

~ New Life ~

by A. K. Naten

Category: Uber Alternative fic

Rated: R-ish with some NC-17; Mature content

Summary: How many chances does a person get at a 'new life'? 'Period piece' set in the 1850's Oregon territory; Drama; Angst.

DISCLAIMER CRAP: This is a F/F SLASH PIECE that depicts a sexual relationship between consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age and/or this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you reside, consider yourself hereby warned. If depictions of this nature disturb you, then stop reading and bail now, dude.

This is an UBER story; characters are *loosely* based on two chicks from a now-defunct TV show, but that's where the similarities end. Any resemblance to people or characters living, dead, or imagined is purely coincidental and completely unintentional.

Sex, Violence, Rock 'n Roll? - Yes, Yes, No. This was a little 'different' for me; it's my first attempt at 'period piece' kind of thing, and I honestly don't know why I chose to do it. The idea has been floating around inside my head, and I had to get rid of it. It gets crowded in there sometimes, y'know? This story and its characters belong to me. No beta, no editor; it's all on my shoulders. If you wanna post it on your site, please ask me. Okay? ...Okay.

PART ONE

Emma lay in her bed, completely drained but unable to sleep. A loud, reverberating snore emanated from the hot, sweaty, bulky body beside her, rattling her head and making her cringe. Emma shifted a bit, scooting her body and trying to get as far away from the man as she could, which was fairly impossible, given that the bed they shared was just a flimsy little double mattress. Her action only prompted the man to stir and roll over closer to Emma, his pungent body odor wafting from the sweat-dampened night shirt that he wore and his putrid breath now blowing directly in her face. She shivered, suddenly wishing a tribe of Indians would descend upon the house and whisk the man away... or at least shut him up. She closed her eyes, suppressing an urge to scream.

Emma realized that she was thinking these hateful things about her very own husband, but honestly, she didn't care. She might have cared a little, once upon a time, when they were first married... when Isaac at least pretended to care for her and treated her reasonably. But that was before. Before Isaac began to show his true colors... before he began to drink so much... before he realized that his pretty little bride may not be able to bear him any fruit.

It was the 1850's, and Emma Dunwoody's family was one of the many thousands who moved from the mid-western United States to the recently acquired states and towns that were popping up in the rapidly expanding territories of the Wild West. Gold rush fever had gripped the Nation,

and people flocked to California and the surrounding areas to get a piece of the action. Emma's father was a farmer, and rumor had it that land in the Oregon territory was lush, fertile, and ideal for raising crops and livestock to sell to the burgeoning towns and industries. To Thomas Dunwoody, God was handing him the opportunity of a lifetime.

Downplaying the rumors and reports that the life was harsh and the towns were often polluted with highwaymen and gunslingers, Thomas packed up his family and headed west on the wagon trains. It was a long, arduous journey, and they endured many hardships and setbacks, but the Dunwoody family persevered, by the grace of God, and eventually carved a new life for themselves in the rugged wilderness of Oregon. Five years had passed since then, and for Emma, the highwaymen and gunslingers didn't prove to be as much of a problem as the simple, eligible bachelors had.

Apparently, pretty, young women of a childbearing age were hard to come by in these parts, and whenever Emma accompanied her parents into town, the single men swarmed around like bees drawn to honey. Martha Dunwoody thought it was wonderful that the men were interested in her beautiful daughter. Emma, on the other hand, thought it nightmarish. Her parents were horrified that she was, in their opinion, well past the proper marrying age and still showed no interest in finding a suitable husband. What they didn't understand was that Emma didn't want a husband, nor any man, for that matter.

She didn't want to get married and end up being someone's work-horse and breeding-stock; she had loftier aspirations and bigger dreams for herself. She was a very bright girl who was fascinated by books and loved to read and write, and she dreamed of being an author, or a poet, or even a schoolteacher or a nurse. She did not share her parents' religious convictions and had, in fact, begun to think of herself as a feminist. She read everything she could about the women's rights movements that were underway, especially back East. Emma liked the thought of being independent, and if that meant she would end up a spinster, then so be it. She didn't care. Her parents, however, had other ideas.

The Dunwoody's were hopelessly old-fashioned and stood fast to their devout Christian beliefs. They cared nothing about the feminist movements and talk of women's rights. In their eyes, it was pure blasphemy, and they insisted that Emma behave 'properly' and settle down and get married. And her parents always got their way.

Emma was 19 when her traditionalist parents 'arranged' for the 35-year-old Isaac Johnson to begin courting her. Not only did Emma not want to court the middle-aged widower, she didn't even like him. He attended their church and played the part of the perfect, mild-mannered gentlemen, but that never mattered to Emma. Something about him gave her an uneasy feeling, and she was always wary of the burly little man with the dark, emotionless eyes. Her mother insisted she was just being childish and ridiculous, but Emma knew differently.

That had been almost two years ago. Emma was now 21... she was married to a man she didn't even care for, let alone love... she was childless... and she was miserable. And her mother still had the nerve to tell her that she should thank the good Lord for giving her such a wonderful new life.

Emma squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth as her husband's snoring rattled the roof timbers of their little house and intensified the headache that had been nagging her all day.

Every day it was the same routine... every evening the same ritual. Isaac would work in the fields tending to the crops and animals all day while Emma stayed close to the house, cooking and cleaning and baking and sewing and washing. If a crop was ready for harvesting, she'd expand her work-horse duties and help Isaac in the fields. If the cows needed milking, or one of the animals was in labor with a newborn, she would help Isaac in the barn. She worked all day, and when that was done, she worked at night fulfilling her wifely duties by submitting to Isaac's urges and needs.

Emma squeezed her eyes tighter at the thought of her husband's heavy, hairy body on top of her, grunting and sweating and gripping her hair to hold her still while he took his pleasure and tried, unsuccessfully, to impregnate his young wife. If he hadn't been drinking, it thankfully didn't take too long; but if he was intoxicated, it drug on endlessly, and he was usually unable to reach satisfaction before falling asleep atop her. Tears burned in Emma's eyes when she thought of the beating she'd receive when she would, most likely, have her monthly courses once again, and Isaac would rant and rave that she was good for nothing.

And I should be grateful for this, mother? Emma thought to herself as a tear broke free and rolled down her fair cheek.

Emma was out in back of the house washing clothes, grateful to be far away from Isaac. As predicted, she had started her monthly cycle a few days earlier, and Isaac had thrown a fit, although this time he'd only slapped her and knocked her across the room while calling her 'worthless'. She'd gotten off easy this month.

As she began to hang the clothes up to dry, she spotted someone riding across the field, near the back of their property. Recognizing the beautiful light gray horse and the cowboy-hatted rider, Emma smiled. Edward Daniels was their neighbor, even though he lived quite a distance from them. He was fairly new in the area, having only moved into the dilapidated old ranch house in the next valley a short time after Emma married Isaac.

The town rumor-mill had it that he was a half-breed - half-white, half-Apache. He appeared to be tall and lanky and always wore his cowboy hat pulled down quite far on his forehead. Having only talked to him once, very briefly, Emma thought Daniels to be an odd, introverted kind of person who never stopped to chat or visit and kept his distance. She recalled him being soft-spoken and very neat and clean in appearance - at least for a farmer-rancher. He had an exotic-looking face, Emma thought, and even though he wore his hat pulled down far, she remembered his exquisite blue eyes. Emma was, quite honestly, fascinated by the strange man, and she thought it a shame that she didn't know him better. *Then again, the way everyone gossips about him, who can blame him for being aloof?* Emma considered.

Some people insisted that Daniels was a full-blooded Apache - apparently ignoring the fact that his skin was not very dark and his eyes were definitely blue - and was simply trying to pass himself off as a white man; therefore, he was a filthy, lying, cheating, murdering heathen who couldn't be trusted. Isaac Johnson was one of these people. He insisted that Emma not interact with the quiet man. She obeyed him, especially since she'd received a beating after Isaac saw her talking to the tall man on the gray horse that one time. Isaac claimed that Daniels was evil, and Emma remembered how he screamed at her, dramatically quoting the Book of Revelations, *"...And I looked, and behold a pale horse; and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him!"* She grimaced, remembering the wild look in Isaac's eyes as he came at her like a madman.

Checking to be sure Isaac couldn't see her, Emma lifted a hand and waved to Edward. The rider tipped his hat at the petite blonde woman, acknowledging her greeting. Just as Emma was waving, however, their dog, a mangy good-for-nothing mongrel named Rascal, spotted the rider and his horse and took off after them, barking and gnashing his teeth.

"Oh no... Rascal!" Emma shouted, quickly taking off after the errant mutt. She watched in horror as Edward's horse reared up and whinnied frantically, but being an obviously experienced rider, Edward was able to maintain control of the animal and calmed him down while the scroungy little dog yapped at the horse's heels.

Emma came racing up, breathless and apologetic, "Oh Mr. Daniels, I'm *so* sorry!" she sputtered, gasping for breath and grabbing hold of the wayward varmint. Edward patted his horse's neck and murmured to the animal, trying to calm him.

Emma felt terrible, "I don't know what got into him... he usually doesn't act so vicious, really!"

"S'alright Mizz. Johnson. No harm done," Edward said in a low, raspy voice, quirkling a slight grin while continuing to pat his horse.

Emma noticed that some of Edward's saddlebags were lying in the grass, obviously having fallen off when the horse reared. She bent to start gathering the items and when she turned back, she was surprised to see that Edward had dismounted and was kneeling beside her, gathering the spilled goods as well. Emma couldn't help but look. She had never been this close to her enigmatic neighbor before, and she found herself staring openly.

Edward was dressed in ordinary, but neat, dark wool trousers, and wore a buttoned up, long-sleeved shirt covered by a buckskin vest. His face was boyishly handsome and smooth rather than rugged and weather-beaten, and if he had any facial hair, it was either very sparse or he kept it immaculately shaved off. His skin was a beautiful olive tone, and he had high, pronounced cheekbones and a strong, hard jaw. Emma decided that Edward Daniels was a good-looking man, and he was much younger than she originally thought. His features were usually shadowed beneath his broad cowboy hat, hiding the fact that he couldn't be too much older than Emma. Some hair peeked out of his hat at the back of his head, stopping midway down his neck. It was dark brown in color, almost black. *Definitely part-Indian*, Emma mused to herself. Just as she reached her inner conclusion, pale blue eyes turned toward her, and Emma felt her heart flip. She

darted her eyes away, a blush stealing across her face as she flashed a nervous smile, feeling bad for staring and embarrassed that she'd been caught.

She stood quickly, smoothing her skirt and holding out the bag of goods to Edward, "Here you go," she mumbled, still forcing her eyes downward.

"Thank you," Edward said, all the while surreptitiously studying the attractive young woman in front of him. He didn't know very much about Emma and Isaac Johnson; he only knew that while Emma seemed very kind and friendly, Isaac seemed to be the exact opposite. Edward exercised and rode his horses across the valleys nearly every day, frequently nearing or crossing parts of the Johnson land in one way or another. He knew how Isaac spoke to Emma; it wasn't too difficult to hear the older man screaming and yelling at the pretty young blonde way out here in the middle of nowhere with no one else around. Some days his harshly shouted words and commands seemed to bounce off the mountains in every direction. Edward felt for the young woman; she seemed to be a good soul, and it was a shame to see her mistreated by a nasty son of a bitch like Johnson.

But that was none of Edward's business, so he stayed out of it.

When Emma dared to look up at Edward again, he caught sight of a light purplish bruise on her cheek. Even though he tried to make his face remain impassive and mask his surprise, Edward obviously failed, and Emma quickly turned and walked away from him. The sad, knowing look that was reflected in the small woman's unusual sea-colored eyes told Edward everything he didn't need to know. Isaac was more than a nasty son of a bitch... he was an abusive one too.

Emma grabbed hold of the dog again, "I'm sorry again, Mr. Daniels," she offered as she began to back up toward her house.

Edward nodded solemnly and climbed back onto his horse, "Not a problem, ma'am," he said.

Their quiet conversation was rudely interrupted. "EMMA!" Isaac shouted harshly, making Emma jump. She turned to see her husband marching toward her with an axe in his hand. Stopping in front of his wife, Isaac grabbed her roughly by the arm, "What the hell do you think you're *doin'*?!"

"I-I was just fetching Rascal... he took off after M-Mr. Daniels and the horse," Emma stammered, grimacing at the pain Isaac was inflicting on her arm.

"Get your worthless hide back in the house, NOW!" Isaac growled lowly so that only Emma could hear, or so he thought. He gave Emma a shove then turned to regard Edward, who was watching the scene with furrowed brows, "If you aint got any business with me, boy, then I suggest you git on outta here!" He spat out tersely.

Edward felt his hackles rising as he regarded the surly man. He bit back the urge to tell him what a sack of shit he was. Isaac Johnson was a mean-looking bastard. Greasy, reddish hair peppered with gray at the temples, bushy eyebrows set upon a face that was craggy and overly tanned and

rough from being exposed to the weather, and a short, stocky, muscular body that was covered in dirty, sweat-stained clothes. What bothered Edward most were the man's dark brown, ominous-looking eyes. They were lifeless and cold, and held no emotion whatsoever.

Deciding that he shouldn't stir the little man's ire any more, Edward simply nodded, "Yessir." He said politely, "You have a good day, sir... ma'am." He added, tipping his hat toward Emma, who was walking away slowly, but still looking. Emma gave a half smile and watched as Edward turned to ride off toward his home.

Emma hadn't seen Edward for nearly two months. She figured that Isaac sufficiently scared the man off the day he'd caught them talking in the meadow. He certainly scared Emma. As soon as they were inside their house, he beat her soundly. She only tried explaining and apologizing for a little while, then she just gave up and let him vent his anger on her and all around her.

Today was, for a change, a bright spot in Emma's gloomy existence. Actually, she got at least one bright day per month, since Isaac always went into town for an entire day to buy supplies and whiskey, then he'd spend the rest of the afternoon getting drunk at the tavern and doing god-knows what else. Well, Emma had a good idea what else; Isaac came home more than one time smelling like a French whore, so she knew what went on. Emma acknowledged that she was somewhat naive, but she wasn't stupid.

A perfect Spring and Summer had produced a bumper Fall harvest for the Johnson's, and Isaac announced today that he intended to take the excess crops to the surrounding towns to sell them, then he would shop for some supplies and farm equipment that they needed. He would be gone for at least three weeks. Emma thought she'd died and gone to heaven.

Isaac had been gone for three days when Emma thought she spotted someone on a horse way off in the distance. She squinted her eyes as she hung up the laundry, trying to determine whether or not it was Mr. Daniels. If it was, then his far-off distance would explain why she hadn't seen him around for such a long time. The man was obviously steering very clear of the Johnson tract.

Deciding that without Isaac being around, she could safely risk talking to Edward, Emma walked out toward the figure, waving to him. The rider stopped and looked for a few moments, but didn't move. Emma waved again, understanding Edward's hesitancy. Soon, the figure began riding toward her slowly.

When Edward was within speaking distance, Emma smiled at him, "Hello Mr. Daniels."

Edward brought his horse to a stop, keeping a safe distance from the blonde as he touched his hat and nodded, "Ma'am."

"I haven't seen you for awhile... how have you been?" Emma asked eagerly.

"I've been fine, ma'am, thank you," Edward answered, his tone forever courteous and genteel.

Emma hesitated a moment; she so wanted to talk and interact with another human being, but she really didn't know what to say to this handsome man she barely knew, but very much wanted to. "Uhm... lovely weather we're having... isn't it?" She said, feeling nervous and verbally inadequate as she brushed her hair away from her face.

