

LAND SWAP

Tyson Greer, Lake Forest Park, Washington

Chapter 1

Owen Breed, VP of Public Relations for Inland Timber Company, took his suit jacket off its hanger behind his office door, slipped it on, and spoke loudly to his assistant: “Got that print-out, Billy?” He picked up his tablet from the polished surface of his desk.

“Yes, sir.” Billy Harding rose from his desk outside the glass office, and with five long strides handed the document to his boss. “The updated files are on the share. The VP of Timber Resources will be ten or twelve minutes late.”

“And our new corporate legal beagle?”

“His secretary confirmed he’ll be there.”

Owen nodded and grunted with what could be generously interpreted as a thank you. “No changes to the agenda?”

“No, sir. Your Idaho land proposal still has the bulk of the meeting.”

Owen used his reflection in the windows overlooking the Seattle harbor to straighten his tie, shoot his cuffs, and then smiled his way through the corridors to Inland Timber’s bi-weekly leadership meeting.

#

Rose Wagonner—or Ma Rose as everyone but her husband called her—had finished checking the north pasture fence under the cottonwood trees. She clamped her rose-colored hat down tighter, gathered the reins closer, and turned the new horse towards the barn.

She was ready for him when he jerked his head up, side-danced, bunched his haunches, and took two quick leaps ready to race for home. “No you don’t, Buster.” The frozen ground was uneven, and she lurched in her saddle, leather creaking, as she ducked under overhanging branches, reined him in sharply, turned him in a tight circle,

and then another one, canceling his forward motion and reminding him she didn't approve of his bad manners and just who was calling the shots.

The horse settled, and although he tossed his head a few times, they proceeded across lingering patches of snow toward the barn at a dignified walk. She wasn't going to have her clients deal with that pony-to-the-stable behavior. Leaning forward, she patted the horse's neck and cooed to him. He flicked his ears back and forward but did his job.

Ma Rose relaxed into the rhythm of the horse, enjoying the early evening shadows proceeding up the succession of hills that rolled beyond her ranch, their colors muted and washed blue with distance. She knew those hills as well as she knew her children, and grandchildren, too, for that matter. To the southeast, her land and the Nez Perce National Forest beyond her fence bristled with Lodgepole pines. To the northeast, a fringe of stately Ponderosa pines presided over a smattering of black cattle on a steep round hill.

It was that round hill that changed the most throughout the day. Always something new to look at. In the fall, when the grasses were dry, it looked like the soft round belly of a teddy bear. Now, at the tail end of March, snow clung only to the north side of the hill. On days like this, when white clouds poofed up the bright blue sky, they created monstrous dark shadows, as if a giant hand were creeping across and hiding, then revealing, the land. One thing was always the same—fourteen black cows.

After she unsaddled her horse and turned him out in the pasture with the others, she sat on the back porch to wait for Angus. Slowly, slowly the sky shifted hues like a slow-motion kaleidoscope, and creeping shadows consumed the golden Idaho light on the hill. Magic hour, she thought, remembering what the photographers called it. A couple more weeks and they would arrive. So much to do before then.

A flurry of barking and then a rumbling sound, followed by a wheeze, told her that her husband's truck had come to rest in the driveway. A smile lightened her features, even before she saw him round the corner of the house with the young Border collie who pranced and whined after him as if the separation had stretched over years, instead of one long day.

"How was the auction?" she asked as Angus bent down to kiss her forehead.

Angus leaned his cane against the wall then folded himself into a chair beside her. "Fine. Lots of buyers. But a little sad." It had been a long time since he'd called a sale at a local ranch.

She reached out and patted his hand. He turned his hand over and gave her thin hand a squeeze. His fingers sought her wedding ring and turned it slowly around and around as he watched their horses ambling up the south pasture toward the stock pond. Their tails furred like flags. "Hunter got himself a good deal on the tractor. And Trey bought Wilson's excavator."

They both knew Trey was intent on punching a new road to a cabin he was building on his ranch. A "guest house" he called it, to the amusement of his neighbors. Most likely it was something to keep him out of the house since he retired.

