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## INDEBTED

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## BETWEEN THE RIVERS

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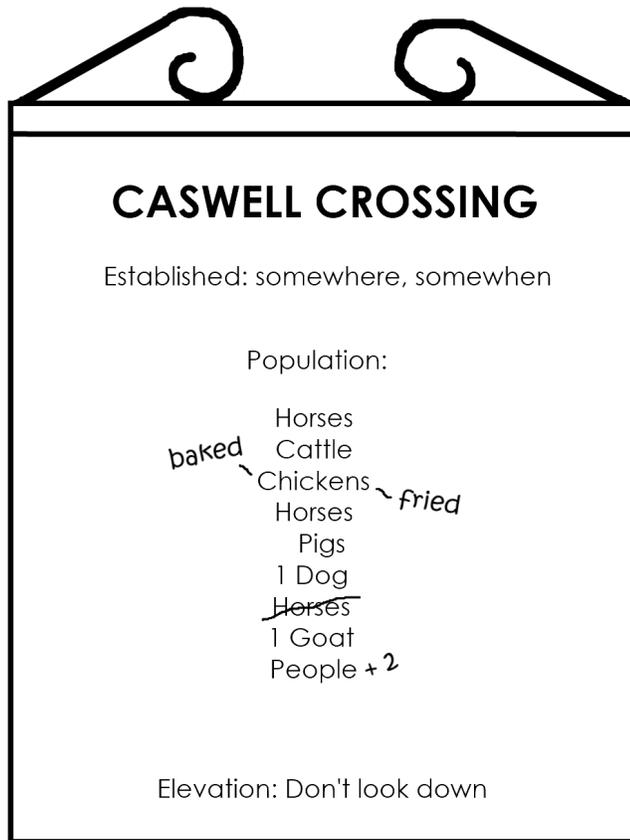
Published by Two Square Books Publishing  
Montana, USA  
twosquarebooks.com

## FIRST EDITION

ISBN 978-0-9890764-1-8

Additional printing information located at back of book

Natalie Jayne



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This started as a story about chickens. It wasn't entirely about chickens of course, unless we are speaking metaphorically. It ended up as a story about sheep who won't stand up. It is also about being in debt, a state generally avoided by the more refined breed of gentlemen— who occasionally resemble sheep, though not in this book, because we can tell the difference. For one, a gentleman always repays his debts.

No matter what.

Even after several years.

Even if they never meant to incur the debt  
in the first place.

Even if the IOU holder  
would really rather they did not.

**Natalie Jayne**

**CHAPTER 1**

Lost Nuts  
On The Dodge  
Hunting  
Unkind Morning

**N**UTS! A bovine at a spit roast could not have been more vexed. All the same, that was as profane, and nearly as profound, as J.E. Haverston ever became. He scurried about his study shifting nicks, nacks, brics and bracs with an indiscriminant fervor. Periodically he stopped, stared about the cluttered study, gave a helpless flap, and resumed his frantic search. It was here. It must be! Haverston had held it in his very own fingers not two minutes ago. If he didn't find it, he was going to have more in common with that cow than he cared to consider.

"Think where you were last," his wife suggested from the living room, in that feminine way she had of attending to one thing with half her brain, whilst completely engaged in a thoroughly unrelated endeavor with the other half. The problem with that, Haverston felt, was neither venture ever achieved more than half-steam.

"Wouldn't think I had thought of that one," he said to himself, followed by self-congratulations for managing a passable 'yes, dear' that proved, between them, it was he with the better upstairs boiler.

Hadn't he done everything sensible? Backtracked every step? Backtracked places he hadn't even been? Of course it made no sense, but that's what people did who knew darn well a thing should be somewhere, despite the fact it wasn't. Somehow it twisted around to logic that if, after looking in every place reasonable, one were to look in all places

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**un**reasonable it would naturally **become** reasonable.

The notion went hand in hand with looking in the self same place one has already looked, as if by Lady Luck's fickle whim the missing item will have fortuitously appeared. Unfortunately, a lady does not keep company with a married man. Oh, dear.

**C**ASWELL Crossing almost didn't exist. Partly this was because its founding father almost hadn't arrived. It was also because, in the fine year of 18-ot, there existed an almighty stretch of territory in which one modest collection of buildings could become quite lost without too much ado. If a rider were to ask had anybody seen a town nearby, the most likely answer would have been 'A what?'. Of course, that was if anyone could have been found to ask.

