

A
Bride for
Tom

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Ruth Ann Nordin's Books
Springfield, Nebraska

A Bride for Tom - Smashwords Edition

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Dedicated to: my readers who make writing worthwhile

This book is part of the Nebraska series. Here is the order of the books in this series that I've written so far:

A Bride for Tom

A Husband for Margaret (coming Fall 2010)

Eye of the Beholder

The Wrong Husband (coming Fall 2010)

His Redeeming Bride

Loving Eliza (though Eliza moves to South Dakota, she is a minor character in His Redeeming Bride)

Chapter One

September 1868

Omaha, Nebraska

Margaret Williams nudged her friend in the side. “Don’t look now but Tom Larson is coming over here.”

Jessica Reynolds looked. Of course, she had to look. Whenever someone said, “Don’t look,” they secretly hoped you would, and Jessica had to oblige her friend. She directed her attention to the lanky blond who asked Daisy to dance.

Daisy shook her head.

His shoulders slumped, he turned toward the next lady in line. He, however, was not a graceful young man for in the next moment he succeeded in toppling into Beth and they both fell onto the barn floor.

People around them chuckled, and yes, Jessica was one of them. She’d never seen a clumsier person in her entire life. Whatever was Tom Larson doing working on his pa’s farm? He’d be best suited away from anything sharp.

Tom stood up and offered to help Beth to her feet, but Beth shoved his hand away. “I’ll do it myself, thank you very much.” Then she got up, dusted the dirt off her skirt and stormed off.

Tom's face was red, but to his credit, he didn't give up. He just proceeded down the line to the next lady who happened to be Rachel.

Margaret grabbed Jessica's arm and dragged her across the barn. "There's no need to stand in line like a sheep waiting for the slaughter," she whispered.

Jessica secretly agreed with her, though she had to admit that she felt sorry for him. At the rate he was going, he'd never find a wife, and everyone knew he was hoping to get married and get his own farm. He was trying too hard, she thought. She shook her head as another lady rejected him. Someone had to teach the poor man how to act around women.

As she stepped forward, Margaret gasped and pulled her back. "What are you doing? He's done with this side of the barn. He won't ask us to dance."

"He needs help."

"But not yours."

"Then who's going to help him?"

"Who cares? As long as it's not us."

Jessica sighed and put her hands on her hips. "Really, Margaret. Just the other day you were instructing your little sister on manners. Is it good manners to leave this man in the state he's currently in?"

"What will Peter think?"

"He'll think I'm doing Tom and the woman he ends up marrying a great service. Besides, Peter couldn't make it

tonight. What am I supposed to do? Spend my time moping in the corner?"

"Yes. You are engaged to him."

"And this won't change that. Now, go find someone to ask you to dance." She smiled and pointed to Ethan. "He's been staring at you. Go over there. Maybe we can be in the same square dance."

Margaret loudly groaned but made her way past the refreshment table.

Jessica turned around and saw that Tom was walking her way. She glanced down and saw that a napkin was stuck to his boot.

"Hello," he greeted as he ran his hand through his wavy blond hair. "My name is Tom Larson."

"Yes. I know." *Everyone knows who you are...and not for a good reason.* "You have something stuck to your boot."

He looked down. "Oh. So I do."

When he was ready to touch the sticky candy that was responsible for gluing the napkin to his boot, she stopped him. If he touched that and then her...Well, that would just be gross. "Hold on. I'll get another napkin and wipe that off."

She hurried to the table and glanced back to make sure he wasn't touching his boot. Good. He wasn't. She snatched a cloth napkin and returned to him and scraped the candy and napkin off his boot.

"Oh, well, I could've done that," he said.

“I know.” She just thought this way would be safer. What if he was trying to clean off his boot and lost his balance? She’d been watching him stumble around all evening. “But it’s fine now. I’ll be back.”

As she made her way to a trashcan, she caught Margaret’s eyes and saw her friend shaking her head at her. Jessica shrugged and returned to Tom.

“I never got your name,” he said.

“Jessica Reynolds.”

“I’ve heard the name Reynolds before. You live in town, don’t you?”

“Yes. My father used to make shoes and boots.”

“That’s it. I bought these boots from him. No wonder your name seemed familiar.”

She nodded.

“So...would you like to dance?”

“Yes.”

“That’s alright. I under-” He stopped and gave her a cautious look. “Did you say ‘yes’?”

The very fact that he seemed shocked by her answer brought a smile to her lips. In some ways, he was a little cute. He was like a clumsy puppy.

“Yes, I said yes.”

A wide smile crossed his face. “That’s great! Come on.”

She raised an eyebrow as he headed for the dance area without her. He obviously didn't know he was supposed to take her hand and lead her there.

When he turned around, he appeared startled that she wasn't right with him.

She waited for him to come back. If he was going to find a wife, she had to teach him what to do and what not to do. This was one of those 'not to do's' on the list.

He came over to her. "Did you change your mind?"

"No, but you didn't take my hand. See?" She pointed to Ethan as he took Margaret's hand and led her to one of the squares where people were getting ready to square dance. "That's what gentlemen do."

"Oh. I hadn't noticed that before. I'm sorry."

As he extended his hand to her, she chuckled. "I guess it's not that big of an issue, but some ladies won't dance with a man unless he does that." She accepted his hand and thought he had a nice firm grip. Not too tight but not lax either. Really, it was just right.

