



*Convincing
Lou*

JODIE WOLFE

A BOUNTY HUNTING WIDOW
WASN'T WHO THE MARSHAL EXPECTED



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Jodie Wolfe

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Dedication

To my Lord and Savior. When I set out to write this book, I thought I had an understanding of what it meant to trust. But You took me on a different, deeper journey. Even in the midst of heartbreak, You showed me the importance of trusting You through the waters, through the rivers, and through the fires. Even then, You are there.

To Ruth Gunnett – Thank you for answering all my horse questions and helping me write hopefully believable horse scenes. Any mistakes are on my part.

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To my beloved, David. God gave me a treasure when He brought you into my life. Thank you for sticking with me as we pass through the waters, rivers, and fires. Thank you for your faithful love and support. Your encouragement means the world to me. I love you, sweetheart.

1

When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert. ~ Isaiah 43:2, 19

*Burrton Springs, Kansas
December 3, 1877*

Four weeks. Four weeks until Ellie Lou Williams lost everything her late husband had worked so hard to achieve. Her chest constricted, and a sharp pain shot the length of her left arm. Where was her deep faith in God when she needed it the most? Dried up and crumpled like a dull, brown leaf separated from the tree in fall. Useless. Ground under a shoe until it became pulverized. No good to anyone. Where was the elusive peace she'd talked about with others, pointing them to Scripture? Why did she feel like the Israelites during the years in the Bible where God was silent in between the Old and New Testament?

Her words from a few months ago rose to haunt

her. "My life is in His hands to do with how He sees fit. I will do whatever I can to keep this ranch because it's what Charles would've wanted, but if it somehow gets taken away, I still must trust God has a plan even when I can't see it." She snorted. That was easy to say until she had to actually live it. *I feel as if I've lived a lifetime since I said those words, God. If I lose the ranch, I have nowhere to go. Nobody alive to rely on.* She toed her boot in the thick dust along the street. *Are you listening, God?*

"Hi, Ellie Lou." Mary Scott waved. "I haven't seen you in town since all that excitement at your ranch a few months back."

She wouldn't call being held at gun point 'excitement.' Too bad there hadn't been any reward money for the capture of the outlaws who'd held her. If there had been she wouldn't be in this mess.

"Were you planning to stop by Betty's shop?" The elderly woman slipped her arm through Ellie Lou's. "Or perhaps you were going to see Gertrude at her place instead."

Ellie Lou glanced at the shop. The sign said Ruffles And Stitches. She hadn't seen much of her newly wedded friend, Gertrude Valentine, but a visit could wait until another time. "I can come in for a few moments to see Betty."

"Oh, good. She's been in such a dither." Mary tugged her in the direction of her niece's shop.

Ellie Lou held back a sigh. Best to focus on someone else's troubles instead of her own for a bit. "What's got her upset?"

The bell above the door chimed as they entered the dress shop.

"There you are, Aunt Mary." Betty Hadler fanned her flushed cheeks. "We've got to do something."

Mary released Ellie Lou's arm and patted her niece's hand. "Now, dear, I'm sure your fiancé will show soon."

"But he was supposed to be here weeks ago. He said he only had to make a short stop in Topeka. I'm afraid something's happened to him." Betty withdrew a handkerchief from the pocket in her skirt and dabbed her moist eyes. "The stagecoach has been coming regularly, so he couldn't have been delayed because of that."

"Now, now. Don't you fret."

Ellie Lou cleared her throat, unsure whether to step away from the private conversation or to remain. She took a step backward.

"I'm thinking of hiring someone to go after him." Betty sniffed and wiped her nose.

Ellie Lou's ears perked. Could this be an answer to her prayers? *Please, Lord.*

"I'm sure that's not needed." Mary squeezed her niece's shoulders.

Betty shook her head, her carefully pinned brown curls bouncing with each motion. "No. I'll see if I can pay someone seventy-five dollars to bring Jeffrey here. Our wedding is less than a month away. Something's happened to him. I feel it in my bones." A tear trickled down her pale cheeks.

