

*Former rivals, now brothers-in-law, Rusty Blackstone and Warren Weston join forces to pursue their rodeo dreams in the year of Covid.*

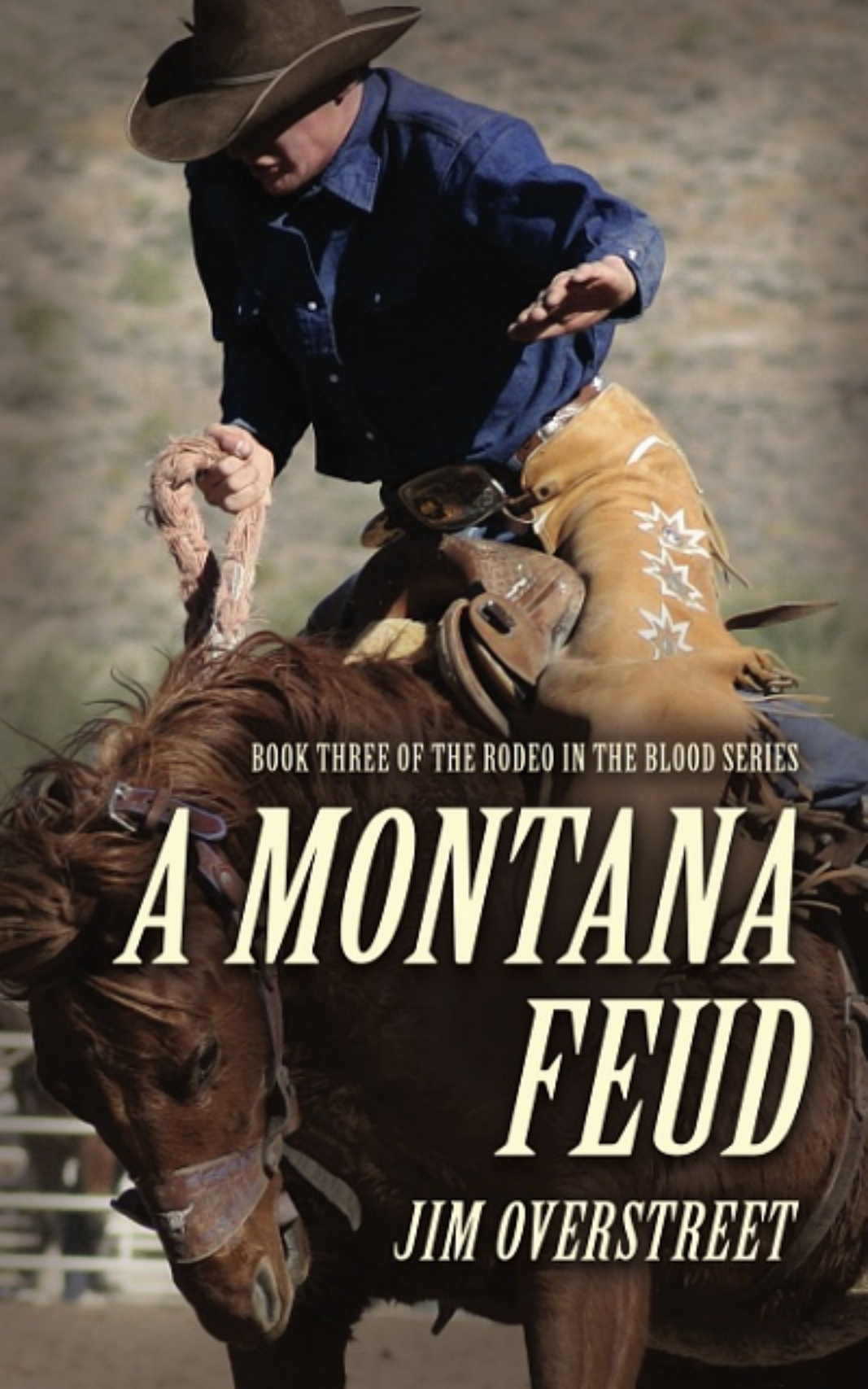
## **A Montana Feud**

By Jim Overstreet

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A photograph of a cowboy riding a brown horse. The cowboy is wearing a brown cowboy hat, a blue denim shirt, and tan leather boots with white star patterns. He is holding a rope in his right hand. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

BOOK THREE OF THE RODEO IN THE BLOOD SERIES

# *A MONTANA FEUD*

*JIM OVERSTREET*

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Print ISBN: 978-1-959620-17-4

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-770-2

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.

