

Ruth Ann Nordin



HIS  
CONVENIENT  
*Wife*

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His Convenient Wife

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Dedication: To Catherine Coleman Michel for being so incredibly sweet!

## Chapter One

December 1907

Omaha, Nebraska

Harriett Larson stared at Stanley Craftsman, unable to believe him. Did he really just come out and propose to her? And on the front porch of her parents' house of all places? Since her mother was in the kitchen and her brothers were helping her father in the barn, she was spared the embarrassment of anyone overhearing them.

She wrapped the shawl tighter around her shoulders and shook her head. "No."

From where he stood in front of her, Stan blinked those light blue eyes that could even now render her helpless if she wasn't careful. "No?"

"No," she repeated, steeling her resolve at the flicker of disappointment that crossed his face. "While I sympathize with your situation, I'm not going to marry you." Truly, he had a lot of nerve! Just because he couldn't get any other woman to marry him so he could have a mother for the little girl he'd recently adopted, it wasn't her problem. "You'll have to ask someone else."

His shoulders slumped. "I understand." He placed his hat on his gorgeous blond hair that she often dreamt of running her hands through. "I'm sorry to have bothered you."

She supposed she should go right back into the house, but she remained on the porch and watched him. He hopped up on his horse and trotted off the property scattered with patches of snow.

How often had she prayed he'd ask her to marry him? But in none of those prayers, did she ask she'd be his last choice. Gripping the doorknob, she opened the front door and went back into the house. She shouldn't feel guilty. She had no reason to feel guilty. It wasn't her fault he had rejected her all these years. He was just reaping what he'd sown.

She took off her shawl and hung it on the coat tree, her gaze going unwittingly to the window where she could see Stan in the distance. Shaking her head, she told herself to stop moping over him and headed down the hallway. Her steps slowed as she passed the parlor. How she wanted to talk to her twin sister, Rose. No matter how horrible she felt, Rose could always make her feel better, and more than anything, she wanted to talk to her. But Rose was married to Kent Ashton, which meant she wasn't living here anymore.

With a sigh, she passed the parlor and went to the kitchen. Her mother was rolling out the dough for the pie she was making.

"Do you need help?" Harriett offered, tucking a few stray strands of blonde hair into her bun.

"No. I'm on my last one." As Harriett scanned the kitchen for something

to do, her ma asked, "Who was at the door?"

Her face grew warm in a mixture of humiliation and anger. "Stan."

"Stan? Did he want to talk to your pa about the cattle?"

"No. He asked me to marry him."

Her mother stopped rolling the dough and turned to face her. "He did?"

Noting the excited expression on her mother's face, she groaned and leaned against the worktable. "It's not as romantic as it sounds. He only asked because none of the other women he asked said yes and he needs a mother for the two-year-old girl he adopted."

Her smile faltered. "I'm sorry, honey. That has to hurt."

"It does." Harriett swallowed and wiped a tear from her eye. "Do you know he proposed to Rose? He didn't even mind that Kent was courting her at the time. I feel so foolish. I even bid on him in that stupid auction Uncle Joel had, and he wanted to invite Rose to eat with us. It took all of my strength not to hit him over the head with my basket."

"Why didn't you tell me what happened?" her mother asked as she stepped over to her and wiped her hands on her apron.

"There wasn't anything you could do to change it."

"No, I couldn't, but I know the pain of rejection." She hugged Harriett and rubbed her back in familiar soothing circular motions that always brought her great comfort. "Someday a man will come into your life who'll adore you. You were right to tell Stan no. There's no reason to settle for someone who'd rather be with someone else when you can have someone who wants you above all other women."

"If only such a man would come into my life," Harriett mused, feeling better.

"He will." She pulled away from her and cupped her face in her hands. "You've got such a wonderful heart and a pretty face. Those are two things a smart man can't resist."

"You sound just like Rose."

With a chuckle, her ma turned to grab an apron from the hook on the wall and handed it to her. "This house isn't the same without her, is it?"

"No, it's not. I used to get frustrated because she spent half her time daydreaming when there was work to be done. Then she'd spend her time finishing up the work rambling on about a book she'd recently read or telling me what the daydream was about. At the time, I used to think it'd be nice to have some quiet for a change."

"And now you'd love nothing more than to hear her chatter?"

Nodding, Harriett slipped on her apron. "What a contradiction I am, huh?"

"No, you're not a contradiction. Rose had a tendency to overwhelm all of us at one time or another, but it was also what we loved most about her. No matter how bad things looked, she managed to see the best in things." She

rolled her eyes as she grabbed a pot from a nearby shelf. "Listen to me talk. You'd swear she died instead of getting married."

Harriett giggled and picked up the rolling pin. "Well, at least we can say she's in a better place. You know she's much happier living in that huge house Kent gave her than being stuck with the lot of us."

"Yes, she keeps saying she feels like a princess."

"I suppose her life did turn out like a fairytale. The man of her dreams showed up out of nowhere and whisked her off to an enchanted place."

Her mother poured some broth into the pot and gave her a sympathetic smile. "Your fairytale will come, honey. And it'll probably come in a way you least expect it."

She hoped so. It'd be wonderful if her prince charming would come along and take her to his enchanted home, even if that home was small and simple.

"Why don't you take the buggy to Rose's tomorrow and pay her a visit?"

Harriett's heart leapt. "Really, Ma? You mean it?"

"Sure, as long as we don't get more snow. Your pa said it's pretty warm for this time of year, so he expects we'll have nice weather tomorrow."

On impulse, she hugged her mother. "Thanks, Ma." Then she turned her attention to finishing the piecrust, already feeling much better.

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"What did Harriett say?" Stan's mother asked as he stepped into her house.

Stan took off his gloves and took his boots off. "She said no."

She came over to him as he slipped out of his coat and hung it on the hook. "I'm sorry."

"I can't blame her. I would have said the same thing if I was her."

"You would?"

He nodded and went to the kitchen where he plopped down in a chair, shoulders slumped. "Is Maggie sleeping?"

"Yes. The poor thing wore herself out with your pa. She wants to ride a horse in the worst way, but she's not old enough so he had to keep pulling her away from the stalls. Finally, he took her for a ride in the fields and that made her happy."

"She takes after Randy that way," he thoughtfully stated, thinking of the girl's father.

His mother brought him a cup of coffee and sat across from him. "I think it's a wonderful thing you're doing, taking care of Maggie and all."

He looked away from her and sipped the liquid, oblivious to how hot it was. He owed it to Randy to raise her. If it hadn't been for his carelessness, Randy would still be alive today. They were trying to retrieve a stray cow on his property, and Randy worried the ground was slippery after the recent storm. Stan insisted the ground was fine and urged Randy to help him. But on

their way down the hill, Randy's horse lost his footing, and Randy fell to the ground and broke his neck.

Night after night for months, Stan replayed that day in his mind, wishing he could go back and do it all differently. The cow hadn't been worth it. No amount of wishing got his friend back, and it took a long time before he'd been able to forgive himself.

"You didn't answer my question," his mother softly said, bringing his attention back to her. "Why would you reject your marriage proposal if you were in Harriett's position?"

After taking another drink from his coffee, he sighed. "It was no secret that I was hoping to marry Rose. Besides, I proposed to Rose first, and Rose probably told her. What's she supposed to think? She wasn't my first choice, and what woman wants to marry someone knowing that?"

"I didn't realize you proposed to Rose."

"It was stupid. Kent was courting her. Why would she say yes?"

His mother held her cup and examined it, a thoughtful expression on her face. "We've all done stupid things. And as much as I hate to admit it, you're right. Harriett did the right thing. I made the mistake of agreeing to marry a man who really wanted to marry my sister, and that was a miserable marriage. It wasn't until I met your father that I realized what a mistake I'd made. If you're worried about taking care of Maggie, your father and I will help. You won't have to take on all the responsibility yourself."

"I know. And I appreciate it."

But it made him feel like a little boy instead of a twenty-one-year-old man who was old enough to support a family. He finally had a house and land of his own, but what good was it? He thought he was being smart by getting everything set up then seeking out a wife, but apparently, none of it mattered, not when he still needed his parents' help.

Leaning forward, his mother squeezed his arm and offered him an encouraging smile. "You'll find someone else you'll want to marry. Just be patient."

"You're right. It's best if I wait for the right woman."

"It'll be best for you and for her."

He nodded and drank the rest of his coffee. "I should go out and help Pa before I take Maggie home."

"Alright. I'll let you know when she wakes up."

Thanking her, he placed his cup in the sink and headed back outside. He wasn't sure what the future would bring, but he'd made a promise to Randy that he'd raise Maggie as his own, and he would do everything he could to fulfill it. The wife, if there ever was one, would have to wait.

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"Harriett, I'm so glad you're here!" Rose gasped as she pulled her sister in

for a long hug.

Harriett laughed and patted her back. "By the way you're welcoming me, I'd swear we haven't seen each other in years."

Giggling, Rose let go of her and encouraged her to enter her manor. "Is Ma coming in, too?" She motioned to their mother who was sitting in the buggy.

"She wants to visit with Aunt Sally first. Then she'll come by."

"Oh, alright." Rose waved to their mother who returned the gesture before she urged the horse forward. The footman closed the door, and Rose gave a slight jump. Pressing her hand to her chest, she thanked the footman as he hung up Harriett's coat. Then she led Harriett to the parlor. "I'm still not used to having servants around," she whispered. "They're so quiet. Sometimes I forget they're even there."

"Well, to be fair, you opened the door, not him."

"Only because I saw you and Ma coming up the road. I've missed you so much that I had to be the one to greet you."

They sat on a settee and Harriett shot her a teasing grin. "Why don't you leave your husband and return home? Then you won't have to miss me anymore."

"Oh, Harriett. You can't be serious. You know I love Kent. I could never leave him."

"What a shame."

"I did read a book once where a woman left her husband. And do you know why she left him? Because she was tired of listening to his boring conversations."

"It sounds like a dreadful story."

"It was actually comical. The whole time I read it, I couldn't stop laughing."

"But she left him."

"Only to come back. She realized she loved him, faults and all."

"Well, that's good." At least this was one of the stories with a happy ending.

"So tell me, how are things with our family?"

The butler brought in some tea and scones then left them alone.

As Rose poured the tea, Harriett shrugged. "There's not much to tell, really. Ma's still making her delicious pies. Pa's still going around bragging about her. Adam's making some animals from the woodcarvings he does. Eli's been playing the piano. He's hoping to get as good as Kent someday."

"He'll succeed if he keeps it up." She handed her a cup of tea then poured herself a cup. "I love listening to Kent. He plays happier songs these days, which is good. Those sad ones he used to play just tore at my heart."

"You give him a reason to play happy songs. I remember when we first

met him. He rarely ever smiled. Now every time I see him, he can't stop grinning like a schoolboy in love."

"I knew he'd be happy with me. That's why I pursued him as hard as I did. And you and Adam thought I was being foolish."

"You have to admit it seemed like he'd never marry you at the time."

Rose sipped her tea and held a scone out to her. "It just goes to show that when you fight for something, good things happen. Now, tell me what's going on with you? You mentioned everyone else and how they are, but how are you doing?"

With a shrug, Harriett took the scone and bit into it, purposely taking her time so she wouldn't have to look her sister in the eye. Rose was much too perceptive about things. "Fine. Life is the same as always. I help Ma around the house. Oh, I did come up with a new soup recipe. It has lots of potatoes and meat, the kind of thing Pa and Adam like a lot. They really enjoyed it."

"Well, everything you make tastes delicious, so I'm not surprised. You got that talent from Ma." After a moment, she added, "Is something bothering you?"

Harriett hesitated but finally nodded. "Yes, there is something that's bothering me." She faced her sister and finally made eye contact with her. "Stan asked me to marry him because he wants me to be a mother to the girl he adopted."

Her eyes lit up with excitement. "He did?"

"But I said no."

Her excitement dimmed. "You did?"

"You know I can't marry him. He doesn't love me. He loves you."

"But I married Kent, and he's had time to get over me. You should have said yes."

"No, I shouldn't have. Rose, even though he knows you married Kent, it doesn't mean he wants to be with me. It just means no other woman he's asked has said yes."

"Did he say he asked other women?"

"No, but he didn't need to. It only stands to reason that he did."

"Not necessarily. Maybe he didn't ask anyone else. You might be his second choice."

Harriett grimaced. "If you're trying to make me feel better, it's not working."

"I didn't intend to be mean. I just meant that maybe he came to his senses and realized you're the right one for him."

"I doubt it." When it looked like Rose was going to argue with her, Harriett groaned. "This is why I didn't want to tell you. I knew you'd make up some fanciful thing about how Stan really wants me. He doesn't want me, Rose. He never has and he never will. Yes, it upsets me, but I can't marry him

knowing he'd rather be with you. Maybe he only asked because I look like you and he figures that he can pretend I'm you. Or maybe he is desperate enough to pick anyone and chose me because all the other women he asked said no. Whatever the reason, I really don't care. The point is, I didn't degrade myself by saying yes. I deserve someone who wants me above all others."

She stopped to take a deep breath and released it. Frustrated, she bit into her scone and stared at the fireplace where the fire crackled and warmed the room.

To her surprise, Rose placed her hand on her arm and squeezed it. "You do deserve someone who loves you more than anyone else."

She relaxed and smiled. "Thank you, Rose."

"The right man will come along. At the risk of sounding like I'm praising myself, you're beautiful and can turn the heads of many men."

Considering they were identical twins, Harriett had to laugh. "I've missed you so much."

She returned her smile and took a sip of tea. "It'll happen, Harriett. You're going to find the man of your dreams who'll love you so much he'll do anything to make you happy."

"I hope so."

"Don't hope. Know it. Know it'll happen and it will."

"Alright." She took another deep breath. "I know it."

"There you go. Your true love will find you soon."

Harriett could only hope her sister was right.

## Chapter Two

March 1908

“I’m twee. I’m twee,” Maggie called out as she banged the highchair she was sitting in.

Stan glanced over at her and smiled. “That’s right. Today’s your birthday.”

Wiping his brow, he continued scrambling the eggs, hoping in his rush to get breakfast on the table, he wouldn’t end up burning them like he did the last couple of days. She wouldn’t eat them if they were burnt, and he was out of bread and butter to offer her in its place. He needed to get to the mercantile today. They barely had enough staple items to get them through the day. He never should have waited so long to go to town, but with the last snowstorm that passed through, he hadn’t dared take the risk of having the wagon slip off the road. He would have if it’d just been him, but he couldn’t do it when he had a young girl to think about.

With a glance out the window, he was assured that the last of the snow was still melting. It was a sunny day, and having just been out in the barn to tend to the animals, he knew it was warm enough for Maggie to be comfortable in her coat, hat and mittens...as long as she didn’t throw them off again.

He took the skillet off the cook stove and placed the eggs on the two plates he set out on the table. Good. They were just right. Relieved, he put the skillet aside and grabbed two forks then filled up their cups with milk.

“Eat up, Maggie,” he said as he sat down next to her. “We’re going to have a long trip into town.”

And today, he was going to do it with her. He’d imposed on his parents too much. If he wanted everyone to treat him like a man, he needed to act like one. And one of the ways he could do that was to take his adopted daughter into town with him. Even though he was nervous, he knew he could do it. After all, if women could take their children into the mercantile, there was no reason why he couldn’t do it.

“No want it,” she said and pushed the plate away.

Sighing, he gently pushed it back to her. “Please eat it. I don’t have anything else.”

“Want bread.”

“I don’t have any more bread. This is all I got. I’ll make some later today. Eat the eggs.”

“No.”

She crossed her arms and shook her head. Usually, the action would have made him laugh because of the way her blonde curls hit her face when she moved her head that fast. But today, he didn’t think it was so cute.

“I’ll tell you what,” he began, hoping she’d agree to the bargain he was

about to make. "If you eat the eggs, I'll get you candy when we're at the store."

"Want bread."

"But I don't have bread."

Her lower lip trembled and tears filled her eyes. He knew she was going to cry before she tilted her head back and let out a mournful wail that would make someone think her favorite doll got ruined.

With a groan, he got up and searched the pantry, but there wasn't anything there he could make in a hurry that would please her, and he had to get to town before the day got too long. He returned to his seat. "Please eat the eggs, Maggie. I promise I'll make bread when we get back from town."

He continued to plead with her for another few minutes, but it was no use. She refused to eat, and there was nothing he could do to make her. He quickly finished both of their eggs and rinsed the dishes before he took her from her high chair.

"Hungry," she said as he gathered her coat and hat.

"I know you're hungry. That's why I'm going to pick up some food in town. It'll be alright. You won't be hungry for long."

After he got her ready to go out, he put his own things on then picked her up and hurried out the door.

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"I'm surprised you wanted to come into town today," Harriett's father said as he pulled the wagon to a stop in front of the mercantile. "Did your ma want to be sure I didn't forget something?"

Noting the twinkle in his eye, Harriett chuckled and shook her head. "No. I just wanted to come to town." She couldn't really explain why, except that she felt restless after being stuck home during the long and cold winter months.

"Would you like to see Rose while you're here?"

"You wouldn't mind taking me to see her?"

"I wouldn't mind seeing her, too."

Excited, Harriett waited until her father came around to her side of the wagon before she got down from it.

"Do you have the list your ma wrote?" he asked as they went up the boardwalk.

"Yes. I brought it with me in my purse."

She loosened the strings on her purse and was ready to pull the folded paper out when someone ran into her from behind. She spun around and saw a little girl who was giggling and holding a man's hat in her hands. Before the girl could dart off, Harriett bent down and picked her up.

"Down," the girl said, her blonde curls bouncing against her bonnet. "Want down."

“I can’t do that,” she kindly told the girl. “Your ma or pa will worry if they can’t find you.” She looked at her father. “Do you know who she belongs to?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t seen her before.” He smiled at the girl. “What’s your name, honey?”

“Maggie,” she replied.

Harriett’s eyebrows furrowed. Maggie? As in the girl Stan Craftsman adopted?

“I’m sorry,” a familiar voice said, out of breath.

She and her father turned around in time to see a flustered Stan hurrying up the boardwalk.

“She ran off when I was putting a crate in my wagon,” Stan explained. “I thought if she held my hat, she’d behave.” He held his arms out. “I’ll take her.”

“Papa,” Maggie said with a giggle as she held her arms out to him.

Harriett handed her over to him and watched as Maggie placed the hat on his head. It tilted to the side then fell off.

“I got it,” Harriett’s father said before Stan bent down to retrieve it. “Looks like you got your hands full.”

“Yeah, she’s quick,” Stan replied then glanced at Harriett. He cleared his throat and turned his attention back to her father. “I’m really sorry. I don’t take her to town much, but we needed to get some food and—”

“Bread, bread,” Maggie insisted.

Stan let out an uneasy chuckle. “I promised I’d make her some bread when we get home.”

“It sounds like a good treat,” Harriett’s father replied and handed Stan the hat.

“Yes. Not too hard to make either.” Stan put the hat on his head, his eyes meeting Harriett’s again before he looked back at her father. “Thank you. Both.”

“Anytime,” her father replied as Stan carried Maggie down the boardwalk to the saddle shop. “Harriett, are you ready?”

Stan reached for the door when Maggie threw his hat off his head and laughed.

“Harriett?”

She blinked and turned her attention to her father. “Right. Ma’s list.” She opened the letter and gave it to him. “There’s everything Ma wants.”

“Good. This time I won’t come back with anything I shouldn’t.”

She smiled at his joke and followed him to the mercantile. Despite her better judgment, she glanced over at Stan and saw that he had managed to get the hat back but didn’t put it on his head, a safe bet since the little girl was insistent on throwing it off. She bit her lower lip and entered the mercantile.

The last thing she wanted to do was feel sorry for Stan, but he was obviously taking on more than he could handle. A single man running a ranch with a little girl? Why weren't his parents helping him? Surely, they would be willing to watch her while he went to town. They were nice enough people.

She shook her head and picked up a basket to help her pa shop. It wasn't her concern. Whatever the issue was between Stan and his parents, it wasn't any of her business. She selected a few items she recalled from the list while her father gathered stuff from the other side of the store.

When she was sorting through some fabrics by the window, she heard Maggie's familiar laughter. Her gaze went to the boardwalk, and she saw Stan calling after her as he carried a saddle. Maggie ignored him and ran down the boardwalk in front of the mercantile. She then darted out into the street. Stan dropped the saddle and chased her, catching her just before a horse ran into her.

Harriett released her breath, unaware she'd been holding it. There was no way Stan could handle taking care of Maggie on his own. He needed someone to step in and help him. He needed a mother for that little girl.

She gritted her teeth. Maybe he needed a mother for the girl, but that didn't mean she had to be the mother. He'd made his feelings for her abundantly clear that day at the picnic when she was foolish enough to bid on him. He didn't love her. He loved Rose. He only proposed to her because he wanted someone to take care of Maggie.

Harriett turned her attention back to the fabrics in front of her, but her eyes betrayed her and went back to the window where Stan was trying to pick up the saddle while holding the little girl. He lost the battle and ended up dropping the saddle.

She'd seen enough. If she didn't step in and do something, who would? Before she could talk herself out of it, she hurried out of the mercantile.

"I'll hold her while you get the saddle," she called out.

Stan stopped trying to balance Maggie on his knee while reaching for the saddle and straightened up.

She held her arms out. "I'll hold her and carry her to the wagon."

"You don't have to do that," he softly said.

"I know I don't, but I will."

After a moment, he nodded and handed Maggie to her. "Thank you, Harriett."

While he picked up the saddle, she looked at the little girl and smiled at her. The girl, in turn, smiled back. "What happened to her mother?" Harriett asked Stan. "I know her father died in an accident, but I never heard about a mother."

He lifted the saddle and led her to his wagon. "Her mother didn't want her."

Her steps slowed for a minute, but then she picked up her pace to walk beside him. “Are you telling me she gave birth to her and dropped her off at the father’s doorstep?”

“Yep.” He stepped off the boardwalk and headed for his wagon. After he flung the saddle into the back, he turned to face her. “They weren’t married and one thing led to another when they were alone. It wasn’t planned, and he didn’t want to marry her—”

“He should have,” Harriett interrupted. “It would’ve been the decent thing to do.”

“I agree with you. He should have, but he didn’t. But it does no good to argue it. She went off to be a mail-order bride and left him with Maggie. My parents used to watch her when we had to round up cattle.”

“If they helped him watch her, don’t they help you?”

He let out a sigh. “Yes, they do, but I’m tired of asking them for help all the time. I’m not a boy. I’m a grown man.”

“No one’s going to think you’re a boy if you ask for their help.”

He took Maggie from her. “I can’t ask them to help me every time I do something. I’ll get the hang of it. I see women with children in town all the time. If they can do it, I can, too.”

She had to admire his desire to raise the girl on his own, but it was obvious he needed help, even if he was too proud to ask for it. But didn’t he ask for it when he proposed to her?

He turned to put Maggie in the wagon, and she just knew she wouldn’t feel right leaving things the way they were. He was trying so hard to take care of Maggie, and his parents couldn’t be there all the time. What Maggie needed, more than anything, was a mother.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she blurted out, “I’ve given your proposal some thought and decided to accept. I’ll marry you.”

He looked at her, as if not believing he’d heard right. “What?”

“I said I’ll marry you. Maggie needs a mother. A man can’t raise a girl all by himself. He needs a woman’s help, and I have experience taking care of children. I assume that’s why you asked me to marry you. Because of Maggie.”

“Well...yes.”

“Then I agree. But only on those terms. There will be nothing between us. In exchange for me taking care of Maggie, you will give me a place to live.”

He winced. “It sounds like a partnership when you put it that way.”

“That’s exactly what it’ll be. You wanted my sister, not me.” He seemed to be struggling to come up with a reply, so she saved him from having to think of what to say. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I just want it to be understood that we’re doing this for Maggie. I don’t want you to feel like you have to pretend you love me.”

“I understand what you’re saying. Considering how things have been between us, I’d say your offer is more than what I deserve.” He cleared his throat. “When would you like to get married?”

After seeing how difficult it was for him to handle a trip in town with the girl, Harriett figured he needed her help as soon as possible. “Tomorrow?”

“A day isn’t enough time to make a dress, decorate the church, or invite guests.”

“I’m not interested in any of that. I just need time to pack my things.”

He glanced at Maggie who was watching them. “Alright. I’ll do whatever you want. Did you want me to talk to a preacher about conducting a small, informal affair?”

“There’s no need. My uncle’s a judge. He can marry us. Tomorrow’s Saturday so he won’t be at the courthouse. I’ll come over with him. Don’t worry about dressing in your Sunday clothes.”

He hesitated for a moment then asked, “Am I right to assume you don’t want any of our family there to witness it?”

“I’d rather keep it simple. There’s no sense in making this something it really isn’t.”

“Harriett?” a familiar voice called out.

She turned her gaze in her father’s direction and saw he was standing at the mercantile, holding the door open. Her brother, Jacob, was beside him. Looking at Stan, she said, “I better go explain things to my pa.”

“I should go with you,” Stan said.

She almost argued with him but realized he was right. If he was going to marry her, it was best if they made the announcement together. Her father was going to be in for a shock. She could only hope he wouldn’t say anything until after Stan left. She waited until Stan had Maggie back in his arms before leading him to the mercantile.

“Hi there, sis,” her brother said. “I thought you were trying to avoid me by bolting out of my store.”

“No, I wasn’t avoiding you,” she greeted.

She stepped onto the boardwalk, very much aware that Stan was behind her. Even knowing what she was getting herself into, she couldn’t deny the way her heart skipped just by having Stan so close to her. This was a fool’s thing she was doing. No good would come of it. Wait. That wasn’t true. She would make a home for Maggie. That was why she should do it. Had any other woman volunteered for the job, Harriett would be off the hook. But no one else was willing, and she wasn’t one to shirk responsibility when something needed to be done.

“I was just talking to Stan.” She gestured to Stan and Maggie. “Maggie’s young, and she has no mother to take care of her. And Stan is trying to manage a ranch all by himself, and I thought it’s hard to do that with a little

girl. She needs a mother, and I like children so I thought..." She paused when she realized she probably wasn't making much sense. Taking a deep breath, she calmed her nerves as much as she could. "Anyway, I told him I'd marry him so I can be her mother."

Jacob's eyebrows rose, but it was her pa who spoke up. "Harriett, can I talk to you for a moment?"

Without glancing at Stan, she followed her pa further down the boardwalk.

When they were out of earshot of everyone else, he turned to face her. "Are you sure this is something you want to do?"

"Yes," she replied, studying the drawstring purse dangling from her arm.

"But he came out in December to ask you to marry him, and you said no."

His tender voice made her look up at him. "You saw how much trouble he's having with Maggie. He needs someone to help him."

"You have a good heart, Harriett. Ever since you were a little girl, you wanted to help every living thing that was hurt. But this isn't like one of the birds that broke its wing or a calf that didn't want to drink its mother's milk. You're talking about marriage. This is a lifetime commitment."

"I understand that."

"Well then, isn't it best to wait until a man comes along who loves you?"

She stared down at her drawstring purse again, unable to hold his gaze. What if no such man did come along? It wasn't like anyone had even asked to court her. She'd had no offers, not even from the couple of boys Rose said were creepy. At least this way, she'd have a husband—albeit one in name only—but it was better than living with her parents for the rest of her life. And she liked Maggie. Sure, the girl had a mischievous side to her, but she was cute and had a lot of spirit. In a lot of ways, Maggie reminded her of Rose.

"I've given it a lot of thought," she slowly began as she lifted her gaze to look at her father, "and I want to do this."

He didn't say anything for a long moment, and she was sure he was going to forbid her to marry Stan. But then he relented. "Alright. I trust your judgment. If this is what you think is best, then you should do it."

Relieved he wasn't going to make this difficult for her, she smiled. "Thanks, Pa."

With a nod, he gently took her by the arm and led her back to Stan who was still holding Maggie while he was talking to her brother.

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"I don't miss living on the farm," Jacob said. "I had enough of dealing with animals that don't mind or hoping the weather cooperates while I try to grow a crop. It's much easier to manage a store."

Stan was ready to reply when he saw Harriett and her father heading back

over to them. He shifted Maggie in his arms, more from unease than anything else. And Maggie had settled down enough now where her eyes were starting to drift shut. After all the running around she did, she was finally getting tired. He sure wished she could have worn herself out before Harriett got to town.

But if she hadn't, then Harriett wouldn't have agreed to marry him. And truth be told, it was hard to raise a little girl all by himself. He needed help. He just wished he wasn't getting it under these conditions.

Harriett's father extended his hand. "Welcome to the family, Stan."

Too bad Stan didn't know what Harriett had told him. Her father had to have known she'd refused his proposal in December. No doubt, this change of events came as a shock. And Stan didn't even want to know if it was a good or bad one. He shook her father's hand and cleared his throat. "Thank you, sir."

"We'll have to have you and Maggie over for supper sometime," her father said then turned his attention to Harriett. "I suppose we best get back in the mercantile and pick up more things. Won't your ma be surprised when we tell her the news."

Harriett nodded then told Stan, "We'll come by your place tomorrow afternoon. Probably around one or two?" She glanced at her father.

"That's fine," her father replied.

Stan indicated his agreement and waited until they said good-bye before he returned to his wagon. Maggie was tired, so he ended up placing her in the back of the wagon, tucking her safely in so she could have an undisturbed nap on the way home. He thought to glance over at Harriett but figured she'd already be in the mercantile. Besides, he wasn't sure if he was making a mistake by marrying her or not. While he couldn't blame her for being so matter-of-fact about their marriage and setting down boundaries, it'd stung all the same.

He settled into his seat and released the brake. It wasn't too late to go into the mercantile and tell her he changed his mind. But he couldn't take care of Maggie by himself anymore. When he adopted Maggie, he had no idea how difficult it'd be to raise a child. Perhaps if he could have afforded a ranch hand, it would have been easier, but he was still getting established. He needed to take Maggie everywhere with him unless his mother or one of his older sisters stopped by. And he was tired of asking for their help.

Marriage was the easiest solution. Plus, it'd give the poor girl a mother, someone she needed more than anything. With a sigh, he urged the horses down the street. When he adopted Maggie, he took on the responsibility of doing what was best for her. What was easy or best for him didn't factor into the equation.

As he passed the mercantile, he dared a glance in its direction and saw that neither Harriett nor her father was in sight. And he didn't know if he was

relieved or disappointed.

### Chapter Three

“Jacob told me you agreed to marry Stan. Is it true?” Rose asked later that day as she sat on Harriett’s bed.

Harriett folded one of her shirtwaists and put it into her carpetbag, not bothering to look at her sister. “I’ve made up my mind, and no one’s going to talk me out of it.”

“I didn’t say I was going to talk you out of it,” Rose commented. “I just want to make sure it’s something you really want to do.”

Ignoring her sister who was studying her reaction, Harriett turned back to the dresser and pulled out her undergarments. “Why would I agree to it if I didn’t want to do it?”

“Because you love him.”

Harriett shoved her undergarments in the carpetbag with more force than necessary. She forced herself to relax then finally met her sister’s piercing gaze. “I’m well aware that he’d rather be with you. But I’m not doing it for him. I’m doing it for the three-year-old girl he adopted. She needs a mother, and no other woman has agreed to marry him.”

“I checked, and it turns out he never asked anyone else.”

Harriett hesitated to reply but managed, “I thought he did.”

“No. He didn’t even send for a mail-order bride.”

“Well, those ads aren’t placed as much as they used to be. Omaha has more than enough single women these days.”

“Maybe, but the fact that he didn’t ask anyone else is a compliment.”

Harriett frowned. “Did you come here because you want me to marry him, or are you trying to talk me out of marrying him?” Because when Rose started talking, Harriett could have sworn her sister was opposed to the idea.

Rose shrugged as she fiddled with her cameo. “I want you to be happy, regardless of the reason you’re marrying him. However, there is hope since you’re the only one he asked.”

“You think he asked because I look like you? You think he’s going to pretend I’m you?”

“We may look alike, but we’re complete opposites. I would never marry someone because he had a child he needed help raising. I’m not duty-bound like you are.”

“I know. You married Kent because you love him.”

“You’ve got a good heart, Harriett. I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I won’t get hurt. I could only get hurt if I fooled myself into believing he cared about me, but I know he doesn’t. I’m prepared for a marriage of convenience.”

Rose grimaced. “That sounds miserable.”

“It won’t be. I’ll be content.”

Harriett finished packing her things and looked at her sister. Rose meant well. She always did. And Harriett understood she wanted the best for her. But these silly fairytales of true love and a happily ever after didn’t work for everyone. Sure, it worked for her. She married someone she thought was a pauper who turned into a prince, and he whisked her off to his mansion in the countryside filled with servants and all the horses she could ever want. Even the dresses she wore for every day activities were better than Harriett’s Sunday clothes. And better yet, she had love.

But Harriett wasn’t Rose. She couldn’t expect things to work out the same way for her. The best she could do was avoid being a spinster. If she’d only had other offers, she might not have agreed to marry Stan. With a sigh, she closed her carpetbag and set it on the floor by her bed.

She sat next to Rose and took her hand in hers. “You’re the only person who truly understands me. Growing up, I often felt like a person from the outside looking in while everyone else enjoyed the activities.” She smiled. “Had it not been for you, I probably wouldn’t have joined in and enjoyed them myself on occasion.”

“You’re shy. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“No, there’s not. But shy girls don’t get asked to court. When an opportunity presents itself, they have to take it, even if they have to make sacrifices.” She squeezed Rose’s hand. “This is a sacrifice I’m willing to make. Stan might not love me, but I know he’ll be faithful. Once he commits himself to something, he does it. And there’s a little girl who needs me. I can’t turn my back on her.”

Blinking back her tears, Rose returned her smile. “I hope it turns out better than you think.”

“I know you do,” she whispered.

“Well, you know you can always talk to me, no matter what. Just because you’re getting married, it doesn’t mean we’ll stop being the best of friends.”

“We’ll always be closer to each other than anyone else.”

“Yes, we will because we’re twins, and twins have a special bond no one can break.”

Chuckling, Harriett nodded and stood up. “I promised Ma I’d help with supper.” She headed for the door and glanced back at her. “I don’t suppose you can stay?”

“I’m afraid not. Kent is bringing over a potential client and his family, and I need to be there to help entertain them. But I do want to be at your wedding.”

“Don’t. It’s a very small, private affair.”

“You’re my sister. And besides, we just went on and on about how close we are. I have to be there.”

This wasn't going to be easy. Harriett figured Rose would want to attend, which was why she didn't run out and tell Rose when she agreed to marry Stan. Swallowing, Harriett met her sister's gaze. Of all the things they had shared and would share, this wasn't going to be one of them. "I'd rather you didn't come to the wedding," she softly said, knowing even before she saw Rose wince that she'd hurt her.

"Why not?" Rose asked.

"Because Stan wanted to marry you. It's bad enough knowing what kind of marriage I'm going to have without you standing next to me and knowing he wishes you were in my place." When Rose opened her mouth to speak, Harriett quickly added, "Please do this for me. I won't ask anything else from you."

After a long moment passed between them, Rose nodded. "Alright. I'll honor your wishes."

Relieved it was that easy since Rose seldom gave up when she wanted something, Harriett relaxed. "Thank you."

Harriett offered a smile, hoping to smooth things over as best she could, and to Rose's credit, she returned the smile, though it didn't reach her eyes.

Turning from her, Harriett opened the door. "I better go help Ma."

Uncharacteristically silent, Rose followed her sister out of the bedroom. Harriett would have to make it up to her sister. She wasn't sure how, but she'd find a way.

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Stan knew Harriett had said she didn't want a big to-do about the wedding, but he dressed in his Sunday clothes. He'd already made her feel bad in the past. The least he could do was show her the respect due to her now. He adjusted his tie. For the hundredth time, he wondered if he should have invited his parents over. But then he decided it was best that he didn't. He was a grown man, and a grown man didn't need his parents' permission to get married.

And since this was happening so suddenly, it wasn't like he had time to warn them. As soon as he got home yesterday, he fed Maggie some of the bread he'd picked up at the bakery and took her along as he did his rounds along the property. He realized one of his calves went missing and spent a good hour finding it and rescuing it from a group of bushes it'd gotten stuck in. Thankfully, no harm came to it, and the mother was relieved to get it back. Things could have been a lot worse. One time he found a calf that had tried to cool off in the shallow end of the pond and got stuck in the mud. He didn't find it until two days later, and by then it was too late.

But he saved the one yesterday, and it was a huge consolation that he wasn't a complete failure. In better spirits, he returned to the house and did the rest of his chores, a bouncy Maggie following him. By the time he was

done, the sun had set and it was time to make supper.

He thought about going to his parents at that point, but by then, he was afraid of what they'd say. It was a foolish thing he was doing. All through the night, he couldn't sleep because he went over all the reasons he shouldn't marry Harriett, the most notable one being how he'd rejected her at the picnic. He'd been so in love with Rose at the time, he hadn't even noticed how much Harriett cared about him. It wasn't until a couple months later he realized how he must have seemed to Harriett. *Like a cold, heartless—*

He stopped himself before he finished the sentence. Even if the admonition was only for himself, he didn't need to think that kind of language.

He didn't know how he was going to make it up to her. There must be a way. She couldn't hate him too much if she was willing to help him raise Maggie. So that meant there was hope.

After he was done getting ready, he checked in on Maggie who was, thankfully, playing nicely in the parlor. She didn't often behave so well. Maybe she sensed this was an important day and was willing to give him a break.

"Ride horse?" she asked, jumping up from the chair.

"Not yet," he replied. "You want some bread to eat?"

"No. Want horse."

He sighed. "I can't. I told you your new ma will be here soon. We need to be ready for her."

"Don't want ma. Want horse."

"We'll ride a horse after she comes here." He picked her up and carried her to the kitchen. "You need to get something to eat."

He glanced out the window. No sign of Harriett yet. After he put Maggie in a chair, he went to a shelf to retrieve a plate, but before he made it to the breadbox, she was already running out the kitchen door. With a groan, he closed the breadbox and ran after her. Granted, the girl was only three, but she was hard to keep after. And the older she got, the more determined she was to do what she wanted. He hoped Harriett knew how to get her to behave because his efforts had been in vain. Maybe it was something women were better at than men.

By the time he caught up to Maggie, she'd made it to the bottom porch step. And—of course—Harriett had shown up just in time to see that he had as much control of the little girl at his home as he did in town. This wasn't the kind of start he wanted for his marriage. It was bad enough they were already getting a shaky start, given their past. But now Harriett was going to think he was completely incompetent.

Pushing aside his embarrassment, he headed over to the wagon her father was leading onto the property. When Harriett said she wanted to keep it

simple, she wasn't kidding, and he was glad he decided not to invite his parents. The only two people with Harriett were her father and uncle. That was it. And that meant this was going to be quick. It was something done out of necessity rather than desire.

Maggie wiggled in his arms, but he refused to put her down in case she ran off again. Maybe a quick wedding was for the best. He doubted Maggie could stay good if it was long and drawn out.

"She's pretty," Maggie said, pointing to Harriett.

"She's going to be your mother," he replied. "And yes, she's pretty." He patted her back, relieved that doing so helped her settle down. At least for now.

The wagon came to a stop, and her father set the brake. "How are you doing, Stan?" he called out.

"Fine, sir. And you?" Stan asked as he approached the wagon. He fully expected to help Harriett down, but she turned to her father and had him help her instead. He stepped back so he wouldn't get in their way.

"Good," her father replied and smiled at him.

Stan relaxed. He'd sensed the older man's hesitation about the marriage yesterday, though he hadn't come out and said anything to him about it. Today, however, he seemed to have put any reservations he had aside. That was a good sign. Maybe things would turn out better than Stan hoped.

"I'm Judge Johnson," her uncle said after he got down from the wagon and extended his arm in Stan's direction.

"I know, sir." Stan replied, shaking his hand. He cleared his throat. "My sister, Emily, said you married her and Isaac."

Her uncle nodded. "Yes, I did. But that was a long time ago."

"It doesn't seem like it was that long ago to me," her pa argued, his tone playful.

"It was. We're getting old," her uncle told her father, who shook his head. "Don't deny it. You can't stay young forever."

"I can do my best," her pa insisted.

Stan glanced at Harriett, wondering what she wanted him to do. Did she want him to walk over to her? Did she want him to take her carpetbag? Did she want him to say something? He was at a total loss on how to properly act. He had the sinking sensation he was a failure as a husband, and he wasn't even married yet.

"Well," her uncle said, taking her carpetbag from the wagon, "now that we're here, we should get the blessed event underway."

Though Stan didn't think 'blessed' was the right word, he didn't argue. He didn't know if it was good or not that no one except for Harriett had called this exactly what it was: a marriage of convenience and nothing more.

Her uncle turned to him. "Do you want to do this on the porch or inside?"

“Oh, um,” Stan looked at Harriett, “whatever she wants.”

“Smart man,” her uncle replied with a chuckle. “That’s the secret to a good marriage. Listen to the wife, no matter what.”

Harriett’s face grew pink, but she cleared her throat and gestured to the front door. “Inside is more expedient.”

Yes, but outside was probably more romantic. Stan forced the thought aside. This wasn’t a romantic event. Had he been smart enough to pay attention to her at the picnic, this whole thing might be different. And besides, it’d be easier to keep track of Maggie if they were inside. Perhaps that’s what Harriett was thinking.

Stan led them to the house and through the front door, and it suddenly occurred to him how simple the house looked. There was nothing feminine in the whole place, even though he had a daughter to take care of. His mother had offered to help decorate the place, but he refused, thinking if it was his house, he should do it. And so far, he’d been too busy to worry about it. Well, maybe Harriett would make it more comfortable.

Once they were in the parlor, Stan set Maggie down. “Stay with me,” he whispered and held her hand.

Thankfully, Maggie decided to obey him this time. Maybe it was because strangers were here. She tended to act better when she was around new people. Well, whatever the reason, he’d take it.

Harriett stood next to him but not as close as she probably would have if she was happy to marry him. As her uncle performed the simple ceremony, he did his best to repeat the vows when it was his turn. The entire time, he couldn’t help but wonder if this was a mistake, especially when it came time for Harriett to speak and she hesitated.

If he was smart, he’d call the whole thing off and tell Harriett to go find someone who deserved her, someone she’d want to bring her entire family to see her marry. At one point, he opened his mouth to put an end to it, but caught a good look at her and decided against it. Maggie was right. She was a very pretty young woman.

Granted, there was no reason he wouldn’t be attracted to her. He had, after all, wanted to marry her twin sister, Rose. But he could always tell the difference between them. Harriett didn’t smile as much. She was more serious and thoughtful. She never did anything without thinking it through first. He didn’t know how else to explain it except that her beauty was subtle compared to Rose’s.

“You may now kiss the bride,” Harriett’s uncle said.

