

BIG ROCK ROMANCE
COLLECTION



NORA NOLAN



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MARRIAGE BY MAIL



BIG ROCK ROMANCE - BOOK ONE

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Nora Nolan
Marriage by Mail

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CHAPTER 1



Derek McBride sat in one of the chairs in front of the stagecoach office. He'd waited for his new bride-to-be for several months, and now the big day had arrived. Molly would arrive today, about fifteen minutes from now if the stage was on time. Derek tried to quell the last-minute insecurities that were popping up in his head out of nowhere. *Why did I think I could be happy with a woman I've never met in person? What if she doesn't like me? What if she doesn't even show up? Why did I even think I should ever get married again after losing Charlotte? I never want to feel that kind of pain again.*

Yet here he was, a thirty-one-year-old widower, waiting for a stagecoach to deliver his new wife to be—Molly Jane Hickam Brewer, a twenty-four-year-old widow. He reflected on how they both seemed young to have tragically lost spouses. His own Charlotte had died in childbirth nearly four years ago, and try though he might, the doctor hadn't been able to save their daughter, either. Char and the babe were buried together on the longest, saddest day of Derek's life. It had taken a couple of years for him to drag himself out of his grief and decide to start over. He knew he

couldn't give up on life at his age. It would have been the last thing Char would have wanted.

Walter Brewer, Molly's late husband, had died of influenza. He had been a bit older than Molly and had been able to provide for her fairly well. She sold the feed and grain store Walter left her and the house they lived in behind the store for a tidy enough sum for a twenty-four-year-old widow. Theirs hadn't been a real love match, but they were comfortable together and happy enough.

Derek pulled a folded paper out of his wallet and opened it. It was a penciled portrait of Molly that an artist friend of hers had drawn for her to send to him. He couldn't imagine a prettier woman—even his own Charlotte. He wondered just how true to the image she would be when he saw her in the flesh.

Flesh. Just that word provoked unbidden thoughts. What would Molly be like, *in the flesh*? Would she be giving and loving toward him, or would she be withdrawn and shrink from his touch? They were set to be married today. Should he try to have relations with her tonight or wait until she got to know him better? They'd been exchanging letters for months, but that's not the same as getting to know someone in person. *Is it?* Would it be like his wedding night with Charlotte, whom he'd known for years before their marriage? Or would it be like wedding a stranger?

He was lost in those thoughts and didn't hear the stage approach until it was almost right in front of him.



MOLLY HAD BEEN beside herself since the coach driver had yelled down that Big Rock was just about a half an hour away. Mr. and Mrs. Benson and their daughter, Bethie, had been doing their best to calm and encourage her. They'd been traveling together since Molly boarded their train this side of Baltimore, and Bethie and Molly had immediately warmed to each other. They'd spent the night at a way station in Cooper's Gap the night before. That

station had never seen so much excitement. When the wife and daughters of the station master learned that Molly would be married that day, they insisted on getting her up extra early that morning. They prepared a bath for her with lots of rosewater and lavender, washed and curled her hair and pinned it up, and made sure she was as ready for a wedding as one could possibly be when you still have to travel by dusty stage for four or five more hours before getting there.

The stagecoach could only go two or three hours at a time without stopping at a way station to get fresh horses. There was such a station, although a rustic one, during the ride from Cooper's Gap to Big Rock, but Molly didn't get a chance to wash up to try to keep feeling fresh. The only comfort to be had was a little private time behind some bushes, while the other ladies kept watch a few discreet feet away to give a semblance of privacy.

Molly was a little fearful, a little anxious, and a lot curious about what was to come when she finally arrived in Big Rock. She'd sent Derek a drawing of her, but all she knew about his looks was what her cousin had told her. He was tall and had dark hair and blue eyes. They'd exchanged several letters, some which had gotten personal enough to make her blush a little, but she'd never asked for any more details about his looks. He might think her shallow and vain, and she didn't want that. Walter hadn't been a handsome man, but he was a good one and companionable. *I hope Derek's handsome. Oh! I shouldn't think that! Okay, I just hope he's as pleasant and good-natured as his letters sound. Maybe a little handsome. Enough to make me swoon? I've never swooned. Do women really swoon, or is that just in books? I'd like to swoon. Oh, could he please be that handsome? No! I shouldn't wish that. It's shallow to hope that. Well, dammit, I hope he's that handsome anyway.*

It was her cousin who had introduced her to Derek, in a most unusual way. Philip and Molly had grown up very close to each other and had played together in the summers as children when visiting their grandparents. Even though he was four years older,

he was always closer to Molly than he was to the other cousins. Her naïve charm and keen sense of humor were irresistible. As Philip grew up, he became interested in raising horses and cattle and went into business for himself as a horse and cattle broker. It was in this capacity, he had the chance to meet and do business with Derek McBride. They'd become fast friends, albeit mostly from a distance. They met up whenever business brought Philip into fair proximity to Big Rock. He'd even stayed on Derek's ranch when he visited. When Philip learned that Walter had passed away of sickness, his heart went out to his favorite cousin. But he immediately remembered that Derek had also lost a spouse. Wouldn't it be a hoot if he could bring them together?

Philip had written identical letters to each of them as an introduction and then sat back and waited for curiosity to take its course. He knew, if nothing else, Molly would surely write to Derek just to profess a little embarrassment that Philip would be so bold and insist she had nothing to do with that introduction. Molly had been only mildly surprised that her cousin would do that, and after thinking about it, was more than a little curious as to what the outcome might be. She and Philip had always been the mischievous ones. So, she waited, and sure enough, Derek had written. She was overjoyed to receive his letter. Thus, began their odd courtship. She grew to be very fond of him from his letters. She knew about his late wife and his struggle to overcome his grief. She knew of his background, that he grew up around the same town where he lived now. His letters told of everyday things on the ranch, and he could make even mundane things sound interesting or funny. He shared some of his innermost thoughts and beliefs, and they matched hers. Her favorite passages were the ones that made her stomach flutter and hinted at more intimate things.

And now she was about to meet him! Her heart was beating so quickly and she could hardly breathe. Thank goodness her corset wasn't that tight. She hated the things, but they were expected of decent ladies. *What if he doesn't like me? What if I'm not pretty enough,*

or he doesn't find me attractive? Will he swoon? Wait, do men swoon? What if he's not there waiting for me? What'll I do? What if I swoon? The Bensons are going on to the next town over, so I can't stay with them. I don't know anybody here. What if I'm all alone? What if he sees me and leaves? What if he's ugly? Oh, no! What if I don't find him attractive? I hadn't even thought of that. What if he's tall, dark, and blue eyed ugly? I can't breathe. I need air.

