

BEDLAM AT BIG ROCK

BIG ROCK ROMANCE - BOOK FIVE



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



EARLY 1880S, WYOMING TERRITORY

Buck Whited left the office of Big Rock's Sheriff, Jim Larkin, and headed up the street and down the next block to Jim's brother's home. Dr. Elliott Larkin and Jim had been Buck's friends since childhood, although Elliott had moved away for ten or twelve years before moving back. In those ten or twelve years, Elliott had gone to college and medical school, married, begun a family and lost his family, before returning to his hometown to start over.

Buck didn't have any children. He had lost his wife several months prior to pneumonia. His father had been murdered only a few weeks ago. He was weary of mourning and knew he needed to crawl out of this hole of grief before he became lost in it. Buck thought it would be good medicine to see his old friend.

It was late afternoon when he tethered his horse to the white fence in front of Elliott's house, which also served as the medical office. He turned onto the walkway just under the white doctor's shingle that hung from the tall end post of the fence. It was a short

walk to the house. He hopped up the two porch steps in one leap and knocked on the door. Elliott quickly answered it, thinking it was probably a patient.

"Buck! Come on in! I haven't seen you in ages," he said, shaking Buck's hand. "You sick?"

"No," Buck said, chuckling. "I just left your brother's office and thought I'd stop in and say hello before riding home. Haven't talked to you much since you moved back."

"I guess we've both had a lot going on, but I'm glad you're here now. I wish I'd been in town for Big John's funeral. I was awfully sad to hear about that, especially since it came right on the heels of losing your wife. Jim told me about it. Come on in and sit down. Want a drink? I've got brandy and whiskey."

"Nah, I don't...well, maybe a little whiskey." They both laughed and Elliott poured them drinks.

"So, Buck, how've you been doing? I know it had to be tough, losing your wife, and then Big John being killed right on the heels of it."

"Ell, it's been hard. Real hard. But I've wallowed in it long enough. They'd both want me to get on with life. For a while, I wanted to die myself, or at least I told myself that. There must be some spark in all of us that wants to go on, though. It's time. I've moved back in the big house now, since Big John was murdered. I guess that's my way of starting over. It was hard living in the house I built with Elizabeth."

"I didn't think I'd come back from losing Ruth and Willa, either. Something about losing a baby..." A flash of a painful expression crossed Elliott's face as his gaze drifted to the window, to the sun lowering in the western sky. "But," he took a breath, looked back at Buck, and his smile came back, "I have Sadie now, and I couldn't be happier."

As if on cue, Sadie came into the parlor to let Elliott know supper would be ready in a few minutes.

"Sadie, I think you met Buck Whited already, right?"

"Yes, I believe we met once before. Hello, Buck."

Buck dipped his head and tipped an imaginary hat since he'd taken his off and hung it on the hat tree when he came in. "Ma'am."

"Why don't you have supper with us, Buck? We cooked up a big ol' pot of beef stew and Elliott requested cornbread, and there's plenty."

"Oh, I probably need to be getting-"

"Nonsense," Elliott said. "You don't have to stay after you eat, and you'll still be home by dark. Might as well get a good hot meal in you before you ride home."

"Well, if you're sure."

Sadie took him by the arm and walked him to the kitchen where Callie Mae was setting the table. "Callie, we have a friend joining us—we'll need an extra place at the table."

Buck hadn't expected there to be anyone other than Elliott and Sadie.

"Oh, if you already have company, I'll just be barging in. I should go on home."

Callie Mae found her tongue. "Oh, I'm not company! I live here, too." Buck saw her face blush, as though she wished she hadn't spoken up and drawn attention to herself. Buck also noticed that she was pretty enough to attract attention. She'd certainly drawn his.

"Buck, this is Miss Callie Mae Weathers. She's a friend of Sadie's from their days at the orphanage in Pistol Pass. Callie, this is Buck Whited. I've known Buck since we were kids."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Whited." Callie blushed anew.

"Likewise, ma'am. Please call me Buck."

She lowered her gaze, and Buck found it charming.

"All right, Buck."

They all heard the front door open and close and a cheery voice called out, "Sorry I'm this late, but Tallulah needed me to help with inventory and the ledger. Oh! I didn't realize we had company." She added the last sentence as she walked into the kitchen.

Sadie laughed. "Well, we're all here now. Lilac Indigo, this is Buck Whited; he's an old friend of Elliott's. Buck, this is Lilac Indigo Preston. She's another of my friends from my orphanage days."

"You look familiar," Lilac Indigo said. "I've seen you in the Buckin' Bronc before, haven't I?"

"Yes, ma'am, I've been there. I believe I do recall you and your red hair."

She smiled and waved off the comment good-naturedly. "I hear that often. It must be hard to forget red hair!"

