



*A Gift For You*



Dear Reader,

I am so grateful for your readership, kindness, encouragement, and friendship.

This might be my birthday month, but I hope you'll enjoy this little gift as my way of saying *Thank You!*

May October bring you autumn joys, sweet surprises, and treasured memories!



*Happy  
Fall!*



*I wrote this short story to enter in the Women Writing the West Laura Awards this year. It was a finalist (yeah!). I thought you might enjoy it as well. Happy reading!*

## THE KIDD

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My mama said I came into this world with a rope around my neck and I'd likely leave the same way.

It galls me to no end that she's about to be proven right.

Twenty years ago, on a sunny October day much like this one, I was born with the cord twisted around my neck, and my skin as blue as the wildflowers that bloom in abundance in the spring around the shack we call home. My granny slapped my backside until I squalled and started breathing.

Probably why I take a wide swath around that crotchety old woman. Regardless of her peevish ways, I love her anyway. If it weren't for my granny, I'd likely have died any number of times over the years, or so she tells me.

At least if I'm about to depart this world, my skin isn't blue, and Granny is miles away, unable to take a switch to me, as she's inclined to whenever I stoke her ire. I hate to say it, but Granny is a downright cantankerous person, and that's on one of her better days. Likely, her volatile temperament comes from my grandpa dying at the Rusty Dog Saloon in an upstairs room with a woman named Verlene. Apparently, his heart quit on him in the midst of his philandering shenanigans. Mama was just a baby then, but according to the stories the gossiping old biddies spread in our little town of Orlana, Grandpa was a regular at the Rusty Dog.

Mama and Granny used to get along like two irate cats stuffed inside a gunny sack. To spite Granny, Mama was seventeen when she up and married a drifter she met at the general store. Of course, he never intended to stick around and rode out a month after they wed. I came along eight months later. To my recollection, George Heck, my father, has never returned. If he had, I'm pretty sure Granny would have made me dig his grave after she shot him dead on sight. Doubt he

ever returns.

It's always been Granny, Mama, and me. After I was born, Mama and Granny started getting along. The truce in their ongoing war was so the two of them could side against me.

Not that I listen to half of what they holler at me. I'm too much like them—independent and stubborn—to pay them too much mind. They might be opinionated, bossy, and often as irritating as a determined fly, but they raised me as best they could. I never once went to bed with an empty belly, although I wouldn't have turned away a few more hugs or kind words.

However, if the cowpokes intent on killing me succeed, it's going to be just Granny and Mama again. I sure hope they can make it through the winter without me there to chop the wood, feed the critters, and keep the path shoveled to the outhouse.

It makes my chest ache to think of never seeing them again.

Right now, I'm not sure if it's the noose around my neck or the bitter taste of regret that makes it so hard to swallow. Why, oh why, didn't I stay home instead of wandering off earlier?

I studied the three men, intent on ending my short and sorry life. The dumbest of the bunch, a man called Vince, was a thick-bellied, black-toothed dunce who didn't look smart enough to pull on his boots without receiving detailed instruction.

The man who seemed to be in charge was slightly on the twitchy side, his right hand never moving far from the revolver he wore strapped low around his hips. He had a hard look about him, like he'd just as soon shoot someone than ask a few reasonable questions.

The third fellow wore his hat pulled down so low I couldn't see his face, but he made me the most nervous. He was tall and rode like he was an extension of his horse. His shoulders were broad, his back straight, his body muscular and fit. He didn't seem at all like the other two.

Since the leader, a man Vince referred to as Jube, landed on the notion to stretch my neck and dragged me out to one of the random juniper trees that sprouted among the sagebrush in our region of Eastern Oregon, the third fellow hadn't spoken a single word.

While Vince had been turning his rope into a noose, and Jube had glared at me like he could intimidate me into giving him answers I didn't know to questions he didn't ask, the third fellow had been sitting on a boulder, sharpening a long, thin knife. The sound of the blade scraping over the whetstone he held in his hand created

an eerie echo in my thoughts.

My senses felt like they rolled over me in a turbulent flood.

