

Assiniboia

Living at the frontier outpost of Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills of the untamed grasslands of the west in 1879, Caleb Lee wants to follow in the gambling footsteps of the man he adored — his father who passed away six months earlier. To do that, he needs to gain control of an inheritance held by guardians until he reaches voting age, voting age, a saddlebag of money buried according to his father's deathbed request.

A gathering of all the tribes led by the legendary Lakota warrior Chief Sitting Bull brings an unexpected opportunity that Caleb decides to risk in his usual manner — haphazard planning and misplaced optimism that he will be able to find a way to make it succeed with as little work and effort as possible.

It takes him across the open plains on a journey with unintended consequences, and one that will give him an entirely new understanding of who his father was, and what that means to Caleb.

Fort Walsh
Cypress Hills
Wednesday, July 23, 1879

Chapter One

When Caleb arrived at the opening in the trees above the creek bank with two pieces of rope, Jedediah was sitting on a stump with his Bowie knife, peeling small branches off a freshly cut sapling no thicker than a child's wrist.

Sunshine filtered through tree leaves and cast bright speckles onto a mildewy canvas sheet in the middle of the clearing. There was a round bump in the center, as if it had been tossed flat over a cannonball. A drawn out moan came from the bump. Caleb was not surprised. He knew that sound and had grown to dislike it.

Caleb's arrival woke a familiar black and brown mutt in the shade of the aspens. It stood and stretched and yawned. It padded onto the canvas as it wandered in a friendly manner toward Caleb. Halfway across, the mutt nudged the cannonball bump with a paw.

"Hey!" A muffled voice erupted from beneath the canvas. It came from Emmitt, an ancient wolf hunter and occasional cowboy. The night before Caleb and Jedediah had buried him up to his neck. Caleb had taken the first shift to guard the man's head against predators.

When Jedediah didn't answer Emmitt, the wolfer's voice grew louder. "What's at my head? Is that the stupid dog again?"

"Well, I'm still sitting on this stump," Jedediah answered Emmitt. "And it ain't Caleb."

Emmitt bellowed. "Get that dog away! You remember what it did last night!"

"Tired of hearing about it," Jedediah said to the canvas. "And your fault for expecting Caleb to stay awake. Think I like setting here for most of his shift? Anybody depends on Caleb for anything is a fool."

Jedediah didn't raise his eyes to Caleb, although at this point they were only a few steps apart.

"Then tie that dog up before it does it again," Emmitt said.

“Make up your mind,” Jedediah answered. “I thought you wanted me to rig something to keep sun off your head. If I use rope on the dog, I’ll have to send Caleb back to town again for more. We’re lucky if he makes it back here once.”

Jedediah flexed the sapling into a circle and gave it a critical eye, then resumed knocking off small branches.

Caleb watched Jedediah’s sure and efficient movements in silence and with a degree of respect. Jedediah could outwork many grown men twice his size. Caleb figured Jedediah needed to prove his value to the world, given that Jedediah didn’t know his father or mother or their fate, only that he’d been found as a toddler, abandoned near a burned out wagon along the Upper Missouri River, his parents killed by an attack led by the Lakota warrior, Sitting Bull.

“Been meaning to ask,” Jedediah said to Emmitt. “Don’t you have to urinate?”

Because Jedediah took seriously his role as an assistant to the only physician in town, he tended to use proper medical terminology. Caleb was also an assistant to the only physician in town, but had minimal interest in his responsibilities, mainly because he had minimal interest in any responsibilities.

“Gone twice already,” Emmitt answered. “You buried me loose enough, it just soaks in. You won’t have to pull me from the ground until I need to push out a turd, and I made sure I purged myself good ahead of time, so that will be a while to come.”

Emmitt returned to silence. Except for another moan. Emmitt had a rotten tooth. Hardly two minutes went by that he didn’t let out the same pitiful sound. The mutt lifted a rear leg above the cannonball hump in the canvas.

“Not on my guard,” Jedediah told the mutt in a cold voice.

