *everybody* had thoughts of that nature, now and then. Maybe God was willing to overlook certain small moral lapses. Maybe He even understood how hard it was to be seventeen and desperately in love.

Of course, if she was mistaken, and He *didn't* understand, she was probably in *very* big trouble.

Even that couldn't ruin Abby's mood this morning, though. What bothered her far more than the thought of peril to her immortal soul was the more likely possibility that the object of her affections might not be quite as anxious to see *her* as she was to see *him*. More than a year had passed since they had last seen one another, and she hadn't filled out quite as well in all those months as she had hoped. She wasn't exactly flat chested, but she wasn't exactly buxom, either, no matter from which direction she viewed herself in the big oval mirror in the corner of her bedroom.

Two years earlier, Abby had traded three arrowheads and her pink shell necklace for a dog-eared cigarette card featuring a faded photograph of Lily Langtry, the actress universally considered the most beautiful and desirable woman in the world by almost everyone Abby had ever known. She'd kept the card hidden in her dresser drawer, under a pile of her best undergarments, and first thing every morning since then, her habit had been to strip to the skin and stand in front of the mirror to compare her own still-in-

progress figure to Miss Langtry's. The comparison continued to be disheartening, though. She had even tried wearing her hair coiled on top of her head the way Lily Langtry did in the picture, but was forced to give that up when stray strands of hair kept falling into the bucket while she did the evening milking. And to make her attempt at glamor even more humiliating, her mother had laughed and told her that the fashionable 'upsweep' made her look like she had a cow turd on the top of her head.

One problem was that Jacob was almost seven years older than her—a full grown man who would no doubt be expecting a mature woman and not a freckled, redheaded little beanpole with smallish mounds where there should have been full, round bosoms. When she and Jacob were together at his folks' sheep farm the previous summer, he was still treating her like a little sister, pulling her hair and teasing her mercilessly, while what Abby had wanted more than anything in the world was to be treated like the woman he wanted to be his wife—when it was decent and proper to do so.

She was only sixteen, then, of course, and while she knew that many young women married even earlier than that, her parents were positively bound and *determined* that she was going to go to some snooty women's college back east. For a while, before Jacob became more than just a friend and playmate, Abby had even found the idea of college appealing, since it would at least get her out of Wyoming and spare her having to be around a lot of cows and chickens every day of her life. Now that she was *nearly eighteen* she was hoping that Ma and Pa would look more favorably on the idea of her getting married. They both liked Jacob, after all, and besides that, *he* had already been to college.

Which was why she would need to make the most of this possibly final opportunity. Jacob would be staying here at the ranch for just two weeks, while he was getting his widowed mother settled into the new home Ma and Pa had arranged for her. And when that was done, he'd explained in his last letter, he would be off to California to make his way in life as a real newspaperman,

and not as an occasional contributor to the agricultural column of a Kansas weekly called the *County Tattler*.

Martha Goodspeed, the woman Jacob called his ‘mother’ wasn’t his real mother, of course—although saying that aloud always made Abby’s *own* mother as mad a wet hen.

“If Martha’s not that boy’s real mother,” Ma had railed, “I’d like someone to tell me what a real mother is. She and Abner took Jacob in when he was a just a baby, the same way they did with most all of those other orphaned kids of theirs. They raised every last one of them all like their own, with no help from anyone else in the whole damned world.”

Ma had been an orphan, herself, which was probably why she had such strong feelings about the subject. And she had *especially* strong feelings about Martha and Abner Goodspeed, since they had taken *her* in the same way they had Jacob. Not as a baby, but when Ma was already sixteen years old and running away from the terrible orphans’ home where her baby sister had died. The sad fact was that before she ended up at Martha’s, Ma had lived a hard life, and she’d never forgotten how much she owed the Goodspeeds.

Abby had strong feelings of her own for Martha and Abner, not just because they were the nicest, kindest two people you could ever meet, but because they were the only grandparents she’d ever known. And because they’d raised Jacob to be the kind of man she wanted to marry and live with for the rest of her life, of course!

The problem wasn’t just that Martha had lost Abner, her husband of so many years, but that her health had begun to fail and that had changed everything. Before Jacob went off to that Indian college, back east, he had made it clear to everyone that he wasn’t going to stay in Kansas and be a sheep farmer for the rest of his life. With the so called ‘Indian wars’ coming to an end, he wanted to become a newspaper man and write about what was happening to the people he had always considered to be his.

Jacob’s Sioux birth mother had lived for several years with a fur trapper who had ‘won’ her in a card game. She was barely fifteen

when she died giving birth to the baby the trapper called 'Jack'. The baby was around two years old when the trapper moved on, after trading the infant for two sacks of flour, a pound of tobacco and a half-hearted promise from the owner of the trading post that he'd find someone to care for the abandoned child. Martha found Jacob there a few weeks later, filthy, dressed in rags, and close to starvation. All that she could learn about little 'Jack' was that his mother had told several people in town that her father was a Hunkpapa Sioux called 'Painted Horse', who died at the Little Bighorn.

