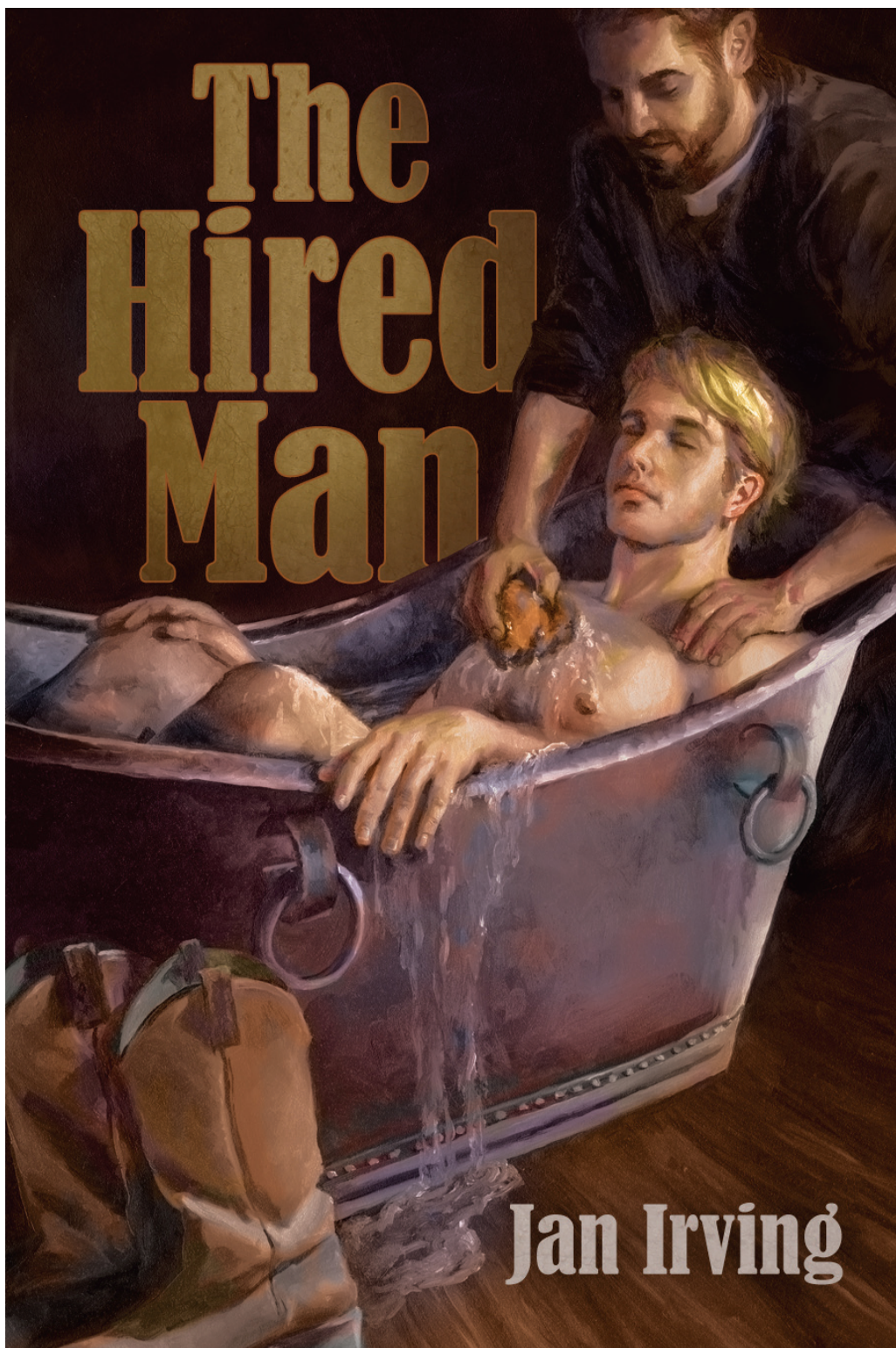


The Hired Man

Jan Irving



The Hired Man

Jan Irving



Dreamspinner Press

Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

The Hired Man
Copyright © 2009 by Jan Irving

Cover Art by Paul Richmond <http://www.paulrichmondstudio.com>

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Dreamspinner Press, 4760 Preston Road, Suite 244-149, Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

ISBN: 978-1-61581-070-3

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition
October, 2009

eBook edition available
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-071-0

In memory of my cousin Kathy,
remembering summers
I put flowers in your hair,
and my friend Betagoddess.

Also for Carolyn Topol, Mickie B.Ashling,
Laurie Ballantyne-Gaska, Kitty,
Armandyouidiot, Aschicca, Camjakefan,
Cay_wylde, Foreverbm, Habemus, Kata, Kim,
Missus Grace, Mahorabelle, Lyn, Trintiff,
Gabrielle, and vikingprincess.
Thank you again, gang!

CHAPTER 1

1898

“BRYN Morgan is back in town!” Mrs. Robson exclaimed as she entered Reverend Ian Kenyon’s kitchen balancing fresh eggs and a pail from milking. The milk suffered from her need to share the latest gossip, slopping on the battered wood of the farm table and pooling in clouds.

Ian looked up, feigning interest. It was like slipping on his clerical collar, just a mask he wore because he felt as empty as the pockets of an old coat.

“Bryn?” He blinked, having no idea who his housekeeper was talking about.

“You know, Bryn Morgan, that little boy who never had any shoes? His father was a disgrace, the way he treated that child! Why, it was almost as if he hated him.” Mrs. Robson sat down, shoving aside the fresh milk. She reached for a cloth to clean up the mess, but was too intent on sharing to pay much attention to her housework. “He’s back from... you know.”

Ian remembered a thin, defiant boy with angry blue eyes, bruises, dirty ragged clothes, and shaggy bronze-colored hair that used to go blond at the curling tips every summer.

Bryn. He’d been sent to prison.

“I can’t believe that no-account had the gall to come back to our town!” Mrs. Robson continued, shaking her head. “No decent folk will have anything to do with him, I can tell you that.”

“Where else would he go? He has kin here,” Ian was roused to point out mildly.

“Kin? Drunken sot of a father with a heavy hand. Some family!”

Ian nodded. “I agree. Seems like that young man never had a chance. His father....” Now Ian drifted, thinking that a father should do anything for his child. Anything. Christ!

“Reverend, you are such a good and sweet man,” Mrs. Robson continued, seemingly unaware that Ian was lost in one of his dark reveries. “You just don’t see that some people even the good Lord ain’t got no time for. Bryn Morgan is a lost cause. Anyone who would force himself on a woman!”

Ian had had enough of the conversation, though it had briefly penetrated his apathy. He climbed to his feet, pulling on his suspenders over his shirt. “Bryn spent most of his time hiding in the woods, I seem to remember. And why would he need to rape Ruthie Bourne? Didn’t she work in the saloon for a while after he was sent up? Seems like she would have spread herself for free.” Then Ian belatedly blushed. His language had been highly inappropriate for a lady! He blamed it on his preoccupation. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Robson. I should not have been so... frank.”

“Well, I never!”

Ian forced himself not to smile, since he was fairly sure that Mrs. Robson probably rarely did, judging from Mr. Robson’s sour disposition.

“I didn’t mean to fight with you,” he made himself say contritely. He remembered how grateful he’d been to her when she’d come to nurse his wife before their baby was born. Ian had been so busy back then, on fire to spread the word and help his parishioners.

“You spend so much of your time in your church you can’t see the wolves for the sheep!”

A quick swipe of the table and then the screen door slammed as she left him to go out and do more chores.

Relieved to be alone again, Ian picked up what he'd been secretly fingering when she'd burst in with the latest gossip: a baby's pale blue christening gown.

ON SUNDAY, Mrs. Robson was baking pies with preserves she'd put up the year before.

Ian could smell them as he went out on the farmhouse porch and sat on the rocking chair.

His apple and pear trees were in blossom. A few daffodils his wife Janet had planted had survived two winters and were sprouting in fairy rings around trees and shrubs.

The house had been built by the Chalmers family, but Ian's father had purchased it and Ian had lived here most of his life, preferring it to Boston, where his cousins chose to live. It was two stories high, still freshly painted light gray with white trim, as it had been just before Ian's wedding. In the parlor was a square bay window with diamond-paned glass ordered all the way from New York City, which Mrs. Robson kept polished with vinegar and water. A little lover's balcony perched above it, which opened off the largest bedroom.

On the second floor, Janet's room was furnished with formal, overstuffed furniture, but Ian never went in there now. He and Mrs. Robson lived in the large kitchen with worn wooden floors, and Ian used the smaller front bedroom upstairs.

The other three were empty.

HE MUST have fallen asleep in the rare warm spring sunshine, because he roused when the step up to the porch creaked and he saw a young man wearing tattered, dirty clothes and sporting a shiner. Blue eyes shone hungry from prison-pale skin.

“Bryn,” Ian greeted the boy automatically. He must be in his early twenties now; he’d been sent to prison when he was eighteen and had been gone about four years.

Bryn muttered something to the hat clenched in his hands.

Ian leaned forward. “What was that?”

“Came looking for a job,” Bryn shocked Ian by asking.

Ian’s eyes widened. Bryn Morgan wanted a job? His father had never earned a decent living. All Ian remembered of the boy before he’d been sent up was that he shunned people, living wild in the woods, unless he got a hold of some whiskey and made trouble in town.

Bryn must have taken his pause for rejection, because his thin shoulders hunched defensively. “Won’t bother you none—can see you don’t want me here.”

“Just a moment, boy!” Ian growled. Damnation! The truth was he didn’t want Bryn Morgan on his land, working for him. He was trouble, and Ian could barely get dressed and work the farm some days when the depression stretched on, endless as gray skies over the prairie. He climbed to his feet and ran a hand over his neatly trimmed beard. What to do? “I just woke up, is all.”

Bryn looked away, and Ian saw bruises on his white skin through the holes in his clothing. The spring day was chilly if a body wasn’t in direct sunlight, but Bryn wasn’t wearing a coat.

“Farming is hard work, not like—” Ian cut himself off, since he had no idea what Bryn had done in prison. “I have to prepare the fields soon,” Ian continued, giving himself some time. Truthfully, Ian didn’t like farming much, but this was good land, and he did his best to see it was put to use. “Know anything about that?”

“I helped Mr. Jacobs for two seasons on his cattle ranch before I...” Bryn took a deep breath and his eyes flashed. “Before I went to prison.”

It would be a mistake to hire this boy, Ian thought. But what he said aloud was, “Ranching is different from farming, but... I haven’t found anyone yet. If you want the job...”

“You’re hiring me ’cause you feel sorry for me, Reverend?” Bryn growled.

Ian stiffened, his patience wearing thin, already regretting offering this angry young man the work. He’d been right; Bryn Morgan was trouble, and he got under Ian’s skin. “Yes, partly that,” he admitted. “But partly because...” He swallowed, uncomfortable mentioning the fresh bruising. “Never you mind. Do you want the job or not?”

Bryn looked on the verge of telling him to go to hell, but then he bit his lip and color flamed in his thin, pale cheeks. “I want the job,” he mumbled, eyes down.

THE next morning, Ian was trimming his beard in his bedroom vanity mirror. He looked out the second-floor window when he glimpsed movement outside. He rinsed his blade in the warm water Mrs. Robson provided fresh every day and leaned close to the pane to take in the view.

A slight figure, hunched against the cool morning wind, was leaning against the apple tree.

It was Bryn Morgan. Apparently he had nowhere else to go. Pity moved in Ian’s chest, and he tried to shove it aside. Hell, he’d hired the boy and just knew it had been a mistake. He preferred to drift through his days, lost in memory, in hating himself, but from the moment Bryn’s name had been mentioned, Ian had been moved to defend him.

“Huh,” Ian grunted.

He pulled out his clerical collar and put it on, seeing reflected a man with dark, untamed hair in need of a trim from Mrs. Robson, a beard, and wintry hazel eyes looking back at him.

Some days he just wanted to wear regular clothing, but folks came by at all times needing comfort, or he could be summoned to tend to the sick or dying....

No one but he knew what a meaningless gesture it was.

Ashes to ashes.

Tears pricked his eyes, so he closed them, shaking his head.

He had better go downstairs and get that boy out of the wind. At least he could do that much.

“COFFEE?” Ian couldn’t let Bryn go without food. He had a feeling the young man would shove aside his concern.

Bryn nodded, gaze on the floor.

Mrs. Robson wouldn’t bring coffee to the ex-convict, so Ian did, and also a plate of thick bread with cherry preserves. Bryn took it automatically, looking slightly startled that Ian would care enough to push the issue of food on him.

Ian invited Bryn to come sit with him and Mrs. Robson, but Bryn only shook his head, slouching against the wall, watching as Ian said grace.

AFTER breakfast, Ian was moved to say to Mrs. Robson on his way out to show Bryn around, “He wasn’t so bad.”

“He certainly watched you, even tried to mimic your fine table manners!” Mrs. Robson noted calmly, stacking dishes in the sink for washing.

“He did?” Ian blinked.

“But then, he used to sneak over to the church before he was sent up. I saw him looking in the windows some days when you gave service.”

Ian frowned. “I wonder why he did that?”

“CHICKENS can be mean,” Ian instructed, rubbing the back of his neck.

“I know how to collect eggs!”

Ian sighed. Bryn had been like this all morning. It was clear he had no experience farming or caring for animals, but he kept insisting he knew what he was doing.

The milk cow had kicked him. Daisy, Mrs. Robson’s beloved plow horse, had pushed out of her stall and nearly trampled him, and now here were the chickens and Bryn had so far broken three eggs and his hands were bleeding from being pecked by the agitated hens.

Bryn wasn’t a good hire. He didn’t listen, and his walls were so thick that he was defensive to even the mildest criticism. It was almost as if he wanted and expected to be fired.

“Look here, this little guy never got eaten....” Ian reached down and lifted a tiny golden chick in his big palm, deciding to teach Bryn another morning about collecting eggs. It would keep, and they had eggs enough.

Bryn’s tense expression eased. “Is he soft? He looks like a seed from a dandelion.”

“He’s very soft. Here.” Ian placed the chick on Bryn’s palm and watched wonder replace the stamped wariness on the young man’s face.

“I never touched anything so....” Bryn ran a finger tip over the little bird.

Ian noticed the boy’s shoulders relaxing. “Let’s tend to your hands.”

IAN returned with supplies from the house to find Bryn had managed to gather all the rest of the eggs without breaking any, but his hands were a mess.

“You did a nice job,” Ian praised, deciding not to lecture the young man, though his bleeding hands made Ian wince inwardly. “Will you let me clean your hands?”

Bryn shrugged.

“It might hurt some,” Ian warned, taking one and wiping it gently with alcohol.

Bryn didn’t even hiss from the pain. “Used to it.”

Ian felt his pity return. “Bryn’s a Welsh name,” he noted, thinking to make conversation.

Bryn’s eyes were fixed on the straw-covered floor. Finally he burst out, “Why’re you so nice to me? Is it because you’re a man of God?”

Ian hesitated. He didn’t know how to answer the simple question. He was used to lying to the townspeople about his lack of faith, but he didn’t want to deceive this strange, bitter youngster. He wasn’t even sure he could, since Bryn had old eyes in a young face.

“You’ve had it rough.”

He cleaned the other hand and noticed Bryn’s ribs sticking out through gaps in his shirt. “Will you eat with me later, Bryn?”

“You don’t want... more from me, do you?” Bryn suddenly demanded.

“More?” Ian blinked. “More what?”

Bryn flushed.

And suddenly Ian knew. “Oh.”

Bryn flashed a glance at Ian, hell burning in his eyes. It was something Ian had seen in his own shaving mirror this morning.

“No. I never...” Ian cleared his throat. “I’m merely... alone. It would be nice to have someone to eat with. That is all.”

Bryn shrugged. “I’ll think about it,” he mumbled.

Ian felt a strange despair as he watched Bryn snatch a broom and begin cleaning out the old straw in the henhouse. He sensed that Bryn carried still-bleeding wounds, just as Ian did.

But what could he do for Bryn? Ian couldn't heal himself. He could find no comfort. Yet he wanted to *give* comfort to this young man, he realized, startled.

"Was prison...." Ian fumbled. "I suppose it was bad."

Bryn paused in his sweeping to give Ian a derisive glance. "Yeah, it was bad!" He laughed in Ian's face.

Ian stroked his beard, watching Bryn sweep. He used to know what to say. How to help people.

Clearly, he had no idea how to reach this prickly young man.

CHAPTER 2

BRYN turned over onto his right side, which was less tender than the other. His bottom lip was still oozing blood, split from the back of his father's hand.

He shivered under the thin blanket, freshly washed in the creek. Something must have nested in it while he was sent up. To clean what few belongings he had, he'd broken through the skin of spring ice at the nearby stream and washed a pile of his old fixings, hands stinging from the cold so he could feel the bones ache.

But his blanket was clean.

You belong to me now, dirt-boy.

He closed his eyes, shoving aside Big Ed's words, choosing instead to listen to the rain hitting the tin roof, the sound he'd grown up with. It wasn't exactly comforting, since he'd never slept easy under that roof, but it wasn't prison, which was worse.

Hand propping up his chin, he thought about Reverend Ian in his big, warm, freshly painted house. He'd actually stolen a look inside the forbidden paradise of the formal parlor from the outside window while waiting to start his first day. The furniture had been like something in a fancy city room from a tintype, sweeping feathers in a vase, carpets with flowers on the floor instead of simple rag rugs, skirted tables dripping with lace.

He'd bet the Reverend slept on fine, sweet-smelling sheets. Bryn had seen Mrs. Robson putting them out on the line the day before yesterday. She clipped dried lavender stalks to each sheet so the scent would be burned into the cloth by the sun and fresh breeze.

Mrs. Robson....

Bryn played with the blanket, his mouth twisting.

She was just like the other townsfolk in Pitt Meadows, lifting her skirts away from Bryn whenever she saw him walking on the boardwalk in town, his shoulders hunched, head down so he didn't catch the scorn in people's eyes.

He reached for a bit of tobacco and rolled himself a smoke, drifting.

That old bitch! Did she think he liked being the town trash? But the Reverend, Ian, he hadn't been so bad. He was too serious, but he was gentle and he hadn't tried anything with Bryn. In fact, Bryn didn't think he'd rightly understood what Bryn had hinted at. He'd probably never imagined using another man.

The curling smoke reminded Bryn of the last time he'd wished to be light, insubstantial, away from this town, living in a place of daydreams.

Not *flesh*—

Blindly, he reached for one of his rocks on the crude table by his cot, grounding himself and shoving away something too painful to think on. Moving his fingers over the rough, irregular surface, concentrating....

Rocks.

Rocks had been around forever and endured whatever nature threw at them. Maybe to most people the ones that Bryn favored were ordinary, but they gave him comfort, chosen for a certain pleasing weight in his palm.

He called them his "thinking rocks."

Now he smoked and thought about his first days working.

Reverend Ian insisted Bryn eat two meals a day while working on his farm. Bryn stayed away from their table, of course, dreading sitting under Mrs. Robson's eye in his ragged clothes, but the Reverend brought him hot food out on the porch.

It was heaven, eating that food! Meat and dumplings. Stewed vegetables. And pie or cake! Sometimes he had a drink of cold milk, but often Reverend Ian brought out coffee and shared it quietly with him, as if he actually enjoyed Bryn's company.

Bryn knew that normal folk had words they shared for times like that, but hell if he knew any. So he stayed quiet even when Reverend Ian obviously wanted him to say something. He felt like a dummy, but it was safer to keep mum than give voice to some of the shit he thought about, like how the drifting clouds reminded him of flossy candy or how the patches on one of the cows looked like a string of daisies to his eye.

Or how he liked Ian's gentle and expressive large eyes, the way he looked at Bryn, as if wishing he could understand him. Before he'd been sent up, Bryn had often found himself stealing to the church on Sundays to watch through the windows when the handsome young minister gave service. Newly married, tall, with a gift for making stories from the Bible seem new, as if they were about people living right here in town and not folks from a long time ago, he'd been something.

Bryn shifted, aware of a new discomfort.

His body was stirring in a familiar and shameful fashion.

Damn! He'd thought he'd never feel that way again. He'd almost been glad! Frustrated tears pricked his eyes. He hadn't felt like a man for a long time. He figured it might be because he didn't get enough food.

The last time he'd felt a mild *something* was when Big Ed had him bent over in his cell, pushing his big penis into Bryn's backside. Big Ed hadn't been as bad as the rest; he used a bit of filched table butter so he didn't make Bryn sore, and sometimes when he was doing it, Bryn experienced something strange. A sparkle of feeling inside. He'd got so he didn't think it was so bad, even though he'd longed for someone to talk to.

Suddenly an image of Reverend Ian pushing Bryn against a tree and thrusting inside him popped into Bryn's head, and his eyes flared wide open. How could he think about the Reverend that way?

Ian was quiet, a good man, not like Bryn, who was just dirty trash. Yet his eyes had a sadness, like he was as beat up on the inside as Bryn was on the outside.

"HE'S not back yet," Mrs. Robson said, sounding worried as she stood safely barricaded from Bryn behind the screen door of Reverend Ian's farmhouse.

Battered hat in his hand, Bryn nodded, avoiding her critical gaze. She'd left his lunch on the porch, same as she had the day before. It had cooled, but his mouth watered at the thought of it. He couldn't wait to eat! It would be his last meal today, since he'd go home to no supper.

"I cleaned out the barn, Missus. I thought I might repair some of the fencing in the corral...."

She fidgeted before whispering something sharp under her breath. "Wait here. The Reverend has some nails in the lean-to you can use."

Bryn nodded. "Yes, Missus."

A moment later, the door creaked open and she handed him an old tin full of nails. He took it, careful not to touch her hand.

He expected to hear the slap of the screen door and the sound of the latch, but she paused, so he looked up, barely able to meet her gaze. Shamed color stung his cheeks. What must she think of him? Sometimes he hated her, thought of her as a bitch, but only because he knew she looked down on him, damn her! "I'm not...." He cleared his throat. "I didn't—"

"You aren't wearing a coat."

Bryn gave her a surprised look. "Haven't got one."

"I'll get you one of the Reverend's old ones."

“No, Missus!” He held her gaze for a minute. She wasn’t as tall as she seemed, but she held herself as if she was. Her white hair was pulled back in a neat bun, her face creased like old paper. “I couldn’t take no charity.”

“Huh. Well, hot coffee, then.”

Bryn nodded, grateful for that much. It was damn cold.

He waited, and, after a pause, she returned with his coffee, frowning as she handed it to him. “If I know him, Reverend Ian hasn’t slept or eaten.”

Bryn sipped his coffee, not sure why Mrs. Robson was sharing this with him. Usually she couldn’t wait to get away from him, as if his presence would infect her with something.

“I worry about him driving back here late, barely able to make out the road, he’ll be so tired.” She folded her hands. “He gives so much to the townsfolk. Too much, you ask me, but he’s what you call an idealist. Know what that is?”

“No, Missus.”

“It’s someone who believes the best of folks.” She gave Bryn a stern look. “Thinks they can change.”

Bryn turned and looked out at the horizon, which was nothing but the flat rustle of hills of dried wheat stalks and blue sky, huge and oppressive and pressing down on the people just trying to live. And yet his heart picked up at a new idea—maybe he could do something for Ian. Before he could crush it under his usual bitterness, he offered, “I’ll walk over to Widow Sherwood’s.”

MELISSA Sherwood finally succumbed to pneumonia in the early hours of the morning.

Ian reached out and gently closed her eyes. He bent his head and tried to pray for her, but the words rattled around in his head like loose pebbles. *Meaningless*. He couldn’t be happy that she was now with the Lord.

Someone touched his shoulder gently. He glanced up in surprise at Bryn Morgan, who looked uncomfortable and out of place in the sickroom.

"Mrs. Robson sent me out here to see if you needed anything," Bryn said softly. "And the Doc said I could come in to see you."

Ian frowned. "Come here into the light, Bryn," he ordered gruffly.

The young man backed away, but Ian lifted the oil lamp by the bed and strode closer. He used his free hand to lift Bryn's chin, taking in the fresh bruises blotching Bryn's pale skin.

"Damn him to hell!" Ian suddenly burst out.

Bryn's eyes widened with shock.

"Can't he leave you alone?" Ian demanded.

Bryn flushed. "It's not so bad. It'll be warm enough soon to camp out, and I'll build a little shelter in the woods," he confided.

"Bryn." Ian took a deep breath. "I'm not angry at you for the behavior of your father. I'm concerned, do you understand?"

Bryn's mouth tightened. "How come? I'm trash," he said flatly, his blue eyes daring Ian to deny it.

"You aren't trash! Don't let me hear you say that ever again, do you hear me? You're good at repairing fencing, and you seem to have an affinity for animals. Daisy's quite taken with you now," Ian said, referring to Mrs. Robson's plow horse.

Bryn shrugged.

"Come on, we better take the buggy into town. I need to let Gerald at the smithy know we need a coffin for Widow Sherwood."

BRYN handed the lantern to Ian after he climbed into the buggy and then took command of the reins. "You'll probably drive us into a gully or something, Reverend," he said firmly. "You look like you haven't slept for two days!"

Ian studied Bryn as they set off. The boy's mouth was bruised and his finely formed lips were cut. He had the clear imprint of a hand on one cheek in rainbow colors from bruised plum to scarlet.

Ian felt the familiar desire to reach Bryn, but how? He had lived such a different life from Bryn, and even though he was only a few years older, was shortly going to turn thirty years of age, he felt dried up, like an old man—except that this young man's dilemma touched him, roused him from apathy.

“The church social is this Sunday. Will you be there?”

HEARING Ian's offer, Bryn lifted a shoulder. He didn't want Ian to know he intended to get hold of some drink. He knew now he wasn't welcome with any of the townspeople, and whiskey helped. He didn't care about *anything* when he was liquored up. It didn't hurt so much to be Bryn Morgan.

“You'd be welcome to join my picnic,” Ian offered hesitantly. “I'll have several single people as my guests.”

Bryn's eyes mocked Ian. “Yeah, I can just see any ladies wantin' me around. And the fellows would be hell-bent on beating the shit out of me, on account of what I did,” he noted bitterly.

“Bryn....” Ian cleared his throat but then seemed to lose his courage. He looked so tired he probably wasn't up to a long conversation. And Bryn knew he wasn't easy to talk to, prickly about some shit. Again, he felt regret he didn't know how to talk to folks, because he'd like to talk to Ian.

They continued the drive in a silence that pulsed with secrets and unsaid words, but also, oddly, understanding.

REVEREND Ian dozed.

Bryn looked over at the other man, taking in his face as he leaned against the side of the buggy, dark hair rumpled boyishly so

he looked younger than a man in his late twenties. Bryn had a strange impulse to cup his face, touch that neatly trimmed beard.

Bryn studied his hands, remembering Ian holding a tiny yellow chick in his palm.

Gentle.

“...WHAT?” Ian blinked in surprise as the buggy came to a halt, and Bryn climbed down and walked around to Ian’s side.

“Back at the house already?” Ian saw Bryn had brought him home. “But—”

“You can see about her coffin in the morning, Reverend Ian. I’m sure Widow Sherwood won’t mind.”

Ian stumbled climbing down, so Bryn gripped his arm. “Come on,” he said. Dazed, Ian let Bryn guide him into the kitchen, hearing the screen door slap, and then up the stairs.... “Which one...?”

“The last door on the right,” Ian said, rubbing his eyes. He couldn’t believe how tired he was.

The door creaked open, and there was his neatly made bed. He fell back on it and heard Bryn laugh. “Your boots!”

Bryn pulled them off and then yanked an extra spread from the hope chest and laid it over Ian. For a moment, Ian saw him looking down at him, face not so tight or angry in the moonlight, but soft.

“Night, Ian,” Bryn said.

CHAPTER 3

MRS. Robson rolled out pie dough, hair loose from her bun, skin jiggling loosely on her arms.

“Five more and that’ll see it,” she told Reverend Ian, breathless, high color in her cheeks. He liked seeing her like this. His wife had never worked in the kitchen if she could avoid it, but Ian liked observing Mrs. Robson with her baking, watching the lattice on piecrusts being constructed or dumplings being added to stew. And lately he’d been proud of the offerings of his table because of Bryn’s appreciation.

Even Mrs. Robson sometimes softened, seeing the young man fall on his food as if he were in heaven, tasting, even sometimes pausing and touching a bubbling bit of fruit oozing from under the crust of a freshly baked tart.

“Mmm.” Ian got to his feet, putting his hands in his pockets and walking to the screen door.

Outside, he saw Bryn sitting under the apple tree, eating his dinner.

“Stopped eating on the porch,” Mrs. Robson noted. “Probably best that boy knows his place.”

Ian frowned. “His place?”

“Don’t give me that look, Reverend. You live in the world we all wish existed. I live smack dab in the real one!”

“I think my invitation to the picnic made him uncomfortable.” Ian rubbed the back of his neck. What to do for Bryn? He ached to help him, but he only failed.

“Sure it did!” She stopped working her dough and walked over to Ian, tentatively putting a hand on his arm. “Folks don’t want him there. You know it and I know it, and nothing is ever going to change that.”

“I’m sure he didn’t rape that girl,” Ian said.

Mrs. Robson shrugged. “Maybe, but it don’t matter. He’s been to prison; that changes a man.”

Remembering Bryn’s fear that Ian wanted something *more*, Ian swallowed, feeling sick. “He was just a boy when he was sent up.”

Mrs. Robson sighed. “Go talk to him if you have to.”

Ian raised a brow.

“If I know you, Ian Kenyon, you’ve taken him under your wing.”

“You disapprove.”

“Don’t matter; it’s who you are. And maybe... might take your mind off things.” Mrs. Robson turned back to her pies. “Why don’t you smoke that smelly pipe out there with him? You know I hate it when you use it here. Have to air the house for days.”

IAN hesitated when Bryn glanced up at him, blue eyes glittering. His bronze hair was ruffled from the spring breeze, his shirt missing a few buttons so he looked like he’d just crawled out of someone’s bed, wild.

Ian swallowed, wondering why he’d had such a thought. It was probably Bryn’s unsavory reputation.

“The corral is looking good,” Ian noted, sliding into comfortable talk about the farm. What else could he and Bryn talk about?

Bryn nodded, sipping his milk. After that first appraisal, he kept his gaze fixed on the ground.

Ian sat down and went through the motions of fixing his pipe. It gave him time to consider. “Mrs. Robson says I was too idealistic, asking you to come to the picnic.”

“She’s right,” Bryn immediately agreed.

“But *I* want you there.”

“Why?” Bryn gave Ian a startled glance.

Ian frowned, lighting his pipe. He couldn’t think of what to say. All the empty phrases of his profession seemed like shit. “I don’t know exactly,” he admitted. “You don’t expect...” Bryn was staring at him now, and Ian flushed, but then he admitted what he had not said to another living soul. “I’m not a good man.”

Bryn laughed. “You are a good man. Damnation! You have no idea.”

Ian blinked, thinking of all the white lies, the empty words, but then he met Bryn’s gaze. “It’s true I have very little idea what it is like for a man in prison,” he said, wishing as always to understand Bryn, even when he knew he’d fall short. Why did he keep trying?

Bryn’s mouth tightened. “I know you don’t. You’re an innocent man, Ian.”

Ian cleared his throat, conscious that this was the second time Bryn had called him by his Christian name. It felt... intimate somehow. He shook his head, shoving aside the thought as fanciful.

“I like all these daffodils,” Bryn said, gesturing toward Janet’s legacy. “Little rings around each tree.”

Ian nodded. “My wife, Janet—she liked pretty things.”

“I was sorry to hear she died. And, uh, your son.”

Ian’s eyes stung as he thought of his little boy. “Truth is, helping you takes my mind off things. He, uh...” Ian closed his eyes. “He would have been three the day I hired you.”

Bryn’s fists balled as if he wanted to do something but was helpless to think of anything. It was a feeling Ian could relate to.

The silence dragged, at first heavy, while Ian just tried to go on breathing, but then it inexplicably eased. *I am understood*, he thought.

And Bryn said, “I might come to your picnic, Reverend.”

Ian nodded, ducking his head. He realized that the picnic, which had been yet another empty exercise in pretense for him, now had some meaning.

Bryn might come. It might do Bryn some good.

SATURDAY night, Bryn got hold of some moonshine. He took a jug up into the hills, walking past the shack where Dandelion lived... watching until he saw the lantern go out.

After, having nowhere else to go, he simply headed for Ian’s farm, sipping as he stared down at the hump of dark buildings breaking up the chilly spring starscape.

The lights were off in the house. Ian was probably in bed, sleeping, which was what all the good folk did this late at night.

Bryn remembered putting Ian to bed, seeing his room. His washing bowl and pitcher. The mirror and dresser. The neatly folded linens in the handsome walnut hope chest.

And Ian lying back on his bed while Bryn pulled off his boots, smiling up at Bryn.

THE day of the church social, Ian watched Mrs. Robson cut more pie to share with their guests. She was in her element, enjoying the gossip and the warm regard in which the townsfolk and farmers held her. No one messed with Mrs. Robson. She reigned supreme in the town, and her word carried as much weight as Ian’s.

It struck Ian how much she belonged.

And how much he felt on the outside, not because people didn’t want to include him, but because of his own unhappiness. It

ached under his breastbone, though he knew no one wanted to see it... except Bryn, the other outcast.

Mrs. Robson broke into his reverie, nodding toward Teresa Bronson and Al Moore. "Those two asked me if you might talk to them. I think they are planning on getting married this June," she said.

Ian nodded, still restlessly scanning the crowd.

Quilts were bright patches on the newly greening grass as families and couples shared food on his land while from the barn, he could hear the hard laughter of some of the younger men, no doubt because they'd snuck a bottle in there.

No sign of Bryn.

IAN watched a cluster of buggies set out, raising smoky dust in their wake. He shook Al Moore's hand. "You and Teresa need to meet with me next Sunday to discuss married life."

Al colored, and Ian suppressed a smile. "I mean how to learn to share things. Lean on each other in bad times." His mouth pulled down. *If only Janet....*

"Oh! Sure, we can do that," Al said, giving his fiancée a shy glance.

Ian nodded, thinking that at least this wasn't a meaningless ritual. Maybe he could help Al and Teresa avoid his own ignorant mistakes.

Ian whirled at the sound of shouting coming from the barn.

"Reverend?"

"See you next Sunday," he dismissed Al.

The wet thud of a fist meeting flesh.

Sudden dread tightened Ian's throat.

THE first thing Ian saw when he entered the barn was Bryn standing over Charlie Beaton. Bryn's mouth was bleeding, his eyes blue flame.

"Don't you cut her no more!" Bryn rasped, fists balled.

"Bryn!" Ian growled, his hope he'd see Bryn at today's picnic souring. He'd come only to get into some kind of fight!

Bryn gave him a defiant look.

"You've been back here drinking?"

"Yessir."

Ian's mouth tightened. *And I believed in him, trusted him, wanted him here!*

"What is happening?" Ian demanded, sitting on his temper. He couldn't believe Bryn would pick a fight with someone at the church social. It reflected badly on Ian that the boy he'd given a chance to would act up first chance he got.

"Nothing," Bryn muttered.

Charlie Beaton climbed off the ground, glaring at Bryn. "He got drunk and just went for me, Reverend! You oughta fire his trashy ass!"

Ian looked around the circle of other men in the barn, but no one met his hard gaze.

He frowned when he noticed a horse with its reins hanging on the ground. It was trembling, and Ian saw something dark and wet on the sleek brown coat. He strode over to investigate.

The horse tossed its head, eyes showing white, but then Bryn moved close, whispering to it, settling it.

Ian's eyes widened as he got a closer look. "Cut. Someone *cut* this horse?"

He glared first at Bryn, who remained stubbornly silent, and then at Charlie Beaton.

“Leroy bet me that she’s so placid I could cut her and she wouldn’t do nothing. Anyway, she’s my horse! Ain’t no call for the piece of shit you got working for you to say anything about it.”

“Bryn,” Ian asked in an even voice, “can you take her reins, please?”

“Yessir,” Bryn said, gaze focusing on Ian’s face as if he sensed something was up.

Ian glared at Charlie Beaton. “Hurting a helpless animal is not the act of a man. I’ll tell you what I’m going to do: go by the bank on the morrow, and Mr. Winters will have money enough for her worth waiting for you. I’ll not let you take her off my property.”

“You can’t tell me what to do!” Charlie puffed, obviously aware of the onlookers. His hair was slicked back and he was neatly dressed, but there was a bruise forming on his cheek from where Bryn must have hit him.

“Not a man in this town will do business with you if I put the word out I am displeased by your conduct,” Ian stated, driving his message home.

“You’re just doing this because of that little bum boy you hired!”

Ian’s gaze went to Bryn, standing in the shadows with the abused horse, cheeks flushing with shame. The other men avoided looking at him, as if he were a secret in their midst.

Christ!

“What happened to Bryn in prison I don’t rightly know, but I do know something about bad things happening to a man. About being...” Ian swallowed. “About being *helpless* like your horse.” He looked at Charlie and ordered quietly, “Get off my land.”

IAN carried a lantern into the barn and hung it by the stall where the injured horse was newly housed. Bryn was sitting on the straw, arms wrapped around his knees. He blinked at the sudden light.

“Bryn?”

“Just wanted to know if she’d be all right. Charlie might get drunk an’ try to steal her back.”

Ian shook his head. “I put the word out that if he ever abuses one of his animals again, I’ll be... displeased. You should not be out here. No blanket or coat! Why, you must be freezing, boy!”

Bryn rubbed his arms as he climbed to his feet. “I’m used to it. Will the mare be all right, do you reckon?”

“Mrs. Robson’s ointment will probably help. It works on people.”

Bryn nodded. Speaking with Ian had opened the cut on his lip so it bled again.

Ian made an exasperated sound and reached out without thinking, rubbing the blood from Bryn’s lip. Bryn’s eyes widened. Before he could back away, Ian pulled off his coat. “Here. Put it on!”

“Can’t do that!”

“Yes, you can.” Ian put the coat around Bryn briskly. “I can’t sleep knowing you’re out here shivering in the cold.”

Bryn smiled slightly and his lip bled more. “All right, then. I’ll give it back to you in the morning.”

Ian wanted to order him to keep it. Instead, he settled for pulling out a handkerchief and handing it to Bryn, suddenly conscious he probably should not have touched the boy, what with his fears of Ian wanting something more.

He cleared his throat, feeling self-conscious. “Well, now. How about if I bring us out some coffee to warm up while you watch your horse?”

Bryn blinked. “My horse?”

“Certainly. You’ll need something to ride while you’re working for me. And you’ll be the one caring for her.”

A soft radiance lit Bryn's face. "You trust me to take care of her?"

"Didn't I tell you that I thought you are a good worker?"

Bryn nodded and stroked the sleepy horse's head so she twitched her ears and looked at him.

Ian could see she already thought she was Bryn's horse.

"I'll get that coffee. And some pie too, hmmm? Blueberry or strawberry?"

Bryn shrugged.

"Come on, you have to have a favorite!"

"Whatever your favorite is," Bryn said, blue eyes holding Ian's. "I'll have some of that."

CHAPTER 4

IAN eavesdropped one morning when Bryn was in the chicken coop collecting eggs with Mrs. Robson.

“All right, boy. I need a fresh chicken for the pot. Pick one out!”

There was a long pause and Ian shook his head ruefully, having an idea what was coming.

“Missus...!”

“What ails you, boy? Find a lazy layer and wring her neck!”

“*Can’t.*”

“Land sakes, you’re a strange ’un! Well, tell me which one ain’t been laying good, and I’ll take care of it myself.”

