

*Wild West Wind* • BOOK 3

*A Place to Belong*

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LAURINE  
SNELLING



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Every writer has to be gifted with friends who play a behind-the-scenes role of encouragement and support. One of my special friends is my assistant Cecile. We have worked together for more than ten years, and besides all her office skills, she has developed a marvelous gift of reading my mind. Amazing how much easier it is to communicate that way. I thank God for her. What a gift she is to me.



# 1

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DECEMBER 1906

ARGUS, SOUTH DAKOTA

*J*ust get out of the wagon. Cassie Lockwood swallowed—hard.

“Are you all right?” Mavis Engstrom was smiling up at her.  
“No hurry.”

*I'll have to see them again. Look at them again. Only this time it will be daylight and close up. If the judge asks me to identify any of them, I won't be able to. I never saw their faces. How to explain this to someone else? Her stomach clenched and she felt like two hands were squeezing her throat. Breathe. And get down. One thing at a time.*

When she thought back to that night, she started to shake all over again. Gunshots in the night, voices hollering horrible things, grabbing her rifle and returning fire, the searing pain of a bullet in her arm, the wagon burning so brightly she could see men on horseback circling the cabin, the Engstroms coming over the hill but too late to do much more than scare off

the intruders and pull the burning wagon away from the cabin. Then passing out from loss of blood and agony.

All that was left from her lifetime of years in the Wild West Show had burned up that night, along with the wagon she'd traveled in and lived in. The scenes of churning, crackling chaos and loss had branded on her memory. But mostly the fear and the anger. Who would do such a thing and why? All because of Chief and Runs Like a Deer. How? Who? Why hate Indians like that? What difference did it make to those men if Indians lived at the Bar E Ranch?

The men had been caught and confined in the local jail in Argus, South Dakota, awaiting a circuit judge to try and sentence them. And she had been forced to shoot a man, winging one of the perpetrators. Nightmares of that night had plagued her for weeks while she recuperated down at the ranch house, with the Engstrom family taking care of her.

All because some troublemakers got liquored up and decided to frighten away the Indians. Chief and Runs Like a Deer were certainly no threat to anyone. But the officials had not demanded that they testify, only she and the Engstrom brothers, Ransom and Lucas. She'd lost a shooting match because of the injury, but what good would it do to send these men to prison? Other than to keep them from inflicting such fury on someone else. That would certainly be a good thing.

Cassie let Lucas Engstrom, the younger brother, help her down. Lucas insisted he was in love with her, and he was certainly playing the part of the gentle, strong young swain today. She shook out the folds in her dark serge skirt and straightened her shoulders, wrapped in a dark shawl to keep out the cold of the December day. She should have worn her black wool coat, but it had grown to look shabby from the long years of use. When she had looked in the mirror, she'd perched her black hat with the fine veil on the top of her head, hoping to give her an appearance of proper fashion.

Her mother would have been proud of her, she knew. The approval in Mavis's eyes had stilled the rampaging butterflies, but on the wagon trip to town they'd taken to cavorting again. What kind of questions would the judge ask her? What if she didn't know the answers? She hated to remember that night but now she was being forced to. One more strike against the three men.

One more strike that fanned the no-longer-sleeping embers of anger that the memories caused. She'd lost the shooting match in Hill City due to the injury to her arm, lost the purse that would have kept them in winter supplies, including the critically needed cattle and horse feed. She who could drive nails into a log with her sharpshooting had been shot in the arm in a midnight raid on her new home. That act of injury had severely damaged everything—her arm, her livelihood, her reputation as a sharpshooter, and so many dreams. She straightened her shoulders, narrowed her eyes, and gave a curt nod.

Was she ready? She most certainly was. May they rot in prison for all she cared.

The large room over JD McKittrick's mercantile was used for community meetings and, when needed, as the courtroom. The only places larger were the churches and the school building. Mavis had told her that they hadn't had a visit from the circuit judge in years, since most cases, what few there had been, went to Hill City for court.

With Mavis in the lead and Lucas and Ransom behind her, Cassie gathered up her skirts and climbed the creaky wooden stairs to the courtroom. Dormers with windows, along with wide windows at each end of the room gave enough light to see, but up at the table where a black-robed man waited, kerosene lamps added illumination. Several other men in black suits and ties were gathered around his table, and the only one she recognized, Sheriff Edgar McDougal, beckoned them over.

“Since Judge Cranston already dealt with the other case, we’re about ready for you all. Have a seat.” He motioned to the straight-backed chairs lined up in front of the table. One chair sat to the right side and the others to the left of the judge.

Mavis nodded. “Good morning, Judge Cranston, gentlemen. I’ve a question, if you please. Will the three be tried at the same time?”

“We’re debating that right now. Won’t be long.”

Cassie forced herself to take deep breaths. At least this wasn’t as formal as some pictures she’d seen. Formal enough, though. The judge sat at a plain old table rather than an imposing bench, but it and his chair had been set up on a platform at least two feet high. He looked down on everyone else. That was imposing enough for Cassie.

