

## *John's First Kiss*

Wrapping his arms around Eliza, John knocked her over so that they both landed on the grass.

After a startled shriek, she wiggled so that she could face him.

He held onto her and threw his leg over hers before she could get up.

“Too bad those people in town can’t see you now. Just look at the way you take advantage of a poor, unsuspecting woman!”

Shrugging, he gave her a wicked smile and kissed her cheek.

“Oh John, you can’t be serious.” Despite her attempt to look stern, she also laughed. “You’re not playing fair. You know I’m not strong enough to get away.”

He raised an eyebrow. She wasn’t even trying to get away from him. That meant there was hope, right? Even if she protested, she seemed to be enjoying it. Noticing that a strand of her hair was close to her eyes, he reached up and brushed it away. Her skin was soft, and he let his fingers linger at her cheek.

“I never met anyone more determined than you. You’re much too stubborn for your own good.”

It was true so he didn’t deny it. Instead, he let his fingers drift to her pink lips. He’d never kissed a woman before, but he’d seen other men do it. It looked simple enough. And if it was so simple, why did he suddenly worry he couldn’t do it right?

She wasn’t fighting him. In fact, her hands stayed on his arms. It was a very pleasant feeling—one he wanted to enjoy forever if she’d let him. He closed his eyes and kissed her. His movement was stiff. He knew it was, and he didn’t know how to relax when his heart was beating frantically against his chest. But he liked the kiss so he leaned forward again for another one.

Her lips were warm against his, and she returned his kiss, almost seeming hesitant but still willing. He let his lips linger on hers, never wanting to leave the sweet bit of heaven he'd suddenly discovered. He thought he'd like to kiss a woman some day, but he had no idea just how much he'd like it. This, he decided, was the most wonderful experience he'd ever had.

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*Loving Eliza*

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*Ruth Ann Nordin*

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Dedicated to Danielle Watson. From the time we met in high school to now, you have, and always will be, one of my dearest friends.

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## *Chapter One*



June 1883

*E*liza stepped out of the stagecoach. She glanced at the wrinkled piece of paper in her shaky hands. She was in the right place. The southern Dakota territory was so different from Omaha. But this is what she wanted. A new start. And what better way to get that new start than to go to a small town? Some place where no one knew her or what she had done. She was safe here. Safe to be what she could never be in Omaha: a lady.

The two women who had accompanied her on the long journey across the prairie land stood next to her. The dirt road felt wonderfully solid beneath Eliza's feet after the endless swaying of the stagecoach. It especially was welcome after the frequent vomiting of the pretty young blond who could not tolerate the ride. Eliza was grateful her stomach maintained its strength, though she almost lost it twice from the foul odor.

"I've never been so glad to be anywhere in my entire life," the blond exclaimed as she wiped her sweaty forehead with a handkerchief.

Eliza watched Charity Grooms as her aunt, Bethany Grooms, disposed of the bag of vomit in a trash can by the small general store. Several people lounged about along the main street of the dusty town and watched the new arrivals with interest. She wondered if one of them was Melissa Peters.

Ignoring them for a moment, Eliza pulled out a mint from her purse and handed it to the nineteen year old. "This will make your breath fresher," she whispered.

"Thank you, Eliza," Charity replied, taking the mint and plopping it into her mouth. "I'm sorry I was such a burdensome companion."

"It was better than going through the wilderness alone."

"Well, you are a dear friend in this unfamiliar place." Charity reached out and placed a hand on her arm. "You must come to my new home sometime. My intended promised he'd let me entertain guests. It's the only part of being back east that I'd miss, and it's the only reason I agreed to be a mail-order bride."

Eliza nodded, though she honestly didn't think they had anything in common. Charity was born and raised a lady. She'd never put one foot in a godforsaken place.

A man who was probably close to thirty approached the blond.

Eliza stepped back. This must be Ralph Custer who sent for Charity. Her eyes drifted to his badge. So he was the marshal in town.

He took his hat off. "Excuse me, ma'am. Are you Miss Grooms?"

While Charity's face glowed, Eliza turned her attention back to the paper in her hand. It was good that Charity had a handsome, respectable man to wed. Eliza was happy for her, and



by the way Charity's aunt gushed, she was obviously happy with the match too.

Eliza needed to find Melissa Peters. Preacher Bill Peters promised that Melissa would be expecting her. All Eliza had to do was go to the address written on the paper. Aware of the way the onlookers watched her, she straightened her hat and picked up her travel bag. It wasn't anything fancy. Nothing like the large trunk Charity and her aunt brought with them.

Eliza shook her head. She wouldn't compare herself to them. It did her no good to do so. Just as Preacher Peters said, she needed to find out who she was and to be content with that. God had forgiven her. That was enough. So why did she feel a pit of despair well up in her chest? And why did she feel more alone than she ever had in her entire life? She wasn't fourteen when her parents died. She was twenty-seven. Well past her prime.

Charity's laughter drifted along the breeze. Eliza shouldn't begrudge the young woman. Charity was nineteen. She was at a good age, and she was such a nice person. Eliza turned and headed down the street. She was used to people staring at her. It came with being a prostitute for twelve years. But she wasn't one anymore. She'd been redeemed. She came here for a new start.

The past remained in Omaha. No one would ever find out about her background. Ever.

Repeating the words in her mind, she passed by the bank when someone stepped in front of her. She gasped and stumbled back.

A strong hand caught her by the arm and steadied her so she didn't end up on the ground.

She quickly regained her composure and looked into the greenest eyes she'd ever seen. She blinked in surprise, for they were beautiful. The man in front of her stood a foot taller than her and had dark brown hair with bangs that fell neatly over his

forehead. The man had dressed in a clean blue shirt and black slacks. He even wore a tie and a nice black vest.

Considering that he was better dressed than the other men she'd seen in town, she found him to be a strange curiosity. "You look pretty fancy. Are you getting hitched?" As soon as she said the words, she wished she hadn't. She needed to learn to bite her tongue. "Sorry, Mister. I meant no disrespect."

She tried to move around him but he blocked her. She frowned and gave him a good look. She'd had her share of difficult men in her time. She placed a hand on her hip. She didn't care if he was built like a tower. He wouldn't intimidate her.

"What do you want with me?" she demanded.

He motioned to the letter in his hand.

She rolled her eyes. Great. The strong silent type. "Look, I don't have time for this, Mister. I came to find Melissa Peters."

When she took another step to the side, he moved with her.

She took a deep breath. "You are annoying me."

He winced.

Her face softened. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be harsh. What is it you want me to do? Read that letter?"

He nodded and handed it to her.

"You could just tell me what's in it."

He shook his head and pointed to his throat.

"Oh. You're sick. I see." Not that she believed him. He didn't look ill. "It's a good thing I know how to read."

He smiled.

She hesitantly returned his smile before she read the letter. As she did, it became clear to her that he thought *she* was the woman who had agreed to come out west to marry him. No wonder he wouldn't let her go around him. He assumed that she was his mail-order bride. Well, now that was easy enough. She'd set him straight. "I hate to break this to you, Mister, but I'm not

Daphne O'Conner. My name is Eliza." She paused. She couldn't recall her last name. It'd been so long ago since she used it. "I'm not your bride."

He frowned as she handed the paper back to him.

"I'm sorry. I realize she was due to come in on the same stagecoach that I did, but my only traveling companions are over there." She motioned to a very happy looking Charity and her aunt. The marshal looked just as pleased. As well they should, she reckoned. They all seemed nice enough. Turning back to him, she shrugged. "I'm sorry. Maybe she'll come in on the next ride."

He folded the paper in slow, methodical motions.

There didn't seem to be anything else to say, so she took a step around him and headed for the houses lining the next road. Wilkins Pike was the name of it, and that was the name of the road she needed.

To her surprise, he tapped her on the shoulder.

She stopped and stared at him, wondering what in the world he could possibly want now.

He motioned to her and then himself and pointed to the small white building.

She nearly dropped her luggage when she realized the building was a church. She shook her head. "I am not Daphne. I'm Eliza. You do understand that, don't you?"

He nodded.

Now she was more confused than ever. "Then what do you want with me?"

He pointed to the church again.

It was official. The poor man was delusional if he thought she could be anyone's wife. "Mister, you'd do much better waiting for that fine young lady who wrote that letter to come off the stagecoach."

He shook his head and tore the letter.

Gasping, she set down her bag and grabbed his hands to stop him. "Now look here. There's no sense in assuming the worst. Something probably delayed her. You just need to be patient."

He touched his throat and shook his head.

She had no idea what he was trying to tell her. "Can't you write down what you want to say?" She picked up her purse and searched through it. "I thought I brought a pencil."

His hand rested on top of hers. When she looked up at him, he shook his head again.

"You can't write?"

He nodded.

She should have been prepared for that. After all, not everyone had formal schooling. She didn't either, but she'd been lucky enough to have a male customer who taught her to read and write in exchange for her services. She sighed, pushing back the instant shame that heated her face. Did it matter how she learned to read and write? The point was she learned it. And she couldn't change the past. Certainly, no one ever had to know about it.

The man's gentle touch on her arm broke her out of her thoughts. He motioned again to the church.

If he knew...If he only knew her past, then he wouldn't even suggest this. "Mister, I can't. You seem like a really nice man, a good man. At least you let a woman get a word in edgewise. But I'm not meant to be a wife." She smoothed out the piece of paper Preacher Peters had given her. "I am here to find Melissa Peters. She's supposed to live down that way."

He nodded and motioned to a little white house that looked comfortably settled between a green house and a brown one.

Well, this was good information. "Yes. I'm here to do housework in exchange for room and board. It's all been arranged. So you see, I already have something I need to do here."

He shook his head at her.

She set her hands on her hips. "I don't care if you like it or not. She's expecting me." Ignoring the fact that he waved his arms and shook his head again, she picked up her bag. "I don't care what you think. You're not telling me what to do."

She pushed past him and stormed down the road. He had a lot of nerve! She'd been nice to him, but she could only handle so much. If he didn't want to wait for Daphne, then that was his problem—not hers. She never agreed to come out here to marry anyone. And the unexpected wave of guilt that rose from her gut shocked her. She had no reason to feel guilty. It must have been because she spent all of her life trying to please others and doing what they wanted. Still, his sad eyes...No. She wouldn't give it another thought. He'd be very happy when Daphne finally came. Daphne, she was sure, was a lady, the kind of woman a man could take home to meet his mother, the kind of woman who could give him a house full of children to carry on his name. She couldn't be either woman for him. Yes, he was much better off without the likes of her.

To her dismay, he followed her. She gave him credit for persistence. Oh well. Let him follow. When she arrived at Melissa's house, Melissa could explain the situation to him. Maybe then he'd pay attention.

As soon as she made it to Melissa's house, she banged on the door. She didn't mean to be so hard on the poor door, but the man was getting on her nerves with his insistent gesturing.

When the door opened, Eliza cleared her throat and quickly adjusted her hat. But as soon as her gaze passed the forty-year-old woman with swollen red eyes to the stack of boxes scattered throughout the parlor, her heart sank. This wasn't going to be good news.

"Hello, John," the woman said before she wiped her nose with a dishtowel. "Is this a friend of yours?"

Eliza glanced at the man—John—and decided to speak for him. “No, ma’am. I don’t know him. Not really. I mean, I just met him.” She set her travel bag down by her feet and rummaged through her purse. “My name is Eliza. I know a man in Omaha. His name is Preacher Bill Peters, and he told me that he wrote to his cousin, Melissa Peters.” She finally retrieved the preacher’s letter. She paused and looked at the woman. “You don’t match Melissa Peters’ description. Do I have the right house?”

“Yes, she mentioned you. We sent a letter to Bill two days ago. Melissa had a terrible fall down the steps, and—” She pressed the towel to her mouth and sobbed.

For a moment, Eliza stood in silence, mostly in shock but partly in sympathy. Turning to John, she saw him nod. He even waved toward a section of land further out of town. She had to squint, but it quickly became clear that he had been pointing to the cemetery during their walk to this house. She released a shaky breath. This definitely wasn’t good...for either her or for Melissa. But she gathered that between the two of them, she fared much better.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Eliza softly spoke. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

The woman shook her head. “No thank you.” She wiped her eyes again. “My name is Addy Garrison. I was Melissa’s friend. We were practically sisters.”

Eliza simply nodded. Grief from men she was used to, but she had no idea how to comfort a woman. She shifted from one foot to the other. “I’ll leave you alone.”

“Take care. John will be good to you.”

Her eyes widened as the woman gently shut the door. Then she looked at John. He didn’t have to speak for her to understand his remorse. Sighing, she picked up her travel bag and dragged her feet back to the business district of the town, as small as it was. She figured it consisted of a store for grocery items, a

barber shop, a workshop to repair wagons and buggies or to care for horseshoes, a church, an auditorium, the one room jail, and a hotel. At least that was the main street. Perhaps there were more businesses spread throughout. A glance down a side street showed her the small post office and bank that were in the same building. Another good look showed her a house with a doctor's name on it.

So there was more in this town than she originally thought. But still, it was very different from Omaha. She didn't know if she liked that or not. Her options would be limited here. She didn't want to return to Omaha. She could never make a fresh start there. No one would take her seriously as an employee. Her shoulders slumped. This was why most women married as soon as they could. Finding work seemed like a frightening prospect.

John reached out and took her elbow in his hand.

Why was he still following her? Couldn't he tell that she needed time to be alone and think? But then, he knew the town and the people in it. Maybe he could help her. "Do you know where I can find a job?"

He shook his head and pointed behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder and groaned. "No. I'm not your mail-order bride. I will not go into that church except to worship the Good Lord on Sundays."

His countenance fell.

She couldn't allow the jab of guilt to overtake her good judgment. It was insane to want to marry a man just because he looked hurt. "You'll thank me when your Daphne comes." She could only pray that this woman would indeed come. She didn't know John, but he struck her as a good man, just as Addy had said. "Do you know of anyone who's hiring?"

To her surprise, his eyes lit up and he tapped his chest.

"How many times do I have to say no? I'm not marrying you."

He quickly shook his head.

“Right. Now you’re catching on.”

She proceeded down the dirt road, wondering why a group of men had congregated outside the building across the road to stare at them. Was it so unusual for an unmarried woman to be seen with an unmarried man? Or maybe it was because she was a stranger? Yes. That was probably it. They didn’t recognize her, so naturally, they were curious.

Next to her, John pointed to the church and shook his head.

“Is that all you can do? Nod, shake your head and point?” she asked.

She was starting to tire of this game, if that’s what he was doing. He seemed sincere, but she sensed something odd about him. Of course, it didn’t have to be a bad kind of odd. She’d met men who were odd but good-hearted souls. They had been much easier to understand than this stranger who had insisted on attaching himself to her like a shadow.

The men across the street laughed. Out of the corner of her eye, she realized they were laughing at John. She wondered why.

John, however, didn’t seem to notice. Instead, he pointed to her, formed the word ‘work’ on his lips and then tapped his chest again.

“You’re talking about a job? Not marriage? You need someone to work for you?” she asked.

He smiled and nodded with the enthusiasm of a little boy in a candy shop.

She stopped and turned to him. “What kind of job?”

He furrowed his eyebrows and frowned, as if debating what to say. Then he snapped his fingers and led her to the general store.

Now she was speechless. What was he doing? Surely, a man as...odd...as him didn’t own the general store, especially since



store owners needed to actually talk to their customers. John didn't strike her as the social type at all.

A man who appeared to be the owner was talking to a plump woman who examined several bags of sugar. He glanced up. "Howdy, John."

John smiled and waved.

The woman turned and gave a nod. "Good afternoon."

The owner turned his attention to Eliza. "I'm Frank Garrison. This is Molly Richie, and that is John Evans."

Eliza wondered why the owner felt the need to tell her John's name. Maybe he was odd too. She glanced out the window and saw that the group of men had made their way across the street and were listening to everything they were saying outside the store. Had the door not been left open, they wouldn't have received the pleasure of hearing anything. Those men weren't right either. Maybe this entire town was odd.

Keenly aware of their audience, she said, "I'm Eliza."

"Eliza what?" the woman asked.

*Just Eliza.* But she couldn't say that. Her gaze drifted to the sugar. "Uh...Eliza Sweet." She winced. Oh, that was awful!

"Nice to meet you, Miss Sweet," Frank said.

So now she was stuck with *that* for a last name. Oh well. Worse things had happened to her.

John motioned around the store.

"Go ahead and search around," the owner replied.

As Frank and Molly resumed their conversation about recipes to use sugar with, John led her to a broom in the corner of the store. He picked up the broom and started sweeping the floor. Then he pointed to her and the broom.

She blinked. Oh. He was telling her what her job would be if she worked for him. "Cleaning. You mean, I'd clean your house?"

He nodded and put the broom back. Then he led her to a table full of fruits and vegetables and pretended to eat them.

“And cook.”

He looked so excited that she understood him that she actually chuckled. Then he showed her soap and patted his shirt and pants.

“And do your wash.”

He nodded again before he turned his hands up. His expression asked her if she would agree to it.

She took a deep breath. “I don’t know. Where would I stay?”

“You’re not his mail-order bride?” Frank spoke up.

Not that it was any of his business, but she answered, “No. I came to help Melissa Peters but found out that isn’t going to work out after all.”

“Yes. Poor Miss Peters. That was a horrible tragedy. Well, you’ll be in good hands with John. But John, where’s your bride? Are you sure she’d be happy to know you hired a woman to take care of your place?”

John held up his torn letter and shook his head.

“She didn’t come?” the man kindly deducted.

John nodded and shoved the letter into his pocket.

“I’m sorry to hear that. But it’s probably for the best. Things work out for a reason.” He looked at Eliza. “You plan to let Eliza stay in that small cabin off to the side of your house then?”

He nodded.

“I suppose that will work. Eliza, John is a good and decent man. He won’t take advantage of you.”

The snicker from outside the door made her wonder, once again, what was going on.

Frank’s mouth formed a tight line as he strode across the room and stood in the doorway. “Get away from my store.”

“Oh come on, Garrison,” one of the three men replied. “What woman is going to want to work for a mute? She won’t even marry him.”

Eliza blinked. That was why John didn't speak. That also explained his odd behavior. Now she really felt bad for getting irritated with him. How else was he supposed to communicate with her?

"Mind your own business and go somewhere else unless you have something to buy," Frank ordered.

"We're going. We're going."

The men grumbled but left.

Frank returned, his face showing his displeasure. "I'm sorry about that, John." Before Eliza had a chance to look at John, Frank approached her. "Eliza, I assure you that John is an honest, God fearing man. He won't steer you wrong, and he could use a woman's help out there. He spends so much time making furniture that he tends to neglect his place."

"You make furniture?" she asked John.

"And fixes and repairs people's homes. He does a lot of good here."

She believed Frank, and she'd had enough dealings with men to know that John wouldn't take advantage of the situation. In fact, his type often got taken advantage of. She sighed. Well, she wanted a fresh start, and though this wasn't how she planned it, she supposed that this was just as well.

"Alright," she told John. "But I'm not marrying you. You still have to wait for that bride of yours."

John seemed content with that so she figured they wouldn't have any problems. But on the way out of the store, one look at the group of men made her aware that problems were going to be inevitable. The question was, just what kind of problems.

## Chapter Two



John tried not to stare at the new woman who'd come to town. Eliza. That was her name. He wished he could say it, to feel the way the word would roll off his tongue. But that would never be. Still, he could see, and she was certainly a beautiful woman. It was unfortunate she wasn't Daphne O'Conner. He didn't know what delayed Daphne. Perhaps she decided not to come when she found out he was mute. He made sure his brother, Aaron, added that when Aaron wrote the letter on his behalf. But her response came after the fact. Perhaps she thought it over and changed her mind...

He shifted Eliza's travel bag to his other hand as they walked down the street past the barber shop. She argued with him about carrying it, but he saw no reason for a woman to do that if she didn't have to. He was briefly aware of the others who watched them. *What is she doing with him?* That was the question in their eyes, and for some reason, Eliza didn't seem to notice it. She

merely chatted on about her trip from Omaha: how she'd boarded a train and found a stagecoach. She went into surprising detail on the subject. But he didn't mind that she rambled. He liked the sound of her soprano voice.

And she certainly had the prettiest hair color he'd ever seen. He'd never seen anyone with red hair. It was vibrant. Gold highlights wove in and out of her strands that were pulled back into a braid that hung halfway down her back. Her skin was fair, evidence that she hadn't spent much time in the sun. She had dark brown eyes that had a light brown tint around the pupils. Her lips were a lovely shade of pink.

Then there was the rest of her. She was slender, but not so much that she had to forfeit her figure as some women had to. He noted the way her hips swayed from side to side as she walked. She was graceful in her movements. Then when he lifted his gaze higher, his face grew warm when he looked at her breasts. He'd only seen bare breasts once in his life, and that time had been an accident. One in which Mrs. Cramer got out of her tub and entered her parlor without realizing he was there to deliver a chair he'd made for her husband. Her husband was as horrified as he'd been, and he made sure to quickly avert his eyes, though the memory was seared into his mind forever. He still couldn't look that woman in the eye.

Now as he ventured a look at Eliza, he wondered what she looked like without clothes on. As quickly as the thought came, he forced it aside. She didn't agree to marry him. She agreed to work for him. That was unfortunate...for him. Maybe not for her. It was probably best for her. As soon as she met his brother Troy, she might decide he was more to her liking. He already knew that Troy would like her. And Troy could talk and read and write.

John considered making another plea with her to marry him but decided that wouldn't be fair to her. Maybe she'd want to marry Troy. Then he shouldn't trick her into marrying him just to

keep her around. Sighing, he returned his attention to what Eliza was saying.

"I guess this town is quaint," she said, inspecting the row of flowers on the patch of grass lining the bank. "I don't recall seeing such pretty flowers all over the place. Omaha wasn't like this. It had more noise and dust rising up in the air because of all the people trafficking through with their horses. Have you ever been to a bigger town?"

He shook his head.

She frowned. "Then you have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?" She shrugged. "It's just as well. You're not missing much. This town doesn't have a bar, does it?"

He shook his head again. The mayor had done away with that establishment a year ago, though he couldn't tell her that.

"That's just as well too. Really, it's a good thing. Too many bad things happen in bars."

She was right. He recalled the loud shoot-out between Abe and Cal. Their tombstones would forever be a monument to that terrible night. Again, this was knowledge he couldn't give her. Someone who spoke would have to do that instead. He sighed. He was being selfish in trying to keep her all to himself.

He could return her to the general store. He didn't really need someone to help him. He managed fine on his own. But she was too appealing. Way too pretty. Way too friendly and accepting of his handicap. She hadn't flinched when she learned he was mute. She even talked to him as if he were a normal person. And he liked that.

No. He wouldn't let this opportunity pass him by. His gaze drifted back to the church. If only...

"This is such a neat little flower," she said, breaking him out of his thoughts. She bent forward and touched the yellow petal in front of the white house. "I won't take it, mind you. I just want to feel it. It's soft. And the color is my favorite. I love yellow. Do you know why?"

Of course, he didn't, but to his amusement, she continued as if he had spoken to her.

"Yellow is the color of hope."

He wondered if he had any yellow flowers on his land. If not, he could probably plant some. Maybe it would convince her to marry him. Then she'd have to stay with him.

She stood up. "Which way to your home?"

He pointed to the two geldings attached to the wagon. He'd purposely parked it away from the heart of town. She wouldn't know why, and for once, he was glad of it. Addy and Frank were nice to him. Some others were too. But not everyone was. He didn't care to stay around when he wasn't welcome.

After they reached the wagon, he placed her travel bag in the back. Then he turned and waited for her to get in.

Laughing, she shook her head. "You obviously don't have any experience with women. I can't get on this thing without your help...unless you want me to be unladylike about it."

He blushed, wishing he had paid more attention to the way other men interacted with women. His world had consisted mostly of objects and his brothers. He picked her up and hesitated. She was a light thing. Didn't she ever eat? But then he realized how nice she looked in his arms. He'd never held a woman before, so this was a pleasing experience. He wondered if there would be more chances like this.

"I meant that you could hold my hand to help me up," she whispered. "Though this is the most chivalrous thing that's ever happened to me, so I thank you."

His eyebrows furrowed. Whatever did 'chivalrous' mean? It couldn't be bad if she was thanking him, right? Pushing the question aside since there was no way he could ask it, he gently placed her up in the seat. She seemed like such a fragile thing, what with her slender frame and all. Yes, she definitely needed to eat more. He'd have to make sure that happened.

When he hopped on his side of the wagon, she picked up where she left off on her talking. She named the flowers they passed, commented on the flat landscape and told him about some of the farmers she had met over the years and what crops they grew. Then she made guesses on the crops that lined their grassy path. She was right most of the time, though he shook his head on one she got wrong. She didn't look offended when he corrected her. Everyone else did. Not her. She actually seemed pleased that her wrong thinking had been corrected.

Yes, he thought. *Eliza is not like anyone I've ever met.* He liked that. He liked it a lot.

She suddenly stopped talking and gave him a good look. "You can't read. Do you recognize any letters?"

Not sure of her meaning, he shifted on the seat so he could pull the torn letter from his pocket and held it out to her.

"Oh. No. I didn't mean that kind of letter. I meant the letters of the alphabet. You know, 'ABC'?"

He shook his head. All the words on the letter in his hand looked like a bunch of scribbling. When he was a child, he used to scribble the same markings down. Since he wasn't allowed to attend school, he never figured out what the scribbles meant.

"Do you know what this letter says?" she asked, taking the ripped paper from him.

He nodded.

"Someone read it to you?"

He nodded again.

"And that's how you find out what things say?"

He nodded.

This time she was the one who nodded. "Then I'm guessing you have someone write the letters to her too. Well, I think it's about time you learned to read and write. I can teach you."

He took his eyes off the path so he could study her to see whether she meant it or not. Maybe she was humoring him. But



she didn't laugh. She neatly folded the paper and put it in her purse. So she might be serious. If that was the case, he wanted to learn.

"We'll start tomorrow. Today's been a long day. I hope you don't mind if I sleep."

He hid his disappointment. He wanted her to stay up and keep talking to him, but he reasoned that for the time being, she would stay with him so he could allow her the good night's rest that she desired. But not before she got something to eat. He tapped her on the arm to get her attention.

She glanced his way. "What is it?"

He motioned to his mouth.

Sighing, she shook her head. "No. I'm not kissing you. You need to save that for your mail-order bride."

Surprised, he stared at her for a moment and almost directed the horses off the path. He quickly steadied the wagon and tried another way to get his meaning across. He touched his mouth again and then patted his stomach.

Her eyes grew wide. "Oh! I thought...Well, never mind. I understand. You want me to get something to eat before I go to sleep."

Relieved, he nodded. Though it would have been nice to kiss her. If nothing else, it would satisfy his curiosity of what a kiss was like. He'd seen people kiss. They seemed to enjoy it. He had no doubt that he'd like to share a kiss with her.

She smiled. "Do you often use motions with your hands to let people know what you want to say?"

Forcing his mind off of her rosy lips, he shrugged. Sometimes it was natural to use hand motions. To demonstrate, he pointed to the tree to their right and then pointed to the sky.

"The tree is tall. That's what you mean?"

Grinning, he nodded. This was fun. Usually, people dismissed his gestures.

“I used to play games like that,” she said. “We couldn’t use any words. This will be the same thing.”

He decided he’d take her word for it. He didn’t exactly see it as a game, but maybe it would be that way. At least she was willing to take the time to pay attention to him and teach him how to read and write. Then, maybe when she realized that his mail-order bride had decided not to come after all, she might know him better and want to marry him. He heard people use the term ‘love at first sight’, but he hadn’t grasped its meaning until he saw her get off the stagecoach.

And with any luck, his brother Troy would stay away from his place while he set about the task of convincing her to marry him.

## *Chapter Three*



Eliza couldn't remember the last time she slept straight through the night. Then again, her job had required her to stay up late. For once, she felt like a lady. A single lady had her own bed. A single lady also had respect, and she wanted to be respected. It was a good thing people in town knew John was the kind of man who wouldn't try to take advantage of her because his home was much further out of the way than she thought it'd be when she agreed to work for him.

He did provide her with a nice little building to the side of his three room house. Her small home was one room, but it was all she needed. He took an old twin-size bed that she guessed used to be his and carried it to the little cabin. Apparently, he used the place to polish the furniture he made, for rows and rows of paints, brushes, and carving knives decorated the shelves. Four table legs rested on the large work table. He had been shaving into the wooden legs, and she stopped for a moment to admire

the intricate ovals and ribbons he had already carved into them. He was a man who took great care into the smallest detail of his work. She admired that about him.

He had dragged out a large trunk for her to put her things in, and her light blue dress, her undergarments and extra pair of shoes made her realize how little she actually owned. Besides a brush, a mirror, a few books and a picture of her son whom she'd given up for adoption, she had nothing else. Well, there was the rest of her cash, but that was only enough to last two weeks. She had tucked the cash and picture under her clothes, but she placed her books on the small table by the bed.

John had also brought out a rocking chair to put by one of the two windows. Then he added another small table, a pitcher of water, a cup, and a wash basin. She brushed her hair and braided it again. One of these days she was going to have to bathe. She had spent most of her life around perfume, and without it now, she became aware of how bad the human body could smell when one went without bathing for a month. She poured some water in the basin and washed her face, realizing too late that she had no towel. She waved the water off her hands while she glanced out the window.

The sun had already risen, and John was leaving his house. She couldn't help but smile. He was sweet. If she had to guess his age, she'd say he was in his mid-twenties. Of course, some people looked older or younger than they actually were.

She opened the door before he had a chance to knock. "I saw you coming so I decided to save you the trouble."

He smiled at her.

"I slept well," she told him, assuming that he'd be wondering. "The bed is more comfortable than any I've ever been in." Partly because it was all hers and no one else's, but she wouldn't tell him that. There was no reason for her to ever tell him about her past.

He nodded and motioned to his house.

“Breakfast?” she guessed.

He nodded.

“I can make eggs and fry up anything you got. I can eat just about anything too. I’m not picky.”

When he pointed back to her new home, she tried to decipher what he wanted, but his meaning eluded her. “I don’t understand.”

He stepped forward, causing her to take a step back.

The first thought that flashed through her mind as he entered the place was that she might have been wrong about him. Perhaps he did expect payment in the same form other men had. Stunned, she watched him. No. She wouldn’t do it again. She’d rather hightail it right back to town. She didn’t come all this way to return to a life of prostitution.

But instead of walking to her bed, he collected his saws and hammers and left the dwelling.

She immediately released her breath, grateful that she’d been wrong. He was clearing out the rest of his things. She waited to see what he did with them before she gathered a couple containers of paint and took them to the shed.

“Since I’m kicking you out of your workshop, I might as well help,” she explained when she saw his puzzled expression as he set the saws and hammers on some nails lining the walls.

He shook his head and motioned to his home.

“Oh. You want me to cook while you transfer your things over here?”

Smiling, he nodded.

“Why didn’t you just say so?” she joked. Handing him the paint, she added, “I’ll get right on it, boss.”

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Yes. I called you ‘boss.’”

He shook his head.

“Well, that is what you are.”

To her surprise, he motioned to his ring finger.

Setting her hands on her hips, she sighed. "You're not one to give up are you? I already said I'm not marrying you, and there's nothing that's going to change my mind on that. Now, you get yourself prepared for that bride of yours. She is happy to be coming out to meet you. I read her letter, so I know this to be true."

Before he could make another motion to protest, she slipped out of the shed. The length to the house from her new little home and the shed was pretty much the same. It took her a total of a minute to get to the house. She opened the screen door and stepped into the kitchen. Curious, she decided to check out the entire place. There was a parlor and a bedroom. It wasn't anything fancy. For a bachelor, she didn't expect fancy, but she had to admit his large bed, dresser with a large mirror above it, the three rocking chairs in the parlor, and chairs around the small kitchen table were made with the same love and care he'd shown those table legs.

She thought lacy curtains and a nice tablecloth would pretty things up a bit. Flowers in a vase would brighten all the rooms. She peaked out the parlor window and noted the wildflowers that grew along the property. Good. She promptly returned to the kitchen and found some well-used containers that would serve nicely as vases. At least they would do until she could go to town and buy some. If she got paid. Maybe she wouldn't get paid. Food and lodging might be her wages. She shrugged. No matter. She could spare a coin from her money.

She set to the task of making the meal, grateful that Preacher Peters' wife had taken the time to instruct her in cooking. Otherwise, she would have been at a complete loss in the kitchen.

When John entered the kitchen, she showed him the plates full of pancakes and eggs. "Ta da! I did it all by myself."

He seemed amused by her comment.

“If you knew how much trouble I went through to learn this, you’d be suitably impressed. Now sit down. This stuff gets cold fast.”

Like a little boy about to receive candy, he rushed to obey her.

She laughed. “I think we’ll get along just fine.”

He must have sensed her humor, for he playfully shrugged.

She placed food on the table and said grace before they began eating. “Do you make a lot of furniture for people in town?”

He glanced up from his fork full of eggs and nodded.

“Frank from the general store said that you also repair things.”

Chewing on his food, he motioned his agreement.

She cut into her pancake and asked, “Do you repair things more than you make furniture?”

He stopped eating for a moment and glanced at the ceiling, as if thinking over his answer. Finally, he nodded.

“You must be a lot of use to the people in town. You do excellent work. I saw those table legs and the furniture you have here. You also have a solid house and buildings. I bet you have people beating down your door just to talk to you.”

He grinned but shook his head.

She didn’t know if that meant he found her comment pleasing or if he was telling her that people weren’t banging down his door to talk to him.

Someone knocked on the door.

Her eyebrows rose. “Well, you must be popular after all.” That only confirmed her suspicions. After all, in the short time she’d been in town, two people had sung his praises. Well, there was that rude group of three men, but she was sure that they were the exception rather than the rule.

He scooted his chair back, but she stopped him with a wave of her hand.

"I'll get it. I'd like to get to know some of the people who come to visit." She smiled and opened the screen door. "Good morning."

Four men who bore a strong resemblance to John stood by the door.

"Let me guess. Brothers or cousins?"

The tallest one laughed. "We're John's brothers."

"All four of you?" She glanced back at John who slowly stood. He didn't seem as happy as she thought he should be. She wondered about it but decided she'd ask about it later. "You got any sisters among you?"

"No, ma'am. We're all there is."

"Five boys. I bet you gave your poor mother a hard time. Do you want to come in?" She moved aside and waved them in.

As they came in, she mentally noted each one. Two seemed to be older than John and the other two seemed to be younger. But they all had brown hair and similar builds. The way they dressed and their facial hair helped to distinguish them from each other. John was the only one who was fully clean shaven, and she thought his eyes were more appealing than the others. That helped too.

They stood in the kitchen, and she suddenly realized how small the space really was. "Maybe we should go to the parlor. There's more room in there."

"Oh, we didn't realize you two were eating," one of them said.

She noted that John had finished his meal. He also stood by the table, lightly drumming his fingers on the table. She couldn't tell what the expression on his face meant but figured he'd like to talk to his brothers. They were family after all.

She cleared her throat. "You five go on to the parlor, and I'll be right along after I get done with this mess."



“You will be joining us, won’t you?” another brother asked.

“Sure. I’d like to meet John’s kin. But you five should catch up on whatever it is brothers talk about when they get together first.” She shooed them to the parlor. “Don’t mind me. I won’t get in the way of men’s talk.”

“Don’t take too long,” one of John’s brothers said.

She wondered why they should care if she joined them or not, but she shrugged off the curiosity and turned her attention to finishing up her breakfast and cleaning up. Most of the talk seemed to revolve around the townsfolk. Since she didn’t know many names, most of it didn’t make much sense to her. But she did find it amusing that they found a way to gossip. In fact, they were just as bad as some women she’d met. That proved that both men and women liked to engage in the activity.

When she completed her task, she entered the parlor.

They all stopped to look at her. Three men sat in the rocking chairs while John and another man stood. John hurried over to her so he could stand right next to her.

“I’m sure he wants to introduce me,” she said. “My name is Eliza. I arrived on the stagecoach yesterday, looking for work at Melissa Peters’.”

“Melissa Peters is pushing up daisies at the cemetery,” the one sitting in a chair with his arms crossed stated.

“I know that now. I didn’t know it then. Anyway, I had nowhere to go, so John offered me a job. I assure you that we are not behaving indecently. I’m staying out at that building over there.” She pointed in the direction of her new home.