“You’ll kill one of the hens on my say-so, Missus?”

“Just said so, didn’t I? You get stupid when you were sent up, boy?”

“No, ma’am, but I don’t think I can choose which one of the hens gets... killed.”

“Killed? I’m *not* going to kill it. We’re going to *eat* it. Where you goin’?”

Bryn suddenly exploded out of the henhouse, feathers in his hair, the backs of his hands bleeding since he was still too gentle with the hens and they took advantage. Ian had tried to show him how to lead a hen away from the eggs with feed, but Bryn said he felt he was tricking the birds and he’d rather gain their trust.

Now he blinked at Ian, who was trying to hide a smile.

There was a commotion in the henhouse.

Bryn squeezed his eyes shut, covering his ears.

Mrs. Robson marched out a second later with a fat hen dangling from her hand. She sniffed as she passed Bryn.

“You’ve been eating our chickens since you came to work for us,” Ian reminded Bryn gently. He suppressed the urge to reach out and squeeze Bryn’s shoulder. He couldn’t keep touching the boy. What would he think?

“I know, but they all have names in my head now.”

Ian shook his head. “That’s not good!”

Bryn’s shoulders slumped. “I know,” he confessed miserably.

Ian peered into the dim recesses of the henhouse. “Got a favorite?”

“Uh...” Bryn’s face had that familiar closed look, which signaled to Ian that he was feeling vulnerable.

“Show me.”

Bryn opened the door and pointed to a little hen that limped just outside the perimeter of the other, larger hens.

“Looks like there’s something wrong with her claw.”

“Yeah.” Bryn reached down and picked her up, and the hen ruffled her feathers and settled against the young man’s slender chest.

“Bryn, you’ve gone and made a pet out of her!” Ian pointed out, a little concerned now.

Bryn bit his lip. “She got pecked at by the others, but since I took over taking care of your hens, I built her a little shelter, and she’s grown back some of her feathers. I, uh, also hide her there when Mrs. Robson chooses a hen for supper.”

Ian shook his head, bemused. He should be going over the sermon he was to give next Sunday to try to infuse some feeling into it, but he’d rather be with Bryn. “You’re a regular St. Francis.”

“Yeah? He likes hens too?”

Ian smiled. “I don’t know about hens. He’s been dead a long time, but he championed animals.”

“Sounds like you,” Bryn said proudly, obviously referring to Ian’s intervention with his new horse.

“We’ll build a little bird box for your favorite and put her in the stable. That way Mrs. Robson won’t cook her up for dinner some night and break your heart,” Ian suggested gruffly.

THE next morning, Bryn was shivering as he stepped out of the henhouse.

Ian watched him from the kitchen window. He forced himself to stay inside and sip his coffee. He spent too much time around the young man now as it was.

“What’s that you’re lookin’ at, Reverend Ian?” Mrs. Robson asked. “Oh, that boy... well, guess he bears watching. Could take up stealin’ since he’s been to prison.”

Ian put his coffee cup down before pointing out mildly, “Mrs. Robson, he was sent up for rape, not for thieving.”

“And that’s so much better!”

Ian sighed. “Did you get those shirts and pants like I asked?”

“Don’t I always do like you say?” she countered. “Not that you asked me for my opinion any.”

“Yes, you do. And I don’t know what I’d do without you. I’m sorry that my hiring Bryn has been such a bone of contention between us,” Ian said, wishing she would support him and understand his decision. Since Bryn had come here, Ian had a purpose again. He had to show Bryn where the corn was, how to dig out rocks before tilling the soil... all manner of things.

“Hmph. Well, it’s just you’re such a good man, I worry you are too trusting!”

Ian dropped his head. "I'm not, you know."

Mrs. Robson patted his shoulder awkwardly and then returned to chopping vegetables for her stew.

"HOW'S Carrot?" Ian asked as he found Bryn in the barn. The late afternoon sun was slanting through the windows in the hayloft above.

Bryn was sweating, freshly arrived from the corral, where he had led Carrot in gentle circuits. "I'm not sure," he confessed. "She gets better sometimes and shies others."

Ian crossed his arms, mulling. He didn't know much about horses, but he figured he could ask Doc Masters in town if Bryn's horse didn't heal right. "You using that liniment?"

"Yessir."

"Then you're doing all you can. You just have to let her do the rest."

"I just want her like she's whole again! I hate waitin', seeing she's suffering. It's almost like..."

"What?"

"Like if I had a little girl, I'd want her to be... happy, I guess." Bryn shrugged one shoulder.

Ian's throat tightened, watching Bryn caring for his horse, fading bruises on his face. "Takes time, I guess," he said. "I know it's not easy when someone, uh, an animal you're fond of is hurting. But every day I think she's stronger."

Bryn looked up at his words. "And maybe some things stay broken."

Feeling helpless, Ian changed the subject, as he couldn't argue with that reasoning. "I bought you some clothes," he said, bracing himself.

Bryn dropped Carrot's reins, lightning shimmering in the blue eyes. "I don't take charity!"

"It's not!" Ian hated to use this argument, but he could think of no other way to take care of Bryn. "Do you want to continue to shame me, boy?"

Bryn's eyes widened. "I... shame you?"

Ian made himself nod firmly. "My hired man needs to dress himself better."

"I've been savin' my earnings. My father—"

Ian felt the familiar burn of acid. How could any man blessed with a child treat him the way Bryn's father treated his son? "He helped himself to your money?"

Bryn shrugged. "Didn't hide it good enough."

"Bryn, what happens if you sicken with something, working out in the cold without proper clothing?" Ian pressed. "What good would you be to me then? Why, you'd let me down if you got sick, now wouldn't you?"

Bryn's eyes burned. "I would never want to shame you, Reverend Ian. And if I get sick, I promise I'll work anyways."

Ian rubbed the back of his neck. Why was the young man so stubborn? "That's not good enough! I want you to dress properly and... bathe regular. I'm afraid I must insist upon it." Truthfully, Bryn seemed to bathe often, despite the ragged state of his clothing, but Ian threw the last in to back up his stance.

Bryn led his mare back to her stall, mouth tight.

"Well?" Ian prodded.

Bryn closed and latched the stall before pulling down his suspenders, his back to Ian.

"Bryn?" Ian breathed, the wind suddenly knocked out of him, though he had no idea why. As he watched, stunned, the boy stripped out of his dirty, unmended clothes. He could only stare at

Bryn's thin back and pale round buttocks, at a loss. "What are you...?"

"You want me to wash; I'll go by the creek!" Bryn growled.

"It's *freezing* down there!"

"I won't shame you, Reverend Ian. Not for anything." Bryn looked over his shoulder at Ian, arms wrapped around himself for warmth.

"*Bryn!*" Ian caught him, feeling muscles tense under his big hands. "I meant take a bath in the house! Mrs. Robson heated water for the big tub in the kitchen."

"That's your tub...." Bryn shook his head, stubborn.

"And I mean to share it with you. I'll use it first and then you." He added, very gently, "Please?"

"You don't need to say 'please' to me, Reverend," Bryn said fervently. "Not ever! I'll do anything... anything you want."

Ian swallowed thickly, letting his hands fall from Bryn's bare shoulders. "Knock on the door after a little while and then you can use it. All right?"

"All right, but... Mrs. Robson ain't around, is she? I don't want her to see me in the altogether," Bryn said, blushing.

Ian smiled, relieved Bryn had agreed. "No, she leaves the house when I take a bath, so it'll be just us men folk."

BRYN waited by the barn, pacing. How long should he give Reverend Ian for his bath? He had never had a real bath in a tub before, so he had no idea how long it took a body. He pushed back his hair and looked at the house and then finally got up the courage to go to the front door.

He knocked, turning the knob and stepping into the lean-to tentatively. He heard water dripping and peered into the kitchen.

Apparently a hot bath took longer than Bryn had figured. Reverend Ian was standing in the center of a copper tub with his back turned to Bryn, soaping his tall body. As Bryn watched, he widened his legs and ran a bar of soap down to his privates.

Bryn could see the back of his heavy ball sac through the crack of Ian's legs, and he knew he should leave. He shouldn't watch! But when the Reverend used a pan to sluice water down his back and rinse off, Bryn's penis stirred.

He averted his face, bewildered, looking out the window and striving to master himself.

What was wrong with him? He'd only done things for other men in prison because he *had* to.

Why did he want to get on his knees for Reverend Ian and wash his feet or run a washrag over his back before pressing his face against the dimple above his buttocks?

"BRYN?" Ian's voice broke into his thoughts.

Ian stepped out of the tub and pulled a large sheet around his lean waist. "Ready for your bath?"

"Yessir," Bryn whispered from the shadows.

IAN couldn't figure out what was wrong with Bryn. He was acting jumpy and strange.

After dressing upstairs, Ian went to Janet's formal sitting room and gathered the store-bought clothes he'd had Mrs. Robson pick out for Bryn. He hoped they'd fit him; if not, Mrs. Robson would have to adjust them.

He brought the clothing back to the kitchen and froze at the door as he heard Bryn give a soft, pained sound. Was Bryn hurting? Had his father...?

Bryn was stroking himself.

Ian dropped the clothing on the sideboard and retreated upstairs to his austere bedroom, pacing, oddly shaken.

BRYN hadn't meant to give in, but desire washed over him. The good food, the warmth of the water, the feeling of safety....

He couldn't stop himself!

He imagined himself on his knees for Big Ed, opening his mouth obediently to take the other man's sex, only in his mind, Reverend Ian replaced the prisoner. And it was Ian who held Bryn's head as he moved in and out of his mouth, moaning as Bryn licked the underside of his penis.

Hunched over, Bryn spilled himself with a soft sound.

Huffing, his gaze darted around, but there was no sign of Reverend Ian.

Thank God the other man didn't know what a bad person Bryn truly was!

HIS bath finished, dressed in the stiff new clothing he'd found on the kitchen sideboard, Bryn went looking for the Reverend, finding him in the bedroom closest to the stairs, which was not the one Ian inhabited.

Bryn hesitated at the threshold.

The room had a large carved canopy bed with a crocheted spread and bed curtains. Dust motes sparkled in the evening sun as Bryn marveled at the finery.

A woman's silver comb and brush sat on a dresser with a large oval mirror opposite the bed where Ian was sitting.

Bryn thought Ian looked wrong in the pastel room, his skin tanned, creased at the corner of his eyes, his big body looking too large for the delicate furniture.

"Were you looking for me?" Ian asked.

Bryn nodded. He put his hands in his pockets. "I've never seen a room like this."

Ian stared dully at the flower-strewn wallpaper. "It was my wife's."

Bryn nodded. "She died while I was away."

"*Died.* Yes, she died," Ian choked. His eyes met Bryn's in the mirror, full of hell. "She... she wasn't right after the birth of our son. One day she took him to the creek and drowned him and then herself."

CHAPTER 5

“YOU little shit!”

Bryn cried out when a knotty piece of firewood struck his bare back.

“Where’s the money?”

His father, the familiar figure from his nightmares, towered over him as Bryn curled in the fetal position on his dirty cot.

“I told you I need it to pay back Reverend Ian! He bought me clothes—” Bryn whispered, fighting the pain. He could feel the wood had punctured his skin.

His father swung again, smashing his chin. Bryn rolled with the blow from experience. Shit! He had been so tired after watching Dandelion’s house last night that he’d slept in and his father had caught him.

“Just suck his cock like you did those boys in prison! Heard you got real good at it!” his father growled. “Should have smothered you at birth, you disgusting little—!”

Bryn tried to crawl out through the hole he’d made by his bed, but the log caught him again and again on his buttocks and lower back until he was openly weeping, hand curled in his blood-spattered pillow.

“*Please stop!*”

His answer was a kick to the ribs. “You’re dirt, you hear me? *Dirt!* Only reason I let you live is to get some work out of you.”

“KNEW that boy would let you down sooner or later,” Mrs. Robson said on Monday morning with the satisfaction of someone proved right. “No-account trash!”

Ian paced the kitchen, his brow furrowed, unease prowling his gut. “He wouldn’t just not show up. He seems to care so much for, uh....” Ian flushed. “His animals.”

The older woman shook her head pityingly. “You just can’t see that he’s a bad person. Anyone that goes to prison is bad, or why do they get sent there?”

“But what if he didn’t do what they say?” Ian said.

“The sheriff put him away on that girl’s word. That’s good enough for me and most folks. You don’t go to prison unless you deserve it.”

“I don’t know if I believe that anymore.” Ian grabbed his coat and headed for the door. “I might have, at one point in my life, but—” Ian shook his head. He wasn’t the idealistic and somewhat rigid young man he’d been. His hopes, his life, had been battered into shades of gray now. But maybe it meant he could better understand someone like Bryn.

“Reverend! Where you off to?” Mrs. Robson scolded.

“I’m going to find Bryn.”

He regretted now that he had avoided Bryn since he’d confessed what had happened to his family, but he’d figured Bryn would think Ian should have done something, been the man of the house. That he’d let down his wife... his son.

And who could blame him? It was what a man did—he stood up; he protected his family.

Ian had failed as a husband, as a father.

But damned if he was going to let it happen again!

BRYN panted by the roadside leading to Reverend Ian's farm, sweat darkening his hairline. He'd lain in his bed all Sunday, trying not to move because he hurt so bad, but when Monday had dawned, Bryn knew if he didn't show up for work, Reverend Ian would think the worst of him.

Dirt.

He squeezed his eyes shut, taking a deep breath.

He figured his job was gone since he was too busted up to work, but despite his bitter disappointment over that, he had to get to the farm and let the Reverend know he hadn't meant to let him down.

He reached for the tree branch he'd been using as a crutch, making an agonized sound as he raised himself.

The sun was getting higher. He had a long way to go.

"BRYN...?" Ian leaped off his horse, coat flapping, hat falling off and rolling away like prairie tumbleweed.

Bryn struggled to stay upright, locking his shaky legs. He licked his lips and covered Ian's hand on his arm.

Ian saw Bryn was shoeless and his left foot was wrapped in a rag, the flesh swelling purple over the lip of cloth.

"I didn't forget!" Bryn rasped, face pale as bone. "Know you don't want me no more, but I meant to show up."

Ian's gaze followed the path of his abandoned hat, down the road that led to the shack Bryn shared with his father. What he would have done, said, he didn't know—

Bryn's fingers brushed Ian's clenched fist.

Ian looked at him.

"Don't... carry on so, Reverend," Bryn whispered, a kind of wonder and surprise in his blue eyes, as if he couldn't believe anyone would take up for him.

Ian made a soft sound as he swung Bryn carefully into his arms. "I'm taking you back to the farm, and it's where you'll goddamn stay!"

"But I can't work!"

"I don't give a sh—" Ian took a deep breath, struggling for control. "I mean, I don't care about that now. I can manage the chores until you rest up and get better."

Bryn ducked his head.

"Shhh, you're all done in. I'll get you home, and Mrs. Robson can take care of your foot. You'll be right as rain in no time."

Ian placed Bryn gently in the saddle and then took the reins, one hand clamped on Bryn's leg to steady him.

It would be a slow walk back to the farm.

MRS. Robson's mouth rounded in an O of surprise when she saw Ian stride onto the porch with Bryn cradled tenderly in his arms.

She came out, her hands twisting in her apron.

"He's hurt!" Ian said curtly. "I need you to see to him."

"All right then," she huffed, taking in Bryn's white face, lumpy with bruising. "Bring him in the kitchen!"

BRYN felt horribly self-conscious.

Mrs. Robson had insisted on seeing all his injuries, so Ian had stripped off Bryn's muddy shirt. Then Mrs. Robson had cut off his trousers, since his foot was so swollen they couldn't get them off easily.

He was wearing nothing but his underwear.

Reverend Ian paced, watchful, as Mrs. Robson used hot water and soap to clean Bryn up. He had two big welts on his back that

made tears burn his eyes whenever they were touched, and his foot....

“Put it in the cold water, boy. It’s a bit late to really help, but it might take down some of the swelling.”

“Is it broken?” the Reverend demanded.

“Just the toes, but the rest is badly bruised. Looks like someone beat it with a plank of wood!”

Ian spun around, gripping the counter top.

Mrs. Robson said, “Worn out, ain’t you, boy? I’ll heat you some soup. You just set there and rest.”

“Carrot... and my hens!” Bryn whispered. “I never meant to abandon them.”

“We’ll take care of ’em. Did all right before we hired you, now didn’t we?” She smiled at Bryn. It struck Bryn that it was the first time a woman had smiled at him since he’d been sent up for rape.

“I’m sorry, Missus,” he mumbled. “I can see the Reverend is mad.”

“He’s not mad at *you*, boy. He’s a good man, but he’s still a man. He wants to go beat the daylights outta your pa.”

Mrs. Robson went over to the Reverend and put a hand on his arm, leaning close and whispering to him.

Bryn anxiously watched the big man’s shoulders slowly relax.

And when he spoke to Bryn, his voice sounded almost like himself again. “Do as Mrs. Robson tells you, Bryn. I’m going to take care of the animals now.”

IAN took special care of Carrot and Bryn’s small hen, lavishing them with the treats Bryn liked to sneak them. Still, Carrot butted his chest, looking around with ears pricked for Bryn. “He’ll be back soon, don’t you worry,” Ian told the mare.

He felt sickened that he'd protected this horse from abuse and yet done nothing for Bryn. He'd known the kind of man his father was. He'd seen bruises on Bryn before but hadn't known if they were from fighting. Now he wondered and struggled with his anger.

The work calmed him. Gave him time to think.

One thing he knew: Bryn wasn't going back to that shack.

He would stay under Ian's roof from now on, where Ian could protect him.

BRYN was sleepy as Reverend Ian carried him up to the second floor, where Mrs. Robson had prepared the guest room. His stomach was full of good food, and the laudanum Mrs. Robson had given him had lessened the pain.

Ian laid him down on the bed and Bryn sniffed the pillow. "Lavender," he marveled, remembering how in his dirty bed he'd often thought of what kind of sheets the Reverend slept on. "I was right," he said, feeling hazy.

"Rest now," Ian said softly.

Mrs. Robson fussed with his sheets. Her eyes didn't seem so hard now.

"But I can't stay here," Bryn said.

"Of course you can, boy!" Mrs. Robson scolded. "Do you think we'll let you sleep in the barn?"

Ian's jaw flexed. "You can't go back there, Bryn, because if he beats you again... then I'll have to kill him."

Bryn stared, shocked.

"And then..." Ian swallowed. "And then *I'd* be sent up. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"N-no, sir."

Ian nodded, satisfied. "I'm going over to your place to let your father know you're coming to live here on my farm and to collect your things. Anything in particular you don't want me forgetting?"

Bryn shook his head. Reverend Ian couldn't go there! He'd see how Bryn had lived. See how he was nothing but trash. "Nothing," he mumbled.

Ian hesitated a moment, as if he wanted to press, but then Mrs. Robson touched his arm and he nodded as if she'd spoken.

After Ian left, to Bryn's surprise, Mrs. Robson stayed with him, pulling out some sewing and working on it on the chair next to his bed.

Bryn watched her, trying to puzzle out why she'd bother. But then the warmth and safety relaxed him, and he closed his eyes.

IAN swallowed, sickened, as he took in Bryn's tiny room.

The sheets were filthy, still spotted with blood, and there was nothing but a broken oil lamp and a handful of rocks sitting on a crate by the bed. He gathered up the new clothing he'd bought for Bryn but couldn't find anything else of value.

"Going to keep the little whore, are you, Reverend?" Bryn's father taunted.

"How could you treat him like this? He's your son!"

"He's lucky I didn't smother him in his sleep. He came out wrong, didn't he?"

Ian felt a wave of something that made him feel dizzy and sick. "A child should be cherished," he whispered.

THE Reverend returned from his errand in the late afternoon.

Bryn was awake, and Mrs. Robson had him chilling his bad foot in a bowl of water again. He looked up as Reverend Ian entered the guest room with Bryn's new clothing.

“You can have this room, if you like.”

Bryn swallowed, overcome by all the attention. He didn’t know how to handle it. It made him feel exposed, like he needed to hide somewhere.

“How’s the foot?” The Reverend knelt at Bryn’s feet, so Bryn was looking down at his dark hair and the nape of his neck.

Ian lifted the injured foot carefully. “Still hurting?” Bryn shrugged. “Well, Carrot misses you, so you have to get better soon.”

“I miss her too,” Bryn admitted shyly.

“Oh, one more thing—” Reverend Ian reached into his pockets and pulled out Bryn’s tiny collection of rocks. He put them on the bedside table.

Bryn stared at them, stunned.

Ian didn’t seem to notice. His face had heated and he gave Bryn an almost embarrassed look. “Saw another rock by the road on the way home. Know you didn’t pick it out yourself, but I thought it was sort of nice looking.” He offered Bryn a squarish rock. “Looks like a flower pattern if you hold it just right.”

Bryn held the gift on the palm of his hand. It was warm from Ian’s pocket. It was a good weight in his hand. He closed his fist around it, unable to think of what to say. Folks said things when they got a gift, only no one had ever given Bryn anything before so he lay there, words and feelings all jammed up.

“You rest up. I’ll bring your supper up later,” Reverend Ian said, backing out of the room and avoiding Bryn’s wide eyes.

“Thank you,” Bryn whispered, long after Ian had gone.

CHAPTER 6

BRYN chewed slowly on his huge helping of dumplings. He'd told Mrs. Robson he enjoyed them, and next thing he knew, she'd made some and brought him a plateful. He couldn't figure out why.

When he'd asked her, she'd gotten red in the face and said he was too *thin* and he had better eat up, or she'd feed it to the hens he was so fond of.

But she'd stayed with him, working on what she told him was a sunshine and shadow patchwork quilt while he ate in silence. He wanted to tell her how he liked all the colors, stretched out like a rainbow—except he didn't like the shadow part so much.

Now he looked up when Reverend Ian hesitated at the door and felt his pulse quicken. *Ian—come to visit me!*

He knew he had no business thinking of the Reverend by his first name. But his clerical collar didn't seem to push Bryn away like he could see it did most folks.

He saw *Ian*.

“Land sakes, Reverend! What are you doing, bringing that dirty old hen in my clean house?” Mrs. Robson scolded.

Ian gave Mrs. Robson an abashed look but nevertheless sat down on the edge of the bed and held out Bryn's little hen in his large cupped hands.

“She's all right!” Bryn said, putting his food on the bedside table. “How did you know I was thinking about her? I was worried about her claw!”

“Must be seeing your face looking out the window up here whenever I came out of the barn.”

“Reverend, you are as crazy as a loon!” Mrs. Robson exclaimed.

“Don’t let her scolding fool you; Mrs. Robson helped me fix her leg. She actually put a tiny splint on the other one, Bryn, so your hen had to put more weight on it, and it kind of helped strengthen it.”

Bryn gave Mrs. Robson a surprised glance, and Ian bit his lips, as if suppressing a smile.

“Hmph!” Mrs. Robson uttered.

Yet Bryn didn’t miss the fond glance she gave Reverend Ian as she took her sewing and left the room. And unbelievably, more and more often, he caught her looking at him like he wasn’t the lowest dirt.

It scared him.

“Mrs. Robson said you were quiet today. I thought this might cheer you a little.”

“I... don’t know what to say,” Bryn said, and then shamed, he confessed, “Or how to act.” His heart was pounding, face flushed. He felt exposed again, like he needed to hide. In prison, Bryn had learned to show no weakness, had cried alone in his cell with his pillow jammed close so no one could hear him.

“Act?” Ian blinked, watching Bryn stroke his hen, avoiding Ian’s quizzical gaze. “Aren’t you getting along well with Mrs. Robson?”

Bryn bit his lip, but suddenly the words burst out. “I’m terrified of her!”

“Has she said anything?” The Reverend’s jaw tightened.

“No!” He moved restlessly on the bed. “She’s a nice lady, but what if I say the wrong thing? She’ll hate me again.”

“Why would she do that?” Ian’s voice was as soothing as a feather brushing against Bryn’s fears.

Needing familiar comfort, Bryn reached out and picked up his favorite rock, the one he’d decided to part with, since it was only right.

“My Ma picked this one out for me,” Bryn said, offering the rock to the Reverend. “It’s just a rock, I know, nothin’ special, but it’s my favorite, and I want you to have it.”

“Bryn, I cannot accept that! It’s too precious to give away.”

“I ain’t got nothin’ else to give you....” Bryn’s fingers played with his rejected offering. “I can’t even work.”

Ian shook his head firmly. “You don’t need to give me anything. Just get well. I better take your hen back to the barn, because if she makes a mess on Mrs. Robson’s quilt, I’ll be in the doghouse for sure!”

Bryn gave Ian a shy look. “She adores you. You’ll never be in the doghouse with her, Reverend.”

AFTER the Reverend left, Bryn couldn’t settle. He played with his offering, scolding himself for thinking the Reverend would want a stupid rock.

But what else did he have to offer Ian?

In prison, he’d learned he could be raped without a protector. Once you found one, it was best to surrender to him so he’d take care of you. He flushed, remembering the things he’d done for Big Ed. Part of him had even *liked* it. Liked feeling a penis inside him, liked sometimes when Big Ed fell asleep with his arm crushing Bryn possessively into the bed.

Dirty.

He was. He was made all wrong. The things he thought about—shit! He tried so hard not to think them or to want.... He squeezed his eyes tight. He hoped Ian never knew how Bryn’s blood

heated and his heart picked up when he was around. How Bryn liked the way he smelled or how he liked Ian's long eyelashes, which set off large, concerned hazel eyes. How he liked his hands, callused and freckling from the spring sunshine. Liked the squint marks by his eyes and even couldn't help looking at his backside when he bent over, showing Bryn something for one of his chores.

And his beard.... Bryn shivered, wanting to feel it against his skin. He'd woken up last night after a dream that Ian was brushing it against Bryn's nipples and his... his cock. Teasing him, making Bryn cry out and beg.

Ian was so beautiful to Bryn it hurt.

It made him wish sometimes he could draw or something, just capture with his fingers what it was about the other man that moved him so much.

Bryn knew there was maybe something wrong with his thinking, but now remembering prison and the bartering system, how it had all made for a kind of inflexible order, anxiety knotted his gut and made sweat prickle his hairline. Reverend Ian had refused his gift.

IAN shifted on his bed, wondering what had woken him.

Then he heard another stifled cry.

Bryn.

He climbed out of bed and walked into the hallway, hesitant.

He heard the creak of the old farmhouse in the wind, his own heart beating... and another choked-off sound from Bryn's room.

Sometimes Bryn had bad dreams, and if Ian stood in his doorway and spoke to him softly, the lad settled back to sleep, unknowing the next morning that Ian had watched over him.

He went there now, staring at Bryn lying in sweaty bedclothes, the sheets pulled off, his fist opening and closing, and his... his rump exposed by his nightshirt. Ian felt sweat coat his forehead at

that sight. What...? He had to leave. He wanted to help Bryn, but this... he could not be feeling this.

Bryn made another soft sound.

Ian's name.

Ian couldn't stay away. Feeling like he was crossing more than a simple threshold, he entered Bryn's room, knowing he shouldn't, but—

In the light of the moon, he could make out tears on Bryn's cheeks.

"Oh, don't!" Ian sat on the side of the bed. "Don't you hurt!"

Bryn made another pained sound, and Ian had had enough. Gently, he squeezed Bryn's shoulder, trying to reach him with simple touch.

The young man opened his eyes, blue as the lit center of a flame, and looked blankly at Ian. His face was flushed, his skin slightly tanned now but perfectly smooth. His parted lips....

Ian looked away, fidgeting.

"You're safe," he reassured.

Then, needing to touch, needing it after months, years, in the empty house, he pushed Bryn's sweaty hair back from his forehead. "You don't have to be afraid. I would... Bryn," Ian's voice softened to a whisper, "I'd kill any man who hurt you."

BRYN didn't know what to say. He'd seen killing in prison, but he believed Ian would go that far to protect him. Why, he had no idea. Because he was such a good man? His stern face looked like one of the warrior angels Bryn remembered illustrated on the single stained glass window of a larger church two towns over. "I know I'm safe here! Can't figure out why sometimes I get so wound up. I'm sorry I woke you, Ian."

Bryn was embarrassed that Ian had caught him like this, but the moment spun between them, fine as candyfloss sparkling in the sunshine. Ian's eyes were sad, reading him, as he rubbed away a tear with his thumb, and Bryn felt some part of himself opening.

Thank God Ian hadn't interrupted him during one of his more shameful dreams!

CHRIST, Ian wanted to comfort Bryn!

He wanted to feel like a man again, able to protect someone, not empty, not just words.

Musing, Ian stroked Bryn's hair. "Well now, I remember there was an old dog that Mrs. Robson found left to starve one winter. It had obviously had a tough life. She nursed it back to health, but it couldn't take being petted for too long. Sometimes it would sit in the corner of the kitchen and just watch her from a distance."

"I have food, clothing; you and Mrs. Robson are so good to me, but I feel..." Bryn sat up and pulled his knees to his chest, as if mindful of his bad foot.

"Have you ever been happy?" Ian asked, letting his hand fall. What had he been doing, stroking Bryn's hair? Yet it had felt so natural.

"Sometimes. In the woods and when my Ma was alive." Bryn picked up some of his rocks, as if remembering specific incidences of happiness, but he didn't share more, and Ian didn't push.

"I was happy when my wife was carrying our child," Ian confided. "She and I.... Things weren't ever easy between us, for some reason. I... tried so hard to be a good husband to her. But when she carried our son and I could touch her belly and feel him moving..." Ian closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry your baby's dead," Bryn said, very simply.

Ian fought the familiar agonizing pain. He could feel Bryn's nearby warmth, and it helped that Bryn gave him sincerity and not

fancy words of comfort. It was something he could hold onto. Something real. “No parent should bury their child,” he whispered. “I wasn’t... myself after.” That was putting it mildly, he thought, remembering the sanitarium he’d briefly visited.

BRYN fisted his hands, feeling helpless and frustrated. Finally, tentatively, he put a hand on one big shoulder, patting it awkwardly.

When Reverend Ian looked at him and made no effort to hide a single tear running down his cheek, Bryn leaned forward, putting his arms around the older man. Holding him. *Don’t hurt*, he told Ian silently with his touch.

“Bryn,” Ian rasped, “After my wife and son died, I went away for a while. No one in the town knows, except... Mrs. Robson.”

Hushed, he asked, “Where did you go?”

“A place... for people who aren’t right in their heads.”

Not sure he understood, Bryn said, “Oh. But you got better.”

Ian nodded. “I... I was able to continue living.” He gave Bryn a shamed look. “I’m not a good man like folks think. I’m not strong. At first I think I only helped you because it distracted me from feeling dead inside.”

“You just can’t see yourself!” Bryn’s lips were fervent against Ian’s ear. The big man shivered, as if at an alien sensation. Bryn’s body felt suddenly heavier, as if he and Ian were in another place. Ian trembled, and Bryn’s arms anchored him. Bryn could feel Ian’s wound up pain and need. When Big Ed got wound up, Bryn had been taught to take care of him.

Bryn’s penis was a stiff ache as he nuzzled the Reverend’s ear gently. He wanted to please. Oh, God, he wanted to please Ian so much. He’d do anything!

“BRYN?” Ian looked at Bryn’s face, taking in the flushed cheeks and the sleepy gaze.

Shockingly, Bryn brushed his lips against Ian's ear again, and Ian gasped, his head falling back. He realized that somehow, purely by accident, his body was becoming excited by Bryn's closeness.

"Shhh; I can give you what you need. I *want* to," Bryn whispered. His hand reached down and stroked Ian's muscled thigh, and Ian tensed, afraid Bryn would discover his sudden arousal.

"No!" He leaped off the bed, staring into Bryn's stricken eyes.

CHAPTER 7

REVEREND Ian paced, avoiding looking at Bryn huddled on the bed. What had just happened? Bryn had touched him and he'd wanted—

Bryn's head was down, his hands clenched white over the quilt. He was trembling finely, as if chilled.

Finally Ian said, "Bryn, look at me. Is this... something you think you need to do for me? Like what you told me when you came to work for me?"

Bryn nodded, as if eager for any excuse than he had seemed like he wanted to... to kiss and touch Ian.

And you wanted to kiss and touch Bryn. He's just more honest than you are. Oh, God!

BRYN was in hell. Would Ian ban him from the house now that he could see how dirty Bryn was? Ian was innocent. He'd never lifted his legs up and held his ankles while another man mounted him. Never wanted to do that, like Bryn had.

He ran a shaking hand over his chin. Why did he think about such things, want them? Why couldn't he stop?

"I can't accept your offering. Do you understand why?" Ian was saying.

Bryn tried to follow Ian's words. His heart was pounding and he wanted to vomit. "Because I disgust you."

"Shit!" Ian swore. He was panting, running his hand through his hair.

“I’m sorry I—” *Repelled you.*

“I don’t know how the hell to handle this!” The Reverend scrubbed his cheeks, and Bryn caught the earthy rasp of night beard as he briefly looked into Ian’s eyes, soft hazel like some of the colors of the new-blooming pansies Mrs. Robson had planted out back. “We’ll... talk about this later, your thinking you need to... to give me something.”

Please, no! “I got it wrong,” Bryn whispered. “I always get it wrong. Don’t... hate me for it.”

“Bryn, I can’t behave like whatever... men you knew before. Do you understand? You need a friend, and I’m trying, Christ!”

“I’m sorry,” Bryn repeated.

I’ll be your friend. I’ll never reach out again. Please, Ian. I got it wrong.

His only answer was the door softly closing.

BRYN didn’t sleep. He watched each star sparkle and fade and then blend into the morning sky through dull, burning eyes, throat and chest aching.

He wished he could cry.

He felt worse than when his father beat him.

“THE Reverend thought a visit to town might cheer you,” Mrs. Robson said two days later, coming in the room with the morning tray and a fresh bedpan. The latter embarrassed Bryn, but the older woman didn’t think anything of it.

“Town? But...” Being around people right now would be like sandpaper rasping against the skin of his wounds, especially people who never had and never would accept him. For a while Reverend Ian had accepted him, but now....

He hadn’t talked to him since the night he’d offered his body.

He'd watched him through his window, seeing Ian taking Carrot out and letting her run and going into the chicken coop to do Bryn's chores. He'd found himself reaching out to touch the cool pane, aching to know what Ian was thinking. Did he hate Bryn now?

Bryn had relived those moments over and over again, and to his shame, he still found it arousing, remembering the texture of Ian's skin, the way he'd caught his breath. At first, it was almost as if he was going along with what Bryn was doing, so that Bryn had felt briefly very powerful, very unlike anything he'd ever experienced—taking Ian with him into a new world.

Sometimes Bryn noticed that Reverend Ian glanced up at his window, and his heart would pound, but he was too far away to read his expression.

"It'll be good to go into town," Mrs. Robson was saying now. "I need a new hat for the next church social, and you got some pay comin', so you might find something at the store."

"The store..." Bryn repeated, remembering the storekeeper, Jervish Radcliffe.

"Are your wits gone this morning, boy? I swear, the Reverend is just as addled these past few days. Banging around the house and yard in a bad mood!"

Bryn flinched. "The Reverend's in a bad mood?"

"Land sakes, he nearly broke my favorite bread bowl when I asked him to get it down for me. He's like a bear with a sore paw over somethin'!"

"Oh." Bryn shoved his food away, what appetite he had gone.

"You like my porridge, boy!"

"Can't eat."

Mrs. Robson sighed. "I'd like to know what got into the two of you!"

Bryn flushed at the idea. It was bad enough the Reverend knew how sick and depraved he was. Mrs. Robson was sure to hate him again if she found out what he wanted.

She picked up the Bible resting at his bedside next to his precious rocks, which he'd stacked so the special one Ian had given him rested at the very top.

"Where was I?" She thumbed through to find her bookmark. Sometimes she read to him, and he asked her questions. A lot of it didn't make sense to him, even after she explained it to him, but he guessed maybe only good people understood it.

Bryn shrugged. Ian was in a bad mood. Ian was avoiding him. He might as well try to forget the throbbing wound by listening to her now.

"Oh, here...." She tapped the book on her lap. "*Song of Songs.*"

Bryn stared up at the ceiling, eyes aching, aware of snippets of phrases read by Mrs. Robson, much like dragonflies alighting on his arm, briefly touching him and then gone.

...My heart was a wake / I dreamed that my love
had turned away /... I sought him, whom my soul
loves / I sought him, but did not find him /... Tell
him I am sick with love....

Bryn curled on his side on the bed and stared at the wall without speaking until Mrs. Robson stopped reading and finally left him alone.

TOWN.

He was worse than dirt in town, and it was time to stop hoping that anyone would see different. Mrs. Robson was nice to him because.... He frowned, unable to think why the woman was nice.

But she would probably go back to not liking him again sometime soon. The only mystery was why she was making an effort now.

And then there was Reverend Ian, who had touched Bryn, who had made Bryn *need*, but now he had deserted him, left him alone in the dark like an empty room without an oil lantern.

He was all tangled up inside, his feelings like restless snakes.

Sometimes he felt angry at Reverend Ian for making him feel so bad.

BRYN rode in the back of the supply wagon, facing away from Reverend Ian and Mrs. Robson. He glanced over his shoulder at the Reverend and was surprised to catch Ian looking at him.

Bryn turned his back, gaze fixing on the passing landscape.

“REMEMBER, I want flower seeds as well as vegetable seeds, Reverend,” Mrs. Robson directed as the big man helped her down from the wagon seat. “It’s good to mix it all up.”

Reverend Ian nodded. He put his hands in his pockets and looked at Bryn, clearing his throat.

Bryn flushed, wanting to leap off the wagon, but knowing he’d need help getting down. He got around all right on his homemade crutch on level ground, but he had to take it easy climbing up and down or the pain in his bad foot was excruciating.

The Reverend lowered the back rail of the wagon and spoke to him for the first time since that night. “Bryn....”

Seeing no help for it, Bryn allowed Reverend Ian to place him carefully onto the dirt street before handing him his crutch. Quietly, Ian asked, “Will you be all right?”

His heart pounded because the Reverend didn’t seem to hate him now, but he was afraid to hope. Bryn nodded.

“Here’s your pay.”

“Oh, I can’t take that!” Bryn flushed, burning indignation. “I ain’t worked for days!”

“You can and you will.”

“I ain’t no charity case!”

“Bryn... Can’t you see that having you come live with Mrs. Robson and me has made a world of difference to us?”

Bryn studied Ian’s face. “Are you saying you like having me live with you?” He needed to know how Ian felt about him.

“I... ah, Mrs. Robson talks about you all the time. Her children all died before they reached ten years of age.”

Bryn nodded. He had known. It wasn’t uncommon.

“She likes having a young man to take care of.”

“I’m not a kid!”

“No, but to her you are. And so am I!” Ian gave a small smile, the first since that night. It lightened Bryn’s sick heart briefly. He was such a goddamned fool, wanting to crawl or soar based on Ian’s mood.

“And me, well... I—I never talked to anyone about what happened to my wife and son.” Ian swallowed before saying very softly, “I trust you, Bryn.”

Bryn surrendered, taking Ian’s greenbacks. “No one wants me here.”

“No, they don’t,” Ian surprised Bryn by acknowledging. He’d half-expected platitudes rather than the guts of the truth, but that wasn’t Ian. “But they’ll just have to learn to get used to you. Do you want to hide out on our farm forever?”

Bryn’s jaw tightened. “No, sir.”

“Then you’ll have to take it, won’t you? Even though I’m sure you don’t deserve it.” Ian almost touched Bryn’s shoulder, but he flushed and his hand fell away before he made contact, looking

directly into Bryn's eyes as if he wanted to say something but then turning away.

