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Moving the curtain aside, Ellen Haskell peaked through the narrow window at the commotion outside the mudroom. Seven horses stood at the dilapidated scrub oak railing, stomping to keep warm in the snowy morning. The piebald gelding belonged to her father. The buckskin was his right-hand man's, Cherry Weston. Cherry had inherited the job when his own father died in the saddle pushing the home herd down from the saddleback in '87.

Seven horses. That meant three extra mouths for breakfast. Already she heard the men washing up at the cattle trough, sloshing her precious hand-pumped water onto the ground while they traded range gossip like old ladies. She knew better than to interrupt. The bunkhouse talk would drop to a mutter and someone would whisper, "Time for church talk." Either that or they would stare like she was something to eat and they were coyote hungry. Especially the strangers. They'd hang their heads and peep from under their battered old Stetsons until she walked away.

Old hens—that was what they were. Clucking, scratching old hens. No wonder they stared. But she was no hen and seventeen wasn't exactly old.

Dropping the curtain, she turned back to the stove. She was obviously the only member of the Rocking H that had work to do before sunup and she was too busy to listen to their chatter, anyway. At this rate she'd be lucky to get coffee on the table. Punching the mass of dough that would make biscuits, given a hot fire and another twenty minutes, she tossed in an extra fistful of flour and beat her frustration into the lump.

She was still fuming when the biscuits came out. On the other side of the door she could hear boots shuffling. She knew without looking that the table was crowded with rank-smelling cowhands who wouldn't even thank her when they were done. Knowing it would nettle her father to do otherwise, she kept her head down as she passed the platter, deliberately ignoring the eyes that watched her.

**OUTSIDE, THE GROUND WAS COVERED** with a layer of white. Any stranger at the table was only riding grub, showing up at mealtime, asking about work when all they wanted was a place to bunk, some grain for their horse and a square meal. "Feed them too good and they'll hang around all winter," her father always said.



The rhubarb pie she'd made for supper was cooling in the pantry where it could stay until the strangers left. There was just enough milk gravy in the chipped crockery bowl to serve up a scant helping for each of them, and a plate of fatback that would be lucky to make it around. **Good and enough for this crew.**

One plate on the table caught her attention with its heap of biscuits piled up like a sandstone mountain. Gravy cascaded down the sides, a slab of fresh butter melted over the top. The cowboy had taken his share and more.

Anger brought her chin up. She found herself staring into icy blue eyes and a cocky, self-satisfied grin. Shaded by a misshapen hat with a broken eagle's feather in the frayed band, the stranger's eyes reminded her of a summer dip in Cougar Lake. The corners of his mouth lifted with a crinkle that should be quarantined by the speed with which it infected her. To her dismay she found herself smiling back.

When she managed to drag her gaze from the stranger, at the end of the table her father's handlebar mustache dipped in a scowl that made even his own men squirm. She lowered her gaze to hide her confusion and noticed the grease spots on her shirtwaist. Why had she never noticed it before, the way her breasts strained against the fabric, a younger girl's garment on a grown woman? She wished she'd worn her second-best dress this morning instead of the dingy shirtwaist that was practically ready for the quilt pile.

**T**he stranger's amused eyes followed her and she felt her cheeks heating. Whirling, she caught up the coffeepot and pulled it from the table with a single, jerky motion. A second later she felt coffee scalding through her skirt. Biting back the pain, she fled before she could humiliate herself with tears.

The damage to her skin wasn't serious, although her skirt was probably stained for good unless she boiled it in the dish water that was heating on the stove. In the privacy of her bedroom she pulled on her blue gingham with the realization that she had

gotten her wish; she would be wearing her second-best dress for the rest of the week while her skirt froze dry on the clothesline.

By the time she returned to the kitchen the cowboys were gone. A broken eagle's feather lay beside a plate that had been slicked clean. Picking it up, she brushed it against her lips and listened to the sound of departing hooves.

