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## Chapter 1

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OCTOBER 1880...

Elsie Bellingham pulled her winter cape around her a little tighter as she settled into the wagon her husband, Wyatt, had just lifted her into. He settled into the seat next to her and buttoned his own coat before taking the reins. "It's only the first of October, but there is a definite chill in the air already," he said.

"Chill in the air? I think it's just plain cold," she said. "Is it normally this cold the beginning of October, and if so, just how cold will it get here?"

"This is not normal for the first part of October, though it's not the first time I've experienced it, either. As for how cold it will get, unfortunately, it generally gets really cold in the winter. Hopefully, we'll have a mild winter this year for your first winter in Wyoming, but we'll just have to wait and see."

"What does a bad winter consist of here?"

"It usually gets very cold for at least a couple weeks at a time, several times during the winter, from December

through March or April, but we can also see some pretty cold air in November and May. That cold air is accompanied by a fair amount of snow. There are winters that the extreme cold hits and seems to stay all winter. The same can be said for snow. I've seen years where we had several inches of snow, maybe even a foot, then it warmed up and the snow melted before it snowed again. But I've also seen winters where we got a foot of snow in November and the ground was white continually up until May."

"Oh, my goodness. When you said we usually get a fair amount of snow, how much is a fair amount?"

"Haven't we talked about this already, my dear wife? You asked what the weather was like in Wyoming, and I thought I'd covered it all."

"You did," she admitted, "but it was nice weather then, so I guess I didn't pay enough attention. Now that winter's almost here, well, I guess it's become more real to me."

Wyatt chuckled as he pulled his darling little wife closer to him. "Well, I don't think this is what you're going to want to hear, but I think you know by now, even though we've only been married a couple months, I won't lie to you. We normally have snow on the ground the majority of the time from when it starts in November or December, up through April or May. The amount on the ground at any time varies, but it's usually somewhere between a few inches and a foot."

"But it can be more than a foot?" she asked with wide eyes.

"Oh, it can most certainly be more than that. I remember one time when I was a boy, we had a cold spell that lasted close to a month and it snowed every day. My pa and I had to shovel a path to the barn nearly every day so we could get out to feed the animals. We had to shovel our way to a smaller building we used for storage to get more corn for

the horses, and the snow was as tall as I was. I was probably about four feet tall back then."

"So you had four feet of snow on the ground?"

"Yes. We've had two or three feet several times over the years, but if we get that much, it generally doesn't last long. It warms up enough to melt some of it before it snows again."

"So, I need to be ready for extreme cold and a couple feet or more of snow," she said more than asked. "I know you said we'll have to stock up some for winter because, if it gets bad, we won't be able to make it to town. What's the longest you've been stranded at the ranch in the winter?"

He thought for several moments before answering. "The year we had four feet of snow was the worst I can remember, and we didn't make it to town for about three and a half months. I remember we went to town a couple weeks or so after Christmas that year, and the next time we went was the end of April."

"So when do we need to stock up?"

"My ma always gave Pa a list of what she would need for the house over winter by the middle of November. Pa added what he thought he would need for the barn and animals, and we took our big wagon to town and brought it home loaded down."

"So, by the middle of November, I need to get a list to you?"

"Yes, but I'm sure Maria will help you with that. She was our cook and housekeeper since I was a young boy, so she's been making these lists for years. Even though you're doing most of the work now, she'll be able to help a great deal, I'm sure. Make sure you get extra sugar and flour so you can make delicious pies and cobblers out of all the fruit you canned and dried this summer. She didn't put up all the fruit that you did or make all the pies and cobblers, so we'll need

more flour and sugar this year, for them. Make sure you get plenty. The men and I love your goodies."

"I will," she assured him with a grin. "So, how soon does it normally start snowing?"

"We usually have at least a little snow in October and November, but not enough to worry about being able to get to town until the end of November."

"Oh, my. I'd better start thinking about what all I might need to get. In Philadelphia, I could walk to about any kind of store I wanted, so if I wanted something, I simply went and got it. It took some time for me to get used to only going to town once every couple weeks when I first got here. I can't imagine not going to a store for two months."

Wyatt chuckled and took her hand in his once they were out their lane and onto the main road to Buffalo Ridge. "It probably does seem odd to you, but I'm sure Maria can help with your list. After a couple winters out here, you'll get used to it. Does the thought of not being able to get to town for a month scare you, or just seem unusual?"

"I'm not at all scared of the idea of being stranded with you," she said and immediately felt her face flush. "I know you'll make sure we have what we absolutely need and that you'll watch out for me to keep me safe. I am a little concerned that I'll forget something, and going without it for two or three months will be difficult."