They went to the same square that Margaret was in, and Margaret gave her a 'you poor thing' look. Jessica simply shrugged. When the music started, it occurred to her that Tom had two left feet. He bumped into other people and tripped twice. It was up to her to prevent him from falling. Still, he had a big smile on his face and eagerly followed the commands. One thing was for sure: he had enthusiasm. And that was refreshing. He probably enjoyed life more than most people.

When the music ended, they returned to their original position in the square and clapped their hands. Jessica chanced a glance at Margaret and saw her nod in Tom's direction. Wondering what had her friend worried, Jessica looked over at him and saw that he was fiddling with the button on the cuff of his shirt. She didn't know why such a thing should bother Margaret, so she decided to ignore it. Maybe it was the fact that Tom was even waiting for the next round of square dancing to start that had her friend upset. He did, after all, spin Margaret too fast when she had to switch partners.

The poor man needed to learn to dance. It just wasn't right to make him continue on like this. She didn't believe he was intentionally being a bad dancer.

She nudged him in the arm. When he turned to her, she whispered, "Let me lead this one, alright?"

He seemed concerned. "Am I that bad?"

She hesitantly replied, "You just need a few pointers. Really, it's minor things." And that was true. If he could master the basics, he'd be better off...and so would those who'd dance with him in the future.

When the music started up, she took the lead, which caused some odd looks from the others, but she pretended not to notice. Tom fell in step and managed much better. Good. That meant he picked up on things quickly. Just as they got to the last command in the square, he raised his arm and her hair caught onto something from his shirt cuff.

Her head jerked back. "Ow!"

"What? Oh no! I'm sorry."

She couldn't see exactly what he was doing but she reached up and felt his free hand trying to undo the button on his cuff.

"I had a loose string," he explained. "It must have gotten tangled in your hair."

She groaned, wishing she had worn a braid instead of letting her hair hang loose.

"Move away from her!" Margaret snapped and shoved him aside.

Jessica shrieked and stumbled against him. Boy, that hurt!

"Her hair is attached to me," he told Margaret. "See?"

"You big oaf!" Margaret yelled. "Only you would be so clumsy."

"I-I'm sorry. It was an accident."

"It was an accident," Jessica quickly assured her friend.

"Well, both of you stop trying to get out of this mess," Margaret demanded. "That hair is too wound up in that cuff and you're making it worse. Go over there and I'll bring back some scissors."

"Scissors?" Jessica gasped. She didn't want to cut her hair! "Can't you just yank off the string?"

Margaret pulled them off the dance floor so they wouldn't be in anyone's way. "Jessica, your hair is wound up in his button. There's no saving it. You ought to be glad it's not your neck."

"I...I'm so sorry," he said.

Jessica blinked back her tears. She brushed her hair a hundred times every night...and all for what?

When Margaret returned, she ordered for them to remain still.

Jessica heard the devastating sound of the snip that set her free. When she stood up and saw how long the strands were that had been cut, she sharply inhaled and touched her head and let her hands slide down her neck. The damaged hair reached a little past her shoulders. It had been past her mid-back. Her beautiful hair. It was ruined!

“Jessica, I-I don’t know what to say,” Tom rambled, his eyes wide. “I didn’t mean to...I mean, I wasn’t trying-”

Margaret set her hands on her hips and glared at him. “I think you’ve said enough. Fine. It was an accident. Will you please leave before you do anymore damage?”

He lowered his head and walked away.

“My hair.” Jessica felt the tears fall down her cheeks before she realized she was openly crying.

Margaret clucked her tongue and shook her head. “Peter’s not going to like this one bit. He’s going to be upset when he realizes what happened and why.”

“But I was only trying to help.”

“And look at what good that did you! I warned you that there was a loose string.”

“I didn’t see it. I had no idea what you were trying to tell me.”

She sighed and shook her head. “Well, what’s done is done. There’s no use in crying over spilled milk. Come on over to my house and I’ll cut the rest of your hair.”

Jessica took note of Tom as he left the barn. As bad as she felt for him, she hated to cut her hair. It took her years to get it just the way she wanted it. Well, this was a hard lesson. Sometimes when someone tried to help someone else, it only made things worse.

Chapter Two

The next day, Jessica sat in front of her bedroom mirror and brushed her blond hair which fell slightly past her shoulders. There was no hiding it. She had lost a good four inches last night. Well, that's what she got for not wearing her hair up...and deciding to dance with someone known for bumping into things. Still, it was an accident, and looking back, she felt bad for Tom. He had the look of a wounded puppy. She also felt sorry for whoever did end up marrying him. His wife would have to keep a safe distance from him in order to avoid getting hurt.

The knocking on her door interrupted her thoughts. "Yes?"

Her mother peered around the door, a kind smile on her face. "Peter's here."

Yes, he would be. He had mentioned taking her on a picnic. *Whatever will he think of my hair?* Though she realized her hair was safe with him, she pulled it back into a braid. It was a scary thing to lose so much of it in one instance, and she didn't want to tempt fate.

She sighed and left her room. As she got closer to the parlor, she slowed her steps to take a good look at Peter. He was refined. Much more so than Tom. He wore a suit and his light brown hair was neatly combed. He stood in front of the window with a slight smile on his face. He also seemed confident. She hadn't noticed that about him before. Tom, with his worn shirt and denim pants and blond hair that looked as if

he constantly ran his hand through it, wasn't refined at all. As far as being confident... Well, it was obvious that he wasn't sure of himself. Maybe that was part of his problem. If he had the same confidence that Peter did, maybe he'd handle himself better.

