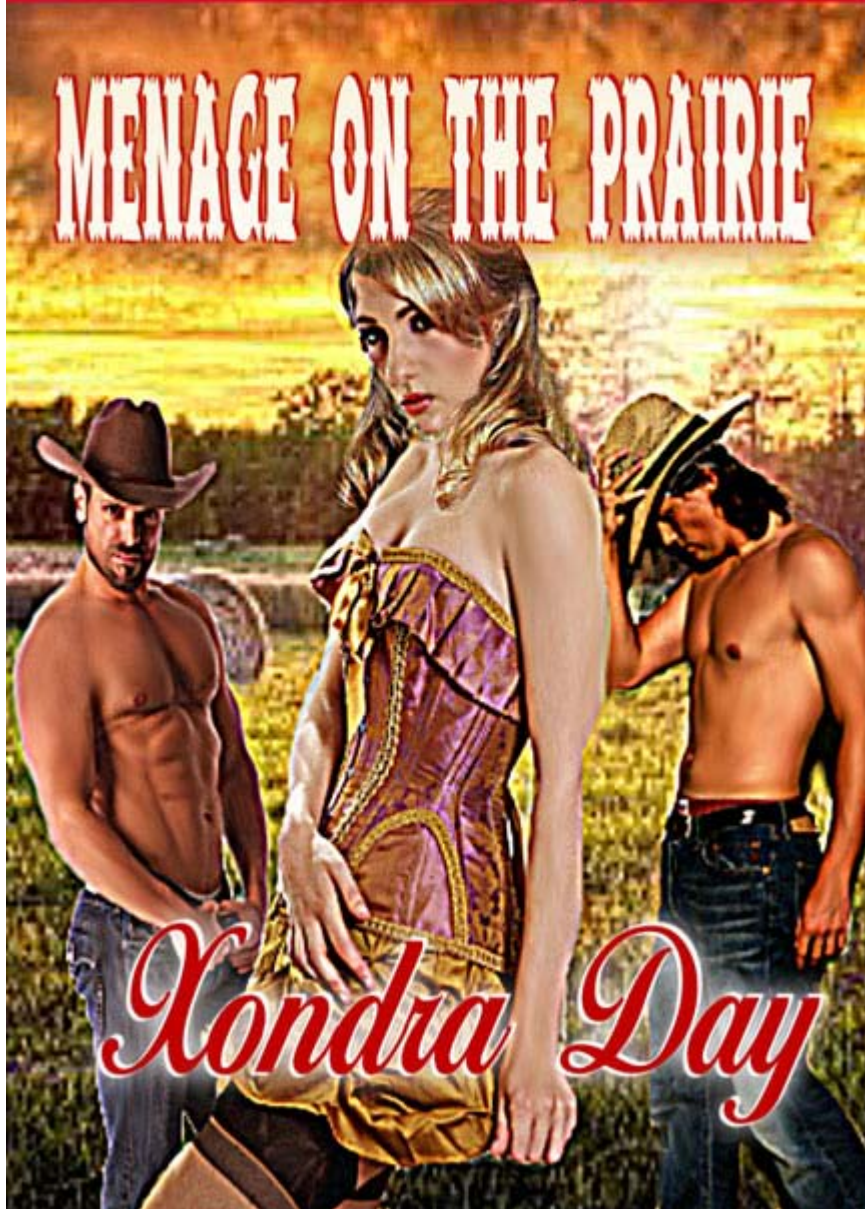


Siren Publishing

Ménage & More

MENAGE ON THE PRAIRIE



Kondra Day

Menage on the Prairie

Socialite Kate Summers is eager to rid herself of the past, but when she replies to Joe Ryder's ad for a mail-order bride, she gets much more than she could have ever bargained for.

Joe Ryder is a man to be reckoned with. When scandal threatens to ruin the quiet life he has shared with his friend and lover, Ryan Starke, he devises a plan to make the townsfolk stop their idle tongues.

A mail-order bride is sought and soon found in Kate.

Unfortunately, Ryan isn't too accepting of Kate. Her very presence threatens the only life he has ever known, along with his love for Joe. After Kate finds out the real reason she was asked to come to marry Joe, she feels betrayed.

Can the three come to an agreement that will benefit all?

Genre: Historical, Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Western/Cowboys

Length: 25,380 words

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Xondra Day

MENAGE AND MORE



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DEDICATION

For the one constant support in my life, my one true love. This one's
for you. Love you forever and always.

MENAGE ON THE PRAIRIE

XONDRA DAY
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Chapter One

The Midwest, 1896

If the driver went over one more bump, she'd scream.

Kate Summers looked to her left and then to the right.

From each side of the stagecoach she saw nothing. That is, nothing worth commenting on other than endless expanses of prairie land. Oh, and dust. So much dust that it permeated inside the coach, settling into every pore on her skin. As soon as she reached her destination, she'd demand a bath.

Forty-eight hours had passed since she'd begun her journey to a new place and life. To state she was worn out was an understatement, and as she closed her eyes, she wished for it to end.

The man to her left, an older gentleman, flashed her a goofy, toothless smile.

She smiled back. It would have been impolite to do anything but. And, as taught by her mother, she was always cordial, allowing her good manners and breeding to show forth.

"And where are you off to, if I may be so bold to ask?" Once again, he flashed her that same smile.

"Cotton Plains. It shouldn't be that far-off now, if I have my calculations completed correctly." She fiddled with the cuff on her

blouse, noting that dust had tinged the fine white muslin.

“Cotton Plains,” he replied, raising his voice just an octave. “Why in the devil would a lady such as yourself want to go there? There ain’t nothing there except a bunch of ruffians.”

“Indeed.” She was curt in her response. Why couldn’t this man mind his own business? “If you must know, I have family there. They run a farm just outside of town.” It was a lie to be sure, and a big one at that. But she could not and would not tell a perfect stranger the real reason for her trip. It simply wasn’t any of his concern. “They needed me, and, well... I simply cannot go into any more detail.” She withdrew a lace kerchief from her bag and brought it to her mouth. The gesture added a nice dramatic touch that told the man indirectly to stop with the questions.

“I shall ask no more,” he said. “I respect that. I respect everything for which family stands for.” The man nodded his head up and down to emphasize his point. “Yes, sir, there is nothing better or more important than family.”

Normally, Kate would have been inclined to agree with that sentiment, but the circumstances during the last month had changed her way of thinking forever. And there was no going back to her old life.

Lost in her own thoughts, she turned to look out the window. It all came flooding back

* * * *

“I cannot believe that you would do such a thing,” snapped her father. “And a married man? Good Lord, what were you thinking, Kate?”

She could not look him in the eye. Of course he was right, he was always right. Never could she remember a time when he had been wrong.

“If your poor mother was alive, well, she’d be scandalized by this

lack of better judgment you have had.”

She watched as he paced the floor of the library, his hands placed firmly in his trouser pockets.

“I never meant for it to go so far. Darcy had promised to leave Celeste. Had I known it would turn out this way, I would have never—”

“Had an affair?” he snapped, cutting her off midsentence. “Kate, you know I love you. You’re my only daughter, and I’d give you the world. I feel I have done right by you, but I cannot condone this type of behavior. I have to think of the family as a whole.”

She nodded. “I understand. I never meant to hurt or embarrass you. And I’ve done both.”

Her mother had passed away five years previous, and her father’s mention of her brought forth tears.

What had she been thinking when she accepted the advances put forth by Darcy Forrest?

Now, Darcy was out of the picture. Once she found out, Celeste, his wife, had threatened to divorce him and take the kids across the country. The last time they had spoken, he’d said he couldn’t see her anymore. It was over. The truth had come out, and he hoped to redeem himself in the eyes of everyone by ending it. So, here she was, alone and now marked with a scarlet letter.

“You have,” replied her father. “I honestly don’t know what else to say. What’s done is done, and there isn’t any turning back. We will have to deal with it.”

He’d left her then, slamming the library door behind him.

The days came and went and it was evident that people were not willing to forgive or forget easily.

The party invitations stopped. Her friendships dried up, and whenever she appeared in public, she felt like she was being watched. And then there were the whispers. There simply was no escaping her sordid past.

One day, three weeks after her initial confrontation with her

father, Kate found herself in the front parlor, thumbing through *The Ridlington Times*, the city's main newspaper. She flipped through the obituaries first and then went to the back of the paper, taking in the various advertisements.

She scanned an ad citing the latest in gramophones, while the one next to it promised to sell a washing powder that would get your whites to shine their best. But it was the one located under it that caught not only her eye, but also her interest.

LONELY bachelor, twenty-eight, seeks wife. Am willing to pay all expenses incurred with relocation. Must be able to cook and clean. If interested, please send a letter to the address below.

What sort of man would advertise for a wife, and why would he have to? She couldn't imagine any man being that desperate. Yet, after reading the short ad three times, it intrigued her to know who exactly was behind it.

She'd heard of mail-order brides before, and while it seemed romantic in a strange way, she couldn't imagine running off to marry some man she had never met. She ripped the ad from the paper and tucked it into her bodice. Why she did this, she didn't know. It felt like the right thing to do for the moment.

The next day, her father suggested she take an extended vacation to her cousin, Amelia. There was zero doubt in her mind that it was an order rather than a mere suggestion. His tone of voice told all.

"Amelia is a good girl. Perhaps some of that will rub forth onto you," he scoffed, his barb sinking deep into her heart.

That night, she pulled the now-wrinkled ad from the top drawer in her bureau where she'd hidden it deep within her under things. A letter of introduction was soon drafted, and early in the morning she saw that it was posted.

And the rest, *as they say*, became history.

* * * *

Now, here she was on her way to nowhere, to marry a man who she had only met through one hastily written letter.

“Cotton Plains up ahead,” bellowed the driver, his deep booming voice startling her.

Kate, still clutching the kerchief clasped to her chest, felt her pulse quicken, and a lump form in her throat. This was it, she was finally here, and soon she’d meet Joe, the man she had come for the sole purpose of becoming his bride.

The stagecoach halted to a jerky stop, and when assisted outside by the driver, she heaved a sigh of relief to be free from the dusty, confined space.

“Your bags,” said the driver, who had already climbed to the top of the stagecoach and back down again.

Kate looked around at her new surroundings. “This is it?” she asked. It was merely one street, shaded on each side by a row of ramshackle buildings.

He chuckled. “This is it. Were you expecting more?”

“Well, I guess so,” she rambled, feeling slightly embarrassed. “Thank you sir, for your assistance.”

“The nearest boarding house is Miss Vickie’s down at the end of the street. You can’t miss it, it being the only building privy to whitewashing. She’s a good woman and will see to you.”

“No, sir, I shan’t be in need of a boarding house. My fiancé is meeting me. In fact, he should be here.” She stopped and looked to and fro, but there was no one. “I thank you all the same for the helpful suggestion.”

“Anytime,” he replied with a nod.

Kate stood in the middle of the dusty street, watching the stagecoach drive off. She was a stranger in an even stranger land. And where were all the people? This place was an utter ghost town.

A gust of wind flew by, almost removing the hat from her head.

“Goodness gracious,” she muttered. “If a man states he’s going to meet you, he should at least hold up to his promise.”

“Yes, he should. I totally agree with you,” replied a deep voice, flowing from behind her.

Her heart just about stopped. She turned slowly to see a man ’round about her own age standing there, a wide grin spread across a devastatingly handsome, rugged face.

“Sir, you should have made yourself known to me.”

“I thought I did.” He was being coy. Could this be him? The man she had traveled so far to marry?

“Just who are you?” she questioned, narrowing her eyes into slits, giving him the once-over.

“I’m the man you came here to marry, I presume, if you are Miss Summers.” He flashed another grin. “And from the looks of you, I’ve done mighty well if I do say so myself. I could not have found a finer filly if I had picked one out myself.”

Kate raised one brow. “You compare me to a horse? Surely you jest?”

“It’s a compliment.” He rolled his eyes. “It doesn’t become a woman to be so serious. I’ll load your bags onto the wagon, and we’ll be off.”

Behind him, in the near distance, she spotted a horse and wagon. It was all so primitive, she wondered what she had gotten herself into.

He walked ahead of her, carrying her bags in both hands. She scurried behind him, making a vain attempt to keep her skirt tail out of the street’s dust. “You might at least slow down and let me walk with you,” she called after him. “And you have yet to properly introduce yourself.”

She caught up to him at the wagon and stood there with hands now on hips, waiting for a reply.

“You know my name,” he replied, placing her bags in the back of the wagon. “And I know yours. I figured that’s enough of a proper introduction.” And once again there was that smile.

“You’re toying with me, Joe.” There, she had used his name.

“See, you just proved my point, Kate. Now, up you go, nice and easy.”

His brute strength surprised the heck out of her. Up and over in one swift motion. She found herself sitting in the wagon, watching as he took his place next to her, reins in hand.

Kate smoothed her skirt out, sitting up straight. “So, this is Cotton Plains. It isn’t much, is it?” From this vantage point she could read some of the signs on the buildings. “Oh, how dandy. You have a store. I’ll have to go there sometime to shop.”

Joe laughed and shook his head. “For some reason I think everything they carry will be a little simple for your tastes. They carry foodstuffs, basic yard goods and such. There ain’t nothing fancy in there.”

“Did I say I wanted fancy? I will have you know that plain and simple suits me fine. And don’t presume things about me that you cannot possibly know.”

“I’m sorry. Please accept my sincerest apologies. You’re right, I barely know anything about you, and I should not have made assumptions about your character.”

“Let’s just carry on. I’m tired and plain worn out from my trip. I need rest, and coffee might be nice, along with a change of clothes.” She spoke the truth. Every joint and muscle in her body ached from the rough ride on the stagecoach.

Together, side by side, they rode out of town.

* * * *

Joe Ryder held back the urge to burst wide open with laughter as he glanced at Kate sitting there, looking just like a bird, all stiff-like.

If there was one thing he had already determined in his mind during their brief time together, it was that he had his work cut out for him with the likes of her.

When he spotted her standing there on the street alone, he knew she had to be the one. She looked just as she had described herself in her brief letter to him, corn-silk hair and all.

“When we get back to the homestead, you can rest. I do hope you will find everything suited to your taste. You might find it all a bit primitive. And I’ve made arrangements with Preacher Dan to see us married just as soon as it suits you.”

He listened as she coughed, raising one hand to cover her mouth. “Yes, marriage. Of course. The sooner the better. I’m sure the homestead will meet my every expectation.” Did he detect just a hint of sarcasm tingeing her voice?

“It’s small, but come next spring I’m hoping to build a bigger house. I have it all marked out where I intend to build. Ryan has promised to help with it.”

“Ryan?”

He’d neglected to tell her about Ryan.

“Ryan is the hired hand that I employ to help work the land. I also consider him a good friend.”

“This Ryan—he lives nearby?” she asked.

“He lives with me. But I guess that will have to change. People won’t see it being proper and all, you living with two men and one of which isn’t any relation to you,” he explained.

