

Wild at Heart

BOOK THREE

Fire & Ice



MARY
CONNEALY



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author’s imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Max Weber is a new addition to our family. I dedicated the first two books in this series to my other sons-in-law, so it's only fair that Max gets a turn.

He's a smart, hardworking, wise young man. Welcome to the Connealy clan, Max. And thank you for putting that glow of happiness in my daughter Katy's eyes.



OCTOBER 10, 1866

The bullet spit dirt up in Gage Coulter's eyes, and he didn't even flinch.

Wilde always missed him. Granted, he missed by inches.

"Don't you ever sleep, Wilde?" Gage had come early, he'd come late. He'd come in peace, and now this was it—he was coming in war.

"The only reason you'd ask that was if you wanted to sneak in here. Now get off my land." Another bullet, this one even closer to his toes.

Gage ignored it. The shots were to keep him back. Trouble was, if he came closer, Wilde might stop trying to scare him and get serious.

"You aren't gonna shoot me and you know it."

At least Wilde never had. That confounded nester had stolen his best land by claiming a homestead that stretched right across the opening to the most fertile canyon on the

entire C Bar range. It was a long ways north and a lot higher up than Gage's ranch house. But he'd done a lot of scouting in his years out here and he'd found this canyon and bought it and used it mainly for winter pasture.

He owned it, but Bailey Wilde wouldn't let him cross on this measly little homestead to get his cattle to the grass.

"Trespassing is against the law, Coulter!" Another shot cut through the thin mountain air and landed a few feet in front of Gage's boots. "I've got a right to defend my land. Don't bet your life I won't shoot. I survived the Civil War and sent more than one man home in a box. I ain't afraid of killing, and I sure as certain ain't afraid of killing you. Just give me a reason."

"This is your last chance, Wilde. Let me come in there and we'll talk. Let's figure out a way my cattle can pass on your land with the least amount of damage." Except there wasn't a way short of ripping Wilde's house down, because the young fool had built it right across the mouth of the canyon, and done it deliberately, too. Oh, there was a narrow stretch of the canyon mouth open, but Wilde had a sturdy fence across it.

"I own that canyon and I need the grass. I'm not going to settle for anything less than getting it." Gage had been checking on nesters all over the range he considered his. This canyon was so far away, and this season had been crazy with some ugly threats against nesters that had been laid at Gage's door.

Gage owned the canyon behind the strip of land homesteaded by Wilde, yet he'd never thought to buy up this rocky piece just outside. Who'd ever want to homestead it?

Someone who realized claiming the land in front of the canyon gave him possession of the canyon too, that's who. And that made Wilde mighty savvy. Add in the deadly accurate skill with a gun and Gage didn't fool himself that he was dealing with a weakling.

By the time he'd found out Wilde had settled here and built this house, the varmint had been dug in deep. Wilde was ready to fight at the drop of a hat too, and he looked eager to drop it himself.

A laugh as wild as his name echoed out of that house. It wasn't the first time Gage had wondered if Bailey Wilde was entirely sane.

What the nester didn't know was that Gage meant it. He'd been trying to just have a simple talk with the stubborn youngster for weeks, ever since Matt Tucker, the mountain man who'd married Wilde's sister Shannon, had come riding out here to find his wife. And Gage had come along and found he'd lost access to the richest pastureland on his range.

Wilde would have nothing to do with him that didn't involve flying lead.

Gage had appealed to Bailey's family. His sister Kylie, who was within days of taking off for the East with her husband, Aaron Masterson, and Shannon, who had plans to move up into the mountaintops, to the cabin owned by her husband, Matt.

Kylie and Aaron, well, he didn't know them that well, but Shannon ought to have helped more. Matt Tucker was a good friend who worked for Gage most summers, and Gage thought that fact should have earned him some loyalty. But nope.

Both Kylie and Shannon refused to cooperate. Their husbands advised Gage to leave Bailey alone.

The harder he pushed, the more they assured him Bailey wouldn't budge. Both sisters had homesteaded on Coulter range, and when they'd married, their husbands hadn't wanted the land. They'd signed away their rights to it, and then Gage had immediately bought it. Shannon had wrung a promise out of Gage to let her and Tucker live on her land when they came down from the mountains, which Gage didn't mind a bit. So long as they didn't bother his cows.

He'd known there was a third member of the family, a brother, Bailey. But he was a while finding out where the third Wilde had set up his holding. And Bailey had no intention of selling out.

Gage had tried being nice. But that wasn't his only choice. He wasn't a man to break the law, but he was going to bend it right around Bailey Wilde's neck if the kid didn't let Gage in that cabin right now.

"This is your last chance, Coulter. I'm tired of fighting with you."

Funny, Gage had been thinking the exact same thing.

"I've told the sheriff you're harassing me, and I told him if I catch you trespassing he can expect to have to fetch your body. He knows about your threats."

"This is your last chance, Wilde. I'm tired of fighting with you." Gage took smug pleasure in echoing Bailey's words right back at him. "You've been warned. Are you going to let me in there so we can talk or not?"

Gage had done more than spend his time yelling. His

cattle needed that grass as the winter closed, and Gage was going to get it.

Another bullet cut through the dirt at Gage's feet.

"That's your answer then?"

"That's the only answer you're going to get." Wilde cocked the gun again, the muzzle emerging from the cabin window. Wilde never showed himself. He'd never had more than a quick look at the kid and then only from a distance. Well, that was about to change.

"You want to do this the hard way, Wilde, we'll do it the hard way." With a tug on his hat brim, Gage turned and strode away.



Bailey watched him walk out of sight. The last few times he'd come, he hadn't ridden in, he'd walked. He said her gunfire upset his horse. She'd told him to stay away and that'd settle his horse right down.

Instead, he must've tied that beautiful brown stallion somewhere nearby, because he'd started showing up on foot.

Which meant he was even quieter. Bailey had learned to stay on edge. He'd come day and night. No rhyme or reason to it.

She listened close and finally heard hoofbeats thunder away. When they faded in the distance, she uncocked her rifle with a hard, metallic click. Exhausted, she turned her back to the wall, leaned against it, and slid to the floor. He was wearing her down. One of these days he'd catch her napping. He'd even admitted as much when he asked, "Don't you ever sleep?"

She'd never seen a man with that kind of relentless confidence.

Well, it wouldn't matter. All his catching her would do was let him figure out she was female. Right now he believed she was Shannon and Kylie's brother. She dreaded the day that changed. A man treated a woman differently.

Something she knew all too well.

But however he treated her, she'd never let him cross on her land. The pleasure she took in denying him was as heady as strong drink—something she knew nothing about except as witness to others indulging.

Shuddering at the memory, she went back to fuming about Coulter.

She had to take this chance to rest.

He'd made a mistake with his visits. He never came back right away. She'd learned to take a nap right after he'd been by. Or if she wasn't too tired, she'd rush with her chores and then sleep awhile before going back to her vigil.

Right now she should ride out and see to her cattle—happily getting fat on the lush autumn grass in Coulter's canyon. But she didn't have the energy.

And that was his fault too, because he hadn't been here for two days and she'd been watching for him the whole time, which meant no sleep. No chores.

Her heavy eyelids were too much. She didn't even get up to climb into bed. She just laid her rifle on the floor, along the length of her leg, within easy grabbing distance.

Then she rested her sleepy head against the log wall and let her miserable, lonely life slip away into peaceful sleep.