Stan blinked, surprised the ceremony was over so soon. He turned to do as her uncle said, but she didn’t even face him. Instead, she said, “Thank you for coming out, Uncle Rick.”

Stan pretended he didn’t notice the questioning glance her father shared

with her uncle. Yes, it was awkward. But what could he do about it? Nothing. So he signed the marriage license with the others, and the entire marriage was official. He just prayed he hadn't doomed them both to a life of misery.

## Chapter Four

Harriett offered Maggie a tentative smile as the little girl picked at the potatoes, green beans, and roast on her plate. Harriett had given Maggie small portions since she was so young, but she hadn't figured that Maggie would be such a picky eater. After a long debate on whether or not to give the girl a couple of cookies she'd baked, she broke down and decided to offer it right away. And so far, that was the only thing Maggie ate. Everything else was shoved from one side of the plate to the other and then mashed together.

"She's a picky eater," Stan spoke up.

Surprised since he hadn't said much since the wedding, Harriett looked at him.

He cleared his throat. "I have trouble getting her to eat much else but bread and biscuits."

"That's all she'll eat?"

"Well, from time to time, she'll eat muffins and cinnamon rolls."

She frowned and glanced at the girl. "But those are all bread items."

"I know." After a moment, he said, "I made some bread yesterday. I can give her a couple slices."

As much as she hated to do it since the girl needed to eat better than that, she nodded. "That might be best. At least for tonight. But," she touched the girl's arm to get her attention, "I need you to try more foods. You need your fruits and vegetables to grow up big and strong."

The girl didn't nod or shake her head. She just stared at Harriett as if she couldn't figure out what she thought of her. Harriett offered a smile, but Maggie turned her attention to Stan and accepted the two slices of bread he handed her.

Well, it would take the girl time before she got used to her. Harriett was new, and that meant the girl didn't know what to think of her yet. Harriett smiled at her again then finished her meal. Afterwards, she washed the dishes, and Stan went out to the barn to take care of the animals, so she had the house to herself for the moment.

Since Maggie was content to buzz around the kitchen, Harriett allowed her gaze to go to the window while she washed the plates. Through the open barn door, she caught glimpses of Stan as he pitched fresh hay into the troughs. She wished he didn't have the power to make her feel so weak. She thought when she married him, she would have better control over her emotions. But it took all her strength to remain calm during the wedding and meal.

She had requested a very private affair for that reason. She didn't want to encourage any schoolgirl fantasies. But like it or not, her pulse raced whenever he was around, and when he was in the same room, she found it

hard to focus on anything except him.

“I can’t believe I was naïve enough to believe this was going to work,” she whispered, a tear falling down her cheek.

She quickly wiped it away. She would make it work. She had to make it work. She’d already committed herself to him—to Maggie. Yes. This was about Maggie. She did this to be the girl’s mother, not to be his wife even if it was the same result. How she hoped that, in time, she wouldn’t be so vulnerable.

She rinsed a dish and set it on the rack, forcing her gaze on Maggie instead of Stan. Maggie was humming and standing on a chair. “Are you trying to get taller?” she asked.

The girl stared at her for a moment as if she hadn’t considered it but then nodded. “Tall like you.”

Harriett chuckled. “I won’t ask what you were really doing. But yes, you’re almost as tall as me when you stand on the chair. Be careful, though. You don’t want to fall off and hurt yourself.”

The girl played quietly for a couple minutes then said, “Go to barn.”

“Who? Me?” Harriett asked, surprised she’d want her out there.

“Want Pa.”

Oh, of course. That made sense. But that would require Harriett to go out there with her. Harriett couldn’t let the girl see Stan by herself. Not at her age.

And as much as she hated to admit it, she wanted to see him, too. There wasn’t a day that went by that she didn’t want to see him. Too bad he never felt the desire to see her. She’d been cool to him, intentionally pushing him away so she wouldn’t have to be vulnerable. But she was already vulnerable anyway, wasn’t she? Like it or not, there would never come a day when she didn’t love him. The only difference was that she couldn’t avoid him anymore. Not when she was married to him.

She finished washing the last dish and placed it on the rack to dry. “Alright. Let’s go see your pa.” The girl ran for the door, but Harriett stopped her. “Wait. I’m not ready.”

Even if this wasn’t the kind of marriage she’d hoped she’d one day have with Stan, she wanted to look presentable. She went to the small mirror in the parlor and tucked her hair under her hat. The girl made an attempt to head on out, but she managed to keep her in long enough to put their coats on. She considered putting a pair of mittens on the girl as well, but Maggie made a third attempt for the door, and she gave up. It wasn’t that cold outside. The girl would manage without them.

“You have to hold my hand,” Harriett insisted before the girl could dart down the porch steps.

She held the girl’s hand and waited for the girl to stop trying to run away from her.

Harriett shook her head. “You’re as restless as my sister Rose. She has a hard time sitting still when there’s something interesting going on.”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wished she hadn’t said them. Maybe that was what Stan liked about having Maggie around. Maybe Maggie reminded him of Rose. But as soon as the thought came to mind, she disregarded it. That was silly. He took Maggie in because she was his friend’s daughter. That was all.

Clearing her throat, she smiled at Maggie. “I’m not trying to be mean. It’s just that you have to learn to stay with me. I don’t want to lose you.”

When she knew Maggie wasn’t going to try to dart away from her again, she walked with the girl across the lawn. The evening sun had graced the sky with magnificent shades of pinks and yellows. The land spanned around her in all directions with cows grazing the yellow grass. Only patches of snow rested on the ground. Soon there would be no more snow left.

It was perfect, just like she’d always hoped for when she imagined her future. She daydreamed of coming out to visit her husband in the barn after supper. Only in those daydreams, he’d kiss and hold her. This time, however, there would be no kissing or hugging. No, not in this marriage.

They reached the barn where Stan was pitching hay into the horses’ feeding troughs.

“Papa,” Maggie called out in excitement. “Sugar! Sugar!”

Harriett let go of the girl’s hand so the girl could run over to him.

Glancing down at her, Stan smiled. “Did you want to give the horses their sugar cubes?”

She nodded and ran for the stepstool that was near a row of hooks. She reached for a sack and took it down. Harriett couldn’t help but smile at the girl’s unbridled enthusiasm. If there was ever a person born for this kind of life, it was her.

“She likes to give the horses their treats,” Stan said.

Harriett turned her gaze in his direction, once again struck by how incredibly handsome he was. Clearing her throat, she forced her gaze off of his. What had she been thinking? She was just asking for trouble by coming out here.

“She asked to come out here,” she forced out, and despite her best effort, she rushed the words out.

“I have no doubt she did.”

Maggie ran over to him, so Harriett dared another glance in his direction and was both relieved and disappointed to see he was no longer looking at her. Instead, he placed his rake against the trough and picked Maggie up. He carried her to one of the horses, which ignored the hay in favor of sniffing the bag.

Harriett watched as Maggie fed the horse. The other two horses snorted in

protest so he took Maggie to the other stalls and let her feed those, too. Harriett couldn't help but smile as she watched them. The two worked well together, and it was obvious that Stan loved her as if she was his own child. It was a very endearing quality he possessed. Harriett's smile faltered for a moment. Why couldn't he love her? Why did he have to fancy her sister instead?

When the horses were satisfied, he put Maggie back down. "Go put the sack on the hook."

Maggie hurried to obey then he took the rake and continued to gather hay for the horses. "I'm almost done," he told Harriett.

"Oh, you don't have to hurry," Harriett said. "I think Maggie will want to stay out here for a little bit longer." Even as she spoke, Maggie was hurrying back over to him. She laughed. "There's no doubt she's taken a liking to you." And who could blame her? It was hard not to want to be near him. How Rose managed it, Harriett could only guess.

"She's used to doing everything with me," Stan said while Maggie watched the horses eat. "She tends to follow me all over the place."

"Do you mind if I take her out to see my parents tomorrow? I'd like to ask my ma for advice on getting her to eat more than bread."

"That would be fine." Done with his chore, he set the rake by the wall and turned those heart-melting eyes her way. "I can keep her out here while I complete the chores for tonight. I know you didn't bring much, but I figured you'd want to get your room set up before bedtime."

"My room?" she dumbly asked.

"I assumed you didn't want to sleep in mine," he softly replied.

Her face grew warm, and she found herself, once again, averting his gaze. "Of course not. We only got married for Maggie's sake."

"Right."

She couldn't be sure, but she thought she detected a slight note of disappointment in his voice. Pushing the notion aside, she asked, "Which room is mine?"

"The one next to Maggie's. There's only three bedrooms in the house."

Three bedrooms. And two of those were bedrooms he had hoped his and Rose's children would stay in. She didn't want to think of the plans he had made when he built the house. She knew he built it with Rose in mind. But things hadn't turned out the way he'd hoped. And now he was stuck with her instead. Just as he'd been stuck with her at the picnic the day she bid on him. It was such a stupid thing for her to do. But not nearly as stupid as marrying him. There was no doubt about it. She was a glutton for punishment. She might have set up the restriction that they would only share a marriage of convenience, but it did little to protect her from the desire to be loved by him.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Well, I better put my things away."

I'll tuck Maggie in when you two return to the house."

Then, without waiting for him to reply, she hurried out of the barn.

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As Stan watched Harriett leave the barn, he opened his mouth to apologize, to say that he regretted the times he had rejected her in favor of her sister. But he didn't know if that would make things better or worse, so he opted not to say anything. He wasn't trying to hurt her, but it seemed that no matter what he did or said, he ended up hurting her all the same.

If he had asked her to come to his room, she would have assumed it was only because he wanted a woman in his bed. If he told her she could have the room next to Maggie's, she would assume it was because he had no interest in her that way. No matter what he did, he was stuck between a rock and a hard place. He had no idea this whole thing was going to be so difficult.

Turning to Maggie, he asked, "Are you ready to go in yet?"

"No. Want horse," she said.

"It's too late. I'll take you out for a ride tomorrow, alright?"

"Now."

"Maggie, I'm tired. It's been a long day." And the awkwardness of having Harriett with them didn't help matters any. "I'll take you out tomorrow."

She crossed her arms and jutted out her lower lip. Usually, he'd think the action was cute, but this evening, such wasn't the case. It only emphasized how unruly she was. When Harriett brought her out here, the girl had been holding her hand and walking—walking!—with her.

Every time he'd taken Maggie to the barn, she ran, and by the time he came in, she was usually climbing a stall door or trying to feed the horses. He didn't think it was possible, but in a mere couple hours, Harriett already proved how much better she was at parenting than him.

He motioned to Maggie to leave the barn with him, but she held her ground. Finally, he picked her up and carried her out. Maggie opened her mouth and screamed that she wanted to ride the horse tonight.

He gritted his teeth and stopped in the yard. "Please don't scream," he told her. It was bad enough Harriett saw the girl running away from him in town. If he had to put up with this humiliation, too, he didn't know if he could sleep through the night. "Your new ma is in the house. Do you want to make her sad?"

After a moment, the girl shook her head. Relieved, he said, "Can you be good when we get in there? For her sake?"

The girl looked at the house, at the barn, at the house, and at the barn again. He had no idea what she was debating, but whatever it'd been, it was worth it since she nodded and quieted down, brushing large tears from her eyes.

"Thank you," he said, relieved.

He set her down and tried to hold her hand so she'd walk the rest of the way to the house with him, but she darted off for the front door. Oh well. She was quiet, and right now, that was probably the best he could hope for.

Once he entered the house, he set his coat on the hook by the door and put his boots on the mat. As soon as he turned, he realized Maggie had zoomed right through the kitchen with her boots on, tracking traces of snow and dirt on the floor he'd cleaned earlier that day so Harriett wouldn't think he was a slob.

Despite his exhaustion, he hurried after the girl and found her in Harriett's room, tugging on her dress. "Want horse ride," Maggie said.

"What?" Harriett asked, turning from her carpetbag, which was on the bed.

"I promised her a horse ride tomorrow," he said, hesitant to enter the room but not wanting the girl to keep tracking her dirty boots all through the house. After a quick debate, he went in and picked her up, greatly relieved when she didn't scream or cry. "She wanted to go tonight, but it's late. I'll put her in bed and let you finish unpacking. Oh, and don't worry about the floors. I'll clean those up."

He turned to head out of the room when she called out, "I could take her to bed right now. That way you can clean the floors right away."

He glanced back at her then glanced at Maggie. "I don't want to make more work for you."

She offered him what seemed to be a hesitant smile. "I used to take care of my little brother and my nieces and nephews. It's no work at all. The only thing is," she turned her gaze to Maggie, "will she let me?"

He didn't see why Maggie wouldn't but decided to ask. "Maggie, you mind if your ma tucks you in bed tonight?" Since Maggie shook her head, he let Harriett take her. "Thank you. I'll be sure to clean up the floors so you won't be able to tell where she was."

She nodded and took Maggie down the hallway.

He watched as Harriett took her into the small bedroom. Harriett was an attractive young woman in her own right. If only he had been smart enough to figure it out sooner. At this point, he had the nagging suspicion he wised up too late. With a resigned sigh, he headed for the stairs so he could clean the floors.

## Chapter Five

The next day after breakfast, Harriett bundled Maggie into her winter coat then tucked her hair and ears under the hat. Maggie proceeded to pull the hat off her head and threw it to the kitchen floor. With a sigh, Harriett picked it up and caught the girl before she could run out of the room.

“It’s cold outside,” she told the girl as she placed her on the chair. “You need to wear this.”

“Don’t wanna.” She crossed her arms and shook her head.

“I didn’t ask if you wanted to. I’m telling you that’s what you’re going to do.”

“Hate hats.”

She opened her mouth to reason with the girl but remembered her age. Maggie was in no condition to understand logic. She had to be older for that. Right now, she was focused on what was convenient, and for her, wearing a hat wasn’t convenient. But she was going to wear it anyway.

“I’m your mother, and you’re going to do what I say.”

“No, you’re not. Ma hates me.”

Harriett remained still for a moment as she thought over how to respond. Finally, she asked, “Who told you that your ma hates you?”

“My pa.”

“Your pa?”

“The real one. He died.”

Oh, she meant Stan’s friend, Randy. She was surprised the girl could remember something like that. “Well,” she slowly began, not sure how to best proceed, “your pa had a good friend, and this friend adopted you. He’s your real pa now. And since I married him, I’m your ma.”

“Not real one.”

She hesitated and placed the hat on the girl’s head. This girl was smart for her age, and she suspected the girl was hoping she’d forget about the hat. “It doesn’t matter if I gave birth to you or not. Since yesterday, I became your ma.” She wiggled the hat over her ears then set her on the floor. “You’re coming with me to meet my mother. She’s now your grandma.”

“She’s not.”

“Yes, she is.”

Done with the argument, she took the girl’s hand and led her to the barn. The brisk wind made her shiver, and she was especially grateful she’d held her ground and made the girl wear a hat. Glancing at the cloudy sky, she hoped it’d be sunny later on. It’d go a long way to warming things up. But the important thing was there was no snow falling.

“Don’t wanna go,” Maggie said.

“It doesn’t matter if you want to go or not. You’re going.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m the adult, and you’re the child.”

“You’re not my ma.”

Harriett resisted the urge to groan. The girl was just as determined to get her way as Rose was. But unlike Rose, the girl had to do what she said. It was the only thing that gave her comfort as they stepped into the barn.

“Do you want me to get the buggy ready?” came a voice from behind her.

With a slight jerk, Harriett turned around in time to see Stan enter the barn.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, offering her another one of those heart-melting smiles.

How could Rose see him and not go weak in the knees? She should probably ask Rose for the secret. Being vulnerable wasn’t going to do her any favors.

Despite the heat in her face, Harriett nodded. “I’d appreciate it, if you don’t mind.”

“No!” Maggie struggled to get away from her. “Don’t wanna go.”

She tried to lift the girl who insisted on falling to the ground and crying. Here, she’d come to help Stan, and it seemed like she was doing a lousy job of it.

“I can help,” he said and picked Maggie up.

“I’m sorry,” Harriett told him. How she wished Maggie would at least behave while he was around.

Facing Harriett, he gave her an understanding smile. “You have nothing to be sorry about. She does this to me, too.” He carried the crying girl to the buggy and sat her in the seat. “I know she can be a handful.”

Maybe, but he was a man, and men were allowed to be overwhelmed when it came to taking care of children. She, however, was a woman, and she was a woman who had experience with a younger brother, nieces, and nephews. She should be able to handle a three-year-old girl, temper tantrum and all.

“Your ma is only going to take you to see your grandma, and when you come back, you can have a cookie,” Stan told Maggie.

Harriett bit her tongue. The last thing she felt like doing was giving the girl a cookie. She didn’t deserve one for behaving this way. But she didn’t want to say anything while the girl was listening. That would make things worse because then she’d know she could divide Harriett and Stan, and if that happened, she’d only get worse.

So whether she wanted to or not, she’d make sure to give the girl a cookie when they got back if she behaved while he got the buggy ready. And as it turned out, she did. Perhaps the promise of a cookie wasn’t so bad after all,

but Harriett was still determined to find a way to make the child behave without having to resort to promises of treats. Maggie needed to go somewhere willingly. Otherwise, it was going to be chaos every time Harriett or Stan needed to take her somewhere.

While Stan led the horse over to the buggy, Harriett went over to him, making sure to keep her voice low while she talked to him. “Are you aware Randy told Maggie that her mother hates her?”

Glancing over at Maggie, he whispered, “Yes, I’m aware of it.”

“Did you tell her that it wasn’t the truth?”

He backed the horse to the buggy. “Why would I tell her that?”

“Maggie shouldn’t go through life thinking the woman who gave birth to her doesn’t like her.”

As he continued hooking the horse to the buggy, he shook his head and kept his voice low. “Look, I grew up with an older sister who went through something similar. Her ma left and didn’t come back except one time, and that was only because she hoped to make money off of her.”

“But we’re not talking about Emily,” Harriett argued. “We’re talking about Maggie and what’s best for her.”

“And what’s best for her is to know upfront there are people in this world who aren’t going to care about her. It’s reality.”

“Well, fine. Then tell her this after she’s old enough to fully understand what’s going on.”

He paused as he was slipping the reins on the horse and glanced at her. “There is no good time to do that. My pa hid the truth from Emily as long as he could, and she found out when she was eight. It wasn’t easy for her. Even if Emily had been an adult, it wouldn’t have been easy, but one thing Emily always said was that she’d wished she’d known right away because then she wouldn’t have wasted so much of her childhood believing a lie.”

Harriett stepped around him, so she was out of Maggie’s view. The girl was watching them, and judging by how smart she was, she’d pick up on what they were discussing if Harriett wasn’t careful. “Do you go around telling her that her ma hates her?”

“No, but I’m not going to tell her something that contradicts what her pa told her either.”

“When she asks you if it’s true, do you tell her it is?”

He groaned and placed the bridle in the horse’s mouth. “She hasn’t asked, but,” he turned to face her, “when she does ask, I’m going to tell her the facts. Her ma left her on her pa’s doorstep then left. She accepted a mail-order bride ad and left. No one knows where she went. It’s up to Maggie to figure out what to do with the information.”

“I still think it’s wrong to put such a burden on a child.”

“Lying to her isn’t going to be any better.”

“Are you also planning to tell her you wanted to marry my sister but got stuck with me?” The words came out before she could stop them, and as soon as she said them, she wished she hadn’t. And by the way he winced, she knew he didn’t like hearing it. “Just how much of the truth do you plan to tell her?” she finally asked.

After a moment, he said, “I’m not secretly pining for Rose.”

He wasn’t? She wanted to ask if he really meant it or if he was saying it to spare her feelings, but she didn’t dare ask.

He finished getting the buggy ready then led her to the seat. “Maggie, you did good. I’m proud of you.”

“I get cookie?” the girl asked, perking up in the seat.

“Yes, you do.”

He turned to help Harriett into the buggy, an action which startled her. He was only being polite. It was what all men did for their wives, sisters, mothers, or daughters, but she still didn’t expect it. As much as she didn’t want to take his hand because it meant she had to touch him, she knew she couldn’t get out of it.

Despite her shaky hand, she accepted his offer and quickly stepped into the buggy. But instead of going in gracefully like she planned, she tripped on the hem of her skirt and fell backward.

He caught her in his arms. “It’s alright. I got you.”

“Um, t-thanks,” she stammered and struggled to get into the buggy so he wouldn’t keep holding her.

Goodness, but no one could fluster her as much as Stan Craftsman. She’d been completely daft to think this would ever work, that she could be near him and not get weak in the knees. And being in his arms... Well, that was nearly her undoing. If she didn’t get in the buggy fast, she just might do something to embarrass herself, like snuggle up to him. This was only a marriage of convenience. That was all.

With as much grace as she could muster, she managed to wobble into the buggy.

Maggie giggled and pointed to her. “You’re funny.”

“I tripped,” Harriett said, glancing at Stan and praying he believed her. She’d die if he thought otherwise.

He handed her the reins. “I hope you have a good visit with your ma.”

She muttered a quick thank you and snapped the reins, breathing a huge sigh of relief when the horse led them out of the barn. Yes, she definitely needed some time away from him, even if it was only going to be for the rest of the morning and early afternoon. Maybe by the time she came back, she’d have better control over her emotions.

## Chapter Six

“I hope it’s alright that I came by with Maggie,” Harriett said as her pa helped her down from the buggy.

“It’s always a good time for you to come by,” her pa replied, his tone soft. “How are you doing this morning?”

“I’m fine,” she assured him.

“Want cookie,” Maggie blurted out.

“No, you won’t get one until you get home,” Harriett told her.

Her pa turned to the girl and held his arms out to her. “Let’s see how far you can jump.”

Maggie, with a wide smile on her face, leapt out of the buggy and into his arms.

Harriett couldn’t believe it. “You must have a way with children,” she muttered.

“She’s probably used to a man taking care of her,” her pa replied and carried the girl to the house, Harriett walking beside him. “It makes sense when you think of everything that’s happened.”

“Maybe.” Harriett used to be confident in her ability to take care of children, but Maggie was beginning to make her question it. She followed him into the house. “Is Ma in the kitchen?”

He grinned at her as he took his boots off by the door. “Where else would she be?”

“She could be in the parlor sewing.”

“You know she prefers the kitchen, especially this time of day.” He rubbed Maggie’s back and added, “I’m now your grandpa, you know. And you’re about to meet your new grandma.”

Harriett removed her boots, hat and coat. Then she helped Maggie out of her things.

“Smell cookie,” Maggie said, looking up at Harriett’s pa instead of her.

“No, your grandma isn’t making cookies. She’s making tarts.”

“What’s tart?” the girl asked.

“It’s a pastry with fruit in it. In this case, she’s using some preserved strawberries.”

“She didn’t use apples?” Harriett asked, surprised since her pa preferred apple treats to just about any other dessert.

“Not this time.”

She tried to take the girl’s hand, but the girl ran over to her pa and took his hand. After a moment, Harriett overcame her shock and asked her pa, “Where’s Adam and Eli?”

“In town helping your brother at the mercantile.”

“That’s why it’s so quiet in the house.”

“No, it’s been quiet ever since Rose got married.”

Amused at his joke, she smiled as they headed down the hall. “I meant there was no one playing the piano.”

“Between you and me, I think Eli’s getting real good at it.”

“He practices every chance he gets.”

“That’s what will work in his favor.”

They reached the kitchen, and her pa called out a greeting to her mother, who was reading a book at the small round table. Harriett couldn’t believe it’d only been yesterday that she was still living here and helping her ma with the meals. And now she had a home with her own kitchen waiting for her. She’d often fancied the idea of having a daughter to cook with, but she didn’t know if Maggie would ever be willing to do anything with her. As it was, Harriett had done good to put Maggie to bed last night, and she suspected the only reason Maggie let her do that was because she was too tired to protest.

“You two came just in time,” her mother said as she put her book down and stood up. “The tarts will be done in five minutes.”

“They smell good, don’t they?” her pa asked Maggie.

Maggie gave him an enthusiastic nod. “Want one.”

“You’re certainly welcome to one,” her mother said and pulled out a highchair. “You can set her in here.”

After her pa did, he left to look for some toys.

Her ma chuckled and glanced at Harriett. “This is why you should save all of Maggie’s things. One day, you’ll need them again.”

“Yes, I know.”

She’d watched her mother dote on her grandchildren often enough. She turned her gaze to Maggie, wondering if the girl would respond just as eagerly to her mother as she did to her father.

“So, you’re Maggie, hmm?” her mother asked the girl, sitting in the chair next to the highchair.

“Yes,” the girl replied.

“Since my daughter is now your ma, that makes me your grandma.”

The girl nodded.

“Here are some things I think she’ll like,” Harriett’s pa said as he returned with an armful of toys.

Maggie cheered as he set them on the tray of the highchair. Harriett peered forward to see the familiar doll she had once played with and the wooden blocks her brothers used to build things with. The girl threw the doll to the floor but started stacking the blocks, and Harriett couldn’t help but think it was the girl’s way of rejecting her.

Which was silly of course. The girl wasn’t trying to send her a message. She was much too young to think that deeply about her actions, but Harriett

still felt rejected all the same. She never should have been so hard on Stan. He was only doing his best to help the girl. It wasn't his fault she was so stubborn.

"I'll leave you ladies to talk," her pa said then tapped Maggie's nose, making Maggie giggle.

After her pa left the room, Harriett checked the clock. "How much longer till the tarts are done?"

"About three minutes," her ma said. "Sit down, Harriett. I'll get them."

"No, I want to do something." She retrieved the doll from the floor and smoothed out its dress. She placed it gently on the table then sat down.

"How have things been for you?" her ma asked, a sympathetic look on her face.

Harriett shrugged. "About as good as I expected."

Her ma hesitated for a moment then proceeded with, "What did you expect?"

"I thought it would be harder to adjust to being married," she hedged, not really wanting to divulge everything to her while Maggie was listening. Who knew what the girl would remember?

"I understand," her mother replied then turned her attention back to Maggie.

For the next half hour, they fed Maggie the tart and let her play. Afterwards, Harriett's mother put her down for a nap and returned to the kitchen.

Harriett set the cups of hot chocolate on the table. "Did Maggie give you any trouble when you put her down?" she asked, settling into her chair.

"No. Should she have?" her ma asked, sitting next to her.

"Maybe not when she's sleepy." Harriett took a sip of the hot chocolate and sighed. "I don't think she likes me. She fought me on letting me put her hat on and bringing her out here to see you and Pa."

"Well, you only married Stan yesterday. You can't expect her to accept the change right away. She might resist you for a while before she comes around."

"At first, I thought it was me. Because I'm a woman, and her mother was a woman. But then she was acting fine with you."

"I gave her toys and something to eat. I wasn't being a mother." She leaned forward and put her hand over Harriett's. "Give her time. She's not used to having a mother take care of her. It's been her pa, and now it's Stan."

"Today she told me her real mother hates her. Since she believes that, I think she hates me because I'm in her mother's place."

"She doesn't understand what hate is. She's only three."

Harriett considered her ma's words. "You're probably right. She doesn't understand what hate is all about, but Randy actually told her that her real

mother hates her. It wasn't right of him to place that kind of burden on her." Because whether anyone wanted to admit it or not, she'd grow up to understand it.

"No, it wasn't right of Randy to say that," her mother allowed, leaning toward her. "But she's only known her father. She never knew her mother. It stands to reason she'll accept whatever he told her."

"He wasn't willing to marry her mother. If the mother had no way to support the child, then what else was she supposed to do but leave Maggie with him?"

"Harriett," her mother began in a soft tone, "we don't know the circumstances. All you know is what Stan told you, and all he knows is what Randy told him. I'm sure whatever the truth is, it's not pleasant for anyone."

"Do you think Maggie should know that her parents weren't married and that her mother left her with her father to raise all by himself?"

"I can't make that kind of judgment."

Harriett groaned. "I'm just asking for your opinion."

"Everyone has to decide how much to tell or not tell their children. It's not for others to decide for them."

"But Stan already went along with what Randy told her."

Her mother's eyebrows furrowed. "Then I don't understand why you're even asking the question. Unless...you want me to say Stan supporting what Randy told her is wrong?"

Harriett's cheeks grew warm. That was exactly what she'd been hoping, but she could tell it wasn't what her mother was going to do.

"Harriett, you weren't there for the first three years of her life. You're going to have to accept what her father and Stan already said. All you can do is be the mother her real one chose not to be. It might be difficult, given her history. And keep in mind, she's only three. She's not old enough to reason things out. All she will go by is what she experiences. My advice to you is to be patient, kind, and firm."

"What do you mean by firm?"

"She's going to test her limits. All children do it. They try to figure out how much they can get away with. When you set rules, stick with them."

"Well," Harriett began, thinking about supper yesterday. "I was going to ask for your opinion on how to best handle things when she refuses to eat something I make, like vegetables or fruit."

Her ma chuckled. "That's a common problem mothers have. One thing you can do is mix the vegetables and fruits into her meals so she doesn't realize she's eating them. She just ate strawberries in that tart and didn't notice."

"I thought she ate it because you made it," Harriett admitted.

"No, it was because it was in a treat. Why do you think I make so many

pies?”

“I thought you enjoyed making them.”

“That’s partly true. I do. But it’s also a good way to get others to eat fruit.”

“Alright. I’ll do that. But it won’t work for every meal. What should I do then?”

“You have a couple options. You can withhold dessert if she doesn’t eat the main course. You can make her stay at the table until she eats what’s on her plate. Or you can let her go to bed hungry. I withheld dessert from Rose until she finally ate what I offered.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“You were only two at the time.” She drank some of her hot chocolate and smiled at Harriett. “I didn’t make anything you, your brothers, or your sisters hated, but I did try to give you a good meal. Also, I’d make enough side dishes so there was something for everyone, but that works best with a big family.”

Harriett decided she should ask Stan what kinds of foods Maggie liked and go from there. “Thanks, Ma. I’ll keep those ideas in mind.”

Harriett took a long drink of her hot chocolate and relaxed. It was strange to think she’d be going back to Stan’s house. This was part of the process of growing up. She always wanted to be a wife and mother. She hadn’t figured it would come about the way it did, but it was still better than being a spinster and living with her parents for the rest of her life.

“Alright,” her mother said as she set her cup on the table and turned toward her. “I’ve been wondering how things are going for you. You don’t have to tell me, of course, but I am your ma, and I worry about you.”

Harriett smiled at her concern. “Are you asking me if I regret my decision to marry Stan?”

“Well, it was sudden. Things we do in haste can have some unpleasant consequences.”

She carefully thought over whether or not she regretted marrying Stan before answering. “I don’t know yet. It still doesn’t seem real. He and I didn’t share a bed last night.” Realizing her voice went lower at the admission, she cleared her throat and shifted in the chair. “It’s like having a brother.”

“You do know that’s not what marriage is supposed to be like, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know. But I don’t want to get close to him. I’m only doing this to help with Maggie.”

“And when Maggie grows up and leaves home, then what?”

“I hadn’t gotten that far. Nor do I have to for a long time. She’s only three.”

“She’ll be eighteen a lot sooner than you think. The time will pass fast.”

Harriett knew her ma was right, but at the moment, the time still seemed a long way off. She felt no reason to concern herself with the future. Right now,

her biggest challenge would be getting Maggie to behave. She could worry about Stan later.

## Chapter Seven

Stan didn't see the fancy carriage right away. He'd just gotten back from feeding the cattle when he saw it in front of his house. The thing looked sorely out of place on his land. When he finally got the two-story home built, he'd been so proud of it, thinking it'd be a nice place for Rose and their future children. As foolish as it'd been, he'd entertained daydreams of how excited she'd be when he showed it to her for the first time.

Such fantasies, however, didn't pan out, but he'd still thought it was a good, solid place to raise Maggie. Now, though, as he compared it to the carriage with gold wheels and trim, it no longer seemed so impressive.

But what could someone who owned such an expensive item want with him? The carriage didn't look like it broke down. In fact, it looked brand new. Despite his hesitation, he rode the horse up to the house to find out who'd be paying him a visit.

When he got closer, he realized a woman, with a gray hat and matching wool coat, was knocking on his front door. He tipped his hat to the carriage's driver then led the horse right for the porch.

"May I help you?" he called out.

The woman turned, and his jaw dropped. Rose? When she told him she was marrying Kent Ashton, he had no idea Kent was so wealthy. He knew Kent had money, but he'd grossly underestimated how much. No wonder she didn't want to be with him. What woman could resist someone who could provide her a fancy carriage and clothes? Stan couldn't afford any of those in his wildest dreams.

"Hi, Stan," she said and headed over to him. "Is Harriett here?"

It took him a moment to find his voice. Even now he had trouble speaking around her, and it didn't matter that he'd put aside his feelings for her. Something about her still intimidated him. She definitely wasn't right for him. What had he been thinking when he thought they'd be a good fit?

Forcing aside the observation, he gestured in the direction her parents lived. "She went to see her parents. I mean, your parents. I mean, both of your parents." Good grief. If this wasn't awkward, he didn't know what was. "She's still there."

Good. That was better. Maybe she'd leave, and he could stop feeling like an idiot.

"Thanks, Stan. I'll go over there," she told him and bounded to the carriage in typical Rose fashion.

It seemed every time he saw her, she was running from one thing to another, and this was no different. But that suited him just fine. The sooner she left, the sooner he could go back to feeling like his usual self, even if his

usual self was probably boring.

How ironic it was that last year, he would have given everything to have her come to his house, and now that she was here, he was glad she was leaving. It hadn't occurred to him that being married to Harriett meant he would have to see Rose, but there was little he could do about it. With a sigh, he pulled his horse's reins, directing his steed back to the barn.

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"Thanks for everything, Ma," Harriett told her mother as her mother tucked Maggie's hair under her hat. Maggie hadn't once raised a fuss this time. What special talent did her mother have that she didn't? "I wish I could make things go so smoothly."

"Give it time. You will."

"Want Pa," Maggie said then ran over to the door, reaching for the doorknob.

"She wants to go home," her ma whispered, patting Harriett's shoulder reassuringly. "That's why she didn't put up a fuss."

That made Harriett feel a little better.

Before she could open the door for Maggie, someone turned the doorknob. Harriett pulled Maggie back while the door swung open.

"Oh good," Rose called out as she waved at the carriage driver. "I hoped I didn't miss you on your way back to Stan's."

Harriett felt her stomach clench. "You didn't go over to his place, did you?"

Her sister chuckled. "Sure, I did. That's where you live now, isn't it? Stan told me you were here, so I came right over."

"You talked to Stan?" Just what Harriett needed. For Stan to talk to the sister he preferred.

"It was only for a second. He only told me that you were here."

"Well, come in and hang up your coat," their mother said. "Invite the poor carriage driver in. I'll get everyone something hot to drink."

"I can't stay any longer," Harriett replied as their ma headed to the kitchen. She glanced at Maggie, noting the way the girl was edging to the door. "Maggie wants to go home, and I don't think she's willing to stay here any longer."

Rose stuck out her lower lip in a familiar pout. "But I came all the way over here to see you."

"I'm sorry about that, Rose, but I have a little girl to think about. I had a hard enough time getting her to come out here."

"Well, if that's all..." Rose leaned down and smiled at Maggie. "Are you tired of being stuck inside this boring old house?"

The girl nodded. "Uh huh."

"How would you like to go for a ride in that carriage?"

Maggie turned her gaze in the direction Rose pointed to and let out a squeal of excitement. “Can I?”

“Sure. You’re my niece now, and if I can’t spoil my niece, then what good is being an aunt?” Rose straightened up and winked at Harriett. “It’ll be fun to go for a ride in the carriage. It’s so much more comfortable than a buggy.”

Harriett watched in dismay while Maggie bolted out the door and headed for the carriage.

Rose laughed. “She sure is full of joy. I bet you love being her mother.”

Harriett resisted the urge to remind Rose that a girl darting for the carriage wasn’t a proper way for her to behave, but what good would it do? Rose did the same kind of thing when she was a child and thought it was just fine if Maggie showed the same lack of restraint.

By the time their mother returned, Rose was halfway to the carriage to help Maggie into it. “Doesn’t Rose want anything to drink?” her ma asked.

Harriett looked at the two cups in her mother’s hands and shook her head. “You know how Rose is. One minute her mind is on one thing. Then the next, she’s already thinking of something else. It’s hard to keep her in one place for long unless there’s work to be done. Then it’s hard to get her to budge from one spot.”

“Yes, I know exactly how she is,” her mother replied with a chuckle. “Will you please give this to the poor driver? I’d hate to think of how much he’s gone through while Rose was looking for you.”

“Alright, Ma.”

She took the cup but decided not to take the one for Rose. She hurried out the door before her ma could stop her. Yes, it was rude. She should have taken the other cup, but it irked her that Rose went over to Stan’s house when Rose knew how insecure Harriett was about Stan’s past feelings for her. It was just how Rose was, thinking of herself first and others second. If she wanted something, she went after it, regardless of how others were affected. And Harriett was tired of it.

By the time Harriett reached the carriage, she gave the driver his cup of hot chocolate then stepped inside. “I need to take the buggy back home,” she told Rose. “If we must go for a ride, it has to be a quick one. You might have a servant who does all the cooking for you, but I don’t.”

“You have no need to worry,” Rose assured her as the carriage moved forward. “It’ll be quick. I only wanted to see how things are going.”

“They’re fine,” Harriett replied, her tone more curt than she intended.

But Rose didn’t notice. She was tapping Maggie’s nose and making the girl giggle. “You look just like a doll I saw in a catalogue the other day. Kent gets these catalogues from back East, and oh, Harriett! They have the loveliest things in them. I should bring one over sometime. You won’t believe how many things they make back there.”

“You aren’t planning to come on over to my house again, are you?” Harriett asked. Good grief. All she needed was for Rose to come by often, constantly reminding Stan that he married the second-best sister.

“You’re my sister. I don’t want to stop seeing you.”

“I’ll come see you instead. There’s no need to take this gorgeous carriage all the way out here. Plus, I’m sure the driver has better things to do.”

Rose shook her head. “No, he doesn’t. The poor man gets bored. He told me so. Besides, I’d go to the ends of the earth to see my favorite sister.”

Harriett knew her sister meant that as a compliment, but at the moment, she would have preferred it if Rachel had taken the slot instead of her. But no. Rachel was in Montana with her own family.

Rose turned toward Maggie. “What do you think of this carriage?”

“It’s fun!” the girl said as she touched the soft seat beneath her. “And soft.”

“It’s the best in the area,” Rose told her. “You know what I do when I’m in here?”

The girl shook her head.

“I pretend I’m a princess going to see my prince. Have you ever heard about princesses and princes?”

“No,” Maggie replied.

“Oh, they get the best of everything. They have servants who do their bidding whenever they want. They get to go to large balls where people dance in beautiful gowns and elegant suits. They’re very happy and very much in love. And when they have children, those children are just as cute as you.”

Rose hugged Maggie. Harriett couldn’t believe it when Maggie didn’t push her away. If Rose had married Stan, Maggie would have called her ‘Ma’. Maggie wouldn’t have fought her or refused to eat anything she made. She would have done what Rose wanted.

Harriett rolled her eyes and looked out the small window. Rose’s life was a fairytale. True, she didn’t marry a prince, but she did marry a man who turned out to be wealthy beyond measure, and what was more, he loved her. She didn’t have a marriage of convenience. She’d had her choice of several suitors, and she married for love. She had everything she ever wanted.

It wasn’t often that Harriett envied her sister, but right now she could feel the green-eyed monster sneaking up on her.

“Sometime soon,” Rose continued, slipping her arm around Maggie, “your ma will bring you to my house, and you can see just how grand it is. And you know what?”

“What?” Maggie asked in excitement.

“Because you’re my niece, you get to enjoy some of the things I have. I can get you candy and ice cream. I can give you toys and lots of other things. I plan to spoil you silly.”

Rose tickled the little girl, who looked as if she'd never had so much fun in her entire life. And for all Harriett knew, she hadn't.

"I can see why you married Stan," Rose told Harriett. "It's hard to resist such an adorable girl."

Maggie didn't seem so adorable when she got along with everyone except for her, but Harriett kept the thought to herself.

"I hope you don't mind I came by to see you," Rose continued. "I spent all yesterday wishing I'd been there for you. It was hard to stay away knowing you were getting married. I used to think we'd get married together in a double wedding. That would have been so romantic."

"Things worked out the way they were meant to," Harriett finally spoke up.

"Yes, you're right. And I understand why you wanted a private affair yesterday. But even if I wasn't with you in person, I was with you in spirit. You do know that, don't you?"

Harriett nodded. At the moment, she would have preferred to have had this conversation in spirit as well. She immediately criticized herself for thinking such a hateful thing. It wasn't like her to resent her sister so much. She'd long ago made peace with the fact that Rose was more appealing to others than she was. And it was still fine if most people thought that way. All she really wanted was for two people to like her more than they liked Rose, but Stan and Maggie wouldn't ever do it.

"Rose, I need to get back home," Harriett finally said when she'd decided she'd had enough. If she wasn't careful, she was going to say something she'd later regret, and she didn't want to do that. Because, even if she was irritated at the moment, she still loved her sister. "Can you please have the driver take us to Stan's buggy?"

"But we hardly got to talk," Rose replied, a hurt tone in her voice.

"We can talk some other time. It's not like I'm moving away from here."

After a moment, Rose nodded. "You're right. I just missed you, that's all."

Rose tapped the top of the carriage, and the driver pulled the horses to a stop. When he opened the door, she instructed him to go back to the house. The driver said he would and shut the door. Shortly, they were moving again.

"You're princess," Maggie told Rose in awe.

Rose chuckled. "I am like one, though I'm not really royalty. But if you find the right man to marry someday, he'll make you feel like one, too."

"She's only three, Rose," Harriett said. "There's no need to fill her mind with such nonsense."

"It's not nonsense. I used to dream of getting married when I was a little girl, and if I recall correctly, you did, too. The men in our dreams were always kind, good looking, and completely devoted to us."

"Those were dreams. They aren't real life. The sooner Maggie learns that,

the better she'll..."

Harriett's voice drifted off the moment she realized what she was doing. She'd just argued with Stan and her mother that the girl should be sheltered from the real world. And when Rose pretty much argued the same case, Harriett suddenly understood how silly the whole thing was. Because real life wasn't a fairytale. Sometimes people didn't get married. Sometimes they had children and abandoned them. Sometimes they married out of necessity, not for love. Sometimes they had a sister who had everything while they stayed in the shadows and took whatever was left over. Just what good was it going to do Maggie later in life if she wasn't prepared ahead of time for disappointment?

"The better she'll what?" Rose asked.

Harriett looked over at Rose, not comprehending what she was saying.

"You just said the sooner Maggie learns dreams aren't real, the better she'll..." Rose indicated for her to continue.

The better she'll adjust to life's disappointments, Harriett thought. But knowing Rose wouldn't understand, Harriett shook her head. "Never mind. It's not important."

