

# BECAUSE of YOU

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Mitchell



**Because of You**  
by Sara Marx Mitchell  
United States, 2001  
Sunstar Publishing, Ltd.  
204 South 20th Street  
Fairfield, Iowa 52556

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First Edition 2001

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2001093936

ISBN: 1-887472-86-X

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*Cover and book design by Irene Archer, Fairfield, Iowa*

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*To My Family.  
I am the luckiest girl.  
I love you.*

*To Kim V.  
Thanks for teaching me  
what a real friend is.  
By the way, could you do me a favor?*

*This book is for Jackie Joudo in Oz,  
aka: Noel.*

*My first editor and one pushy chic,  
your enthusiasm inspires me.*

*XOXO*

*You are the best—*

*No, you are!*

*No, you are!*

*No, you are!*





## Chapter One

“**A** spine-tingling thriller. Another fine specimen of what we have come to expect from Melody Pittoff, best-selling horror novelist.”

Meghan Laine smoothed the wrinkled newspaper that was nearly transparent with wetness. Little chunks of Iowa snow had scattered the countertop when she shook it out, and were melting into tiny pools all around. Folding it again, she took a better look at the weekly syndicated book review.

*“That this rugged work, written from a first person male perspective, could actually be from the pen of a woman, only adds to the intrigue of this novel. There is incredible “ballsiness” that proves masculinity cannot be judged by the writer’s gender.”*

A few blond hairs had worked their way out of her braid, softly framing her face, tickling her eyelashes. She blinked and hastily shoved the hairs out of her cobalt eyes.

“Ballsiness. How charming.”

Gibson Porter was a man who would likely never write a book himself, yet, felt qualified to direct the masses as to where to best invest their seven bucks for a paperback or twenty-five for a hardbound. And the masses paid loyal attention.

Unimpressed with the business of books and reviews, Boo, her tan Labrador, sighed from his place in the corner. Meg smiled at him before her eyes roved down the kitchen countertop to her laptop computer. It was her own novel in the works, one in an unpublished series of dozens, untouched so far this morning.

Meg stretched, arching her back as she yawned. Her rumpled plaid

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pajama pants were warm and cozy, topped off with a navy sweatshirt and a pair of oversized socks that actually belonged to her fiancée. The bulkiness guarded her feet from the icy hardwood floor, as December in Jasper Falls was maybe all of eight degrees above zero. Still, that was better than winter in her hometown, Lacross, Wisconsin, where winter daytime temperatures would peak at ten below on the worst days. But she was used to it, having lived there all her life. It was the only thing she'd known before becoming engaged to Marcus St. John, which called for a move to Iowa.

Meg knew that she and the farm boy couldn't be more different. But he adored her, and she appreciated his intended sweetness, despite his sometimes unconventional way of showing it. Finding a moral, single, self-supporting man in this day and age was a luxury that some never knew. In her young thirties, Meg felt fortunate to have him.

He was barely tolerant of her passion for writing, however, citing far more useful ways that she could spend her days. There were rooms to fill with St. John babies, after all, a project that she was admittedly less enthusiastic about than he. But theirs was a comfortable relationship. She considered it a work in progress.

A blast of northern air pummeled the room as the door swung open, ramming the doorstop with a loud *twang!* Meg turned to see Marcus' solid frame nearly filling the doorway. Even he was battling with the wind gusts this bitter day.

She looked next at the snow that had invited itself in, all over the place.

"Oops." Marcus offered her his trademark little-boy grin, fumbling with his stocking cap. He pulled it off altogether, revealing a mess of dark hair that he shook like a wet dog, flipping little chunks of ice about.

Meg heaved a small sigh of annoyance, but gave him an indulgent smile, watching as Marcus brushed off his coveralls with his wool gloves.

It only took him a few long strides to get to the other side of the cozy kitchen. He smiled at her over rosy cheeks as he poured steaming coffee into his thermos and screwed the lid back on.

"Look at my floor, *you.*" She pretended to smack him with the tea towel, and sidled over, wrapping herself in as close a hug as she could manage over his tan Carharts. The coveralls were cold from having spent so much time in the barn, and little chilly blasts of breath emitted through

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his apologetic laughter. Meg planted a kiss on his cool cheek.

“Creative juices flowing?” The welcome warmth of the oven filled the room, and he gazed over the paper stacks that lined the countertop as they always did whenever she was working. Clumsily, he tousled her hair, causing a few more tendrils to droop into her eyes. She drew back and smirked at her computer, still sitting there, lonely. He nodded. “Having a little writer’s block?”

“Yeah, all the publishers are blocking me from writing. It’s depressing. I just read a review for the new Melanie Pittoff thriller and it was disgusting.” She wriggled out of his hold, flailing her arms hopelessly. “Absolutely gushing—*she’s the best*, blah blah . . .” Meg was all over it now. “I read her last book, and I can’t say it’s any better than anything I’ve turned out so far only to have it rejected.”

Meg paused in her ranting, looking bewildered. She sighed, as she stood in the middle of the floor in her pajamas, her arms folded. When her eyes met his again, her voice was entirely serious.

“Am I making too much of this? Do I like my stuff because it’s *mine* or am I crazy?”

“You are crazy,” he said, chuckling. Marcus stroked the back of her hair with his damp glove. He found her dramatic performances charming. “But that’s besides the point, now. You already know that I think your stuff is good.”