Ellie Lou gasped at the extravagant amount. She

swallowed. The sum would more than cover the money she owed the bank. She could pay off the loan and not have to worry about her home being taken away. Surely this was God intervening in her situation.

"That's way too much, Betty." Mary's lips pinched together.

"He's worth it. I'm sure he would do the same if I was the one missing." Betty glanced out the window.

"If you tell me more about him, perhaps I can go and find your fiancé and bring him back to Burrton Springs." Ellie Lou's words escaped before she had time to fully weigh the decision. "I don't have anything going on right now and can easily get away." She could take her two remaining horses with her, which would enable her to leave the ranch for a bit. It wasn't as if she had fields to tend.

"Truly?" Betty's eyes filled with additional tears.

Ellie Lou quickly calculated the mileage to Topeka. It was doable to get there and back, allow time for the search, return to collect the compensation, and deposit it in the bank to pay off her loan before the end of the year. It had to be the Lord finally speaking to her. Finally, He was breaking His silence.

Betty withdrew something from her pocket. "I have a tintype of my fiancé. It should help you find him." She handed it to Ellie Lou.

Ellie Lou studied the serious looking young man. "Do you mind if I take it along? I promise to take good care of it."

Betty nodded. "You can't tell it from the tintype, but he has light brown hair and blue eyes. He's well-to-

do. We've known each other since childhood." She twisted her hands. "I just don't understand what could be keeping him so long. I'm afraid..."

Ellie Lou touched Betty's arm. "I'm sure he's fine. Just hasn't been able to get a message to you. Don't you worry. I'll find him for you. In fact, I'll head home now so I can get an early start in the morning." She tucked the tintype into her reticule.

"Are you sure it's safe, dear?" Mary frowned. "I've never heard of a woman riding that far on horse by herself."

Her heart stalled a beat. She'd learned the hard way trouble had a way of happening when you least expected it. Ellie Lou stood a little taller. If she took extra precautions, no harm would come her way. But it wouldn't work to go dressed as a woman. She'd have to don her husband's clothes and pose as a man. If she could perform this one job, her problems would be solved.

~*~

As soon as Caleb Dawson performed this last job, his problems would be solved. He'd only agreed to the assignment because it was on his way to Burrton Springs. At least he hoped he'd find his old friend, Joshua Walker, there. Last Caleb had heard, Josh had settled in the small town. Rumors had circulated that the former Deputy U.S. Marshal had moved to where his sister lived. Caleb had worked with the man on and off through the years and never knew Josh had a sister.

"G'dyup, Chestnut. The sooner we find this varmint, the sooner we can start a new life." One where he didn't have constant reminders of the darker side of the law. He'd had his fill. He was more than ready to start a life where trouble didn't come his way. Maybe he'd learn to relax and let down his defenses.

His horse surged into motion.

Caleb withdrew the wanted poster from his vest pocket. A drawing of the criminal stared back at him. The man had last robbed a stagecoach and killed three passengers. A young man and a couple. The description also stated the outlaw had robbed the bank in Topeka. Caleb had stumbled across the stagecoach shortly after the theft. He'd hoped to save the passengers, but they were already dead when he'd arrived on the scene. Lined up and shot in the back. All three had fallen with their faces on the ground. He shook his head to rid himself of the memory.

Don't rightly know what causes a man to go bad, Lord. He chomped down on the inside of his cheek. He'd seen enough pain during the war to know it changed a man. Made him hollow inside.

~*~

Three days later

Ellie Lou was beginning to regret her decision to chase down a delinquent groom. What did she know about tracking? Apparently, nothing. Her muscles complained as she knelt and studied the dirt. A myriad of tracks covered the path. How was she supposed to

determine who left them? She hated to admit it, but she was out of her element. She studied the sky. The purple clouds tinged with green that had dotted the horizon at dawn were long gone. The day had started unseasonably warm but now there was a chill in the air. A drop of rain splashed on her face.

