

ONE STEP
OVER
THE BORDER

Stephen Bly

Chapter One

Central Wyoming, summer of 1996

The yellow dirt road that stretched before him reminded Laramie Majors of the countryside around his grandparent's place in Oklahoma. Miles beyond the blacktop sat their two story, white clapboard house with a front porch swing and sweet tea that tasted a bit sinful if you'd just come back from church. As a kid, those trips north lined a route of escape from the tension of home and invited him to a different world. At Grandma's house, no one yelled. No one got hit. And Mamma never cried.

But the parade of gray sagebrush, dull green scrub cedars and squatty pinon pines on the rimrock reined Laramie back to Wyoming. Yellow grime fogged after his truck like a swarm of South American ants, creeping like a disease across the fenders of his silver Chevy pickup.

Dwight Purley told him to take the short-cut through the south end of the Big Horn Mountains. But Dwight presumed Laramie knew more about Wyoming geography than he actually did. Although the blond gal with stubby pigtailed and logger's biceps at the Sinclair gas station assured him this was the right way, he now found himself grumbling over her apparent misdirections.

He questioned again if he should have stayed on the pavement out of Casper. This endless dirt road didn't have the feel of a short cut and the fuel gauge had dropped near empty. He hadn't seen a ranch, a rig, or an occupied cabin for miles and didn't know

which direction to walk to find gas. He considered turning back, but the drive to make it there today pushed him over the next hill. He promised himself he would not go back to Texas a failure. It was a promise he intended to keep.

Laramie smeared the dirt off the dash and slapped the front of the fuel gauge in hopes that it was stuck, then punched off the CD player. As he crested the hill, he slowed to a stop as two dozen pronghorn antelopes ambled across the road. They turned to gawk at his rude intrusion. He stared back at their blank, clueless expressions, wondering how many times the same look plastered his own face.

The thin blue Wyoming sky unfolded to the west. Hills gave way to rolling sage and brown grass prairie. As he dropped down into a cottonwood draw, he spied a log cabin. Its battered shake roof sported a new satellite dish receiver. Thick gray smoke curled from the chimney. A girl about ten scampered from the outhouse wearing red striped shorts, cowboy boots and a Nike t-shirt.

She waved, then disappeared into an unpainted barn.

Laramie waved back. She was the first person he'd seen in almost an hour.

Eight miles further west he reached Highway 20. He turned north and followed the green highway signs and bright hotel billboards that lured him towards Cody. He rolled the windows down, hoping to blow out some dust. And memories.

Majors parked his pickup under the only shade tree on the level street. He studied the scrap of scribbled brown paper: *Hap Bowman, 2490 Paradise Road, Cody, Wyoming.*

The home looked like a 1960s tract house, only there were no other residences. No landscaping. No parks. No sidewalks. No neighborhood improvement association.

Just one dwelling in bad need of paint on stucco with fake brick walls.

The wide, empty street led to nowhere. Laramie fastened the top button on his collar and practiced a crooked smile in the dusty mirror. He knew it was time to cowboy up, to get his small talk in gear. No one discerned how tough it felt for him to meet new people.

A 1992 black Dodge truck was backed into the driveway. Behind it, on eroding blacktop, a wheelless Volkswagen van perched like a miniature diner, propped up by cinderblocks and weeds. A battered canvass awning stretched out the side. A dust devil that spawned in the vacant lot next to the faded green house seemed reluctant to leave. Laramie watched the dirt swirl a moment as if waiting for an oracle to make a pronouncement.

An aluminum screen door hung crooked, slammed too hard, too often. A half-built front deck stretched out into sun burnt grass, its gray-bleached boards a testament to a long abandoned building project. The black dog asleep on the porch defied pedigree, but Laramie noticed a huge pink tongue hanging out.

Once again, he studied the penciled note, then surveyed the yard. He detected no horse. No barn. No corral. No run-in shed. Not even a plastic steer head stabbed into a bale of hay. Not one sign that this guy ever practiced roping.

Laramie brushed his gritty fingers through short, curly brown hair and rubbed his clean shaven chin. He took a deep breath and muttered, “Mr. Dwight Purley, you said I needed to meet this Hap Bowman. You said he could head rope a steer as good as anyone in Wyoming. I will trust you enough to knock on that door. But this scene better improve quick, because it isn’t looking real good right now.”

When Laramie reached the front step he patted the dog, but the animal showed no interest in him. Afternoon heat reflected off the walls like a radiant electric heater in winter. Laramie longed for the comfort of a glass of Grandma's sweet tea or the throat clearing rush of an ice cold beer.

He scraped open the busted screen door, hesitating to knock on the peeling white paint of the wooden one when he heard a blast of angry Spanish words, followed by a loud crash and a yelp.

Laramie ground his teeth, then checked the note one more time: *2490*. He eyed his truck and considered a hasty retreat, when a man hollered from inside, "Juanita! Put that down."

Even the dog flinched when the lid to a white porcelain commode busted out the front window, scattering glass on the unfinished deck.

The wooden door flung open. A black mustached man about Laramie's age sported a black, beaver felt cowboy hat and several parallel streaks of blood across his cheek.

"Ehhh . . . Hap Bowman?" Laramie stammered. "Dwight Purley sent me to ask you about . . ."

The shorter man grabbed his outstretched hand and yanked him indoors. "Man, am I glad to see you." Then he barreled outside, the door slamming behind him.

The room reeked of garlic and dirty diapers. A divan sprawled backwards. A slice of pizza plastered the wall. Majors heard a roar from the yard and peered out the busted window in time to view the Dodge pickup spin out into the street and head south.

The bristles of a broom smacked Laramie's ear. The surprise, more than the

impact, staggered him into the trash covered pine coffee table. He cracked his shin and hopped around the room trying to flee his attacker.

“Who are you?” the dark haired lady snarled. Her full lips were painted as red as her long fingernails.

“Excuse me, ma’am . . . I didn’t mean to intrude . . . I just . . .”

She walloped him in the side, then jabbed his ribs with the broom handle. “Well, you did intrude. Where’d Hap go?”

Laramie hunkered behind a cluttered, mucky end table. “I wish I knew. He’s the reason I stopped by. I need to talk to him.”

The brown skinned woman yanked open the gauze curtain. “It figures he’d run out on me.” She spun back. “What are you staring at?” She grabbed up a jar of baby food and cocked her arm.