"Yes ma'am, it certainly is." Edward agreed carefully, peering at the woman as the breeze played with her long, golden-blond hair. He wasn't sure what she was up to, but it made him uneasy to think that Isaac Johnson would most likely catch them again. Why Mrs. Johnson would risk angering her husband like that puzzled him.

"Uh, Mr. Daniels, I wanted to-" Emma began unsteadily, but Edward cut her off.

"Mizz. Johnson... I don't mean to be rude, ma'am, but...", The tall man began, "do you think it's... wise for us to be standing here talking, like this?" He asked softly, nodding toward the house as a way of reminding the petite blonde of what happened the last time they dared to speak to one another.

Emma blushed and gave a short laugh, "No, Mr. Daniels... under normal circumstances, it definitely would not be wise for us to talk," she began, piquing Edward's curiosity. "But since my husband has gone away for several weeks... I think I can allow myself to be 'unwise' for a little while and luxuriate in having a real conversation with another human being."

She didn't speak in a sarcastic tone; she spoke in such a way that Edward knew exactly what she was trying to say. And he understood. This bright, beautiful woman was starved for contact with anyone, and though he might kick himself in the morning, Edward decided right then and there that he would do almost anything for her.

They had been talking for hours; just walking and chatting about anything and everything. Emma was captivated by Edward's surprising refinement and easygoing manner. He was intelligent, insightful, witty, and gracious, and the melodious burr of his raspy voice was both calming and unsettling to Emma.

For his part, Edward was equally entranced by the lively little blonde beauty. For a woman to be so full of questions and have such a sharp mind was unusual, even in this day and age. In the short time they'd spent together, Edward could see that Emma was a gem of a woman whose value was most definitely not appreciated. Her eyes sparkled with untapped life and energy, and Edward found it amazing that despite being obviously unhappy, she still possessed the warmest, most genuine smile he'd ever encountered.

The late afternoon air began to cool, silently warning of the approaching nightfall, and Emma found that she didn't want Edward to leave. His presence, although oddly disquieting in some

way, was also reassuring to her. If she were honest with herself, she would admit that she didn't like staying at her house by herself while Isaac was gone. She wondered if she would be so bold as to ask Edward if...

"Mr. Daniels," Emma began, turning to look at the tall man. "Uhm... I suppose this may be exceedingly... 'improper' of me, but...", she twisted her hands nervously, "but... would you consider having supper with me tonight?" Seeing the slightly startled look on her neighbor's face, she almost regretted her foolish words. "It-It's just that... well, I don't really like being all alone out here, and...?" She half-grinned as she let the question trail off, all the while looking at Edward hopefully.

Edward knew he should decline. It was definitely improper for a married woman to play hostess to a single man, especially when they were alone, but more worrisome than that, Isaac Johnson would kill the both of them if he found out.

"Well, Mizz. Johnson...", Edward began to decline; however, one look into those bright blue-green orbs changed his mind. "...Improper or not... I'd be honored to join you for supper, ma'am."

Emma was busy bustling around her kitchen fixing something especially nice for her impromptu guest. She was so thrilled to have someone new and interesting to talk to, and she was especially thrilled that it was Edward Daniels. The man captivated her, and she was most eager to learn more about him. *And you're most eager to stare into those mesmerizing eyes too, Em*, she scolded herself, feeling the tingle of a blush color her cheeks.

A light knock sounded at the door, signaling that Edward had tied his horse out front and had washed up with the basin of water that Emma had given him. Emma opened the door, welcoming him in and taking his hat, her eyes darting to the thick, dark shock of combed-back hair that adorned Edward's head. Emma directed Edward to have a seat and relax while she finished with the dinner preparations. They made idle small talk while Emma continued to steal furtive glances at Edward, observing his lean, lanky figure as he stood uneasily by the fireplace rather than sit down.

"What would you like to drink, Mr. Daniels?" Emma asked over her shoulder as she gathered dishes and silverware for the meal.

Edward's voice so close to her made her jump slightly, "Whatever you have is fine, Mizz. Johnson."

Emma turned around and looked up into sky-blue eyes. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she decided to venture a suggestion. "Mr. Daniels," she began, "since we are neighbors and since we are, hopefully, becoming friends... might I suggest that we drop the formalities?" Edward froze for a moment, momentarily unsure where the conversation was headed, but Emma sensed his dismay. Reaching out to lightly touch his arm she explained, "I've never thought of myself as a 'ma'am', and I don't really like being called 'Mrs.', so... why don't you just call me Emma?" She

finished, smiling at the taller man.

Edward visibly relaxed and grinned back, "Alright, Miss Emma... you must call me Edward then." They nodded and smiled, giving each other nervous laughs, and Emma was amazed at how much a simple smile changed and brightened Edward's face.

"Why don't you let me help you with something... I feel useless standing around here watching you do all the work." Edward said, having no idea what kind of impact such words would have on Emma.

Emma turned, amazed, and looked into Edward's soft, honest eyes. *He's offering to help?* She wanted to laugh... and cry. Why couldn't she be surrounded by someone like this kind-hearted man all the time? Why did she have to be married to a hideous, insensitive beast like Isaac?

Catching herself before she did or said something foolish, Emma blinked hard and averted her gaze, nervously pushing a strand of blonde hair behind her ear, "Why certainly, Edward, thank you. You can, uhm... you can set the table for us, alright?" She said, forcing a small smile and handing the dark-haired man the plates and utensils.

Edward smiled back and took the items from Emma's hands, noticing how she quickly turned away from him and went back to her kitchen duties. It only infuriated him more to think that something as blase' as a simple offer of assistance could be so significant to this woman.

He began to truly loathe Isaac Johnson.

Emma and Edward quickly became good friends. They saw each other nearly every day while Isaac was gone, and their long, relaxing walks were now the highlight of Emma's life. Every morning she would awaken early and rush around to take care of the necessary chores so that she could head out to the meadow, where she and Edward would normally meet. Emma was thrilled to discover that, like herself, Edward was a lover of books and poetry. He possessed several books and would often bring one along on their jaunts so they could read aloud to each other. In addition to occasionally sharing evening meals, Emma had also started packing picnic lunches, and the two of them would sit by the stream that ran through the meadow, and eat, relax, read poetry, and enjoy each others company. It was a wonderful existence, in Emma's mind.

Edward seemed to constantly surprise Emma as he shyly, almost cautiously, displayed the different facets of his personality. He had a refreshing sense of humor, and he was a romantic too, presenting Emma with small bouquets of flowers on occasion. The two of them discussed books and authors, religion and science, politics and the rumblings of war back East... anything and everything she couldn't, and wouldn't dare talk to Isaac about, she talked to Edward about.

Emma would have been perfectly content to consider the kindly neighbor man her friend, but as time progressed, she knew that might not be possible. Not only would they have to stop seeing each other once Isaac returned, but Emma also realized... she was becoming quite attracted to

Edward Daniels.

She knew how immoral and adulterous it was to think such things, but she couldn't help it. Edward was well-read, well-mannered, and kind-hearted; all the things she wanted in a friend and partner, her dark-haired neighbor seemed to possess. But it went beyond cerebral considerations; Emma felt absolutely drawn to Edward, both physically and emotionally. It was strange, because there was something about the engaging man that just didn't quite 'fit' in Emma's mind. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something about Edward was just 'different'. But maybe that was what drew her to him in the first place.

The western territories were harsh, cruel places, and the pioneers and settlers either matched the terrain, or directly contradicted it. Edward wasn't a religious zealot, like Emma was accustomed to, nor was he a rough, crude frontiersman. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and he certainly seemed to possess all the manly attributes... but his was a gentler sort of masculinity that was softer, yet not frail in any way. Emma spent a good deal of time studying Edward, trying to discern what it was about him that was so unique.

His hands, though fairly large and roughened, had long, tapered fingers that moved gracefully when he used them while speaking; his face was a unique combination of sharp angles and smooth sleekness; his voice was low and raspy, but it was tinged with a rich, sultry sort of undertone that unnerved Emma immensely. And then, of course, there were the eyes. The eyes that could either be as pale and light as the clear blue sky, or as dark and deep and churning as the raging river rapids. They were expressive and soulful and honest, and Emma could see every emotion that Edward felt reflected in those blue, blue eyes.

Emma usually told herself that Edward's uniqueness was due to his unknown heritage. She was convinced that Edward had Indian, Spanish, or Mexican blood in his genetic makeup, and this accounted for his unusual features and characteristics. Since she knew very little about people of those nationalities, and since her own family lineage was of the typical all-American, blue-blooded, eastern U.S. type, it made sense that Edward would appear somewhat 'different' to her. She really wanted to just come right out and ask him, but propriety told her that was rude. So... she vowed to keep her mouth shut and her curiosities to herself. But it would be difficult. She felt her attraction to the handsome, dark-haired man growing stronger each and every day.

For his part, Edward was experiencing his share of difficulties as well. Emma Johnson was the most beautiful, engaging, delightful creature he'd experienced in quite a long time. The time they spent walking and talking and dining together were some of the happiest moments he'd had in the past few years, and he'd had very few.

Edward had not allowed himself the luxury of being close to someone - anyone - for such a long time, he was at first very uncomfortable with the good-natured little blonde who seemed intent on getting under his skin. When Emma talked, she used her hands, and when she grew especially animated or emotional, she also touched quite a lot. That was difficult for Edward to get used to; he was not a 'touchy' kind of person. Surprisingly, however, Edward allowed the contact, and he allowed Emma to get close to him. Even more surprising was, he found that he not only enjoyed it, but he was beginning to crave it... and he was beginning to crave her.

But there was a downside to all of it, and that was that Emma was a married woman, and her husband was a bastard who probably wouldn't hesitate to kill the both of them if he knew about their friendship, no matter how innocent it was. Edward knew that he had to watch himself very carefully. He had to keep a very tight reign on his feelings and not give in to his temptations, no matter how intense they might be. It would be so easy to fall for the golden-haired, jade-eyed beauty; Edward could feel the strong pull between the two of them, and he wondered if Emma felt it as well. *No matter*, he would constantly remind himself, *she's not yours for the taking*.

Emma and Edward were enjoying one of their usual leisurely walks along the meadow stream. They had been engaged in a deep conversation about something and weren't paying attention to the time or the area they'd traversed. A loud rumble overhead finally called their attention to the fact that, not only was it about to storm, but they were quite a distance from Emma's ranch. Luckily, Edward had brought his horse along for the walk, so as the heavens opened up and the rain began to fall in a heavy torrent, the two of them quickly saddled up and tore off, laughing all the while.

Closing her eyes tight and hanging on to Edward for dear life, Emma was surprised when they finally arrived at a small ranch house nestled in-between neatly fenced-off pasture areas. Edward whisked her off his horse and carried her up onto the porch of the house, where he hastily opened the door and ushered them inside. Emma darted her eyes around the simple but neat house, shocked that Edward would bring her here, to his house, without asking.

Seeming to read her mind, Edward spoke, "I'm sorry to come here without your permission, Miss Emma, but... I just felt that my house was much closer than yours." He looked at the drenched blonde with sincere apology. "I'll take you home directly, just as soon as the weather breaks."

Emma told herself to relax, and she smiled; it was Edward, after all. "That's alright Edward. I guess I just feel foolish for letting the storm sneak up on us like that."

"We both look rather frightful, don't we?" Edward grinned, pulling his saturated shirt and vest away from his chest. They both laughed, easing the tension. "Why don't I get a fire started and you can make us some hot tea, if you'd like," Edward said, indicating the kitchen.

Emma smiled and went about the job of finding the things she needed in the small, but well-stocked kitchen area. She marveled at how comfortable and at ease she felt as the two of them busied themselves with their tasks. They moved about the house and chatted as though it were something they did every day. It felt entirely ordinary and entirely extraordinary at the same time. Emma had never even seen Edward's house before, let alone be inside, making herself at home while rooting through his pantries and fixing refreshments for the two of them. It was equal parts strange and pleasant.

After a few moments, Edward got a fire roaring and Emma had set the kettle to boil on the stove. They had come to stand in front of the fire when Edward turned to regard Emma's wet

countenance again, "You know, Miss Emma, you really should get out of those wet clothes and change into something dry and warm." Emma's eyes immediately grew wide at the impropriety of the suggestion, and Edward panicked, holding up his hand, "Oh, uh... I didn't mean for that to sound so inappropriate, I was just... I mean, I just think... uh...", he faltered miserably, "I'm just afraid that you'll catch your death if you stand around here in wet clothes." He offered, trying desperately to justify his rationale while retrieving the foot from his mouth.

Emma blinked her eyes and fought to regain control of her flabbergasted senses. She managed a small smile as she nervously fingered the small buttons at the front of her dress, "Thank you, Edward... that's very kind of you, but... well, I sincerely doubt that you have anything for me to change *into*, so... I think I'll just... sit here by the fire and try to dry out." She smiled again and quickly sat down in a nearby chair.

Edward ran fingers through his hair, feeling incredibly stupid, "Uh, I could give you something of mine to wear," He queried carefully, "It wouldn't look very ladylike, but... we're the only ones here to pass judgment...?" He asked, looking hopefully at the blonde.

Emma smiled again, "Thank you, Edward, but I'm sure I'll be fine."

Edward shrugged, "Well, if you don't mind, I think I'll change into something else. I'll be just a moment," he said as he disappeared into his bedroom. Not only was Edward soaked, he was freezing too, and he knew that the little blonde had to be chilled to the bone. Perhaps if she sat by the fire, she'd warm up; but he was still concerned.

Emerging from his room a few moments later, Emma watched as Edward fetched their tea and brought it over to sit with her by the fire. His damp, dark hair was mussed and a stray lock fell across his forehead, making him look very much like a little boy. Emma's fingers itched to reach up and push it back into place. More than that, her fingers itched to run through the shiny, thick tresses.

Goodness, Em... get a hold of yourself! She scolded internally. She could, of course, blame her sudden out-of-control urges on hormones, but the truth was, it wasn't hormones; she just lusted after the unusually attractive gentleman who sat across from her. Emma forced her eyes to concentrate on her teacup as she sat and silently chastised herself.

Edward suddenly turned to look at her, his face pensive, "Miss Emma?"

"Yes Edward?"

"Would you, uh... would you mind terribly if I asked you to call me... 'Danny'?"

" 'Danny'?" Emma asked, "As in 'Daniels'?" She smiled at Edward's shy nod.

"It's sort-of a... nickname. My mother called me 'Danny'... I always liked it much better than... 'Edward'."

"Danny... Danny... Hmm," Emma rolled the word around on her tongue and feigned a contemplative face. "I think I like it better too," she finally announced with a smile.

Danny grinned and nodded at her and they sat and drank their tea in the warm, comfortable silence.

A few hours passed and the storm seemed to be weakening, even though the sound of rain still pinged against the cabin's tin roof. They had been reading numerous stories and poems from Danny's vast collection of books when they realized it was near the evening meal time. Danny offered to fix something for the two of them while Emma checked her clothes to see if she was getting dry at all. It certainly didn't feel like they were drying. Despite the fire, she was freezing and she wished that she had taken Danny up on his offer of dry clothes.

Emma had the skirt of her dress flipped up, feeling around and checking the amount of dampness that remained in the fabric, and she didn't notice that Danny had come to stand beside her.