Mrs. Benson spoke up. "Molly, dear, you do look so pretty. Here, let me brush this dust away—how can so much dust get in these coaches, anyway? You'll make a lovely bride."

She'd come to think dearly of the Bensons; she was touched at the sweet and motherly words. Bethie carried on her chatter about being so excited to see Molly's new husband—and how she couldn't imagine meeting and marrying someone in the same day! Her words didn't do much to settle the butterflies in Molly's stomach. She couldn't imagine it, either, and here she was living it.

The stagecoach slowed to a crawl then to a stop in front of a wide wooden sidewalk. A man ran from inside the station house and climbed to the top of the coach to begin untying suitcases and trunks. Another official looking man scrambled to open the door of the stage to let the people out. Then he stepped around to the back of the stage to grab the cases handed down to him. Mr. Benson was first, then he helped his wife step down, then Bethie. Molly would be the last one to disembark.

Oh, Lord, please let him be here. I don't care what he looks like, just let him be here.

Mr. Benson began reaching up and said, "Here you go, Miss Molly, let me help you down."

"Sir, I'd like that honor, if you don't mind. I'd like to welcome my bride-to-be." It was the deepest, smoothest, silkiest voice either of them had ever heard. Both Molly and Mr. Benson looked up into Derek's bright blue smiling eyes, but his eyes were only for her.

"Why, of course, young man, let me step out of your way." He

was as eager as the women were to see them meet each other for the first time.

Derek didn't just help her step down. He put his hands around her waist and slowly lifted her up from the coach floor then just as slowly put her down directly in front of him, thinking how the drawing of her didn't even begin to show how beautiful she was.

Molly's body was one big blush. *Oh, my Lord. Oh, my Lord. Oh, my Lord. He's the handsomest man I ever saw. He's perfect. His voice must be what molten lava sounds like. I can't repay Philip enough. This can't be right. I'm going to marry this man? He wants me? Oh, my Lord. I can't breathe. Say something. I can't talk. Can't. Talk.*

"I'm glad you're finally here," he said through a warm and welcoming smile. At this moment, he was a very happy man. She was still a little in shock. *Thank you, Sweet Jesus.*

The Bensons introduced themselves to Derek. There were pleasantries and small talk, and the women gave leave to avail themselves of the comfort of a privy. While they were away, Derek thanked Mr. Benson for befriending Molly during her travels. He was grateful she hadn't had to feel alone on the long trip. "Why, the pleasure was ours, young man. Once Bethie and Miss Molly met each other, there was no dragging them apart! You'd have thought they'd known each other since birth. I'm quite sure their friendship eased the discomfort of travel for all of us. I believe you're getting yourself a fine young woman, Mr. McBride."

"Yes, sir, I believe I am, too."

The Bensons had to go on and eat lunch before reboarding the stage; they only broke long enough to change the team of horses and get a quick bite to eat. There were goodbyes and handshakes all around, and Molly and Bethie hugged for the longest time. "I'll write to you very soon, Mrs. Almost McBride."

The Bensons watched Derek and the porter load Molly's trunks and travel cases into the wagon, then they watched Derek lift Molly up onto the seat. As Derek urged the horses into a trot, Molly looked back at Bethie one last time and waved.

Their first stop was the mercantile where he introduced Molly to the owner, Clint Keller. Clint was happy to show them his wedding bands and even happier when he found out Derek wanted a matching set, a ring for each of them. Clint didn't sell that many sets. In his experience, most of the grooms in Big Rock could only afford a ring for the bride, if they could afford any at all.

The wedding was blessedly short and sweet. The stage didn't stop long enough for the Bensons to be able to attend it, so the only people there were the preacher and his wife and young daughter. Both Derek and Molly were inwardly grateful for the small number of people in attendance. They were still new to each other and hadn't begun to learn to be comfortable together.

When the minister told Derek that he could now kiss the bride, Molly panicked for about half a second, until she saw the look on Derek's face as he turned and bent down toward her. He looked very pleased to be able to finally kiss her. Just that thought made her blush. His kiss was tender, warm, and neither rushed nor lingering. It was perfect. They both thought so.

When they left the little white church building, Derek took her hand and helped her back into the wagon. "I thought we'd eat a late lunch at my favorite restaurant. Well, the only one, actually. The food's always good there. Not fancy, but always tasty. Well, there is the Tea Room at the hotel, but all they have are tea, cakes, and these tiny little butter sandwiches." He scrunched his face as he held out his thumb and forefinger to indicate a small size. "So, I'm thinking Mama Mary's Restaurant. Is that all right with you?"

"Oh, of course! I am hungry." She laughed. "I guess there's nothing like four and a half hours in a stagecoach and gettin' hitched to work up a gal's appetite!"

She saw how his eyes sparkled and shone when he broke into a laugh. "Well, let's get going, then!" *I could watch him forever. Why isn't this man married already? I am without doubt one lucky woman.* Her heart thrilled. He was so tall, she had to tilt her head to look up at him. He had his arm protectively about her shoulder, and she felt

wonderfully safe. It felt as natural as could be. It wasn't a feeling she remembered having with Walter. Derek's body language and demeanor spoke volumes. He seemed to treasure her and wanted to show her off. She felt ready to be treasured.

They walked inside and seated themselves at a small table near the big picture window. A short, round, feisty woman walked up to take their orders. Derek grinned and took the woman's hand in his. "Molly Jane, I'd like to introduce you to Mama Mary. Mary is probably the best cook in these parts, at least that's what she tells everybody. Mary, I'd like you to meet my wife, Molly Jane."

Mary pulled her hand away from Derek, and then suddenly Molly was engulfed in a big double armed hug from the little round woman. She squealed and hugged back, and both were smiling. "Why, Molly, I'm so happy to meet you! Derek has been a wreck waiting for you to arrive. I'll tell you what, you've got a good man here. Not a better one anywhere, except for maybe my Henry. I'm here to tell you, he'll make you a fine husband. Yes, ma'am, a fine one. Oh! I'm gonna go fix up some special plates for you two, and I'll send some food home with you, too. It'll be my wedding present!" She was gone back to the kitchen as fast as short, stout legs can possibly move.

Molly was still smiling. "Is she always like that?"

"Pretty much. One of the sweetest ladies around, though. Stood by me and helped me come back to life when I was in a pretty dark place. She and Henry have been steadfast friends of mine. I'd do anything for them."

Molly smiled and felt emboldened enough to put her hand on Derek's. "Then I'm sure I'll love them, too."

