

# **Montana Sky Study Guide**

## **Montana Sky by Nora Roberts**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Montana Sky Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Part One, Fall: Chapters 1-5.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Part One, Fall: Chapters Six-Eight.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Part Two, Winter: Chapters 9-13.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Part Two, Winter: Chapters 14-17.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Part Three, Spring: Chapters 18-20.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Book Three, Spring: Chapters 21-24.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Part Four, Summer: Chapters 25-28.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Part Four, Summer: Chapters 29-31.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">41</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">43</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">45</a>



# Plot Summary

Montana Sky, by Nora Roberts, tells the tale of three sisters, the daughters of Jack Mercy. Upon the death of their father, Willa, Lily and Tess Mercy are thrown together on Mercy Ranch, where they must live together for a year in order to inherit the land.

Willa Mercy, the youngest daughter, has grown up on the ranch, struggling to please her unbending father. Upon his death Willa steps into the role as the owner, only to find that her father has other plans. Willa learns at the reading of the will that unless the two sisters she has never known live on the ranch for one year the land will be given to a nature conservatory and all will be lost. Willa is devastated, not only because her life is now in the hands of two strangers, but also because it is now clear that she does not matter to her father any more than the daughters he cast aside.

Lily Mercy, the middle child, is happy to stay, if only to escape her abusive ex-husband. Shy and nervous, Lily appreciates the beauty of the land and is immediately drawn to Adam Wolfchild, Willa's half brother. The two develop an instant attraction, one that Adam is patient to see to its fruition.

Tess Mercy is not at all willing to give up her glamorous life in California, but does so when she realizes the fortune that is at stake.

The three sisters move into the main house and struggle in their relationships with each other. Lily is the peacemaker, always trying to do for others and make others happy. Willa has no use for either sister, and continues to run the ranch while running herself into the ground. Tess does what she can to contribute while butting heads with Willa constantly. As time passes however, all of the sisters develop a grudging respect for each other.

Things change on the ranch when animals are found slaughtered in the mountains and then closer to the ranch. When Adam's cat is found headless on the steps of the main house it is clear that someone is trying to send a message to the women of Mercy. Whatever the message may be, the three sisters band together, vowing to see things through. The three men in their lives stand with them, making for a stronger team.

Willa struggles with her attraction to Ben McKinnon, a neighboring rancher who her father had wanted her to marry simply to join the properties. Lily and Adam are clearly falling in love and Tess has a passionate affair with Nate, a friend and Willa's lawyer. Together the three men, friends for years, vow to watch out for the women they care for.

Lily's ex-husband appears on scene, working on the neighboring ranch and keeping an eye on his ex. Jesse Cooke is angry that Lily would try and leave him and vows to get back what is his. When Jesse discovers the inheritance that Lily will receive he decides to wait to reclaim her. This changes when Jesse discovers that Lily and Adam are planning to be married. Jesse's anger and the killings that are taking place lead the reader to believe that Cooke is responsible for the destruction around Mercy. This



changes when Jesse is found dead after kidnapping Lily, killed in the same manner as the ranch hand and the hitchhiker that were found dead; stabbed and scalped, on Mercy land.

Willa struggles to keep her sisters safe and run the ranch, sometimes angering those she cares for. After an argument with Ham, the foreman who more or less raised her, Willa discovers Ham injured and Jim Brewster, another man who has worked the ranch forever, standing over the body.

Jim stuns Willa by telling her that he is her brother, the illegitimate son of Jack Mercy. Brewster takes Willa into the mountains so that he can explain why he has been killing, first animals, and then people. Jim's anger at never being acknowledged by their father, and then left out of the will has caused him to snap. At first killing animals was simply to channel his anger but he discovered not only that he liked it, but that it upset the people living on the ranch. Jim tried at first to scare away Lily and Tess, figuring that if he couldn't have the ranch then no one would. Things changed for Jim when he rescued Lily from Jesse, killing the man who had hurt his sister. Deciding that being a hero was better, Jim simply wants Willa to tell the others that she was taken and Jim saved her. Though Willa agrees Jim declares that she is lying and prepares to kill her as well. Ben arrives and kills Jim, saving the woman he loves, and ending the horrors that have been taking place for the past year.

The three Mercy daughters, now sisters and a united family finally find happiness on Mercy Ranch, their home. Willa and Ben will be married, as Lily and Adam are, now expecting a child. Tess, despite her assurances that she would not stay, makes it as far as the airport before realizing that she would be leaving happiness behind in the form of her sisters and the man she loves. In the end, despite the lack of love that Jack Mercy had for anyone, love returns to the ranch, this time to stay.



# Part One, Fall: Chapters 1-5

## Part One, Fall: Chapters 1-5 Summary

The funeral of Jack Mercy, a solitary man who allowed no one close to him draws most of the people in the surrounding area. Willa Mercy, Jack's youngest daughter by his last wife, Mary Wolfchild Mercy, is uncomfortable with all of the people in the massive home she has grown up in. After watching the casket lowered into the ground Willa heads to her room and changes into her work clothes. Bess Pringle, the housekeeper who raised Willa after he mother died is not happy that Willa is being rude to the guests but knows that there is no sense arguing with Willa as the 24-year-old is as stubborn as her father had been. Willa tells Bess to clear the house of the people that have gathered and she will be home for dinner. The mass of people who have gathered to be nosey should be gone, but Willa's two sisters from Jack Mercy's previous marriages will still be in attendance. Willa has never met them, and feels nothing for the two women.

Lily Mercy, the second daughter of Jack Mercy has arrived in Montana from her small Virginia home, and finds the scenery breathtaking. Lily hopes that her ex-husband, Jesse Cooke will be unable to find her at Mercy Ranch. The bruises that Lily had hidden with make-up were fading and she hoped that she would be able to stay in Montana for a while. Her thoughts circle around what she might do with herself if Willa decided she couldn't stay when she is startled by the arrival of Adam Wolfchild, Willa's half-brother, eight years her senior. Adam introduces himself, cautious, sensing that Lily is fragile. After the two chat briefly, Adam invites Lily to see the horses and she happily agrees, as long as she will not be in the way.

From the window of the den, Tess Mercy, the oldest daughter watches the two head down toward the barn. On the phone with her agent, Tess tells Ira that she will return to California by Monday afternoon. Tess is intent on collecting her inheritance and leaving as quickly as possible.

Willa stops on the steps to chat with Hamilton Dawson, the ranch foreman. Ham assures Willa that all is being done that needs to be done, and tells her his is sorry about her father. Ham had taught Willa to ride and rope, raising her like his own since Jack Mercy really had no use for his daughter. Willa stops and talks to Nathan Torrence, a neighbor, friend and Jack Mercy's lawyer. Willa comments that despite Jack's death nothing has changed since a Mercy had run the ranch for over 100 years. Nate is unwilling to hurt Willa, but tells her that they should get to the reading of the will.

In Chapter Two, Nate sits down with Willa and her sisters for the reading of Jack Mercy's will. The three sisters learn that Jack Mercy has left the ranch to all of them, provided they live on the ranch for one year. If any of them leave the entire ranch will be donated to the Nature Conservancy. Willa will run the ranch and be overseen by Nate and her neighbor, Ben McKinnon. Tess refuses, angry, though Lily agrees. Lily apologizes to Willa, knowing that the details of their father's will must be very hurtful.



Tess and Willa argue about the ranch and Lily winds up in tears, angering Bess who tells the two sisters that she is ashamed of them.

Nate leaves and Tess tells Willa she will stay, unwilling to give up her portion of the estate. Willa tells Tess that she will take her orders from Bess, and be respectful about it, and then leaves to ride into the night. Stopping her horse at the land that borders Three Rocks, the McKinnon ranch, Willa realizes what her father was up to. Jack Mercy has always coveted the McKinnon ranch, and has now arranged for his three daughters to be paraded in front of Ben McKinnon, hoping, even from the grave, to combine the two ranches and create one of the most powerful ranches in the area.

In Chapter Three, Ben McKinnon returns from Bozeman and meets with Nate. Ben is not happy about the situation that Jack Mercy has created and comments to Nate that they will have to make sure that Willa doesn't lose the ranch.

Ben rides into the mountains, reflecting about his ranch and his younger brother Zack, married and a new father. Hearing a gunshot Ben heads that way, finding Willa standing over the body of a dead grizzly. Ben offers to help Willa dress the game and Willa relents, despite being ornery near McKinnon. Ben flirts with Willa and she resists, and then goes to wash the blood from her hands. Afterward Willa calmly discusses the unfairness of the will in regards to Adam and the two head toward the cabin where Willa's ranch hands will have coffee. Will smells something and she and Ben discover the mutilated carcass of one of the Mercy steer. The steer was obviously the victim of a human wielding a knife, not an animal. Ben tries to track whoever had killed the animal while Willa heads to the cabin to radio the ranch and check with the men.

At the cabin, Pickles, named for his love of pickles as well as his sour attitude doesn't believe that a steer has been butchered and goes to check himself, returning angry that someone would dare do such a thing. Willa agrees and leaves the men as she heads back to the ranch.

Pickles is angry at having to report to a woman but Jim Brewster, another of the ranch hands reminds him that Willa is their boss for today and that is all that matters.

In Chapter Four, Tess heads to Los Angeles to tell her mother, Louella, what the details of the will state. Louella, a former dancer is the complete opposite of Tess, brash and bawdy, though Tess loves her. Tess asks her mother what she ever saw in Jack Mercy and Louella tells Tess that she had loved Jack when they were young. Their relationship was volatile and lasted barely two years, but Louella was happy with the result, her daughter and the 100 thousand dollars that Jack Mercy gave her when they divorced.

Tess is stunned, telling her mother that she deserved more for the marriage. Louella insists that she is happy with the way things worked out. Tess tells her mother that she has to live on the ranch for a year and Louella laughs, claiming that Jack Mercy, despite his faults, has always been able to make her laugh. Silently, Louella wonders if the time in Montana will change her daughter for better or worse.



Lily quietly watches the horses in the pasture, grateful for the ability to sleep for the first time in months. Adam approaches cautiously and the two talk about the horses and Lily's feeling that she is in the way on the ranch. Adam tells Lily not to be afraid of Willa, and offers to Lily the option of helping him with the horses. Lily is thrilled but still fearful, something Adam knows she has to work through on her own.