Bryn leaned on his crutch, watching him stride toward the feed store.

Ian.

When would this ache go away?

BRYN didn't spend his money on himself. Instead, he looked for small gifts.

Some sweet ginger sticks for Carrot.

For his hen, Henrietta, he found a long wooden branch that was as white as bleached driftwood but silky to the touch.

"That wood came all the way from Australia!" the shopkeeper, Jervish Radcliffe, told him.

Bryn glanced at him, seeing a familiar light in his eyes that made Bryn's belly knot.

"I need to get a couple more gifts," Bryn mumbled. He knew what Jervish wanted. And he was feeling so lousy about himself right now, if Big Ed had walked in the store, Bryn would have done whatever he asked, just to stop feeling so bad....

Just to be wanted.

IAN forced himself to linger at the seed store even though he hated leaving Bryn on his own. He wanted to hover over him and snarl at anyone who treated him with disdain, but he knew that was the wrong way to go about changing people's minds about his hired man.

He had to be patient, which he admittedly wasn't very good at, but this was important. It was better to hope that the respect with which he treated Bryn might in time rub off gently on people by example, like water making new pathways through rock.

And certainly Mrs. Robson seemed to have accepted Bryn, just a little. She had been fussing over him since he'd been hurt, even reading to him. In the evenings over supper in the kitchen, Ian would ask her, as casually as possible, how Bryn was faring.

He dutifully purchased the flower and vegetable seeds and then, acting on a sudden impulse, added a pack of wildflower seeds. His wife had used that mix. Bryn had liked the daffodils... Bryn would like it.

As he paid for the seeds, he didn't dwell on his wife as he would have in the past, which had always led to the heavy depression that could last days.

Instead, he pictured Bryn's face as the assortment bloomed in July.

HALF an hour later, Ian entered the general store, finding Mrs. Robson pacing. "Where's Bryn?" He glanced around, gut tightening.

"No idea! And that no-good shopkeeper must be in the drink again! He isn't to be found, and I want to pay for my hat."

"Might be out back then," Ian said, knowing that was where Jervish went when he wanted a taste of the bottle. "I'll go find him," he volunteered.

AT FIRST, Ian wasn't sure what he was seeing.

Bryn's dark bronze head, his slender body, crouched. Was he drinking some whiskey with Jervish? The store keeper's hands clenched on Bryn's skull while he fed his sex deep into Bryn's mouth—

Ian's eyes widened. He dropped the seed packets.

"*IAN!*"

Bryn. Bryn was holding onto his arm, his face contorted as he tried to keep Ian from striking Jervish again. Ian had been yelling. He couldn't remember what, not even words, maybe—

“He...!” Ian rasped, unable to talk about what he'd seen.

“I said he could!” Bryn admitted, flushing under Ian's stunned gaze.

Ian couldn't make sense of it. “You wanted...?”

“Filthy bum boy!” Jervish snarled, glaring at Bryn. “Didn't tell me you already had a keeper!” With that, the shopkeeper left Bryn alone with Ian, slamming into his store through the back door.

Ian's shoulders slumped.

“Bryn. Why?”

“You can't understand!” Bryn flashed. “But he... he wanted me,” Bryn choked. “Someone wanted me!” Bryn snatched his crutch and hobbled away, leaving Ian.

Ian leaned against the side of the store, dazed.

Not even Ian's wife had done such a thing for Ian.

THE trip back to the farm was tense, Ian and Bryn both silent, avoiding each other's eyes.

Mrs. Robson glared at both men, obviously fed up with the two of them.

When they reached the house, Bryn stubbornly helped Ian unhitch the wagon, and Ian caught himself looking at Bryn's lips, thinking about what he'd done for Jervish in town.

BRYN insisted on visiting Henrietta and Carrot, giving them his gifts, but the long day took a toll on him, so that Mrs. Robson scolded him, and he carefully hobbled back to his room.

Toward dusk, Ian appeared in his doorway, hands in his pockets. “You’re getting stronger. Soon you’ll be able to work again,” he observed.

“Yes, sir.” Bryn played with his quilt.

Ian looked over his shoulder and then came fully into Bryn’s borrowed room and closed the door.

“That thing you did for Jervish....”

Bryn flinched.

“You meant to do that for me?”

“If you asked me to,” Bryn whispered.

Ian rubbed the back of his neck. “My God, I’ve never seen...!”

“It feels good, I think,” Bryn said.

Almost soundlessly, Ian asked. “You... don’t know?”

Bryn shook his head. “No one ever done it for me, but in prison... I did it all the time.”

“Oh.” Ian paced, upset. “So you needed to give me something, and I rejected your gift, and then—it was just like it was in prison in your head.”

Bryn swallowed. “No, it wasn’t,” he croaked. Blue eyes flashed up to Ian’s face and then fell away.

Ian stared, taking in Bryn’s meaning. He couldn’t believe.... And why did it make him so happy that Bryn had wanted to—? He couldn’t help but picture Bryn on his knees for him, hands clasping his hips, Ian’s penis inside his mouth....

He rubbed a damp, shaky palm over his chin, increasingly agitated and... and worked up! “You don’t have to do that for me *ever*, unless you....” The rest of the sentence died. Ian couldn’t say it.

Bryn’s gaze locked with his, and he couldn’t breathe for a moment.

He strode over to Bryn's bedside and found the rock Bryn had offered him days ago. He held it out on his palm before closing his fist around it possessively.

“Thank you for your gift, Bryn. I'll treasure it.”

CHAPTER 8

BRYN watched as Mrs. Robson closed the stall door on Daisy, the Morgan she used for plowing her vegetable patch. In the chinks between boards, he could make out the faint stirring of small birds waking with the dawn. He hefted a pail of milk, still steaming, and leaned on his crutch, stifling a yawn.

Mrs. Robson smiled at him. “Did all your chores, have you? You didn’t turn out to be as bad a hire as I thought.”

Bryn looked away, confused. Why did she smile at him? Was she starting to like him? He was afraid to hope, more used to sullen acceptance at best. He remembered how he’d felt those days and nights after Ian had turned away from him. He wasn’t sure he could go through that again. It was easier just to get along outside the circle of warmth she shared with Ian.

“Yes, Missus,” Bryn said, but he couldn’t help responding with some pride despite the throbbing of his foot. He’d taken care of the chickens and Henrietta and Carrot as well as milking the cow.

“Saw you on the road when I walked to the Reverend’s house this morning.”

Oh, no. He couldn’t—

He swallowed. “Wasn’t me.”

“Don’t tell me it wasn’t you, boy! I seen you two or three times up in them hills, wandering at night.”

“Don’t mean nothing by it.”

“Never said you did.” Her eyes narrowed on his face and he flushed, grappling, wanting to... but he couldn’t *tell* Mrs. Robson about Dandelion.

Dandelion was his secret.

They walked to the house in silence, Bryn carrying a lantern, conscious of Mrs. Robson’s stiff carriage, as if she knew Bryn was shutting her out.

Mrs. Robson pointed to the table. “Set it down there. And I expect you to eat with us today, Bryn.” It was the first time she’d ever pressed the issue. Bryn’s gut knotted.

“I...” He didn’t want to. He still felt as if he were wearing rags, even after Reverend Ian had bought him store-bought clothes, though he couldn’t think why that was.

Exasperated, she said, “You work here, same as the rest of us. You too good to eat with us?”

“No!”

“Then set. Breakfast is almost ready.”

There was a clatter on the stairs and Reverend Ian appeared, beard freshly trimmed, smelling pleasantly of bay rum. He carried a book and some loose papers and an abacus under one arm.

He looked.... Bryn swallowed, feeling his body tighten with familiar yearning. He’d love to feel that beard brush against his skin, maybe the back of his neck while Ian clasped him close, pressing his penis insistently against Bryn....

Bryn looked away. *God! I have to stop having these thoughts! Please, just... stop!*

Reverend Ian surprised him by coming around the table and putting a hand on his shoulder. Bryn was glad he couldn’t read his mind, know what he’d been thinking. It would only drive him away again. “Slept in. Guess you did my chores?”

Bryn nodded, conscious of that hand on him. It seemed to burn through his clothes. It seemed to say, *you are mine to touch*.

“Thank you,” the Reverend said, squeezing Bryn’s shoulder gently. He looked over at Mrs. Robson. “I have to visit the Hollanders today; they want to set a date for the christening of their new baby.”

Mrs. Robson plunked down a heaping plate of beef, corn cakes, and fried potatoes at Ian’s place. “Won’t be easy for you. A baby boy.”

Ian’s head fell. “No.”

“I’ll get out old Daisy and plow my vegetable patch today,” she said, perhaps sensing that Ian didn’t want to dwell.

The Reverend nodded, moving to sit down at his place, his gaze fixed on his food, but nevertheless, Bryn could feel the bond between him and the older woman, bright ribbons of silent understanding.

“I’ll hitch Daisy up after breakfast for you,” Ian offered.

Bryn scowled at his plate, feeling useless. He couldn’t bear to stay in bed another day! “I want to help,” he asserted stubbornly.

“Bryn....” The Reverend sighed, but then, as if reading Bryn’s tension, his eyes softened. “Of course you can help. Mrs. Robson can handle Daisy, and you can pull rocks out of the ground to be tilled. It’s not easy work, though, so don’t push yourself.”

They ate, and then the Reverend lingered, sipping his coffee and thumbing through his book.

“You doing some work?” Bryn asked shyly. He loved books and learning new things, as long as there were illustrations. He was able to puzzle out the meaning that way.

“It’s about life in ancient Rome.” The Reverend pushed the book over to Bryn. “See that illustration of an aqueduct? That was built over a thousand years ago to bring water down from mountains to a city.”

Bryn marveled. “Uh, an aqueduct?” Bryn studied the arches spanning hills. He’d never thought of such a thing, but it would be wonderful for farmers.

Ian asked quietly, “You didn’t get to school much?”

Bryn shook his head, shamed.

“Can you read?”

“No, sir. Wish I could.” Bryn flipped through the book, seeing pictures of buildings and strange-looking places. He hesitated over a picture of an older, portly gentleman in a big pool of water. Another man was scrubbing his back. It reminded Bryn of his forbidden thoughts about caring for Reverend Ian in his bath.

“That man is a slave, Bryn,” the Reverend explained. “And this is one of the great public baths the Roman Empire had all over. They had hot and cold water.”

Bryn shook his head in wonder. “This was a long time ago?”

“Very,” Ian said, reaching for another slice of still-warm cornbread.

“Why can’t we have things like this?” He tapped the illustration of steamy water.

“I hear in Bath, in England,” Ian answered, “they use the old Roman works for something similar. Folks even have fancy bathing costumes. As to why we don’t have those conveniences, it was a long time ago, and I guess folks forgot how to create them.”

“Huh.” Bryn had never heard of a bathing costume. When he wanted to use the creek, he took off all his clothes. What a silly idea, putting something *on* to go swimming!

“That reminds me! It’s bath time, Reverend,” Mrs. Robson put in. “When you get back from your visit, I’ll heat up the big kettles, and you and Bryn can have a good soak. It would do his foot some good.”

“I’ve never seen anything like these pictures,” Bryn confessed, wishing for more time to study Ian’s book.

“Do you want to learn how to read?”

Bryn looked down at his hands. “I couldn’t ask—”

“I’ll teach you,” Mrs. Robson stated, thumping bread dough and leaving it in a hump in a bowl to rise like she did every morning.

Astonished by Mrs. Robson’s offer, Bryn saw the Reverend hide a smile. “Looks like you got yourself a teacher!”

BRYN liked Daisy. She was a big, slow-moving horse, gentle and responsive, as a good plow horse had to be. She blinked at him with velvety eyes, looking wistful, so he fed her a bit of carrot.

“You’ll spoil her,” Mrs. Robson scolded, but she was smiling faintly as they walked the fields together.

“How much ground you do you want to break, Missus?” Bryn asked. He dropped his crutch and decided to use his foot normally. It would hurt, but he was tired of hobbling around.

The older woman patted the horse as she walked Daisy into position and tossed the traces over one shoulder, ready in case she hit a big root or a rock.

“Thought I’d go as far as the willow trees near the stream. I could put the plants that like more water closer to the source that way. But I ain’t plowed down there before, so there will be a lot of tough ground to break up.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll help.” Bryn was already pacing the ground in front of the plow, checking it for big rocks, which he gathered and carried off the patch.

Mrs. Robson nodded. “I know you will, boy. And Daisy might be old, but she’s still strong enough for it.”

The sun blazed hot and the air warmed as they worked. Bryn was soon sweating and filthy. His back hurt, and his arms had that stretchy, pulled feeling from doing labor they were unaccustomed to. He was glad that he could bathe later since he liked to be clean.

In the shack he'd lived in, he'd had no choice but to use the river, which was too cold for part of the year for any washing, but now, living with Mrs. Robson and Reverend Ian, he could take lots of hot baths.

A bird swooped down overhead, and despite the exertion, Bryn felt happiness rise as he worked alongside Daisy and Mrs. Robson. He liked the farming life, working with the earth. In fact, sometimes he had a sneaking suspicion he was better at it than Reverend Ian.

The older woman didn't talk except to mention a rock Bryn missed now and then, so he found himself relaxing; he didn't have to try to sound anything he wasn't. She seemed to accept him.

IT WAS when they got down near the willows they ran into trouble. The ground was full of stubborn roots, hard to work. They moved slowly, and Daisy strained, her brown coat wet with effort as Mrs. Robson leaned into the plow.

Bryn made her rest and fetched water for both her and Daisy. It gave him an unaccustomed feeling as he watched her drink water from a dipper he'd provided.

He was taking care of someone.

"Thank you, Bryn," Mrs. Robson said. "We got the field almost done 'cept for this last section."

"Maybe we should leave it," Bryn suggested, thinking both the woman and the old horse looked done in.

"We'll just finish this last furrow and then call it a day, yes," the older woman agreed, heaving a tired sigh.

Bryn couldn't believe she was listening to him and taking his advice! No one ever paid him any heed unless it was to call him trash or pull their skirts away.

He nodded, watching as she set up the traces again, and Daisy plodded forward, the plow digging deep into the rich earth, turning it

up so it reminded Bryn of one of Mrs. Robson's fluffy chocolate cakes.

Lifting a rock, Bryn noticed the ground was damp from the river's proximity just as Daisy skidded behind him, neighing loudly, going down—

"*Mrs. Robson!*" Bryn raced to the woman's side. Oh, shit, was she hurt? She blinked up at him, forehead bloody from catching it on the plow.

"I'm... fine."

He helped her to her feet, examining her carefully.

"Just hit my head. Oh, no!" They looked beyond to Daisy, who wasn't up yet, both her front legs bent as if she were kneeling in the mud.

Mrs. Robson and Bryn climbed through the sopping soil channel to her horse, and Bryn's throat tightened as Daisy looked at her mistress, eyes patient yet full of silent pain.

"Broken," Mrs. Robson whispered. "Both front legs!"

Bryn felt the horrible moment stretch, thinking it felt just like when he was told he was being sent to prison.

Mrs. Robson stroked Daisy's head with the appearance of calm, her throat working as she swallowed before saying, "Bryn, go on back to the house and fetch the gun hanging in the lean-to."

"Missus..." *No, oh, no!*

Mrs. Robson looked up. "Please do as I ask; I want to stay with her a spell."

Bryn nodded and despite his bad foot, he hobbled back to the house in a hurry, but his steps lagged when he reached the lean-to where the big gun waited.

"BRYN?" Reverend Ian climbed down from his horse, taking in the gun in Bryn's hands. "What's happened?"

“Daisy,” Bryn choked, unable to say more.

“Damn it! Mrs. Robson dotes on that horse. Daisy was the riding horse for all her children before the fever took them....” The Reverend’s fists balled.

Bryn dropped his head, gun weighing heavy in his grip.

“Stay here, Bryn,” Ian urged. “I’ll see to it.”

Bryn’s jaw worked. “No sir.”

“Bryn, I know how much you love animals; how gentle you are....” Ian looked like he wanted to reach out and touch Bryn but refrained.

“It’s because I love animals I have to,” Bryn whispered, willing Ian to understand.

“I’ll go with you,” Ian said, shoulders slumping.

BRYN watched, aching, hands clenched white on the gun as Reverend Ian went to Mrs. Robson where she was whispering to Daisy. The older woman climbed to her feet with Ian’s help, back erect even if her normally neat hair was loose around her mud-streaked face and her dress heavy with clods of thick, damp earth.

“Would you say a prayer for her, Reverend?”

“Of course.” Reverend Ian touched her shoulder. “And then I want you and Bryn to go back to the house.”

“No, Ian,” Mrs. Robson said, trembling fingers covering her lips. “I’ll take care of her.”

The Reverend’s mouth tightened; Bryn knew it wasn’t within protective Ian to let the older woman take it on herself.

Reverend Ian went to the fallen Daisy and laid a hand on her, patting her kindly before saying a few words in blessing.

Bryn watched, feeling frustration rise. Why did this have to happen?

When Ian returned to Mrs. Robson he caught Bryn's eye and his face hardened, as if he could see Bryn's intention written on his face. His mouth opened, as if to deny Bryn as he had Mrs. Robson—

Bryn lifted the gun.

And Ian pulled Mrs. Robson into his arms.

The shot rang out, sending birds flying from the willows on the warm spring day. As he lowered the gun, Bryn remembered how happy he'd been, watching those birds.

CHAPTER 9

IAN insisted Mrs. Robson rest, escorting her up to his dead wife's bedroom, turning down the fancy silk bedspread and insisting she climb into the high bed despite her protests.

Her face was paler than the sheets. Ian held her gaze, aching for her, but there was nothing to say, so he left her alone.

"How is she?" Bryn asked in a hushed voice when Ian returned to the kitchen.

"She's sleeping." Ian rubbed the back of his neck, watching Bryn return the heavy gun to its cradle. "I... uh, gave her a powder in her tea that was once prescribed to my wife for nervous tension."

"Good!" Bryn said. "We have to take care of her."

"Yes, we do. Best we heat some water. We're..." Ian swallowed, then continued, "filthy, both of us. And I want to heat some up for the basin in Mrs. Robson's room. In the morning, I'll go into town and get someone to haul Daisy away."

Bryn lifted the two heavy kettles that Mrs. Robson used for bathing, filled them with well-water from a bucket, and then placed them on the stove, which he'd stuffed with parts of an old stump, set to burn slow.

Ian paced, watching, before turning abruptly on his heel. "I'll haul out the copper tub," he offered, wishing there was more he could do. Wishing they could start the day over, only this time he'd stay and look after Bryn and Mrs. Robson. What had happened was his fault.

BRYN watched steam rise from the heating water, remembering Mrs. Robson's white face and clenched hands, tears that she was too proud to let spill brimming in her eyes.

"I should have been more careful," he whispered.

"SWOLLEN," Ian said, watching as Bryn painfully removed his boot from his healing foot. "Double the size! Oh, Bryn."

Bryn shrugged. "Some things hurt worse."

Ian sighed. Softly, he agreed, "Yes."

Bryn tugged off his other boot, unable to keep from wondering when Reverend Ian would leave him alone to bathe. Despite the sickness in his gut, despite how tired he was, he was young and strong and well-fed now... and his body began to react, as if remembering how he'd felt the last time he'd taken a bath.

Seeing Ian.

And then being unable to keep from working himself off, thinking of Ian's beautiful body.

Ian said nothing but didn't leave, so Bryn had no choice but to continue stripping until he was naked, one hand cupped over his sex. He flushed, hoping Ian wouldn't notice.

"Here, now," Ian said gently, and the reason he'd stayed became obvious when he helped Bryn step into the hot water, careful with his sore foot.

He had wanted to care for Bryn.

Bryn couldn't help but hiss when his hurting body stretched out. It felt so good it was damn painful!

"Better?" the Reverend breathed from behind him, fingertips grazing Bryn's hunched shoulders, as if willing him to relax.

Bryn looked over his shoulder and saw Ian had stripped down to suspenders and his trousers, his long brown hair curling from the steam, the skin on his face moist, his eyes sleepy from the heat.

Bryn licked his lips, trying not to stare at the other man. “Yes....” He stiffened when gentle fingers again touched him, digging into tense muscles. “Ian?”

“I’m sorry you were the one to do it. Daisy, I mean,” Ian said gruffly. “I didn’t want that for you. And I hope... you didn’t take it on because you see yourself as less, Bryn.”

Bryn shrugged, uneasy with Ian’s kindness. “I’m fine. Just... sore from the first day of working the earth again.” Yet Bryn sagged in the water as he remembered. “It was such a good day....”

“I know,” Ian agreed. He picked up a bar of soap and began to wash the grime from Bryn’s back and shoulders, the only sound the tinkle of water droplets as Bryn’s voice dried up. *Oh, God, touch me—!*

“You and Mrs. Robson, you’re my responsibility.” Long fingers scrubbed deep into Bryn’s scalp, and the sensation was so sweetly intense that Bryn’s eyes burned with tears even as his penis stiffened with familiar, shameful excitement. “I can’t bear....” Ian laughed softly, ruefully. “I can’t bear anything bad happening to either of you.”

“It was my fault,” Bryn whispered. “She lost her horse because I wasn’t careful enough, because I—”

“Bryn!” Ian dropped the soap with a loud *plop* and pulled Bryn to face him, big hands cupping his shoulders. “Don’t blame yourself. Sometimes life... it doesn’t make sense.”

Bryn swallowed, looking into Ian’s clear hazel eyes, large and expressive, willing him to listen. “I thought it was supposed to be God’s plan or something?”

Ian’s face tightened with bitterness. “Tell me the plan in a horse breaking its legs and leaving an old woman behind with only memories of watching her children riding. Tell me the plan for why a woman would drown her own b-baby—”

“Ian!” Bryn wanted to reach out, but he remembered what had happened last time, how Ian had been shocked, repelled by Bryn’s offer.

Yet the careful touch of Reverend Ian’s hands on his body, not grasping and forcing him into submission as other men had, but treating him gently, worked on Bryn. He raised a knee, hoping Ian wouldn’t notice his helpless want.

You’re... beautiful, he wanted to say to Ian. *Beautiful as a spring day.*

“Mrs. Robson said you had to christen a baby boy. That couldn’t have been easy.” Bryn lifted one shoulder.

“No,” Ian admitted, the *real* Ian, shown only to Bryn. “I feel such... envy when I touch a baby, but it hurts. I think it would be unbearable to have another child under my roof.”

Bryn’s eyes dropped. “You’d have to remarry for that, I reckon.”

Ian nodded, face distant.

“You ever think of...?”

“My wife and I were not... close.” Ian pushed back a strand of hair from his forehead. “I failed her in every way. Failed our son.” He looked at Bryn as if expecting him to agree.

“I’m sure there was more to it than that,” Bryn said, aching for Ian. “You sure are hard on yourself all the time. Don’t you ever relax?”

“Says you!” Ian shook his head. He bent over the water, groping for the discarded cake of soap. “Don’t blame yourself, Bryn, for what happened today with Daisy. Promise me.”

“I promise,” Bryn mumbled. *God, anything! Ian, can’t you see...?*

The back of Ian’s searching hand brushed against Bryn’s erect penis as Ian located the soap, and Bryn caught his breath. *Feels so good!* Before he could think about how wrong it was, his thighs

closed warmly around Reverend Ian's hand, silently begging for what he knew was wrong, forbidden—

"Bryn?" Ian's pupils were enlarged, his lips parted as he stared into Bryn's eyes.

Bryn's legs fell open, releasing Ian's hand. What had he done? Ian had made it clear he wanted no part of Bryn's disgusting feelings, and yet he'd behaved like some kind of easy whore!

Then the bar of soap moved, stroking Bryn's balls and up his shaft. Not thinking about why, just needy, so damn needy, Bryn moaned, thrusting, the pleasure tenfold. *Ian was touching him.*

Ian's hand froze. He stared into Bryn's eyes with shock—at Bryn's behavior or his own?

Bryn begged in a shamed whisper, "Ian, please! It feels so good, you touching me!"

In response, Ian caressed Bryn with the soap, laving the crown of his penis with silky sensation. He looked dazed, his eyes wide and holding Bryn's, his hand trembling as he used the soap to pleasure Bryn. The sensation was so strong, the need so powerful, that Bryn trembled, on the verge already, lifting himself up into every caress. *Ian's whore. Oh, God, yes!*

And then Ian released the soap a second time, and it was his big, careful hand encircling Bryn, working his shaft, running a thumb over his slit. He knew just how to touch, so Bryn felt a moment of wonder. A man knew just how to touch, where it felt good; and this man wanted to give enjoyment and not make Bryn feel like trash....

Bryn bent forward, pushing his sex into Ian's care, a tiny bit more confident, lost to his need, thrusting helplessly. "Oh, God, Ian, touch me! Touch it, I'm yours."

"If you're mine," Ian rasped, "I want you to spill. I want... need, to see it, God help me!"

Lost in Ian's touch, held captive by his burning eyes, Bryn came, making an almost hurt sound as he found perfect release at

last. Never. Never had it been like this in all his life. This felt so right, so natural. He didn't feel dirty.

But it couldn't last. Huffing, Bryn watched the other man stiffen almost immediately, as if Ian was coming back to himself and a place where he would never touch someone like Bryn.

Ian removed his hand, avoiding Bryn's gaze. Huskily, he asked, "Did I.... Are you feeling better?"

Bryn nodded, scared to speak about what they'd just shared. Scared to hear Ian tell him how wrong it was, when it had felt so beautiful. And more, that he was sick, wrong, because he wanted it again. He wanted to kneel for Ian and brush his face against his cock. He wanted to put his lips to him and take away the cares of the day, the pain of his lost child, the shock of the afternoon, but he knew that was impossible. Ian would never accept it. Hell, he'd as much as admitted his *wife* had never done that for him. Cocksucking was obviously a dirty act in Ian's eyes.

The Reverend cleared his throat. "God help me, what did I...? It was the warm water. It relaxed you and—"

Terrified to admit his true feelings, Bryn nodded emphatically even as his chest tightened. He'd known this was coming, hadn't he? The guilt, the shame. "Yes, I... I was upset. I'll rinse off on my own, and then I'll take care of the animals while you heat your own water," Bryn offered. He looked at the Reverend from under his eyelashes.

Ian gave a jerky nod, but his eyes looked a deep mossy green as they held Bryn's, full of innocence, bewilderment, and heat.

THAT night, Bryn found it hard to sleep.

He climbed out of his bed and walked to the window, looking out at the stars, thinking about when he'd next visit his Dandelion.

His sex was engorged. He ran a guilty hand over himself, remembering the intent and sleepy look in Reverend Ian's eyes as he

brought Bryn to release. Oh God! It had felt like truly dying, giving himself to Ian that completely.

It was hard, so hard, to retreat back to the façade that he didn't think about Ian, didn't want it to happen again, but somehow he had to. Just thinking about it, Bryn thrust in his palm, closing his eyes and pretending it was Ian touching him, Ian he gave himself to, over and over again.

Ian's dirty, eager whore.

THE next morning, Bryn had to use his crutch again since he'd done too much with his foot the day before.

He was in the barn when Mrs. Robson appeared, finding him caring for Carrot. She patted his horse, and Bryn stared at her, wanting to ask how she was but afraid of offending her stiff pride. Instead, he brought up something else that was preying on his mind. "I... haven't seen the Reverend since yesterday," Bryn said, flushing. "I know he brought you some hot water last night but—"

"Oh, he lit out of here like he had a fire under his, er, rump. Said he should visit folks who lived too far from town to get to church much."

Bryn swallowed. "Oh." Reverend Ian had gone away. Did he hate Bryn for what had happened?

"Just came out here to say thank you," the woman continued, interrupting Bryn's depressed thoughts.

Bryn shook his head. "I should have taken more care. If I'd—"

"Bryn, stop that!" Mrs. Robson scolded. She cupped his cheek. "You didn't do anything wrong yesterday, and I'm willing to bet you never have done."

Bryn blinked. She had no idea, since she'd slept innocently through his torrid encounter with Ian. If she only knew....

“Bryn, you never raped anyone, now did you?” Bryn dropped his gaze as Mrs. Robson stroked his cheek. “When you’re ready, you’ll tell us what happened, won’t you, boy?”

CHAPTER 10

“BRYN, can you read the next sentence back to me now?” Mrs. Robson prodded, tapping the back of his hand gently to get his attention.

Bryn rubbed tired eyes as the page blurred. He blinked, not wanting to appear stupid when Mrs. Robson was helping him so much, but in the past two weeks since Reverend Ian had left, he’d been doing a lot of the chores on the farm as well as sneaking out some mornings.

He was all done in.

“See, how she l-leans her cheek upon her... hand! O that I were a glove upon that hand, that I might touch that c-c-cheek!”

Mrs. Robson bent close, spectacles gleaming in the light from the oil lamp. “See how Romeo is transformed by meeting Juliet, Bryn? That means changed, I reckon. Like a plant growing in the garden is just a little seedling one moment, and then by the end of summer has a crop of heavy tomatoes.”

Bryn nodded, sober. “I know ‘changed’. Before I went to prison, I used to pretend I was a wild animal, like a cougar or wolf. Used to feel so... free. Only in this case, I figure Romeo changed pretty quick, faster than your tomatoes.”

Mrs. Robson’s lips tightened as if suppressing a smile. “Well, love is like that. You meet someone, and things seem a little brighter. Maybe one day you’ll have that experience.”

Bryn swallowed, thinking of Ian. But he couldn’t tell this good woman he had Romeo feelings for another man. She’d been so nice to him lately. He needed his only friend.

“Bryn, it’s all right if this is all new to you. You’re doing very well.” She patted his hand.

Bryn’s shoulders relaxed at her silent acceptance. He cleared his throat and continued to read, “When he shall die, take him and cut him out in little stars, And he will make the face of heaven so fine that all the world will be in love with the night.” Bryn’s voice grew husky as he continued, thinking of Ian. “And pay no worship to the g-garish sun.”

Mrs. Robson closed the book and looked at Bryn. “It’s a sad story.”

Bryn shrugged.

“We maybe should have chosen another story, something a little more hopeful.”

“Why couldn’t they just be together?” Bryn demanded, frustrated. “They weren’t hurtin’ anyone.”

“Because of the customs of the time. She couldn’t marry him since folks wouldn’t allow it.”

Bryn scowled. “Seems to me folks interfere too much with what should be private.”

“Things aren’t always fair, and folks aren’t always good, but in the end, don’t you think maybe they all learned from their mistakes?” Mrs. Robson sighed, sitting back and taking her spectacles off, reminding Bryn how late it was and how she’d been staying over lately so she could teach him faithfully every night. “On the surface, it’s easy to believe that people are bad, like villains, or good, like heroines, but really, we are all of us frail.”

Bryn nodded. “Like the Reverend. He has pain inside of him, but most folks don’t see it.”

“Everyone has secrets, Bryn, even you.... Are you ready to tell me why you’ve been sneaking away from the farm lately?”

Bryn’s throat closed up in fear.

“Does it have something to do with your rape charge?” Mrs. Robson probed.

Bryn nodded reluctantly.

“You aren’t getting into trouble again, are you, young Bryn?”

Bryn’s eyes widened. He wasn’t sure what Mrs. Robson meant, but he shook his head. “I’m just... looking out for someone.”

“Oh?”

“Ruth Bourne had a little girl while I was in prison,” Bryn found himself telling the older woman while avoiding her sharp gaze.

“The Ruth Bourne who accused you of rape?”

Bryn swallowed thickly. “I should go to bed now, Missus.” He lit a small oil lamp that he habitually took upstairs.

“I’ll be seeing the Reverend in church this Sunday. I was thinking... I’d maybe tell him we want him to come home. What do you think?” Mrs. Robson asked Bryn. “Do you miss him?”

Bryn hesitated on the stairs. He felt his heart speed up at the thought of Reverend Ian. He missed him so much he was sick with it.

“I hear he’s been sparkin’ with Ellie Mae, the Andersons’ girl,” Mrs. Robson continued. “Might be good for him to have a woman again. Not be so lonesome.”

AS HE had every night since Reverend Ian had gone away, Bryn went to Ian’s room, opening the door and breathing in the scent of the other man.

He set the lamp down, looking at the neatly made bed, and walked over to the chest of drawers where a handsome comb set made of horn rested. He lifted it, brushing his palm while meeting his own forlorn gaze in the small round shaving mirror.

Next, following a ritual that helped him sleep, Bryn wandered to the wardrobe, opening it and taking out an old work shirt of Ian's, faintly scented with bay rum.

Bryn's sex stiffened.

Ian.

Reverend Ian was courting a young woman. Maybe he'd marry her, since that's what men like him did. Marry her and forget all about his hired man and all about what had happened between them.

"IAN?"

Ian lifted his forearm off his eyes and looked up at the young woman who had come out to her family's barn to visit him. Her long blonde hair was loose down her back, and she was wearing a robe that hinted at her lush figure. "I bought you some coffee and pie."

"Thank you, Ellie Mae." He smiled, taking the plate from her. They had a history, but she'd never spoken of it, and he had been relieved, grateful. "I like to sit outside sometimes and have a slice when I'm at home."

He thought of Bryn. Of sitting on the porch back on his farm and pointing out Cassiopeia or Andromeda in the sky while watching the younger man's face light with new knowledge.

"I make very good pie," Ellie Mae pointed out. "It's a shame you have to pay Mrs. Robson to do that for you; you wouldn't if you married."

Ian ate, gaze fixed on his pie, a little uncomfortable at the leading direction of Ellie Mae's conversation. "No, I suppose not."

"Although I have to tell you my Papa wasn't happy you hired Bryn Morgan. I told him you felt sorry for him, but he doesn't want me to visit your farm as long as Bryn is there."

Ian felt a ball of emotion grow in his chest, making it hard to enjoy the pie in peace. "That's too bad," he settled for saying flatly. "Guess I won't see you then."

“I... no.” She blinked. “Ian, whatever can you mean? Surely you don’t want to keep around a man who would hurt... another person.” He had finished, and Ellie took his plate.

“No, I would not, but I never believed he was guilty, and now I am convinced of it.”

“Oh?” Her eyes widened, and Ian wondered if she were truly interested in Bryn’s story... or in the gossip she could spread.

He stiffened when she surprised him by pressing her lips against his in a fervent kiss.

“Ellie Mae,” he whispered, lifting a hand to push her away even as part of him laughed. He’d been ignoring her overtures for years, except for that one time, but after what had happened between him and Bryn, he’d practically made a beeline for her family’s farm, wanting to remember who he was—*not* a man who could ever want... had ever—

Oh God.

She took his hand and molded it to her breast, and suddenly Ian wanted to press her into the straw. *Take her*. Put to rest the forbidden yearning for Bryn.

A HAND shook Bryn awake at dawn.

Bryn blinked up at Ian sleepily; then he threw himself into the other man’s arms without thinking how wrong it was. “Ian!”

“Bryn, you missed me?” Ian’s big palm awkwardly cupped Bryn’s head. He closed his eyes tightly, not pushing Bryn away.

“So much! Couldn’t sleep good while you were away.”

Amused, Ian said, “So I see. Is that why you’re on my bed?”

Bryn felt abruptly self-conscious. What was he doing throwing himself into Reverend Ian’s arms? He was lucky the other man didn’t toss him out on his ass!

But the Reverend only studied Bryn, pushing the bronze curls back from his forehead. “I thought of you when... I ate pie last night.”

Bryn picked up Ian’s hand and nuzzled the palm against his lips, aching. He drank in the sight of the other man, seeing his hair and beard were unkempt, which was unlike Ian. His eyes were red, as if he’d been... weeping?

Bryn’s gut knotted.

“Your house is very quiet.”

“I’ve often thought so.” Softly, Ian admitted, “I couldn’t stay away any longer.”

Bryn cleared his throat, unsure what Ian meant and afraid to hope. “You look tired.”

“I rode most of the night,” Reverend Ian admitted, shifting his shoulders wearily. “I did something that I regret.”

“I’m sure you could never do something bad, Ian,” Bryn contradicted. “Remember how I said you are always too hard on yourself? You just need sleep!” Bryn made to clear off Ian’s bed.

“No,” Reverend Ian rasped. “Just this once, let me hold you, Bryn.” Reverend Ian settled in the center of his bed and pulled Bryn over him.

Bryn was careful to keep his lower body against the mattress so that he wasn’t pressing his shameful erection against Ian. Gentle hands smoothed his hair. This was all Bryn would ever ask for. “Feels so nice,” Bryn said shyly.

Ian cleared his throat. “Have you been taking good care of Mrs. Robson for me?”

Bryn warmed with pride at the idea that the Reverend trusted him to do that. “Yes, sir. I repaired the old corral and helped her plant all the vegetable seeds. She also made me chocolate cake three times!”

“She did?” Reverend Ian marveled.

All the time they discussed Mrs. Robson, Ian's hand was still buried in Bryn's hair. Bryn's heart was pounding.

"I told her it's my favorite," Bryn admitted. "And we need another plow horse, but...."

"I'll handle that," Reverend Ian said. "But I want you to come with me when I do. I'd like your opinion on what horse I purchase."

Bryn stiffened, sitting up to read Ian's face. "But I don't know much about horses."

"I suppose that's why Carrot dotes on you?" Ian's voice sounded like he was smiling.

"I love Carrot," Bryn admitted. "Guess she knows that."

"Guess she does...." The hand moved lower and rubbed gentle circles over the center of Bryn's back. It felt like heaven, that touch.

Finally, the Reverend shifted, and Bryn watched as he pulled out his heavy gold watch and the rock Bryn had given him from his pocket and placed them on the bedside table.

"What do you do when you visit folks?" Bryn chewed his lip, a burning, angry feeling rising because he really wanted to know about the girl Ian was courting, but he had no right to ask. No right to tell Ian that he was *his*.

Ian sighed. "I used to read from the Good Book, but I didn't bring it with me this time. Just... dry words on a page."

Bryn waited, and Ian finally continued, "I used to find him in the book, Bryn, and then for a long time, I didn't feel anything. Until.... Is it wrong that I see him in Mrs. Robson when she's making pies or when I watch you taking care of Carrot?"

Bryn shook his head. "I'm not the one to ask, Reverend. I don't know anything about God, except I think he probably doesn't like me much."

"You're a good man, Bryn. Perhaps because of your experience, you're gentle with helpless creatures like Carrot or Henrietta. How's her claw, by the way?"

“Mrs. Robson made a poultice, and we put it on Henrietta, only she kept pecking at it, so I put it on at night when she was roostin’. We still use a splint during the day.”

“Clever! So she’s better?” Ian’s large eyes looked deep into Bryn, as if absorbing him.

“Yes, sir, but I don’t have to put her back with the rest, do I?” Bryn fretted. He’d wanted Ian around to ask him about that for days. Just one more reason to miss him.

Ian continued to stroke his back in slow circles. “No, she’s yours now.”

Bryn sighed, feeling perfect happiness in Ian’s arms.

“I feel him holding you like this,” Reverend Ian whispered. “How can that be?”

BRYN sat up and looked down at Ian’s sleeping face, at the lines burned by sunlight and weariness. He couldn’t resist, though he knew he should. He cupped Ian’s face and pressed his lips gently against Ian’s in a stolen kiss.

He used a new word he’d learned recently from reading with Mrs. Robson, one that he’d turned over in his mind like his hand playing with one of his rocks. One he felt spoke of Ian. “*Beloved*.”

AS THE sun rose higher later that morning, Bryn crawled on his belly to the top of the hill overlooking Mrs. Hawken’s shack. He’d made himself leave Ian’s bed or God knows what he would have done. An exhausted Ian was too much temptation, making Bryn feel both protective and also irritated, because deep down, he still resented that Ian had left him.