At lunchtime she heard her father's step on the porch. To the white gravy she added salt pork drippings and ladled it over a half dozen fried beefsteaks. Her father claimed that extra fat in a man's winter diet kept him warm, like a grizzly. She had taken an extra minute to braid her hair and to tie it with a scrap of ribbon.

The rider was seated with his back to the door. She recognized him by the tilt of his hat. It was no wonder he ate more than the others, he was a good hand taller than most of them, broad shouldered and trim of waist, his soft wool shirt tucked into denim trousers. From the cook room she studied the gregarious stranger, heard him tell a joke and join the laughter without breaking the rhythm of his meal.

She felt a dish burning her fingers, remembered the bowl of gravy and hurried to put it on the table. He acknowledged her with a tilt of his forehead and turned to spear himself a fair-sized piece of meat from the platter in front of him. He smiled again when she refilled his cup with coffee. At suppertime he was back again, this time bearing gifts.

The heat from the stove seemed to expand the moment he entered carrying a load of dry kindling. His eyes spoke before he did as he bent to add a stick to the stove. "Evening, miss. Owed you some wood for your fine cooking." When his arms were empty, he advanced a step and brazenly traced the line of her jaw with his callused finger. "You sure are a pretty little thing. What's your name?" He heard the others tromping into the dining room and turned like a buck sniffing the wind, his eyes watching the door.

Ellen gawked, open-mouthed, as she brushed her skirts against her legs to allow him to pass.

At the table she tried to concentrate on serving, but it wasn't easy to ignore the jibes from the other cowboys or the glare from Cherry where he sat in her father's place. She answered his annoyance with a look of her own that said; *my father is away. I can talk to anyone I choose.* She wanted to prove to him that she was grown-up, but his glacial stare made her feel silly and small.

When she served the pie she made sure the blue-eyed rider got the largest slice. By the time she got around to Cherry, only one small piece remained. His favorite. She scooped it onto his plate while faint color rose up his neck, a sign of the controlled fury that had earned him his nickname. Thankfully, he kept his head down and finished his meal.

**ON SATURDAY, SNOWFALL LAY SCANT** on the trail into town. Ellen heard her father mention the need for provisions followed by Cherry's low warning that she shouldn't be left behind with strangers in the area. It was on her mind to protest, but she realized he was doing her a favor.

She welcomed the chance to ride on the ranch wagon, even though stiff springs made the wagon little more than a rumbling spine breaker. It felt good having a moment with her father, alone. Apparently not alone; she caught the shadow of Cherry's easy canter as he rode his buckskin alongside.

A feeling filled her, part irksome, part wistful. When she was younger it was Cherry who drove the team while their good-natured banter echoed off

the snow-crueted hills. But lately he had stopped offering. Today her father drove and she was lucky to get ten words out of him during the ten-mile ride. She tried to bring up the subject of the grub rider without being too obvious. "We've been having a fair bit of company, lately."

Her father frowned. "Our supplies gonna make it through the winter? 'Pears to me we been eatin' somewhat better the last few days."

She concentrated on the horses' flanks. "Gets tedious, cooking all the time. What's wrong with some change?"

"Nothin'. Long as you save it for the boys who work up their hunger on our ranch. Get my drift?"

Ellen nodded. She knew her father's rule. Judging from his smirk, so did Cherry, even if he didn't say anything. She'd have welcomed a smart remark. More and more, he seemed a stranger, tongue-tied and awkward when she asked a question of him. The pleased grin he used to give her was gone, replaced by a look of wariness. If he smiled at all it didn't meet his eyes.

A cloud loomed overhead and suddenly the brilliant sun no longer warmed the wagon. She bundled under the grizzly pelt and tried to brace herself as the wagon squirmed through the slick adobe ruts. With a muffled voice she managed a promise from her father that she could spend an hour with her friend, Cora, and abandoned the idea of conversation.