"I see Wilson's still got cattle on his hill." Ma Rose raised her binoculars. "Seven, eight, nine..." She scanned the steep round hill. "...Twelve, thirteen." Another scan before she lowered the binoculars. "Fourteen." When Wilson first pastured his cattle there, Angus had called them "side hill gougers" and insisted they were a breed with one leg shorter than the other.

"See any elk?" he asked.

"Not so far. A coyote or something had the cows riled up earlier when I was out with the horses."

He twirled his cowboy hat and gazed at the hill. "Could have been a wolf? There was talk of a wolf over at Lawson's place couple days ago."

She frowned and looked toward the horses.

The dog cocked his head as the marmalade cat appeared from under the porch and, ignoring him, sauntered up the steps and twined around Angus' long legs. He reached down and scratched the cat's upturned chin. "Wilson's plannin' to take 'em to Cottonwood next week. I'll miss him coming to the sale yard."

"I'll miss his biscuits. Is he comin' Saturday?"

"Didn't say." Angus had decided not to ask. He twirled his hat twice more.

The sunlight was almost gone from the hills. The black specs of cattle were harder for Ma Rose to see. "They were good neighbors." It hadn't been a real surprise that Wilson had given in after his wife died and agreed to move near his daughters in Arizona. Ma Rose couldn't imagine giving up Idaho for the bleakness of Arizona. "Did you hear anything about who's buying his place?" she asked.

"Some young couple from Seattle."

"Seattle?"

"Fellow was a big executive in some computer company, then started another one, sold it, retired early. Seems to be in his late forties. His wife's a lawyer. He seems nice enough. She wasn't there."

"City people." Ma Rose tried to imagine a Seattle executive and his lawyer wife joining the volunteer fire fighters. Most of the volunteers were as old as she and Angus, and with the low rainfall this past winter, people were already worried about the fire season. Ma Rose wondered if her daughter Cecelia knew the couple in Seattle. "A lawyer," she repeated.

Angus stretched out his legs. "There goes the neighborhood."

"At least he's not a developer."

Angus looked out over the acreage that had been home to his wife's family for over one hundred years, and particularly at the round hill across from their place. The evening shadows had stolen all but the very tops of the trees.

"Did you get the power strips for the cabins?" she asked.

#

Laura Strongbow laced up her running shoes and twisted her dark hair into a pony tail.

She paused at the front door and started the app on her phone to track her time and distance. "Back in an hour, Consuela."

"Yes, ma'am. When I finish folding laundry, I will go and come back Friday."

"See you then. Oh, actually, I have an all-day meeting Friday."

"I will look for your list."

"*Gracias. Buenos tardes.*" After Laura closed the front door and punched in the keypad code to lock it, she surveyed the daffodils that followed the curve of the flagstone walk. Irises rose behind them. Hearing the familiar riff of trumpet notes from her cell phone, she answered, "Hi, sweetie. How's life in the slow lane?"

"Pretty fine. Met a lot of the folks around here at the sale."

"Folks? Did you say, 'the folks'?" It would be at least another week before the new irises would bloom. They should complement the fieldstone walls of the house. At least she hoped they would. She had no time to change them now.

"Yeah, well. They were very cordial, considering they're losing a neighbor who's been living in this area since dirt was invented, or more accurately, before we were born. I think I may have to change my name, though. I get a lot of confused stares when I introduce myself as 'Stefan.' They give me a firm handshake but look me in the eye like they question whether I should be allowed to go out unsupervised. 'Stefan Montrose' doesn't exactly sound like I belong here. Anyway, how's the Wica-Coven merger going?"

"Winston-Cooper merger, you monkey. Going slowly. We should have our final settlement in less than a month." The daffodils nodded as if chatting to each other about the chilly breeze that came up Lake Washington.

"Hmmm, the Ides of March."

"No, they're getting along OK—just lots of details to come to terms with, one of which is language ..." Laura gave a few details of the issues, but Stefan was only half-listening.

From his motel room in Grangeville, he looked down at the saddle shop window across the street at an elegant hand-tooled leather saddle with silver trim. A real beauty.

