

A close-up, sepia-toned photograph of a man and a woman's faces. The woman is on the left, looking towards the man on the right. The lighting is soft and intimate.

LILY GRAISON

His Brother's Wife



A Willow Creek Novel

Chapter One

He was going to skin that boy alive. Rafe bit his tongue to keep from shouting and crossed the yard to the barn, his heated gaze on Jesse. Stopping by the fence, he adjusted his hat and propped his foot on the bottom rung. And waited. He hid a smile when Jesse stopped, turned to face him and yelled, “What?”

Rafe propped his arms on his raised knee. “Just wondering where the hell you think you’re going. We’ve got things to do around here if you haven’t noticed.”

Jesse rolled his eyes and cinched the mule before leading him to the wagon. “I got places to be today.”

“Like?”

“Like none of your damn business.”

Straightening, Rafe raised an eyebrow at him. “You aren’t too big for me to take a belt to your hide.”

Jesse scoffed. “Try it.”

“Don’t tempt me.” The rebellious look on his brother’s face darkened, the freckles splattered across Jesse’s cheeks and nose the same color as the thick thatch of red hair on his head. In the ten years, he’d been gone, the kid had grown almost as tall as he was. His attitude had too. He lowered his leg to the ground and tried to keep the irritation out of his voice. “Where are you going, Jesse?”

“Town.”

“What for?” Jesse mumbled something under his breath, his face growing brighter red before he turned his back to him. His movements were jerky, his shoulders held rigidly. “We don’t need anything from town that can’t wait and that hole in the barn roof isn’t going to fix itself. Unhitch that mule and go grab that bucket of nails out by the work shed.” Rafe walked off, hoping Jesse would just do as told for once.

A glance over his shoulder and he bit his tongue, trying to rein in his temper. Jesse was still hitching up the mule. Rafe stopped, turned to look at him again, and had to remind himself that killing a man, even your own kin, was illegal. If the boy didn’t already hate him with a passion he’d be tempted to take a belt to his backside just as he’d threatened to do.

He watched him finish hitching the mule, his lips bloodless from pinching them together. The silence stretched until Rafe thought he could touch it. “Jesse, what did I say?”

“I don’t really give a damn what you said. Fix the barn yourself. I have things to do.”

That was it. The last straw. Rafe closed the distance between them at a fast clip, his booted feet hitting the ground in loud pops. “And what would that be?”

Jesse swallowed and licked his lips. His face went a funny shade of white before he whispered, “I ordered me a wife.”

It took Rafe a full minute before what Jesse said registered. He stared down at him, letting the words rattle around in his head before he

blinked and focused his eyes. "You want to run that by me one more time?"

Jesse flicked a quick look at him before lowering his head. "I ordered me a wife." He swallowed, his throat moving as he did before he lifted his head, his eyes flashing. "And don't go yelling at me for it either cause it ain't going to do you no good."

He ordered a wife? Rafe tried to wrap his head around the statement but as much as he tried, it just didn't make sense. Jesse wasn't old enough to marry. He was just a kid but there he stood, head held high, shoulders back and looking as sure as any man about to make the biggest mistake of their life.

He bit his tongue to keep from shouting what a little fool he was, adjusting his hat instead, and propped his foot on the wagon wheel to give himself more time to collect his thoughts. When he knew he could speak without yelling, he opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

Jesse's face turned a light shade of pink before the look in his eyes turned murderous. "Just get to the yelling part, Rafe. I've got places to be and you're wasting my time!"

Rafe flinched. Jesse's high pitched voice grated on his nerves most days, more so when he yelled. The urge to bend the boy over his knee was strong but he refused to treat Jesse like a child even though, in his eyes, the kid would always be his little brother.

When he left home ten years ago, the kid has been docile and sweet natured. That wasn't the case now. Since the day he'd returned six

months ago, Jesse had fought him at every turn. Everything he said turned into a battle of wills and he was at his wit's end trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong. His pa would have whipped that boy bloody for talking to him the way he did.

Why he was the lucky recipient of his anger was a mystery he'd never figure out.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he narrowed his eyes and pinned Jesse with a glare of his own. "I heard that part, little brother. What I want to know is why?"

The mutinous glare Jesse shot him should have scorched the skin right off of him. "Stop calling me little! I'm fifteen years old."

"Fourteen. You have nine whole months before you'll be fifteen."

"So?"

"So... you're too young to get married." The fire in Jesse's eyes matched the temper the boy had developed over the years. "And you are little." Rafe grinned. "My little brother."

Jesse's face turned red again, his fingers curling into his hands to make fists. "I'm tired of everyone in this town calling me your little brother. I'm a man. Have been since pa died and you were off doing God only knows what. It's about time people saw me as a man, so, I ordered me a wife."

Rafe leaned his head to one side. "And what do you plan on doing with her?"

“Doing with her?” Jesse stared at him wide-eyed. “What do you think I’m going to do with her? I’ll make her clean the house and cook my meals. Wash clothes and make sure my socks don’t have no holes in them.”

“And?” Rafe prompted.

“And what?”

Rafe laughed. The boy didn’t have the first clue what he was getting himself in to. “How old is this wife you ordered?”

Jesse shrugged his shoulder. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Rafe raised an eyebrow at him. “What does she look like?” Another shoulder shrug was all the answer he got. “You do realize most of those mail-order brides are plain and dowdy looking spinsters that no other man would marry, right?”

“What difference does it make? I didn’t order her to look at.”

It was obvious his brother didn’t have the first clue what a wife was for. Sure those other things were nice but a man didn’t take a woman to wife just to make a house servant out of her. He wanted a nice warm body to keep him warm at night. A sweet smelling little thing to make the hard days seem a little less rough. Someone to bear his children.

Rafe grinned and slapped Jesse on the shoulder. “You’re right, Jesse. If your wife is here to cook and clean for you and darn your socks, what difference does it make how old she is or what she looks like? Tell you what. When she gets here, I’ll let you have the big room at the top

of the stairs. We can't have your bride sleeping in that tiny room of yours, now can we?"

Jesse's face went a funny shade of white and he raised his hand, scratching the side of his neck. "Why do I need Ma and Pa's old room?"

"For you and your new bride."

When Jesse spoke again, it was a tiny sound that squeaked. "You mean I have to sleep in the same room with her?"

