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CRIME SCENE  
AT CARDWELL RANCH

# **CRIME SCENE AT CARDWELL RANCH**

**B.J. DANIELS**



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When I think of the Gallatin Canyon, I remember rubber gun fights at our cabin, hikes to Lava Lake and stopping by Bessie and Russell Rehm's place near the current Big Sky. Russell is gone now, but I will always remember Bessie's cooking—and the treat she used to make me at her ranch in Texas: a mixture of peanut butter and molasses. I still make it and I always think of Bessie.

This book is for you, Bessie.  
Thanks for all the memories!

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## **PRAISE FOR B.J. DANIELS**

**“Daniels will have you on the edge of your seat as you become completely engrossed in *Crime Scene at Cardwell Ranch*.”**

**—Candy Cay, *Coffee Time Romance***

### **Enjoy this sneak peek of *Crime Scene at Cardwell Ranch***

**“So who’s the interim marshal?” she asked as the sheriff’s department SUV bounded up the road, the morning sun glinting off the windshield.**

**All the breath rushed from her as she looked over and saw the man behind the wheel.**

**“Maybe I should have warned you,” Warren said, sounding sheepish.**

**“That would’ve been nice,” she muttered between gritted teeth as she met Hudson Savage’s clear blue gaze. The two of them might have been strangers—instead of former lovers—for all the expression that showed on his handsome face.**

**A decades-old murder reunites Dana Cardwell with seductive cowboy Hudson Savage, whom she’d hoped she would never see again. Now Dana’s life is in danger and Hud wants to keep her close. He’s willing to risk his heart, but can she forgive that easily?**



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A former award-winning journalist, B.J. had thirty-six short stories published before her first romantic suspense, *Odd Man Out*, came out in 1995. Her book *Premeditated Marriage* won *Romantic Times BOOKreviews* Best Intrigue award for 2002 and she received a Career Achievement Award for Romantic Suspense. B.J. lives in Montana with her husband, Parker, two springer spaniels, Scout and Spot, and a temperamental tomcat named Jeff. She is a member of Romance Writers of America. When she isn't writing, she snowboards in the winter and camps, water-skis and plays tennis in the summer. To contact her, write: P.O. Box 183, Bozeman, MT 59771 or look for her online at: [www.bjdaniels.com](http://www.bjdaniels.com).

## Books by B.J. Daniels

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Dana Cardwell**—Her two great loves were her family ranch and Hud Savage. She'd already lost one and now, just when she is about to lose the other, a body is found in the old homestead well.

**Marshal Hud Savage**—He's back in town determined to find out who had set him up so he lost not only his former deputy job—but also the woman he loved.

**Rupert Milligan**—The aging coroner thought he'd seen it all—until he climbed down into the old dry well to retrieve the body.

**Ginger Adams**—Right till the end, she thought that love could conquer all. Unfortunately, she was dead wrong.

**Lanny Rankin**—The lawyer had always wanted Dana. But how far would he go to have her?

**Judge Raymond Randolph**—Was the judge's death just a robbery gone wrong, or had the judge become too much of a liability because of what he knew?

**Kitty Randolph**—The widow had buried herself in charity work to forget her husband's murder five years ago. But the discovery of the body in the well brought it all back.

**Jordan Cardwell**—He needed money badly if he hoped to keep his lifestyle—and his young gorgeous unemployed former model wife.

**Clay Cardwell**—He tried to stay out of the family politics but if he could get his share of the ranch he could live his secret dream.

**Stacy Cardwell**—The divorcée had a secret that was eating her alive.

**Brick Savage**—The former marshal was loved and hated—especially by Judge Raymond Randolph. But his son Hud couldn't really believe he was a murderer, could he?

## *Prologue*

### *Seventeen years earlier*

The fall knocked the air out of her. She'd landed badly, one leg bent under her. On the way down, she'd hit her head and the skin on her arms and legs was scraped raw.

Stunned, she tried to get to her feet in the darkness of the tight, confined space. She'd lost both shoes, her body ached and her left hand was in terrible pain, her fingers definitely broken.

She managed to get herself upright in the pitch blackness of the hole. Bracing herself on the cold earth around her, she looked up, still dazed.