He turned his hand to encase hers and used his other one to touch the top of her hand, her wrist, then traced her fingers with his own. She didn't know what to say in the silence. *Say something.*

"So, Derek, tell me about the town. How far away are we from the ranch?"

"By wagon, we're under two hours away in dry weather. Wet

weather and muddy roads will take longer. A horse and rider can make better time, though. It's not too hard to find. The town has grown a lot in the last few years. We've got the church that doubles as a school now. Got a telegraph office, a sheriff's office, a doctor, a general store and mercantile, a hotel, you know, the one with a Tea Room, a bank—all the things a booming town needs. A couple of saloons, a dressmaker, a barber who's also the undertaker. You know, just about everything you might need."

She cocked her head and grinned at him. "Do you need a saloon?"

His eyes twinkled, and his smirk made them crinkle. "I have, a time or two."

Mama Mary rushed back out with large glasses of sweet tea, napkins, silverware, yeast rolls and cornbread, and a little bowl that held a lot of butter. "You two get started on that, and I'll have your plates out in just a minute."

Lunch was completed with happy and friendly conversation, shy yet teasing looks, and slowly mounting tension, each unsure how the day would unfold. He first asked about her trip and her traveling companions. She explained that Mr. Benson was being sent by his employer, a large bank back east, to scout out a building for a new bank in the territory. They still had another day by coach to their destination. She asked Derek if he thought it was close enough that she could invite Bethie to come visit in the future, or if he thought it would be proper for a young unmarried lady to make the trip by herself. He reasoned it was only a day's ride by coach and they could be waiting for her at the station, so he didn't see why not. She looked happy and a little relieved. He wondered if maybe she'd been afraid he'd say no and wouldn't allow her friend to visit.

When they were through eating, they said their thanks and goodbyes to Mary. She didn't let them pay for their meal and had boxed up enough food for several more meals. They found room in

the wagon to put the box of food and crawled back up to the seat again.

"I wasn't sure what you'd prefer to do, so I'll let you pick. We can stay the night at the hotel if you'd like to, or we can still make it to the ranch before dark."

"Oh, Derek, that's so considerate of you to give me a choice. I think I'd like to spend my wedding night in my new home." She lowered her eyes. "In our bed."

"Yes, ma'am. Then we shall do that." He clicked the horses into action and took off down the road, headed home. *She said "in our bed". I hope that means what I think she means. Dear Lord, please, please let it mean what I think it means.*



HER WORDS ECHOED in her head. *Why did I say that? 'In our bed.' Oh, Lord, what must he think? Well, he knows I've been married, so I'm not an innocent. But does he think I'm forward? That sounded forward. He might not like that in a woman. In a wife. 'In our bed.' Should I say I really only meant that after this long trip, I want to get settled in my new home without waiting another day? I need to watch what I say!* Her mind was going in circles, stirring up her imagination. *Okay, I did say it, now I just have to live with it. Oh, sweet Lord. Tonight, we'll be 'in our bed' together. I wonder what his kisses are like?* She thought about her first marriage. She and Walter really hadn't kissed as much as she thought married couples usually do. But surely, all marriages aren't alike. Theirs had been one based more on friendship, she reasoned. *I wonder if Derek likes to kiss a lot?*

They rode in silence for quite a while. Neither of them felt the need to keep up a conversation artificially, and Molly's imagination was fixated on kissing. Finally, Molly gathered the courage to speak her mind.

"Derek, will you kiss me?"

"What?" Amused, he looked askance at her.

"You know, *kiss* me." She emphasized the word kiss.

"I just kissed you back at the church."

"Well, that was just a ceremony kiss. I want a real one." She gave him what she thought was a charming and disarming look.

He was beginning to enjoy this. "I'm pretty sure it counts. According to the minister, the vows, and God, it was a sanctioned, consecrated wedded kiss. Right on the lips."

"Come on, you know what I mean."

"Not sure I do. Explain it to me."

"Oh, Derek, you're just being difficult." She laughed. "Don't make me say it."

"You're gonna have to!" He laughed with her.

"Oh, you! Okay." She took a deep breath, still smiling. "I want a real kiss, a deep one. A lovers' kiss. A husband and wife kiss."

"Right now? Right here?"

"Yes, dammit!" She caught the flash in his eyes. "Uh oh. Are you afraid now, you've married a wanton woman?"

He burst out laughing. "Oh, wife, I'm *hoping* I've married a wanton woman!"

She couldn't stop her giggles. "Then kiss me. Now. Right here. I insist."

"You insist? I think we should get home first." He didn't really, but he was having such a good time, he wanted to keep it going.

"No, right now. I insist. I want that kiss!"

"Again, *you* insist? And not two hours ago, you promised to obey me."

"Well, that's just part of the vows. It doesn't mean it literally."

"You don't think so?"

"Not really. Why...do you?"

"Oh yes, I do! You vowed to obey me, in front of God and the preacher and his wife. I plan to hold you to that."

She let out a big exaggerated and good-naturedly exasperated exhale. "Just kiss me."

He imitated her and said, "Just mind me."

"No—I want that kiss!" The giggles were still coming.

"Woman, am I going to have to turn you over my knee on our wedding day?

"You wouldn't do that!"

"Sure, I would."

"No! Really? No, you wouldn't. No, would you? Not really, no. You wouldn't, right?"

"Oh, but I would." His grin widened even more.

"All I want is a kiss! And I want it right now, right here, and I. Still. Insist."

"Wife, this is all on you." The horses weren't going fast and it took no time to stop them. He tucked the reins in front of them. In one smooth and fluid motion, he had Molly up and turned over his knees. Her head was down near the wagon floor and she was already in a semblance of outrage. It's hard to feign outrage when you're laughing, though.

"Let me up!"

"Don't think so! I think what we need here is a lesson in who does the obeyin' in a marriage." *Swat!* It landed over four or five layers of cotton petticoats and skirt and they both knew it was just for fun. Another swat.

"But...but our marriage should be a partnership!" she managed to shout up at him.

"Yes, ma'am, partners all the way." *Swat!* "But somebody has to be the senior managing partner. That would be me." *Swat!*

"Let me up! What if someone comes along?" *Swat!*

"Well, partner, they'll see a husband takin' care of a wife who's not obeyin'." *Swat!*

"Let me up! We can talk about obeyin' when we get home."

"I don't seem to be making any headway. You're still trying to give me orders. Oh, I know why! Too many layers in the way. Everybody knows a whoopin' has to be on bare skin." He lifted up her skirt to reveal the top of several layers of petticoats. *Swat!* He grasped and began lifting the hem of her petticoats.

