

*Counting the Cost* is a novel that will break your heart and elevate your spirits. It presents a closely-etched picture of life in a hard country in hard times, filled with memorable people and a love story as poignant as it is beautiful.

—Ronald Shook, PhD, Associate Professor of English, Utah State University

This book is a poignant look at a grand passion between opposites, a sensory delight filled with lush descriptions, spot-on dialogue, and a well-told story of choice and accountability. Liz Adair is a masterful storyteller. Don't miss reading this book!

—Marsha Ward, author of *The Man from Shenandoah* and *Ride to Raton*

*Counting the Cost* is the humanizing of Liz Adair's ancestors who struggled with some of the greatest trials man faces; honor, loyalty, integrity, strength, forgiveness, courage and love. An engaging, and at times difficult, story, *Counting the Cost* keeps the reader turning the pages until the end.

—Candace E. Salima, author of *Forged in the Refiner's Fire*

*Counting the Cost* uses words to paint a historically correct picture to transport you back in time to experience the life and loves of a hardworking cowboy. The partnership between man, horse and nature, and the consequences of decisions create a story that rings true with human emotion and challenges. Liz Adair has done a great job of creating an informative and thought-provoking novel.

—Julee Brady, founding member, Cowgirls Historical Foundation

Liz Adair's *Counting the Cost* is a sprawling epic filled with tenderness, heartache, contemplation and a heroine reminiscent of Scarlett O'Hara.

—Gayle Trent, author of *Murder Takes the Cake*

*Counting the Cost* is certainly a spellbinding book. Very, very good.

—Dale Baker, reader, Mesa, Arizona

This book sweeps you away to another place that will stay with you long after the last page is turned. It's the kind you stay up late to finish then call your best friend to tell her about the next morning.

—Ann Acton, reader and business owner, Sedro Woolley, Washington

*Counting the Cost* with its seas of sagebrush, sweeping vistas, and dusty arroyos is reminiscent of *Dances with Wolves*. The scenery wraps itself around you and pulls you into this epic story of passion, morals and love.

—Monique Luetkemeyer, reader, Bellingham, Washington



# Counting *the* Cost

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Liz Adair

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 Inglestone  
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## Acknowledgements

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**T**his book is fiction but, as in most fiction, there are biographical elements throughout. It is based on stories told me by my mother, Lucy Smith Shook, about events in her life and family.

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To my dear, supportive, long-suffering husband, Derrill, goes my deepest appreciation. All of my heroes are part Derrill.

And, lastly, thanks to Curtis, the uncle I never knew, for the germ of this story.

## Dedication

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**T***his book* is dedicated to my mother, Lucy Shook. Those who have read *Lucy Shook's Letters from Afghanistan* know what a marvelous storyteller she was. I grew up with family history: stories of her childhood on a starve-out homestead in the New Mexican Jornada del Muerto, of her cowboy brothers' adventures, and of her life as a bride of seventeen during the Depression.

She was my neighbor and best friend in the last decade of her life and, on her deathbed she confided the family secret of how, fifty years before, her brother met and fell in love with a married woman and ran away to live with her without benefit of clergy. Things like that may not raise too many eyebrows nowadays, but in provincial New Mexico in 1935, it made outcasts of the offending couple and shamed the family.

I think writing this book must have been my way of dealing with my mother's death. Yet, as I wrote it became even more than that—and was even a little spooky, for in the process of writing, as I spoke to my old uncles and got them to open up and talk about their long-dead brother, I learned that a couple things I had already written as fiction had actually happened. It made me wonder what kind of help I had, for the book simply welled up inside me and poured out my fingers.

# Chapter One

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**H**eck Benham welcomed the New Year of 1935 by presiding over the death of a pig. He had intended to go to the dance at Hot Springs but got sidetracked by a weepy female, and things went south from there.

Heck and Mike Eldred, cowhands for the Diamond E, were in from a long, lonely stint at Tucker's Well, intending to rest, chew the fat, and eat Shorty's cooking for a day before heading into town to the dance. Heck was twenty-six, tall and rangy, with sandy hair and blue eyes. Mike was a year younger and a couple inches shorter. Compact and powerfully built, he had dark, curly hair and an engaging dimple in his left cheek.

They had just finished breakfast when the boss's wife appeared in the cook shack doorway and changed their plans for the day. Ruby Payne's pale features and frail frame nearly faded into the doorjamb as she sagged against it.

"Where's Shorty?" she mumbled.

Heck looked behind him. "I don't know, ma'am. He and Dooley were here a bit ago, but they seem to have gone off."

