

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE



Love Inspired™

**Janet
Tronstad**

AT HOME IN

Dry Creek

LARGER PRINT

Sheriff Wall watched Barbara walk outside, leaving the reception behind.

Ordinarily he wouldn't have followed her, but if anyone was going to make contact with her, they would do it at some event like this—a wedding—where they'd blend in. Strangers stood out in Dry Creek, but tonight any number could walk around, and no one would pay attention as long as they had a cup filled with punch.

Of course, the sheriff wasn't worried about Barbara seeking her ex-husband's criminal partners. He'd talked with her enough to know she wasn't likely to turn to crime. But that didn't mean her ex-husband's partners wouldn't try to get to him through her. Yeah, the sheriff told himself, he'd better go talk to her—just to make sure everything was okay....

Books by Janet Tronstad

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- *A Bride for Dry Creek #138*
- *A Rich Man for Dry Creek #176*
- *A Hero for Dry Creek #228*
- *A Baby for Dry Creek #240*
- *A Dry Creek Christmas #276*
- *Sugar Plums for Dry Creek #329*
- *At Home in Dry Creek #371*

JANET TRONSTAD

grew up on a small farm in central Montana. One of her favorite things to do was to visit her grandfather's bookshelves, where he had a large collection of Zane Grey novels. She's always loved a good story. Today, Janet lives in Pasadena, California, where she is a full-time writer.

Janet Tronstad

AT HOME IN DRY CREEK



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Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.

—*Psalms* 127

This book is dedicated to all of the
Mrs. Hargroves of the world who teach
Sunday school, befriend their neighbors
and do good to others.

Dear Reader,

I wish for all of you many days of pouring coffee and sharing fellowship at your church. Our lives are meant to be lived in community and, as often as not, that means taking time to serve each other.

I thoroughly enjoy writing about the church in Dry Creek, primarily because it is a focal point of the community. It is the place where troubles and joys are shared with the whole town.

I'd like to give a nod of thanks to people like Mrs. Hargrove who help such local communities run. I've known many women—and men—like her in the churches I have attended. You'll usually find such people in the kitchens or in the Sunday school rooms or serving communion on certain Sundays. Without them, our shared communities wouldn't be nearly as rich as they are.

Sincerely,

Janet Honstad

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

It wasn't against the law for her to catch the bridal bouquet, Barbara Strong told herself as she cupped her hands to catch the flowers that had been thrown so expertly at her. Besides, if the bride didn't care that the bouquet went to someone who wouldn't fulfill the prediction of being the next to marry, what did Sheriff Wall care?

The sheriff was standing across the room from Barbara and scowling at her as if she'd just lifted the silverware. There was enough music and chatter all around that Barbara doubted anyone else noticed the sheriff's frown—especially not now that everyone was looking at *her*.

Great, she thought, as she forced herself to smile. The whole town of Dry Creek, Montana; all two hundred people, had seen her catch Lizette's bridal bouquet, and now they had one more story to tell each other about her.

For months, Barbara had thought that the interest people here showed in her and her two young children had been because their arrival was the only thing that had happened in this small town for a long time. The days had been cold and people hadn't been able to make the trip into Billings very often. Some days there had been so much snow on the roads no one went anywhere. Added to that, everyone had complained that the television reception had been worse than usual for some reason this past winter.

People had been bored.

Barbara had understood why they would be looking for something new to entertain them. But she and her children had been here almost five months now. In television terms, they were last year's reruns. Nobody should be watching them with such keen interest, especially not the sheriff.

The chatter increased as people came up to Barbara and congratulated her. It was dark outside, but inside the large community center, strings of tiny white lights glowed along the rustic wood walls. A circle of people stayed around Barbara after the initial flurry of congratulations had died down.

There was a full minute of awkward silence as everyone seemed to stare at their shoes or boots and wait for something. Now that they had her surrounded, Barbara realized, they didn't quite know what to do with her.

Charley, a white-haired man, was the first one to clear his throat.

