

1. Welcome to the Bronco Billy Wild West Show

Bronco Billy stood in the doorway of his trailer and inhaled the warm evening breeze. He could hear the crowd settling down inside the dilapidated Wild West Show tent. Although the tent was weather-beaten from countless seasons, it looked brand new to him – or so he always wanted to make believe.

Billy knew Doc Lynch, the ringmaster, was getting ready to run out toward the center of the arena and start the show, which was Billy's cue to finish putting on his costume. He turned and walked back into the trailer. Seated on his bed with the buffalo hide bedspread was his new assistant. Mitzi Fritts was past twenty years old, and, although definitely fifteen pounds overweight, she still had an adorable face. She was wearing a cowgirl costume – a white blouse with a palomino vest and a miniskirt. Her aching feet were squeezed into a scuffed pair of white drum majorette boots with little gold tassels.

Billy sat down behind his makeup table and looked in the mirror at his hard-edged face. He liked to fancy he looked like one of those cowboy statues sculpted out of bronze. His ears perked up when he heard Doc Lynch's voice trail outside and circle the trailer.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls.” The elbows of Doc Lynch's long brown tuxedo jacket were shiny from years of use, and the pinstripe carpetbagger slacks had seen better days, but his ruffled silk shirt was beautiful. He smiled as wide as the Mississippi River, his eyes as warm as the morning sun. “We welcome you this evening to the greatest, the most authentic Wild West Show in America.” Doc absently fingered the pearl-handled derringer cocked in its holster. Crowds like this sometime made him nervous, but Doc had a way of warming up the coldest crowd. “And so let us take you back to a time when cowboys and Indians roamed our great land ...”

As Billy continued to put on just enough pancake makeup to highlight his handsome looks, chills ran up his arms and tickled his lightning-quick hands. Billy always got chills when Doc said that line about “cowboys and Indians.” He loved being a cowboy, loved it more than anything else in the world.

Doc stood inside the solo spotlight. He was sweating like Niagra Falls, not because of the heat but because, now nearing his seventieth year, Doc’s arthritic knees just weren’t what they used to be. He’d never let anybody know they bothered him, though. Doc was still proud when a fancy lady thought he wasn’t a day over fifty-five.

Doc tipped his hat a blank-faced woman in a red dress and winked – until he saw her smile. Then he shifted his ringmaster speech into high gear. Doc always liked this next part of the speech due to the fact that, on his mother’s side, he was a full-blooded descendant of Zulu warriors.

“For our first act ... Chief Big Eagle ... the great, great grandson of the great Apache Chief Geronimo... will perform the legendary Rattlesnake dance that no white man has ever seen before!”

Chief Big Eagle appeared out of a cloud of smoke, accompanied by his wife, Lorraine Running Water. The Chief stood well over six feet five inches tall in his moccasin feet. He wore a breechcloth over a pair of dark cavalry pants with a red stripe running down the side of the legs. His handmade buckskin shirt was decorated on the chest with warrior beads. A flowing war bonnet adorned the top of his head. Holding three-foot rattlers in each hand, he began the legendary dance to the sound of Lorraine Running Water beating on her tom-tom drums.

Billy stood in front of the full-length, brass-framed mirror. As Mitzi watched him pull his cavalry shirt over rippling muscles bulging beneath his leathery skin, she had thoughts she knew her pastor would not approve of. She and Billy had had a meaningful relationship since late that afternoon. He had picked her up at the local tavern where she was trying to raise enough for her bus fare back to Oklahoma City.

“I’m awful scared, Bronco Billy,” Mitzi whined just as Billy was buttoning the last button on his shirt.

“Darlin’, everybody’s a little nervous their first night in show bizness,” Billy said in his melodramatic way of speaking. “Just do what we rehearsed and everything will be okay-dokay!”

“Mitzi took a deep breath and held her nose with her fingers to try and stop her hiccups. When she began to turn blue, she decided to exhale.

“I’m awful scared, Bronco Billy,” she repeated in her trembling, squeaky voice.

Billy looked in the mirror over his shoulder at his new assistant. He hated gripers. He took his Stetson off the horseshoe hat hook and placed it on his head with a slight tilt – just enough to give him a romantic look. Then he grabbed a bottle of cheap, rotgut whiskey off his makeup table and heaved it into Mitzi’s trembling hands.

