

THREE



“THE SON OF A BITCH.” BEN LEANED ON HIS SADDLE horn, shaking his head at Nate. His eyes, shielded by the wide brim of a dark gray hat, glittered cold green. “I’m sorry I missed his funeral. My folks said it was quite the social event.”

“It was that.” Nate slapped a hand absently against the black gelding’s flanks. He’d caught Ben minutes before his friend was taking off for the high country.

In Nate’s opinion, Three Rocks was one of the prettiest spreads in Montana. The main house itself was a fine example of both efficiency and aesthetics. It wasn’t a palace like Mercy, but an attractive timber-framed dwelling with a sandstone foundation and varying rooflines that added interest, with plenty of porches and decks for sitting and contemplating the hills.

The McKinnons ran a tidy place, busy but without clutter.

He could hear the bovine protests from a corral. Calves being separated from their mamas for weaning didn’t go happily. The males’ll be unhappier yet, Nate mused, when they’re castrated and dehorned.

It was one of the reasons he preferred working horses.

“I know you’ve got work to see to,” Nate continued. “I don’t want to hold you up, but I figured I should come by and let you know where we stand.”

“Yeah.” Ben did have work on his mind. October bumped into November, and that shaky border before winter didn’t last long. Right now the sun was shining over Three Rocks like an angel. Horses were cropping in the near pasture, and the men were going about their duties in shirt-sleeves. But drift fences needed to be checked, small grains harvested. The cattle that weren’t to be wintered over had to be culled out and shipped.

But his gaze skimmed over paddocks and pastures to the rise, toward Mercy land. He imagined Willa Mercy had more than work on her mind this morning. “Nothing against your lawyering skills, Nate, but that legal bullshit isn’t going to hold up, is it?”

“The terms of the will are clear, and very precise.”

“It’s still lawyer crap.”

They’d known each other too long for Nate to take offense. “She can fight it, but it’ll be uphill and rough all the way.”

Ben looked southwest again, pictured Willa Mercy, shook his head. He sat as comfortably in the saddle as another man would in an easy chair. After thirty years of ranch life, it was more his natural milieu. He didn’t have Nate’s height, but stood a level six feet, his wiry build ropey with muscle. His hair was a golden brown, gilded by hours in the sun and left long enough to tease the collar of his chambray shirt. His eyes were as sharp as a hawk’s and often just as cold in a face that had the weathered, craggy good looks of a man comfortable in the out-of-doors. A horizontal scar marred his chin, a souvenir of his youth and a slip of the hand when he’d been playing mumblety-peg with his brother.

Ben ran his hand over the scar now, an absentminded, habitual gesture. He’d been amused when Nate had first informed him of the will. Now that it was coming into effect, it didn’t seem quite so funny.

“How’s she taking it?”

“Hard.”

“Shit. I’m sorry for that. She loved that old bastard, Christ knows why.” He took off his hat, raked his fingers through his hair, adjusted it again. “And it’s got to stick in her craw that it’s me.”

Nate grinned. “Well, yeah, but I think it’d sit about the same with anybody.”

No, Ben mused, not quite. He wondered if Willa knew that her father had once offered him ten thousand acres of prime bottomland to marry his daughter. Like some sort of fucking king, Ben thought now, trying to merge kingdoms.

Mercy would give it away, he thought, squinting into the sun. He’d give it away rather than ease his hold on the reins.

“She doesn’t need either one of us to run Mercy,” Ben said. “But I’ll do what it says to do. And hell . . .” His grin spread slow, arrogant, and shifted the planes on his face. “It’ll be entertaining to have her butting heads with me every five minutes. What are the other two like?”

“Different.” Thoughtful, Nate leaned back on the fender of his Range Rover. “The middle one—that’s Lily—she spooks easy. Looks like she’d jump out of her skin if you made a quick move. Her face was all bruised up.”

“She have an accident?”

“Looked like she’d accidentally run into somebody’s fists. She’s got an ex-husband. And she’s got a restraining order on him. He’s been yanked in a few times for wife battering.”

“Fucker.” If there was one thing worse than a man who abused his horse, it was a man who abused a woman.