Never having been in such a situation before, she really had no idea what to expect. She turned to Mavis and whispered, “Will there be a jury?”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

They turned at the sound of more feet on the stairs. Three women came up together and nodded to those gathered.

“Those are the wives of the men on trial,” Mavis whispered to Cassie. “The first of them in the blue cape is Case’s wife, Molly. The lady in the black coat is Joe Jones’s wife; I forget her first name. They live out a ways.”

“You may sit over there.” The sheriff pointed to seats off to the right. A few more townspeople came in, and gradually the rows of chairs filled.

The judge said something and the sheriff left the room while another man moved two more chairs next to the lone one. It looked like they would try the three together.

“At least that will speed things up,” Mavis said to Cassie from behind her gloved hand. They took the straight-backed seats the sheriff had indicated, and the four of them sat down.



After greeting the Engstroms and Cassie, the reverend Brandenburg settled himself into the fifth seat.

Mavis leaned forward to nod a greeting. "Thank you for coming."

Cassie tried to smile politely but failed. Whenever she moved her mouth, her whole face started to quiver. *Lord, please get this over quickly.* No, that was wrong, her whole body quivered like the golden aspen leaves she'd so admired. Shaking like this in public was not admirable. Why was it she could perform in front of hundreds of spectators but this trial was turning her into a mass of jelly?

The stairs creaked loudly. The sheriff and two other men came in escorting the three prisoners. Together they made their way to the front of the room and faced the judge's table. The deputies transferred the handcuffs to the arms of the chairs and stepped back.

"All ready?" the judge asked the sheriff.

"Yes, sir, everyone is here that needs to be." At the judge's nod, he announced, "All rise. Court is in session, the honorable magistrate Homer Cranston presiding."

They all stood and then sat down again after the judge sat.

Cassie studied the man who would most likely change several lives this day. The silver-haired judge looked to be in need of a haircut and an extra night's sleep. Deep creases in his face, from nose to chin, deepened further when the lines in his forehead flattened out. He didn't look like he smiled much.

He scowled, looking around the room. "Ladies and gentlemen, I want to make several things clear before this trial begins. First, there will be no histrionics in my courtroom. We will hear all the evidence, and then I will make a decision. If necessary, we will postpone this trial until January, when I will be able to circuit through here again. But I do not believe that will be necessary." He looked to the sheriff.

Sheriff McDougal nodded and then picked up a sheet of paper, stood, and cleared his throat. “Our case today concerns a nighttime raid on the cabin at the Bar E, the Engstrom ranch, on November”—he glanced at the paper in his hand—“November 13.” He looked directly at the prisoners. “I present to the court the defendants: Case Svenson Beckwith. Joseph Clarence Jones. Judson Hercules Dooger.”

Hercules? A quiet little titter washed across the room. Cassie smiled in spite of herself.

“The charging papers regarding said raid state that these three suspects rode up the hill above the main ranch complex on the Engstrom spread in the middle of the night. Their covert entry constituted trespass. While screaming and discharging firearms, they circled the cabin. Someone fired a shot that wounded Miss Cassandra Lockwood, who, with her men, was protecting the cabin and their lives. The state contends that during said raid, the suspects set Miss Lockwood’s Wild West Show wagon, parked next to the cabin, on fire, and it burned completely. Thus the charge of arson.”

Of course. Arson. Why had Cassie not even thought of that? No doubt because she was still mourning the loss of that last link with her past.

“Mr. Dooger was wounded in the exchange of gunfire, and the Engstroms brought him, along with Miss Lockwood, to Dr. Barnett here in Argus for treatment. Later that same night Mr. Beckwith and Mr. Jones were apprehended when they tried to sneak back into town. The three have remained incarcerated pending trial because of the extreme likelihood that they would leave the area if released. The charges include trespass, arson, willful destruction of property, harassment, drunk and disorderly conduct, and discharge of firearms with intent to kill.”

The judge looked to one of the black-suited men who stood along with the three accused. “Do you understand the charges?”

“Yeah, but we didn’t—” Mr. Jones burst out.

The judge silenced him by slamming the gavel on the table. Cassie jumped. “You will be given your turn to talk.”

“But—”

The gavel slammed again and the judge glared at the lawyer. “Mr. Jenski, if you, as their lawyer, can’t keep your clients quiet, they will be barred from the courtroom.”

“Understood. Yes, sir.” The lawyer glared at the leader of the three and barked in a hoarse stage whisper, “You heard the man.”

Sheriff McDougal ignored the dirty looks from the obvious leader of the three accused men. He glanced back down at his paper. “The state calls Miss Cassandra Lockwood to the stand.” He motioned to the empty chair beside the judge’s table.

Cassie ignored the shaking in her knees and stood. Mavis squeezed the hand that she’d been holding. *One step at a time*, Cassie ordered herself. She kept from looking at the men, but she could feel them drilling her with their eyes. She turned at the chair and faced the sheriff.