The pungent scent of the sagebrush surrounding us smelled fresh and familiar, unlike the stench wafting off Vince that made me wrinkle my nose when he got too close. I'm not sure he's acquainted with the concept of bathing.

Sweat trickled down my back between my shoulder blades, leaving a sticky trail for dirt to cling to while an afternoon breeze, that on any other day would have been most refreshing, made my skin prickle.

Above me, fluffy white clouds moved at a lazy pace across the intense blue expanse of sky. That shade of blue reminded me of a shirt I'd admired in the store window the last time I'd ridden into town for supplies. Around me, as far as I could see, hues of gray and brown filled the barren landscape, interspersed with occasional bursts of green from the juniper trees, like the one Vince tossed the rope over to commence with my hanging.

My mouth was as dry as the powdery dust blowing in the air, and the metallic taste of fear added to my increasing discomfort.

"Might I trouble you for a drink of water?" I asked, forcing myself to grin at the men as though I hadn't a care in the world.

"No, ya fool. I ain't a bartender at the Rusty Dog!" Vince gave a slight tug on the noose that further tightened the rope around my already tender throat.

"Can't hurt to ask, Vince. It surely can't hurt to ask." I twisted my neck, hoping the movement would give the rope some slack. If anything, it drew the rope tighter.

"Give the kid a drink. It's gonna be his last, though," Jube said as he continued glowering at me.

Vince took the canteen Jube held out to him, walked over to my horse, and held it for me to draw a long sip. The water was warm and tasted sour, but I swallowed it anyway, trying to think of a way out of this situation.

Despite my protests that they'd caught the wrong person, and I hadn't stolen anything, I couldn't seem to convince Jube of the truth.

Of all the times I'd stepped right into trouble, this was definitely the worst. If only I'd remained home, cleaning the chicken coop like Granny had ordered, instead of taking my horse, Jiminy, out for a ride to enjoy the beautiful autumn day. Right now, I'd be eating cornbread with honey from the bee tree I'd found in July, and drinking a glass of buttermilk, listening to Granny and Mama nag at me to get to my chores instead of dream-



ing about things that wouldn't ever come true.

Lately, I've taken to contemplating my future. I want more for myself than to spend my life scrabbling from dawn to dusk just to keep food on the table and clothes on my back. I sure as anything don't have any desire to keep living on our run-down farm. The only time I get to escape is to fetch supplies or haul something into town to sell. Or when I sneak off to ride Jiminy.

I reckon I've been standing at a crossroads—not in a literal sense, but in my mind—for a while. No clear path has presented itself, even though I've put a heap of effort into pondering which way to turn.

At this moment, though, things seem a lot clearer than they have for a long time. Maybe being a farmer isn't such a bad way to live. Maybe my granny is right that I need to get my head out of the clouds and keep my feet on the ground. And maybe—just maybe—Mama won't have to say "I told you so" over my grave if I can somehow convince Jube I'm not the person who stole from them.

"What outfit you ride for?" I asked, directing my question to Jube.

"The Rockin' C Ranch," Vince said, not giving Jube a chance to answer or ignore my question. "We been there for almost a month."

I recognized the name. It was the biggest ranch in our section of Oregon's high desert region. It was all the

talk of Orlana a few years back when someone bought up a bunch of land, moved in a huge herd of Herefords, and started the ranch. The man who owns the ranch has remained a mystery, never appearing in town. Folks claimed not even his ranch hands knew what he looked like. It all seemed strange to me, but what did I know.

"What's your name?" Jube asked, taking a step closer to me while Vince adjusted the rope he'd managed to loop a second time around the tree limb.

"Heck. Most folks call me Kidd."

The smirk on Jube's face almost looked like it caused him pain, or perhaps it was just indigestion. "Kidd Heck. That's an outlaw's name if I ever heard one. What gang you riding with?"

"No gang, mister. Like I told you before, I live on a farm on the other side of Orlana with my mama and granny. They depend on me to keep things going."

"Then what was ya doing robbin' our payroll wagon?" Vince asked, as he swung the rope around the limb a third time.

