

Luke's Place

By

William Bruce Bacon

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CHAPTER ONE

Luke rubbed his hand down the gray-and-black horse's neck, then patted him. A small puff of dust drifted up from this affection.

"You're as dirty as I feel Jake. You should take better care of yourself, you old knot head."

Jake looked back at his rider, shook his head and perked up his ears. Without being told, he started walking toward the small town ahead.

"Getting anxious, Jake? So am I. Let's go to town and we'll laze around for a day or so to rest up. It's been a long dusty ride."

Jake snorted like it was about time. A smile creased the cowhand's craggy features. His brown eyes scanned the town ahead. He was a shade over six foot tall, in his well worn boots. But then you didn't often see him without them. He was about the last of the wandering ranch hands. A breed of man that was no longer needed. He squared his shoulders and

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settled back into the saddle. How many towns like this had he been in? A main street, two bars, three stores, some houses on each end. When he first started cowboying, he usually headed for the bars and ladies. That was then; this was now. What Luke didn't know, this town would be different and the events that were about to happen would change his life in ways he never thought of.

Luke wasn't the ordinary ranch hand. He saved his money, played a good game of cards and knew his kind wouldn't be needed much longer, so he had prepared for that time. That time was now and he was making his move.

He had saved enough money to stock the ranch he had bought from the winnings of a big poker game in Abilene, Texas.

That was some game. Luke couldn't do anything wrong. He was about half drunk and played like there was no tomorrow. When the game ended he had a sack full of money and a terrible hangover. He

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remembered to go to Wells Fargo and change the money for a demand Check. That was the last he remembered until he woke up in the hotel. Luke smiled, remembering finding his foreman and having to borrow breakfast money. The foreman just shook his head and didn't say anything until they got back to the ranch, the handing the young cowpoke his check.

"I wondered if you remembered what you did with your money."

That would be the last time Luke drank like that.

Luke smiled at his thoughts as he stopped in front of the stable. "Anybody here?"

A boy stepped out. "Tom ain't here so I'll do for you.

"Okay, son. Jake needs the works-washing, curry, rub down and grain fed. Here's a dollar, another if Jake looks happy after you're done."

"He'll smile so all you'll see is teeth and gums."

Luke nodded as he stepped down, pulled the Winchester from the scabbard and hung his saddle

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bags over his shoulder. He mumbled to himself as he headed towards the barber shop across the street. "Jake ain't the only one that needs to get in the water."

The barber had a Chinaman get the tub ready as Luke undressed. The last thing he removed was the money belt; he folded it under his clean clothes. He eased himself into the water, savoring its soothing heat. He picked up the soap and washcloth and lathered vigorously from head to toe. The Chinaman poured clean water over him. Luke sat back, closed his eyes and relaxed. Almost asleep, he heard something rustle. he opened his eyes and pulled his pistol from its worn holster. "One more step and you'll limp the rest of your life. Woman or not, it don't make any difference."

She smiled over her shoulder, "You really wouldn't shoot a woman, would you?"

Luke stood up; disregarding his nakedness, took the money belt out of her hand. "That's as close to dying as you'll ever get and still breathe. That's my

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future and neither you nor any man will take it away from me. Now strip!"

"You're not..."

Luke unfastened her dress and let it fall to the floor.

"You do the rest or I will, now!"

Quickly she removed the rest of her clothes until she stood in her shoes and hose.

"Now get out!"

"Like this?" She held her hands in front of her wellrounded body.

"Yep." Luke couldn't help admiring the woman in front of him.

"You're serious." She straightened with hands on her hips, boldly displaying her charms to their best advantage.

"Yep." Luke could feel the heat in his loins building.

"Well, damn!" She marched out and slammed the door behind her.

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"Luke, sometimes you ain't too smart and the rest of the time you're just plain dumb! Did you really look at her?"

He shook his head, dressed, got his hair cut and got a shave.

He went next door, got a room and went down to the dining room and sat down. The waitress, pleasant looking, smiled and nodded. "What'll it be, cowboy?"

"I want the biggest, tender steak you got with 'tators and vegetable, coffee now and keep the cup full."

She laughed, shaking her head. "We don't often get a cowhand fresh off the range."

"You got one now, and he's ready to eat!"

It wasn't long before she brought the steak. It filled one platter, potatoes and corn filled a separate plate.

Luke cut the meat—rare and just right. He looked at the waitress. "I reckon this is a close to heaven as this cowboy is ever going to get. Thank the cook for me."

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"You just did."

He nudged her ample hip. "I just might have to take you with me."

After he finished the apple pie and his coffee, he leaned back. "Thank you ma'am."

"You keep that up and you just may have company when you ride out of town."

Luke laughed as he walked into the bar, ordered a drink and looked around.

"Little early for any card action?"

"Yeah. In about another hour."

"Okay. Guess I'll walk some of that supper off."

Luke went to look in on Jake. His coat gleamed as he munched contentedly on the oats in front of him.

"Is that you Jake?"

The horse nodded his head as Luke patted his neck.

"Ain't often you see that 'tween a horse and man; not anymore, anyway." The old man commented as he watched the affection between the man and his horse.

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Luke continued patting Jake. "The boy did a bang up job; I owe him something."

"I'll see he gets it. He helps his mother across the street. She's the cook."

Luke handed the old man two dollars for the boy and three for the stable.

The old man nodded toward Jake. "I checked his shoes. they're tight but worn. He's come away."

"We still got aways to go, but we're in no hurry."

Luke walked back to the saloon and watched a game, then set in when a chair came open. He stayed about even as the players came and went. His winnings started to mount as the evening merged into night. The game narrowed to Luke and two other men. Luke started watching the cards, then spotted a signal from the older to the younger player. Now it was his turn to lose. He carefully felt the cards-shaved. He played along when the sucker hand came up.

The waitress came around for drinks. It was the same one that tried to rob him! She shook her head.

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Luke pushed half his money out and lost. The next hand she nodded. He played it all and won.

"That's about all my luck can stand. I'm done."

"You're not going to let us try to get even?"

"Not with a shaved deck."

"I don't like your remarks, cowboy. maybe I'll just take my share."

"Not with my peacemaker aimed at your gut. Now push back nice and slow, get up and walk out or you're going to be lead sick!"

Luke steadied his gun on the table until the men were gone. Then he scooped the money into his hat, looked at the bartender who was busy polishing a glass, ignoring what had just gone on. Luke went up to his room. He put the hat on the bed and moved to light the lamp.

"Don't do that! They're across the street with rifles waiting on you." It was the voice of the barmaid.

"I reckon I best go to the sheriff. They need to be taught a lesson."

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She laughed. "Those two are relatives of the sheriff."

"How come you're helping me after this afternoon and losing your clothes?"

"I liked how you handled yourself. You're not just another drifter-and you take good care of your horse. I've been wanting to get out of here and out of the saloon. I ain't getting any younger."

"What makes you think I'll take you with me? I could just ride out and leave you high and dry."

"You try, I'll scream and yell before you hit the door. Besides some of your winnings should belong to me. I did give you the nod."

"You sure do make it attractive to have a traveling companion. Get some traveling clothes. You can't ride in what you're wearing."

"You can't see me, can you?"

"No. Why?"

She took his hand and ran it down her body.

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Luke could feel the blouse, split skirt and the body they covered. "You sure are ready to ride. Are you setting me up?"

Her voice turned hard. "That's a chance you have to take. Now let's get out of here. I can get us to the stable without being seen."

She led the way, sticking to the shadows. They went in the back door of the stable. Luke found the attendant and gently shook him awake.

He looked at Luke then saw Ellie. "You'll be wanting another horse. I sure am goin' to miss you Ellie, but you'll do no better than this fella."

Luke paid him forty dollars for Ellie's horse and tack.

Ellie kissed the old man on the forehead. "We left heading North."

They walked their horses to the end of the block, mounted and headed East. Luke was leery at first, but finally admitted to himself this lady was telling the

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truth. Now to put some distance between them and the two gamblers. This was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER TWO

The road was easy to follow in the moonlight. They held the horses to a leisurely pace.

"I heard the old man call you Ellie. What is your name? Mine is Thomas Luke Evermore."

"Samantha Elizabeth Wells."

"I'll be calling you Sam. Those boys will be looking for Ellie and Tom; that's what I used at the hotel."

"You sure are careful. You act like more than just a wandering cowboy."

"I have spent a long time filling this money belt. It will set me up for the rest of my life. All I want to do is get to where I'm going without any trouble. Since Jake and me hit that town back there, trouble has sure bunched up on us. I think the best thing to do is get as far away from it as possible."

They rode on in silence until the Eastern sky started to lighten. Luke turned left in a creek that crossed the

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road. Ellie followed making sure she stayed in the deepest water to cover their tracks. About a half mile Luke found a clearing, walked out of the creek, dismounted and pulled the saddle off Jake.

"It's time to rest. Step down and we'll have a hot meal, then douse the fire."

"You think that's safe? We don't know how far behind those two guys are."

"I didn't see anyone behind us from the last rise," he turned to her, "Can you cook?"

"I'll be damned! I didn't spend all my time fetching drinks or on my back. I'll pull my share of the load, Mister!"

"Whoa, Sam. I wasn't trying to cut or rile you. I don't know anymore than what I saw in the barbershop, and that sure didn't look like any cook I ever had on any trail drive."

"Well, you just get what you got and I'll see the both of us have a full stomach."