“Put your hand on this Bible.”

She did.

“State your full name.”

“Cassandra Marie Lockwood.” Her voice gained strength with each sound.

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

“I do.”

“Please be seated.” He set the Bible on the corner of the judge’s table and nodded to him as well.

“Miss Lockwood, I would like you to tell me what happened that night. Can you do that?” Judge Cranston had considerably softened his tone.

She nodded. “We had all gone to bed like usual. My friend Runs Like a Deer and I slept in the cabin and the two men, John

Birdwing and Micah, slept in the show wagon that was parked right beside the cabin.”

“And Micah’s last name?”

“I don’t know, sir—Your Honor. He might not have a last name. I’ve never in all the years I’ve known him heard him give one.”

“I see. How long have you known him?”

Cassie squinted, thinking back. “Close to ten years, I guess. He came to the show and asked for work and my father hired him.”

“And what did he do at the show?”

“Took care of all the animals and did whatever else was needed.”

“And John Birdwing? I take it he is an Indian?”

“Yes, a Sioux Indian from the Rosebud Reservation. We always knew him as Chief.”

“How long have you known him?”

“Since I was a baby. He came to the show when my father took half control of it.”

“I see.”

“You said another woman sleeps in the cabin?”

“Yes. Runs Like a Deer. We found her with a broken leg on our trip south from Dickinson, North Dakota. Dickinson is where the show was declared bankrupt and disbanded.”

The judge nodded. “Back to the night in question. You were all sleeping when what happened?”

“My dog, Othello, set up a furious barking. By the time I got to the door to see what he was barking at, we heard shots and men yelling and horses running. Chief and Micah were yelling too.”

“So what did you do?”

“I grabbed my rifle from the pegs by the door and stepped out to return fire.”

“Were the two men with you shooting?”

“Yes, Your Honor. They had at least one rifle and a shotgun. It sounded like a 20-gauge.”

“Did you aim at anyone?”

“I did when one of them came around again. They were circling the cabin.”

“Did you see him fall?”

Cassie shrugged. “I’m not sure. Then I could smell smoke, and someone yelled, ‘Fire.’ I kept shooting and then I was slammed against the cabin wall and realized I’d been hit. I think the Engstroms rode up the hill then, and the other men rode off. They—the Engstroms, I mean—pulled the wagon, now on fire, away from the cabin so the cabin wouldn’t burn, but the wagon was burning so fiercely and the water barrels were on the side of the wagon . . .”

She closed her eyes to think better. “By that time I was fighting to keep from passing out. I don’t remember any more, other than I think I was on a horse, and then at the ranch house, and then on a horse again, and then I woke up at the doctor’s house the next day.”

“Do you recognize those men over there as the ones circling the cabin?”

What should she say? *When in doubt, always tell the truth. Even if those three win?* Cassie shook her head. “I couldn’t see anyone that well. Just horses and riders and guns firing.”

“I see. Do you have anything else to tell me?”

Again she shook her head but then paused. “I learned that getting shot is a terribly painful thing, and my arm still has not regained all the strength I had before. It’s hard to be a professional shooter when you have a weak arm.”

“I can understand that. You are truly a professional shooter?”

“Yes, sir. I mean, Your Honor. Besides being a trick rider. I have shot in matches all over the country.”

“You usually win?”

“Yes, sir.” Cassie wondered at his interest. Did she sound prideful? She decided to add a bit more. “That’s about the only way I know to make a living.”

“Thank you, Miss Lockwood. Cross?” The judge looked toward the three suspects’ lawyer. The man thought a moment and shook his head.

“You may stand down,” he said to Cassie and motioned to the row of chairs.

Cassie did as he said, but by the time she got there, her knees quit on her and she sank into her chair. Mavis picked up her hand again with gentle pressure. Cassie blinked back the moisture that threatened to flow down her face.

“You did good.” Lucas spoke from her left side.

“Ransom Lockwood to the stand,” the sheriff called.

She watched as Ransom repeated the vow and took his seat. He didn’t appear scared or shaky at all. He told of the dogs barking, their ride up to see flames, hearing the shots and all the yelling. “We rode in, firing in the air and yelling back. We saw two of the men ride off and a horse with no rider circling around. The wagon had flames coming out the door and the sides, so we pulled that away from the cabin.

“Chief and Micah came out of hiding, and then we found Miss Lockwood sitting against the cabin wall, covered in blood. She was bleeding from being shot in the arm. Chief discovered Jud there.” He indicated the fellow with Hercules as a middle name. “A bullet had grazed his head, a pretty deep one, and we put him back on his horse and told him to hang on. With Cassie in front of Lucas, we headed back down the hill to where Mor waited. Sorry, I mean my mother. She put a tourniquet on Cassie’s arm and told us to get her to the doctor as fast as we could. We rode in on horseback because that was faster than hitching up. I was sure she was going to die before we could get to town.”

“And Mr. Dooger?”

“He looked a lot worse’n he was.”

“That was your medical opinion?” An arched brow accompanied the question.

