A photograph of a snowy mountain slope with evergreen trees under a clear blue sky. The snow is bright white, and the trees are dark green. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

James A.
Janke

Winter
Kill



Young cowhand Matt Jenner has been persuaded by his much older cowboy partner Caleb Miller to sell their horses and head for Arizona by stagecoach before the harsh Wyoming winter sets in.

But they soon find out that they have been set up. A winter storm complicates things. And all the while Matt and Caleb aren't sure where the greatest threat will come from.

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Cover photo taken by the author.

Dedicated to
Andrew and Laura

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Chapter One

Matt Jenner silently counted the greenbacks as the livery stable owner counted them out one at a time into Matt's outstretched hand. He used his other hand to keep the early November wind from whipping the bills away. Standing just inside the big front doors of the livery stable didn't provide much protection from the elements.

"There you go, young man," the buyer said. "You're paid in full too." He glanced at the man standing next to Matt, an older man than Matt, and watched that man stuff the money he had just been paid into a pants pocket.

Matt mumbled, "Thanks." He wasn't feeling happy. How many men would like selling the only horse they owned? He glanced to the side and looked at his horse now standing in a stall. Or rather what had been his horse; the mount belonged to the livery stable owner now.

Matt and that horse had covered a lot of miles together all over northern Wyoming Territory. Right now Matt needed money more than he needed a horse, but it still pained him some to part with the animal.

Yet he was glad that his horse was paying attention to the horse in the stall next to him. Horses were herd animals after all. So Matt knew the horse wouldn't miss him even if Matt felt nostalgic about parting with the horse.

"Sure you don't want to sell your saddles, too, gents?" the horse dealer asked. He nodded toward the two saddles lying on the frozen ground along with the other gear and belongings of Matt and his partner, Caleb Miller. "Can give you a good price," he said.

Caleb snorted. "Rather sell you my left leg," he said. He pulled on a pair of work gloves.

The buyer nodded with a smile. "Yeah, most cowpokes feel the same way. Which way you headed?"

"South," Caleb said. "Toward sunshine."

The livery man laughed. "Well, when the ice starts forming on the water troughs, I start to get the same feelings myself sometimes. Where exactly south?"

Matt finished putting his money away, and he looked at his partner. "Caleb here talked me into heading for Arizona. I hope I'm not making the biggest mistake of my life." He pulled his gloves on too.

"We got nothin' to stick around here for, Matt," Caleb said.

Matt grunted an agreement. They'd been paid off for the season more than a month earlier and had not been able to find any work since then. Not even as line riders for the winter. He and Caleb were just about broke.

Caleb saw Matt's dour expression, and he clapped him on the shoulder. "My boy, you're gonna like Arizona winters, you'll see."

“Yeah? Well then why did you and my pa come north to Wyoming in the first place?”

Caleb turned the collar of his coat up and scrunched his neck down. He squashed his hat down tighter on his head and squinted as the cold wind flapped his hat brim up and down. “That was a long time ago,” he said. “We was young and foolish then, and it seemed like a good idea at the time.” He laughed.

The livery stable owner laughed too, and he wiped at the fluid that was about to drip from his nose. “Know what you mean, know what you mean,” he said. “Right now I’m not lookin’ forward to the snow piled to the hayloft myself. Well, that money will buy you stage fare all the way to Arizona and then some.”

“It’d better,” Matt said. “That’s about all the money we have.” He picked up his saddle with a grunt and draped it over his shoulder on top of his saddle blanket, holding the saddle by its horn. His thin bedroll was still tied to the rear of the saddle with saddle strings. “But you were generous as it was,” he added. “Those horses aren’t in prime condition anymore. They’ve been worked hard.”

The man glanced at the horses and said, “Yeah, they don’t look quite up to a ride all the way to Arizona.”

Matt reached for his saddlebags, a canvas war bag, and his Winchester. It was an awkward armful. “That’s why we sold them.”

Caleb was picking up his own like gear. “But a winter of feed inside a barn will do ‘em wonders, mister. They’re still good mounts.”

“Why, sure,” the horse dealer said. “Don’t you boys worry. I’ll make a profit on ‘em.”

Matt was sure of that. “Which way to the Wells Fargo office?”

“Straight down the street that way and keep to your left.” He pointed to the side.

“Thanks.”