Luke unpacked some coffee, dried beans and jerky.

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Sam smiled. "You sure are putting us on thin rations. But then you didn't have a lot of time to pack."

Sam built a small, smokeless fire and put together what was left of their food. She silently dished up their plates and handed Luke his. Luke cleaned his plate then leaned back, contented. "You kept your word. I'm full."

"We're going to have to stock up at the next town. That's about as far as what you got is going to stretch."

"Well, first thing's first." Luke took the coffee pot and wet the fire down until it was cold, then he hobbled the horses where there was plenty of grass. He laid out his blanket, then looked at Sam.

"Well, hell. You seen more of me than most men." She quickly slipped out of her blouse, skirt and boots and curled to his back.

Luke could feel her warmth through his clothes. I'm supposed to go to sleep like this? That was the last

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thing that went through his mind. They both snored softly as the sun filtered through the trees.

* * *

The sun was well in the West when Luke woke. His face was buried in Sam's hair and their bodies were pressed together. He felt himself getting hard as Sam moved and pushed against him. This isn't working out the way I planned!

She raised her head and softly put her lips on his. Any resistance Luke might have had vanished. They both quickly undressed. There was very little foreplay, just need and desire that overwhelmed them.

Afterwards they lay quietly.

Luke broke the silence. "You're a lot of woman, why hasn't somebody got you out of that saloon before now?"

Sam rolled on her side so she could look into Luke's face. "I didn't want just somebody. I've had

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enough hard times and wasn't about to fall into any more."

"What makes you think I'm any different? I'm just a cowboy that knows there won't be much use for my kind in the not too distant future."

"Well, I know you have some money and you have a plan and I would guess it's in Texas someplace. You're probably going to buy a ranch and run some beef. Probably to make enough to live on the rest of your days."

"You peg a person pretty good, lady. The ranch is paid for and money belt will start my herd and carry me through the first year."

She put her shirt on, then turned toward him.

"I want to go with you. I know you don't know much about me other than I'm a poor theif-a saloon girl on the long side of girl and about middle of woman. I'll tell you this up front. I'm a one man woman, I can cook and clean, and you already know what I can do on a blanket."

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"Well, I'm not a choir boy and never have been. Let's just go along and see how things work out. I don't make snap decisions, but that isn't the worst offer I ever had." Luke smiled, "In fact, I don't remember a better one."

They dressed, got the horses and started down to the creek. About twenty yards Luke held up his hand. They could hear talking ahead, and strained to hear.

"They went either up or down the creek. That mare Ellie's riding leaves a nice print and it didn't go past here."

"Well, there's a meadow downstream about a mile. That would be what the cowpoke would be lookin' for. Someplace to bed the horses down-and Ellie, too."

"If we find them I shore am going to take a share of her!"

"Oh, hell. Quit thinking with your crotch and start using your brain. We know he's wearing a money belt. If he's dead, he can't shoot us and if she's dead nobody can identify us."

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"That may be, but there's no hurt in enjoying her before she's dead."

"Come on, let's get down to that meadow and ambush them before they wake up."

Sam and Luke heard the two men turn their mounts and walk down the creek and finally out of earshot.

Luke turned to Sam. "Nice town you come from."

"Wasn't that bad until that sheriff got elected."

"If he ain't all that good, how'd he get elected?"

"He's the only one that run."

"People don't think too clear sometimes when things are quiet. They sure yell when it pinches them personal, though. We better move on, so we have time to get supplies then get out of town before our friends figure out where we are and not where we aren't."

Sam and Luke moved right along into town just as the store was closing. The cash in Luke's hand decided the owner's mind to stay open a little longer. Sam got a pack horse while Luke bought supplies. They loaded the pack horse and headed out of town the way they

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came in, then circled around until they were heading East on a game trail. Sam didn't question what he was doing. He'd kept them out of trouble so far; that was good enough for her.

They came on a spring long after dark.

"This should be far enough out so those two boys are on their way back to food and bed. Step down and hunt up some firewood for the morning. We'll have some canned goods tonight."

"You sure were serious about making time. I thought I was part of that saddle!" Sam was rubbing her backside as she looked around for firewood. She brought in a load and dumped it near some rocks where there had been fires before.

Luke had made their bed from two blankets he had bought and his poncho was over that. Sam looked at the bed then at him. Her eyes glistened in the full moon. "It's a wonder you're still loose footed. You sure know how to treat a woman." She turned her back to undress then got under the covers.

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Luke smiled as he slid in beside her. "You're easy to get used to, Sam. I haven't found that very often." He leaned over and kissed her forehead. The next thing she heard was his gentle snoring.

She smiled and tried to look at the stars, but her eyes were misty. So this is what it's like to be in love. I thought it would be nice, but I didn't think a hurt could feel good!

* * *

Luke woke to the smell of coffee. He stretched and smiled to himself. Yeah, I could get used to this real easy. He got up, put on his pants and went to the pond to wash. Sam was there already washing her hair. The morning sun sparkled in the water drops on her skin and her brown hair glistened with golden highlights as she threw her head back to get the hair out of her eyes. She turned and walked out of the water. Luke watched her curly brown hair as she toweled the water off,

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leaving her white skin agleam in the sun. Her full breasts swayed gently, and her stomach just slightly rounded.

"You sure take a man's thoughts off his first cup of coffee."

"Is there something else I can offer you?"

"Lord girl, if you don't know, then I'm in the wrong camp!"

She quickly put on her pants and shirt and walked barefoot back to the camp. Luke shook his head, then waded in to wash. When he got back to the fire she had the eggs, bacon, and potatoes just about finished. She dished up his plate and passed it to him; her shirt fell open and he could see all the way to her belt.

She stood up. "I didn't have much time to pick and choose my clothes when we left. What you see is what I got."

"I can see what you got. Just don't bend over if we have company. We got to repack after breakfast anyway." he muttered half to himself.

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After Luke finished he took the coffee pot to the pond and filled it with water to wash the dishes. Sam finished and rolled up the bed, then Luke opened the rest of the pack and took out some folded clothes and handed them to her.

"I wasn't too sure on sizes, so you'll have to do the best you can." He looked like he was about to blush.

She looked at each piece, then stripped bare and tried on the chemise, then the step-ins. Next she put on the split riding skirt and matching blouse.

She looked at Luke, "You're the first man to ever put clothes on me. Usually they're trying to get me out of them."

"Well, lady, you was just about out of them when you served me breakfast. I had to do something or we might never get to that ranch of mine!"

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek then his mouth. He grabbed her around the waist and returned as good as he got. He looked over her

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head, something flashed on the trail they had ridden last night.

"This could turn into a heap of fun, but I think we're about to have company. You put out the fire and collect the dishes. Then fill all the canteens. I've had about enough of being chased. I think it's about time to turn things around."

Sam had the canteens ready by the time Luke had the horses ready to go.

"Now listen close. My ranch is just outside of Middleton. My neighbor is Jack Owens, I bought my spread from him. If anything happens, take the money belt and Jack will help you get started in whatever you want to do. Be sure you show him the money belt. He gave it to me, so he'll know where it come from. Now get in the saddle and stay close, because I aim to be on that ranch with you!"

As they set out on a brisk trot, Luke looked back to make sure he knew where the two men were. About mid-afternoon, he pulled up.

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"This is where we find out what those two are made of. If they know this country at all, they know there's a box canyon up ahead. We're going to camp in there."

Sam frowned. "I don't get it."

"You will. Let's go."

Luke led the way into the canyon. He stopped at the wall that blocked their exit. He dismounted and set up camp. The horses were hobbled in a good stand of grass. He took their clothes and made dummies in the bedroll. "Can you use a pistol?"

"Fair."

"Okay. Take mine. I'll use the rifle."

Luke led her along the edge of the trail they had just traveled. He found some rocks that overlooked the campsite.

"Get comfortable. This is where we wait."

Sam looked both ways. She could see about a quarter mile toward the entrance and the campsite. Nobody would get by them.

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Time passed and the sun slowly marched across the sky. Sam's head gradually leaned against the rock and her breathing slowed. Luke smiled; this was one tough lady. he was pretty sure he could be happy with her. He snapped to attention when he heard the horses. He put his hand over Sam's mouth and gently shook her. Her eyes popped open and she nodded her head.

Two men rode into view. Sam and Luke could see that the men were talking to each other, but couldn't hear them. Finally their voices carried to them by the wind.

"but why in here..."

"he don't...area...well"

"She might..."

"Hell, she don't know anything but pushing drinks and maybe in bed."

"Well, I don't like it. We're out of water and grub and it's not getting any warmer at night. I say we should go back. We can always get more money."

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"You ass. We're going to have all of their stuff shortly."

"That's what you said this morning."

"If you hadn't lost their trail..."

"Well, Mr. Smart Ass, at least I found it again. You couldn't trail a three-legged mule dropping double eagles!"

"Maybe you want to back that up with something besides your mouth?"

"Oh, hell. I could outdraw you with a broken arm. Now keep quiet we're almost there."

The two dismounted and tied their horses to the scrub oaks, and pulled their pistols. Slowly they crept through the bushes until they were in place to make their move.

"Okay. Out of blankets and on your feet with empty hands!"

The two men looked at each other, then it dawned on them. They looked back at their horses; or where their horses should have been.

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"What the..."

Luke called out from behind the rocks. "You two aren't any better at bush whacking than playing cards.