The dog wisely held off. Jedediah was small and only fifteen or so, roughly the same age as Caleb, who was taller and rangy in appearance. Jedediah’s age and size didn’t matter when it came to his force of will. It possessed that kind of effect on animals and humans.

The mutt ambled to Caleb and whined and dropped its head to be scratched. With his knee, Caleb nudged the dog away. It had an embarrassing habit of following him around town and repeatedly sniffing his crotch.

“Not talking to you,” Caleb told the mutt. “Not after last night. ”

“You finally back Caleb?” Emmitt screeched from beneath the canvas. “When I get free, I’m going to rip your tongue from your skull and make the dog eat it. You’re a worse pain than this bad tooth of mine, and that’s saying a lot.”

Emmitt added an extra loud pitiful moan to prove his point.

“There you go again, old man,” Jedediah. “Expecting Caleb to listen to anyone but himself.”

Caleb dropped both pieces of rope at Jedediah’s feet.

“I see you forgot biscuits,” Jedediah said.

Caleb had remembered the biscuits alright, but eaten them on the way because they smelled so good. Caleb hoped no crumbs showed on his face.

"You're welcome," Caleb answered, "in case you wanted to get around to thanking me for this rope."

Caleb pulled his ever present deck of cards out of his pocket, and quick shuffled them, both hands. It wasn't anything he gave conscious thought to and the sound of the cards soothed him.

"Caleb, you better start putting some travel between you and me," Emmitt said. "Maybe head back East and stay there forever.

"I'll be gone as soon as I get my inheritance money," Caleb said. "Everybody knows that."

Caleb glared at Jedediah, who was mainly responsible for the fact that Caleb's inheritance was buried somewhere in the hills.

Jedediah kept whittling, long accustomed to Caleb's bitterness in this matter.

Caleb tucked the deck of cards into a front pocket, and lifted the canvas check on Emmitt.

The wolf hunter's chin barely cleared the dirt. His beard was greasy with flecks of gristle and many things impossible to identify. Emmitt squinted against the sun, too angry to find words. Mouth half open, it showed showed a huge gap where his front teeth had been before a round ball bullet tore through them. The bad tooth, as Emmitt made clear often, was near the back.

The mutt crowded against Caleb's leg as it tried to get a new sniff at Emmitt's wolf head hat. The hat was made of leathery nose curled into a sneer above yellowed teeth. There were slits where the eyes had been, and ragged ears and matted old neck fur as a tail. Emmitt wore it to keep his bald head from burning in the summer or freezing in the winter. The other two seasons, he wore it proud as a fashion statement.

The wolf hat now smelled of fresh dog piss, and added to other odors coming from Emmitt.

"Get that mutt away from me," Emmitt said, his speechless anger turning to alarm. He sounded like a much younger man than he looked. Hard living on the plains had aged the wolf hunter more than his actual years. Caleb wondered how a man with a face this wrinkled was still capable of drawing breath.

"It's that hat of yours," Caleb said. "All I did was turn my back for a second. What dog wouldn't jump in for a close smell?"

"Turned your back for a second?" Emmitt sputtered. "You were wrapped in the canvas and snoring. What if it rained hard? I could have drowned."

"Dead or alive," Jedediah said, "a wash would do you good. Do the rest of us some good too. Humans have invented this thing called soap, you know."

"Fell asleep 'cause you were telling me stories you already told a hundred times," Caleb said to Emmitt. "It was a good sleep too, until you woke me with cussing."

Shameful, some of the language you used. Half the words I didn't understand, they were so vile. Cree maybe or Sioux or Assiniboine. Hard to tell what you were spouting."

Jedediah said, "If you didn't understand them, logic says you can't declare them vile."

"Neither of you would like it much if a dog lifted a leg and filled your ear with pee," Emmitt said.

The mutt managed to squeeze its head past Caleb's knee. It took an exploratory sniff at the territory it had marked the night before.

Emmitt roared at it.

"You don't call that language vile?" Caleb asked Jedediah after Emmitt ran out of breath.