Rafe bit his lip to keep from laughing again. "That's what men do when they take a wife."

"But there ain't but one bed in there."

"Then you'll have to share."

Jesse swallowed, his throat moving with the small action before the boy turned and looked back out over the field. "It'll be okay if she takes that room by herself. I'm comfortable where I am."

The sun was overhead and Rafe felt his stomach give a painful twist. It was past lunch. He looked toward Jesse, seeing his red-tinted face, and the defiance in his eyes, and knew regardless of what he said, the kid would fight him every step of the way.

Bracing himself for the outburst, Rafe nodded toward the house. "Best go on in there and write that bride of yours a letter and tell her you've changed your mind. You're not old enough for a wife, Jesse. You don't even know what a man wants one for."

He turned to the barn, and the gaping hole in the roof he had to fix and motioned to the mule. "When you get finished with that, come put

the mule away and help me with the roof.” He’d taken four steps when Jesse threw his hat at him, hitting him in the back.

“Don’t tell me what to do, Rafe! I’m through taking orders from you. Besides, I can’t send no letter. She’ll be here today.”

Rafe turned to face his brother. “What do you mean she’ll be here today?”

Jesse raised his chin a notch. “I sent away for her months ago. She’s supposed to be on the stagecoach today. That’s why I was hitching up the wagon. I’m going into town to pick her up and see if that preacher is still over at the hotel.”

The mule was hitched to the wagon and Rafe stared at it for long moments before looking back at Jesse. The kid was serious. He could tell by the look in his eyes. “Jesse, you can’t marry some strange woman regardless of what you think. You’re too young. There isn’t a preacher this side of the Mississippi that would do it.”

“We’ll see about that.” Picking up his hat, Jesse brushed it off and put it back on his head, shielding his eyes from the sun. The hat's brim cast his face in shadows, but Rafe didn’t need to see Jesse’s face to know the look being thrown at him would singe the hide off a cows ass.

Watching him march to the wagon, Rafe took off his own hat, ran his fingers through his hair and looked up at sky. “What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

Sighing, he placed his hat back on his head and started after Jesse. When he reached the wagon, he propped his foot on the wheel. “So, what are you going to do?”

Jesse snorted a laugh. “What do you think I’m going to do?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I asked.”

“I’m going to town to pick up my wife. I done told you that.”

Rafe looked toward the sky again hoping some divine answer would slap him across the face and exhaled a long breath when none came. He looked back at Jesse, the fire in his brother’s eyes still shining, and he felt his temper rise again. “You can’t keep her, Jesse. I won’t allow it.”

“You don’t have no say so in it, Big Brother.” Jesse grabbed the reins, throwing them over the front of the wagon and turned, giving Rafe his full attention. “I’m going into town and there isn’t anything you can do about it.”

“I can blister your hide.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Rafe straightened, towering over his brother. “Don’t test me, Jesse. I have enough work to do to last me clean through the winter and I don’t have but a month to get it all done. I don’t have time for this foolishness.”

“Me getting married ain’t foolish. Every man does it at some point. Hell, even you did! I’m just going to do it earlier than most.”

Memories of Katie flooded Rafe's mind so quickly they almost staggered him. He pushed her away like he always did and the anger those memories brought hardened his heart just a little bit more.

Bringing Katie up seemed to accomplish what Jesse hoped it would. The boy had a smug look on his face, and the urge to strangle him until his eyes popped out of their sockets was tempting. The little fool never listened. Why did he think today would be any different, especially with this?

The kid had no idea what he was getting himself into. The woman who came to be married would take one look at Jesse and laugh. Then what? He'll come back home ornery as a bull, he thought. Just like any other day. It would serve him right to be handed his ass by some high-strung woman. Maybe she could put the kid in his place. He sure as hell couldn't.

Rafe repositioned his hat and stared his brother in the eye. There was no talking him out of this, he could see that now. He rarely could when Jesse set his mind to something. Their fights were beginning to be legendary the boy's temper was so out of control, so why not let him have his way for once and let him see, first hand, what it takes to be a man?

“You know what, Jesse? You're right. I think it is time you grew up. Have a little more responsibility than I've allowed. I'll head on in with you to pick up your bride if you don't mind.”

Jesse looked confused for a moment before he nodded and climbed up into the wagon. He waited for Rafe to join him before taking the reins and handing them over. Rafe held back a smile. For someone who was old enough to take a wife, you would think he could handle a wagon, and an older than dirt mule, with confidence. Just goes to show, the kid had a lot to learn yet and his brother's wife was going to give him a lesson he'd never forget.

Chapter Two

They were laughing at her. Grace Kingston's face heated, embarrassment burning her throat and landing on her face as every person in the room guffawed and belly-laughed while staring at her.

Her nervousness about making the journey across the country to marry a man sight-unseen grew tenfold as Ellie, the stagecoach station owner, and the dozen or so men scattered around the room continued to stare after telling them the name of her intended groom.

What was wrong with the man she'd promised to marry that had an entire room full of people laughing?

She'd had a bad feeling the moment the stagecoach stopped and she was helped out to stand on the wooden sidewalk, getting her first good look at the town of Willow Creek. It resembled nothing of Boston and she knew Jesse Samuels, the man she'd agreed to marry, had lied. His descriptive letter had painted a picture in her mind that was filled with wild flowers, fields green with grass and clean mountain air, and a town teeming with life.

How disappointing to realize Willow Creek looked like every other dusty town she'd traveled through to get here.

She'd taken in the dirt road, its deep tracks carved from wagons and horse hooves. Dust seemed to cling to everything in sight and her clothing was covered in a light layer of it in a matter of minutes.

The buildings on the one and only street were lined in uneven rows, the wooden walkways unleveled and tilting toward the rutted road in most places. New construction at the end of town told her the small community was growing but it wouldn't be fast enough for her. She was used to the finer things in life. Why did she think a small pioneer town in the middle of nowhere would be anything like the city she loved and left, to find an adventure?

Her journey so far hadn't been at all as she'd imagined. The money she'd saved to make the trip was all but gone due high priced meals and lodging along the way. The lack of proper hygiene was beginning to make its presence known as her traveling dress was stained and was starting to smell. Of course, most of the stench in the air came from the town's livery stable that sat beside the stagecoach station. The scent of manure and straw filled the air and pulling a perfumed handkerchief from the sleeve of her dress and holding it to her nose, did little to ward off the stench.