"I don't expect you've had a chance to meet my nephew. He lives in Billings," Charley said as he stepped closer to Barbara and lowered his voice. Charley was one of the first people Barbara had met when she'd arrived in Dry Creek last fall. "I don't mind saying he's a fine man. Single and he loves kids. Works as a mechanic in a shop, too, so he could provide for a family—even now he might be able to fix you up with a car so you'd have one. Sort of a courting present, you know—like flowers. He's good with cars."

Charley and some other old men spent their days around the woodstove in the hardware store and they seemed to know more than most people about what was going on in this small town. Barbara respected Charley. He had been a rancher all his life and still had a tan line on his forehead that marked where the brim of a straw hat would normally sit. He knew about hard work. He was also one of the leaders of this community. His roots went deep here. That was one reason why Barbara wasn't as annoyed as she could have been with his matchmaking.

"You know I can't accept a—" Barbara started to say. She'd begin with the obvious protests and work her way up to all the reasons she wasn't ever going to get married again.

"Oh, it'd be his pleasure, don't worry about that. He'd love to help out a pretty young woman like

yourself.”

~~Charley smiled at her. Barbara thought he looked relieved to have his piece said.~~

Jacob, one of the other old men who regularly sat by the woodstove, shook his head in disgust. Jacob was the one who had invited Lizette, who had just married Barbara’s cousin Judd, to come to Dry Creek and open up her dance studio.

“She’s young all right!” Jacob protested. “I don’t know what you’re thinking. That nephew of yours has to be fifty if he’s a day. If no one cares about age, I could court her myself. And I’ll be seventy-six this July.” Jacob’s voice rose higher with each word he said and his gray beard quivered with indignation. “Come to think on it, maybe I will do just that—if you can’t come up with someone better than your nephew! Besides, what’s wrong with that son of yours? He’s sitting out there on that ranch of his not more than five miles from here. He could use a wife—and he’s young enough.” Jacob looked around the room. “Where is he anyway? I don’t see him here.”

“He doesn’t come to weddings,” Linda, the young woman who owned the café, said softly as she stepped closer to Barbara’s side. “Besides, Charley’s son is already in love with someone else. We need to find Barbara a man who’s going to be hers exclusively. That’s the only way it can really work.”

Barbara was surprised to smell jasmine perfume on Linda. In the five months she had known the café owner, the young woman had seemed to go out of her way to avoid perfume and skirts and anything that would hint that she was an attractive woman. Usually, she just wore a big white chef’s apron over her blue jeans and T-shirt.

Linda had spoken of some unrequited love in her life one morning when she and Barbara had sat at a table in the café and shared a pot of tea. Barbara wondered if Linda was thinking of that love now, whoever he was. If she was, it had brought a wistful, fragile look to her eyes.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not—” Barbara tried again. She looked at the faces around her. She liked all of these people. She didn’t want to disappoint them. She just wished they could have asked her for something she could give. “Of course, I appreciate it. But you don’t need to—”

“Don’t you worry none about finding a man who will be yours altogether. My nephew will be faithful,” Charley interrupted staunchly. He’d found his second wind, Barbara thought in dismay. “He may be old, but he’s a fine man. Committed.”

“Well, I’m committed, too, if that’s all you need,” Jacob replied.

“Should *be* committed is more like it, you old coot,” Charley said. “No one here is talking about you.”

Barbara saw the vein grow more pronounced on Charley’s neck.

“No one needs to be committed,” Barbara said as she held up her hands in surrender. A petal or two fell off the bouquet as she lifted it. She made sure she smiled when she talked. She supposed she should be touched that people were worried about finding her a new husband. “It’s all been a mistake. I didn’t mean to catch the bouquet; it was just reflexes. The thing was coming at me and I just grabbed it so it wouldn’t hit me. It doesn’t mean anything. I’m not looking for a husband.”

