

WESTWARD WINDS
MONTANA MAIL ORDER BRIDES: BOOK 1



LINDA BRIDEY

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CHAPTER 1



Maureen O'Connor watched her eldest daughter once again turn down a request to dance. She sighed resignedly. This was yet another night wasted on her headstrong girl. Theresa O'Connor was beautiful, witty, intelligent, and completely bored with their society. None of the would-be suitors were up to her high standards because they were, in her estimation, also boring.

She turned back to the conversation between her husband, Geoffrey, and his long-time friend, Mr. Alex Winters. They were discussing some matter of business that really didn't interest her. Maureen knew her husband better than anyone and could tell Geoffrey had also noticed their daughter's dismissal of the elegant young man. His handsome visage tightened imperceptibly and his deep brown eyes reflected his disapproval.

She laid a hand on his arm and smiled slightly.

He arched a brow at her and said, "Do you find this amusing?"

"I find it aggravating *and* amusing, dear. It's aggravating because these events thrown in her honor seem not to be doing any good. It's amusing because she reminds me so much of you. Always wanting things her way," Maureen responded.

Geoffrey tried to keep the smile from his face but it was a lost cause. He knew Maureen was right. Geoffrey was caught between pride that his oldest offspring was so much like him and annoyance because he couldn't make her behave for the very same reason. "I'm glad you're enjoying this so much."

Maureen's smile grew. "Oh, no, Geoffrey. Not I. I think it's awful." She broke off into laughter, not able to continue as Geoffrey's expression darkened.

Mr. Winters turned and watched Theresa sit with two of her friends and talk animatedly. "Tessa shot down another one, eh?"

Geoffrey grunted. "Yes. How does she ever expect to marry a good man if she doesn't give anyone a chance?"

His best friend turned back to him. "She knows what she wants and none of the men you keep thrusting upon her are what she's after, I'm afraid."

Maureen cleared her throat. "Maybe she's a little more like me in that respect. I, too, wanted something different and I got it," she said with a gentle squeeze of Geoffrey's arm.

"As did I," her husband responded.

Mr. Winters grinned as he remembered their courtship. "And what a splendid time it was, watching the two of you duke it out. At times, it was hard to tell who the hunter was, or who was the prey."

"Some of both, as I recall," Maureen said.

"Agreed," Geoffrey said. "Well, my wife, I suppose we should mingle and dazzle the masses with our charm and wit. Too bad dear Tessa hasn't learned any of that from us."

"Oh, I think she has it in spades. After all, she charms her way out of punishment well enough," Maureen said and followed her husband.



"Oh, and did you know that Melinda Wainwright was caught sneaking around with Scotty Monroe? He's supposed to be courting Rachel Linden," Roxanne Carter told the other two young women with whom she sat.

Johanna Dillinger sat forward, "No! Who told you that?"

"I'm not going to reveal my sources, Jo," Roxanne said. "But, they are quite close to both of them. It's going to be quite interesting when it comes out, don't you think, Tessa?"

"Surely," Tessa said with no enthusiasm.

Her blue eyes, so like her mother's, scanned the ballroom of their family home for any sign of anything that might interest her. She'd had no luck so far.

"And wild monkeys flew down from the heavens and landed on unicorns that took them to the desert, where they were eaten by naked old witches," Roxanne said.

"Too bad I'm not one of them," Tessa said.

Jo laughed behind a hand. "Which?"

"Either. It's not every wild monkey who gets to fly and ride on unicorns and it's not every witch who gets to sit around naked and eat monkeys," Tessa answered, smiling brightly at Roxanne. "You thought I wasn't listening. Fooled you."

Roxanne frowned. "Don't you want to know what's happening in the world? You have to keep on top of things so you can make good decisions."

Tessa gave a short laugh. "So knowing who's fooling around with whom is helping you to make good decisions?"

"Yes, actually, it is. It's helping me figure out which gentlemen are trustworthy and which aren't. That way, I can make a smart decision about who I will marry and in turn will become the father of my children," Roxanne said reasonably

Tessa grew irritated. "That's all well and good for you, but I don't want to have that kind of future. None of this matters to me; balls, society's rules, the endless parade of stuffy men. No, it's not for me, and yet I have no way out. I'm such a disappointment to my parents."

Jo laid a hand on Tessa's in consolation. "Is our life really so bad? I mean, we could be starving and penniless."

Tessa smiled, not wanting to distress her friends. "No, it's not bad, just tedious. I know that you and Roxie are quite happy to gossip and fret over the people in our circles, but I want something more exciting." Her eyes found her parents as they talked to another couple. Her father was proud and charismatic, and her mother was almost delicately beautiful. They were a very popular pair. She'd heard whisperings of their tumultuous courtship and smiled now as she remembered the stories.

There were times when she wished she could be more like her mother. She was respectable and always a lady. She had always been a wonderful mother and wife. However, Tessa knew she didn't have her mother's patience when it came to dealing with society. She had trouble being dutiful and attending parties and brunches while appearing to enjoy them.

No, high society wasn't the place she wanted to be, but there was nothing for it. Her father looked her way, so she smiled at him, hoping he would think she was having a good time. She loved her father and didn't want to disappoint him, but also wondered how she could be true to herself at the same time.

Her father could always see through her smokescreens and although he smiled back, it wasn't a smile of real pleasure. It was so no one would guess he was displeased with her.

Tessa's eyes dropped and she began teasing Roxie about all the horrible matches she could make to cover her feelings of inadequacy.



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Tessa sat at the dining room table with her mother and younger sisters. She read the daily paper, just as she always did. Her father had already gone to his office for the day. He was an early riser and it was only on Sundays that he had breakfast with the family. However, he was always present for dinner unless something urgent took place.

"Tessa, tell us about the party," asked her fifteen-year-old sister, Claire. Her light brown eyes were filled with excitement and her pretty smile eager.

Tessa's eyes never left the paper as she answered Claire. "Tedious. Simply tedious."

"Tessa!" her mother objected. "Do you know how much money we spend to throw these parties?"

"Mama, I have repeatedly asked you to stop throwing them because I'm not going to change my mind about them or suddenly start believing I'll find my true love at one. I won't," Tessa said, putting down the paper and looking her mother in the eye. "I love you and Papa for all you've tried to do and your concern, but

I'm fine as I am. Truly. You should be concentrating on Maddie's coming out party."

Maureen sighed and fixed her poached egg. "I don't understand what it is you're looking for."

Maddie said, "Mama, if she doesn't want the parties, I think she's right. Throw them for me and for Claire when she comes of age."

Maddie was a carbon copy of their mother. Her blonde waves cascaded over her shoulders and her lovely blue eyes had an entrancing quality, as many of the boys her age had found. Unbeknownst to their parents, Maddie was quite the little flirt.

Tessa knew but wasn't about to tell on her sibling. She found it amusing as long as flirting was all that happened. She had been present during Maddie's sweet-sixteen party and had kept close tabs on her sister without anyone realizing what she was doing. Now, at eighteen, Maddie was developing a very womanly figure and would bear close watching. Her coming out party was only two months away.

Her mother responded with, "I will take this up with your father." Her tone was resigned and frustrated. "I think you are right and I think you are old enough to know your own mind, even if it is against what we want for you and what you should want for yourself."

Tessa's temper flared. "I fail to see that it's right for anyone to say what I should and shouldn't want for my life! Just because I don't want what society says I should want, why does that make me wrong? These people don't know me; they don't know what I think, or what I feel. They don't care and, quite frankly, I don't care what they think of me, either."

Claire interjected, "But, Tessa, Mama and Papa have to associate with these people. Think of Papa's business. It's crucial that we don't embarrass them because it's Papa's business that keeps us living in the style we do."

Though young, Claire was highly intelligent and most likely a genius. She had a strong interest in their father's shipping business and his other ventures, and understood much of the operations, even at her age. Their father often took her to his office on Saturdays and unlike many men of that time, he was very

proud that his youngest daughter was interested in the family business and had an aptitude for it.

Tessa sat back in her chair and considered what Claire had said. Sometimes, Tessa felt as if Claire had more sense than anyone she knew outside of her parents. She saw the wisdom in her little sister's remark. "I think you're right, Claire. I need to consider their feelings, too. It's only respectful to do so." She turned to her mother. "Mama, I apologize for my quick words. If you insist upon throwing parties for me, I'll do my duty, but no more. I should be grateful for you and Papa taking care of me so well and I certainly do not wish to cause you any shame."

Maureen smiled. "Although I thank you for that, I truly don't think these parties are doing any good. I think continuing them is futile. However, we will require you to go to a certain number of parties to which you are invited. Especially Roxanne and Johanna's parties. Oh, and you must continue to attend the dinner parties for your father's business associates. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Yes!" Tessa's smile was luminous. "I think those are very reasonable terms. Do you think Papa will agree?"

Maureen smiled sweetly. "Oh, I think I'll be able to convince him."

"Excellent!" Tessa said and went back to her paper.



GEOFFREY KISSED his wife and rolled over. His breathing was slightly ragged and he was perfectly content to lie still for a few moments. Maureen was in a similar state. Their lovemaking was always active, passionate, and extremely satisfying. She rolled over and snuggled against her handsome husband. She ran a hand over his muscular chest and pressed a kiss against it.

Geoffrey put an arm around her and held her close. "Well, you were particularly frisky tonight," he said.

Maureen chuckled against his side. "You just bring out that side of me, husband. It's not as if you weren't frisky yourself."

Geoffrey laughed. “Touché.”

Maureen turned serious. “We need to discuss Tessa.”

“Oh, no. What’s she done now?”

“It’s not what she’s done, it’s what she isn’t going to do. These parties are not doing anything but making her more dissatisfied. I don’t think we should bother with them. Maddie is the one who wants them and she is so excited about her coming out. We should focus on that and give Tessa some breathing room. However, she should attend a certain number of parties to which she’s invited and also continue with our business dinners,” Maureen said in a rush.

Geoffrey’s response was to laugh and roll Maureen back over. “You are a conniver, Maureen O’Connor. Did she agree to that?”

Maureen arched a delicate brow at him. “A conniver I may be, but only for a good cause. Yes, she did. I thought they were decent terms. You’ve always said that in any good agreement, there’s give and take.”

“So I have.” Geoffrey weighed the subject and saw that the deal was a good one. “Very well. I agree with you.”

Maureen laughed and hugged Geoffrey. “You are the best husband and father!” She wiggled under him.

He grinned and kissed her neck. “Really? So how about we seal the deal?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Maureen said.

Their lovemaking was slow and tender this time and Maureen did indeed show Geoffrey what a wonderful husband he was to her.



GEOFFREY CALLED Tessa into his office in the morning. Tessa knew this was not her father’s usual schedule and was nervous as she perched on one of the chairs in front of his large, mahogany desk. She watched her father close the door and settle in his office chair. He was a large man, standing around six-foot three and close to two hundred fifty pounds, and the chair creaked a little under his weight. Geoffrey looked at her for a few moments without saying anything.

Tessa knew he was sizing her up, much the way he did a business opponent.

He was looking for any weakness. She lifted her chin and looked him in the eye.

“What’s on your mind, Papa?” she asked.

Geoffrey smiled inwardly at her bravado. She was tough as nails and it made him feel good. Whoever she did eventually marry wouldn’t be able to run roughshod over her. He wanted his daughters to be appreciated and loved, not ruled over. At least with Tessa, he knew that wouldn’t happen.

“Your mother has informed me that the two of you have come up with a proposal on which you agree. She brought this to me last evening and wanted to know if I approve,” he stated.

Tessa fought the urge to fidget, knowing it would be a signal of her nervousness.

“Yes. That’s true. Both of us thought it reasonable and beneficial to both parties,” she said.

Geoffrey barely contained his smile at her use of business lingo. Apparently she was paying attention somewhat during their dinners with his colleagues. “If I agree to the terms set forth, what do you intend to do with the extra time you will have on your hands?”

Tessa was stunned. She hadn’t given any thought to that. Her father was waiting for an answer and her mind spun as she tried to come up with something acceptable. She decided on honesty because her father would be able to see through any lies she invented.

“I haven’t considered that, simply because I didn’t think you would agree to this.”

He nodded. “That’s understandable. However, if I agree to this, I expect you to come up with a worthy way to fill your time. I’ll not have you simply lying around eating bonbons and such.”

Tessa grinned. “When have you ever known me to lie around eating bonbons?”

“True. You’ve always been active. It was annoying as hell when you were a little girl,” he confessed. He didn’t often swear in front of his girls, but Tessa was not as sensitive as their other two daughters.

“Is it my fault that I take after you, Papa?” she said sweetly.

He frowned. "You know, it's rather irritating that everyone keeps reminding me of that."

"You're full of it. You love it and you know it," Tessa teased.

"Back to our subject. I'm serious about you spending your time on something worthy. I don't care if it's a charity or some type of education. You have a fortnight to decide. I expect an answer within that time frame. As of this moment, there will be no more parties, but if you do not uphold your end of the bargain, the agreement is null and void and the parties will resume," he told Tessa.

She could see her father was dead serious and even though she was thrilled with his answer, Tessa kept her happiness in check for the moment. "We are agreed."

Only then did he smile again. "You are incorrigible. Now, come give me a kiss goodbye. I must get to the main office in town."

Tessa jumped up and went around the desk and hugged her father. She planted a huge kiss on his cheek. "Thank you, Papa! Have a wonderful day. I love you."

"I love you, too. Now, off with you," Geoffrey said gruffly.

Tessa wanted to run from the room, but walked out in a lady-like fashion. She mounted the stairs and kept her composure until she reached her room. Once there, Tessa ran to her bed, buried her face in her pillow and shouted her joy. Then she got up and twirled around the room, performing some moves that would have made anyone watching think she'd gone mad.

A weight had been lifted and now Tessa could start to live life somewhat as she wanted. She lay back on her bed and began thinking about what she would do with her extra time. There *would* be extra time because she didn't have to spend hours preparing for and attending the dreaded parties. During the season, it wasn't unheard of to have an event almost every night.

If she became involved in a charity, it would mean more functions and because that was what she was trying to avoid, she decided against it. What could she do educationally? Society had little use for truly educated women, although her father was very forward thinking in that respect and had made a

large donation to Chatham College for Women in Shadyside, an affluent area of Pittsburgh.

She decided to contact them to make an appointment to visit. The idea of taking a few classes was appealing to her. It would certainly be something different and she would meet new people, too. Tessa ran downstairs to tell her mother the news.

CHAPTER 2



One month later found Tessa miserable yet again. There were only two of her courses she liked, English and history. The others were lost on her. She discovered an aptitude for writing and constantly scribbled down notes, which she rewrote and expanded upon later. Tessa tried her best at the mathematics courses, but she couldn't seem to grasp anything higher than beginning algebra. Her sister Claire put her to shame by being able to complete the whole book, and correctly at that.

The foreign language courses were interesting, but it was really the English class that was fascinating to her. She'd been studying other writers and trying to learn as much as she could about the great writers throughout history. Her professor was very pleased with her progress and told her that she had wonderful insight and wrote beautiful, descriptive passages.

Tessa would have liked to have dropped out of the other courses and only kept writing. However, Tessa knew if she did, the parties would begin again. Therefore, she kept going to classes while trying to come up with another solution.

One day after class, Tessa asked her English professor, Mr. Rothwell, about what made for great writing.

He thought for a moment and then said, "You have to experience life, pay attention to the little things, and know your subject. Research is the key to writing an accurate, meaningful article, or writing anything worth reading, actually."

Tessa took that nugget of advice to heart. Over the next couple of months, she observed everything in her neighborhood and around various parts of the city where she traveled. She soon became aware that there was little in her life that was different to write about. Tessa needed to travel to other lands and experience new things, but she would never be permitted to do that.

Lying in bed late one night, Tessa thought about running away to follow her dream. Her vivid imagination began concocting various scenarios that would allow her to do that. She would need money. She had some in her account, but her father managed that account and would know if she took any out. But if she waited to take it out right before leaving, he wouldn't be able to do anything about it. She fell asleep dreaming of escaping to pursue her dreams.



AT BREAKFAST, Tessa once again scoured the newspaper. An unusual advertisement caught her eye.

THE BROOKS AGENCY is seeking eligible women of good reputation to correspond with gentlemen from the West who are seeking a wife. Please reply to this advertisement with a letter of description or come to our office located at the address below.

TESSA GREW MORE excited every time she read the advertisement. Her mind began churning as she weighed the pros and cons of doing such a thing. She would certainly begin an adventure that would be worth writing about and perhaps find true love in the meantime. She would miss her family greatly and most likely anger them, but she was of age and could make her own decisions. Tessa was no fool and she realized that she would have to be sure of the man before travelling to meet him.

Knowing that she would be noticed writing down an address, Tessa

memorized the address listed in the ad. After a rather boisterous breakfast with a lot of teasing between the four women, Tessa went up to her room and began making her plans to go to the Brooks Agency the next day.

She would need a taxi because she didn't want the family's driver to report where she was going. Tessa had no doubt that Mr. Richards would tell her father if she were to go anywhere out of character for her. She decided she would go for a walk to the park and take a cab from there. Paying cab fare wasn't an issue because Tessa had a rather large sum of money saved and stashed in her room.

Each of the girls was given an allowance every week and it was rare that Tessa used all of hers because almost all of her needs were met by her parents. Maddie, on the other hand, was prone to spending her money on frivolous items and then wanting more money to buy more things that caught her eye. Tessa hoped Maddie married a rich man who could keep up with her spending habits.

The day seemed to pass slowly even though Tessa kept busy. She was impatient for the day to be over and for the next day to come. She lay in bed that night and couldn't sleep, try as she might. She wanted to look her best tomorrow to make a good impression at the Brooks Agency. However, it was a long time before sleep claimed her.



“WELL, Miss O'Connor, you seem to be exactly what we're looking for in potential brides. The men are looking for women of your breeding and temperament,” J.D. Brooks said with a smile.

Tessa returned his smile and said, “Splendid! How do we proceed?”

Mr. Brooks turned and took a large file from a cabinet behind him. “These are advertisements from prospective men. Look through them and see if any appeal to you. I would ask that you choose only one to correspond with at a time because you may become confused as to whom you are writing. Men are jealous sometimes and it may not sit well with them that you are talking to other men as well.”

Tessa saw the wisdom in that. “I understand.”

“Follow me, please,” Mr. Brooks said and rose from his chair.

He led her to a large conference room with a long table and many chairs.

“You will have plenty of room and privacy in here to look through them at your leisure,” he informed her.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Mr. Brooks said and left her. As he went back to his desk, he wondered why such a beautiful, refined young lady was considering becoming a mail-order bride. From her elegant clothing and impeccable hair style, Tessa was obviously a woman of high social standing.

Tessa sat at the table and opened the file. There were many ads in it and she began to read them. She giggled over some of them because they were so amusing. Some were from men who were very strict about wanting a very domestic wife. Others were very sweet, almost too sweet, and she put those aside as well.

After an hour, she’d narrowed it down to five, and then three. Finally, she ended up with the one that struck a chord within her. It read:

LONELY WIDOWER RANCHER with two children seeks lovely lady who is kind, intelligent, and strong. Must like children and should be able to do some cooking. He’s a hard worker, a good provider, and also likes to have fun.

THE NAME LISTED WAS Dean Samuels from Dawson, Montana. She felt sympathetic toward the gentleman because he had lost his wife and was trying to be a good father and earn a living at the same time. After putting all of the rest of the advertisements back in the folder, Tessa went back out to the front office.

Mr. Brooks looked up from some paperwork and smiled. “How’d we make out?”

“I would like to write to this gentleman,” she said and handed him the ad.

He read it and smiled. “Ah, yes. This one is rather popular,” he lied. “Let me write down the information for you. The letters will be private. I would ask that

you be able to make up your mind within three months as we don't want these men waiting for women who never come."

Tessa was surprised. "There are other women writing to this rancher?"

Mr. Brooks nodded. "Oh, yes. It's only fair." He had no qualms about his dishonesty. He had to make a living, after all.

"What if they've already made up their mind?" Tessa asked.

"Don't fret, my dear. Once a decision has been made, you must come to inform me. Thus far, no one has gone to see this gentleman. There is a contract you must sign. We require a two hundred dollar service fee. If you should change your mind about contacting this gentleman further and do not want to try any others, I would refund half of your money."

Hope seeped its way back into her breast. "I see. You said two hundred dollars?"

"Yes. Will that be a problem?" Mr. Brooks asked.

Tessa calculated her funds. "No, it won't," she said as she opened her reticule and counted out the money. "Now, about that contract."

CHAPTER 3



Sweat trickled down Dean's back as he finished mending the last section of fence. Evening was closing in and he had wanted to get the work done before dark. It made him feel good to know that he had achieved his goal. He straightened up and stretched his cramped back. Replacing rotten fence posts and stringing new wire was not easy and it was one of the jobs he hated most.

But, like always, Dean just got on with the job and got it done despite how he felt. He was good at pushing his feelings down deep. It made things simpler and it was less time consuming. He didn't have enough time as it was because he had two kids to raise and a ranch to run. The work was never ending but he didn't complain. It could be worse.

He threw the hammer he'd been using into his tool box and began walking back through the field to the barn. It was early May but summer was coming on fast. Dean hoped that didn't mean there would be a drought that summer. Lord knew he needed a bumper crop this year because the crops and meager profits from the cattle sales last year had barely kept them going through the winter.

As he walked, Dean looked at the lush, green grass under his boots and was thankful his cattle had good grazing with which to start the summer. They were a bit thin and he wanted to get them fattened up. No one wanted to buy a skinny steer. He needed his steers to go for a good price.

"Pa! Pa!" he heard his son, Jackson, holler.

Dean looked up and saw his seven-year-old boy running at him pell-mell.

His wheat-blond hair flew everywhere as he ran. Jasper, one of their Border Collies, ran barking and jumping at Jack.

“Look! Uncle Seth just brought it!” Jack told him and thrust the letter at him.

Dean took the mail from Jack. The envelope was ragged and dirty on the edges, evidence of how many times it had changed hands to get to him. He looked at the return address.

“Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania? I don’t know anyone in Pittsburgh, let alone Pennsylvania,” he mused.

Jack bounced up and down next to him. “Is that what it says, Pa? Pittsburgh? Can I see?”

Dean smiled at Jack. “Yeah, sure. See right there.” He pointed it out to Jack. “I’ll get you to learn it and write it tonight, okay?”

Jack nodded. “I’m hungry. When ya gonna read it?”

Dean loved the way his son was able to focus on two things at once. His son had a busy mind and he was very intelligent for his age. He got that from his mother, rest her soul.

“You’re hungry? I’m not surprised. You’re always hungry. What are you making for dinner?” Dean asked.

That stopped Jack. “Me? I don’t know how to make anything except sandwiches and we had that for lunch. Can’t we have steak?”

Dean said, “Hmm. Steak? What do you wanna have steak for? It’s not like you like it or anything.”

“Pa!” Jack said with a laugh. “Quit teasing me. C’mon, let’s go get dinner.” He tugged at Dean’s arm. “I’ll carry the toolbox. You’re probably tired from all that hard work you did.”

“Okay.” Dean agreed and gave the box to his son.

It was heavy and it fell to the ground at first. Then Jack picked it up in both hands and began walking with it. He didn’t complain about the weight, but Dean could tell it was tough going.

About halfway to the barn, Dean said, “Hey, Jack. You go on ahead and get cleaned up. Tell Sadie to get that steak out of the cold cellar and get it on the stove. I’ll take the tool box. Where’s Uncle Seth now?”

“Went in the barn!” Jack shouted. He dropped the tool box and ran off to the house.

Dean smiled as he watched Jack go. He picked up the tool box and proceeded to the barn. Horses whinnied as they heard him approach. Dean stopped by each stall, patting and stroking their sleek coats. His brother, Seth, came out of the tack room.

“I see you got your letter,” he commented.

Dean nodded. “Jack was all wound up about it. I guess it’s because we don’t get a whole lot of mail.”

“Who’s in Pittsburgh?” Seth asked. His blue eyes held curiosity. Seth was well known for being nosey.

“I have no clue,” Dean answered.

“Are you going to read it now?”

Dean frowned at his older brother. “You’re as bad as Jack. No. I’m going to read it after supper.”

“How is it you have so much patience?” Seth said shaking his head.

Dean retorted, “And how is it you have so little?”

Seth smiled. “Because you’re like Ma and I’m like Pa, remember?” It was an old joke between them.

“How could I not? You staying for dinner?”

“I better get some kind of reward for goin’ after the mail,” Seth said.

“Well, c’mon then. I’m hungry.”



SADIE WAS HER MOTHER, Sarah, all over again, Dean thought as he watched his daughter set the table. Her light brown hair was pulled back in a long braid with little wisps flying about. Her coffee-brown eyes looked to and fro as she went about her work. At eleven, Dean saw glimpses of the beautiful woman she would become. He thought about the boys who would come sniffing around in a few years and his stomach clenched.

Sadie looked up and saw his expression. “Did I do something wrong?”

“What? No, sweet pea. I was just thinkin’ how pretty you are. Just like your ma. I’m gonna have to beat all the boys off with a stick before too long,” he replied.

“Pa, do I really look like her?” Sadie asked.

Dean nodded. “You sure do. Why do you think I tell you that? Look in the mirror and you’ll see your ma.”

Sadie’s smile of pride touched Dean’s heart and his throat constricted with emotion.

“Is it ready yet?” Jack asked.

Dean checked the meat and saw that it was done. “Yep. Let’s eat.”



ONCE DINNER WAS CLEANED up and the children sent to bed, Dean sat down in one of the comfortable chairs in the parlor. The ranch house was one of the larger ones in the area because of several additions that had been made over the years. As the eldest son, Seth had originally inherited the house when their parents had passed on, but he’d given it to Dean because he’d gotten married.

Seth had always been a talented cattle driver and preferred to be on the trail. Dean would rather work the ranch than drive the herds, so it worked out for both of them. Seth still retained his share in the ranch, but didn’t like being tied down, which was why he’d never married.

Their parents, Ralph and Catherine Samuels, had built the house after they’d settled the land back in 1839, before that area of Montana was sectioned off into Dawson County. Their house had been four rooms at that time, consisting of a kitchen, parlor, and two bedrooms. It had been a lot of hard work, but their parents were determined to make a nice home and build a stable business to pass down to their children.

Seth had come along first, only six months after the house and barn had been finished. Back then, the barn had only been big enough for four heads of cattle; a bull and three cows. That was how their ranch had started. Another year passed and, soon, Dean was born. When the boys were five and six, Ralph decided they

needed more room because Catherine was pregnant again.

Another bedroom was added and the kitchen enlarged. Ralph's father died not long after and his mother, Edna, came to live with them. That's when they'd decided to add a second floor. There were three rooms upstairs; two large bedrooms and a wash room with a dry sink and chamber pot. They still had an outhouse, which they used most of the time, except overnight and during the most bitter cold winter weather.

Dean and Sarah had lived with his parents until they'd passed away and then the young couple had taken over the house. Seth preferred to use one of the bunk houses when he was home, saying he liked the privacy and figured that Dean and Sarah didn't want him blundering in late at night if he'd been drinking and such.

Marcus, their younger brother, had bought a place a few miles away when he was eighteen. He also preferred privacy, not because he didn't love his family but because he and Seth shared a common love of freedom. Not to mention that Marcus highly prized books and learning. His house held more books than furniture. When he had lived in Dean and Sarah's house, he had run out of room for them all.

Dean looked around the parlor which he and Seth had enlarged. Both he and Sarah's chairs were nicely upholstered and thickly padded. Sarah's was a rocker. He'd surprised her with them right before Sadie had come along, knowing she'd appreciate somewhere comfortable to rock their baby.

He remembered how thrilled she'd been and the joy that had lit up her face as she sat in the chair. Her belly had been greatly swollen with their child and Dean couldn't have been happier. The chairs both had matching ottomans. Dean had traded a high quality heifer for the pieces and had never regretted it. Turning his head, he gazed at the sofa and smiled. It was another purchase with which he'd surprised Sarah. When she'd gotten farther along with Jack, she'd been more tired than with Sadie and so he'd gotten it so that she could lie down when she needed to rest.

He was equally happy when both children were born and loved having one of each. Sarah was a wonderful mother and took excellent care of her family. A

lump formed in his throat as he remembered when Sarah had told him she was pregnant for a third time. He'd grabbed her and twirled her slowly, just as thrilled as he had been when she'd told him about Sadie and Jack. He remembered how excited Sadie and Jack had been, too.

It wasn't to be, however. Sarah had gone into labor too early into the pregnancy. The neighbor woman at the time, Lydia Benson, had done everything she could, but Sarah had hemorrhaged and both mother and baby perished.

Crushing grief had followed, and if it hadn't been for Lydia and her husband, Charlie, Dean might have gone crazy from it. Both had been quick to make him see that he had two young children who needed him and he owed it to them to be strong. It wasn't that he shouldn't mourn, but he had to keep it together for their sakes. Lydia told him that Sarah would have expected it of him, and she'd been right.

Seth and Marcus had been on a drive at the time and he'd had only Lydia and Charlie to fall back on. Lydia had taught him some cooking, and Charlie had helped with repair work around the ranch and kept Dean moving each day. Dean had buried his pain in work and taken comfort in his children. The last three years had been difficult, but not without joy.

Turning his mind away from all that, he looked down at the letter in his lap and wondered who it was from. He slit the envelope with a pocketknife and pulled out the letter. He detected a faint whiff of ladies' perfume.

Unfolding the letter, he read:

DEAR MR. SAMUELS,

I am responding to the advertisement placed with the Brooks Agency of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I found it to be touching and straightforward, which I appreciated very much. As I understand it, you are looking for a wife and mother-figure for your children.

"WHAT THE HELL?" he said. Then it came back to him. "Marcus!" His younger

brother had told him he should get married again. Dean had said that he didn't know any single women, at least any reputable ones. That's when Marcus had told him about mail-order brides and said that would be the perfect way to find a wife.

Dean had been joking when he said it sounded like a great idea and why didn't Marcus place an ad. "That jackass!" Dean swore. "I can't believe he did this."

Curious despite his anger, Dean read on.

ALLOW me to tell you about myself. I am five-feet, nine inches tall and have dark brown hair, the color of a dark bay horse. My eyes are deep blue and I have a slender figure. I like to think I am kind and have good manners, although sometimes my parents are a little put out with me because I do not always follow the conventions of society.

