

A TRUE STORY OF
FAMILY, BROKEN PROMISES,
AND FINDING FREEDOM

ERASED

— “THE FINAL PAYBACK” —
THE MILAM CURSE

BY-PASS TRUST

CHERRY CREEK RANCH

BASIN CREEK RANCH

PROMISES MADE

PROMISES BROKEN

FREEDOM FOUND

BOOK TWO

CRAIG MILAM

ERASED

"THE FINAL PAYBACK"

THE MILAM CURSE



BOOK TWO

CRAIG MILAM

On my 75th birthday I decided to review and edit my two books for grammar, clarity and to remember not what I lost but what others left behind.

Craig Milam
17771 Wild Goose Lane
Frenchtown, Montana 59835
www.milam.xyz

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For Julius Sebulsky.

*You tried to tell me the truth long before I
was ready to hear it.*

*More than fifty years later... I finally
understand.*

Thank you, my friend.

PROLOGUE

Every family has stories it proudly tells.

Some families also have stories they bury.

The buried stories never disappear.

They simply wait...

Waiting for someone willing to speak the truth.

For years I believed families were held together by blood.

Age has taught me something different.

Families are held together by truth.

When truth is replaced with silence...

when silence is replaced with lies...

when lies become the history a family chooses to remember...

a curse is born.

That curse doesn't pass from one generation to the next through fate.

It passes through fear.

Through manipulation.

Through broken promises.

Through secrets no one is allowed to question.

For much of my life I believed that being loyal meant remaining silent.

I was wrong.

Silence protects the lie.

Truth sets people free.

The pages that follow are not written to seek revenge.

Nor are they written to condemn.

They are written because every family deserves at least one person willing to tell the story honestly.

I have learned that monsters are real.

So are ghosts.

Neither lives in abandoned houses or forgotten graveyards.

They live inside ordinary people...

inside ordinary families...

waiting for someone to confront them.

Only the truth has the power to make them disappear.

— Craig Milam

September 21, 2026

Chapter 1

PARENTAL TRUST



When we are children, trust comes naturally.

We believe our parents know more about life than we do. We believe they love us, want what is best for us, and will guide us through life's difficult decisions. We rarely question their motives because, as children, they are the people we trust most.

I believe most parents begin with exactly those intentions.

They want their children to grow into honest, capable, independent adults. More than anything, I would like to believe they want their children to live happy and meaningful lives.

That was certainly what I believed about my own parents.

Looking back more than fifty years later, I realize my understanding of trust—and my understanding of Paul and Bernice—changed so gradually that I scarcely noticed it happening. There was no single event that shattered my confidence. Instead, it was slowly reshaped by hundreds of conversations, countless expectations, and a lifetime of promises that often changed after I had already committed myself.

As a child, I couldn't see any of it.

By the time I entered high school, however, my mother had become involved in nearly every important decision I made. She wanted things done her way, according to her timetable, and exactly as she instructed. Questions were often interpreted as defiance. Alternatives were rarely welcomed. As a teenager, I simply assumed that was how parents behaved.

At the time, I simply assumed that was how families worked.

One conversation from those years has remained with me all my life.

After watching *The Wonderful World of Disney*, I mentioned that someday I hoped to visit Disneyland—or perhaps Disney World.

I wasn't asking for money.

I wasn't asking to go right away.

I was simply sharing a dream.

My mother's response came without hesitation.

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Disney is for children."

"If you want to waste your time and money, you can do it on your own someday... if you ever earn enough money."

I remember sitting there thinking,

Wow.

Looking back, I realize it wasn't really about Disneyland.

It was about something much larger.

Even my dreams were subject to approval.

At the time, I didn't recognize that lesson.

I simply stopped talking about certain dreams.



After graduating from high school, I left home for college.

Ironically, I attended the university my mother believed I should attend.

I thought the distance might change our relationship.

It didn't.

Every Sunday evening, almost to the minute, the telephone in my dormitory rang at exactly five o'clock.

Never early.

Never late.

Always with the same greeting.

"This is your mother."

More than fifty years later, those four words still echo in my memory.

The conversations rarely began with questions about how I was adjusting to college life or whether I was happy.

Instead, they became weekly reviews of my life.

What had I done?

Who had I been with?

Why hadn't I done this?

Why had I done that?

If the conversation began pleasantly, it seldom ended that way.

By the time I hung up the telephone, I usually found myself wondering what I had done wrong.

At the time, I assumed the problem was me.



Only four months into my freshman year, tragedy struck.

My roommate and close friend, Jimmy Anderson, was killed in a mountain-climbing accident in Glacier National Park.

His death devastated me.

Like anyone who suddenly loses someone close, I struggled to understand how life could change so quickly.

A few days later, my parents called.

I thought, perhaps for the first time since leaving home, the conversation would be different.

I thought they might ask how I was doing.

They didn't.

Instead, the discussion quickly turned to something I had supposedly done wrong—something so insignificant that I can no longer remember what it was.

What I have never forgotten is what they didn't ask.

Not once did either of them ask how I was coping with Jimmy's death.

Not once did they ask if I was all right.

Not once did they offer comfort.

When I hung up the telephone, I realized something that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

Every conversation with my parents left me emotionally exhausted.

Every conversation somehow ended with me feeling guilty.

At the time I couldn't explain why.

I simply believed I wasn't measuring up.



I eventually decided Montana State University wasn't where I wanted to continue my education.

The education itself wasn't the problem.

Something simply didn't feel right.

I made plans to transfer to the University of Montana in Missoula.

Before I could transfer, however, my parents asked me for what they described as one special favor.

One request.

One family obligation.

I said yes.

That decision became the story told in *Julius and the Mysse Curse* —1971.

What I believed would last only a few weeks changed the direction of my life.

Cherry Creek gave me far more than an education in ranching.

It introduced me to Julius Sebulsky.

It taught me what hard work really meant.

It showed me what integrity looked like.

And, for the first time in my life, someone outside my family quietly challenged the way I saw my own parents.

More than once, Julius had warned me to put as much distance as possible between myself and Paul and Bernice. At the time, I understood the words, but I didn't fully understand what he saw coming.

I couldn't imagine why.

He didn't know my family.

I did.

Or at least I believed I did.

Looking back now, I realize Julius understood something long before I was ready to see it.

When I finally returned to college in Missoula, I convinced myself life would simply return to normal.

It didn't.

Cherry Creek wasn't the end of the story.

It was only the beginning.

The lessons I failed to learn in 1971 quietly followed me into the rest of my life.

The expectations became greater.

The guilt became heavier.

The promises became more complicated.

Because the changes happened so gradually, I rarely questioned them.

Instead, I spent much of my adult life trying to become the son I believed my parents wanted me to be.

It took me decades to realize I was pursuing something I could never attain.

No matter how hard I worked...

no matter how much I sacrificed...

no matter what I accomplished...

it was never enough.

I wasn't perfect.

But perfection was never really the issue.



The Cost of Approval

About a year and a half after leaving home for college in Missoula, I finally felt as though I was beginning to build a life of my own.

During that time, I met a young woman who meant the world to me.

I loved her.

For the first time, I could honestly imagine spending the rest of my life with someone.

Like most young men, I wanted the people I loved to meet the woman I loved.

More than anything, I wanted my parents' approval.

When they met her, my father smiled.

"I think she's the one," he said.

My mother said very little.

At some point during the visit, however, she asked to speak privately with my girlfriend.

I never knew what was said.

I only knew that afterward something changed.

Almost overnight, our relationship quietly came to an end.

I never saw her again.

When I finally asked my mother what had happened, her answer stunned me.

“I forbid you to marry anyone.”

Then she added,

“Especially Catholics, Jews, Mexicans, Blacks, or people who aren’t like us. And especially anyone from Butte.”

I simply stared at her.

I remember thinking,

Did I really just hear that?

Looking back now, I don’t believe those words merely ended one relationship.

They quietly shaped every relationship that followed.

After that day, I rarely brought another young woman home.

In truth, I rarely wanted to.

What if she wasn’t the right religion?

What if she wasn’t Norwegian enough?

What if my parents simply decided she wasn’t acceptable?

It seemed easier to protect a relationship by keeping it away from my parents than to risk watching another one quietly disappear.

On the rare occasions I did introduce someone to them, my mother seemed determined to tell every embarrassing story she could remember from my childhood.

Nothing was private.

Nothing was off limits.

Instead of introducing the man I had become, she introduced the boy she still believed she could control.

I never understood why.

After all these years...

I still don't.



Time has taught me that I rarely understand the meaning of important events while I am living through them.

Looking back, I believed I was simply being a respectful son.

I listened.

I worked harder.

I apologized whenever I thought I had disappointed someone.

I believed that was what family required.

Only years later did I realize how much of my life had become centered on earning approval instead of trusting my own judgment.

Cherry Creek should have changed that.

Julius certainly hoped it would. He tried.

I remembered Julius's repeated warning to put as much distance as possible between myself and Paul and Bernice. By then, I was beginning to understand why he had said it.

Still I couldn't accept his advice.

He didn't know my family.

Or so I believed.

Instead, I convinced myself that loyalty meant enduring whatever family asked of me.

As the years passed, I began noticing a pattern.

Not just with my parents.

With my entire family.

Conflict was rarely confronted directly.

Guilt often replaced conversation.

Silence replaced difficult truths.

Promises had a way of changing after commitments had already been made.

At first, I believed I could somehow keep everyone happy.

I couldn't.

As I established my teaching career, my mother's involvement in my life never really diminished.

She wanted to know where I was.

Who I spent time with.

Who my friends were.

She formed opinions about people she had never met and criticized individuals she knew nothing about.

If I disagreed, guilt usually followed.

Whenever something needed repairing around my parents' home, I was expected to come no matter where I lived. .

If my mother needed transportation, I was expected to drive.

Paul was almost always "too busy."

Gary, according to my mother, had his own family to care for and couldn't be expected to help.

After Gary and Réene suffered the heartbreaking loss of their youngest son, my mother often reminded me that nothing like that could ever happen to "her family" again.

Each time I heard those words, I quietly found myself wondering,

Wasn't I part of that family too?

As the years passed, the expectations became less obvious but no less powerful.

There were fewer demands.

More criticism.

More disappointment.

More silence.

I slowly learned that silence can become another form of judgment.

The farther I moved from Bigfork, the more I hoped distance would bring peace.

It didn't.

Looking back now, I realize I wasn't trying to escape my family.

I was searching for enough room to become my own person.

Even then, I still believed that if I worked a little harder...

gave a little more...

and disappointed them a little less...

I might finally earn the approval I had been seeking for most of my life.

It would take many more years before I understood the truth.

Approval was never really the issue.

Control was.



Caught Between Two Worlds

After graduating from college in 1974, I accepted my first teaching position in Jordan, Montana.

Looking back, I often ask myself why I chose Jordan.

There were better-paying jobs elsewhere.

The answer is both simple and painful.

Jordan kept me close to Cherry Creek.

More importantly, it kept me close enough to satisfy my mother's continuing interest in everything happening on the Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

She wanted to know what Sivert was doing.

What Janet was doing.

Who was buying equipment.

What new buildings were being constructed.

How money was being spent.

And what rumors were circulating across eastern Montana.

Without realizing it, I slipped back into the same role I had promised myself I would never accept again.

I became Bernice's eyes and ears.

At the time, I told myself I was simply helping my mother.

Looking back now...

I know I was doing far more than that.



Life in ranch country had its own communication network.

Most of the larger ranches used shortwave radios, often sharing the same frequencies. News traveled quickly. If something happened on one ranch, neighboring ranches usually knew about it before the day was over.

One afternoon in October, three years after Julius and I had finished the log lambing barn at Cherry Springs, I decided to drive back and see how our work had stood the test of time.

I was so proud of that building.

I wanted to see it one more time.

Afterward, I planned to stop at the Jersey Lilly in Ingomar for a cheeseburger, a Pepsi, and whatever stories happened to be making the rounds that day.

It sounded like an ordinary afternoon.

It wasn't.

As I approached Cherry Springs, the log lambing barn stood exactly where Julius and I had left it.

For a few moments, I found myself smiling.

Five months of sweat, splinters, aching muscles, and determination still stood proudly against the Montana prairie.

Before I reached the corrals, however, a cowboy rode toward my pickup.

I had never seen him before.

After introducing myself, I explained that I was one of the owners of Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

He smiled politely.

“My name’s Evertt,” he said.

“That’s Evertt with two T’s.”

Even now, I can still hear him saying those words.

Then his expression changed.

“Sivert told all of us that if you were ever seen on Cherry Creek, we were to let him know immediately.”

He hesitated before continuing.

“I don’t have anything against you.”

“But it’d make life easier for everybody if you’d leave... and never come back.”

The words caught me completely by surprise.

I thanked him for being honest.

Then I quietly turned my pickup around and drove away.

As I left Cherry Springs behind, one sentence kept replaying in my mind.

“It’d make life easier for everybody.”

At the time, I didn’t understand what Evertt meant.

Some time later...

I did.



Cherry Creek's shortwave radios worked exactly as they were supposed to.

By the time I reached Ingomar, Sivert already knew I had been seen at Cherry Springs.

It happened to be the day after my birthday.

I had just settled into a table at the far end of the Jersey Lilly with a cheeseburger and a bottle of Pepsi when the front door opened.

Sivert walked in.

He never looked at the menu.

He never greeted anyone.

Instead, beneath the brim of his white straw Stetson, he slowly scanned the café until his eyes found mine.