The entire situation was deplorable but she had little choice but to see her rash decision through. Which brought her back to Ellie and the men scattered around the room who still snickered at her as if she were the punch line of some joke no one bothered to tell her.

Ellie was heavy set, her graying hair pulled into a tight bun at the back of her head. She had a kind face, wrinkled from laughter and age, and Grace remembered her manners and excused herself without

spouting off a biting remark at the woman's behavior. She turned on her heel and made her way back to the wooden sidewalk outside.

Grace tried her best to look calm but she was failing. Her stomach was in knots as every horrible possibility her friends had told her about screamed through her head in quick succession.

The thought of Jesse Samuels misrepresenting himself was now a reality. The reaction Ellie and the men inside the station had had to mean something. Was her bridegroom a scoundrel instead of a rancher as he'd said? Was he lacking in some way that caused the prospect of marrying him to be so amusing to the townspeople? Was he was a drunkard or worse? A man so ugly the thoughts of giving her body to him would turn her stomach despite his fortune?

Maybe this wasn't a good idea. She knew the possibility of marrying a man who wasn't at all pleasing to the eye was possible but at the time, she felt she had little choice. It was either marry sight-unseen or marry the man she suspected of stealing her father's fortune. A chill raced up her spine at the thought. She'd marry the lowest man in all of Montana before giving that foul beast the satisfaction of having her and her father's money.

She could have changed her mind a number of times during her journey but she hadn't. She'd sold every possession she owned to pay off her father's debts and have enough to travel across the country. Now, she had no choice but to stay. She didn't have the money for a return trip home, and besides, what waited for her there left her feeling desperate.

But would her new bridegroom be just as unwelcome a sight as her old life in Boston?

She walked over to her things, grabbing her skirts before sitting down on top of her trunk, and propped her chin on her hand before sighing. She stared out across the dusty road, watched the townsfolk go about their business and prayed she hadn't made the biggest mistake of her life.

Long minutes of waiting turned into an hour. Grace tapped a heel on the wooden sidewalk and huffed out another breath. A cool breeze sent wisps of dust flurrying across the sidewalk as another wagon rolled over the rutted road. She straightened her back and peered at the driver. He lifted his hat in greeting but kept going just as every other man who passed by did.

She was about to give up hope when she spotted a smaller wagon ambling into town that seemed to be heading in her direction. A man and young boy were both looking at her as they neared the stagecoach station, and she lifted a hand to shield her face from the sun to see them. Surely this wasn't her bridegroom. The wagon was no more than a broken down wooden box with wheels.

When they stopped in front of the station, the man sat staring at her for long minutes before looking to the boy who was doing the same. Neither seemed inclined to move. She stood, stretching the kinks out of her back, and said, "Hello."

The man mumbled something to the boy before he shook his head and jumped to the ground. When he approached her, Grace felt her pulse jump and her lungs seized until she found it hard to breathe.

He was handsome and tall, with dark hair that fell to his shoulders in waves. The brown hat on his head left much of his face in shadow but she could see his eyes were green, in a shade so pale she was mesmerized just looking at them. A light dusting of whiskers was growing in on his chin.

When he stopped in front of her, Grace hoped this was the man she'd been waiting on. He fit the physical description she'd received from Jesse in the letter he sent with his request, and he was more handsome than she'd hoped he would be.

"You Grace?" he asked, repositioning his hat.

Grace nodded her head, her heart thumping in her chest. It was him. This was the man she was to marry. The joy she felt was overwhelming. She smiled when she realized the prospect of being stuck in this tiny town didn't seem like such a burden now. Jesse Samuels was everything she'd hoped to find. A man who was strong, handsome... and who had all his teeth. He wasn't fat nor ugly. He didn't have the look of a drunk and his eyes didn't hold that predatory glint she's seen in so many of the men she'd known in her life. He didn't look like a wealthy rancher but she supposed he wouldn't if he worked his land instead of just hiring others to do it for him.

When he did nothing more than stare at her in return, she looked away. The boy had climbed down from the wagon and was staring at her. His face was bright red, as was his hair, and Grace gave him a smile. His blush deepened before he looked away.

She managed to snap out of her stupor and returned her gaze to the man in front of her. "I was beginning to think you weren't coming."

"It's a long trip into town and that old mule can only go so fast." His gaze moved from her face to her breasts to her hips before coming back up. Grace would have been offended if it hadn't caused such a delicious tingle to run laps up and down her spine. She averted her gaze, watching the boy as he kicked at the sidewalk with the toe of his boot. He was young, long legged, and thin. He'd yet to put on any muscle she could see. He favored her new bridegroom in facial features but that was about it. Their coloring was completely different.

She smiled again, pleased her trip hadn't turned out to be a total mistake and settled her gaze back on those soft green eyes of the man standing before her. "Will we marry now or at some later date? Is there a preacher in town?"

He grinned at her before turning to the boy. "You want to go hunt down that preacher?"

Ellie chose that moment to stick her head out the door of the stagecoach station. She gave a chuckle in Grace's direction before saying, "The preacher ain't here." Nearly everyone in the stagecoach

station was hovering in the doorway of the building. Ellie was smiling, amusement flashing in her eyes. "He left yesterday morning."

"Are you sure?" the youth by the wagon asked.

Ellie laughed before nodding her head. "Afraid so." She glanced at them all before looking toward Grace's bridegroom. "Afternoon, Rafe. I hear there's to be a wedding."

"Seems so."

Grace turned. She stared up at her bridegroom, the man she knew just spoke, but he didn't answer to the name Jesse. "You prefer to be called Rafe?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yep. It's the name my Ma gave me. Everyone uses it."

The snickers started again. Grace took a step to the side so she could see everyone at once and her fatigue started to take its toll. She was getting irritated as well and her confusion was growing. "All right. I'll call you Rafe as well." She smiled at him before asking, "How long will we have to wait to be wed?"

"A while I suppose. The Preacher doesn't get around to these parts but every few months." Rafe repositioned his hat again, glancing over his shoulder to the boy. "But don't worry. Jesse will do right by you. He sent for a bride and he's determined to have one."

