

BROOKSTONE BRIDES • 1

WHEN YOU ARE NEAR



TRACIE
PETERSON



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“Come one, come all to the Brookstone Wild West Extravaganza—the only wild west show to give you all-female performers of extraordinary bravery and beauty! Women whose talent and proficiency will amaze and delight people of every age!”



ONE

SEPTEMBER 1900
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Lizzy Brookstone sat atop her perfectly groomed horse, Longfellow, and waited for her cue. The sleek Morgan-Quarter horse crossbreed was a dazzling buckskin with sooty dappling. Named for one of Lizzy's favorite poets, Longfellow was one of two buckskins she used for the wild west show her father and uncle had started back in 1893.

The horse did a nervous side step, and Lizzy gave him a pat. "Easy, boy. I'm just as anxious as you are, but you know the routine."

She glanced down at her prim English riding costume. The outfit had been created to break away easily, and under it was her basic performing costume—a comfortable split skirt tucked into knee-high boots to allow her a full range of motion. Under the restrictive lady's jacket, she wore a specially designed blouse that easily accommodated her acrobatics. But at first glance she looked like nothing less than a refined lady of society out for an afternoon ride. She even wore riding gloves and a proper top hat with a netted veil.

The crowds cheered as her uncle Oliver continued to build

up their anticipation for the show. He was the perfect master of ceremonies, and the audience always loved him. He announced every event and explained each of the three main acts.

“And so without further ado, I proudly present my darling niece, Elizabeth Brookstone—the most accomplished horsewoman in the world today!”

The crowds roared with approval.

Lizzy straightened in the saddle. “That’s our cue, Longfellow.” She drew a deep breath and urged him forward.

The cheers were thunderous as she entered the arena. Lizzy put Longfellow into a trot and gave a ladylike wave with her gloved hand as they circled. This was her chance to assess the audience. The stands were packed to full capacity, just as all Brookstone events were. Souvenir banners were waved by those who had purchased them, while others waved handkerchiefs or simply clapped. Lizzy had ridden with the show since her father and uncle created it, and had never known anything but sold-out shows and crowds such as these. The Brookstone show was known far and wide to be of the utmost quality and satisfaction.

“Isn’t she lovely, ladies and gentlemen?” Oliver Brookstone asked through his megaphone. The audience roared even louder.

Lizzy set Longfellow into his paces. She signaled him to rear, causing the crowd to gasp. Longfellow began to prance and rear as if agitated and out of control. Lizzy let her top hat fall to the ground. Her chestnut brown hair tumbled down her back. She gave every pretense of being in peril as she signaled Longfellow to gallop.

As the gelding picked up speed, Lizzy pretended to be in trouble. She threw herself across the saddle first one way and then the other in order to rip away the special skirt and jacket. The audience that only moments earlier had been cheering now fell silent except for an occasional woman’s startled cry. This was how the audience always reacted. Lizzy saw one of the

other trick riders racing out to pick up her discarded articles of clothing. Freed of impediments, Lizzy slipped her foot into one of the special straps on her custom-made saddle and went into a layover, looking as if she would fall headfirst off the saddle. From this point on, she didn't hear the crowd or pay them any attention. Her act required her full attention.

Since she was a little girl, Lizzy had performed tricks on horseback. Her father and uncle had been part of Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show. They'd joined up in 1883, when their friend William Cody had decided to put together his famous show. Lizzy's mother had been needed to help with cooking for the crew, and naturally that meant bringing Lizzy along. Lizzy had grown to adulthood under the show's influence, performing her first tricks with the help of her father when she was just twelve. Every winter they'd gone home to Grandfather Brookstone's ranch in Montana to rest and plan new tricks. It was an unusual life to be certain, but one Lizzy enjoyed—probably because her father loved it so.

"You are the very heart of me, Lizzy," her father had often told her. *"You and your mother. Without either one of you, I'm not sure I could go on."*

But he had never considered how they might go on without him. Earlier that year, Mark Brookstone had suffered a heart attack. He had lingered for several hours after the initial onset, and during that time, he had made his wishes known before dying in the arms of his beloved wife.