Without saying a word, he walked to the cooler, took out a Pepsi, paid Bill Seward, and came directly to my table.

He sat down across from me.

For several moments, neither of us spoke.

Finally, in a calm, measured voice, he said,

"I don't ever want you on my property again."

I nodded.

“I heard you.”

He leaned forward.

“No.”

“I mean it.”

“Never.”

Again, I nodded.

Then, without warning, his composure vanished.

His face flushed bright red.

Pepsi sprayed across the table, my lunch, and onto my face as he shouted,

“Listen to me!”

“You’re on my damn land!”

“Not Bernice’s!”

“Not Paul’s!”

“My f...ing land!”

“I’m sick of Bernice meddling in my business.”

“I’m sick of Paul trying to divide this ranch.”

Then he pointed directly at me.

“And I’m sick of you being caught in the middle of it.”

His finger remained fixed on me.

“If you get hurt out there...”

“...it’s your own damn fault.”

“You don’t belong on my property.”

The Jersey Lilly fell silent.

Conversations stopped.

Every eye in the café was on us.

I didn’t argue.

I didn’t defend myself.

I simply sat there.

Not because I agreed with Sivert.

Not because I disagreed.

But because, for the first time, I understood something neither side of the family seemed willing to admit.

I wasn’t the problem.

I was the messenger.

And throughout history...

messengers have rarely been welcomed.



No Man Can Serve Two Masters

I have replayed that conversation with Sivert countless times over the years.

His anger had caught me completely off guard.

Then I remembered why I had come to Cherry Creek in the first place.

I had questions of my own.

Quietly, I looked across the table.

“Is it true,” I asked, “that you and Janet have put Cherry Creek nearly one and a half million dollars in debt?”

Sivert didn’t answer.

“So how are you going to pay it back?”

“No more Fall Parties?”

“No more new Suburbans?”

“No more pickups?”

“No more equipment the ranch doesn’t really need?”

I paused before continuing.

“I’m a partner.”

“My mother is a partner.”

“So is Marie.”

“Whether you like it or not, your sisters own part of Cherry Creek.”

Before he could interrupt, I continued.

“Merton told me more than I ever wanted to know.”

“Then I spent over six months working with Julius at Cherry Springs.”

“I’ve seen enough to ask a few questions of my own.”

Sivert’s expression hardened.

“I should never have let my sister’s son set foot on this ranch.”

He leaned back in his chair.

“Are you finished?”

“No.”

I wasn’t.

“What happened to all the sheep?”

“What happened to the partnership payments everyone was promised?”

“We were told the steers were making money.”

“So where did it all go?”

“And what happens when the bank comes looking for one and a half million dollars?”

The Jersey Lilly became so quiet I could hear dishes clinking in the kitchen.

Sivert slowly stood.

He looked directly at me.

When he spoke again, his voice was calm.

Almost matter-of-fact.

“Mark my words.”

“No one but me has ever done any real work on Cherry Creek.”

“My father intended for me to inherit the entire ranch.”

He paused.

“It’s the Norwegian way.”

“The oldest son inherits everything.”

For a moment, I simply looked at him.

Then I asked the only question that came to mind.

“Really?”

“Where is that written in stone?”

Sivert never answered.

He turned, walked out the door, climbed into his maroon Suburban, and drove away as suddenly as he had arrived.

I looked down at my lunch.

Pepsi covered my hamburger, my fries, and part of the table.

My appetite was gone.

I quietly pushed my plate away.



After Sivert left, one of the local men quietly walked over to my table.

He lowered his voice.

“Word is...”

“Sivert has told the ranch hands that if you’re ever found on Cherry Creek again, they’re to remove you.”

He hesitated.

“By whatever means they think are necessary.”

“With a gun.”

“With force.”

“Or by calling the sheriff.”

For a long moment, I simply looked at him.

I wanted to believe he was exaggerating.

But I knew the man standing before me.

John Pinkerton had never lied to me.

I had no reason to believe he was lying now.



That evening, I called my mother.

I told her everything.

Evertt stopping me at Cherry Springs.

My confrontation with Sivert.

John Pinkerton's warning.

When I finished, Bernice surprised me.

She wasn't shocked.

She wasn't frightened for me.

Instead, she calmly told me that Sivert had already called her earlier that day.

According to her, I would only be allowed on Cherry Creek when Paul and Bernice were present conducting partnership business.

Then she dismissed everything else.

"Just do what I tell you."

"Don't worry about it."

"It was all talk."

I wanted to believe her.

She was my mother.

But for the first time in my life, trusting her no longer came as easily as it once had.

A question quietly entered my mind.

Did the people asking for my loyalty truly understand the position they had placed me in?

Or worse...

did they understand it and simply expect me to accept it?

Looking back now, I realize I had become something neither side wanted to acknowledge.

I wasn't simply Paul and Bernice's son.

I wasn't simply Sivert's nephew.

I was the man caught between two families who no longer trusted one another.

History has never been kind to people caught in the middle.

I was about to learn that lesson for myself.



The Warning Shot

Over the next several months, Sivert's warning became reality.

The ranch hands and sheepherders I had known while working with Julius at Cherry Springs no longer greeted me as a friend.

Whenever I happened to be on Cherry Creek, someone eventually appeared.

The message was always the same.

“Leave.”

At first, no one threatened me.

Then came February.

The roads across eastern Montana were frozen hard. Old snow still clung to the north-facing coulees as I drove from Cohagen toward Ingomar, looking forward to one of Bill Seward's cheeseburgers, a bowl of beans at the Jersey Lilly, and, no doubt, a bag of Cheetos.

Crossing Cherry Creek country, I pulled onto the shoulder for a moment.

I simply needed to relieve myself.

Nothing more.

As I climbed back into my pickup, I noticed another truck racing toward me from the south.

It was coming much too fast.

Within seconds, a light metallic-green Chevrolet pickup slid sideways across the road in front of me.

We both slammed on our brakes.

Gravel exploded into the air.

The pickup stopped broadside, blocking the entire road.

The driver's door flew open.

I recognized him immediately.

John Sebulsky.

Julius's brother.

For one brief moment, I smiled.

I thought I was about to visit with an old friend.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

John stepped from the pickup carrying a rifle.

Without a word, he raised it.

The barrel pointed directly at my chest.

Time seemed to stop.

Then...

he pulled the trigger.

The rifle cracked across the prairie.

The bullet slammed into the frozen gumbo road only a few feet from where I stood, showering me with dirt, gravel, and fragments of ice.

For a moment, I couldn't breathe.

My heart pounded so hard I could hear it.

I simply stood there staring at him.

Finally, John spoke.

"Don't you ever set foot on Cherry Creek again."

His voice was cold.

Flat.

Businesslike.

I still couldn't believe what had just happened.

"John," I said quietly, "I thought we were friends."

He looked at me as though he had never known me.

"You thought wrong."

Then his expression hardened.

"And now..."

"...you don't have my fuckin' brother protecting your worthless ass."

Those words cut almost as deeply as the rifle shot.

This wasn't just another ranch hand.

This was Julius's brother.

A man I believed knew who I was.

When Jack Rumdahl severed his finger, I had driven him to the hospital without a second thought because he was John's best friend.

I believed friendship meant helping one another.

Standing on that lonely road, I realized John and I understood friendship very differently.

He motioned with the rifle.

"Turn around."

"And don't ever come back."

I didn't argue.

I slowly climbed back into my pickup, turned around, and headed toward Jordan instead of Ingomar.

As I drove away, John shouted one final warning.

"Next time..."

"...I won't be so careful where I put the next bullet."

I never forgot those words.



Looking back now, I don't believe John intended to kill me that afternoon.

If he had, I probably wouldn't be here to tell this story.

The shot was a message.

A deliberate one.

Stay away.

What has troubled me all these years, however, isn't simply that a rifle was fired in my direction.

It's that no one who had placed me in the middle of the Cherry Creek conflict ever stopped to ask whether I was safe.

Not Paul.

Not Bernice.

Not anyone.

For years I believed loyalty meant standing beside your family no matter the cost.

Standing alone on that frozen Garfield County road, with the smell of burnt gunpowder drifting through the winter air, I found myself asking a question I had never seriously considered before.

Was loyalty supposed to work only one way?



When Trust Finally Broke

That evening I called my mother.

I carefully told her everything that had happened on the Garfield County road.

John Sebulsky had blocked the road.

He had pointed a rifle at me.

He had fired.

The bullet struck the frozen gumbo only a few feet from where I stood.

Then he warned me never to set foot on Cherry Creek again.

When I finished, I told Bernice something I never imagined I would have to say.

“It isn’t safe for me to be on Cherry Creek anymore.”

I expected concern.

Instead, she calmly assured me she would call her brother and “straighten this whole mess out.”

Looking back, what troubled me most wasn’t what she said.

It was what she didn’t say.

She never asked if I was all right.

She never asked whether I had been hurt.

She never asked how close the bullet had come.

For the first time in my life, I found myself wondering whether my safety had become secondary to the family conflict.

The irony wasn't lost on me.

I wasn't on Cherry Creek because I wanted to be.

I was there because my mother had repeatedly asked me to keep an eye on things for her.

That day I hadn't even planned to visit the ranch.

I intended to check on my grandfather's old house in Ingomar after the winter snows—as Bernice had requested—and then stop at the Jersey Lilly for lunch.

Nothing more.

Two weeks later, I called again.

I wanted to know what Sivert had said.

Her answer changed something deep inside me.

Bernice told me that Sivert had spoken with John.

According to John, none of it had happened.

He claimed he had never even seen me on the Garfield County road.

Then Bernice repeated Sivert's conclusion.

“Craig is a liar.”

She never said whether she believed him.

She never said whether she believed me.

She simply repeated the accusation.

For years, I had believed that when the truth mattered most, my parents would stand beside me.

For the first time...

I wasn't sure.

I hung up the telephone asking myself a question I never thought I would have to ask.

Did my own mother believe her brother more than she believed her son?

That question never completely left me.



By then, I had made another decision.

I would not remain another year in Jordan simply because Bernice wanted me close enough to keep watching Cherry Creek.

The problems at Cherry Creek belonged to the people who had created them.

They were no longer going to become mine.

A rifle had been pointed at me.

A shot had been fired.

Whether John intended to miss me or not was something only he could answer.

I have wondered about that ever since.

One thing, however, was beyond question.

I was no longer willing to risk my life over someone else's family war.



Late that spring, my friend Don Bray, the industrial arts teacher at Jordan High School, suggested we drive to Ingomar for lunch.

He had never eaten at the Jersey Lilly.

"I'll buy," he said.

"You drive."

It sounded like an ordinary afternoon.

We never made it.

Crossing Cherry Creek country on the county road, a familiar metallic-green pickup suddenly slid sideways across the road, blocking our path.

Don stared through the windshield.

“Who is that bug-eyed lunatic?”

Then he saw the rifle.

“What the hell is he going to do with that?”

I knew exactly who it was.

John Sebulsky.

For a split second, I considered turning around.

Instead, I quietly handed Don my Colt .38 Diamondback.

“If something goes bad,” I said, “use it.”

His eyes grew noticeably larger.

I stepped out of the pickup.

John spat tobacco juice onto the frozen road.

“Turn around.”

I explained that Don and I were simply driving to Ingomar for lunch on a public county road.

John wasn’t interested.

“Then take your ass back to Jordan while things are still good for both of you.”

He glanced toward Don.

“Cute bringing somebody with you.”

“It doesn’t change a damn thing.”

Then he smiled.

It wasn't a friendly smile.

"One bullet..."

"...or a few more..."

"...won't matter when the time comes."

He slowly looked across the empty prairie.

"There's a whole lot of places out here where a man can disappear."

"Get my drift?"

I understood perfectly.

So did Don.

John climbed back into his pickup and disappeared toward Cherry Springs.

Neither of us moved until he was gone.

Finally, Don looked at me.

"Get me the bloody hell out of here."

"Now."

"I think I just about shit myself."

Then he shook his head.

"I don't know what you did to make that man hate you..."

“...but I’d never cross paths with him again.”

We turned around and drove back to Jordan.

Neither of us felt much like eating.

Instead, we ended up at the Hell Creek Bar.

I never told Bernice about that second encounter.

There was no point.

After what had happened the first time, I no longer believed it would make any difference.

Even with another teacher sitting beside me as a witness.

That day I learned something I have never forgotten.

When someone refuses to believe the truth the first time...

telling it a second time rarely changes anything.



My remaining weeks in Jordan couldn’t pass quickly enough.

I had grown tired of Garfield County.

Tired of Rosebud County.

Tired of Cherry Creek.

Tired of living in the middle of someone else’s family war.

I wanted out.

I had no way of knowing that, before I left Jordan, life had one final surprise waiting for me.



Crossing My Own Line

The school year was drawing to a close.

One evening I walked downtown to Ryan's Grocery before heading home.

Parked in front of the Hell Creek Bar was a pickup I recognized immediately.

The metallic light-green Chevrolet.

John Sebulsky's pickup.

Whether it belonged to John or to the Cherry Creek Sheep Company no longer mattered.

I simply stood there looking at it.

Almost instantly, the memories returned.

A rifle pointed at my chest.

A bullet striking the frozen road only a few feet away.

Another roadblock.

Another rifle.

Another threat.

"There's a whole lot of places around here where a man can disappear."

I had tried to put those memories behind me.

I couldn't.

As darkness settled over Jordan, I looked through the window of the Hell Creek Bar.