Now, Grace was confused. She looked at Rafe, then Ellie and the men standing in the station, before turning to look at the wagon. The redhead boy was still standing there blushing and Grace felt as if she was being pulled in endless circles. Ellie chuckled one last time before

ushering the men back into the building and leaving her alone with Rafe and the boy. "It's been an extremely long day," she said. "I'm afraid I'm a bit confused."

"About what?"

"Well, everything." Grace sighed. "Are you Jesse Samuels?"

"No. I'm Rafe Samuels. Jesse's brother."

Grace's eyes widened. "Oh! Well, that explains my confusion." She laughed, trying to mask her disappointment. "I thought you were my bridegroom."

Rafe smiled, those fine white teeth of his gleaming. His gaze traveled the length of her again, stopping to linger on her breasts for long moments before meeting her eyes. "I'm sorry to say I'm not. There's your groom." He turned and pointed toward the wagon.

The redheaded boy was still there, looking at anything but her. It took Grace only moments for Rafe's words to sink in. Jesse Samuels was there. He just wasn't who she thought he was. "That's Jesse?"

"Yep."

Looking up at Rafe, Grace could see amusement dancing in his eyes. He knew she'd mistaken him for Jesse and he was enjoying her stupidity. And stupid is how she felt. Not only had she agreed to marry sight-unseen, but she'd somehow promised herself to a child. A boy who was too embarrassed to even look her in the eye.

Chapter Three

“He’s just a boy.” Grace felt her chest tighten before her heart started thumping wildly. No wonder everyone inside the station had laughed at her. Jesse Samuels was a child and no one bothered to inform her. They said nothing. Just stood there laughing at her while she made a fool of herself.

Grace glared at those she could see. They had the decency to blush and look away before snickering. She turned back to Jesse. The real Jesse. He was still staring at his feet, his hands shoved into his pockets. The hat on his head shielded his entire face but embarrassment tinted his ears pink.

She sighed, her shoulders dropping before she shook her head. How had this happened? Grace lifted her hand, laying it to her forehead and tried to think. What did she do now? “How old is he?”

Rafe cleared his throat and shifted his weight to one leg. “He’s fourteen.”

Her eyes widened. “Fourteen?”

“Almost fifteen,” Jesse said, managing to look up then. He still didn’t look her in the eye but he wasn’t a mute as she’d begun to think. He stepped up on the sidewalk and shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. “Well, in nine months I will be.”

“Fourteen?” Grace mumbled the number under her breath before her knees gave out and she sat down hard on top of her trunk. She'd

traveled across the entire country to marry the man painted so eloquently in the pages of his letter and here she sat, staring up at a child not even old enough to shave the whiskers from his chin.

When she woke this morning her first thought had been of him, Jesse, the sweet, shy man she'd come to know through the letter he'd sent. He owned his own ranch, he'd said, with a herd of steer so large he lost count of them most days. He worked hard, had a grand two-story home on five hundred acres of prime Montana soil. But he was lonely. He wanted a wife. Someone to share all his fortune with.

And she'd been gullible enough to fall for every single word.

She realized now how foolish she'd been. Her father often accused her of making rash decisions. He was right, of course, and this mistake had cost her everything. Every dime she owned.

Looking up at Rafe, the man she first thought she would marry, she noticed he fit the description Jesse had painted of himself in his letter. But he'd lied. Lied and led her to believe he was someone he wasn't. Why would he do such a thing? She'd been truthful with him. She'd held nothing back from her history. She'd told him of her parents being gone and how she had sold every possession she owned to pay her father's creditors.

Rafe cleared his throat, drawing Grace from her musings. "It's a long way to the house. If we want to make it before dark we'd best get a move on."

The house? Grace stared at him for long moments before what he said registered. Home. He wanted to go home. With her? She stood and looked between him and Jesse. They were both staring at her. When she said nothing, or made any attempt to move, Rafe said, “Grab her things, Jesse.”

She gaped at him before turning toward Jesse again. He crossed the sidewalk and grabbed one of her trunks, lifting it with a grunt before staggering with it to the back of the wagon. She stared at him for long moments. He wore a smug look on his face... until he looked at Rafe. Him, he glared at before crossing the sidewalk to grab her other things.

This can't be happening, she thought as she watched him. He didn't seem to mind that she was older than he was. Or that the age difference even mattered. Or the fact he lied to her and had now been found out. He loaded her trunks and bags as if he hadn't a care in the world.

“Jesse?” When he stopped to look at her, she felt her chest tighten again. She was going to disappoint him. “I'm sorry, but I can't marry you.”

Rafe inhaled a deep breath before looking down the road. Grace watched him, his silence telling her he wasn't going to say a word. He was participating in this farce of a marriage arrangement, or so it seemed.

She turned back to Jesse. “I appreciate your offer of marriage but I'm afraid there's been a terrible mistake.”

Jesse's eyes narrowed, his brows drawing together. "There's no mistake. I ordered a bride. They sent me you."

She stared at him and knew things would get worse before all was said and done. "Yes, but you weren't truthful with me."

His lips were bloodless as he pinched them together into a defiant little line. "Everything I said was the truth. I didn't tell you how old I was, that was all. I've my own house, just like I said. We've got a herd of cattle so you won't starve and I can support you as good as any man here can."

She looked at him and raised a sculpted eyebrow. "Your appearance isn't as you described."

He blushed again and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, most people don't like redheads so I fibbed about that but the rest is true."

Grace sighed. "But you're only a child, Jesse. How can you expect me to marry you?"

The tension Grace felt then was palpable. Jesse turned and glared at Rafe. Rafe glared back. Something was happening between the two and she wasn't privy to the information.

Jesse's body went stiff, his ears now matching the redness of his face and hair when he shifted his attention back to her. "I'm not a child. I can provide for a wife. I've been taking care of myself for a long time now." He turned and stalked toward the wagon, leaning against the side of it and crossing his arms over his chest.

Grace sighed and turned to look at Rafe. "Can you help me, please?"

The man did nothing but shrug his shoulder. Laughter danced in his eyes when he looked at her but the moment he turned toward Jesse, the look softened. Regardless of his actions, or lack of, Grace could tell Rafe knew how touchy the situation was and he didn't want to sway her decision. She felt better knowing he at least shared in her dilemma but that still left her wondering what she was to do now.

She exhaled a long breath. This was all wrong. Everything was falling apart. She couldn't marry a young boy regardless of how much he claimed she could. She almost laughed at the ridiculousness of it all.