Despite the odds, Caswell Crossing had indeed been founded. Several buildings camped in a slightly crooked row that angled, more or less, northwest to southeast. Construction had been accomplished by use of rough lumber, native rock— possibly the region's greatest resource— and stout timber. Most of the buildings were greeted by a stretch of boardwalk to keep prospective customers up out of the muck which, in its various forms, proved a real problem one month out of the year and provided a considerable measure of amusement for another seven. If it wasn't boot sucking, wheel jamming mud, it was swirling windblown dust, or packed ice which, after the wind had its way, was slicker than a greased watermelon.

Gideon Fletcher walked through this modest representation of civilization as if he belonged there. It generally worked. People were inclined to take notice of someone running. The trick, the way to go unnoticed, was to

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act as if you belonged where you, in point of fact, had no decent business whatsoever. Unfortunately for Gideon, he was not exactly a stranger. It would have been easier if he were. How he had ever ended up in this predicament, he would never know.

*Sure ya do, boyo.*

He did. It had all started with William E. Tarlston and it was nothing Gideon talked about. The upshot was he had been pinned with a three year sentence for a crime he hadn't committed. Several crimes actually. Quite unaccountably, the town's make-shift circuit judge had skipped over the notion of a jail cell in favor of shackling Gideon with his very own court appointed guard, a well-to-do gentleman determined to reform him.

Oh well, a man had to do what he could with what he had— even if it was a reputation as a purveyor of geographically misdirected livestock of a questionably secondhand nature.

Not long ago it had been almighty close to grave sizing time. Not long before that it had been rope sizing time. Gideon had sure dodged something there, because here he stood on his own two feet. Not in his own boots of course, he'd no idea where those had gone. He'd blithely annexed everything he wore and, by and large, his gaunt frame looked like a scarecrow who only maintained employment because the crows were too busy cracking up to bother with the corn.

Gideon caught the apparition of his reflection in a window and allowed the crows would be justified. In his experience, clothes without patches, holes, or stains from sources no one dared investigate counted for goin'-to-picnic finery. If a man had a second shirt to put on after his autumn scrubbing he was living well indeed. The borrowed

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duds hanging on him shaped up to a pretty penny and were wash line clean. A solid foot taller, and twice himself thicker, maybe Gideon wouldn't cut too bad a figure. As it stood. . . thank goodness for braces or keeping his britches up would have been a job. He had already rolled up or tied down various bits of extra yardage like a man lashing down for a squall.

The funny side took a broader hold; there was a worse sight he could imagine. When his do-gooding guard awoke and thought to dress— now there would be one heck of a fine sight. Gideon allowed himself to savor the vision and continued on his way, aiding and abetting a grin that reached to his toes without much touching his face.

The first merchants began arriving to start the predictable pattern of another mundane day. Good mornings were given, welcome signs turned, and doors propped open in silent celebration of the agreeable weather.

Would any of these sleepy-eyed, peace-living townspeople suspect they had a man on the dodge amongst their number? If Gideon was careful, they would remain blissfully ignorant.

Alongside a saloon, empty of customers at this hour of propriety, he drew up. Through the swinging doors came noises of furniture being scraped against the rough floor, followed by footsteps of someone in no hurry. Concealed by the brim of his tattered hat, one item he could at least claim for his own, Gideon peered out at the wide street. No one peered back.

A middle-aged Chinaman came out, offered a courteous nod and added an infinitesimal shake of his head, broom never pausing as he worked it along the boardwalk.

The exchange was little enough for a witness to observe. What could they say? Two people nodded good morning?

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There was a capital crime if ever one had been committed.

Gideon set off again, lest the non-existent witness wonder why he lingered. Between one step and the next, everything blurred, as if the world had turned and left him behind. He slumped against a post, head swimming, and told himself to pull it together.

An aroma insinuated itself upon the cool morning breeze. Like a fish on a line, Gideon let it lure him along. Through the watery distortion of a shop window he spotted a woman, her pleasant oval face gone red from the heat of an oven. She transferred loaves of golden brown, oat sprinkled tastiness to the counter and spared him a moment's affable wave.