John was inside.

Rummy was with him.

Another man I didn't recognize sat at the table.

The three of them looked as though they were settling in for a long evening.

I walked back outside.

For several minutes, I stood beside the pickup.

Then I did something I had never done before...

and have never done since.

I opened the hood.

I removed the distributor rotor.

I loosened the ignition wires.

Using my pocketknife, I nicked the fan belts just enough that they would eventually fail.

Finally, I removed the valve cores from all four tires.

I slipped the rotor and valve cores into my pocket.

When I quietly closed the hood, the pickup looked exactly as it had before.

Only it wasn't going anywhere.

I walked away.

Later that night I watched from a distance as the Hell Creek Bar closed.

John and his friends climbed into the pickup.

The starter turned.

The engine never fired.

Eventually the hood came up.

They argued.

One man kicked a tire.

Only then did they realize all four tires were flat.

One of them became so intoxicated he simply sat down on the sidewalk.

I turned around and went home.

The next morning, the pickup was gone.

Someone later told me it had been towed to Hagen Ford on its rims.

Everything I had done could be repaired.

At the time...

that seemed enough.

Later that summer, Sivert called Bernice.

He wanted to know if she knew anything about what had happened to the Cherry Creek pickup.

Naturally, she asked me.

I answered exactly as I intended to answer anyone else.

“I don’t know anything about it.”

She studied me for a long moment.

Whether she believed me, I never knew.

Inside, however, I couldn’t help thinking about the irony.

John had threatened my life twice.

Twice he had done it with a rifle.

The second time another teacher had witnessed the entire encounter.

If Julius had been there, I have little doubt how he would have reacted.

He loved his brother.

But he also believed there were lines that should never be crossed.

Pointing a rifle at another human being without cause was one of them.

Looking back, I have often wondered how many times Julius protected me without my ever realizing it.

Something else also struck me.

Cherry Creek pickups weren't supposed to leave the ranch without Sivert's permission.

Repairs were normally made in Forsyth, not in Jordan.

The pickup shouldn't have been parked in front of the Hell Creek Bar that night in the first place.

When I mentioned that to Bernice, she had no answer.

Several weeks later, another accusation surfaced.

Sivert claimed he had proof that I had sabotaged the Cherry Creek pickup.

According to him, Jordan's Sheriff "Spud" had witnesses.

I knew that wasn't true.

The street had been empty.

I had worked in complete darkness.

No one had seen me.

For the first time in my life, I refused to defend myself.

"If that's true," I told Bernice, "tell Sivert to file charges."

"I'll turn myself in."

Nothing happened.

No charges were filed.

No sheriff ever contacted me.

The accusation quietly disappeared.

Looking back now, I am not proud of what I did.

Sabotaging that pickup was wrong.

I crossed a line I had never crossed before.

It remains the only act of revenge I have ever committed in my life.

Would I do it again?

No.

Fear changes people.

Being threatened at gunpoint—twice—by someone you once considered a friend changes you in ways that are difficult to explain.

That night, I wasn't trying to hurt John.

I wasn't trying to prove anything.

I wanted him to experience, if only for a few hours, a small measure of the helplessness he had made me feel.

It didn't solve anything.

It didn't bring me peace.

If anything, it taught me something I have never forgotten.

Revenge may quiet anger for a moment.

It never heals the wound that caused it.



You Can't Escape What You Won't See

Later that same summer, something happened that still puzzles me.

My mother had developed a habit of saving issues of the Montana Wool Growers Magazine whenever someone connected with Cherry Creek Sheep Company appeared on the cover.

Each issue represented another small piece of Cherry Creek history.

One afternoon I walked downstairs in my parents' home and stopped in my tracks.

Hanging on the wall outside my bedroom was the newest cover.

It was John Sebulsky.

There he was.

His dark green cap.

That familiar bug-eyed expression.

That same crooked grin I remembered from the Garfield County road.

The man who had pointed a rifle at me.

Twice.

I looked at my mother.

“Why would you hang his picture on the wall?”

Her answer stunned me.

“John Sebulsky is an important part of your grandfather’s legacy,” she said.

“He helped keep Cherry Creek going.”

“He deserves to be recognized.”

For a moment, I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“What about the rifle?” I asked.

“What about Evertt warning me to stay off the ranch?”

“What about Sivert?”

“What about John threatening to shoot me?”

She barely hesitated.

“It was all just a misunderstanding.”

“You need to get over it.”

I stood there speechless.

What stayed with me wasn’t the magazine cover.

It was how quickly my experience disappeared from the conversation.

The threats.

The fear.

The intimidation.

None of it seemed to matter.

Protecting the image of Cherry Creek mattered more.

Looking back, I believe that conversation marked another turning point in my life.

I was beginning to understand that, in my family, preserving appearances often mattered more than confronting reality.



That summer I accepted a teaching position at Kremlin-Gildford High School on Montana's Hi-Line.

It was farther from Bigfork.

Farther from Cherry Creek.

Farther from the conflicts that had consumed so much of my life.

For three years I taught, coached football, basketball, and track, and tried to build a life that belonged to me instead of my parents.

It wasn't enough.

The requests never stopped.

There was always another favor.

Another family matter.

Another reason I was needed.

Eventually I accepted an overseas contract managing hydroponic greenhouses in Saudi Arabia.

Halfway around the world finally seemed far enough.

For the first time in years, I believed I had escaped.

Ironically, it was in the deserts of Saudi Arabia that I found myself thinking most often about Julius.

One sentence of his returned to me again and again.

“Eventually you’ll end up where you’re supposed to be... with who you’re supposed to be with... doing what you’re supposed to be doing.”

I wanted to believe him.

I also promised myself that I would never again become trapped in someone else’s family war.

Near the end of my overseas contract, Bernice began calling by satellite telephone.

International calls were difficult and expensive then.

Only one person could speak at a time.

Even halfway around the world, my mother somehow managed to interrupt nearly every sentence I tried to finish.

She sounded frightened.

Marie had sold her interest in Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

According to Bernice, everything was falling apart. She was losing her heritage.

Then she made another request.

She wanted me to come home.

She and Paul planned to purchase another ranch somewhere in eastern Montana.

Gary and I would operate it together.

Finally, she said the words I had wanted to hear for years.

“Everything with Cherry Creek is over.”

“Everything between you and Sivert has been settled.”

Looking back now, I have asked myself the same question countless times.

Why did I believe her?

Perhaps because she was my mother.

Perhaps because I desperately wanted to believe the past was finally behind us.

Or perhaps because, despite everything that had happened...

I still believed family deserved one more chance.

I would soon learn that some of life's hardest lessons have to be learned more than once.



The Lesson I Refused to Learn

So I came home.

After all the miles, all the distance, and all the promises I had made to myself, I returned to Montana and resumed my teaching career.

Meanwhile, Paul and Bernice were searching for another ranch to purchase with the money Bernice received from selling her interest in Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

Only later did I learn what had actually happened.

According to Paul, the agreement with Kevin Brewer involved far more than the purchase of Bernice's partnership interest.

As part of the transaction, Cherry Creek's enormous bank debt was paid.

Bernice received approximately one million dollars for her interest.

Kevin Brewer assumed well over a million dollars of Cherry Creek's debt, leaving Sivert free of the financial burden that had hung over the ranch for years.

Paul also told me that Marie received considerably less because she sold her interest without retaining valuable mineral rights.

"Marie had no idea what she owned," he said.

Maybe he was right.

Maybe he wasn't.

I honestly don't know.

What I do know is that the most valuable part of Cherry Creek, in my opinion, remained with Sivert.

Everything south of Brown's Gulch.

The heart of the ranch.

The prime pasture.

The best hay ground.

Even then, something about the entire transaction never made sense to me.

It still doesn't.

For years, Bernice had insisted that Sivert had nearly ruined Cherry Creek financially.

She believed he had mismanaged the partnership.

She believed he had wasted partnership money.

Yet when the final agreement was reached, Sivert walked away free of the crushing debt that had threatened the ranch.

I have asked myself why many times over the years.

I still don't know the answer.

What I didn't realize then was that Cherry Creek wasn't really behind me.

Not even close.

It was simply changing names.

Looking back now, I can see that I missed warning signs that should have been obvious.

Or perhaps I simply wasn't ready to see them.

I wanted to believe my mother.

I wanted to believe the past was over.

I wanted to believe our family had finally learned from everything that had happened at Cherry Creek.

Most of all, I wanted to believe that this time would be different.

It wasn't.

The greatest lesson Julius tried to teach me in 1971 wasn't about building a log lambing barn.

It wasn't about ranching.

It wasn't even about Cherry Creek.

It was about learning to recognize the difference between love, loyalty, and control.

I wasn't ready to understand that lesson then.

In many ways...

I was just beginning to live it.



Chapter 2

MILAM BASIN CREEK RANCH



Looking back across my life, no decision shaped my future more than becoming a partner in Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

At the time, it seemed like everything my family had hoped for.

A chance to build something of our own.

A chance to preserve another piece of Granddad's legacy.

A chance to leave Cherry Creek behind and begin again.

I believed we finally had that opportunity.

I was wrong.

The ranch was purchased from Merton Mysse.

Ownership was divided equally among three partners—my mother, Bernice; my brother, Gary; and me.

One name, however, was intentionally absent from the partnership agreement.

Paul.

There was a reason.

Years earlier, because of Paul's infidelity and the pain it had caused my mother, Bernice had assured me he would never have authority or say over another family ranch. After everything that had happened at Cherry Creek—and after the broken promises surrounding Julius and me—I told her I would not become part of another partnership if Paul had any control over it.

She looked me in the eye and made me a promise.

“Paul will never be an acting partner.” “He will have no voice in ranch decisions.”

“This ranch belongs to you and Gary.”

“When I'm gone, it will be yours to manage however you choose.”

I wanted to believe her.

Part of me did.

Another part remembered Cherry Creek.

It remembered 1971.

It remembered Julius.

It remembered promises that sounded sincere until there was no turning back.

It remembered the drive home from Harlowton.

The criticism.

The accusations.

The emptiness I carried away from Cherry Springs.

Deep inside, a quiet voice warned me.

Don't do this.

Don't trust another promise.

Everything I had learned during those months with Julius told me to walk away.

But she was my mother.

And we were family.

For twenty-seven years I had believed that families kept their promises, stood by one another, and returned loyalty with loyalty.

More than anything, I wanted to believe this time would be different.

So I ignored the warning.

Instead, I made a promise of my own.

I told Bernice I would do everything within my power to make Milam Basin Creek Ranch succeed.

She smiled.

I smiled too.

Neither of us knew how much those promises would eventually cost.

When I returned from Saudi Arabia and resumed teaching in Montana, I also resumed something else.

Family responsibility.

During the school year I taught full time.

Every summer, while school was out, I worked full time on the ranch.

That became my life for the next eighteen years.

I built fences.

Repaired equipment.

Worked cattle.

Maintained water systems.

Welded broken machinery.

Fixed whatever needed fixing.

If there was difficult physical work to be done, chances are I was doing it.

I wanted what was best for the ranch.

Julius had taught me how to think beyond the job in front of me and always ask what was best for the operation as a whole.

Those lessons stayed with me long after Cherry Creek was behind me.

Bernice's health prevented her from doing much of the physical labor.

From the beginning, Paul made his position equally clear.

Whenever there were fences to repair, hay to haul, cattle to work, or another difficult job waiting, he usually found a reason not to be involved.

Instead, he repeated the same sentence over and over.

"I am not a partner in this damn ranch."

"It's you and your brother's responsibility."

Technically, he was correct.

Legally, Paul was not a partner.

But reality was very different.



Although Paul accepted none of the responsibility for operating the ranch, he expected to influence nearly every important decision made on it.

He criticized how work was done.

He questioned our decisions.

He freely offered his opinions.

He wanted the authority of a partner without accepting the obligations of one.

Gary and I understood something Paul never seemed willing to acknowledge.

Whether he helped or not, the future of Milam Basin Creek Ranch rested on the shoulders of its three partners.

Bernice.

Gary.

And me.



Gary had his own family and his own responsibilities.

Little by little, I became the primary worker on the ranch.

At first, I didn't resent it.

I believed we were building something together.

That was what families did.

It was also what Julius had taught me.

When you loved a ranch, you did whatever needed to be done.

I loved the Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

You didn't keep score.

You simply did the work.

What I failed to recognize was that another pattern had quietly returned to my life.

The very pattern Julius had warned me about in 1971.

The more responsibility I accepted...

the more responsibility I was expected to accept.

The more dependable I became...

the more indispensable everyone assumed I would always be.

Without realizing it, I was once again building my life around someone else's expectations instead of my own.



Whenever I became discouraged...

whenever I asked for a little time for myself...

whenever I questioned whether the sacrifices were becoming too great...

Bernice always gave me the same answer.

“The Promise.”

She reminded me of it almost until the day she died.

Over the years, the words of “The Promise” became almost like a Buddhist mantra.

She repeated them so often that I could almost say them with her.

“No matter what happens in life, when I die you will inherit one-half of my mineral interests and one-half of my one-third ownership of Milam Basin Creek Ranch. Gary will inherit exactly the same as you.”

Then she would add the words I heard hundreds of times.

“Not a penny difference.”

Eventually, I stopped questioning it.

I accepted it as absolute truth.

Paul, she assured me, would be financially secure through her other assets.

The ranch, she insisted, belonged equally to her two sons.

She didn’t tell only me.

