



Prologue to *Wildfire for Rose*

by

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“We’re out of meat,” Walter grumbled, nudging the canvas bag at his feet with his moccasin. “Not much chance of getting something in this weather. And our supplies are low.”

Mackenzie rubbed the back of his neck and glanced at Walter, the old man’s long gray hair plastered to his hawk-like head as the gentle rain fell.

“I know, I know,” Mackenzie muttered, the anxiety returning despite his prayers. “We need to make camp and rest before we scout for tracks. I know that red Pegasus is around here.” He gestured at the roaring river and the surrounding hills, his Scottish accent pronounced in his agitation. “I can feel it.”

Walter scowled and wiped rain from his eyes, his lined face glistening in the dim light of the gray day. “You say the strangest things, Mackenzie,” the old Cheyenne mumbled as he turned to study the others.

Mackenzie’s gaze followed the old man’s. Blue Heron smiled bravely at her father, but the children, Rose and Scott, huddled on the ground, too tired to even search for shelter. He turned away and peered at the nearby canyons, wondering if they might find a place to build camp.

“Pegasus is a winged horse from the old Greek days,” Mackenzie explained as he bent to retrieve his long rifle.

Walter waved a hand, dismissing the unimportant trivia. “We need meat,” he repeated, and then grunted with satisfaction as he watched his son-in-law prepare to go hunting.

Mackenzie nodded as he examined the gun, checking his load. He’d have to make sure to keep his powder dry in this wet weather. “I’ll see what I can scare up. In the meantime, try and locate a good base camp. I plan on being here a long while and we need shelter.”

Walter grunted again. “I’ll do what I can, but without horses, this trip to the Arkansas might prove worthless. We haven’t seen Wildfire for years and he might’ve left these mountains.”

Mackenzie shook his head, water flying from the ends of his dark hair. “No, Walter. It’s no accident we came here. I feel led, like an unseen hand guided me here. Wildfire must still be close.”

Walter’s scowl deepened, but the old man said nothing.

“Look after the others, old timer,” Mackenzie said as he clapped Walter on the shoulder. “I should be back soon with a fat buck, God willing.”

The old Indian only stared, his dark eyes narrowing.

Mackenzie turned and nodded to his wife. Blue Heron smiled again but he could read the worry in her eyes. She turned to drape a deerskin hide around Scott’s shoulders. The boy mumbled his thanks and bowed his head to the rain. Rose returned Mackenzie’s glance, her green eyes shining, and a knot formed in his gut. He ignored the strong sensation, faking an encouraging grin instead. When had his little girl become a young woman?

Mackenzie’s gaze pivoted to the towering peaks around him. He’d brought his family here because they’d nowhere else to go. However, Mackenzie had mostly decided upon the long journey south to the Arkansas River basin because Wildfire roamed these mountains and Rose needed horses around her like fish need water.

He glanced back at his family, taking longer than needed to review them in the early summer rain. He studied them, etching each of them into his mind before turning away. Then, with a wave, he marched from the sullen group, resolved to find something to eat.

A canopy of steel gray hovered above him, the storm refusing to budge as the steady rain pelted him. His red flannel shirt clung to his broad shoulders. The winter's fur hunt had gone badly, the mountain streams trapped out, and they'd been forced to sell their equipment and mounts to square their debts. Yet, the thought of the big red stallion had lingered, driving Mackenzie to drag the others southward.

He strode further from his group, knowing he held a slim chance finding game in this rain. He gritted his teeth. *I must try.* His family needed him, especially old Walter who was getting up there in years. They needed guidance and encouragement. What would happen to them if he weren't there to help?

Mackenzie slowed as he neared the Arkansas River. Most animals would've found shelter from the storm, but perhaps a deer could be pushed from the brush. He felt almost hopeless as he turned to the east, following the rushing water out onto the open plains.

His moccasins made no sound as he glided over the wet grass, his eyes roaming ceaselessly as he searched for any sign of game. He descended to the level prairie with only the gentle rain for company. The bleak landscape worried him as he surveyed the grasslands beyond the trees along the river, their branches thick with green foliage. Yet the plains stretched empty in every direction, causing Mackenzie to ponder anew on his expedition southward. Had he read the Spirit wrong? Hadn't he sensed God directing his path to these lonely hills where the mountains met the far-reaching plains?

