

SIX



FROM TESS MERCY'S JOURNAL:

After two days of life on the ranch, I've decided I hate Montana, I hate cows, horses, cowboys, and most particularly chickens. I've been assigned the chicken coop by Bess Pringle, the scrawny despot who runs the house where I'm being held prisoner. I learned of this new career move after dinner last night. A dinner, I might add, of roast hunk of bear. It seems Danielle Boone went up in the hills and shot herself a grizzly. It was yummy.

Actually, it was quite good until I learned what I'd been eating. I can report that grizzly does not, despite what may have been stated by others, taste remotely like chicken. Whatever else I could say about Bess—and I could say plenty, given the way she eyeballs me—the woman can cook. I'm going to have to watch myself or I'll be back to the tubby stage I lived through in my youth.

There's been some excitement around the Ponderosa while I was back in the real world. Apparently someone butchered a cow up in what they call high country. When I

said I thought that's what you did with cows, Annie Oakley did her best to wither me with a look. I have to admit she's got some good ones. If she wasn't such a tight-assed know-it-all, I might actually like her.

But I digress.

The cow butchering was more in the way of a mutilation and has caused some concern among the rank and file. The night before my return, one of the barn cats was decapitated and left on the front porch. Poor Lily found it.

I don't know whether to be concerned that this isn't a usual event around here or to pretend it is and make sure my door is locked every night. But the cowgirl queen looks worried. Under other circumstances, that would give me a small warm glow of satisfaction. She really gets under my skin. But with the way things stand, and thinking—or trying not to think—of the long months ahead of me, I find myself uncomfortable.

Lily spends a lot of her time with Adam and his horses. The bruises are fading, but her nerves are alive and well. I don't think she has a clue that the gorgeous Noble Savage is developing a case on her. It's kind of fun to watch. I can't help but like Lily, she's so harmless and lost. And after all, the two of us are in the same boat, so to speak.

The other characters in the cast include Ham; he's perfect, straight out of Central Casting. The bowlegged, grizzled cattleman with a beady eye and a callused hand. He tips his hat to me and says little.

Then there's Pickles. I have no idea if the man has another name. He's a sour-faced, surly character who looks like a bloated string in pointy-toed boots and is nearly hairless but for an enormous reddish moustache. He scowls a lot, but I did see him working with the cattle, and he seems to know his stuff.

There's the Book family. Nell cooks for the hands and has a sweet, homely face. She and Bess get together to gossip and do women-on-the-ranch things I don't want to know about. Her husband is Wood, which I've discovered is short for Woodrow. He has a lovely black beard, a very nice smile and manner. He calls me ma'am and suggested very politely

that I should get myself a proper hat so as not to burn my face when I'm out in the sun. They have two boys, about ten and eight, I'd say, who love to run around whooping and pounding on each other. They're awfully pretty. I saw them practicing their spitting behind one of the outbuildings. They seemed to be quite skilled.

There's Jim Brewster, who seems to be one of the good ol' boy types. He's the lanky, I'm getting to it, boss sort. He's very attractive, looks appealing in jeans with that little round outline in the back pocket, which I'm sure is something revolting like chewing tobacco. He's given me a few cocky grins and winks. So far I have been able to resist.

Billy is the youngest. He looks barely old enough to drive and has his puppy eyes on our favorite cowgirl. He's a big talker and is constantly being told by anyone within hearing distance to shut up. He takes it well and rarely listens. I feel almost maternal toward him.

I haven't seen the cowboy lawyer since my return and have yet to meet the infamous Ben McKinnon of Three Rocks Ranch, who appears to be the bane of Willa's existence. I'm sure I'll like him enormously for that alone. I believe I'll have to find a way to soften Bess up in order to get all the dish on the McKinnons, but meanwhile I have a date in the chicken coop.

I'm going to try to think of it as an adventure.

TESS DIDN'T MIND RISING EARLY. SHE WAS INVARIABLY UP by six in any case. An hour at the gym, perhaps a breakfast meeting, then she would hunker over her work until two. Then she'd take a dip in the pool, or take another meeting, perhaps do a little shopping. Maybe she'd have a date or maybe she wouldn't, but her life was hers and ran just as she liked.

Rising early to deal with a bunch of chickens had an entirely different flavor.