She didn’t add that now that she’d had a moment to think about it, she wished she’d had enough sense to duck when she’d first seen the bridal bouquet heading her way. Failing that, she should have let it hit her square on. She wasn’t sure if she’d live long enough for the story of how she’d caught Lizette’s bouquet to fade from the minds of everyone around here.

That was because every story about *her* lasted longer than it should. That was what had finally made Barbara realize something was wrong.

Barbara had been okay with all of the interest at first. She’d moved around enough to know how it was when a new person moved into a small town. The heightened-interest stage came first, but usually it didn’t last long, and once it was over, someone would ask the newcomer to serve coffee at

PTA meeting or head up a fund-raiser for the school, and that was an official sign that the person was no longer an outsider but a member of the community.

Barbara was prepared for this cycle. She wasn't sure how many times the person needed to pour coffee before they *really* belonged to the community, but she figured it was probably somewhere around a thousand cups of coffee poured at various functions.

It was the after-coffee place that Barbara wanted to reach—the place where she was a comfortable part of everything just as these people standing around her now were part of it all.

She'd begun to wonder if she'd ever reach that place.

There was a moment of silence as the conversation stopped swirling around Barbara. There was still noise elsewhere in the community center, but the circle around Barbara had grown quiet.

"I suppose we can't blame you for not looking for another husband—you probably still have feelings for the one you have," Charley finally said quietly.

"Of course she has feelings," Linda agreed and then sighed. "Sometimes that's just the way of it. No matter what you do, the feelings stay with you."

"They say even geese mate for life," Jacob added with a grunt. "Doesn't matter what kind of a bird they end up with, they stay hooked to that one. Reckon it's the same with her and him."

Barbara shook her head. Finally, they were at the heart of why the people of Dry Creek were so fascinated with her. If it had only been she and her children who had moved to town, the others wouldn't have been interested for so long. No, the interest was mostly because of *him*.

Her ex-husband was sitting in the jail in Billings awaiting trial for robbing several gas stations. It was obvious that the people of Dry Creek were watching to see what happened with her and Neal before they welcomed her into the fold and asked her to do something as simple as pour coffee for them at some function. Barbara wasn't sure what people expected to learn about her by waiting, but she had a sinking feeling that at least some of them were wondering if she was going to play Bonnie to her ex-husband's Clyde.

Barbara didn't know how to explain to everyone that Neal no longer held any part of her heart or her life. He didn't have the faithfulness of a tomcat, let alone a goose. She wouldn't follow him *anywhere*...and certainly not into a life of crime. If she had learned anything from Neal, it was that crime ruined lives. She'd never be Bonnie to anyone's Clyde.

She hesitated long enough that a whisper came from somewhere behind her. Barbara knew she wasn't supposed to hear it.

"Poor thing. She's so brave," the woman's voice said, low and filled with pity. "And him sitting there in jail—he's not worth it."

"Hush, now," another woman hissed. "He must be worth something if she married him."

Barbara knew she wasn't the only one who heard the whispers because there was a sudden chorus of throat clearings and foot shuffles. She hoped no one expected her to answer the whispers. Barbara wasn't upset that people wondered about her and her ex-husband—she just didn't know what to say. She wanted these people to truly welcome her into their community, and she doubted anything she said about Neal would make that happen. If they didn't trust her to be an honest citizen, they wouldn't trust her any more because *she* said she would be one.

From the first day Barbara had driven into Dry Creek, she had wanted to belong here. She'd been frantic with worry that day because she was trying to locate her second cousin, Judd Bowman, so she could beg him to take care of her children while she drove to Denver to check out an abused woman's shelter that might take them. Bobby was six at the time, Amanda was five. Now, they were both a year older.

Even in her distress, Barbara had noticed that the town offered its residents the opportunity to put down roots. It had clotheslines that were actually being used and old men who sat around a potbellied

stove in the hardware store and talked. It was obvious that people really knew each other here. When Barbara's husband was finally arrested and she was released from the hospital where his beating had put her, she was glad she could come back to a place like Dry Creek.

