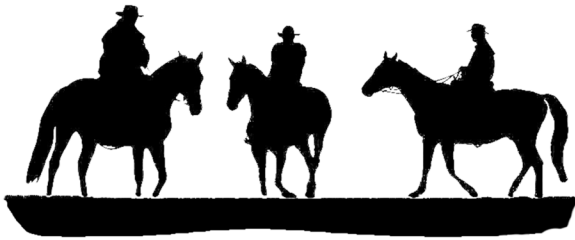


THE MEDDLESOME MAVERICK

KATHLEEN L. MAHER



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With delightful characters, clever dialogue, and a fun ranch setting, award-winning author Kathleen L. Maher delivers a satisfying story that will keep readers turning the pages to find out what happens with headstrong tomboy Sadie and the new cowboy who brings with him a Stetson full of secrets.

— CARRIE FANCETT PAGELS, MAGGIE
AWARD WINNING ECPA BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *MY HEART BELONGS ON*
MACKINAC ISLAND

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Jefferson County Nebraska

Spring 1891

“**T***sk. Tsk.* Your Da will be bellowing, for sure and for certain.”

Sadie leaned forward on one of the kitchen’s long benches and tied the leather chaps over her pantlegs. One leg done, she paused to throw a scowl over her shoulder at Widow Garrity. The ranch’s beloved cook would be a candidate for sainthood if she weren’t such a fussbudget.

“Pa hollers at his mules now and then. So what?”

“No, Miss Sassafra,” the widow said. “He’ll be throwing fits about you! You know good and well, no *lady* wears pants.”

Sadie would chuckle at the woman’s genuine shock at her riding apparel, but irritation clipped the impulse. She’d worn the same outfit every workday since she was eight, yet ten years later, the woman imposed the same conversation on her.

“Pa doesn’t trifle over my riding gear. It’s *you* who doesn’t

like it.” A huff of laughter seeped out once she’d spoken her mind.

“So, you mean to gallivant about the ranch like a boy when a young lady should be catching a husband.”

It wasn’t a question, the way Cookie Garrity said it. It was an Irish lament, almost wailed the way the widow had *keened* at Mr. Garrity’s wake. Sadie had never forgotten the sound, though it had been years ago, and because the widow resurrected the tone whenever she wished to employ extra drama to her lecture.

Sadie clenched her teeth. A twinge at her temple reminded her that if she didn’t loosen her jaw, she’d get a headache. Those hushpuppies the cook had fried up sure looked good. She whisked a few off the platter and popped one in her mouth, chewing as she spoke. “Womenfolk ought to know how to take care of their own selves instead a puttin’ all their hopes in a man. You of all people know that.”

Widow Garrity’s bluebonnet eyes grew wide, and her ample mouth grew small. She looked stricken.

“I’m sorry, Cookie. But you know I’m bound to speak my mind.”

“That’s another thing, Miss Sadie,” the widow began with gusto, proving that her hurt was only feigned. “A young lady should refrain from expressing opinion ...”

Sadie took her leave as the widow’s lecture waxed in both volume and pitch. She swung her brown braids behind her, sending them bouncing against the suede of her jacket as she marched from the grub hall. The morning air stirred with more than the scents of cinnamon and bacon. A tangerine sun stretched warm waves over the prairie’s dips and slopes, and it looked to be a beautiful spring day ahead of her.

She relished the slanting rays on her face, not caring if it made her skin as bronzed as the hired men from south of the

border, or the native folk who traded with her daddy over a chaw of tobacco. Her sun-kissed blush only made fodder for Widow Garrity, who never missed an opportunity to lecture her, even if it was only about her complexion.

Bounding around the end of the building, she nearly collided with a slim cowboy swinging a big black case. If she hadn't had the reflexes of a sidewinder, the man would have clobbered her with the thing. That would have left a nice bruise to add to Cookie's worries.

"Hey, pardner. Why don't you watch where you're going?"

The young man made a full stop and pulled up his big black murder weapon to his broad chest. "I beg your pardon, miss." He tipped his hat and flashed a grin, showing a brighter stretch of white than a full moon over the Platte River. Sadie's legs did a strange little wobble, and she broadened her stance.

"I'm Sadie Mitchell. Who might you be?"

He removed his hat and took a bow. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Sadie. I'm Boyd Hastings." He straightened and his gray eyes met hers. Something in them danced, almost as mesmerizing as the glint off a polished steel pistol. They sure were purty eyes, for a man.

