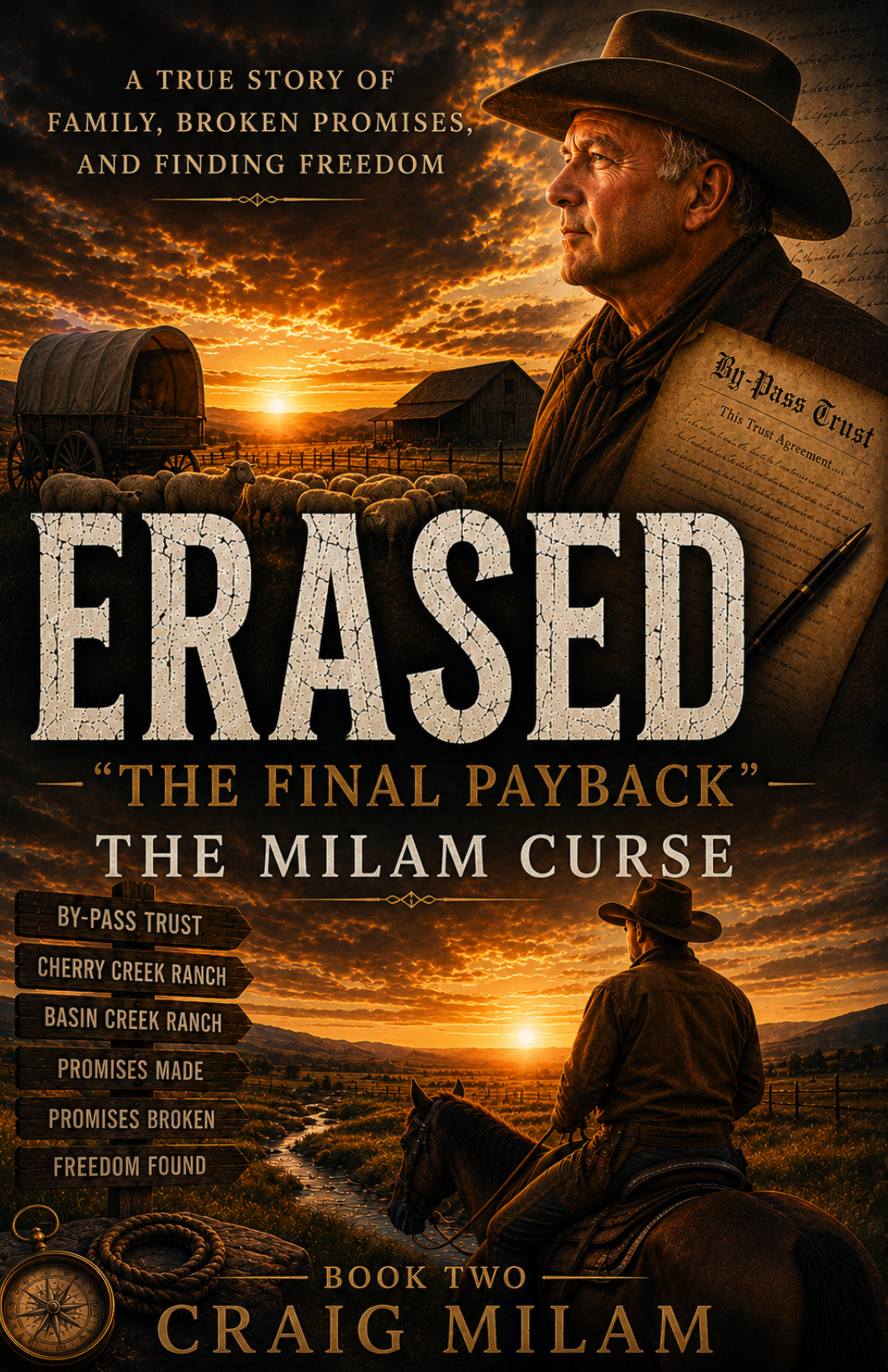
A TRUE STORY OF
FAMILY, BROKEN PROMISES,
AND FINDING FREEDOM



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 using ChatGPT 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

They may erase you from their life. They may erase your name from their story. But they can never erase the life you lived, the love you gave, or the person you became.

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Dedication

For Michelle

You showed me the truth when I was still afraid to see it.

For most of my life, I believed that loving my family meant sacrificing for them, trusting them, and believing their promises—even when something inside me told me that something was wrong.

Then you came into my life.

You never tried to tell me who I should be.

You simply loved me for who I was.

You gave me a home where I didn't have to earn my place.

A family where love wasn't conditional.

And, slowly, you helped me see what I had spent a lifetime refusing to see.

You showed me that love does not require surrender.

That loyalty does not require silence.

That forgiveness does not require forgetting.

And that telling the truth does not mean you have stopped loving the people who hurt you.

When I could not find my way through the darkness, you never tried to walk the path for me.

You simply stayed beside me and held the light.

That light became my way home.

Because of you, I finally understood that the family I had spent my life trying to hold together was not the only family I could have.

We could build our own.

And we did.

You gave me something I had been searching for without even knowing what it was:

a place where I belonged simply because I was loved.

The greatest gift you ever gave me was not an answer.

It was the courage to see the truth for myself.

And once I could finally see it, you showed me something even more important—

there was a life beyond it.

Michelle, you are the love of my life, my best friend, my home, and the light that guided me when I could no longer see the way forward.

I would not have found that way without you.

Thank you for loving me when I was lost.

Thank you for standing beside me when I was afraid.

Thank you for teaching me that love should never require me to lose myself.

And most of all, thank you for showing me the truth.

I love you.

Craig



THE TRUTH THEY COULDN'T ERASE

I spent most of my life believing the worst thing my family could take from me was the ranch. My heritage.

I was wrong.

They could take the ranch. They could take the money. They could take the inheritance. They could even tell me I was no longer a son.

But they could not take **what I remembered**.

That is what frightened me most about what happened.

The people who controlled the land also wanted to control the story. Promises became inconvenient. Memories became negotiable. Silence became easier than truth. And the family history I had spent a lifetime believing in began disappearing right in front of me.

Then I understood something Julius had tried to teach me in 1971.

"A man's words tell you what he wants you to believe. His actions tell you who he really is."

For more than fifty years, I ignored that lesson because I wanted to believe my family.

These two books are what happened after I finally stopped.

They are not really about sheep, ranches, money, or inheritance.

They are about what happens when **the people you trust most decide that the truth is less important than protecting themselves and their interests.**

And perhaps the most painful discovery of all was this:

I wasn't erased because I had failed my family.

I was erased because I finally stopped believing them.

That is the story I never expected to tell.

— 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.

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 Paul and Bernice.

Looking back more than fifty years later, I can see that my understanding of them did not change because of one event. It changed slowly.

There were hundreds of conversations. Countless expectations. Promises that sometimes seemed to change after I had already committed myself.

As a child, I couldn't see the pattern.

By high school, my mother was involved in nearly every important decision I made. She wanted things done her way, on her timetable, and according to her instructions.

Questions were often interpreted as defiance.

Alternatives were rarely welcomed.

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



The Disney Dream

One conversation from those years has stayed with me.

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 immediately.

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 understand that it wasn't really about Disneyland.

It was about approval.

Even a simple dream could be judged, approved, or dismissed.

I didn't have the words for that then.

I simply stopped talking about certain dreams.



“This Is Your Mother.”

After high school, I left home for college.

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

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

Never early.

Never late.

Always the same greeting.

“This is your mother.”

Those four words became the most dreaded words in the English language **for me** to hear as long as my mother was alive.

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, I usually found myself wondering what I had done wrong.

At the time, I assumed the problem was me.

Then, four months into my freshman year, my roommate and close friend, Jimmy Anderson, was killed in a mountain-climbing accident in Glacier National Park.

His death devastated me.

I expected my parents to understand that I was grieving.

They called.

But instead of asking how I was coping, the conversation quickly turned to something I had supposedly done wrong—something so insignificant that I can no longer remember what it was.

What I remember is what they didn't ask.

They didn't ask if I was all right.

They didn't ask how I was dealing with Jimmy's death.

They didn't 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.



1971

I decided to transfer from Montana State University in Bozeman to the University of Montana in Missoula.

The education itself wasn't the problem.

Something simply didn't feel right.

Before I could make the move, my parents asked me for a family favor.

I said yes.

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

What I expected to last only a few weeks changed the direction of my life.

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

Cherry Creek introduced me to Julius Sebulsky.

It taught me what hard work meant.

It taught me the value of paying attention.

It showed me what integrity looked like.

And, more importantly, Julius became the first person outside my family who challenged the way I viewed my parents.

More than once, he warned me to put as much distance as possible between myself and Paul and Bernice.

I heard him.

I didn't understand him.

I couldn't imagine why he would say such a thing.

He didn't know my family.

I did.

Or so I believed.

Julius understood something I wasn't ready to see.

The lessons I learned from him in 1971 would follow me for the rest of my life.

I simply wouldn't understand them until much later.



The Cost of Approval

About a year and a half after leaving home for college in Missoula, I met a young woman I loved.

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

Naturally, I wanted my parents to meet her.

My father smiled.

“I think she's the one,” he said.

My mother said little.

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

I never knew exactly what was said.

I only knew that afterward, something changed.

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?

That conversation changed more than one relationship.

Afterward, I rarely brought another young woman home.

I began protecting parts of my life from my parents because I had learned that approval could come with a price.



Learning Slowly

I have always been slow to recognize what is happening to me while I am living through it.