"Start paying closer attention to your everyday activities and what you use. Make a list and keep it handy so you can add things to it as you come across something else you may want to get some extras of. Maria always got some fabric to make a dress and some yarn to make an Afghan or socks so she had something to work on in the evenings. You may want to consider that, what you like to do in the evenings. If there's too much snow to go outside for walks in the after-

noon, which I know you like to do, you'll have more free time, so you'll want something to do."

"What do you get for your spare time?"

"I usually get two or three new books to read. I generally use some of that free time to repair any harnesses that have broken during the year, though, and that takes up some of my time."

She nodded her head. "Thank you for telling me about this now so I have some time to think about it."

"I want you to be happy living here. Warning you of what lies ahead, can only help ensure that."

"Wyatt, I truly think I would be happy living anywhere, as long as I'm living there as your wife. I've been so happy being married to you."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said with a little chuckle and a quick kiss on her cheek. "I'd hate to think I'm the only one of us who's been this happy the last couple months."

As usual, conversation flowed easily between them during their trip. When they got to Buffalo Creek, they stopped first at the mercantile and greeted their friends who ran the store, Joe and Erma. After visiting a few minutes and giving them their list of supplies they needed, Wyatt walked Elsie to Minnie's restaurant, then went to do his other errands for the ranch while she visited with her best friend. When he returned, they ate their dinner. By arriving after the noon-time meal rush, the restaurant generally wasn't as busy and Minnie could take the time to share a piece of pie with them before they had to leave to go back home.

As they were finishing their pie and saying good-bye to Minnie, Joe came into the restaurant. Seeing them there, he smiled as he approached. "I knew you two always visit Minnie a bit before leaving, so I came over, hoping you hadn't left yet. The train just dropped the mail off and

there's a letter from your father, Elsie, and I knew you'd want it. I'm glad I caught you."

"I'm glad as well," Elsie said, taking the letter he handed her. "Thank you for bringing it over."

"Yes, thank you, Joe," Wyatt added. "We've been waiting for this letter."

"I knew you'd want it, so I hurried over with it. I hope it's good news," he said before leaving.

"I do, too," Elsie said. She told Wyatt, "I'll read it on our way home. I hope he's telling us he's done with everything he had to do back home and is on his way here." She put the letter in her pocket and they followed Joe back to the mercantile, where he had their wagon loaded and ready to go.

When they were out of town and on their way home, he took her hand in his again. "You've been quiet since you got the letter. What's worrying you?"

"I hope Papa's on his way here now and will be here shortly. If he's got anything else to finish up before he leaves, will he make it here okay? What if he runs into some of the cold and snow you were telling me about? Does the train travel in snow?"

"It does, but if it snows too hard, they have to stop. If the snow gets too deep on the tracks, it can cause a train to derail. Occasionally, they have to stop and shovel some off if there's a big snowdrift, or wait for the snow to end and let some of it melt before they can go on."

"The last time he came here, he was with Landon and Blake, and the three of them went partway on the train, but a big part of their trip was on their horses, the three of them traveling together. If Papa and Blake try coming across country by themselves, what will they do if they encounter real cold weather and deep snows?"

"Before you get yourself too upset, let's see what he says.

Hopefully, he's already on his way. He may even be about here."

"I hope so," she said as she opened the letter. She held it out so they could both read it together.

When they had read it, Wyatt was the first to speak. "It sounds like he should be on his way back now, or will be shortly."

"Yes, it sounds like it."

"You look rather guarded. How do you feel about that?"

"Rather guarded, I think, is a good way to describe it. When Papa was missing, I was scared. When you hired Landon and the Pinkerton Agency to find out what happened, I was overjoyed that they were able to find him and clear his name. When he got here, learned we were about to be married and decided to move here, I was elated. I hated that he had to leave to go back to Philadelphia to sell his properties, but I understood and knew that when he returned, he would be coming back for good. I'm still very excited about that, but I was hoping he would be here by now."

"I know, honey. I was too. I know patience is not your strong point, but it shouldn't be too much longer until he's here."

"But you just told me how cold it gets and how much snow we could get. This letter says he's not quite ready to leave yet. That means he could get stranded somewhere in the cold and a couple feet of snow. He's used to living in the city, not traveling in this weather. What if something happens to him before he gets back here?"

"Blake Worthings will be traveling with him. From talking to Blake when they were here when Landon found him, Blake has some experience with these winters. He'll know more what to watch for pertaining to the weather, and the

two of them together will be safer than one man traveling alone."

