

JAMIE ADAMS

THE WELCOME
WAGON



The Welcome Wagon

Jamie Adams

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The Welcome Wagon
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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2022

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0390-9

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0380-0

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family, immediate and extended. Thank you for all the love and support you've given me through the years.

Prologue

Owen Somers counted fifty-three heads, not including his own.

Stationed beside the door to the judge's chambers, he had a clear view of the proceedings. The crowded courtroom buzzed like a swarm of bees ready to defend the hive whatever the cost. Pretty much everyone within the city limits of West Ridge showed for the short-notice meeting called for by Mayor Todd.

The early summer heat combined with scents from the different professions represented in the room permeated the air. Owen fought back a sneeze until his eyes watered. The sweet smell of fresh baked bread from Swenson's Pastry Shop mingled with the subtle reminders of the livery stable's residents. The windows on the west wall of the building were raised, but until a breeze came through there would be no relief.

"What's this all about, Mayor?" Rudy Brown's deep voice rose above the murmuring crowd of spectators. The burly blacksmith sat in the front pew of the jury box. After the chairs filled, he was one of the first to migrate to the benches on the left side of the room. By then folks were taking a seat anywhere they could.

"Everyone, just calm down." Mayor Todd took the

judge's chair. The circuit judge wasn't due in town for another couple of weeks. "There's no sense in anyone getting riled up."

"Why are we just now finding out about this?" Someone from the back of the room called out. Owen suspected the new schoolteacher. Hard to tell what with the way his voice cracked when he spoke.

Like a flame that refused to go out, Rudy rose from his seat this time. "We don't want no mail-order brides in West Ridge."

Rita Todd, the Mayor's wife, jumped from the bailiff's chair and planted her hands on her hips. Her eyes were wide. She thinned her lips and her words shot out like a round of bullets during shooting practice. "They are not mail-order brides."

"Well then," Rudy refused to back down, "what do you call a wagon load of single women invading a quiet little town like ours?"

A series of gasps spread throughout the room. Reverend Irvin's wife, Betty, pulled a large white lacy fan from her purse and waved it back and forth in front of her face.

"Rudy, if you don't watch your tongue, I'll have to ask you to leave." Mayor Todd glared over the top of his spectacles until the blacksmith returned to the pew.

"Please, let's keep this civil." Mrs. Todd sat on one of the more comfortable chairs in the room.

"Rita, dear," Mrs. Irvin spoke so softly Owen was forced to stretch his neck to hear what she said. "What did you have in mind when you agreed to house these people?"

The Welcome Wagon

"I believe it's our Christian duty to do something to help." Mrs. Todd's gaze dropped to the sheets of paper in her hand. She cleared her throat and turned her face toward the crowded chamber. "Besides, the women in this town are sorely out numbered."

Owen gave the room a quick glance. At last count there were sixty-two men, twelve children and twenty women living in West Ridge. Made up of predominantly confirmed bachelors, women made many of his neighbors nervous. From outside the building the sound of a donkey's loud whinny ended with a sharp hee-haw.

"Don't forget to count Dan's donkey." Someone from the back yelled, bringing snickers from several of the younger men in the room.

Mayor Todd turned his eyes upward and shook his head slightly as if looking for help from the heavens. "Whatever the reason, we've got to figure out where to put these people." He glanced at his watch. "The welcome wagon assigned to our community is due to arrive this afternoon."

"That's if the stage in Batesville arrived on time." Rudy had a way of finding the dark side to every situation.

"Lord willing, they'll be here before night fall." The exasperation in the Mayor's voice sounded more like a prayer than a reply.

"How many did you say would be coming?" Dale Sanders, the bank manager, stood at the back of the room beside the window with the best view of the savings and loan building across the street.

“Six, maybe nine.” Mrs. Todd took a moment to peruse her notes but apparently, they didn’t have an answer. “I’m not sure.”

Mrs. Irvin stilled her fan and lowered it to her lap. “We have no work here to offer them.”