"No! Not outside! Let me up!" *Swat!*

"Not yet, I don't even have your bloomers down yet." She sensed him making headway in that very direction.

"Okay, you win! I'll obey! I'll obey you! Let me up! I'll obey! I promise I will! I'll show you! Tell me to do something so I can obey! You'll see! Give me an order! *Please* let me obey!" Her legs and arms were flying wildly about in every direction, trying to find a way to get up. He couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed like this, and it felt good.

He relented and slowly brought her back up. They were both breathless and giggling, until Molly landed upright in his lap, her hair flying out of the pins, and their eyes met. Suddenly, the giggling stopped. Their lips met with all the emotion they'd both been holding back. Her hands flew to his face, his chest. His left arm reached behind her and held her to him.

It was definitely a lovers' kiss—exploring, nipping, nibbling, touching. Tongues took possession, then retreated, then only lips touched, lightly, before he took her mouth again and again. His right hand moved down her back to her buttock before coming up between them to search out her breast.

She moaned and whispered his name. It was enough to bring him back to his senses and pull away.

"Husband, at the risk of being labeled bossy or even disobedient, I *insist* that there be lots of kissing in this marriage, just like that one." Her voice was husky.

His was, too, as he touched his forehead to hers. "Well now, I know a good idea when I hear one. So, I'll assume the authority and say without reservation that there will be an inordinate amount of kissing in this marriage." She smiled a very satisfied smile at that pronouncement.

"But it won't be right now, or we'll be consummating our marriage on the bench of a wagon in the middle of the road." He took her hand and placed it at the base of the bulge in his britches. She blushed a little and moved her hand, and moved it, and moved

it up further. Her eyes grew larger with each placement of her hand along its length.

"Oh, Derek, it's too big! It won't fit! What'll we do? *What'll we do?*" Her panicked voice increased in a tinny pitch until it cracked a little.

He controlled his amusement and addressed her fear. "Shh. Hush now. I promise, it'll fit. I'll show you how your body is made to adjust to it. You don't need to worry. We'll take it slow, and I'll start gently. You'll see. It's okay."

She looked at him in doubt but didn't say anything else. Neither did he. He placed her on the seat again, next to him, very close, where he could keep one hand either holding hers or gently rubbing her leg. The next few miles found them in quiet contemplation. No one said anything. Molly was thinking of how being married this time was surely going to be different from being married to Walter. Derek thought of the little bit of insight he had just been given about her late husband. It made him feel a little smug, then he felt a little guilty for feeling so good about how he fared in comparison to Walter.

He decided to start up a conversation again. "This land on both sides of the road belongs to the Williamsons. It had an old home place on it—if you look over there, on the other side of this field, you can see what's left of the stone fireplace and chimney. Old Mr. Williamson died of a rattlesnake bite. Place burned down about seven years ago, and Mrs. Williamson had to move in with her son. He owns the bank in Big Rock. Nice people."

As Molly looked at the overgrowth, she saw something that excited her. "Derek, would they mind if we stopped and I picked some of their rosemary? It's wonderful for cooking. Oh, wait. Do you have some growing on the ranch? If you do, then I won't ask you to stop."

He pulled the wagon to a halt again and jumped down. "I don't think Tom would mind at all." He lifted Molly down and pulled his

folding knife out of his pocket. "Now show me what rosemary looks like." They both grinned.

Back in the wagon, he felt it time to bring up something else. "Molly, I want you to promise me you'll never try to come out here by yourself. I don't want you leaving our ranch, ever, without me or a couple of the ranch hands with you. It's dangerous out here. There have been rustlers around, even killing people over horses and cattle out here on nearby ranches, and it's not unheard of for Indians to attack. It's rare, but it's happened. Our ranch is a safe place with me and the men there, but don't step outside the fence without me. Understand?"

She promised she wouldn't leave the ranch alone.

He began pointing out landmarks he always enjoyed seeing as he came home. He told her how each one made him feel a little closer to home, and he'd even named them. There was The Siamese Twin Tree that looked like two separate trees had grown together. He'd read about the Siamese twins who were born with only a small part of their bodies joined together, and the trees reminded him of them. She'd read about the twins, too, and had even seen an old advertisement poster of them once from a time when they'd appeared at an exhibition many years before. The Siamese tree was only an illusion from this viewpoint, though, because of how two knots on the trees seemed to overlap and look like they were joined. From every other angle, though, they were just twin trees.

Up the road some was Flatiron Rock. It was a huge boulder that was smooth on one side and stood upright, coming nearly to a point at the top. He said he thought it looked from this angle like something a giant might use to iron his clothes. She offered that most likely, the giant's wife ironed his clothes with it. He admitted with a chuckle that she was probably right about that.

About a half a mile further, he pointed out Dog Belly. It was just a little hill, longer than it was wide. On one end, there was a huge odd shaped rock that, if you squinted, could be a dog head with one ear

cocked down. On the other end of the hill was a scrubby bush or a couple of bushes; it was hard to tell. But there was a separation in the middle that gave the illusion of two legs sticking up. He said he always thinks of getting a dog when he sees it. "If you go through those woods behind there," he looked at her pointedly, "and you won't," he stressed, "but through there on the other side of those woods, the land slopes way down and around to a hollow with high rock sides that have some caves in them. I know bears have been seen around there. Across the little valley is a high ridge that looks down on most of it. It's really pretty in the spring and early fall. I'll take you there sometime."

They passed the next few minutes in silence.

"So, does this mean we're close to the ranch?" She tried not to sound too eager, or worse yet, impatient.

He grinned. "Right up here at Angel Wing Tree, we turn right. That's our property line." She looked up and saw a tree in the distance, stunted at the top, probably from lightning. With a V shape missing at the top, it did make the limbs appear to be a wing shape.

"Angel Wings! It does look like that!" She looked at him, and the happy look on her face and big open eyes without a hint of guile made him think he had become one lucky man today.

Once they made the turn and got further down the drive, the house—her new home—came into view. It was bigger than she expected and much prettier. The house she'd lived in with Walter in town was nice and comfortable but really wasn't that special nor that big.

A little panic set into her. It was controlled for the most part, but it was panic nonetheless. "So, what's going to happen now?" He gave her a sly sideways glance. "I mean, shall I heat up supper yet, or do you need to do anything in the barn, or can I help you unload my things, or..."