"I'm glad Papa met Blake and they became such good friends while he was on the run from the men who thought he had sold them fake gold mines. I do feel better knowing he's agreed to work for Papa in one of his businesses and that they're traveling together. I'm still worried, though. You never know what the weather is going to be like. Even if Blake has been through a winter out here before, that doesn't mean he'll know what to do if it gets real bad."

"No, it doesn't, but it does mean he'll have some experience with it. They're both smart men, and I'm sure if it looks bad, they'll go to the nearest town, get a hotel room and hunker down until the storm passes. There's no reason to get all upset and worried. It's still nice now, and they may very well be on their way by now."

"I hope so."

"He said in the letter he had the business that had been closed back up and running smoothly and had now sold it. He planned on staying a few more days, to make sure the new owner was doing well and was off to a good start, then he and Blake would be returning. They may have left already, or if they leave in the next few days, they should be here before it starts to snow. Even if we have an early snow, they should be okay. Early snow is generally not a heavy snow." He gave her a hug and a kiss on her cheek. "Let's not worry yet. They still have plenty of time to get here."

"I guess you're right. But I hope he gets here soon."

"So do I. But the next time we're in town, we'd better do as he asked and check on houses for sale. He said he and Blake would each like to buy a house in town."

"We'll ask Minnie and Erma. Both of them always seem to know what's going on in town and who's doing what. They'll probably know of any houses for sale."



"You're right. Running the mercantile and the restaurant, they do seem to know what happens in town." He chuckled and added, "I guess they're both good friends to have."

They made it home and were surprised to see a basket of apples on their porch. "The men usually go pick fruit or apples in the evening, after work," she said. "I assume these are some they picked, but why do you suppose they're here now?"

"I'm not sure, but I thought I made it clear to all of them that if they want to pick fruit in the evenings on their own time, you'll make pies or desserts for them, but it has to be on their time," Wyatt said. "I don't mind once in a while, but I don't want this to become a normal thing. We have work to do during the day." He sighed as he looked around to see if any of the ranch hands were close by. "I'll carry these in the house for you after I unload the wagon."

She carried the smaller packages, and together, they took the supplies into the house and root cellar. He was ready to take the wagon to the barn and unload the supplies they'd gotten for the ranch, when Grant, one of the ranch hands, came over to greet them. "Good afternoon, Miss Elsie. Boss, I need to talk to you, and I think Miss Elsie needs to hear it, too."

Wyatt's eyebrows rose, but he nodded. "Okay, Grant, what is it?"

"Last evening after supper, I took a basket and went to pick some apples up by the big rock along the creek by the north pasture up here. I had my basket about full when I heard a noise. I turned around and saw a cougar at the edge of the woods, looking right at me and growling. I had my rifle with me, but I don't use it unless I have to on the wildlife. I watched her a bit, though, because cougars don't usually act like that."

"No, usually, if they see you, they go the other way," Wyatt said.

"Exactly. And I've never seen a cougar that close to the house, either. I know Miss Elsie doesn't have a gun, so she stays close to the house, which is good, but, ma'am, I've seen you out there on nice days. I don't blame you any because it's a real nice spot, sitting on that rock watching the creek, but I wanted to warn both of you. You may not want to go there without a gun for a bit."

Wyatt nodded in agreement. "Did you find out what was making the cougar act like that?"

"I did. As I watched her, I saw a little cub with her. I wasn't sure what exactly you'd want me to do about that, so I thought I'd let you know."

"She's a lot more dangerous with a cub, and I don't like knowing she's that close to the house and barn. I think we need to chase her off, farther back in the woods and away from the house and barn. The problem is they don't normally come that close, so if she's here with a cub, it makes me wonder if there are other cougars in the area, maybe too many."

Grant nodded. "I wondered the same thing. Maybe she can't go farther into the woods because others are chasing her out. But I don't think we want to let them stay there, either."

Wyatt sighed as he ran his hand through his hair. "No, we don't. Thank you for letting me know about this, Grant. Did you bring the apples in last night, or—"

"No, when she was growling at me, I left them there. I kept my eyes on her but slowly walked away. She didn't make any move toward me, so I figured she was just wanting me out of what she apparently now considers to be her territory. I went back early this morning, before breakfast, and brought the basket back. I was careful while I was there, looking

around, but never saw her or a cub. That doesn't mean she isn't in the area, though, so I wanted to tell both of you."