For years, I believed I was simply being a respectful son.

I listened.

I worked.

I apologized when I thought I had disappointed someone.

I believed that was what family required.

The experience at Cherry Creek should have changed that.

Julius certainly hoped it would.

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

As I established my teaching career, my mother's involvement in my life continued.

She wanted to know where I was, who I spent time with, and what was happening around me. When something needed to be repaired at my parents' home, I was expected to help. If my mother needed transportation, I was expected to drive.

Gary had his own family.

Paul was often “too busy.”

I became the dependable son.

The one who could be counted on.

The one who would say yes.

Over time, I began to understand that I was spending more energy earning approval than trusting my own judgment.

I still believed that if I worked harder, gave more, and disappointed them less, eventually I would feel secure in my place within the family.

I was wrong.



Caught Between Two Worlds

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

There were much better-paying jobs elsewhere.

Jordan kept me close to Cherry Creek.

That mattered to my mother.

She wanted to know what Sivert and Janet were doing, how money was being spent, what equipment was being purchased, and what was happening around the ranch.

Without fully realizing it, I became Bernice's eyes and ears.

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

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.

As I approached, I could see in the distance the barn was still standing.

I was proud of it.

Five and a half moths of sweat, splinters, aching muscles, and determination still stood against the Montana prairie.

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 was the day after my birthday.**

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

His name was Evertt.

He told me Sivert had instructed the ranch hands to notify him if I was ever seen on Cherry Creek.

Then he said:

“I don't have anything against you.”

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

I thanked him for being honest.

Then I turned around and left.

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



Uncle Sivert

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.

He went 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 the messenger was taking the blame from both sides.



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, 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 and told her exactly what had happened.

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 Granddad's old house in Ingomar after the winter snows—as Bernice had requested—and then stop at the Jersey Lilly for lunch.

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."

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



Another Roadblock

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.

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 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.

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 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.



What I Still Didn't Understand

Later, my mother hung a Montana Wool Growers Magazine cover on the wall outside my bedroom.

It was a picture of John Sebulsky.

I asked her why she would display the photograph of a man who had pointed a rifle at me twice.

She told me John was an important part of Granddad's legacy.

I reminded her about Evertt.

Sivert.

The rifle.

The threats.

Her answer was immediate.

“It was all just a misunderstanding.”

“You need to get over it.”

What stayed with me was not the magazine cover.

It was how quickly my experience disappeared.

Protecting the image of Cherry Creek mattered more than confronting what had happened to me.

That was another turning point.

I was beginning to understand that, in my family, appearances could matter more than reality.

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

It was farther from Bigfork.

Farther from Cherry Creek.

I hoped distance would finally give me room to build a life of my own.

It didn't.

The requests continued.

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.

I left Montana believing I was finally putting Cherry Creek behind me.

I wasn't.

I was carrying the lessons of Cherry Creek with me.

I just didn't understand them yet.

Julius had tried to teach me the difference between love, loyalty, and surrendering my own judgment.

It would take many more years before I understood what he meant.

By then, the Mysse Curse would become something else.

The Milam Curse.



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 the answer to everything that had gone wrong at Cherry Creek.

A chance to build something of our own.

A chance to preserve Granddad Mysse's legacy.

A chance to leave the past behind.

I believed it was a second chance.

It began with my mother.



Bernice's Search

By the time I was working in Saudi Arabia, Cherry Creek was beginning to fall apart.

My Aunt Marie had sold her interest to Kevin Brewer, and Bernice was devastated.

To her, Cherry Creek wasn't simply a ranch.

It was her father's legacy.

It was the Mysse family's connection to eastern Montana.

She did not want to watch that disappear.

Near the end of my contract in Saudi Arabia, Bernice began calling me by satellite telephone.

She wanted me to come home.

She and Paul were searching for another ranch.

She wanted Gary and me to operate it together.

She even considered Benny Olson's place because, as she put it, “he was Norwegian and Norwegians stick together and understand each other.”

That was Bernice.

She was looking for a way to preserve what she believed her family was losing.



The Money From Cherry Creek

Only later did I learn more about the financial details of the Cherry Creek sale.

According to Paul, Bernice received approximately one million dollars for her interest.

He said Kevin Brewer assumed well over a million dollars of Cherry Creek's debt.

Paul also told me 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 Bernice now had the resources to look for another ranch.

She wasn't simply looking for an investment.

She was looking for a replacement for something she believed her family was losing.

Granddad Mysse’s legacy.



Come Home

Bernice wanted me home from Saudi Arabia.

She told me she and Paul were looking for a ranch somewhere in eastern Montana.

Then she gave me the reassurance I wanted most.

“Everything with Cherry Creek is over.”

“Everything between you and Sivert has been settled.”

I believed her.

I came home.

I resumed teaching in Montana.

And Bernice continued looking.

Eventually, that search led to my Uncle Merton Mysse.



Basin Creek

Gary and Paul approached Merton about purchasing Basin Creek.

The money behind the purchase came from Bernice's Cherry Creek sale.

The ranch became the opportunity Bernice had been looking for.

A new beginning.

A new family ranch.

A continuation of the Mysse legacy.

Eventually, ownership was divided equally among three partners:

Bernice.

Gary.

Me.

There was one important exception.

Paul's name was not on the partnership agreement.

That was intentional.

Because of Paul's infidelity and the pain it had caused her, Bernice had assured me he would not control another family ranch.

I told her plainly that if Paul was going to act as a partner or have a voice in ranch decisions, I wanted no part of the partnership.

She looked at me and promised:

“This ranch belongs to you and Gary.”

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

That promise mattered.

I had already lived through Cherry Creek.

I knew what happened when family relationships became mixed with ownership, money, authority, and control.

I believed Bernice was protecting us from repeating that history.



The Warning I Ignored

A quiet voice inside me remembered 1971.

It remembered Julius.

It remembered what had happened at Cherry Creek.

Everything I had learned during those months told me to stop and think.

Don't do this.

Don't trust another promise.

But she was my mother.

And we were family.

I wanted to believe this time would be different.

So 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.

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



Eighteen Summers

When I returned to Montana, I resumed teaching during the school year and working full time at Basin Creek every summer.

That became my life for eighteen years.

I built fences.

Repaired equipment.

Worked cattle.

Maintained water systems.

Welded machinery.

Put up hay.

Handled whatever needed to be done.

The trip from Plains to Ingomar was approximately 434 miles, followed by another 45 difficult miles to Basin Creek.

I made that trip again and again.

Every summer.

For eighteen summers.

At the time, I didn't think of it as a sacrifice.

It was our ranch.

It was family.

And I believed I was helping build something that would eventually belong to Gary and me.



Gary's Family

Gary had his own family in Bozeman.

He was raising his two sons with Réene.

I never resented him for that.

Children only grow up once.

Parents should be there to watch it happen.

That was never the issue.

The issue was that the physical responsibility for Basin Creek increasingly fell on me.

I was there.

I drove the miles.

I repaired the equipment.

I rebuilt the fences.

I worked the cattle.

I maintained the water systems.

At first, I believed Gary would eventually become more involved.

"Someday," I was told, when his boys were older.

Someday can carry a lot of weight when you are the person doing the work today.



Paul’s Lament

Paul repeatedly made his position clear.

“I am not a partner in this damn ranch.”

Technically, he was right.

His name wasn't on the partnership agreement.

But that did not mean he disappeared from ranch affairs.

He questioned decisions.

He offered opinions.

He expected those opinions to carry weight.

When physical work needed to be done, he could remind everyone that he wasn't a partner.

When decisions were being made, he still wanted influence.

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

That contradiction became part of life at Basin Creek.

Still, I kept working.



The Promise

Whenever I became discouraged, Bernice had an answer.

“The Promise.”

When I questioned the workload:

“The Promise.”

When I asked when Gary would become more involved:

“The Promise.”

When I wondered whether the sacrifices were becoming too great:

“The Promise.”

Then she would repeat what she had promised me.

“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.”

She repeated it over the years.

She told relatives.

She told friends.

It became the future I believed we were building toward.

Gary and I would eventually own the ranch.

The minerals would be divided equally.

Paul would be taken care of through other assets.

And someday, Gary and I would decide what to do with the ranch.

I believed her.

I was her son.

Why wouldn't I?



Julius Lessons

The irony was that Julius had already taught me what I needed to know.

Watch.

Listen.

Think.

Question.

Look at the whole operation.

Don't simply accept the story someone tells you.

At Cherry Creek, I had learned those lessons because I was twenty-one and had no choice.

At Basin Creek, I had a choice.

And this time, the person telling me the story was my mother.

I wanted to believe her.

So I did.

For eighteen years.



What I Didn't Know

I didn't know that the future I was working toward could be changed.

I didn't know that promises could be rewritten without anyone admitting they had changed.

I didn't know that the man my mother promised would never control the ranch would eventually influence its future.

I didn't know that the ranch would become the center of another family conflict.

For eighteen summers, I believed I was building a future for Gary and me.

Every fence.

Every repair.

Every load of hay.

Every mile.

Every sacrifice.

All of it rested on one belief:

“My mother's word meant what she said.”

I never imagined that the promise that inspired me to give so much would one day become the reason I lost almost everything.



Chapter 3

THE PROMISE



For eighteen summers, I worked at Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

But the story of those eighteen years is not really about the work.

It is about why I kept doing it.

It is about a promise.



The Work

The physical responsibility for the ranch increasingly fell on me.

If something broke, I fixed it.