"Ok, I guess that's a fair question. I'll pull up to the house and get down. Then I'm going to carry my beautiful bride over the threshold." She knew she was blushing and could tell that he found

it charming, so she quickly looked down in embarrassment. He lifted her chin and waited until her eyes were back on his. His smirk widened into a smile. "I want to show you your new home. Then we'll get the food in, and I guess you can do whatever to get it on the table while I get the horses put up and bring in your things. Since we just ate in town two or three hours ago, we're not really hungry yet. We can just take our time."

By this time, they had pulled up to the house. It looked huge. It was made of big logs, and the wide porch looked like it went all around the house. Her first thought was that it was a perfect place for children to play. The barn was farther away from the house than Molly Jane expected. She grinned at herself. She didn't know what she'd expected. There were a couple of other outbuildings she could see, and she wondered if there were others behind the house. She thought she heard chickens. She could see an outhouse back behind the barn and remembered that Derek had some ranch hands working for him—that was probably for them. Surely, their own outhouse would be closer to their house. "Do the ranch hands live here?"

"Yeah, all but the foreman. Hank, he's my foreman, lives about a third of a mile farther that way. We built him and his wife, Angie, their own place. The other side of the barn's got a bunkhouse attached to it. It's got its own kitchen and room to sleep twelve pretty comfortably. We've only got five living there now, but I've got plans to grow the place."

Derek got down off the wagon and held up his arms for his wife. She stood up, expecting him to lift her down. He did, but he did it slowly, purposefully. So much so that she began to feel that nervous fluttering in her belly, being the center of his attention. They walked up to the steps of the log home together, wordlessly. When they got to the porch, they walked across it, and Derek opened the front door. Molly didn't even look inside—she was concentrating on looking at her husband, trying to anticipate what he would do. He looked down at her with warmth in his eyes and

leaned down to pick her up into his arms. Her arms naturally went around his neck.

Once inside, he looked into her eyes and kissed her then let her down. He leaned down and gently kissed her forehead, and her butterflies vanished. "Welcome home, Mrs. McBride."

After a few tender moments, he broke the spell. "Let me show you the house."

She smiled up at him then looked to her right. "Well, I can see the table here, and that's a nice big kitchen on the other side of it! I'm not used to a kitchen that big."

"We did that on purpose. It holds a good amount of food and has ample counters. It was a while before we got a kitchen put into the bunkhouse. A long time ago, Angie used to cook for all the hands, here in the house. I think you could cook up a feast for an army in that kitchen."

She headed to the left, into the parlor. "And that fireplace is huge. Derek, it's beautiful in here. It's so much bigger than I expected—so much like you." He smiled at that. "What's that door?" she asked when she saw an interior door on the far side of the room."

"That's my office; we'll check it out on the way back through. Let me show you something back here on this side." He walked to the first closed door along the same wall that divided the parlor from the kitchen. "This room is what they call the water closet. It's fairly new to the house; it used to be another bedroom. I call it a bathroom because of the tub. That far door goes back into the kitchen to make it easier to bring in hot water."

"I've seen one before, but not like this!" There was a big tub dominating the room—a *big* tub. They could both fit in it. The thought made her wonder a little. There were several brass hooks along one wall for hanging clothes or towels and a table built onto the wall that held a wash basin and pitcher. A huge mirror hung above the basin. She could see buckets stored under the table. On each side, there were open cabinets holding towels, sponges and

wash cloths, soaps, jars and bottles of things she couldn't identify, combs and a brush, and just about everything one might need before, during, and after a bath. Closed cabinets were on one end. Next to one cabinet, at the end of the room, was an accordion style partition. She looked behind it and found the fanciest chamber pot setup she'd ever seen. It was a low chair with a big hole in the seat above a tall blue and white ceramic pot. The base of the chair was closed on three sides. Instead of just having a hole in the wood seat, like most outhouses she'd used, there was a seat that had been carved of wood, apparently to make using the chair more comfortable.

"Look at that! Do we still have an outhouse?"

He laughed at her reaction. "Yes, we do. Actually, I still go out there most of the time. But you know, sometimes..." They both laughed. "The tub has a plug to hold in the water. There are pipes underneath, so that when your bath is over, you can just pull the plug. You don't have to empty it by the bucketful, like we used to have to do. The pipes are underground and empty way out in the backyard. The flush toilet was never finished with water that flows in when you pull the chain. Right now, we still have to take a pot out and empty it into the outhouse. I plan to install it and have water attached and pipes under it to flush the waste away. I just haven't gotten around to it yet. I already have all the parts out in the woodshed."

"All right, I see the water pump in here. It's handy having one in here, too. Oh! That means you only have to carry hot water in from the kitchen—the cool water to mix it with is in here already."

"Exactly."

"Oh, Derek, I love this place."

"Darlin', wait until you see the rest of it." His grin was contagious. Just past the bath room was a shorter east-west hall that led to the side porch on the right. They turned there, and Molly saw two doors. They went into the first one to see a small bedroom. It had a bed, a nightstand, a dresser, a rocking chair, with another

table close to it. "Oh, I love that fireplace in the corner. They look so cozy in the corner."

He chuckled. "I'm certainly glad you like them. Let's check out the next room."

They walked back out into the hall and then turned in the next room. It was a mirror image of the other bedroom, and she realized the corner fireplaces shared a chimney. The only difference was that this room held an upholstered chair instead of a rocker.

They turned right from the short hall into the long north-south one that ran almost the length of the house, with this end starting at the parlor. She started into a door on the left, but he pulled her on down to the end of the hall. On the way, they passed another closed door. She was beginning to appreciate just how immense her new home was. She kept thinking about how many children they'd have to have to fill up this house.

The hall ended with an L-shaped bench straight ahead and a small open area to the right of it, with a door to the porch outside. There was another interior door on the far right. The rest of the open area had hooks for coats and space for boots or shoes under the L-shaped bench. The door had a window built in, and Derek explained he didn't want anyone to be able to look in the back door and see all the way up the hall into their parlor, and that was why it was offset instead of being square at the end of the hall. He waited and let her have a thoughtful reaction, and then he burst out laughing. "No, that's not true—I have to confess. The truth is that we miscalculated the measurement for the door opening and didn't realize it until we started putting in the inside walls."

She laughed along with him. "But it turned out beautifully, and it looks like you planned for a mud room to be here."

He ushered her into the corner room behind the interior door. It was another bedroom but more sparsely furnished. She noticed the placement of the fireplace and realized it must share a chimney with the other two bedrooms she'd seen. She also noticed how much brighter it was, due to having windows on two walls. "Derek,

do you think I could set this room up as my sewing area? There's so much room, and I'm sure it gets good light in the daytime!"