2024

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Overstreet, Jim

A Montana Feud by Jim Overstreet

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024915348

# CHAPTER 1

**July 28, 2020**

**Westmont Ranch**

**White Sulphur Springs, Montana**

Bracing an elbow on her knee, Jenny Ward Weston aimed the rifle. No matter how hard she tried to hold steady, the crosshairs in the scope wobbled slightly. Already in a snit, this irritated her further. Her target, a block of cottonwood that had not yet been split for the stove, sat a couple hundred feet away. It had a two-inch stub-branch sticking out that she imagined was her ex-husband Warren Weston's nose. She had drawn his eyes and smirking mouth in with a black marker. As a final touch she had placed one of his old cowboy hats on top. It was black and crusted with age and sweat.

She gritted her teeth and just before she pulled the trigger, thought 'fuck it.' Her finger squeezed as the cross hairs hovered over the space between his eyes. The rifle butt kicked against her shoulder with the force of a fist, but without causing enough pain to make her stop.

Although the roar nearly blocked out all other sensations, she saw the chunk of wood jump and spin. Warren's hat flew delightfully into the air and crumpled in the dust. She couldn't tell exactly where the bullet had struck but felt a trill of satisfaction and a tiny bit less angry. The block lay on its side angled away from her. Readjusting her aim, she blasted two holes into the hat. With her fourth shot, the block jumped in the air and tumbled further up the slope. Her blood lust was up, and she fired rapidly until she emptied the clip.

A petite woman, with dark brown hair, a tiny nose and a pleasing figure, Jenny normally came off as cute, but anyone witnessing the fire in her eyes and her aggressive shooting would have seen someone unexpectedly frightening. The rifle, a .270 caliber, belonged to her ex. It had been a Christmas gift from his mother when he was twelve. Jenny had known him to carry it elk hunting a few times during their marriage, but he'd never brought home any meat. If he ever asked for it, she'd let him take it.

Jenny had learned to shoot as a teen on her uncle's ranch in the Snowy Mountains east of Lewistown. She had never practiced shooting much and seldom hunted, but today the urge to do violence had become so strong that she had to do something. Over the next half hour, she shot up the remaining shells in both boxes and allowed the dangerous peak of her anger to recede. By the end, her shoulder ached but her emotional health was much improved.

Too bad, she thought, that I can't get Warren in my sights instead of a block of wood. It would be an easy way to solve a lot of problems and there would be something poetic in killing the man with his own rifle. Don't be a fool, she told herself. Todd needs his mother.

She gathered up the shell casings and then grinned as she picked up the remnants of Warren's hat before turning for home. Dust on the road appeared to be from a vehicle moving away and for a minute Jenny wondered who she missed. Where the road bent north, she saw an old black pickup, Harlan's. She felt a bit disappointed to have missed her old friend, but knew that if he'd wanted something important, he'd have interrupted her.

The immediate cause of Jenny's black mood began with a call that morning. She had barely gotten started in the hayfield when her phone rang. She must have been in the only spot where a cell signal came in. She recognized the number. She hesitated before answering. Bad news or good, she knew she had to take it. The secretary-receptionist for Carl Stephens, the attorney, demanded that she come to the office ASAP. The woman had refused to divulge any details. Since Stephens was executor for the estate of Robert Weston, the man who had been both her lover and father-in-law, she expected it had something to do with Warren's efforts to interfere with settling his father's estate.

Already stressed from the call, Jenny drove faster than she should have, parked her truck crossways and then burst through the outer door of the law office. Without even looking at the receptionist, she pushed into Carl Stephens inner sanctum. Jerking a chair back from in front of his desk, she plopped herself into it and squinted at the man for a few seconds. Finally, she said, "So what's so all fired important that you can't talk about it over the telephone?"