“I could not care less what anyone thinks,” she snapped. “People are far too hasty with their judgments, and, well, to hell with what they think.” No sooner had she said it, a hand shot up and covered her mouth in surprise. “I’m sorry. I never meant to carry on so.” She blushed crimson.

They were nearing the homestead.

“There is nothing wrong with speaking your mind.”

“A lady should never cuss. It isn’t very becoming.”

“Perhaps. There it is, just up ahead.” He pointed to their right. “That’s Carney’s River, but it’s nothing more than a brook, really. It supplies us with water and irrigates the crops. Up yonder across the

way is the upper pasture for the horses. We also keep a couple cows for milk and some hens.”

“Of course,” she agreed.

“We call the farm Cottonwood, hence the sign.” The wagon passed through the gates which now indicated they were on his land. “And we’re home.”

* * * *

So this was now home. Kate looked around as they pulled up to the small house. It was so foreign to what she had been used to in the city. Up until then she had only enjoyed a life of extreme privilege. This would take some adjustment.

“This is it,” said Joe, climbing out of the wagon. After he helped her down he retrieved her bags, leading her inside the structure.

“There are three rooms. This is the main area, there is the stove, the cupboards. We have a basin for washing up right over there and the two rooms at the back are bedrooms. We will share one while Ryan has the other. The outhouse is out back.”

From behind the curtain of one bedroom a man appeared. He was about her age. He was tall, at least a foot taller than Joe, and tanned. A mess of black curls covered his head and when he smiled, he revealed two deeply embedded dimples planted firm, one in each cheek. He stepped forward and held out his hand.

“I’m Ryan Starke, Joe’s hired hand. It’s good to meet you.”

“Kate Summers. Joe’s told me a little about you. How do you do?”

“I’m well thank you, and yourself?” He gently squeezed her hand.

Kate smiled. Already she liked him. He had manners. She was a great judge of character, and as she looked him over, her heart skipped a beat. He was so strong-looking, masculine, yet he retained this boyish charm that sparkled with wonderment in his deep-brown eyes. They certainly did not make men like this back in the city.

“I’m a little overwhelmed,” she replied. “It’s been a long journey here and everything is new. It’s a lot to absorb.”

“That is totally understandable.” He motioned to Joe, who now stood off to the side, looking a tad amused. “We will have to do our best to make you feel at home. After all this is *your* home now. I’ll go see to the horses now while the two of you become more acquainted.” Upon leaving, she noted that he’d winked at Joe.

“If you’re hungry I can fix you something. Ryan tells me I’m not half bad at cooking.”

“Coffee would be good,” she said, taking a seat at the small wooden table. “I’m not hungry, but coffee would be spot-on.”

Joe sat next her and sipped his own hot brew as she gingerly added sugar and milk to her own.

“How long has Ryan been with you?”

He paused for a moment. “I guess it’s been ’round about two years and a bit now. He’s not from around here. I met him by chance. He was just passing through looking for work. He seemed decent enough, so I took a chance and hired him. I have never regretted it.”

“It’s good to have someone to rely on like that.” Kate thought back to her father. The only person in her life she could ever rely on was her own departed mother. But that was the past and there was no use in thinking about it now. “Good friends are hard to come by,” she added.

“Yes. For tonight I will bunk with Ryan. It wouldn’t be the right thing for the both of us. Well, not until we’re married.”

She sipped her coffee, felt the warmth float down through her. “That’s only right. I had my doubts about you, Joe, I’ll be up front about that. But you’re a proper gentleman and I thank you for it. It’s a rare thing to find this day and age.” She paused for a moment and thought of Darcy and all that he was—nothing more than a liar and a rake. Even now with the time that had passed, she still harbored ill feelings toward him.

“It’s just who I am.” He stood and pushed his chair into the table.

“You should rest. I’ll go help Ryan. I also have some other things that need attending. If by chance you need me before I get back, all you need to do is holler.”

Chapter Two

Ryan had just walked the horse into the barn to brush him down when Joe entered.

“What do you think,” Joe asked, “of Kate? She’s something isn’t she?”

He nodded, saying nothing.

“It’s going to take some getting used to having a woman around Cottonwood,” continued Joe. “But I think she’ll do well, once she settles.”

“She’s nice, Joe. I’m glad for you and I wish you both the best.” It was a bold-faced lie and one that shouldn’t have been told, yet he said it anyway.

“Ryan, I never meant for things to turn out like this. You know that, right?”

He didn’t dare look Joe in the face. The pleading in the man’s voice said more than enough. And while his heart screamed one thing, his mind told him to stay firm and strong.

He felt Joe’s strong hands on both his shoulders, massaging. “Tell me you don’t hate me. I need to hear that now.”

“Hate isn’t something I feel, Joe. You’re doing what has to be done. I do understand, it’s just going to take some time for me to adjust, and I will. I just need time is all.”

Joe’s hands now left his shoulders and then entwined around his waist, pulling him close. He could feel Joe’s breath, hot against his ear. “I still love you, for what it’s worth. That will never change.”

Ryan nodded and closed his eyes, doing his best to not let his emotions take over. “You should get back. She’ll wonder where you

are.”

“She’s taking a nap. She will probably sleep for hours after that trip. You smell so damned good. I never tire of your scent.”

Ryan shuddered as he felt Joe’s hand slide inside his shirt.

“This isn’t right. If she should come out here, it would just confirm the rumors about us.”

It was the rumors that had started this whole kerfuffle.

Two bachelors couldn’t run a farm together, living side by side in these parts, without being the brunt of vicious gossip.

Ryan knew it was Mrs. Roswell who started to seed ideas into the minds of their fellow townsfolk. The sad thing was it had really started to affect them. The men of the town had avoided them, and to go into town to trade became a real chore. Between the looks and the whispers, neither man could bear it.

It was Joe who came up with the idea to find a wife. A wife would make all the gossips and naysayers eat their words. So, he placed an ad in the paper, an ad that would be syndicated. Many responses flowed in, but only three had held any interest for Joe.

A Miss Beulah Belfridge and a Miss Fanny Merriweather had been the other two respondents. In the end, Miss Beulah, who had included a small photograph, wasn’t in any way his type, looks-wise. And Miss Fanny, in her three-page letter, came off as rather boring and stuffy.

So here they were. This was to be their new life. Roles would soon change and nothing would ever be the same.

Ryan felt Joe pull away from him. “This would never have had to happen if the people in this damned town had kept to their own business.” Anger welled in Joe’s voice. “They couldn’t leave us alone.”

Ryan shrugged his shoulders and went back to brushing the horse, this time paying particular attention to the mane. “They’d never leave us alone, Joe. You know that. Our kind or anyone different will never be welcomed in Cotton Plains.”

He turned and watched as Joe stormed off upon hearing those words. However, it was true and often the truth hurt the most.

* * * *

Joe loved Ryan with every fiber of his being. It hurt to know that they had to hide and lie about their love. It wasn't something they had planned, it just happened. He needed to get away for a bit, and a walk down to the river would do him good. It would help clear his head and when he went back to Kate, he'd be calm once again.

Joe thought back to the first time he'd met Ryan as he walked. A cool breeze blew across his face. Looking upward to the clear, blue sky, angry as he was, a smile crossed his lips.

It was early spring and the first year of planting for Cottonwood. The land had come his way via his father who had purchased it with his own intentions of settling in the area to work the land with his only son. But when a heart attack took him suddenly their first month there, Joe was left on his own. His mother had passed away five years previous. He was now alone in the world for the first time ever.

He remembered sitting on the steps to the house, wondering how in the hell he was going to manage all the work on his own, when a shadow appeared, standing over him.

He looked up and squinted to see who it was, and there was Ryan, standing there, shuffling awkwardly from side to side, holding his hat in hand.

"Can I help you?" he asked, standing up.

The man nodded. They were around and about the same age, give or take a year. "I was wondering if you had any work. I'm passing through and, well, I just thought I'd chance it and come and ask."

He needed the help. Hell, there was no way he'd be able to plant the fields on his own. "I can't pay ya. I'm just about flat broke. All I have is my animals and the seed. I can offer you a place to stay and food." He paused, waiting for an answer.

“Name’s Ryan, and, sir, that’s the best offer I’ve had in a long time. I’d be mighty pleased to take you up on it.”

They shook hands. Joe introduced himself and then went on to give Ryan a tour around the farm.

They planted and worked hard from daylight till dusk to get the job done, and when it was, they both sat back, pleased with all their hard work and sweat.

“It’s all worth it in the end isn’t it,” said Ryan, standing back, looking over the vast expanse of what they had just finished. “Just to know that come late summer, early autumn this field will be full and ready to harvest. It’s amazing when you sit and think about it.”

In the past few months, Joe had come to learn that Ryan was of a different sort. He wasn’t much like the men he was used to. Ryan was quiet, yet the guy could be downright funny at times with an odd sense of humor. And work, he would never be outdone by anyone. He soon found he liked having Ryan around, and by harvest he’d decided to make him an equal partner in the farm.

“I can’t take you up on that Joe,” said Ryan adamantly the night when it was first proposed. Ryan paced the cabin, a look of disbelief splashed across his face. “This is yours. It’s what your father started. I have no right or claim to any of it.”

Joe sighed and threw both arms up in the air. “Without your help, I would have sunk. You know it, and I know it. The bank would have taken this place like that.” He snapped his fingers to emphasize his point. “I’m doing what I think is right. Stop being so stubborn and just say yes to it. I can’t run it without you.”

Together they both sat in front of the fireplace. Outside, it was nippy, but inside they were comfortable, both staring into the flickering flames. Joe sat in the stuffed chair while Ryan sat on the floor, his legs pulled up to his chin. “I’ll need some time to think. I’m not sure if I even want to stay. I might move right on down the road once the harvest is over.”

“What? Why would you do that? I need you. I just said that.” The

fact was, there was a whole lot more to it, and Joe's heart skipped a beat thinking about Ryan leaving him. Why, he didn't quite know.

"It might be best for the both of us, Joe."

"Don't say that." He didn't know what Ryan was trying to say, it made no sense.

Ryan was up and on his feet again, standing there, again his eyes in the flames. "I just did," he muttered.

Now he was on his feet, and in one fast gesture he grabbed Ryan by the arm, his grip firm. "I won't let you leave, I won't allow it."

Ryan turned to face him. "You won't allow me? If I want to go, I'll go. And there won't be any stopping me."

Joe knew this was true. He stepped in close to Ryan, their gazes meeting, locking on to one another. And when Ryan kissed him gently, he didn't dare pull away.

For a moment they both leaned onto one another, staying in that position, each breathing hard. Joe rested his head on Ryan's shoulder. "I didn't expect that," he said, his voice breathy.

"Neither did I," replied Ryan. "I've wanted to do that for so long."

Joe released him from his embrace, leading him to the back of the cabin into his bedroom. It felt right.

Face-to-face, chest-to-chest, they embraced again.

For so long he'd been alone. He wasn't even sure what to do but figured it would all come back to him. But hell, he was excited and it showed as Ryan pressed his leg against him.

Ryan's fingers fumbled with the buttons on Joe's shirt. He was trembling. Come to think of it, Joe was, too.

Slipping out of his shirt, he fell back onto the bed and pulled Ryan down on top of him. He grinned, looking up at the guy. "I never thought the day would end like this," he said, with a light chuckle.

Ryan's eyes lit up, the little flecks of green held within the brown shining in the glow of the moon beaming in through the window. "Neither did I. So many nights I lay in the other room, wishing that I could come in here and sleep next to you."

“I never knew.” Ryan’s hands slid across his bare chest and traced down over his abdomen. When they stopped, they rested on his crotch. It had been ages since anyone had touched him there.

“I want to make you feel good, Joe.” Ryan unbuttoned his trousers. Joe gasped when Ryan’s hand pulled him free and started to jack his cock up and down. “How does that feel?” asked Ryan, licking his lips. “That’s one heck of a cock you have, mister.” Ryan grinned. “I have to taste you.”

Joe let out a deep groan when he felt Ryan’s tongue sliding across the tip of his cock. He reached down and grasped the back of Ryan’s head, guiding him along as Ryan swallowed him down, taking him deep inside his hot, wet mouth.

Ryan looked up at him. “Man, you are so hot. Let’s get you out of those trousers. I want to see you naked, all of you.”

“You too,” ordered Joe, his mind reeling with possibilities.

Joe placed both hands behind his head as he watched Ryan standing beside the bed, first pulling off his shirt over his head, revealing a tanned, muscular chest lightly sprinkled with dark hair which trailed down into his tight-fitting trousers. His eyes then moved lower, to the impressive bulge that now stood prominent.

He’d never been with another man before, and the thought of what was contained within the constraints of those trousers excited the hell out of him. He reached down and started to stroke himself as he watched Ryan remove the rest of his clothing. And when the trousers came off, he licked his lips at the sight of the thick cock that throbbed in front of him.

Both men, now naked as they day they were born, slid under the bedclothes and came together, each one’s warmth permeating into the other. Outside, the wind blew cold against the windowpanes, but inside the heat was on.

Intertwined together, they covered each other in a myriad of hot, passionate kisses, their tongues exploring each other’s most intimate places.

Ryan guided Joe toward his cock and encouraged him to take it inside his mouth, to suck it, lick it, worship it until he was on the verge of coming. But he could not and would not allow that to happen yet.

“I want you in me,” murmured Ryan.

“What?” asked Joe, not sure he quite understood what the guy was saying. Then, feeling stupid, he kissed Ryan on the cheek. “Ah. Mmmm... I can do that.” Damn, he could burst just thinking about sliding his hard cock between those lily-white muscular globes.

Ryan shimmied himself into place on the bed, lifting his butt slightly in the air.

“Are you sure you want this? It may hurt.” Joe spit on two fingers and reached down to grease up Ryan’s tight hole. “Have you ever?”

“Long story, but you’re the first for a long time.”

Taking aim, Joe pressed into him. The tightness was overwhelming. He winced slightly, doing his best to proceed. Ryan let out a deep, guttural moan. Was he in pain?

“I’m hurting you,” said Joe.

“No, no. Don’t stop now. Just ease in slowly, like you’re doing.”

Joe balanced himself with one hand while reaching up with the other to run his fingers through Ryan’s curls. “Man, it feels so good. I’m in there now. Every inch of me is inside you.”

“Oh, yeah... Joe, fuck me nice and deep. I want to feel your balls against mine.”

Joe bit down on his lower lip. The feeling was incredible. He withdrew slightly and then slid his cock back to the hilt.

Together they moved as one, bucking back and forth, the sweat from Joe’s chest coating Ryan’s back.

“I’m going to come,” whispered Joe. He plunged deep within Ryan’s ass and could feel the fire rise deep inside his loins.

“Just do it, all over my butt. I want to feel your hot cum all over my ass.”

Joe grinned. Hell, he’d been grinning the whole damned evening

since this started. He withdrew his cock, looking downward at Ryan's quivering hole, his sweaty ass cheeks shining in the dark. With one hand now on his cock, jacking, he knew in less than a minute he'd be covering those cheeks in molten-hot cum.