He loved her excitement. "Of course, you can!"

"Derek?" She looked at him both shyly and slyly. "Can we buy a sewing machine?"

Once again, he threw his head back and laughed. This was the image of him she'd carry in her head—she loved it. "Yes, darlin', I will. If they don't have one at the mercantile, we'll order one. It'll be my wedding gift to you."

"Oh, but I don't have a gift for you."

"Oh yes, you do." He pulled her to him in a kiss that, by all rights, should have shaken the earth. "I'll get my gift later tonight. Let me show you where that's going to happen." Her breath caught at the swiftness of that exchange and at her own reaction to his kiss. If he hadn't been holding her, she might have fallen, her knees were so weak.

He took her to the door of their bedroom, the second of the two doors he had ushered her past when they first came down the big hall.

Once inside, her attention was drawn to the bed. It had to have been specially made, and the mattress, too. She'd never seen one so big. It took her breath away and seemed almost embarrassingly large. But it was beautiful. The primitively carved headboard and footboard appeared to have each been made from a massive piece of wood. The headboard evoked a garden scene with a fence. Birds were atop a couple of the fence posts, and even a squirrel was carved on one side. It was beautiful and grand while still rustic.

She turned to Derek. "This is the most incredible room I've ever seen. I love it, Derek. I never dreamed I'd have anything so beautiful! Who carved the headboard?"

"My dad did that. He was an artist with wood."

"He clearly was." She looked at him wonderingly. "I just realized how little we know about each other."

He put an arm around her and smiled. "We know enough for now. We have a whole lifetime to learn it all."

That was such a sweet thought. She took a deep breath and explored some more. There was a beautiful armoire and a dresser. She saw another corner fireplace and smiled at Derek when she saw a closet. She was excited to see it because she hadn't had a closet in her old house, just a wardrobe and chest. This closet was fairly large and had several empty hangers in it, waiting for her things. He'd cleared out most of it for her. She was touched by his thoughtfulness. A long wooden chest with a cushion on top of it was at the foot of the bed. "Did your father make this, too?"

"No, I made that one. It was one of my first projects when Dad was teaching me carpentry work when I was a kid. Mom made the cushion for it. She made all the quilts in it, too."

She noticed two overstuffed chairs with a table between them. She took it all in before saying, "I love my new home already."

His eyes gleamed. "I hoped you would. We better head back to the front and see the rest, or I'll never get those horses put up for the night."

In the hall, they stepped into the remaining door she hadn't been in. It had a corner fireplace that shared a chimney with the fireplace in their bedroom. It was also sparsely furnished but had a dresser, rocking chair, table, and a small chest that was similar to the big one in the master bedroom. Molly instinctively knew it was supposed to be a toy chest, and this was to be the nursery for the baby he lost when he lost Charlotte. Not knowing what to say, she looked at Derek, who for just a moment had a sad look on his face before he checked himself and smiled at her. "Let me show you my office now."

His office was the room between the nursery and the side porch, and the door to it opened from the parlor. It was a masculine room with dark wood furniture and lots of leather. This room had an exterior door to the side porch, too. His desk was massive, and she wondered how they got it in the door. He

caught the odd look on her face as she eyed the desk then both doors. He laughed. "Good observation! We built the desk before we put up this wall. If we ever move, it'll have to stay with the house."

"No! We're never moving! This house is wonderful beyond anything I ever dreamed of. I can't imagine leaving it."

"I surely am glad, so glad, I think we should have one of those inordinate kisses now."

As they stepped out on the porch, they were hailed by a man on horseback with a pie in his hand. "That's Hank, my foreman. Let me introduce you to him."

Hank got down and handed the pie to her. "Angie sent this for the newlyweds. It's her apple pie, and it's the best in these parts. She's excited to meet ya, Miz Molly, but she wanted to give the two o' ya some time alone first. She made me promise I won't yammer on like I usually do." They all grinned. He looked at the wagon. "Tell ya what, boss, let's get this thing unloaded here, then I'll go put the rig in the barn and take care of the horses fer ya."

"I'm so glad to meet you, Hank, and I look forward to meeting Angie. From what Derek's told me about her, I'm sure we'll be fast friends in no time." They exchanged more pleasantries and Molly took the pie into the kitchen.

It was beginning to get dusky dark, so she lit a couple of lamps. Derek began bringing the food in, and Molly set about laying some on the table and putting the remaining food away. She explored the kitchen and found everything she could think of that anyone might ever need for cooking. She was glad she had sold all her old things along with the old house—she didn't need any of it.

When he came in to settle down, she had food on the table. He walked to the sink and pumped water to wash his hands. He dried them, turned, and leaned back against the counter, his arms folded across his chest, one foot crossed over the other. He watched her going about her business of getting them drinks and finishing up her puttering. She became aware of him looking at her, and she

fidged a little. "What is it—did you want something else other than what I set out? Something besides tea to drink?"

"No, darlin!" *That voice.* "Everything's fine. Everything's perfect. I just want to fill my eyes with you and remember everything about our wedding night."

She laughed nervously and suggested they sit down to eat. The food was delicious, of course, and they talked amiably as they ate it. They talked about how good it was, and how Angie's piecrust was the flakiest, how the weather had cooperated, and today had been so nice. They talked about everything except what was uppermost in both their minds.

When supper was over, Derek helped her clear away and clean the dishes, showing her where some things were that she hadn't discovered yet. The small talk continued until the kitchen was spotless and there was nothing left to do. It was already dark outside.

A little amused at her apparent nervousness, Derek decided to take control.

"Darlin', why don't you go into the bathroom and freshen up. You can use it instead of going out to the outhouse in the dark. Or if you prefer using it, I'll walk you out there."

"No, I guess inside is fine."

"Okay. I'll go outside then; I won't be long. In that little cabinet beside the chamber pot are some cloth rags and a covered bucket for the used ones." She nodded and disappeared into the room, carrying a lamp.

While she was in there, she filled the basin and washed her face and hands and let down her hair. She found the comb and brush on the shelf and figured they had belonged to his late wife. Hers were still inside her trunk. She washed a little more, and when she felt clean and as ready as she ever would, she stepped out to find him lighting a lamp in their bedroom.

She cleared her throat to get his attention. "Would you mind bringing my larger trunk in here? I'd like to get a nightgown out."

He showed some slight hesitation but brought in the trunk. He watched her open it and dig out a pink gown. As she was about to leave the room with it to change, presumably in the bathroom, he took her arm and gently pulled her around to face him.

"Please, Molly." His voice was deep and low. "Don't put it on now. Later. Right now, I've been given a precious and beautiful gift, and I want to unwrap you, myself."