"Warren has filed suit to set aside his father's will," Stephens said.

When Robert Weston had been murdered by his wife the previous October, he had left his shares in the Westmont Ranch to Jenny's five-year-old son, Todd. Bypassing Warren, he left everything to the boy he thought was his grandson. He had named Carl Stephens, the attorney who had drawn up the will, as his personal representative.

Jenny's shoulders slumped and her lip curled in complete distaste. "I guess that's no surprise at this point," she growled.

"My ex-husband is a complete jerk. You already told me that you don't think he has a case he can win."

"I also told you that he could drag it out long enough to keep your personal and financial life in an uproar for years," Stephens said. "It will bleed the estate."

"Can't you file a motion to get the whole thing thrown out?"

"I intend to, but Warren has an excellent attorney. The issues he raises look substantive on the surface and I doubt the judge will toss it. Even if he does, Warren is apt to appeal."

"I know," Jenny said with resignation. "More time, more money."

Stephens nodded. "It's also time for me to hire my own attorney. And you know where the money for that is coming from."

"Tell me again, why you, a lawyer, need to hire another lawyer," Jenny demanded.

"I'm sure you've heard that old saying, he who acts as his own attorney has a fool for a client. Besides, I will likely be a witness in the case and have to testify."

"I don't like it," Jenny said. "But I guess there is nothing I can do about it."

"Have you considered my suggestion that you hire an attorney for yourself?" Stephens asked.

"I've got someone in mind," Jenny said. "What about the appraisal? Have you heard anything? How much am I going to owe the IRS?"

"I'm supposed to have the appraisal in my hand by next Wednesday," Stephens said. "I talked to the appraiser and can tell you where it is going to come in if you'd like to know."

“Fuck, man, you try my patience,” Jenny said. “Of course, I want to know.”

“Thirty-seven five.”

Jenny’s eyebrows moved up her forehead and got stuck. “What do you mean thirty-seven five? Thirty-seven million?”

“Yes. Thirty-seven million five hundred thousand dollars.”

“Holyshit, that’s too much. Can we get another appraiser to give us a lower estimate?”

“I don’t know,” Stephens said. “When I get the actual appraisal, you can come in and we’ll look at the comps. After that, if you still want me to, I can talk to someone about a second opinion. That would cause more delay and, of course, cost more money.”

“If we end up stuck with the thirty-seven million, how much will the tax be?”

Stephens pulled a small calculator out of a drawer and said, “You own sixty percent of the ranch. So twenty-two million five hundred thousand dollars plus approximately five hundred fifty thousand remaining in Robert’s trust. Twenty-three million fifty thousand dollars less the untaxed portion of eleven million seven hundred fifty thousand. That leaves eleven million three hundred thousand you’ll have to pay tax on. Take that times forty percent and you get four million five hundred twenty thousand.”

Standing now, Jenny slammed her hand against the top of the desk. “What? This is a cattle ranch, not a gawddamned gold mine.”

“The only thing I can say is that with current land values, you won’t have to sell all that much.”



“What about the debt already on the place, almost two million dollars. Surely, we can deduct that from the value.”

“I’m afraid not.”

Jenny threw her hands in the air, cursed and started for the door. She stopped and turned back. “I want my son to inherit a working cattle ranch. Not the leftovers.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Stephens said, raising his hand. “I almost forgot there is also a penalty for a generation skipping transfer. I’ll have to find out how much that is.”

Jenny spun away and slammed both doors before she got to the street. In her pickup, she sat for a moment and let tears of frustration drip down her cheeks. The stress of running a large ranch with a crew of barely manageable men plus the looming debt to the IRS and now Warren filing suit weighed heavily on her hopes and dreams.

**July 28, 2020**

**Iowa’s Championship Rodeo**

**Sidney, Iowa**

Two hours before the rodeo, Rusty Blackstone couldn’t sit still. He tucked an errant tuft of red hair back under his straw cowboy hat and began to move. Striding around the outside of the arena, he walked with his head down, thinking about steer wrestling. In his mind, he rehearsed all the variations that might come up in his run and imagined himself adjusting for each one. He liked to compete and was anxious to get on with it.

