

An Unlikely Place for Love

The Disguises of Kate Tanner

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For Aunt Mary who has been a source of great comfort
and joy over the years.
You are greatly appreciated.

This story takes place in June 1886.

Chapter 1

Kate Tanner felt awkward dressed in men's clothes, wearing the short haired black wig and black beard. The beard was itchy, but it did a good job of making her look masculine so she was determined to keep it on. Her brown pants and navy blue and green plaid shirt and white undershirt were loose on her which helped to hide her figure. She had difficulty breathing with the binding wrapped so tightly around her chest but it did hide her bosom. She pinned the brown hat on her head, hoping it would help keep her wig in place so the wind wouldn't blow it off. She breathed a sigh of relief as she got off the train. She was in a fairly small town. It would be isolated enough to make her difficult to find, but with her disguise, she was sure that Derek Robin and Dave Reinhart wouldn't recognize her if they happened to see her.

She walked into the post office in the small North Dakota town and scanned the job listings board. She needed to do work that would keep her safely out of town. She also had to do a job that would be suitable for a man.

"Good afternoon, sir," the post master greeted her.

She turned and nodded to the scrawny old man who was about five inches shorter than her 5'8" height. She began to speak but realized her voice sounded too high so she cleared her throat and spoke in a lower tone. "Good afternoon." She hoped she sounded

like a man. "I'm looking for work."

"You're not from here."

There's nothing like pointing out the obvious. "No, sir. I just hopped off the train. I come from Kentucky," she lied. "The town is a small one, similar to this one. I doubt you'd recognize the name if I told you what it was."

He nodded. "We don't get many newcomers wishing for work."

"Oh, I'm here for a short while, so I'm looking for temporary employment."

"Hmm...Let me think. There are some farms around here, and farmers typically hire for half a year." The man scanned through the job listings. "Uh huh, uh huh. Hmm..."

She forced herself not to roll her eyes. She was fully capable of reading through the listings. Deciding to ignore him for a moment, she did just that. She pointed to the opening for someone to help saw down trees. "What about this one?" she asked. It was safely out of town.

The man shook his head. "No offense, son, but you're not strong enough in the arms to handle that task. Sawing trees down is harder than it looks."

She sighed. He was probably right.

"Oh, this one will work for you." He picked up the small white card asking for a farmhand. "Chad Walker is a nice man. He just lost his wife a year ago. The poor man tries to act happy but I'm sure his wife's death hit him hard. Everyone thought she was a wonderful woman. Sadly, they weren't able to have children, so he's all by himself out there. He does have a couple of other farmhands but they aren't very reliable. Good work is hard to find. If you show up on time and do your job, you'll be a big help to him."

"What does a farmhand do?"

"Well, Chad has a lot of cattle, sheep and horses on his property, so you will be helping with the livestock."

That didn't sound like her idea of a good time. She hesitated.

"Chad is a good employer," the man continued. "He's fair and will give you a decent wage. Of course, his farm is further out of town and more difficult to reach. He's offering lodging and food."

If you would prefer being in town, then this won't do."

But it would be perfect for someone hiding from danger. "It sounds perfect. How do I get there?"

"Travis Richards can taxi you out there on his horse-drawn buggy."

"Alright. I'll see what I can do about getting that job. Where do I find Travis Richards?"

"He's currently at the bank. His buggy is right out front." He pointed to it.

She saw the building across the street. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate the help." She picked up her suitcase and left the post office. Looking both ways before she crossed the street, she quickly walked across it before Travis had time to hop on his buggy and go somewhere. She made it to his buggy just in time to stop him from urging his horse forward. "Sir!"

He turned his attention to her. "Do you need a ride?" He set the reins back down and jumped off the front seat of the buggy.

"Yes, I do. I'm applying for a job at Chad Walker's farm. Can you take me there?"

"Chad isn't exactly noted for welcoming strangers. You might have difficulty getting employment with him."

She shrugged. "We won't know until I meet him."

"I can't argue with that logic. Alright. As long as you can pay the fare, I'll take you out there but I won't leave until I verify you got the job, in case you need a ride back."

She wondered what kind of man Chad Walker was but knew she would find out soon enough. She paid the man and got into the buggy. She adjusted her shirt, hoping it really did hide her figure. It was loose and long enough. She only hoped it was convincing. The ride out to the farm took nearly an hour. There didn't seem to be anyone else nearby for miles. It was the ideal place to hide. *I have to get this job.* Whatever it took, she was determined to get it.

The scenery was so different from Virginia. A few trees dotted the landscape but for the most part, the plains were arrayed in different shades of green. The land seemed to go on forever, and the noonday sun showed several puffy white clouds dotting the clear blue sky. A wave of homesickness brought tears to her eyes but

she quickly brushed them aside. Men didn't cry, so she couldn't afford to cry when she was in disguise. She couldn't afford to think of what happened in Virginia right now. She would think about it later. Then, she would make her plan. *Justice must be done.*

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She settled her emotions rather quickly as she focused on slowly exhaling. *My name is Bob Ingram, and I'm a twenty-eight year old single man traveling the country and working odd jobs along the way. I can do this.* The postman and Travis believed she was a man. Surely, other people would too. She felt calm by the time she reached the farm. A two story white house was on her right and two large brown barns and a white building were on her left. She knew very little about farm life, so Bob would have to be new to this whole world. When the buggy stopped, she waited for Travis to open the door. Figuring it was masculine to take her own suitcase, she quickly grabbed it and exited the cab.

"Mr. Walker is a reserved man," Travis warned her. "He rarely goes into town since his wife passed away a little over a year ago."

She wondered why he felt the need to tell her this. It had nothing to do with being hired by him. She didn't care what kind of person he was as long as he gave her the job. She needed a place to hide out for awhile, not to socialize.

Travis led her to the barn. "Most likely, he'll be cleaning out the stalls this time of day. Since it's still early in June, the weather is cool enough to do hard work without needing frequent breaks. I see Tim Montgomery and Jeff Rod made it out today." He motioned to two men who couldn't have been older than thirty-five. They were checking on the sheep in the white building.

She noted that Chad seemed to take good care of his buildings. She had seen several worn down farm buildings while she was riding the train, so she was relieved that her hope-to-be employer was concerned with his things. After watching the men her father dealt with, she knew that the way they conducted their professional lives reflected how well they conducted their personal lives. From the farm's appearance, Chad was an orderly and detailed man. *He will make a good employer.*

When she and Travis reached the barn door, Travis called out to him: “Chad, I got a possible hire for you!”

“I’ll be down in a minute.” Chad called out from the loft in the barn. “The hail from two nights ago broke through this roof. I just noticed it this morning.”

“Take your time. We’ve got nowhere else to be.” Travis turned to her. “You’ll most likely be staying up there in that loft. He’s been preparing it for the person who is to work here.”

She frowned as she inspected the rest of the barn. Five horses stood quietly in their stalls while a handful of cats and about six hens ran around the ground. She would have to sleep with animals?

When Chad came down the ladder, she didn’t hide her surprise. She expected a widower to be an old man, but he was in his mid-thirties. He was 6’2” and slender with muscles that had developed due to years of farming. He had short light brown hair and a neatly trimmed goatee. He sighed. “I see the hens are out of their coop again.” He looked over at her. “You’re here for the job?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, using her deep masculine voice.

“I’ll tell you what,” he began as he flung the damp towel, he had used to soak up the remaining rain water, over his shoulder, “if you can gather all these hens and put them into their coop outside the barn door over there, you got yourself a job.”

Rounding up hens wasn’t her idea of a good time, but she was determined to get the job, so she started chasing them around the barn. While she did so, she could hear Travis and Chad talking.

Chad crossed his arms and told Travis, “I would fire Tim right on the spot if he wasn’t Georgia’s brother. You know how it is. If I upset him, then the rest of the family would be upset, and they would gather all their other relatives and friends on a rampage against me. Then my life would be impossible.”

“That’s the curse of living in a small community. Everyone knows each other’s business. It’s best to keep the peace,” the buggy driver agreed.

“I should never have left the big city.”

“Why don’t you just sell this place and go back?”

He shrugged. “There’s nothing to go back to. I burned all my

bridges a long time ago.”

She was getting frustrated chasing the stupid hens so she picked up a rake she found in the corner of the barn and threatened to run them down with it if they didn't go to the coop.

Chad and Travis chuckled.

“Obviously, you have no experience,” Chad said to her.

She stopped running and looked pointedly at him. “What I lack in experience, I make up for in drive and determination. Tell me what to do and I'll do it.”

“Put them in the coop one hen at a time.”

She realized that was the best course of action. It was amazing how she dismissed the easiest solution. *I hope that doesn't mean I should have stayed in Virginia.* Pushing aside her thoughts of the past, she chased one hen and succeeded in getting it into the coop. *One down, five to go.*

“So, where did you find this one?” Chad motioned to her but asked Travis the question.

“He found me,” Travis replied. “I came out of the bank when he approached me about the job posting you had in the post office.”

“He's not from here.”

“No, he's not. He's got a suitcase which he left by the barn door.” He pointed to the brown piece of luggage resting on the opposite door from where the coop was. “He probably came off the train.”

She managed to put two more hens into the coop. She was glad the beard was sticking firmly to her face. Her sister-in-law was right that the glue was resistant to sweat.

“Someone new might be a nice change of pace,” she heard Chad comment. He called out to her, “Where are you from?”

“Kentucky,” she replied as she chased another hen into the coop. *Four down, one to go.* Getting hens to behave wasn't as easy as it looked.

“Why are you here?”

Did he really have to ask her all these questions when she was working? “I wish to see the country.”

“So you just do odd jobs while you travel around?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How long do you plan to stay here?”

She was busy cornering the hen so she didn't answer right away. She picked up a stick from the ground and tapped the hen so that it ran to the coop. When she finally got it safely in the cage, she breathed a sigh of relief and dropped the stick. She walked over to the men and looked at Chad. “I'm going to stay here for as long as I want to.”

“So I can wake up one morning and find you gone? That doesn't sound like a good employee.”

“Well, I can't tell what the future is going to bring.” *Especially my future, considering I may not have one much longer.*

“I'm not going to hire you then.” He turned from her and walked to the ladder.

“Wait! You said if I got all the hens into the coop, then I would get the job. You didn't say anything about the length of my stay here.”

He turned back to her. “I have to be able to rely on you to get the jobs done around here that I'll need you to do.”

“Considering the fact that you keep Tim around, I am surprised you put any standards on your employees.”

“What?” He seemed offended by her comment.

“I heard you talking to Travis. Tim apparently doesn't do his job very well, but you keep him on as a farmhand. I guarantee you that I will work harder than him. I have a great work ethic. You might have to teach me a thing or two but I'm a quick learner. I took care of the hens and made sure the latch was secure on the door. They won't be escaping again unless you want them to.”

“Can you give me an idea of how long I can expect you to stay here?”

She thought for a moment. “I can safely say a month for sure. Any longer than that is questionable.” She could tell he was ready to say no again so she added, “Look, all I ask for is lodging and food. You don't have to pay me. I just want the experience of being in North Dakota.”

“In the meantime, you can still leave the job posting at the post office,” Travis reasoned.

“Very well. You can have the job, but I need to know before

you leave so I can prepare to take over your duties,” Chad responded.

“I’ll tell you before I leave.” Whether that involved writing a note or speaking to him, it didn’t matter. If Dave and Derek found her, she would have to hightail it out of town.

“You’ll sleep up in that loft,” he notified her.

She followed his gaze to the loft he had been working on before she arrived.

“Breakfast is at six, lunch is at eleven and dinner is at five,” he instructed. “I don’t make anything fancy, just oatmeal, sandwiches, bean soup, grits and stew. Sometimes I make eggs and bacon but that’s not often. I’m a farmer, not a cook, and since I can’t afford to pay a woman to cook, I make what I can for my farmhands. Now, Tim and Jeff live in town, and they bring their horses in. Sam Montgomery comes in whenever he pleases.”

“Tim and Sam are brothers,” Travis informed her.

“And they figure they can do anything they want,” she reflected.

Chad didn’t seem happy with her analysis.

She shrugged. “You do not need to worry about me. I’m not afraid of hard work.”

“You are unusually perceptive,” Chad noted.

“It’s a gift and a curse.”

“Anyway, we can take your suitcase up to the loft. There is a river down in that direction.” He pointed north. “It is about a mile from here and that will be where you will bathe.”

She cringed. She had hoped for an actual bathtub.

“Of course, you can always use the metal tub in that corner,” he continued. “All you need to do is drag the water from the well and dump it in there. The water will be cooler than the river water but it’s manageable.”

Neither option appealed to her. She missed the life she was accustomed to but realized a bath in unfavorable conditions was better than death. She simply nodded. She would make the best of the situation.

“Congratulations,” Travis told her. “No offense, Chad, but I honestly didn’t think you’d hire him.”

“Why not? He can’t be worse than who I already got working for me.”

“True.” Travis nodded to them and left.

She walked back to her suitcase.

“So, what do I call you?” Chad asked her.

“Bob Ingram is my name. My friends call me Billy.”

“Alright, Bob. I’ll take your suitcase for you and take it up to the loft. I have to finish up with the repairs but it’ll be ready by tonight.”

She noticed that he intentionally used her formal fake name. *He’s not a friendly fellow.* “What should I do now, Chad?”

He glared at her. “Let’s get one thing straight. I’m your employer. You are my subordinate. You will address me as Mr. Walker or sir. You will not call me by my first name.”

“Are you this delightful with everyone?” She said it jokingly but he wasn’t amused.

“I don’t need a comedian. I need a farmhand. Should I send you back to town?”

“Why do I have the feeling you don’t talk to the other farmhands this way?” She frowned at him.

“I don’t have to explain anything to you.” He turned away from her and took her suitcase up the ladder.

“I’m sorry to hear about your deceased wife,” she said.

He ignored her and continued climbing the steps.

He’s a real joy to be with, she sarcastically thought. She shook her head. *The poor woman is probably better off.* She waited for him to come back down so he could tell her what to do next, but he peered over the ledge at her.

“Do you want to check out the loft or not?” he asked.

“Alright, sir,” she said and climbed the ladder. As soon as she was at the top, she inspected her temporary quarters. She considered that it was the perfect hiding place, should she need it.

“I’ll get some blankets and a pillow to put out here, and this trunk can hold your things in it.” He set the suitcase next to the trunk. “I can put some hay up here so it’ll be more comfortable. I realize the wood isn’t very comfortable to lay on.”

She was surprised he seemed concerned about her comfort.

His formal manner and previous words to her gave her the impression that he didn't care about anyone. "Sounds great, sir," she nodded. "Where's the outhouse?"

He pointed down the field to the wooden outhouse several feet from the horses' fence. "It's a little further from the house and barn than is typical but Georgia was very particular about certain things."

She raised her eyebrow. "I reckon you're not too upset that she's gone."

He scowled at her. "My personal life is my business. Don't go snooping into it."

"Fine. As long as you don't go snooping into mine."

"You got yourself a deal. Now let's get to work."

She followed him down the ladder and waited for his instructions.

"I have to get lunch ready. Can you ride a horse?" he asked.

"Sure can. I got great horsemanship." *Thanks to my hours of showing off my horse in competitions.* She did miss her mare, Flash.

"Good. You can ride Reliable over here to the fields and check on the cattle. If any of the cattle are outside the fence or stuck in a ditch, can you get it back to safety?"

"No."

He sighed. "I'll tell you what. Check the cattle and let me know if there are any that are in trouble. I'll take care of them at that time."

She nodded.

"Can you saddle up the horse?" he wondered.

"Yes, I can do that. I'm not completely incompetent."

"When you're done, come into the house and get a sandwich."

"You got it, boss." She hid her grin as he stopped himself from rolling his eyes. *You really need to lighten up, pal.* She went over to Reliable and got him ready for the ride into the fields while Chad went to the house.

* * * * *

By the time she was done checking on the cattle, nearly an hour had passed. She was surprised that Chad owned so much land. She enjoyed riding Reliable. The horse was probably the easiest one to ride out of Chad's other two horses, which was why he told her to ride it, but she could handle more difficult horses. When she went into the house, she noticed that the other two farmhands, Tim and Jeff, sat at the round kitchen table while Chad was nowhere in sight.

So much for introductions. Apparently, Chad wasn't interested in making sure his farmhands got along. Little did he realize that she easily made friends.

"Good afternoon, men," she greeted the two men who were eating some sandwiches and drinking some milk. "I see I scared the boss off," she joked.

They chuckled.

The brunette shook her extended hand. "I'm Jeff. This is Tim," he motioned to the black haired man who wore a mustache.

She shook Tim's hand as well. She wasn't overly impressed with either of them. They had a certain look about them that made her weary of them. She put on a smile and pretended that she was happy to meet them.

"Chad doesn't hang around during lunch," Jeff informed her. "Your sandwich and milk are on the counter."

She nodded and grabbed the food. She was famished but forced herself not to wolf her meal down. Instead, she sat down and watched the way they ate the food and imitated their mannerisms. Her upbringing was to act like a proper lady, but she knew it wouldn't be appropriate to eat that way if they were to believe she was a man. "Where does the boss hang out while you eat?" She took a bite of the sandwich and had to admit that it was good.

"Chad is making you call him 'boss'?" Tim asked.

"No. He wants me to call him Mr. Walker or sir. He made it clear that I am not to refer to him by his first name."

He shook his head. "Well, we're family with him. I am Georgia's younger brother, and Jeff is our cousin."

"Chad usually eats before we do," Jeff said. "He works all the time. But ever since Georgia died, he's stuck mostly to himself. I

suppose he still hasn't gotten over her death."

"Georgia was a good woman. She was the center of his world. He didn't go anywhere without her."

She glanced around the kitchen. It was free of clutter but there was no indication a woman had ever lived there. "How long was he married?"

"Almost ten years."

"Why aren't there any pictures of her hanging on the wall or any other indication that she lived here? She did live here, didn't she?"

"Of course, she did. They were inseparable. He took her death hard. He said he couldn't bear to be reminded of her death so he put all her things away after the funeral."

That's odd. If Kate had been married for ten years, she would want to remember her husband.

"So what's your name?" Jeff asked her.

"Bob, but my friends call me Billy," she replied.

"Good to meet you, Billy."

"You'll fit in just fine," Tim agreed.

"I just got hired this morning," she told them. "I am out seeking adventure all across America. My goal is to see every state and spend at least a month working there. I started out in Kentucky and worked my way over twenty-two states until I got here. So, what is there to do in this town?" She figured the sooner she told them a little about herself, the sooner she could ward off any awkward questions. People seemed to be content when a stranger offered up some information about himself before they had to ask about him. She finished her lunch while they talked.

"You landed in a small town, so if you're looking for big city fun, you came to the wrong place," Jeff said. "However, we do manage to have some entertainment. The church potlucks are a big hit, but we prefer going to the bar. Lots of beer and women."

"Alright!" she cheered, realizing she would fit in easier if she showed them they shared a common interest. It was typical that a man would like women and beer.

"We also have horse races," Tim spoke up. "Are you any good on a horse?"

“I’m the best there is.” She knew bragging would be another popular characteristic since it would show them that she wasn’t afraid of a challenge. “Got a race coming up?”

“Actually, we do. You should come out to the fairgrounds this Saturday.”

“Do you think the boss will let me borrow a horse?”

“Sure. Chad’s easy. He does anything we want.”

She wondered about the comment. *Perhaps that’s why they can work whenever and however they want to.* “He made it clear to me that he’s the one in charge and I am to take his orders.”

“Oh, he’s so funny, acting all tough with you. It must be because you’re a newcomer. Seriously, he’s like a big old dog, harmless and faithful. Don’t mind him. He may act rough, but he’s not.”

“If he gives you any problems, come to us and we’ll help you out,” Jeff offered.

“Thanks, man, but I got it covered,” she replied. “I can handle myself just fine.”

“You’re probably right. So, are you coming to the horse races? We’d love to see how good you are with a horse.” Jeff finished his milk.

“I’ll be there. But if I can’t borrow a horse from Chad, then can I borrow one of yours?”

“Sure.”

She was looking forward to riding a horse in a race. She was competitive by nature and combining her love of horse riding with her desire to win was just the thing she enjoyed.

“We’d better get back to the shed,” Jeff remarked.

Just as Tim and Jeff stood up, Chad entered the house and walked into the kitchen.

“Speak of the devil,” Tim grinned. “Why didn’t you tell us you hired Billy here?”

“I figured that you would meet him soon enough,” he said as he placed the pail of milk on the counter.

“He’s going to borrow one of your horses for the horse race on Saturday.”

Her jaw dropped.

Chad loudly sighed. "I don't recall being asked if he could do that."

"Oh come on, Chad. Billy's new and it would be fun to see what he's like on a horse."

"Besides, what else have you got going on this Saturday that is so important you can't spare your new hired hand?" Jeff added.

"Give him one of your horses since you like him so much." Chad didn't look at them during any part of the conversation.

"We know you miss Georgia, but do you really have to make everyone around you suffer?"

"If he needs me here to work during that time, then I should work," she quickly inserted. She could tell that Chad didn't care much for either Jeff or Tim. The last thing she needed was to get fired because he was having trouble with them because of her.

Chad poured the milk from the pail into a couple of glass containers. "Alright. Bob can borrow Reliable or Buck, but Star is off-limits."

"Star was Georgia's horse," Tim commented. "She loved that animal."

Chad finished filling the glass bottles and took them to the basement.

"He can't bear to see Georgia's horse with anyone," Tim continued. "I guess it's too painful for him yet."

She watched as Tim and Jeff walked out of the house. She frowned. Why would he keep Georgia's horse but nothing else that would remind him of his departed wife? Something was wrong. She wasn't sure if it was a wise idea to pursue her questions regarding Chad and Georgia or not. The last time she investigated a strange situation, she got involved in a dangerous predicament that led to her running from Dave and Derek. *Let sleeping dogs lie. Whatever happened in Chad's past and how he's reacting to it now is not my concern. I'm here to work until Dave and Derek are safely behind bars.*

She stood up and collected her plate and glass, along with the ones that Tim and Jeff left, and put them in the kitchen sink. She didn't need too much discernment to recognize that Tim and Jeff walked all over Chad, and even if her employer was aloof, he still

deserved some amount of respect. After all, he did hire her without knowing anything about her, except that she came from Kentucky and wanted to check out the country. Those were lies of course. She knew she had to keep her secrets to herself until it was safe to return to Virginia. The less anyone knew about her situation, the better. She wasn't going to drag anyone else into the web she was caught in.

Chad walked up the basement steps that led into the kitchen. He blinked in surprise when he saw her. "You don't have to wash the dishes. I can do those."

"I was bored," she shrugged. "Do you mind that I'm doing them?"

"No, I guess not."

But he's surprised. She didn't wish to get off on the wrong foot with him since she would be working under him for at least a month, so she decided to clear the air. "I don't have to go to the horse race. It wasn't my idea to insist on taking one of your horses."

"I've known Tim and Jeff for a long time. I understand what happened." He grabbed a toolbox from under the kitchen sink.

She shouldn't have been startled that he was right next to her, but she worried if he got too close he might discover her true identity.

"I'm alright with your taking Reliable or Buck on Saturday, but I recommend Reliable if you're looking for speed." He closed the cabinet door and stood up. "Just remember to stay away from Star."

Of course, she had to wonder why, but he left the house before she could ask. She knew he wasn't going to answer that question so she remained quiet. Chad was a secretive person, and he wasn't one to open up to anyone. However, she wasn't exactly an open book either. She had her own secrets to hide. So, as long as he could respect her secrets, she could respect his. She finished washing the dishes and went back outside.

She found Chad finishing his work on the loft roof. "What do you want me to do now?" she yelled up at him.

He glanced down at her. "I could use someone to paint the

sheep fence. A can of white paint is in the shed which is in that direction. You can find the can on the top shelf. You're tall enough to reach it without any problems."

"I'll get right on it." She noted that he looked shocked as she left the barn. *Didn't he expect me to actually work?* She shrugged. It wasn't any of her business. Her job was to do whatever he told her to do.

Chapter 2

Chad wasn't sure what to think of his new farmhand. When Bob actually washed the dishes, he couldn't believe it. None of his employees ever showed initiative. Then again, Bob wasn't related to him, even if it was through marriage. He dragged a pile of hay to the loft and spread it out. Living in a small town was a blessing and a curse. On one hand, it was nice to know who people were, but on the other hand, since everyone did know him, it made it that much more difficult to forget parts of his past that he wanted to forget.

Bob had just arrived and he already knew that Chad had a wife who died last year. It was irritating to be reminded of Georgia. He wanted to forget all about her. The woman had made his life a living nightmare. Her family wasn't any better but at least they left at four in the afternoon and he had the rest of the day to enjoy his life. Her brothers, Sam and Tim, and cousin, Jeff, were horrible employees, so he was relieved whenever they decided not to show up for the day. He didn't care to have them around but knew he had to in order to keep peace with the people in town. This was his only home and he couldn't afford to upset anyone. *It's not like I can go back to California.* His parents disowned him when he married Georgia, and they made it clear that he was not welcome back.

He still recalled the day of Georgia's funeral:

He stood in the cemetery surrounded by her family and friends, which made up a third of the town. She had many friends, so no one would ever guess what she was really like. He wore a dark suit to follow in line with everyone else. He learned long ago that it was easier to do what they wanted him to do than to fight them. They were too many in number to resist.

The late March afternoon was bleak. Some rain had fallen the night before, and the sky was dark gray. He didn't listen to the preacher who discussed Georgia's virtues. He just stared down at the hole in the ground which would house the ebony casket. Her family spared no expense in saying good-bye to her. They hadn't spared any expense in taking care of her while she was alive either. While her mother and younger sister cried noisily into their handkerchiefs, her two younger brothers and father silently stood together. Chad was off to the side. He was never officially a part of their family. He was regarded as an outsider but that was fine with him. He cared as much for them as he had for her.

"She looked so lovely during the service in her gown," her mother whispered to her sister. "What a shame for such a lovely woman to die on her thirty-fourth birthday. The world is a bleaker place without her."

Chad closed his eyes so he wouldn't roll them.

"Poor Chad," her sister whispered to her mother. "He was so devoted to her."

He forced himself to not look at his pocket watch. When was the service going to be over?

"And so we ask the Father to welcome Georgia Walker into His Kingdom," the preacher concluded as he closed his Bible. "Through Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen."

Finally. Chad breathed a sigh of relief. How could she fool so many people? He was glad his ten year prison term was over.

"Will you be coming to our house?" her mother asked him once the people began to disperse. "We are going to honor her memory by telling stories of how she improved our lives."

"No, I don't feel up to it," he replied. He couldn't think of a

single way that she had improved his life, though he would never tell anyone else that.

“Oh, come with us,” her sister insisted. The twenty-three year old woman brushed her black straight hair with her hands. “You were closer to Georgia than anyone else.”

“Lacy is right,” Sam, the 5’7” man, added. “You need to be with family at a time like this.”

He knew it wouldn’t do any good to argue with them. They would find a way to make him feel guilty if he didn’t comply with them. At least, he wouldn’t have to pretend to adore Georgia with her right there watching him. He reluctantly nodded and followed them to her parents’ house.

There was a large potluck dinner for everyone who decided to attend the dinner. Her parents were determined to make it a celebration of her life, but he thought of it as a celebration of her death and ate until he was full. The Montgomery women did know how to cook good meals.

“You must have been overwhelmed with grief out there by yourself,” her mother consoled him as she watched him finish his last piece of pie. “I bet you haven’t had anything to eat ever since the accident.”

“The accident was a shock,” he admitted. *It was a good shock.*

“We are going to tell stories to honor her life,” Tim told him. “Finish up and join us outside on the patio.”

He did as instructed and walked out to the patio. He noted that the sun had finally peered through the clouds and showed off a colorful display of pinks, yellows and blues as it set for the night. *After the long gray day has passed, hope is on the horizon.* He liked the thought. Now that she was dead, he could enjoy life again. He sat next to Sam and the family dog. He crossed his arms. *I’ll be home soon.*

Her father stood up. “I’ll start. Georgia Montgomery was a sweet girl. Born and raised in this town, she endeared many people to her with her natural joy and goodwill. She cared deeply for others. I recall a time when she was thirteen. Lacy had just turned two, and though Lacy was years younger than her, Georgia watched over her as if she were already her best friend. One time

when Lacy fell and scraped her knee, Georgia took care of the wound without even mentioning it to anyone. Had Lacy not told us what happened, we never would have known about it. Georgia was humble. She did good things for others but refrained from bragging about it.”

No one knows that she's the one who threw a rock at Lacy and caused the wound, and Lacy was too young to remember what really happened. Chad sighed.

He sat down and motioned for her mother to go next. Her mother dabbed the tears from her eyes. “Georgia was a wonderful girl. She was eager to chip in and help out with the meals. She was the oldest child and delighted in helping me cook for her siblings and father. Her attempts weren't always a success but she had a big heart.”

She intentionally put nasty things in her dishes to watch people gag on her foods. She thought it was one big joke. Chad couldn't believe no one ever caught onto what she was really like.

Lacy stood up next. “She was good about protecting me. I almost accepted Joshua Stein's marriage proposal, but she caught him kissing another woman and warned me about him. I had no idea he was even involved with someone else, for he never mentioned it.”

Considering the fact that Georgia was the other woman, Chad wasn't surprised that she didn't reveal the truth about the situation. Georgia had cornered Joshua and purposely got him drunk enough so he would kiss her. Georgia had disguised herself as another woman, so he never knew who it was who kissed him that night. Georgia didn't want to see Lacy married in case Lacy had children and became the favorite girl in the family. *It's just as well. Joshua's better off with Regina. Regina's a good woman and has made him happy.* Marriage could be a beautiful institution if the man chose the right woman, which is where Chad had messed up.

As her family and friends made their rounds with stories praising Georgia, he tuned them out. Everything they said was a bunch of garbage because none of it reflected how she really was. Finally, it was his turn. He slowly stood up and thought of what he could say that was the truth and nice.

“I'll never forget how we met,” he began. “Georgia was on a

trip with her friends to California, and I volunteered my weekends to be a lifeguard at the beach. She was out in the ocean, and when she cried out for help, I went out to the water and saved her.” She hadn’t really been drowning, but he didn’t find that out until years later. “I thought she was pretty and kind, so I spent the summer courting her. She was a good friend and I learned that we had a lot in common.” *Because she lied and told me what I wanted to hear.* “When it was time for her to return to North Dakota, I couldn’t bear the thought of being without her, so I asked her to marry me, and she said yes. She insisted that she had to be with her family, so I decided to go with her.” *She ruined my life and probably a lot of other lives too. Thank God she’s gone.*

He sat down.

“One thing is for sure,” her mother began, “life just isn’t the same without her.”

He nodded his agreement with that statement. “We’ll never forget her.”

Her mother looked at him sympathetically. “You loved her greatly. I’m sure our grief is nothing compared to yours.”

He decided not to respond. Instead, he stood up with the other people, said good-bye to her immediate family and quietly slipped out before anyone could stop him. When he got home, the first thing he did was tear down her pictures that she had put all over the house. Then he gathered everything that reminded him of her and threw them outside on a pile in the yard. He took everything he could find and burned it. The only thing he kept was Star.

Breaking out of his thoughts of the past, Chad spread the blankets over the hay. He set the pillow in the middle. Bob could figure out how he wanted to sleep. Chad picked up his toolbox and climbed down the ladder. He was satisfied with the repair on the barn roof.

He turned his attention to Star. He loved that animal. He saw the accident from a distance. Georgia was racing through the fields on her horse. He didn’t know what spooked the animal but he saw her fling Georgia off of her back. Georgia flew through the air and her head hit the post of the horse fence. He didn’t even

think. He ran to her. He still recalled how scared he had been. *But I was afraid she survived the fall.* He wasn't a doctor but he could tell just by looking at her that it wasn't good. He checked her pulse and was overwhelmed by the relief he experienced when he realized she was dead. Later he learned that the fall broke her neck. Tim and Sam had been there that day and saw it happen as well. They were upset she died, so he put on the mask he was familiar with wearing and acted like her adoring husband. He was good at pretending to be something he wasn't. *Years of misery will do that to a man.*

He took a carrot from the food pile and fed Star the treat. He patted the horse's nose and silently thanked the animal for saving his life. Reliable and Buck snorted in protest. He grinned and gave them a carrot too. The other two horses belonged to Tim and Jeff, so he ignored them.

When he left the barn, he marveled that Bob was painting the fence as he had asked. Tim and Jeff were talking to Bob, and Bob seemed to be listening but he kept his focus on his work. *I wish Tim and Jeff would do the same.* He shook his head in aggravation as he walked over to them.

"We can bring out a copy of the newspaper for you," Tim told Bob.

"It does cover national news, correct?" Bob asked, never taking his eyes off the fence.

"Sure. We might be a small town but we do keep current on what's going on."

"I do miss reading the paper."

"Why did you pick this place to stay for awhile?" Jeff wondered.

Bob shrugged. "I don't know. I saw the train pull up to the stop and decided to hop off."

I don't believe him. He's hiding something. Chad pushed the thought aside. He didn't get a bad gut feeling about the bearded man, and he knew he was stronger than Bob in case Bob tried to attack him. Being so far out of town, Bob didn't have easy access to steal anything. Not that Chad had anything of value except the land, but no one could steal that.

“Is everything ready for shearing the sheep tomorrow?” Chad blandly asked Tim and Jeff.

Tim glanced up at him. “There’s no hurry on that. A couple more days of wearing those wooly coats won’t hurt the sheep.”

His frown deepened.

“Besides, we got to welcome Billy here to town,” Tim continued. “It was rude for you not to introduce us.”

“Really, what would Georgia think?” Jeff agreed.

“I don’t care because she’s not here,” Chad replied.

“We know you miss her but you should still be polite.”

He gritted his teeth.

“I have a great idea,” Bob spoke up. “The painting will go three times as fast if you fellows will pitch in and help.”

Tim and Jeff hesitated.

“It’ll be a good excuse to talk,” he added.

Tim nodded. “And it’s not too hot out. Alright. Where are the brushes and paint?”

Chad stopped himself from shaking his head in amazement. How did Bob win them over so easily?

“Over there in the shed,” Bob motioned to the building. “It’s all on the top shelf. You fellows think you’re tall enough to reach them?” He smiled as he said it so they knew he was joking.

Both men were two inches shorter than Bob.

“We’ll be back,” Jeff grinned.

After he and Tim went to the shed, Bob looked at him. “I’ll see what I can do about getting them motivated to get the stuff ready for shearing sheep. Tell me, what is involved with that anyway?”

“I don’t need your help, Bob,” Chad bitterly stated.

“Could’ve fooled me,” he muttered under his breath.

“What?” Chad glared at the newcomer.

“Nothing. I’m just trying to make your life easier.”

“Then stay out of my business.” He angrily walked into the house and shoved the toolbox under the kitchen sink. He stood up and stared out the window as Tim and Jeff started painting the fence with Bob. They were laughing. How did Bob do it? What was his secret to getting Tim and Jeff to actually work?

* * * * *

That night for dinner, Chad made beef stew. It wasn't the best meal he ever made, but it was edible. He hesitated to eat at the table with Bob but decided it might be a good idea to feel out the newcomer so he could see whether or not he should keep a close eye on him. He called Bob in from the shed. He had to admit that he was impressed that Bob not only began painting the fence as soon as he told him to do it and talked Tim and Jeff into helping him, but Bob also continued to paint the fence after Tim and Jeff left. He had completed half the fence. Chad knew that if he had to rely on Tim and Jeff to paint it, the fence would take a week to complete. Bob would easily have it done by noon the next day. He had to admit that Bob was a hard worker.

When Bob came into the house, Chad handed him a bowl of stew, a spoon, and a glass of milk.

"How chilly does it get here at night?" Bob asked as he sat down at the table.

"You'll need all the blankets I set out for you," he replied. "I'm not sure what the temperature will be, but June is a nice time of year. The summer nights will be cool as well, though not as chilly as tonight will be. The temperature was a little cooler than usual today." He sat across from Bob with his own bowl and looked at him.

Bob nodded and started eating his stew.

Why doesn't he look me in the eye? Bob had surprisingly clear blue eyes. It almost seemed like a shame to waste such an eye color on a man. He pushed the thought aside. "You came here from Kentucky?"

"Yes."

"Did you leave any family behind?"

Bob looked startled by the question. He stopped eating the stew and finally looked him in the eye. "Does that matter?"

He shrugged. "Not really. I'm just making conversation."

"It doesn't have anything to do with my job performance. Have I met up to your standards?"

"You did fine." *You actually did better than fine. You ex-*

ceeded my standards. He decided on another question. “What state do you plan to visit after you’re done with this one?”

“I hadn’t thought about it. I pretty much like to live one day at a time.”

“Still, you have to make some kind of plan. You must have some idea of where you’ll go next.”

Bob took a deep breath and set the spoon down. He tapped his fingers on the table.

“You have small hands for a man,” Chad noted.

He stopped tapping his fingers and quickly put his hands under the table. *That hit a nerve.*

“Mr. Walker, I do not wish to upset you since I would like to keep my job, but my past and future are my business. As long as I do what you ask, I don’t see how my personal life is of any significance to you.”

“I just like to know something about my employees. It seems that you are more willing to discuss your life with Tim and Jeff than you are with me.”

“They also told me about your deceased wife, which is something you haven’t done. So, I’ll make a deal with you. If you tell me about your personal life, I’ll tell you about mine.”

He had to admit that Bob could handle difficult situations with surprising ease. “Alright. You win. The only thing I’ll say about my dead wife is that she’s dead. End of story.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I hope my future spouse leaves me a better legacy than that.”

Chad quickly finished his stew and got up to wash his dishes. He didn’t care to have a discussion with Bob anymore. So his new employee was a smart alec. He didn’t have to like the man to benefit from his work.

To his dismay, Bob brought his empty bowl to him. “When do the sheep have to be sheared?”

“By Friday at three. That’s when Tyler Patrick is coming for the wool.”

“How long does it take to get the wool together for him?”

He considered the fact that it was Tuesday. “It depends on how many people are here and how well everyone does their job.

It can take a full day if everyone does their part. Judging from your performance today, I'd say that we are guaranteed to have the wool on time if we start tomorrow after lunch. If Tim, Sam and Jeff do half the work, we'll make it by Thursday."

"Do you mind if I ask what got you into farming? Were you born into it?"

"No. I started out as an accountant in California. I came here to be near my wife's family. She was on vacation when we met, and I wanted to be with her so I left California to marry her. She was very close to her family and couldn't live far from them."

"That's sweet."

He looked at Bob. That didn't exactly sound like something a man would say.

Bob's eyes grew wide, as if he realized his error. "Uh...That's what my sister would say. I miss her sometimes."

The explanation sounded plausible so Chad decided to accept it.

"So, did her family own this farm?" Bob asked.

"Her grandfather owned this place. He died two months after we got married, and she wanted to come out here. Her brothers didn't want the headache of running a farm, so they didn't argue with me taking over it."

"Would you rather be an accountant?"

"Yes."

"So why do you stay here?"

"I have nowhere else to go."

"Can't you go back to California?"

"No. And that's all I care to say about it."

Bob nodded. "Well, I think it was a good gesture to leave everything behind for her. I can only hope my future spouse will do the same for me someday."

"So you plan to take your future wife on your travels through America?"

"I don't intend to travel forever. But when I finally settle down, I am hoping she'll come with me."

"Just make sure she's worth taking along." If he could steer Bob in the right direction of finding a good woman, then he would have done more than his part to help another man avoid a terrible

mistake. "Not everyone is what they seem."

Bob glanced out the window.

He's nervous about something, but he won't tell me what, nor is it my business. "Anyway, I'm going to take care of the horses for the night. You can take that lantern over there on the counter for some light."

He hesitated to go to the lantern.

"What's wrong?"

Bob turned back to him. "I forgot to bring anything to read and the night will most likely get long out in the loft by myself. Do you have any books to read? It doesn't matter what kind they are."

"I have some books you can read. Follow me." He led the man to the living room which was sparsely furnished with a couch, two chairs and a bookcase. The bookcase was filled with a variety of literature.

"You love to read?" Bob asked.

"It passes the evenings."

Bob picked out several fiction titles.

"Sherlock Holmes?" Chad noted.

"Among a couple other mysteries," he added.

"Well, try not to let the coyotes disturb you too much."

His eyes grew wide and his voice sounded oddly feminine when he gasped, "Coyotes?" He blinked and shook his head. In a deeper voice, he explained, "I didn't realize there were such animals out here."

"You'll be fine in the loft. If it makes you feel any better, you can take the gun over by the front door."

"I'm not familiar with guns."

"You're kidding? You make it a point to travel alone across the country and you don't know how to protect yourself against wild animals or Indians?"

He shrugged. "What can I say? I'm an optimist."

"Apparently." *And you're very odd.*

"Since I have my arms full of books, I'll just walk out with you to the barn and head up to the loft for the night." He paused. "Coyotes don't climb ladders, do they?"

"No. You have a lot to learn about farming, Bob. You're

clearly out of your element here.”

“You can say that again.”

Chad suspected that there was a hidden meaning in Bob’s words but decided not to mention it. He quietly led Bob out to the barn, carrying a lantern with him.

“Aren’t you worried about coyotes?” Bob asked him, struggling to keep up with his fast pace.

“No. They tend to stay safely away during daylight.”

“That’s a relief.”

When they reached the barn, he shook his head in mild amusement as Bob tried to carry his armful of books up the ladder. He kept dropping a couple of books, went back down, picked them off the ground and tried climbing the ladder again. Chad fed the three horses. Then he went to take care of the hens and sheep. He returned to the barn to find that Bob left a couple of books on the ground and was up in the loft placing the other books on the blankets. Despite his best intention, Chad chuckled to himself. Bob wasn’t very graceful but he wasn’t so bad. Chad picked up the remaining books and took them and the lantern up the ladder.

“Here you go,” Chad told him.

Bob quickly turned around, startled to hear Chad right behind him.

“Relax. Nothing’s going to harm you up here. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He set the books and lantern down and climbed back down the ladder. Then he headed back to the house where he would spend the night reading.

* * * * *

The next day, Jeff and Tim brought Sam out with them to the farm. Chad realized he shouldn’t have been surprised. After all, Sam would want to check out Bob, but he worried that the three men would distract Bob from his tasks. To his shock, Bob had managed to talk all of them into helping him finish painting the fence with him. Then they came up to him about cutting the sheep’s wool. Chad couldn’t believe it. Bob hadn’t threatened the men at all, so how did he get them to work? *Is it because Bob*

wasn't their brother-in law? Did being married to Georgia automatically qualify me to be a doormat?

Even more surprising was the fact that Bob got along with them. Never once in the ten years of his marriage to Georgia did Chad ever fit in with their tight group, but Bob showed up and within a day, he was talking to them as if they had known each other for years. *Perhaps Bob could have put Georgia in line and made her a lovable woman.* There was definitely something about Bob that attracted people to him.

When lunch hour came, Chad went to milk the cows and came back with the fresh milk. When he entered the house, he heard a roar of laughter coming from the kitchen.

"Did that really happen?" Sam asked.

"Yes, it did," Bob assured him. "And if I'm lying, there's not a tattoo on my butt. But you can't see it. Only the ladies can."

"What a riot!" Tim laughed. "Who would have thought to pull such a prank?"

"Well, my brother doesn't mind doing unusual things," Bob said.

Chad hid his disgust. That was why Bob fit in so well with their group. They didn't mind sleeping around. He put the pail on the counter and took out the glass bottles to put the milk in.

"You and your brother sure did have some wild times together," Sam stated. "Tell me, between the two of you, who gets the most women?"

"Me of course," Bob bragged. "I understand women much better than he does. Did you know he actually approached one fine lady and told her that she reminded him of his dog? He meant the color of hair they both shared, but I tell you, that lady took it the wrong way and swung her purse at his head. He was so surprised. I can still see how big his eyes got. They were like this." Bob demonstrated by widening his eyes and crossing them. "He was drunk though, so who can blame him for the saying the wrong thing?"

"What pick up lines do you use?" Tim asked Bob.

"I try not to think of them as pick up lines. Instead, I see them as ways to break the ice. I find a quality I admire about a woman

and mention it. It's really easy. Say she has blond hair. Tell her that her hair reminds you of the sun shining at noon. Or say she's known for being intelligent. You can tell her that you enjoy having good discussions with her. Women like it when you take time to notice their beauty and mind. Also, women are naturally inclined to want babies. It's all a part of that mothering instinct."

The men nodded.

Chad rolled his eyes. Georgia was opposed to having children because being pregnant would ruin her figure. The men were oblivious to the fact that Chad was even in the room, so no one noticed as he stopped pouring the milk and watched them.

Bob continued, "When you see a woman talking to a child, you mention how nice she looks with a child and that you often wonder if you will ever have the fortune of marrying someone with a love for children."

Jeff cringed. "What if you're not looking to settle down?"

"Then find another topic because as soon as you mention children, women automatically assume you're headed for the altar."

"A lot of women are eager to get married."

"It's natural. They're made that way. It keeps us men in line. You find a good woman to marry and it levels you out."

"Are you looking to settle down? We have a twenty-four year old sister named Lacy who would like you," Sam offered.

"Bob, I need you to help me carry these bottles downstairs," Chad interrupted.

They looked up at him, shocked he spoke.

He tried not to show his disgust. He might as well have been invisible for all they cared.

"Can't you take care of those bottles by yourself?" Tim asked.

"When did you get soft?" Sam scoffed.

"Now my boss says he needs me," Bob said as he stood up. "I'm sure it's all a ploy to tell me some deep dark secret about you all that I can use later on to humiliate you." He said it as a joke so the three men laughed. "Whatever it is, I'm sure it won't take long. I'll meet you outside with the sheep."

Chad gritted his teeth when he saw the three men finish their lunches so they could go outside.

Bob collected three bottles and waited for Chad to gather the remaining two so they could take them to the basement where it was cool.

Chad sighed and led him down the stairs and set the bottles on the table in the corner of the bare room. Sometimes, he kept other food items that required cooling but that wasn't the case that day.

"You wanted to warn me about the sister?" Bob asked as he set the bottles next to the two Chad had put down.

"What are you? A mind reader?" Chad didn't understand how Bob could be so perceptive about everything, and he was intimidated by that fact.

"It's obvious what they're like. I've run into men like them before."

"So you know how to handle them because of that?"

He shrugged. "It's simple. All you have to do is act like a know-it-all. They're insecure and need someone to lead their pack."

"Pack?" That was an interesting term to describe them.

"They're a bunch of wolves. Frankly, if I was a woman, I wouldn't go near them. But since I'm a man, they're harmless. They're pretty easy to direct. If you want more control over them, start bragging like you know more than they do. Act like you enjoy drinking and sleeping around. That's how you impress them."

Chad put one hand on his hip and the other one on the table. "So you don't drink and sleep around?"

"No, I don't. But I have to play it up like I do to be believable to them. It's all a game."

"What is real about you then? For all I know, you could be telling me all of this because you've figured out that I actually have morals."

"The truth is, I'm just trying to get by while I'm here. I can see that you need some help putting those morons in line. We're going to get that wool ready for Tyler Patrick by midday tomorrow. You'll be ahead of schedule."

He didn't appreciate the fact that Bob was doing what he couldn't.

Bob seemed to understand the situation. "Look, I'm trying to

make your life easier. I appreciate the fact that you're looking out for me. You were going to warn me to not court Lacy because her sister wasn't all that great so she won't be either."

He felt his anger surge but kept it in check. "What do you know about Georgia? According to them, she was the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Yes, they did mention that, but I see that you don't have anything to remind you of her, except for the horse. I suspect the horse is too practical to get rid of, so you decided to keep it. However, I would never have guessed that you were ever married if someone hadn't told me you were. That tells me that she made your life impossible. Of course, her relatives didn't realize how horrible she was. She must have been good at hiding her true nature, though she couldn't hide it from you for long since you two lived in the same house. When you marry someone, you end up seeing them for who they really are."

"You were married so you would know this?"

"No, I've never been married, but I'm twenty-eight and understand how life works."

He stared at Bob in disbelief.

"You know what you need?" Bob asked.

Chad wasn't sure he wanted to hear it. In fact, he was sure he didn't but something in Bob's eyes stopped him from leaving.

Bob said, "You need a good woman to love you. If you can get that, you'll get the self-confidence back that you had before Georgia destroyed it."

He stared at the newcomer, unable to reply.

"I can tell when I've said too much," Bob finally spoke up. "I'll be out in the building with the sheep in it. We'll start cutting wool at your command."

Chad watched him as he walked up the stairs.

Chapter 3

Kate knew she had struck a nerve in her employer, so she was glad to get out of the house before he could yell at her. She joined the other three men in the building. They were laughing and sitting around, drinking some whiskey they hid in their pockets. She knew Chad wouldn't approve of their drinking on his property, especially during work hours. She wondered why they pretended to obey this rule when they openly disobeyed the others.

"You want some?" Tim offered her his flask.

"Sure do," she lied. She took the flask and pretended to take a big swallow of the stuff. She held her tongue over the opening of the flask so she wouldn't actually drink it but they wouldn't know the difference.

"You know, you're alright," Sam told her. "I can't wait to see how well you handle a horse at the race on Saturday."

"Well, I don't want to toot my own horn, but I'm one of the best horse riders there is."

"I'm like a bolt of lightning on a horse," Jeff warned her.

She grinned. "I look forward to proving you wrong."

The men chuckled.

Chad came out to the building. He didn't say anything as he checked to make sure all the supplies were ready for use. "Jeff, is

Roger ready to help lead the sheep in?"

Jeff went out to check.

"Who's Roger?" she asked.

"That's the sheepdog," Sam answered for Chad. "He's been a loyal dog. He does a good job of protecting the sheep."

She hadn't even seen him yesterday so she was surprised to know that there was a dog on the property.

Tim stood up from the bench he had been sitting on. "Roger also helps us bring the sheep in here. Cutting their wool doesn't hurt them, but they still don't like being held in place."

"I suppose that could be said of anyone," she reflected. "People like to be able to move around at will."

"That's why you're checking out the country?" Sam noted.

She nodded. "My life is all about adventure." Was it ever! She had more adventure than she cared to admit.

Chad walked up to her. "Since you've never done this before, you can hold a sheep while I cut the wool. Sam, you can hold sheep while Tim cuts the wool and Jeff and Roger will bring the sheep in."

She hid her apprehension at the task that loomed before her. She wasn't comfortable with the idea of holding a sheep in place, but she was determined to overcome her fears. "You got it, boss," she said, sounding confident.

Sam and Tim snickered.

"Billy calls him 'boss,'" Tim quietly said to Sam.

Chad ignored them and handed Sam a pair of clippers while he held his own clippers.

"There's nothing to it," Sam told her. "If you can handle a horse, a sheep is no big deal."

Jeff brought in the first sheep. She watched as Tim grabbed the sheep and led him to Sam who began cutting the wool off of it.

The next sheep Jeff brought in was hers. She made sure her hat was securely in place before she ran to the animal. The sheep ran from her, so she chased it around the building.

"Just jump on it!" Chad called out.

That wasn't as easy to do as it sounded. The animal was faster than she thought it would be. She leapt at it but it quickly dodged

her so she fell flat on her face on the dirt.

Sam and Tim laughed.

“I hope you’re more graceful on a horse!” Sam called out to her.

She grimaced as she stood up. She wiped her hands on her pants. She noticed that Chad sighed and rolled his eyes.

“I’ve got this one,” Tim told her. “Get the next one.”

She was disheartened that Sam was already done removing the woolly coat from one sheep. Determined not to let her fall get her down, she got ready for the next sheep. Jeff chased another sheep into the building. Instead of running after it, she jumped in front of it and leapt at it. She landed on its back and held on tightly as it raced across the room.

“Dig your feet into the ground to stop it!” Chad instructed.

She was trying to obey him but holding onto it was awkward. She grabbed a fistful of wool in her hands and managed to slide down the sheep. She tried to secure her footing into the ground but she tripped on her bootlaces. The sheep dragged her around the building.

“Let go of it!” Chad yelled.

She did and rolled into the wall.

The three farmhands were laughing at her. Her face grew hot from embarrassment. She had never been so humiliated in her entire life.

“Forget it,” Chad told her as he grabbed her by the elbow and lifted her to her feet.

She struggled to maintain her balance when he released his hold on her. She rubbed her elbow. Did he have to be so rough?

“Sit on the bench and watch us,” he finally said. He shook his head. “I don’t know whether to call you a man or a boy.”

She stopped herself from making an unflattering comment as she stomped over to the bench and sat down on it. She refused to cry over her failure. She steadied her emotions by focusing on the wall on the other side of the room. She suddenly felt intense anger towards her employer. He didn’t have to make fun of her in front of the other men by calling her a boy. She had just gained their respect but he destroyed her hard efforts to fit in with the other farm-

hands. Was he getting even with her for telling him he needed a woman to love him? Some people in the past were disturbed when she displayed an uncanny ability to perceive their strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps, Chad was the same way and wished to let her know that he wouldn't tolerate it again.

After half an hour of sitting and watching them, she asked, "Can I do something productive?"

Chad wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked over at her. "I don't know. Can you?"

She glared at him. Did he have to be so condescending, especially in front of Tim, Sam and Jeff?

"Give Billy a break, Chad," Sam said. "He's never done this before."

"I don't recall you giving me a break when I first got here," Chad bitterly replied.

"Billy's one of us. He doesn't think he's too good for us."

She could tell that this greatly upset Chad though he didn't do anything about it.

"Billy," Tim called out to her, "do you want to try clipping the wool off this sheep?"

"I'd be glad to," she nodded, relieved that her chances of fitting in hadn't been ruined after all. Thankfully, their opinion of Chad was so poor that they dismissed anything he thought or did. She went over to Tim while Sam held the next sheep for Chad who reluctantly went to work on it. "Is he always such a killjoy?" she whispered to Tim.

"Yes. He doesn't believe in having fun. He didn't even have fun when Georgia was alive."

"It's a wonder she decided to marry him." What woman wanted a man who wasn't fun to be with?

"She was very forgiving of people's faults. He didn't deserve her."

She wondered why they worked as his farmhands if they thought so ill of him but realized that they were probably such lazy workers that they couldn't find anyone else to pay them for mediocre work.

She turned her attention to the sheep and began cutting its

wool. It was easier to do that than it was to hold the stupid animal in place. She was relieved that she could at least do that part of the work. She found the process of cutting wool to be a good distraction from her hurt feelings. She knew that not everyone was going to like her, but she actually thought Chad was a decent man.

She hated to admit it but there was something that attracted her to him. It was probably best that she focused on not liking him. After all, what good would it do to fall in love with a man who thought she was a man? It was insane that she would even consider falling in love when her life was in danger. *I left Virginia with the plan of going back as soon as the police arrest Dave and Derek. I have no intention of living in North Dakota for the rest of my life. My world is back home, even if my parents are no longer alive to be a part of it. My brothers Bob and Paul are still alive. Thankfully, they weren't there to witness their parents' murder. They're safe. Dave and Derek won't be going after them, but they are looking for me.* The safest place for her to be was out in North Dakota, far away from anyone familiar with her and her family. Even if she didn't care much for the way Chad treated her, she knew it was better to be at his farm hiding out than it was to be in Virginia where everyone knew her because she was the daughter of a wealthy Senator.

That morning when the three men came out, Tim handed her a copy of the newspaper. Though there was a blurb about her parents' deaths, the journalist confirmed that the killers were still on the loose. No one but her knew their identities, and she couldn't risk going to the police when one of the killers was a well-known cop in the town she lived in. She could only hope another cop would discover the truth, arrest the two men, and put them safely in jail. In the meantime, she would bide her time in North Dakota and do her best to fit in with the group she was around.

* * * * *

She was relieved when it was time to call it quits for the day. Her right hand was sore from cutting the wool. She decided to walk down to the river that gently flowed on the property so she

could let it rest in the cool water. She took a deep breath. Farming was hard work. She missed her comfortable life in Virginia. She was wealthy, so she hadn't worked like this a day in her life. Her work was mental, not physical. She took her hand out of the water and massaged it with the fingers on her other hand. She flexed her hand several times to work out the rest of the kinks in it.

She examined her surroundings. The land was mostly flat but there was a small slope that dipped to the river. A large rock was on the edge of the riverbank, which would provide a sense of privacy for when she wanted to bathe. She never took a bath outside of a bathroom before, but Chad didn't have the kind of plumbing she was used to. She could use a bath. She felt incredibly disgusting after not having bathed for a week. But she wanted to use soap to wipe the grime off of her body.

She went back to the barn to get her bar of soap so she could go back to the river to take a bath. She was dismayed to see Chad cleaning out the horses' stalls. She had hoped she wouldn't have to run into him. She sighed. He looked exhausted.

"Do you want some help?" she offered, despite her better judgment.

He glanced up from his rake. "I got it," he replied.

"I don't mind helping out. It is why you feed me and provide my lodging. So what if we don't get along? That doesn't mean I can't do my job."

"The other men are done for the day. That means you are too."

She rolled her eyes. "Look, the only thing that's sore on me is my hand from all that clipping. I can manage a rake. But afterwards, I'm going to take a nice, long bath in the river. I'm tired of feeling like a hobo."

"Isn't that what you are?"

She stopped herself from groaning in aggravation. "You don't accept anything from someone who tries to do something nice for you, do you?"

"It's been a long time since that's happened."

"Fine. So now you can say, it happened again." She grabbed a rake from the corner of the barn and started cleaning out a different stall.

Chad shook his head. "You don't take no for an answer, do you?"

"You're right. I don't. I keep going after something I want until I get it. Fortunately for you, I have my mind set to clean out this stall, whether you can appreciate my help or not."

"I do appreciate it," he softly replied. "I'm just not used to it."

Her anger at him from earlier that day died down. *He's been hurt so much that he can't allow himself to believe that anyone would want to be nice to him for the sake of being nice.* She decided not to voice her revelation since he was obviously appalled that she could read him so well. Instead, she said, "You're welcome" and continued to work.

When she was done, she took a bath in the river, which felt soothing and relaxing after such a long day of work. It was nice to let her long light blond hair fall down her back instead of keeping it under the wig. She hadn't realized that her body was sore until she was naked in the water. The cool water's current massaged her body. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of being clean. When she got out, she sat on the rock and waited for the warm sun to dry her off.

The land in North Dakota was drastically different from Virginia. She lived in the city there, but most of Virginia was covered in trees. North Dakota had trees but they weren't many. She missed her home. *Even if I return, my life will never be the same again.* The thought depressed her. Her father had been one of the two Virginia Senators. He had recently sponsored the controversial Tree Removal Bill to present before Congress. She didn't know the details of the bill, except she knew it had something to do with making the southwestern part of the state open to the lumber companies. Her mother was a big supporter of her father, and Kate couldn't imagine that her mother did anything to upset anyone since she was a peacemaker by nature. *Why would someone kill my parents?*

She finally allowed herself the freedom to cry. There was something about being alone on the open prairie that brought the security she needed so she could release her pent up emotions. Though she was far from everything that had been familiar to her,

she had never felt closer to God. One of the books she had borrowed from Chad's library was the Bible. She took comfort in reading it. After her emotions settled, she got dressed and returned to the barn. She had washed her dirty clothes while bathing, so she hung her wet clothes up to dry. Her clean clothes were a relief to wear. She didn't realize farming could be such dirty work.

"Will you be coming in for dinner?" Chad asked her.

She jumped from the clothes line. She hadn't heard him walking behind her. She cleared her throat so she wouldn't use her normal female voice. "Yes. What's on the menu tonight?"

"Beans and rice."

She inwardly groaned. She missed her fancy, good tasting meals she was used to eating in the restaurants. "Sounds good," she lied. She couldn't complain about the food when there was nothing else to eat. She never cooked a meal a day in her life, so she was at the mercy of whatever he decided to make.

She was disappointed when Chad put the plate of food in front of her and turned to leave the kitchen. "Aren't you going to eat?" she asked him.

"I already did." He didn't look at her as he spoke. He simply walked out of the kitchen.

She sighed and ate the meal by herself. She didn't know why she could get along with everyone but him. She shrugged. *I won't be here long anyway, so it's just as well that he won't let me get close to him.*

* * * * *

On Saturday, she took Reliable to the fairgrounds in the town. She was eager to ride a horse for pleasure again. She did enjoy having to ride it for work, but she enjoyed riding it for pleasure much more. She had made sure her wig was pinned securely to her blond hair so that even if her hat flew off her head, her wig wouldn't. She arrived early at the fairgrounds so that she could get a feel for the people who lived in town. She wanted to fit in and needed time to observe them from a distance. Fortunately, since she already fit in with Tim, Sam and Jeff, that would make her job

easier. A lot of families were at the grounds. There was a large potluck, which she was very grateful for since she was tired of eating Chad's mediocre meals. Some men were also roasting hot dogs, steak and hamburgers over a fire. Her mouth watered in anticipation. There was only so much chili, bean and rice, stew, sandwiches and egg dishes that she could eat. She would definitely eat after the race. She already knew she would eat until she was ready to pop, and she would be no good for riding for at least an hour afterwards.

For the most part, people were in a good mood. They were laughing and talking as they waited for the horse racing to begin. She suspected that there would be other games as well, but her interest was in riding Reliable. *This is it. It's show time.* If she could fool four men into believing she was a man, then she should be able to fool the rest of the town. She urged Reliable forward. She wondered why Chad refused to join in the fun. *He never has any fun. His life is all about work.* She shook her head. Whatever Georgia did to him, it destroyed any inclination he had to enjoy life. Pushing aside the observation, she led Reliable up to a post and tied him up. She gave him the carrot in her pocket.

"Now you have to make me look good out there today," she whispered. "I want them to be impressed with you. You have great speed and grace. Just follow my commands and we'll finish first in the race."

Reliable snorted.

