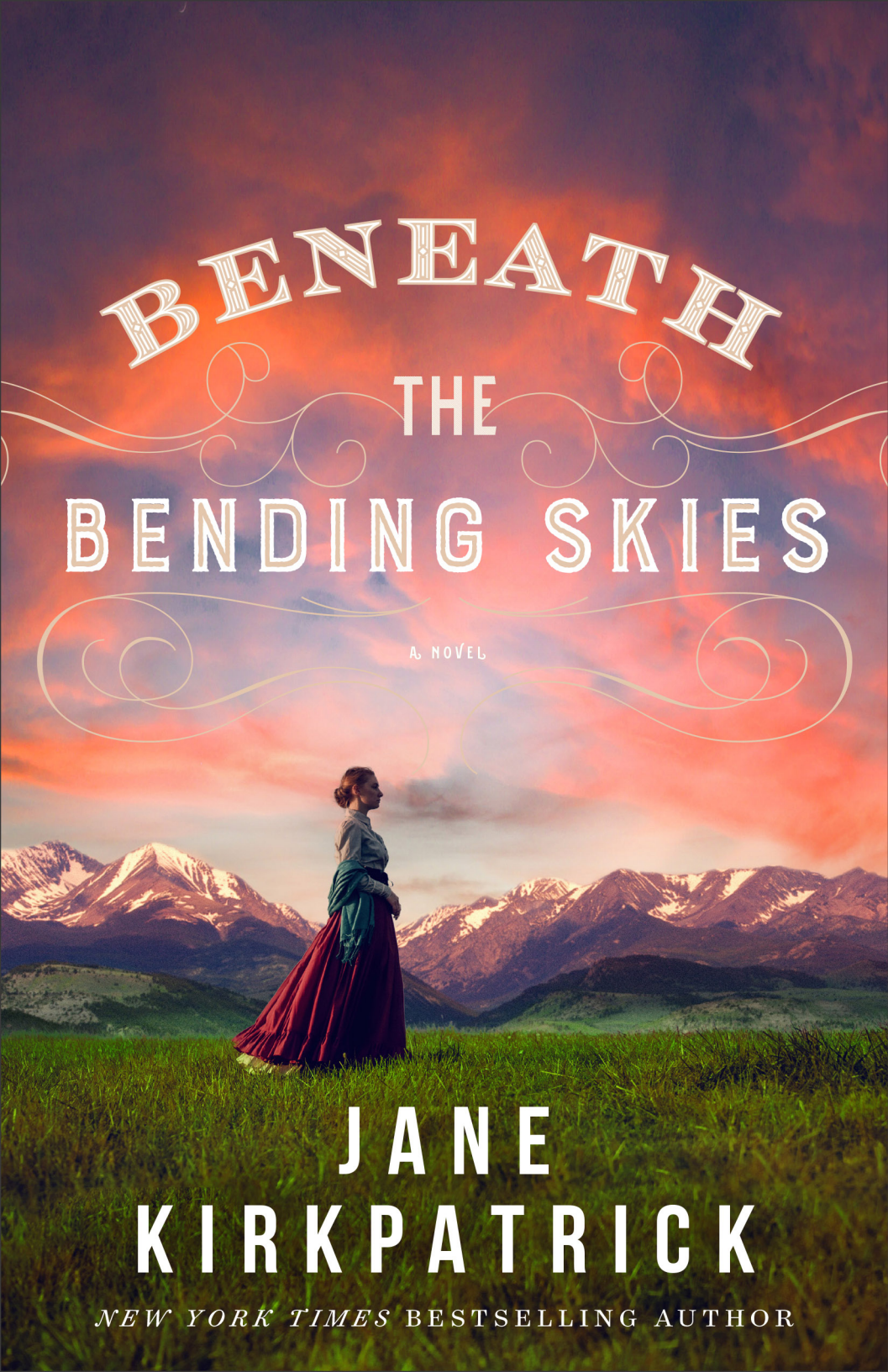
BENEATH THE BENDING SKIES

A NOVEL



JANE KIRKPATRICK

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of historical fiction based closely on real people and events. Details that cannot be historically verified are purely products of the author's imagination.

