

Bertha Muzzy Sinclair



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CHAPTER ONE

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LYNN REBELS

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Lynn Hayward spun a silver dollar on the counter and wished it were as many as it looked while revolving swiftly on its edge. The new school-teacher, turning from the ribbon counter at the moment, glanced at his moody profile and wished she had his eyelashes and that intriguing curve of upper lip. Both wishes slid away into the eternal ether where such thoughts drift in endless journeyings, for the dollar suddenly wobbled and fell clinking on its side and lay, just one dingy silver dollar and no more; and the fascinating profile turned full face to the new school-teacher as Lynn eyed her curiously and with the quickened interest of a normal young man of twenty-two when he sees a young and pretty face that is strange to him.

The new school-teacher's eyes immediately froze to that wordless barrier with which nice young women wall themselves invisibly away from the questing male of their species, and she walked with dignity past him and out into the hazy sunshine of a late summer day in Wyoming. Lynn's eyes followed her, the desirable curve of his upper lip now straightened a bit in a half smile of complete understanding. He liked her the better for the snub, and he decided that he would ride in to the next dance, even if he had to borrow a dollar for the ticket. He hoped she wasn't a Methodist; she couldn't be, with that wavy shine in her hair where it

showed under her straight-brimmed white sailor hat. She sure looked human, anyway. He certainly would ride in to the dance and take a chance on her not being too religious to enjoy herself.

Then the storekeeper, one Jackson by name, set a yellow-wrapped bottle of Hubble's Blood Purifier on the counter and picked up the dollar with greedy fingers. Lynn pulled his eyes and his thoughts away from the new school-teacher.

"How *is* the old man?" asked Jackson in his commercial tone of eager interest in his customers. "This stuff seem to help him any? He's been taking it regular for over a year now; do him any good, you think?"

"No, it don't. But he thinks it does." Lynn slid the bottle into his right-hand pocket and jerked his hat brim a little lower over his eyes with the unconscious motion of a man who expects to ride against the wind. His errand in town was ended, since he had no other dollar to spin or to spend.

"Well, 's long as he *thinks* it does—" Jackson gave a mirthless chuckle. "Too bad, a fine, strapping big man like your dad—must be eight years he's laid on his back helpless."

"He doesn't lie on his back, except to sleep, same as any other man," Lynn corrected, with a frown which the thought of his father usually brought to his face.

"Oh. I didn't know he was able to be up and around. How long—?"

"He's up, but he isn't around. He sits in a Morris chair most of the time and plays solitaire—and bosses the ranch." The frown deepened with the vague resentment conjured by the words and the thought behind them.

"Well, that's something. But I guess there ain't much to boss, these days, eh? Don't even run a wagon any more, do you, Lynn? I heard the Quarter-Circle Bar brand is wiped—"

"Say, do you want to buy us out?"

"Who, me? Me buy out the Hayward holdings?" Jackson's laugh had the hint of a sneer which Lynn's tone had bred. "I ain't buying up ghost ranches; not to-day, I ain't. Why? Your dad want to sell?"

"No. But you're so keen on getting all the details I kinda thought you wanted to buy us out." Lynn turned and walked stiff-necked to the door, glanced up and down the street and went on to where his horse, a springy-muscled roan with a coat like satin in the sun, had trod a dusty path around the end of the hitch rack. The Haywards did have fine horses, even if they had no cattle. Lynn's gloomy eyes lightened a shade when they rested upon the impatient Loney, but there remained a resentfulness that showed in the vicious yanks he gave to the tie-rope. The roan swung as Lynn thrust a toe in the stirrup, and they went off down the street in the easy gallop that was a part of the Hayward horses' training.

With a quarter still in his pocket, Lynn had decided to extend his shopping a bit, and buy a sack or two of Durham down at the new little store beyond the Elkhorn Bar; a rather squalid place of refreshment much frequented by men of a certain type. As he approached the place a man—Hank Miller by name—came out and walked uncertainly down toward the hitch rail where his horse waited dispiritedly, lean-flanked and sweaty from hard riding that day.