"Miss Emma," Danny's soft voice so close to her made her jump. He reached out and touched her arm, "Look... I don't want you to think I'm trying to be... *indecent* or anything... because I'm *not*," Danny started hesitantly, "but... why don't you at least take your dress off. We can hang it up to dry, and then your undergarments will dry better too." He offered gently, hoping that the blonde wasn't offended by the practical suggestion. Emma blushed furiously and bit her lower lip, making Danny grin slightly. "I know you're cold... I can see you shivering." He smiled knowingly at her.

Emma finally gave an embarrassed laugh, "I suppose you're right, Danny, I just....," she blushed again, "it's just so... *improper*," she said, shaking her head a little.

Danny laughed, "Miss Emma... you worry too much about what's proper and improper." Emma gave him a curious look, unsure what he meant exactly. "There's no one here but us, and I promise, I won't think you any less ladylike," Danny said with an easy smile.

Emma finally acquiesced, thinking of the heart attack her mother would have if she could see her now. She began unbuttoning her dress, wiggling out of it as best she could while Danny pretended to busy himself in the kitchen so that she was afforded a little bit of privacy. She was just stepping out of it at last when Danny suddenly appeared by her side again, producing a wooden hanger for the garment. Emma nervously smoothed her damp, wrinkled undergarments while Danny hung her wet dress beside the fireplace to dry. When he turned back to face her, he immediately saw the mottled, fading bruises on her upper left arm.

Apparently, there was more to Emma's hesitation to undress than just her ladylike propriety.

Emma saw the horrified look that flashed across Danny's face, and she brought her other hand up to cover the ugly arm. "It's... it's not as bad as it looks," she murmured, looking down at the floor in shame. *What must Danny think?* She worried, *he must find me positively revolting.* Tears began to well in her eyes, and she suddenly wanted to go home. The feel of Danny's fingers touching her chin startled her, and she looked up into sympathetic, worried blue eyes.

"Oh Miss Emma... how can he do this to you?" Danny whispered in anguish.

"I-I... I make him angry... and... and I can't get pregnant, so... h-he gets upset....," Emma tried to explain, but the tears overtook her and she began to sob.

The feel of Danny's strong arms wrapping around her made her cry even harder, and her body shook as the emotions spilled forth. Danny just held her tight, whispering to her that it wasn't her fault, and stroking her back gently as she cried and cried. Eventually the tears stopped and Emma got herself under control. It felt so wonderful being in Danny's arms that she didn't want to step away from his warm embrace, but she had to... didn't she?

Moving her head away from Danny's chest, Emma nervously ventured a glance upward. Danny's eyes pinned her immediately, the blue depths dilating and revealing a passion and intensity the likes of which she'd never seen before. One of his hands slid up from her back to tangle in her hair, and her breath seemed to evaporate as Danny leaned in closer to her. When their lips met, she thought she'd faint dead away. Her hands unconsciously wrapped themselves around Danny's neck, and she leaned into him as they kissed and absorbed each other tentatively.

Danny's mouth and lips were so warm... so delicate. And his face was soft, lacking the rough, scratchiness she was accustomed to. He was the complete opposite of Isaac. When Danny's tongue darted out to tickle her lips and ask for entrance, Emma's mouth instinctually opened, and the kiss deepened further. Normally she disliked kissing, even though she didn't have much experience; the only man she'd kissed seriously was her husband. But Isaac was never gentle, and he never asked her what she liked or disliked. He just roughly forced his way inside, into her mouth, into her sex - wherever and whatever he wanted, he just took without asking. It was his, after all; she belonged to him, so why should he ask?

But Danny... Danny was so different. He kissed Emma with such gentle reverence, like he was worshipping her rather than conquering her. His hands caressed her body and his thigh subtly insinuated itself in-between her legs, bringing their bodies together and moving treacherously closer to her femaleness as he continued to pleasure her mouth with his tender lips.

Emma knew how horribly wrong it all was, but she couldn't bring herself to stop. She admitted that she'd fantasized about this very moment, but it was turning out to be so unlike what she'd dreamt that she couldn't stop. It was as though her body had developed a mind of its own. She wanted to know every part of Danny; she wanted to feel him and smell him and absorb him. She wanted to give herself to him and know how it felt to have someone like Danny touch her and taste her and take her.

Her lustful thoughts were abruptly halted when Danny brought a hand down to her bottom and grasped it gently, pushing their hips and bodies together even more and bringing his firm thigh into contact with her most intimate parts. Emma gasped, and when she felt the hardness of Danny's desire pressing against her stomach, she finally broke and pulled away, suddenly shocked back into reality.

Both of them breathed great lungfuls of air as they tried to calm their racing hearts and libidos. Emma's eyes were wide with fear and amazement, and she could only stand and stare at the man who had brought out this unrecognizable beast inside her.

Danny raked a trembling hand through his hair, wanting and needing so badly to touch the flushed beauty before him. When was the last time he had wanted someone so badly? ...He couldn't recall ever wanting someone as much as he did Emma Johnson. Her sweet taste was still on his lips, and licked them in an attempt to hold onto her flavor. He was aware of the horrified aqua eyes that stared at him, and he thought that the blonde looked like she was going to faint.

"Emma...", Danny began softly, reaching out to touch her shoulder.

Emma took a slight step backwards, blinking her eyes rapidly, "Danny... I-I need you to take me home... right now." She said, her voice tight and her words clipped. She wasn't angry... she didn't want Danny to think she was angry, she was just... she was just... flabbergasted... overwhelmed... confused. She just needed to get away from him so she could think.

"Emma," Danny tried again, but she shook her head.

"Please, Danny," she whispered, her voice cracking as tears welled in her eyes and threatened to escape down her cheeks, "Please... just take me home."

Danny didn't argue. He simply nodded, giving Emma a long, sorrowful look before he went outside to fetch his horse.

Emma thought she would die. Whether it was from the frightening aftershock of her surprising arousal, or the blossoming sadness she felt growing inside, she didn't know.

PART TWO

Two days had passed since the incident at Danny's house. Two days of misery and loneliness for both of them.

Danny was certain that Emma hated him. How he could have lost control so completely and behaved so inappropriately, he didn't know. He reasoned that Emma Johnson simply drove him so insane with desire, he'd lost his ever-loving mind. Still... he felt he needed to apologize to her. If they could salvage at least a friendship, he would be eternally grateful. Of course, who knew what kind of friendship they could have once Isaac Johnson returned home. They would have to go back to never seeing one another again, so maybe it was best if things ended now. Danny had no idea what to do. He only knew that he would do anything Emma wanted. ...If only he knew what that was.

Emma, on the other hand, was a nervous wreck. Even though she told herself repeatedly that it had been incredibly wrong and a huge mistake, the incident replayed itself over and over inside her head, all day and all night. She thought she would go mad with her jumbled thoughts. Lust and desire mixed with feelings of shame and deceit, filling her mind and confusing her soul. She missed Danny. She missed him, and deep in her heart, she knew she longed for his intimate touch. ...But it was so sinful for her to think such things... such a sacrilege. How would she ever reach a compromise that she could live with?

The next day, Emma arose early in the morning, her mind made up about what she must do. She set about taking care of her daily chores, and when she finished, she took a nice hot bath. After the bath, she slipped into her favorite dress, fixed her hair just so, went out to the barn, saddled up her horse, and headed off toward Danny's house.

She had decided that she would apologize to Danny for behaving like a harlot. She would explain that her emotions had made her weak, and she would ask that they remain friends only. Hopefully Danny would be forgiving and as gracious as always. Hopefully he realized the position she was in, and he would not demand anything from her or try to use the situation against her in any way. She wanted to think that Danny would never do something like that, but she couldn't be absolutely certain. People sometimes carried darkness and cruelty in their hearts, and even though she felt she knew Danny rather well, she also knew that there was something about the man that quietly nagged at her subconscious. He knew full well that she was married, and she hoped that he also realized that they would not be able to see each other at all once Isaac returned. More importantly, they must not discuss what had happened between them. It had to be their secret. She prayed that Danny would understand.

As she crested the top of the hill that stretched between Danny's house and hers, Emma looked down at the small, quaint ranch of her neighbor. It looked so peaceful and tranquil there... not dreary and full of unhappiness like her own home. Shaking off her pessimistic thoughts, Emma urged her horse forward, determined to make amends with her friend.

When Emma at last neared the house, her heart was in her throat, and when she saw the front door open and Danny step out onto the porch, she felt as though the organ would leap right out of her mouth. The dark-haired man wore a casual cotton work shirt, and a pair of suspenders held up pants that fitted his tall, lean frame snugly.

Emma dismounted her horse and slowly walked up to Danny. When she came to stand right in front of him, she found herself completely at a loss for words; her prepared speech suddenly gone missing. They stood and gazed into one another's eyes so deeply; it was as though no words were needed. No language could describe the feelings and the thoughts that rushed through their bodies and filled their minds. Sky blue locked with earthy jade, and both of them knew they were lost. They could never be just friends; they were foolish to ever think so.

They leaned into each other, their lips meeting mutually and fusing together in a rush of need and desire. They kissed feverishly, their desire quickly escalating into a ravenous hunger. Danny suddenly bent and swept Emma up into his arms, carrying her inside the house and into his

bedroom where he laid her gently upon the bed. This was their turning point. After this, there would be no going back. They would not be able to undo anything; they could never take it back nor deny that it happened. They realized all this, and they accepted it. Their need for each other and the need to merge their souls together was so great that it overrode all other thought and consideration.

Danny carefully slipped their shoes off and climbed onto the bed, holding himself above Emma's petite frame so that he didn't crush her. They kissed long and lasciviously, all movement and time seeming to stand still as they worked themselves into a desperate frenzy.

Danny finally broke the kiss and buried his face in the crook of her neck, "Emma... Emma Emma," he whispered in a rough voice as he fully laid his body down upon Emma's. Her breathing hitched as his warmth enveloped her and his manhood again announced its presence. She closed her eyes as a snippet of bad memory flashed through her mind. Normally, with Isaac, this was the part where she dreaded what was about to take place. Normally, this was where she closed her eyes and held her breath, praying that things would be over quickly and painlessly.

But this was different, she told herself. This was Danny... and Danny was nothing like Isaac. The dark-haired man lavished kisses on her lips and face and neck, his hips gently undulating against hers. But it wasn't forceful, and it wasn't harsh; it was slow and mellow and tender. Emma wrapped her arms around Danny's shoulders, pulling him deeper into the kisses and urging his body further between her legs as she opened them beneath him. He reacted by pushing his hips against her, and Emma gasped as Danny's hardness pressed into her intimately. He buried his face in her neck again, and Emma let her nose drift into the soft, dark hair that brushed against her cheek, inhaling the clean smell of soap mixed with autumn breeze.

Danny's hips rocked into her again, and her hands flew up to sink into the thick, silky tresses as she clutched his head tightly, her mouth unable to stifle the moan that escaped from her lips. Lifting his head away from her slightly, Danny bore his pale blue eyes into Emma, silently asking her the question. Wordlessly asking her if she really wanted to do this... to give herself to him... to cross that final boundary. Emma looked at Danny's kind, loving face, and the passion and trust that she saw there convinced her that, more than ever, she wanted to do this. She answered Danny's silent question with a simple nod and pulled him down into a kiss.

He lifted his head again, "Emma... are you sure?" He whispered quietly.

"Yes." She answered, pulling him to her lips again. She tried to tell him everything with those kisses. She tried to tell him that she wanted him; that she needed him; that she was amazed and stunned and so incredibly touched that he had the respect and courtesy to ask her what she wanted rather than just taking what he needed.

Danny quickly unbuttoned her dress and parted the material so that he could feast on her newly-exposed flesh. He lavished attention on the soft, pale skin, tenderly suckling her breasts and peppering her chest with kisses. Emma writhed beneath him, gasping and shuddering at the amazing sensations that assaulted her. Danny did things to her that she'd only read about; the passion that emanated from him overwhelmed her as he continued to love and devour her body.

"Emma," Danny whispered breathlessly into her ear, "Emma, I need... I need to taste you." He nearly wept to her, "I need to taste you so badly!"

"Yes, Danny... yes!" Emma answered desperately, not sure what he meant but not caring anyway. She would give Danny whatever he wanted at this point.

He slid down Emma's body, lifting her skirt out of the way and gently easing her undergarments down. At the first touch of Danny's warm, wet lips on her thigh, Emma nearly shot off the bed. He calmed her with his hands as he stroked her thighs and kissed and touched her all over.

Emma's mind raced in a maelstrom of frantic thoughts. She suddenly had a good idea of what Danny wanted to do, and she felt her entire body surge with heat over the notion. She had read about such sexual acts in some of her more racy books, but she never dreamed that she would experience it first hand. Of course Isaac never tried it. From what she understood, it was something that a man did for a woman, to pleasure her rather than himself; therefore, Isaac would never do such a thing. But Danny... Danny would most definitely do it... Danny *was* doing it.

She felt warm hands urging her thighs apart and pushing her knees upward. She looked down in wide-eyed wonder as Danny lowered himself between her legs, his dark head bending down to kiss a trail and work his way from her inner thighs, up to her groin, and across the curly thatch of hair that concealed her most sacred body parts. Delicate fingers and a warm, wet tongue touched her, and her head fell backwards as a guttural cry erupted from her throat. Danny groaned his approval and he proceeded to first explore and then devour the bounty spread before him. Emma's hips moved on their own accord, her eyes glazed over in lust and her mind lost in an erotic haze as Danny feasted on her over and over.

Suddenly, without warning, Danny stopped and climbed back up to bring his face close to hers, "Emma," his eyes penetrated hers, wild and desperate. "Emma, I want to-"

She cut him off, bringing her hands up to cup his face, "Anything, Danny! Anything!" She answered back, again not caring what she'd just agreed to due her own acute feeling of desperation. Danny delivered a bruising kiss to Emma's lips, her foggy mind taking awhile to realize that the tangy sweetness she tasted was from her, and not him. As her brain somersaulted over that realization, she was dimly aware of the rustling sounds of pants being unbuttoned and the sensation of Danny leaning over her as he settled himself at the hot, damp spot between her thighs.

Danny braced himself with one hand as another hand eased her thighs further apart. Crystal blue eyes were locked onto her, and Emma let out a hushed gasp as Danny gently slid himself inside her.

Emma wasn't new to the sexual act of intercourse; heaven knew that she was quite accustomed to Isaac's insistent rutting nearly every single night. But this wasn't just intercourse, and it certainly wasn't the rough, harsh coupling that she was used to. This was something else entirely.

Danny moved his hips slowly, gliding in and out of her in long, smooth strokes while poised above her, his eyes holding hers and watching her intently. Emma reached up and grasped at Danny's shoulders, urging him down to lie against her fully. He complied and Emma pushed her hands into his hair, bringing his lips to hers in a deeply passionate kiss. She brought her knees up and tangled her legs around his narrow waist, wanting to open herself to him completely and swallow him whole. Danny groaned deep in his throat and wrapped his arms around Emma's shoulders as he hugged her tight and began to work his hips with a little more urgency.

Never before had Emma felt the urge to writhe and move her hips so wantonly and in such a lustful way. Never before had she felt the sensations that now coursed through her body. Never did she know that such feelings were even possible; and never did she dream that she would experience them like this. Danny gritted his teeth, his body growing rigid and taut as he quickened his pace, changing the tempo of his thrusts and moving deeper and faster. Emma could feel the surprising strength and power in the muscles of his arms and shoulders as she clutched him tighter, and she could see perspiration dotting his forehead.