The carriage came to a stop, and Harriett opened the door before the driver could do it for her. "Come on, Maggie. Let's go home to your pa."

As silly as it might have seemed to Rose, Harriett held her breath in dread that Maggie would fight with her. But to her great relief, Maggie went over to her.

"Since you don't want me coming to visit you," Rose slowly began, "do you plan to visit me?"

"Yes, I'll do that." Harriett helped the girl down from the carriage and held her hand. "But Rose, I need to adjust to my new life first."

Rose's smile faltered. "Alright."

Forcing aside her guilt, Harriett said good-bye. She got ready to shut the door when she realized the driver was standing behind her with the cup in his hand.

"Thank you again for the drink, Mrs. Craftsman," he said.

Once she overcame her shock at being called 'Mrs. Craftsman', Harriett nodded and took the cup back to her mother. She'd never get used to being called Mrs. Craftsman. Never. Because deep down, she'd always know she didn't marry for love. She would always have a marriage of convenience.

## Chapter Eight

The next morning, Stan glanced at Harriett as they ate breakfast. For the most part, Harriett focused her attention on Maggie during their meals, and this morning was no exception. He couldn't be sure, but he suspected it was because Harriett was hoping he wouldn't talk to her.

He couldn't be surprised, he supposed. She probably had no desire to spend any time with him. She'd only married him for Maggie's sake. And by the way she didn't like his answers about Randy and Maggie's mother, he probably pushed her further away from him.

If only he could go back in time to the picnic and pay attention to her. He would have come to his senses a lot sooner, and they wouldn't be going through this awkward phase right now.

But there was nothing he could do about the past. All he could do was try to make things better between them. Because if he didn't, this wasn't going to be the kind of marriage that would be pleasant for either one of them, and if that was the case, then he was sure Maggie would pick up on it.

He swallowed the last of his coffee and gently set the cup next to his empty plate.

"Maggie, finish up your pancake," Harriett said in a motherly tone women often reserved for young children. "Then you can play."

"I'm full," Maggie replied.

"But you only have one more bite to go. Surely, you can manage that."

Though the girl groaned, she picked up the last piece and shoved it in her mouth.

"With your fork," Harriett said. "Maggie, a lady doesn't eat with her hands."

Maggie picked up the fork and put it in her mouth then proceeded to shove the pancake further in.

Gasping, Harriett took the fork from her. "Not like that. You could choke doing it that way."

Despite himself, Stan chuckled.

Harriett stilled for a moment then, without looking at him, set the fork by Maggie's plate.

"I'm sorry," he told Harriett. "I didn't mean to laugh."

"It's alright," she replied but kept her focus on Maggie as she wiped the girl's hands with a cloth napkin.

Well, she was talking to him, but she didn't want to look over at him. But at least she was talking, and he'd take whatever he could get. Straightening in his chair, he gathered his courage and asked, "Would you mind watching Maggie while I go to my pa's? He's going to take some cattle north of here,

and Luke and I usually help him get them on his trailer. Sometimes it goes smoothly, but there are times when it gets hectic and it helps to have us there.”

“My pa has cattle. I know how it is,” she told him, still avoiding eye contact with him. “You don’t need my permission to go there. I’ll stay here with Maggie.”

Not knowing what else to say, he settled for a simple thank you and added, “I should be home around five.” He paused. Usually, he fed the cattle before he left, but if she could do it, it’d be one less thing he’d have to worry about. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to feed the cattle around noon?”

“I can do that.”

“You sure?”

This time when she answered, she finally made eye contact with him. “I’ve done it a couple times for my pa. I grew up on a farm. I know what to do.”

“I didn’t mean to imply you don’t know what to do. I just didn’t want you to think I expect you to do it.”

“But it’s what I’m here for. To help you out.”

Though her tone was soft, he winced. Was that how things were going to be between them? Did this marriage of convenience go into every aspect of their lives? Couldn’t they at least be friends?

She picked Maggie out of her chair and set her on the floor. “Let’s try using the chamber pot like a big girl.” Without a glance in his direction, she added, “I’ll clean up when I get back.”

The two left the room, and Stan figured he was officially dismissed. This wasn’t how he imagined their marriage would be. He wasn’t sure what he pictured, exactly, but everything seemed to be so awkward. He didn’t like it.

He didn’t like it one bit. But what could he do about it? Did he just let things continue as they’d been and hope things would eventually get better? Or did he try to nip this in the bud and change things around as soon as possible?

The whole thing was silly. At one time, Harriett wanted to be with him. She was willing to bid on him at an auction so she could spend the afternoon with him. If she cared about him that much back then, then surely, all wasn’t lost.

Maybe there was a lingering sentiment left for him. Things weren’t hopeless. He might have been late in figuring things out, but it was better late than never, right? With a glance at the clock, he carried all the dishes to the sink then left the house.

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“Where’s Maggie?” Stan’s mother asked as he walked into her kitchen.

“I don’t need you to watch her today,” he replied as he removed his hat

and wiped his feet on the rug. "Is pa ready?"

"He's in the barn with Luke." She picked up a coffee pot. "Do you want some?"

"No thanks." He took a deep breath and braced himself for her reaction. "Harriett made some coffee this morning."

As he suspected, that got her full attention. "What was Harriett doing making you coffee? Are you hoping to court her?"

"No." Though that would have been the ideal way to do things. Harriett should have been courted. Running his hands through his hair, he blurted out, "We got married the day before yesterday. I did think of inviting you and pa to the wedding, but she thought it best to make it a simple ceremony. I wasn't in the position to argue with her."

"I didn't say it was wrong for you to marry her without me or your pa there."

He relaxed. "Thank you."

She smiled. "You should know after Emily eloped that your pa and I wouldn't be upset about this. I'm just surprised she agreed to it after she said she didn't want to marry you, that's all."

"I was surprised, too," he admitted. And he still was. He didn't deserve it, not after the way he behaved in the past. "She did it because she felt sorry for Maggie and wanted her to have a mother."

"She also cares for you."

"She did care for me."

"No, she still does."

He shook his head and glanced out the window. "You said Pa and Luke are in the barn?"

"Yes, I did say that, and I also said Harriett still cares for you. A woman doesn't marry a man just to help him with his child. She does it because, deep down, she loves him and hopes one day he'll return her feelings."

"You don't know that."

"I know a woman's heart. She might be fighting her feelings, but those feelings are there." She hesitated then came over to him, an action which made him stop looking out the window in favor of making eye contact with her. "Stan, I hope you'll be gentle with her."

Surprised by the worried tone in her voice, he asked, "What do you think I'm going to do?"

She shrugged. "There are many things, I suppose, but the big one is turning cold toward her. I married my first husband because I loved him, but he wanted to marry my sister. I thought, given time, he would eventually learn to love me, and if he couldn't love me, maybe he'd think of me as a friend. But he never did, and in time, his feelings grew cold toward me until the day when he decided to send me to live with his mother."

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?” He knew she’d been married and became a widow on the same day Luke was born. However, she’d never chosen to disclose the details of her first marriage.

“You didn’t need to know it before. There was nothing you could glean from it. But now you can. I want you to keep in mind what I went through when you go home to Harriett.”

“I wouldn’t send her away,” he whispered.

“Don’t withhold the affections due to her either.”

He opened his mouth to tell her Harriett made it clear they would never share any affections but held his tongue. She was his mother, after all, and revealing the details of the arrangement he made with Harriett didn’t seem appropriate. It also wasn’t fair to Harriett. She wouldn’t want anyone to know about their marriage of convenience. At least, he didn’t think she would. He hated to think she told anyone about it.

Slipping his hat back on his head, he said, “I’ll be good to her, Ma.” And he would. He’d be the kind of husband Harriett wanted him to be, whatever that kind was. “I just wanted to tell you I married her and explain why Maggie’s not here today.”

“I’m glad you did, and for what it’s worth, you couldn’t have married a finer woman. In fact, I wouldn’t mind getting to know her better. Why don’t you bring her and Maggie over here for supper when things are settled?”

He wasn’t sure Harriett wanted to see his parents. Something about it seemed personal, and he didn’t think she’d welcome that level of intimacy.

“I’ll have to think about it, Ma,” he finally hedged when he realized his mother expected a response.

Though she seemed disappointed he hadn’t jumped at the chance, she smiled and wished him luck with the cattle. He returned her smile, thanked her, and left the house.

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A week later, Harriett took Maggie to the mercantile in town to pick up some staple items. Stan had done a decent job of getting everything they needed, but with the things she wanted to make, she needed more. Her only concern had been whether or not Maggie would behave in town. She wanted to take Maggie. It was important that she prove to Stan that he hadn’t made a mistake in marrying her.

She didn’t want to dwell on why she worried about what he thought. She knew full well why she did, and admitting it to herself would only make her vulnerable. Once again, she rebuked herself for believing she could marry him without getting hurt. She still loved him. She kept thinking the longer she was with him, the easier it’d be to put aside such childish feelings. But it didn’t seem to be going that way.

“It’s only been a week,” she whispered as she pulled the wagon up to her

parents' house. Surely, she could overcome her feelings. A week was too soon to expect her heart to change. She hoped.

"What?" Maggie asked from beside her.

She glanced at the girl. "Nothing," she replied. "It wasn't important. I was only thinking aloud."

The girl had fought her about leaving the house again, and to make matters worse, Stan had to help her—again. The only good thing about the girl's temper tantrum was that Harriett didn't have the time or energy to dwell on how close Stan was when he helped her onto the wagon. When she didn't think of such things, it was easier to focus on what she needed to do.

Forcing her attention back to Maggie, she set the brake on the wagon in time for her older brother to come up to her from the barn. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Adam," she assured him. "I just wondered if you or Ma or Eli wanted to go to town with me and pick up some things."

"We went just the other day."

Harriett frowned. She wished she'd thought to take Maggie into town sooner then. But she'd held back because she dreaded the trip. If she couldn't handle Maggie in the barn, how was she going to do it in town? Maybe she should have asked Stan to come with her, even if she didn't want to.

"Do you need someone to go with you?" Adam asked.

"Want tart," Maggie said and scrambled down from the bench.

"No, you can't have one today," Harriett told her.

She stuck out her lower lip, much like Rose did when she was upset. "Want tart!"

Seeing the challenge in the girl's eyes, Harriett offered a firm but kind, "No."

The girl threw her head back and screamed.

Harriett's eyes grew wide, and Adam murmured, "Whoa."

Harriett looked at him. "I fed her this morning before we left. She's full."

"No! Hungry!" Then she continued to cry in a mournful tone that would make anyone who happened to pass by believe she was suffering a horrible fate.

"Stop this nonsense at once," Harriett ordered.

But the girl refused to settle down. In fact, she only got louder, and, to Harriett's horror, she started kicking her legs and flailing her arms.

In the next instant, Harriett's mother, father and younger brother, Eli, came running out of the house.

"Is someone hurt?" her pa asked, rushing over to the wagon.

Harriett was sure her face turned bright red as the group gathered around Maggie. "She's fine," she told them, forcing back the urge to snap at Maggie for acting in such an unpleasant manner.

Truly, this was so embarrassing. Was this how Stan felt when this

happened to him? She cleared her throat, praying her tone remained calm.

“She wants a tart,” Harriett said, “but she already had a full breakfast. She couldn’t possibly eat anything else.”

“I’m hungry,” Maggie screamed, large tears sliding down her face.

“Harriett, would you like me to take her into the house?” her mother asked.

“No.” The last thing Harriett wanted to do was let the girl into their house, even though it was tempting. The girl had to know when Harriett went to town, she’d have to go with her, whether she liked it or not. Harriett glanced at her family. “I was hoping someone might go with me to town. I wouldn’t mind a helping hand with some of the larger boxes.”

Yes, that was good. If she could make it seem like she needed help carrying the items, then she wouldn’t seem like such a failure as a mother.

“Why can’t Stan help you?” Eli asked.

“Stan’s probably busy with the animals,” her pa said.

While that was true, she felt no reason to tell them Stan had offered to go with her if she was willing to wait until after he fed the cattle.

“I’ll go,” Adam said.

Her pa nodded. “I’ll do your chores while you’re gone.”

Relieved no one was going to criticize her for her inability to handle Maggie, who was still bawling, she held the reins out to him. “I’ll take care of her while you drive.”

As she scooted over so Adam could climb into the wagon, Maggie tried to get out of the wagon. Harriett quickly pulled the girl onto her lap before she succeeded. The girl was so startled she stopped fighting and looked up at her.

Her mother shot her an understanding smile. “It’ll get easier, Harriett.”

Harriett hoped her mother was right because it only seemed as if Maggie’s behavior was getting worse.

“You ready?” Adam asked her.

“Yes, I’m ready.”

Harriett fully expected Maggie to start crying again, but she didn’t. Instead, she fell asleep. Apparently, all the fighting she’d done wore her out. It’d worn Harriett out, too, but unlike the girl, she wouldn’t be getting a nap.

She had no idea being a mother could be so exhausting. She’d helped her mother with Eli, and she’d helped Isaac with his children, but she’d never taken care of them all day long. She’d only watched them for a few hours at a time.

“You want to lie down in the back and sleep?” Adam asked her when they were halfway to town.

“I’m wide awake,” she replied. *At the moment anyway.*

“She’s a handful, huh?”

“Yes, she is. More so than I expected.”

“You know who she reminds me of?”

She looked at him, her eyes wide. “You better not say me.”

“No. You were always an easy child. She reminds me of Rose.”

“She’s not completely like Rose,” Harriett said. Even in Rose’s worst moods, she wasn’t this bad.

“No, but Rose did have moments where she was hard to deal with. I overheard Ma telling Pa that she didn’t know what to do with her a couple of times.”

“Did you?”

He nodded. “Yep. Pa assured her that everything would work out, but Ma still worried she wasn’t doing something right.”

“Rose was never so bad she screamed and kicked because she couldn’t get something.”

“Well, that’s true,” Adam allowed.

“I don’t know what to do with Maggie,” Harriett admitted.

If it’d been anyone besides her mother, she probably wouldn’t have been so upfront and honest. But Adam had always been good about keeping confidences to himself. He was the type who didn’t even need to be told to keep something a secret. And best of all, he never passed judgment on what people did.

“I thought since I’ve taken care of children before, this wouldn’t be so difficult,” Harriett continued. “But ever since I married Stan, I feel like I can’t get her to do anything I want. The only exception is when it’s bedtime. For some reason, she lets me tuck her in bed and read to her.”

“And when she’s napping, she’ll let you hold her,” he added.

She glanced at the sleeping girl in her arms. The girl was such a cute thing. Harriett tucked her hair into her hat then pulled her closer. In response, Maggie let out a contented sigh and snuggled deeper in her arms. When Maggie slept, she was really an adorable child. Harriett wished she was like this when she was awake.

Turning her attention back to Adam, she said, “When she’s awake, she fights me on everything. She doesn’t like what I pick for her to wear, she doesn’t want to eat what I cook, and she doesn’t want to play with any of the toys I give her. She doesn’t even want to be near me. If I go to one room, she runs to another. And what’s worse is that she seems to like everyone more than she likes me.”

“To be fair, you’re the only one who is trying to be her mother. I think she’s not resisting you as much as fighting any attachment she might develop with you.”

“Why would she do that?” Harriett thought the girl would love to have a mother in her life.

“Well, you said you married Stan because her real mother doesn’t want

her.”

“Probably because her real father refused to marry her. How was she supposed to raise a child all by herself?”

“It doesn’t matter what her parents did or didn’t do. What matters is what Maggie thinks happened.” Adam turned his sympathetic gaze to the girl. “All she knows is that her mother isn’t in her life, and from her perspective, her mother doesn’t love her. If you were in her place, what would you think of a woman who came into your life and told you she was going to be your mother?”

Harriett considered his words and looked back at the girl, seeing her in a new light. Adam’s reasoning made perfect sense. Maybe the girl was fighting her because she was trying to protect herself from being hurt.

“What should I do then?” Harriett asked.

“Be patient. Give her time to understand you’re not going anywhere. She’s going to test you. She’ll keep pushing you away for a while to see what you’ll do. But sooner or later, when she comes to realize you’re sincere, she’ll let you in.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

With another glance at Maggie, she smiled. She’d love nothing more than for the girl to accept her as her mother. And maybe with enough time, it would happen.

## Chapter Nine

[Two weeks later, Stan debated if he should invite Harriett over to his parents' house for supper. She'd been diligent in making meals every day since they got married, never once complaining when Maggie refused to eat something she made. She'd even gone beyond what was expected and set out several other dishes for Maggie to try.

For Stan, it was the best thing that ever happened since he left home. Her meals were among the best he'd ever had. His were mediocre at best, and he mostly made a lot of bread because Maggie would eat it. But Harriett wanted the girl to eat more than bread, something he had wanted all along but couldn't figure out how to get her to do it. And as it turned out, Harriett was having the same problem. This particular evening was no different.

Maggie threw her spoon to the floor and crossed her arms. "No. I will not eat it."

Harriett let out a long sigh. Though she didn't say anything, Stan could tell she was quickly coming to the point where she was ready to give up. He'd often felt that way himself when it came to Maggie, so he understood her frustration.

Stan glanced at the girl, who was being even more obstinate than usual. The last thing he wanted to do was step in where he wasn't welcome. Harriett knew more about children than he did, and besides, she was now Maggie's mother, and as such, he had a responsibility to let her take the reins. If he tried to step in and help, would Harriett appreciate it or would she resent it? If they'd said more than a couple words to each other during the day, it'd be easier to figure out how to best handle the situation.

"If you don't want the soup," Harriett began in a carefully controlled voice, "then have a dinner roll."

As Harriett reached for a roll, Maggie shook her head. "Want biscuit."

"I made a biscuit this morning, but you didn't want it."

"Want now."

"No. You'll wait until breakfast."

"No. Want now."

Harriett went silent and glanced at the dishes she'd made. "You can't have pudding if you don't eat something on this table."

"Biscuits!"

Stan ran his thumb along the edge of his spoon as he looked over at Harriett whose back was partially turned to him. Harriett insisted on sitting to his left at the table instead of across from him. He knew she did it so she wouldn't have to look at him while they ate. It was a way to put distance between them without being obvious about it. And it was hard to determine

the best course of action when she refused to make eye contact with him.

But he would have to chance it and step in. “What if she has a biscuit and no pudding?” he ventured.

Harriett finally turned her attention to him, and when she did, he knew right away he’d said the wrong thing. Her lips formed a thin line. She was already at her wit’s end, and all he did was add to her frustration.

“I’m sorry,” he quickly told her before she snapped at him. Then, because he’d already said too much, he lowered his head and brought another spoonful of soup into his mouth.

“Pa said biscuit,” Maggie spoke up, further condemning him.

He looked at Maggie and shook his head.

But Maggie wasn’t to be deterred. “Gimme biscuit!”

“That’s enough, Maggie,” he said. “Your ma said you need to pick something in front of you to eat, and that’s what you’ll do.”

“She not ma,” Maggie argued.

Maggie’s face turned red, a clear indication that she was either going to cry or scream—or both. Stan caught the flicker of dread in Harriett’s expression and decided he had to do something for her sake. He went over to the shelf and brought the plate of leftover biscuits to the table. He gave one to Maggie.

“That’s all you’re getting tonight,” he told her. “And Harriett is your mother. I want you to apologize to her right now for saying she isn’t.”

Maggie’s face resumed its normal color, and she bit into the biscuit.

“Maggie,” he said while the girl proceeded to shove the rest of the biscuit into her mouth. “You are going to say you’re sorry to your ma.”

The girl muttered something through the food stuffed in her mouth. With a sigh, he covered the plate and returned it to the shelf. He’d just have to assume it was an apology. It was better than nothing, he supposed.

When he returned to the table, he picked up his spoon to finish his soup but realized Harriett’s posture was stiff. Sure he wasn’t going to like what he saw, he directed his gaze to her. She wasn’t looking at him, but her arms were crossed, her eyebrows furrowed, and her lips tight.

He shifted uncomfortably in the chair. Should he come out and ask her what he did wrong, wait for her to tell him, or ignore it and hope the whole thing blew over? No matter what he did, he didn’t think he could win. After a tense moment, he collected his bowl, plate, and cup and carried them to the sink.

“What are you doing?” Harriett snapped.

“Cleaning up my mess. I can’t eat anything else,” he replied. “I thought I’d start in on the evening chores.”

She didn’t respond, but he could feel the weight of her stare on him as he emptied the rest of his food into the container where they put the pigs’ slop.

He didn't know if his apprehension showed or not, but it was hard to act as if nothing was bothering him.

Alright, so maybe running off made him a coward, but it'd also buy him some time on asking Harriett what he should have done. With her being angry, he didn't have the courage to do it now. He threw on his hat and coat then hurried out to the barn.

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Harriett waited until Maggie was in bed before she confronted Stan. He was still in the barn, and from the looks of it, he was almost done raking the last stall out. The last thing she wanted was for Maggie to know that what happened during supper had greatly upset her.

Plus, she thought waiting would calm her. And she was calmer. To a point. But not enough, because as soon as she found Stan raking the last of the manure out the door, she snapped, "Why did you give Maggie the biscuit?"

He stopped and turned to face her, and for once, she didn't feel so weak in the knees when he turned those amazing eyes in her direction. Who would have thought anger could be such a powerful antidote?

Ignoring the observation, she crossed her arms and glared at him. "Well?"

"I was only trying to help."

"Help? You thought by giving her a biscuit you were helping?"

"Yes, I did. But then I realized I should have stayed out of it and let you two battle it out like you always do." He turned back to raking the manure and straw toward the doorway.

"I told her she couldn't have a biscuit," she said. "When you gave her one instead, it only taught her that she can divide us. It won't matter what I say because she'll know you'll give her what she wants."

He shoved the manure and straw out of the barn. "It was just one biscuit, Harriett."

"One is all it takes to undo everything I've worked so hard on."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is." She waited until he was facing her before she continued, "Stan, I can't get her to obey me if you're going to contradict me."

He moaned. "You're making too much of this. She's only three."

"She might be three, but she's smart for her age." As he set the rake against the wall of the barn, she added, "Remember that day I took her to see my ma, and you promised her a cookie if she behaved?"

"I promised her a cookie on several occasions when she wasn't behaving and you wanted to take her somewhere," he pointed out. "Are you saying I can't give her a cookie when she returns?"

"To be honest, I don't like the fact that she gets a cookie when she misbehaves."

"And how else are you going to get her out of here?" He walked up to her.

“You weren’t going to go anywhere with her unless she knew she’d get a cookie. Sometimes I have to do that because it’s the only thing that works.”

“All she’s going to learn is that she’ll get rewarded for misbehaving.” She waited for him to say something, but he sighed, his hands resting at his sides. “But besides all that, it’s important we don’t contradict each other in front of her. She needs to think we’re in complete agreement about everything. I didn’t like giving her a cookie, but I did it when we got back because you told her she was going to have one. I want her to know that when you say something, I’ll honor your word. You should do the same for me.”

A moment passed before he threw his hands up in the air. “Fine. I admit it. I’m horrible at being a parent.” He pulled off his gloves and set them in a box by the door. “I don’t know how to do anything. Why do you think I needed a mother for her? You see how awful I am at this.”

Harriett told herself not to interpret his words to mean that he only wanted her because of Maggie. He never would have married her if the girl hadn’t needed a mother or if someone like Rose had been willing to marry him. Maybe he didn’t mean it the way she took it, or maybe he did. She couldn’t tell for sure. And quite frankly, she wasn’t interested in figuring it out. The important thing was Maggie. She could go back to her bedroom and cry when this conversation was over.

After she managed to force back her tears, she said, “In the future, please don’t do that. I need you to stand with me.”

“I will. And I’m sorry I didn’t.”

As ironic as it was, his soft tone only made her feel worse. She offered a curt nod and hurried back to the house. She didn’t make it to the porch before her cheeks were wet with her tears.

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“Why don’t you see Rose?” Jacob asked the next day when Harriett went to the mercantile.

Harriett glanced at Maggie who was eating the piece of licorice her brother had given her. Under ordinary circumstances, she would have protested it, but she was exhausted after only getting four hours of sleep the previous night. It took a lot of effort to keep her sobs quiet so no one would overhear her. And even when she finally fell asleep, she’d had nightmares where Stan was telling someone he wished she was Rose. Would she always walk in her sister’s shadow?

“Harriett?” Jacob asked, leaning on the counter as he made eye contact with her.

She let out a long sigh and dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. God help her. She couldn’t recall ever crying so much in her entire life. Stan didn’t love her. He never did. Why couldn’t she get past the desire to be loved by him? What was wrong with her?

“I can’t go to her about this, Jacob,” she whispered so Maggie wouldn’t hear and—God forbid—tell Stan.

“Sure you can. You can go to her about anything.”

She shook her head. “No, I can’t.”

“You two are closer than anyone else I know. Growing up, you did everything together and kept secrets from the rest of us. Why not talk to her? You two are twins. She understands you like no one else does. It doesn’t matter if Stan wanted to marry her. She didn’t want to marry him.”

Harriett shook her head and took a deep breath to settle her nerves. “Everything comes so easy for her. If she had married him, she’d know it was because he wanted to be with her, not because he needed someone to help him with Maggie.”

“That doesn’t matter. She misses you. Do you know she came in here the other day and asked how you were doing? She shouldn’t be coming to me to find out if you’re happy or not. You should be the one telling her that.”

“I’m not ignoring her, Jacob. I just need some time, that’s all.”

“Time away from your dearest friend?”

He didn’t understand. And why should she expect him to? He wasn’t like Adam. Besides, she came here to pick up something. It didn’t matter what it was. As long as she got off of Stan’s property, she could get a reprieve from him. She couldn’t even bring herself to face him that morning for breakfast. She’d left him a note and a couple of muffins on a plate then stayed in bed. Fortunately, Maggie slept in. Otherwise, Harriett wouldn’t have gotten away with it.

And Harriett had waited until he was in the field before leaving with Maggie, leaving yet another note telling him she had to go to town to pick something up. Now, she just needed to figure out what the something was so she didn’t come home empty handed.

“More licowice?” Maggie asked, looking up at him with large imploring eyes.

Harriett bit her tongue. Why did the girl insist on being sweet to everyone but her?

“I don’t know. I got to ask your ma.” Jacob turned his gaze to Harriett. “What do you think?”

“Let her have it,” Harriett replied.

The girl did, after all, stop screaming and crying once Harriett got the buggy out of the barn. It was better than if she’d acted up the entire way to town. And as far as Harriett was concerned, it was progress. Slow progress, but progress nonetheless.

“Here you go,” Jacob said and handed her another piece of candy. “Your ma is pretty good to you, isn’t she?”

Not surprising, the girl only shrugged as she bit into it.

Jacob shot Harriett a sympathetic smile. "Go see Rose. I'm telling you, Rose is miserable without you."

"I just can't. Not right now. Maybe in a month or two."

"You're going to wait that long to see her?"

"I have to wait until I can look at Stan and not..." She glanced at Maggie then lowered her voice. "I have to wait until I can get my feelings under control."

"You really think that's possible? You've been in love with him since you were thirteen, and from what I see, time hasn't worked in your favor."

She scowled but reminded herself he hadn't said it to be mean. He truly believed she'd never get a handle on her emotions. But he was wrong. Sure, she misjudged how long it was going to take, but it was possible. Very possible. If Maggie could resist her, she should be able to resist Stan.

"Anyway," she said, changing the topic, "I think I'll take some flour, yeast, and...and..." She glanced around the store then her gaze went to Maggie who really enjoyed licorice. "I'll take a bag of that." She pointed to the licorice. Maybe it would help Maggie behave.

"You got it."

After Jacob collected the things for her, she put it on Stan's account and led Maggie out to the buggy. She sat in the seat for a long moment, debating what else she could do to avoid going home.

"Want more," Maggie said, her hands already reaching for the licorice.

"Not until we get home," Harriett replied, taking it out of her reach. "And not unless you are good the entire way back."

"Be good." Maggie folded her hands in her lap and smiled up at her.

Why couldn't the girl be like this more often? Why did it always have to take a treat to make her behave? Why couldn't she behave because Harriett wanted her to? Why couldn't she accept Harriett as her mother? Why did everything have to be such a struggle?

Heaven help her if this was all it was ever going to be. With a heavy sigh, she picked up the reins, released the brake, and led the horse back home.

## Chapter Ten

As soon as Harriett and Maggie returned, Stan went over to them. "I can take care of the horse," he told Harriett.

She muttered a thank you and handed him the reins before gathering the small box of items she'd purchased in town.

"I don't mind carrying that in for you," he said.

"I got it," she mumbled.

Then she went to Maggie, took her hand, and practically fled out of the barn. Stan thought about following her and asking what he could do to make things right. But something warned him to stay in the barn and give her more time. He honestly didn't know what was bothering her. Sure, some of it was the fact that he gave Maggie the biscuit, but he sensed something more was going on. But what?

He shook his head and turned his attention to unhitching the horse from the buggy. Women were so confusing. Rose had always confounded him. He never knew what to say to her, and in the end, she'd married someone else. And now with Harriett, he couldn't seem to do anything right. He thought a few weeks into the marriage would smooth things out, that they might find a common ground. But it only seemed that things got worse.

Maybe he should invite her to his parents' place for supper. Maybe he should offer to go to her parents' place for supper. Maybe if they did something with other people, it would help ease things.

Deciding it was a good plan, he put the horse in the pasture then went to the house. Harriett was in the kitchen, rolling out dough on the worktable.

"Is Maggie taking a nap?" he asked, praying it was a safe question.

She didn't glance in his direction but nodded. "She was tired."

"Good," he replied. "I'm glad she's getting her rest." Staying close to the doorway, he thought over how he wanted to phrase what he wanted to say next. "I was wondering..." He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "That is, my ma thinks very highly of you."

After a long moment, she finally gave him an "Oh?" while continuing to roll out the dough.

Well, it wasn't an enthusiastic response, but at least she was talking to him. "Yes. She said she'd like to have us over sometime for supper. You know, to talk to you and get to know you better." When she didn't reply, he cleared his throat. "I told her I'd mention it, but I also told her we'd wait until it was a good time. I don't want to make you uncomfortable, of course, but I was wondering if you'd like to go over there."

He stopped talking and released his breath. That was harder than he thought it was going to be.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said, her voice so low he could

barely hear her.

Alright, that wasn't what he hoped to hear, but he couldn't be surprised. He warned his ma Harriett might not want to go out there. And he was right. She didn't.

"Well," he ventured, "if you wanted to go to your parents' house instead, I wouldn't mind having supper with them sometime. I know you didn't mention it or anything, but just in case you wondered, I'm willing. Your pa mentioned going out there on our wedding day."

She shook her head, and even before she spoke, he knew what was coming. "I think it's best if we keep things separate. You will stay with your side, and I'll stay with mine. Obviously, I will take Maggie to my side, and you'll take Maggie to yours. But it's easier if we don't do things together as if we're a...a..."

"Married couple?" he filled in for her, surprised her words should sting as much as they did.

"This marriage was a necessity, Stan. Both of us know that."

He chose his words carefully, once again figuring no matter what he said, he'd say the wrong thing. But he had to say something. If not for Harriett's sake, then for his mother's and for what she went through in her first marriage. "Just because a marriage starts out as a necessity, it doesn't mean it has to stay that way."

Harriett blinked, as if that was the last thing she expected him to say. Then she turned back to the dough. He waited for several seconds to see if she would reply, but she didn't. And since he couldn't think of anything to add that might help the situation, he left the kitchen.

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Harriett wiped the tears from her eyes as Stan left, willing herself to stop crying. Only Stan could break through her defenses. She had to get supper on the table. Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she blinked back more tears and focused on the dough in front of her.

A knock at the front door was a very welcome distraction. She wiped her hands on her apron and headed to answer it when it occurred to her that someone from his side of the family might be making a visit. She slipped around the side of the parlor and peeked through the curtain in the window. She breathed a sigh of relief. It was her mother.

She hurried over to the door but took a moment to wipe her face with the clean part of her apron, drying the remaining tears away. After a moment, she opened it and offered what she hoped was a convincing smile.

"Hi, Ma. What are you doing here?" she asked as she motioned for her mother to come in.

Her mother stepped through the doorway and smiled. "I wanted to see how things are going and to give you this." She pulled a folded piece of paper

from her pocket. "It's from Rose. I didn't read it."

Harriett glanced at the missive and shut the door. Knowing she had no choice, she took it. "Thank you."

Tapping the letter in her hand, she listened for any sounds that would notify her Stan was still in the house. But all was quiet.

"Is Maggie napping or is she with Stan?" her mother asked.

"She's asleep. I took her to the mercantile today to collect some things." She led her mother into the kitchen and looked out the window, scanning the area for any signs of Stan.

"Did I come at a bad time?"

"No, no you didn't." She smiled at her mother but quickly turned her gaze back to the window. When she saw Stan carrying a bucket to the pigpen, she relaxed and faced her mother. "I was working on supper. Maggie loves bread, so I thought I'd make a fresh loaf."

"Would you like some help?"

"Oh, you don't have to do that."

"Nonsense. I'm your ma, and you've done a lot to help me with meals in the past. It's only fair I return the favor. Besides, I love to cook."

"Well, alright. Maggie enjoyed your tarts. Care to make those?"

With a nod, her mother gathered the ingredients she needed and a large bowl. "So, how are things going with her? Is she still giving you problems?"

"Unfortunately." Harriett slipped the letter in her pocket and returned to the dough. She rolled it up and proceeded to knead it. "It seems the only way to get her to behave at all is to offer a treat like a cookie or licorice."

"So that's why you have a jar of licorice."

"Yes, I got it when I was in town. Jacob gave her a piece, and she loved it."

"There's nothing wrong with giving a child a treat for being good."

"I know, but I'd like her to be good without having to always reward her."

"I understand." Her mother mixed the ingredients into her bowl and glanced at her. "Some children have stronger wills than others. You and Rose might look alike, but you two are very different."

Harriett's face warmed. She'd hoped her mother wouldn't bring Rose up, but she supposed it couldn't be avoided since she came with Rose's letter.

Her mother chuckled. "I love you both equally, but she has the strongest will of anyone I know. There's no talking her out of anything once she sets her mind to something. I think Maggie might be like her in that respect. And while that can be very frustrating for a mother, it can also be a good quality. Once she decides to love you, there'll be nothing anyone can do or say to change her mind."

"I don't think that day is soon in coming. I feel like things are only getting worse."

“Sometimes things get worse before they get better.”

“I know.”

And Harriett couldn't help but think of how much worse it could get. One thing was for sure, she didn't relish finding out. She put the dough in a bowl and covered it, setting it aside so it would have time to rise.

“I hope you'll read Rose's missive,” her mother said. “She misses you.”

Harriett sighed. Everything came so easily to Rose. She couldn't possibly understand what it was like to be stuck in a situation where nothing went as she hoped.

“I'll read it,” she assured her mother.

And she would...when the time was right. That time wasn't tonight. In all honesty, she didn't know when it would come, but with everything else going on, the last thing she wanted to do was worry about it. She had enough on her mind already. Deciding to put Rose aside for the time being, she asked her ma what was going on at home, and her ma obliged her by changing the topic.

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Stan was milking a cow early the next morning when Harriett called out his name. Surprised since she'd never made it a habit of coming out here at dawn, much less initiating a conversation with him, he rose to his feet and peered around the stall.

She stood in the doorway of the barn, and in the soft glow of the morning light, he couldn't help but think she was very lovely, even with her hair pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck. He'd caught a glimpse of her a couple nights ago after she put Maggie to bed. Her hair had hung in loose waves down her back. The image probably shouldn't have aroused him as much as it did, but it'd taken all his willpower to shut his bedroom door before she realized he'd been watching her.

And now as he looked at her, he couldn't help but recall that night. She'd never let her hair down for him, of course, and he had no one to blame that on but himself. Forcing aside the memory, he waved to get her attention. “I'm over here.”

Her gaze went to him, and, with a curt nod, she headed in his direction. Her expression was one of determination, and her tone firm when she asked, “Is this a good time to talk?”

So she hadn't come out here to have an enjoyable conversation before she had to get Maggie up. No. She came here for a purpose, and he had the nagging suspicion this wasn't going to be in his favor.

“Yes, it's a good time to talk,” he finally said and waited for her to tell him what was on her mind.

After a long moment, she clasped her hands in front of her, and he couldn't be sure, but he thought she stared at his chin so she wouldn't have to make eye contact with him. “I was wondering if you'd be willing to eat at a

different time than Maggie and I do.”

“What?”

“Well,” her gaze went to her hands, “it’s hard to work on getting her to behave when you’re there.”

“Is this about the biscuit three days ago?”

“Part of it is, yes.”

“I promise I won’t interfere with you and Maggie again. I learned my lesson,” he assured her.

But apparently, it wasn’t enough since she shook her head. “I think I can make better progress if Maggie and I are alone at mealtime. With you there, it distracts her.”

His eyebrows furrowed. He didn’t believe her for a minute. The two had no trouble ignoring him during every meal. He spent most of the time watching them. He could even count the number of times Maggie had said anything to him on one hand. The girl seemed much more interested in refusing to eat whatever Harriett set in front of her than paying attention to him.

Clasping the edge of the stall door, he softly said, “I don’t want it to be like this, Harriett.”

She jerked a bit, and he couldn’t tell if it was because of what he said or the fact that he called her by name.

“I understand you don’t want us to be like a married couple, and I’ve honored that,” he continued. “But if we can’t be intimate, can’t we at least be friends?”

“I didn’t marry you to be your friend,” she told him, looking at his chin once more. “I married you to be a mother to Maggie, and it’s easier for me to do that if you’re not there while I’m trying to get her to eat foods that are good for her.”

“I don’t see any reason why I can’t be there. I’ll keep quiet and mind my own business. You don’t have to worry that I’ll interfere again.” By the way she sighed, he could tell she didn’t like his answer. “I’m sorry about the past. If I could go back and change it, I would.”

“This has nothing to do with the past. It’s about Maggie and doing what’s best for her.”

He didn’t believe her for a minute. It was exactly about the past, specifically that day at the picnic. “Harriett, I truly am sorry. I wish I could go back to the auction and—”

“It has nothing to do with that,” she snapped. “I don’t want you to bring it up again. All I want to do is be a good mother to Maggie. The rest of it doesn’t matter.”

Alright, so she wasn’t going to forgive him. It was her right. If he’d been in her position, he was sure he wouldn’t feel very forgiving either. He ran his

hands along the top of the stall door and tried to think of the best way to proceed.

“Fine,” he consented. “We won’t talk about that day. But I am not going to eat meals at a different time. I already agreed I wouldn’t have anything to do with your family. When your ma came over the other day, I hurried on out of the house so you two could be alone. I’ll do that whenever any of them come over in the future. And I won’t bring you to see my family. But that’s as far as I’m willing to distance myself from you. We are still married. Granted, it’s in name only, but it does entitle me to at least have meals with you.”

“Why are you making things so difficult for me?”

“I’m not trying to make things difficult for you. I want to have a home. Sharing a meal as a family is part of that. You want to do what’s best for Maggie? She needs both of us. The only time we’re all together is when we eat. I’m not giving that up. I’m sorry. I know it’s not what you want to hear, but it’s how it’s going to be. I’ll stay out of your way the rest of the time.”

He couldn’t be sure, but he thought he saw tears fill her eyes before she turned and headed out of the barn. It didn’t make any sense why his answer should make her cry. He’d spoken softly to her. And he pretty much told her he wanted to spend some time with her. What was so wrong with him wanting to be with her when they ate?

He returned to the cow and resumed milking it. If he’d had any idea that one afternoon at a picnic where he acted like a fool would have such profound consequences, he would have stayed home.

He couldn’t believe he assumed that in a month, they would establish a comfortable companionship. A companionship was the last thing they had. They were strangers who shared a house and nothing more, and he had no idea how he could make things better. But spending all of their time apart wasn’t the answer. No. It’d only make things worse. He had to do something to make things right. But what?

## Chapter Eleven

A week later, Harriett was sitting at the kitchen table with Maggie and Stan, doing her best to ignore him. She kept hoping he would choose to eat at a separate time, but he hadn't. And though she tried to get as close to Maggie—and as far from him—as possible, it was nearly impossible to concentrate when he was in the same room with her.

"No," Maggie said, pushing her plate with a biscuit, mashed potatoes, pickled beets, and chicken away.

"If you don't eat at least one thing on there, you won't get a tart for dessert."

"No like your tarts."

Harriett rubbed her forehead. She already knew when she looked over at Stan, he wouldn't be watching her. He kept his gaze on his plate and ate in silence. Which was why it made no sense to her when he insisted on sharing meals with them. What did he get out of it? All he was doing was bothering her. Couldn't he see that?

Lowering her hand, she directed her gaze to Maggie. The girl had her arms crossed, her eyebrows furrowed and her chin sticking out. "Want licowice."

Harriett pushed the plate back in her direction. "You'll have to eat two things on your plate for that."

"No. Don't want."

"But you like biscuits."

"No want biscuits." After a moment, she said, "Want licowice."

"Not until you eat two things on your plate."

Maggie shook her head. "No."

Harriett took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. Between Stan and Maggie, she couldn't take it anymore. She wiped her mouth with the napkin and picked up her plate. Rising to her feet, she looked at Maggie. "Are you telling me you're not hungry?"

"Want licowice," Maggie said.

"You know what you have to do to get licorice."

Why was Harriett arguing this? Maggie was smart. She knew what she wanted, and she knew what she had to do to get the licorice. Harriett hated all this fighting. Ever since she'd been in this house, it'd been one argument after another. If she wasn't arguing with Maggie, she was arguing with Stan. There was seldom a moment's peace, and she'd had enough. She was at the point where she was shaking, for goodness' sakes.

Harriett dumped her dishes in the sink, not bothering to clean them off first. Before she said something she'd regret, she hurried out of the house. She

couldn't recall ever being this upset. And as much as she hated it, a fresh wave of tears came to her eyes.

She plopped down in a chair on the porch and put her face in her hands. She shouldn't have married Stan. She shouldn't have let a momentary weakness for a little girl stop her from using sound judgment. It'd been a mistake to marry him, and unfortunately, there was nothing she could do to get out of it.

"Want cookie," Maggie told Stan. "And licowice."

Harriett grimaced. She forgot she opened up the kitchen window because it got too hot while cooking. She should have sat further away from the house, but besides the barn, she couldn't think of anywhere to go. She could leave right now, of course. Take a walk. Get away from the house and the barn. And she almost did, but then Stan spoke, and his answer to Maggie came as such a shock, she couldn't budge from the spot if someone tried to pry her away.

"No, Maggie," he said, his tone firm but soft. "I've had enough of the way you've been treating your mother. She goes through a lot of work to give you a good meal, and you don't appreciate it."

"No want."

"Whether or not you eat it is up to you. But you won't get anything else tonight."

A long moment passed then she said, "No."