Had courted some girl.

Now he looked around the small vegetable patch and the few dusty, limp poplar trees, frowning since usually the old woman was out working in her garden this time of day.

He felt his throat tighten with worry. Had his father been here?

He climbed to his feet, hesitant, knowing he was forbidden to ever come here.

Where was Dandelion?

CHAPTER 11

IAN was cleaning his saddle. He used the brush to rub soap back and forth, remembering how he'd felt when he'd ridden away, terrified of what he'd done, what had happened with Bryn.

Yet he'd come back with the same rocks in his belly, only for a different reason.

He shoved back his hair, which was getting long now so he might ask Mrs. Robson if she could trim it for him. How was it that everyone thought he was such a good man and he repeatedly made such terrible mistakes?

Like Bryn. Or... Ellie Mae.

Rationally, Ian knew that the real mistake was letting anything happen between him and Bryn, but his gut told him it was turning to Ellie that had been wrong.

Yet how could that be? Ian rubbed his beard, which he'd trimmed neatly that morning after waking up and finding no Bryn in his bed, just a hollow in the mattress where he had slept. He'd told himself sternly he wasn't disappointed.

He sighed. However he worked it, his feelings were... wrong. But he wasn't drifting like a dead piece of tumbleweed now. Now he felt. Now he wanted.

Bryn exploded into the barn, hanging onto the door as he trembled, face sweaty, eyes wide, panting.

"Bryn!" Ian put aside the saddle, fists balling. Had someone threatened Bryn? He'd said what he'd do, hadn't he? God, he'd never said that about anyone, but no one had ever threatened someone he car—someone who lived under his roof.

Bryn bit his lip, looking torn. There were actually tears brimming in his blue eyes.

Ian felt his gut tighten. What now?

Trouble. What had he thought that first day he'd hired Bryn? And Ian'd been right. And he wouldn't change a thing now.

"What is it, Bryn?" Ian climbed to his feet, squeezing Bryn's shoulder, trying with his touch to impart reassurance, to let him know he wasn't alone anymore. "You live here on my land now, so you can tell me anything. Is it your father?"

Bryn's blue eyes ignited with feeling at Ian's words. For a moment he opened his mouth, but no words came out. He swallowed and then gave a jerky nod. "I was warned if I ever went by there, they'd make trouble for her, but I couldn't stay away. I had to look out for her! *Had to*, Ian!"

Ian was confused. "Trouble for whom?"

"Dandelion," Bryn sighed.

IN THE kitchen, Ian washed his hands very deliberately. He'd insisted Bryn accompany him and have a glass of water. He was so deeply upset he wasn't making sense.

And Ian needed some time to figure out what was going on.

Bryn had been keeping a secret from him?

Mrs. Robson was pulling bubbling tarts from the oven, the warm draft washing over both men. She looked at Ian and then at Bryn, where her gaze stayed, narrowed. "So you're ready to share what's troubling you, young Bryn?" she prodded.

Bryn's voice was a thread as Ian stared at him. "Yes, Missus."

"You told Mrs. Robson about this Dandelion?" Ian demanded. *And not me?* Bryn, his Bryn, had been keeping this from him?

Bryn burst out, blue eyes aflame, "You weren't here, were you, Reverend?"

THE wagon clattered down the rocky track, washed out by some of the early spring rains. There was no man to fix this trail to Mrs. Hawken's place regularly, though Ian did come out sometimes with a hired worker and do what he could, since she was his nearest neighbor.

Now he held the reins, Mrs. Robson beside him. She put a hand on his arm and looked at him, as if reading his rigid body language. "He's in a bad way, Ian," she said very softly, so Bryn could not overhear her words. "Fretting himself for weeks, like running a hand over and over on one of those rocks of his he sets store by. Walking in the hills late into the night."

"How is it that only now am I made aware of this?" Ian hated that he was jealous—jealous of his good, kind housekeeper! But obviously Bryn had chosen to confide in her and not Ian.

"Like he said, you were distracted." She gave a helpless shrug.

Ian's jaw clenched, but under the anger, his true feelings poked out. *Hurt*. "I would have done something."

"I know," she said.

"Doesn't he know I'd have done anything?" Ian whispered.

"I'm sure he does, but he wasn't ready for you to help." She patted Ian's arm. "He just wasn't ready yet."

IAN helped Mrs. Robson down from the wagon in front of Mrs. Hawken's dilapidated cabin. Bryn had chosen to walk beside them, blue eyes moody as he stared at the horizon, careful to avoid Ian's searching gaze.

"Tell me what's wrong?" Ian asked Bryn, folding his arms. *Enough. Confide in me.*

"I didn't see them outside this morning! And they always.... Dandelion likes to play. I left hair ribbons from the store for her to find. Bright colors: sky blue, rose pink, sunflower yellow and a

brown the same color as Carrot's coat, with a little bit of red in it. Silk ribbons. I was sure—" Bryn swallowed thickly and looked under an old wagon with a broken wheel.

Ian looked around, feeling helpless, not something he was used to feeling. The farm was little more than a shack and a few dusty fields. Some laundry was swaying back and forth, limp and abandoned in the dry wind.

Always before when he'd come here, Mrs. Hawken had met his wagon and taken the preserves or pies that Mrs. Robson had given him to offer her, usually made of the best berries growing wild by the river or the best fruit from Ian's trees.

Bryn opened the door to the chicken coop, the creak loud in the desolate place, face tense as he continued to search.

Wanting to help, Ian spotted something flesh-colored lying in the settling dust from their wagon. He picked it up, staring at it, as a new dread settled like heavy rocks in his gut.

Bryn paused in his search, staring at it, so Ian handed him the grimy doll made out of corn, raising his brows in a question he did not want to ask.

"Made that for her before I was sent away," Bryn whispered. "Wanted her to remember me, if I didn't come back."

"GOOD thing you two brought me along!" Mrs. Robson interrupted gruffly, as if deciding to skate over the pulsing emotion coming from Ian and Bryn. "See what keeping secrets does, young Bryn? Secrets have a way of coming out." But she squeezed Bryn's hand as she passed him where he stood with the forgotten doll clasped in his hands. "Come on, we better see what is wrong here," she prodded, heading toward the heart of the farm—the shack made out of dried-up prairie wood and metal scraps.

She knocked sharply on Mrs. Hawken's door and called out. When she received no reply, she swung the door open, disappearing inside.

Ian held his breath, not wanting to go in there for some inexplicable reason.

“*Bryn! Ian!*” Mrs. Robson summoned them.

Weighed by dread, Ian nevertheless entered the shack.

MRS. Robson gently brushed the hair off Mrs. Hawken’s face. “She’s cool and stiff. Looks like she was makin’ breakfast and fell over dead, poor soul.”

“There are worse ways to die,” Ian said, and he knew, having sat with the dying often enough.

“Yes,” Mrs. Robson agreed. “We’ll need a coffin from town. I expect we’ll bury her in the cemetery near the church too. This farm...” She gave a little shrug. “Lonely place for a body to lie for eternity.”

Ian’s fingers grazed the second place setting on the table, and he frowned. *No, oh, no*. It might be what he suspected, dreaded most.

As if to back up his fears, he caught a rustling sound from behind the curtain that separated the living and sleeping spaces in the small shack. Hearing the same sound, Mrs. Robson looked at him dumbly, waiting for him to take the lead as always. Ian braced himself and shoved aside the patchwork screen, which only revealed an unmade cot, small enough that he thought it might be a child’s bed.

And on the upturned box by the bed lay a handful of stones.

Very familiar stones, gathered with love.

Ian looked over at Bryn, who was white-faced, hands clenched on the corn doll as he stood in the doorway, as if afraid to cross that threshold.

Well, no more so than Ian. *I’d do anything to fix things*. Now he’d have to live up to it, no matter how sick inside he felt. “Hand that to me, Bryn,” he asked, trying to keep his tone gentle. Mrs.

Robson was right; Bryn was trembling, on the edge. He needed them.

Swallowing, Bryn passed him the toy.

Ian pretended not to notice Bryn's shaking hands, wanting to say something, to crush Bryn in his arms and—

He turned away, familiar depression catching him. What the hell was he thinking? Shoving his feelings aside, he knelt by the bed, lifting the thin yellowed lace bedspread, the edges browned with prairie dust. He waited but heard nothing but the pounding of his own heart.

After a moment, he held out the doll.

Long minutes passed. Ian settled, now catching the sound of the wind outside, the soft groans of the wooden structure slapped together to create not a home, or hope, but merely basic shelter. Finally he was rewarded for his patience when a tiny dirt-streaked hand reached out and took hold of the toy, and Ian looked into familiar blue eyes under a mop of bronze-blond curls.

Bryn's Dandelion.

Oh God, he could feel something shift inside himself, looking into those eyes. "Mrs. Robson," he called softly, not wanting to frighten the little girl in her ragged patchwork dress.

"Land sakes!" Mrs. Robson exclaimed, kneeling next to Ian while Bryn stayed put, arms wrapped around himself, anguish stamped on his features. "I didn't know Mrs. Hawken had any children! Her man's been dead for years," Mrs. Robson whispered, as if afraid of scandal.

And scandal there could be, Ian worried. He sighed, looking over his shoulder at Bryn, who was staring at the child.

"Come here, girl. We won't hurt you none." Mrs. Robson coaxed, reaching out, but the little girl did not respond, huge eyes fixed on Mrs. Robson's face. After a moment, Mrs. Robson commented, "Almost seems like she didn't understand me, but that can't be right, her living here with Mrs. Hawken."

Ian's throat tightened the way it did whenever he was around someone vulnerable. He ran a hand over his beard, trying to figure out what to do. "But have you ever seen her or heard of her at church or at school?" he asked Mrs. Robson. "I never baptized this child. I never even heard of her birth."

"You're saying that old woman kept her locked away in the house whenever folks came by?" Mrs. Robson's eyes were wide. "My God, Reverend, something ain't right here! Why would she do that, hide her away like a... secret?"

"Like a secret," Ian repeated softly. "I can think of one reason—she's illegitimate, but I don't think she's Mrs. Hawken's daughter."

"No, the woman was too old for that. Poor thing, she's trembling like she's terrified of people!"

Ian had had enough. "Miss Dandelion?" He inched forward and pulled the child carefully into his arms. She could not come to them, could not trust them, so he had to take that step. So small, thin little arms, shadows under her eyes, blue veins showing through her pale skin. Oh, God. She still did not speak but placed one frail hand on his arm, as if asking he not hurt her. "God have mercy," he whispered, unable to keep from cradling her closer. Finally, after a deep breath, he climbed to his feet with the child in his arms.

Mrs. Robson patted her dangling bare foot, crusted with dried mud. "She's dirty and probably hungry too! Best take her home, Reverend."

Ian looked toward the doorway, held Bryn's tortured gaze. By God, he was going to get to the bottom of this!

"What are you going to do?" Bryn asked, focused on Ian.

"Take her home, of course!" Ian growled.

CHAPTER 12

MRS. Robson heated the big kettles for a bath while the little girl sat at the table, a hot bowl of soup steaming in front of her, yet making no attempt to lift her spoon. Instead, her solemn gaze followed any movement from the three adults.

“She’s not eating!” Ian said.

“I can see that!” Mrs. Robson retorted. “Stop fretting, since you might scare her.” She left the kettles and knelt by the little girl, glancing at Bryn as she did. He was leaning just inside the lean-to door, watching the child from the shadows. He hadn’t spoken since they’d found her, taken her home.

“Somethin’ ain’t right with her,” Mrs. Robson whispered to Ian.

Bryn flinched, dragging a hand over his eyes.

The older woman pushed the girl’s hair back off her neck and gently ran her fingers over the child’s skull. She paused with a hiss of understanding. “Her head is shaped different!”

“Different?” The Reverend blinked.

Mrs. Robson sighed and nodded. “She probably got stuck during the birth and ran out of air. When she was pulled out, her skull would have been all soft, and it got damaged. Could be she’s not all there, Reverend; only time will tell.”

Bryn made a hurt sound. A second later, the lean-to door slammed behind him, and they caught the sound of running footsteps.

Ian rubbed his forehead, dazed. Was it wrong that he almost wished the child had stayed on Mrs. Hawken's farm as her secret? Yes, he knew it was wrong, but now Bryn was upset. Ian hurt looking at the girl, and there was possibly something wrong with her.

I can't fix this; I failed once before as a parent, a protector. But Mrs. Robson, Bryn, this damaged little girl—they are looking to me.

Mrs. Robson raised her brows at Ian. "Probably wishing you were still out visiting folks, but we need you. Bryn needs you. You better go out and talk to that boy. I'll take care of the little one."

"But she needs to eat...." Ian stood, clearly torn between worry for the child and wanting to go after Bryn.

"She just don't know how to use as spoon, is all!" Mrs. Robson stroked the girl's head to get her attention and then raised the bowl, putting it gently to the child's lips. After a moment, the little girl tentatively took a sip.

Ian's chest tightened. "She's so small."

"She hasn't been fed proper. And I should warn you, she might be sick a while."

"Sick?" Ian gave Mrs. Robson a blank, terrified look.

The older woman made an exasperated sound. "She's not been fed enough, from what I can see, and it takes a body time to recover from that. And before you go asking, I'll stay the night."

"You can put her in my wife's room."

"You sure?" Mrs. Robson looked doubtful. "She might mess up the fancy silk bedspread."

Ian shook his head, bemused. "Why would I care about that?"

"Well, there's Ellie Mae."

Ian turned away, not wanting to see Mrs. Robson's hopes; they had too much in common with Ellie Mae's.

“All right, I’ll put her in there.” Mrs. Robson patted Ian’s arm. “I know you’re terrified of this little girl and how she’ll change things, but you’re a good man, Ian, and I have faith in you.”

BRYN was brushing Carrot when Ian entered the barn, hands in his pockets. He cleared his throat and nodded to Bryn’s horse. “Coat looks good, nice and glossy.”

“Yes, sir,” Bryn said, avoiding Ian’s gentle, probing gaze.

“Her leg is better too.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And she’s such a delicate shade of pink! Why, I’ve never seen such a color on a horse....”

Bryn’s hand hesitated mid-stroke. He cocked an eyebrow and looked at Ian at last before ducking his head and giving a rusty laugh. “Yes, sir. She’s famous for her color.”

“Dandelion is your daughter?” Ian didn’t look at Bryn as he rubbed Carrot’s head.

“Yes,” Bryn whispered. He reached out hesitantly, almost touching Ian’s rigid arm. “Ian, I wanted so often to tell you.”

“I wish you had, Bryn. I want you to bring me everything, everything about you.” The barn was so quiet in that moment Ian caught the soft rustling sounds, the horse stamping her hooves.

Bryn asked, eyes fixed on Ian’s face, “Why is that?”

Ian struggled with his feelings, wanting to answer, *because you’re mine!* But he couldn’t say that! God! He could never—

“I think I better hear the story so I can keep her safe,” he rasped.

Bryn’s shoulders sagged, and something snapped inside Ian. There was no one here to see, to condemn, no one to know the thoughts in his head. He just needed to keep them to himself. But what could it hurt to touch, to give comfort? He settled for putting a

careful arm around Bryn's shoulder. "Come on, we'll go sit out on the porch, and I'll get us some coffee."

"I WON Dandelion's mother in a poker game." Bryn spoke into his coffee cup, flushing.

"Poker?" Ian blinked.

"Ruth's father. He couldn't meet his debts, so he put up her virginity as a marker."

"Good Lord, you mean little Ruth Bourne? The girl that you were accused of—"

"Rape." Bryn's mouth stretched into something bitter. "She was seventeen and so scared. I cheated and I won her. I never meant to do anything with her, because..." Bryn's throat closed up. "Just because." No way he could tell the Reverend he'd thought about boys and not girls, even before he'd been sent up! Hell, he'd even had thoughts about the handsome young minister that had made him ashamed to enter his church, so he'd settled for watching through the windows sometimes when Ian held service.

"We had one night together, and she said that I... made her happy. Then her Pa wanted to marry her to some rich widower who wanted her, only he found out she wasn't a virgin no more so—"

"So you were accused of rape. But Bryn, why did you go along with it?"

"She was carrying my Dandelion. Her father said he'd beat the child out of her if I didn't keep my mouth shut."

"Four years in prison!" Ian reached out and squeezed Bryn's hand, the truth hitting him in the gut. "Oh my God, Bryn!"

"Had a child to take care of, Reverend." Bryn shrugged, swallowing tightly. "Did what I had to. I know you... understand."

The pain of his own lost son made Ian's chest tighten. He'd do anything—*anything!*—to hold his little boy again. He cleared his throat. "Yes, I understand. Of course. You did what you had to."

“SO HOW did she end up with Mrs. Hawken?” Ian asked after a long pause.

“When I was in prison, Mrs. Hawken wrote me and told me that Ruth had died havin’ our baby. She used to teach us kids, and I guess she felt sorry for Dandelion, so she took her in, only she called her Mary. She said... it was a good name, since she couldn’t risk baptizing her.”

Bryn sighed, running a trembling hand through his hair. “When I got out, I wanted to see her so bad... just hold her! I went looking for work so I could help take care of her. But it wasn’t long before my daughter’s grandpa, Abraham Bourne, warned me he wanted Dandelion kept a secret. If I was caught near my daughter, he would put her down. He don’t think she’s...” Bryn swallowed. “A real person on account she don’t talk. I think that the only reason he didn’t just take her into the woods and leave her for the wild animals was because Mrs. Hawken was there when she was born.”

Reverend Ian sprang to his feet, his face sweaty, his eyes dilated as he paced.

Bryn watched him, hands clenched around his coffee cup.

“Goddamn him!” the Reverend growled.

Seeing that Ian was upset, Bryn climbed to his feet, placing a tentative hand on his sleeve. “Dandelion matters to you? I know it can’t be easy having another child around.”

Ian’s eyes shimmered with suppressed tears. He cleared his throat. “Thank you, Bryn.” He took a deep breath. “However, Mrs. Robson and I are agreed that she matters and we will keep her safe. God help me if anyone ever sets foot on my land to make trouble for her... or you.”

“Don’t take on so,” Bryn whispered.

“I MEAN it, Bryn. I take care of what’s mine,” Ian vowed.

Somehow he was holding one of Bryn's hands, leaning close. Bryn's body was perfect in that moment to Ian's eyes. Hell, if he were honest, it was always perfect. Lean and slightly built, and yet sturdy. And the magnitude of the sacrifice this young man had made...! All for love of an unborn baby.

But Ian understood. If he'd had a choice, he'd have given his life to keep his baby alive. "You are the most...." Ian broke off. He was trembling.

Gentle, Bryn said, "Ian, don't."

"Like... spring, bringing me back to life," Ian mumbled. "Do you know that? And sometimes I hate you for it, but don't you ever leave, Bryn Morgan. You hear me?"

Ian had to turn away then, afraid of what Bryn might see in his eyes.

LATER on that day, Bryn hesitated at the bedroom door. Mrs. Robson looked up, giving him the calm look that helped to settle the knots in his stomach. "Dandelion's a different kind of name," she noted.

Bryn shrugged. "Ruth reminded me of dandelion seeds blowing in the wind. Missus, Dandelion's my daughter."

Mrs. Robson held up her hand. "Of course she's yours! I knew it when I saw those rocks by her bed. So did Reverend Ian, I reckon."

"Where is she now? I have her collection. Went back to the shack to get it, since I thought she'd like it." Bryn shrugged.

"She's...." Mrs. Robson pushed a hand through her hair, which wasn't as neat as usual. Bryn could see the day had taken a toll on the older woman, but she didn't seem to mind. Her whole focus was on the little girl suddenly under their roof. "Under the bed."

“Oh.” Bryn carefully put the pile of stones on the bedside table. Mrs. Robson saw that there were crude letters scrawled on each one spelling out things like *beauty* or *sunset*.

“You gave her those?”

“I asked Mrs. Hawken to spell them out for me, since I couldn’t write. Not, uh, until recently. I left them for her sometimes when I snuck out to see her,” Bryn admitted. He studied Mrs. Robson. “Are you angry?”

Mrs. Robson’s eyes widened. “Angry! Land sakes, why would I...? Oh, you mean having her here is difficult for Reverend Ian.” Mrs. Robson nodded. “It *is*, but I don’t think that’s a bad thing. You look at this girl, and you see that being born was a hard thing for her, but she’s here and it’s a miracle. Maybe Ian needs to be reminded, almost born again himself!”

Bryn shook his head, at a loss for words.

“I know, sounds like nonsense, probably.” Mrs. Robson flushed. “Just a notion of mine. I was... in a bad way after I lost my children and taking care of Reverend Ian helped. And then you came, and I didn’t want to approve of you, even like you, but...”

“No, it’s not nonsense,” Bryn said earnestly. “I was going to say ‘beautiful’.”

Mrs. Robson reached out and squeezed Bryn’s hand. “It’s wonderful to be a parent, Bryn. No matter what.”

Gathering courage, he knelt by the bed, lifting the ivory lace bed skirt and looking into the wide, frightened eyes of his little girl. “Hey, Dandelion,” he greeted her. “I got a new rock for you.” He passed her the gift Ian had given him when he’d first moved in here. “This one is for new beginnings, like a fresh start.”

She cocked her head, and Bryn thought he read a kind of yearning in her dull eyes, as if she wished she could understand him.

His throat tightened. *My little girl*. He took her hand, gently opened it and placed the rock on her palm. “How about you let me

put you on the bed? Have you ever seen such pretty fixings? You can sleep on a real canopy bed, just like a princess in a story!”

IAN paused at the door to his wife’s bedroom, watching with Mrs. Robson as Bryn gently lifted Dandelion out from hiding and onto the fancy bed he’d bought his wife. As he did, he felt strings of feeling cut into his heart: the ever-present ache for his own child that was always there, pride in Bryn, helplessness over little Dandelion. What was wrong with her and could he help her?

He went to his own room, the weight heavy on his shoulders. Yet even though it hurt, it was good to feel, to care again.

He had people.

THE tentative knock on his door late that night caught Ian staring up at the ceiling. He’d been half-expecting it, so he got out of bed and opened his door to find Bryn.

“I...” Bryn’s head was down, as if he was ashamed.

Ian couldn’t resist tugging the other man into his room, heart pounding. He whispered, “Is Dandelion all right?”

Bryn nodded, avoiding meeting Ian’s concerned gaze. “She got sick, but Mrs. Robson cleaned it up. Said it was normal. But I... Ian, seeing her like that scared me.”

Ian returned to the bed and Bryn followed. Feeling an unsettling significance to the moment, Ian brought up something mundane. “It’s Mrs. Robson’s birthday tomorrow.”

“Chocolate cake! We could try making it for her,” Bryn suggested, obviously also needing distraction.

“I’ve never baked a cake in my life!” Ian said, feeling tension loosen as he lay on the bed and pulled Bryn close. “Have you?”

“No, sir, but how hard can it be?”

Ian felt a smile tug his mouth. Bryn was here, in his arms. “I have a feeling pretty hard,” he observed dryly. Then, “You’ll have to leave soon. You can’t stay here or Mrs. Robson might see you.”

Bryn nodded. One hand curled lonely over Ian’s chest until Ian meshed his fingers through Bryn’s so their hands found silent comfort, the only solace of the long day. “Just for a little while.”

“Just for a little while,” Ian agreed, putting aside all thought, all worry, and letting his body tell him this was right.

CHAPTER 13

IAN pulled the slim body closer, liking the scent, the warmth, the lean form against his own. It felt so perfect to grind his erection against a plump rear end, one name on his mind, a forbidden name.

Someone called his own name softly—

Reluctant to leave the warm, satisfying world, he pushed the body next to his deep into the mattress and mounted it, fumbling with denim trousers so that firm skin met his needy penis. “Bryn,” he mumbled. “Let me have you. Want you, hurt for you...”

A whimpering sound broke through Ian’s haze. His eyes flared open. *Oh, God, what was he...?*

“Bryn?” He blinked, groggy and overheated and furiously aroused. His erection prodded the slim backside he’d exposed to the cool air of his bedroom.

It felt like tearing skin, but he somehow managed to yank away, shocked, trembling, on the verge of— “What is happening?”

“Shh, you were dreaming.” Bryn tentatively stroked Ian’s forearm as if sensing he needed gentling, and Ian closed his eyes, savoring that touch like sunlight warming him. It felt so good. How could it be wrong?

“Why are you here? Oh...” Ian watched color bloom in Bryn’s cheeks and felt himself blushing as well. “You... couldn’t sleep. You came here because you couldn’t sleep.”

“You know that’s not the only reason,” Bryn breathed. “You know why I come to you.”

Ian swallowed thickly, looking away. He couldn't.... He was shaking finely now, wishing... he wasn't even sure what he wished for. He had so little experience. Bryn's hand skimmed his belly, making the hard cock below twitch. "You're hurting," Bryn whispered shyly in Ian's ear before tonguing it.

Ian jerked, gasping, his head falling back. "Don't, Bryn, for the love of God, or I'll—!" If Bryn did that, just put his tongue in Ian's ear, laving, circling, Ian would break. He would break and he would come. An enticing picture that he'd tried so hard to suppress popped into Ian's mind: *Bryn on his knees, taking Ian's sex into his mouth as he had the shopkeeper.*

"Bryn," Ian whispered, his tone a plea. *Help me*, Ian wanted to say. *I'm lost. I don't know what to do.* Sweat broke out on his forehead. He closed his eyes tightly, shaking from arousal. His balls were drawn up tight, and he was embarrassingly near to losing control, pulling Bryn's body close and spurting all over him. He even wanted to do that—spill his seed on Bryn's plump backside.

"Shh, don't take on so," Bryn soothed. He stroked the open heart of Ian's palm, resting between them like a question, an offering, as they stared at each other. "See this crease in the line in your palm? Someone in prison told me that means your life has two paths. All you have to do is choose, Ian."

Ian closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "Impossible!"

"I can... take you inside me."

"Inside?"

To illustrate, Bryn took Ian's big hand and placed it on his ass, settling it into the divide between his round cheeks and over the little dimple he was offering for Ian's use.

Ian's fingers hungrily fumbled over Bryn's opening. He ached to just... God! Shove it in. Lose himself in Bryn. Become a part of him. "But... won't that hurt?"

Bryn's blue gaze dropped, and Ian stiffened, sickened that he'd wanted to do it, wanted to bury his penis inside Bryn. "How can you even *think* I'd hurt you?" Ian whispered crossly.

Bryn looked confused. "But you want me...."

Ian shook his head. "I can't hurt you! It would be like... like cutting into my own flesh. Don't you understand? What you want to give me, Bryn, it has to be wrong."

BRYN felt his eyes sting. Hadn't he worried that Ian would be disgusted? He couldn't speak for a moment. He nodded, and Ian cupped his cheek.

"Isn't there some way we can both feel good?" Ian asked, his innocence shining in his eyes, lighting the semi-darkness of the hushed bedroom.

"We could try rubbin' against each other," Bryn suggested quietly after working up his courage. It was hard to talk about this stuff. He'd never talked about it! But clearly they were going to have to.

"That won't hurt you?" Ian studied him.

Bryn shook his head. "Never done it, but... I don't think so."

Ian ran his big palms down Bryn's bare, sinewy arms, making Bryn shiver in delight. Just that simple touch felt so good, so healing. "God forgive me, I know this is wrong."

"Why?" Bryn demanded, his eyes bright with angry tears. "Why is it wrong when it's what we both want? We ain't hurtin' no one! And after all the bad in our lives, why can't we take a little comfort?"

MRS. Robson tiptoed across the hallway in the predawn hour to Bryn's room. She knocked gently and opened his door; finding the bed unmade and the room empty, she wondered if he'd gone down

to the kitchen early this morning. Maybe he was cutting some extra wood for the stove?

She had her hand on the stair rail when a ragged cry made her pause. Had it come from Reverend Ian's room? Was he all right? He used to have nightmares about his little boy when she first came to work for him.

She walked to his door and paused, listening.

BRYN climbed on top of Ian so his bronze-blond hair swung around his face, his eyes lit up like the blue heart of a flame.

Their sexes rubbed, and Ian gave a pained sound.

Bryn leaned down. "Hush. I'm going to see to you."

"Yes, Bryn," Ian's hands dug into Bryn's slender hips, his hazel eyes burning heavy-lidded and possessive. "Take care of it. I want to watch you take care of it."

TIME seemed to slow down, like honey pouring slowly from a jar. At first it was awkward, Ian looking away when Bryn stripped off all his clothing, blushing, but then his hazel eyes looked, admired, claimed. Bryn touched him, touched himself. When he first mounted Ian, he was untried, like a new rider in the saddle, so he mashed Ian's penis and made him grimace.

But he couldn't stop; they couldn't stop, heartbeats pounding for relief of all the painful tension brewing between them like hot summer lightning.

"HOW does that feel? Bryn!" Reverend Ian growled, the brush of another hardness against his own electrifying him. Bryn's face lit up like a candle, radiant, warming. "Does it feel good?"

Bryn sprawled naked on top of him. His head was thrown back, his body bowed, his eyes tightly shut as Ian tentatively

explored his hanging balls through his open legs. He rolled his hips, thrusting against Ian in a way that was not unlike sex between a man and a woman.

“Like when I used to pretend I was a wild animal.” Bryn gasped, pushing his body deeper into Ian’s questing palm. “Free!”

Slick penis rubbed against slick penis. Bryn reached down and guided the stems, a succulent, smacking sound, galloping now, more urgent as he rode Ian.

Ian gave a dark laugh. “You’re like... an old-time concubine from the Bible, born to tempt me,” he whispered. “Mine.”

HANGING close, needy, Bryn grazed Ian’s lips, gasping when Ian nipped his bottom lip. Ian was a sleeping tiger; he’d never have guessed how passionate he would be when he let loose.

Not proper at all! Hungry, desperate hands dug into Bryn’s ass; Ian was desperate to come, desperate for Bryn’s touch.

Ian’s concubine? Bryn thought that might be another name for whore, and yes, if that were all he could ever be to Ian, he would play that role.

A bloom of sensation such as he had never experienced flowered in his chest and spread out to his nipples and balls and wet-tipped cock. He shuddered, moaning, unable to stop as suddenly he was splashing onto Ian’s skin, onto his sex as Ian thrust, cried out, added his own relief.

He swayed on top of Ian, staring into eyes shocked wide by pleasure.

“Oh, my God! Bryn!”

He collapsed over Ian, puffing.

A hand stroked the hair off his sweaty forehead before groping for Bryn’s fingers. Silent after the storm, they held hands in the dark, warm world just before daylight.

Bryn bit his lip but didn't risk words. His body was sated. He was afraid to ask for more.

"I GOT the stove the right temperature, I reckon," Bryn told Ian, dusting off his hands. He was avoiding looking at the other man because every time he did, they both turned a fiery color. Shit!

They would give themselves away if they weren't careful, or so it seemed to Bryn. He thought that his feelings, that what they'd just done, must be inscribed on his skin, glowing.

"Bryn, I think we may have a problem," said Ian, who was wearing an apron over his habitual black clothing. He scratched his beard, which was rough this morning. He'd slept in, body heavy over Bryn's, and lost his shaving time.

Bryn raised a brow, and Ian pointed to the scrawled recipe. "I don't think this is even in English! Are you sure she uses this?"

Chocolat de la Du Barry

d'après Bécary, l'un des deux chefs pâtissiers de Louis XV

Ingrédients:

***de chocolat fondu au bain-marie**

***de beurre en pommade**

***de sucre**

***de farine tamisée**

***4 jaunes d'oeuf - 3 blancs montés en neige**

***Poivre moulu**

***Cannelle moulue**

***Girofle moulue**

***1 pincée d'extrait de café**

Bryn squinted at the recipe, but he was still so new to reading that he didn't want to sound like a dummy, so he just shrugged. "Well now... we know how chocolate cake *tastes*, so I say we sort of... go from there. I know she got this recipe from a lady on another farm. Sets store by her baking."

"Are you sure?" Ian looked at the hot stove nervously, which he'd fed and fed with fresh wood to stoke up. That, at least, he knew how to do. "Mrs. Robson is very particular about her kitchen...."

"We know she puts in flour. And eggs, say a dozen? And butter, milk, chocolate powder...."

"She does something with the eggs," Ian fretted, wiping his brow. That stove was damn hot! "Puts whites in one bowl and yellow in the other, but I don't remember which one she uses for the icing."

"Uh, well, what does it matter? Eggs are eggs," Bryn noted. "Come on, let's get started. Sooner we get baking, the faster we get to eat our wonderful cake!"

"Yes, and Mrs. Robson won't be out planting flowers with Dandelion all morning. I don't want her to have a mess to clean up." A smile touched Ian's lips. For some reason the older woman had been a mite testy that morning, short with both Ian and Bryn. She'd taken Dandelion with her for the planting, saying the child had to fit into life on the farm now.

Bryn suddenly dropped the flour, coating both himself and the Reverend. He snickered. "You look like a ghost, Reverend!"

"Oh, heaven help us!" Ian lamented as he added eggs to the mash of material in the bowl.

"LAND sakes, Reverend!" Mrs. Robson sat down heavily in her kitchen chair, looking around her formerly tidy kitchen. "You better open the door to let the smoke out!"

"Shit!" Ian cursed, sick of baking. Why had he ever thought it was a pleasant task from observing Mrs. Robson? Baking was *hell*!

Then remembering himself, he flushed at his language and strode over to the lean-to door, shoving it open so the embarrassing burning smell would dissipate. “We did some baking.”

The cake sat in a place of honor on the kitchen table, flat and bubbly on one end and full of holes on the other. Bryn had iced it sparingly, having run out of icing; Ian had suggested using butter to make up for the lack. Unfortunately, the cake hadn’t cooled yet by that point, so the butter had made the icing slip off the cake and into an oily moat surrounding it.

“Why did you want to take on baking, Reverend?” Mrs. Robson’s face was pinched, but her eyes showed faint sparks of amusement as she looked at their creation. “You ain’t going to do this regular, are you?”

“Good Lord, *no!*” Ian’s horror made Mrs. Robson’s lips tilt.

“Because it’s your birthday, Mrs. Robson,” Bryn put in. He was still covered in flour, and his hands were blackened from working over the stove. “And look, I found you a rock of your very own.” He pulled a lump of quartz out of his pocket. “It sparkles. I’m sure it must bring good luck.”

She turned it over in her hand; it was a good size. Bryn had written on the back: *thank you for giving me words.*

Ian looked at the sad cake on the table. “I’ll buy you a hat, Mrs. Robson,” he offered, a little desperate now. He really didn’t want to eat that cake. “We thought it would turn out better but....”

Mrs. Robson stared at both men, her eyes misty. Then she reached out and squeezed the hand of little Dandelion, who had been sitting watching the conversation without speaking. “How would you like some chocolate birthday cake, girl?” she asked.

REVEREND Ian had to use the turkey carving set to break through parts of the cake, but he served Mrs. Robson, little Dandelion, and finally Bryn before taking a thin sliver for himself.

The cake was God-awful, of course.

Mrs. Robson laughed as she nibbled, her face relaxing for the first time that morning. “I think you owe me *two hats* for eatin’ this here cake, Reverend!”

LATER that afternoon, Mrs. Robson walked home to see to her husband, promising to return to take care of the child that evening.

Bryn took Dandelion upstairs for her nap, and when she was under the covers, picked up the heavy silver brush and combed her hair. He welcomed this quiet time with her. Maybe they would get to know one another at last. “Just like a mermaid. Do you know what a mermaid is, Dandelion?” Bryn murmured, marveling that after years of thinking about this baby, he was sitting on a fine lace spread and brushing his daughter’s curls, which were light and bouncy, fragile as a blown soap bubble.

He looked up to see Reverend Ian leaning against the doorway, watching him with his daughter. His hazel eyes were full of memory, so that as Bryn held his gaze, he knew Reverend Ian was remembering their predawn hour.

His heart picked up. His body felt heavy. His penis hardened.

He wanted to be like that with Ian again.

DANDELION fell asleep, and Bryn set the brush aside. He sat there, watching her resting, one hand curled under her cheek. His daughter. Did she even know that? Would she ever know? So far she hadn’t said a word.

“Hope you didn’t mind me using your wife’s brush,” Bryn said shyly.

Ian shrugged. “No, it was nice to see it put to use.”

The bed creaked, and a large warm hand covered Bryn’s as Reverend Ian sat behind him, resting against the headboard and pulling Bryn into his arms.

Bryn closed his eyes in poignant relief. “I was afraid....”

“Afraid of what?” the Reverend rumbled.

“That... what happened between us would get all mangled once we were outside your bedroom door,” Bryn confessed.

CHAPTER 14

“WHAT about this one?” Reverend Ian rubbed the coat of an even-tempered Morgan, lifting a brow at Bryn. As the two men examined the horse at auction, a couple of cowboys snickered, and Bryn’s back stiffened. He knew they were talking about *him*. The ex-con. The rapist. The bum boy.

He flushed, embarrassed to attract such attention while with the Reverend, but he’d insisted Bryn come to the horse sale today to help find a new plow horse for Mrs. Robson, stating firmly that since Bryn had stepped up to take responsibility on the farm, he had earned the right to have a say.

But he couldn’t possibly mean it, could he? Doubt ate at Bryn, like a mouse nibbling cautiously at cheese laid over a trap. Was Ian being like this because of what had happened between them? He was afraid to put words to their secret, knowing he shouldn’t be in Ian’s arms and Ian shouldn’t want him there.

“I should go.” Bryn felt his pleasure in Reverend Ian’s confidence dissipate like air from a pricked party balloon, but feeling good about himself couldn’t hold up when they came to town.

There was more laughter from the pair watching them. Bryn wanted to start something, bloody them up! God damn those bastards!

But he had come to town with Reverend Ian, Mrs. Robson, and... his Dandelion. He couldn’t do what he used to on hot, angry Saturday nights when he’d get drink and beat the hell out of any fellow who called him trash.

“Bryn.” Under the cover of touching the horse, so that none of their derisive audience could see, Reverend Ian squeezed Bryn’s hand firmly before immediately releasing it. “Don’t. You have *nothing* to be ashamed of.”

“But they’re laughing at me! And they probably are sayin’ mean things about *you* too,” Bryn whispered. “Ian....” He swallowed, shaking his head. He hadn’t the right to call Reverend Ian by his first name! He was just his hired man, at least when other folks were around.

“I don’t care what they say. Mrs. Robson hasn’t been herself for days, and what else could it be but grieving Daisy? I thought maybe getting her a new plow horse would help.” Ian ran a hand through his hair, clearly frustrated.

Bryn nodded, worry clouding his eyes. Mrs. Robson had been subdued and curt. The reading lessons had continued, but sometimes Bryn caught her staring at him with a strange look in her eyes. He had asked her once if something was wrong, but she’d only bitten her lip, shaking her head.

She had insisted on staying day and night to help Dandelion adapt, and unfortunately, knowing she was sleeping in the next room had forced Bryn to stay safe in his own bed for fear she’d see him slip into Reverend Ian’s bedroom.

He knew if he went to lie in Ian’s arms, the passion between them could catch again like prairie fire. Ian might kiss and touch him like he had once before, hand wrapped around Bryn. He closed his eyes, trying not to imagine that. God, why couldn’t he stop thinking about Ian? His hazel eyes, mossy green with passion; the way his beard felt against Bryn’s cheeks; his lips, the upper one stretching fuller than the bottom, making for what Bryn thought of as a long, expressive line....

But he kept to his room, his cock and heart aching for Ian’s touch.

“Well?” Reverend Ian prodded now, obviously not willing to drop the issue of having Bryn choose their new horse.

Bryn gave him a frustrated look. “You’re going to spend your money on my say-so?”