In the mountains, Jesse Cooke, Lily's ex-husband watches the interchange, angry at his wife for leaving him and for her relationship with Adam. Cooke had stolen a letter to Lily's mother from her mailbox and discovered where Lily was headed. Arriving in Montana two days before Lily, Jesse had gotten a job at Three Rocks working on the equipment and checking fences. Though Jesse is unhappy about having to give up his military appearance so that he will not be recognized, he is more than happy to keep an eye on Lily and Adam, determined to make them both pay.

Willa returns home after a long day and is not happy at the arrival of Ben McKinnon. Ben taunts Willa, flirting again, teasing her about her sisters and keeping them out of her hair. Willa stuns Ben by seeming to respond to his flirting, but winds up dumping her beer on him. Ben retaliates by pinning Willa to the couch and the two wrestle, almost kissing when a scream interrupts them.

In Chapter Five, Ben and Willa discover Lily on the steps with the headless body of a barn cat. Ben encourages Willa to take the shaken Lily inside. Willa cleans the porch of blood, wondering about her feelings of sorrow in the death. Ben and Adam return, and Ben questions Willa about what might be going on at the ranch. Willa is unsure herself, but heads to the ranch hands cabin to cautiously question the men. Though Willa is unsure of what is going on, she trusts her men and does not want them to feel accused.

## **Part One, Fall: Chapters 1-5 Analysis**

The first five chapters of the novel give the reader background into the main characters, as well as their personalities and some insight into their feelings about the events that are taking place in their lives. Background into the plot of the novel is also revealed.

The reader learns that Jack Mercy, the proprietor of the Mercy Ranch in Montana has passed away and his neighbors gather for the funeral and burial. Jack Mercy has ruled his portion of Montana with an iron fist and no mercy for those who do not measure up to his standards, including his three daughters. He married three times, each marriage producing an unworthy daughter. Each wife and daughter was quickly banished from Mercy, with the exception of Willa, the youngest, whose mother died before the relationship could be terminated. Willa is the only Mercy daughter to grow up on Mercy, struggling to be the son that Jack Mercy never had, and trying unsuccessfully to earn her father's approval.

Willa works the ranch and the land she loves, unwilling to give her father the satisfaction of calling her a failure. The knowledge that Jack Mercy knew he was dying and did not share the fact with Willa is just another slap to her, one that she shakes off and steps



around. Bess Pringle, the housekeeper that raised Willa provides her with the ear she needs to vent her anger, as well as the guidance that will help her through. The relationship between the two is deep and meaningful. This will help Willa when she struggles against the knowledge that her father has left his ranch, but her heart, to his three daughters, provided they carry out the details of his will. Willa's discovery that she could lose her home forever is as stunning as the fact that she must spend a year living with the sister's she has not met before the day of the funeral. That coupled with the discovery that Ben McKinnon is to oversee the running of the ranch send Willa into a tailspin, one that she effectively hides from those around her with her usual gruff exterior.

The reader is also introduced to Tess, the oldest Mercy daughter, and Lily, the middle daughter. Tess has been living in California, a screenplay writer. A no-nonsense woman, Tess has no use for Montana or Jack Mercy, wanting only her share of any inheritance and to return to her life. The terms of the will are a shock, but Tess is not willing to give up what's hers, especially when she discovers what the ranch is worth. The only problem Tess can see is being stuck in the middle of nowhere, and trying to keep her heart safe from the family she has never known.

Lily Mercy considers the unexpected trip to Montana a gift, one that will help her escape her ex-husband, Jesse Cooke. Lily loves Montana, loves Mercy Ranch, and hopes that she will be able to stay for a while as she gets control of her life. The will hands her the opportunity she has been looking for, and the presence of Adam Wolfchild, Willa's half-brother, begins to help Lily get past her fear of men and life.

The terms of the will put the three Mercy sisters in close proximity to the men that will come to mean a great deal to them as the novel progresses. Nathan Torrence, a rancher and a lawyer, is also entrusted to look over things at Mercy Ranch. Nate is not happy about the situation that he has been placed in, and not happy about what Jack Mercy has done to Willa in the process. Despite this Nate will do his duty and in the process make sure Willa does not lose what she loves so much.

Ben McKinnon is an owner of Three Rocks Ranch, which adjoins Mercy Ranch. Though Ben has often thought of Willa with interest he knows that she is not going to be an easy woman to win over. Ben also knows that Willa is not happy with the arrangements of the will, understanding that Jack Mercy hopes that Three Rocks and Mercy might be joined if the families marry. By putting his three daughters in the sights of McKinnon, that might happen.

Adam Wolfchild, Willa's half-brother, lives in small house on the ranch, taking care of and breeding the horses. A kind man, one taken to caring for the wounded, Adam is drawn to Lily, seeing in her something that needs nurturing and caring for. Despite his caring nature, Adam is not soft in any way, willing to do what it takes to take care of those he considers his own.

The events at Mercy Ranch are complicated and difficult enough without adding to the problems but soon enough outside events begin to affect those within. Willa and Ben's





discovery of the butchered cow puts those on both ranches on alert, though the one kill is not enough to prove worrisome. The death is chalked up to a lone incident and life goes on. Willa struggles to maintain control of the ranch, asserting herself into her father's shoes, something that not all of the ranch hands are happy with. Despite this, Willa does her best to keep control of things around her. Adding to Willa's stress is living with her sisters, two distinctly different personalities. The three women do what they can to avoid each other and live separately for the most part, though Lily would like nothing better than for the three to become close.

The attraction between Willa and Ben McKinnon is introduced to the reader, as is the teasing way that Ben has with Willa. It is clear that there is a spark between them, one that is almost realized the night that a dead cat is left on the porch outside Willa's door. The death of a second animal is unnerving, and is definitely meant as a message for those at Mercy Ranch.



# Part One, Fall: Chapters Six-Eight

## Part One, Fall: Chapters Six-Eight Summary

Chapter Six begins with an entry into a journal by Tess, expressing her opinions of the different people on the ranch and her duties, such as collecting eggs. While in the coop, Tess is interrupted by Nate. Nate shows Tess the right way to collect eggs and the two flirt a bit before Nate heads out to find Willa. Tess heads to the corral to see what is going on just in time to see a calf castrated. Tess faints to the annoyance of Willa and Nate carries her to the house. Once there, Tess expresses her feelings for Willa, only to be reminded by Nate that Willa has not asked for anything and regardless of the outcome next year will lose two thirds of her ranch to strangers. Tess feels appropriately chastised, and Nate leaves.

On Three Rocks ranch Jesse Cooke goes over the news from Mercy, especially the idea of Lily finding the mangled cat on the porch. The only thing that would make him happier is if he had been there to see it. Jesse is not willing to let Lily go, especially now that she will inherit a part of Mercy Ranch after a year.

In Chapter Seven, Ben has breakfast with his mother, Sarah. Sarah worries that Ben might not find a woman strong enough to love and will live life as a bachelor. Ben tells his mother that he has been thinking of Willa and the tough spot she is in, but denies thinking of her in any other way, though he most definitely has. Ben tells his mother that since Mercy is short a man now that Jack Mercy is dead he might as well spend some time at Mercy Ranch and give Willa a hand. Sarah tells Ben that she will visit as well.

Willa is having troubles dealing with bickering ranch hands who have lost at cards to JC, one of the hands on Three Rocks. Willa stops the men from fighting but Pickles takes offense and leaves the bunkhouse. Jim calms Willa and the two joke around in the normal way for them. Willa takes her sandwich and drives on the ranch, feeling alone as she never has before.

Pickles sulks about the argument with Willa and his losses at poker as he rides the fence line. Pickles is considering his options, unhappy with the changes at Mercy when he comes across a man bent over a steer. Pickles gets out to help and realizes that he knows the man as he sees the knife covered with blood. The old man asks the other why he killed the steer and is told because he can, just before the knife is plunged into Pickles. The man comments that he has never killed a man before, and it is interesting.

Driving Willa comes across Pickles' rig and discovers his lifeless body, scalped. Before she realizes it Ben is beside her and Willa allows him to hold her and comfort her. Ben tries to shield Willa from the sight of Pickles again but she stubbornly declares him hers, and tells Ben that she is the one who sent Pickles out to ride the fence. Ben tells Willa not to blame herself but she cannot help it.



In Chapter Eight, Lily worries about the safety she has begun to cherish at Mercy being lost. Tess arrives and the two discuss recent events. Tess wonders if Lily will stay, telling her sister that despite the recent horrors she is not leaving. Lily is overcome with relief and guilt, thinking only of herself instead of Pickles.

Willa arrives and has a drink, realizing after her sisters tell her that they are staying how close she had come to losing the ranch.

Ben arrives and forces Willa to go lie down, taking no argument. Tess is impressed with the way Ben handles Willa and tells him so. Ben tells the sisters that Willa is simply giving in before she breaks. The three share soup and discuss who might have killed Pickles. Ben does not gloss over things, describing the land and the ease with which someone could have been anywhere.

Adam arrives after speaking to the police and joins the group. Lily fusses but Adam gently quiets her, calming her. Ben and Tess leave but Adam stays with Lily, telling her that he will not let anyone hurt her.

Alone in the dark the stranger relives the kill, enjoying the sensations of power he feels. The man considers his next step and decides that he is through killing animals, humans are much more fun. Deciding that the next killing will be a woman, the man strokes himself gently, enjoying the pleasure he gets from the idea.

## **Part One, Fall: Chapters Six-Eight Analysis**

Tess and Nate spend some time in the chicken coop learning a bit about each other and Tess flirts with the handsome lawyer. Nate flirts back, intrigued by the Hollywood sister of Willa. The two seem to get along fine and the reader is led to believe that the relationship might go further. This is expanded upon when Tess passes out after watching a calf being castrated and Nate takes care of her, carrying her into the house. Once inside the flirting continues until Tess makes what could be seen as a derogatory comment about Willa. Nate reminds the oldest sister that Willa has not asked for any of what is going on at Mercy and she might well remember that even if things go well she will lose two thirds of her life to people she has never known. Tess, despite her gruff exterior and resolution not to care about her sisters is moved by Nate's statement, though she refuses to let him see this. This fact, revealed to the reader, allows one to have a better sense of who Tess really is, not just the exterior she allows those around her to see.

A bit of information is revealed about Ben McKinnon as well. His mother Sarah worries that he will be a bachelor forever, unable to find the perfect woman for himself. Sarah wants her son to be happy and is pleased when he shows his concern for Willa, despite his protestations that he does not think of Willa in a romantic way. Sarah is more than happy to allow her oldest son to spend time at Mercy Ranch, even if he says it is only to lend a hand when needed.