"I might agree the tone was suggestive," Jedediah said. "But since I'm not Cree or Sioux or Assiniboine, I won't commit to answer either way."

The mutt licked Emmitt's beard. Caleb pulled the dog away. He didn't like the mutt much at this moment, given it had started this ruckus with Emmitt, but it didn't deserve to be poisoned.

"I'd never bury myself in the ground and give a dog any kind of opportunity to urinate in my ear," Jedediah told Emmitt. "I take Thea's side in this matter. Modern medicine would do you some good. Only reason I helped you with this is because you promised to sell me that Sharps rifle of yours."

"Speaking of Thea," Caleb said. "I believe she's headed this way."

"Thea?" Emmitt's anger froze to sudden fear. He darted his eyes from side to side and strained his neck to move his head to look for her. "Boys, I'm begging you to make sure she doesn't find me here."

"Too late," Caleb said, "Here she comes up the creek bank. Wonder how she knew to find us?"

Chapter Two

Thea was indeed approaching them. She had bunched a portion of her skirt in one hand to lift the hem as she walked with her usual determined stride through the tall grass at the base of the scattered trees. In her other hand, she carried a physician's satchel.

Caleb combed his fingers through his hair and straightened his shoulders. Because behind Thea, same determined stride, in men's coveralls and a plaid shirt, was Vera Beauchemin, the only girl in Fort Walsh close to Caleb's age. Vera's hair, tied back, gleamed a burnished brown in the sunlight. Caleb believed he had every contour of her face memorized, and was smitten even by the crooked canine tooth of her smile.

"Thea?" Emmitt croaked. "Say it ain't so."

"And Vera," Caleb said. "You probably know that Thea's agreed to show Vera doctoring stuff. You might not like women doctors, Emmitt, but I'm for it. The more work that Vera does, the less for me and Jedediah."

"I expect then that Thea's about to end our vigil," Jedediah said, slipping his knife back into a sheath on his belt. "Saves me finishing this sun shade. Shame we cut up perfectly good rope."

Emmitt moaned. "Boys, I'll give you anything you want. Throw the canvas back over me and dirt on top and don't let her know I'm here. Have the mutt sit on my head if that helps. Just make sure you keep that terror of a woman away from me."

"I'd rather step between a bear and her cubs," Jedediah said. "You're the one that's been bad mouthing her since we moved to town."

Years earlier, Thea had found and rescued Jedediah from that burned out wagon on the Upper Missouri, and had gone on to doctoring at Fort Benton in Montana before moving to Fort Walsh here in the Northwest Territories. Thea was also a woman who most definitely would not have agreed that the dark soil around Emmitt's body would purify his body and cure his scurvy as suggested in a folklore collection of cures in *Gunn's Medicine*.

She'd come from Boston and a university education there, where she maintained that a growing amount of doctors washed down medical instruments with carbolic soap before surgery, since something called germs could lead to infections. What made her blood boil was hearing about frontier doctors who wiped their hands *after* helping a woman through childbirth, not before, even if earlier that day, a doctor had been elbow deep in a cow, pulling out a calf.

Emmitt's problem, of course, was not a difficult childbirth, but that as a result of scurvy, his gums had been bleeding at the slightest pressure. Emmitt's second problem in this regard was that he was a public and outspoken saloon critic of Thea and her presence in town, with a substantial drunken following each night to cheer on his rancor about the existence of a woman doctor in their community.

"Caleb?" Emmitt said. "You need to help me."

"I'm your friend." Caleb dropped the canvas back over Emmitt's head, happy to allay suspicion when Emmitt later began to wonder how Thea had found him.

Thea reached them with remarkable speed. As a spinster in her mid to late thirties, she had considerable physical attraction to the men in town. She was tall, with dark hair and even features and curves that only the loosest of clothing could hide. It was generally acknowledged that her spinsterhood was a result of her high standards, not the lack of offers or her advanced age.

Wondered where you went last night," she said in a curt tone to Jedediah. "You're old enough not to need my permission for most of your actions, but I'd appreciate courtesy."