Above her, she could see a pale circle of starlit sky. She started to open her mouth to call out when she heard him stumble to the edge of the old dry well and fall to his knees. His shadow silhouetted over part of the opening.

She stared up at him in confusion. He hadn't meant to push her. He'd just been angry with her. He wouldn't hurt her. Not on purpose.

The beam of a flashlight suddenly blinded her. "Help me."

He made a sound, an eerie, low-keening wail like a wounded animal. "You're alive?"

His words pierced her heart like a cold blade. He'd thought the fall would kill her? *Hoped* it would?

The flashlight went out. She heard him stumble to his feet and knew he was still standing looking down at her. She could see his shadow etched against the night sky. She felt dizzy and sick, still too stunned by what had happened.

His shadow disappeared. She could see the circle of dim light above her again. She listened, knowing he hadn't left. He wouldn't leave her. He was just upset, afraid she would tell.

If she pleaded with him the way she had the other times, he would forgive her. He'd tried to break it off before, but he'd always come back to her. He loved her.

She stared up until, with relief, she saw again his dark shape against the starlit sky. He'd gone to get a rope or something to get her out. "I'm sorry. Please, just help me. I won't cause you any more trouble."

"No, you won't." His voice sounded so strange, so foreign. Not the voice of the man she'd fallen so desperately in love with.

She watched him raise his arm. In the glint of starlight she saw it wasn't a rope in his hand.

Her heart caught in her throat. "No!" The gunshot boomed, a deafening roar in the cramped space.

She must have blacked out. When she woke, she was curled in an awkward position in the bottom of the

dry well. Over the blinding pain in her head, she could hear the sound of the pickup's engine. He was driving away!

"No!" she cried as she dragged herself up onto her feet again. "Don't leave me here!" As she looked up to the opening high above her, she felt something wet and sticky run down into her eye. Blood.

He'd shot her. The pain in her skull was excruciating. She dropped to her knees on the cold, hard earth. He'd said he loved her. He'd promised to take care of her. Tonight, she'd even worn the red dress he loved.

"Don't leave! Please!" But she knew he couldn't hear her. As she listened, the sound of the engine grew fainter and fainter, then nothing.

She shivered in the damp, cold blackness, her right hand going to her stomach.

He'd come back.

He couldn't just leave her here to die. How could he live with himself if he did?

He'd come back.

## *Chapter One*

As the pickup bounced along the muddy track to the old homestead, Dana Cardwell stared out at the wind-scoured Montana landscape, haunted by the premonition she'd had the night before.

She had awakened in the darkness to the howl of the unusually warm wind against her bedroom window and the steady drip of melting snow from the eaves. A Chinook had blown in.

When she'd looked out, she'd seen the bare old aspens vibrating in the wind, limbs etched black against the clear night sky. It felt as if something had awakened her to warn her.

The feeling had been so strong that she'd had trouble getting back to sleep only to wake this morning to Warren Fitzpatrick banging on the door downstairs.

"There's something you'd better see," the elderly ranch manager had said.

And now, as Warren drove them up the bumpy road from the ranch house to the old homestead, she felt a



chill at the thought of what waited for her at the top of the hill. Was this what she'd been warned about?

Warren pulled up next to the crumbling foundation and cut the engine. The wind howled across the open hillside, keeling over the tall yellowed grass and gently rocking the pickup.

It was called the January Thaw. Without the blanket of white snow, the land looked wrung out, all color washed from the hills until everything was a dull brown-gray. The only green was a few lone pines swaying against the wind-rinsed sky.

Little remained of the homestead house. Just part of the rock foundation and the fireplace, the chimney as stark as the pines against the horizon.

Past it, in the soft, wet earth, Dana saw Warren's tracks where he had walked to the old well earlier this morning. All that marked the well was a circle of rock and a few weathered boards that covered part of the opening.

Warren cocked his head as if he already heard the marshal's SUV coming up the ranch road. Dana strained her ears but heard nothing over the pounding of her heart.

She was glad Warren had always been a man of few words. She was already on edge without having to talk about what he'd found.

