

# COLORADO COMRADE

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## CHAPTER 1

1935, Colorado

Being a creature who told time according to the sun, its position in the sky, and the duration it replaced the moon, the cow resisted being moved from the still grassy and greenish brown pasture in the Colorado high country to winter corals. She was ambivalent about being sent to a railroad car destined for someplace place where perhaps the grass still had some green in them. She had given birth to seven calves thus far, having seen them all grow up to be parents themselves, or become passengers on the large, noisy iron horses which moved on wheels rather than legs. Perhaps her fear of the latter drove her calf to resist being moved by the cowboys who were pushing the herd down the mountain along the gentle slopes leading up to the high country. Or, perhaps, there was a fascination the calf had with the cliff overlooking the valley below. Or perhaps the calf thought he could spread his feet out and fly like the eagles in the clouds. The birds who dipped down to the river to fetch fish three times their size., Or the hawks that lingered somewhat lower to fetch slow moving rabbits. Then there were the low flying crows which pecked out the eyes and entrails of any four legged creature who stopped breathing, eating and defecating.

The harder the cowboys yelled, the faster the calf ran toward the cliff, weaving in and out of brush that most horses would have to go around rather than sneak under. Indeed, the cow had no choice but to follow her calf. Even if it led to the demise of both of them. The eight year old cow, though she had the muscle mass and strength of a one year old heifer, saw the world through life tired eyes which were becoming less functional each year. As such, she knew the cowboys in weather beaten and torn clothing riding magnificent looking horses atop worn out saddles which had been yet again repaired rather than finally replaced. She recognized each of the two legged humans on the four legged equines by voice as much as sight as they moved the rest of the herd along to whatever pasture or feed lot they would be sent to in the upcoming winter. A winter, according the large amount of fur growing on her hide and the others, would be a cold one.

There was Jake Hanson, hotheaded, loud-mouthed 25 years crude cowboy. The fuzz on his upper lip never really grew thick enough to be a real man's mustache. He appended most of his yells at the cow's fellow bovines with the crack of his whip, a spit on the ground, or an expletive of frustration, or all three. The horse between his oversized spurs seemed as unwilling to move as any of the cattle.

Riding on the other side of the herd was freckle-faced Buddy Emerson, whose horse did most of what he asked of it. He was usually quiet cowhand who did everything Jake said to do, including yelling at the cattle and his horse, when he didn't have to.

Riding drag behind the defiant young and life-tired older cattle who wanted to stay atop the grassy pasture that would become an ice covered, slippery skating rink or buried under three feet of snow within the next week, was their boss, Sam Longmore. At the end of this particularly dry summer, his skin was deep red, his hair completely white now. His mustache had grown over his lower lip and nearly his chin. The wrinkles on his face were deeper this year than the last, for reasons he never told Jake or Buddy. Sam seemed to confide a common fate of doom with any cow he looked at. In a herd he worked harder each year to keep. A herd that ate better than he did, by the looks of his slender belly and gaunt face. But there was the hope that better days were ahead, particularly during the middle of what he called The Great Depression. So he kept promising everything walking on two or four legs around him.

On this day the cow, known to the humans (and only them) as 127, was more concerned about her runaway calf, labeled as 127K. That new arrival into the world was ignored by the rest of the cows who under the spell of the bull in front of the herd, or the mounted humans pushing them. For now anyway. It was situation which could change any time if the calf, or she, led them astray, to the overlook where more than one calf, cow or bull had fallen to its death.

Dashing out to help her, the calf, and eventually the herd was a cowhand about the same age of Jake, biologically anyway, by the name of Kumar Patel. His skin was seemed to be not as white as the other cowhands and not as black as the Colored cowboys Sam hired in the 'good old' days before the Depression. He ran his horse, a comrade rather than master to the equine beast he called 'Arjun', towards the calf, and the cow, cutting both off from near falls down the cliff no less than three times. He sang his requests to the calf to move back up to the rest of the herd in a strange language that seemed to the mother cow as Ancient and kind, rather than yelling at her and her precocious son with harsh orders in English. Or Lakota.

The cow didn't know what the words in Kumar's song meant, but whatever they were, it worked. Kumar and his horse, both of whom were very much liked when looked at by the ladies in town (the redskinned and the white ones), were able to convince 127's calf to join his mother, then the herd. Such saved both of them from falling over the cliff. And stumbling in holes made in the ground that broke the legs of two other cows. And preventing the cow and calf from taking a drink from a pool of water that smelled 'off'. And a slow, agonizing death which befell the cows, calves and bulls whose skulls were scattered around the once safe and now toxic pond.

Cow 127 moo'd a thank you to Kumar, which he responded to with a bow of his head. He then got back to his position with Sam in the back of the, thankfully, not stampeding herd.

"Great job," Sam said to Kumar with thumbs up shown to him only.

Kumar replied in a language which Sam didn't understand. The old man raised his eyebrows to the young one with concern and curiosity.

"Hindi for 'no problem'," Kumar answered with a warm smile, and an accent which was as American as any of the other cowboys, but far more literate and seemingly refined. "Loosely translated," he continued with the wisdom of an old man in a young one's body, hiding a wealth of secrets behind his deep thinking brown eyes.

Interrupting Kumar's thinking, just before he seemed to confide something to Sam, was none other than Jake. "Big time problem if he talks that East Indian gibberish in town again," Jake shot back from a mouth as ugly as his tone, after which he spit on the ground.