She bit back a groan as she stood. Rain would wash away what little of a trail she'd found. Ellie Lou couldn't hold back a yawn. Sleeping on the ground had been harder than she'd anticipated. She ran a hand along the tight muscles in her neck. Her head throbbed with each beat of her heart. Using a saddle as a pillow hadn't helped matters.

Ellie Lou dropped down and went to the pack horse. She dug into the pack on Honey's back. She found her husband's rubber coat and pulled it on over her own. Gathering the reins, she boosted up into the saddle. She glanced at the sky. It would be dark soon, especially since the rain was increasing. Best find a decent place to make camp. Somewhere off the trail where she'd be safe. Away from any onlookers stumbling upon her. The only trouble was, the flat Kansas prairie didn't have many places to conceal her.

The saddle creaked as she kned Storm, her horse, into motion. The stallion tossed his head. Ellie Lou patted his sleek, dark neck. She clicked her tongue so Honey would follow them. Light from a campfire glimmered ahead. Best to find somewhere to hide the horses before she crept for a closer look.

A slight dip in the land appeared on her left. A small cluster of cottonwood trees nestled in the middle

of the gully. She urged Storm towards it. Seconds later she dismounted, tying both horses to a branch of one of the trees.

Ellie Lou patted both of her horses and whispered, "Keep quiet, you two. I'll be back in a bit." She slung a length of rope over her left shoulder and slipped her husband's pistol from his gun belt. Her hand shook at the weight of the gun. She should've spent some time getting familiar with it before she took off on this adventure.

Her husband, Charles, had always talked about teaching her to shoot, yet she'd been too busy to find time for those lessons. But he was gone, and she'd never learned. She regretted that now.

Direct me, Lord. Keep me safe. And help me find Jeffrey. She took a deep breath. Her breath hitched in her chest, and she pinched the bridge of her nose. She'd been in such a hurry to start her quest and find the overdue groom, she'd forgotten to ask what his last name was. Great. What kind of bounty hunter was she? Well, not exactly a bounty hunter, but still. She knew better than to rush off without a thorough plan. Or at least she thought she did. Apparently, desperation caused her to do crazy things and not think straight.

She scrunched her toes in her husband's boots. The sock stuffed into the toe of each boot helped to keep them in place. She adjusted her Stetson. There was more room in it since she cut off a good portion of her hair before she set on her journey. She had planned to crop it close to her head, but at the last minute she

opted to leave it just below her shoulders. Long enough she could pin it up and not be discovered to be a woman providing her hat stayed in place.

The bindings on her chest dug into her skin. How she longed to loosen the strips of cloth. She tugged the vest, making sure it helped to disguise her bosom. She hadn't washed her face since she started her journey, so she'd hopefully looked more like a man instead of a woman. While she felt more exposed wearing Charles's britches, it had been a necessary part of her disguise.

Time to stop thinking about her attire and concentrate on the matter at hand. Ellie Lou crouched closer to the campfire, thankful for the prairie grass, and the whispering wind which helped to disguise her footfalls. At least she prayed it did.

A man sat by a blazing fire.

Her stomach rumbled as the scent of rabbit and beans filled the air.

Darkness descended as she continued to watch the man.

She crept a step closer and hunkered close to the ground.

The man turned and stared in her direction.

Her heart pounded in her ears. Could he hear it? She willed herself not to move.

He stayed seated. Didn't reach for the rifle propped beside him.

Her pulse thrummed.

He looked like the tintype in her saddle bag.

She slipped her pistol into the gun belt and swung

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the rope in a loop. It swirled through the air.

2

While Ellie Lou hadn't had lessons on shooting a gun, she was an expert when it came to swinging a lariat and capturing her target. The loop sailed through the night air, circling around the man. She tugged with all her weight.

The man struggled and tried to turn towards her.

She yanked again, tugging him off balance and knocking him to the ground.

His body stilled. Was he playing possum?