Lizzy's body shifted in the wrong direction. *Focus on what you're doing or you'll get yourself killed.*

She pushed the memory aside. Focus was key to not getting hurt. She went into a trick that put her upside down along the horse's neck. The gelding didn't even seem to notice and continued to gallop around the arena. The audience applauded, now understanding that Lizzy's situation was quite under control.

Lizzy swung back into the saddle and gave a wave. The crowds went wild with cheers and the fluttering of the colorful Brookstone Wild West Extravaganza pennants they'd purchased.

She performed various moves for nearly twenty minutes, wowing the crowds with layovers, saddle spins, and shoulder stands, then ending with a death-defying drag that put her upside down, her hair and hand sweeping the floor of the arena. The people loved it. They were on their feet, cheering and whistling. The applause was thunderous as she reclaimed her seat and rode out of the arena.

The other nine performers for the show were waiting on horseback. Lizzy's was the final performance, but now the entire troupe would go out to take their bows. Lizzy positioned Longfellow while the others made their way out to the cheers of the audience. They lined up the horses, and each rider raised her hand high as the horses bowed.

An old man rushed to Lizzy's side, holding up a flag. With quick action, she secured straps over her feet and took the unfurled cloth. She returned to the arena, standing in the saddle and hoisting an American flag as she circled the ring. It was hard to imagine possible, but the cheers grew even louder.

Lizzy smiled and waved the symbol of America back and forth just as her father had taught her.

"People love a good finish, Lizzy. Give them a surprise and something to cheer, and they'll never forget you."

Longfellow headed out of the arena once again with the other riders following close behind. The audience continued to cheer and clap. As usual, no matter how much the performers gave, the audience wanted more.

Lizzy pulled off to the side, and the same older man who had given her the flag now retrieved it.

"Thanks, Zeb. I'm sure glad that's over." Lizzy had pushed herself nearly beyond endurance, having given a private per-

formance for the president and his friends earlier in the day. She was tired and sore and relieved that her obligations were concluded. She could feel in Longfellow's gait that he was too.

"Wonderful performance, Lizzy," August Reichert declared, taking hold of Longfellow's bridle. "You were amazing."

"Thanks." She smiled at the sandy-haired head wrangler, who was the brother of her dear friend Mary. He had once tried to pay her court, but Lizzy kept everything professional. She had no interest in losing her heart to anyone in the show or anywhere else. Falling in love was even more dangerous than the act she'd just performed.

She slid from the saddle. Longfellow gave a soft nicker, knowing they'd both done well. "That's my boy." Lizzy kissed the horse's velvety nose. "You were wonderful. You always are." The horse was puffing and sweating but bobbed his head as if agreeing with her. "I'll bring you some treats later tonight." She gave him one last stroke as August loosened the cinch. "Take good care of him, August. He needs to walk awhile." She knew she didn't need to tell August his job, but it was a force of habit.

"I'll see to it, Lizzy." August led the horse away.

She made her way to the small room where her mother was waiting. Rebecca Brookstone was a fine-looking woman with a slender figure. Just shy of fifty years old, she and Lizzy shared many features. Both had chestnut brown hair, although Rebecca's bore gray as well. They had dark brown eyes—a trait passed down from Rebecca's mother's side of the family—and a brilliant smile. Although Mother smiled less these days. Losing her husband had clearly left Rebecca Brookstone with a broken heart.

"I'm so glad you're safe," Mother said. "Were there any problems?"

"No. None." Lizzy gave her mother a kiss on the cheek. "Are you ready to go?"

The black-clad widow nodded. "I am. I'll be glad to be back on the train."

"Me too." Lizzy picked up the one remaining bag her mother motioned toward and offered Mother her arm. "Let's get out of here before anyone spies us."

Her mother happily complied, and they made their way to their home on wheels. Usually there would be a carriage or wagon to drive them, but the train station was only six blocks away, and Lizzy and her mother had walked it more than once that day. The walk helped Lizzy clear her head, and on this particularly warm night, it was pleasant just to stroll and let the evening breeze cool them.

"The capital is a fascinating city, isn't it?" Mother stated more than asked.

Lizzy nodded. "It is, but given the upcoming election, it seems to almost be running amok."

"I suppose that's to be expected. Still, it was a lovely visit at the White House. I thought Mrs. McKinley such an amiable hostess."