His sharp eye discerned the broken fort. Old Bent's Fort lay desolate amid tumbled timbers blackened by fire. Mackenzie had heard of the old trading post located on the Santa Fe Trail where the road crossed the Arkansas River, but had never seen it before, never traveled this far south. He only glanced at the long abandoned post and quickly walked on, scanning the prairie and wondering where game might hide on a day like this.

An hour later, he paused beneath the spreading branches of a giant elm tree, the dense cover shielding him from the drizzle. He scoured the region, praying for an animal to ignore its natural instincts and step out into the storm where he might get off a shot. His eyes drifted back up the gradual slope toward the high mountains behind him. The bulk of the Rockies loomed majestic against the leaden sky and Mackenzie searched the green ribbon of trees that marked the route of the Arkansas as it burst from the Front Range, the lower hills along the face of the crags.

He'd already traveled farther than he'd realized, the decline to the prairies difficult to measure in the rain. He must be at least five miles now from the others.

"Well, Lord," he muttered under his breath as his gaze swept back to the plains around him. "I'm here because ... well, because I thought you brought me here. Let me find game today. You know our needs."

He finished his prayer and gripped his rifle tighter just as something stirred in the brush a short distance downriver from his position. Mackenzie grinned, thanking the Lord as he lifted his rifle and pressed it against his shoulder. With a lunge, a

young buffalo cow emerged from the river bank and lumbered into view, the black mantle of woolly hair around her head dripping with rain. The range was not over fifty yards. Mackenzie closed one eye as he sighted along the long barrel, squinting at a point on the chest just in front of the buffalo's lead leg.

Before he could squeeze the trigger, a horse whinnied and Mackenzie's head jerked up. A line of mounted Indians rode from a draw on his left. Had they seen him?

He released the finger pressure on the trigger and dropped to one knee, making himself smaller, but too late. With a whoop, the lead warrior pointed at Mackenzie while others in the party turned toward the buffalo. Four of the Indians rode down on him as the rest descended on the hapless cow. They must be starving to pursue the cow rather than him, Mackenzie figured as he scrambled into the brush. Mackenzie saw arrows fly and the buffalo went to one knee as the Indians shouted.

He ducked under a low branch and headed for the river, some forty yards distant. The quartet of riders plowed into the brush in pursuit, their horses snorting loudly as they neared.

A deep ravine yawned before Mackenzie and he skidded to a halt, glancing up and down, searching for a way across. Hooves pounded the wet turf as the Indians closed in around him, searching for him among the low brush of the nearby river. The sound of rushing waters tumbling over boulders told him he was close to the river, but how close?

A shout warned him as one rider called to his companions. Mackenzie lifted the rifle and squeezed off a quick shot, the bullet knocking the young rider from his pony. Mackenzie turned to leap into the chasm as a slug took him from behind, propelling him into the deep ditch. He stumbled and fell, his rifle torn from his grip as he sprawled in the mud. Shaking the fog from his brain, he pushed up to his hands and knees as an arrow drove into his right elbow. He glanced up to see the remaining pursuers line up on the edge of the ravine, grinning at one another as two of them drew their bows at the easy target below them, the third brave reloading his rifle.

Mackenzie threw himself sideways as a pair of arrows rained around him. His left leg buckled beneath him, but he ignored the searing pain and forced himself to struggle down the deep ravine toward the watercourse. The Arkansas River roared, offering protection or possibly a hiding place, if he could reach it.

An Indian shouted instructions to his companions and the horses crashed through the brush, chasing him toward the nearby river. Mackenzie thought only briefly of his lost rifle, laying somewhere behind him in the mud. He'd recognized the Indians. Kiowa. He knew they would not allow him to retrieve the fallen weapon. His only chance now was to hide.

The steep sided ravine turned to the west before doubling back and angling to the east, downhill to meet up with the Arkansas. He scrambled over deadfalls and staggered around boulders, his useless right arm hanging limp. Another bend and the roar of rushing water filled his ears.