A strange, slow burn began in the pit of her stomach and Emma dug her nails into Danny's shoulders as her back involuntarily arched up off the bed and waves of pleasure began to ripple through her body. The tension between her legs coiled tighter and tighter until Danny at last reached down and pressed his fingers on the spot that triggered her eruption. Emma cried out, coming in a violent, crashing explosion, and Danny gave one final thrust, releasing a strangled gasp and following her over the edge.

They rested against each other for a long time, panting and trying to catch their breath. Emma thought that she felt Danny withdraw from her, but she wasn't sure; her mind was in such a daze. She kept her legs looped around his still-clothed hips, not wanting to relinquish the reassuring feeling of having his body fitted so snugly in-between her thighs. She rubbed his neck softly and ran her fingers through his dampened hair, letting herself drown in the feel and smell and weight of him.

Emma's mind raced in a whirlwind of emotions. She was certain that Danny was the most gentle, passionate, tender lover on the face of the earth. Something about him was so familiar... so comforting... so loving. The way he held her and kissed her, the way he respected her and asked her permission, the delirious pleasure he inflicted on her... how did he learn to do such things? *Where* did he learn? Her mind boggled at the multitude of questions, thoughts, and feelings.

She felt Danny shift slightly, and he lifted his head to look into her eyes as he made to move off of her. "No, don't... please?" Emma whispered, "I want you to stay here." She added, tightening her legs and pulling him close to her again. Danny's light eyes bored into her and as he lowered his head to tenderly kiss her lips, she felt tears welling in her eyes.

Feeling the wetness against his face, Danny broke the kiss and looked at Emma, concern and fear on his face and in his eyes. "What's wrong?" Emma couldn't answer, she only shook her head as more tears poured out. "Did I hurt you?" He asked, the worry clearly evident in his tremulous voice.

"No... no, Danny... never," Emma finally said, shaking her head and bringing a hand up to caress his face and push away the dark locks of hair that had fallen into his eyes.

Danny had a bit of an idea why she might be upset, but instead of pummeling her with questions, he just slipped his arms around her shoulders and tucked his face into the crook of her neck, holding her tightly and letting his actions speak for him.

Emma woke with a start, unaware that she had fallen asleep. The comfort of Danny's warm body was missing and she turned her head to the side, finding crystal blue eyes staring at her. She smiled in relief and Danny grinned back. Obviously he had not fallen asleep; obviously he had been lying beside her, watching her the entire time. She felt a little embarrassed and a telltale blush crept across her features.

Danny's grin spread wider, "Is that color in your cheeks because you're feeling shy, or because you're thinking naughty thoughts," he inquired teasingly.

Emma blushed even further, "Perhaps both," she said, an uneasy smile flitting across her lips.

Danny propped himself up on an elbow and reached his hand out to touch her stomach, "Emma... please don't be embarrassed... I'm not," he said, looking directly into her blue-green eyes. "If you regretted this... I would hate myself." He said with quiet sincerity.

Emma looked back at him, feeling a surge of emotions that she couldn't describe, "I don't regret it, Danny... I don't." She said, shaking her head and resting her hand on top of his. Danny smiled at her and leaned down to smother her with a kiss.

After a moment of leisurely lip-locking, the two of them rested quietly on the bed, holding and caressing one another tenderly.

"I don't want to leave," Emma finally whispered.

"I don't want you to leave," Danny agreed.

"I have to, though," Emma said, sighing and pulling herself up into a sitting position. "I've been here all day... I have to go home and check on the animals," she said, smoothing the wayward locks of her long hair. Danny remained silent as he lay back on the bed, watching Emma get up to fix her clothes and put her shoes back on. She knew he was looking, and she grinned, shooting him a sideways glance, "You're staring at me."

"Can't help it," Danny answered with a smile, thoroughly enjoying the blush that colored his lover's cheeks. "You're so beautiful," he whispered, the words coming without thought.

Emma stopped dead and looked at the man lying on the bed, gazing at her with such affection in

his deep blue eyes. She felt her heart begin to pound and her eyes stung with the arrival of tears as her mouth parted, wanting to say something, wanting to refute his incredible words, but not knowing how. Danny saw the shock clearly written on Emma's face, and he reached up to caress her cheek, "You are, Em," he reassured. A single tear trickled down her cheek and Danny sat up and pulled her to him, delivering a kiss that told her how much he truly believed in what he'd said.

"How about a picnic lunch in the meadow tomorrow?" Danny offered, holding Emma's face in his hands and giving her a gentle smile.

"Yes... tomorrow," Emma agreed.

When Emma awoke early the next morning, her thoughts instantly focused on Danny. ...On Danny, and what the two of them had done yesterday. She still could scarcely believe it. She'd thought about it the entire ride home last evening; she couldn't fall asleep because she kept thinking about it; and she dreamt about it during the night. All she could think about was Danny. The way he kissed her and held her; the way he touched her and loved her. The feel of his long, strong body atop her, moving against her... inside her. So unlike Isaac... so gentle and affectionate... so passionate. She was certain that she was in love with Edward Daniels. And she was certain that she was going to go mad.

Mixed in with the fond thoughts of the pleasure she experienced were feelings of incredible guilt. How could she commit adultery? What would the church think? What would her parents think? As much as Emma knew it was wrong and she was committing one of the worst sins, she just couldn't bring herself to regret it. All her life she had been surrounded by church and religion and preaching of right and wrong and morality and immorality. She was sick of it. She'd tried to live by everyone else's rules - God's rules, her parents' rules, society's rules - and look where it had gotten her. She was unwillingly stuck in a marriage with an abusive man, she had no children, and she was woefully unhappy. The only thing that brought her happiness was being with Danny... Danny who was good, and kind, and loving. How could that be wrong?

Her time with Danny was akin to the kind of love and romance she'd read about so many times. This was the life-altering, hopelessly devoted, love-of-a-lifetime kind of romance that she'd always dreamt about but thought she'd certainly never find. This was it... Danny was it. But... she couldn't have him. Emma sighed. Feeling a sharp cramping pain in her side, she sat down on a kitchen chair for a moment. Isaac would be home in another week. She would go back to her role as wife and breeder, and she wouldn't be able to see Danny. She closed her eyes and let her head fall into her hands.

Oh why must I be so cursed? She bemoaned internally. I finally meet someone whom I truly love, and we cannot be together. Perhaps that is my punishment for what we've done... what I've done... perhaps God knows that I'm just a worthless sinner, and that's why he punished me with this life... this life of childless servitude. She lamented, feeling tears building inside.

Another sharp stab pinched in her side, and suddenly, adding together the thoughts about children and the cramping pains, Emma came to a frightful realization. *My God... what if I were to become pregnant by Danny!?* Her head snapped up as that reality sunk in fully. Horrified thoughts filled her head... *What if everyone found out? If the child had Danny's dark hair and exotic features, everyone would know for certain. She would be vilified... the child would be a bastard... the church would banish her... Isaac would kill her... Isaac would kill Danny... oh dear God,* she thought, her head falling into her hands again.

Panic filled her head as she mulled over the wretched possibilities; but... mixed in with the panic, tucked away in a deep, dark corner of her heart was a secret little part of her that thought that it would be wonderful. To share something like that with Danny; to know that his blood would be mixed with hers... to create a new life and have a part of this man - this man she now knew she loved, undeniably - growing inside her... it would be the most incredibly beautiful thing.

Still... she and Danny should not be intimate with each other anymore... or at least not have intercourse. She should tell Danny her thoughts... explain to him what she feared. She should tell him that she loved him, but she just couldn't take the risk. He would understand... wouldn't he?

The two of them were stretched out on a blanket in the middle of the tall-grassed meadow. The mellow gurgling of the nearby stream and the occasional shrill shriek of a hawk were the only things that punctuated the comfortable silence of the afternoon. Danny lay with his eyes closed, his head on Emma's stomach. She ran her fingers through his thick hair, marveling at the silky texture of the dark locks and wondering again where he got his exquisite characteristics from.

"Danny?" Emma asked.

"Yes love?" He answered, his eyes remaining closed

"You've never really told me much about your family, or your mother," Emma began, wanting to start some conversation so that they could get around to discussing what was really on her mind.

"Not much to tell," Danny answered simply.

"Well... where does she live? When's the last time you saw her? Where is the rest of your family?"

Emma began to rattle off the questions, but Danny rolled over and reached up to kiss her deeply, "Emma... I don't want to talk about my family."

Emma drew a deep breath, the sudden dark, lustful look in Danny's eyes pushing her heart to beat faster immediately. She knew they shouldn't do this... she knew it, but she seemed to be powerless to resist. The mere nearness of Danny made her head spin and her body throb with desire. "Well... what *do* you want to talk about then?" She replied throatily, a slight grin playing at the corners of her mouth.

Danny slid his body over Emma until he was on top of her, "I don't." He gave only a brief smile before leaning down to capture her lips in his.

Their kisses quickly escalated in intensity and depth. Emma's hands roamed over Danny's body. He was dressed in his usual pants, long-sleeved shirt, and vest, and Emma sincerely wished that she could undress him so that she could see his body and feel his skin upon hers. Wishing to at least feel him a little, Emma let her hand trace a tentative path down his chest and stomach, until her fingers made sudden contact with something firm in-between his legs. She gasped lightly at the sensation, but before she could explore it further, Danny reached down and snatched her hand away.

Emma giggled, "My goodness, Mr. Daniels... are you always so excited?"

Danny laughed nervously as he continued to hold her wrist, "Well... I guess I just have trouble controlling myself when I'm around you, Miss Emma."

They kissed again, until Danny could no longer stand it. "Emma... I want you," he growled in her ear.

Emma remembered what she'd thought about earlier. She remembered her fear, and she remembered her decision, but she felt her resolve melting in the face of Danny's intense passion. *God help me... I can't control my want of him!* She thought. "Yes... yes, Danny," she breathed.

Danny turned Emma onto her side and positioned his body in back of hers. She felt him lifting her skirt and pushing it out of the way, then she felt the tug as he pulled her undergarments down and away. The sensation of warm hands and fingers gliding along her buttocks and inner thighs made her moan softly, and when she felt Danny shift and then gently ease himself inside her, she let loose a breathy groan.

Strong hands firmly grasped Emma's hips as Danny moved against her backside in slow, short strokes. Emma tried to match her lover's rhythm, her hips jerking backwards, eager to be filled and taken by this man who had captured her heart and soul. She could feel her body responding quickly as her pleasure mounted, and she let loose a low, throaty moan. Sensing the rising passion in his lover, Danny grabbed Emma's thigh and pushed it up and open, bending her knee and twisting her hips and body so that she was mostly on her stomach. Bracing himself on his arms, Danny hovered above her body and increased his tempo, thrusting deeper and harder, his breathing turning ragged. As the waves began to pulse through her, Emma squirmed and reached out, desperate to hold onto something. She grasped at Danny's hands and arms, painfully digging her nails in as she pulled his arms tight around her. Danny rested his body against her and encircled her in his arms while he continued to push both of them to their limits. Emma's whole body tensed and stiffened, and she held her breath as her orgasm ripped through her like a tornado, her mouth opening in a silent, strangled scream. Danny released a choked gasp as he followed right behind her, his hips driven firmly against the soft skin of Emma's backside as he buried his face in her hair and clung to her so tightly.

The afternoon sun was dwindling as Emma and Danny lay snuggled together on the blanket, their bodies comfortably warm and fuzzy from the passion they'd shared. Emma's head rested on Danny's shoulder, her hand idly playing with the buttons of his vest.

"Danny?"

"Yes love?" Danny answered, smiling as he mimicked his earlier words.

"I've been thinking," Emma hesitated, twisting her head up to look at Danny. Her lover's pale blue orbs widened slightly, his sudden anxiety obvious. "I mean... I was worrying, really," she corrected, but Danny's expression didn't change. "What if... what if I were to get pregnant? I mean... what if you were to get me pregnant?" She asked the question and held her breath, fearful of what Danny's response might be.

A smile and gentle chuckle was not what she'd expected. "Em... that wouldn't happen," Danny said, reaching out to touch the soft cheek of his lover's puzzled face.

"You don't know that for sure," Emma argued, "I mean, I know that I haven't gotten pregnant yet, and maybe I can't, but... what if I did, Danny? What would I do?" She asked, the worry plainly evident in her voice.

Danny drew a deep breath. How could he explain to his lover that she needn't worry about such things without giving away his deepest, darkest secrets? It was a complete non-issue, and Emma's fears were totally pointless... but how could he say that without arousing the curiosity of her sharp mind? Edward Daniels had many secrets, but he wasn't ready to divulge them... not yet.

"Emma, my love," Danny began, cupping her face in his hands, "believe me when I tell you that you don't have to worry about this... alright?" Emma opened her mouth to say something but Danny pressed a finger to her lips, "...Just believe me."

She stared at him for a moment as he caressed her face. "I do believe you, Danny," she said. "I... I love you." She spoke the words with soft conviction, her guilty, uncertain feelings suddenly nowhere to be found.

Danny's heart melted. Looking back at her, Danny suddenly wished he could tell Emma everything. He hated keeping things from her, and as he gazed into the blue-green eyes so full of adoration and affection, Danny said a silent prayer that she would understand and forgive him when the time for truth came. "I love you too, Emma," he whispered back to her.

They kissed and settled back down on the blanket, hugging each other tight and wishing things could be so different for both of them. Emma did so love Danny, and she believed him too, but she didn't understand how he could be so certain of his beliefs. What did he know that she didn't? What was he not telling her? The worries and the endless questions began to form rapidly in Emma's mind, but something told her not to ask them. At least not right now. *Some day, Edward*

Daniels, she thought, some day I will know all there is to know about you.

The rest of the week passed much too quickly, and Emma and Danny spent every possible minute together, talking, touching, loving... wanting and needing to be with each other as much as humanly possible. They both felt the foreboding spectre of Isaac's imminent return, and it left them frustrated to know that they wouldn't be able to be together or even see each other once he was back.

Emma explained to Danny how Isaac went into town for a full day once a month, but they both knew that one day would never be enough for them. Still, it was better than nothing at all, and so that was what they had to look forward to. One miniscule day out of an entire month. It seemed like torture, and their love for one another seemed hopelessly ill-fated.

END Parts 1 & 2 of 5

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~ New Life ~

by A. K. Naten

PART THREE

Isaac returned home, much to Emma's distress, and her role as the dutiful wife returned with him. Things immediately went back to the way they were before he left. Any hope Emma had of Isaac changing his attitude and realizing that she was more than his breeding stock and punching bag were dashed the first time he got angry and slapped her. She was miserable, and she missed Danny so much that she felt positively sick.

Week after wretched week passed as the final, lingering warm spells of the Autumn season began to fade away, warning of the harsh Winter that was soon to come. As still more weeks elapsed, it occurred to Emma one morning that her monthly cycle had not started when she expected it should have. She waited until Isaac was out in the fields, then she found a scrap of paper and a pencil and quickly scribbled down dates, counting the weeks and days and adding it all up in her head. She concluded that she was about 16 days overdue. Her cycle was never late...

never. Her heart leapt into her throat and she rushed out the back door, barely reaching the grass in time before she threw up the contents of her stomach.

Emma spent the rest of the day in a daze. Things were suddenly so clear and yet so confusing at the same time. She hadn't been feeling well for a number of weeks, her stomach seemed to be constantly upset, she was excessively tired and tearfully emotional. She had thought that she suffered all these things because she ached for Danny. But instead, it seemed that her worst fear had come true... she was pregnant... and she didn't know who the father was... Isaac or Danny? What should have been a happy, joyous occasion was now met with anxiety and worry.