If a fence needed repair, I repaired it.

If cattle needed attention, I handled them.

If water systems failed, I worked on them.

If equipment needed welding, I welded it.

If hay needed to be put up, I helped get it done.

The work was hard.

But hard work was never what bothered me.

Julius had taught me to take pride in doing a job correctly.

He taught me to look beyond the immediate problem and consider the entire operation.

Those lessons became part of me.

What eventually became difficult was carrying so much of the responsibility for a ranch I believed would someday belong equally to Gary and me.



Someday

Gary was raising his children in Bozeman.

I understood why he wanted to be there.

I never resented him for being a father.

But every summer I returned to Basin Creek.

Every summer the work was waiting.

Eventually I began asking when Gary would start sharing more of the responsibility.

Bernice always had the same explanation.

Gary's children were growing up.

He deserved to be there for them.

Someday, when they were older, he would be able to help.

I understood the explanation.

What became harder was living with the difference between “someday” and “today?”

My responsibility was today.

Gary's was always someday.

I wanted a partner.

More importantly, I wanted my brother.

I wanted us to build something together.



“I Am Not a Partner”

Paul had his own position.

“I am not a partner in this damn ranch.”

Technically, he wasn't.

But his influence never disappeared.

He questioned decisions.

He wanted to know what was happening.

He offered opinions.

He expected those opinions to matter.

When work needed to be done, he could remind everyone that he wasn't responsible.

When decisions were made, he still wanted influence.

That contradiction bothered me.

But I continued working because I believed the future we had been promised would make the sacrifices worthwhile.



Wearing Myself Out

Eventually, the work began taking a physical toll.

I told Bernice:

“I’m wearing my body out.”

Her response was immediate.

“It’s only in your mind.”

Then came the answer I had heard so many times.

“The Promise.”

It became the answer whenever I questioned what I was giving to the ranch.

When I questioned the workload:

“The Promise.”

When I wondered whether the sacrifices were too great:

“The Promise.”

When I asked when Gary would share more of the work:

“The Promise.”

When I considered stepping away:

“The Promise.”

At the time, I didn't see those words as manipulation.

I heard them as reassurance.

That distinction matters.

I wasn't working eighteen summers because I was calculating the value of an inheritance.

I wasn't working because I expected to become wealthy.

I was working because I believed my mother.

“The Promise wasn't about money.”

“It was about trust.”



What She Promised

Bernice repeatedly told me exactly what would happen when she died.

“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.”

Those words became the foundation of my future.

She didn't tell me once.

She repeated them.

She told relatives.

She told friends.

I believed her.

I believed Gary would receive the same share.

I believed Paul would be provided for through other assets.

I believed the ranch would remain in the family.

Most importantly, I believed my eighteen summers mattered because I was helping build something my brother and I would eventually share.



The Physical Price

Years later, I began paying the physical price for those summers.

One surgery became another.

A damaged knee.

A damaged shoulder.

The lingering effects of injuries suffered while working cattle.

Surgery after a rattlesnake bite.

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.

I don't list those injuries to claim that every problem I experienced was caused by the ranch.

I list them because they remind me of the physical life I lived there.

I kept going because I believed the ranch would someday provide security when I could no longer work the way I once had.

The Promise gave those sacrifices meaning.

Without it, I don't know how long I would have continued.



Brothers

Gary and I eventually talked about the future.

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

I told him I would consider it.

But I wanted something first.

I wanted us to work the ranch together.

I wanted us to see whether we could make it profitable.

I wanted to build something with my brother before either of us simply bought the other out.

Gary agreed.

We even toasted the idea with a couple of shots.

At the time, I believed we had made a brother-to-brother promise.

I remember that conversation because of what it represented.

I thought we were looking toward the same future.

I didn't know how differently that future would eventually be understood.



The Ranch Would Never Be Sold

Bernice also made another thing clear.

“The ranch was never to be sold… EVER!”

“A Milam will own it forever!”

I had never proposed selling the ranch.

So who did?

To her, Basin Creek represented more than property.

It represented family.

It represented Granddad Mysse.

It represented a continuation of the legacy she believed Cherry Creek had lost.

I understood that.

I believed it too.



The Cost of Believing

Looking back, I can see that Julius had given me the warning long before Basin Creek.

He taught me to watch.

To listen.

To question.

To think before acting.

To recognize when someone's explanation didn't match what I could see.

At Cherry Creek, I had no choice but to learn those lessons.

At Basin Creek, I had a choice.

And I chose to believe my mother.

For eighteen years.

That is why what happened later hurt so deeply.

I wasn't simply losing property.

I was discovering that the future I had built my life around depended on a promise I had never protected beyond my faith in the person who made it.



What I Didn't Know

I didn't know that promises can change without the person who made them ever admitting they have changed.

I didn't know that a future can be rewritten while the person working toward it remains unaware.

I didn't know that the man Bernice had promised would never have authority over the ranch would eventually have influence over its future.

And I didn't know that one day I would have to decide whether to keep fighting for something my own family had already decided I should lose.

For now, I knew none of that.

I was still working.

Still driving.

Still repairing.

Still believing.

I had one simple belief left:

“Family keeps its promises.”

I had no idea how much those words were going to cost me.



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 I loved.

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 as though I had to earn my place in a family.

I already belonged.

Michelle and I didn't build our marriage around money, property, or promises about what might someday be ours.

We built it around one promise.

To love one another.

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

She gave me a home.

She gave me a family.

And she gave me a place where I could finally be loved for who I was rather than for what I could do.

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

I had no idea how quickly that feeling was about to be tested.



A Warning I Didn't Understand

A few months before our wedding, something happened that I didn't fully understand at the time.

My wife-to-be and I were at the Jersey Lilly in Ingomar, talking with Bill Seward.

Bill knew my parents well.

He had known them for years and had heard the kinds of conversations people sometimes have when they are sitting around a bar, having breakfast, drinking coffee, or playing cribbage.

That day, Bill took me aside.

He spoke quietly.

He told me that people change.

He said Paul and Bernice were not the same people he had known years earlier.

Then he looked directly at me.

He told me my life was about to change.

I asked him what he meant.

He didn't give me the answer I wanted.

Instead, he told me to read Luke 12:53 and think about what it meant.

He also told me that I should use my marriage as an opportunity to build a different life with my future wife.

At the time, I didn't understand what Bill was trying to tell me.

I remember leaving the Jersey Lilly with an uneasy feeling.

But I didn't believe him.

Why would I?

I was getting married.

I was happy.

And, despite everything that had happened in the past, I still believed my family was my family.

I still believed The Promise was real.

I still believed the future of Milam Basin Creek Ranch belonged to Gary and me.

Bill's warning went into my journal.

Then life moved on.

Or so I thought.



September 11

Less than three months after Michelle and I were married, the world changed.

September 11, 2001.

Like almost everyone alive that day, I remember where I was when I first heard what was happening in New York and Washington.

For millions of people, September 11 became a dividing line.

There was life before September 11.

And there was life after it.

For me, the date became unforgettable for another reason.

While the country was watching history unfold, another history was quietly beginning on Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

At the time, I didn't know it.

Years later, I would realize that September 11 marked the beginning of the end of everything my mother had promised me.

That morning, however, was ordinary.

We worked sheep.

Paul.

Gary.

Wayne Vannice.

Our sheepherder, Hank Stocker.

And me.

We vaccinated ewes.

Checked mouths.

Applied paint brands for winter identification.

We did the ordinary work required to prepare the flock for another Montana winter.

Nothing about the morning suggested that my life was about to change.

When we finished, Hank walked over to me.

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

Something in his voice caught my attention.

This wasn't a casual invitation.

Something was wrong.

I just didn't know what.



Hank and Bobbi

When I arrived at Hank and Bobbi's house, Bobbi met me at the door.

She had 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.

Finally, Hank pulled a chair away from the table, rested both hands on the back of it, looked directly into my eyes, and spoke.

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

I nodded.

Everyone knew about her lung disease.

Hank 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.”

His words stopped me.

Over the previous several years, I had noticed changes in my mother.

There had been conversations that didn't seem like the Bernice I knew.

There were times when her behavior seemed different, particularly when she had been drinking.

But I had always found another explanation.

Her health.

Her lungs.

The stress she was under.

Age.

Anything that allowed me to believe the basic truth remained unchanged.

She was still my mother.

And she still loved Gary and me.

I never imagined that whatever was happening to her could threaten the ranch.

Or The Promise.

Hank continued.

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

He drew slowly on his pipe.

“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?”

Hank's voice became quieter.

“You and I are finished, Craig.”

“It's only a matter of time.”

Then Bobbi spoke through her tears.

“Hank knows, Craig. 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…”

Her tears stopped her in the middle of what she was trying to tell me. She wiped her eyes, struggling to continue.

I had never seen Bobbi like that.

If a woman as tough as Bobbi could be brought to tears by what was happening, I knew this was no ordinary ranch dispute. Something far more serious was unfolding, and the people I had trusted most were at the center of it.

I just stared at her.

None of it made sense.

Bernice had promised me the exact opposite.

She had promised that Paul would never have a voice in the operation of the ranch.

She had promised that Gary and I would eventually own it.

Now I was sitting in Hank's house being told that Paul and Gary were already making decisions.

And no one in my family had told me a thing.

Not Gary.

Not Paul.

Not Bernice.

Before Bobbi could say anything more, the front door opened.

Paul walked in looking for a cup of coffee.

The room became silent.

Instantly.

Nobody spoke.

Nobody explained what we had been discussing.