But becoming rooted here wasn't as easy as she had thought it would be. She and her children had been here since November, and she hadn't poured a single cup of coffee. Even now, although she was a bridesmaid at this wedding for Judd and Lizette, no one had allowed Barbara to do more than walk up the aisle.

People still treated her like a visitor, and she didn't know what to do to change it. At this rate, she wouldn't be accepted into this town until she was lying in the cemetery behind that little church. Even then, they'd probably put a fence around her grave and *Visitor* on her tombstone so that people would know to tiptoe around her in search of the people who *belonged* in Dry Creek.

"Well, it's a beautiful bouquet anyway, with all that baby's breath and green stuff," Linda declared as the others nodded and started to slip away. "And those rosebuds are perfect. You could even take some of them out of the bouquet and press them between the pages of a thick book. They'd look real nice tucked in a big family Bible."

Barbara didn't want to admit that she didn't own a Bible, family or otherwise. She'd moved around so much in the past few years that she didn't even have a cookbook, and she was more likely to use that than a Bible—which was saying something, because most of the hotel rooms where she and Neal had lived hadn't had kitchens and a person didn't need a cookbook to figure out how to heat up a can of soup in a beat-up old coffeemaker.

But a lot of people in Dry Creek valued the Bible and Barbara wanted them to think she belonged here.

"Thanks, that's a good idea," she replied to Linda and smiled a little vaguely. "Maybe I'll do that."

Before long, everyone had left her side. The bad part about the crowd around her thinning was that Barbara could see the sheriff again. He hadn't moved when all of the people had surrounded her, he'd just waited for them to leave. She wondered what his problem was. If his frown was any indication, Sheriff Carl Wall would be the last one to accept a cup of coffee from her even if she *did* manage to pour a cup.

Sheriff Carl Wall knew he couldn't arrest someone just for their own good, but he was sure tempted. He was standing here watching Barbara Strong, and she had just gotten the attention of every single ranch hand at the wedding reception. Not much escaped the eyes of those mangy fellows, and they had all noticed that she'd caught the bridal bouquet.

Until today, the sheriff had been able to warn everyone off Barbara, saying she was still in shock over what had happened with her ex-husband. After all, it wasn't every day a woman woke up and found out she was married to a thief. The older people in town had agreed with him, and everyone had decided to give Barbara at least a year to catch her breath. No one was going to put any extra strain on her for at least that long. No requests for volunteer help. No urgent need for favors.

The sheriff trusted the older people in town to keep their word.

He didn't trust the ranch hands. One of the older women, Mrs. Hargrove, had added her voice to the sheriff's when he'd talked to the men about giving Barbara a year of peace. Many of the ranch hands had had Mrs. Hargrove as a Sunday-school teacher in their younger days, and they didn't want to cross the older woman, even though it had been many years since they'd sat in her class.

The sheriff made it clear that he felt it would disturb Barbara's peace if she had to brush off countless pleas for dates. The ranch hands had reluctantly agreed that Barbara might need a little time to heal before she had to start figuring out which man among them to marry next. They'd said a year sounded about right—unless, of course, the woman herself seemed unwilling to wait that long.

The sheriff had thought he was doing good to buy her a year. He'd agreed to the terms.

But now Barbara had just destroyed all his efforts when she'd caught the bridal bouquet. She should have just stood up on a chair and announced her intention to start looking for a new husband. She'd probably get a dozen proposals before the night was over.

The sheriff shook his head. He was tempted to tell the ranch hands that the woman they were ogling was being watched by the FBI. *That* would slow them down. Not that it was strictly true. The FBI wasn't watching her; they'd asked *him* to do that for them.

It seemed Barbara's ex-husband, Neal Strong, might not have been content with robbing gas stations. The FBI suspected he might also have joined forces with two other men to rob some bank down in Wyoming. One of the other suspects, Harlow Smith, was in jail in Billings along with Neal, but the third man was unidentified and still free.