Rusty had won his second World Championship at the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas the previous December. His 2020 season started well through the winter rodeos in Arizona and Texas. Then, because of soaring Covid-19 infections, in March, the mayor of Houston closed the Stock Show and Rodeo in the middle of the competition. With nearly all rodeos suddenly canceled, Rusty holed up in New Mexico with his father for a month. Then in April he got a call from Doris Olds. He had worked for her and her husband, Kenny, from the eighth grade through high school and part-time after that. They had practically adopted him. Doris had been nearly hysterical on the phone but managed to tell Rusty that Kenny was in the hospital after having a stroke. Rusty quickly loaded up and headed north. There were too many miles to cover and Doris herself died before he could get there to help her. Kenny lingered for a few days before he, too, passed away. Rusty was astounded to discover that they'd left him their ranch.

By the time the rodeo season picked up again, with a few large rodeos around the Fourth of July, Rusty had worked a lease and calf-share arrangement with one of his neighbors. He reserved the house and enough acreage for his horses to graze.

Back at his pickup and trailer, Rusty resisted saddling Apache, one of the best steer wrestling horses in professional rodeo, because he thought it was too early. Instead, he made a telephone call. When a woman's voice answered, Rusty said, "Hello, I'm trying to reach Ray McDonnell. Is this the right number?"

"Yes, but Ray is still at work."

"When would be a good time to call?"

"He'll be home in the next hour or so. But he usually practices roping on Tuesdays. It's hard to say when he'll be home from that, nine, nine-thirty or ten. May I tell him who is calling?"

"Sure, this is Rusty Blackstone. We've never met, and he's probably never heard of me."

"I'll tell him," she said. "Could he call you back?"

"He could try," Rusty said and gave her his phone number. "I'm up in a rodeo tonight, I leave my phone in the rig, so it could be hit or miss."

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Rusty straddled Apache and mentally rehearsed his run. The rodeo announcer said, "Next up is Rusty Blackstone a two-time and reigning World Champion in this event. As steer wrestler's go, Rusty is on the small side. He makes up for it with determination and faultless technique."

Several of the steers that had run ahead of Rusty started slow. Rusty gave his steer too much start and the animal turned out to be extra fast. Even with Apache's speed, they got down the arena too far. Still, he jumped off and threw the animal. He executed a near perfect take down and the steer landed with all four feet in the air.

Afterward, Casey his traveling partner, who had been hazing on Peanut asked, "You were out of the money, why did you jump that steer?"

Rusty grinned and said, "There are thousands of people here. The announcer told them that I'm the reigning World Champion. They paid good money to see me throw a steer. Besides, he was running straight, and I don't want to get in the habit of riding by a decent steer."

Casey, with lips widened into a half-smile, said, “You’d been, what, four days without bulldogging? You probably needed the practice.”

Casey threw his steer in 4.6 and led the rodeo at the end of the first performance. The two cowboys loaded their horses in the trailer and headed for Dodge City, Kansas where they were scheduled to compete the following morning. Google maps suggested that it would be a six-and-a-half-hour drive. Since only short sections of the trip were on interstate highways, they figured with pulling a trailer and stopping to refuel, it would take more like seven and a half hours. Since Rusty liked to listen to audio books, he had reserved a mystery for the late-night drive, and he let Casey take the first shift.

## CHAPTER 2

With Casey driving, Rusty called Amanda Wagner, his fiancé. "I made a perfect throw," he said. "It felt great, but I was too far down the arena to win anything."

"Dang," she said. "At least you enjoyed it." She paused for a second and then continued, "Guess who I saw today?"

"I only know a few people in Utah. If it wasn't Clint Rawlins, I can't think of who it could be."

"He was parked in my lot when I got home tonight."

Rusty knew. "Shit! Paul!" Amanda's ex-husband.

"Yes. Right in front of my apartment. I only stopped long enough for him to see me videoing with my phone and then I circled back out onto the street. He followed me but I lost him with a couple of quick turns and a timely red light. I called a police officer I know and asked him to park his car in my lot until I got in the door."