She took that as his agreement and smiled. "I'll be back when it's time for the race. Rest up." She patted his neck before turning her attention to the fairgrounds. To her surprise, Sam and Tim walked over to welcome her.

"I'm glad Chad didn't talk you out of coming," Sam greeted. He handed her a beer.

She took it. "What am I? A child? He can't tell me who I can and can't see." He didn't try to talk her out of going. In fact, he didn't say anything when she told him she was heading to town. She opened the bottle of beer. "So, when are the races? I'm anxious to ride Reliable hard."

"We'll do those after a little socializing. The women are big

into that kind of thing.”

“That’s typical of a woman.” She happened to enjoy socializing and entertaining others.

“Come along,” Tim said. “We want to introduce you to some people.”

She followed them. When they weren’t looking, she spilled some of the beer to the ground so it would look like she was drinking it. She had no intention of drinking any alcohol since it would hinder her ability to act like a man.

Sam introduced her to Jack, Wes, and Todd. She noted that all the men except for Sam shared the same black hair. They were an inch or two shorter than her. *We could be related since I chose to wear a black wig.* That was a disturbing thought. She had no desire to be related to them.

“They’re our cousins,” Sam told her. “Jack is the blacksmith. He’s married to Veronica, and he already has five kids even though he’s thirty-two.”

“Good to meet you, Jack.” She shook his hand, hoping her grip felt firm enough to pass off as a man.

“We rarely get to see him since he’s always with the family. Good of you to break away for a few moments.”

“Well, we’ll be having number six in eight months,” Jack informed them.

“No kidding,” Tim chuckled.

“The woman can’t keep her hands off me.”

“You must be a tiger in bed.”

“Well, I am well-endowed.”

She realized that the other men seemed especially impressed that Jack was such a good lover. *That must be important to men.*

Tim continued the introductions. “Wes runs the grocery store. Wes’ wife is pregnant with baby number two.” He pointed to the large brunette who looked like she was ready to give birth at any moment. “Todd is a farmer and is still single even though he’s thirty-five.”

“There’s no woman that strikes my fancy in this town,” Todd explained.

“You should probably travel the country and find one that

does,” she quickly spoke up.

“Is that why you’re traveling?” Sam wondered.

“No. I want to experience freedom. I’m only twenty-eight. I can be tied down later.”

“Yes, though I love Veronica,” Jack began, “I wished I hadn’t married as soon as I turned eighteen. We heard that you’re a free spirit. I admit that I’m jealous.”

“Oh, well since you’re married, you might as well enjoy all the sex you can get.” She didn’t want to deter Jack from his wife.

“Not being married doesn’t stop some of us from having fun,” Tim chuckled. “There’s a saloon in the next town with some soiled doves that know some pretty good tricks.”

She inwardly cringed as Jeff and Sam joined him in the joke. *These men are pigs. No self-respecting woman would go near them.*

“And I’m sure there’s some disease they’re carrying too,” Todd frowned. “I don’t care to catch anything like that.”

“Besides,” Kate began, “everyone knows that married people have sex more often and that the sex is better.”

“That is true,” Jack nodded, smiling again.

“My true love is riding horses,” she remarked, eager to change topics. “When are the races going to begin anyway?”

“You sure do sound confident in your abilities,” Tim noted.

“You’d better not be all talk because I bet some money that you’ll win today,” Sam added.

“Didn’t anyone bet on me?” Jeff wondered.

“A couple of us did,” Wes said.

“It’s too bad you’re going to lose.” She turned to Sam and Tim. “Get ready to add some crisp bills to your wallet because I’m coming in first.” She grinned. “How many of you all are related, anyway?” She pointed to the large gathering of people on the fairgrounds.

“A third of us are first cousins, another third of us are second and third cousins, and the rest aren’t related at all.”

That explained why so many of them looked a lot alike.

“We need some fresh blood here,” Todd replied. “It would be nice to get some new women in town.”

“What about Chad?” she asked. “He didn’t come from here. Are there any women seeking him out?”

“Chad is impotent,” Sam quietly confided. “That’s why he and Georgia never had children. The whole town knows about it, so none of the women are interested.”

She couldn’t tell if that was the truth or not. If it was, it would be humiliating for the whole town to know. If it wasn’t true, it would be irritating to have such an awful rumor spread about him.

“Georgia was pretty upset about it,” Tim recalled. “But there was nothing we could do about it.”

“Why didn’t she just annul the marriage since they couldn’t do it?” she asked.

“She felt sorry for him. She was very selfless.”

If that was true, then it was no wonder why Chad was glad she was dead. Who wanted a wife who stayed married to a man out of pity?

“Let’s start the horse races!” An older man called out.

“That’s Pa. We’ll introduce you to him later,” Sam promised. “Good luck. I’m rooting for you. You’d better win!”

“No need to worry,” she casually replied before she set her beer bottle on the ground and hopped up on Reliable.

There were three different types of races and she entered each one. One race was a straight run around the track. The second race was for running and jumping over hurdles. The third race was a straight run around the track five times. She won each one, thanks to her years of training. She figured that these people were amateurs in this area. Sam was thrilled and patted her on the back. His enthusiasm and strength nearly knocked her over. Then everyone wanted to know who she was and where she came from and what she was doing there. She made up all kinds of stories about her past while she ate the delicious food. When she couldn’t eat anymore, she joined the other men in unbuckling their belts and leaning back in the chair in satisfaction while the women cleaned up the mess from the meal. For once, she was glad that she was pretending to be a man so she didn’t have to do the work. She was used to servants doing it for her. *I didn’t appreciate my servants. When I get back to Virginia, that is going to change.*

“There is Pa,” Tim told her, pointing to the man with gray hair. “Pa,” he called out to the man a couple chairs down from them. “This is Billy Ingram. He is Chad’s temporary farmhand.”

“Good to meet you, sir,” she nodded.

“A polite young fellow,” the old man smiled. “Sam and Tim say you’ve been trying to get old Chad to come out of his shell.”

Really? She wondered why they said that. “Oh, I don’t know. I call him boss and do what he tells me to. It’s all in a day’s work.”

“He actually calls Chad ‘boss’ to his face,” Sam laughed.

The men around her chuckled.

Why is that so funny? “Well, he is my boss,” she replied as she glanced around at them, confused that they laughed even harder at her announcement.

“It’s just hard to think of him as an authority figure,” Sam explained. “He’s such a wimp.”

“He’s strong,” she protested. She had watched him lift heavy items that even Sam, Tim and Jeff had trouble with.

“You’ve got a good heart, Billy,” the old man said. “But when Sam said that Chad’s a wimp, he wasn’t referring to his physical ability to do things.”

She still didn’t get what was so funny but she played along as if she understood what they were talking about.

“Chad is such a joke.” Tim shook his head in amusement. “He tries to act like he knows how to manage a farm but he has no clue.”

Jeff spoke up. “When Georgia brought him here, he acted like he was superior to us because he came from San Francisco. He spoke as if he were rich or something.”

She wondered if the men felt inferior to Chad and made fun of him to make up for it.

“He was so awkward on a horse,” Sam recalled. “He even cried one time after he fell off of it. What a baby.”

She had a hard time believing that Chad cried. He didn’t strike her as a weak man.

“He adored Georgia though, so we put up with him,” Tim stated.

“Yes, they had the perfect marriage,” Sam reflected. “Though

they couldn't have children."

"Through no fault of her own," their father added.

"Georgia wouldn't ever leave him because she was faithful to God and her marriage vows. She was a saint. Chad's not easy to deal with." Sam took a drink from his beer bottle.

She didn't know whether to believe them or not. She cleared her throat. "Why do you say that?"

"That farm is technically ours, but he won't let us have it. It was my grandfather who owned it. He left it to Georgia. Chad doesn't have any right to it though he claims he does."

"Because he was married to her."

"Right. But blood is thicker than water. One of these days, we'll get the farm back."

The other men nodded.

She wondered why Chad chose to stay in this town. Her relatives obviously hated him because he owned the farm, and he had to deal with them five days a week. No wonder he was so aloof. It was how he coped. She felt sorry for him.

She was relieved when it was time to separate out to play different games. She played horseshoes but was no good at it.

"It's a good thing I didn't bet on you for this game," Sam told her.

"I have to admit that this isn't my strength," she agreed. She pretended to drink another gulp of beer from another bottle the men had handed her. She poured some of it on the ground when she bent down to tie one of her bootlaces. If she had drunk all the beer they had handed her, then she would have given her true identity away an hour ago. She wasn't used to drinking much except for the occasional glass of wine.

"Would you like to see what Georgia was like?" Sam and Tim's mother asked her at one point during the afternoon while she stood around talking to Sam, Tim, their mother and Jeff. "It might be nice to put a name with a face. I know Chad doesn't have any pictures of her in their house."

She noticed that the mother didn't refer to it as *his* house. She shrugged and agreed to go to the house. It seemed that Georgia's mother took great delight in showing off Georgia to anyone who

cared to listen. She wondered where that left Lacy. Lacy wasn't granted as much attention as Georgia was, even though Lacy was still alive. She had briefly met Lacy but Lacy stuck with the other women while she stuck with the men.

When she entered Mrs. Montgomery's simple three story home, the pictures of all four of her children lined the walls of the house. Georgia had been the oldest, so naturally, there were more pictures of her. Sam was the second oldest, Tim was the third oldest, and Lacy was the youngest. Lacy still lived at home because she hadn't found a man to marry yet.

"How old are you, Billy?" Mrs. Montgomery asked her.

"Twenty-eight," she replied as she took in all the pictures in wonder. The woman obviously adored her children. She wondered where Mr. Montgomery fit into her world since there was only one picture of him, and that one was smaller than the others.

"You are the right age for Lacy," she thoughtfully stated. She bit her lower lip, as if considering the match.

Kate quickly cleared her throat. She had to put a stop to this. "Mrs. Montgomery," she began, "I will be leaving within a month or two, so I don't plan to stick around for long. I am checking out different parts of the country in my quest for adventure."

"That is nice. However, if you should encounter the right woman, I'm sure you'll find that marriage will be even more exciting than traveling."

She cringed. The woman had no idea how unlikely the idea of her marrying Lacy really was. Kate considered that it was proof that her disguise was working. She followed the woman to a closed door at the top of the first flight of stairs.

"This is Georgia's bedroom," the woman told her. She rested her hand on the doorknob and put the other hand over her heart. "Georgia was so lovely. Chad adored her, of course."

Kate took her mind off of the pictures lining the hallway and forced her attention on the woman as she opened the door and led her into the large bedroom.

"We gave Georgia the biggest bedroom since she was the oldest child," her mother said. "Sometimes, if I stand still and listen, I can almost hear Georgia singing one of her favorite songs. She

had the most beautiful voice. She is surely singing with the angels in Heaven now. Heaven is blessed to have her there, though we miss her terribly.”

That depends on who you talk to. Kate took in the room in amazement. It was like a museum. Mrs. Montgomery apparently dusted the room often, for it looked as if Georgia was sleeping there. The light pink bed sheets and comforter were neatly made on the bed. Five white pillows with lacy pink trim were placed in order from smallest to largest at the head of the bed. A group of stuffed animals sat on the bed too. The bedroom dresser featured pictures of Georgia from infancy to adulthood. Kate had to admit that Georgia was good looking. She could see why Chad was initially attracted to her.

But I'm beautiful as well. He might even find me to his liking if I took off the disguise. She caught herself by surprise at such thoughts. She hadn't expected to feel a wave of jealousy over seeing pictures of his dead wife. She forced herself to focus on Georgia's mother who was rambling on about the kind of person Georgia was.

“My little girl was such a sweet person. She couldn't hurt anything or anyone. She cared deeply for all of God's creatures. She was always protecting her little brothers and sister. She had a natural mothering instinct about her. It was such a shame that Chad wasn't able to perform his husbandly duty to her. Though I don't blame him for it. How can a man help whether or not he can give a woman children? Georgia loved him so much that she stayed with him anyway. She told me that when she married him, it was for life. And he was devoted to her. Without her around, he's lost his will to live. She was his strength. Wherever he went, he took her with him. He couldn't bear to be away from her.”

“But he has nothing in his house that would indicate he was even married,” she said in disbelief.

“He was too upset to be reminded of her death. It nearly drove him insane to lose her.”

Did Mrs. Montgomery actually believe that? As she looked at the woman, it was apparent that she did.

“Georgia was one of a kind,” her mother sighed sadly. “There

aren't many women like her around." She went to the dresser and picked up Georgia's diary. "Would you like to read some of her entries? It will give you an idea of how she was."

Now this was something Kate had to see. She nodded and took the diary from the woman. She didn't know whether to believe her eyes or not. Georgia had written nothing but praises for her family and the town she lived in. She was upbeat and loved life. She even wrote prayers to God about protecting her family and friends. *This doesn't match up to the picture of her I get when I am in Chad's house.* Chad didn't speak of her. In fact, he seemed like he wanted to forget she even existed. But even according to her brothers and father, Georgia was an outstanding woman. *Someone's either lying or delusional.* Was it possible that Chad was so distraught over losing her that he mentally blocked her from his mind so he didn't have to deal with the pain of her death? She had been so sure of what Georgia had been like before that day, but standing in Georgia's old room, surrounded by her things and reading her diary, she wasn't sure of what to think anymore.

"Do you think well of Chad?" she finally asked Mrs. Montgomery.

"Yes. He is a fine man. He was good to my daughter."

Kate shook her head, trying to clear it from the fog that she felt like she was drifting through. How could Mrs. Montgomery like him when the rest of the family detested him? Suddenly, everything seemed overwhelming to her.

"I shouldn't keep you here all day," Mrs. Montgomery smiled as she took the diary and placed it gently on the dresser. She adjusted the hairbrush. "There. That's the way Georgia liked it."

She numbly followed the old woman out of the room and watched her close the door. Then she went outside. She breathed a sigh of relief. It felt good to be in the warm sun where people were laughing and talking around her. She felt as if she had walked from death back into life. Time had seemed to stand still while she was in Georgia's room. She was relieved to be out of that creepy house.

Chapter 4

On Monday, Chad decided to repair the roof of his house which had been damaged during the last hailstorm. He repaired the barn roof first because it was the smaller of the two tasks. He had Sam and Bob work on the roof since they were thinner than Tim and Jeff. The less weight he had to put on the roof, the better. He explained the process of repairing the roof to Bob who intently listened to his instructions. He gave them the materials to set down the items they would need and went to his own corner to work on his part of the roof. A few minutes into the process, he noticed that Bob was rubbing his arms.

“What’s wrong?” he called out to the new farmhand.

“Some of these nails are hard to pound in with the hammer,” Bob replied.

Is he kidding? “What’s so hard about it?”

“It takes a lot of strength to do.”

“Well, you’re a man, right?”

Bob looked at him in disbelief. “Are you implying I’m not?”

“If you’re already worn out from this simple task? Yes.”

He could tell that Bob was greatly upset by his statement but turned back to his work. Chad cringed as Bob haphazardly pounded a large nail into the wood. He sighed and stood up to investigate the quality of Bob’s work.

“Give him a break,” Sam said.

“Did I ask for your opinion?” Chad shot back.

Sam stood up. “I don’t have to be doing this today.”

“Then don’t. And you won’t get paid either.”

“Fine. Billy, let’s go.”

“No, Sam,” Bob argued. “I need this job.”

Sam calmed down.

Chad looked at the poor quality of Bob’s work. If he didn’t know any better, he’d swear that Bob was really a woman. He sighed. “Take the new boards and bring them to me and Sam when we ask for them. Alright?”

Bob silently put the hammer down and did as instructed.

About halfway through the project, Bob stumbled over a box of nails which went flying all over the place. He lost his balance and fell off the side of the roof. Chad and Sam ran over to see where he landed and tried not to laugh when they saw that Bob had landed in the bushes next to the house. Chad knew that Bob wasn’t seriously hurt, though his ego might have taken a blow. A skunk ran out from the bush and sprayed Bob who screamed in protest.

That sounds like a woman’s scream. Pushing the thought aside, Chad shook his head in amusement and climbed down the ladder. He went over to Bob who looked horrified. He cringed at the stench that was all over his new farmhand. “Get into the metal tub in the barn. I’ll get you the tomato juice to get that skunk smell off of you.”

“What? Why can’t I just wash off in the river?” Bob quickly stood up and adjusted his hat. He touched his beard.

“Because regular water won’t get the smell out. You need tomato juice. Fortunately for you, I got some.”

“I don’t know, boss. I’m not comfortable with the idea of you seeing me naked.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s not like you’re a woman. You don’t have anything interesting for me to look at.”

“Believe me, boss. It would be much better if you didn’t look at me at all.”

“Why? Are you tiny down there?” Sam asked from over the roof.

Bob looked appalled. "I'm huge. I don't want to embarrass the boss."

Chad rolled his eyes again. "We're not here to talk about penis size. We're here to work. Fine. Since you are so particular, I won't look. I promise. Now, I'll get the metal tub ready for you, since it's apparent you don't have the strength to move heavy objects."

"Excuse me. I suppose I need to have a heart to heart talk with the Creator about the way He made me."

Chad sighed. "I'm sorry, Bob, but you aren't cut out for this line of work. Once you leave here, I'd recommend you find a desk job."

Bob silently followed him to the barn where he pulled out the tub. "Can you put it over there in that corner?"

He glanced at the spot which had several piles of neatly stacked hay to hide him from anyone who entered the barn. "Aren't you taking this modesty thing a little too far? I assure you that I have everything you do. Really, I'm not going to look."

"It's complicated."

"Very well." He dragged the tub over to the corner and left so Bob could get undressed. When he returned with the jars of tomato juice, Bob was hunched in the tub. Chad made sure not to look as he handed Bob the opened jars to pour into the tub. "Be sure to wash your clothes in that juice too. And then you can go to the river to wash up. I'll leave a couple of towels and a bar of soap for you on this pile of hay. Alright?"

"Just let me know when you're done putting out the towels and soap. I don't want to be seen by anyone."

"I'll be sure to keep everyone away from viewing you. Not that anyone is interested in looking at you," he grumbled as he ran to do the tasks at hand. He didn't understand Bob at all. The man was clearly out of his element on the farm. Why did he pick this job when others would have been better suited for him?

* * * * *

Though Bob seemed sissy for a man, Chad was still glad that

Bob was his farmhand since Bob was a hard worker who actually did what Chad told him to do. He was relieved that Bob didn't join Tim, Jeff, and Sam in their rounds of criticisms and sarcasm when it came to their personal views about him. It was one thing for Georgia's relatives to condescend him but for an outsider to do the same would have been more upsetting since Bob didn't even know him well enough to make an accurate judgment.

The only friend Chad did have in the town was Travis who kept his opinions on any given subject to himself. He was of the opinion that he needed to mind his own business, and Chad respected him for that. Bob wasn't good about keeping his opinions to himself but at least he didn't look down at Chad.

It was Tuesday evening at dinner when Bob decided to have a conversation with him. Usually, he and Bob ate in silence when they ate breakfast and dinner. Since Bob ate with Tim, Sam and Jeff during lunch, Chad made it a point to be busy doing something else during that time. He didn't mind eating with Bob, but there was no way he would eat with the other three men who made his life almost as miserable as Georgia had. Except with them at least, they went home at night. He still didn't understand how Bob got along so well with them. He had heard that Bob won every horse race, so it made sense that the three men admired him for that. They seemed to almost worship the newcomer. *How unfortunate it was for them that Bob didn't marry Georgia.* But he wouldn't wish Georgia on anyone. That kind of misery was best left alone.

Bob cleared his throat after he swallowed some stew. Chad was beginning to recognize that was an indication that Bob was about to speak.

"What is it?" Chad asked.

Bob looked surprised that Chad spoke first. Bob took a deep breath. "Do you mind if I ask you some questions regarding your wife?"

"Yes," he simply replied. He took a drink of milk and set it back down on the table.

Bob frowned and stared at his bowl.

"Haven't the other farmhands and the people in town told you about her?" he pointedly asked.

Bob looked back at him.

He was struck by his eyes. There was something about his clear blue eyes. It was as if he could see right into his soul. He turned his gaze to the meal in front of him and pretended to be interested in it.

“Well, I’m hearing conflicting messages depending on who I talk to,” Bob began. “When I’m here, I get the impression that she was a hard woman to be with, but when I talk to anyone else, she almost sounds like a saint. I mean, they really talk her up as if she could do no wrong. Now, I know that’s impossible because everyone is a sinner. No one is perfect. That’s why we need Jesus in our lives.”

“That explains it,” Chad interrupted him.

He looked startled. “Explains what?”

“That’s why you actually do your work. You’re a Christian.”

“Yes, I am. Are you one?”

He nodded. “I am.”

“Was Georgia?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. She said she was. She could quote Scripture and say the most eloquent prayers at church, but you’d never know she was one when I was alone with her.”

“What was she like?”

Chad realized he said too much. “I don’t want to talk about it.” He drank the rest of his milk and put the glass in his empty bowl.

“Do you want to know what they’re saying about her?”

“I already know. They think she was wonderful and that she was too good for me.”

“That’s pretty much what they said.”

He hid his irritation. Though he knew what they were saying, it bothered him that they were revealing this to the newcomer.

“Have you seen her old bedroom?” Bob asked.

“Her mother gave you the tour?” How could Bob fit in so quickly with those people? What was his secret?

“She did. It was spooky. I almost expected Georgia to show up. That bedroom is a shrine to her.”

“Her mother never could accept the fact that she was dead. I suspect that she pretends that Georgia is still alive.”

“How sad.”

He shrugged. “It’s how she copes.”

“But what about her other kids? Isn’t she interested in them?”

“Georgia was the favorite. Tim and Sam are alright, but they’re men so she doesn’t feel the close connection with them that she did with Georgia. Lacy...” He paused. “Lacy never had a chance.”

“Do you like her?”

“Lacy?”

Bob nodded.

“No. I don’t like anyone in that family. Well, I don’t mind the mother.” She had actually been nice to him.

Bob looked relieved.

“Did you meet Lacy?” Chad wondered.

“I danced with her on Saturday. I danced with a lot of women that day.”

“Look, I wouldn’t get involved with her if I were you. I mean, she seems nice and harmless on the surface but she’s got a lot of bitterness built up inside because she’s always been second best compared to Georgia. She had a tendency to want whatever Georgia had.”

“Did that include you?”

Again, Bob threw him off guard. “I don’t want to discuss it. Just know that Lacy is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. That whole family is messed up.”

“So Georgia wasn’t a good wife then?”

He stood up in aggravation. “Why do you care so much about it? You’re just a farmhand who’s going to be gone sometime this summer. You’ll be off to another state soon enough. Do you go around asking other people about their personal lives?”

“No.” He couldn’t tell if Bob was angry or embarrassed. Bob continued, “I just want to figure out who’s telling me the truth about the woman. Was she a saint or not?”

“Fine.” He placed his hands on the table and glared at Bob. “You want to know the truth? I’ll tell you. Georgia was very good at disguises. She had a mask for everyone that she wore very well. She even wore it for me when I was courting her. But as soon as

we were married, she took it off and I discovered the devil wasn't living in hell. She was living in my house. She made me miserable and she made others miserable, though they weren't aware that she was behind their misery. She was extremely clever. If you were to meet her, you would swear that she was the most wonderful person you ever met, despite your amazing ability to perceive the truth about a person you know almost nothing about."

Bob nodded. "I understand."

Chad examined him. Did Bob actually look relieved?

"I won't bring her up again, unless you want to," Bob responded.

"I don't want to remember her at all."

Bob took his glass and bowl to the sink and began washing his dishes. "I'll do yours too, if you want."

Chad shook his head. "You don't have to baby me. I can take care of myself."

He shrugged, finished his dishes, said good-night and left. Chad was relieved to see him go. He hoped that Bob really would let the matter of Georgia go. It was bad enough her family and friends kept bringing her up. He didn't need an outsider to do it too. It would be nice to have one person who didn't connect him with Georgia.

I ought to just leave. If he had somewhere to go, he would pack his bags tonight and hand the farm over to her brothers since they made it clear that they wanted it so badly. However, since he had nowhere to go, he stayed put. He sighed and methodically washed his dishes, imagining that he was also washing his past away.

* * * * *

The next day, Chad went out to the barn to get Reliable so he could make his rounds and check on the cattle. On his way to the barn, he saw Bob laughing with Tim, Sam and Jeff who made it a point to come out to the farm every work day ever since Bob arrived. He didn't know why it bothered him that Bob spent so much time talking to them. Bob obviously got along with every-

one he came across. *They would have loved it if he had married Georgia.* Bob would have fit in very well with the family. Chad sighed. Her family never accepted him, even when they first met him. He had hoped that once he moved to North Dakota to be near her family, she would go back to being the woman he had courted. He didn't understand it but as soon as he married her, she changed into someone who couldn't stand to be near him. He didn't wish to remember her. He would love to get amnesia and forget all about her.

He wondered what Bob would talk to the three men about. They were gathering eggs from the hens and feeding them. The men liked to hover around Bob who was clearly the leader of the group. As much as Chad hated to admit it, he liked Bob too. Bob was a very likeable person.

"There are four eggs this morning," Bob said. "Tim wins the bet today."

Chad watched as they handed Tim their money. He frowned and walked over to them. "I don't condone gambling on my property."

The four men looked at him. They seemed to be surprised that Chad was there. Chad felt as invisible as ever.

"I didn't realize you had that rule," Bob replied. "Sorry, boss. It won't happen again."

The other three men chuckled.

Chad hid his agitation for their obvious dislike for him.

"We can always bet on other things when I'm in town," Bob casually remarked. Turning back to Chad, he asked, "What do you need us to do this morning, boss?"

"You and I will go check on the cattle. Tim and Sam, check on the sheep and Roger. Jeff, you can get the hay together for the horses."

They grumbled but went to work.

Chad led Bob to Reliable while he took Buck and saddled him up.

Bob saddled Reliable. "Why don't you take Star?"

"Because I don't want to." He didn't feel like explaining Georgia's death. Though he was grateful to the horse, he wouldn't ride

her or let anyone else ride her. He didn't trust the horse to not kill someone else.

"I don't understand you at all."

"At least there's one thing you don't get about me."

Bob finished saddling the horse and jumped on the animal with ease.

He really is good with a horse. Chad finally finished saddling his horse, brought some rope to hold and got on the animal. He led them out of the barn and into the fields.

"Why am I going with you today?" Bob wondered.

"I figured you could learn to lasso. I take it that lassoing cattle is something you need to learn?"

He nodded. "You're right. I haven't done that before."

"Then you're the right choice."

"I didn't think you'd consider taking any of the others out with you."

Once again, Bob was right, and it annoyed him. How could Bob be accurate on so many things? He rounded the corner of a field so they approached the beginning of the cattle field.

Bob cleared his throat. "Sam is talking about brining Lacy out here."

Chad cringed. He had purposely told those three not to bring her out to the farm. "Tell them not to."

"I can handle myself. I have no inclination to court her. I'll just make myself unattractive to her."

He gritted his teeth. "Don't let her come out here. Do whatever it is you do to get those three to obey you." He knew him telling them to keep her away would be pointless if they wanted to fix her up with Bob.

"Why does it even bother you that she's coming out?"

He really didn't wish to go into this. "I told you that she's a wolf in sheep's clothing. You can't trust her."

"You said that she wanted everything Georgia had. I take it that she made advances at you. Did you give in?"

He pulled the reins on the horse and stopped so he could glare at Bob.

Bob quickly stopped Reliable and turned to him in interest.

“You almost did,” he whispered.

“Only because I was drunk and thought she was Georgia. I had no idea she put alcohol in my drink.”

“What happened?”

“That entire family is crazy. You can’t trust any of them. You think you’re being smart by doing whatever it takes to fit in with them, but you’re wrong. The best course of action is to have as little to do with them as possible. Keep your distance.”

“Like you do.”

“Sometimes you learn the hard way.”

“What stopped you from having sex with her?”

Chad was startled by how bluntly Bob asked the question. “That isn’t your concern. What you need to know is that you’re playing with fire. Do you honestly think if you sleep with her and get her pregnant that she or her brothers will let you leave? You’ll be trapped here forever just like I am.”

Bob laughed as if that was the funniest statement he ever heard. “Believe me, I’m not going to get her pregnant. There’s no danger of that happening.”

“With all the sleeping around you do, haven’t you ever worried about getting a woman pregnant?”

He sobered. “The truth is, I haven’t slept with anyone. I’m a virgin.”

“You’d better be careful. That could easily change. All you need is the right condition and you’ll lose control of the situation.”

“Like her getting me drunk?”

He nodded.

“That’s something else I don’t do. I don’t drink alcohol. Well, I’ve had the occasional glass of wine or champagne, but I only pretend to drink the whisky and beer they’ve been giving me. I’m a grown man. I know how to take care of myself.”

He shook his head and bitterly laughed. “Just when you think that, they pull something on you. They have plenty of curve balls they can throw your way.”

“I won’t drink anything when she’s around. Your warning is heeded.” He paused as he looked at the open land. “Why don’t you get out of here if this place is that bad?”

He sighed. "I have nowhere to go."

"So? I didn't have anywhere to go before I got here. You just pull up your roots and go plant them somewhere else. You used to do accounting. Can't you do that again?"

"You don't understand. All my money is tied up into this land. I don't have anything but the farm."

"Surely, you have some cash lying around."

"Not enough to make a fresh start."

"Why don't you sell the farm to that family? They were telling me that it belongs to them anyway."

"I tried that but they insist that they don't owe me any money for it since it really doesn't belong to me, though the lawyer disagrees with them."

Bob frowned. "Do you want to leave?"

"I just accepted the fact that I would be here for the rest of my life."

"I understand."

Bob's soft tone surprised him. Bob almost sounded feminine. Chad stared at him, trying to determine if Bob was who he seemed to be. There was something odd about him.

Bob cleared his throat and spoke in a masculine voice. "You lost hope. I'm sure if I were in your shoes, I would have lost hope a long time ago too. Fortunately for you, I'm here. You don't have to be confined to this place. If you want, we could travel together."

"I'm not looking to be a hobo. I do like stability." Chad moved his horse forward and Bob followed suit.

"Well, if you change your mind, I could always use a friend to travel with."

Chad was surprised he was even tempted to accept Bob's offer. He liked the man. He seemed like he could be a good friend. Instead of answering him, he turned his attention to the cattle. "Come along. I'll show you how to lasso one."

Bob nodded and followed him.

He handed the farmhand an extra rope. "You make a noose, like this." He demonstrated how to do the task. He watched as Bob clumsily did the process. He took the rope from him and

tested it. "It'll work, though it's a little loose." He handed it back to him.

Bob sighed.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Chad decided not to press the issue. Instead, he instructed, "You need to swing the rope above your head. Focus on your target and when you work up the momentum in swinging the rope, let it go. Make sure to aim at your target." He expertly released the rope with one hand while holding onto it with the other hand. The noose went firmly around the cow's foot. Chad urged his horse to a trot until he was beside the cow. He let the noose fall off of the cow's foot. Returning to Bob, he said, "Now, you try it."

Bob took a deep breath. He swung the rope well enough and built up enough speed so that when he released it, it got close to the cow.

"Not bad for the first try."

Bob looked pleased by the compliment. He dragged the rope back to him and swung it again. This time, it landed right next to the cow's foot.

"You'll probably get it on the third try," Chad remarked.

The third try was the charm.

"Great! Now pull the cow towards you."

Bob struggled to hold onto the rope while urging Reliable to go backwards.

"Hold on tight," Chad ordered when he noticed Bob's rope slipping from him.

The farmhand gritted his teeth as he braced himself against the weight of the cow. Reliable kept backing up but the cow wasn't budging.

Chad shook his head. He knew that Bob was going to fall off the horse before it actually happened. To his surprise, after Bob fell to the ground, the cow suddenly ran off. Since Bob held onto the rope, the cow dragged him along the ground. Chad winced. That had to hurt.

"Let go of the rope!" Chad yelled as Bob went fumbling around as the cow picked up speed to get away from him.

Bob either didn't hear him or was too shocked to obey.

Chad urged Buck to go forward and quickly swung his rope around the cow's other foot to stop it from dragging Bob any further along the ground.

Bob adjusted his hair and hat before he stood up.

How strange. If it was me, I would be more concerned about my bruises and limbs than my hair. Chad left Bob so he could pull the two ropes off of the cow. When he returned to Bob, he noticed that Bob had managed to get on Reliable again.

"Apparently, I'm not going to send you out to do this chore," Chad said as he pulled Buck to a stop.

Bob wiped his eyes.

His jaw dropped. Was Bob crying? He hid his disgust at the farmhand's sensitivity. "Look, it's not a big deal. We've established the fact that you're weak in the upper body area. I'll just give you chores that a woman can do."

Bob stared at him as if he couldn't believe his ears.

"What?" Now Chad was losing patience with the man.

"Do you really think I can't handle this job?"

"You can't do certain aspects of it. I don't know what you did for employment before you came here, but it obviously wasn't physical labor."

Bob looked down at the ground as he urged Reliable to go back to the barn.

"You're incredibly temperamental for a man," he called out to the retreating figure. Really, if he didn't know any better, he would swear Bob was a woman. He shook his head.

Chapter 5

Kate couldn't hold back her tears as she went to the river. She couldn't go back to face any of the other farmhands until she had gotten the swell of emotions out of her system. It was hard to be tough all the time. She had to constantly act like she didn't have feelings since men didn't seem to express anything but disgust, anger or humor. She wanted to bathe but didn't want to go to the barn to get the soap and towels so she simply sat on Reliable and looked at the river. She allowed herself the freedom to cry. The river was a wonderful place for solitude and peace. The North Dakota winds blew through the tall grass. At one time, Chad had planted crops in those fields but now they were allowed to go untouched. She wondered why he didn't plant anymore. Perhaps the animals and repairs took all of his time and attention.

Why do I care about his opinion? So what if he thinks I'm a sissy? The reality was that she was a woman. Could she be expected to do a man's work? Didn't she have bigger problems to deal with? Why did Chad's opinion matter anyway? If he knew her true identity, would he still be rough with her? Did the people in town have a point when they said he didn't deserve Georgia? Was Georgia a nice woman after all? Perhaps she had been wrong about Chad. Maybe he wasn't a good man. She felt foolish for entertaining romantic notions about him. She spent an hour crying,

not only about how she felt rejected from Chad but also about the loss of her parents. She spent her nights in the loft crying over them. Whenever she could let her defenses down, she allowed herself the freedom to grieve. So far the newspapers didn't express anything promising. It seemed that Derek and Dave were safe. She prayed that they would be discovered for committing the crime they did. *I want to be safe again.* It was hard to feel like a fugitive. She recalled the night she witnessed the murders:

After Derek and Dave realized that she saw them murder her parents, she ran out of town. She had taken her horse through the trees so she lost the two men as they chased her. She knew they intended to kill her too. She managed to lose them and made good time to Richmond where she let her horse loose. She couldn't afford to be found on her mare. The men knew what horse to look for and though she loved the animal, it wasn't worth dying over.

She showed up at the backdoor of her brother's house and knocked on it. The servant came and let her in. It was late at night, so the servant went to wake her brother, Paul, and his wife, Olivia, who immediately went to see her.

"Kate, what happened to you?" Paul asked as they stood in the kitchen. "You look like you've been through a war."

Her hair and clothes had gotten messed up as tree branches had poked at her on her ride through the forest. She didn't bother to consider the tears in her dress. She was too scared to care. Surely, the men would search for her at her brothers' houses. Bob, who was nicknamed Billy and was two years younger than her, lived in the same town that she did, so she didn't bother stopping by his place. Instead, she opted to go to Paul's place. Paul was four years younger than her.

"I can't explain why I'm here," she hurriedly told the astonished couple. "I have to get out of this state for awhile." Until Derek and Dave were arrested, she knew it wasn't safe for her to be in Virginia.

"What?" Clearly, Paul wasn't expecting this.

She turned to Olivia. "Can we go to your costume shop? I need to disguise myself."

“My goodness, Kate. What happened?” Paul looked stunned.

“I told you that I can’t tell you.” She knew that doing so would only put his life at risk. “You have to trust me.”

“Whatever it is, it’s terrible,” Olivia noted. “We’ll get dressed and take you to the shop.”

Paul reluctantly agreed and went to dress in his daytime clothes. Once they were ready, they hastily walked to the shop. Kate’s anxious movements prompted them to hurry.

“How can I best disguise myself so no one will recognize me?” she asked her sister-in-law.

“The best way for a woman to hide her identity is to be a man,” Olivia replied. She took out a black beard, a black wig and some male clothes. “This is the wardrobe of a typical western man. You won’t fit in with the wealthy society in these clothes. You’ll be a common man.”

“That’s even better,” she absentmindedly said as she inspected the loose clothing.

“You’ll need this glue. It will hold your beard in place no matter how much you sweat or talk. You will need this solvent to get the beard off.”

“I should leave here in this costume. I need to hop on the first train out of here.”

She let Olivia help her get dressed. Olivia explained how to use the binding around her chest to press her bosom down so that her chest appeared flat. It was hard to breathe with the binding on but she would rather be uncomfortable than dead. She carefully watched as Olivia put her beard on and set the wig on her head so that it didn’t fall off, even when Olivia tugged on it.

“It’s a good thing you’re tall. These clothes fit you pretty well,” Olivia noted. She stood back to examine her work. “What do you think?” She motioned to the mirror.

Kate took a good look at herself. “You do an excellent job, Olivia. I do look like a man.”

She was pleased.

“Just in case, you should take some skirts and shirts with you too,” Paul softly commented. “I don’t know what’s going on but the more disguises you can wear, the better your chances are of be-

ing safe. You don't know if someone's going to discover you're really not a man."

She nodded. "Do you have any women clothes in my height?"

Olivia thought for a moment. "There are a couple of costumes that I had used for the play about life on the prairie. They go well with the male costumes I gave you."

She breathed a sigh of relief as Olivia threw some female clothes into a suitcase for her.

"Kate," her brother began, "won't you give me some idea of what you're running from?"

She closed her eyes and steadied her emotions so she wouldn't start crying. "You will find out soon enough. It will become clear to you once you read tomorrow's paper. I'm sorry, Paul, but I don't have time to waste."

"Can you tell us where you're going?" Olivia wondered as she put a couple of male clothes into the suitcase.

"No, I can't. I'm sorry. I can't put your lives in danger."

They looked startled at her reply.

"Is everything ready?" she asked Olivia.

Olivia shut the suitcase and turned to her. "You need to talk like a man. Let me hear your male voice."

She lowered her voice and said, "Male voice."

"Don't force it so much. You sound like you're holding your breath. Take a deep breath and speak while you exhale."

She did as instructed. "Male voice."

"That will work."

"Will you be alright?" Paul asked.

She smiled at his concern. "I think so. As long as I stay in disguise and keep a low profile, I should be fine. I have to go to the train station alone. I don't want to risk either of you being seen with me." She picked up the heavy suitcase. "In case I don't see you again, I want you to know that I love both of you very much."

They looked as if they were ready to panic.

She hugged them.

"We love you too," Olivia quietly replied, still shocked.

Her brother nodded his agreement and hugged her back. "Here's some money." He handed some cash to her. "This should

be sufficient for almost a year.”

“I’ll find a job somewhere. I hope to return in a month,” she assured him.

As she left the shop, she focused on the number of light posts lining the street so she wouldn’t start crying. She was terrified. She didn’t know where to go or how she would survive in an unfamiliar world. She reached the train station in good time and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that Derek and Dave were nowhere in sight. She wasn’t sure where she wanted to go. She walked over to the front desk and studied the map of the United States. The train went through North Dakota. She had been reading up on that state. She figured it was a good time to check it out. It certainly was far from Virginia. A person could easily hide out in one of the smaller towns. *Derek and Dave will have a tough time finding me all the way out there.* She picked a town at random and paid the fare to get there. As she boarded the train, she allowed herself to relax. She knew her trip would be long and tiring, but she could at least stay safe.

The next afternoon, one of the train employees came by with newspapers. She bought one and noted that news of her parents’ murders were on the front page. It took her a good hour to read through the entire article since she had to keep looking out the window to settle her tears so that she wouldn’t cry. A man didn’t cry in public like a woman did. She had to stay in character.

Senator Tanner and Wife Murdered

Early this morning, Virginia Senator Murphy Tanner and his wife, Abigail, were found strangled in their home. A neighbor went to the police to report signs of a forced entry in through the side of a window. Upon inspection, the police discovered the Senator in the parlor and his wife in the upstairs hallway. Both were dead. The coroner estimates the time of death to be at 10:35pm. So far, there are no suspects to this crime though the police are holding investigations. Senator Tanner was well-known for his lumber factory and Abigail was a talented actress at the Victorian Playhouse. Senator Tanner had just proposed a bill to

remove trees from the western section of Virginia to clear the way for land and building development. Virginia Senator Rich was a strong opponent to this bill, stating that the land needed to be protected in order to preserve the great Virginia heritage. The dispute between the two Senators divided Congress. With Tanner dead, however, the bill will most likely fail to pass through the Senate. Senator Tanner and his wife are survived by their three children, Kate, Bob, and Paul Tanner. The funeral is scheduled for Tuesday at 7pm at First Virginia Baptist Church on Washington Avenue.

The article continued to describe her parents' achievements. She tore out the article and saved it. She threw out the rest of the paper. She had watched Derek strangle her father. She had slipped into the house from the window in the den because she needed to find a picture of them for their surprise anniversary party which Bob was holding at his house. The party was scheduled for the next evening, but she wanted to get the picture that night since she had to spend her day writing down letters her father planned to narrate to her. These letters were to be mailed to the other Senators and it had to do with the Tree Removal Bill he was supporting, so she knew she wouldn't have a chance to pick up the picture before the party.

She slipped in through the window so that her parents wouldn't discover the surprise party. She heard sounds of a struggle. Since the servants had the night off, she and her parents were the only people in the house. She quietly went to the closed door in the den and slowly opened it a crack. She gasped when she saw Derek strangling her father. Her mother, who had been asleep, came down to investigate the sounds and screamed. Dave peered around the corner and ran upstairs after her. Kate heard loud banging and screaming from upstairs. She knew she had to get the police. She turned to run to the window but tripped on the hem of her long dress. She fell to the floor. She anxiously stood up as she heard purposeful footsteps approach the den. She managed to reach the window by the time Derek opened the door and turned on the light.

He scowled at her. She jumped out of the window and landed on the freshly manicured grass. She ran onto her horse and rode

off. Derek followed her on his horse. She recognized both men. Derek Robin was the chief of police, and Dave Reinhart was a friend of her father's. At least, her father thought he was a friend. Dave joined the pursuit but she finally lost them in the forest she rode her horse through. She sighed. She had feared her parents hadn't survived the ordeal and reading the paper only confirmed those suspicions.

And now she was stuck in the middle of nowhere. Alone and scared. When she had settled her emotions and she knew her eyes and nose were no longer red from crying, she returned to the barn. She noticed that Tim, Sam and Jeff had left for the day. She hadn't realized that she had stayed at the river as long as she did. She returned Reliable to the stall and grabbed her supplies to bathe in the river. When she took her clothes off to bathe, she winced at the bruises and scratches on her soft and delicate white skin. Having grown up in a wealthy family, she hadn't endured the effects of physical labor. She sat in the river and let the current soothe her sore body.

She closed her eyes and thought of how her life used to be. She enjoyed going to dances, dinner parties and luncheons. Her great love was caring for the library she bought after Mr. Unger got tired of owning it. He was ready to tear it down or make it into a store, but she bought it so that she could keep the place open for people to have access to read literature. Not everyone could afford to buy a lot of books, and she had hired a young woman to entertain the children and their mothers for a children's story hour. She didn't wish to simply cater to the wealthy citizens of the city. She also wanted to entertain those who had lesser incomes but worked just as hard as those in her economic circle did.

Perhaps that was why she would even consider a courtship with Chad. He was a farmer, and he certainly was at a lower economic level than her. She had her offers of courtship from wealthy bachelors. She had accepted a couple of them, but none of them intrigued her enough to seriously consider for marriage. Her brother, Bob, often said that she should just settle for someone who enjoyed their wealthy lifestyle so she wouldn't end up being so old

that she would no longer be desirable for marriage. At thirty, she was rapidly approaching the age where she soon faced a possible life of spinsterhood. She wanted to get married and have children. She just wanted to love the man she wed. She also longed for him to love her instead of the fact that she was the Senator's daughter.

She sighed. Such concerns shouldn't even be on her mind considering the seriousness of the situation she was in. She was hiding in order to protect herself. She couldn't afford to go up to Chad and reveal the fact that she was a woman. It wasn't the right time nor was it the right place to fall in love. *Maybe I should find employment somewhere else.* She considered it, but she did feel safe out here. And that safety was more important than the awareness that she was quickly losing her heart to a man who might not be the kind of person she thought he was.

When she returned to the barn, she put up her newly washed clothes to dry on the clothesline. She didn't feel like seeing Chad for the rest of the day, so she climbed the ladder to get to the loft and took off her wet wig. She let her hair fall down and took the male clothes off. It felt good to be naked and free from the constraints of her costume. She laid down on the pillow and pulled the blanket over her. She noted that the pillow and blankets were new and recently cleaned. She was surprised that Chad took the time to replace her linens for her.

After the physically and emotionally exhausting day, it felt so good to lay down that she fell asleep within minutes. She heard someone calling Bob's name in the middle of her sleep. At first she thought she was dreaming but the sound of someone climbing up the ladder quickly alerted her to action. She grabbed the dry wig and threw it on her head. She didn't have time to put her beard on, so she shoved it under the blanket with her and pulled the blanket up to her nose so only her eyes were exposed.

"I'm not decent," she called out in her best male voice.

Unfortunately, Chad had already made it to the top of the ladder and looked at her. "I yelled out your name a couple of times and you didn't respond. Anyway, do you want to eat dinner or not?"

"No." Though she was hungry, she had no desire to spend any

time with him at the moment.

“Are you still sore about what happened in the field with the cow today?”

“No,” she lied.

“You’re hiding something. I know it.”

“Can we discuss this later?” *Like when I’m dressed as Billy?*

“There’s nothing to discuss. We’ve already figured out that you’re not meant to be a farmhand. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Some men have more physical strength than others. I can find other work for you. You don’t have to worry that I’ll fire you.”

“Alright.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell the other men why you won’t be doing the more demanding tasks. I understand what it’s like to be the laughingstock of the town.”

“Alright.”

“Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat?”

“No. I’m fine. I just want to go to sleep early tonight.”

“It’s only six.”

She rolled her eyes. Did they have to keep having a conversation when she was naked under a blanket? She could only hope it concealed her figure.

“I get it. I’ll leave you alone,” he finally muttered as he climbed down the ladder.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

“Just so you know, men aren’t usually so sensitive about being seen naked. And other men don’t care. Now, if you were actually a woman, you’d have a need to worry.”

“Why? Would you try something with me?” She meant it as a joke but he was too serious to notice her humored tone.

“Yes. I probably would.”

She peered over the edge of the loft, but he was already gone. The thought pleased her. She shook her head. Chad had no idea that she was a woman. He was merely making a comment. *What would he do if he got to meet me as Kate?*

* * * * *

The next day, she practically inhaled her breakfast. She didn't care much for grits, but she was so hungry that it tasted like a first class restaurant dinner. She spent some of the night listening to coyotes howl in the distance, and the haunting howls spooked her. She shook under her blankets and prayed through the night until she finally fell asleep, clutching the Bible close to her chest. She was relieved when the sun finally came out. After she ate, she put her bowl and spoon in the sink and washed them. She added her glass and washed it too.

"Do you want more to eat?" Chad asked.

She jerked. She hadn't expected him to come into the house. She figured he had decided to leave her alone at mealtime. "No, I'm alright."

"Well, if you get hungry before lunch, here's a sandwich you can eat. I know grits aren't very filling and considering you didn't have dinner last night, you might need something more substantial than breakfast to tide you until lunch."

She was surprised that he would do something as thoughtful as make her a snack.

"Anyway, it's right here." He placed the covered plate in the corner of the counter. "When you're done, I want to show you how to put up a shelf in the barn," he said before he left.

She quickly ate the sandwich, since she was still hungry. She joined him in the barn where he had placed a wooden shelf, four smaller pieces of wood, some nails, a hammer, two screwdrivers and some screws on the ground.

"The key is to make the shelf sturdy so it won't fall if you put something on it," he explained. "The smaller boards are going to provide the shelf with enough support so it can do the job."

She patiently watched as he screwed a smaller board to the end of the large board.

He handed another small board to her and told her to screw it to the other end of the long board.

She managed to get one screw in, though it was tough to force the screw through the wood. The second screw proved more difficult since her wrist and hand ached from the effort of doing the first one. She shook her wrist and flexed her hand to loosen her

muscles. She hadn't realized how much work went into doing such a simple task. *I really should have appreciated my servants who did all of this hard work for me.*

Sam, Tim and Jeff showed up with their horses.

"Good morning, Billy," the men called out.

"Howdy," she replied, liking the western talk she had recently picked up.

"Working on a shelf?" Sam asked.

"Yep."

They unsaddled their horses and put them into the stalls.

"Are you coming back into town this Saturday?" Tim wondered. "Nick Hanna wasn't at the fairgrounds last weekend and wants a chance to race you. He says he's the best horse rider in the state."

She grinned. She could never resist such a challenge. She glanced at Chad who was focused on his side of the board. "Can I borrow Reliable, boss?"

"Go for it," Chad replied, not taking his eyes off of the screw in front of him. He was almost done with his side.

"I'll be there," she told Tim. "You tell him that he may be the best in the state, but I'm the best in the country."

Sam chuckled. "My money's on you. There's a lot of bets going around."

"I won't disappoint anyone who bets on my side," she assured him.

"I don't know," Jeff argued. "Nick is good."

She shrugged. "That may be true but I'm the best."

Chad rolled his eyes but didn't comment.

He really hates it when people brag. He thinks a person's actions should speak for him.

She ignored the observation and focused on her work and her conversation with the other men. She didn't care for them but wanted to fit in with the townspeople.

"We might be able to gather some people together to play some fiddles and have a square dance after the race," Sam added. "Have you ever square danced?"

"Nope. Can't say I have," she responded. She loved to dance

but it had all been ballroom dancing.

“It’s a good way to dance with a lot of women since we frequently change partners. A lot of the women in town were impressed with you last weekend and want to talk to you.”

She inwardly groaned. That wasn’t her idea of a good time, but she would play along in order to stay in character. After all, it would look weird if she didn’t pretend to be interested in women. “As long as they understand that no lady can hold me down, then there won’t be any broken hearts. I don’t want to get any of their hopes up since I have no intention of marrying for a long time.”

“That’s what Frank Crane said before he met Elizabeth Baker. Now they’re engaged.”

She forced her agitation not to show. Instead, she said, “I’m out of here before the summer is up. I won’t be taking any of the ladies with me.”

“Who knows? Maybe you’ll like it here so much that you’ll want to stay,” Tim inserted.

“It worked for Chad. He moved here to be with Georgia,” Jeff added.

She saw Chad grit his teeth before he turned to her and asked, “Are you done with your side yet?”

“Almost,” she told him, pretending she didn’t notice that he was irritated with the men. She worked on her last screw. Her hand was protesting but she forced her discomfort aside so she wouldn’t have to listen to him tell her how feminine she seemed since she couldn’t do the work he told her to do.

“You’re already popular around here,” Sam told her. “I think we might be able to talk the women into making a couple of dishes so we can have another potluck.”

Now that sounded like a good idea. She was eager to taste some of their delicious food again. “Who made the fried chicken last Saturday?” she wondered.

“Rachel Courtney. She’s married though so you can’t court her.”

“I just wanted to eat more of her food. I might thank her for making it but I had no intention of being friendly with her. Really, I can’t stress the fact enough that I am not settling down yet.”

“We’d love to have you stick around,” Jeff replied.

They clearly didn’t believe her or chose not to believe her, so she left the matter alone. She turned to Chad. “Alright. I’m done. What’s next, boss?”

Chad turned to his other farmhands. “Sam and Jeff, I need you to get a ladder and some red paint and brushes from the shed. Tim, I want you to feed the sheep and collect the eggs.”

“We must have done too much socializing,” Tim grumbled as they went to their assigned tasks.

“Would they have done what you told them to if I wasn’t here?” she asked Chad.

It was meant to be a question spoken out of curiosity, but he apparently took offense to it since he scowled at her.

“Lighten up. I was just asking a simple question.” She shook her head and waited for him to tell her what to do next.

To her surprise, he glared at her.

What did I do now? He was so particular about anything she dared to say. *And they say women are hard to deal with.*

“I managed this farm before you came and I’ll manage it after you’re gone,” he coldly stated. He practically threw the board up to the wall and angrily pounded the nails through the smaller boards and into the wall.

“Were you this delightful with your wife?” She hadn’t meant to say it aloud but the words flew out before she had time to consider the sanity of asking such a question to a man who had a hammer in his hand.

He ignored her and continued to work on the shelf.

She crossed her arms. “I’m starting to wonder just what kind of husband you were to her. Perhaps I misjudged her. Maybe she was a saint because she had to put up with you and your radical mood swings.”

He stopped pounding the nails into the wall and turned to her.

Wow. I said too much. She was ready to run out of the barn and find Sam and Jeff or Tim. At least with the other farmhands around, he kept quiet.

“Do you think I’m a fool?” he finally demanded.

This wasn’t what she expected. “Uh...” She wasn’t sure how to

respond. Did she think he was a fool? She thought over his question. "Alright. Yes, I do."

His jaw dropped.

"Well, you asked. Did you want me to lie?"

"You are so good at reading people you barely know. How am I a fool?"

"You let them walk all over you. I'm the only one you care to tell your true opinion to. You have no trouble pointing out how inferior I am to you in physical strength, yet you would never say one negative word to any of those three men. You don't stand up for yourself, and that makes you a fool. You think you're strong, but real strength comes from within. Your father-in-law was right. He said you were weak."

His face grew red. "I'm not as foolish as you think I am, Bob, if that's your real name. I don't believe your story. I don't believe you're from Kentucky and seeking adventure out through the country. You're here for another reason. Either you're hiding because you're in danger or in trouble with the law, I haven't figured that out yet. But I will discover your secret."

She blanched. *So give him a point for figuring that one out.* She uneasily cleared her throat. "Fine. So we're both fools."

He dropped his hammer and ran to the ladder.

She gasped and followed him. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to find out the truth."

This wasn't good. "Look, let's not be hasty. We both have things to hide. I can live with that. Let's agree that we won't go snooping into each other's business."

Just as he reached the top of the ladder, she grabbed him by the ankle. He shook his leg to get her loose but she held on with all of her strength.

"I take it back! You're not a fool," she quickly yelled. "I'm sure you were a perfect gentleman around your crazy and unlovable wife. Everyone is wrong and you're right!"

"Let go of me!" He kicked his leg back and the ladder almost fell backward. Chad held onto the edge of the loft and pulled them forward until the ladder settled back into place.

There was no way she was going to let him discover her secret.

She rested one foot on the ladder and stepped up far enough so she could reach the belt around his waist. She climbed over his back and over his head. Her foot landed by accident on his face as she pushed off of him so she was safely in the loft. She managed to get away from him before he could grab her.

To her shock, he climbed back down the ladder and took it away. She gasped and looked down at him.

“Bring that back!” she demanded.

“I will when it’s convenient for me. I need this to paint the side of this barn.”

“What? You can’t leave me here!”

“Why not? I’m a horrible person. You’ve figured it out. My wife was wonderful. I did this to her all the time.”

“Oh, we both know you wouldn’t have done this to a woman.”

“Do we?” He put the ladder on his shoulder and walked towards the barn door.

“You can’t be serious!”

He shrugged and kept walking.

She stared after him, appalled that he actually left her up there without any way to get down. After a few minutes, she sat down. She had pushed him too far. She didn’t really believe he was mean to his wife. It didn’t fit with everything she had seen. He wouldn’t have made her a sandwich that morning, frequently clean her blankets or let her borrow Reliable for the horse races if he wasn’t a considerate person.

He was tired of being ignored and put down from other people though. It was bad enough that Sam, Tim and Jeff taunted him on a daily basis, but for her to insinuate that he needed her in order to keep the other farmhands in line and calling him weak was too much. Considering all the things he could have done to her in her masculine role, leaving her stranded in the loft was tame. She had heard stories from Sam, Tim and Jeff about how they proved a point to other men who irritated them by beating them up. At least, she hadn’t upset them.

She sighed as she glanced around the barn. Thankfully, her secret was safe. The less anyone else knew, the safer they were. She watched the horses for awhile before she got bored and laid down.

She would have loved to have taken off her binding but didn't dare in case Chad came back and found her. The previous day had been too close of a call. She closed her eyes. Despite her irritation with Chad, she still cared for him. It was getting more and more difficult to hide her true identity when he was near her. She was too aware of her attraction to him.

Just as she drifted off to a light slumber, some voices woke her up.

"I don't get why Billy is so nice to Chad," Jeff said.

"Billy's probably a lot like Georgia," Sam replied. "They would have gotten along great. It's too bad she didn't marry Billy instead of Chad."

"Chad always thought he was too good for anyone. Just because you come from wealth, it doesn't make you better than everyone else."

She peered over the ledge, making sure she was safely hidden from sight.

Sam and Jeff were sitting on a couple of stools and drinking some whiskey.

"Where is Billy at, anyway?" Jeff asked.

"Chad said that Billy had to take care of some personal stuff."

"I'm glad he decided not to replace Billy with that man who came by looking for a job here. I like Billy."

"Billy's a good man. He's one of us." Jeff took a gulp of his whiskey. "How do you know someone applied for the farmhand job?"

"I saw him talking to Chad a few minutes ago. He was a big muscular man. I didn't catch his name but heard him telling Chad about his experience as a farmhand. Chad just told him that he already had someone filling in for the job."

They sat in silence for a minute while they drank more whiskey.

"You know, it's not just the money that made Chad feel like he was superior to us. It's that whole religion thing," Sam said. "He won't drink, gamble, swear, or sleep around."

"Well, it's not like he's physically able to have sex. Poor guy. Can you imagine not being able to perform? What a shame. Geor-

gia wanted children so badly too.”

“That’s just as well. Would we really want him to be the father of our nieces or nephews? They’d all be religious fanatics. If he doesn’t want to do all that, then that’s fine but don’t go preaching to other people about not doing it.”

“There was a time when he did drink a lot.”

“Yeah and then he suddenly stopped and gave himself to Christ.” He rolled his eyes. “And he’s been acting holier than thou ever since.”

“I can’t stand him either but what are we going to do when we can’t get the farm back from him? It’s not his but he insists on holding onto it.”

“He’s probably holding onto it because it reminds him of Georgia. If nothing else, he was as devoted to her as a puppy dog is devoted to its owner.”

“Thankfully, he has no kids to give it to. We can claim it as soon as he dies.”

“Which can’t happen soon enough, as far as I’m concerned. It should have been him that died instead of Georgia.”

Kate cringed. With in-laws like those two, who needed enemies?

Sam put his whiskey flask back in his pocket and stood up. “We better get out there before he comes looking for us. I don’t know what’s gotten into him today, but he’s been unusually bossy.”

“Maybe he’s finally developed a backbone,” Jeff snorted.

They left the barn.

What lovely men, she sarcastically thought. Suddenly, she felt guilty for the way she talked to Chad. Sure, he didn’t have to be so rough telling her she couldn’t handle the more physically demanding chores on the farm but wasn’t he right? She wasn’t a man, so how could she expect to be able to do a man’s job? She was lucky that he was nice enough to keep her on as a farmhand. He could easily fire her but chose not to, not even when he had another offer from someone who was trained in farming. *He’s a good man. He would be faithful and considerate to a woman if he can keep a farmhand hired who couldn’t perform some of the duties on the job*

and actually told him what he didn't want to hear.

She laid back in her temporary bed and closed her eyes. She actually found the neighing of the horses, the meowing of the cats and the clucking of the hens soothing. She didn't know how much time passed before she heard someone enter the barn and put the ladder against the loft. She waited until Chad came up the ladder before she opened her eyes.

"Am I allowed to join in the fun and work?" she joked.

He sighed and leaned against the ladder. "I'm sorry about earlier. You're entitled to your opinion as long as it doesn't affect your motivation to work. As for your secret," he shrugged, "we all have something to hide so it's no big deal as long as you're an honest man. You don't strike me as someone who would be running because of a crime you committed."

"I'm sorry too. You're a good employer. I know I can't handle the harder tasks as well as other men my height can."

"It's probably because you're so thin, though being thin does come in handy when it comes to being on a roof. I need someone to paint the barn roof."

"I'll be happy to do it, boss."

She noticed him give a slight smile as he shook his head and went back down the ladder. She followed him down.

"The black paint is in the shed. It's where all the paint is," he told her.

"I'll get right on it." She was relieved to have things go back to normal.

Chapter 6

Half the barn was painted by Friday afternoon, and once again, Chad marveled that Bob could get Sam, Tim and Jeff to help out. Though Chad tried to be firm with them, they seemed to be content to ignore him or do their job slow enough that they made little progress. What was Bob's secret? It was more than being the leader of their pack. Bob had a natural charm about him that won people over. He probably never made an enemy a day in his life. He was too likeable. Chad didn't get along with everyone. He was more quiet and serious than Bob. Bob was talk-a-tive and joked around. There were times when Chad sensed a deep sorrow from Bob, but he respected the man's need for distance on emotional issues. It wasn't Chad's style to dwell on emotional topics either. He simply went about his life and did what he had to do. He lived from one day to the next with little thought to his future.

After Sam, Tim and Jeff went home for the weekend, Chad saw that Bob was still painting the side of the barn. What Bob didn't have in physical strength, he more than made up for in determination and patience. He preformed his given task to the best of his ability. *I really have been too hard on him. Can he help it if he's not built to do more demanding tasks?* God didn't make everyone the same way.

Chad finished cleaning out the horses' stalls and went over to

Bob who was concentrating on his up and down strokes with the paintbrush. "Aren't you hungry?" he asked the farmhand.