“I brought you here, didn’t I? You’re my hired man and I trust you, Bryn.”

Bryn felt a lump in his throat. He ducked his head.

“Bryn, I meant what I said. You took care of Daisy and Mrs. Robson. You earned the right,” Ian pushed earnestly.

Bryn looked up to hold Ian’s gaze and then, finally, said, “I think the Morgan.”

“Why?” Ian cocked his head, clearly curious.

“Because he’s got soft eyes like Daisy. Mrs. Robson will like that. Also, I was thinking maybe... maybe we could teach my little g-girl to ride.” Bryn stumbled over the word, never having said that aloud. *His little girl*. “Mrs. Robson suggested it might help make her more wise to what’s happening around her. She says that on the days she takes Dandelion into the garden to help her plant the beds, she seems a little better.”

“That’s a fine idea! I heard....” Reverend Ian cleared his throat. “Bryn, I’ve done some reading, and I heard there is a kind of sign language that people can use if they don’t know how to speak and such.”

Bryn felt familiar mingled pain and love. His little beauty couldn’t talk as far as they knew. But at least she didn’t seem so damn scared anymore. Her being scared tore his gut. “Do you think she’s... a simpleton?” he whispered, afraid of hearing the Reverend’s opinion but needing to express his worry and confusion. He wasn’t a real father, and he had no one to ask, but Ian had been one, however briefly, and Bryn figured he’d been a good one.

Reverend Ian sighed. “No, I don’t think it’s that simple. She watches everything we do, and sometimes I think she might be *listening*. But... I’m not sure she can speak. We should take her to see Doc Masters. I think that’s the first step.”

It hurt talking about his daughter this way. Hurt because if the words were said, somehow it might make her problems real. But he had to put aside his own fears and figure out what was best for her. Dandelion could no longer be hidden under a dead woman's bed in a remote shack. It was time she was around other folks, though it made Bryn scared for her.

He nodded, holding Ian's gaze, seeing understanding in his clear hazel eyes. "All right, but let's wait 'til the fall, please. Maybe she just needs to get used to us. Meantime, I'd give my right arm if she could talk," he whispered.

BRYN and Ian rejoined Mrs. Robson in the store. Bryn tensed up, but Jervish only flashed him a resentful look, obviously not wanting to revisit his anger with Ian and Mrs. Robson present to witness it.

Dandelion was sitting in a dusty corner, a ray of light hitting her hair.

Bryn walked over, boots ringing, but then slowed his pace self-consciously when he got closer. He knew what it was to be wary of loud noises.

Dandelion's shoulders were hunched. She was looking at him with serious eyes, holding her cornstalk dolly, with its dirty straw and painted flat eyes, crushed to her chest.

Bryn knelt next to her, wanting to brush the hair out of her eyes. She was still wearing a shriveled flower ring on her head made of buttercups and daisies Bryn had given her that morning before they'd headed into town. His daughter had fine hair like he did.

"What are you lookin' at?" he asked, nodding to the nearby display.

Her mouth opened and then shut, pressing tight.

He examined the goods, trying not to feel rejected. "A china tea service for your dolly?" He grazed a finger over delicate cups and saucers with pansies in rings. He knew right away he'd buy it. Hell, if he could afford it, he'd buy out the whole store for her.

Dandelion's head fell, but he saw her eyelids move, as if she were mulling over what he'd said. Did she understand him? How had she communicated with the old woman who'd raised her?

Behind him, he sensed Ian's presence. They locked eyes, and Bryn didn't feel as alone in his frustration. "Picking up anything?" Ian asked mildly.

"Yes sir, a tea service for my... for my little girl."

OUTSIDE the store, Mrs. Robson pointed to Dandelion, who was dressed up in a ruffled pink frock like an undulating wedding cake. "I bought her more...." The older woman cleared her throat. "Girl things."

Having only a vague idea what that meant, Bryn nodded anyway. "I'll pay for them."

"Bryn..." the Reverend began. "We enjoyed doing it."

"No, sir! She's my daughter, and I'll pay for her fixings," Bryn said stubbornly. The Reverend and Mrs. Robson did enough for Dandelion, spoiling her and doing their best to lure her from her isolation and fright. Bryn wouldn't have them pay for her clothing too. He was her father, and, damn it, he wanted to provide for her!

"She's been a right distraction to have around the place," Mrs. Robson put in, very mildly.

Bryn read her eyes and then Ian's. There was something there. Did having his daughter in the house really do them some good?

"You said that I earned the right to choose a horse," he reminded Ian. "By taking responsibility."

Ian nodded. "You're right. She's your daughter, and we don't have a say."

No, that wasn't what he meant, but Ian turned away, and Bryn swallowed, picking up the box of china. Dandelion hadn't said anything when he bought it for her, but now she put one small hand on the wooden crate.

“Just what the hell do you think you’re doing, boy?” A familiar voice thundered, and a hand shoved him so he lost his balance and his precious crate bounced onto the street.

Bryn flinched, his early embarrassment at the behavior of the strange cowhands nothing to seeing his father, drunk, and accompanied by his longtime cohort, little Dandelion’s grandfather, Abraham Bourne.

Damn the luck!

Reverend Ian had been loading the wagon, but now he paused, coming around to stand next to Bryn, crossing his arms. Mrs. Robson took Dandelion’s hand, pulling her away, but the little girl tugged free and knelt in the dust, reaching into the burst crate for a shattered piece of the pansy china. She traced the design with her fingers.

“Come here, child,” Mrs. Robson said gently. “We’ll do some baking when we get home. Maybe those berry tarts you’re so fond of.”

“Just a minute, Mrs. Robson; that there is my grandchild!” Abraham reached for Mrs. Robson’s arm to pull her away from Dandelion.

“Get your hand off me!” Mrs. Robson hissed, looking shocked that a strange man would dare touch her.

Reverend Ian shoved the large, wobbly man aside, hitting his chest so solidly that his white muttonchop whiskers quivered on his skin. “Don’t you ever handle a lady in that fashion!”

Seeing the circle of townspeople attracted by the commotion, Abraham ducked his head, obviously aware that men who handled ladies roughly could find themselves featured in a necktie party—hanged from a tree. “Didn’t mean nothing by it! Just wanted to take charge of the girl. She’s my granddaughter, and the woman I paid to take care of her is dead! I want her to come home with me where she belongs.”

“Oh, were you planning on selling her favors in a poker game as you did her mother’s?” Reverend Ian growled. “How unfortunate her father and I would never allow that!”

“Her father!” Abraham gave Bryn a disgusted look. “Surprised he had enough in his pistol to fill my girl. All he managed was that little runt!”

Bryn went for Abraham, furious at the insult to Dandelion, but Ian grabbed him, holding his arms as he struggled.

“Don’t you raise a hand to *me*, boy! The men in this town are just itchin’ for an excuse to give you a whippin’!”

“Bryn didn’t rape *anyone!*” Ian said in a firm, carrying voice, arms still wrapped around Bryn. “And I would swear on a bible to that. Now you better take yourself off, the both of you, and by God, never threaten my family again!”

“Your family! Your boy died because you couldn’t mind your own woman,” Bryn’s father sneered, and Ian’s face tightened. “Besides, what’s a man of God going to do?”

“God had many warrior angels,” Ian warned. “So I’d not lose any sleep, *gentlemen*, in playing the part of Michael or Raphael. In short, giving you both the hiding you so richly deserve!”

CHAPTER 15

IAN'S hands were balled into fists as he watched the barber and blacksmith drag Bryn's father and his drunken cohort back into the saloon, but Bryn was just relieved the confrontation was over. Without Ian and Mrs. Robson's intervention, he was sure Abraham Bourne would have succeeded in taking his daughter from him. He would have had the aid of the men in town, who hated Bryn. No way would an ex-con sent up for rape be considered a fit parent!

Except Ian had told the whole town that Bryn wasn't guilty.

Ian had put his name and reputation behind Bryn. Mrs. Robson had done the same. Why, why would they risk themselves for him? No one had ever....

He swallowed thickly, trying to master the feeling expanding in his chest, bewildered. He had to think about this, but right now it didn't matter. What mattered was Dandelion.

Concerned for his daughter in the aftermath of the encounter, he touched her slight shoulder, squeezing it. The little one had her face crushed against Mrs. Robson's dress. "They're gone, Dandelion," he whispered, hoping to reach her. He remembered several terrifying standoffs in prison, how he'd be shaky and sweaty after, how it would crash through his mind days after.

He didn't want that for Dandelion. He never wanted her to be scared like that—God!

One blue eye peeked out at him. Bryn swallowed, unsure of how to reassure her when she was so frightened. It was clear now why she was leery of men. Who knew how often the drunken pair

might have visited Mrs. Hawken's shack and terrorized the little girl?

"Don't be scared, Dandelion. Say, Reverend Ian bought a horse today, and I was thinking of teaching you to ride him. Would you like that?"

Mrs. Robson smoothed a hand over the girl's hair, adding her silent brand of comfort, but Dandelion jerked away to kneel again beside the box of broken china. But this time when she reached for a shattered plate, Bryn had to stop her. "No, honey, it's dangerous; you could cut yourself."

Dandelion pulled her hands behind her back, head falling.

Bryn ached to reach out, stroke her hair, the shards of his first gift to his little girl lying between them. As if offering the comfort Bryn ached to give but was afraid to offer, Mrs. Robson patted Dandelion's shoulder.

Bryn took his hat off and shoved his hair back. What to do? Well, he couldn't leave the box lying on the street. Shit! Maybe some of the contents weren't busted. He gently picked up the crate and placed it in the back, catching Dandelion watching him solemnly.

"Time to go home, I guess," Ian said, shoulders slumped. Bryn figured he was feeling the aftermath as well. It wasn't easy, standing up to folks.

ON THE drive to the stable, Bryn tried to talk to his daughter, but Dandelion didn't acknowledge her father's words. Still, when he reached out and set her little crown straight where it had tilted over one eye, she didn't flinch away from him.

Time. Maybe that's what she needed. Maybe she'd see that she was safe with the three new adults in her life if they gave her time.

At the corral, they tied the Morgan to the back of the wagon and, loaded down with supplies, clothing for Dandelion and the

crate of broken china, along with the two hats for Mrs. Robson the Reverend had insisted she pick out, they headed back to the farm.

Dandelion was tired when they got home. Mrs. Robson felt her forehead and pronounced the child was running a slight fever. "I'm a bit... tired, myself. I'll go lie down with her," the older woman offered.

Bryn swung Dandelion into his arms and carried her to her room, laying her on the high canopy bed. Reverend Ian had cleaned out all of his wife's fixings, and as Bryn watched, Mrs. Robson unpacked the paper-wrapped store-bought comb and brush set which she'd purchased for Dandelion, nickel-plated with a simple scroll design. The gesture spoke of the room belonging now to his daughter.

She'd also dug out a cut glass vase that Ian's wife had once used for flowers in the fancy parlor. It had glittered there, empty, abandoned. Now she filled it with the simple wild flowers Dandelion had gathered that morning.

Bryn felt peace wash over him, seeing the care, remembering Mrs. Robson and Reverend Ian standing up for him in town. As if sharing his contentment, Dandelion's warm body was limp, her eyes already closing.

"I asked Reverend Ian if we could repaper the walls," Mrs. Robson told Bryn. "Maybe let the little one pick out a design, and we'll order it next time we're in town."

"Thank you," Bryn said, unable to put into words just what he was feeling. Maybe Mrs. Robson sensed what he did not say, since she gave a little smile and nod.

Then she frowned, pausing as she ran a hand over the new brush set. "Bryn..."

"Yes, Missus?"

She chewed her lip, flushing. "Nothing."

"She's so tired," Bryn remarked as he brushed hair off his daughter's forehead. She was dead asleep already.

Mrs. Robson nodded, dipping a handkerchief into the basin on the dresser and wiping her own forehead. "It's the fever, so it's best she sleeps it off. I think I have a touch of it as well. I'll stay here another night."

Bryn stood up. "Can I... do anything for you, Mrs. Robson?"

The older woman smiled tiredly. "No; it'll pass."

Bryn was at the doorway, reluctant to leave his daughter, but knowing she was in good hands.

"Bryn?"

He paused.

"Don't you let those men make you feel bad. I know you're a good man, even if you... you are misguided."

"Misguided?" Bryn blinked. "Missus?"

"Never mind, Bryn," she sighed before she closed the door gently in his face.

"DID they eat the soup you brought up?" Ian asked Bryn in the barn later. Bryn had brushed Carrot until she was glossy and then combed the new unnamed Morgan until his coat looked like velvet.

Henrietta was sitting on Bryn's shoulder, and Bryn was moving slowly so as not to knock her from her favorite perch. She shit on his shirt sometimes, but he knew she didn't mean anything by it; he just changed shirts.

"Yes, sir. They were both mighty sleepy."

"Don't worry, Bryn. If they aren't better in the morning, I'll go into town and see the doc."

Bryn nodded, relieved. He was finding it was harder being a parent than he'd imagined. His stomach was often knotted with worry over his little one. At this rate, he'd have white hair in no time!

He carefully reached up, put his hen down, and scattered some fresh seed on the barn floor for her to peck at. His shirt was soiled, so he also tugged it off, and then, wearing nothing but his suspenders and pants, went to the barrel and used a dipper to splash water over his head.

He wasn't self-conscious until he looked up, dripping, water running down his chest and arms, and saw the Reverend staring at him.

"Ian?" he whispered.

"You're... beautiful, Bryn," Ian said in a choked voice, as if the words were being torn from him.

Bryn's penis thickened at the buried honey and need in Ian's tone. It had been days since they'd been able to touch or even look at each other freely. They had to be so careful around the little one and Mrs. Robson. But at night, Bryn dreamed. Dreamed of all manner of things, such as lying under Ian, feeling him pound inside his body. He didn't think it would hurt quite so much if it were Ian. In fact, he wanted Ian there, wanted it so much!

"I used to draw things when I was younger. Just scribbles," Ian confessed in a soft voice, as if he felt what he had to say should be in a whisper even though they were alone. He leaned against an empty stall door. "Sometimes the branch of a tree or some wild orchids.... I stopped, since my father didn't think it was an appropriate pastime for a young man."

"And you always did what folks expected of you," Bryn guessed.

Ian swallowed, reaching out to touch Bryn's hair. At the last moment, his hand dropped. His fingers were shaking, Bryn noticed. "Yes, I always do what's expected of me."

Bryn studied him, aching. "I'd love to see those drawings some time."

"Bryn...." Reverend Ian's face worked, and Bryn waited, lips parted.

Ian's hand was white where it was wrapped around a support post. He closed his eyes before continuing, low, tortured, "God, I want to see you! All I've thought about for days is... is you. Your body, the way your hair falls around your face so I want to touch it. Your eyes in direct sunlight, when I can see flecks of gray in with the blue." His eyes opened, and somehow they were standing close, leaning toward each other. "Will you come up to the hayloft with me?"

CHAPTER 16

BRYN'S heart was pounding. Ian wanted him. Ian wanted to see him, claim him. Bryn could feel it humming between them, the question Ian was afraid to ask.

I always do what's expected of me.

And sooner or later that meant, as sure as the moon rising over the farmhouse, that Ian would turn away from him. But even knowing that, Bryn couldn't say anything else. Ian had given him a job, given him dignity; Ian wanted him.

And Bryn wanted Ian. "Yes."

Ian's hazel eyes flared, though heat rose in his cheeks; he was bashful in his need.

Bryn reached out and took his hand. After a moment Ian squeezed it back, their fingers acknowledging everything they couldn't say.

"But I need to fetch something first." Bryn licked his lips, knowing what would happen even if Ian was still groping, too innocent to realize what might result from looking, touching in the hay. It made Bryn feel oddly protective of him, and also in control.

Ian needed; Bryn was his answer.

"What? What do you need?"

"Something from the house." Bryn kissed Ian's cheek, reassuring him. Ian was rigid, aroused... guilty.

"Mrs. Robson—"

"I'll... I'll make up a story if I see her. She'd never think—"

“No! No, God, I hope she never....” Ian’s hot gaze dropped.

Bryn swallowed. “She’d never guess. It’ll be all right. No one has to know about me, Ian.”

Some fragment of pain must have been in his voice, because Ian looked up, his eyes apologizing now. “Bryn, we—you don’t have to.”

“I *want* to. This is what I want, can’t you see? I’ve ached for you since I saw you teaching the Word every Sunday,” Bryn admitted.

Ian’s eyes widened in shock. “You... thought about me?”

Bryn kicked at the barn’s dirt floor. “I came back, Sunday after Sunday. You were....” He swallowed. “You seemed golden. Folks looked up to you and admired you. You could have had your pick of any of the women. And... you were handsome.”

“Oh Bryn.” Ian’s voice had so many shades it was like a rainbow. Sorrow, shock, desire. He pulled Bryn into his arms. “I shouldn’t do this! I keep telling myself I’ll stop! Why can’t I stop?”

Bryn’s fingers dug into muscular shoulders, stroking, trying to tell Ian with his touch that he felt the same power between them, like two of the planets in the solar system Ian had once described, drawn together in a fatal orbit. “*Don’t!* Don’t ever stop!” he pleaded.

But he was afraid that one day Ian *would*.

IT WASN’T easy, being Ian’s model. It was even harder because of the understanding between them. That Ian wanted to draw him, but it would be something more....

Bryn blushed as he pulled his suspenders off his arms. He only stripped when he was taking a bath. Even in bed, he wore something, though lately he’d been thinking about what it would be like, warm skin pressed against warm skin, lying against Ian in his bed... *their bed*.

He swallowed, trying to shove away that thought, that temptation. It could never be; he knew that. With trembling hands, he unbuttoned his pants. His penis fell out of his underwear, long and already wet-tipped with excitement. And yet, from the window facing the fields, warm spring sunshine illuminated his body, making this act seem not so dirty, not so wrong, to Bryn's way of thinking.

Still, it was hard to be exposed. He cupped his hands over himself, looking away.

Ian was close enough, so he reached out, his cooler fingers touching Bryn's sun-warmed ones. "Please?"

Bryn took a deep breath, let it out and let his hands fall away.

"I want this to be mine," Ian admitted in a distracted tone, touching Bryn, stroking along his length so Bryn shuddered, helpless. "Is that wrong, for me to feel that way?" He looked up at Bryn, and again there was innocence, heat, bewilderment.

"I don't know what's wrong anymore, Ian. Do you?" Afraid to hear the answer, Bryn continued, "I want my penis to be yours. I want..." He chewed his lip.

"*Concubine*," Ian whispered. "You want to belong to me."

"Is that a good thing? I thought you meant I was your whore." Ian was touching him, exploring him, and if he didn't stop, Bryn might spurt. He was trying so hard not to, standing there on display, trying to stay very still.

"No, oh, no, Bryn. A concubine was one of the lovers of a king," Ian told him. "Brought to him for his pleasure."

"I ache every night to be... brought to you," Bryn admitted, whimsical.

"And if I lived in another time, I would summon you to my bed every night." Ian's hand cupped Bryn's thigh, holding him in place with words and touch. "I'd cover you like a fine cloak. I'd make you cry out."

Sweat broke out on Bryn's forehead. "God Almighty! I wish we could go back in time somehow so I was your slave, like in that picture of the bath you showed me."

"I've thought of you like that. When I showed it to you, I was wishing...." Ian's voice trailed off. "Now, Bryn, concubine, I want you to show me what belongs to me alone." He settled back, and Bryn didn't try to hide himself.

While Bryn had picked up something from the house, Ian had dug out the paper and pencils he told Bryn he carried in his saddlebags. Now he chewed on the wood and dashed out a line, his forehead wrinkled. "This way I can have you with me when I can't...." His voice tapered off, and Bryn knew he meant most days, since they could only ever be together in snatches.

Bryn stripped off the rest of his clothes, and then, not knowing what to do or how to pose, he curled in that pool of sunshine, blinking like a lazy cat, his penis full and aching between his legs. He blushed, but he couldn't stop his body from reacting to Ian's attention, his eyes looking at Bryn, finding the hollows, muscle, and skin. Focused on lips, on beaded nipples that prickled as if from a touch.

The pencil whispered over paper, and Bryn's eyelids lowered. He was tired from his regular early morning, from the worry for his daughter, from the scene in town. He'd kept worrying at it, off and on, but now he dozed. It seemed to him as if Ian wasn't just drawing on paper, he was touching Bryn's body. Lines and swirls, impatient exclamations... pauses when Bryn felt Ian's gaze on Bryn's open, wanton legs.

"Maybe this is how we begin all our nights, the king and his concubine," Bryn mused in a husky tone. "You bein' a king and all, you probably have a lot of problems with folks. And drawing makes you forget."

Ian nodded. "It's a door I want to open."

Bryn's throat tightened. "So why don't you?"

"I'm... afraid."

“No need to rush, I guess.” Bryn had been hard for days, thinking of Ian. He could leave it. It could be just this, this moment.

Finally, Ian put aside his drawing and crawled close to run a palm over Bryn’s back, as if lured there by Bryn’s relaxed pose. “Feels the way it did when I drew it on paper,” he murmured. “Curving, lean, but warm. I feel like Pygmalion must have felt when he brought his statue to life. You’re perfect, so perfect, Bryn.” *Perfect for me*, Ian’s eyes said.

“Pygmalion?” Bryn loved Ian’s stories.

“He was a lonely sculptor who created his perfect lover.”

Bryn’s eyes closed again so he could fully absorb Ian’s touch, just as he’d been enjoying the sun on his body. He was breathless, full of need. Ian’s admiration caused a heaviness in his body, an ache deep in his ass where he wanted to accommodate his beloved.

Was Ian right? Was it wrong for him to want to do that, get on all fours and let Ian mount him from behind?

Next, Ian drifted fingers over Bryn’s arms. He grazed a nipple. Prodded Bryn’s lips so they parted. Grazed his cock with the back of his hand. Gentle touches that made Bryn long to be thrown down and violently fucked.

He dropped his head, embarrassed.

But Ian’s hands scrawled fresh poems over Bryn’s body, awakening him like the sculptor had his statue, his lips burning over nipples while his hand found Bryn’s penis and played with it.

“If I were stone, I’d come to life for you!” Bryn vowed, unable to keep from making soft sounds of need and encouragement that seemed to inflame Ian as they got closer, so much closer than ever before.

Ian squeezed Bryn’s ball sac, handling Bryn with more confidence as Bryn gasped, falling open like an early camellia flower, all floppy from the heat. When he lay on his back, legs sprawled open, he felt the very air change between them like the crack of lightning before a storm.

Suddenly impatient, he sat up, fumbling to free Ian, laughing since their hands collided. He and Ian raced to open Ian's pants until Ian's penis twitched between them, and Bryn wanted to attend to it. He needed to! He pulled out the butter he'd removed from the cellar in the house.

"What?" Ian hissed, face tense as Bryn anointed him with gentle fingers.

"So you don't hurt me." Bryn dared a timid little kiss before falling back, his legs raised high. "I know you don't want that."

"Bryn?" He could read uncertainty and fear and desire and *yes, I want you* and *yes, I will take you* in those sober hazel eyes.

Bryn read him and waited, his spread body a silent invitation.

IAN hesitated a moment, still wearing his shirt, his pants shoved down but not off. He'd never had congress in the daytime! Never dreamed of taking another man. He hadn't even removed his clothing fully, because he felt shy and too big and too clumsy and his focus was all for Bryn. Bryn's body. Bryn's lips and soft blue eyes.

Ian mounted him, shaking in his need like a suppliant on an altar. Not knowing what else to do, he guided himself to Bryn's pink dimple and thrust inside firmly, seating himself, buried balls deep.

Delicious!

He groaned, needing Bryn. Oh, God, Bryn.

IAN'S eyes were closed, so he missed Bryn's gasp of pain and the way his hands clenched in the straw, white-knuckled, before Bryn forced first his fingers and then his ass to relax and accept the sudden, rough invasion.

He panted through it, sweat on his face and chest, and it eased a little, his body becoming slightly accustomed to the thick penis stretching him.

Ian's hands tangled in his hair. "*Concubine*. Beautiful, open... healing me—" He kissed Bryn's face and neck, eyes brimming with tears of gratitude as he thrust again. "Accepting me."

Ian's big cock was difficult to accommodate at first, but its length banged against something inside Bryn so he gasped again, his balls tightening at the incredible feeling, like a sudden shower of sparks rising from the heart of a bonfire.

What? He didn't know what it was. He'd felt it sometimes with Big Ed, but with Ian, the feeling was magnified. He spread himself wider, forcing his body to accept Ian, watching his face as he closed his eyes, grunting as he fucked Bryn—

It was over quickly, the familiar warm spill inside and the heavy body on top of his own, but Ian snuggled Bryn close, his hands saying *thank you, oh, my God, thank you*, and his eyes full of pleasure and delight and relief. He even fumbled at Bryn's groin, but Bryn pushed his hand away before Ian could discover that his penetration had withered most of Bryn's excitement.

A little while later, his fingers threading through Bryn's hair, Ian asked, "Did I make you feel good, Bryn?"

Bryn's eyes widened. He hadn't expected Ian to ask him straight out! "Yeah, it was nice," he whispered, his guts feeling uneasy at the white lie. But what could he say? It wasn't nice. It was... he didn't know! He just wanted it, but it left him wanting.

"Nice? Really?" Ian sat up, examining Bryn's face, his clear hazel eyes begging for reassurance.

"I'll spread for you whenever you want," Bryn offered shyly and was rewarded by dark fire in Ian's eyes even though the Reverend was blushing.

It wasn't until Ian fell asleep, snoring against his neck in his contentment, that Bryn's hardness revived. But he didn't touch himself or wake Ian.

His ass burned where he'd been penetrated, fucked, but Ian was holding him.

CHAPTER 17

IAN woke to sunshine warming his face. His body felt lazy, weighted with a satisfaction he never allowed himself. He had barely touched himself since losing his child. He had felt as little interest in sexual relief as he did food or the people around him.

Until Bryn had come to live with him and Ian had simply wanted to help him.

Bryn had awakened him, stirred something sleeping that Ian didn't recognize. Good feelings, friendship... family, almost. And this disturbing hunger he could not deny. Even if he had never acted to touch or taste Bryn, he *wanted*.

Now Bryn was sleeping innocently in his arms, his smaller body still nude from their congress, looking like a frail bit of prairie wood, skin white where he wasn't tanned, slight bones, bruises under his eyes. Had he had as much trouble sleeping lately as Ian had?

It was the dreams that had kept Ian awake. Forbidden thoughts about licking Bryn, teasing him. Running his hands over the smooth body. Ian had never indulged in this part of himself, the part of a man that yearned to feel skin under his hands. And it was damn near impossible to stay away from Bryn, knowing he would never deny Ian the ease he needed. Ian felt a flash of heat tighten his balls when he remembered losing himself in Bryn's body, but it was quickly followed by his belly knotting up.

What he was doing was wrong, putting his penis into another man. Using him as a concubine—but such a sweet concubine....

“Ian?” Bryn’s drowsy blue eyes opened and he studied him. As if guessing Ian’s thoughts, he ran a timid hand over his cheek.

Ian cleared his throat, wondering how it was that this young man could know him so well. He had never been able to hide himself from Bryn. His despair, his flashes of anger... his desire. He was naked to Bryn, as Bryn chose to be naked for him. “Thought you were sleeping,” he rasped. What now? Lying with Bryn felt so right, like something shot with sunlight. It had always been like that when Ian held him. He felt a respite from his worries and cares; he felt protective, caring, like a good man and not only the sham of one.

“You got all tense, and I could hear the thunderheads movin’ in. Woke me up.” Bryn sat up, looking at Ian with the sun hitting his hair and gilding his bronze curls. Ian had the whimsical thought that he resembled Cupid, god of love.

“Bryn...” Ian realized his pants were still open. He hadn’t even cleaned away the residue of his passion! Shame stung his cheeks. *What was he doing?*

Bryn leaned close and put his lips against Ian’s, pressing a kiss. It made Ian aware that all the time he’d fucked Bryn, he hadn’t kissed him. But how could he? “Don’t,” Bryn whispered.

“Don’t what?” Ian raised a brow, trying to assert some authority, trying to... God! Get back to safe ground. But where was that? Twice he had woken up after being inside someone lately. But with Ellie Mae, he’d felt sick, wrong, horribly guilty, as if he’d betrayed her and himself... and Bryn! But now, after being with Bryn, all he wanted—

Ian pressed his eyes closed, making a frustrated sound. Why couldn’t he stop needing this? He had prayed while he was away, wandering like a prophet lost in the desert, begging a God who had been distant from him for years to lead him to answers. Finally, Ian had been forced to find his own, and the only thing he wanted was to return home to Mrs. Robson and to Bryn.

Now Bryn's fingers brushed against the most visible evidence of Ian's frustration.

"Oh, Bryn!" Ian's body arched, taut nipples, hard, aching cock, all enslaved at a touch. "You shouldn't," he choked. "You're my Bryn, my... friend. I shouldn't want this. I told you when you came to work for me that I'd never require... more."

Bryn gave him a slightly exasperated look. "I'm glad sometimes I don't read so much as you, Ian. Or that folks don't hold me in high esteem. Seems a real burden for you, so you worry all the time about being a good man, never seein' that you *are*. I'm not here with you because you ordered me to do it, like putting up a fence post. I'm here because I want to be, because it's like losing parts of myself when I can't touch you."

"I feel the same way," Ian admitted in a whisper, brushing Bryn's hair back from his forehead. He felt like something inside himself, a shriveled-up seed from a long ago harvest, was sprouting, though he had no idea what would grow from it.

"You worry too much. Why can't I be what you called me, your... concubine? No one needs to know. We ain't hurting anyone." Bryn's lips ghosting over Ian's neck.

Bryn had to stop or Ian would...! Ian shoved him away, panting, staring into Bryn's shocked blue eyes.

Color burned in Bryn's cheeks. His gaze dropped.

And Ian hurt, seeing it. Bryn had misunderstood him. "You have to stop touching me or I'll shame myself," he confessed, embarrassed by how needy he was. How Bryn could move him so effortlessly.

Bryn cocked his head, as if reading how troubled Ian was. He gave a rough sound. "And how will you stop me?" he dared to tease.

Ian smoothed his hair as the mood shifted to something that skittered lightly between them, sparkling like diamonds on the creek water. *Oh, Bryn, I—*

Ian swallowed the words and snagged an old rope, growling, “I’ll show you who is boss!”

Laughing, Bryn leaped to his feet, face alight, the shadows gone like clouds blocking the sunbeams, so Ian wished they’d never return.

“Have to catch me!” Bryn exclaimed. Buck naked, he ran to the other side of the loft.

Ian went after him.

MRS. Robson couldn’t sleep.

She sat up and checked the little one first, finding Dandelion’s forehead still warm.

Maybe some cool well water would help the child. Or some of the milk she kept chilled in the root cellar. She sat up and ran a hand over her dress, brushing out some of the wrinkles.

DOWNSTAIRS, there was no sign of Bryn or Reverend Ian, though it looked like they’d built themselves sandwiches out of cheese and her sourdough pan-fried bread. She really should have cooked for them.

Flushed and a little dizzy, she opened the kitchen door and walked out onto the porch. The setting sun was a yellow ball and the spring wind was cool against her face. The yard was deserted except for the faces of late daffodils.

She frowned, climbing down the stairs, but hesitated before going on to the barn.

She stood there, her dress and hair blowing in the breeze, a hand on her throat, and felt very alone under the giant blue bowl of prairie sky.

IAN tied the rope around Bryn's wrists, trussing him to the wooden frame that gated the loft. He looked up at Bryn, lips parted, and Bryn held his gaze, his head falling back, a smile of impishness curving his lips. "Now what do you say? Still defiant?" he whispered, enjoying their game.

How often had he ever seen this side of Bryn? He was nothing like the sullen and defensive young man who had come to work on Ian's farm. Now he smiled often, grooming Carrot or talking to Henrietta, even sharing friendly words with Mrs. Robson. And his face when he looked at his daughter tugged at Ian's gut. Ian would never be a father again, he couldn't risk it, but from a careful distance, he wanted to help Bryn.

Ian closed his eyes and brushed his lips against Bryn's slender back, just above the swell of his ass. His body was like a miracle to Ian, the sturdy shape, the cool curves under his touch. *Beloved*.

Bryn shuddered under that gentle touch and made a soft sound and, encouraged, Ian pressed his lips against the other man again... only this time he couldn't help opening his mouth and tasting warm, healthy skin. Bryn. His Bryn.

"Ian!" A cry of need.

His imagination failed him, and Bryn's voice drove him to his feet. Kissing Bryn's shoulder, his neck, brushing his hair back, Ian stood with his legs between Bryn's splayed ones, which he'd playfully tied along with his wrists.

"Take what's yours," Bryn whispered.

Holding his blue eyes, Ian grasped his penis and placed it into position. He wrapped his arms around Bryn, his larger frame encompassing Bryn's, protective, a supplicant.

He thrust, claiming, hearing Bryn's soft sound.

It sounded a little rough, and Bryn ducked his head. Frowning, Ian grasped his chin, forcing him to meet his gaze.

Knees bent, in and out, slowly this time, he watched expressions move over Bryn's face like changing spring weather. Watched his eyelids fall, heavy.

Covered one of his hands as he was covering his body, fucking him.

AS SHE was heading back into the house, Mrs. Robson caught the rattle of an approaching wagon. Folks were coming! It was a relief from her confused thoughts. She paused and put a hand above her eyes, shielding them so she could see who was visiting. Someone needing Ian? People came day and night to summon the preacher, but she hoped it would not be anything urgent. Ian was tired lately, as they all were now they had a young one under his roof again.

She pressed her lips together, feeling her relief grow as she took in neatly braided blond hair, a blue dress and blue matching gloves. An older man wearing a battered farmer's hat sat next to the young woman, reins in his hands.

It was Ellie Mae and her father.

Mrs. Robson's gaze darted to the barn. Just what Reverend Ian needed.

IAN sat up, pulling hay from a place that made him blush. "We might be missed if we stay out here any longer," he sighed, hating to leave. He felt like the sunlight had lodged in his chest while he and Bryn were together. But now it was back to the ache. Back to forcing his eyes not to rest on Bryn too long, so as never to give himself away.

Bryn swallowed, blue eyes darkening. "Yes, sir." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I want to spend the night in Dandelion's room if Mrs. Robson doesn't stay over. Figured I could sleep in the chair next to her bed."

“That’s a damned uncomfortable chair,” Ian said with feeling, remembering how he’d slept there sometimes, watching over his wife in the last stages of her pregnancy.

Bryn shrugged. “I need to make sure she’s okay.”

“You can borrow one from the kitchen,” Ian offered. He wished he could invite Bryn back into his bed, but that wasn’t wise.

“Ian,” Bryn reached out as if to touch. “Please don’t feel bad. Don’t hate me because of what we did.”

Ian shook his head. “It’s not that simple. I could never hate you, but—I’m sorry, Bryn. I can’t.... This makes no sense to me. I tried to work it out, sitting out nights with my campfire. I’ve always followed the path I was made for. Never questioned until I lost my... my family.”

“Being with you wasn’t *wrong!*” Bryn vowed, passionate, trembling.

“As a young man, I took a sunny path, and everything seemed clear. Then it didn’t make any sense, and I was angry, lost,” Ian confessed. “But this path... where can it lead?”

“Maybe the path you took then was for a young man,” Bryn suggested, eyes suddenly heavy with hard experience. “And now you are on one belonging to a man.”

“But I’m lost.” All his confidence was gone. The sureness of the way had crumbled.

“Hell, Ian, so are we all! Only a child thinks he knows the way. You think I know how to be a father?”

Ian had to turn away to dress himself. But Bryn’s words were a sliver he’d caught in his skin.

“*Reverend Ian!*” Mrs. Robson’s voice called from the house.

“Time to go back, Bryn,” he commanded. *Back to pretending all you are to me is my hired man.*

BRYN burned with suppressed anger, and he tried to smother the flame, knowing that Ian didn't mean to hurt him. Hell, he was used to being shoved aside like trash, so you'd think he would be used to it by now.

But he found now he didn't like hiding. Not now he'd found a family.

He didn't feel dirty when Ian was inside him. He wished he could tell Mrs. Robson, so he and Ian could sleep together every night in Ian's room. So he could leave his own simple horn comb next to Ian's fancier fixings.

And he wanted his daughter to come find him in Ian's room and crawl up on the patchwork quilt so he could squeeze her tight, offer her a new rock for her growing collection.

He wanted to go to sleep against Ian's warmth.

"OH, BRYN, you remember Ellie Mae," Mrs. Robson said when Bryn entered the kitchen, his hair still wet from the dunking he'd given it in the stream.

Ill at ease, Bryn nodded, not surprised the girl and her father didn't even look his way. He was dirt to them, same as anyone from town.

Ellie Mae was sitting next to Ian, a hand on his arm as she spoke to him, large eyes eloquent on his face. Seeing that after his thoughts of waking up with Ian, Bryn felt rage blossom inside him, like an angry bleeding flower.

Jaw tight, he glared at the hardwood floor.

What did she want, sniffing around? Ian *wasn't* a free man.

He belonged to Mrs. Robson and Dandelion and... him.

As if sensing Bryn's silent anger, Ian glanced up, holding Bryn's gaze before his own fell away and color heated his cheeks.

Shame?

Furious, Bryn shoved open the door, barreling out into the dusk.

To hell with Ian! If he wanted to belong to that bitch, let him. Let him lay with her; let him push away the memories of every touch, every stolen kiss.

Tears burned Bryn's eyes, but he scrubbed them away.

Damn you to hell, Ian!

CHAPTER 18

“YOU know it’s the only right thing to do. Ian, I don’t understand your reluctance. You being the preacher, you have to set a standard, and you always have in the past,” Ellie Mae said, holding Ian’s gaze in challenge. Her blond hair picked up the faint yellow light from the setting sun, reminding Ian poignantly of another blond he’d seen in silhouette against sunbeams.

He was pacing his wife’s formal parlor, a room he normally avoided with its lace tablecloths, hard chairs and dark curtains. It reminded him of his stilted courtship, how he’d spent afternoons sipping lemonade and barely speaking a word to the girl he’d eventually made his wife.

Nothing like the time he’d spent in a simple hayloft. Laughing. Fucking.

He wondered how he’d gone from those moments to being trapped in the parlor with this insistent young woman.

But Mrs. Robson had suggested he use this room to talk to Ellie Mae. And it was clear as glass what she was hoping! Thank God she couldn’t know about Bryn, but she had often chided Ian for living alone, even going so far as to tell him that having another child in his life would repair some of the holes where he’d become unraveled.

“What happened between us....” God! How could he say it? He had used Ellie Mae’s willing body. Not for pleasure, but as a man drowning. He was not the man the townsfolk looked up to. Every hand given to him in friendship, all the respect they offered him....

He was undeserving.

He swallowed thickly. He could not tell Ellie Mae the truth and shame her, hurt her feelings. He'd wronged her, and he knew it.

Ian spun around, staring out the windows Mrs. Robson kept as sparkling clean as she did everything in his big house. The heavy velvet drapery framing them. The cameos on the wall, profiles of a man and woman, were carved from ivory. The ticking of the wound clock, his wedding gift to his wife, punctuating his tension.

"You would never take advantage, I know," she whispered. She was humbling herself, cornering him in this manner.

Please don't. Please don't do this; I can't bear it.

"I did take advantage," he said, very clearly, hoping she'd understand. "I made a mistake, Ellie, but you were willing."

"You can make it right, Ian."

Right? He felt like he was confronted by a tumbled trail after a prairie flash flood, all familiar landmarks toppled, debris strewn where he would walk. Where was his direction?