"I thought he would still be in jail," Rusty said.

Amanda said, "I still can't believe he threatened you with a gun and then shot out your tire."

"Yes, and I'm still trying to come to terms with you placing yourself between me and him."

Amanda ignored that and said, "I heard they kept him in jail overnight and the next morning his dad put up five thousand dollars to bail him out."

"They don't take gun threats very seriously in Utah, I guess," Rusty said.

"I never found out for sure, but I think he has a juvenile record. Of course, they can't use that now."

"It worries me, you living alone and Paul stalking you. Could you stay with you parents for a while?"

"I could but with the traffic like it is, I think I'm safer dealing with Paul than trying to make the commute from Ogden every day."

Changing the subject, Rusty asked, "How's your wedding planning coming?"

"Would you mind getting married in my folks back yard? I had a church wedding already, and you know how that worked out."

"That would be okay with me, but wouldn't that put a lot of pressure on your mother? There must be a renovated barn or something close by that would make a nice place for a small ceremony. Corinne and Warren got married in the large dining room of a dude ranch earlier this summer. It was simple and classy in a cowboy sort of way. If you can keep it pretty much to immediate family, we could afford a basic catered meal afterward. I can cover the cost."

"Are you still thinking that one day the third week in September would be good?" Amanda asked.

"Yes, so long as you don't mind going to the Pro Tour Finale in Rapid City on your honeymoon."

Amanda laughed, "I've never been to Rapid City, and I suspect that from now on it's going to be about fitting my life into your rodeo schedule. I just as well start now."

"I won't let it get that bad," Rusty promised. "I'll try to be flexible. But you'll have tell me straight out what's important to you when the time comes. I'm not good at taking hints."

"I know what you do for a living," Amanda said. "I wouldn't want to make you miss a rodeo in case it made the difference for you to qualify for the National Finals."

"Let's not worry about that until we get there," Rusty said. "Back to this thing with Paul. Do you need to get a restraining order? I want you to stay safe. Will your cop friend escort you home every day?"

"Don't worry, I can handle Paul."

"You shouldn't have to," Rusty said. "I'd feel better if you had some bear spray or a pistol or something."

"Dad bought me a small taser that I could carry on my belt, and I've got a can of mace in my purse."

"Get a big can of bear spay. If it will turn a grizzly, it ought to work on Paul. Give him a good blast before he gets close enough for your taser."

After they ended the call, Casey said, "They let that goofy bastard out already?"

"Yup."

"He timed his getaway good that day in Spanish Fork," Casey continued. "I was about six inches from jerking him out of his pickup. If I'd got my hands on him, he'd still be in the hospital."

"At least, the way it turned out, you're not in jail for assault."

"I'm twenty-nine years old and been in some fairly dicey situations. Until this year, I never got shot at. Now, in six months' time, I've been shot at twice. I'm thankful that this time nobody got hit, if we don't count your tire."

Somewhere on Highway 75, a few miles north of the Kansas state line, Rusty's phone rang. The caller asked, "Is this Rusty Blackstone the steer wrestler?"

"Yes, I am."

"This is Ray McDonnell. What can I do for you?"

"I understand that you are a pretty good header."

"I don't know. Fair, I guess."

"I'm trying to win the Linderman Award this year. You know that takes winning at least a thousand dollars in three events including at least one timed event and one riding event. I've got enough points in the bulldogging and the bronc riding but I'm about two hundred dollars short in the team roping and I'm looking for a header."

"Sorry, I haven't bought a PRCA card for several years," Ray said.

"Do you have a decent head horse?"

"Yes."

"If you would get a card and rope with me, I will pay for the card, the entry fees and buy your fuel to get to a few Montana rodeos, until I win enough. How does that sound?"

"Sounds more than fair," Ray said, "but I've been looking at the rodeo results and there are a bunch of real tough ropers coming to even the small pro rodeos in Montana this year."

"It isn't like I have to win a lot," Rusty said. "Probably placing sixth once or twice would do what I need."

"My arm isn't what it used to be. I can't reach the way these kids do nowadays."