I have an excellent sense of humor and enjoy the outdoors. I sit a horse well and can write, read, and do some mathematics. Perhaps I shouldn't tell you this, as I am informed that many men are intimidated by educated women, but I somehow think you are perhaps more forward thinking than that. I would ask that you keep an open mind.

I have never been married and have no children, so I come unencumbered. I should like to have children so I hope you aren't opposed to having more. Although it's been a few years, I'm sure that you still deeply feel the loss of your wife and I am sorry you have had to endure such a thing. I would never presume to take her place, either in your heart, or in the hearts of your children. Rather, I would like to make my own place in all your lives and hope that we could be happy together.

I am looking forward to corresponding with you and becoming better acquainted.

YOURS TRULY,

THERESA M. O'CONNOR

DEAN READ the letter several times and he was surprised to find that he was moved by this woman's words. She was honest and sensitive and had added a little humor. He had to admit that his interest was piqued. Although tempted to write back, he had no idea how to respond. He decided to sleep on it and see how he would feel in the morning.

CHAPTER 4



“*W*hat were you thinking?” Dean said as soon as he saw Marcus the next day.

Marcus had come to help Dean geld a couple of colts. Seth was out moving part of the herd to a new pasture. Lydia had taken a walk with the kids to pick some early spring berries they’d located on one of the trails.

Marcus frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Dean snatched the letter from Theresa O’Connor from a drawer in the kitchen and thrust it at his brother. “Read it.”

Marcus unfolded the paper and began scanning the page. His mouth curved in a smile that grew wider the more he read. He finished and handed the letter back to Dean.

“I’ll be damned. She sounds like a keeper,” he said.

“Why did you put that ad in the paper?”

“Because you said I should. You said it was a good idea,” Marcus answered.

Dean let out an exasperated sigh. “I was being sarcastic.”

“I know,” Marcus said with a nod. “But you need a wife. You need help with those kids. It’s not going to be long before Sadie is a young woman. Are you gonna talk to her about womanly matters?”

“Lydia will do that,” Dean said. He tended to be shy about sexual matters.

Marcus harrumphed. “Lydia and Charlie have their own kids to raise. You could certainly use a woman around here and one in your bed. You might be nicer to be around.”

Dean whipped his head around, ready to berate Marcus but his brother held up a hand.

“I know, Sarah was the love of your life, but the fact is, she wouldn’t want you to stay single the rest of your life and she’d want someone helping to take care of those kids. If you haven’t noticed, there’s a shortage of women in these parts, so the pickings are slim,” Marcus said. His gray eyes, which he had inherited from their mother, were serious. “If you’re not after love, at least be practical. Maybe you won’t fall head over heels for someone, but you could be somewhat happy and have a good life.”

Dean stayed silent for a few moments and saw the wisdom in Marcus’ words. His grief over Sarah’s death had colored his life for so long and he just couldn’t shake the feeling that he would be replacing her if another woman came along. Marcus may have been wiser than he about the subject, and Dean knew he had to take his children’s welfare into consideration.

He gave Marcus an unsure glance and said, “What the heck would I say to her if I did write? I can’t compete with that letter.”

Marcus smiled. “It’s not a competition, Dean. You just say what you feel.”

“I don’t know how I feel. No woman is gonna make the trip out here if I say that,” Dean said.

“I’ll tell you what. You give me a general idea what you wanna say and I’ll write the letter.”

Dean mulled over Marcus’ offer. Marcus had the most education out of the three brothers and certainly wrote better than he did. “Okay. Um, just tell her what we’re like and that I’m a hard worker and she sounds real nice. Oh, and tell her about the ranch.”

“Done,” Marcus said. “Now let’s get to those colts.”

All through the day, Dean kept thinking about that letter and wondering about the woman who’d written it. Why was she contemplating moving to an unknown land that was barely settled? She seemed smart and nice. Why couldn’t she find a man in Pittsburgh? He assumed there was a good reason and decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

By the time Dean’s day was through, he was exhausted. That was nothing

new, though. He welcomed the work and the fatigue because they kept thoughts away that he didn't want to deal with. That night, however, he had something new to think about and it kept him awake for a while.

He lay in the bed in which he and Sarah had made love so many times and wondered how he could ever share it with someone else. Dean reached over and ran his hand over the side of the bed where Sarah had slept. What would it feel like to have a womanly figure lying next to him again?

"Sarah, I don't know about all this. Marcus tells me I need to find someone to marry, to be a mother to our children, but I don't know if that's the right thing to do. I still miss you so much and I don't think I can love someone like that again." Dean fought the tears that threatened. "You always said you'd be with me no matter what. I hope you're with me now. There's times when I think I hear you laugh or feel you next to me. If you are around, can you give me some sort of a sign?"

He waited, but nothing happened. Dean laughed at himself, thinking he was incredibly foolish to expect some sort of otherworldly sign. He rolled over away from Sarah's side of the bed and eventually nodded off.

CHAPTER 5



*A*fter visiting the Brooks Agency, Tessa was on tenterhooks as she waited for a response to the letter she'd written. Would the man she'd sent the letter to be interested? Should she have written something more or had she written too much? Doubts bombarded her but she did her best to hide her feelings.

She couldn't afford for any of her family to suspect anything, so she went to her classes and worked hard at her writing and other studies. She also took home some books about Montana, where Mr. Samuels lived. It was wise to research the place where she might end up living.

Tessa hid the books away during the day and only brought them out late at night. It wouldn't do for the servants to find them lying about. House servants tended to gossip. She studied them closely and took notes. The more she read, the more excited she became. It was as far removed from the current life she led as could be. It would certainly be an adventure. She longed to hear a wolf howl, feel the cold winter winds, and watch the cattle being driven.

The books also helped her understand the type of clothing she would need. She was sensible enough to know that high heels and ball gowns would have no place somewhere like Montana. Now the problem would be to figure out how to start buying these things and where to store them.

Making the purchases wouldn't be so hard, but there was no way to bring them home without being noticed. All three sisters liked to show each other new clothing and such that they bought. For Tessa to abruptly stop doing that would

cause everyone to become curious about why she would suddenly be secretive about her shopping. That would put her plan in jeopardy.

She thought about places to stash her things until she needed them, but came up with only one place to do so. Her cousin, Edwina, was always pushing the envelope when it came to societal rules and Tessa knew she would help her.

Edwina Bradbury was known for being a bit of a wild woman, but because she was the sole heir of her family's vast fortune, those of her class tended to look the other way. With no parents left and no husband to whom to answer, Edwina enjoyed a freedom that few women of her social standing did. She had always been a sounding board for Tessa's frustrations.

Tessa loved her family but she felt like she was drowning. She visited her cousin to plead for her assistance. Edwina understood how smothered Tessa felt in a world that was filled with the same thing day after day. She herself had felt that way her entire life so she was only too happy to help Tessa prepare for her journey, should it ever happen. Tessa left her fiery cousin's house a happy woman. Now if only a positive response came.

Two weeks later, Edwina contacted Tessa by note that a letter had come. Tessa left the house as quickly as possible, saying that she needed to go to the library. A short time later, she sat in Edwina's ornate parlor. Tessa took the letter from Edwina. She was jittery as she opened it so she took a breath before beginning to read it.

DEAR THERESA,

I WAS REALLY surprised to get your letter. I didn't think anyone would write to me because I have two children. It's only a very special woman who would be willing to take on that. I'll tell you about them. Sadie is just like her ma. She has golden brown hair and bright brown eyes. She turned eleven last fall. Jack is all boy and full of energy.

They're both good children and I want the best for them. Our house is pretty

big. There's a kitchen, parlor, four bedrooms, and a washroom upstairs. I keep it in good shape along with the rest of the place. I'm not the richest man, but I keep our heads above water. My kids and my cattle are my life, but I'd sure like to share it with someone again.

Your letter was something else. I can tell that you're a real lady and smart, too. I'm wondering where you went to school and why a fine lady like you would want to come here. It's pretty here, don't get me wrong, but it's a lot different than what you're used to. The sky is so blue, and on clear days you can see across the valley. The sound of the cattle lowing and the horses nickering to each other is comforting.

You said you like to ride and we have plenty of good horses, so that wouldn't be a problem. Your schooling would be welcomed because we don't have a school close by here and the kids need to learn. Both are real bright and like learning new things.

I guess because you told me what you look like, and you sound very pretty, I should tell you about myself. I've been told I'm handsome. I have blond hair and blue eyes. Last I knew, I stood six feet, two inches tall. I don't know what I weigh, but I'm very fit. I work off most of what I eat. I have strong arms and a strong back and I provide well for my family.

That's about it for now, but I hope I hear from you again soon. Let me know if you have any questions.

SINCERELY,

Dean Samuels

TESSA FINISHED READING the letter and leaned back in her seat. The letter hung from her fingers and Edwina snatched it away and read it.

"Oh my," she said. "Tessa, you have a live one here. He sounds dreamy. A

real man, not like some of the fops around here. Just think of how manly he must be from all that work. And blond hair and blue eyes? Cousin, if you don't take him, I just might."

Tessa looked into her cousin's lively green eyes and laughed. "Hands off. Go get your own Montana man." She took the letter back and stood. "He does sound wonderful, doesn't he? And just imagine the trip. Why, I would have enough to write about for a lifetime with that alone!"

"See what the next few letters bring, but I wouldn't wait too long to meet him if all is satisfactory. You said other women write these men? Some other woman might beat you to it," Edwina said. "Like me!"

"Stop your teasing, Eddie. You're awful and wonderful. So you'll continue to help me?" Tessa asked.

"Oh, yes. And more than that, I'll lend you the money for the trip. You're going to need more than your allowance and there's no way to access your dowry, of course. There's no telling what you'll come up against and it's best to be prepared," Edwina said.

Tessa was shocked. "You can't do that! I won't take your money."

"You're not taking, you're borrowing, dear. Besides, I have tons of money to spend and watching you live out your dream is a real pleasure for me. I'll live vicariously through you. Accept the money or I won't help you," Edwina said. Her expression was serious.

"Blackmailer," Tessa accused. "Very well. I accept."

Edwina clapped her hands. "Wonderful! Now go home and write to your cowboy immediately so it reaches him as soon as possible."



THE LETTERS BEGAN COMING on a regular basis over the next two and a half months and Tessa was enchanted by them. Dean's description of Montana and his life made Tessa want to go there all the more. It sounded like a very purposeful and romantic life.

Marcus had a blast playing matchmaker and enjoyed writing the letters. As

he wrote them, he tried to make them sound the way Dean spoke. He felt that Dean would be a lucky man to get a woman like Tessa and was a little jealous.

Dean didn't say so, but he liked Tessa's letters, especially the way she wrote about her sisters. They sounded like a lively bunch and Tessa's vivid writing made him feel like he could almost see them. He was glad that she had a close family.

It was obvious that Tessa was a smart woman and sometimes Dean had to use a dictionary he'd borrowed from Marcus to tell him some of the word meanings. When she asked questions about Sarah, Dean froze up and told Marcus to not go into detail about his wife or his grief. He felt that was his business alone.

Other than that, he mostly left writing the letters up to Marcus and rarely read them before they were sent off. It seemed like Marcus was doing a good job and that was good enough for Dean.

One day, during the middle of July, Marcus showed up waving a letter. Dean smiled because he knew it was another one from Theresa. He'd actually come to look forward to them.

"You're going to love this one," Marcus informed him.

Dean took it and opened it.

DEAR DEAN,

I WILL COME RIGHT to the point. I have enjoyed our correspondence immensely and it seems you have as well. I think that it's time we meet and would like to make the trip forthwith. Please reply to let me know if this is acceptable to you and if so, I will make the final plans.

In your earlier missives, you have told me that the closest railway would stop in North Dakota and that I would come by coach from there. You warned that it would be a long journey, but I am willing to undertake it. I have the means to hire a first rate guide and have no fear of the journey, which I think will be well

worth any effort.

YOURS,

THERESA

BY THE TIME Dean finished reading the letter, panic had begun to set in. When all this had started, he'd never expected it to go this far. Now, half a continent away, there was a woman who was ready to leave her life and come west to meet him.

"Breathe, Dean. It'll be okay. Ain't that something?" Marcus said. His delight brought Dean to anger.

"How do I explain this to the kids? Where is she going to stay? What am I supposed to do with her?" he asked enraged.

Marcus laughed at the fear and bewilderment on Dean's face. "Well, I know it's been a while, but it's kind of like when you fall off a horse. You just get back on and it'll all come back to you."

Dean grabbed Marcus by his shirt collar. "It's not funny, you idiot! I should have never done any of this. I shouldn't have let you talk me into it!"

Marcus laughed all the more and Dean could have choked him.

"Dean! Knock it off! The fact is, you wanted to do it or you never would have told me to go ahead," he said, yanking his shirt out of Dean's fist.

"I *didn't* say go ahead! I was joking! I didn't know you'd take me seriously and put that ad in the paper," Dean said.

Marcus nodded. "Yeah, but you told me to go ahead and send a letter back. You coulda just never answered, but you told me to write back."

Dean stood very still as he recalled their conversation. "Shoot! You're right." Dean put a hand to his forehead. "What do I do now?"

Marcus crossed his arms over his chest and gave Dean a speculative look.

“The question is, what do you *want* to do? I think you want to meet her but you’re scared to death. You never told me to stop writing to her or tell her it was off. That says to me that you’ve been seriously contemplating meeting her.”

Dean was cursing his stupidity. He felt bad about not stopping the letters and now didn’t know what he wanted to do. “You’re right. It’s not your fault. Let me think about it today and I’ll let you know tomorrow.”

“Okay. That’s fine. Dean, the worst that can happen is that things don’t work out and she goes back home,” Marcus said. “At least you would have given it a try.”

“I’ll think on it,” Dean agreed.

That night, Dean wrestled with the decision that lay ahead. Should he take a risk and have this woman come? What would he tell his children? He needed to talk to someone other than Marcus about this. He needed a woman’s point of view.

The next morning, Dean rode his stallion, Twister, over to the Benson’s place. At the sound of a horse’s hooves, Lydia Benson looked out from behind a sheet she was hanging on a wash line.

“There’s the woman I’m after,” he said with a smile as he climbed down off Twister.

Lydia chuckled. “Don’t let my husband hear that. He’s the jealous type.”

Her dark blonde hair blew around in the breeze and her brown eyes smiled up at him. She looked at Dean closely. She’d known him and his brothers for ten years now and could tell when something was on the man’s mind. His furrowed brow and the look in his eyes gave him away. Dean had become a little brother to her and she wondered what was bothering him.

She’d loved Sarah and had grieved right along with Dean when she’d died. Lydia still felt guilty about not being able to save Sarah and their baby. It had been another boy.

“Can we talk?” Dean asked.

“Sure, hon. C’mon into the kitchen. I could use some coffee, how about you?” she said.

“I can always use a cup of your coffee, Lydia,” Dean answered and followed

her into their house.

The kitchen was large, as was the table. It had to be with four children and a couple of ranch hands to feed. Meals were lively at the Benson's, and Dean and his kids had eaten many a meal with them. It had a homey feel to it and the surfaces of the wooden table and benches were worn to a smooth patina from so much use. Charlie had installed plenty of cupboards and bought Lydia a nice buffet to house all of their dishes and various cooking tools.

"Sit," Lydia said and set about getting their coffee. When it was ready, she poured it and sat down at the table with Dean. "What's going on?"

"I'm not sure where to start. Seems I've got myself into a pickle," Dean said. "Back in May, Marcus decided to put an advertisement in a paper back East for a mail-order bride. He thinks I need a wife and he said this was the perfect way to find one." His words started coming fast once he'd started. "I was joking when I said go ahead and put the ad in. Next thing I know, a letter comes from a woman. I read it and damned if I wasn't interested. She's educated and seems very nice and doesn't mind that I have kids. She was really sorry to hear about Sarah and doesn't want to try to take her place. We been writin' back and forth and now she wants to come and meet us. I don't know if I should or not. What do you think?"

Lydia laughed softly. "Oh, that Marcus. I think he did a good thing. It sounds to me like you like her, or at least her letters. You know, a lot of men are beginning to find wives that way. Nothing wrong with it. Do you think your heart is healed enough to entertain the idea of meeting another woman with the idea of proposing marriage?"

Dean felt his stomach drop at the idea. "I don't know. I don't know if I could ever go through that again. What if we get married and things are good and then she dies?"

Lydia laid a hand on his. "Dean, I know you're scared, but what if she comes here and you get married and *you* die? You know as well as I that your work can be dangerous. You're not the only one taking a risk."

Dean looked at Lydia in surprise. He had been so busy thinking of *his* situation that he hadn't considered what Theresa would face. She obviously had a lot of courage, maybe more than he did. She would be traveling a very long

distance just to meet his family and him, without any guarantees. Shouldn't he be just as willing to take that step and at least meet her?

Dean gulped down his coffee, then rose and kissed Lydia on the forehead. "You are the wisest person I know. Thanks." He kissed her cheek and quickly left.

Lydia chuckled as she finished her coffee and then went back to hanging her laundry.



DEAN RODE ON TO MARCUS' place. It was a slightly run down house with only four small rooms. Marcus kept it in fair repair, but wasn't overly concerned with making it more attractive because he had no intentions of getting married. His one small barn housed two horses and a mule. An outside shed gave his five steer shelter during the winter months. A few chickens and a rooster roamed free on his land. Marcus didn't have any need to keep a lot of animals, only what he needed to feed himself.

A small vegetable garden occupied an area off to the right of the house, where it had a nice combination of sun and shade from a large oak tree that stood sentinel along the edge of the patch. Roscoe, Marcus' big, furry mongrel, started barking and running toward Dean and Twister. His tail wagged furiously when he saw that one of his favorite people was there.

Marcus sat in a rocking chair on the porch that ran the length of the house. He whittled on a piece of wood. It seemed like Marcus was always whittling something. He made beautiful pieces and many people in the area hired him to make specific things, which they liked to give as gifts and such.

He didn't get up from his chair or stop whittling as he called out, "C'mon and have a seat. What brings you?"

Dean leapt up onto Marcus' porch and dropped down into the chair next to him. He rocked for a few moments in silence, scratching Roscoe's ears and petting his head. Marcus started whistling, another one of his habits. He was a beautiful whistler and entertained people with it.

“Send the letter. Tell her to come ahead,” Dean said. He got up and jumped from the porch. Dean gathered Twister’s reins and climbed aboard the stallion. He gave Twister a light kick and the stallion sprang forward, setting out at a canter. Dean rode home fast, enjoying the speed of the big stallion under him. He’d had to leave right after his statement to Marcus or else he would have changed his mind. Dean knew Marcus well enough to know that he wouldn’t waste any time getting that letter written and sent off.

CHAPTER 6



Maddie's coming out party was everything she'd ever wanted and more. It was a magical night surrounded by her family, wonderful friends, and very attentive young men. Her dance card was full and she was thrilled.

Tessa watched her little sister twirl around the dance floor, first in one man's arms and then in another's. The light in Maddie's eyes made Tessa so happy for her sibling. She'd decided she couldn't leave until after Maddie's party because it would be cruel to cause so much sadness. She would never do anything to ruin Maddie's special night.

She'd decided to leave a little later that night, when the party was in full swing. Her parents would be distracted by entertaining the guests. Tessa would plead a headache and make her escape to Edwina's where she'd gather her bags, which were packed and waiting in Eddie's large hall closet. Eddie's driver was going to take her to the train station, where she would catch the eleven-forty-five train.

Claire had been allowed to attend the party for a short while and was in awe of the happenings. She watched the elegant women in their beautiful gowns as they danced with handsome men. Her excitement was palpable as she sat next to Tessa. She watched her little sister's sweet face and tried to memorize it. She didn't know how long it would be until she saw it again.

Tessa reached out and took Claire's hand. Claire looked at her in surprise.

"What is it?" she asked.

“All of this is wonderful in its way. I was excited when I was first introduced to society and I know you will be, too, but don’t make it your life. You have a wonderful mind and you should use it to do great things, but have some fun, too. There has to be a balance,” Tessa said.

Claire smiled at Tessa. “Thank you, but why are you so sentimental tonight?”

“I was just remembering my own coming out and how much I enjoyed it, but then later wished that I could do something else besides attend balls and parties. So have fun with all this, but don’t let it rule you. That’s all,” Tessa said with a smile. Inside, she was warning herself to not let her emotions show so much. Someone might suspect something was amiss. “I mean, aren’t you bored already?”

Claire laughed. “That’s just like you. The party has barely begun and already you want to leave.”

Tessa propped her head on her palm and affected a bored expression. “Am I that transparent?”

Claire nodded and turned back to watch the dancers.

Tessa watched, too, for a few moments before noticing that Maddie was heading in the direction of the ladies’ toilet. She gave Claire a kiss and went after her other sibling. Tessa caught Maddie in the hallway off the ballroom.

“So, little sister, are you enjoying your special night?” she asked.

Maddie grabbed Tessa’s arm and squeezed a little. “It’s the most amazing thing! This will sound terrible, but so many of the men want to dance with me. I don’t understand why you don’t love this life.”

Tessa was swept up for a few moments by Maddie’s enthusiasm. “I’m thrilled you are having such a wonderful time. You look very elegant and lovely on the dance floor. You dance much better than I do.”

“Oh, stop. You dance very well,” Maddie protested.

“Well enough, I suppose, but not with your grace. I have a few words of caution. Just beware with whom you dance with. They’re not all being altruistic. Some of them have hidden agendas. I’m sure it won’t be long until you have marriage proposals thrown your way, but listen to your heart and don’t let money influence your choice,” Tessa said.

Maddie nudged her sister. "Come now! Listen to you, the voice of doom. I understand that you don't enjoy this, but I do and I don't intend to let it stop too soon. Who wants to get married when I can have this kind of fun? Trust me, I'm not in a hurry to wed. But when I do, it will be with someone fun and exciting, who doesn't give a flip what people think."

"Good girl," Tessa said. She gave Maddie a quick hug and a kiss before sending her on her way.

It was getting late and Tessa knew she needed to go. Before she lost her nerve, she found her parents and drew them away slightly.

"I'm going to excuse myself. I think all of the perfume has given me a headache. I should like to go to retire early," she said.

Maureen looked at her eldest child with concern. "Well, you do look a little peaked. Perhaps it's best. Get a good night's rest and I'll check on you in the morning."

Tessa hugged her mother, hanging on a bit longer than normal. "I love you, Mama. You are the most wonderful mother anyone could ask for."

Maureen hugged her back. "Thank you, darling."

Then Tessa turned to her father and steeled herself. This would be the toughest goodbye to get through without giving herself away. "Goodnight, Papa."

Geoffrey kissed her cheek and gathered her close. "Goodnight, daughter. Sleep well and feel better."

Tessa struggled to hold tears back as she hugged her father. She drew away and pretended to sneeze. She pressed a handkerchief to her nose and made it seem as if the perfume was having a severe effect on her sinuses.

"Pardon me. I fear that some people have been extremely heavy with the perfume," she said as a reason for her eyes being so bright with tears.

Geoffrey placed another kiss on her forehead. "Go then before it becomes worse. Good night."

"Goodnight. I love you both so much. Have a wonderful rest of the night and tell Maddie how sorry I was that I had to leave the party early," she said.

"Yes, we will," said Maureen.

She and Geoffrey watched their daughter leave. “She should have been an actress,” Geoffrey commented. “I almost bought that she was feeling poorly.”

“She’s faking? I didn’t know. What does that say about me as a mother?” Maureen said.

Geoffrey squeezed her hand. “You’re a wonderful mother and you know it. She really does hate parties and just wanted to leave this one, too. That’s all it is, Maureen.”

Maureen sighed. “I suppose you’re right.”

“However, we have another daughter who is enjoying every second of it,” he said with a gesture at Maddie, who was out on the dance floor again.

They watched their graceful daughter float around the room in the arms of a very good-looking boy.

Tessa watched her family from the doorway leading to the main foyer as they enjoyed the special night. The picture they made together would be forever etched in her mind. With tears in her eyes, she forced herself to turn away and mount the staircase to prepare for her journey.



“MAMA! MAMA!”

Maureen heard Claire calling her and it sounded as if something was drastically wrong. Claire burst into the dining room the morning after Maddie’s coming out party. She held an envelope and papers in her hand.

“What is it, Claire?” Maureen asked.

“It’s Tessa! She’s gone,” Claire said and thrust the papers at her mother.

“What?” Maureen took the papers and began reading.

TO MY DEAREST FAMILY,

I KNOW that when you find that I have gone, you will be very distressed and try to

find me. I beg you not to do so. I will be in touch when I can. For years, I've been telling you that this is not the life I want for myself, but my words have fallen on deaf ears. You seemed to think that it was just a phase and that I would grow out of it.

Most of my life has been spent primping and preening and learning how to behave like a lady and be charming to others. I never felt fully comfortable in this type of life. Maddie is much more proficient at it than I and she certainly enjoys it. I find nothing wrong with that.

I felt compelled to leave because I know I will never be allowed to live life on my own terms. I would have liked to have had more opportunities to participate in serious conversations concerning societal issues and many other matters, but any time I attempted to do so, I was made to feel that I wasn't intelligent enough simply because I'm a woman.

There were scores of men who were pushed my way in the hopes of me finding a suitor among them. No matter how many men of our society I would meet, I know I would never find a match with any of them. I would like a man of substance, someone who knows about hard work and taking chances. I want someone like you, Papa. I need a man who is strong, yet loving and has a sense of what's really important in life.

So I am setting out on my own life's journey and doing so in secret because I feel it is the only way I could make it happen. By the time you read this, I will be long gone and you will not find me. I am not doing this to hurt you, I am doing this because I am of age to make my own decisions and live life on my own terms.

I want to be appreciated for my true self and not be forced into a box or told what I should want. I love you all, but I am suffocating and need room to breathe and I think this is the best course of action for us all. I know that it will take you some time to see it, but I hope that one day you will.

Know that I love you all more than I could ever tell you.

ALL MY LOVE,

Tessa

MAUREEN REREAD THE LETTER, disbelief and terror filling her breast. She was first and foremost a wife and mother, and the fact that one of her children had set out alone to only God knew where filled her with dread. She didn't want to alarm Claire unduly, however, so she tried to keep her demeanor and voice as calm as possible.

"Oh, dear. That Tessa. She has always been somewhat dramatic. No doubt we'll find her at one of her friends' residences," Maureen said. She smiled at her youngest. "All will be well, Claire. I'll go talk to your father about it. You eat your breakfast."

Maureen kissed Claire on the forehead and left the room. Claire was old enough and smart enough to know when her mother was truly concerned, and she knew that Maureen was very worried. She had no desire to eat and instead went out to their garden to get some fresh air. It was her favorite spot in which to think. She was deeply concerned about her sister and prayed that wherever she was, she was safe.

Geoffrey finished reading Tessa's letter and sat back in his office chair. Worry, anger, and shock all warred within him. How could she do this to her family, especially her parents? She had always been spirited and headstrong, but he had never seen this coming. As her father, he felt that he should have.

He looked at Maureen and rose to embrace her. "Don't worry, dear. I'll find her. She couldn't have gotten far and someone has to know where she has gone."

Maureen held Geoffrey close, taking comfort in his assurances. "Yes. You're right. Please bring her back to us."

"I will," Geoffrey promised her. "No matter what it takes."

CHAPTER 7



The trip westward was one Tessa would never forget, not only because it was full of memorable sights and events, but also because she wrote about everything she experienced and people she encountered. She strove to get everything she could down on paper just as she saw it at that particular moment. Her fingers became sore, but she kept on writing anyway. One of her suitcases had held nothing but paper and pencils. She hadn't wanted to run out of writing materials before reaching her destination.

To ensure that didn't happen, Tessa also bought more writing supplies whenever she could. She didn't know whether supplies would be available in Dawson and she needed to keep as much in stock as possible. After Dean had made her aware of how remote his ranch and community were, Tessa realized that there were things that would not be as readily available as they had been in Pittsburgh.

Another reason she wrote so much was to quiet her nerves. She was leaving her home for the first time in her life to head into the unknown. Although exciting, it was also scary. Would she be welcomed? Was Dean as he seemed in his letters? What would his children think of her? It was highly possible they would be resentful or jealous of her, and that would put a strain on any possible relationship she and Dean might have.

She hoped they would like each other and get along well. Despite not finding anyone to marry in Pittsburgh, she had always hoped to find a loving husband and raise a happy family. Tessa felt that, in going to Montana, she would have

the opportunity to meet someone special and have just such a life.



“SO, IS SHE PRETTY?” Sadie asked. Her brown eyes shone with excitement at the possibility of meeting a genteel lady from a big city. She seemed more interested in that than the fact that she might marry her father.

Dean smiled. “I’m sure she is. She sounds like it. She’s tall and has blue eyes and dark hair and she’s, uh, slender.”

“What’s ‘slender’, Pa?” Jack wanted to know.

“It means not fat but not skinny. Just right,” Sadie said.

Jack nodded. “That’s good, I guess.”

“I reckon it is. So what do you think about her maybe marrying me someday?” Dean asked. He almost stumbled on the word “marrying”. He still wasn’t comfortable with that idea, but he was trying to get accustomed to it.

Sadie pondered that for a few moments. “I guess if she likes me and Jack, it’s all right.”

Jack, ever practical, said, “If she can cook and clean, fine with me. Oh, and sing. Can she sing, Pa?”

Dean laughed. “I don’t know if she can sing, son. I never asked her and she never said.”

Jack shrugged. “It’s okay. We can see when she gets here.”

“Okay. We’ll do that.”

“When is she getting here?” Sadie asked.

Dean mentally calculated the date of the letter he’d received, telling him when she’d left North Dakota. “She should be here in three days.”

Sadie clapped. “I can’t wait. I’m so excited!”

“I can tell,” Dean said.

“Me, too,” Jack said. “Can I have a snack?”

Dean ruffled Jack’s hair. “Yeah, you can have a snack. Aunt Lydia sent over some cookies.”

Jack ran off to the kitchen for the cookies. He was far more worried about

them than he was the prospect of a strange woman entering their lives. Dean wished he had his son's calm outlook about it.



THE STAGE COACH pulled up in front of the general store in Wolfe Point, which also served as a stage depot. As she alighted from the coach, Tessa stretched, glad to be on solid ground at least for a little while. The driver unloaded her belongings and sat them on the porch of the store. Tessa thanked him and gave him a tip, something she was used to doing in Pittsburgh. The rough-looking driver looked at the money she was handing him and then back at her as if to say, "Are you sure?"

