

*The Sweetest Bounty is a 65,000-word, multi-POV rom-com set in the American Old West. It looks at themes like self-determination, independence and loyalty all with a rollicking sense of humor. It is the first book in The Wild West series.*

**The Sweetest Bounty  
The Wild West (Book 1)**

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**Chapter 1 • Collapse**

*New Mexico Territory, Late Nineteenth Century*

Russell was running out of time—he had to get the bullet out of his thigh, or he might as well just lay down for that damned eternal dirt nap. His temperature had begun rising yesterday. He'd have a full-blown fever soon unless he could get the supplies he needed: a pair of tweezers to dig out the bullet, some alcohol to clean the wound, and a needle and thread to close it. *Needle-nose pliers would work if they don't have tweezers*, he thought with a wince. Alcohol, in large enough quantities, would also be helpful to dull the pain. Preferably whisky, although, as this was the New Mexico territory, he was more likely to find tequila. As a disinfectant, tequila was just fine. But it wasn't the best tasting alcohol around. *Why would anyone make alcohol out of a cactus?* he wondered. *No surprise it tastes like the devil—it's made from a spiny bastard of a plant that will puncture your leather chaps if you have the misfortune to fall on it.* Not that he'd ever encountered this particular sticky succulent in the wild. But he had been stung by the thorns of the mighty agave more than once in a saloon. The hangovers were hell.

Still, if tequila was all they had, tequila was what he'd use. Russell knew he led a fairly dangerous life—by choice—but that didn't mean he was ready to meet his maker just yet, even if it meant imbibing in the devil's own juice. After all, there were worse things than a shot or two of tequila. And much like tequila wouldn't be his first choice for pain management, his fairly dangerous life—that of a bounty hunter—hadn't been his first career choice either. It had been his second choice only after the less-dangerous first choice had been denied him. Thinking about it just made him long for a shot of tequila, so he shook his head to dislodge the thought.

He looked through his binoculars again at the cabin on the other side of the green pasture of the Valles Caldera. The little log cabin was situated at the southernmost end of the natural bowl. The front of the cabin boasted a couple of windows, but the door was on the side of it that faced the barn. In between the two buildings was a vegetable garden, a clothesline, and the well. Russell needed to fill his canteen at the well and he needed more food, too. The outhouse was positioned behind the cabin. He looked at the outhouse with longing—more so than he'd ever felt for such a structure before. He didn't need it at the moment, but he'd recently learned that having a bullet in your thigh makes squatting very painful.

The man who lived in the cabin had left in a nearly empty buckboard shortly after dawn. Heading south, which meant he was probably going to Jemez Springs to lay in supplies. The two women never went far from the cabin. The raven-haired one stayed the closest, which made sense as she was heavily pregnant. The other one, whose nearly black hair had some copper-colored highlights as if it had been painted by a sunbeam, left the cabin most often to do the chores and was the only one of the two women who went as far afield as the barn. Neither of them went so far as to check on the couple hundred sheep that grazed nearby. The shepherd who had watched the flock last night had walked off at dawn—along with his two dogs—probably to one of the other cabins in the caldera.

As Russell watched, the woman with the copper dancing in her hair came out and drew a bucket of water from the well, then went back into the cabin. Even with binoculars, he couldn't see her particularly well from this distance, but the sight of her made his breath quicken anyway. She was petite but shapely. Her hair was loose, which seemed terribly intimate as she was well past the age when girls wore it down. What got to him the most was the way she walked—as though she'd rather be astride a stallion galloping across a field. She looked like she had a certain kind of passion for life. The kind of passion that needed a willing partner in order to be kindled properly. His heart, beating a more staccato tune every time he saw her, made it clear that it thought Russell himself would be the perfect such partner. He took a deep breath to calm his heart. And other body parts.

The caldera was one of Russell's favorite places in the New Mexico territory even though he'd been told it was a collapsed volcano. He'd found this rather hard to believe, since a fiery volcano bespoke of an entrance to hell, but the caldera was as close to heaven as the living could hope to reach while on Earth. It was especially breathtaking in summer. The huge bowl, which was dotted with small, pine-tree-covered domes, was a green plain with several creeks running through it. The cabin he was watching, set against the side of the bowl, had a backdrop of evergreens and aspens running up the low-rising ridge just behind it.