Looking over at him again, seeing how young he was, she said, "You do realize I'm much older than you are, don't you?"

"So?"

"So, when you're my age, I'll be near forty. Will you want a wife so old then?"

Jesse looked as if he was thinking about it but shrugged his shoulders moments later. "Don't matter none to me. A wife is a wife. Age is just a number, anyway."

"I see." She chewed her bottom lip, trying to think of anything that would dissuade him. She smiled when an idea hit her. "What does your mother think of all this? Is she going to be all right with sharing her home with your wife?"

"Ain't got no ma. She died years ago."

Grace felt deflated then. So much for that tactic. This wasn't going to be easy any way she went. A glance at Rafe showed him still staring

off down the road. She was at a loss as to what to do or say to convince Jesse she couldn't marry him and the only person who could help her do that was ignoring her.

The month she'd spent traveling by train and stagecoach across the country had fatigued her more than she thought. She was bone weary, hungry, and she'd worn her traveling dress for so many days, she was sure she smelled as rank as that horse stable beside of the station. This situation only added to her stress.

She'd left everything, and everyone, familiar to her behind, determined nothing would stop her from marrying a man of her choice, even if she only picked him from a catalog, just to spite her friends. Now, she was stranded in a dusty little town, in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but the clothes stored in her trunks and a few coins rattling in the bottom of her bag.

A crisp wind blew and even through all the layers she was wearing, Grace shivered. Winter was coming. Even if she had the funds to go back to Boston, she'd be stranded somewhere between here and there. The snows would come and then what would she do?

She glanced back over at Jesse. If she didn't marry him, or someone in Willow Creek, where would she go? How would she survive? She had no money. Nowhere to live.

Rafe glanced her way, a spark of amusement in his eyes. Grace gritted her teeth. The man was enjoying this. He had no intention of

helping her, that much was obvious. Her reaction to the situation couldn't have been a surprise, so why did he even come to town?

The laughter dancing in his green irises said it all. He was waiting. He probably expected her to pitch some sort of fit, to stomp and cry at the injustice of it all. Well, she'd show him!

Besides, she had no other choice.

Turning to face Jesse, she smiled at him before straightening her spine and speaking loud enough for Rafe to hear every word. "Well, we don't have to discuss this out on the street. The preacher isn't in town yet so we'll have to wait regardless. Why don't you show me your home and we can discuss it there?"

Rafe made a choking sound and Grace looked back over her shoulder at him. Amusement wasn't twinkling in those green eyes now. Shock and disbelief were. She smiled at him before walking to the edge of the sidewalk to where the wagon sat. "Would you help me up please, Jesse?"

The boy rushed to her side, smiling for the first time since meeting him as he took her hand and helped her up onto the wagon seat. He hesitated for a moment before looking at Rafe. "You going to drive us back or just stand there?"

Rafe stood motionless for far longer than Grace liked. She half wondered if he was going to refuse. He could have. Instead, he rounded the front of the wagon, climbed into the seat beside of her and took the reins. He gave her a look before shaking his head and turning the mule.

They were rattling down the rutted road out of town before Grace realized how improper this all was. She was leaving with a man and a boy with no proper chaperone, traveling to their home. Of course, she'd traveled across the country without one but the people she met then didn't know her. These people, she'd see whenever she came to town. What would they think of her knowing where she was living?

They would think the worst.

She bit back a groan. She would be ruined. Even if she found other unmarried men in town, would they want her once they realized she was living under the same roof as this man and young boy? Her reputation would be in shambles and there wasn't anything she could do about it. She had no choice. Did she?

She glanced at Rafe out of the corner of her eye, wondering if he had a wife at home. For some odd reason, the thought made Grace's heart kick inside her chest. She almost asked him but decided against it. Of course, if he were married, the situation wouldn't be so perilous. Another woman in the house would halt some of the gossip she knew would be coming her way, but she couldn't find her voice enough to ask the man if he had a woman waiting for him at home. She chose to believe he didn't. They would have made mention of her, right?

He was staring straight ahead, his hat pulled down low over his face so his eyes were shielded from the glare of the sun. His profile showed a strong jaw line with a dusting of stubble from a beard growing in. His nose was straight and narrow, his eyes deep set. He turned to look at her

then and when she met his gaze, her heart slammed against her ribcage so hard it stole her breath. He was so beautiful, his soulful eyes mesmerizing.

The situation was going to be difficult. Having a bridegroom who was no more than a child was distressing enough, but his too-handsome brother, Rafe, would be a problem she wasn't sure how to avoid.

Her attraction to him was undeniable. She'd felt it the moment he stepped onto the sidewalk and turned those oh-so-green eyes on her. How would she ever be able to deal with the situation of being promised to one brother while secretly wanting another? And how did she go about finding a husband in this small town while living under the roof of a man she couldn't help but want?

Chapter Four

Rafe fought the urge to look at her again. Every time he did, his muscles tensed, his heart rate soared and all the blood in his body started to head south.

She was the prettiest thing he'd seen in years. Her blonde hair glistened like spun gold in the sunlight. Her ivory skin was flawless and her eyes were so blue they looked violet. Her lips were rosy pink and full, lashes longer than any he'd seen and the womanly curves he noticed taking shape in her dress caused his mouth to go dry. Thoughts he shouldn't be having at all ran rampant through his mind and he had to remind himself who she was and why she was here.

Jesse had done something most men died trying to do and he'd done it without much effort. He found a beautiful woman to be his wife and he'd be the envy of every man in town, himself included. His brother's wife was a looker. An angel sent through a mail-order bride agency. He almost laughed at the thought of it. What were the odds?

Every man in town would be sending off for a bride now. Chances are, none of them would look like Grace Kingston. He still couldn't believe she'd answered Jesse's ad. He'd seen plenty of the women who answered those listings and never had he seen one that looked anything like this one. They were all plain, too tall, and shapeless.

Grace wasn't.

Her skirts filled the seat and the material rustled as the wagon jolted down the road. The fabric was unlike any he'd seen around here. It was too shiny. Too pink. Too fancy by half. Her hat alone told him she didn't belong in Willow Creek. The thing sat at an odd angle on her head and the top was filled with flowers and feathers. On anyone else, he thought it would have looked ridiculous. On her, it reaffirmed his belief that she didn't belong here. She had money. Lots of it from the looks of her and her trunks. Which begged the question, what was she doing in Montana, promised to a fourteen-year-old boy?