“They aren’t looking for work.” Mrs. Todd raised her chin and pressed the palms of her hands together. “These women and children are the victims of the horrible attack that took place in Missouri nearly two weeks ago. The incident left them alone in the world and penniless. Several other towns have offered to house women and children left without any means of support. It’s part of a relief program organized by the local churches.”

Owen flexed his arms before crossing them over his chest. The news had been in all the papers. A group of settlers taking the Southwest Trail to the Red River Valley were forced to stop in Missouri when some folks got sick with cholera.

Two days after stopping, they were attacked and robbed by outlaws. No match for the bandits, those who survived were forced to stand by and watch the wagons burned to the ground. Single men and families with a male head of household were allowed to continue on to Searcy, Arkansas, to regroup. Women and children without family to return home to, were being relocated to Batesville where they were assigned to a community willing to take them in.

Owen looked past the faces of people he’d known all his life and then out the front window. Their concern wasn’t unwarranted. West Ridge didn’t often

see strangers. Travelers didn't pass through their out-of-the-way community. If someone new wandered into town, most likely, they were lost.

"Sheriff?" Mayor Todd cleared his throat with three sharp hacking sounds.

Owen raised one brow and waited for the mayor to repeat what he'd missed hearing. The mayor's wife invited these women, but Owen would be the one called upon to find a fix.

The badge he wore symbolized the law to outlaws, but there weren't any such persons in West Ridge. Over time, his duties quickly turned from keeping the peace to fixing the problems. Cow got out of its pen? Call the sheriff. Can't open last year's jar of beets? Call the sheriff. Foliage-eating caterpillars feasting on your tomato plants? Call the sheriff.

"What do you suggest we do with the ladies?" Mayor Todd nodded several times and then shrugged his shoulders as he waited for an answer.

Giggles came from the back of the room where Anna Grace and Sadie Mae Swenson sat side by side. The elderly spinster sisters were never seen apart. There was no telling what mischief they would get into next. The mayor banged the judge's gavel on the desktop and shot a harried glance toward the ceiling. "Sheriff Owen?"

All eyes were on him. Owen lowered his arms and stood to attention. He'd held the office of town sheriff for the past four years. His friends and neighbors, the community, counted on him.

Reverend Irvin raised his hand and stood. The tall

gray-haired man tugged on the hem of his coat jacket and squared his shoulders. He gave both Mr. and Mrs. Todd a brief nod before turning to face the crowd. "For the time being, we can let them stay in the old meeting house." The minister's soft reply seemed to bring a sense of calm over the group. "The empty office and living quarters in the back of the building should be enough room to shelter them comfortably."

"That's a wonderful idea." Mrs. Todd clapped her hands together. Her voice dropped as she continued speaking out loud. "It has a kitchen, and the outhouse isn't very old. It even has an indoor pump. Why didn't I think of it?"

It was a good solution if only a temporary fix. Since the congregation moved to the new church house last spring, the old building remained abandoned, unused, and stood right next door to the sheriff's office.

1

TUESDAY JUNE 2, 1867
NORTHEAST ARKANSAS

“Hold on!” The wagon driver’s warning snapped Maggie from dozing. Her eyes flew open and her stomach roiled as the front wheel hit a rut in the road. The rig tilted dangerously to the right. She held tight to the child in her arms and prayed.

The driver got them back on level ground. The danger passed, but her heart didn’t stop racing. She blew out a deep breath to calm her nerves, careful not to wake Esther. Her four-year-old niece clutched her favorite yellow blanket as she slept undisturbed. The bench seat was hard, but the discomfort kept Maggie from totally falling asleep. A tumble from this height would be disastrous. Her head bobbed along as the wagon wheels gained a steady rhythm. Her chin dipped toward her chest as she fought to keep her eyes open. The sun’s heat mixed with the humidity made everything sticky. The bodice of her dress clung to her sides. Her skirt stuck to her legs. A cool breeze would be nice or, better yet, a dunk in the river.

“Maggie, I’m scared.” Katie’s timid voice came from the back of the wagon. The teenage girl’s words tugged on Maggie’s heartstrings. At seventeen, Katie

was almost an adult but in so many ways still a child.

