

The background of the cover is a scenic landscape. In the foreground, a bald eagle is shown in mid-flight, wings spread wide, flying from the left towards the center. Below the eagle, a large snake is coiled on a rocky ledge, its head raised. The middle ground features a valley with a river or stream, and the background consists of rolling mountains under a hazy sky. The text is overlaid on this scene.

Miracle

the novel

M.L. Bushman

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Jigsaw Press
Sun River, Montana

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*For my daughter, Dayle,
my sweetest gift,
my constant joy,
and my greatest blessing.
You are my hero.*

Prologue

From a flat rock perch high atop the stratified sandstone cliff, she dangled her feet over spinach-green slashes of juniper, pinion, and ponderosa pine, terrain creased and buckled like a rumpled blanket. Tears rivered her freckled cheeks, dripping from her chin to splash her bare thighs.

Wouldn't it be great to just soar like an eagle? Sail free like the hunting pair circling the treetops below?

Where was the justice, the so-called mercy in leaving the bastard responsible alive? And free, don't forget that. Free the little prick was, to live and love as if innocent blood never stained his hands.

Either there was no God, or he simply couldn't be bothered. Maybe he'd pressed some cosmic remote and muted the world, changed the channel, surfed on to bigger, better things.

Perhaps life on Earth never mattered.

"I'm done, damn you. Done," she shouted to the cloudless sky. "You don't even know who I am."

Squinting against a brilliant sun, she opened her arms to the warming updrafts, her auburn hair sweeping the smooth rock behind.

"See me, God?" her voice broke on a sudden choking sob, and with great effort, she wailed, "I'm—"

A shudder of sandstone beneath her, a resounding snap, and terror squelched her rising scream, arms and legs flailing thin air for purchase.

Hair whipping in the wind, she watched the rough cliff face growing into the ever-blue approach to Heaven and tensed for impact, certain Hell itself was but a final breath away.

Chapter One

1

Micah snatched the young woman from the treetops with inches to spare, proud of his finesse not a cosmic moment later. No simple feat that, the aerodynamics radically different on a planet with an atmosphere, ensconced in a life form he'd only gained use of a scant terrestrial day prior.

Fortunately, he'd retained his powers this time, unlike the last two (or was it three?) assignments where he'd been required to live like every other member of the indigenous species until the moment arrived, and his task performed, he was free to leave for home. Almost a demotion, those errands had seemed, not that he'd done anything remotely worthy of punishment.

He was none too happy with his given method of Earthly transport, however, especially after too long a taste of the saddle left his...what...uh...*oh, something...*

Ass, right, Gabe? My ass is sore?

The archangel snickered through his thoughts and said, Is it?

Can't you just answer me and leave it at that?

I did, asshole. That's the word. Thought you had a handle on the lingo.

I do, for the most part, but it was a crash cour—.

Then get with the program.

What? Oh, shit.

The familiar little snigger that followed had always grated his being raw. An eternity under Gabriel's supervision left little room for even the tiniest of illusions that Time might soften his attitude. And why he was always free for each of Micah's assignments simply boggled. Was everyone at his level *that* busy, all the time? Change was good, wasn't it? A change of supervisors

even better.

Quit hovering around, Gabriel snapped. You can't afford to be late.

I'm right on schedule.

You'd think so, wouldn't you?

Ignoring the overt attempt to instill doubt, Micah envisioned a graceful upward spiral, the erose face of the high cliff sliding by, the girl a sleeping feather in his arms. Like a damn... hmmm...butterfly, wasn't he? Sure, beautiful in flight. Over the jagged edge he swooped, stalling to a perfect two-point landing near a pile of faded jeans and green t-shirt, underwear, socks, and cowboy boots. He placed the naked woman on a soft patch of verdant turf in the shade of a young pine created especially for the purpose, then re-dressed her in a thought. A step back into a turn toward the trees, he blew a two-fingered whistle for his four-legged ride.

The black beast cleared the forest at a canter, speeding up on his approach, and Micah dropped to a seat beside the woman. Damn horse had set him in the dirt for the last time. No wonder his...uh...ass hurt, not to mention his chest. Shit, a failure this time might take them both over the cliff and catching a horse wasn't noted anywhere on his schedule. Besides, the silly animal might decide he liked to fly and try it when Micah wasn't looking.

The horse skipped to stop a short distance away, eyed him a moment, then ambled forward to plop his velvet muzzle in Micah's lap, angling his head to rub brow and cheek against Micah's bruised chest. He scratched about the flickering ears, up into the thick mane until the affectionate equine lifted its head to stare at him, vigorously working the bit with teeth and tongue.