Cora answered the door looking dainty in a ruffled dress that showed her lush femininity. Ellen glanced at her own garb, a buckskin skirt and a *gutta percha* shirt that she had taken from her father's store-room. Sometimes the difference between her and Cora stung, but today she brushed past, eager to share her news. Cora had the town boys to woo her; Ellen had only the range hands. Usually Cora had stories of kisses on the front porch swing, but today it was time for a country girl to make her friend swoon with envy.

**She tried to bring up the subject of the grub rider without being too obvious. "We've been having a fair bit of company, lately."**

Pulling Cora out into the street, she pressed through the rutted tracks toward the general store. On her day of freedom, an hour cooped up in a house—even a town house—was more than she could bear. When they were out of hearing distance, Ellen blurted, “Cora, I’ve met the most magnificent man.”

“Anyone I know?”

“He’s a line rider. Wait till you see him. At the Grange dance next week. I’m sure he’ll be there.”

“What’s his name?”

Faced with her scanty set of facts, Ellen realized how uneventful her romance might appear. Thinking fast, she blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “I...uh...I’m not supposed to tell. He’s keeping low in the saddle.” Cora’s gasp filled her with satisfaction.

“Is he an outlaw?”

“Nothing like that. Trust me...I’d tell you if I could. You’re my best friend.”

Cora nodded in understanding. “How does he kiss?”

“K...kiss?” She stuttered, then caught herself. “Oh, Cora. He’s got the softest lips, the bluest eyes in the world. Remember when Mr. Archer traveled to the Yellowstone and he came back raving about the high mountain lakes? Well, my rider’s eyes are the same color.”

“Blue.” Cora pronounced the word with a satisfied sigh. “The man I marry will have blue eyes. What else?”

“He likes my cooking. I vow, if I cooked up the shank side of a dried up old bull, he’d eat it and be glad.”

Cora raised her arms to tend a stray curl and Ellen was reminded of her own lacking curves. She could sit a horse far better than she could fill a dress. Cherry used to tease her about her skinniness, back when they swam in the stock pond. They’d grown up together on the ranch. She’d never caught him in a lie so she’d had to believe him about her lack of feminine wiles. But the blue-eyed rider felt differently. “He can’t keep his eyes off me. I’m going to sneak out to meet him one of these nights. We’ll have to keep a watch out for Dad and Cherry.”

“Maybe Cherry’s jealous. Wouldn’t that be something? If he wasn’t a ranchman, I’d set my sights on him.”

“Cherry?” The thought struck her like a mule kick. She dismissed it just as quickly. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her father motion toward the buckboard while snowflakes fell softly onto the boardwalk. Her time was up. “Let’s meet at the dance,” she whispered.

Cora’s giggle pealed through the air. “I’ll be there. Be sure and bring your blue-eyed rider or I’ll think you made him up.”

Close behind and to her left, Ellen sensed a movement. Turning her head ever so slightly, she met Cherry’s frown. He’d heard. Apparently Cora hadn’t finished humiliating her because she heard her friend say, “Hello, Cherry Weston. Hear you have some competition out your way.” Ellen fled in the direction of the buckboard before she could hear his reply.

On the day of the dance, Ellen finished packing the basket of fried chicken, placed it in the hamper alongside her Apple Dandy cake and smoothed the folds of her blue gingham dress. Cherry had offered to drive her to the dance and, to her chagrin, her father had taken him up on the offer. At the last minute Mrs. Head, the housekeeper from the next ranch over, appeared for a ride.

Cherry handled the reins in silence as if he could think of nothing to say. For once Ellen was grateful for Mrs. Head’s chatter. Curious about Cherry’s continued silence, Ellen turned to find him studying her soft ginger curls, newly washed and lightened with vinegar from the root cellar. She

snapped her head forward and concentrated on the woman’s words.

Mrs. Head was giving vent to a frustration that had plagued her for months. “I vow, those grub riders are getting to be a nuisance. Wasn’t only yesterday I had to swat the hand of one of them, seemed determined to eat the whole plate of sausage himself. Man acted like bringing in a handful of wood was payment enough for eating my larder clean. Sometimes I think those boys could benefit from a good worming.” Ellen heard Cherry’s chuckle as she pressed her hand against her own smile. The woman continued. “There’s one, seems to think he’s royalty. Needs a fessick for his digestion.” Again, Ellen heard a chuckle from the other side of the wagon.