"I'll bet if you catch a few, keep them on a short rope with their feet together, we'll place some."

"Okay," Ray said. "So long as you're not expecting too much."

"I'm entered in a couple more rodeos in the Midwest. When I get back, if you've got a place to practice, maybe I could come over and rope a few with you."

They decided to enter the Wednesday night rodeo in Big Timber on August 12 and try to fit in a practice the Tuesday before.



A few miles further up the road, Casey said, "I miss having Nick with us. He's good company and it splits the expenses down further." Nick was Casey's cousin and had been their traveling partner for the two previous years.

"Yeah, me, too," Rusty said. "You said he seemed to be doing alright, when you saw him before you came to Montana."

"I think so," Casey said. "But it takes a while to heal up from a gunshot wound."

"I didn't mind Warren traveling with us," Rusty said. "Ruby kind of tricked me into it over our Fourth of July run." He paused and then said, "Since the first time we met when we were seven years old, Warren and I have pretty much communicated with our fists. Turns out he's not a complete jerk anymore."

Casey shook his head. "It's hard to believe he's the same guy who used to always be mad and wanting to fight. I give Corinne the credit for changing him for the better."

"Boy," Rusty said. "I didn't like that much to start with. My beautiful little sister taking up with my worst enemy."

"Too bad she didn't take up with me," Casey said. "She's the prettiest redhead I've ever seen. And nice. That's the best part."

"Maybe you should have made some kind of move when we stayed overnight at her house last year."

"You know me, it takes me a while to get comfortable."

"What about Buckshot?" Rusty asked.

Buckshot was a tall, young woman who worked on the Westmont Ranch.

"I don't know. I do kinda like her," Casey said. "She hasn't got the prettiest face I've ever seen, but she's not really homely

either, and she's nice enough. Truth be told, she's pretty well put together."

"She was kind of quiet when she rode to Stanford with us."

"She didn't say two words the morning she helped me and Harlan move cows," Casey said. "When I saw her at the bar the night of the benefit, she warned me that she'd already drunk two beers and she might say most anything."

"Did she say anything interesting?" Rusty asked, grinning.

"Yeah, several things. For one, she said that when I got out of my pickup that morning before we moved cows, the first thought that came into her head was 'that's the man I'm going to marry.' Is that weird or what?"

"What else did she say?"

"Maybe I won't get into that," Casey said.

"I've known you for several years now," Rusty said. "You're not a ladies' man like Nick. Since you didn't get home until well after daylight, I'm going to suggest that she seduced you."

"Think what you want," Casey said without looking at Rusty.

"I guess I should have told you before. But you just heard me talking to Amanda, so you already know the big news from me is that I'm getting married."

"That's the gal who was at the Finals with you, isn't it?"

"Yes," Rusty said. "She came to the ranch for a couple of days in June before you got there. I'm a little worried about moving her so far from her family but she's willing to live on the ranch. Give it an honest try anyway."

"Well, good," Casey said. "So, that means you're going to become a full-time rancher?"

"Eventually, I think. I'm not ready to quit rodeoing yet, but ranching is a great life, honest work. It's my heritage, you might say. I grew up doing it."

"I did, too," Casey said. "I loved it, but it doesn't pay very good. I'll never have the chance to have a place of my own."

"I never expected to either."

"Those people must have really liked you to leave you their ranch."

"I guess they did," Rusty said. "Kenny was great. Doris, too. My dad got me a job working for them when I was thirteen years old. I used to walk out there from Mom's house in town. My dad was running a few horses in their pasture, and I started working to pay his monthly bill. It wasn't long until I was out there every free minute, and they were paying me. I ate with them almost as much as I did at home."

"There's always a lot to do on a ranch," Casey said. "Even in Texas where we graze out all year round."

"They didn't have any kids of their own," Rusty said. "I guess they had to leave their place to someone or else it would have gone to the government."

"Still, they picked you. Like I said, they must have liked you a lot."

"I liked them, too," Rusty said. "Old Kenny was tight with a dollar, but they got a satellite dish installed so they could watch me at the Finals on TV. Doris told me that if I ever had any kids, she was going to claim them as her grandchildren."

