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## Chapter 1

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*April 1892, Poor Fork, Arkansas*

**F**urrowed brow, and jaw set to pure anger, Wade Westby slammed through the door of the jailhouse. Jerome Couch, a part-time deputy, but most of the time a sleeping drunk, jumped to his feet.

“Where is she?” Wade demanded.

“I don’t know. Wisdom took her,” Jerome said, looking nervous.

Wade snarled and stomped across the road. He pounded on the door of a small room behind the feed store. The space served as an office, and a courtroom when needed.

There was a loud yell from inside. “The door ain’t locked!”

Sitting behind a desk, Wisdom Samuels was pouring himself a drink from a moonshine jug. The old man was in his high seventies, maybe older. He was shrinking, and his hair and beard had turned pure white in the last few years. Wisdom was the law in Poor Fork. Sheriff, when needed, judge, and arbitrator of disputes the rest of the time. Wisdom was still capable of scaring the pants off most lawbreakers.

“Wisdom, you’ve got to do something about that girl!” Wade yelled.

“I have her locked up where she won’t get loose,” Wisdom said. “More to protect her from you. She ain’t broken any law unless you want to charge her for stealing your horse.”

“That’s a hanging offense!” Wade exclaimed. “Besides, she always brings him back!”

“Then I ain’t got nothing to charge her with,” Wisdom said. “What do you want her charged with? Getting the best of you? She does it too damn often for you to be pissed about it. You ought to be used to it by now.”

“She screwed up my chance to win the race!”

“According to her, she borrowed your stallion because no one could find you. She rode Blackjack in the Spring Race and won fair and square. Kassie was right peeved for being disqualified for being a girl. The other riders complained she didn’t weigh half as much as a grown man.”

“The race was mine to win!” Wade growled. “She locked me in the tavern outhouse, knowing no one would hear me because everyone was going to be watching the race!”

“Maybe,” Wisdom said. “Or, maybe like she said, no one could find you, and she rode Blackjack for you. Kassie won the race, but she didn’t get the prize money! You’ll have your race, boy. I couldn’t give it to Albert Nichols, even if he did come in second to a girl. He pitched a fit, and he ain’t happy about being beaten by a girl, either. I’m holding the money, and I’ll set a date for the race to be run again, or I’ll add a race to the Fall Festival.”

“Kassie is a damn nuisance. You’ve got to rein her in! She’s as wild as a gypsy!”

“I reckon, if we were to follow the bloodlines far enough, she might have gypsy in her,” Wisdom said calmly.

“I could have used that two hundred and fifty dollars! She locked me in the outhouse, and it wasn’t an accident!”

“Can’t count on what you ain’t got yet. You’ll have another chance at the prize money,” Wisdom said mildly. “Now, don’t bust a gut. I didn’t believe her story either. Horse thieving is a bad charge, but she only had Blackjack for about an hour. County ain’t got no jails fit to house a girl. The state don’t neither. You know what would happen to her if she was sent over to the men’s prison in Little Rock.”

“Hell, I don’t want Kassie sent to prison!” Wade complained.

“You haven’t told me what you want me to do,” Wisdom said mildly.

“That’s your job!” Wade snarled angrily. “What she needs is a trip to the woodshed!”

“You can’t take a girl to the woodshed,” Wisdom said. “I agree she deserves to be spanked until she can’t sit for a spell.” The old man tossed back the shot of rotgut whiskey and swallowed. “Is Mack still leaving to join the Army?”

“Says he is,” Wade grumbled. “Mack is set to go the day after tomorrow. Why?”

“Go home to Spring Hill, Wade. Work off your mad and spend time with Mack. Get your brother drunk, and see if that will change his mind. He ain’t got no business joining the Army. God knows where he’ll be sent to fight. Those dang people in Washington don’t have a lick of sense. First, they had the country split in half and fighting each other, and now they’re sticking their noses in other countries’ business.”

“I can’t stop him,” Wade said. “He’s a grown man.”

Wisdom shook his head in disgust. “Come back in a week, Wade. Maybe by then, I’ll have figured what to do about Kassie.”