The schoolhouse and the sound of fiddle and bow put an end to the conversation.

Cora was already on the dance floor. So were a dozen other girls from ranches that dotted the valley. Ellen took her cake from Cherry and placed it on the planked table alongside the others. She arranged her basket of chicken and turned to find the blue-eyed rider slouching against a wall, his eyes idly following her as she tried to find something to do with her hands and somewhere to stand where she wouldn’t feel like an awkward, unpartnered country girl.

Fortunately, one of her father’s friends swept her onto the dance floor and she almost forgot about the lazy pair of eyes that watched her.

When the fiddler announced “Ladies Choice,” she managed to be standing alongside her blue-eyed stranger. Up close and bareheaded, his hair was curly, with a corkscrew curl of dark brown lying against his temple almost to his eye. She felt her breath close off, caught the scent of bay rum, watched as he teased the curl with a sudden expulsion of air. She smelled whiskey on his breath and her normally clear-eyed assessment suffered a sudden change of heart. There were exceptions to her father’s rules; lots of good men drank upon occasion. The idea of a whiskey bottle stashed in his saddlebags only added to his charm.

The music began and she turned to him as though the idea of dancing together had just occurred. Weakness assailed her as she felt his arm tighten across her back. His grip seemed possessive, firmer than she was used to. She liked the feeling of being claimed. Using every ounce of concentration, she managed to settle into the rhythm just as Cora and her partner danced past. Tilting her head, she nodded and mouthed, "This is him," just before her own partner whirled her in another direction.

Across the room she caught a glimpse of Cherry, scowling. With a flush, she realized that he had seen her exchange with Cora. Indignant at being watched like a schoolgirl, she pressed closer, allowing her breasts to brush against the solid chest of her rider. Surprise flitted across the rider's face, replaced by eagerness. She felt his lips against her ear, heard him whisper, "What's your name, missy?" His voice was a low, timorous demand that set a spasm of pleasure down her spine. "I've been waiting to find out."

Caught in his embrace, Ellen felt as sensual as Cora. She tried to think what Cora would do if a man's breath suddenly wiped out her ability to think.

"What happens if I don't tell you?"

Her teasing remark sounded like something Cora would say. Cora thought she was country plain. Tonight she would show her; Cherry, too, if he wasn't too busy talking range with another stockman to notice.

"Bet I can make you tell me."

"How you gonna do that?"

"First we get rid of your bod-guard."

Ellen looked around, confused. "My father's not here."

"Not your father, his range boss. The one chased me off your place."

Ellen stumbled and missed a beat. "Is that why you haven't been around?" She figured he'd moved on. Cherry hadn't bothered to enlighten her.

"Wild horses wouldn't have kept me away, otherwise." His eyes were dreamy, half closed, filled with hunger that had no hint of chicken or gravy. His eyes were hungry for her; she sensed it and felt herself grow hot with feelings that tingled deep inside her. She had seen, firsthand, his insatiable appetite.

The music ended. The fiddler announced the supper break and the rider released his hold, craning his neck to see where the food line formed.

Ellen found herself wedged behind a table, cutting pie and serving ham to her neighbors. Cherry filled a plate and returned for another. When he made a third trip through the line she watched until he carefully set the plate in the lap of an elderly woman whose cane hung on the back of her chair. Two other women, equally infirm, sat in rocking chairs, trying to do justice to the food he had piled onto their plates. Ellen bit off her smile. There was more food on each plate than the three could eat together. It was obvious Cherry didn't have much experience with little old ladies.

