

A romantic scene featuring a shirtless man and a woman in a white wedding dress. They are embracing and looking at each other under the shade of a large, ancient tree. The background shows a dramatic sunset sky with orange and yellow clouds. The overall mood is romantic and dramatic.

# Stormy Wedding

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Stormy Wedding  
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Constance was distracted. The eye of the needle caught on the thimble and the point slipped through the cloth, piercing the tip of her bare ring finger. She sucked the blood from the wound so she wouldn't stain the mending in her lap.

Sixteen-year-old Modesty, two years younger than Constance, was working on a hoop of fine embroidery. "Constance pricked her finger again," she tattled.

"Hush, Modesty." Mama didn't even look up from the dress she was finishing. "Today Constance has her mind set on other things."

Constance frowned and finished the last few stitches. *Other things indeed, she thought. It's the morning of my wedding day. They talk as if I'm already gone.*

She took a deep breath and knotted the thread. *This hem is all the way out, she thought. She glanced across the room to where Faith, her youngest sister, was fashioning a new corncob doll. Faith is growing so fast that this Sunday-go-to-meeting dress won't be serving much longer. But fall is almost over, and once we're wintered in she won't have cause to dress up before spring.*

Constance got up from her place in the corner and handed Faith the dress. Her sister was concentrating too hard to look up, but she mumbled, "Thank you."

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Constance climbed the steps into her sleeping loft. She glanced around. The room had been hers for the four years since her brother, Obadiah, married. Today it felt invaded. Erik's heavy coat already hung by the chimney and man-things cluttered the washstand. While she was out collecting eggs her intended had come in from the barn and done whatever men do to get ready for the morning.

She sank down on her kneeler and folded her hands over her bible. "Sweet Jesus," she whispered. "How can I be getting married?"

"Careful what you pray for." Mama walked in the door and laid out the new dress on the bed. "I got it finished," she said with satisfaction.

Constance stood and turned to admire it. "I'm sorry you had to rush, Mama." She looked at the worn hands smoothing the sky-blue cotton. Lace that had once graced her grandmother's bosom covered the bodice of the dress.

Mama shrugged. "Canna help it if the circuit preacher rides in a week early. You take the Lord's blessings when He sends them."

Constance nodded. She twisted a lock of her long, chestnut-colored hair. Finally she said, "Thank you for making me a new dress for..." She couldn't finish.

Mama sighed. "For your wedding, girl. You feeling puny?" Her daughter shrugged. Mama pressed a hand against her daughter's forehead and looked into her eyes. "Constance, I was a mite nervous the day I married your Pa. I listened to your Aunt Rachel too much. You do ken most of the things she told you about the wedding night are pure hooey?"

Constance shrugged. "I figured. You wouldn't have had the five of us if she was right."

"Ain't that the truth." Mama looked up into her daughter's eyes and stroked her cheek with a work-worn hand. "I ain't been close with you. Not like with Modesty. After your big brother Jacob died and Obadiah married and moved out on his own you always ran more with your Pa. That'll be making this day harder for you. And for him."

"Y'all getting dressed?" The call came from below.

Mama sighed. "Not yet, Pa."

"Good." His boots clomped up the ladder. He filled the room. As tall as Constance, his head nearly brushed the ceiling. He looked closely at his daughter. "Ain't too late."

"I promised, Pa."

He shook his head. "You could do better than a —"

"A square-headed German?" Before he could finish she stalked toward him. "Erik was born right here in Texas same as me."

Pa balked at backing up. They ended up nose to nose. Her father looked at her and said, "It ain't he's a bad boy. Done better with that poor land his father homesteaded than most would've. Still..."

"He's not Andrew Lamont, right? He's not the banker's son. He's not having good Scots blood." Constance heard her voice ringing through the house, but she was too angry to stop. "And you and Andrew's father are best friends, so you think I'd make Andrew a *fine* second wife. After all, I'm eighteen years old. Past time to be a wife and mother. And Andrew has those two younguns from his first

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wife. Well, regardless of what you and Andrew and Mr. Lamont think, I *don't* aim to take Abigail's place!"

Pa's voice went quiet, like it always did when he was angered. "Ain't Andrew's fault she got that fever and died."

Constance bit back her response. Pa would just dismiss the rumors as vicious gossip. *But I saw the bruises*, Constance thought. *I knew Abby after the happiness fled her soul*. She looked into her father's dark eyes. "I made Erik a promise, Pa. I'll not be going back on it."

"Oh, Lord," her father said for the umpteenth time. "Why'd You bless me with a headstrong child."

Constance pushed past him and jumped the steps two at a time. She stormed between her wide-eyed sisters and out into the crisp fall morning. She stalked across the yard, scanning the endless horizon at the edge of the flat plain. She muttered, "Sweet Jesus, how can I think while Pa's pushing so? Or is that just an excuse? If Andrew wasn't just mean, could I go to him? Am I going to Erik because he's so gentle? Am I really ready to wed any man? Am I—"

She ran into solid muscle. Erik said, "Whoa," and wrapped his arms around her to keep her from falling. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing!" Constance snapped. "Let me be."

"When you settle down." He loosened his embrace enough to look into her eyes. "Your Pa again?"

"Aye. He keeps saying you're not good enough for me."

Erik chuckled. "That may be the only thing your Pa and I agree on. I wake up every day wondering why



you said yes."

"You're funnin' me," Constance said. But she saw the truth of it in his gaze. It made her tremble.

He looked deeper into her eyes. "But is your Pa all of it?"

"Aye. Nay. I'm not sure." She buried her face in his chest. "I *am* sure I'm not *ready*. The wedding was supposed to be *next* week. There isn't enough baking done. Our house-raising isn't until day after tomorrow. We don't even have a place to live until then, unless you count that old dugout Mr. Nordhaus built back when he first settled here. Why did the preacher have to be showing up a week early? It's not fair!" She looked up into his blue eyes. "Erik, he'll be back at this end of the circuit next month. Maybe we could..."