"Well, sure." Micah slipped the bridle free and a joyful whack to his midsection by the black nose knocked him back to his elbows. The horse proceeded to wander back toward the trees, head down, snuffing the semi-barren ground.

For the umpteenth time since first he'd put it on, Micah yanked the black hat from his head to smooth the sweat of his brow, ruffle his silken hair to catch the cooling breeze—excuses,

mainly, to further experience his fingers. Sensitive marvels these singular digits, the opposing thumb making the perfect all-purpose tool, this life form a superior biological design overall. Maintenance was another matter: that first need to eliminate a warm, wet surprise to Gabriel's unabashed amusement.

Howled with...laughter. Yeah, that's what he'd done, the bastard.

The young woman stiffened, then sat up, green eyes dazzling in confusion. Sunlight basted her long thick hair in copper flames, like those that had danced atop the small fire he'd napped beside the night before.

"I'm not dead?" she cried, scrambling to her feet.

"Look pretty lively to me," Micah said.

She looked down at herself, then surprisingly aimed a glare at him. "And who are you?"

"Micah."

"Micah who?"

A second name? No one mentioned that. At Gabriel's whispered suggestion, he replied, "Divine, Micah Divine."

Hands on her hips, she tilted her head, and fired. "What kind of silly name is that?"

A cosmic snicker and Micah frowned. "Good as any other, I guess."

Prick, he snapped at Gabriel between two earth seconds of time. You left that two names shit out on purpose.

The archangel laughed outright and said, Epithets are easy to remember, aren't they?

Not always.

Right, you had trouble with your ass.

Shut the hell—.

"What're you doing here?" she demanded, Gabriel's howls of amusement preventing a ready reply. Before Micah drew a breath, she asked, "Just where are you from anyway?"

"All over Creation," he said.

"You being smart-mouthed now?"

"Uh...no, ma'am. Not trying to be." Smart-mouthed? What the hell's that? Gabriel, this wasn't on the schedule.

Miracle

Maybe not *yours*, came the whispered reply.

She folded her arms across her chest. "I've never seen you around here before."

"Just got here yesterday," he said and snatched his hat upon getting to his feet, amazed to discover he towered over her by a good...fuck...what's the word?

Foot, Gabriel said. Twelve inches, ok? Not that appendage on the end of your leg. Your expletive was magnificent, by the way. Starting to think like a real human now.

Micah's pride at the unexpected praise dissipated with her next sentence.

"I think you better go."

"Me? Why do I have to leave?"

"Well, I was..." Her eyes widened, then she wrinkled her freckled nose. "Busy."

"Sleeping?" he asked, clapping his hat on his head. "That isn't safe, a woman alone, is it?"

She cast her gaze to his scuffed black boots. "Never mind."

"Bad dream, was it?"

She bit her lip, glanced back to cliff's edge, then refused to meet his eyes.

"So, what's your name?" he asked.

"Carol...Flannigan." She looked past Micah now. "If that's your horse, you don't want him wandering off around here. Rim Road's just beyond the trees."

"Aw, he won't leave."

"You're sure about that."

What a skeptic—they weren't all like that, were they? Micah rammed two fingers in his mouth to whistle, and a moment after, his horse loped free of the pines.

"Aw, crap," he muttered, dropping into a crouch.

"You have a problem?" Carol asked.

"Me? No, it's him." Micah gestured at the speedy black beast flattened into a gallop. "He's convinced he can stop on a dime. Well, I let him try to prove that a couple of times and now he won't quit. He'll knock me down if I let him." He slapped his back pocket. "No offense, ma'am, but this ass is already sore."

Was that a flicker of a smile? Hard to tell, it was gone so fast.

The horse crow hopped to a halt, doing his best to guilt Micah in a stare.

He took up the bridle on the rise to his feet, then crooked the fingers of his right hand. "Come on, then." The animal snorted, tossed his head, then pricked his ears, and high-stepped the short distance, neck arched like a carousel pony, tail a wavy black plume.

Micah couldn't help a chuckle at the show-off, and Carol's wide-eyed wonder.

"You train him yourself?"

"Nah, just talked him into it." He corralled the satin neck with an arm to feed the docile equine the bit.

She was silent, watching while he bridled the horse, then said, "My father might be interested in you."

Micah casually latched the chinstrap, his timing impeccable, his delivery unmatched. "What for?"

"He needs a new man...who knows horses." She scowled, averting her eyes. "Well, if you showed him...this one."

"Like to meet your father then. I could use the work."

Her shoulders sagged. "He can't pay anywhere near what you're worth—."