“She jumped on staying,” Nate continued, and in his quiet, methodical way began to roll a cigarette. “I have to figure she’s looking at it as a good place to hide out. The older one, she’s slicker. Hails out of LA, Italian suit, gold watch.” He slipped the pouch of Drum back in his pocket, struck a match. “She writes movies and is royally pissed at the idea of being stuck out in the wilderness for a year. But she wants the money it’ll bring her. She’s on her way back to California to pack up.”

“She and Will ought to get along like a couple of she-cats.”

“They’ve already been at each other.” Nate blew out smoke contemplatively. “Have to admit, it was entertaining to watch. Adam simmered them down.”

“He’s about the only one who can simmer Willa down.” With a creak of leather, Ben shifted in the saddle. Spook was growing restless under him, signaling his wishes to be off with quick head tosses. “I’ll be talking to her. I’ve got to check on a crew we sent up to the high country. We’re getting some storms. Mom’s got coffee on at the main house.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got to get back. I’ve got work of my own. See you in a day or two.”

“Yeah.” Ben called to his dog, watching as Nate climbed into his Range Rover. “Nate—we’re not going to let her lose that ranch.”

Nate adjusted his hat, reached for his keys. “No, Ben. We’re not going to let her lose it.”

IT WAS A GOOD RIDE ACROSS THE VALLEY AND UP INTO the foothills. Ben took it at an easy pace, scanning the land as he went. The cattle were fat; they’d be cutting out some of the Angus for finishing in feedlots before winter. Others they would rotate from pasture to pasture, hold over for another year.

The choices, and the selling, had been his province for nearly five years, as his parents were gradually turning over the operation of Three Rocks to their sons.

The grass was high and still green, glowing against the paintbrush backdrop of trees. He heard the drone overhead and looked up with a grin. His brother, Zack, was doing a flyover. Ben lifted the hat off his head, waved it. Charlie, the long-haired Border collie, raced in barking circles. The little plane tilted its wings in a salute.

It was still hard for him to think of his baby brother as a husband and a father. But there you were. Zack had taken one look at Shelly Peterson and had fallen spurs over Stetson. Less than two years later, they’d made him an uncle.

And, Ben thought, made him feel incredibly old. It was beginning to feel as though there were thirty rather than three years separating him and Zack.

He adjusted his hat and guided his horse uphill through a stand of yellow pine. The air freshened and cooled. He saw signs of deer, and another time might have given in to the urge to follow the tracks, to bring fresh venison home to his mother. Charlie was sniffing hopefully at the ground, glancing back now and then for permission to flush game. But Ben wasn't in the mood for a hunt.

He could smell snow. He was still far below the snow line, but he could smell it teasing the air. Already he'd seen flocks of Canadian geese heading south. Winter was coming early, and he thought it would come hard. Even the rush of water from the creek spurting downhill sounded cold.

As the trees thickened, the ground roughened, he followed the water. The forest was as familiar to him as his own barnyard. There, the dead larch where he and Zack had once dug for buried treasure. And there, in that little clearing, he had brought down his first buck, with his father standing beside him. They'd fished here, plucking trout from the water as easily as plucking berries from a bush.

On those rocks he'd once written the name of his love in flint. The words had faded and washed away with the years. And pretty Susie Boline had run off to Helena with a guitar player, breaking Ben's eighteen-year-old heart.

The recollection still brought him a tug, though he'd have suffered torments of hell before admitting he was a sentimental man. He rode past the rocks, and the memories, and climbed, keeping to the beaten path through trees as lively with color as women at a Saturday night dance.

As the air thinned and chilled and the scent of snow grew stronger, he whistled between his teeth. His time in Bozeman had been productive, but it had made him yearn for this. The space, the solitude, the land. Though he'd told himself he'd brought a bedroll only as a precaution, he was already planning on camping for a night. Maybe two.

He could shoot himself a rabbit, fry up some fish, maybe hang with the crew for the night. Or camp apart. They'd

drive the cattle down to the low country. This much snow in the air could mean an early blizzard, and disaster for a herd grazing in the high mountain meadows. But Ben thought they had time yet.

He paused a moment, just to look out over a pretty ridge-top meadow dotted with cows, bordered by a tumbling river, to enjoy the wave of autumn wildflowers, the call of birds. He wondered how anyone could prefer the choked streets of a city, the buildings crowded with people and problems, to this.