Tessa smiled and said, "I can't tell you how much I appreciate all of your help in bringing me here."

He smiled and took the money. "Thanks, Miss. You ever need to go anywhere again, let me know."

"Of course," Tessa said.

He mounted the coach, tipped his hat to her, and then rode away. Tessa gathered her belongings into a more orderly lineup and then entered the store. The elderly gent behind the counter came out from behind it and looked at her. "Well, you are a sight for sore eyes," he said. "We don't get many young ladies around here who look like you."

Tessa smiled. "Thank you. You're much too kind."

"Nope. Just tellin' the truth. So you're that blue blood gal from the East, huh?" he said.

"I suppose I am. I see you've heard about me," she said. She had expected that the people of the area would be curious about her since it was supposed to be a very small, close community.

"Hell, everyone around here's heard about ya. It's big doings, ya know. Besides which, Dean asked me to keep an eye on you when you got here. Said he'd be here today, so I expect him any time now. He keeps his word."

Tessa was comforted by that fact. "I'm Theresa O'Connor," she said, holding

out a hand.

The store owner took it and shook it the same way a man's hand would be shook. "Lance Long. Pleased to meet you."

Tessa shook his hand firmly, knowing to do so from watching her father do the same thing over the years.

"Good shake. Can always tell a good person from the way they shake hands," Lance said. "Good lookin' and ya got good manners. If Dean doesn't marry you, I will."

Tessa laughed. "You're such a flirt!" she accused. She was no stranger to flirting and could hold her own when it came to the oral dance between men and women.

"Flirt? Hell, I mean it!" Lance said. "Oh, pardon my language, Miss."

"Please think nothing of it. I've heard much worse," Tessa said.

The sound of horses' hooves and wagon wheels prevented any further conversation.



THE BUCKBOARD WAGON rattled around the last turn on the way to Long's Mercantile. Dean and Marcus were running late because the front axle on his buggy had broken. He didn't always use the buggy and didn't realize that part of the axle had weakened. They'd hit a bad rut and it had snapped it the rest of the way.

They first had to get the broken buggy off the road and take the horses back to the ranch to get them hitched to the wagon. Dean had wanted to use the buggy because it would be more comfortable for Theresa. He and the kids were used to riding the buckboard, but to someone who was used to riding along smooth streets, the dirt roads could be awfully hard on the rear end.

He was hoping that maybe the stage coach had been late and that they'd still get there ahead of Theresa. Dean's hope for that died as they neared the store and saw a womanly figure out on the porch of the store.

"Wow, Dean, she's a looker," Marcus said as the wagon drew closer.

Dean didn't need Marcus to tell him that. He drove the wagon automatically, but his senses were honed in on the beautiful woman watching them. Her dark hair was stylishly done. *She looks like something out of a magazine*, Dean thought. She looked fresh, despite the lengthy journey. She was smiling and as they pulled up, Dean could see her teeth were white and nicely shaped.

Dean's eyes roamed over her full bosom, slender waist, and slightly flaring hips. Her blue eyes smiled right along with her mouth and Dean saw her keen intelligence reflected in them. Her deep blue traveling suit was a little wrinkled and a trifle dusty, but on the whole, she looked as if she'd walked out of a dream.

Dean pulled the team to a stop and stepped down from the wagon. "You must be Theresa."

She smiled broadly and came down from the wooden porch. "And you must be Dean," she answered.

"Yes, ma'am," Dean said. "How was your trip?"

"Exhilarating!" she announced. "There's so much to see and learn about."

Dean smiled at her enthusiasm. "I'm glad to hear it. You may change your mind once you're here for a while."

Tessa tilted her head a little and asked, "Are you trying to get rid of me already?"

"What? No, of course not," Dean said. Then he caught the devilish twinkle in her eyes. "You're pullin' my leg," he said and grinned.

"I must be talented indeed to be able to do that from here," Tessa joked. "I'm sorry. I must be more tired than I thought."

Dean laughed. "Don't be sorry. It's good to see you have a sense of humor and that you're not stuck up or anything."

"Far from it or I wouldn't be here, would I?" Tessa said.

Dean frowned. "What's wrong with it here?"

Tessa rushed to apologize. "Nothing, of course! It's beautiful here."

It was Dean's turn to laugh now. "I'm just joshin' you."

Tessa pretended to be offended. "You, Mr. Samuels, are a bad man, I think."

"You have no idea," Marcus said, speaking for the first time. "I'm Marcus, Dean's younger brother."

“Well, Marcus, I’m pleased to meet you. And please, call me Tessa. It’s my nickname and frankly, I prefer it,” she replied.

“Very well, then, Tessa it is,” Marcus said with a deep bow over her hand.

Tessa played along and gave him a deep curtsy, and Dean watched her graceful movements closely as she dipped and rose again. “What a gentleman you are,” she commented to Marcus.

Dean said, “More like full of bull crap.”

Marcus scowled at Dean and Tessa laughed. She could see that this was going to be a lot of fun. She sobered and looked at Dean, admiring his fine physique. His shoulders were broad and his chest well-muscled. As his letters had said, he had strong arms, too.

“So, who are these beautiful animals?” she asked, referring to the pair of chestnut draft horses hitched to the wagon. She needed a distraction to keep from staring at Dean.

“This one is Buster and the other one is Nugget,” Dean answered.

Tessa moved to Buster’s side before Dean could warn her. Buster tended to be a little cantankerous around strangers, but he saw that he didn’t have to worry. Tessa whispered to Buster and he watched the big gelding’s ears flick back and forth. She didn’t touch him, but held a flat palm out and let him sniff it. Slowly then, she raised her hand and lightly stroked his neck.

The whole time, she kept whispering to him. Once he’d gotten her scent, Tessa stroked the pretty white blaze, enjoying the soft hair and velvety skin of Buster’s muzzle. The horse seemed hypnotized by the treatment and lowered his head to her. Tessa slipped up close to him and embraced his neck briefly.

She then repeated the process with Nugget, who was much friendlier and more mischievous. Tessa laughed softly when he wanted to nibble at a bow on her jacket. She quietly disciplined him and Nugget behaved.

“They’re splendid,” she said as she turned back to the men.

Dean had been watching raptly and found he was jealous of the horses. Her pretty hands stroking their coats made his male flesh remember what it was like to feel a woman’s touch. He shifted his feet a little and cleared his throat.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to delay our departure. I adore horses and can’t

stay away from them. However, I'm dying to see your ranch and meet everyone," she said.

"I didn't mind at all," Dean said. "We'll get your things loaded and get underway. I'm sure you'd like to get settled in and rest a little."

"Yes, that would be lovely," Tessa agreed.

Dean and Marcus moved her belongings to the wagon and they headed out.

CHAPTER 8



Tessa was thankful to Dean for thinking to place a thick folded blanket on the wooden seat of the buckboard wagon. The going was rougher than she was used to and her bottom kept smacking against the seat. Her rear was beginning to get sore. She could imagine how much worse it would have been if there had been no blanket.

As they rode, she kept sneaking looks at Dean and found him quite attractive. His blond hair was disheveled from the wind and his jaw was beginning to show stubble. He was tanned and muscular, and filled out his clothes in a way that the men she knew didn't. Tessa smiled to herself, thinking that Edwina would certainly be jealous when she wrote to her and told her that Dean was incredibly handsome and virile.

She'd been charmed by Marcus and had pegged him a likable troublemaker. She wondered from which parent each of the brothers got their looks. Outside of the shape of their jaws, there wasn't much resemblance between Marcus and Dean. Marcus's jet black hair and gray eyes were far removed from Dean's golden locks and vivid blue eyes.

Dean looked down at Tessa and Tessa's stomach did a little flip. His gaze did things to her that she hadn't expected so soon. She thought she saw the same thing flicker in his eyes, but couldn't be sure.

"See that big maple tree over there?" he said.

Tessa looked where he indicated. "Yes."

"That's the start of our land," Dean told her with pride. "Those steer you see

are some of our finest cattle.”

Tessa took a small notebook from her reticule and began looking around with interest and writing down her observations. Dean watched with curiosity, remembering Tessa had told him that she was working on improving her creative writing skills. “What are you writing?” he asked.

“I’m writing in detail about how everything looks and how it makes me feel,” she responded.

Dean arched an eyebrow at that. “How it makes you feel?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean by that?” he asked.

Tessa didn’t look at him, but responded as she wrote on. “I mean, how what I see, and hear, and smell makes me feel.”

“I don’t get it.”

She looked at him then. “Look at the steer.”

Dean did. “Okay.”

“How do you feel when you look at them? You just told me that they are fine animals,” Tessa said.

Dean looked into her deep blue eyes looking at him so eagerly and he wanted to please her. He thought about it carefully. “Proud, I guess. It took a lot of hard work to breed such good stock.”

“Yes! Proud! And you should be. I’ve seen some steer back East and I don’t think they’re as nice as these. Look at how strong their shoulders are, and sleek and healthy their coats are!” Tessa was still writing as she talked. After a minute, though, she put away her notebook and pencil.

Marcus leaned up from the wagon box. “Someday, I’d love to read some of your observations.”

Tessa turned to him. “Really? Do you enjoy reading?”

“Oh, yeah. He’s always reading. You’ll have to go to his house sometime. There are more books than anything else in it. I’m surprised he doesn’t just sleep on them,” Dean said.

Marcus smiled. “It’s true.”

“When I get them more polished, I would certainly welcome your insight. In

fact, you are both welcome to read them,” Tessa said.

Dean said, “I’d like that. I really enjoyed your letters, so I can just imagine what your other writing is like.”

Tessa was flattered. “Thank you,” she said with a smile and blushed.

“Pa! Pa! Is that her?”

Dean looked up and saw his children running toward them as fast as they could.

“Here we go. Prepare yourself. Both of them have been on tenterhooks waiting for you to get here. We all have,” Dean told her.

Tessa looked in his eyes and saw that flicker of something unnamable. Then the children arrived and her attention became focused on them.

“Hi! I’m Jack. Boy, you’re pretty. Can you cook? I like to eat,” Jack stated as he climbed on board the wagon and squeezed between Tessa and Dean.

“Mind your manners, Jack,” Dean said a little gruffly.

Jack barely gave his father a glance. “Okay. But can you?”

Tessa smiled down at him. He looked a lot like Dean. “Honestly, I haven’t had much chance, but I’m a quick learner. I’m Tessa and it’s very nice to finally meet you. I’m looking forward to becoming friends.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, me, too. It’s okay if you can’t cook. I can’t either.”

Tessa smiled and then turned and looked down at Sadie. “And this pretty young lady must be Sadie,” she said.

Sadie blushed and smiled. “Thank you, ma’am. Pleased to meet you. Jack’s right, you’re beautiful and your clothes are so pretty.”

“Why, thank you,” Tessa said.

“C’mon, Sadie. I’ll help you up here,” Marcus said and held out an arm.

Sadie grabbed on and giggled as Marcus swung her up into the wagon. She came to stand behind Jack, holding onto the back of the wagon seat. “What’s Pittsburgh like?” Sadie asked as they drove beneath the arch that marked the entrance to their ranch.

Dean chuckled. “Sadie, let Tessa get settled and a little rested before asking so many questions. We’re all gonna have time to get to know each other, but it doesn’t all have to happen right now.”

“Okay, Pa. Sorry, Miss Theresa,” Sadie said respectfully.

“That’s quite all right. I promise I’ll tell you anything you want to know. And I have a lot of questions of my own. Oh, and please call me Tessa,” she said.

“Tessa?” Sadie asked.

“It’s my nickname,” Tessa informed her.

Dean pulled the team to a stop in front of the house. “Okay. Here we are.”

Tessa turned and was instantly charmed by the house. It was a wooden two story structure with quite a few windows. A nice porch wrapped around it and several wooden rocking chairs sat behind the railing. A swing hung from the porch rafters. The house was a rustic brown color. Tessa didn’t know a whole lot about construction, but it looked sturdy and well put together.

Dean watched Tessa closely as she looked the place over. He was nervous about what she’d think of it because he knew her family was rich and lived in a large mansion. He knew their place couldn’t compare to the kind of home Tessa was used to. Her eyes moved quickly, he noticed.

As he looked at her profile, Dean was struck again by how beautiful Tessa was. She had a pretty, straight nose and a graceful neck. Her dark hair shone with good health. He had a sudden urge to touch it to see if it felt as soft as it looked. Dean’s hands tightened imperceptibly on the reins as he fought the impulse.

Tessa turned to him with her eyes shining. “It’s lovely! I can see the care that went into building it and you certainly keep it well maintained.”

Dean grinned as relief flowed through him. “Thanks. I was afraid you wouldn’t like it.”

“No need to worry,” Tessa said.

“Good.” Dean stepped down from the wagon. “I’ll help you down.”

“All right,” Tessa said.

Dean grasped her by the waist and helped her down. The physical contact sent a jolt of awareness through Tessa. Her hands rested on his large biceps and his scent reached her nostrils. He smelled of hay and horses and a little sweat. The combination was far from repulsive. It was a little primal and she felt a stirring of desire.

Dean was having much of the same feelings. He hadn't touched another woman since Sarah and her waist and lower back felt soft, yet firm. It scared him a little that he could desire another woman. He cleared his throat and stepped back quickly.

"There. Ready for the tour?" he asked.

Tessa had sensed the change in him and frowned a little. Then she chastised herself for being so silly. Of course he was not going to engage in anything physical in front of the children or Marcus. Besides, they didn't know each other nearly well enough for anything like that.

She brightened. "Of course."

As they moved through the house, the kids told her a lot of things about it. She found the interior of the house as charming as the exterior. The kitchen was clean and orderly. The cupboards were carved with intricate flowered patterns. Tessa ran her fingertips over them.

"Where did you ever get these beautiful doors?"

"Uncle Marcus made them," Sadie explained.

Tessa turned to him. "You did these?"

Marcus nodded.

"You are an expert craftsman, Marcus. I have to say, I've never seen any finer work. In Pittsburgh, your services would be highly sought after," she said.

Marcus was a little bashful, which wasn't like him. "Really? Thank you."

"He's always doing something with wood. People around here get him to carve and whittle a lot of stuff," Dean added.

"I can see why."

They moved to the front parlor and Tessa fell in love with it. The light coming in the windows made it a bright, cheery room. Pretty white eyelet curtains dressed the windows. The furniture was of good quality. A large braided rug of browns and pinks covered much of the shiny wooden floor. Tessa saw a woman's touch all over the room.

"Your wife was very talented in furnishing a home. It's lovely. Did she make the curtains?" Tessa asked.

Dean nodded. "She could make almost anything that way. Clothes, quilts,

baby blankets, curtains. You name it.” It made him feel good to see Tessa appreciating Sarah’s handiwork.

Tessa saw a picture on the mantel of the fireplace and crossed the room to it. It was of Dean, Sarah, and younger versions of Jack and Sadie. They were all dressed in their finest clothes and they were all smiling. Tessa focused on Sarah. She was a beautiful woman with brown eyes and light brown hair.

They all looked so happy. It was such a shame that her life had been cut short and that their baby had perished. Those thoughts brought tears to Tessa’s eyes. Dean saw her lips tremble and wondered at the cause.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Tessa looked up at him and he saw that her eyes were bright with unshed tears. “I’m so sorry for your loss. She was a beautiful woman and I know that she will always be missed.”

Dean felt a lump form in his throat and he found it difficult to speak. “She was beautiful and Sadie looks just like her. It’s been hard.”

Tessa nodded. “How could it not be? As I said in my letters, I am not here to take her place, but to make my own in your lives. Please don’t feel that you cannot talk about her around me. I would like to know all about such a wonderful woman.”

“We have all kinds of stories to tell you about her,” Sadie said. “She was so much fun and made great cookies.”

“I’m sure she was. Do you have the recipe?” Tessa asked.

Sadie nodded.

“Maybe we could make them together sometime.”

“I would love that!” Sadie exclaimed.

“Me, too,” Jack piped up. “I really like cookies.”

Tessa laughed. “I have a feeling that you like almost any kind of food.”

“Yup,” the little boy said.

Dean was glad the children had lightened the moment. It gave him a chance to compose himself. “Well, why don’t I show you your room? Follow me.”

It went against societal norms for a single woman to stay in the same house as a single man, but there was no other place for her. Marcus’ house would not

accommodate a guest and it was the same type of situation as at Dean's house. Their close friends, the Bensons, also had no room and without a hotel present, Dean's house was the only choice. Tessa had no qualms about it. She sensed that Dean was an honorable man and she didn't fear for her virtue.

Tessa followed Dean up the staircase. The boards under her feet creaked a little, but they were sturdy and she had no fear that they would fall through. The stairs opened into a wide hallway. There were two doors on the right and one on the left. A window at the end of the hallway let in light. Dean opened the door on the left.

"This is the wash room."

Tessa walked into the room. It was equipped with a large metal tub, and a wash stand with a porcelain basin and pitcher. The stand itself was elegantly crafted. "Marcus did this as well?"

"No. I made it for Sarah's birthday five years ago. I wanted her to have a nice place to bathe. I know how important that kind of thing is to women," Dean replied.

Tessa raised her eyebrows. "Craftsmanship seems to run in the family."

"Our mother was really skilled at it. Her pa taught her," Dean explained.

"Really? How unusual," Tessa marveled.

Dean shook his head. "Tessa, you're gonna find that, out here, women often work right along with the men, doing things like growing crops, carpentry, and taking care of the livestock. When the men are off on a cattle drive, it's the women who are left to keep things going."

"I never thought of that," Tessa confessed.

Dean smiled at her. "I have a feeling we're gonna learn a lot from each other."

"Me, too."

"Well, c'mon. I'll show you your room," Dean said.

She followed him again. He opened the first door on the right and motioned her through. Tessa saw a large four-poster bed standing sentinel in the room. A quilt done in bright greens and blues covered it. There was a dresser and a small chest at the foot of the bed. Tessa saw that there was no closet, but there was a

long row of pegs on one wall.

“It’s probably not as big or pretty as yours back home, but it’s homey,” Dean said.

“Yes it is, and I’ll be quite comfortable here, I’m sure.”

“Sadie’s room is the other one up here. Jack’s room is downstairs. He likes the little one off the kitchen. Mine is the one beyond the parlor,” he told her.

“All right.”

Marcus arrived with a couple of Tessa’s bags then. “There’s only a couple more. You travel light for a woman,” he teased.

Tessa chuckled. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I’ll just put them on the bed for now,” Marcus said.

“Thank you,” Tessa said.

The two men left her and retrieved her other bags. Dean was a very strong man, but by the time he reached the top of the stairs with one of them, he was huffing.

“What the hell is in that thing?” he asked. “Pardon the language.”

Tessa laughed. “A lady is allowed to have her little mysteries, gentlemen.”

Dean smiled back. “If you say so. Well, we’ll leave you to get settled in. We’ll get some supper going. I imagine you’re pretty hungry.”

“Yes, very. All of the fresh air has given me quite an appetite,” Tessa said.

They left and Tessa stood still for a few moments, getting her bearings. She looked around the unfamiliar room and felt a pang of homesickness. Tessa also felt guilty about leaving the way she had but knew that it had been the only way. Her father especially would have never allowed her to leave and would have had her watched to make sure she didn’t. It would have been out of love, but Tessa knew that, eventually, it would have made her bitter to be trapped in a life she didn’t want.

Then she brushed off the negative feelings and let all of the excitement return. She looked down at her clothing and decided to change. She was disheveled and it would feel good to be in fresh clothing and wash up a little.

She opened the valise that contained her new clothes and pulled out the necessary items. She was excited to wear a little less clothing, as the women in

these parts did. All of the undergarments were binding and it was hotter here, so it would feel good to wear something cooler.

Tessa chose a pretty calico print dress, gathered her toiletries, and went next door to the wash room. She used the cool water in the bucket on the floor to wash up in and then put on her new clothes. Tessa checked her appearance and was pleased with the way she looked. It was a more relaxed fashion, yet still attractive. Her hair was still in the more formal style, so she took it down and brushed it out. She then French braided it. Again, Tessa was happy with the way it looked. She dabbed a little bit of rosewater behind her ears and her transformation was complete.

She hurriedly put away her things and headed downstairs. As she reached the landing, Sadie and Jack met her there. Sadie took her hand and led her to the kitchen.

“Aunt Lydia is here to meet you. She helped make supper, too,” the girl explained.

“Splendid!” Tessa was happy to have another woman to talk to.

As Lydia watched Tessa walk into the kitchen hand in hand with Sadie, she thought that some kind of an angel was coming her way. The girl was certainly beautiful and Dean and Marcus and the children seemed to like her, but Lydia was going to test her right away. She was protective of these people who had quickly become her family and she wasn’t going to put up with any funny business.

“Hello, Theresa. I’m Lydia Benson, neighbor to the Samuels, and adopted family. It’s good to finally meet you,” Lydia said formally.

“Please, Lydia, you must call me Tessa. All of my close family and friends do, and I certainly hope we quickly become friends. It’s so good to meet you, as well. Dean has told me many good things about you and your husband, Charlie,” Tessa said. She understood that Lydia’s words were meant as a warning and wanted to put the older woman at ease.

Tessa extended her hand and gave Lydia a warm smile. Lydia looked closely at Tessa, searching for any sign of falsity or malice. Finding none, she took Tessa’s hand and shook it.

“Likewise. I like your dress and you have beautiful hair,” Lydia observed.

“Thank you. Something smells good,” Tessa said.

“Aunt Lydia made fried chicken and mashed potatoes,” Jack told her. “That’s my favorite.”

Dean laughed. “Almost everything is his favorite.”

He had finally been able to speak again after watching Tessa come into the room. Although she’d been very pretty in her refined clothing, he thought her infinitely more beautiful in the simple clothing she now wore. It had been a long time since he’d felt the stirrings of desire and it was disconcerting. Dean shoved those thoughts aside.

“C’mon and sit down. We’re almost ready to eat,” Lydia said. To Jack, she said, “Go find your Uncle Seth and let him know to get his rear to supper.”

Jack tore out the door, intent on his mission.

“Is there something I can do to help?” Tessa asked.

“No, no, dear. Please sit. You traveled a long way and need to rest yourself,” Lydia replied.

Tessa smiled. “All right, but I intend to earn my keep, you know.”

Lydia laughed. “Don’t worry, you will.”

Jack soon returned with Seth, who was a slightly larger version of Dean. Seth’s eyes were a slightly flintier blue than Dean’s. He grinned disarmingly at Tessa.

“Well, ain’t you a fine lookin’ thing,” he said.

Tessa blushed at his direct compliment and returned his smile. “Thank you, Seth,” she said with a little laugh.

“Welcome to our crazy life,” Seth said. “We’ll try not to scare you away right away.”

“Behave yourself, Seth,” Lydia said in a motherly fashion.

Seth said, “Yes, ma’am,” but his eyes said otherwise.

Dean didn’t like Seth’s forward behavior and he decided he was going to talk to his brother about it.

Supper was delicious. Tessa had never eaten fried chicken before and marveled at how tasty it was. The mashed potatoes were creamy and flavored

well with butter. There was also canned corn from the last season. Between her empty stomach and the stress of meeting Dean and his family, Tessa's appetite was great and she cleaned her plate quickly.

She'd always eaten with decorum but wasn't shy about eating her fill, even at social events. Women had remarked how jealous they were that she could eat like that and still retain her figure. Tessa told them it was all of the horseback riding and a lot of walking, both of which were true.

Finally, she put her fork on her plate and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. She leaned back with a contented sigh. "That was incredible."

Dean smiled at her. "It's always nice to see a woman eat well and I'm glad you enjoyed it. Not surprised, though. Lydia's a wonderful cook."

"Yes, she is," Tessa agreed.

"Now go on with you both," Lydia said, but Tessa could tell she was pleased by the praise.

Seth said, "Quit acting so shy about it, Lydia. If your cooking stunk, we wouldn't want you to make stuff." He winked at Lydia.

Tessa smiled. Seth and Dean looked a lot alike but had different personalities. Marcus and Seth had similar attitudes. Dean was more serious than the two of them and Tessa wondered if it had always been that way or if it was only since Sarah and their baby had passed. She became lost in her musings for a few moments.

"Tessa?"

It was Sadie who brought her back. "Yes?"

"Will you show me how to braid my hair like that? I can braid, but yours is different," the girl said.

"Of course. I'll show you tomorrow," Tessa promised.

"Thank you."

Tessa looked down into her eager little face and felt something inside her tilt a little. She had a sudden feeling that it would be hard for her to deny Sadie anything. "You're welcome."

"I don't need my hair braided," Jack stated. "What do I get?"

"Jack!" Dean said. "Mind your manners."

“Yes, Pa,” Jack said, but didn’t seem very sorry.

Tessa had a hard time not smiling. She looked at Lydia to distract herself but the other woman seemed to be having the same problem. “Well, actually, I have a little something for each of you. I’ll be right back.”

She rose from the table and hurried upstairs.

Dean watched her go, her skirts swishing as she went. He couldn’t help appreciating her fine figure. He turned back to the table and saw that both of his brothers were watching her as well. “Knock it off,” he said.

“C’mon, Dean. You can’t blame us,” Seth said with a smile. “You say she has sisters?”

“Don’t get any bright ideas,” Dean warned. “Not unless you’re suddenly serious about settling down?”

Seth snorted and finished his iced tea.

“Didn’t think so.”

Marcus chuckled. “Let’s see, she’s beautiful, cultured, educated, and brings presents? If you don’t take her, I will.”

Lydia smacked his arm. “Be serious for once, Marcus. This isn’t a game.”

“Sheesh! I was just kidding,” Marcus rubbed his arm but sobered.

Dean silently applauded Lydia’s reprimand of his little brother. It surprised him how possessive he felt of Tessa already.

Tessa came back into the room, carrying one of her suitcases. Dean rose and took it from her. “You should have told me what you were up to. I’d have carried it for you.”

She laid a hand on his arm briefly. “You are quite the gentleman, but I was quite capable.”

“All right.” Her touch was pleasant and Dean could have stood for longer contact with her.

Tessa pulled her chair out a little more and then sat down with the suitcase in front of her.

“I didn’t wrap them in fancy paper because I was afraid it would get ripped, so I hope you’ll pardon the wrapping. Sadie, this is for you.”

She handed a package to her. Sadie took it carefully and opened it. It was a

little white jewelry box done in white satin with a pink bow on the top. She opened it and inside stood a tiny ballerina. Tessa showed her the winding key on the bottom and soon, the ballerina began to spin, dancing to pretty music.

“It’s beautiful!” Sadie said. “Thank you!”

“You’re welcome.” Tessa turned to Jack. “And now for the young master.” She reached into her suitcase and pulled out another package.

Jack pounced on it and ripped it open. He stopped when he saw the little tin train and train tracks. His mouth hung open and everyone laughed.

Dean said, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him speechless except when he’s sleeping.”

“Thanks, Tessa. It’s great,” Jack said finally. He promptly began playing with it on the kitchen floor.

Lydia was shocked when Tessa handed her a present. “For me? Why?”

“Because I know that you are family and I was not about to leave you out. Besides, as one woman to another, you can never have too much of this,” Tessa answered.

Lydia opened the package and gasped. It was a fine French perfume. Delicately, she sniffed at the bottle and closed her eyes. It was glorious. “You didn’t have to, but I’m sure glad you did. You’re right. I haven’t ever smelled anything like it. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Marcus. You’re next.”

“Me?” Marcus’ eyebrows rose in surprise.

“Yes, you. Here.”

He took the gift, which turned out to be a set of leather bound journals. He gave her a questioning glance. “They’re beautiful.”

“Oh, shoot. That’s the wrong one. I mean, it is and it isn’t,” Tessa was slightly flustered and pulled out another one. “This is the real gift.”

The second one revealed an autographed copy of Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*. He looked at Tessa sharply. “How? Why?” he stammered.

“I was privileged several years ago to be able to meet him and have him sign this book. I’ve gotten much joy from it and would like to pass it on to you because as another avid reader, I knew that you would draw as much enjoyment

from it as I,” Tessa explained. Before Marcus objected, she said, “I shall be extremely offended if you do not accept it.”

Dean was enjoying watching her get the best of his little brother. Usually, it was Marcus getting his own way about something. It was nice to see the tables turned.

Marcus smiled, realizing she’d beaten him. “Very well, milady. As you wish.”

Tessa clapped and then handed Seth a package. Seth frowned a little but took it when she raised her eyebrows at him. He opened it and found a fine dress shirt and silk tie.

She laughed at his confused look. “As I understand it, you are a bit of a scoundrel. No lady will be able to resist you in those. Trust me.”

Seth laughed. “I’m not sure what to think of you.”

“Good. I enjoy keeping people guessing,” Tessa responded. Then she turned to Dean. “And for you.”

Dean looked uncomfortable but took the gift she offered, recognizing that he couldn’t refuse any more than his brothers had been able. He unwrapped a fine pair of work gloves that were soft, yet highly durable. He looked at Tessa in surprise. How had she known he had needed a pair? In fact, all of her gifts were very thoughtful and appropriate to each person.

“Thank you, Tessa,” he said. “These will be useful, that’s for sure.”

“I’m glad.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have anything for you. We weren’t expecting gifts,” Dean said.

Tessa sought to soothe his pride. “Yes, you have. You’ve opened up your home to me and allowed me to meet your family. Not only that, but I want you to teach me some things. So although the presents may not be purchased, think of them as education. Lydia, will you please show me how to make chicken like that and give me some cooking instruction in general?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Marcus, I’d be very grateful if you were to show me how to whittle something?”

“Sure,” he said with a smile.

“Seth, I would enjoy it if you were to tell me what a real cattle drive is like so I can write about it.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t seem like much of a present,” Seth replied.

“To someone like me, it is,” Tessa assured him.

“And, Dean, please show me how to cut a calf from the herd?” Tessa leaned toward him, her eyes pleading with him. “You said that when the men are gone, the women have to carry on, so I see no reason why I shouldn’t be allowed to learn something like that. What if one becomes sick and needs tending? I might need to separate it so it can be treated.” She heard a snicker behind her and frowned at Marcus.

“Sorry, but you’re awful cute when you’re determined,” he said.

Dean tried not to, but he couldn’t prevent the laugh that started in his chest. “Not you, too!” she said in dismay.

“I’m sorry. Marcus is right. You’re very pretty with your eyes all bright and your pink cheeks. Are you sure you really want to learn that? It’s dangerous.”

Tessa crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you implying that I’m a weak woman and can’t handle it?”

Lydia heard the steel under Tessa’s cultured voice and sat back to watch the show.

