

A Reason for Hope

Chapter 1

“Here’s your breakfast! Come and get it, sweet kitties!” Tessa called.

She didn’t have to wait long. In the April sunshine dappling the forest floor, wary eyes peeked from behind trees and under bushes, and noses twitched at the delicious smells emanating from her wicker picnic basket. The feral cats now knew that they were about to dive into shredded broiled chicken and chopped hardboiled eggs sprinkled over their favorite homemade kitty kibble. Their chorus of meows demanded, *Hurry! Feed us!*

Tessa quickly counted the cats, as she always did at feeding time. Six of her seven had shown up—Dickens, Alcott, Wharton, Melville, Fitzgerald, and Austen—but Bronte, a silvery, ladylike part-Siamese was missing. A contemplative sort of cat, she enjoyed climbing madrone trees and gazing at the Olympic Mountains or meditating on the sun rising over firs. She had never strayed much till Tessa had recently trapped her and Dr. Vargas had spayed her. Now exceedingly mistrustful, Bronte began to wander.

Without breakfast, she’d be hungry. Tessa mentally begged her, *Please, come home tonight for dinner. No one will hurt you. I promise.* Feral or not, the cats were her family—and a family among themselves. She often found them grooming one another, going off on expeditions together, and lying side-by-side in the sun.

She set her wicker basket on a cedar stump and pulled out a stack of aluminum pie tins. At each of her feeding stations, she exchanged a food-encrusted pan for a clean one, and she spooned out breakfast. Knowing the kitties would not come near if she stayed too close, she moved a respectful two car lengths away. In seconds, the cats dashed to the food, and the forest filled with smacking sounds.

“You be safe,” Tessa told the cats as she did at every feeding time because they were vulnerable in a perilous world. Coyotes, eagles, dogs, moving vehicles, and cruel people could injure or kill them. They could eat a poisoned rat or sneak into a garage and lick antifreeze off the floor—and die. No wonder the cats were cautious. They had to be, to survive.

From a gallon milk jug, Tessa poured fresh water into the cats’ community ceramic bowl, which was large enough for a goldfish school. “See you tonight,” she called. Usually, she stayed to watch the kitties eat, but today she hurried across the field to her cottage to finish an important task. As she walked, she thought, *If only Bronte will be safe.*

At Tessa’s cottage door, she paused, as she always did, to touch the tiny brass hand she’d bought at a garage sale and nailed to the wall. The hand was shaped like a policeman’s, held out palm forward to say *Stop!* It was meant to keep evil from sneaking into the cottage or barging into Tessa’s life. She liked to think that it would make intruders, thieves, or assaulters take their business elsewhere.

Inside, she passed her faithful Bentwood rocking chair, in which she read all winter by her wood-burning stove. She went straight to her desk, a thrift-store antique with an iron key for the side drawer’s lock and legs that curved out like a slew-footed tiger’s. As she booted up her computer, she smiled to herself. She pulled her chair up to her desk and settled her fingers on the keyboard.

Name: Teresa Jordan. *Call me Tessa.*

Where she lived: San Julian Island. *Population eight thousand, about fifty years behind the rest of the world, across Puget Sound from Seattle.*

Occupation: Librarian. *In my bookmobile, whom I named Howard, I travel to out-of-the-way communities all over Nisqually County. And amateur literary psychologist. I recommend books and poems to help my patrons with their problems.*

Hobbies: Tending feral kitties. *I know what people say about crazy cat ladies, but I am nothing if not honest about it.* Reading just about anything. Walking beaches. Baking pies. *Every Sunday I also bake bread and make soup with my garden’s veggies.*

A phrase that described her physical appearance: *How am I supposed to judge that myself?* she wondered. *People tell me that I am pretty, and that my face lights up when I laugh.* Her dark hair had a touch of auburn in the sunshine, but it frizzed in the rain. And though she was average height and slim, she could lose an inch around her hips. But never mind about pluses and minuses. She typed, “reasonably attractive.”

Her age: “Well, go ahead and admit it,” she mumbled to herself. She answered, thirty-six—not that she was anywhere near over the hill. But her mother had started reminding her that she was running out of time to find a husband. What, ten years ago? Not exactly a confidence boost. When she broke up with her fiancé two years ago, she’d been more worried about her mother’s reaction than her own sense of loss.

Tessa glanced around her cottage at the dried hydrangeas in her copper vase, the crowded bookshelves, and the knitted afghan draped over her sofa’s arm. As cozy as she’d tried to make her home, sometimes it felt lonely when she returned from work and no one was around. When Tessa’s father had drowned in a sailing accident off the Maine coast just weeks after she’d moved here, she’d learned not just that life could change in a flash, but also that a crisis was harder to face by herself. Those lessons she was still trying to digest.

But, then, she reminded herself that she had her “people,” as she called her patrons, as well as her friends, the best of whom was Emma. Last week she’d urged Tessa to sign up for Northwest Singles. “You can’t sit home and wait for some delicious man to come along and ring your doorbell. You’ve got to gird your loins and put yourself out there.” *Maybe so.*

Tessa would let fate decide how lonely she’d be. She pressed “submit,” and her profile flew through the ether to NWSingles.com. To amuse herself, she scrolled through the site’s photos of men she might contact. One looked like a hamster was among his forebears. Another had leprechaun ears. Another had a bit of a werewolf about him—his tensely closed lips could have been hiding fangs.

Oh, my. What am I getting myself into?

In Tessa’s one-room-plus-bath cottage, her “bedroom’s” desk and Murphy bed were along one wall, and her “living room’s” wood-burning stove, sofa, and chairs were

in a corner opposite her “kitchen.” She stored dishes behind glass doors in a cabinet above the sink, and pots, pans, and cleaning supplies behind a chintz curtain under it. Next to her stove, a butcher-block table served for meals and a countertop.

With her NWSingles profile on its way to God knows where (possibly a werewolf!), she would make her weekly soup. She began chopping onions, and, as usual, her eyes stung and tears slid down her cheeks. To avoid those tears, she’d frozen the onion before slicing into it, turned its sliced side down on the cutting board, worn goggles, even kept a piece of bread in her mouth, as recommended in a cookbook. Nothing had worked.

Wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand, she put down her knife and crossed the room for a tissue. A ping sounded on her computer. Blinking against her watery eyes, she sat back down at her desk and found in her NWSingles message box an email from Nicholas Payne. *San Julian’s Nicholas Payne?* In yards all over the island, campaign signs urged people to vote for him for City Council in a special election this summer. His message to Tessa: “Meet up for a glass of wine? Planet of the Grapes downtown tomorrow @ 4?”

Tessa expected a leprechaun or hamster, but Nick Payne? His bio said he was the forty-two-year-old Rainier College professor she’d read about in the *San Julian Review*, and he enjoyed sharing a good bottle of wine with friends. She studied his online picture: an honest face, a neck as sturdy as a marble column, intense gray eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses. He was wearing a black turtleneck, and his dark, layered hair was mussed just enough to keep him from looking stiff.

Scarcely believing her beginner’s luck, Tessa replied that she’d meet him tomorrow, and she gave him her cell number in case of a last-minute change of plans. “We’ll probably recognize each other from our NWSingles photos, but just in case, I’ll be wearing black jeans, a blue sweater, and a scarf with butterflies printed on it.”

Two minutes later, another ping. “I’ll be easy to recognize by the red carnation in my teeth. (A joke!)”

Tessa fired back, “LOL!”