Her intended shook his head. "I figure his coming early is providence. The sky this morning was all red. That likely means a storm coming. And it's late enough for snow."

"But..." Constance hesitated. A winter storm howling down across Indian Territory was something to give pause. "But just until next month? Do we need to be rushing?"

Erik sighed. "I showed you the pelts I've been trapping along the creek. Thicker than any I've seen. And the wooly worms, and the squirrels. All the signs point to a long, hard cold. By next month we could be wintered in." He pulled her tighter against his hard frame. "Constance, I love you. I want you for my wife. And I'm not willing to wait for spring. If'n you want a preacher-wedding before we join, it best be

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today.”

Then, slowly as he would approach a frightened mare, he bent and kissed her. Right out in the middle of the yard, where anyone could see. He straightened, and her feet left the ground.

*Oh*, Constance thought as their bodies flowed together. *Now I remember why*. When their lips parted she caught her breath and said, “I love you too, Erik Schmidt. Now let me go so I can get dressed. Don’t want to keep the preacher waiting.”

His blue eyes were bright with mirth as he returned her to the hard-packed earth, but he bit his tongue and just let his arms fall away. *How he looks*, she thought. *Standing there in his Sunday-go-to-meeting suit*. She spread her hand in the middle of his chest and felt his heart beating. Then she turned and bolted for the house like a frisking colt.

The next three hours were a blur. By the time Mama helped her dress and fixed her hair up fancy, the yard was filled with wagons. Modesty handed her a bouquet of garden flowers and she almost dropped it. By the time she got to the garden gate she was light-headed. She took Pa’s arm and he led her up to the preacher, standing there all solemn in his frock coat. Pa glared at Erik every step of the way, but when the time came he handed over his daughter, although a bit reluctantly.

Constance heard everyone singing a hymn. She listened as Erik made his vows, then made her own. Suddenly she had a new ring on her finger and Erik was kissing her. The preacher introduced them as Mr. and Mrs. Erik Schmidt and before she could catch a



breath friends and relatives crowded around. They hurriedly shook hands with Erik. The men kissed and the women hugged the bride and said, "Wish we could be staying longer, but..." Then they'd look north, where gray clouds were gathering. "We'll have more time at the raising."

After the last family climbed into their wagon and started home Constance glanced around the yard. Her parents had gone inside, leaving her alone with her new husband. She sighed and started to turn away.

Erik put his arm around her. *Oh, she thought. He aims to kiss me again, where anyone can see.* It took a strong will not to pull away.

He drew her closer and whispered, "We're alone."

But no sooner were the words out of his mouth than Faith shot from the house. "There y'all are! Wasn't that just about the finest..." She caught sight of her new brother-in-law's expression and skidded to a halt.

Erik relented. "Come on, sister. I'll have time later to kiss my bride."

Faith rolled her eyes. "Don't be disgusting."

Erik knelt down to her level. "Besides, I'd like to ask a favor."

"A favor?" Faith looked suddenly cautious.

Constance smiled. *My little sister's been smitten ever since Erik came courting. Spends every minute she can in his back pocket. But she's learned to count his fingers before shaking hands.*

Erik nodded. "I built Constance and me a bower in the clearing down by the creek. Planned on spending the night there. But..." He looked north, into the

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looming clouds.

"Aye," Faith said. "Won't be a fit night out for man nor beast."

Erik nodded. "Thing is, I left a bundle of quilts and such in it. By the time the storm clears they'll be in a sorry state. Of course whoever went to fetch them would need to ride Bruno."

"Well..." Faith drawled, trying to keep the twinkle from her eye. "I *suppose* if you're willing to let me ride your horse, I *might* be going down to the pond to fetch your bundle."

Erik grinned. "Ask your Mama first."

Faith skittered back toward the house and ran into Pa coming out. Erik called to him, "Mr. MacTavish, do you need help with the stock?"

Pa didn't even look back. "Dinna think so." He headed into the barn.

Constance felt her husband wince. "Come on," she said. "I need to gather the chickens, else they'll be all over the county." A first, distant rumble of thunder hurried them toward the coop.

By the time they finished rounding up the skittish fowl a cold wind was whipping through the yard and the wet smell of a norther blew heavy in the air. Erik picked up an extra load of logs on the way and dumped them by the hearth. Mama already had a fire going to heat the chimney before night fell.

Constance sniffed at the smells wafting from the iron stove and pushed up her sleeves. She reached for the mixing bowl and looked at Erik. "Think I better be making some extra?"

"Of your biscuits?" He grinned. "Reckon I could

eat one or two."

Mama smiled. "Unless you want them burned, you might find something else to do meanwhile. Dinna want Constance distracted."

"Yes, Ma'am." He tipped her his hat. "Don't reckon Constance knows how to burn biscuits. But there is something I need to fetch from the barn." He turned and headed back out into the gathering storm.

Just as Mama pulled the skillet of chicken off the stove Erik pushed the door open. He eased through, lugging a heavy wooden chest. Faith jumped to shut the door against the wind and the wet flakes of snow it carried into the room. Erik carried the chest over to Constance's corner and eased it to the floor. There was a bridle thrown over his shoulder, and he tossed that down as well.

Mama eyed the chest and said, "I was just calling supper."

Erik shrugged. "Then this'll wait."

They sat down around the table. When they had all linked hands, Pa bowed his head. "Lord God, bless us as we gather to partake of these fine victuals. Thank You for Your help with the tasks of the day. We ask that the storm pass quickly and not be causing too much damage. Watch over our family and our guest. Amen."

Constance clenched her teeth. *Guest indeed*, she fumed. *Like Erik isn't family now*. She looked right at Pa and reached for the bowl of sweet boiled corn. She helped herself, then passed it to Erik.

"Mind your manners," Pa said.