The fight over cards and the confrontation between Willa and Pickles places the old man in harm's way when he stumbles across the killer bent over a steer that he is gutting. Pickles recognizes the man who kills him to preserve his secret. In doing so the man realizes that he is more happy killing people and takes a trophy, Pickles scalp, in order to relive the details of the crime. It is clear to the reader that the person who has been causing trouble on Mercy Ranch is mentally unstable, though at this point there is really no clue to his identity. One wonders if the killer might be Jesse Cooke, or JC as the ranch hands at Mercy know Lily's ex-husband, as he is the only new face that has been introduced in the area.

Willa's discovery of Pickles body tears her with grief and guilt, as she is the one who sent the old man out to check the fence line. Ben McKinnon reassures Willa, but knows that there are no words that will make the youngest Mercy daughter feel any better. At the house, after the police question Willa it is Ben who is able to make her go rest, making her realize that there is nothing more she can do. Willa listens but Ben explains to Tess that Willa is at her breaking point and would never allow anyone to see her break.

Adam and Lily's relationship takes a small step forward when he comforts her after Pickles death. Lily is still frightened, and feels guilty for only thinking of herself when she hears of the old man's death. Adam is his patient self, telling Lily that he would like to get to know her better, but at her pace. Lily is amazed, having never dealt with a man that expected nothing from her.

The killer gives the reader some insight into his future plans, considering taking a woman into the woods where he keeps his trophies, raping and killing her. There is reference made to a mother who obviously was worth little to the man. The killer is happy, realizing the power of killing a person, and the fear that those around the ranches feel.



## Part Two, Winter: Chapters 9-13

### Part Two, Winter: Chapters 9-13 Summary

In Chapter Nine, Willa talks with Ham who advises her that they can get through the winter without hiring any more hands. He also tells Willa that she needs to slow down and when she balks questions her faith in him. Willa tells Ham that this is a low comment, but Ham knows that Willa will at least think about slowing down,

In the house, Nate tells Willa that there is some paperwork to go over and then leaves to ride out to meet Adam, Tess and Lily. Ben teases Willa that Nate is interested in Tess. Willa wonders if Tess is the kind of woman that Ben is interested in. The two flirt again until Ben challenges Willa and she accepts, kissing him. The passion flares between them and Ben asks Willa to go home with him. Willa reveals that she is a virgin, stunning Ben.

In Chapter Ten, snow arrives in Montana. Willa works in the office while Tess, Lily and Adam ride out in the snow to take pictures of the deer in the area. Adam spots something in the woods and sends the two women back to the ranch while he investigates. Lily refuses to go back, and argues with Tess, showing more backbone than she ever has before. The two are arguing when a gunshot rips the air.

Willa meets with Nate and Ben to go over the books and make sure that Willa is adhering to the will. Willa discusses the changes she will make to the ranch and the two men can see that she has a good handle on things. Willa and Ben discuss the future of the ranch and Willa tells him of her worries; losing her home and her heritage. Ben suggests a small distraction. Willa admits that she has thoughts of Ben, but is not finished working things through. Before things can go much further Adam, Tess and Lily arrive back. Adam tells Willa that someone has killed a deer, simply for the sake of the kill and left it to the wolves. There is no chance of tracking the person who had gutted the animal. Willa insists on seeing the sight despite arguments and head over for her coat.

In Chapter 11, Lily and Tess worry when the party checking the deer carcass in the blizzard takes longer than expected. Nate arrives and reassures them just before Willa and Adam return. Nate, Willa and Adam head back out to make sure the cows have been rounded up. Tess tells Lily that they have to start thinking about safety and Lily tells Tess that despite the dangers she feels safer than she has in a long time.

Willa arrives, finally, cold and tired. Tess tells Willa that she will eat, even if she eats in a tub of hot water to warm her. Willa settles into a hot bath only to be interrupted by Tess who has something to say. Lily arrives and the three discuss the problems at the ranch. Willa shocks Tess by agreeing that the three sisters need to work together to make it through the year and keep Mercy Ranch.



Chapter 12 begins with another entry in Tess's journal, discussing the upcoming holiday season. Tess decides to bring Nate his Christmas present early and possibly jump start a fling. Willa is not happy to see her sister go, worried about the unresolved murder and animal mutilations. Ben arrives and finds Willa lying on the couch and tells her to go to bed. Startled to find Willa crying Ben comforts her, and the two kiss, enjoying the simple comfort of each other. Ben knows that Willa is worried about Tess and leaves, telling Willa he will drive past Nate's house to make sure Tess has arrived safely.

At Nate's, Tess surprises the lawyer working at his desk and surprises him again with a book of poetry. The two flirt and dance around each other until Tess makes the first move, unleashing a torrent of passion between the two. They make love quickly on the desk in Nate's office and the lawyer tells Tess that she had better hold on tight. Tess does, wondering what she has gotten herself into with the handsome cowboy.

In Chapter 13, Willa rides the fences of the ranch as the weather breaks for a short time in December. Thinking about the sisters that she is growing closer to despite every effort not to, Willa is happy when Adam rides up. Adam tells her about the party that Lily is planning. The two discuss Lily's ex-husband and the little she's told them about him, as well as Tess and her similarities to Willa. Adam's declaration to Willa that Tess admires her is a bit unbelievable. The two race on horseback back to the ranch.

Willa enters to be assaulted by Tess and Lily who insist on her getting ready for the New Year's Eve party. Giving in, Willa dresses in one of Tess's altered dresses and readies for the party. Tess helps with her make-up while Lily speaks to Adam, longing for him.

Willa and Tess return and the party is underway, though it is not long before someone tries to get information from Willa regarding Pickles' murder. Escaping outside, Willa runs into Ben who is amazed by her transformation. The two flirt but Willa manages to forget what has upset her. The two return inside where Ben leads a horrified Willa to the dance floor. Ben kisses Willa in front of everyone, flooring her as the emotion of it courses through her, then leaves her to get her a drink.

Tess and Nate make plans to head upstairs and Ben catches Willa right before the New Year is to begin. Ben asks Willa to kiss him, insisting that the minute before midnight is not real. Willa kisses him and tells him she believes it is real. The two glance around and Willa sees Adam and Lily, wondering at the love the two obviously feel for each other. Willa wonders what is going on, why things are changing and how to deal with it when they hear screaming.

## **Part Two, Winter: Chapters 9-13 Analysis**

Life on the ranch goes on despite the murder of Pickles. Willa throws herself into the ranch, making sure everything is running smoothly, but running herself down in the process. Flying in the plane with Jim Brewster, Willa gets a sense of what her men are thinking, and what Pickles meant to them despite the fact that he could be ornery.



Brewster is emotional when he discusses the men's wishes to buy the old ranch hand's tomb stone, and Willa accepts the gesture for what it is worth.

Meeting with Ham, Willa realizes that she might be trying to do too much, and might be making the men wonder if she values them at all. Ham has the ability to make Willa see things that she is trying to avoid, having raised her and been her father in all ways but blood as she grew up. Willa takes his words to heart and will honestly try to let some things go.

The relationship between Ben and Willa takes a turn when innocent flirting becomes more intense. Willa accepts Ben's challenge to kiss him but the two are in for more than they bargained for when the sparks fly. Ben is in for much more than he bargained for when Willa tells him quite candidly that she is a virgin. Willa has no pretense, and having no female role model has no idea of the games that men and women can sometimes play. Ben accepts that Willa is different from the other women he has been involved with and gives her space, though it is clear that this is a difficult thing for him to do.

Tess takes matters into her own hands in regards to her flirtations with Nate and arrives at her home with a plan to seduce. Despite Nate's first reaction of shock he jumps into the fray happily and the two discover that they are extremely compatible.

Lily and Adam grow closer, spending time together riding and working with the horses. Lily feels safe with Adam, something she has not felt in a long time. No mention is made of her ex-husband during these chapters, except when Willa and Adam speak about Lily's past and her reluctance to open up about it.

The relationship between the three sisters grows a bit more complex as time passes. Both Willa and Tess have a great fondness for Lily, the wounded middle sister and try to get along for her sake, though they tend to snap at each other. Lily, in the mean time, tries to make peace between the two, making suggestions to Tess and running interference between her older and younger sister. Willa and Tess clash, but it seems to be almost bantering between the two for the most part, something that each expects from the other.

Winter arrives and makes the life on the ranch more difficult as the snow piles up. Adam, Tess and Lily discover the mutilated carcass of a deer, reminding everyone of the dangers around them. Lily surprises everyone when she refuses to seek safety, instead riding after Adam, refusing to let him go near danger alone. Afterwards, Lily and Tess wait for Willa and Adam to return, worried as the night grows long. Despite the awkwardness of the situation they were all thrown into, there is a clear sense of caring between those at Mercy Ranch.

The holidays arrive and Lily manages to plan a party, one that Willa attends, however reluctantly. When questions arise about the murder of Pickles Willa removes herself, only to find Ben there to help. The two spend some time together and it is obvious that the relationship is headed toward something more serious. Ben wants Willa, and she



him, but the youngest Mercy sister is unsure of herself, a feeling she is not used to. As midnight nears and the two share a passionate kiss in front of everyone at the party, Willa is overwhelmed with feelings. They are feelings, not just for Ben, but about everything that has changed in her life recently. As the two gravitate toward each other and Ben tries to reassure Willa, a scream punctures the night.





## Part Two, Winter: Chapters 14-17

### Part Two, Winter: Chapters 14-17 Summary

In Chapter 14, the party is over when the body of a naked girl is discovered at the foot of Willa's porch. The police are called and they question those present. Ben finds Willa asleep much later and takes her to bed. He is met outside Willa's door by Nate and the two go to find Adam. In the stable the three men discuss the killings and Ben and Nate ask Adam about Lily's ex-husband. Adam is angry for Lily, thinking she should be safe with him. Lily finds the three men and asks Adam to come in the house where she can give him her history.

Lily tells Adam about her relationship with Jesse. Starved for affection Lily fell for Jesse hard, and they were married before his abuse began. Jesse blamed Lily and she forgave him after each episode until she finally woke up and walked out. Jesse always followed, beating her for daring to leave him. The trip to Mercy Ranch was Lily's final attempt at escape. After talking to Adam about her past, Lily tries to tell Adam she loves him but he tells her first. The two make love, happy to be together despite the troubles around them.