Hank had a pint of whisky in his pocket and three or four drinks under his belt, and he was feeling frisky. Two hilarious cow-punchers followed him, and as Hank turned with a remark over his shoulder, the three burst into laughter. Lynn, just riding abreast of them, read a jeer in their mirth and in the glances they cast his way. He pulled the roan to a restive stand before them.

"Say, you fellows see anything funny about me?" he challenged sharply.

"Well, if it ain't Lynn Hay-wire!" chortled Hank, and swept his hat to the ground in a derisive bow. "Just in from his vast domain, the Hay-wire ranch! How's the cattle business, Lynn? Goin' to ship a trainload er two of beef this fall?"

Lynn went white around the mouth at the jibe. He reined closer to Hank, giving back the taunt with an old and unforgivable insult that stung Hank to quick, drunken fury.

"Say! Damn your soul, no man living can call me that and get away with it!" bawled Hank, reaching for his gun with awkward haste, too drunk to draw quickly and no expert at any time.

Lynn's hand likewise dropped to his pocket for the only weapon he possessed. He leaned and struck with savage force.

"Purify your dirty soul—you need it!" he shouted above the pop of breaking glass. As Hubble's Blood Purifier and a pungent aroma of brandy mixed with strong herbs filled the air, Lynn added a sentence which may not be repeated. The roan, rearing at the crash of glass, wheeled on its hind feet and bolted for the open prairie; and Lynn, turning for a parting jibe back at the group, with Hank weaving blindly

about in their midst, felt that he had acquitted himself with honor, after all.

But that backward look nearly cost him dear. The galloping horse averted disaster by swerving sharply to one side as he went up the street and Lynn, abruptly facing to the front, saw that he had all but run down the new school-teacher who was crossing the street at that moment. He had a swift vision of wide, indignant eyes under her white straw sailor hat as he thundered on past, but that did not deter him from another backward look. He wanted to see if she were going into the house of the Methodist preacher who lived across the street. If she did, she was religious, and if she was religious she would not attend the dances. But it was the milliner's shop she entered, and Lynn faced forward and permitted his thoughts to dwell again upon Hank Miller's insult.

"They stole us outa cattle, and now they got nothing but sneers!" He gritted in futile rage, and let the roan out in a run.

"Hay-wire! We're a hay-wire outfit!" He clenched his teeth as the words bit deeper and deeper into his pride. For in the range land, as you all probably know, there is a certain contemptuous reproach in the term. Springing from the habit of using the wire from broken bales of hay to patch harness and machinery in a makeshift kind of mending, "hay-wire" grew to mean a poverty born of shiftlessness. To go hay-wire meant to go to the dogs generally; to be broke, or its equivalent, and through laziness and mismanagement.

One cannot wonder then if Lynn's blood boiled with futile rage as he rode homeward.

CHAPTER TWO

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"HE CALLED ME HAY-WIRE"

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In the range land, homes love to snuggle deep within the arms of some little valley facing the south or the east; never west or north if they can help it, because of the bitter sweep of the winds in winter. Groves are a godsend for the shelter they give in cold weather and for the shade they offer from the fierce heat of midsummer. So the Hayward homestead sat well back in a high-walled coulee facing Elk Basin to the southward, with a wooded creek running down to the lower prairies and tall cottonwoods throwing long leafy branches over the scattered buildings. The big corrals lay farther out in the open beyond the fence that guarded the grove from loose cattle and horses.