She blinked, then remembered herself. "What ya got in that-there contraption? You aimin' to kill someone?" She gave him a crooked grin. Some folk needed assurance that she was teasing. She'd been told—by Widow Garrity—that she had a rough humor. *Too rough for a lady.*

He chuckled and plunked the case down with a thump, then set about unhinging a couple metal clasps. Presently he produced a stringed instrument and held it up as though it was the finest thing since Colt made his handy revolver.

"Nothin' like music by a campfire under the stars. A banjo can sure break the ice for a new buckaroo." He set the thing

back in its case with a wink and then, giving a deferential nod, he punctuated his friendly explanation.

The spark of Sadie's curiosity had been kindled. "You must be our new bronc buster."

"That's me." He spun his hat in midair and caught it in a quick draw. With another dazzling grin he clapped it back on his sandy-haired head.

That grin and twin dimples on his smooth-shaven cheeks brought a twitter to her tummy. She rubbed the leather belt at her waist to make sure she'd cinched the buckle properly. Land sakes, why was she getting all soft and squishy around this cowboy? Just because he had a baby face and cut an image like some sculpted figure ...

"Well, it's been a pleasure to meet you, Babyface." She said with a teasing lilt to her tone. "Maybe I'll see ya 'round the campfire later. Right now, I got some steers to rustle."

"Babyface, eh?" Boyd gave her a sideways look and shook his head. "Well, I'm no greenhorn, in case you're wond'rin', Miss Sadie. Stick around for the show, and you'll see for yourself." A tug of humor lifted one side of his mouth into a lopsided grin.

"That sounds like a date." She shoved her Stetson down over her brow, hoping it hid any schoolgirl, starry-eyed look, and headed her way to the other side of the yard to the horse barn, his chuckles carrying back to her on the easterly breeze.

Ack! She wasn't the type of girl to flirt—she despised those who did. A girl ought to be more than a fancy face and practiced charm. Shoot, a cornstalk might be slid into a dress and posed to look fetching, but it was still a scarecrow with a head full of cornsilk and stuffing.

Roping a man won't help nothin'. Some of her friends had found out what catching a husband had cost them. Sadie shuddered. No, she'd rather catch cowpox than have her

dreams scrubbed away in wash water with every dirty supper dish and diaper. No siree, marriage was not for her. No man, not even Baby-faced Boyd Hastings, would claim her hard-won independence.

“Hey, Miss Sadie. Which way to the bunkhouse?”

She hadn’t gotten far. His voice stopped her, and she turned to look back at him.

He held up his banjo case with a sheepish shrug. “I’ll need to set this somewhere safe before I start.”

She laughed. “This way, Greenhorn.” She swung her arm in a wide arc to compel him to follow.

The cowboys would have fun with this kid. Might as well show him what awaited if he didn’t get his bearings straight, and right-quick. But she wouldn’t exactly throw him to the wolves—just to Widow Garrity.

Boyd surveyed the building the girl had led him to with a squinting appraisal. “Hey, this doesn’t look like the bunkhouse.” He rested his banjo case on the top of his boot to avoid dirtying it in the dust.

“You’re right, clever fox. It’s where we eat. Come in and I’ll introduce you to our cook.”

The girl disappeared through the door and left him standing there. Grunting, he hefted his instrument and reluctantly followed. First impressions mattered. *Hope they don’t think I’m the type of fellow who lingers around the waterhole all day.*

“Oh, you’re back.” The matron wiped her hands on her apron and set her face in a deep scowl.

He removed his hat, tempted to wave it at his face. He’d suddenly grown flushed, and it wasn’t the heat from the

kitchen. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I got turned around looking for the bunkhouse."

"Not you, sonny." The cook folded plump forearms over her bosom, and she shook her head in disapproval at the girl who stood between them. "Sadie and I were just conversing. I was telling her—"

"Watch this cowboy's banjo while he works today, Mrs. Garrity. If I know Teddy and Sven, they'll be pulling pranks on the new kid."

"What do I look like, a nanny? Saints alive, Sadie. Why should I do this for you when you won't listen to a word I say?"

"It's all right, ma'am," Boyd fiddled with his hat, really wanting to clap it back on his head and skedaddle from these women and their argument. "I best get to work."

"But Boyd, the *vaqueros* here have no common respect. They might destroy your nice ... whatchamadoodle."

"Banjo."

Mrs. Garrity heaved a sigh that filled her ample, though squat, frame. "Very well, I'll set it behind the flour bin. But you owe me, Sadie Mitchell. And don't go thinking I'll be forgetting."

"No, ma'am." Sadie shook her head in resignation. "Not with your memory." She murmured the last part so quietly that Boyd barely heard it.