Bob glanced down from his work. "What time is it?"

"A little after six."

"Already?" He inspected the work he had done and how much more he needed to paint. "I'll eat once I'm done with this section." He motioned to the area he wanted to complete. "I want everything to look good once I'm done."

Chad chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"I thought women were the only ones who were concerned with the way something looked." He went to the house to make dinner.

A half hour later, Bob came to the kitchen and took off his hat. "Whatever you're making tonight, it smells great."

Chad grinned. "I thought I would get some use out of one of the lambs I had Sam and Tim help me kill today. Albert Price came out today. He owns the butcher shop and paid me for all but one. I kept one so we could have something decent to eat for a change. I know it gets old eating the same meals all the time. Do you like lamb chops?"

"I love them." Bob sat down. "So that's why that man came out today. Why didn't you have me help with that chore?"

"Because you were doing such a good job on the barn roof. Sam and Tim were goofing off so I put them to use in something they do well." *Like killing things, such as people's spirits.*

"I understand."

Chad glanced at him. Every time he said that, it unnerved him. He almost felt like he was an open book to the man. Pushing aside the eerie thought, he put the cooked lamb chops on the plate and added a baked potato to each plate.

"I didn't realize you had potatoes," Bob said.

"I have a vegetable and fruit garden. Haven't you been by those?"

Bob shook his head.

"Maybe you should ride Reliable around this weekend and check out this farm. Do you ever wonder where I go off to during

certain times of the day?”

“I assumed you were hiding from the delightful three.”

“I don’t need to hide from them. They run off and drink whiskey or talk when they think I’m not looking.”

“You know they do that?”

“Very little gets by me.”

Bob looked uneasy about that.

“Whatever your secret is, I have no idea what it is,” he assured the man.

“I’m not in trouble with the law or anything like that. It’s just something I need to do until the time is right for me to go back.”

“Because someone’s out to harm you?”

“More or less.”

“Can I ask you anything about your family or where you came from?”

Bob sighed. “I suppose there’s no danger in telling you some things. I have a brother and a sister. I had good parents who have joined the Lord. I had a regular, happy childhood. And now I’m seeing what life has to offer.”

That sounded innocent enough. It only confirmed Chad’s earlier suspicion that his new farmhand was in some kind of trouble from someone who wished to harm him.

“What about you? Do you have any siblings?” Bob asked.

“I have one brother. He’s three years younger than me.”

“So that makes him how old?”

“Thirty-three.”

“Hmm...I didn’t think you were older than thirty-five.”

“You were one year off.”

Chad put their plates on the table.

“Do you want any help?” Bob offered.

“You always ask me that and I always say no. I don’t mind doing this. It’s the least I can do for all the work you do.” Sometimes he wondered if he should be paying Bob some actual money since Bob worked harder than any of the other farmhands.

“Alright. I don’t mind doing my part.”

You already do more than your part. When Chad wasn’t looking, Bob made it a point to feed the horses or clean out the stalls or

collect eggs and put them in the house. Chad suspected that Bob was a humble man who didn't want attention drawn to him, so Chad refrained from mentioning the fact that he noticed the younger man's work. Instead, Chad tried to make the loft more comfortable by adding more blankets and frequently washing the linen and setting out fresh towels and soap. Bob seemed to take a lot of baths in the river and washed his clothes often since Chad would find his clothes on the clothesline on most days. *He's very particular about being clean.* That was probably a good thing since he slept outdoors. Chad often took baths as well but he had his own tub in the house.

Bob waited until Chad was across from him before he began eating. Chad thought that was strange but in a nice way. It was better than feeling invisible.

"So, are you going to the horse race, square dance, and potluck tomorrow?" Bob asked.

"No."

"Why not? Don't you want to see me beat Nick at the horse race?"

"Are you that certain you'll win?"

"I used to train other people on how to handle a horse. I get along with every horse I meet. Reliable and I work in perfect unison. That horse won't let me down."

Chad was tempted to go to see if Bob's claims were based in reality or if he was simply bragging to look good to Sam, Tim and Jeff. *But why would he brag to me? I'm not impressed with such boasting.* "I'm sure it would be a sight to see but I'll just hang around here and catch up on the laundry."

"If I help with that chore, then you'll have time to go. It would be fun. We could pig out on some great food. That Rachel makes the best fried chicken I ever tasted." He took a bite of the lamb chops. "Though this is great too."

He grinned, pleased that the man found it to his liking. He shrugged. "I'm content to stick to myself."

"Don't you like to socialize?"

"Only if I have someone to go with that I like."

"You can go with me."

“That’s not exactly what I meant.”

“Oh, you mean you would rather go with a woman.” He paused from eating and looked at him. “Maybe you should go to meet women. Some of them in town are good looking and have good morals.”

“I know the women in town and none of them are interesting.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.” He sighed. Bob didn’t ask easy questions. “After Georgia died, I was just so glad to be out of the marriage that I didn’t bother to think of marrying anyone else. It’s nice to not have a woman running every facet of my life.”

“Do you mind if I ask what she did?”

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to talk about the woman that made him miserable but there was something about Bob that he could relate to. “I guess not. She had to keep track of everything I did. Whenever I went into town, she had to come with me to make sure I didn’t reveal her secrets. She looked good to everyone. You’re right about me. I am a fool. I believed she was who she pretended to be. It was as if she wore a disguise when I was courting her, and as soon as we got married, she took the mask off and I got to see her for who she really was. Only, she kept the disguise on around everyone else. She looked the same and dressed the same but she was two completely different people. She was warm and kind to everyone on the surface, but she brought a lot of misery that they never knew about. There were things she plotted behind their backs that messed up their lives, and while she pretended to let them cry on her shoulder, she would come back here and laugh about it. She used to say that people were easy to manipulate.”

“Do you think I’m manipulative?”

“To a point. You lie about who you are to get Sam, Tim and Jeff’s approval. I mean, I can understand why you do it. You’re not here for the long-term so you should do what you can to fit in.” He paused. “I may not like those men, but they are honest with me. At least, I know what they’re saying about me to my face is what they’re saying about me behind my back. That’s why I can tolerate them.”

“Sometimes someone has to lie. There are situations where

you can't reveal the truth for fear of being harmed or unintentionally harming someone else. Not all disguises are bad."

He considered Bob's words. "I can see your point."

"Did you join Georgia in her goal to make everyone think she was a perfect person?"

"I did after her brothers made it clear that I better talk nice about her."

"How did they do that?"

"A year into our marriage, Georgia made it look as if the man who was courting Lacy was secretly courting another woman. The truth was that the man wanted to marry Lacy, but I didn't find out what happened until several months later. I went to tell Lacy, but she didn't believe me and neither did her brothers. Her brothers were so upset I would say something bad about Georgia that they beat me up until I got the point. I hope you're careful when you're playing your game with them. Considering your strength, you don't stand a chance against them."

"How awful for Lacy."

That struck Chad as a feminine observation but he dismissed the thought. Bob was just a strangely sensitive man. "Lacy discovered the truth on her own four years later. She tried to get her own revenge but it didn't work."

"She tried to sleep with you?"

"Thank God it was just 'tried.'" He didn't want to think of that night. It turned his stomach to think of how close he came to committing adultery. He finished his meal. Now he was depressed. "I'm not proud of certain parts of my past, but there's nothing I can do about it now. I just go on and try to live right before God."

"Well, you do a good job."

The validation meant a lot to Chad, though he didn't tell Bob that. Instead, he stood up and went to the sink to wash his dishes and the pot and pan.

"If you met a woman who was sincere about caring for you, would you be interested in marriage?" Bob asked.

Chad took a moment to reflect on the question before answering. "I know that very few women are like Georgia. I'm not op-

posed to marriage. I just want to make sure she's real. I don't want her to pretend to be something she's not. That's the problem I had with Georgia and I spent ten years regretting that mistake."

Bob slowly nodded. He stood up and took his dishes to the sink. "I'll wash them if you want."

"No. I got it. You should go to the loft and rest. You worked harder than usual today."

"Do you mind if I take Reliable for a ride in the fields? I'd like to prepare for the race tomorrow."

"Go ahead. I hope you win."

Bob smiled. "I always do. Are you sure you won't come along? You don't have to marry a woman to enjoy dancing with one."

"No. I'll stay here. I have plenty to keep me occupied."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. I like to get out and socialize."

"I can tell. You need to be around people."

Bob left the house.

Chad turned his attention back to the dishes. He hadn't considered marrying again up to that point. He didn't believe that all women were evil. His mother and aunts, after all, had been good women. He was aware of how lonely some of his days and nights felt with it being just him in the house all the time. He did like having Bob around. One of the reasons he set up the loft was so he could have someone to talk to on the weekends. Sadly, even being surrounded by people whom he didn't care for was better than the resounding emptiness that plagued him on the farm. After Georgia's death, he had been relieved to be alone because it was better than being with her. He still preferred the loneliness to her. But her brothers and cousins weren't as bad as she was. She was in a class by herself.

Having met Bob, however, he realized how nice it was to have a friend. He figured that a good woman would be even better. God gave man animals in the Garden of Eden and man was still plagued with a loneliness for someone who was his equal. He didn't want to be with any of the women who knew Georgia. He wanted someone who never met the woman. He didn't want to be reminded of his dead wife. *I should get out of here. I can't just*

expect the right woman to show up on my doorstep. But where would I go? That was the question that haunted him every time he thought about leaving the farm.

* * * * *

When Bob returned from town late the next afternoon, he reported that he won the race. “Nick was upset but he’ll get over it. You missed a great show. We were tied for most of it, but good old Reliable came through. You got a terrific horse. He lives up to his name. He’s very dependable.”

“I’m glad to hear you won.” Chad smiled as he looked up from the cow he was milking.

“You missed some great food. Square dancing wasn’t so bad either. I never did that kind of dancing before. It was actually fun. Have you square danced?”

“I did when Georgia was alive. It was alright.”

“Do you like to dance?”

“Yes, it was fun.”

“I sense you used to have a lot of fun.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Well, just because you stopped, it doesn’t mean you can’t start to enjoy life again.”

Bob walked out of the barn.

After Chad was done taking care of the milk, he went to see what Bob was up to. He knew that Bob wouldn’t be having dinner since he was full from the potluck. He walked into the horse barn and noticed that Reliable was gone. Curious, he saddled Buck and went to see what Bob was up to. He should have known. He couldn’t help but be impressed with Bob’s determination to learn how to lasso cattle.

Bob swung the rope several times before he threw it at one of the cattle. He got the rope around the cow and pulled on it but fell off when the cow began running away from him. He let go of the rope and stood up. He brushed the dirt off of his clothes and hopped back on Reliable. He chased the cow until he caught up to it. He waited until the cow stopped before he took the rope off of

it. Then he found another cow to try to lasso.

I'll give Bob credit for not giving up. Chad shook his head in amusement and went back to the barn.

* * * * *

The next morning after breakfast, Bob offered to help him with his garden.

"You can take the day off," Chad replied. "I don't expect you to work on Sunday."

Bob shrugged. "I have nothing else to do. I read enough at night. I'd like to do something to stay active."

"I suppose if I say no, you'll continue painting the barn?"

"I could do that instead if you'd prefer."

"I could use help with the garden. We've had more rain than usual over the past two weeks, so weeds have been springing up everywhere. Do you mind pulling some?" That should be a task Bob could handle with ease.

"I'd be happy to do it, boss."

Chad grinned as they left the house. "Did you take the time to explore the property?"

He nodded. "I did after I got back from the potluck yesterday."

"So you know where the vegetable and fruit gardens are?"

"Yes." He paused. "Why don't you plant crops anymore?"

"I thought I'd give the land time to rest. The soil was beginning to wear down from years of use, so I figured if I gave it a break, it would replenish itself. I got the idea from the Bible. I think all things can use a break, which is why you deserve a day off. Even when you come back from town, you do some type of work."

"I don't mind. It keeps me from being bored. Besides, I notice that you don't take a day off."

"Well, this is my property. I have to constantly maintain it or else the work will be overwhelming."

"I notice that you take good care of your things."

"I try to. It's easier to do upkeep on things that need attention than it is to wait until the whole thing is destroyed."

Bob nodded. "It probably is."

When they reached the vegetable garden, Chad got on his knees and started pulling some weeds. "These are the weeds." He showed them to the farmhand so he wouldn't accidentally pick the growing vegetables by mistake.

Bob seemed hesitant.

"What's wrong?" Chad asked as he continued pulling out the weeds.

"You don't use gloves?"

He shrugged. "I see no reason to. I don't use chemicals in the soil, and I wash my hands at the water pump with soap when I'm done."

Bob glanced at the ground uncertainly.

Chad decided not to comment on how odd it was for a man to be picky about touching dirt. Instead, he said, "If you would like to wear gloves, I do have several pairs in the shed."

The younger man looked relieved and went to get them.

He turned back to the garden and pulled out more weeds and some small rocks that were in the vegetables' way. He had been rough on Bob since the man showed up, but despite the hard time he gave the man, Bob still gave his full effort to helping him. Therefore, he was determined that he wouldn't give the man a hard time anymore. Not everyone was built for farming.

When Bob returned with the gloves, he knelt close to Chad and began pulling up the weeds. Feeling uncomfortable with being so close to his farmhand, Chad worked his way away from Bob.

"Do you like this work?" Bob asked him.

Chad hadn't ever thought of it before so he had to take a moment to consider it. "I suppose it's alright. It's a living. There's a feeling of accomplishment in working with my hands. Unfortunately, this is a profession that's reliant on the grace of God. He sends the rain and the sun. I can't take credit for all the profit I obtain."

"I can tell that God has blessed you with all the healthy animals and your gardens doing as well as they are."

After a couple of minutes of silence, Chad asked, "Do you mind if I ask what other jobs you've done?"

Bob worked his way down the row across from Chad. "I have had a desk job and even had to use a telephone."

Chad had heard of telephones but hadn't had the need to use one.

Bob continued. "I've cleaned up a library and helped restore it to its former glory. I've acted in a play. I've trained horses."

"That explains why you're so good with Reliable."

"Well, I can honestly say that the horses were often easier to train than the owners. You'd be surprised at how many people think they understand their horses, but they miss subtle cues from the animals. That's the danger in riding a horse. If you aren't attuned to its cues, you run the risk of getting hurt, or worse."

Like Georgia being thrown off of Star. He wondered if Star sent out a cue that Georgia missed.

"I used to do a lot of racing but it was always for fun," Bob continued.

"Did you win all of them?"

"No. My brother used to beat me in every race. He's the one that taught me how to lean forward on a horse to increase my speed. I managed to beat him a couple of times but he can still outrun me if I'm not careful."

Chad glanced at him. "I thought you said you were the best."

"I might have exaggerated a little bit but I'm pretty close to it. I just need a little more practice and I'll beat my brother in every race. He's worried about it too, though he does his best to hide that fact."

"I'm fast too."

Bob looked up from the ground and studied him in interest. "You are? Why haven't you said anything before?"

He shrugged. "I don't care to say anything in front of the other men."

"You know, I can't resist asking if I can see your skill on a horse. Care to race?"

"A friendly race might be fun, but I'm not making any bets. I don't believe in gambling."

"I don't either." He sighed. "My family doesn't race for anything but entertainment. I can't help it if the other people insist on

making bets.”

“You made a bet about the eggs the other day.”

“Only because I was trying to fit in.” He pulled a couple of weeds from the ground. “I realize I’m compromising some of my beliefs in going along with the other farmhands. I just want to get by while I’m here, but I have to confess that you’re not weak. I’ve had time to think about it, and they got it all wrong. They think that anyone who joins them is strong, but the truth is, it takes strength to stay true to your convictions, even when it means being unpopular.”

Chad appreciated the man’s compliment. “Doing the right thing isn’t always easy. Just be glad you can get out of here.”

After they finished clearing the gardens from unwanted weeds and rocks, they went to the barn to race the horses.

“Which one do you want to race?” Chad asked.

“Which one do you race best on?” Bob wondered.

“Reliable is the best for speed. Buck is good about holding his own too.”

“But you won’t even ride Star?”

“Star is best left alone.”

The man hesitated but finally spoke up. “Do you mind if I check her out? I won’t ride her. I just want to get a feel for her and see what she’s about.”

Chad nodded. There was no danger in that. He led Bob to the fenced land behind the barn so he could check out Star. He watched as Bob approached the mare. Bob was careful in how he walked over to her and gave the animal sufficient time to get used to him before he touched her neck and back. Star remained calm while Bob walked around the animal, touching her the entire time, probably to notify her that he was still nearby. It was a good tactic.

When Bob returned, he said, “I can see why you don’t want anyone to ride her. She’s easily spooked. She doesn’t like surprises. Anything remotely small that pops up in her path is going to disturb her. You have to know how to train her to overcome her fears. I could work with her on that if you’d like.”

“No. I’d rather just let her be as she is.” Chad wasn’t comfortable with anyone riding the animal, even if that person did figure

her out. Apparently, Bob's gift wasn't limited to reading people.

Bob shrugged. "It's your horse. I'll abide by your rules. Alright. Do you want to have that race? Give me the horse you think won't win."

"No. I'm going to give you the horse I think will win. I don't want you handing me a victory." Chad had to admit that he enjoyed the opportunity to compete with Bob on a horse. "I'll take Buck."

Once they saddled their horses, they agreed on a path to race and set out on the horses. Chad had to admit that he was impressed with Bob's grace and ability on the animal. Chad won the race but it was a close win.

"I can't believe I lost!" Though Bob pretended to be upset, Chad noted the amusement in his voice. "You really know how to handle a horse."

"I had a lot of time to learn out here."

"Remind me not to race you in town. I don't need you to show me up."

Chad grinned. "There's no danger of that." He had forgotten how much fun it could be to do something for the sake of having fun. He was enjoying having Bob around. Bob was a good friend.

Chapter 7

The next day while Kate was in her Billy outfit and painting some of the roof on the barn, she was able to look out along the fields to see what was going on around the farm. She noticed that Chad, Sam and Tim were on their horses and leading the cattle from one field to another. She recognized Chad's lean and muscular frame as he gracefully moved with Reliable as the horse chased the cattle. She set the paintbrush down for a moment so she could admire the way he looked while working on the horse. He was in tune with the animal and easily handled its movements. *He would do well in the horse competitions back home.*

"Billy! Some of that paint is getting on me!" Jeff complained.

"Oh, sorry."

She immediately put her paintbrush back into the can of black paint. While she painted the roof, Jeff was painting the side of the barn. She quickly ran the paintbrush over the section of the roof where the paint had dripped off of her brush before it had time to dry. Though no one would actually see the error, she didn't wish to have it there.

After the men returned from the pasture, their shirts clung to their bodies from the sweat of working in the hot sun. She tried not to stare at Chad as he took his shirt off so he could wash his

sweaty face, arms and chest with the cool water that he pumped from the well but he was too tempting to resist. Sam and Tim also took their shirts off but they weren't nearly as muscular as Chad was. Her eyes drank in the sight of her employer, trying to memorize each muscle on his body. She sighed. He had the kind of body that a woman would be very happy to touch.

"If you're thirsty, go ahead and get some," Jeff told her. "I'll paint this section of the barn for you."

She quickly looked away from Chad. She was glad the beard hid her embarrassment. She hadn't realized she was staring at Chad. She cleared her throat. "Yes. I think I will get some water."

Her hands and legs were shaking as she made her way down the ladder. She took her time in walking to Chad. She hoped that he would be gone by the time she reached the water pump. She was aware that Jeff was glancing at her to check on her progress. She took a deep breath. Sam and Tim had already left the pump and had put their shirts back on but Chad was taking his time and was washing his face. She stood uneasily before him, acutely aware of the butterflies fluttering wildly in her stomach. She had seen her brothers without their shirts on when they were younger but they weren't anywhere near as attractive as Chad was.

I could stare at him all day and never get bored, she thought. She knew that if she were in front of him as a woman, it would be inappropriate for him to be without his shirt on. But since she was a man, no one thought anything of it. Only, she was pretending to be a man, and she was strongly attracted to him.

"Oh, hey there, Bob," he greeted when he noticed her. "Did you need something?"

Yes. I need you to take me in your strong arms and kiss me. Of course, she couldn't actually say this, so she cleared her throat and asked, "I saw you and the others in the fields. I noticed you lassoed a couple of cattle."

"We do that when we need to reign them in. Some of the cattle like to veer off to a different field, so they have to be lassoed to stay with the rest of the group."

Though she nodded, she wasn't really paying attention to what he was saying. She was too busy thinking of how wonderful he

looked as the sun dried the water off of his body.

“I was thinking of some lassoing techniques you can use to improve your skill,” he suddenly said. “If you’d like, I could get a lariat out and show you different methods to spin the rope. You could stand to improve your knots too.”

She dumbly nodded, not sure what she was agreeing to.

“Alright. I’ll get a clean shirt on and join you in the shed.” He left to go into the house.

She sighed, disappointed. She was enjoying the view of him way too much. She shook her head. *Stay in character. I’m Billy, not Kate.*

She mutely walked to the shed. She had a hard time believing that he couldn’t perform his husbandly duty to Georgia. A man that gorgeous surely didn’t have trouble in that area. Even if he was, there were other ways a man could please a woman. Sex wasn’t merely about physical activity. A man had to be kind, considerate and loving. What woman would want a man who treated her poorly, even if he could do the physical act of sex? She decided that she would rather be with a man who treated her well. She hadn’t had sex but she had enough of an imagination to understand that should Chad be impotent, then he had other ways to be physically satisfying to her. After all, sexual pleasure wasn’t restricted to intercourse.

“Billy,” Jeff called out.

Startled, she stopped at the shed door and glanced at the barn where Jeff was taking his time painting. She cleared her throat. “What?”

“I noticed you didn’t get any water.”

“Oh.” She had forgotten about that. “Boss said he wanted me to go to the shed. I’ll get a drink later.”

Before he could say anything else, she slipped into the shed and waited for Chad to show up. Once again, she contemplated appearing before him as Kate. But would he welcome her as a woman? After his experience with Georgia, would he be willing to open his heart to someone else? How would she even approach him as a woman? She couldn’t just show up on his doorstep.

Chad appeared in the doorway in a fresh blue and white shirt

with black britches and black boots. His black hat completed the look. His clothes were well worn with time, but he still looked amazing in them. She hadn't been so aware of how appealing he was until she saw him without his shirt on, and now that she knew what was under his shirt, she found it hard to focus around him. She desperately wanted to kiss him and feel his strong arms around her.

This has to stop! I can't keep thinking this way! She took a deep breath and turned her attention to the lariat he handed her.

"I think this will work," he said. He picked up another lariat. "I'll use this one."

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?" she asked, hoping she sounded adequately masculine.

He shrugged. "No."

Now that he was standing in front of her and looking at her, she had trouble knowing how to word her question. How would one man ask another man the question that was on her mind? She cleared her throat. "I was just wondering if you would be interested in marrying again?"

He frowned. "You're not going to play matchmaker, are you? I already told you that I have no interest in any of the women in town."

"No. There's no one in mind." Well, that was technically a lie, but she couldn't tell him that without revealing her secret. "What I meant was that since your relationship with Georgia was far from ideal, have you sworn off women all together?"

"That sounds like a loaded question."

"Depends on how you take it." She looked down at the rope in her hands.

"I realize that Georgia was unusual, but considering the fact that everyone in town thinks so well of her, I would rather not get involved with the women who knew her."

"So you don't want to marry again?" She dared to look back at him.

"It's not likely to happen since I'm not leaving town."

"Let's say a new woman showed up in town. Would she be interesting to you?"

He crossed his arms and studied her.

She suddenly felt as if he could tell that she was really a woman, so she quickly knelt down to retie her bootstraps.

“Did a new woman show up at the potluck on Saturday?” Chad finally asked.

She paused before answering. “You could say that.”

“Then I’m sure the other available men in town will be anxious to court her.”

“You wouldn’t be interested?”

“I probably would be.”

She was relieved. At least, he hadn’t dismissed the very notion of marriage.

He glanced at her. “Are you trying to fix me up with this new woman?”

“No. I was just wondering if you had let Georgia sour you from other women. There are some women out there who are good and would make a loving spouse.”

“I know. I had good female relatives while growing up.” He turned his attention to the lariat in her hands. “Are you ready to learn how to lasso?”

“Are we going out to the field again?”

“No. We can do it here. Come on.”

She followed him out of the shed.

“I’ve been thinking of what I did wrong when I had you go out to the pasture to lasso a cow. I never took the time to show you the technique to use when you swing your rope. So, we’ll start here. Do you remember how to make the loop?”

She nodded and repeated the procedure for making the appropriate knot.

He took it from her and tested it. “It’s better than last time. You’ll get the hang of it.”

She was pleased by his compliment. She watched as he expertly made his own knot and began spinning the rope, pointing the noose at the ground. She imitated his actions but he made it look easier than it really was.

“Your wrist needs to be flexible,” he remarked.

She tried to loosen her wrist movements but she realized her

wrist was still stiff.

“It comes with practice.” He stopped spinning his rope and went over to her. He took her hand and guided it. “There you go.”

She could hardly concentrate on the task at hand. His hand felt wonderful on hers.

Sam and Tim walked over to them.

“Billy, you mean to tell me that you’ve never lassoed before?” Sam asked.

“I’m learning,” she replied.

“Now move the rope over your head,” Chad told her.

She did as instructed but the very closeness of him caused her to lose her concentration.

“It’s a good thing you didn’t go out with us today,” Tim chuckled. “You may handle a horse well, but you’re not much good at lassoing cattle.”

“I just need practice,” she insisted. “I didn’t start out good on a horse. I worked hard at it.”

“We can’t be experts at everything,” Chad commented. “But I’m sure with practice, you’ll manage to lasso a couple of cattle.”

She nearly fell over. That was the first time she could recall hearing Chad actually stand up for her in front of the other men.

She wasn’t the only one who noticed it. “Having Billy out here has been good for you, Chad,” Sam noted. “You actually said something nice.”

“It’s been long overdo since Georgia’s death,” Tim agreed.

“I do take notice when people work hard,” Chad simply replied. He stood close behind her and took her hand again. “Alright. Let’s try it again.” He guided her wrist and hand as she swung the lasso over her head. He grinned. “Which farmhand do you want to catch?”

Tim scoffed at him. “You’re not going to lasso us.”

“How about him?” She could play along. She watched Tim.

“Oh come on. You wouldn’t really lasso one of us,” Sam laughed.

“You better run before he does it,” Chad warned.

She was disappointed when he let go of her hand and walked away from her. Realizing she was being watched by everyone, she

decided to try to lasso Tim since he was closest to her. She let go of the lariat and it landed around his chest.

“Why didn’t you run?” Jeff called out from the ladder.

“I didn’t think he’d actually do it,” Tim stated.

“Good work!” Chad patted her on the back.

She nearly fell over. He clearly didn’t know his own strength.

“You should be practicing on the animals,” Tim commented as he threw the rope off of him.

“I thought I was,” she joked.

The men chuckled.

“Seriously, Tim is right. Go on ahead, take Buck out to the pasture and see if you can lasso one of the cattle,” Chad replied.

“Alright.” Though she would have preferred to stay with Chad and pretend she was having difficulty so he’d further instruct her on how to handle the rope, she was too self-conscious in front of the other three men to keep practicing.

* * * * *

During the rest of the week, Kate continued practicing with the lariat. She was determined to succeed in lassoing cattle. She also continued to paint the rest of the barn while Chad worked on his gardens. Sam, Tim and Jeff occasionally did some work between periods of sitting down and drinking whiskey. Their talks ranged from which brand of whiskey they liked best to a possible new game they wanted to play at the potluck that upcoming weekend. It seemed to Kate that the people in town had a potluck every weekend.

On Thursday, she asked Chad if she could go to town to pick up some newspapers, and he said she could go on Reliable. She figured that Sam, Tim and Jeff wouldn’t do much work with her gone, but she was anxious to find out what was going on back in Virginia. The other farmhands had forgotten to bring anymore papers out for her after the previous Wednesday. By the time she reached town, it was midday.

When she reached the newspaper office, she realized she was hungry. She hadn’t thought to grab a bite to eat before she left.

She decided that she would have to eat lunch at the local diner. She had heard that the two women who cooked there had made the pot roast and blueberry pie at the potluck, so she knew the food at the diner would be great.

While she read through the papers, she waited for her lunch at the diner. There was one article that sparked her interest.

Senator Rich Gains More Land

Virginia Senator Ethan Rich, who had been working on acquiring ten more acres along the southwestern Virginia border, finally succeeded in expanding Ethan Rich National Park. Since Senator Murphy Tanner's death, no other senator has come forward to claim the Tree Removal Bill, so the bill has been thrown out of Congress. Senator Rich was able to purchase the acreage without any opposition.

The article continued to explain Ethan Rich's concern for the environment and his plans to preserve the land granted to his care. She sighed as she put the paper down. Another paper described her disappearance and how she was feared either dead or kidnaped. She was relieved that she wore her Billy disguise because there was even a picture of her with a reward for any information leading to her whereabouts.

As soon as she finished eating her lunch, she made her decision. She knew it was a daring venture, but she needed to find out why ten acres were so important. She didn't know why Ethan Rich was so determined to have that land for himself when he hadn't even done anything to the fifty acres he currently possessed. He had named it a park but had done nothing to cultivate it for sightseeing as he claimed he was going to. She recalled how her father was confused that Rich even cared for the extra ten acres.

Is there a connection between the Tree Removal Bill and my parents' deaths? That was the big question that loomed in the back of her mind. She had been her father's secretary, so she had access to a lot of the politics he engaged in. She recalled how con-

troversial the Tree Removal Bill had been. Would it be controversial enough to kill someone over? She decided that she would have to find out what was at Ethan Rich National Park.

When she got back to the farm, she knew she had to talk to Chad. She found him cleaning out a stall. She put Reliable out in the field behind the barn.

“Sir, can I have a word with you?” she asked.

Chad glanced up from his shovel. “Sir?”

Realizing her formal name of him was unexpected, she quickly said, “I have something serious to discuss with you.”

He blinked in surprise. “Alright.”

“It’s something I would rather keep private. Where are the other farmhands?”

“Drinking in the other barn.”

She took a deep breath. “Do I have your permission to take a leave of absence for a week? There’s something I need to check out but it’s in another state.”

“Should I find another farmhand?”

She had hoped he wouldn’t consider it but she couldn’t fault him if he wanted to do that. “I’ll leave that decision up to you. I have a personal matter to take care of and it can’t wait.”

“Can you give me some idea of what this personal matter is about?”

She hesitated to tell him but she knew she could trust him. “I saw something I shouldn’t have seen and now my life is in danger until the criminals are safely behind bars.”

His eyes grew wide. “That’s why you’re hiding out?”

She nodded. “I suspect there is a third party involved in this but I have to check on a few things to make sure my suspicion is warranted. I cannot afford to reveal my whereabouts yet. If you wish to get another farmhand, I’ll understand. I don’t expect you to hold my job for me.”

Chad sighed. “I can’t blame you for running. Do you think you’ll be gone for longer than a week?”

“I hope not. I plan to be quick. It’s not time for me to go back to my old life just yet. As long as the killers are free, I won’t be able to stop hiding.”

“I’ll keep your job here. You shouldn’t have to worry about finding another place to hide.”

She was relieved. She was tempted to ask him to go with her, for she would feel safer with him there, but she couldn’t bear the thought of seeing him in danger because of her, so she quickly left for the next train due to pull into the town. She felt better knowing she had a place to go back to. Chad had offered her money but she had more than enough from her brother Paul.

* * * * *

Five days later, Kate was back on the train and heading for her hometown in Virginia. She wished she had thought to bring another change of clothes but hadn’t wanted to drag herself down with a suitcase. She decided that she was going to have to buy a change of clothes when she reached her hometown. Her suspicions had proven true. She considered the dirt and grime all over her was worth the information she found when she was in the ten acres that Ethan coveted so badly. It took her a full day to find the mines but she discovered a wealth of gems safely hidden in the ground that Ethan had carefully mined. The entire operation was top secret and his workers were well compensated for their work. Her father’s Tree Removal Bill was a direct threat to Ethan’s secret mining operation.

She rested as much as she could on the train. She had spent one night outdoors, but she hadn’t gotten much sleep. She spent the chilly night alone and wishing for the comfort of her bed in her home or for the safety of the loft back at Chad’s farm. She cried most of her time alone. She had found a river and took a quick bath, but until she got new clothes, she wasn’t going to feel clean.

By the time the train reached her town, she was exhausted. She noticed that a group of reporters with their pencils and pads and cameras were anxiously waiting at the station. She turned to the person next to her and asked, “Do you know why those reporters are here?”

“Oh, Senator Rich is due to come in this afternoon and wish the new senator luck in office,” the man replied.

“There’s a new senator?”

“Yes. Senator MacArthur. He was put in office last week.”

She closed her eyes to force back the tears that threatened to emerge. *Is life so easily expendable?* She knew she shouldn’t be surprised to hear that her father’s position in Congress had been replaced. Virginia needed two Senators, just like the other states did. But it still stung.

She cleared her throat and strengthened her resolve. Now was not the time to crumble. She could cry on her way back to North Dakota. She wasn’t planning on staying overnight in Virginia. She took a deep breath as she followed several people off the train. She hoped no one would recognize her in her Billy disguise.

As she stepped off the train, her heart raced. Her eyes scanned the reporters while she walked past them. Part of her felt as if she was moving in slow motion. *Stay focused. Clear your mind. You’re Billy Ingram. You come from Kentucky.*

She tried not to tremble but her nerves were wearing thin after spending two days and a full night in the acreage. She passed Chief Derek Robin. She stopped and watched as he joined several reporters to the train where Senator Ethan Rich got off and waved at the people surrounding them. Derek shook his hand. This only confirmed her suspicion that Ethan was behind her parents’ murders.

She reached in her pocket for her wallet but gasped when she realized she didn’t have it. She turned back to the train but it pulled out of the station. She needed money. She groaned. She would need to go to the bank. Since it was late morning and a weekday, she could at least get money. After she entered the bank, she examined the three tellers. Which one could be trusted to keep her secret? Noah Edwards was twenty-six and a loud mouthed man who liked to boast about his accomplishments. She did not wish to be one of those accomplishments since he would enjoy being the one to discover that she was in town after all. Jesse Samson was thirty and showed no potential at getting anywhere. He was lazy for the most part and would most likely confuse her with someone else. Jake Mitchell was twenty-two and despite his young age, he showed great promise. She caught talk in the station about his recent decision not to marry his fiancée an hour before the wedding.

No one knew why, which meant he could keep his own secrets, and if he could keep his secrets, then he could keep hers as well.

He's the one I can trust. She got in line.

"Sir, I can help you over here," Noah called out.

"It's alright. I'll just stay in this line," she replied.

Noah shrugged and turned to counting the money in front of him on the counter.

Conrad Leroy, who was one of her father's acquaintances and the president of the bank walked up to Jesse, who was unsuccessfully trying to hide the fact that he was reading a book. Conrad tapped Jesse on the shoulder and motioned for him to follow him into his office. The man's face turned red as he obeyed his employer.

Chad would sympathize with Conrad, she thought as she watched Conrad shut his office door. She sighed. She did miss Chad. It almost seemed as if a part of her was missing.

She took a deep breath as Jake thanked the person in front of her who turned around. Her first instinct was to greet Phillip Tobias who was the husband of her good friend, Lorraine, but she stopped herself in time.

"May I help you?" Jake asked.

She whispered so Noah wouldn't overhear. "Yes. I need to withdraw some money from my account but in order to verify who I am, I need to speak with you in private."

He looked confused but shrugged and stood up from his stool. "Will you follow me?" He led her to a vacant room which had a desk. Two chairs were in front of the desk and one was behind it. "Mr. Hunter won't be back for another fifteen minutes. Please, have a seat."

She did as instructed as he shut the door.

By the time he sat across from her, she had her wig and beard off. It had been loose considering the length of time it had been on since she reapplied the glue to it. His eyes grew wide in surprise.

"Do you recognize me?" she asked in her normal voice.

"Of course, I do. You're Senator Tanner's missing daughter, Kate."

"So you can understand my need for privacy. Considering the

fact that my parents' killers are still loose, I can't afford to be an easy target. They know I saw them. I need money."

Despite his shock, he nodded. "Your secret is safe with me."

"Thank you. Until the men who murdered my parents are safely behind bars, I will be disguised as Billy Ingram." She put on her wig and beard. "I'll have to go to the police and confess what I saw but I need a quick escape plan so I can head out of town."

"How much do you need today?" Jake asked.

She thought for a moment and then told him.

He nodded and went to get the money for her.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Would she ever feel safe again?

When Jake returned with the money, he had her sign the slip as Billy Ingram. "I will also need you to fill out this paperwork opening an account in Billy Ingram's name. If you need to withdraw more money, then this will avoid suspicion in case I'm not here."

She didn't wish for the other bank employees to question why Kate Tanner was taking out money when she wasn't supposed to be in town, so she was relieved that he thought to do this for her.

"Thank you, Jake," she said when they were done and he handed her an account card.

He nodded and led her out of the office. He shook her hand. "It's good doing business with you, Mr. Ingram."

She understood what he was doing, and she appreciated it.

Now it was time to get some clothes.

* * * * *

Despite the strange looks she got from the salesperson, she bought a man's outfit and a woman's outfit. The man's clothing was of a considerable lower income status than the woman's dress was. She found a hotel room and bathed so she could clean the dirt and grime off of her body. Then she threw out her old Billy clothes. She cleaned her wig and the beard, and she also bought more glue for holding her beard in place so she could be ready to put the beard back on before she left town that evening. She had also bought a large purse so she could carry her new Billy clothes

in it while she wore her Kate outfit.

She wore a light purple dress and a nice hat to go with it. She pinned her long wavy blond hair back into a popular hairstyle. She grabbed the purse and examined her reflection in the mirror. She took a deep breath. She had to be quick if her plan was to work. She had purposely picked a hotel close to the police station. From the way things looked, no one was going to arrest Derek Robin and Dave Reinhart unless she did something. If Derek and Dave were allowed to get away with murder, then that meant Senator Rich would be free to keep doing his own nebulous business. She suspected that he had something to do with her parents' murders, but she didn't have the proof to back that claim up.

She took a deep breath as she left the hotel. She tried to stay as inconspicuous as possible on her way to the police station. She kept her head low but a couple of people turned their eyes to her and nudged the person next to them. She quickly slipped into the police station. As soon as she rounded the corner to the front desk, someone looked up and announced that Kate Tanner was there. Just as she feared, this led to a group of people surrounding her.

She ignored them and walked to the front desk. "I must speak with a police officer about the murder of my parents," she softly told the cop in front of her.

"Is that why you disappeared?" the man loudly asked.

She gritted her teeth. "Sir, please lower your voice. I don't wish to catch undo attention."

"It's too late for that."

She glanced at the silent group who hovered near her. She knew he was right. The people surrounding her were already whispering to themselves.

The policeman took her back to a room with a table which had two chairs on one side of it and one chair on the other side of it. She hadn't been questioned by a police officer before, so she tried to hide her apprehension.

Officer Osmund and Detective Walter sat across from her and listened as she gave the account of her parents' murders.

"Why would Chief Robins and Judge Reinhart want to kill your parents?" Detective Walter asked.

She sighed. "I suspect that it has something to do with the Tree Removal Bill my father was working on."

"Are you saying that Senator Rich is behind all of this?"

"I think he is." She took a ruby and diamond out of her purse. "He has been mining for gems in the ten acres my father was trying to obtain. The Tree Removal Bill will stop him from obtaining this wealth. I found these in a mine on that acreage."

"Were you alone?"

"Yes. I can't risk anyone else's life by having them with me."

"Miss Tanner, you should let the police and detectives do their job," the forty-two year old detective kindly admonished her. "You can't be risking your life by playing detective."

"My life is already in danger. Chief Robin and Judge Reinhart know I saw them. I've had to hide from them."

"We'll be sure to look into it."

"Aren't you going to arrest them?"

"Miss Tanner, we can't just arrest someone," Officer Osmund told her. "We have to question them first. As of this time, there is no evidence linking any of the three men you mentioned to the murders. We appreciate you coming in to tell us what you saw, and we'll be sure to follow up on it."

She hid her disappointment as she left the room.

A crowd of reporters and cameras filled the police lobby.

"I'll get rid of them for you," the detective assured her when he saw her blanch.

She quickly slipped into the men's restroom while Officer Osmund had his back turned to her and Detective Walter went to talk to the reporters. She ran into a stall, grateful that no one else was in there, and quickly changed into her Billy disguise. She shoved her dress and hat and women's shoes into the purse and threw them into the trash can. As she was leaving the restroom, a man walked in and almost bumped into her.

"Excuse me, sir," he said.

She nodded and left the room. She touched her beard. It was a little loose. She hadn't taken the time to secure it. She had shoved the glue in her pocket. She would have to take care of her beard soon.

“We can’t be sure that Kate is telling the truth,” she overheard Officer Osmund tell the detective as they huddled in a corner to talk.

“Why would she lie about seeing her parents get murdered?” Detective Walter asked him.

“It’s hard to believe the Chief would commit murder. I’ve known him for fifteen years. He’s always been diligent about upholding the law and protecting the citizens of this city. Judge Reinhart is somewhat believable but we don’t have sufficient proof for either man.”

“Senator Rich is in town today. I think I’ll question him.”

“There’s one thing we need to consider, though I hate to.”

“What is it?”

Officer Osmund shrugged. “Perhaps she committed the crime. We did see a thread from the dress someone saw her wearing earlier that evening that got caught onto the ledge of the window in the den of her parents’ house. Why would she be breaking into their home?”

“She was looking for a picture for their anniversary surprise party.”

“And she couldn’t have done that during the day?”

She groaned. She had hoped that coming to the police would make things better, but it seemed to only make things worse. She had to get out of town. But she wanted to stop by the library first.

Just as she reached the crowded front entrance, a middle-aged male reporter stopped her. “Excuse me, sir.”

She stopped. She recognized Calvin York. He was a fifty-seven year old shrewd reporter whose journalistic skills had won him many awards and prestige. He often hung out in her father’s circle of influential friends. She absentmindedly touched her beard.

“May I help you?” She prayed that he wouldn’t see through her disguise.

“Did you happen to see this woman?” He showed her a picture that was taken of her a year ago. “Her name is Kate Tanner. She has been missing for a couple of weeks but just showed up at this station. She is a key eyewitness in Senator Tanner’s murder.”

And her mother. She was aggravated that he left her mother out of that sentence.

“No, I haven’t seen her.” She handed the picture back to him.

“If you do, will you come see me at my office?” He handed her his business card. “I do pay people for their assistance.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for her.”

“Thank you. Good day, sir.” He tipped his hat to her and went over to another person in the lobby of the police station.

She slowly exhaled as she walked out of the building. Her pulse pounded anxiously in her chest as she walked onto the sidewalk which was lined with businesses.

That was a complete waste of my time. They can’t believe Derek or Dave would commit murder. They even think I made it up in my mind to cover the fact that I did it myself. Why would I want them dead? Lord, what am I going to do?

She forced back her tears as she entered the library. She walked over to the twenty year old blond who was putting books away. She knew she could trust Sue Lewis to do the job she needed her to do.

“Sue,” she whispered to the blond who had two books left in her arms.

“Yes? May I help you?” Sue asked, turning her attention to her.

“I need to look at the newspapers.”

Sue nodded and placed the books on the shelf so she could lead Kate to the backroom where the periodicals were kept.

Kate closed the door so she could have some privacy.

Sue gasped, so Kate quickly took off her wig.

“Please, don’t scream,” Kate used her regular voice. “It’s me.”

“Miss Tanner?” The young woman stared in disbelief at her employer.

“Yes. I’m still hiding. What I have to tell you is very important. I saw who killed my parents, and I just went to the police to tell them what I saw. Unfortunately, there’s not enough proof to convict the people involved. I need you to help me. Can you do that for me?”

Sue’s shock was quickly wearing off. “Yes. What do you want me to do?”

Kate quickly put her wig back on and opened the door so no one would think Sue was compromising her virtue by being alone with a man. She kept her voice low enough so the people nearby wouldn't hear her. "I need you to look through the papers for the past nine months. I suspect that Senator Rich is ultimately behind this, but the immediate people I am interested in are Derek Robin and Dave Reinhart."

"The cop and the judge?"

She nodded. "Find any articles you can about the three men I just mentioned. If you can connect the three men somehow, then it will help. Also, I need you to find anything mentioning the Tree Removal Bill my father was working on. If you can find any connection, please take it to the police. I can't stay in town. I have to get out of here."

As if to prove the need for her to leave, Calvin York entered the library. Kate worried that he had caught onto her disguise.

"Will you cover for me so I can leave without him seeing me?" she asked Sue.

The young woman thought for a moment and then nodded. "Alright." She walked out of the room and over to the man who had a pencil and paper out. "Good afternoon, Mr. York," she greeted. "May I help you?"

Since Calvin had his back turned to Kate, she was able to slip out of the library undetected. She tried to act casual as she walked down the street.

A little girl saw her and giggled. "Mother, why is that man's beard falling off?" she asked the tired woman who didn't bother to answer her.

Kate quickly reached up and realized half of her beard was off of her face. She found an alley and hid in it while she pulled out the glue from her pocket. *I really should have taken more time to glue this thing on my face when I was in that restroom.*

"Miss Tanner?" a voice called out.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Calvin running to her. She forced herself not to utter a curse word she overheard Sam and Tim use on occasion as she broke into a run down the rest of the alley.

He followed her. "I only want to ask you a couple of questions!"

She didn't stop. She ran onto the street and dodged several people. Some of them commented on her beard so she held it in place. She crossed the street and ran into the bank. She knew that Calvin was still behind her. She thanked the Lord when she saw most of the bank employees were at a meeting in Conrad Leroy's office. She quickly ran behind and under the counter where the tellers took care of their customers. She crawled over to Jake's side of the counter and forced her breathing back to normal before she glued the beard back onto her face. *I should have taken two disguises with me.* Who knew Calvin York could be so perceptive?

"I thought I heard someone enter the bank." She recognized Noah Edwards' voice. He sat at his stool.

"No. We're about to close anyway, so it's usually a quiet time." That was Jesse. He also sat down.

"You better shape up or you won't be able to keep your job. Mr. Leroy doesn't tolerate goofing off at work."

"Yes. I already got the lecture from him."

"Where did Jake run off to?"

"Oh, he had to take his mother to the doctor. She's not doing well these days. He'll be back any minute."

"The poor man. His heart just got broken and it looks like his mother's not going to last much longer."

"He was the one who called off the wedding."

"Because he overheard Patrick Stafford tell Johanna Clark not to marry him," Noah replied. "Don't you know what really happened?"

"Apparently not."

"You need to pay attention to what's going on around you. Patrick told everyone at Brad Allen's dinner party that he and Johanna realized they loved each other a week before the wedding, so he asked her to call it off, but she refused because she wanted to marry Jake for his money."

"He doesn't have that much."

"Not yet but everyone knows it won't be long before he's rich. He has a gift for making money."

“Why hasn’t he said anything? A lot of people in town have been shunning him for breaking Johanna’s heart.”

“You know how Jake is. He’s a private person.”

Kate felt sorry for Jake’s situation but it only confirmed her instinct that she could trust him.

The door opened. She held her breath. She wondered if Calvin had tracked her down. Fortunately, she was out of sight of the two tellers.

“How is your mother doing?” Noah asked.

Jake sat on the stool behind the long counter. “As well as can be expected,” he replied.

“The doctor is still saying she only has eight months left to live?”

“Yes.” He put his name plate up on the counter.

“We’re sorry, Jake,” Noah softly said.

Jake sighed but didn’t say anything.

The door opened again. She heard the sound of footsteps as the person came closer to the tellers’ counter.

“May I help you?” Jake asked.

The woman went over to him. “I would like to take out \$10.”

Another person entered the bank.

“Good afternoon, Mr. York,” Jesse called out. “Did you come to make a deposit?”

Kate stiffened. The sudden movement caused her to brush her elbow against Jake’s shoes.

Jake, who was counting out the dollar bills, tensed. He quickly peered under the counter and his eyes widened when he saw her.

She put her finger to her lips and gave him a pleading look to not reveal her location.

“Sir! I’m in a hurry,” the woman snapped.

He sat back up, apologized and quickly handed her the money.

Calvin turned to Jake. “Have you seen a man with black hair and a beard?” he asked Jake. “I have reason to believe that he is really Kate Tanner.”

“May I ask why you’re interested in knowing whether or not a woman is dressed up as a man?” Jake replied.

“I’m not interested in that,” the reporter pointedly responded.

"I am interested in whether or not Kate Tanner is in this bank."

"The only woman in this bank just left," Jesse stated. "I already told you that no one else is here."

"I thought perhaps Mr. Mitchell might have a different version of events. Do you?"

"No. Kate Tanner is not here."

"I thought I saw her enter this place."

"Well, you were mistaken."

"Should any of you change your mind, here's my business card. I do offer a good sum of money for anyone who is willing to work with me."

"We'll keep that in mind."

She watched as Jake threw the card into the trash can between him and Jesse.

After Calvin left, she breathed a sigh of relief. She stayed safely hidden behind the counter until it was time for the bank employees to leave. Jake waited until everyone but Conrad was gone before bending down and helping her up.

"We need to be quick," he told her as he ushered her out the door. "There's a lot of talk about you. I'm guessing you don't want them to find you."

"Yes, you're right."

He motioned for a horse-drawn buggy driver to pick them up. He waited for her to enter the buggy before asking, "Do you plan to go to the train station?"

"Yes."

He told the taxi driver to take them there before he sat across from her. He waited until the horse began moving before saying, "I can tell that the situation you're in is serious. I've been reading the papers and figure I'll read about your encounter with the police at the station."

"You'll find out what happened soon enough. I'm sure Calvin York has figured it out."

"Well, your secret is safe with me. Do you need any more money?"

"No. I'm fine." She smiled at him. "Thank you, Jake."

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

“No. I don’t think so. Keeping Calvin from me was more than enough.”

The driver stopped in front of the train station. She only had to wait for twenty minutes before the next train out of town. There was a benefit to living in a big town. The train station in North Dakota wasn’t as busy as this one was.

The driver opened the door and she got out and paid the driver. She also added the money for Jake’s ride home.

“I can get it,” Jake argued. “You need all the money you can get.”

“I have more than enough,” she assured him. “A gentleman always returns a favor.”

She went to into the building and paid for her ticket. She was eager to get back to North Dakota where she would feel safe again. Also, she did miss Chad. She couldn’t wait to see him again. It was just unfortunate that when she saw him, he wouldn’t be wrapping her in his strong arms and offering her safety in them. He would simply be her employer. Still, it was better than being dead. She gladly hopped on the train when it pulled up to the station. As soon as she was in her sleeping car, she allowed herself the freedom to cry.

* * * * *

The next morning, she bought a paper and read the article on the front page:

*Senator Tanner’s Daughter Gives Story to Police,
Then Disappears
written by Calvin York*

Yesterday during the three o’clock hour Kate Tanner came to the police station. People saw her enter the station but no one saw her leave. The police are keeping the matter confidential but it is rumored that she said she saw Chief Derek Robin and Judge Dave Reinhart kill her parents on the night of her disappearance. I was unable to find Kate in order to verify that claim. Had this reporter

not seen her talking to the police with his own eyes, he would swear that there was nothing to these rumors. However, all this reporter has to go on is speculation and what a confidential source has told him.

Both Chief Robin and Judge Reinhart were available for my questions, though under the direction of their lawyers.

"I was relieved to see that she was alright," Robin said. "The entire police force feared that the people who killed her parents had harmed her. Why she disappeared again, I don't understand."

"Are the allegations that you and Judge Reinhart murdered her parents true?"

"Of course not. We are in a position to uphold the law. I was asleep at home during the time of the murder. My wife can vouch for that."

Upon asking Judge Reinhart the same question, he said, "I have no reason to kill them. We attended dinner parties together and got along well. On the night of the murders, I was in my chamber reviewing a trial that I was about to preside over. My secretary was there the entire time."

When I asked Mrs. Robin and Conner O'Malley, the secretary, if these men's alibis checked out, they assured me that the men were where they said they were on the night and at the time in question. No evidence points to them as being the murderers, though they are still suspects. Both men are still at work, though they are being carefully monitored.

I am not in the business of making a judgement. I merely set out to report the facts. I have been unable to secure an interview with Miss Tanner but would be much obliged to allow her the chance to give her side of the story if she would be inclined to send me a message. I can use discretion if she would like to remain hidden.

There was a picture of Kate talking to the police, but the picture was taken from a distance so it was difficult to tell what she looked like. There were also pictures of Derek and Dave. She sighed and put the paper down. Going to the police had been a complete waste of her time.

Chapter 8

Eight days after Bob left, he finally returned. Chad was relieved to see his farmhand. He had started to wonder if something bad happened to the man. Bob had mentioned seeing a crime, and his later statement regarding killers made Chad realize that Bob had witnessed a murder. It sounded like the murderers knew he saw the crime. The least Chad could do for the man was hold his job for him.

Sam had stopped coming out, and Tim and Jeff returned to their mediocre work. Chad wasn't surprised, but he was startled that Bob had such a big impact on his other farmhands. For Chad, he realized he missed having his friend around. Bob was a good man.

Bob returned on Friday around noon. Tim and Jeff ran out to greet him but Chad could tell from where he stood that Bob was worn out. Whatever Bob had been doing had been physically exhausting. Bob greeted them but his usual easy going manner was weighed down by whatever happened while he was away.

Chad decided to help his best farmhand out. He walked over to the men. "Welcome back, Bob," he smiled. "Are you hungry?"

"No. I ate on the train," he replied. He seemed to be glad to be back. "I'm ready to get back to work. That is, if I still have a job."

“Of course you still have a job. You should probably rest a bit in the loft. You don’t look like you’re up to working in this heat.”

The sweat covering Chad’s own shirt was a silent testimony of how hot the July sun had gotten over the past few days.

“You’re right. I should rest,” Bob admitted.

“Are you thirsty?”

“No. Travis Richards gave me some water when he brought me out here.”

“Alright. Go ahead and rest up.”

Bob nodded and went to the barn.

Chad noted that Tim and Jeff followed him. “Tim, Jeff!” he called out. “I need you to lead the cattle to the river.”

The two men groaned but turned to do the chore.

Later that day, Bob came down from the loft. He looked rested but sad.

Chad had finished looking after the sheep when Bob came out of the barn. Since Tim and Jeff were in the shed, hiding so they could talk, Chad walked over to the farmhand. “Are you doing better?”

Bob glanced at him. “You’re concerned about how I’m doing?” he asked.

Chad shrugged. “Obviously, whatever happened to you was traumatic. I never saw a man who looked so worn out before.”

“I suppose it’s not masculine to show one’s feelings.”

“Not necessarily. Women aren’t the only ones who have feelings. Men do too. Even Jesus wept.”

“I hadn’t considered that.”

“Do you mind if I ask what happened?”

“I went to tell the police what I saw but they seemed reluctant to believe me.”

“Can you tell me what you saw?”

“I saw who killed Senator Tanner and his wife. The killers know I saw them and they are men in powerful positions, so it’s prudent that I’m careful.”

“I can appreciate your desire to hide out here. I won’t ask anything else.” He saw Tim and Jeff coming out of the shed. “Do you think you can handle them right now?”

Bob took a deep breath. "Yes. What do you need us to do?"

"The stalls could use some cleaning."

"We'll get right on it, boss." He left to walk over to the two men who looked happy to see him.

Chad marveled that Bob could put on such a carefree facade with the men.

As happy as Bob acted when the men were there, he spent most of the weekend by himself. Sam and Tim came out on Saturday to invite him to a potluck but he said he wasn't in the mood for being social. Sunday afternoon, he asked Chad for some work to do.

"If you don't feel up to it, don't worry about it," Chad replied as he took some ripe vegetables from the garden.

"I want to be busy. I've had enough time alone," Bob said.

"Alright. Would you mind helping me pick out the good vegetables? When we're done, I can show you how to do canning."

"Sounds good, boss."

He grinned. "If you want to call me Chad, you can."

"I kind of like 'boss,'" he admitted. "It keeps me in my place."

"I don't have to keep you in line. You're a good employee." After spending years with the other three farmhands, he appreciated Bob's strong work ethic.

They spent the rest of the afternoon canning. Bob had difficulty with it.

"I take back what I said about what job to choose next," Chad chuckled after Bob accidentally knocked over some beets that had just been cut and placed in a jar. "Don't do any kitchen details. You'll be better off doing outdoor farm work."

Bob laughed. "Well, I can't be good at everything."

"It's good to see you laugh again."

"I can clean up though. Where are your dish rags?"

Chad motioned to the drawer.

"Sorry I spoiled some of your beets." Bob put water and soap on the rag he found and collected the food off the floor.

"Don't worry about it. I have too many as it is, and I don't like them that much. They taste alright when their pickled, but other than that, I tolerate them."

"I think Mrs. Turner would like some beets. She likes to put

beets into everything she makes. Do you want to get rid of some?"

"I know Mrs. Turner. She's a nice woman. The next time you go to town, you can give her a couple of jars."

"She lost her husband four months ago. He died after a heart attack."

"That's too bad. He was actually a good man."

"She has a couple of grown children."

"Her children are pretty nice too. I've sold her son a couple of cattle."

"Her daughter just turned eighteen and the mother was trying to fix me up with her the last time I went to town."

"Gabiella's already an adult?" He shook his head. "The last time I remember seeing her, she was fifteen. Time keeps marching on. Sometimes I feel like time stands still out here. The seasons still come and go, but life on the farm almost feels stagnant."

"I notice a lot of men your age prefer women that are eighteen."

"I hadn't noticed. I suppose men tend to marry later than women do."

"Why is that? Is it offensive to men when women are closer to their age?"

"Some men find older women to be intimidating. A young woman is obviously easier to impress. Older women have had time to mature and be independent. They will have stronger opinions."

"I would actually prefer a woman who's not afraid to speak her mind."

"Don't let Tim or Sam hear you say that. Lacy's twenty-four."

"I was thinking of someone who's close to my sister's age. She's thirty."

"And she isn't married yet?"

"No. She hasn't met the right man. She thinks that marriage should be more than about money or a man's name. She wants someone who's a friend."

"That's a good idea. Georgia and I were never really friends. I didn't think that a wife should also be a friend, but if I had a different attitude about that, I'm sure I wouldn't have chosen her. I had

assumed that love and friendship didn't mix when it came to romance. Friendship is a good foundation for a marriage."

Bob finished cleaning the mess and asked, "Would you consider marrying a woman in her thirties?"

"Sure. It's not the age of the woman but it's her personality that matters." He stopped cutting the beets and looked at his farmhand who threw the bad food into a bucket Chad kept for scraps to give the animals. "Are you thinking of fixing me up with Mrs. Turner?"

"No! What is she? Forty?"

"Yes."

"She's too old. She should be with a man who's at least her age."

"Why have you been asking me so many questions about women and marriage?"

Bob shrugged but wouldn't look at him. "Just curious."

Chad sighed. Obviously, Bob wasn't going to tell him what was going on. "I'm not opposed to women, alright? But before you think of bringing any woman out here, ask me about it first."

"I understand."

"Can we talk about something else now?"

"I was going to ask you about what you do when you moved the cattle from one pasture to another. What exactly does that chore entail?"

Glad for the change of topic, Chad filled him in on the details.

* * * * *

The next morning, just as the sun was rising, Chad decided to collect the eggs so he could make scrambled eggs. He put three eggs into his basket. He wondered how many eggs Bob wanted so he decided to climb the ladder to ask him. When he reached the top, his jaw dropped for he saw a beautiful woman sleeping in the loft. Bob was nowhere in sight. The woman had long blond wavy hair that was spread over the pillow. She was also naked, and the blanket only covered the lower half of her body. He forced himself to action and quickly went back down the ladder. He took a

moment to regain his composure.

“Where is Bob?” he finally yelled so he would wake her up.

He heard her stir.

“Where is Bob?” He asked the question louder this time.

He heard her gasp. She peered over the edge of the loft and looked down at him. She looked as shocked as he felt.

“Where is Bob?” he repeated.

She seemed to be struggling for an answer.

“Can you speak?” he demanded.

“Bob is at the outhouse,” she replied. “He’ll be back soon. If you go back to the house, I’ll tell him to talk to you there.”

He decided he wouldn’t give her a lecture about sleeping with Bob on his property. “While you’re at it, get dressed,” he ordered before he left for the house.

He forced himself to calm down. He didn’t know what was worse: knowing Bob was lying to him about sleeping around or the fact that he was aroused by seeing the woman in the loft. It had been almost a year since he had any interaction with a woman, and the fact that she was naked only made it that much more difficult to forget how turned on he was. He didn’t recognize her. Was she new in town? He hadn’t been to town in ten months.

Five minutes later, Bob ran into the house, looking overwhelmed.

Chad was sitting at the kitchen table. His jaw clenched. “I do not approve of immoral behavior on my property. Send her home and don’t bring her back.”

“It’s not what it looks like,” Bob quickly argued. “I’m not sleeping with her.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“Yes. She’s my sister.”

Chad scoffed. “Then what was she doing sleeping naked in the loft?”

“You saw her naked?” Bob’s eyes grew wide. Then he asked, “Did you like what you saw?”

He shook his head. “What kind of question is that?”

“Just making conversation.”

How could Bob make light of this situation?

Bob sat across from him. “Look, she came here late last night. I had to let her stay here. She has nowhere else to go. I slept in the space under the loft, so we weren’t sleeping in the loft together. That would be gross.”

“How did she get here?”

“Our brother dropped her off. He had to keep going so he quickly left.”

“Is she really your sister?”

“Of course. Didn’t you notice the resemblance?”

“No, not really.” He hadn’t been looking at her face.