He wanted to laugh just thinking about it. His brother, hot-headed little shit that he was, had snagged himself a real jewel, one Rafe knew he wouldn't be able to keep. Why she'd agreed to come along with them puzzled him. He glanced at her, wondering if she planned to go through with the marriage and the thought made his stomach ache for reason's he didn't want to think about.

The trip back to the farm was made in silence and Rafe was glad for it. He wasn't sure he'd be able to say much if he was forced to do so. When they entered the main gate and he steered the wagon toward the house, the look on Grace's face caused his heart to leap into his throat. She looked horrified, as she should be.

When he stopped, pushing the brake lever with his foot and looping the reins around it, he jumped to the ground and looked up at her. She was still sitting there, staring at the house with wide eyes. Rafe looked as well and sighed. The house was all to hell. Had been since he rolled into

the yard six months earlier. The entire ranch was a wreck. The only thing he could be grateful for was the fact the animals were healthy and he still had a decent size herd of steer. They wouldn't get rich from them but just as Jesse had said, they'd keep them from starving. He hoped.

* * *

Grace stared at the house in stunned silence. It was two stories, just as Jesse's letters had said, but that was about all you could say for it. The windows were so dirty she couldn't see a thing beyond them. The railing on the porch was broken, most of it having fallen into the yard. Two chairs sat by the front door, one leaning precariously to the left.

Chickens ran loose, pecking at the dirt around the house and Grace searched for a single blade of grass. She found it in the pasture where cattle stood grazing.

A barn off to her left looked as pitiful as the house. A hole large enough to fit the wagon inside glared at her from the roof and the lean-to off to one side was at an odd angle. A few buildings further from the house were in ill repair and all in all, the entire place was in ruins.

And this was to be her home?

She turned to look at Rafe where he stood by the wagon. He had the nerve to smile at her, spread his arms wide and say, "Welcome home." He glanced at Jesse before nodding to him. "Take her things in, unhitch this wagon and come help me with the roof." He turned and walked away without a backward glance at her. She watched him disappear

inside the barn before she looked back to the house. The thought of what lay inside caused her stomach to ache. She could only imagine.

Turning to look behind her at Jesse, she offered him a tentative smile. “Could you help me down?” He jumped from the wagon and rounded the side, offering her his hand. When her feet were on the ground, she took a deep breath and glanced in the direction Rafe had gone before making her way to the house.

Her spirits were about as low as they could get, or so she thought, when she stepped over the threshold of the house. She was stunned, too overwhelmed by the shape of the interior to even move. She only did when Jesse prodded her to do so as he started carrying her trunks inside. She watched him take them upstairs, the boards creaking with every step he took before she looked back at the sitting room.

The furniture was in decent shape but the fabric coverings were old and faded. A thick layer of dust lay on every surface and the ashes sitting in the bottom of the fireplace looked as if they’d been there for years. The curtains hanging over the windows were so dark brown, she couldn’t tell if that was the color of them or if they were just that dirty. She was betting on dirty. Everything else was. Even the floor. She could see a trail through the dust that led from the stairs into the next room. She followed it, finding an unused dining room then the kitchen just beyond. This room, unlike the others, wasn’t in as bad a shape. Well, dirt didn’t cover every surface. There were dishes sitting on the shelf above the sink. The table looked clean but the stove gave her pause. Dried food

splatters were cooked onto its surface. The floor looked as if someone had tried to sweep it but it did little good.

Turning and exploring the rest of the house, Grace was met with the same sight in every room. The bedrooms weren't littered with dust but she could tell it had been ages since anyone bothered to give them a thorough cleaning. When she'd seen all she cared to, she searched for Jesse. She found him in the bedroom at the end of the upstairs hall. The room was larger than the others she'd seen and from the smell of it, it hadn't been aired out in a while.

She smiled at him when he turned to look at her. Her things were stacked in the corner by the dresser and she gave the space another look. "Is this to be my room?" she asked, knowing the question was dumb before the words were out of her mouth.

He nodded his head at her, his face once again turning bright red. "Yeah. Used to be my ma and pa's room but it's ours now. If it's okay with ya."

Grace stared at him, his use of the word "ours" ringing inside her head. She watched his ears turn red before he cleared his throat and said, "We can wait until the wedding before I move in though." He fidgeted, swiped at his nose with his fist and shot her a quick glance. "Unless you want me to move in now."

She blinked at him. Move in? To her room? It took her a full minute to find her voice. "Well, seeing as we're not properly wed, maybe we should wait. It's improper enough for me even to be living here before

we're married, let alone us sharing a room." He looked ready to run and Grace had to wonder how much the boy even wanted a wife. He didn't look as if he was that worldly but what did she know of boys? Most women waited for marriage to act upon any such fleshly desires. How the male half of the population went about things was beyond her knowledge.

He looked relieved with her answer, his breath let out in one long sigh. "Don't matter to me none. Rafe's the one said I had to sleep in your room."

"Did he now?" Grace could only imagine what that man had said. He seemed to enjoy watching her squirm in town when confronted with the fact she'd promised herself to a fourteen-year-old boy. Of course, just thinking of him caused her pulse to jump and his image floated in her mind's eye moments later. There was trouble waiting for her where he was concerned. She could feel it in her bones.

"Well, I'm sure with a thorough cleaning the room will be just fine." She walked to the bed, laying her hand on the blanket spread across the top. It would need replacing before she slept on the thing. Turning, she smiled at Jesse before placing her bag on the bed. "I don't suppose you have someone who helps with the chores in the house, do you?"

"Someone like who?"

"Well, a hired servant? Or a woman from another farm who helps?"

Jesse shook his head "Nope. Just me and Rafe. We do what we have to."

“I see.” Grace turned a full circle, noticing the dust collecting on the dresser top. The house was a mess and no one would be around to clean it. No one but her, that is.

Was this why Jesse had ordered a wife? He needed someone to clean his house? She let her gaze linger on him while letting her last thought run through her mind. If he didn’t have anyone to clean, that meant no one would be there to cook either. She sighed. The boy wasn’t looking for a wife, he was looking for a mother.

Marrying and having a family of her own is all she’d wanted when she set out to find a husband but she didn’t expect her first child to be a fourteen-year-old boy. “I think I’ll get settled in,” she said. “Besides, I do believe Rafe asked for your help in the barn.”