Elsewhere, the killer relives his time with the young girl, Traci, a hitchhiker he had picked up. The killer had raped her, and then left for a day as work had to be done. Returning a day later the girl was almost grateful and did whatever she could think of to be allowed her freedom. It was not to be. The killer places the scalp of the young girl with his other treasures, knowing that he is a powerful man.

In Chapter 15, Tess comforts Willa when she is told the identity of the young girl left dead at her door. The two women decide that it would be best if Tess and Lily learned to defend themselves and Willa vows to teach them to shoot. The farmhands discuss the problems of women with guns when Jesse arrives with supplies for Mercy that he has picked up in town. Talking to Jim, Jesse makes it clear that having a woman boss is not a good thing.

Willa teaches her sisters to shoot, helping them find motivation. After a friendly competition that Tess loses, the oldest sister heads to town with Nate. Along the way Tess quickly undresses, shocking Nate to the point where he has to pull off the road. The two make frantic love in the cab of his truck. It is clear that the attraction between the two is volatile.

In Chapter 16, Ham speaks to Willa about business on the ranch, and then gets more personal. Ham knows that Willa is throwing herself into work to avoid thinking about the deaths but reminds her that she is taking over his position. The two bicker but Willa comes to realize that Ham loves her. Ham shocks Willa more by telling her to take a night and go out on a date. Ham suggests Willa make a trip to Three Rocks and visit Ben's father, who has been down with the flu.



Willa thinks while riding over, narrowly missing a deer in the road. Willa is even more startled when a man knocks on her jeep window. J.C., a hand at Three Rocks, saw Willa slide in the snow when avoiding the deer and has stopped to make sure she is alright. Willa assures him she is, but she has a strange feeling about the man. J.C. follows Willa to the house and Willa enters, unaware that she has just met Lily's ex-husband, Jesse.

In the house, Willa is pleased to see Shelly, Ben's sister-in-law and her baby. The two share news and gossip with Sarah, Ben's mother. Stu McKinnon arrives, happy to see Willa and the pie she has brought from Bess. Minutes later Zack, Ben's brother, and Ben arrive. The atmosphere is friendly and the news that Lily and Adam are to be married excites Sarah and Shelly.

Ben takes Willa home so that she will not be alone after dark. The two stop at the cemetery on Mercy land and Willa stands at her father's grave and tells the ground that she is finished trying to please him. Back in the truck Willa stuns Ben by asking why he has never asked her out. Barely recovered Ben tells Willa that he will pick her up Saturday for dinner and a movie. Willa laughs and says goodnight.

In Chapter 17 winter continues as does work around the ranch. Tess and Willa make a bet on who can assist in more calf births until Willa sees a face outside. Unwilling to upset the others Willa and Adam go outside to check things out, unaware that an angry Jesse Cooke is watching the entire time. As Willa and Adam head to the barn Jesse knows what they will find. Willa is almost sick when they discover calves, slaughtered and tossed into the snow. The pair runs to check the horses but they are safe.

Afterward, Willa helps her men pile the calves aside. The ground is too hard to bury them so they must burn them. Willa insists on doing it herself. Afterward Nate calls Ben as Willa arranges a watch on the ranch to try and keep what is hers safe.

## **Part Two, Winter: Chapters 14-17 Analysis**

As winter passes more events, both good and bad occur at Mercy Ranch. The party on New Year's Eve ends abruptly when the body of a young runaway is discovered in front of the house. Though no one at the party knows the girl Willa takes the death personally, perhaps more so than the death of Pickles, simply because the young girl was laid at her door. Though the police investigate the killer once again appears to have left the area.

Despite the death, or perhaps because of it, the three Mercy sisters draw closer, forming a unit. Even the differences that Tess and Willa have are forgotten when Willa teaches her sisters to shoot in order to be able to protect themselves. In the face of adversity, Willa, Tess and Lily stand together, bonding without even realizing it.

The relationship between Adam and Lily flourishes as the two fall more deeply in love. The two are cautious around each other, moving slowly until Adam is forced to ask Lily about her ex-husband in case he is behind the violence around them. Lily's tale of the



horrors that Jesse Cooke put her through are moving, both to Adam and the reader, providing better insight into just how strong Lily has become, as well as the strength she needed in order to break away from her abusive husband. Lily's strength is maintained as she tells Adam how she feels about him and is rewarded when he tells her that he loves her as well.

Ben and Willa continue to dance around each other, flirting and bantering. The night of the party, the two seem to be prepared to move forward but the discovery of the body obviously stops them in their tracks. The deepness of Ben's feelings for Willa become obvious when he cares for her, worrying over her and the way she is running herself into the ground working on the ranch.

Tess and Nate move forward in their relationship as well, though to Tess it is still simply sex that is enjoyable and makes Montana more worthwhile. Though Tess is intent on keeping things light it becomes clear quickly that the two have a tremendous chemistry and the relationship between the two might have a mind of its own.

The reader also gets some insight into the mind of the killer who is stalking Mercy Ranch. Though it is unclear who the mysterious killer is, one wonders if Jesse Cooke might be responsible for the deaths that haunt the ranch. This is especially the case when Willa sees a face outside the window and investigates with Adam. While Jesse watches the two from a distance his mind crawls with anger as he plans how and when he will take his wife back, harming anyone who gets in his way. Jesse's thoughts also wander to the barn where Willa and Adam find the dead calves, and it is clear that he knows the carnage that awaits them. There is no confirmation whether Jesse is the crazed killer or not, but it is clear that he has the motive and opportunity, working at Three Rocks so nearby.



## Part Three, Spring: Chapters 18-20

### Part Three, Spring: Chapters 18-20 Summary

In Chapter 18, the operation continues to run at Mercy. Ben stops in to check on things and witnesses a fight that turns physical between Willa and Tess over a trip to the spa over the weekend. Tess wins and Willa stalks off. Ben tells Tess that Willa will go with her because Tess questioned her word. Tess comments that Willa needs to get away, as well as to have sex. Ben tells Tess that Willa is a virgin, shocking the oldest Mercy sister.

Tess, Lily and Willa go to the Mountain King Spa where they all experience the luxury of many massages and treatments. Lily confesses to her sisters how much she loves Adam and the beauty of making love to him. Tess tells Willa that she had booked her a male attendant for her massage so that she can get used to the feel of a man's hands on her. Willa agrees with Lily that despite their differences she is glad she now knows her sisters.

In Chapter 19, the sisters continue to bond over beauty treatments and discuss men. Tess comments that a woman would have to be brave and strong to mess with Ben, knowing that she is laying down a challenge to Willa.

The women return to the ranch. Ben arrives and the two flirt once again, feeling the pull of attraction. After kissing a bit Ben tells Willa that he and Adam are riding up to check the cabin. Willa tells him she's going. On the ride Willa torments Ben with comments about her massage and the talents of her male masseuse. The afternoon is interrupted when a shot is fired and Adam is hit. Willa takes her brother to the cabin to tend to him while Ben covers them. In the cabin Willa finds a bucket of rags covered in dried blood and realizes that this must be where the girl left at her door was killed. Willa cares for Adam and worries that Ben has not arrived. Just as Willa is about to leave to look for him, Ben arrives. Willa first hits him, and then hugs him.

In Chapter 20, Willa, Ben and Adam head back to the ranch as soon as Adam feels he can ride. Willa spends the next week waking from nightmares, putting her in a foul mood. Sitting in Jack's office Willa decides she is tired of being a trophy to her father, like the animals that line his walls. In a rage Willa tears down all the mounted heads, attracting Tess and Lily. The three sisters push all the heads and stuffed animals out of the office and down the stairs. The men arrive to see what the commotion is and Willa tells them to take what they want and bury the rest. The three sisters discuss their plans for the evening and Tess tells Willa that as she will have the house to herself it is the perfect time to seduce Ben.

In the mountains, Jesse Cooke is angry that the scope is off on the rifle he used to shoot at Adam. Upset at the missed opportunity, Jesse vows to strike again, and perhaps take Willa, making Lily pay twice.



## Part Three, Spring: Chapters 18-20 Analysis

The ranch must still operate and jobs need to be done, but as Ben observes when he stops to check in after the calves are slaughtered, the mood on the land is changing. Willa's men are silent, barely speaking as they go about their work. Willa is also quiet, though it is anger that simmers beneath her surface. Willa is not afraid of the person that is tormenting Mercy Ranch, though she is worried for her sisters.

Willa's anger is finally unleashed and directed at Tess when the oldest sister goads her, challenging her credibility when Willa refuses to go to the spa for the weekend. Willa has not had much but her word for her entire life, and having someone question her is too much to bear. The two sisters fight while the men watch, wisely staying out of harm's way. Afterward Ben congratulates Tess for winning the point, as he is worried about Willa, concerned that she will collapse if she does not care for herself soon.

At the spa the sisters do bond, growing closer as they share the experiences there as well as discuss men. Lily opens up to her sisters and the feelings that she has for them. Tess and Willa are touched by her statements and though the two will never admit it out loud it is clear that the oldest and youngest Mercy sisters are growing fond of each other as well.

Willa's feelings for Ben continue to stir within her and she has no idea where to put her feelings. Though the flirtations between the two are becoming more volatile it is not until Willa believes that Ben might have been injured by the man that shot Adam that her feelings explode. Willa is willing to risk her own life to help Ben, and his arrival is met with borderline hysteria. Ben is puzzled by her attack and her embrace until Adam tells his friend that Willa had cried at the thought of losing him.

Lily is not the only sister that is changing on the ranch. Though Willa would not admit that she is any different it is clear that she is. Thinking of others before the ranch is new to her, as are her feelings about her dead father. The trophies that line his office, the heads and stuffed bodies of the animals he hunted symbolize his desire to possess things. Willa is tired of being a possession, something she realizes when contemplating her father's decision to place the three sisters on the ranch in order to accomplish his goals with no thoughts for anyone else. Willa dismantles the office, casting off her father, removing his visible control, and once again bonding with her sisters in the process.

This step forward, coupled with the near panic that Willa felt when she thought Ben might be hurt pushes her forward, deciding to invite Ben to the house for the evening rather than go out. Willa feels that it is time to take the next step in their relationship.

The reader learns that it is Jesse Cooke that shot Adam, intent on ending Lily's relationship. Cooke's anger is directed at Lily and he wishes to punish her, as well as those she cares for. Jesse manages to get away before Ben finds him, and is intent on having another opportunity to end Adam's life and Lily's happiness.



# Book Three, Spring: Chapters 21-24

## Book Three, Spring: Chapters 21-24 Summary

In Chapter 21, Willa and Ben finally make love. Willa is sated and pleased afterward, and Ben informs her that there are many different ways to have sex, and he plans on showing her more. Willa is anxious to learn, having discovered yet another angle to their relationship.