The chicken house was big, and certainly looked clean. To Tess's untrained eye, the fifty hens Mercy boasted seemed a legion of beady-eyed, ominously humming predators.

She dumped the feed as Bess had instructed, dealt with the water, then dusted off her hands and eyed the first roosting hen.

“I’m supposed to get the eggs. I believe you may be sitting on one, so if you don’t mind . . .” Gingerly she reached out, her eyes locked on the hens. It was immediately apparent who was in charge. Yelping as beak nipped flesh, Tess jumped back. “Look, sister, I’ve got my orders.”

It was an ugly battle. Feathers flew, tempers snapped. The henhouse erupted with clucking and squawking as neighboring hens joined the fray. Tess managed to get her hand around a nice warm egg, wrenched it clear, then stepped back red-faced and panting.

“That’s quite a technique you got there.”

At the voice behind her, Tess let loose of the egg. It spurted out of her fingers and fell splat on the floor. “God-damn it! After all that.”

“I spooked you.” The commotion inside the henhouse had lured Nate. Instead of heading on to see Willa, he’d detoured and found the California connection—in her designer jeans and shiny new boots—battling chickens. He could only think she made a picture. “Looking for breakfast?”

“More or less.” She pushed her hair back from her face. “What are you looking for?”

“I’ve got some business with Will. Your hand’s bleeding,” he added.

“I know it.” In a bad temper, she sucked on the wounds on the back of her hand. “That vicious birdbrain attacked me.”

“You’re just not going about it right.” He offered her a bandanna to wrap around her hand, then stepped up to the next roost. And managed, Tess noted, to look graceful despite the necessity of stooping and bending to keep from bashing his head on the ceiling. “You’ve just got to go in like it’s natural. Make it quick but not abrupt.” He demonstrated, slipping a hand under the roosting hen and pulling it out with an egg. Not a feather stirred.

“It’s my first day on the job.” Pouting only a little, she

held up the bucket. "I like to find my chicken in the freezer section, wrapped in cellophane." As he walked along, gathering eggs, she followed behind. "I suppose you keep chickens."

"Used to. I don't bother with them now."

"Cattle?"

"Nope."

She raised an eyebrow. "Sheep? Isn't that a risk? I've seen all those western movies, the range wars."

"I don't raise sheep either." He settled an egg in the bucket. "Just horses. Quarter horses. You ride, Miz Mercy?"

"No." She tossed her hair back with a shrug. "Though I'm told I'd better learn. And I suppose it would give me something to do around here."

"Adam would teach you. Or I could."

"Really?" She smiled slowly with a flutter of lashes. "And why would you do that, Mr. Torrence?"

"Just being neighborly." She sure had a nice smell about her, he thought. Something just a little dark, just a little dangerous. And all female. He set another egg inside the bucket. "It's Nate."

"All right." Her voice warmed to a purr, and her eyes slanted up a sly look under thick, spiky lashes. "Are we neighbors, Nate?"

"In a manner of speaking. My place is east of here. You smell good, Miz Mercy, for someone who's been fighting with chickens."

"It's Tess. Are you flirting with me, Nate?"

"Just flirting back." His smile was slow and easy. "That's what you were doing, wasn't it?"

"In a manner of speaking. Habit."

"Well, if you want advice—"

"And lawyers are full of it," she interrupted.

"We are. My advice would be to tone down the power. The boys around here aren't used to women with as much style as you've got."

"Oh." She wasn't sure if she'd been complimented or insulted, but she decided to give him the benefit of the

doubt. "And are you used to women with style?"

"Can't say I am." He gave her a long, thoughtful look out of quiet blue eyes. "But I recognize one. You'll have them crazy and thinking of killing each other within a week."

Now that, she decided, *was* a compliment. "That ought to liven things up."

"From what I hear, they've been lively enough."

"Dead cats and cows." She grimaced. "A nasty business. I'm glad I missed it."

"You're here now. That seems to be the lot," he added, and she looked down in the bucket.

"Plenty of them. And Christ, they're filthy." It was liable to put her off omelets for quite a while.

"They'll wash." He took the bucket from her and started out. "You settling in?"

"As best I can. It's not my milieu—my usual environment."