"Thank you. I guess we had all better keep a gun with us no matter where we go if we're not right at the barn." He turned to Elsie and sighed. "I know this is something else you don't want to hear, but until we find out what's going on with the cougar, Elsie, I don't want you out there, or going for walks. I know I told you you'd be safe going that far, but that's obviously changed. If you want to learn how to use a gun, I'll teach you, but until then, stay close to the house or barn, okay?"

"Okay," she said as she slumped her shoulders.

"I know you like taking walks, but I don't want you out there if there's a cougar claiming that area for herself and her cub. That's a dangerous situation."

"I understand. Thank you for the apples, Grant. Would you rather have a pie or some cobbler?"

"Anything you make with them is delicious, but if I had my choice, I love your apple cobbler."

"Cobbler it is, then," she said with a smile.

Wyatt carried the basket inside for her, then gave her a kiss before going back outside. Once he left, she put her supplies away, then started peeling apples for cobbler. Maria, who had been Wyatt's family's cook and housekeeper for years, no longer felt she was able to continue but agreed to stay on to help Elsie get acclimated to her new job and surroundings. She had two rooms off the kitchen and came out to greet Elsie when she heard them return. Seeing Elsie peeling apples, she picked up another knife. "Where did the apples come from?"

Elsie explained the story to Maria, who wasn't happy. "I don't generally go outside much, but I don't like the idea of cougars that close to the house. We'll have to keep our eyes and ears open anytime we go outside for the next while. The

garden's done for the year so we won't be out working on that, but we'll have to watch and listen when we hang up the laundry."

"I wouldn't think she'd come that close to the house, but we'll watch out for her." She told Maria about the letter from her father, and they talked about his return while they peeled apples and Elsie made apple cobbler for them and the men at the bunkhouse.

When Wyatt and Cord, his foreman, came in for supper that evening, both ladies listened as the men talked about their plans for the cougar problem. Wyatt had already talked to the men that evening before they'd come in for supper, and warned them about keeping a gun with them in that area now, as well as when they were farther from the barn. He told all of them to watch for the cougar if they were in that area. If they saw it, they were to make sure they saw where the cub was, then shoot over the cougar's head, and hopefully, it would scare it back, farther away. He also planned to have several men in that area more often for a while, hoping if she sees lots of people in that area, she will move farther into the woods on her own.

Elsie thought it sounded like a good plan and hoped it worked. "So, if they chase her back farther into the woods, how soon can I go for walks again?"

"Not for a while. Just because we don't see her for a few days, doesn't mean she's gone. There's also a chance she'll go farther into the woods, but other cougars will chase her back out."

"So, you're saying there could be too many cougars for this area?"

"There could be. We're all going to watch for cougars anywhere. If we start seeing a number of them, we may have to kill a couple to thin the number. I don't like to do that, but I may not have a choice. They all claim a certain territory so

they have enough wildlife to eat. If they don't have sufficient space, they don't have sufficient food and will start attacking our cattle. I can't let that happen."

"Have you had to do that in the past?"

"We did one time when I was younger. We also had to kill three bears one year, for the same reason."

"You killed three bears?"

"Yes. I remember we had bear stew, bear roast, bear steaks." He chuckled and added, "I never was a huge fan of bear meat, but you don't want to let it go to waste, either. We gave a bunch to our neighbors so we could get rid of it. One of our neighbors loves bear meat, so we gave them a lot of it."

"I'm glad to hear you didn't just throw the meat out," Elsie said.

"Pa would never just throw good meat out. He wasn't real big on bear meat, either, though, so he gave it to anyone who wanted it. He took some to town after they shot the third one and gave it to families who had several kids and could use a little help."

"You don't eat cougars. What do you do with them if you have to thin them out?"

"We burn them so they don't draw bigger wildlife, like bears."

"That makes sense," Elsie said. "So, how long will it be before you know what you're going to do?"

"I don't know. If the men see a lot of cougars, we'll thin them out. Then if we don't see any more, we should be safe."

"But it will probably be spring before I'll be able to go out walking again?"

"Probably, yes. I'm sorry, but I need to keep you safe. It's getting colder out now, so at least you won't have to stay inside on nice, warm days."

"Can we still go riding on nice days if we're together?"

"Of course. We'll try to go out when we can before the snow sets in."

"Good." Elsie wasn't happy about having to stay inside more, but she understood his concern. She had to admit she didn't want to go out walking and see the mother cougar. That would be terrifying. She tended to take more walks when she was worried or upset about something. Hopefully, her father would get here soon and she wouldn't have to worry about him. That would eliminate a lot of her angst.