“Oh, we have no doubt that this arrangement is platonic,” another replied.

She smiled, relieved. “That’s good. I don’t want anyone to misunderstand the situation. I know that John’s mail-order bride will be coming in any day now.”

“What will you do when she does?”

She glanced at John. His jaw was clenched and his body was stiff. Did she say something wrong? Maybe she shouldn't have been so bold in jumping in and introducing herself like that. Directing her attention back to his brothers, she shrugged. "I guess we'll see when she gets here. She may not like another woman hanging around on her property. If she and John wish me to leave at that time, I will."

"We're sure we can find employment for you if that happens," the one who was standing across the room said.

The others indicated their agreement.

"That's awfully nice of you," she said, touched that they even cared about her fate. She looked at John. "You have some great brothers here. I bet you all are great friends."

John didn't look in her direction.

"We all look out for each other," one of his brothers said, directing her attention back to him.

"Especially after Ma and Pa died," another added.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she replied. "I lost my parents when I was fourteen." Not wishing to explain what she did after that, she continued, "I didn't have any siblings, so it's good that you have each other. You look close in age too. Who is who and how old is everyone?"

The one sitting back in his chair spoke up. "I'm Aaron. Thirty-one and the oldest."

She nodded. *The one with the mustache with the long handles is Aaron.*

"He's Guy." Aaron pointed to the brother with a bushy beard. "He's Twenty-nine." Then he motioned to the one who was standing who had a neatly trimmed beard. "That there is Troy. He's twenty-eight."

"Your poor mother. She didn't even get a break between you two," she joked.

They chuckled. Well, everyone did but John who tensed even more—something she didn't think possible.

“Then there’s John. He’s twenty-five. Actually, he just turned twenty-five a week ago.”

She jabbed him in the arm, hoping to ease his tension. “I should make you a cake.”

His eyes met hers and there was no denying that he wasn’t at all pleased with what was happening.

Aaron leaned forward and motioned to the youngest brother who had a trim mustache. “He’s Shawn. He’ll be eighteen in two months.”

“So you’re the one that decided to give your mother a break. Good for you,” she said.

“Yeah. Good for him.” Guy shot John an amused look.

Something wasn’t quite right. John was much too stiff, and his brothers were much too relaxed. One thing she learned long ago was that family dealings weren’t any of her business. As it was, she already put her nose in where it didn’t belong. Now it was time to leave the brothers to themselves.

“I thank you all for making me feel welcome,” she said, ready to bolt for the door. “I’ll see you again when you stop by.” Next time, she wouldn’t make a nuisance of herself.

“You don’t have to leave,” the one named Troy spoke up.

She shifted from one foot to the other. “I’d better. I have some personal business to attend to.” There. No man wanted to insist a woman stick around when she had *personal business* to do.

“It was nice meeting you, Eliza,” Aaron called out.

The others voiced their agreement.

She didn’t even bother looking in John’s direction as she thanked them and left. She breathed a sigh of relief as soon as the door swung shut behind her as she made her way across the grass to her new home. She’d wait until they left before she asked John what else he wanted her to do to earn her keep. For the moment, she wasn’t needed. And whatever was going on, she was glad to be out of it.

## *Chapter Four*



John wished they hadn't come out. This was exactly what he feared when he and Eliza stalled in town yesterday, and since she refused to marry him, his brothers were much too interested in her, especially Troy. At least Aaron and Guy were married. Shawn was too young. That meant he had to worry about Troy.

He turned his attention from the door Eliza just walked through so he could face his brothers.

"She sure is a fine looker," Shawn commented. "How old do you think she is?"

"Too old for you," Aaron remarked. "Most likely, she's about twenty-five." His gaze shifted from John to Troy. "Looks like you two have some competition."

Troy snorted. "As if there's a real choice to be had."

John's face flushed in anger. Naturally, Troy assumed she was going to end up with him. This was exactly what John feared.

Just because he couldn't talk, did it really make him undesirable to women?

"Of course, there's no real choice," Guy spoke up. "John's expecting a mail-order bride. He's as good as married."

Shawn smirked at Troy. "Only she didn't show, did she?" He glanced at John. "She didn't come at all, or did she meet you and decide it wasn't going to work?"

John shook his head. He didn't want to discuss it with them.

"If she'd shown up, we would have heard about it," Shawn said nonchalantly as he placed his hands behind his head. "The marshal's mail-order bride came in with her aunt, and Eliza came too. There wasn't a fourth woman."

"That's a tough break," Aaron told John. "Maybe you should post another ad. The next one might come out. There must be one woman who wouldn't mind marrying a man who can't talk. Sometimes my wife wishes I'd shut up. A mute might be ideal."

"I doubt it," Troy stated. "The sooner John gets used to being single, the better."

"That's not true," Aaron replied. "Daphne did say she'd come out, even after I wrote about his handicap."

"But she decided against it," Troy added.

"Maybe the next one won't. Maybe we're going about this all wrong. Maybe we should include he's mute in the ad. Then whoever replies, we know she's prepared."

"You're wasting John's time and money. Leave it alone. Besides, he's happy as things are."

"He is not."

"He is too. Why, it's peaceful out here, and he makes a good living. In fact, I bet he makes more than us with his odd jobs."

"He's standing in the room," Shawn intervened.

"We know," Troy said.

"Then why are you talking about him as if he's not here?"

"Because he can't talk. We can't have a real conversation with him."

"He's mute, not dumb," Guy added.

"And how is he going to talk to us?" Troy looked at John. "How is your day so far, John?"

*Leave. All of you need to go home.* If John could talk, that's exactly what he'd tell them. Instead, he glared at Troy.

"See," Troy said. "He just stands there and watches people. He's spooky."

"He's not spooky," Guy argued.

"Are you kidding? None of the kids will talk to him. They even have a rhyme they made up about him. It goes—"

"Enough!" Aaron snapped. "Our parents would be rolling over in their graves if they knew about this conversation." He stood up. "We wanted to see Eliza for ourselves. We heard she was the prettiest little thing in town, and darned if that isn't the most accurate statement I've ever heard. But Troy, if you expect her to consider you, you'd better shape up."

"I'd do better if I didn't have the lot of you chaperoning me," Troy dryly replied. "I wanted to come alone, but you all had to stick your noses into my business."

"You should thank us for coming out," Guy said. "Otherwise, you would have made a fool of yourself."

Troy narrowed his eyes at him.

John hastened to the kitchen and grabbed a broom. When he returned, he banged it on the floor, immediately stopping Guy and Troy from getting into another fight. When they grew silent, he pointed to the door.

"Let's get out of here," Aaron said, standing up.

Shawn followed suit and also stood. "Yeah, the last thing he needs to lose is another chair because you two couldn't keep your tempers down," he told Guy and Troy.

Relieved, John watched as they left. Now that they met Eliza, they could stay in town. He set the broom back in the kitchen and rubbed his eyes. He hated it when they came out. Getting them gathered into one room was like waiting for dynamite to explode. Thankfully, Troy never came out alone. He knew that Troy thought he had limited mental abilities. Just because he couldn't talk, it didn't mean he didn't understand what was going on around him.

Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, he decided to see where Eliza went. He frowned when he reached the screen door. Eliza stood a few feet from the house. She had collected a handful of flowers but stopped when Troy approached her.

Before he had a chance to think about it, he strode out of the house, not bothering to look at his other brothers who stopped on their way to their horses to watch what he'd do. He didn't care what they thought. A woman like Eliza didn't come his way every day. In fact, she'd never come his way until the day before, and he wasn't stupid enough to lie down and give her up to his brother.

"If you need anything at all, be sure to let me know," Troy told her.

"Well, that's very kind of you," Eliza replied.

John clenched his jaw. Did her smile mean she looked forward to seeing Troy again? He stepped up to her.

She jerked. "Oh, John. You gave me a good scare. I didn't even hear you coming."

Troy's eyebrows furrowed. "He's sneaky that way."

"Then you'd better watch your back. You don't know when he's coming," she replied, chuckling. She turned to John and showed him the purple and white flowers. "I hope you don't mind but I thought I'd collect some flowers to put into your home. Flowers brighten up the place, don't you think?"

He smiled at her and nodded. *Take that, Troy. She's bringing flowers into my house, not yours.* Still, he realized he had no yellow

flowers for her to choose from. He'd have to rectify that. He thought he'd seen some along the small creek winding through his property. He'd go back there before the day was over to check on that.

"Come on, Troy," Guy called out, sounding annoyed. "We have to get back."

"I'll see you around." Without a glance in John's direction, Troy tipped his hat in her direction and approached his horse.

Shawn whispered something to him.

"Shut up," he growled before he got on his steed.

John relaxed. Good. They'd be gone...at least for awhile. Maybe long enough for him to convince Eliza to marry him. Then Troy would have to stay away for good.

Eliza waited until his brothers were out of earshot before she spoke. "Do they come around often?"

He shook his head.

"Then it must be good when they do." She picked up a couple more purple flowers before she turned back to him. "I'm sorry I interfered. I should have let the five of you be by yourselves."

He wondered why she said that so he lifted his hands, palms up and gave her a questioning look.

"Naturally, I was in the way. They came by to see you, not me."

Before he could protest, she turned back to the flowers. What did it matter what she assumed? He couldn't explain it, nor did he really care to. If she knew that Troy wanted to get to know her better, then she might consider the possibility of being with him, and if she did that... John frowned. He didn't like that idea at all. Maybe it was best to let her think what she did. Then she'd leave whenever Troy came around in the future. It'd give John a better chance with her, though it was probably wrong for him to manipulate things like he was.



She straightened up and warmly smiled at him. She was so beautiful. He'd love to wake up every morning and see her smile at him like that. Fine. So maybe he'd have to pull some strings until she agreed to marry him. But he'd be good to her. He wasn't exactly sure what husbands did to care for their wives, but he could learn.

"I think these will be enough for your home. They'll smell nice too." Closing her eyes, she lifted the bouquet to her nose and inhaled. When she opened them, her brown eyes were sparkling. "There's nothing as wonderful as fresh flowers."

*No. There's nothing as wonderful as you.*

"I'll get out of your way so you can go about your day as you usually do. I'll yell out for you when lunch is ready. Is noon alright for that?"

He nodded.

"I'll holler for you at noon."

He wanted to follow her in the house and join her in whatever she planned but figured she must not want him nearby since she specifically said she'd call for him when she was ready to be with him again. Sighing, he dragged his feet to the shed. Noon suddenly seemed a long way off.

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Eliza finished making the bean soup and loaf of bread before she spread out the nice lacy green tablecloth she'd found tucked away at the back of the cupboard while she examined the kitchen to see what she could make. She found containers for the flowers and placed a bouquet in each room. Pulling back the heavy drapes in his bedroom, she realized that the place needed a good scrubbing. She already knew she had her work cut out for her in the kitchen and parlor, but the bedroom came as a surprise for he had made it a habit of putting all his things in their proper

place. The darkness of the room hindered anyone's ability to see the faded walls.

Paint. The whole place needed a fresh coat of paint. She thought a nice cheery yellow would do for the kitchen. A nice soothing green would work for the parlor and maybe the bedroom too. She'd scrub the hardwood floors too so they would look much better.

She grew tired at the thought of all the work she'd end up doing but already knew it would be worth it. The furniture was so beautiful. John needed a house to go with it. As she left the house to find him, she calculated the cost for everything, remembering the curtains she wanted to put up too.

She found John in the shed. He was painting the table he had just completed. She whistled. "This is the prettiest table I've ever seen. The person you're making it for will be pleased."

He looked up from his brush and smiled at her.

She cocked her head to the side and studied him. "You know, you're a heartbreaker when you smile."

His eyes grew wide.

She laughed. "Hasn't anyone ever told you that your whole face lights up when you smile?"

He shook his head.

"Well, I'm sure your mother did at some point. Once I trim that shaggy hair of yours, you'll be one of the best looking men in town. You just wait. That Daphne's going to take one look at you and thank her lucky stars she came out to marry you."

His smiled faltered.

"Oh, don't give up hope. She's coming."

He shook his head and pointed at her.

She sighed. What in the world was he trying to tell her? "That's it. We're starting you on your lessons today. The sooner you learn to read and write, the sooner I can understand everything you're trying to tell me." She waved him to the house. "When you're done with that table, come on into the house.

Lunch is ready. It's nothing fancy, mind you, but I just started learning to cook."

He nodded and motioned to the unpainted part of the table.

"You're right. It won't take long. Just come in when you're done. I have a surprise for you."

His eyebrows rose in interest.

Who could resist a surprise? She grinned. "After you finish the table."

He immediately dipped the brush into the paint and continued his work.

While she walked back to the house, she made a mental note to ask him about making the purchases to get his house looking better. The outside of his house was in shape, so he obviously cared about its appearance. That should make her job of talking to him easier.

Ten minutes after she spread out the meal for them to eat, he entered the house.

"Do you only wear a hat when you go into town?" she asked.

He nodded.

"It's fun to feel the sunlight on your face. Is that why you do it?"

He shook his head.

"I guess the reason doesn't matter." She clapped her hands and turned to the table. "Do you notice anything different?"

A smile spread across his face as he pointed to the flowers at the center of the table.

"Anything else?" she pressed, enjoying this game.

His eyes grew wide and he touched the tablecloth.

"You're right. I found it in the cupboard. Was it your mother's?"

He nodded.

“I bet she was a good woman.”

He nodded again, looking sad for a moment.

She sighed. Her son would never know about her. As she requested, Matilda and Harvey Wright raised them to believe he was their son. He'd be twelve now. She hoped he was happy. The baby picture of him was all she had.

John approached her, his face sympathetic as he brushed a tear from her cheek.

She quickly touched her face. She didn't realize she was crying. Laughing off her tears, she waved her hand at him. “Don't mind me. I get sentimental when I think of mothers.” She took his hand and led him to the parlor. “Look. I put flowers in here too. Don't they brighten up the room?” Then she took him to his bedroom. “Do you ever open those drapes?”

He shook his head.

“You should. This room faces north. That means you don't have to worry about the sunlight coming directly into this room, so you can enjoy it throughout the day. I'd like to paint the rooms and get lacy curtains. I love lace. It's so pretty. Will you let me do that?”

He pointed to himself and made a painting motion.

“You'll paint too?”

He nodded and squeezed her hand.

Her face flushed. She didn't realize she was still holding his hand. Before he got the wrong idea, for she had no intention of leading him on, she gently removed her hand from his. “Then it's alright with you if I do this to your home?”

He reached for her hand again.

“John,” she warned. Despite his pleading look, she shook her head. “Save that for Daphne. Now, come and eat.”

## *Chapter Five*



John didn't want to take Eliza to town the following week. What if she went there and decided she didn't want to come back? What if she met a man there that appealed to her? Troy wasn't the only single man in the area. There were a couple of others who'd like nothing more than take a bride like Eliza home.

Like usual, he parked the wagon on the outskirts of the main part of town. And again, he stopped her in front of the church and pointed to it.

She gave him her typical 'no' look.

Why did she have to keep doing that? Couldn't she just say yes and marry him? Daphne wasn't going to show up, and even if she did, he no longer wanted to marry her. He wanted to marry Eliza. Eliza was beautiful. Eliza was full of life and joy. She thought it was the flowers that brightened up his house, but it was really her that did the trick. He hadn't realized how empty his

life had been until she came into it. Now he didn't want to go back to the way things were before.

He took her hand and nodded to the church. He even used the expression on his face that she claimed reminded her of an adorable puppy. She seemed to like that expression.

She laughed but shook her head. "John, you know I'm not marrying you. As it is, I missed the Sunday worship. Why won't you go to that?"

He should have driven her to town on Sunday. Maybe that was why she refused to marry him. But if she knew...If she understood the way people stepped away from him. Not everyone was as kind as Addy or Frank. Some people would rather pretend he didn't exist. It wasn't a situation he exactly sought out, and being in a small church would force that. He recalled how his family all sat in their own row while he grew up. People found reasons to sit away from them. But if Eliza sat with him, it wouldn't be so bad.

He nodded and pointed to the church.

"I don't believe you. You really don't stop when you set your mind to something, do you?"

He shook his head and motioned to it again.

She put her hands on her hips and gave him a scolding look.

He looked at the door. Next to it was a sign. He recognized the letter 'S' from what she'd taught him. Walking to the sign, he pointed to it and then turned his gaze to her.

"That's the word 'Sunday'."

Good! He nodded and tapped the word.

"Oh. You'll drive me to church this Sunday?"

Excited, he nodded. Then he pointed to himself.

"You'll come too?"

He grinned.

She raised an eyebrow. "You wouldn't be doing this to get me to marry you, would you?"

The thought hadn't occurred to him. He was thinking of sitting next to her. He liked being close to her. Shaking his head, he walked back to her.

"I don't know. I think you'd do anything to get me to agree to marry you."

She was right on that assumption, but even if he could speak, he wouldn't tell her that. He just shrugged.

"John, you are the sweetest man I've ever met, but it can't be. There are things about me that you don't know. Believe me, this is for the best."

She turned from him and proceeded down the street before he could argue with her. He didn't care what things were in her past. All he knew was how she treated him and how wonderful she was. What more could there be in order for him to love her?

"You know what your problem is?" she asked when he caught up to her. "You haven't been around a lot of women. I've seen it before. A man who's spent most of his life alone sees the first woman he meets and thinks he loves her. Most of those men end up regretting it because they didn't wait for the right one. I'm not the right one, John."

So she wouldn't marry him today. He wished that Aaron had never talked him into posting an ad for a wife. If he hadn't, then there would be no Daphne and Eliza wouldn't cling to the notion that he needed to wait for her. Daphne wasn't going to show up. But Eliza had and he wanted her.

After she cut his hair, she took him to a mirror and said he was the best looking man she'd ever seen. That made him feel as if he really was attractive. He'd never felt that way before. Then she was teaching him how to read and write. That meant she thought he was smart enough to learn. No one else had taken the time to teach him because they thought they'd be wasting their time.

Why would he want someone else? Eliza made him feel as if he mattered, and he liked that. He might be a fool in some areas, but this wasn't one of them. Eliza had the warmest heart of anyone he'd ever met, and he wasn't going to let her go without doing his best to convince her to marry him. She was so completely wonderful.

Eliza nudged him in the arm.

Blinking, he turned his attention to what she was saying.

"Where do you buy paint?"

He took her hand to lead the way, but she shook her head.

"You can't do that here. You don't want people to get the wrong idea."

No. He wanted people to get the *right* idea, and him and Eliza being together was the *right* idea. How he wished he could say it. But he couldn't because he was mute. Many times he hated his handicap, and this was one of them.

"Just walk and I'll walk beside you," she said.

Reluctant, he obeyed. As they neared the center of town, his gaze fell on several groups of people who loitered around the buildings. Most of them refused to look in his direction, though they took note of Eliza. He glanced at her, wondering if she noticed that she held their attention...especially that of the men.

He stopped in front of Old Willy's place and knocked on the door.

William Jafferty opened the door and grinned. "Mornin', John. How are you doin'? And who's this pretty lady with you?"

"I'm Eliza Sweet," she replied, smiling in her usual pleasant way.

John really wished she wouldn't be charming with everyone she met, but he figured that's the way she'd always been. Still, if they were married, he'd feel much better about that.

The forty-year-old widower ran a hand through his thinning brown hair and straightened his sloppy clothes. "If I'd known you were goin' to bring over a lady, I'd have shaved. I



heard you got a fine woman helping out around your property.” He smiled at her. “In a small town, word spreads like wildfire.”

Great. Now John had to worry about Old Willy too. And suddenly, William didn’t seem so old anymore. John didn’t like that either.

“I figured that much,” Eliza assured him. “But even in bigger places, word gets around.”

William smiled at her. “My name is William, but people call me Willy. You can too.”

“Willy is a fine name. I like it.”

John frowned. Did she like the name ‘John’?

Of course, Old Willy looked flattered. He turned his attention to John. “Did you come by for some paint?”

He nodded.

“What colors?” Willy directed his gaze to Eliza.

“A soft yellow for the kitchen. A light green for the parlor. And,” she glanced at John, “did you want green or blue for the bedroom?”

He pointed to the sky.

“Blue. Like the color of the sky today. It’s such a beautiful color, isn’t it? And soothing too.”

“That it is, ma’am. But I like red too.” He motioned to her hair and winked. “You’re the first redhead I’ve ever seen, which is too bad. It’s a great color on a woman.”

She laughed and fingered the braid that hung over her shoulder. “You certainly have a way with words, Willy. Why, I bet you get a lot of kisses from your wife.”

He blushed. “Oh, well, Bethann passed on to be with the Lord a good two years ago.”

She stopped laughing and grew serious. “I am terribly sorry to hear that.”

“She was a fine woman. We had twenty fine years together, and she gave me three terrific children. But the Lord has

provided and I'm doin' alright. I should probably be lookin' to get married again."

John tensed. Could Old Willy be more obvious?

"Maybe you should put in for a mail-order bride," Eliza replied. "I hear lots of men do that when they are this far out west."

John relaxed.

"Maybe. Who knows what the future will bring?" He turned to John. "You need any paint or stain for the furniture?"

John reached for the wallet tucked into his back pocket.

"Not this time, John. You took care of that wall for me, and I didn't have money to pay you. This will make us even. Deal?"

John nodded and put his wallet back into his pocket.

"Well, that's really nice," Eliza commented. "Two friends helping each other out."

Old Willy grinned. "We do what we can to help each other out around here. I'll load the usual amount and the extra paint into your wagon while you two continue on in town."

John nodded again. He was glad Old Willy did that for him. Old Willy had the cart to lug those heavy cans around, and he understood that John didn't like to park his wagon inside the town limits. So even if the older man was interested in Eliza, he was still a good man. Still, John had no intention of letting the man have her.

He was grateful to depart from the man's house. At least ordering the lumber from Greg would be safe. Greg was already married. When they reached the lumber store, he motioned for her to go first through the open door. He waved to Greg who was setting a stack of freshly cut rectangular boards by the counter.

"It's nice to see you, John," Greg called out as he stood up. He sauntered over to them. "You must be Miss Sweet."

"I am," Eliza said.

"I'm Greg Stevens. It's a pleasure to meet you." He turned to John. "Do you want the regular order?"

John held up two fingers.

"You're going to double the order this time?" Greg asked.

John nodded.

"Business must be treating you well." Smiling, he made his way to the counter and took out his ledger. "I can have it delivered tomorrow morning around ten. Does that work?"

John nodded and pulled out his wallet.

"Let me mark down the transaction." He glanced at Eliza. "In business, it's important to keep track of all your expenses and profits. Expenses are what you spend money on and profits are what you make."

John noticed a flicker of irritation cross her face. "Really?"

Greg didn't seem to catch the sharp tone in her voice, for he had returned to his paperwork.

John sensed the tension in the air. Eliza wasn't pleased but she kept quiet. He wondered what was wrong. He wondered if she would tell him on their way home. He wished he could talk so he could ask her about it.

Greg finished writing and handed him the paper and pencil. "All I need is your 'X' and the total comes to \$2."

John took the pencil and paper and got ready to put the 'X' where he usually did when Eliza grabbed his arm.

"That's the funniest looking two I've ever seen," she said, obviously upset. She looked at John. "Do you know your numbers?"

Embarrassed, he shook his head. No one had taught him that either.

"Mr. Stevens, I happen to be literate, and I've learned a couple of things when it comes to business. That is a three. You are trying to make a fifty percent profit off a man's inability to read. Now, I understand that you are using a shrewd business

sense to rip someone off, but this is illegal and I don't mind finding the marshal so I can discuss this matter with him. I believe his wife, Charity Grooms, might like to see me again. I did accompany her on the stagecoach ride to this place."

John glanced from her to Greg, one of the few people he had believed to be a friend. His face grew red in both anger and shame. Why would Greg do this to him?

Greg glared at her for a moment before he turned his attention to John. He smiled. "Let me see that." He took the paper and clucked his tongue. "I meant to write a two. Thank you for catching my error, Miss Sweet."

John watched as he erased the old number to write in the new one. Now John knew the difference between a two and a three. This was one lesson he'd never forget.

Eliza smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. "I'm teaching John how to read and write. I think it'll be good for his own business. Maybe he can even keep his own ledger and write out contracts too. Then he'd be a real professional."

Greg gave a curt nod as he set the paper aside. "Yes. It'll be good for your business, John."

John decided not to give any gestures. Instead, he joined Eliza and left the store. How long had Greg been doing that to him? Like a fool, he'd just handed Greg his money and let Greg give him the change. He knew that \$2 was a fair price. He knew that \$3 was too much. But without being able to recognize the symbols and what they meant, he hadn't been able to deduct whether or not Greg was being honest with him. He suspected it happened a lot. And Greg hadn't known Eliza could read. John's gaze traveled the length of the street where store owners had opened their doors to waiting patrons. Who else had ripped him off?

Eliza let out a low sigh before asking, "Where do I buy curtains or have someone make curtains? I never learned to do any sewing."

Addy did that. He pointed down the street to the house that stood next to Melissa Peters' home.

"But Melissa's not alive."

He shook his head.

"Addy?"

He nodded. He liked that she caught on fast to what he meant, and he liked that she looked out for him. *I need to learn to read and write. I need to learn my numbers.* He had gone along with her plan to teach him partly because it meant that he could be near her, but now, in light of what just happened with Greg, he realized this was a necessity. He didn't like being a fool, and if he could read, he'd have caught the error—whether Greg intentionally did it or not. Sadly, he suspected Greg did it on purpose.

After they went to Addy who seemed more than happy to make the curtains, they went to the general store where Eliza picked up some baking supplies. Watching her choose what she'd make took his mind off of Greg. He imagined for a moment that she was his wife and that they'd end up going home together to snuggle...to kiss...and then...

"I think this will do," she said, interrupting his thoughts.

He walked over to the counter where Frank tallied their total. When Frank announced the amount, John looked at Eliza who gave him a slight nod. Comforted in her answer, he handed Frank the money and was reassured, once again, when she indicated that Frank gave him the right amount of change. Good. At least, he could trust Frank, which was good because he liked Frank and didn't want to think ill of him.

John lifted the sacks of grocery items and followed Eliza out the door.

On their way back to the wagon, a couple of men lounging by the post office snickered at John. "And that's what they call 'beauty and the beast'."

John stopped and glared at Michael Reeves and Larry Gordon. His brother Aaron had warned him to stay away from those two, and for the most part, he managed. But once in awhile, he ran into them and ignored their taunting. Today, after what happened with Greg, he was especially sensitive to their comments.

“Did I hurt your feelings there, boy?” Michael asked, obviously not caring either way.

Eliza halted her steps and turned to them. “Is there a problem, mister?”

Larry examined her from head to toe. “Not with you, ma’am. You’re downright perfect.”

She didn’t respond.

Michael looked at her. “You do know you’re with a retard, don’t you?”

Her jaw dropped. “A...a what?”

“A retard,” he slowly said.

“A woman as pretty as you can find other places to stay,” Larry said. “You don’t need to settle with someone like him.”

This was exactly what John was afraid of. They were giving her ideas she didn’t need to be having. He caught her attention and nodded in the direction of his wagon.

The two men laughed.

“Just like a pup,” Larry said. “He gets so excited when anyone pays him the slightest bit of attention.”

She placed her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at them. “You owe John an apology.”

“I would apologize if he could understand me, but he can’t. It’s why he never went to school. The boy is dumb.”

“Like a dog,” Michael agreed. “You can’t do much to train him either.”

She slapped both of them before John had time to blink.

Larry put his hand to his cheek, stunned, while Michael bolted to his feet.

John quickly stood between her and Michael.

The doctor who worked next to the post office ran out of the building. "Hold it right there." As soon as he reached them, he said, "I don't know what's going on here, but you'd better stop right now. I won't have this kind of conduct while I'm around. I have enough sick people to tend to without you two beating each other up. Now, I suggest you leave the matter be and go home."

Once John was sure that Michael wouldn't harm Eliza, he stepped back.

The doctor nodded. "Good. Go on home."

"Like a good little doggy," Michael hissed.

The doctor shot him a warning look which made him stop his taunting.

Eliza shook her head but obediently walked down the street. The dust kicked at her heels since she practically ran. John went after her and was glad when they reached the wagon.

Now she knew. She knew what most people thought of him. They assumed that if he couldn't talk, he couldn't think...or feel. This only added to his shame.

He put the bags into the wagon and helped her into the seat.

To his surprise, she pulled his hand closer to her. Leaning forward, she said, "Don't you mind them. They're not worth your time."

He stared into her eyes, noting the tears that had formed in them. He nodded. He knew. He always knew. But he was grateful to know that she knew it too.

"Good." She let go of his hand and faced forward.

He got into the wagon. Unlike the first time he took her to his property, she was quiet. He wondered what she was thinking. At one point, he even nudged her arm so she'd look at him before he tapped his head with his finger.

"Nothing. I just don't feel like talking," she replied.

He decided not to press the issue. She had a right to keep her thoughts to herself. But he sure wished he could tell her his.



## *Chapter Six*



Eliza turned the knob on the kerosene lamp so the light grew brighter. Then she poured another cup of water for her and John and set them at the table where John sat with a stack of papers in front of him. He was currently writing the letter M on the blank sheet in front of him.

It had been three days since their venture into town, and she noticed how serious he got about learning to read and write after that. The thought that someone would go out of their way to rip off someone who couldn't find out what was going on left her sick to her stomach. John was much too trusting of people. But then, did he have a reason not to be? At least until she clued him into what Greg Stevens was doing to him?

It made her want to take him in her arms and protect him from the harsher realities of the world. He seemed to be in such a sheltered environment. In some ways, she envied him that. She hadn't been that way since she was fourteen and her parents died.

Nothing was the same for her after that, and there was no turning back the clock and doing things differently. Besides, just how much could a fourteen year old do?

She slowly exhaled and sat across from him. "It's late. We should call it a night when you're done with that sheet of paper."

He didn't answer her. Instead, he carefully wrote another M on the paper. His letters were still sloppy, but she noted the progress.

"You're doing great, John. Why, you're going to master this in no time."

Again, he just continued writing, not bothering to acknowledge her statement.

She sighed and took a drink of the cool water. A slight breeze blew in from the window. July was a hot month and it took the nights to cool things off enough so she could be comfortable. The humidity wasn't so bad up here though. That was nice.

Her eyelids grew heavy. She wondered what time it was. She should've checked the clock when she was getting the water. Yawning, she forced her eyes open and stretched the muscles in her neck. When she was done, she glanced at John who had stopped writing to look at her.

She straightened up. "Do you need something?"

He motioned to her and then pretended to be asleep.

"Yes, I'm tired. We've been doing this for a good five hours. I'm ready to sleep, aren't you?"

He shook his head but stood up and helped her up. He put his arm around her shoulders and led her to the kitchen door.

She was too tired to protest. Instead, she leaned against him as they left his house. The night was quiet except for a round of crickets chirping. Saturday night was so peaceful out here, unlike the rowdy noise in the saloon back in Omaha. One thing was for sure, she didn't miss that place.

John's steps came to a halt.

"What is it?" She yawned and glanced up at him.

He pointed to the sky.

She smiled. There was a full moon out tonight and the thousands, if not millions, of stars sparkled in the clear night sky. "It's really something, isn't it? Every time I look up there, I feel insignificant. We're so small in the whole scheme of things."

His gaze met hers and he grinned back.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

He nodded and then touched her cheek, softly tracing her skin with his fingers.

"You think I'm beautiful too?"

He nodded again.

It was such a touching thing for him to tell her in his own way, and for a moment, she thought if Daphne never did show, then maybe he'd be free to marry her after all. She quickly blinked and shoved the thought away. She'd been a prostitute for goodness' sakes. He'd never even kissed a woman. He deserved someone as pure as him.

So she decided that she wouldn't acknowledge the compliment. "Will you take me to church tomorrow?"

A frown crossed his face before he nodded.

She sighed and looked down at the grass which blew softly in the breeze. She didn't like hurting him. Why he figured she was the one for him, she didn't know. There was nothing special about her. In fact, in many ways, she was far from ideal. And she'd read Daphne's letter. Now there was a lady. A real lady. One who'd never get into a man's bed unless she'd already exchanged vows with him.

Once again, Eliza wondered how things might have played out if her parents hadn't died when she was fourteen. Then her mother's sister wouldn't have taken her in, and then she'd never have to deal with her uncle.

Taking a deep breath, she reminded herself that she'd survived. Her life was better now. Preacher Peters assured her that God could work all things for good for those who loved Him. And she did love Him. That's why she wouldn't rob John of Daphne...or Daphne of John. They would do well together. They'd have a house full of children. Lots of laughter and love. An ideal family. A situation she could never have.

"Will you take me to church tomorrow?" she softly asked.

He winced.

"I know you don't like the way some of those people are in town. I bet they go to church too, don't they?"

He nodded.

"Do you think God is like them?"

He shrugged.

"He's not, John. You can't base God on what people do. It's people who aren't perfect. And I've learned that just because someone claims to be a Christian, it doesn't mean they'll act like one."

Which explained the minister and other pristine looking church men who had arranged for her to accommodate their needs in an out-of-the-place area. They didn't want to look bad on Sundays...or in front of people who knew them. At the time, she didn't care about God, so it didn't matter to her. How things changed in the span of three months from the moment she met Preacher Peters.

"Do you mind if I take myself to town?"

He shook his head in a way that she knew meant he didn't want her to go without him.

"I'd like to go to church, John. I know I have my Bible, but it's not the same as going."

Slowly exhaling, he finally nodded.

"You'll take me?"

He indicated his agreement.

"I'll be with you. You won't have to face them alone. And there are some good people there. Addy and Frank attend, I bet. Then there's Charity. I met her on the stagecoach I came on. She married the marshal, you know."

He nodded again.

"She's nice. So is her aunt. I don't think it'll be as bad as you fear, and if people start giving you a hard time, we'll just leave. I promise."

Taking her hand in his he motioned to her ring finger and looked at her with the all-too-familiar question in his eyes.

She groaned. "No. I'm not going to marry you." She chuckled. "I'm going to my quaint home before you get even more bold, mister. I need to go to sleep. I'll see you at sunrise."

She quickly ran to her home before he could stop her.

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Eliza put on her best dress, which happened to be her blue one. She pulled her hair up and tucked it under her hat. A part of her was apprehensive about going to church. She'd gone to Preacher Peters' church for about a month and a half before she left Omaha. The people there had known about her past and had accepted her. But the people here didn't know anything about her. This was a clean slate. Even so, she had to quench the nervous anxiety in her body. She took a deep breath and looked at herself in the small mirror.

"I can do this. I am a lady now."

She picked up her small purse and left her home. She made it halfway across the yard to John's house when she saw him emerge from the small barn. Smiling, she watched him as he led the geldings and the wagon in her direction. He really was an attractive man, and that was so much more evident when he dressed up in a dark blue suit.

She waited until he reached her before she spoke. "Thank you for taking me. I promise that when we get back, I'll make you a little something special for dessert."

To her surprise, he didn't smile, but when his eyes met hers, she understood that he didn't want to go but was going for her sake. She considered saying that they could stay. Then she thought that if he was going to get over his aversion to town and some of the people in it, he needed to go and face them. The best way to conquer a fear was to confront it.

She wasn't sure what to talk to him about on their way to town, so she rambled on about everything from the beautiful weather to the deer she saw leaping across the fields. He listened...at least she thought he listened. He could have been tuning her out. It was hard to tell if a man who didn't talk at all was paying attention or not unless he made eye contact or did a gesture. When she stared at him, his focus remained on the dirt path in front of them. And so, she continued to ramble just to ease the tension.

When they entered the church, she noticed the shocked looks on the people's faces. Well, this she could handle. She'd dealt with those types of stares before whenever she ventured out of the saloon in Omaha.

She searched the group and found Charity and her aunt. Reaching for John's hand, she led him forward. "Good morning, Charity, Bethany. How are you doing?"

Bethany was the first to answer. "Eliza! How good it is to see you again. We wondered how you fared."

Eliza's body relaxed. It felt good to be talking to people she knew. Not that she knew them well, but after spending a long time in a stagecoach with them, she felt that they had become friends. She motioned to John. "This is my friend and employer. Did you hear what happened to Melissa Peters, the one I was supposed to work for?"

"Yes, and what a terrible tragedy that was."

“It was terrible. I’m sure she’s singing with the angels now.”

“Yes.”

A moment of silence hung in the air as Eliza tried to think of what to say next. Finally, she patted John on the arm. “You know, it was really a godsend when John ran into me in town. I don’t know what I would have done if he hadn’t.”