He yelled out into the dark and closed his eyes as cum spurted from the head of his cock in streams, and for a tiny minuscule of a second he felt as if he'd pass out from sheer, unbridled pleasure. "Fuck!"

He collapsed next to Ryan in a heap. When the guy turned over, he kissed Joe hard, their tongues merging together. Ryan brought his hand up, flashing a wry smile. "You fucked the cum right out of me. That was beyond amazing."

Joe felt Ryan's hand grasp his now softening cock. "Already?" he chuckled.

"It's a perfect cock," answered Ryan. "I just want to hold it for a while."

And that's how it was from that night onward. They worked together during the day and at night shared each other's bed. In Ryan, Joe had found the one thing that had been missing from his life—love. The fact that it took shape in the form of another man didn't bother him. Sure, at first it had been unexpected, but he embraced it and everything that Ryan offered him.

Coming back to reality, Joe fired a rock into the river and looked across to the hill that lay in the distance. Many times he came to this spot to think, to ponder about life.

He shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and squinted up to the setting sun. It really was beautiful here, even if it was desolate, unforgiving country.

That was what had brought his father to it. He'd wanted his freedom and the chance to be indebted to no one, unfortunately for him it didn't work out so well. It was at times like this he missed his father and his mother. They'd always been good to him. But that was the past and none of it could ever be undone.

With a sigh, he turned and began to walk back to the house. Tomorrow he'd marry, making Kate his wife. In time he'd grow to love her. And Ryan, he'd never stop loving him.

Chapter Three

Kate woke early the next morning. She yawned, stretched, and for a moment she couldn't remember where she was. Then it came to her—Joe, Ryan, the small house, and today was the day she was to marry.

She heard movement in the other room and then the smell, the glorious scent of bacon frying and fresh coffee. Her stomach rumbled in response. It had been almost a whole day since she'd last eaten and she'd be darned if she wasn't famished now.

Rummaging through her bags, Kate picked her best dress and was quick in preparing herself for the day. She stood in front of a mirror that hung on one wall, examining her appearance before making her entrance into the other room. She let out a small sigh, silently wishing for a bath. Perhaps she'd mention that later, just to see what was available at Cottonwood.

"My, that smells delicious," she said, entering the other room.

Joe stood at the stove with a huge cast-iron skillet in hand. Ryan already had taken his place at the small table.

"Sit." Joe motioned to the table. "You must be hungry."

She watched as he piled a plate high with bacon, scrambled eggs, and fresh toasted bread. When he placed it in front of her with a hot cup of coffee, she thanked him graciously.

She looked to Ryan, who sat to her left with his head down and quickly forked in one mouthful of food after another.

"Preacher Dan will see us at nine," explained Joe, taking his seat to her right, his own plate in hand. "It's just a simple service, nothing fancy, and then we'll be done. Ryan will be our witness."

“It’s rather simple, isn’t it? Back where I come from, weddings are large affairs that often take a year or more to plan.” Taking a sip of coffee, Kate remembered when her best friend, Alexandra Whitley, married. The whole affair had cost a fortune and had almost sent her friend to the insane asylum. Everything had to be perfect, from the invitations down to the place settings for the reception afterward.

“This is just an in and out deal,” said Ryan, speaking up. “You won’t get much more than that around these parts. I think Emily Wayne had a small reception when she got hitched earlier this year, but even then it wasn’t much of anything.

“Preacher Dan is a decent man. He’ll see to you both getting a decent service. I’ll go see to the horses and get the wagon hitched.” In a flash, Ryan was gone.

Kate detected something wasn’t right. She may have been reading into something that wasn’t there, but Ryan had seemed a bit off to her. Shouldn’t he be happy for Joe?

“Did I say something wrong?” She motioned to the now-closed door.

“Ryan will be fine. It’s been just the two of us for so long and a woman, well,” Joe smiled, “it’s going to take some getting used to for him. But time heals all and things will be fine. So, how did you sleep? Was the bed suitable?”

She put down her fork. “It was most formidable. I slept like a baby, and with all things considered, I did quite well.”

She jerked her hand away when she felt Joe’s cover her own. Flushing scarlet, she felt the need to apologize. “Oh my, I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I must be more nervous than I thought.” She returned Joe’s touch and smiled back at him. “So, we have an hour or so to kill, tell me more about you and Cottonwood.”

* * * *

Ryan kicked at the ground and watched as a rock flew through the

air and then landed somewhere in the grass ahead of him.

It wasn't fair to be angry with Kate or to dislike her. She'd been nothing but cordial to him since her arrival. It was obvious that Joe was taken with her. When she entered the room this morning and took her seat at the table next to him, his eyes lit up. Blast it all, blast it all to hell and back again! Why couldn't things just remain just as they always had?

Inside the barn, he plunked himself down on a bale of hay. The two horses whinnied when they spotted him. He waved with one arm to silence them. He needed to think, to think to the future, *his* future. If he decided to stay on at Cottonwood, there would be some big changes, and he wasn't sure he'd be able to handle them. At this point, the open road was looking more appealing than it ever had before.

* * * *

The trio, Joe, Ryan, and Kate, stood together on the steps of the little weather-beaten church.

Joe glanced at his silver pocket watch. "He said he'd meet us here."

The two men, dressed in their best, looked rather smart and dapper.

Kate felt her nerves grab hold. What was she doing? Was she really to marry this man, this stranger that she had traveled all those miles to meet? Struck down with a huge dose of reality, she grasped Joe's arm as if to get a grip on life.

"Are you okay?" asked Joe. "You look a little pale. We could go over yonder and sit in the shade until it's time." Her eyes followed his hands when he motioned to a large tree, standing proud and tall in the churchyard, surrounded by a small cluster of headstones.

"I'm fine." She smiled to reiterate what she had just said. When the door to the church opened up and they were beckoned to come inside by a small man and his equally petite wife, she turned, calling

to Ryan, who now stood off to the side away from them, looking off into the horizon.

“Ryan.” He glanced at her and stepped forward. “I want you to be right at our side through this.” She reached and grabbed his hand and all three walked up the steps into the church, followed by the preacher and his wife.

The service was short, simple vows followed by a blessing. Then they were given a quick send-off as the preacher and his wife peppered them with their best wishes for the future.

Outside at the wagon, Joe helped her step up and onto the seat. Then, just as before, he took his place next to her.

Ryan stood at the side with one hand bracing the wagon. “You two go on back, I have some business to attend to here in town. I’ll walk back when I’m done.”

“He’s not happy with this,” said Kate, watching Ryan walk away. “It shows all over his face.”

“Naw, it’s just Ryan,” replied Joe, dismissing her statement. “And if he has a problem, he’ll just have to move past it. I’m sorry about the lack of a ring.”

Kate held herself in place as the wagon jerked forward. “It’s nothing.”

“I did go into town to look for one, but there wasn’t anything suitable. I put one on order. It should be here next month.”

A ring, a symbol to solidify their commitment to each other. It was something that Darcy had once promised her.

“That’s fine, Joe.” Her eyes flickered to the road ahead of them. This was to be her life from here on. Until death came and separated them. Of course, she didn’t feel love for Joe, not yet. But in time she hoped she would develop that feeling, the same feeling that had flooded her heart every time she had been in Darcy’s company.

Her father had been right all along. She’d been nothing more than a foolhardy girl to believe what that man had promised her.

The last time they’d been together, she’d remembered sitting in a

hotel room of all places, the best in the city, listening to Darcy give her some spiel about how he couldn't leave his wife. How quickly his love had changed for her.

"She'll take me for everything," he claimed, standing there, handsome as always. "She'll ruin me, you know what she's like. And the kids, I have to think of them."

She tossed her head back and laughed sarcastically. "You've more money than almost anyone else in this city. That's not a viable excuse." She shook one finger at him. "I do know your wife. Too well, in fact. I'd bet my life that she's gotten you scared to death with her threats. Why, I bet the first thing out of her mouth was that you'll never see the kids again if you divorce her. Am I right?"

"You don't love me. You never did. I was just a toy, a good-time girl for you to escape to. So here we are. You'll walk away from this unharmed, while I look like the harlot, the whore who seduced another woman's husband."

"It's not like that." He moved toward her and on bended knee grabbed her hand, attempting to kiss it. But she was quick and managed to pull away before the deed was done.

"It is like that and you know it!" she yelled. "The woman always comes out looking like the evil one."

"Go, Darcy. You've been washed clean of all this. Go, be the family man, play husband and daddy."

Still on bended knee, he lowered his head. "It was never supposed to be like this."

"But it is," her voice had turned to ice. "And now it's over and done with. Now, I think you should go."

She stood and, holding her skirt, walked to the hotel room's door. She held it open, waiting for him to exit.

Just before he left, he stopped and muttered something that sounded remotely like *sorry*, but she wasn't sure. He didn't look at her and he didn't look back as he walked down the hallway. She slammed the door behind him.

* * * *

Was it always going to be like this from this day forward?

Joe sat next to his bride, looking ahead. It was hard to believe that he was now a married man, a husband, and maybe at some point in the future he'd become a father. Of course, for that to happen, he'd have to have relations with a woman.

He was equally attracted to both sexes, and even before Ryan he wasn't a virgin. He'd lost that when he was eighteen, to a saloon girl named Maggie.

She was many years older than him, all woman from head to toe. She'd been a birthday gift from his father and when he was brought there it was apparent what was to happen that night.

"Son, you just go right on in and ask the bartender to direct you to Maggie. That's all you have to say. It's been paid for, and she'll be expecting you. I'll come 'round in a couple hours to fetch you."

Inside, a few of the saloon's patrons flashed him a glance as he walked across the smoke-filled room.

When he saddled up to the bar, it took the bartender, a grizzled older man with a white beard, a while to notice him.

"What can I get ya?" asked the bartender.

"Maggie," he replied, feeling like an insignificant fool. His cheeks grew hot. They'd all known what he came for. "I'm supposed to see Maggie."

"Get this, boys," yelled the bartender, his deep voice radiating throughout the room. "The kid's here to get it on with our Maggie!"

A roar of laughter overtook the saloon. If Joe could have sunk down through the floor at that moment, he would have.

The bartender flashed him a devilish smile and motioned to the large staircase positioned over to the far right side of the building. "She's upstairs, the fifth door down the hall on your left. Oh and son, go easy on her." He let out a big roar of laughter, slamming his fist

down on the bar.

“She’ll eat him alive,” he heard one say as he made his way up the stairs. “Maggie will swallow him whole.”

Joe stood in the hallway, looking down the narrow corridor stretched out before him. In the air he smelled a heady mixture of perfumes. Lemon Verbena, his mother wore that, it was familiar to him, and smoke from downstairs. But of course, his mother never once smoked, she’d always been a lady right up to her dying day.

Joe sauntered down the hallway, glancing at each closed door he passed. A loud squeal bounced from behind one shut door and a series of deep grunting noises from another, followed by a high-pitched feminine voice crying out, “Ride ’em, cowboy!”

Five on his left. He counted the doors as he walked and when arrived at the fifth one, he froze. Panic had taken over, and for a brief second, he felt like turning and running in the direction he had come. The one thing, however, that stopped him from doing so was the men downstairs, in particular the bartender who sure as heck would have laughed him off. He didn’t want that.

Should he knock? Was she really expecting him? Self-doubt crept into his mind. Then it happened, the door opened.

Maggie stood there in all her glory, looking him over from head to toe and back again, a half smile crossing her lips. “Well, hello there. You must be Joe.”

“Yes’m.” He felt out of place. What was he to do next?

“Come in.” She stepped aside and motioned to him. “I won’t bite, unless you want me to.” And there was that grin again. “I’m Maggie, but I guess you knew that already.”

“My father told me your name,” said Joe, passing her. “He set this up.”

“Your father’s a great man,” she replied. “A real gentleman.”

“You know him well?” he asked.

“Well enough. But that’s neither here nor there. Tonight’s all about you, darlin’.”

He wondered *how well* she knew his father and how his father had known about this woman?

“Sit,” she said, directing him to the small bed in the dimly lit room.

The room itself was small, sparsely furnished with just a bed, bureau, and a washstand. One sole lamp lit the room, casting shadows across the walls.

“My, you’re just a boy.” Maggie walked to him and placed one hand under his chin, forcing him to look up at her. “Just how old are you?”

“Eighteen,” he muttered. “I’ll be nineteen come fall.”

“Then a man in many ways.” She took her place next to him on the bed, curling one arm into his. “You know why your father sent me to you.”

He nodded.

“Then let’s get it over with.”

He lay back on the bed and she undressed him, first removing his shirt and then his trousers, leaving only his boots. “I figure you’ll want to keep those on, most men who come here do.”

Under the glow of the lamplight, Joe watched as Maggie undressed, her long flaxen hair trailing down over her bare shoulders.

Standing there, just in her corset and bloomers, she was a vision of loveliness. He was young and naive but she was there to teach him, and through the course of the next two hours she did, in every way possible.

When they had finished, she lay on the bed watching him dress. “So, honest opinion, what did you think of it?”

He guessed *it* meant sex. “It’s something I’ll never forget.”

She laughed. “I don’t s’pose you will. We always remember our first time, even a whore like me.”

Joe sat back on the bed. He couldn’t understand how she had gotten to this place in life. Maggie was attractive, smart, and a great talker. “If you don’t mind me asking, how did you end up here, doing

this?”

“Circumstance, you could say. I had me a life once, beyond all this. I had a husband and a baby. Now can you imagine that, me a mother?”

“What happened?” He was more than curious to know.

“My husband.” She looked off to the other side of the room. “He robbed banks. I knew about it, but we never actually talked about his “business,” as he liked to refer to it. And one day, he didn’t come home. He ended up getting himself shot dead, just like a dog.

“I was alone with a baby to raise. We had no money to start with, and no one wanted to help out the widow of a bank robber. A month after, my baby died of consumption, in her sleep.

“After she was buried, I pulled up and left that place, I never wanted to see it again. There was no reason for me to stay there, all I had left was memories, bad memories, and bad memories can be pressing for a person, especially if you think too much.

“I found my way here. It’s work, I get a bit of money, food, and a roof over my head, and to tell you the truth, it ain’t half bad.”

Years later, he’d heard that Maggie had gotten herself killed. Some man she’d been messing with didn’t like her line of work, and when she refused to give it up, he killed her in that very same room. Joe remembered her story and he hoped wherever she was, that she had found some sort of peace.

Chapter Four

Entering the mercantile, Ryan had one thing on his mind.

Mrs. Roswell was quick to get to her feet when she spotted him. She'd been sitting there behind the counter, awaiting her next customer.

Ryan despised the woman. She was the one who had perpetuated the rumors about him and Joe; she was the one who had brought unwanted attention to them.

"Can I help you?" asked Mrs. Roswell, her tone abrupt and to the point.

Ryan couldn't force himself to address her properly. "I'm looking for a gift, a wedding gift."

"Well now," she replied, saddling up to one counter. "I can't imagine who would be getting married in this town without my knowledge." She stopped and waited for him to reply. It was obvious she was seeking information.

