

## *John's first kiss...*



(Note: John is mute, so this is why he never speaks.)

John watched Eliza as she moved the paintbrush up and down on the wall next to him. She had a slight smile on her lips and her hair was pulled back into a bun for the task. He wanted to stand there forever and stare at her. She was the prettiest woman he'd ever seen, and despite her insistence that Daphne would suit him, he refused to believe that. How could anyone come close to her now that he got the chance to know her? She was even better than he originally thought.

She glanced in his direction with an amused expression on her face. "Are you going to help me or do you expect me to do all the work?"

Blushing, he turned his attention back to painting his section of the wall.

They worked in silence for a good hour before she decided to take a break. He covered the paint and followed her out of the house, wondering where she was going.

When she realized he was behind her, she laughed. "You don't have to come with me. I'm just going for a walk." Though she said those words, she stopped and waited for him to catch up, which he did.

He wanted to hold her hand. She'd stopped doing that ever since they went to church, and he wondered why. Of course, he couldn't ask.

"I think you'll like the way the rooms look when we're done. I never did like white walls. I like color and variety. White is boring."

He smiled. For her, white probably was boring. He likened himself to the white walls—easy to miss but serving a purpose. She was definitely color—dynamic and intriguing. Funny how he didn't realize how empty his life had been before she came into it, but he supposed one didn't realize how boring a white wall was until someone put some color on it. He had to admit that he liked the way the new green she chose.

As they strolled along the path he had cleared along the tall grass in the prairie, she continued to talk. "Sometimes I wish I could fly like one of those birds up there. I try to imagine what it would be like to feel the air beneath me. They look free up there, don't you think?" As usual, she didn't wait for his response. "When I was a little girl, I use to run around my house and pretend I was a bird. My parents thought I was ridiculous to want to be a bird. But my pa would humor me and put me on his shoulders so I could stretch out my arms and fly."

When he realized she had stopped talking, he turned his gaze to her. To his surprise, she wasn't looking at him like she often did to see if he was even paying attention to her. Instead, she had her head bowed and a frown, as if she was sad. He tapped her in the arm.

Finally making eye contact, she shrugged. "I miss my parents sometimes. My life would have been different if they would have lived."

He made a motion for her to continue but she didn't.

They reached the creek that ran along his property. It was the only section of his land that had a row of trees on it. The rest of the place was mostly prairie grass, though he did have four trees spread around his house.

He found a bunch of yellow flowers grouped together close to the creek, so he gathered a couple of them and brought them to her.

A smile crossed her face as she took them. "Is this your way of trying to make me feel better?"

No, it hadn't been. He just wanted to show her that he had yellow flowers nearby. He planted some close to his house but they hadn't come up yet. He didn't plant near them near her home. There was no sense in making her *too* comfortable there. If he did that, she might never think of his house as hers.

"Thank you," she said. She sat next to the creek and put the flowers on the ground next to her so she could wash her hands.

He settled next to her and also washed his hands. Deciding to press his luck, he inched toward her, trying to be subtle about it so she wouldn't notice. When she finished and sat back, he joined her on the grass, happily noting that they were just a couple of inches from touching. He liked this. Just sitting next to her and enjoying the late morning under the shade of the tree. He wished they could stay there forever...without anyone or anything coming between them.

She collected the flowers and placed them on her lap. "How many days do you think it'll take to paint the rooms?"

Since he could now count to ten, he held up seven fingers.

"A full week?" She sighed. "I guess that's right. At least if we want to do a good job. For some reason, I thought it'd go faster than that."

He shook his head and grinned at her.

"I know. I need more patience. Things worth doing shouldn't be rushed. Did anyone ever tell you that redheads have a terrible time of waiting?"

She had to be kidding. She had no trouble waiting to marry him. His gaze shifted to her hands. It was hard to judge the size of her ring finger from looking at it. He reached forward and touched her hand.

"John."

He recognized the warning in her voice, so he quickly plucked a nearby white flower with his free hand and held it in front of her.

She didn't look convinced that his actions were innocent, but he pressed forward and opened the palm of her hand so it was facing up. He placed the white flower in it and collected two of the yellow flowers and put one on each side of the white flower. As he smoothed the flowers out, he took one of the petals and wrapped it around her ring finger.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

She didn't sound annoyed, though there was a hint of hesitation in her voice.

He rubbed his fingernail against the part of the petal that marked the width of her finger. Then he glanced around for a distraction. Finding the squirrel sniffing around the tree across from them, he nodded toward it.

Success! She looked at the critter. "What is it?"

He yanked the petal from the flower and let her hand go.

"I don't understand. What is so important about the squirrel?"

He shrugged as he slipped the petal into his pocket.

"Sometimes I don't know what to do about you."

Holding his hand up, he pointed to his ring finger.

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. "When are you going to give up?"

He noted a hint of amusement in her tone instead of the usual exasperation, so he decided to press his luck. Wrapping his arms around her, he knocked her over so that they both landed on the grass.

After a startled shriek, she wiggled so that she could face him.

He held onto her and threw his leg over hers before she could get up.

“Too bad those people in town can’t see you now. Just look at the way you take advantage of a poor, unsuspecting woman!”

Shrugging, he gave her a wicked smile and kissed her cheek.

“Oh John, you can’t be serious.” Despite her attempt to look stern, she also laughed. “You’re not playing fair. You know I’m not strong enough to get away.”

He raised an eyebrow. She wasn’t even trying to get away from him. That meant there was hope, right? Even if she protested, she seemed to be enjoying it. Noticing that a strand of her hair was close to her eyes, he reached up and brushed it away. Her skin was soft, and he let his fingers linger at her cheek.

“I never met anyone more determined than you. You’re much too stubborn for your own good.”

It was true so he didn’t deny it. Instead, he let his fingers drift to her pink lips. He’d never kissed a woman before, but he’d seen other men do it. It looked simple enough. And if it was so simple, why did he suddenly worry he couldn’t do it right?

She wasn’t fighting him. In fact, her hands stayed on his arms. It was a very pleasant feeling—one he wanted to enjoy forever if she’d let him. He closed his eyes and kissed her. His movement was stiff. He knew it was, but he didn’t know how to relax when his heart was beating frantically against his chest. But he liked the kiss so he leaned forward again for another one.

Her lips were warm against his, and she returned his kiss, almost seeming hesitant but still willing. He let his lips linger on hers, never wanting to leave the sweet bit of heaven he’d suddenly discovered. He thought he’d like to kiss a woman some day, but he had no idea just how much he’d like it. This, he decided, was the most wonderful experience he’d ever had.

Reluctant he pulled away from her. His gaze met hers and he sensed the uncertainty in her eyes. He pointed to his temple.

“What am I thinking?” she softly asked.

He nodded.

She took a moment before she responded. “I’m thinking we need to get back to painting the house.”