Paul poured his coffee.

I watched him.

And for the first time, I wondered whether I had been the last person to know what was happening inside my own family.



The Echo of 1971

I left Hank and Bobbi's house trying to convince myself they were wrong.

Maybe they had misunderstood something.

Maybe the information had been exaggerated.

Maybe Paul had said something that had been taken out of context.

Maybe Bernice was still in control.

I wanted to believe that.

Because if Hank was right, something much bigger was happening.

The memories of 1971 began coming back.

Cherry Creek.

Julius.

Paul.

Bernice.

The promises that had persuaded me to go to eastern Montana.

The promises that had changed after I had committed myself.

The half-truths.

The silence.

The feeling of being caught in the middle of something I didn't understand.

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

Now they were coming back.

One question began bothering me.

Was the Mysse Curse becoming the Milam Curse?

I didn't know the answer.

Not yet.



I Needed to Know

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 warning had been based on rumor or whether there was something behind it.

Their story hadn't changed.

They told me essentially the same things they had told me before.

That mattered to me.

So I left the ranch and drove to Bigfork.

I wanted answers from the people who were actually making the decisions.

I deliberately didn't tell Paul and Bernice where I had heard the information.

I simply asked them what was happening.

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.”

I listened.

I wanted to believe her.

But something inside me had changed.

I had watched Paul for too many years.

I had seen him deny things.

I had seen him tell one version of a story and then another.

I had seen explanations change when the first explanation no longer worked.

Now I was sitting across from him again.

And I didn't believe him.

The problem was that I couldn't prove anything.

So I did what I had done for most of my life.

I went looking for another explanation.



“You Promised Me”

Later, I found Bernice alone in the kitchen.

I looked at her.

“Mom, you promised me.”

She knew exactly what I meant.

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

I paused.

“That isn't what's happening.”

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

“Do you know what they're doing?”

Bernice looked at me.

“That’s just your imagination.”

Then she said two words I have never forgotten.

“Grow up.”

I stood there silently.

Those words hurt.

Not because they were angry.

Because they dismissed everything I was trying to tell her.

For years, I had found reasons to explain away the warning signs.

I blamed stress.

I blamed fear.

I blamed her failing health.

I blamed the effects of her lung disease.

I always found another explanation because she was my mother.

And because I loved her.

But standing in that kitchen, I could no longer make those explanations fit what I was seeing.

Something had changed.

I didn't know exactly what.

But I knew it was real.

For the first time, I began to wonder whether The Promise was no longer something I could depend upon.



The Sheep

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

I remember the day because, once again, nothing about it seemed unusual.

We were doing ranch work.

The kind of work I had done for eighteen summers.

Then 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.”

I looked at him.

“We've?”

“Who is we?”

Neither 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 told me the annual lamb crop covered Hank and Bobbi's wages.

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

Now I was being told it had to end.

I looked at Gary.

Then Paul.

“Did Bernice agree to this?”

Neither answered.

I asked again.

“Did she?”

Finally, Paul spoke.

“Just do what you're told.”

The words hit me harder than they should have.

I had heard them before.

Twenty-five years earlier.

Another ranch.

Another family conflict.

Another decision made without me.

Another reminder that I was expected to obey rather than participate.

For years, I had believed Cherry Creek was behind me.

Standing there beside those sheep, I realized it wasn’t.



Telling Hank

Gary and I were expected to tell Hank.

Paul had made the decision.

Gary had apparently agreed with it.

But somehow the responsibility for delivering the news belonged to us.

We found Hank walking up from his house.

He 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…”

He paused.

“…then I'm done.”

His voice was calm.

Almost resigned.

As though some part of him had expected the day to come.

Then he looked directly at me.

“Does Bernice know?”

I couldn't answer.

“I don't know.”

Hank held my eyes for several seconds.

He didn't argue.

He didn't accuse me.

He simply nodded.

The disappointment in his face said more than words could.

I had spent eighteen summers working beside people like Hank.

These were the people who actually did the work.

They knew the land.

They knew the livestock.

They knew what it took to keep a ranch operating.

Now the decisions affecting them were being made somewhere else.

And I was beginning to realize that the same thing was happening to me.



“It Is Over”

That evening, I drove back toward Plains with Wayne Vannice.

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.

And I no longer knew exactly where Bernice stood.

I called her when I got home.

I wanted to understand why Hank had been dismissed.

I wanted to know why the sheep were being sold.

Most of all, I wanted to know why I had not been included in 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 nobody had discussed the decision with me.

She interrupted me.

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

Then she said three words.

“It is over.”

The line went dead.

She never said goodbye.

I sat there holding the telephone.

What did she mean?

Was the sheep operation over?

Was the conversation over?

Or was she telling me something much larger?

Was my place in Milam Basin Creek Ranch over?

I didn't know.

But I knew something had changed.

For the first time since becoming a partner, I no longer felt like one.



Playing by Different Rules

Looking back now, I don't believe the decision to sell the sheep was an isolated event.

It was the first unmistakable sign that the rules had changed.

For eighteen years, I had believed the ranch belonged to three partners.

Bernice.

Gary.

And me.

That was the partnership.

That was the understanding.

That was what The Promise reinforced year after year.

But now decisions were being made without me.

Paul was increasingly involved.

Gary was participating in those decisions.

And Bernice, who had once assured me that Paul would never have a voice in ranch affairs, was no longer defending the boundary she had established.

I didn't know what was coming.

I didn't know about a bypass trust.

I didn't know that Bernice would eventually make a decision that would change the ownership structure of everything I had spent eighteen years helping build.

I didn't know that I would one day sit at a table with legal documents in front of me and realize that the future I had spent my adult life believing in was disappearing.

I knew none of that.

All I knew was that something had changed.

And for the first time, I was afraid that the promise I had built my life around might not survive the people who had made it.



The Choice I Didn't Know I Was Making

There is something else I understand now that I couldn't understand then.

My marriage to Michelle had changed me.

Not because she demanded that I choose between her and my family.

She never did.

Michelle never asked me to abandon the ranch.

She never asked me to stop helping my parents.

She simply gave me something I had never fully experienced before.

A life that was mine.

A home where I was loved without conditions.

A family where I didn't have to earn my place.

That changed the way I saw everything.

For most of my life, I had believed being a good son meant saying yes.

Yes to my mother.

Yes to my father.

Yes to the ranch.

Yes to another summer.

Yes to another repair.

Yes to another sacrifice.

But marriage had introduced a new word into my life.

No.

Not a selfish no.

Not an angry no.

A healthy no.

The kind of no that says:

I have a life too.

I have responsibilities too.

I have a family too.

I matter too.

I didn't understand it yet, but that simple realization was going to change everything.



The Beginning of the End

September 11, 2001, is remembered around the world as the day everything changed.

For me, it became something more.

It was the day the first crack appeared in the foundation of the future I thought I understood.

Hank warned me.

Bobbi confirmed it.

Paul denied it.

Bernice dismissed it.

Then the sheep were sold.

And suddenly, the eighteen-year promise that had always seemed so solid didn't feel solid anymore.

I still wanted to believe.

I still wanted my mother to be telling the truth.

I still wanted Gary and me to someday work the ranch together.

I still wanted to believe that our family could find its way through another difficult period.

But something inside me had begun to change.

For twenty-five years, I had believed that what happened at Cherry Creek was finished.

Now I understood something I should have recognized much earlier.

Cherry Creek had never really been finished.

The names had changed.

The ranch had changed.

The people had changed.

But the pattern was beginning to look painfully familiar.

Once again, I was being asked to trust.

Once again, I was being told not to question.

Once again, important decisions were being made somewhere behind the scenes.

And once again, I was being reassured that everything would eventually be mine.

The Promise was still being spoken.

But for the first time…

I was beginning to wonder whether anyone still believed it.



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 most of my life, Bernice had been able to influence nearly every important decision I made.

She knew how to appeal to my sense of duty.

She knew how to make me feel responsible.

She knew how to remind me of the ranch.

And most importantly, she knew about The Promise.

Marriage changed something.

Michelle saw things I couldn't.

She hadn't spent a lifetime inside my family.

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

She simply looked at what was happening and saw it differently.

“Your mother's expectations aren't reasonable.”

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

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

I still believed promises mattered.

I still believed that, underneath everything else, my mother loved me.

I wasn't ready to believe otherwise.

I would soon have no choice.



My Mother's Demand

Not long after Michelle and I were married, and after I had retired from teaching, Bernice called me.

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

For most of my adult life, that request would not have required much thought.

I would have gone.

That was what I did.

When the ranch needed me, I went.

When my parents needed something, I went.

When there was work to be done, I went.

But things were different now.

I had a wife.

I had a home.

I had responsibilities of my own.

And I had begun to understand that my life could not continue to revolve entirely around the ranch.

For the first time, I answered my mother differently.

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

The line went silent.

Then I heard Paul in the background, trying 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.

I was stunned.

Not angry.

Not yet.

Stunned.

I had spent eighteen summers working on Milam Basin Creek Ranch because I believed my mother.

I had sacrificed time with friends.

I had sacrificed opportunities.

I had worked through injuries.

I had worked through exhaustion.

I had continued returning to the ranch year after year because I believed that someday Gary and I would share the ranch equally.

And now my mother was using her will as a weapon against me.

The Promise had changed.

For eighteen years, it had been presented as reassurance.

Now, suddenly, it had become leverage.

Twenty-five years disappeared in an instant.

I was back at Cherry Creek.

Back to Julius.