"Again, that's your choice, but I don't care how blue your face turns when you hold your breath. You won't get anything from me this time. You will either do what your mother says or you won't have anything tonight. The choice is yours."

Harriett didn't hear anything for a couple minutes after that except for the familiar sound of Stan's fork scraping across the plate as Stan finished his meal. And then, as Harriett suspected, the girl started crying.

Curious to see how Stan handled it when she cried, Harriett got up from the chair and peeked into the kitchen. Stan collected all the dishes, leaving only the plate in front of Maggie in case she changed her mind.

"You no love me," Maggie sobbed, wiping large tears from her cheeks.

"You're wrong," he told her. "I'm doing this because I do. I should have done it long ago. Now, I'm going to wash these dishes. By the time I'm done, if you haven't eaten at least two things on your plate, you won't get any licorice. I don't care how much you cry or scream."

Harriett hadn't thought he'd actually wash the dishes, but that's exactly what he did. And during the whole time, Maggie's cries turned into screams. But he ignored her.

Harriett settled back in the chair. She had no idea he had such patience. It was painful to endure one of Maggie's tantrums. The girl could hit a pitch so high even those hard of hearing would wince. But Stan gave no indication

that she bothered him. He just kept working, refusing to give in. And Harriett couldn't help but be touched. He was doing it not only for Maggie's sake but for hers as well. He was supporting her by sticking with the rule she set down.

After what seemed like a full hour but was really only fifteen minutes, Maggie calmed down. The pressure in Harriett's head relented, and she breathed a sigh of relief. The absence of noise never felt so good.

She closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the chair. A cool breeze blew over her, reminding her April hadn't brought spring quite yet, but it was close enough. The winter hadn't been that long, and all the snow was gone.

Even so, a chill lingered in the air, especially as the sun set. She shivered and considered going inside for her shawl. No. The last thing she wanted to do was disrupt the peace that had finally settled upon the place.

The door from the kitchen opened, and she looked over in time to see Stan stepping onto the wraparound porch. When she realized he was heading over to her, she straightened in the chair.

In a low voice, he said, "I sent Maggie to the parlor. She refused to eat anything on the plate."

She gathered as much from listening to them but decided not to say it.

He knelt in front of her. "I took her to the parlor and told her to stay there, so I could talk to you. What do you want me to do about her?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I've never taken care of a child who was so stubborn before."

"I didn't think she'd be that way with you when I asked you to marry me. Harriett, I'm sorry. I know this isn't what you wanted, and I know you're not happy. I'm going to do everything I can to change that." He rose to his feet. "I'll take Maggie to the barn with me to work on the evening chores then I'll tuck her in bed. If it's alright with you, I'd like to take her to my parents tomorrow."

She looked at him. She hated making eye contact with him because all it ever did was remind her of how much she wanted him. Even now, she wanted nothing more than to get lost in those amazing blue eyes, especially when he was being so nice to her. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she forced her gaze away from him so she could think clearly.

"I think you're a great mother," he said. "I'm not saying you aren't. I meant that sometimes I find it helps to get away from the problem, and I know Maggie and I aren't making things easy for you. I just want to give you a chance to...to..."

"I know what you mean. I didn't take offense by anything you said." There was no way she was going to tell him why she could never maintain eye contact with him for longer than two seconds. "Thank you. I could use a break."

He waited for a moment then said, “If there’s anything you want, you can tell me. I want to do my part to make things better for you.”

She forced a nod in his direction. He was being nice to her, but she’d always wanted more than nice from him. She wanted what he’d been willing to give Rose. And it was something she’d never get.

He went back into the house, and a minute later, he came out, holding Maggie.

“Sorry,” the girl said.

Harriett glanced up at her and saw her cheeks were red and splotchy from all the crying she’d done in the kitchen. Despite the fact that her head was still pounding from the girl’s screaming, Harriett felt her heart soften. With a smile, she thanked Maggie. Then, bracing herself, she forced her gaze higher and looked, once again, into Stan’s baby blue eyes.

“Thank you, Stan.”

She forced aside the urge to wince. She’d meant to say that clearly, but her voice faltered because of her accelerated heartbeat. It shouldn’t be harder to talk to him when he was going out of his way to be nice to her—when he was making an effort to support her—but it was.

“You’re welcome,” he replied then carried Maggie to the barn.

Harriett released a shaky breath. Thank goodness he hadn’t given any indication that he’d picked up on her weakness. He had to have detected it. It’d been no secret she’d spent a big part of her life pining for him. And now he had to know just how much he could make her weak, even after everything that had happened.

After sitting in the chair for several minutes, she finally rose to her feet. From the barn, she caught sight of the lantern Stan had lit. Stan shook his head when Maggie tried to pet a horse. He pointed to the stool, and she sat on it, her shoulders slouched. It occurred to Harriett that Stan was trying to impress upon the girl how important it was she obey her mother, and she couldn’t help but fall in love with him all over again.

No. She was stronger than this. Yes, Stan was being nice. He was willing to do his part to help make her life with Maggie easier. But that didn’t mean she had to continue giving her heart to him. He simply wanted an amiable relationship with her. Even if it’d be difficult for her, she should at least be willing to meet him halfway.

Releasing her breath, she went back inside the house and saw the kitchen was surprisingly clean. She knew he’d done the dishes, but she thought there might be a mess somewhere. But no. He’d been thorough. Her pa and brothers could never manage to get the kitchen, or any other room, so clean. Her mother would be shocked.

Harriett climbed the staircase and made it to her bedroom. She hadn’t read her sister’s missive yet, but if she was going to, now was the right time. She

shut the door, pulled the drawer of her dresser open, and took out Rose's missive.

She turned back to the room and studied it. Undoubtedly, this was the room Stan had intended for him and Rose to share when he built it. It was the largest bedroom in the house with the largest bed. He'd given it to her when they married and moved to the smaller one across from hers, and Maggie was in the room next to her.

Yes, it was nice of him to give her the best bedroom in the house, but from time to time, it irked her that it was meant for Rose. But there was nothing she could do about it. And ignoring her sister wasn't making things better.

She sat on the bed and traced the fancy paper with her fingers. The parchment was trimmed in a gold line, and the quality of it spoke of someone who was affluent.

It fit Rose so well. Rose always had grand dreams. She'd dreamt of princes and fairytales. And that was how her life played out. The man they all thought had nothing to his name turned out to be rich, and, just like in fairytales, he'd whisked her off to a mansion to be his wife.

Harriett glanced up at the mirror above the dresser, catching sight of her reflection. It was ironic, really. She looked just like Rose, except she didn't wear the latest fashion and her hair wasn't pinned up in the most becoming style of the day.

No. She wore a simple blue dress, which was faded with time. As for her hair... She blew aside the errant strands that had escaped the bun she pinned back in a hurry as soon as she woke up that day.

Her life was so different from Rose's, just as she was different from Rose. The only thing they had in common was their looks. Early on when she was trying to impress Stan, she'd let her hair down, choosing to pull it back with a couple barrettes or a ribbon, and she'd worn her better dresses. She'd thought it'd give her an advantage. But it never did.

And that had never been more obvious than the day of the picnic where she'd been foolish enough to bid on him at an auction. The auction had been Rose's idea, something she came up with in hopes of making Kent spend an afternoon with her. Harriett had been uncertain about going to it, but she thought it was time she took a chance. Perhaps if Stan got a chance to spend time with her, he'd realize she was the right one for him.

Harriett traced the missive again as her mind went back to that summer day last year.

This is foolish, she thought as her grip tightened on her picnic basket. Her stomach twisted in anticipation as her uncle called out for bids on Adam. Stan was next in line. It still surprised her that Adam agreed to be a part of the auction with the other men Uncle Joel had managed to gather together. All the proceeds would go to new medical supplies, something her uncle desperately

needed. That was why Adam agreed to be up there with the other men.

But that wasn't why she was willing to part with her hard-earned five dollars and fifty-two cents. Her gaze kept going from the women, who were waiting to make their bids, to the men.

Stan was especially handsome that day, choosing to wear a nice gray suit and a matching hat. She didn't dare fancy he'd dressed up that way for her. He'd dressed up because he'd hoped to spend the day with Rose. But perhaps, he'd give her a chance and find she wasn't so bad after all.

When it came time for the women to bid on Stan, she had to go against two other women, neither one Rose. She won him, though, when the bid came to two dollars and sixty-three cents. Her stomach was twisted into a knot as Stan made his way over to her. He wasn't happy she'd won him. That much was obvious, but she reminded herself she had a couple hours to show him she had some desirable traits.

"Where would you like to sit?" she asked him, barely recognizing her voice over the rapid beating of her heart.

He scanned the area. "Anywhere, I suppose."

She glanced around the park and couldn't help but wonder if he was looking for Rose, but she forced the question from her mind. "The spot by the flowers is pretty."

Without even looking at the section of lawn she motioned to, he nodded. "Alright. We'll eat there."

She led him to the spot she wanted to sit and took out the blanket she'd carefully folded and placed in the picnic basket.

"I can spread that out for you," he offered.

As she handed him the blanket, her fingers brushed his, and sparks of delight shot straight through her. Her face warmed as she watched him. Truly, if there was a finer man, she didn't know who he could be.

Once he was done, she settled on the blanket with him. Despite her shaky hands, she managed to collect their plates and forks. "I have fried chicken, cinnamon rolls, pickled beets and dainty cakes," she told him, praying he didn't notice the way her voice wavered. It was hard to focus when he was so close. "Which would you like first?"

He snapped his head in her direction. "What?"

"Um, I wondered what you want to eat first."

"Oh. What do you have?"

She released her breath. He definitely wasn't paying attention to her. "Fried chicken, cinnamon rolls, pickled beets and dainty cakes."

"The cinnamon rolls, I guess."

His lack of enthusiasm over her meal didn't go unnoticed, but she decided not to let it bother her. He'd never eaten what she made before, and her family often told her that her meals were just as good as her mother's.

She put the cinnamon roll on his plate then gave it to him. Afterwards, she poured him a cup of punch. Then she collected a couple of dainty cakes. She couldn't bring herself to eat the chicken since it was the messiest part of her meal, and she didn't wish to get messy around him.

"What do you like to eat?" she asked him. "Not now. I mean, what do you like to eat at other times? Do you have any favorite foods?" She forced a dainty cake in her mouth to shut up. The last thing she wanted to do was ramble like a fool.

"Oh, let's see..." He lowered his gaze to his plate. "This is good."

Good. She managed to make something he enjoyed.

"You said you made fried chicken?" he asked.

She nodded. "Want some?"

"When I finish the roll." He lifted it off the plate then gave a quick scan of the area until his gaze settled on a spot behind her.

With a sinking feeling in her gut, she looked over her shoulder and saw Rose sitting by herself and eating one of her sandwiches. She turned her attention back to Stan, who was still watching her sister. "So, Stan." She waited for him to look at her. "What do you enjoy?"

"I enjoy this food." He bit into the cinnamon roll.

"No, I mean, what do you enjoy doing?"

He swallowed his food then took a drink of the punch. "I never thought about it. I pretty much do whatever my parents need me to do."

"What do they need you to do?"

"Things around the farm. We grow a couple crops, mainly corn and beans. But for the most part, we take care of cattle and breed horses, though we don't often breed them."

"I noticed you and your pa came by with a couple cattle to sell my pa."

He nodded and finished his roll. "The cattle cooperated well that day."

Encouraged since he hadn't glanced over at Rose during this time, Harriett asked, "Is it rare that they cooperate?"

"I'd say they behave most of the time, but when they don't, it seems like they never behave."

She pulled out the largest piece of chicken she made and set it on his plate. "I can understand that. What was the worst time you've had with getting them together to sell?"

"Oh, well," he picked up the chicken breast, "I'd say that was a year ago when one of the cows barged out of line. The rest of them started scattering in all directions, and we had to chase them down and bring them back to the line."

She imagined him in his denims with his Stetson hat and striped shirt as he chased a stray cow with a lasso in hand. She could think of few things more exciting than watching a man riding a horse, especially when he was

wearing the kind of clothes Stan usually wore. He was probably incredibly attractive when he was working. Well, of course he was. He was attractive no matter what he did.

“This is good chicken,” he told her. “Your cinnamon roll was really good, too.”

Pleased, she smiled as he continued eating the chicken. “Thank you.” She turned to the basket and dug out some beets and dainty cakes. “Would you like to try either of these?”

She held them up for him to look at, but once again, his gaze went to Rose.

“Did your sister come here planning to eat by herself?” Stan asked.

Her smile faltering, she said, “No.”

“But she didn’t bid on anyone.”

She wasn’t sure how to answer him. While she didn’t want to encourage him to keep pursuing her sister, she also hesitated to tell him Rose had planned to bid on someone else. She shouldn’t hesitate. It was silly. She should tell him Rose was interested in Kent. But if she did, he might think she was saying it in order to manipulate him into giving up on Rose. Then he’d hate her.

“Maybe we should invite her over here,” he suggested. “It’s not right she’s all alone when everyone else has someone to eat with.”

She glanced back at her sister. Why couldn’t Rose have picked somewhere else to eat? Why did she have to eat in a place where Stan could easily see her?

“Rose will be fine,” Harriett told him.

In the next instance, Kent walked over to Rose, and Rose smiled up at him and gestured for him to sit with her.

“See? She’s fine,” she said, turning back to him. Pretending she didn’t notice his disappointment, she asked, “Did you want beets or dainty cakes?”

He didn’t answer for a moment. He just kept watching Rose and Kent. “Um, the beets.”

With a sigh, she put some beets on his plate and added the dainty cakes since he probably wasn’t paying much attention to what she was doing or saying anyway.

The rest of the picnic was much the same. He spent most of his time watching Rose and Kent, and he even asked her what he might say or do to impress Rose, to which she said, “I don’t know.”

The last thing she wanted to do was encourage him. The rest of their meal was spent mostly in silence, and by the time it was finally over, she was so upset, she didn’t know whether to scream or cry.

She’d spent almost an hour getting dressed that day. She’d worn her nicest green dress with a matching ribbon. Twice, she almost changed clothes,

wondering if blue or pink might be more to his liking. In the end she'd chosen green because she heard that was his favorite color. But it did no good because she wasn't Rose.

Rose was exciting and fun. It was the same reason all the other young men had been interested in her. Harriett had always felt invisible next to her sister, but she hadn't cared until it became clear Stan was never going to show any interest in her.

Now as she stared at the missive in her hands, she wished she'd been Rose. If she'd been Rose, he would have wanted her, and he would have been more than happy to bring her to his home as his bride.

"Instead of Rose, he got stuck with me," she muttered.

She traced the parchment in her hands again. She wasn't Rose, nor could she ever be like her sister. Brushing back a tear, she stood up and put the letter away. She couldn't read it. Not now. Not when she felt so inferior to her.

Maybe tomorrow. Maybe then she'd feel better.

With a heavy sigh, she went back to bed and closed her eyes, willing this marriage to be a horrible dream and that she'd wake up in her old bedroom, thankful for a second chance to do things right.

## Chapter Twelve

The next morning after Stan was done with the animals, he put the small basket of fresh eggs on the worktable then took a skillet down from the hook on the wall. Though his bedroom wasn't right next to Harriett's, he heard her crying last night. This, in turn, made it hard for him to sleep as well, and he ended up taking his blanket and pillow to the parlor and sleeping on the couch.

Even so, the echoes of her crying still made his gut tighten. He was the reason she was miserable. First, he married her, knowing full well she was giving up the possibility of being with a man who deserved her. Then, he pretty much handed Maggie to her and let her take over everything. At the time, he figured that since Harriett was a woman, she knew what to do with the girl. But looking back on it, he realized she needed his help. Despite all of this, however, his biggest offense was refusing to let her and Maggie eat at a separate time from him. It was the only thing she asked of him, and he had said no.

Not too long ago, she had cared about him. Now, he wouldn't be surprised if she hated him. All he'd ever done was take from her. He never took the time to appreciate her. The last thing he wanted to do was remember every time he had pushed her aside in favor of her sister. But all night he'd gone through each attempt she'd made to talk to him. The picnic had been the last one. And instead of being considerate enough to give her his undivided attention, he'd suggested they invite Rose to eat with them.

What he needed to do was talk to his mother and find out what he could do to rectify the past. Surely, there was something he could do to make things right. Whatever the answer was, he didn't know. Hopefully, since his mother was a woman, she'd be able to give him some ideas.

This morning, he would make breakfast, thereby giving Harriett a reprieve from having to come up with something Maggie might possibly eat. He gathered some cheese, milk, and butter. Setting them on the worktable, he decided to get canned peaches from the pantry.

Harriett had done a good job of filling the shelves. He never used it much when it was just him and Maggie. The girl never ate that much, and he stuck with a couple main meals. But Harriett had bought an impressive supply of food and gadgets to aid her in cooking. He didn't know what half the stuff was for, but there was no doubt she was skilled when it came to the kitchen. He'd heard her mother was one of the best cooks in Nebraska, and he guessed Harriett acquired her talent from her because he couldn't recall a time when he'd eaten so well.

Except for the food she'd given him at the picnic. But he'd spent so much

time wondering what he could have said or done to get Rose to bid on him that he'd given little thought to what Harriett had made.

Pushing aside the stab of guilt in his gut, he spent the next half hour making omelets. Once he put them on their respective plates, he carried his blanket and pillow up the stairs and put them on his bed.

He stepped into the hallway and hesitated outside Harriett's closed door. He didn't think she would still be asleep, but she'd been up for a long time and she'd been upset. Should he wake her up and let her know breakfast was ready? Or maybe she was already awake and getting dressed.

After a quick debate, he knocked on her door. "Harriett, are you awake?"

No answer.

He glanced at Maggie's door. She'd also done a lot of crying the previous evening. Perhaps she was just as tired as Harriett. Just what he needed: two crying females. He hoped both would be in better moods today.

"Harriett?" he called out, louder this time.

But again, no answer.

She was still here, wasn't she? The thought hadn't occurred to him that she might be so upset, she'd go back to live with her family. Holding his breath, he turned the knob and opened her door a crack, afraid he'd find her bed empty. But she was still there, curled up on her side with the blanket pulled up to her chin.

He released his breath. Good. He hadn't thought of how awful he'd feel if she left. After all she'd been through, he wouldn't have blamed her for leaving, but it was very reassuring that she hadn't.

He opened his mouth to wake her then got an idea. There was one week when his mother had been sick, and his father would bring her meals to her. Granted, this wasn't the exact same situation, but his mother had been touched by his father's kindness. Maybe this would be a good way of making amends with her.

He hurried back to the kitchen and gathered her plate with a cup of coffee. Though he didn't have a tray, he did have a board, so he put them on there and carried it up the stairs. When he reached her room, he set the board on the dresser and went over to her.

"Harriett?"

Her eyelids fluttered, but she didn't open them.

He leaned forward and got ready to touch her shoulder but stopped. She was beautiful. Which was silly, of course, because he'd always known she was attractive, but he hadn't ever taken the time to look at *her*, to see her as she really was. And having gotten to know her better, she was actually a very lovely woman.

She opened her eyes and gasped. Gripping her blanket to her chin, she backed away from him until she almost fell off the other side of the bed.

He almost reached out to prevent her from falling but stopped himself. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten her more than he already had. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I knocked, but you didn't answer." Gesturing to the dresser, he added, "I brought you breakfast." He went over to grab the board and showed her the omelet, peaches, and cup of coffee. "I'll feed Maggie downstairs."

"You made me breakfast?"

Catching the shock in her voice, he chuckled. "I'm not as good at cooking as you, but omelets are one of the things I can do well. At least, it's edible." He nodded to her lap. "Can I set this there?"

She looked down at her lap. "Oh, yes. Let me get ready for it."

She lowered the blanket, exposing her nightshirt. His gaze went to her chest without meaning to, but once he caught sight of the way the cloth outlined the curve of her breasts, he couldn't help but look. Her shirtwaists and dresses never revealed so much. Too soon, she brought the blanket under her armpits, effectively blocking him from staring at her.

Clearing his throat, he put the board on her lap. "I'll take Maggie to my family for the day. I won't be back until this evening."

"You don't have to stay away that long."

"I know, but I want to make this a day where you can rest." He hesitated to say more but decided he might as well. "I want things to be different between us. I know I haven't treated you the way you deserve. I can't change the past, but I can do something about the future. All I ask is that you be willing to let me make things right."

Without waiting for her to reply, because he feared she would say it was too late, he left the room and shut the door. Then he went to get Maggie ready for the day.

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Stan arrived at his parents' house and glanced down at Maggie who was sitting in the saddle in front of him. "You will behave while we're here," he told her, using a firmness in his tone he hadn't used before, except for the previous evening after Harriett left the kitchen in tears.

It was time he took his role as a father seriously and stopped catering to Maggie's every whim. Doing so had only made Harriett's job more difficult. But he was going to change all that, just like he was going to change other things between them.

"Stan, what are you doing here?" a familiar voice called out from behind him.

He turned the horse and saw Emily, his sister who was eleven years his senior, carrying an empty laundry basket. His gaze went to the clothesline, and he saw his mother hanging one of his pa's clean shirts.

"I thought I'd bring Maggie over for a visit. Are Luke and Lizzy here,

too?" he asked, inquiring after their other siblings.

"No, it's just me and my children." Emily held her arms to Maggie. "Jump into my arms."

The girl looked up at Stan. Surprised Maggie felt the need to ask his permission, Stan nodded his consent. She stood up in the saddle then jumped toward Emily, who caught her.

"My, you're getting big," Emily told the girl, ruffling her hair.

"No mess, Aunt Em," Maggie protested, smoothing her wavy hair out the best she could.

"Oh come on," Emily replied with a chuckle. "You needn't worry about getting messy. It can be fun. Now, do you want to see Grandma?"

"Yes."

Stan waited for Maggie to add that she wanted cookies or some kind of treat, but she didn't. Instead, she waited until Emily set her feet on the ground then ran over to his ma.

He shook his head. "If I didn't know better, I'd say I took the wrong girl out here."

"Harriett must be doing her a lot of good," Emily commented as he got down from his horse.

"Harriett's been working hard to get her to behave."

He was sure Harriett's influence had something to do with it, but there was no denying that something else changed yesterday evening. And it wasn't just with Maggie. He suspected something changed for him as well, though he couldn't pin down exactly what.

"So," he began as he led the horse to the barn, "when did you get out here?"

"Just a half hour ago," Emily said, falling into step beside him. "Ma was doing laundry, so I pitched in to help. It's the perfect day for it. Sunny with a warm breeze. The clothes will dry in no time."

Stan hoped Harriett wouldn't take this day to do laundry, even if it was a nice one. He hoped she'd do no work at all. Maybe she could visit her family, perhaps Rose, and enjoy herself. That was what she needed most. It was why he left the buggy behind.

"Then the horse told me I should fly over the house."

He blinked and looked at his sister. "What?"

She shot him a wry grin and held onto the reins while he started to remove the saddle. "I didn't think you were listening to me."

"I'm sorry. My mind's been elsewhere this morning."

"Anything I can help you with?"

He shrugged, not sure he wanted his big sister helping him with his love life, or a lack thereof. "A lot's been happening."

"Yes, I gathered as much. I didn't even know you fancied Harriett Larson.

I thought you wanted her sister.”

His face warmed, but he refused to make eye contact with her. “I did, but that was long ago.”

“Long ago? Isaac said you proposed to her last year.”

He gritted his teeth. It was just his luck that Isaac happened to be Harriett and Rose’s oldest brother *and* Emily’s husband. Everything that happened to the Larsons went through the gossip mill of his family.

“It doesn’t matter because she said no.” He pulled the saddle off the horse and set it in the corner of the barn. When he returned to her, he added, “She wouldn’t have been happy with me anyway. It’s best she married Kent Ashton.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.” He took the reins from her.

“You don’t wish she’d said yes to you?”

“No.” Not anymore. But he didn’t really feel like going into it with her. “Things worked out for the best.”

“That’s good. I’d hate to hear you regretted marrying Harriett.”

“No, I don’t regret it.” Regret was something he definitely didn’t experience. He only wished he could say the same for her. He led the horse to the stall then removed the bridle and reins. After directing the horse to the feeding trough between the stalls, he turned back to Emily. “Did Ma tell you anything about her first marriage?”

Emily crossed her arms and shrugged. “Not much. She only said it was important to make sure I marry someone who sincerely cared for me. She said she didn’t want me to go through the same thing she did with Jim.”

“Jim?”

“That was her first husband’s name.”

Funny how he never thought to ask what the man’s name was. He was Luke’s father, after all. “You think Luke knows about him?”

“Probably more than us. I remember the day Luke was born. She came onto this property right after Jim died and went into labor. Luke was born that night.”

“She wasn’t happy with Jim. Apparently, she loved him, but he didn’t love her.”

She studied him for a moment then asked, “Is the same thing true with you and Harriett? I heard she’s been in love with you since she was thirteen or something.”

“That long?”

“You sound surprised.”

“I am.” He thought Harriett cared about him for maybe a year at the most. He had no idea her feelings stemmed that far back. Now, he felt even worse.

“Do you love her?”

He hadn't expected such a bold question, though maybe he should have. Emily was never one to hold back. Unlike their mother, Lizzie, and even Harriett, she said whatever was on her mind. Their pa thought it was cute, and usually Stan didn't mind, but today it made him uncomfortable.

"Stan?" she pressed.

"I don't love Rose. I was in love with the idea of her, but it wouldn't have worked. I can see that now."

"I didn't ask about Rose. I asked about Harriett."

"I don't know how I feel about Harriett. She's different."

"Different how?"

Irritated, he stepped around her and set the reins and bridle on a hook along the wall. "I don't know. Why are you asking me all these questions?"

"Because I'd like to think you're going to be good to Isaac's little sister, that's why."

"I don't want to do anything to hurt her."

Emily walked over to him. "I know you don't want to hurt Harriett. I just hope you're taking the time to look at her as she truly is instead of how she compares to Rose."

"I've never had trouble telling them apart."

She smiled. "Good." A child screamed from outside, and she rolled her eyes. "I better tend to Amos. Just you wait until Harriett has a child. Then it'll be Maggie and a little brother or sister. Things don't get really interesting until there's two who can fight with each other."

He grimaced. "You shouldn't bring your children over. They'll only give Maggie ideas she doesn't need to be having."

Laughing, she patted his shoulder. "If you didn't want more children, then you should have remained a bachelor."

He watched her as she left the barn. From the doorway, he saw her kneel in front of her son as he cried about something his older brother did to hurt him.

Stan turned his attention back to the barn and straightened some things up, wondering where his pa was. He peered out the other doorway leading to the pasture but didn't see him. His pa's horse wasn't in sight either. His pa either went to town or was out in the fields. Both were likely, and it was just as well, he supposed.

He really came to talk to his ma anyway. He needed a woman's advice on how to best handle things with Harriett. After a few more minutes of making sure everything was organized in the barn, he headed for the house.

## Chapter Thirteen

By the time Stan entered the house, his ma was cleaning up the kitchen after giving all of her grandchildren a snack. Since Esther and Lisa were fourteen and thirteen, they pitched in to help, but ten-year-old Jerry took seven-year-old Amos out to play. And Maggie stayed in the kitchen to quietly play with a doll she often played with when she came over.

“Are you sure you want to come into the kitchen?” his ma asked as he stepped into the room. “We might put you to work.”

He grinned at her joke. “I can handle a little clean up,” he assured her. “I took the liberty of straightening things up in the barn.”

“Jerry and Amos were playing in there right before you came,” she replied.

“Boys are so messy,” Esther said as she wiped smeared blueberries off the table.

“I forgot Amos doesn’t like blueberry muffins,” his ma replied. “I should have given him the plain one. But,” she turned her gaze to Stan, “you’ll be happy to know Maggie ate one.”

“She did?” he asked, surprised Maggie even had an appetite after eating her omelet and a slice of a peach. Granted, she hadn’t eaten all of the slices he’d given her, but one was better than none. And as for an omelet, she usually only had a couple bites of it before claiming she was full, only to be hungry a half hour later. “She ate her breakfast this morning.”

“So she’s doing better?”

He nodded. “With any luck, she’ll keep it up.”

He glanced over at Maggie, who was humming a tune as she played with the doll’s hair. Though the girl didn’t seem to be paying attention, he wondered if she really was.

“I was really proud of her,” he added, thinking if she was listening, maybe it would encourage her to eat the next meal Harriett made for her.

“As you should be,” his ma said. She put the last dish in the sink and gave him a good look. “Did you want to talk to me?”

He scanned the room. Lisa put a broom and dustpan away while Esther put a rag in the sink. “Yes,” he slowly admitted. “But I’d rather talk alone.”

“Esther, why don’t you take Maggie outside, and Lisa, help your mother with the wash,” she instructed.

Stan’s nieces hastened to obey, and he thanked them as they left the room.

“You want any muffins or coffee?” his ma offered once they were alone.

“Just coffee, please.”

She poured him a cup. “We’ll sit in the parlor where it’s more comfortable.”

He took the cup when she held it out to him and followed her to the

spacious room.

After they sat down, she turned to him. "You said you wanted to talk to me?"

Stan nodded but hesitated to say anything. It seemed like a simple matter when he decided to come out here, but now he was in front of the woman who'd given birth to him.

"Does this have something to do with Harriett?" she softly encouraged.

"Yes," he admitted. He'd come here to talk to her, and that was exactly what he was going to do. "I'd like your advice." When her eyebrows furrowed, he quickly added, "On what I can do to make her happy."

"You don't think she's happy now?"

"I know she's not happy." He let out a long sigh and placed his cup on the table. "She spent all night crying, and it's my fault."

She leaned toward him. "How so?"

"I dumped Maggie on her. Then when she asked me leave her alone, I wouldn't."

"You dumped Maggie on her?"

"As soon as we got married, I let her do everything for her."

"I'm sure she expected that. A woman naturally takes care of the children. I had no problem caring for Emily as soon as I came to live here."

"Maggie's a handful, Ma. You know that."

She took a sip from her coffee and smiled at him. "Yes, I know that, but Emily wasn't exactly thrilled to have me here at first either. It took time before she accepted me. Maggie was abandoned by her mother. The same thing happened to Emily. Your father was the one who did everything for Emily. Believe me, she made it clear that I was never going to be her mother."

"Even so," he began as he shifted on the couch, "I should have done more to help Harriett with her. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was so glad not to have to worry about Maggie, I was more than happy to let Harriett do everything."

"Most men leave the childrearing to the women. That's not uncommon."

Maybe, but he had asked Harriett to marry him because of Maggie, and that being the case, he should have stepped in more to help her.

"Alright, we'll put that aside," she said then put her cup down. "What is this about her asking you to leave her alone?"

"Well, we started out eating meals together, and I thought everything was fine. But she asked me to stop eating at the same time she and Maggie ate." When he saw her furrow her eyebrows, he explained, "There was one supper where Maggie was giving Harriett an especially hard time. She wanted a biscuit, but Harriett told her to eat something else and she wouldn't. I could tell Harriett was at her wit's end, so I gave Maggie the biscuit to quiet her down. Before you say it, I know it was wrong for me to do that. Harriett had

told her no, and I should have abided by it.”

She waited for a moment then asked, “It was after this she asked you to leave her alone?”

He nodded.

“Was this only to leave her alone at meal time or did she want you to leave her alone at other times, too?”

His face warmed. “The only time I got to see Harriett was when we ate. That’s why I told her no.”

“What were you both doing during the day?”

“I was taking care of the animals, and she’d take Maggie somewhere or she’d be with her in the house.” He shrugged. “I don’t know what women do all day.”

At that, her lips curled up into a smile. “A lot more than you’d believe if I told you. I assure you, Harriett wasn’t sitting in the parlor with nothing to do. She was busy working. The house and clothes don’t clean themselves, and meals don’t cook themselves.”

“I realize that. I just meant, I don’t know the details of what she did with her time. I know she liked to go visit her family.” He took a deep breath to get ready for why he came. “But I want to spend more time with her. I want to get to know her better.”

“So what are you doing here talking to me?”

Noting the amusement in her tone, he relaxed a bit and chuckled. “I want your advice. You’re a woman. You know what women want. What can I do to be a better husband to her?”

“It’s really not that complicated, Stan. What every woman wants is for her husband to be sincere in his care for her. If you do that, she’ll want to spend time with you.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It is easy.” She picked up her cup and took another sip. “What is she interested in?”

As much as he hated to admit it, he needed to be honest. “Besides her family, I don’t know.”

“You’ll have to ask her, and when you find out, suggest doing those things with her.”

Her answer was so simple. It felt like there should be more to it than that.

“Stan, there is no substitute for sincerely caring about her. You can do the same things with her and go to the same places, but if your heart isn’t in it, she’ll know.”

“Is that what your first husband did? Did he do things with you?”

She hesitated for a moment, staring at the cup in her hands, then finally turned her gaze to his. “He never pretended to care when we were alone. He was cordial enough, but he wasn’t warm. He kept me at a distance. When we

were in front of others, he played the devoted husband. It was so he could look good. He only cared about himself. Your father might not have a perfect past, but he cares about people. He was interested in me, and he treated me the same whether we were alone or in public. That's why I'm telling you to care about Harriett. It really is that simple."

"Thanks, Ma." He grabbed the cup and finally drank the coffee. When he was done, he stood up. "I think I'll find pa and help him out, if you don't mind watching Maggie?"

"Your pa will appreciate the help." She took his cup. "I'll be happy to watch Maggie."

On impulse, he gave her a hug. "Thank you."

She returned his hug. "It'll be alright, Stan. Every woman will soften to a husband who cares about her."

He wasn't exactly sure how he was going to show Harriett that, but he was determined to do his best.

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Harriett wasn't sure what to do with her time. Ever since she was old enough to pitch in and help her mother, she couldn't remember a time when she had an entire day to do nothing for someone else. After she ate a breakfast that was surprisingly good, she cleaned up around the house, a process that didn't take nearly as long as she anticipated.

She spent about an hour walking outside. It was the perfect day for it, and there wasn't a cloud in sight. A nice warm breeze allowed her to go without a shawl. But she couldn't recall a time she'd ever taken a walk by herself. Usually, she'd go with Adam or Rose. Occasionally, she'd go with her mother or Eli. But today, she went by herself, and that was more difficult than she thought it'd be.

However, by the time she returned to the house, she was ready to read Rose's missive. It'd been a month since she'd had a good talk with her sister, and even if it hurt to know Stan preferred Rose over her, it wasn't Rose's fault. Rose had never encouraged him, so she shouldn't be blaming Rose.

When she reached her bedroom, she pulled open the drawer and retrieved the neatly folded piece of paper. She sat on her bed and took a deep breath. Unfolding the paper, she caught sight of Rose's familiar script, and as silly as it was, tears filled her eyes. Despite her inner turmoil, she missed her sister. They'd been closer to each other than anyone else their entire lives. Rose had always been there for her, and she'd always had a way of making her feel better when no one else could. If there was one person she needed to see more than ever, it was Rose.

*My dear Harriett,*

*I understand you're going through a difficult time. Marrying Stan must have been a hard decision to make. It's just like you to sacrifice what you*

want for the sake of others, and in this case, it's a little girl who has no mother. I wish I could say I'm as selfless as you, that I'd do the same if it hadn't been for Kent. But we both know that's not the truth.

*Of all the people I've ever known, there has never been anyone as giving and caring as you. I miss you. I know you need time away from me, and I'll wait for as long as it takes for you to be ready.*

*I still believe once Stan gets to know you, he'll realize you're much better for him than I could ever be. Be your wonderful self and give him time. Getting Kent to see that I was perfect for him wasn't easy. Just because something is hard, it doesn't mean it's not worth doing.*

*Love,*

*Rose*

Wiping more tears from her eyes, Harriett folded the letter and returned it to the drawer. Rose hadn't given her a hard time about pushing her away. Harriett had feared Rose might be upset with her for intentionally ignoring her, but she hadn't. And that made Harriett feel much better about seeing her again.

## Chapter Fourteen

“I’m so glad to see you,” Rose greeted as the butler led Harriett into the house.

Rose engulfed her in a warm embrace, and Harriett wished she hadn’t stayed away for so long. Being with her sister brought back all the things she’d missed by not seeing her every day.

Pulling away from her, Harriett dabbed the tears from her eyes. “I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner.”

Rose took a handkerchief from her pocket and handed it to her. “I understand, Harriett. Did Ma give you my missive?”

“She did, but I couldn’t bring myself to read it until today. I’m not sure why. I...I...” At a loss for words, Harriett shrugged. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright.” Rose slipped her arm around her shoulders and led her to the informal parlor. “You don’t have to say it. I’m your sister. I know you’ve been going through a difficult time.”

After Rose encouraged her to sit on the settee, she asked the butler to bring them some tea and scones. Harriett finished drying her cheeks and waited for Rose to sit next to her before she turned to face her.

“I feel like such a fool,” Harriett softly confided. “I know you think I’m selfless, but I think a part of me married Stan in hopes he’d come around to falling in love with me. Only, I didn’t realize it at the time. I kept telling myself I was doing it for Maggie.”

“I’m sure you would never have said yes if it hadn’t been for her.”

Harriett considered her words and nodded. “You’re right. I wouldn’t have. But she gave me an excuse to say yes without making him think I was doing it to be with him.”

“I know you, Harriett, and the main reason you said yes was because you felt sorry for her. No child should be without a mother. A man can’t do the same job a woman can. When a child is sick or scared, they want their mother.”

The butler brought the tray into the room and set it on the table. With a bow, he left and closed the door.

Rose poured tea into their cups. “You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself. You’re only human.”

Staring at the expensive handkerchief in her hand, Harriett sighed. “Some decisions last a lifetime.”

“Yes, and you’ve given Maggie a mother she wouldn’t have had otherwise.”

“Maggie doesn’t like me. She knows I’m not her real mother, and she resents me because of it. She intentionally says no to everything I want her to

do, and she won't eat anything I make unless she can get a treat afterwards. I feel like everything I do is for nothing." Using the handkerchief to catch more tears, she added, "I can't please her no matter how hard I try."

Rose scooted closer to her and put a comforting arm around her shoulders. "Oh Harriett, how awful."

"I had no idea one little girl could be so hard to win over. I knew Stan might never love me, but I thought Maggie would let me in. I'm not much more than a maid. I could have suggested doing that instead of marrying him."

"That wouldn't have been any better. You'd still be spending a lot of time with him. At least this way, you get him to think of you as a wife."

Harriett let out a wry chuckle. "A lot of good that does me." Taking a deep breath to steady her resolve so she wouldn't burst into a fresh wave of tears, she forced out, "How can you resist him, Rose?"

Rose released her and handed her a cup of tea, but Harriett wasn't in the mood to drink anything. Still, she held it because the heat from the cup was oddly soothing.

"I don't know," Rose said. "He just never interested me that way."

Harriett wished she could say the same thing.

Rose drank more tea then set the cup on the tray. "I don't know why I was never attracted to him. He's attractive enough, I suppose, and he was pleasant when he talked to me. But," she picked up a scone, "I didn't have much in common with him. He was always just...there. I didn't care whether he was around or not. Maybe it's like you and Kent. You were never interested in him. What's the difference between Stan and Kent?"

"Well, Kent used to be brooding," Harriett reflected as she thought over the days shortly after their father had found him unconscious and beaten up in an alley. "He didn't smile or laugh. He seemed to have a dark cloud hanging over his head. Stan seemed happier, and he was hopeful about the future." She shot her sister a wry grin. "Adam believes it was because Kent didn't fall at your feet in utter adoration that made you take an interest in him."

Rose giggled. "If that was true, then I would have lost interest in him as soon as he started to adore me."

"By the time he fell at your feet, you knew he was rich. Of course, you wouldn't lose interest in him."

"I won't say it's not nice to have someone else to cook and clean for me, but it's not why I married him." She hesitated for a moment then continued, "I liked the fact that he was serious about life. He wasn't a boy. He was a man."

"Stan's not a boy."

"I know, but he wasn't like Kent. I don't know how to explain it, Harriett. I think there are just some people you're attracted to and others you aren't."

"And Stan isn't attracted to me."

As if realizing her error, Rose gasped and put down her scone. “I didn’t mean that the attraction could never develop over time. Sometimes the right person is right in front of you and you don’t know it until you give it a chance. The thing is, I never wanted to give Stan a chance. I could have. Maybe I would have fallen in love with him. But I didn’t want to. But if I had married him, I would have made the effort because marriage is forever. Stan has a reason to give you the chance I never gave him.”

“How can I get over him?”

Offering a sympathetic smile, Rose said, “I don’t know.”

“What about all those books you read? Isn’t there some piece of advice in one of them?”

Rose shook her head. “I’m afraid not.”

Then Harriett was doomed because being with Stan only made her love him more. Perhaps if he didn’t insist on being kind and helpful, she could have, but he wasn’t that way.

Even if he’d left her and Maggie alone most of the time, he’d helped her collect the dishes after their meals and gave her freedom to take over as Maggie’s mother. Then this morning, he completely surprised her by bringing her breakfast and looking at her in a way that made her foolish heart believe there might be some hope for them after all.

“I’m sorry I can’t help, Harriett,” Rose said after she finished her scone. “More than anything, I want you to be happy.”

Harriett smiled at her. “I know.”

“I realize I have a lot of things to be thankful for, but my life is much better when you’re in it.”

“My life is better when you’re in it, too.”

And it was. Harriett was glad she’d made the trip to see her sister. It’d been long overdue. In the future, she wouldn’t wait so long to do it. No matter what happened, she’d be able to get through it with her sister’s help.

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When Harriett came home, she saw that Stan had returned because the horse he’d taken that morning was back. But in its place, he’d taken another horse, and she guessed he’d gone out to the pasture to take care of the cows.

After she unhitched the horse from the buggy, she went to the house and found a note waiting for her on the table. It was from Stan, and he’d written that he would take care of supper when he returned from the pasture.

She held the note longer than necessary. Not because there were any endearments in the missive, but because he had written her name. She’d dreamed of receiving a letter from him when she was younger. She’d imagined how her name might look when he wrote it out. Silly, schoolgirl fantasies.

But even if it wasn’t a love letter, she couldn’t resist neatly folding it and

slipping it into the same drawer as she'd put Rose's missive. She was a lost cause, that's what she was. It was good no one else was there to see what she'd done. They would have laughed at her if they'd known.

With not much else to do but wait for him and Maggie to return, she cleaned under the beds, washed the windows, and did other small jobs she didn't normally do. She had to keep busy. Yes, she figured Stan wanted her to sit and relax, but that'd never been her way.

By the time she finished dusting for cobwebs along the corners of the room, she heard Maggie, speaking in an excited tone, from the kitchen. Harriett straightened up, put the rag in a basket, and started down the stairs. Her steps slowed as she came toward the bottom of the staircase.

"We're making something she'd like," Stan told Maggie. "I'm willing to make something you want, but it can't be a dessert. It needs to be something that's good for you."