Laramie shielded his face. “Wait, lady. Whoever got you angry, it’s not me. I was told to come talk to a Hap Bowman who lives here.”

“He doesn’t live here.”

“I guess that’s my mistake.”

“He never lived here. That’s the problem.”

“Then, I’ll be leaving. I just wanted to talk to Hap. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Inconvenience? The jerk ruined my life. Look at me. Look at me! He turned down all of this.”

A full, stained yellow t-shirt hung outside her skin tight jeans. Bright yellow round earrings dangled even with her chin. Smearred mascara darkened her sad eyes. Slumped shoulders belied her feigned defiance.

“I’m sorry for whatever’s going on here. But I never met Hap before. I have no explanation for his behavior. I’m a roper and I was told that . . .

The pureed peaches sailed at his head. Laramie ducked. The glass jar crashed into the black iron table lamp which tumbled to the soiled green shag carpet.

Laramie retrieved the lamp and shoved it back on the table. “I take it you don’t like ropers.”

“What he did to me wasn’t right.” When she tossed her head back, a wave rolled down the massive black curls.

Laramie scooted towards the front door. “I really need to get on down the road.”

“That’s what they all say.” The fake yellow flowers tumbled out, but the orange pottery vase flew across the room and shattered on the wall below a Clint Eastwood movie poster.

Laramie’s hand clutched the sticky brass door handle. A baby’s cry wafted in from a back room.

“Don’t you dare move. I want to talk to you.” The woman scooted down a carpeted hallway and into the next room.

Common sense told Laramie to run, to dive through the glass shards of the broken window if needed. But like hundreds of times before, he froze, unable to escaped the person who confronted him.

A diaper clad, cocoa-skinned boy with thick black hair and a round nose rode her hip when she returned. “What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t. But, I’m Laramie Majors.”

“I’m Juanita and this is Philippe.”

“Pleased to meet you both. I presume that’s Hap’s little boy?”

“Why did you presume that?”

“Well, I, eh . . . sorry, I assumed you two were a couple.”

“Do you think I would make love with some scrawny cowboy who treated me that bad?”

“No, I, eh . . .”

“I am not an easy woman. Is that why you are here? Were you told Juanita has no virtue?”

“No, ma’am, I guarantee that was never in my mind. I really must get . . .”

“It wasn’t in your mind? Are you saying that I am unattractive?” She threw her shoulders back. “I am not ugly.”

“No, ma’am . . . I just . . .”

“Many men want to make love with me. I am not hideous.”

“I never implied that you were . . .”

“Do you want to make love with me?”

“Good grief, lady, I don’t even know you.”

Still toting the infant, she scooped up an open can of soda.

Laramie held up his hands. “Don’t throw it. You don’t want to mess up your house.”

Her glazed eyes appraised the broken front window and the trashed living room.

“Yeah, right. It wasn’t always like this. But it’s not your fault. I’m just mad.”

“I can see that.” Laramie relaxed when she sat the can down.

“Something inside me just snaps when I get angry.” She strolled towards him.

“But I’m not mad at you.”

Laramie’s back mashed flat against the door. “I’m grateful for that. Now I need to . . .”

Her voice softened. “You are too skinny, but other than that you are a handsome man.”

Laramie’s blue shirt collar squeezed too tight. He eased open the front door behind him. “Thanks, ma’am. I hope things start going better for you.”

“You must know that under these grubby clothes, I am still a beautiful, sensual Latin woman.”

The loud ring yanked their attention towards the kitchen.

“You’d better get that phone, ma’am, and I’ll be . . .”

“Here . . . hold Philippe.” She shoved the baby in his arms and slalomed through the litter towards the telephone.

Round, brown eyes ogled up at Laramie as he tried to maneuver the six month old with a mushy plastic diaper into a comfortable position. He hadn’t held a baby more than twice in his life. His cousin’s boy, Ronald, at his dedication. And his fourth grade teacher’s one-week-old baby girl when she brought her to school. Panic growled at his stomach.

He rocked Phillipe back and forth. Sweat dribbled down the back of his neck as Spanish threats boomed from the back room.

“Lady, I have to go,” he called. “Come get your baby.”

“Uno momento,” she yelled.

The baby grabbed his ear. Laramie shoved his hand away.

Philippe wailed.

“Now, now . . . shhhh. Everything’s okay. You’re being raised in the most dysfunctional home in Wyoming, but everything’s okay. I know how you feel, little pal . . . I’ve been there too, but crying never changed anything.”

The baby continued to sob as Laramie hushed him.

There was a hollered, “Venga aqui? Ahora?” Then silence.

“Juanita, I have to go. Come get your baby. Philippe needs you,” Laramie called out.

No reply.

“Juanita?”

Philippe began another round of wails.

“I suppose you want your diaper changed. That’s not my department, son. In fact, you’ve already experienced all of my child care skills.” Laramie hiked toward the kitchen. “Juanita?”

The wooden counter around the sink and the square table were piled with food-hardened dishes. Two metal folding chairs with “Property of Park County Social Club” stenciled on the back, completed the furnishings. Next to the open door of an avocado green refrigerator, a beige wall phone swung back and forth on a long cord that at one time spiraled.

Laramie paused at the doorway next to the phone and could hear someone still on the line, shouting in Spanish.

In the laundry room, dirty clothes piled the floor and the top of the avocado green clothes dryer. The back door and screen door swung open in the slight breeze.

A large horsefly buzzed into the pantry as Laramie inventoried the backyard. Brown weeds bunched around an abandoned chain saw. A trackless snowmobile lay on its side next to a dried garland of once fresh flowers. A faded blue silk banner read: “Congratulations.”

“Juanita?” At the sound of his voice, the baby cried again.

“Shhh . . . just hang in there, little partner. If I wasn’t twenty-one, I’d be bawling, too. Your mamma will be right back.”

Laramie wandered across the backyard, baby riding his arm. Dry grass crinkled under his boots. He poked his head in the open door of a portable storage shed.

“Juanita?” In the shadows of the shed, he spied a heavily chromed and polished Harley-Davidson motorcycle. “Baby, does your mamma ride a Harley?”

Untilled, bare ground stretched for a half-mile behind the house. Laramie circled the entire dwelling, but found no one. “Philippe, where did she go?”

Laramie hiked back through the laundry room and kitchen to the living room. The short hallway led to three small bedrooms. In one squatted an unmade, cluttered waterbed. U-haul cardboard boxes crammed a second room. A window in the third had been darkened with foil and duct tape. Under it was a crib. Under the crib, a toy lined floor.