"I wish I'd got a chance to meet them," Casey said.

"I offered to buy them plane tickets to the Finals last year, but Kenny said he wasn't sure they could stand the travel,"

Rusty said. "The way things turned out he was probably right."

They rode in silence for a while and then Casey said, "I never have thanked you for practically forcing me go back to Deadwood for the short-go. I placed third in it and ended up second in the average. On a year like this, that could be the difference in whether or not I make the NFR."

"Damn," Rusty said. "I hated to turn out, but I figured the chance to formally meet my son and have him find out I'm his father was more important."

"You placed in both go rounds so you didn't make out too bad," Casey said. "You were leading the average. Your missing the short-go probably put money in my pocket."

# CHAPTER 3

**July 28, 2020**

**Weston Residence**

**Belgrade, Montana**

Corinne Blackstone Weston brushed a lock of auburn hair out of her eyes and met Warren at the door with a hug. They'd been married for just over a month. She still marveled at her luck in catching this handsome, tall, blond man.

Corinne had been home from her job in an insurance office for nearly two hours. She had the air conditioner running on high and hamburgers ready to put on the grill.

As Warren leaned down to embrace his wife, he said, "Sorry, I'm late. I was in the office most of the morning and then Roger sent me to Townsend this afternoon. Our ranch manager had gone to Helena, and I had to wait for him."

Warren had been a full-time steer wrestler in professional rodeo for several years previously. In April after many of the rodeos had been canceled because of the Covid-19 pandemic, he had taken a job with the Running W Real Estate and Ranch Management Company overseeing several ranches in their management portfolio. He'd had a good winter on the rodeo trail before the rodeos shut down and was in the top ten of the PRCA standings. When rodeos resumed, he'd taken advantage of his understanding with his boss, Roger Williams, and entered four rodeos over the Fourth of July. Since then, he'd competed only in Montana. Overall, he'd won enough to maintain his position in the standings. With a

limited number of rodeos still scheduled, it seemed likely that he could qualify for his second National Finals Rodeo.

A tall glass of iced tea waited on the kitchen table. As Warren hung his hat by the door and pulled out a chair, Corinne frowned and said, "Problems? You look worried."

"It's not really a big deal," Warren answered. "I'm not sure my 'manager' on the Townsend place is going to work out. Today, he was gone when he should have been home putting up hay."

"You just hired him," Corinne said.

"I can't take all the blame for that. I wasn't too happy with any of our applicants. Roger picked him. I hope I can get some work out of him while we're looking for someone better."

Corinne's left eyebrow lifted, "That's not all. What else?"

"I gave Jorgenson the go ahead to file the suit to overturn Dad's will," Warren said, shaking his head. "I'm not sure I should have done it."

"Why ever not?"

"For one thing, I'm pretty sure it's not something I can win," Warren said. "I'm not devious enough, but my lawyer is. He figures we can be enough of a nuisance that Jenny will be willing to negotiate, and I'll get something out of it. I guess anything we end up with will be more than I have now."

"Jorgenson has quite a reputation," Corinne said.

"My old man was mad at me. He left all his shares to Todd. He never forgave me for catching him in bed with Jenny. His daughter-in-law. My wife." Warren couldn't help it. Emotion boiled up whenever he remembered the scene.

"He was in the wrong. Jenny was in the wrong. Not you."

"That's true as far as it goes, but I was going to beat him to death. He knew. He saw my intentions. I could see it in his

eyes. If Jenny hadn't come up with a pistol at the right time, I'd be in prison today."

"She has my thanks for that," Corinne said. "I still think you have a right to inherit your family ranch."

"Not really. But by rights, at least half of Dad's shares should have gone to my mother. It was her family's ranch when they got married." Warren held up a hand, "I know, my grandfather was about broke when Dad put up the money to buy him out. But they were married for close to thirty years. Besides, history should count for something."

"Since her accident, there's no way your mother could run the ranch."

"I know but I'm her guardian. I could run it. If she'd have inherited half of Dad's sixty percent, added to her thirty percent and my ten percent. He could have left the rest to Todd and Jenny would not have so much power. Everything would have been fine."