She sighed. Her chin began to quiver, and tears welled up and slid down her weathered cheeks.

"Oh, here, ma'am. What's the matter?" Springing up, Heck took her arm and helped her to a nearby chair.

She pulled a hankie from her apron pocket, wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and said damply, "I needed Dooley and Shorty to help get the bungalow cleaned out." Her voice quavered. "I just knew they'd try to get out of it!" Tears began flowing again.

"Me and Heck'll clean it out," Mike offered.

When Heck looked at him in amazement, Mike went on, "Ol' Heck was just sayin' this morning that he's tired of being a cowboy and he'd like to try some other line of work. And, here you are, the answer to a young man's dream. Ain't that right, Heck?"

"That's right, Miz Payne," Heck lied. "I'd dearly love the chance to clean that house."

Ruby brightened. "Oh, you boys! Will you really help me?"

"Yes, ma'am. But, only if you promise to go on home and leave us to it."

After giving detailed directions, Ruby Payne tottered back to her house, and Heck and Mike, instead of swapping stories in the bunkhouse, spent the morning getting the bungalow ready for new tenants.

First, they stowed all the furniture in the toolshed loft. Then, they took down the blue chintz curtains, and, with Mike on the inside and Heck outside, they polished the windows, heedless of the stares and gibes from other cowboys riding in.

Next, while Heck scrubbed the kitchen floor, Mike cleaned out the bedroom closet. "Hey, Heck!" he called from the depths. "Come in here."

Heck carried the mop and bucket into the bedroom.

"Look what I found in the closet." Mike gingerly held a stick at arm's length.

Heck examined the ebony bump on the end from a respectful distance. "What is it? A black widow?"

"We'll know in a minute." Mike squatted down and flipped the spider over on her back. She stayed there long enough, legs slowly working in the air, for them to see the telltale red hourglass on her belly. Then, Mike stepped on her.

"Well, now you've made a mess," Heck said.

"No, I just did my good deed for the day. Can you imagine the new tenants coming face to face with Miz Spider?"

"They're not too lively when you find one in the winter. I don't think it would have been a problem," Heck said, handing the mop to Mike. "Careful it doesn't throw you," he cautioned.

"I ain't never been thrown by a mop yet," Mike bragged as he wiped up the ill-fated spider.



“You wouldn’t lie about it if you had, either.” Heck laughed then sauntered from the room, saying over his shoulder, “While you finish up there, I’m gonna check out the kerosene refrigerator in the kitchen. I want to see how it works.”

“The way it works is that no working cowboy like you will ever have one anyway!” Mike said.

While Heck inspected the refrigerator, Mike finished the final mopping and, by midday, they had the bungalow empty and clean. Ruby’s husband, Alan, rewarded their hard work with a bottle of whiskey.

Mike looked at the label and whistled. “I don’t know, sir. That’s pretty high class whiskey for a couple of cowhands.”

Alan Payne shook his head. “Mr. Hancott sent me that whiskey. Since he owns the place and it’s his wife’s nephew that’s going to live here—him and his missus—I figure you boys should have it. I guess you can tell Ruby’s having one of her bouts of fever. She’s been worried about getting this done. Dooley and Shorty were supposed to help her.”

“I’ve been wondering,” Heck said as he rolled down his sleeves and buttoned them, “if you’ve got someone coming to stay, why did you have us take all the furniture out?”

“They’re bringing their own. I get the idea they’re used to something a bit better than what we have here. She’s something of a socialite, I gather. Quite a beauty.”

“Well, now, she’s bound to find lots of socialness around here.” The dimple appeared in Mike’s cheek. “Why, Ol’ Heck is about as sociable as they come when he’s primed with fine courage like you just gave us.”

Mr. Payne smiled and offered his hand. “Are you going into the dance at Hot Springs?”

“Yep. We’d better go purty up so we can go practice our socialness. Thanks, Mr. Payne.” Mike saluted his boss with the bottle as Heck shook his hand, and then the two cowboys ambled across to the bunkhouse.

Mike put the bottle in one of his boots while they bathed, shaved, and put on clean clothes. They ate Shorty’s stew and cornbread and then sat, chairs tipped back against the cookhouse wall and feet up on the porch railing, as they passed the whiskey back and forth. By late afternoon, they hadn’t drunk enough to be ready to face the girls in town,

but they were ripe for a lark, and when Mike bragged that he could rope anything, Heck said he bet Mike couldn't rope a pig.

Mike insisted he could and set out to prove it. The only person they knew who had a pig was Ol' Lady Lyons, so Mike got his rope and they went to find Ras and ask him if they could borrow his car.