“Oh. That’s good,” Charity said, appearing to be uncertain.

Eliza searched her mind for another topic and quickly found it. “How are things with the marshal?”

Charity blushed. “Ralph is a very kind and good man. I’m lucky I was his mail-order bride.”

“That’s wonderful! Isn’t that wonderful, John? Apparently, John’s mail-order bride was supposed to come on the same stagecoach we were on but never made it. Maybe she’ll show up on the next one. I read her letter. She sounds like a real nice lady. Who knows? Maybe you two will like her.”

Bethany and Charity exchanged looks that couldn’t be good.

Did they think the same way some others in this town did? That John was stupid just because he couldn’t talk? She couldn’t go through this service without setting them straight. “Excuse us for a moment,” she politely said. She found a pew in the middle of the church and led John to it. “Why don’t you sit here for a bit and I’ll see what’s going on with them,” she whispered.

His eyes grew wide and he shook his head.

“I’ll be right back, John. Just sit tight.”

He obviously wasn’t happy about it but he obeyed her.

She returned to Charity and Bethany who stood with the marshal. “He’s not dumb,” she told them. She didn’t care if they found her manner offensive or not.

“Who?” the marshal asked.

“John Evans.”

“We never said he was dumb,” Charity protested.

Eliza eyed them. “Then why were you put off by him just now?”

“That should be clear,” Charity replied. “You are living in sin. It’s wrong.”

“I am not!” she argued, careful to keep her voice low. “I’m staying in the workshop on his property. I really didn’t have a job, and he gave me one so I could stay here.”

“I don’t know,” Charity slowly said. “It doesn’t seem possible for a man to keep his hands off a woman when there’s no one around.”

Before Eliza could correct her thinking, Ralph threw back his head and laughed. “Charity, my dear, I assure you that John Evans is as safe as they come. He’s not like other men.”

Now Eliza focused her intense stare on him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

He sighed. “He doesn’t have all his lights on.” He tapped his head.

“That’s not true. He can’t talk but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t think like everyone else.”

“I’m two years older than him. We practically grew up together. His parents sheltered him a lot, but we all knew he’d never be like the rest of us.”

She gripped her purse. “I’m teaching him how to read and write.”

“Young children can learn to read and write. I’m not saying that he doesn’t have some things to learn, but he’ll never be like a full-grown adult.”

So this is what he typically ran into. It was no wonder why he protested coming to church today. Her initial impression had been so wrong. When Frank and Addy had spoken well of John, they were the exception to the mentality of this town. She had no idea. But John knew. No wonder he was in a hurry to leave town and didn’t think Daphne would be coming for him.



Eliza looked the marshal square in the eye. "I assure you that John is as normal as any grown male."

He folded his arms and stared right back at her. "So you're saying that you've been sharing a bed with him?"

"No. I'm saying he acts like a grown man. He doesn't act like a child."

"Then you are naïve about men."

Eliza almost laughed. That showed how little he knew, but she could never tell him that. So that was why no one thought anything of her staying on John's property. No one thought he was capable of sexual desire. They thought he had the mentality of a child. Except Charity and Bethany didn't know him at all, so they assumed the worst.

She glanced at John who was sitting with Frank and Addy who were talking to him. Did they think he was like a child too? Or did they realize that even though he did think and feel like a man, he had enough self-control to restrain his urges? She knew that John held back. She knew what the looks he gave her meant, except there was a tenderness that was new to her. He'd never take advantage of her. He was a gentleman.

Eliza returned her attention to Charity and Bethany. "I assure you that I wouldn't engage in that type of behavior. I'm sorry that our time in the stagecoach gave you such a poor impression of me. If you'll excuse me, I'll leave you to yourselves."

Without waiting for them to respond, she joined John.

Frank looked up at her. "Oh, hello there, Miss Sweet. I heard you already met my wife, Addy."

Forcing aside her irritation with the people she'd just been talking to, she smiled. "I didn't realize that, but it's certainly nice to see you again."

"We were asking John if you two would like to come to our home for lunch after the service," Frank offered.

Addy smiled at her. "We'd love to have you both over."

Eliza glanced at John. She couldn't tell what he was thinking but decided that she'd had enough of people for the time being. "Maybe next time. I already set out the ingredients I'm going to use for lunch."

Addy looked disappointed but nodded. "Next time then."

"It looks like everyone's sitting. I guess I should follow suit."

"Do you mind if we sit with you?"

"No."

She stepped past John whose expression remained unreadable and sat next to him, making sure she left enough space between them so people wouldn't get the wrong idea...if that was possible. If everyone assumed he had no romantic inclinations at all, then they probably likened her to sitting with a little boy. The whole thing was absurd.

"You would have liked Melissa," Addy said. "She always spoke of her cousin, the preacher. She was excited about meeting you."

"I looked forward to coming here and meeting her too."

And she had looked forward to arriving to this place. A chance at a new start. And while it was true she got a new start, she also discovered that things were not going to be as pleasant as she'd hoped. Well, things didn't always go according to plan. She'd have to bend and adjust as she had in the past.

Addy talked a little more about Melissa before everyone stood up to sing a couple of hymns. Eliza didn't know the words since she wasn't familiar with them. Beside her, John kept his hands folded in front of him while Addy sang loud enough for all of them. She had a nice voice too.

After the sermon, they sang another hymn and left the building.

Frank shook John's hand. "It was good to see you. I hope you'll come on back, and we mean it about having you and Eliza for lunch next time."

Eliza watched the scene. That meant that Frank considered John an equal, didn't it? He wouldn't be directing that invitation to John if he thought of John as a child. At least, she wouldn't think so.

Addy gave her a hug. "Now if you need anything, you let us know. Anyone who knows a relative of Melissa's is a friend of ours."

"Thank you," Eliza replied.

"Miss Sweet," someone called out.

The voice sounded familiar. She turned and saw one of John's brothers making his way toward them.

"I just wanted to say you look lovely today," he said.

She noted that John stiffened next to her but kept her gaze on the man. "You're Guy, right?"

"Troy," he corrected.

Blushing, she said, "Forgive me, Troy. I've met so many people that it's hard to remember names and faces, and to be honest, all you brothers look so much alike. Well, except for the facial hair, but I can't remember who has a mustache or a beard. John's easy to remember. He doesn't have either one."

Troy smiled. "There's nothing to forgive. I'm sure we overwhelmed you by showing up at the same time."

Addy chuckled. "The five of them together is an impressive sight."

Frank nodded. "They are the only Evans in town, and they're all men too."

"A force to be reckoned with then," Eliza chimed in, slowly feeling better.

"You could say that," Frank joked.

John nudged her in the side.

She turned to him.

He pointed in the direction of his wagon.

"I guess we should get back," she said.

"But I didn't get a chance to talk to you," Troy argued.

Eliza inwardly groaned. Not another Evan's brother being more interested in her than he ought to be. The trouble with this town was that there were more men than women, and apparently, being single had made her an easy target. Why didn't Preacher Peters warn her of this? She might have considered another location...like somewhere out in the middle of nowhere so she could spend the rest of her life alone.

"We'll see you soon I hope," Addy stated. "I'll have the curtains ready for you this Thursday."

"Really?" Eliza did want to hang up those curtains. She looked at John. "Can we come back then and get them?"

John's gaze shifted to Troy and despite his obvious uncertainty, he nodded.

"We'll be by then," she said.

Addy waved good-bye before she left with Frank.

"I could take the curtains out there," Troy offered.

"That might be a good idea," Eliza reflected.

John quickly motioned to her and shook his head. Then he pointed to himself.

She shrugged. "John must have some business he needs to do that day. I'll come in with him." She suspected that wasn't really the case, but she didn't feel like dwelling on John's feelings for her.

"Well, then I'll have to keep an eye out for you," Troy said. "It would be rude if I didn't make you feel welcome. Good day."

She caught the warning look Troy gave John before he passed them to walk down the boardwalk.

Great. Just what she needed. Two men, brothers no doubt, vying for her attention. This was getting much more complicated than it needed to be. Daphne would be the solution to John's interest in her, but if Troy was as persistent as John, then she might have to end up leaving town altogether. She hoped it wouldn't come to that. She had nowhere else to

*Loving Eliza*

go...except back to Omaha, and she didn't relish that, though she might ask Preacher Peters for another place to go.

## *Chapter Seven*



John was working on the last chair for the table he'd made when Aaron stopped by. He glanced out of the small window and saw that Aaron carried something. John wondered what his brother wanted. He set the chair down on the floor and leaned forward so he could see if anyone came with him. He breathed a sigh of relief. Aaron was alone, which meant Troy was safely out of sight.

Eliza said she had gone to do some washing at the creek. He had wanted to join her. Not because he liked to wash clothes but because it meant he could be near her and hear her talk. But she'd protested, saying he needed to finish the chair so he could deliver the complete dining room set to the Chapmans. He also realized his money was getting low, and there hadn't been any house repairs to take care of for over a month. So he stayed in his shed and worked.

Now he left the shed to see what Aaron wanted.

"Good afternoon, John," Aaron greeted.

John motioned to his house.

"I could use a cup of coffee. Alright."

John led him into the kitchen and pumped water into a coffee pot. After he set the pot on the cookstove, he listened to Aaron.

"I haven't seen anything at the post office for you. It's been three weeks and Daphne hasn't showed up. Maybe you should look into another mail-order bride. I brought a paper to look at."

As soon as he was done getting the coffee ready, John glanced over his shoulder and saw Aaron open the paper up.

"I think the school teacher might be a good one. She's a little older than average. That might work to our advantage though. I mean, she won't be as picky as someone who's younger."

John snatched the paper off the table and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, John. I'm not trying to be mean. I know you're as smart as I am."

John shook his head again. That's not what he meant. He picked up a piece of paper and wrote 'Eliza' on it and then pointed to Eliza's little cabin.

Aaron frowned. "You aren't sleeping with Eliza, are you? You know that goes against our values. You can't do that until you're married."

John waved his hand in a way that indicated he wasn't sleeping with her.

"Good." His brother looked relieved. "I don't care what others say. I know you're fully capable of doing it."

For some reason, that made John feel good about himself. Aaron saw him as an equal.

Then Aaron raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to marry Eliza? Is that what you're saying?"

John nodded.

"Troy's not going to like that, you know."

He scowled. What did he care what Troy thought? He picked up the paper full of the mail-order bride ads and wrote a "T" on it before he handed it to Aaron.

Aaron chuckled. "I don't think Troy's going to seek a mail-order bride. He's too interested in Eliza. He talks about her a lot. The only reason he hasn't been out here is because his boss has been working him overtime on the farm."

Well, good. John didn't become a farmhand for that very reason. They could work long and rough hours. He much preferred the idea of setting his own hours and working with things that didn't depend on the weather to grow.

"There is that town social coming up. I suspect Troy will ask her to go with him if you don't give her the invitation first."

He grimaced. That meant he'd have to be around people. He wondered if Eliza would say yes if Troy asked her. The only reason he'd even go was to stop Troy from taking her, and apparently, Aaron knew it or else he wouldn't have brought it up.

Aaron shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you. A pretty woman like Eliza isn't going to be single for long. Even that Old Willy and Buck Stanley are keeping a lookout for her."

That made John's face harden.

"You better get a ring on her finger fast, brother."

John gritted his teeth as he grabbed two cups from the cupboard and slammed them on the counter.

"Let me guess. You've been trying to get her to marry you, but she keeps saying no?"

How could his brother know that? John sighed but didn't deny it.

"Is it because you're mute?"

John shrugged. Maybe. Though for some reason, that didn't seem right. She treated him like Aaron did, as an equal. So no. It couldn't be that. But what was the reason? He sensed that she was hiding something. But he had no way to ask until he learned to write his words out.



“Being mute is not a crime. Don’t be with a woman who judges you on that.”

John nodded. Of course, he wouldn’t. It was bad enough to deal with it from people in town. He refused to deal with it in his own home.

“Good.”

John poured the coffee in the cups and handed one to Aaron.

“Just in case things don’t work with Eliza, you should at least consider these ads.” Aaron picked up the paper. “It looks like there’s some nice women in here. Two especially caught my attention.”

He didn’t have the heart to search for anyone else. He wanted Eliza. No other woman would come close to her.

“I’m going to read these to you. I’m not saying we’re going to write any letters today, but at least think about it. Alright?”

Reluctant, he nodded. Why not? The best thing that could happen was he wouldn’t need to do it. The worst...? Eliza would marry one of the other men in town and leave him alone...to send another letter out requesting a bride. That wasn’t something he relished.

“And to be fair, I’ll show this to Troy too.”

That part made him feel better. John nodded and listened as his brother read the ads to him.

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Two weeks later, Eliza decided it was time to do some painting. “It’s cooler outside than it has been. This way, we won’t sweat as much.”

John thought she might be willing to consider marrying him if he agreed so he quickly got to the task of covering the furnishings so they wouldn’t get paint on them. He glanced at her

dress and thought it would be a shame to get paint on it. She obviously hadn't painted before if she thought her clothes wouldn't suffer.

He went into his bedroom and dug out a trunk full of things from his past, including his mother's old dresses. He knew that he should throw out the clothes his parents wore, but he couldn't bring himself to do it, especially not his mother's things. While he was rummaging around, he found her wedding ring. It was a simple gold band. He lifted it and tried to judge its size. Would it fit Eliza's finger? He quickly shoved it into his pocket and retrieved a dress. It'd be loose on Eliza, but it'd do the trick.

When he left the bedroom, he found Eliza ready to start painting with her brush. He hurried over to her and showed her the dress.

She looked down at her green dress. "I should change, shouldn't I? I didn't think about making a mess."

He smiled and tapped the side of his head.

She grinned. "I know. You're always one step ahead of me, aren't you? Alright. I'll be back." She set down the paintbrush, took the dress, and departed from the parlor.

Turning his attention to the light green paint, he dipped his brush into it. By the time she returned, he had painted around the bare window.

He sighed at the sight of her. She needed to eat more. He'd forgotten his initial impression of her when she arrived in town. Maybe he could convince her to eat more dessert. That brown candy she made was sure tasty.

She joined him with her own brush. "This will look much better than the faded old white paint. And since we already washed the walls, we can just get right to it."

He watched her as she moved the brush up and down on the wall next to him. She had a slight smile on her lips and her hair was pulled back into a bun for the task. He wanted to stand there forever and stare at her. She was the prettiest woman he'd

ever seen, and despite her insistence that Daphne would suit him, he refused to believe that. How could anyone come close to her now that he got the chance to know her? She was even better than he originally thought.

She glanced in his direction with an amused expression on her face. “Are you going to help me or do you expect me to do all the work?”

Blushing, he turned his attention back to painting his section of the wall.

They worked in silence for a good hour before she decided to take a break. He covered the paint and followed her out of the house, wondering where she was going.

When she realized he was behind her, she laughed. “You don’t have to come with me. I’m just going for a walk.” Though she said those words, she stopped and waited for him to catch up, which he did.

He wanted to hold her hand. She’d stopped doing that ever since they went to church, and he wondered why. Of course, he couldn’t ask.

“I think you’ll like the way the rooms look when we’re done. I never did like white walls. I like color and variety. White is boring.”

He smiled. For her, white probably was boring. He likened himself to the white walls—easy to miss but serving a purpose. She was definitely color—dynamic and intriguing. Funny how he didn’t realize how empty his life had been before she came into it, but he supposed one didn’t realize how boring a white wall was until someone put some color on it. He had to admit that he liked the green paint she chose.

As they strolled along the path he had cleared along the tall grass in the prairie, she continued to talk. “Sometimes I wish I could fly like one of those birds up there. I try to imagine what it would be like to feel the air beneath me. They look free up there, don’t you think?” As usual, she didn’t wait for his response.

“When I was a little girl, I used to run around my house and pretend I was a bird. My parents thought I was ridiculous to want to be a bird. But my pa would humor me and put me on his shoulders so I could stretch out my arms and fly.”

When he realized she had stopped talking, he turned his gaze to her. To his surprise, she wasn’t looking at him like she often did to see if he was even paying attention to her. Instead, she had her head bowed and a frown on her face, as if she was sad. He tapped her on the arm.

Finally making eye contact, she shrugged. “I miss my parents sometimes. My life would have been different if they had lived.”

He made a motion for her to continue but she didn’t.

They reached the creek that ran along his property. It was the only section of his land that had a row of trees on it. The rest of the place was mostly prairie grass, though he did have four trees spread around his house.

He found a bunch of yellow flowers grouped together close to the creek, so he gathered a couple of them and brought them to her.

A smile crossed her face as she took them. “Is this your way of trying to make me feel better?”

No, it hadn’t been. He just wanted to show her that he had yellow flowers nearby. He planted some close to his house too. He didn’t plant them near her home. There was no sense in making her *too* comfortable there. If he did that, she might never think of his house as hers.

“Thank you,” she said. She sat next to the creek and put the flowers on the ground next to her so she could wash her hands.

He settled next to her and also washed his hands. Deciding to press his luck, he inched toward her, trying to be subtle about it so she wouldn’t notice. When she finished and sat back, he joined her on the grass, happily noting that they were just

a couple of inches from touching. He liked this. Just sitting next to her and enjoying the late morning under the shade of the tree. He wished they could stay there forever...without anyone or anything coming between them.

She collected the flowers and placed them on her lap. "How many days do you think it'll take to paint the rooms?"

Since he could now count to ten, he held up seven fingers.

"A full week?" She sighed. "I guess that's right. At least if we want to do a good job. For some reason, I thought it'd go faster than that."

He shook his head and grinned at her.

"I know. I need more patience. Things worth doing shouldn't be rushed. Did anyone ever tell you that redheads have a terrible time waiting?"

She had to be kidding. She had no trouble waiting to marry him. His gaze shifted to her hands. It was hard to judge the size of her ring finger from looking at it. He reached forward and touched her hand.

"John."

He recognized the warning in her voice, so he quickly plucked a nearby white flower with his free hand and held it in front of her.

She didn't look convinced that his actions were innocent, but he pressed forward and opened the palm of her hand so it was facing up. He placed the white flower in it and collected two of the yellow flowers and put one on each side of the white flower. As he smoothed the flowers out, he took one of the petals and wrapped it around her ring finger.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

She didn't sound annoyed, though there was a hint of hesitation in her voice.

He rubbed his fingernail against the part of the petal that marked the width of her finger. Then he glanced around for a

distraction. Finding the squirrel sniffing around the tree across from them, he nodded toward it.

Success! She looked at the critter. "What is it?"

He yanked the petal from the flower and let her hand go.

"I don't understand. What is so important about the squirrel?"

He shrugged as he slipped the petal into his pocket.

"Sometimes I don't know what to do about you."

Holding his hand up, he pointed to his ring finger.

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. "When are you going to give up?"

He noted a hint of amusement in her tone instead of the usual exasperation, so he decided to press his luck. Wrapping his arms around her, he knocked her over so that they both landed on the grass.

After a startled shriek, she wiggled so that she could face him.

He held onto her and threw his leg over hers before she could get up.

"Too bad those people in town can't see you now. Just look at the way you take advantage of a poor, unsuspecting woman!"

Shrugging, he gave her a wicked smile and kissed her cheek.

"Oh John, you can't be serious." Despite her attempt to look stern, she also laughed. "You're not playing fair. You know I'm not strong enough to get away."

He raised an eyebrow. She wasn't even trying to get away from him. That meant there was hope, right? Even if she protested, she seemed to be enjoying it. Noticing that a strand of her hair was close to her eyes, he reached up and brushed it away. Noting the softness of her skin, he let his fingers linger at her cheek.

“I never met anyone more determined than you. You’re much too stubborn for your own good.”

It was true so he didn’t deny it. Instead, he let his fingers drift to her pink lips. He’d never kissed a woman before, but he’d seen other men do it. It looked simple enough. And if it was so simple, why did he suddenly worry he couldn’t do it right?

She wasn’t fighting him. In fact, her hands stayed on his arms. It was a very pleasant feeling—one he wanted to enjoy forever if she’d let him. He closed his eyes and kissed her. His movement was stiff. He knew it was, but he didn’t know how to relax when his heart was beating frantically against his chest. But he liked the kiss so he leaned forward for another one.

Her lips were warm against his, and she returned his kiss, almost seeming hesitant but still willing. He let his lips linger on hers, never wanting to leave the sweet bit of heaven he’d suddenly discovered. He thought he’d like to kiss a woman some day, but he had no idea just how much he’d like it. This, he decided, was the most wonderful experience he’d ever had.

Reluctant, he pulled away from her. His gaze met hers and he sensed the uncertainty in her eyes. He pointed to his temple.

“What am I thinking?” she softly asked.

He nodded.

She took a moment before she responded. “I’m thinking we need to get back to painting the house.”

## *Chapter Eight*



*E*liza pushed John off of her and quickly stood up. What was she doing, kissing a man who'd never kissed a woman before? She'd kissed virgins before, and there was always that tentative moment in the kiss, like they weren't sure of what to do next.

The sweetest man she'd ever met had just kissed her, and she initiated him further into it by responding to him. She shouldn't let her pleasure get in the way of her senses. Yes, she enjoyed it. Much more than she should have. After all, she'd kissed so many men in her time that she couldn't even count them all. But even the most experienced men hadn't affected her the way John had. He cared for her. And that terrified her.

She strode back to the house and he followed her. She didn't want to face him. Not now. Not when her hands trembled and her heart hammered loudly in her ears. She needed to get back to something concrete, something she could concentrate on



and lose herself in. Painting was as good a method for escaping her unwanted emotions as anything else she could do.

As she reached the house, a horse's neigh caught her attention. She groaned when she saw Troy riding toward the house.

"Morning, Eliza," he greeted as he pulled back the reins. "You are certainly looking fine today."

The man was lying. The dress John had given her hung on her like a limp rag.

"I'd ask John what he's doing giving you Ma's old dress to wear, but he won't be able to answer."

She glanced at John who didn't look pleased. Who could blame him? "John is right here if you want to ask. He may not talk but he has other ways of communicating. He can tell you almost anything you want to know just by using his hands."

"Is that so?" By the way Troy said that, it was obvious he didn't believe it.

John stepped in front of her before Troy got there first.

She rolled her eyes. All she saw was John's broad back. The man was worse than a protective mother bear.

"Alright, John," Troy said in irritation. "I get the message. I'm not taking her away from here. You can back off. I came out to talk to you anyway."

She breathed a sigh of relief. Good. "In that case, I'll get back to painting!"

Before anyone could protest, she scurried back into the house. The first thing she noticed was the strong smell of paint fumes. Well, John would just have to keep the windows open for awhile.

"What's the meaning of this?" Troy demanded, shoving a piece of paper at John.

She stopped at the kitchen window. She really had no right to find out what upset Troy. After all, it wasn't like he was speaking that loud. But he was speaking loud enough for her to

hear him. So technically, she wasn't eavesdropping. Besides, she did need a cup of water. She went to the work table and lifted the pitcher, deciding it was a good idea to take her time at the task.

She peaked out the window. Troy didn't just look annoyed. He looked fuming mad.

"You had no right to do this!"

John stood still, his face unreadable.

"I ought to make you deal with this." He motioned to the letter in John's hands.

She poured the water into the cup and sipped it.

"What's the big idea, John? You wrote to a mail-order bride in my name?"

Startled, she spit out her drink. She grabbed a towel and dried her lips and the table in front of her. John did what?

"I don't need you to find me a bride," Troy seethed. "I'm perfectly capable of handling that area of my life on my own. It's you who needs the help, what with you being a freak and all."

Oh, he didn't! Not John's own brother! Eliza set the cup and towel down and peered out the corner of the window without trying to be spotted in case they looked in her direction.

John threw the letter back at Troy and pushed him back.

"You think Eliza's going to marry you? You couldn't even get that mail-order bride of yours to show up. And she never met you. What makes you think Eliza's going to want a mute for a husband?"

John marched over to Troy's horse and untied its reins from the tree.

Troy strode after him. "What are you doing?"

Eliza moved so she could see where they were going.

John held up the reins and pointed to the saddle.

"You think you're going to tell me what to do? Well, let me set something straight for you. No one orders me around, you understand?" Then he pushed John away from his horse.

John made a move toward Troy but stopped and then waved him off the property.

"I'm not marrying Cara. You hear me?" Troy jumped on his horse. "I told her that my mute, freak brother wrote the letter as a joke. She won't be coming." He glared at John. "Since when did you learn to write anyway? Aaron teach you?"

He shrugged.

"It probably was him. He's soft. Just keep your nose out of my business." Then he tapped the horse in the sides with his boots. As the horse trotted off the land, he called out something.

Eliza couldn't make out what it was, but John rolled his eyes. She expected John to come into the house but he didn't. Instead, he strode over to the shed he worked in, entered it, and slammed the door behind him. Well, who could blame him for being upset? Apparently, it wasn't just most of the town who thought John wasn't worth the time or effort to treat with respect. She had no siblings, but if she had, she'd like to think she'd be close to them.

The more she got to know John and the people in town, the less she wanted to know about them. She didn't know why she assumed that a small town would have a friendly feel to it. In a bigger place like Omaha, it was easy to be impersonal. She made a few good friends, other prostitutes like herself who had nowhere to go. She learned to appreciate what she did have and not think of things that could've been. That's where unhappiness came from. Not being content with what one had. Always looking at how things could be better. Always wondering "what if".

She recalled her first friend at the saloon. Maggie had been a prostitute for five years when Eliza was sold into the business. Maggie was miserable there and ended up committing suicide. That was when Eliza decided she'd stop feeling sorry for herself. Yes, what happened to her was bad. Her uncle had taken advantage of her and then lied about it. To cover up his sin, he

sold her to Ross. And she'd never forget how mad Ross was when he discovered she was carrying a child.

She forced the memories back into the safe corner of her mind where she could lock it away and forget about it. It did no good to dwell on things she had no control over. She also had no control over what people thought of John or how John reacted to it. All she could do was control how she reacted to it. Like everything else in life, she had to deal with it the best she knew how. So she'd put on a smile and find reasons to be thankful.

She glanced around the room. She had food and shelter. She had a generous employer who was also kind. She was no longer a prostitute. She was a lady now. She could finally walk through town without pretending that the stares and whispers didn't bother her. People now treated her with respect. It was a good feeling. Yes, she had lots to be thankful for, and she'd do her part to make life better for those around her.

She returned to the paint and got back to work.

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That Sunday, Eliza put on her modest dress and adjusted her hat. It was as hot as August could get, but that was the price she paid for being a lady. Her clothing hadn't covered all of her when she worked at the saloon. But she worked for John now. Honest work. Work she was grateful to have. And if no one could appreciate John and the fact that he gave her a good job and did honest work, then that was their problem. Not John's. And not hers.

Determined, she took one last look at her reflection and nodded. She left her home and strode over to John's house. Just as she made it up the steps, he opened the door.

"You look nice," she greeted. "Isn't it a beautiful day? It's the perfect day for a Sunday ride into town." Even as she said

it, she batted away a couple of flying insects that circled her head. She laughed. "I guess the bugs think it's a nice day too."

He pointed to his ring finger.

Rolling her eyes, she decided to ignore him today. He seemed to think that just because they were going to church, it was the right time to propose. Well, that wasn't exactly true either. He seemed to think that every day was a good day to propose...and any reason was a good reason.

"I can't wait for Daphne to show up."

He shook his head.

Pretending she didn't notice, she turned around and headed for the wagon. "We don't want to be late. I have a feeling that things will go fine today."

He closed the door behind him and walked after her.

She waited for him to get the horses hooked up before she hopped into the wagon. When she saw his exasperation, she giggled. "I know. I should have let you help me in, but I didn't want to wait."

That was a lie, and by the expression on his face, she knew he realized it. Oh well. Let him realize it. As long as she didn't have to say it, it didn't matter. The truth was, she didn't want him to help her in again because last time, he actually kissed her on the cheek and held her in his arms before he let her get in. She really had no business enjoying that either. For all reasonable purposes, he was practically married to Daphne.

*But what if Daphne doesn't come? It has been two months since she was supposed to arrive.*

She sighed and forced her attention to the scenery as he urged the horses forward. No, it was best if her thoughts didn't drift in that direction. It was enough that she agreed to go to the gathering the town was putting on that evening. She wasn't originally going to go, but when Troy and Willy asked her, she figured she'd better go with John. If nothing, it got the two men to back off. Never mind that it was nice knowing that she'd go

with John. She sighed again. She was getting to be as bad as he was!

He nudged her in the arm.

She looked in his direction.

He tapped his temple.

"You are much too curious about what I'm thinking. Most men don't want to hear women yap on about their thoughts, you know."

He gave her a sweet smile and waved for her to speak.

"You are an odd man."

Shrugging, he motioned for her to continue.

"Is that what you want to hear? That you're odd."

He pointed to his lips.

"Oh. You just want to hear me talk. It doesn't even matter what I ramble on about."

He nodded and scooted closer to her.

"Alright, Mister. Don't think I don't notice when you do that. I wasn't born yesterday. You need to keep your distance. I've come to learn that I can't trust you. And don't flash that smile at me. You won't charm me that easily." She paused for a moment. "Not that you can charm me. Don't get me wrong. I'm not the kind of woman you can charm."

He didn't look convinced.

"Think of it what you will." She gave him a nudge. "You need to get back to your rightful position."

He stuck out his lower lip.

"What am I going to do with you?" Before he could point to his ring finger again, she held up her hand to stop him. "Don't answer that. Now look here. If you don't move over to your side, I'm going to be forced to jump out of this wagon. Then I'd land on the ground, and I might get hurt. Do you want that to happen?" She steeled herself against his puppy dog eyes. "Alright. Fine. Here I go."

She started to stand, but he quickly stopped her. Then he scooted back to his side of the seat.

Satisfied that her bluff had worked, she settled back down. “You should be happy enough with the fact that I’m going to town with you tonight. That means I won’t dance with anyone but you.”

His smile widened.

“Don’t take that to mean I’m going to marry you.”

He didn’t stop his foolish grinning.

“I’m serious, John.”

He just shrugged.

She huffed and shook her head. “You know, for a man who can’t talk, you sure do say a lot.”

Deciding it was time to change tactics, she spent the rest of the way into town discussing what she planned to make for lunch and what she’d wear that evening. She figured such topics might bore him, but she was at a loss on what else to discuss, and he had said that she could talk about anything. To her surprise, he actually seemed to enjoy listening to her. Odd. That word didn’t even seem to describe him. He was more than odd. A man who willingly listened to topics that would only interest a woman just couldn’t be right in the head.

When they reached town, she allowed him to help her down. It wouldn’t be right to out-smart him in front of other people. Men, no matter who they were, had their pride to protect.

Upon entering the church, she noticed that his steps had slowed to a pace that would make a snail seem fast. “I’m with you,” she whispered. “It’s alright.”

He didn’t look convinced but lumbered to the pew they had been sitting at every Sunday.

“I thought we’d say hello to Charity and her aunt. Then we can say good morning to a few others.” Fortunately, Troy made it a habit of coming a few minutes after the service started.

She didn't feel like dealing with him. At least not yet. She motioned for John to follow her. "Come on."

Looking as if he were facing a death sentence, he joined her.

"Good morning, Charity!" she greeted, pasting on a friendly smile. "Good morning, Bethany."

The two women turned from talking to Willy and Ralph Custer.

"Of course, good morning to you too, gentlemen," Eliza quickly added. "You're all looking fine. Why, Charity, I do believe you're glowing."

Bethany gave a satisfied nod in Charity's direction. "You see. I told you that it was obvious."

Eliza's gaze shifted to Ralph whose chest puffed up with male pride. Eliza stopped Bethany before she could continue. "Let me guess. Charity, are you expecting?"

Charity blushed.

"That's wonderful! Isn't that wonderful, John?"

John looked as if he wished he were anywhere but there.

Eliza returned her attention to the group. "Well, that is wonderful. You'll make a terrific mother."

"We just found out yesterday," Ralph added. "The baby will be here in April."

"Good. That gives me plenty of time to make a gift. Is there anything special you need?"

Charity shrugged. "I don't even know what a baby needs, except for clothes and diapers."

"I'll think of something then."

Bethany patted Eliza's hand and leaned forward to whisper in Eliza's ear. "You do know that we don't think there's anything inappropriate going on with you and John. I know we haven't had a chance to talk to you the last couple of times you've been here, but I wanted to clear the air. Charity and I misunderstood the situation. We know better now."



Right. Because Ralph explained that John was incapable of having a single sexual thought. Eliza supposed that this worked in her favor. No one assumed anything was going on, which there wasn't. She did like the respect people were finally giving her, and the last thing she wanted to do was to ruin it.

Eliza nodded and smiled. "It's good to have things resolved." Then she took a step back. "I better say hi to Addy. Last time she said she had some recipes for me, and I'm anxious to check them out." She turned but glanced over her shoulder. "Congratulations, Charity and Ralph."

She led John over to Addy and Frank, so they could sit next to them. Of all the people in town, she felt most comfortable with them.

As Addy pulled out a couple of recipe cards from her purse, Aaron came up to John. And Aaron didn't look too happy. "John, I need to talk to you outside for a minute."

John shook his head and motioned to Eliza, Addy and Frank.

"They'll keep your seat," Aaron insisted.

John shook his head again and crossed his arms.

Aaron leaned down so that he could speak low. "It's about Troy and that thing you did. I didn't give you that paper so you could write a letter on Troy's behalf like that."

If John did have a voice, he would've groaned, for Eliza recognized the exasperation on his face as he stood up and motioned for Aaron to go outside.

Eliza turned to Addy as John and Aaron left. "You said you have recipes for me?"

Addy seemed curious about the exchange between John and Aaron but turned her attention back to her purse. "Yes. I wrote everything down for my three favorite dishes. The best part is that they are simple too."

"Good." Eliza didn't care much for cooking. It was alright, but she'd rather be doing other things. She'd never be a

gourmet chef, but at least John could eat her food without getting sick. “The simpler, the better. I’m still learning.”

“Really? Didn’t your mother teach you how to cook?”

“A long time ago. I don’t remember much of what she did teach me.” Her lessons had been basic up to the time her parents died. And after that, well...there was no need for cooking. “But some of it’s coming back to me as I go along.”

That was true. She didn’t like to lie, especially in church where she could feel the eyes of the Lord bearing down on her. But He understood that she needed to keep her past a secret. At least she hoped so.

John returned as the first hymn started, and she frowned. He didn’t look happy. In fact, he looked downright grumpy. She wondered what happened between him and Aaron. She glanced at Aaron who seemed equally upset as he stood next to his wife and sang the words to the familiar song.

All of her life, Eliza had wished for a brother or sister. Now she was glad she never had one. It seemed to be more trouble than it was worth.

## *Chapter Nine*



John adjusted his tie for the tenth time. He hated this. He didn't want to go to the social gathering in town where people would eat and dance and talk. His parents used to drag him to those things when he was a child but let him stay home when he turned fifteen. And now someone else was dragging him. Well, that wasn't necessarily true. He asked Eliza to go with him and she agreed. It was his choice.

He sat on the edge of his bed and pulled on his nice boots. No. It hadn't been a choice. Not really. Troy and Old Willy wanted to take her. Then there was Buck who usually farmed so much he rarely came to town. Funny how he managed to make it to church to talk with Eliza after the service.

John adjusted his tie again. It felt too tight. Frustrated, he yanked it off and threw it on the hardwood floor. He'd be fine in his green shirt, black vest and denim pants. He rubbed his eyes. He still remembered when he was at the social gatherings as a

child and the other kids made fun of him. The adults didn't do anything to stop it, but they had to have known. He ended up spending all of his time in the corner of the room, watching the ascent of the moon and judging when the gathering would be over. Back then all of his brothers had joined in the rounds of pulling jokes on him and laughing at his expense. As they got older, things changed. It wasn't until after their parents died that Aaron, Guy, and Shawn shaped up.

But then this morning when Aaron talked down to him as if he were a child...John didn't want to have anything to do with any of them. So what if he wrote to a mail-order bride on Troy's behalf? He picked one of the best ones that Aaron read to him. If Troy would just leave Eliza alone whenever they went to church, he wouldn't have bothered writing that letter anyway. Not that it was much of a letter. He kept it simple because he was still learning how to read and write. The words he had used, he showed to Eliza, but she had no idea what he was doing it for. She thought he was just practicing.