The ranch did not look "hay-wire" from a distance, Lynn thought, when he rode over the hill and pulled the roan to a walk down the steep road that led to the creek crossing. But his eyes were bitter as he gazed up the creek and saw the deceptive prosperity of those long, low stables, those great wide-winged corrals; at the big ranch house just beyond and the sprawling, homey house just visible within the depths of the grove. Lynn knew only too well what a closer view would reveal: stables, corrals, sheds, bunk house all empty and decaying with disuse. Chuck wagons—three of them—standing in a forlorn group, tires rusty and with long grass growing between the wheel spokes. Mowers, rakes, farm

wagons, harness, fragments of chains broken and left lying where they were dropped. A ghost ranch, Jackson had tactlessly dubbed it. Well, it looked the part. All it lacked was the ghost—and that, he thought with a sardonic twist of humor, might be furnished later when his father finally fled his hulking, helpless body; if such things could be, which Lynn strongly doubted.

Sometimes he almost hated the place for its run-down look and the atmosphere of failure that seemed almost a visible miasma of discouragement and gloom, when one stopped to gaze with seeing eyes upon its slatternly disorder. And yet he loved it somehow, with a yearning love not to be put into words; perhaps he loved what it could be—what it once was and would still have been if disaster had not struck down the man who had built the ranch log by log, acre by acre—and refused to see how it had slipped into ruin. The hatred was dominant in Lynn's thoughts now; hatred and a great disgust with life as he had found it.

He unsaddled Loney and turned him into the horse corral where another black pony nickered greeting, and went on up to the house. His sister Rose, a slim young thing with fine hazel eyes and such lashes and mouth as the new school-teacher had envied Lynn, was sitting on the kitchen doorstep stringing green beans—she called it that—for supper. As Lynn approached she looked up studiously, snapping a bean pod in two with her thumb and dropping the pieces negligently into a large yellow bowl while she watched him.

"What's the matter?" she demanded bluntly as he came up. "You're black as a thunder cloud, Lynn. And Pa's on the

rampage because you're late—"

"If he wants me to fly, he'll have to furnish the wings," Lynn sullenly retorted, coming to a halt because Rose with her basin of beans and her yellow bowl and herself was using the full width of the step with no room to set his foot. "Move over, can't you?"

"What are you so cranky about? My goodness, this is a sweet family!" But she gathered up her bowl and let him up the steps. "Any mail, Brudder?"

"Not a thing," Lynn said in a gentler tone, perhaps because of the childish nickname she still used upon occasion; chiefly to express sympathy without going into details. "I ran my horse half the way home—I don't see why Dad thinks I'm late," he said by way of explanation.

"I know—but he hasn't had his Purifier to-day. He ought to buy it by the barrel so he wouldn't run out so often. It always makes him unlivable to be out of that stuff. Don't keep him waiting, Lynn."

Until that moment he had not thought much of the smashed bottle or the effect its loss would have at home, but her words sent him into the house with his underlip between his teeth. No dodging the interview; postponement would only make matters worse. His mother (Hat Hayward, the neighbors had called her for more years than Lynn was old) came into the kitchen when she heard his step, but his glance slid away from her expectant look.

"Your father's waiting for his medicine," she said briskly. "I wish you'd hurried a little more; he's been real bad all day."

"I did hurry."

"Well, I guess maybe you did. Where is it?"

"I haven't got it."

"Lynn!"

"What's that you say?" came booming through the living-room doorway. "You ain't *got* it?"

"No."

"Spent the money for whisky, I'll bet! And your father sufferin' the tortures of the damned at home—"

Lynn walked to the door and looked in, impelled by the injustice of the charge. What he saw was a big man sitting in a heavy chair before a little table, mechanically shuffling a deck of cards while his hard, bulging eyes glared at him in angry accusation.

"I didn't do anything of the kind. I broke the bottle on the way out of town."

"Broke it! Pity you didn't break your damn' fool neck!"

"Lynn!" cried his mother behind him. "That horse didn't buck you off, did he? Was you hurt?"

"Hurt!" put in the old man. "You couldn't hurt him with an ax! Didn't you know any better'n to come home without my blood purifier? Why didn't yuh go back and get another one? Want me to die, ay?" He flung down the cards like a pettish child. "I'd be a damn' sight better off dead and outa the way; that's what yuh want, all of yuh—"

"Why didn't yuh get another bottle, Lynn?" his mother hurried to divert the stream of invective.