Vera said nothing. Vera was far from meek, but when Thea was in a mood, it made sense to keep silent.

"Yes ma'am," Jedediah said. "But you were asleep when it was my turn with Emmitt and —"

"Take responsibility for your choices," Thea said. "You might get tired of hearing it, but I don't get tired of saying it. Caleb is reckless and lazy and doesn't have any kind of high standards to hold him accountable. You, on the other hand, should know better."

"Thank you, ma'am," Caleb said. "Happy I can meet your expectations."

Her frown told him she was deciding on his sincerity, but before she could deliver a customary tart response, Emmitt moaned from under the canvas. The pain must have really been horrible for him to betray himself.

"As for the wolf hunter," Thea said. "Vera and I are here to rescue him from his idiocy. Buried himself in dirt to purify himself, indeed. That's not how to cure scurvy."

"The wolf hunter?" Caleb said as innocent as he could, knowing Emmitt could hear every word. "Where?"

Thea lifted an incredulous eyebrow. It was enough to prompt Jedediah to pull away the canvas to expose Emmitt's head.

Emmitt squawked.

"Emmitt Daniels," Thea said, kneeling in front of his face. "Finally a conversation where you can't run from hearing the truth that folklore methods are gobbledygook."

Emmitt's face contorted into pure misery.

Thea opened her physicians satchel and withdrew a corked quart-sized bottle filled to the brim with brown liquid.

"This ain't the time to be trying to purge me," Emmitt said. "Not until these boys dig me out. As it is, I'm cleaned out pretty good anyway. I wouldn't be able to pop out anything bigger than a mouse turd."

"Dig you out so that you could run from me again? I hardly think so. Besides, modern medicine doesn't demand purging or bleeding or purifying. What I've got here will cure you of your scurvy."

Thea reached into her bag again and pulled out a small block of smooth wood and handed it to Vera. "Make sure you get it on the left side of his jaw so I have room to work around the other side of his mouth. Take care he doesn't bite you. Only thing that could be worse is a rabid dog."

"Yes ma'am," Vera said.

Vera had a near musical accent that almost made Caleb giddy. French was her first language, Caleb had learned. She was Michif — mixed blood — and the Michif had been displaced from the family homes out on the flat prairies. Caleb didn't know much about the circumstances. Didn't care either, was bored whenever the talk turned to some leader named Louis Riel, who fought for the rights of the Michif.

Thea pinched Emmitt's nostrils. The wolf hunter held his breath until his eyes bulged, but he could not forestall the inevitable. When he opened his mouth to gasp, Vera slid the block of wood into Emmitt's mouth and wedged his jaws open.

Thea uncorked the bottle and handed it to Vera. "You'll remember I predicted the wolf hunter might not be agreeable. You know what to do. It works on small children too."

Vera tilted Emmitt's head back and poured from the bottle into Emmitt's mouth. She pinched his nostrils again until he was forced to swallow the liquid to get air. His eyes widened in recognition of the taste.

"That's right," Thea said. "Onion juice and cod liver oil. Vera's going to make sure you drink the entire bottle. It has all you need to stop scurvy. Would help plenty if you stopped wearing out your body with whiskey."

Vera pinched Emmitt's nostrils again and repeated the process. Every time he swallowed and came up for air, she poured more juice into his mouth. All he could manage was caws of outrage between sputtering, like he was an indignant trapped crow.

It was five minutes of entertainment for Caleb. He was able to admire Vera without the need for sideways glances *and* enjoy Emmitt's discomfort.

After Vera had drained the bottle, Caleb walked around to the back of Emmitt's head and lifted away the wolf head hat. He had always been meaning to get a good look at the hole at the back of Emmitt's head and didn't know if he'd ever get a better opportunity than this. There it was — a scar at the base of Emmitt's head, just to the right of the center of Emmitt's neck, where the bullet that had shattered his front teeth had torn through on its way out again. The scar from the exit wound was as puckered and as big as Caleb had been led to believe. Caleb extended his pinky and fit it into the end of the hole. He pushed, pleased at the sponginess of the scar and the snug fit of the indentation against his finger.