"I don't do anything for money." Ah, there it was, a real smile to trade, her posture a bit straighter now.

"You don't?"

"Do you?"

She paused as if to consider, then said, "I don't think so."

"From what I understand, that's fairly uncommon here."

Oh, now she gave him a skeptical look, edged in alarm. Had he misused the language in some way? His horse yawned, stretched his neck, and shook out his mane.

"So, where'd you park your rig?" she asked.

"My what?"

"Truck and trailer. Don't you have one?"

"No." The snicker on High intensified his irritation. To think he could be piloting a machine about the terrain instead of—.

Miracle

Pay attention, Gabriel barked.

Her eyes narrowed to slits a gamma ray couldn't sneak past. "Well, you're just plain odd."

"No odder than a nightmare, am I?"

Her head jerked as if he'd slapped her. "Where are you from?" she asked, enunciating every word.

He grinned. "All over Creation."

Her quarter pivot ended in a sudden squint, then a turn back to look him square in the eye. "You want to meet my father, you can follow me to the house. You'll have to wait for him though."

"Is it far?"

"A few miles. Why?" She abruptly showed him both palms. "No, don't tell me. Your ass is sore."

A backward glance or five and she climbed behind the wheel of a faded-blue pickup parked in the shade of the pines, the motor thrumming to life a moment later. Micah gathered the reins and swung into the saddle, right on time.

According to his schedule.

2

Carol paid little attention to the rutted dirt road angling north, away from the Mogollon Rim, the rugged escarpment defining the southwestern edge of the Colorado Plateau, a geological formation thousands of years in the making. Cooler forest left for sun-lit fields of native grass harboring the occasional squat prickly pear cactus, via rear and side mirrors she kept a flitting eye on the stranger and his trick horse trotting behind her idling truck, the return home hardly worth a conscious thought, she knew the way so well.

Shouldn't she be toasting her tootsies in Hell about now? How did she wake up—*wake up*—at the top of the cliff fully clothed, this irksome man beside her? Perhaps he was right, maybe she'd fallen asleep and that snap of the rock, the sudden drop was all a bad dream.

Chills shivered despite the oven-hot wind gusting through

the open cab windows. God might not be quite as far away as she'd been wont to assume.

Tall he was, this cowboy out of nowhere, his hair a deeper black than even that of his horse, and his eyes, the violet-blue of a late autumn sky, irises rimmed in a riotous bronze...unearthly...almost.

Who was he? All over creation? What could he mean by that?

Upon her descent of the drive, the lazy blades of the windmill rose over the yellowing hillside, undulating in the heat beyond a two-story log house shaded by leafy giant elm and ancient cottonwood at the rear. A large barn emerged stark white on her left, a round corral at its back, holding pens forward of a small shop and loading chute for cattle ferried to market.

What had she been thinking? Times were tough enough for her father. As hard as he'd worked over his lifetime, as well off as he'd been just three years ago, he now teetered on the brink of losing everything. Still, wasn't the state of the world itself living proof that God didn't give one big fat shit about anything on Earth, much less the lives of individuals like her father? Good men didn't stand a chance. Yet her father clung to his faith, rock-solid sure God would help him. Even told her he'd been praying for a miracle. And she'd almost called him a fool? Not quite so easy to think that way, not now, not after...

A glance in the rear view mirror only deepened her confusion.

She parked the pickup near the five terraced steps leading to the front door, surprised to see her father leaning against a cedar stanchion in the shade of the covered porch. A rugged man in his late fifties, silver streaked his bright red hair, a hint of paunch under the white shirt tucked into his jeans. Carol slammed the cab door and trudged up the stairs.

"What're you doing here?" she asked. "Thought you were going to Holbrook."

"Who you got with you, Daughter?"

"Some guy named Micah Divine."

"Heck of a moniker there."

Micah's lack of gear mystified, rooted her to the porch to

stare. Sand-colored duster and light bedroll behind the cantele, black saddlebags hardly laden, coil of new rope cinched in the latigos, striped canteen hanging from the saddle horn. Dressed in a long-sleeved chambray shirt and jeans identical to clothing favored by two of her father's hired hands, Micah wore no gun of any kind, no knife, not a single weapon she could see.

"That's a trick horse he's got there," Carol said finally.

"Where's he from?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't ask, or he didn't tell you?"

"Ask him yourself."

A half-smile and he said, "All right, I will."

At Micah's approach, the black horse on his heels like a dog, her father descended the stairs with his hand out.

"Rory Flannigan."

They eyed one another, the handshake secondary to the initial sizing up, then both traded grins like old friends.