"I remember the first time we met her." Lizzy paused at a busy street corner to wait until the traffic cleared. The other pedestrians around them seemed less inclined and dodged in and out of the traffic, much to the annoyance of the drivers. When they were once again on their way, Lizzy continued. "Do you suppose the president will be reelected?"

"I think so," Mother said, nodding. "The country has returned to prosperity, and industry is progressing. I believe most people will see the president as having a part in that."

They reached the train depot and made their way to the area where the Brookstone railcars awaited. There were eight bright red cars in total, artistically painted with performance scenes. Each bore the lettering, *THE BROOKSTONE WILD WEST EXTRAVAGANZA*, and all were customized to their personal

needs. Half were dedicated to the animals' welfare and equipment, while the other four were set up for sleeping and living on the rails.

Lizzy made her way to the family car and helped her mother up onto the temporary wooden platform. Once they were inside, both women heaved a sigh in unison.

Mother smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "We're a sorry pair."

"We're tired. It's always hard when we get to the end of the season. I'm just thankful that you don't have to furnish the evening refreshments. Mrs. McKinley was so kind to send over all that food from the White House."

"She was indeed. I don't think I would have had the energy to lay out a table this evening. I'm glad there won't be too many more meals to arrange for this tour."

"Maybe we should hire someone to assist you next year."

Mother shook her head. "No, this is my last tour."

Lizzy wasn't all that surprised to hear this declaration. Since Father had died, neither of them had much passion for the show. They would have quit immediately had he not begged them to continue.

"*The show must go on,*" he had said in barely audible words. "*Promise me you'll finish out the tour.*"

They had promised, although neither had the heart to continue.

"I think it shall be my last as well," Lizzy said, plopping down on the comfortable sofa. "After all, I'm twenty-eight. I'm getting a little long in the tooth to be doing this." She rubbed her abdomen. "I get sorer with each performance, it seems."

"Besides, you should consider settling down, getting married and having a family. I would find it a great comfort to have grandchildren." Her mother took off her black veiled hat and set it aside.

Lizzy shook her head. "I'm sorry that I've disappointed in that area, but I'm not sure it's ever going to happen." She couldn't say that seeing her mother's pain from Father's death had made her look at romance and marriage in a completely different way.

"There's always Wes," Mother said. "He's free now. We both know he married Clarissa out of pity, but he's always cared about you."

This was not the conversation Lizzy wanted to be having. She had watched her mother go through the overwhelming grief of losing the man she loved. It had made Lizzy rethink her dreamy notions of marriage. She had loved Wes since she was a child, but he had never cared about her in the same way, and maybe that was for the best.

"There are other things in life besides marrying and having a family. Wes has his own life, and I have mine. Besides, he thinks of me as his sister," Lizzy said, shaking her head. "Nothing more than a pesky sibling."

"But that could change," Mother countered.

Thinking about Wesley DeShazer, their ranch foreman, always made Lizzy's heart ache. She had first met him when Wes was just eighteen and she was eleven. Her adoration of the young ranch worker had been overwhelming. She followed Wes around like a puppy for days, asking him questions and showing off her tricks. Wes had been kind and fun. He had treated her with tenderness. He was never condescending toward her, which only served to endear him to her all the more. It had been hard to leave him behind each spring when they returned to the wild west show. Lizzy would count the days until they returned, and when they did, she had rejoiced to find him still working at the ranch and more handsome than she'd remembered. As he grew into a man and took on more and more ranch responsibilities, Lizzy had determined he was the man she intended to marry.

“Lizzy?”

She glanced up to find her mother watching her. Lizzy smiled. “Sorry, I’m tired. What were you saying?”

Mother sat down beside her. “I was speaking of Wes.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Clarissa’s been gone two years now.”

“True, but during those two years, Wes has avoided me whenever we’ve been home. I don’t think there’s any future with him. If we were meant to be together, he wouldn’t have married Clarissa.”

“You were just a child when he married.”

Lizzy frowned. “I was eighteen. Hardly a child.” She yawned. “I’m sorry. I’m too tired to talk about this. I think I’ll get ready for bed.”

Mother took her hand. “Darling girl, you mustn’t give up on true love. If Wesley is the man God has for you, then it will come about.”

“And if he’s not?” Lizzy already knew the answer but voiced the question anyway.