"I didn't rob your payroll wagon. It was a nice day, and I decided to go for a ride. I was on my way into Orlana when a rider, someone about my size, raced past me, heading out of town. He had a neckerchief pulled up over his face, and saddlebags tossed in front of him. His horse was a big bay with a white blaze on its face."

"Kidd, there can't be too many grown men as scraw-

ny as you,” Jube said, his smirk melting into a grimace. “We saw the rider. He was a runt like you with a brown hat.”

“My hat might be brown, but I’m riding a pinto, and your thief had on a bright green shirt, not a brown one.” I was beginning to think Vince wasn’t the only dummy in the group. “If you saw him, why didn’t you stop him?”

“He was riding away when we got to the wagon. By the time we realized he’d taken the cash, he was already out of sight,” Jube said, annoyance thick in his voice. “I’ll ask again, Kidd. Where did you stash the money?”

“I didn’t stash anything because I don’t have it.” I stared at Jube, then at Vince, as my frightened brain finally sorted through the details. “Why were you three collecting the payroll from the wagon? Doesn’t it get delivered to the ranch? What happened to the wagon driver? Surely, he could tell you what the thief looked like.”

Vince cackled as he handed Jube the end of the rope that was fastened around my neck. “The driver was deader’n dead when we got there. We was gonna rob the wagon ourselves and light out for Burns. We would have been set for the winter, but some kid stole our money.” Vince snarled and pointed a filthy sausage-sized finger at me. “You stole it.”

I watched as Jube wrapped the rope around his saddle horn, then fixed his deadly gaze on me again.

“You were planning to rob the wagon and someone beat you to it?” I asked. If they didn’t hold the balance of my life in their hands, I might have fallen out of my saddle laughing at them. Prudence, and the desire to live to see another day, kept me from snickering, though.

“You beat us to it!” Jube shouted.

Jiminy nervously shifted to the left, and the rope tightened uncomfortably around my neck.

“It’s okay, boy. It’s okay,” I whispered to my horse, pressing my knee tight against the saddle, hoping he’d move back before I lost the ability to breathe. If my hands hadn’t been tied behind me, I would have used the reins to guide him.

The man with the knife gave a sharp whistle, the first sign he wasn’t a mute, and Jiminy shifted again. Thankfully, it was in the other direction.

With air once again traveling to my lungs, I took a few deep breaths before I dared to glance at Jube.

His eyes looked as dark and evil as any images from my worst nightmares. I hoped the taint of him wouldn’t stain my soul if I did end up swinging from Vince’s rope today.

“I didn’t rob the wagon,” I said slowly and clearly, wanting to make sure they understood my words. “I

didn’t rob it, and I don’t have your dilly dang money. If I did, I wouldn’t have been stupid enough to ride through town with it.”

Jube seemed to consider my words, then shook his head. “Where did you hide it, Kidd? Tell me right now, and I’ll put a bullet between your eyes instead of letting you dance at the end of the rope. It’s a less painful way to die.”

“I don’t have your money. I didn’t hide it. If you weren’t such a thickheaded simpleton, you’d have already caught the fellow who did steal it from right under your noses.”

Jube’s face turned as red as a ripe tomato, and he nudged his horse forward until it bumped against my leg. He grabbed my face between his fingers and squeezed until it felt like my jaw might crack. “Where is my money?”

I couldn’t have spoken with his fingers about to reshape my face even if I’d wanted to. I should have turned tail and raced Jiminy home the moment I saw the three men riding toward me like fury bearing down on a freight train. They’d kicked up a huge cloud of dust and I could hear Jube’s torrent of cuss words from half a mile away. If Granny had heard him, she would have fed Jube enough of her nasty-tasting soap that he’d have belched bubbles for a month of Sundays. I learned a long time ago to watch what I said around her and Mama lest they experience the need to make sure my mouth and mind were good and clean.

“How’s he gonna answer when you got his face all pinched up, Jube?” Vince asked as he swung onto his sway-backed mule. I felt sorry for the animal having to haul around his considerable weight. No wonder the mule’s back bore a permanent dent.

Jube roughly released my face and backed his horse away from me, but not before he made Jiminy fidgety again. My horse sidestepped, and I could feel my backside rising off the saddle as the rope tightened around my neck.