Sighing, he stood up and took the ring from his dresser. It had been too big for Eliza, but he made the necessary adjustments to it. Now it would fit right. Only if she'd put it on! He tucked it into his pocket. Ever the optimist. What made him think that tonight she'd say yes? Still, she was right about him. He didn't give up easily. He sensed that she enjoyed being with him. Just not enough to commit to him...yet.

He left the bedroom and walked through the kitchen. His stomach protested, but he mentally reminded it that there was plenty of food at these social gatherings in town. His stomach growled again, obviously not believing him. He shut the kitchen door behind him and looked up to see Eliza fiddling with the blue bow in her hair that went with her nice blue dress.

He smiled. She looked so pretty. Then he frowned. No doubt the other men would think so as well. And that was a problem.

She turned and saw him. "Are you ready?"

He shrugged and went to get the horses. They looked healthy. Too bad. Now he couldn't claim they were sick. After he hooked them to the wagon, he checked the wheels. Too bad the wagon was in good shape. Now he had no excuse to stay...and keep her safely away from Troy, Old Willy or Buck.

Once again, she managed to hop in the wagon before he got around to her side. She spread her skirt around her and glanced at him. "I'm not dancing with anyone but you. I promise."

Alright. That helped him feel better. He nodded and joined her. On the way, she talked about how she looked forward to talking to Addy.

"Frank will be there too, so we can talk to both of them. You like Frank."

It was true, so he nodded.

"It won't be so bad, John. Not if you look on the bright side."

Well, she was going with him. That was good.

"That's what I try to do. Look on the bright side. No matter how bad things get, there's always a bright side."

Then she rambled about things that he tuned out. The closer to town they got, the more tense he became. When he finally pulled the wagon to a stop a block from the town hall where the festivities occurred, he gave one last look at the road out of town. Four hours. He just had to go through four hours of this.

Reluctant, he stepped down from the wagon and wondered why she bothered to let him help her down from it. As they strolled up to the group of people entering the building, Old Willy waved to them.

John inwardly groaned but followed Eliza as she approached him.

"I didn't realize there were so many people in this town," she told Old Willy.

"Whenever there's food, people come scurryin' out of their holes to find it."

She laughed. "You have a real sense of humor, Willy. That's refreshing. Life can get too serious sometimes."

Willy blushed and waved his hand as if to dismiss the compliment. "Oh shoot, Miss Sweet. That's awfully nice of you to say. Hello there, John. The Kendells like that bed frame you made for their little girl. They've been braggin' on it so much that the Carsons are thinkin' of askin' you to make them a cabinet for their kitchen."

Eliza turned to John. "That's wonderful. I told you that was a gorgeous bed frame, and all you did was shrug as if it wasn't anything important. You do beautiful work."

"A true statement," Old Willy agreed. "You folks comin' in to eat?"

"You bet. This is a good excuse to get out of cooking." She glanced at John. "Not that I mind cooking, but it sure is nice to have a break from it."

"You work her too hard out there, John." Old Willy chuckled and patted his shoulder. "Just kiddin'. I know you wouldn't overwork anyone."

John was too nervous to smile to show his friend that he understood he was joking. He really wished Old Willy would find someone other than Eliza to like. This town needed more women. He shifted from one foot to the other.

"I think John's more ready to eat than I am," Eliza said.

John followed her into the building. He was relieved when he realized that they'd be sitting with Frank and Addy. At least he could relax during the supper. Afterwards however was another matter. Troy came up to them and asked for a dance.

"Oh, I told John that I'd dance with him," she replied as she took John's hand.

Troy's gaze met John's, and John narrowed his eyes at him.

"Come on, John," she said and pulled on his hand.

He obeyed and lumbered to the area set aside for couples to dance. He spotted the corner where he used to sit and hide. He used to watch the people dance, noting the way they laughed and smiled. Even now, people enjoyed themselves. The only thing different was that he was out in open for all to see, and as much as he hated that, he did like holding Eliza without her trying to find a reason to get out of his arms.

If he hadn't noticed the way Troy glared at him or how a couple of people in the room snickered and shook their heads at him, it wouldn't have been so bad. But he was aware of them. Acutely aware. He stepped on her foot and nearly tripped her. He quickly caught her by the arms and steadied her.

She flung her hair over her shoulder. "It's alright. Maybe we should get something to drink."

He nodded and walked over to the table where a big bowl of punch and ladle waited for them.

"How quaint! I heard of these but I'd never seen such a grand display." She picked up one of the cups by the bowl. "Whoever set out all these lovely flowers and lacy napkins did a marvelous job."

"Charity did that," a woman spoke.

They turned to see Bethany.

"She learned to do this where we came from," she continued.

"She did a fine job of it." Eliza scanned the room. "Where is she anyway?"

"The poor thing is sick to her stomach. It's because of the child, you know."

"Oh, yes. Well, it's a shame she's missing this, especially when she took the time to set this out."

"It'll be worth it. Next year, she'll be holding her own baby. There's no better joy than that."

John thought he caught a flicker of sorrow in Eliza's eyes.

"I suppose you're right," Eliza softly replied before she picked up the ladle. Her hands slightly shook as she poured the red liquid into the cup.

John took the cup and ladle from her so no more would splash onto the table. What had caused her unease? The talk of a baby? If she wanted a child, she could marry him and then have one of her own. He paused. He hadn't tried that angle yet. Maybe he needed to get her thinking of babies.

Eliza wiped her hands on a napkin.

"She's already decided on a name," Bethany said. "Patrick for a boy and Patricia for a girl. Aren't those wonderful names?"

"Yes. They are." Eliza took the cup John offered her and drank a sip. "She is blessed."

"Well, perhaps you'll find someone to marry. I hear that Willy is a sweetheart. Though he's a bit older than you, he's a stable, hardworking man."

John gritted his teeth.

"Of course, there is Buck, if you don't mind a man who spends most of his time in the fields. That wouldn't do well for a woman who wants lots of attention. You have to be willing to spend most of your time alone. Thankfully, Charity didn't end up with him. She loves to be pampered."

"I am content with things as they are," Eliza said before she took another sip.

"Maybe for now. But the future is ahead of you, even if you are nearing an unmarriageable age. You should keep that in mind. Oh, there is Troy Evans. Why, he works for Buck." The woman clapped her hands and giggled. "What a small world. At any rate, you can choose any of them."

*Or there's me. I'm right in front of you, you old coot.* If John could speak, that's exactly what he'd tell Bethany.



“Let me introduce you to Chloe. You’ll like her.” Bethany grabbed Eliza’s hand and started walking away.

Eliza glanced back at John. “Stay put. I’ll be right back.”

John had a sinking feeling that Bethany would keep Eliza with her longer than a moment. And he was right. After five minutes, he found his corner and sat down. Again, he watched everyone else. Eliza stood to the side with Bethany, Chloe and Chloe’s sister. Eliza kept looking back at him, and at one point, she motioned for him to join her. He refrained. Instead, he averted his gaze so he could pretend he hadn’t seen her.

He turned his attention to the window, noting it was a clear night. It would be a good two hours before he could go home. He sighed and let his gaze fall back on Eliza who laughed at something Chloe said.

He hated being here. He hated being in town. He hated being alone.

“John?”

He looked over at his brother Shawn.

“Aaron and Guy said you were here, but I didn’t believe them. Why are you hiding? We’re not kids anymore.”

He rolled his eyes.

Shawn sat next to him. “You look like you saw a ghost.”

Irritated, he crossed his arms and directed his attention to Eliza who was still talking to the other women. So much for dancing with her...or coming so he could spend time with her.

“You need to relax,” Shawn said. “I know how to make that happen, but we can’t do it here. Come outside with me.”

John shook his head. He wanted to make sure Troy or Old Willy didn’t go near Eliza. If one of them did, he planned to go up to her so they’d back off.

“We’ll only be gone for a minute. It won’t take long at all. Besides, this kind of thing relaxes me all the time.”

John thought about it, nodded and strode out of the town hall so they could be alone. Interest peaked, he watched as his brother pulled something from his jacket pocket. It was a flask.

"Take a good drink of this. In no time at all, you'll feel good."

John accepted the flask but pointed to it.

"It's moonshine. Jerry makes it."

He'd heard the term before, but he couldn't quite recall where.

"It's good for nerves."

Jerry seemed like a good man. At least, he didn't make fun of him, and he had no reason to distrust Shawn. He nodded and drank from it. It had an odd taste, though it wasn't exactly bad. He took another drink and decided it tasted fine.

"Don't gulp it all down. You just want to relax, not get drunk."

"I think I saw him come out here," Guy said.

Shawn motioned for John to hide the flask so John slipped it into his back pocket and turned to the entrance of the town hall. John noticed a warming sensation spread over his face. Was that because they were almost caught or was it the moonshine?

Aaron and Guy came into John's viewing range.

"What are you two doing out here?" Aaron wondered, sounding suspicious.

"Just taking in the fresh air," Shawn replied. "Got a problem with that?"

"No. We came to ask if you wanted to play some poker."

"Alright, but this time I'm quitting when I get to my last penny."

"No one forced you to lose all your money last time," Guy said. "Well, come on. We're about to start the game."

John hated this. Of course, they wouldn't invite him. They never did.

Shawn patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. In no time at all, you’ll feel better.” He ran into the building with Guy and Aaron.

John stood there for a minute, waiting for the moonshine to do its trick, but he didn’t feel relaxed at all. Maybe he needed more of it for it to work. He pulled it out of his pocket and drank more. The flask was practically full. He wondered how much of this liquid it took to take effect. Deciding that his tension was pretty severe, he drank the whole thing. He waited until his muscles began to relax before he sauntered back into the place.

## *Chapter Ten*



*E*liza opened the kitchen door so Aaron and Shawn could help John into his bedroom. They dumped him on the bed.

“Thank you,” she told them. “There was no way I could bring him here by myself.”

“I’m sorry,” Shawn said. “I had no idea he’d drink all the moonshine.”

“About that. Give me that flask.” Aaron held out his hand.

“No. I never get drunk off it. I just drink it once in awhile to relax after a hard day of work.”

“I don’t care. You don’t need to be drinking it at all. Don’t you see what it’s doing to Jerry and his marriage? Now, give it to me.”

Shawn loudly groaned but pulled it from his jacket pocket and handed it to his brother. “Fine. You never have any fun.”

"I'm the oldest brother in the family. It's my job to make sure you don't have fun."

Shawn glanced at her and rolled his eyes. "He means that too."

"We played poker, didn't we?"

"Sure. But you gave Ron his money back."

"Because we don't rip anyone off in a game. Ron needs that money."

"You didn't mind ripping me off last time."

"And you didn't mind cheating either."

Shawn threw his hands up in the air. "I wasn't cheating. I don't know how that ace found its way up my sleeve."

Aaron shook his head. "We'll get out of your way, Miss Sweet."

Eliza waved to the arguing brothers and went to help John. She found him asleep on the bed, looking as if he didn't have a care in the world. She'd let him sleep with his clothes on, but she had to take off his boots. As she slid the last boot off his foot, he stirred.

She glanced up and saw that he was staring at her. She placed his boot next to the other one and stood up, placing her hands on her hips. "You're drunk."

He smiled and motioned for her to get closer to him.

"Oh no. I'm not getting near you. You, Mister, are not in control of anything you do." She'd been around drunk men before. The best thing to do was to get away from them.

He sat up and patted the space next to him.

"It's a good thing you don't act this way when you're sober because if you did, I would have left a long time ago. You need sleep. Lie down and close your eyes. Oh, make sure you sleep on your side. You don't want to choke on your vomit."

She turned to leave. Once morning came and he woke up, he'd be one unhappy man. Maybe she could get up early and make some coffee.

By the time she made it to the kitchen door, she heard footsteps behind her. "You need to go to bed." She peered over her shoulder. "Rest."

To her surprise, he stumbled forward and fell on the floor.

She should just leave him there, but she didn't have the heart to leave him there all night. She hurried over to him as he clumsily made his way to his feet.

He straightened his vest and smiled at her.

"Come on. You need to go to bed." She reached for his arm. "This time you have to stay there, you hear?"

He didn't budge.

"John. Don't make this difficult."

He pointed to his ring finger.

She let her exasperation show. Even when he was drunk, he couldn't stop proposing to her! What was she supposed to do with him?

He took a step toward her, and before she could walk back, he wrapped his arms around her.

"John—"

He didn't let her finish her sentence.

She gasped when he kissed her. The alcohol sure did make him bold! He was still gentle, but he wasn't hesitant like he'd been that day he kissed her by the creek. She was too taken off guard to know what to do, and for a moment she stood there, in the kitchen with him, and just let him kiss her.

But the kiss was just as wonderful and sweet as it had been that day when he first kissed her. She didn't want to enjoy it. She knew she shouldn't. And yet, she did. It was different when a man who cared for her kissed her than when one who wanted to use her body kissed her. She couldn't exactly pinpoint the difference, but she felt it.

Despite her better judgment, she leaned against him and closed her eyes so she could better experience the kiss. Even if it

was this one time, she wanted to thoroughly enjoy kissing a man who sincerely cared for her.

He cupped her face in his hands and deepened the kiss. She didn't realize she was clinging to him until her nails dug into his shirt sleeves. His lips were soft and warm, and she parted her mouth for him. He didn't seem to know what to do, so she traced his lips with her tongue. He paused for a second before he opened his mouth and let her taste him. The alcohol was evident, but she didn't care. Who knew that kissing a man could be this wonderful? This kind of thing could get addicting. He eagerly responded to her and explored her, as she explored him. Her heart raced with a mixture of joy and fear. She didn't know what else to do but stay near him and experience the moment. It was as if no one else existed. She loved it. Loved feeling as if they were the only two people on earth and no one could come between them. For the first time since her parents died, she felt safe and protected. If only the feeling would last forever...

When his lips left hers, he pulled her closer to him and kissed her forehead, her cheeks and her neck. She groaned. Her body had been trained to respond to these things, though her heart hadn't been. Up to this point, she kept her feelings closed off from every man who'd touched and kissed her. She struggled for the ability to do that now, but it was hard to do something when a part of her wanted to feel the uplifting emotion that made her feel as if she could walk on water.

When he stepped away from her, she opened her eyes, wondering why he stopped. Then he pulled something out of his pocket. She had to squint in order to see it in the moonlight. A ring. How long had he been carrying a ring with him? She was too stunned to stop him as he reached for her hand and slid the ring on her finger.

It was the most beautiful gesture a man had ever given her. She wiped the tears from her eyes and imagined, just for this moment, that she really could be a wife. Married to this sweet

man and living in this simple house. The feeling was so real, and she wanted to hold onto it. She used to dream of marrying a good man long ago. Before her parents died and her entire world changed. Back when she was innocent. But she wasn't innocent, and no amount of wishing would make it so.

"I can't," she cried and yanked the ring off her finger. Her hands shook as she pressed the warm metal into the palm of his hand. "I just can't."

He fell on his knees and hugged her.

"Stop. Please. I can't take this," she said as tears fell from her eyes. "Don't make this harder than it has to be."

But he wouldn't release her.

"I'm not who you think I am, John. You need a good woman, one you can be proud to take home to your mother. You deserve that."

He looked up at her and she saw the hurt in his eyes. The greenest eyes she'd ever seen. They were as beautiful as his heart.

"I want to," she confessed, surprised even as the words came out of her mouth. "I do want to."

He took her hand again, but she snatched it back before he could slip the ring back on her finger.

"But I can't. I can't!"

She pushed him away and ran out of the house. She rushed to the safety of her simple dwelling and closed the door. She leaned against it, and unable to stop her tears, she spent the next hour crying.

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The next morning came too soon, and Eliza remained on the floor next to the door. She'd managed to doze off a few times but she couldn't successfully sleep. The kiss John had given her the night before had unlocked a well of emotions that she had trouble handling. She'd gotten good at putting a mask on her face



and acting as if everything was alright when it wasn't. Now the mask had crumbled around her and she was left feeling far too vulnerable.

She could still feel the cool metal of the gold band on her finger. She swore the memory would be seared into her mind forever. Was there anything lovelier than belonging to a man who loved her? But he didn't know about her past. If he knew, he wouldn't care for her. He just wouldn't, and she hated the thought that he might not love her anymore. She wanted him to love her.

But she shouldn't. *What about Daphne? Is she here? But she could show up. It's been two months. If she got delayed, surely she'd send a letter. Maybe she changed her mind. Maybe she isn't coming.*

It was possible. And if she wasn't coming, would it be acceptable for her to marry John? *But he doesn't know. Tell him. But what if he doesn't want to be with me anymore?*

And so the thoughts circulated in her head. If she knew how to break the cycle, she'd gladly do it.

Someone knocked on her door. Startled, she jumped off the floor even though her body was sore and stiff. She quickly wiped her face to get rid of the fresh tears and opened the door.

"Good morning," she told John who winced. She lowered her voice. "Sorry."

He held a pad of paper and a pencil.

"Let's go to the house. I'll make coffee and we can talk there."

He nodded and walked with her to the house.

She placed the coffee pot on the stove, careful not to bang it. "What do you want to ask?" she softly asked as she got everything ready to make the coffee.

He thought for a moment and then wrote something down.

When she finished, she sat next to him at the table and took the pad. "What happened last night?" she asked. It was hard

to tell if that's what he meant, but she figured after being drunk, that he would naturally ask that question first.

He nodded.

"Shawn gave you some moonshine to drink and you got drunk from it." She paused and chose her next words carefully. "Do you remember what happened?"

He took the pad and wrote on it. *Little.*

"You remember a little bit."

He nodded.

"What do you remember?"

He scratched his head and then wrote down, "Pepl lauf at me. Aron tak me home. Yu tak bootz off. We kiss. I slepe on floor."

Oh great. He remembered more than she'd hoped he did. She took a deep breath. "Right. You were drunk so you started dancing by yourself."

He cringed.

"Aaron and Shawn brought you back here, and I took off your boots so you could sleep comfortably in bed."

He nodded.

"Then you asked me to marry you again and kissed me again. I said no like I always do."

He nodded again.

She studied his face. He didn't look like he knew anymore than that. That was good. If he knew that she let it slip that she wanted to marry him, he'd haul her off to the church right away...whether he was feeling good or not. She cleared her throat and continued. "You didn't make it back to your bed. You ended up sleeping on the floor. And now it's morning and your head hurts."

He wrote something else and then handed it to her.

She laughed. "Was the kiss good?"

He nodded, his expression serious.

“If you don’t remember enjoying it, then I guess it wasn’t.” She tapped him on the arm and gave him the pad back. Good. They could continue on as if it never happened. “I bet the coffee’s ready.” She got out of the chair and checked it. “Almost ready.”

He motioned to her.

She glanced over at him while she grabbed the cups. “What?”

He held up the paper, pointed to his question and pointed to her.

“Did I think the kiss was good?”

He nodded.

She hid her amusement. “A lady doesn’t discuss such things.”

Rolling his eyes, he pointed to her again.

Well, she guessed that she could at least make him feel good about himself. “I didn’t hate it,” she finally said.

He obviously didn’t care for the answer.

“That’s all I’m saying. Now, the coffee is ready. You’ll feel better once it’s in your system.” She poured the hot liquid into their cups. “I know this is terrible timing, but I need to go to the general store. Frank said the apples will be in today, and I want to try making you a pie.”

He blanched and shook his head.

She placed the cups on the table and sat back down. “You can’t avoid going to town for the rest of your life. So you did something foolish. Everyone’s done something stupid at one time or another. You just need to pick yourself right back up and keep going. You can’t let these things set you back.”

Picking up his cup, he shook his head again before he drank from it.

“Don’t you want to try one of my pies?”

He shook his head.

“What if I told you that this is important to me? I want to see if I can do it.”

His expression softened. Then he put the cup aside and wrote, “Mary me.”

“You spelled ‘Marry’ wrong.”

He rolled his eyes.

“M-A-R-Y is a woman’s name. See?” She wrote the name down. “M-A-R-R-Y is to wed someone.”

He took the paper and pencil from her and quickly inserted a sloppy ‘R’ to the word. Then he gave it to her.

“You are impossible, do you know that?”

Shaking his head, he pointed at her.

“Me? I’m not being impossible.”

He shot her a ‘you’ve got to be kidding me’ look.

“I told you from the beginning that I won’t marry you. I can’t help it if you refuse to accept that answer.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring.

She held her breath. Did he remember?

He held it out to her.

She gulped her coffee even though it burned her tongue and practically threw the cup in the sink.

He winced, making her regret making the loud noise.

“I should wash up for the day,” she whispered. “I’ll be back. If you don’t want to take me to town, then I’ll go by myself.”

Giving her a ‘yuck’ facial expression, he nodded.

“‘Yes’ as in you’ll take me?”

He sighed but nodded.

“Thank you, John.” She paused on her way to the door. She walked back over to him and kissed his cheek. “I’m sorry I left you alone at the town hall. I had promised I wouldn’t. I really didn’t think Bethany would keep me away for so long. You getting drunk like you did was my fault.”

He shook his head and pointed to himself.

“No. It’s mine,” she whispered and kissed the top of his head.

As soon as she realized what she was doing, she excused herself and left. She made her way to the well and gathered a fresh pail of water. Once she shut the door of her home, she poured the water into the basin. She had hoped he’d kiss her again. That’s why she lingered by him like she had. What was wrong with her? She’d been granted a reprieve and all she could do was tempt fate.

What was wrong with her? *You love him.*

She washed her face, willing the nagging thought from her mind. She was a prostitute for goodness’ sakes! She had no right to marry anyone.

*You were a prostitute. You aren’t one now. You’ve been rescued from that life.*

She slowly dried her face with a towel. Did he have to know? It wasn’t like the past could be undone. Telling him wouldn’t change anything. And since Daphne decided not to show up...Did it make any sense that they should spend their lives alone?

She set the towel down on the nightstand and changed her clothes. She didn’t have to make a decision right now. It could wait. What she needed to do was get ready so they could go to town. She’d think about it later.

## *Chapter Eleven*



*E*liza turned her gaze to the church. The memory of the ring made her finger tingle. Maybe she should marry John right now. Her heart pounded frantically in her chest as she quickly thought over the implications of such a decision. She spent the entire ride into town thinking through all the consequences of marrying him. She recalled his kisses...the one by the creek...and the one last night. Both had been so wonderful. She wanted to be kissed like that for the rest of her life.

As she and John strolled down the road and neared the white building, her steps slowed. John held two bags of food, and despite the fact that his arms were full, he pointed at the church and gave her a pleading look.

She didn't say no this time. Instead, she stopped and glanced at him. He loved her. She could tell that in the way he looked at her. She'd seen other men give women the same adoring look and never thought someone might look at her that

way. But John was looking at her that way now, and it made her stomach do crazy flip flops. Yes. She'd marry him. The past was the past and it could stay there. It was time to truly enjoy her life. After all, hadn't Preacher Peters told her that God could give her a new life and it'd be like the past never happened? Maybe this was her new start, a chance to erase all that had occurred.

Just as she was about to say yes, someone called out that the stagecoach had just arrived. She turned her attention to the group of people gathering to see who was coming.

This time it was only one person. A young woman. From the looks of it, she was younger than Eliza. She was probably Charity's age. Eliza could tell from the way she held herself that she was a respectable lady, just like Charity. An uneasy feeling unsettled her nerves. She had a nagging sensation that everything in her newfound world was about to change. And not for the better.

The young woman spoke with the mayor who pointed at John.

Eliza closed her eyes and sighed. This whole time she'd hoped that Daphne would show up, and now that she had, Eliza wished she hadn't. Taking a deep breath, she turned to John and opened her eyes.

He hadn't been watching Daphne. He'd been watching her.

"She's here," Eliza whispered. "You should meet her."

John blinked, as if not understanding, but when someone called his name, he finally turned his attention to the woman and the mayor as they made their way to them.

Eliza stepped aside so the mayor and the young woman stood before John. The woman wore a pretty yellow dress with a matching hat. She had silky brown hair that rested softly against her shoulders. She even offered a polite smile to Eliza who forced a smile in return.

"You'll never guess who finally showed," Chandler Davis told John. He laughed. "Go ahead and guess."

John glanced at the mayor and then to the woman and then to Eliza.

Eliza quickly looked away. It was hard enough to go through this without seeing the unspoken question in his eyes. What were they to do now? Well, the answer was simple. He'd marry the bride he sent for.

Chandler laughed again and patted John on the back. "He can't speak, so it's not fair to make him guess. John, this is Daphne O'Conner. You know, the mail-order bride you sent for."

"I know he can't talk," Daphne told the mayor. She turned and gave John a soft smile. "It's nice to meet you, John. I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to write and tell you I'd be coming in later than we agreed. You see, I ran into some problems with the first stagecoach I took. Then I had to wait for another one to come. Between all of that, I had to stay in a small town and wait. I wanted to write but I lost your PO Box address."

"What an unfortunate thing to happen," the mayor said, shaking his head. "It's good you made it."

"I still haven't gotten my luggage though. That is still on its way. I believe Mr. Bower said it will be here in two weeks."

"Oh, how unfortunate. I'm sure we can arrange for you to get another dress and anything you may need until then. I'll send you on over to Addy Garrison. She does most of the sewing in town, and her husband owns the general store. They'll get you set up, so you don't have anything to worry about."

"Thank you. That's very nice of you."

Grinning widely, he shrugged. "Think nothing of it. You're a part of this community now, and if there's one thing we believe in here, it's the importance of helping each other out."



*Of course that depends on whether or not you're mute.* Eliza bit her tongue so she wouldn't say the words that screamed in her head.

"This is a wonderful place," Daphne agreed, nodding. "I am looking forward to spending my life here. John, I hope you don't mind waiting until my luggage comes in before we wed. I put my wedding dress in there, and since I spent two months making it, I do want to wear it."

*Oh, why don't they just get married now and get it over with?* Eliza willed her thoughts to calm down. It was hard enough to go through this without a prolonged engagement. She didn't realize she'd been gripping her purse until one of her fingernails ripped the fabric. She immediately loosened her hold. She ventured a look at John and saw him shaking his head.

"The boy is anxious to make you his wife," Chandler remarked, obviously amused. He turned to John. "I realize it's hard to wait, but you don't want Miss O'Conner to miss out on the chance to wear the dress she made, do you? That wouldn't be fair to her."

"I'm sorry, John," Daphne said in her gentle voice. "It is important to me, but if you really do want to marry today, I'll certainly do so."

John shook his head again.

The mayor looked satisfied. "Oh well, there. That's good. He's willing to wait. Two weeks isn't a long time. Actually, neither is two months. Why, it was two months ago that Miss Sweet here came to town."

Eliza almost jumped back at the mention of her made-up last name. "Two months ago?"

The mayor chuckled. "You came here two months ago, remember?"

She nodded. "Yes. I did," she told Daphne.

"She came to work for Melissa Peters, but the poor thing had a terrible fall and had to be buried."

Daphne brought her hand to her heart. "No!"

"Yes. It was tragic. She was a good woman too. Since that happened, Miss Sweet had nowhere to work, so John here decided to employ her. She's been painting up his house and doing things a maid does. Now, she stays in the small cabin on his property, so there's nothing immoral going on between them."

"No, there isn't," Eliza assured Daphne. "I have my own little house."

Daphne took her hand in hers. "I'm glad that you found someone to give you a place to sleep and food to eat. I believe in people helping each other." She turned to John. "What a beautiful thing you did for her." Then she returned her attention to Eliza. "I will make sure that you keep working out there. I certainly don't want anyone to go hungry."

Eliza swallowed the bitter lump in her throat. Stay there? And watch the two of them together?

Daphne released her hand and asked, "Where did you come from?"

Startled by the change in topic, she hesitated before answering. "I came from Omaha."

"That's a long way from here. I came from Ohio."

"You had a longer journey than I did."

"Part of it was by train. That's where my luggage is."

"I hope it comes in soon."

How easy the lie came out, Eliza thought. She chastised herself for wishing the wedding dress would never get here, for if it didn't, Daphne wouldn't marry John. Then maybe she'd go back to Ohio and Eliza could have John again. Not that he was ever hers to begin with. He had belonged to Daphne as soon as she agreed to marry him.

Daphne directed her attention to the mayor. "I must stay in town until I'm married."

*Yes, Daphne O'Conner is every bit the lady.* She was polite, kind, and pure. She probably wouldn't even hurt a fly. She would

do the right thing and be blessed because of it. As Eliza watched the mayor and Daphne discuss where she could stay, she couldn't help but think of how much she hated Daphne. Daphne represented everything that Eliza wanted to be but couldn't. She also had what Eliza couldn't. Eliza glanced at John who was staring at her. She quickly averted her gaze to Daphne and the mayor.

*I refuse to hate her. She's done nothing wrong. She doesn't deserve to be hated.* Eliza didn't know what to do with her whirling emotions except to force them back into the place where she put all of her unwanted feelings. She'd pretend that everything was fine. The method had worked in the past. If she could think of something—anything—that she'd count as a blessing right now, it'd help. She ran through the things she was grateful for. A place to eat, a place to sleep, a woman who was no longer a prostitute, the chance to be a lady, having received a kiss from a man who wanted more than a quick rump in the bed... No. She wouldn't go there. She wouldn't think of John.

"I appreciate the help, Mr. Davis," Daphne said, breaking Eliza from her thoughts. "I'll go see Mrs. Custer at once."

Eliza decided that she'd start being friendly and this was a good time to do so. "Charity just arrived here two months ago too. In fact, I came on the same stagecoach she did. I think you two will get along very well. You have so much in common." *Like being proper young women.*

"Then I must meet her. Thank you, Miss Sweet."

Eliza returned her smile.

The mayor looked at John. "You want to come along and spend a little time with your intended?"

John shook his head and nodded toward the groceries.

"Alright. Go on home. But don't stay away for too long. You got yourself a keeper," he replied.

"I'll see you soon, John," Daphne promised.

That, Eliza thought, is exactly what I'm afraid of. She breathed a sigh of relief as the two left. She caught sight of the group of onlookers before she turned and walked in the direction of John's wagon. He walked beside her and gestured, but she pretended not to notice that he was trying to get her attention. Instead, she stared straight ahead, only to glance back one time at the church. She should have married him when she first got here or at any of the other times when he asked. But now she missed her chance, and it was too late. Now she wouldn't ever know what could've been.

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John didn't want to leave town. He didn't want to marry Daphne. It was unfortunate that she had been delayed, but let Old Willy, Buck, Troy, or even Shawn marry her. Shawn was close enough to her age since she was eighteen. Daphne had four men to choose from. Certainly, that was more than enough. She didn't need to be with him.

There was only one person he wanted to marry, and that was Eliza. He had tried to get her attention as she walked back to his wagon, but she wouldn't look at him. He thought she was actually going to marry him until that stagecoach pulled in. There had been a hesitation in her step and she had a thoughtful look on her face, as if she was finally giving it serious consideration.

But then Chandler had called out his name and that was it. All along, Eliza had been holding out for Daphne to appear. And now she got her wish. He sat in front of his work bench where the block of wood waited for him to cut into, but he didn't feel like working. He felt like finding Eliza and hauling her to town and to the preacher.

He looked out his window and saw that Eliza hadn't returned from the creek. Maybe he should go there and ask her what was on her mind. She hadn't told him anything. In fact, she

remained quiet the entire way back. That wasn't like her. And it worried him.

He took the ring out of his pocket and examined it. It seemed to him that something important happened last night, but he couldn't remember exactly what it was...well, besides the kissing. She had said something that gave him hope. What was it? He sighed and shoved it back into his pocket. He didn't want to put the ring on Daphne's finger. He was going to have to explain to her that he loved Eliza. It wasn't exactly what he was looking forward to, but it had to be done. Then he could assure her that there were other single men who would be more than happy to be with her.

A horse neighed and he turned his attention to the window. Old Willy rode up on his property.

John frowned and stood up. He put the hat on his head and ran out to meet him.

Old Willy stopped the horse. "Thank goodness. John, my fence broke down an' that neighbor's dog has been findin' his way into my shed. You know that's the shed I keep my paints in. Well, the dog seems to think he can jump all over the place and knock them down. I can't go on like this. If he keeps on destroyin' my paint, how will I ever stay in business? Can you repair the fence? I'll give you more free paint."

John nodded.

The man looked relieved. "Thank you, John. I'll be at home. I don' dare leave that place for long."

As Old Willy led the horse into a run, John turned in the direction of the creek. He paused. He should bring something to write on. He didn't know how to explain the situation to her through gestures. Once he retrieved the paper and pencil from the kitchen table, he walked to the creek where he found Eliza. She was resting against a tree and had apparently fallen asleep.

No wonder she stayed here for so long. He sat next to her and got ready to wake her when he realized that she'd been crying. What made her sad? He gently shook her arm.

She slowly opened her eyes and jerked up when she saw him. "I didn't mean to fall asleep." She rubbed her eyes and blinked several times as if she was having a hard time waking up.

He took the pad and wrote, "Rong?" Then he showed it to her.

"What's wrong?"

He nodded.

"Nothing. I'm just tired, that's all. It was a long night."

He didn't believe her, so he shook his head.

"Fine. If you think there's something wrong, then tell me what it is."

He thought of all the possibilities and couldn't find anything that applied. Finally, he shrugged.

"So there you have it. Is that why you came out here?"

Recalling his reason for being there, he wrote, "Wily cam. Need fix fens."

She read his words. "Willy needs you to fix his fence?"

He nodded. He did like being able to write his thoughts out. It made it easier to communicate.

"How long will you be gone?"

He thought over how much time it might take and held up two fingers.

"Two hours?"

Smiling, he nodded.

"I'll have something ready for you to eat when you get back."

As she stood, he reached for her hand.

"What? Is there more?"

He pointed to her ring finger.

She pulled her hand away and snapped, "I can't believe you. Daphne's in town now. How can you persist in this now that she's here?"

He wrote, "No want her. Want yu."

"She came all this way to marry you, John. She's a good woman. The kind you need to marry. She'll make you happy. She'll give you lots of children."

He shook his head and pointed at her.

"I can't give you what she can. I just can't."

Then he remembered the previous night when she looked down at him and said she wanted to marry him but couldn't. He smiled and quickly wrote, "Yu sed yu want marry me. I rember."

She snatched the pad from him. "Don't you have a fence to fix?"

He jumped up and took the ring from his pocket. He pointed to her finger and then the ring.

"Get out of here! Go!" She threw the pad into the creek and stormed off.

He followed her. He knew she wanted to be alone, but he couldn't leave her be until she told him why she still rejected him, even when he told her he didn't want to marry Daphne.

"Stop it!" She whirled around, making him jump back. "Just stop."

He pointed to his temple.

"You already know what I'm thinking."

He shook his head and pointed to the ring and then to his temple. Then he shrugged.

She groaned. "You won't give up, will you? No matter what I say or do, you just won't stop."

Taking her hand, he pressed it to his heart.

She yanked her hand away. "You love me?"

He nodded.

Letting out a bitter laugh, she flung her arms in the air. "You love a prostitute, John?"

What was she talking about? He shook his head and pointed at her.

Her face turned dark. "I am a prostitute. That's what I did in Omaha. I got paid to have men come to my bed."

He shook his head. No. She wouldn't do that kind of thing.

"What's so hard to believe about it? It's true. I started at fourteen and went on until earlier this year. I'm twenty-seven. I was entertaining men in my bed for nearly thirteen years. I had all kinds of men, John."

He didn't want to hear anymore. He put his hands over his ears and closed his eyes. She was lying. She was just saying it so he'd back off from proposing to her.

She strode up to him and grabbed his hands.

He opened his eyes and saw the anger in her face before he heard it in her voice.

"It didn't matter what color or age they were or even what they wanted to do. I did anything they wanted. I've done many things, John. I've seen some perversions that would make your head spin, and in the end, I couldn't tell what was right and what was wrong. I just did it because I had to. But most of the men who came to me were lonely. They just wanted someone to be with, to take the edge off the pain that was in their life for one night. I did it all. I gave each one what he wanted and it didn't matter if he was married or not. Some of them had a wife and children waiting for them at home. Do you get that? I committed adultery too. And you want to marry someone who'd do that?"

He shook his head, denying it. She was just telling him this to get rid of him. She didn't really do any of it.

"That was my job. That's who I was. Now go to Daphne. She's never been touched by a man. I can tell these things. I've done it long enough. You haven't been with a woman. It's apparent in the way you kiss. You two need to be together. A man and a woman who haven't been tainted by the world need to



be together. She's a nice woman. She'll treat you well. She'll love you and give you children. I can't give you children. The doctor my boss hired made sure of that. They don't like whores to get pregnant. It's bad for business."