Matt and Caleb left the livery stable and headed down the dirt street.

Caleb’s long strides easily kept up with the much younger man. “Least there’s no dust, Matt,” he said. “Ground’s already froze.”

Matt squinted at another gust of wind. “Just doesn’t seem right, Caleb.”

“Maybe it’ll just be for the winter, Matt. Maybe we’ll come back up north in the spring.”

Matt said, “I meant walking. Doesn’t seem right.”

Caleb laughed. “Oh! Well, we’ll find work soon as we reach Flagstaff. Git ourselves some horses right away.”

Matt hopped up onto a boardwalk, and his boots clumped noisily as they walked past some stores. “What makes you think the ranches down there have any more work in the winter than the ranches up here?”

“They had plenty of work when I was down there with your pa.” Caleb resettled the saddle on his shoulder.

“That was thirty years ago, Caleb,” Matt said. “Way before he married my ma up here.”

“Maybe more than thirty, to tell the truth,” Caleb admitted. “Look, there’s the stage office.”

They passed several more stores and stopped in front of the Wells Fargo office. Matt put down his saddle so he could grab the doorknob. He pushed the door open. A small bell jingled. He picked up the saddle again and walked inside. Caleb followed and shoved the door with a boot. The door closed with a bang. They headed for the counter directly across from the front door.

A gray-haired man sweeping the floor in the far corner stopped his chore and looked at the two cowboys. “Mornin’, fellas,” he said.

Matt gratefully plunked all of his gear down on the floor in front of the counter. He straightened up with a stretch. "We want to get tickets for Flagstaff, Arizona, mister," he said.

"Yeah," Caleb added. "And when does the next stage headed south toward sunshine and warmth leave?"

The man with the broom smiled and took a step toward them. "Oh, I ain't the agent. You'll have to wait for him to get your tickets. But your timin' is real good. There's a stage comin' today that's headed south. In fact, should be here in about an hour." He glanced at the ticking clock on the wall. "Yeah, in about an hour."

"Good," Matt said. "We'll wait."

Caleb said, "Whoa, Matt. An hour gives us time to get some grub. I'm so hungry I've been thinkin' of chewin' on my saddle."

Matt smiled and put a hand on his stomach and nodded. "Good idea, Caleb." He looked at the cleanup man. "You won't let the stage leave without us, will you?"

"Oh, no," the old man said. "Besides, the stage won't leave as soon as it gets here anyway. You'll have plenty of time."

"Ah. Well, mind if we just pile our gear in the corner instead of hauling it all over town with us?"

"Help yourselves. It'll be okay there."

The two cowboys picked up their belongings and carried them over to the corner of the office near a pot-bellied stove. Caleb dropped his things down and then stepped up to the stove. He pulled off his gloves and warmed his hands by holding them close to the hot iron sides of the stove. "Mmm."

Matt dumped his things next to Caleb's and then joined him at the stove. "Well, what'll it be, Caleb? The fire or food?" He tucked his gloves under an arm and rubbed his hands together and held them out toward the stove.

Caleb chuckled. "Well, I—"

The office door opened with a jingle. They both looked to see who had entered. It wasn't the station agent, though. It was two women dressed in long coats, hats held down by scarves, and muffs. One woman was quite young and the other much older. The younger one closed the door quietly behind them.

The cleanup man said, "Well, hello, Mrs. Winner, Miss Lucy. What brings you in here? And on a blustery day like today to boot."

Matt's mouth dropped open a bit. He thought the young Miss Lucy was aptly named if her last name too was Winner. She had to be the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Even bundled under a heavy coat and that hat, it was clear that Lucy would turn men's heads wherever she went. For that matter, even the older woman would give her some competition. And they strongly resembled each other. Matt surmised they were mother and daughter.

"Is the stage heading south due in soon, Elmer?"

"Yes, ma'am," Elmer said. "You expectin' someone?"

"No. My daughter and I will be on it when it leaves."

Matt looked sideways briefly at Caleb and raised his eyebrows. These two attractive women would be on the same stage the two men were taking. Caleb gave him a slight grin.

"You don't say," Elmer said. He took a step closer and stopped. "Where you goin'?"

"Cheyenne."

"Well, then I guess you'll be sharin' the coach with these two cowpokes here as far as that." He motioned toward Matt and Caleb, both of whom continued to stare at the two women, their

hands held motionless toward the stove. "They're headed for Arizona."