“Last time, Kidd. Where is the money?” Jube belled so loudly, the mule brayed in response. Vince almost fell out of his saddle, and Jiminy twitched as he shied away another step. If my horse moved another six inches, I was going to hang for certain.

I thought about making up a story about where the money was hidden, but Jube had already confirmed what I knew. He was going to kill me regardless of what I said, and it seemed powerful wrong to end my life speaking lies.

“I don’t have it,” I rasped, unable to swallow.

“Then you die!” Jube reached out a hand to swat Jiminy.

Lifting my eyes for one final glimpse of the sky, I then closed them, not ready to die, but refusing to allow Jube’s horrible face to be the last thing I saw on earth. A shrill hum sounded in the air, followed by a yelp of pain. My eyes shot open to see the silent man’s knife embedded all the way to the hilt in Jube’s right hand.

Before Vince could do more than gape with his mouth open like a gulping fish, the quiet cowpoke tossed a rope around him, pinning his arms to his sides. In a lightning-fast move, he yanked Jube out of his saddle and tied the other end of the rope around him.

Vince kicked his mule and started to drag Jube who went from cussing about his hand to yelling at Vince. “You half-witted clodhopper! Stop before you drag me to death!”

The mule crowhopped a few steps and set in to bucking. Vince flew up in the air and landed in a heap on top of Jube, knocking the wind out of him.

Frightened, Jiminy made it clear he was finished with the proceedings and stepped right out from under me. As I dangled in the air, wondering if my neck would snap or I’d suffocate first, I thought of Mama and Granny. They might be hard on me, but they loved me. Too bad I hadn’t ever gotten around to telling them I loved

them. I sure hoped they knew it.

I closed my eyes again, feeling darkness creeping in. One minute, I was praying for deliverance, and the next, I heard the pop of a gun and opened my eyes as the ground rushed up to meet me. A grunt rolled out of me when I landed and dropped to my knees, blessedly alive.

Stunned, and unable to draw in a breath, I felt the noose loosen and sucked in a great gasp of air.

“You okay, Kidd?” the silent man asked in a rich, deep voice that made a shiver glide down my spine.

Unable to speak, I nodded. I glanced upward to see the quiet cowpoke had shot clean through the rope and freed me from my death sentence. Behind him, I could see Jube shoving at Vince to get off him and the two of them entangled in the rope.

“Come on, Farley. Why’d you do that for?” Vince asked in a whine as the man pushed him off Jube.

“Name’s not Farley. It’s Clay. Clay Cambridge.”

Jube stopped cussing and stared at the man named Clay. “The owner of the Rockin’ C?”

“Stand up!” Clay ordered.

The two men struggled to their feet. Clay turned Vince around, positioning him with his back against Jube’s, then he started looping the rope around and around them, lashing them together from their shoulders to their feet. I could see he’d already relieved the



two men of their weapons, which sat in a pile beyond their reach.

"As for me owning the ranch, I do," Clay said, his face expressionless as he pulled the end of the rope tight. "I caught wind someone was planning to relieve me of my payroll, and decided to see how you two lackwits carried it off by joining your robbery. Except there was no payroll on the wagon today. I hired a neighbor kid to act like he'd stolen something when we came into view. What I didn't count on was encountering Miss Heck. You two are lucky I didn't shoot you when you landed on the idea of lynching her."

"Miss Heck?" Vince asked, turning to stare at me. "You mean the boy over there?"

"You two are as blind as you are dumb," Clay said, giving another shrill whistle before he picked up the knife he'd pulled out of Jube's hand and walked over to me. He sliced the rope binding my wrists together, then removed the one around my neck. His voice softened as he tipped back his hat and looked at me.

I fought the urge to draw in another gasp, not because I needed the air, but because Clay Cambridge was much younger than I expected and far more handsome than I'd imagined.

"Are you sure you're well, Miss Heck?" he asked with kindness and concern in his voice.

Dumbfounded, I nodded. All this time, Clay Cambridge had been hiding in plain sight. I'd seen him around a few times and assumed he was one of the cowboys who worked on one of the ranches in the area, not the man who owned the biggest spread in Orлана.