Ryan rolled his eyes. "If you must know, Mrs. Roswell, it was Joe. He's taken a bride, they married this very morning."

"Joe? You can't be serious. Why, I thought—"

"You thought what?" snapped Ryan. "Tell me, Mrs. Roswell, just what do you think? I'm extremely curious to know."

The woman turned crimson and began fiddling with her hands. "I didn't mean anything." Her eyes traced the countertop. "Anyway, it makes no difference to me who that man has married. Let's get back to business."

He fought hard not to smile, yet inside he felt triumphant. He'd put the old gossip in her place and it felt damned good.

“We have some very nice things. So my next question is, are you looking for something practical or impractical? Personally, I think impractical is more suitable when it comes to a special occasion such as a wedding.”

For once, he agreed with her.

“I, myself, love this.” Mrs. Roswell presented a small heart-shaped porcelain box. She placed it gently on the counter. It was a delicate looking piece, hand-painted with tiny pale pink roses and blue, flowing ribbon. “It’s a trinket box. And since I assume the bride and groom have rings, it’s the perfect keepsake. They can store their rings in here if needed.” She lifted the lid. “It has a rich, lush interior as you can see.”

Ryan nodded, he’d seen enough. “It’s fine, I’ll take it.”

“If you give me a moment, I’ll wrap it all fancy-like.”

He nodded again. “I can wait. I’ll just look around the store while you do that.”

When she had finished with the wrapping, Mrs. Roswell called to him. He accepted the package and handed her the money. Without further word, he left.

Damn it all to hell! Ryan stood on Main Street in front of the mercantile with a knot in his stomach. Things had been perfect for so long and now he wasn’t sure if he knew his place in all this, or if he even had a place in Joe’s life anymore.

* * * *

He’d been looking for work.

Starving and desperate for anything, Ryan still remembered that day when he had stumbled onto Cottonwood and Joe, and what had led him to that in the beginning.

At fifteen he knew he was different, different from the other boys, and at age eighteen it was apparent to those who knew him. When twenty rolled around, it was apparent that he had to make a move.

“You need to find yourself a girl. Your brother’s been married for two years now. It’s about time you found yourself a potential wife,” stated his father, one night after they had finished supper. “Folks will be wondering about you, Ryan.”

“Leave him alone,” said his mother. “Ryan’s interest just lies elsewhere and there isn’t anything wrong with that.”

“Books,” replied his father, rolling his eyes. “Perhaps if he read less and got out there more to socialize, he’d be attached right now.”

Sitting there, they just talked back and forth, around him, like he wasn’t there.

“There will be lots of time for that, he’s still a boy.”

Ryan accepted the plate of apple pie she placed in front of him muttering a “thanks.”

“He’s a man, Bea. And it’s time he put himself out there. Jiminy Larson’s lass, the youngest one, Rebecca, I know they’re looking to marry her off. She’s decent-looking and respectable.”

“Decent and respectable without an ounce of personality,” said Ryan.

“Personality? Son, that should be the least of your worries, whether or not a girl has personality. What’s important is that she’s got the skills to make you a good wife and hopefully, at some point, a mother to your kids. Personality has no place in it. Rebecca’s a fine young woman and she’ll serve you well. I’ll speak to her father this week.”

“You can speak all you want,” said Ryan, his voice rising in anger. He stood up from the table, pushing his plate of pie aside. “But I won’t marry her and you can’t force me.”

Ryan ran from the house, his father behind him, yelling. But it was no use, his father couldn’t keep up to him, and soon, the man was left behind in the dust.

When he stopped running, he found himself at the edge of the Shawnee River. He stood there on the bank, watching the swirling water rush past him in torrents. It would be easy to just slip below the

darkness to let it take him into forever. And for a bit he thought about doing it, just jumping head-on. Would it hurt? There was a strong possibility that it would. He didn't care for pain, much.

To his left a bird chirped, perching itself on a nearby branch of a crab apple tree. It didn't budge, but now chirped louder than before as he swiped at it to go away.

"Blasted thing," he yelled. "Go, I don't want you here!" Yet the bird, a magnificent blue in color, still sat there looking at him with curiosity while he yelled.

"You really are a stubborn thing, just as stubborn as my father," explained Ryan. "What would you think about marrying someone you didn't love?" Ryan paused, then laughed. "Look at me, I'm telling you my problem. As if you could even understand. I must be going crazy."

The bird chirped again, flying off into the sky.

Ryan looked to the river again, but this time backed away from the edge of the bank. Would he have really gone through with it? He wasn't sure, but he shivered at the thought.

After another hour passed and night had fallen, he made his way back to the house. Both his parents now sat in front of the fireplace, his mother stitching something while his father just stared into the flames.

"You will marry her," said his father, his voice calm and collected. "It'll be a fine wedding, and Rebecca will be a wife you can be proud of."

His mother looked up from her stitching, flashing him a backward glance from where she sat. She nodded, now agreeing with her husband.

Ryan stood, said nothing, made his way upstairs, and went to bed.

Ryan was ready when dawn made itself known the following morning, and in those early hours, with some food and money he had saved over the years, he slipped out the front door and was gone.

Walking down the road leading out of town, Ryan felt more alone

than ever. Never in his life had he fit in. Not with his parents, not with his two other brothers, and not with the other boys who he had attempted to befriend. He was always the outsider, sitting on the side, watching, trying to be a part of the game that was life.

While he walked, he remembered that first time when it was certain in his life, when without a doubt he knew there was something inside of him that most wouldn't see as being right.

"Hell's fire and damnation," the preacher would have yelled at him. "You'll burn just like the rest down in the pit of hell!" The preacher didn't actually say this to him, but he imagined he would if he knew his secrets.

He had just turned eighteen and boy, was he ever changing inside. Even with the irony and sadness of the memories from then, he couldn't help but smile as he thought back to that one summer.

* * * *

The heat that July had been unbearable, and it was a full-time job just keeping the crops irrigated.

"We need to rig some sort of a system and connect it to the river," explained his father, looking over the vast expanse of fields. "This is lunacy, doing it like this. I've hired a new hand to help. He's your age, Ryan, so I guess I can trust you well enough to show him what needs tending to around here."

"Yes," Ryan replied, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Who is he?"

"He's from over in Rustago. He'll be around today, and like I said, show him what needs tending to."

Midmorning, Ryan found himself cleaning the stalls in the barn. He despised the dirty job, but like any other it had to be done.

"Hey."

Ryan looked up to see a boy, who, like his father had said, was about his own age, standing, hands in trouser pockets, looking at him.

Ryan placed the shovel he held to the side. “Hey.”

“Name’s Jason Winters. I was speaking with your father. He told me to seek you out to tell me what to do.” A hand was extended.

“Oh yeah, sure,” replied Ryan, walking over to the stranger who now had a name. He gripped Jason’s hand, and they shook, the shake lingering long after the motion put forth by the two had ceased.

Both stood there, sizing the other up. It was odd, yet Ryan didn’t dare move an inch.

Jason was slightly shorter than him, but blocky, muscular, which showed he was no stranger to hard work. His sandy-blond hair had been cropped short and his dark blue eyes contrasted with his dark, tanned skin.

Jason grinned. “You’re looking at me funny. Is there something wrong? Do I look that bad?”

Ryan pulled his hand away, breaking their physical connection. “No...no,” he stammered. “Not at all.” His face grew hot. “Your eyes startled me, the color.”

Jason nodded, the grin remaining on his face. “I get that a lot. It could be the color of my skin that makes them stand out so much.” He gestured to one bare arm. “I sure do tan easy.”

He did indeed. Ryan could not help but look him over. Without a doubt he was attracted to this Jason. It was wrong. He couldn’t feel that way about another boy. It was a sin. Yet, it was there. And standing in front of Jason, he couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to touch him.

“Yeah, it looks good on you.” Ryan lowered his eyes and regretted that statement. It wasn’t normal to say that to another boy. Blood rushed into his cheeks.

“You think?” asked Jason. “Momma tells me I should cover up more when working, but I get so darned hot.”

Ryan looked up. “Yeah, it’s hot all right.” He watched as Jason unbuttoned his shirt to the waist, revealing an equally tanned, tight torso, a light trail of blond fuzz meandering down into his trousers.

Damn, he could feel himself getting hard. “So, yeah, you can start by helping me finish the stalls.”

They worked until noon, only stopping to go inside for dinner.

Jason sat across the table from Ryan and told both parents his life story while they all looked on, amazed at Jason’s gift for gabbing, as Ryan’s father often called it.

When they finished, Jason thanked Ryan’s mother and was off, eager to get back to work.

“How’s he working out, Ryan?” asked his father. “Any trouble?”

Ryan nodded his head in the negative. “No, sir, he’s one heck of a hard worker. He hasn’t stopped since he arrived.” It was the truth.

“He sure can talk,” chimed Joe’s mother. She laughed and shook her head as she cleared the table. “But there’s no harm in that. I think he’ll work out just fine. You can tell him the spare room will be made up for him and ready after supper.

Ryan looked to his father. “He’s staying here?”

“Of course. He can’t make that trek every day. He’s agreed to work the week, and the weekends are his own unless I need him if anything comes up out of the ordinary. That was the agreement.”

Just the thought of Jason sleeping in the next room. Well, there was that feeling again, one of anxiety mixed in with a whole mess of confused emotions.

Together, Ryan and Jason worked until late afternoon under the sweltering heat of the sun. When they had finished irrigating the crops, both collapsed under a nearby tree, seeking relief from the sun’s harsh rays.

“Man, that’s hard work,” proclaimed Jason, taking a swig of water from his canteen. He then handed it to Ryan who gratefully accepted. “Is it always like this?”

“Naw, it’ll get easier, and the weather isn’t always this hot.”

Side by side, they leaned back against the tree, deep into the cooling shade.

Stealing a sideways glance, Ryan could see that Jason’s eyes were

closed, his shirt wide open. He wanted to slide his hand across Jason's chest, to feel him, to caress him. The stirring in his trousers felt good.

"You're looking at me again," said Jason, smiling.

"I wasn't." Ryan was firm in his reply. He turned his head away and pretended interest in something else.

"You were looking at me, I caught you, and I know I wasn't dreaming since I wasn't asleep but resting my eyes." He felt Jason punch him in the arm gently. "It's okay, I don't mind."

"But I wasn't."

"If you say so. So, I'm hot as hell sitting here. How about we go down to the river to take a dip?"

"Yeah, sure. I know a shallow spot, the current's not too bad there." And they were off.

Standing on the riverbank with arms planted firmly across his chest, Ryan watched as Jason stripped off his clothes. With eyes rooted on the little white behind that faced him, he fought to control his erection that was ready to burst through the confines of his trousers.

Jason glanced back at him. "Come on, get out of your clothes and let's dive right in."

"Yeah, okay. You go on ahead, and I'll be right there."

Jason shrugged his shoulders, and with one leap, landed in the river with a mighty splash.

Perhaps if he willed his hardness to go away, it would. But his thoughts stayed on that white ass, smooth and perfect, a stark contrast in color to the rest of Jason's body.

Now naked, Ryan covered himself and walked to the edge of the bank. Jason, in the water with just his head sticking out, motioned for him to come in.

"It's great, nice and cool."

Ryan slid into the water, cool was right! He shivered slightly, getting down into it. Goose pimples broke out over his arms.

"This is awesome," gushed Jason. "I could stay here all day."

Being in such close proximity, naked with Jason, made Ryan nervous. It must have shown, and it wasn't long before Jason took notice.

Jason swam to him and near the riverbank where it was shallow, they lounged in the water.

There was silence as each stared up into the hazy blue sky.

"Can I ask you something?" Jason asked, this time there was no joking manner in his voice, nor was there a grin on his face. His stark blue eyes stared directly at Ryan, who said nothing in return. He just did a quick nod.

"Can I touch you?" The words came fast out of Jason's mouth. He pulled himself closer toward Ryan. "I mean, would it be okay?"

Ryan reached out, and took Jason's hand, guiding it to his chest.

They came together, slick skin against slick skin. At first, each just caressed the other, no words were exchanged, each being transfixed with exploring the other.

"Come on, let's go up on the bank." Jason grabbed his hand, pulling him up from the water. He was fully hard now and so was Jason.

Under a cluster of trees they lay down atop their clothes.

"You're beautiful," said Jason, sliding next to Ryan. "I've never told another guy that, but I felt the need to say it."

Jason moved in closer, their lips touched, just grazing.

"That's nice," murmured Ryan, caught up in Jason's twinkling eyes. He felt Jason's hardness rubbing against his leg as Jason ground into him.

"When I saw you this morning, I knew you were like me."

"How did you know? I didn't even know for sure about myself." Ryan blushed.

Jason grinned. "I felt something between us. But it cinched it for me when I knew you were sizing me up."

"No one can ever know."

Jason nodded. "No one will." He pressed one finger against

Ryan's lips. "It's our secret." They kissed.

They explored each other that day and when they had finished, a friendship had been forged along with a bond.

"That was awesome." Ryan pulled on his trousers and then his shirt. "We'll have to do that again."

Jason chuckled. "You can say that again." He winked. "I could have you again right here and now. 'Cept we have to get back or your father will wonder where we have run off to." Jason grabbed him by the trousers and pulled him in close. "But don't think you'll be getting away from me that easy." A hand grabbed his butt and then another gripped his cheeks. "Like I said, I could have you again, right here."

"You need to get dressed," suggested Ryan, being the voice of reason. His hands rested on Jason's shoulders. He leaned in and kissed Jason's cheek.

It was like that for the rest of the summer and well into the harvest season. They were inseparable, and whenever they could, they went off together to have time to themselves.

Then one day in late October, Jason was gone.

"He's gone?" Ryan asked, looking at his father not believing what he was hearing.

"Of course. We won't need him now that the harvest is over."

"Of course. It was stupid of me to think otherwise."

Outside on the front porch, the crisp October night air brought with it a bitter chill. Jason was gone, no good-bye, just gone.

He felt like screaming out into the night. And damn it all to hell. For once he had found someone, a friend who understood him. And now, it was over, Jason was gone.

A lump formed in the back of his throat, tears welled in his eyes. He wouldn't give in to them, no sir, not now he wouldn't. He'd be fine, he'd be a man, and everything would be okay.

Chapter Five

Kate stood, staring off into the distance as Joe passed her heading into the cabin. When he returned he stopped, placing one hand on her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. She smiled.

“I have work to do, so I guess you can do whatever it is that womenfolk do. If you need anything, I’ll be around. Just call for me. I should be able to hear you.”

Kate watched him walk off into the distance. Backing up, she turned and entered the house. She wasn’t the domestic type back in her old life, a life that it now seemed so long ago she’d been catered to by servants.

But this was now, this was her reality, and like it or not, she’d made the choice to come here to marry Joe. There was no going back, there was nothing to go back to. She shuddered to think what her father would say if she did after running off only leaving him a brief letter.

Dearest Father,

As I sit here, penning this letter, my heart is filled with much sadness and regret. After much thinking on my part, I’ve decided that I have no choice but to leave this place and my past behind.