They sat down, and Elliott asked the blessing.

As the food was served, Elliott asked Buck about his visit with the sheriff.

"They aren't any further along on finding out who murdered Big John, or why. It's still a puzzle." Everyone called John Whited "Big John," even his own son.

"If I may ask, what were the circumstances?" Callie Mae asked.

"Well, ma'am, one day Big John was out riding the east fence loop—we've got a big spread outside of town—and that afternoon, his horse came home without him. Some of the hands and I rode out and found him. Looked like he'd been in a fist fight, and he'd been stabbed once and shot once. There were hoof prints of two other horses headed south. We think Big John may have shot one of them, because he had his gun in his hand, and there were blood drops along the trail where the hoof prints led. That eastern end of the ranch juts out into heavy woodland, so there was nobody around who could have witnessed it."

"Oh, my," Callie commiserated. "I'm very sorry for your loss, Buck. There really don't seem to be any clues to go on, I don't suppose."

Lilac Indigo spoke up. "Well, you know there are at least two of the bad guys, and one of them was wounded. Was anything else going on around town at the time, you know, like some robberies or cattle rustling?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary, I don't believe. Nothing I know of, anyway."

"Elliott," Lilac Indigo asked, "do you think the Snow brothers could help?"

Buck saw the others at the table stifle smiles.

"Well, now, I suppose it's possible. Reed Snow and his brother Deacon are detectives out of Rawlins." He looked at Buck. "They helped us quite a bit recently with a situation that had arms reaching across half the territory. They were a big help, working together with the law."

Lilac Indigo spoke up again. "Reed is, well, I guess you could call him my beau." She shifted in her chair and looked down coyly at her stew. Buck sensed it was feigned shyness. "He's coming to town in a couple of weeks on business, and I convinced him he should stay longer for the church's homecoming celebration."

Sadie chuckled. "Does that mean you plan to start going to church with us again? I seem to recall practically having to drag you, week before last, then, last week, we couldn't get you up to go."

Lilac Indigo's voice lost a bit of vitality. "Yes, I'll go," she said as she looked down at her plate.

Buck caught the playful look on Callie's face as she eyed him furtively, her amusement at Lilac Indigo's squirming quite clear.

Buck cleared his throat. "Well, I just might have to have a talk with him when he gets here," he said. "If he's that good, he might turn up something we haven't been able to find yet."

"Oh, yes, he's the best. He and his brother, of course." Her look was of sincere conviction, and Buck again noticed stifled amusement around the table.

"I will say, he's a good detective. It definitely might be worth your while to enlist his help," Elliott offered.

"When did you say your father was murdered?" Callie Mae got Buck's attention again.

"It was several weeks ago, ma'am."

"Please, call me Callie."

Lilac Indigo must have shot her a look, because Buck briefly saw Callie scowl at her. He got the idea that Lilac Indigo wasn't averse to stirring up trouble.

"You know," Lilac Indigo spoke up, "seems like it was just about six or seven weeks ago that a couple of men started coming in to the Bronc a few times. One had his arm in a sling after a while. His buddy calls him Rufus. I don't care for him. He likes to pester me."

"Lilac Indigo," said Elliott, a bit concerned, "you need to tell me if anyone bothers you at the saloon. Or at least tell Tallulah. I don't want you working there if there's any danger."

"Oh, I will, if it comes to that. It hasn't been anything I couldn't handle; not so far, anyway."

"What does he do that annoys you?" Sadie was concerned, too.

"Oh, he's just a lecherous coot. He flirts too much. He keeps telling me I should leave with him so he can give me a green gown."

Buck spluttered the coffee he'd just taken a sip of, and Elliott had to chew quickly so he could swallow a big bite of buttered cornbread.

"Why? Is that bad?" Lilac Indigo didn't understand their reactions.

Elliott glanced at Buck then took a sip of his own coffee and cleared his throat before speaking. "That's an old expression. It's not an appropriate comment for a man to make to a woman. The green refers to grass stains. He wants you to go outside and have relations with him in the grass, turning your dress green."

"Oh! Well, that scoundrel! If I'd known that, I'd have given him what-for! Besides, wouldn't it be better to take off your clothes and use a quilt on the grass?"

"Lilac Indigo!" Callie Mae was shocked.

"How do you answer when he says that?" Sadie wanted to know.

Lilac Indigo considered then laughed. "I tell him that the only person I would accept a green gown from is my beau, Mr. Snow. You know, I wondered why it was always a *green* gown he mentioned! I thought he just liked green. Besides, why would I have

to go outside with him—I wondered why he couldn't give me a dress inside."

When their laughter subsided, Elliott spoke up again, and there was fondness in his voice. "Lilac Indigo, I'm sure you can handle most situations, but as long as you're living here with us, I feel responsible for your safety. I'd feel awful if something were to happen to you. I want you to consider cutting back your hours."