The way he looked at me sure made me wish I hadn't rushed off from the farm before I changed into a dress like I normally do before I ride into town. I had on pants that were too short, boots that were worn out at the toes, a shirt the color of dirt that had once belonged to my grandpa, and an old hat I'd found blowing across our land in a windstorm. My hair was shoved up under it to keep it out of my way.

The jingle of a harness and the creak of a wagon carried on the breeze before a wagon pulled by a matched team of work horses rounded a bend in the road, heading our direction. The driver stopped near us and jumped down from the wagon. I recognized him from town.

Vince and Jube looked as though they were seeing an apparition.

"You're dead!" Vince declared. "You was dead when we saw ya."

Clay grinned as he shook the man's hand. "The wag-

on driver happens to be a friend of mine. He only pretended to be dead. I'd like you to meet Sheriff Hiram Smith."

The sheriff tipped his hat to me. "Miss Heck. I am real interested to hear how you got yourself tangled in this mess." He thumped Clay on the shoulder. "Let's get these two loaded in the wagon."

Trussed as they were, Jube and Vince couldn't have escaped no matter how hard they tried. Clay and the sheriff hefted them into the bed of the wagon. The sheriff didn't seem to trust they'd stay put. He tied a rope around their feet and fastened it to the wagon's end gate.

"If you get any wild ideas about escaping, you'll end up dragged to death," the sheriff warned. "Makes no never mind to me, though. Less fuss and bother if you do."

Clay smirked at the terrified look on Vince's face. When Jube commenced into cussing again, the sheriff took the handkerchief from his pocket and shoved it in the man's foul mouth.

"Before you head home, Miss Heck, come to the office and give your statement," the sheriff said as he climbed onto the wagon's high seat.

"Yes, sir," I croaked, finding it hard to speak, even after I cleared my throat.

The sheriff took the weapons Clay handed to him, setting them in a box at his feet, then clucked to the horses and turned them around, heading toward Orлана.

Clay took a canteen from his horse and gave it to me. My hands shook as I raised it to my lips, but that water was the sweetest I'd ever tasted. I tipped my head back and greedily drank half the canteen. My hat fell off and my hair tumbled out. When I handed the canteen back to Clay, he stared at me like he'd never seen flaming red hair. Mama says I inherited it and my green eyes from my father. Likely be the only thing I ever inherit from the man.

"What's your real name, Miss Heck?" Clay asked, reaching out and boldly fingering one of the curls that sprang free from the braid I'd fashioned that morning.

"Kendall," I whispered. "My granny claims I need to grow into the name. She has always called me Kidd."

He grinned at me, then took a step back. "Well, Miss Kendall Heck, would you mind if I rode into town with you?"

"Not at all," I said as unfamiliar feelings settled over me. I've never been a female who fusses with her appearance, but right at that moment, I wanted to fix my hair, wash my face, and pull on my best dress, which



wasn't much, but it was better than dirty britches and my grandpa's old shirt.

I looked around for Jiminy. He'd gone a dozen yards away and stopped, standing near Clay's horse. We walked over to them and I patted Jiminy's neck before taking the reins in my hands and swinging onto his back.

Clay looked at me, and I couldn't tell if he was impressed or appalled by my ability to mount with ease.

"You live on that little farm on Dover Road, don't you?" he asked as he caught the reins of Vince's mule and Jube's horse.

I nodded, surprised he knew where I lived.

"Farming isn't easy." He gave me an observant glance as he led the two animals over to his horse, then mounted. "It's hard work for a woman."

"It's hard work for anyone," I said, looking straight ahead instead of at his face, which was already emblazoned in my mind. He had a strong jaw, full lips, a nose that was a little crooked, and eyes so blue they appeared to be a reflection of a summer sky.

His gaze rested on me as he spoke. "That it is. I admire people who work hard and live honestly. People who are brave and true."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I remained silent as the horses and mule plodded along toward Or-lana. We were nearly to town when Clay stopped and placed a hand on my arm. "Miss Heck, if I came to call on you, would you be receptive to the idea?"