“Have a drink!” Billy walked up to her and placed his knuckles under her chin. “Don’t worry darlin’, I won’t let you down.”

Mitzi clutched his hand, suddenly feeling foolish for being so nervous. She uncorked the bottle and took a big swig. She **use** to dream about being with a big hunk of man as handsome and tough as Billy, and now that she had her chance she didn’t want to blow it.

Billy looked into her droopy eyes, heavy with shadow, and thought to himself, Well, she ain’t Miss Lily Langtry, the woman of my dreams, but she’ll have to do tonight because the show must go on.

Finding the perfect assistant was Bronco Billy’s biggest problem. He could overcome engine failure and bill collectors, but doggone it, he had a hell of a time dealing with women. They loved him, and he would make them believe he loved them back. Over the years many a jealous husband came looking for him, but Billy had a rule: never mess with another’s man wife. Unfortunately, many of these painted ladies didn’t hold to Billy’s rule. Now, Billy wasn’t a mean man. He treated women with respect. It was just that he had high ideals. It was pretty hard to find a woman who could shoot like Annie Oakley, ride like Belle Starr and look as good as Miss Lily Langtry. And Mitzi Fritts couldn’t do any of those things.

The rotgut whiskey was starting work wonders on the chubby gal. She put her arms around Billy and nestled her face into his rib cage. She wanted more of that good-

time loving he had given earlier that afternoon in the back seat of his red 1960 Oldsmobile convertible, Just as Mitzi was beginning to get inside Billy's sympathy, a loud knock came on the trailer door. Without waiting for a response, in barged Two-Gun Lefty Le Bow, ruining the joyous moment. But Lefty was in no mood to apologize.

"You know to knock before entering," Billy shouted at his head wrangler. Unfortunately for Lefty, Billy hadn't heard the knock. The Boss demanded respect from his outfit and Lefty was no exception – even if Billy had blown off his hand last year while working the show.

Now Lefty was the type of guy who hated everything he didn't like. He truly had a pair up his ass when it came to life's little obstacles. But there was one man on earth who could shout at him and get away with it, and that was Bronco Billy.

"Sorry Boss!" Lefty tried to remember why he hadn't knocked – even though he remembered he *had* knocked – but if the boss said he hadn't knocked, well, he must not have knocked. "Big Eagle got bit again by rattlesnakes!"

Billy slammed his clenched fist in his hand. "Dammit to hell! I told him to use gopher snakes!"

Lefty concurred by nodding his head. "Running Water took the Chief back to their truck and gave him a bottle of Doc's Snakebite Remedy to ease the pain."

Billy tucked his trousers inside his boots and thought about Running Eagle. He knew the Snakebite was powerful enough to deactivate the rattler's bites. Hell, Doc's hooch was a 101° proof. It could kill fleas, rats and horse rustlers. Billy strapped on his shooting irons and secured his bowie knife in the leather sheath tied behind his back. He grabbed hold of Mitzi's hand and yanked her toward the trailer door.

"Come on, darlin'! It's show time!"

Lasso Leonard James, the thick-rope artist, stood in the center of the ring. He was a handsome young cowboy with a prairie fire smile. Leonard wore a high-brimmed Stetson, a red floral shirt and a leather vest decorated with three conches, wooly chaps and high-topped boots. It never bothered Leonard when people compared his looks to Will Roger's. But in his own mind the young cowpoke believed he was a direct descendant of Jessie James. Leonard kicked his heels together as he jumped inside a wide

loop of his rope, then jumped out of the loop and repeated the same trick over and over again.

Just as the blister on his foot popped, Doc Lynch ran back into the center arena, snapping his buggy whip to signal the end of the act. Leonard was perspiring like a beer keg as Doc's voice bellowed out for all the audience to hear.

"A big, big, big hand for Lasso Leonard James, the greatest trick-rope artist in the West!"

Leonard took several bows and let out a big cowboy yell, "yip-yip-yippeee-yay!" before running out of the arena, tired as all get-out, but happy with his own performance. As Leonard ran past Billy, he nodded his head and gave a wry grin as if saying, "Boy, am I glad to see you!"