"Reckon I am," she snapped. "If Erik's a guest to be

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served first, reckon his wife is also."

"Ain't what I meant," Pa said. "Lord, why'd You bless me with a headstrong child."

Before Constance could snap a reply, Mama shot her a forbidding look. She squeezed Pa's hand as well. "So," she said in her don't-mess-with-Mama voice. "Looks like Mary Alice is expecting again."

While they ate, Mama managed to keep a conversation going about several of their recent guests. Finally, the meal ended and they managed to clean up. At the first opportunity she could manage, Faith said, "It certainly is a fine chest."

"Faith Elizabeth!" Mama scolded.

"It's okay," Erik said. "Actually, I was thinking to bring it out tomorrow, after we got back from..." He glanced at Constance. "But the way things turned out, now seems fitting. It's by way of a wedding gift, more or less."

Constance sat down beside the chest and smoothed her hand across the lid. "It's certainly finished fine. It looks like it traveled a long way."

"All the way from England," Erik said.

Constance lifted the tarnished padlock. "And it's locked up tight. Is what's inside so precious?"

Erik pulled at a thong tied around his neck and drew forth a key. "I do hope you think so." He handed the key to Constance. While she fitted it into the lock he continued, "I got top dollar when I took my pelts down to Amarillo and ended up with some cash money. I had in mind to get you something fine to wear, until this came my way."

Constance eased the lid open and her eyes

widened. "Sweet Jesus," she whispered. "It's full of books."

"Merciful heavens," Mama said. "Outside school I ain't never seen so many in one place."

Constance wiped tears from her eyes. "Oh, Erik."

He shrugged with embarrassment. "Well, shucks. You knowing how to read and all, I thought it might be fitting."

Then Pa stepped forward. "Wait a minute. Looks to me like they're all copies of the same book. I think maybe you got taken."

"Pa!" Constance cried.

Erik took her hand. "Let me tell the story." He looked at Pa. "Sir, it's true I can't read. My dad died before he taught me much more than writing my name, and after he was gone I never had time. But I do know what I have here."

He turned back to Constance. "I met this family who just come up from landing in Galveston, a widow and four kids who were moving in with some cousins. Her husband was a teacher, planning to open a school. But he drowned crossing a river on the trail north. They're nice folks, and truly needed the cash. Still, I had the trader I do business with look the books over and tell me what they all are."

He reached down and picked up one of them. "The top layer *is* all the same book. They're readers, to teach a class with. Under them are writing slates, and on the bottom twelve more books, all on different subjects. I figured Constance would want those most. And I figured if this winter is as long as it looks to be, she might teach me to read, too."

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"I suppose," Pa said. "I guess you can sell off the readers, and make some back. Makes more sense than putting down good money on the Nordhaus farm."

Erik shrugged. "I worked for Mr. Nordhaus once he took sick. When he died, his daughter offered me a good deal. I knew what the place was worth to me, so I took it." He picked up the bridle.

Pa shrugged. "It was cheap, right enough. But it ain't much of a farm. And there's no call to keep harness in the house."

"Needs mending," Erik said.

Pa looked closer. "So it does."

Erik shrugged. Mama took the opportunity to jump in. "If we aim to get a reading done tonight, best be getting started." She got up to light a lamp.

Constance breathed a sigh of relief. "My turn to read," she said, and scurried for the family Bible. *I don't aim to let Pa select the verse, she vowed. What can I read that's not hurtful? Maybe something about the Israelites going to war or being carried off as slaves. There's lots of that in Nehemiah.* But the Bible opened to the book next to it, and a verse caught Constance's eye. She skimmed it and blushed.

"What is it, Daughter?" Mama said.

"Nothing," Constance mumbled.

Mama shook her head. "Dinna remember any 'nothing' in the Good Book. Read where you've been led."

Constance took a deep breath. "It's the book of Esther," she said, and began the story of how a virgin found favor with the king who reigned from India to Ethiopia. By the time she finished the tale of

gambling, political intrigue, marital relations, and war, she figured her blushing was burned out. She glanced over at Erik, but he was working steady on the bridle. He was smiling but didn't look up.

"Well," Pa said. "The Lord does work in mysterious ways."

In the sudden silence they could all hear the wind wailing around the cabin. Faith shivered. "Are we going to be snowed in so early?"

"Dinna think so," Pa said. "The flakes are big and wet and the temperature ain't dropping that fast. I reckon the snow will be melting off tomorrow morning. It'll be cool for the raising, and dry. But tonight there ain't nothing to do but get some sleep." He stood, glanced at Constance, and ambled into his bedroom. She looked down at the ring that still felt so strange on her finger and wondered how she was going to survive the next few minutes.

"I need to finish this up," Erik said quietly. "Reckon I'll be up in a quarter hour or so, if you want to go on ahead."

Constance put the Bible back on the mantle and walked over to him. As she reached out to caress his cheek, she whispered, "Thank you." He turned his face quickly and kissed the hollow of her palm. The feel of his lips sent a jolt through her hand and it was all she could do to keep from snatching it back. She picked up a lamp and climbed the stairs, blushing every step of the way.

She pulled the curtain closed behind her and took a deep breath, then stepped out of her wedding dress and hung it carefully beside her hope chest. She



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glanced around at the chimney that ran up one wall. The warm stones were doing their best to heat the room, but the chilly wind outside would soon cool things down. Constance pulled the brand-new wedding ring quilt from the chest and spread it on top of the down comforter. *Wedding ring*, she thought, and looked at the one on her hand as she smoothed over the rings the women of the community had sewn into the quilt.

She slipped her best flannel nightgown over her head and hastily removed her underthings. Then she sat down on her stool, and pulled the pins and ribbons from her hair. The feel of the soft locks cascading down her back was familiar, but this time it drove home the fact that she was about to climb into her marriage bed. Her middle filled with butterflies.