In Chapter 22, Willa and Tess discuss the ranch and Willa wonders if she is doing the right thing by letting the sisters stay while a killer is on the loose. Tess reminds Willa that the decision is not hers. Lily hosts a dinner party for her sisters and their men. Willa informs those present that Lily thought she saw Jesse while she and Tess were shopping in Bozeman. Ben and Nate agree that they need to find out what Jesse looks like. Afterward the dinner goes smoothly and the couples go their separate ways, each making love through the night. The following morning Nate runs into Ben as they leave. Nate tells Ben that he is in love with Tess, and wants her to stay in the fall. Ben wishes his friend luck with the strong-willed woman.

In Chapter 23, Jesse tires of waiting for a chance at Adam and goes after Lily. Adam and Willa arrive after he strikes her but Jesse threatens to kill her if they shoot him. Jesse forces Lily to drive into the mountains as snow starts to fall, leaving Willa and Adam to gather help and search for Lily.

Adam and Willa find the jeep against a tree. Willa assures Adam that Jesse will not do to Lily what he did to the others as she is his only way out of the area. They continue to track Lily while the middle sister tries to slow Jesse down as much as possible. Despite her fear she refuses to show it to her ex-husband who grows furious at her lack of reaction to his anger. The snow piles up and Lily grows exhausted but continues on, knowing that Adam will find her. Jesse arrives at a cave when he has stashed some supplies and the two enter. Lily struggles for warmth and listens to Jesse brag about his cleverness and planning. Lily drifts in and out of sleep as she becomes feverish, dreaming of Adam. A scream wakes her briefly but her exhaustion is too much to push aside.

In Chapter 24, the search continues as Lily sleeps. Exhausted Lily does not feel the knife that slices the rope that ties her hands. A man stands over her wishing he could stay and be a hero but knowing he has to move on. Taking the hair had been necessary so that he would have a trophy but the others would recognize it from the previous killings. Starting a small fire so that the others will see smoke, the stranger leaves.

Willa spots the smoke and they race to the cave where Lily stumbles outside into Adam's arms. In the cave Willa sees the body of Jesse Cooke, dead and scalped like the rest. Adam is sorry that he was not able to kill Jesse himself.





At the ranch Willa paces and waits for word on Lily. Bess cares for her, telling Willa and Tess that Lily needs to stay in bed, only Adam may see her. Ben arrives and angrily carries Willa to her bed, telling her she needs to rest before she falls. The two argue and Ben tells Willa that Jesse had worked for him. Willa knows that Ben is upset but reminds him that he had no way of knowing the man's identity. The two realize that though they had believed Jesse was the killer, it is clear he was not.

## **Book Three, Spring: Chapters 21-24 Analysis**

Willa and Ben finally make love and the experience is amazing to Willa. It is clear to Ben that Willa is willing to give him whatever he asks and he is amazed by the giving nature of the woman he has known all his life. Ben looks forward to sharing more nights with Willa and not only teaching her, but learning from her, as well.

The three Mercy Sisters, so different from each other, grow closer as their relationships with Adam, Ben and Nate grow as well. Nate confesses to Ben after they spend the night with their respective women at the ranch that he intends for Tess to stay when the year that requires she stay at the ranch is over. Ben wishes his friend well, knowing that Tess intends to return to California. Nate knows that he cannot ask Tess to stay, because he needs to make the headstrong woman think that staying is her idea.

Events begin to move more rapidly as Jesse Cooke loses patience waiting for another chance to get to Adam and he decides to take Lily instead. Cooke is angry at Lily for leaving him, but angrier that he must give up his chance at a third of Mercy Ranch because of Lily's pending marriage to Adam. Arriving at the door of Lily and Adam's small house Jesse enters and strikes out at Lily. Lily, having grown and learned not to run from what she is afraid of perplexes Jesse when she refuses to shrink from him. The arrival of Adam and Willa sends Jesse further over the edge as his carefully laid plans unravel. The former Marine takes Lily under force, using her as a shield so that Adam and Willa are unable to shoot him.

In the mountains Lily's efforts to slow Jesse down so that Adam can save her infuriate her ex-husband who loses control rapidly. Jesse blames Lily for everything that has happened and is happening, unable to accept the fact that he is a failure. Lily questions Jesse's involvement in the killings and he does not deny them, though Lily has often said that Jesse would not hurt anyone but her.

In the cave, Lily is overcome with fever having been exposed to the harsh snow around them and drifts in and out of sleep. A scream that she believes she dreamed is explained when she awakens and finds Jesse dead, clearly the victim of the same killer that has been tormenting those at Mercy Ranch.

The killer is experiencing a change of feelings, pleased at being a hero, yet saddened that he cannot claim to be since killing Jesse will tie him to the other deaths in the area. The unknown man lights a fire so that the others will find Lily and leaves, planning to cherish his memories of saving the middle sister.



Adam is thrilled to have Lily home and safe though she is very ill and needs care. Willa's half brother is a bit lost, having intended to take care of Jesse Cooke himself, angry that someone has taken the opportunity away from him.

Willa and Ben fight when Ben forces Willa to care for herself, telling her that he cares for her and needs her to stay healthy. The two come to an understanding when Ben tells Willa that Jesse had worked for him. Willa realizes that Ben feels guilty for allowing the man to work so close by, and feels responsible for putting those he cares for in harm's way. The two make peace and Willa rests, finally.

The reader learns that despite the fact that Jesse Cooke has been on scene for quite some time, he is not the killer that has been tormenting those on Mercy Ranch. Though it seemed that Jesse was angry enough to have committed the crimes, things are back to square one, and the unknown killer remains unknown.





## Part Four, Summer: Chapters 25-28

### Part Four, Summer: Chapters 25-28 Summary

In Chapter 25, Lily confronts Adam, Willa and Tess, who coddle her after her ordeal. Tired of others walking around as if she would shatter, Lily angrily tells them all that despite what Jesse had done she is over it and they should be too. Adam tells Lily that he has been afraid to touch her, afraid that his touch would remind her of Jesse. Lily tells the man she loves that he is the reason she was strong enough to live through the ordeal and they make love.

The three sisters drive the cattle into the mountains, intent on staying together for safety. On the ride Willa speaks to Ben, wondering aloud when it will all end, and wondering who the killer is. The two agree that it might be one of their men and the thought is enough to shake Willa as she questions those she has known for so many years.

In Chapter 26, Nate confesses his love to Tess and tells her that he wants her. Tess is angry that Nate has changed the dynamics of their relationship but he simply tells her he will give her time to adjust and leaves.

Guests arrive for Lily's bridal shower. Lily's mother Adele is welcomed and she tells Willa that she is happy that Lily is at the ranch and that Willa is keeping her safe. Tess is surprised when her mother, Louella arrives, having been invited by Willa. Tess is embarrassed by her mother's brash nature at times and Nate, who has given Louella a ride to the ranch, tells Tess that she should be ashamed of herself. For the first time Tess is.

The killer watches, happy that the women are having fun. After saving Lily he has made the decision that he will not ruin her wedding by killing anyone for a time. So that Lily does not worry, the killer slips a note under her kitchen door.

In Chapter 27, Lily shows the note to Willa. Willa takes it to Ben and they give the note to the police. Willa intends to leave but Ben keeps her, needing her more than he was even aware.

The day of the wedding arrives and the three sisters get together. Willa gives Lily earrings that had belonged to her and Adam's grandmother. Lily informs her sisters as they share a sip of champagne that she is happily pregnant. Afterward the wedding takes place and a party follows. The killer watches, happy. Saving Lily has changed him. Watching the police mingle with the partygoers, the killer dances with a redhead, wondering if her hair would make a nice trophy.

In Chapter 28, the stranger kills a redheaded hooker, unwilling to bring more death to Mercy for now. Though he now feels protective of those on the ranch, he still hungers for death.



Willa and Adam visit the cemetery and find a dead skunk spread on Jack's tombstone. Willa cleans up but wonders at the word written in blood, 'Dead but not forgotten'. Willa wonders if all of the attacks against Mercy were directed at Jack, not at her.

The fourth of July arrives and Three Rocks and Mercy stage the annual competition between ranch hands. In the two months since Jesse Cooke's death things have been quiet and things have settled down, giving those that matter a sense of peace. At the evening fireworks Willa and Ben talk, then spend the evening together.

The killer dreams of the woman he killed with the red hair. He recalls showing her the knife he would use to kill her, telling her his father gave it to him when he turned 21. Afterward the killer had hidden the body, no longer feeling a need to torment the residents of Mercy. After saving Lily his feelings had changed, and it was enough for him that he knew what he was capable of.

## Part Four, Summer: Chapters 25-28 Analysis

Lily once again shows her strength when she confronts Adam and her sisters. Feeling better after weeks of rest Lily is tired of being treated like fragile glass and tells everyone just that. Adam is unsure of himself, afraid to hurt Lily not just physically but emotionally. The fragile nature that Lily has always seemed to have is gone, replaced by a stronger woman. Lily has grown, become her own woman and is finally showing those around her how strong she can be. Telling her sisters and Adam what Jesse was capable of horrifies them but her willingness to fight back amazes them as well. Adam confesses that he was afraid that Lily would not want him to touch her and Lily comforts the man she loves, telling him that his love is what got her through the ordeal.

Time flies as the wedding approaches and love is in the air. Tess is floored to discover the extent of Nate's feelings though she will not admit that hers are similar. Unable to deal with such strong emotions Tess keeps them inside. The arrival of her mother is one more thing that overwhelms Tess. Though Tess loves her mother, the fact that Louella runs a strip club and is brash and loud has been an embarrassment to her in the past. Nate chastises Tess, telling her that Louella is someone she should be proud of. Tess realizes that Nate is right.

The bridal shower and wedding are a success and there are no more killings. The only event that occurs is a dead skunk left on the grave of Jack Mercy. Willa realizes that whoever left the animal hated Jack and with this comes the knowledge that the violence at the ranch has not been directed at her, but at her father and his memory.

The killer has come to a realization of his own. Though he still feels the need to kill he does not wish to scare those on Mercy any longer. Saving Lily has changed him in some ways. Unwilling to ruin Lily's wedding the killer controls his urges, but not wanting her to worry he leaves a note for Lily telling her not to worry. Though the note is not threatening, the sisters still feel threatened, knowing that whoever had left the note



moved easily about the ranch and could be anyone. This thought enrages Ben as well, as he feels helpless in keeping Willa safe.

