

# AN UNCOMMON WOMAN



LAURA FRANTZ

  
Revell

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Laura Frantz, *An Uncommon Women*  
Revell Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2019. Used by permission.



# 1

*Buckhannon River, Western Virginia  
Spring 1770*

**W**hy could she not quit pondering that flounced petticoat?

The rule of the river was vigilance, Pa had always said. Embraced by blooming redbud and dogwood on both banks, the Buckhannon gushed snow-cold in the spring thaw, its muddy depths a maelstrom of danger. Yet even the high water could not keep Tessa's thoughts from wandering overmountain. Nor silence her eldest brother's promise to return from there with a gift fit for a town-bred lass.

Despite the sweat that slicked her brow and the fierce tug of the queasy current, despite the swarm of insects like a white blizzard over the water's surface or the immense catfish that was visible mid-river, her woolgathering loomed larger than the ferrying at hand. Starved for frippery, she was.

Might Jasper bring her a pined-for petticoat that fell with a flounce to the top of her ankle bone?

"Tessa!"

Her uttered name was half hiss. Rarely did Ross speak so. If he'd jabbed her with his iron-tipped setting pole she'd have been less startled. While his gaze swung wide, taking in the opposite shore, hers narrowed to her youngest brother. His wary stance bespoke danger as much as the nervy, blindfolded horse they'd taken aboard their ferry. Ears back, nostrils flaring, tied to both railings by the bridle, the nag looked near to bolting. 'Twas always the creatures that sensed danger first. The ferry rocked from the horse's skittish dance, slapping the muddy water and sending up frothy spray.

Squinting, Tessa scanned the west shore. Beyond the muted birdsong and wildflower-fringed bank they were hurtling toward were three . . . six . . . eleven Shawnee streaked with war paint, their bald heads befeathered, all wending single file among the leafing trees. Their blackened eyes so like a coon's, their split earlobes adorned with flashing pendants and hoops, and their near-naked, hard-muscled forms sent a tremor through her. Even without war clubs, knives, and muskets likely gotten in Pontiac's Rebellion, these were the deadliest of forest warriors, dark eyes trained on the ferry.

"Lord Almighty," Ross breathed.

'Twas something their mother oft said, the start of many a silent prayer. Here and now, in their predicament, it seemed more epithet.

"Pole backwards!" Tessa choked out.

"Backwards ain't no better!" Ross shot back.

Jerking her head around, she saw more Indians along the riverbank they'd just left. But not Shawnee. Cherokee.

Bitter enemies.

At mid-river now, the blindfolded horse's owner began a slow raising of his rifle. But at whom? Which side?

“Drop anchor!” Tessa spat out the hasty words like rancid cider.

Ross was already at work, abandoning his setting pole for the heavy, forged-iron weight roped to the deck. Trapped between the Buckhannon’s banks, they were at the mercy of the current’s ruthless tug. Any second the anchor might give way and sweep them sideways downriver.

Breaking from the line of warriors to the west, the lead Indian moved to the riverbank, every muscle tensed, bow drawn.

His target?

Stomach fisted and nerves raw, without so much as a barrel to cower behind, Tessa braced for the whoosh of his arrow. All life seemed suspended in that instant, her pining for a petticoat a vain, trifling thing.

A shrill Cherokee war whoop split the tense air at her back. Defiance pulsed in every syllable. The answer was a rapid release of two Shawnee arrows. Tessa whirled as an outcry erupted on the opposite bank, one taunting Cherokee doing a macabre dance. Stoic, the Shawnee reached into his fringed quiver, then drew his bow again.

The whooping Cherokee fell, and his agile companions dragged him into the brush even as the triumphant Shawnee faded into the forest. With a swollen river between them, little fighting would be done.

Knees soft as candle wax, Tessa sank to the gritty deck. Slowly, their foot passenger lowered his rifle. Ross studied the anchor chain as if in no mood to lift it and reach the Shawnee side.

“Best tarry a spell,” the frontiersman said beneath his breath.

Ross gave a nod even as the ferry strained to be free. Raising her knees, Tessa folded her arms and rested her head on them, stricken thoughts spinning to those in the settlement. Trapped on this river, how could they sound an alarm?

Quickly she ticked off the whereabouts of those in gravest danger. Cyrus, her third-eldest brother, was farther up the valley helping raise the newest fort in a string of such defenses. But the rest of her clan? Sadly, she'd missed the usual breakfast jabber as she'd gone searching for a milch cow in the woods.

She raised her head. "Where's Zadock and Lemuel?"

"Clearing the new cornfield." Ross wiped his damp brow on his sleeve. "Ma's still at the cabin, likely, though she talked of going to help feed the crew at Fort Tygart."

"Tygart?" The frontiersman's gaze left the Shawnee shore and settled on the bank where the Cherokee had fallen.

"Aye, the newest garrison a league or so north of here," Ross answered. "Named after some officer in the Seven Years' War."

"I served with a Tygart at Fort William on the Hudson River under General Webb." He grimaced. "A bloody business."

"Never heard of Tygart myself, but he's on his way south to take command of the militia." Ross's chest seemed to swell before Tessa's eyes. "I can muster now that I'm of age."

"Sixteen, aye? We've need of stalwart souls if we're to keep this land." He continued to talk quietly as his gaze swept both banks. "Last time I was this way an older man with the look of you kept this ferry."