Emma realized that the chances of it being Danny's were slim; they had only joined together a few times compared to her nearly nightly couplings with Isaac. However... she could not ignore the coincidence of being with Danny and suddenly becoming pregnant after more than a year and a half of non-success with Isaac. It made her ill to think that she didn't know whose child she carried, and she supposed she wouldn't know until it was born and she saw for herself whom the child favored. Images of a dark-haired, blue-eyed little baby filled her head constantly, and she was in perpetual turmoil.

She didn't want to tell Isaac... not yet. She wasn't sure why, but she felt like she needed to talk to someone else first, perhaps get some confirmation somehow. She knew she could see a doctor to have him verify it, but she couldn't do that without going into town and raising Isaac's suspicions. She was at a loss about what to do. Her own mother had never told her much about pregnancy and childbirth; she'd read some fascinating medical journals and books which dealt with it, but other than that, she really had little idea what to expect. She briefly considered going to her Mother for help; surely she would be able to answer her questions and allay her fears. But she shelved that idea when she realized that she wouldn't be able to appear excited about having a baby, and her Mother would be suspicious if she sensed Emma's unhappiness. Still, she needed to talk to someone. She needed Danny.

Isaac left early in the morning for his once-a-month journey into town. As soon as the wagon was safely headed out the long dirt lane, Emma cleaned herself up and got dressed, desperate to go see Danny. She was scared and uncertain what Danny's reaction would be once she told him her news. She hoped and prayed that he wouldn't be angry with her or deny her outright; she needed him to be understanding and supportive. But mostly, she needed him to hold her and tell her that everything would be alright.

As she crested the hill that separated her land from Danny's, she spotted the little ranch house situated in the middle of the green pastureland. A small smile touched her lips and warmed her heart, and she urged her horse onward toward her salvation.

Danny was up on the roof of his house repairing some of the wood shingles. The cool weather reminded him that the Winter snows would soon be upon him, and since he had spent so much time with Emma, many needed repairs and seasonal chores were incomplete. Over the past several weeks, Danny had thrown himself into the work, grateful for the distraction the hard

labor offered. He couldn't get his mind off Emma. She was the first and the last thing to fill his mind every morning when he awoke, and every evening when he fell asleep. He was worried about her; he knew what a bastard Isaac Johnson was, and he feared for Emma's safety and well-being. It absolutely killed him to know that she was with the man, in more ways than one.

He often chastised himself for getting involved with Emma in the first place. He knew damn well that it was an impossible situation; he had no one to blame for his misery except himself. And yet... he couldn't help but think that, even though he was miserable, the fleeting time he and Emma had spent together was worth every ounce of pain he suffered now. Just to know her... to experience her... to love her... even one day with her was worth it.

Danny was hammering a shingle into place when he felt a distinct chill race up his spine. Turning his head, he saw a rider approaching on a horse, long, blonde hair flowing like gold behind her galloping form. ...*Emma*, Danny thought to himself as a slow grin spread across his face.

Danny hopped down off the ladder just as Emma reached the house. They immediately ran into each other's arms, hugging and kissing fiercely while rejoicing in their reunion. Emma already had tears in her eyes, and when Danny held her close and whispered in her ear how much he missed her and loved her, she suddenly broke down and began to sob. As she withered in Danny's arms, he picked her up and carried her inside the house.

They sat silently by the fireplace for a few moments, Danny's arms encircling Emma while she cried and released her pent-up sorrow, burying her face in his chest and clinging to him tightly. She finally quieted down and Danny reached down to cup her face, tilting it upward so he could gaze into her oceanic eyes. But instead of seeing her eyes, all Danny saw were the black-and-blue marks along her cheekbone and jaw.

He reached up with a trembling hand and touched his fingertips to the bruises, a hundred thoughts and emotions flooding his mind. Anger, dread, fear, hatred, sadness, horror, disbelief... but the primary feeling was one of rage. Rage against the man who did this to this woman... this woman he loved and cherished... this woman who deserved everything but got nothing. The agony and shame reflected in her sea-green eyes was almost more than he could bear.

Danny shifted Emma off his lap, and he stood up and quickly walked away. The fury that invaded his heart and his hatred of Isaac Johnson was so great that he thought he would explode. He stood with his back to Emma, leaning on one of the kitchen chairs and gripping it fiercely; he didn't want her to see how close he was to losing it.

"Danny...", Emma quietly walked up and touched her lover's arm. "Danny... please don't be upset," she pleaded in a whisper.

Danny whirled around to face her, his eyes dark and burning with his rage, "Don't be *upset*!?" He said. "Emma, for the love of God! Look what he's *done* to you!" He yelled louder, motioning to her face.

Emma could only stare as tears began to fill her eyes again. The intense fury that radiated off Danny alarmed her; she'd never seen him display even the slightest bit of displeasure before.

"Does he do this often?" Danny asked as he suddenly stepped closer to her. "I mean, does he do this to you every goddamn *day*!?" His tone was loud and demanding, his words harsh and cutting. Emma took a step away from him, not liking the malevolent look that clouded his normally clear eyes. "Tell me, Emma!" Danny shouted and Emma flinched as he reached for her arms.

"I... H-He...", Emma could only stammer while Danny pinned her with his murderous glare.

Suddenly Danny spun away from her, a deep growl sounding in his throat as his anger finally boiled over inside. He lashed out at the closest object, that being the kitchen furniture. He grabbed the end of the wooden table and flung it across the room, flipping it end over end. A chair was next, and he hurled it against the stone fireplace with a loud crash as the legs snapped and it fell to the floor in a clatter of splintered wood.

Emma cowered in the opposite corner of the room, watching her lover in wide-eyed shock. Danny brought both hands to his head, grasping handfuls of hair, trying desperately to reign in the vicious fury that pulsed through his veins and threatened to consume him. He leaned against the wall, banging his forehead on the hard surface and castigating himself for losing control so violently. He didn't want to scare Emma... he wasn't angry with her... he loved her... he wanted to protect her and take her away from all this pain and terror.

Danny opened his eyes, the clarity and surety of what he needed to do hitting him full force. He turned and started to approach Emma, hating the fearful look in her eyes as they tracked his movements carefully. "Leave him." Danny spoke the words with calm, clear conviction as he came to stand directly in front of her.

"W-What?" Emma stammered, her mind still bewildered from Danny's surprising outburst.

"I want you to *leave* him, Emma!" Danny exclaimed, reaching out to grasp her arms, "Leave that bastard and come away with me!" Emma's mouth dropped open, but no words came out. "We'll run away... we'll go where no one can find us! Come on... right now!" Danny said forcefully, tugging on her arm.

"No!" Emma said, but Danny paid her no heed.

"Let's go pack some things and leave right this minute!" Danny urged, heading toward the door and pulling on her arm again.

"No! Danny, I can't!" Emma said louder, pulling backwards against his firm grip.

Danny finally stopped and looked at her, confusion and worry etched into his face. "Why not?" He asked, his voice soft and unsure.

"Because I...", Emma hesitated, her chin trembling, "Because... I'm pregnant."

The force of her words punched Danny in the gut, stealing the wind from his lungs and knocking him senseless for a long moment. Emma began to cry again, and Danny suddenly couldn't look at her. He walked over to the fireplace, leaning both hands against it while his mind processed the information and his heart began to sink with the horrible realization that this changed everything.

A few minutes of silence filled the small house until Emma finally spoke, "Danny... I know you told me not to worry, and I know you said that nothing would happen, but... but it **has** happened, Danny! ...It's happened, and now I don't know what to do!" She cried, "I don't know what to do because I don't know who this child's father is!" She said, breaking down into sobs again.

Danny turned to her; she looked so small and fragile standing there with her arms wrapped around herself. Her skin was pale, her face was gaunt, and she had dark circles under her eyes. His heart broke for her.

"Emma...", Danny said as he approached her, "It's Isaac's baby." He gently grasped both her arms again, "I already told you... it **can't** be mine... It's just not possible." He shook his head and spoke as calmly as he could, wanting to quell the panic he could feel rising inside her.

Emma's heart dropped; her fear that Danny would deny that the child could be his seemed to be coming true. She hadn't wanted to think about the possibility that he would turn his back on her, but the reality of the situation was certainly more than he could handle. Truthfully, she couldn't really blame him. Of course he didn't want to be tied to her and saddled with the potential responsibility for an illegitimate baby. She was married to one man and was possibly carrying another's bastard child. What man would want any part of that?

"Danny... I know what you said. I understand the position I'm putting you in, and I... I want you to know that I don't expect anything of you if-"

Danny held a hand up, cutting her off, "Wait - you think I'm trying to deny it? To deny you?" He asked, his voice incredulous.

Tears ran down Emma's cheeks, "I'm not telling you this to make you feel guilty, Danny... I just wanted you to know... I just..." Her voice trailed off and she began to cry softly.

Danny reached up to cup her face, "Emma, you don't understand!" He whispered fiercely. "I **cannot** be the father! It is **impossible**, I assure you!" She merely stared at him, her green-blue eyes weepy and confused. How could he make her understand without telling her things he wasn't prepared to divulge yet? Danny drew a deep breath, holding her face and speaking tenderly, "Emma... you just have to trust me when I tell you that it **isn't** mine... alright?" His blue eyes pinned her, willing her to understand what he was trying to say.

Emma looked into Danny's eyes, seeing only truth and honesty there. She tried to understand and

believe what he was saying. Apparently, Danny didn't think he was able to have children. How he knew that for certain, she didn't know, but somewhere in the back of her mind lurked the irrational hope that he was wrong. If she were going to have a baby, she wanted it to be Danny's more than anything. But he asked her to trust him, and he insisted that it was Isaac's... so she would accept that. She would have to accept that until she held the proof in her arms, seven months from now.

They stared at one another for a long moment. Emma finally dropped her eyes, swallowing hard against the lump of sadness that had become wedged in her throat, "I have to go. Isaac will be back soon." Her voice was quiet and laced with anguish.

Danny dropped his hands and let her walk toward the door. Before she disappeared, however, he spoke, "Emma," he called out, "...does Isaac know?" He asked.

Emma looked at him mournfully, her eyes glistening with tears, "No... I wanted you to be the first to know."

Danny paused, then said regretfully, "You need to tell him." Emma just stared. Danny walked closer to her, "You need to rest... take better care of yourself." He looked into her eyes, making sure she understood exactly what he meant. He took a deep breath and continued, his voice quavering slightly, "And you need to tell Isaac that... if he continues to hit you... you're going to lose the baby."

Emma's mouth opened and she gave Danny a horrified look. She didn't know how to respond. Why would Danny say that? Did he really think she would dare say something like that to Isaac? And how did Danny know about such things anyway? She closed her mouth and turned her head away; she was so confused and upset, she felt sick to her stomach. She escaped out the door, but before she got off the porch, Danny chased after her again.

"Emma...", Danny called again. She stopped at the edge of the porch and turned to face him, her eyes hesitantly looking up. Danny approached her and leaned in close, reaching out to hold her face in his hands again, "I wish it **were** mine, Em... I wish it with all my heart." He whispered the words with such conviction, and his eyes pinned her with such an intense look of sorrow and regret and anguish that she couldn't bear it any longer. Her face twisted and a sob burst forth from her chest as she collapsed in his arms, weeping and wailing and wishing that the two of them could just disappear forever and ever.

A few more weeks passed, and Danny was going fairly insane with worry. All he could think about was what that beast was doing to Emma. Hopefully she told him that she was with child, and hopefully he was leaving her alone. But who knew for sure? For all Danny knew, it made no difference to Isaac Johnson if his wife was pregnant or not. He was enough of a bastard that he would probably still hit her and mistreat her, regardless of her delicate condition.

Danny knew that he would have no rest until he saw for himself that Emma was alright. Until he

saw with his own eyes that she was unharmed and healthy, he would not be able to sleep at night.

A few days later, Danny came up with a plan that would allow him to check on Emma, under the guise that he needed to talk to Isaac. It seemed crazy to take such a risk, but he knew that he had to go. He had to see her. He told himself that he could handle whatever Isaac threw at him, so long as he got to see Emma.

Danny rode up the dirt path that lead to the Johnson farm, his saddle heavily laden with bags of potatoes. He had devised a plan where he would tell Isaac that he was in desperate need of some feed for his animals, and since he'd had a bumper crop of potatoes, he would offer to trade some for a few bags of feed. They were neighbors, and neighbors helped each other out, didn't they? He knew it was terribly flimsy, but it was all his desperate mind could think of. Hopefully Isaac would take the bait. And hopefully, Emma would be called to give her input, and then Danny could see for himself that she was well. He rolled his eyes at his hair-brained scheme as he rode on.

The Johnson cabin came into view, but Danny saw no one outside. He pulled his horse up to the front porch and got off, looking around to see if Isaac was out in the fields. Seeing and hearing nothing, Danny felt a twinge of worry. He walked up onto the porch and rapped his knuckles lightly on the door. A moment of silence passed until the door finally opened a small crack. A pair of uncertain sea-green eyes peered out at him, and when Danny's eyes made contact, the door opened wider and Emma's surprised face met him.

Emma took in the lean, handsome countenance of her lover and couldn't bring herself to say anything; she was too shocked to see Danny standing on her porch looking so tall and striking.

"Hello... uh, h-hello, Mizz. Johnson," Danny stammered, nearly forgetting that he was only supposed to be Mr. Daniels, the neighbor-man, not Danny, the man who was madly in love with Emma Johnson.

Emma gave him a strange, startled look, "Hello... Mr. Daniels...?" She questioned back with uncertainty.

"Uh, I was looking for your husband, ma'am... I wonder if I might speak with him about some... business?" Danny continued hurriedly, looking at Emma expectantly, hoping that she would catch on to what he was trying to do.

"H-He's out in the barn, doing some butchering," Emma said, her brows furrowed deeply.

Edward visibly relaxed, blowing out a breath, "Oh thank God." He mumbled.

"Danny, what are you *doing* here?!" Emma whispered under her breath, nervously shooting a glance up toward the barn.

"I had to see you," Danny whispered back, careful not to make any inappropriate movements, just in case Isaac appeared. "I had to see if you were alright!"

"Danny...", Emma said breathlessly, closing her eyes and shaking her head slightly. She was touched by Danny's heartfelt concern, but was he insane? She opened her eyes but did not look at him, "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine." Danny said quietly. Emma tilted her head upward and they locked eyes. "You look exhausted, Em. You look too thin, and you look... so unhappy." Danny said, pinning her with mournful eyes.

"Danny please!" Emma closed her eyes again as tears quickly filling them and spilled down her pale cheeks. "Please, you have to go before he sees you!" She pleaded, her voice trembling with emotion.

Danny started to move his hand up to touch and reassure his love, but he quickly remembered himself. "Emma...", he started, but another voice interrupted.

"What do you think you're doin' here?!" Isaac's voice called out harshly as he walked toward the house carrying a bloody butchering knife.

Shit, Danny cursed to himself as he turned away from Emma and hustled down off the porch. "Uh, g'day Mr. Johnson," Danny hesitantly called out in greeting. "I was just looking for you, sir."

Isaac came to stand in front of Danny, his meaty arms crossed over his chest and an angry, impatient look on his leathery face. "Well you found me. What do you want?" He snapped.

"Uh, well, I have somewhat of a trade proposition for you, sir," Danny began awkwardly. Emma still stood on the porch, nervously biting her thumbnail as she watched and listened intently. "You see, uh, I could use a bit of feed for my horses, and uh... I had a bumper crop of potatoes this year, and... well, rather than see them go to waste, I thought I'd see if you folks would be interested in a trade of some sort." Danny tried his best to sound upbeat and practical.