The crack of gunfire made his horse shy and cleared his own mind of dreamy thoughts. Though it was a country where the snap of a bullet usually meant game coming down, his eyes narrowed. At the next shot, he automatically turned his horse in the direction of the sound and kicked him into a trot.

He saw the horse first. Will's Appaloosa was still quivering, her reins looped over a branch. Blood had a high, sweet smell, and scenting it, Ben felt his stomach clutch. Then he saw her, holding the shotgun in her hands not ten feet away from a downed grizzly. A growl in his throat, the dog streaked ahead, coming to a quivering halt at Ben's sharp order.

Ben waited until she'd glanced over her shoulder at him before he slid out of the saddle. Her face was pale, he noted, her eyes dark. "Is he all the way dead?"

"Yeah." She swallowed hard. She hated to kill, hated to see blood spilled. Even seeing a hen plucked for dinner could cause her gorge to rise. "I didn't have any choice. He charged."

Ben merely nodded and, taking his rifle out of its sheath, approached. "Big bastard." He didn't want to think what would have happened if her aim had been off, what a bear that size could have done to a horse and rider. "She-bear," he said, keeping his voice mild. "Probably has cubs around here."

Willa slapped her shotgun back in its holder. "I figured that out for myself."

"Want me to dress her out?"

“I know how to dress game.”

Ben merely nodded and went back for his knife. “I’ll give you a hand anyway. It’s a big bear. Sorry about your father, Willa.”

She took out her own knife, the keen-edged Bowie a near mate to Ben’s. “You hated him.”

“You didn’t, so I’m sorry.” He went to work on the bear, avoiding the blood and gore when he could, accepting it when he couldn’t. “Nate stopped by this morning.”

“I bet he did.”

Blood steamed in the chilly air. Charlie snacked delicately on entrails and thumped his tail. Ben looked over the carcass of the bear and into her eyes. “You want to be pissed at me, go ahead. I didn’t write the damn will, but I’ll do what has to be done. First thing is I’m going to ask you what you’re doing riding up here alone.”

“Same thing as you, I imagine. I’ve got men up in the high country and cattle that need to come down. I can run my business as well as you can run yours, Ben.”

He waited a moment, hoping she’d say more. He’d always been fascinated by her voice. It was rusty, always sounding as though it needed the sleep cleared out of it. More than once Ben had thought it a damn shame that such a contrary woman had that straight sex voice in her.

“Well, we’ve got a year to find that out, don’t we?” When that didn’t jiggle a response out of her, he ran his tongue over his teeth. “You going to mount this head?”

“No. Men need trophies they can point to and brag on. I don’t.”

He grinned then. “We sure do like them. You might make a nice trophy yourself. You’re a pretty thing, Willa. I believe that’s the first time I’ve said that to a woman over bear guts.”

She recognized his warped way of being charming and refused to be drawn in. Over the last couple of years, refusing to be drawn to Ben McKinnon had taken on the proportions of a second career. “I don’t need your help with the bear or the ranch.”

“You’ve got it, on both counts. We can do it peaceable,

or we can do it adversarial.” He gave Charlie an absent pat when the dog sat down beside him. “Don’t matter much to me either way.”

There were shadows under her eyes, he noted. Like smudged fingerprints against the golden skin. And her mouth, which he’d always found particularly appealing, was set in a hard, thin line. He preferred it snarling—and figured he knew how to bring that about.

“Are your sisters as pretty as you?” When she didn’t answer, his lips twitched. “Bet they’re friendlier. I’ll have to come calling, see for myself. Why don’t you invite me to supper, Will, and we can sit ourselves down and discuss plans for the ranch.” Now her eyes flashed up to his, and he grinned hugely. “Thought that would do it. Christ Almighty, you’ve got a face, and nothing suits it better than pure orneriness.”

She didn’t want him to tell her she was pretty, if that’s what he was doing. It always made her insides fumble around. “Why don’t you save your breath for getting this carcass up to bleed out?”

Rocking back on his heels, he studied her. “We can get this whole thing over quick. Just get ourselves married and be done with it.”

Though her hand clenched on the bloody knife, she took three slow, easy breaths. Oh, he was riding her, and she knew he’d like nothing better than to watch her scream and shout and stomp her feet. Instead she angled her head, and her voice was as cool as the water in the nearby stream.