He found himself slightly jealous of the people who lived in the cabin—and for more than just their outhouse. The whole set up was a rancher's paradise. It'd be the perfect place to homestead—had he been of a mind to do so. The idea of settling down was becoming more and more prominent in his mind. If he brought in the two desperadoes he was chasing—one of whom had put that bullet in his thigh—he'd be able to buy a home or maybe even a small ranch. Bagging his prey might also mean he could finally get a job as a *bona fide* lawman in Santa Fe. When he'd applied to be a deputy, Sheriff Lopez had told him he needed more experience. Of course, Raul, the man Lopez had hired instead, didn't have any experience. But he was a cousin, and blood ties were a higher qualification for a job than experience. That was one of the problems of settling in a town like Santa Fe. Everybody was related to everybody else in some way or another. *It's a wonder anyone ever finds someone who's far enough away on the family tree that they can marry.*

With a good job and a home, Russell could leave this vagabond life behind. Maybe even take himself a wife. He sighed at that thought. He wasn't sure he was ready to settle down that completely, but every day he was more and more certain he was ready to quit being a bounty hunter. The bullet in his thigh was one painful mark in favor of doing so.

A cool breeze, infused with the scent of pine needles, lifted Russell's hair, sending it scattering. He rubbed the five-days' growth of beard on his jaw and closed his eyes for a moment, wishing he could lay down and nap; he was tired as his injury had made sleep uncomfortable. He knew he needed to rest and the longer he looked at the cabin, the more it appeared the perfect place to do so. But the question was, should he present himself at their door so he could throw himself on their mercy? Or should he sneak into the barn and hide in their hayloft? The latter would mean leaving his horse to roam in the caldera. And then sneaking into the cabin at night to find the supplies he needed. It would also mean climbing a ladder up to a hayloft and he wasn't sure his wound would allow him to do that. Just getting into his saddle the last time he'd done it had been a challenge.

Russell decided to present himself at the cabin, and hope these good women had no connection to the Tyson brothers, and enough common sense to know that they had no reason to fear a man too wounded to hurt them. He put his hat on and, with a grunt, pushed himself up from the rock he'd been sitting on. The wound on his thigh hurt like fire, as if he'd been stuck with a red-hot poker. He immediately had to grab the rock to steady himself as the ground began to sway. *Good Lord, if I pass out now the devil might as well take me, since no one else will ever find my body here.* He leveled his eyes on the horizon and took a deep breath in an effort to ward away the sick feeling suddenly roiling in his gut.

Taking a moment to steady himself and let the pain subside, he limped to his horse, which had been feeding on the green grass in a patch of sunshine just to his left. He threw his saddle blanket over the horse and followed it with his saddle. Once it was cinched, he tucked his binoculars into one of his saddlebags, then attached them and his bedroll to the saddle. Knowing he lacked the strength to mount the horse from the ground, he led it over to the rock, which he could use as a mounting block. Even so, the exertion of mounting his horse nearly made him black out. He held onto his saddle horn until the dark spots that half-blocked his vision had cleared. Then he walked the horse across the grassy expanse of the caldera toward the cabin, allowing the animal to stop when they crossed a stream so it could drink. "Walk on," he told it when it was done. *Casually, so we don't scare the women. Well, as casually as a horse can walk.*

He stopped the horse at the well and prepared to dismount. He was somewhat surprised that the two women weren't coming out to greet or question him. Perhaps they were deciding what to do about the stranger at their well. Maybe they were at the looking glass primping, the way women do before they meet a handsome man. Or perhaps they were loading their rifles. *I've had women tell me I'm handsome, so I guess it's possible they're primping. Nah, they're loading their rifles more like.* This was the Wild West, after all, and people had good reason to fear strangers.

As he dismounted the horse at the well, he gasped as an explosion of pain ran from his thigh up through his hip and down to his knee and beyond. *This must be what it's like to be hit by lightning. Damn!* He paused a moment, unsure if he had the strength to fill his canteen. He reached up and untied it from his saddle. It was then that the sky tilted, the ground came roaring up toward him, and everything went black.

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