“Juanita?”

He rapped on the only remaining closed door with his free hand. “Juanita, are you in there?”

He tried the cold aluminum door handle. It wouldn’t budge.

He banged again, this time with force. “Juanita!”

The baby wailed.

Majors heard the front door slam and hurried out the hall. He paused before a hulking, bushy bearded, tattooed man in black jeans and sleeveless blue denim shirt who tilted the couch back to its rightful position.

“Who are you?” the man roared.

Laramie edged towards the front door. The rancid air of the room now reeked of fresh grease and old sweat. “This is all a big mistake.”

The man whipped out a switchblade knife and flipped it open. “Where’s Juanita?”

“She, eh, shoved the baby in my hands and took off toward the back of the house. Maybe she’s in the bathroom. I’ll sit your baby here in this chair and be on my way.”

“You ain’t goin’ nowhere until my Juanita clears this up.”

“Look, mister, I never met your wife before today. I just”

“I didn’t say she was my wife.” The man stalked closer. “You just stopped by to do what to her?”

“I needed to talk to a guy, not Juanita. I was told he was here. But I think I . . . eh, just missed him, and then . . .”

“What guy? Who’s been hanging around here?” The big man jabbed the knife in the air. “What was his name?”

“Eh . . . his name . . . I think it was Ha . . . Hamilton. I don’t know his full name. A mutual friend mentioned that I should . . .”

“What mutual friend?” the big man growled.

“Dwight . . . eh . . . Dwight Eisenhower,” Laramie blurted out.

“Does he work for the road department?”

“No, but I think he did have something to do with the Interstate.”

“Never heard of him.” The man scraped the piece of pizza off the wall with his knife.

“Look, here’s what happened. I asked her about, eh, Hamilton, then the telephone rang. Juanita shoved the baby at me, went to answer the phone and never came back. That’s all I know.”

“Juanita!” the bearded man bellowed. “Get in here.”

“Maybe the phone call was from a neighbor. An emergency of some sort.”

“It’s a mile to a neighbor’s house and they threatened to shoot us if we ever showed up on their property again.” The man gazed out the broken window towards the street. “Was the call in English or Spanish?”

“Spanish.” Laramie thought about closing his eyes to make the whole scene disappear. But that never worked when he was a kid and he knew it wouldn’t work now.

The man exploded like a jack-in-the-box. “I’m not going to put up with this anymore.” He stomped down the hall, then waved his knife at Laramie. “Get down here.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to see what’s going on in the bathroom. If you even so much as touched her, I’ll kill you.”

Laramie toted Philippe to the hall.

The big man beat on the door. “Juanita, open up right now.”

Laramie figured he could outrun him, provided he didn’t have a gun or throw that knife. But he froze again. This time out of fear.

“Did he hurt you, Juanita-mia?” He jammed the point of the switch blade into the

door handle and twisted it. The white door popped open.

Majors spun for the living room when the man disappeared into the bathroom. The scream “Noooooooooooo!” would have rattled windows, if there had been any left. Laramie propped Philippe on the sofa. “Sorry, little man”

“I’ll kill you!” The man lumbered down the hall.

Laramie banged open the screen door and hurled himself off the deck.

“Hey,” someone to his right called out. “Do you know how to use one of these?”

Hap Bowman stood like a sentry at ease in foot tall weeds in the front yard. Amazed at the man’s calm demeanor, Laramie reached out his hand as Hap tossed him a coiled nylon rope. The big man roared out of the house. The dog on the porch let out a solitary “woof” without raising his head.

As the wild man stormed down the wooden stairs, Hap’s rope looped his arms. When he yanked back, the man flew off his feet onto his back. At that moment, Laramie’s rope circled the man’s legs. Amidst screams about parentage and curses meant to last for generations, the man flailed in tall dead grass and weeds.

Laramie heard a crack, like a bat hitting a baseball. The man collapsed.

“Did he just knock himself out?” Hap asked.

After wading through weeds and trash where the man lay, Laramie scratched the back of his neck. “I think he hit his head on a bowling ball.”

Hap meandered over to him. They gawked down at the unconscious man. “That was mighty thoughtful of him because I didn’t know what to do next.”

“I’m grateful that you showed up, Bowman, but you were about an hour late. What’s going on here? Dwight Purley told me I needed to talk to you about roping

together. He said you were cowboy from boot to hat. Then you run out the door and leave me in a situation straight out of the Jerry Springer Show.”

Hap squatted beside the big man and examined the lump on his head. “It’s a long story. I didn’t know you were aimin’ to stick around and visit with Juanita. I figured you were right behind me, comin’ out the door. I waited down at the stop sign, but you never showed. I was beginnin’ to think I had the wrong guy. I called Dwight. When he mentioned you bein’ tall, skinny, and a tad shy, I figured I’d better come pull you out. Who is this guy, anyway?”

“You don’t know him?” Laramie asked.

“Nope. Never seen him.”

“He claims to live here. I think he’s the father of that baby.”

“So, he’s the one.”

“The baby,” Laramie groaned. “I dumped him on the divan when I ran for my life.”

Laramie and Hap jogged back to the house. The black dog on the porch opened one eye, then closed it quick.

Philippe stood on the couch chewing a dry, yellow celery stick.

“Where the heck is Juanita?” Hap asked.

“I don’t know. She left me holding the baby.”

“What do we do now?”

“You check out the bathroom.”

“Why?”

Laramie plucked Philippe off the couch. “Because the old boy in the yard spotted

something in the bathroom that made him decide to kill me. If you find a body in there, I don't want to know about it."

Hap stepped over a spilled tray of cat litter. "Where's the bathroom?"

Laramie waved at the hall. "You don't know your way around this house?"

"This was the first time I've ever been here."

"You aren't going with this Juanita?"

"We've been talkin' on the phone for three months, but this is the first time we met."

"You made a great first impression. The bathroom is the first door to the left."

Laramie bounced the baby and snatched a look out the busted window. "Hurry up. That self-inflicted bowling ball wound won't keep him down forever."

Hap wandered back with two sheets of paper. "She taped a Dear John letter to the toilet seat lid, which seems rather appropriate."

Laramie surveyed the room. "She was leaving all this?"

"It says she's splittin' with a dark, handsome cowboy."

"Who?"