"Is it this thing with Todd that's bothering you?"

"Some, I guess," Warren said, looked pensive, and continued. "Hell yes, that's bothering me. He'll always be my son even if, as it turns out, I'm not his genetic father. I hate to have it in the public record that I sued to keep him from his inheritance. I don't know how I'll explain it to him."

"He's only five years old. I don't think you'll have to explain anything to him yet."

Warren leaned back and looked at a spot somewhere high on the opposite wall. "You know what's weird?"

Corinne took that to be a rhetorical question and only looked at him and waited for him to continue.

"Todd's my son, but no blood relation and all that time you worked for his mother and helped take care of him when

he was a baby, you had no idea that he was really your nephew."

"It was a surprise to everyone but Jenny, I think. Maybe even her. My brother had no idea."

"I know. I'm not blaming Rusty. Jenny was the one who flew to Denver and slept with him two days before our wedding."

"If it was me, I could forgive her for that a lot easier than sleeping with your father."

"It's not all that much different," Warren said and threw up his hands. "Enough of this talk. It makes me want a drink and nobody likes me when I'm drinking."

Corinne slipped her arm around Warren and said, "You've lived through a lot. It may have seemed like hell at times, but you came through it. I knew you before and I can assure you that you're a better person now. In the end, it made you the man I love."

"You're my angel," Warren said with a smile. "When you were staying with us, helping with Todd, you were so shy. I'd have never guessed that someday you would be my everything."

"Me either."

"Life is good," Warren said. "Most of the time I can forget that the bad stuff happened." He didn't say it, but he knew that he'd made plenty of bad decisions on his own. One of them was trying to drink away his sorrows for a couple of years. Lost years, he thought.

"Bad feelings that we think we've vanquished tend come back out when we're tired and stressed," Corinne said.



"I guess that's true. I'm feeling a little stressed," Warren said and grinned. "Maybe a little later, we could figure out a way for you to help me relax."

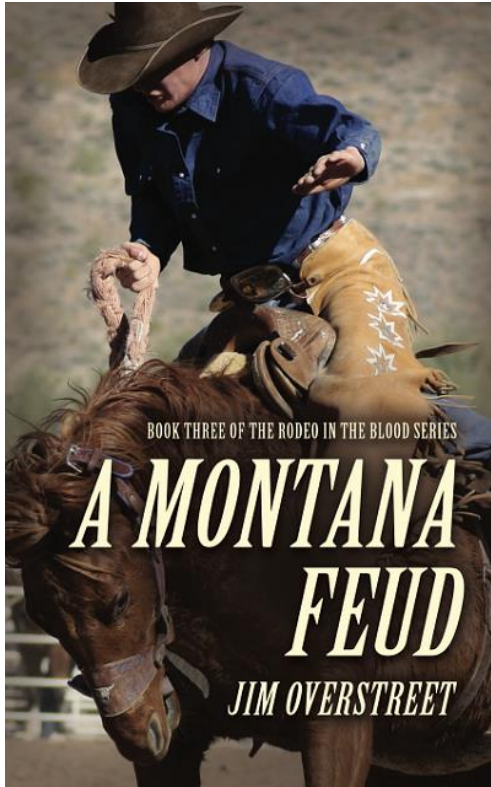
Corinne punched him gently, gave him a coy look and said, "I'll try to think of something."

"I've had to get past several things," Warren said. "I spent years hating your brother—since we were kids. Rusty always had a way of making me feel inadequate. Turns out he isn't that bad a guy and now we've been hauling to rodeos together. I've learned not to compare myself to him. He's such a natural athlete. It's hard not to feel inadequate. I wouldn't say we're best buddies, but we get along."

"I'm so glad," Corrine said. "We can thank Ruby and Harlan for making that happen."

"You Blackstone girls do know how to get what you want," Warren said.

"Not me. I'm the timid one. Ruby just tells it like she sees it. If she gets a notion in her head, she goes for it."



*Former rivals, now brothers-in-law, Rusty Blackstone and Warren Weston join forces to pursue their rodeo dreams in the year of Covid.*

## **A Montana Feud**

By Jim Overstreet

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