She told relatives.

She told friends.

She repeated it so often that, within our family, it simply became accepted as fact.

Eventually, Gary and I even talked about what would happen someday after our mother was gone.

Gary told me he hoped to buy my half of the ranch.

I told him I would consider it.

But not immediately.

First, I wanted us to work the ranch together as brothers.

Maybe together we could finally make it profitable.

Gary agreed.

The two of us even toasted the idea with a couple of shots.

At the time, I believed we had made a promise to one another.

Looking back now...

I sometimes wonder whether we had heard the same conversation.

Or whether each of us had quietly imagined a very different future.

For the next eighteen years, my summers belonged to Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

Every fence I built...

every piece of equipment I repaired...

every load of hay I hauled...

every sacrifice I made...

was built upon one belief.

One promise.

I never imagined that the very promise which inspired me to give so much...

would one day become the reason I lost almost everything.



Chapter 3

THE PROMISE

The letters 'FM' in a bold, sans-serif font, with a simple curved line underneath the 'M' resembling a smiley face.The letters 'FS' in a bold, sans-serif font, with the 'F' and 'S' stacked vertically. The logo is set against a light gray square background with a fine grid pattern.

During the eighteen summers I worked on Milam Basin Creek Ranch, my mother and father supervised nearly every move I made.

Meanwhile, Gary was hundreds of miles away in Bozeman, building a life with his wife and raising their two sons.

I never resented him for that.

Children only grow up once.

Parents should be there to watch it happen.

That was never the issue.

What troubled me was something entirely different.

Each year the workload became heavier.

Each year I asked the same question.

“When will Gary begin sharing the responsibility of operating the ranch?”

Paul’s answer never changed.

“It’s none of my concern.”

“I’m not a partner.”

That ended the discussion.

Technically, Paul was right.

Legally, his name never appeared on the partnership agreement.

In reality, however, the ranch operated very differently.

Whenever difficult work needed to be done, Paul reminded everyone that he wasn’t a partner.

Whenever important decisions were made, he expected his opinions to carry the authority of one.

He accepted none of the responsibility.

Yet exercised much of the influence.

That contradiction became one of the defining realities of life on Milam Basin Creek Ranch.



Whenever I turned to Bernice, her answer was always the same.

“The Promise.”

She reminded me that Gary deserved to raise his children.

She reminded me that children only grow up once.

She reminded me that, someday, after the boys were grown, Gary would be there to help.

I accepted that explanation.

I always had.

What became harder to ignore was what eighteen summers of ranch work were doing to my body.

Every year there were more fences to rebuild.

More water systems to repair.

More equipment to fix.

More livestock to care for.

More hay to put up before winter.

More miles to drive.

More lifting.

More digging.

More welding.

More hammering.

More repairs.

The work never really ended.

One day I finally told Bernice what had been weighing on me for years.

“I’m wearing my body out.”

She barely hesitated.

“It’s only in your mind.”

Then came the words I had heard hundreds of times before.

“The Promise.”

Those two words became the answer to nearly every concern I raised.

Whenever I questioned the workload...

“The Promise.”

Whenever I wondered whether the sacrifices were becoming too great...

“The Promise.”

Whenever I asked when Gary would begin sharing the work...

“The Promise.”

Whenever I thought about stepping away...

“The Promise.”

Then Bernice would repeat the assurance I had heard for years.

“When I die, you will inherit one-half of my mineral interests and one-half of my one-third ownership in Milam Basin Creek Ranch.”

“Gary will inherit exactly the same.”

“Not one penny difference.”

I believed her.

Looking back now, I realize I wasn't working eighteen summers because of an inheritance.

I wasn't working because of minerals.

I wasn't even working because of the ranch itself.

I was working because I believed my mother's word.

To me, The Promise wasn't about money.

It was about trust.

And at that point in my life, I still believed my mother's word was something that could never be broken.



Years later, after my future with Milam Basin Creek Ranch had been taken from me, I began paying the physical price for those eighteen summers.

One surgery became another.

A damaged knee.

A damaged shoulder.

The lingering effects of crushed testicles suffered while working cattle.

Surgery after a rattlesnake bite causing my veins to collapse in my right leg.

Repeated skin cancer surgeries—including the removal of a melanoma attached to my skull after years beneath the Montana sun.

Eventually...

cataracts.

Then a total hip replacement.

Each operation reminded me of another summer spent building a ranch I believed would someday help care for me if my health failed.

With every surgery, I found myself hearing Bernice's voice.

“The Promise.”

She had assured me that the ranch would provide security later in life.

She often reminded me that if my health ever gave out, I would have the ranch money and my share of the minerals to fall back on.

I believed her.

The ranch remained.

The work remained.

The scars remained.

Only The Promise disappeared.

Looking back now, I understand something I couldn't see then.

Promises have extraordinary power.

They inspire hope.

They influence decisions.

They shape entire lives.

For eighteen years, The Promise shaped mine.

It influenced where I spent my summers.

How I used my time.

What I believed my future would become.

I postponed dreams.

I passed up opportunities.

I gave my strength to something I believed would someday belong equally to Gary and me.

No one forced me to make those choices.

I made them freely.

Because I believed my mother's word.

I do not regret believing that a person's word should mean something.

I still believe that today.

What I regret...

is believing that everyone else treasured a promise the way I did.



The Price of Believing

Paul insisted he wasn't a partner, even though his opinions influenced nearly every important decision concerning the ranch.

Bernice's health limited what she could physically do.

Little by little, almost without anyone acknowledging it, I became the dependable one.

The one who was always there when something broke.

The one who could always be counted on.

The one who rarely said no.

I wasn't trying to be a martyr.

I was simply trying to be a good son.

I also wanted what was best for Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

That was how Julius had taught me to think back in 1971.

He taught me far more than how to build fences, repair equipment, care for livestock, or solve problems.

He taught me how to think like a rancher.

Before making a decision, Julius always asked one simple question:

“What's best for the ranch?”

That question became my own.

For the next eighteen summers, I approached every project with the same mindset.

Not because anyone demanded it.

Because I believed it was the right way to care for something that would someday belong to Gary and me.

I believed that was what families did for one another.

What I didn't understand was that loyalty, when it is never balanced by mutual responsibility, slowly becomes something else.

Years later I finally understood what Julius had tried to teach me all along.

“Loyalty is one of life's greatest virtues. Blind loyalty can quietly become a prison.”

Back then, however, I couldn't see the difference.

Julius's lessons had taught me how to build a ranch.

My mother's promise convinced me to sacrifice myself building one.

For years, those two voices competed inside me.

One asked,

“What's best for the ranch?”

The other answered,

“The Promise.”

For far too long...

I believed the second voice.

Chapter 4

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001



June 22, 2001, remains one of the happiest days of my life.

Michelle and I were married.

We had already shared five wonderful years together before exchanging our vows, so our wedding day wasn't the beginning of our love story.

It was the day we promised to spend the rest of our lives together.

I didn't just marry the woman of my dreams.

That day I found the family I had always hoped for.

Along with Michelle came two extraordinary gifts—her daughter and her son.

From the beginning, they welcomed me into their lives without hesitation.

I loved them as my own.

Almost overnight, I became part of a family built on love, respect, and acceptance.

For the first time in my life, I didn't feel I had to earn my place in a family.

I already belonged.

Michelle and I never built our marriage around money, property, or promises of what might someday be ours.

We built it upon one promise.

To love one another.

Looking back now, I realize that Michelle gave me far more than a wonderful marriage.

She gave me a home.

A family.

A place where love wasn't something I had to earn.

After everything I had experienced, it almost felt like a fairy tale.



Less than three months later, the world changed.

September 11, 2001.

Like almost everyone alive that day, I remember exactly where I was when I first heard about the attacks on New York and Washington.

For millions of people, September 11 became a day that would forever divide life into before and after.

For me, it became unforgettable for another reason.

That same day, another event quietly unfolded on Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

At the time, I had no idea what it meant.

Years later, I would realize it marked the beginning of the end of everything my mother had promised me.

I simply didn't know it yet.



That morning we worked sheep on Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

Paul.

Gary.

Wayne Vannice.

Our shepherd, Hank Stocker.

And me.

We vaccinated ewes.

Checked mouths.

Applied paint brands for winter identification.

Finished the ordinary chores that come with preparing a flock for another Montana winter.

It was, in every way, a normal day.

Or so I thought.

When we finished, Hank quietly walked over to me.

“Craig,” he said, “when you get a chance, come down to the house. Bobbi and I need to talk to you.”

Something in his voice immediately caught my attention.

This wasn't a casual invitation.

Something was wrong.

I had no idea that the conversation waiting for me inside Hank's house would change the way I looked at my family forever.



Bobbi met me at the door with a piece of chocolate in one hand and a beer in the other.

Hank was standing in the dining room, quietly filling his familiar curved pipe with tobacco.

He struck a match.

For several moments, neither of us spoke.

The sweet smell of pipe smoke drifted through the room as he slowly packed the tobacco with his thumb.

Finally, he pulled a chair away from the table, rested both hands on its back, looked directly into my eyes, and said,

“Craig, I think you already know Bernice is sick.”

I nodded.

Everyone knew she had serious lung disease.

Hank slowly shook his head.

“I’m not talking about her lungs.”

He paused.

“I’m talking about her mind.”

“I don’t think she’s thinking clearly anymore.”

For a long moment, neither of us spoke.

Then he quietly added,

“I believe she’s becoming mentally ill...

just like Marie...

and Merton.”

His words hit me like a punch to the stomach.

I knew my mother wasn’t always herself.

Over the previous several years I had noticed changes, especially after she had been drinking beer.

Even so, I never questioned her love for Gary and me.

As her lung disease worsened, I convinced myself that a lack of oxygen was affecting her judgment.

I worried about her.

I wanted to help her in any way I could.

Never—not even once—did I imagine her illness could threaten our ranch partnership.

Or The Promise.

Despite everything that had happened over the years, I still believed my mother wanted what was best for her two sons.



Trying to understand where Hank was going with the conversation, I finally asked,

“What are you talking about?”

Hank didn’t hesitate.

“I’m going to tell you exactly what I’ve heard.”

He drew slowly on his pipe before continuing.

“Your family has turned Bernice against Bobbi and me.”

He looked directly at me.

“And Paul and Gary are planning to send you and me down the river.”

For several seconds, I couldn’t speak.

“What?”

My mind refused to accept what I had just heard.

Hank’s voice softened.

“You and I are finished, Craig.”

“It’s only a matter of time.”

Before I could answer, Bobbi spoke through tears.

“Hank knows.”

“We heard it from Gary’s in-laws...

the Hamers.”

She wiped her eyes.

“Paul told Jan Hamer that Bernice isn’t competent to handle ranch business anymore.”

She hesitated.

“Paul and Gary are making the decisions now.”

I just stared at her.

None of it made sense.

Bernice had promised me that Paul would never have a voice in operating the ranch.

Now I was hearing exactly the opposite.

Then Bobbi looked at me.

“There’s more...”

Before she could finish, the front door opened.

Paul walked in looking for a cup of coffee.

The room fell instantly silent.

No one spoke.

No one even looked at one another.

In that moment...

I knew there was far more being left unsaid than had already been spoken.



I tried to convince myself Hank and Bobbi were mistaken.

I wanted to believe they had misunderstood what they had heard.

After all, no one in my family had said a single word to me.

Not Gary.

Not Paul.

Not Bernice.

In my mind, The Promise still existed.

Surely, if something that important were happening, someone would tell me.

Wouldn't they?

Looking back now, I understand what I couldn't see then.

I was the one person they couldn't afford to tell.

Without warning, the memories of 1971 came flooding back.

Cherry Creek.

Julius.

Paul.

Bernice.

The promises that persuaded me to go.

The promises that quietly changed after I had committed myself.

The broken promises made to Julius.

The half-truths.

The lies.

The silence.

The long drive home from Harlowton.

The emptiness I carried away from Cherry Springs.

For twenty-five years I had convinced myself those events belonged to another ranch and another time.

Now one question refused to leave my mind.

Was the Mysse Curse quietly becoming the Milam Curse?

I didn't know it then.

But the answer was already unfolding around me.

I simply hadn't recognized it yet.

FM

The Decision Had Already Been Made

About a month later, I returned to Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

Officially, I was there to check on the sheep.

Privately, I wanted to talk with Hank and Bobbi again.

I needed to know whether their earlier warning had been based on rumor or fact.

After hearing the rest of their story, I realized nothing had changed.

They told me exactly what they had told me a month earlier.

Their story was consistent.

That was enough for me.

I left the ranch and drove straight to Bigfork, determined to ask Paul and Bernice about what I had learned.

I deliberately never told them where the information had come from.

Almost immediately, both denied everything.

Paul insisted he had never discussed ranch matters with Jan or Blair Hamer.

Bernice assured me nothing had changed.

“Milam Basin Creek Ranch will belong to you and Gary.”

“That’s always been the plan.”

Outwardly, the conversation ended there.

Inside, it didn't.

I had watched Paul for too many years.

I had watched him lie.

I had watched him get caught.

Then I had watched him tell another lie to explain the first one.

By then, I had begun to wonder if my father was even capable of telling the truth when the truth didn't serve his own interests.

His words sounded confident.

His eyes did not.

As I listened to him that day, I realized he was lying to me once again.

The difference this time was that his lies would determine the future of my life.

The problem was...

I couldn't prove it.



Later, I found Bernice alone in the kitchen.

"You promised me," I said quietly.