I assure you that I will be fine. Please do not worry about me.

Your Daughter,

Kate

By then she had already made arrangements to come to Joe. So, early in the morning hours, she’d slipped the note onto her father’s

desk in the library, taking her leave via the back door of the house before any of the servants had a chance to stir.

“Hello?”

Goodness! Her heart nearly leapt out of her chest.

“Ryan, I didn’t hear you come in. I figured you’d still be in town.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I just had some brief business to take care of, then I made my way back.” He held a package wrapped in brown paper in his right hand.

“We could have waited for you. There was no need for you to walk all that way. And in this heat, it isn’t good.”

He nodded. “It’s only bad from noon on. I can handle it. I’m used to it.” There was a slight coolness to his voice.

“You don’t like me very much do you?” questioned Kate. Right after she said those words, she wished she hadn’t. But she was never one for going through back doors. She preferred people to be up front and honest, and thus she lived by those rules herself.

He hesitated. “No. That’s not it at all. It’s just that for so long it’s only been Joe and I.”

“And I’m like an intruder of sorts,” added Kate. “Ryan, I want us to get along. I want you to like me. I think that’s important to Joe. He obviously thinks highly of you.”

Ryan stepped forward, placing the package he’d been holding onto the table. “I don’t dislike you, Kate.” He motioned to the package. “I bought that for you, and for Joe. But I guess it’s more for you than him. It’s a wedding present.”

Clasping her hands to her chest, Kate was touched and no words would come. She moved toward the table, reaching out gingerly to touch the package, her fingers lingering on the simple paper. “Ryan, that’s very kind and most thoughtful of you.”

“It’s nothing, really.” He shuffled awkwardly from side to side. “You may open it.”

Pulling at the paper, Kate smiled as she revealed the item contained within. “It’s beautiful,” she said, her voice just above a

whisper. Before her now lay a small porcelain trinket box, delicately adorned with tiny painted flowers.

“It’s for trinkets,” said Ryan.

“It’s perfect, Ryan, and thank you for it. I’ll always cherish it.”

“I best get to work. I’m assuming Joe is already out there, hard at it?”

“Yes. He left right away just after we returned.” Kate paused for a moment. “Ryan, this may be a stupid question, but what should I be doing?”

Ryan surveyed the room. “The place could use a cleaning. We’ll be back a bit after noon for something to eat. Sandwiches would be good. Can you cook?”

“I can.” She was now thankful for her hours spent as a girl watching the cook whip up meals in the kitchen.

“You’ll get the hang of it all. The pantry is well stocked, and if you need to, just ask questions.”

Kate heaved a sigh of relief. She now felt more at ease. “I just don’t want to fudge anything up.”

Ryan smiled. “Kate, life is a learning experience and one that never stops. Just you remember that.”

“I will.” She watched Ryan walk away. But before he got past the door she felt the need to thank him once again. “Thank you, Ryan, for everything.” She looked to the trinket box.

“Don’t mention it. It was nothing.” He nodded to her before making a quick exit.

Standing there full of mixed emotions and just slightly anxious, Kate’s mind flittered to what it meant to be a good wife and the duties that subsequently went along with the same. She had an hour or so to kill before the two men would be back to eat. She best start with that.

The pantry. Now where would a pantry be? The word itself and its meaning weren’t unknown to her. A small doorway just off the kitchen, closed off with a red-and-white gingham curtain, revealed a neat little room lined with shelves and, lo and behold, foodstuffs.

* * * *

He'd gone and done it now!

Joe stood tall, looking over the fields he had planted along with Ryan earlier the spring. Everything was coming along fine and good. But yet, inside he was fighting a war with himself, not knowing if marrying Kate had been the right thing to do.

Already the day had turned humid, the air thick with moisture. It was a good thing, they needed rain desperately.

"The barn is clean. I just checked it before coming out here." It was Ryan.

Joe couldn't bear to look at him. He felt like a cad, he'd hurt Ryan, and that was never intended. Even today, while he and Kate married, he could see it in Ryan's eyes as he watched them tie the knot.

He nodded, not able to make eye contact. "It looks like rain, possibly a storm." His gaze moved upward toward the sky. The sky was relatively clear with some overcast, but it was the air and once again the humidity that keened his senses. "I thought you were in town?"

"I was," answered Ryan. "I stopped into the mercantile to buy something, a gift."

"A gift?"

"For you and Kate—a wedding gift."

Joe glanced at Ryan and then quickly looked to the fields again. "You didn't have to do that. This is difficult for both of us and you don't have to pretend to be okay with it."

"I'm not pretending anything, Joe. But I'm making an effort. I did some thinking on my walk back from town. It isn't fair to take my frustrations out on Kate. She's innocent in this. She couldn't and didn't know what she was walking into. If she did, I don't think she would have come."

“I suppose not.” Ryan was right. No woman in her right mind would have walked into *this*. “Anyway, I’m sure Kate appreciated the gift. It was a good gesture on your behalf.”

“Like I said, I hold no ill will toward her. She’s not to fault for anything.” Ryan moved to his side. “Storm’s on the way. I can feel it.”

Joe nodded. “Is it always going to be like this?”

Ryan shrugged. “Maybe. Things will never be the same. I no longer have the man I love.”

Ryan’s words cut deep, and Joe winced upon hearing them. “You still have me.”

“No.”

“Yes, you do. I will always be there for you. That will never change as long as I have breath in my body.” He grabbed Ryan and pulled him close, looking into his eyes, eyes filled with sadness. “We’re a part of each other whether we like it or not.”

Ryan pushed against him. “You have a wife, Joe. Kate is where your heart should be from this day onward. Now please, let me go. I don’t like the look of the sky, and I think we best get things done before the storm’s upon us.”

He released Ryan.

* * * *

Once her sensibilities kicked in, Kate changed into something more practical and then set about cleaning.

She started with the floor, sweeping it, and then proceeded to dust and rearrange things more to her liking. She didn’t dare make any drastic changes since she still felt somewhat like a stranger.

After that much was completed, she went back to the pantry and selected two cans of beans and a loaf of bread. She guessed one of the two men had a hand in baking that. Perhaps she would get them to teach her. She was a quick and studious learner, the top of her class back when she attended boarding school.

Ah yes, boarding school. She'd spent more time there than she did at home when she was a girl, only going home for Christmas and of course the summer. But even at home she didn't feel like she fit in, love didn't come easy for either of her parents, and, well, that much really explained itself.

Her mother had always been more hung up on her societal commitments rather than her children. Nannies raised her, they were the ones who saw to her needs, they tucked her into bed at night and when she needed a shoulder to cry on, it was them that provided one.

Kate added wood to the cook stove, opening the two cans of beans. While waiting for them to warm, she set the table, put on a pot of fresh coffee, and sliced bread, piling it high onto a plate.

When she heard them outside on the steps, relief washed over her. Being left alone for too long left her open to her memories of Darcy, her father, and the past.

The two men entered, each taking time to remove their hats.

"Whatever it is, it smells downright good," said Joe, taking his place at the table.

She smiled. "It's nothing much, just beans. I'm afraid I'm not the most experienced in the kitchen."

Joe nodded. "Everything just takes time."

Ryan sat opposite of Joe and thanked her when she served him. After she served Joe, she took her seat and gingerly picked at her food.

"There is a storm coming," said Joe. "A bad one."

"Oh my, nothing to worry about I hope?" She clasped one hand to her chest in concern.

"Just lots of rain, I figure, and some thunder and lightning. The river may get a little high, but naw, it's nothing to worry yourself about. The crops could use the rain."

"Of course," she said, nodding.

And then a huge crash of thunder boomed overhead, shaking the house.

“It’s started sooner than I thought.” Ryan was at one of two front windows looking outside at the sky, which had fallen dark. “This is going to be one humdinger.”

Joe was at the other window. “It’s a good thing we brought the horses into the barn.”

Kate sat there, looking to both, as another crash rang out, followed by a bright flash of lightening. “Coffee anyone?” she asked. “It’s fresh.” Her appetite had gone. Storms of any sort made her nervous, and out here on the wide-open prairie she felt vulnerable and foreign.

“After we’re done,” said Joe. Both men returned to the table and resumed eating.

For the rest of the day, it rained like she had never seen before. At times, she thought they’d be washed clear into the river, never to be seen again.

To pass time, Kate washed the dishes and continued on with the organization of her new household, while the two men sat and twiddled their thumbs. It was painfully obvious that neither was used to sitting around.

“Is there anything I can help with?” asked Joe, coming to her side while she sifted through the pantry, rearranging things more to her liking. “There isn’t much to do with the rain and all.” Overhead, the heavy drops pounded the roof. “Ryan is checking on the horses and livestock. I think it’s safe to say we can write the day off.”

“I have not been here long but I can guess the farm is a lot of work. For two men, it’s a big undertaking.” Kate examined a can of peaches and then, looking at the shelves, decided to keep them together on the third shelf.

“Indeed. I’ve thought about hiring more help but I can’t rightfully justify the cost. Money is always tight, though I don’t expect for you to understand that being from the city.”

She braced her hands on the shelving. She’d wondered when Joe would start asking about her past. Of course he had a right to know, but some things she wouldn’t divulge, not now and perhaps never.

“Not everyone from the city is rich, Joe, if that’s what you are implying. You would be surprised if you were to walk into some of the poorer areas.” She knew this to be fact, she’d volunteered at more than one soup kitchen in her spare time. She’d witnessed the desperation of many, both young and old. It was a sad situation that never seemed to get any better. And the children, they were the ones who stuck out in her mind. Many a night she had lain awake with their forlorn faces running through her mind.

“I guess so. I’ve never had much use for the city or the life that comes with it. I just saw your clothes, and, well, you are refined.”

She raised one brow. “Are you asking me for my story? We all have a story to tell, so I guess you are entitled to know mine now that we are husband and wife. It’s only fair.”

Kate felt Joe’s hands rest upon her shoulders. She turned to him and smiled. “Let’s sit.”

“I don’t mean to pry,” explained Joe. “But I am a bit curious as to why you would actually come here to marry me. I mean no offense, but you look to have your pick of any man. And, well, I’m not really—” He stopped. “What I’m trying to say is that I’m sure you could have done much better than me.”

“That’s just a matter of opinion. Love is a fickle thing and often you find it where it’s least expected.

“I’ve led a privileged life. I never wanted for much. That much is true. I have my reasons for coming here, and I have no regrets in doing so. I really don’t know what else to say other than if you have questions, feel free to ask.” She didn’t dare bring up Darcy. That memory itself was still far too painful.

Chapter Six

Supper that evening was quiet. Ryan sat at his usual place and glanced back and forth at Joe and Kate between bites.

“That’s some rain, eh?” It wasn’t the best way to kick-start a conversation, especially since the said topic had already been bled dry throughout the day. But anything was better than nothing. It wasn’t hard to sense tension in the air.

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” Kate smiled. She stood from the table and motioned to the stove where a pot of coffee sat waiting for them. “Coffee anyone?”

Both men nodded at the same time.

After coffee, it wasn’t long and it was time to settle into bed. Early to bed and early to rise was the motto around these parts, and it was a well-set routine.

In bed, Ryan did his best to avoid thinking what may or may not be going on in the other bedroom. And while the idea of Joe being married was sinking in, he still didn’t have to like it.

Turning onto his side, he faced the wall and closed his eyes, begging for sleep to soon overtake him, the only sound being the rain pounding the rooftop overhead.

* * * *

Kate stood before the lone bureau in the bedroom. She ran one finger across the trinket box. Inside she was nervous, scared in fact. Both were silly emotions considering she was well aware of what was to come next, being a new bride and this being her wedding night. She

wasn't a virgin, she wasn't inexperienced, but yet she felt as if she were all that and more.

Through the dim light, she turned to see Joe sitting there on the edge of the bed. He looked up, smiling at her. She was quick to return one. She motioned to the buttons on the back of her dress. "Could you?" she asked.

Standing behind her she felt his fingers work the buttons, unfastening them one by one.

"Sorry," he said, his voice low as he struggled with one button. "I'm a bit clumsy and my fingers seem so large compared to these tiny buttons."

"It's okay. You can just imagine how hard it is to dress sometimes. It's very impractical to have them located back there. But fashion being what it is, who am I to question it?"

"I don't know anything about fashion or things like that, but I do know that you smell really good."

His comment had taken her aback. She couldn't help but giggle, just a bit. "It's just a bit of scent. I don't like anything too strong. His hands slid the garment down over her shoulders, underneath her corset came into view.

She turned to him and allowed the dress she'd been wearing to fall to the floor. Her hands now traced down each of his shoulders, feeling the firm muscle under the home-spun cotton.

Together, they moved to the bed. Joe pulled back the bedclothes and then looked at her as if waiting for direction.

"Could you?" she asked, needing help undressing. Of course she could have done it herself, but this way was much more fun. "Just loosen it a bit for me."

"Of course."

"Now I can breathe. That thing can be most uncomfortable."

Joe sat on the edge of the bed and watched her with a curious eye. "Then why do you wear it?"

Kate tossed the contraption, as she often called it in secret, to the

end of the bed. “Good question. It’s a combination of fashion and just proper dressing. I’ve not really put much thought into it before.”

“Forgive me asking such a silly thing. You must think I’m just some dumb country boy.”

She sat next to him. “I think nothing of the sort.”

“I’m not the most experienced.” He flashed her a sheepish grin. “This is kind of new to me.”

“Then we can both do our best to put each other at ease.” Just clad in her under things, Kate slid under the bedclothes, patting the empty spot next to her. “I promise I don’t bite.”

* * * *

And there he was, alone, with Kate watching and waiting for him to make the next move. Her eyes following him as he first shed his shirt and subsequently his trousers. Standing there in just his long johns, he could hear his heart pounding, his pulse racing. It was his first time all over again and then some. It didn’t help matters to know that Ryan lay just on the other side of the wall. Ryan who he loved and desperately didn’t want to hurt, yet he knew the damage had been done.

Sliding in bed next to Kate, his nervousness subsided. Her fingers touched his bare chest, grazing his nipples, and they stiffened under her touch.

“Coming here, I wondered what would be on the other side of that ad and I can say I’m very pleased.” She pressed her body against him, her smooth, soft skin gliding against him. She looked up, her chin now pressing against his chest while with one hand she pulled her hair down, well over her shoulders, in a lush golden wave.

“I can say the same. Having that attraction there is definitely a bonus, and I couldn’t help but wonder if it would be. But once I saw you that first day, I knew it would all come together even if we did get off to an abrupt start.” He touched her hair, reveling at its silken

texture.

“But here we are,” she replied adding a sigh. “And we’re doing fine.”

“We are indeed.” Joe glanced up at the ceiling for a moment and listened to the rain overhead. That’s when she leaned over him and kissed him with an eagerness that instantly caused a stirring deep within.

Her lips, soft and sweet, glided across his own. Together they both merged into a hot, passionate embrace of not only the emotional but also the physical.