"...and employees have gotten wind of it and, as you can imagine, the rumors are flying about layoffs. Productivity is down at both firms as people jockey for position to take advantage of opportunities..." Looking at the gathering clouds, Laura considered whether she needed to go back to get a light jacket but decided to keep going and began an effortless lope south.

"That's tough. Say, when I was at the sale, I, uh, thought about opportunities, and we're gonna need some equipment to keep a ranch running. So, the tractor looked like it had come with the pioneers, but the excavator was in good shape, so I bid on it and got it."

"Excavator?" Between the other lake front mansions and manicured gardens, Laura caught glimpses of the last rays of sunlight glowing on Mount Rainier and the expanse of evergreen trees across the lake climbing the hill of St. Edwards Park.

"No, I mean the backhoe. It's a real versatile tool and good to have on hand." He watched a customer walk into the saddle shop. "There's a real problem with the invasive rose bushes taking over the fields and if you don't use poison, you have to dig them out, plus I think there's an attachment we can get to use it like a snow plow..." He could already imagine himself at the helm of the backhoe, bouncing along like he was on the back of a horse, hauling on the levers to maneuver the digging scoop or bucket or whatever they called that thing.

"*Invasive* rose bushes? They dig out rose bushes?"

"It's not that they dislike roses, honey, but it's a type of plant that once they get started in a field, they take over and ruin the field for grazing. Anyway, lots to learn." Through the shop window, Stefan could see the man looking at the silver-trimmed saddle and talking to the shop owner. He knew Laura missed having horses. She had grown up with them on the reservation.

He stood and put his room card in his pocket. "One more thing. You know when I was out there? On *our* ranch." The sound of those words triggered a burst of pride to Stefan. "And I saw those black cows—they're a Black Angus cross—so peaceful, like a Courbet painting. That field is really steep. Can't do anything with it. I think we ought to just buy them. We can give the old guy a good price, save him the trouble of rounding them up and trucking them into the sale yard. And they just look so right there, grazing on that big hill."

Laura stopped in the middle of the trail. "Stefan, we don't know the first thing about cattle."

#

"Could you get the door, Patsy?" A large man wearing wide red suspenders and pink oven mitts squeezed past the woman and carried his Dutch oven inside the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Hall in Clearwater. "Where do you want desserts?"

"Ask Ma Rose," said a thin young woman bearing a large glass bowl of coleslaw toward the long tables that stood against the side wall. Black cast iron pots containing elk stew, roast chicken, ginger-pear crisp, and biscuits filled the air with delicious fragrances.

"Down here, Henry." Ma Rose put down her coffee and repositioned the framed photos of two young men in uniform in the middle of the second table. "I hope you made your peach pie."

Henry slowly slid off the lid. "Get a whiff of that! I added some huckleberries this time."

Angus came up behind his wife. "Trudy sent me out with these." He held out a bouquet of large spoons as he eyed the bubbling pie.

Ma Rose took the spoons from him. "Serving spoons, not tasting spoons. How much more time do the folks still cooking need?"

With a last look at the peach pie Angus said, "I'll go check."

On the cement apron outside the hall, a young man wearing a leather welder's apron over his camo shirt presided over a smoldering grey bed of charcoal briquettes. A few coals glowed and winked sparks. An older man with a trimmed white beard shoveled coals into a scoop.

"Getting a late start, aren't you Doc?" said Angus. The other cooks drew near.

Doc Oliver settled his pot on top of the nine coals he had placed in a precise circle on the cooking stand. "Well, Angus..." Doc said, adjusting the position of one coal to even the spacing, "My steelhead is worth waitin' for. Lord knows I waited long enough for him to bite."

As the laughter bubbled around them, Doc leaned closer to Angus. "I stopped by Wilson's to get him to come and that fellow that bought his place was there. I think Wilson likes him. So, I invited him, too."

Angus got a consensus of the time before the cooks would be ready and went back inside. "What's he like?" a wiry man asked the Doc.

"I heard he paid cash for the place," another man said.

His wife slapped his arm with her oven mitt. "You don't know that. But I do know that your new young doctor knows him. Knew him before he came here."