“No, sir. But to be truthful, I had a hard time feeling any sympathy for a man who could take part in such a thing.”

“Thank you, Mr. Engstrom.”

Lucas was called next, but he didn’t have any new information, so his time was shorter. The sheriff testified that he’d thrown Jud in jail after his wound was bandaged, and that the other two were caught later.

“I think we’ll break for dinner, folks, and hear from the accused afterward. Court is dismissed.” Judge Cranston banged his gavel and stood up even as the sheriff was calling, “All rise.”

Reverend Brandenburg smiled at the Engstroms. “The missus and I figured this is what would happen, so she has dinner waiting for us. We can walk or, of course, take your wagon.”

“Oh, a walk would feel so good.” Mavis gathered up her coat and slipped into it while Ransom held it for her. Lucas helped Cassie into her shawl, patting her shoulders before stepping back.

Cassie stopped a sigh. Lucas had vowed he would make her fall in love with him. Surely this was another bit of his plan. But she had to admit, right now a touch from anyone helped dilute the fear that seemed to flow along with her bloodstream. What if these men got off scot-free because she, the witness, could not identify them? It would have been so easy to simply say they were the ones.

What if their next attempt, now with thoughts of revenge, was many times worse? Was she being fair to Chief and Runs Like a Deer to keep them in harm’s way? But then, what else could she do? They no longer had a wagon to live in if they decided to move someplace else, and she had no idea where

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someplace else could be. With winter hard upon them, they would have to have dependable shelter if they traveled. The wagon had provided that.

Gone now.

*And I don't want to leave here. I want to live here, especially since, thanks to my father, I own half of the Bar E.* Not sure whether this was a plea or a promise, she kept pace with the others as they walked for what seemed like a thousand miles to the parsonage next door to the church.



## 2

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*M*rs. Brandenburg greeted them at the door, and Lucas helped Cassie with her shawl. They filed into the dining room to sit, Lucas at Cassie's elbow. Her knees thanked her as she dropped into her chair and Lucas scooted it in.

Mrs. Brandenburg dished up bowls of steaming soup as soon as they sat down. "There is bread in one basket and crackers in the other. Mavis, I tried a new cracker recipe. You'll have to be honest and tell me what you think of it. I put dill seed in it, of all things. Ran the seeds through the coffee mill. Now we're probably going to have dill-flavored coffee for a while."

Reverend Brandenburg offered up the grace along with a plea for justice and nodded to the others. "We need to be back at the court by one thirty. Judge Cranston is a stickler for time, and I know he wants this wrapped up today."

Lucas snorted. "I don't see any need for a hearing at all. We caught Jud red-handed, or redheaded as was the case for him, and the others never said they didn't do it."

"But they have the right to a trial. I'm just glad there is no jury

to make it take longer. Although everyone here knows Case's bigotry, he's never been one to keep his mouth shut." Brandenburg dunked one of the crackers in his soup. "Delicious." He smiled at his wife.

She looked not at him but to Mavis.

"What do you think?"

"I want the recipe."

Cassie could have been eating sawdust for all she knew. She could not pay attention. *I don't want to leave here, Lord. What's wrong with wanting a home? Here I think I have one, and now this.*

"Don't worry about this, Cassie." Mrs. Brandenburg laid a hand on her arm. "All will be well."

Cassie sent her what she could manage of a smile. A nod would have to suffice. Both Mavis and Mrs. Brandenburg knew how to trust God, no matter what. She, however, was still trying to learn that.

She did have enough curiosity to ask, "What does *cross* mean? The judge said it when he was looking at the lawyer."

"Cross examination," Reverend Brandenburg replied. "The defense declined, because they didn't want the court to hear that damaging testimony twice. Not too important when it's only a judge, but it's very important when a jury is hearing the case."

"Thank you." She managed a smile this time. So the reverend knew quite a bit about law as well as faith.



Cassie and the Engstroms arrived back in the courtroom with ten minutes to spare. Here came Sheriff McDougal with his charges; his deputies again handcuffed the three prisoners to their chairs. Loud enough to be heard easily, Case grumbled something about being bound to the chair like a common criminal.

“Shut up,” hissed one of the others. “You want to make this even worse?”

“You tell me to shut up and—” Case’s ugly face grew even more so.

The judge entered, the sheriff called, “All rise,” and the afternoon was under way.

The sheriff called Dr. Barnett to testify. He described the wounds and his treatment. “That young lady could have lost the use of her arm had things gone only a tiny bit differently. Even worse, she could have died from loss of blood.” He shook his head. “I left the South to get away from the Ku Klux Klan and to find that same kind of hatred here . . . Heartbreaking, that’s what it is.”

Judge Cranston looked up. “Cross?”

Again the lawyer shook his head.

The sheriff announced, “The state rests.”

“Defense?”

Reluctantly, it would appear, the lawyer called, “Case Beckwith to the stand, please.”

A deputy unlocked the chair half of his handcuffs, and Case bolted upright. He plopped down into the witness chair.

