

CIMARRON'S LAW
Cimarron Jack Westerns Series Book 1

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Chapter 1

St. Louis, Missouri, September 1888

"Haven't I always treated you fair and square?" Jack Wheatley threw his hands wide and then let them fall again to his sides. "I thought I had."

"That's your problem, Wheatley," the sinewy Charlie Tuft said. "You got your head so deep in your own concerns, you don't know what's fair and what ain't."

"May seem that way to you, Charlie, but you don't sit in on meetings where we work out the business side of this show."

Red O'Malley, another of Jack's trick riders, stood hip-cocked just inside the entrance flap of Jack's canvas dressing tent. "We know enough to say one thing for sure — you been givin' us the short end of the stick."

Jack opened his mouth to respond, but Red cut him off. "Fact is, you oughta be grateful we're givin' you notice before the show pulls outta St. Louis. Town this big, maybe some Johnny-fresh-off-the-farm will come to you, hat in hand, and beg to ride for you."

Charlie pointed. "And maybe you'll learn from this and start payin' talented and able hands what they're worth."

"That's right." Red nodded emphatically.

Jack drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Would it do any good to tell these two that *he* sure as blazes wasn't getting rich off ticket sales? Certainly not at his employees' expense. True enough, they were performing before packed houses every night. But practically everything he personally earned was going right back into running the show. Meanwhile, he paid his people everything he could, plus room and board.

He cocked his head. "By any chance has Stu Portman been bending your ears?"

"What if he has?" Charlie said.

"For eighteen months now, things have been harmonious, I'd say. Traveling together, drawing bigger and bigger audiences, adding new acts. Far as I know, everybody getting along just fine. Then we hit St. Louis. Within mere days, Portman quits over money. Then, Diego Camacho and Beto Vega come to me and quit — although I've gotta say, they weren't all horns and rattles like you two. Two more days, and here you come. What's stirred all this up?"

Red gave Jack a cold stare. "Let's just say yours ain't the only show in town."

Charlie turned for the tent opening and said over his shoulder, "We'll ride for you tonight, Wheatley, and that'll be that."

Before Red let Charlie lead the way out, Jack said, "No need. Stop by Mr. Birch's tent and tell him I said you can draw full pay for St. Louis. I don't need performers who don't have their heart in it."

Charlie scowled at Jack, and the two stunt riders exited.

Jack shook his head. What was going on?

He pulled his watch from his vest pocket. *Sweet Jezebel!* Half past three already. He had a parade to ride in at four o'clock and a show at six. While he dared not put off getting to the bottom of all these unexpected resignations, he certainly didn't have time before the parade to dig into the matter in earnest. He didn't even have time now to clean his revolvers as he'd planned to do. And given his line of work, he wasn't simply obsessing over a little extra unburned gunpowder.

In three brisk strides, he was at the tent flap to check the afternoon air. The notion of sweating in a heavy buckskin jacket didn't sit well with him. He had a lighter-weight jacket, but he preferred to save it for performances. At least there was a nice breeze today.

Just as he was about to tie the flap shut and change into his showman's attire, he caught sight of the darling of the show, the lovely Miss Adelia Flynn, "The Pride of the Prairie." She was marching directly for his tent, and judging from her expression, she plainly wasn't happy.

His heart gave a peculiar thump. *Tell me she's not coming to resign, too.*

Chapter 2

Adelia glowered. "When were you gonna tell me?"

Jack deliberately remained close to the tent opening. The lithe blond sharpshooter never would let him know just how old she truly was, but he guessed no older than eighteen – if that. He, being over thirty already, thought of himself as a much older brother figure to her. And he didn't want ugly rumors regarding the two of them floating about.

But, *land o' Goshen*, was she pretty! Already dressed for the parade in a fringed sapphire-blue riding skirt and blouse, her golden hair was fastened below the back of her Stetson with an oversized matching blue bow.

"Tell you what?" Jack tilted his head.

"About this sudden spate of resignations – the bunch of ingrates!"

"So . . . you're not planning on resigning too?"

"Don't be foolish, Jack. 'Course not."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Of course not. Anyway, it's not a 'spate.'" He looked her in the eye. "Five performers, that's all."

Arms folded, she said, "Five who've quit and a whole trainload of grumblers over in the big show tent."

Jack trusted she was exaggerating. He found it hard to believe that, overnight, any considerable number of his cast and crew had suddenly become truly disgruntled. Not like Charlie and Red. The season had gone well – no, *exceptionally* well. Most likely, it was just one lone malcontent over there in the big tent, sowing seeds of dissatisfaction.

"Listen," he said, "we'll sort this out after tonight's performance." He tugged at the lapel of his vest. "Look at me, I'm not even dressed for the parade yet."