“Uh, no, not exactly,” Dean said.

“Mr. Samuels, I should like you to explain to me in exact words, then, what your concerns are so that I may put them to rest,” she said.

Dean frowned at her formal tone. “All right. Have you ever ridden a cow horse?”

“No, but I have ridden a lot of horses, including rather difficult ones,” she explained.

“Okay. Have you ever been around cattle? I mean, up close?” Dean asked.

“Does being able to milk a bad-tempered cow count? Or being unafraid to pet a bull?”

Dean nodded. “I guess so. How fast do you ride?”

Tessa gave a snort. “I think you mean race and jump, sir.”

Marcus and Seth exchanged surprised looks.

“What kind of saddle are we talkin’? Side saddle?”

“Yes, but I also ride astride,” Tessa said. “I know! If you teach this to me, I’ll teach you how to jump side saddle.”

Everyone laughed, even Dean. Marcus had tears in his eyes, he laughed so hard. He couldn’t get the picture of Dean in a dress, riding some pretty mare sidesaddle, out of his head.

When the laughter died, Dean said, “All right. You’re on.”

“Thank you,” Tessa said.

Lydia stood and said, “Well, I’d better get this cleaned up. It’s starting to get late.”

Tessa stood with her. “Please let me help. I’ve never washed dishes and I’d like to learn.”

“No time like the present then,” Lydia agreed.

An hour later, she and Lydia had finished and Lydia set about getting the children ready for bed. Tessa decided to leave her to it, figuring she would be learning that soon enough. She also had to remind herself that although she was eager to learn, she didn’t want to overstep and offend. She went into the parlor and found a lamp and matches. She lit it and sat in the rocking chair. It was very comfortable. Tessa thought about the day and knew that before she went to bed, she would have to write as much down as possible. Her eyes closed as she rocked gently, and soon she drifted off.

Dean found her that way. He and his brothers had gone to the barn to make sure things were secure and feed the stock while Lydia and Tessa had cleaned up the kitchen. The kitchen was empty when he came in. Seth had retired to his bunkhouse and Marcus had headed on home. He saw the light coming from the parlor and went in.

Tessa sat in Sarah’s chair, her head tilted to one side. Her eyes were closed and her chest rose and fell slowly. Dean experienced a hollow feeling in his stomach. She was so different in both appearance and personality, but she was a woman and Lydia was the only woman who had sat in that chair since Sarah had died. It was both unsettling and nice.

Tessa was a fetching woman and the male part of him responded. Any man would be lucky to have her. Dean wondered why a woman of her age wasn't married, especially one who obviously came from money and had all of the positive attributes Tessa possessed.

Tessa stirred and opened her eyes. Their gazes locked and that unnamed something passed between them. Tessa smiled, her soft lips curving and her eyes shining softly in the lantern light.

"Hello. You caught me nodding off, I'm afraid," she said.

Dean smiled. "You looked comfortable."

"Very. This is a wonderful chair," she said.

"I bought the set of chairs when Sarah was expecting Sadie. I traded a heifer for them. Her feet would swell and her back hurt when she was further along," he explained.

"She was a lucky woman to have such a thoughtful husband and I know you were all lucky to have her," Tessa said.

Dean nodded. "Isn't it strange for you to come here with the possibility of marriage and be talking about my late wife?" He sat down in the other chair.

"Did you expect me to be jealous?" Tessa asked.

"Something like that. I reckon that a lot of women wouldn't want to talk about her, that they wouldn't want to be compared or something."

"Yes, I've known women like that. They somehow felt as if they were walking in the shadow of the first wife," Tessa agreed. "I think that's unreasonable, especially when that family had such a happy life together. Of course they're not just going to forget all about her and I don't expect any of you do that with Sarah. Dean, I knew what I was getting into when I answered that advertisement. Do you know why I chose yours?"

Dean laughed. "I have no idea. I've wondered about that."

"Because though it was brief, it was full of heart and honesty. There have been a lot of marriages that have had neither of those. Marriages in my circles have been built for purely business reasons and the need to produce heirs. I didn't want that kind of life."

"Is that the way it is with your parents?" he asked.

Tessa's smile lit up her face. "Oh, no. They are an exception. My father is Irish, hence the O'Connor name. My mother is of English descent. He's hot-tempered, humorous, and ruthless in business and sometimes in personal relationships. She's sweeter tempered, but cold as ice when she's angry. They're fire and ice and completely in love."

Dean smiled. "My parents were the opposite. Two peas in a pod. If they ever fought, I never knew it. They had a great marriage."

"That's what I'm after. I know this will take time, but I'm confident so far," Tessa said.

Dean smiled and said, "I'm going to turn in. Do you need anything?"

Tessa rose. "No, thank you. I should do the same. Good night, Dean."

"Night, Tessa."

He watched as she left the room and listened as she walked up the stairs. Dean felt bad that he hadn't been able to return her sentiment, but it was best he was honest. As he went to bed, Dean tried to not think about the fact that a very attractive, available woman, who had come there to possibly marry him, was now sleeping above him. He failed.

CHAPTER 9



Dean was in a panic. Things with Tessa were going very well. She was curious about everything and tried to learn and when she failed, she tried again. It was obvious she was never going to be as good of a cook as Lydia, but they wouldn't starve and she wasn't going to give up working on it. There were a lot of other things at which she excelled, however.

Dean had been skeptical at first, thinking that it wouldn't be long before her real colors showed. He didn't want to admit it, but he had a tiny bit of prejudice when it came to the upper classes and figured that she would grow bored when she saw how hard life was there and end up going home. He was chagrined to find out that wasn't the case.

The children loved her. She coaxed Jack into doing math by daring him that he couldn't do it. It seemed that she understood that men were predisposed to not being able to turn down a dare and little boys were no different. Sadie was a willing pupil, however, and had no problem with studying. Tessa wasn't above playing hide and seek with them or cleaning a stall.

Dean had come running from the barn one day when he heard a woman shrieking in the vicinity of the house. Expecting to see some catastrophe, he couldn't reconcile what he found at first. Tessa was tied to a tree and Jack was running around it whooping like an Indian. Every time he showed her his tomahawk, Tessa would scream and they would laugh. Dean smiled at their playacting and went back to the barn.

Lydia liked Tessa, too. The two women seemed to enjoy their time together

as Lydia taught her about manually running a home and Tessa regaled her with stories of her family and Pittsburgh's social life. His brothers also seemed to be under Tessa's spell. Dean liked her and felt that there might be something between them, but he couldn't truly let himself explore it.

He sat out on the porch swing a little over three weeks after Tessa had arrived, stewing about things. It was just after dusk and the night was muggy. It would most likely storm at some point. Seth appeared out of the dark and sat down beside him.

"What?" Seth said.

Dean looked over at him. "I didn't say anything."

"No, but I heard you thinking from over here," Seth answered. "What's the problem?"

"What am I going to do about Tessa?" Dean said. "She's one hell of a woman, but she's not going to stay here forever and wait for me to make up my mind."

"You're right on both counts. Do you like her?" Seth asked.

"Heck yeah. Everyone likes her."

"Dean, you know what I'm talking about. Do you wanna grab her and kiss her and--"

"Hey! I know what you're saying. Look at her, who wouldn't?"

Seth smiled at Dean's shyness about the physical aspects of a romantic relationship. He'd always been that way. "Exactly, so don't wait too long. You pining for Sarah could cost you a lot of happiness." Seth got up and walked off to his bunkhouse then.

Dean thought about Seth's remarks over the next couple of days and decided his older brother was right. He watched Tessa in a new light and separated his feelings for Sarah from what he felt about Tessa. He found her engaging and desirable. It was time to start courting her.

Tessa was intensely attracted to Dean and was disappointed that he didn't seem to be more interested in her. She told herself that she was silly to think he would be like the men back home, in that they were rather bold about what they wanted and she didn't have to guess at what they thought of her. Dean was a

different breed and Tessa could tell she was going to have to work harder to figure him out.

That's why she was surprised one night after dinner when Dean said to the children, "You practice your lessons for a while. I want to show Tessa the horse she's going to ride tomorrow."

"Okay, Pa," Sadie said. She ran to her room for a book and some paper. Jack reluctantly sat at the table with his sister.

Tessa followed Dean out to the barn. She was further surprised when he took her hand and brought it to his mouth. His lips were soft and warm on her skin and her breath quickened at the contact. She looked at him with questions in her eyes. Dean leaned close to her and ran a thumb over her cheek. It was smooth to the touch.

"Tessa, I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed having you here. I never dreamed that when that ad was put in the paper, someone like you would answer it and want to come here," he said. He was intensely nervous, but forced himself to continue.

She smiled and Dean's eyes followed the motion of her lips. "I never imagined all of this would come from my answering it, either. It's been wonderful. You have a beautiful family, Dean. Your children are adorable and Sadie is going to be a beautiful young woman. Jack is all you. And I can't even begin to really tell you how much I value Lydia's friendship. And your brothers, too."

"I'm glad you like it here and all of them. What about me, Tessa? How do you feel about me?" Dean asked. He was anxious about what she might say, but he had to know.

Tessa's eyes lowered for a moment and then she looked him square in the eye. "I think you are a wonderful man. You run a successful business, even though things have been difficult at times, and your children adore you. My only regret is that you seem to want to keep me at arm's length. I want to know you better, but you have to let me in. How do you feel about *me*, Dean?"

Dean looked down into a face that he had grown eager to see every morning and he stroked her silky hair. It was softer than he'd imagined and he wanted to

bury his hands in it. Instead of answering her with words, Dean gently pulled her closer and dipped his head so that he could press his lips to hers.

She tasted sweet and Dean wanted more. Male instinct took over and he kissed her harder. He'd been without female contact for so long that he felt like he'd been walking around in the desert for three years and, suddenly, a torrent of desire had started to fall on him, filling up the cracks in his lonely heart. Dean wanted to soak up all he could of her.

Joy surged through Tessa as they kissed and she couldn't ever remember feeling like this. She'd been kissed before, but not with such hunger. Tessa's hands encountered Dean's hard chest as he fully closed the distance between their bodies. His strong hands settled on her lower back and Tessa very much enjoyed the way they felt. When the kiss ended, Dean smiled down at her as their breathing came a little rapidly.

"Well, that was nice," he said.

Tessa cleared her throat. "Yes, it was."

"Theresa O'Connor, may I court you?" Dean asked. "I know I should have asked before, um, well, that, but I just couldn't help myself. My apologies."

"Don't you dare apologize for doing something I've wanted to do for a while now," Tessa said. "The answer is yes, you may court me."

Dean grinned down at her and Tessa responded in kind. "We better get looking at that horse or we're going to be in trouble."

Tessa laid a hand on Dean's arm. "Well, then I suppose we should," she said.



A MONTH WENT BY, during which Dean courted Tessa in earnest. He took her to Wolfe Point for a special night out and on moonlight rides. Tessa made Dean laugh more in that month than he'd laughed in the past three years. She got him to do silly things that he hadn't done since Sarah and he had been teenagers. She enticed him into chasing her through a field and she didn't let him forget his promise to teach her how to cut a calf from a herd.

The day they'd chosen to do this, both Marcus and Seth made sure they were

present for the lesson. Tessa had worn a pair of jodhpurs and a blouse in lieu of a dress. Dean's temperature began rising as he covertly watched her shapely body move in the attire. He noticed his brothers doing the same thing and glared at them. Marcus had just smiled while Seth shrugged as if to say, "Who can blame me?"

Dean tried to give Tessa one of the tamer mares they had to ride, but Tessa insisted on riding one of the regular cattle ponies. Reluctantly, Dean put her on Zip, one of their faster geldings.

"Now, you're used to riding English, right?" Dean asked as he sat beside her on Twister.

Tessa nodded. "Yes."

"Well, controlling a cattle pony is a lot different than riding English. In Western riding, we do what's called neck-reining," Dean said.

"What does that mean?" Tessa asked as her brow puckered.

"It means that instead of separately pulling the reins to make them move a certain direction, you're gonna lay the reins against the opposite side of the neck of the direction you want the horse to move in," Dean said. "I'll show you."

Dean started walking Twister. "I want him to go to the left, so I'm gonna press the right rein against the right side of his neck, making him move to the left. You do it."

Tessa thought this very bizarre, but did as Dean directed. She made Zip walk and worked the reins as Dean had shown her. Zip responded and turned to the left.

"Good. Now do the opposite," Dean instructed.

Tessa moved Zip to the right using the method Dean had described.

"Great. Now, I want you to do a few figure eights to really get the hang of it," Dean said and moved Twister out of the way to a corner of the pasture in which they worked.

Tessa concentrated but got the hang of it quickly.

"Put him in a trot," Dean said.

When he was in the appropriate gait, Tessa began posting. Zip stopped at the unfamiliar movement from his rider.

“Tessa, don’t post,” Dean said with a chuckle. “You don’t do that when you’re driving and cutting cattle. You need to sit well down in your seat.”

Seth and Marcus smiled at her. She laughed and said, “It’s force of habit and keeps my rear from getting sore.”

This drew laughter from the men.

Dean said, “We’ll toughen your rear up. Don’t worry.”

Seth guffawed at that and Dean scowled at him.

“Ignore him. Anyway, go ahead and canter while you neck-rein. Speed is important when you’re cutting cattle. Not only that, but you need a free hand so you can work the lasso. Neck-reining frees up your hand to do that,” Dean explained patiently.

Tessa enjoyed the feel of the responsive horse under her. The lightest touch of the reins turned Zip and it was obvious to Tessa that the horse was very well-trained. She urged Zip faster and took the horse on a slightly larger figure eight. Zip was game and did her bidding willingly.

Dean let her go for a little bit as he enjoyed watching her have fun. He also wanted to see what kind of rider she was. She had a good seat and didn’t haul on the reins. It didn’t hurt that her shapely backside was pleasant to see.

“Okay, Tessa, bring him over here,” Dean said.

Her eyes shone with excitement as she rode over to Dean. “That was so much fun. I see what you mean about that freeing up your hand.”

“Yeah. I’m not gonna teach you how to rope yet. We’re gonna have to get you gloves because your hands aren’t tough enough for that. Right now, I want you to get used to chasing a calf. Seth already put one in the paddock. I’m gonna go get it out in the pasture for you.”

“All right,” she said with a smile. “What do I do then?”

“Zip is gonna want to go after it. It’s what he’s trained for. Be ready for quick movements because these horses can spin on a dime. He’ll know what to do mostly, but once in a while, you might have to point him in the right direction. Mainly, you’re just along for the ride,” Dean said.

Marcus and Seth smiled at each other. Now the fun would begin. Dean chased the calf out into the open and it took off. Tessa tensed, ready for Zip to

chase it. The horse didn't move.

"What is he doing?" Tessa asked.

Dean let out a short, piercing whistle and Zip sprang forward. Tessa had to grab the saddle horn for a moment but quickly recovered. She gave the cow pony his head and grinned as they picked up speed. The calf knew the horse was gaining on it and changed direction. Zip followed and Tessa leaned into the quick turn. So it went until Zip had the calf cornered. The horse was waiting for the calf to be roped.

Tessa decided that there was no point keeping the calf cornered and turned Zip back in Dean's direction. As she approached, Marcus clapped.

"Well done, Tessa. Well done. A lot of other people would have fallen off during all of that, but you hung in there," he said with admiration.

Seth nodded. "Yep. He's right."

She looked at Dean, who smiled at her. "We'll make a cowgirl out of you yet," he said. "That was a good first lesson. We'll do more tomorrow."

"I want to see you rope the calf," Tessa said. "Please?"

Dean smiled. When she looked at him that way, there wasn't much he wouldn't do for her, he realized. "Okay," he said and shook out his lariat.

He clicked to Twister and they thundered across the pasture toward the calf that had come back toward them a little ways. Dean didn't need to corner the calf. Twister got in range of the calf and Dean's lasso snaked through the air and settled over the calf's neck. Twister skidded to a stop and Dean wrapped the lasso around the saddle horn and leaped off the horse and ran to the calf.

Tessa's heart raced as she watched Dean flip the calf over and tie three of its legs up in a matter of seconds. The outline of his powerful muscles was visible under his shirt as he finished and stood up. All of them cheered. Dean playfully bowed to them and then released the calf. It got up and wandered off, acting a little dazed. Dean wound up his lasso again and walked over to Tessa with Twister trailing him.

"That was the most exciting thing I've ever seen," she told him as she put a hand on his arm.

Dean looked down into her flushed face and wanted to kiss her. He hadn't

expected to ever meet anyone who made him feel like that again, but here Tessa was right in front of him and if his brothers and children hadn't been around, he'd have had her in his arms right then. However, he had to settle for looking at her and grinning.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," he said. "It's not often I have such a pretty audience."

Tessa's cheeks became even pinker at his compliment. "Then I shall consider myself privileged to be able to watch a real cowboy work and receive a lesson from said cowboy."

Seth and Marcus watched Dean laugh with Tessa and looked at each other. It was good to see their brother lighten up a little and they knew that Tessa was the cause of his improved disposition. Seth motioned for Marcus to follow him and they went over to his bunkhouse.

The kids ran off to the stream that ran in back of the house. It was hot and they could cool off there. They saw their father rope cattle all the time so it wasn't very exciting to them.

Noticing that they were suddenly alone, Dean took advantage of it. He cupped Tessa's face and brought his lips down on hers. Tessa was caught up in the excitement and was more than ready to kiss Dean. She slid her hands over his shoulders and got rid of his hat so she could thread her fingers through his short, soft hair.

Fire spread its way through Dean and he couldn't help himself from deepening the kiss. She felt so good and he could tell she felt the same way. Tessa smelled heavenly and tasted the same way. It seemed unbelievable to him that she was as attracted to him as he was to her.

Seth and Marcus looked out one of the windows of his bunkhouse.

"Look at him go," Seth said.

Marcus pulled him away a little. "I can't see around your big, fat head."

"My head is not fat. As for big, I can't help that. I didn't make my head," Seth said.

Marcus laughed at that. "Oh, Lord. I don't think we should watch anymore of this," he said.

“You’re right,” Seth said. “Damn. I don’t think I ever saw him kiss Sarah that way right out in the open.”

“Huh. Me either, come to think of it. Okay, c’mon. We shouldn’t spy like this,” Marcus said.

“Yeah, I know,” Seth said and drew away from the window.

Marcus followed him and said, “I don’t wanna go out there and interrupt them. I wonder how long they’re gonna be.”

Seth chuckled. “I don’t think they’re timin’ it. Wanna play cards?”

“Instead of working?” Marcus asked with a smile. “You bet. Get out the deck.”

Marcus sat down at the small table in the bunkhouse and waited for Seth to deal.



AT SOME POINT, reason prevailed and they ended the kiss by mutual agreement. Their breathing was ragged and passion was reflected in both of their faces. Tessa put a hand to her chest and laughed.

“Well, I, um, I don’t really...” she stammered.

“Uh huh. My thoughts exactly,” Dean said and retrieved his hat from the ground.

Tessa blew out a breath and said, “I need something cool to drink.”

“I think that’s a fine idea,” Dean said.

They walked toward the house and Dean looked around for his brothers. It was funny that they’d disappeared like that. He frowned and told Tessa to go on to the house. He jogged over to Seth’s bunkhouse and opened the door. It was empty. He shrugged and closed the door again, reasoning that they must be out in the barn doing something. Smiling, he ran across to the house again.

Seth and Marcus stood along the wall behind the door and waited a few minutes to make sure Dean had gone.

“That was close,” Seth said.

“Yeah. How are we gonna get out of here without him seeing us now?”

Marcus asked.

Seth arched an eyebrow at his little brother. "Why do we gotta go anywhere? I was winning."

"Hmm. You're right. He won't check here again, right?" Marcus wondered.

"Why are we hidin' from him in the first place?" Seth asked.

Marcus chuckled. "Because he's a tyrant and he's scary."

"We're grown men. Why is he so scary?"

"I don't know. He just is. Sorta like Pa," Marcus explained.

"You're smarter than you look, little brother. That's what it is. He sounds just like him," Seth said. "I kept tryin' to figure it out. You know, why he, uh, what's the word...?"

"Intimidates you?" Marcus supplied.

"Yeah, we'll go with that. Well, he's not Pa and I'm not gonna let him do it anymore," Seth said defiantly.

"Right," Marcus said.

"So let's play cards," Seth said and sat back down.

"Deal," Marcus said.

CHAPTER 10



Dean hadn't felt this way in so long and he began having hope that he could finally get past his grief and perhaps build a new life with this amazing woman. He didn't tell Marcus so, but he was grateful to his little brother for going ahead and placing that advertisement. If he hadn't, Tessa would have never come here and Dean wouldn't have a second chance at happiness.

One night, Dean paced the floor in his room after they'd gone to bed. He knew it was time for him to make up his mind about Tessa. It seemed that they were compatible on many levels and he could certainly do worse for a wife. That they shared a passionate connection was evident and Dean had to keep a tight rein on his physical reaction to Tessa. He wasn't the type of man who believed in casual liaisons and he didn't plan on having one with Tessa. She deserved better than that.

Dean knew it wasn't fair to Tessa to be kept in limbo and it wasn't fair to himself or his children, either. They were very attached to Tessa now and he didn't want them to be hurt if things didn't work out between them and she left.

The next day, he made the trek to Wolfe Point, telling Tessa and the children that he had to go work on the farthest part of their land. He didn't get back until almost sundown. Tessa had waited supper on him and he walked in to find that she'd made a meatloaf with potatoes and green beans. It was good and he remarked about how her cooking was improving, which delighted her.

One day, a short time after this, he rode over to Lydia and Charles' house.

Their kids came out and surrounded him. They loved Dean and were always full of questions for him. This day, they wanted to know where Tessa was. She always played with them.

He greeted them and explained that Tessa was working at home. Then Dean headed out to the barn where he knew he'd find Charlie. Charlie was a big, gruff man with iron gray hair and a mustache. He was a few years older than Lydia. He looked up as Dean came in the barn and could tell the younger man was thinking about something.

"What's on your mind, son?" he asked as he cleaned a bridle.

Dean sat down next to him and pulled out a ring box from his pants pocket. He opened it and showed it to Charlie. Charlie whistled.

"Nice ring. It's unexpected. I didn't know you felt that way about me," Charlie quipped.

Dean laughed. "Shut up, you old fart."

Charlie chuckled. "So, you're gonna ask her to marry you? I think it's a good move. She's a good woman and it doesn't hurt that she's easy on the eyes. The kids like her a lot, too."

"I know. She's funny and smart and, yeah, beautiful, and I'd be crazy to let her get away, right?" Dean said. "You know, I'm confident about everything else. The ranch, my kids, breaking horses, breeding cattle, and growing crops, but when it comes to a new woman in our lives, I get all twisted up inside."

Charlie laughed. "I'm not surprised. It can be a hard thing. I think your head and heart are in the right place, though."

"I'm gonna ask her tonight. I can't put it off any longer or I'll lose the nerve," Dean said.

Charlie nodded. "Yep. Good thinkin'. Proposing is nerve wracking, all right. Best to do it and get it over with."

Dean said, "Yeah. Wish me luck. The next time you see me, I hope to be an engaged man."



DEAN AND TESSA lay out on a blanket in one of the pastures. Marcus stayed with the kids to make sure they weren't disturbed. The kids didn't mind this in the least since they loved spending time with their funny uncle. Dean rolled over and looked down at Tessa. The moonlight created a soft glow on her face. He loved the way she smiled at him.

"Tessa, you are a wonderful woman and we are so lucky you're here. Since you arrived, you've made things better for us all, but especially for me. After Sarah died, I never wanted to get involved with another woman. I never wanted to open myself up to that kind of pain again. You've changed my mind about that and made me think that I could be happy again. I don't want to let you slip through my fingers. Theresa Marie O'Connor, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Tessa's heart filled with joy and tears welled in her eyes. "I've never met a man like you, Dean. Someone strong and devoted and honest. It's wonderful here and I adore your children. I've always said that I didn't want to replace Sarah in their eyes and I still mean it, but it means so much to me that you would trust me with them. I promise to be a good wife and a good mother-figure. I love you and yes, Dean, I'll marry you."

Dean took out the ring box and opened it. The moonlight glinted off the small diamond and Tessa's breath caught in her chest. Dean lifted her left hand and slipped the ring on her third finger. Tessa looked at the ring and thought it beautiful. However, what it represented was something much more meaningful than its beauty.

She wasn't upset that Dean hadn't told her he loved her. Tessa knew men well enough to know that they sometimes couldn't say that kind of thing but she hoped that one day, she would hear those words. Right now, she was happy that he'd showed her by asking for her hand and giving her a ring.

Tessa looked up at this handsome man she'd fallen in love with and pulled his head down so she could kiss him. They kissed each other tenderly as the moon shined its approving light on them.

CHAPTER 11



Dean and Tessa broke the news to the children at breakfast the next day. Sadie was thrilled and wanted to know when they were getting married. Jack was happy about it but quickly moved on to more pressing matters, like what they were having for breakfast. The rest of the family was equally happy and the couple was congratulated by all.

Neither Dean nor Tessa wanted a lengthy engagement and the ceremony date was set for the next month when the circuit preacher would be in Dawson again. Tessa showed Lydia her dress.

“I can’t believe you brought it with you,” Lydia said. “It’s gorgeous.”

Tessa held it against her. “I wanted to be prepared and I wasn’t sure that there would be a dressmaking boutique near here. Do you really like it?”

Lydia said, “Yes, and so will Dean. He’s going to be bowled over when he sees you.”

“I’m so nervous, Lydia. Unbelievably happy, but nervous nonetheless,” Tessa said.

“Getting married is serious business. It’s not to be taken lightly because it’s for the rest of your life.” Lydia took Tessa’s hand. “I know that you and Dean belong together. I see the way you look at each other and it reminds me of Charlie and I. We were so in love and it didn’t take us long to get married either. So don’t be nervous. Just be happy.”

Bolstered by Lydia’s assurances, Tessa’s fears melted away and she concentrated on the festive occasion ahead of her.

The ceremony was simple yet elegant, thanks to Lydia's eye for detail. She and Sadie decorated the small chapel in Dawson with flowers and ribbons. The effect was very quaint.

Tessa became a little teary-eyed over the fact that her family wasn't there to witness her wedding day, but she told herself that perhaps they could come West sometime and celebrate. She also felt guilty over sneaking away to start a new life without a proper good-bye. It had been necessary though, because she would have never been allowed to do so if she had been upfront about it.

Dean was incredibly nervous as he waited at the altar. He fidgeted with his tie and jacket. What if he was making a mistake? Once the ceremony was over, that was it; there would be no going back. He cared greatly for Tessa but wasn't sure if he loved her. In a way, it wasn't fair to her, but she didn't seem to be worried about that.

Seth, his best man, kept trying to calm him down. Marcus also stood up with him. The preacher, John Williams, was a circuit minister and was in town for a week to minister to the parishioners there. Lydia acted as Tessa's maid of honor and Sadie was thrilled to be her bridesmaid. Jack had happily accepted the duties of ring bearer. Charlie gave Tessa away.

Pastor John's wife, Melody, played the wedding march on the piano. When Dean saw Tessa coming down the aisle, he couldn't breathe for a moment. She was incredibly beautiful and he couldn't believe she was marrying him. He was a lucky man and he vowed to do his best to make her happy.

Tessa's hair was done in an updo with baby's breath woven into it. Her deep blue eyes were alight with happiness. She wore just a hint of color on her lips. The dress she wore was lovely with a tight, demur bodice and a full, flowing skirt. She carried a bouquet of lavender and baby's breath.

When she reached the altar, Charlie gave her hand to Dean. He squeezed her hand and looked into her gorgeous eyes. Her smile was radiant as they said their vows. When they exchanged their vows, there were tears of joy in her eyes.

Pastor Williams said, "By the powers invested in me by the state of Montana, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride."

Dean's kiss was long and tender and Tessa lost herself in it. Sadie giggled

and it made Dean and Tessa break apart. Dean leaned his forehead on Tessa's and chuckled.

"I guess I forgot that there were other people here," he whispered.

"Me, too," Tessa replied.

They turned and faced the wedding participants. The minister presented the newlyweds to them and they were congratulated and embraced. They held a celebratory meal in the basement of the chapel. It was a small affair, but jubilant nonetheless. They cut the cake and fed each other a piece amid cheers and laughter.

Lydia and Charlie took Sadie and Jack for a week to give the newlyweds privacy. Dean and Tessa bid them goodbye and rode off in their buggy, which had been decorated with ribbons and flowers.

Dean was quiet on the drive to their ranch.

"What are you thinking about, husband?" Tessa asked. She loved the way that sounded.

Dean smiled at her. "I was just thinking that I'm a lucky man and that I'm looking forward to our life together."

"As am I," Tessa said and leaned against Dean.

They turned onto the road leading into the ranch and as the house came into view, Tessa had a true sense of homecoming and saw the ranch in a new light. This was her home now and she was now a married woman. Dean stopped the buggy by the house and helped Tessa down.

"You go on in the house and I'll get the horse taken care of and feed the stock quickly, okay?" he said.

Tessa nodded. "Yes, of course. I'll be waiting." She gave Dean a coy look and then entered the house.

Dean hurried to the barn to get his chores done.

When he entered the kitchen, it was dimly lit by candles and two wine glasses sat on the table, over which a lacy table cloth had been placed. Tessa sat in one of the chairs. She poured them each a glass of wine.

Dean loosened his tie and undid several buttons of his shirt. Tessa swallowed at the sight of his bare throat and the top of his chest. "Come and have a drink."

Dean pulled another chair over closer to her and sat down. Their legs touched and Tessa felt the heat of his thigh against hers. Tessa picked up her glass. "A toast."

Dean raised his in response.

"To a bright future and a new beginning for us all. May we all share love and laughter and happiness for the rest of our lives," Tessa said.

"Well said," Dean agreed.

They touched their glasses together and then set them down. Dean leaned over and cupped the back of her head. He brushed his mouth gently over hers and such desire as he'd never known rushed through him. Tessa's lips tasted of the wine and added to her own sweetness.

Tessa placed her hands against his chest and leaned closer. She enjoyed the strong flesh under her palms and became bolder. Pushing his suit jacket from his shoulders, Tessa shifted even closer to him. Dean began removing the pins from her hair, letting them fall to the floor. Once the silken tresses were loose from their confinement, Dean buried his hands in her hair.

