

HIGH PLAINS REDEMPTION
Cimarron Jack Westerns Series Book 2

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Chapter 1

Quint

A railcar rockin' like this would've lulled me into a deep and untroubled sleep only a few weeks ago. This trip, however, it seems like every time I pull my Stetson down over my eyes, thinkin' I might drift off, a dad-blame bump or jostle sends enough pain up my spine to yank me full awake again.

So, here I sit, watchin' the tallgrass prairie go by, recallin' how—right along this very stretch of the Kansas Pacific—we nearly lost the whole entire show at the end of last season. Bad wreck that was. But thanks to Mr. Wheatley and Miss Flynn, we've all still got jobs.

Hm. It's thanks to them I expect I'll still have a job next season, too, as long as my back heals proper. And how I hope it does. Ridin' for a big show like Cimarron Jack Wheatley's Real Wild West Extravaganza, at only twenty-one years of age? Why, I'm livin' the life.

That thought is still hangin' in my mind when somebody comes bustlin' down the aisle from the front end of the railcar. My seat faces the back of the car, so I can't see who it is, but owin' to the rustle of skirts, I figure it's a woman. What I don't figure is that she's gonna plopp down on the bench right beside me—which she does.

"Give me your hat," she whispers with a hurry-up tone in her voice.

I lean away to get a look at her, which pinches my back again and makes me wince.

"Your hat. Please." She steals a quick glance over her shoulder.

Pretty girl—blond hair, deep-brown eyes, expensive-lookin' clothes. Under the circumstances, though, she makes me think of a rabbit with a coyote on its tail, desperate for a way to escape.

Without a word, I pull off my brand-new wide-brimmed Montana-peaked Stetson and hand it over.

I snatch a quick look over my shoulder. Nobody comin'. At least not yet. "Here, take my jacket, too," I say as I shrug off my fringed buckskin. Again, a shootin' pain flies up my backbone. *Criminy, I hope this thing heals fast!*

Just about the time the girl has got the jacket around her, the front-end door of the railcar opens again. The tromping down the aisle this time is definitely not that of a woman, but I don't look back lest I draw attention our way.

She turtles her head down into my buckskin, my hat low over her eyes.

I let my own head loll forward onto my chest just a bit, as if I were asleep.

The footfalls pause a few seats behind us. I hear a low *humph*, and then the fella continues toward the back door of the railcar.

With my eyes almost, but not quite, closed all the way, I can see he's a big fella. He's wearin' a fancy suit and tie and a bowler hat. He appears to be headin' on to the next car, but with his hand on the door handle, he stops for one last look up the aisle.

And that's when he sees her.

He don't roar at her like I assumed he was gonna. He just ambles back, reaches out, and lifts her chin with his thumb and forefinger. He leans in close and says, real quiet-like, "Just where did you suppose you were going to go, my dear?" He shoots a heated look my way.

The girl recoils from the big fella, and in her obvious longin' to put some space between herself and him, she leans against me.

I'm wonderin' who he is, and who she is. A young husband and wife, havin' a lovers' quarrel? Brother and sister? The two don't share features like siblings usually do. He's bigger than average, and she's what they call petite. He's dark complexioned and dark haired. She's blond but does have those dark eyes.

"Who is this?" the big fella hisses with a gesture toward me that makes her flinch. Makes me think he might hit her sometimes.

She don't answer the big fella. Instead, she says to me, not loud enough for folks all around us to hear, "I can't go with him. I won't."

He grabs her by the arm and looks as if he's about to pull her to her feet. I see that she's got no wedding band on the proper finger.

She leans back into me even more, and I'm still tryin' to decide whether to make this unasked-for intrusion my business or not.

Earlier in the trip, as passengers got on and off the train, I noticed that most folks on board weren't packin' iron. The big fella don't look to be either, but who's to say? He could have some sort of pocket-model revolver tucked away beneath his suitcoat.

I am packin'—on my hip. And I'm ready to pull if I need to.

He gives her another tug and mutters somethin' I can't quite make out.

"Leave her be," I tell him.

He quits pullin' on her, but don't let go of her arm. He glances at my gun and then glares into my eyes. "This is not your concern," he says. "You'd better think twice before you get yourself in deeper than you bargained for."

I glance at the girl. The big fella's words clearly haven't changed the fact that she don't wanna go with him.

“Sir,” I say, “if she wants to sit next to me, I figure that’s her choice. Train rollin’ like it is, I don’t reckon she can wander too far off from you.”

He looks up and down the aisle real quick, lets her arm go with a shove, and takes a seat on the facing bench. I can see he ain’t none too happy.

I’m not sure where this little drama’s gonna go, so I remain ready to shuck my Colt should the fella resume his ungentlemanly conduct.

The girl takes off my hat and hands it back to me, but presently she shows no intention of returnin’ my jacket.

I study the big fella’s face. He’s clean-shaved and smells faintly of some kind of men’s perfume. Rich fella, I s’pose. A few years older’n I am.

“Who’s your friend?” he asks the girl with a nod my way. He’s still wearin’ a deep frown.