"Call? On me?" I gaped at him, wondering if he'd damaged his head while he was rescuing me. I couldn't picture a man as handsome as Clay, or one as wealthy, wanting anything to do with a poor girl like me. My entire education came from Granny, who had been a schoolteacher before she met my grandpa. But the way Clay smiled with encouragement sure made me hope he meant what he'd said. I couldn't think of a thing I'd like more than seeing him again.

"Yes, you know, as a potential suitor." His face turned red from his ears down past the collar of his shirt. "I must confess, Miss Heck, I've had my eye on you for a while, but wasn't sure how to approach you. It seemed providential that our paths crossed today, although I am deeply sorry for any distress caused by Vince and Jube. I would have stopped them earlier, but I was waiting for the sheriff to arrive."

"It was rather an unsettling and unexpected afternoon." I smiled at him, then circled back to his other comment. "I don't get into town much. When and where did you have your eye on me?"

"On your farm, mostly. Working. I was riding the fence line one day and heard a woman's voice. I followed the sound to your field and watched you hoeing weeds while singing. It was ... captivating."

"You might need your ears checked, Mr. Cambridge. I sound more like a dog with its tail shut in the barn door when I sing, but I'm pleased you enjoyed it."

He chuckled. "I did, Miss Heck. Immensely. I'd sure like to get to know you. If you want to know about my character, ask the sheriff. He and my father were best friends growing up, and they stayed in touch through the years. Sheriff Smith told me about the land for sale out here, and I liked the openness in this part of Oregon. It seemed like a good place to build my ranch and my life. I'd sure like someone to share it with. Someone hardworking and honest, someone lovely and kind. Someone," he paused and smiled at me, "like you."

Unable to hold it in, I laughed, then nudged Jiminy forward. "You might not think any of those things once you get to know me, Mr. Cambridge."

"It's Clay, and I do look forward to knowing you better, Miss Heck. From what I've seen, you are a woman of strength and integrity, as well as being quite beautiful."

No one had ever called me beautiful, and it was a heady feeling to hear someone like Clay Cambridge say it.

I kicked Jiminy into a trot and smiled over my shoulder. "Then you best start by calling me Kidd."

## THE BEGINNING . . .





# Spice Blondies

These spice blondies start with a cake mix and, thanks to some add-ins, are full of flavor. If you like the texture of a soft, chewy blondie, then these are for you!

## INGREDIENTS

- 1 box spice cake mix
- 3/4 cup butter, softened
- 2 eggs
- 1/3 packed brown sugar
- 3 tablespoons cream
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 cup dried cranberries
- 1 cup white chocolate chips (or chunks)
- 1 cup chopped pecans (optional)

## DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Spray a 11×17 baking pan with nonstick spray. Set aside.

Cream butter and sugar, blend in eggs, stir in cake mix then cream and vanilla. If desired, you can add extra spice with a dash of cinnamon and nutmeg.

When batter is mixed, stir in cranberries and white chocolate (if desired, you can add pecans.)

Spread into baking pan and bake for about 30 minutes, until center is set but edges don't look overbrown. Allow to cool, then cut into bars and serve.

You could drizzle cream cheese frosting over the top, but these bars are plenty sweet all on their own.

Enjoy this pumpkin coloring page!



For the young artist to color - or young at heart!



# Fall Word Search

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| H | A | R | V | E | S | T | E | I | S | E | T |
| R | S | L | O | E | C | D | D | E | C | H | A |
| A | E | U | O | L | I | A | V | A | A | S | S |
| E | A | U | N | R | L | A | A | N | R | C | N |
| E | E | P | Y | F | E | A | K | R | E | O | R |
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| R | H | M | E | L | G | O | U | T | R | N | C |
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## Words to Find:

|           |              |
|-----------|--------------|
| pumpkin   | harvest      |
| yellow    | apples       |
| scarecrow | hayride      |
| autumn    | red          |
| leaves    | Thanksgiving |
| sunflower | football     |
| acorns    | orange       |
| corn      |              |



*Heart, Humor, Hope*

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