

Small Town Christmas: Return To PromiseMail-Order Bride

By Debbie Macomber

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Small Town Christmas: Return To PromiseMail-Order Bride By Debbie Macomber Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #884208 in Books
- Brand: Mira
- Published on: 2008-10-21
- Released on: 2008-10-21
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.62" h x .99" w x 4.21" l, .40 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 384 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Debbie Macomber, with more than 100 million copies of her books sold worldwide, is one of today's most popular authors. The #1 New York Times bestselling author is best known for her ability to create compelling characters and bring their stories to life in her books. Debbie is a regular resident on numerous bestseller lists, including the New York Times (70 times and counting), USA TODAY (currently 67 times) and Publishers Weekly (47 times). Visit her at www.DebbieMacomber.com.

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Cal Patterson knew his wife would be furious. Competing in the annual Labor Day rodeo, however, was worth Jane's wrath—although little else was.

Bull riding had always enticed him, even more than bronc riding or roping or any of the other competitions. It was the thrill that got to him, the danger of riding a fifteen-hundred-pound bull, of staying on for eight seconds and sometimes longer. He craved the illusion that for those brief moments he was in control. Cal didn't do it for the trophy—if he was fortunate enough to take top prize—or to hear his name broadcast across the rodeo grounds. He was drawn by the challenge, pitting his will against the bull's savage strength, and yes, the risk. Jane would never understand that; she'd been raised a city girl and trained as a doctor, and she disapproved of what she called *unnecessary* risk. In her opinion, bull riding fell squarely into that category. He'd tried to explain his feelings about it, but clearly he'd failed. Jane still objected fervently whenever he mentioned his desire to enter rodeo competitions. Okay, okay, so he'd busted a rib a few years back and spent several pain-filled weeks recuperating. Jane had been angry with him then, too. She'd gotten over it, though, and she would again—but not without inducing a certain amount of guilt first.

He watched her out of the corner of his eye as she ushered their three-year-old son, Paul, into the bleachers. Cal dutifully followed behind, carrying eighteen-month-old Mary Ann, who was sound asleep in his arms. As soon as his family was settled, he'd be joining the other competitors near the arena. A few minutes later, Jane would open the program and see his name. Once she did, all hell would break loose. He sighed heavily. His brother and sister-in-law would be arriving shortly, and if he was lucky, that'd buy him a couple of minutes.

"Glen and Ellie are meeting us here, aren't they?" Jane asked, her voice lowered so as not to disturb the baby. His daughter rested her head of soft blond curls against his shoulder, thumb in her mouth. She looked peaceful, downright angelic—quite a contrast to her usual energetic behavior.

"They'll be here soon," Cal answered, handing Mary Ann to Jane.

With two children demanding her time and attention, plus the ranch house and everything else, Jane had cut back her hours at the medical clinic to one weekend a month. Cal knew she missed practicing medicine on a more frequent basis, but she never complained. He considered himself a lucky man to have married a woman so committed to family. When the kids were in school, she'd return to full-time practice, but for now, Paul

and Mary Ann were the focus of her life.

Just then, Jane reached for the schedule of rodeo events and Cal tensed, anticipating her reaction.

"Cal Patterson, you *didn't!"* Her voice rose to something resembling a shriek as she turned and glared at him.

"Cal?" She waited, apparently hoping for an explanation.

However, he had nothing to say that he hadn't already said dozens of times. It wouldn't do any good to trot out his rationalizations yet again; one look told him she wouldn't be easily appeased. His only option was to throw himself on her good graces and pray she'd forgive him quickly.

"You signed up for the *bull ride?"*

"Honey, now listen—"

"Are you *crazy?* You got hurt before! What makes you think you won't get hurt this time, too?"

"If you'd give me a chance to—"

Jane stood, cradling Mary Ann against her. Paul stared up at his parents with a puzzled frown.

"Where are you going?" he asked, hoping he could mollify her without causing a scene.

"I refuse to watch."

"But, darling…"

She scowled at him. "Don't you darling me!"

Cal stood, too, and was given a reprieve when Glen and Ellie arrived, making their way down the long row of seats. His brother paused, glancing from one to the other, and seemed to realize what was happening. "I take it Jane found out?"

"You knew?" Jane asked coldly.

Ellie shook her head. "Not me! I just heard about it myself."