Peter turned and saw her. A wide smile lit up his face. "Jessie, you're certainly beautiful this morning."

"You mean there are mornings when I'm not beautiful?" she joked.

"You know what I mean."

Her mother came into the room, holding a basket and blanket. "You'll need this for the picnic."

"Oh. Yes. I forgot." Jessica had prepared the meal before she went to get dressed for the outing.

Peter took the basket and blanket. "I reserved the horse and carriage, so we can take a ride around the lake."

"That sounds like fun," her mother said, clasping her hands together. "That's just the thing you need after having to cut your hair," she told Jessica.

"I heard about that," Peter replied. "I hope it doesn't take too long to grow back. Your hair is one of your loveliest features."

Her mother sighed and shook her head. "A shame too."

"It was an accident, and there's nothing I can do about it," Jessica said. Lord knew that crying hadn't done her any good.

“Whatever convinced you to dance with Tom Larson anyway?” Peter asked.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. I guess I thought I could teach him how to be less clumsy with women.” Then she gave him a wary glance. “Are you mad at me for dancing with him?”

Peter laughed. “Mad? Why ever would I be mad? The man’s a bumbling idiot.”

She frowned.

Her mother shook her head. “Let’s not get into all that. You two should concentrate on having a good time today. Jessica dear, I’ll talk to you when you get home.”

Jessica sighed but agreed to let the matter rest for the time being. She wondered if her mother would criticize her for dancing with another man while engaged to Peter. Whatever the matter, her mother would, in deed, talk to her when she came home.

“Are you ready?” Peter asked as he opened the front door.

“Yes.”

As she joined him, she wondered whether or not she should stay home. She didn’t think Peter’s statement regarding Tom was a nice one but needed time to think through what she should do about it, if anything.

“Here comes Tom. Watch out or you might lose your hair, Ma!”

Tom glared at his twelve-year-old brother who was sitting at the kitchen table with a fork in one hand and a knife in the other.

“Joel.” Their mother shot him a warning look as she turned from the cookstove with a spatula in hand. “That’s enough of your teasing.”

Tom sat across from his pesky brother who snickered at him. He couldn’t wait to get his own place. Then he wouldn’t have to put up with his annoying brother anymore. The dog hastened by Tom’s side and panted in anticipation for the meal to come. Tom usually snuck in food to the animal during meals because he couldn’t stand having the poor dog peer up at him with those sad eyes.

Joel glanced over his shoulder and when he saw that their mother had her back turned to them, he set his fork and knife down and made a screaming motion as he grabbed his hair.

Tom grabbed Joel’s fork and knife and let the dog sitting next to him lick the utensils. Just as Joel voiced his protest, he swiftly returned them to Joel and smiled.

Their father and Dave came into the kitchen and sat at their usual places.

“Ma!” Joel screeched. “Tom let the dog lick my fork and knife. I need new utensils.”

“I did not,” Tom lied.

Their mother looked over at their father. “Did you see anything?”

Their father shook his head. “When I got here, the utensils were where they belonged.”

“Well, I am not eating with these.” Joel picked them up as if he were handling a dead rodent and pitched them into the sink.

“That’s it, Joel. You’re helping me with dishes,” their mother stated.

“What? Why?”

“Because you just made more work for me, young man.”

“But they had dog spit all over them.”

“Are you arguing with me?” She placed a hand on her hip and stared at him.

Joel sunk into the chair. “No, Ma.”

When Joel turned his attention to Tom, Tom raised his eyebrows and gave a slight smile. There. That should teach the little weasel to harass him. Tom hadn’t had a moment’s peace ever since Dave told everyone what happened. Too bad Dave witnessed the whole thing. He sighed. He really needed his own place. His two younger brothers were such a nuisance.

“So Tom,” their father began, “when are you going to get your own place?”

Tom inwardly groaned. Not this question again! “I’m waiting until I get engaged.”

“Oh great,” Joel muttered to Dave. “We’ll never get rid of him.”

“Joel,” his father warned.

Fifteen-year-old Jenny entered the house. "I'm done hanging the laundry. Tom, I'm sorry but I couldn't get that hair off your shirt without cutting it. I'll sew it back up after supper."

Tom decided to ignore his brothers' quiet chuckles.

While their mother and Jenny set the food on the table, their father cleared his throat and looked in Tom's direction. "You're already twenty. It's about time you thought about owning your own land. Not everyone waits until they're ready to get married to get established. Your brother Richard lived by himself for two years before he met Amanda."

"I know," Tom grudgingly admitted.

The men waited until the women were seated before they said grace and started to eat.

Their mother shook her head at her husband. "There's no hurry in any of this." She patted Tom on the arm, which only succeeded in making him feel like a child. "Don't rush into anything."

Across the table, Joel pressed his hand to his heart and pretended to cry.

Tom straightened in his chair and grabbed a roll before the other hounds ate them all. "Look, it's not that I don't want to get out of here. I just don't have enough money yet."

"What do you mean, you don't have enough money?" Dave asked after he took a drink of water. "You've been saving up for two years."

He sighed. He had to use a good chunk of that money to buy a present for Jessica so he could make up for his blunder at the

dance. Otherwise, he'd never be able to look at himself in the mirror again. But he didn't care to explain that to his little brother!