The sheriff glared at him. “Up.”

He stood.

The sheriff waved the Bible. “This is a Bible, in case you’ve never seen one before. Put your left hand on it and raise your right. Your other right.”

Case repeated the familiar promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Was he capable of that?

Mr. Jenski, the lawyer, stepped in next to him. “You’ve been identified as one of the miscreants. Do you dispute that, Mr. Beckwith?”

Case growled, “We didn’t go there to do any arson or murder. We just wanted to scare ’em a little so they’d move on. We

didn't set fire to nothing. We didn't mean to shoot anybody. She just got in the way. Maybe she even did it on purpose to get us in trouble."

Cassie gaped. Her stomach felt as if she'd just been punched.

The judge asked the sheriff, "Cross?"

He was smirking. "No need. No, Your Honor."

Mr. Jenski looked pained. "You may stand down, Mr. Beckwith."

"But I ain't done testifying! We didn't really hurt anything, except some too-big-for-her-britches stranger. We didn't start no fire, so *they* musta. They did it to get us in trouble, I tell you. We're innocent!"

The judge roared, "Stand down!"

And Case did so.

The judge glared at all three. "Anyone else have anything to say?"

Case howled one more time, "We're innocent!"

The lawyer was covering his face with one hand, his head drooping sadly.

"Very well. We already have the confession of Mr. Dooger that you three were all in on the raid, and now you, Mr. Beckwith, established that you were there. Does anyone here present have any proof or credible witness that might change any of that?" The judge looked at Mr. Jenski, then rather imperiously around at everyone else in the room.

Mr. Jenski shook his head. His face was, to Cassie, exactly what defeat looked like.

The judge picked up a piece of paper. "Then I declare the defendants guilty as charged. The defendants will approach the bench for sentencing."

Sheriff McDougal cleared his throat and then poked Case to make them stand. The deputies unlocked their handcuffs from their chairs but, Cassie noted, cuffed the men's hands behind

their backs. Reluctantly, the three shuffled over and stood before the platform.

The judge leaned forward, his elbows on the table. “I feel constrained to point out that if you three had the brains God gave a goose, you wouldn’t be standing before me today. You acted despicably and brought shame to this town.

“Case Beckwith, I hereby sentence you to five years for each count, to be served in the state penitentiary at Sioux Falls, the sentences to run concurrently.” Eyes narrowed, he stared at the big man. “Possible parole at three years if you behave yourself.”

Case glared back at him, but for a change he kept his mouth shut.

“Judson Dooger, I sentence you to one year on each count, your sentences to run concurrently. I hope you can learn to think for yourself and not just follow a bad leader. Joseph Jones, you receive the same sentence as Mr. Dooger, and the same advice. Are there any questions?”

“Who’s going to take care of my family?” Mr. Jones muttered, shaking his head.

“You should have thought of that before you went off carousing with Mr. Beckwith. Case closed. Court dismissed.” The judge brought his gavel down—not so loudly this time.

“All rise.” The sheriff did not look particularly excited or happy. Was he pleased he had won?

With a great deal of noise, chairs all over the room rattled as people stood to leave. The volume of many voices grew. Cassie could not bear to look toward the three wives. What now? How must it feel to hear and see your man taken away?

Judge Cranston stepped down off his platform and started to remove his black robe.

Cassie said to no one in particular, “I don’t understand. Why didn’t he just sentence those three without the trial, if the evidence was so cut and dried?”

Reverend Brandenburg shrugged into his coat. “We may be a ways out from civilization, but we maintain the civil law. The trial followed the letter of the law. Those three can never say they did not receive a fair trial.” He went up to the judge and stuck out his hand. “Good to see you again, Homer. You want to come by for supper? You know there is always a room for you too.”

“Thanks. Wish I could, but I need to be on that five o’clock train. You come on down to Rapid City one of these days. ’Bout time for a real visit.” He stepped in closer. “If I could have justified it, I would’ve sent him off forever. You can bet that Case Beckwith hasn’t learned any lesson. He’ll be trouble in prison too. Count on it.”

“Fraid you might be right, but you never know. The Holy Ghost might get ahold of him and make him a new man. That’s what we’ve been praying for.” They shook hands, clapped each other’s arms, and walked off together.

“Are you all right?” Mavis asked Cassie.

“Can you beat that?” Cassie nodded toward the men. “They know each other.”

Mavis seemed downright lighthearted. “To quote a good pastor friend of mine, God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform.”

“Did you know who the judge would be?”

“No, and I didn’t know that Reverend Brandenburg and Judge Cranston were friends. But then, there are a lot of things I know nothing about. I do know that we can rest easy now and go on with our lives. Let’s go home.” She hooked her arm through Cassie’s on one side and Ransom’s on the other.

Cassie glanced over to see two of the women comforting the third, Mrs. Dooger, the one whose husband had been the one with the wound to his head.