"Looks like Jane's leaving me," Cal joked, trying to inject some humor into the situation. His wife was overreacting. There wasn't a single reason she should walk out now, especially when she knew how excited their three-year-old son was about seeing his first rodeo.

"That's exactly what you deserve," she muttered, bending to pick up her purse and the diaper bag while holding Mary Ann tightly against her shoulder.

"Mommy?"

"Get your things," she told Paul. "We're going home."

Paul's lower lip started to quiver, and Cal could tell that his son was struggling not to cry. "I want to see the rodeo."

"Jane, let's talk about this," Cal murmured.

Paul looked expectantly from his father to his mother, and Jane hesitated.

"Honey, please," Cal said, hoping to talk her into forgiveness—or at least acceptance. True, he'd kept the fact that he'd signed up for bull riding a secret, but only because he'd been intent on delaying a fight. *This* fight.

"I don't want Paul to see you injured," she said.

"Have a little faith, would you?"

His wife frowned, her anger simmering.

"I rode bulls for years without a problem. Tell her, Glen," he said, nodding at his brother.

"Hey," Glen said, raising both hands in a gesture of surrender. "You're on your own with this one, big brother."

"I don't blame you for being mad," Ellie said, siding with Jane. "I'd be furious, too."

Women tended to stick together, but despite Ellie's support, Cal could see that Jane was weakening.

"Let Paul stay for the rodeo, okay?" he cajoled. "He's been looking forward to it all week. If you don't want him to see me compete, I understand. Just leave when the bull riding starts. I'll meet you at the chili cook-off when I'm done."

"Please, Mommy? I want to see the rodeo," Paul said again, eyes huge with longing. The boy pleaded his case far more eloquently than *he* could, and Cal wasn't fool enough to add anything more.

Jane nodded reluctantly, and with a scowl in his direction, she sat down. Cal vowed he'd make it up to her later.

"I'll be fine," he assured her, wanting Jane to know he loved and appreciated her. He slid his arm around her shoulders, hugging her close. But all the while, his heart thundered with excitement at the thought of getting on the back of that bull. He couldn't keep his gaze from wandering to the chute.

Jane might have been born and raised in the big city, but she was more than a little bit country now. Still, she'd probably never approve of certain rodeo events. Cal recognized her fears, and as a result, rarely competed anymore—hadn't in five years. But he expected Jane to recognize the impulses that drove him, too.

Compromise. Wasn't that what kept a marriage intact?

* * *

Jane had no intention of forgetting Cal's deceit, but now wasn't the time or place to have it out with her husband. He knew how she felt about his competing in the rodeo. She'd made her views completely clear, even before they were married.

Still, she'd acquiesced and held her tongue. She glanced at Cal's brother and sister-in-law and envied them. Their kids were with a baby-sitter, since they planned to attend the dance later that evening. Jane would've preferred to stay, too, but when she'd mentioned it to Cal, he'd balked. Dancing wasn't his favorite activity and he'd protested and complained until she dropped it.

Then he'd pulled *this* stunt. Men!

Partway through the rodeo, Paul fell asleep, leaning against her side. Cal had already left to wait down by the arena with the other amateur riders. As the time approached for him to compete, she considered leaving, but then decided to stay. Her stomach would be in knots whether she was there watching him or not. Out of sight wasn't going to put her risk-taking husband out of mind, and with Paul asleep, there was no reason to go now.

"Are you worried?" Ellie asked, casting her a sympathetic look.

She nodded. "Of course, I don't know what Cal was thinking."

"Who said he was thinking at all?" Ellie teased.

"Yeah—it's the testosterone," Jane muttered, wondering what her husband found so appealing about riding such dangerous beasts. Her nerves were shattered, and that wasn't going to change. Not until she knew he was safe.

"I was hoping you and Cal would come to the dance."

Ellie was obviously disappointed, but no more than Jane herself. She would've loved an evening out. Had she pressed the issue, Cal would eventually have given in, but it hadn't seemed worth the arguments and the guilt. Besides, getting a sitter would've been difficult, since nearly everyone in Promise attended the annual Labor Day rodeo—and Ellie had managed to snag the services of Emma Bishop, one of the few teenagers available for baby-sitting.