She distracted herself by giving the chestnut-colored hair a vigorous brushing. She hesitated at first, but then braided it up like she usually did for sleeping. *Calm down*, she thought to herself. *You know about what's going to happen. You've watched the stock breeding since you were tall enough to see over the fence. And you've heard Mama and Pa often enough. It won't be so bad. A lot of huffing and puffing and it's over fairly quick.*

She knelt on the kneeler and said her usual evening prayer, asking blessings on her family. When she got to Erik she blushed, but figured the Lord would understand. Then it was time for her own petitions. "Sweet Jesus..." and there she stuck, knowing she didn't dare ask for what she wanted.

"Reckon that'll hold." Erik's warning voice from

below sent the butterflies in her stomach into another commotion.

Constance abruptly finished with, "...thank You for making my husband so considerate." She scurried for the bed and hid herself under the covers. She slid to the far side and turned her face to the wall. *Sweet Jesus*, she thought. *That was also a petition.*

She listened to his feet hit each step, counting to know when he was actually in the room. She listened as he spent a few minutes on her kneeler, wondering if he felt awkward, too. She listened while he sat and pulled off his boots. She listened while he took off his clothes. She listened while he washed up. She tried her best not to think on what parts he was washing. Then he blew out the lamp and it was suddenly dark.

He felt his way under the covers and slid onto the other side of the bed. When his hand found her shoulder, she flinched. When he tried to pull her toward him, she resisted. Her body would have scooted away, except there was no more bed.

"Constance," he whispered. "I won't force you. If you can't; I'll wait."

She shuddered. "Oh, please, don't do that to me. I'd just die, worrying over it another day." She took a deep breath and rolled into his arms. When her hands found his chest she thought, *He's in my bed naked!* It took all her will not to cry out.

She felt the tips of his fingers brush across her cheek and around her neck under her braid. He kissed her on her forehead, then pulled her head back so he could reach her lips. *He's going too fast*, she thought. The kiss lingered. *I wish he'd hurry*, she

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thought. His hand slid down her back and pulled her closer until her breasts pillowed against his hard chest. *Too fast.* The soft friction through the softer flannel stirred her butterflies again. *Hurry.* The hand roamed lower, and found the top of the cleft in her backside. *Too fast.* Inch by inch his fingers drew the hem of her nightgown higher. *Hurry.* He kissed across her cheek and down into the hollow of her shoulder. *Too fast.* She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him deeper.

"I don't deserve you," he said.

"Hush," she whispered. "They'll..."

"Hear?" He chuckled. "Mixed blessing." He was breathing too fast to talk plain. "Storm chased us here. But it hides—the sound of—our lovemaking."

*Lovemaking* echoed inside her. *How can he name it so bold?*

Then his fingers found the soft, bare skin inside her knee. She pulled her leg away, but that opened her thighs to him. He let her roll onto her back and leaned over to kiss her mouth again. His weight settled onto her shoulder and bosom. He touched his way up the inside of her thigh. She thought to close her legs, but instead they opened wider.

The hip closest to him ran into something hard. She gasped, her mind filling with gruesome pictures of what unsheathed from a longhorn bull as he prepared to mount a cow.

Erik's hand found the soft curls that covered her mound. She arched at the touch and pressed her thigh against his organ. It didn't feel *quite* as big as a bull's pizzle.

He whispered, "Constance?"

She nodded. Then she realized he couldn't see any better than she could. "I'm ready," she lied.

He shifted himself and settled into the valley between her thighs. He eased higher, pushing her legs apart. She felt the touch of his organ at her entrance and grabbed handfuls of sheet.

He hesitated long enough to give her another endless kiss. *Sweet Jesus*, she thought. *Get it over with.* Then she felt the muscles of his belly gather. Wait! her mind screamed, but as quickly as she gathered breath to say it aloud, he plunged into her.

Her inside stretched. There was a prick of something giving way, but it wasn't any worse than the sting of a mesquite thorn. The word she intended to say came out as a loud squeak.

Erik froze. "Constance?"

"It's okay," she said. "Didn't hurt at all." She wondered, *Is he done?*

He kissed her again. "I do love you," he murmured. He started moving inside her. "I've wanted you so much. I've spent so many nights lying awake, wondering what it would be like." His thrusts took on a deliberate rhythm. "I never imagined..."

The bed started squeaking, and suddenly Constance pictured the others outside the thin curtain and just down the steps. *Faith is certain to be sleeping*, she thought. *And Modesty just as certainly is not. And Mama and Pa?* Then the full force of the storm hit, and she quit worrying.

"So good," Erik groaned. His strokes became long and hard and she felt his teeth against her neck. She

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spread her legs a little wider to accommodate him. Suddenly he pushed against her center and something tightened inside her. With each deep thrust it tightened a little more, building, stealing her breath away. She echoed his gasping.

Then he surged deep, and with a groan locked himself to her. She found her hands clenched on his backside, pulling him even deeper. This time she *knew* he was done.

*It's over, she thought. We cleaved unto each other. He went in unto me. We lay together. Maybe we even begot.* She cut off the ramble before it turned profane. She felt him relax. *Sweet Jesus, he's heavy.* She whispered, "Erik?"

"Mmmh." He got heavier.

"Erik!" she gasped. "I can't breathe."

He mumbled, "Sorry." He pushed himself up onto his elbows, a motion that pushed him deeper between her thighs.

"Oh," she sighed. He moved inside her again, deliberately. It felt delicious, but she knew whatever had started building was gone.

"Now you are truly my wife," he said.

*Men, she thought. That's not what does it.* But she bit her tongue before she said it out loud. He bent down to kiss her gently, and gently withdrew. She felt his leaving as a sadness. *Somehow it wasn't empty until he filled it.* He moved to the side and drew her after him into his arms. She laid her head on his shoulder. *I'm not a virgin any more. I'm a woman, like Mama and Grandma and Aunt Rachel and cousin Mary Alice and...*

He found her tears with his fingers. "You're

crying?"