“There’s about as much chance of that as there is of what’s left of this bear rearing up and biting you on the ass.”

He rose as she did, circled her wrist with his fingers, and ignored her quick jolt of protest. “I don’t want you any more than you want me. I just thought it would be easy on everybody if we got it out of the way. Life’s long, Willa,” he said more gently. “A year isn’t much.”

“Sometimes a day’s too much. Let go of me, Ben.” Her gaze lifted slowly. “A man who hesitates to listen to a woman with a knife in her hand deserves whatever he gets.”

He could have had the knife out of her hand in three seconds flat, but he decided to leave it where it was. "You'd like to stick me, wouldn't you?" The fact that he knew it to be true both aroused and irritated him. But then, she usually managed to do both. "Get it through your head: I don't want what's yours. And I don't plan on being bartered for more land and more cattle any more than you do." She went pale at that, and he nodded. "We know where we stand, Will. Could be I'll find one of your sisters to my taste, but meanwhile, it's just business."

The humiliation of it was as raw as the blood on her hands. "You son of a bitch."

He shifted his grip to her knife hand, just in case. "I love you too, sweetheart. Now, I'll hang the bear. You go wash up."

"I shot it, I can—"

"A woman who hesitates to listen to a man with a knife in his hand deserves what she gets." He smiled again, slow and easy. "Why don't we try to make this business go down smooth for both of us?"

"It can't." All the passion and frustration that whirled inside her echoed in the two words. "You know it can't. How would you take it if you were standing where I am?"

"I'm not," he said simply. "Go wash the blood off. We've got a ways to ride yet today."

He let her go, crouched again, knowing she was standing over him fighting to regain control. He didn't fully relax until she'd stomped off toward the stream with his dog happily at her heels. Blowing out a breath, he looked down at the exposed fangs.

"She'd rather a bite from you than a kind word from me," he muttered. "Goddamn women."

While he finished the gruesome task, he admitted to himself that he'd lied. He did want her. The puzzle of it was, the less he wanted to, the more he did.

IT WAS NEARLY AN HOUR BEFORE SHE SPOKE AGAIN. THEY wore sheepskin jackets now against the cold and wind, and

the horses were plodding through nearly a foot of snow, with Charlie happily blazing the trail.

“You take half the bear meat. It’s only right,” Willa said.

“I’m obliged.”

“Being obliged is the problem, isn’t it? Neither of us wants to be.”

He understood her, he thought, better than she might like. “Sometimes you have to swallow what you can’t spit out.”

“And sometimes you choke.” One of the wounds in her heart split open. “He left Adam next to nothing.”

Ben studied her profile. “Jack drew a hard line.” And Adam Wolfchild wasn’t blood, Ben thought. That would have been uppermost in Jack’s mind.

“Adam should have more.” Will have more, she promised herself.

“I’m not going to disagree with you when it comes to Adam. But if I know anyone who can take care of himself and make his own, it’s your brother.”

He’s all I’ve got left. She nearly said it before she caught herself, before she remembered it would be a mistake to open any part of her heart to Ben. “How’s Zack? I saw his plane this morning.”

“Checking fences. I’d have to say he’s happy, the way he goes around grinning like a fool day and night. He and Shelly dote on that baby.” They all did, Ben thought, but he wasn’t going to mention the fact that he couldn’t keep his hands off his infant niece.

“She’s a pretty baby. It’s still hard to see Zack McKinnon settling down to family life.”

“Shelly knows when to yank his reins.” Unable to resist, Ben grinned at her. “You’re not still carrying a torch for my baby brother, are you, Will?”

Amused, she shifted and smiled sweetly. There had been a brief time when they were teenagers that she and Zack had made calf’s eyes at each other. “Every time I think of him, my heart goes pitty-pat. Once a woman’s been kissed by Zack McKinnon, she’s spoiled for anyone else.”

“Honey . . .” He reached over, flipped her braid behind her back. “That’s because I’ve never kissed you.”

“I’d sooner kiss a two-tailed skunk.”

Laughing, he shifted his horse just enough so that his knee bumped Willa’s. “Zack’d be the first to tell you, I taught him everything he knows.”