Unable to find an answer, he stared at the view. By the creek he could see Bryn, his Bryn, tossing rocks into the water. His hair was still wet, slicked back and gleaming, his lean muscles drawing his shirt taut in quick, angry motion.

All Ian wanted in that moment was to leave this prison of a room, leave this young woman, and share coffee and confidences with Bryn as they walked by the stream together. He could pose his idea of what to seed in the north field. He could listen to Bryn's worry for his daughter—not that he could do anything there, but he'd learned that sometimes when a man just listened, it helped someone.

His cheeks burned with shame as he relived the flash of hate in Bryn's eyes when lately there had only been the sweetest of compliance, adoration.

You see me for what I am, don't you, Bryn? A coward. A liar. You are despised by the townsfolk, but you are an honest man. A better man than me. Oh, God. Don't hate me, Bryn.

The unbearable idea that Bryn no longer looked up to him left him feeling cut off, adrift from the happy man he'd been for such a short time. He felt as if he had never truly lived until those forbidden moments in the barn, laughing, losing himself, his cares, his body, in Bryn's.

As he'd told Bryn, as a young man, he'd followed the path chosen for him. He'd studied hard, become a preacher, and married a young woman his father had approved of. After his father had passed on, they'd lived here one year before she'd become pregnant with his son.

But even then, the walls had just contained him. He'd ached for something he didn't understand. He felt it sometimes when he married young couples—the eager light in their eyes, the flushed faces and stolen kisses. Ian had only felt wooden in his own private life, but he'd tried, tried so damn hard to be a considerate husband.

He remembered stiff suppers served by Mrs. Robson to the newly wedded couple, kissing Janet's cheek before she went into her room and he was left alone in his. The relief he'd felt then. He'd only brought himself to go to her a handful of times, knowing it was expected so they might have a child. He remembered how his feet had seemed too big, his hands awkward on her body, every creak of the mattress, every soft suppressed sound from Janet. He had ached to talk to her, to fill the void between them, but the young, innocent man he'd been had been unable to find the words.

A child had meant he could stay in his room, eat his meals at Mrs. Robson's warm table downstairs. Walk his land and watch the sunsets, thinking, almost as solitary as he'd been as an unmarried man.

Then, unexpected light had come from touching Janet's belly, bashful, wondering. Finally, there had been a miracle in Ian's life.

Mrs. Robson had knitted blue booties by the fireplace over Christmas, sharing a smile with him. The first time he held his child, it was like a horse had kicked his gut. He'd known then that he'd die if anything happened to that baby, his son.

Thinking of it, tears pricked his eyes.

"I was wrong to lie with you," he confessed in a whisper. "I was confused that night, Ellie, and you told me that we could forget it, act as if it had never happened."

"Not wrong, just hasty, as I was hasty to give you that promise," Ellie Mae said. "Ian, I am not a young woman. I am almost a spinster. I want a home of my own, and it might as well be with you."

She would not be moved.

Ian's shoulders slumped. "I can't." Ian closed his eyes. "I cannot have children. Ever."

Ellie Mae shrugged. "I can do without them." She took his arm. "I didn't tell my father about the other time, after your wife died—"

"My wife and my *son*," Ian corrected. It had killed him at the time, his child so young that many had only acknowledged the loss of his wife. But that small grave at the churchyard—he hadn't been able to visit the spot since the funeral. The pain and rage and failure. He couldn't face his son and ask his forgiveness. Couldn't seem to remember the brief joy in his staid life. Until he'd met Bryn, he hadn't thought life would ever offer him anything more than getting up in the morning, trimming his beard, staring into his own eyes in his mirror and aching, without voice, without relief.

He barely remembered the first time with Ellie Mae. He'd been drinking in his kitchen, and she'd come by to pay her respects. He'd taken her on the kitchen floor, half out of his mind. But he did remember the smell of vinegar and Ellie's knowing hands. "You are no virgin," he observed now.

“What does that matter? I’ve always wanted you for a husband. I believe we will suit, and I know you’ll do the right thing by me,” she said quietly. “You are a good man, a respectable man, and you always do what’s expected of you, don’t you, Ian?”

“BRYN.” Ian’s soft voice.

Bryn had been tossing rocks, smashing them against the far bank, gravel spitting up until he’d finally collapsed on a log.

He’d heard the farmhouse door open, Ian’s guests chatting, exchanging pleasantries that made Bryn feel shoved out of the house he’d begun to think of as his, until finally they left, dust rising, buggy clattering.

And somehow he’d known Ian would find him.

Now the sun was low, just touching a few violet clouds. All the light was fading.

Ian’s hand brushed his shoulder.

Bryn jerked away. Sullen, he demanded, “What did she want?” As if he didn’t know.

He heard pebbles grind under Ian’s boots as he paced behind Bryn. “Me” Ian said at last, very simply. “And God, I wish she didn’t. Bryn? I... I lay with her when I went away.”

Tears stung Bryn’s eyes. He stared at the stream, trying to breathe through the hurt. He remembered his naïve dream about placing his comb next to Ian’s. About curling up next to him every night.

What a goddamned fool he was!

“How could you do that, Ian? You said you couldn’t sleep nights, thinking about me!”

“I didn’t want to think about you.”

Bryn glared at Ian. “So you turned to *her*?”

“Bryn, please, you’re killing me,” Ian confessed in a thready voice.

Bryn leaped to his feet, spinning to confront Ian. “*Good!* I want you hurting! I want a big hole through your gut. Do you hear me?” He cursed. “I hate you!”

Ian’s face worked. “Yes, I hear you.”

“And what about me, and Mrs. Robson, and my... my daughter? Do we mean nothing to you?” Bryn accused, fists balling. He felt like he was soaring, angrier than he’d ever been in his life, riding the backdraft of a fire like burned up ash. “You lost your family, but don’t we count for anything?”

“I cannot live with you as a man lives with his wife,” Ian said, his eyes miserable—as miserable as they had been when Bryn first came to work for him. But he’d done it to himself, put his foot in a trap, and now it was closed. But it was killing more than him. It was killing them both. Goddamn him!

“You’re... everything. You must know.” *Please*, Ian’s eyes begged. *Please*, Bryn.

For the first time, Bryn was stone. Hotly, he said, “No, I don’t know!”

“Bryn...”

“I don’t know! You’ve shown me that I... that *we* don’t matter.” Bryn shrugged. “You’ve said all there is to say by how you’re actin’, by making what happened between us something wrong.”

Ian stiffened his shoulders, as if bracing himself to say the words. “I am engaged.”

Bryn struck him full on the face, so hard a red handprint stood out red against his skin.

Panting, Bryn dropped his hand.

“I hope that made you feel better,” Ian said, eyes aching.

Bryn laughed, wild. “No, it didn’t! I wish you were dead! I wish I’d never....” Now a tear ran down his cheek. “Why did you ever give me a job, eat with me, talk to me, teach me... *touch* me, when you had to know you would turn away from me?” He scrubbed away another tear with a shaking hand. “Because it’s your nature; I know it.”

“What happened between us must never happen again,” Ian whispered. “I’m doing this to protect you.”

“I don’t *want* your protection,” Bryn growled, wanting to hit Ian again. “I didn’t ask for it! You think what we did was dirty? To hell with you, Ian. What we did was....” *Beautiful*. “I’ll stay in the barn from now on.”

Ian looked away, as if shutting Bryn out. “That would be best.”

“She’ll never touch you like I did,” Bryn vowed. “You’ll never...! In sunlight, Ian. I touched you in sunlight.”

Ian’s face crumpled.

Unable to look at him, Bryn strode away, boots ringing, the angry sound satisfying the ugly snake living in his gut, hissing, hungry.

Only that afternoon, he’d kissed Ian’s palm. Now he wanted to hurt him.

At the porch that wrapped around the house, he paused, tears running freely down his cheeks. This was where it had all started. He’d come looking for a job, a man with nothing.

He remembered how it had seemed like Ian was hesitant to hire him, how bitter anger had lived under his need for a job. And then Ian had invited him for supper. They’d had coffee and pie right here on this porch.

CHAPTER 19

“THE grippe?”

Ian rubbed the back of his neck, wondering when things would get easier. First, he’d become engaged, and Bryn—his throat tightened. He couldn’t blame Bryn for hating him. He hated himself.

Mrs. Robson nodded gravely, her face pale and sweating. She crushed a handkerchief with trembling fingers. “Influenza. Must have come from town.”

Ian took her arm, steadying her. “You’re unwell!”

“I...” She cleared her throat, and he felt misery shift in his gut. She’d told him quietly that when Ellie Mae came to live under his roof, she’d leave his employ. He had listened in numb silence, wishing he could tell her to stay, but he knew it wasn’t how things were done. Ellie Mae would expect to run this house as her own, since unlike his first wife, she was not of a delicate disposition, but a capable farm woman, so there would be no room for Mrs. Robson... or Bryn.

But Bryn had already abandoned the guest room Ian had given him. He was sleeping in the barn now, above his beloved animals, in the hayloft where he and Ian had come together in sunlight. The past two nights, Ian had found himself returning to Bryn’s deserted room, fingering the quilt he had slept under.

He’d also found one rock from Bryn’s collection lying on the bedside table, next to the oil lamp. This one had the word *love* scrawled over it. Bryn had left it behind—as a message to Ian or a sign of what he himself was abandoning? Ian was haunted with the need to ask Bryn, to press him, but he had to stay away from him or

God help him, what had happened in the hayloft might ignite between them again.

He hugged his pillow to his chest at night, wishing he were breathing in the scent of Bryn's hair.

Bryn had cursed him, saying he'd never forget coupling in sunlight. And now Ian lived with a fatal poison coursing through his veins, sweet and hot, quickening his heartbeat and his imagination.

But the memory of being touched was all he had to carry now.

As if conjured by Ian's longing, Bryn left the barn, bronze hair curled against his head from the warm day, milk pail sloshing. Seeing Ian with Mrs. Robson, his face was hard and sullen, only softening slightly as he studied the older woman.

"Bryn," she called, beckoning him over with a shaking hand.

"Missus?" Alarm crossed his features as he studied her, took in Ian's arm bracing her.

Mrs. Robson rasped, "Something's happened...."

"Bryn, it's Dandelion," Ian interjected, saying the words he knew Mrs. Robson was dreading sharing.

Bryn fell back, his blue gaze snapping up to his daughter's window. The pail dropped, rolling over, sloshing their feet with a wash of warm milk, and then, with a smothered sound, Bryn shoved past them and into the house, the porch door slapping closed behind him.

Emotion a hard ball in his chest, Ian caught the sound of his hired man's boots ringing on the stairs as he ran to his daughter's sick bed. He ached to go after him, but his feet felt leaden, as if he couldn't enter the house.

A dead child. A house of grief. Christ, never again!

Ian felt desolate, as if he was getting further and further away from the man he'd wanted to be. But he was doing everything expected of him, and wasn't that what a good man did? It was the

path he'd always followed, except when he'd come apart after losing his family... and for a few stolen hours with Bryn.

"God help us!" Ian swore softly, staring up at Dandelion's window, imagining Bryn leaning over his daughter, a trembling hand tucking the sick child under a quilt. He swallowed thickly, envying Bryn even as he was frightened for him. "I have to go to town and see what I can do to help," he said, clinging to his duty. He needed to be with Bryn, but he was afraid to go to him.

"You need to get some medicine for the little one from Doc Masters," Mrs. Robson directed. "She's bad off, Ian."

"Will she die?" Ian whispered, turning away from the house to stare off into the horizon, wishing he were a hundred miles away. Wishing he weren't Reverend Ian Kenyon.

"Ian," Mrs. Robson said, addressing him by his Christian name as she had when she'd come to see him at the sanitarium. He'd managed to drift away for days at a time there, wishing only to stay lost, but Mrs. Robson *seeing* him had summoned him back. "We need you now. And Bryn, you know what he'll be feelin'."

"I can't! If she's going to die, I can't!" A tear rolled down his cheek, but he was unashamed with this woman who knew him so well. "You don't know what you're asking."

"God won't take her away if we fight for her!" Mrs. Robson shook Ian's arm.

"*God!*" Ian scoffed, his mask falling, shattering at last as he glared into Mrs. Robson's eyes. "He doesn't exist!"

Mrs. Robson swallowed, hand falling away. "You better hope he does, Ian, because only a miracle will keep that little girl alive. A miracle... and *us*."

"WIPE her down her back and chest with the sea sponge. You have to keep her cool," Mrs. Robson instructed Bryn in a drained voice.

Bryn nodded. He'd watched Mrs. Robson do it over and over again for hours and then pull the bedclothes over Dandelion when she settled, briefly comfortable. He caught his reflection in the dresser mirror, blue eyes full of hell as he used a dripping sponge he'd dipped in the water basin to soothe his restless daughter.

Dandelion twisted on the bed, her hair tangled and sweaty, her eyelids fluttering as she stared blankly at her father. Did she even know who he was? She made strange sounds in her fever, the voice of her pain.

"You should sleep, Missus," Bryn said, shoving his hair off his forehead. He was stiff from sitting with Dandelion, caring for her, but Mrs. Robson's face was paper-white and perspiring, her eyes dark-ringed.

She only shook her head. "I had a touch of it when I was a child and survived. I'll be all right, Bryn."

"I appreciate you takin' care of her," Bryn said but then finished roughly, "not like the Reverend. He couldn't leave us fast enough!"

"Bryn?" Mrs. Robson frowned. "He had to go to town to see how bad things are. There are probably folks who need him even worse than we do. And... you know Reverend Ian is afraid."

Bryn's jaw flexed. "I know it."

"He's afraid of letting you down."

Bryn gave a bitter laugh.

After a moment she straightened in the chair by the bed. "What is wrong between you? You've always looked up to him. I know he helped you, and I think it also helped him."

Bryn looked away, flushing. He smoothed a hand over the quilt draped over the slight body of his daughter. "Don't reckon it matters much, now he's getting married. I'm just his hired man."

Still frowning, Mrs. Robson said, "Yes, Bryn, but surely you don't want him to be alone?"

There was something in her tone. He looked up sharply, but her gaze had dropped to the pile of mending she'd been working on sporadically.

He closed his eyes and pressed his face against his quilt-wrapped daughter, listening to the sound of her heart beating. "No, I don't want that," he admitted, but he couldn't tell her, ever, that he still ached to put his comb next to Ian's, to lay down next to him.

But it was Ian who had pushed him away.

IAN'S carthorse shied, and he gripped the reins, slowing the spooked horse. On the path into town he saw a dead robin lying in the dusty road, its eyes missing.

It seemed an omen for what he might find.

Swallowing thickly, Ian drove into town, passing people who had forgotten their daily business and errands, apparently too sick to care about their appearance as they lay on benches in the open or on the porches outside their homes, fanning themselves weakly or just staring into the distance with dead eyes.

He shook his head, ice skittering down his neck. This wasn't his town. This was a place of death, of scared eyes and sweaty, hopeless faces.

The only thing that steadied him was a sense of purpose. This was what he'd done all his life, helped folks out. He was needed here. He had lost his faith, but he was needed. Who else lived in this small town and knew these people and could give comfort?

Bracing himself for what he might find, Ian guided the horse to the Doc's office and tied it there, stepping onto the boardwalk.

Mr. Chalmers, an elderly man who had run the telegraph office until his son took over, was staggering toward the doctor's office. Ian took his arm, guiding him to the bench where others waited. "Here, let me help you," he said, feeling dry skin and burning heat under his touch.

“Thank you, Reverend,” the man said in a hoarse voice, leaning heavily against Ian’s strength. “My... my wife passed. I found her best dress. Just need a fresh c-coffin, so that’s why I come here.” The old man’s eyes spilled tears, and he gripped Ian’s hand fiercely.

“You had forty-eight years together,” Ian said.

“Yes, sir.” Mr. Chalmers nodded, face crumpling.

“I will find someone to help you, but you need to rest,” Ian admonished.

“Don’t reckon it matters now what happens to me,” the elderly man said, closing his eyes. “Now she’s gone, my Beth.”

Across town at the blacksmith, Ian caught the staccato of hammers. Fresh pine boards had been laid out and were being pounded into coffins. He was frightened, but he’d learned a long time ago to shove aside his feelings and wear the mask of calm. It reassured folk.

Leaving Mr. Chalmers, he ducked through the open door of the doctor’s office.

Inside, it was stifling in the warm spring heat. A man with the familiar pale face of sickness, coughing harshly into his hand, stood aside for Ian’s passage. He pointed to where the doctor was helping an older woman drink something.

“Reverend! Thank God you’re here, man! I got dead and dyin’ all over the place!” Doc Masters exclaimed. He was a short, rotund man with curly white hair and small, gentle hands. His brown eyes were dark with compassion and yet steely as a warrior’s. It wasn’t the first time Doc had battled with a sickness running through their town.

“My hired man’s little girl has taken sick,” Ian said, even more afraid for Dandelion now he’d come here, seen how things were. “Is there anything you can give me for her?”

“Quinine powder for the fever. And I’ve got some of that coneflower tea the Indians use. I can give you that. But we need you here!”

“I’ll deliver it and return as soon as I can,” Ian offered.

The doctor nodded. “Another thing, Reverend. I came by the Robson farm on my way into town this morning. Clement Robson is dead.”

“Oh, no! Mrs. Robson...” His housekeeper, his friend for the years he’d lived alone, the only person to make the trip out to the sanitarium to see him—now she was truly alone, widowed.

“She doesn’t know yet?” the doctor asked.

“I don’t think so. She’s been caring for our hired man’s daughter. She did ask me to stop by her farm and make sure her husband was all right, but he was fine yesterday.”

The doctor’s face was grim. “It can take you fast, less than a day for some, and Clem always had a weak heart.”

“I’ll have to tell her, visit her farm, and... bury her husband. I’ll need a coffin.”

“There are fresh ones at the blacksmith’s. Plenty of them.”

Ian took the supplies in a sack from the doctor. “I will return as soon as I can.”

“Just be sure that little girl drinks lots of that tea and give her the quinine to keep her fever down,” the doctor instructed. “I wrote down how often she should take the quinine.”

“I’ll make sure that Bryn, my hired man, and Mrs. Robson know the dosage.”

“You ever had it?” The doctor measured Ian, and Ian wondered if he saw the empty coat of Ian’s faith. But the doctor was a pragmatist, so he probably didn’t care as long as Ian helped the town.

“The grippe? No.”

The doctor sighed. “Some that have had it sometimes don’t take too ill. You’d probably be safer stayin’ out at the farm.”

“My place is with the suffering,” Ian said, turning to head back out onto the street. “Same as yours, Doc. I’ll be back as soon as I take care of my people.”

DANDELION’S crying woke Bryn. He’d fallen asleep, lying curled protectively around her little body on top of the quilt.

Her breathing was labored, her color high.

He covered her hand with his larger one.

CHAPTER 20

AT THE Robsons' farmhouse, Ian sat in the wagon, waiting. Mrs. Robson had ordered him to give her a moment alone with her husband, and although Ian hated to leave her alone, he had to do as she asked. Adding to his worry, she was obviously sick, but thankfully not as bad off as Bryn's little Dandelion.

As he waited, he noticed flies buzzing around the body of a dead crow lying in the dirt yard. He swallowed, feeling another finger of cold fear touch him.

Mrs. Robson appeared in the doorway and leaned against it. She wiped her face with shaking fingers. Her hair was tangled raggedly around her neck.

"Ian...." She closed her eyes.

Ian leaped off the wagon, gut tight. He went to his housekeeper and pulled her into his arms.

"That's better," she said, patting his shoulder.

His lips quirked, though his eyes were full of concern. He *hurt* for her. "Why is it when you... you love someone, you can't find the words to truly offer comfort, Mrs. Robson?" he asked her quietly.

"Ian." She cleared her throat. "My name is Clara."

He nodded, since he'd known that, though of course he'd never used it. He squeezed her hand.

"I don't need words." She reached up and cupped his cheek. "You being here, that's what matters."

“I’ll always be here, Clara. And if you don’t choose to live in this place, you can lease out the land and come live in my house,” Ian offered.

“We’ll see,” she said, shaking her head. “Your fiancée.”

Ian’s face darkened. “I don’t want you to be alone. You’ve always been more than a housekeeper to me. You’re—” He couldn’t say she’d been a mother to him, to Bryn and to Dandelion, could he? “You took care of me,” he rasped, hoping she’d understand. “Please stay in my house.”

She sighed. “For a while, but first....”

“I’ll take care of him for you.” Ian offered. “Don’t you worry.”

He entered the Robson farmhouse, finding it as neat as his own, which was no surprise. This little woman worked very hard, scrubbing, polishing, keeping two houses, which he realized for the first time must be difficult at her age. Why had he never thought about that before? He felt a wash of guilt, but damn it, he liked her in his house! If she got so she couldn’t work, he’d hire one of the young girls from town to come by.

Chagrined, he realized he’d forgotten his fiancée again. Well, Ellie Mae would just have to accept having Mrs. Robson under her roof. It was unconventional, but the older woman felt like part of Ian’s family.

Mrs. Robson had followed him, hands limp at her sides. “He must’ve... must’ve took bad with it and died in the night. All alone, Ian.” She gave him a poignant look.

“No, he wasn’t alone! Look at this house and how you kept it. Fresh flowers here on the table? Any man who lived in this house had to know he was fortunate. The Doc said it looked like he merely fell asleep.”

She shook her head. “All these years since the Lord took our children, he got so quiet.” She fingered a petal on a daffodil sitting on the table, but then she took a deep breath as if marshaling herself. Ian ached for her as she straightened her back. “Thank you,

Reverend,” she continued. “I’m going to see to him now. He was my husband, and I have to find his best suit.”

TOGETHER, Ian and Mrs. Robson lifted Clement Robson into his plain wooden coffin in the cart. His hair was combed, his body washed and smelling of bay rum. Mrs. Robson had placed an early daffodil into his lapel.

THE wind picked up on the hill where all the Robson children were buried, stirring the fresh flowers at each plot, tended daily.

Ian got down from the wagon and went around to the bed to heft out the shovel where it rested next to Clement’s coffin. He removed his hat and coat and stripped down to his shirt and suspenders, already hot under the warm spring sun.

Mr. Robson’s plot lay in the center of the smaller graves of his lost children; he would not be alone.

Mrs. Robson sat in the wagon, hands primly folded, and watched Ian as he dug her husband’s grave.

“IT’S supposed to bring the fever down, Bryn,” Ian said, rubbing his bloodshot eyes with dirt-encrusted fingers.

Bryn was lying on the bed with his daughter, holding her. He’d wanted to help Mrs. Robson, but he couldn’t leave Dandelion. Someone had to stay with her, care for her.

Mrs. Robson entered the room with a milky glass of the medicine. “I’m also making some tea with that coneflower,” she told Bryn, as if wanting to reassure the terrified young father.

Bryn put the cup to Dandelion’s lips, after shaking her to rouse her enough to drink. It dribbled from the corner of her mouth, but she swallowed most of it.

“She’s burning up!” Bryn breathed. “I been watching her all morning, and I think she’s hotter than she was. She’s barely making a sound anymore, like she’s gettin’ weaker!”

Ian finished scrubbing his hands in his wife’s old basin and looked to Mrs. Robson helplessly. What could they do?

“It’s taken her bad,” Mrs. Robson said, clearly as alarmed as Bryn as she touched little Dandelion’s forehead. “We have to do something before it’s too late! Bryn, Reverend Ian, we need to get her out to the stream. *Now.*”

BRYN waded into the water with Ian, the men cradling Dandelion’s small body between them.

The stream rippled merrily past, and Ian saw more daffodils bent over the bank, the beautiful day a jarring contrast to his dread. He closed his eyes, remembering how he’d found his wife and son.

God, please, I know I don’t matter to you. I know you’ve turned away from me, but please don’t take Bryn’s little girl!

“Put her in the water but mind her head!” Mrs. Robson instructed, twisting her fingers in her apron.

Dandelion’s body arched in shock as she was immersed in the icy spring water. She clawed her father’s arms and mewed in distress.

Bryn sobbed, holding her shoulders and stroking her curls back from her face. “Please stay with me. Please, Dandelion.” He sat down in the stream so it reached his shoulders, rocking his daughter while the water ran past. Ian and Mrs. Robson watched, hands at their sides.

“BROUGHT her fever down a mite,” Mrs. Robson pronounced when they returned to Dandelion’s room. Bryn and Ian were soaking wet, dripping on the pine floor.

“She’s shivering!” Bryn said, pulling the blankets high around the child’s neck.

“That’s good. She was too hot to do that before,” Mrs. Robson reassured him.

IAN doled out stew for Bryn when he came downstairs, watching him, aching for him as he had for Mrs. Robson, for Dandelion. He hated how goddamn helpless he was! “How is she?” he asked softly.

“Sleeping now, and Mrs. Robson too,” Bryn said, for once the hardness gone from his exhausted face when he looked at Ian.

“That’s good.” Ian cleared his throat. “Please eat something, Bryn.”

“I can’t—”

“You have to.” Ian pulled out a chair for his hired man. “You can’t be strong for Dandelion and Mrs. Robson if you don’t take care of yourself.”

Bryn studied him, a little spark of defiance in his blue eyes, but he sat down and picked up a spoon.

Sighing, Ian sat down as well.

“You’re all dirty,” Bryn said, nodding to Ian’s filthy clothing.

Ian nodded. “I’ll go wash up in the stream after you eat. I... buried Mrs. Robson’s husband.”

Eyes on his stew, Bryn nodded. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help her. I hope she knows—”

Ian’s eyes pricked when he thought of his housekeeper. How much she meant to him... and Bryn. “She knows we’ll take care of her.”

“We?” Bryn raised a cool brow.

Ian flushed. He knew he should leave Bryn alone, the way things stood between them now, but after the difficult morning, after

the scare with Dandelion, he wanted to spend some quiet time with him.

I love him.

The thought bubbled to the surface, so easy after the weeks with Bryn. Caring for him, desiring him. Yet how could Ian feel this way?

He swallowed, pushing aside the raw voice inside.

"I don't want you to leave when... when Ellie Mae comes to live here. I told Mrs. Robson, and I'm telling you."

Bryn shook his head, setting aside his spoon. "You know that could never work."

"I want you here."

"We'd get too close. We'd be alone, and something would happen," Bryn said flatly.

"I'd be married."

"A married man who came out to the barn some nights to be in my bed," Bryn said. "You'd cover me, Ian." His eyes were heavy lidded, as if he were picturing it. "And I'd want you to. I'd welcome you."

Ian jerked to his feet. He couldn't stay here, listening to Bryn. He was tired and confused, and he knew Bryn was worn out. "You don't know what you're saying! I'm going down to the creek to wash up, and then I... have to go back into town."

Bryn's eyes flashed. "Leaving us?"

"Bryn, no!" Ian reached out as if to touch, but let his hand fall. "People are dying in town."

"And you haven't had it, have you? So you could—" Bryn cut off his words, turning his head sharply. "Fine—go back there and get sick! I don't care, damn you!"

ACHING in the wake of another fight with Bryn, Ian pulled off his suspenders, letting them fall. The air was warm, fresh against his tired body as he opened his pants and stripped out of his underwear.

Diamonds sparkled on the stream. He could see the flattened grass where they'd gone in earlier to bring down Dandelion's temperature. He only prayed that she would get through the worst of it. Bryn and Mrs. Robson were fighting so hard.

"Let me help you with the rest," Bryn breathed against his ear.

Ian moaned, his head falling back as he stepped out of his clothing, nude under the spring sunshine again with Bryn, wrapped in Bryn's possessive arms.

Bryn rubbed his lips against Ian's ear, his jaw and throat, his fingers working Ian's flesh.

"Oh, Bryn! Oh, God, don't stop touching me!" Ian heard himself beg. Tears filled his eyes at the sweet pain of it, of being held in this man's arms, of coming alive after feeling like ashes.

"I know you're set on going to town, but if you get sick...."

"I won't!"

"I have to stay here with my daughter, Ian." Bryn nipped his neck, and Ian gasped. Bryn's hand was running down his chest, down his belly, to the hardness that lived for Bryn's touch. Bryn laughed when his fist enclosed Ian. "You still think nothing would ever happen between us again, even if you were married? You think you could push me away when I wanted *this*?" He tugged pointedly on Ian's penis.

"No..." Ian groaned, admitting the truth. "But how can I let you go?"

Bryn's eyes were a sad shade of blue. "Only you can decide, Ian."

"I'm yours, Bryn," Ian whispered.

"Mine." Another tug. "I've been going out of my mind with worry for my daughter, for Mrs. Robson... and for you," Bryn

confessed. “And now I need this. I need to feel you inside me, just for a little while, before you go to town and I climb those stairs to my daughter’s room.”

“How do you want me?” Ian asked, innocent, bent like soft metal to Bryn’s will. His fingers buried in bronze-blond hair, his body at Bryn’s service. They shared a kiss so full of pain, love, and brimming sexual need they had to break apart to pant for breath.

Bryn shoved Ian so he fell into the shallow part of the stream, water just touching him, his knees spread, his cock heavy and trembling with want. He looked up at Bryn, who was stripping out of his clothes, a light of triumph burning in his eyes.

“Think you can just push me away? I’m going to use what’s mine,” Bryn taunted.

CHAPTER 21

IAN was breathless at this new Bryn, possessive, angry, ordering Ian to give him service.

This was his timid, sweet Bryn? He felt as if he were at the feet of a sudden predator. This was the defiant, untamed Bryn he had seen only glimpses of—a Bryn that went his own way, lonely, but now his feelings for Ian had lured the wild young man into the open.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Bryn whispered, removing his shirt, drawing out the moment his body was revealed as if he liked the touch of Ian’s hungry eyes on his skin. “But I began changing the moment you hired me. *You* gave this to me. You and Mrs. Robson... and Dandelion. You wanted me to be a part of this farm. You trusted me to choose a plow horse.”

Ian swallowed, watching Bryn’s fingers rubbing the thick knob of his erection through his pants. “I was so ashamed to feel this way, to want you. But then you wanted me too.”

Bryn reached out and tugged Ian’s hair so his head fell back. He stroked Ian’s beard and Ian shuddered, so aroused he wondered why the water wasn’t boiling around his helpless body. “You made a mistake, wanting me back, Ian. I won’t let you take it back now.”

“Bryn, kiss me,” Ian pleaded. He suddenly craved the touch of hot silken lips against his own. Bryn’s taste. Bryn’s scent. His hair tangled in Ian’s fingers.

Bryn dropped his pants and raised a cool brow, not the easy compliant lover of the past, but now a tiger bent on scratching his

mark into Ian's skin. "You fucked her," he gritted. "How do you think that makes me feel?"

Ian flushed, partly at Bryn's crudity, but also at the truth of his words. "I'm sorry."

"You did it to push me away."

Ian took a deep breath, tears pricking his eyes. Bryn was relentless, stripping away all the niceties. He was primal, reacting as if Ian was his mate. But... wasn't he?

You made a mistake, wanting me back.

But how could he not want Bryn? Bryn had burned, enticing Ian, even back when he'd first hired him. Defiant, mouthy, bitter... and so very wounded that Ian had been roused from his chilly routine into trying to help him, touch him. But it turned out that touching Bryn meant *being* touched. Caring for someone gave them a devastating power. Now Ian felt it, felt all the power he'd given Bryn to hurt him, to move him.

And Bryn was relentless, both Ian's lover and his enemy.

"I don't want to go back," Ian blurted. "You brought me to life. But it hurts. It hurts to feel this way."

"You don't have to go back, but the choice is yours, damn you!" Another tug of his hair, and Ian's cock reacted. "Maybe because I'm not the town's goddamn darling I can see there are other ways a man can live. Ways to be free. When I was in prison, I didn't want to be the toy of more than one man, so I chose someone." Bryn swallowed. "And he wasn't so bad."

Ian's face hardened. He hated to think about what must have happened to Bryn. Slender, beautiful Bryn, but at last Ian was seeing... Bryn was not fragile. Not as fragile as Ian had always assumed.

"No, you don't understand. I made a choice, and I stuck with it. And sometimes... sometimes I wake up here, outside in the world, and I miss having a cock up my backside. I want it again, but I want it to be you." Bryn gave a wild laugh, tears magnifying his

burning blue eyes. He kissed Ian, attacking his mouth, taking him, and Ian could only moan, swept away in this unexpected role. He'd never thought that Bryn, his Bryn, timid, diffident, would be demanding he satisfy him.

Demanding he make a choice.

He wasn't acting like someone Ian had to take care of and protect. He was acting like Ian's lover. But Bryn said that Ian had given him this new self, this new confidence. Trusting his judgment on the purchase of a plow horse. Listening to his opinion on what crop to grow. Little things had led to Bryn looming over him, claiming Ian.

"Bryn, please."

"You've proven you aren't so good at thinking things out, Ian. So for now I'm doing your thinking for you." Bryn calmly picked up butter wrapped in paper he must have brought with him. As Ian watched, Bryn anointed Ian's penis, and Ian twitched under the touch on his needy flesh.

Fiery blue eyes held his as Bryn sloshed into the stream. Now Ian had no idea what was to come, as he had only been inside Bryn twice. He barely knew how to make love to him. But Bryn seemed to know what to do; he held Ian's cock tall in his hand and, kneeling over Ian's splayed body, impaled himself.

"*Bryn!*" Ian sucked in a breath, so hard, so excited, his heart was galloping like a runaway horse. Bryn made a soft sound, biting his lip.

Dazed by the satisfying, gut-wrenching feel of being inside Bryn again, Ian nevertheless frowned. What? It almost sounded like Bryn was hurting, but surely he enjoyed their coming together as much as Ian did?

And then all thoughts scattered like leaves blown from a tree in a spring storm as Bryn raised himself, held himself above Ian with just the tip of his cock probing him.

Ian reached out and grabbed Bryn's soft, round ass, growling at the satisfying feel of it under his hands. Shit, he loved touching Bryn's bottom, though he had never imagined he'd ever feel this way about anyone, man or woman. Sometimes just looking at Bryn's ass made him break out in a cold sweat, needing to bury himself deep inside, finding the sweet relief only Bryn could give him.

"God, what you do to me!" he marveled.

Bryn cupped the side of his face, breathing harshly as he raised and lowered himself, rocking their bodies so ripples of water lapped against heated skin. "This is what you want to give up," he reminded Ian.

"I don't," Ian admitted poignantly, pain tightening his throat.

"Tell her you were wrong! Tell her you don't want to marry her. Tell her you have someone," Bryn pushed.

"Bryn!" Ian was a slave now. A slave to his cock, buried inside his tormentor, living for each time Bryn's body took all of him, looking up into Bryn's eyes as they widened when he was fully seated, as if Bryn was experiencing something powerful.

Ian wished he knew more about lovemaking. He loved seeing Bryn's eyes reflecting their experience. He wanted him hot, wanton. He wanted him heavy-lidded, offering himself to Ian.

Bryn whispered against Ian's lips, "Tell her you belong to me."

"I... can't!" Ian groaned, unable to lie.

Bryn eyes flared, and he lifted himself off Ian, who was on the brink, tinder lit, on fire—

Ian dove for him, snatching his ankle. Bryn kicked him. They tussled, water erupting around them as Bryn struggled, cursing him. "You goddamn liar, Ian!"

Ian covered Bryn's lips with his own.

Bryn bit him.

Not giving up, Ian cupped Bryn's jaws in his hands, exerting pressure, meaning business.

Bryn finally let him into his mouth, not responding when Ian's tongue stroked against his but shivering as if he couldn't help himself any more than Ian could. When they touched....

Their erections brushed, silken, wet, hot flesh.

Ian moaned and hefted Bryn high, walking with him in his arms until he came to a willow leaning over the creek. He seated Bryn in the fork, raising his thighs—

Inside, thrusting.

Bryn's hands tangled in his hair, his mouth open, giving that little grunt as Ian seated himself, fucking him, battering him now, impatient, using Bryn for his release.

"When I want *in*, you let me in, goddamn you!" Ian swore, his hips pounding under Bryn's scrabbling, desperate fingers.

"Yes, Ian," Bryn whispered. "I need it!"

Ian could feel his climax coming, tingling up his back, tightening his balls. But Bryn.... "Need what, Bryn?" *I want to give him pleasure. How do I do that?* Sweat stung Ian's eyes, dripping from his hair.

"Feel something when you're deep inside," Bryn confessed, flushing. "Like... those fire crackers that go off, shooting sparks into the sky."

"Like this?" Ian lifted Bryn's ankle over his shoulder, trying to slow his thrusts, wanting to love Bryn, make him want to take it.

"Yessss. Give it to me—hard!"

Trying to fight off his need to come, Ian closed his eyes, concentrating on giving to Bryn. Bryn mattered. He loved Bryn with his body.

"*Ian!*" Surprise and fear clouded the other man's voice. "What's...?"

“Come for me, Bryn,” Ian coaxed, desperate now. He couldn’t hold off. “I want your come all over me, all over you.”

Bryn’s eyes were wide, bewildered. Hadn’t he climaxed previously? Ian couldn’t remember. *Goddamnit!* He wished he knew how to pleasure his Bryn. Frustration held him back, and then Bryn was gasping, his penis spilling, his body clenching hard around Ian so that Ian had no choice. Gripped, milked, he came in a rush of hot relief, crying out at the incredible warmth, the wonder of sex.

IAN pulled on a clean shirt, seeing that his hands were still shaking. Behind him, Bryn was leaning against the tree, his back to Ian. He swallowed, wanting to say something. What? As he looked at Bryn, Bryn turned his head and caught his gaze.

Ian looked away.

“Did you...?” He cleared his throat. “Do you like having me inside you, Bryn? Do I... give you pleasure?” He needed to know. Bryn had said it was nice before, but his face had tightened when Ian had thrust inside, worrying him. Was he doing something wrong?

Bryn waded into the water, dunking his head, as Ian waited.

“What does it matter?” Bryn asked, bitterness lacing his voice. “Don’t you belong to Ellie Mae now?” He looked over his shoulder at Ian. “I remember watching you through the window at church. The stained glass sometimes caught you in different color, lighting you up in red, in blue. Made me think you were the most beautiful man I’d ever seen, like how an angel would look, I reckon. When I came back here to take care of Dandelion, no one would hire me. Then I thought of you, remembered you.”

IAN looked up at the window on the second floor. More than anything, he wanted to stay here with Dandelion, Mrs. Robson, and Bryn, but the time had come to do his duty, to leave them again.

Bryn.

His chest ached with the need to hold the other man. The sex had been amazing, so his body still buzzed from the pleasure of it. He loved being inside his Bryn. But unlike the first time, he hadn't slept with Bryn in his arms. Hadn't held him after they'd both spilled. Bryn had disengaged his body while they were both still panting, damp with sweat and semen.

He wanted to climb those stairs and kiss Bryn, stamp his possession on his lips. Reassure him that he'd try to take care in town. Let him know he'd be back.

But he couldn't do that in front of Mrs. Robson. He could only do that in secret. And yet.... He mulled over everything he'd shared with his housekeeper. She'd seen him at his worst, shut down, unwashed, a pathetic wretch.

If he told her that he loved Bryn, would she turn away from him?

The lie his life had become yawned like a soulless black void.

What was the right path to take?

He rubbed his tired eyes. He couldn't think of this now. Right now, folks needed their Reverend, needed what comfort he could offer. He clicked the reins and headed for town.

"SHE'S so quiet now," Bryn told Mrs. Robson, who was sitting in the chair, sewing calmly, holding the vigil with him. *Thank God she's here*, Bryn thought. How was it that this woman who had disapproved of him, who hadn't even wanted him in the farmhouse when Ian had first hired him, had come to mean so much to him?