Hap shrugged. "Me, I reckon. That's why she went crazy. I told her there was no way I was takin' her and the baby with me."

Laramie continued to shake his head as he gaped at the room. "That explains it. A scorned woman." Philippe swatted him in the ear with the dried celery.

"She deceived me, man. During all those phone calls, she neglected to mention that she lived with a guy, had a kid, and gained umpteen pounds since the picture she mailed me. Worst of all, she lied about having a birthmark in the shape of a horse's head

under her right ear.”

“What’s a birthmark got to do with anything?”

“I told you, it’s a long story.”

“Hey, is he dead?” The voice from the front yard was female, curious, but not panicked. They found Juanita crouched over the unconscious man. “Did you kill him?”

“Where have you been?” Laramie marched out to the woman and shoved the baby at her.

She straddled Philippe on her hip. “When I heard Francis was on his way home, I knew I had to get out of the house. If he found you here, he would beat on me and the baby again.”

“What about me?” Laramie asked. “Weren’t you concerned that he would carve me up?”

“Why should I be? I don’t even know you.” She turned and purred at Hap.

“Honey, did you come back for me?”

“I came back for Laramie, my new ropin’ partner.”

“Well, you’re stuck with me now, too,” she said. “I’m going with you. When Francis wakes up, he’ll kill me, now that you did this to him.”

Hap held up his hand. “I told you, I’m not taking you with me. I came up here for a chat. That’s all I promised and you know it. We agreed to a ‘no strings’ visit.”

“Do you call ten minutes a visit?”

“A short visit. That’s all we needed.”

“If you didn’t plan on staying longer,” she whined, “why did you give this guy my address?”

“Optimistic speculation.”

“I’m not staying here. Give me and the baby a ride to my parents,” she demanded.

“You owe me that much.”

“Where do they live?” Laramie asked.

“Greybull.”

“Get your stuff, quick, and change the baby’s diaper. We’ll give you a ride,”

Laramie offered.

Juanita scampered toward the house toting a celery wielding Philippe.

“Why did you promise that?” Hap said.

“She has to get out of this situation. That guy’s crazy.”

“But she chose the situation herself.”

“And we complicated it. The least we can do is to get her to her folks.”

“Then she’s ridin’ with you,” Hap insisted. “She had this romantic notion that I was comin’ up here to rescue her and the baby, then live happily ever after. I don’t want her in my truck. No tellin’ what she’ll do.”

“Okay, she rides with me. But we caravan over to Greybull together. Right, partner?”

“Yeah, but we need the ropes. You think he’ll stay unconscious?”

While Hap untied Francis, Laramie found the switchblade knife.

“You think that’s the only weapon he’s packin’?” Hap asked.

“No, but I don’t intend to search him.” Laramie eyed the front door. “I wish she’d hurry up. Go in there and nudge her along.”

Hap threw up his hands. “Not me, partner. I ain’t goin’ in that house ever again.

And for sure and certain, I won't do any nudgin' with her."

"But she's your Juanita."

"That's the point. She's not my Juanita."

"Get both trucks running," Laramie said. "I'll see what I can tote."

Juanita held the baby wearing a clean diaper, boots, and a t-shirt. Laramie carted a cardboard box and two brown grocery sacks crammed with clothes.

The black dog raised up on his front paws and howled.

As they bolted to the trucks, Francis propped up on his elbow. "Where do you think you're going?" He reached for his black boot and brandished a hunting knife with ten inch blade.

"To a better place than you." Hap hefted the sixteen pound, ebony bowling ball with #135 engraved next to the holes. He bombed Francis' upraised forehead.

"Did you kill him?" Juanita asked.

"I don't reckon I killed him." Hap trotted to the trucks.

"It's alright with me if you did," she called out.

Hap hopped behind the steering wheel of the black Dodge. With the door still open, he shouted, "Well, it ain't alright with me."

###

The fifty mile ride to Greybull took less than an hour.

Philippe slept in his mother's arms as Juanita stared out the window at bleak prairie and irrigated farmland. Laramie gripped the steering wheel tight and focused on the broken yellow line of Highway 14.

The hum of the tires on the asphalt dulled his mind. The cab of the truck smelled

strong of garlic. He rolled the window down. Juanita seemed to slump lower in the seat every mile they traveled.

Laramie mulled over how Juanita might have gotten herself into such a fix. He found it hard to believe that Francis was her best available choice. But then, he had often thought the same thing about his mother.

Litter and dust swirled as they pulled into, then through, Greybull. The Big Horn Mountains towering to the east provided a Wyoming landscape, but the rundown stores and abandoned cars reminded Laramie of many of the dozen or so Texas towns where he grew up. He couldn't help studying every bar they passed, expecting his dad to emerge. When he was young, he had teased his mother about writing a book on the front door architecture of bars and saloons.

He leaned towards the window and gulped the dry summer air.

Juanita pointed to the railroad tracks. "Pull in there."

Laramie found himself cruising through an old abandoned brickyard and following a winding, dirt road through the sage. He slowed to a crawl through the foot-deep ruts, glancing at the sleeping baby each time. Gravel gave way to dirt, then two parallel paths in the weeds. Hap's dusty, black Dodge bounced along behind them.

A fortress of top-burnt cottonwood trees shielded three old singlewide trailer houses that curved in a U-shape. Several kids played soccer in the hard packed dirt yard.

"Are these all your relatives?" Laramie asked.

"Three of them are my brothers. Two are my sister's kids. I can never remember who the other one is."

Laramie parked his Chevy truck in the shade next to an International pickup with no hood or engine. “How many live out here?”

“Mamma says there’s fifteen now. But it changes all the time.”

Hap parked his rig next to Laramie’s, then lounged against the front of his truck.

Laramie grabbed the box and sacks of clothes. ”Where do you want these?”

Juanita pointed at the center trailer. “On the porch by the blue one.”

A small, gray haired Mexican lady draped in an old, long dress stalked out on the porch to yell in Spanish.

“Who is that?” Laramie called out above the diatribe.

“My mother.”

“What is she saying?”

“She’s happy that I came home.”

The screaming intensified as they neared the blue trailer. Juanita said nothing. When Laramie shoved the box and sacks on the porch, the woman leaned over and spit into each of them, then stormed into the house.

“What was that all about?” Hap called out from his position next to the trucks.

“She’s stating the rules,” Juanita announced.

“Spitting is part of the rules?” Laramie asked.

“That was for emphasis.”