The two women glanced in the direction of Matt and Caleb.

Matt, still entranced by the sight of Lucy Winner, only managed to nod a little, but Caleb smiled and touched the brim of his hat. "Ma'am, miss," he said.

The two women gave them a quick visual examination, and Matt thought the looks on their faces were not approving or maybe just indifferent. Neither Lucy nor her mother said anything. They turned back to Elmer.

Matt's shoulders sank. He glanced at Caleb and realized that the two of them must have looked like two buffalo chips fresh off the prairie. Dirty, unshaven, and disheveled. And the longer they stood by the stove, the more they would smell of horses and sweat. He was pretty sure the two Winner women would not enjoy the ride to Cheyenne.

"It'll be about an hour before the stage arrives," Elmer said. "And then it won't leave again for a while. You want to come back later?"

"That's all right. We'll wait." Mrs. Winner motioned to Lucy to join her on a bench against the wall opposite from the pot-bellied stove. "Elmer," she said as she and Lucy sat down, "we have some valises back on our front porch. We thought you might like to earn two bits by going and bringing them over here for us."

"Sure thing, Mrs. Winner," Elmer said. He propped the broom against the wall and reached for a coat hanging on a peg behind the counter. "Be right back with 'em." Elmer headed for the door.

Matt, feeling deflated, crooked a finger at Caleb. "Come on, Caleb, us too." He started for the door, putting his gloves on as he walked.

"Food," Caleb said. He gave his stomach a rub and followed Matt.

Elmer opened the door and the little bell jingled. He stepped out of the office but held the door open for Matt with a hand. Matt grabbed the doorknob but stepped aside and held the door open for Caleb to go out next ahead of him.

As Caleb was walking past him Matt took another look at the two women. Lucy had taken off her scarf and undone the top button of her coat. Matt could see under her bonnet the shiniest yellow hair he'd ever seen. He stood there, staring. He could hear both Elmer and Caleb clumping away from the office door.

Mrs. Winner was looking straight ahead, but Lucy glanced in the direction of the door. Her face was expressionless, but Matt couldn't help but give a little smile when her eyes landed on him. His heart leaped when she smiled back. It wasn't much of a smile and she turned away immediately, but it definitely had been a smile. He left the office and closed the door behind him. He hurried after Caleb.

Elmer was several storefronts farther down the boardwalk. Matt called, "Hey, Elmer." Elmer stopped and turned around. Matt asked, "Is there someplace we could get ourselves a bath and a shave?"

Caleb's head snapped around. "A bath?" He looked back at the door to the Wells Fargo office. He grinned. "Oh, I get it. You figure that pretty little lady in there might be more likely to talk to you on the long ride to Cheyenne if you didn't smell like the inside of a horse barn, huh?"

"Something like that," Matt said. "Wouldn't do you any harm either."

"I had a bath last month," Caleb said. "Besides, the older one's married, even if she is mighty fine lookin'." They caught up to Elmer.

Elmer said. "Mrs. Winner's a widow. Almost a year now."

"Do tell," Caleb said.

“Yup. Her husband died in a mine accident. But she probably ain’t interested anyway. She’s been mighty bitter since her husband died.”

“Bitter?” Matt asked.

“Yeah, she don’t quite believe it was an accident.”

Caleb said, “What do others say?”

Elmer shrugged his shoulders. “Say it looked like an accident.”

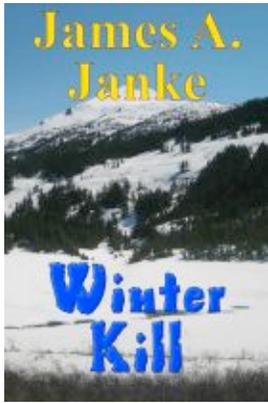
“Ah.” Then Caleb smiled. He scratched at the five days’ growth of whiskers on his face. “Well, you never know.” He slapped Matt on the back. “Okay, my boy, let’s do it.”

Elmer grinned. “Barber shop.” He pointed in the other direction. “And you’re in luck. The barber’s selling *hot* baths today.”

Matt asked Elmer, “And then where could we get some food and a beer?”

Elmer now pointed directly across the street. “Broken Heart Saloon right there.”

The two men nodded. “Thanks.”



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