Back to 1971.

Back to the promises that had convinced me to sacrifice myself for a family business.

I could hear Julius asking the question he had asked me so many times:

“What's best for the ranch?”

But for the first time, another question was louder.

“What's best for me?”

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 saying I would never help.

I was asking for something I believed was completely reasonable.

I was asking to be treated the same way Gary had always been treated.

My mother's response was immediate.

“Have it your way.”

Then she hung up.

No goodbye.

No attempt to understand what I had said.

No discussion.

Just silence.

I slowly put the telephone down.

And I remember sitting there thinking:

I can't believe my mother just did that to me.

I couldn't make sense of it.

This was the woman whose promises had shaped eighteen years of my life.

This was the woman I had trusted.

This was my mother.

How could she speak to me that way?

How could she threaten to change her will simply because I wouldn't immediately leave my wife and my home to do what she demanded?

For the first time, I began to understand something I had been unwilling to see.

My marriage had changed my relationship with my mother.

Not because Michelle had asked me to choose between her and my family.

She never did.

Michelle simply gave me another family to love.

And that made it possible for me to finally see what my own family had been asking of me.



I Couldn't Believe My Mother

For days afterward, I kept replaying that telephone conversation in my mind.

I couldn't let it go.

I kept asking myself the same question.

Why would my mother do this to me?

I wasn't a stranger.

I wasn't an employee.

I was her son.

I had spent eighteen years working toward the future she had promised me.

I had believed every word.

And now, instead of talking to me about the ranch, she was threatening me with my inheritance.

The irony was almost impossible to comprehend.

The Promise had been the reason I stayed.

Now The Promise was being used to control whether I stayed.

I didn't know what to believe anymore.

I wanted to believe there had been some misunderstanding.

I wanted to believe she had simply been angry.

I wanted to believe that once she calmed down, she would call me and apologize.

She didn't.

And that silence was beginning to speak louder than her words.



When Love Became Conditional

There was something else I began thinking about.

My mother had never told me she loved me.

Not when I was a child.

Not when I was a young man.

Not as an adult.

When I once asked her why, she explained that we were Norwegian.

“Norwegians don't say those things.”

“We show our love by our actions.”

For most of my life, I accepted that explanation.

I wanted to.

I believed her.

But now I was beginning to look at those actions differently.

If love was supposed to be demonstrated through actions, what were her actions telling me?

I didn't want to answer that question.

Because the answer frightened me.

I still wanted my mother to be the woman I had believed she was.

I still wanted to believe that somewhere underneath all the arguments, demands, and disagreements was the mother who loved her son.

But something had changed.

I could feel it.

And I didn't know how to stop it.

The Trust

About three months later, Bernice called again.

Paul was quietly listening on another telephone.

This time, her news was even more difficult to understand.

She told me that after discussing the matter with Paul, Gary, and Réene, she had decided to place everything she owned into a trust.

When she died, Paul would become the trustee.

I listened without interrupting.

But inside, my mind was racing.

When had Paul become part of this decision?

When had Réene become part of this decision?

When had the four of them become the people deciding the future of a ranch that, according to everything my mother had told me, belonged equally to Gary and me?

I finally 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 explanation was that I didn't have children.

I sat there trying to understand what I was hearing.

I was almost fifty years old.

Michelle and I had built a happy life together.

We had accepted the circumstances of our lives and had moved forward.

But my mother knew something else.

Repeated injuries I had suffered while working cattle on the ranch had left me unable to have children.

She knew that.

She knew what had happened.

She knew Michelle and I had accepted it.

Yet when I reminded her of that reality, her answer was four words I will never forget.

“That was your choice.”

I was speechless.

I couldn't believe she had said it.

Of everything my mother had said to me over the years, those four words may have hurt the most.

Not because they changed anything about my physical condition.

They didn't.

But because they reduced something painful and permanent in my life to a choice—as though the injuries, the surgeries, the pain, and everything that followed were somehow something I had deliberately chosen.

I remember thinking:

How could my mother say that to me?

How could the woman who had spent eighteen years telling me that I was part of the future of the ranch now use something she knew I could never change as the reason to change that future?

I couldn't understand it.

I didn't want to understand it.

Because understanding it meant accepting something I had spent my entire life refusing to believe.

My mother was willing to change the rules.

And she was willing to use The Promise to do it.



The Day I Finally Understood

I sought legal advice.

I explained everything that had happened—from The Promise to the proposed trust.

The attorney listened carefully.

Then his advice was immediate.

“Don't sign the trust.”

He explained his concerns about the proposed trust and told me that signing it could have significant consequences for my interests.

Then he looked directly at me again.

“Craig… don't sign it.”

The difficult part wasn't understanding the legal advice.

The difficult part was accepting that I had reached a point in my life where I needed legal protection from the people I had trusted most.

My own family.

I never imagined that would happen.

I didn't want to believe it.

But I was beginning to realize that this was no longer simply a disagreement between a mother and her son.

Something much larger was happening.



“If You Love Me...”

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

I hoped Paul would be there.

He wasn't.

He had gone uptown for coffee.

Bernice and I sat alone in the kitchen.

I told her I wasn't signing the trust.

She didn't argue with me.

She didn't explain why eighteen years of promises no longer seemed to matter.

Instead, she made one final appeal.

“If you love me…”

She paused.

“…you'll do this for me.”

I looked at my mother.

For a moment, I didn't know what to say.

Those weren't the words I had expected.

I had come to talk about The Promise.

About the ranch.

About our family.

About the eighteen years I had given to Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

Instead, once again, love had become part of the negotiation.

And I remember thinking:

Why does loving my mother require me to surrender something she promised me?

I finally said I would sign.

Not because I agreed.

Not because I believed the trust was fair.

Not because I suddenly accepted what was happening.

I signed because, by then, I understood that the decision had already been made.

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.

The silence was unbearable.

Finally, she spoke.

“I want you to leave.”

Five words.

No explanation.

No apology.

No denial.

Just:

“I want you to leave.”

I walked toward the door.

Then I stopped.

There was one question I couldn't leave without asking.

“Then The Promise…”

I paused.

“…was never really a promise…”

I looked at her.

“…was it?”

She finally turned toward me.

I asked her one final question.

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

Our eyes met.

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

She didn’t answer.

I didn’t ask again.

I walked out of the house.

That was the moment I understood.

I wasn’t walking away from a ranch.

I was walking away from the family I had spent my entire life believing in.

And that was the moment the Mysse Curse became the Milam Curse.



What I Was Really Losing

That afternoon, I realized something I had never expected to understand.

I wasn't grieving the loss of a ranch.

Not yet.

I was grieving something much deeper.

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

Those are not the same thing.

A ranch is property.

A partnership is a legal arrangement.

Money can be earned again.

Property can be bought again.

But trust is different.

Once it is broken, you cannot simply write another check and replace it.

For eighteen years, I had believed my mother.

I believed her when she told me the ranch would someday belong equally to Gary and me.

I believed her when she told me Paul would never have control over the ranch.

I believed her when she told me my sacrifices mattered.

I believed her because she was my mother.

And now I was sitting across from her, listening to her tell me—without actually saying the words—that The Promise no longer applied to me.

I could not believe it.

Even then, some part of me was still searching for another explanation.

Maybe I had misunderstood.

Maybe circumstances had changed.

Maybe she had simply made a terrible decision.

Maybe someday she would realize what she had done.

Maybe she would remember that I was her son.

Maybe she would remember those eighteen summers.

Maybe she would remember Julius.

Maybe she would remember the promise.

But as I drove away from Bigfork that afternoon, I began to understand something I had resisted for years.

The Promise had not been broken in one moment.

It had been dismantled one decision at a time.

The sheep.

Hank.

Paul's increasing influence.

The decisions made without me.

The demand that I leave my wife and return to the ranch.

The threat to change her will.

The trust.

And finally, the explanation that I didn't have children.

Each event by itself could perhaps be explained.

Together, they told a different story.

For the first time, I stopped asking myself what I had done wrong.

Instead, I began asking a much harder question.

Why had my mother chosen to do this to me?

I still didn't have the answer.

But I knew something had changed forever.

The eighteen-year Promise that had once given meaning to my sacrifices was gone.

And the hardest part wasn't losing the future I thought I had been promised.

The hardest part was realizing that the person who had made the promise to me was the person who had chosen to take it away.

That was the beginning of the end.

And I still couldn't believe it was happening to me.

Not from my mother.

Not after everything I had given her.

Not after eighteen years.





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.

By then, I had stopped trying to understand how my mother could have done what she had done.

I simply couldn't.

I had spent eighteen summers helping build that ranch.

I had believed every conversation we had about its future.

I had believed every promise.

And most of all, I had believed my mother.

Now she was gone.

The one person who could have explained why she had broken The Promise was no longer here to answer my questions.

I was left with the trust.

And with a family that seemed determined not to talk about it.

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

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 would ask him the same questions.

“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.

I would ask a question.

He would deny any involvement.

Then he would offer another explanation.

And somehow, I was always left standing there with more questions than answers.

But years later, Paul would unintentionally destroy the story he had told me for so long.

His last written letter to me contained an admission that changed the way I viewed the bypass trust.

Paul stated that Gary and “the rest of the family” supported Bernice's decision because Michelle and I had no children.

There it was.

In writing.

For years Paul had told me the trust had been between my mother and me.

Now his own words told me something very different.

The bypass trust had not simply been a private decision between Bernice and me.

At least according to what Paul later wrote, Gary and other members of the family supported what had been done.