"Never mind, Dave," their father said.

Dave shrugged and returned to buttering his roll.

"I'll tell you what," their father continued. "I'll let you start building on that space of land east of here that you said you like. We can even help. A sod house is all you need to get started, and it's relatively inexpensive. In the meantime, I'll find some work for you to do to pay me back."

Tom thought over the plan as he tore the roll apart. The dog nudged his leg, so he quickly slipped a piece of it to him when no one was looking. He quickly patted the dog's head and chewed the other half of the roll.

He really had hoped to find a bride before he made arrangements for his own land and house, but what if his family's fears were going to come true? What if he never found a wife? Did he really want to grow old and die here...in his parents' home?

"Alright," he finally agreed.

"Yay!" Joel cheered.

Their mother shot him a 'be quiet' look.

"We'll get started in November," their father stated.

That soon? Tom thought they were talking about next year.

Their father picked up his cup of coffee and said, “That way we don’t have to rush the rest of the harvest or the planting season next year.”

It made sense. But still, Tom didn’t relish the thought of living alone...even if his brothers were a big nuisance. Sighing, he finished his meal.

Chapter Three

Jessica sat on the swing on her front porch, trying to read the book in her hands, but she couldn't concentrate on it. Though three days had passed, she still couldn't get Tom Larson out of her mind. Maybe that was because every time she touched or looked at her hair, she remembered why she had to cut it. That, of course, led to thoughts of Tom.

When she saw a young man walking down the road toward her house, she thought he was Tom simply because he'd been on her mind a lot. Then, as he got closer, she realized that it was Tom, and he was holding a package in his hands. Was he coming to see her? She quickly adjusted her shirt and skirt and straightened up. Why did she even care how she appeared? He may not be coming by to see her. And even if he was... Well, why should that excite her?

She picked up the book and turned her attention to the words on the page in front of her. She read the first sentence three times before she realized that, though she was reading it, she really didn't know what it said. This was ridiculous. It was just Tom Larson. And she was engaged to Peter. Oh good grief. What was wrong with her?

Tom halted in front of the porch and cleared his throat.

She pretended to be startled and glanced up.

He shifted from one foot to the other. "I hope...I mean, can I...?" He motioned to the top of the porch.

Realizing what he was trying to say, she nodded. “Come on up.”

He lumbered up the steps and stood in front of her. “I wanted to apologize for the other night. You know. Your hair. I can see that you had to cut it.”

His contrite expression made her smile. Shrugging, she said, “It was due for a trim.” Suddenly, it didn’t seem like a big deal. It was just hair after all. It would grow back. She scooted over. “Would you like a seat?”

“Thank you.” He sat next to her, keeping a safe distance between them and held the box to her. “I thought that this..gift...might help...you know, with your hair and all.”

She had to admit that she was flattered he seemed to be shy around her. Not that it meant much. He was shy around every lady he came across, from what she’d seen. Still, it was nice that he cared so much about what she thought. She took the box and thanked him. She lifted the lid, surprised by the number of items in it. There were several ribbons, three bonnets, a brush, a comb, four barrettes, and a hat.

“I wasn’t sure what you like to wear, so I picked up everything I found at the mercantile. I hope something in there is to your liking.”

She laughed. It was a sweet gesture. “A simple apology is enough, but I do like all of these.”

He looked relieved.

“Try not to feel bad about what happened. I know you didn’t mean to do it.”

He smiled. "I appreciate that. I see that you're reading. I won't take up anymore of your time."

"Wait," she said as he began to stand up. She placed the lid back on the box. "Do you have to go somewhere?"

"No. I mean, I do have to get back to my pa's farm, but that can wait."

"Would you like to have something to eat and drink? It is around noon."

He seemed surprised by her invitation. "Are you sure?"

She stood up. "I wouldn't have asked if I didn't mean it. I can make you a quick bite to eat and some coffee to drink before you head back home."

"That's really nice of you."

"It's the least I can do for a man who bought me all these gifts." She opened the screen door and motioned for him to follow her. "I can't get you anything out here."

He immediately jumped up and joined her as she went into the house.

"Ma?" she called out. "We have a guest." She turned to him and smiled. "Go ahead and make yourself comfortable in the parlor. I'm going to put this in my bedroom."

He nodded and stepped into the other room, so she headed down the hallway. As soon as she placed the box on her dresser, her mother entered her room.

“That’s not Peter,” her mother whispered before she shut the door so they could speak in private.

Jessica rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “I know that, Ma.”

“Who is he?”

“Tom Larson.”

“Tom La-” She shook her head, looking bewildered. “But what is he doing here?”

“He came to apologize about my hair. Look. He even bought me a present. Wasn’t that nice of him? No man has ever been that considerate before.” She took out the hat and put it on her head. “It really is a lovely shade of blue, don’t you think?”

The woman frowned. “I don’t know if it’s wise to accept that gift, honey. I mean, what if he gets the wrong idea?”

“If I didn’t take the gift, he would’ve been hurt.”

“Maybe. But what will Peter think?”

She placed the hat in the box and took out a barrette. Deciding to pull the sides of her hair back, she snapped the barrette in place and brushed her hair so it fell slightly over her shoulders. “You know what Peter will think. You heard him call Tom a bumbling idiot,” she continued, her tone sharp. It still bothered her that Peter said that.