"Pay it no mind," she sighed. "I've been a girl my whole life. Being a woman takes getting used to."

"Oh," he said dubiously. "Well..." He relaxed.

Constance started to explain, but before she could frame the words he was fast asleep. She thought, *How can he doze off so quick, after all that? I'll be lying awake the rest of...*

Hours later she woke to a bolt of lightning so bright it reflected from the buckles on the bridle Erik had hung on the chimney. The wind had settled to a steady moan. A moment later thunder crashed around the room. She couldn't hear rain hitting the roof, so it must be snowing instead.

"You okay?"

Constance started. "What?"

"You okay about the storm? You're skittish." He spooned behind her and kissed the back of her neck.

She shrugged. "Lightning outside my window is south of us. Means the worst of it is already past. Storms don't frighten me. Finding you in my bed was a startle."

He chuckled. "Best get used to it."

"I'll be doing that." She smiled. "How about you?"

"What?"

"Storm woke you as well."

"Wasn't the storm." He snuggled closer, and prodded against her backside.

Constance jumped. "Oh. Again?"

"Well," he whispered in a husky voice. "It struck me that before, when we were courting, I never did more than touch my intended's breasts while we were

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kissing.” He nuzzled down her neck to her shoulder. He murmured while he kissed. “They felt pretty good, even through all the clothes you were wearing. But this afternoon you became my wife, and tonight my lover. I figured you might allow more liberty.” He slipped his fingers under the hem of her nightgown and traced up along her thigh until his hand spread across her tummy.

Constance caught her breath. “I suppose I must,” she sighed. “You didn’t warn me that you have such a carnal nature. But it *is* a wife’s bounden duty to submit to her husband’s lustful desires.”

His kiss spread into a smile. “I’d believe you had been listening too much to your Aunt Rachel, if I couldn’t feel giggles bouncing in your belly.” He lifted his elbow to draw the hem of her gown up around her waist.

“Oh,” Constance sighed. Suddenly his erection slid against bare skin. He thrust against her. She was still distracted from that when his hand slid around her breast. She sighed again. “Gently.” His hands were work-hardened, the skin rough.

“Always,” he said. “How can anything so firm be so soft?”

He caressed them with feather touches, and Constance’s breath grew ragged. “Erik?” she gasped. “They aren’t fragile.”

He kneaded firmly. “Wherever did you get the name Constance?” He thrust harder against her cleft.

The answer tumbled out. “Lord figured I’d be needing it. Same as naming the pretty sister Modesty.”



"The pretty sister's name is Constance."

She only felt one hand on her breast. The other she found combing through the curls covering her mound. "And I suppose your name is Veracity?"

"I'm tellin' true," he said. "I reckon you're the most beautiful sister." His fingers probed deeper. "It's blooming for me."

"Sweet Jesus," Constance sighed, and her wit whirled away like the flakes of snow outside. She writhed in his arms, excitement playing through her body like the lightning flashing through the window. It flowed from the breast he was caressing, down through her body and back out where his fingers explored her womanhood. He discovered the little button at the top of her vestibule, and she shrieked.

"Constance?"

"Don't stop." She pushed against his hand. Something wasn't complete. "I want you."

"I'm here." His voice was filled with wonder.

She twisted against his organ. "I want you *inside*."

"Oh, Constance!" Instead of letting her turn toward him he inched lower. She felt the tip of his organ slide down the crevice in her backside and spring free between her thighs. His fingers guided it to her entrance. Then he inched higher, slowly filling her empty place with his hard erection.

"Oh," she called. "Erik!" She pulled her pillow down and hugged it in front of her. As he slid in and out, he pushed against something sensitive deep inside. The excitement building in her nerves suddenly doubled, and doubled again, until she arched hard against Erik's groin and shrieked into the

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pillow. He held on, continuing his ministrations to her breast and button and his thrusts until she nearly passed out from the pleasure.

Then, suddenly, it was pain. She grabbed his hands and stilled them. He froze. "Constance?"

"Sensitive," she gasped. He started to withdraw. "Nay!" She moved against him. "Not that." She shifted his hands, pulling the lower one up to her tummy. "Just your hands."

"Oh." He began to thrust again. "You didn't tell me you had such a carnal nature."

"I didn't know." She concentrated on what it felt like, with his organ moving inside her and his groin pushing up against her backside. *And I wondered if it would be over quick enough.* He stiffened against her, thrusting as deep as he could go, and groaned his release.

She listened to his ragged breathing ease. *I'm as sweaty as he is,* she thought. *Maybe lovemaking isn't something a man does to a woman. Maybe I have to do my part as well. But it's worth it. Is he going back to sleep still inside me?*

"Constance?"

"Mmm hmm?"

"You awake?"

"Again?" She moved against him.

"Lord, no. Give me a couple of minutes at least."

"Aye, dearest Erik. I'm awake."

"Oh." He hesitated. "Well..." He slipped out of her, then kissed the back of her neck.

Constance sighed. She turned in his arms. "You find something to say. Then you get it all plugged up

inside. When you decided to propose I didn't think you'd *ever* be getting started."

"Well," he said. "That's not a problem you have." He kissed her to take the sting from the words.

Then he snuggled closer, throwing one of his legs over hers and pressing his damp organ against her thigh. *He does it so casual*, she thought.

"About the Nordhaus place. It isn't much of a farm. The good fields are split into three pieces by the canyons that run through the property. It takes hours just to move a plow and team between them. And since Mr. Nordhaus mainly lived in town the only home on the place is his old dugout."

Constance shrugged. "But you said the creeks in the canyons had the best trapping around. And the folks at our house-raising will provide a place to live."

It was his turn to sigh. "You already had it figured."

"I know you. I knew you'd have it figured six ways to Sunday. Why didn't you tell Pa?"

He stroked her hair. There was a strange smell in his hand. "I figured to share it with you first."