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Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.

—Neil Gaiman

Desire accomplished is sweet to the soul.

—Proverbs 13:19

Dedicated to Jerry,
one more time

Cast of Characters

Mary "Mollie" Sheehan—an Irish daughter

James Sheehan—Mollie's father

Patrick, Ellen, and Mary Sheehan—Mollie's cousins

Anne Cleary Sheehan—stepmother to Mollie

Kate Sheehan—half sister

Jimmy Sheehan—half brother

Peter Ronan—(Row-NAN) editor, friend of James Sheehan

Jules Germain—student in Mollie's Montana school

Father Van Gorp—Helena priest and matchmaker

Richard Egan—*alcalde*, mayor of San Juan Capistrano, friend

Martin and Louise Maginnis—congressman, friend, and partner of Peter Ronan; and his wife

Harry and Mrs. Lambert and Grace—agriculturist at the agency and his family

Hanna Hoyt—cook and sister of miller

Dr. E. L. Choquette and Hermine—agency physician and his wife

*Shows No Anger and son Paul—Salish friends of Mollie

Chief Arlee—Salish chief at Jocko Agency of Flathead Nation

Chief Charlo—Bitterroot Salish chief, non-treaty Flathead Nation

Chief Michelle—chief of Pend d'Oreille of Flathead Nation

Chief Joseph—Nez Perce warrior

Chiefs Looking Glass, White Bird, Sitting Bull, Eagle of the Light—part of Nez Perce War of 1877

Elizabeth Custer—widow of General Custer, author and speaker

Michel and Maria—blind interpreter and his wife

Children of the Ronans—Vincent, Mary, Gerald, Matthew, Louise, Katherine, Margaret, Isabel, Peter

*fully imagined characters, not a part of historical record

Prologue

I loved my father, but that didn't mean I understood him. Nor that I ever pleased him, much as I tried. His disappointment shone in his Irish eyes like that of a teacher whose star pupil gives up academics to file a mining claim in Montana, choosing to wear pants instead of petticoats. My escape into fairy tales helped me face the trial between him and the other love of my life. "Your mother is turning in her grave that that man of yours has taken you into Indian wars," my father told me. It was a painful time.

But I think my mother would have said, "Trust your husband, Mollie, until he gives you reason not to." I last heard her lilting voice in 1858, when I was six. I remember her fanning my hair as long as Rapunzel's out behind me to dry as we lay together on her Irish linen. We stared at cloudless Kentucky skies, her belly mounded with my soon-to-be-born brother. What she did say as I chattered about what I wanted to be when I grew up were these words: "Whatever you do, be kind, Mollie. Notice what others' needs are and try to meet them."

"You mean fetch Pa's pipe before he asks?"

"Like that, yes." She smiled and whispered her fingers across my forehead as we rested in the shade of an umbrella magnolia. How I wish she'd lived to see Montana. And San Juan Capistrano. And her son. And mine.

She stood, helped me up. She rolled up the linen.

"Let me, Mama."

She nodded, watched, her hands on either hip, stretching her back. "I believe this child will arrive today." She sighed, hugged my shoulder to her side. She smelled of lavender. "We'll keep your papa happy. I'll make that serviceberry pie he likes. That might please him."

"Be kind."

"Yes." She smiled, then added, "To yourself, too, Mollie. And remember to be brave."

I'd have done better with her advice if she'd been there to show the way.

ONE

Making Happiness out of Muddle

Once upon a time there was a place, a people, and a love as astonishing and rare as a blood moon over a Montana peak. I—Mary "Mollie" Catherine Fitzgibbon Sheehan—was forced to leave that place and love behind in 1869, complying with my father's wishes without understanding why. But I never abandoned hope that one day I'd find my way back to that happy ending cherished in Ulster fairy tales, if not often in real life.

But my growing up occurred in a turbulent time. The War between the States raged. My father brought his brother and his three children from Ireland. My younger brother passed away, as did my uncle. We left Kentucky, reached Missouri, where my father said goodbye, leaving us on a cousin's plantation in the midst of turmoil.

It was his first leaving of me. The almanac read 1861—I was almost ten.