He didn't want to hear anymore. He pushed her away and ran to his house. He didn't even slam the door behind him. He just collapsed on the floor and gave into the need to cry. He couldn't recall the last time he cried. It must have been when he was a child. As much as he wanted to keep denying Eliza's words, he couldn't. Not really. He clutched his chest. His heart hurt. It hurt to think of Eliza with other men who paid her to do things that were supposed to be between a man and his wife. All his life he'd believe in the sanctity of the marital bed. To think of those men kissing and touching her in places where they shouldn't...It was too much.

Why? Why would she choose that life? And at such a young age? She'd been fourteen. She'd done that for thirteen years? Thirteen years of men groping her and doing things...things he really didn't understand...to her. He knew nothing about lovemaking, but there was no way that could be loving. How could a man love a woman he bedded at his convenience? Why did she do it? Did she enjoy that kind of thing? Is that what she wanted?

He couldn't believe she was happy doing that. If she was happy, then why would she leave? He didn't understand any of it. He didn't even know if he wanted to. But he had to. He still loved her. He had to find out. Sitting there on the floor and wondering wasn't going to do him any good.

After he managed to collect his thoughts and clear his head enough for a reasonable conversation, he left the house. She wasn't anywhere in sight, but the door of her little home was closed and she'd drawn the curtains in the windows. Steadying his legs, he walked forward, trying to think of how to approach this situation.

When he reached the door, he heard her crying. It hurt her to tell him what she did, he realized. That meant that she hadn't been proud of it...or liked it. Didn't it? If it made her happy, she wouldn't be crying. He had to find out. He knocked on the door.

Silence came from the other end. He waited for her to open the door but she didn't. He knocked again. Still, she refused to let him in.

A horse neighed, and John turned to see Aaron riding in his direction. "Old Willy said you planned to come over to work on his fence. What are you doing here?"

John motioned to the door.

Aaron rolled his eyes. "Look, take it from a married man. If a woman doesn't want to talk, there's nothing you can do to make her. Now come on. You can talk to her when you get back."

Deciding his brother was right, John reluctantly agreed and got his tools together and headed for Old Willy's place.

## *Chapter Twelve*



*J*ohn wanted to get back to Eliza, so he worked as fast as he could in putting Old Willy's fence together. As he repaired the places that needed attention, he had time to think about everything Eliza told him. It still hurt. He hated knowing that other men had been with her. It didn't seem fair. It was as if she had belonged to him her entire life, and those men had robbed that for both of them.

He had time to assess the situation and concluded that she'd been ashamed when she told him. He could tell that by the look in her eyes and the trembling in her hands. Her voice had remained tough, though the rest of her hadn't. She wasn't proud of her past, and he realized that was why she told him she couldn't marry him. She wanted him to be with Daphne because, in her mind, Daphne was better for him.

She was wrong. But how could he tell her that? He picked up another stake and pounded it into the ground. He

shouldn't have run from her. He just wanted her to stop talking. He'd heard enough—too much—to last him a lifetime. He didn't want to hear anymore. She must have taken that the wrong way. She must have assumed it meant he rejected her.

He finished the fence, noting that the dog watched him, as if upset that his fun was now at an end. Ignoring the canine's barking, he gathered his nails and hammer and put them into his leather bag. He swung it over his shoulder and lumbered into Old Willy's house.

"The fence done?" the older man asked.

John nodded.

"Good. If Harvey'd watch his dog, I wouldn't have called you out. Oh well. I guess there's no use worryin' 'bout the past. What's done is done. At least things are fixed now."

John thought over the man's words and agreed with him. What could either he or Eliza do about her life in Omaha? There was no going back and erasing any of it. He'd have to write that down so Eliza could see it. Maybe if she understood that he wasn't going to dwell on the past, she'd marry him. In fact, that was probably the reason she refused to be his wife all along.

As he left the house, Old Willy slapped him on the back. "I owe you more free paint."

John nodded that he understood and walked back to his wagon. He supposed he should go see Daphne and tell her that he didn't want to marry her. It'd be only right, but he wanted to clear things with Eliza first. He passed the church, wishing for the hundredth time that Eliza had just married him. Maybe she still would. He couldn't give up hope, not when he was so close to having her as his wife.

The ride back home seemed to take forever, even though he ran the horse as fast as he could. As soon as he unsaddled the horse and set the animal out to pasture, he hurried to Eliza's house. He knocked on the door and waited.

Nothing happened.

That wasn't necessarily a surprise, but he suddenly realized the curtains were open and everything was strangely quiet. Sensing that he wasn't going to like what he found, he stepped to the window and peered into the one room dwelling. His heart beat picked up and his grip tightened on the wood frame of the window sill.

No one was there. In fact, he didn't see any of Eliza's things. He quickly opened the door and examined the room. The bed was neatly made, and everything was in its proper location. It was unsettling. He knew she left, but from all outward appearances, no one would know it. He hurried to his trunk and threw it open. Her travel bag had been in here, and now it was gone. That confirmed his fears. He rummaged through the room, trying to find a note or some indication of where she might have gone.

Nothing.

It was as if she disappeared. He turned around one time, his anxious gaze carefully sweeping the room. Releasing his breath, he ran through a list of possible places she might have gone. Somewhere in town was the obvious answer. But where? Charity Custer's place? Addy and Frank's home? It had to be one of those two. The town was a small place. She couldn't have gone far, and surely, someone knew where she was.

He raced back to the pasture to get his horse saddled up again.

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Eliza hid in the cornstalks lining the path to town when she heard the sound of a horse charging in her direction. She'd seen John on his way back from town, and now it looked like he was heading back. Why he was heading back, she didn't want to guess. Her heart constricted at the sight of him as he passed by

her. Whatever was on his mind, he was in a hurry. Maybe he wanted to see Daphne.

And wasn't that what she wanted? That's why she told him the truth. So he'd find Daphne and cling to her. They deserved to be together. Eliza did the right thing by telling him everything. Well, almost everything. She looked down at the picture in her hand. Her son. The only child she would ever have. A child born out of her uncle's lust. It didn't matter how this child came to be. The fact was that he was her son and she loved him. She always would. She prayed for him every night since she came to God and changed her life.

She waited until John was safely out of sight before she stood up and left the wall of corn. Clutching the picture to her heart in one hand and holding the travel bag with the other, she resumed her walk to town. The bag grew heavy but she pressed on, knowing her arms would be sore the next day, even if she did switch the bag to the other arm once in awhile.

By the time she made it to town, the evening sky brought its assortment of yellows and pinks. It was such a pretty sight that she stood on the edge of the town and stared out at the prairie sky. It seemed to go on forever. She wished she could keep walking and never get tired or hungry. Part of her just wanted to leave and fade into that sky. Of course, such a thing was impossible.

She sighed and cautiously approached the main street. She recognized some of the people, and thankfully, none were John. Mentally calculating how much money she had, she figured she could afford a room at the boarding house. As soon as she found a paying job, she could afford rent and food. At least her needs would be taken care of.

She crossed the street and passed some of the homes. One of those homes happened to be Charity's house. She glanced over and saw John leave through the front door. Scurrying to the nearest building, she struggled to calm her nerves. She shouldn't

look. Oh, she knew she shouldn't! But she had to see it again. Before she changed her mind, she peered around the building and saw Daphne and Charity talking to John on the porch.

It shouldn't surprise her. She told him to go to Daphne. And yet, she had to force back the tears that welled in her eyes. What did she expect? What *could* she expect? He only did what she ordered him to do. Surely, there was no fault on his part. Finding little consolation in the admission, she forced her feet forward and hurried to the boarding house. The sooner she got into her new room, the better.

She prayed that John and Daphne would stay out of town as much as he did now. She couldn't bear to see them together..and happy. Someone called her name. She stopped. Was it John? No. Of course not. John couldn't speak. Relieved, she turned around, surprised to see Troy walking toward her.

He waited until he caught up to her before he spoke. "Is something wrong?"

She relaxed. "No. I thought since Miss O'Conner showed up that it'd be best if I came to stay in town." It was the truth...in a roundabout way.

He nodded. "That's understandable. If it were me, I'd do the same thing."

*If only you knew...*She cleared her throat and blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. "I should get to the boarding house."

"I can help you with your bag."

She hesitated, not sure she wanted him to be near her. Could she trust him? Pushing aside the notion, she handed him the bag. She could trust him. He was John's brother after all. Tucking the picture in her shirt sleeve before he could see it, she said, "Thank you."

He joined her in strolling by the closed businesses. People milled about and conversed, content to relax after a hard day of work. She didn't bother making eye contact with any of them. She knew John wouldn't tell anyone about her past, but she still

felt exposed, as if they could tell what she'd done just by looking at her.

"You didn't bring much with you," Troy stated. "This bag is light."

"I don't need much."

"I suppose not. So, did John bring you in?"

What was the best way to answer that question? She ran through a list of possible things to say but finally decided on the truth. "No. I left while he was here in town fixing the fence for Mister Jafferty."

"Didn't you tell him you were coming in?"

She shrugged, glad that they had finally arrived at the boarding house. "I didn't see any need to. He'll figure it out when he gets home." She didn't want to answer more of his questions. It was hard enough to say what she already had. It was painful to leave John. "Anyway, he'll have his mail-order bride now, and that's what matters."

"Right. I agree." He motioned to the front door. "I might as well bring this in for you."

"Oh." She shifted from one foot to the other. "Alright."

She climbed the porch steps, aware that he was behind her...and probably watching. When she glanced over her shoulder, he averted his gaze. She hastened her steps and knocked on the door. The sooner she got into the house, the better. She rubbed her arms. Though it wasn't cold, she felt chilly and she wasn't sure why.

The door opened and Molly Richie smiled at them. "How may I help you?"

"I came to ask you about a room. Do you have one available?" Eliza already knew the answer was yes since Addy had told her that Molly was looking for another tenant. Still, she didn't want to come right out and demand a room.

Molly waved her in. "I sure do."



Eliza turned to Troy. "Thank you again for carrying my bag for me." She held out her hand to take it.

He gave it to her and tipped his hat. "It was my pleasure. I'll see you around town. Good evening, Mrs. Richie."

Eliza exhaled, surprised that she'd been holding her breath. Now that she stepped into Molly's parlor, she felt her tension subside.

"I thought you were working for John," the woman said as she encouraged her to sit.

Eliza settled in the chair and placed the bag by her feet. "Yes. Well, I'm guessing you heard about Miss O'Conner's arrival today?"

The woman's eyes lit up as she sat across from her. "Yes, as a matter of fact I did. Oh, well no wonder. You'll be needing a place to stay. Fortunately, I have a nice room available. It has a lovely view of the town so you can see everything that's going on."

Great. Just what she needed: a view of John and Daphne. "You do have thick curtains, don't you?" That way she could draw them tight and block them out. Out of sight, out of mind.

"I do have curtains but they aren't very thick. Does the moonlight bother you?"

"Sometimes I like to take a nap during the day, and the sunlight can be bright." At least that was true. She was used to resting at some point in the daytime. She usually spent part of her nights staying up to read...now that she had a bed to herself all the time. She sighed. Recalling the past wasn't something she wanted to do, so she shoved the memories safely back where she wouldn't have to deal with them. Shifting in the chair, she continued, "I do intend to work and pay my rent. Do you know anyone who's hiring?"

Molly leaned back and tapped the tip of her index finger against her lips. "As a matter of fact, I do. Harriet Lube needs

someone to clean her house. She's too old to do it herself anymore."

Relieved, she smiled. "I can clean houses." She had cleaned John's, so she now had experience doing that. "Are there any other houses that need cleaning?"

"I don't know of any off the top of my head, but I'll keep an ear open in case I hear of any."

"That sounds good." Eliza bent forward and opened her travel bag. "How much should I pay you?"

"I ask for \$8 upfront."

Her stomach tightened into a knot. "\$8?"

"I know that's two weeks' worth of rent, but ever since Malcom ruined one of my rooms, I learned it was necessary to ask for renter's insurance. He never did pay for the damages. I had to repair the whole room on my dime. That wasn't cheap." She paused and smiled. "I don't mean to be cruel. I just need to protect my home."

Eliza glanced at the money in her hand. She only had \$10. That seemed like a large amount when she left Omaha. Now it didn't look like it was that much after all. She looked back up at the woman. "So how much is it a week?"

"\$4."

"And the \$8 will only get me through one week?"

"Technically, \$4 of that \$8 is for the renter's insurance."

She took a deep breath. She didn't even have enough for two weeks. "Does the \$4 include meals?" Even as she said it, she winced. It sounded pathetic. But what could she do?

"Well, yes. Food can get expensive."

"What if I didn't eat here?"

"Then I suppose we could agree to \$3 a week. So you would only have to pay me \$7."

So that made it \$4 for the insurance and \$3 for the week. She had \$3 left. That at least gave her another week. "Alright, Mrs. Richie. Here's the \$7."

The woman took the money and stood up. "I will show you to your room."

Eliza obediently followed her up the narrow staircase. "That woman you mentioned who needs her house cleaned...What's her name?"

"Harriet Lube."

"Do you think I could stop by her house tomorrow to ask about the job?"

"I'm sure she'd welcome it, dear. The poor thing hasn't had anyone to clean her place in almost a year."

"That long? Why?"

The woman shrugged as they reached the top of the staircase. "Who knows? The last person who worked for her just quit and never said why."

Good. That would give her a start on earning money. "I'll stop and see her tomorrow then."

"She'll like that. It'll help ease the loneliness." Molly pointed to the opposite end of the hallway. "Alan Grey stays in that room. He's been a recluse ever since his wife died. Now, in the next room is Erica Strickland. She's nearing sixty and spends most of her time sleeping and sitting in the parlor. Then there's you. My bedroom is next to yours."

Eliza followed Molly to the small room with a made up bed, a dresser, and a rocking chair and small table.

"This is your room. That big window will give you the view I told you about."

Eliza entered it and set the travel bag down. In some ways it reminded her of her place next to John's house. She walked to the window and looked out of it. Just as Molly said, she could see the main street and most of the houses in the area. She could even see the road that led out to John's land. She quickly closed the curtains. They weren't going to block out all of the light, but they blocked the view well enough and that's all that mattered.

"This room is perfect," Eliza said.

Molly gave her a wide smile. "I'm glad you think so. I pride myself on being a good hostess. I'll bring a pitcher of water and a bowl for you. If you need the privy, it's out back. There's also a chamber pot under the bed. Baths are allowed once a week. Your turn will be Saturday at six in the evening. We all must be as clean as possible when we go to church."

"Thank you."

"I'll return with that pitcher and bowl."

As soon as Molly closed the door, Eliza pulled the picture from her sleeve and stared at it. It had given her comfort ever since her son's adopted parents sent it to her. He'd been six months old when it was taken. She wondered what he looked like now. He'd be twelve. She imagined he was a happy boy. His parents seemed like nice people. She crawled into bed and held the picture to her breast. The exhaustion of the day suddenly caught up to her. She hadn't slept much the night before, and the day had been grueling. *At least it's over. I can finally rest.* She slowly inhaled and then released her breath.

She'd make it. She always did. No matter what life handed her, she would survive. She did before and she would again.

The door creaked open.

Her eyelids fluttered and she saw Molly gently placing the pitcher and bowl on the dresser. "Sleep well, Miss Sweet." Then she turned the knob on the kerosene lamp until only a dim light lit the room.

Eliza wanted to respond, to thank her, but she was too tired, and before she knew it, she fell into the bliss of sleep where all aches and pains disappeared.

## *Chapter Thirteen*



*J*ohn had hoped that Eliza would be back at his place when he returned. The first thing he did was check the little home he'd given her to stay in. But it was empty. He stood in the doorway, unsure of what to do. He'd looked all over town, starting with Frank and Addy's place and then to the boarding house before he finally made his way to Charity's home. He couldn't think of anywhere else she might stay. While he was at Charity's, he tried to ask the marshal to search for her, but the man shooed him away as if he were a child. When John grabbed the marshal by the shirt collar, Daphne intervened and after a good fifteen minutes of trying to write down what he wanted, she finally translated it to the big oaf who—at long last—left the house to notify everyone in town that he was looking for Eliza.

John had also taken the time to tell Daphne that since she had been delayed, he had gotten to know Eliza and wanted to marry her. He apologized and hoped she would soon find one of

the other single men in town who were more to her liking. Daphne said she understood, and Charity started making plans on which available bachelor would be the best pick to go after.

John took his time in returning home. The sun was setting, which made it hard for him to examine the landscape. Perhaps Eliza had decided to leave town altogether. But where would she go? There wasn't anything around them for miles.

He heard a noise. Hoping it might be Eliza, he turned around but only saw a deer leap out of sight. He lowered the lantern and lumbered to his house. The absence of Eliza's chitter chatter was deafening. He'd been used to silence before she came, but once she made her home here, he'd had the pleasure of her voice. Whether she talked to him or sang, she had delighted him with her presence. And now she was gone.

Where did she go?

He swallowed the lump in his throat and blinked back his tears. He didn't want to cry. Crying didn't solve anything. He needed solutions. He needed information. He needed to act. But what else could he do? He'd already exhausted all of his ideas. Entering the house, he set the lantern on the kitchen table and sat down. He took a moment to look at the yellow walls. She enjoyed the color yellow.

His gaze drifted to the wilting yellow flowers at the center of the table. Flowers didn't last long once they were plucked from the ground, but there were so many on the property, she could pick a dozen each day and still have more to choose from. Now she wouldn't be picking flowers and that made the place seem emptier as well.

*I shouldn't have run from her. I should have stayed.* It was his fault she left. She told him a part of her past that he hadn't wanted to hear and he ran away from her. He put his face in his hands and took a deep breath, fighting off the tears. *No. Don't cry. Crying won't solve anything.* In many ways, crying was admitting defeat. People cried when things were hopeless.

## *Loving Eliza*

But this couldn't be hopeless. Once Eliza found out that he was no longer engaged to Daphne, she'd understand how much she meant to him. Then she'd come back. He couldn't marry Daphne. If he did, he'd always be wishing he'd married Eliza instead. Then he'd be doing wrong by Daphne, for what woman wanted to be married to a man who secretly loved another? He sighed. No. If he couldn't marry Eliza, he didn't want to be married at all.

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Eliza sat up and straightened her back. The late morning sunlight struck her eyes and made her wince. She lowered her head and wiped the sweat off her brow. The kitchen floor was almost clean now. She leaned forward on her knees and dipped the rag into the soapy water and rang out the dirt. Harriet Lube had needed someone to clean her house in the worst possible way. As tired as Eliza was, she was satisfied that she was doing honest work. Work she could be proud of. That counted for something.

She placed the rag back on the floor and scrubbed the grime from the wooden surface. Several strands of her hair fell into her mouth. She tried to spit them out but the strands were resistant things, so she threw the rag down and forced the rebellious hair back into the bun. She'd have to wear a braid tomorrow.

"Girl?"

Eliza glanced up as Harriet used her cane to help her limp across the floor. "Yes, Mrs. Lube?" She sat up and placed the rag in the bucket.

"After you're done in here, I need you to go into the attic and clear it out. I'm not getting any younger, and it's time I threw some things out."

"Yes, Mrs. Lube."

“I will need you to haul all that junk to the garbage heap out past Third Road.”

“Where do I get a wagon to carry everything?”

“I don’t know. That’s not my problem.”

“Do you know someone who’d loan me one?”

“Girl, I hired you to figure that kind of thing out. Now, I must get something to eat.”

Food. Eliza’s stomach grumbled, reminding her that she hadn’t had supper the previous night or breakfast that morning. “May I make it for you? I can cook.”

“I’m not paying you to eat. I’m paying you to work.”

She clenched her skirt so she wouldn’t snap at her employer. She needed the money. The woman promised \$5 a week. That’d be enough for the rent and food. If she was careful, she could buy clothes or other necessary items as the need for them arose. She waited for a moment to calm down before she spoke. “I haven’t had anything to eat since yesterday afternoon. Couldn’t I grab a quick bite? I’ll even make the meal.”

The woman frowned. “I’m being generous with the money I’m going to pay you at the end of this week, aren’t I?”

“Well...yes, ma’am, and I appreciate it, but I can’t do my job if I’m hungry.”

“Then go and eat. While you’re taking the things from the attic to the garbage heap, stop by Rhonda’s restaurant.” Harriet shuffled over to the table in front of the window and took a loaf of bread out of her breadbox. “Now, when you go out to eat, don’t take more than twenty minutes. And that will be once a day.”

Eliza knew when it was pointless to argue, so she turned back to her work and continued scrubbing the floor while Harriet made a large sandwich and ate it right in front of her. Eliza’s mouth watered and stomach rumbled to the point of pain, but she pressed on in the task.



Finally, when she was done, she dumped out the bucket of dirty water and went up to the attic which was full of cobwebs and junk that hadn't seen the light of day in well over ten years. She sat down for a moment and closed her eyes. She was hungry, and her employer just told her she had to take away some of this junk in order to eat. But she had to find a wagon first. Maybe she could slip into that restaurant as she looked for the wagon. Harriet didn't have to know.

Eliza decided on that plan and climbed down the ladder and then down the steps to the first floor where Harriet had nodded off to sleep. Good. She could just do her task and not worry about upsetting the old bat. Eliza realized it wasn't a Christian thing to do—thinking poorly about another human being—but she couldn't deny that she didn't like the woman. From the moment she met her, Harriet Lube struck her as a crotchety woman who had nothing better to do than sulk in her own state of misery. Miserable people often made others miserable. Life had taught her that, and that was why Eliza vowed that no matter what, she wouldn't fall into that trap. Despite her circumstances, she'd be pleasant to others.

She slipped into the restaurant and saw Addy talking to Cynthia Taggart. As soon as Addy saw her, she waved to her. Glad to see a friendly face, Eliza rushed over to the table and sat down. She glanced at the clock. She'd have to be careful to keep her time to twenty minutes.

"You had me worried," Addy said, clasping her hand.

Eliza blinked. "Why?"

"Don't you know?"

Cynthia stood up. "I'll leave you two to talk. I'll see you both at church."

Eliza smiled and nodded as the woman left. Turning her attention back to Addy, she asked, "What is it? What don't I know?"

"That John's been looking all over for you."

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Yes. Well, I thought it best if I stop working for him. Miss O'Conner will be out there soon enough, and the last thing they need is for me to interfere."

"Oh, then you don't know."

"Know what?"

Rhonda left a table of laughing men and came over to them. "Good day. What can I get you two to eat?"

Addy glanced up. "I'd like the ravioli."

"I'll have the same," Eliza said not really caring what she ate as long as it was edible. She couldn't wait until the food arrived. Just the smell coming from the kitchen made her weak.

Once Rhonda left, Addy said, "John broke off the engagement."

She gasped. "What? But why?"

Addy smiled. "Isn't it obvious?"

Her face flushed. She hoped it wasn't because of her. "Isn't what obvious?"

"He loves you. I could tell when I saw you in church together."

Rhonda set two cups of coffee in front of them.

"Thank you," Addy said, picking up her cup and taking a sip. "Ooh. It's still hot." She quickly put it down.

Eliza felt sick to her stomach. Why would he go and do something so foolish? Did he think she was lying about being a prostitute? It'd hurt to tell him. She knew he had thought of her as a lady. He certainly treated her like one. But she had no choice. Still, he couldn't give up the chance to be with Daphne. If he did, Eliza would never forgive herself.

"He promised Daphne that he'd marry her," Eliza finally said and took her cup in her hands.

"Maybe, but she didn't show up and you did. It seems to me that God had other plans in mind."

She gave a bitter laugh. "God didn't plan that one. I assure you of that." She took a sip of the coffee despite the fact that it was still hot. She needed something to occupy her mouth, and it felt good to drink something. Harriet had allowed her one glass of water when she arrived at her house that morning but that had been it.

"God works in mysterious ways," Addy said, grinning.

Eliza breathed a sigh of relief as Rhonda placed a plate of ravioli in front of her. She eagerly grabbed her fork and dug into the meal. As soon as she realized how unsophisticated she must look, she forced herself to slow down.

"Where are you staying?" Addy asked as she bit into her food.

Eliza brought the fork to her mouth. "I'm at Molly's boarding house." Then she ate the ravioli. Cheese never tasted so good!

"John went there. He must have been there before you arrived. Eliza, can you afford a boarding house?"

"Yes. I got a job that pays well. I'm doing fine."

"That's good. You do know that if there's anything you need, you can come to me."

Eliza ate another bite of ravioli and smiled. "Thank you, Addy, but I'm doing fine. I came here to be on my own, and now I'm doing it."

Addy nodded.

"Oh, I do need something. Do you know anyone who has a wagon that I might borrow?"

"Sure, I do. Frank has one. He needs it for the store. Do you need someone to drive it?"

She hadn't thought of driving it. "I should. I am not familiar with horses."

"Well, if Frank is unavailable, then you can go to Willy. You've met Willy, haven't you?"

"Yes. He's a nice man."

“Very nice. Willy’s the kind of person who’ll do anything for anyone in need.”

“Thank you, Addy. I’ll remember that.”

After she was finished eating, she went to Frank and asked for use of the wagon. When she realized that Frank had to stay at the store, she went to Willy’s house.

As she was about to knock on his door, Troy called out to her. She quickly knocked and turned to him. Willy would open the door soon, and she’d feel better. She didn’t know what it was about Troy that bothered her, but she felt it best to limit their conversations.

“How are you doing?” Troy asked her.

“Good.”

“You managing alright?”

“Yes. I’m doing fine, thanks.” Where was Willy?

“I’m glad to hear that.”

The door opened and she said a silent prayer of thanks for the interruption. “Hello, Mister Jafferty.”

“Hello, Miss Sweet, Mister Evans,” the man replied, straightening his shirt. “How may I help you?”

“I was just over at Mister Garrison’s store, and he said I could borrow his wagon but I’ve never driven one before so I was wondering if you could help me with that? I need to empty out Mrs. Lube’s attic, and she wants her things taken to the garbage.”

“I’d be happy to help you,” Willy said. “Let me get my hat and vest on, and I’ll be right out.”

“Thank you.”

Troy smiled. “You know, I have a wagon too. Should you ever need one in the future and if Willy’s not able to help, I’d like to offer my services.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, and it’s nice of you to offer.” She prayed she’d never need to take him up on that.

To her surprise, the marshal walked over to them. “Thank goodness I finally found you, Miss Sweet.”

Her eyes widened. Did Harriet send the marshal to look for her? “Is there a problem, Marshal?”

“No, but at least Miss O’Conner can rest assured you’re safe. That John came by last night and insisted that I do a search for you. Never mind that you are an adult woman who is fully capable of leaving him if you wish. Quite frankly, I don’t know why you agreed to work for him in the first place. But that’s just me. Anyway, now I can tell Miss O’Conner I found you.”

“Miss Sweet is staying at Molly’s,” Troy said on her behalf.

“That’s a good choice. Molly is a nice woman. She’ll do you right. That’ll make Miss O’Conner feel better, which means that my wife will feel better.”

Eliza wondered if she should have left John a note. Then he wouldn’t have worried other people. Oh well. There was nothing to be done about it now. Hopefully, things would settle down and he’d rethink breaking off the engagement to Daphne. She could only hope he’d do that, even if a part of her dreaded it.

As the marshal headed off, Willy asked, “Why did you leave John’s place?”

Was it really any of his business? Or anyone’s business? But Willy had been kind to John—one of the few people in town who actually were nice to him—so he deserved respect. “I left because Miss O’Conner is in town now, and I know that a woman doesn’t want to share her space with another woman, even if that other woman is the help.”

“I’m sorry you had to leave. John’s a good man, and I’m sure he’s better than Mrs. Lube. That woman’s a hard one to deal with.”

“Is she?” Here it came. What he’d say next would only confirm her fears.

“She’s got to be. No one works for her for long. I think the longest anyone’s worked for her was half a year.”

Troy shrugged and crossed his arms. “Well, that don’t matter. I’m sure Eliza can find a man who’d be more than happy

to marry her. Then she won't have to deal with Mrs. Lube or any other job."

This wasn't going well. She didn't have any desire to marry Troy.

Willy closed the door. "Anyway, I best get you over to Mrs. Lube's before she starts screamin'."

"Oh, you're jesting. She wouldn't really scream," Eliza said, grinning.

He raised an eyebrow. "I've seen it before. She had that Marcia cryin' that one time. I'll never forget how afraid of Mrs. Lube she was after that."

"Then Marcia married Stephen and she's fine now," Troy interjected.

"True. Stephen's a good man. Treats her real well too."

Eliza sighed. "I better get back then. Will you take the wagon over there? I'll start clearing out her attic."

"I'll help too," Troy offered. "I got the rest of the day off and nothing to do."

Troy...with her all afternoon? Eliza quickly looked at Willy. "Will you help?"

"Sure, I will. Any friend of John's is a friend of mine, and I believe in helpin' my friends whenever I can."

Troy seemed disappointed, but she didn't care. She liked Willy and was relieved he'd be there too. "I'm fortunate to have the help of two strong men."

They both beamed at her, so she left it at that. She just hoped that none of them got the wrong idea about this.

## *Chapter Fourteen*



*T*hat Sunday, Eliza almost didn't go to church. What if John was there? What if he came with Daphne? What if he didn't? What if he came to see her? What if he didn't come at all? Life had continued on without him, but she felt a lingering emptiness. Is this what it felt like to be in love? She'd never experienced love with a man before, so she wasn't prepared for how much it hurt to leave John.

She stood outside the church and took a deep breath. For a moment, she imagined what might have been if she had married John here. He'd always make it a point to stop and point to the church anytime they came to town. His persistence annoyed her to no end, but now she wanted nothing more than to have him ask again. But it wouldn't be fair to him. Not really. He deserved better than her.

She peeked into the church and saw that he was there, sitting in the pew they usually sat in together. Frank and Addy

were talking to him. She shook her head. No. She couldn't do it. She couldn't face him. Not today. Maybe she could next week. She turned and fled down the street, not caring if anyone saw her or not.

She glanced over her shoulder and bumped into someone. She nearly shrieked. Then she looked forward and saw Daphne who was with Charity, Bethany, and Ralph. "Oh, Miss O'Conner. I'm sorry." Really, that applied to bumping into her and being responsible for John breaking the engagement.

Daphne smiled and shook her head. "I know it was an accident. There's no need to apologize. Would you like to join us for church this morning?"

Daphne had to be kidding! What woman wanted to sit with the woman who took her intended away from her?

"You're more than welcome to join us," Charity offered.

Eliza wouldn't step into that church right now if her life depended on it. "Thank you for the offer, but I don't feel well."

"What's wrong?" Daphne asked, looking concerned. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

Daphne's kindness was making Eliza feel worse by the minute. She couldn't bear to be around someone this good. "John's there," she blurted out before she had the chance to think over the wisdom of her words. "Maybe you should sit with him. I mean, I heard that you're no longer engaged, but he doesn't know you. You shouldn't just give up on him."

"I don't understand. I thought you two were planning to get married."

Eliza nearly gasped. "What? No! I never said I'd marry him."

"See?" Ralph inserted. "I told you."

Daphne shook her head. "But John came by looking for you. It was obvious that he was upset that you left his place. And there has been talk--"

"Talk? What kind of talk?"



“Nothing much really, but a few people said you two looked happy together and then he came by to tell me he loved you and needed to break off his engagement to me.”

“But that’s because he didn’t know you. He’s never spent time with any woman. I was only there to help him with his place. I never gave him reason to think I’d marry him.”

“A wise move,” Ralph muttered under his breath.

Charity and Bethany nodded.

Eliza ignored them. “Anyway, I knew you were his mail-order bride, and I respected that. Believe me, I don’t want to come between you two.”

“I know that,” Daphne replied. “But you should understand that I only met him through two letters. Actually, his brother, Aaron, wrote on his behalf. I had no attachment to him.”

“You should get to know him. He’s a sweet man, and you’re a sweet woman. The two of you should be together. He and I just don’t belong together. At least take the time to talk to him.” Eliza caught sight of Troy as he walked down the street. She cringed. “Look. I have to go home and lie down. Please think about what I said.”

Before they could respond, she hurried in the opposite direction. Troy’s intentions were too obvious, and she found the best thing to do was to avoid him altogether. By the time she made it back to the boarding house, she was out of breath. She was about to run up the steps and hide out in her room when she realized someone sat in the parlor, reading a book. She had met all the boarders except for one.

She stepped into the room and wandered over to the bookcase. Molly had a lot of good books here, and her eyes fell on one by William Shakespeare called *Romeo and Juliet*. She read the back cover and decided that it sounded like an interesting book. Two people falling in love despite their feuding families. She decided she would read it.

As she sat in a chair across from the man, she glanced in his direction. Her eyes fell on the title of the book he was reading. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain.

"Mister?"

He jerked, as if startled that she spoke to him. He was an older man, probably in his late forties with graying black hair and a mustache. He was rather pleasant looking, though she sensed loneliness in his blue eyes. With all her experiences with men, most had that same lonely look, as if life had done them a wrong turn. She wouldn't ask him about his past. She rarely asked men what troubled them. Usually, they just came out and told her anyway.

She cleared her throat and motioned to his book. "I see that you're reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Is it any good?"

After a moment of moving his mouth but not speaking, he finally said, "Yes, it is."

"What is it about?"

"A twelve year old's adventures."

"Oh." That didn't sound very interesting. She'd much rather read a love story, like the one in her lap.

"I've read this book five times already, and each time it gets better."

"Why?"

"I get a better understanding of the characters, like Tom's aunt and his good friend Huck. Of course, it doesn't hurt that Tom saw a murder."

"A murder?" Well, she had to admit that a murder was interesting.

"I shouldn't spoil it for you, in case you want to read this."

She nodded. Would she read such a book? Currently, she had two books in her possession that she had read. One was the Bible and the other was *The Scarlet Letter*. *The Scarlet Letter* gave her hope. If Hester Prynne could rise above the stain of adultery, then maybe she could rise about the stain of prostitution. Only,

she hoped no one would be putting a big letter on her chest like they did to Hester. It was bad enough that John now knew her shame. She knew he wouldn't tell anyone else. But how she wished she'd never had to tell him!

"Shakespeare is good too," the man said.

She turned her head in his direction. "I'm sorry?"

"William Shakespeare. He's good too. My wife never could get into his style though."

"You're married."

"Was."

*Oh. That's right. His wife passed away.* She'd forgotten Molly had told her that. That's why she sensed that he was lonely. "That's a real shame, Mister."

He swallowed and nodded.

She felt bad for him. The world, it seemed, was full of suffering men. She guessed women suffered as much but she hadn't been in the business of catering to them, so she only understood men. And this man needed a friend but refused to take the initiative to make one. "Have you met Willy Jafferty?"

"No, but I've heard of him."

"Then you know he also lost his wife not too long ago?"

"Yes."

And unlike Willy, he hadn't moved on. And unlike Willy, he would attach himself to the first woman who showed a sincere desire to get to know him. He was much too vulnerable. It was written all over his face. "I suppose that I should take this upstairs."

"What's your name?"

Slowly standing, she answered, "Miss Sweet." There, that ought to keep it formal. A first name was much too personal, and that was the last thing he needed. If he were to meet a woman, she'd have to be genuinely interested in him.

"My name is Alan Grey."

“Yes, I know. Molly told me when I first came here.” Before he could ask for her first name, she said, “I have a headache. I must rest.”

She hurried out of the room and up the steps, relieved that she didn’t make matters worse. The last thing she needed was to cause another man grief. After she entered her room, she shut the door and leaned against it, clutching the book to her chest. She closed her eyes, wishing she could stay there for the rest of her life.

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The next day, Eliza lugged the chair up the narrow, wooden steps.

“Don’t get one scratch on it or it comes out of your wages!” Harriet yelled at her from the bottom of the staircase.

Eliza grunted but pressed forward, holding the chair above the next step so she wouldn’t scrape it. She paused for a moment to make sure her footing was steady before she moved forward.

“Can’t you go any faster? I’m not getting younger, you know!”

“Shut up, you old hag,” Eliza muttered under her breath, tired of the woman’s constant nagging.

“What’d you say?”

As she made it to the top step, she exhaled and wiped her forehead with her blistered hand. She turned to Harriet who glared up at her. “Nothing.”

“Hmm...” The woman obviously didn’t believe her by the cynical look on her face. “Well, set it in my bedroom and then come down for the ottoman.”