"Why?" Maggie asked.

"Because it's what your ma wants, and we're going to start doing things for her. Now, what do you want?"

"Um...dinner roll?"

"Alright. I'll make a dinner roll. But if you don't eat it or anything else on your plate, then you're choosing to go to bed hungry. Understand?"

Harriett couldn't see the girl's reaction, but since she didn't protest, Harriett assumed the girl nodded. Bracing herself, Harriett entered the kitchen.

Stan set a pot on the cook stove and glanced over at her. Then he gave her a smile that made her heart skip a beat. "Hi, Harriett. I was thinking of making soup and dinner rolls. But if you don't want them, I can make something else."

"Rolls," Maggie spoke up.

"Maggie," he warned and shook his head.

"Soup and rolls sound find to me," Harriett told him. She hadn't done anything with him, except eat, so she wasn't sure what would happen if they actually cooked together. But even so, she pressed through and asked, "Did you want any help?"

He smiled again. "You don't have to do anything, Harriett. This should be a day where you can do whatever you want. You've done a lot for us, and I appreciate it."

Surprised since she didn't think he was aware of anything she did besides make the meals, she murmured a thank you. Watching him fill up the pot with water, she said, "I don't mind helping, and I've been cooking since I was seven." Glancing at Maggie who was studying her, she told the girl, "Unless you'd like to go for a walk or play on the porch?"

"Cooking fun?" Maggie asked her as Stan went to the pantry.

“It depends on who you talk to,” she replied. “Some women like to cook, and some don’t.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Pa doesn’t.”

Stan returned from the pantry with the ingredients he planned to use in the soup. “I do alright with it,” he said, “but no, it’s not my favorite pastime.”

“Then I should help,” Harriett insisted. “I really don’t mind doing it.”

“I don’t want to impose. You’ve done so much already.”

“You’re not imposing if I’m telling you I want to do it.”

He hesitated then nodded. “You’re right. I just want to make sure we’re not being a burden to you.” She wasn’t sure how to respond to that, but he saved her from having to do so when he added, “If you want to help, I’d rather make the soup than the rolls.”

“I’d be happy to make the rolls.” Up to now, she hadn’t included Maggie in the cooking, choosing instead to let the girl play while she took care of the meals. But Maggie seemed interested in what Stan was doing, so Harriett asked, “You want to learn how to make rolls?”

“I eat them?” she asked.

“Sure.” And maybe it would inspire the girl to eat more if she had a hand in making the foods. “Come on. I’ll let you get the things we’ll need.”

“I’ll get something for her to stand on,” Stan told Harriett. He retrieved the step stool and placed it in the pantry. When he came back out, he gestured to Maggie. “I bet you can’t tell where the flour is.”

The girl’s eyes lit up at the challenge, and she hurried into the pantry. “What color,” Maggie’s face scrunched up, “flooouuur?”

“It’s flour,” Stan corrected with a chuckle. “And I’m not telling. You have to guess.”

“Hint?”

He tapped his fingers on the shelf ledge for a moment. “Alright. It’s in a sack that is the color of your hair.”

The girl’s brows furrowed, and she turned to the shelf in front of her. “Is it here?” She pointed to the shelf.

“It’s on this row, yes.”

Then, in what Harriett thought was an absolutely adorable fashion, the girl put her finger on her lips and studied all the yellow sacks. Finally, she pointed to one. “Here?”

Stan leaned forward. “You got lucky. One more over, and you would have picked the sugar.” He handed her the sack. “Give this to your ma, and when you get back here, you can guess where the yeast is. I’ll even give you a hint. It’s in a small yellow sack.”

The girl brought over the flour to Harriett then ran back to the pantry. The

process of gathering all the ingredients Harriett would need was going to take awhile, but after considering how much fun Stan and Maggie were having, she decided it didn't hurt to let them play this game out.

And as they did, she found that it was nice to watch Stan interacting with the girl. She knew he had a good heart simply because he adopted her, but she hadn't realized they'd developed a bond. Perhaps by insisting the girl spend all her time with her, she'd upset Maggie without knowing it.

Maggie, being a child, couldn't voice this thought appropriately. So maybe when Maggie protested going out with her, she'd wanted to stay with Stan and help him with his chores.

Why hadn't Harriett picked up on it before? Maggie probably fought her as hard as she did because she thought Harriett was intentionally trying to prevent her from being with Stan. Even if Stan wasn't her real father, she had grown to think of him as such.

Well, Harriett would be better about this in the future. Maggie needed a mother, yes. There was no denying that. But she also needed a father.

"I think we got everything," Harriett told Maggie when the girl handed her the butter. "Do you want to help me make the rolls, or do you want to help your pa with the soup?"

"Use pin?" Maggie asked.

"The rolling pin?"

"Yes."

"Sure," Harriett agreed.

"Do rolls."

Stan moved the step stool over to the worktable and motioned for Maggie to get on it. "This will make you taller." He made eye contact with Harriett and added, "If you need anything, let me know?"

Face warm, Harriett nodded to indicate she would. The only reason she didn't say anything was because she didn't trust herself to speak. He had no idea what affect he had on her, and God willing, he never would. It was bad enough he knew she'd been pining for him for years. He didn't need to know that, even now, all he had to do was look at her and she'd do anything he wanted.

Forcing her attention back to Maggie, she opened the sacks and started teaching her how to make rolls.

## Chapter Fifteen

The next day, Harriett decided to work on making the girl a summer dress out of the materials she'd found stuffed in the girl's trunk. Stan had offered to take Maggie out with him when he did his chores. Harriett was surprised when Maggie looked over at her, as if seeking her permission. After assuring the girl it was fine with her, the girl let out an excited cry and hurried out the door.

And so, Harriett had spent a good portion of the day working on Maggie's new dress. But today, she didn't mind being alone. In fact, it was pleasant to be sitting in front of the window where she glanced out at the fields from time to time. Once, she caught sight of Stan and Maggie passing by, and she took a moment to stare at his profile as she'd often done in the past.

She didn't think she'd ever get tired of looking at him. He'd always been attractive, and becoming an adult had only made him much more so. He'd gotten stronger, and his features were better defined. For the life of her, she still couldn't understand why Rose had no interest in him. Reminding herself that she needed to give up silly notions of him ever loving her, she forced her gaze back to the cloth in her hands.

She made good progress, and around three, she figured she could finish up the dress tomorrow. Now, she needed to start supper.

As she was placing all the sewing items back into her basket, the door opened, and Maggie ran through the kitchen and over to her. "Cow was stuck."

"It was? Where?"

"A fence. I help Pa! Cow good now."

"You did?"

"Uh huh."

Harriett had never done anything like that in her entire life. And when she thought about it, she couldn't think of any girls who did either. Not even Rose, despite her adventurous spirit, wanted to spend time in the fields unless it was so she could ride her horse.

"It was fun," Maggie said.

"I suppose so." At least, it was for Maggie. She, however, couldn't imagine ever finding such an activity enjoyable. Taking in the way Maggie spun in circles, she smiled. "I had no idea you liked doing boy chores so much."

She stopped spinning and shot her a pointed look, which was absolutely adorable. "Girls do them."

"Yes, I know, but typically boys are the ones who help their fathers. But," she quickly added before she further offended the girl, "I remember hearing

something about your aunt doing a lot of outdoor chores when she was growing up.”

“Which one?”

“Emily.”

“Oh, Pa’s sister.”

“You want to know something else?”

“What?”

“I hear she was a lot better than some of the boys her age,” Harriett said, amused by the way the girl’s eyebrows rose in interest. “So you can do those chores just fine.”

As Harriett finished gathering her sewing supplies, Maggie asked, “What’s that?”

“I’m making you a dress.”

“You are?”

“Yep. Want to see it?” Since the girl nodded, Harriett gently lifted what she had sewn so far. “You said you liked the color of the sun, so I thought I’d make it yellow.”

“It’s pretty.”

“You really like it?”

“Yes. Like sun.”

Pleased, Harriett smiled. “Thank you. I was thinking of adding a bow. Maybe right under the collar.” She pointed to the area she was talking about.

“A bow?”

“Let’s see if I can show you.” Harriett put the dress down and sorted through her basket. “I used to wear them all the time when I was little, and I saved my favorite ones.” She pulled out a large white one with a small fake pearl in the middle. “What do you think?”

“Touch it?”

“Sure.” Harriett held it out. “This will be the dress you’ll wear when you have to look nice.”

“When?”

“On special occasions.”

“Like what?”

“Like weddings and—”

“Weddings?”

Harriett set the bow back in the basket and tucked everything into place so it was secure. “Weddings are when people get married.”

“You marry Pa.”

“Yes, I did.”

“I not have dress.”

With a soft chuckle, Harriett said, “That’s alright, Maggie. Your pa and I had a private wedding. I thought it best if we had a quiet affair.”

“Why?”

With a shrug, Harriett picked up the basket. “I don’t know how to explain it except to say I don’t like large gatherings.”

Especially when she risked others’ pity. No doubt the people attending her wedding would have felt sorry for her since she married someone who had hoped to marry her sister instead. She didn’t need that kind of humiliation.

Harriett cleared her throat. “Women also wear nice dresses when they go to church.”

“You go church?” Maggie asked.

Harriett was ready to ask her why she didn’t remember her since Stan went to the same church as her parents, and Stan had taken Maggie there right after he adopted her. But then, she figured the girl was young and had been grieving the loss of her real father, so she hadn’t noticed her.

Since marrying Stan, Harriett had decided not to go to church because she didn’t want to run into people who would ask why she married him. It was enough her family and his family knew the situation. She didn’t want the entire community talking about it.

“Um, you see, Maggie,” she began as she settled the basket on her hip, “I do go to church. Or at least I did before I married your pa. And, well...”

“Did you want to go this Sunday?” Stan asked.

Gasping, Harriett turned around in time to see Stan enter the room. Goodness, he was quiet. She hadn’t heard him come into the house.

Stan took off his hat and brushed his hair back with his fingers. “I’d like to take you to church, even if it’s one that our families don’t go to.”

“Oh.” Harriett wasn’t sure what to say. Sunday was a couple days away. “Can I think about it?”

“Of course. I don’t want to push you into anything.”

Glad for a reprieve, at least for the moment, she thanked him.

“She make dress,” Maggie told him.

“Is she?” Though Stan asked Maggie the question, he kept his gaze on Harriett.

“Uh huh,” the girl replied. “It’s yellow.”

Harriett’s skin flushed. “I should have it finished tomorrow if I have enough time. I made good progress today.” Realizing her voice was wavering from embarrassment since he continued to direct those wonderful eyes her way, she added, “Maggie’s small, and the dress is simple. It’s nothing fancy.”

“It’s pretty,” Maggie said.

“It’s not done yet,” Harriett told her, purposely avoiding further eye contact with him. Why was he still looking at her? It was completely unnerving.

“I’ve seen your dresses, Harriett,” he said, “and you make pretty ones.”

Since when had he noticed anything she wore? But instead of asking the

question, she chose to thank him then added a quick, “I should put these away so I can start on supper,” and rushed up the stairs.

She stayed up in her room for a few minutes to calm the butterflies in her stomach. It was easier to keep them at bay when she only saw him when it was time to eat. He hadn’t said much then. But he seemed to be seeking out ways to talk to her now.

At breakfast, he’d come in from the barn and asked her if she wanted him to do anything for her. She’d said no, but he stayed in the kitchen, telling her how the animals were doing. She had no idea why he did it. And worse, she didn’t know how to respond. Did she say as little as possible and hope he’d go back to leaving her alone? Or did she talk to him in return and try to establish a friendship?

He’d never care for her the way she cared for him. That much, she knew. But would it be best if she at least got his friendship? No doubt, she’d only be deeper in love with him. It couldn’t be helped. But this wasn’t just about her. It was about Maggie. She had a responsibility to the little girl, and the girl would benefit if she and Stan could be in the same room and talk to each other as friends.

Harriett closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She had to do what was best for Maggie. Yesterday and today had been a refreshing change in the girl, and there was no doubt it partly stemmed from the way Harriett and Stan were acting.

“I can do this,” she whispered.

Opening her eyes, she squared her shoulders back and headed down the stairs. By the time she returned to the parlor, she realized Stan and Maggie were in the kitchen.

“What eat?” Maggie asked.

“Nothing fancy,” Stan replied. “I’m not as good of a cook as your ma is.”

Surprised Stan planned to help make supper again, Harriett came into the kitchen. But instead of seeing him bringing items from the pantry, she saw a box on the worktable. And Stan was making sandwiches while Maggie sorted through the blueberries in a bowl he’d set next to him.

“What’s going on?” she asked, walking over to the box and peering down at it. It was empty. “Are you planning to put the sandwiches in here?”

“I thought it might be nice to have a picnic,” he told her.

“Why?”

He stopped smearing the peanut butter on the bread and offered a hesitant smile. “I want to start over, Harriett. I regret how I acted last year at the picnic. I was stupid, and I’m sorry. I never should have treated you that way. You didn’t deserve it.”

She didn’t know what to make of this. But he was making an effort to get along with her, and the least she could do was meet him halfway. With a

glance at Maggie who was picking out the good blueberries and placing them on the table in front of Stan, she tried to figure out what she could say that would prevent her from looking like all she'd done was pine over him her entire life.

Finally she opted to say, "It was so long ago. I don't remember much about that day." Then, because she didn't want him to mention anything else about it, she hurried to add, "I'll be happy to have a picnic with you. I'll find a blanket and be back to help."

"Thank you, Harriett."

Forcing a smile, she left the room and went to find a suitable blanket for the outdoors.

## Chapter Sixteen

Perhaps the only saving grace Harriett could see about going on the picnic was the fact that Maggie was there. It allowed her a good source of distraction while she concentrated on giving the girl her food.

And while she expected the girl to protest eating most of it, Maggie surprised her when she said, "Bluebewies and bread. Please."

"You don't want a sandwich?" Harriett asked.

The girl shook her head.

"That's fine." At least she was willing to have some fruit. It was better than it'd been in the past. She waited for Stan to take his portion of the supper out then dug out the bread and blueberries. "Here you go." She handed the plate to Maggie. "If you eat everything, I'll give you some licorice."

"Thank you."

Harriett blinked, sure she wasn't hearing correctly. But when Stan chuckled, she realized her ears weren't playing tricks on her.

"I think she got the message that night you left the kitchen," he said then held his plate to her. "This is for you."

"For me?"

He nodded then shot her that incredibly charming smile of his. "If there's anything you don't want, you can put it back in the box."

"No. I would have picked out everything you did." She took the plate and cleared her throat. "You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to."

"Thank you."

As he gathered his food, she turned her attention back to Maggie. If she had to maintain eye contact with him while she ate, she'd most likely do something foolish like eat too fast or spill her drink.

The majority of the meal went smoothly enough with Maggie and Stan telling Harriett everything they'd done for the past two days. Harriett listened, keeping her gaze on Maggie or the plate in front of her. Tearing off small bits of the cheese and sandwich provided a good distraction.

She'd never been particularly interested in the outdoor chores. Her pa and brothers spoke of them often while she was growing up, so she knew enough about them, which allowed her the luxury of only paying half attention. Her mind was mostly on the close proximity between her and Stan. He didn't make it a habit of sitting this close to her when they ate at the table, but the blanket only allowed for so much space.

And from time to time, his arm brushed hers. Too late she'd thought to suggest that Maggie sit between them. It was just another symptom of how flustered she got around him. No matter what she tried to do, she couldn't

think straight when he was near.

Maggie finished eating before they did, and she turned to Harriett. “May I play?”

“Oh, well...” If the girl left, then it’d be just her and Stan, and she wasn’t sure she was up for that, even if the meal had been pleasant so far.

“Ate food,” Maggie said.

“I’d like to talk to you,” Stan told Harriett, his voice coaxing her to allow the girl to leave so they could have some privacy.

She had absolutely no resistance when it came to him. If he asked her to walk on coals, she’d probably do it. With a sigh, she relented. “I need to see you at all times, Maggie.”

The girl jumped up and promised to stay close before she headed off to the grass where flowers were starting to bloom.

“I have to admit,” Stan began as he reached into the box and took out another slice of bread and cheese, “I didn’t know what to expect when I adopted her. It was a scary prospect at the time. I was the youngest in my family, and I never took care of children before.”

Realizing she had to say something, she collected the remaining blueberries on her plate and smiled. “It was an honorable gesture for you to adopt her.” And it was just one more thing she had loved about him, but she ate the blueberries before she added that.

“Not a day goes by that I don’t wish my friend had lived,” he whispered then cleared his throat. “I don’t want to be morbid. I want this to be a good memory, something we can both look back on in years to come and say we’re glad we did it.”

“It is a nice picnic.”

A minute passed before he spoke up. “What do you enjoy doing?”

“What?”

“I was thinking the other day, and it occurred to me that I don’t much about you. I mean, I know who you are, and I know your family. But I don’t really know you.”

Finally looking over at him, she asked, “You really want to know what I enjoy?”

He set his empty plate in the box and nodded. “Yes. You’re my wife, and what you like is important to me.”

She wasn’t sure how to take that since it could be taken a couple ways. While it would be nice to think he wanted to get to know her because he was truly interested in her, she suspected he was doing this out of obligation since she was, as he pointed out, his wife.

Either way, she knew she had to respond. “I enjoy doing things that most women do, I suppose.” Except for her sister who loathed cooking and sewing.

“I know I have a mother and two sisters, but I’m not really sure what that

means. What do women enjoy?”

She broke off a piece of her cheese and shrugged. “Cooking, sewing, cleaning—”

“Cleaning?” He laughed. “I didn’t think women liked to clean. My sisters always grumbled when they had to do it. They used to threaten me and my brother within an inch of our lives whenever we came into the house after it rained or snowed.”

Catching his teasing tone, a smile tugged at her lips. “I like how the house looks after I clean it. I don’t particularly care for the actual process of cleaning.”

“I see your point, but I am wondering about something.”

She swallowed her cheese. “Oh?”

“Do girls and women ever make a mess?”

“Sure, they do.”

“Next time you see my sisters, would you tell them that?”

Surprised he’d make such an unusual request, she forgot the rest of the cheese on her plate and turned her gaze to him. “You really want me to go up to them and tell them something so silly?”

“Growing up, all I ever heard was how disgusting I was because they were always cleaning up after me. I tried to tell them they made messes, too, but they insisted girls weren’t gross like boys were.”

“I’m not going to tell them any such thing because boys are gross compared to girls. I have a couple brothers myself, and I did three times as much work keeping up after them than I ever did going after Rose.”

As soon as she said her sister’s name, she regretted it because she didn’t want him to remember he had to be with her instead of Rose. She ate the last piece of cheese so she wouldn’t say anything else to ruin the day.

“It hardly seems fair to blame boys for messes,” he said. “I mean, if you enjoy cleaning because of how nice things look when you’re done, then aren’t we doing you a favor by being gross?”

Fortunately, she swallowed the cheese right before he finished his ridiculous statement, for in the next moment, she burst out laughing. “I’ve never heard of anything more absurd,” she said once she could manage to speak.

“I’m being serious.”

“You’re being seriously daft.”

Though he gasped, his lips curled up. “I’m not being daft. I don’t understand why women get upset about messes when they like cleaning.”

“You know why.” Before she continued to argue the point with him, she shook her head. He was baiting her. That’s what he was doing. And worse, she was falling for it. “I didn’t realize you had such a mischievous side to you.”

“I’m not mischievous.”

“Yes, you are. If you tell your sisters I said I like to clean, I’ll deny it.”

“You will?”

“Of course, I will. No woman wants her brother or husband to intentionally make a mess for her.”

“I don’t understand you women at all,” he replied. “It makes no sense that you’d get upset over something you enjoy.”

She opened her mouth but then realized he was still baiting her. “I will not have this discussion anymore.”

Chuckling, he scooted closer to her, this time his arm and leg brushing against her. Her skin warmed from the contact, and she thought about putting some distance between them. But she didn’t. Not only did it thrill her beyond her wildest expectations, but he probably didn’t realize what he was doing. And there was no sense in making him aware of how much he was affecting her.

“What other things do you like doing?” he asked. “What do you do when you aren’t cooking, cleaning, or sewing?”

She thought over his question. Unlike Rose, she didn’t care much for reading. Unlike Eli, she didn’t care to play the piano. Unlike Adam, she didn’t want to spend her free time carving things out of wood. She’d never given it serious thought, but it was quickly occurring to her that she’d spent so much time worrying about meeting the needs of others, she hadn’t taken time to think of what she wanted to do.

“I don’t know,” she finally said.

“You don’t know?”

Noting the tenderness in his tone, she looked over at him. She didn’t realize his face was so close to hers. Surprised, she jerked slightly. Then, to cover up for her embarrassing reaction, she put her plate into the box. “I never thought about it. I just did what my parents told me to do.”

“Are you telling me you never took time to play when you were a child?”

“I played. My brothers, Rose, and I would chase each other and hide while the others looked for us. But those aren’t things I do today.”

“No, and I don’t either, though it was fun back then.”

A moment of silence passed between them, so she glanced over at Maggie who was humming to herself as she collected some flowers, even the ones that hadn’t bloomed yet.

“I like flowers,” Harriett finally said. “I only planted them a couple times, but I liked it. Flowers are pretty, and they smell nice. There’s nothing quite as lovely as the smell of fresh flowers first thing in the morning.”

“There’s some space along the front and side of the house. I can get the ground ready for you, and we can get some seeds for the flowers you want to grow.”

“You don’t have to go through all that trouble.”

“I know I don’t have to, but I want to. Besides, it’d be nice to have some flowers around the house. It’d pretty things up.”

Amused, she shot him a skeptical look. “I didn’t think men cared whether a house was pretty or not.”

“Sure, we do. We just don’t want to be the ones to do it. Do you know how humiliating it’d be to tell someone that we planted flowers to make the place look better?”

She giggled. “No, I suppose it’s not something men would do. But do they really like that kind of thing or are you being mischievous again?”

“They like it. Granted, some like it more than others, but I think having a woman’s touch makes the house more,” he shrugged, “comfortable.”

“Comfortable?”

“It’s hard to explain, but the house feels more like a home ever since you moved in.”

“It does?”

“I’m telling you the truth.”

“I didn’t say you weren’t.”

“Not in words, but your eyebrows furrowed in the way it usually does when you have a hard time believing something.”

She watched him for a moment, wondering if it was true, if she really did furrow her eyebrows when someone told her something she didn’t believe. But why would he lie about that?

“I think it’s cute,” he said.

This time when she was aware that her eyebrows furrowed, she reached up and touched her forehead.

“I can’t believe you don’t believe me,” he said, chuckling.

What she didn’t believe was the fact that he took the time to notice anything about her.

He leaned toward her and placed his finger in the middle of her forehead. “You have two small lines that form right here.”

She didn’t dare breathe until he stopped touching her. How she wished she didn’t feel like she’d swoon just because he smiled at her or touched her. If he picked up on her critical side, did that mean he knew when he made her tingle with excitement? Were all her feelings obvious to him?

“Do you like horseback riding?” Stan asked.

Tucking a stray hair back into the bun at the nape of her neck, she shook her head. “I’m not like Rose. I don’t like to get on horses.”

His smile faltered a bit. “I know you’re not like Rose, Harriett. Do you think I’m comparing you to her?”

She never should have said Rose’s name, but it came out without her meaning to—again. And this time he didn’t ignore it. Nor did he have to. She

was the one who mentioned Rose. Why couldn't she just stop? Feeling foolish, she started putting all the things from the picnic into the box, except for the blanket since they were still sitting on it.

"Harriett, wait." He placed his hand on her arm. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. The reason I asked if you liked horseback riding is because I was thinking of taking you out to see the land and animals. I thought it'd be nice to show you around. I can take you in the buggy if you'd prefer."

She relaxed, glad he hadn't laughed or criticized her for reacting the way she did. "I'd prefer to go in the buggy." She cleared her throat. "I can ride a horse, but I never cared for it."

"Then I'll take you in the buggy. Would you like to go tomorrow?"

"Will I be intruding on your work?"

"No. I can do the chores before or after I take you out. It's one of the benefits to working on the land."

Venturing a shy smile, she nodded. "I suppose it isn't too much different from doing things in the house. As long as things get done, it doesn't matter when you get to it."

"Yep."

Maggie ran over to them, her arms filled with an assortment of new flowers and weeds. Harriett couldn't help but grin at the odd arrangement. Undoubtedly, the girl couldn't tell the difference between them and had selected the ones most appealing to her.

"Keep them?" Maggie asked.

"Of course, we can keep them," Harriett told her. "We'll put them in a vase and set them in your room so you can be with them tonight."

"I don't have a vase," Stan interrupted.

"Well, I'm sure we can find something," Harriett replied.

"There is an old container that will work."

He stood up and held out his hand to help Harriett to her feet. She hesitated for a moment, but then accepted it. Though he released her hand as soon as she was standing up, her hand remained warm long after they returned to the house.

## Chapter Seventeen

Stan hitched the horse to the buggy the next morning after breakfast. Maggie followed him in the same manner she'd been doing for the past two days. Amused, he glanced over at her as he slipped the bridle on the horse.

"Are you afraid if you let me out of your sight, I'll disappear?" he asked.

Her eyes grew wide as if she'd suddenly considered that an option. "Could you?"

He chuckled. "No. No one can disappear. It's just that you follow me all over the place. Don't you want to spend any time with your ma?"

"She boring."

"Boring?"

The girl nodded. "Like being here."

"Oh." So it wasn't him, specifically that invited the girl's interest. She just liked to be in the barn and with the animals. "You're a lot like your aunt Emily. She used to go everywhere with your grandpa when he did his chores."

"Horses and cows fun."

"Yes, she thought so, too."

"Ride horse?"

"You already do. With me," he reminded her.

"Alone."

He shook his head. "Not yet. You're not old enough."

She stuck her lower lip out but didn't argue. He couldn't believe it. A month ago, she would have lain down on the ground and kicked and screamed. He wasn't sure what caused the girl to start behaving better, but he was sure Harriett had something to do with it.

A movement caught his eye, and he looked over at the barn door. A smile tugged at his lips. Harriett stood in the entrance wearing a lovely pink dress that brought out the color in her cheeks. At the moment, she was struggling with a knot in the strings of the white bonnet that matched the white ribbon tied around her slender waist.

He hurried to finish up with the horse then went over to her. "Here, I'll help you with that."

She looked up at him, and he caught the flicker of embarrassment in her eyes.

"You have nothing to be embarrassed about," he assured her as he took the strings and carefully worked through the knot.

"You could tell I was embarrassed?" she softly asked in a way that made his skin warm with pleasure.

Ignoring the sensation, he chuckled. "I'm afraid so. But there's nothing wrong with it. I like not having to guess what you're thinking. It helps me

know what to say.”

“Oh?”

He noted the worried expression on her face and tapped her nose, hoping to ease her fears. “I never realized you were so adorable.”

Her face turned red, and he knew that was a sign of pleasure. His smile widened, glad he’d managed to do something to please her. When he finished untying the knot, he retied the strings for her.

“There,” he said when he was done. “Perfect. You’re a pretty woman, Harriett.”

Then, before she could pick up on his sudden wave of nervousness, he put his hand on the small of her back and led her to the buggy. Maggie was already sitting in the seat, so all he had to do was help Harriett in. He took her hand, noting how soft it was. Usually, Harriett wore gloves, but he suspected she saw no reason to dress so formally when they were just going for a ride on their land.

She sat down, and it was with reluctance he let go of her hand. He wasn’t sure what it was about touching her that appealed to him so much, except maybe it was because it seemed to establish a connection between them that words couldn’t. At any rate, he supposed the reason didn’t matter. She was his wife, and he had the rest of his life to touch her, and that was something he was looking forward to.

After he got into the buggy, he released the brake and tapped the reins to urge the horse out of the barn. “I think winter is officially over,” he said, glancing past Maggie, who was in the middle, so he could get a good look at Harriett.

Harriett turned her gaze in his direction, and her eyes widened again. She was such a curious thing. It almost seemed as if she had a hard time believing everything he said.

He led the horse by the house and slowed it to a stop. “I was thinking that these would be good areas for your flowers.” He pointed to the front and the side of the house. “The sunlight is best in these places. It should help them grow nicely.”

“You really don’t mind if I plant them?” Harriett asked.

“Of course not. Like I said, they’ll make the place look a lot better.” He looked down at Maggie. “What do you think of having a bunch of flowers around the house?”

Maggie turned her big eyes to Harriett. “Can I help?”

“Yes, if you want,” Harriett replied, sounding surprised.

“She only wants to be with me when I’m with the animals and in the barn,” Stan told Harriett.

“It’s fun,” Maggie said.

“See what I mean?” Stan asked.

“It is fun planting flowers,” Harriett began, “especially when you know how beautiful the place will look when they bloom. When they’re ready, you can pick them and have them in the house.”

“My room?” Maggie asked, excitement in her voice.

“Some, but I’d also like some in the kitchen or parlor.”

The girl nodded, and that seemed to settle the matter.

“My ma plants flowers,” he said. “I can get some seeds from her if you wish.”

“Oh, you don’t have to go through all that trouble for me,” Harriett replied.

“It’s not any trouble. I used to take Maggie to see my folks at least once a week. Maggie likes going there.”

Maggie nodded and told Harriett, “Grandma nice.”

Harriett fiddled with the ribbon around her waist. “Yes, she is.”

“You know Grandma?”

“I’ve met her.”

“See her a lot?”

“Well, no. Only if she comes over to my house.”

Maggie’s eyebrows furrowed. “She not here.”

“I meant my other house. I mean,” Harriett cleared her throat, “the house I used to live in before I came here.”

“Did marry other pa?”

Stan chuckled at the surprised expression on Harriett’s face. “You’ll get used to it,” he assured her. “Children ask a lot of questions, and some will startle you.”

Despite the pretty shade of pink that crept up Harriett’s cheeks, she told Maggie, “No, I didn’t marry someone else. Your pa is the only one I married. I used to live with my parents. It’s the way things are. You live with your parents, and when you grow up, you’ll get married and live with your husband.”

“My ma didn’t.”

Since Harriett didn’t seem to know what to say, Stan rubbed the girl’s back. “Granted, that’s true. Your real ma didn’t, but I think you’ll be a lot happier if you do it the way Harriett did.”

Or maybe not. Harriett had married him out of a sense of obligation. It wasn’t because he loved and cherished her, as should have been the case. But that didn’t mean it wouldn’t be that way in the future.

Yesterday, he’d taken the time to talk to her—really talk to her—and got a chance to see a side of her that he never knew existed. Harriett had always been in her sister’s shadow. Rose took center stage in everything, and people were drawn to her because of it. He’d been no different. Like a lot of others, he overlooked Harriett.

But now, he knew what he'd been missing all those years, what he'd been too foolish to see. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

Turning his attention back to the flowers, he asked, "Harriett, would you like me to get seeds from my mother? She won't mind. She has more than enough."

Harriett bit her lower lip in the cutest way, and the familiar lines showed up on her forehead.

He hadn't realized she was so sensitive to the needs of others. How often did she do things to please someone else with little regard to herself? Reaching across Maggie, he placed his hand on her back and gave her a smile he hoped would reassure her. "I mean it. My mother will be fine with it. You won't be imposing."

She finally relaxed and returned his smile. "Alright."

Glad she accepted, he gave her a gentle pat then set his hand back at his side. "I'll go tomorrow." Not sure if she'd accept the invitation, he asked, "Would you like to go with me when I get them?"

She hesitated for a moment before answering. "You want me to go with you to your parents' place?"

"Yes, I would."

At first, he thought she was going to say no. But then, she turned her gaze in his direction. "I can see you're sincere in having an amiable relationship. The least I can do is meet you halfway. I'll be happy to come with you."

Amiable relationship? He had plans to do more than that. He fully intended to be married to her in more than name only. She was far too lovely to just be friends with. He'd make love to her tonight if she'd let him. Even now, the thought of cupping her breasts in his hands and feeling her legs around his waist made him hard. He had no idea someone who was so shy could excite him so much.

He quickly shifted to hide the evidence of his arousal. When he proved himself worthy of her, he'd get to consummate the marriage. He could wait until then. Forcing his attention to the path in front of them, Stan led the horse away from the house and toward the pasture.

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Harriett's stomach was tied up into all kinds of knots when Stan pulled up to the front of his parents' house the next day. She had only seen them when they came to celebrate a special occasion with her parents when Emily and Isaac were there. She'd never had a reason to come over here to see them. So she didn't really know them very well.

But she was determined to step out of the safe and familiar world she was used to. Besides, sooner or later, she'd have to visit Stan's parents at their home. She had to press through it. She couldn't hide from them forever.

Stan set the brake, and Maggie didn't even wait for him to help her out.

She just scooted over Harriett's lap and jumped down from the buggy. Then, she bolted to the front door, calling out that she had arrived. Harriett would have laughed if she wasn't so nervous.

Stan turned to her. "How long did you want to stay?"

Harriett clasped her hands together and shrugged. "I figured I'd stay as long as you wanted to. These are your parents after all."

"They're your parents by marriage. You have every right to say how long you want to see them."

Why was he asking her to make such a difficult decision? It would really depend on how well things went. If they couldn't find anything to say to each other, then a shorter visit would be better. All she'd said to them in the past was a hello and good-bye. Her brother and parents had done all the talking.

To her surprise, Stan scooted closer to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "You have nothing to worry about. They already like you."

"They hardly know me," she whispered, trying to ignore the way her skin tingled. Would she ever get over the thrill of being touched by him?

"Fair enough. They know more about you than they actually know you. But over the past few days, I've gotten to know you, and you're far more wonderful than I ever imagined. I want to kick myself for all the times I was too stupid to realize it." Then he leaned closer to her and kissed her cheek. "I won't ever make that error again."

Did he really kiss her? She was tempted to pinch herself, thinking she must be dreaming, but then she heard Maggie calling out to them and turned her gaze to the porch. Sarah, his mother, waved to them.

He greeted his mother and hurried out of the buggy to come to Harriett's side.

Harriett bit back her disappointment. He probably only kissed her because his mother was watching. Such foolish notions of him wanting to kiss her. It was just like it was in the past. She'd spent most of her time daydreaming about what it'd be like to be touched and kissed by Stan Craftsman. Truth be told, it was better than she'd ever imagined. Too bad it didn't mean anything to him.

But he was making an effort to get along with her. She needed to remember that. Theirs was a marriage of convenience, and he was making the most of it. At least, he cared enough about her to not come out and compare her to her sister. He couldn't help but notice the differences, she was sure. Rose wasn't the least bit shy, she could make people laugh, and, better yet, she made friends easily.

"Mind if I help you down?" Stan asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she murmured, realizing he'd been holding his hand out to her. She accepted it, and despite her intention, almost tripped on the hem of her skirt as he helped her down.

He caught her and chuckled. "I certainly don't mind an excuse to hold you," he whispered.

She wasn't sure what to think about his comment but quickly steadied her footing so she didn't have to hang all over him. This wasn't a good way to get on his mother's good side. Clearing her throat, she mumbled, "Thank you," and headed for the porch, careful to lift the hem of her skirt so she wouldn't trip again.

"I'm glad to see you," Sarah told her, opening her arms to offer her a hug.

Despite her unease, Harriett hugged the woman. She didn't make it a habit of hugging people she barely knew. That was something Rose did. And it was another example of why Rose attracted people and she didn't.

When the hug ended, Harriett forced aside her uncertainty and said, "I'm glad to see you, too."

Stan came up to them and placed his hand on the small of Harriett's back. "I hope you're not busy," he told his mother.

"Not at all," Sarah assured them. "Come on in and have something to eat and drink."

"I don't want to impose," Harriett said.

"You're not imposing. I'm glad you came." Sarah gestured to the parlor. "Make yourself at home."

Maggie ran on ahead of them, and Stan kept his hand on the small of Harriett's back, something that alarmed her as much as it excited her. She wished she knew the proper way to respond to him. Did she smile at him? Did she ignore him? Did she slip her arm around his? Did she thank him?

In the end, she decided to ignore him. Not because she wanted to be rude but because she didn't want to trip again and needed to focus on what was in front of her. When they got to the parlor, she was ready to sit in a chair, but Stan steered her to the couch.

"Why don't we sit here?" he asked, his voice very pleasant in her ear.

Oh for heaven's sakes. If she didn't sit down immediately, her knees just might buckle under her. And that would be way worse than tripping. Face warm, she settled on the couch, glad she made it before she embarrassed herself. Stan sat beside her, sitting closer than necessary and held her hand. This was horrible. Her heart was beating furiously in her chest, and it was hard to concentrate. How was she supposed to focus on anything his ma said?

Before she could suggest that Maggie sit between them, Stan patted the spot on the other side of him. "Grandma will come back with a treat, and I want you to be on your best behavior."

Maggie stopped running around the table in the middle of the room and jumped on the couch next to him. "I get treat if good," she told Harriett.

"She's a smart woman," Harriett replied.

Sometimes the method had worked for her and sometimes it hadn't, but

she had to admit things had gotten a lot better ever since the night she stormed out of the kitchen. Maggie might not be calling her Ma or be as excited to see her as she was to see Stan's mother, but it was a start.

His ma came into the room and set down a tray holding a pitcher of lemonade, cookies, and fudge on it.

Stan let go of Harriett's hand and picked up a piece of fudge. "You must have something important going on if you made fudge."

With a smile, Sarah whispered, "You pa's been craving it for a while now, so I thought I'd make it."

"Then we're lucky we stopped by when we did." Turning to Harriett, he added, "This doesn't last long around here. You should eat one before they're all gone."

Since he gave it to her, Harriett took it.

He then proceeded to give a piece, along with a cookie, to Maggie.

"Will you be staying here for supper?" Sarah asked as she sat in the chair near them.

"Oh, well," Stan glanced at Harriett, "we hadn't talked about it yet. I told Harriett you have some flower seeds, and I thought I'd come by to see if you wouldn't mind giving us some."

"I'd be happy to." Sarah's gaze went to Harriett. "Would you like to see the flowers I grow?"

Doing her best to settle the butterflies in her stomach, Harriett nodded. "If you're busy doing something else today, I can wait."

"I'm never too busy for family."

Sarah's smile helped settle Harriett's nerves enough so that she could eat.

After Stan swallowed his piece of fudge, he offered Harriett a glass of lemonade. "What do you think?"

"The fudge is good," Harriett replied then looked at Sarah. "Thank you."

"You should thank Stan's pa," Sarah joked.

"Speaking of which, where is he?" Stan asked. "I didn't see him in the pasture on our way here."

"He went to town," Sarah replied. "I don't expect him back until supper. So you see, I had nothing at all to do. I'm glad you came by."

"And me?" Maggie asked her.

"I'm glad you're here, too," Sarah said.

The girl, seeming happy with Sarah's answer, finished the cookie.

"Is this all the fudge you have?" Stan asked his mother.

"I have a small box reserved for your pa. You can have everything on the plate."

"See kitties?" Maggie asked, turning to Stan with an expectant look on her face that even Harriett would find hard to say no to.

He finished his drink then glanced at Sarah and Harriett. "Um, I don't

know if now's a good time."

"If you'd like," Sarah began, gesturing to Harriett, "I could show you the flowers in my garden while he takes Maggie to the barn to see the kittens."

Harriett hesitated to say yes since she wasn't completely comfortable with the idea of being alone with Sarah, but since Maggie seemed to have her heart set on seeing the kittens, she relented. "That would be fine," Harriett told Stan.

Maggie let out an excited cry and jumped off the couch.

Stan grabbed a few more pieces of fudge, giving Harriett a couple. "I won't be long."

"It's fine, Stan," Harriett replied. "Take your time."

He paused, and Harriett thought he was going to say or do something, but then he nodded and led Maggie out of the house.

In Stan and Maggie's absence, Harriett couldn't help but notice how quiet the house was. She chewed on the fudge, trying to think of what she might say that Sarah would find remotely interesting, but her mind was blank except for a simple, "This is good," about the fudge.

"I spend half the day stirring it so it's just right. That's why I only make it a couple times a year."

"I've made some of those treats, too. I have to be in the mood to make them."

"Me too."

After a moment, Sarah asked, "Would you like to eat or drink anything else?"

Harriett shook her head. "No, thank you. I'm full."

Sarah picked up the tray. "Would you like to see my flowers now?"

"Yes, I would."

It'd give them something to do—and talk about—so Harriett wouldn't have to feel so awkward. With a nod, Harriett followed her out of the parlor. After Sarah put the tray down on the worktable, she led Harriett outside and to the garden.

"What do you think? See any flowers that catch your interest?" Sarah asked.

"The tulips are pretty," Harriett replied as she studied the purple, red, and yellow tulips. "Too bad they don't bloom for more than a couple weeks."

"They're beautiful," Sarah agreed, her hands behind her back. "They're my favorite of all flowers, but I agree with you. They don't last long enough for me to fully enjoy them."

"I think I'd like to have a mix of annuals and perennials." After considering all the flowers Sarah had, Harriett finally decided, "I'd like some false indigos, yarrows, impatiens, tulips, and cleomes. With Maggie around, I don't want to spend all my time caring for flowers, but I wouldn't mind a

little time in the garden.”

“You made good choices, and I can give you a couple of the flowers I already have. That way, you don’t have to plant the seeds and wait for them to grow.”

“I don’t want to impose.”

“It’s not an imposition. I’m offering. All we need to do is dig a few up and put them in an old container.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“Well, I’m happy Stan married you. I always thought you were the kind of young woman who’d make a good wife. It’s in how you act. A person’s character is best defined by how they treat others.”

Letting out an awkward chuckle, Harriett said, “I didn’t think you paid much attention to me the few times we were together.”

“I did. I noticed how much you helped your mother when she needed it.” Sarah put her hands in the pockets of her skirt and started walking toward the porch steps then turned to Harriett. “There is something I want to ask you, but I’m not sure how or if it’s even appropriate.”

“What is it?”

“Maybe it’s a silly question. I can tell he’s grown to care for you. But I keep wondering, is Stan good to you?”

Harriett was surprised so many people seemed concerned about whether or not Stan was good to her. She wasn’t sure how husbands typically treated their wives, but she supposed in her case, Stan was as nice as he could be, given theirs wasn’t a normal marriage.

“He’s very kind, yes,” Harriett replied, not sure what Sarah wanted to hear.

It was a vague answer, but it was the truth. Stan was considerate toward her needs and sought ways to please her. There was nothing more she could ask of him, especially since he didn’t compare her to Rose, at least not openly. For all she knew, he did, but he kept those thoughts to himself. Yes, he was kind in that regard.

Sarah breathed a sigh of relief, her body relaxing. “I’m glad to hear it.” Then she led Harriett up the porch steps. “I will gather my gardening tools, and we’ll get those flowers for you.” When they reached the door, she turned to face her. “I hope you don’t think I’m being forward, but I’d be delighted if you stayed for supper. You don’t have to, of course. But I want you to know you’re welcome here.”