“Don’t fret.” Maggie shifted her body and craned her neck to check on the three passengers sitting in the back. The two children and Belinda were huddled tight against the bench seat. Esther’s twin, Hannah, sat on Katie’s lap playing with her favorite rag doll.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of.” Maggie forced herself to display confidence. “We’re all in this together. Remember, you’re not alone. Think of it as having a new family that loves you and will take care of you.”

The words came easy, but she was a bit nervous herself. She’d never heard of West Ridge, Arkansas, until they stepped off the stage in Batesville. Little more than strangers, she and her companions were headed to an unknown future together. Maggie returned to facing forward and pulled Esther closer.

“You heard what the man from the way station told us.” A slight pause followed the sound of Belinda clearing her throat.

Maggie could imagine the dark-haired woman resting her hand on the teenage girl’s arm.

“He said the people in the town are nice. We’ll all be fine. Just you wait and see.”

Belinda was a few years older than Maggie. Small in stature, with dark eyes and dark brown hair, she looked younger than her late twenties at first glance. Worry lines etched her face. Smiles were few and often feigned. Only a lifetime of suffering could be responsible for the sharp features hiding such a soft and caring heart.

“The road’s a bit twisty for my taste.” Mrs. Lamb sat beside Maggie. The elderly woman adjusted the strings on her bonnet before a brave smile spread across her face, “but the hills here are quite beautiful.”

For the first hour or so of their journey, they’d rolled past green fields dotted with longhorn cattle and wide-eyed calves. Half an hour ago, the landscape began to curve upward, with towering cliffs on the right and a sheer drop off on the left. Below, a rushing river carved a path through the Ozark Mountains.

“Yes, they are beautiful.” Maggie reached out and gave the elderly woman’s hand a quick squeeze. She admired Mrs. Lamb’s sweet spirit.

The sound of a shotgun blasted in the distance. Mrs. Lamb gasped and grabbed onto her arm. Maggie held back a scream. *Not again! Dear Lord, please this can’t be happening again.*

Mr. Gentry gave the woods a sharp look. He scratched the back of his neck and glanced toward Maggie and Mrs. Lamb without any sign of concern. “Just someone out hunting for deer.”

The rolling scenery speeding alongside them captured Maggie’s attention and calmed her racing heart. Tall pine trees lined the top of the craggy ridge. Above the rock wall, layers of leaves from autumns past covered the forest floor. Shrubs she’d never seen before sprouted among the foliage. The land formations in this part of the country were filled with caverns, so different from her home in Boston.

Nestled in her arms, Esther smiled in her sleep. Maggie stroked the angelic child’s soft cheek and

smiled. Tears filled Maggie's eyes. Her breath hitched in her chest. She was single, jobless, but determined to find a way to care for the children of her deceased relatives.

"West Ridge is around the next bend." Mr. Gentry's voice vibrated from somewhere deep in his chest. When he met them at the way station, the man introduced himself as Rob Gentry and had little else to say. He looked to be in his late forties.

Either he was a quiet man by nature, or he wasn't happy to be handed the task of driving a wagon filled with females. Maggie suspected the latter.

They passed by what may have been a tall wall or gate at one time. Broken chunks of bricks lay scattered on the ground next to what was left of a structure.

"Don't pay those old bricks any mind." Mr. Gentry waved his hand toward the eyesore. "A few years back, a feller who owned a lot of land around these parts thought he'd build a fancy sign to let folks know they'd reached West Ridge. He hired a bunch of townfolk to drag boulders up from the river. The cement he used wouldn't dry in the humid air, so he finally gave up. That's what's left of his gate."

Mr. Gentry didn't seem to think it odd no one bothered to clean it up. There wasn't time to ask because just on the other side of the broken gate was a town.

"There she is!" their driver said with enthusiasm, or maybe it was relief, as he pointed toward the scattering of buildings ahead of them. The excitement in his deep voice roused the sleeping child in Maggie's

arms.

A mixture of fear and excitement sent a shiver through Maggie as they drew closer to the town. She wasn't surprised by the size or number of structures. The Women's Church Committee representative in Batesville warned them West Ridge was a small community.