*Hey! Boyo!*

Gideon shook himself up. He was right; standing there gawking like a guppy was an attitude he could not well afford. Nice and easy like, he scanned the street. The mercantile remained closed, the warehouse beside it as well. At the livery stable, a horse nickered excitedly at the arrival of her breakfast. A body couldn't ask for anything more normal.

Bear sign! That woman had made bear sign! Come to think on it, maybe that mare had her a thought worth thinking. Did he have— Gideon dug for the means and came up with a quarter eagle, a veritable treasury to someone whose pockets seldom held even a three cent piece. It wasn't his, and it was barely the wish of a drop in the very large barrel of what he was due, but handing over that coin gave Gideon an unrestrained, childish satisfaction.

The first donut was gone before he left the shop and it made an excellent breakfast. Then again, he'd skipped last night's supper and wasn't too sure about lunch, so maybe this was yesterday's breakfast today.

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Outside, a bench invited him to linger, and Gideon eyed it with no small inclination, but ducked around into the cover of an alley instead.

There was a game he played, sometimes for fun and sometimes despite himself. When the miles stretched out, he'd dust off the crates of memory, check the labels and play a few rounds of 'When Was'. When was the last time he'd owned five dollars of his very own? When was the last time he'd slept without a gun to hand? When was the last time he'd had a proper bedroll? When was the first?

What Gideon wondered now was when had the bright morning, heretofore a comfort, become too much? A stack of overturned half-barrels steadied him whilst he willed the strange feeling washing over him to wash itself away. He told himself firmly it would pass and wondered if he lied.

"You mind telling me what in tarnation you think you're doing?"

Gideon sprang from the barrels, staggered and, thanks to Sheriff Luke Gandy, failed to fall flat over.

"Gggff!" he protested, cheeks stuffed with the last of his breakfast.

"Nevermind. No call to ruin a promising day," and with a relaxed inexorableness, Gandy escorted his prisoner around the corner and down the street.

The lawman was a neat, clean shaven gentleman in his early thirties. Where he was forced to look up to many a man physically speaking, it was many another who looked to him when it really counted. Gandy wondered at times if his unremarkable five foot nine might be an advantage for him as a lawman. A big shouldered brute was naturally set up to discourage a certain amount of mischief before it even got its teeth in, but there were those who felt challenging such a man, provided they came out the better, would set their ego

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up a treat. To some, having bragging rights was worth the risk of getting their fool head blown off.

That was one worry Gandy never had to contend with, for him it was the presumption he could be walked over with impunity. A misguided unfortunate, who did not have the knack of recognizing where impunity left off and recklessness took up, might be foolish enough to take him for insubstantial. It usually took them quite by surprise to discover his lean frame was pure compact muscle backed by a personality that knew exactly where it stood. It had certainly come as a surprise to many an intractable Saturday night good-timer. The smart ones took a short lesson in stepping back. The slower learners were given a few days of quiet solitude, compliments of Caswell Crossing, to reflect upon the error of their ways.

“Ya can’t lock me up,” opinioned his current pupil.

“Can’t I?” Gandy contradicted tolerantly.

A lawman could lock a man up for right about anything, or right about nothing. It all sort of depended on their mood and, to Gideon’s figuring, who was payrolling them. Although he did not resist the hand on his elbow, as it at least was steady whilst the ground was not, sheer habit drove Gideon to pursue his objection with the present embodiment of institutionalized authority.

“What’s the charge?”

“Excessive Use Of Stupidity In Public’ sounds about right. In you go.”

Sheriff Gandy went through his office to the cells beyond and deposited his catch on a narrow cot. Normally, he would be the first to instill the notion being arrested was not akin to checking in at the Marion Hotel. His cells held to the bare necessities and did not feature room service, hot water, nor soft feather-down beds. In this case, he decided to

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make an exception.

“Aspen’s going to have words for you, boy,” Gandy called out, as he collected a stack of blankets from the room he over glorified as quarters. Returning to the lock-up with them, he frowned. His prisoner sat, slumped against the wall, precisely as he’d been left. “And mighty strong words at that.”

“He ain’t my brother,” Gideon objected, a flash of spark jumping to grey eyes gone dull.

“Did I say it? Call him an officer of the court if you like, but Aspen will still have something to say about this.”

Gandy charitably chalked Gideon’s stubborn refusal to acknowledge his situation up to an overwrought brain and began spreading out the extra bedding.