The woman’s kind words set Harriett’s mind at ease. Even if Stan had wished he’d married Rose instead of her, it was apparent Sarah was satisfied with having her as a daughter-in-law. “I’d be happy to stay for supper,” Harriett replied.

Sarah’s smile widened then she opened the door, and as Harriett followed

her inside, she suspected Sarah would be a good friend in the years to come.

## Chapter Eighteen

Sunday morning, Stan dared a glance at Harriett as they ate breakfast. Ever since they got married, she refused to go to church with him. He could have taken Maggie, but he didn't think it was appropriate to do so now that he was married. He should take all of them together as a family. They were a family, after all. And he wanted to act like it.

"Harriett," he began, waiting for her to look in his direction before he continued. "Would you be willing to go to church with me and Maggie today?"

He caught the uncertain flicker on her face as she probably weighed the pros and cons of going. Then she asked, "Which church will we go to?"

"The one we went to before we got married."

She tapped her fork on the plate and took a deep breath. "Alright. Rose doesn't go there."

Her eyes grew wide, as if she hadn't meant to say the last part aloud, so he chose to resume eating his eggs, pretending he didn't notice. It wasn't the first time she let something slip about Rose. He'd noticed every single incident.

He had hoped that she would stop thinking of how much he once wanted to marry Rose. He told himself to be patient. He and Harriett had only been married for two months. That wasn't a long time. But it was starting to feel like she'd never let the past go.

After they finished eating, he picked up the plates and put them in the sink while she cleaned Maggie up. With a glance at the clock, he decided there wasn't time to do the dishes if they wanted to get to church on time.

"I'll help you with the dishes when we get back," he told Harriett, turning to her. "We need to change into more appropriate clothes."

She looked over at the clock and sighed. "You're right. I'll help Maggie get dressed." She bent in front of the girl and smiled. "How would you like to wear that dress I made for you?"

With a squeal, Maggie jumped off her chair and bolted for the steps.

Stan laughed. "I'll take that as a yes."

Harriett chuckled. "It's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

Before she could follow the girl, he reached for her hand. "Thank you."

"For making the dress?"

"Well, for that, too. But I wanted to thank you for being a good mother to her. She's been through a lot, as you know, and it's nice to see her happy. When I adopted her, she didn't do a lot of smiling and laughing. She does now, though."

"I can't take credit for that, Stan."

"Sure, you can."

"No." She shook her head then lowered her voice. "I was ready to give up

on her that night when I stormed out of this kitchen. At that moment, I was ready to go right back to my parents and stay there for the rest of my life.”

He suspected as much. “What stopped you?”

She shrugged. “I realized just how difficult things had been for you as you tried to take care of her. It’s not as easy to raise her as I thought it’d be.”

Touched by her admission, he squeezed her hand. It didn’t seem anyone else understood he really had been doing his best, even if it’d been obvious he’d been failing to be the perfect father with the way Maggie kept acting up when they were in public—and when they were at home. Now, he had someone who did know he’d been doing everything he could to give Maggie a good home and raise her right. And that meant he didn’t have to feel like such a failure.

“If I’d known it was going to be so hard, I probably wouldn’t have adopted her,” he whispered. “I’m glad I didn’t know. I might not be her real father, but I feel like I am.”

“She’s behaving much better because of you.”

“Because of me?”

“I overheard you that day in the kitchen. You were kind to her, but you were also firm. You’re a better father than you realize.”

His face warmed with pleasure from her compliment. “I appreciate that.” Since she hadn’t pulled her hand out of his, he ventured, “There’s something else I’m glad about. I’m glad you’re here.”

He leaned forward, thinking to kiss her, but she blurted out, “I can hear Maggie in my bedroom looking for the dress,” then hurried out of the kitchen.

He was sure she fled because she knew he intended to kiss her, but he couldn’t prove it since it did sound like Maggie was getting into trouble. The girl was amazingly quick when she wanted to be. He’d dealt with her mischievous side often enough to know that, but he suspected it hadn’t been the reason Harriett refused to kiss him.

He wasn’t surprised. Disappointed? Yes. But surprised? Definitely not.

He went up the stairs and to his room to change. He hesitated to put on his best suit since he’d worn it when he married Harriett and it might bring up unpleasant memories for her, but it was the only suit he had that was suitable for church. Whether he liked it or not, he was stuck with it. He could only hope she wouldn’t take one look at it and say she changed her mind.

It was more than church he was after. He wanted to do something with her in front of others besides his parents. He wanted people to see them as husband and wife, to know they were married. If someone asked him why that was so important to him, he wouldn’t be able to explain it. It just was.

Once he combed his hair, he slipped the tie on then checked his reflection. In the past when Harriett looked at him, she must have liked what she’d seen. He wasn’t sure why she chose him, of all the young men in the area, but he

was glad she did. She had a good heart and a gentle and meek spirit.

His heart still warmed when he recalled her kind words regarding his ability to be a good father. It had been her sincerity that struck him the most. And it'd been so much like her. She might not stand out where people noticed her, but that didn't make her any less charming.

She sought out ways to help others, never expecting anything in return. It made sense she would marry someone because a little girl needed her. He couldn't think of anyone else who'd be willing to sacrifice her happiness for the sake of others.

A woman like that deserved to be loved—and loved with a man's entire heart. How he wished he'd noticed that sooner. But today was a new day, and he wasn't one to give up easily when he wanted something badly enough. And he wanted Harriett.

Taking a deep breath, he left his room and saw Maggie twirling around in the hallway. She stopped and looked up at him with a wide smile on her face. "Am I pretty, Pa?"

He smiled. "Yes, you are."

"Wear this tomorrow?"

"I'm afraid not. You can only wear it on special occasions so it doesn't get dirty."

The door to Harriett's room opened, and she stepped into the hallway. She wore a blue dress with white gloves and a matching hat. Had she worn that before? Surely, he would have noticed her if she had. Wouldn't he? He'd like to think he would, but he'd been surprisingly daft when it came to her in the past.

"You look lovely," Stan told her before he lost his nerve.

He took a deep breath, suddenly aware he was, of all things, experiencing the same awkward shyness he had with Rose, except this was different. It was more important that she would find him acceptable, which was silly since she already cared for him.

"It's a new dress," Harriett replied. "I tried a new pattern my ma showed me."

"Well, it certainly is a good one. The dress is perfect on you."

A hint of pink colored her cheeks as she smiled. "Thank you. My ma knows what styles complement a particular woman. I'll let her know she made a good choice."

No, it wasn't necessarily the pattern. It was her, specifically, but he wasn't sure how to get that point across. She seemed determined to believe he couldn't have a sincere romantic interest in her, and that worried him. If she continued to be oblivious to the overtures of affection he was giving her, then he wasn't sure how they were ever going to change their marriage of convenience into something more.

Was he going to have to be more obvious about his intentions? Perhaps come out and kiss her? But hadn't he just tried that in the kitchen? She claimed Maggie might be getting into trouble and ran upstairs.

"We should get going," she said, bringing his attention back to the moment. "We don't want to be late."

Right. Church. He followed Harriett and Maggie down the stairs, his gaze inadvertently going to Harriett's backside. He'd made it a habit of walking next to her, but he could definitely see the advantages of letting her take the lead.

Their trip to the church was a quiet one. From time to time, Stan saw Harriett fidget on the seat. Sometimes she'd readjust her hat or fiddle with her gloves.

He reached out and touched her shoulder. "I won't say or do anything to embarrass you," he promised, his tone light.

As he hoped, she relaxed a bit and smiled. "I know you won't embarrass me."

"I won't either," Maggie piped up, looking up at Harriett.

"I don't know. It's hard for a child to sit still while the preacher's talking," Stan said, patting the girl's back. "Even if you do have your favorite doll with you."

"I can always take her outside if she needs a break," Harriett replied.

Feeling playful, Stan whispered, "Don't give Maggie ideas."

"I'm sure Maggie will be on her best behavior," Harriett said then looked at the girl. "Won't you, Maggie?"

She nodded. "Is there licowice?"

Stan burst out laughing. "I'm afraid Maggie's good behavior comes at a price."

"Certainly not." Harriett shook her head at Maggie. "I can't give you licorice for behaving. You'll have to behave because you're in public, and it's only right you behave when you're around others. Now, if you help me or your pa with a chore or if you eat your meal, I can see giving you licorice."

Maggie sighed. "Being good is hard."

Stan resisted the urge to laugh again, more amused by Harriett's look of shock than Maggie's comment. He led the horse onto the church lawn and parked the buggy between two wagons. After he got out, he helped Harriett and Maggie down, surprised that Maggie didn't jump out like she usually did.

"Keep dress clean," Maggie explained as if she could read his mind.

Eyebrows raised, he told Harriett, "So that's the secret to making her behave in public." He caught the twinkle in Harriett's eye and knew he'd said the right thing. She was more relaxed, and that was good. Pressing his luck, he slipped his arm around hers. "Want to say hi to your family before we go in?"

She hesitated for a moment then nodded.

He could only imagine the internal debate she'd gone through to decide to lead him over to them. She probably weighed the pros and cons, knowing full well it took them one step closer to truly being husband and wife. But despite her apprehension, she chose to let him into her heart a little more, and he wasn't going to take that for granted.

Maggie followed them as they approached Harriett's parents. "Got new dress," Maggie blurted out before Harriett or Stan had a chance to say anything.

Harriett's ma turned to her and smiled. "It's a pretty dress, Maggie." She glanced over at Harriett. "You always had a good eye for fashion."

"You get that from your mother," Harriett's pa added with a wink.

"I know. I learned from the best," Harriett replied. She cleared her throat then gestured to Stan. "You know Stan, of course."

"Sure do." Her pa gave him a pat on the shoulder, similar to the way he did with his sons. "Nice to see you two together."

"Yes, well," Harriett began, "we thought it was best to adjust to the marriage and let Maggie get used to having me for a mother before coming to church."

"There's nothing wrong with that," her pa said. "I'd say it was a good move. You won't want to rush things too much." His gaze went to Maggie. "You look happy."

"Dress pretty," Maggie replied.

The group chuckled, and Stan said, "Once she sets her mind on something, it's hard to talk to her about much else."

"It is a lovely dress," Harriett's ma replied. "I bet you feel like a princess, don't you?"

Maggie nodded.

"We should get in there before the service starts," Harriett's pa spoke up as people passed them to get into the church. "Stan, after the service, I'd like to ask you about breeding cattle. I was going to ask your pa, but since you're here," he shrugged, "I might as well ask you."

"I'd be happy to help you in any way I can," Stan told him.

"I appreciate that," he said. "You and your family know more about cattle than I do."

Stan glanced at Harriett as they followed her parents into the small building. She was smiling, and smiling was a good sign. It meant she was happy, and more than anything, he wanted to make her happy. Today, he thought, was a very good start in that direction.

## Chapter Nineteen

Two mornings later, Stan went upstairs after he finished tending to the animals. His plan had been to change his pants since he fell in the mud, but as he reached the middle of the hallway, he caught a glimpse of Harriett. Usually, her bedroom door was shut, but today it was open, and he couldn't help but stop and take a good look at her reflection in the mirror, especially since she was only wearing a chemise with her skirt. This gave him a good view of her breasts, and he even caught the hint of her nipples as they poked against the cotton fabric.

More arousing, however, was the fact that her hair was down. She hadn't had time to pin it back into a bun, so it fell in soft waves down her back. He wouldn't have guessed her hair was long enough to almost reach her waist, but it gave her a soft look.

If he was a gentleman, he would either go directly to his room or let her know he was there. But on this particular day, he didn't feel like being a gentleman. He'd spent the past week being a gentleman.

He hadn't kissed her, though he'd been tempted to a couple of times. He'd kept his touching simple. He hadn't done anything he wouldn't have done had they not been married. But they were married, and the more he got to know her, the harder it was to act as if there was nothing of a more romantic nature between them.

She dug around in her dresser drawer until she found something then straightened up and glanced over her shoulder. For a moment, he thought she saw him, and he stepped further into the shadows. As embarrassing as it'd been to get caught, he didn't want to stop looking at her.

But then she said, "I found a brush. It'll be gentler on your hair."

Maggie stepped into view, already in her dress for the day, and stood in front of her. "Won't hurt?"

"No, it won't hurt. It's the same brush I use when my hair gets all tangled."

The girl hesitated then nodded.

Harriett brushed her hair, working carefully through the tangles. "I can put your hair back so it won't tangle so much."

"No want bun."

Harriett's lips curled up. "It won't be a bun. I can weave the strands together into a braid. It'll hang down your back."

"Won't hurt?"

"No, it won't hurt."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Maggie nodded.

Stan's gaze went back to Harriett, and he was able to get a better view of her breasts in the mirror. Too bad she had the chemise on. His fingers itched to pull it over her head. But of course, he couldn't. Instead, he had to stay where he was and study the way the chemise outlined the curve of her breasts, a decision that only served to make him so hard it was difficult to concentrate.

"Trees eat people?" Maggie asked.

Surprised by the strange topic, Stan's gaze went to the girl's reflection in the mirror.

Harriett chuckled. "No, they don't eat people. They grow fruit and provide shade in the summer."

"Have bad fruit?"

"Bad fruit?"

The girl's nose scrunched up for a moment before she said, "Posonis."

Harriett slowed her brushing then grinned. "Poisonous?"

The girl nodded.

"I know there are some poisonous berries," Harriett said, "but you don't have to worry about those around here."

"Like blueberries?"

"No. Blueberries are alright for you. Nothing bad will happen if you eat those."

"What bad? How know?"

"Because others have told us they're bad. However, it can be hard to tell just by looking at them. Kings used to have someone taste their food to make sure it didn't have any poison in it."

Maggie's eyebrows furrowed in a skeptical manner similar to the way Harriett did when she had a hard time believing something.

"Now," Harriett said as she began to braid the girl's hair, "whatever gave you the idea that trees can eat people?"

"Had dream."

"Oh?"

"Tree ate you."

Harriett's hands grew still and her eyes met Maggie's in the mirror. "It did?"

The girl nodded again. "Bad dream. No want it."

Harriett let go of Maggie's hair and turned her around. Then, kneeling in front of the girl, she said, "You have nothing to worry about. Nothing's going to eat me."

"Good."

"Oh, Maggie, you're such a sweet little girl," Harriett said, her voice soft, tears in her voice. "Thank you."

"For what?"

“For caring about whether or not a tree eats me.” Harriett laughed. “I know how silly it sounds, but I want you to like me.”

“Never had ma.”

“I’ve never had a child before either. We’re both learning as we go along, aren’t we?” She stood up. “I should finish braiding your hair before your pa comes back.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to be fully dressed when he comes here.”

“He there.” She pointed to him.

Stan made a move forward to pretend he just came up the stairs as Harriett covered her breasts with her arms.

“I didn’t hear you come up the stairs,” she said, her cheeks flaming red.

“I’m not wearing my boots,” he quickly replied, hoping his guilt didn’t show. Yes, she was his wife, but that didn’t mean he had the right to stand and gawk at her like a lovesick schoolboy. “The socks are quiet on the floor.”

“He there whole time,” Maggie pointed out.

He shot her a pleading look to stop talking because she was only going to get him in trouble.

But the girl was either oblivious to it or enjoying the fact that she’d caught him doing something wrong because she said, “He hear dream.”

Harriett grew pale.

“Oh for goodness’ sakes,” he muttered. “Maggie, go downstairs.”

“Braid.”

“Your ma can take care of it down there,” he said.

Maggie let out a long sigh but headed down the steps.

He waited until she was safely out of hearing distance before turning back to Harriett, who was scrambling to put her shirtwaist on. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Oh no? You’re not the one practically naked,” she mumbled as she hurried to fasten the buttons.

“You’re missing a hole,” he told her, gesturing to the one she didn’t fasten.

With a groan, she unfastened all her buttons and started refastening them, this time being more careful.

“We’re married, Harriett. There’s no reason to be so modest.”

“We might be married, but you haven’t seen me naked.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing you naked,” he admitted, trying to make light of the moment by smiling playfully at her. “You certainly have a beautiful face and a beautiful body to go with it.”

She looked up at him as if she couldn’t believe her ears, and he wasn’t sure if she took it as an insult or a compliment.

“Harriett,” he continued, lowering his voice, “I like looking at you. I also

like talking to you and doing things with you. You're not just beautiful on the outside. You've also got a kind heart. Please don't be upset with me because I enjoy looking at you and being with you."

She moved her mouth as if she wanted to speak but was having trouble finding her voice, and her face became a brighter shade of red, something he hadn't thought possible. It took him a moment to realize she was flustered. She was trying to form a coherent reply but couldn't. He didn't think he'd take her off guard in such a way, but she was absolutely adorable when she didn't know what to say.

"You're so charming, and you don't even know it," he whispered.

He made a move to kiss her when something made a loud noise in the kitchen.

"Maggie," she gasped and darted around him.

With a groan, he turned around and watched as she scurried down the steps like someone with their backside on fire. He thought about going after her but thought better of it when he remembered how dirty his pants were.

As he changed his pants, he thought over all the possible ways he could get Harriett to kiss him. If it wasn't for Maggie, he might have succeeded by now, but as it was, Harriett seemed to be using the girl as an excuse to avoid kissing him. And a kiss was the only way he could see making their marriage progress from being boringly platonic to something much more interesting.

Once he buttoned his new pants, he made a decision. He would try to kiss her tonight after Maggie went to bed. Maybe then, things would change for the better.

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"You want to go on another picnic?" Harriett asked later that day.

Stan set a picnic basket on the parlor table, Maggie at his heels. "We enjoyed ourselves last time, so I thought it'd be fun. Do you mind?"

"No, I don't mind," she said. "I should put away these things and help."

She began to gather the sewing supplies, but he stopped her. "Maggie and I are going to make it."

"You made the last one," she reminded him.

"And we'll do this one, too." He came over to her and placed his hand on her shoulder, and as if that wasn't enough to cause her heart to speed up, he leaned forward and kissed the top of her head. "You're mending my pants. You have enough to do already. And," he squeezed her shoulder affectionately, "I want to show you how much I appreciate it."

Though he released her, her skin still tingled. Good heavens, but the man was going to be the end of her. She knew he felt bad about the way he'd rejected her in the past, but she wished he didn't feel like he had to constantly make up for it. She'd forgiven him.

Maybe she should tell him. As much as she didn't want to dwell on the

past, maybe it was best if she brought it up. Then, perhaps, he would feel at ease and stop forcing himself to pretend he fancied her in the same way he fancied her sister.

With a sigh, she spread out his pants in front of her and resumed her sewing. Yes, she'd absolve him from all guilt after Maggie went to play during their picnic.

By the time she finished mending the pants, she thought to help them. But when she caught sight of Stan and Maggie laughing as they rolled up the dough for the bread, she decided to tend to the flowerbed instead. When she finished with that, she washed up and changed clothes for the picnic. And as she came to the kitchen, Stan told her they were ready to go.

"I didn't realize you liked picnics so much," she told him as they walked down a path that would take them near the same wildflowers Maggie had enjoyed before.

Stan shrugged. "It's nice when it isn't too hot. I know there's a good wind today, but I figure it'll keep the bugs away."

"Yes, it will. I suppose it is a good day for a picnic."

"And it's a good day to share your company."

There he went again, trying to make up for the past. "Stan, I'm not upset with you about the auction. You don't have to worry about it anymore."

"I wasn't worried about it."

Though he claimed it, she wasn't sure she believed it. Why would he insist on taking picnics if it didn't worry him?

He stopped and spread the blanket on the ground. Once he set the basket down, she helped him dig out the food and plates. They called Maggie over, and the three enjoyed the meal well enough except for the bread, which was too tough to eat.

"Why hard?" Maggie asked, banging it on the ground.

"I must have messed up with the recipe," Stan replied as he tried, unsuccessfully, to tear his slice in half. "It was fine when I cut it."

Harriett chuckled. "We all make mistakes when we're learning to cook."

"But I've made bread before," Stan said. "I don't know what I did to it this time."

"No read card," Maggie replied.

"Yes, that's probably it," he admitted. "I thought for sure I knew all the ingredients, how long to let the dough rise and how long to cook it."

"It's fine, Stan. Everyone makes mistakes in the kitchen," Harriett assured him.

He glanced at her. "Not you."

"Yes, I do."

"Ever since you came to live with us, every meal's been perfect."

"That's because I've had a lot of practice. But I promise you I had my

moments of getting things wrong.”

“I find it hard to believe.”

“Fine. Then don’t believe it. Just ask my brothers next time you see them at church. They’ll tell you the truth.”

His eyebrows rose. “You don’t want me to ask your parents?”

“My parents will be much too kind. They’ll cover up any mishaps I’ve made. If you want the truth, you need to go to Adam, Jacob, or Eli. Isaac was already out of the house when I started to cook, so it’s no good asking him.”

“I don’t need to ask them. I believe you.”

“Ma cook good,” Maggie said then stood up. “I full. Play now?”

Harriett barely heard Stan tell the girl she could play. Over and over in her mind, she kept thinking that the girl had called her *Ma*. And better yet, the girl had said it as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

As Maggie hurried to the flowers, her gaze went to Stan. “Do you think she really sees me as her mother?”

“Maggie doesn’t say something unless she means it.”

Pleased, she smiled and turned her gaze back to Maggie, her daughter.

## Chapter Twenty

“Good night,” Harriett whispered to Maggie then kissed her forehead.

“Night, Ma,” Maggie replied.

Harriet slipped out of the room and softly shut the door. She turned in time to see Stan standing in the hallway, the faint light from the moonlight streaming through the small window allowing her to see his smile.

“It’s been a good day, don’t you think?” he asked, keeping his voice low.

What was he doing here? He hadn’t been waiting for her after she tucked Maggie in bed before. She waited for a moment then said, “Yes, it was nice.”

“Even though I didn’t make the best meal?”

She chuckled as she recalled the hard bread. “It was the effort that mattered.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“I do. Well, I should make sure the kitchen is clean.”

She made an attempt to walk around him, but he stopped her. “I took care of everything. You don’t have to worry about it tonight.” Before she could make another attempt to go around him, he asked, “Why do you find it so hard to believe that someone could be attracted to you?”

She almost reminded him that he’d been able to successfully ignore her for years, but then, he leaned forward and kissed her. She’d managed to dodge his kisses before, but he hadn’t given her sufficient warning this time. If she was smart, she’d put an end to it at once and hurry to her bedroom. But in her shock, her feet remained firmly in place, and no matter how much she willed them to move, they wouldn’t.

The kiss started off gentle, his lips lightly brushing hers. Then he grew bolder and deepened the kiss. He brought her into his arms, and as much as she didn’t want to, she melted in his embrace. He always had this effect on her. No matter what, she couldn’t resist him. It’d been that way from the moment she realized she loved him, and it hadn’t gotten any easier over the past few years. If anything, her feelings had only grown stronger.

And right now, she was overwhelmed with the pleasure of his kiss. Many times in the past, she’d imagined what it’d be like to kiss him, and it was much better than what she expected. He brought his hand up to the side of her face and angled her head so that he could kiss her cheek and then her neck. She shivered in delight. If there was anything better than this, she didn’t know what it was.

He brought her to her bedroom, and before she had time to question what was happening, he was unbuttoning her shirtwaist. His actions were tender as he removed it. She bit her lower lip. Was this a good idea? Should she stop him? He brought his mouth back to her neck, and his hands cupped her

breasts, which strained against the chemise. No one had touched her so intimately before, and it was far more wonderful than she thought possible.

She should have known when he started kissing her it was going to lead to more, that he was going to want to continue. They were married, after all. There was no reason for him to stop at a simple kiss.

And honestly, she didn't want him to stop. Not when he lifted the chemise over her head. Not when he removed the pins from her hair so it fell softly over her shoulders. Not when he brought his mouth to her nipple and suckled on it. She moaned and leaned into him, holding his shoulders because she didn't trust her legs to remain firm. All he had to do was look at her, and her knees became weak. It made sense that she'd be much more powerless when he touched and kissed her in such a tender way.

His mouth went to her other breast, and he proceeded to suckle her other nipple while cupping both breasts in his hands. Her fingers dug into his shoulders then she quickly lessened her hold on him in case she hurt him. He hadn't complained. In fact, he seemed much too wrapped up in exploring her to care about whether or not she was being too forceful. And for some reason, that excited her all the more, causing an unfamiliar heated wetness to settle between her legs.

Releasing her breasts, he knelt in front of her and unbuttoned her skirt. His movements were slow as he lowered it then her petticoats and, last but not least, her bloomers. Despite the fact that there wasn't much moonlight coming in between the curtains in her room, she was relieved it was dark enough so he wouldn't see her blushing. Even if she was caught up in the thrill of the moment, she couldn't help the sudden wave of shyness that came over her at being naked in front of him.

He lifted his gaze to hers, and never once did she imagine he'd ever look at her with such longing. "You're so beautiful." He traced her legs and brought his hands to her hips then to her breasts. "I've never seen anything so lovely in all my life."

Overcoming her apprehension, she touched the side of his face. She hadn't been so bold with him. Oh sure, she'd fantasized about it. Many times in the past, she had wanted to lean forward and kiss him. But she hadn't dared because she knew he wouldn't like it. But maybe he'd be fine with it now. They were, after all, going to consummate their marriage.

Taking a deep breath, she leaned forward and brushed her lips with his, her kiss more of a question than anything else. And he didn't hesitate to respond to her. His tongue caressed her lower lip, urging her to open her mouth, and she obeyed, wanting nothing more than to please him, to give him whatever he wanted. She loved him. She would always love him. It'd never be anyone else but him for as long as she lived. Deep down, she'd always known it. But only now did she dare admit it.

In one swift motion, he swept her up into his arms and carried her to the bed. Without taking his clothes off first, he settled next to her and resumed their kiss. And she wrapped her arms around his neck to encourage him to keep going. She never wanted this moment to end. In this room, for tonight, he was hers. Completely hers. There was no one else but them.

While his tongue interlaced with hers, he continued to explore her. His touch was absolutely thrilling. She recalled the way her fingers had sparked that day when her hand had brushed his at the picnic. This was much better. Because now he was touching her on purpose, and in his touch was the intent of being with her.

His mouth left hers and, once again, he was kissing her breasts and teasing her nipples in a way that made her squirm. When his hand brushed the curls between her legs, she gasped. Truly, she hadn't expected that area of her body to be so sensitive.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, lifting his head and looking at her in concern.

Her face warmed from embarrassment. "No. I...it felt good." She cleared her throat. "I liked it."

He relaxed. "I don't want to hurt you."

She brushed aside a lock of blond hair that fell over one of his eyes. "I know."

Taking her hand in his, he kissed her palm, and for some reason she couldn't explain, the tenderness in his action made her tingle straight from her head to her toes. He gave her one of those heartwarming smiles then let go of her hand so he could caress the area between her legs once more.

She closed her eyes and gave into the moment. She wasn't going to think through everything that was happening. She was simply going to let it happen and enjoy it. Because it was enjoyable. Very much so, in fact. The way his fingers slid over the opening of her flesh made her heart race in anticipation. And when one tentatively went into her, she groaned.

"It feels good," she whispered, fearing he'd stop in case he thought he hurt her.

But he wasn't hurting her. In fact, she couldn't recall ever feeling so wonderful in her entire life. She parted her legs further for him, and he slid another finger into her, making her moan in appreciation. Then he proceeded to stroke her core, slow at first as if to learn what she liked and didn't like, and since there was nothing at all to dislike about what he was doing, she rocked her hips encouragingly and murmured for him to keep going.

He obeyed, his fingers going deeper into her until he touched a very sensitive spot that made her dig her fingernails into his arm. She told herself to release him, but he kept caressing that area and she could only cry out as he brought her closer to the brink of something she suspected was going to be the most wonderful sensation she'd ever experienced. And sure enough, when

she reached the peak, she was overwhelmed by how much pleasure her body was capable of experiencing.

When she descended back to Earth, Stan pulled his fingers out of her. She was only half-aware that he was undressing. Still caught up in the lingering effects of the pleasure he'd just given her, she watched him until he removed his pants. No. There was no way she could look at all of him. At least not yet. And it wasn't like she would have gotten much of a chance to check him out anyway since in the next moment, he was on top of her, his naked body settled between her legs.

He brought his mouth to hers again. There was no denying the passion in his kiss. Perhaps he was seeking the same pleasure he'd just given her. And considering just how pleasurable the climax was, she wanted nothing more than to give it to him.

He entered her with surprising swiftness, and this time when she cried out, it was partly from shock and partly from the stab of pain the sudden movement caused.

In the next moment, he pulled out of her. "Harriett?" He cupped her face in his hands. "What's wrong?"

She struggled to ignore the pain so she could focus on him. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, sweetheart." He kissed her, and the gentle action helped calm her. "I don't want to hurt you, but I heard it can hurt during the first time for the woman. I thought I got you ready for me, but guess I didn't."

"Who told you a woman's first time can hurt?" she asked.

She hadn't thought he'd been with a woman before, but his father had sowed his wild oats in his youth. Maybe he'd done the same thing, thinking he'd be a better lover in bed because of it or because he didn't want to wait until he was married.

"You can't tell anyone because it's embarrassing, but my pa did. He said I shouldn't go to a prostitute to learn this, that he'd just come out and tell me, so I wouldn't have to be curious."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Why is that embarrassing?"

He shrugged. "It just is. Maybe you have to be a man to understand why."

Maybe. But even so, she was relieved to know, without a doubt, she was the only one he'd been with. "Does the pain go away?"

"Yes, but this time, maybe not. Next time, it should be better."

She ran her hands up his arms and pulled him closer to her. At least now she was prepared. Her mother had offered to tell her about what to expect, but since she didn't believe she'd ever be in bed with Stan, she refused to listen to her. But that didn't matter now. What mattered was that she was with him, and she could still give him pleasure.

"Don't stop," she whispered, wrapping her legs around his waist and

pulling him toward her, acutely aware that the tip of his erection was pressing against her entrance.

“We can wait.”

“It’ll be better next time. You said so,” she reminded him, even as a part of her dreaded the idea of having him in her again. But she’d do it. And next time, maybe it wouldn’t hurt at all. “It’s alright, Stan. I’m telling you to do it.”

He gave her another kiss and nodded. “I’ll try to be quick.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant by being quick, especially when he eased back into her. But she did notice the pain wasn’t as intense as before. In fact, it had dulled to the point where it was bearable. And he was gentle with her. He moved slowly into her then almost all the way out before sliding back in. It wasn’t long before he grew taut and groaned, signaling that he had found his release.

When he relaxed, she held him in her arms. Shortly, his breathing grew steady and long, notifying her that he’d fallen asleep. She didn’t mind. It gave her time to hold him and enjoy this moment when he was completely hers.

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Stan didn’t remember falling asleep, but when he woke up, he was resting in Harriett’s arms, his head settled on her breasts. And more than that, he was fully erect and eager to make love to her again. He’d never experienced anything so wonderful in his entire life. And better yet, he got to experience it with Harriett.

His pa had told him there was a difference between being intimate with just any woman versus a wife. Both offered pleasure, his pa had said, but the pleasure offered by the wife was a lasting one. It was more fulfilling, and it made the man feel closer to her afterwards. Such was not the case with the woman who simply offered a temporary release. Randy hadn’t seemed to care one way or another what happened with Maggie’s mother. He’d found her to be an amusement and had gotten some satisfaction from being with her, but as much as Stan hated to think ill of his friend, Randy’s motives had been selfish. And Maggie’s mother knew it, which was why she left Omaha.

Stan couldn’t imagine thinking of Harriett the same way Randy had thought of Maggie’s mother. In a short time, Harriett had become the most important part of his life. All the time, she’d been right in front of him, but he’d been too dumb to realize how perfect she was for him.

Well, he wasn’t so dumb anymore. He’d gotten smart before it was too late to miss out on the best for his life. And there was no doubt about it. Harriett was the best. Having spent the last two months with her showed him how much better she was than anyone else ever would have been.

Stan lifted his head and studied her breasts, tracing the white mounds with his fingers then brushing her nipples which hardened. He hadn’t planned to make love to her again tonight in light of the fact that their first time had been

painful for her. And even though he tried to talk himself out of waking her, the male part of him wasn't patient enough to wait for tomorrow.

They'd gone through their first time, after all. So maybe their second time would be pleasurable for her. At the very least, he could ask her if she'd be willing to make love again. If not, he'd wait. But he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep unless he asked her.

Rising on his elbows, he scooted further up. He hadn't realized that by doing so, his penis would be pressing nicely against her opening. She was so very soft and still wet from their first coming together. He let out a low moan and kissed her neck, murmuring her name as he did so.

She let out a sigh and stirred beneath him.

Lifting his head, he kissed her on the mouth. He told himself to show some restraint, to wait until she was fully awake before initiating love making, but her legs wrapped around his waist and pulled him closer to her. And this action allowed the tip of his penis to dip inside her.

As good as it felt, he didn't dare proceed, not until he had her permission. Because if he hurt her again... He definitely didn't want that. The reminder gave him enough control to stop, and his shaft settled against her sensitive nub.

"Harriett," whispered in her ear between kisses.

She shifted and rocked her hips so that her flesh was rubbing against him. The sensation felt incredible to him, but even more so, he was aware of the way her breathing grew faster and her actions more insistent. He remained still and let her continue, closing his eyes so he could fully enjoy each up and down motion against him. Truly, it felt like heaven, and it was so much better than his hand. Maybe in the future she'd stroke him. He'd love to feel her hand around him.

At first, he thought his were the only moans in the room, but it soon occurred to him that she was also expressing her pleasure. And what aroused him even more was that she wasn't quiet about it. There was no mistaking how much she was enjoying this activity. He had no idea shy and quiet Harriett Larson was capable of so much passion.

Lifting his head, he watched her in the moonlight, doing his best to memorize the look on her face when she was fully aroused. She never looked more beautiful, and better than that, he was the one responsible for it. Her fingers dug into his hips and her rocking grew more insistent.

Between her moans, she murmured his name, and he warmed in pleasure. Lowering his head, he kissed her cheek and whispered her name in return, the simple action seeming to border more on devotion than sensual excitement. Yes, there was no doubt about it. Being with her this way was definitely bringing him closer to her, and he hoped it had the same effect on her. That it would bind their hearts together in the same way the vows had bound their

lives together.

Before long, she let out a final cry and stilled. Gasping, she held onto him, and he kissed her cheeks, her forehead, and her lips. He'd given her completion. Not someone else. This would be something they would only give each other.

When she relaxed, he brought his mouth back to hers and gave her a lingering kiss, his tongue brushing against hers, his need for release pressing him to complete what they'd started. He wiggled against her until his tip was, once more, just shy of entering her.

Thinking it best to seek her permission first, he asked, "Can I enter you?"

"Yes," she murmured and lifted her hips to take him in.

He slid easily into her. The resistance he'd felt before was no longer there, and she didn't stiffen. But he had to make sure it didn't hurt this time. He studied her face, searching for any signs of discomfort.

She opened her eyes, her gaze meeting his. "Is something wrong?"

"I..." How did he word this? Finally, he settled for a generic, "Are you alright?"

"Yes. It doesn't hurt at all this time," she assured him.

"Good."

Relieved, he kissed her. More than anything, he wanted her to get as much enjoyment out of their time in bed as he did. She wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him closer. Then he gave himself completely to the moment.

This time was better than the one before because this time, he didn't have to hurry in order to make things easier for her. He was allowed to set a slower pace, which gave him more time to fully appreciate the process of making love. And when he finally reached the peak, he held her close while he released his seed. He'd thought it was incredible the first time, but this was much better.

Afterwards, he rolled off of her and brought her into his arms. He kissed her once more then encouraged her to rest her head on his shoulder. She snuggled up to him and closed her eyes, and he smiled. He'd never felt closer to another person in his entire life, and in all honesty, he couldn't think of a better person to share this moment with than Harriett Craftsman.

## Chapter Twenty-One

When Harriett woke up, the early morning light filtered through her curtains and hit the wall across from her. It was the time she usually woke up, but this morning felt different somehow. Then she became aware that she wasn't alone.

She glanced behind her and saw Stan sleeping on his back, the blanket pulled up to his waist, exposing his bare chest, which was lightly covered with hair. Face warm, she quickly looked away. No doubt, the rest of him was just as bare as his chest.

And she... She clutched the blanket to her breasts. She'd broken her own rule. She let him into her bed. It wasn't supposed to happen. What had she been thinking? Why didn't she put a stop to it as soon as he kissed her?

Because she was weak. When it came to Stan, it was nearly impossible to tell him no. And they didn't just make love once. They made love twice. Who knew if he'd been thinking of her or Rose? She looked just like her sister. It'd be easy enough for him to pretend he was with Rose instead of her. Worse, the entire night was a blur. She couldn't remember if he'd said Rose's name or not during any part of their time together. If he did...

No, she wouldn't think about it. She lifted the blanket from her body and eased out of the bed. She had to get out of this room. The sooner she did, the sooner she could think clearly. Stepping over his clothes, she went to the washbasin and washed up as quietly as she could, praying he wouldn't wake up.

After she was done, she grabbed her clothes. Then she looked for her hairpins and saw they were scattered across the floor. Her cheeks flushed. She hadn't even thought of where Stan put those when he took them out of her hair, but right now, she didn't want to dwell on it. Instead of trying to retrieve them all, she grabbed a ribbon from the top drawer in the dresser then hurried out of the room. Once she shut the door softly behind her, she released her breath, unaware she'd even been holding it.

She glanced around the hall and considered dressing in his room but thought better of it. No. He might wake up and come to that room. Then what? It'd be even more embarrassing than what she was going through at the moment.

Finally, she tiptoed down the steps and got dressed in the kitchen. She couldn't recall a time she'd dressed in under two minutes, but she swore that was how long it took. After she fastened the last button on her shirtwaist, she ran her fingers through her hair, doing her best to work out the tangles the best she could. It wasn't perfect, but it'd do. She gathered her hair at the nape of her neck and tied the ribbon around it.

There. Maybe that wasn't so bad. She crossed the room and went to the window so she could get a good look at her reflection. Her hair was a bit messed up, and she had to redo one of the buttons, but other than that, no one would guess she was out of sorts.

She really had no control when it came to Stan. She should have been able to handle a kiss, and yet, she hadn't. How did Rose do it?

It didn't matter. He'd probably been thinking of Rose the whole time anyway. It wouldn't have mattered to him if she let him into her bed. He wasn't the one who insisted on sleeping in different rooms. And for all she knew, men didn't care who they slept with. One woman was probably just as good as another.

She heard Stan's familiar footsteps and considered bolting out of the house. But where would she go? Maybe to see her parents? Maybe to see Rose? If she wasn't so flustered, she'd be able to think clearly enough to make a plan of escape.

She caught sight of the kitchen door and slipped out to the porch. As soon as she quietly shut the door behind her, she paused. Now where should she go? To the barn? He took care of the animals every morning. She heard him call out her name from inside the house. Gasping, she crept along the wraparound porch to a spot where he wouldn't be able to see her if he looked out the windows.

Why was she running from him? This was ridiculous. But even as she criticized herself for acting so rashly, she couldn't seem to help it. Something in her was too scared. She didn't understand it. She wouldn't be able to explain it if someone asked.

The front door opened, and he poked his head out. She stood still, sure she must be quite the sight, staring straight at him like a deer who just caught sight of a hunter. Why didn't she think he might check for her by opening the door?

He smiled and stepped outside, shutting the door behind him. "Did you come out to enjoy the morning air?"

"Um..." Should she lie and tell him she did? She scanned the land around them. Was there anything she could claim to be looking at? Then her gaze went to the new flowerbed she'd been working on. "I was checking on the flowers your ma was kind enough to give me." There. That should work.

He went over to the railing and peered down at them. "You did a lot of work through here. The place looks better already."

She cleared her throat. "It's a labor of love."

"Well, you're doing a wonderful job. But then, everything you do comes out wonderful."

He closed the distance between them, and she wanted to shift away from him, but her stubborn feet wouldn't obey her silent command. He was smiling

at her in the same charming way that always made her heart skip a few beats faster. He cupped her face in his hands. Then he lowered his head and kissed her, his lips gentle on hers.

Something in her finally snapped, and she was able to pull away from him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, reaching for her.

Dodging him, she hurried to the other side of the porch. She almost went to a chair, but then he could sit next to her and she’d have to be close to him again. She just couldn’t handle that. Not right now. Not when everything in her body was screaming at her to go back to him. She craved his touch and his kiss. She wanted more of it. But another part of her wouldn’t have it.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she finally said once she trusted her voice to remain even. “I just don’t think kissing is a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because...”

She looked over at him and noted the bewildered expression on his face. *Why? Answer him, Harriett. Tell him something.* But she couldn’t come right out and ask him if he’d been thinking of Rose last night. Not only did it seem highly inappropriate, but she didn’t know what words to use.

His expression softened, and he stopped advancing toward her. “I know I hurt you the first time,” he slowly began. “But I thought the second time, you were fine. Was I wrong? Did I hurt you again?”

“No, it’s not that.”

He relaxed. “Then what is it?”

She shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. Something’s bothering you.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” She made a move to go to the kitchen door, but he blocked her. “What are you doing?”

“Whatever’s going on, I want to know what it is.”

“But I don’t want to talk about it.”

She tried to go around him, but he moved in front of her, successfully blocking her once again. Irritated, her gaze met his. Why couldn’t he let the matter go? Why did he have to press the issue?

“I don’t like this,” he said. “After last night, this was the last thing I expected.”

She stiffened. “What did you expect?”

“I thought we’d be laughing and hugging and kissing and,” he shrugged, “enjoying the day. But for some reason, it’s worse than it was before because now you’re shutting me out completely.”

“I’m not shutting you out.” Even as she said it, her conscience condemned her for lying. “I just have a lot on my mind, that’s all.”

“Like what?”

Noting the challenge in his tone, a thin line formed on her lips. “I don’t need to explain myself to you.”

“You do when you’re pushing me away.”

He was right. She knew he was right, but for some reason, she couldn’t bring herself to admit it. “I need to get Maggie up,” she finally said, making another attempt to slip around him.

But he was too quick for her, and once again, he was standing in front of her. “I’m tired of you using her as an excuse to avoid me.”

“I’m not using her as an excuse to avoid you.”

“No? Before last night, I tried to kiss you twice, but both times you made a flimsy excuse about needing to get to Maggie. It’s not going to work this time. You’re going to tell me what’s going on, and you’re going to do it right now.”

“And if I don’t want to?”

“You’re going to do it whether you want to or not. I can’t get past your wall if you don’t tell me what’s wrong.”

She stared at him for a long moment, noting the determined spark in his eyes and his clenched jaw. She remained silent, sure she looked just as stubborn as he did. But she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t ask him if he still loved Rose, if he wished he’d married Rose instead of her. All these years, it’d always been Rose. It’d never once been her. But she’d rather not know. And yet, not knowing either way was taking its toll on her, especially after last night.