Gritting her teeth, she picked up the chair and lugged it to the old bat’s bedroom which hadn’t been aired out in over a hundred years, or at least that’s how it smelled. Once she set it on

the rug by the window, she leaned over it and struggled to catch her breath.

Her stomach growled. It was lunch time, and again, she had to skip breakfast so she wouldn't use up the remaining funds she had. She kept careful track of her expenses. If she didn't have to eat, she wouldn't have any problems...minus her broken heart.

How she missed John. She missed him so much that it hurt. Did Daphne talk to him? Did the two work things out? Groaning, she closed her eyes and willed the memory of John's kisses from her mind. She couldn't continue on in regrets. She'd made that her goal. Always press forward. Never look back. Don't waste time on what if's. It never did any good.

She forced back her tears and stood up. Taking a deep breath to steady her emotions, she returned to the parlor and brought the ottoman up. Harriet had disappeared but the question was where to. When she got back downstairs, she called out for her.

"In here, if you really must know," Harriet snapped.

Biting back a retort she'd once heard a farmer use, she walked to the kitchen and saw that Harriet was eating a sandwich. Her mouth watered. Licking her lips, she smoothed her hands on her dress. "I got the furniture upstairs like you wanted." She watched as the woman took a large bite of the food. "May I please have something to eat?"

The woman frowned at her. "I told you that you need to find your own food. I'm not a grocer."

She gritted her teeth. She understood why Harriet had a hard time keeping employees, but all of her efforts to find other employment over the weekend had failed, so whether she liked it or not, she was stuck with the miserable old coot. That, naturally, meant she couldn't retaliate. Sadly, even her bosses at the saloon weren't as mean to her as Harriet was. John, however, had been

the best person she'd ever worked for. If only he could have kept things professional. If only *she* had kept things professional!

Maybe if he married Daphne, she could go back and work for him. No. That would never work. She loved him and couldn't go back to how things were, no matter how much she wanted to...or didn't want to. She took a deep breath and settled her thoughts. Right now she needed money. She had to pay her rent for the next week, and that left her with only enough to eat at the restaurant for three more days if she ordered one of the cheapest items on the menu.

Directing her gaze on Harriet who finished up her sandwich, she asked, "May I get my pay, please?"

The woman groaned. "You shouldn't bother a woman while she's eating. Give me a moment and I'll get your wages."

Good. Five dollars would solve the bulk of her problem. Maybe she could get dessert this time.

Her employer took a final gulp of water and took her things to the sink. "Clean the dishes and I'll be back."

Excited to be getting paid, Eliza readily obeyed. When she finished, Harriet returned. She tried not to seem too eager for her pay. That wasn't a good thing for an employee to do, but her growling stomach was doing flip flops over the notion of eating something at the restaurant.

Harriet handed her some coins.

The amount didn't feel heavy enough to equal \$5. Eliza counted the change. "But this is \$3.50."

"Right."

She licked her lips. "We agreed on \$5."

"I agreed to pay you \$5 for your work."

"Yes."

"Well, those two men came over to help you take my stuff out of the attic, and then they came by the next day to help you clean up the yard."

“Because you had some things that were heavy and I didn’t know how to drive a wagon.”

“Still, they did that work. As far as I’m concerned, they should get the remaining \$1.50.”

Fifty cents for one week’s worth of food? “But I need \$4 so Molly will let me have room and board. Otherwise, I pay her \$3 and have to find another source of food. I don’t see how I can manage on fifty cents.”

“Then don’t have other people help you do your job.”

“Well...” She struggled not to whack the woman on the head with the rolled up newspaper resting on the table in front of her. “I mean...Can I have an extra fifty cents this week and then take \$4 next week?”

“No. I don’t lend money out ahead of time. How do I know you won’t take my money and not do the work? You work first and then get paid.”

“May I do something else to earn some food for here?”

“No. I don’t reward people who can’t watch their funds. If you don’t have enough money, then that’s your fault. Not mine. I scrimped and saved my entire life, and I learned how to make money last. This will do you good.”

“But-”

“There’s no need to thank me.” The woman turned to leave the kitchen. “When you get back from the restaurant, we’ll discuss what chore needs to be done next.”

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On her way home after six, she decided to skip supper. In a short while, she could go to sleep and it was easy to forget her hunger then. She clutched her stomach as she passed the restaurant. The aroma of steak and chicken never smelled so good. She hurried across the street so she could get away from it. When she reached the boarding house, she stopped and groaned.

Why was John there? Why wasn't he over at Charity's residence so he could be with Daphne? Didn't he know he was only prolonging her pain?

Her stomach rumbled. Where was she supposed to go? She didn't have the strength to confront him. She sighed as she thought over her options. Where could she go and not be found? Finally, she decided to go to the restaurant. She ordered the cheapest thing she could find and took her time in picking at her rolls. At least it settled the nagging hunger in her stomach, but she was too busy calculating how much money she had left so she couldn't enjoy them. If she didn't have to eat, she'd be doing just fine right about now.

"Good evening, Eliza!"

Eliza glanced up and saw Addy. "Good evening. Are you planning to grab a bite to eat?"

"No. I happened to see you from outside and thought I'd come in to see how you're doing. I haven't had a chance to talk to you since last week."

She took a sip of water while her friend sat across from her. "I'm doing fine."

"That's good. John's been by three times since I last saw you. He's worried about you."

Eliza suspected that Addy was worried too. "I said I'm fine. I have shelter and a job and food."

"Well, if you need anything—anything at all, please let me know."

If she did that, she'd have to admit she couldn't make it on her own, and that was the last thing she wanted to do. Her entire life was spent relying on others. This time she had a chance to make it on her own. In the future, she just wouldn't let Troy or Willy help her at work, and then she could get the full \$5. Then she'd be fine.



“Eliza,” Addy continued, “John loves you. Why do you keep rejecting him? He’s a good man. He’d make a fine husband and father.”

She sighed and finished her last roll. Glancing around the room, she caught sight of Alan Gray as he paid for his meal. She nearly fell out of her chair when she saw all the money in his wallet. Why didn’t he own a house? He looked like he could afford it.

“He’s not going to marry Daphne,” Addy softly stated.

It took Eliza a moment to realize she was talking about John. “Haven’t the two of them talked so they could get to know each other?”

“I don’t understand why this means so much to you. Daphne doesn’t mind if you’re with him.”

Of course, Addy couldn’t understand. What could Eliza do? Say, “I was a prostitute for thirteen years”? Finally, she decided on saying, “It’s complicated.”

Addy laughed. “Why is it that unmarried women assume that everything is complicated when it comes to love?”

*Why is it that everyone assumes an unmarried woman never stepped foot into a whorehouse?* “I better go home. I’m tired.”

Addy stood with her. “The offer is open anytime you need it. Don’t let pride get in the way of asking for help.”

Eliza placed the coin on the table and looked at her friend. Did Addy know...or suspect that Eliza did need help or was she just saying that because it was one of those things friends said to each other?

“The least I can do is walk back with you. The boarding house is on the way to the general store.”

Eliza nodded. That sounded simple enough.

After they were outside and Addy glanced around, she whispered, “You’re not sweet on Troy, are you?”

“Goodness, no!”

"I'm sorry but I had to ask. He's been talking as if he's courting someone. He hasn't mentioned names but he says it's a matter of time before he makes it official."

Eliza cringed. She didn't know why Troy gave her the creeps but he did. "I try to avoid him whenever I can. I assure you that I don't encourage him."

"That's good. There's no sense in sending the wrong message. Troy is alright I guess. I don't really know him. The only reason I know John as well as I do is because he does business with Frank. He made the tables and counters and shelves in the general store, you know."

"No, I didn't know." But it made sense since John was the only one in town who did that kind of thing.

"John took over his father's business. His father taught him the trade. None of the other boys were interested."

"It's good someone does this in town."

"Yes. Otherwise, we'd be in trouble." Addy chuckled.

They stopped in front of the boarding house, and Eliza breathed a sigh of relief. John wasn't there anymore. "I'll see you around."

Addy smiled. "Remember, I'm here to help...should you need it."

"I know. Thank you." Then she turned and went up the steps, glad to be done with another day.

## *Chapter Fifteen*



*E*liza's stomach growled so she closed her eyes as she walked past the restaurant. *If I don't think about food, I won't be hungry.* A week had passed, and she was out of money for food. Harriet refused to pay her more than \$3 this time because Harriet accused her of "shoddy work". "This will teach you a strong work ethic," Harriet had concluded, looking as if she had just performed a good deed.

Eliza knew it was wrong but she purposely gave Harriet day old coffee the next day. To her surprise, Harriet liked it. So Eliza didn't do that again. It was wrong to look for ways to irritate her employer, especially since the only other job that opened up paid \$2.50 a week, but a part of her wanted to do something to get even with the woman for cheating her out of her fair wages. Eliza was, after all, doing the best she could.

When she made it home that evening, she climbed the stairs, feeling weak. She had to pay Molly the rent, but she'd do

that in the morning. She was out of money, and since she'd accepted the invitation to eat at Addy's place three times already, she didn't feel right about going over there and hoping for another invite. She couldn't take advantage of her friend who'd already done so much for her.

She reached the top of the steps and took a deep breath to quell her nausea. Averting her eyes from the staircase because a glance down made her dizzy, she focused on the kerosene lamp on the small table in the hallway. As soon as she could trust herself to not heave, she lumbered toward her room. She'd go to Addy's tomorrow. She had to. It'd been a full day since she'd eaten anything and she had to manage through another ten hours at Harriet's.

A door from behind her opened. She turned and saw Alan emerge from his room. Recalling the money in his wallet, she bit her lower lip. He was a man, and since he hadn't been with a woman since his wife died... Even as the thought came to her, she hated it. She gulped the lump in her throat. Oh, she couldn't. Not when she struggled so hard to make her life right. Not when God had given her a second chance.

*But he has money. Money that can buy food.* Her stomach growled again and her mouth watered. Molly had made supper. Pot roast from the smell of it.

"Good evening, Miss Sweet," Alan said as he closed the door. "Will you be going to supper tonight?"

She hesitated. She knew what the going rate would be if they struck a deal, and depending on how long she could talk him into staying in her room, she might be able to make a dollar. That would give her a full week's worth of food here at the boarding house or maybe even two weeks if she was careful at the restaurant.

She wiped the tears from her eyes, glad the dim light hid her tears from him. When she could trust herself to speak, she

lowered her trembling hand. "I...um..." She took another deep breath. "I already ate."

"Is something wrong?" he asked, coming closer.

She steadied herself against the wall. *Stay back. You're the mouse and I'm the snake.* She took a step away from him. "No. I'm fine. You should go to supper." She prayed he didn't hear her stomach rumble. "I just need to lie down."

He came closer to her. "Are you sure you're not ill? I can help you into your room if you'd like."

He had no idea what he was doing, she realized. He didn't have the experienced look about him, and that made him an easy target.

*Just one time...to get you through one or two weeks until Harriet pays the wages she rightfully owes you.*

"Your room is this one, isn't it?" he asked, pointing to it.

"Well...yes," she slowly replied. Her heart sped up with a mixture of fear and hope. She hated this. She didn't want to even consider it. Temptation was a terrible monster. A hunger pain shot through her stomach, causing her to bite her tongue.

He gently took her by the arm and led her to the door. "You look like you're going to pass out. Lean on me if you have to."

"Do you miss your wife?" she asked, ashamed of the question, for she knew where the conversation was leading...what she was leading him into.

"I do. She was a good woman."

"I'm sure she was happy with you. You seem like a good man." She moved closer to him and placed her hand on his. "It must get lonely."

They stopped in front of her door, and he nodded. "It does. A part of me went with her." He opened the door.

"I haven't been married," she whispered, purposely moving so that they stood inches apart, allowing parts of her body to touch his. She knew what such proximity did to men. Leaning

forward, she let her lips brush against his cheek. "But I often think it's a shame when a man has to spend his nights alone."

As soon as she said the words, she regretted them. This wasn't right. She pulled back and crossed the threshold of the room, cursing herself for leading him into a trap. It was a trap. God help her withstand temptation! She hurried to the window and opened it, letting a light breeze cool the hot sting of the tears that trickled down her cheeks.

"Miss Sweet, I was wondering... Well, that is to say that I think we might get along. Would it be too forward if I asked to call on you sometime? I could take you for a walk or we could go to the restaurant."

Placing her hands over her face, she allowed the tears to fall with greater freedom. Here she was thinking of a night of sinful pleasure and he was thinking of doing the right thing. He really had no idea what she'd brought him to her room for. "I can't. I'm sorry. You see, I..." What could she tell him? I'm a prostitute? No. But an idea came to her. Turning to him in the dark, she asked, "Do you know Bethany Grooms?"

He blinked. "No, but I've seen her in church."

"She lost her husband five years ago. She's a lovely woman. I think you two would do well together." Bethany would never think to lure a man to her bed for the sole purpose of making money from him. She'd make him a good wife, and she was just as lonely as him. The two would get along right away. "Let me introduce you to her tomorrow morning on my way to Mrs. Lube's."

"She is agreeable to look at. Alright."

Her stomach growled but she held her hands over her abdomen and took another deep breath. The room seemed to tilt to the side, but she knew it was another wave of dizziness kicking in so she ignored it.

“Thank you, Miss Sweet. That’s very nice of you.” He turned to leave but saw the book she’d thrown across the room a week ago and picked it up. “Is this *Romeo and Juliet*?”

“Yes,” she weakly replied. “It’s a horrible story.”

He chuckled. “My wife didn’t care much for it either. She said if a book didn’t have a happy ending, then it wasn’t worth reading. I can return this to the parlor, if you’d like.”

“Please do.”

“Good night, Miss Sweet. I hope you feel better in the morning.”

As soon as he left and closed her door, she released her breath, unaware that she’d been holding it. That was close. Much too close. Slipping out of her dress, she slid into bed and pulled the covers over her head. It was still hot out, but she shivered anyway and she couldn’t tell if it was from hunger or fear that she’d almost given into the temptation to sell her body for a piece of bread. She spent the rest of the night crying fitfully in her sleep.

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During her lunch half hour the next day, Eliza decided to visit with Addy to see if Addy might extend an invitation for supper. She didn’t want to ask. It was preferable to let Addy make the offer. That way, Addy wouldn’t worry about her.

When Eliza knocked on Addy’s front door, she noticed that Troy was walking in her direction. She inwardly groaned and pretended that she didn’t see him. She knocked on the door, using more force than necessary.

But Addy didn’t answer, and Eliza had no choice but to offer a polite greeting as Troy caught up to her. “Good afternoon, Mister Evans.”

He smiled and adjusted his hat. "You can call me Troy. I'd like to think we know each other well enough to be on a first name basis."

She didn't. Not really. Unsure of whether her queasy stomach stemmed from being near him or being unbearably hungry, she took deep breaths to steady it. "What brings you out this way?"

"I'm running an errand for my boss."

She nodded and started walking down the dusty road. As much as she loathed the idea of returning to Harriet's house, especially when Harriet was eating, Eliza felt a desperate need to get away from Troy. She thought that the strange sensation would leave as she got to know him, but it only grew stronger.

If there was one thing she wasn't, it was stupid. She'd had the same eerie feeling with her uncle before he slipped into her bed. She'd brushed off the notion then. Now, she knew better. She wrapped her arms around herself to thwart the trembling of her body. Her uncle had liked her fear. He seemed to thrive off of it. The last thing she wanted was to give Troy that kind of power over her.

Thank God it was daylight and people were around them. It was the only thing that prevented her from running off in a panic. She willed the past back to where it belonged. *Think of positive things, Eliza. Positive things. Don't let your circumstances control you. Overcome them.* As long as she didn't give up, she'd survive. She'd keep pressing on. She wouldn't end up like the prostitute who killed herself. The reminder settled her nerves. She was still alive, and that counted for something.

Troy kept his pace even with hers. "I'm going to Marshal Custer's house for supper tonight. Would you like to be my guest?"

She halted in mid-step. Food. Her mouth watered at the very thought of it. If she ate tonight, she'd be able to get through tomorrow without eating. Then she might get an invite to Addy's



place. That would settle her complaining stomach until Harriet paid her for the full wages. Eliza had been good this time. She'd been watching to make sure she did everything exactly the way Harriet wanted it done. For sure, she'd get the \$5.

All she had to do was eat with Troy for one night. And it was in Charity's home where other people would be. It wouldn't be like she'd have to be alone with him. Wasn't it much better than sleeping with Alan for money? Going to dinner with Troy wasn't a sin. And it would be once. Just once.

"What time should I be there?" she asked, peering up at him.

"I'll pick you up at 6:15. Supper is at 6:30."

She nodded. "Alright."

His smile widened.

Shivering, she looked away. She hoped she didn't just make a mistake. "I should get back to Mrs. Lube. She won't like it if I'm late."

Without waiting for him to walk with her, she bolted down the road, feeling almost like she was running from a part of her past that was about to rear its ugly head. It wasn't until she opened the door to Mrs. Lube's house and saw that he hadn't followed her that she allowed herself to relax.

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John returned home after he finished repairing the staircase in the Hallows' house. He checked the small house that Eliza used to inhabit while she stayed on his property, but she wasn't there. Why should he expect her to be? She wasn't there any of the other times he'd checked. She didn't even want to see him. He sighed. Maybe it was time he gave up and let her go.

As much as the thought pained him, he realized that he couldn't keep going to town and hoping she'd see him when she did everything she could to avoid him. He'd catch glimpses of

her, but she remained out of his reach. Just when he thought he could reach her, she seemed to vanish.

He rubbed his chest, thinking that doing so would somehow ease the ache that was his constant companion. His brother Aaron had been out to see him and assured him that the heartache would ease over time. And when John was ready, Aaron promised to send out another list of women seeking men to marry. But Aaron didn't get it. John decided that he'd spend the rest of his life alone. There'd never be anyone but Eliza for him.

His shoulders drooped as he made his way to the shed. He had to get the jewelry box finished for Charity. Her husband requested it as a gift, and though it was difficult to make it, he decided it was time to finish it so he could work on the cabinet that the preacher wanted. He sat at his work table and picked up his tool to carve in the images of doves and hearts that the marshal had specifically requested to go on it. John wished he was making something this nice for Eliza. A gift from a husband to his wife. Something to demonstrate his love for her. He swallowed and brushed back a tear so he could focus on the lines he was carving into the wood.

A loud tapping on his door interrupted his thoughts. For a moment, he wondered if it was Eliza but quickly realized she didn't knock like that. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Troy saunter into the small building. Disappointed, he turned back to his work.

"That's a fine welcome for your brother," Troy said.

John didn't bother to acknowledge the statement. Maybe they were blood, but it didn't make them friends.

"You deaf on top of being stupid and mute?"

John traced the outline of the dove. No. He wouldn't let Troy's words bother him. His brother got a sick and twisted pleasure out of watching him get upset.

Troy picked up the nearly completed jewelry box and examined it. "At least there's one thing you're good at. Pa would actually be proud."

John grabbed the box and glared at him.

He shook his head and shrugged. "Now don't get upset. I was complimenting you. At least you can make a living. It beats begging for food on the corner of a street or bumming off someone else's hard work. But that's not why I came. I thought you might like to know that the marshal wants that fancy box by tonight. There's going to be a special supper at his house."

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He should be glad. The sooner he dropped this off, the sooner he wouldn't have to deal with the marshal...until the man needed something else from him.

"Be there around six. You do know when to tell it's six on the clock, don't you?"

Gritting his teeth, he stood up and yanked out his pocket watch and pointed to the six. Then he pointed to his temple.

Troy chuckled. "It has nothing to do with your head, but I get the message."

John took the pencil that he used to draw his designs and wrote on a piece of paper, *I am smart*. Then he shoved it at Troy.

For a moment, Troy looked worried but then quickly threw the paper down and clapped. "Good for you. You can write just like a kid in grade school. The dinner starts at six-thirty. The marshal wants to surprise his wife, so make it between six-thirty and seven."

As he left, John resisted the urge to punch him. He slowly inhaled and exhaled while he flexed his hands. Violence never solved anything. He knew this. But once...just once...he'd love to make Troy admit that he was smart.

*He's not worth it.* He sat down and glanced out his window, making sure that Troy was leaving. Good. He was. John turned

to the jewelry box. One look at the pocket watch notified him that he'd better hurry. Three hours wasn't that far away.

## *Chapter Sixteen*



*E*liza noticed the smell of food before she noticed the large group of people who had gathered at Charity's house that evening. In some ways, it worked to her benefit. She could easily mingle with more people, which meant she had more chances to get away from Troy. She supposed she should feel guilty for using Troy to get a good meal, but she was too hungry to adequately care. Ever since she agreed to come here tonight, she'd been unable to think of anything but food. What kind of food would Charity serve? She remembered how Charity and Bethany expressed their desire to have some of the "finer dishes from back east" after their arrival at their new home. She couldn't help but be curious as to what those "finer dishes" were...and if they succeeded.

Her stomach did its relentless growl, and Eliza was grateful that the ring of laughter floating from the front porch hid this embarrassing fact from everyone else. She took a deep breath and willed her slight nausea aside. She had to sit down or get

something to eat soon or else she'd get dizzy. Her first choice, of course, was to eat.

As Troy followed her up the porch steps, she caught a glimpse through the window and saw that Charity, Bethany, and Daphne were passing around hor devours. The only reason she knew that's what the finger foods were called was because she'd had some wealthy customers who'd hired her for their weekend excursions out of Omaha where no one knew she was a prostitute. Instead, the customers referred to her as their daughter or wife.

At the reminder of her past, she blinked and looked away from the activity inside the house. Whether parts of this meal were going to bring up unpleasant memories or not, she didn't care. The point was she managed to avoid falling into temptation the previous evening, and glancing at Bethany who laughed at something Alan Grey said made her grateful that she'd been able to do that. He'd be happier this way. And thank goodness God had granted her an honest meal in exchange. She didn't even bother to wonder where her next meal would come from. She'd just focus on taking it one day at a time like she'd learned to do after her parents died.

"Well, if it isn't Eliza and Troy."

She glanced over her shoulder as Willy bounded up the steps.

"I didn't expect to see you two together," Willy continued.

"Really? Why?" Troy asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I guess it's because I got used to seeing her with John."

She breathed a sigh of relief when Daphne came onto the porch carrying a tray full of strawberries, cheese, and apple slices. They wouldn't exactly fill up her eager stomach but at least they were a start.

"Care for a quick bite to eat before the main dish?" Daphne asked.

Like she needed to ask! Eliza nodded and forced herself to stop after she picked up a couple of cheese cubes. Fruits weren't as filling, and right now she wanted to satisfy her hunger instead of sample the fruits, even if she didn't often get a chance to eat strawberries.

Willy laughed as he took one of each item. "I must say that this is sure fancy."

Daphne smiled. "Yes, it is. I confess that I've never seen a dinner this extravagant before. Part of me feels out of place, but it's all in good fun."

"That it is."

Eliza didn't get much of a chance to taste the cheese since she swallowed her cubes as soon as they were in her mouth. She wanted to savor them, but her stomach kept pestering her. Since the men were focused on Daphne, she snagged in a couple more pieces of cheese.

"My name is William but people call me Willy," he told Daphne.

"Oh, you're Willy!" Daphne squealed in a delighted tone that surprised Eliza. "I heard that you were painting Charity's portrait for Ralph."

Eliza coughed on the cheese she had just swallowed. A portrait? Out here in the southern Dakota territory? She cleared her throat and pressed a hand to her chest. "Excuse me."

"Are you alright?" Troy asked, looking worried.

She suspected he feigned concern but gave the matter no more thought. This dinner was not going to be a common occurrence with Troy, so she didn't need to examine his motives. "I'm fine. Go on," she told Willy. "The marshal asked you to paint a picture of Charity?"

"He did. In fact, after dinner, I'm supposed to go back home and grab it. Then I can present it to her. I believe he asked a couple of others to make her things too."

“He sure is excited to be married to her,” Eliza commented.

As she plopped another piece of cheese in her mouth, she wondered why some husbands fussed over their wives like they did, but then she reminded herself that not all men ran off to visit a whore when their wives thought they were out working or gambling. She shouldn’t begrudge Charity such a devoted husband. She should be happy for the young woman. Her fairytale came true. How nice that must be. *No. I won’t go there. There’s no changing the past.*

As Daphne rattled off the guest list, Eliza snuck in more appetizers when no one was looking at her.

“Now I feel underdressed,” Willy said, examining his attire.

“How do you think I feel?” Daphne motioned to her simple dress. “Just between you and me, and you and you,” she added, smiling at Troy and Eliza, “this isn’t something I would do. But Ralph and Charity are happy together, so it’s only right that we celebrate with them.”

Eliza was still ravenous. Those cheese bits weren’t doing anything but teasing her. She could celebrate much easier on a full stomach. “We should go in. Supper is ready, isn’t it?” *Please say yes!*

“After the entertainment,” Daphne replied.

“Entertainment?” Troy asked before Eliza could.

“I’m not supposed to spoil the surprise. Charity’s been practicing for nearly a month.” Daphne glanced at her empty tray and frowned. “Oh, that’s odd. I thought I brought out a full tray.”

Eliza quickly swallowed the last strawberry she’d broken down and snagged.

Fortunately, Bethany called out for everyone to gather into the parlor, so Daphne forgot the tray and led them in. As Eliza joined Troy in sitting in the room which had been cleared for a



small piano and a group of thirty chairs, she inwardly groaned. When were they going to eat? She clutched her stomach and closed her eyes to settle her nerves. She could smell freshly baked breads and pies and meats. It wasn't fair that Charity allowed her guests to suffer like this. But then, out of everyone in the house, she was the only one who hadn't eaten a full meal in the past two days.

Ralph entered the parlor and clapped his hands together. "I want to thank everyone for coming. As you know, Charity wanted to wait until she got settled in before we had an official event to celebrate our wedding. She is now going to play a few melodies that she learned during her childhood. Her aunt Bethany will be singing the lyrics."

Eliza reluctantly clapped along with the other people as she glanced at the kitchen. She bit her tongue and forced her attention to the two women who bowed. Charity sat at the piano and Bethany stood beside it. Eliza glanced at the clock on the fireplace mantle. 6:20. Troy said the meal would start at 6:30. She prayed that was accurate.

Charity started up the music, so Eliza concentrated on the uplifting tune. This wasn't so bad. She settled into her chair and tried not to think about food. Instead, she pictured flowers. Yellow flowers. Lots of flowers. It was an image she had saved from childhood. As a child, she used to run through the field while her parents lounged by the lake and watched her. A faint smile graced her lips at the memory. It was an innocent time in her life. A time of happiness. A time of hope. A time of love.

Then Bethany sang the first line of the song and Eliza blinked, immediately pulled out of the past and into a not-so-pleasant present. Though Charity could play the piano, Bethany could not hold a tune. Shifting uncomfortably in her seat, Eliza scanned the room and saw that though people put on their polite smiles, they also found the singing horrendous. There really was

no other word for it. She'd only heard the term used once in her life, and she never had a need to use that word until this moment.

The song finally...mercifully...came to an end. She breathed a sigh of relief. Then Charity started in on another song, this one a sad one, and Bethany inhaled, obviously getting ready for another round of her bellowing. Eliza felt her stomach flip over. She couldn't handle this. At least, she couldn't handle it on an empty stomach.

She leaned toward Troy and whispered, "I have to use the privy." Sure, it wasn't the most graceful thing to say to a man, but she was desperate to get out without anyone finding a reason to stop her. And who would stop a woman from answering nature's call?

He nodded.

She slipped out of her seat and tried to be inconspicuous as she crept out of the room. Now that she was free from the squeaking sounds that Bethany called singing, she could relax. She didn't know what to do. She hated this. Hated knowing there was food and not being able to eat it. Hated the insistent hunger that lingered on and on, day after day. The only time she got any relief was when she was asleep.

Tears stung her eyes. No. It was much more than hunger and sleep. It wasn't even the bad singing that bothered her so much that she had to flee from the room. It was flowers. Yellow flowers. She loved them...except when she was miserable. Like now. Placing her face in her hands, she willed away the urge to break down and sob. She missed John. She'd been happy when she was with him at his happy place with his insane insistence that she marry him. Even through the unwanted tears, she laughed. The man never gave up. He even planted yellow flowers by his house for her. She knew why he planted them there instead of in front of her little home. He hoped to lead her in his direction. And that's where the yellow flowers directed her all along. To him. Until she rejected them...rejected him.

*No. Don't think of that.* She wiped her hands on her dress and forced her mind on the present. *Don't think of what could've been. Just move forward.* She stepped toward the kitchen. *God, I'm so hungry. I can't bear this hunger anymore.* Another round of applause drifted from the parlor before Charity began another song. At this rate, Eliza would starve to death. She glanced around. No one was in the hallway. She tiptoed to the kitchen and slowly opened the door. No one was there. She glanced back again. No one had followed. She was safe. Just a few bites of food and she could return to the parlor. Her eyes scanned the wide assortment of food on the tables in front of her. Tables. Tables of food!

Her body shook in anticipation and all calm left her as she ran forward and grabbed a drumstick. There were more of them. One wouldn't be missed. She hadn't had chicken since she left Omaha. She bit into it, too hungry to let the wonderful flavor sink into her tongue. She devoured the whole thing in less thirty seconds and quickly discarded the bone into the trash. She turned and snatched a slice of pie, knowing it was disgusting to eat it without a fork but not wishing to dirty a utensil lest she give away the fact that she had snuck in some food before it was time to eat.

She closed her eyes and moaned. Peaches never tasted so good! The crust melted in her mouth. She passed the rolls and went straight for the small steak. Who cared about rolls? Rolls were bland and she had enough of those at the restaurant. She picked up the steak and chewed off a big piece of it. The juice slid down her chin so she wiped it off with her sleeve. This was good steak—the kind that those rich men ate. She never imagined that eating could be such an intoxicating experience. She finished the steak and reached for the piece of cake. Just as she bit into it, the kitchen door opened.

Her eyes grew wide and she jerked. The cake fell out of her hand and onto the floor.

John stood there in the doorway, holding a box. He stared at her as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Which he probably couldn't. She didn't know what to do, and for a moment, she just stood there and stared back at him. Then something in her snapped and she bolted past him and ran out the door. She ran as fast as she could through the backyard and across the next lawn that marked Wilkin's property. Tears descended by the time she made it down the dusty road heading to the outskirts of town.

The shame! She didn't know which was worse, falling into the sin of gluttony or being caught. Oh, of course she knew. Being caught was worse. And by John of all people! It had to be him. Why did it have to be him?

She choked on a sob as she pressed forward, aware that he was gaining on her. It had to be him. She could hear someone running after her and who else but John would pursue her? Still pursuing her. Ever since she stepped foot into this town, he'd been after her. Always asking her to marry him like a man who didn't know what was good for him.

And even as she ran into the vacant field that lined a stream, she prayed he'd catch up to her and stop her from making the biggest mistake of her life. She passed a tree and tripped on the root. She fell face first into the tall grass. Gasping for air, she struggled to stand up but fell again, this time landing on her hands and knees.

Then a pair of strong arms wrapped her into an all-too-familiar hug and she collapsed against John's chest, sobbing like the little girl who'd once lost her parents.

"I didn't want to be a prostitute," she wept.

He cupped her face in his hands and lifted her head. His touch was so gentle and warm that she cried even harder.

"My parents died when I turned fourteen, and my mother's sister took me in. Her husband, my uncle, came to my bed..." She had to stop to take a breath and to steady her voice. No one knew. She'd kept it to herself all these years. And now she was about to let the one man who'd shown her real love know

the details of her tainted past. She grabbed the sleeves of his shirt, afraid he'd run off as soon as she told him, but needing to tell him—to finally clear the air between them. "I didn't want him there. I told him no. But I was fourteen and scared and I didn't know how to stop him."

She dared to look into his eyes, fearing the rejection she'd find there. Instead she saw sorrow and compassion. Tears welled in his own eyes. He loved her. He didn't have to say the words for her to know this.

Gathering courage, she continued, "I was too afraid to tell my aunt, and when I got with child, she assumed it was one of the boys down the road that did it. She told my uncle to get rid of me. He sold me to the owner of the saloon in town who had a whorehouse. That's how I became a prostitute."

When she realized he wasn't going to leave, she released her hold on him and removed the picture she had tucked under her shirt and next to her heart. She showed it to him in the moonlight.

"That's my son. He's twelve now. He'll be thirteen next month. The people who adopted him sent me the picture. I had to keep it hidden because my boss wouldn't have liked it if he knew I had it. I take it everywhere I go. He's the only child I'll ever have." She wiped her eyes so she could see clearly. "There was a doctor who came and made sure I wouldn't have another child. You see, in my line of work, it wasn't good to be having babies. I'll never have another child, and I'll never know the one I have." She broke into a fresh wave of tears.

He held her tightly against him and let her continue to cry. The beating of his heart soothed her and after awhile her breathing and tears slowed. The sharp pain in her heart eased. He rested his cheek on top of her head and softly rocked her. She held onto the picture with one hand and held onto him with the other. Closing her eyes, she took a moment to simply enjoy being

with him. It felt right to be with him, to rest in his arms and be surrounded by his love.

"I'm not like Daphne," she whispered. "I can't give you my innocence and I can't give you children. That's why I left you. I want you to be happy with a good woman."

He reached down and took her hand, careful to not damage the picture of her son, and pressed it against his heart.

She laughed. It was so typical of him to do something so sweet...and she was overcome with relief. She'd told him everything, let him see a side of her she'd carefully hidden from everyone, and he hadn't turned away from her.

"I love you too. I think I loved you the first day I met you. You were such a stubborn man, but you were so wonderful too."

He pulled back so he could reach into his pocket.

When she saw that the moonlight caught something shiny, she shook her head. "There's no stopping you once you set your mind to something." He'd come with the ring. She should have known, and yet, she hadn't.

He slipped the gold band on her finger. Then he pointed in the direction of the church.

She laughed again. A wife. But not just anybody's wife. She'd be John's wife. She couldn't think of anything more wonderful than that. "Yes, John. I'll marry you."

A smile widened on his face and he pulled her back into his arms and kissed her.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she leaned into him and returned his kiss. When she realized her cheeks were wet, she thought she was still crying, but when the kiss ended and she opened her eyes, she was surprised to see that even though he smiled at her, more tears trickled down his face.

"Did you think I was going to say no again?" she asked.

He nodded.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize how much it meant to you that I marry you. I thought any woman would do.”

He shook his head and pointed at her.

She took his hand and placed it over her heart. “I don’t want to be with anyone else either.”

He inspected her hand.

She blushed, suddenly remembering the food she’d grabbed with her bare hands. She looked at her other hand and then his shirt. “I had to watch my money. I didn’t have enough for food and lodging. I...” She sighed. “I spent a lot of days fighting off hunger pains.”

He slid his arm around her waist and led her to the stream where he washed her hands. She hadn’t realized how large his hands were until she saw how small hers were compared to them. His movements were slow and deliberate, gentle and caring. She had no doubt that, unlike the other men she’d been with, this man would cherish her. She wanted to be cherished.

Resting her head against his shoulder, she whispered, “Thank you.”

After he washed her hands, he took her to the restaurant and listened while she told him in quiet tones everything that had happened to her. He joined her in eating and encouraged her to eat anything on the menu. It felt good to be able to do that...and to be full. She’d forgotten how nice it was to be full.

Then he took her to the preacher’s house and married her before they went to Molly’s boarding house and collected her things. And after that, he took her home.

## *Chapter Seventeen*



*E*liza didn't say much that night, nor did she feel the need to. Mrs. John Evans. The name was so new to her, and she rolled it over in her mind as she recalled the vows she and John exchanged at the preacher's house. She was now a wife. And there was nothing more reputable than a married woman. It was all so wonderful, and she feared she'd wake up back in Omaha or at Molly's boarding house and find out this was all a dream. But it wasn't. John was here with her in bed, holding her close to his side and smiling at her. She smiled back and stared at the ring on her finger. She never imagined something so small could be so profound.

His hand traced her breast and the curve of her hip. He took his time touching her, as if he wished to memorize every part of her body. Now that they'd consummated the marriage, his movements weren't anxious. She'd watched him as he made love to her, and not because she was interested in how he looked



during the act but because she wanted to know it was John who was doing this with her. She wanted to fully enjoy the fact that a man who loved her was with her in bed.

It was all so new yet. This concept that someone could actually love and cherish her, even after knowing about the dark shadows in her past. But here she was with John. She no longer felt alone in the world. Now she had a place to belong, a place she could take comfort in. A place that was truly home.