"Well, he's friendly," Doc said. "Very respectful. Seems like a real nice fellow." The sound of a vehicle pulling to a stop in the gravel parking lot made heads turn. A small cloud of dust swirled up to the black tinted windows of the shiny black Range Rover.

"See for yourself." Doc turned and blew gently on his coals.

Stefan stepped out of the Rover and, making sure his polo shirt was tucked in, moved quickly to the passenger side. To disguise the assistance he offered the older man, Stefan remarked on how the vehicle was really too tall and his wife thought so too, and when he got back to Seattle he was going to get one of those after-market steps put on and that would take care of the problem. Wilson accepted his arm and, after he gained the ground, waved once to acknowledge those on the porch who shouted greetings to him.

"They're going to be sorry to see you go, Mr. Wilson," Stefan said as they walked to the porch. Glancing sideways behind his dark Ray Bans, Stefan saw the old man make a

thin line of his lips and grunt in response, but noticed his eyes threatened to betray him. "Boy, something smells really good!" Stefan said. "I don't think I've ever tasted Dutch oven cooking before."

Stefan hadn't even *heard* of Dutch oven cooking before, much less seen a lineup of metal stands extending the length of the covered cement area in front of the building. The building looked like it had seen better days. A small woman gripped a pot's wire handle with a folded tea towel and her shoulders stiffened with the weight as she carried the pot inside. Stefan wasn't really hungry. It was barely five PM.

Although Wilson had invited him out that morning to do a final walk through to learn the quirks of the house, and there were many, the old man insisted on feeding him lunch, and that was after he had insisted Stefan try his elk jerky, which he had to admit was surprisingly good, and he should have stopped eating it sooner. Still, Wilson was a nice old man, going through a hard change, and Stefan didn't begrudge him the time. After all, he was retired now.

Wilson introduced Stefan to the men and women on the porch, pronouncing his name carefully, breaking it correctly into two syllables, 'Stef-fan.' Stefan smiled affably as he shook hands and commented on the enticing aromas but knew he wouldn't remember half their names.

Wilson laid a hand on the shoulder of the young man in the welder's apron. "Good to see you back, son. Back safe."

The young man straightened immediately. "Thank you, Sir. Sorry to see you leave, Sir."

With a short wave, Wilson moved to go inside. "Were you in the service?" he asked Stefan.

"Yes, I was. Army for four years, 10th Mountain Division. I had wanted..." He was about to tell his regular joke—he had wanted to join the Marines but couldn't because his parents were married—when he stepped back to let a man bearing a heavy pot move through the door, and by then Wilson was already inside.

A swarm of people swirled around Wilson like white water surrounding a rock, which left Stefan standing alone. The room was dark, not only compared to the brightness outside. The wood walls were dark. The high ceiling might have once been white. Dark beams punctuated the length of the room. A few people nodded to him, perhaps he'd met them at Wilson's auction.

Stefan smiled back. He glanced at his shoes: Ferragamo loafers, black like his jeans. Well, they *were* black when he started out this morning. He was the only one in the room not wearing cowboy boots. He needed to get a hat, too. There were a few ball caps, but most of the men wore cowboy hats. Inside. He took off his sunglasses, folded them carefully, and slipped one arm of the aviator sunglasses into the front placket of his polo shirt.

When a tall skinny woman came out of the kitchen carrying a large bowl of green salad announced, “Grab a plate. Grab a plate,” people filtered themselves into a semblance of a line. “One plate, Ernie. One plate.” She teased an old man, “Just because I said it twice don’t mean you get two plates.” Stefan was relieved to see the salad amid the long line of black pots.

Wilson came up to him with another couple and invited him to join the line with them. The woman was hanging on his arm, as if that might prevent him from leaving town.

“Glad you could come,” the woman said. “Wilson said you haven’t been to a Dutch oven cook out before.”

Nor had he been to a party where mostly it was the men who cooked. Lots of them. Men cooked at summer grill parties he and Laura went to, but that was a solo host manning the grill and waving a spatula about like it was broad sword. “No, ma’am, never have had the pleasure. I was pleased to be invited, but I’m sorry to arrive empty-handed.”