I couldn't believe it.

But there was something else in Paul’s letter that was even harder for me to understand.

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

I read that sentence again.

And again.

I simply stared at the page.

Granddad had given those five shares to me when I was born.

There was something about that fact that Paul's explanation could not make sense of.

If Granddad intended those shares for my future children, why were they given to me in the first place?

And there was an even harder question.

Why had Gary never received a single share of Cherry Creek stock when he was born?

The shares were mine.

I had eventually signed all five of them over to Bernice because she told me they would ultimately be divided equally between Gary and me.

That was part of The Promise.

I had given up something that was mine because I trusted my mother.

Now, years later, Paul was giving me an entirely different explanation for why those shares had supposedly been taken from me.

I couldn't help wondering:

If Granddad's intention had really been what Paul claimed, why did the shares belong to me—and why did Gary receive none?

I had spent years believing I was honoring my family by giving those shares up.

Now I was being asked to believe that the very thing I had surrendered had never really been mine to begin with.

That was another explanation I could no longer reconcile with The Promise.

I had spent most of my adult life believing that when my mother made a promise to me, she meant it.

But now, every promise seemed to come with a new explanation—and every explanation seemed to reveal another truth I had never been told.

And each new truth emerged only after the damage had already been done.



The Items That Were Never Returned

After Mom passed away and the bypass trust was established, Paul asked me for several personal items. Each request came with an explanation, and I agreed to provide with the items he requested.

Simply because he was my father.

The first was my Milam Basin Creek scrapbook. It contained eighteen years of photographs and history from my time at the ranch. Paul told me he wanted to make a copy of the scrapbook for his Grandkids and return the original to me. The second request was for my collection of How To manuals covering the disassembly and repair of Model A and Model T automobiles. He explained that he wanted to do some repair work on the cars he had at Bozeman..

The third request involved two revolvers from my personal collection: a six-inch Colt Python, chambered in .357 Magnum, and a Colt Diamondback, chambered in .38 caliber. Paul wanted one for the ranch and the other for his home in Bozeman. He told me he wanted the revolvers for his own safety.

I provided the items. The scrapbook was never copied and returned. The manuals and revolvers were never returned either. I asked for my belongings back, but my requests went unanswered.

The scrapbook was particularly important to me. It represented eighteen years of my photographs, memories, and personal history at Milam Basin Creek Ranch. Its loss was not simply the loss of a book. It was the loss of a record of my own life at the ranch—one more piece of my history that I no longer possessed.

Paul had given me reasons to believe that the items would be returned or put to the use he described. Those assurances were never fulfilled. I had trusted him because he was my father. That trust had cost me more than the belongings themselves. It had cost me another piece of my past that wasn't Paul's to erase. .

By then, I had learned that a promise could sound convincing and still leave me with nothing.



More Promises

After Bernice's death, Paul began making promises of his own.

"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.

Experience had taught me something 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 gives them meaning.

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.

Why should I?

I had spent eighteen summers helping build that ranch.

I believed those years should count—not only when there was work to be done, but when decisions about the ranch's future were being made.

The bypass trust had made something unmistakably clear.

My role in the future of the ranch was over.

Bernice had placed her confidence elsewhere.

Paul.

Gary.

Réene.

And eventually, Russ Milam became increasingly involved through Gary and Paul.

How that decision came about, I honestly don't know.

I wasn't part of that conversation.

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.

Then, a couple of years later, 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 understood what was happening.

This wasn't simply a buyout.

It felt like the final step in removing me completely from the ranch.

The bypass trust had erased my future.

Now they wanted to erase my past.

Michelle and I had already decided that 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.

But one thing continued to bother me.

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

The reality was 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.

I couldn't understand it.

I couldn't accept it.

And I couldn't forget it.



The Black Coats

Gary made one request repeatedly.

“No lawyers.”

He referred to attorneys as “the black coats.”

I listened.

But after everything that had happened, I knew I needed someone looking out for my interests.

I had already learned what happened when I trusted family promises without protecting myself.

I wasn't going to make that mistake again.

The dissolution of my interest in 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.

During the negotiations, Gary was frequently the voice in the background.

Paul was the one doing the talking, but Gary would sometimes quietly prompt him.

Paul spoke.

Gary supplied the words.

I could hear it happening.

And once again, I found myself wondering how two people who were supposed to be my family could sit on the other end of a telephone and negotiate with me as though I were a stranger.

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.

That was when I began to understand something I had been unwilling to see.

They weren't simply trying to end my involvement in the ranch.

They were separating me from the history I had spent eighteen years helping create.

Then Gary said something I will never forget.

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

He believed his family and he had contributed as much —or more — to the ranch than I had.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Eighteen summers.

Gone with one word.

“Inconsequential.”

Gary hadn't lived through those eighteen summers beside Bernice and Paul.

He hadn't lived through what Julius and I endured at Cherry Springs in 1971.

He hadn't experienced the endless projects.

The emergencies.

The physical labor.

The animals.

The repairs.

The construction.

The demands.

The sacrifices.

He hadn't been there for all those days when there was simply no one else to do the work.

I had.

An old Ingomar friend, Lee Cool, 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.

Years later, I understood exactly what he meant.



Erasing the Past

As the negotiations continued, the demands became increasingly difficult for me to understand.

I asked about 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.

And so did my memories.

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 never belonged to my family.

They belonged to me.

So did the memories.

No one could take those away.

Not Bernice.

Not Paul.

Not Gary.

Not anyone.

But there was another realization that came to me during those negotiations.

Even when something Paul or Gary said wasn't technically a lie, it could still be deceptive.

A small piece of truth could be combined with an omission.

A half-truth could be mixed with another half-truth.

A statement could be technically accurate while leaving out the one fact that mattered most.

After enough of those conversations, I began to see a pattern.

I came to believe that Gary had become the strategist behind many of the decisions affecting our family, including the bypass trust.

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.

And then something else happened.

Gary and Réene almost completely stopped communicating with Michelle and me.

No phone calls.

No visits.

Nothing.

The family relationship that I had spent most of my life trying to preserve was disappearing right in front of me.

I had never imagined it would happen this way.

I had never imagined that one day my own brother would simply stop talking to me.

But he did.

And there was nothing I could do about it.



I Was No Longer Needed

For most of my life, I had measured my worth by what my family needed from me.

When they needed work, I worked.

When they needed help, I helped.

When something needed to be repaired, I repaired it.

When another sacrifice was expected…

I made it.

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

I would always put myself last.

Then something changed.

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…

My brother's and my future.

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

I had given eighteen summers of my life to Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

I had given my time.

My labor.

My energy.

My loyalty.

I had believed I was helping build something that would eventually belong to Gary and me.

Now I was negotiating to get out.

And somehow, I was being treated as though I were the problem.

I remember thinking:

How could this be happening?

How could my mother make those promises to me for eighteen years and then change everything?

How could my father deny having anything to do with the trust?

How could my brother stand on the other side of the table and tell me that my eighteen summers were inconsequential?

How could the people I had spent my entire life trusting suddenly treat me as though I were an adversary?

I still couldn't believe it.



Walking Away

Eventually, the negotiations ended.

So did my relationship with my brother.

There was no dramatic goodbye.

No final family meeting.

No apology.

No attempt to repair what had been broken.

Just silence.

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 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.

For the first time in my life, I stopped asking why they had done this to me.

I stopped asking what I could have done differently.

I stopped wondering what I could say that might bring my family back.

There was nothing left to fix.

The family I had believed in was gone.

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

And perhaps that was the hardest truth of all.

I had not simply lost a ranch.

I had lost the family I thought I had.

I had lost my mother in a way that was more complicated than death.

I had lost my brother while he was still alive.

And I had finally accepted that my father was never going to give me the answers I had spent my life seeking.

I had believed that family meant something permanent.

I had believed that love, loyalty, sacrifice, and promises created obligations that people honored.

I was wrong.

Not because those things didn't matter.

They mattered enormously to me.

They simply didn't mean the same thing to everyone.

And that was a painful lesson to learn.

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 was 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 our home.

We chose our marriage.

We chose the people who loved us because of who we were—not because of what we could do for them.

And slowly, something inside me began to heal.

For the first time, I wasn't waiting for another promise.

I wasn't waiting for another explanation.

I wasn't waiting for my family to give me permission to live my own life.

I had finally understood something that should have been obvious much earlier.

My life belonged to me.

The ranch was gone.

The Promise was gone.

The family I had spent so many years trying to protect was gone.

But I wasn't.

And neither was Michelle.

For the first time, that was enough.

The Milam Curse had taken almost everything I thought my family was.

But it could not take the life Michelle and I would build together.

And that…

was where my life finally began to belong to me.



Chapter 7

Another Broken Promise



I thought the worst was behind me.

I had walked away from Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

I had accepted that The Promise was gone.

I had accepted that my relationship with my brother was over.

I had finally begun building a life with Michelle that did not depend on my family's approval.

I thought that chapter of my life was finished.

I was wrong.

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.



The Question

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.

Maybe he already knew something I didn't.

Maybe he simply wanted to see how I would answer.

I will never know.



Uncle Bill

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

I was the first person in the Milam family they called—not Paul, not Gary.

Seemingly, at that moment, I still had a place in the family.

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?”

Uncle Bill had just died.

And that was Paul's first concern.

Not Bill.

Not his life.

Not his family.

Not the loss of a family member.

He wanted to know about the land.

I remember sitting there listening to him and thinking:

How could that possibly be the first thing you wanted to know?

