

PEOPLE OF THE SUN
CHAPTER 12
Wyoming 1952
Ten Sleep

L.J. eased himself into the saddle using the top rails of the chute for balance. The gelding bucked a little when the animal felt the weight but he was confined and snorted his displeasure. L.J. gave a nod to the cowboy at the gate and, in the next second, man and animal were in the arena together, each of them fighting to dominate the other. He admired the gelding's spirit as the animal twisted and turned, spinning about to show him just who was the master of the moment. In the next second L.J. was flying through the air and landed in the dirt. When he dusted himself off and climbed back over the corral rails the men around him were laughing.

Ty slapped him on the back, grinning, "I told ya they didn't call him Flash Dancer for the hell of it. That beast ain't been rode yet and I doubt it's gonna happen in yer lifetime."

L.J.'s bad knee hurt as much as his pride. "We'll just see about that."

He didn't make much on the saddle bronc event but Ty and L.J. did well steer wrestling and team roping. This was the third and last day of the Ten Sleep 4th of July rodeo and it was Saturday night. The small Wyoming town was full of cowboys ready to unwind. Ty and L.J. started hitting the bars at seven that night and were still going strong by eleven. Girls half their age tried to pick them up but besides the obvious they had little appeal to L.J. once they opened their mouths to speak. Ty on the other hand was more than happy to accept their youthful enthusiasm and take advantage of it.

The phantom still came and went as he chose, engaging L.J. in conversation at times or content watching him from a distance without saying anything at all. His messages were cryptic, as if there was some puzzle L.J. was supposed to discover, but delivered in such a way that made it seem as if there was some joke that everyone understood except him. The only time he really felt complete was during that eight-second ride.

A woman in her late twenties or early thirties came up to him at the bar while his back was turned, "Hi cowboy. Can I buy you a drink?"

L.J. turned his head and studied her with his gaze in such a way that seemed to say, "I like what I see but I'm not interested," but said instead, "Sure why not. I'm drinkin Jack."

She ordered two shots from the bartender and held out her hand, "My name's Nancy Stryker. That was my horse that dumped you on your backside this afternoon." She smiled, "You stayed on longer than most." The bartender brought their drinks and she held up her glass, "Cheers."

He held up his, "To Flash Dancer." He upended the glass and finished the drink, "Bartender, two more." He looked back at her and thought she was pretty. She reminded him a little of Lizzie but with far more experience in the world. "Is that what you do, raise stock for rodeo?"

She took another sip of bourbon, "I'm more of a broker, but yes, among other things. Flash Dancer is my greatest success. He draws crowds and the promoters like him on the bill."

L.J. subconsciously stood up a little straighter so she'd have to look up to see his eyes, "Where ya takin him next?"

His attention pleased and excited her more than she wanted to let him know. She sensed that he couldn't wait to try Dancer again. "We're booked for Frontier Days in Cheyenne." She held out her hand again, "See ya around cowboy."

He took her hand, held it just long enough to let her know he was interested and smiled, "There ain't a horse that can't be rode."

She laughed, "We'll just have to see about that."

He tipped his hat as she started to walk away, "Mam."

A voice behind him said, "You're married boy. Besides she'd eat ya up en spit out what's left."

L.J. turned back to the bar and the apparition stared back at him, "Mind your own business."

He felt a slap on the back and turned to see Ty standing there with his arm around a girl, “Who’re you talkin to?”

The smell of her perfume still lingered in the air. “My conscience.” L.J. finished his drink, “I’m goin back to the motel. I’ll see you later.”

“Don’t wait up pard. I might be a while.”

When he left the bar the cool, fresh night air felt good. He began walking back to their room, took a cigarette out of his pack and lit it. He wondered where Katherine was tonight. What she was doing? Who she was with?

A couple of blocks from the bar a pink fifty-one Cadillac convertible pulled up and Nancy Ryker smiled back at him, “You want a ride cowboy? I’m goin your way.”

He walked out into the street, over to her car and leaned against the driver’s side door, inches from her face. “I’m married mam.”

She opened the door and slid over to the passenger seat, “I’m not.”

There was a moment’s hesitation before he closed the door, “See ya in Cheyenne.”

He started to walk away, and she called after him, “Hey Stewart!”

L.J. flicked the rest of his cigarette into the street, “How’d ya know my name?”

“You have any idea how much stock I’ve delivered to the Prescott Rodeo over the years? Besides your name’s in the program.” She was still laughing as her tires squealed and the Cadillac burned rubber down the block.

They had the horses in the trailer and their things packed by nine the next morning. It was unclear between the two of them who was more hung over. The only comfort they had was the silence between them as they worked. L.J. sat down in the passenger seat and asked, “Ya ready ta get something ta eat?”

Ty put the truck in gear, “There’s a truck stop down the road a piece. I’ll stop there.”

Thirty minutes later they were sitting having coffee at the counter when a family of tourists sat in the booth behind them. L.J. heard them discussing their vacation. They were on their way to the Black Hills Monument but wanted to stop by the Little Big Horn battlefield first. When the waitress brought their eggs L.J. asked her, "How far is the Custer battle ground from here?"

She grabbed a coffee pot and started to refill their cups, "I spect it's about three hours north uh here. That place gives me the willies though, with all them soldiers gettin killed up there."

Ty took a bite of his eggs, wondering how they would settle on his stomach, "I didn't know ya went in fer history."

L.J. took a sip of coffee, "I got some family buried close by. Do ya mind if we take some time and go up there?"

"Hell, no pard, we don't have ta be in Laramie till the end uh the week."