She don’t answer him.

He folds his arms and leans back on the bench, as if he plans to stay as long as she does.

“I’m nobody,” I say.

He stares hard and says to her, “Where did you meet him?”

She folds her arms and still don’t answer.

“We’ve never met before,” I say. “The girl plainly just wants somebody—anybody—who’ll make sure she can have a little space.” I glance at her and see her cheeks are flushed, and tears glimmer on her eyelashes.

The big fella says to me, “You don’t know what she wants. Nor what she needs. So, I think you’d better ask the lady to return your jacket and then suggest to her that she go back to the first-class carriage, where she belongs.”

As he’s sayin’ this to me, I sense that the train is beginnin’ to slow down. Seems we must be gettin’ close to the Junction City station.

I’m in no big hurry to reach Denver, so when this certain idea pops into my head, I decide right away to act on it. The least it’ll do is buy the girl some time to ponder her options. She can head back to where she came from, she can go on and follow the big fella to wherever it is they’re headin’ now, or she can really go pretty much wherever she can afford to go.

The big fella and I keep our eyes on each other until, with one last loud exhalation from the steam engine, the train finally comes to a full stop.

Soon as it does, I get to my feet and step past the two out into the aisle. The girl and the big fella both have questions on their faces. I’m fairly positive it ain’t the same question, though.

I tell the girl, “If you wanna keep my jacket, you’ll need to come with me. Otherwise, I need it back.”

The big fella stands and says, “She’s not going anywhere with you.” He says it loud enough to where folks round about are starin’ at us.

Apparently, she’s had enough of him tellin’ her what she is and ain’t gonna do, ’cause quicker’n you can say *Git*, she’s off the bench and squeezed around behind me in the aisle.

When the big fella reaches for my sleeve, I skin my Colt real fast and use it to bat his hand aside. “You go on where you’re goin’,” I say, shufflin’ back a few steps, the girl movin’ back with me. “If she decides that’s where she wants to be too, why, I reckon she’ll be there directly.”

The big fella’s face is red as a radish. He points a thick finger at me. “The next time we meet, you’ll rue the day you did this.”

He may be right. As I back toward the railcar door with the girl behind me, I’m already wonderin’ whether I’m in my right mind . . . and whether I’d be doin’ this if the girl were mud-fence ugly.

Chapter 2

Cora

The train whistle sounds its doleful last call, and here I stand on the platform, touching shoulders with a “consort in crime” whose name I don’t even know. I’m suddenly aware I’m still wearing his jacket. One part of me can’t believe I did this. The other part says, *You know Julius McAdams well enough. You’re right to be scared of him. And it’s a safe bet that you’re in less danger getting off the train with a perfect stranger than staying on the train with Julius.*

The locomotive begins to chuff and heave its way slowly forward. Julius is glaring at us out the railcar window.

“If you decide this is all a big mistake,” my new champion says, “then you can get on tomorrow’s train and continue on your way.”

“I’ll need to think about it,” I say, turning to look closely at him for the first time. He’s younger than what I imagined he’d be when I first grabbed the seat beside him on the train. I don’t think he’s younger than me, though.

When I was hurrying down the aisle, trying to hide from Julius, all I saw from behind was that big hat and a vacant seat. The hat could hide my hair, I thought, and if I slumped down, my shoulders, too. It looked new and clean, so I figured it didn’t belong to some kind of loathsome lowlife. Quite simply, that’s how I chose where to quit running. I guess I somehow just expected the hat to belong to someone a little older.

Based on initial impressions, it seems as if my hasty choice was a lucky one. A clean new hat doesn’t mean its wearer is a person of virtue—many a scoundrel dresses well enough for the politest of society. So far, anyway, my current company has behaved gentlemanly enough.

“Can I buy you supper?” he asks.

I’ve got my reticule with me, and in it is a little bit of money. I can pay for my meals and get myself a room for the night. At first, I’m tempted to give back his jacket, decline his offer, and continue on my own. But then it dawns on me—Julius has my railroad ticket! I don’t have enough money with me for a new ticket all the way to San Francisco. Or to get back to Chicago.

“I won’t ask too many questions,” he says.

I hardly hear what he’s saying. I can’t ask *him* for a new ticket. Yet I wouldn’t be standing here in this predicament if it weren’t for him.

My pulse quickening again, I begin to reassess what I know about him. His speech is unrefined, and he’s quick with a gun. Given the gallantry he’s displayed, neither of those is necessarily a negative. He exhibits a politeness I imagine may be common among Westerners—the more civilized of them, anyway.

I've already placed an unexplainable degree of trust in him. But that was when I thought I could simply hop back on the train tomorrow.

I take a quick look around. Now that I'm stranded out here in some unknown Kansas railroad town, perhaps I don't have any choice but to trust him. The truth of the matter is, I don't know what kind of people live and travel out here. The best I can do, it seems, is hope to goodness that, if my new champion kept Julius at bay, he'll keep other men—wicked men—at arm's length, should I encounter such.

Perhaps all this worry is for nothing. What if I don't need the actual paper ticket after all?