“Maybe so, but I think I can live without either one of the McKinnon boys.” She jerked a shoulder, then turned her head slightly. “Smoke.” There was relief in that, in the sign of people and the near end of her solitary ride with Ben. “The crew’s probably in the cabin. It’s dinnertime.”

With another woman, any other woman, Ben thought, he could have reached over, pulled her close, and kissed her breathless. Just on principle. Since it was Willa, he eased back in the saddle and kept his hands to himself.

“I could eat. I’m going to want to round up the herd, get them down. More snow’s coming.”

She only grunted. She could smell it. But there was something else in the air. At first she wondered if it was the sensory echo from the bear and the blood on her hands, but it lingered, seemed to grow stronger.

“Something’s dead,” she murmured.

“What?”

“Something’s dead.” She straightened in the saddle, scanned the ridges and trees. It was dead quiet, dead still. “Can’t you smell it?”

“No.” But he didn’t doubt she could, and he turned his horse as she did. Already on the scent, Charlie was moving ahead. “It’s the Indian in you. One of the hands probably shot dinner.”

It made sense. They would have brought provisions, and the cabin was always stocked, but fresh game was hard to resist. Still, that didn’t explain the dread in her stomach or the chill along her spine.

There was the scream of an eagle overhead, the wild, soul-stirring echo of it, then the utter silence of the mountains. The sun glittered off the snow, blinding. Following instinct, Willa left the rough path and walked her horse over broken, uneven ground.

“We don’t have a lot of time for detours,” Ben reminded her.

“Then go on.”

He swore, reaching around to check that his rifle was within easy reach. There were bear here, too. And cougar. He thought of camp, hardly more than ten minutes away, and the hot coffee that would be boiling to mud on the stove.

Then he saw it. His nose might not have been as sharp as hers, but his eyes were. Blood was splattered and pooled over the snow, splashed against rock. The black hide of the steer was coated with it. The dog stopped circling the mangled steer and raced back to the horses.

“Well, shit.” Ben was already dismounting. “Made a mess of it.”

“Wolves?” It was more than the market price to Willa. It was the waste, the cruelty.

He started to agree, then stopped short. A wolf didn’t kill, then leave the meat. A wolf didn’t hack and slice. No predator but one did.

“A man.”

Willa drew a sharp breath as she stepped closer, saw the damage. The throat had been slit, the belly disemboweled. Charlie pressed against her legs, shivering. “It’s been butchered. Mutilated.”

She crouched, and thought of the bear. No choice there but to kill, and the field dressing had been done efficiently with the tools at hand. But this—this was wild and vicious and without purpose.

“Almost within sight of the cabin,” she said. “The blood’s frozen. It was probably done hours ago, before sunup.”

“It’s one of yours,” Ben told her after checking the brand.

“Doesn’t matter whose.” But she noted the number on the yellow ear tag. The death would have to be recorded. She rose and stared over at the stream of smoke rising. “It matters why. Have you lost any cattle this way?”

“No.” He straightened to stand beside her. “Have you?”

“Not until now. I can’t believe it’s one of my men.” She took a shallow breath. “Or yours. There must be someone else camping up here.”

“Maybe.” He was frowning down at the ground. They stood shoulder to shoulder now, linked by the waste at their feet. She didn’t jerk away when he ran a hand down her braid, or when he laid that hand companionably on her arm. “We had more snow, a lot of wind. The ground’s pretty trampled up, but it looks like some tracks heading north. I’ll take some men and check it out.”

“It’s my cow.”

He shifted his eyes to hers. “It doesn’t matter whose,” he repeated. “We have to get both herds rounded up and down the mountain, and we have to report this. I figure I can count on you for that.”

She opened her mouth, closed it again. He was right. She was next to useless at tracking, but she could organize a drive. With a nod, she turned back to her horse. “I’ll talk to my men.”

“Will.” Now he laid a hand over hers, leather against leather, before she could mount. “Watch yourself.”

She vaulted into the saddle. “They’re my men,” she said simply, and rode toward the rising smoke.

SHE FOUND HER MEN ABOUT TO HAVE THEIR MIDDAY MEAL when she came into the cabin. Pickles was at the little stove, sturdy legs spread, ample belly spilling over the wide buckle of his belt. He was barely forty and balding fast, compensating for it with a ginger-colored moustache that grew longer every year. He’d earned his name from his obsessive love of dill pickles, and his personality was just as sour.