"Hey," Emmitt said. "Keep your hands to yourself."

Quit fooling with Emmitt's head," Thea told Caleb. "I'm not finished with him."

Thea reached into her satchel and came out with a set of tongs.

Emmitt's grunt turned into a squeal as he understood the significance of the tongs.

"This might hurt some at the beginning," Thea told Emmitt, "but you'll thank Vera for it later."

She would have Caleb's gratitude too. He was tired to death of Emmitt's moaning about that abscessed tooth. It was the entire reason he'd informed Thea where to find Emmitt this morning. Only way to extract a tooth was if the person was willing to let a few strong men hold him down. Or, in this situation, if the person was buried in dirt up to his neck.

Thea tapped the right side of Emmitt's jaw with the end of the tong. He gargled in pain. She nodded in satisfaction.

"That's exactly what we needed to hear," she told Vera. "With so few teeth left in his head, we'd be doing Emmitt a disservice to get the one from the wrong side."

She knelt in front of Emmitt and examined the interior of his mouth. She turned to Vera. "It will be the black one, near the back."

Thea handed the tongs to Vera. "Won't be any different than working with a horse. I expect you'll do just fine."

Vera peered in Emmitt's mouth, then pushed the end of the tongs deep inside and clamped the handles together. She strained her arms and shoulders as she pulled upward with both hands, driving her knees a few inches into the softened dirt.

Vera glanced at Thea, who said. "Roots go deep on teeth. Don't stop now."

Vera leaned down to re-grip with the tong. She began to heave upward, bracing hard against bent knees. Emmitt screamed and violently shook his head the entire time, but less than a minute later, the tooth popped loose, firmly held in the grasp of the tong.

As Vera allowed herself a few deep breaths, Thea opened her hand and Vera dropped the tooth from the tong into Thea's palm. Thea gave the tooth a critical eye. "Excellent work. Roots didn't break loose. A blacksmith couldn't have done better."

Thea spoke to Emmitt. "Day or two, you'll forget it ever gave you any pain. Word gets out that two women cured your scurvy and pulled your tooth, maybe you'll stop trying to convince people that we can't be good doctors."

Thea stood and tossed the tooth aside. As Caleb marveled at the length of the roots of the tooth that gleamed with blood and gum tissue, the mutt came over, gave it an experimental lick and in one swallow, gulped down the pulpy mess.

Vera walked down to the creek to rinse off the end of the tong. Knowing that Thea missed nothing, Caleb avoided the temptation to follow Vera with his eyes.

"Caleb, do me a favor," Thea said. "Leave that block of wood in there until I'm out of earshot. You boys might be accustomed to the foul words that come out of Emmitt's mouth, but I'm in no mood for it, now or later."

"Yes ma'am," Caleb said. He knew Jedediah wouldn't fault him for his own meekness around her.

"As for you, Jedediah. . ." Thea said.

“Ma’am?”

“I know how you feel about Sitting Bull, especially after what he did to your parents. You want permission to become a new recruit for the Northwest Mounted Police, and I’m afraid I can’t give it. Not until the danger passes.”

“Danger, ma’am?”

“Word is fresh out this morning that Sitting Bull is back in Canada, already killed some soldiers across the border, then fled back to Wood Mountain for a big gathering of tribes there. I don’t know whether to put stock in the rumors that he is ready join forces with Riel. You remember when Sitting Bull first came across last year, he tried to unite the tribes to get ride of the whites. Regardless, with the buffalo shortage, everyone knows how desperate things are for them. And desperate people do desperate things. Wood Mountain is only a few days travel. Until we hear more about the situation, I’d rather you stayed in town. Makes this one of the few occasions I wish you were half as lazy as Caleb.”

With that, she lifted her satchel and waved for Vera to meet with her, marching away with her spine as military stiff as if she were part of the meager Northwest Mounted Police force stationed behind the walls of nearby Fort Walsh.