Laramie’s voice lowered. “Are you going to be alright?”

Juanita twisted around. She let out a big sigh and shifted the baby to her other hip. “Now do you see why I wanted so bad to go with Hap? But I am better off here than in Cody when Francis wakes up. I would rather be hit with my mother’s words than his

fists.”

“Take care of that baby. Philippe and I are pals, now,” Laramie said.

She glanced down at her grubby tennis shoes. “Are you sure you don’t want me to live with you?”

“I’m not the one you need. You can do a whole lot better than me.”

Four scrawny white chickens clucked and pecked their way across the yard.

“That’s a nice way of saying ‘no’.”

“Look after yourself and your baby. Find a job. You’ll get some breaks. You were right, Juanita, beneath all that gloom and self-pity, you’re a pretty lady.”

The two cowboys drove back into Greybull. Hap pulled in front of the Sportsman Bar & Grille. Laramie parked behind him. Hap wandered back to his truck. “Did you ever eat at Frank’s Last Chance Steak House?”

Laramie studied the buildings along the street and watched the doors of each bar. “Nope. Where’s it at?”

“About fifteen miles on down Highway 14 towards the Big Horns. Leave your truck and ride with me. I’ll fill you in on the deal with Juanita.”

Laramie slid out and locked the door. “You think it’s okay to leave my truck parked here?”

“Hey, this is Wyoming. You could leave it until February and no one would notice. How long have you known Dwight?”

Laramie flopped down on the passenger’s side. “About two years. I met him at a clinic in Amarillo and worked for him all winter. How about you?”

“I was fifteen when he decided to teach me to rope.” Hap eased onto the highway headed east.

Laramie rubbed the back of his neck. “Dwight’s a great teacher. He pushes you to the point that . . .”

Hap tapped on the steering wheel. “You almost want to bust his crooked nose . . . but then it . . .”

“ . . . dawns on you that he’s right, and almost in spite of yourself . . .” Laramie boomed.

“ . . . he’s made you a better roper.” Hap glanced at Laramie in the rear view mirror. “Geez, we ain’t known each other for two hours and we’re finishin’ each other’s sentences.”

“I’ve never known anyone better at sizing up a man than Dwight. That’s why I drove up here. If he says we should rope together, it’s futile to argue.”

“Did Dwight ever take you to the jack-pot ropin’ in Chugwater?”

“That’s the first place we roped together,” Laramie said. “He headed, I heeled. We won the money that night and I never argued about his teaching tactics after that.”

“No foolin’? Same thing happened to me. I reckon we didn’t go over there until I was about sixteen. I headed, and Dwight heeled. I’ve forgotten a lot of ropin’s since then. But I remember that night. We won the average with two 8.2 times.”

“This is uncanny,” Laramie added. “Dwight and I had two 8.2 times.”

“Are you kiddin’ me? Maybe Dwight’s right. Maybe we are supposed to rope together.”

“How much did you and Dwight make that night?”

“My share was \$155. I thought I was rollin’ in big money. Don’t tell me that’s what you and Dwight made.”

“Nope. We made \$475 each.”

Hap pushed his hat back. “I’m glad to hear that. This was gettin’ weird.”

“I went out and bought a video camera so I could analyze my roping. Do you remember what you spent that purse on?”

“Yeah. On a date.”

“A \$155 date when you were sixteen?”

“It was high school prom night. I rented a limo and ever’thin’.”

“She must have been quite a girl.”

“I’m sure she was. I just don’t remember her very well. She was an exchange student. But she was cute. And I remember her name.”

“You remember her name?”

“It was Juanita. They are all named Juanita.”

Laramie leaned back and folded his arms. “What is this thing about you and girls named Juanita?”

The walls of the steak house displayed a wide collection of taxidermied mounts, racks and heads of most every game animal in Wyoming, plus a few from other continents. The tablecloths were linen, the dishware sturdy, and the floors polished hardwood. With the massive grill in the center of the room, smoke swirled with scents of hot red meat and sweet sauces.

The cowboys finished their medium-rare rib-eye steaks and thick sliced fries, then

dissected cherry cheesecake as Hap finished the story about his fascination for girls named Juanita. "I reckon that all seems a tad strange," he offered.

"No, not at all."

"Really?"

"It's not a little strange; it's a big, totally bizarre strange," Laramie chided.

"That's nice. I'm glad you understand so well."

"I don't understand. There's got to be more to it."

"Yeah . . . " Hap pushed his hat back and rubbed his temples. "I suppose there's somethin' that keeps pushin' me. Mama used to say it's because I'm the middle of five boys. Brad can ride the wild broncs. Terry Wayne's a natural born farmer. Kenny quarterbacked the football team, an all-around athlete. My youngest brother, Jeb, is a computer whiz at age fourteen."

"So, your distinction is this Juanita obsession?"

"It's an ice-breaker. Most people laugh when they hear about it."

"You do plan to give it up some day, don't you?"

"I ain't goin' to be chasin' Juanitas when I'm thirty, if that's what you mean."

"I guess my only real question is, how does this Juanita obsession of yours affect us roping together?" Laramie pressed.

"Just don't set me up with some buckle bunny that ain't named Juanita. And if we pull into a café with a waitress named Juanita, you got to back off and let me talk things up a while. Other than that, ain't much to it."

"Are we thinking about going down the road this week, this month, or when?"

Laramie asked.

“You got some funds set aside?”

“A few hundred. And you?”

Hap stabbed his cherry cheesecake. “I got some. I had thought about workin’ for old Tom Beall over in Nevada for a couple months, then crackin’ out. But that was before I figured on sharin’ expenses. We could go down to Dwight’s and work his steers for a week or so, just to see how we rope together.”

“Look, Hap, I need to tell you I’m sort of a quiet person. I mean . . . don’t expect me to liven up a party or stay up late every night. On more than one occasion, I’ve been called downright boring. But I like to think of it as being peaceful. I like things quiet and simple.”

“Hey, that’s exactly the way I like it. Just rope, work a few cows, tell lies with some friends, and enjoy the countryside. Nothin’ showy. Nothin’ wild. Shoot, I spend a lot of nights just waitin’ for the moon to come up.” Hap motioned to the waitress, “Say, darlin’, could you fill our coffee cups again?”

The girl in black jeans and white shirt swung around by their table with a steaming glass coffee pot. As she swooped down for a quick refill, the spout crashed into the rim of Laramie’s cup, tipping it towards him. He sat transfixed as the boiling hot coffee flooded across the glass table top and plunged over the edge into the crotch of his jeans.