Isaac frowned at him, his dark eyes studying the tall stranger carefully. "We don't want any of yer garbage," Isaac's upper lip curled in disgust. "We ain't uncivilized Injuns like you, boy... we don't hafta 'trade' for our goods." The shorter man sneered hatefully at Danny, who was shocked by Isaac's sharp words, even though he knew he shouldn't be. He also knew he should keep his mouth shut and just turn away and leave, but something inside him refused.

"Oh I don't know about that, Mr. Johnson... it certainly doesn't seem very **civilized** around here." Danny spat back sarcastically, shifting his gaze from Isaac to Emma. Emma looked stricken as all eyes seemed to focus on her. She looked straight at Danny, silently crying out to him, warning him of the dangerous territory he was treading in. Danny read her thoughts, and he answered her back as best he could. His face told her that he loved her, but if she wasn't going to fight, he would.

When Danny turned his eyes back to Isaac, the little man was positively fuming. He threw his

wife a dark, warning glare and took a step closer to his tall neighbor, "Boy... if you know what's good for ya, you'll git on yer horse and git yer good-fer-nothin' half-breed hide away from my wife and off my land." His words dripped with venom and he used his knife to make his point by poking the tip into Danny's vest. Emma's gasp was audible as the two men glowered at each other for a long moment.

Danny was filled with such disgust and revulsion; he thought Isaac Johnson had to be the most vile creature on the face of the earth. He gritted his teeth, the urge to reach out and strangle the abominable man was so strong he had to clench his hands into fists.

By this time, Emma had stepped nervously from the porch, the tense atmosphere filling her with heart-stopping fear. She twisted her hands nervously, "M-Mr. Daniels," she called out hesitantly. Danny turned to look at her. "Thank you for the kind offer, Mr. Daniels... but we aren't interested." She gave him a pleading, wide-eyed look, asking him to back off, begging him to go before he got himself into trouble. Danny returned her look with much regret and sadness. It would be so easy for him to start a war with Isaac Johnson, but he knew full well that Emma would be caught in the middle, and she would be the one to get hurt the most.

Isaac watched the silent interaction between his wife and his half-breed neighbor. He wasn't a smart man, but he could sense that something was going on. Two people didn't look at each other like that if they were just neighbors. Dozens of dark, angry thoughts began to fill his mind as he began to consider all the possibilities.

Danny finally turned back and gave Isaac one last hate-filled look before climbing onto his horse and trotting away.

He was not quite out of ear-shot when he heard the first stream of curses that Isaac let loose against his wife. Jerking his horse around, Danny saw the short man backhand Emma, landing her face-down in the dirt.

Something let loose deep inside Edward Daniels' chest and he saw nothing but red. Blood red. He no longer cared how polite or necessary it was to stay out of Emma's life - she was his life. He was going to beat the living hell out of Isaac Johnson, or he was going to die trying. Danny kicked his horse in the flanks and tore off toward the Johnson house, bound and determined to save Emma from the wrath of man who was beating her senseless.

Isaac was hovering over Emma's cowering body when Danny reached them. He vaulted off his horse and immediately leapt onto Isaac, pulling him off of Emma and throwing him to the ground. Isaac quickly got to his feet and lunged at Danny. They grappled with each other, throwing punches and dropping one another to the dirt, only to rise and continue fighting. Emma screamed for them to stop, and Danny instinctively turned to look at her. With that one misstep, however, he sealed his fate. Isaac grabbed something lying on the ground and made another lunge at Danny. Before the younger man could brace himself for the attack, Isaac was on him.

Danny felt a sharp, horrible, searing pain in his side. When Isaac finally backed off of him, he saw the bloody knife in the other man's hand and realized what had happened. He looked down

where he was clutching his side and saw the blood. The crimson stain under his hands spread quickly, saturating his clothes as the dark fluid began to leak out of him. Emma cried out and Danny fell down to his knees. When he looked up, Isaac was coming at him again, the knife poised to deliver the killing blow.

Somehow, with some last surge of strength and determination, Danny managed to grab hold of Isaac's wrist and prevent the knife from plunging in. They battled against each other, their arms and hands and souls locked, quite literally, in a life or death struggle. They dropped to the ground, twisting and turning and fighting for domination. Danny didn't remember exactly what happened or how it happened; he only knew that suddenly, the struggling stopped. When he refocused his vision, he was lying on top of Isaac, the shorter man's dark brown eyes staring up at him at close range.

Isaac made strange choking and gurgling sounds in his throat, and he gritted his teeth and grasped Danny by the shirt collar, "Y-You... half-breed... s-son of a... bitch!" Isaac growled through clenched teeth. Danny pushed away from him, revealing the knife blade deeply imbedded in Isaac's chest. Emma screamed again and promptly fainted.

Danny collapsed as well, but he didn't lose consciousness. As he laid on his back, staring up at the clear blue sky while his life slowly trickled out of his body and onto the hard earth, he wondered what was going to happen to Emma. Surely Isaac would die, and most likely, he would die as well. What would she do? She'd be all alone... with a little baby. How could he die and leave her all alone like that? But if he didn't die, he'd go to jail. No one would ever believe a half-breed, and no one would believe that he had killed Isaac in self-defense. And how would it all be explained? What would people think of Emma if they knew the truth? If they knew that the half-breed was her lover, they would think that he killed her husband in a jealous rage. Emma would be eaten alive by the scandal, and the baby would forever suffer the stigma.

Danny couldn't allow that. He had to spare Emma the horror of it all. He had to do what he did best... he had to run away. If he disappeared, then no one would have to know anything. Emma could make up whatever story she wanted, and she could get on with her life. Maybe she would move away... she would forget about him and start over. Danny blinked his eyes, staring up at the sky again. He was still alive, and that meant that he had to get up and get out of there.

Somehow he did manage to get up; somehow he managed to stumble over to his horse, and somehow he managed to clamber onto the beast and ride off toward his home. After that, he didn't remember. After that, everything faded into blackness.

PART FOUR

Emma sat by the fireplace in a stupor. Her dinner lay before her, untouched, and her hot tea was now cold.

"Emma Louise," her mother's voice called to her softly, "you need to eat, child." The strawberry-blonde woman picked up a spoon filled with lukewarm soup and touched it to her daughter's lips. The younger woman turned her head, silently declining the nourishment.

Martha Dunwoody was worried about her eldest child. The girl had been through so much, and she'd been sitting around in a silent daze for so long, the older woman feared for her sanity. She brushed Emma's long blonde hair away from her bruised and beaten face. How could she and her husband have been so wrong about Isaac Johnson? He had seemed like such a nice, upstanding Christian man; the perfect husband for their young daughter. How he ended up abusing Emma and trying to kill her was just beyond her comprehension. She couldn't say that she was sorry he was dead. She was only sorry that Emma was the one who had to kill him.

Martha released a sigh, "Maybe you'll want to try something later," she said, replacing the spoon in the bowl and taking the tray of food away. Emma watched her go, not caring that her stomach was cramping and crying out for the food. She couldn't eat... all she could do was think about Isaac and the fact that he was dead, and about Danny and the fact that she didn't know what'd happened to him. She couldn't sleep... all she saw when she closed her eyes was the blood that poured out of Danny's stomach... and the look of shock and terror on his face when he realized that he'd been stabbed... and the image of the knife protruding out of Isaac's chest. She felt like she died every time the images flashed through her mind.

She couldn't remember how she ended up at her parent's house that fateful day. She only remembered coming-to, seeing Isaac's dead body lying on the ground, and not seeing Danny anywhere. She remembered getting sick and vomiting several times, and she remembered feeling an overwhelming sense of panic and dread. After that, it was all a blur.

Obviously her parents had taken care of everything. She didn't know how long she'd been at her folks' house, but she remembered talking to the Sheriff about what happened. She told him that Isaac beat her - had been for some time - until finally, that night, he came at her with the knife. They struggled, and she accidentally stabbed and killed him. The Sheriff seemed to buy the story; apparently her beaten face and body was enough evidence for him, combined with the fact that, unbeknownst to her and her family, Isaac Johnson had developed somewhat of a reputation. It seemed that Isaac stirred up quite a bit of trouble when he took his little monthly jaunts into town. Emma's suspicions that he caroused with the ladies of the evening were correct, and he was also known to be a gambler who was indebted to several people. Overall, the man was a lying, cheating bastard, and no one was sorry to hear that he was gone.

Emma's concerns now centered on Danny. She had been at her parents' house for two days... two days of not knowing if Danny was alive or dead. What happened to him? Where did he go? Was he here or was he long gone? She had lied to the Sheriff to spare Danny's involvement in Isaac's death. She felt compelled to protect him; after all, he had tried to protect her. She wondered if he was at his house, or if he had just taken off. Would he really run away and leave her? With each passing hour, sitting in her parents' house in the agonizing silence, Emma knew that she had to discover Danny's fate. She had to go to his house and see if he was there, or at least see if she could figure out where he'd gone. The trick would be to get away.

Emma hadn't told her parents of her pregnancy. Isaac's death had been everyone's focus, and she just didn't want to bring it up. She wasn't really showing yet, and her Mother obviously couldn't tell, so she decided to keep quiet about it. Emma thought that she would like to tell her Mother, at least, but when she decided that she had to go back to search for Danny, she realized that her parents would never let her go if they knew she was with child. They wouldn't let her out of their sight once they knew. They'd make her sell her home and her land and come live with them again, and she definitely did not want to do that. So, she had to figure out a way to convince them to let her go home.

"Mother, *please*!" Emma cried out again. "I have to go! You don't understand!" Emma had arisen this morning fully awakened from her stupor and determined to leave the confines of her parents' house.

"No, Emma Louise, I don't understand! Why in the world would you want to go back to that-that *place*, all alone?! I don't understand that!" Martha Dunwoody yelled back at her daughter. "You can't live there all by yourself! You can't make it alone!"

"Your mother's right, Emma," Thomas Dunwoody's deep voice cut into the conversation. "You can't handle that farm by yourself. Besides, it isn't safe for you to be there alone."

"Then I'll hire some ranch hands to help me... or something." Emma insisted, standing with her arms crossed defiantly.

"Emma," Her father walked up to her, "Like it or not, you're a widow... you're a single woman again. Your place is not on that farm anymore... your place is here, with us." His firm but gentle tone told Emma that he was quite serious.

"You'll find another man, Emma... a *nice* man with a pure heart... we'll make sure of it this time." Her mother added, trying to sound cheerful.

Emma wanted to throw up. She squeezed her eyes shut, "I don't *need* another *man*, Mother! I don't *want* another man!" She yelled. Emma didn't need or want anyone but Danny... but of course, she couldn't tell her parents that.

"Oh don't talk such nonsense, girl! You'll find someone... not every man out there is going to be like Isaac." Her mother added ignorantly. "Now then... your father will take you back to the farm, and you can load up your things and bring them back here. We'll handle the sale of the animals and the property." Sarah asserted as she walked out to the kitchen, effectively ending the discussion.

"I'm going home... but I'm not coming back here." Emma said, her voice low and even. Martha turned around to look at her daughter in surprised disbelief.

"Emma...", Thomas gave his daughter a warning look, "you mind what your mother says." Emma knew she would have a hard time convincing her folks to let her return home. There was a slight chance her father would understand since he was the more lenient of the two, but her mother would prove much more difficult.

Emma drew a deep breath, steeling her nerves and standing as tall as she could, "I am not a child... I am a grown woman, capable of living her own life and making her own decisions! And I certainly intend to make better decisions than the ones *you* have made for me!" Emma yelled, her anger getting the better of her.

"You'll watch your tongue, young lady!" Thomas responded sternly, scolding her with a pointed finger.

"Father, please... try to understand," Emma pleaded, calming herself. "I need to go back. I need... I just need to be alone for awhile. I'm not saying that I'll stay there, I just...", her voice broke and she held a hand to her forehead. "I just need some time... alone... I need to sort things out on my own. Please... can't you at least give me that much?"

Thomas stared at his daughter realizing for the first time that she was, indeed, a grown woman. She seemed so much older than her 21 years, and he was quite certain that she could take care of herself. Emma had intelligence and an indomitable spirit that would serve her well, no matter what path she chose. But did she really want to do it alone? ...He couldn't understand that. He wanted her to have someone who would take care of her, but she was right... he and Martha had made a grievous mistake by pairing her with Isaac Johnson. She had been through so much for a young woman, and Thomas felt directly responsible for it.

"Alright." Thomas said with quiet resignation.

"Thomas! You can't let her go!" Martha cried out.

"She's right, Martha. She's not a little girl. She has to make her own decisions now." He looked at his daughter with understanding in his sad green eyes. "I'll grant you your time alone to make your decisions, Emma, but not for long. No matter what you think, you can't handle the farm all by yourself, and you'll have to decide what you're going to do eventually." He added, giving Emma a stern look.

"I know." Emma said simply.

Thomas Dunwoody took his daughter back home that same day, agreeing to leave her for a week; after that, he would return to check on her. Emma felt reasonably calm and in control the whole trip, until they started up the dirt lane that led to the homestead. When they neared the house, Emma exited the wagon and immediately walked over to the spot where her husband had met his gruesome end. The vivid memories of the dark puddles of blood that haunted Emma's dreams were nowhere to be found. All evidence of Isaac's demise and Danny's involvement

seemed to have either vanished or washed away.

"I uh... I tried to clean up a little after... after they took him away." Her father's voice was quiet and close to her as she stared at the barren ground. Emma nodded absently. Even though the physical evidence had been removed, the ghostly specters of her husband and lover still seemed to resonate in the area. Emma could still see their bodies so clearly. She blinked her eyes and shook her head, forcing herself out of her morbid reverie. She realized her father was standing beside her, watching her closely. If he didn't believe she was fine, he would force her to return home with him, so she managed to look at him and give him a small smile of gratitude.

A few hours later, Thomas was waving to his daughter as he headed back out the dirt drive. A part of Emma didn't want to see her father go; she hated to admit that she was scared to be by herself, but she also couldn't deny that she felt uneasy. The other part of her, however, was anxious to be alone; she had to go find Danny.

As soon as her father disappeared from sight, Emma saddled her favorite horse and headed off toward her neighbor's small ranch.

Emma approached Danny's house with much trepidation. She had been gone for three days... three days since Danny had been badly stabbed, perhaps mortally. Upon reaching the homestead, Emma dismounted her horse and looked around. The first thing she noticed was Danny's pale gray steed grazing out in the open, unfenced pasture, still fully saddled. Turning her attention toward the house, she next saw a trail of dark reddish-brown dribble which led up across the front porch and into the house. Her stomach twisted into knots and her heart began to hammer in her chest as she walked up the porch steps, carefully avoiding the dried splotches of blood.

The front door creaked eerily as she pushed it open. "...Danny?" Emma called out, her heart in her throat. Receiving no answer, she entered the house further. What met her eyes was horrific. Dried-up spatters and streaks of blood were everywhere. There were large droplets and footprints on the floor, and there were smear-marks and handprints on the furniture and the walls. The stench of sickness and death hung heavily in the air, and Emma's stomach roiled unsteadily. Fighting the bile that arose in the back of her throat, Emma walked toward Danny's bedroom. The door was partially closed, and when she pushed it open the whole way, the sight and smell that greeted her sent her racing back out the front door immediately.

Emma retched outside for a good five minutes before she was able to go back in. Her whole body was shaking so badly, she could barely walk. She went to Danny's room again, a trembling hand held to her mouth as she entered.