A soft moan escaped Tessa's lips and their embrace became even more passionate. Together, they got rid of Dean's suit jacket completely and Dean trailed kisses along Tessa's neck to her collarbone. Dean could take no more and rose from the table. Taking her hand, he led her to their bedroom.

CHAPTER 12



The next two days were filled with happiness for Dean and Tessa. Dean still took care of the stock and Tessa kept the house, but they also had many passionate moments together. One night, they lay in a pasture after they'd made love. They watched the stars and lay close against each other.

"Tell me about the winters here again. You told me about them in your letters and it felt as if I were there, it was so descriptive," Tessa requested.

Dean fought the fear that gripped him. He had no idea what Marcus had told her and he certainly wasn't good with words like Marcus was. "Well, that was a little while ago, so I'm not sure if I remember exactly."

Tessa snuggled even closer. "I know. It's all right. It's very hard to recreate something like that."

Dean cleared his throat. "Let's see. They're cold, of course."

"Winters generally are," Tessa said with a laugh.

"The storms can come on real quick. We usually get at least one blizzard each winter. It can get down below zero sometimes and we have to make sure the cattle don't freeze. When we see a blizzard is coming, we string a rope between here and the barn so that we don't get lost going out to feed them. You can't really see where you're going because the snow comes down so thick and fast," Dean told her and mentally cringed.

Tessa was puzzled. Dean was giving her a general description, but nothing like what his letters had described. As a writer and a student of writing, she recognized that the voice was not the same at all. It was as if someone else had

written those letters. Maybe it was just because she had put him on the spot. She had an idea.

“Yes, and you said that the clouds become dark gray, like dull metal,” Tessa said.

Dean nodded. “Yep, I did.”

Tessa tensed beside him and raised her head so their eyes could meet. “Your letter said no such thing. You didn’t write those letters, did you?”

Dean knew his goose was cooked. “Look, I’m not good with words, so I had Marcus help me out.”

“Marcus? He wrote them?” Tessa moved away from him as shock took hold of her. “Did he read the letters I wrote back?”

“Yes. He had to so he knew how to answer them,” Dean said. It seemed reasonable to him.

Fury blurred Tessa’s vision for a few moments. “I said many personal things in those letters, Dean. Things I didn’t think anyone else would ever read! How could you do that? How could you lie to me?”

Dean propped himself up on an elbow. “I didn’t lie. Everything in those letters was true.”

Tessa got up and pulled her dress over her head. Anger showed in every movement as she pulled it down and straightened it. “How would you know?” she shouted. “You didn’t write them!” She gathered up her petticoats, turned away, and headed for the house.

Dean hurriedly put his pants on and went after her. He caught her arm and turned her back around. “Everything in them was true. Marcus only wrote what I told him to write. He just said it better than I can,” he said.

“Did you approve them before he sent them?” she asked stiffly.

Dean scowled. “No. I figured he knew what he was doing.”

Tessa looked down at her arm. “Kindly unhand me. I don’t care to be touched by someone I don’t know.”

“What? You can’t be serious. Not after the past few days,” Dean said.

Tessa colored because she knew he was referring to their lovemaking. “Yes, well. That won’t be happening again. That was when I thought I knew the man I

married.”

“Tessa, you do know me,” Dean insisted. “And I know you. I read every one of your letters, over and over. And we’ve spent so much time together over the last couple of months. How could we not know each other?”

Tessa ripped her arm out of Dean’s grasp. “I said let me go. I came here based on what was said in those letters. You don’t even know what was in them! I fell halfway in love just from what they contained. I think I married the wrong brother.”

She whirled and entered the kitchen. Tessa marched to their bedroom and packed up her belongings in her suitcases. Dean watched silently as she finished.

“I’m not leaving the house. I’m moving back upstairs. I don’t want to leave the children and I’ll do my wifely duties, all but one,” Tessa said giving him a meaningful look. “I can’t share a room with a man I don’t know.”

Dean began to get angry. “This is ridiculous. You’re blowing this way out of proportion.”

“Really? Am I?” Tessa’s eyes blazed with pain and anger. “I don’t think so. Now, if you’ll move out of the way, please.”

Dean could see by the stubborn set of her jaw and stiff posture that she wasn’t going to budge. “Fine. Have it your way,” he said and left the house.

Only when she was in her old room upstairs and had deposited her things on the floor did Tessa let the tears come. She shut and locked the door and lay down on her bed. She sobbed quietly into the pillows. Tessa was hurt because Dean had essentially lied to her and he couldn’t see it. He didn’t think it was a big deal, but, to her it was. Had it not been for what was said in those letters, she would have never left home to come West. She would not be married to a man who had deceived her and thought she didn’t have a right to be hurt.

Suddenly, she wanted her mother just like she had when she was a little girl and had suffered some kind of hurt. She needed her mother’s strength and comfort, but could not have it. Tessa cried herself to sleep as she realized how alone she was and how foolish she had been to come to Montana all alone.

CHAPTER 13



When Lydia and Charlie brought the kids back a few days later, Lydia could tell that something was going on with the newlyweds. She waited until after Sadie and Jack had a chance to visit with them before asking about it. Charlie had gone out to the barn with Dean and Sadie and Jack had gone upstairs, so Lydia took the opportunity to bring it up.

“Is everything all right?” she asked Tessa.

Tessa smiled. “Of course. Things are fine.”

Lydia cocked her head. “I’m your friend, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then tell me what’s wrong,” Lydia said kindly.

Tessa bit her lip, undecided if she should talk to Lydia about it. It was true that they were friends, but she was family to Dean and Tessa wasn’t sure who Lydia would side with.

Lydia wasn’t going to let it go. “Tessa, I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me.”

Tessa sat down at the table. Her shoulders slumped in dejection. “He lied to me, Lydia. Dean lied to me.”

Lydia’s brows drew together and her brown eyes held puzzlement. “About what?” Dean was one of the most honest people she knew and it was hard to believe that he’d been dishonest with Tessa. However, she also knew that Tessa didn’t lie, so she was ready to hear Tessa out.

“You know that we exchanged quite a few letters,” Tessa began.

“Yes.”

“His letters were wonderful. He told me about Montana and your lives here in great detail and it was splendid. We discussed so many things and I first began having feelings for him based on those letters or I would have never come here,” Tessa said.

Lydia smiled. “I can understand that.”

Tessa sent her a sad smile. “I came to find out a few days ago that he didn’t write them. Marcus did.”

Lydia’s smile faded as Tessa’s words sank in. “He didn’t write them? Marcus wrote them? Why?”

“He says that Marcus writes and speaks much better about things, that he doesn’t describe things the way Marcus does. So he read my letters, told Marcus a basic way how to answer them, and then just left the rest up to Marcus. Marcus read my letters, Lydia. My privacy was invaded. I said things in those letters that were meant for Dean alone. He never even looked at the letters Marcus wrote back to me.

“That’s how I found out that he didn’t write them. I was asking him questions about what he’d written and his answers didn’t add up. I confess that I tricked him a little. I’m not proud of it, but I had to know the truth,” Tessa finished and took a steadying breath. She didn’t want to have the children come into the kitchen to find her crying.

Lydia was stunned. It was something she never would have expected of Dean. She saw both sides of the issue. She knew Dean had trouble talking about his feelings and that neither he nor Seth had Marcus’ head for reading and writing. Lydia could understand why Dean would get Marcus to write the letters, but he could have handled things differently.

“You think I’m being silly, don’t you?” Tessa asked anxiously. Lydia’s opinion mattered greatly to her.

Lydia laughed. “No, I don’t. It’s understandable why you’re hurt. He should have asked your permission to have Marcus help him. Dean should have explained the situation, but that’s male pride for you, Tessa. I’m sure you’re used to dealing with men who have a lot of education, but, out here, it’s different. As

you know, we don't have a school near here, so it was a good thing the boys' father was fairly well educated. My mother was a teacher, so I was lucky, too. Marcus was a natural born student, much the same as Sadie, but Seth and Dean were not and had to work at it."

"I see," Tessa said. "I sometimes forget that it's not as settled here and that schooling is scarce. I can understand, but it's the principle behind it. He doesn't understand why I'm so upset about it. I feel as if I was brought here under false pretenses. I wanted to connect with *Dean* and no one else, and I feel as if that didn't happen. I moved back upstairs. I can't sleep in the same room with him."

Lydia put a hand over her mouth. "Oh, my. I would ask that you don't do anything rash, Tessa. It might take some time, but do you think that there's a chance of forgiveness?"

"I don't know. That might be up to him, Lydia. I'm just so hurt right now," Tessa said.

Sadie came into the room then and the subject was dropped.



EVENING HAD COME and Dean sat on the small porch of Seth's bunkhouse, explaining the situation with Tessa to his brother. He valued Seth's opinion and needed a sounding board.

Seth let out a low whistle. "Boy, you really stepped in it, Dean."

Dean's face took on a stubborn scowl. "I told her why I did it and it didn't seem to matter to her. I wasn't trying to lie. I just didn't want her to think I was stupid."

"Hmm. Seems like that's what happened anyway," Seth said with a smile.

"This isn't funny, Seth. She moved back upstairs."

Seth said, "Well, I can't blame her in a way."

"Why?"

Seth shifted in the rocking chair on the small porch of his bunkhouse to look at his brother. "Dean, the only woman you've ever been romantically involved with before was Sarah. You two knew each other as youngsters and fell in love

early. She was a sweet woman and I loved her very much,” he said. “But take it from someone who’s been, uh, involved with a lot more women. There are things that matter most to women and honesty is number one. Even if they don’t like what you’re saying, if you’re honest, they respect you. You weren’t completely honest with her and she thinks that everything was a lie. She’s not going to want to share a bed with someone she thinks she doesn’t know.”

Dean sighed. “There were no lies in those letters. Everything Marcus put in those letters was what I told him to write. He just says it better, that’s all. I didn’t know this was going to be such a big deal.”

“Yeah, you’re right about Marcus being smart like that. He’s like Pa. Ma was a smart woman, too, don’t forget. Just in a different way,” Seth said. “As far as lying goes, I’m not sayin’ you meant to trick her or anything, but you should have let her know that someone was helpin’ you. I didn’t know Marcus was or I would have mentioned that part to you.”

“I know. Tessa comes from a whole other world, Seth. She has an education and I figured that she wouldn’t keep writing to someone who sounded like I would have. How was I gonna compete with those letters?” Dean asked.

“Yep, I get that, too.”

Dean shot Seth an exasperated look. “You get it, but I’m still wrong somehow. That’s what you’re sayin’. She wouldn’t even listen to me or try to understand.”

Seth chuckled. “Well, that’s typical. When anyone’s feelings get hurt, it’s hard to listen to reason. You know what that’s like. Maybe just give her some time and let her temper cool.”

Dean said nothing more. He may not be a man of many words, but he was a man of action. He was danged if he was going to let this go on. Dean wasn’t going to let the woman go on thinking the worst of him.



MARCUS SAT out on his porch that same evening, whittling like usual. Roscoe sat beside him. The dog’s ears perked up and he barked. Marcus looked up and was

surprised to see Tessa riding Zip up to his porch.

“Hey there, Tessa. Did you come for your whittling lesson?” he asked with a smile.

As Tessa came up on the porch and sat in one of the chairs close to him, Marcus could see that something was troubling his sister-in-law.

She looked him in the eyes and said, “Marcus, it has come to my understanding that you were the one who wrote back and forth with me.”

“Yeah. Well, sort of. Dean responded to what you wrote, but I just made it a little more polished,” Marcus said.

Tessa’s eyes became stormy with anger. “You had no right to read the things I wrote. They were meant for Dean and no one else, Marcus. You invaded my privacy and now I feel as if I do not really know my husband. Do you understand that?”

Marcus put down his whittling and faced her. “I’m sorry, Tessa. I didn’t think of it like that. I was just trying to help him out, that’s all. He’s pretty reticent about his feelings, especially after Sarah and the baby.”

“I would have appreciated knowing that he had help with writing them, but I will be honest with you. If I had known that someone else was reading my letters, the correspondence would have stopped and I would not be here,” she said.

Marcus’ eyebrows rose. “Really? You feel that strongly about it?”

“Yes! Imagine if you were writing to someone, telling them very personal things, only to find out that they were reading them to other people,” Tessa said.

“Tessa, no one ever saw those letters but Dean and I,” Marcus said. “I promise you that. Is that what you and Dean are fighting about?”

It surprised Tessa that Marcus was aware of the strife between her and Dean. “You know? Did Lydia tell you?”

“No. It’s your body language when you’re together. I’m good at reading it. I could tell that something was amiss just by the way you acted around each other,” Marcus said.

“You are obviously very observant,” Tessa said. “Yes. This is what is wrong between us. I feel as if I do not know him. He didn’t even take the time to read

what you wrote in response to my letters.”

Marcus smiled a little. “That’s because Dean trusts me so much. I should have made him proofread them. This whole thing is partly my fault. I got caught up in playing matchmaker and I didn’t stop to consider your feelings about someone besides Dean reading your letters. I should have written to explain to you why Dean wanted help. But in a way, I’m glad I didn’t because you’re here now.”

Tessa said, “So you feel the deception was worth it?”

“Yeah. Dean has been miserable, Tessa, as you know. Since you came here, he started coming alive again and seeing him happy again, well, I can’t really tell you how much it means to me and Seth to see him like that. And can you honestly say that in your heart that you aren’t glad, in a way, that you didn’t know? You just said that you wouldn’t have come if you’d known about my involvement. You would have missed out on a good man and gaining a good family.”

Tessa looked at Marcus with narrowed eyes. “You are very smart and very tricky. I am still very upset about this, but you are right. I am glad that I didn’t miss out on Dean. Please do not ever divulge what those letters contained.”

“You mean *contain*. He kept every one of them, Tessa,” Marcus said.

“Really?”

“Yep. I will never tell anyone what’s in them. My lips are sealed,” Marcus said with a smile.

Tessa smiled back and found that her anger with Marcus was cooling. “You really are hard to stay angry with.”

Marcus grinned. “It’s just part of my natural charm,” he said and patted her shoulder.

Tessa had learned early on that Marcus was a hands on type of person and that no offense was to be taken from it. She laughed and said, “Now, about that whittling lesson.”

CHAPTER 14



Tessa walked along the road that ran adjacent to their property, picking some raspberries that had just ripened. Sadie worked along the other side. If they were able to pick enough, Tessa wanted to make a couple of pies. She heard Sadie singing and smiled. Sadie had a sweet voice and Seth especially was always getting her to sing.

The sound of carriage wheels came to Tessa's ears. She looked up to see one in the distance. They didn't get a whole lot of traffic on the road so she was curious about who might be approaching. It was a large carriage pulled by two horses. Sadie stopped picking berries and came to stand with Tessa as it drew closer.

The driver pulled the reins and the carriage came to a halt at the entrance of their ranch.

"Hello, miss. Do you live here? Is this the Samuels place?" he asked.

"Yes, it is," Tessa said.

One of the carriage doors opened and a man alighted. Tessa's face paled and she gasped as she recognized him.

Sadie looked from Tessa to the man and asked, "Tessa, who is he?"

"My father."



GEOFFREY STOOD on the dirt road in his fine clothes and looked at his daughter.

He knew it was her, but she was dressed as he'd never seen her. Tessa's emerald dress was pretty enough, but there were far less petticoats underneath. Her hair was done in a long braid that reached almost to her waist. Normally, Tessa wore her hair in a stylish coiffure.

She carried a basket and he could see some berries in it. His daughter was picking berries like hired help. Tessa raised her left hand to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear and he saw the flash of jewelry on her third finger. Married? Tessa had married? His feelings were muddled as he stepped forward.

"Tessa!" Above all, he was overjoyed to have found his daughter safe. He had been incredibly worried about her. To find her apparently well gave him immense pleasure. He opened his arms to her.

Tessa couldn't believe her father had found her at first and then remembered that he was a man of vast resources and that he possessed a keen intelligence. She was scared of his reaction to finding out about her marriage, but she had greatly missed him. Tessa ran and let herself be enfolded in her father's comforting arms.

They stood there, clinging to each other, tears flowing freely for several minutes. Then Tessa drew back and looked up at her father. "Papa, I know you're angry, but please listen before passing judgment."

He looked down at his daughter, who was so much like him. "Yes, I'm angry. We have been worried to death about you. However, this isn't the place to discuss it," he said with a meaningful glance at the driver. He seemed to notice Sadie for the first time. "And who is this lovely young lady?"

Sadie's cheeks flushed at the compliment. Tessa broke away from her father and went to Sadie.

She took the girl's hand and led her to Geoffrey. "This is my stepdaughter, Sadie Samuels. Sadie, this is my father, Geoffrey O'Connor."

Sadie remembered how Tessa had taught her to greet gentlemen of a higher status. She dropped into a deep curtsy and then rose and looked shyly at Geoffrey. "Pleased to meet you, sir," she said.

Geoffrey hid his shock over the word "stepdaughter" and smiled at her good manners. He bowed to her then and said, "Pleased to make your acquaintance,

Miss Samuels.”

Sadie giggled and picked up her basket again.

Tessa picked up hers and handed it to Sadie. “Will you please take these to the house and tell your father we have company?”

“Yes, Tessa. Of course,” Sadie said and trotted down the lane to the ranch.

Geoffrey turned to the driver. “Please take my things to their residence and place them where you are directed. Here is your pay as promised. Thank you for your services.”

The driver took the money, pleased that it was more than they’d agreed on and tipped his hat to Geoffrey. “Thank you, sir. It’s been a pleasure.” He started the horses off again, following Sadie’s path.

Geoffrey regarded Tessa carefully then. Her skin showed signs of sun and there were a few freckles across her nose. Geoffrey was happy to see that she looked healthy. “So this is where you ran off to. The middle of nowhere, when you had everything you could ever want? I need an explanation for your actions, daughter.”

Tessa felt a prick of anger but squelched it as she tried to see things from his perspective.

“Papa, I don’t need material things like Maddie and Claire do. I told you again and again how I felt, but you didn’t listen. No one did. So I did what I had to do. I had to set out on my own and live my life as I wished,” she said softly. “You of all people should understand that. You left Ireland to come to America, after all.”

Geoffrey frowned. “That was different.”

“Why? If you say it was because you were a man, you can turn around and leave right now,” Tessa warned in a firm tone.

Geoffrey raised an eyebrow. “Very well. I won’t say it and I’m not leaving. At least not before I meet your husband.”

“You’ll like him,” Tessa said, despite her and Dean’s recent differences. “He’s a good man.” She frowned despite her words. *How can I be proud of Dean, yet be so angry with him*, she wondered. Tessa looked back up at her father who was looking at her with intense curiosity. “Come then, Papa.”



“HER WHO IS HERE?” Dean said as he looked at his daughter.

“Her pa, Pa,” Sadie said. “He’s tall and looks like Tessa.”

Jack said, “He’s our grandpa then, right?”

“No,” Dean said. “Not really.”

“Yeah, he is,” Jack said stubbornly.

Dean let it go. “Where are they?” he asked as a carriage pulled up to the house. “Stay,” he said to the kids and went outside to meet the driver.

“I have some luggage here,” the man said as he climbed down from the vehicle. “Where do you want it?”

“I’ll take it,” Dean said.

The driver handed Dean two suitcases made of fine leather and a briefcase. “There you are.”

“Thanks,” Dean said.

The other man climbed back up on the coach, clicked to the horses, and turned around. He headed off back up the drive.

Dean deposited the bags in the kitchen, warned the children that they weren’t to mess with them, and told them to stay put. Then he went back out and began walking up the road to meet Tessa and her father. He was nervous about meeting the man. This wasn’t like when he’d met Sarah’s parents. He’d been fifteen at the time and had become close to them over the years.

No, this was a whole new ball of wax and Dean wasn’t sure what to expect. He knew from what Tessa had told him that their family was close and if the roles were reversed and this was Sadie, he knew how he’d react. He rounded a curve in the drive and saw Tessa and the man who was her father.

Sadie’s description of Tessa’s father was apt. He was tall with dark hair like Tessa’s. His gray suit was made of fine cloth and expertly cut. Even from a distance, Dean could tell that he was physically fit. Dean hastened his pace but not too much. Though he was anxious, he wanted to appear confident when he met his father-in-law.

Geoffrey watched as Dean got closer. He knew without Tessa telling him that

this was her new husband. His eyes narrowed as he looked at the man. Geoffrey could see why Tessa had been attracted to him. Dean's blond good looks and powerful physique would attract any woman. But Geoffrey knew his daughter well enough to know that there had to be more to the man than good looks. In Pittsburgh, she'd had her pick of many handsome men, but had chosen none. Good looks were not enough for her and for that he was glad.

"Papa, this is my husband, Dean Samuels. Dean, this is my father, Geoffrey O'Connor," Tessa said as they all came together.

Dean held out his hand and said, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. O'Connor. Tessa's told me a lot of nice things about you and your family."

"Good to meet you, Dean. I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure of hearing anything about you," Geoffrey said honestly as he shook hands with Dean.

Dean gave Tessa a questioning glance. "You didn't send a letter home?"

"No, she didn't," Geoffrey said. "We didn't even know where she went. It's a good thing I know some top notch investigators."

Tessa saw anger flash in Dean's eyes and felt a moment's shame.

"I'm sorry about that, sir. I had no idea," Dean explained.

Tessa gave him a haughty look. "We can discuss this later," she said. "I'm sure you're tired from your travels, Papa. We should get you settled and give you some refreshments."

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea," Geoffrey agreed. He knew he didn't need to say anything more about Tessa's wayward behavior. The way Dean had looked at his wife told him that it would be addressed.

He began walking toward the house again. Tessa hung back and put a hand on Dean's arm.

"Dean, I can explain," she said.

"You bet your sweet behind you will," he said. "Seems like dishonesty is going around. I'll keep him busy while you get your stuff packed and move back into our room. I'm not putting a man like that in one of the bunkhouses."

"No, I'm not ready to do that yet," Tessa said adamantly.

Dean looked down at Tessa with an unyielding expression. "You better get ready. I can sleep on the floor. I've slept outside enough and it's no problem for

me.” He pulled his arm away and began walking after her father.

Tessa took another couple of moments to gather her wits and then went after the two men. If ever there was a time she needed her mother’s calming influence, it was now.



“SO YOU’RE our new grandpa, huh?” Jack said to Geoffrey.

Geoffrey wasn’t sure how to answer the boy. “Sort of, I suppose.”

“But you’re Tessa’s pa, right?” Jack said.

“Yes.”

“So that makes you our grandpa,” Jack told him.

Geoffrey smiled. “Right.” He looked into Jack’s eager blue eyes and couldn’t tell the boy no.

“Good. So are you gonna live with us?” Jack asked.

“No, no. I’ll be going back to Pittsburgh after a while,” Geoffrey explained. “But I wanted to meet all of you.” He looked up at Dean, who gave him a grateful smile.

“We’re glad you’re here,” Dean said truthfully.

Sadie sat a glass of lemonade in front of Geoffrey and he drank it down. The journey from Wolfe Point had been long and hot, and the cold drink was just what he needed. He asked Sadie for another glass and she readily complied.

Before Dean could stop him, Jack sat down on Geoffrey’s leg and said, “So, Grandpa, tell us about Tessa when she was little.”

Dean laughed. “Yeah, Grandpa, tell us all about Tessa.”

Geoffrey gave Dean a sharp look but then relented because Sadie and Jack were looking at him expectantly. He settled Jack better on his lap, thinking that the boy was certainly well fed. “All right. Ah, yes. Here’s a story you’ll like,” Geoffrey began.



TESSA PACKED her clothing and other things up again, thinking that she couldn't believe her father was here. She should have known that he would look for her and that he had enough money and clout to hire people who would find her. She hoped that he hadn't discovered that Edwina had been involved.

As she carried the cases down the stairs, Tessa was glad that things in the kitchen were noisy so that they wouldn't hear her taking them into her and Dean's room. She put them around the other side of the bed so they couldn't be seen. She would unpack again later that night when everyone was in bed. Using the training she'd received all her life about hiding her true feelings to get through a social engagement, Tessa put on a smile and entered the kitchen.

Dean looked at her when she came in. There was no smile on his face. Tessa saw hurt and anger in his eyes. She tried to ignore it, but it was difficult. It hadn't been her intention to hurt him, but she had. Dean had been right when he said deception was going around. Even though she'd had good reason to do what she had, Tessa knew that it would be hard for Dean to see it from her point of view.

Geoffrey watched Dean and Tessa and could see that there was trouble between them. He hated to be the cause, but he had been bound and determined to find his daughter. He planned to dispatch a letter home right away so that the rest of their family knew that Tessa was safe. Though he was angry with Tessa for what she'd done, Geoffrey knew he should hear Tessa out more before judging her too harshly.

CHAPTER 15



As Tessa prepared supper, Geoffrey watched her. Watching her cook and do menial labor was a strange experience for him. He'd never wanted his girls to do that kind of work, but it seemed as if Tessa enjoyed it. She hummed as she worked and seemed very contented in her task.

"Who taught you to cook?" he asked her.

Tessa turned to look at her father. "Lydia Benson, a good friend and neighbor of ours. She's a wonderful cook and has given me valuable lessons. I'm a fairly good cook and I'm always striving to improve my skills."

"You're doing great, Tessa," Marcus said as he came into the kitchen.

"Papa, this is Dean's younger brother, Marcus. This is my father, Geoffrey O'Connor," Tessa explained.

Marcus held out a hand. "Pleased to meet you, sir."

Geoffrey shook Marcus' hand and said, "Likewise, Marcus. Pardon me for saying so, but you do not resemble your brother very much."

"I take after our mother. She had dark hair and gray eyes. My brothers take after Pa with their blond hair and blue eyes," Marcus explained. "Your daughter has been learning by leaps and bounds about cooking and all things domestic. She has a knack for it."

Geoffrey replied, "That's good because this kind of life demands such skill."

Marcus sat down at the table. "True. Ranching is hard work, but it's worth it to know that your building something that can be handed down. Someday, the ranch will be divided between whatever children we all have. We've talked

about that and that's what we decided. It's what Pa did with us. We each own a third of this place and we split the profits accordingly."

Geoffrey nodded. "And are you making a profit?"

Marcus frowned. "I won't lie to you. This past year was hard and getting through the winter was tough. But the steer are filling out nicely and our hay crop is doing well since we've had enough rain. The garden has been yielding a lot of produce, too. We have a pretty big truck patch. I'll show you around tomorrow."

"I would like that," Geoffrey said, thinking that Marcus seemed like a very intelligent individual. The way he spoke put him in the mind of Claire a little.

"Good. I know you'll want to visit with Tessa tonight, but tomorrow night we should play some poker, if you're game," Marcus said.

Geoffrey smiled. "I would love to." Playing cards with them would give him a chance to get to know his daughter's new family better.

Marcus stood and said, "Great. I promise it'll be a good time. I'll be back for supper, Tessa. I have a couple things to finish up or else Dean will be on me about them. Again, good to meet you, Mr. O'Connor." Marcus clapped Geoffrey on the shoulder before exiting the kitchen.

Tessa smiled at Geoffrey's expression. "He's always like that, Papa. I guess you would call Marcus a very 'hands on' type of person."

"I can see that. He seems like a nice fellow, though," Geoffrey commented.

"He is. So is Seth. I'm sure he'll be along soon," Tessa said.

Jack came in the door and plopped down on Geoffrey's lap, making him grunt.

"You really are a very stout little fellow," Geoffrey told him.

"Thanks," Jack said. "I'm hungry, Tessa. Can I have a cookie?"

"Not so close to dinner, Jack," Tessa replied.

Jack frowned. "But I'm hungry now. When's dinner?"

"In about a half an hour," Tessa said.

"I want a cookie now," the boy insisted. "Please?"

Tessa smiled. "Jack, we're going to eat very soon. I don't want you to ruin your dinner."

“I won’t ruin it. I’m real hungry,” Jack said.

Tessa was becoming irritated. “Jackson, I said no.”

The boy’s expression became mutinous. “I say yes.”

She gave him a direct stare. “You will do as I say, Jackson.” She always called Jack by his full name when he misbehaved. It was rare he did so.

“Don’t call me that,” he said as Dean entered the kitchen.

“Then behave yourself and stop arguing with me,” Tessa said.

“I want a cookie!” Jack said. “Pa, tell her I can have a cookie.”

Dean wasn’t about to interfere. He had wondered when something like this would come up. It was important that the children learn that he wasn’t going to intercede on their behalf when Tessa was disciplining them. “You talk to your mother about that,” he said. The words were out before he could stop them.

He and Tessa exchanged startled looks and Tessa couldn’t prevent the pleased smile that broke out on her face.

“She’s not my ma, Pa,” Jack said.

Dean gave his son a stern look and said, “She is now, Jack.”

Tessa said, “No, I do not wish to be your ‘ma’, Jack. No one will ever replace your ma, but what if I were to be ‘Mama’ to you?” she suggested.

Jack gave her a critical look and said, “Only if I can have a cookie.”

“What a little blackmailer you are,” she said. “No.”

Jack said, “You can’t tell me what to do!”

“Jackson, you need to stop this right now or I will take you over my knee and you will not be able to sit for a week!” Tessa said with a fierce expression. “Do you understand me, young man?”

Jack quieted and dropped his eyes. Quietly, he said, “Yes, Mama.”

Tessa had to turn away to hide her eyes that suddenly welled with tears. “Good. Now go wash up for supper, please.”

Jack got off Geoffrey’s lap and said, “Yes, ma’am,” before running upstairs.

Dean heard Tessa sniff and said, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just wasn’t expecting that. It was very touching, that’s all,” Tessa said.

“Okay. I’ll go wash up, too,” Dean said and followed his son.

Geoffrey said, "You're becoming a good mother, Tessa."

"Thank you, Papa. You go wash up, too," she said as she wiped her eyes with a handkerchief and blew her nose.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, imitating Jack.

As he moved toward the stairs, Tessa threw him a grateful smile for lightening the mood a little.



GEOFFREY WAS STARTLED at the rowdy affair supper turned out to be. Seth had come wandering in right as they were sitting down. He'd made Marcus move to a different chair because he liked to sit facing the door for some reason.

Marcus grudgingly made the move, saying, "You're too nosey for your own good."

"Shut up, Marcus," Seth said.

"He's right. You just wanna see what's goin' on out there." Dean grinned.

"Tessa, that roast looks delicious," Seth said with a smile as he pointedly ignored his brothers. "Oh, I'm Seth, by the way. You must be Mr. O'Connor."