The reader learns a bit more about the killer when he kidnaps another woman, a prostitute. The woman is chosen because she resembles the woman the killer danced with at Lily's wedding. It is now clear to the reader that the stranger is clearly someone well known to the main characters. The reader also learns that the knife the killer uses on his victims was a gift from his father, and is a cherished item.



## Part Four, Summer: Chapters 29-31

### Part Four, Summer: Chapters 29-31 Summary

In Chapter 29, Willa fights with Ham who refuses to come in from the heat. Afterward Ham asks for his check intent on quitting because Willa embarrassed him in front of Billy. Tess finds Willa brooding on the porch and Willa shares her worries. Tess tells Willa that it will work out and suggests they meet for a swim later.

Ham arrives and the two argue again until Willa confesses that she was worried, afraid to lose the man that was more a father to her than Jack Mercy. Ham is a bit ashamed and the two make amends. Ham goes inside and shares some ice cream with Willa and then heads for the bunkhouse. The killer is cutting a calf and Ham finds him. Striking out without thought the stranger is saddened, having true affection for Ham. Willa comes outside to speak to Ham and the killer tells her he can explain, not to call out, that he is her brother. He then knocks Willa out.

Ham awakens and finds Willa's hat. Struggling to his feet he makes it to the main house and falls through the door at the feet of Tess and Bess.

The killer ties Willa and takes her on horseback into the mountains intent on explaining. Willa looks at Jim Brewster and tells him to explain. Jim tells Willa that Jack Mercy had picked his mother up in a bar and gotten her pregnant. When his mother had informed Mercy he was already married to Louella and had cast her out. Turning to drugs, Jim's mother spent her days telling her son about Mercy and what was rightfully his. Jim had promised his mother that he would return to the ranch one day and claim it.

On the ranch, a search is organized. Though there is no proof of who has Willa there is only one man missing. Ben is beside himself, intent on saving the woman he loves.

In Chapter 30, Willa tells Jim she is sorry, that her father was not a good man. The youngest child of Jack Mercy tries to keep Jim talking, telling him that he had a chance to hurt Lily but did not. Jim confesses that he was angry when he first learned about the will, but realized that it was not his sisters fault. Jim tells Willa that he had confronted Jack and that the old man had laughed in his face, but given him a job. After working so hard Jack gave him the knife he wields while the two talk for his 21st birthday. Jim's anger is at Jack, for denying the son he always wanted and giving the three daughters everything. Jim had intended to scare Tess and Lily away and make sure no one got the ranch that he felt he deserved. Jim tells Willa that she should tell the others that someone had taken her and Jim saved her. Willa agrees but Jim knows she is lying. Jim prepares to kill Willa but Ben arrives. Jim shields himself with Willa and tells Ben he will kill her. Ben looks at Willa, then shoots Jim between the eyes. Willa passes out and comes to in Ben's arms. Ben holds her tight until Adam finds them.



In Chapter 31, Ham recovers while Bess cares for him after having spent six weeks in the hospital. Willa arrives and asks Ham if Jim was really Jack's son. Ham simply does not know.

Outside Lily cries as Tess prepares to leave. Tess promises to return in time to see Lily's baby born. Trying to remain strong Tess hugs Willa and heads to the airport with Nate. Nate asks Tess to marry him but she insists that she has to return to her life in California. Before boarding he plane Tess changes her mind, racing to find Nate in the airport. Saying she can work anywhere, the two head back home.

Ben finds Willa working and the two talk. Ben tells Willa that despite her ornery nature he has fallen in love with her. Ben asks Willa to marry him but she says no until she gets a better proposal. Ben tells her that he loves her and can't live without her. Willa asks where the ring is and Ben reminds her that she wouldn't wear one anyway. Willa tells him that she would wear his ring and asks him what took him so long in coming around. Willa steps over the wire fence that separates their land and into the arms of the man she loves.

## Part Four, Summer: Chapters 29-31 Analysis

Willa and Ham fight after Willa tells the old man to stop working in the heat and rest. Though Willa had tried to be casual about it Ham had refused to listen to reason and Willa had to force him off the fence line. Embarrassed at being pulled from work in front of Billy Ham tells Willa that she can have his check waiting for him.

That evening Willa tries to reason with Ham and he accuses her of being a know it all. Willa explodes, telling the old man that she is afraid of losing the man that raised her. Despite the fact that Jack Mercy was her father, Ham is the man that Willa has always looked to him as her father. Ham is embarrassed at his pride, and touched by the fact that Willa clearly loves him. The two make amends and things seem to be fine. Leaving the house Ham runs into the man that has been causing all the problems on the ranch and is stabbed before he has a chance to call out.

The killer is finally identified as Jim Brewster, a ranch hand that has been working on Mercy for many years. Jim is the bastard son of Jack Mercy, conceived one night after Jack had picked up Jim's mother in a bar. When Willa stumbles across Jim standing over Ham's body Jim is forced to take Willa into the mountains so that he can explain.

Willa learns that Jim had confronted Jack Mercy years before and that Jack had laughed at him. Despite this, Jack had given Jim a job and Jim had worked hard, trying to earn his father's respect. Despite the horror of the situation Willa feels badly for Jim, knowing that there was never any pleasing Jack Mercy. The irony of the situation strikes Willa. Jack Mercy had turned away from his wives and daughters, bitter about never having a son. Despite this, Jack had turned away from his son as well.

Jim tells Willa that the situation can be salvaged and the two can run the ranch together as brother and sister. Willa agrees, but Jim knows she is lying and prepares to kill her.



Ben arrives and confronts Jim. Ben had been listening to Jim explain himself to Willa while he crept up on their position and knows the man is unsettled, having killed in order to claim what he believed to be his. Ben does not hesitate when the time comes, and kills Jim with one shot, unwilling to lose the woman he has found in Willa.

The conditions of the will have been met and Mercy belongs to the three sisters. Tess is still intent on returning to California, though it is clear that the dynamics of the relationship between the women has changed. Willa and Tess now argue and bump heads simply because they have fun doing so. The three respect and love each other. Tess loves Nate as well, but refuses to admit it, even to herself. When Nate challenges Tess to deny her love she flees, needing to break free. Love is stronger and Tess is unable to leave, finally admitting that she can need someone and that needing is alright.

Ben confronts Willa and tells her of the horror he felt the night that Jim had taken her. Willa is angry that Ben has not been around but he tells her that he can't get past the fact that he almost lost her. Clumsily Ben proposes but Willa forces him to dress it up, and he declares his love. Willa loves Ben as well and the fact that she will wear his ring shows it. The two embrace when Willa steps over the property line that separates Mercy from Three Rocks. The properties that Jack Mercy had always wanted to see joined will be, but Willa and Ben's way, not Jack's. The Mercy women have broken free of Jack Mercy's hold.



# Characters

## Willa Mercy

The youngest daughter of Jack Mercy, Willa is a 24 year old young woman, raised on Mercy Ranch, Willa has spent her life trying to make her father proud of her. Willa's mother died when Willa was still a baby, making it impossible for Jack Mercy to send Willa away as he had with her two older sisters and their mothers. Willa was ignored for the most part by her father, and raised by the housekeeper, Bess Pringle.

Stubborn and spirited, Willa tries her best to make her father proud of her, working the ranch and striving to be everything Jack wanted in the son he never had. Despite this, Willa is left stunned when Jack's will leaves the ranch to the three sisters equally, provided they all spend a year on the ranch, working and living together. Willa is not happy with the arrangement and has no use for Tess and Lily, but her stubbornness does not allow her to give up. Willa's stubbornness also comes into play regarding Ben McKinnon, the rancher who her father assigned to oversee the ranch for a year. Ben is the owner of Three Rocks, the adjoining ranch, and Willa is aware that her father would have liked nothing more for Mercy Ranch and Three Rocks to merge, making them one of the most powerful ranches in the area. Willa has no use for her father's wishes or ideas, but she has trouble denying her attraction to Ben.

Living with her sisters on the ranch is difficult for Willa until the three bond over time and difficulties. A killer is in the area and Willa feels it is her job to protect all of those on the ranch. The struggle takes its toll on the youngest Mercy daughter, who suffers from nightmares and worry. Throughout all of the worry and danger, Willa is unable to keep herself from wanting Ben and the two finally consummate their relationship, with Willa giving her virginity to Ben in an ultimate act of trust and love. The relationship grows deeper and stronger with each protecting the other from the evil killer that stalks everyone Willa cares about.

## Tess Mercy

The oldest of Jack Mercy's daughters, Tess is a beautiful woman who has thrived in California, working as a screenwriter and enjoying the importance of her career. Tess has no use for the man that cast herself and her mother aside when she was a child, simply turning up at Mercy Ranch for the reading of Jack's will. Tess expects some type of inheritance, but is stunned when she learns that Jack Mercy's will states that she must live in Montana on the ranch for one year. Tess is willing to leave with nothing until she learns that her share of the estate is worth around six million dollars. The money makes the sacrifice worth it to Tess, though she appears not to care for either of her sisters. The reader learns that Tess does have a soft heart and she does care, especially for the wounded Lily, but she feels that putting up a disinterested front will keep her heart safe.





Tess is determined to live on the ranch for a year to inherit her share of the Mercy fortune and does what needs to be done while she is there. Called Hollywood by Willa, Tess manages to collect eggs and other chores, making herself as useful as she can. Within a short period of time the attraction between Tess and Nate Torrence blooms into a full blown affair, initiated by Tess but there is little resistance on the part of Nate, the gentleman rancher and attorney.

Tess is determined to do her time on the ranch and go home but despite her plans to keep an emotional distance from her sisters and the land Tess is unable to. Though Tess and Willa are at odds quite a bit the two eventually come to terms, united by blood against the murderer that torments Mercy Ranch. Tess's relationship with Nate also grows into something more than Tess expects, and at the end of the year Tess comes to realize that Montana is a part of her, her sisters mean the world to her, and she cannot live without Nate Torrence.

## Lily Mercy

The middle of Jack Mercy's daughters, Lily is quiet and unassuming. Though she appears shy to an outsider, Lily's shyness comes from her abusive relationship with her ex-husband, Jesse Cooke. A school teacher, Lily had been swept off her feet by the romantic Marine, falling head over heels with the man who showered her with love and romance. It was not until after speedy romance and marriage that Jesse's love for Lily became more demanding and controlling. Lily learned quickly that when Jesse was unhappy he would strike her, then cry and apologize, blaming Lily for the situation. Lily accepted the blame for the problems in the marriage for some time before finally finding the strength to leave her husband. Despite this, Jesse continued to stalk Lily and abuse her. The death of Jack Mercy and the trip to Montana appears to Lily to be the perfect solution to her situation.