Drop the hardware and put your hands where I can see them."

The men looked at each other when they whirled and fired at Luke's voice. That was the last thing they would ever do on this Earth. Luke jacked the rifle lever three times. It sounded like one roar! The two would-be killers fell in their tracks. Waiting until he was sure they wouldn't move again, Luke called to Sam.

"Come on in now. They won't hurt anyone again."

Sam lead the horses to their camp and tied them with their own; careful not to look at the two bodies lying in the bushes.

"What are you going to do with them?"

"Bury them. We'll take the horses with us. You don't think they're stolen, do you?"

"No. They're the ones they had in town."

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Luke dug two shallow graves, buried the bodies then set their saddles on the graves. He removed his hat, wiped the sweat off his face and bowed his head.

"I don't know anything about these two. There must have been some good in them. They made a big mistake, and now You have to decide what to do with them. Amen."

"We going to stay here tonight?"

"No. We'll stop at the next town and stay in a hotel. We don't need worry about those two any more."

"Luke, could we camp out instead? The quiet and stars are nice this time of year."

"Sure we can. I just thought..."

"I appreciate what you thought, but I've spent most of my life stuck in a building of one kind or another. This is what I've always wanted. I hope you don't mind. I know you've had your fill of outdoors, but I haven't."

Luke nodded. They broke camp and headed East.

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CHAPTER THREE

That night they dry camped, and got an early start the next morning. A bond was growing between them. Luke didn't seem to notice, but when they talked he would use we more and more in his future plans. Sam smiled, but didn't say anything.

Luke didn't seem to be in any rush. They walked the horses from morning to the noon meal, rested a couple of hours, then back on the trail until evening. The horses were always rested as were the riders.

Sam asked about his not being in a hurry.

"I've had to dance to somebody else's tune all my life. I'm finally in a position to call my own tune. I know there will be times when I'll have to be in a hurry, but this isn't one of them. We'll just take our time and let the animals set the pace. I guarantee ol' Jake won't overwork himself, but we'll be a ways down the trail come evening."

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"You set a lot of store in that horse. How'd you come by him?"

"Well, he was one of a string I used working up in Colorado. We was shaking some ol' mossy horns out of some thickets when one cantankerous ol' cuss come busting down a game trail. Ol' Jake lit out of there Hell bent for Sunday, with my hanging around his neck like a collar. He stayed ahead of that ol'bull what seemed like all day, and me just hanging on. Finally we got clear and I figured if he was smart enough and fast enough to get us both out of there, then I wasn't about to let him go. We've been together ever since."

"How you going to sell the stock if you get that close to them?"

"Well, cattle is one thing, and horses is another. A good horse can keep your bacon out of the fire, but a cow ain't got the brains God gave a goose. So that's the difference."

Sam rode in silence, then asked, "How many head you planning to start with?"

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"Well, I reckon a hundred will be about all I can handle. With about four or five good breeder bulls. The second year we should be driving about seventy-five to a hundred to the rail head. If we can average that many a year, then we'll be okay."

"And if a bad year comes?"

"That's what our money belt'll be for. I hope to keep back enough to carry us through one of those years. I've been stuck to a saddle most of my life. I don't complain. That was my choosing. But the time has come for these ol' bones to take a rest; and I'm not going to do it on an empty belly. I've been hungry and it didn't set too well; so that's not going to happen again."

They rode along; each in their own thoughts.

Sam broke the silence. "How do you feel about kids?"

"I never thought much about them. I guess they're okay if you have them."

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"Well, I'm not over the hill yet. If we start playing house serious I want to know what to do. I learned how to be careful."

"Well, as fast as things are happening, we might ought to be careful for a spell. You aren't that way already are you?"

Sam laughed. "No. Not yet. I'll take care. I'm not about to hang that rope around you just now. I was just wondering. I think it's time to tell you about me. When I left home the only tears shed were mine. My pa decided to marry me to a farmer who had four youngens to raise, and needed an extra hand in the field. His wife died in those fields. She was just over thirty. He worked her to death. I tried to tell pa, but he wouldn't listen so I ran away. I was fourteen.

I worked in boarding houses, hotels, saloons, washing dishes, making beds, or whatever. I found out pushing drinks paid better and I was able to be choosy about my friends. I almost married a gambler once,

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until he wanted me to bed down with his friend. I've been standoffish ever since."

Luke leaned back in his saddle. "We haven't had the best of the shuffle, but then it hasn't been all that bad either. If we just go slow and don't crowd our luck we just might be able to finish up in good shape."

They rode into a town. Luke didn't see anything different from any of the others he had been through. They started to pass on the sheriff, but he stepped out of his office with a shotgun cradled in his arms.

Luke nodded.

"Hold up just a minute." It was a command more than a request.

"What you need, sheriff?"

"I got a wire, to be on the lookout for a man and a woman. You two fit that description."

"Well, yes, I'm a man, and she is definitely a woman. What'd they do?"

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"Well, that's the thing. I don't now. But the wire said hold them for the deputies that were chasing them."

"I reckon they wouldn't be coming through towns if they was being chased. We're on the way back to the ranch with them horses I bought up north."

"What are your names?"

"Luke and Samantha Evermore."

"That don't fit. their names are Tom and Elizabeth, and they aren't married."

"Well, I guess we're not the ones you're looking for."

"Well, I'm not all that sure you're right either."

Sam looked at the sheriff. "So now what we supposed to do? I sure don't like being taken for an outlaw."

"Now, don't get your back up. I not accusing anybody of anything."

"Sheriff, what did these people do, and where did they do it?"

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"The telegraph came from Dumont. It just said to hold them or you."

Sam looked at Luke, "Isn't that where we met the sheriff—oh, what's his name?—Travers, wasn't it?"

"I think so."

The sheriff looked at both of them. "He didn't have a gray streak on the left side, did he?"

Luke frowned. "I truthfully don't recall. I didn't like the way he looked at Sam, so we camped on down the road."

"That's him. He always had an eye for the women." with that, he tore up the telegram. " I wouldn't pee on him if his shirt tail was on fire. Beg you pardon, ma'am."

"Then it's okay to stay for the night?"

"Only if you'll let me take supper with you. It gets lonesome eating by yourself."

"We all have surely been there a time or two ourselves. See you at supper."

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Luke and Sam dropped the horses at the stable and got a room. Luke ordered a tub and plenty of water for both.

Sam leaned back as luke washed her down with perfumed soap. "So this is how a honest woman gets her bath."

Luke grunted, "Don't bet heavy money on that. My turn is next."

They finished, dressed and found the sheriff waiting for them in the dining room.

Sam wore a skirt and blouse. Luke had missed her size in the blouse, leaving no doubt that Sam was a nickname. The sheriff stared as did most of the men there. Luke was a little uneasy and decided she would get one that fit before they left the next morning.

The trio finished the meal and the men were sipping their coffee when the sheriff told them he had done some checking. Luke looked at Sam, then at the sheriff.

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"First of all, relax. I contacted the cook in Dumont. I knew her and her husband years ago. She told me about the card game and the two men that followed you. Now what happened?"

"They followed us until I got tired of it. So I set a trap and got the drop on them. They wouldn't listen to reason. I buried them in a box canyon and those are their horses. They wouldn't need them anymore."

"I also checked with Doc Hollen. Shorty Holden is riding for him full time now."

"Didn't think Shorty would ever settle on one spread."

"They said give you their best. Ellie, I like that better than Sam. You picked about the best from what I found out. Luke or Tom, she had nothing to hang her head about. I cancelled the wanted bulletin. Said they were found dead. It's easier that way."

The sheriff stood and stretched. "Enjoyed your company. Have a good life."

Luke's Place

Luke looked hard at him. "You wouldn't know a hired gun from about ten years back, up in Idaho called the Flat Plains Kid?"

The sheriff smiled. "He died a long time ago."

"I thought he might have. It's been a pleasure."

Sam waited until the sheriff walked outside.

"Okay, who was the Flat Plains Kid?"

"Well, that's another story we'll get around to some day. Like the man said. He died a while back. Now let's go to the store and get you a blouse that fits."

"I kind'a like this one." She pulled her shoulders back and smiled at Luke.

"You do that again and them buttons aren't going to hold. Now let's get to the store before these gentlemen start poking their eyes out with their forks!"

The next morning they were on the trail by daylight. A big burden had been lifted from their shoulder.

William Bruce Bacon

CHAPTER FOUR

Ellie and Luke enjoyed the rest of the ride to the ranch. Ellie asked only once about the Flat Plain Kid. Luke repeated that was another story, then changed the subject. Ellie made a mental note to find out more later.

Mid-afternoon Luke stopped and pointed off to the left. Ellie could make out a faint trail toward some buildings.

"There it is, our ranch." he turned Jake onto the path and they made their way through the tall grass. As far as she could see was waving grass.

"How big is this ranch? It looks like you could run a thousand head instead of a hundred."

"The weather's been good lately. Come a dry spell and this could all be brown. I aim to have enough to take care of the herd regardless."

About fifty feet from the house they waded through a small stream, with a stand of cottonwoods, following

Luke's Place

its course across the land. They stopped at the house, or what might have been a house at one time. The porch roof sagged and was supported by two logs propped under each end. The porch had boards missing. The door looked like it might be supporting the front wall. The windows still had their glass.

Luke looked at Ellie. "I guess it needs some work."

"We might better use what's good and build another one. But, I don't think we better try to go inside."