“Well, next time you see her, take a good look at her. I know, I’ll tell her to come speak to you. Take a good look at her face. We have the same features. There’s no hiding the fact that we are related. You’d be surprised at just how close we really are.” He jumped out of the chair and ran out the front door.

Chad’s head was spinning. Was she really his sister? He did recall Bob mentioning a sister and a brother. *Why didn’t he tell me his sister was coming? I would have made provisions for her.* When did all of this happen? How late at night did this occur?

Ten minutes later, a disheveled but beautiful tall woman with flowing blond hair walked into the house. She wore a modest light blue shirt and a light brown skirt. He couldn’t tell what she was thinking but figured she would be embarrassed. He stood up as she entered the room.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I thought you were Bob so I just climbed up the ladder. I didn’t mean to see you...sleeping.”

She smiled at him. “I know. It was an accident. I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to warn you that I was coming. Believe me, it was very unexpected.”

He felt better. “Are you Bob’s sister?”

She nodded. “Can’t you see the resemblance?”

He examined her features. She did have the same nose, cheekbones, and light blue eyes. “Yes, you do look a lot alike, except for the hair color.”

“I take after my father’s side of the family. They are blonds.”

That probably explained it.

“So, is it alright that I’m here?”

It was more than alright. It was wonderful. “Yes. Are you going to be here as long as Bob will be here? He didn’t specify how long he planned to stay.”

She hesitated. “Yes.”

He went to the stove and checked to see if it was hot enough to cook on.

“Billy has told me about you,” she continued. She still had that wonderful smile on her face. *She must be as optimistic and outgoing as her brother.* “Apparently, you’re a good employer. You may be tough but you’re fair.”

He returned her smile. “He’s the best employee I’ve ever had. He didn’t really say anything about you.”

“Well, he’s a free spirit. I suppose he doesn’t run into many people who care whether he has a sister or not.”

“Since you surprised him, I take it that you don’t usually visit him.”

“You got that right, which is why I decided to come out here. If he had known I was coming, he would have warned you.”

“It would have been less awkward if he had.”

She shrugged. “There’s nothing to be done about it now. What’s done is done. Can I help you with breakfast? I don’t know much about cooking but I can follow instructions.”

He was startled that she would offer to help him. Apparently, the Ingram family was a group of hard workers. “You’re a guest here. It wouldn’t be right to expect you to help.”

She walked over to him and put her hand on his arm. “Really, I don’t mind. In fact, it would help me feel better about being here if I could be useful.”

He felt his cheeks flush at her touch. It had been too long since a woman touched him, and his body was on fire from the simple action. Georgia hadn’t been affectionate. She had made it clear that physical contact repulsed her, which was why they hadn’t had children, except for the one time she lied about it. Sex with Georgia was a rare occurrence, and when it did happen, it wasn’t fulfilling since she made him feel guilty for even having a sex drive. He pushed the memories away. He didn’t realize that having Bob’s sister near him would drag up the past with crystal clarity.

He forced himself to back away from her touch. "If you want to help me, then I will need those eggs over there." He pointed to the basket on the table.

She nodded and went to get the basket.

I love the way she walks. She has so many wonderful curves. He suddenly had the inclination to throw a pitcher of ice water all over himself. He took a deep breath to force his heartbeat back to normal. "Where's your brother? Shouldn't he be coming back? He usually eats breakfast with me."

"Oh." She paused at the kitchen table with her hands on the basket. "Billy mentioned something about wanting to sleep in since he was up late getting my things put away in the trunk."

That made sense. "I can't complain about the quality of his work. I'm sure he needs a lot of rest in order to do everything he does."

She seemed pleased by his words. "Billy does like you. He says that you are real. He thinks of you as a friend." She returned with the basket and looked at him.

"I think of him as a friend too." He glanced at her. He was struck by her beautiful blue eyes. They looked better on her than on Bob. *They are related, alright.* There was no denying that those could be the same eyes Bob looked at him with. He was relieved that she was Bob's sister instead of someone Bob was sleeping with. He reluctantly turned his attention to the eggs and cracked them into a bowl. "I'm making scrambled eggs and bacon this morning," he told her. "How hungry are you?"

"I'm famished," she admitted. "I haven't eaten since yesterday afternoon."

He winced. "I wish Bob had woken me up. I would have made you something to eat."

"You would have done that, wouldn't you?" She seemed pleased.

"It wouldn't have been a big deal."

"Is there anything else I can do?"

He glanced around the kitchen. "If you like milk, we could drink that. Sometimes I even pour a little milk in with the eggs and add butter for flavor."

“I’ll get it right away.” She immediately went to the basement door.

“How do you know I keep the milk down there?” he asked, shocked that she knew where it was.

“Uh...Billy mentioned it. We talked a lot last night.”

“What else did you talk about?”

She thought for a moment. “We talked about where he’s been since I last saw him, what I’ve been doing, and what kind of work he does out here. He did mention you and how good you’ve been to him.”

“Has he mentioned my dead wife?”

“You were married?”

He was relieved that Bob had been considerate enough to not mention Georgia. He didn’t want to spend his time with his sister discussing his past. “Yes but she’s not alive anymore. I would like to focus on my future.”

“I understand,” she softly replied.

The way she said those words reminded him of Bob. “It’s really uncanny how much alike you and Bob are. You sounded and looked just like him when you said that.” He shook his head. “You two are obviously related.”

She looked relieved. “I am looking forward to getting to know you. From the way Billy talks about you, I know I’m going to like you.”

“Maybe we’ll be friends.”

She peered at him through her eyelashes. “It’ll be a start.” She opened the basement door before she headed downstairs. When she returned with the milk, she asked him where the glasses were.

“In that cabinet.” He pointed to where he was talking about. He put the bacon in the pan and placed it on the hot stove. He added the scrambled eggs next to the bacon. “I forgot to ask you what your name is.”

“My name is Kate.”

“I like it,” he told her. “It fits you. Simple and pretty.”

She blushed. “Thank you.” She took the glasses out of the cabinet. “I’m glad I made the trip out here.”

“So am I.” He didn’t look at her as he said it.

She quietly set the table and filled the two glasses with milk.

“You are a lot like your brother,” he noted.

She glanced at him.

“You are the two nicest people I’ve ever met.”

“So are you, Chad.”

He was ready to ask her how she knew his name but figured Bob mentioned it. He chuckled. “Your brother calls me ‘boss.’”

“Should I refrain from using your first name? I don’t wish to offend you.”

“You can call me Chad.”

Her smile lit up the room. The place seemed brighter with her there.

After he finished cooking the meal, he put the bacon and eggs on their plates and saved aside a plate for Bob. “Will you tell Bob that I saved a plate for him in the basement?”

“You don’t have to do that. He’ll get something to eat at lunch.”

“But he’ll need his energy for the morning chores. The other farmhands are due to come out soon. I don’t want him to go through the morning on an empty stomach.”

“You really are a thoughtful person.”

He couldn’t recall the last time someone spoke so nicely to him. He tried not to let his gratefulness show in case she thought he was weak. He covered Bob’s plate and took it to the basement so it would stay cool. When he came back upstairs, he saw that she had taken the plates to the kitchen table and had the utensils set out next to the plates and glasses. It seemed so natural to see her sitting at the kitchen table and waiting for him to join her for breakfast. *This is something I can get used to seeing every morning.* Georgia didn’t eat with him. She stayed in her room and let him serve her. Georgia didn’t lift a finger to do anything around the house. He ran around and managed the house and the farm. The only thing Georgia did was make herself look as good as possible so she could impress her family and friends. So to have Bob and Kate do so much to help him was a very pleasant change. If he could judge Kate by how Bob behaved, then he was assured that Kate was as wonderful as she initially seemed.

“Will you tell me more about running a farm?” she asked him as he sat across from her.

That was a safe discussion, he realized, so he gladly did that while they ate. After they finished, he assured her that he could wash the dishes.

“I don’t mind. You made the meal,” she remarked.

“Kate, please let me take care of it. I’m used to it.”

She nodded. “Alright.”

He smiled at her. It was hard not to fall in love with her.

Tim, Sam and Jeff walked into the kitchen. He tensed. He really didn’t want to share her with them.

“Well, look here,” Sam began as he looked her over, “Chad, are you keeping a beautiful secret from us?”

Chad sighed. “These are my farmhands. Sam and Tim Montgomery and Jeff Rod. This is Bob’s sister, Kate.”

She smiled and said hello to the other men.

Chad watched as the men nearly drooled over her.

“We don’t recall seeing you before,” Tim commented. “And I don’t believe Billy mentioned you.”

“Oh, that’s because he didn’t think I would show up,” she explained. “I’m spontaneous by nature so I decided to come out with my other brother and see Billy. Billy travels all over so much that I hardly get to see him anymore, so when I learned he was here, I figured I would come out and surprise him. He didn’t expect me.”

“When did you get here?”

“I got here at two in the morning.”

“So you must be tired,” Chad stated. “Would you like to rest? You can lay down on the bed in my bedroom if you want. We’ll be outside working with your brother.”

“Where did you sleep last night?” Sam wondered.

“Is that your business?” she asked him.

“Kitty’s got claws,” Tim mumbled.

“Well, we know that Chad is safe,” Sam told her, still smiling. “He has problems rising to the occasion, if you know what I mean.”

Chad’s jaw clenched. That was what Georgia said in order to explain why they didn’t have children, and it wasn’t the truth, nor

was it the image he wanted to present to Kate. "It's not like Georgia ever inspired my interest," he retorted.

The three men lunged at him.

He got ready to fight back.

She quickly stepped in between them. "Please. I am a lady. I would prefer a peaceful morning. I think Billy mentioned milking cows when you arrived, but he didn't know where the pail was for such a chore."

Chad and the others relaxed. He didn't want to fight in front of her anymore than they did.

"I will rest in your bedroom after I wake Billy and tell him everyone is here," she told Chad.

"Be sure to lock the door," Chad whispered so the men wouldn't hear.

She nodded and left.

"You can't have her," Sam snapped.

"And you think you can?" Chad sharply asked.

"You're lucky we like Billy. If it weren't for him, we wouldn't even bother to help you."

"Considering the fact that I pay you, that's hardly an insult."

"I'll never understand what Georgia saw in you."

He shrugged. The question was, what did he ever see in Georgia, but he knew it would be pointless to tell them that. "I suggest we put aside our differences for Billy and Kate's sakes. We don't need to get them tangled up in our family bonding," he sarcastically said. He tried to be nice to the men but found it nearly impossible. So he settled for any kind of truce he could possibly get.

"She'll make her own decision anyway," Jeff replied. "But you know, once Todd finds out about her, he'll want to come out and see her. She's a good looker, and I think he's getting serious about marriage."

Chad didn't want to hear this but held his tongue. Todd wasn't a bad man, but he hung out with shoddy people. Bob knew what the men were like. He would warn his sister about them, right? He decided he would have to ask Bob if he planned to tell her about them. But that would have to wait until he could speak to Bob alone.

Chapter 9

Kate was in a panic as she ran from the house to the barn. She didn't intend to start a fight. She nearly tripped on her shoes when she saw Lacy waiting outside the barn. *I can't believe they brought her out here!* She stopped as the raven long haired pretty skinny woman called out to her.

"Where is Billy?" Lacy asked her.

"He's in the barn. I'll get him. Stay here," she ordered.

She was out of breath by the time she reached the loft. She anxiously threw open the trunk and took out her Billy disguise. When she went to bed the night before, she never imagined she would be waking up as Kate. She assumed it was going to be like any other morning. She would get dressed as Billy and join Chad in the kitchen for breakfast. She had no idea he would even consider climbing up the ladder of the loft to ask her a question while he knew she might be asleep. Part of her was relieved it happened since it meant she could approach him, at least part of the time, as Kate. The more she got to know Chad, the more she liked him. She had been trying to think of a way to approach him as Kate, and this was as good a way as any. For the moment, she would have to go back to being Billy. And confront Lacy. That part, she was dreading.

She checked herself in the mirror to make sure her beard and wig were in place. She adjusted the binding around her bosom so that her chest appeared flat. Her flannel green shirt and brown pants were loose enough to make her appear masculine. She cleared her throat. "I'm Billy," she said using Billy's voice. She nodded. She was ready. She quickly climbed down the ladder. She made it to the barn door in time for Chad's arrival. Once again she marveled at how good looking he was. She cleared her head. She was Billy right now. It wasn't the time to think of him in such romantic terms.

"I was just on my way to find you," she said.

"Kate mentioned you wanted to milk the cows," Chad replied. "Where is she?"

"Oh, she ran through here on her way to the outhouse. Anyway, I've never milked a cow before, so you'll have to show me how to do it."

Sam, Tim and Jeff walked into the barn. She inwardly cringed as they brought Lacy with them.

"I told them not to bring her," she whispered to Chad.

Chad sighed as they walked into the building. "Now we'll never get any work done."

"Billy, you've been holding out on us," Sam greeted as he slapped Billy on the back. "We had no idea you had such a good looking sister."

"I didn't know she was even coming until she woke me up in the middle of the night," she replied. "Our brother brought her out here. I'm very protective of her. I don't tolerate anyone mistreating her."

"Oh we wouldn't do that," Tim assured her.

She didn't believe them for a minute. But she also knew they had no chance with her, so she wasn't worried about it.

"We brought Lacy out," Sam said. "We thought you might like to talk to her."

"This is a work day," Chad reminded him.

"Don't worry. We'll fill in for Billy here."

"Well, I was hoping to learn to milk the cows today," she remarked. "Lacy can watch if she wants." She forced herself to

smile at the younger woman who blushed. *This is going to be a long day.* The last thing she wanted to do was spend time alone with the woman.

Kate noticed the slight grimace on Chad's face at the thought of Lacy joining them. She was secretly relieved that he really did not like the woman. It gave her a better chance with him.

"I don't mind watching," Lacy cooed. "In fact, I've milked a few cows in my time. I can probably help."

"Fine," Chad replied. Turning to Kate, he said, "If you need any help, let me know. I'll be doing something else. Remember what I told you."

Kate was disappointed as he walked out of the barn. She wished she could spend the day with him, even if she were pretending to be Billy, but she would have to play her part.

"There goes Chad, running off again," Sam commented. "He was the same way when Georgia was alive, so don't take it personally. He's just no good with company."

"When are you going to bring Kate out to town?" Jeff asked her. "We can all have a potluck and dance at the fairgrounds."

"Tell me when you'll do it and I'll pass along the invite," Kate replied.

"Or we can invite her. Is she out of the outhouse yet?"

"Oh yes. She already went to the house to rest. Didn't any of you see her?" She pretended to be bewildered that they had missed her.

"No, we didn't," Sam frowned.

"Hmm...Guess you all are slipping." She breathed a sigh of relief that they bought it. She looked around the barn. "Where is the milk pail?"

"Over here." He led the way to the other barn where several cows waited in their stalls to be milked.

She noticed that Lacy was on her heels. She wasn't sure what she should do about Lacy, but she had to stay true to her character as the laid back, easy going man who was charming but polite. She slowed down and waited for the shorter woman to walk beside her before continuing to walk. "So, how come a pretty lady such as yourself isn't married yet?"

Lacy wore a nice pink dress, which only intensified the pink color in her cheeks as she blushed. She shrugged. "I haven't met the right man yet, I suppose."

"Well, I'm a hobo. I travel from place to place and do odd jobs to support my free lifestyle. I won't be settling down for a long time." She wished to put a stop to any fantasies Lacy might be entertaining.

It seemed to work for Lacy frowned.

They entered the second barn which housed the milking cows. Sam grabbed a pail from the shelf in the corner of the place and brought it to her. She took it.

"You know," Sam began, "Lacy's always wanted to see the country. She would be a good traveling companion."

At this announcement, Lacy's eyes lit back up again. "I won't be any trouble either. I can cook and clean anything, no matter where I am."

Kate hid her horror. Instead, she said, "We'll see." It was time to disgust the younger woman, so Kate let out a big burp before asking Sam, "Can you show me how to milk her?" She pointed at the cow closest to them.

Both Sam and Lacy looked stunned.

"What?" Kate asked.

"Well...ah...nothing, I guess," he slowly replied.

Kate simply nodded. "So, are you going to show me how to milk her?"

"Alright." He led Kate to the stall and set down a short stool for her to sit on. He placed the pail under the cow's udder. "Pull on the teats to get the milk out."

"It's easy once you get the hang of it," Lacy added. "I could demonstrate if you want."

"No, that's alright," Kate confidently stated. "I can pull on these things. It's kind of like grabbing onto a very long nipple on a woman. Am I right, Sam?" She chuckled as if she was the most clever person in the world.

He hesitated to answer.

"That's one way of putting it," Lacy awkwardly replied.

Kate involuntarily gagged as she touched the teats with her

hands. She quickly pretended to cough to cover up her repulsion to the feel of the animal. She had never felt anything like it before and she hoped she wouldn't again. How did Chad do this every day? She pulled on one of the teats and the cow mooed as the teat squirted milk at her feet.

Sam laughed. "I hope your aim is better when you pee."

She laughed with him. "Don't worry. I can write my full name in the snow with the best of them." She glanced at Lacy. "Do women ever try to write their names when they pee?" She already knew the answer was no but wanted to be gross.

"Well, we aren't built like men, so we can't," she told her.

"Really? I wonder what my sister was using all those years when she wrote out her name?" She said this for Sam's benefit.

"Kate fooled you into believing something like that?" he asked.

Kate frowned when she realized he was impressed.

"Try to get milk out again," Lacy encouraged her. "Just aim the teat at the pail this time."

Kate sighed and pulled on it again. She gagged again at the sensation of the milk flowing out of it.

"Are you sick?" Sam asked.

"A little. I must have drunk a little too much last night. I drink a lot. So does Kate. She's so much like a man though she dresses like a lady."

"It doesn't matter how she acts. She's a good looker."

Kate frowned.

"And we see nothing wrong with having some fun with alcohol," Lacy added. "We may be religious, but we're not fanatical like Chad is."

Kate sighed in dismay.

"Right," Sam agreed. "Chad is a real killjoy. He takes the Bible to the extreme. Sometimes, he gets all preachy at us but we don't pay him any mind, and you shouldn't either. If you want to drink and make bets, go for it. Life's too short to live miserably."

"That's my philosophy!" Kate quickly spoke up. "Speaking of which, are any of you going to the bar this Friday? I was thinking of checking out the action. I was thinking of taking a couple of luscious ladies to the woods for a little fun, if you know what I

mean.” She winked at Sam.

He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

“I suppose a man needs to sow his wild oats,” Lacy softly replied. “It probably makes him a better lover in the long run.”

Kate rolled her eyes. What was wrong with Lacy? Kate would never go out with someone so crude. She turned back to the cow and tried not to gag as she milked it. When she was finally done, she breathed a sigh of relief. Hoping to further turn Lacy off, she allowed herself to fart. It wasn’t something she did in front of anyone before, so her face grew bright red from embarrassment. Thankfully, the beard hid this fact. “Oops. Those beans do a number on the digestive system,” she explained. “I better run to the outhouse before more comes out!”

She eagerly left the two siblings and ran out of the barn. She was glad to get away from them. She wondered where Chad was. She saw Tim and Jeff lounging on their horses in the field. They were given the task of cleaning the horses but didn’t mind taking their time. She went to the other barn where the loft was and was happy to see Chad working on the door to the other end of the barn.

“Give me a job that requires me to be alone,” she insisted as she ran up to him.

Chad looked startled to see her.

“Lacy and Sam are relentless,” she complained. “I’ve been downright disgusting and they are still talking as if I’m going to marry her.”

He shook his head. “What did I tell you? They have curve balls they’ll throw your way.”

“I have a plan but I can’t go through it yet. I just need a temporary escape.”

“You better make sure you’re careful.”

“I am.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Do you have anything for me to do?”

He thought for a moment. “You could practice lassoing the cattle. I won’t mention where you went.”

“Thanks. I owe you one.” She quickly ran to Reliable and saddled him up. She ran him out of the barn before Sam or Lacy had time to track her down.

* * * * *

While she was out, she made a quick trip into town and bought more dresses. Now that Chad knew Kate existed, she would be showing up as Kate more often and needed more dresses and skirts. She also bought a redheaded long wig. She might need to disguise herself as another woman for her plan to ward off Lacy to work. When she returned to the farm, she hid the bags of clothes and the wig on the corner of the property so no one would find them. She would retrieve them after dinner when everyone but Chad was gone. She would figure out some excuse to get away from Chad. Billy and Kate would be busy with something. She could think up her excuses later.

She reluctantly went to lunch in the kitchen. She knew she had to make an appearance there. Chad was out doing some chores, as usual, while the farmhands ate their sandwiches. Lacy sat and ate with them. Kate took a deep breath and got ready for her encounter with Lacy. She made sure everyone saw her enter the house before she scratched her crotch. She hoped Lacy would find it as repulsive as she found it when she saw men do it.

“Where did you run off to?” Tim wondered.

“Oh, boss sent me on a mission to lasso cattle,” she replied. She sat at the only seat that was available, and that happened to be between Lacy and Jeff.

“We looked all over for you,” Sam told her. “We were beginning to think you ran off to the next state you plan to check out.”

She laughed. “Would you hunt me down and drag me back if I did?” she joked.

They chuckled.

She took a big bite into her sandwich and chewed with her mouth open.

“We asked Chad where you were, but he said he didn’t know,” Jeff informed her. “I don’t know why he was secretive about your whereabouts.”

She was glad that Chad protected her. He really was a good man. She wondered what he thought of her as a woman. She wasn’t sure if he would tell her in her Billy disguise. She turned

her attention back to the conversation at the table.

“I suppose Chad doesn’t want anyone to get close to Lacy,” Jeff commented.

She glanced at Lacy. “Is he interested in you?”

“He did get romantic with me five years ago,” Lacy said. “I wouldn’t betray my sister so I told him no.”

Kate didn’t believe the woman but acted as if she did. “Does he try to pursue you now that Georgia is gone?”

“No,” she replied.

“We taught him a lesson on being loyal to Georgia,” Sam said. “We agree with you, Billy. We don’t tolerate anyone misbehaving with our sisters. We can appreciate your need for protection. That’s why we wouldn’t dream of harming Kate.”

Kate still didn’t trust them, nor did she trust Lacy. But she did trust Chad. She needed to get Lacy off her back as soon as possible. She loudly sniffed and wiped her nose. She took a big gulp of milk, hoping it would produce a large burp in the near future. “My allergies sometimes act up,” she quickly explained. For added measure, she wiped her eyes. “Today seems to be worse than usual. It really hit me after I went out to the fields.”

“You should tell Chad. He might keep you around the barn more if you do,” Tim stated.

“I do love riding the horse though. I hate to give up the freedom of going through the fields.”

“With the way you are on a horse, I can’t say that I blame you.”

“You were magnificent,” Lacy gushed. “I can’t believe you won the race against Nick.”

“Oh yes,” Kate bragged. “There’s no horse I can’t handle.”

“How did you learn to ride so well?”

She didn’t like the way Lacy was looking at her as if she adored her. She purposely sneezed all over Lacy’s food, making sure to spray some saliva everywhere while she was at it. She quickly wiped her hand over her nose and reached for her second sandwich. “I’m sorry, Lacy. Would you like my sandwich since I sneezed on yours?”

Lacy quickly shook her head. “No thank you.”

For added measure, Kate let out a big burp. “Excuse me.” She

pretended to look shocked. "I don't know what's going on with my body today. It's as if it has a mind of its own. I don't wish to be gross in front of you."

"It's alright. I have two brothers and many male cousins. I know what men are like."

She sighed, disappointed. The woman was relentless.

"Billy's a good old boy," Sam told Lacy.

This was getting worse by the minute.

"Unfortunately, I got to take her back to town. Mother wants to cook dinner with her," Sam told Kate.

Kate breathed a sigh of relief. At least she wouldn't have to worry about Lacy for awhile.

Chad entered the kitchen, and as usual, he ignored everyone while he put the pail of milk on the counter. He got out the glass bottles and filled them up.

He's stable and consistent. He can be relied upon to keep his word. He's also honest. He was the man Kate had been looking for her entire life. She forced herself not to run over to him and hug him. Instead, she turned her attention back to the table.

"So Billy," Tim began as he finished his meal, "tell us a little bit about Kate. What is she like?"

"She enjoys the big city," she honestly stated. "She wouldn't be happy to live here. She's only here to visit me."

"Surely, she can adjust to the small town life."

"No, she really can't. She would get bored."

"Perhaps she just needs the right kind of man to bring her the excitement she's looking for."

"Well, she's very particular about who she will marry." *You three have absolutely no chance with me.* "She's thirty and though she's had offers, she hasn't found anyone who meets her standards."

"What are those?"

She sighed. She knew where this was going. "Actually, she's into a man who knows his Bible. She's an old fashioned type of woman."

"The kind of woman who would make a good mother," Sam reflected.

Her jaw dropped. She had expected the comment about being into the Bible to turn the men off. “She also wants a man who’s taller than her. In case you haven’t noticed, she’s tall for a woman.”

“Height is a small issue.” Tim waved his hand.

“Would you be willing to leave North Dakota to go back to her home? She wouldn’t live here.”

“I’m sure that could be worked out.”

Not in a minute! She didn’t like the way they easily dismissed her wishes. Chad finished filling the bottles and went down the steps. She wondered if he would be willing to leave this place to go back to Virginia with her. He didn’t seem to be eager to stick around here if he had somewhere else to go.

“She sure is a good looker,” Sam commented.

Lacy frowned. No one else seemed to notice it but Kate did. It was her gift to notice subtle details. That’s what enabled her to pick up so much of what was going on.

“Lacy, do you have any feelings for Chad?” She would never ask the question when Chad was in hearing distance.

“No!” she quickly replied. “He came onto me. I didn’t ask for his affection.”

She’s lying. Kate nodded, as if she believed the raven haired woman. “Just wanted to see if I had some competition,” she quickly covered her tracks.

Chad returned to the kitchen and shut the basement door.

She picked up her empty plate and glass. “I better get back to work. I don’t want to upset the boss.”

“When is Kate going to wake up?” Tim asked her.

She shrugged. “She was worn out. It could be awhile yet. She’s a night person by nature.”

“We hope we don’t have to wait until the potluck to see her again.”

“Well, I’d love to stay and chat but I’m eager to get back to work. The fresh air and warm sun make me energetic.” She quickly washed her plate and glass and set it out to dry.

While the other men and Lacy continued their discussion, Chad quietly asked her, “Didn’t Kate tell you that I saved some breakfast

for you down in the basement?”

She blinked. “Oh, yes. I forgot all about it with Lacy glued to me. Thanks for not saying anything so I could get a much needed break from her. She’ll be going home after lunch, so I can spend the rest of my day focused on my work. What would you like me to do next?”

He thought for a moment. “The animals need to be fed.”

“I’ll get right on it, boss.” She happily said good-bye to Lacy and ran out of the house.

* * * * *

Once she finished feeding the animals and confirmed that Sam had taken Lacy back to town, she breathed a sigh of relief. Tim and Jeff pretended to work on setting up a couple of shelves in the shed. She would have gone with them to make sure they did their job but wanted to talk to Chad for a moment. She found him repairing a section of the cattle fence.

“Good afternoon, boss,” she called out as she walked up to him.

Chad looked over his shoulder and smiled at her. “Hi, Billy.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You’re no longer calling me Bob?”

He shrugged. “Billy seems to fit better.” He turned back to the fence.

“Do you need any help?”

“No. I got it. Did you need more work to do?”

“I’m going to motivate Tim and Jeff to finish those shelves you told them to put up after I talk to you.”

“What do you want to discuss?”

“I decided not to mention Georgia to Kate, but if she finds out about Georgia from the Montgomeries, what do you want me to tell her?”

“Just tell her that Georgia passed away a year ago and I have no attachment to her.”

That sounded promising. Kate suspected that he might feel an attraction to her but wondered how his past experience with Georgia would affect how he reacted to it.

“You should warn her about those men,” he said.

She knew he was referring to Georgia’s relatives. “Oh, I already did that. I told her what they’re all about. She isn’t interested in men like that. It’s almost funny that they actually think they have a chance with her.”

He looked relieved.

“Believe me, they have no chance with her.”

He hesitated for a moment before saying, “Be sure to tell Kate to not ride Star.”

“I will.”

“Is there anything else?” he asked her.

“I thought you should know that Lacy’s still interested in you.”

His eyes grew wide. “What? Did she say that?”

“No. In fact, she denied it but I can tell she was lying. I thought you might want to be careful.”

“Why? She’s not coming back out here, is she?”

“I hope not. I tried to be as gross as possible but she’s relentless.”

He shook his head. He turned to her and placed one hand on his hip while the other one held the fence. “I thought she was interested in you.”

“She likes both of us. It seems that either one of us who shows her the slightest interest will get her attention.”

“Well, I’m not going to encourage her. I avoided her like the plague the whole time she was here. You were the one who talked to her.”

“And I was purposely being disgusting. My sister wouldn’t even go near me with the way I was acting today.” She rolled her eyes. “I thought for sure it would send Lacy running out of here.”

“What did you do?” He seemed amused.

She explained how she burped, farted, scratched her crotch, sneezed everywhere and loudly sniffled.

She noticed his soft laughter. “I’m almost sorry I missed it. That must have been quite a show.”

He has such a nice laugh. He definitely needed to laugh more. “I thought it was until she said that she’s familiar with how her male relatives act. She made it clear that she is willing to overlook

all my gross habits.”

“I don’t think anything you do will work. Like I said, she’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing. I imagine she’ll be a lot like her sister if she does get married.”

She cringed. “Sounds lovely,” she sarcastically responded.

“Just watch out.” He sobered up. “Make sure you don’t drink anything around her. If she can, she will get you to sleep with her since she won’t be able to get you any other way. Then if she gets pregnant, you’re stuck.”

“Well, that would be impossible since it definitely won’t happen.” Since she wasn’t a man, she was very safe in that department.

“Good luck with that.” He turned back to the fence.

“What would she have accomplished by sleeping with you? I mean, you were already married.”

He paused. “I think she wanted to rub her sister’s nose in it. She did ask me if it would be funny if she had my kid when Georgia couldn’t. I was so drunk at the time, it didn’t even register what was going on.”

“Did you used to drink?”

“I did for awhile. It’s not something I’m proud of. I used to purposely get drunk to forget about my life with Georgia. But after I lost it one night, I avoided alcohol altogether. Even now, I won’t touch it. It’s a quick way to lose control.”

“Do you mind if I ask what happened that night?”

He paused. “I don’t like to think about it. I don’t remember everything about it. That’s what happens when you get so drunk you pass out. You forget things.”

“What happened?”

“Billy, if I told you, you wouldn’t like me.”

Her breath caught in her throat. Was it really that bad?

“But I suppose you have a right to know in case you want to warn your sister about me.” He was silent for a moment. Then he simply said, “I hit her.”

She hadn’t expected this. She couldn’t imagine him actually hitting a woman. He didn’t even hit a man.

He continued, “I was ready to leave Georgia because I discov-

ered that she had pretended to give birth to our stillborn child. The truth was, she lied about even being pregnant. I was so mad that I went to town to get drunk. I drank until I was ready to collapse. I know I rode Reliable back here but I don't remember leaving the bar. I can only remember bits and pieces of that night. I was packing and yelling at her. She said something but her voice sounded distorted. One minute I was packing and the next thing I remember, I was slipping on the step on the front porch. Everything else is a blank. I woke up the next morning with a hangover and laying in a puddle in front of the porch steps with a suitcase in my hand. Apparently, it had rained the night before and I slipped on the wet steps. When I saw Georgia, she had a black eye. She said I hit her. I don't remember doing it but there was no one else there that night who could have done it." He took a deep breath. "After marrying Georgia, I slid far in my walk with Christ. After that night, I went back to Him and I haven't steered off the path since. I became aware of how weak I really am. The good news is that I rely on Him to be my strength."

"When we come to Jesus Christ, we are new creations. Our past is cleared as if it never happened."

"I can assure you that I'm a different person than I was back then."

"I believe you, but I don't think you did it."

He looked at her.

"You didn't even hit me and you were furious with me when I called you weak. I think you don't remember it because you didn't do it."

"I'd like to believe that, Billy, but I'm afraid to in case you're wrong. So many things can go wrong when a person is drunk."

"Well, whatever really did happen isn't an issue anymore. The point is that you don't drink anymore and won't hit anyone now."

"Thank you, Billy." He looked relieved.

What I think really matters to him. She was surprised that she had such a profound impact on him. She couldn't help but fall in love with him. He was the first man who seemed real to her. It was ironic that such a thing would happen in the midst of her own deception. She only hoped that when the time came for her to re-

veal the truth, he would understand. She took a deep breath. “I should go back and check on Tim and Jeff. I’m going to catch an early dinner and rest for the night. I hope you don’t mind. Kate will be your only company tonight.”

She sensed that he was happy at the announcement. She smiled to herself. She would rather be with him as Kate but was learning a lot about him and the type of man he was when she was Billy. The more she learned about him, the more she liked him. She turned away and went to take care of her new clothes and wig before she went to Tim and Jeff.

Chapter 10

Chad took his time finishing the fence for two reasons. He wanted to do a good job so he wouldn't have to repair it for a long time. Also, he was nervous about seeing Kate. It had been a long time since he had talked to a woman, and he felt out of practice with what to say or what to do. When he returned to the shed to put his tools and some barbed wire away, he noticed that Tim and Jeff were talking to Kate who stood by the barn door. She wore the same clothes as before, but for some reason, she looked even nicer than she had that morning. He knew he would have to compete for her. He wondered if he had a chance with her. He turned his attention to putting his things away.

When he came out of the shed, he pleasantly noticed that she was walking over to him. He sighed when he saw Tim and Jeff following close behind.

“Good afternoon, Chad,” she smiled.

“Hello, Kate.” He returned her smile.

“I want to thank you for letting me rest in your bedroom.” She glanced back, uncertainly, at Tim and Jeff who were standing nearby. “Anyway, I wanted to ask you a question but I guess it can wait.”

Chad figured that they would be just as attracted to her as he was so he wasn't surprised that they gave her their undivided attention. He sighed. "Did you two finish putting up the shelves?" he asked them.

"We did," Jeff said.

"Do you have any other work for us?" Tim wondered. "A hard day of work is good for a man."

Chad's jaw dropped. Since when did Tim want to work?

"The Lord says that it's good for a man to work," Jeff added.

"You read the Bible?" She turned to him in interest.

"I sure do. Every day. I never miss church on Sunday morning either."

Chad stopped himself from rolling his eyes. He knew what they were doing. Billy had told them that she was an old fashioned woman who honored the Bible, so they were trying to win her over by lying to her. *They aren't much better than Georgia. Except they'll probably actually want sex.*

"Are you serious about wanting more work?" Chad looked at Tim and Jeff. He could play along with their game.

"Sure," they nodded.

"Alright. I need to put in a couple more stalls in the barn for the cows. It qualifies as hard work and will most likely take a day or two to complete," he stated. "Still interested?"

Tim and Jeff hesitated.

"I would ask Billy to work with you but he's resting after not getting much sleep from last night, and I'd hate to disturb him after he worked so hard today." That much was true. Chad didn't want to overwork his best farmhand.

"Would you be putting up the stalls with us?" Tim asked him.

Was he actually afraid that Chad would win Kate? Chad didn't think they would consider him competition since they seemed to be so confident that he wasn't worth a woman's attention. *They must want me to help them so I'll do most of the work while they take the credit for it.* As much as he wanted to spend time alone with Kate, he didn't trust them to do a good job if they were unsupervised. "Yes, I'll be putting them up too."

"I've never seen stalls put up," Kate said, her eyes wide with

interest. "Do you mind if I watch?"

"We would love to show you how much we can do," Tim eagerly replied.

Chad hid his agitation as he went into the shed to collect the supplies they would need for building new stalls. He put pieces of wood into the wheelbarrow and added the nails and hammers he would need. He added several latches and screws with screwdrivers since they would need those to secure the stalls so that the cows wouldn't escape.

"Chad, you should let us help with that," Jeff kindly admonished him.

He stared at the shorter man, bewildered.

"It wouldn't be right for you to do all the work by yourself," he added.

He gritted his teeth as Jeff took the wheelbarrow and pushed it out of the shed. He reluctantly put more boards into the second wheelbarrow. To his shock, Tim came into the shed and politely offered to wheel it out. He stood in the shed. He didn't appreciate the fact that Jeff and Tim were lying in order to please Kate.

"Are you coming?" Kate's words brought him out of his thoughts.

He silently nodded, closed the shed door and walked with them to the barn.

"You know, your hair reminds me of the noonday sun," Tim told her. "It's radiant."

"Oh, well thanks," she slowly replied.

"I must admit that you are the prettiest woman around," Jeff added. "Considering your brother is a good friend, it's not surprising to find that his sister has a good personality as well."

"You don't even know me. I might be a shrew," she joked.

"I find that hard to believe. Someone as pretty as you has to be a good woman."

Tim spoke up. "Your brother is a lot of fun. He rides a horse better than anyone else in town."

"He prides himself on his skill with a horse," she commented. "He can handle any horse."

Except Star. That horse will kill anyone who gets on her.

Chad suddenly wondered if he should shoot it. Was it really safe to keep a dangerous horse on his property, even if it did kill his horrible wife for him? “Did Billy warn you to stay away from Star?” he asked her.

“Yes, he did,” she told him. “But he wouldn’t tell me why.”

“Did Billy also tell you about the potluck?” Jeff quickly asked to get her attention away from Chad.

“He did,” she nodded.

Chad was secretly relieved that Jeff spoke up so he wouldn’t have to make up an excuse as to why Star shouldn’t ever be ridden. As long as she understood that the horse was off limits, he felt much better.

“Will you be going?” Tim asked her.

“I don’t know. I just got here,” she responded. “Who’s going to be there?”

“Most of the town folk will be there. You can get an idea of who lives here, in case you decide to stay.”

She looked startled. “Stay?”

“You might find someone to your liking.”

“Oh, I fully intend to return home. I just came here to visit Billy. I hardly see him. He’s always running from one place to another.”

“Where is your home?”

“I live in a big city in Virginia, but I was born in a small town in Kentucky. I am familiar with how close people can be in a small place.”

“Yes. We are like one big family here.”

And some of us are the black sheep of that family. Chad led them over to the empty spot in the barn where he intended to build the stalls. “We will start on this one today and do the other one tomorrow,” he said.

He walked to the level that was on the shelf in the corner of the barn and walked back to them. When he returned to them, he frowned. “You weren’t supposed to start yet.” He tried to hide his irritation when he saw the board they had already nailed into the wall. He walked past them and put the level on the board. “Look. It’s uneven. If you’re not careful, then the work you’re doing

won't last."

He shook his head as he went back to a wheelbarrow and picked up a hammer. He went back to the board and pried the nails off so it came off the wall. He really wished Billy was there to help. Billy might be weak, but he was thorough and deliberate in his work. He considered getting Billy but didn't want to wake him in case he was asleep. Billy had a long night and worked hard that morning and early afternoon. He deserved a good rest.

"We're sorry, Chad," Tim apologized. "Just tell us what to do and we'll do it."

He nearly pounded the hammer at the wall. It was one thing for them to treat him badly on a regular basis, but he couldn't handle their being nice to him just to impress Kate. It was the same thing they did in front of Georgia and her parents. "You know what, I'm going to wait until tomorrow," he finally said. "Billy and I will do this. Why don't you two collect the remaining hay from the fields and bring it to the horses' barn? Be careful not to wake Billy. He's asleep."

Tim and Jeff looked disappointed.

He crossed his arms. "Did you want to work or not?"

Kate looked at them and waited for their response.

"We don't mind putting this stall together," Jeff said.

"No offense but I prefer Billy's work to yours. He takes great care in his work." Chad no longer cared if she found his words to them upsetting or not.

"Alright." Jeff didn't hide his hurt.

Chad knew it was all a ploy to gain Kate's sympathy.

"We didn't realize we were being so careless," Tim replied. "We'll try better next time. Come on, Jeff. Let's get the hay."

"Do you want to check out the fields and see what North Dakota looks like in the day since you came so late at night?" Jeff asked her. "You can ride on the horse with me."

Chad forced himself to gently set the hammer down in the wheelbarrow and quietly left the barn. He couldn't take it anymore. If she wanted to go with them, he would get Billy to go with her, whether Billy was tired or not. Billy could make sure she was safe from anything Tim or Jeff might try with her out in the fields.

“Where are you going?” She ran after him.

He was surprised that she followed him. He glanced behind him and noticed that Tim and Jeff were right behind her. *They’re like a bunch of puppies.* “If you’re going with them, I’m getting your brother to take you on Reliable.” He continued walking.

“No. There’s no need. I don’t want to go out to the fields,” she quickly argued.

He stopped.

“Don’t you trust us, Chad?” Jeff asked him as he and Tim reached him.

He pointedly stared at them. Jeff and Tim already knew the answer to that. He knew they didn’t mind sleeping around.

“I’m sure Lacy would be interested in this conversation,” Tim said. “Kate, you would like our sister Lacy. She’s a sweet girl who wouldn’t hurt a fly. It’s too bad that not everyone treated her so well.” He looked over at Chad.

Chad tensed. He took a deep breath and held it as he willed himself to relax. He didn’t appreciate them bringing up his past in front of Kate and they knew it. *Lord, help me calm down so I don’t say or do the wrong thing.*

“I’m sure I would like her,” Kate told Tim. “Billy mentioned that she was here earlier today but I slept through her visit. How old is she?”

She didn’t know how much he appreciated the fact that she spoke up when she did.

“She’s twenty-four,” Tim replied, turning his attention to her. “You and her could probably be good friends. It just isn’t the same for her since Georgia died.”

“Who’s Georgia?”

He blinked in surprise. “Chad didn’t tell you about his wife? She passed away a year ago. She was just as sweet and lovely as Lacy is.”

At least Tim got that part right. Chad couldn’t argue with that. Lacy was just as bad as Georgia.

“Georgia was Chad’s entire world,” Jeff inserted. “He was heartbroken when she died. I don’t imagine he’ll be able to love another woman.”

Chad knew what Jeff and Tim were doing and he didn't like it. *Don't yell at them.*

"Maybe he hasn't found a woman worth loving again," Kate commented. "It would be a shame for someone as kind as Chad to go through the rest of his life alone."

She's too good to be true, isn't she? She had no idea how her words affected him.

"Yes, we think Chad's a good boy," Tim smiled. "He does a lot of good for people, and we do appreciate him."

He rolled his eyes. Tim and Jeff couldn't be trusted.

"I agree with you, Tim. I think someone who willingly takes in his new farmhand's sister without any questions is the kind of person who does good for others too," she said. She smiled at Chad.

Tim and Jeff scowled at him, but he didn't care. He was pleased that she chose to say something so nice to him. *Perhaps Billy said good things about me to her.*

When she turned back to them, they were smiling.

"We hope you'll come out on Saturday," Tim told her. "We would like to introduce you to the other people in town. We think you'll like them."

"I'll be there," she decided.

They beamed.

Chad sighed. "Let's call it a day." He turned to the house and started walking to it. It was too late to start any lengthy chore anyway.

"Will you gentlemen be coming out tomorrow?" she asked Tim and Jeff.

"We come out every day, Monday through Friday," Jeff assured her.

"Then I'll get a chance to see you tomorrow."

Chad frowned. Was she looking forward to seeing them? He noted that as soon as Tim and Jeff said good-bye and left, she ran after him. He reached the front door by the time she caught up with him.

"Can I help you with dinner?" she offered.

He didn't hide his surprise. "You don't have to do that. I can make something. I'm used to cooking."

“Then can I keep you company while you cook? With Billy sleeping, I don’t have anyone to talk to and I spent the day by myself.”

He was pleased she wanted to talk to him but wondered if she would have preferred Tim and Jeff’s company. He pushed such thoughts aside and smiled at her. “I would like to talk to you while I cook. What do you like to eat?”

“Oh, anything you make will be fine. I’m not picky. Besides, I’ve inconvenienced you enough. I don’t wish to be a burden.”

“Believe me, you’re not a burden.”

He opened the door for her. He followed her into the house and noted how wonderful she looked when she walked. No doubt, Jeff and Tim enjoyed the same view. He forced aside his irritation at the thought of those two looking at her in such a way. Then he had to wonder if he was any better than them since he was responding to her in the same way. *But I wouldn’t use her and they would.* There was a difference.

She stood next to him while he got some canned items and put them on the counter. He hoped his slight shaking wasn’t showing. He was thirty-six but he was acting like a twenty year old. He really felt out of sync with the rest of the world. Being away from women for ten months definitely had an affect on him that he wasn’t aware of until he saw her that morning. It was as if he was discovering women for the first time, and it was a very pleasant sensation.

“If you need me to do anything, just let me know,” she said. “I really don’t mind helping you.”

Just talking to me is more than enough. He shrugged. “I don’t know what you can do. I have everything under control. It is nice to have you here to talk to.”

She smiled at him. Her smile lit up the room. The place seemed much brighter with her there. “I did enjoy our conversation earlier today. Billy says you are a good man.”

He tried to hide his pleasure that Billy would do that for him. “Billy’s a good man too. It’s rare to find someone who not only does his job but does his best at it. I was a little rough on him when he learned to clip wool off a sheep and trying to lasso cattle.

I never did apologize for it.”

She seemed touched by his confession. “I’m sure he knows you didn’t mean any harm in what you said.”

He sighed. “He didn’t deserve it. I’m going to have to apologize to him next time I see him.” He unscrewed the lids that were on the cans. “I hope you don’t mind beef stew. I’ll also be adding a fruit salad.”

“Those sound delicious.” She paused. “Do you plan to go to the potluck on Saturday?”

“No. I don’t like to go to town.”

“Do you mind if I ask why? Should I avoid going as well?”

“That’s up to you. If you go, I recommend that you go with Billy. He knows his way to town and will look after your best interest.”

“It would be more fun if you were there, but if you would rather not, then I won’t press the issue.”

Did she enjoy being with him? “I’ll consider it,” he finally said. “In case you’re wondering, I’m not mourning over my dead wife. It’s not the way Tim and Jeff make it sound.”

“I figured that they’re all talk. I deal with men like that all the time.”

“Do you have the same uncanny ability to figure people out like your brother does?”

She nodded. “I think it annoys a lot of people.”

“Only if they have something to hide.”

“Doesn’t everyone have something they need to keep to themselves? I mean, we can’t always be an open book.”

“That’s true. I hadn’t considered that before.” He glanced at her. “You and your brother are a lot alike. It’s almost as if you are the same person.”

She laughed.

He grinned. She had a nice laugh.

“You’d be surprised at how much alike we really are,” she replied. “I notice you do a lot of work. Do you ever take time to have fun?”

He shrugged as he mixed the vegetables and beef into a pot of boiling water. He added some broth to the pot and stirred it to-

gether. Then he turned his attention to the canned fruits to put in a large bowl. "I do a lot of reading. There's not much for someone to do out here. I suppose that is the attraction of the town."

"I don't know. It is peaceful here. The landscape is amazing. I can see why Billy wants to see the country. It's so different from back east."

"What is your home like?"

"There are a lot of trees and mountains. I live in the valley though, so the mountains are in the distance."

"In California, there are mountains as well. I lived close to the Pacific Ocean."

"Do you wish to go back?"

"No."

"Do you wish to stay here?"

"It's alright to be here. I like the solitude. I feel close to God out here. But I can be anywhere and be close to Him. As long as God's in my life, it doesn't really matter where I am. Don't get me wrong," he quickly added before she got the idea he didn't want her around, "I do like to have someone nice to spend my time with."

"I agree. I didn't find anyone worth being with back home. If you had been there, I wouldn't have even bothered to track Billy down to visit him."

She has no idea how much her words are affecting me.

She looked out the kitchen window. "After dinner, will you show me your fields? I am interested in seeing them but didn't wish to go with Tim or Jeff."

She wants to go with me. His heart raced in his chest. It seemed to be too soon to want to kiss her. *It must be the solitude catching up to me.* He didn't wish to rush things. *If there's anything to even come of her being here.* He knew he would gladly follow her anywhere. She was so different from Georgia. She was sincere and real.

"I'll be glad to show you the place," he responded.

"Can I set the table?" She put her hand on his arm and looked up at him with her amazing blue eyes. "Really, I don't mind helping you."

“I don’t want to be a rude host.”

“You aren’t. I’m asking to help you. You would be rude to say no to my request.”

He chuckled. “The way you reason things makes it hard for me to resist you.”

“Good. I want to please you.”

“You’re succeeding.” He couldn’t look at her as he said it. He swallowed the nervous lump in his throat.

“You please me too,” she whispered. She quietly went to the cabinets to get the plates and glasses.

“Will you get a plate for Billy? I don’t want him to go hungry tonight.”

“I’ll do that. I’ll even take the plate to the barn so he can eat it when he gets up.”

“Kate, what is your life like back home?”

She glanced up from the dishes as she put them on the table. “I have a good life. I have many friends and a wonderful family. I’m the oldest but the only girl.”

“You have two younger brothers?”

She nodded. “My family is in the lumber business. With all the trees in Virginia, it’s easy to see why we do so well.”

“I thought you were from Kentucky.”

“Kentucky is where I was born. We moved to Virginia when I was a child. My father set up the lumber business there.” She set the utensils next to the plates. “I do a lot of reading and even decided to take over the library in town. The person who owned it before was going to tear it down, so I bought it and repaired it. I don’t make any money from it but I do enjoy doing what I can to give people a place to read. My actual job is being a secretary at Senator Tanner’s office.”

He turned to her in interest. “Senator Tanner. I heard he was murdered.” *And your brother saw it happen.* Did she know that? He knew he couldn’t reveal that information to her because Billy had told him about it in confidence.

She took a deep breath and looked back at the plates. “Yes. The murders were a shock.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t get the details of the situation. I just over-

heard Tim and Sam talking about it to Billy. I take it that the murderer is still loose?"

"They are."

"They? The newspaper only mentioned one murderer."

She looked startled by his question. "I don't think it was just one person."

"Do you know something more about it than what is in the newspaper?"

"I have my suspicions."

He wondered if Billy told her that he witnessed the murders after all. He sighed, realizing he couldn't ask her that since it was up to Billy to tell or not tell her what he saw. "Did you leave because it was too painful to stay there?"

"Yes." She quickly wiped some tears from her eyes.

He set the bowl aside and walked over to her. "It's been a long time since I've tried to comfort anyone. I'm not good at this kind of thing, but is there something I can do to help you?"

"Would you hold me?"

Is that all? He took her in his arms and softly held her. She felt wonderful. He didn't ever want to let her go. He could hardly remember the last time he hugged a woman. Georgia hadn't been very affectionate when he was courting her. He had assumed it was because she was shy, but after he married her, he soon learned that she had no desire for physical intimacy. She was relieved when he left her alone.

So when Kate wrapped her arms around his waist and pulled closer to him, he was almost afraid of the swell of emotions that came over him. He was grateful, relieved, terrified and aroused at the same time. He feared she would turn away from him, but she didn't. She softly cried into his shoulder and stayed with him. He closed his eyes and tightened his hold on her. He rested his cheek against her hair. She smelled wonderful. He wanted to hold her forever. He hadn't felt close to anyone like this. Not even the few times Georgia allowed him to have sex with her was as intimate as holding Kate. He didn't realize a simple hug could be so amazing.

After several minutes, she reluctantly pulled away from him. "Thank you, Chad," she whispered. She softly kissed his cheek.

“I am glad I’m with you.”

“Me too.”

She smiled at him. “The pot is boiling over.”

So am I. He glanced over his shoulder and grinned. “I better take care of that.” He let go of her and turned his attention back to the dinner.

After dinner, they went to the barn where he quietly saddled Reliable so they could take a ride in the fields. He didn’t wish to wake Billy up in case he was still sleeping. When he helped her on the horse, he was surprised with the ease in which she handled herself on the horse. She sat behind him and had her arms wrapped around his waist. She was familiar enough with a horse that she didn’t have to hold onto him too tightly, but he noted that she held him close anyway.

Once they were out of hearing range of the barn so he wouldn’t wake Billy up, he asked her, “Do you ride horses often?”

“You can tell I’m used to them?”

“You handle riding with ease.”

“Yes, I am good on a horse. I’ve won some ribbons and trophies in horse competitions. You do well on a horse as well. I can tell that Reliable enjoys it when you take him out.”

He grinned. “I like him too. He’s always been a good, dependable animal.” He paused. “So, Billy isn’t the only one in your family who excels on a horse. I heard he won all the races he’s been in since he got here. He’s pretty popular.”

“Billy’s always had a way with winning people over.”

He had a feeling that she did too but didn’t say it.

“I have to admit that it is beautiful out here,” she reflected.

The sun shone brightly on the yellow and green landscape. They passed a river. He motioned to it. “If you need to take a bath, this river is a good place to do that. There’s plenty of privacy and the sun warms it up nicely during the day.”

“I’ll be sure to remember that.”

The ride through the fields was pleasant. He enjoyed being with her. He hadn’t realized how lonely he had been until he spent time with her. Though he liked talking to Billy, it was much nicer to be with her. After Georgia died, the last thing he wanted was

another woman in his life. He was shocked when several women in town made their attraction to him known. He suspected they wanted the farm he came with, so he stopped going to town altogether and grew his own fruits and vegetables.

He mainly lived off the land. He had plenty of cattle and sheep for meat. Travis brought him food ingredients from the grocery store in town so he could make things like bread, and he paid Travis for doing this. It was safer for him to stay in the quiet, peaceful world he carefully created. With the exception of Sam, Tim and Jeff, he didn't have to deal with anyone. He spent most of his time working and praying or reading books, including the Bible. He had decided to hire another farmhand because his cattle and sheep had more offspring in the past year than he expected. His gardens were also doing better than anticipated, so he needed someone dependable to help him get his work done. He wondered if God had blessed him so that he would have to hire someone. Could it be that God planned to bring Kate into his life? Was she meant to be his wife?

He took his time showing her the property, for he wanted to be with her for as long as possible. He knew that Tim, Jeff and Sam would be out the next day to hog her attention. He wondered if they would bring anyone else out to the farm. He was dreading that part of the equation.

"Do you ever ride Star?" she asked.

He was startled by the question. "No. I leave Star to herself. I suppose I should have let you ride Buck. I didn't realize you were familiar with riding horses until we were already riding this one."

"Well, it is nice to ride on a horse together."

He felt his cheeks grow warm. "It is fun," he softly admitted.

When they returned to the barn, he unsaddled Reliable and put him back into his stall. "Do you think your brother is up yet?" he asked her. "I could make us all something to drink. I'm sure he'd like to talk to you. You probably didn't get much of a chance to talk to him last night."

She smiled at him. "You are very thoughtful. I would love to talk to him, but I do confess that I would like to have that drink alone with you. I will talk to him afterwards."

His heart beat faster at her words. "I'm afraid he'll think I'm selfish with the way I'm stealing your attention from him."

She shrugged. "So, be selfish. I don't mind being selfish for this reason. I'm sure that Billy will be alright with it too."

He nodded. "Very well. Do you like hot chocolate?"

"I do."

He walked with her back into the house and had a good conversation with her for the next hour. He discovered that they shared a common love for God, reading, horses, and dancing. She asked him if he had a phonogram for playing music. Since he did, they danced to several musical pieces.

"I didn't realize you were a fan of Beethoven and Bach," she said as they danced.

He was having trouble concentrating on anything but how wonderful she felt as he held her close. "I used to dance to them a lot in California."

"I danced a lot to them back home as well. My parents were insistent that I learn to dance."

He smiled. "I had parents like that too. I have been to my share of dinner parties and dances. My life in California was a lot different from the one I have here. I grew up in a wealthy environment but had to give it up when I married Georgia. I told her that would be the case, but I don't think she believed me until we were married and I didn't have a dime to my name."

"Did that upset her?"

He didn't realize he had said so much about his past. It was too easy to talk to her. He decided he might as well continue. He didn't wish to push her away. "Yes, it did. I suspect that my money was the only reason she married me. My family realized what she was like but I didn't want to believe anything bad about her, so they told me that they would disown me if I went through with the wedding. I married her anyway and decided to go to North Dakota with her. I figured that she was my new family. She wasn't pleased when she discovered I became broke because I married her."

"Did she feel guilty?"

"No."

“She was mad at you. She started treating you poorly.”

He shouldn’t have been startled that she could figure it out so well but he was. “You really do have a gift for perceiving things.”

She sighed. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

He smiled. “I’ve gotten used to it since your brother is the same way.”

She returned his smile.

No other words seemed necessary as they continued to dance.

Chapter 11

Kate wanted to stay with Chad but forced herself to return to the loft so she could sleep. She was exhausted. She had put the things she bought in town and hid them in the trunk, so they would be ready if she needed them. She hoped she wouldn't have to use them, but she realized the sooner she got Lacy off her back, the better. As she laid in her bed, she thought about Chad. She already loved him, though she hadn't known him for long. *He's the one I want to spend the rest of my life with.* She sensed that he wanted to be with her as much as she wanted to be with him. She did worry about what he would think once he discovered that she was Billy. She couldn't hide the secret from him forever, but it was too soon to give up her charade.

She slept well that night and woke up refreshed. She knew she had to put on her Billy outfit. She had already planned up the excuse as to where Kate would be. She didn't know how much longer she could pull off her scheme to separate Billy and Kate all the time, but she would have to deal with it one day at a time.

After she got dressed as Billy, she went to the house. It was strange to talk to Chad as Billy after being with him as Kate, but it was still nice to be alone with him before the other farmhands arrived. She walked into the house and saw that Chad was already

making breakfast.

“Good morning, boss,” she greeted.

He grinned. “Good morning, Billy. Is Kate with you?”

“No. She’s still asleep. I think she plans to take a bath in the river when she wakes up. So, what’s on the menu this morning?”

Chad looked disappointed at the mention that Kate wouldn’t be there that morning. He glanced at her. “I hope oatmeal is alright. I try to make a variety of meals. Did you get the dinner last night that Kate brought out to you?”

“I did. Thank you for thinking of me.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I spent so much time with her last night. I didn’t intend to take her away from you. The time just flew by.”

She smiled. “I’ve known her all of my life. There’s not much new for me to learn about her. You’re welcome to spend as much time as you want with her. I will be taking her to town with me on Saturday, so I’ll get to talk to her then.”

“I have to warn you that if she’s going to be at the river while Sam, Tim and Jeff are here, don’t tell them where she’s at. If they find out, they’ll claim to check on the cattle.” He looked at her. “They won’t be checking on the cattle.”

She grimaced. The thought of those creepy men going by the river to see her naked was enough to make her shudder. “I understand.”

He shook his head. “I should be used to it but it amazes me that sometimes you and Kate really do seem like the same person.”

If only he knew...She cleared her throat. “What’s on the chore list for today?”

“Yesterday an effort was made to start building two stalls for the cows, but we didn’t get very far.”

“I’ll be happy to work on it, but you’ll have to show me what to do.”

Chad walked over to the table and set the bowls of oatmeal on the table.

“Do you want me to get milk?” she offered.

“No. I got it. Oatmeal is easy.” He got the glasses and set them on the table and poured milk into them. He sat across from

her. "Before I forget, I wanted to apologize for being so rough on you about your physical strength. I was out of line."

"Apologies aren't necessary."

"I have to admit that I'm impressed with the way you're able to handle the other farmhands."

She shrugged. "I've always been pretty outgoing. I think I naturally attract people." She looked at him in interest. "Why don't you come along to the potluck on Saturday?"

"Because everyone would feel the need to express their condolences over me losing my wife and how empty the world is without her. Some of them will even tell me their favorite stories of her."

"Surely, they realize after a year, it's time to let it go."

"You went there a couple weekends ago. Her mother showed you a tour of the place. Did anyone else talk about her?"

She nodded. "Yes. Quite a few people did. I see your point. Though it would be more fun if you were there. I know if I don't take Kate out there, then every available man will be making a trip out here to see her."

"Some men in town are decent. I heard Jeff and Tim talking about bringing Todd out to meet her. He's not bad, though he hangs around a bad group of men."

"Perhaps, but he's boring." She recalled her past encounter with the man when she was in town. "Besides, he's also shorter than her. She's a tall woman and wants a man she can look up to. I mean that figuratively and literally. I would think you would be more her type than anyone else around here."

He looked down at his bowl.

"You know, she's nothing like Georgia," she assured him.

"Yes. I know."

She breathed a sigh of relief. She had worried that he would compare her to Georgia and wonder if she would make him miserable as well.

Tim, Sam and Jeff walked into the kitchen.

She didn't hide her surprise. "What are you all doing here so early? Can't wait to get started on those stalls?" she joked.

They chuckled.

Chad quickly ate his breakfast.

Todd followed them into the kitchen.

“I remember you,” she stood up and shook his hand. “What brings you out here this fine morning? Did you get excited by the prospect of putting up the stalls too? I must admit, this must be one fun chore to inspire so many people to do it.”

Todd grinned. “I don’t mind helping out. I have my own farm. But I came to see your sister. Is she around?”

“She’s still asleep. She’s a night owl. She likes to sleep in.”

He frowned.

She shrugged. “You might as well stick around until after lunch anyway. You made the trip out here and I promise that I’m not that dull to be around.”

“He’s got that right,” Sam agreed. “Lacy is looking forward to seeing you again.”

She hid her disgust. Instead, she said, “You know how many women I danced with at the last potluck. I will not be tied down to anyone. Seriously, I love my life of roaming around and meeting new and interesting people.”

“Lacy would like to travel.”

“No offense, men, but having a woman around would cramp my style. I love them and leave them. I don’t stick around. Now, I’ll leave Lacy alone since she’s your sister. I sure wouldn’t want any of you taking advantage of my sister, so I’ll respect yours.”

“Oh, Todd here is looking to get married. He wouldn’t mistreat her. He’d marry her.”

“She couldn’t give up her home. Todd, are you willing to move?”

Todd considered it. “If she’s as good as they say she is, I’d be willing to. The selection in this town is limited.”