Spring runoff still ran high, perhaps revealing a place to hide. Mackenzie pushed on, determined to escape the Indians. His family counted on him. The ravine widened and he stumbled, slipping in the mud. The protruding arrow in his elbow bent and Mackenzie winced and gritted his teeth, unwilling to cry out and reveal his position to the pursuing Kiowa. He could hear their horses thrashing in the brush on the level above him. He needed to hide.

His wounds were extensive. Besides the arrow in his right arm, he knew he'd been shot from behind. Warm blood oozed down his thigh and he believed something was wrong with his left leg. Whether he'd been shot there, too, he wasn't sure. His entire body hurt and Mackenzie wondered how much of his pain was from wounds and how much was from the tumble he'd taken in the deep ravine.

No matter. He needed to evade the Kiowa hunting party and treat his wounds, hoping to return to his family under cover of darkness.

A glance at the steely sky told him nothing. Light shimmered dully, the sun invisible in the rain storm. Mackenzie couldn't tell how late in the day it was. Would night descend soon, allowing him to return upriver?

He shook his head as he slipped again, his eyes darting, desperately seeking cover, a hiding place, anywhere he could disappear. A glance behind him revealed his tracks plainly visible in the wet ground and Mackenzie waded into the river's edge, obscuring his tracks as he moved downstream, following the river and leading the Kiowa away from his family.

He heard more shouts, but no one showed atop the high bank. Perhaps their hunger had driven them to butcher the buffalo rather than chase an enemy. The hopeful thought faded quickly. The Kiowa would prefer a fight to hunting. Mackenzie knew they were a warlike people, bravery and courage in battle admired above hunting skills. Without a doubt, they would be searching for him.

A cottonwood tree, dislodged by an ancient flood, leaned from the bank, naked branches stretching into the rushing water like arms of a skeleton. Near its roots, a dark hollow in the bank peered at Mackenzie, offering a refuge from the storm and his pursuers. Without hesitation, he waded from the river and dragged himself into the beckoning burrow.

Thunder rumbled along the front of the mountains as Mackenzie pulled branches across the opening, attempting to conceal his retreat. Only his left arm worked now, the long arrow still sticking from his right elbow. He picked up a short piece of driftwood and thrust the stick between his teeth, clamping it tightly as he reached for the feathered shaft. With a wrench, he snapped the arrow a few inches above his elbow and then shoved the remaining shaft through his arm, the rock point splitting the taut skin on the other side of his arm.

His head spun with pain and he wanted to cry out, but he didn't dare. The Kiowa must be nearby, searching for him. If they discovered his hiding place, he'd be killed quickly, his scalp torn from his head.

Mackenzie ripped a ribbon of material from his faded flannel shirt and bound the wound in his arm. Then he looked at his belly. The rifle bullet had gone through him, entering his back and exiting above his belt. He didn't know if he should be grateful or not that the bullet had not lodged inside of him as he studied the gaping, ragged hole. Blood pumped from the wound, matching the beat of his heart. He wondered briefly at how much blood he'd lost.

He stuffed another torn piece of shirt in the front wound and then searched for the entrance, his fingers probing when he felt the round hole. Sweat broke out on his puckered brow as he shoved another dirty rag into the wound, wincing with pain.

Mackenzie lay back on the damp ground, the thick roots weaving a solid shield above him. He panted as he stared at the intertwining roots, wondering at their

intricate route and the possible meaning of various paths. Why had the Lord brought him all the way to the Arkansas to die?

He drew in a deep breath and pursed his lips. He mustn't think this way. He wasn't dead yet. He had a family that needed him. He must return to them.

"Lord, help me. I love Blue Heron and Scott and Rose. Old Walter is my best friend. Help me get back to them. They need me so much."

He turned his head, peering through the branches, and studied the gray sky. It did seem darker. Was night coming on or were his senses failing him? Was he surrendering to his wounds?

With a groan, Mackenzie sat up, leaning on his one good elbow. It *was* darker. With satisfaction, he realized night was coming on. Soon, he would leave and return to his family.

His thoughts turned to the Kiowa. That they had a rifle or two among them didn't surprise him. The plains Indians had traded for decades with French fur trappers from Canada or with renegade Spaniards from the south. He'd even seen the fur companies from St. Louis sell guns during the annual rendezvous, held high in the mountains each summer. But that was long ago, when he was only a boy, learning the craft from other trappers.