“Granted, it was wrong for him to say that, but he is your fiancé. You shouldn’t be accepting gifts from other men and entertaining them when you’re already engaged. It’s not proper.”

She sighed. "It's just a lunch, Ma. It's only right that I give him something to eat and drink during the lunch hour. Besides, you're here. There will be no misconstruing the situation."

"You aren't planning to make a habit of this, are you?"

Jessica set the brush down by the box, refusing to look her mother in the eye.

"Jessica?"

"I'm not thinking of a romantic attachment, but I do think the poor man needs help. He can't dance and he keeps bumping into people. If I taught him how to be...less awkward...in social situations, I'd be doing all women a favor. Who knows? Maybe I can even find him a wife."

"Peter's really not going to like this."

Jessica's face flushed with anger. "Who cares?"

The woman gasped and put her hand up to her mouth.

She groaned. "What I mean is that maybe it's time to show people like Peter and Margaret that Tom isn't as idiotic as they say."

"You must be careful because if you're not, people will get the wrong idea."

"Why do you think I'm telling you this? The fact that you know what I'm doing is proof that there's nothing underhanded going on." She went to the door and opened it. "You'll be with us at lunch, and you can verify that everything we will discuss is innocent. I'm thinking Tom might like some of those leftover pork chops if we put some of that apple glaze on them."

“That’s a fancy dish for lunch.”

“Look at all those things he gave me,” she whispered, motioning to her dresser. “I don’t know how much he spent, but it couldn’t have been easy for a farmer’s son to come up with that kind of money.”

“We’ll have to give him some cake for dessert too. Though,” her mother stopped her before she could leave, “you can’t accept anymore gifts from him.”

“I won’t.”

As soon as Jessica and her mother arrived in the parlor, Tom stood up from his chair. “Hello, Mrs. Reynolds,” he greeted. He fiddled with the hat in his hands and shifted from one foot to the other.

“Hello, Tom. That was a very lovely gesture to give Jessica something because of the mishap.” She glanced at Jessica. “I’ll get lunch prepared. Jessica, you should take Tom out to the porch and keep him company while I get the food ready.”

“But I thought I was going to help,” Jessica argued. Especially, since it was her idea to invite him to eat.

“And leave the boy bored? That won’t do. Go on.”

“Alright.” She looked at Tom. “Would you like to come back out to the porch?”

“Yes. Sure.” He placed the hat back on his head and walked forward.

Jessica turned toward the front door when she heard her mother gasp. She glanced back in time to see Tom trip on the rug. He

managed to steady himself but the rug pulled the small table along the floor and sent the vase teetering. Her mother caught the vase before it fell off the table. Clutching the heirloom to her chest, she breathed an audible sigh of relief.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I...I didn’t realize the edge of the rug was in front of the chair.” His face grew red. “Well, I mean, I saw it, but then I took a step forward and my foot-”

Her mother smiled. “That’s alright. Everything is fine.” She set the vase back on the table and smoothed the rug out. “See? It’s like it never happened.”

“Come on, Tom.” Jessica waved him forward as she did a quick scan of the floor. It looked clear of any potential obstacles. She decided it was best if she held the door open for him. She realized that this wasn’t exactly how things were done, but she didn’t want to take any chances with the porcelain figurines on the shelf in the entryway.

Tom managed past her without incident.

Before Jessica could join him on the swing, her mother gently tugged on her arm. “What is it?” Jessica asked.

“Be careful,” her mother whispered.

“Why? There’s nothing out there that can break.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Just as Jessica was going to ask for clarity, her mother turned and strode to the kitchen. She shrugged and joined Tom on the swing.

Chapter Four

Tom watched as Jessica sat next to him. His body warmed from their close proximity. He hoped she didn't notice. She was the prettiest young woman he'd ever seen. Part of him couldn't believe she was even talking to him. It almost seemed like a dream, except in his dreams he wasn't clumsy around females.

"It's a nice day," he said, trying to think of something she might be interested in hearing. "It's perfect weather for September. Not too hot and not too cold." He tapped his thumb on his knee. "I guess it's that time of year though. I mean, now that August is gone, the hot days are pretty much behind us."

"Yes. And just think last week I had to wear a shawl. I don't think summer is over quite yet."

"Probably not." He sighed. He was no good at making small talk, and it didn't help that he couldn't think straight with her being next to him. Here was his chance to make up for the dance, and he was ruining it.

"I like the barrette. Did you notice I'm wearing it?"

No, he hadn't but he shifted back so he could see it and nodded. "It looks nice." *Good one, Tom. The weather's nice. She looks nice. Can't you think of a better word than 'nice'?*

"Everything you gave me is lovely." She glanced at her hands which were neatly folded in her lap. "You do know that you didn't have to get me those things, right?"

He wasn't sure. She'd looked so horrified when she realized she would have to cut her hair that it reminded him of his mother when she got so upset his father went right out to get her a present to apologize for upsetting her. He figured it wouldn't hurt to try the same thing. And it hadn't. In fact, it seemed to work out great since she invited him for lunch.

"Anyway," she continued, "just so you know that when something happens and a girl gets upset with you for something, you don't have to spend money to make amends."

"Oh. Alright," he slowly responded, not sure where she was going with this. Did she mean that she wasn't interested in him?

"So...when do you start digging up the crops?"