Even though he knew very little about the woman who had given birth to him, Jacob had grown up fiercely proud of his Indian heritage, a feeling that his adoptive parents, Martha and Abner, had honored by adding the middle name 'Painted Horse' when their new son was christened. With Martha's encouragement, Jacob had taught himself the Lakota language, and he had worn his hair in a single long braid down his back for as long as Abby could remember. One night, though, she had overheard Pa and Martha talking, and Pa had said that feeling the way he did about being Sioux was probably going to break Jacob's heart someday—with '*the way things are*'. Abby hadn't understood what Pa meant by that, but Martha seemed to know, because she just nodded and looked sadder than Abby had ever seen her. Abby knew that Martha was probably remembering that awful day when she was just a little girl, watching from the bushes while her village was attacked and burned by the army—the day when her entire family was killed.

After Abner died, Jacob's letters no longer mentioned his hopes of going to California to be a newspaperman. In one long, sad letter, he'd explained to Abby that he owed Martha more than he could ever repay, and now that she was alone, his place was with her, doing everything he could to help out. It was a responsibility that he obviously accepted with love and gratitude, but while his words sounded happy enough on paper, Abby could tell that he was trying very hard not to show his disappointment.

She pulled Jacob's last letter from beneath her pillow and read it

again—for maybe the twentieth time. This time, she studied every word and convoluted paragraph even more carefully than she had in her previous readings. His letters were always wonderful, full of interesting thoughts and ideas. Sometimes, though, they were hard for her to understand or even make sense of. The letters were so serious and filled with such enthusiasm that he sometimes seemed to be writing in circles, going back and forth and over and around the subject from slightly different points of view. And lately, it seemed to her that the main thing that he wanted to talk about was something about which Abby knew almost nothing—the terrible injustice that was taking place almost in her own back yard—in the Dakotas.

According to Jacob, the Sioux—whom he usually called *Lakota*—along with the other Plains tribes, were being driven from the land where they had lived and hunted for as long as anyone could remember. And now, starving, disarmed and with their hunting grounds stolen, they were being forced onto barren ‘reservations’, with orders from the government to become farmers. Just like that!

After reading one of Jacob’s angry letters, Pa had shaken his head sadly. “Well, he’s a born newspaper man, that’s for sure,” he said, “getting ready to sally forth and do battle with dragons and windmills a whole lot bigger and more dangerous than he realizes.” The word *dangerous* had frightened Abby, and she didn’t *begin* to understand the part about dragons and windmills, but she hoped it didn’t mean that Pa didn’t *like* Jacob, since she intended to be *Mrs.* Jacob in the very near future.

Abby had been in love with Jacob Painted Horse Goodspeed for as long as she could remember, certainly since she first began to notice some of the very nice ways in which boys were different from girls. But she was just beginning to see how complicated peoples’ lives could be, and that made her glad that she was just plain, seventeen-year-old Abigail Harper, whose only problem at the moment was to get Jacob to fall hopelessly in love with her before he went west and met some other girl and forgot all about



her. And the way things stood now, she had just two short weeks to do it.

She and Jacob had been writing to one another almost since she knew the alphabet well enough to spell out the words. At first, his letters to her read more like an older brother giving advice to a younger sister, but two years ago, that began to change. His letters began to talk about all the things they would do together that summer, when she and her parents came to visit. He told her about his dreams for the future, and asked about her own dreams, and what she wanted to do with her life. Other than daydreaming about *him*, Abby hadn't yet given *any* of that much thought, but Jacob's letters had made her start thinking about her *own* future, as well.

Before long, in response to the increasingly comfortable intimacy of these on-paper conversations, Abby had begun telling Jacob about *her* life, as well—secret things that she'd never told anyone else in the world, not even Pa. She loved both her parents, but she'd always felt especially close with Pa, since he seemed to understand her better than Ma did. He almost never got angry enough to yell, while it seemed that she and Ma were always at it about one thing or other. Pa had once told her that the reason she and Ma quarreled so often was because they were too much alike, and Abby had to admit that was probably true. She and Ma *did* look alike—on the short side, with bright red hair. She had heard people in town compliment the two of them as 'those beautiful Harper women'. While Pa was obviously pleased at that, he had added that while she and Ma were easily the most beautiful women in the territory, they had the same quick temper, as well—which didn't sound to Abby like much of a compliment.

But no matter how much she loved and respected her father, or how well they got along, the last thing in the world Abby wanted was to end up married to someone like him—a cattle rancher. That was one thing she had already decided. What she *did* want from life wasn't all that clear, which made it hard to describe in words. Even now, though, she knew two things for sure. She didn't want to end

up scrubbing clothes and mopping floors, and she was absolutely, one hundred percent *positive* that wherever her life took her, Jacob was going to be right there beside her. And what could be more exciting, she thought, than being married to a newspaperman? Or maybe being a writer and newspaperwoman, herself? Like the famous—maybe *infamous*—Nelly Bly, traveling around the world, meeting fascinating people and writing about all the important stories of the time? Seeing all the big cities and exotic places that Abby had dreamed about for her whole life? A life filled with adventure and excitement? Even just a bit of *danger*?