The elderly ranch manager was as dried out as a stick of jerky and just as tough, but he knew more about cattle than any man Dana had ever known. And he was as loyal as an old dog. Until recently, he and Dana had run the ranch together. She knew Warren wouldn't have gotten her up here unless it was serious.

As Dana caught the whine of the approaching



vehicle over the wind, the sound growing louder, her dread grew with it.

Warren had told her last night that he'd noticed the boards were off the old dry well again. "I think I'll just fill it in. Safer that way. Give me something to do."

Like a lot of Montana homesteads, the well was just a hole in the ground, unmarked except for maybe a few old boards thrown over it, and because of that, dangerous to anyone who didn't know it was there.

"Whatever you think," she'd told him the night before. She'd been distracted and really hadn't cared.

But she cared now. She just hoped Warren was wrong about what he'd seen in the bottom of the well.

They'd know soon enough, she thought as she turned to watch the Gallatin Canyon marshal's black SUV come roaring up the road from the river.

"Scrappy's driving faster than usual," she said, frowning. "You must have lit a fire under him when you called him this morning."

"Scrappy Morgan isn't marshal anymore," Warren said.

"What?" She glanced over at him. He had a strange look on his weathered face.

"Scrappy just up and quit. They had to hire a temporary marshal to fill in for a while."

"How come I never hear about these things?" But she knew the answer to that. She'd always been too busy on the ranch to keep up with canyon gossip. Even now that she worked down in Big Sky, her ties were still more with the ranching community—what little of it was left in the Gallatin Canyon since the town of Big

Sky had sprung up at the base of Lone Mountain. A lot of the ranchers had sold out or subdivided to take advantage of having a ski and summer resort so close by.

"So who's the interim marshal?" she asked as the Sheriff's Department SUV bounded up the road, the morning sun glinting off the windshield. She groaned. "Not Scrappy's nephew Franklin? Tell me it's anyone but him."

Warren didn't answer as the new marshal brought the black SUV with the Montana State marshal logo on the side to a stop right next to her side of the pickup.

All the breath rushed from her as she looked over and saw the man behind the wheel.

"Maybe I should have warned you," Warren said, sounding sheepish.

"That would've been nice," she muttered between gritted teeth as she met Hudson Savage's clear blue gaze. His look gave nothing away. The two of them might have been strangers—instead of former lovers—for all the expression that showed in his handsome face.

Her emotions boiled up like one of the Yellowstone geysers just down the road. First shock and right on its heels came fury. When Hud had left town five years ago, she'd convinced herself she'd never have to lay eyes on that sorry son of a bitch again. And here he was. Damn, just when she thought things couldn't get any worse.

OVER THE YEARS as a policeman in L.A., Hudson "Hud" Savage had stared down men who were bigger and stronger. Some had guns, some knives and baseball bats.

But none unnerved him like the look in Dana Cardwell's whiskey-brown glare.

He dragged his gaze away, turning to pick up the heavy-duty flashlight from the seat next to him. *Coward*. If just seeing her had this affect on him, he hated to think what talking would do.

Her reaction to him was pretty much what he'd expected. He'd known she would be far from happy to see him. But he had hoped she wouldn't be as furious as she'd been when he'd left town. But given the look in her eyes, he'd say that was one wasted hope.

And damn if it was no less painful than it had been five years ago seeing her anger, her hurt.

Not that he blamed her. He hadn't just left town, he'd flat-out run, tail tucked between his legs.

But he was back now.

He picked up the flashlight and, bracing himself against the wind and Dana Cardwell, he opened his door and stepped out.

The sun glinted off the truck's windshield so he couldn't see her face as he walked to the front of the SUV. But he could feel her gaze boring into him like a bullet as he snugged his Stetson down to keep it from sailing off in the wind.

When Warren had called the office this morning, Hud had instructed him not to go near the well again. The ranch foreman's original tracks to and from the well were the only ones in the soft dirt. It surprised Hud though that Dana hadn't gotten out to take a look before he arrived. She obviously hadn't known the order was from him or she would have defied it sure as the devil.

As he looked out across the ranch, memories of the two of them seemed to blow through on the breeze. He