



The Fire in Ember

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Chapter 1

1888 Colorado

June

A hanging is no place for a woman.

Bert cast a wary glance at the man who lifted a rope from his saddle horn and stomped her way. With her hands tied behind her back and a second man holding her shoulders, she had no hope of freeing herself.

“Horse thieves are hanged.” The man they called Leon gazed up into the branches of a cottonwood and pointed. “That limb looks sturdy enough to carry the likes of you. If it breaks, we’ll find another one.” He tied the noose around her neck.

“But he’s just a boy,” an old man said. “I’m not up to hangin’ a kid.”

“Billy the Kid started his murderin’ ways at fourteen.” Leon walked toward Bert. His breath reeked of liquid courage, and the swagger in his step meant she couldn’t reason with him. “He won’t even tell us his name. That means this ain’t the first time he’s broke the law.” He sneered, revealing a mouthful of black and broken teeth. “But it’ll be the last time.”

“Maybe he’s too scared to talk. You hit him hard,” the old man said.

Bert touched her tongue to the stinging side of her mouth where blood dripped down her chin. That had been Leon's first punch. She glanced his way again through one eye. The other one had already swollen shut, and it throbbed in time to her pounding heart.

"In case you've forgotten, the boss's been lookin' for that horse nigh onto six months." Leon tossed the rope over a branch. "This here's his prize mare all right, and she's wearing the Wide O brand."

"All I'm sayin' is you've taught the boy a good lesson. One he ain't likely to forget. Let's send him on his way and take the boss his horse." The man held the bridle of the sleek mare she'd been riding.

Bert stared into the face of the haggard man who was attempting to reason with her executor. His lined face and bushlike silver beard showed his age. He couldn't help her with three men determined to hang her. But maybe the others would listen to his reasoning.

Leon strode to Bert and grabbed her by the neck and out of the clutches of the man who'd held her shoulders. "Why'd you steal this horse?"

"I didn't." Bert could barely speak for Leon's hand cutting off her air supply.

"Then where'd you get it?"

She couldn't answer that.

"What do you men think?" Leon released his hold and shoved her backward onto the hard ground.

Bert knew what a beatin' felt like, and she'd lived through enough to know she'd survive. But not a rope swung from a tree branch. A crow flew overhead. The bird opened its mouth and cawed as if it were voting on tying the rope around her neck. She pulled her attention from the crow to the other men for maybe a sign that one of them might agree with the older man.

The greasy-looking man who had held her for Leon glanced at a fourth man and nodded. "We agree with you. If'n this kid has already stole a horse, what else is he gonna do? Murder a man?"

"Let's get 'er done then." Leon grinned. "How about a little whiskey to sweeten up this party?"

"This is wrong," the older man said. "The boss won't like it one bit. And you already know how he feels about drinkin' when we're supposed to be workin'."

“Who’s gonna tell him, Ted?” Leon juttled out his chin. A breeze swept through the cottonwood’s treetops and picked up his tattered, flat-brimmed hat. Amidst the snickers, he chased after it, cussing like her brothers. He snatched up his hat and plopped it down over his head. “We’re doin’ him a favor and savin’ the marshal some time.”

“I’m not a part of this.” The old man offered a hand up to Bert, and she stood. “Sorry, boy. I tried.” He swung himself up onto his saddle. “You men ever been boys? Ever got yourself caught up in something you didn’t have any business doin’? This is murder, and you know it.” He headed south.

Her last hope rode away in the form of an old man named Ted. Leaving dirt clods behind him. She watched until the sound of his horse’s gallop faded away along with any hope. Regret for trying to save Simon from a hanging tightened like the noose around her neck.

Leon cursed again, then made his way to his horse. He pulled a bottle from his saddlebag, untwisted the lid, and took a swallow. “We’ll use the boss’s horse to hang him.”

Bert stole a look at the clear blue sky and the green-and-white-tipped Rockies in the distance. Her last look at anything on this earth. She inhaled the sweet scent of summer and cast her gaze toward the pink and yellow wildflowers scattered around them. As a child, she’d taken such wildflowers and woven them into crowns.

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Her brother’s words raced across her mind. Would it make any difference to these ranch hands if they knew she was a female?

John Timmons didn’t usually ride across his ranch without one of his brothers. But this morning was an exception. He’d saddled his chestnut stallion and left his ranch with too much on his mind to waste time talking. And with his horse’s wild temperament, riding alone made sense.

He breathed in appreciation for the green, rolling land surrounding him. Cattle and horses grazed in abundance. To the west, the Rocky Mountains stood guard over the valley. Definitely a blessing in any man’s vocabulary.

Four years ago, his widowed mother deeded the ranch to him and insisted their brand be changed to reflect John as the owner. Until then, the ranch was simply the ranch. He chose the name of 5T to reflect all of the Timmons brothers. The brand looked good on the livestock, and John continued to add calluses to his work-worn hands, just as he’d done since he was a fourteen-year-old.

Weeks later, the responsibility placed on his shoulders to look after his younger brothers on into manhood hit him like a bolt of lightning — there were four other Timmons boys who’d one day need a way to make a living. John woke up to the reality of what ranch ownership and a family meant and vowed to grow the 5T not only in cattle and horses, but

in acreage. Since then, his Uncle Parker had sold him a bordering ranch, adding a total of a thousand acres to the 5T.

Most folks called him successful. Some called him a working fool. His brothers called him a slave driver when they thought he was out of earshot. Truth known, he claimed the title of a working fool. Ranching was all he knew, and all that mattered to keep food on the table and the cold off their backs.