Esther wiggled. Maggie took a deep breath and forced herself to smile. Esther blinked several times before she sat up and yawned.

A fair-sized gathering of people congregated in the center of the street. Were they blocking the path on purpose? Maggie held her breath. What would become of her and the children if they weren't allowed to stay? Mrs. Lamb and Belinda were on their own, as well. A tall man with broad shoulders and a gun belt strapped around his trim waist stood front and center of the crowd. Their gazes met and held. Her cheeks warmed, and she lowered her gaze.

He wore a badge.

Resentment welled up inside her. Not having some sort of control over her destiny was unnerving enough without coming face to face with a sheriff. The last person she wanted to see was a lawman.

Their driver brought the team of horses to a stop and set the brake.

Belinda and the young girls in the back scrambled closer to her. Mr. Gentry stood where they could all see his face and waved his hand toward the crowd of people. "Welcome to West Ridge, ladies."

~*~

Owen joined the mayor on the boardwalk in front of the old church building. The welcome wagon had finally arrived. The women and their sad tale were the talk of the town. A group of settlers taking the Southwest Trail were forced to stop in Missouri when illness struck. Two days later they were attacked and robbed. No match for the bandits, those who survived watched their wagons burned to the ground. Women and children without family were relocated to Batesville, where they were assigned to communities willing to take them in.

“Get off the street,” Mayor Todd ordered the crowd of curious onlookers. “Give them room to breathe.”

Owen motioned for Buster, his Blue Heeler, to sit as Mayor and Mrs. Todd took their rightful place as the town greeters. Buster wagged his tail.

Rob Gentry hopped down from the driver’s side of the wagon and grinned. The look of relief on his face was almost comical. A confirmed bachelor, he ran the livery stable. The new wheels on his buckboard earned him the task of riding out to Batesville to meet the stage. He owned the best rig in town.

“Welcome.” Mayor Todd stepped forward, waving until he reached the side of the wagon. “Welcome to West Ridge. I’m Thomas Todd, the mayor of our beautiful town. We’re pleased to have you all joining us.”

Mayor Todd gave Owen a sharp nod when he was

ready for him to help the women from the wagon.

Owen took a step forward, and Buster rose to join him. "Stay." He raised the palm of his right hand. The dog sat and watched, waiting for his next command.

A silver-haired woman, carrying a drawstring purse that matched her calico dress, held out her hand. He steadied her as she lowered herself to the ground. Next came a tall, thin, dark-haired woman. She held something in her arms, covered by a thin yellow blanket. When he reached out to help her, a fist came out from under the cloth, followed by the face of a beautiful, blue-eyed little girl. Owen reared back and nearly lost his balance on the edge of the walkway. The little angel gave him a playful grin. An abundance of blond curls covered her head.

The woman holding the child cleared her throat. Owen looked into a pair of dark-blue eyes so striking his jaw dropped open. The woman's dark hair was tied in a bun, but loose strands draped the back of her neck. Her lovely eyes reflected a wariness he attributed to the horrific events of the past two weeks. The woman's lips tightened into what appeared to be an attempt at a smile. She pulled the child close to her chest. He took her by the waist and swung her and the youngster to the walkway.

"Thank you." The woman kept her gaze trained on the young girl, adjusting both the blanket and the little one in her arms until she had them propped steady on her hip.

"Look! It's a dog." The child pointed at the ground behind Owen.

Buster's tail thumped against the boardwalk in response to the little girl's excited greeting. The compliant canine didn't move from the spot where he had been told to stay. The good dog would receive an extra treat when they returned to the jailhouse.

Owen tipped the brim of his hat toward the woman and child before he moved to the back of the wagon. Another blond-haired, blue-eyed youngster, nearly identical in appearance to the other, stood holding her arms out toward him. This one tilted her head as if sizing him up. Her shy grin put a smile on his face. He swung her to the ground, where she hurried to join the woman with the beautiful blue eyes.

A third woman clambered out of the wagon before he could get to her. Last was a teenage girl with bright red hair pulled back into a tight bun. Freckles covered her fair skin. She moved back when Owen reached out to help her.