Constance realized where the scent had come from, and blushed. *At least it's still dark*, she thought. "What's the rest?"

"I got it figured like this," he said, and anticipation filled his voice. "I made more on the furs than Mr. Nordhaus paid me for farming, almost as much as he made from the crops. I've also been fixing harness and tack for folks, and making more than I did from the furs. When I was in Amarillo I learned how to

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prepare hides and found out where I can study bootmaking. Our new place, besides the trapping, is close enough to town to be handy for customers. Then I was offered the books, and the rest came together."

*Our new place*, Constance thought, and almost missed the last of it. "The rest of what?"

He took a deep breath. "The part I must talk to you about. Last time your Pa and the other county commissioners met the judge's wife hoorawed them about how many kids there are around here. She was saying how we need our own school for the youngest instead of sending them over to Dalhart." Erik hesitated.

"So?"

"Well, you're good with little kids. There isn't anyone in the county that doesn't trust you with minding theirs. And you're the only girl hereabouts that's finished high school. I figure you could be a teacher."

"Me?" Constance wished she could see his face. "Are you funnin'? I just barely passed trigonometry. I don't know enough to be teaching."

"Not to teach high school. But I'm talking about the first three or four years. Down in that box there's books on figuring, geography, elocution, everything you need to study up on before spring. There's even a book on—can't remember the word. Planning about what to study."

"Curriculum?"

"Yes, that's it. And you have me to practice on over the winter." He kissed her before she could object.

"Well," Constance said when she had a chance.

"I'll think on it. I'm not sure Pa will go along."

"So?" Erik chuckled. "I haven't noticed that slowing you down much."

"At least not with you." She hesitated. "Are you prodding me again?"

"Shucks," he replied. "Guess I am."

"Well, just wait." She untied the neck of the nightgown and pulled the flannel off over her head. "Doesn't seem to be doing me much good tonight."

"Oh, Constance." Erik rolled over on top of her and took a nipple between his lips.

"Oh," Constance sighed. She ran her fingers through his blond hair. "I thought your *hands* felt good." She writhed under him, feeling his naked body on hers, feeling the sweet, slow buildup of passion until she could stand it no more. Then she pulled him up, drew him inside her, and threw her legs high around him to give him complete access to her body. He took her wild and she responded the same way. They set the bed to creaking loudly and only the dregs of the storm hid the secret of their impassioned cries.

When finally they lay satiated in each other's arms the wind suddenly dropped. In the silence they heard another bed creaking, and Mama's voice crying out, "You randy old goat!" before she could stifle it.

"Sweet Jesus," Constance whispered, blushing.

Erik shrugged. "Haven't you heard them before."

"Well, aye," she sighed. "But before I had to be using my imagination." He laughed at her and it took all her will not to slap him.

After another brief flurry of wind the storm left

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them behind, heading south toward Amarillo. By the time dawn filtered into the sky the air outside was still. "Can't stay here forever," Erik said. "I have to see to Bruno. He had a chafe day before yesterday and I want to make sure it's healed." He gave Constance another kiss and reluctantly slid his feet out from under the covers. This time she lay fingering her new ring and watched. Shivering, he quickly pulled on his pants, giving her only a glimpse of him from behind.

But then she got to see him lather up and shave, a process that looked much too dangerous for an early-morning task. By the time he stepped into his boots and clomped down the stairs Constance heard others stirring about.

She slid her own legs out into chilly air. She thought, *It isn't too cold*. Gathering her nerve, she sat up and let the quilt and comforter slip aside. She looked down between her legs. The hair was matted with crusts of dried stuff and there were more crusty patches inside her thighs. *What a mess*.

She checked under the covers. *The sheet's stained as well. But at least it isn't with the buckets of blood Aunt Rachel predicted*. Constance slid off the bed and walked to the washbasin. Standing led to something more leaking out. She gritted her teeth and used the chilly water in the washbasin to clean herself up. She quickly pulled on her underthings and everyday dress. Only then did she wash her face. When she sat down at her dressing table and looked in the hand mirror, she found her hair pulled every which way. *Wonder how that happened*, she mused with a smile as

she freed the tatty braid.

"Constance?" The voice came from the steps.

"Come in, Modesty." Her sister pushed the curtain aside and eased into the room. Constance waved her closer. "Come on. It's to be your room soon enough."

"Aye." Modesty looked her over. "Uh. Mama said you might appreciate some help."

"I think I would," Constance replied. She handed her sister the hairbrush and sat still while Modesty worked out the tangles.

Modesty glanced around. "May not be my room for long."

"Oh?"

"I am almost sixteen. And I finished eighth grade." She worked loose the biggest tangle and started brushing her sister's waist-length hair in long strokes.

Constance smiled. "Got anybody in mind?"

Modesty shrugged. "Not really. Except do you know Cullen?"

"Works with his father, the blacksmith? Big, with black hair." Constance held the mirror so she could see her sister.

"That's him. He is handsome." Modesty glanced up at Constance.

"I seem to remember he's courting Edith Ann."

Modesty shrugged. "He is. Sort of. But he let on it wasn't working out."

"Oh?" Constance sighed. "Let on to you or let on to Edith Ann?"

"Well..." Modesty bit on her lower lip. "Cullen said she was looking around on him."

"So he's gossiping about her as well." Constance



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shook her head. "Not that I wouldn't believe it. I seem to remember Edith Ann bragging on how she lured him away from Rosemary. Still—what do you think Mama would be calling it?"

"Oh, Constance, it isn't cheating. Much."

"Much?"

Modesty sighed. "Aye, you're right. I need to be talking myself out of it. What do you want me to do with your hair?"

Constance turned the mirror back to herself. The chestnut-colored locks cascaded around her face in soft waves. *Braid it, or just pull it back?* Then the feel of her new ring reminded her. "I think I want you to twist it and pull it up into rosettes, like Mama wears."

"Oh, aye." Modesty looked at her with awe. "What's it like?"