Now, he was here, hiding in a hole like a wounded animal. His vision blurred and he closed his eyes for only a moment. Time passed and he awoke, startled by the fear that he'd passed out. He'd lost a lot of blood. Mackenzie checked his wounds, scowling at the saturated flannel bandages, still leaking blood.

He hadn't heard anything in hours. Perhaps the Kiowa had left, busy with their own needs. Perhaps they had families to return to as he did.

Night descended quickly, the dim light of the rainy day slipping behind the tall peaks to the west. Mackenzie struggled to his knees and peered into the gloom. He had to make his move now, before he passed out again and then couldn't move.

Without really knowing why, he slipped the broken Kiowa arrow into his shirt. Pain sliced through him as he wormed his way through the branches of the up-ended cottonwood. He managed to pull himself to his feet with the aid of a long stick, small green leaves still fluttering at one end. Using the stick as a crutch, Mackenzie walked along the dark bank, moving upstream again, wondering how far he'd traveled from the others.

The rain had stopped now and he peered across the river, searching for any sign of movement. The tall bank above him protected him from view on the north side of the river. Were the Kiowa still around? Regardless, he needed to get back to Blue Heron and the others. He'd passed out once already and his head felt light, buzzing from the arduous activity and his wounds. No doubt he'd lost a lot of blood, but he needed to return to his people. Blue Heron knew the herbs and she could help his wounds.

Mackenzie paused, his breath coming in great gasps. If ... if he was not too far gone.

The thought startled him. He'd been wounded before. Most of the fur trappers he knew had run ins with hostile Indians or tussles with other trappers. Knife fights or fisticuffs were common ways to settle disputes.

But he'd never been this badly wounded before. The bullet hole in his middle concerned him, almost more than the splintered elbow that he pressed against his side as he hobbled upriver. The arm might never be the same, but wasn't life threatening, unless infection set in. The bullet wound frightened him. Blood poisoning, or if the bullet had struck an organ, would mean certain death.

Mackenzie drew in a deep breath and glanced at a star that peeked between the black clouds. He leaned on the staff and shifted his weight, trying to relieve the pressure on his aching left leg. "What have you got for me this time?" he asked, as if speaking to a close friend. "You know they need me."

No answer came to him and Mackenzie stumbled on, hoping to reach the others before his body refused to move at his commands.

His thoughts shifted from his wounds to the reason that brought them so far south. He and Walter had trapped the high Rockies for years while Blue Heron skinned pelts and helped around camp. Then Rose came and then Scott, filling out the small family unit. Occasionally, they'd trapped wild horses during the summers, Walter's great skill making this possible. It were as if the old Cheyenne could read the wild mustangs' minds.

Although the horses provided trade goods and mounts for his family, they had held their love of any particular horse until they'd discovered Wildfire, the red stallion. The great horse had relocated farther south as men moved into the Cherry Creek region, searching for gold and silver.

Rumors had drifted to Mackenzie that Wildfire had a new territory, along the headwaters of the Arkansas River, among the canyons and meadows of the mountains.

Now, desperate and out of options, they'd come south, searching for the great stallion. Even the Cheyenne villages to the north didn't welcome or trust him and his half white children. But with a strong sire, the Mackenzie family could finally settle down to real ranching and horse breeding. Walter's skills with mustangs were unmatched and Rose had learned swiftly how to handle the horses.

Mackenzie paused again after he'd hobbled a mile. He was going too slowly, the others still too far away. His hand slid to his belly wound and worry mounted when his fingers came away wet, smeared with fresh blood. He gritted his teeth and pushed the soaked flannel bandage deeper into the wound. Fatigue threatened to make him lie down, but he refused, afraid he'd never rise. Leaning against the rough bark of an elm tree, the rushing waters of the river only a few feet away, Mackenzie tore a bigger piece from his shirt tail and pressed the fabric against his belly. His useless right arm dangled beside him, the arrow wound burning. With his left hand, he felt behind him for the entrance wound. His fingers trembled as he examined the opening, his stomach tightening as he felt the ripped edges of his flesh. Again, more blood seeped past the cloth bandage.