Lily loves Montana and the Mercy Ranch, agreeing to stay for the year quickly, though she feels bad for Willa and tells her so. Lily would happily sign her share of the ranch over to Willa at the end of her year there if only to experience the sense of peace that she feels on the ranch. Lily also meets Adam Wolfchild, Willa's half-brother, who shows her patience and love that Lily never believed she would know. Lily is able to feel safe for the first time in a long time and flourishes, her love for Adam growing daily.

Lily shows her strength when Jesse returns to her life, kidnapping her and taking her into the mountains. Lily is able to keep her head and leave a trail for those that are following, knowing that her sisters and Adam will do everything to find her. When Jesse is killed by the murderer that has been terrorizing Mercy Ranch, Lily refuses to be coddled, demanding that her loved ones treat her as a capable woman, rather than damaged goods.





## Nathan Torrence

Jack Mercy's attorney and neighbor, Nate Torrence is a long time friend of the Mercy family. As such, Nate is tormented when he is forced to reveal the details of Jack's will to Willa. Nate is also appointed to oversee the operations of Mercy Ranch for the year that Willa runs it while the sisters fulfill the terms of the will.

Nate is an attorney as well as a rancher, raising horses as opposed to the cattle that Mercy Ranch produces. Handsome and intelligent with a penchant for poetry, Nate falls under the spell of Tess Mercy, the oldest daughter of Jack Mercy. Tess initiates a steamy sexual affair that Nate participates in willingly, enjoying Tess's company and the laughter they share when they are together. Nate has never experienced a woman like Tess and she surprises him almost daily. Nate is quick to realize that he is in love with Tess and wants to marry her, though he is aware that Tess will have to come to the same realization in her own time. Happily she does, and the two plan a future together.

## Adam Wolfchild

The half-brother of Willa Mercy, Adam is a handsome, quiet and patient man who lives in a cottage on Mercy Ranch. Adam was eight-years-old when his mother, Mary Wolfchild Mercy, married Jack Mercy and gave birth to Willa. The half-siblings share the same exotic looks due to their mother's Indian heritage.

Adam raises and breeds the horses on Mercy Ranch, something he is very good at due to his quiet nature and patience. The same nature and patience draws Adam to Lily Mercy, the wounded middle sister. Adam quietly allows Lily to feel safe on the ranch and with him, and the love between the pair grows into something deep and lasting.

## Ben McKinnon

The oldest brother of the McKinnon family, Ben runs Three Rocks Ranch with his family. Three Rocks adjoins Mercy Ranch and Ben has known Willa her entire life. Though Ben has always felt an attraction to Willa it is something he has never acted on. Despite this Ben is unable to keep from teasing Willa, constantly making veiled comments, trying to get a reaction.

When Ben is appointed as overseer with Nate Torrence to watch over Mercy Ranch and Willa for the year, Ben takes advantage of the situation, making sure to be in close proximity to Willa whenever he is able, even though he is aware that Willa despises having to answer to anyone.

Ben and Willa are finally unable to keep the spark between them from flaring and a relationship develops between the two that is stronger than either expected. When the troubles at Mercy Ranch escalate, between the murderer at large and the return of Lily's



ex-husband, Ben's main focus is making sure that Willa, the woman he loves deeply is safe.

Though it was Jack Mercy's desire to see Three Rocks and Mercy Ranch united, Ben as well as Willa had no intention of making his wish reality. Despite this, the undeniable attraction between the two is something that neither can deny and they wind up together, deeply and truly in love.

## **Bess Pringle**

The housekeeper at Mercy Ranch for over thirty years, Bess is a strong and capable woman. Bess raised Willa after the death of her mother, Mary Wolfchild Mercy, providing Willa with all the knowledge to run the house as well as the ranch, plus the love and care that Jack Mercy neglected to give his daughter. Because of this Bess is basically Willa's mother and the two accept the relationship as such.

Because Bess has been on Mercy Ranch for so long she knew Jack Mercy's other two wives, the mothers of Tess and Lily. Willa's two older sisters were also briefly part of Bess's life before they were cast out by Jack Mercy. Because of this Bess treats both Tess and Lily as family, and as if they had never left Mercy Ranch.

## **Hamilton Dawson**

The foreman of Mercy Ranch, Ham is capable and strong and cares for Mercy Ranch as much as Willa does. In addition, Ham acted as a father figure to Willa as she was growing up, something that Jack Mercy could not be bothered with. Teaching Willa the ways of the ranch, how to ride a horse and numerous other things about ranch life, Ham earned the love and respect of Willa, something that she longed to give her father but was unable.

Ham still looks on Willa like a daughter and though sometimes uncomfortable discussing certain subjects he feels the need to be up front and honest with her. These topics can range from whether Willa is comfortable with Ham's running the ranch to her budding relationship with Ben McKinnon. Despite any differences the two may sometimes have, Ham and Willa have a stable, loving relationship, one that both know they can count on.

## **Jesse Cooke**

The ex-husband of Lily Mercy, Jesse is a former Marine, proud of his strength and perceived superiority of others. Jesse is handsome, however his good looks hide the abusive man that he truly is. After sweeping Lily off her feet Jesse became abusive and cruel, often beating Lily so badly she required hospitalization. When Lily gathers her internal strength and leaves Jesse, Cooke is unable to accept it, refusing to give up what is his.



Jesse is able to track Lily to Montana and takes a job at Three Rocks, the McKinnon Ranch that adjoins Mercy Ranch. Working as a ranch hand, Jesse disguises himself so that he can keep an eye on Lily. When Jesse discovers the growing relationship between Lily and Adam he is unable to control himself and kidnaps Lily, taking possession of what is his. Dragging Lily through the mountains Jesse hides in a cave with his ex-wife, planning on taking her to Mexico where she will never be able to leave him.

Jesse is killed by the murderer that has tormented those on Mercy Ranch while he is in the cave with Lily. Until this point there seems to be a strong possibility that the killer is Jesse Cooke but his death brings new questions to the reader.

## **Jack Mercy**

The father of Tess, Lily and Willa Mercy, Jack Mercy was a hard and unforgiving man. Though the novel opens with the funeral of Jack Mercy, it is clear that in death Jack is just as strong a force as he was in life. Unwilling to give an inch to anyone, Jack Mercy lived his life his way, not caring who he hurt or what anyone thought.

Jack Mercy wanted a son to take over Mercy Ranch when the time came and married three different women through the years, hoping to sire a boy. When each wife produced a daughter Jack packed them up and sent them off, seemingly washing his hand of them. Willa remained at Mercy Ranch only because her mother died while she was barely more than a baby, leaving Jack no choice but to keep her. Despite the fact that Willa lived on Mercy Ranch with her father, Jack showed her no more care or concern than her two sisters. The only thing Jack Mercy consistently gave to Willa was his disappointment.

Jack Mercy attempts to control life on Mercy Ranch from beyond the grave, leaving a will that requires the three Mercy sisters to live on the ranch for one year or the land reverts to a nature conservatory. Despite Jack's lack of faith in the females he sired, the sisters band together and prove to their deceased father that they are more than good enough.

## **Mary Wolfchild Mercy**

Willa's mother, Mary Wolfchild Mercy died when Willa was little more than a baby.

## **Ira**

Tess's agent in California



## **Pickles**

A ranch hand on Mercy Ranch, Pickles is surly and gruff, having little use for women, especially Willa once she takes over running the ranch. Pickles is the first victim of the killer that torments those on Mercy Ranch.

## **Jim Brewster**

The illegitimate son of Jack Mercy, Jim Brewster works on Mercy Ranch, hoping for the acceptance of his father, but is never recognized as the only son that Jack Mercy has seemed to long for all of his life. Brewster begins causing problems on Mercy Ranch and is responsible for the killings that take place there.

## **Louella Mercy**

Tess's mother and Jack Mercy's first wife.

## **Adele Mercy**

Lily's mother and Jack Mercy's second wife.

## **Traci**

The young hitchhiker that Jim Brewster kills and leaves in front of the steps on Mercy Ranch.

## **Sarah McKinnon**

Ben's mother

## **Stu McKinnon**

Ben's father

## **Zack McKinnon**

Ben's brother

## **Shelley McKinnon**

Ben's sister-in-law



## **Objects/Places**

### **Mercy Ranch**

The ranch that has been in the Mercy family for over 100 years.

### **Bozeman, Montana**

The closest big town to Mercy Ranch

### **Big Belt Mountains**

The mountains that loom over the Mercy Ranch.

### **Three Rocks Ranch**

The ranch owned by the McKinnon family. Three Rocks adjoins Mercy Ranch.

### **Mountain King Spa and Resort**

The spa where the three Mercy sisters spend a weekend.

### **The Cabin**

The cabin in the mountains on Mercy land where Jim Brewster kills Traci, a young hitchhiker.

### **The Nature Conservancy**

The Conservancy will receive Mercy Ranch if Jack Mercy's three daughters do not live together on the ranch for one year.

### **Missoula**

The town where Jim Brewster lived with his mother until she died and he returned to Mercy Ranch to stand up to Jack Mercy.

## **Virginia**

The state where Lily was raised by her mother after Jack Mercy cast them aside.

## **California**

The state where Tess lives and works as a writer until she is forced to move to Montana under the terms of the will.



# Themes

## Family

Family is a central theme in *Mountain Sky* by Nora Roberts. The novel revolves around three sisters, the daughters of Jack Mercy who meet on the day of their father's funeral. Forced to live together for a year in order to fulfill the terms of Jack's will, the three women are not close to a family unit and are as different from each other as night and day. As events unfold around them the sisters are drawn together to face adversity from an unknown source. Because of this, three women who were discarded by the man who fathered them find themselves bound, forming a family despite the willing destruction of the family they might have known by the man who drew them together after his death.

Another aspect of family, or lack of it, is the motivations of the killer, Jim Brewster. Brewster becomes a killer when he discovers that Jack Mercy, his father, has left the ranch to the three daughters he had more or less ignored. Brewster is devastated that even in death Jack Mercy refuses to acknowledge his existence. Ironically, Jack Mercy had no need for his daughter because he longed for a son. Despite this, Jack refused to accept Jim as his own either.