John leaned forward and kissed her shoulder.

She reached up and brushed the hair out of his eyes and let her fingers run through the silky tresses. She hadn't done such a thing before, and the action was so gentle she marveled that it could seem sensual in nature.

He lifted his head and kissed her, his lips soft on hers. She settled against him, taking in the way he felt strong and solid next to her. Lowering her hand, she lightly played with the thick hair on his chest. His body was warm, and she snuggled closer against him when the wind drifting in through the window made her shiver. He wrapped his arms around her and the shivering died down, and in its place, she began to feel the stirrings of desire.

Long ago, she'd learn to pretend to be enthusiastic in bed. It was all a show. There were some men she did feel sympathy for, and they needed comfort more than anything else. She was soft and slow with them. Other men wanted it rough, and she'd learned to play along with that too. But with John, it was hard to know what to do. The problem wasn't so much that John didn't take a lead. He was gentle despite his passionate movements, but what kind of woman did he want her to be when they were in bed?

She didn't dare ask him. It didn't seem like the thing a wife—a lady—would discuss. Whores had no trouble asking men what their preferences were. It came with the job. But a wife didn't do this for a living. She did it because she wanted to. But how did wives act in the bedroom? She had one consolation in

her confusion. John hadn't been married before, so he couldn't compare her to another wife and find her lacking. That was good. And it made her feel safe. If she failed to act correctly, how would he know? She decided that she would just have to be what she finally was—a lady. She'd been given a second chance in life, and she wasn't about to ruin it, especially when John knew her past and still wanted to be with her.

She wanted to please him, to be the wife he wanted her to be. And so she let him dictate how things would evolve between them. When he parted his lips, she parted hers. He seemed to especially enjoy brushing his tongue against hers for his hold tightened on her hip. She liked it too but kept in mind to not be obvious about it. It didn't strike her that proper women were explicit in the bedroom. At least, that was never the impression she got when listening to men talk while they gambled in the saloon.

John rolled on top of her, and once again, she opened her eyes so she could remind herself that she was with him instead of a nameless face. When he entered her, she involuntarily closed her eyes and bit her tongue so she wouldn't moan. It felt good. She hadn't expected it to. It wasn't that she hated this activity, but having to do it all the time made her numb to it. She didn't know if it was because it'd been awhile since she'd done this or because she was with someone she loved who loved her, but her body responded easily to him. She couldn't avoid the pleasure it brought, nor did she want to. She just didn't want it to be as insistent as it was, and to her dismay, it was even more arousing this time than the last time they'd done it. It was like someone set a spark and it was gradually being fanned into a flame.

She ran her legs down his, finding the action more stimulating that she supposed it should be. His movements which had been hurried before due to the novelty of it all had now settled enough so he was taking his time as if he were savoring every moment they were together like this. She inhaled and

tightened her hold on his arms, aware of the ache that was getting stronger between her legs. Her breathing grew fast and her body went from a comfortable warm to a burning heat. Maybe if she watched him again, she could keep her uncomfortable desires at bay. Forcing her eyes open, she studied him in the moonlight, trying to concentrate on the way his hair fell over his forehead.

Then he opened his eyes. The action startled her, and when he smiled and kissed her, she couldn't think of how to respond. No man had ever looked at her and smiled during the act before, and she knew why. It seemed much more intimate than connecting their bodies together. It was as if she and John had just connected on an emotional and spiritual level. She didn't understand it, and part of it scared her so she quickly shut her eyes. His mouth left hers and he resumed his thrusting, now becoming more insistent. A groan escaped her lips and she immediately hoped he hadn't noticed.

A lady. She was a lady now. Ladies were dignified at all times. They didn't get rowdy in public..or anywhere else. They were controlled at all times. She gritted her teeth, fighting her body for control over the sensations coursing through her. When he gasped and stiffened, she breathed a sigh of relief. There. It was over. She managed through it, and she was still a lady. She held him as his body relaxed. Again, she ran her fingers through his hair. He kissed the side of her neck and drew her in for a long hug.

She smiled. "I love you too," she whispered and rested against him.

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The next afternoon, John joined Eliza outside. She'd wanted to enjoy the nice breezy day, so he found an old blanket and spread it out on the grass by the house where she set out a basket filled with sandwiches, apples, and bread and cheese. He

thought it was funny that she wanted to eat outside when the kitchen was a few yards away, but she peered up at him with those sweet eyes so he agreed. He watched her as she fussed over their lunch and smiled. She'd let her hair fall down in gentle waves over her shoulders which he particularly liked. She wore a hat to protect her fair skin from the sun and had on a purple dress. If it'd been up to him, she wouldn't wear anything at all, but she laughed when he wrote that suggestion down.

"John, if someone comes to see you, it wouldn't be good for me to be immodest."

He didn't think that would happen, but he realized it was a small possibility so he dressed as well. And now as she placed the food out on the blanket, he decided he'd surprise her. He collected a handful of yellow flowers and put them in a vase he'd made while she was gone. He hid the vase behind his back and approached her.

She glanced up at him. "Isn't this pretty? I can't think of anything to add. Can you?"

He sat next to her and showed her the vase.

She gasped when she saw it and held her hands out to receive it. "You made this vase?"

He smiled and nodded. He pointed to the engraved lettering that spelled out her name. When he made the vase, he didn't know if she'd ever see it or not. But here she was, and she was finally with him for good. He edged closer to her, enjoying the way their arms touched.

"It's the nicest thing anyone's ever made me," she said, tracing the floral design with her thumb. "There's a lot of detail in it too." She brought the flowers up her nose and inhaled. "There isn't anything that smells as fresh and lovely as flowers, especially these."

He brushed the hair off her shoulder and kissed her neck. Who cared about the way flowers smelled? He rather preferred the way she smelled.

She giggled. "John, that tickles."

He loved the way she wiggled against him.

"We need to eat before the food spoils. Then we can return to the house and undress."

That sounded good to him. He kissed her cheek and settled back beside her.

She set the vase in the middle of the blanket. "Shouldn't you sit across from me?"

He shook his head and kissed her on the lips, thoroughly enjoying this activity that he'd only recently discovered. In fact, he enjoyed anything as long as he could be close to her. It really didn't matter what they were doing, though he had to admit the bedroom had a greater appeal to it. He hoped that's what she meant when she spoke of undressing.

Laughing, she handed him his plate of food. "Eat up. You'll need your energy." Then she gave him a quick kiss. "There will be more later."

He took that as a yes, so he took the plate and started eating.

She sighed even as she grinned at him. "You don't need to rush. It's really a wonderful day, don't you agree?"

He slowed down and nodded. She was right. It was a nice day.

"You should move your work bench and the things you're working on back into the little house I had been staying in, before I left." She took a slice of cheese and put it on her bread. "I don't need to be there anymore, and there's a lot more space there than in that cramped shed."

In all the excitement of having her back, he'd forgotten about that. He'd need to finish up with the rocking chair he'd started for Addy. He decided he'd take Eliza into town with him when he dropped it off. Since Eliza and Addy were friends, they might enjoy getting the chance to talk.

Eliza swallowed her food and glanced up at the sky. "When I was a little girl, I'd close my eyes and pretend I could fly. A lot of the time, I was jealous of the birds. They seemed to be free and happy. They were always singing, so they had to be happy. Don't you think so?"

He smiled and picked up an apple as she continued talking as if she'd never asked the question. The horrible silence was officially gone. What a relief.

A horse neighed and his gaze turned in the direction of the sound. He finished biting into the apple and resisted the urge to toss Aaron off his property. Why did his brother have to come and bother him when he was trying to enjoy the day with his bride?

Eliza quickly set down the remaining slice of bread and cheese and drank some water before she jumped up.

John didn't see any other option but to follow her lead. Just as he stood up, Aaron tied his horse to the post and lumbered forward.

"I guess congratulations are in order," Aaron called out, taking his hat off and wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Then you heard?" Eliza asked.

"Everyone's heard. It's a small town." He turned to the leather pouch attached to the saddle. "Though I must say that no one expected it."

John wasn't sure what to make of that statement, so he put his arm around Eliza's shoulders and pulled her close to him.

Aaron glanced their way and grinned. "You two sure know how to surprise people."

John relaxed. At least Aaron wasn't going to give them a hard time.

"Here it is." His brother pulled out a silver picture frame. "Ma had set these all aside to give to each of her sons when they married, and as the oldest, it's my responsibility to hand them out

when the time is right.” He looked at Eliza. “Our ma loved pictures, even if we only had two in the house.”

She took the frame and held it as if it was going to break. “This is lovely,” she whispered.

“Now you two got to get your picture taken. It was one of her dying wishes. And just so you don’t think you’re off the hook, there’s a photographer coming to town in a month. So you have no excuse to get out of it.”

John liked that idea. He wanted a picture of Eliza, and this would suit just fine.

“How exciting!” Eliza cheered. “Isn’t this a wonderful gift, John?”

He nodded and squeezed her shoulders.

“I don’t know a woman who doesn’t like pictures,” Aaron told John, chuckling.

“I’m going to take this into the house. I’ll put it next to the vase.” She looked at Aaron. “John made me a wonderful vase. He really has an eye for detail. I’ll be back soon.” Then she darted off to the blanket, picked up the vase, and ran into the house.

John found her enthusiasm infectious. Yes, it was definitely good to have her back.

Aaron cleared his throat.

He turned his attention back to him.

“I’m not sure how to tell you this.” He paused.

John’s good mood dimmed and he frowned in response.

“Troy’s not happy. I don’t know if you’re aware that he was courting her.”

John shook his head and waved his hand. Just because Eliza went to one dinner engagement with him, it didn’t mean they were courting. Besides, she went to get food, not to be with him. She’d told him about it, and she included how ashamed she’d been to use Troy like that. But it was all water under the bridge now.

“You know Troy,” Aaron continued, his tone serious. “He’s not one to take this kind of thing sitting down, especially when it comes to you...and the way he thinks about you.”

John knew all too well exactly how Troy thought of him, and it gave him all the more reason to ignore his least favorite brother.

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

John grabbed Aaron’s arm as the man turned to get back on his horse. He pointed at Aaron’s chest.

“Me? You want to know what I think of your marriage?”

John nodded. Not that Aaron’s opinion would change the situation, but it would be nice to get his oldest brother’s blessing.

Aaron smiled. “I’m happy for you both. It’s about time you got a good woman to keep you out of trouble.”

He laughed and John also chuckled, noting the joke for what it was. The only time John had gotten into trouble while growing up was when he was seven and decided to cut Shawn’s hair.

Aaron hopped on the horse. “Enjoy the honeymoon.” Then he waved and left.

John sauntered back to the blanket and sat down just as Eliza came out of the house.

“He’s gone? Already? I didn’t even have a chance to offer him something to eat or drink.”

He motioned for her to come over to him. When she did, he sat her down on his lap and hugged her.

“Is this what being married to you is going to be like? I can’t even eat without you trying to have your way with me?”

He wiggled his eyebrows at her and cupped her breast in his hand.

“Well, that’s not how it’s going to be, Mister. I’m going to eat first. Then we can do other things.” She playfully shoved his hand away and scrambled off his lap.

He gave her the best wounded look he could muster.



She laughed and placed the apple in his mouth. “Be a good boy. I promise you’ll get dessert soon enough.”

Well, he was hungry, so he supposed—just this once—he’d follow her orders.

## *Chapter Eighteen*



*E*liza had just pulled back the lacy curtains with hunter green ribbons when John came into the parlor. She glanced at him and smiled. “I found these and thought they would make the room look prettier.” She adjusted the lower half of the curtain and noticed the way the breeze ruffled the lace. Scanning the entire room, she added, “I think this room is complete now. What do you think?”

He nodded.

She raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t even look.”

He shook his head.

Resting a hand on her hip, she grinned. “No. You didn’t really look. All you did was check out the ribbon on the curtains. I wanted you to examine the room.”

Appearing amused, he made a big show of slowly turning and squinting at everything in his direct vision.

“You’re humoring me.”

He peered at her from the corner of his eye and gave a slight shrug.

She bit back her laughter. “You’re awful. You do know that you’re awful, right?”

A smile broke out on his face and he lunged at her.

Shocked, she stepped back and squealed as he pursued her around the room. It wasn’t really a contest. He was much too fast and big for her. He caught up to her and wrapped his arms around her waist. Then he lifted her in his arms and sat on the rocking chair, making sure she faced him. He straddled her on his lap and began to kiss her neck.

The action caught her by surprise and so did the overwhelming urge to move her hips. She thought that the sensation would recede if she didn’t give into it, but it only grew stronger, and the more they came together as man and wife, the harder it was to quench the desire burning inside of her.

He cupped her breasts in his hands and she groaned. His breath was hot on her neck, and she grabbed his arms. Despite her mind’s refusal, her body acted on its own accord and she wiggled until the female part of her centered on the male part of him. Even through the clothes, the contact felt incredibly sensual. She moved against him and kissed his forehead, his cheeks and his lips. His tongue slid into her mouth and she moaned again.

She couldn’t take the endless restraint anymore. She had to satisfy the ache that became so intense that nothing else mattered. He caressed her hips, and she couldn’t decide if he was helping her along or if he was unaware of the flow of intense pleasure prodding her along. She’d never done this sort of thing fully dressed, and even as she wanted to strip their clothes so she could feel his flesh against hers, she couldn’t stop rocking her hips.

The chair swayed with her, aiding her along. She cupped his face in her hands and deepened the kiss, knowing she was the aggressor this time. His hands tightened on her hips, not

demanding but encouraging her. And when she came near the peak, she threw her head back and groaned. Then she gave in completely to the pleasure that engulfed her and cried out. Caught up in the sensation, she stilled and was only half aware of the fact that he was, once again, kissing her neck.

By the time she could focus, she wondered how such a thing could happen while she wore clothes, even if it was intriguing to her. But there was that unspoken question lingering in the back of her mind. Was she still a lady? Here she'd been, moving with all the abandon she used to employ as a prostitute, except this time it wasn't an act. Was it something that was similar to what other wives did or was it a lingering effect from what she used to be?

She bowed her head so she could look into her husband's eyes. *Her husband.* He was hers, and she was his. He wasn't another customer. He loved her. She saw it in his eyes. She gently held his face in her hands and caressed his cheeks with her thumbs. He didn't seem to mind that she'd been aggressive and loud. In fact, judging by the happy look on his face, it actually seemed that he had enjoyed that side of her.

"I love you. You know that, don't you?" she whispered. "There's no one else but you in my heart."

His smile widened and he kissed her. Afterwards, he stood up and set her on her feet. Then he went over to the small table by the window, picked up the silver frame, and set it on the fireplace mantle next to the picture of her son. He then flipped his hands over in a gesture she'd come to associate as him saying, "All done."

"So you were paying attention when I said to look around the room."

He nodded. To her surprise, he gave her another kiss and turned toward the front door.

"John?"

He paused and looked at her.

She blinked, hardly knowing what to say. “Well...” She shrugged and blurted out, “Don’t you want to continue what we started?” She pointed to the chair.

He flipped his hands over.

Now she was baffled. “What do you mean, we’re done? I don’t recall you finishing.”

He picked up a piece of paper on the kitchen table and wrote on it.

Curious, she walked over to him and read his message.

*I want you to have pleasure. It was your turn.*

She looked at him. “You were concerned that I wasn’t enjoying myself in bed?”

He nodded.

“I did. I just didn’t let myself go all the way.” She really didn’t know how else to put it, but he understood what she meant. “I didn’t think a wife should act like that.”

He wrote, *A husband wants his wife to be like that.* He pointed to the chair. Then he quickly added, *But no clothes on. That is not as good.*

She laughed and nudged him in the arm. “You’re silly. I promise that I won’t hold back anymore. And I’ll be naked next time.”

He smiled and kissed her again before he turned back to the door.

“Are you sure you don’t want to enjoy yourself before going back to work out there?”

He touched his mouth and then motioned to the clock on the wall.

“After supper?”

He nodded.

“Alright. And I’ll make it worth the wait.” She winked at him before she stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek.

He looked intrigued but grinned and left.

She watched him and thought of how odd it was that he should be concerned so much about her. But it was wonderfully odd. In fact, there were many wonderfully odd things about him, and she loved him for that.

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A week later, John loaded the rocking chair into the wagon and sat beside Eliza. She adjusted her hat so that the sunlight wouldn't hit her eyes. It felt strange to be going to town with John, this time as his wife. She wasn't used to being a wife, and so she had to look at her ring again to remind herself that she wasn't dreaming. It was real. John was real.

She looked over at him and slid closer to him. Slipping her arm through his, she said, "There's no need to be shy."

He grinned before he urged the horses forward.

On their way to town, she picked up a fan lying beside her on the seat and opened it. "I can't believe this heat, can you?" She waved the fan but it did little good. "Next month should be cooler. Does it get cool quickly this far up north?"

He gave a slight nod.

"That's good. But I guess that means you have longer winters than what I'm used to in Nebraska."

He shrugged.

"You've never been down there, have you?"

He shook his head.

She sighed. "That's just as well." She'd hate to have met him during that part of her life. It was much better with the way things were now. She resumed fanning herself, but the sweat still stuck to her. "Maybe I should take a bath later today."

Turning his attention to her, he smiled and nodded like an eager school boy.

She laughed. "You men are all the same, you know. Your mind is always on one thing." She caught him laughing, though no sound came with it. "You need a bath too, Mister."

He leaned over and kissed her.

“Keep your eyes on the road. I don’t want to end up in the ditch.”

Making a big show of rolling his eyes, he faced forward.

“You really are a strange man. You do realize that you’re strange, don’t you?”

He raised his eyebrows as if he had no idea what she was talking about.

By the time they reached town, Eliza realized she was eager to see Addy. When he didn’t park the wagon on the edge of town, she asked, “You’re going to go right up to Frank and Addy’s house?”

He pointed to the chair.

“I thought you were going to lug that thing all through town just to avoid riding through it.”

He shook his head as if she was the one who was silly.

“You’re the one who avoids people, not me.”

Figuring it was bad manners to be holding onto him in public, she straightened in her seat and left a suitable distance between them. She really didn’t know how close a lady sat next to her husband but decided it was best to play it safe. It felt good to be a wife. There was a sense of honor about it. But the fact that she was married to John was even better.

When they reached their destination, Addy came running out of the house. “It’s true? You are married? That’s why you disappeared from the face of the earth?”

Eliza furrowed her eyebrows good-naturedly. “Disappeared from the face of the earth?”

John jumped down from the wagon and Eliza moved to the edge of the seat to wait for him. She could get down on her own, but she understood that this was how things were done, and it was refreshing to be held in high enough regard that a man would go to such lengths to do these things for her because he valued her as a person.

“Yes,” Addy replied. “I heard you went to the big dinner at Charity’s and then vanished. Well, there was that rumor you ate in the restaurant with John.” She smiled at John as he helped Eliza down. “But you didn’t even tell me you were going to marry him or anything.”

Eliza shook her head at her. “If it bothered you that much, you should have come out and checked for yourself whether or not I had gone back to his home.”

“Oh.” She glanced at John.

Eliza turned her head and saw that he was taking the rocking chair down from the wagon.

Addy stepped forward and whispered, “I didn’t wish to intrude. A newly married woman has better things to do than have her curious friend sticking her nose in her business.”

John came up to them with the chair in his arms.

Addy hurried to the front door and opened it. “It looks just fine, John. You did a terrific job.”

Eliza followed him into the house and turned as Addy entered the parlor.

“I think over by the window would be good,” Addy said. “Frank asked me to tell you to go to the general store, and he’ll pay you there.”

John nodded.

“I hope you’ll let Eliza stay with me for a bit.”

“I would like to stay and talk,” Eliza added.

John smiled and gave Eliza a kiss on the cheek. He waved to Addy before he left.

“I hoped you’d come to your senses about him.” Addy motioned to the door leading to the hallway. “Let’s get something to drink. I don’t know about you, but this heat makes me thirsty.”

“It is hot.” Eliza walked into the kitchen. “Do you need any help?”

“No. I have it. Why don’t you have a seat and try to cool off with what little breeze we got coming through the window?”



Eliza took off her hat and set it on the table. She liked this. It felt nice to do something a married woman—a lady—would do. She was meeting a friend in the middle of the day and waiting for her husband to return. She glanced at her wedding ring as the sunlight bounced off the gold band and struck her eyes. Would she ever get tired of looking at it? Somehow she doubted it.

Addy chuckled as she set a cool drink in front of Eliza. “I remember when I first married Frank. I couldn’t get my mind off of him.”

Eliza picked up the glass and drank some of the sweet liquid. “How long have you two been married?”

“Twenty years.”

“That long?”

“It seems like it’s been half that. You’ll find that as you get older, time passes quicker.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Addy took her own glass of tea and sat across from her. “You two make a good couple.”

“Yes. I think so too.”

“And you don’t need to worry about Daphne.”

“No?” She looked up from her drink. “Is she mad?”

“Goodness, I should say not! She and Old Willy are courting.”

Eliza blinked, hardly believing her ears. “Willy? You mean, William Jafferty?”

“That’s the one.”

“Well...I remember they met at Charity’s party, but I didn’t think anything would come of it.”

“Apparently, neither did he. He was concerned because of their age difference. He’s nearly twenty years her senior, you know, but she doesn’t mind. It’s good to see him happy again. He wasn’t the same since his wife passed away. Now, we got the old Old Willy back.”

“That’s good. It means that everything’s worked out then.” And Eliza didn’t have to feel guilty for stealing John from the younger woman.

“It seems so.” Addy took a drink. “I did miss you at church last Sunday. There’s so much I wanted to tell you.”

“Oh. Well, John and I were going to go, but we got...distracted.”

A knowing smile formed on her lips. “I can imagine.”

Eliza traced the bottom of the glass with her fingers. “Can you?”

“Of course. We’ve all been there. I missed a couple of Sundays myself.”

Intrigued, Eliza put her glass down and leaned forward so her elbows rested on the table. “Did you?”

“It wasn’t intentional, I assure you. It’s just that Frank was being sweet and one thing led to another and...” She shrugged and blushed. “Well, we didn’t get our daughter by sitting in the pew.”

That’s right. Addy had a grown daughter who lived thirty miles west of them with her husband. Eliza bit her lower lip. She’d never had a meaningful conversation with a lady. She’d only discussed the deepest questions with other prostitutes. But Addy was opening up to her, and Eliza had to know for sure if she was behaving correctly. “Addy, can I ask you a personal question?”

“Sure. As long as it stays between us.”

“It will.” Taking a deep breath, she asked, “When you’re alone with Frank, do you ever...get caught up in the moment and act in a not-so-ladylike way?”

“I didn’t realize there was a ladylike way to behave.”

Yes, there was. Some of her customers had made comments on how their wives behaved in the bedroom, but she didn’t dare explain that to Addy.

Addy lowered her voice. "I never discussed this with anyone, but I feel comfortable with you. I assure you that my manners in the bedroom are not something I would ever do in public."

Eliza immediately felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

"Are you worried that you are acting inappropriately?"

"Yes," Eliza confessed. "I've never been a wife before, so I don't know how to act like one."

"Just be yourself. That's all you really can be."

"Well, John doesn't seem to mind."

"Then what's there to worry about? It seems to me that what happens between a married couple is nobody's business but their own."

"Thank you, Addy."

"Anytime." She tapped her fingers on the table. "There is something I wanted to ask you but didn't think it was right to do before."

"What is it?"

"What was it really like to work for Harriet Lube?"

Eliza groaned. "It was awful. She did nothing but complain. Nothing I ever did pleased her."

"Did you ever notice a foul smell coming from her attic?"

"What? No. Why would I notice such a thing?"

Addy giggled. "There's a rumor going around that she has dead rats in her attic."

"I never saw a dead rat anywhere, and I had to clean her attic."

"Yes. I remember that one."

Eliza broke into a wicked grin. "Maybe she ate them."

"Oh, of course she didn't."

"I did see some strange looking meat in that house," she joked.

Addy laughed and picked up her glass. "I'm glad you don't have to work for her anymore. I know she doesn't pay any of her workers a fair amount of money."

"Is that why you asked me over for supper as much as you did?"

She grew serious. "I worried about you. I looked for a better job but couldn't find one, and I feared you'd never accept an offer for me to take you in and house you here."

"You're right. I wouldn't have. I'm much too stubborn. I wanted to prove I could make it on my own."

"It's a good thing John got you when he did."

Eliza glanced at her friend, wondering just how much Addy really understood about the situation but deciding it was best to leave some things unasked.

"I'm also relieved nothing happened between you and Troy."

"No. I only went with him to Charity's party because I wanted to eat."

"Was it that bad?"

Eliza didn't like to think about it. Every time she did, she recalled how close she'd come to selling her body for money. She never realized temptation could creep up on her like that. Forcing the memory aside, she said, "I never would have married Troy."

"Of course, until Old Willy met Daphne, he was interested in you as well. I guess you could have had your pick of any of the available men you wanted."

"Maybe, but there was only one I wanted to be with."

She smiled. "And I'm glad for that."

Eliza returned her smile. "I am too. I never knew that love could be this wonderful or that I could be this happy."

"John's sure not complaining. You two go well together."

"You're right."

"And I'm glad you came to your senses before it was too late."

*Loving Eliza*

Eliza agreed with her on that one too. Few things were as fulfilling as finding a man like John, someone who knew all about her and loved her anyway.

Addy stood up. “Now, come on. I want to show you your wedding gift. We got you and John a rug.”

“How did you know we needed one?”

“I remember you mentioned that shortly after you arrived in town.”

“You have a good memory.”

“Well, come and see it. I think you’ll be pleased.”

Eliza got up and followed her to the other room.

## *Chapter Nineteen*



Three weeks later when the photographer was due to come to town, Eliza took the time to put her hair up in a fashionable hair style. She even had on her best dark blue dress for the occasion. This would be permanent, something that she would always look back on and remember with great fondness, so she wanted to look her best. When she was happy with the way she looked, she left the bedroom to find John who was sitting in a chair at the kitchen table with one of her books open.

“Are you able to understand all of that?” she asked.

He looked up from the book and shook his head.

“Give it time. It’ll come to you.” She picked up a hat and put it on her head. She hoped it wouldn’t mess up her hair. She decided she wouldn’t wear it when it came time for the photographer to take her and John’s picture, but for now, it would have to do. She turned to her husband and smiled. “You’re wearing the same clothes you had on when we met. It suits you

very well. When I look at the picture, I'll always remember the first time we met. I thought you were annoying in some ways but sweet in others."

He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Well, in some ways you were annoying. You wouldn't leave me alone." She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "But that was also sweet. Thank you for not giving up on me."

He softly kissed her before he stood up and retrieved his hat from the table.

"I can't wait to see the picture when it's ready. Can you?"

He shrugged.

She sighed. "I guess pictures are a female thing. Alright. I'm finally ready and we're not running behind. I did good today."

Smiling, he followed her out of the house. On the way to town, she spent the time discussing how they might stand or sit for the picture. She always liked pictures. It was a picture that allowed her a tangible connection to her son, and now a picture would be the thing to tell the world that she and John did live in this place. She had a hard time sitting still. For once, the trip to town seemed to take much too long. He seemed amused by her eagerness, but she didn't pay his teasing glances any mind. The fact remained that this was a perfect day. The day was cool enough to enjoy it, and the sun shone brightly. Yes. It was perfect.

When John parked the wagon on the edge of town, she didn't have the patience to wait for him to help her down. By the time he reached her side, she was already on the ground. She adjusted her dress and took his elbow. "Maybe we should see what Addy and Frank are up to before we leave. What do you think?"

He nodded.

It wasn't hard to find where the photographer was. In front of the general store was a line of people waiting for their pictures to be taken, and the photographer was busy setting up his equipment. Eliza and John took their spot in line.

"It looks like the whole town came out for this," she told John. "Well, at least mostly everyone."

She didn't see Harriet Lube anywhere, and that was a relief. She figured she'd have to run into the grouchy woman at some point but was more than happy to delay that event. However, she did see Troy there. He sat across the street talking to two men. He glanced their way and she quickly looked away. She hadn't spoken to him since the night of Charity's dinner. In church, she and John sat on the other side of the room, and Troy had left them alone. Still, she couldn't shrug off her unease whenever she did see him. She felt that she should apologize for leaving him as abruptly as she had but didn't know how. It was much too awkward.

"Good morning, John. Good morning, Eliza," a woman called out.

They turned and saw Alan Gray and Bethany Grooms behind them.

Eliza blinked in surprise. "Why, Alan, you're out in public."

He chuckled. "I've been known to get out once in awhile. I don't hide in my room all the time."

"Oh I know, but you did keep to yourself a lot."

"That's before he met me," Bethany said.

"Actually, I should thank you for introducing us," Alan added. "We've decided to marry come spring."

"No kidding?" Eliza asked.

"We would marry today but don't want to rush it," Bethany stated.

"Well, that's great," Eliza said. "Isn't that great, John?"

He nodded.



Eliza grinned. "I'm happy for you both. Now Alan can start living life instead of reading about it."

Alan laughed. "I do still read."

"Just not as often," Bethany added.

Marshal Custer ran over to them, interrupting their conversation. "Oh good. I'm glad you're in town," he told John. "I need you to fix a broken step in my house. I was going to go out and get you, but since you're here, would you mind doing it now?"

John glanced at the photographer and then at Eliza.

"I'll talk to the photographer so he'll take your picture first," the marshal said.

John nodded and they followed Ralph over to the photographer who held a dry plate in his hand.

"Corbin," Ralph called out, getting the photographer's attention. "I'm the marshal here in town, and I have something that needs fixing in my house. Now, this man John here is the only one qualified to fix it. I was wondering if I could move him and Eliza to the front of the line so that he can tend to my home."

Corbin gave her a good look. "Eliza? That's your name?"

She shifted from one foot to the other, unsure of why the question unsettled her. "Yes."

He smiled. "I thought you looked familiar."

Her eyes grew wide. No. It couldn't be. No this far out west...in this small town.

"I'll be happy to take your picture. I'm just about ready. Why don't you two go on over there. John, you sit in that chair and Eliza, you stand beside him and put your hand on his shoulder."

She numbly followed John to the platform with the light green curtain behind it. She took a deep breath to settle the panic rising in her chest. He wouldn't come out and tell anyone *how* he knew her, would he? Despite her slight trembling, she managed to stand beside John and set a hand on his shoulder.

John glanced at her, obviously sensing something wasn't right.

She forced a smile. "I've never had a picture taken before." Her voice shook. She hadn't meant for it to, but it really couldn't be helped. A part of her past was behind that camera and could easily announce what she used to be to the entire town. "Let's just go home as soon as you're done with that step. We can come back another day to see Addy."

His gaze shifted from her to the photographer and then back to her.

She knew the question in his eyes. Had Corbin been one of her customers? She hated answering it but knew she had to. "Yes. He's from Omaha."

"I need you two to look at the camera," Corbin shouted out.

She forced her eyes on the camera. All she could do was act as if nothing was wrong. Maybe everything would be fine. There was no reason to panic. She focused on her breathing and counted silently. Her hands steadied and she was able to give a slight smile when Corbin counted backwards from three to one.

After he took the picture, he called out, "I'll have it ready by tomorrow morning."

She breathed a sigh of relief as the next couple with two children were ushered forward. She gladly stepped down from the platform. One look over her shoulder told her that Corbin had turned his attention to the next people in line. Maybe that was it. Maybe there was nothing to worry about after all.

The marshal walked over to them. "Will you come over and fix that step now?" he asked John.

She was aware that John glanced in her direction but she couldn't make eye contact with him. Even if he knew what she'd been and what she'd done, she just couldn't look at him at that moment. For him to see one of the men she'd been intimate with

wasn't something she relished. She'd hoped that she'd never see any of those men again.

She didn't know what else to do except sit in one of the few vacant chairs in front of the general store. She didn't feel like seeing Addy or talking to anyone. She just wanted to wait for John and then go home. After John left with Ralph, she settled into the chair and put her face in her hands. She couldn't come back out here tomorrow and face Corbin again. She just couldn't. All she wanted was for the past to stay buried in the past. Why did he have to come to town and stir up old memories? Why couldn't the past just stay there? Maybe she could have Frank or Addy pick up the picture tomorrow. Then she could avoid coming back while Corbin was still in town.

She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly feeling vulnerable. She wished she had brought the picture of her son but she hadn't. Glancing up at the crowd, she watched Corbin as he took another picture, acting as if nothing was wrong. Well, maybe for him, nothing was wrong. He, after all, had only seen her as a prostitute, and who knew how many of those he'd visited in his time? Maybe it made no difference that she was there. All he said was hi. He hadn't been rude. If he'd wanted to come out and tell everyone what she'd been, he would have already done it, wouldn't he?

Another family moved to the platform and assembled to get their picture taken. Corbin told them how to stand. She watched the process for awhile. The line moved slowly. Not once did Corbin look in her direction. That was a good sign, wasn't it? Maybe he would leave her alone. Maybe she worried over nothing. She stood for a moment and peered into the general store to check the clock. She'd been there for a full fifteen minutes. Sitting back down, she slowly exhaled. John had to fix one step. Once he was done, he'd be back and they could go home. Surely, he was almost done by now.

"I never did congratulate you," a familiar voice said.

Jerking, she turned to Troy who was now sitting next to her. She placed her hand over her heart. "I didn't see you come over here."

"Apparently not."

Great. It wasn't bad enough that Corbin was within viewing range, but she had to contend with Troy as well. Shifting in the chair, she cleared her throat and said, "I never did apologize for leaving the way I did. When I was heading out of the house, I ran into John, and..." She hesitated, knowing that whatever she said, it wouldn't come out right. Men never handled rejection well. At least, not in her experience. "I mean, it was just a dinner we were going to. We weren't courting or anything." And even if they were, she had every right to marry John anyway. She'd been under no obligation to marry Troy. Ever.

Troy leaned back in his chair. "You don't have to explain anything to me. You loved him all along. You should be with him."

Right. She didn't believe him. The nagging feeling that there was something bad about him was screaming at her. "Thank you," she finally said, deciding it was best to act as if he meant it.

"I see you two got your picture taken."

"Yes." Now she had to look for an excuse to get out of there. She scanned the crowd of people who mingled around the business district. There really wasn't anyone she felt comfortable going up to and starting a conversation with. She glanced through the doorway and saw that Frank was helping a customer. When would John get back?

"I figured that you two got one of those silver frames," Troy continued. "Our mother gave Aaron one for each of her sons, even John. None of us thought he'd ever get married at the time, but he sure showed us."

She frowned, not particularly caring for the way he laughed. "He almost married Daphne."

"I know. Everyone knows. If Daphne had showed up first, then John would've married her when you came into town."

She blinked at the bitter edge in his words.

"But things work out for the best," he continued, his eyes sharp even as he smiled. "Good Old Willy has a reason to smile again. Those two are going to do well together."

That was it. Eliza didn't care if Frank was with a customer or not. She had to get away from Troy. She quickly got to her feet. "I just remember something I have to get from the store. It was real nice seeing you again, Troy."

She didn't wait for him to respond. As soon as she was in the store, she wiped her hands on her dress, hoping to dry them. She shouldn't break out into a sweat just because she talked to someone. What was it about Troy that bothered her? Was it always going to be like this? She hated it. Hated having Corbin out there, taking pictures, and knowing exactly what she used to be. Hated having Troy lingering around, thinking that she'd duped him. She never should have agreed to go to that stupid party with him. If she hadn't been so hungry, she wouldn't have. It was better than sleeping with Alan so he'd give her money for the restaurant. Wasn't it?

She squeezed her eyes shut tight, willing the tears away. This was supposed to be a good day. She and John were getting their picture taken. It was supposed to be perfect. So why was it quickly turning sour? And how could she get things back to how they should be?

"Eliza, are you alright?"

She opened her eyes and looked at Frank's concerned expression. "Oh. Hello, Frank. I...Uh..." She glanced around the store. What could she use back home?

Corbin entered the store. "Oh good. Do you have a screwdriver?" he asked Frank. "I got a loose screw out there."

She took a step back, wishing she could fade into the background or slip out. She glanced out the window and noticed

that Troy was still sitting by the door. Gritting her teeth, she wondered if there was a door in the hallway behind the counter that would lead outside. Was there an alley behind the store?

Frank turned to his counter and pulled out a drawer beneath his cash register. "I have one in here somewhere."