“After everything that happened at Cherry Creek in 1971, you promised me Dad would never have a voice in running this ranch.”

I paused.

“That’s not what’s happening.”

“I know Gary and Dad are making decisions behind my back.”

“Do you know what they’re doing?”

Bernice looked at me without the slightest sign of concern.

“That’s just your imagination.”

Then she added two words I have never forgotten.

“Grow up.”

Those two words cut deeper than she could have known.

For years I had explained away every warning sign.

I blamed stress.

I blamed fear.

I blamed her failing health.

I blamed the lack of oxygen caused by her lung disease.

I always found another explanation because I loved my mother and wanted to believe the best about her.

Standing there in her kitchen...

I could no longer explain away what I was seeing.

Over the years, I had dismissed too many warning signs. I had blamed stress, illness, fear, and her lung disease. I wanted to believe there was always another explanation because she was my mother, and I loved her.

But not this time.

As I looked into her eyes, something changed deep inside me.

For the first time, I could no longer deny that she was lying to me.

And if Bernice was lying...

then Paul was lying too.

It wasn't simply another family disagreement.

It was the deliberate destruction of an eighteen-year promise that had shaped my life.

Standing in that kitchen, I realized The Promise wasn't beginning to collapse.

It already had.

The promise that Paul would never have authority over the ranch.

The promise that Gary and I would inherit equally.

The promise that had shaped eighteen years of my life.

Whether those promises had slowly changed...

or whether they had never been true at all...

I still cannot answer.

What I do know is this.

Standing in my mother's kitchen, I felt the unmistakable echo of Cherry Creek.

History wasn't repeating itself.

It had never really ended.



The following spring, after lambing season, we gathered once again to work the sheep.

Partway through the day, Paul walked over to Gary.

“Have you talked to Craig yet?”

Gary glanced in my direction.

“No.”

“Then we'd better.”

The three of us walked away from the others.

Gary spoke first.

“We've decided to sell all the sheep.”

For a moment, I simply stared at him.

“We've?”

“Who is we?”

Neither Gary nor Paul answered.

Gary repeated himself.

“We can’t afford to keep Hank and Bobbi anymore.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

Only months earlier, Bernice had assured me that the annual lamb crop paid Hank and Bobbi’s wages.

She had always described the sheep operation as an essential part of preserving Granddad Mysse’s ranching heritage.

Now I was hearing exactly the opposite.

I looked from Gary to Paul.

“Did Bernice agree to this?”

Neither answered.

I asked again.

“Did she?”

Finally, Paul spoke.

“Just do what you’re told.”

Those five words instantly carried me back to December 1971.

Cherry Creek.

Another ranch.

Another promise.

Another decision made without my knowledge.

For years I had convinced myself those days were behind me.

Standing there beside the sheep still gathered in the corral, I realized the truth wasn't what they were saying—it was what they were hiding.

I wanted answers.

I wanted the truth.

There had been many times over the years when I wanted to grab Paul by the shoulders and demand that he tell the truth just once.

There were times my anger became so intense I wanted to physically confront him.

I never did.

He was my father.

No matter how angry I became, I could never bring myself to cross that line.

So I remained silent.

I already knew how Paul handled disagreement.

His voice became louder than everyone else's.

Facts no longer mattered.

Whoever spoke the loudest won.

Then he said something that stopped me cold.

“This ranch is going to belong to you and Gary someday.”

The words sounded hauntingly familiar.

Another promise.

Another reassurance.

Another statement that no longer matched the reality unfolding in front of me.

Then, almost in the same breath, he stepped away from the very decision he had helped make.

““I’m staying out of this.”

“This is you boys’ ranch.”

“You and Gary need to tell Hank.”

It was the same pattern I had watched at Cherry Creek in 1971.

Paul helped make the decision.

Gary and I were expected to deliver it.

Twenty-five years later...
nothing had changed.



Gary and I found Hank walking up from his house.

He quietly sat down on an old cottonwood stump while Gary explained that the family had decided to sell the sheep.

There wasn’t much to say.

Hank lowered his head.

“If there’s no sheep...”

“...then I’m done.”

His voice was calm.

Almost resigned.

As though he had expected this day to come.

Then he looked directly at me.

“Does Bernice know?”

It was the one question I couldn’t answer.

“I don’t know.”

Hank held my eyes for several long seconds.

He didn’t argue.

He didn’t accuse me.

He simply nodded.

The disappointment in his expression said everything words could not.

Driving back toward Plains with Wayne Vannice that evening, I couldn’t escape one conclusion.

Everything Hank and Bobbi had warned me about months earlier was beginning to happen.

Important ranch decisions were being made without me.

Paul and Gary were speaking with one voice.

Whether Bernice truly understood what was happening—or whether she had quietly surrendered that authority to them—I still didn't know.

What I did know was this.

For the first time since becoming a partner...

I no longer felt like one.



When I arrived home, I called Bernice.

I wanted to hear her reasoning.

I wanted to understand why Hank had been dismissed.

Most of all, I wanted to know why I had been excluded from the decision.

Her answer was painfully brief.

“Don't question what we're doing.”

I reminded her that I was a partner.

I asked why no one had discussed the decision with me beforehand.

She interrupted.

“Your father's at coffee, and I don't want to discuss it.”

Then she spoke three words.

“It is over.”

The line went dead.

She never said goodbye.

At the time, I didn’t know what she meant.

Was she talking about the sheep?

Was she ending the conversation?

Or was she telling me that my place in Milam Basin Creek Ranch was over?

I had no way of knowing.

Years later, I realized those three words carried far more meaning than I understood that day.

Something much larger than the sheep operation had ended.

For the first time in my life...

I no longer believed I was an equal partner in my own family’s ranch.



Playing by Different Rules

Looking back now, I no longer believe Hank's dismissal was an isolated decision.

It was one move in a much larger plan.

A plan that would eventually remove me from Milam Basin Creek Ranch altogether.

At the time, however, I couldn't see the entire picture.

I was trying to understand one event at a time.

I kept reminding myself of the promise Gary and I had made years earlier.

Brother to brother.

We had shaken hands.

Shared a drink.

Agreed that after our mother was gone, we would operate the ranch together and finally discover what Milam Basin Creek Ranch could become.

I believed that promise as completely as I believed my mother's.

I never imagined either of them would be broken.

Perhaps I should have recognized what was happening.

Perhaps the warning signs had been there all along.

The truth is, I have never been very good at anticipating other people's hidden agendas.

Life has never been a chess match to me.

I've never been someone who thinks three or four moves ahead.

When someone gives me their word, my instinct is to believe them.

That has always been both one of my greatest strengths...
and one of my greatest weaknesses.

Looking back now, I wasn't trying to outmaneuver my family.

I didn't even realize we were playing different games.

I believed we were building a future together.

Someone else was quietly planning a different future.

That is what still troubles me the most.

Not that I lost.

But that the people I loved were able to look me in the eye...
make promises they knew I would believe...
and continue doing so while a different plan was already taking
shape.

Whether they ever felt remorse...

I honestly don't know.

After all these years, that question still has no answer.



A Friendship That Endured

Some time after Hank and Bobbi left Milam Basin Creek Ranch, I met them for lunch after they had settled in Anaconda.

We spent most of the afternoon remembering better days.

The sheep.

The cattle.

Long summers on the ranch.

The people we had known.

The work we had shared.

Curiously, we never talked about the day Hank lost his job.

We didn't need to.

Some memories are understood without being spoken.

After Bobbi passed away, Hank eventually moved into a care facility in Miles City.

In October 2013, he called me.

His voice was weaker than I remembered, but I recognized it immediately.

He told me he knew he was living the final chapter of his life.

He said he had no regrets.

Then he told me something I have never forgotten.

“Craig, I’ve never blamed you.”

“I always knew you wanted no part of what happened.”

For several moments neither of us spoke.

Then he quietly added,

“I felt sorry for you.”

“I knew your family wasn’t finished with you.”

“The worst was still ahead.”

Hank was right.

Neither of us knew exactly what form it would take.

But somehow, he saw the direction my life was headed long before I did.

He understood something I was still unwilling to accept.

When our conversation ended, I sat quietly for a long time.

Hank had lost his livelihood because of decisions made within my family.

I had lost something that would prove even harder to replace.

My trust.

I will always regret that someone I respected as much as Hank became caught in a conflict he never deserved.

He paid a price for decisions that weren’t his.

So did I.

The difference was that Hank recognized what was happening long before I did.

In time...

I would learn just how right he had been.



A Different Kind of Love

One thought has stayed with me throughout my life.

My mother never once told me she loved me.

Not as a child.

Not as a young man.

Not as an adult.

One day I finally asked her why.

Her answer came without hesitation.

“Because we’re Norwegian.”

“Norwegians don’t say those words.”

“We show our love by our actions.”

For many years, I accepted that explanation.

I wanted to believe it.

After all, every family has its own traditions.

Its own way of expressing affection.

As the years passed, however, I found myself paying less attention to the words...

and more attention to the actions.

When I finally told Bernice that I could not surrender the eighteen years I had invested in Milam Basin Creek Ranch—or the partnership rights that legally belonged to me—without an honest explanation, she didn't argue.

She didn't try to persuade me.

She didn't try to understand.

She simply said nothing.

In time, that silence became an answer.

Looking back now, I have come to believe that love cannot be measured by promises alone.

It is measured by honesty.

By respect.

By loyalty that flows in both directions.

Those were the gifts I believed I had given my family throughout my life.

They were also the things I eventually realized I could no longer count on receiving in return.

If my mother's belief was that love is shown through actions rather than words...

then, in the end, it was her actions that taught me the lesson I had been searching for all my life.

It wasn't the lesson I wanted.

But it was the one I needed to learn.

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Chapter 5

THE BEGINNING OF THE END



My wedding day remains the happiest day of my life.

Marrying Michelle gave me something I had never fully experienced before.

A true partner.

Someone I trusted completely.

A home built on love instead of obligation.

A future that belonged to us rather than to someone else's expectations.

Looking back, I now believe our marriage marked a turning point in my life.

For the first time, I wasn't making decisions alone.

For years, Bernice had been able to influence nearly every important decision I made.

Marriage changed that.

She could still pressure me.

She could still make promises.

She could still appeal to my sense of duty and make me feel guilty.

But she could no longer shape my life without also confronting someone who loved me simply for who I was.

Michelle saw things I couldn't.

She hadn't spent a lifetime living inside my family.

She wasn't influenced by old promises, old obligations, or years of learned expectations.

She simply looked at what was happening and quietly said something that changed the way I eventually saw my own life.

"Your mother's expectations aren't reasonable."

At the time, I wanted to believe Michelle was mistaken.

I still believed my family would eventually do the right thing.

I still believed promises mattered.

I still believed love would ultimately prevail over control.

I was wrong.

It would take several more years before I finally understood what Michelle had recognized almost from the beginning.

She wasn't judging my family.

She was seeing a pattern that I couldn't.

I had spent my life trying to earn the approval of the family I was born into.

Michelle loved me without asking me to earn it.

Sometimes the people who see us most clearly...

and love us most completely...

are the ones who become our family.



One evening, not long after Michelle and I were married and I had retired from teaching, Bernice called.

She wanted me to leave immediately for Milam Basin Creek Ranch to help with lambing.

For the first time in my life, I answered differently.

“I’ll come when Gary is there lambing with me.”

The line went silent.

Then I heard Paul in the background, trying unsuccessfully to calm her.

Suddenly, Bernice exploded.

“You will do what I tell you, or I’ll change my will.”

For a moment, I couldn’t speak.

Twenty-five years disappeared.

I was back at Cherry Creek.

Back to Julius.

Back to 1971.

Back to The Promise.

For eighteen years I had sacrificed my summers believing my mother's repeated assurances that someday the ranch would belong equally to Gary and me.

Now, for the first time...

that promise was no longer an assurance.

It had become a threat.

I answered as calmly as I could.

"I'm not going."

"I have my own home now."

"I have my own family."

"I would appreciate the same consideration you've always given Gary and his family."

We hadn't even celebrated our first wedding anniversary.

I wasn't abandoning the ranch.

I wasn't refusing to help.

I was asking to be treated by the same standard my brother had always been given.

Her final words were as cold as they were brief.

“Have it your way.”

She hung up without saying goodbye.

As I slowly set the telephone back in its cradle, a realization settled over me.

For most of my life, my value to my mother had depended upon one thing.

My willingness to obey.

The moment I began making decisions for myself...

The Promise stopped being a promise.

It became leverage.



Three months later, Bernice called again.

This time, Paul quietly listened on another telephone.

She informed me that after discussing the matter with Paul, Gary, and my sister-in-law, Réene, she had decided to place everything she owned into a trust.

When she died, everything would first pass to Paul.

Paul would serve as the trustee.

I listened without interrupting.

One question immediately entered my mind.

When had Paul—and even Réene—become decision-makers in a ranch partnership that legally belonged to Bernice, Gary, and me?

I asked her why she was doing this.

Her answer stunned me.

“Because you don’t have children.”

I reminded her of The Promise.

The promise she had repeated to me for nearly two decades.

The promise that Gary and I would inherit equally.

The promise that had shaped eighteen years of my life.

She didn’t hesitate.

The promise no longer mattered.

The rules had changed.

Without ever admitting it, my mother had rewritten the agreement that had governed my life for nearly twenty years.

Quietly, I reminded her of something she already knew.

Repeated injuries suffered while working cattle on the ranch had left me sterile.