"Dad knows darn well why I didn't; because I didn't have another dollar, that's why. He's too darn stingy to give me a dime more'n he has to—"

"Now, Lynn! Don't you speak of your father that way. How did it happen? Did your horse fall with you?"

Lynn suddenly flung off the restraint that had irked him from the moment he looked at the dour face of his father. He took a step farther into the room, trembling a little and with that white line around his mouth which meant that his temper was raging.

"I'll tell you how it happened—maybe it will take Dad's mind off that patent dope for a minute. I smashed the bottle over Hank Miller's head, because he called me Hay-wire! I'd do it again too. But he's right—we are a hay-wire outfit. Look at us! Ten thousand acres of deeded land, and not a hoof of cattle on it that belongs to us! Pasturing other men's stock for a living, and our own wagons rusting in the weeds.

"Look at us! Here I am with my hands tied—can't do a damn' thing to put the ranch on its feet again—can't even get out and work for wages—got to wear run-over boots and hand-me-downs for want of the price to buy clothes fit for a white man. There's Rose ought to be in school, and the boys growing up as worthless as two Injun kids, and I—here I am, able to take charge and make something of the outfit, tied hand and foot just because Dad won't trust me with a dollar —"

"Can't trust yuh with a dollar, that's why! Can't even trust yuh to ride in and buy me a bottle of medicine!" snarled the old man. "And that ain't all. I ain't *goin'* to trust yuh, neither; I don't trust nobody. You want me to plaster the ranch with a mortgage so's you can buy cattle. I know your argument. Cattle's up now, and so forth. They can go up and be damned to 'em—and you along with 'em! I ain't going to buy

no more cattle for these damn' rustlers to steal. I've got the ranch—and they can't walk off with that! I've got the deeds on record, and there ain't an acre that ain't paid for or that I ain't holding according to law. And there ain't goin' to be; not while I'm alive."

"Other men borrow money to buy cattle," Lynn retorted. "They get rich at it. Or sheep. I could get a bunch of sheep on shares and not put out a cent—"

"Not by a damn' sight!" Joel Hayward almost lifted himself out of his chair so that he could thump the table harder. "There ain't ever been a sheep on Hayward land, and there ain't going to be! Not while I'm alive, there ain't. Mebby," he added with heavy irony, "you better kill me off so's you can run things to suit yourself. Put a bullet through me—anything, so's you can get things into your own hands. That's all yuh want, anyway."

"Now, Joel, that's not so and you know it!" his wife remonstrated sharply, sending a quick, somewhat apprehensive glance at her eldest son. "You say that just to be talking, and it ain't right or just. Lynn's going to do the best he can, and as you think best, Joel. He don't really mean to bring sheep on to the ranch; he hates 'em just as bad as you do. He just said it same as you say things you don't mean when you're mad." She drew a breath of relief when he grunted and picked up the cards again, tapping their edges on the table to even the deck for shuffling. Lynn had walked out of the room into the kitchen, and by these signs Mrs. Hayward knew that the worst of the storm was over.

"Why don't you give the boy a chance to do something for himself and us?" she pleaded, laying a hand on old Joel's shoulder "He's a man grown, and a good steady one with a level head like his father. All he needs is a little money to get a start, and he'll pull us all outa the hole in a few years."

"Money! What's went with all that pasture money?"

"You know well enough where it went, Joel! To pay taxes on all the land you've got, and to feed us. There ain't anything left to run the ranch on like it should be run. Lynn couldn't even buy enough seed to put in more'n ten acres of oats. We rake and scrape to keep clothes on our backs and food in our mouths. Lynn can't even put up any hay, except what him and the boys can do with that toggled up mower. If you'd let him buy a couple of new mowers and a stacker, we could have hay to sell and winter stock. But no, you won't give him an inch of leeway!