Mike took the wheel as they headed east toward Palomas Creek. The old car hunched along, wheezing up the inclines, rattling and backfiring on the descents.

It took both Mike's hands to drive, so Heck held the bottle. "I don't know, Mike," he said. "What'cha gonna get a rope on?"

"Why on the snout! A good roper could rope the snout. Or, the legs. Shoot, Heck, you heel calves all the time. What's the difference?"

"It's just, I know a lot of good ropers, but I've never heard of one roping a pig."

"Well, who's gonna brag about roping a pig? Ten dollars says it's easy."

"How easy?"

"Give me a couple a tosses to figure 'em out. Then I'll get 'em in the next toss."

"You're on." Heck pointed to the road turning off to the Lyons' place.

No one answered when they knocked, so the men wandered out back to a pen where a pig lay in the shade of a rude shelter in the far corner. At the sound of the cowboys' steps, he scrambled to his feet and stood grunting, head up and nose working to overcome the deficiencies of porcine eyesight.

Heck eyed the animal. "You gonna rope in or out of the corral?"

"Shoot, Heck, ain't no sport in ropin' in a corral. Let's turn 'em out. I'll get on the front of the car, and you follow along. How fast can he go on them short little legs?"

The pig, by this time, had come over and began snuffling around the trough, grunting interrogatives as he nosed in the dirt. Mike stood by the gate with his lasso in his hand. "You get the car, and I'll let him out."

Heck nodded, and he whistled as he walked back to where they were parked. Getting in, he stepped on the starter and coaxed the reluctant engine to life. He drove slowly around the house and got to the pen just

in time to see Mike swing the end of his rope and catch the pig smartly on the rear end.

The ungainly animal raced toward the creek bank, its high, keening squeal cutting through the winter afternoon like a rusty razor. Mike jumped on the front of the car, and Heck took off in hot pursuit.

What the race lacked in finesse was amply supplied by enthusiasm. Heck, urging the old car to its rheumatic limit, drove with his head out the window because he couldn't see past Mike, who, pointing and hollering, tried to direct him along the astonishingly devious path of their quarry. They never got close enough for Mike to make the first of his trial tosses, for, still squealing, the pig disappeared over the bank at a spot too steep for the jalopy to follow. Mike pointed south, and Heck propelled the car over sage and bunchgrass to a place where they could make the descent. As luck would have it, the pig was running parallel to them. Mike got his lasso ready, riding the car down the hill as he would a bucking bronc. He lifted his arm to twirl the loop as they hit the bottom and, just at that moment, the old car backfired.

The pig dropped in its tracks. Just folded up its legs and obeyed the law of gravity. Stopped. Instantly.

It happened so quickly that Heck almost ran over the inert form. He rammed on the brakes, and the car slid on the gravel, stopping just a foot away from the little pink mound.

Both cowboys had seen death enough times to recognize it. Heck got out and walked around to stand with his hands in his back pockets, looking down at the ridiculous face of the pig, its ears awry and tongue sticking out. Heck looked up at Mike, still riding the hood of the car. "Looks like we just bought us a pig."

They cut the throat and bled the pig, then put it on the fender and drove the three miles on to Palomas, intending to hang it on Heck's family's front porch to cool overnight. Mike said he knew a Mexican who would buy it; so, though they needed to pay Ol' Lady Lyons the price of a full-grown pig, they wouldn't be so far in the hole.

When they arrived, Heck's mama came out to greet them. At sight of the carcass on the fender, she clasped her hands over her bosom and tears sprang to her eyes. "Nathan, come see!" she called to her husband. "Heck brought us some meat."

They didn't tell her otherwise and sat in the kitchen with coffee mugs in their hands, watching as she boned the meat to grind into sausage. It would be cooked and put down in crocks to keep, covered with smooth, white lard rendered from the fat.

Heck and Mike were almost sober when they got back to the Diamond E bunkhouse. Heck got a stub of a pencil and a piece of lined paper to figure how they stood financially. He wouldn't take the ten dollars on the bet, since his mama had the pig. He emptied his new-saddle savings out of the Montgomery Ward envelope he kept under his mattress, and Mike shook a roll of bills out of a Prince Albert can. When they got through with their accounting, they had both lost a year's savings.

As neither was prone to repining, they decided to salvage what was left of New Year's Eve and headed into Hot Springs in Ras's old rattletrap. There wasn't enough bottled courage left to get them to the dance, so they went tearing through the town throwing out quarter-sticks of dynamite instead. When folks found out who was responsible, they said they sure would be glad when those boys got married and settled down.