They walked the horses around back to the barn. It looked better. The roof seemed good and walls square. Luke unlocked the door. There was a pile covered with canvas. He raised the cover so Ellie could see the furniture. He dropped it. "The barn was in better shape than the house so I stored the furniture in here."

"Well, we could set up housekeeping in the barn.. I don't think Jake would take to it."

"We got about three or four months of good weather. We can put up a tent by the stream until the house is rebuilt."

William Bruce Bacon

"What had you planned on doing when you got here?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I didn't think too much about it. I kind of live wherever, so I just cover up when it rains."

"Let's go with the tent in the cottonwoods. I don't want Jake to be put out." Ellie put her arm around Luke's waist. "I'll help, and we'll put up a house. We don't need much, long as it keeps the rain out."

Luke found a canvas folded up in the back of the barn. They put up a frame and stretched the canvas over that. After supper they sat by the fire drinking coffee. Luke stretched his legs out. "For better or worse this is the ranch."

"What are you going to call it?"

"Oh, how about the L&E?"

"I guess that means I'll be staying."

"Now darn it! You know damn well you're going to stay. We just haven't made it legal, that's all."

Luke's Place

"How was I to know? You didn't say one way or the other."

"Well, Hell. I figured you knew."

"Well, Hell, youself. I can't read your mind."

"Don't cuss. It ain't ladylike."

"Luke, in case you forgot, you didn't meet me in a church."

"Where I met you don't make no—never mind. As my wife, you're a lady and that's the straight of it."

"You asking or telling?"

"Both! I'm asking you to be my wife, and telling you you're a lady."

"In that case, yes I will, and I'll try."

"How in tarnation did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Oh, never mind. I was going to ask you anyway."

"Luke, I don't want you to ever think I tricked you into asking. If you want to change your mind, just say so."

William Bruce Bacon

"You're something else. I don't think I ever met more woman than you. You're more than that. You're my friend. That's what is going to make us happy."

"Well, now that we got that out of the way, let's go to bed."

The sun was barely up, when Ellie had coffee on and breakfast started. Luke went to the stream to wash and found the towel and soap waiting.

"What do we do today?"

"I been thinking, we should start on the house. It's nice now, but come winter we are going to need more than a tent."

"Okay. I'll finish dishes and we'll start tearing down."

"That's not woman's work."

"It's my house, too; so I can help."

"Best wear some old clothes."

Luke finished eating and went to the barn for the tools. They worked side by side. Slowly the house started looking like a skeleton. The pile of usable

Luke's Place

lumber grew. Days were long and hot and blended together. They ate supper late and fell into bed and asleep in the same motion. They decided the new house would have one main room with the bedroom behind the fireplace for warmth. The loft over the bedroom would serve as a guest room. The kitchen was off the other end with a large porch that could be used for cooking in the summer. There would be a large porch on the opposite sides so air could pass through in the summer. Luke said they would build a spring house over the creek to keep food cool.

Ellie was there everyday. They had the new frame up and floor laid. Luke said they would take a day off. They lay in bed until after sunrise. Then Luke made coffee. He had dammed the creek up and made a pool where they washed. They were laying on an old blanket, sun drying. Luke was on his side when Luke heard a cough.

"What the...?"

William Bruce Bacon

"Ah, Luke. It's me, Jack." He was standing by the tent looking away from the creek.

"Well, damn." was Ellie's comment as she hurriedly got dressed.

"Be right with you." Luke dressed and walked over to where Jack was standing.

"I'm sorry about busting in. I was just checking the place out when I saw your camp."

"That's all right. We was taking a holiday. I want you to meet Ellie, my future missus as soon as we get to town. Ellie, this is Jack Owens. He's our neighbor to the North."

"Proud to make your acquaintance, ma'am."

Ellie put her hand out. "Nice to meet you. I'll get some coffee."

Luke and Jack sat in the shade while Ellie got the coffee heating.

"It appears you been here a while. With all the building you've done."

Luke's Place

"Ellie's been helping so it's been coming right along. I'd been aiming to get by and tell you I'm here to stay and will need some cattle and good bulls."

"Well, I can sell off about fifty head and Dave Davis has some. Hear tell he's got some good bulls."

Ellie brought them coffee.

"I'm sure sorry I didn't make more noise, ma'am."

"Well, I guess you know more about us than most people. If you need anything, holler."

"I sure am sorry Luke. Martha is going to give me whatfor walking up like that."

"Well, we won't tell. You didn't know anyways."

"You need any help? It's pretty slack right now."

"Yeah, I need to fence around the house and buildings. About ten acres. Anybody fencing the range yet?"

"Some has and some hasn't. I haven't. Davis mentioned it. I don't rightly know. I guess we should but it makes it hard to get around. I heard tell they had

William Bruce Bacon

a Blue Northern up Montana way and the cattle bunched against a fence and froze on the spot."

"Well, I'm going to hold off for now, but you know it's coming sure as the sun comes up."

"Yeah, I know. It gitting harder and harder what with all the restrictions we got to contend with. Martha keeps telling me it's progress."

"I heard the South is gitting all up in arms against the North. They don't stand a chance. But a man's gotta do what he's gotta do. Me, I'm going to stay right here, start me a herd and live inside when it's cold. I got me the best woman a man can get. We'll be by on the way to town before long. I want Ellie to meet the women folk here."

"Well, they'll be happy to see a new face. I'll be going. I thank you for the coffee, and again, I'm sorry about slipping up on you. I'll sent two hands over to give you a hand. About two weeks, okay?"

Luke's Place

"That would be about right. I stopped the freight wagon and ordered fence and posts. It should be here this week."

Ellie stood by Luke. "Give your family our best and come visit."

"We surely will." Jack waved as he rode off.

Ellie waved after him. "Well, that's one way to meet your neighbor."

Luke squeezed her waist. "They know we don't spend all our time working."

* * *

Luke had gone to the neighbors to check on the bulls and hoped to be back before lunch. Ellie had started the whitewash the outside of the house. She looked toward the road and saw the freight wagon slowly making its way toward her. Must be the fence and poles. She got down from the ladder and shaded

William Bruce Bacon

her eyes watching the driver urge the team through the creek. She laid out plates for the two freight men.

"Luke Evermore Ranch?"

"Sure is. Would you put the fence by the barn?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She returned to the tent to finish lunch.

The driver unhitched the team to water them and told his helper to unload the wagon.

Ellie felt the presence of the man before she saw him. "Lunch will be ready in a bit."

"Well, I believe I see what I want from here."

His meaning was clear.

"If I were you, I'd forget any ideas that will lead you into more trouble than you can handle."

"That's what I like, a woman with spunk. I'm going to make you happier than you have ever been." He reached out and undid the top buttons on her blouse. It was plain Ellie had nothing on under the blouse. He stepped forward to put his arms around her. She whirled around with a frying pan and slammed it on

Luke's Place

top of his head. He fell and lay still. Ellie buttoned her blouse and continued to fix lunch.

The helper moaned and shook his head. "You bitch! I'm going to have you for sure now."

He started to get up as Luke rode up. Luke quickly dismounted and kicked him in the side. "Boy, you are fixing to meet your God in heaven."

"Luke! Don't kill him!"

Luke pulled him up by the shirt front and slammed his fist in his face. Then he kicked him in the crotch. "Now you crawl out of here 'fore I hurt you bad."

The driver came running to the camp site. "What the...?"

"You got your choice. Load him up and git out of here, or I bury him!"

"We're leaving, Mr. Evermore. He's been warned before. He won't be with me anymore." The driver picked up the helper and put him in the wagon. They splashed across the creek toward the road.

William Bruce Bacon

"The driver was yelling at his helper. "Tom Durkins, you're about the dumbest thing that walks on two legs. When we get back to town, you look for work. You're through."

"You hurt, Ellie?"

"No. I was fixing to lay him out with the frying pan again."

They looked at her weapon and started to laugh. The handle was bent straight up and cracked.

We'll finish whitewashing the house. Then we're going to town and get married proper. We'll git you a new frying pan, too."

Luke put his arms around her. "I don't think this ranch would be worth much if you weren't here with me."

"I know you're going to worry about me, and there's no need. There's always one bad apple, but they're few and far between. Most men are okay."

Luke's Place

The day after the house was done, Luke hooked the horses to the wagon and they headed for town, by way of the Owen's ranch.

Martha was busy sending word of the marriage to all the surrounding ranches. Jack gave the hands off to go with them.

The town was ready when the Evermores and Owens arrived. Jack introduced Luke to the businessmen of Middleton. They finished up in the saloon, where Luke's money was no good.

A young man stepped on Luke's foot as he came up to the bar to get a drink. "Watch your step, young fella."

"Old man, it's you that has to watch his step." He turned to his drink, took a deep swallow. "In fact, maybe you shouldn't be at the bar. Get the Hell outta' here!"

"I don't see anybody that wants to throw me out, so I'll be staying for a while."

William Bruce Bacon

The young man backed up and dropped his hand to his holster. "I believe I'll just have to do that for the others." He started to draw. Luke locked the boy's hand on the holstered gun and put his pistol under the boy's chin. "Don't even think about it. Now you back out of here while you're still breathing."

The kid looked around; he saw no backing. He turned and unsteadily walked out. The saloon was quiet, then the piano player started the music again.

Jack watched the door. "I saw that done once before. A young fella named the Flat Plains Kid was going to take on a sheriff. That's as far as he got. You wouldn't know anything about that?"