The jail was no place to keep a woman, even if she was still a half-grown whelp. Wisdom had taken Kassie to his house and locked her in his cellar. The little underground space didn’t have any windows big enough that she could

escape. The foundation walls of stone had been parged with cement. No critters or snakes were going to get in there. If he got busy dealing with town matters, she wouldn't starve because most people paid him in root vegetables and canned goods, and he stored them in the cellar. He'd let her come upstairs when he got home, as long as she was tethered so she couldn't run. His problem was he didn't know what to do about his granddaughter.

Kassie's last couple of years had been rough. Losing her parents at fifteen had set her on a wild path. She had always been headstrong, not listening to her elders. With no mother and father to keep her under control, she'd been left to do as she pleased. She wouldn't listen to anyone, and her folks had left her with a nest egg big enough that she didn't think she had to listen to anyone. She'd gone wild and started acting more like a boy than a girl, wearing britches, and riding horses astride like a man.

Wisdom knew he hadn't been any help. He'd lost his only son when a killing fever had swept through the Ozarks. He'd taken to the drink. It had taken him a while, but he had that demon under control. The trouble with regaining his mind and common sense was now he knew what he'd thrown away. While grieving over what was gone, he'd lost what was still there. He'd lost his granddaughter, with harsh drunken words and blame that wasn't hers to shoulder.

Wisdom figured he was partly to blame for Kassie running off and marrying Billy Ray Collins. Ozark mountain folk married young. The law said if the boy was fourteen and the girl over twelve, they didn't need parental consent. Those laws dated to the previous century, but they hadn't been changed, so they were still legal. Kassie had been a whisper from sixteen, and Billy Ray was seventeen, although he had claimed he was older. If they'd come to him for the marrying, Wisdom wouldn't have done it. A month later, she was a widow.

Billy Ray had hired on to the Westby Lumber Camp on Bannon Mountain. A newcomer to Poor Fork, he claimed he was older. He boasted of experience as a faller. Fallers were the lumberjacks that cut the trees down. It was a skilled and dangerous job, as they had to know where and how to cut to make the trees fall precisely where they needed to drop. The boy had exaggerated his abilities. Billy Ray was killed because he didn't know what he was doing. He'd been cocky and wouldn't listen when the older lumberjacks told him he was making a mistake.

Kassie had blamed Wade Westby for Billy Ray's death, although it wasn't his fault. Since then, Kassie had become a thorn in everyone's side, but especially in Westbys. When her folks died, Kassie had inherited their farm on Brannon Mountain. It was a good piece of land that had caused the Westby family many headaches over the years.

Kassie's property separated two sections of Westby property on Brannon Mountain. The Westby family owned most of the mountain and used it for farming and lumber. The lumber business had been operating for more than three decades. The cut logs had to be moved from where they were cut to the Westby/Bannon Lumber Mill. The most sensible route was to drive the mule wagons loaded with logs over a section of Kassie's property.

That particular access road had been used for decades. The property now belonged to Kassie, and she had rescinded the consent. The Westbys could not cross her land unless they paid a fee. Having to pay Kassie for crossing land she wasn't using was a cross to bear for Wade Westby.

She'd done about everything she could think of doing that would cost the Westby businesses money and delays. Every time Wade tried to approach her or tried to force the issue, he was faced with a rifle or slapped down by the law.

Wisdom was the law in these parts. He knew Arkansas law

and could quote it from memory. The law was on Kassie's side, but trying to talk sense to her was like talking to a rock. He'd tried and failed. Everyone had, but she wouldn't budge.

Now, she had pulled this stunt. There weren't many in Newton County who believed Wade wouldn't have won the race. The purse was two hundred and fifty dollars. Causing a man to lose that kind of money was wrong.

Wisdom wasn't going to send his granddaughter to jail. He figured all Kassie needed was a firm hand. When her folks had died, she'd lost that guidance. Kassie needed someone who wouldn't let her get away with stomping around, cussing, and pretending she was as tough as a man. She needed someone who would make her behave and act like a grown woman, not a bad-tempered child.

The old man shoved his chair aside and left the jail. He walked to the end of town. It wasn't a far piece, as Poor Fork only consisted of seven businesses and a church. The church was also used as a schoolhouse. He walked into the cemetery and went to the far side where a small section was surrounded by a fancy metal fence. Wisdom pulled a few weeds and bowed his head to pay his respects. He sat on a bench in front of the grave markers. All his people were buried here—five generations of them. Samuels' kin had been on Brannon Mountain since the first settlers had crossed into the forbidden mountains from Tennessee.