"I'll think about it, I promise. But can we discuss it later? Right now, I don't work many nights, and that's usually when it gets the rowdiest."

"That's all I ask, that you think about it. I know you want to work, and I admire that. But I don't want you taking any risks."

Buck tried to be helpful. "That might be a discussion to bring your beau into, too. That Snow fellow."

Callie and Sadie looked down, and Buck could see they were trying not to show amusement. Lilac Indigo blushed and said hesitantly, "Well, maybe 'beau' is a strong word." Then a big smile broke out on her face. "But I do get letters from him!"

Elliott rescued her. "I think it's fair to say that Mr. Snow is interested in you, Lilac Indigo. You've completely charmed him. Just because nothing's official yet, doesn't mean the sentiment isn't there."

Lilac Indigo smiled appreciatively.

"I'd probably better be leaving soon. It's a long ride home," Buck said as he stretched back in his chair.

"Oh, but you don't want to leave without Callie's peach cobbler," Sadie said, rising from her chair. She brought five bowls from the sideboard, then brought the cobbler to the table.

"Callie makes the best cobbler you've ever had—even better than you can get at Mary's Restaurant, but don't tell Mary I said that!"

"I'll let you twist my arm on that." Buck winked at Callie, and she smiled back at him.

Sadie topped their cobblers with fresh cream, and they ate their dessert with coffee and small talk.

When they were all through, Buck stood up to excuse himself. "I sure do thank you ladies for the fine meal. I can't remember when I've had better food or better company. I'd like to reciprocate, but I'm just not that good a cook. This might be a one-sided relationship, I'm afraid."

They laughed with him. "Buck, you are welcome to stop by anytime and join us; you're always welcome. No invitation needed," Sadie said.

"I'm surely glad to hear that," he said as he looked directly at Callie, then he turned to his hosts. "Elliott, Sadie, thank you again. Lilac Indigo, I wish you a happy outcome with Mr. Snow, and thank you for suggesting his services. I will definitely talk with him when he comes to town. Please ask him to contact me. And Callie," he took her hand as if to shake it, then covered it with both of his, "I hope to see you again soon."

Callie Mae blushed. "I hope so, too."

"Ell, walk me out," Buck said as he tossed his head toward the front door.

"Sure," Elliott said, slapping him on the back.

Once out at the fence, Buck turned and leaned on it. "Now tell me how in the Sam Hill you ended up living with three women?"

Elliott laughed. "Long story, my friend. I'll give you the short version. They all lived at an orphanage in Pistol Pass. When Sadie neared her eighteenth birthday, they arranged a marriage for her. She hated the old coot and ran away before the wedding. I happened to find her. Damned if I didn't fall in love right off the bat. Ended up marrying her. Anyway, when we were in Crawford, we found out there was a woman named Lilac Indigo working at the saloon. Sadie had a friend named Lilac Indigo from the orphanage who had been married off a year before. We figured it had to be her, so we checked it out. Sure enough, it was."

This time, Buck laughed. "I'm sure it had to be the same girl."

Not sure the world could survive two Lilac Indigos, and I just met her!"

"Buck," Elliott paused to chuckle some more, "you have no idea. She's a handful. Anyway, come to find out, the marriages were shams. The old bastard was taking the women to work in his saloons and whorehouses. It was bad. Some died at his hands. So, we took in Lilac Indigo to get her away from that. Callie Mae was still at the orphanage, and I felt compelled to rescue her, too. She's been filling in for the schoolteacher some. I'm proud of how she's come along. They don't have anyone else or any other place to go. I've grown fond of both of them; it's like they're my little sisters."

"You always were a good man. The responsible one. Still, though, it must be tough corralling three women!"

"Yessiree. You'd think three women might be three times smarter and wiser than one. I thought that. I was wrong."

"Have you had problems?"

"At first, but we found our way. Well, I found a way. It's not elegant, but it works." Elliott had a sly smirk on his face.

Buck was curious. "What are you talking about?"

"Do you remember what happened to us when we turned over old man Turner's outhouse?"

"No!"

"Oh, yes."

Buck burst out laughing. "I guess it does work. I sure as hell never tipped over another outhouse after that!"

"Neither did I."

"I'll have to remember that." He paused. "So, tell me, does Callie have any gentleman callers?"

"She does not. I take it you're interested in her?"

"I'd like to call on her again, yes."

"She's a sweet girl. I'll talk to her. After what they went through at the orphanage, I don't want to speak for her. I don't want to invite someone to court her unless she's amenable. But from what I

NORA NOLAN

observed at the table, she'll welcome you. When will you be back in town?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"Come by for supper."

"All right, I'll be here."

They shook hands, and Buck headed home.