Her stomach clenched. Not allowing herself to consider the consequences, she ran towards him, keeping resistance on the rope.

He hadn't moved a muscle. His eyes were closed. His white Stetson had slipped off when he fell backward. Dark red stained the ground.

Dear God, please let him be alive. Her fingers shook as she pressed them against the side of his neck. A steady beat pumped against her fingertips. *Thank You, Lord.* She slipped the rope off his torso and quickly checked his pockets. A paper crinkled as she withdrew it from his left side. She also found a set of steel bracelets. Why would Jeffrey have handcuffs? She shrugged. They would come in handy. She pocketed the paper and slapped the handcuffs on one wrist,

shifting his body so she could clip both of his hands behind him.

Grunting as she adjusted him to a seated position, Ellie Lou bound his calves with her rope. Best to keep him off guard until she had the chance to talk to him. She unbuckled his gun belt, relieving him of his pistols and ammunition, and scooped up his rifle.

Ellie Lou glanced at him.

He still hadn't moved.

Should she check his boots and make sure he didn't have a knife stowed somewhere? Best to be cautious. She removed the man's boots and discovered a blade in each one. Tucking them under her gun belt, she shifted his footwear out of reach.

The rain continued as Ellie Lou gently nudged his foot with the tip of her boot. Still no movement. Maybe she had time to run and collect her horses. She scurried into the night, stumbling over a patch of prairie grass, but she managed to keep a hold of the man's weapons.

Back at the horses, she untied the reins. "Come on." She clicked and the pair followed her. "Doesn't make sense. Why would a city fella who's supposed to get married soon be rambling the countryside as if he had nowhere special to be?"

Storm snorted and tossed his head.

"Maybe he doesn't trust travel on the stagecoach and wanted to make his way to Burrton Springs on his own." She chuckled. "Bet he's been lost the past couple weeks."

She ground-tied her horses beside his magnificent mare. Maybe he'd be interested in striking a deal and

swapping a stud fee in exchange for the offspring his horse and Storm could produce. It would help in the long run to build up her herd but wouldn't solve her current problems.

One thing at a time. One day at a time.

The man was in the same position.

Ellie Lou strapped his gun belt to her waist. She tucked the knives into her saddle bag and his rifle in the pack of supplies she'd removed from Honey. After a good rub down of her horses, she slipped the tintype from her pack and studied it in the dim light from the fire. Sure looked like the man on the ground. What a relief to have found him so soon. If all went well, she could collect her pay from Betty, and have it in the bank by early next week. *Forgive me for doubting Your care of me, Lord.*

Her stomach growled, and she glanced at the pot hovering above the fire. Wouldn't hurt to help herself to some food, would it? She could always share some of her supplies with him once he woke up.

Decision made, she dug in her supplies and found a plate and spoon. Back at the fire, she moved the pot away from the heat and lifted the lid, breathing deep. It smelled like the best meal she'd ever had. Scooping a hefty serving onto her plate, she dipped her head and said a quick prayer.

Her tongue exploded with flavors as she chewed the rabbit and beans. She couldn't identify the spice he'd added to the dish, but she liked it. Maybe he'd share his recipe once he woke up.

Ellie Lou studied him.

Not a muscle flitted.

Maybe she should take another gander at his head. It hadn't bled much, but maybe there was something else going on. She set her empty plate aside and stood.

Dusting off her backside, she crept closer to him. Her fingers hesitated over his neck before she got up enough nerve to check his pulse again.

Strong and steady.

She tiptoed to the back of him and studied his head.

His hair was wet from the rain, but the blood had stopped flowing and was already crusting.

Guess there's nothing I can do except wait for him to wake up. As she sat down across from him, the paper in her pocket crinkled. Ellie Lou withdrew it and studied it. A man's face stared back at her. Why would Betty's fiancé have a wanted poster in his pocket? It didn't make any sense. Maybe there was more to the man than Betty realized. That must be it. After all, look at her friend, Gertrude. When her fiancé came to town to marry her, he ended up being a criminal and was arrested as soon as he stepped off the stagecoach. Good thing she hadn't ended up with the scoundrel.