Luke smiled. "I heard the Flat Plains Kid was fast. That was years ago, and I believe you could find that sheriff at West Falls. He said the Kid is dead."

Well, we all know how stories grow. Probably nothing to it anyhow."

Luke raised his glass. "I'll drink to that."

Luke's Place

Luke went to the room they would use to change in. Ellie was getting ready. I was wondering if I was going to be stood up."

Luke hugged her. "No chance. You're stuck with me, like it or not."

She pushed her body against his. "I'll not complain about that, mister."

"We better be gitting dressed or we'll both be late for the church."

They walked out the door of the hotel. There was a carriage waiting with one of the ranchhands to drive. He delivered them to the church. After the ceremony, their neighbors showered them with rice and they were driven through town and back to the hotel. Everybody wished them well and they went to their room. The marriage was consummated that evening.

The next morning they got their supplies loaded and started back to their ranch. People waved as they passed them on the road. "Well, it looks like we're part of the community." Luke said as he waved.

William Bruce Bacon

"Like you said. This is our future and the past is the past. I like the sound of Mrs. Evermore. Thank you, Luke. I'll do my damndest to make you proud."

"Mrs. Evermore, you're going to have to watch your language."

"Oh sh..shucks. Yes, sir." She giggled.

They got home late afternoon, and it was dark before they got the wagon and supplies put away. Ellie made them a light supper and they got into bed and set about solemnizing their nuptials again when there was pounding on the door. They sat straight up in bed, then Heard that one word. Shivaree!

Ellie grabbed her robe and put it on as Luke got into his pants. That's as far as they got. The crowd boiled into the house with lanterns and the party began. The men carried Luke to his horse with pants and boots. Off they went, yelling and laughing.

Ellie started a fire in the cook stove and the ladies pitched in to help. Ellie might be newly wed, but she

Luke's Place

was old enough to know how to get the party going. Coffee first, then food.

The men came back, but without the groom. There were snickers and remarks about Luke missing all the good food.

Ellie was in the kitchen cutting the pies, Luke opened the back door. "Get me some pants."

"I would, but I have to serve this pie."

"Okay. Then I'm taking your robe."

He had it about half off when he found that's all she had on.

"Do you want me to serve without it on?"

Martha came in, coughed. "You two could wait until everybody leaves." Then she turned and walked out.

"I'll get you some pants. I don't want everybody seeing what I got." She handed him the pants and went out with the pie.

"Hey, how about a shirt?"

"You didn't ask for one."

William Bruce Bacon

"I'm going to get you. Wait and see."

She kissed his cheek. "Promise?"

They went into the dining room together.

Jack nudged Dave. "I sure hope Luke didn't get moon burned. It would make it hard to fork a saddle."

"Very funny. Can I have a piece of pie?"

Ellie put her arms around his chest. "Can I keep my robe?"

The men laughed and the women covered their mouths to hide their smiles.

Luke finished his pie then joined the men on the porch. He produced a jug and passed it round.

The women came out after the dishes were done with glasses of wine that appeared mysteriously out of the food baskets. The false dawn was showing in the East when the wives collected their husbands to go home.

Ellie stood up to make an announcement. "I want to thank you all for making us feel a part of this

Luke's Place

community. If there's anything I can do to help anybody, just let me know."

Luke put his arm around her shoulders. "I thank you, too. Where's my pants?"

Jack said, "Look in your saddle bags."

Luke laughed. "That figures. Thank you."

They waved until everybody was out of sight.

"Okay, lady, let's get back where we were before all this started." They went in the house, and did.

William Bruce Bacon

CHAPTER FIVE

Now that the fence was up, Ellie put in her garden. Then Luke brought home five chickens and a rooster and trailing behind the wagon was a milk cow, named Daisy.

Housing the animals was the next thing. Luke built a chicken coop. Daisy had the run of the barnyard, and was content as long as she was milked twice a day.

Ellie began selling the extra eggs and milk to the neighbors. Luke said that was her pin money which she could use as she pleased. She put it in a box on the top shelf of the cupboard. Ellie looked at her hiding place thoughtfully. What if a robber... Ellie shook her head; she felt safe here with Luke. But she had noticed a drifter, watching from a distance. Maybe he was looking for a job.

The garden produced well and Luke helped her can the fruits and vegetables as they ripened. He built a pantry to the kitchen to store the goods for the winter.

Luke's Place

When they went to town Ellie would ask if she should bring her pin money. Luke would say next time. They might need it then. Ellie soon put a second box beside the first one as she put her money away.

Luke went on the roundup with the neighbors and selected cattle for his herd. His were set aside and the rest were driven to Milddleton and loaded into the railroad cars for Kansas City. The owners boarded the train and Luke went back to his herd with two hands he had met in town. They drove the herd to his ranch then went to get the bulls he bought from Dave Davis.

They branded the cattle and let them go. It would be spring before he know how the herd would shape up. The hands stayed for supper and slept in the barn and were gone by morning.

Ellie had finished milking Daisy and was putting the milk in the spring house when she was grabbed from behind and felt with a dirty hand over her mouth.

"Now, you she-bitch, we're going to finish what I started a while back."

William Bruce Bacon

Ellie opened her mouth and bit as hard as she could. She heard a bone snap as the intruder yelled out in pain. "Damn you! I'm a-going to slap you stupid, then you're mine!"

Ellie ran for the house. She heard a shot and felt the pain at the same time. Her leg gave way and she fell face down on the ground. He was on her before she could move. He threw her dress up over her head and was fumbling with his pants.

"Luke'll kill you for this!"

"That's bull. He's on his way to Kansas City with the rest of the ranchers."

That would be the last word he would say. Luke's rifle cracked and the molester fell back on Ellie's feet.

"Ellie!" Luke ran to her. She was still, then moaned. "Get him off my feet; I'm shot in the leg."

Luke rolled the man off her feet, then picked her up, carried her in and put her on the bed. He looked at the wound. "We're lucky, the bullet went through and

Luke's Place

no bones broken." He got the antiseptic and washed out the wound then wrapped it.

"You lay here and rest. I got work to do."

"Aren't you going to get the sheriff?"

"I'll tell him when I see him. There's no rush. That fella ain't going nowhere anymore. I'll be back in a bit."

Luke dug a hole, dumped the molester in and finished covering it. He looked up as Ellie limped to the grave site.

"You got something to say over him. It isn't proper to just walk away."

Luke took off his hat and stared at the new grave.

"Lord, when an animal goes crazy, you shoot it. Well, here's another one." He put his hat back on and let Ellie lean on his shoulder as they slowly made their way to the porch. "You sit there, I'll get you some cool water."

William Bruce Bacon

They sat in silence watching the sun go down. Ellie put her hand on his arm. "I love you more the longer we're together. Thank you, Honey."

"I won't stand for another man to do that to any woman, especially my wife. There won't be any trouble from the sheriff. You'll be sleeping alone until that leg don't hurt so much. I'll sleep on the couch."

"Not for very damn long, Mr. Evermore."

"Ladies don't cuss."

"That's what you think."

It didn't take Ellie long to heal, but she did walk with a very slight limp. The grave was never marked and Luke never bothered to tell the sheriff. As far as he was concerned, the case was closed and justice had been served.

CHAPTER SIX

Ellie was content working her garden and taking care of Daisy. The days were getting shorter and cooler. It was cool enough that she was able to cook in the kitchen. Soon the brisk mornings demanded that they wear jackets. Little by little, Luke bought the herd closer to the house and built wind breaks for them.

"Luke, I think we should go to town before it gets much colder. I have to do some shopping."

"Okay. I'll make a list for the winter."

"You may want to look at my list first."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to get some material for blankets and diapers."

"What's that got to do... What diapers? You mean...? How?"

"What the hell do you mean, 'how'?"

"Well, I'll be damned. I'm going to have a baby."

William Bruce Bacon

"No, I'm going to have it. You said you wouldn't mind."

"Ellie, I couldn't be prouder than for you to be carrying our baby." His eyes were moist as he hugged her.

They left in the wagon, instead of on horseback. Ellie didn't ask why, she assumed he didn't want her riding.

She went to the doctor. He confirmed what she knew. Then he questioned the scar on her leg. She looked at him and said nothing.

They stayed overnight at the hotel. Eating out was one of the things the ranch didn't offer.

The next morning Luke brought the wagon around. It was covered with a tarp, but looked full.

"Did you buy out the town?"

"No, just some things that we'll need this winter."

On the trip back they stopped at the Owens' place. Martha Owens told Ellie to talk to Thelma Davis. Thelma was a midwife. Jack and Luke talked cattle

Luke's Place

and the coming winter. The signs looked like they were in for a bad one..

Luke put the wagon in the barn then rode over to see Thelma and Dave. Ellie put the food in the pantry and cleaned house. She was starting to fix supper when she heard Luke ride up. He called to her.

"Put another plate on for Dave."

After dinner they were having coffee when Luke told her Dave would be staying with them for the week.

"I'll get the loft ready."

Dave stood up. "You don't need running up and down ladders. I'll do it."

Luke put his arm around her waist. "He's going to help me build a nursery off our bedroom."

Ellie kissed him on the cheek, then went to the kitchen. That night she thanked him properly, after they heard Dave snoring.

Luke proudly showed Ellie the metal wash tub they would use when it got too cold to go to the creek.