He reached across the table to shake Geoffrey's hand. Ignoring Seth's bad manners, Geoffrey shook it. "Good to meet you, Seth."

"Same here. So you tracked your girl down, huh? Bet it's a surprise to find her at a place like this," Seth said as they started passing food.

Tessa always made very large meals because all of the men had healthy appetites. However, Seth ate the most. Marcus called him a 'bottomless pit'. Much like Jack, the man was always hungry.

Geoffrey wanted to be truthful but diplomatic. "Yes, it's very different from her old life, but it seems to be treating her well."

"It is, Papa," Tessa assured him. She watched Seth scoop up a large spoonful of potatoes and plop it onto his plate. She noticed that Geoffrey also watched with his eyebrows raised.

Marcus caught his expression and started grinning. He nudged Dean and motioned toward Seth, who was engrossed in his food. Dean chuckled and

Marcus followed suit. Tessa tried not to laugh, but couldn't help it.

Seth glanced up to see what was so funny and saw they were all looking at him. His brows knitted together and he said, "Ain't you ever seen a hungry man? Mind your own business."

Geoffroy laughed along with the others and Seth gave him a dirty look, too.

"Mama, can I have more taters?" Jack asked.

Sadie's eyes held surprise when she heard what her brother had called Tessa. "'Mama'? We're calling you 'Mama' now?"

Tessa said, "Only if you want to, Sadie. I won't be offended if you don't. I've always told you that I am not trying to take your mother's place."

Sadie swallowed hard and she said, "But you are kind of like a mother to us, right?"

"Yes, I am," Tessa said.

"I think I like the idea of calling you 'Mama'." Sadie smiled at her.

"Sadie, I asked Mama a question. Let 'er answer," Jack said.

Tessa said, "You may have more potatoes, Jack."

"Thanks," Jack said and took the bowl from Marcus.

"Excuse me," Dean said as he wiped his mouth and rose from the table. He went out the kitchen door and strode toward the barn.

"Where's Pa goin'?" Jack asked after swallowing a large mouthful of potatoes.

"I'm not sure," Tessa said. She wondered what had upset Dean.

Marcus sighed. "I'll go."

Geoffroy put up a hand and said, "Allow me, please."

Marcus had been halfway off his chair and he sat back down. "Okay."

Geoffrey followed his son-in-law.



DEAN STOOD LOOKING out onto the pasture beyond the main barn. Tears stung his eyes as he thought about Sarah. His mind conjured up her pretty face and the sound of her laughter. Dean had loved her deeply and hearing their children call

Tessa a motherly name had created mixed feelings in him.

Seeing someone move into his periphery vision, Dean was surprised to see Geoffrey come to stand by him.

Geoffrey asked, "What has upset you, Dean?"

Dean shook his head. "It's hard to explain."

"That just means you find it hard to talk about," Geoffrey said insightfully. "Dean, I can see that you are rather private about your feelings and I've only just met you. There are times, however, when it's better to voice them."

Dean sighed as he gathered his thoughts. "Geoffrey, I've seen so much death in my family in such a short time. Our parents both passed within two years of each other. I was nineteen when Pa died and twenty-one when Ma passed away. Sarah and I were married the year before Pa died. If I wouldn't have had her, I probably would've gone insane with grief."

Geoffrey laid a hand on Dean's shoulder. His heart went out to the younger man. Though he made the comforting gesture, Geoffrey remained silent.

"Then five years after Ma died, my wife and child died during childbirth," Dean said.

Geoffrey actually jerked with surprise. "Oh, Dean. I had no idea. I'm so sorry," he said. Geoffrey could only imagine how much such painful grief must have weighed on Dean.

"At the age of twenty-six, I was a widower with two little kids to raise and I'd lost a child, too. I almost didn't make it through it, Geoffrey. I'm not proud of it, but I gave in to the grief a lot. And then three years later, Marcus puts an ad in the papers back East for a mail-order-bride for me. Next thing I know, I get a letter from your daughter and I just had to write to her. At first, I was dead set against gettin' involved with another woman. I was too scared."

"I can understand that," Geoffrey sympathized.

Laughing a little, Dean said, "We wrote for about two months and then she said she wanted to come meet all of us. Geoffrey, I never expected to find anyone who would be willing to take on two kids who weren't their own, but Tessa did. You see her with them. They've gotten very attached to her."

"Yes, I do indeed see," Geoffrey said with a chuckle. "And I have quickly

come to be an adopted grandfather.”

Dean laughed. “Yeah, that’s Jack for you. Stubborn as the day is long. Once he gets something in his mind, that’s it. He’s like Seth that way.”

“Oh, I think he has a lot of his father in him, too,” Geoffrey admitted.

“I guess so,” Dean said with pride. “The truth is that I half hoped that the kids would want to call her ma or something like that, and the other half of me dreaded it.”

“Why?”

“Geoffrey, you’ve never lost the woman you were in love with and the mother of your children, have you?”

Geoffrey shook his head. “No, I haven’t.”

“It’s hard to let her go,” Dean said. “I have been bit by bit, but it’s hurt like hell. Finding out that I could be attracted to another woman besides Sarah was a shock. That was the first little bit I let go of Sarah. Then there was the first time I kissed Tessa and so it went. Little by little, I’m letting go of her. I think the last little bit is hearing the kids actually call Tessa a name that means she’s a mother to them. And although it makes me happy, it makes me sad, too. Does that make sense to you?”

Geoffrey cleared his throat against the constriction there and said, “Yes, Dean, it does. If I ever lost Maureen, I’m sure that I would feel the same way. After hearing all you’ve said, there’s a question I need to ask you, Dean. Do you love my daughter?”

It was the question Dean had been wrestling with for some time now. Dean looked deep within himself and thought about Geoffrey’s question some more. He smiled as he found the answer. “Yes, sir, I do. I never thought I’d fall in love again, but I have.” *Now I just have to tell her. That is, if I can get her to talk to me.*

“I’m glad to hear that, Dean. I want my daughter to be happy and it seems like she found happiness with you when she couldn’t find it with any of the men back home,” Geoffrey said.

Dean asked, “Why is that? I mean, she’s smart and beautiful and full of pluck. Who wouldn’t want her?”

“It wasn’t they who didn’t want her. It was her who didn’t want them. She found the men in our social circles boring and phony. Tessa wanted someone exciting and a man with substance.”

“I guess she thinks I’m exciting enough if she married me,” Dean said with a grin.

Geoffrey chuckled. “Yes, I can see how she would. And you are a man with substance. You’re a hard worker who has come through the most horrible things life could throw at you and you’re still here. I’m sure one of the things that attracted Tessa to you was your fortitude to be able to go on after something like that.”

“Thank you, sir. That means a lot coming from my father-in-law,” Dean said. “Look, I’m not rich, but I’m a good provider and I’ll make sure there’s food on the table and clothes on everyone’s back. My brothers and I are working to make this place start to turn profits and I’ll do anything to make Tessa and the kids happy. You need to know those things about me.”

Geoffrey felt respect for Dean grow inside as he looked at the younger man. “As one father to another, you understand how much hearing you say that means. Before I go back to Pittsburgh and leave my daughter here, I need to know that she’s in good hands. From what I’ve seen in just one day, I’m inclined to believe that she is.”

Dean nodded and said, “Yes, sir, she is.”

Geoffrey smiled and walked away, leaving Dean alone with his thoughts once more.

CHAPTER 16



Bedtime came and Dean couldn't sleep as he lay on a bedroll on the floor. The thought of Tessa's warm, shapely body only a few feet away tormented him. He tried everything to get to sleep from thinking about cattle prices in the fall to actually counting sheep. Nothing worked.

Tessa heard him tossing around and knew the feeling. She'd never understood what true passion was before marrying Dean and she longed for her husband. Sighing, Tessa rolled onto her back and looked at the ceiling.

"You can't sleep, either," came Dean's voice from below the bed.

He'd startled her. "No, I can't."

"Tessa, how long is this gonna go on? Aren't you as miserable as I am?" Dean asked as he rose and sat on the bed.

Her hands itched to touch his broad, muscular chest. The moonlight shone on his hair and turned it from golden blond to silver. His eyes roamed over her and there was no mistaking his desire for her. Tessa's body reacted and she was sure he could see the same thing in hers.

Dean asked, "How long do I have to sleep on the floor and not beside my wife where I belong?"

Tears pricked the backs of her eyes. "I don't know, Dean. Do you understand why I am hurt so much?"

Dean looked away for a moment and his jaw squared. "Do you understand how angry I am at you for not telling your family about marrying me?"

Tessa rolled back over. "I guess there are things that neither of us

understands about the other. Goodnight, Dean.”

Dean made a sarcastic noise. “I guess so.”

Slow tears made their way down Tessa’s face as she felt Dean leave the bed and heard him lay down on the floor again.



TESSA AND DEAN avoided each other the next day and it was apparent to everyone but the children that there was something wrong between them. Geoffrey tried to figure it out, but couldn’t. No one seemed inclined to fill him in, either. Finally, in the afternoon as Seth was showing him around the property, Geoffrey asked about it.

Seth said, “Geoffrey, it’s not exactly my place, but I don’t think you’re gonna get an answer from either of them at the moment, so I’ll tell you.”

“All right.”

Smiling, Seth said, “As you can tell, Dean and I are not all that book smart. Pa was, but we’re not. Letter writin’ isn’t exactly our strong suit. Marcus, though, he’s sharp as a tack. I’ve read some things he’s written and only understood half of it. So, Dean had Marcus help him answer Tessa’s letters. I’ve never read any of her letters and it’s none of my business what’s in them. I’m curious, but I wouldn’t read them.”

Geoffrey chuckled. “That’s only human nature, Seth.”

“No, I got a bigger dose of curiosity than most people. Anyhow, Tessa didn’t know Marcus was doin’ this and her feelings are hurt because she feels like she doesn’t really know Dean. Thing is, everything that was in the letters is true, but it’s not how Dean would say it. You see what I mean?”

Geoffrey could indeed see what was wrong between them. “And now he is angry that she didn’t tell us about marrying Dean. I could tell that yesterday when I arrived.”

“Yeah. I get why she didn’t send a letter back to your family, though,” Seth said.

“Why?” Geoffrey asked.

“C’mon, Mr. O’Connor. Be honest here. If Tessa had told you where she was right away and that she’d run away to the West to marry a rancher she didn’t know, what would you have done? Just what you did. You’d have come here and tried to stop the wedding,” Seth said with a direct gaze at the other man.

Geoffrey sighed. “Yes, I would have. Tessa was sneaky all the way around and I’m very angry with her about it, but I also understand why she did it. I’m afraid I didn’t listen to her like I should have,” he admitted.

Seth’s curiosity got the better of him. He intended to keep Geoffrey talking until he got the full story. “Oh? What about? I’m sorry. It’s none of my business...”

“No, I’d like to tell you,” Geoffrey said.

“Okay. If you’re sure,” Seth said.

“Yes. Truthfully, it’ll be good to get an objective opinion about it all,” Geoffrey said.

“Geoffrey, then how about we sit down in the barn out of the sun?” Seth said and led the way.

Once they’d settled on a couple of hay bales, Geoffrey said, “Women in our society are expected to perform certain duties.”

Seth arched an eyebrow. “Like what?”

“Attending parties, making their husbands look good by being pretty and obedient. Charming guests and always being a lady,” Geoffrey explained.

Seth frowned. “That sounds boring as hell.”

Geoffrey laughed. “That is just what my daughter kept saying, but no one really heard her, I’m afraid.”

“Why?”

“Because we thought we knew what was best for her,” Geoffrey admitted.

Seth didn’t want to appear critical but he said, “So you don’t want women who know their own minds? You’d rather have some kind of a puppet that you can make dance whenever you want to?” Seth heard what he’d just said. “Hey, that was pretty good. Sounds like something Marcus would say.”

Geoffrey smiled, despite the sting he felt from Seth’s words. “I think you’re smarter than you think you are, Seth.”

“Maybe I am,” Seth said doubtfully. “But I meant it. It sounds to me like you didn’t *want* to hear what Tessa was sayin’ because it went against what you thought she oughta want.”

“I didn’t think I was that kind of father, but now perhaps I see that I am. You see, our youngest daughter, Claire, is very intelligent and enjoys anything to do with education. I see nothing wrong with that. In fact, she has actually been helpful to me in business dealings. Sometimes she sees things that I have not. She’s only just turned sixteen, by the way.”

“Holy smokes,” Seth said. “I guess, too, she’s smart.”

“I allow her to go to the office with me and there are times when she is smarter than some of the people who work for me and it makes me very proud. This is why I thought I was more... tolerant of women who were intelligent and who perhaps didn’t completely fit in with societal norms for women,” Geoffrey said.

“But?” Seth encouraged.

“I failed Tessa in that regard. Part of my anger is directed at myself because I didn’t listen as carefully as I should have. We didn’t really consider her feelings,” Geoffrey said.

“Mr. O’Connor, this’ll sound funny, but I’m glad in a way that you didn’t.”

Geoffrey raised an eyebrow at Seth.

“Dean has hurt for a long time and Tessa makes him happy. I know they’re fightin’ right now, but I have faith that they’ll work it out. A lot of people don’t know this about me, but I have a romantic streak, at least where other people are concerned,” Seth said. “I haven’t seen Dean this happy in I can’t remember when. So at the risk of you sluggin’ me, I’m glad Tessa ran away and came here. Dean’s not the only one who’s happy she’s here. The rest of us are, too. Make no mistake about it, we all appreciate your daughter.”

Geoffrey ran a hand over his face. He started laughing. “She really was smarter than us when it came to her life. I don’t think anyone ever said that about her much in our circles. I’m envious of all of you because I think you know the real Tessa and I do not.”

Seth said, “Then it’s time you get to know her. She’s one heck of a lady.”

When Seth rose from his seat, Geoffrey stayed where he was. He wanted to be alone to ponder the things they'd discussed.



POKER THAT NIGHT WAS A LOUD, humorous event that made Geoffrey realize how much he sometimes missed his younger days when such games were a regular event in his life. He found it amusing that the ranchers played for toothpicks instead of money. It was a smart alternative to losing cash and it didn't dampen the level of competitiveness at all. It actually made them a little reckless, which added to the hilarity.

Tessa was as good of a poker player as the men and thoroughly enjoyed herself. Marcus was the worst player because he had no poker face and they could always tell how good of a hand he had. He wasn't even aware of his facial expressions half the time, which made it easy to know if he was bluffing or not.

Even though she and Dean were on the outs, Tessa was not going to miss out on spending a fun evening with her father and brothers-in-law. Seth and Marcus told raunchy stories, which made Geoffrey's protective streak about Tessa come out after a little while.

"Papa, I have heard much worse in Pittsburgh. I'm not offended in the least," she said.

Geoffrey's stare was stern. "Just what kinds of things were you doing when you snuck out of parties and balls?"

Tessa said, "A lady never reveals her secrets, Papa. You should know that."

"Aw, c'mon, Tessa," Seth said. "Tell us."

Dean said, "Yeah, Tessa. Tell us."

Tessa's gaze turned cool as she looked at Dean. "Perhaps another time."

Seth scowled. "Well, I'm not gonna let you get out of it. I'll keep askin'."

Tessa chuckled. "I know you will. I'll tell you about my wild days if you tell me about your evening out last week."

Seth grinned. "Who said it was an evening *out*?"

Dean smacked the back of Seth's head. "Knock that off!"

Marcus laughed. "Loosen up, Dean. Tessa's a grown woman."

"It's not polite to talk about that kind of thing in front of women," Dean said.

Geoffrey said, "Perhaps we should get back to the game?"

"Yeah. Good idea, Geoffrey," Dean said.

"Papa, Dean, let me remind you that I do not need protecting. After all, I got to Montana just fine all by my weak little self," Tessa said as her voice turned icy. "So, if I want to hear some amusing, off-color jokes or stories, I will. I suddenly find myself tired. Marcus, Seth, thank you for a lovely evening." She rose and left Seth's bunkhouse without another word.



"DO YOU MIND TELLIN' me what the hell that was all about?" Dean asked as he undressed for bed.

"What are you talking about?" Tessa brushed her hair out while they talked.

Dean looked at the wavy, silky tresses and wanted to run his hands through them. That he couldn't made his temper rise even more. "You know exactly what I'm talking about, Tessa. Don't play dumb with me."

"I only spoke the truth. I don't need protecting," Tessa said.

"Yeah and then you left and ruined the rest of the night," Dean said.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Tessa said, feeling spiteful.

"No, you're not. You wanted to punish your father and I. You especially wanna punish me, Tessa. I'm not the only one in the wrong here, Tessa, but you're too damn high and mighty to admit it," Dean said.

Tessa stiffened. "High and mighty? I think not."

"Well, I think so," Dean said, coming to stand in front of her.

Tessa forced herself to look into his eyes instead of at his body. "I'm sorry you feel that way."

His face tightened as his anger neared the boiling point. "No, you're not. Do you enjoy this? Because I sure as hell don't. Maybe what I did was wrong—"

Tessa's eyebrows rose. "Maybe?"

Dean wanted to throw something breakable to release the pent up anger that

burned in his chest. “Is that what you want? For me to admit that I was wrong? Fine! I was wrong, Tessa. I was wrong to care enough about what you thought of me to have Marcus help me out so I didn’t sound dumb! There, I said it.”

“But do you believe it?” Tessa asked. “Or are you just saying it because it’s what you think I want to hear?”

Dean flung his arms wide. “I don’t know what you want to hear, Tessa.”

Then he put his face in his hands for a moment and tried to get himself under control. Lowering his hands, Dean went over to where his clothes hung and started putting his pants on.

“What are you doing?” Tessa asked.

“I’m going to sleep in the barn,” Dean said.

Tessa asked, “Why?”

Dean pulled his shirt on and buttoned it as he said, “Because I can’t stay here arguing with you and then sleep on the floor while you’re so close to me. I can’t promise to keep my hands off you and you don’t want anything to do with me at the moment. If I’m out there, I won’t be tempted.”

He left the room and Tessa almost went after him. Pride intervened and made her stay where she was.

CHAPTER 17



Tessa sat at Lydia's kitchen table sipping on some coffee. She'd brought the children over to play with their kids and to get away from the ranch for a while. The situation between her and Dean was getting worse, not better, and Tessa knew that something had to give at some point. She just didn't know if they could get past the problem.

Lydia looked at Tessa with concern. "You don't look like you slept at all last night."

"I didn't. I don't know what to do. We're both so angry with each other," Tessa said. "It might sound silly to other people, but we're both angry about letters that were either sent or not sent."

Lydia took a sip of coffee and said, "You're going to have to explain that to me, Tessa."

Tessa looked into her kind, brown eyes. "I'm upset because he just doesn't understand why I'm upset. He also thinks that I don't have a reason to be. He's angry because I didn't write home to tell my family about marrying him."

"Let me guess, both of you feel you're justified in your anger and you want the other one to admit you're right," Lydia said with a chuckle.

Tessa said, "Yes. He admitted he was wrong last night, but it didn't seem like a true admission. It was as if he just wanted to end the fighting."

"Would that have been a bad thing?" Lydia said.

"If it wasn't real, yes." Tessa said.

Lydia said, "Is your anger and pride getting you anywhere?"

Tessa put her head down on her forearm. “No, but I can’t seem to help myself. I keep asking myself why I can’t let it go, but I’m not coming up with any answers.”

“I can help you out with that,” Lydia said.

Tessa raised her head and said, “You can?”

“Yeah. When you’ve been married as long as Charlie and I have, you learn a few things about how men and women deal with each other,” Lydia explained.

“Yes, that makes sense,” Tessa admitted.

“You said you ran away from home because no one was listening to you and you couldn’t live your life like you wanted to. You feel like Dean isn’t listening to you. He hears you, but he’s not really listening,” Lydia stated.

“Yes! That’s exactly it,” Tessa said. She felt relief that someone understood what she was feeling.

“Well, here’s your problem, Tessa. Men don’t listen like women do. Well, unless they’re Marcus. He pays attention. Always has. Anyway, there are certain times when men listen better than others and one of them is not when they’re angry. I love Dean like a brother, but the man has a temper and when he’s mad, it’s hard to reason with him sometimes. So that is not the time to try to talk to him,” Lydia explained.

“Yes. I have found that to be true,” Tessa agreed. “So when then?”

“Well, this is a little personal but I’m guessing that there’s not been a lot of physical contact going on,” Lydia said.

Tessa’s cheeks turned pink and she dropped her eyes. “No. There hasn’t.”

Lydia smiled. “That’s another thing that’ll change the longer you’re married. This subject isn’t nearly as embarrassing to talk about. I think it would be a good idea to do...that. Afterwards is the best time to talk to him. He’ll be in a better mood and more open to really hearing what you’re saying.”

Tessa put her hands over her face and said, “I can’t do that.”

Lydia laughed. “You’re as shy as he is. I’ve never seen a man like him who’s shy about this stuff.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin,” Tessa said.

Lydia made sure none of the kids were close to the open window in the

kitchen and said softly, “Do you want him?”

“Oh, yes. Very much.”

“Then take what you want. I doubt you’ll get any complaints from him, Tessa,” Lydia said and winked at her.

Tessa laughed and Lydia changed the subject.



BY MID-AFTERNOON, Seth and Marcus had had enough of Dean’s rotten temper. Geoffrey had heard the three of them arguing and decided to steer clear of the situation. He sat on the front porch swing, reading a book Marcus had lent him and watching with high amusement as Dean bossed the other two around.

At one point, Geoffrey saw Marcus and Seth run over to his bunkhouse and go inside. Not long after, Dean walked from the barn, calling for his brothers. He went over to Seth’s bunkhouse and opened the door. Geoffrey thought that the brothers were caught, but Dean closed the door and walked away again. He had a hard time holding his laughter in. Geoffrey was surprised that Dean hadn’t looked a little more thoroughly.

Then he saw Marcus open the door and look over toward the barn. Apparently finding the coast clear, Marcus motioned to Seth to follow him. They each carried a fishing pole and Seth carried a bucket. Quickly, the two of them ran from the bunkhouse and disappeared into the woods. Geoffrey couldn’t prevent the laugh that rose in his throat.



AS SHE COOKED SUPPER, Tessa thought about what Lydia had said to her that day. She wasn’t sure she could go through with it. Tessa felt that she wasn’t experienced enough to pull something like that off. She was mixing up a batch of biscuits when Marcus came stomping into the kitchen and marched right over to her.

She’d never seen such a furious expression on his face as she did just then.

Normally, Marcus was smiling and pleasant. He wasn't either of those things at that moment. He put his hands on his hips as Tessa stared at him with wide eyes.

"You need to make up and make love with your husband or else you're gonna be a widow because I'm gonna kill him," Marcus said. "I've had about all of him I can take. I'm goin' home so don't wait supper on me."

Tessa watched him stride angrily out the door. That was the second person that day who'd told her to be intimate with her husband to end their fighting. As she finished the biscuits and put them in the oven, Tessa thought that maybe there was something to it after all.



AFTER SUPPER, Tessa sent Jack and Sadie upstairs to get ready for bed. Geoffrey was once more outside on the swing. He seemed to be developing an affinity for it.

"Dean, please sleep in our room tonight," Tessa said nervously.

Dean looked at her. "You mean on the floor?"

She gave him a meaningful stare. "No. Not on the floor."

Dean stared at her back as she turned around to wash dishes.



AS SHE DID EVERY NIGHT, Tessa brushed her long hair out. Dean undressed and sat down on the bed a little hesitantly. He was afraid she was going to change her mind and want him to sleep on the floor again. *Like hell I will. I'm here now and I'm not leaving this bed.* His mind made up, Dean pulled his side of the summer weight bedclothes down and lay down.

He wanted in the worst way to reach out to touch Tessa's hair, but didn't want to be rebuffed. With great effort, Dean kept his hands to himself. Tessa stood up and went over to their door and locked it. She gave him a lightning fast glance and blew out the lamp. Dean's eyes never left her as she went to stand by her side of the bed.

Tessa was nervous as she removed her nightgown and slid under the covers completely naked. *What is he thinking? Does he want to? Oh, Lord, what if he doesn't?* She felt the bed shift suddenly and she was in Dean's arms so quickly that she couldn't register what had happened at first. Then his mouth descended on hers and there was no question that he wanted her. Tessa willingly surrendered to her husband and passion took over their mind and bodies, and for the moment anger and pride were left behind.



AS SHE LAY against Dean's side, Tessa toyed with his hand where it rested on his stomach.

"Dean?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you asleep?"

"Umm hmm," was followed by his soft laughter. "No, Tessa. I'm awake."

"All right. Good. Can we please talk now that we're, um..."

"Resting?"

Tessa hated how shy she felt about all of this. "Yes. Resting."

"Sure. What's on your mind?" Dean said as her hand moved over his chest.

"Well, I'm sorry that we've been fighting," she said.

"Me, too, honey. I hate fighting with you," Dean said.

Tessa had lost control of her hand and couldn't stop touching Dean. It was interfering with her train of thought. "I don't want to fight with you, either. We shouldn't fight like this."

"No, we shouldn't," Dean said as he rolled over to look at her. He brushed her back hair from her cheek and she shivered slightly as his fingers touched her shoulder.

Now it was Dean who couldn't control his hands. "It doesn't get us anywhere."

"No, it doesn't," Tessa said and moved closer to him.

"Then let's not fight," Dean said as he put an arm around her and then kissed

her.

Tessa gave up on rational thought and kissed him back fervently.



THE NEXT MORNING, Tessa woke to an empty bed. She groaned as she remembered how miserably her plan had failed. Yes, they'd made love several times, but they hadn't resolved their differences. She looked at the clock on the dresser and was shocked to see how late it was. She hurried to get dressed so that she could make breakfast.

She needn't have worried. Marcus presided over the stove with ease as he flipped eggs and made bacon.

"Good morning," she said as she watched him.

"Morning, Tessa. Slept in a little," he said with a knowing grin.

She blushed and said, "I guess so."

Suddenly, Marcus hugged her and said, "God bless you."

Then he released her and went back to cooking. "How do you want your eggs?"

"Uh, scrambled. I didn't know you could cook," Tessa said.

"Yep. Ma taught me when I was younger. I'm glad she did. I cook at home whenever I'm not up here," he responded.

She sat down at the table as Marcus went to the stairs and shouted, "Hey, kids, shake a leg! Breakfast is ready. You, too, Geoffrey! I ain't got all day!"

Soon, running footsteps sounded and Sadie and Jack appeared. Jack sat down and Marcus put a plate in front of him. The boy began eating with his usual zeal and Tessa and Marcus shared a smile over it. Sadie ate more sedately. Marcus gave Tessa her plate. Geoffreystill hadn't appeared.

"Where is Papa?" Tessa asked.

"Well, I forgot. He played cards with us in Seth's place last night. Ended up killing a fifth of whiskey. He's probably sleeping it off," Marcus said with a naughty grin.

Tessa laughed as she thought about her father being hung over. "I wonder

when the last time he did that was. I think you're all a bad influence on him."

Marcus said, "Nah." He stepped outside and yelled, "Hey! Breakfast!"

Seth came from the barn. He didn't run, but his long, easy strides ate up the ground quickly. Dean wasn't far behind him.

Dean smiled when he saw his wife and kissed her cheek. Marcus winked at her while Dean talked to the kids. Tessa colored and turned her attention to her food.



LATER THAT MORNING, Tessa could put off their talk no longer. She found Dean in the barn and asked him to come to the tack room with her.

He shut the door and came toward her, smiling. "What is it?"

"I need to talk to you," she said.

"Like last night?" he asked as he put his arms around her.

"No. Yes. I mean, I wanted to talk to you last night, but it never happened because, well, you know," she said.

"Oh, yes. I know, all right. Are we gonna talk more like that?" Dean asked.

"No. Not right now," Tessa said.

"Okay. So what do you want to talk about?" he asked as he loosened his hold on her a little.

Tessa took a breath and then plunged ahead. "Last night was wonderful. Well, more than wonderful."

"C'mon, Miss Writer, you can do better than that," Dean coaxed.

"Spectacular. Incredible. Magnificent," Tessa said, getting carried away.

Dean kissed the side of her neck and Tessa giggled.

"Keep goin'."

"Fantastic. Passionate. Earth shattering," Tessa continued.

"Earth shattering? Love it," Dean said as he backed her over against the wall by the door.

"Dean, no, not here. Here?" she said as he locked the door.

"Yep."



TESSA FUMED as she walked back over to the house. She'd never done anything like that in her life and she'd loved every second of it. But her desire for her husband was keeping her from talking about the issues that still lie between them. She encountered Marcus on the way there.

"Hey, are you all right?" he asked when he saw the scowl on her face.

"I'm fine. You can thank me again," she said and continued on her way.

Marcus looked after her and then at the barn. His laughter rang out as he caught her meaning.



THAT NIGHT, Tessa decided that they were going to have it out finally.

"Dean, we need to talk. No, don't touch me!" she said when he moved toward her. "I'm completely serious and I am not going to let you distract me with sex."

Dean laughed. "I think that's the first time I've heard you use that word."

"That's not important right now! We need to talk about our disagreements. I'm still upset with you and you're still upset with me," Tessa said.

"I am?" Dean asked. "I'm still mad at you? I don't think so."

"You're not?" Tessa asked.

"No. I thought we made up?" Dean said.

"No, we didn't," Tessa informed him.

Dean grinned. "It sure felt like we did. Several times, as a matter of fact."

Tessa closed her eyes and groaned. "I know, but that wasn't my intention."

"What was your intention?"

"To get you to listen to me so we could work things out," Tessa explained.

"I listened all right," Dean said. "You talked, I listened."

Tessa's anger was piqued by his humorous remarks. "No, you didn't. We made love. That's not listening."

Dean sighed and sat down on the bed and gave her his attention. He could

tell that she wasn't kidding around. "Okay. I'm listening now."

"I need you to really hear me, Dean," Tessa almost pleaded.

"Okay. Go ahead."

"You don't seem to understand why I've been angry about this whole letter business," Tessa said.

Dean's face fell. "You've gotta be kidding me, Tessa. I thought all was forgiven and forgotten."

"No! That's what I've been trying to tell you but you keep distracting me. You don't understand why what you did was wrong," Tessa said.

"I'm gonna sleep on the floor again tonight, aren't I?" he asked.

"You're not listening to me," Tessa said. "Please listen to me."

"I'm listening and I'm not believing what I'm hearing. Do you *want* to fight? Do you want me to still be mad at you for not tellin' your folks about me? Because I can get mad about it again, if you like. In fact, I'll save us both sometime and just go sleep in the barn right now," Dean said.