“Geez!” He sprang up and staggered back. His oak captain’s chair sprawled across the wooden floor, just as a large lady in green flowered Bermuda shorts stood to leave.

The sliding chair rammed into the back of her bare knees. She tumbled forward

onto a table that had not been cleared. A table leg weakened from years of service gave way. The other three legs dominoed with a scream and crash.

Three Japanese men at a table next to her leapt up to help, spilling their drinks and knocking over the candle. The green linen tablecloth flamed as the men staggered back. Thick smoke billowed from plastic flowers now consumed with the blaze.

A cook with tall white hat propped on his head sprinted out of the kitchen with a fire extinguisher. One quick blast of white foam put out the fire, but the foam kept spraying.

“It won’t shut off,” the cook yelled as he foamed the Asian tourists.

He kicked open the doors and sprayed his way into the parking lot. A black Labrador, foamed from head to tail, snarled his way into the restaurant, crashing into chairs and tables as he tried to paw the fire retardant out of his eyes.

A lady in sweat pants, who looked about ten months pregnant, crawled up on her chair screaming, “Keep the mad dog away!”

Just then, an old man, with two weeks of white beard, staggered into the dining room from the bar next door. He stared at the screaming woman, pulled up a chair, then shouted, “Oh, good, it’s Karaoke night.”

The original waitress, still standing next to the cowboy’s table with coffee pot in hand, grumbled, “Crap . . . I didn’t need this.”

She glanced down at Hap, the bite of cheesecake still suspended on his fork. “I think I’ll pass on that refill, darlin’.”

Thirty minutes later, after some order was restored in the restaurant, Laramie and

Hap strolled out to the parking lot. Neither said anything until they were back on Highway 14 headed west towards Greybull.

“Does that happen to you often?” Laramie asked. “I’d like to know what I’m signing up for.”

“Me? You were the one who jumped up when the coffee hit your Wranglers.”

“It was a self-preservation, reflex reaction.”

“I don’t reckon we’ll soon forget it.” Hap tugged on his black hat and chewed on a wooden toothpick. “It could have been worse.”

Laramie looked over at him. “How in the world could it have been worse?”

“The building could have burned down and that pregnant lady could have gone into labor.”

“Well, that was enough excitement for me.”

“You got plans where to stay tonight?” Hap asked.

“Hadn’t thought about it yet.”

“I got an aunt and uncle in Worland. We can bunk with them.”

Laramie pushed his hat back. “Are they boring? I would like very much to stay some place boring.”

“Uncle Ralph will talk about his hay crop and whether they had enough moisture. Aunt Shelley may entertain us with some excitin’ stories from quiltin’ camp.”

“Sounds like my kind of people.”

Hap tromped on the accelerator and pulled around a slow moving cattle truck.

“We’ll pick up your truck, then head south on Highway 20.”

Laramie stomped around his pickup in the dim streetlight of Greybull, Wyoming. “Look at this! Oh, sure, leave your rig here on the street, you said. Nothing will happen to it. That’s what you told me.”

Hap pulled off his hat and tousled his black hair. “I reckon it’s the first time I’ve ever seen all four tires slashed.”

“Have you noticed that ever since I met you, my life has been out of control?” Laramie hollered.

“You blamin’ this on me?”

Laramie flailed his hands. “I’m just saying, I don’t know if I’ll be able to live through this partnership. There goes the money I’ve saved up. Wyoming is a disaster.”

“I reckon we can bunk in Greybull tonight. Can’t get you new tires until mornin’.”

“And leave my truck on the street, looking like some war zone casualty?”

“If you squint your eyes, it kind of has that lowrider effect. It ain’t that bad. Just four tires. What happened to the easy goin’ . . . kick back . . . stay out of the conflict, Laramie?”

“No one should be allowed to abuse women, kids . . . or trucks.”

A thin, pony-tailed girl wearing a black “Eat Dirt & Die” t-shirt rode up on her bicycle. “Is that your truck?”

“Yeah . . .” Laramie mumbled.

“I saw who did it.”

“Who?”

“A big guy on a motorcycle.”

Laramie clenched his teeth. "I knew it! There was a Harley in that shed at Juanita's house. Good old Francis must have followed us. He's not going to get away with this. It's payback time."

"Wait a minute, partner, we don't know it was him."

Laramie turned to the girl. "Did he have on a sleeveless denim shirt, with a tattoo on his right arm like a crown of thorns?"

"Yeah, do you know him?" she replied.

Laramie reached down and fingered a slit in his tire. "Not as well as I will."

"He called you some names," she added. "Do you want to hear them?"

"No, thanks. Can't be near as many names as I'm going to call him."

"Cool! Can I listen to you call him names? Maybe I'll learn some new ones."

"Go home, darlin'. It's late." Hap ushered the girl down the sidewalk.

Laramie stomped back to Hap's truck. "Come on."

Hap paused. "I know I'll regret askin' this, but where are we goin'?"

"2490 Paradise Road, Cody."

"What do you aim to do?"

"I don't know, but I'll think of it by the time we get there."

Hap slid behind the wheel. "Laramie, you got to think this through. Vengeance ain't a purdy thing."

"No vengeance. But he will get what he deserves. This has to end right now."

"You goin' to shoot him?"

"No."

"Then it might be time to ride away."

“It’s not your truck that’s sliced up. Why did this happen to me? She was your Juanita.”

“I told you she ain’t mine. Never was. But, I say you need to walk away from it right now. You go over and do somethin’ to his bike, or his house, and then he’ll come look you up and do somethin’ worse than slashin’ tires. Back and forth it will go, gettin’ worse ever’ time, until finally one of you kills the other. So why not just get it over and shoot him now? Either that, or walk away from it. Those are your only two choices.”

“Hap, I’m not going to shoot him, but I am going to challenge him. He can’t get away with this.”

“Don’t you think we ought to wait until mornin’?”

“No.”

Hap flipped a U and drove out of town. “What if he isn’t over there in Cody? What if he’s here at Juanita’s folks’ place, lookin’ for her? He could have sliced up the entire family.”

“That’s a happy thought. Go over to her folks place.”

“What if he’s there?”

“I’ll call him out.”

“Now, partner, I ain’t questionin’ your heart, nor your ability. But he’s a big, strong rounder.”

“Yeah, but I’m on the side of right.”