She didn’t like to hear this.

“It’ll be interesting to see who wins her heart and the money,” Sam thoughtfully commented.

Her eyes grew wide. “Are you making a bet on who she’s going to choose?”

“Sure. We bet on everything.” He turned to Chad, “And we made the bet in town, so it wasn’t gambling on your property.”

She laughed. “You all are insane. You can’t bet on something

like love.”

“Sure we can.”

“Alright. Who else is going to go after my sister?”

“We all are,” Tim said.

“How many people are in on this bet?”

“About half the town.”

“How much have you got riding on this?” She couldn’t believe they were doing this.

They told her.

She frowned. “Is that all you think she is worth? My goodness, men. She’s a lady. She’s not the kind of girl who misbehaves.”

“Billy,” Chad snapped.

She glanced at him.

“In her best interest, I wouldn’t say anything else,” he warned.

“Oh come on, Chad,” Tim rolled his eyes. “We don’t deflower every virgin we see. We’ll treat Billy’s sister with respect.”

Her heart pounded nervously in her chest. She didn’t believe him. The fact that she was a virgin made them even more determined to be the one to sleep with her first. Todd was probably the exception. She put on her best “Billy showing off” face and said, “My money is on the boss.”

The four men laughed.

“What’s so funny? As far as I can see, he’s got the best chance of anyone in this town,” she told them.

“You’re a riot, Billy.” Tim slapped her on the back, nearly knocking her over.

She looked at them in disbelief. “I am serious.”

They laughed even harder.

She shook her head. She threw her hands up in the air. She quickly finished her oatmeal and put her bowl and glass in the sink. “Fine. Don’t believe me. But if he proposes, she’ll say yes and you will all see that I’m right. I know my sister, and the boss is her type.” She ignored their continued laughter as she turned to Chad. “Are we ready to get to those stalls?”

Chad nodded and placed his dishes beside hers. Instead of washing the dishes, he led them to the barn.

“With all of us working on the stalls, we can get it done in no time,” she said.

The farmhands grumbled.

“Or you can go back home. I’m sure Kate wouldn’t mind spending time alone with the boss,” she continued.

“Of course, we’ll help,” Sam quickly replied.

“I’ve done it before,” Todd responded. “I don’t mind pitching in.”

She knew that would get them to do it. If nothing else, she was going to make them work hard that morning. She didn’t appreciate them betting on her as if she were an object. *Chad has no idea how much better he is than these animals.*

* * * * *

As she worked on the stalls with the men, she got satisfaction out of watching them sweat from their labors. They completed both stalls shortly before lunch. As they took a break to wait for Chad to make sandwiches, she sat with Tim, Sam, Jeff and Todd and talked with them in her usual easy going manner.

Right before lunch, Todd’s farmhand came out and told him that he needed to take care of a minor emergency at his own farm. Todd looked disappointed to miss his chance to see Kate.

“Don’t worry about it, pal,” Sam smiled. “You can meet her this weekend. She’ll be coming out to the potluck.”

“Tell her I said hi,” he told her.

“I will,” she replied. Todd wasn’t a bad man. She would have to keep her eyes out for a woman to fix him up with.

During lunch, Chad was out doing his usual chores while she sat with them and ate.

“When are we going to get a chance to see Kate?” Tim asked. “I find it hard to believe she sleeps in until noon.”

“Oh, she’s already been up for awhile.” She glanced at them in disbelief. “You mean to tell me you missed her again? She headed on out to the river to take a bath. Didn’t you see her leave?”

They looked stunned.

Did they believe her?

“She’s as quiet as a mouse,” Sam finally said.

“She doesn’t wish to disrupt our work,” she commented, relieved that they accepted her lie. “She’s very thoughtful that way.”

“We’ll have to show her our work when she gets back,” Tim said. “She was interested in it yesterday. I’m sure she’ll want to see the finished product.”

“She enjoys a man who knows how to work hard. The harder he works, the better. That’s why I think she’ll be impressed with Chad. He’s always doing something.”

“Does she want children?”

“Sure she does. What woman doesn’t?”

They glanced at each other and smiled.

“What?” she asked, wondering why they were looking at each other with mischief in their eyes.

“Nothing,” Sam quickly responded.

She frowned.

Chad walked into the house with the pail of milk. He set it on the counter and filled up the bottles.

She stared in shock as the men wolfed down their sandwiches and gulped their milk in a hurry. Then they excused themselves and ran out of the house.

“Did they get scared that they’d have to do more work?” Chad mused.

She glanced at him in interest. He actually made a joke. She smiled. “I think you finally scared them off.”

He rolled his eyes. “Hardly. They’re not intimidated by me.”

She finished her sandwich and stood up. “What do you want me to do next?”

“Aren’t you exhausted? You worked harder than they did this morning.”

She shrugged. “I don’t mind. Do you want me to practice my lassoing skills on the cattle?”

He nodded. “That’s probably a good idea. Now that you can lasso them, you can go by yourself.”

“How do you know I can finally do that?” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Have you been keeping tabs on me?”

He grinned. "On Sunday, I was curious where you took Reliable and saw you succeed at the task. I didn't want to say anything in case I made you nervous. Sometimes, we do our best work when no one is watching."

"Huh. I'll have to keep an eye out for you." He really was aware of what happened on his property.

He chuckled.

"Well, I'm glad you'll be here to watch after Kate. I will take a sandwich out to her, if you'd like."

"Alright."

She grabbed an extra sandwich and left. She quickly made her way to the sheep building where she gave the sandwich to the sheepdog to eat. Then she went to the barn where her temporary lodging was. She gritted her teeth when she saw the men walking back from the river. Her eyes narrowed and she clenched her fists in anger. *That's it. I'm going to make them work so hard that they will be begging to go home.* She quickly got dressed in a pink shirt and wore a blue skirt. She brushed her long flowing hair and climbed down the loft ladder.

She checked outside the barn and saw that the men were out of sight. She shook her head, still angry, and went to the house where she saw Chad washing dishes. She forced her anger aside so she could be pleasant to him. "Hello," she smiled at him.

He looked up from the sink and returned her smile. "Did you have a good night's sleep?"

She nodded. "Yes. I confess that I stayed up for a good portion of the night to read. I didn't realize I slept in as late as I did." She wanted to run over to him and kiss him but refrained. It was still too soon to act on her strong feelings for him. "I enjoyed going out to the fields and dancing with you last night. I can't remember the last time I had so much fun."

"Me neither."

"Are we going to do more dancing tonight? I really liked it."

He looked at her and smiled. "We can dance again."

She liked to have any excuse to touch him. Having his strong arms around her was better than she thought it would be when she saw him without his shirt on.

They talked for twenty minutes before she glanced out the window and saw that the three men had reappeared.

He followed her gaze and sighed. "They've been asking about you all morning," he warned her.

She grimaced. "I can only hope going to town on Saturday will get them off my back. They don't come out on the weekends, do they?"

"They haven't up to this point but you never know. You're hard to resist."

"As long as you think so," she smiled at him.

He blushed.

"Well, it'll be interesting to see how much they'll do to impress me," she thoughtfully stated. It still disgusted her that they went to the river in hopes of seeing her naked. Turning back to Chad, she asked, "Will you stay near me this afternoon? I don't want to be alone with them. I don't trust them."

"Billy is out with the cattle, so he's not around. I'll be with you," he nodded.

She kissed him on the cheek. "You are my knight in shining armor."

He shrugged. "It's not like I don't want to be with you. My motives are selfish."

He does love me. She smiled again. "You're a good man, Chad."

They left the house and the three men frowned at the sight of her with him.

"Billy told us you wanted someone to help you lift something," Tim lied to her. "We couldn't find you anywhere."

"Why would my brother send three of you to lift an item for me when one man could easily do the task?" She decided to play along. She didn't want Chad to know what they were really doing since he would be greatly upset by it.

"We figured that you would pick which one of us you wanted to do the task. Strength is my middle name."

"I don't have anything for you to lift," she replied.

"Then why would Billy say you did?"

"I don't know. Ask him." She gritted her teeth. How dare they

imply that Billy lied? *That's it. It's time to get tough.* "Well, I'm looking forward to watching you this afternoon. I do admire a man who can be a hard worker."

"We do our best at everything we do," Sam assured her, nearly shoving Tim and Jeff aside so he could be closer to her.

Tim and Jeff pushed him aside and stood on either side of her.

"There are a lot of short men in this town," she noted as she looked at them.

"What we lack in height, we make up for in other areas," Jeff assured her.

She smiled despite her inward shudder. *Like I would let any of you touch me.* "Perhaps, but height does have its advantages. But we shouldn't stand around idly. I'm sure Chad has more work for you gentlemen. The more work a man does, the more impressed I am."

She looked at Chad and waited for him to give instructions on what to do.

He seemed startled to have their full attention. "Alright," he slowly began. "I want to build a new shed. I also need to make a new door for this shed. Who wants to do what?"

Sam looked at her. "Where will you be?"

"Watching you men do the work," she sweetly replied.

Her plan worked. She watched in satisfaction as they scrambled to volunteer for the supplies they would need. She sat on the tree stump and viewed the scene before her in amusement. The men were fighting over who got to do the tasks which would give her a direct view of them. Though they were in the shed, she could hear the three of them fighting.

"I want to lay down the foundation for the new shed," Jeff snapped from inside the shed.

"We can do that together," Tim insisted.

"So no one wants to make a door?" Chad asked.

"No way. We want to do real work," Sam huffed.

"Very well. I'll take care of the door," Chad replied.

She hid her laughter as the three men finally agreed on their assigned tasks and ran to do it. They scrambled around in order to be the first one to work on their project. She spent the afternoon

watching them work hard to do a good job in a timely manner. They sweated in the sun and weren't able to chat, so she knew they were miserable. *It serves them right for trying to get a glimpse of me naked.*

Meanwhile, Chad took his time in carefully constructing a new door. He was always within viewing range of her, so she could watch him as he quietly did his work. It was fun to be able to admire him instead of fighting her feelings for him. He was very attractive with his broad shoulders and slender frame. His skin was tan from the hours he spent in the sun, and he had gained considerable strength in his arms and legs from his years of working on the farm. She hadn't taken the time to enjoy looking at a man's body before but found the masculine form to be intriguing. Chad was handsome. *He's going to be my husband, even if he doesn't realize it yet.*

* * * * *

The rest of the week was stressful for Kate as she struggled between her roles as Billy and Kate. Fortunately, Lacy didn't come back for another visit, but Tim, Sam, Jeff and Todd brought her flowers, candy and other trinkets. She politely thanked them and threw them out. She could tell their attention bothered Chad but he held his peace. Finally, she had to make a deal with them that she wouldn't go to the potluck on Saturday if they continued to pay more attention to her than their work since they weren't getting anything done despite her insistence that she loved hard working men. They seemed to think she was more delighted with their affections. As the week wore on, she found more reasons to appear as Billy than as Kate. She didn't like being with Tim, Sam or Jeff when she was Kate. She didn't trust them at all.

That Friday after she spent the evening with Chad, she headed to barn loft so she could read. Just as she reached the ladder, Sam, Tim and Jeff called out for Billy. She quickly dodged behind the pile of neatly stacked hay so they wouldn't see her.

She cleared her throat and called out, "Over here," in her best Billy voice.

They began walking to her.

Panicking, she quickly said, "Don't come any closer. I'm not decent."

"Well, get decent," Jeff replied. "We're taking you out to the next town. We thought you might enjoy a night out after all the work we've been doing this week. I swear that Chad's been overworking us."

"We should ask for a raise," Tim muttered.

"Actually, I'm tired. I think I'll rest up for the night so I can be ready for tomorrow's potluck," she stated.

"We're not taking no for an answer, Billy," Sam responded. "If you don't come on out, we'll go back there and drag you out. Come on! It's time we had some fun!"

She groaned. She wished she had taken Chad up on his offer to walk her to the barn. She had declined because she was afraid he would discover her secret when he didn't see Billy.

"Alright!" she shouted before they moved closer. "Get out of here and I'll meet you outside the barn. I have to get dressed. I just took a bath and I'm not presentable."

"That's right. We forgot you were abnormally modest," Sam laughed.

The three men left the barn and waited outside.

As soon as she got dressed in some clean Billy clothes, she took Reliable and met them outside the barn. To her surprise, Chad was talking to them. Chad looked over at her.

"Do you want to go with them?" Chad asked her.

"We're taking him out for a night of fun," Jeff stated. "It doesn't matter what you think. You don't own him. It's after work hours."

"I won't have you bullying my farmhand." She noted the tension in Chad's voice.

"What are you going to do, Chad?" Tim wondered. "I mean, there are three of us."

"I do have a gun."

"If you can get to it in time..."

It suddenly occurred to her that this wasn't the first time they gained up on Chad to get what they wanted.

“I don’t mind going,” she lied. The last thing she wanted was to be responsible for a fight. “I can handle myself.” She knew she was safe in her Billy disguise. They wouldn’t try anything with her as a man.

Chad sighed. “Very well. I’ll see you tomorrow, Billy.”

She nodded as he turned back to the house. She breathed a sigh of relief. Chad was right. These men were not pleasant to be with. She had been hasty to say anything just to get along with them. She originally thought it would help to fit in, but she was beginning to wonder if that was such a bright idea. Perhaps keeping her distance would have been a better choice. *Oh well. It’s too late now.* She was stuck with the role she chose and would play it out.

They rode their horses until they got to town. They boarded the train and headed for the next town. By the time they arrived there, it was after sunset.

“The saloon here has the best beer in the state,” Sam said. “It’s a great place to listen to music too.”

“You know, my sister wouldn’t be happy knowing you three come here,” she told them, hoping they would finally back off from pursuing her as Kate.

“Well, Lacy wouldn’t be thrilled either but we won’t tell if you don’t,” Jeff winked.

She forced herself not to gag. No self-respecting woman would choose to be near them.

They led her into the saloon where music played loudly and the beer was in great supply. They bought her a bottle of beer and sat with her at a round table.

She waited until they were talking to some other men before dumping her bottle of beer into the empty glass on the table next to her. A man who was already drunk noticed his glass was suddenly full, shrugged and drank the liquid in it.

Sam, Tim and Jeff had already begun their third bottle when a scantily clad woman got up on stage and did a dance number. They hollered and cheered along with most of the other men. She shook her head. The poor woman was probably no older than fifteen. She wasn’t really a woman. She was a child. How did she

get stuck doing this horrible job? She heard that some women were forced into working in less than honorable jobs because they were orphans. She suddenly felt sick to her stomach. She hadn't considered how fortunate she had been to enjoy the life her parents had worked so hard to give her.

She stood up to leave. She didn't care if she upset the three farmhands or not. She couldn't sit there and watch the girl be treated like a sex object.

Sam turned to her. "Hey Billy, why don't you go with her upstairs? She does more than dance."

Tim and Jeff chuckled.

I'm going to throw up. These men are disgusting! She quickly prayed to God for forgiveness for making light of enjoying beer and women. In her quest to fit in with them, she had endorsed this horrible environment.

"No thanks," she argued. "I don't feel well. I'm going to go outside."

As she made her way to the door, Tim and Jeff grabbed her.

"We know what will make you feel better," Jeff laughed.

Before she could protest, they carried her up the stairs and dumped her in front of a door.

"You'll thank us when you have a big smile on your face." Tim patted her on the back.

She was ready to run down the stairs but a woman opened the door. She was older than Kate and wore immodest clothing. "What do we have here, boys? Another costumer?" She slyly smiled at her.

Kate cringed.

"Poor Billy here hasn't seen any action for awhile so we thought we'd do him a favor and bring him by," Sam grinned. "We know you'll find a soiled dove to take care of him."

"He seems a little shy," she replied. "I'll send him to the new girl."

"New? Is she a virgin?" Tim asked.

"Won't be after he gets through with her," the woman laughed.

"You're lucky, Billy. She'll cost a pretty penny but it'll be worth it," Sam remarked.

Kate shook her head. “No, I don’t think so.” She tried to bolt for the steps but the men stopped her.

“Haven’t you ever been with a virgin?” Tim asked. “They’re the best kind to sleep with.”

Tim and Jeff hauled her to the room where the fifteen year old was waiting for her. They threw her in and shut the door.

Kate looked at the frightened girl and was overwhelmed by the wave of sympathy that washed over her. *Lord, I am in the devil’s playground. This poor girl doesn’t belong here anymore than I do. Forgive me for making light of sinful behavior.*

There was a knock on the door. The older woman opened the door. “Remember what I told you, Chloe. Don’t take less than \$5.” Then she shut the door.

Kate looked at the window. She ran over to it. “How many floors are we up?” She threw the window open and peered out of it.

“You...You’re not a man?” Chloe asked.

Kate turned to her and gave her the “shush” sign. “I can’t explain the details but we need to get out of here.” She ran back to the door and quickly opened it. She noticed that the other men were making allowances for their own soiled doves. She hid her disgust and called out to them, “Now don’t wait for me. I plan to enjoy myself for a long time in here.” She hoped she sounded enthusiastic.

“There you go, Billy boy,” Sam chuckled.

She shut and locked the door in disgust. *Those men are creeps!*

She turned to Chloe and grabbed her hand. “Come on. We have to get out of here.”

“But I can’t,” Chloe quietly protested. “I have nowhere else to go.”

“Nonsense.”

“My parents are dead and I have no other relatives to care for me.”

Kate stopped, realizing she was going to have to talk sense into this poor, scared girl. “When did they die?”

“A couple of days ago. My uncle sold me to Beatrice.”

“That’s the woman who just talked to you?”

Chloe nodded.

“I am sorry for you,” Kate told her. “I recently lost my parents too. But you can have a better life than this. Here.” Kate took out her wallet and handed the girl all the money she had. “There’s a train due to go east that will arrive here in half an hour. I want you to board it and go to Richmond, Virginia. When you get there, take a buggy to Paul and Olivia Tanner’s residence. You tell them that Kate Tanner sent you. Paul is my brother. He and Olivia will make sure you find a good, honest job.” As an afterthought, she added, “Don’t let anyone know you have all this money.”

The girl began to cry. “Why are you doing this for me?”

“Because you have your entire life ahead of you and it doesn’t have to be spent here. By the way, how old are you?”

“Fourteen.”

She shook her head, forcing her own tears from her eyes. “You’re a child. You have no business being here. My family is wealthy. You don’t need to worry about being turned away. Paul is a good man who will set you up with the right job.”

“It’s better than being here,” the girl agreed.

“You need to give your virginity to your husband, not to a stranger. You promise you’ll do that for me.”

“Yes, I promise.” The girl cried into her handkerchief.

“Do you have any decent clothes?”

She nodded and quickly got dressed in a skirt and shirt. She put the money in her purse.

“Good. Let’s get out of this snake pit.” She climbed out the window and helped Chloe down the side of the building.

Once they were safely out of sight of the saloon, Kate thanked God and took the girl to the train station and saw her on the train. She wrote a quick note for Chloe to give to Paul so he would know for sure that Kate sent the girl.

She felt much better for Chloe. She decided that she would wait for the next train going west at the train station. She had no desire to return to that saloon.

A woman ran into the station and yelled that her house was on fire and her son was trapped in the flames. Kate didn’t think. She

joined the other men to the house and saw that the house was beginning to crumble despite the many men who were pouring water on it.

A man walked over to her. "You're thin enough to fit through that narrow doorframe. Will you save the boy?"

"What's his name?" she asked.

"Raymond."

She didn't think. She simply nodded and ran through the fallen frame. She crawled through the dark and smoky house. She heard someone coughing and crying.

"Raymond?" she yelled. She stayed still and listened.

"Help me," a boy cried out.

"Keep talking. I'll follow the sound of your voice."

He obeyed and kept calling out to her.

She followed his voice until she found him huddled in the corner. She coughed and wiped the tears from her eyes. It was getting harder to breathe. Just as she crawled through the doorway of his bedroom, the door fell behind her and a flame of fire shot up behind her. It was so dark that she couldn't see much of anything but a sliver of light from the moon that poured in through the open window.

"Raymond?" She realized she was using her female voice but it didn't matter in her state of panic. She had to get them out of there.

"Over here!" a man yelled from outside the window. "Give us the boy and we'll take him. Then we'll pull you out."

She did as instructed and was greatly relieved when two men pulled her out of the burning house. She collapsed on the ground and breathed the fresh air. After several coughs, her lungs felt normal again.

The boy's mother ran over to her and hugged her. "Thank you, sir!" She was sobbing loudly and handed her a necklace. "It belonged to my mother, and I want you to have it. Give it to your wife."

"I'm not married," Kate said, using her Billy voice again. "I don't need it."

"Please, take it. It's all I have that is worth anything."

“No, ma’am. You keep it. You just lost your home tonight.”

“Will you take this teddy bear?” Raymond walked over to her and gave her his stuffed toy.

Kate stood up and saw the four year old boy holding the bear out to her. “Raymond,” she softly began, “that bear would be better loved by you. Really, a simple thank you is all I need.”

“You are a good man,” the mother cried. “Thank you. What is your name?”

“Billy Ingram,” she replied.

“If I have a boy, I’ll name him after you.”

“You’re pregnant?”

“Three months. I’m not showing yet.” The woman dabbed the tears from her eyes and held her son. “My husband died two months ago. My children are all I have left to remember him by.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“He was a good man. Raymond was his name. Thankfully, he has a namesake.” She kissed her son on the forehead. “I don’t know what I would have done if I lost my children.”

Kate hugged her and the boy. “Do you have anywhere to go?”

“Yes. I was going to move back home to my parents. The house was for sale but it doesn’t matter now.”

“So, do you need money?” She suddenly remembered that she no longer had any money.

“No. We have enough at the bank. You are really a thoughtful man.”

A man ran up to them and took their picture.

Another man quickly followed him. “What is your name?” he asked. He held open a notebook.

Obviously, we will be in the next day’s paper. Kate was relieved she had on her Billy disguise. She didn’t wish for anyone to find out where she was at.

“This brave man is Billy Ingram,” the mother reported.

Kate was startled by the sudden wave of attention from the people who surrounded them as they answered the reporter’s questions. She hadn’t expected everyone to take note of her. Even Tim, Sam and Jeff came over to her.

“You saved a boy?” Sam looked impressed.

“He sure did,” the mother smiled at her. “Billy is a hero. I’ll never forget him.”

“He’s my guardian angel,” the boy smiled.

“Good going, Billy,” Tim patted her on the back. He almost knocked her over. He steadied her. “That smoke must have weakened you. I can’t wait to tell everyone in town about your heroic deed. It beats the other thing you were going to do.”

“Saving lives is more important,” Jeff agreed.

She sighed. “Yes, well, let’s get back home. I’m exhausted.”

Chapter 12

Chad knew he was in love. In the course of a couple of days, Kate had turned his world upside down. He reasoned that it was because she was the first woman who came into his life who seemed to be genuinely happy to be with him. He felt as if he had known her his entire life. It was easy to be vulnerable with her, and he didn't fear that she would laugh at him. He longed to take her in his arms and kiss her but worried that it was too soon to act towards her in such an amorous way. He marveled that she could so easily push aside Tim, Jeff, Sam and Todd's affections in favor of him.

He woke up early on Saturday morning and rode out to the field where wild flowers grew. He was rusty at courting a woman but he thought that Kate would enjoy the white and purple flowers. He recalled the previous evening when they took a long walk through the field. She mentioned that she liked the color purple. They had also discussed the different books they had read and places they had been to. She seemed well educated, so he was surprised she came from such a humble background. She didn't discuss her small town life in Kentucky. Instead, she focused on her life in Virginia as Senator Tanner's secretary. They returned to the house where they ate and danced. He was pleased that Billy

thought well enough of him to trust him alone with his sister. Chad had no desire to behave improperly towards her, but it was nice to know that Billy knew that.

Since Kate was upset about Senator Tanner's death and Billy had witnessed the event, he decided he would go into town to get a newspaper and ask Mark Risley, who owned the newspaper office, if he knew if the police caught the killer or killers. He wrote a quick note and left it on the kitchen table so when Billy and Kate looked for him, they would know where he had gone. He hadn't been in town for ten months, so it felt awkward to make an appearance. He was determined to find out the information Billy and Kate desperately wanted, which was why he steeled himself for the matter at hand. They were worth the discomfort.

When he reached town, he saw that Lacy was walking along the boardwalk past the shops. He almost turned around and went back home but realized he couldn't hide from his past forever. He reluctantly got off the horse and tied him up to the post in front of the newspaper building. He quickly went into it before she had a chance to reach him.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed behind him. He didn't wish to have anything to do with her since she had only added to his misery in this town. It would be good to get out of here and start a new life somewhere else. *I ought to ask Kate to marry me and ask her to take me with her when she goes back home.* He hesitated to do so. It seemed to be too soon to propose marriage to her.

Mark Risley came out of his office. "I almost feel like I'm seeing a ghost." He smiled at him. "We all miss Georgia, but I'm sure you miss her more. How have you been holding up since Georgia's death?"

This is why he didn't like to go to town. People assumed he and Georgia had a happy marriage and that he was completely destroyed when she died. "I'm doing well. It's been a year," he finally replied.

"Time is a good healer of broken hearts. How can I help you this morning?"

"I came in to buy today's paper."

Mark nodded and handed him the paper.

Chad blinked when he saw Billy on the front page. He read the headline: *Local Hero Rescues Boy From Burning House.*

The door opened behind him but he didn't look back.

"Do you have any papers from earlier this week?" Chad wondered.

"Actually, I do have a few copies left. What days would you like?"

"All of them."

"Are you taking a sudden interest in what's going on in the nation?"

He shrugged. "My new farmhand and his sister are. I thought I'd help them out."

"Well, the farmhand is a hero. Everyone's talking about how brave he was to run into the house to save the little boy. He didn't even think about it. He just ran right in. As for the woman, I haven't seen her but heard she's beautiful."

"Yes."

"I'm surprised you ventured into town," Lacy said.

He tensed. Of all the people who would be walking around town when he finally ventured out here after ten months, it would have to be her. "I'm just picking up papers," he stiffly told her.

Mark stayed out of the conversation as he collected the papers from the back room.

"There's no reason to be rude," she continued.

"Are you really surprised after what you did? You still haven't confessed to what really happened that night." He shook his head. When was Mark going to be done?

"We know that you wanted me as much as I wanted you."

"I thought you were Georgia." Why was he wasting his time? Lacy would never reveal the truth to the people in town.

Mark returned with the papers. He mutely paid Mark and left the building. He gritted his teeth when he realized Lacy followed him to his horse. Lacy never left him alone. As soon as he arrived to town with her sister, she had a habit of following him around. Early on, he had dismissed it as a young girl's crush since she had been fourteen at the time. But now, he knew better.

“Get away from me, Lacy,” he angrily ordered as he put the newspapers in the bag and flung the bag over his shoulder. Thankfully, they were in broad daylight with a couple of witnesses so no one would misunderstand the situation.

“We both know what my sister was really like.”

He untied the horse.

She grabbed his arm. “You can’t keep ignoring me.”

He shook her hand off his arm. “The last time I talked to you, you accused me of rape.”

“You hated her as much as I did. Besides, we both know you weren’t getting anything from her. You should thank me that I was willing to satisfy your basic male need.”

“Sex is a sacred gift that is meant for a husband and his wife. You had no right to pretend to be Georgia.” He got up on the horse. “Get out of my way before I run you over.” He stared at her.

“Chad? What are you doing in town?” Sam and Tim asked as they walked over to them.

“I came to pick up some newspapers,” he replied. “Lacy insists on pestering me.” He glared at her.

“Chad wanted to speak with me. I told him no but he said that it was important.”

Chad shook his head. He knew that Sam and Tim wouldn’t believe him so he didn’t bother to tell them the truth.

“We will thank you to stay away from Lacy,” Sam coldly stated.

“I’ll be more than happy to comply with your wishes,” Chad replied.

“If we catch you trying to make advances at her again, we’ll be happy to teach you another lesson,” Tim growled.

“I have no interest in her. You should know by now that my affections are for Kate. I better get back to the farm.”

Before he could head back home, the sheriff and a woman in her forties came up to them.

“That’s Billy Ingram’s employer,” the sheriff told her.

Sensing that this was a serious matter, Chad reluctantly got off the horse and greeted the sheriff.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, Mr. Walker,” Sheriff Donald began. “Madame Beatrice Mellows says that your new farmhand helped one of her soiled doves escape from the Franklin Saloon in the next town. Are you familiar with that establishment?”

Chad looked from the sheriff to the upset woman. Billy didn’t strike him as the kind of man who would voluntarily go to the saloon.

“He probably enjoyed the virgin so much he took her back here,” Sam chuckled.

“Billy was in a whorehouse?” Chad didn’t mean to snap the question but he was shocked his farmhand would engage in such activity.

Tim rolled his eyes. “You are incredibly snooty. It’s not a crime for a man to enjoy himself. Just because you can’t perform, it doesn’t mean you need to condemn everyone else to a life of celibacy.”

“Really. Envy is a sin too,” Sam added.

Chad gritted his teeth.

“I don’t approve of this behavior either,” Sheriff Donald inserted on Chad’s behalf. “But our personal opinions don’t count when it comes to robbery. I’m sorry to trouble you, Mr. Walker. I realize you aren’t involved in this but we need to go out to your place and talk with Mr. Ingram.”

Chad nodded. “I will have him ready to speak with you when you get out there.” He knew the buggy ride would take longer than him riding on his horse.

“What if he warns the man to hide?” Beatrice asked.

“He won’t,” the sheriff responded. “Mr. Walker is a man of his word.”

Tim, Sam and Lacy frowned at the man’s high opinion of Chad.

“We’ll meet you out there shortly,” the old man nodded to Chad.

Chad returned the man’s nod and rode out of town. As he rode back, he didn’t know what to think. Had Billy wanted to go with the three men to the saloon last night? Did he really enjoy that type of lifestyle? Billy just didn’t strike him as that kind of person.

The only other thing he could conclude was that the three men had backed him into a corner so that he had to go with them. That was a likely situation since they didn't mind forcing people to do what they wanted. Chad had resisted them, which was why they ostracized him from their group. Still, being on the receiving end of their "lessons" was preferable to compromising with his beliefs. Billy thought he was smart while trying to fit in with their group, but he sorely misjudged how "convincing" Sam, Tim and Jeff could be.

He returned Reliable to the stable, careful to be quiet since he didn't wish to wake Kate. He didn't see Billy anywhere. He could only assume the man was already awake.

I told Billy the best thing to do was to keep his distance and now he's in trouble because he didn't listen to me.

He took out the newspapers and flowers and took them into the house. He wondered where Billy was. As he returned to the barn, he was surprised to see Kate walking to the barn with a towel and a bar of soap in her hand. Her hair was still wet from her bath in the river but she wore her blue shirt and brown skirt. His anger cooled at the sight of her. *The poor woman probably has no idea what happened last night.* He decided not to mention it to her. He would talk directly to Billy to find out what was going on.

"Good morning, Chad," she smiled at him.

He returned her smile. "Good morning, Kate. I bought a week's worth of newspapers for you. Since you mentioned wanting to see any updates on Senator Tanner, I thought you might like to read them."

"Thank you, Chad. That's very thoughtful of you."

He blushed. He liked to please her. As much as he wanted to forget Billy and focus on her, he knew he had to settle matters with the farmhand. "Where's Billy?"

She looked startled by the question. "He came home late last night. I didn't hear him when he returned. Didn't you see him sleeping?"

"No. The area beneath the loft is empty."

"Oh, that's right. He wanted to take a bath when I was done."

He stared at her for a long moment. Was she lying to him?

“Do you want to see Billy?” she asked before he had time to think over the situation.

“Yes. I have something I need to discuss with him.”

She frowned. “Is it something bad?”

He didn’t wish to upset her so he said, “What I have to talk to him about doesn’t concern you.”

She seemed concerned but nodded. “Should I get him now?”

He sighed. “I do want to talk to him as soon as possible. Where is he at?”

“I passed him by on my way back here. He should be at the river now. I’ll tell him you wish to speak with him.”

“No, you shouldn’t get him at the river. I’ll go down and get him.”

“What?” Now she looked like she was in a panic.

“I’m the logical choice. I’m a man and he’s a man. It wouldn’t be right to send a woman to get him while he’s bathing, even if that woman is his sister.”

“I won’t look at him.”

“Billy’s very sensitive about people seeing him naked. When he got sprayed by a skunk, he nearly had a heart attack when I got tomato juice for him and he was in the metal tub. Trust me on this one.”

She glanced around uneasily. “But... Well..”

“The newspapers are in the kitchen. Why don’t you go read them? I also got you a gift to brighten up your day.”

“You got me a gift?” She smiled.

“Yes but it’s not a big deal. It’s simple.”

“But it came from you. Wouldn’t you like to see my face when I see your gift?”

“I would but I really need to talk to your brother.”

She didn’t hide her disappointment.

He was pleased that she wanted to be with him. “After I talk to him, I’ll come into the kitchen and make breakfast.”

“Well, before you go, I saw a mouse in the outhouse. Would you please take care of it before you talk to Billy?”

He nodded. “I can do that.”

“Thank you, Chad.”

He went to the outhouse and searched for the mouse. He spent a good amount of time looking for it but didn't see it anywhere. Finally, he gave up and went to the river. Wherever the mouse was, it was long gone. To his surprise, Billy was already dressed and was just putting on his boots. *That's odd. His hair should be wet if he just bathed.* Such matters did not concern him, so he pushed the observation aside.

Billy looked like he was out of breath.

"What happened last night?" Chad asked him.

Billy seemed concerned. "Are you upset I went with them?"

"Did you want to go?"

"No, I didn't. I told them I wanted to sleep but they insisted I join them."

"I understand how that can happen. You should have let me get my gun."

"I didn't want to be the cause of a fight."

"They find lots of reasons to fight. I don't mind helping you tell them no. I've dealt with them before. I know what they're capable of." He sighed. He had more important things to talk about at the moment. "I asked you what happened last night."

"I rescued a boy from a fire."

"I gathered that much from the newspaper. But did anything else occur?"

"Sam, Tim and Jeff took me to a saloon. It was a very uncomfortable position for me to be in but I managed to get out unharmed."

"And you took a young woman with you?"

"That wasn't a woman. She was a fourteen year old girl. She was still pure." Billy didn't hide his disgust. "I couldn't see her soiled so I helped her escape and put her on a train. I even gave her all the money I had so that she would find a good, respectable job. I've never been in one of those places before so I didn't know that kind of thing went on there."

"Are you familiar with Beatrice Mellows?"

"Is that the girl's employer?"

"Yes."

"I briefly saw her."

“Well, she’s on her way out here to get payment for the girl.”

“Payment?”

“You will owe her the price of her employee.”

“I have no money. Can I do work to pay it off?”

“Let’s make a deal. If you let me get the gun next time those men try to drag you off to a saloon, I’ll pay the fee.”

“I don’t wish for you to get involved in this.”

“You’re my employee. I’m responsible for you.” Chad groaned. “Alright. We better get back to the house so that you’re there to talk to Madame Mellows.”

Billy followed him to the house.

They walked in silence.

As soon as they reached the house, the sheriff and Beatrice had just arrived to the house in Travis’ buggy.

“Young man,” Beatrice snapped as she got out of the buggy, “I cannot have you stealing my employees from me. Chloe was a prime addition to my business and you just took her away. I demand for her to return at once, and if you deflowered her, I will insist on her virgin price.”

“I didn’t sleep with her,” Billy replied. “She was scared. She didn’t want to be there. My goodness, she was only fourteen.”

“That’s why she is worth a lot of money.”

Chad knew that the whorehouse business was a cold one but it still made him cringe for the poor girl to be valued for the sole purpose of bringing forth customers to a sinful business. He could appreciate Billy’s desire to rescue her, but he didn’t approve of Billy going into that establishment to begin with. He pushed aside his personal feelings. “The girl is long gone. We don’t know where she is. Just tell me how much she’s worth and I’ll pay you for her.”

The woman stated her price.

Chad nodded. “I have the amount in the house. I’ll return in a moment.” He went into the house and realized that Kate wasn’t in the kitchen as he expected her to be. He glanced at the neatly folded newspapers and untouched flowers. Where did Kate go? He didn’t have time to think about it. He went to the tin can he kept in case of emergencies and took out the necessary amount of

money from it. Then he went back outside and paid the woman.

“Very well,” Beatrice nodded, calming down. “Now I’ll have to find another virgin. They aren’t easy to find in my line of work.”

“With all due respect, you would do better to find the Lord,” Chad replied. “You can’t place a price on your immortal soul. I could give you a Bible if you’re interested.”

“I don’t need you preaching at me,” she hissed. “Stealing from people is alright but meeting a man’s needs isn’t? Hypocrites.” She turned to the sheriff. “I got what I came for.”

“Not to upset you, ma’am, but I noticed that you did get restitution,” Sheriff Donald reminded her.

“Just get me out of here,” she snapped at Travis.

“Good day, Chad. Good day, Billy.” The sheriff tipped his hat before he joined her in the buggy.

Chad breathed a sigh of relief as they left. “It’s alright, Billy. I would have done the same thing in your situation. Well, except I wouldn’t have gotten myself in that situation to begin with.”

“I understand. I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Do you want to have breakfast?”

“No thanks. I figure I’ll walk around for a bit on this property and enjoy the view. I’m not particularly hungry this morning.”

Chad nodded. “I’ll see you later then.” He watched Billy head to the barn before he went back into the house for a few minutes. He had no idea where Kate went but decided she would show up soon, so he decided to collect some eggs. He was surprised to see Kate come down from the loft as he was feeding the horses.

“I had to take care of some personal business before I went to the kitchen,” she quickly explained. “It’s a female issue so I won’t bother you with the details.”

“I was married before. I know what women go through once a month. Do you feel up to eating?” Sometimes Georgia didn’t have an appetite during that time of month.

“My appetite is fine. Did you get things taken care of with Billy?”

“I did.”

“I hope he wasn’t in trouble.”

“No, he’ll be fine.” Chad figured that Billy had bigger things to worry about than an upset soiled dove. He had to worry about the killers who were seeking him out.

“I’ll help you make breakfast,” she offered.

He knew it was pointless to argue with her so he nodded and walked with her to the house. He was struck by how natural it felt to be with her. It was something he could easily get used to. *She really is a good woman. She’s the kind of woman a man would be very happy to be married to.* She was so beautiful with her long hair flowing gently down her back. She was so unlike Georgia. Kate had no idea how much he appreciated her.

They worked on cooking the eggs and making a side of hashbrowns from the potatoes he had saved from his garden. When they were almost done, he walked to the cabinets and took down the plates and glasses. He put the dishes on the table.

“You haven’t read the papers yet.”

She sighed. “I would rather eat first. It’s hard to have an appetite after thinking about Senator Tanner and his wife.”

“That’s understandable.”

“I do appreciate you picking them up for me.”

“I was happy to do it.” He was happy to do anything for her.

“I think I’m done. Will come over and tell me if I can take the skillet off the burner?”

He walked over to her and looked at the food. “It looks done to me.”

She took a deep breath. “Let’s hope it’s half as good as what you make.”

“I don’t know. It’s hard to mess it up.”

“You’re obviously an experienced cook.”

“I had to cook a lot. I used to make fancier dishes but with being alone and feeding farmhands, I got used to making simple meals.”

“Didn’t she cook for you?”

He noted that she didn’t refer to Georgia by name or by the position of wife that she used to hold. “No. She didn’t wish to concern herself with trivial details.”

“She must have thought she would have servants to cook and

clean for her.”

“Pretty much.”

She sighed. “I’m sorry, Chad. I didn’t mean to bring up the past.” She turned her attention to carrying the skillet to the kitchen table and putting the food on each plate.

“I suppose there is one thing I can say,” he ventured. “If it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t appreciate you as much as I do.”

She finished emptying the skillet and smiled at him. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever told me.”

“Surely, you had men tell you better things than that.”

“They weren’t sincere. You are.”

A knocking at the door interrupted them.

“That must be Billy,” he said.

“Why would he knock?” she asked.

The answer was obvious. He wouldn’t. He was used to coming in unannounced. Chad walked to the front door. He didn’t recognize the blond haired, blue eyed man about his height who was standing in front of him.

“Paul!” Kate greeted and ran over to hug him. “Chad, this is my brother, Paul Ingram. Paul, what are you doing here?”

Paul looked stunned. “Paul?”

“I want to thank you for dropping me off here so I can spend some time with our brother Billy. It’s been nice here. I have so much to tell you. But first, I want to introduce you to Chad Walker. He gave Billy a job as a farmhand and has graciously let me stay here so I can spend time with Billy. You know how Billy is always running off to visit other parts of the country. Anyway, it was nice of you to drop me off earlier this week. Did you have a successful trip out to Virginia?”

Paul stood still and stared at her.

“Would you like something to eat?” Chad offered. “She helped me make eggs and hashbrowns.”

The younger man who looked to be in his mid-twenties suddenly grinned. “Kate cooked? Now this is something I have to see.”

Chad decided that Paul was probably overwhelmed from all his traveling. He decided that he would make some sandwiches for

Billy to eat since Paul would eat his breakfast. "Billy is going for a walk in the field," he told Paul.

"Is that where he is?" He chuckled. "That Billy's hard to pin down, isn't he, Kate?"

She nodded. "Go ahead and try this." She sat Paul down at the table and motioned to the plate of food.

"You're reading a lot of newspapers."

Chad sat across from him, and Kate sat between them at the round table.

"Yes," she began, "I am keeping updated on Senator Tanner and his wife's murder. Did you find out anything?"

Chad noted the sorrow that momentarily passed across her brother's face.

"They're still looking for the person who did it," he reported.

"I hope they find them soon," she said.

"Them?" He looked at her in interest.

"Oh. Well, I have my suspicions. It's as if I can picture it in my mind." She gave him a meaningful look.

It suddenly occurred to Chad that there was a secret message she was giving her brother. He wondered if Billy told her what happened but before he could dwell on it, she turned to him.

"I didn't intend to meet Chad when I came here," she told Paul. "But I'm very glad I did." She looked at Chad and smiled.

He smiled back, pleased by her words.

"I can tell," Paul grinned. "What does Billy think of Chad? No offense that I'm speaking of you as if you're not here."

Chad didn't mind. He ate his meal. Kate did a good job of cooking.

"Billy thinks the world of Chad. There aren't a lot of men who are as honorable as he is. Chad's letting me stay in the loft and Billy sleeps under the loft in the barn."

"Will you be staying there as well?" Chad asked him.

He chuckled. "No. I will stay at the inn in town."

"I suppose it is getting crowded in the barn," she replied.

"This is a good meal, Kate," Chad told her.

She beamed at his compliment. "Thank you."

Paul took a bite and shook his head. "I have to agree with

Chad. I didn't think you could actually pull it off."

"I watched Chad do it, so I just did the same thing he did." She paused for a moment. "There's a potluck today in town at the fairgrounds. Will you go to it?"

"That depends. Who will be there?"

"Chad, are you going?"

He was still upset from his encounter with Lacy and her brothers. "No, I won't be going."

She looked disappointed. "It would be much more fun with you there but I understand." Turning back to Paul, she said, "Billy will be there."

"He will?" Paul looked like he was ready to laugh.

"Of course. They do horse races at the potluck lunches. Billy doesn't miss an opportunity to show off his skill on a horse."

"That is true. So, you and Billy will be going?"

She nodded. "Of course. We'll go on Chad's horse, Reliable."

"I wouldn't miss this potluck for the world," Paul decided. "I've got to see you and Billy in action with the townsfolk."

"You two probably want a chance to talk in private," Chad stated as he stood up. "I'll go take care of some chores. Don't worry about the dishes, Kate. I'll wash them. You just enjoy spending time with Paul, alright?"

"Thank you, Chad," she smiled.

He put his dishes in the sink. "It's nice meeting you," he shook Paul's hand.

"Likewise," the man nodded.

As Chad left the house, he thanked the Lord for bringing Kate into his life.

Chapter 13

After Chad left to do chores, Kate knew she had to quickly explain the situation to her brother, Bob Tanner, whom she had nicknamed Billy when they were children. She and Billy sat at the kitchen table with the newspapers opened in front of them, and she used the articles she found regarding the mystery of their parents' deaths to support why she dressed up as man named Billy Ingram and headed out of Virginia.

"Your name was the first one that popped in my head," she told him. "I figured if I stuck with something familiar, then I would be able to stay in character better."

"So now I'm Paul?"

"Well, I don't think our younger brother will show up here. Do you?"

"He can't. He's got too many cases to judge."

"Does he know where I went?" Was that how Billy was able to track her down?

"No. He has no idea where you went after you left his wife's costume shop, and it took me a couple of weeks to narrow it down. I recalled our discussion about that book you were reading on North Dakota. You had mentioned an interest in this particular town, so I came here, asked several people if there were any new-

comers, and they led me right to this place. If you're supposed to be dressed up as me, then what are you doing as yourself?"

"It was uncomfortable to wear the binding around my chest all the time, so I slept naked. Well, he climbed up the ladder, thinking I was Billy, and saw me. I had to do something. So I told him that you, Paul, dropped me off here so I could visit our brother Billy who is a hobo checking out the country."

"A hobo?" He looked offended. "Can't you do better than that?"

"No. Senator Rich will be looking for me, and since we're rich, he'll stick with the bigger areas. I had to be far out of the way, and this farm is in the middle of nowhere."

"Did you return to Virginia in the middle of all of this and tell the police what happened?"

She nodded. She had a hard time not crying whenever she thought of that night.

"So the article that Calvin York wrote is accurate? Did Derek Robin and Dave Reinhart do it?"

"Yes. But I suspect Senator Rich is behind it. Did any of the articles mention that?"

"No. It just said that both men have been arrested. There have been some talk around town though that those men have connections with the senator you mentioned. Apparently, one of your library employees found several articles that picture the three men together at various social gatherings and a bank employee alerted his boss to a large transfer of funds that went from Senator Rich's account to Dave and Derek's accounts. Conrad Leroy is currently searching for anyone else who might have received a big sum of money recently as well. Those things are just circumstantial. This case will ultimately hinder on your testimony unless the men confess."

"I know. I just don't know when it'll be safe to go back. Senator Rich most likely has someone looking for me."

He nodded. "That is probably true." He leaned towards her. "Will you tell me what happened?"

She explained how she slipped into their parents' home to get the picture in the den, how she heard a struggle and how she saw

the murder of her father and Dave running after her mother. She related how they saw her and came after her, how she managed to escape from them, and how she went to Paul and his wife to get her Billy disguise. "Then I jumped on a train and came out here. Paul and Olivia have no idea where I am. I'm sure as soon as they found out about our parents' deaths, they figured out why I was in such a hurry to get out of Virginia," she concluded.

"You must have been scared," he softly stated.

"I thought once Derek and Dave were arrested, I'd return home and confess to what I saw. If I stayed in town, they would have come after me to kill me. But this goes deeper than them."

He sighed. "So, how many people are you pretending to be?"

"Up to this point, I've done two people. You and me."

"How are you going to be both people at this potluck?"

"You will have to help me."

"What?"

"You need to carry the bag of my costumes for me. Just leave them with the horse you rode out here."

"I had to rent that horse."

"Alright." How he got the horse was irrelevant.

He paused. "You care a lot about Chad, don't you? That's why you decided to be Kate too."

"He's going to be my husband. It's just a matter of waiting for his proposal."

"You turned down about ten wealthy bachelors in town who came by to court you, yet you come out here and fall in love with a farmer."

"Billy, don't be a snob. Money isn't everything."

"Does he know you're rich?"

"No. Like I said, he thinks we all came from a small town and Billy's a hobo who happened to see Senator Tanner and his wife's murders."

"You told him that much?"

"I knew I could trust him."

"Yes. I get a good feeling about him as well. Anyway, I do feel better knowing he isn't after you for your money. I can tell he loves you."

“Oh, I should warn you that his deceased wife, Georgia, was popular in this town, so you’ll be hearing a lot about her at the potluck. People think she was this wonderful woman but she really wasn’t.”

“Is that jealousy talking?”

“No. Look around this place. Would you ever guess he was married?”

He glanced around. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“He couldn’t stand her, though he did everything she wanted.” She turned her attention to the newspapers.

“I should warn you that Billy Ingram is a popular person.” He held up the featured article of her. “This is you, right?”

“It is. I couldn’t sit by and let a boy die in a fire.”

“Let’s just hope no one on Senator Rich’s payroll makes the connection between you and Billy Ingram.” He put the paper down. “Well, you’re my big sister. I’m not going to let someone hurt you if I can stop it. You should know that Paul and I would do anything possible to protect you.”

“I know. I just didn’t want to put your lives in danger.”

He smiled at her. “If we can’t put our lives in danger for our sister, then who can we take a risk for? I can understand why you did what you did. I don’t blame you for running. But you have help now. Alright?”

She returned his smile. “Thank you, Billy.”

“Just call me Paul.”

She was grateful that he was such a good sport about it. Then again, Billy always had a great sense of humor.

They sorted through the papers and found articles Calvin York wrote regarding the fact that Senator Rich was a suspect in the murders. Nothing was conclusive and neither Dave nor Derek, whose alibis were found to be false, were talking.

When Chad returned with the pail of milk, Paul winked at her and stood up. “I think I’ll go find Billy and have him show me around the farm before we go to the potluck.” Just as he was about to leave the house, he turned back. “Are you expecting company?”

She glanced at Chad who shook his head. She went to the front door and sighed. “I didn’t expect them to come today.” She turned

to her brother. "They're Sam and Tim Montgomery and they work here as farmhands."

"Except they usually only come during the week," Chad blandly added.

"Are they aware that there's a beautiful attraction here?" her brother asked her.

"Unfortunately," she whispered. She looked back at Chad who was pouring the milk into the bottles. Did it bother him that Sam and Tim were coming out to see her? She turned back to her brother. "It's going to be a long day."

"There's no need to be rude. Introduce me to them," her brother insisted.

She nodded and led him outside. At least with him there, the men would behave themselves. As they reached the men on their horses, she forced herself to smile as they smiled widely at her.

"These aren't as pretty as you but I wanted you to have them." Sam handed her some daisies.

"Thank you," she uneasily replied.

"And you can't forget candy," Tim added as he handed her a box of chocolates.

Her brother looked amused. "How thoughtful. I didn't know this was part of the work that farmhands do."

"Paul," she warned.

"Who's he?" Sam wondered.

"This is my other brother, Paul," she said. "He thinks he's funny but he's not."

"Yes, it seems that Kate got all the funny genes in our family," her brother sarcastically replied. "So, you two would like to court my sister?"

"We figured it was too soon to ask," Tim responded. "We don't want to scare her off."

"That's a good plan. As her brother, I wouldn't want her to feel pressured into making a bad decision."

"Oh, of course not."

"We will be happy to escort you to the potluck," Sam offered.

"As long as I'm there to chaperone," her brother inserted. "I must make sure no one mistreats her."

“We wouldn’t dream of mistreating a lady,” Tim replied.

She forced herself not to roll her eyes. Instead, she said, “I’ll take these things to the loft.”

Before anyone could stop her, she ran to the barn. She was relieved to see that her brother was still talking to them so they didn’t follow her. She was tempted to spend the day as Billy but knew Kate couldn’t just disappear, even though she wanted to. *This is going to be a long day.*

* * * * *

Around noon, she had her Billy disguise in the bag. She noticed that Chad continued to do his usual chores while Sam and Tim hovered around her and her brother. *Doesn’t it bother him that Sam and Tim are here?* She pushed the question aside as she got on Reliable. She had told Sam and Tim that “Billy” planned to join them later. She wanted to say good-bye to Chad but he was nowhere in sight when they left. She was relieved that her brother was with her to keep the two farmhands in check.

When they reached the town, the potluck was already set up. They got off their horses and several men walked over to them.

“You are more beautiful than we heard,” one man said to her.

“My name is Earl Johnson,” another one introduced himself. “You are a fine looking lady.”

“Fine? She’s gorgeous,” another man said.

Her brother chuckled. “This happens all the time,” he told Sam and Tim. He must have noticed her look of dread, for he said, “I think Billy will be coming soon. Perhaps you ought to freshen up before the dancing starts? I believe the vanity mirror is in that building.”

“Yes. I should make myself presentable,” she readily agreed, took the bag he held for her and ran to the local inn where she could change in the restroom.

When she changed into her Billy disguise, she took the back entrance and walked around a couple of buildings so it looked as if she had been in town for awhile. She hid the bag behind the out-house so she could use it in the future.

As soon as her brother saw her, he whispered, "So, this is how Billy looks. You looked better in the paper."

"It's the best I can do. It's not like you gave me a lot to work with," she joked.

He huffed, clearly offended.

"You need to relax," she told him as they joined the people.

"This is Paul," she told Jeff. "He came by to see why I would bother to stay here for a short while."

"Yes, we've already met. Any brother of Billy's is a friend of mine," Jeff grinned and shook his hand.

"You're a hero, Billy," Tim told her. "We've been telling everyone all about how you saved that young boy last night."

The other men surrounded her and asked her to tell them about how she saved the boy. She did her best to sum up the events. She wasn't sure she liked all the attention they were giving her. It made her feel self-conscious.

"So, where is that good looking sister of yours?" Sam asked Paul.

"I believe Billy knows the answer to that," Paul replied, turning to her with an amused expression on his face.

"She's in the outhouse," she told them. "When are the horse races?"

"We already know not to bet against you," Tim stated. "We lost a lot of money last time."

"You won all the horse races?" Her brother looked impressed. "I see all that training has paid off."

"Yes. I love to race. It's in my bones. I never feel more alive than when I'm on a horse, racing and jumping," she stated.

"Billy always had an affection for horses. He's been known to handle the toughest of them."

She was pleased by his compliment.

"If your sister doesn't hurry, she'll miss the races," Sam told them.

"Oh, I'm sure she'll come out soon and see me riding. She's seen me ride many times before."

"But she hasn't seen me ride," Tim protested.

She shrugged. "When she's ready to come out, she'll come

out. I'm not going into the outhouse to get her."

Satisfied that they accepted it, she took Reliable to the start line, eager to race the stallion. It was a good horse and responded well to her commands. She easily won the four races. She could tell that her brother was proud of her.

"It's good to see a strong woman winning against the men," he whispered to her. "Does Chad have any idea at how well you ride?"

"He knows I'm a good rider as Billy but not as Kate. I have to go make my appearance as Kate. Can you tell them that I had to fix a hole in my boot?"

"I'll do that."

She ran off to grab the sack and run into the outhouse. By the time she returned, as Kate, she found her brother talking to Sam, Jeff and Tim. She forced aside her aggravation as they were introducing him to Lacy. *It's like they're trying to pawn her off on any bachelor they can find.* She didn't think she would have to warn her brother about the raven haired woman, but that was her mistake.

"Hello, Paul," she smiled at her brother.

"Good afternoon, Kate," he replied.

The men turned to her in interest and said hello.

"Oh, good afternoon again," she smiled at them.

"Kate, have you met our sister, Lacy?" Tim asked her.

"I briefly met her when she was at the farm. Hello, Lacy."

"Hello, Kate," the woman sweetly nodded. "I didn't realize your other brother would be in town."

"Paul just got here today. Billy and I didn't expect to see him so soon."

"Yes, I do a lot of traveling, though I do not confine myself to the hobo lifestyle," her brother remarked. "I enjoy the comforts of a bed. I cannot imagine sleeping in a barn loft."

Kate realized that this would only impress Lacy further so she spoke up. "It's too bad your fancy lifestyle has gotten you heavily in debt."

He glanced at her, appalled.

"If only you could find a woman who was rich enough to pay it

off,” she continued to lie, encouraged by Lacy’s frown.

“I beg your pardon,” he huffed.

“Just expressing the obvious.”

“Billy’s quite the talk of the town, Kate,” Tim laughed. “Did you see the paper?”

“Yes, I did,” she nodded. “We’re all proud of him.”

“He’s a noble man,” Lacy agreed. “Where is he? I wanted to express how wonderful I think he is for saving the poor child, but I didn’t get a chance to do so earlier because I was taking care of a pie. I made the apple one. Be sure to tell him to try it out.”

“Lacy’s a great cook,” Sam added. “She’d make a good wife for any man.”

“We believe that a woman’s worth is above rubies,” Jeff added. “That’s from the book of Proverbs in the Bible. Anyway, we are respectful of all women.”

You are such a liar. Had she not been playing Billy, she would have actually believed him, for he seemed sincere. Instead of calling him on his lie, she blurted out, “It’s a shame that Chad wasn’t able to join us. I do miss him when he’s not around.”

The men frowned.

She turned her attention to the music from the fiddle and banjo. “I don’t know about anyone else, but I feel like dancing.”

A group of men crowded around her to be the first one to dance with her. She wasn’t looking forward to dancing with any of them but realized she would have to. While the men fought over who would dance with her, she glanced at her brother and Lacy.

“Would you like to dance?” Lacy asked him.

He chuckled. “No. You are not my type.” Then he walked away from her and sat down at the table.

She breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently, her brother had quickly figured her out and knew exactly what to say.

“I win,” Tim told her. “I get to dance with you first.”

Kate forced herself to smile. She didn’t appreciate being treated like a piece of meat to be fought over, but she graciously danced with each man. When the sixth dance was done, it was time to eat. She excused herself and ran to the outhouse to change into her Billy disguise. She returned, sat next to her brother and

started eating her meal.

“Yet again, you won every race,” Sam congratulated her as he stopped by to pat her on the back. “You’re a regular hero. You are the fastest man on a horse I’ve ever seen and you save boys in trouble.”

“You made us some good money today,” Tim agreed from next to her. “It’s a good thing we got to see you in action before today.”

“Well, save that money because you’ll lose the bet on who Kate will pick to marry,” she warned them.

Her brother looked at her in curiosity. “There’s a bet on who Kate will marry?”

She nodded.

“Yes. Since Chad is impotent, it’s a sure thing she won’t choose him,” Tim said.

“Chad Walker is impotent?” He stared at her.

“Oh, that was just something his dead wife said,” she stated between bites of her fried chicken. “I don’t buy it though.”

“He was married for ten years and never had children,” Sam remarked.

“That doesn’t sound very promising,” her brother replied. “Doesn’t Kate wish for children?”

“Honestly, Paul. There’s no problem,” she insisted.

“Well, a woman will surely want children,” Sam confidently said.

“So you’re betting on who will win Kate’s heart?” her brother asked her.

“It’s a sure thing. I’m going to win this one,” she nodded.

He laughed. “Let me in on this bet too. I’m going with Billy on this one.”

“We’ll see,” Sam stated as he left for his seat.

“Speaking of Kate, where is she?” Tim asked.

“Oh, she’s around here somewhere,” she vaguely replied.

She quickly ate the food on her plate.

Her brother looked at her in disgust. “Really, Billy. You might want to show better table manners.”

“I’m in a hurry,” she whispered.

“Still, your upbringing was better than this.”

She ignored him and wolfed down the rest of the food on her plate. After she was done, she changed back into Kate. When she returned to the fairgrounds, she sat next to her brother, aware that she was gasping for air.

“You should be an actress,” her brother commented. “You are actually pulling this stunt off.”

“Being two people is wearing me out,” she admitted.

He frowned at her. “How do you know that Chad isn’t impotent? Did you have sex with him?”

She gasped. “I can’t believe you would think that. I’m still a virgin.”

“How far did you go with him?”

“We just danced. We haven’t even kissed.”

“Then how do you know he’s not impotent?”

“Because he told ‘Billy’ that Georgia lied about being pregnant. Now how would he believe her if he wasn’t able to perform?”

“Alright.”

“He’s a gentleman. He wouldn’t take advantage of anyone. I hope you’re the same way.”

“Of course, I am. I’m waiting until my wedding night. I take Scripture seriously.”

“So does he.”

“Good.”

To her dismay, Lacy came over to them. “Where is Billy?” she asked them.

Kate sighed. Too bad “Billy” didn’t tell Lacy that she wasn’t his type in the same fashion that her brother did.

“You think you have a chance with Billy?” her brother asked.

“He’s been a perfect gentlemen,” Lacy replied. “I can tell he likes me.”

“That’s interesting.” He looked at Kate with a raised eyebrow.

Kate was surprised to see that Lacy’s mother came over to them. “Isn’t it a lovely day? Lacy looks most beautiful in her pink dress.”

“Is that your standard of beauty around here?” He shook his

head as if he couldn't believe his ears.

Even Kate couldn't believe her brother was being blatantly rude.

Lacy ignored his comment. "Oh, I didn't introduce you to Kate Ingram," Lacy told her mother. "Kate is Billy's sister, and she's staying out at Chad Walker's place."

"I'm much more handsome than my brother," her brother casually inserted. "My name is Paul."

"Nice to meet you both," her mother kindly smiled. "Poor Chad," she sighed. "He is so distraught over Georgia's death."

"Well, he seems to be healing from it," Kate replied.

"He's always been very brave about not showing his sorrow over losing her. She was his whole world. She confided all of this to me. A mother can tell when her son-in-law is devoted to her daughter."

"Chad was deeply in love with her," Lacy agreed. "He can't function without her. Why, when he came into town this morning, he asked to see Georgia's old bedroom."

Kate didn't believe her for a minute.

Lacy's mother put her hand to her heart. "I wish I had known. I would have showed it to him." She turned to Kate. "Would you like to see Georgia's old bedroom?"

"No thank you." Kate shook her head.

"You keep a bedroom for a dead woman?" her brother asked.

"I see." Her mother brought out her handkerchief and dabbed her eyes. "Georgia's memory lives on every time someone sees what she was like."

"She made the world a brighter place," Lacy said, though Kate sensed she didn't mean it.

"Maybe so but she's not here anymore," Kate responded. "I think it's time we accept her death and move on with our lives. Chad would be much happier if he didn't have to be reminded of her all the time."

"The poor man. He really needs to be loved again," her mother sighed.