Adelia unfolded her arms and trooped over to his wardrobe chest. "Leave the jacket behind today," she said. "I know how you detest being overly warm."

"I can't ride in the parade without a jacket. People expect a scout of the Western frontier to wear a beaded and fringed buckskin jacket."

"You were never a scout." Adelia shuffled through his clothes.

"They don't know that."

"Some do, and they love you just the same. Here." She turned around holding up a bib-front, fringed shirt of lighter buckskin with fancy stitching on the chest and cuffs. "This is perfect."

Having bigger things to worry about, Jack said, "Well, go on and pick out a tie for me then. Something colorful."

"A bandanna," she said. "A tie's too formal."

"Not for Custer."

"Custer's dead." She dug deeper into the trunk.

"But isn't that a big part of what the show's about? Keeping all the heroes of the West, like Custer, alive in the hearts and minds of the people?"

She sighed aloud. "You win – this time." Buckskin shirt and scarlet, cravat-style tie in hand she traipsed up to him. "I've got to fetch my gun belt. See you at the remuda." She pressed the clothes into his hands.

Jack tied the tent flap behind Adelia and made quick work of changing into his parade costume.

Minutes later, he emerged from his tent and made his way through the staging area behind the main performance pavilion. A huge, colorfully painted canvas banner with the words CIMARRON JACK WHEATLEY'S REAL WILD WEST EXTRAVAGANZA covered a large portion of the side of the venue. In a big golden oval at one end of the banner was a fairly accurate likeness of him: shoulder-length auburn-brown hair, straight nose, and a long, well-manicured mustache. In the image, the front left quarter of his sand-colored Stetson's brim was curled up a bit. *In dashing fashion*, as Adelia often said. Most days, admiring that banner on his way over to the corral filled his chest with a healthy dose of optimism, and some days, a gratifying measure of satisfaction with the show's success. Today, it left a knot in his stomach. Was this enterprise beginning to unravel just as it was getting started?

"Nothing to be done about it at the moment," he murmured.

Putting on a showman's smile as he passed a large red-wheeled cage, he waved at Hitch Porter and Ty Simmons. "Priscilla all fed and happy?" he asked.

Ty waved back. "Happy as a housecat."

Jack caught a quick glimpse of the beautiful, tawny-coated mountain lioness the two men were tending.

As he approached the wranglers and horses, he spied his seal-brown paint mustang, Fuego, already saddled and ready for him.

Lefty Braddock, wearing his signature Montana peaked hat, handed over Fuego's reins. "There you go, boss," he said.

"Much obliged, Lefty."

Jack had one foot in the stirrup when Adelia came a-running. She wore the fancy gun leather and six-gun she had gone to fetch. Customarily she carried her trademark Colt Lightning rifle in the parade too, but she didn't have it with her.

"Where's your Lightning?" he asked.

She stopped and put a hand to her forehead. "I don't know what's wrong with me today."

Before she could turn away, he told her to saddle up, and he sent Lefty back for her long iron. Once she was situated astride her horse, he asked, "You'll be all right for tonight, huh?"

She nodded. "Of course."

Lapses like this weren't typical of Adelia. A peculiar feeling flitted through Jack's innards, and he had to tell himself – more emphatically this time – that a few performers quitting on him didn't necessarily augur full-fledged disaster for the whole show, nor even for its most popular act.

Lefty returned in no time with Adelia's rifle, and before long, the cavalcade was on its way – colorful cowpokes driving a dozen particularly handsome longhorns, then a bold yellow stagecoach pulled by a team of bay geldings. The massive trio of buffalo that followed was always popular with the crowds. Then came the Indians with their painted ponies and feathered war bonnets, and the Cowhand Brass Band right behind them kept things lively.

Jack waved to the eager crowds lining the street. Now, he was in his element. The enthusiastic response along the parade route lifted his heart and boded well for a full house at tonight's performance. Gaze still on the crowd, he said to Adelia, "I'm glad we've ended the tour in St. Louis. Nice town. I've enjoyed it."

"Me too," she said.

When he glanced her way, he found her smile genuine. And when she waved, the onlookers responded with animated applause.

Sun out, a fresh breeze blowing, Jack at last began to let go of the annoyance he'd felt since this afternoon's meeting with the discontented trick riders.

Then he spotted a pair of smiles in the crowd, the owners of which he'd prefer never to see again.

Chapter 3

Jack said nothing to anyone – not to Adelia, nor to his business manager, Albert Birch, not even to his closest amigo, Billy Douglass – about having spied James and Loftus Stilton in the crowd along the parade route that afternoon. Last he'd read about them in the newspapers, the rival Stilton Brothers' Wild West Show was performing somewhere back East – Baltimore, he thought. He'd have to look into the brothers' unexpected presence in St. Louis, but not until after tonight's performance.