He blinked. "You mean the harvest?"

"Yes, that's the term. You'll have to forgive me. I don't have many dealings with farmers or their sons."

"But I've seen you a couple of times dancing out at the barn."

"Because my friend Margaret doesn't want to go alone. She doesn't have any sisters of courting age to go with."

He refrained from rolling his eyes. He wished he could go alone. Having Dave and Jenny go along with him was like having his personal journalist taking notes on everything he was doing. Dave and Jenny had to come back home and tell everyone everything that happened. Tom really had to get his own home. Well, at least they weren't here right now. So if he made a fool of himself, no one would harass him about it.

Turning his attention back to Jessica, he asked, "Was Margaret the one who cut your hair?"

"Yes."

He recalled the angry brunette in vivid detail. He thought fire was going to come out of her mouth. Some women were too scary, but he decided to keep that thought to himself.

A few moments of uncomfortable silence passed before she spoke. "Would you like me to teach you how to dance?"

He turned to her in interest. He'd hope to see her again, but he hadn't expected her to actually say yes when he asked her. He wasn't planning on asking her until after lunch though. There was no sense in spoiling a meal if she said no. But here she was asking him. Resisting the urge to leap off the swing and holler his good fortune, he restrained his excitement enough to simply reply, "Yes. That would be fine."

She smiled. "When can you come out? I don't want to get in the way of harvesting. I heard you spend all day in the fields."

"Well, we officially start in two weeks. I can come any time before then."

"Oh. Let's see. I think three days from now will work. What do you think?"

What did he think? He pinched himself. No. He wasn't dreaming. "Sure. When should I come by?"

"How about lunch? Or would supper work better?"

"I can get away whenever. I'm sure my pa will be alright with it." He winced. That made him sound like a child instead of a

grown man who was ready to take on the responsibility of his own farm and family. “What I mean is that I don’t think whatever I have to do will be so pressing that I can’t get away.” No. That really didn’t sound better. Well, maybe a little better...but not a whole lot. “I’m an adult of course. I mean, it’s not like my pa is still telling me what to do. I’m twenty. It’s just that...” Oh great. Now he was rambling on like a moron.

“I understand what you’re saying. You just want to be sure that if your pa needs help, you’re there to assist.”

“Right.” Yes, that definitely sounded better. Thank goodness she came up with the right words. “Three days from today is good. Nothing’s going to happen that’ll be an emergency.”

“Then I’ll have lunch ready at noon, and you can stay and dance afterward.”

He nodded, struggling to remain seated so he wouldn’t jump up for joy. He managed a slight grin, hoping it looked like the kind of grin that someone would give when mildly interested in something.

Her mother came out and announced that lunch was ready.

He was relieved. He really couldn’t think of what else to say, and he figured leaving the conversation with Jessica on such a high note was perfect. Nothing could top this. Nope. He was on top of the world.

“She’s what?” Tom repeated dumbly as Joel broke out into a fit of laughter.

“Engaged,” Jenny repeated that evening as they checked on the animals in the barn.

“But she can’t be engaged. She invited me to go to her house to dance.”

Jenny shrugged and put the pail of milk next to the cow she’d been milking. “I don’t know why she asked you over there. I just stated a fact. She’s engaged. Peter James is marrying her in December.”

Turning to Dave who chucked feed into the horses’ troughs, he asked, “Did you know Jessica Reynolds was engaged?”

Dave shook his head. “No. But I don’t keep track of the local gossip.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “It’s not gossip when someone’s engaged. It’s a fact.”

“I don’t care who’s marrying who.”

“Sounds just like a man.”

“Look, I have better things to do than worry about which girl is with which boy.”

“Well, when your time comes to find a wife, you’ll care.”

Joel stood up from the floor that he’d been rolling around—and laughing—on. He dusted the hay off of his pants. “Hopefully, you’ll do a better job of paying attention than Tom.”

“I didn’t see her with any men,” Tom snapped. “And contrary to what everyone thinks, I work hard. I don’t get much time to

find out what is going on in town. Besides, why would she dance with me if she was engaged?"

"Now that is a very good question," Joel agreed. "In fact, I often wonder why any woman would dance with you at all."

Jenny groaned and looked at Joel. "Aren't you supposed to be cleaning out the stalls?"

"I'm done," Joel stated, puffing out his chest with pride. "I did it all myself too. I believe Tom was supposed to help. In fact, I know it. And if he hadn't been gone all day doing who knows what with Miss Reynolds, then I'd been done sooner."

Dave lowered his rake and glanced their way. "Well, what did she say when you apologized?"

"Nothing!" Tom replied, realizing he sounded harsher than he needed to. After all, Dave wasn't the one who gave him as much grief as Joel did. Still, what did Dave care? "I thought you were too busy to concern yourself with gossip."

"I take that to mean it didn't turn out good." Then Dave set the rake down and picked up the feed for the chickens before he left.

"I don't know," Joel slowly said. "You had a goofy smile on your face when you first got here. Something interesting happened."

Tom frowned. "You needn't concern yourself with my affairs."

Jenny sighed and picked up the milk pail. "Just so you know, Pa wants you to check the loose latch on the cattle fence before you go in for supper."

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "I'll do it."

"Come on, Joel," she told their younger brother.

"I'm coming," he called after her as she left the building. Turning to Tom, he asked, "Will you tell me how to handle women?"

"Why?" Tom asked.