"Daughter tells me that's a trick pony you got there."

Micah shrugged a shoulder. "No, not really."

"Is too," she said emphatically. A flicker of his eyes in her direction, then his horse plopped its head on his shoulder like a jealous child, irritating Carol all the more. Damned if she knew why though.

Rory nodded at the horse. "Where'd you get that guy?"

"Found him," Micah replied, curling his arm about the black nose, then backing the animal up a stride with a forefinger's worth of pressure to his muzzle.

Her father's smile deepened the crow's feet about his eyes. "You found him, you say?"

"Uh-huh. A few miles from the base of that cliff where I caught your daughter—sleeping."

Carol's breath seized her throat. Was that just a slip of the tongue, or was he trying to say...no, he couldn't mean...could he? She turned her head from a prickly chill of disbelief to her father's intense concern.

"What were you doing out there?"

How was she supposed to answer that? She looked away.

“Man said he just got here yesterday.”

Micah busied himself relieving his horse of its bridle, the corners of his mouth upturned in what looked like a self-satisfied grin. Damn man, what did he know anyway?

Rory hesitated, then said to Micah, “Looks like a mustang to me. How long you been working with him?”

He squinted. “Wasn’t very cooperative at first.”

“They rarely are. How long?”

“Since yesterday.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Carol muttered under her breath.

Rory rubbed his chin as if he hadn’t heard her. “You say you just acquired him yesterday?”

“Well, I...” Micah glanced her way briefly, but she couldn’t read his eyes. Was he mad now, had she gotten to him? Confused him like he’d done her? Was that a shake of his head? He hooked the bridle over the saddle horn, then furrowed his brow, and said, “Yep, yesterday.”

The smile on her father’s face broadened, the first display of genuine amusement Carol could recall in too long a time, and a breathless chuckle escaped his throat.

“That’s the biggest whopper from a poker-straight face I’ve heard in a good while. Where you from?”

“All over creation.”

“See?” she said, righteously baffled now. “He doesn’t even have a rig—.”

Rory shut her down with a wave of his hand. “Makes no difference to me.”

Why not, she wanted to scream the instant before the gunshot crack of a whip precipitated a painful squeal. Micah’s horse wheeled to face the barn, ears flat against his neck.

“Kerry,” she said, the sudden nausea watering her mouth.

Her father’s countenance darkened at a scowl. “Bastard’s supposed to be breaking that horse, not beating it to death.”

Micah’s frown scared Carol for the intensity. “Your daughter mentioned you might have some work—.”

“You want a job, come with me.” Rory strode the wide graveled

Miracle

drive toward the barn, Micah a half step behind, his horse in an agitated, head-tossing trot beside him.

Carol hurried after, the pace quickening at each new report, each heart-rending equine cry for help.

Maybe her father would fire the murderous prick...at last.

3

Kerry Penfield lifted his gray hat long enough to swipe the gritty sweat of his brow on a sleeve before the salt chanced to burn his eyes, then wagging the bullwhip, started after the huffing silver stallion. Teeth bared, the animal lunged, and quick as a rattler's strike, Kerry stung the sleek haunch with the knotted tip of the leather plait, springing the squealing horse into a full pivot. The unexpected move in close quarters knocked Kerry flat, and he scrambled for the fence on all fours, stopped at a glance over his shoulder to the immobile horse, head up and ears forward, as if someone approached.

The urge stirred Kerry then, a shadow he recognized, hungry, waiting to be fed. Ah, but he was so restless with it lately. Or maybe it was restless with him.

Kerry got to his feet, swatted the dust from his jeans, scaring the stud to the far side of the corral. The bullwhip lay in the dusty earth at the center of corral like a braided snake frozen mid-slither.

The perfect opportunity had almost slipped through his fingers. When Carol left the house that morning, puffy eyed and too fucked up to manage a pan of scrambled eggs, he had no doubt where she was headed. Her father off to Holbrook, the county seat, all the surreptitious tracking looked about to pay off until Dawson and Seth dillied about the barn too long to risk simply riding out after her. The purring motor had announced her return, early enough to kindle a secondary plan of action. Minutes after the engine died, he'd baited the trap, certain the snotty little bitch wouldn't hesitate to confront him over the horse in her father's stead. The irony wasn't wasted on him, however. Snatch her from the same corral, even kill her first, if necessary.

Her truck parked back at the ranch before lunch, before anyone else might be expected to return, and they'd find him hard at work in the barn. Beyond suspicion—this time.

Gravel crunched underfoot, too loud to be anything less than alarming. He turned to face the sound, squinting to cover his astonishment at meeting Rory's glare.