Limbs entwined, the last of their clothing was quickly shed. Kate moaned when he first thumbed her left nipple and then brought his mouth down over the right one. Inside his mouth he felt them harden, nubs that begged to be suckled.

“Why, well I never,” she said, her voice breathless. “That’s just delightful.”

There was no doubt in Joe’s mind the difference between making love to a woman than to a man.

The differences were striking and now feeling Kate submit to him, sliding under his body, her legs wrapping around his waist, he truly appreciated what each had to bring to the table, so to speak.

She was smooth, soft, beguiling and again her lips and that mouth. Her hands toyed with his sparse chest hair. And when she reached down to grip his buttocks, he felt himself slide between her legs, connecting with her hot wetness.

* * * *

Joe sure as heck wasn’t Darcy. And now with him throbbing against her most intimate parts, she wanted him more than ever. She wanted him inside her, exploring her, and in turn she’d explore him.

With her legs wrapped around his waist, she looked up at him and smiled. This was her husband, everything was right, everything was

just the way she wanted it to be and there was a wondrous sense of security that came in knowing that.

Joe paused for a moment, his hardness pressing into her. Was he waiting for her approval to continue? She moved her hips to meet him and felt him slide slowly into her.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he whispered into her ear. “Tell me to stop and I will.”

She appreciated the thought and sensitivity. Joe was one in a million. She nodded. And to accentuate her point, she took him deeper, savoring newfound sensations that she had never experienced before.

Lovemaking with Darcy had always been quick and very self-serving, his needs always coming first. But now, with Joe, for the first time she felt things she had never experienced and it was glorious, liberating, and all points in between.

A heat rose between them as they moved together, forming one fluid motion locked together.

With his head nestled against her neck, Kate ran her fingers through Joe’s hair, coaxing him along with words that she would never have imagined she’d say. It was hard to break from sensibilities that had been engrained into her very core over the past years of her life.

His breath, hot and rapid, blew onto her cheek. Locking eyes, each became lost in the other’s.

He tensed over her, every muscle of his well-toned body flexing the more he worked himself into her.

And then Kate felt it, for the first time ever, it rose from deep down in her groin, a combination of intense pressure and hot, delicious pleasure.

She groaned and tossed her head back as Joe quickened his pace, thrusting into her with an unrelenting vigor, his hips rising and then slamming back down to make her feel every inch of his manliness.

When she exploded, she clung to him, panting, gasping to catch

her breath, feeling wave after wave of orgasmic bliss wash over her.

* * * *

When Kate clenched around him, her arms pulled him tight. He couldn't hold off any longer, and he released himself into her, filling her with his seed.

He carefully slipped to the side and together they lay in the darkness, each regaining their senses and composure.

"It's never been," she muttered, "so good."

He laughed. "I'd be disappointed and slightly shamed if you said anything else."

She nudged him playfully in the arm.

It wasn't long before Joe could tell that she had fallen asleep beside him. He pulled the covers up around her and lay back, staring into the darkness. Sleep wouldn't come so easily for him, he had things on his mind. In the next room, without a doubt, Ryan was still awake. A tinge of guilt wafted through him, causing him to grimace. Had he done right? Was this the way to salvation, as the preacher would have said? So much ran through his mind but the guilt was something awful to try and swallow.

Chapter Seven

At the crack of dawn, Ryan was awake and out of bed. He dressed quickly, made himself coffee, and was out of the house before anyone stirred.

Last night, he had heard more than enough to last him a lifetime, and the prospect of sitting at the table with the ever-loving couple this morning wasn't something he wanted to face.

Hearing Kate moan through the walls and *them* whispering caused him to be heartsick. For most of the night he laid there in the darkness with a lump in the back of his throat, his heart breaking.

Pretending everything was fine and dandy was a lot harder than he thought it would be, and right now, he doubted if he could maintain the charade much longer. Love was the strongest emotion known to mankind, or so that was his thought. And he loved Joe without a doubt. Joe had been his, they had belonged to each other for so long and now...

His mind ran amuck with many cuss words as he crossed the path leading into the barn. What he needed was to get away. The ground was soft under his boots as he tread closer to the barn door, the rain had made a mess of everything. The crops were pretty self-sufficient at this stage, so, darn it, he was taking the morning off and doing what he wanted to do for once.

Riding bareback was easy, he'd been taught to do so as a boy, and as he mounted the horse he looked back at the house, squinting his eyes against the morning sun. For a brief moment, he wondered what Joe and Kate were doing. Then he told himself he shouldn't care. But he did.

Marsden wasn't too far, he could be there and back in a couple of hours. And if they wondered where he was at, then let them wonder and worry. No longer did anyone have a claim to him, he was his own man.

With the wind in his face, Ryan bolted off down the road, his thoughts scattering across the plains surrounding him.

* * * *

Kate stretched lazily, her arms moving down to her side, feeling for him. She stopped once one hand rested on Joe's solid form.

She listened to him snoring, soft and even. Just the sound brought a grin to her face, and that feeling... It was sensational. She still tingled down there. That feeling only came from superb lovemaking, and Joe was one heck of a lover. She'd take him again, right now, if only he was awake.

Answering his ad had been so out of character for her, but darn it, it was the best thing she had ever done in her life thus far. She was ecstatic, giddy, and totally enamored. Never had she experienced such emotions and feelings.

Turning onto her side, she spooned up to Joe's back. Sliding one arm over him, her hand nestled onto his chest, her fingers dancing across his pectoral muscles. He stirred.

"Hey," he murmured, coming to life. He sounded like a bear.

She giggled.

"What's so funny?" he asked, turning to face her.

"You sound like a big old bear."

He nodded. "That's me first thing in the morning. I always rise early, but I can't say I've ever enjoyed it. I guess it just comes with the life. There's so much work that has to be done in a day and I'm not one to shirk my duty."

Work. She hadn't really ever become acquainted with the word in its truest sense. But she supposed she would soon enough. She not

only had to pull her own weight, but was expected to.

“It’s hard work, isn’t it?” Kate motioned with one hand to everything and nothing at the same time surrounding them. “One man could never do it alone.”

“Definitely not,” answered Joe, sliding out bed. He stood and stretched, his naked, sculpted form rippling as he worked out the kinks in his muscles. “Ryan is a huge help, in fact, he probably does more than I do around here.”

Kate paused for a moment before she spoke. “I like Ryan, but I feel like an intruder whenever I’m around him.”

“He’ll get used to you. He hasn’t a choice, nor say in the matter. We’re married, you’re my wife, and that’s the end of it. I’ll speak to him when I see him today. I thought I heard him earlier, up and about. My guess is that he’s already set about working this morning.”

Kate hesitated again. “I don’t want to stir any trouble between you two. I’d like for us to all get along.”

Joe cast her a knowing look. “You’re not stirring anything that perhaps hasn’t already been there way before you came along. I will talk to him, and hopefully all will be fine.”

Kate watched Joe slip into his clothes. She climbed out of bed and dressed, following him.

“Yup, he’s already up and gone.” Joe touched the coffee pot on the stove. “It’s still hot.” He poured two cups and offered one to her before taking his seat at the table.

Bacon, eggs, and toasted bread were soon served up as Kate made her way around, her surroundings becoming more familiar to her.

Watching Joe eat was a joy in itself. Her eyes never left him as she sat there trying not to be obvious, sipping her coffee, yet marveling at the man’s more-than-adequate appetite. She’d definitely have to brush up on her culinary skills. Perhaps she could order a cookbook or two, or maybe the shop in town stocked them. The next time she ventured that way she’d be sure to check.

“Well, I’m off,” proclaimed Joe, stepping away from the table.

“That breakfast was great.” He leaned down, kissing her gently on the cheek. “I’ll be back at noon for dinner. And you might want to think about doing the wash.”

The wash?

She must have looked clueless to him.

“Clothes,” he added. “There’s a huge kettle set up out in the yard to the left of here. Just fill it with water, start a fire underneath, and the washtub and scrubbing board is there too. The laundry soap’s in the pantry on the lowest shelf.”

Get the look of stupid off your face, she told herself, forcing a smile.

“I’ll get right on it once I clean up in here.” She watched him grab his hat, looking back at her waving good-bye.

Looking around, Kate sighed. She had a long day set forth ahead of her and she figured she best dig in.

* * * *

Where the heck was he? Joe searched the property twice and still, no Ryan.

Fear now crept into his heart. What if Ryan had just decided to take off without telling him? What if this was it, and he never saw him again?

It’s nothing. He’s probably just screwing off somewhere, letting out steam. If he’s not back at day’s end, then I’ll go looking for him.

Joe kicked at a rock in frustration and nearly slipped in the mud. The rain had done a number on the land turning everything to muck.

Joe looked back to the house. Kate was fumbling with the washtub, she looked to be hauling it in place. He shook his head as he watched her, she was a fish out of water, but what she lacked in experience, she made up for in determination. He admired that.

Last night had been his second time with a woman and this time, it had been much better than the first.

Kate had been more attentive, she had opened herself to him in more ways than just the physical. Of course the physical was... great, but it was also nice to feel an attachment.

* * * *

The city. Okay, well it wasn't quite a city but rather a large town. But it was as close enough for Ryan to get lost in the crowd if he wished to do so.

He ran the length of one of many main drags, which linked everything together, and then his eyes settled on just what he had been looking for—a saloon.

He wasn't much of a drinker. The last time he'd touched the stuff he ended up getting sloshed with Joe, and they'd both been rendered useless for a day, subsequently vowing never to touch the devil's brew again.

Given the recent events in his life, he needed an escape. He needed to relax, and, to hell with it, he needed a drink. With the horse secured in front of the large wooden structure, he waltzed inside.

“What'll ya have?” asked the bartender who looked to be about his own age. The young man looked him over and smiled. “You're new to these parts. I haven't seen you in here before. Are you from around here?”

“I'm just passing through. It's one heck of a hot day outside, and I thought a drink would be refreshing.”

“That it is,” said the bartender with a nod. “So what'll it be?”

“Whiskey.”

“House best.” The bartender slid a glass in front of Ryan, accepting the coins Ryan handed him.

“Slow day?” asked Ryan, taking a sip of the strong liquor. He winced and forced it down, feeling the warmth wash down his throat and into his belly.

The bartender shrugged his shoulders. “The usual. The weekdays

are quiet, the nights pick up, and on the weekend, the place is blocked from daylight well on into the morning.”

“Makes sense. I suspect most are looking to let off a bit of steam after working their asses off all week.”

“And then some,” added the bartender with a wink. “We keep a couple of girls on to see to their needs.” He motioned to a large staircase that wound its way up to the second floor. “If you’re looking for some entertainment, it’s easily arranged, for a price.”

“Not right now. But perhaps later.”

The bartender grinned and extended his hand. “Name’s Winter. And yes it’s an odd name. My mother loved the season.”

“Ryan,” he replied, gripping the man’s hand. “This is quite the place you have here.”

“My father started it, and when he passed on three years ago, I took hold of the reins. It’s a living, and a honest one, even if some folks in town don’t think so.”

Their eyes met for a moment. A moment of understanding passed between the two men.

Ryan lowered his eyes to the top of the bar, concentrating on finishing his drink. After downing the last drops, he asked for another.

After his fifth, he tried to stand. He wasn’t much of a drinker. Taking two steps forward, the last thing he remembered was the floor coming to meet him.

* * * *

Once night had fallen, that’s when Joe started to get seriously worried. Ryan had yet to return, and his intuition told him that something had to be wrong.

Even in Ryan’s most scatterbrained moments, he wouldn’t just run off like this, not for this long.

Kate sat across from him, watching him as he ate. “He hasn’t come back,” she said, fiddling with her fork. “It’s just as I have

suspected all along. If I had known that I would be putting someone out like this with my presence, I would never have come here. This was his home way before it ever became mine.” Pushing her plate away, Kate stood up from the table and walked to the front door. Opening it, she looked out into the night. “I just hope nothing has happened to him.”

He should just tell her, be outright with everything. If honesty truly was the best policy, then it was the right thing to do. He opened his mouth and went to start, but words didn’t come.

What made him think that Kate would be any different from the rest? The rumors about him and Ryan, the looks and the gossip that had hounded them. No, they certainly didn’t understand, and they had only just suspected. She wouldn’t either. How could she accept her husband sleeping with another man, or better yet, loving one?

“If it’s meant, he’ll come back to us.”

She turned and glared at him. “You don’t get it, Joe. I’ve done this. I’ve chased him off. I don’t feel right about this.”

Her eyes flickered with concern.

“Kate, there’s something I think you should know.”

“Joe? I don’t like that look you’re giving me. What’s going on? I’ve stepped into something haven’t it?”

He nodded. “Yes Kate, yes you have.”

Chapter Eight

I'm dead. The two words that echoed first in his mind came out of his mouth. "I'm dead."

A voice chuckled. "Not dead, but I suspect you may feel like you are for the next day or so." It was the bartender, Winter.

"Where the heck am I, and what happened? Did someone take a swing at me? My head feels like it's about to bust wide open."

Winter grinned. "You had a bit too much drink and when you went to stand, down you went. This is my room. I figured you needed a place to rest until you're up and on the go again."

"Thanks—er, I feel fine now, so I can go and leave you be." Ryan attempted to stand but fell back onto the bed. His head throbbed to no end. "Damn it!" he muttered.

Winter sat on the bed next to him, his eyes wide with amusement and a smirk crossing his lips. "You're staying put, at least until tomorrow."

"But—"

"No buts. And that's all there is to say about it."

Ryan settled back onto the bed, his head resting on the pillow. Embarrassment washed over him. "I never could handle my drink."

"No harm done." Winter smiled, pressing one hand down upon Ryan's shoulder.

Hot damn, the guy had sexy eyes. Through the dimly lit room, he could see that they were light green with tiny specks of brown.

"You're tense," commented Winter.

Ryan nodded. He didn't dare move an inch when Winter slipped his hand underneath his shirt. A small sigh escaped his lips. It felt so

good to have a man touch him again. He craved the one-on-one intimacy.

A look was exchanged between them. Winter swallowed hard. “You’re a very handsome man, Ryan.”

Ryan felt his cheeks flush at the compliment. Glancing downward onto his chest, he watched as Winter unbuttoned his shirt. The man’s hand brushed against his nipples as he opened it to reveal Ryan’s chest.

Ryan looked up, Winter bit down on his bottom lip. His lust-filled eyes glazed. “You’re truly beautiful. Total perfection and then some.”

Ryan watched Winter lean in over him, Winter’s lips now connecting with his left nipple. At first, Winter hesitated, as if he expected Ryan to stop him. But why the hell would he stop something, something that felt so damned good?

Ryan moaned, Winter’s lips sucking his nipple, nibbling just enough to make him react.

“You like that?” asked Winter, his eyes curious as if they questioned just how far he could take things.

“Yeah, I like that.” Ryan inhaled deep, holding his breath for a minute before exhaling. He curled his fingers into Winter’s hair, the man’s head moving lower, trailing little kisses, Winter’s fingers fumbling with his belt buckle.