He was lying supine on his bed, stock-still, his eyes closed and his lips parted slightly. His skin was so pallid that it had a bluish tint to it. Emma was sure that he was dead. One side of his cheek and jaw was black and blue, and there were dried patches of blood at his mouth and nose. He was drenched in wetness; his hair was sopping wet and everything smelled of stale perspiration and blood. The whole side of his shirt and pants were completely saturated and

colored by dark crimson, and the bed that he crookedly laid on was soaked in the reddish-brown color. Emma had never seen such a bloody, revolting mess before.

Danny's shirt was pushed up slightly, exposing his stomach, and the side of his abdomen was covered with a large, bloodied piece of cloth. Emma supposed that he must have tried to doctor the wound himself before... She glanced back to his ashen face, *Oh dear God Danny... you can't be dead!* She thought as she stood staring at her silent, motionless lover, the crushing reality of the situation hitting her fully.

Steeling herself, Emma walked further into the room until she was standing right beside Danny's bed. Bending down closer to him, she saw that his face was beaded with perspiration and his chest moved up and down in shallow, labored breaths. "Oh thank God!" She murmured aloud, closing her eyes and bringing a hand up to cover her mouth as the tears that flooded her eyes now spilled forth. Biting her lip, she reached a jittery hand out to feel his forehead. He was burning up. *Fever... the wound is probably infected,* Emma surmised. She reached down and peeled the bloody cloth away, her stomach lurching again when she finally saw the angry, clearly infected stab wound at the side of his abdomen. The whole side of his torso was flushed bright pink and the injury oozed foul-smelling blood and pus. Emma had to cover her mouth with her hand and look away, lest she retch right there on the floor.

She was suddenly overcome with horrible feelings of guilt. The whole time she was at her parents' house, Danny was here, suffering. While she sat on her laurels and let everyone else clean up her life, Danny was alone and in agony, bleeding half to death, his body wracked by infection and fever. Emma didn't know how he'd made it this long, but she knew what she had to do. She had to help him. She had to clean him up and clean up this mess and nurse him back to health. He was alive and he was going to stay that way. She absolutely swore it.

Emma worked tirelessly cleaning up Danny and the house as best she could. He was still unconscious, which was probably a good thing, since she needed to disturb his injury and clean it. She had little experience playing nursemaid, but luckily she'd read enough books and watched her mother attend to her father's injuries over the years so that she had some idea what to do. Fortunately, Danny had several poultices and herbal medicines in the house which Emma recognized, and she was able to clean and dress the wound satisfactorily. She could only wait now and see if it did any good and he regained consciousness. The only thing remaining was to get his filthy clothes off of him and clean his body.

She began with his boots and socks, pulling them off and setting them aside. That was the easy part. Taking a deep breath, she then unbuckled his belt and unzipped his trousers. Getting them down off his hips was a bit more difficult since they were stiffened with encrusted blood. Emma cringed as her fingers came in contact with the sticky, dried-up redness, but she kept tugging gently until the pants finally slid down and off, leaving Danny in his undershorts. Emma tried very hard not to stare, but she couldn't help looking at Danny's long legs. Although well-toned and slightly muscular, they were rather slender and shapely. They were covered with dark hair, but it was fine and fairly sparse, not coarse and thick like Isaac's. Danny's upper thighs were

perfectly smooth and hair-free, and Emma felt compelled to see if they were as soft as they looked. Reaching out hesitantly, she let the pads of her fingers touch his skin, verifying that, indeed, it was soft as silk. ...*Amazing*, she thought to herself.

Returning her attentions to the task at hand, Emma was now confronted with Danny's blood-drenched shirt. As she unbuttoned the garment and opened it, she was surprised to find that a large bandage was wrapped around Danny's chest. The bottom of the bandage was soiled by blood, and Emma wasn't sure if it was from his stab wound, or if perhaps he had another injury somewhere on his chest that he had managed to dress himself. She laid the shirt open the whole way, wondering how she was going to unwrap the bandage and get the shirt off without jostling him too much. Contemplating for a moment, she turned and went out to the kitchen to search for scissors or something to cut the material away. It was the least invasive way; Danny would just have to be upset with her for destroying his already-ruined clothes.

Finding some scissors, Emma made her way back to the room to begin her pseudo-surgery. As she sat gingerly on the side of the bed, Emma noticed that Danny was sweating profusely again. She fetched a damp cloth and pressed it to his head as she'd done before, trying to keep him cooled down. As she was patting him gently, Danny's eyes began to flutter and open. Emma gasped as pale blue orbs suddenly looked upon her in confusion.

"...Em...ma?" Danny rasped softly. He thought he was certainly dreaming.

"Yes! Yes, it's me, Danny!" Emma nearly wept to him as she reached out to touch his face tenderly.

"Emma... you came back," He marveled, a mixture of relief, gratitude and pain playing across his battered features.

"Of course, love! I'm here and I'm not going to leave you!" Emma whispered emphatically.

"Emma... I'm... so sorry," Danny choked out, closing his eyes and trying to move his arms as his face twisted in distress.

Emma had to bite down on her bottom lip to stop it from quivering; the anguished expression displayed on her lover's face was killing her. "Shh... Hush Danny, hush," Emma touched a finger to his lips and stilled his movement, "don't try to talk now."

Danny shook his head and opened his eyes again, "No, Em... I'm sorry... for so many things," he struggled to get the words out. "There's so much... I have to tell you... so much I need to explain... Emma!" He gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut again as another wave of pain rushed through him.

"Oh Danny! Please don't talk now, love... you need to rest," Emma fretted, leaning closer to him as she cupped his face and brushed the damp hair away from his forehead.

Danny shook his head again, wincing and trembling, "I'm so sorry, Emma... I love you so much...

remember that!" He rasped out as he took a few shuddering breaths and then fell unconscious again from the acute agony.

"Oh Danny, please... please come back to me!" Emma whispered as she held his face and softly kissed his parched lips.

Emma had experienced sickness and death before. She saw friends and family members suffer and perish, and only a few days ago, she watched her own husband's demise. It had been terrible, but it was nothing compared to what she was feeling right now. She had never known pain like this; this pain was an invisible sword that pierced straight into her heart. It slashed through her deep, tender layers of love and devotion, severing her delicate emotional ties and leaving a gaping hole inside her. She hadn't truly realized just how much she needed Danny until that very moment. It hit her like a freight train, and she began to feel immense desperation and panic welling up inside her.

"You can't leave me Danny... you can't!" She said, closing her eyes and breaking down completely. Emma wanted to lean down and grab hold of Danny so badly, but she could only bow her head and release her deep sorrow, letting all the sadness, worry, and anguish of the past several days drain from her eyes and drop onto Danny's still form.

It took Emma a long time to settle down and regain control of her raging emotions. Once she had calmed herself, she remembered her forgotten task of getting the rest of Danny's clothes off so she could bathe and clean him properly. She found her scissors and sat down beside his recumbent form, slipping the metal shears underneath his chest binding and cutting it. When the bindings at last fell away, Emma found no additional injury; what she found instead was most unexpected.

Emma could only sit and stare with her mouth agape as she looked at the very obvious, very female breasts that adorned Danny's chest. She couldn't move... her brain could not comprehend... she was in shock. Danny was... Danny was... Danny was a *woman*?!

Emma shot up off the bed, stumbling backwards and falling to the floor. She scrambled to her feet, staring in wide-eyed horror at the body of her lover. *It can't be... it can't be... it's impossible... it's not POSSIBLE!* Her frantic mind screamed inside her head. It must be some sort of a physical... anomaly... a birth defect... she'd read about such things... it happened. *He couldn't be a woman, he has a -*, Emma stopped abruptly, her eyes shifting to look at Danny's undershorts. She swallowed the lump in her throat and walked hesitantly toward the bed again. Reaching out with trembling hands, Emma gently grasped the undershorts and pulled them down off Danny's hips.

"Oh my GOD! Nooo!" She wailed aloud, clapping her hand over her mouth. Staggering back toward the bedroom door, Emma gave one last horrified look before turning on her heel and dashing out of the house as fast as her feet would carry her.

PART FIVE

Emma laid on her bed in a daze. It seemed that was all she did lately... cry, throw up, and sit around in a stupor. She didn't know how long she'd been lying here, staring up at the ceiling; it was now dark outside, so it'd been quite awhile.

She'd been thinking so much, her head was throbbing in pain. She was still shocked with disbelief, but now she felt anger too. Why would Danny lie to her like that? How could he do such a thing? And how could she not realize it? She felt betrayed, and incredibly stupid. All the things they said to one another... all the things they **did** with one another. Emma cringed and her stomach flipped when she thought about that.

How could she be so foolish and naive? How could she not see it? Or had she just been in denial about it? Thinking back, she realized that she had noticed little things, like the hat pulled down to shield his face, his penchant for wearing buttoned-up long-sleeved shirts, the smoothness and exquisite structure of his face, the melodious tone of his voice, his slim build. At the time, Emma had passed it all off as 'uniqueness' and nothing more. Even today, when she'd glimpsed Danny's naked legs, she shrugged off the irregularity. Now, all the little idiosyncrasies and curious characteristics were coming together and making sense.

Her mind turned to consider the whole pregnancy issue; Emma understood now why Danny had been so insistent that he couldn't be the father - of course! *Oh dear God... this really is Isaac's baby*, Emma thought as yet another realization hit her on the head. She brought a hand to her stomach and closed her eyes, feeling sick again.

Thinking of her pregnancy made her think of the most distressing realizations, which were the peculiarities of her intimacies with Danny. She recalled how Danny never took any of his clothes off... how he never gave Emma the opportunity to touch him or see him... how delicate and tender his caresses were... how gentle and emotional his lovemaking was... how he seemed to know exactly what Emma wanted and needed. *Oh how could I not have *known*?!* Emma bemoaned again. Her mind flashed back to the prosthetic phallus she'd discovered when she yanked off Danny's undershorts. Again, she remembered reading about such things, but she'd never seen one, of course. Danny had worn that and used it on her, obviously, when they'd made love. She felt a hot flush race through her body as her mind somersaulted over the thought.

After some of the shock and anger began to wear off, Emma started to reevaluate her feelings for Danny. *'Danny'... is that even his name? ... *Her* name?* She thought, drawing a deep sigh and resting her arm over her eyes. Danny had said that he loved her, and she was certain that she had loved him too, but now, in light of all this... did she still feel that way? Emma's mind flashed back to when they first met... their long walks together... the time they spent talking and laughing with one another... the undeniable chemistry between them... the beauty and perfection of their unions.

The feelings she had experienced were real; the overwhelming pull and the strong emotional bond she felt was not simply because she thought Danny was a handsome man or was physically alluring. She was drawn to him because of something deeper; something inside him... and inside her. *Yes, but he's a *woman*!* Emma thought, shaking her head. *I'm drawn to a *woman*? How can that be?!* She fretted.

Emma knew that if she were honest with herself, **really** honest, she would admit that it really shouldn't be such a shock. She knew she had no interest in men; she knew she wasn't attracted to them, physically or sexually. But women... she'd been interested in a few women in the past. She called it 'interested', because her feelings were confusing at the time, and she assumed it was simply misguided teenage adulation. Now she was forced to rethink things.

She had actually been somewhat relieved to find herself so terribly attracted to the man she thought Danny was. Even though it was adulterous, it had validated her 'normalcy' and eased some of her underlying fears about her own sexuality. She had pushed the doubts and questions aside long ago, but now it seemed that they were back and stronger than ever. Her validation and sense of self had been shattered. *'Sense of self'? I have no sense of self... I never did!* Emma thought.

She knew what society at large thought about relationships between people of the same sex. Worse than that, though, was what her parents would think if they knew. She imagined their horror-stricken faces... their anger. She imagined the humiliation they'd suffer... the outrage of the church and the townspeople. It made her cringe. How in the world did Danny manage to hide it? Was that why she pretended to be a man? To hide her homosexuality? Or was it something else?

Emma had finally started to think of Danny as a 'she' instead of a 'he'. In doing so, she began to wonder how Danny managed to successfully live by herself, taking care of her house plus her farm and her horses. It wasn't a large farm, but still, she was alone and... she was a woman. Emma considered that Danny was tall and strong and always seemed quite capable. Perhaps she'd lived alone all her life? Perhaps she was used to it? She never talked about her family very much... did they know who she really was? Emma was driving herself crazy with the incessant thoughts and questions and she sighed aloud in frustration.

Sitting up on the bed, Emma looked out at the darkness outside. Her thoughts immediately went to Danny, injured and all alone at her house, probably still unconscious... no one to help her... no one to take care of her. Emma felt her eyes well with tears again, and she squeezed them shut. Danny loved her; she felt certain that those feelings were genuine. The tall brunette had cared for her and listened to her troubles and protected her when Emma needed it most. She was lying in her house, gravely injured and hovering near death because of the depth of her love and devotion toward Emma. *And I ran off and left her there... oh Danny... I'm sorry!* Emma thought as the tears spilled over.

She thought about what Danny had said to her before she made her discovery and fled: *"...You came back... I'm sorry for so many things... there's so much I have to tell you... so much I need to*

explain... I'm so sorry... I love you so much... remember that." Emma cried harder, realizing that Danny knew Emma would discover her secret and she wanted to tell her. She knew what Emma's reaction would be, and she obviously expected Emma to run away from her. *Oh God Danny*, Emma lamented again, letting her face fall into her hands.

Emma didn't waste much time wallowing in tears again. She knew what she had to do... she knew what she wanted to do and where she wanted to be. She wanted to be with Danny; she still cared for her. She would work through her muddled feelings later; right now, Danny needed her.

Emma tended to her animals quickly, then packed a few things for herself and rode back toward Danny's house in the darkness, the full moon providing the only beacon of light for her. When she arrived, she entered the house tentatively, looking at everything in a whole new perspective. This was no longer the home of an unusual, single man; this was the home of a mysterious, unknown woman. Observing everything with a critical eye, Emma quickly decided that the distinction made little difference, as far as the house was concerned. She wondered if that would hold true for other things as well.

She entered the bedroom cautiously, her eyes immediately going to Danny's chest and legs, which were bare and exposed, the way she'd left them. "Oh God," Emma murmured aloud, chastising herself for being so careless. Ignoring everything else, she worked quickly to free Danny of the remaining soiled clothes and wrappings, pulling everything off and tossing it all aside at last. She then got some warm water and soap and carefully washed the sickly brunette as best she could. She didn't look at Danny's body; she avoided it, in fact. She had to at this point. She couldn't think about anything but her tasks. Still... once the bath was over and Emma changed the wound dressing and wrapped Danny in clean, warm sheets and blankets... she sat on the edge of the bed and gazed at her enigmatic lover in wonder.

With a trembling hand, Emma reached out and brushed her fingers down Danny's bare forearm. It was soft, as she now knew it would be, with tiny fine, dark hairs. She gently grasped Danny's hand and turned it palm-up, observing the thin wrist and the long tapered fingers. Emma held Danny's hand, remembering the gentle touches that it bestowed on her. She reached up with her other hand and caressed Danny's face, recalling the soft kisses and the tender words that came from the perfectly-shaped lips. She raised Danny's hand to her own lips, placing a kiss in the palm and saying a silent prayer for her love.

But did she still love Danny? Did it matter if it was 'he' or 'she', or 'him' or 'her'? Shouldn't it only matter what's on the inside... in the heart? Didn't the inner being remain the same, no matter what the outside dictated? What is it that we fall in love with... the outer shell or the inner soul? Emma was so confused.

The night and following morning came to pass, and Emma tried to keep herself busy while caring for the still-unconscious Danny. She cleaned up the rest of his house, scrubbing away

blood stains and washing Danny's clothes, and she also tended to the animals, which she knew had been neglected and left out to pasture for several days.