Best to be on guard. One never knew if someone wasn't who they said they were. Just look at the trouble she'd had at the ranch a few months ago.

Decision made, she'd do whatever it took to stay awake until the man woke up and she could question him. She'd better get some coffee started. She had a feeling she would need the extra boost to get her through whatever lay ahead.

Help me stay awake, Lord. Keep me safe so I can get the money from Betty for this delinquent groom. Could You make him agreeable to go with me when he wakes up? You know how much I need this.

~*~

Caleb woke to a throbbing head and cold, wet feet. His body trembled with the frigid rain pelting him. The wind had picked up. He'd been awake for a while but had stayed quiet so he could learn more about his captor. He couldn't believe someone had gotten a jump on him. Caleb prided himself on his abilities especially after being one of Sheridan's scouts in the war. Guess it proved he shouldn't be a U.S. Marshal anymore. Good thing he'd hung up his badge in Topeka. Once he found this last outlaw, he'd settle down to the quiet life.

There hadn't been a sound from his captor for a while. Should he chance opening his eyes to better access the situation?

He took a quick peek.

A small gasp escaped his prisoner's lips. Small, flat lips. Big brown eyes widened. There was no way those eyes belonged to a man.

Caleb cleared his throat. "What's your name?"

"Name's..." the word came out in a squeak. The captor cleared her throat and coughed. "Name's Lou." This time the words were said in a deeper tone.

"Lou, huh?"

Lou's hands shook as she adjusted her brown

Stetson, pulling the brim to cover more of her face. She stood and Caleb bit the inside of his cheek to keep from making a sound. There was one thing he knew about his captor. 'Lou' was a woman posing as a man. The question was, why? And how had he allowed a woman to get the drop on him? "What do you want with me?" Best to get her talking.

She didn't answer right away, but paced back and forth, her hand resting on her gun belt.

No. Wait. *His* gun belt. Embers flared in his chest. She had no right. He glanced at his stocking feet. If she'd removed his boots, she'd likely found the two knives he'd hid there.

"Plan to take you where you're supposed to be."

What did that mean?

Lou had a gift for giving answers that were as clear as mud, just like every other woman he'd encountered over the years.

His head pulsed as he strained to make sense of the situation. The handcuffs chafed his wrists, and his shoulders complained. Just how long had he been in this position? His stomach rumbled.

Caleb's thoughts fuzzed as he tried to remember what had happened before the captor had come upon him. What had he been doing? The pieces fell into place. He'd stopped to make camp. His supper was just about ready. He'd been on the trail of the outlaw. "You're making a big mistake."

Lou stopped short, tripping over a tuft of grass. Almost as though her boots were too big for her feet.

He filed the information to examine later.

Even though dirt lined her face, there was no disguising her fine cheek bones and chin. She shook her head. "I don't think so. You look exactly like your tintype."

Tintype? Had she retrieved the wanted poster from his pocket and somehow thought the outlaw was him? His head hurt. What exactly had he hit his head on? She did know the difference between a tintype and a wanted poster, didn't she?

"Shame on you for not letting Betty know what delayed you." A frown marred her face.

"Betty? Who's Betty?"

Her mouth gaped open. She swallowed. "Just how hard did you hit your head on the rock when you fell?"

A rock? He growled. "I wouldn't have hit it at all if you hadn't lassoed me." This discussion wasn't getting anywhere, and it was making his head throb more and more. He closed his eyes against the sudden, searing pain.

~*~

Caleb's body slumped over.

Ellie Lou scurried to check him.

His heart still beat steadily. So, what had caused him to pass out again?

She caught her lip between her teeth. If it wasn't the middle of the night, she'd get them back on the trail towards home, but she'd never been great when it came to directions. There was no way she'd find her way in the dark, especially with the rain wiping out