"No! Don't go. Can't you see that this is important to me? Why do you think I want to talk about it?" Tessa said frantically as Dean started dressing. "Take your pants off!"

Dean stilled. "Tessa, there's only one reason I'm gonna take them off and I don't think we have the same idea about that at the moment."

Tessa had to work hard not to scream. Through clenched teeth, she said, "Why is it so hard for you to do one simple thing for me?" Tears of anger and disappointment gathered in her eyes. "I don't ask you for much, Dean. Please."

Dean saw that her eyes were overly bright and cursed under his breath. "Okay. Fine. I told you the other night that I know I was wrong and that I was sorry, but that wasn't good enough for you, I guess. Do you want me to say it again, because I will if that's what you need?"

"I'm telling you what I need, but you won't hear me," Tessa said.

"I'm confused, Tessa. I really don't know what's going on here," Dean said.

"I was trying to get you in a good mood last night," Tessa said.

Dean said, "Well, it worked."

"Yes, but we didn't talk about what I wanted to discuss. Can we please talk

now?” Tessa said.

“All right.”

Tessa could see by his mutinous expression that he really wasn’t willing to talk. “Never mind, Dean. Go to the barn or wherever you want to go. I’m going to sleep.”

“What? I thought we were going to talk.”

“No. It’s not important. Goodnight, Dean,” Tessa said and got into the bed. She lay down facing away from him.

Stunned, Dean stared down at her for long moments. Rising from the bed, he put on his shirt and pants, and left their room.



“WHAT THE HECK DID YOU DO?” Marcus asked as he came into the kitchen the next morning. “He’s worse than ever!”

Tessa sent Marcus a scathing look. “It is not my responsibility to keep him in a good mood. I need more than...that. He will not listen to me and he thinks I shouldn’t still be upset. Just because you make love it doesn’t mean that issues have been resolved.”

Marcus sighed and sat down at the table as she cooked. “Is this about the letters?”

Tessa said, “Yes, but it’s more than that. It’s about him not really listening to me. He thinks that I enjoy fighting or something like that. I’m getting myself confused.”

“I get what you’re saying. Dean is stubborn and listening isn’t always his strong suit,” Marcus said. “I could hog tie him for you and then he’d have to listen to you.”

Tessa smiled. “Although that offer is tempting, I’ll pass on it.”

“Okay, but if you change your mind, let me know,” Marcus said. “That smells good.”

Tessa said, “Go ahead and get your breakfast, Marcus. Where is my husband?”

“Over in the other barn. He’s curing hay,” Marcus said.

She nodded and took off her apron. Marcus watched her go out the door.



DEAN SAW her coming and he almost groaned at the furious expression on Tessa’s face. *Now what?* he thought.

“I want you to listen and I mean listen, Dean,” she said. Her blue eyes flashed fire and there was a stubborn set to her jaw.

“Okay. I’m listening,” Dean said.

“You need to stop being nasty or bad-tempered with others because we are having a disagreement. It’s not fair to them and I’m tired of being told that I should keep making love with you so that you will stay in a good mood,” she said. “So do not take your frustrations out on others. Do you hear me?”

Shock kept Dean silent for a moment before he said, “Who said that to you?”

“That’s not important. You need to change your attitude, Dean. It’s not right to make others miserable because you are. Stop it right now,” Tessa told him. She whirled around and walked angrily away.

CHAPTER 18



Seth watched Dean walk back and forth across the main barn floor. His brother was highly agitated and seemed to be growing more so with every passing minute.

“Dean,” Seth said softly.

“What?”

“You wanna talk about it?” Seth asked.

Dean let out a sarcastic laugh. “Talk? Why does everyone have to talk about everything? I thought we did talk about it. I thought everything was fine. Then, all of a sudden, it’s not again. I have no clue what’s going on. All I know is that I keep sleeping in the barn because I can’t sleep in our bed because I can’t sleep while she’s so close and mad at me or I’m mad at her.” His groan of frustration was loud in the barn.

Seth watched a couple of the horses’ ears flick back and forth at the sudden sound.

“Dean, quit scaring the horses and just tell me exactly what’s goin’ on,” Seth said and leaned against a wall.

Looking at Seth, Dean said, “She’s still wound up about those letters. Can you believe that? I thought it was done and over.”

Seth frowned. “What made you think that?”

“Because we made up,” Dean said.

“So you talked about it?”

“Sort of.”

Seth asked, "What does that mean?"

Dean resumed his pace and said, "We, you know. Made up in bed."

Seth sputtered with laughter, which drew an annoyed look from his brother.

"I'm sorry, Dean, but it always cracks me up that you're so shy about this subject," Seth said. He cleared his throat and forced himself to be serious. "Okay, so you thought because you, 'made up in bed', as you put it, that it meant that the argument was over?"

"Yeah. I thought she forgave me and I forgave her," Dean said as he came to stop in front of Seth.

Seth let out a sigh. "Dean, sit down here and listen to me," he said as he indicated a couple of hay bales.

Once they were seated, Seth said, "Dean, I want you to think about something, okay?"

"Okay."

"Are you really over bein' mad that Tessa didn't tell her family about gettin' married?" Seth asked. "Think about it carefully."

Dean didn't want to think about it. Like with everything else, Dean just wanted to forget it and go on. "What good does it do to keep going over it? I'd like to just move on from it."

"That's not what I asked you, Dean. This is why she's still mad. You don't want to talk about stuff. I'm not sayin' that I'm the chattiest guy, but I'm not afraid to face what I'm feeling," Seth said. "You are. When Ma and Pa passed away, you wouldn't talk about it. I've yet to really hear you talk about it and you don't talk about them very much at all. It was the same way with Sarah and the baby. When you keep buryin' stuff, it's got a way to come back on you later, Dean."

Dean wanted to hit something. "You wanna talk about Ma and Pa? Okay, let's do that. I was here with Marcus when both of them died. I had to arrange the funerals and take care of Marcus while you were on drives. I had a wife and we had Sadie at the time. The ranch wasn't gonna run itself, Seth. I didn't have time to sit around wallowing in grief. There was work that needed done so that I could keep us fed and everything else.

“Again, when I lost Sarah and the baby, I was alone. You know that if Lydia and Charlie hadn’t been here to keep me sane, I might have.... You know what I’m saying. I had another funeral to arrange and I had to watch them put my wife and child in the ground. I had two little kids to comfort and take care of, Seth. I lost the woman I loved and I had to face the fact that she was never coming back! And the ranch. It’s always here, always needs attention, and I don’t have the luxury of constantly whining about crap that I can’t change. So you’ll have to forgive me if I don’t talk about things like that because the fact is that I can’t handle it!”

Seth had never seen Dean so worked up before. “I’ve always felt guilty that I wasn’t here, Dean, but I was tryin’ to keep our business going, too. It was just in a different way. Pa couldn’t do the drives anymore, so it was up to me. I’m sorry, Dean.”

Dean nodded. “And now, I’ve got this woman who I love who is mad at me and she wants to talk. Sarah never had to talk all the time.”

“Tessa isn’t Sarah, Dean. There’s partly where you’re making a mistake. She’s her own woman and has different ideas about things. You’re expecting her to act a certain way because that’s what you were used to with Sarah. I loved Sarah. You know that. But she was very sweet natured and didn’t rock the boat. Tessa’s not like that. She speaks her mind and she’s not a pushover,” Seth said.

Dean half-smiled. “Yeah, she sure does. I think it’s one of the things I love most about her. She’s not boring, that’s for sure. Okay. You asked me if I was really over her not tellin’ her folks about me.” He blew out a breath as he looked at it honestly. “No. I’m not.”

“Then why say you are?” Seth said.

Quietly, Dean said, “Because it’s easier than dealing with it.”

“Exactly. Tessa’s not going to let you get away with that, Dean. She needs and deserves more than sex from you. Sex is not gonna fix what’s wrong. You gotta dig deep here and face the real issues or you’re gonna lose her,” Seth said. “Don’t let that happen, Dean.”



MARCUS WHISTLED as he poured some coffee, put a splash of brandy in it, and walked out onto his porch. He spent a lot of time out there because he loved being close to nature and the view was always pretty. Sitting down in his favorite chair, Marcus took a sip of his coffee and thought about what he wanted to do more, read or whittle.

He did neither because he heard hoof beats on the lane and he wondered who it was this time of night. Marcus was used to late night visitors because he didn't require much sleep and was usually up when other people were sleeping. It was still fairly early, however. Geoffrey and Tessa rode into the light thrown by his lanterns.

Marcus gave them a big smile. "Hey, you two. This is a nice surprise."

"Papa wanted to see your house and I wanted to pick out a book to borrow, if that would be all right?" Tessa said as she dropped Zip's reins. She'd finally gotten on to ground tying a horse.

Geoffrey followed suit.

"Well, there's not much to see, but you're more than welcome, Geoffrey. I'm sure you'll find something to borrow, Tessa," Marcus said as he rose from his chair.

Geoffrey climbed the three porch steps and looked at all of the curls of wood on the floor. Three chairs sat across the porch that ran the length of the house. A small table sat by one of the chairs and Geoffrey saw whittling tools and knives sitting on it along with a lantern. A small stack of books sat by the porch railing.

Marcus saw him looking around and said, "My porch might as well be another room. I'm out here most evenings."

"It's nice," Geoffrey said. "It seems like it would be very relaxing after a hard day of work."

Marcus nodded. "It is. Well, c'mon in and I'll show you around."

Tessa had already gone inside. Geoffrey followed Marcus into the small house and found himself standing in a small kitchen.

Smiling, Marcus said, "Welcome to my chaos."

Geoffrey laughed because that was exactly what Marcus' house looked like. He was astounded at the number of books in the small space. Tessa crouched in

front of a bookcase in the parlor, searching through titles. As he looked at some of the books, Geoffrey saw that Marcus had very eclectic tastes. The books were not arranged in any particular order or even by subject. Fiction and nonfiction were jammed together.

“Marcus, you have quite an impressive collection,” Geoffrey said as he looked at the younger man.

“Thanks. Our pa was an educated man and I guess I followed in his footsteps that way. We don’t have a school so I read whatever I can. As you can see, I’m sort of a packrat when it comes to my books. Even if I’m not going to read a book again right away, I hang onto it. You never know when it’ll come in handy, especially when people around here want something to read,” Marcus responded.

“Yes, I appreciate the one you loaned me,” Geoffrey said. “I’m enjoying it very much.”

“Good. I thought you might. Would either of you like some coffee?” Marcus moved toward the kitchen.

“I would love some,” Geoffrey replied.

“Yes, Marcus. That would be nice,” Tessa said.

Marcus said, “Do you want a little kick to it or just boring old coffee?”

Geoffrey laughed. “A man after my own heart. Please add a kick.”

“None for me,” Tessa spoke up.

“As you wish,” Marcus said in a lofty manner.

Geoffrey found Marcus very amusing. “Are you always like this?”

“Guilty, sir,” Marcus said as he carried their coffees out onto the porch.

They joined him and sat down. Tessa took a sip of coffee and made a face. She switched cups with her father while the men laughed at her.

After swallowing, she said, “I think there is more brandy in that than coffee.”

“Good. Just the way I like it,” Geoffrey said.

Marcus picked up a new piece of wood and turned it around a few times while he made a thoughtful face. Geoffrey watched as he smiled and started carving. Marcus’ hands were strong and his movements sure as he began shaving off large pieces of the wood as he rounded off the corners.

“What are you making?” Geoffrey asked.

“I think it’s going to be a wolf. Speaking of dogs, I wonder where Roscoe got to. Maybe he has a lady friend,” Marcus said with grin.

“Perhaps he does,” Geoffrey said. “How do you know what it’s going to be?”

“Well, I just sort of see it in my head. Each piece of wood has its own spirit, so to speak, and it tells me what it will be,” Marcus said.

Geoffrey thought that was very unusual. “So what you’re saying is that the wood tells you what it wants to be?”

“Yeah, that about sums it up,” Marcus said.

Geoff took a long sip of his coffee and enjoyed the brandy laden drink. “Mmm. That hits the spot.”

Marcus smiled. “I thought you might like that.”

Tessa enjoyed listening to her father and Marcus talk. While her father was getting to know him, Tessa was also gleaning more information about her brother-in-law.

“Who taught you how to whittle?” Geoffrey asked as he looked out into the night.

Marcus’ hands stopped working for a few moments before starting up again. “Ma. She was always working with wood of some sort. She said it relaxed her when she was upset or nervous.”

“Your mother? I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a woman doing woodworking,” Geoffrey said.

Marcus’ throat became clogged with tears as he thought of his mother. His voice was thick as he replied, “Ma was an extraordinary woman who was strong and kind. Woodworking wasn’t the only talent she had.”

“I’m sure not,” Geoffrey said as he frowned with concern. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Marcus.”

“Don’t think anything of it,” he said. “As closed up as Dean is about his feelings, I’m the exact opposite. I don’t hide my feelings very well and, frankly, I don’t care to. Well, sometimes, anyway.”

“Where does Seth fall in that category?” Geoffrey asked.

Marcus brushed away a tear and said, “Somewhere in the middle, I guess. Seth isn’t as touchy about stuff like Dean and he doesn’t get misty-eyed at the

mention of our mother.”

Geoffrey cleared his throat and said, “I, um, noticed that Dean is rather a strict task master.”

Marcus laughed at that. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“Why do you listen to him?” Geoffrey asked. “I’m sorry. I think the brandy is getting to me and I’m becoming nosy.”

“No more than Seth,” Marcus said. “After both our parents were gone, Dean helped finish raising me. I’d just turned fourteen when Pa passed and I was sixteen when Ma died. Dean was the one here with me mostly because Seth was out on the trail a lot. So it fell to him to do it. I guess he became a sort of surrogate father to me. So, that’s why I listen to him. Plus, it’s just easier to go along with him.”

Tessa had seen this aspect of the relationship between Dean and Marcus, so she understood what her brother-in-law meant. She admired her husband for his commitment to his family. There was never any question about how seriously he took his responsibilities. Her mind wandered as Marcus and her father talked of all manner of things for another half hour or so.

When the visit ended, Tessa thought about the rift between her and Dean and looked up at the stars as they rode home. She prayed for some guidance in the matter, but none magically came to her.



TESSA WATCHED as Dean undressed with trepidation. Apparently he wasn’t planning on sleeping in the barn and when he slid under the covers, Tessa knew he wasn’t going to sleep on the floor either. As she got in the bed, Tessa kept as far away from him as she could and lay on her side facing away from him. She jumped a little when he spoke, breaking the silence.

“Tessa, we are gonna talk about all of this, but I need a little time to get my thoughts together about it so that I can have an honest conversation with you,” Dean said.

“How much time?” Tessa asked.

“I’m not sure. I’m not good with feelings and stuff, but I’m gonna try,” Dean said as he remembered Seth’s words.

“All right.” Tessa decided to be patient with him for the time being. “I appreciate that.”

Dean smiled in the dark. “I don’t suppose you’d be interested in the other kind of talking.”

Tessa put her pillow over her face and tried to smother the laugh that came out. It amazed her that, even in the middle of an argument, Dean could say something funny like that.

Dean heard her and chuckled. “Is that a yes or a no?”

“Goodnight, Dean,” Tessa said from under the pillow.

Dean sighed and rolled away from her. “Okay. Goodnight, Tessa.”



SOMETIME DURING THE NIGHT, Dean was woken by hands on his back. He recognized Tessa’s touch and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, good. You’re awake,” Tessa said and smiled. While Dean had drifted off at some point, she hadn’t slept a wink because she couldn’t make her body behave.

Dean laughed. “Yeah, because you woke me up. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I was just wondering if you were still interested in the other kind of talking,” Tessa said and pressed a kiss to his shoulder blade.

With a deep growl, Dean rolled over to face her and captured her mouth in a searing kiss. When the kiss ended, he said, “What do you think?”

Tessa shook her head. “I don’t want to think. I just want to feel.”

Dean happily complied and they became lost in a sea of passion where all else was forgotten.



WHAT ENSUED WAS a strange pause in their fighting. During the day, they were

distant and argumentative with each other. Dean tried not to make his brothers or anyone else suffer because of his frustrations. Tessa tried to distract herself from her impatience with Dean by writing.

But at night, when they were alone, they left all of that outside their bedroom door. It seemed as though neither one of them wanted to give up the pleasure they shared. Once the door was shut, their bodies did most of the talking.

Geoffrey didn't know exactly what was going on, but he didn't pry. To do so wouldn't have helped. In fact, it would have made the matter worse, he thought. Seeing the sadness sometimes in his daughter's eyes was hard. As a father, his instinct was to help his girl and fix what was wrong. However, this was something that he couldn't fix for her. She and Dean had to work out their differences.

Out of the blue one day, Tessa asked, "Papa, why don't men listen when women talk?"

Geoffrey chuckled a little. "Because we're not always as smart as women when it comes to that."

"Do you listen to Mama when she talks?" Tessa said.

"Mostly, but when I don't, she makes sure to get my attention so that I do listen," Geoffrey said.

"How does she do that?"

"In different ways, depending on how aggravated she is with me. Sometimes she scolds me or sometimes she's playful about it. Why do you ask?" Geoffrey asked.

"I can't get Dean to really listen to me, Papa," Tessa said. "He says he wants to talk, but that he's not ready. How long do I wait?"

"That's a tough question to answer, Tessa. How long are you willing to wait?" Geoffrey asked.

"Honestly, Papa, I'm not sure how much longer I can wait," Tessa said.

Geoffrey took her hand. "That's something you're going to have to decide, honey."

Tessa nodded. "I know."



DEAN EMBRACED TESSA THAT NIGHT, but could tell that Tessa's mind was elsewhere.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he looked into her eyes.

She laid her hand on his cheek and said, "I love you, Dean."

"I love you, too," Dean replied with a smile.

His statement caused her heart to speed up. It was the first time he'd said the words to her. *If only it were at a better time, it would be perfect*, she thought. She smiled and kissed him softly. Then she watched his face as his smile widened. She loved his smile. "When are we going to discuss things?" she asked him quietly.

Dean's smile disappeared to be replaced by a guarded expression. Again, he'd hoped that it would all be forgotten and, again, he'd been wrong. He knew that Tessa wasn't going to be put off for forever, even though he wished the problem would just disappear. Dean ran a hand through his hair and said, "I don't know."

Tessa eased away from him and rolled over. "Never mind. Sleep well."

"I'll be back. Don't wait up for me," Dean said as he got out of bed.



AS DEAN KNEW he would be, Marcus was still up. His brother was a night owl and sometimes read and whittled long past midnight. Dean thought he heard laughter as he neared Marcus' house. Roscoe barked upon hearing Twister's hoof beats and the laughter abruptly ended.

Marcus watched Dean ride into the circle of light from the two lanterns he had burning and was surprised to see his brother.

"Hi. You're the third visitor I've had tonight. What brings you at this time of night? You're normally in bed by now. Is everything all right?" Marcus said.

"I couldn't sleep. What were you laughing about?" Dean asked.

Marcus held up a book he'd been reading. "There're some funny passages in

here. How come you can't sleep?"

Dean jumped up on the porch and settled in a rocking chair near Marcus. "Still fighting with Tessa. Sort of. I don't know what the hell we're doing."

Marcus arched an eyebrow at him. "Sounds complicated."

"Yeah, it is. It's my fault right now. I know that and yet, I can't seem to get past it. I'm a coward, Marcus," Dean said. "I can't talk about my feelings. Seth is right about that. How does he know so much about how women feel? He's the biggest womanizer I know."

Marcus laughed. "That's exactly why he understands how women feel or at least why they might feel certain things."

"Why does this have to be so hard?" Dean said. "I'm gonna lose her and over something so stupid."

"You didn't say that to her, did you?" Marcus said.

Dean shook his head. "No."

"Whew. That's good. The worst thing you want to do is tell her that her feelings are stupid," Marcus said. "That will only make things worse."

"No, I didn't mean her feelings are stupid. I meant that *I'm* so stupid," Dean said. "Shut up, Marcus."

Marcus swallowed the smart remark on the tip of his tongue.

"This could have been over by now if I could only be brave enough to talk about things. Why can't I do that?" Dean asked.

Marcus was pretty sure that Dean's question was rhetorical and stayed silent.

"I mean, I can talk about anything else, but when it comes to what I'm feeling about bad stuff or arguments, I get all tongue-tied. I'm good at being angry and I like being angry sometimes because then I don't have to face being hurt or sad. Anger is easier for me to express. I can hide behind it, I guess," Dean explained.

"It's a defense mechanism, Dean. Look, most people don't like talkin' about how they really feel," Marcus said.

Dean looked at him. "You talk about how you feel all the time. Why is that?"

"I don't know," Marcus said with a shrug. "I don't mind it. Actually, I can't seem to help myself. They just come out."

“I wish they did for me,” Dean said.

“They can, Dean, at least with your wife. You’ve got to decide if you trust her enough to bare your soul to her, so to speak. She’s now the one person in the world you should be able to talk to about anything, Dean. And she needs to be able to talk to you about anything, too,” Marcus said. “You two have to lean on each other. I think you’re afraid to rely on her too much for fear that one day she won’t be there.”

Dean thought about that for a moment. “You might have something there, Marcus.”

“Dean, you deserve to be happy. I know she makes you happy. Tessa’s not going anywhere. You can’t let fear rule your life anymore. If you keep letting fear get in the way, you’re gonna find yourself alone and miserable someday.” Marcus put a hand on Dean’s shoulder and squeezed it a little. “I’d sure hate to see that happen.”

“Me, too. How’d you get so smart?” Dean asked with a smile.

Marcus grinned. “Just lucky, I guess.”

“So what are you workin’ on now?” Dean asked as he spied a piece of wood on the floor that had something etched into it.

Marcus picked it up and began explaining it to Dean. The brothers talked for a couple of hours about all kinds of things and it was late when Dean went home.

Tessa heard him come in and undress. She kept her eyes closed and never let on that she was awake as he slipped into bed. Tessa’s nose wrinkled as she detected the faint scent of whiskey on him. She knew then that he’d been with one of his brothers. It made her miss her sisters. She lay in the darkened room, feeling lonely and disappointed.



ALL THE NEXT DAY, Dean thought about the things both of his brothers had said and realized how right they both were. He went through his day as if he was sleepwalking. Seth and Marcus noticed his preoccupation, but didn’t comment.

They saw that Dean was wrestling with things and knew that they didn't need to interfere. Also it meant that he wasn't harassing them about anything, which was refreshing.

With each passing hour, Dean grew more determined to face his fear and do what needed done. He looked at it from the perspective that he always did his work. He might not like doing it, he might not find it pleasant, he might not do something perfectly, but Dean knew he did it to the best of his ability. It was the same way with being a father. It was tough sometimes, dealing with the kids when they were stubborn or argumentative, but it needed done and because he loved them so much, he was willing to deal with it.

Shouldn't I do the same thing with Tessa? Shouldn't I force myself to deal with the hard stuff because I love her and she deserves it from me? Shouldn't I be willing to get past that fear like Marcus said and do right by her? I don't want to lose her because I'm too scared or stubborn. Tessa's right, neither of us have cleared the air and it's about time we do it.



THE MOON WAS RISING HIGHER as Dean lay down on their bed. As he waited for his wife to come to bed, Dean mentally went over what he wanted to say to Tessa. A little while passed and Dean began to wonder where his wife was. He looked at the clock on the dresser and put his head back down on the pillow.

When a half-hour went by, Dean got up and put his pants on. He didn't bother with a shirt. When he didn't find her in the house, Dean started to get worried. The warm September night held a soft breeze and Dean could smell the scent of hay and cattle as he walked to the main barn.

Dean saw her when he entered the barn floor. The big doors were open to allow for cool air to reach the horses. Moonlight poured inside, illuminating Tessa's tantalizing figure as she stood in front of one of the stalls. He couldn't have prevented the jolt of desire he felt for her any more than the tides can resist the pull of the moon.

Tessa's dark hair hung down her back in soft waves. Her body was

silhouetted in her nightgown and Dean found it more alluring than any lingerie could ever be. With great effort, Dean fought those thoughts so he could concentrate on the matter at hand. He took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and stepped toward her.

Tessa stood outside of Buster's stall, stroking his face and neck. She had put the children to bed but wasn't ready to retire herself. Her father had also gone to bed. Tessa wasn't ready to go to bed because she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep because of the turmoil in her heart and mind.

She also didn't want to be in such close proximity to Dean. Although her heart and mind were still hurt, her body was traitorous and she missed her husband's touch. It was too easy to give in to her physical reaction to him. Even though making love with Dean was a beautiful experience every time, it wasn't solving things between them. She wished it could, but the reality was that, eventually, they were going to start resenting one another and that was the last thing she wanted.

Tessa heard soft footfalls behind her and closed her eyes as she recognized Dean's steps. *So much for not having a confrontation*, Tessa thought. *I was hoping he would fall asleep if I stayed out here long enough.*

Dean decided to let it all hang out; his anger, his hurt, and his confusion. "You know, Tessa, I never pegged you for a hypocrite," he said softly.

She whirled around at his insulting words.

Dean held up a quieting hand. "You accused me of being a liar and in a way, I guess I was. But I didn't run away and not even tell my family I was getting married. So even though you didn't lie outright, you lied by, by, oh, hell, there's a word for it..."

"Omission," Tessa said.

"Yeah, you lied by omission and you put me and the kids in a very bad position. If it was just me, I wouldn't mind so much, but when it comes to my kids, I don't tolerate anything that could hurt them. It's a good thing that your old man is a stand-up guy or else we'd have a real problem. But if things go south, I'll deal with it head on," he told her with a stern expression.

"What are you saying?" Tessa said.

“If he starts causing trouble in front of my children, I’ll ask him to leave. I’m not gonna be blamed for something you did or didn’t do,” Dean answered.

“I won’t let that happen and I won’t let the children be upset, either. Besides which, my father is a wonderful man who has raised three daughters and would never purposely upset a child. You have nothing to worry about.”

Dean nodded, apparently satisfied on that score. “Why didn’t you write home to tell them you were getting married? Are you ashamed of me because we’re not from high society? Is it because you felt that your parents wouldn’t approve of you marrying someone below your station?”

“No! Of course not,” Tessa said.

“Sure, Tessa,” Dean said sarcastically. “Why don’t I believe you? You said you were bored with your old life and wanted some adventure. Here’s what I think happened. You thought running away to the West would be romantic, so you wrote me and agreed to come here. As time went on, you began to see what it was really like here, that livin’ here is a lot of hard work. You started thinking that your parents would be really disgusted by the fact that you were marrying some poor rancher with two kids. I guess you’d say it was scandalous. Yeah, I think that’s the right word.”

Tessa couldn’t help saying, “It is.”

Dean nodded. “Okay. Then once you’d married me, you were trapped. You couldn’t go back home because you’d be disgraced. Unless your family came up with a good story, of course. Maybe you went to visit your sick aunt or something? Isn’t that how you people do when someone gets into some kind of trouble? You just sweep it under the rug and make up something so that no one is the wiser?”

Tessa hadn’t thought to ask her father what they’d told any of the friends or family in her circles about her disappearance. She looked at Dean with wide eyes and said nothing because she could neither confirm nor deny his statements.

Dean saw her confusion. “What excuse did your father give them?”

“I have no idea. I’ve never asked him,” Tessa said.

His laugh held no warmth. “So you didn’t even think it was worth your time to find out what lie they told to your blue blooded friends? You know, Tessa,

your family has enough money and clout that if you wanted a divorce, you could get one and no one would know. Do you want a divorce?"

If Dean had stabbed her with a knife through the heart, it wouldn't have been nearly as painful as his last remarks. She didn't want to show any signs of weakness in front of him, so Tessa tossed her head and turned away from him so he couldn't see the tears welling in her eyes.

She fought to make her voice strong as she said, "No, Dean, I do not want a divorce. I would never do that to the children."

"But if it were just me?"

"I'm not going to deal with fiction—"

"That's rich, coming from a writer," Dean said. "I thought that's what writers did? Make up stories? That's it, isn't it? You wanted something new to write about and having an adventure like this would definitely be something to write about," Dean said.

Tessa turned back to him as fury built inside. "Yes! At first!" she cried. "You don't know what it's like to be trapped in a life you deplore, Dean. You have no idea how miserable I was!"

Dean didn't smile as he said, "I think I know something about misery, Tessa."

Tessa had to concede that point. "Yes. You do. I know that my misery was greatly different than yours, but it was misery just the same. You don't understand what it's like for women, at least in the East. In many ways, women are considered property and although my parents are wonderful, they saw it as my duty to do what was expected of me for someone of my station, as you put it."

"Explain it to me more, Tessa," Dean said.

"Every day, I was told how to feel, what to think, how to dress, where I could and could not go. What to eat, how much to eat, who my friends should or shouldn't be. Can you imagine such a life? And the damn parties! Endless parades of men who had no substance, who were out for a dalliance, or to marry someone with whom to breed just to create an heir. No one wanted me for me, Dean. No one even knew the real me."

Dean replied, “Why didn’t you just tell them you didn’t want to do that anymore?”

“You’re not listening again and neither did they! They didn’t listen when I *did* tell them over and over. They believed I was just being silly and thought I would see the error of my ways at some point. Just like you have believed about me of late. My feelings don’t seem to matter to people.

“I love my family very, very much, but I know they were hoping that I would suddenly become the dutiful daughter and be what society said I should be,” she said. “I had to get out of there or go mad, Dean. I was in danger of suffocating and dying inside.”

“So you thought up this crazy plan when you saw an ad in the paper for mail-order brides? So, I was just a way of escape?” Dean couldn’t believe how much that stung. “Me and my family were a means to an end?”

Tessa saw her own fury matched as Dean’s protective nature regarding their children came to the fore. His eyes took on a fierce light. Tessa put a hand on his arm without thinking.

“No! I swear! All right, maybe it sort of started out that way, but once we began writing back and forth, getting to know each other, I began to care about you and I wanted to come meet you because I felt you were a wonderful man. Not as an escape. I still had to sneak away because they would have never let me come here to meet you. And after we met, I knew I’d made the right decision, or at least I thought I had.”

Dean sighed and closed his eyes for a moment as understanding dawned on him. “So that’s why you were so mad about the letters. I guess I didn’t look at it from your point of view, but I see it now. You left everything you knew behind; your family, friends, and your way of life because of our letters to each other. You felt safe enough to do that because of the things you thought that *I* had said to you. And finding out that Marcus wrote them instead of me scared you. Like the stuff in them wasn’t true and here you were married to some guy you didn’t really know.”