If he wasn't mistaken, a twinkle of dread lit in those light brown eyes of hers. Whatever the matron expected for this favor, he would pay it, not Sadie. Would the cook force the girl to shuck bushels of corn? Or pluck a half-dozen chickens for dinner?

"I thank you kindly, ma'am. You be sure and let me know if you need wood for the fire, or water buckets carried from the well." He flashed his best grin at her, and the woman's face burst with color.

“Miss Sadie, if you want to keep this nice young man out of trouble, you show him around, you hear? Make sure the others know he’s a friend of your father and that he’s a *special friend* of yours.”

Boyd’s pride prickled. *As if I’d hide from the bunkhouse toughs behind a little tomboy.* He knew how to handle himself.

“Now here’s an extra nibble for you to be on your way. I must see to my chores.”

The woman shoved an apple into one of his hands while whisking the banjo case from his other.

Before he could thank Widow Garrity, Sadie took his arm and spun him toward the door. He tucked the apple into his shirt pocket and bit back the impulse to protest. Sure, they were only trying to be nice, but if he didn’t put a halt to this, he’d be henpecked.

“Whoa there, little lady. I got it from here. Thank you kindly, but—”

“Don’t look now but here comes Sven, Teddy and Miguel. Three prickly pears you don’t want to step on. Follow my lead.”

“I reckon I can handle—”

Sadie raised her voice over his, cutting him off. “I was just saying to my father how nice it would be to have real music around the campfire. And who knows? maybe a social. You’re mighty generous with your talent, Mr. Hastings. Why, I’ll bet these cowboys would be glad for a concert at the end of a hard work-week.”

A swaggering *vaquero* broke from the trio and spit a stream of tobacco juice off to the side. “Who’s your new friend, Sadie?”

“His name is Boyd,” she replied. “Boyd, this is Miguel.”

Miguel’s dark brown eyes shone with a bit of mischief. Boyd clasped the man’s hand in a firm greeting. “*Buenos Dias.*”

A tall man with platinum blond hair poking out from

under his hat approached next, inhaling through a long nose. "Smells green, *ja*? Fresh off the turnip wagon." He gave the other cowboy a sidelong look and snickered.

Sadie put a hand on her hip. "Better than the rotten fish you rolled in, Sven."

The others hooted in laughter and clapped the Swede's back. Boyd stood back to take the man's measure.

The three cowboys took up positions around to his sides and behind him, but Boyd kept his stance loose like the time he'd been surrounded by coyotes out on the range. Neither afraid nor aggressive, he stood his ground.

The last man, a blunt-looking figure with a shape not unlike a big toe, swaggered closer, swiveling his no-necked head to the side. "You git hired on for your good looks, or are you gonna get to some real work, *Boyd*?"

Done sizing him up, the others fell back behind the *big toe* Sadie had called Teddy.

"You Ted McAllister? The foreman?" Boyd neither reached out a hand nor shifted his direct gaze.

"That's me. Boss man says you break horses. Let's see what you got."

Boyd reached out then with a sturdy grip and shook McAllister's hand with a pump he intended would not soon be forgotten. "Lead the way."

"I reckon I'll stick around for the show." Sadie almost skipped along, matching the long strides of the men with a double-quick step on her spritely legs. She had the enthusiasm of a tag-along kid, and he wondered exactly how old she really was. Hers were not the legs of any child.

He blinked away the stray thought. Observations like that had gotten him tangled up with the wrong sort of young lady. Thank the Lord he had escaped, but the singe of fiery indignation still kindled upon every recollection of her.

“Hastings, we’ll have you pick out a horse from the corral. We’ll send him through the chute, and you’ll have the round pen all to yourself.”

“Just you and the horse, *ja*.” The Swede hung his mouth in a grin that did not improve his long face any.

Boyd wiped his palms down his trouser seams and approached the pen of skittish horses. Some of them broke from the herd and pushed to the other side of the corral at his approach. Most hung back, except one large paint with a blue eye. The animal stood his ground and snorted, pawing the ground.

Boyd grinned. “Looks like you’ll do right nicely, Ol’ Blue Light.”

Ted’s toe-head bobbed in a nod and Miguel pulled the cord, lifting the lever to open the chute. The skewbald stallion charged through the opening and thundered into the round pen, claiming it with powerful strides, blowing and neighing with his head in the air.

Boyd’s blood stirred. He climbed the five-foot barrier, and with one leap, landed square inside the enclosure. Arms loose at his sides, he faced the big stallion whose articulated muscles quivered with the tension of a cat about to pounce.