Meg shrugged her shoulders and mouthed *good?* Marcus shuffled past her, back to the door. He shook out his stocking cap before putting it back on, adding crystalline flakes to the nearly melted pool he’d created earlier. He looked at her through squinted eyes and shook his head.

“But you know I don’t get all that publishing business in the first place. I know this much though. I took a look at that last book of hers too, and I’ll tell you what I think.” Marcus paused, looking right, then left, as if to be sure that no one else would hear. His voice was a whisper. “I’m thinkin’ she’s a man.”

“Marcus, *you* are crazy.” Meg said, laughing. She playfully kissed his nose, standing on her tiptoes to reach him.

“Hey, you never can be too certain these days. I have a cousin who lives in the big city who picked up a woman from a bar one night. Turned out that she had a little secret hiding under those control tops.” He wig-

gled his eyebrows, nodding vigorously.

Meg rolled her eyes. She went back to the neat stacks of paper.

“You do *not* have a cousin that lives in a big city, and they don’t have bars there anyway—they have *clubs*.” She shot him a playful grin. “In any case, this book’s not going to sell itself. I better get back to it.”

Marcus plunged his hand back into his glove, his tone becoming more serious. “You know, Meg, I wish you were half as committed to having a family with me as you are to frittering away your time on that computer all day.”

It was started.

What Meg called independence, Marcus called stubbornness. Refusing to marry a man who was absolutely head over heels for her for the simple reason that there was no book yet.

And she would airily defend herself, waving her hands with her usual wide-eyed expression and soft, reassuring smile that told him not to take it personally.

“Marcus,” She prepared her typical defense.

“There’s that look again,” Marcus said, narrowing his eyes.

“What look?”

“The one that says *really honey, it’s not you*.” He rubbed his forehead. “I was okay with that in the beginning, but it’s getting harder and harder to buy.”

“Honey, it’s *not* you. You know how important this book is to me.” Her eyes softened. “These things take time.”

“You know how important having a big family is to me and those things take time. You can’t just decide one day that *that’s* the day and squeeze out four or five healthy tots for an instant family.”

The same conversation was played out at least every few days. His thirty-six year-old patience was wearing thin, this she knew. But she couldn’t quit now, not when she felt so close.

She went to him, encircling his waist with her smallish arms, and kissed him.

“Give it just a little more time,” she whispered.

“Well, that’s fine, Meg, but too much more time and you’ll be ordering a specimen for fertilization off that computer too, because *this* old body will be bedridden, watching Lawrence Welk reruns and imbibing a



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steady diet of Geritol.” The distraught look on his face said that he was trying to be understanding. Her lips formed a thin, consoling smile while he continued: “Besides, I thought you were going to get yourself an agent—I mean that’s what them publishers keep tellin’ you.”

“Inside the confines of a rejection letter, what else are they going to say? You *stink*, hang it up?”

“They’re writers, Meg, I think they’d say it better than *that*.” Marcus grinned at her as he pulled his muffler tighter around his neck and turned to go.

“I should just face facts. I’m destined to be the Queen of Rejection, perched high upon an ever mounting throne of returned post and *sorry-but* letters.”

“So long as you remain the Queen of My Heart, I don’t reckon I care much what else you do.” Marcus winked at her, grinning sheepishly. Meg softened some.

“I know, honey. You know, I should probably beg for my job back at the Gazette and just call *that* my writing career.” She rubbed her forehead with the backside of her hand. Her eyes turned dreamy before going on. “I just had this notion that it would be so nice to see *Meghan Laine* on the cover of some thick, wonderful novel.”

“The only thing I can think that would be nicer would be to see Mrs. Marcus St. John on one.”

“Soon, soon.” Her defense was weakening.

“Come on Meg.”

“If the rejection count hits two hundred I’ll give in.” She turned toward her work again and pretended to busy herself, restacking papers randomly.

Meg, I’d like to toss a football around with my kids without relying on the use of a cane.”

“Please, Marcus, you know how I feel.” Her tone said she was done talking about it.

“Tick, tick, tick—”

“Go to work.” It came out in the form of an order as she pointed toward the door. The subject was changed. Unsatisfied with her answer, he left, his hands raised in surrender.

Meg slumped over her laptop.

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The water-wrinkled newspaper seemed to mock her as it lay there. She tossed it into the garbage.

*Get an agent.*

“This is crazy,” she muttered.

*Ballsy.*

She mulled over the review. *Who was Gibson Porter to say what was ballsy anyway?*

Her eyes roved over a pile of freshly-returned manuscripts still in their envelopes. She grabbed one and tore it open.

*“Dear Author, I don’t care what your name is. Thank you for thinking of our company for your manuscript, now think of someone else. Unfortunately at this time, it doesn’t fit our publishing needs—we hate it, take it away. Good luck with your future endeavors, take it away very quickly—in fact if you plan to send us anything else, please enclose express postage for the most expedient return possible.”*

Meg added it to the box where the others were: The rejection collection. Her eyes fixed upon three hundred pages of her most recently returned labor.

*I’m thinkin’ she’s a man.*

Suddenly, she grabbed a fresh manila mailer and shoved the same story into it. Meg flipped through her schedule of publishing companies.

“Hm, let’s see. Oswell House. I haven’t received a rejection letter from them for a few weeks.”

Addressing the mailer in thick black marker, she revised her cover letter a bit and snatched the freshly printed sheet from the Epson.

*Sincerely, Mr. Marcus St. John.*

Smiling, Meg plunked the letter into the envelope along with the recycled story, and sealed it shut.