He smirked. "Because I need to know what women don't like, and you're a wealth of information on what men should never do."

Tom's face grew red. He ran after his brother, ready to chuck him right into the stall, but Joel was too quick for him. Tom glowered at his siblings before he grabbed the tools he needed to fix the fence. His good news wasn't such great news anymore. Now he felt like a fool. Here he thought that Jessica wanted to see him again.

But if she was engaged, then why did she even ask him to come back? Why did she care if he could dance well or not? Maybe it was a joke. Maybe she, her fiancé and friends were laughing at him right now. He grumbled as he stormed out of the barn, ignoring the way Joel whispered something to Jenny and laughed before he darted into the house.

How Tom hated living at home! *That's it. I'm getting my own place before the year is up!*

Chapter Five

“You did what?” Margaret asked, her eyes nearly popping out of her head.

Jessica sighed and pulled the needle through the cloth she held. “I think you heard me the first time.”

Margaret stood up from her chair and paced in Jessica’s parlor. “No, I couldn’t have because after he ruined your hair, there’s no reason you would need to voluntarily see him again.”

“I never said I wasn’t going to see him again.”

She stopped at the window and rolled her eyes. “What do you want him to do next? Burn your dress?”

Jessica laughed. “Don’t be silly. He’s not *that* clumsy.” Then she recalled the vase. If her mother hadn’t caught it, then it would have shattered all over the floor. Not that it was his fault, but who could tell if he’d trip on something else? Well, that was simple enough. “I’ll remove all the breakable items from this room and since it’ll be day, there won’t be any candles or kerosene lamps burning.” She smiled, proud of her ingenuity. “That solves that problem. Nothing will break or catch on fire.”

“I don’t like this. I don’t like it one bit.”

“Then don’t come over when he’s here.”

She grunted and glanced out the window. “What are you going to tell Peter?”

“I already told him when he stopped by last evening to give me the design he wants sewn onto my veil.” Jessica motioned to the fabric in her lap.

Margaret shook her head and crossed her arms. “Why does he care what your veil looks like?”

“He doesn’t but his mother does.”

“Why? It’s not her wedding.”

“Someone ought to tell her that.” Jessica inspected the white rose on the edge of the veil. “There. I think that will do. All done.”

“You’re much too nice to people, Jessica.”

“I don’t want to cause problems.”

“People take advantage of you.”

She stood up and collected her sewing kit.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes,” she snapped. She took a deep breath and faced her friend. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get short with you. Weddings are stressful.”

“I wouldn’t know. First Monica. Then Wendy. And now you.”

“Your time will come.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You already have your man.”

“Is it really that bad?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I don’t go to those barn dances because I like to dance or because I like to be around a lot of people.”

Jessica grinned. “Maybe you should get a mail-order husband.”

She gasped.

“Well, why not? Men get mail-order brides all the time. Why not reverse it?”

“Because there are men available in this town.”

“Maybe they’re all the wrong ones.”

“Nice try, Jessica, but it won’t work.”

Jessica carried the sewing kit and veil and walked to her bedroom. “What won’t work?”

Margaret followed her. “You’re trying to avoid the issue. What did Peter say when you told him you’re going to have Tom over for dancing lessons?”

She set the items on her dresser and frowned. “He laughed.”

“And?”

“And that’s it.” She picked up the hat Tom had given her and placed it on her head. “Isn’t this a lovely hat?”

“Jessica.”

She couldn’t ignore the warning in her friend’s voice. She groaned. “Fine. He laughed and said that Tom was a hopeless cause.”

“So he doesn’t care that you’re with another man?”

“It doesn’t seem that way, does it?” And that bothered Jessica, though she decided not to say it aloud. “His exact words were that I was wasting my time but he couldn’t blame me for wanting to rush in and try to help someone. He thinks it’s ‘adorable’.”

Margaret followed her out of her room and down the hallway. “Hmm...”

“Hmm what?”

“I notice you’re not wearing the hat Peter gave you. You’re wearing Tom’s.”

“I like Tom’s better. Peter got that horrible green color his mother likes. I swear, it’s like wearing vomit.”

“It is atrocious.” Her eyes lit up and she stopped her at the front door. Leaning forward, she whispered, “Wear Peter’s hat when Tom is here and he’ll find a way to destroy it.”

Despite herself, Jessica chuckled. “Oh Margaret, give Tom more credit than that. I think he’s just nervous.”

“You’re probably right,” she relented. “I guess I shouldn’t be so critical of him.”

“You shouldn’t. He’s actually a very sweet person.” She pushed the screen door open and walked down the porch steps.

Her friend joined her and they strolled down the sidewalk. “Are you sure though? I mean, you are engaged.”

“I’m not hiding anything. I’ve told Peter. My mother will be in the house when Tom comes over. I don’t see why everyone is concerned.”

“Everyone but Peter?” she commented in a sympathetic tone.

Jessica hated that Margaret could read her mind. “You can’t tell anyone else what I’m about to say.” Jessica paused and turned to her friend. “You promise?”

If there was one thing Margaret was, it was loyal to her word, which was why Jessica even ventured to reveal what she’d been carefully concealing for the past month.

“Of course, I promise.”

Jessica nodded. “Sometimes I wonder if Peter’s marrying me because his mother approves of me.”

“No. That can’t be right.”