“No matter. We always have plenty. Sorry your wife couldn’t come.” The woman gave him an expectant look.

“I am too. She would enjoy this.” Then he added, “She likes cooking.” As they moved forward in line, Stefan noticed the parade of once-black and white photos down the wall behind the tables. Stiffly-posed wedding pictures, children lined up smartly on their schoolhouse steps, solemn rows of gravestones, and several faded families in front of wooden porches or now-classic cars with new babies or old parents—they must have stared down for decades at the comings and goings of the hall. He bypassed the roast chicken but couldn’t resist a small portion of barbeque ribs. There was so much meat. He looked gratefully at the two salad bowls, although the coleslaw looked like a whole jar of mayonnaise, Costco size, had tumbled in. He helped himself to a small spoonful of potatoes au gratin.

“You have to try the elk stew,” Wilson said handing Stefan a large spoon. “Cliff makes the best elk stew.”

“Coming in with steelhead,” Doc Oliver squeezed between them, and made a place for his Dutch oven. Doc Oliver set aside the heavy lid, removed his oven mitt, greeted Wilson, and offered his hand to Stefan. “Welcome.” He held out a serving spoon, “Gotta try my steelhead.” He closed his eyes in self-appreciation of the fragrance. “Thinly sliced onions, dill, and my secret sauce. You a fisherman?”

“Haven’t really had the time...” Stefan looked into the pot of salmon and said, “I can tell I’m gonna get full up pretty quick.”

The Doc leaned down to Stefan. “My sauce’s got apricots in it, and capers. Not too many. I tried a lot of things—put a touch of honey in it for a while, tried a little Dijon—but once you get it right, you don’t need to change it.”

Dill? Dijon? Apricot sauce? Not exactly the culinary wasteland he was expecting. *Laura is not going to believe this. Wonder if there's a five-star restaurant in town that I haven't discovered yet?*

When his plate was full—fuller than it should have been—he followed Wilson to a place at the long table. Balancing his plate, cutlery, paper napkin, and a glass of lemonade, he swung a leg over a bench next to the chair Wilson took and seated himself without spilling anything on the young woman next to him. He nodded to the woman and the man across with bushy black eyebrows, “Hi, I’m Stefan Montfort.” They said their names in response, and he said them to himself three times, in an effort to remember them.

“So, you’re moving into the Wilson place.” The man sitting across the table made more of a statement than a question. His eyes drifted to Stefan’s sunglasses, perched at the front of his polo shirt.

“That I am. Really love this area and am anxious to make it our home.”

“Pretty piece of property,” the man agreed. “Lot of elk come through there.”

“We’re gonna take good care of it.” He tried the elk stew.

“Got good water on it too,” the woman sitting next to him who appeared to be his wife added.

Between mouthfuls the man continued. “We had a Dutch oven cookout there late last summer. You know that big flat space in front of the barn?”

Stefan nodded and wondered if that was a hint that he should host a Dutch oven cookout, but decided it probably wasn’t. “Really nice barn. Have you lived in this area long?”

The man and his wife looked puzzled, then he replied. “Always.” He pointed with his fork to the photos on the wall. “That there’s my father and mother when they got married.”

“We’re gonna miss you, Wilson,” the woman said. The man nodded in agreement.

The sound of something metal—it turned out to be a pocket knife—clinking against a mug brought a hush to the room. Angus, sitting at the other end of the table rose and looked down the table. “Before you have third helpings...”

“Come on Angus, I haven’t even had my second one yet,” The man who brought the peach pie protested.

“Well, you may be a slow starter, Henry, but I have confidence you’ll get there.” The crowd laughed and then grew quiet. Angus looked across the table at the young man who had been managing the coals, captured him with his eyes, and then spoke again. “I think you all know why we held off our regular schedule and are having the February Dutch oven cook out today. Stand, will you, son.”

The young man stood, ramrod straight, arms behind his back, legs spread in the at ease stance. “We all want to welcome Brian back and give thanks that Brian has come back safely from the Middle East.” The applause started immediately, so Angus had to

raise his voice and he spoke rapidly. "This Marine has come back from his third tour of duty for God and country." Applause filled the hall and many men stood. Stefan hesitated, but then stood too. Shouts of "Ooh-Rah! Ooh-Rah!" rang out punctuating the applause.