William Bruce Bacon

"I thought cowhands were rugged and could break the ice to wash or shave." She laughed.

"That may be, but this rancher enjoys warm water and soft beds. Being clean isn't all that bad either."

"Well, some of them that came in the saloon must have been afraid of water."

"This isn't one, and that's why I got the tub, besides, I like seeing you in your all together."

"As I remember, that's how I got the way I am now."

"You mean, going to have a baby?"

"Hell, no. I mean married. If you remember when you threw me out of the barbershop, I didn't have much on."

"How'd you get home, anyway?"

"My room was across the alley. The Chinaman would let me know when to come over."

"You mean you robbed other men?"

"It was either that or go to jail, then the sheriff and his two cousins would have taken turns with me.

Luke's Place

That's why I had to leave. I didn't get your money so I would have been jailed."

"That sheriff better hope I never go back that way."

"That's all over now. You've even made me an honest woman."

"I hope so. I don't need my kid being born in jail."

* * *

The days grew shorter and colder. Ellie kept a fire going day and night. Luke would check the cattle, milk Daisy, and gather eggs. Ellie was busy making diapers and blankets. Their house was tight and kept the wind out. Luke put up some shelves and put his collection of books on them. He helped Ellie to read and showed her how he kept the ranch books. He said, "I've seen too many times when something happened to the man of the house, the woman didn't know anything about what was going on. It's not going to be that way here. This is your ranch, too."

William Bruce Bacon

The first storm of the winter came with the fury of a thousand screaming banshees. Luke and Ellie snuggled down under the covers and waited for morning. At the first light of day they were up and bundled for the storm. Luke went to check on the cattle and Ellie to check on her chickens and Daisy. She carried warm water to thaw the frozen trough for the chickens.

Daisy was lying down, chewing her cud, but got up to be milked. After milking she waited until there was fresh straw then lay back down; content with the world.

Luke stopped in the barn to carry the milk to the house. Ellie carried the eggs. Chores finished; they held their coffee cups in both hands, enjoying the warmth. "How are the cattle doing?"

"They seem to be doing okay if this blows over pretty soon and it don't get too much colder."

"Is this the kind of winters we are to expect?"

Luke's Place

"No, but Jack said we might better expect a bad one this year. The signs indicated it."

"Is there anything we can do for the cattle?"

"They have to make their own way. The strong survive and weak don't make it. It makes for a better herd."

"It sure seems like a waste. Why don't we butcher some of the weak ones and take them to town? People there don't have much in the way of meat. You could put runners on the wagon. I'm sure the other ranchers have some weaklings to butcher. Then you could take it all in at once."

"I suppose so. I never thought of it. It could work. That would cut our losses and what the town couldn't use, they could sell to other towns and move it by rail as long as it was cold."

Luke went to the barn and started making runners for the wagon. Ellie got down the Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog.

William Bruce Bacon

She looked through the tools and farm equipment until she found what she wanted then she checked her pin money. She had enough. She smiled to herself. It's about time he got instead of always giving.

When Luke got the wagon ready and the weaker cattle butchered, Ellie asked if she could go to town with him. The weather had broken and looked like it would be clear, so he agreed. They stopped at Dave and Jack's. Then Luke told them what he was about. They quickly butchered some of their weaker cattle and loaded them on the wagon.

The town's people were standing in line for fresh meat. The storm had held up the train and the butcher shop was empty. The butcher was glad to see Luke but asked, "What are you asking for the beef?"

"What do you usually pay?"

"In the winter the price goes up. About twenty, twenty-five."

"Twenty sounds about right."

"That's a half, you know."

Luke's Place

"No, I can't do that. We'll make twenty for the whole animal. We're getting rid of the ones that wouldn't make it through the winter, so you're helping us as much as we're helping you. You do what you want, but we just hope it will help the city folk."

"Mr. Evermore, you have lowered the price almost half. We're going to eat good this winter."

Ellie had sold her eggs and milk and by the time they were ready to go home, it was getting dark. Luke stopped by the restaurant to see about supper and was told their meal was on the house. They finished and set out for home. The snow crunched under the wagon and the stars looked low enough to touch. Ellie pulled the big robe around both of them, making it almost comfortable.

The following month, Luke made the rounds of his neighbors and had another load of meat and eggs to take to town. Ellie was getting pretty big and decided to stay home. She was in her seventh month. When Luke stopped at the Davis's, Thelma promised she

William Bruce Bacon

would come over in three weeks. Dave would have to stay at the ranch and look after their kids and livestock.

Luke made the trip to town alone and again the weather held-cold and little wind. He drove to the butcher shop and unloaded the beef. The butcher said this was the first year the town has had enough meat to see them through the storms. He thanked Luke and the ranchers again. Luke said probably one more load would clear out the weaklings so the butcher should start ordering from his supplier.

He dropped the eggs off at the store and was getting his supplies when the sheriff came in. "Could I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure. I'll get my supplies together and we'll have supper at the restaurant."

The station master called to Luke. "Mr. Evermore. There's some freight at the train depot for you."

"Must be something Ellie ordered. Thanks."

There was a small crowd at the depot. Luke asked about something Ellie ordered. The station master

Luke's Place

smiled. "It's on the west side of the building ready to go."

Luke looked out the window. "All I see is a sleigh."

"That's it. Ellie said if you're going to run around in the snow then that's what you need."

They went outside and hitched the team to the sleigh.

"I wonder how she figured I was to get the wagon home?"

"She made arrangements to leave the wagon at the livery."

Luke went to the livery and found that Ellie had indeed taken care of everything.

With that, he went to the restaurant. The sheriff was waiting. Luke took off his coat and ordered the special and coffee up front. "What did you want to see me about?"

"Do you know anything about Tom Durkins?"

"Wasn't he the helper for the freight hauler?"

William Bruce Bacon

"Yeah. I hear he tried to assault your wife, awhile back."

"That's right. I beat hell out of him and sent him on his way."

"He's been missing for a while. Wondered if you might know anything about it?"

"Well, suppose you were thought to be out of town and some varmint come around and tried to assault your wife. In trying shot her in the leg. What would you do?"

"I beleive I would see to it he didn't bother any woman again."

"If that were the case, then the sheriff would most likely be resigned to the fact he wasn't coming back."

Nothing more was said about the freight hauler. They ate their supper and talked about the winter and how glad the town's folk were about the beef Luke brought in. Luke finished his coffee and said he was going to head back that evening, with Ellie being as close to her time as she was. The sheriff said to give

Luke's Place

Ellie his best. Luke waved as he walked out. He got in the new sleigh, pulled the big robe around him and turned the rig smartly around, heading out of town and to the woman that loved him.

The ride home was a lot faster and easier on the team. Ellie was waiting at the door. Luke waved and put the sleigh and team in the barn then came to the house.

"Lady, you are something else. How'd you pay for that rig?"

"Oh, a lady has ways of making money."

He grabbed her and pulled her down to his lap. "Thank you Ellie. And the team thanks you. It's a lot easier pulling than what we had."

"You been doing it for everybody else, I figured it was time somebody did for you."

"How you feeling?"

"I'm okay, but we're going to need wood brought in for the evening. I'm getting so I can't bend to pick it up."

William Bruce Bacon

"Thelma will be here in a couple of weeks so you won't be alone any more."

"I wonder what these women would say if they knew I was a saloon waitress?"

"Honey, our friends wouldn't care and the ones that did care don't count. It's what we do from here and not what we did before. The sheriff asked me about Durkins. I told him what I supposed happened and he decided that's what should of happened so, it's in the past now."

He let her up to make supper and he went to get the wood for the stove. Supper seemed very special and as soon as the dishes were done they walked hand in hand to the bedroom.

Luke stayed close to the house until Dave brought Thelma to stay. Luke had made a bed for her in the nursery. Thelma took over most of the chores. This gave Ellie more time to sew more diapers and blankets.

Luke's Place

A few days later Luke was milking Daisy, Thelma was starting supper when Ellie called for help. Thelma checked her and got her things ready. "You're fixing to drop that younun' Ellie. Now you just lay back and rest while you can. You're going to need your strength."

When Luke came in, Thelma told him to get a pile of firewood and keep the house warm. She started heating water, and put out supper for Luke. "You eat your supper, I don't need two sick people on my hands!"

Luke did what he was told then sat in the kitchen to wait.

"Come on," Thelma stood, hands on hips, "You started this, now you can help finish it." He followed Thelma into the bedroom. Ellie was resting between pains. "Luke, I love you, but right now it hurts like hell!"

William Bruce Bacon

Thelma smiled, "If it make you feel any better, it looks like you're going to have a easy time for your first one."

Ellie leaned back and strained. Thelma was at her side. "That's it, Ellie, come on—a little more—it's showing—come on, now! Push hard. Luke, gently now, push on her belly, way up high and push down. All right, one more, Ellie. Atta girl. That's it. Okay Luke. There you are—a boy!"

Thelma laid the baby on Ellie's stomach and tied and cut the umbilical cord, cleaned his nose and wiped his eyes. Then she wrapped him in a blanket and put him beside Ellie.

"Now the hard part." Thelma sounded happily tired. "We gotta get the afterbirth." Thelma finished up, then went into the kitchen to rest.

"Ellie, we did it. A boy."

"I'm so happy. Now I need to go to sleep, I'm tired." She closed her eyes and was asleep before Luke left the bedroom.