"There's the Dollar outfit, been after you to sell the upper ranch. They don't want to pay as much as it's worth, of course. Trust the Dollar outfit to scheme and connive to get something for nothing! But it'd put us on our feet once more, and you could go where you'd get help—"

"Help! Damned little help I'd get anywhere! Only thing that ever did help me I can't have, because that damned idiot of a half-witted pet son of yours had to bust the bottle —"

"What's one bottle of medicine when you've got it in your power to be cured, maybe? You could run the ranch to suit yourself then. You won't sell the horses, even after Lynn worked like a dog breaking a bunch you'd promised to let go. That boy rode himself ragged gentling the lot so they'd

bring more money—and then you balked on signing the bill of sale! Seems like you want to see your family go hungry and naked, Joel—and keep yourself helpless the rest of your life. We could have things and be somebody if you'd just sell the upper ranch—"

"Sell! Sell! That's all I can hear, day or night. You'd sell the roof over my head if I'd let you. If it ain't horses it's land you harp on. All you want is money for that damned lazy hound to blow in. Always something you're whining to *sell*! There ain't goin' to be a hoof sold or a foot of land while I live, and you can put that in your pipe and smoke it. Sell! You and that damned—"

The screen door slammed as Lynn left the kitchen.

CHAPTER THREE

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THE FAMILY DIPLOMAT

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"Lynn!"

Lynn, walking fast down the path to the corral where he kept his saddle horses, neither answered nor looked back.

"Where you going, Brudder?" Rose waited, then set the string beans inside the screen door out of the way of an investigative old hen with a brood of half-feathered chicks, and went running down the trail after him.

"Lynn, you aren't going anywhere before supper, are you?"

"The sooner I get off the ranch the sooner there'll be peace in the family," Lynn said between shut teeth as he yanked his saddle off the fence and whistled for the black horse.

"But Lynn, you surely aren't going to blow up and leave just because Dad's on the rampage? My land, that's about all the fun he has! It isn't the first time—"

"No, but it's liable to be the last. I've heard that subject mauled in that room ever since I was a kid. Now he's taken a notion to make *me* a cussing post for everything that goes wrong. If I clear out, maybe the rest of you—"

"Oh, that's just because he wants his Purifier," laughed Rose, though she blinked back her tears. "I've got a dollar, and I'll donate that to the cause. If you feel you must ride or

bust, chase yourself in after another bottle of soothing syrup, Brudder, and forget—"

"Forget! Yeah, that's dead easy for some." Lynn had bridled the black horse and now settled the saddle on its back, pulling the blanket straight underneath with practised fingers that received no thought whatever from his seething brain.

"It's all right for you, Rose," he said, between yanks on the latigo. "You aren't expected to keep things running smooth with both hands tied behind your back. What's the use of my trying to hold the damned ranch together? I can't make a turn but what he goes straight in the air and calls me everything he can lay his tongue to. I've got about as much authority here as old Heinie up the creek; not as much, because he does listen to Heinie, and I can't open my mouth about anything, but what he cusses me to a fare-ye-well. And yet I'm the one that has the work and the worry and the scheming to make ends meet." He dropped the stirrup from the saddle horn and turned upon her with a despairing look of utter defeat.

"Rose, it's enough to drive a man crazy! All this land, and no stock! Dad doesn't realize what it takes to pinch along and pay taxes out of the pasturage. Look at all that hayland, if I only had the machinery and could hire a crew to put up hay! Look at those corrals! Rotting, full of weeds—and we could have a bunch of cattle and be shipping beef every fall and have money to do things with, if he'd only let me go ahead. It takes money to make money—any fool knows that much. He roars at me because the ranch is going to the dogs, but don't he know I can't hold it up with my bare

hands? Hay-wire! They're calling me Lynn Hay-wire now, Rose! They—"

"It's a pity," flashed Rose, "that you didn't have two bottles of Purifier to smash over that idiot's head! I'll bet he was drunk or he couldn't have had such a bright thought. You don't care what they say, do you, Brudder? Hayward or Hay-wire—what's the difference?"