“What were you thinking?” he said, resuming his scolding. “No, forget I asked. Untangling your explanations makes my head hurt. Budge up, that’ll do. Now let me get this shirt off you— Aspen’s I suppose? —and we’ll see what harm you’ve done yourself.”

Three bullets. Three slugs of metal had ripped through this boy leaving him with a hole clean through his side, another in his right shoulder and a nearly healed furrow along his left arm.

Any rational person would take that as sufficient cause to keep still. It would make sense if the person in question had some pressing business that demanded he remain on his feet— such as if whomever had done the shooting was still on **his** feet. Gideon had no such excuse. Shot three times and here he was gallivanting around town. Doctor Connell would have something to say about that, until then the sheriff was willing and able to stand proxy.

“Stay put. Not one foot, not one toe, off that cot. Do I make myself understood?” Placing restrictions on Gideon

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required circling the words until he was thoroughly surrounded. “**Stay put.** You so much as think about moving and, so help me, I will handcuff you to the wall.”

“Favor my comp’ny that much do ya?” Gideon mumbled, in a pale attempt at humor as Gandy pulled off his boots.

Pale, that was an apt word. Gandy had helped old ladies across the street with more effort than it had taken to bring Gideon in. A thick bush of unruly hair was the only thing about him with an ounce of gumption. As usual, it was a patchwork of color that hinted towards brown with a hold out on red and no decision whatsoever as to wavy or straight. The only thing every last strand had in common was a complete commitment to chaos. Appropriate really.

Gandy rubbed the back of his neck and wished Doctor Connell were there. Gideon’s cheeks were too hollow, his movements too slow. It wasn’t that Gandy couldn’t handle it, he could and had before this. It was simply that he was more at home with the brute force and ignorance method of problem solving: kick it, shoot it or play dumb until it talked.

About to repeat his injunction, Gandy instead shook his head and harrumphed softly. Gideon was already asleep. What a kid. The sheriff started the Arbuckle’s brewing; looked like he was going to be there awhile.

**A** breeze twined its way through the pine trees, causing a soft rustling. It wasn’t precisely cold, but it sure wasn’t warm either. It usually wasn’t at such an elevation; mountains were good at chilly nights no matter where they were or what name men had given them.

On this mountain there was a secluded nook of a space, sheltered from wind, cold, prying eyes and all. In this nook hunkered a man cooking his supper. His judiciously small

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fire burned low and what smoke escaped quickly became lost in the thick screen of pine branches overhead. More familiar with a poker table than a mountainside he might be, he'd not deny it, however he was a man with a strong desire for a long and prosperous future. Leaving the welcome light blazing for all and sundry ran directly counter to that hankering.

As he crowded close, enjoying the flames, an overly excited spark snapped up and lit upon the brim of his hat. He shook it off without bother, brushed back a lock of dark hair, and resettled the hat. Then the man adjusted the rifle cradled across his lap and listened closely, though his horse made it clear everything was as it should be. Animal or man, if something approached, that horse would go from aimless munching to instant ears-pricked attention.

The traveler sipped his coffee and pulled out a bowie knife to check the potato buried in the coals. Red heat danced and shimmered along the blade. Whilst he waited for his supper, the man considered on where he had been putting his own attention.

It had all happened years ago, but that made no difference. There were some things nothing could alter, not time, nor distance, nor whatever may have occurred in between.

He had been following bits and pieces and best guesses. It had been a fruitless search to say the least. Just when it looked like he'd found something, by the time he arrived there would be nothing but the proverbial cold soot and old tracks. It was worse than searching for a needle in a haystack. Then serendipity had delivered a discarded, out of date newspaper and, like a compass swinging around, his search had finally taken a solid direction.

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**A**UGUSTUS Thacker, who wisely went by Gus, had been keeping an eye on the office of Doctor Tadhg Connell—pronounced Tige not ‘Tag’ nor ‘Tad’— and for the most part the locals had been thus educated. The man himself had been called away before the rooster cockled its first doodle-do. Since Gus’s barbershop was to hand, and until Tadhg’s arrival Gus had been the nearest thing to a physician, it was a common favor.

It was not common for the very patient he was supposed to be watching to slip away without him knowing and Gus had to admit to a certain amount of guilty conscience. It was this that had caused him to hold the morning coffee for ransom.