Yet over the past weeks, he'd shared a lot of himself with her, giving her pieces of himself like the treasured rocks he offered Dandelion. Now he found himself wishing he could confide his confusion and pain over Ian in her.

"She's sleeping. It's a good sign," Mrs. Robson reassured softly.

He swallowed, unable to forget the terror he'd felt when they'd bathed her in cold creek water. "Will she die?"

Mrs. Robson rubbed her eyes. "No way to tell, Bryn. I'm hopin' not. It kills you when you lose a child." Her voice dried up.

Bryn reached out with his free hand, taking hers, holding it as night fell.

A long time later, he whispered, "If she dies, I don't want to live."

"I know," Mrs. Robson said.

CHAPTER 22

DOC Masters had set up a temporary hospital at the surgery in town, trying to keep the sick people comfortable and separated from folks who hadn't come down with the grippe.

Ian was helping him there.

Now, late at night, he was slumped over Mr. Chalmers's bedside, holding his sweaty hand. The elderly man was not only gravely ill, but he was also grieving for his wife. Ian was spending as much time with him as he could.

"So the recipe was in French?" Mr. Chalmers rasped. "Oh, Reverend, you should have known better than to mess with Mrs. Robson's kitchen!"

"Truer words were never said!" Ian agreed, smiling. "Bryn and I—" He paused before continuing in a softer tone, "My hired man helped me with the cake. It was so hard we could barely cut through it!"

Mr. Chalmers laughed weakly, and Ian immediately reached for a carafe, pouring water from it and stirring in some quinine for the old man's fever. "Don't waste all that medicine on me," Mr. Chalmers chided Ian.

"It's hardly a waste. Who else will sit in the middle of the third pew this coming Sunday if you don't drink it?"

Mr. Chalmers sipped, making a face. "I don't know if there is anything to look forward to. Beth..." His eyes were as cloudy as the medicine he'd been given.

"In time, you find reasons to go on. Remember your son and his family, your grandchildren."

“They are always so busy. Don’t get to see them as often as I’d like. But maybe....” The elderly man studied Ian sharply. “Do you really believe there is anything to look forward to?”

“Sometimes you find... unexpected blessings.” Ian’s gaze was carefully on his glass.

“You’re in love for the first time, aren’t you, Ian?” Mr. Chalmers asked gently.

“I was married!”

“Remember that I’ve watched you for years. Not many things stay secret in this town.” The old man shook his head. “I always felt something was missing between you and your wife. Is it Ellie Mae you are in love with?”

Ian replaced the glass on the table and then tapped it with his fingers, trying to swallow down his misery. “No.”

“Ian.” His voice was filled with compassion.

Hearing it, Ian met Mr. Chalmers’s gaze. Here he was, supposedly giving comfort, but sometimes the people he looked after surprised him, gave him insight. Mr. Chalmers had always been a favorite. The old man took time to think things over, and when he had something to say, it was worth listening to.

“I don’t think I’ll be sitting in that pew this coming Sunday,” Mr. Chalmers sighed. “I miss my Beth.” Ian could see the elderly man’s breathing was labored, and his grip on Ian’s hand and his own life seemed to be slipping.

“I hate to see you go,” Ian said simply.

“Why don’t you leave my bedside and go be with the person you really love?” Mr. Chalmers suggested.

“Because he’s angry with me,” Ian admitted. Then his eyes widened. It had spilled out so easily. What must Mr. Chalmers think?

The old man’s eyes widened. “Oh. Young Bryn, of course.”

Ian nodded, flushing. “It... just happened.”

“Your unexpected blessing?”

Ian met Mr. Chalmers’s eyes. “Yes, he is.”

“Probably it would be best to marry Ellie Mae.” The old man squeezed Ian’s hand. “And you certainly better not go around blurting this out, Reverend. But don’t you do it—don’t you marry someone if you don’t love her.”

IAN watched Mr. Chalmers sleep.

He’d shared his secret, and the old man hadn’t seemed to hate him. Now he rubbed his eyes, considering. Could he tell Mrs. Robson about Bryn?

He thought about his home, missing being there. He prayed that Dandelion was all right. In the morning, he’d ask one of the boys who worked in the stables to ride out and see how his people were doing.

Stroking his beard, he mulled over the past two years. Mrs. Robson had kept him going; somehow her simple cleaning, cooking, and gossip had made him feel involved in the town, in the outlying farms. She’d given him a routine, been the person who fussed over him. Then Bryn had entered his life, scattering it into confusion like chickens exploding from the henhouse.

He’d told himself Bryn needed him, but the truth was that it had always been *Ian* who had been the needier of the two. He could see that now, especially after being the recipient of Bryn’s passion and new confidence.

He caught the sound of the door to the clinic creaking open. Ian reached for the lamp by Mr. Chalmers’s bedside to see who it was and if they needed his help.

His lips tightened.

Jervish Radcliffe, the storekeeper who had pushed his sex into Bryn’s mouth, was wavering on his feet, holding onto the open door as the night air breathed inside with him.

Right away, Ian could see he was bad off. He struggled with himself for a moment, with the rage that licked at him like flames under a log. Finally, he made himself go to the other man, putting his arm around him in silence since he couldn't trust himself to speak.

They hobbled up the stairs to find a free bed in the rooms above.

Following Doc's orders, Ian mixed up some quinine powder with water and then handed it to the other man, steadying his hand so he could drink from the cup. Jervish's eyes were ringed with black smudges. His long johns were soaked with sweat. Dull brown eyes followed Ian's movements.

"I'll wipe you down. It'll help with the fever," Ian found himself offering. He had to do this. As much as he was angry with this man for touching his Bryn, he did not wish him dead.

Jervish coughed, the sound dry and rattling. Ian held his hand until the spasm had passed. "Gonna die, I know it!" Jervish whispered, tears spilling down his cheeks.

"No, you'll be fine!" Ian reassured him.

"Should've known better. God struck me down on account of that little bum boy."

Ian stiffened. He went to the door and closed it, not wanting anyone to overhear Jervish's words about Bryn.

"Heh! Afraid someone will find out your s-secret, Reverend?"

"I... don't know what you mean," Ian said, filling a basin so he could sponge Jervish off.

"You had him too, didn't you?" Jervish closed his eyes. "He's made for it; you can always tell. Loves the feel of a cock up his ass. I guessed years ago he was that kind."

Ian put down the pitcher, sickened by Jervish's words about Bryn but also caught by something he'd mentioned. He stirred,

restive, but Jervish seemed to have knowledge he lacked. And he needed to know. “Bryn can enjoy it, then?”

“Ha ha! Not much of a lover, eh, Reverend? ’Course he can. There’s a place inside him, same as there is with a woman. Touch that and he’ll be an eager little bitch for it!”

Ian bit his lip, disgusted at himself for talking about such things but... he wasn’t sure if Bryn had always enjoyed what they’d done. He’d said he had, but sometimes Bryn had looked uncomfortable.

And there was no one Ian could ask, confide in.

Or was there?

BRYN sat outside the chicken coop, needing a moment. He looked across the yard at the kitchen window and met Mrs. Robson’s tired gaze through the window.

A minute later, she left the house and crossed the yard, her skirts swinging in a hustle of determination despite how tired she had to be. “Why, Bryn! You haven’t gathered the eggs yet. Whatever is the matter?”

Bryn swallowed. “Dead, Missus. Most of the chickens. Not sure what happened. A fox maybe?”

The woman paused and put a hand over her heart before firming her mouth and peeking into the coop. “Poor little things,” she said, shaking her head.

“What do we do? I counted five still alive, and the chicks seem all right,” Bryn asked, weary. His shoulders slumped.

Ian. How he wished he were here. Had he thought about Bryn, or was he glad to be free of him and the way Bryn had pushed him?

But it didn’t matter now. Bryn was a part of this farm. He had to take care of things whether or not Ian was here. And the farm needed looking after, as what he’d found this morning had

illustrated. People were sick, but the coop needed to be repaired and cleaned out all the same, or they risked losing the rest of their hens.

“We’ll burn all the straw and scrub it down good with soap and water,” Mrs. Robson said. “Probably whatever it was got in under the wall.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Bryn said, nodding, glad to have something to do. The still little bodies in the coop had shaken him deeply, a cold shock after taking care of his daughter all night. It seemed like their life on the farm was suddenly touched everywhere with death. It made him even more afraid for Dandelion, for Ian and Mrs. Robson... and for himself.

“Is Henrietta all right?” Mrs. Robson asked, patting Bryn’s arm.

“Yes, Missus.” Bryn had been relieved to find his favorite hen pecking seed, same as always.

“You come back to the house for nails, and I’ll make fresh coffee. It’s good to keep busy.” Mrs. Robson swallowed. “Helps you think that things will get back to normal.”

Bryn looked up toward his daughter’s window on the second floor, and his eyes widened with a sudden idea.

IAN leaned against the wooden porch support, rubbing his sweaty forehead. His head was pounding and his eyes were gritty from lack of sleep. He blinked at the morning sun just touching the wooden rooftops of town.

Another night had passed and more people had died, but Mr. Chalmers was still with them, thank God. Doc thought the old man might be through the worst of it, although the blacksmith’s youngest boy had passed away, a child only a little older than Dandelion.

Ian had held hands, mumbling words that he hoped comforted others, since he wasn’t sure anymore that they were going to a better place. His tired mind flailed, asking why they had to die at all. Why was there disease?

He shook his head now, groggy. He had decided not to think about the holes in the tattered cloth of his faith. Not when people needed him as their symbol of comfort.

He wondered for the hundredth time how Dandelion, Mrs. Robson, and Bryn were faring.

Please keep them safe until I can return to them. Please, don't let Bryn's child die. It would kill him. And... don't let Bryn hate me anymore.

“LAND sakes, Bryn, it'll take you forever to do that!” Mrs. Robson exclaimed, finding what Bryn had been up to all afternoon in Dandelion's bedroom. The older woman had napped in Bryn's old room, and Bryn was relieved to see her looking better.

“Not so long I can't hitch up the horse so you can visit your cutting garden later, Missus.”

Mrs. Robson's face softened. “I do want to go back to my farm and leave some flowers for my family. Thank you, Bryn.”

Bryn nodded, knowing it was her daily ritual.

He put another cup on Dandelion's bedside table, glue he'd carefully brushed on with a feather slopped over the broken pansy-patterned teacup but holding it together.

“You said we should keep busy, as if things will go back to how they should be,” Bryn whispered, lifting another broken plate carefully in place so he could begin repairing it.

The box of china was open beside him, daunting, filled with hundreds of broken shards.

“I'll help you,” Mrs. Robson offered. She looked at Dandelion. “She's still sleeping. That's a good sign, Bryn.”

“I'd like to help as well, if you let me,” Ian offered, pausing outside Dandelion's door, beard untrimmed, pale with fatigue.

“Reverend Ian!” Mrs. Robson reached out and took his hand. “Land sakes, we weren’t expecting you!”

“I was going to send a boy around to see how you were, but I....” Ian’s eyes went to Bryn, asked questions of Bryn. “I found I couldn’t stay away.”

Bryn shifted so there was more room on the floor. Ian walked over, boots clomping, and sat down. Silently, Bryn handed him a chipped plate. Ian took it, the china fragile in his big hands. He reached for the goopy feather.

“You should rest,” Mrs. Robson scolded Ian, but she nevertheless went to her habitual chair and reached out for another teacup.

Ian looked at Bryn, his eyes naked, hiding nothing.

And Bryn took a deep breath, his heart thumping. His hands were shaking as he fitted together two shards, repairing shattered pieces.

CHAPTER 23

“TAKE Carrot with you,” Bryn insisted. “I saddled her up.”

“She’s your horse.” Ian rubbed his burning eyes. He hadn’t rested, hadn’t wanted to miss a moment of being with Bryn, of sitting with his family: Mrs. Robson, Dandelion, Bryn.

It felt like some layer of his skin had fallen away, so that when Bryn touched him now, it was almost unbearable. And yet Ian wanted that. He needed to see himself reflected in Bryn’s eyes. He stared at him now, swallowing thickly.

“You’re practically asleep on your feet; I can trust Carrot to look after you.” Bryn made an exasperated sound. “And if you keep lookin’ at me like that, everyone will know!”

Ian flushed. Was Bryn still angry with him? He’d wanted to talk to him, but he was afraid. Bryn wasn’t the fragile young man he’d believed, but a tiger he’d roused.

“I’m sorry about your hens,” he said, settling for talking about the farm as it was safer ground. He wanted to offer an olive branch between them. He wanted Bryn to take it.

“It’s funny, Ian,” Bryn said, leading Carrot out in front of the barn as she stamped her foot and curved her long neck to butt her head against him, showing her partiality for him. “Folks are suffering, and it seems like everything should be about all the sadness and the fear.” He glanced at Dandelion’s window. “But a fox can still get in the coop, so I had to fix it.”

Ian nodded, understanding. Life continued; life demanded. “Go to Morley’s farm and get more hens,” he ordered.

Bryn blinked at Ian putting him in charge again. He gave a curt nod, face working. “Yessir.”

Ian took Carrot’s reins but couldn’t stop from looking at Bryn, not wanting to leave him.

“Just what are you looking at?” Bryn’s voice was throaty.

“I’m looking at you,” Ian replied.

Bryn yanked Ian into the shadow of the barn door. On tiptoes, hands clenched in Ian’s coat where it rode his broad shoulders, Bryn covered Ian’s lips with his.

Open mouthed, hot, wet, they kissed, breathless, hungry, moaning.

Then Bryn was high up against the door, Ian braced between his legs, his cock a hard log pressing insistently against Bryn. Bryn wrapped his legs around Ian’s hips.

Carrot snorted, annoyed.

Ian dropped her reins, huffing.

Bryn’s head fell back. “Shit! You have to go,” he groaned.

“I have to go, but even if I didn’t, I wouldn’t make love to you,” Ian said.

Bryn’s eyes flashed, and he slid to the dirt floor, shoving Ian away.

“Stop it, tiger!” Ian scolded, snagging Bryn’s cocked fist.

“You’re back to fucking *her*?”

Ian laughed.

Bryn’s face tightened, and he punched Ian’s stomach.

“Ooof! Will you...?” Ian couldn’t stop laughing. He hauled an angry Bryn close, stamping a kiss on his lips. “I meant that I’d like it to be nice, when we’re together again.”

Bryn studied him, uncertainty, vulnerability and anger storming in his eyes like a sudden spring thunderhead. “It’s never going to be nice, Ian!”

“Oh.” Ian deflated.

“It can’t just be ‘nice’ between us. Not ever. Don’t you see that? Not when right now I’m wishing you were hammering inside me, my head sliding up and down against the wall, ankles digging into your ass!”

Picturing it, Ian broke out in a sweat. Now Bryn laughed, but there was a poignant edge to it. Hearing it, Ian pulled him close. At a loss, he whispered, “Tiger.”

Taking a deep breath, he ventured into new territory for them, hoping this time he would be certain he pleased Bryn completely. He kissed down his body, bent on trying to make up for past mistakes. He had so little time, and he was uneasy about entering him again until they could talk—truthfully, until he knew he was doing it right! But maybe there was a way to find this place inside Bryn that Jervish had hinted at?

He opened Bryn’s breeches, listening to his husky sound, feeling his hair being tugged by Bryn’s impatient fingers. “What are you doing?”

Ian rolled the clothing down to the tops of Bryn’s thighs, baring him. Swiftly, he gripped Bryn’s hips and turned him, so his bottom, as round and perfect as a summer moon, was facing Ian.

“Ian?” There was a little fear in Bryn’s voice, as there had been when he’d come with Ian. Ian could almost hear his thoughts—*this is new. This makes me afraid.*

“Let me, Bryn.” Ian kissed Bryn’s backside while his fingers pushed him open. Confronted by mystery, Ian sat on his heels. *A place inside him.* Where? He licked his lips and looked up to see Bryn giving him a doubtful look.

Ian leaned forward, following his heart, and kissed Bryn again, letting his tongue peek out to touch the curve of Bryn's ass. Encouraged by Bryn's surprised cry, he did it again.

Now Bryn was pushing himself back toward Ian, rubbing his front wantonly against the door, his hands scrabbling against the wood.

Ian opened Bryn and placed his lips against the dimple he'd invaded previously. Bryn made a mewling sound. Ian reached up to cup and squeeze Bryn's balls gently as his lips parted and he gave Bryn a tentative lick.

"Ian!" Bryn's voice was rough. "I— You're looking at me *there?*"

"I want to know all of you." Ian looked up and saw bright, embarrassed color in Bryn's cheeks.

"It's just—" Bryn shrugged. "I feel really naked."

"Please, Bryn," Ian pleaded, waiting out Bryn's tension. "I want to look at you, taste you." Ian closed his eyes, drifting, riding the hot wind of this new experience, wanting to put his tongue into Bryn for the first time. Was it wrong to do that? He didn't know. He was fumbling, needing to give to Bryn, to become a part of him without hurting him.

Bryn nodded, eyes wide, a little wary.

"Don't be ashamed," Ian soothed. "This king only wants to please his concubine."

Body trembling finely but otherwise rigid, Bryn surrendered, allowing Ian to look at him and finally to lick him again. With every touch of Ian's tongue, he reacted as if Ian were using a lash against his body and all his focus was on the delicate invasion.

Ian devoured, and then he pulled back and pushed in with two fingers.

"Uh, Ian, I never saw this in prison."

Ian heard want under the uneasiness. Was he doing right? But when he reached up to touch Bryn, he found reassuring hardness under his hand. Bryn liked it; he was just afraid that he liked it.

And Ian could understand that. Hadn't he felt the same about his feelings for Bryn? "This king is rather innocent. He wants to reward his young concubine, but he doesn't know how." His probing fingers explored deeper, and Bryn suddenly tensed. "Bryn?"

"Something.... Oh, Ian."

Watching Bryn's body language, the play of tension spelled out in the muscles of his lean back, Ian continued exploring, centering on a small spongy place that seemed to light Bryn up.

"Touch me; I need it!" Bryn was shaking now. Hearing need and fear of the unknown, Ian stroked Bryn's erection while plying him, his eyes riveted on Bryn's face, which was tight, eyes closed, lips open, panting—

"Ian!"

Bryn came, spurting sloppy on the wall, on Ian's hand. He shook like a tree on the verge of being felled and collapsed, landing partially on top of Ian.

Tears seeped down his cheeks. His color was high, his eyes sleepy and shy, and he hid his face against Ian's briefly.

Ian felt tears prick his own eyes. He'd pleased Bryn! He leaned his forehead against Bryn's. "I love you," he whispered. "With my body, with all of me."

"Hurts," Bryn rasped, scrubbing his eyes. "Hurts to love someone."

Ian held him, comforting, feeling again like a good man, the man he wanted to be. And suddenly it was so simple: Bryn *was* his path. "I know."

IN TOWN, Ian left Carrot in the corral attached to the smithy. The blacksmith's assistant, Jack Robbins, looked up from where he was

hammering nails into fresh coffins, rings heavy under his eyes and freckles standing out in the pale, fixed set of his face.

“Another one, Jack? Who is it this time?”

Jack shook his head. “Just making a few extra now, Reverend. We did lose Mrs. Hopkins, but it seems to be slowin’ down a mite.”

“Thank God!” Ian closed his eyes, living in gratitude. He’d been afraid that their little town might be wiped out like Marsh Hollow. It was not uncommon. “I must get back to the clinic. Can you take a look at Carrot’s right hoof? It looks like she might need a new shoe soon.”

Robbins nodded. “Be happy to get back to regular work.”

Ian braced himself for what he was about to do. There were two people he very much needed to talk to.

IAN slumped in a chair opposite Doc Masters as the doc pulled out his silver flask and raised his brows at Ian.

Ian was fighting tears. He took a deep breath and nodded to the silently offered whiskey. He watched the doctor, his friend of many years, splash a little in a glass for Ian amidst open medical books before the doctor also served himself. It was quiet now; all the patients were sleeping in the heat of the spring afternoon. It did seem as if the worst of the sickness had passed.

“When I went to medical school back East, I had a friend who fell in love with an Irish servant,” Doc shared calmly, swishing liquid in his glass. “There was a scandal.”

Ian swallowed, still a little shaky. Yet, like Mr. Chalmers, Doc hadn’t seemed to recoil from him. He still seemed to see Ian as the same man.

“Did your friend marry the servant?” Ian asked, wondering what Doc’s story had to do with his confession.

“Couldn’t. His servant was another man.”

“Oh.” Color bloomed in Ian’s cheeks.

“Reverend, it’s more common than you think. I’ve had patients who wanted me to ‘cure’ them.”

Ian’s eyes widened. “And did you?”

“I think it’s how some people are made, the way some have diabetes or some have gray eyes. Or maybe you just end up liking someone that folks feel you shouldn’t. Hell if I know.” The doctor continued, taking another sip, “But you know you can’t go around tellin’ folks.”

Ian’s gaze was fixed on his glass. “I know. I was thinking perhaps I must step down as reverend to this town.”

“I think if you’re discreet, you can live your life,” Doc Masters said. The older man climbed to his feet and walked to a locked wooden cabinet. Taking a key off his watch fob, he opened it and took out a few volumes, bringing them to Ian. “I’ll leave you to look these over. If you want to borrow any, just return them when you’re next in town.”

Alone, and greatly relieved that the doctor hadn’t seem shocked and repulsed by Ian’s painful revelation that he’d developed feelings for another man, Ian sipped his drink, studying the first book, Sir Richard Burton’s *Kama Sutra*. The second book was housed in elaborate leather, as if it had been self-published. It was written in Latin, but the words were almost superfluous. It was full of illustrations.

A Greek warrior mounted behind a male captive, pushing his phallus inside him.

Ian flushed as he remembered the *feel* of pushing inside Bryn. God help him, how could he resist touching his hired man? Like the lithe captive in the drawing, Bryn’s body was softly muscled, compliant, so *giving*—

Ian had tried to stop wanting Bryn, tried to stop himself from taking him, but he couldn’t do it. All Bryn had to do was push him, and he gave in.

Thank God the doctor was truly his friend, helping Ian to understand, to take some of the fear out of this path into the unknown. He rubbed his jaw, turning the pages with wide eyes, his sex stiffening between his legs as he pictured returning to the farm with this new knowledge. Why, here was a picture that was cloaked in heavy ink, but it seemed to suggest the figure of a man putting his mouth to another man's backside, in the manner Ian had done with Bryn.

And in flipping through the *Kama Sutra*, Ian's eyes widened at a description: "...the male servants of some men carry on the mouth congress with their masters. It is also practiced by some citizens, who know each other well, among themselves."

Ian snapped the book closed.

Bryn, I will please you.

CHAPTER 24

BRYN blinked, abruptly awake, his body spooned around his daughter with Mrs. Robson snoring peacefully on the other side of the bed. His throat tightened. The older woman hadn't wanted to leave him or his daughter. Or maybe, having lost her family, she needed him and Dandelion as much as they needed her.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. For Bryn, all he wished for in that moment was that Ian were here as well; then their little family would feel complete, as it had been when they all worked to repair Dandelion's tea set.

Yet his gut was also heavy, uneasy rocks shifting inside as he thought of Ian, afraid to hope that the way Ian looked at Bryn now, love burning in his eyes, meant that they could ever have what Bryn had wished for—his comb resting next to Ian's, his body cupped by Ian's larger one while Ian nested his bearded face against Bryn's neck.

Hell, he knew a lot of folks hated men who wanted to lay with other men! He'd known it all his life. He'd already been despised for being poor and wearing dirty clothes and bruises when he came to school, so he'd kept his crush on the handsome young minister to himself.

He only hoped Ian would be careful. He was the town darling, and he had a certain amount of innocence about folks. He just couldn't look at Bryn openly like that, like a man... in love.

Bryn swallowed thickly, closing his eyes briefly to remember that look, to savor it. Yet Ian was still engaged! Did he still mean to marry Ellie Mae?

I hate her!

Dandelion made a soft sound; Bryn was gripping her too tightly, lost in his flash of rage.

He loosened his hold but stared up at the ceiling, wondering just what Ian meant to do.

“BRYN?”

Bryn’s eyes snapped open a second time. He must have fallen asleep again. He sat up, noticing right away that something had changed; the bed was soaking wet, and Dandelion’s skin was shiny with sweat!

“Mrs. Robson!” Frantic, he rested his head on his daughter’s chest, hearing her heart beating, feeling her breathe.

“There, lad!” Mrs. Robson said in a reassuring tone. She reached across Dandelion’s body, and they gripped hands. “Her fever broke!”

Bryn took a deep breath, almost unable to believe. “She’s going to be all right?”

Mrs. Robson nodded. “Reckon she wants to stay with us!”

“Sometimes I feel like... her bones and blood are still part of me somehow.” He leaned close to Dandelion, whispering, “Thanks for staying with me.”

IAN dozed in the surgery, waiting to see if he was needed by another of their recovering patients, daydreaming he was back on the farm.

Dandelion was laughing as she helped Mrs. Robson gather wildflowers, and the shadows were gone from Mrs. Robson’s eyes. Ian knew she was happy to have a child to care for again.

The little girl’s bright spirit made Ian’s heart lighten as he walked through the tall summer grass, looking at trees that were

now only blossoming, but in his dream were heavy with apples and pears, yellow-red and ripe for eating.

The sun was hot on his shoulders, making his hair stick to his neck in coiled ringlets. Maybe he'd have Mrs. Robson cut it for him again soon? Although Bryn said he liked it long, liked to hold onto it when they were together. He stepped into the warm gloom of the barn. Here was a special world belonging to him and his hired man.

Bryn was scrubbing a saddle with a brush, but when he saw Ian, he gave him a coy look of welcome under his lashes that immediately heated Ian's body. He cocked a brow, insolence in his blue eyes. "Want something... sir?"

"You know what I want," Ian rasped. This was a game they sometimes played, master and servant. Bryn would mouth off to him, acting like the angry young man Ian had first hired, and drive Ian to take him in hand. He guessed it was wrong, them playing such games, but it was so exciting sometimes! Ian hadn't been allowed to play much growing up. He liked doing it with Bryn.

Now he crossed his arms and leaned against the stall door, watching breathlessly as Bryn stood and stripped off his shirt, revealing his lean body that still reminded Ian of a bit of pale prairie wood. Bryn, his beautiful Bryn. Lightning flickered in his blood as Bryn licked his lips before pulling his suspenders off and unbuttoning his pants.

His lovely body was bared to Ian's hungry, possessive gaze.

Ian swallowed thickly, unbearably aroused. "Against the wall, Bryn," he ordered his hired man. "I need you against the wall."

Bryn turned his back so his high, round buttocks couldn't help but catch Ian's attention, making sweat break out on Ian's forehead as he obeyed, gripping the top rung of the ladder to the loft, heading up for their play, his body moving in silken invitation.

Following him inevitably as the sun rising in the east field and then setting in the northwest against the distant purple bumps of mountains, Ian jerked open his pants, freeing himself. He'd snatched

some butter from the pantry, and now he used it hastily on his sex, fingers shaking.

In the loft, bodies lit with sunlight and glittering dust, he went to Bryn, kissing the back of his neck and making him shiver at the touch of Ian's hot mouth on his bare skin.

"I'm going to have you," Ian growled. He kicked Bryn's legs wider apart, playing a more dominant role. Bryn seemed to like it sometimes, as if it excited him too. His fingers fumbled for Bryn's opening, plying the dimple with butter. "Do you know why?"

Bryn bit his lip, gasping at Ian preparing him, his head falling back, forcing Ian to bite his neck, wanting to leave a mark there. His mark. "Because I love you, Bryn," Ian admitted, tears pricking his eyes.

Bryn breathed out in a prolonged groan as Ian carefully breached him. "Yes, sir."

"Reverend Ian?"

Ian opened his eyes, embarrassed at his body's reaction to the forbidden dream, to see... Bryn!

He felt a rush of joy hit him in the chest before fear rose like a dark cloud—

"Dandelion? Mrs. Robson?"

Bryn's tired face broke into a grin. "She's fine, Ian," he said softly. "They both are. Everyone is fine."

*Ian closed his eyes tightly, able to breathe again. If he ever lost anyone on his farm, he wasn't sure he could bear it. *Please, never again.* "Thank God!"*

His blue eyes full of laughter, Bryn repeated, "Will you stop? You worry too much, Ian. Everyone's fine. Mrs. Robson sent me into town to check on you. We've been worried because we haven't seen you."

“I missed you so very much,” Ian whispered, his tone low and for Bryn’s ears alone. “It hurt not to be with you. All I could do was pray every day you were safe.”

Bryn’s eyes were full of the same powerful need Ian felt, like he ached for comfort as much as Ian ached to offer it.

Ian forced himself to stay in his chair, balling his fists.

“MOST of the townsfolk are improving,” Ian told Bryn as they checked on the few sick people remaining in Doc’s clinic. “I believe they can all return to their homes in the morning, but I want to monitor them one last night.”

“I’ll stay and give you a hand. Reverend Ian.” Bryn’s tone was caressing. He cleared his throat, blushing. “You look all done in. Are you sure you’re all right?”

Ian rubbed the back of his neck. His muscles were aching, and he felt flushed, but he blamed it on being tired. Once he was home, he could rest.

“I’m fine, Bryn. It’ll be good to have your help. You’ve proved yourself to be invaluable to me.”

Bryn’s brow crinkled, and he studied Ian, as if he wasn’t happy with what he saw. “Why don’t you lie down on a free bed for a while? I can take over.”

Ian meant to argue, but his legs felt heavy. He was worn as a fallen log. He leaned on Bryn and let his hired man guide him upstairs to a free room. “Maybe just for a little while,” he mumbled, eyes fixed on Bryn’s concerned face, which was clouded with anger. “Don’t be mad, Bryn.”

Bryn yanked a blanket over him. “You haven’t the sense of a goat! You’ve gone and worn yourself out and now you’re sick!”

Ian gripped Bryn’s hand.

“Damn you, Ian!” Flashing blue eyes filled with a touch of fear.

Ian pulled Bryn close and Bryn kissed him, an aching kiss that said *I'm sorry. I'm so worried about you.*

BRYN knocked on the door of the last patient he had to look after, his face glazed in sweat. Ian didn't seem too bad, but he obviously had a touch of the sickness, and Bryn was frightened for him. He wasn't leaving that damn bed until Bryn was sure he was all right.

Now, milky quinine mixed with water in hand, he stiffened as he recognized the man reclining on the bed, smoking.

Jervish.

He knew it was wrong, very wrong of him but... he wished the shopkeeper had died instead of some of the other townsfolk.

Jervish took the offered cup. "Going to take care of me, little Bryn?" he asked, smirking. "I hear you were very good at that in prison, weren't you?"

Bryn backed away stiffly, clearing his throat. "Just lending a hand for Reverend Ian."

Jervish swallowed, his bony Adam's apple working as he drank. He polished off the contents of his mug, and then his brows lowered as he regarded Bryn steadily.

"You're very fond of the Reverend, aren't you? You and I got some unfinished business."

BRYN closed the door to Jervish's room and then wiped his mouth with shaky fingers.

He needed Ian. Just needed to look at him. God!

He crossed the hall and knocked softly on Ian's door, feeling his shoulders sag with relief when Ian's calm voice bade him enter.

"Bryn?" Ian frowned, as if noticing immediately something was wrong. He was sitting up in his small cot, only a sheet covering

his nudity since his body was so warm. After a moment's hesitation, he offered his hand and Bryn took it, holding onto his fingers.

Ian. You're the only man I've ever....

Ian brought Bryn's hand to his lips, nuzzling it fervently, eyes closed.

Bryn gave a rough sound.

Ian's eyes opened, and he studied Bryn, somehow reading him. "I know it was rough taking care of things on the farm, but I knew I could count on you. And now I'm grateful you're taking care of folks here. But... no one's been rude to you or something?"

Wordlessly, Bryn shook his head. He reached into the basin next to Ian's cot, soaking a dry sea sponge and then bringing it to the center of Ian's chest, cool water dripping. Ian gasped, closing his eyes, and right away Bryn flashed to being with him. He swallowed, hating himself. How could he think about that now?

"Just rest now," he scolded. "I'll watch over you."

"I know you will," Ian said, eyes open again so Bryn could see all the feeling Ian had fought so hard to hide. Now he wasn't trying. "I missed you," Ian admitted easily, that innocence shining, making Bryn feel tired and dirty in contrast. "I need to soak you up like a sunny day."

Bryn pulled a chair closer, lifting the sponge off Ian and tossing it in the water.

He brushed Ian's dark, sweaty hair away from his forehead, taking his hand, holding onto it tightly.

CHAPTER 25

MUCH later, Ian stroked the pale, silky skin of his hired man's bare back—skin he thought of as the color of bleached wheat after a long winter.

Bryn had locked the door and agreed to stay with him as the drowsy afternoon went by, dust rising from the street, the sounds of townfolk below coming more often now, so that Ian could feel his town returning to life. It was a relief, even if he was exhausted and Bryn was worried about him.

Now he looked at Bryn, curled in his arms, eyes sleepy and yet oddly secretive as Ian caressed him gently. What was going through his head? He'd seemed upset when he'd returned from doling out medicine. Ian decided to share, maybe see if it encouraged Bryn to talk to him. "I told Mr. Chalmers about us."

Bryn tensed, sitting up in Ian's arms to glare at him.

Ian almost wanted to smile at the fiery look, but he was afraid if he did, Bryn might swat him. It turned out his hired man had a temper! It was arousing for some reason, knowing he could set Bryn off. That Bryn... cared about him enough to get angry.

"What? Ian, why would you do that?" Bryn demanded, voice disbelieving.

"I didn't plan on it," Ian admitted, rubbing his jaw. "I thought he was dying, and we got to talking, and it just slipped out."

"Just passin' the time," Bryn said sarcastically. "The price of corn sure has gone up. Oh, by the way, I like fucking my hired man!"

“It wasn’t like *that*!” Ian blushed, gaze falling. Put that way, it did seem like he’d made a mistake, but the old man’s acceptance had encouraged Ian to confide in the doctor, and that might lead to good things. Things he’d like to give to Bryn.

“How was it, then?” Bryn raised his sandy brows.

“I wasn’t crude.”

Bryn exhaled a deep, exaggerated sigh and collapsed on his back beside Ian, huffing, “I’m so glad you weren’t crude!”

“He didn’t seem to hate me, Bryn.”

“Ian.” Bryn’s eyes were troubled.

“And I told Doc Masters.”

“Him you can trust,” Bryn said, surprising Ian.

Ian blinked. “Oh. He knows about you?”

Bryn nodded. “Before I went to prison he talked to me. Turns out he worked as a prison doc for a while. He told me about using butter. Suggested I find someone in there that wasn’t so bad as soon as I could. Thank God, he did, Ian,” Bryn confessed in a whisper. “It wasn’t easy for me, at first.”

Ian hated to think about it. He felt the familiar flicker of rage in his gut and had to remind himself it was in the past now. Many bad things had happened to them both, so Ian felt like a growing vine, savaged by the winter. Yet now he wanted to branch high. Bryn had made that feeling grow inside him, from a small seed to what was unfolding now.

“You can’t tell everyone in town! It would be dangerous,” Bryn warned. “Ian.” He stroked hair off Ian’s forehead. “Promise me you won’t. I’ll do anything to keep you safe. Anything,” he finished flatly.

Ian frowned, wondering at the source of Bryn’s tension. Would he ever convince him that he loved him? At first, he couldn’t help but see what they had as a shameful thing, but now.... Hell, he

didn't know. He just wanted to be on his farm with Bryn, Dandelion, and Mrs. Robson. He'd lost his family and found it again.

Sleepy, he watched as Bryn reached over to his bedside table and opened one of the books Ian had been studying discreetly. Bryn's eyes widened and his lips parted.

"God Almighty!" he swore.

Ian looked at a crude drawing of a man in chains, other men attending him with their mouths. His cheeks pinkened. Roughly, he asked, "What do you feel when you look at that?"

Bryn swallowed. "The fella all tied up sure looks like he's having a good time."

"Yes, he does." Ian cleared his throat. Here was another big hurdle between them he was determined to deal with. He knew that Bryn was far more experienced than he was, from being in prison, but it didn't sound like it had been particularly pleasurable. Although Ian had never discussed sexual congress, not even with his wife—they'd both been too easily embarrassed for such talk—now he was older, saddened by loss, not so sure of his path. This time, on this uncertain road, he wanted it to be different.

So they had to talk about it.

God help them!

"It's a bit like when I hog-tied you with that rope in the loft," he said. "You seemed to like it."

Eyes lowered, face bright red, Bryn nodded.

"You... you had relief from what we did that time, didn't you?"

"Yes." Bryn gave him a heated look under his eyelashes.

Ian frowned at a sudden thought, reaching out possessively to cup Bryn's round bottom. *Mine*. "Bryn, it's not enough for me to find relief for myself. I want—" Ian chewed his lip. "I want you to always enjoy it. I need you to always be honest with me. If you aren't...."

Bryn stiffened and gave Ian an apprehensive look.

“...I’ll tan your ass,” Ian finished.

The threat didn’t seem to faze Bryn. He put a hand on Ian’s cheek and reached up to kiss him. “Yes sir,” he said, eyes simmering.

“You’re a handful, boy,” Ian growled when Bryn smiled at him.

AN HOUR later, there was a knock on the door. Ian had been expecting it, almost dreading it, but Bryn stiffened, sitting up.

Ian tossed a hand towel over the books by his bedside, hiding them, and then raised his brows at Bryn. Seeing familiar uncertainty, he squeezed Bryn’s hand, trying to reassure him that things were different now, even though he wasn’t looking forward to this interview.

“That will be Ellie Mae,” Ian said quietly. “I asked her to come see me.”

Bryn growled something under his breath.

“Bryn! I need to speak with her.”

“I’m sure you do.” Bryn burned Ian with a look, and Ian sighed. He couldn’t do anything about Bryn’s anger now. Later.

“Please let her in the room, Bryn.”

“IAN?” Ellie Mae laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I came as soon as I got your message. Now I find you’re unwell!”

Avoiding the glare of a fuming Bryn, who was giving Ellie Mae a narrow look, Ian cleared his throat. “I wouldn’t have sent for you had I known,” he said contritely.

Ellie Mae looked over her shoulder at Bryn. “You may leave us now,” she directed coolly.

Bryn's lips parted.

"Bryn." Ian swallowed. "I need to speak with Ellie Mae."

"I'll just bet you do!" Bryn snarled, shoulders hunched, slamming the door behind him.

"Oh my!" Ellie Mae put her hand on her throat. "He's so rude, Ian! I can't understand why you hired him."

Ian shrugged, not wanting to discuss Bryn with Ellie Mae.

"Fortunately, after we're married, you can let him go," she continued.

Ian shifted restlessly on the cot. Thank God Bryn had left a window open; the warm air was a breath of freedom. Ian breathed it in and braced himself.

Ellie Mae was studying him frankly, almost like one of the men would, and he was reminded why he'd always liked her. She was straightforward. He was only sorry now she had it in mind that he was the answer to ending her spinsterhood.

"Ellie Mae."

"Yes?" Her brows rose, almost in challenge, Ian thought, or perhaps that was his own guilty conscience.

"Now the sickness is mostly over, it seems a good time to talk to you," he said.

"Ian...." She frowned, as if sensing she wouldn't like what he had to say.

"I thought marrying you was the right thing to do!" Ian burst out. "But the truth is, if I put you and doing what is expected of me above my own heart...." He took a deep breath. This was so hard. He did not want to hurt her. He had wronged her. "I am wrong. I'm hurting myself and in doing so I'm also hurting you."