"Can you wait for me?" I say. "I left my ticket on the train. I need to talk to someone at the window to find out how the railroad handles such things."

He scratches his forehead, blows out a stream of air, and then says, "I'm afraid I know how they handle it."

"How?"

"You're out of a ticket. Gotta buy a new one."

For a second, the world goes a little tipsy around me.

Before I can explain my predicament, however, he says, "Gettin' you off that train was my bright idea. I mean, I didn't do it for *me*. I did it so's you'd have a little time to decide what to do about the big fella that was pesterin' you. Now that I've got you in a pickle, least I can do is replace your ticket."

Not wanting to be in debt to him any more than I already am, I say, "I don't even know where I'll be going yet."

"Then like I said, maybe I could buy you some supper. You can think about it while you eat."

He's right. I need time to think. "Thank you," I say. "I can pay for my own supper. I would appreciate the company, though." Again, I peer out into the street, still sizing up the situation I've gotten myself into. The town looks respectable enough.

We find a restaurant about two blocks from the railroad station. Even from outside, it smells good—like fresh-baked pie—so we go on inside. We take a table by the front window, and when a rail-thin woman with a warm smile comes to the table, we order roasted chicken and mashed potatoes.

Once she goes to fix our plates, my new travel companion places his hand on his chest and says, "My name's Quintin Woodall. My friends call me Quint."

"I'm Cora," I say. Since I'm not sure I want him to know any more about me than is absolutely necessary, I don't tell him my family name. "Thank you for what you did on the train."

“I told you I wouldn’t ask too many questions, so I won’t,” he says, looking me in the eyes. “But maybe you won’t mind if I tell you a little bit about myself. That way you’ll at least know who you got off the train with.”

I study his face a moment—blue eyes, clean-shaved, a strong jaw. His light-brown hair looks recently barbered. I nod. “That would be nice.”

“I’m headed home to my ma’s place in Colorado,” he says. “The doctor says I need to take the rest of the season off to heal up.”

“What season?”

“I ride for Cimarron Jack Wheatley’s Real Wild West. Maybe you’ve heard of us.”

“Why, of course. Your show was in Chicago . . . ” I realize I just gave away a little clue about myself.

“Did you come see us there?” His eyes light up.

“No, I didn’t get to.” I recall how much I wanted to go. “What do you need to heal up from?”

“A bronc threw me. I know how to land and all, but this one was wilder’n Friday night in Deadwood. I hit my back on a fence rail. Thought I broke it, at first.”

“Will you ride again?”

“The doctor thinks so.”

The woman with the warm smile returns with our supper. It smells wonderful. And there’s even gravy for the mashed potatoes.

“Would you like coffee?” she asks, looking from Quintin to me.

“Water is fine,” I answer.

Quintin says, “After supper, a little coffee would be nice, please, ma’am.”

When the woman heads back toward the kitchen, Quintin pauses briefly with his head inclined over his plate. I wonder whether he thinks something is not quite right with the food, but in no time at all, he’s got his knife and fork in hand, sawing away at the chicken.

“Wouldn’t it be wiser to turn to another kind of work?” I ask. “I mean, if you were to take another bad fall . . . ”

“There’s risk in everything, Miss Cora,” he says.

“Just Cora—” I stop myself before telling him that the servants call me “Miss Cora.” I suppose a Wild-West-show rider has done better for himself than a servant.

“You don’t care to take risks, Cora?” He gives a subtle grin.

The truth is, I've long dreamed of taking more risks. I've imagined the very risks I might take. But in reality, saying no to Julius and getting off that train—those are some of the first true risks I've ever taken. And while there is a certain thrill to it, I can also feel a sense of panic lurking right on the other side of the proverbial door.

"You don't think I'm taking a risk right now?" I ask.

"You are." He nods. "I just don't know how comfortable you are with yourself, now that you've done it."

After thinking about it a moment more, I say, "It all happened so fast." I don't want to tell him I'm still more than a little scared. Julius, his parents, my father—who knows what they'll do?

"The most exciting things in life seem to happen fast."

"Do Westerners live for excitement?"

"You haven't been out West before." It's a statement, not a question.

"For a long, long time I've *wanted* to see the West." That's precisely why I *wanted* to see Cimarron Jack's Wild West show back home in Chicago. But Mother said such entertainment was vulgar and beneath people of our station in life. When I reminded her that Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West performed for Queen Victoria and the German Kaiser, she scolded me for being impertinent.

"Then you should come see it with me," he says. Immediately, he shows me his palms. "I'm sorry. You hardly know me. And you're obviously a lady."

"Quintin—"

"If you'll call me Quint, I'll quit callin' you *Miss* Cora."

The reference to me being a lady aside, I'm wondering whether Quintin is getting ahead of himself. "Remember Julius."

"The big fella on the train."

I nod. "He's no one to trifle with."

"Can I ask you just one question about him?"

Not sure I'll answer honestly, I nod again.

"What is Julius to you? He's not your brother?"

I hesitate. "I'm to be engaged to him in San Francisco, where his father and mother live." *At least that's what I've been told.*