She swallowed but stood there, acquiescing. It seemed a reasonable request from a husband. He took her gown and tossed it onto a nearby chair. He bent to kiss her passionately and felt her sway a little bit. He kept his left arm around her, steadying her, as he began to unbutton the top button of her blouse. She wondered if he could hear her heartbeat, because it felt like it was going to beat right out of her chest. Soon, he had all the buttons undone, but he didn't slip it off of her yet. Instead, he stood there, looking down at the sight before him, just a glimpse of the swell of her breasts above her shift and corset. It had been a long time since he was this close to a woman, and nearly four years since he was this close to a woman who meant the world to him. Savoring the thought of what lie ahead, he lowered his lips to hers again while his right hand slipped inside her blouse and explored, finally reaching around. He had his arms around her, one inside her blouse and one outside.

At last, he pulled her blouse out from her skirt and let it drop to the floor from her shoulders. Her thin shift had narrow straps and a low gathered neckline that covered what seemed to be an ample bosom before disappearing behind her corset. He bent and placed little kisses across her smooth skin, stopping to concentrate on that place where shoulder meets neck. Molly could barely stand it. She didn't remember ever experiencing this sensation. It was almost too intense to bear. She was surprised to realize how her body was reacting. Her little mewling cries let him know he'd found the spot. She found herself bending her head to that side to dissuade him or at least get him to lessen his intensity, but he would have no part of that. His big arms drew her to him more forcefully, and he knew

she'd have a passion mark soon from his attentions. He wanted to mark her that way.

When he broke free, she was unsteady. Her eyes were closed, and it took her a moment to realize he'd stopped. She opened her eyes to find him watching her with such apparent want. He bent down on one knee to unbuckle and unbutton her boots and remove them. Then he reached up gently and removed her stockings and garters, gently stroking her legs as he did so. It was such an intimate gesture, but at the same time, it struck her as a sweet one. He stood back up, grabbed at the buttons on her skirt and almost ripped them off in his desire to get her out of it. He wanted to get her down to her intimate clothing—the clothing only a husband sees his wife wearing. Once he got there, he savored the sight. Next, he untied her petticoats, one by one. He lifted each one over her head, held it out, and let it drop to the floor.

He walked behind her. "Darlin', once I get this corset off you, I don't want to see it again. I'd be happy if you'd throw it away. But I'll understand if you still want to wear it to go into town and such. Next time we go into town, you'll notice that not that many women bother with them out here. Too much work to be done, and you need to be able to breathe."

She managed a small laugh. "Well, I'm scandalized and grateful at the same time to hear that. I hate these things." They both laughed, and her apprehension vanished.



HE WAS ALMOST THERE. *Damn women's fashions.* He stepped in front of her again and looked into her eyes. He pulled up her shift enough to find and undo the ties on her bloomers and helped her step out of them, never letting his eyes leave hers. They were both breathing much more quickly. When he lifted her shift over her head, he lost his breath for a moment at the sight of her body. *Sweet Lord.* "Molly, you're so beautiful. Let me look at you." His eyes

drank her in. She was perfect, and her long golden hair fell in soft curls down her back, inviting his touch. She smiled and surprised him by turning in a slow circle, giving him full view. His eyes darkened with desire, and her next words surprised him even more. "Now it's my turn." She knelt and took one of his boots in her hands.

"Yes, ma'am."

She removed his boots and socks and took his belt out of his pants while she was still kneeling. Just her nearness to his body—her naked body so close to that part of his body—almost took him to the edge. She stood and unbuttoned his shirt, letting it fall to the floor as he had done with her blouse.

She paused. "I want to feel your skin on mine," she breathed.

Molly stepped in to him, putting her arms around him, savoring his skin against her breasts. He moaned, but as he reached to put his arms around her, she backed away. Instead of going straight to his britches next, she touched his chest, moving her hand through his chest hair and along the planes and ridges of his muscles. His own breath caught, but he was determined to let her explore as she wished. It took every ounce of his will to keep from grabbing her and throwing her on the bed.

She finally made her way to the buttons of his pants. He had to help her when she encountered trouble getting them down over his hardness, but soon, they stood with nothing between them.

Derek picked her up until she was at his eye level and kissed her as though it might be their last. He held her up like this for an eternity, her feet about eight or ten inches off the floor, this time both of them relishing the feel of skin on skin.

He kept kissing. "Darlin', I plan to kiss every inch of you." He leaned closer to her ear and whispered, "Every inch."

He groaned, wanting to prolong the embrace but wanting to succumb to their need at the same time. As he set her down, he pulled down the quilts and sheet on the bed, then he went over and

added another log to the fire he'd started earlier. She climbed in the massive bed.

He came to her then and kissed her lips again, nibbling and kissing his way down to that spot on the other side of her neck this time. Again, she moaned and her breath became more labored. He loved how she responded to him. *Wanton woman, indeed.* His hand found her breast and fairly worshiped it. He touched it, rolled it under his hand, took it into his hand and gently kneaded it. His lips and tongue found her other breast. His fingers and thumb rubbed her nipple with gently increasing pressure until it hurt with the sweetest throbbing. He flicked it over and over with his fingertip and brought to Molly another sensation she'd never felt with her late husband. Sweet little gasps came out of her mouth, and they were music to Derek's ears. His mouth and tongue and even his teeth mimicked the actions of his hand on her other breast.

Her hands didn't know what to do. She realized she was grabbing the sheet into her fist with one hand and the other one was in Derek's hair.

His hand left her breast and made its way downward. Her hips ever so slightly turned up to him in anticipation. He couldn't tell if she did it on purpose or if her body was just reacting. Either way, he'd take it.

He brought his face back up to hers. There was heat in his eyes and a wry grin on his face. "I've waited so long for this. Pretty sure I won't last long this first time."

She just smiled, and then she knew what to do with her hands. She brought his face to hers and began to plant little kisses all over it. That is, until his hand found its way home. His big hand covered her for a moment then slowly began to explore.

He whispered, "Come on, darlin'," as he nudged her thighs apart more.

She responded, and he felt her wetness. His fingers stroked her folds and the insides of her thighs. He ran his fingers through her triangle of hair and touched everywhere except where she wanted

it most. Then he lowered his hand again and put his finger inside her. She moaned and closed her eyes. He moved it in lazy circles before pulling it out and inserting two fingers. She was taking breaths in short, shallow intakes. He watched her face as he began moving his fingers in and out of her with increasing speed and pressure.