They saw the sign for the national monument a little after one that afternoon as a large group of thunderheads started to roll in from the west. Ty parked the truck. "I'm gonna git some shut eye pard. Besides I'm not partial ta gettin wet."

L.J. opened the door, "I won't be long." He saw the tourists from the restaurant looking at the tombstones in the graveyard at the top of the hill.

A familiar voice behind him said, "She ain't up there with the blue belly's son." The phantom stood next to him and pointed, "She's down yonder towards the river." L.J. started walking that way with the ghostly sound of his companion's Mexican spurs being carried away by the wind. L.J. stopped but the phantom walked a few more paces before squatting down on his haunches, "She died right here savin our boy, yer brother. Matoskah weren't more en sixteen and he buried her right here." His hand gently reached out to caress the grass, "I should uh been there fer em." He stood up and looked L.J. in the eye, "Couldn't be there fer yer ma either."

There was a crack of thunder followed by a jagged streak of lighting. L.J. turned to look and when he turned back his sidekick was gone. It started to rain as he walked back towards the graveyard and looked around. He could see right away that Custer and his men had a great field of fire but that wasn't enough to stop the swollen tide of warriors coming at them. It reminded him

suddenly of the countryside around Bullingen and Elsenborn Ridge where Saul died. Water started to drip from the brim of his Stetson as he stood there on the hill where the Seventh spent their last moments. Why he wondered did he live when so many died?

The passenger door slammed shut and Ty groaned, “Give a guy a break. My head is splittin.”

L.J. took out a cigarette, “Ya want me to drive?”

“Nah, I’ll drive. It’ll keep my mind on somethin else.” He put the truck in gear and headed back down the road towards the highway. “You okay pard?”

The rain began to fall harder, washing away some grime from the windshield, turning it briefly to mud before becoming clear again. The wipers moved across the glass this way and that as L.J. rolled down the window a crack to get some fresh air, “I’m gettin there.”

L.J. threw a good loop. From the time he was a little boy he practiced with the lariat, roping fence posts before gradually working his way up to dogs and chickens around the ranch yard. When they branded at the ranch he could snag the back hoof of a calf in one try. He was the one that talked Ty into signing up for team roping. They placed third in Ten Sleep and signed up again in Laramie for the Jubilee Day Rodeo. The only thing that stood in their way was Two Bits, the horse L.J. was using. The animal was okay when L.J. rode him to haze for Ty but they needed something better for calf roping. The trouble was that animals like that didn’t grow on trees.

They arrived in Laramie two days early and L.J. spent his time working with him and the animal gradually began to respond the way he wanted him to. He began to realize just how much he liked working with horses, teaching them to be the best they could at the task expected of them. That’s the way it was when he trained Shadow as a young man. For the last several years L.J. felt like the little boy with his finger in the dyke when it came to trying to make a profit from a cow and calf operation on the ranch. It was just enough to pay the bills when the market was good and a struggle when prices went down. The real money was in feed yards like the ones in Colorado.

The first night in Laramie L.J. called Karl to ask him if Gil Masters delivered the car. His mother answered the phone and he could tell by the tone of her voice she wasn’t happy with him.

He had to remind her that he was forty years old and could make his own decisions. She reminded him that he was married and told him his wife had called.

After she finished talking to him, Wachiwi handed the phone to Karl. The old wrangler said, "How ya doin hoss?"

"Better, I think. Did that kid show up with the car?"

"Yah, nice fella, I put him to work like ya asked but an extra hand around here is gettin kind uh tight on the purse strings."

Four years before, Shadow had sired a colt that L.J. had been working with since that time. He was one of the best roping horses he'd ever trained. The bay gelding just seemed to have the sense of just what to do and when to do it. "I want ya to put Gil on a train with Rabbit and ship him to Cheyenne by the fifteenth. I'll meet them there."

Karl hesitated a minute before saying, "That ain't gonna be cheap hoss."

"It'll pay. I'll send ya the money as soon as I can."

It was a profitable weekend. L.J. came in first in saddle bronc and team roping. Ty came in third steer wrestling. The two men shared expenses fifty-fifty and they were using Ty's rig but L.J. was making most of the money. L.J. noticed that Ty seemed to be spending more time in the bars. On the day, they left Laramie for Cheyenne it was Ty that brought up the subject. "I'm not pullin my part uh the load partner."

L.J. was lost in thought about some of the things his mother had said. "It'll even out in the end."

"Maybe so, maybe not, but I'm thinkin I'll try bulls over in Cheyenne."

That got L.J.'s attention, "Have ya ever tried ridin bulls?"

Ty wanted to be careful about his answer. "Yep, a few years back but I quit."

L.J. studied him for a minute, "I'd think it over Ty, real hard."

“I have pard, but this is all I know and I ain’t goin back ta my folks in Elko.”

It seemed to L.J. that his friend was grabbing at straws and asked, “Have you ever tried anything else, another event, roping or bronc riding?”

“Naw, bulls pay more. If I’m gonna take the chance uh gettin stomped I might as well make more money while I’m doin it.”

His mind seemed to be made up and L.J. decided to let the subject drop, for a while anyway, and see just what would happen in Cheyenne.

The night before his mother had tried to talk him into going home. She said if he wanted his marriage to work he had to fight for it and stop running away. It occurred to him that she might be right. But the question that kept coming back to him was running away from what or who?

The voice of the phantom in his head chuckled and said, “Yer runnin from yerself boy, and L.J. replied, “Maybe I’m runnin from you.”

Ty looked over at him with a puzzled expression, “What do ya mean yer runnin away?”

“It’s nothing Ty. I was just thinkin about something else.” He put his hat down over his eyes, “Watch the road. I’m gettin some shut eye.”