She also knew Michelle and I had accepted that reality and built a happy life together.

Her response came instantly.

“That was your choice.”

Those four words remain among the most painful I have ever heard.

The injury itself had been devastating.

The surgeries.

The pain.

The certainty that Michelle and I would never have children of our own.

Those were wounds time could never erase.

But hearing my mother describe that loss as a choice cut even deeper.

No one chooses to be injured.

No one chooses infertility.

And certainly no one chooses to suffer a life-changing injury while helping build the very ranch later used to justify breaking a promise.

In that moment, something inside me finally changed.

I accepted what I had resisted believing for years.

The Promise was over.

Not because circumstances had changed.

Not because I had failed to keep my word.

But because my mother had chosen to abandon hers.

Everything Julius had tried to teach me back in 1971 suddenly came into focus.

The trust I had placed in my family hadn't disappeared overnight.

It had been quietly dismantled, one decision at a time.

This was simply the day I could no longer pretend otherwise.



“Do Not Sign the Trust.”

I sought legal advice.

After listening carefully to everything that had happened—from The Promise to the proposed bypass trust—the attorney leaned back in his chair.

His advice was immediate.

“Do not sign the trust.”

He explained that the proposed bypass trust would effectively remove me from my mother’s estate while avoiding many of the protections ordinarily provided through a will.

Then he told me something I hadn’t expected.

Even if I signed it, I would still retain the legal right to challenge the trust in court.

Once again, he looked directly at me.

“Craig... don’t sign it.”

His advice couldn’t have been clearer.

The difficult part wasn’t understanding the law.

The difficult part was accepting that I had reached a point in my life where an attorney believed I needed legal protection from my own family.

That was something I never imagined I would hear.

And something I desperately didn’t want to believe.

Erased

A few days later, I drove to Bigfork to speak with Bernice face to face.

I hoped Paul would be there as well.

He wasn't.

He had gone uptown for coffee.

Avoiding difficult conversations had become one of Paul's lifelong habits, and that day was no different.

Bernice and I sat alone in the kitchen.

I began quietly.

"I'm not signing the trust."

She didn't argue.

She didn't explain why eighteen years of promises no longer mattered.

Instead, she reached for one final appeal.

"If you love me..."

"...you'll do this for me."

For a long moment, I simply looked at her.

Those weren't the words of an explanation.

They were the words of guilt.

Once again, love had become the price of obedience.

In that instant, something became painfully clear.

No matter how much I had done...

it would never be enough.

There would always be one more sacrifice.

One more obligation.

One more request.

I finally answered.

“I’ll sign it.”

Then I asked the question that had been building inside me for years.

“You were always going to do this to me... weren’t you?”

“It wouldn’t have mattered whether I married or stayed single.”

“You planned to remove me all along.”

Bernice never answered.

She turned and looked out the kitchen window.

After a long silence, she spoke only five words.

“I want you to leave.”

Nothing more.

No explanation.

No apology.

No denial.

Just five words.

As I reached the door, one final question escaped before I could stop myself.

“Then The Promise...”

“...was never really a promise...”

“...was it?”

She finally turned from the window and looked directly at me.

Our eyes met.

Yet it felt as though she was looking straight through me.

In that moment, I realized I no longer mattered.

As I reached the door, I stopped and looked back.

“Wouldn’t Granddad Mysse be proud to see what his family has become?”

She never answered.

She didn’t have to.

Her silence told me everything I needed to know.

I quietly walked out of the house.

That afternoon, I realized I was no longer grieving the loss of a ranch.

I was grieving the loss of the mother I had believed in for most of my life.

Those are not the same thing.



Erased

The day came to sign the bypass trust.

I walked into that room carrying one last hope.

Surely someone would stop this.

Surely someone would remember eighteen years of promises.

Surely someone would remember The Promise.

No one did.

Bernice signed.

Paul signed.

Gary signed.

Each signature felt like another shovel of dirt falling onto a grave.

Not just the grave of a ranch partnership...

but the grave of everything I had believed about my family.

Eighteen years of work.

Eighteen years of sacrifice.

Eighteen years of believing my mother's word.

One signature at a time...

it all disappeared.

When the papers were finally placed in front of me, I looked down at my own name.

For a moment, I couldn't move.

I knew exactly what my signature meant.

It meant surrendering the future my mother had promised me.

It meant accepting that every sacrifice I had made for Milam Basin Creek Ranch no longer mattered.

It meant acknowledging that the people I loved most had already chosen a future without me.

Then I signed.

Not because I agreed.

Not because I believed it was right.

I signed because I finally understood there was nothing left to fight for.

The decision had already been made.

My signature simply acknowledged it.

That afternoon I wasn't merely removed from a trust.

I was erased.

The irony was impossible to ignore.

Years earlier, after Paul's infidelity and the pain it had caused my mother, Bernice had repeatedly assured me that Paul would never have authority over the ranch or its financial affairs.

She understood exactly why I insisted on that promise.

She knew what had happened at Cherry Creek in 1971 concerning Paul.

She knew why I no longer trusted Paul in matters involving family, ranching, or money.

She agreed.

Yet in the end...

Paul became the trustee.

The very man my mother had promised would never control the future of the ranch ultimately held complete authority over the very future she had promised Gary and me.

As I laid down the pen, I realized I hadn't simply signed a legal document.

With my signature, I surrendered twenty-seven years of promises...

twenty-seven years of hope...

twenty-seven years of trust...

and, in many ways...

the love I had spent a lifetime trying to preserve.



Choosing My Own Life

Whether Bernice was mentally stable...

whether illness had clouded her judgment...

or whether she fully understood what she had done...

none of it mattered anymore.

My signature was already on the bypass trust.

The decision had been made.

Nothing I could say...

nothing I could do...

was going to change what had already been set in motion.

The snowball had begun its long journey downhill.

Just as Granddad Mysse's family had eventually fractured...

so had ours.

The Mysse Curse had completed its circle.

It had become the Milam Curse.

As I drove away that afternoon, I felt every emotion imaginable.

I was hurt.

I was angry.

I was disappointed.

I was heartbroken.

More than anything...

I was in disbelief.

I couldn't understand how the four people I had trusted most—Bernice, Paul, Gary, and Réene—could believe they had done nothing wrong.

The ranch...

the future...

The Promise...

everything I had believed I was working toward...

was gone.

Perhaps it had never truly existed.

To me, family had always meant something different.

Family should accept you for who you are.

Family should encourage you.

Protect you.

Tell you the truth—even when the truth is difficult.

Above all...

family should keep its promises.

Love should never depend upon what you can provide in return.

As I drove home from Kalispell, one truth settled over me with absolute certainty.

The Milam family, as I had believed it existed, no longer did.

For years, I had measured my worth by what my family needed from me.

Whenever they needed work, I worked.

Whenever they needed help, I helped.

Whenever another sacrifice was expected...

I made it.

Without ever realizing it, I had taught everyone around me one painful lesson.

I would always put myself last.

The moment I was no longer useful...

I was no longer needed.

That realization hurt more than losing the ranch.

For years, I believed I was investing in our family's future.

Instead, I had been investing in a future that no longer included me.

As the miles disappeared beneath my pickup, the loneliness became overwhelming.

For one brief moment, a terrible thought crossed my mind.

If I drove into one of the bridge abutments...

all of the pain would finally stop.

It was only a moment.

Then another thought came just as quickly.

Michelle.

She was waiting for me at home.

She loved me for who I was—not for what I could build, repair, or sacrifice.

She had already endured enough pain in her own life.

I loved her far too much to add to it.

In that instant, I understood something that had taken me a lifetime to learn.

My life was worth more than someone else's broken promises.

That moment changed me.

I decided my story would not end on that highway.

I was finished allowing other people to define my worth.

I was finished allowing broken promises to determine my future.

For most of my life, my family had been writing the story of my life.

That day, I took the pen back.

From that moment forward...

my life would belong to me.

Not Bernice.

Not Paul.

Not Gary.

Not Réene.

Me.



Chapter 6

MORE PROMISES



After Bernice passed away in 2002, nearly three years passed with Paul, Gary, and Réene managing Milam Basin Creek Ranch under the protection of the bypass trust.

From the beginning, I believed Paul knew exactly what had happened to me.

He simply refused to admit it.

Whenever I tried to discuss the trust, he immediately distanced himself from it.

“That trust was between you and your mother.”

“I had nothing to do with it.”

I asked him the same questions every time.

“You and Gary persuaded Mom to abandon The Promise.”

“You both supported the bypass trust.”

“You both signed it.”

“How can you possibly say you had nothing to do with it?”

Paul never answered.

He would look away, mutter, “Bullshit,” and change the subject.

That became his pattern.

When one explanation no longer worked, another one quietly took its place.

Years later, he unintentionally destroyed his own story.

In the last letter he ever wrote to me, he admitted that Gary and “the rest of the family” supported Bernice’s decision because Michelle and I had no children.

With that single sentence, Paul contradicted years of insisting he had “nothing to do with it.”

His own words confirmed what I had known all along.

The bypass trust had never been solely between Bernice and me.

It had been a family decision.

But the explanations didn’t stop there.

Paul next claimed that Granddad Mysse intended my five Cherry Creek shares to benefit my future children.

I couldn’t believe what I was reading.

Granddad never told me that.

He never told Bernice that.

Once again, Paul was speaking for a man who could no longer speak for himself.

Even worse, he ignored one undeniable fact.

Years earlier, I had voluntarily signed legal documents prepared by an attorney transferring my five shares of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company to Bernice, so she could divide them equally between Gary and me.

That single fact destroyed the argument he was now trying to make.

Still, the explanations kept changing.

Later he told me,

“Your mother wasn’t quite herself mentally or physically during her last few years.”

I sat quietly, thinking about what he had just said.

If Bernice truly lacked the capacity to make sound decisions...

why hadn’t anyone protected her?

Why had every decision she made been accepted without question when those decisions benefited everyone else?

Those questions have never left me.

By then, I had stopped trying to reconcile Paul’s explanations.

There had been too many of them.

Each new version contradicted the one before it.

I finally accepted what I had been reluctant to believe for years.

Paul wasn’t trying to explain what had happened.

He was trying to justify it.



But Paul wasn't finished making promises.

If anything, promises became his preferred way of avoiding responsibility for the past.

He assured me I would someday inherit half of his house in Bozeman.

He promised me his Winchester .30-30.

He said my Model T and my Model A would be returned to me.

He had borrowed my .38 Diamondback Special revolver and my .357 Magnum, promising they would come back to me after he was gone.

Then he spoke about the money he claimed to be making in the stock market.

"Don't worry."

"When I'm gone, you and Gary will both be wealthy."

"That'll make up for what happened with the ranch."

Years earlier, I probably would have believed him.

Not anymore.

By then, experience had taught me lessons I could no longer ignore.

1971 had taught me.

Cherry Creek had reinforced it.

Julius had warned me.

Milam Basin Creek Ranch had confirmed it.

I wasn't going to build my life around another promise.

Promises are easy to make.

Keeping them is what reveals a person's character.

By then, I had learned one final truth.

The biggest promises are often made by the people least willing to keep them.



Waiting on the Sidelines

After Bernice passed away, I did nothing to help operate Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

Not physically.

Not financially.

Not in its day-to-day management.

I had spent eighteen summers helping build that ranch.

The bypass trust made it unmistakably clear that my role in its future was over.

Bernice had placed her confidence elsewhere.

Paul.

Gary.

And, increasingly, Russ Milam.

My final visit to Basin Creek only confirmed what I already knew.

The future my mother had promised me now belonged to someone else.

So I stepped aside.

Not out of bitterness.

Not out of spite.

Out of acceptance.

For eighteen years I had carried my share of the responsibility.

Now I chose to do what Gary had done for much of those same years.

I waited on the sidelines.

I no longer felt any obligation to build a future that no longer included me.

The only thing I expected was what I was legally entitled to under our partnership agreement.

Nothing more.

After The Promise and the bypass trust, something far more valuable than my interest in the ranch had been lost.

My trust in my family.

Once that trust disappeared, so did my willingness to believe another promise.



A couple of years later, after I had completely stepped away from the ranch, Gary approached me with another proposal.

He asked whether “they”—meaning he and Paul—could buy out my interest in Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

By then, I knew exactly what was happening.

This wasn't simply a buyout.

It was the final step in removing me completely from the ranch.

The bypass trust had erased my future.

Now they intended to erase my past as well.

Michelle and I had already decided our future belonged in Frenchtown.

Our home deserved the time and energy I had once devoted to the ranch.

I no longer intended to sacrifice our lives for people who had repeatedly broken their promises.

One thing continued to bother me.

Gary often spoke as though he were buying the ranch with money he had earned.

The reality was quite different.

Neither Gary nor I had invested our own money into purchasing Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

The ranch had been funded by Bernice.

Her repeated promise had always been that everything would someday be divided equally between her two sons.

That had been The Promise.

Now the same assets I had spent eighteen years helping build were being treated as though I had little claim to them.

Gary made one request repeatedly.

“No lawyers.”

He referred to attorneys as “the black coats.”

He wanted us to settle everything ourselves.

Looking back, I understand far better why lawyers made him uncomfortable.

Many of my suspicions about those discussions were confirmed only years later after Paul passed away.



Negotiating my departure from the ranch became one of the most painful experiences of my life.

Telephone calls often began with Paul speaking while Gary listened on another extension.

Many times it seemed as though Paul wasn't expressing his own thoughts at all.

