

A DARK NIGHT

ON THE PRAIRIE



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“Bang!” I shouted as I fired my imaginary revolver. I ducked behind the water barrel, my back against the barn wall. I peered out at the evil outlaws who had come to kill me. There were three of them: one was Fly, our scruffy old dog; the second was my mom; and the third was... well, there was nobody else for miles around, so I had to just imagine the third outlaw taking cover behind the henhouse. I could barely see anything, though, as it was almost dark. Out here on the prairie, in the middle of nowhere, it got dark real quick, and the sun had already dipped behind the distant hills.

“Tom,” Mom warned, “don’t joke around.” She was uneasy tonight. We always came out at dusk for one last stroll around our little homestead farm, but tonight she had brought her rifle, and it was loaded. My father had died of typhoid when I was a baby, so now Mom and I lived out here, all alone, with only the dog for company. Yesterday, the sheriff from the nearby town had ridden out to warn us about the Cassidy brothers, who were dangerous outlaws. There were three of them, and they had been seen somewhere not too far away from here.

“I ain’t joking, Mom,” I replied. “I’m training, just in case the Cassidys come.”

Fly was sniffing at the dusty ground, searching for prairie dogs or skunks. I hoped he wouldn’t find one of those stinking beasts, but it wouldn’t be the first time! I shot my invisible gun and shouted, “Gotcha, Fly!”

“Come on, Tom,” Mom called to me. “Time for bed.” She turned towards our house. Well, I call it a house, but really it was a cabin built of logs. It had a low roof of wooden shingles and a stone chimney stack. My father and mother had built that house, and the barn, 12 years ago. I had lived there all my life and could hardly believe that anywhere else in the world existed. Now, though, the barn badly needed a new roof, which we couldn’t afford. Mom had been worried sick about that, and now she was worried about the Cassidys too.

I ran to join her. Just as we reached the door, Fly began to bark.

“Quiet, boy,” I said.

He barked again.

He was looking towards the east where it was darkest. I crouched down and held him to me. “Ssshhh,” I said, and we listened for the sound of hooves. I heard the cry of a hawk and the hiss of the breeze blowing over the prairie. And then I heard the drumming sound of approaching horses. They were galloping.

They were almost upon us before we could see them: three huge black shapes in the darkness, racing across the prairie. I thought they were going to crash right into us and I almost cried out. Fly barked and the lead horse reared, throwing its rider to the ground. The second thundered past us before its rider managed to make it stop. The third veered off to one side, its hooves skidding in the dust as it came to a sudden halt. “Woah!” the rider cried as he reined the horse in and brought it trotting back towards us. “Nearly rode straight into your house! It’s so dark out here already. Could hardly see a thing.”

“Sure is,” Mom replied. She was already heading over to the man who had fallen, and the other two riders dismounted. I took the reins of their agitated horses and tied them to the hitching post. One of the men fetched the riderless horse and brought it back, tethering it beside the others.

The man on the ground was groaning and we all gathered round him, Mom crouching at his side.

“Best get him inside,” Mom said.

I led the way, and the two men carried their companion after me. Inside, we had a table and a bench, a rocking chair and a black, iron range for cooking on. A ladder led up to the loft where Mom and I slept, and a low door led to a storeroom where we kept jars of pickles, small sacks of grain and some salted meat.

Soon, the groaning man was lying on a makeshift bed of blankets in the storeroom. By the light of a hurricane lantern, Mom was checking his injuries. She looked up at the other two men. “He’s been shot,” she said.

“Yes ma’am,” the younger of the two men replied. He glanced at the older man, and then added, “Bandits did it. We were lucky to get away.”

I wondered why they hadn’t told us this sooner, and I tried not to look at the revolvers hanging from their belts in leather holsters.

Fly was sniffing around with interest. “Come here, Fly,” I said, pulling him back so that Mom could dress the man’s wound without Fly’s slavering muzzle getting in the way.

Mom knew a lot about medicine and how to treat wounds. She had the dark skin and shiny, black hair of the Lakota Sioux people. I also had long, black Lakota hair, but had inherited my father’s pale skin.

“Tom,” Mom said, “these gentlemen must be hungry.”

“We sure are, ma’am,” said the younger one, politely.

Feeling very uneasy, I went into the other room. I lit some candles, stoked the fire and stirred the pot of stew that Mom had prepared earlier.

The two men followed me. The spurs on their boots jangled as they walked. They took off their hats and sat on the long bench at the table. Whoever these men were, they were here now and there was nothing we could do about that. We might as well help the injured man, show them some kindness, and hope they go on their way without causing any trouble.

“He’ll live,” Mom said, standing and wiping her hands on a cloth. “I’ve stopped the bleeding. He’s sleeping now, but he’ll need some medicine. One of you had best ride into town tomorrow and pick some up. It’s an hour’s ride away, due south.”

“I gotta thank you, ma’am,” said the older man. He was built like an ox. He had a scruffy beard which was going grey, and his long hair was tied back in a ponytail.

“Thank you both for your kindness,” the younger man echoed. His face was stubbly and he had curly, blond hair. He smiled at us. I thought it was strange that neither of them got up to go and see their injured companion.

As I served the stew, the younger man picked up the wooden spoon I had given him. That was when I noticed that his right hand had a finger missing. Mom and I looked at each other nervously. Yesterday, the sheriff had told us that one of the Cassidy brothers had lost a finger some years ago.

The older man smiled and ate a mouthful of stew. "Mmm," he said, "you are a good cook, ma'am," and he shovelled in another mouthful. Then, still chewing and allowing gravy to run down his chin into his beard, he said, "It's mighty polite of you not to comment on my little brother's hand. I saw you looking." He grinned. There was meat between his teeth.

The younger man held his hand up as if showing it off. "Mighty polite," he agreed.

Mom, knowing that he knew what we were thinking, said, "You're the Cassidy brothers, ain't you."

"We sure are, lady," said the older man. "I'm Wyatt, and my brother here is Roy."

I had gone cold. Wyatt, Roy and Scoot Cassidy were known to be ruthless outlaws, and here they were in our house.