And Ryan wanted it, he wanted it bad. He needed this man to caress him, to touch him in ways that could only be done behind closed doors in private, away from prying eyes and idle gossips.

Ryan could feel the burning sensation grow between his legs, his cock swelling, he ached. Every inch of him down there sought release and when Winter set him free, he groaned.

“Well, look at that,” commented Winter, his hands snaking around Ryan’s engorged cock. “Someone’s *very* glad to see me.”

“I’ll be even more glad when you take me in your mouth.” Ryan flashed a boyish grin. Suddenly his headache was all but gone. All he wanted now was to feel pleasure, unabashed, hot, dirty pleasure.

In one swift movement, Winter hauled Ryan's trousers down across his hips. Now fully exposed, Ryan grabbed himself. "You want that, eh?" he asked, one corner of his mouth curled in a wicked, snake-like grin. He'd always been submissive to Joe, but with this man, he'd play differently.

"I do, I want it bad. I noticed you from the first moment you strutted into the saloon. Everything about you made me wanna—"

"Wanna what? Tell me what you want to do to me." Ryan was enjoying this immensely.

Now firmly planted between Ryan's legs, Winter gazed at him, gingerly stroking his cock. "I wanted to strip you down, lick you from head-to-toe, and have you," Winter paused.

"And?"

"I... want you inside me. I want you to stick this inside me, deep."

"How much do you want it?"

"More than anything."

* * * *

"Just exactly what are you saying?" asked Kate, arms folded across her chest. From the get-go, deep down she had felt that something wasn't right with the whole situation.

The tension, the looks that Ryan had often given her when he thought she hadn't been looking, and him distancing himself from Joe. It was as if the two men may have had some sort of relationship other than just friendship. But that wasn't possible, was it?

She erased the thought from her mind. It was silly to think such a thing. Joe wasn't that way, he was all man. He'd proved that to her in bed.

* * * *

"Before you came, I mean before you arrived there was something

between me and Ryan.” Joe stood from the table and paced the room.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I know that you two were very close, being best friends and all.”

“It was more than close, Kate. I don’t even know how to talk about this.” Joe stopped, catching her gaze. Their gazes locked with one another. “I’ve kept this hidden for so long it just feels so damned awkward to talk about. It’s the kind of thing that was never meant to come out.”

“Close,” her voice rose another octave. Was he telling her what she thought he was telling her? This couldn’t be true.

“It was romantic.”

Silence sluiced through the air between them.

Kate’s mind went blank. She went to speak and nothing came out. There were no words to explain the shock that had overtaken her. She opened the front door and stepped out onto the front porch, the humid night air sweeping over her. She gripped the railing, feeling like she might be sick, her stomach churning, her heart racing. Did he really mean what he had just revealed to her?

In less than a minute, her world came crashing down, and when she felt Joe’s hand come to rest upon her right shoulder, that’s when she lost it.

“You two were together? Intimately?” Her voice broke saying the words, a look of confusion plastered across her face.

“Kate, I never meant to entwine you into this.”

“Well, what were you thinking when you placed that ad for a wife? If it hadn’t been me, it would have been some other poor, unsuspecting woman. And how is that fair, Joe? Do you think that’s fair to lead a woman into this hotbed of... immorality?” She winced at the last word, memories of her father and his thoughts regarding her own indiscretions came flooding back. She wasn’t in much of a position to judge, but darn it, she felt like a fool. A fool who had rushed into something that was beyond her realm of understanding.

Anger coursed through her veins like fire. How dare he do this to

her?

“No, it wasn’t, and I’m sorry. I’m truly sorry for everything I’ve done, but I needed a wife.”

“You needed a wife,” she scoffed at him, shaking her head. “Much like you need common sense I suppose, because that, Joe, you definitely lack.”

“People.” He tossed both hands into the air. “They were talking, about me and Ryan. There were rumors and well, I figured having a female here might help alleviate the situation.”

“A token wife? Well, that makes me feel so much better. At least I served a purpose other than cooking and cleaning.”

“Kate.” He stepped forward toward her.

“I’d advise you to keep your distance from me at this time.” Her gander was up and she did not, under any circumstance, husband or not, want this man near her any more than he already was.

“So let me see if I have this right. You placed an ad, I responded and came here.”

He nodded.

“Were you thinking about anyone else besides yourself when you were hatching this plan?” Goodness gracious, the man was so self-centered.

“I just thought it would be better for all of us involved.”

“But that’s where you’re wrong. It may have been better for you, but what about me and, land sakes, what about Ryan? Where was he to stand in all of this? I now understand why he’s run off. You practically drove him away from here, his home.”

“You’re right. Everything you say is right, and I hate myself for it.” Joe ran down the steps out into the darkness.

She didn’t call after him. If he had been expecting her to, then he was plum out of luck.

Kate wasn’t naive to the ways of the world. She knew that men like Joe and Ryan existed. Of course it was never talked about openly in polite society. She’d heard her father once or twice reference to a

couple of men he felt were rather *flighty*. And once when she had asked her mother what it had meant she was told to stop asking silly questions and to mind her manners. In the end, she figured it out on her own.

* * * *

Winter's tongue amazed Ryan. The man had talent, he'd give him that much credit. And to think such a mild-mannered, clean-cut man was practically a wildcat in bed. The irony amused him.

Of one thing he was certain: Ryan wanted this man naked. Now!

"Let me see you," he said, his right hand caressing Winter's cheek.

Winter withdrew Ryan's cock from his mouth and grinned. "This sure is something. I could suck it all night long."

"You'll get your chance, but right now I want you naked next to me. I have some exploration of my own I'd like to do."

"Yes, sir."

Ryan looked on eagerly as Winter first shed his shirt. When he slipped the trousers from his slender hips, Ryan stifled a gasp. Winter's penis was a lot bigger than he had expected.

Ryan's gaze roamed up and down the toned, naked form now displayed before him. The man was candy, and Ryan wanted to lick him all over. With one hand, he beckoned for Winter to join him again. This was going to be one hell of a night. And right now, Joe was the furthest thing from his thoughts.

Saddling up to him, Ryan could feel the heat emanating from Winter's body. He curled one arm around the man and pulled him in close. Their eyes locked, their lips met with a lusty embrace, toying with each other's tongues.

Winter was the first to break away, his eyes alight with mischief. "Hold on there, tiger."

Ryan laughed. "What can I say other than I can't get enough of

you.” His hands slid across Winter’s smooth chest. “You excite me to no end.” And damn, the man even smelled good, like soap with just the slightest hint of musk; Winter’s man-scent that made Ryan want to devour him and come back for seconds.

“You’re cute, very cute,” muttered Ryan. Both now faced each other side by side. And when he rolled onto his back, he pulled Winter on top of him. Winter ground against him, the sensation was fantastic. Each vying the other for dominance. But this time Ryan was coming out on top.

Ryan grabbed Winter’s head and kissed him sensually this time, savoring each moment. “I want you, now.” The pressure between his legs told him he had to get off soon. He ached for Winter, and when Winter shifted position straddling him, his balls clenched at what was to come next.

Winter spat onto his hand, reaching back to lubricate his butt. Ryan grunted when he felt Winter grab him, taking aim.

Feeling Winter yield to him as he pushed his hips upward, Ryan let loose with a deep groan. Fuck, the guy was tight, so deliciously tight and hot, the heat now wrapped around him was out of this world.

It was like being enveloped within a silk glove, not that he knew what a silk glove felt like, he’d never even seen one much less felt one. But it’s what he imagined one must feel like.

“Oh yeah, that’s it. Slide into me.” Winter tossed his head back. A small cry escaped his lips.

Ryan, grabbed Winter by the waist, gripping him tight. He wasn’t letting him go until they were done.

Small beads of sweat covered both men, their skin sticking together as one bumped against the other.

Winter pulled up and slammed down. This time Ryan went deep inside, Winter’s tight hole swallowing him, holding him.

“Oh yeah, baby,” crooned Winter. “You feel so damned good. That’s it, do me like that.”

Gearing up, riding the momentum, Ryan slammed into Winter, the

only sound in the room now their moans combined with slapping skin. His balls bounced against Winter's ass cheeks, his cock sinking each time into the silky, wondrous depths.

"God, that feels so good." Ryan groaned, plowing deep. "You're so hot and tight, man."

"Yeah, baby, screw your boy nice and hard." Winter leaned over him slightly, balancing himself against Ryan's chest. "You're so hot, man, I can explode just looking at you. Drill it in me, handsome." Winter's hard-on bounced in the air.

The sight mesmerized Ryan. With one hand he grabbed Winter's cock and started jacking, rubbing his thumb across the head.

"Oh God," cried Winter, his eyes clenched shut. "You're going to make me blow!"

"I'll make you feel so damned good you'll never forget me." Ryan fell into a rhythm, pummeling Winter's butt, stroking his hot, thick hardness. Ryan felt his balls rise and fall, and when they rose again, he grunted, drilling deeper into Winter.

"Oh, yeah, shoot it for me baby," pleaded Winter.

That was all Ryan needed to hear. The pleasure combined with the whole unexpected scenario. Here he was making love to this hot man he'd known only some hours ago, and now the guy was begging to be filled by him. It was way too much for him to handle.

"Oh yeah," he grunted, feeling the cum jet from his cock into Winter's clenching hole. "Take it, take it!"

"I'm going to shoot." Winter hunched over, looking down at Ryan jacking him. "Here it comes. I'm going to shoot all over your hot chest, man."

Ryan heaved a sigh of satisfaction when he felt hot rivets of cum land on his chest. Together, both men fought to catch their breath, to reclaim the situation that had just occurred between them.

Winter collapsed on top of him. "That was sure something." He gingerly kissed Ryan's neck, nuzzling into him.

"It sure was." Ryan ran his fingers through Winter's locks. This is

how it had been with Joe in the beginning. Suddenly he felt sad, very sad.

* * * *

A stranger in a strange land. That's how she felt. Kate walked into the small bedroom, hell-bent on packing and getting out of what was nothing more than a house of lies.

She harbored no ill will toward Ryan, he was just another pawn in Joe's game, like she was. He'd been smart to take off, and she was going to do the exact same thing.

Her mind reeled with everything she had learned less than an hour ago. How could he have led her here under false pretenses? She'd thought he wanted a wife, not a cover-up.

Removing her things from the dresser drawers, she jumped when she heard Joe say her name. He'd come back.

"Kate."

She ignored him, keeping to the task of hand.

"Kate?"

Again, she went about her business. This man didn't deserve her attentions. He could find solace elsewhere for all she cared.

"Kate, what are you doing?"

"What do you think? What does it look like?" she snipped. "I'm going to take a room in town for now, and when I can get it together, I'm heading back to the city where I belong."

"You just can't up and leave like this."

"I can and I will. I refuse to stay with a man in a marriage that's nothing more than a sham. When I said my vows I wanted them to be forever, but not like this." She wanted to cry desperately, but she wouldn't.

"It's not a sham," his voice was pleading. "Kate, contrary to what you may believe, I don't regret our marrying."

"Of course you don't. I'm your cover-up. Just a woman who will

stop them talking in town. You really don't know how it warms my heart to know that." Her voice seethed with cutting sarcasm.

What she said must have hit home. Looking like a man defeated, he turned from her. "You can't go tonight, not in the dark. I'll drive you to town in the morning. You can sleep in here, and I will sleep in the barn."

As he walked away he muttered something to her that sounded remotely like goodnight.

Chapter Nine

Just after dawn, Ryan slipped out of Winter's bed.

"It's early," said Winter, he stretched lazily. "Come back to bed, and we can fool around some."

"Can't be done," replied Ryan, sliding into his trousers. "I wish we could, but I have somewhere I need to be. My horse, where is he?"

Winter sighed, placing his hands behind his head. "I had him taken to the livery. It's just down from the saloon." His eyes connected with Ryan's. "Will I see you again?"

Ryan shrugged. "I can't answer that but maybe." He walked to the bed and leaned down onto Winter, one knee resting on the mattress. "I had a great night and I thank you for it." He placed a kiss on Winter's left cheek. "You're a great guy."

"But there's someone else on your mind. I can see it in your eyes when I look at you."

He couldn't lie to the guy. "There is. I have some unfinished business that I need to take care of."

Winter wrapped his arms around Ryan's neck, planting a deep kiss on his lips. "I hope everything works out for you, handsome. And if you need me, you know where I am. I'm more than willing to see you again. Guys like you are few and far between around these parts."

A thought crossed Ryan's mind. It wasn't easy to meet men of their persuasion, it wasn't like a guy could be open about this. "But you manage, right?"

"Manage?" asked Winter. "You mean, with men?"

Ryan nodded.

"I do okay, I guess. It isn't easy but yeah, there are some that

come and go. It's hard when you'd like to have something more long-term and stable. I'm starting to think that it's not meant to be. You just have to take what you can get and settle for that."

Ryan sympathized with Winter. He'd thought he had it forever with Joe until Kate came along. Now, it was practically over and done with. Yet, something inside him was refusing to let go.

With one last kiss, he was gone. He promised Winter they would see each other again, though deep down he knew they wouldn't.

After he had saddled up at the livery, he made his way out of town and home, or what he had known as home. Again, now he wasn't so sure.

* * * *

Kate spent most of the night in bed awake, staring at the ceiling, looking to the lone window in the room.

She'd heard Joe banging around earlier and guessed from the smell of coffee that he'd fixed himself breakfast before continuing to his workday. She hoped he wouldn't forget his promise to run her into town. But if he did, she'd walk, despite the long distance.

Today she felt calmer, less angry, but the hurt remained. And the funny thing was, after she got over the initial shock of knowing that Joe and Ryan had carried on an intimate relationship together, she was more upset with Joe's lies more so than the actual act itself. Love was love, and she had nothing against where anyone else found it or with whom. It wasn't her place to judge, nor did she want to.

The prospects of going back to the city, back to her father, caused her to shudder whenever the very thought entered her mind. But what choice did she have? She had some money, more than enough to set up house if she chose to do so. Yet, starting over somewhere new once again, well, it was off-putting.

Choices. Too many choices. She slipped out of bed and dressed. She felt lost. It wasn't a feeling she hoped to ever feel again once this

kerfuffle had come to pass.

Kate paused long enough to pour herself a cup of coffee, she wasn't hungry, and after she finished she'd go and find Joe to take her from here. That was her plan such as it was, the rest she could figure out later.

* * * *

Joe wiped the sweat from his brow as he cleaned the stalls in the barn. Only one horse remained, since Ryan had taken off with the other.

The trotting sounds were the first to catch his attention, causing him to look up from his work. Ryan.

"Where the hell have you been?" asked Joe, raising his voice as Ryan neared him on the horse.

Joe's eyes followed Ryan as the guy swung himself down from the horse, landing on his feet just a foot away.

"I needed to get away, to clear my head. I wasn't thinking straight," muttered Ryan, walking into the barn. "But I'm back and I feel better."

"You feel better," scoffed Joe. "Well I'm sure as shit happy that someone is. She knows, I told her last night."

"Knows about what?"

"Us."