Leonard's job wasn't through, though. He ran around the outside of the tent to the other side and crawled underneath, back into the tent where the spotlight was located. He brushed the twigs and leaves off his chaps and repositioned the spotlight toward the center of the arena at Doc. As Leonard lowered the spotlight, the crowd could feel the excitement they'd all been waiting for.

Doc, in his best showmanship of the evening, raised his hand like a country preacher about to give the Sunday sermon.

"And now folks, it is my privilege to introduce to you the greatest trick shooter, the fastest draw, the toughest hombre who ever rode the range. The one, the only ... BRONCO BILLY MCCOY!"

Lefty placed a scratched-up recording of a grand symphony by an unknown composer on the Victrola. Billy felt that classical music gave the act an air of respectability- that sound of the orchestra, the cymbals colliding, the horns blaring – all while Billy was riding out on his trick horse, Buster.

And so Bronco Billy charged out on his old reliable steed. While making two passes around the arena, he stood on his hands, then jumped off and pulled himself back on using Buster's tail, and finally did a pony express kick. He reached the center of the arena, and reined Buster back on his hind legs.

The audience went nuts while Bronco Billy waved his hat over his head. It was a classic cowboy pose, and Billy milked the seconds for all they were worth. Next, he leapt

off Buster and made the horse kneel, then lie down on his side. The audience clapped as loudly as twenty-five people could, but Billy always made believe the house was filled to capacity.

Billy flashed a friendly smile. “Thank ya, folks, thank ya, and especially my little pardners out in the audience. I want thank you all for coming out tonight and visiting us!”

The kids in the audience laughed and applauded wildly as Billy continued.

“It’s always good to be back in Great Falls, Montana, and see all my friends. At this time, I’d like to introduce my new assistant. It’s her first night in the big tent, so I want you all to give her a big round of applause. Won’t you welcome . . . Miss Mitzi Fritts!”

Leonard zeroed the spotlight in on Doc and Lefty, who were pushing a reluctant Mitzi out toward Bronco Billy. Mitzi had a great case of stagefright, and it finally took a deep goose from Lefty’s hook to force her into show biz. She leapt forward and ran up to where Billy was standing in the center arena. Billy quickly realized he had a scared calf in the herd, and had to whisper “Get the plates” five times before she responded.

Doc brought out the table with the plates and set it down next to Mitzi. Billy shrugged his eyebrows at Doc as if to say, “Don’t worry, everything is okay!” Doc’s smile seemed to answer, “If you say so!”

Billy swung back up onto Buster and shouted out, “ON WITH THE SHOW!”

As Bronco Billy galloped around the arena, Mitzi took two clay plates off the little blue wooden table and held them over her head. Billy rode by and leaned under and around Buster’s neck, quick-drawing his six shooters and blasting the clay plates out of her hands. The broken debris fell down on top of her head. Mitzi shook the pieces out of her hair, and quickly grabbed two more plates off the table, just as Billy approached her again. She threw one plate up in the air too soon and he missed it. The plate fell to the ground and shattered as Billy called out in disgust for Mitzi to throw up another plate, but the only thing she felt like throwing up was her lunch.

Too frightened to disobey his order, Mitzi waited for him to gallop by before heaving the plate in the air just at the right split-second moment. Billy smacked a bull’s-eye, and the pieces once again sprayed on her hair. Mitzi felt good that she’d done it right this time. She remembered to pick up two more plates and hold them over her head. As

Billy rode by, he turned around in the saddle and swung his gun hand behind his back, blowing the pieces apart. The audience went wild as Bronco Billy rode out of the arena, waving his hat over his head to the crowd.

Doc Lynch hurried out to the center of the arena, snapping his buggy whip to quiet the thundering applause of the twenty-five spectators.

“AND NOW ...” bellowed Doc as if he were the coach of a high school football team at half-time, “all you settlers sit tight, ‘cause Bronco Billy is gonna do his death-defying WHEEL OF FORTUNE SHOOT-OUT!”

Lefty pushed the huge roulette wheel out toward the center of the ring. Then, as Doc and Lefty strapped the quivering Mitzi aboard, Billy ran back out to the center arena, stopping fifteen paces away from the wheel. Taking off his Stetson, he bowed magnificently to the sparse, but enthusiastic, crowd. The folks were applauding so hard their hands were red – or so Billy liked to imagine. Billy quick-drew his two Colt 45s as fast as lightning, flipping them in the air so high the pigeons perched at the top of the tent got a bird’s-eye view as they pecked away at stolen popcorn kernels. Billy had positioned himself just right to allow the six-shooters to land right back in his holsters.