He let out an irritated groan. “Why are you making this so difficult for me?”

“I’m not trying to.”

“Then just tell me what’s wrong.”

Finally, she blurted out, “I think we should forget last night ever happened. Then everything can return to normal.”

His eyes grew wide. “What? Are you kidding me?”

“I wouldn’t kid about something like this, Stan.”

“Well, I don’t want to forget it.” When she didn’t respond, he ran his hands through his hair and released his breath. “You can’t pretend something as wonderful as last night never happened. It brought me closer to you.”

“I don’t want you to get closer to me.”

He stared at her for a moment, looking as if she’d slapped him. Finally, he whispered, “I don’t want that kind of marriage.”

“Exactly what did you think you were going to get when you married me? I might look like Rose, but I’m not her.”

“Rose?” he asked, his voice louder. “This is about Rose?”

“She’s the one you wanted. I can’t help it if she married Kent instead of you, and I can’t help it if I look like her. But when I agreed to marry you, it

was understood there was never going to be anything between us.”

He glanced up at the porch ceiling and groaned. “I wish I’d never gone to that stupid auction your uncle did. This wouldn’t even be an issue if I’d stayed home.” His gaze returning to her, he continued, “How many times do I have to apologize? I was wrong. I’m sorry. I love you. I didn’t love you then, but I love you now.”

“You only love me because I look like her.”

He muttered something under his breath that she suspected was inappropriate to say in front of a lady then shook his head. “You believe that. I can tell by the look on your face, you really believe that.” He paced the porch for a moment then turned to her. Then, in a louder voice that wavered between frustration and anger, he added, “I’m sick of being reminded of the past. The past has no relevance to what’s going on now. I made love to you last night, not her.”

From inside the house, Maggie called out for them.

“You woke her up,” Harriett told him. “Now, I have to go to her.”

“No! You’re staying here until I convince you you’re wrong about Rose.”

“You’re not going to tell me what to do, Stan.”

“Well, I’m not letting you in there until we resolve this.”

Maggie called out for them again. Fine. If he wouldn’t let her in the house to take care of the girl, then he could do it himself. Without a word, she stumped down the porch steps and headed for the barn. She had to get away from here.

“Where are you going?” he called after her.

Without bothering to look back at him, she snapped, “Away from here.”

“Are you coming back?”

Noting the worried tone in his voice, her anger subsided a bit. Not enough to make her turn around and head back to the house, but enough so she could answer him civilly. “Yes.”

“When?”

She turned to face the house. As much as she wanted to go to Maggie, she couldn’t. Not when he stood in her way. “Supper time,” she finally called out. “I’ll be back by supper time.”

“Alright,” he replied.

He went into the house, his shoulders slumped, and gently shut the door behind him. Ignoring the stab of guilt in her heart, she continued on to the barn.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Harriett slowed the buggy to a stop when she made it off Stan's property. She didn't know where to go. She could see her parents, she supposed. Maybe talk to her ma or Adam. Or she could visit Rose. But considering how upset she was, she thought it best not to see her sister. Yes, she wanted to believe Stan, that he no longer had feelings for Rose, but she'd been so used to him casting her aside for Rose that it only seemed natural to expect she'd never mean anything to him.

She wiped a tear that slid down her cheek. What she probably should do was clear her mind for a while. Simply take time to not think. It'd be her pa's advice. Her ma would have given Stan the benefit of the doubt and trusted what he said, but in this case, she thought her pa's approach was best.

If she put some distance between herself and last night, she might get a better perspective on what Stan told her this morning. As much she wanted to believe him, she was too afraid to.

After brushing back another tear, she led the horse down through the field, taking it off the path the neighboring families used to go to town. The tall grass didn't impede her journey. It was further away from town, and as far as she knew, no one had claimed the land yet. If she wanted to truly get away from others, this was the only way she could do it. Otherwise, someone would come by at some point, and no doubt, they'd want to know if she was alright.

On any other day, she could make up some excuse to mask her feelings, but such was not the case today. She couldn't even pretend nothing was bothering her when Stan confronted her.

She continued down the field, only glancing over her shoulder once in a while to see how far she'd traveled from the main path. Once she was safely out of view, she set the brake and got down from the buggy. She unhitched the horse then led it to a tree where she wrapped the reins around it, giving the steed freedom to eat while he waited for her to be ready to head back home.

She patted the horse's neck and tried to fight the tears that welled up in her eyes. How could she return to Stan after all this? Her feelings had always been transparent. Now, it just seemed worse.

Leaving the horse, she found a spot where she could sit. She was risking getting a tick or two, she knew, but that was the least of her worries. Running off was so unlike her. It'd be something Rose would do. Rose was spontaneous like this, throwing caution to the wind and letting whatever was meant to be happen. If only Harriett could be the same way. Then maybe she wouldn't second guess everything.

She drew her legs up to her chest and settled her forehead on her knees. After taking a few moments to relax, she became aware of the gentle breeze

brushing against her hair. The sun warmed things considerably. In fact, it was slightly hot, but not so much so that Harriett felt the need to seek shade under the tree.

She lifted her head and realized she was crying. She wiped her cheeks but had to soon give up since it seemed the harder she tried to stop crying, the faster the tears came. Why couldn't she just be happy? If Stan was being nice to her, did it really matter why? The question was silly. Of course, it mattered why. But what if he was telling her the truth? What if he did love her instead of Rose? Why was that so hard to accept?

She wasn't sure how long she sat in the field, but after some time passed, she finally stopped sobbing like a pitiful child. Then, disregarding any notion of bugs, she settled on her back and closed her eyes. Not too long after, she drifted off to sleep.

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Stan glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall as he set the last bowl on the table. It was suppertime, but Harriett hadn't returned. And worse, the clouds in the sky were getting dark. The day was bright and sunny when she left. His main fear as she took the buggy out was whether or not she'd return. Now he was beginning to wonder if she'd be able to return. Unless she left her parents' home or Rose's home a half hour ago, she was going to get stuck in the storm.

He retrieved the spoons and put them next to the bowls, hoping that by focusing on getting supper ready, it would make Harriett come home. But by the time he had the food in the center of the table, ready to eat, she still hadn't walked through the door.

"Where's Ma?" Maggie asked as she came in from the parlor, holding her doll.

"She's on her way back from seeing her family."

He hoped. Maybe she decided to stay there for the night. Up to now, he hadn't considered it, but it was a possibility. She might be so upset that she'd stay away for an entire night...or longer.

He went over to the window and searched the land for any indication she was on her way home, but he didn't see her or the buggy anywhere. And to top it off, the wind had picked up considerably. His gaze went to the barn. Maybe she was in there. Maybe she'd gotten to the barn while he was setting out the soup and biscuits. It wasn't likely, but it was possible.

"Want to go to the barn and see if she's there?" he asked Maggie.

Since the girl nodded, he picked her up and carried her out of the house. The wind pushed against him pretty hard, and he searched the clouds, looking for signs of a possible tornado. But the sky wasn't a dark green color, nor were any funnels forming in the sky. Still, the wind was picking up and some debris was starting to fly around.

“Come on,” he told the girl, though it was pointless since he was still carrying her.

He hurried to the barn, but right away, he could see Harriett hadn't returned. It was on the tip of his tongue to say something he shouldn't, but he managed to refrain from doing it for Maggie's sake. Up to now, he'd taken Harriett's absence pretty well.

Yes, it'd bothered him that she left the way she did. But he managed to hold onto the hope she'd return, and when she did, they could have a good, long talk and hopefully resolve the issue about Rose. Given the way the weather was, though, he could only pray she had the sense to stay at her parents' or Rose's house until the storm passed.

“We'll have to eat alone this evening,” he told Maggie. “Ma will come home after the storm is over.”

“She safe?”

“I'm sure she is. She's smart. She wouldn't come home if a storm was brewing.”

He hoped. What if she started home before the clouds began to gather? Storms could come on so suddenly across the Nebraska prairie, and this happened to be one of them. He considered taking the horse out so he could look for her, but he had to keep Maggie safe. He couldn't risk her getting hurt in the storm. No, whether or not he liked it, he had to wait the storm out. Then, he'd search for Harriett.

He ran back for the house and made it to the porch in time for thunder to rumble in the distance. The first raindrop hit just as he shut the kitchen door.

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A raindrop fell on Harriett's forehead, and she stirred. Another raindrop fell on her. Groaning, she opened her eyes. Where was she? She saw the dark sky above her and the tall grass around her blowing wildly in the wind. Not too far away, she heard a horse neighing.

With a gasp, she sat up. She'd fallen asleep out here? In the middle of nowhere? She'd only meant to close her eyes and force herself to forget Stan for an hour. Never in a million years did she intend to drift off to sleep.

Another raindrop landed on her hand, and she scrambled to her feet. She hurried over to the horse and untied the reins from the tree. The horse neighed again, probably letting her know it wasn't at all happy about their current predicament.

“I'm sorry, Chester,” she told the horse. “I never meant to stay out this long.”

She had no idea what time it was. The sky was too dark to tell. For all she knew, it was well past the time she told Stan she'd be back. He'd be worried about her. But she hoped he wasn't foolish enough to search for her with Maggie.

No, of course, not. He knew better than to risk Maggie's safety. And besides, there was no way he would find her. She'd done too good a job of hiding, something she was quickly regretting, given the perilous situation she was stuck in.

"I never should have fallen asleep," she muttered as she led the horse over to the buggy.

Just as she made it, the raindrops became more frequent and a faint rumble echoed through the air. The horse neighed again in irritation and pulled away from the buggy.

"Chester, don't!" she called out over the wind.

But the horse bucked back. She struggled to maintain her footing but tripped and hit the edge of the buggy. Crying out, she let go of the reins with one of her hands, her free hand going to her sore hip.

She knew it was a mistake as soon as she did it, and while she struggled to regain control of the reins, a flash of white light lit up the sky, scaring both her and the horse. The horse bucked back again, and this time it ran off, taking her along with it across the grass.

"Chester, stop!"

The howling wind was no match for her voice, and neither was the sudden downpour of rain that came upon them. She held onto the rein with one hand for as long as she could, afraid if she let go, she'd be stuck out here. But in the end, the rope slipped from her grip, and before she even knew what was happening, she came to an abrupt stop.

She called out for the horse as she scrambled to her knees. Pushing the hair out of her eyes, she saw the horse racing across the field. There was no way it was coming back for her. She searched the area, hoping she could tell where she came from, but the rain was so thick, it was hard to see anything unless it was close to her.

And all she saw were blades of grass and wildflowers in every direction. Even the tree and buggy were nowhere in sight. Just how far had the horse taken her? Was she closer or further from the main path? Who owned the nearest property to her? She couldn't have gone too far. Yes, the horse was fast, but he wasn't that fast...was he?

For the time being, she thought it best to remain where she was. The storm would pass. Considering how fast it came, she doubted it would last long. Maybe a half hour at the most? Another flash of lightning lit up the sky, followed by thunder ten seconds later.

She closed her eyes and focused. What was it her pa said she should do if she ever got stuck in a thunderstorm? Finding shelter was his first piece of advice. Even if she had to abandon the horse and buggy, she was better off getting into a barn or some other solid structure. But there was nowhere she could go, and the horse had abandoned her, not the other way around, a point

that was neither here nor there.

She shook her head to will aside the distracting thoughts. Focus. She needed to focus. She took a deep breath. There was nowhere to go. So now what? It wasn't safe to be outside in the middle of a storm, especially one producing lightning. There was a possibility of a tornado, too, but she wouldn't let her mind go there. At the moment, she needed to focus on what was actually happening.

After what seemed like a long moment, she remembered her pa said not to stand up and not to lie down. Either position would make her vulnerable to a lightning strike. And in retrospect, her getting away from the tree and buggy worked in her favor.

As the rain beat down on her, she struggled to recall the rest of her pa's advice. It took her a few moments, but she got it. She placed her feet together and got into a squatting position. Then, she tucked her chin to her chest and placed her hands over her ears.

This had to be right. She hoped it was right. Another flash lit up the sky, and this time, five seconds followed before thunder boomed around her. She jerked and curled up into a tighter ball. She'd never been stuck out in a thunderstorm in her entire life. She'd always been too sensible for this kind of thing. If anyone was likely to get stuck out in a storm, it'd be Rose. Rose, after all, was the one who liked to ride in the fields and lost track of time.

*It's because I can't think straight when it comes to Stan. I never have, and I never will.*

She wouldn't have believed anyone could have this much power over her when she agreed to marry him. But it was as true as the fact that she was stuck in a thunderstorm in the middle of a vacant field because she was too afraid of opening up to him and being vulnerable all over again like she'd been that day of the picnic.

Another flash of light lit up the sky, so she closed her eyes and braced herself for the next booming thunder that would soon follow.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Stan had to wait a full hour before it was safe to take Maggie outside. Supper had been tense. He could hardly eat anything, and the girl, who must have picked up on his apprehension, only nibbled her food as well. He didn't have the heart to encourage her to eat more.

Instead, he quietly took care of the dishes while Maggie asked him if Harriett would be coming home now that the storm had passed. He was too afraid to answer her, and after asking three times, she gave up and went back to the parlor to look out the window.

Once the lightning and thunder stopped, he put a hat on the girl's head and carried her to the barn. Soon, he had her on the horse with him and was riding out of the barn. The clouds were lingering in the air, but some sunlight was peering through, allowing him a good view of the land.

"Where we go?" Maggie asked.

"To see if your ma is at her parents."

Or to see if she was on her way back from there. He'd take either one. There was the possibility she went to visit Rose, of course. The two were always close, but given how she thought he was still pining for Rose, he didn't know if Rose was the person she'd want to see right now.

The ride to Harriett's parents' home was just as tense as supper had been. The girl knew something was wrong. She had to have known there was more to this than her mother choosing to spend the day with her family.

He never should have pushed Harriett. She hadn't been ready to make love to him. He knew it. But he'd been impatient and started kissing her, and one thing led to another and then they were in bed. He'd let his desire override sound judgment, and now he might lose her.

Clenching his jaw, he willed the urge to cry aside. He had to find her first. Maybe he could work something out with her. Maybe she'd agree to come back if he promised not to touch or kiss her. As much as it hurt to think they'd never get to experience anything as wonderful as last night again, he'd rather give it up than lose her.

"Don't see buggy," Maggie said as they finally arrived at the Larsons' house.

"It might be in the barn," he told her, hoping she didn't detect the worry in his voice.

After he helped her down, he secured the horse to the post then picked her up and went up the porch steps. Taking a deep breath, he knocked on the door. If she didn't want to come home with him, he couldn't force her, but maybe he could talk to her.

The door opened, and her pa smiled. Well, that was good, right? That

meant Dave wasn't mad at him for upsetting her.

"What can I do for you, Stan?" Dave asked.

"I was wondering if Harriett's here." Oh, good heavens. His voice squeaked just like it had when he was thirteen. He cleared his throat.

"No. Did she say she was coming over?"

"No, but I thought she might. She left earlier today." No sense in telling him why. "And she said she'd come back at suppertime, but that was over an hour ago, and she's still gone. I suppose she might have gone to Rose's."

Her pa frowned. "It's not like her not to say where she's going."

Stan thought that was the case since she'd been good about letting him know that in the past. With a sigh, he said, "We had a fight."

"Oh." After a moment's pause, her pa added, "Usually, when she's upset, she talks to Rose. The storm was a bad one. She might have stayed in town until it passed. Chances are, she's on her way back right now."

"I thought of that but wanted to try here first. I'll see if she's on her way back from Rose's."

"She might have already gone by the fork in the path going to town. If that's the case, you won't see her. I can go on to your house to see if she's there."

"I don't want to inconvenience you."

"You wouldn't be inconveniencing me. She's my daughter."

"Thank you, sir."

Stan turned to leave but her pa said, "Why don't you leave Maggie here? There's no sense in her going all the way to town and back."

With a nod, Stan put the girl on her feet. "I'll be by to pick her up when I get back from town."

"It'll be close to her bedtime. You might as well let her stay over. We have plenty of room."

"Alright. Thank you. Again."

Stan released an unsteady breath. There was no way her pa was going to be happy with him if Harriett told him she no longer wanted to live in the same house with him. It wouldn't even matter why. The fact that he upset her to the point where she had to leave was bad enough.

"I can tell you're worried," her pa said. "Go on ahead. I'll be on my way in a few minutes."

Without hesitation, Stan hurried down the porch steps.

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Harriett stopped walking and turned around, wondering if she was going in the wrong direction. Some of the land out here wasn't owned yet. What if she was going further and further from the farms? She could see the sun setting in the west, but try as she might, she couldn't figure out which direction the farms were in.

She didn't think she'd ever need to know it since she stuck to the well-traveled paths. How she wished she'd thought to ask her pa or brothers. Or even Rose. Even Rose knew the direction the farms were in. And all Harriett knew was that the sun rose in the east and settled in the west.

From where she stood, there was nothing but tall grass in all directions. She had no idea which way the horse had pulled her, and with the storm, it was too easy to get disoriented. After a long moment, she decided to turn course. Maybe this was the correct way.

Her wet skirt clung to her legs. She lifted her skirt and kept walking. She'd never make any progress otherwise. A half hour later, the world seemed to tilt ever so slightly around her. And worse, she felt sick to her stomach. The absence of food that day was catching up to her. Stopping, she closed her eyes and took deep breaths.

But it didn't work, and she ended up falling to her knees and throwing up. How it was possible to vomit when her stomach was empty surprised her. But when she was done, the relief she felt was worth it.

Feeling weak, she crawled away from the soiled area and found a clean place to settle in. She'd start walking again when she had enough energy to do so. At least the storm was over, and there was still some daylight left. The sun was starting to set, but if she hurried, she might make it to the nearest house before nightfall. Yes, that's what she'd do. Once she had the strength to walk, she'd continue.

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By the time Stan made it to Rose's estate, the sky was filled with shades of purples, pinks, and yellows. On any other evening, he might have paused to take it in. But on this occasion, he was too exhausted. He'd made good time in coming to town, but Rose lived further south, which added to his journey.

The door opened, and a man Stan didn't recognize greeted him.

It took Stan a moment to answer. He hadn't been to Rose's new home, but shouldn't Kent have come to the door since he was her husband? "I was wondering if Harriett's here? She looks like Rose. Rose is her sister." He shifted from one foot to another. "Anyway, I'm her husband, Stan Craftsman. She hasn't come home yet, and I thought maybe she was here." He shut his mouth. He was beginning to ramble, and that wasn't good.

"The only lady who paid a visit to Mrs. Ashton today was Miss Fields. Would you like to talk to Mrs. Ashton?"

It took him a moment to remember Ashton was Kent's last name. "Yes, I would."

The man nodded and gestured for him to enter the house. "Follow me to the formal parlor, and I'll let her know you're here."

It was then that Stan realized this was one of the servants. He'd heard Kent had a house full of them. Feeling like an idiot for suspecting Rose had

been doing something inappropriate with another man, he removed his hat and followed the servant to the parlor.

“May I pour you a glass of brandy while you wait?” the servant asked.

“Uh, no,” Stan replied. “Thank you.”

The man nodded and motioned to the couch. “Please have a seat.”

The man left without waiting for Stan to sit and closed the door behind him. There was no way Stan could sit. Even as tired as he was, the growing sense of fear propelled him to keep going.

He released his breath, and, since there was nothing to do but wait, he studied the room. It was large. He guessed it was big enough to fit his parlor and kitchen. The fireplace had a mantle with a painting of a horse on it. From there, Stan’s gaze went to the furnishings and piano. They were expensive. It’d take him a lifetime, if not more, to be able to afford all this.

It made sense to him why Rose chose Kent. What woman could resist all this? What he didn’t understand was why Harriett, having seen everything Rose was getting by marrying Kent, didn’t ask Rose to match her up with one of Kent’s male relatives. Surely, Kent had someone in his family or a friend who would’ve given Harriett a much more comfortable life than he ever could.

The door opened, and Stan turned as Rose and Kent came into the room.

“The footman said you were asking about Harriett?” Rose asked, not waiting for him to speak.

“Yes,” Stan said. “I was wondering if either of you saw her today? The...” What did she call the servant again? “The footman said she didn’t come to this house. Is that right?”

“Harriett hasn’t been here today,” Rose replied then glanced at Kent. “Did you see her when you were in town?”

“No.” Kent glanced at Stan. “What’s going on? Should we be concerned?”

Stan wasn’t sure what to tell them. Maybe the fact that Harriett hadn’t gone to her family should have made him feel better, but it didn’t.

“I think she got stuck in the storm that just came through here,” he finally said.

If Harriett wanted to tell her sister and brother-in-law what a horrible husband he was, then fine. Right now, he had to worry about finding her, and he could use their help.

“Did she say she was coming here?” Rose asked.

“No. She just said she was leaving for the day and would return by suppertime.” He lowered his gaze to the hat and shrugged. “She didn’t tell me where she was going. Your pa thought she might be heading back to my house, so he’s looking for her there. Meanwhile, I thought I’d come here.”

“It’s not like her not to tell someone where she’s going,” Rose said.

His face warm from guilt, he replied, “I know.”

A moment of silence passed, and he was afraid they might ask him what he did to upset her.

Fortunately, Rose only said, "I'll change and look for her."

"We'll go together," Kent added. "I'm not letting you alone out there at night." She nodded, and Kent turned his gaze to Stan. "We'll look for her, too."

"Thank you," Stan said then put his hat back on his head.

Stan had stayed here long enough. The longer it took to find Harriett, the greater the possibility was of her being in danger. Maybe the buggy broke down. Maybe the horse ran off. Maybe an animal got her.

Forcing the possibilities aside, he left the house and got back on his horse. He glanced at the sky. It wouldn't be long before it was dark, and unfortunately, there only a quarter moon tonight. That wouldn't give him much light to go by. He thought to ask Rose and Kent if he could borrow a lantern but decided against it. He'd buy one in town. He'd already imposed on them enough by asking for their help.

With any luck, he'd go back to his house and find Harriett there. Then he'd beg her to forgive him, and he'd be content to go back to the way she wanted things. Whatever she wanted, he'd do it. All he wanted was for her to be safe. Kicking his horse in the sides, he led the steed to town.

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The wind howled, and though Harriett hugged herself, she couldn't stop shivering. The day had been warm, but as soon as the sun went down, the wind picked up and the temperature dropped significantly. Her wet clothes didn't help matters any. The only thing that did help was walking, but it was getting harder and harder to do that when she fought bouts of nausea and exhaustion.

By the time the moon was high in the sky, she couldn't go on anymore. She'd picked the wrong way. She was lost. She had no idea where she was or how to get back. Never in her life had she felt so scared.

She shouldn't have strayed off the familiar path. She shouldn't have fallen asleep. She shouldn't have gotten stuck in the storm. She shouldn't have overreacted. She should have listened to Stan. He tried to talk to her, but she refused to listen to him.

What if he'd been telling her the truth? What if he did love her? What if he'd gotten past his feelings for Rose? Things had been nice between them. He'd been attentive to her, spending time with her and talking to her the way she'd hoped he would for so many years.

"Why did I have to be so stubborn?" she whispered, her teeth chattering. "Why couldn't I have just been happy with what he was offering me?" It was more than she ever thought he would, after all.

Her steps slowed until she came to a complete stop. The wind blew her

hair into her eyes, so she brushed it back. It was so dark out here. The only sounds she heard were her anxious breathing and the howling wind. She needed to rest. Tomorrow morning when it was light, she'd walk again. She had no idea which direction she should walk, except she couldn't keep going the same way she was now.

Swallowing, she sat down and placed her face in her hands. She'd done everything she could to ignore the many animals that lived out here, and going over and over the previous evening and this morning helped to take her mind off her fears that something was watching—and waiting—to attack her. But it didn't help enough.

Still shivering, she brought her knees to her chest. Resting her forehead on her knees, she cursed herself for not wearing a thicker dress. The nights could get cold in late spring, and the storm had cooled the air considerably.

Closing her eyes, she tried to focus on things that warmed her. Rose had once told her about a story she'd read where someone got through a snowstorm by pretending to sit by a fire. In this case, Harriett decided to remember how nice and warm she'd been while Stan held her last night.

Tears filled her eyes, something that surprised her since she thought she had no more tears to cry. She wished she could go back to this morning and do it all over again.

A howling in the distance caught her attention, and her head snapped up. That wasn't the wind. It sounded like an animal. She scanned the area around her but didn't see anything. The only thing surrounding her was the tall grass. She crouched lower in the grass, hoping none of the animals scouting the area would find her.

After five minutes, the chill took over and she focused, once more, on trying to keep herself as warm as possible. This night, she knew, was going to be the longest one she'd ever been through.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Morning. Daylight had finally returned, but Stan worried it hadn't come soon enough. This wasn't good. There was no sign of Harriett. Her brothers, Rose, Kent, and her pa hadn't found her. Stan hadn't had any luck either. He did find the buggy, but the horse and Harriett were missing. It was possible she took the horse and rode away with it, but it was unlikely. She hated riding horses. The most likely scenario was that she lost control of the horse, and it ran off.

So that meant she was probably out there walking through the fields, and since the place was uninhabited, she could be anywhere. He thought they would have found her in short time since she was probably on foot and they were on horses, but she'd made considerable progress the previous day.

It was close to noon when he heard someone call his name.

"Stan! Stan!"

Stan pulled the reins on his horse and turned to Adam who was riding toward him.

"My pa found Harriet," Adam said, out of breath.

"What happened?" Stan asked. "Is she alright?"

"She was sleeping when I saw her. It looks like she was out all night. Her clothes were wet, so she must have got caught in the storm."

Noting the hesitation in Adam's voice, Stan pressed, "What else is there?"

"I'm not sure. She just didn't look right."

Didn't look right? What did that mean? Though Stan wanted to ask, he was too afraid to. He'd just have to see her for himself. "Where is she?"

"Pa's taking her to your house. I'm going to get Uncle Joel. He'll know what to do."

Swallowing, he managed a, "Thanks," and kicked his horse in the sides.

Getting caught in the storm then being stuck outside all night couldn't be good for anyone, but the day was a warm one and that gave him hope she wasn't too bad off. She hadn't been attacked by an animal, nor did Adam say she was bleeding or had an infection. She was sleeping, but she didn't look right. Just what did that mean? The more he had time to think on it, the more anxious he got, and he ended up running his poor horse hard in his hurry to get to her.

When he made it to the house, he quickly tied the horse to the post. Ignoring the horse, which neighed in protest, he bolted up the porch steps and into the house.

"Mr. Larson?" he called.

"Up here!" he heard her pa reply from her bedroom. "I need your help."

This wasn't good. He could feel it in his gut that something was wrong.

By the time he made it to the bedroom, she was lying on the bed, unnaturally pale and asleep.

Her pa, who was struggling to remove her wet clothes, waved him over. "I'm glad you're here. I need your help. She's unconscious, and I'm having a terrible time getting these things off of her. They're stuck to her."

Quickly overcoming his shock, Stan moved forward and helped her pa take her clothes off. She mumbled something about a doll, a swing, and trees. None of it made any sense to him, but he pushed the meaning of her words aside and focused on the task at hand. By the time they had her in a dry nightshirt, they tucked into bed.

Her pa wiped the sweat off his brow. "I'm going to get her ma over here," he told Stan. "She'll know what to do."

"Adam said he was getting Joel," Stan said.

"Good. Between the two of them, they should have Harriett back to her normal self in no time."

Noting the worried tone in the older man's voice, Stan decided not to reply. Whether her pa was trying to convince himself that everything would be alright or if he was hoping to reassure Stan, Stan couldn't tell. But really, it didn't matter. Harriett was obviously sick, and they needed to do something to help her.

After her pa left, Stan sat on the bed, taking Harriett's hand in his. Not only was her skin pale, but her hand was limp and cold. He caressed it. This was worse than he initially thought. He'd never seen anyone this ill, and he didn't know what to do about it.

He'd have to wait and see what the doctor said. Joel was competent at his job. He knew how to handle these things. And her mother would be over to tend to her. Surely, Harriett would find comfort in having her mother nearby.

Blinking back his tears, Stan leaned forward and brushed her cheeks and chin with his fingers. She was so cold. He hurried to his bedroom and brought back another blanket to put over her. He tucked the blanket around her and up to her chin.

Returning to her side, he sat down and took her hand back in his. It felt just as cold as before. But more than that was the fact that she didn't seem to have any strength. He didn't understand what was wrong with her. If she had a fever or was bleeding, he'd feel better equipped to deal with this. But she had no energy, wanted to sleep, and was unnaturally cold. Just what did it all mean?

He swept her hair away from her face again. The strands were tangled from the wind, but they were dry. As much as he wanted to kiss her forehead or cheek, he didn't dare.

"I'm probably the last person you want at your bedside," he whispered, "but I love you. I'm willing to do whatever you want. Just please stay with

me.”

His voice choked up as more tears sprang to his eyes. Try as he might, he couldn't manage to say anything else. He brought her hand to his chest and gave himself permission to cry.

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“I'm afraid there's nothing I can do,” Joel told Stan and Harriett's mother a couple hours later. “She has hypothermia.”

Stan never heard the term before, so he wasn't sure what to ask.

Fortunately, her ma spoke up. “Do you have any idea how serious it is?”

“It doesn't look too bad.” Joel glanced back at Harriett. “She's mumbling things that don't make sense, and she keeps sleeping.”

“But?” Stan blurted out, thinking if Joel had said it didn't look that bad, there had to be some hope.

“But her condition is mild. As long as you're diligent about keeping her warm, things should improve,” Joel replied. “The warm towel around her head should keep warmth from leaving her body, and you have already taken her out of her wet clothes and put her in bed. You might want to warm something like potatoes, wrap them in a towel, and put them on her body around here.” He motioned to her chest and abdominal area. “However, the best way to warm her up,” he turned to Stan, “is if you take off your clothes and get in bed with her. Body to body contact works faster than blankets or hot potatoes.”

Stan glanced at Harriett and knew he couldn't do it, even if it was best for her. If she woke up while he was holding her, who knew what she'd think?

“Another thing you can do,” Joel continued, this time looking at her mother, “is give her plenty of warm drinks to sip on when she wakes up. But don't force it.”

“There's no medicine you can give her to help?” her ma asked.

Joel shook his head. “No, there isn't. She needs time. I don't see any reason why she won't get better.” He picked up his medical bag.

Her mother followed him to the bedroom door. “Thank you for coming out here, Joel.”

“It's really not as bad as it looks,” Joel assured them. “If she'd spent another night outdoors, then it'd be a different matter. It's a good thing you found her when you did.”

After he left, her mother smiled in relief. “That's good news. As long as we're diligent, she should be fine. I'll go downstairs and heat up some potatoes and water.” She paused for a moment then asked, “Would you like me to leave you alone with her for a half hour so you can get into bed with her and help her warm up?”

He wasn't sure what to say. Her mother's goal, of course, was for her daughter to get better as fast as possible, but he couldn't do it and—worse—

he couldn't explain why. Fortunately, Maggie came running into the room, followed by Rose.

"Uncle Joel said Harriett will be alright?" Rose asked her mother.

"Yes, he did," her ma replied. "She lost body heat and needs to get it back."

"Mama," Maggie called out as she ran over to the bed.

Stan caught the girl before she jumped up on it. "We need to let your ma rest."

"She sick?" Maggie asked, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Yes, but hopefully not for long," he whispered, patting her back. Glancing at Rose, he asked, "Would you like to have some time alone with her? I'm sure she'd like it if you talked to her."

Rose nodded. "If you don't mind?"

"No, I don't mind," he said. "Harriett is closer to you than anyone else."

"She's close to you, too, Stan," her ma argued.

No, no she wasn't. Her ma meant well, but she was very wrong. There was no sense in going into it, though. What Harriett needed was Rose. Of all the people Harriett knew, Rose would be the one who could give her the strongest reason to fight. There was no denying the bond the two sisters shared. Maybe it was their bond that would get Harriett on the mend much sooner. Without replying, he settled for smiling at her mother before taking Maggie downstairs.

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Images came and went in Harriett's mind. They were bits and pieces of her life, and they were all good times. Her first memory was the doll she'd gotten for Christmas. It was the first item she'd gotten that wasn't a hand-me-down, and she spent a good six months doing nothing else but playing with it.

Then there was the time she and Rose were six and their pa made them a swing that hung from a tree branch. They took turns on it, but even as fun as swinging was, Harriett's favorite part was watching the autumn leaves circling around her as they fell from the branches.

When they were eight, Rose had talked her into playing instead of helping their ma clean the house, and they snuck into the barn and played hide and seek in the loft. But then Adam caught them and told them to get back to work.

There was also the time when she cried right after Rose got married because she missed her sister, and Adam spent the whole night trying to make her feel better. He even told jokes that were so dumb, she couldn't help but laugh.

More memories came to her, most of them having to do with Stan. She recalled the moment she looked at him in school and realized she was in love with him. There'd been nothing he said or did to evoke such a strong emotion,

and though she initially assumed nothing would come from such a fondness at thirteen, she never could seem to deny any romantic attraction to him. All he had to do was say hello or smile at her, and she'd be in heaven for the rest of the day.

Oddly, she didn't think of the times he would bypass her to talk to Rose or even the time when she found out he'd proposed to Rose. In this whirl of memories, she could only remember the good things. Like the time he made a picnic for her and told her he wanted to make things right. Or the time he supported her and wouldn't let Maggie have licorice.

And he'd made attempts to touch her and had paid her compliments. Maybe he hadn't done or said those things because he felt obligated to since they were married. And maybe all those times she thought he was comparing her to Rose, he hadn't been. Perhaps she'd been the only one who was doing the comparisons. All this time, her assumption that he found her lacking because she wasn't Rose was all in her mind.

Funny how, in the midst of her dreams, she could see things clearly. And she knew he'd been thinking of her during their lovemaking because she suddenly remembered him whispering her name. Why couldn't she remember that while she was awake? Maybe it was because things were easier to figure out when she didn't let her insecurities get in the way.

Voices started drifting into her dreams, and at first she pushed them away, immediately choosing the world of her good memories. But then she realized the voices were coming from Stan and Rose. It took some effort, but she was able to pick out what they were saying.

"You need to get some sleep," Rose told him. "I can watch her through the night. I'll let you know if there's any change."

"I don't want to sleep," he said. "I want to be here when she wakes up."

"I know you do, but what good will you be to her if you're exhausted?"

Harriett felt someone's hand caressing hers and instinctively knew it was his by the subtle strength in his grasp. It was then that she realized she was no longer outside. She was in bed, and several blankets were tucked in around her, along with something warm resting on her chest and stomach. She was no longer in any danger. Now, she was safe and warm. For some reason, knowing she was so comfortable made her want to return to sleep.

"Stan, Harriett will understand if you're not here when she wakes up," Rose softly said. "She wouldn't want you to make yourself sick with worry."

"You don't understand," he replied. "I've failed her in so many ways. This is one thing I can do right."

Stan squeezed Harriett's hand, and though she willed herself to squeeze his in return, she couldn't make her fingers move. The world of dreams was pulling her back, and try as she might, she couldn't fight it.

"Alright," Rose said. "But if you need any help, my ma and I are here."

“I know. Thank you.” The door softly closed, and she felt a light brush of his fingers as he stroked her cheek. “Come back to me, Harriett. Life won’t be worth living without you. You’ve become the most important person in my life.”

She made another attempt to squeeze his hand, to let him know she heard him, but she drifted off to sleep and was fully immersed in her dreams once more.

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At dawn, Harriett’s mother entered the room, carrying a bowl filled with water. Rose came in with her, and in her hands were a bar of soap and washcloth.

“Any change?” her mother asked.

Stan reluctantly released Harriett’s hand. “She feels warmer than before,” he replied. That had to be good news. It meant she was doing better. He hoped.

“Good.” Her mother set the bowl on the table and placed her hand on his shoulder. “Rose and I need to tend to Harriett.”

“I can help,” he offered.

“Not for this, Stan,” Rose told him. “It has to do with her more personal needs. I know Harriett, and she’d rather Ma and I take care of this.”

“Oh.”

Rose was right. Harriett was so shy when it came to him seeing her naked. Taking her clothes off to get her in dry ones was one thing. Making sure she used the chamber pot was different. He didn’t have a problem with helping Harriett that way, but he could see that Rose was right. Harriett wouldn’t want that at all.

He got up and headed for the door. Turning back to face them, he asked, “Can I return when you’re done?”

“Of course, you can,” her mother assured him, an understanding smile on her face.

With another look at Harriett, he thanked them and left the room. When he made it downstairs, he saw his mother holding a sleeping Maggie in the rocking chair on the porch. Next to her were his father, Kent, and Harriett’s father.

He stepped onto the porch, and they looked over at him. Before they could ask, he said, “Harriett’s still asleep.”

“She hasn’t woken up at all?” his father asked.

“No, not yet,” he replied. “But her temperature is higher.”

“That’s good news,” Harriett’s father said. “Joel said she should be alright. I think it’s just a matter of waiting until she wakes up.”

Stan nodded. He’d feel better once she did. He hated this waiting, especially when he wasn’t sure how she’d respond to seeing him again. But

even if she wasn't happy to see him, he'd find a way of making things right.

"Well, I think I'll put Maggie down," his mother said, rising to her feet. "I'll make sandwiches so you all can get something to eat."

He opened the door for her, and she offered him a comforting smile as she passed him and went into the house. After he shut the door, he glanced around, unsure of what he should do. The horse neighed, and he glanced at the barn. Maybe he should feed the animals. It'd give him something useful to do while he was waiting for Harriett's ma and Rose to be done.

"Sit down," Stan's father called out.

Looking at his pa, he shook his head. "I can't. I need to do something. I think I'll feed the animals."

"We already did that," his pa said. "In the barn and in the fields."

Stan sighed. He had to do something. He ran his hand through his hair and tried to remember all the things he'd marked down on his list. There were usually some odd chores he did from time to time that he could do now.

"Well, the wheel on my carriage is loose," Kent spoke up. When Stan looked at him, he shrugged. "I can wait until Rose and I get back home, but--"

"Sounds good," Stan interrupted. "Where is it?"

Kent gestured to the other side of the house. "I parked it over there."

"Stan," his pa began, "you did catch the part where Joel said Harriett was going to be alright, didn't you?"

"Of course, I did," Stan replied.

"So all your worrying is pointless."

"I've never been one for sitting still. You know that."

"I know, but you won't be any good if you wear yourself out."

"I'm not going to wear myself out. Besides, all I'm doing is sitting up there." He motioned to Harriett's bedroom.

His pa sighed but leaned back in his chair. "Alright."

"He'll be fine," Harriett's pa assured him. "He won't be able to rest until she wakes up. Then he'll calm down." With a smile at Stan, he added, "It's nice to see you love her."

Stan wanted to respond, but he didn't know what to say. It made sense her father would worry he wouldn't love Harriett. He was sure, he'd worry too, if Maggie married a man under conditions similar to the ones that brought him and Harriett together.

Thankfully, Kent got out of his chair and walked over to him so Stan didn't have to think of something to say. "You sure you want to work on the carriage?" Kent asked.

Stan nodded.

Kent led him down the porch and to the side of the house where he'd parked the carriage. "It's not in bad shape, but I know it needs fixing." He walked to the wheel and patted it. "This is it."

Stan inspected the wheel for a minute then faced him. "I'll get the things I need from the barn, and the wheel will be like new in no time."

Stan headed for the barn, not sure if Kent would follow or not, but he didn't. He wasn't sure what to think of Kent. Up to now, he really hadn't had anything to do with him, especially since Kent hadn't grown up in Omaha.

But when he returned with some tools and worked on the wheel, Kent offered to help him. Stan hesitated to accept the help. Kent was rich. His world revolved around things wealthy people did, and while Stan didn't know exactly what that entailed, he knew it had nothing to do with fixing wagons, rounding up cattle, or growing crops. He didn't work with his hands. He probably never got dirty. But Kent pitched right in and did whatever Stan asked.

When they were done, Stan put the tools back in his box and glanced at him. "You know, I didn't expect you to stick around and help with the wheel."

"I don't mind," Kent told him. "Besides, you taught me something today. In the future, if I need to, I can fix my wheels."

"You have a lot of money. Why don't you have one of those motor cars?"

"I'm planning to get one in a couple years, but right now, there's no need. I can't visit Rose's family in it. I figure as they get more popular, they'll be easier to drive this far out west."

"Oh. I suppose people back East are ahead of us."

With a smile, Kent shrugged. "Not in the things that matter."

Stan studied Kent for a moment, detecting that there was more to Kent than met the eye. And then he realized what Rose had seen in him. Kent might be rich, but he was an honest and decent person. He was able to look beyond someone's status and see who the person really was. Stan had no doubt Kent was the kind of man who made a good husband, and he probably made a good friend.

Turning his attention back to his box, Stan closed the lid. "I better take this back."

"Your wife will be alright," Kent told him.

"I know. Doctor Joel's good about knowing these things."

"Maybe, but there's also Rose. She's convinced Harriett will be back to normal in no time, and if there's one thing I've learned about her is that if she says something's going to happen, it does."

"I heard she can be stubborn when it comes to getting her way."

"Stubborn?" Kent chuckled. "That's a mild way of putting it. It'd take an act of God to stop her."

Stan laughed at his joke. "I heard she was relentless in her pursuit of you."

"I had a better chance of outrunning an angry bull."

"But the chase was worth it. I mean, she's never been happier."

"I hope not. I'd like to think she made the right decision when she picked

me.”

“She did.”

Kent paused for a moment then asked, “Does it bother you she chose me instead of you?”

“You heard I proposed to her?”

“I overheard it, actually.”

“Oh.” Stan cleared his throat. “I didn’t think you two were serious about each other at the time. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s alright. I understand. But we’re part of the same family now, and when someone gets sick or there’s a special occasion, I hope there won’t be any bad feelings between us.”

Understanding what Kent was getting at, Stan shook his head. “There won’t. I’m glad Rose said no. Harriett’s perfect for me.” He wasn’t sure she’d agree when she woke up, but he’d do whatever it took to win her back.

Kent relaxed. “I’m glad to hear it. Things could get awkward otherwise.”

“You’re right, especially since our wives like to see each other all the time.”

Harriett’s mother called out to Stan, so he looked over at her. “You can go back up and see Harriett now,” she told him.

“Is she awake?”

“She woke up briefly, but she went back to sleep.”

He hurried over to the porch and climbed the steps. “She woke up?”

“For only a minute.” Lowering her voice, she added, “It was when Rose and I helped her with personal matters.”

Since Harriett was able to use the chamber pot, then that meant she was definitely on the mend, and that was good news.

“She needs a lot more fluids,” her mother continued. “I’ll bring up some more water and a glass of warm milk.”

“Alright.” He stepped toward the door, and she stopped him. With an understanding smile, she took the toolbox from him. “I don’t think you’ll need that up there.”