“Yes! Yes!” Tessa could have wept with joy. He was finally listening to her. “It was as if everything I had come to know about you was false. What would I

find out about you that contradicted the things in those letters? Were they just said to lure me here to be domestic help or were you really looking for someone to love you? And were you looking for someone to love again? I knew no one here, Dean and yet I came because I felt that I'd come to know *you*. Those letters made me trust you and made me feel safe in coming here."

Dean nodded. "I get it, Tessa, but why not write home about us? Was it because I'm not rich or come from some fancy bloodline?"

Tessa saw how vulnerable he felt and wanted to reassure him. "I don't care from what class you come. I've never cared about class, Dean, and I never thought of you as being inferior in any way. I had planned to send a letter once we were married because then there would be nothing anyone could do to prevent it. Dean, I wanted very badly to marry you and I wasn't going to let anyone stop me from becoming your wife."

"That makes sense," Dean said with a smile. "I'm glad in a way, for that reason, you didn't send a letter beforehand, too. I wouldn't have wanted anything to mess up us getting married. But you didn't send a letter *after* we were married, either. That makes me feel like you were ashamed that you'd married someone like me. Someone who doesn't have the kind of education you do or fancy clothes or knows which fork you're supposed to use at an expensive restaurant."

A smile curved her mouth over his "fork" remark. "Dean, I don't care about any of those things. What I was looking for in a man, I found in you. Someone brave, honest, caring, and strong. A man who wouldn't be afraid to make a commitment or honor that commitment."

"Yeah? What else?" Dean said.

"A man who knew how to be loyal, who would be a wonderful father, and who found it important to take care of his family. Someone smart."

Dean pursed his lips at that.

"Dean Samuels, do not do that! Do not think less of yourself because you didn't have the opportunity to go to school or because you were too busy making a living for your family to have the proper time to study! There is certainly no shame in that and you are much more educated about what's really important in

life than a fraction of the people I used to associate with back in Pittsburgh,” Tessa said.

Dean was startled by her stern demeanor. It reminded him of the way she talked to Jack when he was misbehaving. “You really feel that way about me?”

“Yes, I do!”

Dean grinned. “I still don’t know how smart I am when it comes to women. Not very, I don’t think. Tessa, I really didn’t think it was a big deal about the letters. I would never lure you here under...no, don’t tell me...false pretenses. I need to tell you something else about those letters. Please don’t get mad again. We’re makin’ progress here. Aren’t we?”

His unsure expression amused her but Tessa kept from smiling. “Yes, we are.”

“Good. You see, Marcus was the one who put that ad in the paper. He knew that I had a lot on my hands with the ranch and the kids and all and he kept teasing me that I should put an ad in the paper for a mail-order bride and finally, one day, I said go ahead. I was only joking, but he did it anyway, the jerk,” Dean told her.

Tessa laughed. After coming to know Marcus and his mischievous ways, she could well imagine him doing it.

“But, Tessa, once I read that letter, I wanted to know more about you. The main reason I asked Marcus to help me was because I was afraid if I sounded stupid, you’d stop writing and I wanted to keep hearing from you. I couldn’t admit it to anyone, including myself, at first.

“You’ve never lost a spouse, Tessa. You’ve never lost the person you thought you were going to grow old with and raise a family with. After Sarah died, I was scared to death to love anyone again. I was afraid of losing someone again. I also somehow felt that if I did get married again, I’d be cheating on Sarah. Can you understand that, Tessa?”

“Yes,” she said and hated herself for the first prick of jealousy she’d felt toward Sarah.

“So I locked up all those kinds of feelings and I never intended on letting them out again. But every time I got a letter from you, a little bit of my grief

went away. And then you said you wanted to come here and that really made me panic because it was becoming real. But something made me have Marcus send that last letter to you, the one tellin' you to come out here.

"Then you were here and you were so much more than I ever expected you to be. I thought you were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen and I kept thinkin' that there was no way you would end up stayin'. But you did and little by little, I started letting Sarah go and saw that it was okay for me to be happy again. To be happy with you.

"You finally got me through my grief over Sarah. She'll always be a part of me and I'll always love her, but I'm not *in love* with her anymore. I love you, Tessa, only you," Dean said.

His tender words melted away all of Tessa's doubts and fears. "I love you, too, and I'm so happy to have my own place in your heart, Dean. It means more to me than I'll ever be able to tell you. Thank you for telling me your feelings even though I know you're not comfortable with talking about them."

Dean said, "We're married now and we should be able to tell each other anything. I won't promise to be perfect at it, but I promise to do my best. Does that sound fair?"

Tessa took his hand and squeezed it. "Very fair. You know, for someone who says he's not very smart, you certainly sound intelligent."

"Thank you, Mrs. Samuels. I appreciate that," Dean said with a smile.

Tessa said, "You're very welcome, Mr. Samuels."

Dean leaned closer and said, "So how do you feel about doin' some of that other kind of talkin'?"

"What other kind?" Tessa asked with mock innocence.

Dean's kiss slowly went from being tender to sensual and demanding. Tessa became warm all over and she responded to him eagerly. When it ended, Dean smiled down at her.

"That kind."

"Oh. Yes. That kind. I think I could be persuaded," Tessa said.

"Then up the ladder you go," Dean said as he pointed to the hayloft.

Tessa's eyes widened. "What? Up there?"

“Uh huh. Unless you’re chicken,” Dean said with a grin.

“I am no such thing,” Tessa said defiantly as she gathered the bottom of her nightgown and started climbing.

Dean followed closely, enjoying the view as they went. When they reached the loft, he grabbed Tessa and pulled her down onto the loose hay with him. Tessa laughed as Dean nuzzled her neck and asked, “So are you serious about wanting more children?”

“You know I am,” Tessa said. “Why do you ask?”

He answered by embracing her and kissing her fiercely. “Talkin’ time is over. I’ll show you,” he said when he ended the kiss.

Like the winds of fate that had brought her to Dawson, Tessa let herself be swept away by her love for Dean. She responded to the love and desire in his eyes and in his touch. Soon, they were lost in one another as the moon shone down on the barn.

EPILOGUE



The next afternoon, Geoffrey and Tessa walked through the barn, trying to work out their differences since they hadn't done so yet. She had been too preoccupied with the tense situation between her and Dean. Geoffrey knew this and had not pressed until now. However, he was due to return to Pittsburgh soon and wanted some answers from his daughter.

"Papa, don't you see? I'm not much different than you. As I said before, you struck out on your own, so why shouldn't I have been allowed to?" Tessa asked.

"It was different for me, Tessa. I didn't want to get caught up in all of the fighting. Things were dangerous there. It wasn't what I wanted for myself. I wanted to be my own man and make my own future," he told her.

Tessa arched a brow at her father. "Did you hear what you just said?"

Geoffrey went back over it and saw her point. He gave her a considering look. "You tricked me," he said.

"No, you tricked yourself, Papa," Tessa said with a mischievous smile. "I had nothing to do with it."

"I hate it when I'm outsmarted by a woman," he teased.

Tessa laughed.

Geoffrey sobered. "But your life wasn't in any danger."

"No, not any physical danger, but I was in danger of becoming resentful of the people I love because I couldn't pursue my own dreams and wishes. If I had stayed in that life, I would have withered away inside. Would you want that for me?"

“Of course not.”

“And if I had told you what I wanted to do, would you have let me?”

Geoffrey’s silence and uncomfortable expression told her the answer to her question.

“Right. So you see that I had no choice and none of this is Dean’s fault. He had no idea I’d run away like that, so please don’t blame him,” Tessa said.

“I understand where you’re coming from,” Geoffrey said. “And I don’t blame him. I could see that he had no knowledge of your subterfuge. I don’t necessarily agree with your methods, but I can now accept why you did it. I now know that we should have listened to you better. I’m sorry that I didn’t.”

Tessa hugged her father. “Thank you for saying so, Papa. I appreciate it very much. I have a good life here. You don’t have to worry about me anymore. We’re not the richest people, but Dean is a hard worker and he loves me and the children. That means more to me than any amount of money.”

“I know he’s a good man, Tessa and the children are a delight. Jack is quite amusing,” Geoffrey said with a smile as he thought about how Jack had started calling him “Grandpa” right away.

“You don’t know the half of it, Papa. You never know what he’s going to say or do,” Tessa said. “And he’s so hard to stay cross with.”

“Hmm. I know someone else like that,” Geoffrey said with a twinkle in his dark eyes.

“Papa!” Tessa’s objected.

Geoffrey said, “You know that it’s true, Tessa. You may be incorrigible and strong-willed, but you’re also beguiling and charming. It’s a very lethal combination.”

Tessa smiled. “I will take that as a compliment.”

Geoffrey embraced his daughter and laid his cheek atop her head. “As far as worrying about you goes, I’m your father and I will always worry about you. That’s what parents do. I’m sure you’re learning that already.”

Tessa said, “Yes, I am. It astounds me that I fell in love with Sadie and Jack as well as their father, Papa. But we are going to have more children, so be prepared to be a grandpa several times over.”

“I look forward to it.” He tightened his hold on her and said, “I love you, Tessa.”

“I love you, too, Papa,” Tessa said.

Geoffrey released her and smiled at her as Jack came running into the barn. “Grandpa! C’mon, we’re goin’ fishin’ and Uncle Seth says you wanted to learn.” Laughing, Geoffrey said, “So I did. Lead the way, young Jack!”



BY THE TIME two weeks had passed, Geoffrey was indeed convinced his daughter had made a good match and that he would be leaving her in good hands. He’d enjoyed meeting the rest of Dean’s family and had gotten to know them all a little better. Geoffrey found himself impressed by Marcus’ self-taught knowledge. Seth entertained him with stories of his exploits on cattle drives and Geoffrey told them some of his own adventures in Ireland.

Too soon, it came time for her father to head back, which made Tessa realize how much she missed her family. Geoffrey promised that he would try to bring the whole family to meet them the following spring.

Dean and Tessa drove Geoffrey to Wolfe Point to meet the stage coach. They waved him goodbye and Tessa couldn’t help crying. Dean held her and whispered comforting words to her. Tessa finally dried her eyes and smiled.

“I’m all right now. We’ll write all the time to keep in touch and next year will be here before you know it, right?” she said.

“Of course it will. Don’t worry, I’ll keep you busy,” Dean said suggestively. She smacked his arm. “You’re awful.”

Dean laughed and helped her get back in the wagon. “Yep, that’s me, your awful husband.”

“Who writes awful letters,” she said.

“About that. I had an idea. You have two sisters, right? I have two brothers. Seth needs a wife, he just doesn’t know it. So does Marcus. How do you feel about playing match maker?”

Tessa considered it. “Well, it might take some work, but I’m quite sneaky

and you're very smart, so I think we might be able to pull it off. I hope Seth writes better letters than you do. Oh, wait, I've never read any letters written by you, so how would I know?"

Dean captured her mouth in a kiss. "Hush up now, wife," he said when he released her.

"I will not!" she exclaimed.

Dean laughed again as he clicked to the horses. "Well, then I'm gonna have to keep kissing you to get you to shut up."

Tessa was quiet for a moment and then began talking a blue streak about anything and everything.

As they drove back to the ranch, they laughed and loved, accompanied by the westward wind.

The End

WESTWARD DANCE: BOOK 2 CHAPTER 1



“Let’s have a walk in the park before going to Stanton’s, shall we?”

Maddie gave Theo a smile. He was a handsome young man, only a couple of years older than her twenty-one years. He wore his dark hair slightly long and a lock of it fell attractively over his forehead. Theo Wilson and she had grown up together, and Maddie had always thought of him as a brother. His green eyes glinted with mischief and good humor.

“What are you up to, Theo?” she asked as she narrowed her blue eyes at him.

“Why do you think I’m up to something? It’s a pleasant night, and I feel like stretching my legs a bit, that’s all,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders.

Maddie knew Theo’s penchant for playing pranks and was slightly leery of his motives.

Theo gazed at her with a serious expression. “Madelyn, I promise this is not a joke. I just feel restless, that’s all. I have my boards in the morning and my nerves are getting the best of me. Help a fellow out, huh?”

Maddie relented. She knew how much passing his attorney licensing tests meant to Theo; he’d been studying very hard and could use a respite.

“Since you put it that way, perhaps a walk would be good for you at that,” she said.

“Splendid! Murdock! To the park. Look sharp, man!” Theo called to the driver.

Murdock started the horse out at a fast trot, and they soon left the O’Connor residence behind. It wasn’t long before they reached the park, and Theo helped

Maddie down from the carriage, telling Murdock to wait for them there. Murdock assured his young master that he would stay put.

Theo took Maddie's hand and they walked along the lit path. Walking hand in hand was something they did sometimes, and Maddie thought nothing of it. She looked up at the stars and smiled as she found the Big Dipper. This was by far the best place to see the stars since there weren't as many lights around to dim their brilliance.

Following her gaze, Theo found it as well and smiled. Maddie had always liked the stars. He looked at her in the moonlight, and her platinum hair looked even paler, more ethereal than it normally did. Madelyn O'Connor was one of the most beautiful and sought after women in the city, and it wasn't unusual for several men to be crowded around her at balls and parties.

She turned to look at him and he smiled at her. "I see it. What is it about the Big Dipper that fascinates you? Surely there are more exciting constellations to look at," he said.

"It's because of Papa. When we were little and came to the park at night to see the stars, we always imagined what would be in it. You know; is it milk? Coffee? We would choose one and he would make up a story about how it got there or who put it in there. I think Tessa gets her imagination from him," Maddie answered.

Theo smiled. "How is our Tessa?"

"She's quite well, actually. She's very happy with her husband and their children. I wish they would come for a visit so I could meet them. I'm sure their little one is adorable," Maddie said.

"Oh, yes. They had a little boy. What did they name him again?"

"Michael, but they call him Mikey. Dean started that, I believe," Maddie said.

Theo nodded. They neared the bridge leading over the brook that ran through the park. He stopped her and held her hand a little tighter. "Maddie, I need to talk to you."

Maddie turned to him and was intrigued by the serious expression on his angular features. "What is it, Theo?"

“I want you to know how much you mean to me,” he said. “We’ve known each other for such a long time, and I’ve enjoyed every minute we’ve spent together.”

Maddie smiled. “So have I.”

“I love you, Maddie. I always have,” Theo said.

“Theo, you know I love you, too.”

Theo could tell from her easy tone that she didn’t realize what he was saying.

“No, I mean I love you as a man loves a woman. I’m in love with you,” he explained before dipping his head and brushing his mouth against hers.

Maddie pulled away and laughed at him. “Theo! What are you doing? I knew you were trying to pull a prank on me. Now let’s go to Stanton’s and stop this silliness.”

“I’m serious, Maddie. I’ve been in love with you for so long, but never had the courage to tell you until now,” Theo said as he encircled her waist with his arms.

Maddie pushed at him as he brought his mouth down on hers. She turned her head to the side and tried to avoid his kiss. “Theo! Stop this instant! Let me go! We’re just friends.”

“That’s the problem. What I feel for you isn’t something one feels for someone who’s just a friend,” Theo informed her, and held her even tighter.

“I’m sorry, Theo, I didn’t know.”

“Can’t you see how perfectly suited we are? Our families are close; we share the same interests and have so much fun together. Why shouldn’t we be together?” Theo continued with earnest.

Maddie said, “Because I don’t love you in that manner, Theo. I’m not romantically attracted to you. Now I demand that you release me!”

Her high-handed attitude brought out an explosive anger in Theo. Maddie watched in horror as she saw Theo change from her good-natured friend into an evil-faced stranger. His eyes took on a furious gleam, and his mouth twisted in an ugly snarl. The first blow came so swiftly that there was no time for her to react. It made her head swim, and she reeled backwards.

Theo hauled her back to him and struck her on the other side of her face;

Maddie felt her left eye begin to immediately swell. Self-preservation kicked in and Maddie began to fight furiously, scratching and kicking. No man had ever touched her in a violent manner, and she'd be damned if she was going to take Theo's abuse like some weak-willed woman.

Her further resistance infuriated Theo even more, and he hit her harder and faster. Maddie fell as her senses became muddled from pain and dizziness. Theo was on her, ripping her bodice and trying to do the same with her gown and petticoats.

"If I can't have you willingly, I'll take you any way I can," he told her. His tone was hate-filled and his voice coarse with rage.

Maddie still struggled, although she knew it was futile and there was no way she could hold off Theo's assault. Through the foggiest in her pain-riddled mind, she heard shouting.

"Hey! You there! Leave her alone!" a male voice came.

Theo looked up and saw the man coming at him. He gave Maddie a last shake that bounced her head off the trail and then ran.

The man knelt next to Maddie and was shocked to see the awful state she was in. The woman who was with him took her battered hand gently in hers. "It's all right, Miss. You're safe now. We're going to help you. We have to get her to the hospital, John."

John saw how badly Maddie's bodice was torn, exposing her bare flesh. He took off his suit jacket and wrapped it around Maddie to cover her. Then, as gently as he could, he picked her up and carried her to the street where cabbies tended to sit and wait for customers.

"Ashley, hail that cab over there," John instructed.

Ashley did so and informed the cabbie of the situation. The cabbie helped John get Maddie into the conveyance; he cracked the whip at his horse and they took off at a canter.



GEOFFREY SAT with his wife in their front parlor reading one of the financial papers

to which he subscribed. Maureen worked at a particularly difficult piece of needlework. She sighed and Geoffrey looked over at her and smiled.

“If it frustrates you that much, why not quit it and work on something else?” he asked.

She flicked an annoyed glance at Geoffrey and said, “When have you ever known me to give up on something just because it was difficult? If I did that, you and I would not be married.”

Geoffrey laughed at that. “’Tis true, lass. It’s lucky for me that you didn’t cease your pursuit of me.”

“You weren’t the only one being pursued, if you remember correctly. We led each other on a merry chase,” Maureen responded with a smirk on her lips.

“Right again. You have to admit that there were a lot of fun moments involved, though.”

“Yes, there were,” she agreed.

The front doorbell chimed, and they looked at each other. It was nearly eleven, and they wondered who could be calling at that time of night. Mrs. Duncan had been sent home for the night, and they’d also given the butler, Richard, the night off. Geoffrey answered the door and was surprised to see a police constable standing on the stoop.

“Hello. Can I help you?” Geoffrey asked.

“Are you Mr. O’Connor?” the man inquired.

“I am.”

“Might I come in, sir? I have something of a serious nature to discuss and I don’t think you want to talk here,” the policeman explained.

Geoffrey stood back and motioned the man into the foyer. Maureen came out of the parlor.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“Well, ma’am, I’m sorry to inform you both that your daughter, Madelyn, was attacked tonight in the park,” he said, shifting from foot to foot. He was obviously uncomfortable at having to impart such terrible news.

“What?” Geoffrey said, stunned.

“Attacked? By whom?” Maureen said.

“Apparently, it was a family friend. Theodore Wilson,” the policeman told them.

Maureen put her hand to her bosom. “Theo? But, they’re friends. Why would he do such a thing? Never mind that right now. We need to get to her.”

Geoffrey asked, “What is her condition?”

“Very serious, I’m afraid. It was a brutal assault. I have a carriage out front to take you to the hospital,” the policeman said.

Claire came down the front staircase. She’d heard the conversation from the landing at the top. “I’m coming, too.”

Geoffrey turned to his youngest daughter and said, “No, Claire. I’m afraid not. You need to alert the staff for us.”

“But, Papa—”

Geoffrey cut her off as he gave her a forbidding look. “Claire, this is not open for discussion! Now, do as I say!”

Claire looked down at the floor. “Yes, Papa.”

Geoffrey instantly regretted being sharp with her. He hugged her and said, “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’m just upset. Forgive me?”

“Of course, Papa. I shall do as you ask,” Claire said.

Geoffrey kissed the top of her head and said, “That’s my good girl.”

Maureen kissed Claire’s cheek and said, “Try not to fret too much. Maddie will be fine.”



AS SOON AS they saw Madelyn, Maureen realized how wrong her words to Claire had been. The policeman had told them to prepare for how bad Maddie looked, but her parents were still shocked. Their daughter was barely recognizable. Dark bruises and nasty cuts covered her face, and her left eye was swollen shut.

Maureen had to turn away at first to regain her composure. Geoffrey hugged her close as a fierce anger took hold of him. He vowed that Theo would pay for what he’d done to their daughter. The doctor came to talk with them and

informed them that although Maddie's injuries were severe, she would heal.

"Dr. Spencer, was she, did he...?" Maureen couldn't bring herself to say the words.

Dr. Spencer looked at her with sympathy and said, "No. He didn't get the chance. There was another couple in the park who saw what was happening and intervened. I believe they are still here. They've been very concerned."

"I should like to thank them," Geoffrey said. "I'll be right back, Maureen."

Maureen nodded and sat in the chair beside Maddie. She picked up Maddie's hand.

"I'm here, Maddie. Mama is here and you're safe," Maureen said. She kissed Maddie's hand and held it against her cheek as tears made their way down her face.

Maddie's right eye opened slightly as she located her mother. "Mama?"

"Yes, darling. I'm right here."

Maddie squeezed her mother's hand even though it hurt. Her mother's comforting presence caused relief to surge through Maddie. Sobs began to wrack her battered body, and Maureen moved to sit on the bed so she could gather her daughter close. She rocked Maddie as she had when she was a little girl. She uttered words of comfort and tried to soothe away her daughter's misery.



GEOFFREY ENTERED the waiting room and spotted the couple who'd saved Maddie right away.

"Are you the ones who brought Madelyn O'Connor here?" he asked.

They both rose from their seats.

"Yes, sir. I'm John Heath and this is Ashley Brooks," John said.

Geoffrey shook hands with them. "We owe you a huge debt of gratitude for saving our daughter from an even more horrible fate. How can we ever repay you?"

John shook his head. "There's no need, sir. We're just sorry that we didn't happen upon them sooner, so that she might not have been hurt at all."

“How is she?” Ashley asked.

Geoffrey was touched by the young couple’s concern. “She is in a bad way, but Dr. Spencer is confident that she’ll make a full recovery.”

“That’s good to hear, indeed,” John said.

Geoffrey thanked them again and gave them his card. He told them to call upon him if he could ever help them in any way, and then returned to his wife and daughter.



MAUREEN SOFTLY CLOSED the door to her daughter Madelyn’s room. She walked down the long hallway in their family home located in the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Point Breeze. Her deep distress was apparent to the head housekeeper, Mrs. Duncan, as she passed her mistress. Mrs. Duncan didn’t speak because she could tell Maureen was deep in thought.

Mrs. Duncan was as upset as Mrs. O’Connor over the horrible events that had taken place two months prior. Maddie had healed well physically, but her mental condition was still tenuous.

As Mrs. Duncan continued on her way to the kitchen to make sure lunch would be served on time, she figured that Maddie must not have improved, judging from the expression on Maureen’s face. She gave a worried sigh and shook her head. She would talk with Cook about making one of Maddie’s favorite dishes to entice her to eat.



MAUREEN DESCENDED the main staircase and went through the dining room and out the double French doors that led to the garden. She walked to a bench in a secluded part of the garden and sat down. It was so hard to see her beautiful daughter this way. Prior to the attack, Maddie had been a vivacious social butterfly. She had rarely been home in the evenings because she attended so many parties and dinners. Unlike her older sister, Tessa, Maddie had willingly

immersed herself in the party life. She was also very charming at the dinners that were thrown for Geoffrey's business associates and was adept at easing tensions with her wit.

Now, however, she was reclusive, depressed, and had very little appetite. Anger and sadness were Maureen's regular companions these days, and she had a hard time sleeping some nights. The sight of their daughter bruised, battered, and terrified as she lay in the hospital bed that night would be forever burned in Maureen's mind.

Geoffrey had been consumed with rage and had barely been prevented from going over to the Wilson's residence to call Theo out and kill him. Although Maureen would have liked nothing better than for Geoffrey to thrash Theo, her sense of reason had prevailed and she and the police were able to keep him from doing so. Maureen kept telling him that their family needed him at home, not in prison, and she eventually got through to him.

Charges were pressed, but though it would have gone to court, Maddie didn't want the humiliation of testifying. The Wilson family had protected their son, as any high society family of that time would have, and there had been rumors spread around the city that Madelyn was promiscuous and had led Theo on. Maddie had flat-out refused to testify and be subjected to the kind of publicity that would surely come.

Geoffrey had fumed and cajoled and pleaded, but he couldn't budge Maddie. He wanted that animal to suffer and be punished for hurting his little girl, and it ate at him that he couldn't get justice for her.

Their social life had ground to a halt with the exception of smaller dinners with their close friends and a few business associates. They did their best to avoid the Wilson family, because Geoffrey wouldn't have been able to control himself. Before accepting any invitations to parties and the like, they always made sure the Wilsons were not invited. It would seem as though many people had stopped inviting the Wilsons, a sign that they believed Theo guilty of the crime. They didn't want him around their daughters.

Thinking of all this now, Maureen let herself cry. She allowed the tears to flow once per day, but otherwise tried to appear positive for her family.

However, Claire wasn't fooled and would often give her mother comfort with a spontaneous hug or kind words. Claire was also able to make Maddie smile by reading her the more amusing articles in the paper each morning.

Geoffrey had taken to coming home earlier in the day to be there to support his family. The tragedy had drawn them all closer, and they worked their hardest to heal their daughter and sister. They all did their best, but it wasn't easy. Maureen feared that Maddie would never fully recover.

CHAPTER 2

Tessa laid the letter from her mother down on her lap and wiped away tears from her eyes as her husband Dean entered the parlor. He saw Tessa's distress and crossed the room to her.

He knelt next to her chair and asked, "Bad news?"

Tessa looked into his caring blue eyes and said, "I'm afraid so. Maddie is not improving much. She doesn't want to go out and when she does, it's only for a short period of time because she's terrified that she'll see *him*. Once in a while she'll come down to one of Papa's dinners, but she only eats and then retreats back upstairs to her room."

Dean rubbed her shoulder in sympathy. "I'm sorry, honey. I feel so bad about this happening to her."

Tessa smiled and laid a hand on his cheek. "You are such a good man, Dean Samuels."

"Thanks. And you're a good woman, Tessa Samuels. And a great wife and mother."

"You are too kind, but I thank you. Oh, Dean, I wish there was some way to help, but it's so hard from so far away," Tessa said.

"Do you want to go there for a visit?" Dean asked.

Tessa shook her head. "I don't think it would help. She needs to get out of the city for a while, I think. It would be good for her to get away from the situation, but Mama says Maddie won't go to our country home because the Wilson's country home isn't far from ours. Papa wants to sell it and buy another

one far away from theirs, and I think that's best."

"Yeah, me, too. You know, maybe she could come here. It would be somewhere completely new and a different kind of life. There's no way she'd run into that monster here. She'd be able to meet her niece and nephews and her brother-in-laws. It's quiet here, and maybe it'd give her a chance to get her strength back."

"You mean *brothers-in-law*," Tessa said, and planted a passionate kiss on Dean's sensual mouth.

When she drew back, Dean grinned at her and asked, "What was that for?"

"For being the best husband and such a smart man! That's a wonderful idea. I'll write Mama back immediately," she said. She gave Dean another kiss and hurried off to their room to begin her letter.

Dean smiled and rose from his knees. He loved how impetuous and excitable his wife was. It certainly kept things interesting, and he never had to guess at how Tessa felt about something. "Oh, by the way, I know what the correct way to say it is, I just like driving you crazy by sayin' it wrong," he called after her, and then left Tessa to her task. He had to check on a mare that was close to giving birth.



Seth Samuels, Dean's older brother by one year, sat on his horse, a big chestnut gelding named Hank, and watched the herd of fifteen Holstein heifers, ten steer, and one bull. He and his brothers wanted to start some milk production with the intent of selling to the people in their area and the settlers who passed through the county. It was a good way to diversify their ranching business.

His keen ice-blue eyes watched the animals' behavior and ascertained that something was not right. They were restless and seemed to be constantly testing the breeze. Hank was acting anxious as well. He snorted and tossed his head, clear signs that something sinister was about.

He and two other drivers were bringing the herd home and were only about a hundred miles from reaching their ranch. The herd may not be large, but it was

valuable and they needed to protect it at all costs. Their livelihood depended on it.

Their best cattle dog, Jasper, was also on the alert. He helped keep the herd together, much to the annoyance of the bull. The dog wasn't intimidated when the bull rushed at him, though. He'd dealt with many a testy Texas long horn and the Holstein didn't faze him.

Ray, one of the other drivers, circled around the other side of the herd, tightening them up so there were no stragglers. The cattle didn't fight much, knowing that they were safer together than not. It was another signal that danger lurked near. The bull snorted and pawed the ground, ready to fight.

Marty, the third driver, rode up beside Seth. "Something's spooking them. Duke here doesn't want to go near that stand of trees over there. I think we need to head off in the other direction right quick," he said.

Seth watched the section of trees Marty had noticed. Duke was Marty's horse and seemed to have a sixth sense about cougars and such, so Seth took Marty's comments seriously. He nodded. "Okay. You and Ray get them going. I'll bring up the rear and keep an eye out behind us. Might be a cougar or coyotes. We can't afford to lose a single head of cattle, but especially that bull and the heifers. Not at the prices we had to pay for them."

"Right, boss. We'll get on it." Marty rode off, shouting instructions to Ray.

He whistled commands to Jasper and the three of them began moving the herd forward and to the right away from the trees. Ray wanted to get them going at a good clip, so he whistled another command to Jasper to push them harder. Jasper began nipping at the heifers' heels and barking. He was so fast that it seemed like there were two dogs instead of one.

Seth watched them for a moment and then started to follow, taking over for Ray who moved up alongside the herd to keep them headed to the right. He kept turning Hank around so he could watch the trees. Ray shouted something and Seth turned back to the front in time to see where Ray was pointing.



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WESTWARD WINDS: CAST OF CHARACTERS

- **Theresa** (Tessa) O' Connor
- Maureen & Geoffrey O' Connor (Theresa's parents)
- Claire & Maddie O' Connor (younger sisters)
- **Dean** Samuels
- Jackson (Jack) Samuels (Dean's son)
- Sadie Samuels (Dean's daughter)
- Seth Samuels (Dean's older brother)

This book is dedicated to all of my faithful readers, without whom I would be nothing. I thank you for the support, reviews, emails, love, and friendship. I am truly blessed to have such a wonderful readership.

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