“That’s what Travis and Bowie said at the Alamo.”

“If you aren’t up to it, let me borrow your truck.”

“Oh, no, I’m stickin’ with my truck,” Hap insisted.

About 11:00 p.m., they pulled through the old brickyard and bounced along the dirt road towards the grove of cottonwoods. No lights shined from the three singlewide trailers.

“You aim to go up and knock on each door?” Hap asked.

“I thought maybe I’d look around for the motorcycle. If it’s not here, there’s no reason to disturb anyone.”

“You need help? Or do you want me to wait in the truck with the engine runnin’?”

“You can help me look,” Laramie said. “After all, you are my new partner.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

Cool air drifted from the west as they parked back in the trees. Laramie and Hap meandered towards the mobile homes.

“Do you see a Harley?” Laramie whispered.

“I see an old abandoned 1949 Studebaker, a John Deere two cylinder tractor without wheels, an Albertson’s grocery cart, but no motorcycle. Of course, I know a guy in Sheridan who keeps his motorcycle in his living room. He rolls it into the house ever’ night.”

“You saying I need to wake everyone up?”

Hap pointed toward the middle trailer. “You don’t need to wake up mamma. She’s on the porch with a shotgun.”

In the shadows, Laramie spotted the woman’s small frame. She looked like a defiant hen standing against the wolves. “Ma’am, we’re not burglars,” he called out. “We were with Juanita this afternoon. I just need to ask you a couple questions.”

“You get two questions, then I pull the trigger.”

“Is Francis, the father of Juanita’s baby, here at your place?” Laramie said.

“No.”

“Did he come over lookin’ for Juanita?” Hap blurted out.

“Yes.”

“Did she go with him?” Laramie asked.

They heard her pump a shell into the chamber.

“Wait a minute, ma’am . . .” Hap called out. “We thought you meant two questions each.”

“After I chased him off, she took the baby and my pickup and left. I have no idea where she went. If you find her, tell her I want my truck back.”

Laramie and Hap trudged back to the idling pickup.

“She got scared and ran to some other safe place,” Hap suggested.

“If he was smart, he’d wait at the end of the drive and follow her.”

“That’s a scary scene. It makes you not want to read the paper in the mornin’.
Where are we goin’ now?”

“To Cody,” Laramie replied.

“Do you ever call it a day and go to sleep?”

“Not until the work’s done. Too many times I’ve backed down just to keep the peace. ‘Don’t make it worse,’ Mamma would say. But it got worse even when I did nothing. Well, no more. This isn’t right and I won’t retreat.”

“No one’s at home except the pooch on the porch,” Hap reported. “And the

Harley's gone."

They slipped through the night shadows back to the pickup.

Hap opened the driver's side door. "Do you reckon he's out chasin' her down somewhere?"

"What worries me is that we're going to hear of her murder in the morning. I don't know if I can live with that."

Hap leaned up against the door. "There ain't nothin' we can do. She has to file a complaint against him. What's the plan now?"

"We wait for him."

"You think he'll be back?"

"It's his house."

"Without Juanita and the baby, what is there to come home to?" Hap insisted.

"Then there's nothing for us to worry about."

"I ain't leavin' my truck here. We need one rig with tires. Let's park near the mobile home grounds, out at the highway. We can hike back down here." Hap flipped a U in the wide, treeless street and drove north.

"This is a long way to run, if we need a quick exit," Laramie said.

"Why will we need to run? You're plannin' on whippin' him, ain't you? If you intend to lose the fight, let me know right now, so I can call an ambulance on stand by."

"I don't know what will happen," Laramie admitted.

"On the other hand, if you'd like to just keep on goin', I can head this rig to Greybull or Worland right now."

Laramie motioned toward yard lights. "Pull in at the trailer park."

Hap fumbled around behind the seat. "I expect we'll need a couple ropes."

"I'm not using ropes or a bowling ball this time."

"Well, in that case . . ." Hap pulled out a lever action carbine. "Think I'll tote my 30/30."

Laramie and Hap prowled south along the street without lights. The breeze from the west hovered between mild and cool.

"What do you plan on doing with the gun?" Laramie asked.

"I'm goin' to try to keep him from killin' you."

"I appreciate that."

"And if that's not a possibility, I can at least put you out of your misery quick."

"That's a real comfort to know."

When they reached the darkened house, they tramped over to the VW perched on cinder blocks. They sat on the cracked, but still warm asphalt and leaned against an abandoned chest freezer with the door removed. Both men kept their eyes on the street.

"You got a girlfriend, Laramie? I told you about my search for Juanita. What about you?"

"There was a gal at college last year. I thought maybe she was the one."

"You went to college?"

Laramie rubbed on his clenched fist. "Junior college. I was an agriculture major. I thought about going on, but just couldn't get motivated."

"What was her name?"

"Shelby. She's one of those types that's so dadgum beautiful, you're embarrassed to talk to her. But she started talking to me after class . . . then one thing led to another

and . . .”

“Wait, wait, wait . . .” Hap interrupted. “We might have a very long night here. There’s no reason to skip over one thing leadin’ to another. What was the one thing and what did it lead to? Fill in the details, partner.”

“We got chummy.”

“How chummy?”

“Real chummy,” Laramie said.

“Oh, well, that makes a difference. Real chummy as opposed to slightly chummy . . . or unreal chummy.”

“The point is, I thought she was the one. Since she majored in elementary education, I even considered ag education.”

“And Mr. and Mrs. School Teacher would live happily ever after?”

“Something like that. We had a great time over Thanksgiving and for the next couple of weeks. Then she went home to Baltimore for Christmas break.”

“She was from the East coast? Was she sort of snotty in a good sense and have a little upturned nose and bangs that jiggle in time with . . . with the rest of her parts that jiggle.”

“Yeah . . . why did you say that?”

“That’s the way all the college girls from the East look,” Hap said. “What happened over Christmas break?”

“She didn’t come back for spring term. After a week of shock and wonder, I went over to her old dorm and asked around. No one would talk to me.”

“Was she pregnant?”

“We weren’t that chummy. A friend’s roommate worked maintenance at her dorm. He brought me the news that Shelby had gotten married on Christmas Eve.”

“She dumped you and married another guy?”

“It seems she was engaged all fall. From what I finally found out, she was worried that maybe she had been in a hurry to get married. She dated me just to make sure she had made the right choice.”

