

Brothers of the Mountain

Blood on the Prairie

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Lucas could no longer ignore the flurry of insults. He laid his pair of queens on the table, pushed away, and stood up slowly.

The boisterous fellow spoke again. "That's right, you big horse's ass. Git up and face me like a man. Maybe you got a little sand after all."

Henry stood relaxed. He watched from a distant corner, sipping his rum. He was certain his brother could handle the intoxicated buffoon.

Turning to his drunken assailant, Lucas narrowed his gaze.

"Jake, I was hopin' you were gonna take your smelly skunk carcass and get the hell outta here." The other patrons sniggered at the remark. "But it looks like you can't keep your damn mouth shut."

The brawny, young trapper shoved the empty chairs aside and proceeded across the makeshift saloon. Jake produced a devilish grin, displaying a set of dark, tobacco-stained teeth. The rugged trapper looked as if he hadn't seen soap and water for some time. Behind his bloodshot eyes was the look of someone with a strong suspicion of being swindled. Earlier, Lucas had exhausted the contemptuous fellow of his seasonal earnings in a friendly game of draw poker.

Jake spat a stream of tobacco juice and spoke. "I'd say thar ain't no way in hell any man could ever win that many hands in a row." A bottle of rum sloshed in his right hand as he flailed and pleaded his case.

"I may be a lot of things, Jake, but I *ain't* what you're about to say I am," Lucas replied. He followed with a cold, hard stare, but the foolish drunkard didn't observe the cautionary gesture.

"Oh," Jake began. "You mean a damn, no good, *lyin', cheatin'* dog?"

He mocked Lucas, emphasizing each insult, pushing the equable frontiersman to his limit. Henry held his position, but jerked to attention after hearing the blasphemous slurs. He knew what was about to happen.

With a crushing right hand, Lucas seized the belligerent's throat. Jake's hatchet face flushed, his eyes bulged, and his mouth gaped while he struggled to draw air. Henry eased closer to the action, making himself readily available. The surrounding patrons scattered, giving the men their needed space.

With the bottle of rum, Jake tried to retaliate with a crashing blow to Lucas' skull. The frontiersman caught the man's wrist in mid-swing and forced the bottle from his hand. Realizing

he couldn't match the strength of his younger opponent, Jake fumbled desperately for the butcher knife tucked away at his backside. Before grasping the handle, Lucas gave a powerful heave and slammed the helpless combatant onto a nearby card table, splintering the wooden structure into many pieces. Henry scoured the tent still defending his brother's blindside.

Jake lay on a pile of rubble, helplessly moaning in agony.

"I think he's ... broke my back," he said, gasping for air. "Leroy ... kill ... that sum-bitch!"

A man from the crowd stepped forward with a knife pulled. But when he felt a pistol inserted firmly into his ribcage, he froze solid.

Henry pulled the hammer back on his flintlock. "Don't be so foolish, *Leroy*. You best think long and hard before you go tryin' to use that Arkansas toothpick. I'd hate to make a mess of ya all over this fine establishment."

Without hesitating, Leroy slid the dagger back into its sheath.

"Now you're thinkin' with a little more reason," Henry said slyly.

Lucas stood over Jake as he labored for each breath.

"I suggest next time you reconsider before callin' someone a liar," said Lucas.

Henry yelled to his brother. "I think it's time to go!"

Backing away, Lucas scanned the other patrons cautiously. The brothers then exited the tent, leaving Leroy with the honor of tending to his crumpled crony.

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