"What?" Constance blushed.

Modesty blushed in turn. "Not *that*. What's it like just being married?" She got the hair parted right and left.

Constance sighed. "I haven't figured it out yet." She held the left half out of the way and shifted so Modesty could do the right side. "But you got to count on being married for a long time. It don't hurt to look carefully."

"Well, aye." She reached the end of the hair and started to pin it up. Then she asked, "But what is there to be looking for? What did you first see in Erik?"

Her big sister hesitated. "First? I'd have to think on that."

"Well then, what was it about Andrew? Pa..."

Modesty finished pinning the right side and added a comb to hold it secure.

"Aye. Pa favored him." Constance turned to face the other way. "Do you like him?"

Modesty started in on the left side. "Well, not much. But he wasn't courting me."

Constance nodded. "That's what I'm getting after. He treated me grand because he was courting. And he treated Pa right as well. But when you went through that clumsy spell, his teasing was downright mean. And when he cheated Faith and wouldn't own up to it? That was enough for me."

Modesty chuckled. "You sure sent him packing. He's lucky you didn't tell Pa."

Constance shrugged. "That would have ended with Andrew getting thrashed and Pa crosswise with his best friend. Best to leave it where it lay." She thought for a moment. "I guess what I figure is this. You'll have boys courting because Pa has a fine spread and he's a leader in the county. And some will come because you're the pretty one. And some will really be interested in you. And they'll all be treating you fine because you have what they want. You can learn a lot more by watching how they're treating those who don't."

Modesty nodded. She finished pinning up the left side and adjusted the comb to hold everything secure. "There."

From below they heard the clip, clip, clip of a spoon in the mixing bowl. "Just in time," Constance said. "Mama's starting pancakes."

Modesty closed the pin box and stood up. "She'll

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be after me to set the table."

Constance drew her into a hug. "Come to think on it, I do remember the first time I noticed Erik. You remember before he came courting, when he dug postholes for Pa? That time he got crosswise with Faith?"

"Reckon so. Don't remember what they quarreled over."

Constance shrugged. "I don't either. But I remember he could have treated her like a little kid who got in his way. Instead he took the time to make things right between them. Not many of my beaus would have done that. Help me make the bed?"

Modesty nodded. "He pretty much treats everyone that way. Still, some of the deals between the two of them were pretty sharp."

"That's the truth." They rescued the nightgown and pulled the covers straight. "Erik is careful with a dollar—he's had to be. And he works hard when he's bargaining. But once a deal is made and he shakes hands, he's always fair. Faith didn't always end up liking the deals they struck, but she never had call to complain she didn't get what she bargained for. And she's learned a lot from him. I'm lucky to be Erik's wife."

"Maybe." Modesty smiled. "But I think he's lucky too." Then she turned and ran down the steps.

The rest of the morning was a hassle of unexpected chores. The hens were all aflutter and after Constance got them settled there were broken eggs to clean up. Mama's garden was blown helter-skelter. She rolled up her sleeves to right it. Pa rode out to check fence

and their herd of cattle. The youngest of the hounds had got his collar caught hiding under the house and Faith was the only one small enough to rescue him. One of the rabbit hutches had blown over. When they found an injured doe inside, it became what they were having for supper. Modesty set to skinning and cleaning it. Finally, one of the mesquite trees had split down the middle and fallen. Erik cut it up and stacked the wood at the green end of the pile.

Pa didn't return in time for lunch, so they made a quick meal of leftover biscuits and gravy. They were clearing the table when Mama said, "We need to do some baking this afternoon. I want to be taking pies to the house-raising tomorrow."

"Aye, Mama," Constance said.

Mama looked at Modesty. "Actually I was figuring on your sister helping me."

"Me?" Modesty glanced at Constance.

Mama smiled. "You been hinting that Faith is old enough to take on your chores. That leaves you free to be taking over most of what Constance has been doing."

Modesty sulked. "I know. Careful what I pray for."

Mama nodded. "The sewing that wins you county fair ribbons may keep your future husband well dressed. But he ain't gonna be well fed until you learn to roll lighter piecrust."

Modesty sighed. "Aye, Mama."

Erik carried another armload of logs in the door and stacked them by the oven. As he straightened up he said, "Well, shucks." He felt back over his arm.

"What happened?" Constance pounced on him.

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"That's your good work shirt."

"Pulled the shoulder a little," he said. "It's okay."

Constance sighed. "You'll be wanting that shirt tomorrow. Take it off, so I can mend it."

He fingered the loose threads and shrugged. "It isn't bad. You can do it later." He turned to go.

Constance planted herself in his way. "If you think I'm letting my husband go to our house-raising in a shirt with a pulled seam, you got another think coming." She pointed up to the loft. "Git!"

Erik grinned and tipped her his hat. "Yes, Ma'am." On the way to the stairs he shared a wink with Mama, who was grinning just as wide.

Before her mother could speak, Constance whirled and snapped, "Careful what you pray for." She followed her husband up the steps.

By the time she ducked past the curtain he was already stripping off the shirt. The play of muscles across his back distracted Constance, and she forgot about scolding him. He turned and caught her looking. He grinned wider, and flexed for her.

She stepped up under his nose. "You big oaf. What—"

His lips covered hers, and again she lost track of her intention. He drew her close against his hard chest. When he was thoroughly finished kissing her he nuzzled into the hollow of her throat, and whispered, "I do love you so. I wish..." She felt him harden.

She cuddled against his erection. "Constance," he moaned. "We can't—" This time it was her kiss that silenced him. She pushed against him until he fell

back across the bed, and dropped on top of him. "Constance?"

"Hush." She reached up under her dress and skinned out of her bloomers. Still under the skirt she awkwardly pulled at his belt until he took over to free the buckle. She unbuttoned his trousers and drew them down far enough to take him in hand.

His throat tightened to suppress a groan. She bent down to kiss him again, and straddled his loins. His fingers teased into the curls between her thighs, and she had to stifle her own voice.