Hap whistled. “You kiddin’ me?” He plucked up a piece of gravel and chucked it against the VW bus. “I’ve dated a Juanita or two just like that.”

“That’s when I decided college wasn’t for me. So, to answer your question, no I don’t have a girl . . . and I guess I’m not looking too hard for one right now. At least, nothing complicated.”

Clouds stacked up against the Big Horn Mountains and blocked the stars in the eastern side of the night sky. Hap rubbed out a cramp in his thigh. He looped his hat over his knee and leaned his head back against the empty freezer. “Laramie, I started this day in Lander. New cologne and a clean shirt. This was going to be huge. Court Juanita . . . find happiness . . . settle down. Now look at me. Sittin’ in the dark with a carbine on my lap. Seems I took a wrong turn sometime today and I can’t go back.”

Laramie watched the dark clouds roll over the stars. When he rubbed his shirt-covered arm, he could feel goosebumps. “You notice that’s the way life is? You never get to go back.”

“Well, if I could do it over, I’d never have come to Cody. Shoot, I don’t think I would have dated that Juanita from Colorado, neither. I learned to stay away from girls more obsessive than I am. If I had a choice, I’d spend more time with my dad. He died

when I was thirteen. A massive heart attack at forty-two years old. That's way too young. I always figured he had a lot to teach me and we just never got around to it. Kinda sad, ain't it? How about you? If you had a chance to go back . . . where would it be?"

"Are you getting philosophical on me?"

"Just tryin' to stay awake. Don't you have a time you'd like to go back to?"

"New Year's Day, 1985."

"Now, that's specific. What about it?"

"I'd have clobbered my old man with a baseball bat, instead of letting him take it away from me."

Hap traced his finger along the cold, hard walnut carbine buttstock. "Did he get mean when he was drunk?"

Laramie waved his arm to the east. "Did you see that lightening over in the Big Horns?"

"You need to change the subject?" Hap pressed.

When Laramie closed his eyes, he saw the streaks of blood mixed with tears on his mother's face. "Yeah, I'm changing the subject. At least for now. Maybe some day, Hap. Is that fair enough?"

"Partner, I'll listen to anything you want to tell me. But I won't hound you."

"And I'll do the same for you." Laramie cleared his throat. "Do we have a storm headed this way?"

"Looks like it. You should have worn your hat," Hap said.

"I never wear a hat. Except in the arena and that's because they make me."

"You cowboy, but you don't wear a hat? What's the deal?"

”Some guys can wear a hat, some can’t. I look funny in a hat.”

“Who told you that?”

“Molli Peters, when I was twelve.”

“Do you mean to tell me what some girl said when you were twelve still controls your life?”

“How old were you when you started looking for your Juanita?” Laramie quizzed.

“Twelve, but it’s completely different.”

“Oh?”

“Look, that night after I met her, when I was twelve, I prayed. I said, ‘Lord, I’m never goin’ to ask you for another thing as long as I live. I just want to marry my Juanita some day when I grow up.’”

“So, prayer makes your situation different?”

“It’s in the Lord’s hands.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Laramie murmured.

Hap raised the carbine and pointed it at the brightest star. “You do believe in God, don’t you?”

“I suppose most everyone does. But that doesn’t mean I understand his ways.”

“What are you thinkin’ of?” Hap asked.

“Philippe.”

“Juanita’s baby?”

“Yeah, Juanita and good old Francis. That little guy hardly has a chance in life. What kind of world is this that he’s growin’ up in? He’s got violence and filth and constant tension. How can he make it?”

“You blame God for that?” Hap asked.

“Not exactly, but I truly don’t understand. I have a sister, Diana. She’s about three years older. She married Barry right out of high school. He got into computers and made so much money they can’t find enough ways of spending it.”

“That’s a nice problem.”

“They’ve got a big house near Seattle. Diana doesn’t need to work. So all she wants is to have kids.”

“But they can’t?”

Laramie sighed. “Nope. It’s not Barry; it’s her. She can’t bear children. My sis is a saint. She’s the sweetest, kindest, smartest lady I know. If I ever find one like my sis, I’ll marry her. But for the life of me, I don’t get why God above prevents her from having kids . . . and little Philippe is born in a home like this. There’s a whole lot of things like that I don’t comprehend.”

“Here comes a rig,” Hap said.

Laramie crouched forward. “Two headlights. It’s not a motorcycle.”

“Maybe someone’s lost.” Hap sat cross-legged, carbine across his lap. “I think they’re turnin’ in here. Duck down.”

“Is that a Harley in the back of the pickup?” Laramie whispered.

A red bandanna do-rag around his head, Francis climbed out of the passenger side. He carried a sleeping Philippe.

Juanita bounced out on the driver’s side, keys spinning on her fingers. “Honey, do you think we should tape some cardboard over that hole in the front window to keep the bugs out?”

“Just pull the curtains, babe,” Francis replied. “I’ll repair it tomorrow. You might want to bring in the commode lid, though. I’ll put the baby to bed. He’s tired. He’s had a long day.”

“We’ve all had a long day.”

“Did you get it out of your system?” Francis asked.

“Running away? Yeah . . . I think I did. How about you? Did you get your anger out?”

“Nothin’ like slicin’ tires to relieve stress.”

Hap prodded Laramie with the carbine. “Now’s your chance. You want the gun?”

Laramie waved him away.

Juanita and Francis paused in front of the busted screen door. Francis leaned down. Juanita threw her arm around him and kissed him on the lips. Then the three, and the black dog, disappeared into the house.

Neither said much on the drive back to Greybull until they hit the thundershowers.

“If it rains hard, they’ll wish they had that window fixed,” Hap finally offered.

“I sat there most of the night thinking of all the things I was going to do to the guy, but I didn’t count on that.”

“It’s a tough one to figure out.”

“It’s still a mess. I don’t know how they can make it.”

“Yeah, but it’s not our mess. I hope you learned a lesson from all of this.”

“I learned that slashing tires relieves stress.”

“You didn’t exactly slash them.”

“Letting the air out and tossing away the valve cores was the best I could do. I should have carried my pocket knife,” Laramie said.

“You should have let me blast the tires.”

“I didn’t want to wake up the baby. But I’m glad I let the air out of the Harley, too.”

Hap pushed his hat back. “What do you say, cowboy? We make a good team. You ready to rodeo?”

“After today, I’m braced for anything.” Laramie rubbed the back of his neck.

“Besides, I figure it can only get better from here.”