After months of my wondering if he'd return, he did. Within days, we left again, heading toward the gold rush gulches of Colorado,

my feelings mixed, leaving cousins behind. He didn't smile as much as before. I wondered that he held something back or had I upset him? I tried to please him now. I sat beside my father on his freighter wagon led by six mules we called the Gems: Agate, Amber, Amethyst, Pearl, Jade, and Jasper. He'd sing Gaelic songs and, in the evening around the campfires, had me read to him. I did my best. He brought a cat along for company. Often while we plodded between towns, the feline would jump on the back of Amber, the mule closest to the wagon's dashboard.

"I think Puddin doesn't like your singing, Pa," I said.

"Or she wants another view."

I could see that the cat might want to gaze at the wide expanse of mountain peaks touching skies as blue as my father's eyes.

Then he told me he'd be leaving me behind once we reached Colorado. That secret revealed.

"Why can't I go with you?" A child's question of her only parent.

"Don't you worry, Mollie." He patted my knee. "I'll come back to get ye."

Would he? He always had returned, though months would pass. Months, filled with my wondering if he had found another child to love. Our reunions were tainted that way, my feeling orphaned even with him beside me as he was now. The wagon rattled down a ravine, then up the other side, toward a cluster of buildings in the shadow of mountain peaks.

My father—James Sheehan—was literate, did not drink, and was quick with numbers rumbling in his head. He was an honest man, though being Irish he wasn't always assumed to be so. He wasn't a big man in western country where physical bigness carried power beyond intelligence. He couldn't afford to be hunched over or broken further by his grief.

I knew that grieving effort. I had little memory of my mother except for a sweet voice, a set of Irish linens, and a square of Irish lace she'd worked on that I kept in a precious box. And a green

parasol with black fringe. I could almost see her face behind that edging when I opened the brolly against the hot sun, miles from where I was born and where she had died when I was six.

I knew I was supposed to be obedient and kind. Still . . . desire pushed me to disagree with my father's plans.

"I can heat the stew now," I said. "And I could carry the collars to you." I showed him my almost-ten-year-old muscled arm, puny as a cat's back leg. I could drag the heavy yokes to where he harnessed the mules. Or rub oil into leather at night around the campfire to keep them pliable, and him near.

"Travel to those camps has its risk, Mollie. Bandits. Indians bent on revenge. No. You'll be safer where I've arranged." Then he added the promise I'd hang on to: "I'll come back." His blue eyes pooled tears. "We'll be together again."

My father pulled up before a framed house. A flower box spilled vines. "You need to stay here for a little bit, lass," he said.

He didn't tell me the town.

The couple who came out to greet me looked like the father and stepmother in "Hansel and Gretel." Short and round, they wore smiles of pity. What did they think of me that my father would leave me behind? I cried as the wagon rolled down the dusty road. The woman put a pudgy arm around my shoulder and offered me a cinnamon roll, which I accepted.

My father wouldn't say he abandoned me. After all, I had a roof over my head and a woman who smelled of comforting sauerkraut. She fed me and taught me needlework too. But I was alone, as sure as an orphan. I stayed quiet, shy, and watched in silence every sunrise, praying I would see my father's wagon coming back, giving me another chance to be his dutiful daughter. My world spun still.

The strangers put me to work doing tasks a little girl could do. I learned to hem there, practicing on my landlord's shirttails,

warming at the praise for my precision. My mother had taught those little fingers to knit, but she'd died before I learned to stitch. Looking back, I wonder if I worked for room and board; perhaps I also earned a wage that my father garnered—as fathers were allowed to do.

In the early morning, before my German keepers were awake, I'd wander the streets looking for the familiar Gem team of mules. I never saw them nor my father.

The one reward in that time of separation was that the German couple one evening took me to a play. I thought it strange to call something that seemed so real a "play," but I loved the splendor of the stage, the words the actors spoke, the music. For that time, I didn't think of my father or my mother, only of the costumed people prancing across the stage, making people laugh and clap and wet their cheeks with tears. They took me to another world where all turned out well in the end. I hoped for that, as I had no magic wand to make happiness out of muddle, nor to bring my father back.