He tucked his tongue in his cheek. "Folks from your—what was it?—milieu come out here all the time. Not that they stay." Automatically he ducked down to avoid rapping his head on the low doorway of the henhouse. "Those Hollywooders come charging out, buying up land, plunking down houses that cost the earth and more. Think they're going to raise buffalo or save the mustangs or God knows what."

"You don't like Californians?"

"Californians don't belong in Montana. As a rule. They go running back to their restaurants and nightclubs soon enough." He turned, studied her. "That's what you'll do when your year's up."

"You bet your ass. You can keep your wide-open spaces, pal. I'll take Beverly Hills."

"And smog, mudslides, earthquakes."

She only smiled. "Please, you're making me homesick." She figured she had his number. Montana-born and -bred, a slow, thorough thinker who liked his beer cold and his women modest. The sort who would have kissed his horse at the end of the last reel in any B western.

But my, oh my, he was cute.

“Why the law, Nate? Somebody sue your horses?”

“Not lately.” He continued to walk, shortening his stride to let her keep pace. “It interested me. The system. And it helps keep the ranch going. Takes time and money to build up a solid herd and a reputation.”

“So you went to law school to supplement your ranch income. Where? University of Montana?” Her mouth was smug and amused. “There is a university in Montana, isn’t there?”

“I’ve heard there is.” Recognizing the sarcasm, he slid his gaze down to hers. “No, I went to Yale.”

“To—” As she’d stopped dead, he was well ahead of her before she recovered. She had to scramble to catch up. “Yale? You went to Yale and came back here to play range lawyer for a bunch of cowboys and ranch hands?”

“I don’t play at the law.” He tipped his hat in good-bye and circled around to a corral beside the pole barn.

“Yale.” She said it again, shook her head. Fascinated now, she shifted the bucket he’d handed back to her and scurried after him. “Hey, listen. Nate—”

She stopped. There was a great deal of activity in the corral. Two men and Willa were doing something to a small cow. Something the cow didn’t appear to appreciate. Tess wondered if they were branding, and thought she’d like to see how that little trick was done. Besides, she wanted to talk to Nate again, and he was moving to the action.

She hefted her bucket, strode up to the gate and through it. No one bothered to look at her. They were focused on their work and the cow had all their attention. Lips pursed, Tess stepped closer, leaned forward to check out the activity over Willa’s shoulder.

When she saw Jim Brewster quickly, neatly, and efficiently castrate the calf, her eyes rolled back in her head and she fainted dead away, with barely a sound. It was the crash of the bucket and breaking eggs that made Willa glance around.

“Well, Jesus Christ, will you look at that?”

“She’s done passed out cold, Will,” Jim informed her, and earned a bland scowl.

“I can see that. Deal with the calf.” She straightened, but Nate was already lifting Tess into his arms. “Looks like a handful.”

“She’s not a featherweight.” He grinned. “Your sister’s built just fine, Will.”

“You can enjoy that little benefit while you haul her into the house. Damn it.” She scooped up the bucket. “She busted damn near every egg. Bess’ll have a fit.” Disgusted, she looked back at Jim and Pickles. “You two keep at it. I’m going to have to see to her first. As if I’ve got nothing better to do than find smelling salts for some brainless city girl.”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on her, Will,” Nate began as he carried Tess across the road toward the ranch house. His lips twitched. “She’s out of her milieu.”

“I wish to hell she’d get back in it and out of mine. I’ve got this one fainting on me, and the other one tiptoeing around as if I’d shoot her between the eyes if she looked at me.”

“You’re a scary woman, Will.” He glanced down as Tess stirred in his arms. “I think she’s coming around.”

“Dump her somewhere,” Willa suggested, pulling open the door of the house. “I’ll get some water.”

He had to admit Tess was an interesting armful. Not one of the bony, pencil-thin California types but a soft, round woman who had her weight distributed just where it belonged. She groaned, and her lashes fluttered as he carried her toward a sofa. Her eyes, blue as cornflowers, stared blankly into his.

“What?” was the best she could manage.

“Take it easy, honey. You just had yourself a swoon, that’s all.”

“A swoon?” It took a moment for her brain to get around to the word and its meaning. “I fainted? That’s ridiculous!”

“Went down real graceful too.” She’d toppled like a tree, he remembered, but didn’t think she’d appreciate the analogy. “Didn’t hurt your head, did you?”