She heard the woman cry, “But my Jud isn’t a bad man, he was just—”

“Stupid!” interrupted Mrs. Jones. “To go to the saloon and get mixed up with the likes of Case Beckwith, and my Joe was just as stupid. I’m sorry, Molly, but that’s just the way it is. And now we all get to pay for their stupidity.”

*Who will help them out?* Cassie wondered as they left the courtroom. *For that matter, how will the rest of us manage? We’re paying too. Nothing is for certain, that is for sure.* After all, what if she could never shoot again professionally or do her trick riding routine, thanks to a stupid man who put a bullet in her arm?

# 3

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*Another day of putting off getting those timbers up to the mine.* Granted, it was Sunday tomorrow, but surely God would understand that Ransom needed to work when the weather permitted. After all, this was South Dakota in December. Snow, deep snow, was imminent. Woolly caterpillars and animals' dense coats predicted a bad winter, and the signs never lied. At least not that he knew of. But so far, the killing winter had held off, allowing them to cut and mill the pine trees. He needed to remember to be thankful for that.

But Ransom wisely kept his thoughts to himself as he continued with the evening chores—milking, since Gretchen was spending the night with Jenna. Lucas had left before twilight to get set up for the evening elk run. Sometimes they came down the hill, and sometimes he needed to go looking for them. Since there had been no rifle shots, Ransom figured tonight would be the latter. Still, Lucas would most likely get his elk. As a hunter, he was superb. Tonight he had taken Micah and Chief with him. Maybe they would come back with two.

He finished the milking, tossed more hay in Rosy's manger,



and checked on the hogs. Since they had plenty of milk again, he poured soured skimmed milk from the cream can beside the hog gate into the trough and added cracked oats. Didn't he see a grinder over to Dan Arnett's house that would let them turn that steam engine into a grinding machine too? Probably was all rusted up, but they could remedy that.

He whistled his way to the house, stopping by the springhouse to strain the milk and set it in pans for the cream to rise. One thing he'd love to buy was one of those new cream separators, but it didn't make sense for the one or two cows they had. As best as he could remember, Rosy was due to calve in February. He needed to check the calendar.

Taking a jug of cold milk with him, he tramped on up to the house. For a change he didn't have to go throw wood on the smoker. Since the light was still on in the bunkhouse, he rapped on the door to remind Arnett it was time for supper.

"Come in, come in." Did his voice sound even more gravelly than usual?

Ransom stepped into the bunkhouse, now meticulously clean with a stack of books on the table and a rocking chair in front of the stove. From a utilitarian bunkhouse, this place had been rendered quite homey. Arnett sat with his wool-stockinged feet up on the fender, book in his lap.

"Surely can't be suppertime already," the old man said with a chuckle. "But then I get to readin' and the time just drifts on by."

"Mor will be ringing the bell any minute now. Hey, I was thinking. You got an old grain grinder out by your machine shed?"

Arnett slit his eyes, gazing into some distant place. "Why, by jerky, I think you're right. Hey, that might to be another cash machine for you. Let folks know you can grind grain and they'll be bringing their cattle feed over. You know, we might keep that old steam sister going after all." He slapped his thigh, making the book bounce and slide to the floor with a *thunk*.

## *A Place to Belong*

He stood and stretched before limping over to his boots and jacket by the door. “We’d best get that Monday afore the snow buries it again. We’ll take it all apart, get the rust off it, and put it back together. Be good as new.” He shrugged into his sheepskin jacket and clapped Ransom on the shoulder. “Good for you, boy. You got a memory like an old bear trap. Why, think I got one of them too, up on the barn wall.”

Ransom closed the door behind them, and they headed on up to the house just as Cassie came out to ring the iron triangle, the song of which echoed across the valley. As they stepped up on the back porch, two rifle shots answered the supper bell.

Ransom heaved a sigh. “Guess I better get the wagon out there. Tell Mor to go ahead.”

“You need another pair of hands?”

“No, thanks. There are three of them already.” He turned and headed back for the barn. Good thing he’d not let the team loose like he’d thought to do. One of the horses nickered when he opened the door. Stepping into the quiet warmth of the barn, he lit the lantern hanging on the hook by the door and, using the dim light, lifted the harnesses off the wall and hauled them over to the stalls where the team waited, ears pricked as if they’d heard the shot too and knew that meant a trip out of the barn.

“Guess you two don’t like staying in here after all, eh?” He slung the harnesses in place, buckling and snapping everything together, and then backed the horses out one at a time. As he led them outside, one on each side of him, Ransom stopped at the wagon tongue set on a chunk of log, and they backed into place so he could snap on to the whippletrees and the wagon tongue. They stamped their feet and blew steam into the air. The temperature had dropped noticeably since sunset.

After checking to make sure nothing was rubbing or loose, Ransom climbed up onto the wagon seat, gathered the long lines, and flicked his wrists to send the go message to his team.