Luke's Place

The next day Thelma had her up and helped her walk to the kitchen, wash, then go back to bed. "You'll get your strength back faster if you start moving around. It looks like your milk's coming in good so that boy is going to be a healthy one. What you naming him?"

"We decided on Thomas Luther Evermore. I've got a Luke and now Tommy which will be Tom later. I don't need Luke and Little Luke."

The doctor came by and checked the baby and Ellie. "Thelma did a bang-up job. You're both in good shape. You tell Luke I don't want you pregnant before fall. That'll give you enough time."

"I don't think we'll have any more. I don't think Luke can go through this again."

The doctor shook his head. "Well, I don't know about that, but you're not getting any younger. If you're going to have more, don't wait too long. I just read where there's an opinion that older women don't have as healthy youngins as younger ones do."

William Bruce Bacon

"I beleive this is the only one for us. We aren't for pushing our luck."

Luke came in and heard the end of the conversation. "If there's any chance of losing Ellie, then that's the last one."

"Luke, I'm glad to see you. Before I leave, I just wanted to thank you for the meat when we needed it most. I didn't have near the sickness I had when the town used to run out. There's a lot we don't know about medicine. But we're finding that what a person eats has a lot to do with how healthy he is."

"Well, it helped the ranchers as much as the town. We were able to cut our money losses considerably this winter. I think we'll be doing that from now on. It'll sure make the herds healthier."

The doctor took Thelma with him as he was going toward her house. Luke looked at Ellie. "We're on our own now. I know cattle, but this is the first time raising a little feller."

Luke's Place

"Well, first, you don't brand him and don't plan on riding his ma for a couple of weeks."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Winter finally passed so spring could bring the green grass and spring flowers out. This was a happy time for the Evermores. Luke turned the garden over and helped Ellie get the seeds in. Tommy went to the garden with them and cooed, laughed and giggled as his parents worked the soil.

Luke put in a pipe from up stream so Ellie had water in the house. Now she could heat water and wash diapers without carrying it from the creek. Luke got the cattle together and put them on the far range so they could slowly eat their way toward the house. They had wintered well and the calves were about what he had expected. The herds of the other ranchers were in about the same shape. The year looked good and Luke would have enough to drive to market. The spring rains came and went. The range was a waving sea of knee-high grass. Luke cut enough to have a

Luke's Place

stack as tall as the barn. Then he dug a well close to it. He ordered a windmill and dug a holding tank.

Ellie felt both proud and puzzled of him. "Luke, why all this work? No one else has this. They just let the cattle fend for themselves."

"I watched a ranch go back to the bank during a dry spell. I worked on it and was the last hand to be let go. I saw what it did to the owner. That will never happen to us. I'll have enough feed and water to carry us through that sort of thing. We had a hard winter. They can be worse so we're prepared for that, too. I'm not goin' back in the saddle for thirty and keep."

Ellie nodded in agreement. "Well, now's good time as any to tell about an idea I've been thinking on. What do the stockyards do with the hides when they butcher cattle?"

"I guess they sell them to companies than tan them and make leather goods. Why?"

"What if you ranchers got together and butchered your cattle here and sent the beef to the big cities, and

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then used what was left just like they do in the stockyards?"

"You mean start our own stockyard right in Middleton?"

"Hell, yes! Then you ranchers get all the money for what you raise. Probably about three times what you get now."

"I'll have to think on that a while."

Tommy was watching his parents talk. He crawled to Luke and pulled himself up on his pant leg, then reached up with both hands. He fell back down then started again.

"Well, I'll be. That's the first time he stood up."

Luke picked him up. "Guess it's about time we get you a horse."

"Your son is going to know something besides ranching, Mr. Evermore. He's going to school, maybe even college!"

"I think we might better wait until he can make up his own mind."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Luke and Ellie continued to work, Ellie sold her eggs and milk. Luke watched over his herd and bred his cattle with the best of the bulls. The herd grew stronger and the other ranchers came to him for bulls to service their stock. He kept in mind what Ellie had brought up about the stockyard.

Luke got the ranchers together and discussed Ellie's idea of haveing a stockyard in Middleton. In no time they agreed to the idea but decided the yard should be out of town and downwind. Luke talked to the mayor and business men. They agreed it would be good for the town, but who would pay for it? Dave suggested they contact one of the meat companies to see if they were interested in it.

The company sent a representative to talk to the ranchers and townpeople. He agreed that it would be possible to establish a packing plant there and he was sure the companies that used the rest of the animal

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would be interested. They could ship the goods further west opening a better trade there. The ranchers would have to sign contracts that they would sell only to the packing company and in return the company would give them a fair price.

Some of the ranchers were skeptical, but were finally convinced when they realized that getting the cattle to market meant rounding them up and merely getting them to the plant. There would be no transportation charges. Soon the papers were drawn and contracts signed. Within the year the spur track was in and the cattle were herded to the processing plant.

In one year the town grew by a third. Houses were built on both sides of the main street and finally the town could boast of six streets. There was another church and a new school built that went to the tenth grade. Now the children could complete their schooling at home; some might even go to college out of town. The school was named the E.S. Evermore

Luke's Place

for the person who started the rise of Middleton to city size.

The new townspeople built a theater and contacted several touring companies to include Middleton in their itinerary.

Tommy went with Ellie as she made her daily rounds selling her milk and eggs. When Tommy was four, Luke decided the boy needed his own horse. Ellie was a little worried, but she knew Luke was right. Jake was getting on in years so they decided to breed him with Ellie's mare. Jake seemed to like the idea, but the mare wasn't too sure. She came in season and accepted Jake's amorous advances. Ellie watched as her mare grew, then foaled; Little Jake came into the world. He looked just like Big Jake, but had the disposition of the mare.

Tommy went to the barn everyday with Luke to feed "my Wittl' Jake." When Tommy was five and ready to start school, Little Jake was ready to ride. On Tommy's first day Ellie rode with him to the school

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that the ranchers had built. The school had living quarters in back. They hired a teacher right out of school. Ellie saw to eggs and milk for her and for the children who needed them. Tommy liked to learn and listened to the other grades to learn what they were taught. This caused problems at first. He soon found that if he answered his own questions and not those of the other grades there was less chance of getting in fights during recess.

Ellie was happy with the way Tommy studied. Luke never mentioned anything about the fights; Tommy could usually hold his own. The raw knuckles and bruises testified to his prowess in the fine art of recess.

CHAPTER NINE

One afternoon, Tommy came home later than usual. Luke saw that he went right to the barn and was tending to Little Jake. Luke followed and tried to talk to Tommy. But Tommy stayed on the opposite side of his horse and answered in mumbles.

"What's the matter, son?"

"Nothing."

Luke moved to Tommy's side and slowly turned him around. "Good Lord, boy, did you take on the whole school?"

Tommy grabbed Luke around the waist and sobbed into his shirt. "They said Momma used to be a bad woman!"

Luke stiffened. "Just what was it they said? Tell me all of it. We'll get to the bottom of this right now."

Tommy sniffed, wiped his nose on his shirt sleeve. "They said Momma worked in a saloon and did bad things with men. That's when I hit them."

William Bruce Bacon

"How many said that?"

"Four. But three won't say much for awhile. I bloodied their mouths."

"Well, son, let's go get cleaned up and have a family talk."

They went to the house. When Ellie saw Tommy, Luke shook his head to stop her questions. She got a pan of warm water and washed her sons bruises and took his ragged shirt off. He put on a clean one the sat at his place at the table.

"Okay, Tommy. Tell your mom what you told me."

"Pa, do I have to? It ain't right."

"What's going on?"

"Four boys told our son you worked in a saloon and weren't a proper lady. He took offense."

Ellie stared at Luke. "Tommy, the boys were part right. I served drinks in a saloon, but that's all I did. I ain't proud of my past, but I'm not ashamed either. I made my own way since I was fourteen. I worked

Luke's Place

where I could make a living. When I met your daddy I was working in a saloon."

"But you weren't a bad woman."

"No, she wasn't. She saved my life. Two men were mad about how a card game went and were going to shoot me. Your Momma got me out of town with no holes in me. I'd say she did right well. Did any of those boys' Momma save their daddies?"

"I guess not."

"How'd the boys come on this news?"

"They said their daddies heard it in town from some ex-sheriff."

Luke looked at Ellie. "I guess we'll go to town tomorrow."

"No Luke. It's not worth it! It will pass. Leave it be."

"There are some things a man can walk away from and some when he has to make a stand. I believe this is where I make my stand. I think there's more to this than just a loud mouth. He wants to see me about his

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cousins. I'll do my best to change his mind, but I'll not stand for any more talk about my family."

Supper was a very quiet meal. Tommy finished and got up from the table, went to his mother and hugged her. "I love you, Momma." Then went to bed.

Luke took Ellie's hands. "I beleive our son said it all. He's going to be a man before long-a man we'll be proud of."

"Oh, Luke, why does this have to happen? We didn't hurt anybody that didn't start hurting us first."

"Some day people will leave one another alone, but for now a person has to take care of his own. Come to bed. Tomorrow will be a long day."

Luke rode into town just before lunch. He hitched his horse in front of the bar and started to go in. The sheriff called him. He waited for the sheriff. "Luke, I think I know why you're here. Don't start anything. I'll jail you just as fast as I would anyone else."

"I'm going to wet my whistle. Care to join me?"

Luke's Place

"I'll not leave you out of my sight until Travers or you leaves town."