"Come on, Kate. Let's see this room. It's probably the most entertainment this town has to offer," her brother said. "Besides,

I'd like to see what Chad's first wife was like. It will be interesting to see how she compares to my sister."

Her mother beamed. "Follow me."

Kate's brother took her hand and led her along the street to the old woman's house. She didn't feel like looking at the bedroom again. "Billy's already seen it," she told him.

"Really? What did he think?" her brother asked.

Lacy's mother glanced back at her.

She chose her words with great care. "It's very well preserved."

The woman smiled. "I try to keep it as immaculate as the day she left to go to California. That's where she met Chad. From there, his life greatly improved. She brought him back here since his family died in a horrible accident. I don't know the details, but Georgia assured me that it was a sad story."

He looked at Kate who shook her head to let him know that Georgia had lied about it. He kept his comments to himself, which she was grateful for. They walked into the house.

As soon as they entered the bedroom, he said, "I see that Georgia was a princess." The way he said it was demeaning but her mother glowed as if he paid her deceased daughter with the highest of all praises.

"Georgia was lovely," her mother nodded. "Pictures don't do her justice though. I assure you that she was much more breathtaking in real life."

"As breathtaking as a skunk," he muttered under his breath.

"She was kind and generous to everyone," her mother continued. "Here are some pictures of her."

He walked over to the dresser and examined the pictures along the mirror. He shrugged. "She's alright. Kate's much better."

The woman gasped.

He glanced at her. "Just look at her," he motioned to Kate. "Georgia has nothing over her."

"Georgia could win a beauty pageant," her mother insisted.

He raised an eyebrow. "That depends on who the other contestants are. I'm sorry. I'm not impressed. Chad can do better."

"Her diary tells you what kind of person she was. Here. Read

it. You will find she had great inner beauty.”

“Now this, I have to see.” He didn’t hide his amusement as he read a couple of pages. He chuckled as he turned the page.

“What is so funny?”

“This is cute. Where is her real diary?”

“That is her real diary.” Her mother was obviously offended.

“I’m not buying it. No one is this good.” He tossed it back on the dresser. “This was a decoy to throw you off track.”

Her mother ran over to the dresser and anxiously put the diary neatly back into its regular spot.

“Mrs. Montgomery, I must be frank with you,” he started. “You would do better to pay attention to the children you have who are still living. I’ve seen enough. You have nothing to worry about, Kate. You far exceed Georgia. Chad will be extremely lucky to have you. Poor man went through enough misery with his first wife. It’s only fitting his second wife should be an honorable and good woman.”

“What are you talking about? Georgia didn’t make him miserable. She blessed his days,” her mother angrily spat.

“I’m sure you have to believe that since you are her mother, but from a man’s viewpoint, I can assure you that Georgia was a selfish, spoiled and manipulative brat. There’s no way a man could be happy with character flaws that great.”

“You can’t tell that from looking at her bedroom,” Lacy argued.

“No. But I’ve seen his place. He’s glad Georgia’s dead, and after seeing this bedroom, I understand why. I have also seen the way he looks at Kate, and he’s very much in love with her,” he told Lacy. “I suspect a proposal is imminent.”

“Georgia was his whole life,” her mother replied, clearly distraught.

“Kate is a diamond. Georgia was a cubit zirconia. Kate is real. Georgia was fake. There is no contest.”

Kate quickly followed him out of the house before her mother or Lacy could say anything else. She didn’t care for the sudden wave of animosity that was coursing through the room. *They don’t like me. I’m a threat to them.* She stood in their way of how they wanted to view Georgia.

“You need to learn to choose your words,” she told her brother as they walked back to the fairgrounds.

“Why? They needed to hear it. I won’t have them building up that money sucker as if she was a saint.”

“Money sucker?”

“Anyone can tell from the way Chad handles himself that he came from a wealthy background. He acts different from the other people in this place. He’s out of his element here. You’ll do him a favor when you take him to Virginia.”

“Now I know how Chad feels whenever I figure things out with pinpoint accuracy.”

“It runs in the family. I’m just as perceptive, if not more so, then you are.”

It was true, so she couldn’t argue with him.

“You’re best bet is to get into your Billy costume again. You’re not very popular with those two,” he said. “Though Lacy is in love with Billy, there’s no telling what she’ll do to get him so watch out. That woman is desperate for any man.”

“Your advice is well-heeded.” She went off to change into her Billy outfit. When she went back to the fairgrounds, she decided to take a soda that was on the table. She was tired of acting like she was drinking beer all the time.

“Billy!” Sam called out to her. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you? Where have you been?”

“I’ve been walking around.”

“Well, now that we found you, let’s play horseshoes.” Jeff handed a couple of horseshoes to her. “Want to play, Paul?”

“Alright. Such a game is bearable,” her brother consented.

“You’re a little high and mighty.”

“I have fine taste.”

“That explains the debt.” He handed the horseshoes to her brother.

“Right,” he frowned at her. “My debt.”

They followed Jeff and Sam to the place where they would throw their horseshoes.

“I was trying to get Lacy off your back,” she whispered.

“I can handle her. I’ve met women like her before. She won’t

go near me after the way I put her down today. Just watch out for yourself,” he softly replied.

So that was the secret to deterring Lacy. For once, her brother’s attitude was the perfect thing to ward off unwanted female attention. She wished she had thought of it. She glanced over at Lacy who smiled and waved at her. She sighed. She would have to do something about the woman but she would have to figure out what that was later on.

After the potluck was over, her brother rode with her back to the farm.

“I have some things I want to check out about Senator Rich,” he told her. “Now that I know you’re alright, I feel safe about going back to Virginia. You say that there are mines in the ten acres Father wanted to designate for the lumber industry?”

“Yes. What do you plan to do?”

“Get concrete proof. I bet that Ethan’s cabin in his park will have some interesting evidence too.”

“Billy, you can’t do that! It’s too dangerous.”

He stopped his horse and looked at her.

She stopped Reliable.

He sighed. “Kate, they were my parents too.”

“Then I’ll come with you.”

“No. You’re the witness. You have to stay safe. You’ve already taken too many chances. Now it’s time for me to take over. Let me do some investigating. When I’m done, I will come back and let you know what I discover. Alright?”

She knew she wouldn’t be able to talk him out of it and he was right. Without her testimony, Dave, Derek and Ethan would likely get away with murder. She wiped the tears from her eyes.

“I’m going to take you back to Chad’s farm,” he softly said. “He’ll take care of you. I want you to be safe.”

She nodded and silently rode with him back to the farm.

* * * * *

On Monday, Tim, Sam and Jeff were even more annoying than they had been the previous week. She had to constantly remind

them to get back to work. Now that they hailed Billy as a hero, they kept asking her to replay the events surrounding the fire rescue, and it was difficult to get any work done during the morning. Even as Kate, they continued to go out of their way to impress her. If it weren't for her as "Billy" and Chad finishing the new shed, it wouldn't have been completed late on Monday afternoon.

On Tuesday afternoon, Chad fixed a door to the horse barn while Tim, Sam and Jeff took their time painting the other barn. She had on her Kate outfit and was glad for the reprieve from the farmhands' attention as she got a chance to watch them instead of having to talk to them or listen to them. She sat in the grass and watched the men work.

She blinked when she noticed an unfamiliar man riding onto the property. She hadn't seen him in town. Upon closer examination, she realized he shared the same light brown hair and facial features that Chad did. He was younger, clean shaven, and not as muscular as Chad. He wore what he considered to be western clothes, but they were expensive so she knew he came from money. She wondered if he was Chad's brother.

To her surprise, he rode his stallion over to her. "You are far too beautiful to be Georgia. Are you one of her friends?"

"Uh...no." His manners threw her off guard. He spoke and acted like the elite did in her society. She wasn't sure what to think of him. "I'm the sister of Chad Walker's new farmhand."

"And a wonderful attraction to this farm."

"Thank you," she uncertainly responded. Did she dare trust him?

"I come looking for Chad Walker. He's my brother."

So her initial impression had been correct. "He's over there." She pointed to Chad who was working on the barn door.

"Perhaps when I am done with him, I'll get a chance to get more acquainted with you." He tipped his hat to her and urged the horse to trot over to Chad.

Even from a distance, she could tell that Chad wasn't happy to see him. Chad wiped his forehead with a cloth he kept in his back pocket and took several pieces of paper that his brother handed him. His brother was talking while he flipped through the papers,

carefully reading everything on them. She wondered what they were talking about.

Jeff walked over to her. She inwardly groaned. "I just finished painting my section of the barn. I have a few moments to spare before I help Sam and Tim with more of it."

She forced her attention to him. "Where were you when I went to see everyone at lunch?" she kindly asked him, wondering what lie he would come up with since she knew he had checked out the loft to find her in a compromising situation.

"Oh, I fed the horses. I didn't even wait for Chad to ask me to do it."

"So you take initiative?"

"I sure do. I don't mind taking the lead. It makes for good practice when I have children someday. Do you want to have children?"

Not with you. Keeping her thoughts to herself, she said, "Of course. What woman doesn't?"

"Well, I can assure you that I have no problem with that. Everything works like it should. That's important to consider."

"I suppose." What was he getting at?

"Georgia wanted children. She used to cry on her mother's shoulder about her desire to bear her mother some grandchildren, but Chad wasn't able to accommodate that wish."

Oh. That's what he's doing. She decided to play along. "Really? How so?"

"Well, you know."

She stared innocently at him. "I'm afraid I don't."

He cleared his throat. "You know how babies are made. Well, certain things have to be working on a man for that to occur."

She just blinked at him as if she had no clue as to what he was talking about. She hoped that by playing dumb, she would turn him off.

"You do know how babies are made, don't you?"

"The stork brings them." She forced herself to look as serious as possible. She had to focus on the way the wind blew her hair around her shoulders so she wouldn't laugh at his uncomfortable expression.

“Not exactly.”

“I’m confused. If storks don’t bring them, then how are they delivered to the parents?”

Sam and Tim walked over to them. Jeff looked relieved. “I was trying to explain that Chad wasn’t able to give Georgia any children.”

“Poor Georgia,” Sam nodded. “She was devastated to learn that Chad was impotent.”

“Impotent? What does that mean?” She couldn’t help but continue her stupid act. She looked wide eyed at them.

“You’re kidding, right?” Tim chuckled.

“I’m sorry. I lead a very sheltered life.” She hoped she sounded sincere.

“Well,” Sam slowly began, “being impotent means that a man can’t get an erection.”

“I don’t understand. Why would he need an erection?”

“Erection,” Tim clarified.

“Oh. Right. That word. What does it mean?” *Don’t laugh.* The expression of disbelief on their faces was well worth the act she was putting on.

“Do you really believe a stork brings babies?” Jeff hesitantly asked.

“Of course. My mother told me so.” Just how much were they actually going to explain to her? She decided to be even more outrageously stupid. “The stork’s name is Bonnie and she collects the babies out of the cabbage patches from a magical place called Babyland. People who are honest and good get to receive these wonderful bundles of joy. The babies are a real blessing.”

They looked at her, as if trying to determine whether or not she was serious.

She glanced from one man to the other. Then she gasped. “Was my mother lying?” She put her hand to her heart.

“Apparently,” Jeff uneasily replied.

“Do you know the difference between men and women?” Sam asked her.

“Sure. Men have facial hair and women don’t. Oh, and women have these things called nobs that stick out of their chests.

They feed the babies,” she said.

“Are there any other differences?”

She pretended to think about it. Finally, she shook her head. “No. That’s it.”

Now they looked like they were ready to bolt.

She hoped that her plan was working and they were going to stop pursuing her.

“Maybe we should get you a book,” Sam finally said. “It’s not really appropriate to discuss these matters aloud.”

“Really?” She didn’t think it was appropriate for them to discuss Chad’s impotency in front of her either but it was all a part of their ploy to get her interest off of him and onto one of them. She knew exactly what they were trying to do and she was determined not to give them the satisfaction of going through with their plan.

“We’ll get a book for you,” Jeff agreed. “You’re a lady, and we wouldn’t want to impose on your delicate sensibilities.”

“Oh. Is it that awful?”

“No. No, it’s not awful,” Tim quickly assured her. “It’s just not talk meant for mixed company.”

Though you don’t mind taking advantage of women. She pretended not to be disgusted with them and smiled instead. “Alright. Just make sure there are lots of pictures. I finally mastered my ABCs but still have trouble reading.” Maybe being a complete moron in every aspect of life would repel them. “Oh, I have to go talk to Billy. I will be back soon.”

She ran to the barn to get away from them. She ran up to the loft to spend some time alone before she would show up again as Billy.

Chapter 14

Chad wasn't happy to see his younger brother, Chris, nor was he happy to see the three farmhands surrounding Kate. *No doubt they are giving her reasons to not be interested in me.* He sighed as he forced his attention back to the forms his brother handed him. He hadn't seen Chris since he left California to move to North Dakota with Georgia. He didn't especially care for his brother, and he was aware that his brother felt the same way.

Chad carefully read through everything his brother wanted him to sign.

"Since Father passed away three years ago, Mother got soft and left you half of the estate," Chris informed him. "I wasn't even aware that she changed the will until she died. As the executor, it's my duty to make sure her wishes are carried out."

"If I sign these, then you will receive all of the estate," Chad noted. Leave it to his brother to be greedy, even in the aftermath of their mother's death.

"It is my rightful due. I didn't abandon our parents and the family business. You did."

"It wasn't like I was given a choice."

"Right. You let a woman separate you from us."

He shrugged. He didn't wish to rehash the past. "Why would

Mother leave me half of the estate?”

Chris rolled his eyes. “She was sentimental. She regretted cutting you off from the family.”

He frowned. “Did she try to contact me?”

His brother glanced at the ground. “No.”

Chris never was a good liar. Chad felt his face grow hot with anger. “She did. Who stopped her?”

Chris looked startled.

“Obviously, you did. Who else? Father?”

“She was weak,” he finally replied. “She wanted you to come back or to come visit you. I assure you that had Father outlived her, then this wouldn’t even be an issue now.”

“But she lived longer. When did she die?”

“She passed away in the hospital a week ago. She left you a letter but I saw no reason to dig up the past, so I disposed of it.”

“How typical of you.”

“Why open old wounds? Surely, you got what you wanted. You have this farm that is worth enough to provide you with a good living if you ever sell it. You have Georgia. You probably even have some little Chads running around the place somewhere.”

“I hate to destroy your image of the happy family life you seem to think I enjoy but Georgia passed away a year ago and we had no children.”

“So, is that pretty young woman over there the new Mrs. Chad Walker?”

Chad tensed. “You wanted me to sign the papers. If I do that, will you go back to California?”

He smiled. “She’s not married to you yet. Why else would those men be slobbering all over her? She said her brother works here. I suspect that’s why she’s here, to visit him?”

“I won’t sign this if you insist on staying.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You did notice how much our parents were worth?”

He nodded.

“And you’d give up all that money for her?” He pointed to Kate who stood up and walked past the three men and to the barn.

Chad wanted to run after her and find out if anyone said some-

thing to upset her. She looked like she was relieved to get away from them. Instead, he focused on his brother. “Does that surprise you since I gave it up for Georgia?”

“You were always soft when it came to women. Was Georgia worth it? Will she be worth it?” He nodded to Kate.

“I don’t believe that’s your concern. You came for the money, did you not?”

“She’s much more attractive than Georgia ever was.”

Chad gritted his teeth. This wasn’t the first time Chris tried to win over a woman he was interested in.

“Perhaps I’ll stay in town for awhile. There just might be some appeal to the small town life after all.”

He didn’t like the satisfied smirk on his brother’s face. “Give me a pen or pencil and I’ll sign the papers so you can get out of here,” he snapped.

“She must be quite the woman.” He grinned as he handed him a pen. “I just need your signature on pages 1, 4, and 7.”

“I can read where I’m supposed to sign.”

“Why do you keep giving up money for women, Chad? I mean, the sex can’t be that great.”

“You know this from experience, do you?”

“No, actually I don’t. I just can’t imagine sex is worth all this money.”

“It’s not about sex, Chris. There’s more to a marriage than sex.”

“Right.” He clearly didn’t believe him.

“You’re going to live a lonely life.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I could think of settling down with someone like her. What’s her name?”

Chad quickly signed the papers and shoved them at his brother. “All the money is now yours. Get off my property or I’ll run you off.”

Chris laughed. “You seem to get more and more stupid each time I see you.” He folded the forms and put them in his pocket. “I think I’ll stick around and see why you would give up all this money for her. She must be something.”

Chad knew his brother wouldn’t leave town, which was why he

signed the papers in his brother's name. Chris was so busy harassing him that he hadn't noticed the name he wrote. "Yes. You showed me up alright."

Suddenly, Billy showed up. "The cattle are doing fine," he announced. "Kate is hiding out in the loft. Apparently, Sam, Tim and Jeff were bothering her."

Chad sighed. "I'm sorry, Billy. I was detained."

Chris raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your farmhand?"

Did he have a choice? "This is Billy Ingram. Billy, this is my brother, Chris."

Billy nodded. "Glad to meet you." Billy shook Chris' hand. "How long are you staying?"

"I wasn't originally planning on sticking around but I just found a good reason to. If there's something I can't resist, it's a good challenge." Chris smiled at Chad.

Chad hid his irritation. *It's too bad he didn't win Georgia.* Of course, once he discovered she was after money and he would lose his inheritance if he married her, he gave up on her. Money was more important than women.

"What challenge is that?" Billy asked Chris.

Chris chose to ignore the question. Instead, he said, "Am I going to meet the other farmhands?"

"You weren't talking about my sister, were you?"

Chad was surprised with the accuracy of Billy's perception.

Chris hadn't expected Billy's ability to see people's motives without knowing them very well, for he stared at the farmhand in disbelief.

Billy chuckled. "You better stand in line because she's used to having men line up to court her. She's very particular. If you want to join in the bet that those men are having over who will get her, then go for it. Personally, my money is on the boss."

Chris smiled. "There's a bet?" He glanced at Chad. "This might prove interesting."

"I'm constantly amused that so many men think they have a chance with her. Well, give it your best shot, but be warned that she can figure out motives really quick."

Chad wondered why the man was encouraging his brother. Did Billy wish to see all these men go after her? It was annoying that he had to fight them for her.

“Do you have any other tasks for me to do, boss?” Billy asked him.

Chad sighed. “No. Tell everyone to go home for the day. We’ll just do it all again tomorrow.” The hour was getting late anyway and he was eager to get Chris off his property.

As Billy went to tell the three men they could go home for the day, Chris turned to him. “So, where am I sleeping?”

“In town.”

“That’s not very hospitable of you, brother.”

“I wasn’t trying to be. You aren’t welcome here.”

“I’m dismayed. What would Mother think?”

“Go or I’ll force you off my property.”

“I’m sure you would do your best to try. I don’t want to embarrass you in front of your farmhands, so I’ll graciously bow out for today.”

Chad released his breath as Chris turned to leave. He stopped to introduce himself to the other farmhands first, and they laughed at something he said. *Why do I have a hard time getting along with so many people?* It hadn’t always been that way. He actually used to have quite a few friends. Did being with Georgia really have a sour effect on his personality? Certainly, Kate would rather be with someone who was more likeable. *Someone like Chris.* Pushing aside the depressing thought, he turned back to his work on the door.

* * * * *

The next day was Wednesday but Chad wished it was Saturday so everyone would just stay in town. As soon as he took out the paint for the barn to continue painting, he saw a group of eight people coming onto his property. He shook his head. He knew they were all coming to see Billy and Kate. *I’ll never get any work done today.* Worse, he would have to share Kate with every interested male in the town, plus his irritating brother who had decided

to join the group. He groaned. This was going to be a long day.

Billy came out of the barn and stopped when he saw the people.

Chad put the paint back in the shed. He would be doing good just to feed the animals and milk the cows that day.

Billy ran over to him as soon as he shut the shed door. "What are all those people doing here?" he asked, not hiding his shock.

"I think they came to see you and your sister. They've never come to see me."

"Why? What is so great about us?"

Chad shrugged. "You are two very likeable people."

"I had no idea that my personality could attract so many people."

"Well, Kate has a good personality too."

"What? Oh, right. Kate." He shook his head. "This is insane. Don't they know that Kate sleeps in late?"

"Apparently, they figure she'll wake up as soon as she hears the festivities."

"There's no way that's going to happen. She was up so late that even I'm tired this morning."

"I'm sorry, Billy. I kept her up. We were talking about books that we've read and we lost track of the time. I didn't think we were that loud when I walked her to the loft."

Billy didn't seem to hear him. Instead, he groaned. "They brought Lacy back."

"Along with two other women."

"Gabriella Turner and Cheryl Alan." He slapped his hand to his forehead. "I wish I knew how to turn women off." He turned to him. "What do you do when you want to repulse a woman?"

"I never had the problem where a woman couldn't get enough of me, so I'm not the person to advise you on what to do about them."

"Well, Kate likes to spend all of her waking moments with you. You must do something different with other women than you do with her."

"Kate's the only woman who's shown any real interest in me. It's probably just friendship."

Billy rolled his eyes but didn't say anything as Sam called out

to him. Billy cringed. "This can't go on every day. I have to find a way to put a stop to this madness. I came to North Dakota to get away from people, not to attract them. Why do I have to be so likeable?" He sighed and turned to Sam who was running over to him.

"We thought we'd come out and have a little fun today. Get your sister. We're going to do a square dance."

"You've got to be kidding me. I can't get her."

"Why not? She is here, isn't she?"

"Well, yes, but..." He looked flustered.

"But what?"

"She's asleep. I can't wake her up when she's asleep."

Chad took a good look at Billy. Was the man panicking? *Something isn't right.* What could it be? *He's hiding something besides the identity of Senator Tanner's murderers.* He suddenly realized that he never saw Billy and Kate together. One was conveniently busy when the other one was available. Chad was so glad to get some time alone with Kate that he hadn't thought to question it until that moment as he watched Billy argue with the men that Kate couldn't show up to partake in the square dance. Did Billy fear that if Kate were with him in public then she would unknowingly expose his secret? There was no denying they were related. There were even times he wondered if they were the same person since they were so much alike. Chad examined the way Billy shook his head and threw his arms in the air while Sam kept telling him to get Kate.

"Sam, this is Wednesday," Billy reasoned with the farmhand. "We're supposed to be working. We have Saturday to engage in entertainment." Billy turned to Chad. "Are you going to allow this?"

"I'm not cooking for anyone," he finally replied. He turned to go to the barn so he could milk the cows.

To his surprise, Billy followed him. "Don't you know why the men are here? They're trying to get Kate's attention."

"And the women are here to get yours. I told you that the best approach to those people is to keep your distance from them. That's what I'm going to do today, and I'll manage to stay out of

trouble. But you had to be their friend, and now they like both you and Kate because you've done such a good job of playing the game of getting along with them. I told you they throw curve balls. You thought you had perfect control over the situation but you didn't."

"Fine. You were right. Aren't you going to send them back home? This is your farm."

"Things will go a lot smoother if they get today out of their system. I've learned a long time ago not to make waves. It's best just to ride the current. It's a lot less painful that way."

"So the fact that the men are here doesn't bother you?"

"They were at the fairgrounds on Saturday when she went out there. What's the difference? I'm not her boss. She's free to do her own thing. Last time I heard, she agreed to meet them in town. She might as well meet them out here too."

"Do you honestly want that?"

"Kate's an adult. She can pick whoever she wants." He didn't like the idea of her with someone else but if she chose that, then he wasn't going to stop her.

"I don't believe what I'm hearing. Don't you care if she ends up with another man?"

"My personal business is my personal business. She may be your sister but I don't have to explain anything to you." He picked up the pail from the corner of the barn and carried it over to the cow he planned to milk for the day.

"Are you serious? All this time you've been spending with her has been because you just think of her as a friend?"

He set the pail under the cow's udder and sat down. "You're not the person I want to talk to about this, Billy. Just because you're her brother, it doesn't give you the right to probe into her personal life."

"Considering the fact that our father is dead, I am in his position."

Why couldn't Billy just back off? An idea came to him. "You were asking me how you can turn a woman off? Bother her about something that she doesn't want to talk about. It's the perfect repellent."

"Alright. I can read the writing on the wall. Fine. If it doesn't

bother you that other men are seeking her out, then so be it.”

He rolled his eyes as Billy left the barn. *Sometimes Billy reminds me of a woman.* Men didn’t typically make a big deal out of a simple social gathering.

After he milked the cow, he took the pail into the kitchen. He saw Billy laughing with the men and women. He noted that Sam, Tim, Jeff, Todd, Chris, Lacy, Gabriella, and Cheryl had made the trip out to the farm that day. He was relieved to see they brought their own food with them. At least, he wouldn’t have them going into his house to eat lunch. He also noted that Kate was still out of sight. It only confirmed his earlier suspicions that Billy was afraid to be with her in front of other people. *What else is Billy hiding?* If Kate wasn’t sleeping in the loft, Chad would have investigated that trunk.

He poured the milk into the bottles and set them in the basement to keep cool. He wasn’t sure what he should do next, but he knew that he didn’t want to stick around for all the festivities. He loved dancing and meeting with people he liked, but he didn’t care for the Montgomeries or their friends. An idea came to him. He took his wallet, counted the money in it, and put it in his pocket.

To his surprise, Kate came up to the house. He wondered what she told the men so they didn’t follow her. He smiled at the sight of her. She was beautiful. “Good morning,” he greeted. He stepped back so she could walk into the house. “I thought you were sleeping.”

She seemed like she was upset, though she was struggling to be pleasant. “What are all those people doing here?”

“Didn’t they explain it to you when you walked past them?”

She hesitated. “Well, I didn’t really give anyone a chance. I just told them I had something urgent to tell you.”

He tensed, immediately concerned. “What is it?”

“Nothing. I just said that to get a moment to talk to you without someone hovering nearby.”

He motioned to the kitchen table. “Alright. Do you want to sit down? Are you hungry? I could make you something to eat.”

“I’m fine.” She sat down and waited for him to sit.

“Do you want something to drink?”

“No.”

He frowned. Did she sound impatient with him? He slowly sat across from her, uncertain of what he did to upset her. “Are you mad at me about something?”

“Billy said that the men are here to see me so he woke me up. Are you alright with them being here?”

“No, I’m not, but it’s easier to have them out here for the day so they can get it out of their system than to get into a big fight with them. I figure that tomorrow, things can go back to normal.”

“So you’re upset that they’re here but you won’t tell them to go home?”

He sighed. He didn’t feel like bringing up unpleasant topics around Kate. It was one thing to talk to Billy about the less attractive side of his past but he didn’t wish to burden Kate with it. “It’s not worth arguing with them about. You have to trust me on this. If we just go along with what they want, things are better for everyone.” He recalled the last time he had upset them with crystal clarity. They didn’t mind gaining up on him to prove a point. He was no match for four men and his brother.

She shook her head, as if she couldn’t believe her ears. “You can’t let people bully you. You have to stand up to them.”

He wished she didn’t feel the need to press the issue. “I’d rather not discuss this. I have my reasons. Fortunately for Billy, he gets along with them. I’m sure it’ll be a much needed break from all the work he’s been doing anyway.”

“You think Billy wants them here?”

He shrugged. “He goes to town every weekend so he can hang out with them. Since he won’t be here for long, he might as well enjoy himself as much as he can. He certainly works hard enough to earn a day off.”

“What if he doesn’t want a day off?”

“Then I’m sure he can find a way to work. They’ll listen to him better than they’ll listen to me. I don’t know his secret but he’s able to talk to them in a way that gets results. If you’re that upset that they’re here, ask Billy to send them home.” He hated to sound like such a wimp but he had unsuccessfully tried to get them off of his property in the past on several occasions. He was tired

of fighting them.

“Why don’t they listen to you?”

“Probably because I never played along with their games the way Billy does.”

“Do you think Billy’s making a mistake?”

“As long as he keeps his hands off the women, he’ll be fine. The men aren’t his problem. They consider him to be a friend, so they will be good to him. I’ve already warned him about Lacy. He knows what to do about her. As long as he heeds my advice, he won’t have any trouble getting out of town when he’s ready to go somewhere else.” He didn’t wish to go into detail about it since she was a woman.

“Should I be worried?”

“No one is going to try to take advantage of you, if that’s what you’re worried about. There are plenty of people around so you’re safe. They’ll probably just be obnoxious in how they try to impress you.”

She huffed. “Do you care that they’re interested in me?”

Before he could respond, there was a knock at the door.

“Could the timing be any worse?” she grumbled.

Chad didn’t know anyone who would knock with the possible exception of his brother, so he reluctantly stood up to answer it. He hid his distaste for the way Chris was smiling at him. It was the same satisfied smirk that drove him insane when they were growing up.

“What is it, Chris?” he politely asked him.

“I’d rather speak with you alone.” Chris looked past the screen door and at Kate.

She sighed and stood up. “Alright. I can take a hint.” She stomped past them and went to the crowd of people who waved to her.

Chad didn’t like the fact that she was upset. He didn’t understand what he did to cause it, but he had to wait until everyone was gone before he could approach her. With the way everyone gathered around her, he knew he wouldn’t be able to tear her away from them.

“She’s got a certain appeal to her, doesn’t she?” Chris noted.

Turning back to Chad, he continued, “She attracts men to her like flowers attract bees. I can see that it bothers you.” He crossed his arms. “I know you signed my name on the papers.”

“Only because I knew you had no intention of leaving once you realized I like Kate. You can’t resist trying to steal her from me.”

Chris laughed. “My dear big brother. It turns out that winning her won’t be as difficult as I originally thought it would be. What woman wants an impotent man who can’t get over the death of his wife?”

“What?” Chad knew that the men played up on his devotion to Georgia but he didn’t realize that they would be pushing the impotency story on her. The knowledge that they were doing that greatly angered him.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Sometimes the equipment malfunctions.”

“My equipment works just fine.”

“Would Kate be aware of this?”

“Of course not! I don’t believe in having sex before marriage.”

He looked amused. “So it’s your word against theirs. Considering your lack of proof, the story looks damaging.”

“What lack of proof?”

“You have no children and you were married for ten years.”

He didn’t feel like explaining his lack of a sex life with Georgia, so he asked, “Is there anything else?”

“No. I think I’ll go join the fun. We’re going to square dance. I’ve never done that before. It’ll be interesting to see how the common people dance.”

I need to get out of here. Chad angrily shut the door behind him and headed out to the barn to get Reliable. He noticed that Billy was nowhere in sight and the horses were all there. He was tempted to go up to the loft and see what it was that Billy was hiding in that trunk. The answer was there. He knew it was, but he couldn’t bring himself to intrude on Billy’s privacy. Instead, he saddled Reliable and headed out of the barn. No one noticed him as he left. It was typical. People enjoyed his things but didn’t take the time to acknowledge him.

When he reached town, he saw Georgia's mother walking along the boardwalk past the shops. He almost turned around and went back home but was determined to get the gift for Kate. He reluctantly got off the horse and tied him up to the post in front of the mercantile. He quickly went into it before she had a chance to reach him. It wasn't that she was mean to him. In fact, she was the one person in Georgia's family who had been nice to him. He just didn't want to be reminded of Georgia.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed behind him. It would be good to get out of here and start a new life somewhere else.

Wilma Jensen heard the bell on the door and walked over to him. She smiled at him. "I didn't expect to see you," she kindly greeted. "Georgia would be proud of you for coming to town. She wouldn't want you to stay at the farm by yourself all the time. She was full of life. Certainly, she would want you to get yours back."

He hid his annoyance. *Why does everyone want to talk about Georgia?* Perhaps his next words would give her the hint to stop talking about Georgia. "Actually, I'm here to purchase a wedding ring."

Her eyes widened in interest. "You are? Why, Chad Walker, you are a sly one. No one suspected you were courting."

"I'm not officially courting her."

"May I ask who it is or is it a secret?"

"Her name is Kate Ingram."

"Billy's sister?"

He nodded.

"I saw her last Saturday. She had men swarming all around her. I confess, some women in this town will be glad if she accepts your proposal."

He wondered what chance he had against all the available men in town. He got along great with her and loved her, but he wasn't sure how she felt about him since he hadn't asked her. He figured that a proposal was a definite way to find out.

"Well, she's a lucky woman," the older woman kindly stated. "I always thought you were a good husband to Georgia." She clapped her hands. "Do you know her ring size?"

“Yes. Actually I do.” He had to be subtle about finding out that information but it worked. He told her the size.

She led him to the jewelry case where her rings were.

“She’d probably like that one.” He pointed to the gold ring with a diamond in the center of a butterfly made out of black hills gold. She did like butterflies.

“It is a beautiful ring.” The woman took it out and handed it to him. “It’s the right size.”

“I’ll take it,” he decided.

She took it back and put it in a small black velvet box.

He glanced over at another counter and saw a new mystery novel. Kate seemed to gravitate to mysteries. “I’ll take the book too,” he told Wilma.

She nodded and walked over to the other counter to get the book for him.

“Chad Walker, how good it is to see you,” a woman kindly greeted from behind him.

He jerked, startled. He didn’t need to see Georgia’s mother to know who spoke to him. He forced himself to smile and turned to her. “Hello, Mrs. Montgomery.”

“Oh, you can still call me ‘Mother.’ Just because Georgia passed on, it doesn’t mean we aren’t still family.”

He didn’t really feel like doing that but decided it was the least he could do for the one person who made his life bearable while he was married to Georgia. “Alright, Mother.”

“It is such a lovely day. Georgia would have liked it.”

“Yes, she would have.”

“I remember when she was six and she caught a yellow butterfly. She showed it to me and called it Flutters because of the way his wings went up and down.”

Then she took him to her room and pulled those wings off to see what would happen to him. He recalled Georgia’s version of that story. She thought it was a riot to watch the creature scramble around without wings.

When Wilma returned, he said, “I change my mind about the ring. I think the rose with the diamond in it will be better.”

He couldn’t get the ring now. It would remind him of this dis-

cussion every time he looked at it.

Wilma simply nodded and exchanged the rings.

“Who is the ring for?” Mrs. Montgomery asked.

He really didn’t want to answer that question. He knew she would have a difficult time with the thought of him marrying anyone but Lacy. “It’s just a ring for a friend.” He paid for the items she placed in a bag and turned to leave.

Since Mrs. Montgomery followed him, he held the door open for her.

“I heard that you were in town last week,” the woman said as she walked through the doorway. “I met Billy Ingram and showed him Georgia’s old bedroom. He seemed quite captivated by her. I think we can all understand why. She had a certain charm about her that inspired the best in others.”

Or worst, depending on how one looked at it. He followed her outside after nodding his good-bye to Wilma.

She stopped and put her hand on his arm. “Would you like to see Georgia’s old room again?”

No, he didn’t. The room brought back too many memories of things he wanted to forget. “I’m afraid it would be rude for me to stay from the farm for too long since there are guests out there waiting for my return.” Well, they weren’t exactly waiting for him. They would have a good time whether he was there or not.

She sighed. “I understand.”

The sad expression on her face made him stop from running over to Reliable. *If the least I can do is see the room again so she can be happy, then I owe her that much.* “I suppose they will survive without me for a little longer.”

A big smile formed on her lips and her eyes lit up like the noonday sun. “You have always been a good man, Chad. If my little girl had to be with anyone, you would have been my first choice. I’m glad she found you.”

“Yes, she was one of a kind.” That was the nicest possible way he could put it. He walked with her towards her home.

“Of course, I shouldn’t exclude Lacy from that list of nice young women. She has turned into a beautiful young woman too. I would not be opposed to keeping you as a son-in-law, should you

find her to your liking.”

He inwardly cringed.

“How are you holding up without Georgia? I haven’t seen you for ten months.”

“I am much better.”

“Good. I worry about you on the farm all by yourself. Georgia wouldn’t have wanted you to hold onto the pain of losing her. She was full of warmth and life. She would want you to move on. Perhaps Lacy could help ease your heartache.”

“I hear that Tim and Sam have introduced her to Billy.” Not that he wanted to encourage that match, but he desperately wanted to steer the older woman’s thoughts from any matchmaking.

“I met him. He’s a nice man, of course. I was quite fond of him, but I like you better.”

They reached the house and she led him inside. He felt his dread increase as he entered the house. His feet numbly followed her past the many pictures of Georgia. She was beautiful to look at but what good was that beauty if he couldn’t touch it? *I should have known when I couldn’t even touch her hand or kiss her on the cheek while we were courting that she was cold.*

By the time they reached the bedroom, he felt sick to his stomach. It wasn’t Georgia who haunted his thoughts this time. It was Lacy. He recalled that night with disturbing clarity:

He and Georgia had gone to one of the many potlucks the town enjoyed, and, as usual, he sat by himself while everyone around him played games, raced horses, danced, talked and had a good time. He silently drank his punch. He didn’t dare touch the alcohol since he had been sober for two years. It hadn’t been easy to recover from the addiction to the stuff. Even as he watched the men around him drinking it, he had to fight the urge to take one sip. But he knew that one sip would lead to another and another until he was drunk. However, Lacy had been putting shots of whiskey into his drink when he wasn’t paying attention.

He thought the punch tasted funny and even asked Mrs. Conner if she put anything alcoholic in it, but she assured him that she hadn’t. “It’s a new recipe, so it tastes a little different.”

He decided that had to be it, so he kept drinking the stuff. When he was bored with nothing else to do, he absentmindedly accepted more glasses of punch from Lacy. Lacy had always been unusually interested in him, but he shrugged it off as a silly schoolgirl crush. He figured she was harmless, so he would talk to her on occasion. That night was one of those times.

“Isn’t it a nice evening?” she asked him as she sat in the seat next to him.

He nodded. “It is. Soon it will be harvest time.” He liked that time of year the best since he was so busy in the fields, he didn’t have time to go to social events where he would be ignored by almost everyone. He was aware that the people around him seemed strange. They almost looked as if they doubled. He rubbed his eyes, hoping his focus would return.

He couldn’t remember much of his conversation with Lacy. Things started getting fuzzy for him.

He thought at one point she asked him, “Wouldn’t it be funny if I had your baby?”

“What?” He blinked. His ears started ringing.

She said something else but he didn’t remember what it was. Then she left, and he kept drinking.

He didn’t know how much later it was when Lacy told him that Georgia wanted to meet him in her old bedroom. He assumed that Georgia wanted to look at her old things. She did that once in awhile. She enjoyed showing him pictures of herself when she was younger. Then she would write one of her saintly journal entries for her mother to read. He stood up and felt dizzy. He stayed still for a moment. He looked around the fairgrounds. No one seemed to notice him, and since they were all blurry anyway, he stumbled away from the table and clumsily made his way to the empty house. He had been there enough that he felt comfortable walking in. He didn’t remember walking to the bedroom but he did remember falling onto Georgia’s old bed. Her mother faithfully sprayed perfume in the room every day so it smelled like Georgia at all times.

He dozed off. The next thing he knew someone was kissing him. “Georgia?” he asked as he tried to shake off his sleepiness.

“Yes, it’s me,” she whispered as she climbed on top of him.

“But I thought you didn’t like sex.” He was shocked that she was actually taking the initiative.

“There’s something in this room that inspires me.”

He didn’t bother to question his good fortune. If she was offering it, he wasn’t going to turn her down. Who knew when he’d get another chance? He eagerly responded to her kisses. He couldn’t remember her ever being an active participant in their sexual encounters, nor could he recall her allowing him to actually touch her while she was naked. He didn’t remember taking off his shirt or rolling on top of her but the sudden glare of light in his eyes stopped him from going further.

Fortunately, he still had his pants on or he wouldn’t have remembered the fact that Sam, Tim, and Jeff had stopped him before he had sex with Lacy. He hadn’t realized Lacy was pretending to be Georgia in order to get him to have sex with her. She claimed that he was trying to take advantage of her, and they believed her despite his protests that he thought he was with Georgia. He didn’t recall much of their beating him up. He woke up the next morning in a lot of pain, lying in one of his fields, and nursing an intense hangover. When he finally walked home, Georgia was fuming. He did recall how she yelled at him because it made the ache in his head feel like a sharp knife stabbing him.

“How could you do this to me?” She demanded as he anxiously searched the cabinets for the pain medicine. “You have humiliated me!”

He winced. “I thought it was you. Lacy said you wanted to meet me in your old bedroom so I went there. When I got there, it was dark and she was whispering. I asked her if it was you and she said it was. I had no idea it was her.”

“Why would I want to have sex with you?”

That was the million dollar question and had he been sober, he would have been smart enough to ask it. He opened the last cabinet and banged it when he didn’t find the pills. He groaned and put his hands to his head.

“Are you looking for these?” She held up the opened bottle of pills he had been looking for.

He readily reached out to take them but she quickly turned the bottle upside down and let the pills fall into the sink. She laughed as he tried to dig them out of the drain. He banged his fist on the counter and glared at her. "I told you that I thought it was you!" He ignored the intense pounding in his head. "I was drunk. I wasn't thinking straight! I'm not interested in having an affair. You know it goes against everything I believe in."

"You're telling me that Lacy got you drunk and seduced you?"

"Yes. She kept handing me punch yesterday and I thought it tasted funny but it never occurred to me that there was alcohol in it. I'm telling you the truth."

She frowned. "Well, just so something like this doesn't happen again, I will no longer allow you to have sex with me."

"You think you're punishing me? We don't do it more than three times a year. Four if I'm good enough to earn it."

"We will no longer have sex so that this little misunderstanding doesn't happen again. This way you won't believe another woman when she claims to be me. I can't have people thinking that you would rather be with someone else. It makes me look bad."

"That's actually fine with me." He was tired of begging for it anyway.

"And when we are in town together, you will stay by my side the entire time so I can keep an eye on you and any other woman who leads you astray."

"Alright." He was actually relieved since he didn't wish to go through the pain the three men had inflicted on him the night before, nor did he wish to relive his hangover.

"You will play the devoted husband when we're out. I need to make it clear to people that you are sorry you tried to have sex with Lacy."

"But I didn't."

"That doesn't matter. People are only going to believe what my brothers and Jeff saw. They won't believe what a drunk man said. You'll have to do your part to make it up to me. We must be the happily married couple."

Do your part. Keep up the act. Pretend. Those were words she often told him ever since they got married. "I will," he finally

replied. He knew it was pointless to ask her to tell everyone what really happened. Though she believed him, she wouldn't support him.

Now as he mindlessly listened to Georgia's mother ramble on about all the things she missed about her firstborn child, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath to steady his thoughts so he could push the memories safely back where they belonged, in his past.

"This is my favorite journal entry she wrote," Mrs. Montgomery continued, unaware of his lack of attention. "It was written two years before her death."

He refused to look at the bed. Instead he stared at the wall.

She read the entry to him. *"Dear Diary, I greatly rejoice when something good happens to those I love. So many good things are happening. First, Chad had a productive year with his crops. He's done an excellent job, and I'm proud of him."*

Chad sighed. The truth was she criticized him for not planting more crops since she wanted more money for the furniture set she wanted.

"Second, my mother and father celebrated their thirty-seventh anniversary. They are as much in love as they were on the day they were married. Their love has been an inspiration to me and Chad."

Whether or not her parents had a good marriage, Chad didn't know, but he did know that it didn't inspire her at all. She had wanted to portray her marriage as a great success, and early on Chad tried to make it that way. He tried to please her and be her friend, but she wasn't happy with anything he did. He had also hoped if he looked for ways to satisfy her sexually, then she would be interested in sex, but she didn't even want him touching or kissing her, so that was pointless as well.

"Third, Sam and Tim have been coming out to help Chad with the farm work. This has enabled Chad to expand from solely working with crops to including animals. Sam and Tim also recommended cutting the sheep's wool and setting up an account with the butcher when it's time to take some of the cattle and make steaks out of them. Sam and Tim have been such a blessing to us."

She often snickered that Sam and Tim had poor business sense and took credit for the ideas herself. She said that she was generous to let them take the credit. The truth was, Sam, Tim and Chad came up with the ideas while she listened.

“Fourth, Lacy has become a beautiful woman. She has nicely recovered from her ordeal with Chad, who has more than made up for his drunken mistake. Lacy is attracting the attention of a couple of notable bachelors in town. I hope she will find someone who will love her the way Chad loves me. She should be as fortunate as I have been.”

Georgia saw every man who took an interest in Lacy as a threat and was greatly relieved when those courtships didn't last. Despite Sam, Tim, and Jeff's account of what happened the night Lacy got Chad drunk, some men in town believed Chad's version of events and stayed away from Lacy for that reason. Georgia used that to her advantage. “I can't have Lacy showing me up by giving my parents a grandchild. That just won't do at all,” Georgia often told Chad. Surprisingly, she didn't see her brothers having children as a threat to her since she was in direct competition with Lacy.

Chad wished that Georgia was the person she portrayed herself to be in her journal. It would have been a good marriage if her fantasy world overlapped into reality.

Her mother smiled and set down the diary. She looked over at him.

He turned his attention to her.

“I'm sorry I kept you for so long,” she said. “I fear that I get carried away when I talk about her. It's all I have left of her.”

He sighed. He couldn't blame her. Wouldn't he want to believe the best about his child if he had one? “I don't mind, Mother.”

He was relieved when she finally let him leave. After he picked up more newspapers, he went to Reliable. Several people said they were happy to see him venturing into town again and expressed their sorrow of not seeing him with Georgia.

“We know you loved her,” one woman commented. “She adored you too. At least, you have good memories.”

“It's good to see you,” a man said. “Georgia would have

wanted you to live your life again.”

“We haven’t forgotten Georgia,” two women told him. “The church choir isn’t the same without her. But I’m sure she’s singing wonderful hymns to God now.”

It was those kinds of statements that prompted him to stay out of town ten months ago. He didn’t want to be reminded of her. He was relieved to get to his horse and get out of town.

Chapter 15

Kate was so mad at Chad that she had to stop herself from screaming at him as he left the farm. She had no idea where he was going and was upset that he thought so little of her that he didn't care that five men were trying to win her heart. She really thought he was falling in love with her. How could she have been so wrong? She had never misjudged a man's heart so poorly before. *Maybe I just wanted to believe he cared for me because I care for him. What is wrong with me? Am I not desirable enough?* She considered her options. She could pretend to go back to Virginia and go back to being Billy full time, but that option didn't appeal to her at all. She could turn her attention to other men and hope she found someone else who caught her attention, but she knew no one could replace Chad. So that left her with the only thing she could realistically try. She would have to make Chad jealous. Maybe if he saw her with other men, he would discover that she was worth pursuing after all. It was worth a shot. As much as she hated to encourage their attention, she hated the thought of losing Chad because she wouldn't take the risk even more. But feigning interest in the men was pointless unless he was around, so she made up an excuse about having to rest from menstrual cramps so she could be assured they wouldn't come looking

for her and changed into her Billy disguise. When Chad showed up, if he showed up before the men left, she would change back into her normal Kate appearance.

As Billy, she definitely didn't want to encourage the women, especially Lacy. Therefore, she resumed her ploy to be disgusting. If it worked, she wouldn't need to go with her plan to dress up as the crazy redhead who was looking for Billy, but that plan was to be used as a last resort. She hoped that she could dissuade the raven haired young woman from pursuing "Billy" before she had to resort to that particular plan.

"Sam, Tim, Jeff, Todd and newbie Chris," she called out to the men. "What did you think of Kate? I told you she wasn't feeling well this morning but once she rests up, she'll be good to go for entertaining." *And hopefully Chad will be back to see it.*

"We had no idea she was dealing with a woman's issue," Todd said. "We never would have insisted on you waking her up if we had known."

Todd is a nice man. What is he doing with these losers?

"There's no harm done. At least she can get some rest now. So, why are you here anyway?" she asked Chris.

"I came to see my brother," he replied. "I see he disappeared."

"Yes, he's well known for that," Sam nodded. "Georgia had to keep him by her side at all times so he wouldn't go running off somewhere."

"I remember her," Chris stated. "She wasn't bad to look at. I could have been with her but when I learned she would make him miserable, I decided to let him have her. He got so jealous when he saw us together. It was all a game of course, but it was fun to mess with him."

Everyone stared at him, their shock showing.

Kate understood at that moment that women were a game to Chris.

"What do you mean that she would make Chad miserable?" Tim asked, clearly upset. "Georgia was one of the sweetest women around."

Chris laughed. "You've got to be kidding. She was awful. She pretended to be nice but she didn't mind stabbing anyone in

the back. Thankfully for Chad, she hated anything to do with physical contact. I suspect his impotency was actually a relief to her.”

She had to give Chris credit for being brave enough to say this in front of her relatives and friends.

“What do you mean she stabbed people in the back?” Sam demanded, his face getting red.

“Why do you think she let me court her while Chad was courting her? She enjoyed making a fool of him. She and I used to laugh about it. We were using each other to make him squirm. I have to admit, she was fun.” He smiled in amusement.

“She really wasn’t interested in sex?” She had to ask it. How could a woman not want to have sex with Chad?

“She didn’t even want anyone to hold her hand. She said that any form of physical expression repulsed her. She said she was too beautiful to let anyone defile her by touching her. I tested her on that one time, just to see if she was telling the truth or not. She practically had a heart attack when I kissed her. She was a cold woman. Anyway, that’s not why I gave her up. Our parents found out she was only going out with me and my brother because we had a lot of money and she was interested in it. Well, I don’t care how pretty or entertainingly evil a woman can be. I don’t give up money for anyone. So I let Chad win her from me. He really thought he accomplished a great feat. He even gave up everything he had for her. What a moron.”

Being Billy was proving to be a real eye opening experience for Kate. She was learning more in her disguise than she would have learned otherwise.

“These are all lies,” Sam insisted. “You can’t be trusted. After all, you are Chad’s brother.”

He shrugged. “Believe what you will.”

“Do you mind telling us why you hate your brother so badly?” she asked.

“Who said I hate him?”

“It’s obvious.” Anyone who wanted to see his brother miserable had to hate him.

He eyed her warily. “I wouldn’t call it hate. Perhaps I found

him a bit annoying.”

“How was he annoying?”

“He was always trying to outdo me. He acted like he was better than me.”

“That’s Chad alright,” Sam agreed. “He’s got this holier than thou thing going on.”

Now that Chris was off the topic of Georgia, the other men had relaxed.

“The only person who could tolerate him, besides Georgia, was our mother,” Sam told Chris. “Of course, our mother sees the best in everyone.”

“Mothers are prone to do that,” he replied.

“So, that’s why you can’t stand him,” she began. “He was the favorite. It’s the old sibling rivalry story. You and Lacy have something in common. Georgia was the favorite too.”

She saw Chris narrow his eyes at her. That meant she struck a nerve because she was right.

“I wouldn’t say Georgia was the favorite,” Tim protested. “We love Lacy as much as we loved Georgia.”

Kate suspected that was true of the brothers, but the mother definitely chose her favorite child. She was relieved that her parents hadn’t been obvious about choosing a favorite among her and her brothers. As far as she could tell, they didn’t choose a favorite.

The women walked over to them.

“Would anyone like to do some dancing?” Lacy sweetly asked.

“It would be hard to square dance without a fourth woman,” Sam replied.

“Oh, we can square dance later.” Kate waved Sam’s protest aside and took Lacy’s hand. “Someone get that fiddle going and we’ll take turns dancing with these lovely ladies.” Now it was time to put her plan into action.

Todd picked up the fiddle and Tim took the banjo and began playing some music.

Sam danced with Cheryl and Chris danced with Gabriella.

Kate took on the leading role since she was pretending to be Billy and took Lacy in her arms. Since the music was fast paced, she could get away with being rough on the woman. She knew she

was a good dancer, so she could easily act like a bad one. She turned Lacy in three circles, dipped her and spun her around. Then she let go of her so that she stumbled and fell to the ground.

“Oh no! I’m sorry,” Kate quickly apologized as she helped her up.

She coughed all over Lacy when their faces were close. Once they were dancing again, she made it a point to step on Lacy’s feet. She knew how to angle her boots to best hurt her feet and Lacy’s cringe let her know that she was succeeding.

The dance finally ended and she loudly clapped her hands, making sure her hands were close to Lacy’s ears. “Alright! Todd and Tim do a great job!” She yelled into Lacy’s ear. Then she let out an annoyingly high pitched whistle.

Lacy winced.

The two men looked pleased.

“How come you don’t play at the fairgrounds?” she loudly asked.

“Joe, Phil and Richard usually play,” Todd responded.

“Well, join them this weekend!”

They nodded and grinned.

“Who’s next?” Kate looked at Gabriella and Cheryl who slowly shook their heads. They had seen how she danced with Lacy and were appropriately turned off from Billy.

“You usually don’t dance that badly,” Sam said.

“Oh, that’s because I’m not drinking today. I perform better when I drink.” She saw Tim and Sam snicker. *Great. They think I’m talking about sex,* she sarcastically thought. She quickly added, “I dance better is what I meant.”

“Sure.” Sam clearly didn’t believe her.

She groaned.

“I’ll dance with you,” Lacy offered.

She hid her annoyance. What was going on? Why wasn’t Lacy offended by her? She was doing everything she could imagine to make Lacy flee from her. It was time to get insanely repulsive. She took a deep breath and nodded when an idea came to her. “Let’s go.”

Todd and Tim played another song.

She roughly took Lacy by the hand and danced wildly. She waved her arms and legs around like a puppet attached to a string. She even loudly sang out of tune to the words of the familiar song.

Lacy had to struggle to keep up with her.

Towards the end of the song, Kate saw Roger, the sheepdog, walking past them. Inspired by a new thought, she swung Lacy around and let go of her so that she flew across the lawn and landed on top of the dog which bolted from her so she landed face first on the ground. A couple of hens clucked by her, checked for any food they might find and walked off when they found nothing of interest in her hands.

“I am so embarrassed!” Kate put her hands to her head and pretended to be mortified. “I can’t do this to you, Lacy. I’m sorry. It can never be!” Then she ran off to the barn where she hid in the loft to settle down before she changed back to Kate.

* * * * *

Once she was in her Kate attire, she came back out of the barn and acted as if she was happy to see everyone. Chad wasn’t back yet, but she figured he couldn’t stay away too much longer. As soon as the men saw her, they surrounded her. She forced herself to smile. To her surprise, Lacy come up to her too. She briefly noticed that Gabriella and Cheryl looked upset that the men were no longer talking to them. Unfortunately, this wasn’t the first time men left other women to talk to her. She didn’t know what was so special about her. Had Chris, Tim, Sam and Jeff not been shoddy characters, she would have felt guilty for taking them from the other women. In this case, she was doing them a favor.

“Hello, Kate,” Sam smiled at her.

“Good afternoon,” she replied.

“How are you feeling?” Todd asked.

“I’m feeling better. I really needed that rest,” she lied. *What I really need is for everyone to leave.*

“We’re glad you’re doing better,” Tim said.

“A beautiful woman shouldn’t be in such discomfort,” Jeff quickly inserted.

“Lunch is ready,” Lacy told her. “I would like a chance to talk to you, if the men can spare you for awhile.”

Since Chad wasn’t around, Kate was happy to comply with Lacy’s wishes. At least as Kate, she wouldn’t attract the wrong kind of attention from the woman. “That sounds wonderful. It would be nice to talk to another woman for a change. I’m surrounded by men all the time out here.”

“What a horrible problem,” Gabriella muttered to Cheryl.

Kate sighed. She never was popular with many women. She hoped that would change once she got married and women no longer saw her as a threat. She decided to help the women set up the picnic. She couldn’t cook much but she could do this task.

During the lunch, she decided to sit between Lacy and Cheryl.

“What is Billy like?” Lacy asked her.

Kate paused as she lifted the fruit salad to her mouth. “I heard what happened during the dance. Are you sure you want to be with him?”

“He can’t help it if he’s a lousy dancer.” She bit into her sandwich.

Kate suddenly lost her appetite. What was wrong with Lacy? “Billy is pretty gross. I mean, he farts, burps, snorts, and coughs on people. He scratches his crotch and his butt. Then he picks his nose and eats his boogers when he thinks no one is looking. I can hardly tolerate him. Why do you think I try not to be around him so much?”

“He’s a nice man.”

“You can have him, Lacy,” Cheryl stated. “After the way he flung you around, he’s obviously not a considerate person.”

“Exactly.” Kate was relieved that someone was showing some common sense.

“You’re way too hard on him,” Lacy protested. “He can’t help it if he turns women off. What he needs is to have one woman who overlooks his flaws.”

Kate hid her aggravation. “He was telling me that he can’t bear to face you after you landed on the ground during the dance. He was too humiliated to stick around. I don’t think he’ll dare come out to see you again.”

“He will once I make it clear that I won’t abandon him.”

Cheryl and Gabriella shook their heads. “Good luck with him then,” Cheryl remarked. “He’s not worth the effort.”

“Chad’s not so bad,” Gabriella commented. “I didn’t realize he was so attractive.”

“He’s gotten more muscular over the past year,” her friend nodded. “I can certainly see why Georgia was interested in him.”

“I wonder where he’s at.”

Kate tensed. She didn’t like the idea of the women showing an interest in him.

“Who knows?” Lacy shrugged. “He has a tendency to disappear unless someone’s closely watching him. Why do you think Georgia kept him on a short leash?”

“He was devoted to her,” Cheryl added. “It’s hard to find a man who cares so much about his wife that he can’t bear to be away from her.”

“A year has gone by. He’s probably healed enough to pursue a relationship with another woman now,” Gabriella reflected.

This wasn’t in Kate’s plans. None of it was. Just as she was about to refer them to Todd, Chad rode Reliable onto the property. She gritted her teeth when she saw the two women look at him appreciatively. She glanced at Lacy and saw that even she had a noted interest in him. *This is all his fault! He should have sent everyone home!* If he had, then Cheryl and Gabriella wouldn’t have even noticed him.

She stood up, ready to put on her Billy disguise and talk everyone into going back home when Chris stood up and took her hand. She gasped, startled. He was only doing this because Chad was back. Otherwise, he had no interest in her.

“I think it’s time we enjoyed that square dance,” Chris told the group.

They readily agreed and Todd got up to grab his fiddle while the other women quickly put the picnic items away.

Kate didn’t know what to do. She didn’t like the way Cheryl and Gabriella were whispering to each other as they watched Chad take his horse into the barn.

“What a great idea!” Kate cheered, hoping to get their attention.

They looked at her.

Good. It worked. “Fortunately, we have enough men and women to do this dance,” she said.

“And fortunately for Lacy, Billy’s out of sight,” Jeff chuckled.

Everyone but Lacy laughed.

“I’ll start out as Kate’s partner,” Sam said.

“No. I will,” Chris argued.

“Excuse me? I haven’t heard her say who she wants to start with,” Jeff spoke up, pushing past the two men to get to her.

“Wait a minute. You can’t hog her all for yourself,” Tim stated, grabbing Jeff’s arm and pulling him back.

The three women frowned at her.

Chad thinks that I’m likeable to everyone, but he has no idea how wrong he is. Kate was comforted in the fact that Chad had finally come out of the barn so she was in his view. He could watch all the men adore her. She turned her attention back to them and sweetly smiled, as if she was enjoying the fact that they were fighting over her. “There must be some way we can work this simple problem out,” she remarked. “Whatever could it be?” She knew that men liked to be the problem solvers so she played into that desire.

“We’re going to do a dance that requires frequent partner change,” Todd called out. “So it doesn’t matter who starts dancing with who.”

“I’m holding her hand, so I get her first,” Chris smiled at the men.

The men reluctantly dispersed into their respective spots in the square.

Thankfully, her trips to town as Billy provided her with the knowledge of square dancing. She just had to assume the female role. She hadn’t danced much as Billy, but she still couldn’t understand why people didn’t realize she intentionally danced with Lacy poorly so that Lacy would back off. Shrugging, she followed Chris’ lead as the dance began.

She sourly noted that Chad didn’t even look in their direction. He simply walked into the house and shut the screen door behind him. He had been carrying something but she couldn’t tell what it

was from the distance she was at. *What is wrong with him? Isn't he interested in me at all? This should be driving him insane!*

Not only did Chad stay inside the house for the next hour but when he finally emerged to feed the animals, he didn't even glance in her direction. She even loudly laughed at one of Chris' lame jokes so he had to know that she was surrounded by the five men. Chad didn't so much as give one indication that he noticed her. What was worse was that Gabriella and Cheryl, who had been talking to Lacy, stopped to stare at him. *I can't believe this! He's supposed to be jealous, not me!*

"I created a musical piece for you," Todd told her. "Would you like to hear it?"

"Sure," she half-heartedly agreed.

He picked up his fiddle and played a tune for her.

"I've been reading up on the Bible," Tim said over the music. "Did you know that there are ten commandments?"

"They were given by Noah," Sam added.

"No, you dimwit. They were given by Moses."

"Oh, right. Noah was the one with the animals and the flood."

"Wasn't it twelve commandments?" Jeff asked.

"It's ten," she said. They obviously didn't know the Bible, but here they were, going out of their way to lie about it.

"You know," Chris began, "I would like to have children some day. Certainly, you will be looking for a man who can provide that for you."

Unlike Sam, Tim, Jeff and Todd's harmless ways to get her attention, she suspected more dubious motives from Chris. "I don't understand what you're getting at."

"Oh, that reminds me! I'll be right back," Jeff said. He jumped up and ran to his horse which was tied to the side of the barn.

She wondered where he was going but quickly dismissed the question when she saw Chad go to the shed for some paint. He came out with a ladder and a can of paint and a paintbrush, and to her horror, Cheryl and Gabriella ran over to him. It took all of her energy to sit still. Didn't it bother him at all that she was surrounded by men?

Chris glanced at him and back at her. "I wouldn't concern myself too much with him, my dear. He's not able to give any woman a child."

She didn't listen to him. Instead, she saw Chad stop in front of the cattle barn while the two women talked to him. Lacy had decided to join her brothers.

When Jeff returned with a book on how babies were made, which was written for a child, her jaw dropped. Lacy looked over at her and snickered. "Didn't your mother ever give you the talk?" she asked.

Kate couldn't believe Jeff had taken her literally. She had no idea she was that good of an actress.