"Pa was killed some time back by Indians."

Tessa felt an inward flinch. That dismal wound was still sore

as the day it was made and rarely mentioned. The frontiersman fell silent. No telling his losses too. Everyone on the frontier had a chair that sat empty, a place unoccupied. Who would be next?

They floated in silence a good quarter hour, and then the sky darkened with cinder-colored clouds, turning the woods more shadowed.

“Let’s put to shore,” their passenger finally said. “I’ll cover you if needs be on the west bank.”

Tessa stood as Ross lifted the anchor. With dogged determination, they soon landed the horse and rider, then pushed off again with such haste that Ross nearly fell overboard.

“Reckon we’ll make it back before the heavens open?” Tessa asked. Already the wind carried the scent of rain and was ruffling the hem of her homespun skirt.

Ross’s smile was feeble. “If my scalp’s still attached I’ll not complain about a little damp.”

Never had they landed and tied up the ferry so fast. They abandoned the setting poles, taking care not to turn their backs to the trees. Tessa knew what was next but could barely stomach it.

“You see to Ma,” Ross said in a rush, “and I’ll run to the fields then the fort and raise a warning.”

*If the fort still stood. If Ma—*

Tessa forced the thought away as Ross vanished, the soles of his bare feet a dingy white against the greening ground. At least no smoke smudged the sky. The Indians were forever burning things. Crops. Cabins. Captives. That was the shining thread in the Swans’ dark tapestry. Dear Pa, Lazarus Swan, had died outright, felled by a tomahawk. Swiftly if not painlessly.

Heading the other direction, Tessa ran along a deer trail till her lungs cried for air and she nearly couldn't stammer out a sensible greeting. Ma stood in the fenced garden patch, hoe in hand, planting squash and beans. How Tessa hated to end her tranquil task.

“Ma, get to the cabin fast as you can.”

Without comment, Rosemary leaned her hoe against the split-rail fence and made for the log structure just a stone's throw away, taking her prize hen with her. Inside the cabin, she and Tessa shut the massive black walnut door, heaved the crossbar into place, then barred the sole shuttered window. Embers glowed in the blackened hearth that overtook the west wall, built inside lest the stones be torn down and entry gained through the outside opening. Through an adjoining door was the two-story blockhouse that earned the name Swan Station, with no openings save loopholes to jam a rifle barrel through.

All smelled damp. Rank. The hen strutted about, making discontented noises, deprived of its bug eating and dirt baths. Ravenous when she'd left this morn, Tessa now eyed the barely visible stack of corncakes atop the table with woozy disinterest.

“Tell me everything from start to finish,” Ma said in her easy way, as if they'd been bedeviled by no more than a swarm of yellow jackets.

Tessa told the tale with far more detail and elaboration than her taciturn brothers would. Save Ross, all were men of action, not words. She recalled with special force the whoosh of Shawnee arrows and the precise moment the Cherokee brave had pitched headfirst onto the riverbank before being pulled away by his fellows. How the lone frontiersman spoke

of the war hero Tygart. The telltale pewter hue of the river warning of the coming rain, which even now drummed with such force on the roof she lifted her voice to finish the telling.

Ma's gnarled, liver-spotted hands opened the Bible resting on the mantel, and she began reading. "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress . . ."

But Tessa was too focused on the sounds outside the walls to pay the holy words much mind. Their cur, Snuff, began howling from the edge of the clearing, a low, mournful lament. Their livestock were belled, all but the pigs, and roamed the near woods. Prickles shivered her skin.

Passing to the wall, Tessa looked out a loophole to the pasture. Her brothers had taken two of their fastest horses to Fort Tygart. Another was missing. Likely Ross had taken a third bareback, making a precarious dash to warn their brothers in the far fields and their nearest neighbors on his way to the fort.

Mimicking her mother's calm, Tessa built up the fire, then took her father's worn rifle from its perch on a pair of antlers to check powder and bullet lead.

*Lord, let the wait be not long.*

They had been lulled into a lethargy after a long, quiet winter when the Indians kept to their villages and ceased raiding. Spring meant yet another season of watching their backs had begun. Her muscles tensed at the thought. Not till hallowtide or chestnutting season could they rest easy.

All her life had been spent looking over her shoulder. Such unceasing, ingrained guardedness wore a body down. Day was never begun without a long, measured look out a cabin loophole. Ever clever, her second-eldest brother, Zadock, had designed a straw man to thrust in the doorway when it

first opened of a morn. How they'd laughed at the foolish sight bedecked in their homespun rags and a tattered hat! Yet here the straw man remained just inside the door to do its duty, a burnt hole through the worn felt brim proof of its purpose. She couldn't imagine a day not dogged by danger, when one's own shadow wasn't suspect.

Folks overmountain didn't live on the razor's edge of peril. Soon Jasper would return from there with far more than salt or the needed stores. He reappeared just as heavily laden with word of society's ease, of bread and sweetmeats to be had in confectioneries, shiny cloth in shop windows, books and ink and reams of spotless paper brought in by tall-masted ships from England. Was it wrong that her girlish heart longed for an unfrayed ribbon or sturdy cobbled shoe? A book to call her own? She'd never known such, born in this wilderness place, and doubted she ever would.

But oh, what she'd give for a pretty petticoat.