It was during one of her indoor cleaning sprees that Emma came across a document that opened her eyes and struck fear in her heart.

She had been tidying up; nothing too invasive, just putting stray books and things away while she cleaned. She was replacing a book on one of the shelves when she noticed a tattered paper document wedged in-between some other books. She pulled the document free and unfolded it. It was a poster... a classic Western 'Wanted' poster.

'Wanted: For Murder... Danielle Edwards', it read. Emma gasped as she looked at the grainy black and white photo. The dark hair was much longer and the face was younger... but the light eyes were unmistakable... it looked exactly like Danny. *Edward Daniels... Danielle Edwards... 'Danny'*, Emma quickly put two and two together... and promptly collapsed onto a nearby chair.

After another long session of shock, disbelief and stupefaction, Emma gathered her wits about her and ventured back to Danny's bedroom. She stood in the doorway for a long time, staring at the figure on the bed, wondering and questioning and feeling more confused than ever. She eventually walked up and sat herself beside Danny again. "Who are you?" Emma whispered aloud. "Who are you, and what have you done?"

That evening, Emma returned to her own house. She felt bad leaving Danny alone, but she couldn't stay there with her. Finding the poster and realizing that she had absolutely no idea who Danny really was weighed heavily on her already perplexed mind. She hated to admit it, but she felt afraid. Emma admitted that she still cared very much for the Danny that she knew, but she now realized that there was much more to Danny than meets the eye. Her feelings, although deep, had been unwittingly limited to a very specific part of Danny - the only part that the mysterious brunette had allowed her to see and know. And judging from everything Emma had learned in the past few days, it was a very small part.

The next day, Emma took her time in getting back to check on Danny. She still wanted to go; she still cared enough to want to take care of her friend and lover... she just felt uneasy about being with her. Emma had thought that Danny was so different from Isaac and everyone else, and in part, she certainly was. But she was also the same as Isaac and everyone else too. She carried secrets and lies and she deceived people and pretended to be something she wasn't. She had deceived and pretended with Emma.

The difference was, in her mind, Emma really felt that Danny's heart was pure, and that she meant her no harm. Emma had trouble believing that the gentle soul who loved her so passionately and touched her so deeply could be a dangerous, deviant criminal. That was why she went back. Besides all that... she had too many questions that needed answers.

As soon as Emma entered Danny's house, she sensed that something was amiss. Heading straight

for the bedroom, she was shocked to see Danny sitting unsteadily on the side of the bed.

"Danny! My God, what are you doing?!" Emma squawked, rushing forward.

Danny looked up with uncertain, glassy eyes, regarding the blonde angel who instantly appeared at her side. She had thought that she just dreamt Emma's presence before. She was certain that she was dead, and that Emma's spirit had appeared only because she begged for her absolution before descending into Hell. Imagine her shock when she awoke this morning to find that she was quite alive.

"Emma, I...", Danny began, but Emma interrupted.

"Hush," she said, shaking her head, "Lie back down... you shouldn't be up and about yet." Emma spoke softly but succinctly, not looking at Danny. Her feelings were a jumbled mess, and she didn't trust herself to look into the brunette's soulful eyes. She pulled the blankets up and turned her attention to the injury. "Ugh... you've made yourself bleed now, see?!" Emma scolded mildly as she rose to fetch some ointment and a clean bandage.

Danny said nothing as she watched Emma flit about and come to rest again on the side of her bed. She kept her gaze carefully locked on the blonde's pretty but tense face as she cleaned and redressed the wound. Emma knew she was being scrutinized, but she refused to look back at Danny.

"Emma," Danny finally whispered, "...you know...?" It was more a statement of fact than a question.

"I know now," Emma answered, her tone a bit curt.

"I'm sorry, Em... I wanted to tell you, but--," Emma cut her off again.

"It doesn't matter. Be quiet now and rest." She asserted, finishing with the bandage and covering Danny fully with the blankets.

Danny reached out to grasp her wrist, "It does matter, Em. Please let me explain." Emma finally looked at Danny. Her pale, hollow eyes were pleading and apologetic, the sorrow in them deep, the regret honest. "Please?"

Emma closed her eyes and shook her head, fearing that she was giving in and making another mistake. "Alright." She finally answered. "But I have a lot of questions that I need answers for." She warned, pinning Danny with a look that brooked no argument.

"I understand," Danny answered with a slight nod.

Hours passed and morning stretched into afternoon as Danny laid out the story of her life and the

details of her sullied past. Her life, as it turned out, seemed to be destined for turmoil right from the start.

Daniel Edwards hailed from Texas; but when the American pioneers who settled there began to talk of revolt against the Mexican-owned territory, Edwards decided to leave. He married his sweetheart - a tall, blonde-haired, blue-eyed fellow Texan named Sarah Walker - and they packed up their belongings and headed northwest, hoping to find a new life. Unfortunately, they only made it to New Mexico. They were ambushed by Indians - Apaches, or possibly Comanches, Danny was told - who killed Daniel and brutally raped Sarah, leaving her for dead.

But Sarah Edwards did not die; she lived. She managed to return home to her family in the Midwest, where she soon learned that she was with child. Not knowing if the baby was her husband's or her rapist's, she hid herself away at her family's farm until she gave birth.

When the child was born, it seemed obvious that it did not belong to the fair-haired, fair-skinned Daniel Edwards. The baby had tan skin and rich, dark hair; the only white trait that was apparent were the pale blue eyes that looked so much like Sarah's. After much debate and against her parent's wishes, Sarah decided to keep the child. She named the little girl Danielle, after her late husband.

Danielle grew into a lovely girl; tall, slim and athletic with a beautiful, albeit unique, face. That uniqueness, however, got her into trouble with the locals. Tensions between Indians and Whites ran high, and Danielle was constantly teased and looked down on by her peers. It made no difference that neither she nor her mother had any control over her genetic makeup - she was a half-breed... she had Indian blood in her... therefore, she was less.

By the time Danielle reached her early twenties, she had a reputation as a sullen, temperamental loner. Her life had no direction, and the fact that she was attracted to women rather than men made things all the worse. She was both a freak and an outcast, and she kept to herself because she knew no one could possibly understand her. She was miserable. She had been contemplating moving East to either Philadelphia or New York City when her life took a tragic turn.

Danielle had always been teased and pursued by the young men in her hometown. Although a half-breed, she was quite beautiful, and the men couldn't understand why she repeatedly spurned their advances. While most of the men begrudgingly accepted her scorn, some detested her because of it. One such man detested her so much that he began stalking her, determined to teach her a lesson and put her in her place. As Danielle walked home one night, he attacked her and raped her at gunpoint. But she didn't give in easily; she fought back. During the struggle, the gun went off, and Danielle soon found herself with a dead man on her hands.

The mayhem that ensued frightened Danielle and infuriated her mother. No one believed her story that she had been assaulted and had acted in self-defense. Everyone seemed to think that she had simply lashed out and killed the young man out of sheer spite and hate. She was half-Indian, after all, and that's what Indians were - savage killers.

Danielle felt she had no choice but to run, so she did. She fled her hometown, leaving her mother

and her old life behind. She hopped from one city to the next, taking odd jobs here and there and just trying to stay alive. Her decision to reinvent herself as Edward Daniels wasn't borne out of a desire to become a man; it was merely intended to change her appearance so that she couldn't be identified. So far, she had been successful.

She ended up in Oregon because it was the most isolated and remote place she could think of, and it seemed to hold good promise for a new life. But she avoided towns, she avoided people in general, and she certainly avoided making friends or having long-term relationships with anyone. She had been successful with that, too... until she met Emma Johnson.

Danny was exhausted after spilling her sordid tale to Emma, but it was worth it. Emma had asked a lot of questions, and she felt that she now understood just about everything. Although she still felt confused about her feelings, she at least felt a little better about knowing who and what Danny was.

Hearing about Danny's violent, unpleasant past made Emma wonder how Danny came to be such a gentle, loving person. The taller woman had always shown her nothing but kindness and caring; how could such tenderness come from a person who had such a dark history? If Danny had made it a point to avoid people, why did she willingly become so close to Emma? If she had been so hurt and betrayed in the past, why open herself up to anyone? Through all the questions and all the 'hows' and 'whys' she continued to ask herself, Emma's mind repeatedly kept coming back to the same conclusion and the same answer: Danny loved her. The immediate connection they'd had with each other was real; Emma couldn't deny that. And she still felt it. She still felt absolutely drawn to Danny.

She tried to sympathize with some of what Danny must have gone through. Emma knew full well what it was like to deal with lustful, crude men; how they would sniff and circle around women like wild dogs, making crass, suggestive comments when no one was looking. She imagined they would have been especially volatile around a beauty like Danny - and she was sure that Danny had been a beautiful woman. *She still is a beautiful woman... isn't she? The clothes may be different, but she is the same.* Emma just couldn't get her head around it.

She was tempted to say that she still loved Danny; she loved what was on the inside, absolutely, but... it was the physical aspects that she was having trouble with. She told herself that it shouldn't matter; a body is just a body. Danny's body happened to be female, which admittedly was a shock, but that shouldn't matter... she didn't want it to matter. Emma loved her for the person she was, not the body she possessed. And besides all that... Danny's female body was very lovely. Still... Emma struggled with it.

Days passed and Danny continued to make good progress. She was able to sit up and eat and drink, but she was very weak and was still plagued by the effects of the lingering infection.

Emma had warmed up to Danny a little, but the brunette sensed her uneasiness and could just imagine her troubled thoughts. They had not talked about what had happened. Emma didn't mention Isaac, nor did she mention anything about her pregnancy. Neither one had brought up the subject of what they were going to do, nor what the future held for either one of them. As tempting as it was to just sit back and continue to play dumb, Danny knew that she couldn't do that. Surely Isaac was dead; surely Emma was going to have to sell her farm; surely her family wanted her to come back home with them so they could take care of her and her baby. *Surely she won't want anything to do with me*, Danny thought.

Emma entered Danny's bedroom, stirring her from her thoughts. "I made you some fresh soup," Emma said with a smile as she sat on the edge of the bed holding the steaming bowl in her lap.

"Thank you," Danny answered, gazing at Emma's tired face. Emma proceeded to feed Danny, taking great care and gently dabbing at her mouth after every bite or two.

"You know... I can do this myself," Danny said, not wanting to disturb the peacefulness of the moment, but knowing that they had to discuss things.

"I know," Emma said simply, looking down at the bowl.

"In fact, I can do just about everything myself now... I'm well enough for you to leave me, Emma." Danny said softly. At that, Emma's head snapped up, her wide aqua eyes boring into Danny's calm blue.

"You want me to leave?" Emma snapped, the surprise and hurt evident in her tone.

"No, I don't **want** you to leave... but I understand that you must." Danny tried to explain, "I understand that you want to... that you need to." He said quietly.

Emma closed her eyes and sighed, "The only thing I need, is to take care of you." She asserted, dipping the spoon again and bringing it toward Danny's lips.

Danny reached out and stopped Emma's hand, "You have taken care of me, Em... and for that I'm eternally grateful." They locked eyes with one another. "But I know that you can't stay here with me... I understand that. You have to go back to your life... you have to go back to your family and let them take care of you now."

Emma looked at Danny in disbelief and confusion. She rose from the bed, sitting the soup on the side table as she turned away and walked toward the door, her hands on her hips. Pausing for a moment, she finally turned around, feeling the certainty, at last, of what she desired.

"What life do I have to return to, Danny? A life of parents who push me to do things I don't want to do and marry men I don't want to marry... that's their idea of 'taking care of me'." Emma voice trembled as the tears began to gather in her eyes. "They think that marrying some man will solve all my problems. All they can see is that I'm a woman, and therefore I cannot be alone. They don't care about what I want... they don't know who I am." The tears rolled down her cheeks as

she looked woefully at Danny.

"And what is it that you want, Emma?" Danny asked.

"I want to be with you." She answered with surety, pinning Danny with her bright jade eyes.

Danny closed her eyes and shook her head, "No, Emma... no, no, no--," she started to protest, but Emma interrupted.

"Yes!" She insisted, quickly coming to perch on the side of the bed again. "Danny, I want to be with you... I **need** to be with you!" She insisted. "I wasn't sure at first, but now... now I know. My feelings for you haven't changed, Danny, I--,"

Danny cut her off, "Emma... I **killed** your husband! Doesn't that matter to you?!" She asked incredulously.

"You killed a man I was forcibly married to and did not love." Emma replied in a calm voice.

"He's the father of your unborn child." Danny hated to keep pushing, but she had make Emma see reason.

"Not in my eyes. In my eyes, he doesn't deserve that privilege." Emma asserted, shaking her head.

"Did you ever give him the chance to earn the privilege?"

"I shouldn't have HAD to give him ANY chance!" Emma shouted, her calm facade at last breached. "I was his WIFE! He should have loved and honored me! But instead, he abused and hurt me!" The tears flowed freely as the hurt and anger burst forth. "You're the only person I've ever truly **loved**, Danny... please don't try to push me away."

"Emma...," Danny whispered, her own eyes filling with tears, "I **killed** Isaac! I'm a **murderer**!" She said emphatically, grasping Emma by the arms.

"You didn't mean to... you were just defending yourself. He tried to kill you!" Emma insisted. "Besides... as far as anyone else is concerned, I'm the one who killed Isaac."

"...What?" It took a moment for the words to register, but when they did, Danny was flabbergasted.

"No one knows you were involved, Danny." Emma stated calmly. "I couldn't tell them... I couldn't do that to you... not after you did what you did for me. You saved me, Danny... so I saved you."

Danny couldn't say anything... she didn't know what to say or think. Her hands fell away from Emma's arms and she just sat, mouth agape, staring in disbelief. Emma was telling her that she

had taken the fall for her, that she had spared her involvement in Isaac's death and didn't tell a soul what had really happened. No one had ever done anything like that for her, ever.

Danny could only think of one thing to say, "...Why, Em?" She whispered as tears made their way down her cheeks.

"Oh Danny... don't you know?" Emma answered back as she reached out to caress the tear-streaked face. "Because I love you... because you are my life."

EPILOGUE

Sure hands gripped the little baby and lifted her high into the air while she giggled and made gurgling noises. Silly, nonsensical words were uttered and the baby's belly was nuzzled by a smiling face.

"You're going to make her sick," the child's mother warned.

"No I won't... she likes it... don't you Danielle?" Was the teasing response.

Danny smiled and kissed the belly of the tiny tow-headed girl again, eliciting another gleeful squeal from the jade-eyed baby as she grabbed fistfuls of dark hair. Emma reclined back on the blanket and laughed at her lover's playful antics. Danny was so good with her daughter; she couldn't imagine any one else so thoroughly loving a child that wasn't their own flesh and blood the way that Danny loved little Danielle. But then again, she knew that Danny truly felt like the baby was a part of her.

It had been nearly a year since the tragedy that nearly cost them their lives and their sanity. In that year, they had decided that they wanted to be together, and that they needed to escape everything and everyone who might try to keep them apart. They moved away, determined to make a brand new start, together. It hadn't been easy, but they persevered.

They shared everything equally: home responsibilities, parenting, work chores... everything was fifty-fifty. They were partners, and neither one held control over the other... not even in the bedroom.

Emma gave birth to a healthy baby girl, and they became, for all intents and purposes, a family. They were happy, they were healthy, and they had each other.

They had their new life. And it was everything they dreamed, and more.

END.

Thanks for reading.

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