"I got it from the library," Jeff explained. "You can give it back to me or give it to Billy to give to me when you're done. I made sure it was at your reading level."

"Come on," Chris laughed. "Surely, you know the facts of life at your age."

She tried not to keep looking over at Chad and the two women but it was difficult, so she was only half aware of the conversation going on around her. *Why isn't Chad painting the barn? Does he enjoy their attention?* He had no trouble getting away from the men. Did he find the women to his liking?

When she turned back to the people around her, she suddenly realized that Chris was giving her a detailed explanation on sex. She didn't care to hear this. She shook her head. "I have to go!" She shoved Jeff's book back at him and quickly made her way to the loft. She needed a moment to think of the unexpected turn of events.

She sat in the loft and tried to decide what to do. She had to get rid of those women. They had no right to flirt with Chad. He belonged to her! He was going to marry her. No man had ever been able to resist her before, so why was he turned off by her? What had she done wrong? What did he find so repulsive about her? She thought she was a decent enough woman. She certainly wasn't creepy like Lacy, and if Georgia was anything like Lacy, then she was much better than his dead wife. She was attractive, even if she was wearing prairie clothes instead of her usual expensive dresses.

She had to get rid of Cheryl and Gabriella. They didn't need to turn on their charm and win him over. She quickly opened her trunk and changed into her Billy disguise. Her spontaneous plan required some climbing and she needed to be in pants to do this or else she'd slip on her skirt. She climbed down the ladder and dragged it along the ground. She checked to make sure everyone was occupied so that no one would see her run to the other barn where Chad had set up his things to paint. She grumbled to herself when she noticed that he was still talking to the two women. *Why is he encouraging them?*

She had to struggle to get the ladder against the side of the barn. There was a slight decline from the side of the barn, so it took a moment for her to balance the ladder until it was sturdy enough to hold her. Before she climbed it, she walked around the side of the barn, still making sure no one saw her. The men and Lacy were talking and laughing while the two women still talked to Chad.

She found two cats and quickly picked them up. Fortunately, her long sleeved shirt was thick enough for her to dismiss their claws which dug into the sleeves. She gingerly climbed the ladder, trying to maintain her balance as she struggled to keep the cats in her arms. They didn't like being dragged up to the barn roof, but she ignored their meowing and clawing at her arms. *Sometimes love can hurt.* After she made it to the roof, she held onto the cats while she spied where the women were. They stood in front of Chad and laughed at something he said. She didn't know who upset her more. The women who had initiated the flirting or Chad who seemed to enjoy their attention. He didn't have to encourage them!

She finally decided that she was more angry at him and pushed the cats down the side of the roof so they would have to land on him. She heard the cats screech and the sound of the paint can fall to the ground. The women shrieked and ran off. Kate felt satisfied and cautiously made her way down the side of the roof. The men and Lacy laughed hysterically. Kate wished she could have seen exactly what happened. As she spotted a cat covered in red paint race across the field, she knew one of them had landed in the paint can. The other cat had climbed a nearby tree.

She glanced down at her feet and spotted the ladder. She slowly made her way to it. Just as her foot got to the top rung, the ladder moved. She gasped and regained her footing on the roof. She looked back down and saw that the ladder was a foot away from her. She moved along the roof until she was at the ladder again and just as her foot touched the ladder, it moved again. It suddenly occurred to her that someone was moving it. She wondered who it was. Perhaps it was Lacy? She didn't know if she should move to the ladder again or not so she waited.

A couple of minutes passed by uneventfully. She sighed, bored. How was she going to get down unless she went down the ladder? She hoped that whoever had moved the ladder would get bored and leave. As she drummed her fingers absentmindedly on the roof, a pigeon flew to her and landed in front of her. She tried to shoo it away but it jumped on her head and sat down. She shook her head. The bird flew off of her head and rested on her foot. What was this stupid bird doing? She angrily jerked her leg back and forth until it flew away. She breathed a sigh of relief.

She decided enough time had elapsed since her last attempt to climb down the ladder so she moved over to it and set her foot on the rung. To her surprise, it moved again. This time someone moved it in the other direction. "Very funny!" she yelled.

No one answered her. Really, if Lacy wanted to get her attention when she in her Billy disguise, she could afford to do a better job.

She climbed to the top of the roof and saw the group of people were gone. If it wasn't Lacy who was moving the ladder, that meant it could only be one person. Chad must have figured out what she did and decided to teach her a lesson. She saw that the ladder he planned to use was still leaning against the other side of the barn.

As she was ready to position herself to the other side of the roof, Chad said, "If you're going to paint the roof, don't you need some paint?"

Startled, she lost her footing.

He quickly reached out and grabbed her wrist so he could pull her up.

“I was wondering how long it would take you to figure out that I kept moving your ladder,” he said.

Was he amused? She grunted and sat up. “Fine. So you discovered I was the one who threw the cats down at you.”

“Why would you do that? If you wanted the people to leave, why didn’t you just tell them to go?”

She decided not to answer that because it would require her confessing her feelings for him, and since he obviously did not return those feelings, she didn’t need to suffer further humiliation. “The cats were funnier.”

“You know, if you were Kate, I’d kiss you.” He shrugged. “However, since you’re Billy, I’ll have to play rough.”

What did that mean? Before she had time to think about his comment, he grabbed her ankles and flipped her over so that she was upside down. She put one hand over her hat so that her hat and wig would stay in place. He picked her up and carried her to the edge of the roof. “What are you going to do?” she demanded as she anxiously tried to reach the side of the roof with her free hand so she could hang onto something. She feared that he was going to drop her so she would fall to the ground.

“Why did you throw cats at me?” he asked.

Did he still sound amused? It was hard to tell with all the blood rushing to her head.

He let go of one of her ankles.

She screamed.

“You sounded just like a woman when you screamed like that,” he noted. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

She cleared her throat. “Of course not,” she said, using her masculine voice.

“Alright.”

He’s not actually going to drop me, is he? Her heart pounded wildly in her chest. “Let’s be rational about this. Can I be of any use to you with broken bones? You need a farmhand who can work.”

He paused. “You’re right.” He lifted her by the waist and flipped her so that she was standing next to him.

She grabbed his arm to steady her footing. “You’re insane,”

she finally told him. Then she quickly slid down the ladder before he could toss her in the air again.

Before she could grab the ladder from him, he was already halfway down it.

She marveled that he could be so fast.

When he was on the ground, he took the ladder down and handed it to her.

She buckled under its weight.

“I have decided that you’re right, Billy. You are a man, not a boy, and I need to give you manly duties. So for now on, I won’t be babying you. You need to gain some upper body strength so if you ever decide to be a farmhand for someone else, you can handle the job.” He slapped her on the arm with so much force that she nearly fell over. He chuckled. “I’ll make a man out of you yet.”

She rubbed her arm. *That hurt.*

“Where’s your sister?” he asked.

She quickly thought of a place where Kate would be. “She got tired of the activities so she went to rest in the loft.”

“And you took her ladder so she had to stay up there?”

She shrugged. “I was going to bring it right back.”

“Do you mind if I go see her? I got her something while I was in town today.”

“You did?” She was pleased that he thought to get her something. “What is it?”

“I’d rather tell her.”

She realized that he was walking to the loft. She couldn’t let him find out that she wasn’t really there. “Oh, hmm...You know, I bet she went to the river to take another bath. That crazy woman has to be as clean as can be.”

He looked disappointed. “Well, I suppose I can wait to give it to her. When do you think she’ll be back?”

“Soon. I’m sure it won’t be long. Why don’t you go into the house and wait for her?”

He nodded. “I’ll do that. I should make some dinner. What would you and Kate like to eat tonight?”

Right. They were supposed to be two different people. It was getting harder and harder to come up with excuses as to why Kate

and Billy couldn't be in the same place at the same time. "Actually, I'm full from the picnic. I couldn't eat another bite."

"That's funny. I saw Kate eating with the group but I didn't see you anywhere."

So he did notice her. She felt better that he took the time to look for her. She waved her hand. "I ate and left. Lacy was coming onto me. I had to bolt."

"She was? Did you manage to discourage her this time?"

"No," she sourly reported. "I flung her all over the place and even threw her at Roger but she still wants to be with me. I don't know what I can do to get rid of her."

"I know what you can do."

"What's that?"

"Be Kate." He turned to go back to the house. "I'll be waiting for Kate when she decides to make an appearance."

Chapter 16

Chad chuckled as he watched “Billy” go to the barn with the ladder. He shook his head. No wonder Billy had such a hard time carrying things, holding down sheep and lassoing cattle. Billy was really a woman. It wasn’t until Chad read through the papers that everything clicked. The papers talked about Senator Tanner’s daughter who had disappeared. The date of her disappearance coincided with Billy’s arrival to town. Chad figured there was something unusual about his farmhand from the moment he saw him, but he decided to hire him. If Chad had known his farmhand was a woman dressed up as a man in order to hide out in North Dakota, he wouldn’t have been so hard on her. However, since she insisted on keeping up the charade of being Billy and Kate, he figured the least he could do was play along for the time being. If she wanted to play the role of Billy, he would help her do that.

Of course, he had more fun with her when she was Kate, though he knew she wasn’t Kate Ingram. She was Kate Tanner. The description of her in the paper made it impossible to mistake her true identity. He only hoped the other people in town hadn’t put the pieces together. He reasoned that the men were too infatuated with her to care about her past. He did worry about Lacy. If Lacy put the pieces together, she wouldn’t hesitate to notify the Virginia po-

lice on her whereabouts. As long as Lacy thought Billy was real, Kate was safe since Lacy wouldn't dare harm Billy's sister.

He couldn't help but sympathize with her plight. He recalled her sorrow over Senator Tanner and his wife. Little had he known at the time that she was crying over her parents. Worse yet, she saw the murders. That was the only logical explanation as to why she would disguise herself as a man and run away. Everything made sense. All the pieces fit together very well.

She hadn't intended to reveal her true identity but he caught her sleeping and what else could she do but make up a story about a brother dropping her off so that she could explain why she was there when she was supposed to be a man. He guessed that she didn't tell him the truth because she was afraid if she did, then the men, who were looking for her, would go after him as well. He couldn't blame her for lying. He would probably do the same thing if he was in her situation.

Oh Kate. You have no idea how much I love you. When he got back from town, he had been furious to see her surrounded by the men. He pretended not to notice since showing signs of being upset would only prompt the men, especially his brother, to pursue her further. He read through the papers and went to the trunk in the loft to verify his suspicions. Then it occurred to him that she was trying to make him jealous by intentionally flirting with the men. After his earlier conversation with "Billy" regarding "Billy's" insistence that he be upset to see the men vying for Kate's affections, it dawned on him that she wanted him to care about her, which he already did but had been too timid to outwardly express in case he scared her off.

When he went to get the paint, he was shocked that Cheryl and Gabriella came up to him to ask him about how he was recovering from Georgia's death before asking him about the farm. He hadn't thought anything of the encounter until Kate disappeared. He realized that Billy wasn't in sight either. As soon as one cat landed on him and the other one landed in the paint can, it dawned on him that Kate had thrown them at him because she didn't like him talking to other women who were being more friendly than they should have been. Kate's plan had worked. The women quickly

left and talked the others into leaving too. So Chad took the moment to find out which character Kate was playing and saw that she had chosen the Billy costume. He decided that the opportunity was too good to pass up and acted like she really was Billy. Georgia had never been jealous of him. Her main concern was looking good to others. But Kate actually cared about him, and he was very pleased with that knowledge.

By the time Kate made her appearance, he had finished making the steak, mashed potatoes and corn.

She didn't hide her surprise. "You made this for me?" she asked.

He hid his smile. She was obviously flattered he thought so well of her to do such a thing. "It's more fun to cook for a woman than for a man," he simply explained. "Billy told me that I didn't have to worry about you and the other men. He assured me that you have absolutely no interest in them and wished to simply go along with them just so they would leave sooner."

She looked startled. "Billy said that?"

He nodded. "He sure did. I was ready to force everyone off the property but once Billy cooled me down and explained the situation, I decided to play along too and acted like I was having a good time talking to Gabriella and Cheryl."

"Billy Ingram?"

He forced aside his laughter by focusing on the food he put on the plates. "Yes. Your brother, Billy." He set the plates on the table. "Oh, before I forget, I got you a book and some newspapers." He handed them to her. He would wait later for the ring.

Her shock was replaced with a big smile. She blushed as she took them. "You got these for me?"

He grinned. "I wanted to get you something special while I was in town getting the papers. I thought you might like to read the latest on Senator Tanner." He sighed at the momentary flicker of sorrow that passed over her features.

"Thank you, Chad. That was very thoughtful of you."

He walked over to her and pulled out her chair. "Will you have a seat?"

She silently sat down and watched as he placed a glass of water

and apple juice in front of her. "Is that what you were doing today? Buying me a book and getting newspapers for me?"

"Yes. I was happy to do it for you."

"I must admit that I'm touched you would venture into town again just for me."

He had a feeling that the men who usually attempted to court her weren't as interested in her as they were in how she looked. He decided to keep his observation to himself. Instead, he replied, "You're worth it."

She took a bite of her steak. "You do a great job of cooking. Don't tell any of the women I said this, but your food actually tastes better than half the women's stuff at the potluck."

He grinned. "I don't think the women would like to hear that."

"That's why we won't tell anyone I said it."

"I hope you find the book to your liking. I thought since you liked Sherlock Holmes that you would find this book interesting as well."

"I like to read just about anything. That's why I bought the library. Sometimes it saddens me when I talk to someone who doesn't like to read. There are so many different genres out there that everyone should be able to find something interesting to read."

He figured that when she was Kate, she was her real self. Now that he knew she was also Billy, he picked up the similarities between her two roles easier. They used the same hand gestures while they talked. It was no wonder he often thought that she and Billy seemed to be the same person. They were.

"Well, you missed the excitement earlier. Your brother thought it would be funny to throw cats down at me from the barn roof in order to get rid of the people. I don't know why he just didn't tell everyone to go home if he was anxious to get rid of them."

"Billy has a weird sense of humor."

"Apparently. One of the cats scratched me up pretty good."

"Really?" She frowned. "Did it hurt?"

"I'll survive. I just have to remember to watch what's going on around me when Billy's nearby."

"Billy wasn't trying to hurt you."

“I know. He just wanted to get rid of the people.” He hid his smile.

After they finished eating, she insisted on cleaning the dishes.

“I want to do something to help out,” she insisted when he protested. “You’ve gone out of your way to be nice to me. I appreciate it, and I would like to do something nice for you.”

“Then I’ll dry.”

She nodded, seeming content with his small role in helping her.

It felt natural to be with her, doing everyday work. *I could get used to this.* He enjoyed doing simple household tasks with her. She was completely different from Georgia. He knew that women like Kate existed but didn’t dream that she’d ever show up in his life, especially right in his barn one day. *Thank you, Lord, for her.*

“Isn’t it strange that it almost seems like we do this all the time?” she asked him after she handed him another plate.

He marveled at her ability to detect his thoughts. He figured he should be intimidated by it but found it comforting instead. He didn’t need to say everything that was on his mind. She understood him very well. He wondered how well she could read him. *Kiss me, Kate. Show me you care for me the same way I care for you.*

She took the skillet from the stove and began washing it.

He forced aside his disappointment. She stood close by him but seemed to focus on washing the skillet. He held the hand towel and got ready to dry the skillet when she was done.

She turned to him. He expected her to give him the skillet but she had left it in the sink. She looked up at him through her thick eyelashes. His breath caught in his throat and his heart raced nervously in his chest. She bridged the gap between them so that she could wrap her arms around his waist. He dropped the towel and slowly brought his hands up to her arms so he could pull her closer to him. He was very much aware of how her body felt as it pressed against his. Her hair smelled like lilac soap. His hands gently shook as he took her into his arms. *It’s been so long since I’ve kissed a woman.*

She closed her eyes and leaned towards him. His breathing was shallow. Despite his feelings of awkwardness since he hadn’t been close to a woman in so long, he closed his eyes and kissed

her. Her lips were soft and warm. She responded to him. Georgia had never been so receptive to him. He became aware of his desire for her as their kiss deepened. *This feels right. It's as if she was made for me.* Her lips slightly parted. He accepted her invitation and felt as if he were on fire when his tongue met hers. *Oh Kate, I could kiss you forever and be content.* If this was a foretaste of what he could expect from her, lovemaking was going to be the most amazing experience he would ever have.

He reluctantly ended the kiss. He held her close and kissed her on the neck. His body was primed for more but he had to stop. They had to be married before he could proceed further. Would she say yes if he asked her at that moment? He wasn't sure if the timing was right or not. He wished to wait until she knew he had figured out her secret.

"You are the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on," he whispered in her ear. He gently let go of her. "Would you like to read the papers?"

"Maybe later when I'm in the loft. I want to enjoy my time with you."

"If you need a shoulder to cry on, I'm here."

"I know. Thank you, Chad."

"What do you want to do?"

"I do like walking along the field with you. The evenings are pretty out here." She turned to look out the window.

"Don't they have evenings like this in Virginia?"

"It's different here." She glanced at the sink as if noticing the dishes in them for the first time. "Oh. I need to finish these first." As she continued to wash the dishes, she asked, "Are you attached to this place?"

"No. I can live anywhere and be content." He would gladly follow her to the moon if she asked him to.

She seemed happy with his answer.

Yes, Kate. I will go to Virginia with you. He knew it was just a matter of time before she asked the question. *Be patient. Don't rush it. Give her time to warm up to the idea.*

* * * * *

The next morning, Billy made his appearance again, so Chad decided he might as well have some fun with it. He couldn't exactly mess with her as Kate, but it was too tempting to mess with her as Billy. Billy showed up to eat his meal.

As they ate their meal, he examined her closely in her Billy disguise. She did do a good job of hiding her identity, but it was easy to see she was really a woman, now that he knew the truth.

"I saw you taking a walk during sunset yesterday," he lied.

"What?" She looked startled.

"You were walking to the river to take another bath. I notice you take a lot of those."

"Are you sure you saw me?"

He hid his amusement since he knew that she couldn't have been heading out there since she had been with him. "The man was your height and slender. He wore your clothes." He paused. "Did your brother come back yesterday?"

"Uh...no."

"Well, if it wasn't you that I saw, who could it have been?"

She shrugged and quickly finished her meal.

He waited until she went to the sink to wash her plate and glass before grinning. Now she would be wondering who else was on the property. He finished his meal and joined her at the sink. It was hard to be near her in the kitchen and not recall their kiss.

"What do you have for me to do today, boss?" she asked. She finished drying her dishes and turned to him.

"We're going to give Roger a bath."

"Roger's a big and heavy dog."

He noted the uncertainty in her voice. "That's why he's perfect for practicing on. If you can hold him, you won't have any trouble with sheep. You never know if another farmer is going to need you to hold his sheep so he can cut its wool off."

"Alright," she slowly agreed. "Do you want me to get the supplies ready?"

He couldn't help but be impressed with her willingness to do the work. She was completely different from Georgia. He nodded. "Yes. They are in the shed. We'll need a bucket, a sponge, and soap. You will need to fill the bucket with water. Oh, and we'll

need that metal tub in the barn. We'll wash Roger right in front of the house."

"You expect me to bring the tub all the way out here?"

"It'll be good exercise for you. You need to build up your upper body strength and this will help that happen."

She looked uneasy.

"Is something wrong?"

She finally sighed. "No. I'll get right on it, boss."

He watched her as she left the house. He shook his head. He couldn't believe she was that determined to remain in her Billy disguise. He glanced out the window and saw her enter the shed. She came back out with the supplies and set them in front of the house. Then she walked to the barn. When he was done, he went out to help her with the tub. He knew there was no way she would be able to move it by herself. By the time he reached the barn, he heard her grunting as she struggled to drag the tub across the floor.

"Billy," he whispered as he ran over to her. He jumped in front of her.

She jerked back in surprise.

"We don't want to wake Kate," he softly said. He pointed to the loft. "She's sleeping, right?"

She blinked. "Right. I forgot."

He hid his smile. "I came here to help you move this tub."

"Really?"

"Of course. I know you can't move this all by yourself. I thought you were going to wait for me to show up before trying to move it." He lifted one end and waited for her to lift the other end.

She looked relieved.

Once they put the tub on the lawn in front of his house, he helped her fill the tub with water and added the soap.

"Now comes the hard part," he said. He let out a loud whistle and called out, "Roger!"

The dog dutifully came over to him.

He smiled and patted the dog. "Good boy!" He did like the dog which had proved to be faithful in caring for the sheep.

She grinned.

"Did you ever have a dog?"

“When I was a kid. It was a poodle. My mother adored poodles.” She took a deep breath. “So, what do you want me to do?”

“Lift him up and put him in the tub.”

If she had been dressed up as Kate, he would have lifted the dog himself, but since she was Billy, he would let her lift the heavy and big animal. He watched as she wrapped her arms around the dog and tried to drag him to the tub. Roger assumed that she was playing and started licking her face. She cringed.

“You can do it, Billy,” he encouraged her.

She attempted to pick him up but he jumped up, put his paws on her shoulders and knocked her down. She covered her face with her hands as he tried to lick her face again.

He chuckled as he pulled the dog off of her. He knew she would want to bathe in the river later on that day. He had to give her credit for trying. “I’ll tell you what,” he began as she stood up and wiped her wet face with the sleeves of her shirt. “I’ll put him in the tub and you hold him down.”

“Alright,” she agreed.

He picked the dog up and threw him into the tub. Of course, Roger hated to be bathed and immediately tried to jump out. He was impressed with how quickly she responded. She pushed him back into the tub. He noticed that she had suds and water all over her. He took the sponge and began washing the dog which struggled against her hold on him while trying to play with her at the same time. She was practically laying on him to get him to stay put.

“You’re doing fine, Billy,” he said.

She grunted as the dog continued to struggle with her.

“Good morning, Billy,” Sam laughed. “Having a little trouble there?”

She didn’t bother to look up at him.

“Do you need help?” Jeff offered.

“He’s doing fine,” Chad quickly inserted. “I’m teaching him how to handle sheep.”

“No offense, Chad, but that is a dog.”

He rolled his eyes. “If Billy can handle this dog, he can handle sheep.”

“We’re not cutting more wool, are we?” Sam wondered.

“No. It’s too soon for them to have their wool cut off again. I’m just toughening him up so he will be able to help out in the future.” He was almost done washing the dog that bounced around haphazardly in the tub.

“You’re actually giving Roger a bath?” Tim laughed. “Billy, you look so funny.”

She groaned. “Are you done yet?” she asked Chad.

“Almost,” he assured her. “Why don’t you three paint the rest of the barn?”

“Billy, we need to ask you a question about your sister,” Sam said, clearly ignoring Chad.

Chad hid his irritation.

“Can you ask it later?” she replied in annoyance. “I’m having some problems here.”

“Oh, of course. We’ll see you later,” Sam said as the three left.

Chad shook his head. How did she do it? Everyone liked her. *What’s not to like? She’s got a great personality, whether she’s playing herself or someone else.*

Just as he was about to announce that he was done, Roger turned around and knocked her over so she flipped backwards and fell into the tub. Realizing he had his chance, he bolted out of the tub and ran off to the field where the sheep congregated.

Chad didn’t hide his laughter as she gasped for air while she clumsily struggled to get out of the tub. He reached into the tub and helped her out. She was drenched and looked mortified. “You did better than I thought you would.” He gave her a hearty pat on the back. He caught her when she nearly fell over. “Steady yourself, man. The others are watching.”

She glanced back at Sam, Tim and Jeff who were laughing hysterically. She tried to straighten her wet clothes.

“You can’t work like that,” he told her. “You’ll have to take a bath.”

She gasped and shook her head. “No! I’m fine. It’s sunny out. The clothes will dry.”

“Oh come on, Billy. Haven’t we been through this before? No

one here is interested in seeing you naked.” That was no longer true but he couldn’t let her know that. “But if you are going to insist on being modest, you can take a bath in the house. I’ll get your clothes for you.”

“No! I’ll get them myself.”

“That’s right. I don’t want to catch Kate in an uncompromising situation again. That one time was embarrassing enough. While you get your clean clothes, I’ll get the tub in the bathroom filled up for you.”

She nodded and went to the barn. On her way there, the three men stopped her and started talking to her.

He tensed but reminded himself that they didn’t know she was really a woman. He dumped the water out of the tub and let the tub sit in the sun to dry. Just as he was able to enter the house, he saw his brother ride up to him on his horse. If he could think of some way to get rid of his brother, he would gladly do so. An idea came to him. Why not ignore the irritating man? He slammed and locked his door so that his brother couldn’t come into the house. He didn’t answer the door when Chris knocked on it. He simply filled up the tub and placed a bar of soap and some towels on the counter next to the bathtub. Then he went out the back door and found Kate walking to the house with some clothes in her hands.

He motioned to her so she walked to the back of the house.

“You can come in through here,” he told her. “The front door is locked so no one will come in but you can lock the bathroom door too if you want.”

She nodded and went into the house.

He took a roundabout way to the barn and went to the barn to feed the horses. When he got there, he was hid his irritation. Sam, Tim and Jeff were drinking whiskey and talking outside the building. He decided to ignore them too and collected some hay on his pitchfork. It looked like it would be a normal day.

* * * * *

As much as Chad tried to avoid his brother, Chris finally tracked him down on his way to ride Reliable out to the field to

check on the cattle. He was going to ask Kate, still dressed as Billy, to go with him, but he knew he'd have to deal with Chris sooner or later. Kate and the other three farmhands were painting the barn. At least he knew the men wouldn't try anything with her while she was in her Billy disguise.

Chad had just saddled Reliable and got on him when Chris rode his horse into the barn.

"Your reputation for disappearing is well deserved," Chris told him.

"I'm not signing those papers," he replied. "You'll just have to make do with half the estate." He got on Reliable and urged him out of the barn.

As he expected, Chris followed him. "I won't leave until you sign them."

"You won't leave until you've managed to steal Kate from me."

His brother's horse caught up to his. "I could have her if I wanted her."

Chad ignored him.

Chris continued, "I saw the way you looked at the other men while they fawned all over her during the last two days. You care very much for her."

That was before he figured out her secret. Billy was sure that Kate would pick Chad, so he knew what she already thought of him and the other men. Chad shrugged. "Just make sure you get Billy's approval first. He's very protective of his sister."

"Do you think I'm joking around? I really will take her from you."

"I don't care what threats you make. I will not sign those papers. As far as I'm concerned, it's the best way to honor our mother, especially after you and Father went to great lengths to make sure she couldn't contact me." It bothered him that he never got a chance to speak to his mother after he left California. He would have liked to have let her know that he didn't hold any hard feelings for her, but she would never know that.

Chris shot him a hard look but didn't reply as he left the barn.

Chad took his time in the field and saw that the cattle were doing fine, so he returned Reliable to his stall. It was time to make

lunch, so he went to the house. He noticed that Kate was still dressed up as Billy and Sam was helping her finish one side of the barn. Tim and Jeff were working on the other side. Chris had found a ladder and was standing on it while he talked to Kate, though he refused to do any work. *He's probably trying to get a feel for what type of man Kate wants to be with.*

Chad made the usual sandwiches and filled up the glasses with milk. He only made enough for Sam, Tim, Jeff and Kate. His brother could go back to town if he wanted to eat. Chad ate his lunch before they came in to eat theirs. He went out to milk a cow as he did every day at this time and noticed that Chris followed Kate into the house. Sam, Tim and Jeff joined them but weren't glued to her like Chris was.

When he returned to the house to fill up the glasses, he saw that Chris dominated the conversation.

"I'm rich, you know," he bragged. "I have a lot more money than Chad. Kate could do very well with me."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm sure you think she'd be impressed with money but money can't replace a good personality."

"Are you saying that I'm boring?"

"No. I'm saying that when I hear you talk about yourself, I get as bored as a piece of plywood."

The other three farmhands chuckled at her play on words.

"I've won four trophies in horse racing. Kate might be interested to see how well I handle a horse since she likes horses so much," Chris told her.

"You think that's impressive? Well, it's not," she replied while she rolled her eyes.

"I'm an excellent rider."

"I bet I'm better."

Sam's ears perked up. "You should race each other."

She looked at him in interest. "Want to race?"

Chad watched the scene carefully. His brother had always prided himself on his horse riding. Kate was good on a horse, but was she good enough to beat him?

"Alright," Chris agreed. "When do you want to do it?"

She looked at Chad. "Can I borrow Reliable?"

“Racing is unnecessary,” Chad replied.

“Oh come on, Chad,” Tim argued. “Let them have some friendly competition.”

“We should make it interesting,” Chris slyly stated. “If I win, I get to spend Saturday with Kate.”

“Chris!” Chad snapped before he had time to stop himself. He was hoping to marry Kate on that day.

The only indication his brother showed of hearing him was to raise his eyebrows. He kept his focus on Billy.

Kate glanced at him for a moment but quickly looked back at Chris. “Alright. If I win, you have to spend the day with Lacy.”

“Billy!” Sam and Tim snapped.

“What? Lacy’s been dying for a man to spend time with and I can’t think of anyone she deserves more than Chris. They were made for each other.”

Chad didn’t like this. What if Kate lost?

Chris smiled. “So either way, I get to have a pretty woman on my arm. That hardly sounds like I’m going to lose.”

“Then it’s a bet. You are my witnesses,” she nodded.

“You can’t bet on women who aren’t here to agree to this,” Chad inserted.

“Oh, I’m going to win,” she assured him. “There’s no way this annoying man over here can beat me on a horse. I’ve seen him ride and he’s not that great.”

“What?” Chris looked offended. “I’m the best there is in San Francisco.”

“Well, I’m the best there is in the country,” she told him.

“Billy, we want to see you with Lacy,” Sam said.

She sighed. “I keep telling you all that she and I aren’t meant to be. I refuse to be tied down to a woman. Besides, Lacy doesn’t have to marry him. She just has to spend the day with him. However, if it does work out and they marry and have a son, they can name him Billy.”

“I’m not interested in Lacy. I’m interested in Kate,” Chris remarked.

She laughed as if that was the funniest thing she ever heard.

“What?” Chris was clearly upset.

She shook her head. "She deals with men like you all the time. She can see right through you. Your motives are selfish. You're not interested in her. You're interested in what she can do for you."

"Which isn't a whole lot," Jeff added.

Now Chad was upset because Jeff just put her down.

"Are you still moping about yesterday?" she asked him.

"I'm not moping."

She clearly didn't believe him. "It's better that you found out sooner than later. At least now, you can avoid the misery."

"That's true," Sam reluctantly admitted. "We're much better off."

Tim nodded.

Chad grabbed the bottles full of milk and took them to the basement. He wondered what she did to lose their interest. When he came back into the kitchen, they had just finished their meals.

"So, it's a deal," she told Chris. "I'll meet you at the fairgrounds on Saturday at noon. Get your dancing shoes ready for Lacy because you'll need them."

As Sam, Tim and Jeff left, Chris walked over to him at the sink where Chad got ready to wash the dishes.

"Care to sign those papers now?" Chris asked him. "I'd be willing to forfeit the race if you do."

"What papers?" Kate asked.

"It's not your concern." He didn't look back at her. He kept his focus on Chad. "We both know that once I get a chance to be with her without the interruption of other men fawning all over her, she'll fall in love with me."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I can't wait to watch you with Lacy. You have no idea how much you two really deserve each other." She turned to Chad. "Don't you dare sign those papers. You have nothing to worry about. Anyone can see exactly what Chris is like." She took a deep breath to calm down. "What would you like me to do now?"

"Why don't you go check on the cattle in the field?" He didn't know if she would pick up on the hint for her to change back to her Kate persona but he hoped so. He wanted to see her as Kate.

She nodded and left the house.

“You don’t know what you’re up against,” Chad finally said, turning his attention back to the dishes.

“So you’ll risk Kate?” Chris asked.

“I’m not signing anything.” He washed the dishes without looking at his brother.

Chris gritted his teeth and quietly left.

Chad breathed a sigh of relief. He didn’t enjoy these types of confrontations which was why he learned to keep to himself. He wanted to simply go about his life in peace and quiet. Was that too much for a man to ask?

Chapter 17

Kate wasn't sure if she should put on her shirt and skirt or not, but she knew she had to make an appearance as Kate or the men would get suspicious about her and wonder if she was hiding something. So she took her time in putting on her female clothing and brushed her long wavy blond hair. She had finally turned off Sam, Tim and Jeff. She wasn't aware that men wanted sex so badly that they would easily dismiss a woman who was appalled by it. She recalled her conversation with the three men earlier that morning after she helped Chad wash the dog:

They waved her over while she was still soaking wet.

"Billy, is your sister aware of what sex entails?" Sam asked her.

"What are you talking about?" she wondered, shocked at the question.

"Two days ago, she told us that a stork named Bonnie delivered babies," Jeff told her. "Then yesterday when we described the process to her, she panicked and ran off."

That was when she remembered that she had been distracted by Chad and the two other women while they were explaining how babies were conceived. She almost laughed and told them it was a

big misunderstanding when it suddenly occurred to her that this repulsed them. Now that she knew for sure that Chad did care for her after all, she didn't need to try to make him jealous.

"You're right," she nodded. "Mother told her about the stork so she wouldn't be scared to get married. Kate's always had delicate sensibilities. She came running to me late yesterday afternoon and cried about how disgusting the whole thing was and how she swore off sex altogether. Then I explained to her that Chad won't be able to perform that particular function in a marriage, and she was very relieved. I had no idea she was offended by something so natural."

"What a shame," Tim sighed. "She's so beautiful but what good is it if no one can enjoy her?"

"It's better you found out now rather than later."

They looked disappointed but nodded.

She was greatly relieved. Thankfully, she didn't have to worry about them anymore. But she did have to worry about Chris. She didn't understand what he was up to when he went to her while she was dressed as Billy and asking her all kinds of questions about Kate. He asked her about what Kate wanted in a man. She told him that Kate wanted Chad and that he had no chance with her. He wouldn't leave her alone though. Despite her insistence that she wasn't going to tell him anything, he wouldn't leave her alone. Finally, she told him, "I have to do my work. If you want me to give you information, then you'll have to grab a paintbrush. Still interested?" He cringed and finally left her alone until it was time to have lunch. That's when she agreed to the bet with him. She didn't know how good he was but she knew she had a good chance of winning.

After she got dressed in her blue shirt and brown skirt, she climbed down the ladder. She wasn't sure where Chad was. She knew he would be working somewhere. Just as she turned from the ladder, she saw him. *That's odd. How did he know I'd be right here?*

To her surprise, he didn't say anything. He simply smiled at her and took her in his arms and kissed her. She loved the feel of

his arms as he held her close to him. The thrill of his kisses made her feel lightheaded. Despite her cold appearance to the other men, she was secretly looking forward to having sex but knew that the proper time for it had to be after marriage.

When their kiss ended, he held her close to him. "I missed you this morning," he whispered in her ear.

His breath both tickled and excited her at the same time. "I missed you too."

He smiled and reluctantly let go of her. "I need to go to the field and talk to your brother."

Her eyes widened. She hadn't expected this. "Why?"

"He made a bet that he didn't have to." He looked at the stalls. "Why are all the horses here? Didn't he go check the cattle like I asked him to?"

She quickly thought of a reason why Reliable was still waiting in his stall. "Oh. Well, Billy wanted to get some things ready before he left."

"Really? What things did he have to get ready?"

"Men things. He was vague about it." It was getting harder to lie. People could only be fooled for so long, especially when it was someone she spent so much time with.

"Men things?" Then he laughed and nodded. "Oh. *Those things.*"

She suddenly wondered what that meant. Did men do certain things before a job that women weren't aware of?

Before she had time to think about it, he reached for her hand and led her to a pile of neatly stacked hay and lifted her so she sat on it. He jumped up next to her, sat and held her hand. "Did he tell you about the bet he made with my brother?"

"Yes."

"Are you alright with it?"

"Sure. Chris doesn't have a chance. He'll be spending the day with Lacy."

"I don't need your brother to bail me out of anything. I'm not going to sign those papers."

"What are those papers for?"

"My father passed away a couple of years ago and my mother

just passed away. She updated her will and left me half of the estate. Chris wants me to sign over my half to him. I told him I won't do it. He's using you as a bargaining chip."

She had already gathered that much information, but she couldn't tell him that without revealing her secret. So she settled for a safe answer. "He's not interested in me."

"But I am and he's trying to use that to his advantage."

"He did this with Georgia?"

"How did you know that?"

"There was a conversation the men all had yesterday and Billy filled me in on the details."

"Oh."

"Certainly you know that you're the one I'm interested in."

"The kisses have been good indicators." He put his arm around her shoulders. "You're the best thing that has ever happened to me. I'm not worried about the other men. I don't like the attention they give you but I can't help how they react to you. But Billy needs to cancel the bet. It's not right to bargain on a person, much less money."

"I'm not the one who's really on the bargaining table. Lacy is. Billy figures once Lacy has to spend time with Chris, she'll forget all about Billy. He doesn't plan to lose."

"I can see the point to the bet, but it's not fair to use you like this."

"Let him use me. I don't mind. Really, he's going to win."

"Chris is pretty good on a horse."

"And so is Billy." Why were they arguing about this? Chad already knew how she felt about him.

"I really can't talk you out of anything you set your mind to."

"Billy knows what he's doing."

"He'd better because I have something special I want to do with you on that day."

"Really? What?" She smiled.

"That's for me to know and you to find out." He gave her a light kiss before he helped her back down. "I have to get back to work."

* * * * *

The next morning, she dressed up in her Billy disguise again. It was getting more and more difficult for her to remember what she said and did as Billy as opposed to what she said and did as Kate. Chad would bring something up that Billy supposedly said but she didn't remember saying it. Then, he would mention something Kate said when she was Billy, but she didn't remember that either. She began to wonder if switching roles as frequently as she was led her to forget little details.

That morning as she brought eggs into the house, Chad looked at her as if he hadn't expected her. "Where's Kate?" he asked.

"She's sleeping like she does every morning," she replied. Wasn't he used to that by now? She handed him the eggs.

"Yesterday evening she said she would be having breakfast with me while you slept in for a change."

She didn't recall saying that. She was sure she told him she would see him after lunch. She struggled to remember their conversation from the previous evening before she went to her loft to sleep for the night.

"Maybe she'll be coming in soon." Chad shrugged and cracked the eggs into the skillet. "Thank you for the eggs. I was ready to get them but you beat me to it. It's like you can read my mind."

She stared out the window. Did she say she would have breakfast with him as Kate?

"I hope you like cheese omelets," he said, breaking her out of her thoughts.

"Oh, yes. I do." She couldn't exactly run back to the barn to change into Kate. That would be too suspicious. She took a deep breath. "I don't think Kate will be coming for breakfast. She was up late last night reading. She was reading the book you bought her before going to bed." That much was true.

Chad didn't hide his disappointment. "I'm sorry to hear that. I had hoped to ask her something important."

Was he talking about a marriage proposal? She wished she was dressed up as Kate. "I could pass the question along to her."

He smiled at her. “No. This is the kind of thing you ask in person. I’d rather wait until she’s with me.”

She sighed. She would have to wait to find out what he wanted to ask her. She turned back to the meal he was preparing. “Do you want some help?”

“I’ve already told you that I got it covered.”

She nodded and sat down to wait for him. “What’s on the agenda for today?”

“Well, I was thinking of working on your upper body strength. I’m going to have you carry some bags of seed and fertilizer from the shed to the vegetable garden.”

She frowned. That sounded like heavy work. “But I’m not very strong.”

“Which is why we need to work on that. You can’t be going to someone else’s farm unless you’re prepared for some of the tougher tasks. The other men will laugh at you.”

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “I suppose you’re right. Are you going to help me?”

“I won’t be able to help this morning. I have to give the horses a bath.”

“I can do that. I love horses. I’ve given them many baths. I can even give them shots and put their shoes on.”

“That’s nice to know for the future, but I really need to do some planting in the garden this afternoon.”

She inwardly groaned. She didn’t know how she was going to carry those heavy bags all the way to the garden. She had seen those bags and they weighed more than things she was used to carrying. She bit her lower lip apprehensively.

“You’ll do fine,” he assured her. “Just use the wheelbarrow and wheel the bags on over.”

She felt better with that option. “Alright.”

He finished making the omelets and put them on the plates.

“I didn’t realize you knew how to make so much food.” She was impressed with his wide range of meals that he knew how to prepare.

“It’s not a big deal. I experimented with a lot of different recipes.” He set the plates on the table and got the glasses of milk

ready. "I haven't made omelets in over three years. It's actually nice to have them again."

She waited for him to sit across from her before she began eating. "This is good," she said. She was shocked a man could cook as well as he did. He was as good as her female servant who cooked for her.

"How do you like being a farmhand?" he asked.

"It's not too bad," she honestly replied. "It's hard work but in a way, it's nice to do some physical labor. Of course, my favorite part is doing stuff with the horses."

"I'm sure you won't have any trouble getting a farmhand job in the future."

She decided not to respond since she wasn't planning on doing that. Instead, she nodded and continued to eat.

"Do you mind if I ask what my brother wanted when he wouldn't leave you alone yesterday?"

She glanced at him. "I didn't realize you noticed."

"I notice a lot of things that happen here."

"Oh, well, he was grilling me for information on Kate. I wouldn't give in though. He's completely wrong for her. I understand what he's doing and he's not going to succeed."

"You don't have to get him to race you tomorrow. I'm not signing those papers."

"What are those papers for anyway?"

"Don't you remember?"

She hesitated. Was this another one of those moments where she forgot what she learned as Kate or Billy. She was sure that he had told Kate about his mother's will. "No," she slowly responded as she searched her mind for the correct person he had told the information to.

"You were standing right over there." Chad pointed to the counter by the sink. "I told you yesterday after you told me not to sign them."

"I'm pretty sure you didn't. I walked out after I told you not to sign them."

"That's not the way I remember it." He looked at her with great concern. "Are you feeling alright?"

She blinked. "Of course, I am." She was, wasn't she?

He sighed and shook his head. "It's so odd that you are forgetting so many things. I hope the hay isn't affecting your memory."

"Hay can't affect memory."

"That's what Burton Myer said before he forgot who he was."

"What?"

"Didn't you hear about Burton Myer?"

She shook her head.

"He used to farm the fields that way." He pointed to the south. "He was as sharp as a whip and could recall any minute detail. Well, he took a liking to sleeping in the barn because the hay was comfortable. Anyway, after a couple of weeks, he began to forget little things. These things were minor. They were stuff like what color shirt he wore the day before or a simple comment he made to someone. He didn't think anything of it at first, but after another week, he began to forget parts of his childhood and entire conversations he had with someone. Once a full month passed, he even forgot who he was. It was really sad. You should ask the other farmhands about him."

She didn't like the sound of this. Could hay really affect her memory too? Was that why she was forgetting things that she had told Chad or he told her?

"By the way," Chad continued after he finished eating, "tell Kate that green is her color."

"Green?"

"Yes. She wore a green shirt yesterday. It really went well with her blond hair. She's a very pretty woman."

"She didn't wear green. She wore a blue shirt."

He thought about it for a moment. "No. It was definitely green. It was the color of the grass in front of the house."

She swallowed the nervous lump in her throat. She had worn a blue shirt. She was sure of it, wasn't she?

"Anyway, I better get started on washing those horses. You're going to take care of the seed and fertilizer, right?"

"Uh...yes. I will." At least, she remembered that task that loomed before her. She quickly finished the rest of the meal and

washed her dishes. "I'll use the wheelbarrow."

"What a great idea!"

"What?" Again, she was startled.

"The wheelbarrow is a great idea. It's practical. You'll get much further if you use it. You're an excellent problem solver." He patted her so hard on the back that she nearly fell into the sink. "Be careful. You don't want to get water all over you and have to take another bath."

She did remember taking the bath. "I took a bath after helping you give Roger a bath in the metal tub, right?"

"Yes."

She was relieved she recalled that.

"Anyway, I'll see you in a little bit. Go ahead and take care of those seeds and that fertilizer," he stated.

She nodded and did as he said. She went directly to the shed and found that even placing one bag of the fertilizer into the wheelbarrow was a daunting task. She would pick it up and fall backwards as she struggled to put it in the wheelbarrow. She finally managed to put one in and decided to push the wheelbarrow to see if she could handle pushing it along the grass. She decided she could add another bag and did so.

Once she was ready to take it to the vegetable garden, she saw Lacy riding on a horse next to Sam, Tim and Jeff. She groaned. Why did they keep bringing Lacy out there? She would have to put a stop to this nonsense. She knew her chances of getting any work done with Lacy hovering around her would be slim to none.

Why is she here?

She groaned and lifted the handles on the wheelbarrow. It was more difficult to push the thing than she anticipated, so she had to struggle to maintain her balance while wheeling it up the small incline in the yard. She gritted her teeth when she realized Roger had come running up to her and was barking and trying to play with her. Ever since she helped give the dog a bath the day before, he had been practically glued to her side when she was in her Billy disguise.

"Shoo, Roger," she told the animal. "We can play later."

The dog was relentless. He ran in front of the wheelbarrow

and jumped into it. The sudden change in weight caused her to lose her balance. She fell sideways and landed on the ground. The dog jumped on top of her and licked her face.

Gross! I'll have to take another bath for sure. She didn't like having dog slobber all over her.

Sam and Lacy walked over to her.

Sam was laughing. "I see that Roger can't get enough of you."

Apparently, neither can Lacy.

"Maybe I should hang out with the sheep since he isn't doing his job," Kate replied. "I don't understand why he suddenly likes me as much as he does."

"Dogs are very perceptive when it comes to a person's character. He knows you're a good man."

She sighed and pushed the heavy animal off of her. She stood up and smoothed her clothes as best as she could. "I need to take these bags of seed and fertilizer over to the vegetable garden." She tried to pick up one of the bags but Roger kept jumping on top of it. She was beginning to get irritated.

"It looks like you could use some help," Sam commented. He easily picked up the bag and threw it into the wheelbarrow. "I can take that for you too."

"Thanks." She was relieved to be rid of that duty. It was tougher than it sounded when Chad presented the idea to her. Why was he so insistent that she do the harder chores?

"I made some muffins for you," Lacy said as she presented a plate of blueberry muffins to her.

She reluctantly took them. "Thank you. You didn't have to do this." *Really, you didn't have to do it.*

"Oh, I don't mind. I like doing stuff for you."

Since being outrightly repulsive wasn't working, Kate didn't even bother pursuing that angle. She could only hope her plan at the bar that night would work. She hated the thought of going to the bar in town but was desperate to get the woman off of her back. At least, the bar didn't include a whorehouse.

Tim and Jeff walked over to them.

"Lacy is a great cook," Tim bragged. "These muffins are just

a foretaste of what you can expect if you decide to marry her.”

Kate smiled but inwardly cringed. “No woman can hold me down. How many times do I have to say that?”

“I don’t mind a man who plays hard to get,” Lacy grinned.

“I’m not playing. I mean it.”

“We’ll see.”

“What are we doing today, men?” Kate turned to Tim and Jeff. “I still like to do a hard day’s work.”

“We figured that we’d fill in for your chores so that you can spend time with Lacy,” Tim said.

Kate was afraid of that. “I don’t think the boss will be happy with that.”

“He’ll be fine. Let us deal with him.”

She already knew that Chad would go along with it just to get them off his back. She had to admit that he was right. She should have kept her distance instead of trying so hard to fit in with their group. This was another curve ball they had thrown her way.

“Do you want to eat one?” Lacy pointed to the muffins on her plate.

“Maybe later. I just had a big breakfast.” She tried to decide where to put the muffins. “I suppose I should take them into the house.”

Roger darted in front of her so she tripped on him. She fell over him and the plate of muffins tumbled to the ground with her. The dog eagerly ate the muffins.

“You bad dog!” Lacy screamed and slapped him on the nose.

Roger looked back at her and growled.

She stood back, startled.

Roger barked at her.

She uneasily stepped back.

Kate suddenly felt a kinship with the animal. Suddenly an idea came to her. “Let’s give him a bath!”

Lacy looked uncertain.

“Oh come on. It’ll be fun.” Before Lacy could protest, Kate ran to get the water and soap for the metal tub that was still sitting in front of the house. This time, Lacy could hold the animal.

* * * * *

By lunch, Lacy left the farm because she got wet from holding the dog in the tub and needed to change clothes.. “I had no idea that the dog was so rambunctious,” Kate lied to her before she left. She breathed a sigh of relief to have the woman leave. Lacy was unbearable. She had to go through with her plan that night or Lacy would never leave her alone. Even if she really was a man, she wouldn’t choose to spend her time with the woman. She was much too clingy.

She finally got to change into her Kate clothes after lunch. She made up a lame excuse about Billy taking a bath in the river after the ordeal with Roger and the tub. She noticed that the farmhands politely said hello to her but left her alone when she was dressed as Kate. The whole disgusted with sex thing worked like a charm. She wished she had thought of it sooner.

She found Chad planting seeds in his garden.

He glanced up and smiled. “It’s nice to see you. I’d take you in my arms and kiss you but my hands are dirty.”

“Do you want some help?” she offered.

“No. I don’t want you to get messy.”

“I should do something. I can’t just sit idly by every day while everyone else works.” She knelt next to him.

He raised an eyebrow. “I seriously doubt that Sam, Tim and Jeff are working. Most likely, they are sitting around and groaning about the bet your brother made. They’re worried that Lacy will end up with Chris tomorrow afternoon.”

He was right. She had overheard them talking about that on her way to see him. He really did pick up on things that were going on around him with surprising accuracy. She wondered if he ever questioned why she and Billy were never in the same place at the same time.

“You missed the entertainment earlier,” he continued as he raked the dirt over the spot where he just planted a seed. “Billy had Lacy hold Roger down while he washed him. It was funny.”

“It’s too bad I didn’t see it. Anyway, I’m sorry I wasn’t up this morning to meet you at breakfast.”

He glanced at her as he dug another hole. "Were you planning to see me this morning?"

She blinked. "Well, didn't I promise I was going to?"

He shook his head. "I don't recall that conversation."

"You don't?"

"You always sleep in late because you stay up reading. That is correct, isn't it?"

She hesitated to answer. Was she starting to forget simple details? Did hay affect memory after all?

He stopped what he was doing and studied her. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I think so," she slowly replied. How could she forget parts of her conversations with him? It didn't make sense.

"Well, I'm sure you probably had a dream where you were supposed to meet me for breakfast. Sometimes that kind of thing happens."

She bit her lower lip. "There's nothing wrong with the hay in the barn, is there?"

"That's an unusual question."

She shrugged. "Is it? Billy told me something about a man named Burton Myer. Do you know anything about him?"

"Burton Myer? The old man who has amnesia? He lives with his daughter and her husband. You can ask one of the other townsfolk about him."

"He got amnesia?"

Was Chad trying not to laugh? She couldn't tell for sure because he was planting another seed, so he wasn't looking directly at her.

Chad cleared his throat. "Yes. It was strange. One day, he knew everything and the next, he began to forget little pieces of information. Before long, he didn't remember anything. The doctor searched for a cure but none could be found. A case like that hadn't been reported before, so they name the disease the Myer Syndrome. Hopefully, no one else will be affected."

She didn't like the sound of this. "Were you going to ask me a question?"

He looked over at her. "I don't think so. I can't recall men-

tioning it. Did I tell you I needed to ask you something?"

Suddenly, she didn't feel well. She shook her head. "No."

He turned his full attention to her. "Are you feeling alright? You look flushed."

"Maybe I should lay down."

"That's a good idea. The hay in the loft will make for a nice mattress while you sleep."

The thought of sleeping on hay seemed like a dangerous one. "I'll go for a walk. Maybe it'll help if I get some fresh air and stay out of the barn for awhile."

"Alright. I'll see you later."

She nodded and went for a walk.

* * * * *

Later that night after she said goodnight to Chad, she dressed up as Billy and went to the bar in town on Reliable. She took along a dress and the red wig she had bought. She hoped that after this night, she would be able to spread enough rumors about her to dissuade Lacy from further pursuing her Billy character. She didn't relish the thought of going to the bar but she had to show Lacy's family that "Billy" wasn't a respectable man worthy of their little sister. She tied Reliable to a post. The costume for the crazy woman was safely hidden in the sack beside the saddle.

She entered the bar, pretending to be happy that she was there. At least, the women were decently dressed, so that was far better than the saloon she had gone to the previous weekend.

Tim and Jeff waved to her as soon as they saw her.

She nodded to them but walked to the bar. The place was full of cigar smoke and beer. Some music played in the background and there was a dance floor for some couples to dance on. She bought a bottle of beer and went to the table where Tim and Jeff sat. "Where's Sam at? Don't you all hang out together all the time?"

"He decided not to join us tonight," Tim said. "He helped Burton Myer deliver the colt earlier tonight, so he's exhausted."

"Burton Myer? Didn't he get amnesia?"

The two men glanced at her as if she lost her mind.

“Amnesia? No,” Jeff replied. “Who told you he had amnesia?”

“Chad did,” she said, confused. “He said that Burton started forgetting things after he slept around the hay in his barn. Then he got a disease called the Myer Syndrome that no one had ever heard of before. Now he can’t remember anything.”

They laughed.

“There’s no such thing as a Myer Syndrome,” Tim responded between fits of giggles.

“Chad said it was caused by the hay. He said that hay can affect someone’s memory,” she insisted.

They continued to laugh so hard that their beer splashed out of their bottles.

“He’s pulling your leg, Billy,” Jeff assured her. “There’s no such thing as hay affecting memory. I can’t believe you’re so gullible as to believe that.”

“Who knew that Chad had a sense of humor?” Tim added.

She frowned. Did Chad make it up? Why would he do that?

“I have an idea,” Jeff spoke up. “Let’s talk to Burton. He just came in here. Burton!” He waved the old man over.

Burton nodded and sat beside him. “Hello, Jeff. Hello, Tim.” He turned to her. “You must be Billy Ingram. I heard a lot about you. Apparently, you’re swift on a horse and a regular hero. Chad Walker is lucky to have you working out there.”

“You’re Burton Myer?” she asked.

“The one and only.”

“You won’t believe this one.” Jeff explained the situation to Burton.

Burton chuckled. “He fooled you with that, did he? I haven’t heard him making a joke for the longest time.”

“We’ll get you a drink,” Tim offered. “Do you want one, Billy?”

She shook her head. “This is one is still full.” She motioned to her beer.

Jeff left with Tim.

Burton turned to her. “I heard you’ve been a hard worker out

there and saved a boy's life."

"I do what I can," she replied. She forced aside her shock that Chad had intentionally lied to her about the hay and made up things that she really had not said or done after all. She focused on the man in front of her.

"Chad is a good man. Between you and me, he was too good for Georgia. I know that a lot of people believed she was a good woman but she wasn't. A woman can do one of two things to a man. She can lift him up to great heights or drag him down to great depths. That woman tore him apart, and her family went right along with it. I stick to myself most of the time but when they come by, I make it a point to be friendly. Trust me, son, you don't want to mess with them. Just go along with them and you'll stay out of trouble. They have a lot of relatives who stick together regardless of the situation. Sometimes loyalty is blind."

"I had figured as much." She thought it was nice of Burton to warn her about them.

Burton continued, "I hear that Chad came into town on Wednesday. Wilma Jensen, who owns the mercantile in town, said he looked happier than he had since he first moved here. She mentioned that he bought a wedding ring. Has he proposed to your sister yet?"

She had to stop herself from smiling. He bought her a ring while he was in town on Wednesday? "No, not yet," she answered.

"I'm sure he's waiting for the right moment. Now that I hear he's telling you that crazy fib about Myer Syndrome, I can tell that he's doing much better. I guess having your sister around has done him a lot of good."

Jeff and Tim returned to give them Burton's bottle.

"I was just telling Billy that Chad is doing good to concoct that silly joke about me having amnesia," Burton said. "I see Milly over there. I'm going to dance the night away."

"Will you be at the fairgrounds tomorrow?" Jeff asked him as he stood up. "Billy here is going to race Chad's brother. Both claim to be the best horse racers."

"Really? That might be interesting. Maybe I'll make an ap-

pearance. But I might get caught up working with the new colt. Nice meeting you Billy.” He tipped his hat and left.

Kate tipped her hat and turned back to Tim and Jeff.

“We’re glad you made the trip in here tonight,” Jeff told her. “There are plenty of women to dance with.”

“It is a good place to meet honorable women,” Tim agreed.

“That’s a great idea!” she nodded. Thankfully, the women were actually treated decently here. “I want to dance with some lovely ladies. Are there any available women here?”

Jeff nodded to the blond with shoulder-length straight hair who was sitting by herself at the bar. She was drinking water.

“She is good looking,” she stated, hoping she looked intensely interested in the woman. “If you will excuse me, I’m going to mingle around a little bit.”

She took her beer and casually went up to the bar where the young blond was sitting. She found an empty cup, and when she was sure no one was looking, she poured half of the beer into it before approaching the woman.

“Howdy, ma’am,” Kate greeted as she tipped her hat. “What is a pretty lady like you doing here all by yourself?”

The blond turned to her. “You’re Billy Ingram, correct?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I don’t remember your name.”

“Kelly Martin. We danced at the potluck last Saturday.”

“I remember dancing with you. You were one of the best dancers there. I really liked the floral pattern you had on your bow. I have often looked for such a pattern back home but couldn’t find anything like it.”

“Oh. Well, I made it myself. I sew my own clothes.”

“Really? That’s amazing. You have a real gift for making clothes. You should open up a dress shop or make clothes for other women in town. You would make a fortune.”

She blushed. “Do you really think so?”

“I know excellent clothes when I see them.”

She shot Kate a curious look. “I must admit that it’s strange for a man to take such an interest in women’s clothing.”

“Oh, uh...” Kate suddenly realized that she had momentarily slipped out of character. She had to quickly redeem herself as

Billy. "My sister, Kate, is always looking for beautiful but practical clothes."

Fortunately, the woman bought it for she nodded.

"So, what are you doing in a bar? You seem like a nice woman. Don't you have lots of men trying to court you?"

"I'm here to find someone. I don't do well with men. I get shy."

"Really? You're doing fine with me."

"There's something about you that makes it easy for me to talk to."

It's probably the fact that I'm a woman. "Would you like to dance?"

She nodded.

Kate turned to Jeff and Tim and winked at them.

They looked impressed, which was what she was hoping for. Now she had it established that she could easily pick up women. As she danced with Kelly, she learned that Kelly was actually a nice woman who made it a point to go to the bar with her two brothers who watched out for her.

Kate looked around the bar and saw that Todd was there. He sat by himself. What in the world was he doing? He should have been asking women to dance. How did he expect to find a wife if he didn't take the steps to find her? She had to admit that Todd was a nice man.

"You know, Kelly," she began after a couple of songs, "I will only be in town for a short time, but do know Todd?"

Kelly looked over at Todd. She blushed. "He is good looking."

"And he's looking to settle down. He was telling me that he wants a nice woman who values family and farm living. Mind if I introduce you two?" Todd obviously needed help in meeting women.

"I don't know him very well but he seems like a good person. I would like to meet him."

Kate led her over to Todd. "Why aren't you hanging out with Jeff and Tim?" she asked him.

Todd glanced over at her. He had barely touched his drink. He shrugged. "I'm not in the mood. Sometimes I like to be away

from them.”

She nodded. Todd really didn't belong with their group anyway. “I wanted you to meet Kelly Martin. Her brothers, Jason and Brian are over there.”

“I know Jason,” Todd said. “He's a good man. I didn't realize you were already grown up,” he told Kelly.

“I turned twenty-three on Monday,” Kelly replied.

“Where have you been hiding?”

She laughed. “I've been at my parents' farm helping them.”

“She was at the potluck last Saturday,” Kate added.

Todd had been too shy to dance. He had stuck with his friends. “I did see you there but I didn't realize you were of courting age yet.”

“I have an idea. You two should dance and get to know each other.”

“I'd like that,” he agreed. “Would you like to dance?”

Kelly smiled and accepted his offer to dance.

Kate felt good with getting two people together who seemed to be well matched. If Todd got to hang out with Kelly's brothers more often, he would finally have a group of good people around him. Todd wasn't a bad man. He just needed a better set of friends. Kate made sure that Jeff saw her go towards the outhouse. Now she had an alibi as to where Billy would be when Lois showed up. Lois was the name of the redheaded woman she would become. She hid in the outhouse and quickly got dressed as the woman. She took off her black wig and beard and threw her red-headed wig on. She took out her pocket mirror and examined her reflection. Good. She looked just like another woman.

She hid Billy's outfit in the sack and entered the bar, looking upset. She stomped up to the bar and slapped her hand on the table. “Where is that lying piece of scum named Billy Ingram?” she yelled, making sure everyone could hear her.

The bartender looked at her, startled. “May I help you, Miss...”

“It's Mrs. Billy Ingram,” she loudly announced. “My first name is Lois. Is Billy here?”

“He was dancing on the floor over there just a few moments ago. I didn't catch where he went.”

She let out a low growl. “Just you wait until I get my hands on you, Billy.” She took an empty beer bottle and smashed it on the bar so that it broke in half. “I’m going to kill him!” She turned to face the group of astonished people. “I don’t see him.” Her nostrils flared and she scowled.

“Um, are you sure you’re looking for the right person?” Jeff stood up and walked over to her.

“He’s got black hair, a beard, and is almost six feet tall.”

“That sounds like Billy alright.”

“You’ve seen him?” She grabbed his collar and shook him. “Where is he? I’m going to kill him!”

“Whoa, whoa!” Tim ran up to her and gently removed her hands from Jeff’s shirt. “I’m sure we can figure things out.”

“What is there to figure out? The lying scumbag left me. He courted me, married me and suddenly left. I’m going to take him back home. He can’t go loving women and leaving them behind.”

“He never mentioned you.”

She gasped and forced a couple of tears to fall from her eyes. “I can’t believe he won’t even acknowledge me.”

“Well, he’s not here right now. He went to the outhouse.”

“Great! I’m going to cut his manhood off.”