"What the hell did I tell you before?" he said upon making the wood rail fence.

"I didn't touch him, just put the fear of God in him." Dread knotting his stomach, Kerry glanced from Carol's frown to an equally unhappy stranger, a head taller than his angry employer, *who should be in Holbrook right now*. What the fuck was Rory doing home—?

"Why?" the newcomer asked.

"Why what?" Kerry snapped.

"Why do you need to scare any horse into working with you?"

Caught without reply, he glowered at the nosy bastard instead until an outfitted, yet unbridled black horse trotted freely around the far side of the corral to touch noses in greeting with the gray.

"Do I have to remind you how much that stud is worth?" Rory said to Kerry.

"I know already, Hancock pedigree and all that." Man was a skipping fucking record sometimes. "You want him broke, Rory, that's what I'm doing. No one else wants to try."

"Bet he could do it," Carol said, a tip of her head toward the imposing stranger.

Rory looked up to the man beside him. "If you're of a mind, then be my guest."

Damn that fucker could move, up and over the rails like a giant chimpanzee, beside Kerry not five seconds later. Or so it seemed.

He offered his hand along with his name to which Kerry sniggered, avoiding his gaze until the bastard slowly let his arm to his side and said, "So. You're Kerry, huh?"

"Who...ah, Rory or Carol, they told you my name?"

Miracle

Micah leaned closer. "No one had to tell me, Penfield." The ominous whisper closed in from all sides. "We were scheduled to meet."

Kerry sucked a staccato breath, backpedaling half a step in alarm.

Micah looked to Rory. "Horse got a name?"

"Miracle."

"Perfect." He levied a beaming smile on Kerry. "Believe in them, don't you?"

"What?" he said, his thoughts in a nasty gridlock. Scheduled to—?

"Miracles. Happen every day you know."

"I like you already," Rory said.

Kerry headed for the fence to escape the oddball, and said over his shoulder, "Grab my whip while you're down there in the dirt."

Micah chuckled after him. "Should've got it when you were down there before, don't you think?"

Rory shared a grin with Carol, who then studied her boot tops and giggled. Fuming, Kerry perched on the top rail, more than happy to witness the damnable horse make a fool out of the smart-ass.

Miracle swung his head about for a good look at the tall man approaching slowly, hands out at his sides, then returned to the black horse, who lifted his nose and...nodded?

Of all the stupid shit, damn nag had to be shagging a fly. Kerry looked past Carol, lost in a wide-eyed stare after Micah, to Rory, who met his gaze with hiked brows and a challenging smirk.

Shreds of a whisper rode the erratic breeze and Kerry gaped in angry disbelief when Micah ambled right up beside that stiff-legged gray stud.

"I'll be damned," Rory murmured, trading yet another smile with his daughter.

Micah ran his hands over the horse's face and neck, fondled both ears, then scratched along the narrow ridge of coal black mane, landing an itchy spot mid-way down the neck. Miracle

shivered, arched his back, head rising into the air until his dark muzzle pointed skyward, top lip draped over bottom, a foamy drool oozing over his chin. When Micah stopped, the horse whickered in collecting himself, then nudged the man's arm with his nose.

"Just like...aw, God," Carol whispered, bowing her head. Rory slung his arm about his daughter's shoulders.

"What the fuck?" Kerry muttered under his breath. All that work with the horse shot to hell. And that silly black broomtail, head and neck stretched over the rail as if mesmerized by Micah's hand tracing a pewter foreleg to a black hoof, which Miracle promptly lifted as if he'd done that a million times.

Carol searched her father's face. "Did Chase get that far with him?"

"Let's think he did and leave it at that," Rory replied.

Kerry was dumbstruck. Even the most famous of horse whisperers should've had a rough time winning the animal's trust, taking days, maybe weeks, not minutes.

Who the hell was this guy?

Micah settled a smile on Rory, and said, "He'll work for you now." His disapproval roasted Kerry not a blink later. "Well, not you. He doesn't like you at all."

Rory snorted. "No surprise there."

"I ain't taking any chances," Kerry said, looking directly at Carol. "He's a killer—"

"Shut up," she yelled, and spun on her heel to stalk around the corner of the barn.

"From now on, you'll answer to Dawson," Rory said. "In fact, you can go catch up with him and Seth right now. You know exactly where they are, don't you?"

Beyond furious, Kerry stomped to the middle of the corral to collect his whip, then returned to the rail, grimacing in the effort to maintain his composure. "You're making a big mistake, Rory."

The old man met his glower with hazel fire ablaze in his eyes. "Wouldn't be the first time now, would it?"