His neighbor of one door down came, as he did every morning, to share a pot and had even brought doughnuts from the new bakery, only to have his much anticipated ritual denied. Entirely focused on the delicious black ambrosia, the man heard not a word Gus said until the barber smacked his hand and levered his capacious body between mortal man and liquid heaven. Only then did Gus’s urgency get through and would he mind watching— attentively— for Aspen to emerge from the doctor’s office whilst Gus went to look for someone or other and he didn’t care whom just give him the coffee and yes, yes he would watch and no he wouldn’t leave and yes he promised.

The coffee pot was now empty, the doughnuts a happy memory, and Silas Cooper still reclined in a chair outside the barbershop. His legs were stretched out comfortably and absentmindedly he rubbed the toe of one shoe against the back of a trouser leg to remove an imagined scuff. He was well suited, though less expensively than many another lawyer, and his genial features danced as if he were forever

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enjoying some small and private joke upon the world. On the whole, Silas measured up handsome enough to turn the head of the average woman.

With the woman across the street he hadn't a chance. She was far too busy gawking at Aspen Rivers. Her hands flew to her mouth and her delicate young face blushed exquisitely.

"Hey, Gus! You better get out here."

The barber came to the door at a trot and stopped on a dime as the petite woman scuttled off, leaving Aspen— son of a prominent citizen— standing in the middle of the street as if forcefully expelled from the doctor's office. Locks of golden-brown hair stood up haphazardly and his chest boasted no covering but summer weight unmentionables. Aspen's feet were naked, and a pair of britches— clearly not to his measure— climbed up his shins whilst the braces dangled unproductively at the knee. Clearly the morning was not being kind; the orderly Aspen Rivers was desperately out of order.

The only thought on Aspen's mind, however, was not his state of appearance, but his charge's disappearance.

He spotted Gus and called out, "Have you seen—"

"Gandy has him— Aspen, wait! You can't parade around like that!"

Even as Gus spoke, another woman drew up sharply, this one in her fifties with every pin in perfect place, gasping and sputtering, unable to believe what she was seeing right there on the public street.

The sight of Mrs. Driscoll, scandalized and appalled as she stomped away, made Augustus Thacker crack up. He roared so loudly it took his breath and that made Silas, heretofore content to smirk, lose it as well, though he at least had the decency to do so with less volume.

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Despite debilitating laughter, Gus waved Aspen over and pulled him into the shelter of the barbershop. Silas followed along and took a seat on one of the official chairs where he tried to pull himself together and failed. Gus did not even try. Aspen Rivers glared at them both.

“This is no time—” he began sternly, trying valiantly to gain some fragment of control.

“Gideon’s. . . fine. . . honest,” Silas gasped out, wiping away a tear.

Gus could do no more than lean against the counter, hands wrapped around his prodigious belly, and fight to draw breath.

“Will you two be serious!” Aspen scolded. “Do I look like a man in a humorous mood?”

They examined him afresh and their laughter burst anew and that young thing blushing the deepest of reds clean to her toes and Mrs. Driscoll— that gossiping busybody of all people— it was more than they could stand.

“Aw, knock it off,” Aspen tried again. “That boy could be in twelve kinds of mischief by now.”

Manifestly incapable of speech, Gus gestured for Aspen to wait and went upstairs. His barrel laughter accompanied him as he left and preceded him as he returned.

Even the most generous of descriptions could not claim the clothes he handed over had even the whisper of a hope of fitting Aspens trim 6’4”. Gus was significantly shorter and, bluntly, rounder. The overall result was a distinctly hodgepodge collection that looked like it had been gathered from the depths of numerous forgotten closets. Aspen stood, if not a man of fashion, at least a man of modesty.

Though there were not many women in town to be offended at sight of his disreputable self, for Aspen, the sight of Mrs. Driscoll had been more than sufficient. That woman

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had an absolute talent for being exactly where you would really rather she was not, exactly when you did not want her to be there. Why her?! He would never, ever, hear the end of this. He really wouldn't.

Gales of laughter erupted once again from his barely controlled friends. Aspen shook an impotent finger at them, searching for something, anything, he could say to make this embarrassing episode one shaved penny better.

He gave up.

The expression on Mrs. Driscoll's face would stay with him forever— his brothers would make sure of it and Gus would be sure to tell them. In a rare state, Aspen Rivers turned on his heel and aimed himself towards the sheriff's office.