The men in the bar cringed.

She raced to the front door.

Jeff and Tim stopped her.

“You know, I don’t think he’s there anymore,” Jeff said. “He probably headed on out. He’s such a free spirit. You can’t hold him down.”

She hadn’t expected this. “What?” She didn’t hide her shock.

“Well, he was talking about heading out to Oregon. He might be on his way there as we speak.”

She couldn’t believe it. They were actually lying for Billy. *They really do like him.* She grunted and stabbed the wall with the sharp end of the broken bottle. “If I find out that you’re lying to me, I’ll come after you and teach you a lesson you won’t ever forget.”

Jeff smiled at her. “You’ve got a lot of spunk. I like you. Maybe you should divorce him and be with me.”

“I don’t know. Billy’s so amazing. I find it hard to believe any other man can match up.” She figured she might as well increase their approval of Billy if they were going to stick up for him. “But if I catch him with another woman, I’ll rip her eyes out and feed them to her!” Hopefully, that would get Lacy to back off if the fact that Billy left his wife didn’t work. She opened the door to the bar and looked back at them. “I better not find him with another woman!” Then she turned and slammed the door on her way out.

She quickly ran so they wouldn’t be able to track her down. She went to the sack she hid behind a tree and went into the outhouse where she changed into her Billy disguise. Once she was dressed as Billy, she hid her sack with Reliable and casually entered the bar.

“Billy!” Tim and Jeff called out to her.

“Did you marry a gorgeous redhead?” Jeff asked.

She blanched. “Lois found me?” she gasped.

“So it’s true? You really are married?”

“She’s unbearable. I’m telling you. She’s psycho. You get involved with a woman like that and you wish you were dead. I got to get out of here before she returns. You didn’t tell her I was staying at Chad Walker’s place, did you?”

“No way. We’re on your side. We told her we didn’t know where you were. Us men have to stick together.”

She hid her irritation. Instead, she said, “I can’t risk being found. I’ll see you all later.” She bolted out of the bar and jumped up on Reliable. As she rode him out to the farm, she shook her head in bewilderment. That didn’t go as she had hoped. Tim and Jeff were supposed to turn Billy over to Lois in outright disgust that he would dare leave his wife. Instead they lied for him. She didn’t understand men at all.

Chapter 18

The next morning, Chad went out to the barn to collect eggs for breakfast and saw Kate anxiously looking down from the loft at him.

“Are you alright?” he asked, immediately concerned.

Her blue eyes were wide and she looked bewildered. “Where am I?”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I woke up in this strange place and I can’t remember how I got here. It’s...it’s as if I should be here but I can’t remember why.”

“What?”

She climbed down the ladder. He was shocked to see her wearing Billy’s clothes but she had her long wavy blond hair flowing gently down her back and she wasn’t wearing a beard. She was Kate dressed in men’s clothing and her shirt wasn’t tucked in nor were her breasts pressed down with binding. She ran over to him and wrung her hands, as if she were greatly distressed. “I don’t know what’s going on. I’m wearing these clothes and I’m in this unfamiliar place. I just don’t know anything. Who am I? Who are you? What am I doing here? Are we married?”

He could only stare at her.

“Are you my husband?” She put her hands on his arms and drew closer to him. She was so close to him that their lips were almost touching. “Do we love each other?”

He wasn’t sure what was going on but being close to her made him forget about everything except for how wonderful she was. “I do love you, Kate,” he whispered. He pulled her closer so he could kiss her but she quickly backed away.

“Kate? Is that my name?”

What was going on? Was she being serious? He decided to test her. “Yes. Your name is Kate Walker. You’re my wife and we have three children: Chad Jr., Nathan, and Irene. You fell asleep in bed with me but came out here in the middle of the night. You were sleepwalking again. You said you wanted to ride good old Deniable over here.” He patted Reliable.

“Reliable,” she absentmindedly corrected him.

He smiled at her. “Kate, isn’t it time you told me your secret?”

She caught herself and smiled in return. “Alright. You got me. So there is no Myer Syndrome. How long have you known that I’m also Billy?”

“Since Wednesday when I read the newspapers. I know you’re Kate Tanner.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He shrugged. “I was having too much fun messing with you.”

“So you were intentionally telling me things that I didn’t really say or do.”

“I couldn’t resist.”

“You’re sneaky.”

“But I do love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Then come back over here and let me kiss you.”

She pretended to think about it. “Maybe you should catch me.”

He couldn’t resist a challenge like that. He caught her just as she reached the barn door and kissed her. “How did you find out I was messing with you about the Myer Syndrome? Did you figure it out?”

“You’re not going to like it when I tell you how I discovered it.”

He felt tension form between his shoulders. "Alright. You've prepared me."

"Last night, I went to the bar in town."

"You what?" Chad shouted the question.

She appeared startled by his response. "Now, just hear me out. I'm alright. No one did anything to me." She waited for him to speak but when he didn't say anything, she nodded and continued. "I was desperate to get Lacy off my back. That woman is relentless."

"I could help you with that."

"How?"

He thought for a long, hard moment.

"It's too late for me to ignore her, and I've done everything I can to dissuade her but she's like a dog who doesn't know when it's time to go home. Nothing I was doing was working. So I went to the bar, dressed as Billy, and made an appearance in front of Jeff and Tim. Then I excused myself to go to the outhouse and changed into another disguise as a woman with red hair whose name is Lois. Lois is Billy's jilted wife who threatened physical harm on any other woman who would make advances at him."

Chad could only stare at her with a mixture of shock and anger. What was she doing, going to a bar by herself? "You could have been harmed," he finally replied.

"But I wasn't." She lightly kissed him.

"I don't believe this. Why didn't you tell me? I would have gone with you to make sure you were alright."

"No one was going to mess with Billy because he was a man. As for Lois, I was holding a broken beer bottle and threatening all kinds of violence while I waved it around. Who'd want to mess with a lunatic woman?" She kissed him again, this time deepening it as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Besides, I didn't know you knew I was Billy."

"Kate, you have to be careful," he whispered. Despite his protests, his resolve was weakening. She was so warm and affectionate. It was a refreshing change after years of being with Georgia. He pulled her closer to him and kissed her with all the passion he kept beneath the surface of his cool exterior.

“It serves you right anyway for all that Myer Syndrome talk. I’m glad I went to the bar because I ran into Burton Myer while I was there. Do you know, I was actually starting to believe that the hay in the loft was making me forget things?”

Chad hid his grin. He hadn’t realized that he actually fooled her into believing it. “Alright,” he gave in. “We’re even. But don’t you ever do anything like that in the future. I can’t have you risking yourself like that again.”

“I won’t,” she promised him.

He felt better. “So are you going through with the race today?”

“Of course. I’ve beaten everyone I’ve raced.”

“You didn’t beat me.”

She considered his comment. “You’re right. I forgot we raced.”

“Let me race instead.”

“You don’t think I can win?”

“I know I’m faster than you. That means I’ll have a better chance.” When she was ready to protest, he continued, “He’s my brother. Let me deal with him.”

“You’re right. I was just upset that he’s using me to make you jealous so you’ll sign over your inheritance.”

“I know. No one likes to be used.” Chad noticed someone riding onto his property. He recognized the blond haired man. Turning to her, he asked, “Is that really Paul?”

She followed his gaze. “Billy!” Kate greeted and ran over to hug him as he got off the horse.

Chad walked over to them.

“Chad knows that I was pretending to be Billy Ingram,” she told her brother. Turning back to Chad, she explained, “I do have a brother named Paul but he’s still in Virginia. This is the real Billy.”

Billy looked at her in disgust. “My goodness, Kate. What are you wearing?”

“Don’t you recognize my Billy costume?”

“Yes but you need to be wearing a dress or a skirt when you look like a woman.”

“No one else is around. Who’s going to care?” She looked at

Chad. "You'll have to forgive my brother. He's stuck up on societal expectations. Sometimes he's rather snobbish."

Billy pretended to be amused.

Chad realized that Kate was close to Billy, so it made sense that she would choose his name for her male disguise. Not only were they close but they shared a good-natured and easy going relationship.

"Does he know why you're here?" he asked Kate.

"Yes," she responded. "He knows I'm Kate Tanner and that I saw our parents get murdered."

"Alright." He turned to Chad. "Since you are updated on everything, I will tell both of you what I discovered. Kate, you were right. Senator Rich is behind the murders. You should know that the Senator is searching for you. Now that Derek Robin and Dave Reinhart are behind bars, he's promising them life in prison instead of death if they don't link him with the murders. Apparently, he paid them to kill our father. Our mother wasn't supposed to be killed but she happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. They thought she was staying at her friend's house to help out with a sick child but Mother decided to stay home at the last minute."

"And when she heard the men coming after Father, she came downstairs to see what was going on. They couldn't let her live to tell the police what happened."

"Then they saw you but you got away."

She nodded. "That's what happened." She paused. "How did you find out all of this?"

"I overheard him talking to another man in his cabin outside of Ethan Rich National Park. I also got some pictures which I gave to Detective Walter."

"Did you get enough evidence to convict him?"

"I'm not sure. I got a chance to look at his payroll, and he has a lot of influential people working under him. Not everyone is above taking a bribe to overlook justice. For the time being, your best bet is to continue to hide out here."

"Did Ethan say anything about figuring out where I am?"

"No. I think you're safe here."

She looked relieved.

“The good news is that there is a good case for Derek Robin being one of the killers,” Billy said. “Walter found one of his buttons under the sofa in the parlor. Those buttons are one of a kind. They have his initials on them. Apparently, he’s quite taken with himself. Anyway, since our parents had nothing to do with Chief Robin, the button looks damaging.”

“What about Dave Reinhart?”

“The detective is looking into the connection between Dave, Derek and Ethan. It’s all in the paper back home. Apparently, there’s quite a few past articles that tie the three men together. That library employee of yours does a good job of making connections.”

“Sue just started working at the library five months ago but shows incredible promise.” She glanced at Chad. “I cannot stay here once it’s safe for me to return. Owning the library isn’t the only thing I do back in Virginia.”

“I know and I’ve already taken that into consideration,” Chad assured her.

She looked relieved.

“Does anyone else know that you’re playing two people?” Billy asked.

“No,” she told him. “Chad’s the only one who figured it out.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way. I saw the story in the newspaper about how you rescued that boy, and there was a fourteen year old girl by the name of Chloe who showed up on Paul’s doorstep. She called you by name and said you sent her to work at Olivia’s shop. Apparently, the girl is a talented seamstress so she makes costumes now.”

“Oh good! I’m glad that worked out.”

“Kate, you have to be careful. You can’t keep putting yourself out in the spotlight. It’s dangerous.”

“I couldn’t let the girl be used in a whorehouse and I couldn’t let a boy die in a fire.”

“You’ve always had a good heart. Just make sure you stop letting people take your picture or giving out your real name. Though no one else knows about Chloe, everyone did see the story of you saving the boy. I just hope no one makes the connection

between you and Billy Ingram.”

“That story reached Virginia?”

Billy looked at Chad. “She’s always running around and helping people out. I should have expected she’d do something noteworthy here as well.”

“I forgot you were in a whorehouse,” Chad frowned at her, getting upset again.

“Only because Sam, Tim and Jeff picked me up and dragged me up there,” she shrugged.

“Why did you go with them to the other town that night? Don’t you realize how close you came to being harmed?”

“It was either that or they were going to come into the barn and find me there as Kate. I didn’t want them to figure out I was playing Billy.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to settle down.

“Those men are disgusting,” she told Billy. “They think that women are playthings for their amusement.” She turned back to Chad. “You really have no idea how much better you are than those creeps.” Then she changed topics and looked at her brother. “Anyway, will you come to the potluck today? Chad’s going to race Chris, and if he wins, Chris has to spend the day with Lacy. It’ll be fun to watch her drool all over him instead my Billy character for a change.”

“Will you be Billy and Kate again?” Billy asked her.

“Yes. I think I will. Did you know that a group of men and women came over here this past week to see Billy and Kate?”

He chuckled. “Kate, you always find a way to get yourself into a mess. I’ll be there. I wouldn’t miss the show you’ll put on again for anything. What happens if Chad loses?”

“Then Chris will spend the day with me.”

“She made the bargain as Billy,” Chad quickly inserted. “She originally wanted to race Chris but he’s my brother and it’s only fair I deal with him.”

“Kate’s had more than her fair share of male suitors,” Billy remarked.

She sighed. “Chris isn’t interested in me. He’s using me to make Chad jealous enough so he’ll give away his inheritance.” She

changed the subject and turned to Chad. "Can I make breakfast this morning? I want to give it a try."

"If that's what you really want to do, then go ahead." He knew it would be pointless to argue with her. If she had her mind set to do the task, then she would find a way to do it.

She smiled and ran to the hen coop to gather eggs.

Billy shook his head in amazement. "I suppose you nearly had a heart attack when you realized she's been up to all kinds of mischief as Billy."

"She didn't tell you how she went to the bar in town last night," Chad grumbled. "I had no idea she did that until she told me about it this morning."

"Why would she go there?"

"Lacy won't leave her Billy character alone. She dressed up as another woman and pretended to be Billy's wife. Does she always put herself in dangerous situations?"

"No. Usually, she just goes around doing good deeds for people."

Chad was glad to hear that. He didn't like finding out that she was risking her well-being in order to accomplish her goals. He couldn't take that kind of horror for the rest of his life.

After a breakfast which Billy surprisingly admitted Kate did a good job of making, he brought them the newspapers that he had saved aside in his suitcase. Chad helped them sort through them for anything new regarding the ongoing investigation of their parents' murders and information on Kate's whereabouts.

"Your Billy disguise seems to be a success," her brother thoughtfully commented as he put down a paper and picked up another one. "It looks like Senator MacArthur was ready to sponsor the Tree Removal bill when he suddenly decided against it. No one else dares to touch it either."

"Senator Ethan Rich claims that he's interested protecting the environment," Kate commented as she sorted through another paper. "I used to collect the mail and Senator Rich sent Father many letters regarding that bill. Father didn't see what the use was of protecting ten acres of land when Ethan already had fifty acres at his disposal. Father used to ask Ethan about his insistence on ob-

taining the extra ten acres for himself, and Ethan told him that God didn't intend for mankind to destroy all the trees in a state. Now we know that Ethan wanted to protect the gemstones he found on that land."

"What a sad condition it is when people put a price tag on people's lives," Chad softly commented.

They silently nodded.

* * * * *

While Kate put on her Billy disguise, her brother asked to talk to Chad on the patio. He sat across from her brother.

"I notice that my sister is in love with you," he commented.

"I love her too," Chad confessed.

"Yes, I realize that. I also realize that your deceased wife wasn't good to you. I got the most educational tour in Georgia's old bedroom last time I was here. In fact, it made such an impression on me that I had to go back this morning. I apologized to Mrs. Montgomery for my harsh words to her. The poor woman really believes her eldest child was a saint, and I suppose it's only humane to let her continue along that line of thought, especially since she won't be alive much longer anyway. However, in the interest of my sister's future husband, I felt it necessary to divulge the truth about Georgia."

"I know what she was really like. She's not the person the other people in this town thought she was."

"You also didn't do something you may have thought you did."

Chad had no idea what Billy was talking about.

"I have Georgia's real diary." Billy went to his horse and took something out of a bag on the animal. When he came back, Chad realized he was holding an old journal. "Her mother has no idea that Georgia kept her real thoughts in this book. She had the decoy diary sitting on the dresser. The thing that gave it away was the fact that she sounded too good to be true. I mean, no one is that perfect. She was always praising someone or praying for someone. I figured she had a real diary hidden in that room, and I

was right. You'll never guess where I found it. It was in the most obvious place of all: under her mattress. It's a good thing her mother never got rid of anything in that room. Anyway, I would like to bring your attention to a couple of entries you will find most illuminating. I know if I were in your shoes, I would want to know the truth."

Chad waited as he sat down and opened the pink covered book.

"You need to hear this," he began, "even though it may be painful. *July 2, 1879. Dear Diary, Chad threatened to leave me tonight. He even packed his bags. I couldn't let him humiliate me in front of my family and friends, so I came up with a plan. I told him I was pregnant. It was a lie, of course, but I will figure out how to resolve that little detail later. My lie worked. Chad is staying. I'm even getting him to finally do everything I want since I'm carrying his child. It's amazing how easy men are to manipulate.*" He shook his head. "It's terrifying to think that this woman seemed to have no conscience, and it gets worse, or better, depending on your desire for drama."

Chad braced himself for what was to come. He didn't like to recall that time in his life.

Billy continued, "*March 8, 1880. Dear Diary, I have been carefully placing pillows under my dress to fool Chad into thinking I'm pregnant, but in another month, he will expect a baby, so I have to take care of things before they get messy.* Apparently, she intentionally claimed she needed bedrest as soon as she was supposed to show in her pregnancy, and she wouldn't let you go into town with her so you wouldn't tell any of her relatives or friends. She kept you so busy you didn't have energy to question her."

"She was clever," Chad slowly stated.

"She was more clever than you imagined. Let me continue. *While Chad was out in the fields, I 'gave birth' to a stillborn girl. I had a childhood doll I kept in my bedroom and put it in the casket I made out of wood. Then I dug a hole in the ground, put the casket in and buried it. I set a marker so I can lead Chad to his daughter's grave. He was devastated at the news and wondered why I didn't bother to wait for him to come home so he could help*

me bury our child, but I said I couldn't bear for him to go through that much sorrow. What a joke. He bought the whole thing." He shivered. "Doesn't that just give you chills? The woman was made of icicles. Now this entry will be of special interest to you. April 25, 1880. Dear Diary, Chad discovered my secret last night. He had been curious as to why I've been secretive about my pregnancy and the birth to my family and friends, so he went to dig up the grave. I had no idea he would do such a thing. Of course, he found the doll. He threw the doll at me and rode the horse into town to get drunk at the bar again. When he came back, he was packing and saying he couldn't stand to look at me anymore. I ran after him to stop him and tripped on the doll which was on the floor. I hit the corner of the chair as I fell, which gave me a black eye. Fortunately, he passed out in front of the house. I couldn't let him leave or tell my secret to anyone else. I must maintain my pristine reputation. So when he woke up, I was crying and begging him to not hit me again. He was so drunk that he didn't remember anything, so I was able to get away with it. Now I have him for good. He won't dare leave me since he feels intense guilt. I have him exactly where I want him." He looked up from the book. "There's more. You wouldn't believe what other things she did. I had no idea a woman could be capable of such deceit."

Chad accepted the book that Billy handed to him. His hands shook as he opened it. Was it true? He really hadn't hit her after all? Was he absolved from his guilt?

"You should probably read the whole thing. I only got the highlights," Billy said. "It's a good thing she would only let you have sex with her three times a year. I'd hate to think of what her children would have been like."

He inspected the handwriting. It was Georgia's script. She had a funny way of looping her o's. He almost didn't read the book but realized it would be good to find out what the truth was all along. "I thought I knew everything."

"Now you do. I can understand why you don't want to remember that woman. I just didn't want you to go through the rest of your life thinking you hit her. You're a good man, Chad. You

will treat my sister well, and I assure you that she is nothing like Georgia.” He stood up. “I will leave you alone to read that journal. I think I’ll talk with my sister.”

Chad thanked him as he left. He decided read the book.

Chapter 19

By the time Kate, Billy and Chad were ready to leave for town, Roger came running into the barn and barked at them. Since she was in her Billy disguise, she thought the dog was trying to get to her again, but he jumped up on Chad.

“I better see what he wants,” Chad said. He followed the dog out of the barn.

“It’s a nice day for a race,” she commented as she and Billy urged their horses out of the barn. “Reliable is a great horse. He and I are in tune with each other’s thoughts. It’s like he was made for me. I almost wish I was the one racing Chris.”

“You don’t always win against me,” her brother warned. “Chris might be just as good as me or Chad.”

She reluctantly admitted that he was right.

They waited for five minutes before Chad returned. “I have to take care of the sheep fence. Apparently, an animal tore a hole and went through it. There is a dead sheep I also have to dispose of.”

So Roger could be useful when he needed to be. She nodded. “We’ll see you later on then.” She was disappointed that he wasn’t going to be coming along to the race, but she understood that taking care of the sheep was more important.

“You’d better win,” he told her. “I don’t want you spending

the day with another man, unless it's your brother.”

She smiled at his desire for her to be only with him. “You have nothing to worry about.”

Chad nodded and went to the shed for the supplies he would need to fix the fence.

She gave Billy the sack that held all of her disguises so he would hold onto it for her during the day. She put in all her costumes in it in case she needed to make an appearance as Lois. She hoped she didn't but there was no telling how Lacy would react to the news of Billy being married.

When they reached the town, the potluck was already set up. They got off their horses and Sam, Tim and Jeff walked over to them. She noticed that Todd was talking to Kelly's brothers. They would make a much better influence in his life than the Montgomery and Rod families.

“We were wondering if you would bolt out of town,” Tim said. “After your wife showed up last night, we weren't sure what you would do.”

“Is she here?” she uneasily glanced around the fairgrounds.

“No. We haven't seen her since last night,” Jeff replied.

“You'll understand that you won't be able to court Lacy now that we know you're married,” Sam warned her.

“I never wanted to court her to begin with,” she responded. “I kept telling everyone that no woman can hold me down.”

“Including your wife,” Tim noted. “Just as long as you understand Lacy is off limits, then we're alright with you.”

She was relieved. Changing topics, she asked, “Where's Chris?”

“He's over there, showing off his horse,” he nodded in the man's direction. “He's been bragging about his skill on a horse all morning. You'd better win. We have a lot of money riding on you.”

“We don't want to lose anymore money by betting against you,” Jeff added.

“You have nothing to worry about,” she assured them.

“If your sister doesn't hurry, she'll miss the race,” Sam told them. “Since she might spend the day with Chris after this event,

she should be somewhat interested in the outcome.”

“I’ll go look for her,” her brother said on her behalf.

She nodded and took Reliable to the start line, eager to race the stallion. She patted his neck and softly said, “You can do this, Reliable. You’re a good animal and you have a lot of strength and speed. I’m proud of you. You haven’t let me down yet, and I’m sure you won’t now.”

He neighed in response.

She smiled.

Chris came up next to her. “Where’s that pretty sister of yours?” he asked. “She is here today, isn’t she?”

“Oh, she’s here. She’s closer than you think.”

“She’ll enjoy spending time with me.”

“She’s going to marry your brother.”

“Has he proposed?”

“Not yet. But it’s just a matter of time. Rumor around town is that he bought the ring.”

“Until they’re married, nothing is set in stone. I don’t mind watching him squirm.”

“You’re a horrible brother.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t break my parents’ heart by giving up the family business for a woman. As far as I’m concerned, the full inheritance is my rightful due.”

“You’re also greedy.”

He didn’t answer her as he got on his horse.

She got on Reliable. She waited for the race to start. As soon as Sam called out it was time to go, she urged her horse to a run. She almost lost. The race was too close. She breathed a sigh of relief as Chris threw his hat on the ground and stomped on it. Tim, Sam, and Jeff surrounded her and patted her on the back for winning.

“You pulled it off,” Billy congratulated her. “You improved out here. A month ago, he would have won.”

“Well, I’ve had a lot of time to race and run this horse in the fields,” she replied, pleased by his compliment.

Lacy walked over to her. “I’m sorry I’ll have to give my attention to Chris this afternoon, but I can understand you did it to pro-

tect your sister from him,” she told Kate. “Billy, I just want you to know that I won’t be like that horrible woman who forced you on the run. I heard about her and she sounds dreadful. I promise that I won’t be that way with you.”

Kate’s jaw dropped. She could only stare after Lacy as she reluctantly walked over to Chris.

Her brother shook his head. “That woman is desperate for any man, isn’t she?”

“I don’t get it. What is her problem? I made it a point to let her know that my Billy character has a wife, yet she won’t give up.”

“You should have been rude like I was. It works every time on any woman I don’t care to associate with.”

“It’s too bad you weren’t here to give me that lesson when I first met her.” She groaned. “I should’ve known she would throw this curve ball.” The fact that Chad was married didn’t discourage her from trying to sleep with him. But she wanted to get even with Georgia. Kate didn’t know what to do.

After playing horseshoes with Tim, Sam, Jeff and Billy, she decided it was time to be Kate. On her way to the outhouse, Lacy stopped her.

“Though I have been talking to Chris, my affections are for you,” she told Kate.

“But Lacy, what about my wife? I mean, I did leave her,” Kate protested.

“She must be horrible if she drove you away. She doesn’t understand you like I do. It’s true that you’re awkward around women, but I can overlook your weaknesses. A simple divorce will take care of Lois. Then I will travel the country with you.”

“Lois is crazy. She’ll kill us both if I divorce her.” What was wrong with this woman?

“I can handle her.”

“Lacy, what are you doing?” Sam demanded as he walked over to them.

Kate silently thanked him.

“Oh.” Lacy quickly backed away from Kate.

“I told you not to talk to him anymore,” he sternly stated.

“Billy, you can’t be encouraging her. It’s best that you make things right with your wife.”

At least Sam was being reasonable.

“You know what, Sam, you’re right,” Kate nodded. “I’ll be going. Don’t worry.”

“But Sam, you don’t understand Billy like I do,” Lacy argued.

“He’s married, Lacy!”

As they fought, Kate quickly made her escape and changed into her Kate outfit. When she returned, people were enjoying the potluck. She hoped that she would find Lacy talking to Chris but Lacy was helping some women with the food. She sighed and sat down. She wondered where her brother went. Chris sat next to her. She groaned in dread.

He spent the lunch sitting next to her and bragging about his wealth. “I even have a telephone,” he reported.

She rolled her eyes. She also had a telephone.

“Really, Chris,” she began, “I’m not interested. I love your brother.”

“Speaking of my darling brother, where is he? Shouldn’t he be interested in who you spend the day with?”

“He had to take care of his sheep. He’ll be here later.”

“Hmm...Is it wise to spend your life with someone who cares more about animals than you?”

“The only reason you’re interested in me is because you want Chad to sign those papers so you’ll have the entire inheritance from your mother’s will.”

He stiffened. “He told you that, did he?”

“I’m smarter than you give me credit for. I can figure some things out for myself.” She glanced at Lacy who was helping the other women with the clean up. “You might find Lacy to your liking. She’s as selfish as you are.”

He put his arm around her shoulders and leaned so close to her that their noses almost touched. “Tell Chad to sign those papers and I’ll leave you alone. Otherwise, we’ll be able to get better acquainted.”

Before she had a chance to respond, he kissed her.

She slapped him. “You have no right to make advances at me.”

Chris laughed. "Then have him sign the papers. If you don't, I'll make him think we're involved. Those other men might buy the fact that you're not interested in sex, but Chad is not that foolish and neither am I."

"Get your hands off of my sister!" Billy barked as he grabbed Chris by the shirt and lifted him out of the chair. "I believe you lost the race. You need to be with Lacy."

Chris looked startled.

"I suggest you get back to her," her brother stated.

He mutely left and walked over to Lacy who looked stunned to see him.

She smiled at her brother. "You do know how to handle people better than I do."

Billy shrugged. "I think I have a way with upsetting people. You're the popular one."

"Which isn't always a good thing." She sighed as Lacy walked over to them. Chris stayed on the other side of the table.

"Where is Billy?" Lacy asked.

"Why aren't you with Chris?" her brother asked.

"Chris doesn't want me. He wants you." Lacy looked at her. "Chad wants you. Every man wants you. It must be nice."

Kate could feel the animosity from the woman and she didn't like it. "Men only want what they can get from me."

"Lacy, if you don't leave, I'll carry you back over to Chris and tie the two of you together," Billy replied.

Lacy grumbled but left.

"She can't stand me," Kate commented. "Ever since you spouted your mouth off in Mrs. Montgomery's home, she's had nothing but outright disgust for me."

"I already went back and apologized to the mother about my comments. As for Lacy, if I apologized to her, then she'd most likely think I was interested in her and give me as much grief as she's giving you. It doesn't even bother her that your Billy character has a wife."

She considered that he was right. "Well, I'm going to have to do something about that."

"What do you have in mind?"

She stood up. "I'll let my actions speak for me."

Then she left for the outhouse to change. It was time to pull out her final weapon in her arsenal. Lois. She put on her Lois disguise. She put the sack back with her brother's horse and took a deep breath so she could get into character. She adjusted her red wig so it would look like her hair hadn't been combed in days and ripped her pink dress so that she looked like she hadn't changed clothes in awhile too. Lois was supposed to be crazy enough to rip another woman's eyes out.

She ran over to Tim and Jeff who had settled down at the table, ready to eat some pie and ice cream as everyone gathered together at the tables to eat dessert.

"I'm here," she told them, an anxious look on her face.

They turned their attention to her.

Her brother nearly spit his drink when he saw her.

"Where is he?" she asked them. "You promised me that you would show me where he's at if I came to this potluck today."

Jeff shook his head. "We never said that."

She gasped. "Are you going back on your word?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You men are all alike. You will defend each other to the death." She grabbed him by the collar and shook him. "Tell me where he is!"

"Get off of him!" Tim snapped at her.

She fought against Jeff as he struggled to pry her fingers off of his shirt. Tim quickly ran around the table and lifted her up so that she had to let go of Jeff. Then he put her down.

Everyone watched the scene in amazement.

She turned to Tim and scowled at him. "I want my husband and I want him now!"

"I don't blame Billy for leaving you," he spat. "You're a real shrew."

"There's rumors flying around about him with a Lacy Montgomery." She found a fork and grabbed it. "I'll kill her! Where is she?"

Lacy looked up from the cookies, startled.

Kate turned to her. "Are you Lacy?" She walked over to her

and held her fork in front of her face.

“No,” the woman lied.

“I don’t believe you. Someone told me that Lacy Montgomery is a raven haired woman wearing a blue dress. You fit that description.”

“Obviously, Billy wouldn’t want you since you’re so ugly,” Sam told her from down the table.

Ugly? Kate glared at him.

“Maybe Billy was drunk when he married you and woke up and realized what a mistake he made,” Tim shrugged.

“Well, he married me so he’s stuck,” Kate finally said. “He belongs to me.” She turned back to Lacy and snarled. “And no one is going to steal him from me. I heard all about you. You go around putting stuff in men’s drinks and try to lure them to bed you. Well, it won’t work on my Billy. I’m onto you.”

“You do what?” Chris asked in interest. He was near Lacy but hadn’t bothered to talk to her before.

Lacy looked uneasy. “I do no such thing.”

“Lacy’s an angel,” Tim insisted.

“What did she put in someone’s drink?” Billy demanded as he walked over to her.

“She put alcohol in Chad’s punch when he wasn’t looking,” Kate told Billy.

“She did that to Chad?” Chris grinned.

“She had her clothes off and everything,” she explained.

Chris looked at Lacy in amusement. “You wanted to have sex with him so badly you got him drunk?”

Billy shuddered. “He saw her naked? It’s amazing he didn’t go blind.”

“Are you insulting our sister?” Tim demanded.

“She’s hardly worth the effort. Apparently, the only way she can get a man’s attention is to get him drunk,” Billy replied.

Tim punched her brother in the nose.

Her brother reached up to touch his nose and gasped when he saw the blood on his fingers. “No one gets away with hitting me.” He punched Tim in the jaw.

Several men joined in the fight.

Kate jumped on Lacy and the two women went tumbling onto the ground, dragging the table cloth with them. Pies, cookies and punch fell on top of them as they rolled around on the ground.

Lacy tried to grab her hair but Kate pulled back just in time.

“You leave him alone, you little home wrecker!” Kate demanded and shoved a fistful of cookies into her mouth.

Lacy tried to speak but her mouth was too full.

Half of the people joined in the fight while the other half sat back to watch.

Just as Lacy reached for a slice of pie to fling at Kate, Jeff pulled Kate off of her. Lacy threw the pie and it landed on Sam’s face as he was about to pick her up from the ground.

“Shrew or not, you have a lot of passion,” Jeff grinned at Kate. “Forget Billy and come with me.”

“I will not! I love Billy,” she insisted.

He laughed. “You can learn to love me, honey.” Then he kissed her.

“I don’t want you,” she spat. She found an untouched pie and threw it at his face.

“You are all fighting over Billy and he’s not even here!” her brother yelled.

Lacy jumped on her back.

She stumbled and fell to the ground. She pushed the woman off of her and pulled her hair. “If you don’t leave Billy alone, I’m going to kill you!”

Lacy slapped her as hard as she could.

Kate put her hand up to her cheek. *That hurt!* She grunted, quickly stood up, picked up the other bowl of punch that was lying on the table and threw it at her. Lacy’s clothes got drenched in the red liquid. Lacy quickly grabbed a napkin and wiped her eyes so she could see her opponent. She took a cherry pie and threw it at Kate. Kate dodged the pie and laughed.

Chris picked up a blueberry pie and threw it at Kate. This pie landed squarely on her face. Shocked, she stumbled back and fell on her bottom.

“What is going on here?”

Everyone stopped to turn to the voice. Kate wiped her eyes so

she could see who interrupted them. She was stunned to see Chad staring at everyone in shock. Finally, he looked at her, as if trying to figure out if she was Kate or not.

“She needs to leave Billy alone,” Kate explained. She quickly adjusted her wig before anyone noticed her hair was fake. “He’s my husband.” She stood up and tried to brush food off of her dress and face.

Chad shook his head. “Is it any wonder why I don’t come into town anymore? Billy’s my employee. I’ll make it clear to him that he has to go back to Kentucky to make things right with you. Alright?” He looked at Kate.

Billy leaving town was the only way she would ever successfully get rid of Lacy. “Alright,” she agreed.

“The rest of you can go about your lives,” he told the onlookers.

The people took that as their cue to leave him and Kate alone.

Chris turned to Lacy. “I had no idea you could be so devious,” he smiled at her. “You do look pretty. Personally, you’re better looking than Georgia was. There’s just one thing I have to check.” He pulled her in his arms and gave her a long kiss.

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

When their kiss ended, he smiled. “That’s all I need to know. Would you like to talk?”

She smiled back at him. “Alright.”

Tim and Sam ran over to them.

“Lacy, we don’t want you with Chad’s brother,” Sam argued.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m a grown woman. I can make my own decisions.”

“No need to worry, Lacy,” Chris began. “If we get married, I’ll take you to California, so you won’t have to deal with their meddling ways anymore.”

Tim started to protest, but she stopped him. “I’ve had enough of you and Sam trying to run my life. Honestly, I can make up my own mind.”

Chris extended his arm to her. “Care to join me?”

She nodded and ignored her brothers.

Kate’s jaw dropped. She hadn’t expected this!

Chris looked at Chad. "I'll let you have your half of the inheritance. I found something more interesting than money on my venture out here."

Now Chad's jaw dropped.

They watched the two lovebirds sit on the lawn and talk to each other.

Billy shook his head in amusement. "Ironically, they'll be very happy together."

"Where is Kate?" Chad quietly asked Kate.

"She went off running as soon as the fighting began," she replied.

"I'll leave you two alone," Billy told them as he walked off.

"I thought if Lois fought with Lacy that Lacy would leave Billy alone," she quickly explained. "Had I known your brother would take an interest in her as soon as he realized she was devious, I would have said something sooner."

"It looks like I missed an exciting potluck," he smiled.

She was relieved that he had a sense of humor about it.

"I wanted to know if you would like to marry me and go back home as Mrs. Chad Walker? I was hoping to spend the day with you."

"Definitely! I was wondering if you'd ever ask." She was about to hug and kiss him but he stopped her.

"I'm only going to marry Kate. I'm not going to marry Billy's wife."

"Let me clean up and change. I'll be back. Then we can go find that preacher!"

Chapter 20

Most of the town was shocked that Chad married again. They had assumed that he would never marry again after losing Georgia, but he was more than happy to leave his old life behind and start a new one with Kate. Billy was there to witness the event and left them as they went back to the farm. A couple of people congratulated them. Travis, Burton, Wilma and Mark were among them.

Making love to Kate was the most amazing experience he ever had. They took their time exploring each other's bodies, and he learned more from one night of being with her than he had in ten years of marriage to Georgia. Georgia had made sex seem like something that needed to be rushed through. It wasn't very satisfying, though there was no denying the physical pleasure of release. After awhile, he didn't even want to approach Georgia for any kind of physical intimacy since she made it clear that she was only doing it to make him happy. With Kate, however, it was an entirely different world, and for that, he was grateful. She made sex something that was beautiful and pleasurable. For once, Chad didn't have to feel guilty for having a sex drive. He had never felt closer or more in love with anyone than he did with Kate. She accepted all of him and gave all of herself to him. When they finally fell

asleep in the early morning hours, he held her to him, wishing that they could stay there forever.

When they did wake up, it was time to do some chores. Just because he got married and could actually enjoy the benefits of being married, that didn't mean the animals didn't still need to be taken care of.

Since she insisted on helping him, he warned, "I'm not going to give you any work that requires heavy lifting."

She shook her head as they left the house and headed for the barn. "You didn't mind doing that a couple days ago."

"That's because you insisted on being Billy."

"I can do everything that Billy can. Haven't I proved myself to be a good worker?"

"Yes but I like you better as my wife."

"Then you have the best of both worlds."

He smiled at her. "You're hard to say no to."

"Good. Now what do you want me to do?"

"Which chore do you like the most?"

"Checking the cattle in the field because it requires me to ride Reliable."

"Then go check on the cattle."

"Why do I get the feeling you're going to let me get away with anything I want now that I'm your wife?"

He chuckled. "Because I will."

"You're a good man, Chad. I'm very fortunate that I came to this place to look for work."

"I just want you to understand that I see you as my equal."

"I know."

They entered the barn and she gave him a kiss and patted him on the butt.

"I'll be back soon," she promised as she saddled up the horse.

He had to admit that when she got on the horse, he enjoyed seeing so much of her legs exposed since she wore a skirt. It was nice to be able to admire her body and know he actually had permission to touch it. When she left, he turned to milk the cows.

By the time he finished milking the cows and putting the milk in the bottles, she still hadn't returned. He sighed. He was anx-

ious for her to return so he could be with her again. After he finished feeding the animals and went to the shed to get some tools to fix a wobbly shelf in the barn, she returned. She had a rope in her hand.

“I found a cow stuck in a ditch so I pulled it out with this lasso!” She smiled. “And I did it on the first try.”

“I thought you would come and get me if you found something wrong.” He didn’t hide the fact that he was proud of her.

“I was determined to do it myself.”

“You’re very independent for a woman.”

“Yes, I am. Come along with me. I need to take a bath in the river and I need some company.”

“Is that an invitation?”

“Come with me and find out.”

He chuckled as she rode to the barn. *Kate, you have no idea how wonderful you really are.* He left his tools outside the shed and joined her.

* * * * *

The next morning, they went to the barn to feed the horses. After they were done feeding the animals, they began kissing and decided to go up to the loft since it was already mid-morning and none of the farmhands had shown up. He figured they would decide not to come by that day, and that didn’t bother him since he wished to be alone with his wife. They had just laid down on the blankets when he heard a horse approach.

“Do you think Sam, Tim and Jeff are actually coming out to work?” she whispered.

“No. There’s only one horse. They never come out alone.”

She groaned. “If it’s Billy, I’ll kill him.”

“At least whoever’s here is stopping something interesting from happening. I’ll be right back.”

She nodded. “I’ll be waiting.”

He grinned and went down the ladder. After being married to Georgia, he knew there were worse things than being stopped from having sex. He left the barn.

He turned his attention to the stranger who was riding his horse towards the house. The man appeared to be in his late fifties. He had brown hair with streaks of gray in it and was skinny.

“Can I help you?” Chad called out.

As soon as he saw Chad, he got off of his horse and waited for him. “Are you Mr. Walker?” he asked.

Chad noted that the man wore clothing that was typical of the wealthier class. His accent was similar to Kate’s speech. *He must be from Virginia.* Unlike her brother, the man had no resemblance to her, so he wasn’t one of her relatives.

“Yes, I’m Chad Walker,” he finally answered when he reached him.

“My name is Calvin York.” The man pulled out his wallet and showed Chad his identification card.

A reporter. “You’re not from here,” Chad said.

“No, sir. I am not. I’m from Virginia. My editor gave me the job of tracking down any information I can regarding Senator Tanner’s murder.”

“What do you think that has to do with me?”

“I’m sure it has nothing to do with you, Mr. Walker. I am seeking someone out.”

“Do you think the killer is here?”

“No. However, I did stumble upon this paper from your neighboring town.”

Calvin pulled out a newspaper featuring an article about Billy Ingram rescuing the boy from the fire. “Billy’s” picture was right next to it. Chad was glad he hadn’t known she was Billy when she went off with Sam, Tim and Jeff to the next town. He would have had a heart attack.

“What does this have to do with the Senator’s murder?” Chad wondered.

“I have reason to believe that this man is really Kate Tanner, the late Senator’s daughter. She has recently been seen in her hometown but quickly disappeared after going to the police and testifying to the murder of her parents. Her testimony is the key to getting the suspects she mentioned safely behind bars for good.”

“Why would she hide?”

“Well, she claims that she witnessed the murders and the killers saw her.”

“Weren’t they arrested?”

“Yes but she still hasn’t returned. Of course, there is no concrete evidence that link one of the men who was arrested to the murders.”

“Why did you come to me?”

“I heard that you just hired a new farmhand and that farmhand comes with a sister. The name of the farmhand is Billy Ingram and his sister is Kate. I happened to see both Billy Ingram and Kate Tanner on the same day she told the police what happened. I haven’t seen either one since. I think it’s more than a coincidence both people would appear and disappear at the same time, don’t you?”

Calvin took out a picture of Kate dressed in a long black gown at a symphony. She stood with an older man and his wife. The caption beneath the picture read: *Senator Tanner out on the town with his wife and daughter.* Chad was struck by how beautiful Kate looked in her formal wear. *And she looks happy here.* The death of her parents had taken some of that innocence in her smile. He didn’t regret meeting her though he did regret the circumstances that led to their meeting.

“There are several people in town who say that Billy Ingram is a farmhand here and he has a sister who looks just like this woman. They also said you married this woman on Saturday,” Calvin continued.

“When I read the papers, it said that there’s another person who may be involved in the murders, and that person hasn’t been caught yet,” Chad slowly stated.

“Senator Rich. I’ve been following up on him too.”

“Isn’t it likely that he’ll be looking for her if she’s crucial to the murder investigations?”

“I knew the late Senator and his wife. I wouldn’t wish to put his daughter’s life in danger.”

“But aren’t you doing that by searching for her? There could be someone following you.”

“I suspect that she can explain the link between Senator Rich

and the murders.”

“And if she can’t?”

“If she couldn’t, then why would she tell Detective Walter that he was behind them?”

Chad finally decided that it was a bad idea to tell the reporter that Kate was in the barn. As her husband, it was his duty to protect her. If Calvin tracked her down, then Senator Rich would be able to also.

“She doesn’t look familiar,” Chad lied.

“She may be wearing a disguise,” the man thoughtfully stated. “Does Billy Ingram look familiar?”

“He was my farmhand. I sent him back to Kentucky to make things right with his wife. He and Kate Tanner are not the same person.”

“Then may I see your wife? She is Billy Ingram’s sister.”

Chad was ready to protest when he saw Kate who was dressed up as her Lois character. Instead of looking unkempt, her wig was neatly combed. She had trimmed some bangs and had two pigtails. She wore the same blue shirt and brown skirt she had on earlier that day. *She looks wonderful no matter how she’s dressed.*

“She’s right there.” Chad pointed to her as she walked over to them.

Calvin looked at her. “Good morning, ma’am.” He tipped his hat to her.

“Howdy,” she replied, using an accent that Chad didn’t recognize. “Are you here about the farmhand position?”

“No, I’m not. I won’t trouble you with the details of my visit. I can see that I should be on my way.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help you,” Chad responded.

Calvin got back on the horse, nodded to them and left.

Chad breathed a sigh of relief.

“How did he find me?” She turned to him.

“He saw Billy Ingram’s picture in the paper and said he saw you and Billy on the same day in Virginia and figured you were the same person.”

She closed her eyes for a moment as she shook her head. “I didn’t realize anyone in Virginia would care about a North Dakota

small town paper.”

“Apparently, news of your heroic effort reached Virginia.”

“This isn’t what I hoped for. Senator Rich is still searching for me. If Calvin York tracked me down, then it stands to reason that the Senator will too.”

“He said he was a friend of your father’s.”

“Yes, he was.”

“Do you trust him?”

“I’m afraid to tell anyone that I’m here.”

He could understand that. “Well, I told him I had no idea where you were.”

She hugged him. “Maybe I should go back. At least, Derek and Dave are still in prison, and I can use the police force for protection.”

“That would probably be best if a reporter found you.”

“You’ll come with me, won’t you?”

He smiled at her. “Of course, I will. It will be good to leave this place. I need to go to town and talk to the Montgomeries about selling this place to them. Once the sale is finalized, we’ll be ready to leave for Virginia.”

“I promise you that you’ll enjoy my hometown much more than this place.”

“I know that is true because you’ll be with me.” He kissed her. “Let’s go back to the loft and finish what we started.”

* * * * *

Chad didn’t want Kate to go with him to town since he couldn’t be sure that Calvin York had left the area. As soon as he arrived in town, he was glad he chose to keep Kate safely at the farm. He saw Calvin talking to a couple of people. He considered that he and Kate couldn’t leave town soon enough. It looked like Calvin wasn’t going to stop until he pulled off Kate’s red wig and properly identified her.

He tied Reliable up to a post and knocked on Sam Montgomery’s apartment door.

“If you’re looking for Sam and Tim, they are trying to talk

Lacy out of letting Chris court her,” someone informed him.

He looked over and saw Jeff.

“Is that why no one came out to the farm this morning?” he asked Jeff.

“Yes. They consider this an emergency.”

“Are they at Mrs. Montgomery’s house?”

“Yes.”

Chad thanked him and went to the house. Sure enough, Sam and Tim were giving Lacy all kinds of reasons as to why she shouldn’t pursue a relationship with Chris. They stood around her on the porch. She sat in the swing and was sewing some buttons onto her father’s shirt.

“You can’t trust a Walker,” Sam told her. “He’s Chad’s brother. Can you imagine what he will be like?”

She glared at her brothers. “Georgia spent all her time making sure no man would take an interest in me, and now that she’s gone, you two have taken over. I’m sick of being single. I want to get married and settle down. No one in this town will take note of me since you threaten them. Chris is the first one who hasn’t been intimidated by you.”

“That’s not true,” Tim argued. “We were willing to have you marry Billy.”

“And we all know how well that turned out,” she snapped. “Let me live my own life. I’m twenty-four. I’m not a child anymore.”

Chad cleared his throat.

They looked startled to see him.

He forced himself not to roll his eyes. Once again, he felt invisible.

“What are you doing here?” Sam grumbled. “Haven’t you done enough damage by marrying Kate so that your brother would pursue Lacy?”

He decided to ignore Sam’s sour mood. “Kate and I will be moving back to her hometown. Who will buy the farm?” He looked at the stunned faces.

“You can’t be serious,” Sam scoffed.

Billy happened to walk by and stopped when he saw them.

“Good morning, gentlemen. Lacy.” He turned to Chad. “Shouldn’t you be enjoying your bride?”

“Mr. Calvin York paid a visit out to the farm this morning,” Chad informed him. “In light of that fact, we feel it prudent to sell the farm and go back to her home.”

Billy didn’t hide his surprise. “Mr. York is in town? I just left the inn, so that must explain why I haven’t bumped into him yet.”

“What would a reporter want with Kate or Billy?” Tim wondered.

“He wants to do an article about the rescue,” Chad lied. “Anyway, I came to sell a farm. Are you interested or not?”

“How much?” Billy asked.

Chad hadn’t expected her brother to be interested in the property.

“You can’t sell it to an outsider,” Tim protested. “That farm used to belong to our grandfather.”

Chad told them how much the property and everything on it was worth.

“This place doesn’t even belong to you,” Sam argued, clearly upset. “You married into it.”

“We’ve already been through this with the lawyer. It belongs to me,” Chad replied. He wasn’t going to be intimidated into handing the property over to them.

To his surprise, Kate’s brother spoke up. “I’ll offer you 80% of what you’re asking.”

“Make it 90% and you have a deal.”

He smiled. “I’m impressed with you, Chad. Alright. You just sold this place.”

“Why do you want it?” Sam asked him.

“I know a couple of men back home who are interested in owning a farm or ranch out west. This place can handle crops and animals. It’s perfect. I can sell it for twice the amount I paid for it.”

Chad didn’t mind her brother’s intention to sell it for a profit. He was intrigued by the man’s good business sense. It had been a long time since he came across someone who was skilled in the art of making money.

“Fine,” Tim anxiously said. “We’ll buy it.”

“Are you trying to outbid me?” her brother wondered, seeming to be amused.

“We can come up with the money if we take out a loan.”

“Then you’ll have to pay the full asking price,” Chad responded.

“But you were just going to let it go to him for 90% of the total price.”

“Alright. Paul gets it.”

“No! Wait.” Tim looked at Sam who nodded. “We’ll give you full asking price.”

“Perhaps I should offer an additional \$200,” her brother thoughtfully commented.

“What?” Tim was ready to panic.

Her brother shrugged. “Competition can be a fruitful enterprise.”

“\$300 more.” Tim stared at her brother to see if he would make a better offer.

“Your desperation is showing. It’s unbecoming at the business table.”

“What do you say, Chad?” Sam glared at him.

Chad nodded. “You got a sale. Let’s go to the bank and make it official.”

Her brother chuckled at Tim and Sam. “Your entire family is so amusing.”

The brothers didn’t find his comment half as amusing as he found them.

“I think it’s time I got out of town,” Billy decided. Looking at Chad, he asked, “Do you think Kate will need me for anything before I go?”

Chad could understand why Billy didn’t want to stick around with Calvin in the area. “No, I don’t think so. We’ll most likely be heading out soon ourselves.”

Once the sale was final, he didn’t have any reason to stick around.

After Billy said good-bye to everyone and left, Chad waited for Sam and Tim to walk with him to the bank. Lacy looked relieved to be rid of her brothers.

On their way to the bank, Sam and Tim grumbled about Lacy's willingness to be with Chris.

"He's going to take her to California," Sam muttered to Tim.

"And there's nothing we can do to stop her," Tim replied.

"Just be glad she found someone who's interested in her," Chad interrupted. "I may not like my brother, but even he will be better for her than you two have been."

They didn't respond. They simply followed him into the bank. He was looking forward to the life that waited for him and Kate in Virginia.

Chapter 21

Kate spent her time alone taking care of some of the chores on the farm after she took off her wig. She was familiar enough with Chad's routine so she knew what to do. It was afternoon when she saw someone approaching the property. She had just taken Buck out to the pasture so he could be free from the confinement of the stable. She hesitated as she watched the person ride towards the house. She had seen him before, though not in this town. It wasn't even Calvin York.

She watched in horror as the man turned towards the barn. It was Senator Rich! She knew she didn't have a choice. She didn't have time to get Buck, so she quickly saddled Star and got on her. The animal seemed spooked but obeyed her command to walk forward. As soon as Star was out of the barn, Ethan saw her. He didn't say anything, but she saw his gun.

She urged Star to run. The horse immediately sprang to action. Fortunately, she knew the fields well enough so she wouldn't get lost in them. She ignored the wind which blew the bottom of her skirt up. Now wasn't the time to think of her modesty. Her heart beat furiously in her chest as he called out her name. She knew how he tracked her down. He had seen the same article that Calvin did and narrowed down where to find her.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw that he was gaining on

her. She commanded Star to go faster. She gritted her teeth and tightened her hold on the reins when the horse almost bucked her off. "Steady, Star," she told the horse. "Steady."

Realizing he was going to catch up to her if she didn't do something drastic, she turned Star to the right and led her to the cattle fence. She was going to spook some cattle, but there was little she could do about that. "Faster," she ordered Star. "I need you to go faster." Again, Star protested and tried to buck her off. *No wonder Chad didn't want me to ride this horse. She's unstable.* Well, there was no sense in getting off of her now.

She ignored the sound of a gunshot as she braced herself for the jump. Star began to slow down as they approached the fence, so Kate prompted her to go faster. Since Star was reluctant, Kate leaned forward and pressed harder into Star's sides with her feet so that she overcame her hesitation. It worked. Star picked up the pace. At Kate's command, the horse jumped. Every time a horse jumped, for one moment, Kate felt as if she was suspended in the air. When she landed, she almost fell off the horse but quickly steadied herself. It was a good thing she worked with wild horses in the past. This horse was incredibly temperamental and irritable.

She quickly looked over her shoulder and saw that the jump had slowed Ethan down, so she continued her rapid pace. She pulled the left rein so Star swerved to miss a cow. She had to lead Star around several cows that were too dumb to move out of the way. The sounds of gunshots weren't comforting but she forced herself to keep riding Star. She was quickly approaching the other side of the fence. She saw that Ethan had lost considerable ground. He was further behind. *I can't let my guard down yet.* She had just gained an advantage. She didn't want to lose momentum. She took a deep breath.

"One more jump, Star. You can do it." She gritted her teeth and dug her heels into Star's sides. The horse neighed and shook her body, but Kate tightened her hold on the reins and stayed firmly in place. At the crucial moment, Star leapt in the air and expertly landed on the other side of the fence.

"Kate! Get off the horse!"

She turned her head to the source of the voice. Chad was approaching her from the right.

“I can’t. Senator Rich is behind me!” she yelled back.

She saw Ethan and his horse jump over the fence.

“I’ll get him. You get off that animal!” Chad ordered as he swung the rope at his side.

She knew it would startle Star too much if she abruptly pulled back on the reins so she settled for gradually slowing the horse down. She nearly fell off the horse from shock when she saw Calvin approaching them. What was he doing there? She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Chad lasso Ethan around his chest. Star’s heavy panting matched her own. They were both exhausted after the stressful ride. She stopped Star and got off of her.

She noted that Ethan fell off of his horse but the rope held him by Reliable’s side. Calvin bent down to pick up the gun that had fallen out of Ethan’s hand. Calvin had a cloth in his hand so he wouldn’t get his fingerprints on it. Ethan’s horse slowed to a stop. She realized that she was shaking. She didn’t know what was worse: being on Star or running from Ethan.

Chad held the rope around Ethan’s chest. He said something to Ethan who grabbed the reins to the white horse before Chad led him over to Kate. “You can ride his horse,” Chad told her.

She eyed Ethan warily but got on the horse.

Ethan frowned at her.

Chills crawled up her spine. She looked away from him.

Calvin reached them. “I saw him shooting at her,” he told Chad. He looked over at her. “I saw the Senator board the train and followed him here. I figured it was a matter of time before he found you. Kate, did you actually think I would endanger your life by revealing your hiding place before the whole world? I was trying to find you so I could tell you that I found evidence that Dave Reinhart, Derek Robin and Ethan Rich planned your parents’ murders.”

“Why didn’t you tell the police?” she wondered.

“I tried but they said it wasn’t enough. They wanted to verify that they went through with the plan. Without you there with me, there wasn’t enough to convict Senator Rich.”

“What about my brother’s evidence? He sent some damaging pictures in for the police to investigate.”

“Again, we need you to imprison the Senator. There are too

many influential people working under him who will turn a blind eye to what your brother and I found. But a jury can't dismiss your testimony, and now that your husband and I have witnessed him actively trying to kill you, the case is airtight."

She hadn't realized her part in the ordeal was crucial to convicting the criminals. "I'm sorry, Mr. York. I assumed you wanted to write another article that you would gain publicity for."

"I assumed the same," Chad added.

"Fortunately, there's been no harm done." Calvin smiled.

Chad grabbed the reins to Star and led everyone back to the barn.

* * * * *

After careful consideration, Chad decided to give Star to Burton who would keep her out in the fields so no one would ever ride her again. They also turned Senator Rich in to the local police who escorted him to Virginia. She was relieved the ordeal was over and she could go back home. Chad adjusted quickly to his new life, and he started his own accounting firm. She could tell he was happier with his new job than he had been with farming. She was delighted to see how well he got along with her family who was grateful to him for protecting her.

Three months later, Chris and Lacy sent her and Chad a letter announcing that they had married and that they had found Christ and wished to apologize for the way they acted in the past. Kate was happy to see Chad and Chris resolve their past differences.

Two months after that, Kate found herself sitting in a courtroom with Chad as they waited for the jury to announce their verdict on the murder of her parents. He held her hand to help ease her nerves. It had been a trying experience to go before the public and relive that horrible night over and over in the courtroom.

She looked over and saw that Ethan was sitting stiffly in his seat. Dave had confessed to the crime and Derek was convicted based on the button that Detective Walter had found. Ethan, however, had remained harder to convict, for he had some notable people who vouched for him during the trial. Detective Walter was sure that Dave's confession would be the final evidence needed to

convict Ethan. She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

The head juror stood up to pronounce the decision, and Ethan stood up to listen to him.

“We, the jury, find Senator Ethan Rich, guilty of murder,” the man said. “We sentence him to prison for life.”

Chad squeezed her hand and a few tears fell from her eyes. She felt a mixture of feelings. She was relieved and sad. It was good to have the trial behind her and Ethan, Dave and Derek safely behind bars, but it was sad that money had played such an important role in the men’s lives that they killed in order to make more of it.

Four months later, Kate found herself in the hospital giving birth. Olivia was in the room with her to provide support. Chad, Billy, and Paul were in the waiting room. Kate and Chad’s friends would come by later to congratulate them on the birth of their child.

“It’s a boy!” the doctor happily announced as he handed her the baby.

Tears came to her eyes as she held him in her arms. Out of the stress over the past year, her child’s birth was a welcome and joyous event.

“I’ll go tell the men,” Olivia excitedly stated as she ran out of the room.

It wasn’t too long before the doctor opened the door to visitors.

Chad looked proud to be a father as she handed their baby to him.

“You’re stuck with me now,” she joked.

He grinned. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.” He bent down to kiss her.

“So, have you come up with a name?” Billy wondered as he peered over Chad’s shoulder to look at his nephew.

She looked at Chad. “Do you still want to go with Murphy?”

He nodded. “It seems fitting to name him after your father.”

“Well, he’ll be adored by all of us,” Olivia replied.

“Now we’ll have to pick out a different name when our little one is born,” Paul mused.

Kate glanced at Paul and Olivia. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Olivia shrugged. “We didn’t want to ruin your spotlight. I just found out last week that we’re expecting.” She shook her head. “Paul was supposed to wait for another month before saying anything.”

“I got excited,” he admitted.

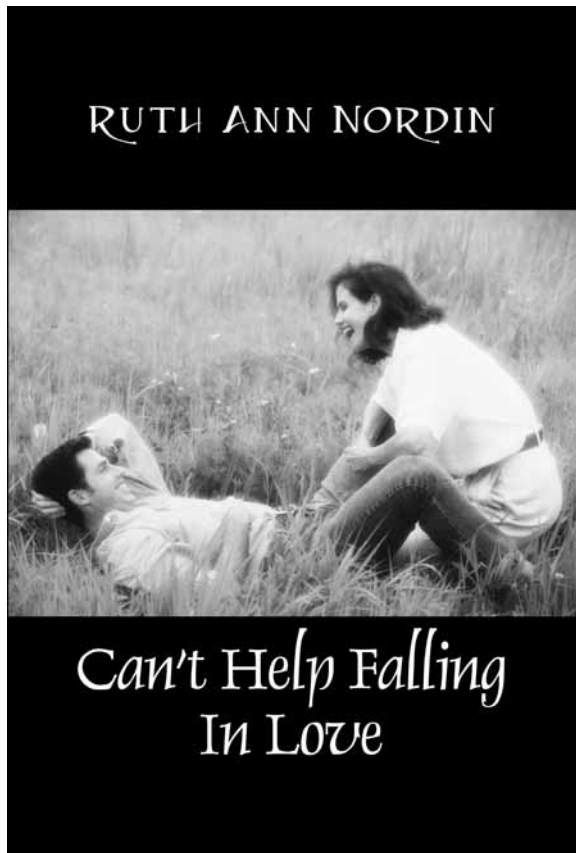
“It’s great news!” Kate told her. “Our children will be close in age. I think they’ll be good friends. We should celebrate.”

“There are certainly plenty of reasons to celebrate,” Chad commented.

She placed her hand on his arm. “You’re right. There are.”

It was time to look forward, and she reasoned that the future held many good things for her and Chad and the rest of her family.

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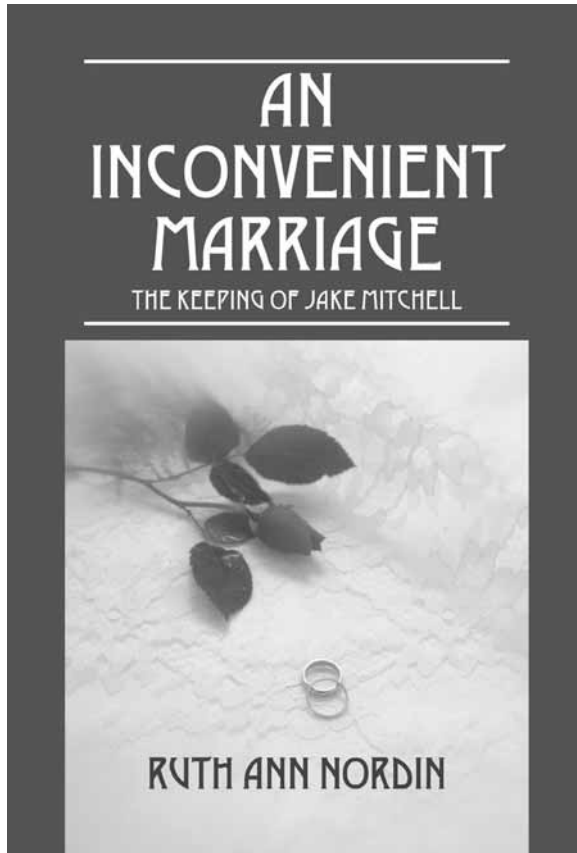


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