"It's all right, Katie." The elderly woman came to stand beside him, as if to reassure the girl she was safe. "Let this nice man help you down from there."

The young lady squared her shoulders and took a deep breath before she timidly came to the side of the wagon where Owen stood. He reached up and gently swung her stiff form to the ground. Once she was on her feet, she scurried to stand beside the others in her group.

"Welcome to West Ridge." Mrs. Todd's warm greeting was directed at the newcomers huddled together on the boardwalk. "I'm Rita Todd, wife to the mayor and president of the Women's Church

Committee."

Owen exhaled a quick breath and stepped back, happy to let her take control of the situation. He stood next to Buster, rubbing the dog's head while he watched and listened.

"We are so happy to have you join our community."

"We appreciate your kindness." The dark-haired woman juggled the girl on her hip while the one on the ground clung onto her skirt. Apparently, the spokesperson for the group, she held out her free hand and shook Mrs. Todd's. "I'm Maggie Lynn. This is Esther and her sister Hannah."

The sisters looked so much alike, if not for the difference in the shape of their faces and noses, they could be identical twins. The one being held grinned happily while the other shyly hid her face in Mrs. Lynn's skirts. The little girls didn't resemble the woman caring for them, other than the color of their eyes. Owen remained quiet but kept his full attention on the proceedings.

Mrs. Todd bent down and smiled sweetly as she reached her hand out to the little one standing beside Mrs. Lynn. "Hello, there."

The girl shook her head and turned a pleading gaze at the woman holding her sister while the other one squirmed in her arms. One wanted up and the other wanted down. The woman had her hands full.

Mrs. Todd straightened and returned her attention to the spokesperson for the group. "Are these your children?"

"They're my nieces and have been entrusted in my care." Moisture filled the woman's eyes, and her voice quivered. She took a deep breath. "By their parents."

In all the excitement and commotion, it had been easy to forget the emotional ordeal this group of travelers had endured. A lump formed in Owen's throat as an awkward silence settled over those assembled.

Before Miss Lynn could explain more, the eldest of the women stepped forward. "I'm Martha Lamb, sixty-five and from New Jersey."

"I'm sorry for your loss." Mrs. Todd's lips thinned, and her brow wrinkled. The edges of her mouth pulled downward, but her attempt at a heartfelt reply was cut short.

"My husband died twelve years ago."

Owen's attention snapped toward the eldest member of the welcome wagon. What was a sixty-five-year-old woman doing headed west on her own? Each new introduction brought more questions. To protect these people and keep the peace, he would need answers sooner or later.

"How did you come to be part of a wagon caravan, if you don't mind me asking?" Mrs. Todd's train of thought seemed to coincide with Owen's.

"My nephews planned to start a ranch out West. They convinced me to sell everything and join them. They said that with my money they could start big and promised to take care of me." Mrs. Lamb shook her head slightly and turned her hands palm side up. "As they're my only living relatives, I had no choice but to

agree rather than be left alone."

"Oh my. Were they lost in the attack?" Mrs. Todd pulled a handkerchief from her skirt pocket. She dabbed the edges of her eyes as the crowd waited to hear more of the woman's sad story.

"No. They decided to go on ahead. They promised to come for me once they got their ranch started. I don't expect I'll be hearing from them anytime soon."

Mrs. Todd clutched the hankie in her fist and trained her attention toward her papers for a moment before acknowledging the third adult woman in the group. Her lips curved into a friendly, if not somewhat feigned, smile. "And you are?"

"Belinda Jones, twenty-eight, from New York City." She answered the standard questions without pausing to take a breath.

"You have no family back in New York?"

"None who would take me in. I was on my way to California with my business partner. He disappeared the day before the attack on the wagons."

"He disappeared?"

"Yes. The wagon master sent men out looking for Brent, but there was no sign of him." The woman crossed her arms. She looked more annoyed than saddened by the loss of her friend. "They figure he either got lost, got killed, or returned to the East."

After making a mark on her list, Mrs. Todd gave Miss Jones a nod before stepping over to the young girl in her teens. "And how about you, young lady?"

"I'm Katie," she spoke so soft, Owen strained to hear, "from New Jersey."