Jesse snorted and his face twisted into a grimace. “He thinks he owns the place. Let him fix it.”

The animosity in his voice was clear. For whatever reason, he and Rafe didn’t get along. A host of questions popped into her mind but she ignored them. There was plenty of time for that. “Well then, what do you do around here?”

“Cook and clean but since I got you now, I don’t have to do that anymore. I can do other things.”

“Like what?”

He looked perplexed before shrugging his shoulders. “I’ll find something. My pa was busy from sun up to sundown. I’ll just do what he did.”

“Do you think he would fix the roof on the barn?” She bit back a smile when he shot her a look.

He glanced out the window where the barn sat. Grace looked as well. Rafe stood on the roof staring down at the hole. He’d shed his coat, letting her see that the breadth of his shoulders was just as wide without the added bulk of all that material. He lifted his hat, pushing his hair back before resettling it and bending to grab a plank that lay by his foot. She watched him work for several minutes before the sound of her name startled her. She turned to Jesse, seeing a frown on his face.

“I’m going to go help Rafe. You need me to cook supper tonight or can you handle it?”

She smiled to cover her embarrassment of being caught staring at Rafe. “I think I can manage. Anything, in particular, you would like?”

He shook his head and started across the room. “Don’t matter to me.” He stopped when he reached the door. “Well, as long as it ain’t eggs. I’m sick of ‘em.”

“Isn’t,” she said.

“Huh?”

“As long as it isn’t eggs. Ain’t isn’t proper.”

He raised an eyebrow at her before shaking his head and leaving the room. She listened to his feet shuffle across the floor and the stairs creaking under his weight before turning back to the window. Rafe looked up then, his gaze focused on the house, and even though Grace

knew he couldn't see her through the dirt coating the window, her pulse leaped and butterfly's danced in her stomach.

She turned, putting him out of her mind. She had more important things to think about than how handsome Rafe Samuels was. Like figuring out a way to break Jesse's heart without causing too much pain.

Chapter Five

The sun was setting by the time Rafe walked across the yard toward the house. He stopped by the water pump, filling the bucket and giving his face and hands a scrub. The air was filled with the scent of cooking food and his stomach had been growling since noon. He hoped whatever Grace had fixed wasn't eggs. He was sick of them.

Jesse ran into the house in front of him, the door slamming as it closed behind him and Rafe shook his head. He wasn't sure what had gotten into the boy. Jesse had climbed the ladder onto the barn roof after taking Grace's things inside and started helping him with the repairs without a word said. Which suited him just fine. The less they talked, the less they fought. His sudden urge to help was uncharacteristic and he wondered where the sudden desire came from. He hadn't asked but he had an idea.

When Rafe stepped into the house, his hunch was proven right. Jesse was there, standing by the sink, his face and hands washed while his gaze followed Grace as she flitted around the kitchen setting dishes on the table. She looked up at him as he shut the door, their gazes clashing for brief moments before she looked away. He hung his coat and hat on the peg by the door and smoothed his hair back. Then, he just stood there. He glanced at Jesse. Maybe that's why the kid was standing like a statue by the sink. He didn't know what to do either.

The last time Rafe remembered a woman in this kitchen, it had been his ma, some ten years earlier, before he took off to fight a war that left more scars than he wished to think about. His ma had spent most of her days cooking and cleaning and from the looks of the room, Grace had done the same.

She'd traded in her frilly pink dress and feathered hat for a less fancy version. There were no ruffles on this one and the color was a dark green. Her hair was pinned to the back of her head, a few whips falling down around her face. An old flour sack was tied around her waist as an apron and without all the ruffles from her fancy dress, Rafe could see how tiny she was. Her waist was small, his hands would span it with little help, and the curve of her hips was more enticing than it should have been. He looked away when she turned toward him.

“Do you two eat standing up?”

Jesse cleared his throat and took a step toward the table. “No, ma'am. Just waitin' til you was finished.”

“Waiting until you were finished,” she said, correcting him. Rafe watched Jesse's face, waiting for the blush, but the frown he threw her way was unexpected. He shot a look at him before he grabbed one of the chairs and plopped down in the seat like he couldn't hold his body weight up any longer. When Grace turned to look at him, Rafe followed suit and took his place at the head of the table.

Rafe looked at what Grace had sat out for them in astonishment. He wasn't even sure where she got most of it. Of course, he didn't make a

habit of cataloging the larder every day but he wasn't aware there was so much variety. A small ham sat in the center of the table. Corn, green beans cooked with onions and bacon and fresh biscuits still steaming and dripping with butter met his gaze. He didn't see them but he smelled apples, too. He glanced at the oven and hoped it held those apples, preferably stuffed into a pie crust with plenty of cinnamon and sugar.

When Grace grabbed his plate and started filling it, Jesse looked over at him. The hard glare he was throwing his way said his little brother didn't like not being served first. Rafe smiled at him and looked up at Grace when she sat his plate back in front of him. "Thanks," he mumbled, picking up his fork.

As Grace filled Jesse's plate, then her own, Rafe had to fight the urge to look at her. He'd spent every minute of the day up on that roof stealing glances at the house in the off chance he'd see her without much luck. Now that he could look his fill, he couldn't make himself do it. He had to remind himself every time he thought about her that she wasn't there for him. She was his brother's wife. Or would have been if Jesse were older. Surely the woman wasn't going to marry the kid. Which really begged the question, what was she doing here?

He snuck a peek at her then, watching her take dainty little bites of her food, her free hand tucked into her skirts. She looked out of place in his kitchen. Too fancy to be in such shabby surroundings. He pictured her surrounded by fine china and white lace tablecloths.

She glanced at him and sat her fork on the edge of her plate before dabbing at her mouth with a cloth. He noticed another cloth sitting beside his own glass. He cleared his throat and nodded toward the table. “I have to say, Ms. Kingston, this sure beats the hell out of eggs.”

She smiled. “Well, Jesse said he wasn’t too fond of them.”

“It’s not a matter of being fond of them. It has to do with eating them for every meal.”

“Every meal?” she asked.

He nodded. “It’s about all Jesse’s been willing to fix.”

“I see.” She took a sip of her water before looking at him again. “You never bothered to cook your own meal?”