When he saw Willa, he grunted in greeting, sniffed, and turned back to the ham he was frying.

Jim Brewster sat with his booted feet on the table, enjoying the last of a Marlboro. He was just into his thirties with a face pretty enough for framing. Two dimples winked in his cheeks, and dark hair waved to his collar. He beamed at Willa and sent her a cocky wink that made his blue eyes twinkle.

“Got us company for dinner, Pickles.”

Pickles gave another sour grunt, belched, and flipped his

ham. "Barely enough meat for two as it is. Get your lazy ass up and open some beans."

"Snow's coming." Willa tossed her coat over a hook and headed for the radio.

"'Nother week easy."

She turned her head, met Pickles's sulky brown eyes. "I don't think so. We'll start rounding up today." She waited, holding his gaze. He hated taking his orders from a female, and they both knew it.

"Your cattle," he muttered, and turned the ham out onto a platter.

"Yes, they are. And one of them's been butchered a quarter mile east of here."

"Butchered?" Jim paused in the act of handing Pickles an open can of beans. "Cougar?"

"Not unless cats are carrying knives these days. Someone opened one up, hacked it to pieces, and left it."

"Bullshit." Eyes narrowed, Pickles took a step forward. "That's just shit, Will. We've lost a couple to cougar. Jim and me tracked a cat just yesterday. She musta circled around and got another cow, that's all."

"I know the difference between claws and a knife." She inclined her head. "Go look for yourself. Dead east, about a quarter mile."

"Damned if I won't." Pickles stomped over for his coat, muttering about women.

"Sure it couldn't have been a cat?" Jim asked the minute the door slammed.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Get me some coffee, would you, Jim? I'm going to radio the ranch. I want Ham to know we're heading down."

"McKinnon's men are up here, but—"

"No." She shook her head, pulled out a chair. "No cowboy I know does that."

She contacted the ranch, listening to static, waiting for it to clear. The coffee and the crackling fire chased the worst of the chill away as she made arrangements for the drive. She was on her second cup when she finished passing the information along to the McKinnon ranch.

Pickles slammed back in. "Son of a bitching bastard."

Accepting this as the only apology she'd get, Willa moved to the stove and filled her plate. "I rode up with Ben McKinnon. He's following some tracks. We're going to help get his herd down with our own. Has either of you seen anyone around here? Campers, hunters, eastern assholes?"

"Came across a campsite yesterday when we were tracking the cat." Jim sat again with his plate. "But it was cold. Two or three days cold."

"Left goddamn beer cans." Pickles ate standing up. "Like it was their own backyard. Oughta be shot for it."

"Sure that cow wasn't shot?" Jim looked to Pickles for confirmation, a fact that Willa struggled not to resent. "You know how some of those city boys are—shoot at anything that moves."

"Wasn't shot. Ain't no tourist done that." Pickles shoved beans into his mouth. "Fucking teenagers what it is. Fucking crazy teenagers all doped up."

"Maybe. If it was, Ben'll find them easy enough." But she didn't think it had been teenagers. It seemed to Willa it took a lot more years to work up that kind of rage.

Jim pushed the barely warm beans around on his plate. "Ah, we heard about how things are." He cleared his throat. "We radioed in last night, and Ham, he figured he should, you know, tell us how things are."

She pushed her plate away and stood. "Then I'll tell you just how things are." Her voice was very cool, very quiet. "Mercy Ranch runs the way it always has. The old man's in the ground, and now I'm operator. You take your orders from me."

Jim exchanged a quick look with Pickles, then scratched his cheek. "I didn't mean to say different, Will. We were just sorta wondering how you were going to keep the others, your sisters, on the ranch."

"They'll take their orders from me too." She jerked her coat off the hook. "Now, if you've finished your meal, let's get saddled up."

"Goddamn women," Pickles muttered as soon as the

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door was safely closed behind her. “Don’t know one that isn’t a bossy bitch.”

“That’s ’cause you don’t know enough women.” Jim strolled over for his coat. “And that one *is* the boss.”

“For the time being.”

“She’s the boss today.” Jim shrugged into his coat, pulled out his gloves. “And today’s what we’ve got.”