He was speaking for both of them.

Every conversation seemed to involve another request that I surrender something else connected to the ranch.

Buildings.

Property.

Rights.

History.

Even my connection to Ingomar itself.

At times it felt less like dissolving a partnership and more like removing every trace that I had ever been part of it.

One statement from Gary has remained with me ever since.

He insisted that my eighteen summers of work had been “inconsequential.”

He believed his family’s contributions had equaled—or exceeded—mine.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

Gary had never lived through those eighteen summers beside Bernice and Paul. Gary never lived through what Julius and I endured at Cherry Springs in 1971.

He hadn’t experienced the endless projects.

The emergencies.

The constant demands.

The physical labor.

The sacrifices.

An old Ingomar friend, Lee Cool, had once described my situation better than anyone else ever did.

“You’ve got three chiefs,” he told me, “and one Indian doing all the work.”

At the time I laughed.

Later I realized how accurate his observation had been.



By then, whatever remained of our family relationship had disappeared.

Even simple discussions became negotiations.

When I asked about future hunting rights, Paul immediately changed the subject.

Those rights, he said, weren't even open for discussion unless I first agreed to give my mineral interests to my nephews.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

My mineral rights belonged to me.

They still do.

Those eastern Montana breaks, coulees, and prairies remain as familiar to me today as they were when Julius first showed them to me in 1971.

No one taught me that country better than Julius Sebulsky.

Those lessons have stayed with me for the rest of my life.



Walking Away

Over time I learned something about both Paul and Gary.

Even when what they said wasn't technically a lie, it was often designed to deceive.

Small pieces of truth were carefully mixed with omission, half-truths, and misdirection until it became almost impossible to separate fact from fiction.

Little by little, I came to believe Gary had become the strategist behind many of the decisions affecting our family including Bernice's.

Paul became the spokesman.

Gary became the voice behind the curtain.

Once I recognized that pattern, I could no longer pretend I didn't see it.

During the negotiations to dissolve my interest in the ranch, Gary and Réene almost completely stopped communicating with Michelle and me.

By then, I believed I understood why.

Gary wanted the ranch.

I had become an obstacle to that goal.

Once my partnership in the ranch was gone, I no longer had a place in their lives. I was no longer useful. I didn't simply lose the ranch—I felt as though I was being intentionally erased from the family.

The silence became so complete that, eventually, I stopped reaching out as well.

I was disposable.

What I do know is that, after nearly eighteen summers of giving everything I had to Milam Basin Creek Ranch, I no longer seemed worthy of their time, their trust, or even their attention.

I never asked for more than what had been promised under our partnership agreement and what had been promised to me throughout those eighteen years of work by my mother.

Those were two very different goals.

Paul frequently complained about “that God-damned lawyer friend of yours.”

He insisted my attorney was making everything unnecessarily difficult.

I couldn’t help thinking that no attorney had ever treated me as unfairly as my own family had.

Ironically, that attorney became one of the finest friends I have ever known.

He demonstrated more honesty, kindness, and loyalty than the people I had trusted all my life.

Throughout those negotiations Gary rarely confronted me directly.

Instead, I could often hear him in the background, quietly prompting Paul during our telephone conversations.

Paul spoke.

Gary supplied the words.

Listening to those conversations, I sometimes wondered whether Paul believed or knew what he was saying anymore.

Or whether he had simply become accustomed to repeating whatever best served the moment as dictated by Gary.



When the negotiations finally ended, so did my relationship with my brother.

Deep down, I suspected that was how this entire ordeal would end.

Years passed.

No phone calls.

No visits.

Not even a Christmas card addressed to Michelle and me.

The silence told me everything I needed to know.

After everything that had happened, I wanted nothing more to do with Gary or Paul. I had spent too many years honoring promises, trying to preserve relationships, and believing that somehow things would eventually work themselves out.

Those years were over.

Instead of continuing to invest my time and energy in people who had chosen to remove me from their lives, I invested it in the people who truly wanted to be part of mine.



That decision changed everything.

Interestingly, after Paul passed away, Christmas cards from Réene suddenly began arriving each year.

I never opened a single one.

Perhaps her intentions were sincere. Perhaps they weren't.

By then, it no longer mattered.

The damage had already been done.

Some relationships reach a point where reopening old wounds serves no purpose. Mine had reached that point long before.

One lesson above all others remained with me:

Some of the most poisonous people we will ever encounter don't arrive as strangers. They arrive as family.

Looking back now, I no longer carry the anger I once carried. I carry understanding.

The greatest mistake of my life wasn't believing in family.

It was believing that love, loyalty, and sacrifice would always be returned simply because they had been freely given.

They weren't.

And eventually, I had to accept that.

That chapter of my life is over.

Michelle and I chose a different path.

Not one built upon manipulation or broken promises.

Not one sustained by guilt or obligation.

We chose peace.

And with that choice, for us, **the Milam Curse finally ended.**



Chapter 7

Another Broken Promise



Four years before my father passed away at the age of ninety-two, my Uncle Bill Straw died in Forsyth.

Bill had been married to my mother's sister, Marie Mysse. Years earlier, after selling her interest in the Cherry Creek Sheep Company to Kevin Brewer, Marie and Bill had purchased the Hein place near Forsyth.

Before Marie passed away, she made her wishes known to the family. She wanted the Hein place divided equally among her nephews. In her mind, that land represented her remaining share of the Mysse family heritage.

Everyone knew what Marie wanted.

Bernice knew.

Paul knew.

Sivert knew.

Janet knew.

Their sons knew.

Nothing about Marie's intentions was a secret.

And that is important because **Paul knew exactly what Bill and Marie wanted to happen to the ranch.**

Several years before Bill died, he and I spent a day riding the pastures above Forsyth, checking cattle and repairing fence.

Somewhere during that afternoon, Bill asked me a question I have never forgotten.

“Can you trust your father?”

Without thinking very long, I answered,

“I think so.”

Even as the words left my mouth, I wasn’t completely certain.

Too much had already happened.

The Promise.

The bypass trust.

The years of broken assurances.

Still, some part of me wanted to believe there was enough family left to preserve whatever relationship Paul and I still had.

I never asked Bill why he posed the question.

Looking back now, **I wish I had.**



One morning, I received a telephone call informing me that Uncle Bill had passed away.

I immediately called Paul.

Before I could say much of anything, his first question caught me completely off guard.

“Do you think you and Gary will get the land that Old Haney and Marie promised?”

That was Paul.

He seemed incapable of speaking about almost anyone without inventing a nickname, even members of his own family. For just a moment, I found myself wondering what name he used when talking about me.

But his question told me something else.

Paul already knew what Bill and Marie had intended.

He knew the land had been promised to us.

He knew what Marie wanted.

And he knew that I expected those wishes to be honored.



When Bill's estate entered probate, something strange happened.

Paul became unusually quiet.

Whenever I asked whether he had heard anything about Bill's will, he always gave me the same answer.

"No."

Weeks passed.

Then months.

The subject simply disappeared.

Eventually, I learned from a friend in Forsyth that Bill had, in fact, left a will.

More surprising still, I was told that **Paul was the sole beneficiary.**

That wasn't how I expected to learn the news.

It confirmed something I had been slowly accepting for years.

Whatever had once connected our family no longer existed.

What I couldn't understand was why Paul had made something so simple so complicated.

He already knew what Bill and Marie wanted.

All he had to do was tell me the truth.

Instead, just as he had done so many times before, he avoided giving me a direct answer and forced me to discover the truth from someone else.

I called Paul again.

This time, I confronted him directly.

“Is there a will?”

Finally, he admitted there was.

“What does it say?”

He refused to answer.

“Can I have a copy?”

“No.”

Then he added words I have never forgotten. Years later, they were still there in the pages of my journals:

“It’s none of your damn business.”

“Your name isn’t mentioned.”

“So you don’t need a copy.”

The conversation ended exactly where so many conversations with Paul had ended.

Not with honesty.

Not with openness.

But with another wall of silence.

By then, I had begun to recognize something I had spent much of my life trying not to see.

My father’s silence wasn’t simply avoidance.

It was his favorite way of hiding the truth.

And once again, **a promise made by my family had been broken.**

This time, I knew exactly what had been promised, **and so did Paul.**



The Final Payback

Just before Christmas, I drove to Bozeman to visit Paul.

I wanted one thing.

The truth.

Once again, I asked to see Uncle Bill's will.

Paul refused.

Instead, he simply told me that Bill had left everything to him and that there was no reason for me to read the document.

I asked two simple questions.

"Are you going to honor Marie's final wishes?"

"And what are you going to do with the estate promised to the Milam and Mysse nephews?"

Paul never answered either question.

Instead, he said he was thinking about giving the money to his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, although he hadn't made up his mind.

At that moment, I knew exactly what was happening.

History was repeating itself.

Just as Bernice had ignored her promise to me, Paul was now ignoring Aunt Marie's final request.

Once again, a family promise had become disposable.

Once again, I had become invisible.

Erased.

Paul knew exactly what Marie wanted.

He knew exactly what Bill had intended.

Yet he chose to do what benefited him instead.

When I questioned him, he insisted he was simply carrying out “Bill’s wishes” and “Marie’s wishes.”

It was another familiar pattern.

Whenever Paul wanted to justify something, he spoke for people who could no longer speak for themselves.

Bernice.

Granddad Mysse.

Uncle Bill.

Even worse, Paul assured me that Gary and Réene agreed with his decision.

By then, I no longer had any questions about where I stood with my father.

For most of my life, I had searched for some explanation—some reason to believe that beneath the anger, the broken promises, and the manipulation, there was still a father who cared about his son.

That day, I stopped searching.

Whatever doubts I had carried for years were gone.

Paul had finally made his position clear.

Then, almost as if the conversation had suddenly taken a completely different direction, Paul asked me a question that caught me totally off guard.

“Do you want to be buried next to your mother?”

I was stunned.

After everything we had just been discussing, I couldn't understand why Paul was suddenly asking me where I wanted to be buried.

My mind immediately went back to the bypass trust and everything that had happened surrounding my mother's decisions. **There was no way I wanted to be buried in the Mysse family cemetery in Forsyth.**

The only thing that made that thought difficult was my grandfather. I would have loved to be buried beside him.

I told Paul that Michelle and I had already made other plans for our burials.

Then Paul surprised me again.

He said he wanted to be buried next to his wife.

I remember thinking about Uncle Sivert, who was already buried there.

Knowing what had happened between Paul and Sivert, I couldn't help but wonder if Sivert would have turned over in his grave knowing that Paul would eventually be buried beside him.

I also knew Merton would have been laughing his ass off at the thought. He absolutely did not want to be buried in the Mysse family plot either.

I should have said that to Paul.

Then Gary arrived.

Paul didn't say a word.

Gary acted as though **I was the one intruding on his father's life...**

their lives.

I remember standing there thinking, *How could my own brother treat me this way?*

I didn't say anything.

Not because I agreed with them. Not because I was afraid to speak.

I simply couldn't believe what I was witnessing.

At the time, it was almost impossible for me to accept that members of my own family could stand together and make me feel like an intruder in my own father's life.

I would understand the significance of that moment much later.

By then, the pattern within our family had become painfully predictable.

The snowball kept rolling downhill.



Several months later, an envelope arrived in the mail.

Inside was a check for ten thousand dollars.

Michelle looked at me and said something that made me stop and think.

“That may be the only money you ever see from Paul's estate.”

She was probably right.

If Paul had simply written,

“Craig, this is a gift from me.”

I would have accepted it with genuine gratitude.

Instead, the short note accompanying the check read:

“From your Uncle Bill.”

I stared at those four words for a long time.

Bill had never written them. Paul had.

And that was what bothered me more than the money.

I was tired of Paul speaking for people who were no longer alive to speak for themselves. He had done it before, and now he was doing it again.

I was tired of Paul making it seem perfectly normal to put words into someone else's mouth when, in truth, those words allowed him to justify his own decisions.

I thought about keeping the check.

Michelle was right. It might have been the only money I would ever see from Paul's estate.

But by then, I was tired of the money, the promises, the explanations, and the constant need to separate Paul's version of events from the truth.

I wanted to return the check immediately.

Michelle convinced me to deposit it in our account and think about it before making a final decision.

She was right.

I didn't need to make another decision that day.

For the first time, I could simply walk away from the argument and decide for myself what I wanted to do.

Looking back now, I realize that was important.

I was no longer making decisions based on what Paul wanted me to believe.

I was finally making the decision for myself.



The Final Payback

Finally, I asked Paul one last series of direct questions on the telephone.

“Did Sivert Jr. receive what Bill intended?”

“Did Richard?”

“Did Gary receive what Uncle Bill and Aunt Marie wanted him to have?”

Paul didn’t answer.

Instead, his temper exploded.

“You and your God-damned big mouth,” he shouted.

“It got you into trouble with your mother...”

“...and now it’s gotten you into trouble with me.”

“You need to learn to keep your God-damned mouth shut!”

Then came the words I have never forgotten.

“Basin Creek Ranch is my legacy.”

“It was never yours.”

“Ever.”

I sat there in stunned silence.

Everything Bernice had promised.

Everything Paul had promised.

Everything Gary had implied and promised.

In one angry outburst, Paul erased it all.

Then, shouting as loudly as he could into the telephone, he delivered the five words that became the title of this book.

“This is the Final Payback!”

I was speechless.

“The final payback for what?” I finally asked.

“For being your son?”

“For believing your and mom’s promises?”