The FBI didn't have any real evidence that Neal was in on the bank robbery, but even though the robbers had covered their faces with ski masks, his body had a strong resemblance to a drawing one of the bank tellers had made of the men. The FBI figured that if Neal was in on it, he would give himself away by trying to do something with the \$150,000 in cash that was missing. At the very least, they figured he'd lead them to part of the money through his ex-wife.

So far, the sheriff had watched Barbara closely but noticed nothing. He knew how much she earned at her job at the bakery, and she was barely spending that. She sure wasn't spending any extra stolen money. The only thing she had purchased besides groceries was the school supplies she'd bought for her children. He knew because Barbara didn't have a car and Mrs. Hargrove gave her a ride to Miles City to buy groceries. It all checked out.

The sheriff frowned again. The most suspicious thing Barbara had done was what she was doing now. She'd taken that bridal bouquet and was using it as a fan. It wasn't hot inside here, but Barbara's cheeks were all pink and flushed like—

The sheriff followed the direction of Barbara's eyes. He should have known. She was looking directly at Pete Denning. Or Pete was looking at her. The sheriff wasn't sure who had started looking first.

Pete was the worst of the lot when it came to the ranch hands. He flirted. He broke hearts. He would dance with a cactus if that was the only thing he could find to put his arms around. Rumor had it that Pete had been claiming he was ready to get married these days, now that his good friend Judd was tying the knot. The sheriff had known Pete for years. He figured the ready-to-marry line was just Pete's latest pick-up bait.

But Barbara wouldn't know that. Women just couldn't resist a no-good ladies' man who said he was ready to settle down.

Pete had obviously decided to forget about the year of grace for Barbara. He had probably already said his line to her now that he was standing closer to the woman. That must be why she was fanning herself so hard the rose petals were beginning to fall off that bouquet she held. She probably wanted Pete to know she was listening to his talk about his new-found desire to settle down.

Of course she was listening, the sheriff told himself. Pete was the kind of guy women liked. That was the worst of it. Even when Pete had played a huge mouse in that Nutcracker ballet last Christmas women had swarmed around him afterward like he was the hero of the piece instead of the villain. Women just naturally thought Pete was exciting.

The sheriff felt himself fade into the background a little bit. He'd long ago made his peace with the fact that women found him dull. They knew he was trustworthy, of course. Women always voted for him for sheriff. But women didn't look at him the way they looked at Pete.

The sheriff knew he didn't understand women. He'd never had much reason to understand them. He couldn't remember his mother. He had grown up in an endless cycle of institutions and foster homes. He'd always been more of a number than a name.

There had never been much demand in adoption circles for a stocky, plain boy who was average in just about everything, so he'd stayed in the state system.

Still, the sheriff was content. He had his job and he was a good sheriff. He understood doing his duty much more than he understood things like being part of a family. Married couples baffled him. Young children made him nervous. But it was okay. He'd found a place for himself in life and it was a fine place.

He'd even made himself a home of sorts on a piece of land outside Dry Creek a couple of years ago. The twenty-acre plot he'd bought had a few trees on it and a creek that ran across the upper northwest corner. The creek wasn't much more than mud in the fall, but in the spring, like now, it ran full and sweet.

The sheriff had bought a used trailer and set it on a foundation close enough to one tree so he'd have shade in the summer. Then he'd built a wooden porch that reached out a good ten feet from the main part of the trailer. The trailer was two bedrooms and, with the porch, felt like a house. Last spring, he'd put a white picket fence around the trailer to keep the deer away from the corn he had planted next to the porch.

Yes, the sheriff thought to himself, he was doing fine.

It's just that he didn't believe in pretending to be something he wasn't. And he wasn't a family man. He could count on one hand the times he had sat down to eat with a group of people when he was growing up and felt like he was eating with a family.

Still, he'd come to peace with who he was. He'd learned some lessons the hard way, but he was a decent, strong man. He might have limitations, but he knew what they were. He wasn't a touchy-feely, emotional kind of a man like most women wanted. But that was okay. He knew the importance of duty and he knew how to keep the people in his care safe.

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