A muscle twitched along his jaw and Mackenzie broke into a cold sweat. He was in bad shape and he knew it.

His gaze surveyed the route ahead of him. The river bank was muddy, littered with driftwood and dense underbrush. Perhaps he should climb to the level above and try his luck there.

As quickly as the idea occurred to him, he dismissed it. Too dangerous with the Kiowa around, possibly still searching for him. Besides, the bank appeared steep here, impossible for him to scale. He would have to go on and hope to find a better path to the prairie above. Gripping his staff with his good arm, he plodded on.

Mackenzie had no idea how long he stumbled over drifting logs or avoided jumbles of rocks, but hours passed, sheer determination driving him forward, thoughts of his family making him push himself.

Abruptly, he stopped, his eyes refusing to believe the torn earth beside him, proof a herd of buffalo had stampeded over the bank sometime in the past. The torn up turf allowed ascent to the prairie above. Struggling with the staff and his one good leg, Mackenzie broke from the river bottom and paused, his shirt drenched with sweat and the remnants of the past rain storm. He peered all around, trying to get his bearings in the dark.

Downriver and on the south bank, perhaps a mile or two, he could see small orange dots glimmering in the night. He narrowed his eyes, studying the pinpricks of light. A wagon train? Surely the Kiowa would not use so many campfires. The old trail was near, Mackenzie mused, but there was no way he could cross the river in his condition. He must've passed the old fort in the dark, the place where the wagons crossed the river.

He looked to the west, the bulk of the Rocky Mountains looming before him like an impenetrable wall, stretching endlessly away. He knew there were canyons and rivers and basins there, too. And that was where the mountain mustangs lived, moving from meadow to meadow, always searching for good grazing and fresh water.

Mackenzie held himself upright, exhausted and haggard, his clothing torn and stained from the night's journey. His breathing came in gasps, his chest heaving. He wanted to lie down and rest, maybe never get up again, but he needed to find the others. They needed him to find the great stallion and provide for his family and make everything work out perfectly.

Then he saw it. A single gleam of light penetrated the darkness, winking at him. A campfire, assuredly. The Kiowa? Mackenzie shook his head. The Indians were somewhere behind him, still out on the plains. He was in the hills now, probably close to where he'd left the others. He was close now, he could feel it. His family huddled around that campfire.

He almost fell as he leaned into the trail, eagerness gripping him as he pushed on with his failing strength. His wounds still seeped, but he ignored them now, excited to be closing in on his family. His battered left leg buckled again, stiffened by the short break, and Mackenzie winced as he shuffled over the tufts of thick grass. This was good ranch land. The mustangs they planned to catch would love his ranch with good feed and protection from the grizzlies and mountain lions that roamed these lofty crags. The others would be so happy then, all their dreams achieved, especially Rose. She wanted a horse ranch even worse than Mackenzie did. But the family would finally have a place to call their own, a place to settle down.

He limped along, his crude crutch dragging in the mud. The firelight seemed no closer, yet he knew it was there, calling to him. He tried to pick up his pace but there was no more push in him, the ebbing blood having its effects on his reserves.

The crutch slipped on a flat stone and he went down. Mackenzie lay there, gasping, every inch of his body in agony. His left leg would no longer answer to his commands, the fractured knee cap finally giving out. His wounded right arm felt bloated and stiff. The two wounds in his lower torso bled freely now, the warm liquid inching like lava from a small volcano.

He stared at the glowing firelight, closer now, the light reflected on a nearby canyon cliff. He was so close to his family. He had to get to them. They needed him.

Leaving the staff, Mackenzie lurched forward on his hands and knees, pain shooting throughout him, but he reached another hand forward and followed it, his body crawling toward the glowing fire. His vision blurred and he knew he wasn't going to make it. Strength failed him and he cried out with his last bit of power. A shout and trampling feet told him the others had discovered him. Mackenzie felt hands grip him and drag him to the fire. A woman sobbed.

Mackenzie felt his eyes flutter and he peered up at the hovering black clouds as he searched for the single star he'd seen earlier.

*Lord, he thought as his sight dimmed and his lungs exhaled their last. Help my family. They need someone, a leader. Who will you send to help them?*