“For asking you to stop lying in 1971?”

“For asking you to stop speaking for people who could no longer speak for themselves?”

Paul never answered.

He simply hung up.

The line went silent.

For the next-to-last time.

Looking back now, I realize that phone call wasn’t really about Uncle Bill’s estate and Aunt Maries wishes for her nephews.

It wasn’t about money.

It wasn’t even about Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

It was about something much deeper.

Paul had been given one final opportunity to answer my questions honestly.

Instead, he chose anger.

He chose to defend a lifetime of broken promises, half-truths, and lies rather than simply tell me the truth.

And in doing so, he revealed something I had struggled to accept for most of my life.

That phone call told me exactly how much I mattered to him as his son.

In the end, however, Paul accomplished something he never intended.

He finally told me the truth.

Not with honesty.

Not with an explanation.

But with anger.

And that truth needed no further explanation.



The Last Letter

I responded to Paul's "legacy" and "final payback" with two candid letters.

Neither was written in anger.

They were written because I wanted the truth acknowledged while there was still time.

By then, Paul no longer answered my telephone calls whenever I tried to discuss Uncle Bill's estate or the promises that had been broken.

Writing was my only remaining way to communicate with him.

I suppose I could have driven to Bozeman.

But it wouldn't have changed anything.

Paul had already made up his mind.

Just as Bernice had years earlier.

My first letter simply documented what I believed to be the truth.

Paul answered with a letter of his own.

He called me a **"very sick individual,"** consumed by what he described as **"festering greed."**

He also wrote that, because of my attitude, he was changing his will.

He accused me of being so ungrateful for everything he and Bernice had supposedly given me that I would undoubtedly contest his estate after he died.



With my second letter, I enclosed a personal check for **\$10,000.00** and sent it to Paul.

I enclosed a simple note.

“GOD BLESS.”

Two words.

That was all I wrote.

Paul did not believe in God.

I knew that.

He knew that.

I wasn't trying to change him.

I wasn't trying to punish him.

I wasn't trying to make one final argument.

I was finished.

The ten thousand dollars wasn't going to change what had happened. It couldn't restore the promises that had been broken, return the years that had been lost, or bring back the trust that had disappeared long before.

I no longer wanted anything from Paul.

Not an explanation.

Not an apology.

Not his money.

Not another promise.

I had spent enough of my life trying to make sense of things that should never have been so complicated.

So I sent the check back.

And with those two words—**“GOD BLESS”**—I said everything I had left to say.



Ironically, I never saw Paul’s final will.

I wasn’t told what it contained.

I wasn’t even told when or where he would be buried.

Gary informed me only that there would be a memorial service at Milam Basin Creek Ranch...

at an undisclosed time...

for family members only.

The message couldn’t have been clearer.

Gary had made his choice.

His desire to have the ranch and everything that came with it had become more important than having a relationship with his brother.

And somehow, in the process, I had stopped being family.

That realization hurt more than I expected.

Gary was my brother.

Whatever had happened between us, I never imagined that the pursuit of the entire ranch could become more important to him than our relationship.

But his actions had answered that question for me.

Oddly enough, after thinking about it, I realized there was nothing I wanted to return to.

Not Cherry Creek.

Not Basin Creek.

Not the promises.

Not the lies.

The places themselves had never betrayed me.

The people had.



Looking back now, I realize the greatest mistake of my life wasn't trusting my family.

It was continuing to trust them long after they had shown me, over and over again, that trust was no longer deserved.

First Bernice.

Then Paul.

Finally Gary.

Each, in his or her own way, made it unmistakably clear that I was no longer regarded as a son...

or a brother...

or even a member of the family.

What hurt most wasn't losing an inheritance twice.

It wasn't losing a ranch.

It wasn't losing mineral rights.

It was realizing that none of them ever believed they had done anything wrong.

Not one apology.

Not one acknowledgment.

Not one moment of genuine regret.

Greed doesn't destroy a family overnight.

Neither does betrayal.

They destroy it one broken promise at a time...

until eventually there is nothing left to save.



If I have one lasting regret, it is this.

I should have listened to Julius in 1971.

Or perhaps I should have listened to Hank on September 11, 2001.
Both men saw what I refused to see.
Both warned me.
Both understood my family better than I did.
Instead, I spent years chasing something that no longer existed.
From childhood I had been taught that earning my parents' approval was one of life's greatest responsibilities.
I believed that loving them meant sacrificing for them.
I believed that if I simply worked harder...
gave more...
endured more...
and remained loyal...
everything would eventually work out.
It never did.
Today I understand something I wish I had learned much earlier.
Love cannot survive where truth does not exist.
And no amount of loyalty can save a family that has already abandoned honesty.
That lesson cost me far more than a ranch.
It cost me the family I spent a lifetime believing I still had.



Chapter 8

The Final Phone Call



Some time passed after my and Paul's exchange of letters.

After I made that one final decision.

After I returned the \$10,000 check to Paul.

Every penny.

Whatever the money represented in his mind, I wanted no part of it.

Once the check was returned, Paul could never again accuse me of being motivated by what he had called "festering greed."

The matter, at least from my perspective, was finished.

I had no idea how deeply returning that check would wound his pride.

It was late one evening.

Michelle and I had just gone to bed when the telephone rang.

It was Paul.

The last time I would ever hear my father's voice.

From the moment Paul began speaking, I knew something was terribly different.

He was not acting like the father I knew.

His words were slurred. His voice rose and fell unpredictably, and there was something in his manner that I had never experienced from him before.

I don't know if it was alcohol, medication, emotion, or some combination of the three. Whatever the cause, I will never know for certain.

But I also wonder if there was something else driving him that day—the intensity of finally saying the things he had apparently wanted to say to me for years. It was almost as if he had been waiting for the opportunity to have the last word.

What I do know is that Paul was not himself that day.

And yet, I have never forgotten what he said.

Without allowing me to speak, Paul launched into what became the final conversation of our lives.

“You are no longer a Milam.”

“You’re no longer my son.”

“Don’t you ever set foot on Milam property again.”

“And don’t you ever speak to a real Milam.”

Then came the final declaration.

“You won’t get one God-damned red cent from me when I die.”

I simply listened.

I didn't argue.

I didn't defend myself.

I didn't try to change his mind.

The next day, I wrote every word of that conversation in my journal.

I wanted to remember exactly what Paul had said—not what I might later wish he had said, and not what my emotions might eventually convince me I had heard.

I wrote it down while the words were still fresh in my mind.

I had no idea then how important that journal entry would become.

Years later, those words were still there, exactly where I had left them.

Throughout my life, I had noticed something about Paul. Whenever he was confronted with facts he couldn't explain, his voice became louder. **This night was no different.**

But his anger could not change what had happened. It could not change the promises that had been made or the years that had passed.

For me, something finally ended that night.

When the call ended, I felt something I never expected.

Relief.

Not once in my life did Paul ever tell me he loved me.

A sad fact, made even harder by knowing the same was true of my mother.

For the first time in my life, I realized I no longer had to chase my father's approval. I no longer had to argue, explain myself, or hope that someday he would tell me the truth—or simply tell me that he loved me.

I had spent a lifetime waiting to hear those words.

They never came.

And finally, I understood that I could stop waiting.

I was done.

After that final telephone call, I finally understood something Paul's brother Donald had told me **several times over the years I knew him.**

“Someday you'll understand why we always called your father Tall Paul.”

The first time Donald said it, I was puzzled. He repeated it several times over the years, and each time I understood a little more of what he meant.

Now, after that final conversation with Paul, I understood completely.

The nickname had nothing to do with height.

It had everything to do with stretching the truth.

Even near the end of his life, Paul remained true to that reputation.

But I never walked away from the truth.

I walked away from the lies.

I no longer needed to argue with Paul, defend myself, or convince him to acknowledge what I knew to be true.

I had finally learned that walking away from the lies was not giving up on the truth.

It was choosing to live with it.



I believe Paul truly thought that last phone call was his final victory.

His own Final Payback.

His voice carried a strange sense of satisfaction, as though he believed he had finally said everything he wanted to say and had left me with nothing more to answer.

Perhaps he saw his final words as the completion of what Bernice had begun years earlier: the bypass trust that broke The Promise she had made to me.

Perhaps, in his mind, this was the final step—cutting me completely out of the family and erasing me from the legacy I had once been promised.

But there were no scores to settle.

I had never been his enemy. I had only been his son.

What I couldn't understand then—and still struggle to understand today—was why.

What had I actually done that deserved such contempt?

It wasn't because I refused to work.

My years at Cherry Creek and Basin Creek proved otherwise.

It wasn't because I lacked loyalty.

If anything, I had been too loyal.

The only real difference was that after marrying Michelle, I was no longer willing to surrender my life to someone else's control.

That changed everything.

Unfortunately, none of us chooses the family we are born into.

Looking back today, I don't believe my parents' actions reflected my character.

They reflected theirs.

At the same time, I have learned to accept my own responsibility.

I stayed long after I should have left.

I believed promises that should have been questioned.

I ignored warnings from people who cared about me.

That was my mistake.



What Remained

Looking back now, I believe the outcome would probably have been the same whether I had married Michelle or remained single.

Marriage didn't create the problem. It simply revealed what was already there.

For much of my life, I believed that being a good son meant working hard, keeping promises, sacrificing for family, and being useful.

What I eventually understood was much harder to accept:

My value should never have been measured by what I could do for my family.

No child should have to earn his place through labor, sacrifice, or usefulness. A family should be the one place where a child knows he belongs simply because he is a child of that family.

That was not the life I experienced.

I cannot change what happened. I cannot recover the years that were lost or make the people who hurt me see things differently.

But I can choose what I do with the years I have left.

I can tell the story as I experienced it—not for revenge, not for sympathy, but because the truth deserves to exist.

For years, others wrote the story of my life for me.

These pages are where I finally took the pen back.

And perhaps that is what remained after everything else was taken away:

the freedom to decide who I am, what my life means, and how I will spend my remaining years.



Chapter 9

Family Will Always Come First



I grew up.

Despite everything that happened, I became the man I had hoped to become—**the man most parents would be proud to call their son.**

I became a good husband, a good father, and a good grandfather. I worked hard, kept my word, served my community, and tried to treat people with honesty, kindness, and respect.

I am proud to be an American, proud of the life Michelle and I built, and proud of the family we created together.

My parents may have chosen to define me by what I could do for them. I chose to define myself by how I lived my life and how I treated the people I loved.

After nearly eight decades, that is what remains.

I am at peace with who I became.

And for the remaining years of my life, **family will always come first.**



To Bill Seward

There are people who pass through our lives without ever realizing how deeply they have influenced us.

Bill Seward was one of those people.

Bill never preached.

He never demanded.

He simply listened, observed, and when the moment was right, quietly offered his advice.

Looking back now, I realize he possessed something that cannot be taught.

Wisdom.

To me, Bill was far more than the owner of the Jersey Lilly.

He was an ambassador of friendship.

He welcomed everyone who walked through his door with the same kindness, the same respect, and the same genuine interest in their lives.

He made people feel as though they belonged.

That is a rare gift.

Over the years Bill shared more wisdom with me than he probably ever realized.

He changed the direction of my life without ever trying to do so.

For that, I owe him a debt of gratitude that can never truly be repaid.

One evening, sitting in the Jersey Lilly, Bill quietly warned me about my family.

He saw things I could not.

He understood relationships I refused to question.

I heard every word he spoke.

But I wasn't ready to understand them.

My belief in family was simply too strong.

For that, I have always carried a measure of regret.

I should have listened more carefully.

I should have trusted the wisdom of a man who had already lived long enough to recognize truths that I was still unwilling to face.

Bill wasn't the only one.

C. M. Coffee.

Patty Erickson.

And others.

Each, in his or her own way, tried to warn me.

Each saw pieces of my life that I could not yet see for myself.

Unfortunately, my loyalty to the idea of family drowned out the voices of the people who genuinely cared about me.

Time has a remarkable way of revealing the truth.

Today I understand what Bill was trying to teach me all those years ago.

Some people enter our lives to share our journey.

Others enter our lives to help us find our way.

Bill Seward did both.

This book would not exist without him.

Thank you, Bill.

I only wish I had understood your wisdom while there was still time to tell you so.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Craig Milam

Craig Milam was twenty-one years old when he was sent to eastern Montana in 1971 and given an assignment that would change the course of his life.

What began as several months working on Cherry Creek Sheep Company became something far greater. Through the people he encountered—most notably Julius Sebulsky—Craig learned lessons about loyalty, responsibility, keeping one's word, and standing by another person when things become difficult.

More than fifty years later, Craig returned to the journals and memories of those years and began writing the story he had carried with him for most of his life.

His books, *Julius and the Mysse Curse* and *Erased: The Final Payback*, are not simply stories about ranches, family disputes, or broken promises. They are the record of a personal journey through loyalty, disappointment, forgiveness, love, and ultimately understanding.

Craig has been married to Michelle, the love of his life and his partner in building the family he always wanted, for many years. Together they raised their family and created the kind of home in which love was never something a child had to earn.

Now approaching eighty years of age, Craig writes not to change the past, but to preserve it.

He writes for Julius, for the people who believed in him when he was young, for the family he and Michelle created, and for anyone who has ever wondered whether the circumstances of their past must determine the rest of their life.

They do not.

Craig's greatest accomplishment is not what he acquired or what was left to him.

It is the man he became.

And after nearly eight decades, he is still writing his story.