"A damned lot of difference! You aren't a man; you don't know how a man feels about making good in the world. And I *could* make good—if I just had something to start on! That's what grinds me, Rose. Dad could give me a start if he wanted to. We don't need all this land; we can't eat it, and we can't wear it. And that bunch of horses—what good are they to us? We can't sell them—he won't stick to any deal he lets me make. We might eat them," he added darkly. "We might have to or starve, the way things are going."

Rose stood close beside him, one hand on Lynn's shoulder while with the other she stroked the satiny neck of the black horse. She would never dare put her sympathy and love into words, but she must have known it was some comfort for Lynn to open his heart to her. He never did to any one else.

"Don't you suppose you could—" Lynn's laugh stopped her.

"No. You can't suppose a thing that I haven't thought of a thousand times. But I'm hog-tied, I tell you. I can't make a move that Dad wouldn't balk me in. He acts as if he sits there just studying out ways to keep me from making a living for the bunch of us.

"No, Rose, there's no use talking—I've got to get out. I—I couldn't stand much more and keep my hands off him, even if he is a cripple and my own father! He's trying to edge me up to the point where he'll have an excuse for ordering me off the ranch, so I'll just beat him to it. I wouldn't give him that satisfaction to save his life. I'm no use here anyway, the way things stand."

"Well," said Rose with an artful alacrity, "I don't blame you one bit for leaving, if that's the way you feel. But I'd wait till after supper; there's an errand Mom wanted you to do. She baked to-day and she promised Heinie she'd send him up a loaf of bread when you got home. He's back from Cheyenne. Now there," she said, with a laugh that sounded almost natural, "is a shining example of how to be happy though poor! There's old Heinie with his eight dollars a month pension and the dollar he gets every day he washes gold—though he did say he made a little more the last three months—and he's happy as a king. He says he had a 'hell of a time' in Cheyenne this trip. He says he ate peanuts and drank lemonade till he was sick as a dog. You ought to hear him tell how riotously he squandered his gold dust! He says he'll have to go without sugar in his coffee for the next three months, but he saw the sights and lived like a king (on peanuts!) and he's satisfied." A side glance at Lynn's face told her that the small diversion was doing what she had hoped. His eyes had lost a little of their black rage. So she gave his shoulder a final pat of complete understanding and stood back so that he could mount if he chose.

"I know just exactly how you feel, Lynn, and I'd go too if it wasn't for leaving Mom in the lurch. I expect to marry the

first man that asks me—and there are a few that are liable to!—just to get away from pop's eternal yowl about money and the roof over his head. But it would seem kind of low-down to sneak out on the old girl, so—" Another sly glance from under her thick curtain of brown lashes seemed to give her intense though secret satisfaction. Lynn was squirming mentally, just as she intended.

"You let me catch you marrying any of these boneheads around here! I'll shoot him, just as sure as God made little apples! There ain't a man in the country fit for you to wipe your shoes on, Rose, and you know it. You needn't—"

"Well, I haven't been asked, yet. You won't let any of them get close enough to see the whites of my eyes, so how do you expect—"

"That's only half of it," snorted Lynn, pulling Blackie's foretop straight;—to kill time, Rose knew well enough.

"Well, good-by and good luck, and I hope,—Oh, would you mind waiting long enough to chop us some wood? Mom used the last identical stick to finish her baking, and I've scraped the chip pile down to the bone. Would you do that for the onliest sister you've got, please? If it was the kind of wood I could chop—"

"You've no business chopping wood. Where's Sid and Joe? I thought that was their job."

"It is, and that's why they beat it the minute any one mentions the woodpile. Boys are awful when they get too big to spank. I asked them to water the garden; my flowers, anyway. My four o'clocks are just perishing for a drink, and it gives me a pain in the side to pump—"