"Cal didn't want to leave the kids," she explained. There'd be other dances, other opportunities, Jane reassured herself.

"He's up next," Glen said.

"Go, Cal!" Ellie squealed. Despite her sister-in-law's effort to sound sympathetic, Jane could tell she was excited.

When Cal's name was announced, Jane didn't want to look but couldn't stop herself. Cal was inside the pen, sitting astride the bull, one end of a rope wrapped around the saddle horn and the other around his hand. She held her sleeping child more tightly and bit her lower lip hard enough to draw blood. Suddenly the gate flew open and fifteen hundred pounds of angry bull charged into the arena.

Almost immediately, Glen and Ellie were on their feet, shouting. Jane remained seated, her arms around her

children. "What's happening?" she asked Ellie in a tight, urgent voice.

"Cal's doing great!" she exclaimed. Jane could barely hear her over the noise of the crowd. Ellie clapped wildly when the buzzer went. "He stayed on!" she crowed. "So far, he's ahead!"

Jane nodded. How he'd managed to last all those seconds, she had no idea.

"Whew. Glad that's over." Ellie sank down next to Jane.

"My brother's got a real flair for this," Glen said to no one in particular. "He could've gone on the circuit if…" He let the rest fade.

"If he wasn't married," Jane said, completing his thought. Actually Glen's assessment wasn't really accurate. Her husband was a long-established rancher before she'd come on the scene. He'd competed in rodeos since he was in his teens, but if he'd been interested in turning professional, he would have done so when he was much younger. She had nothing to do with that decision.

"Glen," Ellie said, squeezing her husband's arm, "who's that woman over there?" Ellie was staring at a brunette standing near the fence.

"What woman?" Glen asked.

"The one talking to Cal."

Jane glanced over, and even from this distance she could see that the other woman was lovely. Tall and slender, she looked like a model from the pages of a Western-wear catalog in her tight jeans, red cowboy boots and brightly checked shirt. It was more than just her appearance, though. Jane noticed the confidence with which she held herself, the flirtatious way she flipped back her long brown hair. This was a woman who knew she looked good—especially to men.

"She seems familiar," Ellie said, nudging Glen. "Don't you think?"

"She does," he agreed, "but I can't place her."

"Apparently she's got a lot to say to Cal," Ellie added, then glanced apologetically toward Jane as though she regretted mentioning it.

Jane couldn't help being curious. The woman wasn't anyone she recognized. She wasn't the jealous type, but she found herself wondering how this Rodeo Princess knew her husband. It was clear that the woman was speaking animatedly to Cal, gesturing freely; for his part, Cal seemed more interested in what was happening with the rodeo than in listening to her.

Jane supposed she should be pleased by his lack of interest in another woman, and indeed she was. Then, as if aware of her scrutiny, her husband turned toward the bleachers and surveyed the crowd. His face broke into a wide grin when he caught her eye, and he waved. Earlier she'd been annoyed with him— in fact, she still was—but she'd never been able to resist one of Cal's smiles. She waved in return and blew him a kiss.

An hour later, after Cal had been awarded the trophy for the amateur bull-riding competition, they decided to leave. With Mary Ann in the stroller and Paul walking between them, they made one last circuit of the

grounds before heading toward the parking lot. They passed the chili cook-off tent, where the winner's name was posted; for the first time in recent memory, it wasn't Nell Grant. But then, Jane understood that Nell had declined to enter this year.

It was near dusk and lights from the carnival rides sparkled, delighting both Paul and Mary Ann. Cal's arm was around Jane's shoulder as they skirted the area set aside for the dance. The fiddle players were entertaining the audience while the rest of the musicians set up their equipment. People had gathered around, tapping their feet in anticipation.

The lively music had Jane swaying to the beat. "I wish we were staying," she murmured, swallowing her disappointment.

"We'd better get home," Cal said, swinging his trophy at his side. "I didn't want to say anything before, but I'm about as sore as a man can get."

"Your rib?" she asked.

He grimaced, obviously in pain. "Are you going to lecture me?"

"I should," she told him. "But I won't. You knew the risks."

He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "You're right. I did."

What really bothered her was that he'd known—and participated, anyway. He was fully aware that he could've been badly injured, or worse. And for what? She simply didn't understand why a man would do anything so foolish when he had so much to lose.

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Darren Billups:

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