Lefty finished strapping Mitzi’s ankles just in time to witness Billy’s twirling act. He thought to himself that no man in the wild and wooly West could outdraw Bronco Billy.

Billy looked over at Doc, Lefty and Mitzi. He could see that his new assistant was ready for the ride of her life. After Doc gave him the high sign, Billy cleared his throat.

“Thank ya, Doc, thank ya, Two-Gun ... And most of all, I wanta thank all you nice folks for coming out and seeing me tonight.”

Mitzi was now bound to the Wheel of Fortune, surrounded by four balloons. A fancy red balloon was tacked between her chubby thighs as Mitzi began to pray to the Lord for mercy.

Billy walked over to her and whispered, “Ya look great, darlin’.”

Mitzi’s eyeballs were bulging out of her head. “Are those real bullets, Bronco Billy?” she demanded in her squeaky, trembling voice.

Billy grinned. “Don’t worry, I never miss!” he told her, and turned his back before she had a chance to scream for mercy. Billy walked ten paces before facing the audience.

“Miss Mitzi,” he shouted in his most theatrical stage voice, “would you like a blindfold?” He turned and faced his quaking assistant.

Although Mitzi’s voice was hoarse from fright, she miraculously recited her lines. “No, Bronco Billy! You are the best shot in the whole wide West!”

Billy smiled approvingly. “Very well, Miss Mitzi . . . But *I* will use one!” The audience was on pins and needles with anticipation as Billy removed the blue bandana, from around his neck and tied it quickly around his eyes. Besides the scratchy recording of a drum roll, only the howling wind rustling through the tent flaps could be heard as Billy recited his lines once more.

“ARE YOU READY, MISS MITZI?”

Although Mitzi was about as ready as a cat in a sack, she called, “Yes, Bronco Billy!” But she secretly crossed her fingers on both hands.

Billy felt his hands as he rubbed his fingertips together. In a thundering voice matched only by the thundering hooves of a thousand wild horses, he shouted, “SPIN THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE!”

Two-Gun Lefty had a big grin on his face as he spun the wheel with all his might. He quickly jumped out of the line of fire of Billy’s blazing guns.

Mitzi let out a bloodcurdling scream – and a burp – as Billy quick-drew his six shooters and blasted apart the four outer balloons. He twirled his guns several times before sliding them back into their holsters. Then, with lightning reflexes, he slid his huge bowie knife out from behind his back. When Mitzi caught the glint of the lethal-looking blade, she told herself, This is where I get off! She began struggling to break her leather straps but was only able to force loose the one around her left ankle.

Unfortunately for Mitzi, her timing was bad because just then Billy flipped the knife toward the little balloon tacked between her thighs. The knife hurdled forward like a bullet, landing right on target – but instead of penetrating the balloon it bored its way through the fatty tissue of Mitzi’s left thigh. Mitzi screamed bloody murder as Billy

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ripped off his bandana. Rather than hearing the applause of the audience, Billy was met with the grizzly shouts for help from Mitzi!

The wheel had not stopped spinning and Mitzi was dangling crazily, not being totally strapped in. A middle-aged school teacher with a fragile stomach fainted into the arms of a former Green Beret sergeant home on leave.

Doc and Lefty stood dumbstruck beside the wheel. This had never happened before in the history of the show. Lasso Leonard James didn't have enough sense to take the spotlight off Mitzi as she whirled around. Out of habit, half the audience began to clap, while the other half couldn't find the exits fast enough.

Finally, Mitzi was cut down off the Wheel of Fortune. Billy pulled the Bowie knife out of her tender flesh while Doc gave her a big dose of his Snakebite. Mitzi drank half the bottle, then Doc poured the other half over her wound, which eventually required ten stitches.

In all his years of working the circuit Billy had never seen a show with more unforeseen complications ... except maybe that time he blew off Lefty's hand. But as Billy looked at the delighted faces of the youngsters in the audience, caught up in a slice of true-life drama, Billy told himself it wasn't a half-bad show after all. At least when someone came to see Bronco Billy's Wild West Show, he got his money's worth of excitement.

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