As the applause diminished Angus still stood and then looked down. When it was almost quiet, he said, "And most all of you know, his brother Ethan was not so fortunate. He gave his life defending his troops over there. He will be missed. Let's raise our glasses to Ethan and send our blessings and gratitude for his service to our country." Chairs and benches squeaked as they were pushed back, and every person stood.

As people resumed their seats, Angus spoke again, "You know one of the things I think we'll remember about Ethan was that he loved his country and he loved pie. Really loved pie. So, get yourselves some coffee and let's remember Ethan and have dessert. But you, Henry, go ahead and have that third helping first."

Stefan turned towards Wilson and nodded towards Angus. "That's the fellow who was the auctioneer, at your place, isn't he?"

"Yes, that's Angus. Angus Bailey. Best damn auctioneer in the county. He's the caller for the square dances too. He moved here a couple decades ago and then married Ma Rose.

"Ma Rose?" Stefan said to Wilson.

"Well, her given name was Rose, but everyone's always called her Ma Rose. I forget why. Matter of fact," Wilson pushed his chair back, "I'll introduce you. He and his wife are the people you need to talk to if you want to buy a horse."

"But first things first." Wilson headed for the dessert line. "That peach pie disappears real quick," he said.

When their plates had a representative sampling of Dutch oven desserts, Wilson steered Stefan to where Angus and Ma Rose were sitting and made introductions.

Stefan offered his hand to Angus, "Good to see you again, Mr. Bailey."

"It's Angus. If you call me Mr. Bailey, I'm liable to look around for my father."

"Angus, then. I was so impressed with your auction calling," then turning to Ma Rose said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Bailey."

"Rosie agreed to be my bride eighteen years ago but wouldn't agree to change her name." He shrugged as if he still thought it was a good bargain. "Her full name is Rose Wagonner."

"Didn't see the point of changing my driver's license," Ma Rose said. "My driving hadn't changed. Just my marital status. Everybody calls me 'Ma Rose.'"

"Well, Ma Rose, that makes sense," Stefan said. "I don't want to keep you from your dessert, but Wilson tells me that if I want to buy a good horse—and I do, a couple of good horses—that I should talk to you." He looked from one the other, "So, at your convenience... I expect to be in town for a week or so. Call me any time that suits you."

He handed a business card to Angus, who looked at the embossed gold lettering that identified a name, email, and phone numbers.

"Don't know if Wilson told you," Ma Rose said, "but we're just across the valley from you. You can probably see our house from the round hill north of your house."

"Round hill?"

"Below that stand of Ponderosa pines," Wilson said. "The big field where my cattle are now. Well, your cattle."

"Ah. Yes. If I can see you, I'll wave."

Ma Rose smiled, "If you need anything, don't hesitate to call us. Don't send up a smoke signal, the fields are already turning dry."

Stefan attempted a smile.

"Do you have a card on you, Rosie?" Angus asked.

"I might." She reached for her small purse, pulled out a card and handed it to him.

Stefan read: ROSE WAGONNER, BACK COUNTRY GUIDE AND OUTFITTER. "So, you're a guide?"

Ma Rose smiled, "I am. But I need to make new cards. We look forward to meeting your wife."

"Yes, I'm sure she'd like to meet you, too." Stefan figured out by now that kind references to his wife were probably politely-veiled, *When is your wife coming?*

About herself, Tyson says,



I failed to persuade my parents, when we moved to a house with a two-car garage, that we could use one "stall" to keep a horse. (I figured the horse could eat the grass, so I wouldn't have to mow it.) But I did get to go to horse camp and after art college, left Baltimore and moved out west where there are plenty of horses. After an eclectic career that included writing feature articles, corporate television and documentary programs, a non-fiction book for Microsoft, and teaching screenwriting, I turned to fiction. When not writing, I enjoy an undisciplined garden, a supportive husband, and traveling.

#

Land Swap is the second book in a series set in rural Idaho. Her agent is currently shopping the first one, *The Other Side of the Mountains*.