She stroked him. "It's so hard," she sighed. "And so big." When she was ready, she placed the head at her entrance and eased down around it.

Erik pulled his hands out from beneath her skirt and reached up behind her head. He drew her down into a kiss. Then he set to opening the buttons down her back. When the last one was loose he drew the top of her dress down her arms and pushed her up until she sat on him. She watched him look at her breasts. He said, "They're so perfect."

Constance felt no urge to cover herself, and wondered at it. *Am I so bold?* Then she remembered who started this lovemaking. *That answers that question. But we have to be keeping quiet, with the others just downstairs.* Then she left off thinking and concentrated on taking her pleasure. She felt Erik deep inside her, and between her thighs, and caressing her breasts. What happened in the rest of the world ceased to matter.

When she fell back into his arms he slid strong fingers beneath the hair twisted at the back of her

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neck. His other hand was hard against her backside. He thrust deep until he turned to iron beneath her and spent himself inside her.

*It's not fair, she thought. He's strong enough to breathe with me laying on him.* He relaxed under her, and she reconsidered. *On the other hand, that means I don't have to be moving so soon.*

Then she remembered. "I suppose we better get up before the others get suspicious."

"Reckon it's a mite too late for that," Erik chuckled. But he helped pull the top of her dress back where it belonged. She reached behind to button herself up, knowing he was watching how it made her breasts shift under the cotton of her bodice. She eased herself off him and he pulled up his trousers before she rolled away.

"I'll have to be cleaning up a bit," she said.

He leaned over and gently kissed her. Then he slid off the bed. She lay on her back and watched him pull an older shirt over his head and tuck it into his trousers. When he was straightened up again, he turned. Quietly he said, "I do love you, Constance Schmidt." Then he ducked past the curtain.

Constance forced herself off the mattress. She found her bloomers beneath the bed and straightened up her own self. Then she picked up the damaged shirt and examined it more closely. *This isn't the first time the shoulder has pulled, she thought. Whoever mended it last doubled over the seam so it would hold better. But that just makes it tighter across Erik's back, and puts more strain on the stitches. Best pull it out and sew it flat. Finer stitches and good thread will be holding it*



*stronger.* She started downstairs.

She didn't notice her father until she ran into him. When she looked up, he was glowering at her. "Pa?"

"Ain't fittin'," he muttered. "Middle of the day."

"What are you saying, Pa?" Constance took a step back and clenched her fists.

"You dinna even straighten up your hair before you came down here looking like..."

"Looking like what, Pa? A harlot? Well, I'm not." Constance yanked the comb from her hair and shook it out. Pins scattered across the floor. "Or is this what you want me to look like? You want me to be your little girl again? Well, I can't. I'm married. To Erik. And he's made me a woman. And what comes between me and my husband is our business and none of yours."

"Not under my roof. Not in the middle of the day." His voice was deadly quiet, but still it echoed in sudden silence.

"Aye," Constance snapped. "In the middle of the day. Just like when Mama comes back from the barn with hay in her hair and high color on her cheeks."

"Oh, Lord," Pa said. "Why'd You bless me with a headstrong..."

*I'll murder him,* Constance thought. *If he says that one more time I'll wring his neck. I'll pluck out his heart. I'll claw the vitals from his belly with my fingernails.* Suddenly she was aware of Erik, tense, ready to intervene. The thought of the two of them tangling over her brought sudden concern.

Then she noticed how Pa's face was twisted. She saw the tear at the corner of his eye. Before she could

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react he stepped forward and awkwardly put his arms around her. He kissed her forehead. "I been wrong," he said. "Reckon you are a woman at that. I best be getting used to it." He drew her closer and Constance let herself relax into a hug. "Forgive me?"

She couldn't resist. She whispered, "Are you really a randy old goat?"

Startled, he stepped back. Then he filled the house with his laugh. "I guess the apple don't fall far from the tree." He turned to Erik. "You know what you got yourself into, marrying this strong-willed woman?" He wiped his hand on his trouser leg.

"Reckon I do, and willingly," Erik said. He wiped his hand on his trouser leg.

Pa stuck out his hand. "Then I pray the Lord God's blessing on your union, Son. And I'll be hoping he sends an extra measure of patience your way."

Erik shook hands with him. "That might come in handy, Pa." Then they both turned to Constance.

*They're grinning like a couple of hounds prideful of finding a rabbit. I'll wring both their necks. I'll...* Behind her she heard Mama's rocking chair take up its familiar rhythm, and understood the message. So instead of murder, she took a deep breath and said, "Well, now that's settled, I have mending to do." She stepped right up to Erik and kissed the grin off his face, and it was as natural as when Mama did it to Pa. Constance didn't blush at all. Then she turned and walked serenely to her corner.

Pa shook himself and looked at Erik. "I got some fence to be mending. Lend a hand?"

"Sure," Erik said. They gathered their coats, and as

they went out he was saying, "About the Nordhaus place. It isn't much of a farm. The good fields are split..."

Constance began pulling the broken stitches free with her needle. She remembered the way Erik's hard muscles pulled the shirt across his shoulders. She considered another part of him that got just as hard. *Tonight, she thought. Before we blow out the lamp, I aim to get me a good look at it.*

While she was distracted, the eye of the needle caught on the thimble and the point slipped through the cloth, piercing the tip of her wedding ring finger. She sucked the blood from the wound so she wouldn't stain the mending in her lap.

Constance glanced across the room and smiled. Modesty was far too occupied fighting piecrust with a rolling pin to notice what had happened. But Mama had, and she smiled back.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**A**fter raising fiercely independent daughters, Sean MacReady and his long-suffering wife live in an empty nest in Texas. He is a professional writer with awards for website content, journalism, technical writing, and fiction. His hobby is teaching people to shoot. Since a lot of the people he teaches about guns are women, his stories always show respect for the fair sex.