They trotted smartly out of the yard and through the gate to the long pasture. He'd have several more gates to open and close before reaching the hunters. If they had come down a different way, Lucas would let him know. A quick bark behind him and he stopped the team to let Benny ride up on top with him. It was a shame he didn't let Arnett come along; company was always nice. And he knew the old man liked to be useful.

"Sorry, I just didn't think. So used to doing it all myself."

The dog whined beside him and wriggled all over when Ransom thumped him on the ribs and rubbed his ears.

Instead of two elk, they had an elk and a deer.

"Micah's first deer," Lucas bragged. "Those shooting lessons are paying off, for sure."

Ransom nodded. "Looks good and heavy. How'd you see those little prongs in the dim light?"

"Lucas said shoot when it breaks through the brush, and I did."

"Right through heart," Chief added. "Like he's been shooting for years. He run the rabbit snares now too."

"Thanks to all of you, I have good teachers," Micah said.

Ransom stopped his eyebrows from rising in surprise. Micah didn't usually say a whole lot. In fact, Micah had been talking more lately, up at the sawmill, asking questions. This was a good thing. He was certainly one fine worker. You only had to show him something once. Just the other day Micah offered a suggestion that was a better way to do something. He might have been just an animal handler at that Wild West Show, but there was far more to be discovered in that young man.

Arnett had commented on Micah too. Maybe between the three of them, they could get a lot more done on the ranch this winter and into the spring than Ransom had ever dreamed. And with Arnett's experience and machinery, maybe they'd even bring in some cash money.

After hanging and gutting the two carcasses, Ransom invited them all to eat at the house, but Micah and Chief said Runs Like a Deer would be expecting them. They took the heart, liver, and tongue from the deer and rode up the hill.

“I was thinking you’d not found any, late as it was,” Ransom told his brother as Lucas pulled the tall doors together and dropped the hasp in the lock.

“Micah got his deer way up on the hill at the aspen grove, and I thought sure the rifle shot would spook the elk herd, but they must have been way up back. We slung that buck up across behind Micah and headed on down. We settled in under the trees, and they finally made their way down. Good thing we had a bit of moon so I could see enough to shoot. Almost shot a cow and then this young buck stepped in front of her. That was close.” One did not shoot the cows if they wanted the herd to continue. “You’d think by now they’d not come down that same trail all the time.”

They scraped their boots and, once in the kitchen, set the bucket with the innards up on the counter. They hung their coats on the tree. A kerosene lamp on the table spread enough light to welcome them, so Lucas paused to turn it up.

“Your plates are in the warming oven,” Mavis called from the big room. “Let me finish this and I’ll be right there.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Cassie said over her shoulder as she wandered into the kitchen. “How’d it go?”

“Micah shot his first deer.” Lucas turned from washing his hands at the sink.

“Good, then maybe I won’t have to go hunting anymore.” She opened the flue, then set the stove lids back to the side and added a couple of chunks to the coals already flaring from the draft. “Coffee will be hot in a jiffy.” Fetching the loaf of bread from the bread box, she sliced off several thick hunks and set those on a plate on the table. Mor and Cassie had left the hunters’

place settings on the table after they ate and cleaned up, so all was ready for the men. As soon as they sat down, she set their plates in front of them. “Would you like beet pickles?”

“Always,” Lucas replied with that special smile he reserved for her.

Ransom kept an eye on his brother without seeming to make the effort. Perhaps what he’d thought was infatuation really wasn’t. Had he misjudged his brother’s feelings for Cassie? Based on Lucas’s quick declarations of undying love in the past which, unsurprisingly, died after all, this was something new. As Ransom thought about it, the only woman Lucas had ever continued a relationship with was Betsy Hudson. What to do about that mess plagued them all. So when Lucas arrived back at the ranch a couple of months ago and said he’d found the woman of his dreams but he’d not met her yet, what was a brother supposed to think? Common sense had never been one of Lucas’s strong suits.

When he’d learned that *the woman of my dreams* was a trick rider and shooter in Wild West shows and held a paper that said she owned half of their ranch, well, Ransom had never claimed to be anything but a common ordinary rancher—with a slow-fused temper.

Snatches of the conversation between the two tickled his consciousness, but he had learned he was better off if he tuned them out. He could go easier on the judgmental side that way. No need for him and Lucas to get into another so-called discussion, which was really a polite name for brotherly fighting.

Ransom finished his meal, cut himself a large slab of the leftover gingerbread, buried it in applesauce, and with a refill on the coffee, took cup and plate to his desk in a corner of the big room. He settled into his cushioned chair with a sigh. Of all his many favorite places on the ranch, this was tops. Unless he included being stretched out on the leather-cushioned couch a

few steps away. His father sure did know how to make comfortable and substantial furniture.

Ransom pulled out the drawings he'd made of a possible furniture line, based on some of the things his father had made and others he'd thought of himself. He studied the schematics. He planned on using the lumber long dried out in the barn for a couple of end tables, incorporating cottonwood branches for the legs, like his father had. That was a distinctive touch. All the pieces proclaimed western ranch design. Where would they find a market?

Mavis stopped beside his desk. "Dreaming?"