“Then you wouldn’t want him for a husband. We need to rest in God’s will for our lives, Lizzy. You know that. To seek our own would only result in a world of hurt and problems.”

“Seems we have that anyway.”

Her mother’s eyes filled with tears. “I know. It’s been so hard without your father.” Tears trailed down her cheeks. “I don’t know why God took him from us. He was so loved.”

Lizzy hated seeing her mother cry. She put her arm around her mother’s shoulders and hugged her close. “I don’t know either. I do my best to trust God for the future, but losing Father makes the future seem grim.”

Her mother sobbed into her hands. Lizzy couldn’t count the number of times her mother had broken down like this, which was exactly the reason she couldn’t be honest with her mother

about her own feelings. “Come on, Mother. We’re both done in and will soon be lost in our tears. Let me help you get to bed.” She helped her mother to her feet and led her to one of the four private sleeping rooms in the family car.

The space wasn’t all that large, but there was a small built-in dresser and a rod to hang clothes on beside a double bed, which was also built in with a nice ledge at the side of the headboard. One of the cleaning girls had opened the window and lit the kerosene lamp, which was affixed to the wall above the bed. Lizzy wished they could spare the extra money to electrify the car. It would be much safer, less smelly, and far easier to manage an electric switch.

Still pondering that matter, Lizzy helped her mother undress. She hung up the discarded clothes while her mother donned her nightgown.

“Would you like me to help with your hair?”

“No, I’m fine. You go ahead and get to bed yourself. I know you’re tired.”

Lizzy smiled. “I’ll fetch you a glass of milk. I know you enjoy that before bed.”

“No. Don’t bother.” Her mother sat down on the edge of the bed. “I just want to read my Bible for a while.” Her tears returned, and Lizzy knew it was better to just go.

She slipped from the room and pulled the door shut behind her. Her own sleeping quarters were next to her mother’s. Close enough to hear her sobs well into the night. Lizzy prayed God would give her mother comfort.

Maybe it was best not to marry. She couldn’t imagine the pain her mother was bearing. Losing a father was misery enough, but losing a lifelong companion had to be like losing part of yourself. An amputation of the very worst kind.

Lizzy went into her small room, sat on the bed, and began unlacing her boots. She spied the pitcher of water, steam rising

from the open top. The cleaning girl was no doubt responsible. Once she was rid of her boots, Lizzy poured some of the water into the bowl and washed her face, then began discarding her clothes.

Just as she'd anticipated, her mother's sobs could be heard through the thin wall. How Lizzy wished she could comfort her mother, but as Uncle Oliver had told her, this was a burden a wife or husband must bear alone. No one else understood the pain of a marriage severed. Especially when it involved a couple who had loved each other as deeply as Mark and Rebecca Brookstone had loved.

Lizzy looked at her reflection in the mirror on the wall. *Why would I ever want to experience that sorrow and pain? Loving Wes and being rejected was painful enough. I can't imagine how hard it would be to share his love and then have him die.* No, the best way to avoid widowhood was to avoid love.

She quickly finished washing up, then readied herself for bed. With her hair braided and nightgown in place, she extinguished the lamp before crawling beneath the covers. Her window was still open, and she heard Uncle Oliver conversing with someone as they drew near the car. No doubt he was settling last-minute problems before their railcars were hooked up to the next westbound locomotive. It was a strange life, living on the rails. Sometime in the next hour they'd feel the gentle—or not-so-gentle—bump of the cars being coupled, and then they'd begin to move as they were transported to their next stop. At each city where they performed, their eight cars were moved onto a siding, and there they would live until the performances were complete. It was an exciting life—seeing America, meeting new people. Lizzy had even met three presidents: Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, and William McKinley.

When Lizzy was younger, her mother had always seen to it that they visited places of historic importance at each stop. Lizzy

had learned so much along the way. The trips had always been something she looked forward to. Now, however, there was no joy. She was ready to be done with it all.

“But then what?” Her voice was a barely audible whisper.

The ranch in Montana was home, but without Father, it wouldn’t seem that way. Then there was Wesley. If she quit the show and stayed on the ranch with her mother, could they find a way to just be friends?

“Can *I* find a way?” Lizzy gazed at the top of her berth, then closed her eyes.

Her mind whirred with questions, but by the time the train car began to move, she was starting to fade off to sleep. Sadly, without any hope of answers.