That moment told me more about Paul than anything he could have said about Bill.

Paul had a habit of giving people nicknames—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 knew the land had been promised to us—the Mysse and Milam nephews.

He knew what Marie wanted.

He knew what Bill knew.

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 way of keeping me from knowing what he didn't want me to know.

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

But this time, the betrayal was different.

This time, it wasn't about my future.

It was about something that had already been promised to us before Bill ever died.

Paul knew exactly what Marie wanted.

And so did I.



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.

And once again, I was expected to accept it without asking questions.

Paul knew exactly what Marie wanted.

He knew exactly what Bill had intended.

Yet he was choosing a different path.

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.

Aunt Marie.

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 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.

But I was beginning to understand that this was no longer about the ranch.

It was about whether I still had a place in my own family.



The Check

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 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.

Tired of the promises.

Tired of the explanations.

Tired of constantly having 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 how important that was.

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

I was finally making the decision for myself.



The Last Conversation

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

“Did Sivert III. 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 seemed to erase it all.

Then, shouting as loudly as he could into the telephone, he delivered the words that would eventually become 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 in 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.



What I Finally Understood

Looking back now, I realize that phone call wasn't really about Uncle Bill's estate and Aunt Marie's 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 and half-truths 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.



Chapter 8

The Final Phone Call



Some time passed after that phone call.

Paul and I exchanged letters.

By then, Paul had stopped answering my telephone calls whenever I tried to talk with him about Uncle Bill's estate, the promises that had been made, and the things I believed needed to be addressed.

Since Paul would no longer speak with me, I wrote him an honest letter.

I explained how I felt about the Bill **Straw** situation and the other issues I had raised.

I wasn't writing to attack him.

I was writing because I wanted him to understand why I was asking the questions I was asking.

Paul eventually answered my letter.

His response shocked me.

He called me a "very sick individual" afflicted with what he described as "festering greed."

He told me he was changing his will because of my attitude.

But there was one statement that affected me more than anything else.

Paul said I was ungrateful for everything he and Bernice had done for me in life.

I sat there and stared at those words.

Ungrateful?

After everything I had done for my family?

After the promises I had believed since I was a child?

After the years I had spent trying to protect the family and keep those promises alive?

I was absolutely stunned.

That accusation cut deeper than anything Paul had said about the money.

I had never believed that asking questions about my family, about promises that had been made to me, or about what had happened to Uncle Bill's wishes made me ungrateful.

But Paul saw it differently.

And perhaps that was when I finally understood that there was no explanation I could give him that would change his mind.



The Last Letter

I had already received the $10,000 check from Paul.

I could have kept it.

Instead, I made one final decision.

I returned the check to Paul.

Every penny.

I wanted nothing from him that could later be used as evidence that I had somehow been motivated by money.

The $10,000 wasn't worth carrying another argument, another accusation, or another obligation.

I returned it because I wanted the record to be clear.

I wasn't asking Paul for his money.

I was asking him for the truth.

And once I understood that he was never going to give me that, there was nothing left for me to ask.

I thought that returning the money would end the matter.

I was wrong.

It would lead to Paul's final phone call to me—the last time I would ever hear my father's voice.

I had no idea how deeply returning that money would affect him.



The Final Phone Call

It was late one evening.

Michelle and I had just gone to bed when the telephone rang.

It was Paul.

It would be the last time I would ever hear my father's voice.

From the moment Paul began speaking, I knew something was different.

His words were slurred.

His voice rose and fell unpredictably, and there was something in his manner 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 sometimes wonder if I was seeing Paul more clearly that night than I ever had before.

Maybe he wasn't someone else.

Maybe, for once, he was simply saying exactly what he wanted to say—and being exactly who he was.

And I have never forgotten what he said.

Without allowing me to speak, Paul began what would become 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 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.

That night was no different.

But his anger could not change what had happened.

It could not change the promises that had been made.

It could not change 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 had Paul ever told me he loved me.

That was 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.

I no longer had to explain myself.

I no longer had to 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.



TALL PAUL

After that final telephone call, I finally understood something Paul's brother Donald had told me several times during 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.

I no longer needed to defend myself.

I no longer needed to 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.



What Remained

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 Really Did Remain

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.

And I cannot 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

THE CALL



Paul's Death

The telephone rang.

It was Gary.

I answered.

"Dad is dead."

Four words.

That was how I learned my father, Paul, was gone.

For a moment, I couldn't speak.

No matter how old a parent becomes, nothing prepares you for hearing those words.

My father was dead.

Gary said that Réene and he had been with Paul at his bedside.

Then he told me Paul had left instructions about his obituary.

He wanted it left at the Jersey Lilly for his friends—the place where he had spent years smoking, telling stories, and enjoying his life in Ingomar.

Then Gary told me about the memorial.



The Memorial Exclusion

It would be held at Milam Basin Creek Ranch, next to Bernice's memorial.

Michelle and I had attended my mother's memorial.

But this time, Gary made it clear that the memorial for my father would be private—family members only.

There was no invitation.

No date.

No time.

No indication that I was expected to be there.

Paul's burial in Forsyth, at the Mysse family plot beside my mother, was still to be determined.

I sat there listening.

My father had just died, and I was being told that I would not be included in his final remembrance.

His obituary would be waiting at the Jersey Lilly for his friends.

His memorial would be held at the ranch beside my mother's.

And it would be for family only.

I was his son.

The call had begun with Paul's death.

It quickly became something else.

It became the moment I was forced to confront what the ranch —and my place in the family—had meant all along.



The History of The Promise

I wasn't thinking only about Paul anymore.

I was thinking about why I had spent so much of my life believing the ranch was mine, too.

The answer went back to Cherry Creek.

In 1971, when I was twenty, Paul and Bernice sent me into the middle of the war inside the Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

I didn't understand the full game they were playing.

I only knew they were my parents, and I was doing what they asked.

After I had worked myself nearly to exhaustion, Bernice told me:

"We are doing this for you and your brother… our family."

I believed her because she was my mother.

Years later, when Milam Basin Creek Ranch became part of our lives, that message became **The Promise**.

Bernice said that when she died, I would inherit one-half of her mineral interests and one-half of her one-third ownership in the ranch.

Gary would receive exactly the same.

“Not a penny difference.”

Paul reinforced that future.

He repeatedly said that Gary and I would eventually inherit everything from our mother.

For eighteen summers, I worked with that future in mind.

I built fences, repaired equipment, hauled hay, worked cattle, fixed water systems, welded, and drove hundreds of miles.

I wasn’t simply working for wages.

I believed I was working for our family.

Gary and I eventually discussed what would happen after Mom was gone.

He wanted to buy my half of the ranch.

I told him I would consider selling it, but first I wanted us to work the ranch together as brothers and see whether we could make it profitable.

Gary agreed.

We drank shots together and sealed that understanding.

Brother to brother.

I believed it meant something.

Looking back, I also remember Uncle Merton's warning.

After Sivert married Janet, Merton believed their marriage had destroyed the relationship between the brothers and eventually driven him from Cherry Creek.

One morning at the Jersey Lilly, he told me:

"Don't ever underestimate what one marriage can do to a family."

At twenty, I thought he was talking about the Mysse family.

I didn't know I might someday be living the same story.



The Betrayal

Now, during Gary's call, the pieces began falling into place.

The bypass trust.

Paul's decision to exclude me from his will.

Gary's position regarding the ranch.

The negotiations that had pushed me farther away.

The promise we had made.

The future I believed we would share.

And now Gary was telling me that the memorial for my own father was family only.

For decades, I had been told the ranch was for Gary and me.

It was our family.

I had spent eighteen summers working toward that future.

Yet the person I was supposed to share it with treated me as though I had never belonged there.

Not as a brother.

Not as a partner.

Not as one of the two sons my mother had promised would receive exactly the same.

That realization hurt more than losing the ranch.

The ranch was never the thing I was fighting for.

I was fighting for what it represented:

Family.

Trust.

My mother's word.

My father's word.

My brother's word.

And every one of those things had been taken away.

I began to believe that Gary and Réene had played a larger role in the bypass trust and Paul's decision to exclude me from his will.

I cannot know everything that was said behind closed doors, but I know the outcome—and who benefited.

The brother who once wanted to buy my half of the ranch had become part of the process that erased me from the future I had spent my life believing we would share.

That was the betrayal.

Not the money.

Not the minerals.

Not even the ranch.

My brother.

I had seen family loyalty disappear at Cherry Creek when money, property, and control entered the picture.

I had watched Paul and Bernice use promises to control people.

I had heard Janet say that she and Sivert were the ones who really controlled Cherry Creek.

Still, I believed my own family would be different.

I believed Gary was different.

I was wrong.

The call that began with "Dad is dead" forced me to see what I had spent years refusing to see.

Gary had become part of the same pattern: secrecy, manipulation, control, and a willingness to sacrifice family for the ranch.

We were supposed to stand together.

We were supposed to work the ranch together.

We were supposed to build something our parents could leave behind.

Instead, I was dismissed as though I had never belonged there—as though the eighteen summers, the promises, and my place in the family had never existed.

That was what it meant to be erased.

Not simply being removed from a document.

Not simply losing an inheritance or ownership of a ranch.

It was having your history rewritten until your contribution, loyalty, sacrifice, and place in the family could be treated as though they had never existed.



The Decision to Walk Away

After the call, I thought about my father.

Paul was dead.

My mother was already gone.

And the brother I believed would stand beside me had made his choice.

The anger was unlike anything I had ever felt before.