"There is, nor was there ever, any *us*," spat Ryan.

"I hate myself. So much it hurts. And when you took off, I thought you'd never come back."

"That might have been for the best, for all of us," replied Ryan, lying back on a pile of hay. "I'm in no mood to fight, argue, or anything else."

Joe stood over Ryan. He reflected on the first time they had come together. Falling to his knees, he reached out to caress Ryan's cheek.

"That probably isn't a good idea," said Ryan, yet Joe couldn't help

notice that Ryan wasn't pulling away from him. Try as he might, he couldn't envision his life without Ryan. This man, this perfect, sweet, handsome man meant a hell of a lot to him. Even now his heart raced at just the thought of them being together.

"Don't ever leave me. Promise me that you'll never run off again."

"I can't and won't promise you anything," explained Ryan. "It really hurt to think that you could just toss me away like that. I understand the reasons behind bringing Kate here and I don't dislike her. But I don't have to like what you did to me. I didn't deserve to be treated that way."

"I'm an idiot."

Ryan raised one brow. "I can't say that I disagree with that." A smirk rolled across his lips.

"Hey now. I'm trying my best here. The fact is, I love you so much and I don't think I even began to realize it until I thought I had lost you forever."

Looking at the man he'd just professed his love to, Joe searched Ryan's eyes for some remnant of what he must have been thinking. He was torn—he didn't want to lose Ryan or Kate. But Kate already seemed to be a lost cause.

Ryan's hands ran the length of Joe's shoulder as Joe closed in on him. "I missed you, I missed us. And most importantly I missed this." They kissed.

* * * *

"Well now, what do we have here?" With both hands on hips, Kate eagerly waited for an explanation. She was amused more than anything, wickedly amused. "Welcome back Ryan, I hope you enjoyed your little interlude away. It's a pity we now meet in passing."

She watched, still amused as the two men scrambled from the pile

of hay. “Joe, you promised to take me into town?”

“Yeah, we just—” Joe had now turned a bright shade of red.

“No need to explain.” She placed one hand out in front of her to silence him. She swallowed hard, the lump in her throat was back, making another appearance. And this time she knew she couldn’t hold back her emotions. One too many times things had went bad... Darcy, Joe. And for once she thought she had found it, a decent man, marriage, a place to call home, love.

In the flash of a moment, she was in Joe’s arms. She sobbed as he held her and when she tried to talk, she couldn’t. And if she could, what would she have said? Were there any words to describe emotions that had wound and mixed themselves up inside her, confusing her?

“Kate, I know you don’t believe me but I will say it again. I never meant to hurt you. I don’t want you to go. You’re my wife. That means more than just words to me.”

His arms, so big, so strong. Falling into him, Kate suddenly felt warm, too warm. She looked up at the barn’s ceiling and everything spun ’round and ’round. She was spinning, out of control, falling into a dark hole. The last thing she remembered was going limp, limp like a rag doll. That was a funny thought.

* * * *

“I think it was the heat,” explained Ryan. Kate now lay upon the bed back inside the house. With eyes closed, cheeks flushed, she looked much less threatening and more, if anything, like a lost soul. He was reminded of himself.

Kate was the innocent in all this. Truly she hadn’t known what she was getting into when she made the decision to come and marry Joe. Ryan was certain that if she had, her good sense would have taken over and she would have declined.

“Is she okay?” asked Joe, a worried look slashed across his face. “It’s nothing serious is it? I could fetch the doctor.”

“I think she’ll be fine. Just wet a washcloth and hand it to me.” Ryan touched Kate’s cheek. He was sure she’d be okay physically, but emotionally was a whole other matter of concern. It was the second that he was sure that caused her to collapse, the heat being secondary.

“If anything happens to her, I’ll blame myself,” muttered Joe, pacing the small room.

“Kate,” whispered Ryan, calling to her. She didn’t respond. “Kate.” Again, nothing.

He looked to Joe. “I guess for now we just wait.”

* * * *

Kate stirred at first, then she opened her eyes and there was a man, a very handsome man but more boyish than anything.

He sat on the bed, holding her hand and at first, she didn’t remember who he was.

With his shirt half unbuttoned she spied a nicely defined, tanned chest and deep down something stirred within her.

“She’s awake.” Then she realized it was Ryan, Joe’s Ryan, and how she had stumbled upon the two men kissing in the barn.

She reached out and touched Ryan’s chest. She’d always liked Ryan. He was a stark contrast to Joe, who was the stronger one, the dominant one of the two.

Ryan felt soft, smooth under her touch. His gaze, warm and soulful, looked at her as if wondering what she was about to do next.

“Kate, I was so worried.” Joe was now kneeling at the edge of the bed.

Looking from one to the other, she then came to a realization. It was as if everything she had known all along had come crystal clear.

“Kiss me,” she ordered.

Both men looked at her and then to each other.

Joe leaned into her first but she stopped him with one hand against his chest while the other still toyed with Ryan. “No, both of you.” It

seemed the perfect solution to their problem.

Their mouths merged, becoming one.

Joe broke away briefly. "I love you both," he murmured.

Joe loved her, he loved Ryan, and she knew she could grow to love both of them and perhaps Ryan would in time grow to love her.

Ryan groaned when she reached between his legs to encase his swollen bulge with her hand. She repeated this gesture with Joe. And out of total curiosity she desperately wanted to see the two men together, doing things that for most would have been taboo. She throbbed at the sheer thought, it was maddening.

"I want to see you together."

"Kate, you don't have to be okay with it," said Joe, casting her an odd look.

"I want to see what you guys do with one another. Show me."

Joe looked to Ryan, who shrugged his shoulder then stood.

Kate was enthralled with the scene unfolding before her. She watched the two men merge in a standing position. Their arms entwined each other, and when they kissed the first time, she held her breath.

Shirts were peeled from hot, sweaty skin and, now bare-chested, both men held each other firm in the other's arms.

Kate felt the hot, burning desire down below increase in its intensity. Her nipples hardened and through the fabric of her chest she rubbed them, her buds now swollen, begging for their own attention.

She watched Joe fall to his knees in front of Ryan. And when he lowered Ryan's trousers she stifled a moan at what was revealed to her for the first time.

She need them both, she wanted them both. But could she even take two men at once? She harkened her thoughts back to a time once when she discovered a book in her father's library. He must have meant to have kept it hidden, but there it was right out in the open, sitting on the top of his desk.

Thumbing through the pages of the black leather-bound book, she

was in total awe at what she had found.

Page after page there were illustrations of a couple in various sexual situations, one of which included two women and a man. She remembered putting the book back where she had found it, terrified her father would find out that she had looked at something that wasn't meant for her eyes.

After Ryan had released Joe, the two men stood before her, each in a very high and obvious state of arousal. Goodness gracious, what had she gotten herself into?

Chapter Ten

Joe licked his lips, looking at Kate. He coiled one arm around Ryan's waist and pulled the guy close to him. Feeling Ryan, sliding up against him, his penis throbbed to no end. "I think it's time you shed your clothes," he said to Kate. "We'll help you."

Now totally and unabashedly naked, she lay there before him looking like a goddess. He'd take control now, he was the dominant one of the three and when he reached down between Kate's legs, slipping a thick finger between her moist lips, he knew she'd be his forever.

She laced her hotness around him and when he slid in a second finger she spread her legs, yielding to him.

"Have you ever?" he asked Ryan. Instinct told Joe that it was possible that Ryan had never been with a woman sexually.

"Never," replied Ryan.

Joe spread Kate's legs wide. With one finger he flicked her hardening nub. "See that," he explained to Ryan. "Touch her there."

Kate groaned, her hips bucked slightly when Ryan made contact.

"That's it, just like that. Slip a finger inside while you play with her. That'll make her feel so good."

Keeping his eyes on Ryan and his manipulations with Kate, Joe moved upward, guiding his hardness toward Kate's mouth.

"That's it, open your mouth and take it inside. Just like that, good girl." Joe felt her envelop him, her tongue gliding his length. "Everything's going to be fine. We'll take good care of you."

She nodded, looking up at him. Her mouth wrapped around him.

"She's so hot and tight," said Ryan. "Can I stick it in her?" He

looked to Joe for approval.

“Kate, would you like Ryan to stick his hot dick inside you?”
asked Joe.

She nodded, groaning.

He looked to Ryan. “That’s a yes.”

* * * *

This was his first time with a woman and he liked it, a lot!

His curiosity now piqued, Ryan drew closer to Kate. He desperately wanted to feel what it was like to be inside that hot, pink tunnel. Taking aim, he pressed into her, all the time watching her lips swallow his hard-on one inch at a time.

She writhed against him, taking him deeper. She wanted it just as bad as he did. “Oh, that’s good,” he said, sinking into her hot center.

“It’s very good,” added Joe, sliding in and out of Kate’s mouth. “I bet that tight ass feels great, too.”

Ryan imagined that if it was anything near what he was feeling currently, it’d be fantastic and then some. But for now he enjoyed Kate’s hot gash sliding up and down on his dick. Damn! She was so wet, he could feel her dripping onto his balls as they slapped against her ass.

Pulling all the way out, he looked down at her gaping hole. He reached down with one hand, sticking two fingers inside, he brought them up to his mouth and tasted them just before he went deep inside her again.

“I want some of that.” Joe stood next to him as he drilled in and out of her.

Now standing back, stroking himself, Ryan watched as Joe assumed position between Kate’s legs. Saddling up behind Joe, he reached around, massaging Joe’s chest.

“That’s great,” murmured Joe.

Joe’s tight muscular ass pressed back against him. He’d never

thought much about doing Joe but now he wondered if Joe would let him.

Wetting one finger in his mouth, he reached down and slid it between Joe's buttocks, feeling for the tight sphincter. Pressing gently, Joe let out a deep guttural moan, but he didn't protest.

Working him, he prodded a little until Joe loosened slightly, allowing him entry with a second finger.

"You're driving me crazy back there," said Joe. "Man, you wanna stick it in me?"

"Yeah, very much so," whispered Ryan, his free hand jerking himself.

Kate sat up in bed slightly. She smiled, one brow raised high. "Do him hard, Ryan." She covered one hand over her mouth as if what she said was highly naughty. "Teach him a lesson."

"Yeah," chimed Joe, his breathing rough and haggard. "I've been a very naughty boy. I need to be punished."

Ryan nodded. "You've been bad, very bad." Grasping his dick, he slid it between Joe's cheeks. "Take it like a man, you know you want it."

* * * *

Ryan was going to split him wide open.

Feeling that thick dick sliding into his virgin ass, he jumped ahead just a fraction, sinking deeper into Kate.

Joe bit down on his bottom lip. It hurt like nothing else he had ever experienced. Is this what Ryan had felt every time they'd done it?

On the receiving end, he grunted, feeling every hard inch. "Man, easy." He winced, hoping that it would feel better soon.

"Just let me in, baby," said Ryan, his breath hot on Joe's ear. "Let me in, open up that tight, little hole of yours."

* * * *

Kate looked on in awe. With her pussy stuffed with Joe's cock, every time he bucked ahead reacting to Ryan penetrating him, she felt a surge of adrenaline rush through her. It was like she was fucking Joe at the same time.

She rubbed her swollen bud with her fingers. Gracious, at any time she felt like she was going to explode, this was foreign. Never with Darcy had she experienced such pleasure.

"You like that?" she asked, her voice taunting Joe. "I bet that big dick feels great inside you."

He nodded, a look of pain mixed with pleasure forged into his eyes. "I've never felt anything like it."

Kate slid from the bed, her hot center tingling with excitement and wanton lust. Standing next to the two men, she explored them, caressed them, licked them in places she had only ever fantasized about.

"On your back," ordered Ryan, pushing Joe forward. He looked to Kate. "Straddle his face."

Ryan was definitely the man now in control. He grabbed her, kissing her deep, slapping her ass playfully as she climbed back onto the bed, assuming position over Joe's eager mouth.

When Joe's hot, writhing tongue connected first with her down there, she gasped. "Keeping doing it just like that." This was about her pleasure, pure and simple.

Seeing Joe splayed on the bed, now in her former position, she wanted to laugh. It was all just so dirty, so wickedly dirty. But she liked it, she liked it a lot.

"I can't keep this going much longer." Ryan pummeled Joe's butt, the bed creaked and groaned beneath them, and the heat in the room was liable to kill them all with the humidity.

* * * *

Ryan groaned, his balls rose once, twice, and then it burst forth, surging up through his cock, his hot seed exploding deep inside Joe's former virgin hole.

He bucked hard as each wave of ecstasy rolled over him. At the same time, he gripped Joe's dick. He stroked hard, until he felt it shudder and then bust. He watched in amazement as hot cum splattered across the man's heaving chest. It was a delightful sight.

Kate squealed and moaned.

It was obvious she was coming, too, and when she did, she called out both their names before collapsing next to Joe on the bed.

The threesome lay together, not a word was said, and it wasn't long before they all drifted off.

Epilogue

After their interlude together, their lives continued on as normal. It was as if everything had been right between them all along.

This pleased Kate.

Coming here as a mail-order bride, she had hoped to start life anew. And leaving the old behind, including lost loves to start over had not only been life changing but liberating. It was most definitely a good thing.

She liked to remark to herself that the two men were like chalk and cheese. Yet, each complemented the other quite nicely, and in turn she brought something to them that they had both lacked.

When all was said and done, she wondered if they could possibly maintain and make a three-way relationship work. It was most unconventional and would remain a secret to any outsiders, but she was willing to try. Perhaps convention wasn't the way to go. She was happy and for now, that's all that mattered.

* * * *

Kate, darling Kate.

Joe smiled whenever he thought of his new bride. She'd adapted to everything so easily.

All she wanted was love, a home, and to feel secure, and he'd spend the rest of his life making that a top priority.

And then there was Ryan. Sweet, handsome, and sometimes brooding Ryan.

Often, Ryan still demanded Joe's attention and affections. But the

guy realized that it wasn't a competition and that all three would be treated as equals.

Ryan was his first love. Ryan would always and forever hold a special place deep inside his heart.

* * * *

Talk about one hell of a whirlwind.

Thinking back, Ryan felt like a fool with all of his dramatics. But the thought of losing Joe scared the hell out of him.

He'd built his life and world around Joe. Joe was everything to him, and without him, he'd be lost.

Kate. What could he say about Kate?

She's come into his life and at first, he just wished she would go away. But after getting to know her, he knew that if anything he'd found a kindred spirit. She was much like him, and they both loved Joe. It was a common bond they shared.

Theirs was a relationship based on respect and love. And he was happy she decided to stay on with them.

They were a family.

And just like a fairytale he had once read in a book as a boy, they now had their own happily-ever-after.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Xondra Day lives for romance, whether it's between the pages of a book, or with the love of her life, Adam.

Xondra lives with her fiancé and Charlie the cat in Eastern Canada, and doesn't mind the snow one bit. Well, maybe a little. When not writing, she loves to read, garden when it's nice out, and quilt when it isn't.

She also enjoys keeping fit and spending time out in the country, either on foot or by bike.



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