The grub rider came through the line with a heaped plate. Ellen watched as he cut in front of a young mother who had turned her attention to her cranky child and noticed that he was already on



his second plateful. She started to speak when Mattie Young, a girl from the ranch west of theirs, speared a piece of ham onto his plate. Ellen felt her fists curling as Mattie cooed, "You come back to our place tomorrow night and I'll make that chocolate cake you love so much." Fury spiked her blood as she watched the two of them disappear through the cloakroom door. She wondered if he knew Mattie's name.

Across the room Cora was sharing a plate with Tom Booker, the banker's son. His confident manner bespoke a familiarity. By the looks of things, Cora had found her blue-eyed boy.

To her shame, Ellen felt tears welling up as everyone paired up except herself. Without thinking, she grabbed a plate. She wasn't hungry, but she could scarcely stand behind the pie table and wait for Mattie and the grub rider to return for dessert. They probably had something else in mind besides her Apple Dandy cake. With nothing else to do, she joined the end of the line and found herself standing in front of Cherry. "I thought you'd have your fill by now," she muttered peevishly.

He hesitated. She thought he was angry with her until he finally spoke. When he did, his words surprised her. "Nah. I'm accustomed to taking my meals with you. Wouldn't taste the same." She glanced up, surprised to see no teasing in his eyes. He reached for the remaining piece of rhubarb pie, hesitated, and forked her Apple Dandy Cake, instead.

Ellen noticed his pause. "Might as well take the pie."

"Nah, it's yours."

**PLEASURE PULSED THROUGH HER,** a feeling as if he were holding her in a close dance. Suddenly she wanted to please him. "Take it Cherry, please. You can have my cake anytime." She caught herself staring into green eyes. How strange that she had forgotten his eyes were the color of mountain vetch on a late spring morning.

"Don't need it. I'm satisfied with what's in front of me."

She wondered at his tone of voice, different from what she was used to. There was a wonder about him tonight, something she couldn't define. She struggled for something to say, remembered that

they had been discussing pie. "You should have it. You love it. "

"You think you know what I love?"

There it was again, that tone. She tried to judge his mood. "I'll get fat."

"You look mighty good, with or without the pie."

Despite the flush that his words brought, she recalled something that had churned at her for three years. The last words she had allowed him to taunt her with before she raced back to the ranch house, dissolved in tears and learned to live without him as a best friend. Raising her chin, she bit the words out, one by one. "You said I was skinny and built like a boy. You shouted it in front of all the ranch hands." Her voice trailed off. She felt young, and foolish, and she needed to cry.

This time it was he who seemed puzzled. "When did I say that?"

"That time I outroped you at the roundup." She tried to keep her voice level, despite her trembling lips.

"The roundup? Elly, that was years ago. We were kids." He shook his head and

stared at her like she had taken leave of her good sense. "Elly, you're so much a woman that I don't know what to say to you, anymore. Don't know what to think about when I'm around you. Don't know if I have a place. Elly, I don't know how to live around you." His voice lowered to an uncertain whisper.

Weakness in Cherry Weston? The idea was unthinkable. She felt tears form and she realized how much she had missed his nickname...and him.

"You never..."

"Watching you grow up, flirting with every grub rider that came along... what was I supposed to think? You seemed hell-bent on picking anyone but me. I figured you had me classed right alongside your father. Elly...I'm not your father."

"Cherry. I wanted you to..." She tried to form her thoughts, tried to decide what she wanted from him. To push in and take more than his share without earning the right? No, that wasn't Cherry. Cherry would wait his turn. Suddenly she had no appetite for the plate of food she held.

Cherry set his plate behind an empty cider jug and reached for hers. "Let's go outside and settle this for once and all."

On her way across the room she met Cora's raised eyebrows. She felt beautiful. Taking Cherry's arm, she allowed him to push open the heavy door to the outside where the western sun had set into a sky of midnight black.

At the base of a cottonwood he pressed her against its soft bark. Everything seemed familiar until he lowered his lips. With that first touch she realized nothing was ever going to be the same.



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She has won numerous awards for her writing including *Ordinary Aphrodite*, a humorous memoir about her life of small steps.

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