Corbin smiled at her. "It sure is nice to see a familiar face. I do a lot of traveling, so I rarely get a chance to meet up with someone twice."

"You know Eliza?" Frank asked.

"We had some business a couple of times."

Eliza was going to throw up. She just knew he was going to tell Frank what kind of business they had. Another glance out the window showed her that Troy hadn't budged from his spot. She couldn't decide who was worse. Both Troy and Corbin were dangerous, just for different reasons.

"Found it," Frank called out.

"Thank you." Corbin took the screwdriver and left.

She breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't told Frank! She didn't know why, but he was being quiet about the whole thing. Maybe he understood that she wanted out of that business and needed a second chance to do it. Whatever the reason, she wasn't going to let the opportunity slip by.

"I better find John. We should head back home," she told Frank. "Will you tell Addy hi and that I'll see her next time I come into town?"

"Are you sure that's all you want? I do have lots of goodies on the shelves," he hinted with a wide grin.

"You're always the salesman, Frank. We'll spend our money here next time we're in town. I promise."

"I'll hold you to that."

She couldn't help but smile.

"Frank, can you come out here? We need help with the platform!"

One look out the door notified her that it had fallen over.

"I better assist."

"Frank, do you have a door that leads to the alley?" she quietly asked.

He stepped closer to her and whispered, "Trying to avoid Troy?"

"How did you know?"

"Addy."

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I am trying to avoid him."

He nodded. "Back down that small hallway is the backroom. The door is there."

"Thank you, Frank."

"Anytime."

She slipped out the door he mentioned and breathed in the fresh air. She was alone in the alley, and she never felt so good to get away from people in her entire life. She turned in the direction that would lead to Charity's house and made her way down the dirty alley, careful to lift the hem of her dress.

She reached the end of the row of businesses and stepped onto the dusty road, squinting in the sunlight. John would be three blocks away. She strolled along, thinking of how odd it was that things were so quiet in this section of town but she figured all the activity was in the center part of it. When she approached Harriet Lube's house, her stomach tensed and she paused. Did she dare even walk in front of the woman's residence? Harriet rarely looked out her windows. Maybe she could quickly pass by unnoticed. That was the curse of living in a small town. Everyone knew everyone else, and when something bad happened, it made future dealings a very unpleasant experience.

"I thought you might be down this way."

She gasped and whirled around.

Corbin sauntered up to her, looking as if he didn't have a care in the world. "It sure is good to see you again, honey."

"I'm not your honey."

"Not all the time. Just when I pay you to be."

She took a deep breath to settle her nerves. "Please Mister..." She suddenly realized she didn't even know his last name. But what did that matter? "I don't want any trouble."

"I don't want any trouble either. Why do you think I kept my mouth shut back there? However, I have been looking for a moment to speak to you...alone."

"I'm married. I don't do that anymore."

He chuckled. "Married? You? A prostitute?"

"I'm not one anymore. I came here to leave that life behind."

He stopped laughing and sighed. "That's a shame. I saw you and hoped that we could..." He shrugged. "Well, you know. In a town this size, it's not likely there's a brothel either."

"No, there's not."

"Very well. I'll just have to wait until I get to a town that does. Sorry to disturb you, Eliza."

Was that really it? Was he going to leave it at that? She tried to think back to what she'd learned about Corbin, but there had been so many men who'd come her way, it was hard to remember who was who. All she could remember was his face. She sighed. She hoped he was one of the nicer ones.

She turned around and nearly ran into Harriet who had a satisfied smirk on her face. "Interesting," Harriet said as she scanned her from head to toe. "A prostitute, hmm?"

"Mrs. Lube, I'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything."

"I bet."

Eliza struggled on how to handle the woman. In her time of working for her, Mrs. Lube hadn't proven to be a rational woman. "I worked hard to get out of that life."

"You certainly did. You took your feminine wiles and married that poor retard who didn't know any better."

Something in Eliza snapped. "Now you listen here, you tired out old hag. It's one thing for you to point the finger at what I used to do, but when you talk about my husband that way, it's



the final straw. I have put up with you long enough. You promised me money for my work, and yet you've cheated me out of a good \$4."

"Because you didn't earn it."

"I did so earn it! I went without food and you sat there and ate right in front of me, knowing how hungry I was and refusing to have enough compassion to let me even have a scrap of food from your table. You even fed the stray dog that makes his rounds to your place once a day, but you couldn't spare anything for me."

"And it looks to me like someone who'd give her body in order to make a living is beneath a dog. The only man who'd have you is one who can't tell the difference."

Eliza slapped her.

The woman pressed her hand to her cheek, looking horrified.

"I warned you not to speak about John that way."

Harriet threw down her cane and screamed.

Startled, Eliza stepped back, not sure of how to react. The stupid woman was a loon through and through.

"She's beating me! Make her stop!"

"Why you—" Eliza pulled on the woman's hair. "I've had enough of you, you witch! Now, shut up."

"She's hurting me!"

She let go of the woman and retrieved the cane. "You want this? Then stop your hollering."

"What is the meaning of this?" a man called out.

Great. A group of people came running to see what the ruckus was about. "I ought to club you over the head with this," Eliza hissed.

Harriet glared at her. "I wouldn't expect less from a whore."

Eliza's hand tightened around the club, but this time her actions were out of anxiety instead of anger. "Please don't tell

them. Look, I'm sorry. I won't do anything to upset you ever again."

"Then I guess you'll have to keep coming to my house and working for me. My silence will be payment enough, don't you agree?"

Eliza winced. Could she afford to make such a deal? Sooner or later, she'd do something or say something to upset the woman, and the woman would end up revealing her secret anyway. Eliza knew people like Harriet all too well. *"Be a good girl,"* her uncle once whispered in her ear. *"As long as you don't tell anyone our little secret, I won't let your aunt get rid of you."* But when she got pregnant, he quickly forgot that promise. No. She couldn't afford to make such a pact. There was no honor among liars, and sooner or later, Harriet would grow tired of her and tell the town anyway. She was tired of living in fear.

Eliza handed the cane back to Harriet as the people reached them. "No, Mrs. Lube. We are not in agreement. I will never be your slave again."

The group crowded around them. She recognized a few of them, but most of the people had turned back to whatever they had already been doing. The ones that remained were all just a bunch of busybodies who had absolutely nothing better to do than to mind other people's business. Every town had them, and every town had a Harriet Lube who patiently waited for the right moment to strike a deal, only to turn the tables at the most inopportune time.

"In that case," Harriet began, turning to the crowd, "I suppose these nice, moral people might like to know what kind of woman they have in their midst. Is that what you want?"

The people, naturally, were curious. Why wouldn't they be? They could taste the sweetness of gossip when its fruit was ripe.

Eliza was tired of fighting. All of her life, she'd hidden. She either hid from herself or from someone else, but she'd

always hidden something. What was it her father once told her? The truth shall set you free?

“I’ll save you the trouble,” she told Harriet. Looking at the crowd and ignoring her pounding heart, she said, “Before I came here, I was a prostitute. I didn’t want to be one, but when I was fourteen, my uncle sold me into the profession. I came here for a clean start. But I guess there are some things that one can never run from, no matter how hard they try.”

Her gaze shifted from Harriet’s startled look to John who had finally shown up. A little too late. She felt numb as she moved forward. As if on cue, the crowd parted for her. She didn’t dare look any of them in the eye. As long as she could keep her focus on what was in front of her, she would make progress. Somehow, she’d rise above this. She was a survivor. She’d always survived, and she wasn’t about to stop now.

She stopped in front of John and finally looked up at him. Of all the people there, he was the only one who’d devastate her if he turned his back on her. Tears came to her eyes as he put his arm around her and led her down the road, away from the people, away from the whispers and stares. For once, she was glad he parked on the edge of town.

## *Chapter Twenty*



*E*liza sat on the bed and stared out the window, not really seeing anything. A tear trickled down her cheek. This was supposed to be a good day. Part of her wanted to take the picture frame and smash it. The only thing that stopped her was knowing that John's mother wanted him to have it. She pulled her knees up to her chest and rested her cheek on them. She closed her eyes and took deep breaths.

All was not lost. John still loved her. He took her home. She cried while she told him what she did and why. He didn't make any gestures to communicate. He simply held her close and let her cry. Then she asked to be alone so he went to his work house while she undressed until she was in her chemise and petticoats and sat on the bed. She didn't know how much time passed as she sat there, contemplating her life and how tired she was of running from her past. Now that she'd come out and told everyone the truth, there was no hiding from it. And now she'd

face whatever consequences came from it. She was done running. But it hurt. There was no denying how much it hurt.

The front door opened and she lifted her head and turned her attention to the bedroom doorway. It had to be John. If it wasn't, then the person would have knocked. Sure enough, John peered around the corner of the doorway and looked at her with a question in his eyes.

"If people avoided you before, you just wait. No one will go near you now." She swallowed the lump in her throat and turned back to the window. Another tear slid down her cheek.

He sat next to her, his body warm and solid against her, and his lips brushed her shoulder.

"How can you still want to be with me?" she asked, her voice trembling.

He reached for her hand and pressed it against his heart. He loved her. Of course, the answer was so easy to him. But then, that's how John was. He saw things in black and white; things were either good or bad, and when he looked at her, he didn't see any of the grays that shadowed her for years.

She tightened her hold on his hand and turned so she was facing him. Even as she felt more tears forming in her eyes, she kissed him, taking comfort in his touch. She needed him. It'd been so long since she admitted that she needed anyone, and it scared her to no end to confess it but she whispered, "I need you," before she buried her face in his neck.

His response was to pull her into his arms and kiss the top of her head. They stayed still for a few minutes, and she focused on the calm beating of his heart and the steady rhythm of his breathing. When it was just the two of them together, the rest of the world seemed to slip away and nothing else mattered. She loved that most about being with him.

He stroked her back and she felt her muscles relax. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the moment, for she would learn to appreciate each moment for what it was instead of worrying about

what would happen next. Tomorrow would take care of itself. For now, she was loved and cherished, and she'd drown herself in the affection her husband was bestowing upon her.

She pulled away from him so she could undo the strings on her chemise. He leaned forward and kissed the side of her neck. A slight smile crossed her face as he offered to help her out of her undergarments. His hands were familiar to her by now, and she granted him access to anything he wanted to touch.

Once she was naked before him, she gave him a small smile and whispered, "It'd be more fun if you took off your clothes too."

To her surprise, he didn't let her undress him. He hopped off the bed and shrugged his clothes off so fast that if she'd blinked, she would have missed it.

"Well, you're a little eager, aren't you?"

He smiled and jumped into bed and pulled her into his arms.

She laughed. The simple action of laughing made her feel so much better. She'd forgotten how uplifting something like a laugh could be, but she suspected he made her laugh for that very reason. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, giving herself permission to fully enjoy him.

He returned her kiss, his lips firm but not impatient. He'd take his time to enjoy her. He laid her on her back and took his time in caressing her skin. His kisses drifted from her mouth to her cheeks and down her neck and lower. She ran her fingers over his skin as he kissed her body, not leaving one inch untended to. Where his lips went, his hands followed, and in his actions, she felt adored. She'd heard that making love could be an act of devotion, an act where a man showed the woman that she was the most important person in his life, but she didn't fully understand it until then.

When he came back up and kissed her lips, she decided she would do the same for him, for she wanted him to know how

much she loved him and though she hadn't connected lovemaking with real love, she could now. She liked the give and take that was taking place, and it became clear how two people could become one. One mind, one heart, one flesh. There was something spiritual in the process, in what was happening between them. And to think she thought there was nothing new to learn in doing this.

She wanted him to be on top of her when he entered her so she urged him to roll on top of her, and he followed her lead. She closed her eyes and embraced the feelings his movements aroused in her. He took her hands in his and she held on tight, wishing they could always be like this. The sensation was slow in building, their bodies moving at a leisurely pace. She took in the small details associated with him; his smell, the sound of his uneven breathing, the taste of his skin, and the feel of the male part of him. She kept her eyes closed so she could absorb everything, wanting to remember this moment for the rest of her life.

When she felt the urge to moan, she did. And when her release came, she cried out and clung to him, no longer self-conscious about voicing her pleasure. He came soon after and collapsed on top of her. She held him even closer, unwilling to let him go. She wasn't ready to let this moment in time pass. Not yet. And he stayed with her. Even as the minutes ticked from the clock in the kitchen, they remained still, listening to the birds singing outside and feeling the gentle caress of the breeze that drifted in through the window.

And she knew that no matter what the future brought, he'd be with her every step of the way. She was no longer alone in this world.

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The next day came and to John's surprise, he saw Frank and Addy as they rode their buggy up to his property. He set aside the second vase he had started for Eliza, hoping to make one for every room in the house so she could have flowers everywhere she went. He stood up and left the work building. He didn't expect anyone to come onto his land. People usually stayed away when things got unpleasant, and there had been no mistaking the uncomfortable atmosphere in town yesterday. As he approached Frank and Addy, he gave a hesitant wave.

"How you doing, John?" Frank asked in his familiar friendly tone.

John relaxed. So they hadn't come to criticize Eliza. That was good. She needed to have friends in her corner, people besides him who would support her through this trial in her life. He wanted to thank them for coming out but didn't know how unless he wrote it down. So he settled for shaking Frank's hand and smiling at Addy.

After Frank helped Addy down from the buggy, she turned to John and took a package from the seat. "I figured that neither one of you would go to town today to pick up your picture."

She was right. They hadn't planned on it, so he nodded.

"Well, we thought we'd bring the picture to you. Is Eliza ready to receive company? I'd like to give it to her."

He motioned for them to follow him. When he opened the front door, he heard Eliza moving around in the bedroom. He gestured to the kitchen table for them to sit and went to find his wife.

Eliza was gathering a pile of their dirty clothes and putting them into a basket. She smiled when she saw him. "Is there anything else you want me to wash today?"

He shook his head and held his hand out to her.

"What is it?"

He waved her forward and pointed to the kitchen.



She frowned. "Is someone here?"

He nodded and smiled encouragingly at her.

"Then it's good?" She sounded hesitant.

He wished he could tell her it was alright, but all he could do was smile and gently take her hand in his.

She didn't fight him, but he noted the way her steps slowed as they got closer to the kitchen.

Addy and Frank, who were sitting together, looked up as they entered the room.

Addy jumped up and ran over to hug Eliza.

John let go of Eliza's hand so she could hug Addy back.

"How are you doing?" Addy asked.

"I-Well..." Eliza glanced at John and then at Frank. "You did hear about me...About what I used to be?"

Addy pulled away but held onto her hands. "Yes. Everyone knows by now, and we're terribly sorry for what happened to you when you were fourteen. Why, you were just a child."

Frank cleared his throat. "It's a mighty shame. We're just glad you got out of that life and married up with John."

"Melissa spoke about how excited she was that you were coming," Addy said. "Seeing as how her cousin is a preacher, it makes sense. She kept saying how wonderful it was that you were getting a second chance. Of course, I didn't really understand what she meant until yesterday. I hope you realize that you do have friends in this town."

"Addy's been fretting up something awful that you and John will leave for a new town. We certainly don't want to see you two go."

As soon as John saw the tears form in Eliza's eyes, he grabbed the handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her.

She laughed as she accepted it. "He always seems to know what I need." After she dabbed her eyes, she looked at them. "I

can't tell you how much this means to me. I'm fortunate to have you all in my life."

"We also came to bring you your picture." Addy pulled the lid off the box and took out the photograph.

John leaned forward and thought it turned out well. No one would know that Eliza had been shaking. He nudged her in the side and pointed to her.

"You think I'm beautiful?" Eliza guessed.

He nodded.

"Now how do you two communicate like that?" Frank wondered, looking intrigued.

"Oh Frank," Addy began with a grin, "they don't need to speak to know what the other one is thinking. Love has its own language."

"I suppose you're right." He looked at John. "But I still need you to write things down."

Eliza laughed again, and John suddenly realized how much he missed that sound. Yesterday had been such a somber day, and he hated watching her cry. He went to retrieve the silver frame from the parlor and came back so he could put the photograph in it. Then he showed it to her.

"He doesn't look so tall when he's sitting, does he?" Eliza noted. Glancing at him, she said, "You can seem intimidating at times, you know."

He blinked. Him? Intimidating?

"That's true," Frank agreed. "It's because of your height."

Eliza placed the picture down on the shelf above the cookstove. "Thank you for bringing this out. I do like it."

"Every woman should have a picture of her and her husband," Addy commented.

"Will you two stay for lunch? I was just about to make something."

"We'd be delighted. And let me help."

Frank stood up. "I don't know about you, John, but I take that as my cue to leave."

"What? You don't want to make a casserole dish?" Addy teased.

"You know very well what would happen if I were to help out in the kitchen."

She sighed. "He's right." She looked at Eliza and John. "He nearly burned down the kitchen in our first year of marriage. I have banned him from the cookstove ever since."

"You won't hear me complaining about that either." He turned to John. "You want to show me what you're working on?"

John nodded and grabbed some paper and a pencil. It'd be nice to have a real conversation with Frank for a change instead of nodding or shaking his head. He kissed Eliza on the cheek.

"Oh now I can't have John showing me up here," Frank grumbled good-naturedly. He walked up to Addy, put his arms around her, leaned her back and gave her a long kiss. By the time he set her upright, she was blushing. "There. Now when John here has been married to you for a good twenty some odd years, he'll kiss you like that," he told Eliza before heading out of the house.

Addy tapped Eliza on the arm. "We ought to come out here more often."

John chuckled to himself as he followed Frank out the door.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*



*E*liza went out to the creek the next morning to do some light washing. Fall was quick in coming, but she thought she might take advantage of the warm weather while it lingered in the air. She had taken some soap and a washcloth. She took off her clothes and knelt by the cool water so she could wash her hair. The row of trees provided a sense of privacy from anyone who might ride onto John's property to visit, though she doubted anyone would do that while it was still early in the morning. She rose with the dawn, something that she hadn't done in a long time.

She wasn't accustomed to the sunrise. John didn't need to be up at dawn like a farmer did, so he liked to sleep until around eight. Even when she worked for that horrible Harriet Lube, she woke up at eight to be at Harriet's door in the half hour. This was a nice change, she decided as she dipped her hands in the cool water and rubbed the soap until she had built up a nice lather. She

filled the cup with water, bent her head forward so her hair fell in front of her, and tipped the cup so the water poured over her tresses. Then she worked the lather into her hair before she rinsed it. Reaching for the comb she'd brought along, she picked it up and worked the tangles out, gritting her teeth each time the comb got stuck. She patiently worked through her hair.

At one point, she thought she heard a twig snap, so she stopped and glanced over her shoulder, only to see a squirrel run up a tree. She did a quick scan of the trees around her. It hadn't occurred to her how far the house was from the creek until that moment. Everything seemed normal, and yet she couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. She threw her comb on the towel beside her and decided she could bathe later. Next time, she'd take John with her. She stood up and threw on her undergarments and dress. Just as she was finishing her top button, she turned around and saw Troy standing in front of her.

She gasped and nearly fell back. As soon as she caught her footing, she grabbed her comb and pointed the sharp edge of the handle in his direction. The edge really wasn't all that sharp, but it would do. She took a step back, careful not to slip.

"It's a shame you put those clothes back on," he calmly stated, his expression cold.

"What do you want?" she yelled, hoping John would hear her. Surely, he'd investigate if he thought someone was on their property.

He sneered at her. "How cute. You think John's going to hear you and come running. It's too bad someone shut the windows in the house."

She didn't know whether to believe him or not, but there was no way she was going to take her chances if she didn't have to. She took a step to the side, careful to keep the comb pointed at him. "Get away from me, Troy!"

"I don't think so, Eliza," he said in a low tone. "Word on the street is you're used to being alone with men. You owe me, honey."

Her heart caught in her throat and she struggled to take a deep breath. She needed to think clearly. Now wasn't the time to panic. "Stop it! Get out of here!" She took two steps closer to the house. But the house was still too far! She didn't dare turn her back on him. She needed to keep the sharp edge of her comb on him. It could mean the difference between him succeeding in what he'd come to do and her getting away.

He chuckled. "Yes, ma'am. Just because you tell me to do something, I should do it." He lowered his hands and undid his belt buckle. "You were supposed to stay with me during that dinner at the Custer house but you bailed on me so you could marry John. Do you really think I'm going to let you off the hook for that?" He unzipped his pants and approached her.

Oh crap! Her hands started to shake and flashbacks came at her full force. She took a deep breath and steeled her resolve. No. She wasn't fourteen and he wasn't her uncle. It didn't have to end the same way! She took another deep breath and screamed at the top of her lungs. Then she scrambled backwards, toward the house, but not daring to keep her focus off of the beast in front of her.

He lunged for her and she sidestepped so that he tripped on the tree root that had been at her foot. Still screaming, she tightened her grip on the comb and bolted for the house. How much time did she just buy? A few seconds. That was all, but she was going to use those few seconds to her advantage. Adrenaline shot through her as her bare feet ran over rocks and sticks that jabbed her. Flesh wounds. She could tend to those later. She heard him get up and glanced back to assess how much distance she'd gained. Not enough!

Screaming while she was running was making it hard for her to breathe, but she figured it was her best offense. If John

heard her and came to her...She said a quick prayer that it would work. She hadn't screamed before and her uncle succeeded. So she had to scream now. She glanced over her shoulder and saw that he was gaining on her. She gasped for air and got ready to scream again when he plowed into her.

"Listen, you little whore," he seethed as he slammed his hand over her mouth so she couldn't scream anymore.

Tears stung her eyes but she couldn't give up. She had to keep fighting. She gripped the comb and tried to figure out where to stab him so he'd have to release her.

"You're use to this kind of thing," he whispered as his free hand curved down her leg and lifted her dress. "You made a fool of me. You owe me."

No! Not this time! Focus. She needed to focus. In one swift motion she threw the comb at his neck. He released her but not before he slapped her across the head. She ignored the ringing in her ears and scrambled away from him.

She hadn't crawled three paces when she realized someone else was there with them. She looked back and saw John lift Troy by the collar and punch him in the jaw. The relief she felt at seeing John there was too much for her to handle. She collapsed on the ground and kept praying her thanks that history wasn't going to repeat itself.

"John! Stop!"

Suddenly a pair of hands were around her, and she was looking at Shawn. "Are you alright? Did we get here before Troy...?"

She nodded. "I'm fine."

He helped her to her feet and waited until she had enough strength to stand on her own before he let go of her. She turned her attention to Guy and Aaron as they struggled to pull John off of Troy. She saw the blood, but it was hard to tell where it was coming from. Everything was happening so fast. She could tell that John had Troy pinned to the ground and he wouldn't stop

punching him, but Aaron and Guy were hovering around and blocking a clear view of him. They kept yelling at John to stop and grabbed for him.

"It's a good thing we came out when we did," Shawn said, not taking his eyes off of his brothers.

She sobbed into her hands. "It's my fault."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I let him take me to Charity Custer's party. I should have said no."

"Troy's taken other ladies to parties and other social gatherings, but he never tried to rape any of them. I hate to say this but I think it was because you married John and were a...well...a lady of ill repute."

She took small comfort in that. Maybe there was nothing she could have done to avoid it. Maybe it would have happened just because she had been a prostitute and he figured that meant she would be intimate with any man who wanted to be with her that way.

Aaron and Guy finally succeeded in pulling John off of a battered Troy who was barely moving in the grass. She had the sudden urge to go over to him and kick him in the face but refrained when she realized that her comb had landed right into his throat.

Once a bloody and winded John settled down, Aaron knelt beside Troy and pressed his fingers to the side of his neck. He looked up at the group watching him. "He's alive but we need to get him to the doctor. Then we'll have to report this to the marshal." He turned his attention back to Troy. "Why did you have to go and do something stupid like this?" He stood up and Guy helped him lift Troy. Glancing at John and Eliza, he said, "We saw what Troy was trying to do. We'll back up your story to the marshal."

Beside her, Shawn gave a heavy sigh but joined his brothers as they made their way back toward the house.



Still trembling, she walked over to John and wrapped her arms around his waist. He held her tightly against him and kissed the top of her head. She closed her eyes and reminded herself that this time she had taken the steps necessary to defend herself. She'd learned to fight back.

"You heard me screaming, didn't you?" she asked.

She felt him nod.

"Thank you for coming."

He took her hand and pressed it against his chest where his heart beat, steady and strong.

"I love you too," she whispered.

He then led her to their wagon to get ready for their trip to town.

They followed his brothers, and John kept his arm wrapped around her shoulders the entire time. She sensed the anger still raging inside him. In all the time she'd known him, she couldn't recall a time when he'd been this furious, but given the circumstances, she really couldn't blame him. It was a rough trial, and the fact that it was his own brother had to be a sharper sting. Somehow, they would make it through this. Troy hadn't succeeded. And that counted for a lot.

When they reached the doctor's office, they waited as Aaron and Guy took an unconscious Troy in to seek medical attention. A part of her wished her aim hadn't been off. She'd wanted to kill him—anything to stop him. And even as she struggled to forgive him, she realized this was going to take time. She couldn't simply will her anger away. No. It was good he lived. How else could he get a second chance? If they prayed for him, maybe he would call on God. Or maybe not. Everyone had to make that decision on their own time.

As she thought over her life, she realized that she couldn't control what others thought or did. All she could do was control what she did. The revelation struck her so suddenly that it shocked her. And in that moment, she felt freer than since the

day before her parents died. Somehow, some way, she knew that everything was going to be alright. God hadn't abandoned her all those years ago, and though she had no idea how He could allow her uncle to mistreat her, she had to put her faith in Him. The fact of the matter was that evil was in the world, and as long as it was, bad things were going to happen. It was just like Preacher Peters told her before she left Omaha. God would find a way to work good out of any of the bad things that happened. Sometimes it happened right away, and at other times, it took longer.

And here she was with John. She hadn't hoped for marriage when she stepped off that stagecoach. She certainly hadn't hoped for someone like John to come into her life. Oddly, she considered that if she had to go through everything she'd been through so she could be with John, she'd do it all over again. She took his hand in hers and squeezed it.

Aaron came back out. "Guy is going to help the doc, but it looks like you got his larynx," he told Eliza. "He'll live but he won't be talking ever again." He looked at John. "Are you ready to see the marshal?"

John nodded.

They waited until Aaron got on his horse and followed him to the jail where Ralph was doing some paperwork. He looked up as soon as the four of them entered. "Howdy," he called out. Then he blinked. "What's going on? John, is that blood on your shirt? Are you hurt?"

"No," Aaron quickly said. "But Troy is. Look, Troy just assaulted Eliza, and we came to find out what's to be done about it."

Ralph grabbed a chair from the vacant cell and put it in front of the other two chairs in front of his desk. He then motioned for Eliza to sit in his chair but she declined. She went to stand behind John as soon as he sat down. She needed to stay connected to him, and touch was the best way she could think to

do that. After she gave her story, John wrote his, and Shawn and Aaron supported what she and John reported.

Ralph leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "I always thought there was something off about that boy. Alright. There's no need for a judge in this case. He'll have to go to jail in Sioux Falls."

She relaxed. At least, he wouldn't be in their town anymore. She noted that John's shoulders also relaxed.

As they left the jail, a group of people had gathered outside. Eliza instinctively stepped closer to John. Aaron and Shawn stood to her other side.

The preacher stood in front of the group and came forward. "Morning, John, Eliza. We heard you were in town and wanted to see you. We hope that you will still want to be a part of this community. There was some talk that you might leave, but when trouble happens, we've got to stick together."

"That's right," Willy called out. "John, this place wouldn't be the same without you and Eliza. You do a lot of good in this town."

"He's right," the marshal said from behind them. "I think a lot of us didn't realize how much you do around here. I'm sorry for that."

"Me too," Greg Stevens added from the crowd. "I'm sorry, John. I owe you some lumber."

"We've learned our lesson, John," another man called out.

Charity spoke up. "And Eliza, after what you've been through...I mean, what with your uncle and all...I just can't imagine what you've been through. It would be wrong for us to turn our backs on you."

The crowd nodded and murmured their agreement.

The preacher turned back to them. "I hope you won't let the opinion of a few run you out of town."

Eliza didn't know what to say, but John smiled and shook the preacher's hand and that seemed to settle the matter. The

crowd surrounded them, and for the first time, Eliza felt like she was a part of the community instead of watching everyone from the outside. She glanced up as someone called her name and smiled and hugged Addy.

“Are you alright? I saw Troy leave for your place and sent his brothers after him,” Addy whispered. “Frank said he heard Troy talking to you that day you got your picture taken. We’ve been watching him.”

“Thank you, Addy. They got there in time.”

Addy looked relieved. “Good. I’m so glad. I’ve been praying hard for you.”

Eliza didn’t mind the tears that filled her eyes or stop herself from hugging her friend. Glancing up at the clear sky, she caught sight of the sun. It was the most beautiful shade of yellow she’d ever seen. Much better than yellow flowers. Maybe the time for sorrow had passed. Maybe this day was the beginning of the good that Preacher Peters had talked about. A new start. A time to wipe the slate clean.

Her eyes met John’s and he smiled at her. She returned his smile. Yes, everything was going to be good for now on, and they’d have the grace of the sun to light the way.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*



Christmas morning came and with it the wind howled and snow covered the ground. Eliza found that she loved winters in the southern Dakota territory. There was something magical about watching snowflakes fall down, so when she woke up early that morning, she decided to add more wood to the fireplace in the parlor.

Dawn had passed a good hour ago, so she could see the snow whirling in the wind. Wrapping the blanket around her shoulders, she stood in front of the window and smiled. The world contained simple joys that she'd long ago forgotten to savor. Being married to John reminded her that miracles still happened.

She heard John come into the room before she saw him. "It's a beautiful morning, don't you think?"

He walked over to her and kissed her. Then he pointed to the bedroom.

She laughed. "Don't you ever think of anything else?"

He crossed his arms and pretended he was shivering.

"Oh. You got cold without me next to you."

He nodded.

"We should get up anyway. It's almost mid-morning. Farmers have been up for hours by now."

Grimacing, he shook his head and motioned to the bedroom. Then, before she could say anything else, he picked her up and carried her back to bed.

"You are the most persistent man I've ever met. You do know that you're persistent, don't you?"

He shrugged as he gently placed her on the bed and tucked her in. Afterwards, he slipped under the covers, snuggled up to her, and closed his eyes.

She seriously doubted that he wanted to go back to sleep, and when she felt his hand lightly stroke her breast, a wry grin crossed her face. "So you had an ulterior motive for bringing me in here. I should be cooking breakfast. Aren't you hungry? You used up a lot of energy last night."

He kissed her.

Eliza wondered if he did that to shut her up, but if that was his intent, she didn't mind. It was a wonderful way to be told to quit talking. She closed her eyes and melted in his arms. He proceeded to make love to her, taking his time in bringing them both pleasure. And when they were satisfied, he drifted off to sleep.

Excited, she couldn't doze off, even if she woke up earlier than she usually did. It was Christmas. That afternoon, they had plans to go to Charity's party. As she imagined how nice it would be to spend time with friends, she remained in John's arms and watched the snow as it fluttered outside the bedroom window.

An hour passed by and she decided she couldn't lay still anymore. She quickly got up and put on her warmest dress and made a quick snack. She knew Charity would have enough food

prepared to feed an army of hungry men, so she didn't have to make a large breakfast—not since John had delayed her.

She glanced out the kitchen window. The snow had stopped but the sun had finally come out so the white ground sparkled. Humming, she went over to the freshly cut tree in the corner of the parlor and gave it some water. John had thought she was silly to decorate it, but to his credit, he humored her and helped her string popcorn and cranberries on the tree.

When she returned to the kitchen sink, he emerged from the bedroom. “Good morning again, sleepy head.”

To her surprise, he gestured for her to go back into the bedroom.

She placed a hand on her hip and shook her head. “I can't believe you. We have to leave in an hour.”

He pretended he was shivering.

“Oh no, you don't. Not again. I'll keep you warm in bed when we get back. Right now you need to get ready. I set out a couple of biscuits and honey to tide us over until we get to town. You do want to save your appetite. That Charity knows how to make the best food you've ever tasted. And who knows? You might eat so much that you will actually come back and go to sleep.”

He sighed but obediently went to the bedroom to get dressed for the day.

As soon as he returned, she grinned. “I hoped you would wear the same clothes you wore the day we met. You look handsome.”

He pointed to her and made a circle around his face.

“I'm pretty.”

Nodding, he made his way to the kitchen table and got ready to eat. Once they finished their snack, he got the horses and sleigh ready while she put on her coat.

She gathered the baby gift she planned to give Charity. Eliza glanced at the photograph of her son which remained on the

fireplace mantle next to the picture of her and John. "Merry Christmas," she whispered, hoping her son would have a good one with his parents. Taking a deep breath, she turned and left the house.

She smiled as John pulled the sleigh up to the porch. He leapt out and picked her up so he could carry her to the sleigh. She giggled, amused that he still did that. She reckoned it was so she wouldn't get her boots wet, but it reminded her of the first time he'd helped her into his wagon.

She sat close to him and set the gift in her lap. "Just look at the way the snow glistens on the trees. Isn't it pretty? That's my favorite thing about snow. It looks so pretty on tree branches." And so she rambled on.

Once in awhile, John glanced her way to let her know he was paying attention.

He no longer parked on the edge of town. Now he went through town and stopped the sleigh close to Charity's place. Music and laughter drifted from the house. John helped her down and she held onto him so she wouldn't slip on the patch of ice in their path.

Addy called out to them before they reached Charity's porch. She hurried over to them as Frank struggled to keep up with her. "Isn't it a gorgeous day? You know, we couldn't have asked for a better Christmas."

"It certainly is festive." Eliza studied the wreath and garland spread along Charity's porch. "She really goes all out for every social gathering, doesn't she?"

Addy giggled. "Maybe a little too much, but I guess we all have our quirks."

"It's good to see you two," Frank said. Turning to John, he added, "I hope Eliza can spare you for a good hour. We thought we'd enjoy a couple games of rummy." Glancing at Eliza and Addy, he smiled. "We don't want to get in the way of you women gabbing on."



Addy rolled her eyes. "You men can be just as bad, if not worse, than us."

"No truer words were ever said," Eliza agreed.

John shook his head at the women but gestured that he would join Frank when the men wanted to play cards. Then he made the sign for playing chess.

"I think we can spare a board or two of that game as well," Frank replied.

Willy walked up to them. "What are ya'll doin' outside? It's colder than the arctic out here." He rubbed his hands together.

"Oh, we're just saying hi," Addy replied.

"We can do that in the house, cain't we?" he asked.

She nudged him in the arm. "You're not anxious to get out of the cold. You want to see Daphne."

He blushed. "Maybe."

Eliza smiled. "You two are happy together." She didn't think it was possible but his face grew even redder.

"Yes. Well, I plan on askin' her somethin' important today."

"You're going to propose?" Addy squealed.

He held his finger to his lips.

She immediately lowered her voice. "I'm sorry. Your secret is safe with us."

"Are you going to stand out there all day or come in?" someone called out from the front door.

They looked over and saw Daphne waiting for them.

"We better hurry so the two lovebirds can be together," Addy told Eliza, her eyes twinkling.

Eliza had to admit she shared her friend's enthusiasm. She knew Daphne would say yes, and she realized that Daphne and Willy were a better match than Daphne and John would have been. And that was just as well too, considering she was married to John and all.

Frank groaned. "Come on, John. Let's go see what the men are up to before we get snared into talks of weddings, flowers and dresses."

"I like weddings," Addy argued. "They're romantic."

"I agree," Eliza said.

"What did I say?" Frank responded. "I'll never understand the appeal of women talk."

"Then be glad you're not a woman," Addy said.

"Believe me—" he kissed her cheek—"I am very happy to be a man because it means I get to be married to you."

John squeezed Eliza's hand and indicated that he agreed with Frank.

"I'm happy to be married to you too," Eliza replied.

John motioned that he would see her when it was time to eat and walked toward the house with Willy and Frank.

The women followed and joined Daphne in the parlor where Bethany played Christmas carols on the piano. Eliza placed her gift with the others on the piano and sat with her friends on the settee by the window. She glanced out the doorway of the parlor and saw that John was mingling with Frank, Willy, Aaron, Guy, and Shawn. Even Ralph came over and slapped John on the back. He said something and John's shoulders shook with laughter.

Eliza smiled to herself before turning her attention back to Addy and Daphne. This, she thought, was going to be the first of many wonderful Christmases to come.



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