The idea of family is not something that any of the daughters of Jack Mercy ever expect to find, yet they do. At the same time Jim Brewster learns that he desires the family that he has been so angry with, and decides that his actions are heroic and supportive, helping bring the family he longs for closer together.

## Greed

Greed is also central in the novel, *Montana Sky*. At the outset, the reader learns of the greed that Jack Mercy possessed. Jack owned and operated Mercy Ranch until he died and his will leaves the ranch to his three daughters as long as they live there together for one year. Jack's greed and his desire to possess drive him and continue to control his family from beyond the grave.

The greed of Jim Brewster is also important in the novel. Jim is driven to killing, first animals and then people when he discovers the terms of his father's will. Brewster has long desired not only the ranch but to be acknowledged by Jack. When Jim discovers that he will never have his heart's desire he is determined that his sisters will not have the family or home that he has been denied. Brewster's greed takes a different turn when he saves Lily from her ex-husband, Jesse Cooke. The sense of heroism that Jim feels when killing Jesse once again makes him long for a family and a sense of belonging. Jim tells Willa of his desire to run Mercy ranch by her side and it is clear that he longs for a sense of belonging.

Another instance of greed is that of Jesse Cooke. Jesse is determined to get his wife back when he discovers that Lily has moved to Montana after the death of her father.



Though Jesse is intent on taking what he believes to be his, he is willing to wait the year that Lily must stay on the ranch so that he can take the fortune that she will have when the time is up. This changes when Lily falls in love with Adam and they plan to marry. Jesse is unwilling to share what he considers his possession and kidnaps his ex-wife in order to have what he 'owns'.

## Love

Love is an obvious theme in *Montana Sky*, most notably because it is lacking at the beginning of the novel. Though Willa Mercy was raised with love by Bess Pringle, the housekeeper, and Ham, the foreman, there was never any love given by her father, Jack Mercy. Jack Mercy had expectations from those around him and was unforgiving if they were not met. This extends to expectations that were impossible to meet, including being born a male, in the case of Willa and her sisters. Each of Jack Mercy's daughters grew up lacking the love of their father, something that they should have gotten with no questions asked. Because of this each of them struggles to accept love when they finally find it.

In the case of Willa, who struggles to prove herself capable in the eyes of her father, love is almost denied because she feels that Jack wishes her to be with Ben McKinnon because he covets Three Rocks Ranch. Willa and Ben are able to overcome this obstacle from beyond the grave and find happiness together.

Lily thought she had found love in her ex-husband, only to wind up in an abusive relationship. After a time Lily is able to accept that Jesse's problems are his own and not her fault. In *Montana* Lily is able to fall in love with Adam, and receive the gift of love that he longs to give her.

Tess is a headstrong woman, intent on making it on her own in a man's world, not unlike Willa. Unwilling to accept that a man would complete her life, Tess almost walks away from the true love she finds in Nate. In the end, all of Jack Mercy's daughters overcome the abandonment that they suffered because of their father, and move on to find love with the men complete them.



# Style

## Point of View

The novel *Montana Sky*, by Nora Roberts is written in the third person. This is extremely helpful to the reader as there are many characters that interact with each other within the novel and all of them are central to the storyline. The three main characters, Willa, Lily and Tess Mercy are the three unwanted daughters of Jack Mercy. By writing in the third person the author allows the reader to gain a better sense of what each character thinks and feels, as well as to get a better idea of what motivates each woman. As the novel progresses the reader also gets a sense of how each woman grows and changes during the year they are forced to stay together on Mercy Ranch. The mind of the killer that terrorizes Mercy Ranch is also open to the reader and as the novel progresses and his madness grows, the reader is able to gain insight into what motivates his insanity.

The novel is written with both dialogue and exposition. The descriptive passages allow the reader to experience the scenic areas of Montana where the novel takes place and get a sense of the strength of character needed for the characters to succeed in the harshness of the weather and climate around them. The dialogue between the characters gives the reader an idea of the relationships between the characters as well as how those relationships change as the novel progresses.

## Setting

The novel *Montana Sky* is set in the mountains of Montana. The majority of the novel takes place on Mercy Ranch, the land owned by Jack Mercy and left to his three daughters as long as they can follow the rules of the will. The land, where the Mercy family has raised cattle for years, is massive and the beauty of the mountains is evident in the descriptive passages detailing the various activities that take place on and around the ranch. The reader easily understands the grandeur of the area and the massive mountains that loom over the ranch that the Mercy sisters run.

There are several other locations in the novel, including Three Rocks Ranch which abuts Mercy Ranch. The McKinnon family owns Three Rocks and it was always the wish of Jack Mercy that the two properties would be merged. The ranch where Nate raises horses is also visited by Tess when she decides to seduce the lawyer.

Outside of ranch life the characters visit the city of Bozeman where they are able to shop and purchase supplies for the ranch. Another site visited is the Mountain King Spa and Resort, where the Mercy sisters bond over a weekend of massages and spa treatments.



## Language and Meaning

The language of *Montana Sky* is modern and straight forward, allowing the reader to experience the storyline as it happens. The novel flows freely and move along at a rapid pace, giving the reader a sense of time passing quickly as busy life on the ranch rushes by.

The language expresses the different levels of class on the ranch. Though there is never a question of one character being more educated or experienced than another, the accents and speech patterns of the main characters is slightly different from the employees that work on the ranches. The employees speak in a classic western pattern, placing them at a different level than that of the main characters such as the Mercy sisters and the man that they have relationships with.

## Structure

The novel is separated into four parts and contains thirty one numbered chapters. As the novel describes the life of the Three Mercy sisters as they are forced to live on the ranch together for one year in order to fulfill the terms of Jack Mercy's will, it is natural that the four parts of the novel would be named for the four seasons of the year. Breaking the novel into the four seasons also gives the reader a better sense of the drastic changes in weather in Montana as well as how the seasons differ so drastically, not unlike the three sisters.

The numbered chapters follow the lives of all the characters, sometimes jumping from one to the other quickly. Though at times this makes it difficult to keep up with the action that is taking place, it does highlight the way events happen rapidly and have to be dealt with immediately.

The plot is fairly straightforward as the three daughters of Jack Mercy are forced to spend a year living together on the ranch so that the land is not given to a nature conservatory. Though there does not to be a thing the sisters have in common at the outset, the reader as well as the main characters learn that their inner strength binds them and draws them closer as a killer terrorizes the ranch. As events come to a head the reader learns that the killer is the illegitimate son of Jack Mercy. The characters use the strength they have within themselves as well as the strength they draw from each other to overcome adversity and triumph in the end. Along the way the three sisters fall in love and find happiness. as well.



## Quotes

"She had, despite everything, loved Jack Mercy. And she said nothing, not one word, to the two women, the strangers who shared her blood and had come to see their father buried."

Chapter One, pg. 6

"The little bitch, letting that half-breed paw her. Sniveling little whore thought she could get rid of Jesse Cooke, figures she could run and he wouldn't catch her. Put the cops on his ass. She was going to pay for that."

Chapter Four, pg. 54

"When she saw Jim Brewster quickly, neatly, and efficiently castrate the calf, her eyes rolled back in her head and she fainted dead away, with barely a sound. It was the crash of the bucket and breaking eggs that made Willa glance around.

"Well, Jesus Christ, will you look at that?"

Chapter Six, pg 78

"Even murder couldn't stop work. The men were jumpy, but they took orders. Now that they were another hand short, Willa pushed herself to take up the slack. Sheh rode fences, drove out to the fields to check on the harvest, manned the squeeze shoot herself, and huddled over the record books at night."

Chapter Nine, pg. 113

"Tess kept a grip on the flashlight and held her arms out while Lily filled them with wood. Legs spread to hold her balance, the tip of her nose tingling, Tess gritted her teeth. "Hell has nothing to do with fire," she shouted. "Hell is winter in Montana."

Chapter 11, pg. 147

"And anyone could see that Adam was in love with her. A little afraid of that vulnerability Lily carried around, Willa mused, but quietly in love with her. It could work, she supposed, with time and care. She doubted that Lily realized just how deep Adam's feeling went. As far as Willa could see, Lily though he was being kind."

Chapter 13, pg. 171

"He blames me." Her voice was thick and drunk with exhaustion.

"Who blames you?"

"Pa. He always did." And she sighed. "And he always will."

Ben left his hand on her cheek for a moment. "And he was always wrong."

Chapter 14, pg. 190

"If it is him," she continued calmly, "I have to face that, and live with hit. I've been hiding here Adam, using you and Will and this place to keep all the bad things away. It doesn't work."

Chapter 14, pg. 198



"Hell you don't." Anger hastened his words and brought him out of the chair. "You think I don't see, I don't know. You think somebody who tanned your hide when you needed it and bandaged your hurts don't know what's inside your head? You listen to me girl, 'cause you're too big and mean for me to turn over my knee like I used to. You can beat yourself into the ground from here to the Second Coming and it don't mean a damn to Jack Mercy."

Chapter 16, pg. 219

"Because it's a fine butt, and I have excellent eyesight." Tess skimmed her tongue over her teeth. "Of course, a woman would have to be brave enough, strong enough, and smart enough to match him in power and style."

There, Tess thought, as Willa sulked beside her, challenge issued, Ben. That's the best help I can give you."

Chapter 19, pg. 263

"So this was what it was like to awaken a woman. To know that your hands were the first hands. To know that you were the first to bring that flush to the skin, that weakness to the limbs, that quiver to the muscles. He could be careful with her, would be careful with her, no matter how that very innocence made his blood surge."

Chapter 21, pg. 297

"I'm sorry, Will. I'm sorry." He turned the knife on her, held it to her throat. Don't call out. I don't want to hurt you. I swear I don't want to hurt you." He took a deep, shuddering breath. "I'm your brother."

And bringing his fist up, he knocked her out cold. "

Chapter 29, pg. 411



## Topics for Discussion

What does the will of Jack Mercy demand of his daughters? What is their reaction?

Why does Willa feel the need to spend all of her time working on the ranch? Do you think that this is a new development or has Willa always acted this way?

Why is Lily happy to stay at Mercy Ranch?

Why do Willa and Tess have such a hard time getting along? How and why do things change?

What is the motivation of Jim Brewster? Why does he decide not to torment the daughters of Jack Mercy? What does he want instead?

Why do you think Tess is unwilling to commit to a relationship with Nate? How do you think Tess changes during her year on the ranch?

How does Willa change during the year the sisters are together on the ranch? Are the changes for the better? Why?