"There's someone else, isn't there? Tell me who she is!" Her face was hard. Ellie Mae had always been sensitive to feeling slighted, although she'd always been very much in demand at any dance or picnic, the town sweetheart as Ian was the admired

minister. They had seemed the perfect couple. “I’m not letting you go so easy, Ian.”

She was angry, and she had a right to be angry. He’d made a mess. Their engagement was all over town.

“I’m sorry. I can’t marry you.”

“You’re *sorry*? That’s not good enough! I thought you were a good man, an honorable man!”

Shamed, Ian’s gaze dropped. “It seems I am neither. But I never wanted to hurt you.”

“I swear if you marry someone else I’ll find a way to hurt you, Ian!” Ellie Mae vowed hotly.

“There is no one else I will marry,” Ian said honestly. *But there is someone I love.*

“THIS time I want to spill inside your mouth when I come. See you swallow it, all of it, boy,” Jervish suggested gruffly. “Last time you pulled away.”

“*Shhh!* Ian—the Reverend might hear you!” Bryn warned, hating himself, hating being in this little overheated room with this man he didn’t want. But as he’d been leaving Ian’s room, upset, he’d encountered Jervish.

He’d had no choice but to follow him to his room. He’d learned in prison that sometimes you did what you had to. And he had to protect Ian.

“What do I care? Or don’t you want him to know what a good little whore you are?”

Bryn swallowed. God, he couldn’t do it again! He’d almost been sick the last time! As much as he told himself that he’d done it before, that it didn’t mean anything, now, after being with Ian, it felt like a betrayal. Only spending time with Ian afterward had eased his gut. But he knew if Ian ever found out, he’d take back the love he’d

offered Bryn, that is, if he hadn't already, since he was busy keeping company with Ellie Mae right now.

Miserable, Bryn pushed, "Only one more time. I can't... I won't do more."

"You don't want it to get around that the good Reverend is a sodomite, do you?" Jervish narrowed his eyes. "Way I see it, he'd have it coming. Acting all these years like he walks on goddamn water. He's just as dirty as the rest of us!"

"But he's not." Bryn closed his mouth. He didn't want to expose what went on between him and Ian to this man. But it had never felt dirty. "All right then," Bryn whispered, closing his eyes. He could do this. It didn't mean any more than servicing Big Ed or one of his friends in prison.

Jervish reached for him, cupping Bryn's groin and squeezing it, and Bryn forced himself not to shove away his hand. Jervish would only take it out on Ian.

"Don't want the good Reverend to know you share yourself with someone else, huh?" Jervish said. "Take care of me good, boy, and he won't ever have to know. It'll be our secret."

Bryn got to his knees beside Jervish's bed, bracing himself. "He's a good man."

Jervish was pulling aside the sheet.

Please finish fast. Please, so I can forget, Bryn willed.

IAN drank all the water in the carafe by the bed once Ellie Mae left, his hands shaking on the glass. He'd taken the first step away from the townspeople and toward Bryn. He just wished he wasn't so scared, wished he didn't feel like he was burning his bridges. It hurt, letting down Ellie Mae, knowing he was not the man she thought he was. He liked that people looked up to him, liked being the town darling, as Bryn had once called him. But if he had to choose, he needed to be with Bryn. And now, now he just needed to see him, be with him. Then he'd feel he was on the right path.

He took a deep breath and left the bed, pulling on his clothing with trembling fingers. He broke out in a sweat from the effort, but right now he couldn't rest until he found Bryn and felt his body pressed against him.

Bryn would make him feel clean again.

LAVING cock, something he knew he was good at, Bryn tried again to pretend it was Ian he was doing, but it didn't work. Ian would never grab a handful of his hair, fuck his mouth so that he choked.

When he heard the door open, he yanked away from Jervish's sex, staring into dark, shocked eyes.

Ian.

CHAPTER 26

BRYN ran after Ian, catching his arm.

“Don’t, Ian! It’s not what you think, I swear!”

Ian shoved him against the wall, making the pictures rock on their nails, his fist cocked above Bryn’s head, trembling, dark eyes drilling into Bryn’s.

Bryn dropped his gaze, flushing.

Ian made a sound of rage and crashed his hand into the wall.

Bryn flinched. An angry breath of air stirred from Ian’s passage, and then his door slammed.

Bryn slid down the wall, eyes welling with tears, his only company his ragged breathing. Finally, he pulled his legs up, hiding his face against his raised knees.

HE WAS still sitting there, staring dully at the opposite wall, when Mrs. Robson climbed the stairs, hand on her chest, puffing from the steep climb. “Why, Bryn, I was expecting you back hours ago! Is Reverend Ian all right?” She took in Bryn’s dejected pose with alarm. “He’s not sick, is he?”

“He’s—” Bryn swallowed, head falling.

Just then, the door behind him opened. Jervish gave Mrs. Robson a polite nod, and, ignoring Bryn, walked past them both.

“MRS. Robson?” Ian coughed weakly and raised his head from his pillow. His face was pale and sweating under his tan. “How can you be here? What about Dandelion?”

“I asked Mrs. Ellison to watch her as long as it took me to hitch up the wagon and head into town. We needed a few things. Oh, Ian!” The older woman rested her hand against Ian’s forehead. “You feel very warm. You went and wore yourself out, didn’t you?”

“Dreamed I was under a honeysuckle vine,” Ian rasped, licking his cracked lips, his eyes unfocused. “It was late summer. I decorated Bryn with branches of flowers.”

“Hush, now!” Bryn moved forward, seeing discomfort in Mrs. Robson’s eyes at Ian’s fevered words. “Mrs. Robson bought out the wagon, which means we can take you back to the farmhouse. Would you like that?”

Ian’s jaw tightened, and Bryn figured he was remembering. He rolled over on his side, looking only to Mrs. Robson. “I do want to go home,” he admitted.

“Aw, lad,” she scolded softly, cupping his cheek affectionately. “We want you back. After all, you have to get well so Ellie Mae can have a June wedding.”

Ian’s eyes flashed to Bryn’s. “No wedding.”

“What do you mean?” Mrs. Robson’s voice was sharp. “Ian?”

“I can’t marry her, Mrs. Robson,” Ian said, giving the older woman a direct look. Then he covered his eyes with his forearm.

“But Ian...” Mrs. Robson looked from Ian to Bryn.

“You’re not going to marry her?” Bryn whispered.

BRYN held the reins firmly, the setting sun warm on his back as the wagon clattered by the stream toward Ian’s farmhouse. A pair of birds dived past on some errand in the stand of trees. It was spring, the world awakening, fresh, but Bryn felt old and tired.

Rejected.

He guessed it was only a matter of time, him and Ian being so different. Yet Ian had ended his engagement. Did that mean he'd really cared about Bryn before coming into Jervish's room and seeing...?

In the wagon bed behind him, he heard Ian stir. He swallowed thickly, conscious of any movement the other man made. He couldn't help but glance over his shoulder at him, needing to see how he was doing. How badly off was he? Bryn wanted so much to take care of him the way Ian had Bryn when Bryn had been beat up, hobbling on crutches. But Ian wouldn't look at him, talk to him. He was acting like he was barely aware of Bryn's existence, treating him coldly for the very first time, as if Bryn were truly nothing more than his servant.

Now Ian rubbed his unshaven face against Mrs. Robson's hand. "Cool." He coughed and the older woman steadied him as he worked through the spasm. Afterwards, he trembled in her arms like a shivering child.

"Thought I *wanted* to die, you remember," he confided in the older woman. "You told me I'd find a reason for living. Now that I've got the grippe I'm scared. Clara, I'm—"

"Shhh, you're so hot, you're out of your head, but when we get home, I'll have Bryn draw water from the well. A cool bath is what you need and then rest," Mrs. Robson soothed. "You do too much, Ian. You set a standard too high for yourself. One day I hope you wake up and see that you are a good man; you don't need to do anything more to prove it to the townsfolk or to yourself." Mrs. Robson squeezed Ian's hand. "But for now, ain't nothing going to happen to you. We'll take care of you, me and Bryn."

"I don't want *him*!" Ian burst out.

Mrs. Robson frowned, giving Bryn a level look. Bryn's cheeks burned with humiliation. "First you break your engagement, and now you have it in for Bryn?" she mused aloud.

“I just don’t want him near me, do you hear me?” Ian said wearily, closing his eyes.

Bryn dragged in a deep breath. His chest hurt as if he were inhaling flame. *Ian, please.*

“Ian! What on earth has got into you? You’ve always championed Bryn, even to me.” Mrs. Robson shook her head, face creased, before saying to Bryn, “It must be the fever. Don’t pay him any mind.”

“I’d do anything for Ian,” Bryn whispered. “Don’t you worry, Missus.”

THE jealousy Ian was feeling made his head feel like it was going to explode. Suddenly he grabbed Mrs. Robson’s arm, frantic.

“Bryn,” she yelled, and the wagon thankfully jolted to a stop.

Head pounding, Ian fell out of the wagon bed onto his knees in the brush by the side of the road. Pebbles dug into his palms and knees as he sat there, heaving, eyes bleeding tears, sick... and then he felt a hand rubbing his back gently, bracing his head, someone holding him, taking care.

He recognized that special touch and Bryn’s familiar scent of hay and leather from the barn where he slept, the sunshine-bleached scent of his clothes.

Feeling him, Ian choked, humiliated. “I *hate* you,” he whispered. “Do you hear me?”

Bryn’s arms stiffened, but he didn’t let go. When Ian looked at him out of the corner of his eye, trembling with weakness, he saw Bryn’s jaw was set at a stubborn angle.

“I hear you,” Bryn replied calmly, though heat stung his cheeks. After a moment, he let Ian go, climbed to his feet, and went to the stream. Ian watched him dully, wanting to lie down on the grass and close his burning eyes.

Bryn dipped a handkerchief into the water and returned, wiping Ian's mouth and face. Ian longed to shove him away, but he was too weak. Fresh tears budded in his eyes, and he concentrated on fighting them. He would not bear to let himself be vulnerable with Bryn ever again. It hurt too much, worse than this sickness, worse than vomiting in the grass.

Mrs. Robson knelt beside them, passing Bryn a flask. Ian wanted no part of Bryn caring for him, even if under his anger, he felt a needy part of him wanting Bryn's care, but he took the water, drinking thirstily to rid himself of the taste in his mouth.

But Ian's humiliation wasn't over. Bryn put an arm around his shoulders and helped him get to his feet, steadying him as they walked back to the wagon together. He needed help climbing in; the brief strength he'd felt had evaporated like water in hot sand from his sickness. Now his head pounded even worse.

Bryn got in the wagon bed and then wrapped his arms around Ian, pulling him close so Ian couldn't avoid looking in Bryn's sad, soft blue eyes. He couldn't hold that gaze, so he swallowed and looked away as Bryn hefted him onto the wagon, feeling helpless in the arms of his hired man, experiencing how the spring work on the farm had made Bryn both lean and strong.

WHEN the wagon resumed rattling toward the farmhouse, Ian rested an arm over his eyes. How was it that he had comforted hundreds of people through sickness and death and now felt so lost? Where was his strength, his certainty?

His confidence as a man had taken a bitter blow. He squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to relive seeing Bryn again with Jervish.

Bryn, I wanted to pleasure you. I had books to show me how.

"WELL, at least it's not the grippe," Mrs. Robson said, sleeves rolled up as she helped Bryn fill the copper tub with cool water. Ian was in the parlor, resting until they had the water ready for him.

Bryn heaved another pot of water into the tub and paused to wipe his forehead. "What is it, then?" he asked.

"I think he wore himself out caring for others, and he just got sick. Like a chill, only it got worse."

"It doesn't seem fair," Bryn observed. "He spent days helping folks in town."

She shook her head. "I guess it don't rightly matter that Ian made himself sick caring for others. His body has to heal just the same, but don't worry, he'll recover. We'll see to it."

"Yes, Missus," Bryn said. He guessed Mrs. Robson had picked up on how subdued he was, like a rug that had had the dust beat from it.

"Truth is, it's also good to keep busy. Keeps my mind off my husband."

Bryn wanted to pull the small woman in a brief hug, but he wasn't sure she'd be comfortable with that. "I know you would have been with him if not for my Dandelion."

"No harm, Bryn. He just fell asleep and didn't wake up. Doc says he had a weak heart." She pushed a stray lock of hair off her forehead. "Bryn, Ian will need a proper bath before we put him to bed, but he'll never let me help him. Wouldn't be proper, of course!"

"Of course not, Missus." Swallowing, dreading what was coming, Bryn nevertheless asked her, "What do you need me to do?"

I can't touch him. He hates me!

A shadow passed over Mrs. Robson's face, and she took a deep breath, pulling Bryn out onto the porch. Now Bryn felt a touch of foreboding. Whatever the older woman had to share, he knew it was something serious.

"I would never have spoken of this, Bryn, but Ian breaking off his engagement and the two of you quarreling, why, it almost seems

like there is more to it.” Mrs. Robson paced the porch, rubbing her hands on her apron. Finally, she stood with her back to him, facing the prairie view. In a low tone she said, “Bryn, in prison, I heard you... that is, it’s said you lived as a woman for the men there.”

She cleared her throat, putting a trembling hand to her throat. “I don’t rightly know what that means, but I have some idea.”

Bryn stared at her, horrified, his face on fire. *God Almighty!* He hadn’t expected her to talk about this! He hadn’t dreamed she’d known. He dropped his gaze, humiliated.

“Yes,” he whispered. “What you heard, it’s true.”

Mrs. Robson’s head fell. Now her fingers were clenched in her apron, working it over and over again. “The Reverend, he’s not been himself since his child died. His relatives back East convinced him he should visit a place for people sick in their heads.”

“Ian mentioned something about that.”

Mrs. Robson gave him a sharp look, and Bryn realized he’d slipped and called the Reverend by his Christian name. How many times had he done that?

She swallowed, as if not wanting to touch on why Bryn had become more familiar with Ian’s name, and in a moment continued her story. “They just wanted control of his money. Oh, you didn’t know? His uncle had a pile of it, and he left it all to Reverend Ian. He preferred to stay here and be our minister, but sometimes he has to make trips out East to handle his business affairs.”

She shook her head. “After he lost his family, he headed back there. I was unhappy with how long he’d been gone, so I went to see him. I worried I was being a busybody, but I’d always been very fond of him, and no one else seemed worried.... He was suffering from what they called acute melancholia, but once I visited him, he came back to himself, and eventually they let him out.”

“I’m glad you got him free of that place, Missus.”

“I know things in your life have been bad. And I know the things done to you maybe confused you. But the two of you are

behaving as if you've had a... a lover's quarrel." Mrs. Robson's voice grew stronger, and she reached out to grip his arm. "You cannot be a woman for Ian. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Bryn ducked his head. *Oh, God. She knew! How...? How did she know? She knew!*

"You're hurting him, confusing him, by... by doing those things. And what if the townsfolk found out? They'd turn on him. I know you wouldn't want that, now would you?"

"No, ma'am. *Never*. I'd never want to hurt Ia—the Reverend." Bryn's chest felt like a small burning knot was lodged deep inside, cutting him.

Mrs. Robson cupped his cheek, and her eyes forgave him, even as they were merciless. "Then you will put aside these feelings. Promise me, Bryn. Give me your word, and I'll believe you."

CHAPTER 27

KNEELING at Ian's feet, Bryn felt like one of the slaves in that book about ancient Rome Ian had shown him. It didn't help that Ian still wouldn't look at him. He tugged at Ian's left boot, fighting the absurd desire to kiss Ian's hairy calf after it was revealed. He was a sad case!

"Now the other one," he mumbled. He'd longed for days for Ian to come back home to the farmhouse, so how was it that everything had gone so wrong? Ian believed he'd betrayed him, and Mrs. Robson knew about them. Knew, and demanded Bryn put Ian aside for Ian's own good.

What a laugh! If only she knew how much Ian didn't want him. How much he hated Bryn now. Bryn tried to swallow the knot of misery in his throat, removing Ian's second boot, steadying him, aware of one of Ian's feet resting on his shoulder, Ian leaning over him, hands braced on Bryn's shoulders.

Bryn looked up and met dazed black fire in Ian's eyes.

Ian immediately looked away.

Clearing his throat, Bryn tossed the second boot aside. Next he had to remove Ian's clothing. Shit!

Just treat him like a sick man back at the Doc's clinic.

Easier said than done.

Ian was opening the buttons of his shirt, blushing, gaze down. His fingers were trembling, awkward, so Bryn took over briskly. But somehow doing this, undressing Ian, could never merely be about helping him. Bryn was too conscious of the pattern of dark hair flaring out on the center of Ian's chest and then threading down to

the top of his trousers. Aware of hard brown nipples he wanted to take in his mouth.

You can't be a woman to Ian.

But Bryn wanted that, even if it was bad for Ian; he wanted to spread himself, feel Ian thrusting inside him, fucking him. He wanted to get down on his knees and take Ian's penis in his mouth. Ian would have no doubt of whom Bryn loved if Bryn could only show him.

"Bryn, don't look at me like that. Don't play the whore for me. I can't bear it," Ian said in a rough voice. He was weak, shaking, but the color in his cheeks, his heavy eyes—Bryn knew what they signaled.

Desire. Under the anger, the hurt, it still breathed, teasing Bryn, touching Ian.

"If you want me to be your whore, I will be," Bryn admitted.

"Yes, you're good at that, aren't you?" Ian's voice was bitter.

Bryn bit his lip, remembering his conversation with Mrs. Robson. If he didn't tell Ian why he'd been with Jervish, Ian wouldn't want him, and then it would be over between them. If Bryn truly loved Ian, he had to kill what was between them. But it hurt, hurt so goddamned much to do that, not to try to explain, not to reach out, touch.

Instead, he played his part, trying to do what was right for Ian. "Can you manage your pants?"

Ian gave him a burning look, turning to face the tub. He wobbled, and Bryn caught his arm. "Don't be so stubborn!"

"Says you!"

Standing behind Ian now, Bryn reached around him and placed his hands over Ian's fumbling ones, opening Ian's pants. He was conscious of his breath hitting Ian's neck, of wisps of Ian's silken hair grazing his face, so all he wanted was to press himself, body and face, against Ian, breathe him in.

God, it had been almost impossible not to burn for him when Ian had been an innocent, unaware of his hired man's forbidden thoughts. Now....

"You're free of them," he rasped, standing back and watching Ian's pants puddle on the floor.

Then his hand fell, brushing something unexpected. Ian was hard. Hard for him.

Bryn caught his breath.

Ian slapped his hand away. "Don't!" His voice was full of hurt. Bryn heard it and wished he could wrap his arms around Ian.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

Ian splashed into the tub, his lean backside flexing with muscle, so Bryn had to fight to keep his hands from reaching out to squeeze, to weigh Ian's heavy balls and rub his face against his groin.

"Are you all right?" he asked, worried about Ian's fever.

Ian shrugged, hunched over.

"I'll wash your hair and back," Bryn offered. "Mrs. Robson said it would help you rest better."

Ian growled something under his breath, not sounding very happy about it. Was he feeling every touch the way Bryn was? It hurt to be apart.

Bryn picked up a pitcher of well water and, after touching Ian's shoulder in warning, doused him with it, watching avidly as water ran down his head, making his hair sway like a merman's from one of Ian's books, sliding down his chest to the erection Ian was trying to hide with upraised knees.

Ian gasped at the cool feeling, his wet eyelashes stuttering open, his dark eyes fixed on Bryn.

Bryn let the pitcher fall so it rang against the tabletop. He was held in place by Ian's look.

Ian made a soft sound. “I don’t care if you whore yourself out!” He lifted up, water cascading over the rim of the tub, and then Bryn was pressed, fully clothed, against his Ian.

Ian, who cupped his cheeks with both hands and brought him down for a kiss, devouring Bryn.

The sweet pain of contact—Bryn cried out as Ian sat him down on his lap, rubbing his cock wantonly against Bryn.

“Yes, yes, Ian!” All thought dissolved like a cake of soap left in the bottom of the tub. He needed Ian!

“Get this off you—!” Ian was struggling with Bryn’s wet trousers.

Bryn gave a breathless laugh. “Damn it, Ian, just tear them!”

Growling, Ian did, the sound of ripping cloth primal, raw, like the cock that was waiting to fill Bryn. Bryn reached for the soap and gave Ian’s penis a sloppy swipe, leaving him slippery, and then Ian lifted him so his legs were spread open, lying on either side of Ian. Then Ian thrust up.

Bryn grunted, head falling back.

And Ian chanted, large hands scrabbling on Bryn’s back, “Take it! Take it all!”

His heart galloped as his body jolted up and down, impaled roughly, but Bryn didn’t care. Ian’s hands were trembling, eyes unfocused as he fucked Bryn, giving him everything, all his strength, his hands warm with fever against Bryn’s cooler skin, but nothing compared to the fever that burned between them, a sudden wild fire, blazing dry wood set off at the first spark.

“I love you. I love you!” Bryn couldn’t keep the words in. He whispered them against Ian’s hair, tangled in his fingers like wet lace, against his lips as he kissed him. His fingers meshed with Ian’s as they both writhed together, pounding to relief until Bryn came on Ian’s skin and Ian came inside Bryn.

“JUST where do you think you’re going?” Ian grouched when Bryn self-consciously tried to pull away.

“You hate me, remember?” Bryn said.

Ian exhaled, head falling back. “No, I don’t. You hurt me, Bryn. I’m not a very... confident lover.”

Bryn chewed his lip, uncertain. “All right, but let me climb out of this tub and finish washing your hair. I also have to find something to wear. I’m not decent!”

“You certainly aren’t!” But Ian’s eyes had a tiny flame of humor. Bryn stared into them, hungry now for any tenderness.

“Jervish knows, Ian. He threatened to tell the town about you.”

“So what if he does?” Ian said wearily.

Bryn stared at him in shock. “But—”

“Bryn, when I made love to you, when I ended my engagement, did you think I meant those things lightly?”

“I didn’t know what to think.”

“You should have talked to me. Did you...” Ian swallowed, Bryn’s hands now deep in his hair, massaging in soapsuds. “Let him have you?”

Bryn shook his head and Ian relaxed slightly. “I couldn’t.”

“Because you’re mine.” Ian’s hand covered Bryn’s, and suddenly it was just that simple.

“Yes,” Bryn said. “But Mrs. Robson knows. She knows, Ian!”

Ian turned to face Bryn.

“She wants me to stay away from you for your own good.”

“The hell she does!” Ian swore. He yanked Bryn close so their eyes were level. “There’s no going back. I burned my bridges and I don’t care. Do you hear me? I don’t care.”

"I hear you." But Bryn wasn't sure that Ian understood what it would be like, to live the life of a pariah. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that. "What about Mrs. Robson?"

"I'll—we'll talk to her, of course."

Bryn swallowed.

Ian gripped his hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing it. "We'll talk to her at supper. Going to help me finish up bathing now?"

"Yessir," Bryn said. Could they all live together, like before, except with him and Ian being close? He felt like a fledgling hawk, ready to soar but unsure of his wings.

IAN thanked Mrs. Robson as she brought a bowl of stew up to his bedroom. She gave Bryn a sharp look, taking in the way he was sitting on the floor, leaning against the side of Ian's bed.

They were holding hands.

Bryn tried to tug his palm free, but Ian wouldn't let go. He burned Bryn with a look and then calmly began to eat his food with his free hand.

Mrs. Robson fidgeted, working her apron. Finally she said, "Reverend, I—we need to settle some things."

Ian put down his cutlery and glanced at Bryn, who felt apprehension rise.

"Clara, I am not going to marry Ellie Mae," Ian said clearly. "I did my duty once and endured a loveless marriage, and sometimes I wonder if... if I lost my son because I was so unhappy with his mother. It was never right between us. Now I want...." Ian looked at Bryn. "I want to be happy."

Mrs. Robson's face softened at the last, but then her lips firmed. "And the folks in town?"

"It need not concern them." Ian reached for some cornbread.

“Ian!” Bryn exclaimed. Was his lover so naïve?

“Ian, they will never accept this!” Mrs. Robson protested, obviously agreeing with Bryn’s concern.

“I will be stepping down as a minister to the town, of course,” Ian said calmly, munching on his cornbread. “And spending most of my time out here on the farm.”

“Ian, no!” Bryn straightened. “I never wanted to hurt you, make you less!”

Ian shook his head. “Bryn, you of all people know I had no faith. I was just... giving lip service. But my miracle finally happened; when I made peace with wanting to be with you, I felt....” Ian’s eyes were on the window, the setting purple and gold sun.

Mrs. Robson looked from Bryn to Ian. “I don’t know how we’ll all get on!”

Ian reached out for Mrs. Robson, tugging her until she sat on the corner of his bed, so he was sitting between both her and Bryn. “We can’t do it without you. Please stay, Clara.”

“DO YOU think she’ll stay with us?” Bryn asked a long time later. Ian had eaten, and he was quiet now, resting. Bryn was still on the floor by Ian’s bed, his head lying against Ian’s hand.

Ian sighed. “I have no idea, Bryn. I hope so.”

Pain tightened Bryn’s throat. Mrs. Robson had held a place here with Ian long before he had. He didn’t want her to go, but Ian wasn’t backing down.

He meant to be with Bryn.

LATER that night, Bryn snuck back into Ian’s room, boots under his arm so he wouldn’t wake the sleeping household.

He leaned against the doorframe, watching the moonlight run over Ian's body, illuminating an open hand, his sleeping profile.

After Ian had fallen asleep, Bryn had given in to the urge to walk the hills, restless. When he had climbed the highest one, which had a view of the dots of light from the town, he remembered Ian's indifference that Jervish might expose their secret.

He wished it could be simple, him and Ian living together as lovers. But Ian seemed to have faith that things would work out.

And yet, now, as he placed the curiously ringed rock he'd found on his lonesome wanderings by Ian's bedside, Bryn couldn't find it within himself to regret breaking his promise to Mrs. Robson.

Maybe some promises should never be made.

He grazed Ian's fingers with his own. "Sleep well," he whispered.

AT DAWN, Bryn blinked awake on the bedroll where he slept outside Ian's bedroom door. Mrs. Robson stood over him, neatly dressed, an unreadable expression moving over her face that resolved into a kind of exasperation.

"You slept out here on the floor all night, young Bryn?" she asked.

"Yes, Missus."

"You're worried about him."

"How is he?" Bryn nodded, seeing also that his daughter was in Ian's room this morning, probably so Mrs. Robson could more easily feed both her patients. Dandelion had been slow to recover, seemingly barely aware of the adults in the house, lost in her own world. Now she was sitting on a quilt with the rough corn doll Bryn had made her at her side, as if she expected it to share breakfast with her.

"He wants some of my pancakes! First time he's wanted to eat for a while, the stubborn man." She gave a faint smile, the first she'd

offered since the truth had come out about him and Ian. “Looks like his fever broke during the night, and he’s on the mend.”

LATER that morning found Bryn sitting again beside Ian’s bed, watching him examine the rock that Bryn had left him the night before. This one had the word *beloved* scrawled on it, so that in reading it for the first time, Ian had flashed Bryn a look. Bryn looked up when Mrs. Robson entered with some coffee and hot cakes grilled in bacon grease. She placed the food on a table and served Ian, making sure he had a heaping plate.

But before he reached for his food, Ian reached for Bryn’s hand, taking it and giving it a squeeze. “I was thinking—I’d like to visit my son’s....” Ian swallowed. “His grave.”

Mrs. Robson and Bryn stilled, staring at Ian, who was cutting his food, as if not wanting to meet their eyes. Even Dandelion paused in her play, as if sensing the tension of the moment.

Mrs. Robson offered mildly, “I can cut some flowers for you.”

Bryn said. “I’ll go with you.” He bit his lip. “But only if you want.”

Ian took a deep breath. “I want you to come with me. I want to... tell you about my son.”

Bryn nodded, suppressing the need to comb his fingers through Ian’s hair in front of Mrs. Robson. It was too soon, he knew. Maybe they’d never do such things unless they were alone. He knew what Ian was doing; he was choosing now to remember the good things about his son, not just how he’d died. And Bryn wanted to be there with him.

CHAPTER 28

BRYN was mending an old saddle by the light of a lantern on an August night when the barn door creaked open and Ian appeared, huffing. The taller man paused, taking off his hat, his hair slicked back from a visit to the pond so drops of water still spattered his shirt.

Bryn licked his lips, remembering what it was to catch cool droplets of water off Ian's body with his mouth when they'd gone for the occasional midnight swim together, bodies slick and cool, twining, kissing, humping against each other.

Nevertheless, there was a chill in the air, and he still worried about Ian after his bout of sickness earlier in the spring. Since then, Bryn had taken over running the farm.

At first it had been to spare Ian, but later on it became clear Ian had made a better minister than farmer. Bryn had a gift for working the land and had hired two other men to work for him during harvest. Now his fair skin was bronzed and his hair bleached white. His body was lean and muscled, and he was hungry all the time from the hard work.

He'd never been happier.

The only sadness for Bryn had come when Ian resigned as town minister, finally admitting to his parishioners he'd had a crisis of faith but fortunately keeping to himself he was Bryn's ardent lover. Bryn was just relieved his exasperating and innocent man hadn't blurted it out in the church!

Yet Ian didn't seem to miss it. He spent the summer reading books, wandering his farm, and sketching Bryn, Dandelion, or Mrs.

Robson, who had agreed to stay a few months to take care of Dandelion. Bryn and Ian were both hoping she'd stay with them when the season changed.

"Ian! You must be freezing!" Bryn scolded now, but his voice was soft with welcome, nearly drowned out by a crack of thunder. "Shit, is it rain at last?" Bryn looked toward the open barn door, hopeful.

The past July had been dry, and in the middle of August the creeks were drying up. Bryn knew the crops would be in danger if the drought held.

Ian tugged Bryn away from the door, enjoying Bryn's hands on him, confident now, removing his heavy slicker, which he'd worn in case the thunderheads traveling past in a rush spilled a downpour.

It was long past dinnertime, and Mrs. Robson and Dandelion were safely asleep. Now it was *their* time, when Ian would cover Bryn in the loft above and they'd lay talking after. Ian would fall asleep, arms wrapped around Bryn until, toward dawn, Bryn would shake him awake so he could return to the house.

Mrs. Robson knew what was going on, of course, but they'd figured it was easier for her to adjust to the two of them being together if they were discreet.

But tonight, Ian covered Bryn's hand when he attempted to tug him to his bed in the loft.

"This barn will be drafty come winter," Ian noted.

Bryn shrugged, mind already on what they'd do in the loft, experimenting with Ian. They'd tried all kinds of things he'd never heard of, mostly going by what felt good to them. Bryn particularly liked it when Ian sucked his cock, drawing it out and making him beg while he wiggled a finger deep inside Bryn—he could make Bryn's body go off like a fire cracker.

"Could be during a winter storm, I wouldn't be able to find my way out here."

Bryn paused, brow furrowing. “Why do you mention that now?”

Ian sighed. “Bryn, I want you to come home.”

Bryn laughed. “*I am* home! Ian, you have the strangest notions!” He paced back and forth, hay crunching under his boots. “Dandelion even sometimes comes out here. She likes spending time with Carrot and Henrietta.”

Ian smiled, understanding. The child ghosted around the farm, wild, but she had Bryn’s affinity with animals.

“Even found her here the other morning, sleeping!”

“Oh.” Ian blushed.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure she didn’t see or hear us.” Bryn rubbed his forehead. “I just wish she was aware of folks, what was happening around her.”

Ian reached out, squeezing Bryn’s shoulder. “Give her time. Didn’t we all need time this summer to make this work? I think she’ll come to us one day, want to be a part of our family. It seems to me she’s just as gun-shy and stubborn as her papa once was. But a little patience paid off when I was first dealing with you, hmmm?” Ian’s eyes were tender with memory, but then he shook his head. “But when I said ‘home’, I meant home to our bed in my room up at the house.”

Bryn’s breath left him. He stared at Ian. In a small voice, he finally asked, “And Mrs. Robson?”

“It’s not like we’ll do our experimentin’ in front of her,” Ian said, a dimple showing in his clean-shaven cheek.

He’d shaved his beard early in the summer, revealing dimples that Bryn teased him about and found damn near irresistible.

Bryn’s eyes saucered. “No sir, we would not!”

Ian pulled him close, looping an arm around him. “You always find a reason to put me off, but I’m asking you, Bryn. Come sleep in

my bed.” He rested his forehead against Bryn’s, meshing their fingers. “You once told me you wanted your comb beside mine.”

Bryn’s heart ached because it hurt to have what he’d wanted for so long, so much so he was afraid of it. “All right,” Bryn agreed huskily, letting Ian drag him from the barn, the screen door slamming behind them as they entered Mrs. Robson’s kitchen and then walked up the stairs together, Bryn’s hand in Ian’s.

“BRYN!”

“Wha...?” Bryn rolled over on his side, groggy. He had just fallen asleep, body heavy and spent, plastered, still sweaty, against Ian’s larger body.

He blinked, wondering if it was later than he thought; orangey light writhed against the ceiling and wall of Ian’s room.

“The barn’s on fire!” Ian yelled, shoving into his pants.

“Shit!” Now Bryn could hear it, the terrified squeals of the horses, locked for the night safely in their stalls—

Ian threw Bryn some pants, taking some time to pull on heavy work gloves to protect his hands. Another pair was tossed on the bed for Bryn. “Come on!”

Mrs. Robson suddenly flung open the door to Ian’s bedroom, eyes widening for a moment on finding them together, her long gray hair in a braid down her gown, a shawl thrown over her shoulders. “Dandelion’s not in her room!”

SPRINTING from the house to the barn, Bryn could hear Carrot screaming, hear the thud of her hooves striking her stall door. The loft above boiled with choking black smoke, a hungry snake, the north side of the barn a plume of flame as tall as a cypress tree.

“Water, get some well water!” Mrs. Robson yelled. “Ian, let’s get the buckets!”

Bryn ran directly for the barn, ignoring Ian's shout behind him.

He touched the door, and it was like touching metal fresh from the blacksmith. Burned. He clawed his handkerchief above his mouth and nose and shouldered his way inside—

Murky hell light. Bryn stepped over a pair of shattered lanterns, thinking they were out of place; he didn't remember leaving any there, and then he was under the burning loft, scrabbling with the white hot latch to open Carrot's stall.

She exploded out, galloping for the open barn door, trumpeting terror. He released their plow horse next, the animal hitting his shoulder while getting free.

Gripping his numb arm, Bryn yelled, "Dandelion! Are you here, girl?"

Tears streamed down his cheeks, ash choking the air, suspended, touching his clothes, his face and hair, leaving little melting holes in cloth and skin.

Behind him, he heard Mrs. Robson in the henhouse, shooing out their flock.

And then Ian was there, hand on his shoulder, bandana shielding his face. "The loft's going to give!"

"Have to find her!" Bryn dived under the groaning timbers where part of it had already collapsed.

Then he saw it: a child's white face, smudged, wide eyes staring at him. Dandelion was holding Henrietta, Bryn's hen, trying to hide from the fire.

"Goddamnit, Dandelion!"

She was gripping his neck, in his arms; Henrietta was squashed, indignant, flapping frantic wings between them.

Bryn lunged free of the loft.

A long, mournful sound and it fell in a shower of timbers, ash, and fire.

“Bryn!”

Ian. The way to him was blocked by the blaze, but then Ian twirled a blanket, dueling with flame. In that moment he was a protective warrior angel, tall with a determined hazel gaze. The cloth fell, creating a temporary firebreak, a safe passage.

Bryn ran into Ian’s arms, hacking, letting Ian take his precious burden, Henrietta giving a disgusted squawk and hopping free outside the barn door.

Grateful to be alive, trembling, Bryn staggered with Ian, leaning against him.

The little family gathered on the farmhouse porch, huddled, clinging, as their barn burned, lighting up the night.

MRS. Robson was cooking breakfast when Bryn returned from collecting some of their animals. Carrot he’d put in the corral, the hens in a lean-to he’d hastily constructed to keep them safe and give them a place out of the sun.

He stomped his boots, smacking his dusty hat against the doorframe before he entered, grateful for the enticing aroma of food. Shit, he was starving!

“Bryn.” Ian nodded. “I brought down Dandelion’s toy box. She seems to want to stay close this morning.”

Most mornings the little girl disappeared, escaping her watchers to collect wildflowers or walk the hills. Bryn usually had to go looking for her and bring her back for meals, but he did it over and over again, without complaint, love and pain living in his chest as he held her hand, walked her home.

“I imagine so,” he said, nodding thanks to Mrs. Robson as she placed a plate before him. “I was thinking I might build her a dollhouse this winter, like the fancy one I saw in the store.”

Bryn’s face hardened, since Jervish continued to needle him and Ian whenever they were in town.

Ian leaned forward, as if reading his thoughts. "I found a note. It was Jervish and your father who set the fire."

"Damn them! They could have burned the house down!"

Ian shook his head. "It's well known Mrs. Robson lives here with us. They wouldn't do anything to harm her, or they might end up run out of town or worse."

Mrs. Robson served Ian, saying calmly, "I guess I better stay here then, just until those fools stop harassing us."

But when she returned to the stove, Bryn whispered, "It won't go away, Ian. Not completely. And one day Mrs. Robson won't be here with us, shielding us from folks."

Ian's face was solemn. "We might have to sell and move on then, but it's a long ways away, Bryn." He reached out and took Bryn's hand, squeezing it. "And anyway, I don't care. We can rebuild the barn."

Bryn held Ian's gaze and settled deeper in his chair. "All right," he said, feeling better at the notion of rebuilding something. "I'll get some timber and nails in town. We can clear the ground and—"

"Well, land sakes, look what she's playing with!" Mrs. Robson pointed to little Dandelion, who had pulled out the remains of her tea set from the box Ian had brought down to soothe her after the rough night.

She'd arranged a sloppily repaired teapot with its nozzle askew next to a chipped cup, whispering to her doll as she played on Mrs. Robson's sunshine and shadow quilt.

Bryn blinked in surprise. He had repaired the entire set over the summer, but he'd never seen his daughter play with it before.

Dandelion suddenly looked at him and said, very clearly, "Thank you."

"God Almighty!" Bryn swore, tears pricking his eyes. "She said something!"

Dandelion returned to her play, ignoring the adults again, but Bryn was glad Mrs. Robson had a hand on his shoulder, squeezing silent comfort, and Ian leaned across the table and kissed him, right there over the breakfast dishes.

Don't miss this exciting title by JAN IRVING



Hiding behind the safe mask of Obsidian, his online persona, Kain Mitchell woos Nick Anders, an untouched artist. Nick tells himself that Obsidian is merely his erotic muse, but when Kain drags him down into his dark world, echoing the myth of Hades and Persephone, Nick discovers he wants to see him, touch him, and move beyond the limitations of masks. Because as seductive as Obsidian is, Nick senses Kain's real isolation.

Implicated for the murders of young men matching Nick's description, Kain lives under a shadow, and troubled by the mystery, Nick pushes to get closer. Driven to prove Kain's innocence, Nick pursues the killer with Kain's reluctant help—and strives to become the human submissive and tender lover needed by the lonely and otherworldly warrior.

<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>

JAN IRVING has worked in all kinds of creative fields, from painting silk to making porcelain ceramics, to interior design, but writing was always her passion.

She feels you can't fully understand characters until you follow their journey through a story world. Many kinds of worlds interest her, fantasy, historical, science fiction and suspense—but all have one thing in common, people finding a way to live together—in the most emotional and erotic fashion possible, of course!

Visit Jan's web site at <http://www.janiceirving.com> and her blog at <http://jan-revealed.livejournal.com>.



For more of the
best M/M romance,
visit

Dreamspinner Press

www.dreamspinnerpress.com