Her body moved up to meet him with each thrust. His mouth went to her breast again, his tongue roughly flicking her nipple. She cried out, begging for him, but he didn't want this to be over that quickly. He dipped his thumb in her wetness and let it find her sweet spot. He moved his thumb all around it, then concentrated on rubbing it in a fast and continuous back and forth movement.

Molly let out a few guttural sounds and a few moans, and Derek knew she was almost there. He intensified and quickened his movements until she gasped and cried out loudly as her body spasmed. He watched her reach her peak then come back down to earth. Her heart beat wildly to match her breathing, and he felt it as his hand made its way back up to her head, where he took her hair gently but firmly and turned her face to him. It made her open her eyes. She seemed a little embarrassed, but he kissed her so tenderly, the embarrassment melted away.

"I love how you look when you come. I plan to put that look on your face as often as I can."

She laughed a little, still breathing hard. "But, Derek, you still haven't—"

"I'll get mine. Let me do this. I want to see you do that again."

"I don't think I can!"

"Oh, yes. You can."

He kissed her lips again then pulled up and balanced himself on his elbows astride her as he kissed and licked in a meandering line down her body. She was mildly confused when his head went below her belly button.

He almost had his mouth down to her hard, little bundle of

nerves when she had to speak up in a panic. "Derek, what are you doing?"

He paused to look up at her, a little confused, himself. A light dawned. "Darlin', I'm gonna kiss you and lick you and suck you until you come again. You've never done this before?"

"No, um, no. Do people really do this?" she asked in a small voice.

"Yes, ma'am. They do. I do. And I'll do it every chance I get." He went back to business, filing away that little bit of insight into her previous marital relationship.

"Oh, are you sure? I-I'm, um, I don't know what to do now."

"Tell you what. You reach up and grab one of those headboard rails in each hand. Hang on tight and close your eyes and concentrate on what I'm doing and what you're feeling."

She did, and he continued with his mouth, his lips, and his tongue, until he had her worked up into another frenzy and very near to going over the edge again. When the moment was right, he concentrated on her little pearl. First, he covered it with the flat of his tongue and varied the pressure. Then he began sucking it in and flicking it with his stiffened tongue until she screamed out and lost her grasp of the headboard. She tried her best to draw up and close her legs, but he wasn't quite ready to let go. As he watched her, he continued to gently lick her as she came down, making it harder for her to do so.

"Oh, Derek, I'm shaking," she panted. "Need. To breathe. Feel my heartbeat."

"That's it, darlin', just lie there and let me watch you."

She closed her eyes.

Before long, he took her still-heaving breast in his mouth one more time, this time treating it a little more roughly. He nibbled a little and ground his tongue around the tip. He took as much of her breast into his mouth as he could and firmly sucked on it. She cried out as it sent a shocking jolt from her nipple to her very core; her mind's eye even pictured a thick cable passing the sensation from

point to point. He quickly and powerfully put himself above her, holding himself up on his hands. Putting most of his weight on his left hand, he brought his right hand down between her legs again. "Oh, Molly, you're so wet, darlin'. I can't last much longer."

He shifted his weight to his knees and straightened up enough to take her knees and spread them farther apart to accommodate him. He saw the look in her eye, and remembered her comment about him being too large. "Are you all right, sugar?"

"I think so."

"Good girl, darlin'. Look in my eyes. Just let me know if I need to stop, all right?"

"Yes." It was more a breath than a word.

His eyes burned into hers as he took the head and put it inside her. She inhaled several times quickly, as though one breath was divided into several fast parts. He paused to let her adjust to him. When she didn't object, he slid in another couple of inches and was rewarded with moans of pleasure. Again, he paused and amazed himself that he was able to. Then he finished the stroke, agonizingly slowly, until he was all the way inside her.

Her eyes, still boring into his, were wide with both wonder and heat.

"Still all right, darlin'?"

No words formed, but she was able to make a slight nod yes.

"That's good," he whispered. He slowly pulled almost out, then pushed back in, not slowly, but not too fast, either. She closed her eyes and moaned. He began to increase his rhythm until they were both on the edge again. "Open your eyes for me, darlin'!" She did and held his gaze for the next few moments, until she seemed to lose control. Her hands were all over him, his arms, his shoulders, his back and buttocks; she couldn't keep them still. This drove Derek to the point where he finished in a fury, taking them both to their breathless completion.

"I wasn't sure that was going to happen tonight," Derek said later as they were lying together, she with her head on his chest, his

arm around her. "I wasn't sure you'd feel like you knew me well enough. I thought you might need time to maybe fall in love with me."

"But I know you through your letters already!" She looked up at him. "Derek, I fell in love with you through them. I loved you even before I ever laid eyes on you."

All he could do was hold her tighter to him. He didn't trust his voice. After a time, he responded, "I love you, too, Molly."

She began drawing lines and circles in his chest hair, occasionally spiraling around a nipple or dipping in his belly button, discovering where he was a little ticklish. He got her back by tickling her side and under her arm.

He gave her a mischievous look. "You know, being the one who will be obeyed in this marriage, I'm making another rule we have to follow. There will not only be an inordinate amount of kissin', but there will be an extraordinary amount of fuckin'. We must fuck like rabbits."

"Derek! That word! You're not supposed to say that word!"

He laughed. "What word?"

"That word you said. Twice!"

"What word?"

"I can't say it."

"Sure, you can. Say it."

"No! It's a cuss word!"

"I heard you say dammit earlier today."

"That's just a little cuss word. You said the *big* cuss word! Twice!"

"Darlin', if you were to walk into the bunk room in the barn on any evening, you'll hear that word. Go to a saloon, and you'll hear it. Pretty much any place two or more rowdy men get together, you're gonna hear 'fuck.' Now lemme hear you say it."

"I can't. It's not ladylike."

He chuckled. "Well, I grant you that; most people wouldn't think it's ladylike. That's why we don't say it at church or the fall harvest

dance or at Mama Mary's restaurant. But in our bedroom, it's a *very* good word."

"I don't get the difference."

"It's a matter of context. It might be one thing to use it as a cuss word. It's so much different when you're, let's say, in the throes of passion."

She looked up at him. "But why would you say it if you're already doing it?"

He laughed again. "Um, okay, well, what if I'm hard at work 'doing it' as you say, but not being as," he paused, "energetic as you'd like. You might say something like this." He took on a breathless demeanor, raised the pitch of his voice to mimic hers, and breathlessly whisper-shouted, "Oh, Derek, fuck me harder!"

Molly cackled and vowed she'd never say those words. Derek laughed and vowed to himself to make her say them.