“My head?” Still dazed, she lifted a hand to it. “I don’t think so. I . . .” And then she remembered. “Oh, God, that cow. What they were doing to that cow. What are you grinning at?”

“I’m imagining what it was like for you to see a bull turned into a steer for the first time. Guess you don’t see much of that in Beverly Hills.”

“We keep all our cattle in the guest house.”

He nodded appreciatively. “There now, you’re coming around.”

She was, indeed. Enough to realize she was being cradled against his chest like a baby. “Why are you carrying me?”

“Well, it didn’t seem neighborly to drag you by the hair. Your color’s coming back.”

“Haven’t you put her down yet?” Willa demanded as she strode back into the room holding a glass of water.

“I like it this way. She smells pretty.”

The exaggerated drawl made Willa chuckle and shake her head. “Stop playing with her, Nate, and dump her. I’ve got work to do.”

“Can’t I keep her, Will? I don’t have me a female out on the ranch. Gets lonely.”

“You two are a riot.” Striving to restore some dignity, Tess swiped the hair out of her eyes. “Put me down, you idiot beanpole.”

“Yes’m.” From a considerable height, he dropped her onto the leather couch. She bounced once, scowled, and pushed herself up.

“Drink this.” With little sympathy, Willa thrust the glass of water into Tess’s hand. “And stay away from the corals.”

“You can be sure I will.” Furious with herself, and the fact that she was still shaky, Tess drank. “What you were doing out there was revolting, barbaric, and cruel. If mutilating a helpless animal isn’t illegal, it should be.” She set her teeth when Nate beamed at her. “And stop grinning at me, you fool. I don’t imagine you’d appreciate having your balls snipped off with pruning shears.”

He felt them draw up, cleared his throat. "No, ma'am, I can't say I would."

"We don't castrate the men around here till we're through with them," Willa said dryly. "Look, Hollywood, weaning and castration are part of ranch life. Just what do you think would happen if we left every cow with his works? We'd have bulls humping everything."

"Cattle orgies every night," Nate put in, then backed off at the searing looks delivered by both women.

"I don't have time to explain the facts of life to you," Willa continued. "Just get over it and stay away from the corral for the next couple of days. Bess'll find work for you inside the house."

"Oh, joy."

"I don't see what else you're good for. You can't even gather eggs without breaking the lot of them." When Tess hissed at her, she turned to Nate. "You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yeah, I did." He hadn't expected quite so much entertainment. "First, I wanted to see if you were all right. I heard about the trouble you've been having."

"I'm all right enough." Willa took the glass of water out of Tess's hand and drank the rest of it down herself. "There doesn't seem to be a lot I can do about it. The men are a little spooked, and they're keeping their eyes out." She set the empty glass down, pushed her hat back. "You haven't heard about this sort of thing happening to anyone else?"

"No." And it worried him. "I don't know what I can do to help, but if there is anything, just ask."

"I appreciate it." Willa took his hand and squeezed it, a gesture that caused Tess to purse her lips thoughtfully. "Were you able to deal with that other business we talked about?"

Her will, he thought, naming Adam as beneficiary. And the papers transferring his house, the horses, and half of her interest in Mercy to him at the end of the year. "Yeah, I'll have a draft to you on all of it by the end of the week."

"Thanks." She released his hand, adjusted her hat. "You can talk to her if you've got time to waste on it." She sent

Tess a wicked smile. "I've got cows to castrate."

As Willa strode out, Tess folded her arms and tried to settle her temper. "I could learn to hate her. It wouldn't take any effort at all."

"You just don't know her."

"I know she's cold, rude, unfriendly, and riding on a power trip. That's more than enough for me." No, she realized as she got to her feet, the temper wasn't going to settle. "I haven't done a damn thing to deserve that attitude from her. I didn't ask to be stuck out here, and I sure as hell didn't ask to be related to that gnat-assed witch."

"She didn't ask for it either." Nate sat on the arm of a chair, methodically rolled a cigarette. He had a little time and thought there were things that needed to be said. "Let me ask you something. How would you feel if you suddenly found out your home could be taken away? Your home, your life, everything you've ever loved?"