I wanted Gary to understand what it meant to be discarded by the family you had spent your entire life serving. I wanted him to understand the depth of the hurt his actions had caused.

In the darkest part of that anger, I found myself wishing that somehow he could feel the pain he had caused me. **I wanted him to understand, even for a moment, what it felt like to be pushed out and made to feel as though a lifetime of love, work, and loyalty meant nothing.**

That was not about the ranch.
It was not about the money.

It was about betrayal.

It was about losing the brother I thought I had—and finally realizing that the brother I believed would always stand beside me was no longer there.

That realization hurt more than anything I could have lost.

For years, I had been told the ranch was ours.

Paul and Bernice repeated it.

They used it to make the sacrifices seem worthwhile.

They gave me a future to believe in.

And I believed them.

I believed my brother.

Then the person I was supposed to share that future with treated me as though I had never been part of the Milam family.

That was what hurt.

That was what finally allowed me to stop asking why.

There was nothing left to prove.

Nothing left to save.

Nothing left to inherit.

Nothing left to wait for.

The ranch had not rejected me.

The land had not rejected me.

The fences and cattle had not rejected me.

The years I spent working had not disappeared.

The people had made that choice.

For the first time, I understood that I didn't have to spend the rest of my life trying to make them change their minds.

I could walk away.

Not because I had stopped loving the land.

Not because the memories didn't matter.

But because I finally understood something I should have understood years earlier:

You cannot belong to a family that has decided you are no longer family.

Paul was gone.

Bernice was gone.

Gary was still alive.

But the brother I had trusted—the brother I had raised a glass with and promised to work beside on our family ranch—

he was gone too.

That telephone call didn't just tell me my father had died.

It told me the family I had spent my life trying to hold together had already died long before the phone ever rang.



Chapter 10

Family Will Always Come First



For most of my life, I believed family came first.

I believed blood created an obligation.

I believed being a good son meant working hard, keeping my word, forgiving mistakes, accepting responsibility, and staying loyal—even when loyalty became painful.

I believed those things because that was what I had been taught.

And because I believed them, I spent much of my life accepting things I should have questioned.

That is the hardest lesson I carry from this story.

Family loyalty can be a beautiful thing.

But loyalty without truth can become a prison.

I learned that the hard way.

Julius tried to warn me in 1971.

Hank tried to warn me in 2001.

Bill Seward saw things I was too close to see.

C. M. Coffee, Patty Erickson, and others saw pieces of the truth I kept trying to explain away.

They weren't asking me to abandon my family.

They were trying to help me see my family clearly.

I wasn't ready.

I wanted to believe my parents.

I wanted to believe the promises.

I wanted to believe my brother.

Most of all, I wanted to believe that family would eventually make everything right.

It didn't.

Over the years, I learned that forgiveness does not require forgetting.

Love does not require surrender.

And being someone's son does not require spending your entire life trying to earn a place you should have been given simply because you were family.

My involvement with the land did not begin or end with eighteen summers at Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

It began with Cherry Creek and became a lifetime of work, responsibility, and belief that I was building something for my family.

I believed my mother's Promise.

I believed my father's assurances.

I believed my brother's handshake.

In the end, the ranch was not what I lost.

I lost the people I believed those promises represented.

That was far more painful.

But somewhere along the way, I finally understood something important:

I could not choose the family I was born into.

But I could choose the family I created.

Michelle taught me what family could be.

Our children never had to earn their place with us.

They never had to work for our love.

They never had to wonder whether a disagreement would cost them their place at the table.

They simply belonged.

That is the family I wanted.

That is the family Michelle and I built.

And that is the family I am most proud to leave behind.

I cannot change Paul.

I cannot change Bernice.

I cannot change Gary.

I cannot make them understand what their choices did to me.

I cannot make them apologize.

And I no longer need them to.

For many years, I thought closure would come when someone finally admitted the truth.

It didn't.

Closure came when I stopped waiting for them to do it.

I stopped asking why.

I stopped trying to prove what I had given.

I stopped trying to reclaim what had already been taken.

And I stopped confusing family loyalty with allowing someone to destroy my peace.

The Milam Curse was never really about a ranch.

It was about what people were willing to do to one another when money, property, pride, control, and resentment became more important than love.

That was the curse.

But I don't have to carry it forward.

The curse ends with me.

I choose love over control.

Truth over silence.

Forgiveness over hatred.

And family over everything that once tried to destroy it.

I am proud of the man I became.

I am proud of the husband I have been to Michelle.

I am proud of the father and grandfather I became.

I am proud of the life we built.

When I was young, I thought my parents' expectations were simple:

Work hard.

Be responsible.

Keep your word.

Become the kind of son who would carry the family forward.

I spent my life trying to meet those expectations.

I worked the land.

I accepted responsibility.

I kept my word, even when others did not keep theirs.

I carried burdens that were never mine alone to carry.

For years, I believed that if I did everything a good son was supposed to do, my parents would be proud of me and my family would stand together.

But I eventually learned that I could fulfill every expectation they placed on me and still be denied the love, trust, and place I had spent my life trying to earn.

That was not my failure.

It was theirs.

The expectations I inherited did not disappear.

I carried the best of them forward.

I taught my children to work hard, keep their word, accept responsibility, and care for the people they love.

But I left behind the part that had caused so much pain—the belief that a son must sacrifice his dignity to prove his loyalty, or keep accepting betrayal simply because it comes from family.

I became the kind of man my parents expected me to be.

I just became him on my own terms.

And after everything that happened, I have finally learned what **"family will always come first"** really means.

It doesn't mean protecting people because they share your blood.

It means protecting the people who love you.

It means telling the truth.

It means keeping your word.

It means making sure your children never have to wonder whether they belong.

It means leaving the next generation something more valuable than land or money.

It means leaving them a family that loves them without conditions.

That is my final payback.

Not revenge.

Not money.

Not the ranch.

A life they could not erase.

I spent much of my life trying to hold together a family that was falling apart around me.

In the end, I realized I didn't have to save it.

I only had to make sure the damage stopped with me.

So I close these pages without asking anyone for permission to move forward.

I have nothing left to prove.

Nothing left to reclaim.

Nothing left to wait for.

I have my memories.

I have Michelle.

I have our children and grandchildren.

I have the people who stood beside me when it mattered.

And I have a life that is still mine.

The ranch is gone.

The promises are gone.

My parents are gone.

And the brother I once believed I would stand beside for the rest of our lives is gone from my life as well.

But I am still here.

And after everything—

I am still standing.

That is enough.

That is my final chapter in life.

And this time, I get to write the ending.

And live our own happily ever after.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Craig R. Milam

Some stories take a lifetime to understand. Others take a lifetime to find the courage to tell.

Craig R. Milam did not set out to become an author. He spent much of his life teaching, working, building, and meeting the responsibilities he believed came with being a son, a brother, a husband, and a member of a family. He had plans for his future, expectations of the people closest to him, and a belief that years of loyalty and sacrifice would mean something in the end.

Life had other plans.

Decades later, Craig found himself looking back at two families, two Montana ranches, and a history that had shaped far more of his life than he had understood at the time. What began as an effort to preserve personal memories became an examination of the relationships, decisions, and unanswered questions that had followed him into old age.

His journals provided a record. Time provided perspective. Neither offered easy answers.

Craig's two books, *Julius and the Mysse Curse* and *The Final Payback — Erased and the Milam Curse*, explore different chapters of that history. Together, they examine how family legacies are created, how they can fracture, and how the meaning of belonging can change when the people we trust no longer share our understanding of what family should be.

But Craig's purpose in writing extends beyond preserving his own account of events. He wants readers to consider questions that have no easy answers.

How much of ourselves should we sacrifice to preserve a family relationship? When does a promise become an obligation, and when does keeping that promise begin to cost us too much? What happens when the history we have believed for most of our lives no longer makes sense?

And perhaps the hardest question: **How do we move forward when the people from whom we most need answers may never provide them?**

Craig does not pretend to have all the answers. He knows that memories can differ, that people interpret events through their own experiences, and that no account can fully capture what was happening inside another person's mind. His books offer his perspective, supported by the records he kept and the life he lived.

He leaves readers to consider the evidence, the consequences, and the questions that remain.

There is another part of Craig's life that matters just as much as the history he recounts: the life he and his wife, Michelle, built together. Their marriage gave him a different experience of family—one in which belonging did not have to be earned through endless work, sacrifice, or obligation. Their life together helped him recognize that the past could remain part of his story without dictating its ending.

That distinction matters to Craig today. He cannot change the decisions others made, restore every lost relationship, or recover the years that have passed. He can, however, decide what those experiences mean to him now.

Writing these books gave him the opportunity to do precisely that. It allowed him to examine his history rather than simply carry it, to preserve memories before they disappeared, and to put his own account into words.

He hopes readers will find something of themselves in these pages. The names, places, and circumstances may be his, but the questions are not exclusive to him. Many people know what it means to hold on to a promise, struggle to preserve a relationship, or discover that the future they imagined is no longer possible.

Craig's story offers no guarantee that every wrong will be righted or every mystery solved. Instead, it asks readers to consider what remains within their control when life refuses to unfold as they expected.

After nearly eight decades, Craig has come to understand that a person's life cannot be measured solely by what was inherited, accumulated, lost, or left behind.

It must also be measured by what that person learns, whom they choose to love, and whether they find the courage to live according to their own convictions.

These books are his record of the past. What he and Michelle have built together is his life in the present. And the freedom to choose what comes next is his to keep.