Wisdom found peace in the cemetery where his beloved Martha was buried. She'd left him a decade before, but he still talked to her. She'd been with him for forty-five years and had always known the right thing to do in her no-nonsense manner. When he was gone, there would be no more Samuels. Kasandra was the last to carry his bloodlines.

Had his granddaughter a smidgeon of self-preservation, she would not have taken on Wade Westby. He was a good man, and he'd been more than a patient man, trying to deal

with her. Wade was also a prideful man and he wouldn't stand for anyone making him a laughing stock. Most men in his position wouldn't.

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Kassie was released from the cellar and taken upstairs to a pantry room with no windows. There was a galvanized bathtub of water drawn and several clean towels. She was told gruffly by her grandfather to get herself cleaned and fittin'. She didn't need to be asked twice. She wasn't like most people who could bathe once a month and be okay with it. She needed to be clean all the time. The dress hanging on the door was hers.

Wisdom must have sent somebody to her place to fetch it. He hadn't shown himself at her farm, but once since her father had died. She'd bitched at the old man when he'd locked her in the cellar. Her animals had to be cared for, and he'd promised to send someone to do the chores.

Kassie did wonder why someone had chosen this particular dress. She only had two dresses, and this one was her best. The dress hadn't gotten much use because it was fancy. She didn't need fancy, and she had a skirt and blouse to wear if she couldn't wear trousers. Working and riding on her property, she needed to wear trousers.

The old man was waiting for her when she opened the door. With a firm grip on her arm, he marched her from his house to the jail. He locked her in the single jail cell and took his seat behind the desk. Wisdom poured himself a glass of rotgut and lit a cigar.

"You can't charge me with anything!" Kassie complained. "The bastard didn't have the guts to take me on himself. He came whining to you!"

“Hush girl, and quit swearing,” Wisdom said gruffly. “You’ll learn soon enough what I’ve decided.”

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Wade rode into town for the second time in little more than a week. Wisdom had sent a rider to his place. Wade was still pissed, and if he had to deal with Kassie again... well, he might have to strangle her. It would save everyone from having to deal with the brat. He figured she’d cost him the prize money on the Annual Newton County Horserace. At least Wisdom had held onto the prize money. He’d have another chance at it. Over the past couple of years, Kassie had cost him a lot in time, wages and patience.

Wade ducked his head as he entered the jailhouse. He’d been ducking his head through doorways since the middle years of his teens. A growth spurt had him sprouting upward, and it hadn’t stopped until he was six-foot, six-inches tall. His mother claimed it was his Norwegian blood. Westby men were large, broad-shouldered and tall, although his height had exceeded both his father and his brother. He’d stood taller than any man in town since he was seventeen.

Wade nodded at Wisdom and cast a glance over at the young woman in the jail cell. Pain in the ass or not, Kassie sure was pretty when she was dressed nice. She was scowling at him, and he narrowed his eyes and spoke to the old man. “Have you decided what to do about Kassie?”

“Yeah, I have,” Wisdom said. “Take a walk with me.”

Wade followed the judge over to what served as a saloon in Poor Fork. Henry’s place was an eight- by ten-foot cabin, with several shelves of bottled whiskey. It was challenging to run a business selling liquor when homebrew was cheap and available.

Wisdom went to a table. Wade followed and Henry



brought over two glasses and a bottle. They were left facing each other. “Well?” Wade demanded.

“I’ve decided not to charge Kassie with anything,” Wisdom said.

“Aw, hell,” Wade grumbled. “Damn it, Wisdom, letting her get away with all the crap she pulls is wrong!”

“I can’t send her to prison for pulling a prank on you. I agree something has to be done, but keeping her in jail ain’t the answer.”

“I already told you I don’t want her sent to prison, but what is the answer?”

“Marriage,” Wisdom said.

“Ha! Who is going to be fool enough to marry her?”

“You are.”

“What?” Wade exclaimed. He slammed his hands on the table. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Hear me out,” Wisdom said, focusing his steely eyes on the younger man opposite him until Wade sat again. “Kassie needs to be held accountable. She needs a strong man who won’t let her get away with her nonsense or her temper. She needs a husband who will set her ass on fire if she crosses him. Billy Ray wasn’t that man. Hell, he wasn’t but a boy himself, only a few months older than her. The young fool claimed to anyone dumb enough to listen that he was twenty-one.”