His eyes were mild as he struck a match, held it to the tip of the cigarette. "To keep it, you have to rely on strangers, and even if you manage to hold on, you won't keep it all. Good chunks of it are going to belong to those strangers. People you don't know, never had the opportunity to know, are living in your house with as much legal right as you. There's nothing you can do about it. Added to that, you've got all the responsibility, because these strangers don't know squat about ranching. It's up to you to hold it together. All they have to do is wait, and if they wait, they'll get as much as you, even though you were the one to work, to sweat, to worry."

Tess opened her mouth, closed it again. Put that simply, it changed the hue. "I'm not to blame for it," she said quietly.

"No, you're not. But neither is she." He turned his head, studied the portrait of Jack Mercy above the fireplace. "And you didn't have to live with him."

"What was he—" She broke off, cursed herself. She didn't want to ask. Didn't want to know.

"What was he like?" Nate blew out smoke. "I'll tell you. He was hard, cold, selfish. He knew how to run a ranch,

better than anyone I know. But he didn't know how to raise a child." Remembering that, thinking of that, fired him up. Now his voice was clipped. "He never gave her an ounce of affection or, as far as I know, one single word of praise, no matter how she worked her skin off for him. She was never good enough, or fast enough, or smart enough to suit him."

Guilt wasn't going to work, Tess told herself. He wasn't going to make her feel guilt or sympathy. "She could have left."

"Yeah, she could have left. But she loved this place. And she loved him. You don't have to grieve for your father, Tess. You lost him years ago. But Willa's grieving. It doesn't matter that he didn't deserve it. He didn't want her any more than he wanted you, or Lily, but she wasn't lucky enough to have a mother."

All right, guilt was going to work. A little. "I'm sorry about that. But it doesn't have anything to do with me."

He took a slow drag on his cigarette, then crushed it out carefully as he rose. "It has everything to do with you." He studied her, and his eyes were suddenly cool and detached and uncomfortably lawyerlike. "If you don't understand that, you've got too much of Jack Mercy in you. I'll be going." He touched the brim of his hat in farewell and walked out.

For a long time, Tess stood where she was, staring up at the portrait of the man who'd been her father.

MILES AWAY ON THREE ROCKS LAND, JESSE COOKE WHISTLED between his teeth as he changed the points and plugs in an old Ford pickup. He was feeling fine, pumped up from the conversation over breakfast about the animal mutilations at Mercy. What was more rewarding, what was so damn perfect, was that Lily had come across that headless cat.

He only wished he could have seen it.

But Legs Monroe had it straight from Wood Book over at Mercy that the little city woman with the black eye had screamed her head off.

Oh, that was sweet.

Jesse whistled a country tune as his clever fingers made adjustments. He'd always hated country music, the whiny women sobbing over their men, dickless men moaning over their women. But he was adjusting. Every damn one of his bunkhouse mates was a fan, and it was all anyone listened to. He could handle it. In fact, he was beginning to think Montana was the place for him.

It was a land for real men, he'd decided. Men who knew how to handle themselves and keep their women in line. After he'd taught Lily a proper lesson, they'd settle down here. She was going to be rich.

The thought of that had him chuckling and tapping his foot to his own tune. Imagine dumb-ass Lily inheriting a third of one of the top ranches in the state. Worth a fucking fortune, too. All it was going to take was a year.

Jesse pulled his head out from under the hood and looked around. The mountains, the land, the sky—they were all hard. Hard and strong, like him. So this was his place, and Lily was going to learn that her place was with him. Divorce didn't mean shit in Jesse Cooke's book. The woman belonged to him, and if he had to use his fists to remind her of that from time to time, well, that was his right.

All he had to do was be patient. That was the hard part, he admitted, wiping a greasy hand over his cheek. If she found out he was close, she'd run. He couldn't afford to let her run until the year was up.

That didn't mean he wasn't going to keep his eye on her, no, indeedy. He was going to keep watch over his useless stick of a wife.

It was easy enough to make friends with a couple of the asshole hands over at Mercy. Drink a few beers, play some cards, and pump them for information. He could wander over to the neighboring ranch at will, as long as he didn't let Lily see him.

And the day Jesse Cooke, ex-Marine, let a woman outwit him was the day they'd eat cherry Popsicles in hell.

Ducking under the hood again, he got back to work. And reviewed his plans for his next visit to Mercy.