"HIS problem, not ours," Sam said to the fifth generation White skinned American spoiled brat he felt obligated to hire on. Who was orphaned after Sam's best friend died of the Spanish flu ten years ago. "Or YOURS."

"Sure," Jake grumbled back to Sam, as Kumar, ran off to sing Hindi request to American raised cattle. "But Kumar reckons these cows are incarnations of really great people. Which means---"

"---That you should take care of them like they are," Sam shot back to and into Jake's resentful and jealous face. After which Sam rode back to his position in the heard, Jake taking his after an angry sigh.

The cattle drive progressed further down the mountain, the ground having less editable growth on it with each loss of elevation. The bits of dirt churned up by the bull and his harem of heifers in the lead turned into clouds of dry dust which made the cattle, horses and cowboys cough. Ironically, the river for which Blue River was named still flowed behind the dusty fields. Those once lush fields that supported grass for cows and crops for people were now hard slabs of dirt that sprouted pockets of inedible and toxic weeds. Cow 127, or as Kumar secretly named her, Indira, recognized one of her sisters and two of her offspring by their faces and eyes behind the mangled fences. As for the bodies connected to them, they were more bone than muscle, their feet pillars of rotting flesh. They bellowed calls for help, asking to be invited back into herd they were sold out or, or a bullet from one of the cowboys they seemed to recognize.

In front of the broken down pen those once healthy cattle were in was a sign reading 'Property of Morgan-Richter Financial Group'. Behind the pen, lay three farm houses with boards hammered across the doors and windows. At the gate of the farm, reinforced by three layers of barbed wire, was a metal mini billboard reading 'Property of Morgan-Richter Bank. Trespassers will be shot, even if they are former owners.'

How and why the three bovines remained there and why they were permitted to remain in their condition was something Indira didn't know. But the owners of the spread, Larry Jackson, his wife and three dirt covered barefoot kids, were just as emaciated as the cattle they had once owned. Cow 127 saw them living in tents outside of the property with 'Will Work for Food' on the 'doorstep'.

Most of the smaller farms and the houses of people who worked in town on the trail to town were also boarded up, property of the Morgan-Richter Bank. The sun baked the land around them. Just last season, they all had been irrigated into sprouting crops for two legged creatures and grass for those able to get around on four limbs. Ironically, the river still flowed, filling the air with a musical murmur. But the player of that watery tune was not matched with the usual

harmony of farm animals enjoying being fed, or telling each other how well they had trained the two legged humanoid mammals to feed them.

The ground under Indira's feet felt...violated somehow. Through her various senses, some of which perhaps were remnants of being a highly advanced yogi in Kumar Patel's native country during the last lifetime, she could feel the ghosts of animals from past eras under her feet. Their remains had been converted to crude oil and coal. Those 'resources' had been and even more so now were brutally pulled out of the ground in the dirtiest way possible. For the purpose of serving the wants of the rich rather than the needs of the poor.

Then there were the logged out slopes of the mountains that echoed the dirge of sorrow and despair, holes blown into them by explosives to dig out privately owned mines which were abandoned, or boarded up. The sky felt more black than blue, but still yielded no rain, despite the efforts of those who put up signs saying 'Will Make It Rain for Food' Those signs were appended by correcting 'make' with 'try to make' and 'food' for 'whatever you can spare'.

Indeed, Mother Nature was extracting her vengeance on the Paleskinned two legged creatures who had, out of desperation or ignorance, taken more than they gave back. Of course, just as experienced cattle said to less learned members of their species, there was an 'I told you so' built into this. "Your Dust Bowl, not ours," the Lakota Band who refused to join those who made the land bleed by plowing so much of it said in a sign which was still up, despite bullet holes shot into it.

Upon entering the official town of Blue Water, Indira and her fellow bovines were herded down a street lined with boarded up, repossessed or abandoned wooden and brick shops which outnumbered those still opened for business. Citizens clad in torn, mismatched clothing walked about, rummaging the garbage cans and alleys for whatever could be used for shelter, food or coverings for their thin arms and legs.

Behind the one and two story structures that had been functional businesses last year were three, three and four story dwellings made of material which was made of something else. Something shiny. Something that said the people who lived and worked from them were important. A small number of people inside and around them wore clothes that were color coordinated, which fit their plump torsos well, and with no tears or holes in them. Their bellies were fat. Their chins were raised up high. Their eyes were diverted when passing by, and insulting, those not of their caste, or class, whose clothing was three sizes too large for their thin bodies.

But of more concern for Indira was what she saw in Sam's face when he looked at the sign on the coral where she was heading as the manager of the coral was approached him. Indira knew that the natural way of things was that old and sick fellow members of her bovine species were destined to be taken onto the iron horse to somewhere else, along with those who had lost the ability to produce offspring. A better place, she intuited. A chance at a new lifetime, according to what Kumar had assured them. But as for what Indira and her were worth this lifetime in her present life form, that was disappointing to Sam and insulting to her. Cattle and horse prices were half of what they were last year. But Sam, who was determined to hold onto what was left of his herd, had no choice. Indira was to be sold for the lowest price imaginable.

While being loaded onto the railroad cars, with her calf, the Cow 127 mooed a thank you to Kumar. With his eyes, from a distance, he wished her a fond farewell in his Native tongue. Promising her to carry on the lessons she had taught her.