"I am. Think I'll start with these." He pointed at the pair of tables. "I can work on them here in the evenings."

"True, once you get all the pieces cut." She glanced around the room with a smile. "Ah, the stories these walls could tell."

"What are you working on?"

"I'll never tell. Christmas is coming, and you know better than to ask questions."

He made a face. "Right, sorry." Christmas and, as always, there was no money to buy gifts and he'd not started making anything. At the moment, he didn't even have any ideas of what to make. He needed some time with his mother without all the others around. Lucas and Cassie laughed their way into the room, and Lucas settled into working on the buttons he made from antlers and bones to send to his buyer in Chicago. Cassie picked up the knitting needles Mavis had given her, along with the yarn, and resumed her painful progress. She seemed to be ripping out more stitches than she was putting in.

Good thing she was a better shooter than a knitter. The thought made him smile. One had to give her credit for sheer determination and stick-to-itiveness.



After chores the next morning, they gathered on the front porch as Lucas brought up the wagon. Usually by now they'd changed out the wheels for the sledge runners, but no snow, so no runners. Ransom helped the women into the back of the wagon, along with Dan Arnett up on the seat with him, and got everyone bundled warm with elk robes and quilts.

"Why don't you join us?" he asked Lucas, who was mounting his saddle horse.

"I have some errands to run after church, so I'll ride."

"As you wish." What kind of errands could he be referring to? But Ransom put a guard on his tongue. After all, Christmas was coming and no questions allowed. If only his curiosity could be stilled as easily.



"I need to talk with Reverend Brandenburg after church, if that is all right," Cassie said as Ransom helped her to the ground in the churchyard. "I need to see if he can come out to the ranch to marry Micah and Runs Like a Deer."

"We're not in any rush."

"Thank you."

Gretchen met them inside the church, and thanks to some unseen machinations, Lucas ended up on the end of the pew, obviously not next to Cassie, where he wanted to be. He glared at Ransom, but Ransom made a slight motion to the Hudson family four pews behind theirs. Betsy had returned from her trip, and the family could see no sense in throwing fuel on the fire. Mavis sat on one side of Cassie and Gretchen on the other. Ransom made sure the grin of pride he was feeling did not show on his face. What a family he had.

But then, the Hudsons had just as interesting a family. For years, Lucas had considered Betsy his girl, and everyone assumed that one day, when he was financially stable, he'd propose. Now

here he was courting Miss Lockwood. Betsy had disappeared suddenly, mysteriously, and now she had reappeared. Where had she gone? What did she do while she was away? Ransom really ought to ask, but he couldn't quite bring himself to do it. Frankly, he didn't care enough to ask. That was Lucas's job. He's the one who had courted her, sort of.

The glow lasted through the service as he and Gretchen shared a hymnal and Mavis looked out for Cassie. Arnett sat next to Mavis, leaving Lucas on the wall side. Afterwards, Mavis made a point to greet the Hudson family as if no hard feelings had ever transpired. Ransom admired that in her, especially because he knew that her openness was no act.

Betsy's little sister, Sarah, scowled smoldering coals at Lucas, but Mrs. Hudson took her cue from Mavis and returned a cheerful greeting.

"Have you heard anything more on the rustlers?" Ransom asked Mr. Hudson.

The rancher shook his head. "Strangest thing, no one has. Like they fell off the face of the earth. Took two head from us. Two from Jay Slatfield, and Arnett said he wasn't sure but maybe several. He don't run his herd as carefully as he used to, you know."

"Not surprising, I doubt he can see far enough to count heads. He does all right reading, however, so don't count him out yet."

"Oh no, I'm not, just trying to figure out what is happening."

"Nothing. Looks like the sheriff got the right men in jail after all."

"Well, if that don't beat all. From what I heard, that was some fracas at your place."

"That would surely be one way to describe it." Ransom glanced over and realized Cassie was back beside the wagon with his mother and Gretchen, so he excused himself and stopped at the tailgate to help them into the wagon. Lucas was nowhere to



be seen and his horse was gone, so he must have left immediately after church. Perhaps he'd told their mother where he was going.

"Lucas said he'd meet you all at the ranch," Arnett informed him when he picked up the lines.

"Did he say where he was going?"

"Nope. And I didn't ask. Sure was good to be back in church like that. Thanks to you, Mavis. You folks are real friends." His voice cracked on the last word.

Ransom backed the team and swung the wagon around to head for home. "Thanks, Arnett. We've been neighbors for a long time. Glad we can help each other out. Kinda fits in with his sermon today, didn't it?"

"Ya ever get the feeling like Reverend Brandenburg's been listening over your shoulder at times, or can see into your mind? I mean, it's uncanny."

"Mor would say that is the Holy Ghost at work."

"She sure would" came from the wagon bed.

Ransom and Arnett swapped a glance. Maybe taking this time to be with his family was more important than setting posts and supports in the collapsed part of the mine after all. Somehow it would all get done. At least he sure hoped so.