There was an accusation in her tone and Rafe felt his face heat as she sat staring at him. “I would have if I hadn’t been busting my ass trying to fix this place up. Seems to me, the one doing the least should do the cooking.”

“I do as much as you do!”

When Jesse yelled, Rafe knew a fight was brewing. They’d gone for hours now without an outburst. If Grace hadn’t been sitting there, he would have told Jesse exactly how little he did do, but refrained for her sake. He took another bite of his food and ignored them both.

When their plates were clean, and all the dishes on the table emptied, Grace stood and cleared them away. Rafe looked toward the stove, the smell of apples filling the room and as full as he was, his mouth watered just thinking about a warm apple pie. When Grace

walked toward the stove, a towel in one hand, his heart nearly stopped when she opened the door and reached inside. It was pie. Lord, how long had it been since he'd eaten something as common as apple pie?

She placed it on the table and smiled when Jesse reached for it. "Not so fast. It has to cool first." She slid it out of his reach before turning to the sink. "By the time I'm through with all these dishes, it should be cool enough to eat."

Rafe stood then and looked her way. "Me and Jesse will do the dishes."

"What?" Jesse yelled. "It's what she's here for, Rafe. Let her do 'em."

He shot Jesse a look before walking to the sink, motioning Grace away. "She cooked. The least we could do is clean up the mess."

Grace looked between him and Jesse before grabbing the towel from the counter. "That's not necessary, Rafe. I don't mind."

"I do." He took the towel from her hands, his fingers brushing against her own as he did. She stared up at him for long moments before relenting. Rafe looked over his shoulder at Jesse when she walked away. "Get over here."

Jesse grumbled all the way across the room, dragging his feet and mumbling under his breath. "I got a wife so I wouldn't have to do this stuff no more, Rafe. Why I got to do it now?"

Rafe held back a smile. "Because I said so." He glanced over his shoulder, watching as Grace wiped the top of the stove off. He leaned

toward Jesse and lowered his voice. “Look, she’s been on a stagecoach for Lord knows how long and came in here, cleaned the kitchen then cooked all that food. Don’t you think she might be just a little bit tired?”

Jesse sighed. “Yeah. Guess she is.”

When the dishes were done and had been dried and put back on the shelf above the sink, Grace was nowhere to be found. Jesse helped himself to the pie without another thought and Rafe was tempted to do the same. “Don’t eat all of it. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Jesse shoved a piece of pie in his mouth and mumbled as Rafe walked into the other room. Grace wasn’t there. Climbing the stairs, he checked her room, peeking around the corner. He found her then, sitting in the rocker by the window, sound asleep.

Waking her would have been the right thing to do but seeing her sitting there with the glow of the moon shining down on her he didn’t have the heart to do it. He stood staring at her for long minutes, studying her features, memorizing the shape of her lips and the way her hair tumbled around her face.

Lord, how did a woman that fine looking end up in a mail-order bride catalog? And how would he ever get anything done with her in his house? Just looking at her made his pulse race, caused his blood to heat and his groin to ache with need.

The tiny voice in the back of his head that warned him of impending danger spoke up loud and clear then. It reminded him of how dangerous the opposite sex was, the faces of two others swimming in his mind's

eye. His chest tightened as he thought of them and how manipulative they had been. He was sure Grace would be no different. The reminder was enough.

He glanced at the bed, noticing the blankets and sheets were missing. Turning to the hall, he retrieved clean ones from the spare room and remade the bed, turning down the blankets before looking back over at her.

He debated on waking her again before crossing the room, placing both hands on the arms of the chair so he was eye level with her. The moment he looked at her face, that voice was back, whispering words he wanted to refuse to hear. Words that told him she may be different. That she might be the one he'd been waiting for.

He lifted his hand, brushing a stray curl from her cheek. The moment he touched her hair, his fingers itched to thread their way through those golden strands. He slid the back of his fingers across her cheek, feeling the softness of her skin.

Looking away, he stared out the window into the darkness and wondered what he was doing. He'd seen plenty of beautiful women before and would probably see a dozen more before he died but this one...

He looked back down at her face, his gaze drinking her in. This one was different. He'd known it the moment he saw her sitting in front of the stagecoach station smiling up at him. The look she'd given him had nearly staggered him at the time. The joy on her face directed at him

caused his chest to tighten. And it had been so long. So long since a woman had looked at him like that. Like she was happy to see him.

Memories of the past flooded his mind and he closed his eyes, forcing the images, and the heartache they brought with them, away.

He reached down, hooking an arm under her knees before reaching around her and lifting her from the chair. She mumbled something under her breath and tucked her head under his chin. He stilled the moment she snuggled in closer and savored the feel of her in his arms.

He took his time crossing the room to the bed. The scent of her filled the air around him and he lingered, lowering his head until his face brushed those golden curls framing her face. She smelled like roses warmed in the sun, her perfumed skin soft and smooth. She felt so delicate in his arms he loosened his hold on her for fear of hurting her.

Reaching the bed, he laid her down and stood staring at her for long minutes, brushing her cheek again with his fingertips before pulling off her boots and tugging the sheets up over her and leaving the room.

When he closed the door and turned toward the stairs, Jesse blocked his path, his features set in hard lines, his eyes narrowed.

“She’s mine, Rafe.”

Rafe wondered exactly what Jesse had seen and walked away from Grace’s door. When he reached the stairs he stopped and looked back at his brother. “I know she’s yours, Jesse. I just put her to bed. She’s had a long day. So have you. Let’s get some sleep. The sun will be up before we know it.”

The house was quiet as he turned out the lamps and walked into the room off the kitchen. He'd been sleeping in there since he'd come back home. It was small but he didn't have much in the way of possessions anyway. He closed the door and sat down on the bed to take his boots off.

As he undressed, thoughts of Grace filled his mind. He couldn't seem to think of anything else for some reason and that had to stop. Like Jesse said, she was his and regardless of the fact Rafe knew a marriage between the two wouldn't happen, it was clear, Jesse thought of her as his wife.

And so should he. If he wanted any peace, he'd have to. He'd have to push Grace as far away as he could get her and hoped she stayed there regardless of how much he wanted her for himself. He wasn't the marrying kind. The proof of that lay buried in his memories and he fought to keep them there. If he was smart, he'd forget about Grace Kingston and keep his distance. He just hoped his heart would let him.

End of Excerpt

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