Luke shrugged his shoulders and pushed through the doors. The customers looked up and went back to their drinks except one. He had his holsters tied down and coat cut short. "The bushwhacker finally showed up, with protection. You can't face a real man alone."

"I guess you're talking about me, but I really don't see any man in here that's running his mouth. As far as bushwhacker, I wonder if you were fired from your job or you had to go against a man and couldn't handle it without your cousins to back you."

The sheriff stepped between them. "I told you both there ain't going to be any shooting in the saloon, unless I do it!"

Luke turned to the door and started out. "I'll be outside if you get enough courage out of that bottle."

Travers went for his pistol. The sheriff knocked his hand away. "Take 'em off and walk out behind me." Travers looked around, shrugged and started to

William Bruce Bacon

undo his gunbelt. He slipped on pistol in his waistband. Then started toward the door.

"Hold it, Travers." The sheriff lifted the gun from the waistband then called out the door. "Luke, take off your gun. He's not armed. Now you go out and face him."

The rest of the men crowded out to see what was about to happen. Luke stood in the middle of the street, hands at his sides, legs spread. Travers looked around. There was no way out. "I demand your protection sheriff! I know my rights!"

"You gave that right up when you started talking about my wife. I'll track you to the end of your days. You and your clan tried to kill us when we left your town, now you have done your best to discredit me and mine here. I'm going to make you wish you never heard of the name Evermore."

Travers charged Luke head down, arms ready to bear hug him. Luke grabbed him around the waist and fell back, throwing him over his head. Luke was back

Luke's Place

up before Travers stopped rolling. When Travers came up, he pulled a knife from his boot. "Now, you son-of-a-bitch, I'm going to cut you from ass to appetite. You ain't going against my dumb-ass cousins now."

He lunged and sliced at Luke's stomach. Luke jumped back and grabbed for his hand that held the knife. Travers jerked back and caught Luke's arm. The sleeve dropped away and blood ran down to his hand. Luke unbuckled his belt and wrapped it around his hand, leaving the buckle hanging from the end. He swung and wrapped it around Travers' arm, then jerked as hard as he could. Travers went down, losing his knife. Luke scooped it up and threw it across the street. Then he swung the belt again and again across Travers' back. Luke tried to kick him and Travers grabbed his leg and threw him on his back then jumped straddle of his chest. He pounded Luke's face with both fists. Luke wrapped the belt around Travers' neck, then rolled from one side to the other, finally throwing him off. Luke staggered to his feet. As

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Travers got to his knees Luke hit him in the face with the belt clinched fist. He pulled him up by the hair and hit him again. Then he kicked his ribs. Travers lay still. Luke reached for his hair again. The sheriff grabbed his arm. "that's enough, Luke. He's finished. Let it go. You go see the doc about that arm. Boys, pick this up and put it in the jail. The party's over."

Luke staggered toward the doctor's office. Two men helped him walk and sat him down in the office.

"Thanks, boys, I owe you one. Okay Doc, it's your turn now." Luke leaned back and closed his eyes.

Tommy was home from school before Luke got back from town. The word had spread that Luke had won the fight and there wasn't anybody that wanted to go against him now.

He rode up to the house and slowly got off Jake. His arm was in a sling, his face was puffed. Ellie ran to him then stopped. "Where do I hug or kiss you so it won't hurt?"

"How 'bout waiting awhile. I hurt all over."

Luke's Place

A little smile played on his lips. "I can't be doing this anymore. Guess I'm getting too old."

Ellie's eyes glistened with tears of love. "You'll never be too old for me, Cowboy."

The next few days, Luke sat in the sun and Ellie waited on him. His arm healed quickly. When he started to dress he couldn't find his belt. Ellie couldn't find it either. The mystery was solved when Tommy got home. He had been wearing it to show off at school.

William Bruce Bacon

CHAPTER TEN

Luke worked around the ranch in the weeks that followed. Ellie was busy with the garden and canning. She gathered eggs and drove to town to sell them. She noticed as she drove through that the people stopped and stared. She assumed it was because of the fight. She went in the store and Mrs. Bascom waited on her. "Can I help you, Mrs. Evermore?"

"I brought you some eggs, and it's Ellie. We've been knowing each other long enough for first names."

"I don't think we ever knew each other that well, Mrs. Evermore. We will be getting our eggs elsewhere."

The rest of the customers were snickering. Some of the men were boldly looking at her figure. She frowned as she walked to the front door. One of the young men put his hand on her bottom as she past. She turned and swung, catching him in the face with

Luke's Place

her purse. Then kicked him in the crotch. "The last man that tried that is dead. You want to join him?"

Ellie didn't wait for an answer and stalked out of the store. She was mounting her horse when the sheriff called her.

"Ellie, what's wrong?"

"Damned if I know. Mrs. Bascom said she didn't need my eggs and a cowpoke made a play for me." The tears welled up in her eyes and ran down her cheeks. The sheriff set his jaw, then relaxed. "You and Luke be at the town meeting next week. Wednesday, 7:30 sharp. I guess it's time to remind the people of the background of this town and some of the people."

Ellie nodded and turned for home. That evening she told Luke they were to be at the meeting next Wednesday. She made no mention of the rest of the happenings.

The Evermores got in town early to have supper at the restaurant. They had ridden in on their horses.

William Bruce Bacon

Little Jake now had no trouble keeping up with his parents.

Ellie, Luke, and Tommy were in the front row. The sheriff was about the only person that nodded to them. Luke was puzzled, but said nothing. The mayor called the meeting to order, then the preacher said the opening prayer.

The mayor took his place at the podium. "Tonight we will dispense with the usual business and turn the floor over to the sheriff." The sheriff took the mayor's place. "First, I would like to thank all of you who took the time to come out. There have been some serious charges and mistakes talked about in this city and tonight I'm going to clear the air. I have lived here almost all my life, so I know about everyone here."

The people were whispering and looking around.

The sheriff went on. "About eight, ten years ago a man and a woman came here to live. He had bought some land here, and then worked as a wrangler until he had saved enough to buy stock and build a herd.

Luke's Place

Along the way, he met a lady in a saloon. She was able to save his life from a couple of card sharks. They left that town together. They settled his land. Side by side they built their house while living in a tent. They were married in this town; most of you were at the wedding. Since then, the lady thought it would be a good idea for the ranchers to butcher their weak stock and bring it to town when we had no beef. Later she suggested the ranchers should see about a stockyard here—you know how that went. We even named a school after her. Now there's some things you don't know. She was assaulted on her own ranch when it was thought her husband was on a cattle drive. She was on her own from the time she was fourteen until she met her husband. He was a drifting cowboy that knew his kind would no longer be needed. He saved his money and built one of the best ranches in the area. At one time he was pretty quick with a gun. Some of you might have heard of the Flat Plain Kid. I have been told the Kid is dead; I'll leave it that way.

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"Why am I bringing this up? There are some people who seem to forgot where they themselves came from. Mrs. Bascom, weren't you a mail-order bride? Mrs. Trout, wasn't you a dance hall girl at one time? Mrs. Mason, shall I tell where your husband met you? I can go on, but I think you get the idea. When we came West, we left our past behind us. It's what we have done since that matters." The sheriff sat down. The mayor cleared his throat. "I believe sometimes we forget our preacher's teachings. I think we should revise our thinking and look at our friends as our friends."

The room was quiet, then the Mayor adjourned the meeting and people started filing out. Luke and Ellie walked with Tommy between them were among the last.

Mrs. Bascom stepped to Ellie. "I hope you will forgive me." She offered her hand to Ellie. "We do need your eggs."

Luke's Place

The cowboy stopped Luke. "Sir, I made an ass of myself, with your wife. No offense, please."

Luke started in surprise, fists clenched.

The foreman stood behind the cowboy. "Luke, Ellie took care of that herself. He didn't work for two days."

Luke smiled at Ellie, "Not another frying pan?"

"Hell, no. My purse!"

"Ellie! The boy."

"Oh, he..heck, pa. I heard worse the time Daisy stepped on your foot."

Luke flustered, "Ain't they taught you kids should be seen and not heard?"

"Yes, Pa." The rest of the crowd laughed and slapped Luke's shoulder.

The trip home was quiet. After the horses were put away Tommy asked Luke, "Pa, were you really the Flat Plains Kid?"

"I'm not all that proud of it, but yes, I was."

"I never heard of him-er, you."

William Bruce Bacon

"I didn't last very long. A sheriff proved I wasn't as fast as I thought I was."

"Did he shoot you?"

"No, but he chewed me out proper when he had the drop on me. It made me think. He must of figured there was some good in me. I never went looking for a fight again and that's when I decided I would save my money and get my own ranch."

"Tommy, we had our ups and downs when we were growing up. When we met we never tried to fool each other. Your dad and I knew who we were and decided we could make it together. We aren't worried what people think of us. We have each other, and we have you. We think we're pretty rich."

"I'm glad you had me. Other kids don't have parents that talk to them." Tommy smiled proudly.
"Good night, I love you both."

Luke took Ellie's hand and they stood looking out over the plains, but it was dark and they couldn't see too much. Besides, it's hard to see through tears.

About the Author

Bill is a thirty-six-years retired Air Force Master Sergeant who now lives in Nevada. His love for the Southwest fueled his choice of his current (and final) home. He now has the time for fishing and prospecting. He has been writing for the last ten years and is torn between these loves.