“Damn it, Wisdom! We’ve been here before. You were the one who said Kassie wasn’t ready and needed time. You were the one who broke the promise! What the hell would I gain from marrying her now, except a hard time,” Wade demanded angrily.

“A wife, with all the benefits of a wife,” Wisdom said. “How long has it been since you had time to go over to Bear Falls or St. Louis for a woman? Other than being a pain in the ass, have you looked at Kassie lately? Really looked at her? She’s a damn sight prettier than most of the women around

here. She's built real nice in the right places, too. If you married her... well, think about it. You've had your eye on her for years, and yeah, I was wrong. I'm giving you a chance to fix my mistake."

It was a simple statement, but it made Wade think. He was like every other man. He had needs, and there weren't many single women in Poor Fork. There had only been one girl who had ever interested him.

The idea of having Kassie under him wasn't one he could dismiss easily. He could admit it to himself. He had thought of her in that way. It was an inappropriate thing to be thinking about, but no one ever had to know about it. He had thought about it many times. She was all legs and tits, with a tiny waist and a cute, rounded ass. Hell, yes, he'd thought of her that way. She wore men's trousers, and they didn't hide much.

"You ain't got no reason for not taking a wife, now. Not that you ever did," Wisdom said. "Mack's grown, and he's joined the Army."

"I'm marrying Kasandra to you for no less than a year. At the end of that time, if you ain't happy, I'll let you divorce her. I want you to wed her and bed her proper. I also want you to spank the hell out of her at least once a day for the first three months or longer if you think she needs it. You treat her like the woman she can be, and a wife. She needs taming, and you're the man to do it. I'm her only kin, and I'll admit I've let her run wild. I'm too old to deal with her, but you ain't!"

Wade closed his eyes. His brain was having one hell of a battle with his dick. "She hates me now!"

"It don't matter. If I'd told Kassie the truth, she would have married you, and not that worthless hound, Billy Ray. I reckon I owe you for making that mistake. I've got my head straight, and I need to do right by her. You'll be Kassie's legal husband, Wade. She ain't got no say in the matter.

"I'm marrying her to you, rather than see her in trouble

beyond my control. I can't keep protecting her from the law, and it ain't doing her no good getting away with the way she behaves. You've got my permission to set her ass on fire, 'cause as the Lord is my witness, you're going to have a hard time taming her. You set about beating on her though, and I'll shoot you dead myself. There's a fine line, between taming and hurting for the sake of meanness. You better know how to walk that line!"

"You'll have her at your place, just the two of you. You have good people working for you. The farm runs itself, and so do the lumber camps. Overseeing your properties doesn't take much of your time. The way I see it, you ain't got nothing to lose."

"What does she say about it?" Wade asked. Whacking on Kassie's ass did appeal to him. At least once a day! Well, howdy, after all the trouble she'd caused him over the last couple of years, he owed her quite a few hidings!

"I ain't told her. I told you, and she ain't got no say in it. We ain't got no family left, except her and me, and I'm the head of it. She'll do as I tell her!" Wisdom said, getting to his feet and stalking out.

Wade was left to ponder his fate with a woman he'd thought of strangling a few minutes earlier.

Wisdom walked over to the jailhouse. Kassie stood when he came in, waiting for his verdict. Her curly black hair and glass green eyes reminded him of his own Martha. He'd taken her on, tamed her and loved her fiercely all the years they'd shared together.

"I've decided," Wisdom said, bluntly. "You're going to marry Wade Westby."

"I will not!" Kassie exploded.

"Oh, yes, you are, Missy," Wisdom said harshly. "You'll wed him and live with him as his wife. You'll cook, clean, and be his wife in every way that a woman can be a wife."

“That’s crazy!” Kassie exclaimed. “Why would you make me do that?”

“Because, for once, I’m not letting you get away with behaving like a hoodlum,” the old man said, his eyes looking tired. “I have failed you, granddaughter. I let you run wild, and this is where it ends. I’m your only kin and elder left. You will do as I tell you. I’ve already talked to Wade. If he agrees, you will wed him.”

Kassie sat on the jail cell cot with a thump. She covered her face with her hands, feeling sick. How in the hell was she going to get out of this mess?