Thanking her, he hurried into the house. He hoped Harriett would be awake when he got to the room, but she wasn’t. She was in a deep sleep. He released his breath and sat next to the bed, taking her hand in his. He ran his thumb along back of her hand, praying she’d be happy the next time she woke up and saw him.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

“Stan.” Someone nudged his shoulder. “Stan?”

Stan opened his eyes and lifted his head from the edge of Harriett’s bed. It took him a few seconds to remember where he was. He’d gone to sleep, holding Harriett’s hand. Blinking back the sleep from his eyes, he saw it was almost evening.

He turned his gaze from the window and to his mother. “You’re still here?” he asked as he straightened in the chair, working out the kinks in his back.

“I’m just about to leave.” She set a warm cup of milk on the table by the bed. “Maggie wants to come up, but I thought it best to wait until Harriett wakes up.”

“It is. She needs to get better, and I don’t think that will happen with Maggie bouncing around the room. You know the girl can’t stay still for long.”

“That’s normal for a child her age.” After a moment, his ma added, “I heard you refuse to leave Harriett’s bedside.”

“I want to be here when she wakes up. It’s because of me she left and got stuck in the storm.”

“What happened?”

Of all the people he could talk to who’d understand and possibly sympathize, it was his mother. But then, he supposed mothers were partial to taking their children’s side of the story. In this case, though, he wouldn’t sugarcoat it. She deserved to be told the truth, just like the others would find out when Harriett finally woke up.

“It was my fault,” he softly said. He made a move to rub his thumb over Harriett’s hand, but his hand was numb. Reluctant, he pulled his hand away from hers and wiggled his fingers to get the circulation going again. “I did what you said. I took an interest in her, and it worked. I fell in love with her. But she still thinks I want to be with Rose, so she kept me at a distance.” Breaking eye contact from her, he glanced at Harriett. “I don’t want to go into detail, but suffice it to say I rushed her.” His face warmed. Maybe he shouldn’t be telling her this. This was his mother, after all.

“I don’t understand. What did you do?”

Without trying to give too much detail, he said, “I kissed her. She wasn’t ready for it. I knew she wasn’t ready, but I kissed her anyway because I thought once we kissed, we could move forward and be like a husband and wife are supposed to be. But it was too soon. I should have waited.”

There. That was all Stan was going to say. If Harriett wanted to tell others he took advantage of her weakness, let her. He’d agree with whatever she

said.

“Did you kiss her because you care about her?” his mother asked.

“Yes,” he whispered. Not that Harriett was likely to see it that way, but he did.

“In the end, that’s what matters.” She patted his back. “I’ll leave you alone with her. If you need anything, let me know.”

He thanked her and waited until she left, closing the door behind her, before he took Harriett’s hand back in his and rested his head on the bed. Yes, he was stiff. His neck hurt. But it was a small price to pay. He wasn’t the one trying to recover from being stuck out in the chilly weather while in wet clothes.

A gentle squeeze on his hand came so unexpectedly, he hardly believed it. He waited, and sure enough, there was another squeeze. Lifting his head, he saw that Harriett’s eyes were open. He jumped up and grabbed the cup of warm milk.

“Are you thirsty?” he asked.

Of all the things he wanted to tell her, it was ridiculous this should be the first thing to pop out of his mouth. He wasn’t as smooth as other men would’ve been, he supposed. He probably should have gotten on his knees and expressed his undying love for her or something equally dramatic. But he opened his mouth, and the only thing that came out was whether or not she was thirsty.

She smiled and tried to speak, but her voice cracked.

He was ready to give her the cup when he remembered she was probably too weak to sit up by herself. He quickly set the cup down. “Can I help you get up? Sitting, I mean. Not standing.”

Since she nodded, he did, careful not to touch her breasts as he did so. He fluffed the pillow behind her then used an extra towel for additional support.

“Can you hold the cup?” he asked, once again picking it up.

“I think so,” she managed in a hoarse voice.

He handed it to her then sat back in the chair. “You’ve been asleep for about a day and a half. Your pa found you and brought you here. Your uncle Joel said all we could do was keep you warm. You lost a lot of body heat, but he said your condition was mild. He had a term for it. Don’t ask me what it was. I couldn’t pronounce it to save my life.”

She smiled again, letting out a weak chuckle. “It’s fine.”

She drank most of the milk. He winced. Though he had pressed a wet cloth to her lips to give her water, he hadn’t thought she was so thirsty. He should have given her more.

When she coughed, he took the cup from her in case she spilled it on herself. Retrieving his bandana from his back pocket, he held it out to her in case she wanted to cough into it.

She shook her head then cleared her throat. "I feel better, thanks."

He set the cup back down. "Are you hungry? Your ma made some soup. It's ready any time you want."

"I don't think I could eat right now. The milk has upset my stomach a bit."

"Do you need a bucket to throw up in?" he asked, ready to get up and get one for her.

"No, it's nothing like that. I just need the milk to settle, that's all." She patted the spot next to her. "Will you sit with me?"

He hesitated to do as she wished, but when she patted the spot again, he eased onto the bed. To his surprise, she leaned toward him. Thinking his weight had made her lose her balance, he apologized and started to get up.

"Don't get up," she protested. "I want to be close to you."

"Alright." He settled back next to her and wondered if he should hold her or if he should keep his hands to himself.

She saved him from having to make a decision when she slipped her arm around his and rested her head on his shoulder. "Stan, I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," he said.

"I do. I didn't listen to you."

"You had every reason to doubt me. I spent a lot of time ignoring you in the past."

"But you were trying to make up for it. I can see that now. I let my feelings of inadequacy get in the way of what was really going on."

He frowned. "You feel inadequate?"

"I'm nothing like my sister. I tried to be like her early on, but no matter what I did, I couldn't entertain people with stories or get them to want to come running over to me whenever I came into a room. I pretty much followed her wherever she went and watched while everyone went over to her. It's like Adam and Jacob. Jacob has an easy time with people, and Adam doesn't."

"Harriett, you shouldn't feel inadequate," Stan began.

"Will you let me finish?" she asked, her voice soft. When he nodded, she said, "I had a hard time believing you could ever love me, but I heard what you said when Rose was in here. You said I was the most important person in your life. I tried to show you I heard you. But I was so sleepy, I couldn't. I just wanted you to know I believe you, and I'm sorry I didn't listen to you sooner."

He waited to see if she had more to say, but since she grew silent, he took that as an indication she was done. Shifting so he could face her, he cupped her face in his hands. "The past couple of weeks have been the best of my life. I'm glad you're who you are. You've got a giving spirit, a tender heart, and you're loyal to those you love. I can't understand why you want to be with me when you could be with someone like Kent Ashton who could give

you a much more comfortable life. Surely, he must have some wealthy young male relative somewhere who's looking for a wife."

"Money doesn't buy happiness. I could never be with anyone but you. If it wasn't going to be you, then I decided I'd never get married."

He couldn't understand why, not when he had ignored her all those years. He didn't deserve her years of devotion, but he would earn it. Little by little. Moment by moment. Day by day. He would strive each year they had together to be worthy of her. He brushed her cheek with his thumb, noting the pink color had returned. She was no longer pale. But she did look tired.

He kissed her then whispered, "I should let you get more sleep. I'll come back with some more warm milk, and when you feel up to it, I'll get soup. I'll also let the others know you woke up and are feeling better."

As he made a move to get off the bed, she stopped him. "Will you hold me for a while first? Please?"

She yawned, a sign that their conversation had taken a lot out of her. She'd been determined to talk to him, to make things right. And he couldn't help but love her all the more for it.

"I can do that," he told her.

He kicked off his boots and got under the blankets. He brought her into his arms and rested his head on top of hers. He couldn't recall a moment where he felt more complete. And better yet, he had the rest of his life to love her as she was meant to be loved. Closing his eyes, he soon joined her and drifted off to sleep.

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Two mornings later, Harriett felt she had enough energy for a bath. It was taking a while to get back to normal. But it didn't matter. Stan loved her. And only her. She no longer had to live in her sister's shadow.

As she was buttoning her shirtwaist, there was a knock on the door. She glanced over at it and called out, "Who is it?"

"Your favorite person in the entire world," her sister replied.

With a smile, she went to the door and opened it. "Oh, I thought you were Adam," she said, feigning surprise.

Rose gasped but then laughed. "Why, Harriett. Who knew you had such a sly streak in you?"

"Come on in. I'm almost ready to go downstairs."

Slipping into the room, Rose closed the door behind her and walked over to her. "Mind if I brush your hair?"

"No." She handed Rose the brush and sat by the vanity. "Is everyone still here?"

"Pa had to go back to the farm, and Stan's parents had to watch a couple of their grandchildren. I'm afraid ever since everyone got a chance to see you last evening at supper, you're no longer that interesting."

Though Harriett caught the teasing tone in her sister's voice, she let out a "humph" and crossed her arms.

"It doesn't matter, though. The only people who matter are here," Rose replied and started to gently brush Harriett's hair. "Besides, do you really want Pa and Adam to bore you about breeding their cattle or for Eli to go on and on about the different songs he's playing on the piano?"

Harriett pretended to think about it and nodded. "You're right. I'm much better off with you and Ma."

Harriett glanced at her sister's reflection. These days Rose dressed so differently from her. While Harriett still wore simple shirtwaists and skirts, Rose had traded in her shirts and pants for expensive dresses. The contrast couldn't be more startling, even though they looked just the same.

"Rose, are we always going to be close?"

Rose put the brush down and retrieved a few pins. "Of course, we are. You're my sister and dearest friend in all the world. Nothing will ever change that." Her gaze met hers. "Why do you ask?"

"I feel foolish for pushing you away when I first married Stan."

"Don't. I understand. You worried if I was around Stan, he'd forget all about you." She rested her hand on Harriett's shoulder. "Do you still worry about that?"

"No. After what I put him through, he didn't give up on me. He searched all night for me, and he stayed by my bed until I was awake and well. Only a man who truly loves a woman will do all that."

"You're right, and he does. You're a fortunate woman."

"I am."

Rose smiled and turned her attention to putting the pins in Harriett's hair, allowing most of her hair to fall gently down her back. "Men like it when a woman lets her hair down."

"They do?"

Rose nodded. "It says so in books."

Harriett rolled her eyes. "You'd swear that all those dime novels were the God's honest truth with the way you talk about them."

"It's not just the books that say so. Kent's said it as well."

"He has?"

"Yes, and you know Kent doesn't exaggerate."

"No, he doesn't. He's much too serious. Speaking of which, is Kent still here?"

"He is. He and Stan are talking while Ma is watching Maggie and making breakfast."

"Oh, so you came up here to get out of cooking."

"I did not."

"Yes, you did."

Rose let out a long sigh. "I came up here to get a moment alone with my most favorite person in the world. It hasn't been easy with that husband of yours hogging all of your attention. I had no idea I'd have to fight for you when you decided to get married."

Harriett laughed at her sister's joke. Standing up, she gave her a hug. "No one could ever replace you."

"Does that mean you don't mind if Kent and I visit you and Stan sometime or if I come see you by myself?"

Pulling away from her, Harriett shook her head. "I won't mind."

"Good. I just knew once Stan took the time to get to know you, he'd realize you were the right one for him."

"You were right." And thankfully so.

They left the room and went to the kitchen where Maggie was helping their mother set the table. As soon as Maggie saw Harriett, she yelled out, "Ma!" and ran over to her.

Harriett knelt down and brought the girl into her arms, her heart warmed. She'd never get tired of hearing Maggie call her *Ma*, no matter how often the girl said it.

"Maggie missed you," Harriett's mother said, glancing at Harriett with a pleased smile.

Harriett kissed Maggie's cheek. "I missed her, too."

The men came into the kitchen, and Harriett rose to her feet, surprised when Maggie held her hand instead of running over to Stan.

"It's good to see you looking healthy," Kent told Harriett.

"It is," Stan agreed as he went over to her and placed his hand on the small of her back. "You look nice, especially when your hair is down."

Rose shot Harriett a meaningful look as Kent pulled out her chair, but Harriett chose to ignore her sister. Instead, she thanked Stan and helped Maggie into her seat.

Once they were all seated, Harriett chose to keep her portion down to a slice of bread and some jam, deciding not to press her luck. She'd had soup and a small roll the evening before, and that had been enough to fill her for the entire night. Then Stan held her while she slept. Even now, she could feel his arms around her, keeping her nice and warm by his side.

"Good news about the buggy," Stan told her. "It's in the barn. It's just a little worn by the weather and should be easy to repair."

"What about the horse?" she asked. "Did anyone find Chester?"

"No." He placed his hand on her thigh, a reassuring message no one would know about but her. "But that's alright. The important thing is you're here and you're well."

"It is," her mother agreed. "Horses can be replaced. You can't."

In all her years, Harriett couldn't recall a time when she felt more loved.

She was a most fortunate woman indeed. She had a husband who loved her, a daughter who finally thought of her as a mother, a sister who was her dearest friend, and a family who did everything they could to see her happy. If life could get any better than this, she didn't know how.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

A week later, Harriett decided to surprise Stan with a picnic. It'd taken her three pieces of licorice to get Maggie to keep it a secret, but the girl managed to be good and didn't peep a word. When the basket was ready, she turned to Maggie.

"Find your pa and tell him I need his help," she told the girl.

"Say why?" Maggie asked.

"No. We want this to be a surprise, remember?"

The girl nodded and headed outside.

Harriett collected the basket and waited on the porch while Maggie ran into the barn. Harriett slid the basket behind her skirt so he wouldn't see it.

A minute passed before Stan followed Maggie out of the barn, and though Maggie ran as fast as her little legs could carry her, Stan had no trouble keeping up with her pace. Harriett giggled at the sight. They were adorable together.

"Maggie said you needed me for something," Stan called out as he approached the porch.

"Were you busy with anything in the barn?" Harriett asked.

"Nothing that can't wait." He brushed the hair out of those amazing blue eyes that even now could send a thrilling spark right through her. "What is it?"

"I was wondering if you're hungry."

"I am. Is supper ready?"

"It is!" Maggie replied before Harriett could do it.

Well, the girl had waited long enough. Harriett turned and grabbed the basket. "I thought it'd be nice to have a picnic today."

His smile grew wide. "You want to go on a picnic?"

"I wouldn't have prepared the basket if I didn't," she teased.

"Chicken, pie, rolls," Maggie said. "I did candy."

"She did," Harriett allowed as she came down the steps. "It tastes really good. You'll like it."

"I'm sure I will. Here, let me." He took the basket from her. "Do you want to eat at our usual spot?"

"That sounds good." She looked at Maggie. "Want to collect more flowers? We can bring some back."

Since the girl darted on ahead and called out for them to follow her, Stan chuckled. "I'll take that as a yes."

He took Harriett's hand, and they followed Maggie to the section of land with the wildflowers. With the breeze and warm sun, the day couldn't be more perfect. Once they set out the blanket, Maggie helped them pick out

what to eat, something Harriett found charming. The girl had a tendency to want to act older than her age at times. There was no doubt about it. She'd make a good big sister.

Harriett looked forward to having more children. When she was a girl, playing with her dolls, she'd often envisioned she'd have a lot of children. Since Stan hadn't been interested in her, she'd put away such notions. But now that she knew he loved her, she was free to dream once more, and in these dreams, she saw a house full of them.

Content to let Maggie ramble on with Stan about horses and cattle, Harriett ate her meal, not really listening to everything they were saying but getting the gist of it. After they finished, Maggie went to collect flowers. The absence of her talking was a startling contrast to the silence.

Stan must have noticed it, too, for he said, "You're awfully quiet this evening."

With a shrug, she smiled. "I was enjoying listening to you two. I'm afraid I don't share the same kind of excitement for horses and cattle you do."

"Were we boring you?"

"No. I like hearing about it."

He scooted closer to her. "Is something else on your mind?"

Her face warmed. "I was just thinking about things."

"What kind of things?"

"I don't know. Just things."

"Oh come on," he pressed, nudging her shoulder with his. "You can tell me. There's no need to be shy."

"You'll think it's silly."

"Try me. You might be surprised."

"Well," she bit her lower lip then decided she might as well say it, "alright. I was thinking of the future. Our future. I can see us having lots of children, can't you?"

His eyebrows rose. "Are you telling me you're expecting?"

"No, not yet. It's just that when I was a girl, I used to pretend my dolls were children." She glanced at Maggie, who was collecting flowers, and said, "Maggie will make a good big sister, don't you think?"

"I do." He lowered his head toward hers and softly added, "I don't think your desire to have children is silly. I want more of them, too."

"Do you?"

He nodded and shot her that disarming grin of his. "And I can't think of anyone who'd make a better mother."

His lips met hers, and she leaned into him. They hadn't made love since she got sick. He hadn't made a move to do more than hold her at night in bed. He was being a gentleman, waiting for her to let him know when she was ready. Now that she'd been intimate with him, she knew what happened to a

man's body when he was aroused, and there were times in the middle of the night when she was aware of his erection.

But he never did anything about it. He just continued to hold her, willing to be patient for as long as she needed. And she loved him for that. It'd taken her longer to heal from her night outside than she thought it would. But today, she felt completely well again and saw no reason to delay their lovemaking any longer.

"Got flowers!" Maggie called out.

Reluctant, Harriett ended the kiss and turned her attention to Maggie, who was holding a bunch of flowers in her hands.

"You nearly took the whole field," Stan said with a laugh.

"Some yours," she replied.

"That was very sweet of you, Maggie." Harriett rose to her feet and started gathering their things. "Let's get back to the house so we can put them in some containers."

Stan hurried to help, and soon, they were on their way back home. Once Harriett helped Maggie put the flowers in all the rooms she wanted, they tucked the girl into bed and went downstairs to have some hot chocolate.

It was a habit they got used to since her mother had made it for them while Harriett was on the mend, and more than that, it allowed them a good time to talk. They'd sit in the kitchen and share whatever was on their minds. This was quickly becoming Harriett's favorite time of the day.

Usually when they were done talking, Harriett would wash their cups and they'd go upstairs. But tonight, after she washed the cups, she returned to the table, and before Stan could stand up, she cupped his face in her hands.

"I want to be with you, Stan," she whispered. "I want to be your wife."

Then, in a bold move, she leaned forward and kissed him. She didn't expect the kiss to spark the passion between them, but that's exactly what it did. And before she knew it, he brought her onto his lap and wrapped his arms around her. Like always, she had no defense against him. But this time, she didn't need to feel weak for the way her body responded to him. This was right. He wanted to be with her. He loved her. And she loved him. Making love would complete it. This time she didn't have to wonder if he was making love to her or thinking of someone else. He only wanted her, and that was all that mattered.

His hands went to her shirtwaist, quickly undoing her buttons, and with a thrill, she realized he fully intended to have her right here in the kitchen. The wickedness of it all—knowing they weren't going to wait for bed, aroused her far more than it probably should have. But she'd spent her entire life doing exactly what was expected of her, and now she had the chance to do something completely inappropriate.

After he removed her shirtwaist, she helped him as he took off her

chemise. He cupped one of her breasts in his hands and licked her nipple. She shivered in delight as a spark of pleasure went straight to her core. Before she lost her nerve and thought better of it, she lifted her skirt and petticoats then straddled him.

“Oh Harriett,” Stan whispered, bringing his mouth to her neck and leaving a trail of kisses to her ear.

His hands slid under her skirt and petticoats and traveled up her bloomers. She spread her legs further so he could slip one hand in the opening of the cotton material. She let out a soft sigh. It felt so wonderful. His fingers brushed her curls and she gasped. It'd been so long since they'd been intimate. Even now, the memory of the night they'd consummated their marriage made her core clench in anticipation, and a familiar heat centered between her legs.

“I want you,” she told him, wiggling so that his fingers were closer to her entrance. “Bring me to completion, Stan.”

He slid two fingers into her, and she moaned in pleasure. Before they'd been together, she had no idea her body was capable of such intense sensations. But now she knew the ache between her legs would only be satisfied when he finished what he'd started. She placed her hands on his shoulders and shifted so that she could moved up and down his fingers, quickly establishing a rhythm that allowed him to tease the sensitive area deep in her core. Biting her lower lip, she groaned, louder this time, heedless to anything else going on around them.

“You're so lovely, Harriett,” he murmured, using the pad of his thumb to caress her sensitive nub.

His action only served to heighten her pleasure, and she continued moving her hips until she reached the peak. Crying out, she stilled and gave herself completely over to the moment, savoring each wave as it crashed into her. He continued to stroke her core, an action which only prolonged her pleasure. When the intensity subsided, she brought her mouth to his and kissed him, and by the way his tongue probed her mouth, she knew his body was just as eager for her as she'd been for him.

She brought her hands down between them and shifted so that she could unbutton his pants. Lifting her, he wiggled until his pants were at his knees, allowing her to better feel him. She took his penis in her hands and traced the length of it. He was hard and there was a silky texture to his shaft that made it easy to stroke him.

“I've been dreaming of what it'd feel like to have you touch me there,” he murmured, squeezing her hips in silent encouragement for her to keep going.

Unable to resist the urge, she shot him a wicked grin. “Have you?”

He shot her a seductive smile. “It's better than I imagined.”

She leaned forward and kissed him again, this time wrapping her hand

around his shaft and moving it up and down in a motion similar to the way she would soon be moving her hips when he was finally inside her. For the moment, she was curious about this part of him and saw no reason to rush through to the end.

When their kiss ended, he whispered, "I've also imagined what it'd be like to be in your mouth."

She paused in her stroking motion and considered whether she dare oblige him. She was curious about him, and this would give her a chance to better explore him. Even as the idea made her pulse race with excitement, she had to fight back the sudden wave of shyness that came over her. It was alright to do this. He was her husband, after all. She could explore any part of him she wanted, and she had no doubt, he'd enjoy it.

Decision made, she got off of him and knelt down, not able to make eye contact as she took him in her hand once more. With a moan, he put his hands on her shoulders and gently squeezed them in silent encouragement. She dared a glance up at him and saw that he had his head tilted back and his eyes closed.

Good. He wasn't watching her. That being the case, she felt more at ease about what she was doing. Lowering her gaze, she took note of his erection, intrigued by all she was learning. She stroked him, starting at his base and moving up to his tip. He groaned again and whispered her name, making her face flush with pleasure.

She leaned forward and took him into her mouth, tracing his tip with her tongue. As she continued learning more about him, she realized his groans grew louder, something that let her know he was enjoying her ministrations.

"I need to get inside you," he whispered.

More than happy to do whatever she could to satisfy him, she got up and removed her bloomers. Tossing them aside, she lifted her skirt and petticoats and straddled him once more, except this time, she reached between them and took him into her. She gasped as he filled her core.

"Harriett?" he whispered, his voice strained.

"It feels good," she assured him. "It feels so very good."

With a moan, he brought his hands to her breasts and teased her nipples, an action which only made her ache once more. He began moving inside her, and she bit her lower lip. It did feel good. Incredibly so, in fact. She couldn't think of anything that felt better than this.

He thrust deeper into her, and she proceeded to work with him. She rocked her hips in time to his thrusting, her sensitive nub rubbing against him.

"I want to do this again tonight," she murmured as she purposely clenched around him, shivering in delight at the spark of pleasure that swept through her.

"We're just getting started, sweetheart," he rasped and plunged deep into

her.

She gripped his arms and worked faster, aware that she was getting very close to the peak. She loved this. Loved it when he softly repeated her name. Loved it when he cupped her breasts in his hands. Loved it when he rocked his hips so she could more easily slide up and down his penis.

And loved it when he brought her to completion. Heart racing, she grew still and squeezed his arms as her flesh clenched around him. He wrapped her in his arms and kissed her neck, whispering that he loved her and only her. When she relaxed, she murmured that she loved him, too, and brought her mouth to his.

His tongue sparred with hers while he began moving inside her once more. Soon, his thrusting became more insistent, and she worked with him, doing her part to help him find completion in the act. And when he climaxed, he let out a soft cry and shuddered as he released his seed into her.

After a couple minutes passed between them, he kissed her neck. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Harriett. Thank you for not giving up on me.”

Smiling, she turned her head so she could kiss him, letting her lips linger on his. When the kiss was over, she brushed his jaw with her fingers, her eyes meeting his. “You were worth the wait.”

“I’m glad. And I promise I’ll never make you sorry you gave me another chance.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

He gave her another kiss then shot her a suggestive look that sent a spark of delight right through her. “Why don’t we continue this upstairs?”

Eager to be intimately entwined with him again, she stood up and helped him retrieve their clothes then followed him to bed, where they continued to make love through the night.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

The next morning when Stan woke up, his first thought was that the past week—especially last night—had been a dream. It all seemed too good to be true. But when he opened his eyes, Harriett was sleeping next to him, naked and curled up against his side.

With a smile, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. It hadn't been a dream. Everything had been real. She'd initiated their lovemaking. She had lowered her wall and let him in. Now, they were truly husband and wife. And it was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

A moment of immense joy passed before doubt started seeping in. The last time they'd made love, she hadn't been happy. It'd come as a shock to him, of course, because he thought once they became intimate, she'd feel secure in his love for her, but she hadn't.

"Harriett," he whispered.

As much as he hated to wake her up, he needed to know she wouldn't feel the need to close herself off from him again. And he had to know this before he could do any of the day's chores.

He stroked her cheek, and lowering his head to hers, he whispered, "Harriett?"

She stirred, and he kissed her. It hadn't been his intention to kiss her, but she was so very lovely. He'd have to be made of stone not to want to kiss her.

"Stan?" she asked in a soft voice, her eyes still closed.

"Yes, it's me."

He caressed her cheek then let his fingers drift down her neck. He would have thought making love four times the night before would have appeased his desire, but his body notified him it wanted to be with her again.

She opened her eyes and glanced at the window. "Is it morning already?"

"Afraid so." Good. She hadn't gasped or pulled away from him. She was still at his side. And better yet, she was smiling.

She slipped her arm around his waist and snuggled up to him. "I wish we didn't have to get out of bed."

Chuckling, he pulled her closer and kissed her. "I wish we didn't have to, either."

He brought his lips back to hers, glad when she responded with the same passion she had the night before. In fact, one thing led to another, and soon they were making love again. Afterwards, he continued to hold and kiss her, reluctant to put an end to a perfect beginning to the day. This was so much better than last time. It was how they should have woken up the first time they made love. But at least they were doing this now, and this would set the precedence for mornings to come.

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In September, Harriett opened the kitchen window to let the fresh air in, glad when a breeze drifted into the room. Now that it was getting cooler outside, she could get a reprieve from the August heat. These days she tried not to wear her hair in a bun since Stan liked it when she wore it down, but sometimes she just had to. On this day, however, she was able to pull it back with a couple barrettes.

At the moment, Maggie was playing in the parlor with a couple toys, allowing Harriett to take her time making breakfast if she wanted. But she was much too excited. Deciding she'd opt to make a quick meal, she retrieved the ingredients she'd need to make muffins. As she was mixing the ingredients in a bowl, Stan came into the kitchen with a small basket of eggs.

"Oh good," she said, coming over to him and taking the basket. Eggs would be quick and fill everyone up for a long time. "This is perfect." She kissed him. "Thank you."

"You can thank the hens. They were laying good ones today."

"Yes, but you got the eggs for me." She set the basket on the worktable. "I'm a little anxious to go to town."

Chuckling, he brought her into his arms and kissed her. "You already know what your uncle's going to say."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I know, but I want to hear it. Plus, I'd like to know when our baby will be born."

"Just count the months."

"But I want to know for sure. Joel's a doctor. He's delivered many babies. He knows what he's doing."

He gave her waist a playful squeeze. "It'll be nice to see what he says."

He lowered his head and kissed her again, this time letting his lips linger on hers. She leaned into him and responded to his kiss. His tongue traced her lower lip, and she opened her mouth to receive him. Tingles of delight traveled up and down her spine. No matter how often he kissed her, every time he did it, it felt like it was the first kiss she'd ever received. In her wildest dreams, she didn't think being married to Stan would be this wonderful.

Maggie groaned. "Kissing again."

Harriett turned around and saw Maggie roll her eyes. Giggling, she gestured for Maggie to come over to the worktable. "Want to help me make muffins?"

Maggie shook her head. "Ride horse?"

Stan placed his hand on the small of Harriett's back. "What if I take her for a short ride while you make breakfast? Then we'll go see your uncle and pick up some things from the mercantile."

"That'd be best," Harriett replied, glancing at the girl who was already

putting on her boots. She shook her head in amusement. “She’s going to beat you outside at the rate she’s going.”

Laughing, he kissed her cheek. “We won’t be more than twenty minutes.”

“Have a good time,” she told him as he picked Maggie up and carried her out the door.

Smiling, she turned her attention back to the ingredients she set out and started making the muffins. A half hour later, she had breakfast ready, and they enjoyed a good meal. During the whole time, Maggie told her about the horse ride and helping Stan with feeding the horses. Stan would add something from time to time, but Maggie seemed to be content to take most of the spotlight, proving just how much like Rose she really was. And Harriett liked that. With Maggie around, she didn’t have to miss her sister quite so much. She’d never trade her life with Stan for anything, but her sister would always be important to her.

When they were done with their meal, Stan hitched the horses to the wagon and took them to town. As they arrived at the main street, Stan asked her, “Do you want to stop by the mercantile or see if your uncle’s in first?”

“Let’s see if Uncle Joel’s in his office,” she said.

She’d never be able to concentrate on getting what she needed if she didn’t get confirmation about her pregnancy. Stan pulled the wagon to a stop, and she scooted to the edge of her seat, getting ready to jump down by the time he reached her side.

“Hold on there, sweetheart.” Stan placed his hand on her leg. “I’d never forgive myself if you hurt yourself. Give me your hand, and I’ll help you down.”

“I’m trying to be patient,” she replied as she accepted his hand and let him help her. “It’s just hard.”

“You’ve been telling me you’re expecting for two weeks now. What’s a few minutes more?”

“I don’t know. I guess it’s because we’re finally here.” She looked up at him. “Aren’t you excited?”

He smiled and squeezed her hand. “Yes, I am, but I don’t want you breaking a bone in your hurry to see your uncle.”

She returned his smile and squeezed his hand back. “I’ll be careful. I promise.”

He patted the small of her back then helped Maggie down. “Are you looking forward to having a little brother or sister?”

“I clean it?” Maggie asked.

“No,” he replied, laughter in his voice.

“Baby fine,” she said.

Harriett took Maggie’s hand, and they walked down the boardwalk until they came to the doctor’s office. Since there was no sign on the door saying

Joel was out, she opened the door. She knew she should have waited for Stan to do it, but she couldn't.

Joel, who'd been sorting medicine bottles on the shelf, glanced over at them and smiled. "It's good to see the color back in your cheeks, Harriett."

Amused, Harriett went over to him. "You say that every time you see me."

"Well, you have to admit getting hypothermia isn't something a person does every day." He reached for a piece of peppermint and threw it toward Maggie, who caught it. "What brings you here?"

"I think I'm in the family way," Harriett told him.

"Thinks it? She knows it," Stan inserted. "She wants you to tell her when she can expect the baby to be here."

"I can't tell you exactly when," Joel began, "but I can give you an estimate. When did you last have your monthly flow?"

"About the first of August," she said.

"Are your cycles regular?" he asked.

She nodded. "I haven't missed a single one since I started. That is, until this time."

He went to his desk and pulled out his calendar. "You notice any other symptoms?"

"Like what?"

"Didn't your ma fill you in on what to look for?"

"Well, I hadn't thought to ask." And it seemed there hadn't been much time for the two of them to sit and talk whenever she brought Stan and Maggie with her to visit her parents.

Her uncle sighed. "Harriett, you need to do a better job of talking to your mother. That's why God gave women mothers to talk to. Poor Stan has to stand there and listen to all of this, and I can tell you firsthand, a husband doesn't really want to hear about a woman's cycle or how she's feeling while she's expecting a child."

"Oh, don't be silly," Harriett said. "Stan had a hand in making the baby." She glanced at Stan. "This doesn't embarrass you, does it?"

"No, but then I've been breeding livestock most of my life," Stan replied.

Joel chuckled. "Smart answer. Harriett, to answer your question, the things you can experience early on will vary. Some women don't notice anything at all while most usually feel sick or are more tired than usual. I find the best indicator is the stop of the monthly flow, but even then, a few women still have their cycle."

"You're kidding?" Harriett asked.

"Nope. A woman last year had no idea she was expecting until she came to see me, and she left with a baby. Turns out she was in labor and didn't know it."

She stared at him, trying to decide if he was joking but then decided he

wasn't. "Well, I didn't think such a thing was possible."

"When you've been a doctor for as long as I have, you learn that almost anything is possible, except for men having babies. Stan, if you come in here with pain in your abdomen, we're safe in knowing you're not going to leave with a baby."

Her lips curled up at her uncle's jest. "Since you mentioned it, I have been tired lately, though I haven't been sick."

"If you do get sick, try nibbling on some food during the day."

"I'm bored," Maggie said.

"In that case, I better get to work." After Joel gave her another piece of peppermint, he turned to his calendar. A few seconds later, he looked over at Harriett. "I'd say you'll probably have a baby in early to mid-May. Don't ask me if it'll be a boy or a girl. The only way to know that is when you actually give birth."

"Oh, I know that," Harriett replied in amusement.

"These might help if you do start feeling a little nauseous from time to time." He collected a handful of peppermints and gave them to Harriett. "Peppermints are good for the stomach. Don't chew them. Suck on them instead."

"Thank you, Uncle Joel."

"Any time."

She left the small building with Stan and Maggie and waited until they were at the wagon before turning to them. "You hear that? The baby will be here in May."

"You notice he only counted the months," Stan pointed out with a teasing gleam in his eye.

"Well, yes, but if we hadn't gone, I wouldn't have found out about peppermints."

"No, you wouldn't. I had no idea peppermint could soothe an upset stomach."

"You learn something new every day."

"Indeed, you do."

He helped Maggie up into her seat, and she looked over at Harriett. "Want peppermint, Ma."

"I'm afraid those are for Ma in case she doesn't feel well," Stan told the girl. "But we can pick up some licorice at the mercantile."

The girl nodded her consent.

After Harriett put the peppermint into her drawstring purse, he took her hand, and she thought he was going to help her up, but he didn't. Curious, she looked up at him. "What is it, Stan?"

"I was just thinking of how lucky I am," he whispered, bringing her hand to his chest. "I got a sweet little girl and another child on the way, and best of

all, I have the most wonderful woman who's made it all possible. I'll never take it for granted that you married me."

She leaned into him. Yes, he still had the ability to make her weak, but he wrapped her safely in his arms so she wouldn't fall. "I love you, Stan."

"I love you, too."

He kissed her then helped her into the wagon. Maggie settled next to her, and Harriett kissed the girl on her head. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Ma," the girl whispered and hugged her.

Stan hopped up next to them and released the brake. "Don't tell me you're crying," he said when he glanced at Harriett.

"I am," Harriett admitted, wiping the tears from her eyes. "But it's because I've never been so happy in my entire life."

"Well, I guess it's not so bad when they're tears of joy," he replied.

Putting Maggie on her lap, she scooted closer to Stan and settled against him. Her life was better than she ever imagined it'd be. And the best, she knew, was yet to come.

## Epilogue

May 1909

Harriett placed her finger over her two-week-old daughter's hand. Her daughter opened her fist and clenched her finger, an action which made Harriett laugh. It was cute the girl did that every time. After much debate, she decided to name her Leah. Stan had left the decision up to her, and that was the name she finally settled on. And now as she sat on the settee in Rose's informal parlor, she was glad she picked the name. It was a simple name. A pretty name. A pretty name for a pretty girl.

Rose came into the room, holding her three-week-old son, Theodore. Noting the way her sister brushed aside a few strands of her hair that were damp with sweat, Harriett asked, "Do you want to go on the porch?"

"No, I'll be fine as soon as I sit down." Rose settled in a rocking chair by the open window and let out a sigh as the wind blew over her. "I know I could have a nanny take care of Theo. Kent says they do it all the time back East and in Europe, but I want to be the one who takes care of our son, even if it means changing diapers."

Harriett shook her head in amusement. "I must admit, Rose, I never thought I'd see the day when you volunteered to work. You spent your whole life avoiding it whenever possible."

Smirking at her, she settled the boy in her arms. "When you consider the kind of work I was being asked to do, it shouldn't surprise you. I still don't cook, do laundry, or clean. Taking care of Theo is a labor of love."

Harriett gave a playful shrug. "I suppose."

"Not everyone likes to cook and clean like you do."

"When I cook, I get to eat exactly what I want. As for cleaning, it's nice to see clean clothes and a clean house. It's not the process I enjoy as much as the result."

"You always say that, but I don't believe you. I think you enjoy doing it. Why else would you hum so much?"

"Humming helps pass the time."

"So you say."

Harriett rolled her eyes but chose not to argue with her sister. Instead, she turned her gaze back to Leah, still in awe that the little girl was actually here. Harriett could see a bit of Stan in her, but for the most part, the girl took after her side of the family.

"It's a shame you didn't have Leah one week sooner," Rose spoke up, bringing Harriett's attention back to her. "If they'd been born on the same day, they would be just like us."

"They would never be twins, Rose."

“Not in the traditional sense, but they’d share the same birthday. They would be twins in spirit.”

Harriett chuckled. “Kent told me you tried to fight off the labor so we could give birth at the same time.”

“I did, but Theo was quite insistent.”

“Just be glad we both have healthy and happy children.”

“You’re right, though it would have been so much fun if they’d been born on the same day. Imagine the kind of stories we could tell others. Twins having a child on the same day. No one would believe it.”

“No one would care.”

“Sure, they would. It’d be something different. People like it when things are different. Why, there was a story I read in a dime novel once where—”

“Rose,” Harriett began, interrupting her, “I love you. You’re not only my sister; you’re my dearest friend. But if you go into another longwinded account of a story you read, I might do something I’ll regret later, like hit you over the head with that Sears Roebuck catalog.” She gestured to the catalog resting on the table near the settee.

“Don’t you like the stories I read?”

“If you’d tell me what the story is about in less than five minutes, I’d like them just fine, but you can go on for a half hour. I don’t have that kind of patience.”

“I can’t help it if so many interesting things happen in every story I read.”

“What’s interesting to you isn’t interesting to everyone else.”

Rose huffed. “Kent likes hearing about them, especially at night when he’s had a long day at work and wants to relax.”

Harriett chuckled. Oh, she bet Kent loved listening to them. The stories probably put him right to sleep.

“It looks like they’re back,” Rose said.

Harriett glanced out the window and saw Kent and Stan leaving the stables with Maggie. “Our husbands seem to get along, don’t they?”

“They do, which is fortunate since we want to see each other often.”

“It is.”

“Harriett?”

Glancing back at her sister, Harriett indicated for her to continue.

“You don’t secretly worry about Stan, do you?” Rose asked.

“No, I don’t. I know he loves me and is glad he married me instead of you.” Then, unable to resist teasing her, she added, “He got the better sister.”

Rose gasped, but her smile betrayed her good humor. “Since you recently gave birth to my adorable niece, I’ll let the matter go.”

The front door opened, and Maggie came running into the parlor. “Hi, Ma!” She jumped on the settee and gave Harriett a hug.

Touched, Harriett hugged her with one arm, careful not to disturb Leah.

“Did you have a good time?”

“Yes,” Maggie said. “Rode horse.”

“You did?”

“Uh huh. Someday ride alone.”

“You’ll have even more fun doing that,” Rose assured the girl.

Harriett shook her head. “Better you two than me.” There was no way Harriett would get on one. “I’d rather go somewhere in a buggy or wagon.”

“Don’t mind her, Maggie,” Rose told the girl. “She has no sense of adventure.”

“I have plenty of adventure already.” Harriett kissed Maggie on the head, followed by a kiss to Leah. “You two are the best adventures anyone could ever hope for.”

“What did I tell you?” Kent told Stan as the men came into the room. “As soon as women have children, they forget about us.”

Harriett shot her brother-in-law an amused look. “That’s not true, and you know it.”

Kent’s eyebrows rose. “Oh no? This morning as I was trying to give Rose a kiss, she ran off to take care of Theo.” He glanced at Stan, a hint of a grin on his face. “Tell me that’s not a blatant disregard for a husband.”

“That’s because Theo was crying,” Rose replied, standing up. “He needed me.”

“I need you, too.”

“But you’re not a helpless baby. He can’t do anything for himself.”

“Well, I can’t very well give myself a kiss,” Kent replied.

“You could,” Stan argued, “though not on the lips.”

Kent smirked. “You go around kissing your hand?”

“Don’t mind him,” Harriett told Stan. “He’s baiting you.”

Stan came over to her and helped her to her feet. “Are you ready to go home?”

“Yes, I am.” Harriett looked over at Kent who whispered something in Rose’s ear that made her chuckle. She waited until Kent was done before saying, “Thank you both for a lovely dinner.”

“We were happy you could come,” Rose replied.

“Will you be coming over to our house when you get back from your trip to Kansas City?” Harriett asked.

“We will, and I’ll bring you a shawl from there,” Rose told her as they headed for the front door where the footman waited for them. “You have no idea how many fine clothes are there.”

“She goes there to shop, and I go to make business contacts,” Kent whispered to Stan.

“I heard that,” Rose said. “And I don’t just go to shop. I also go because I miss you when you’re not around.”

The footman opened the door, and they stepped outside. When Harriett saw that the coachman had brought Stan's buggy up to the porch, she said, "You didn't have to go through the trouble of getting the buggy over here for us."

"It's no trouble for my favorite sister," Rose replied. "Besides, you need to take care of yourself. There's no need to walk all the way to the stables if you don't have to."

"She's right," Stan agreed. "It's alright to let someone pamper you for a change."

Harriett gave her sister a hug then followed Maggie and Stan down the porch steps. After Maggie hopped into the buggy, Stan took Leah from Harriett and helped her in. Once she was comfortable, she accepted Leah back into her arms.

When he got in beside them, he leaned over to kiss her.x

Her cheeks warm, she glanced at Kent and Rose, who were still on the porch. "Are you sure you should do that in front of them?"

"Why not? I don't mind showing Kent I got the better sister."

Though she knew that Stan had kissed her because he wanted to—not because he wanted to show Kent anything—it was sweet he could look at her and Rose and think of her as the better choice. And she was the better choice. For him. As long as she was first in his life, nothing else mattered.

"I love you, Stan," she said.<3

"I love you, too, Harriett," he replied and gave her another kiss.

"Do you love me?" Maggie asked, glancing from one to the other.

Chuckling, Stan patted her back. "We sure do, kid. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't be together."

Harriett adjusted Leah, so she was settled in one arm, and brought her other arm around Maggie's shoulders to pull her close. "You'll always be my first little girl, no matter what."

Stan released the brake and led the buggy forward. "Yep, our family wouldn't be complete without you," he told the girl.

They gave Kent and Rose a wave before he urged the horse to head on home.

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