He shook off the thoughts vying for the topic worrying him like a boil on his rear. He needed to add more land to the ranch.

In two weeks, Evan would be eighteen.

Aaron just had his sixteenth birthday.

Mark fell in right behind him at fourteen.

Davis, Mama's baby, turned nine in April.

Of course, that didn't mean all the boys planned on taking up ranching themselves. All the harping and preaching and lecturing about his brothers claiming an education seemed to be working. Or it might be that studyin' sounded easier than mending fences or running down stray cows.

Except Mark. The boy loved the land like he did.

Evan liked doctoring animals — wanted to take care of them for the rest of his life. Aaron claimed he'd live in the city, and Davis never wanted to leave his mama. But John had promised himself that each of his brothers would be given one hundred sixty acres when they reached their eighteenth birthday, a homestead plot like his father had purchased years before. They could sell the land back to John or start their own spread. Their choice.

John laughed at his frettin' — worse than an old woman watching for winter weather. He turned his horse northwest toward the land belonging to Victor Oberlander, the Wide O Ranch. Six hundred forty acres of Oberlander's land bordered on John's ranch — four homestead plots for four brothers. Today he planned to offer a fair price for it. Cash. With those thoughts, a northern breeze cooled his face.

For right now, John would enjoy the warm weather, clear blue skies, and solitude of his thoughts. Although his thoughts would be more pleasing once he had a firm handshake on a deal with Oberlander.

He rounded a hill about three miles from the Wide O and saw Ted Hawkins riding his way. The old ranch hand waved and spurred his horse toward John.

"How are you?" John came to a stop and leaned on his saddle horn.

"I've been better." Ted's face was flushed, what a man could see of his whiskered skin and his hat pulled down low. "But I'm sure glad I run up on you."

John's insides soured. "What's wrong? Trouble?"

"Yep. The kind a deputy like you can handle just fine. A couple of Oberlander's ranch hands have a boy they're about to hang for stealin' a horse. I tried to stop them, but — "

"A boy? What's got into them?"

"Bored, I reckon. The boy was ridin' the boss's prize mare, the one he thought got stole. But hangin' a kid isn't my way of settlin' things. Tried to talk them out of it, but Leon's mind's set."

The good Lord must have had more on His mind this morning than striking a deal for land. "A hanging of any kind without a trial is against my style. Show me where they're at."

"Sure thing, John. They're about a mile and a half back. Leon's fit to be tied about everything this mornin'. Been drinkin', and he's meaner than a wounded she-bear."

The two men rode north. Horse thieves were the sludge of the earth, but a young boy often didn't have much sense. He'd been there, and what often sounded like fun could end up being deadly. In the distance, three men gathered around a horse. On that horse sat a boy with a noose around his neck.

John lifted his rifle and fired into the air. That ought to get their attention. Heads and bodies snapped his way.

"That ain't gonna stop Leon," Ted shouted above the rhythmic pounding of their horses' hooves against the ground.

Although John and Ted were gaining ground, it didn't seem to deter Leon's hanging. He walked behind the horse where the kid sat.

I won't get there soon enough.

John raised his rifle again and shot through the rope.

Leon smacked the horse's rump, and the animal took off. Instead of dangling in the air, the boy was doing his best to stay atop a horse with his hands tied. Ted took out after the mare and boy as John rode up in front of the others.

Cursing broke through the morning, and Leon threw a bottle aside then jerked out his revolver. He waved his gun toward the boy.

"Pull that trigger, and I'll shoot you dead." John aimed his rifle straight at Leon's chest.

“He’s a horse thief.” Leon’s words thundered louder than his swearin’ had moments before. “Maybe so, but you aren’t a judge. And your thief looks to be around eleven years old. That makes you a big man.” John pointed at the broken whiskey bottle. “So does cheap whiskey make you brave enough to kill a kid?”

The other two ranch hands backed off. Their horses had been spooked and were headed in the direction of the Oberlander barns and house. Ted had caught up with the boy and the mare, but John’s stallion had noticed her too. Wonderful. Now he had one more problem to contend with.

“What about you two?” John swung his rifle toward the others. “Leon said — ” one man began. “If you’re going to follow Leon around like a puppy, maybe you’d like to follow him to jail?”

“I’m gettin’ back to work,” the second man said. John recognized him, but he wasn’t about to call the cow pie by name. Leon picked up his broken bottle. Most likely looking to see if any of the amber liquid in the bottom was drinkable. “Mr. Oberlander will want to know where we found his horse.” “Tell him the truth.” John shot him a look meant to challenge him.

Leon raised a scraggly brow. “Some money in my pocket would keep me quiet.” John refused to let Leon see his anger. “I’ll take the horse and the boy to Mr. Oberlander, since it’s his property.” He studied the boy while Ted cut the rope binding his hands behind him. The kid shook so that he had difficulty jumping down from Oberlander’s mare. “You all right?”

The boy nodded. “What’s your name?” The boy stared at him. “Where you from?”

Nothing. Not even a muscle moved. His right eye was turning blue. Swollen too. John turned his attention to Leon. “Did you beat up this kid?”

“He did,” the boy said.

For sure the boy wasn’t older than eleven or twelve. He’d tan Davis’s hide if he ever pulled a stunt like this. “Well that proves you aren’t deaf and mute. Come on over here and climb up behind me. You’ve got a horse to return. Then we’re having a long talk about taking another man’s property. I have a mind to let you spend a night in jail. Might knock some sense into you.”

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