“Can’t it? You know how picky Connie James is. I think she has a tight leash on him.” Jessica stepped forward to resume their walk.

“Well...” She walked forward. “I grant that they are close. But...” She winced. “It’s not that bad, is it?”

“I don’t know. I mean, she and I get along wonderfully, but sometimes I wonder if she told him to propose to me.”

“If that’s the case, then why did you say yes?”

“I didn’t think it when he asked. It’s just something that’s been on my mind for awhile now.”

“And does this whole thing with Tom make you wonder even more?”

“Shouldn’t it bother Peter, even a little, that I’m with another man?”

“Yes. It should.” She picked a leaf from a tree lining the road and asked, “So, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to teach Tom how to dance.”

Chapter Six

Tom stood in front of Jessica's house and quickly ran through his plan. He wasn't sure it was going to work, but he had to do something. He didn't appreciate being made fun of. Well, if Jessica and her friend and fiancé thought he was a fool, he'd oblige them...for awhile.

Taking a deep breath, he straightened his tie and knocked on the front door. It opened and for a moment, he lost heart. But only for a moment. It didn't matter how pretty she was or that she wore one of the ribbons he had given her. The fact remained that she had brought him here for her amusement.

Jessica smiled at him and waved him inside. "I'm glad you could make it. I think we'll have a good time."

He smiled back. *I'm sure we will.* He scanned the hallway and parlor. Very clever. It seemed as if they were alone for the moment. But they couldn't be. That Margaret friend of hers and Peter had to be hovering nearby. The closet by the front door was open a crack. Maybe they were hiding in there? His gaze turned to the parlor. The couch was against the wall but not right up against it. Maybe they were behind it. He mentally calculated all the places they might possibly be.

"My mother is upstairs, but she'll be down in a few minutes," Jessica explained as she entered the parlor. "I was thinking we'd do some dancing after lunch. Would you like to sit and talk for a bit?"

Convenient that her mother should be out of hearing range. Obviously, her mother wouldn't approve if she knew her daughter planned to make fun of him. Well, he supposed the girl had to cover all of her bases. He took another deep breath. If a show is what she and her friends wanted, then he'd give them all a good one.

"I don't mind learning how to dance a little bit before lunch," he said. "It'd be good to warm up, don't you think?" *Then we can see how badly I can really dance.*

"Oh. I suppose you're right."

He stepped into the parlor and glanced at the table by the chair. "Where's the vase?" He took off his hat and placed it on the hat rack.

"The what?" she asked, turning around to face him.

"The vase. The one I almost broke last time I was here." Might as well get this whole thing started by reminding them how obnoxious he could be when he was nervous.

She looked startled. "Oh. That. Um...Well..."

"Didn't want me to almost break it again, huh?"

Her face grew red, notifying him that he was right. "No." She gave an awkward laugh. "My mother wanted to have it in her bedroom."

She was a horrible liar. But he'd let her believe that he didn't pick up on that. Too bad for her he was better at lying. Deciding to play along, he said, "That's actually a good thing. You know, that she took it out of here. I remember the time when I broke my mother's entire china set. Boy, I never saw

anyone scream like that. My family won't let me near anything that can break." He laughed. "You know what they do when I'm inside the house? They tie me to the chair so I can't go anywhere."

Her eyes grew wide. "That's terrible."

"No. Really, it's not. I keep destroying things. I don't know why. It's like I attract trouble." He spread his arms out and knocked the plant off the table, pretending it was an accident. "Oh no!" He quickly knelt down and purposely dug out some of the soil in the pot and rubbed it on his hands. Then he picked up the plant and set it back on the table. "There. All better." He ran his hands through his hair.

"Uh...Tom..."

He ruffled his hair again before he wiped his hands on his pants. "What?"

She looked as if she didn't know what to say.

"Are you ready to dance?"

Her eyes drifted to his hands.

He held them up and inspected them. "Oh. Of course. The dirt from the plant." He pulled out the handkerchief from his pocket and wiped them clean. "Better? If you want, I could wash them. Though you might want to wash them for me. I can't wash my hands at home ever since the rotting floor incident."

"The rotting floor incident?"

He hid his amusement at the mixture of curiosity and horror on her face. “I had pumped the water into the sink, but the water didn’t stop coming out so the kitchen flooded.”

“Surely, that’s not possible.”

“I didn’t think so either until it happened. It’s amazing how fast water can cover the whole floor. It took my pa and brothers and me all of a half hour to stop it. Apparently, I yanked the handle too hard. I just don’t know my own strength sometimes. And that’s why they have to feed me too.”

“But...But you ate fine here the other day.”

“And that took a lot of self-control.” Inspired, he twitched his shoulders. “Sometimes I get the shakes.”

She took a step back. “The...the shakes?”

“Yep. Really bad at times too. One time I got them so bad I ended up throwing food all over the place—and don’t even get me started on what I did with the utensils.”

She shook her head. “You can’t be serious. You’re pulling my leg.” Then she chuckled, but it sounded as if she was only half-sure of her analysis.

He shrugged and let his hands slightly shake. “Alright.”

Her laughter died completely.

“So...What will we do for music?”

She cleared her throat. “Oh. Yes. Dancing. Right.” She clapped her hands together and then motioned to the center of the room. “I thought I’d just hum a tune.”

“That’s a strange way of doing things, but since there’s no one else around here...” He leaned forward so he could check behind the couch. Odd. No one was there. Looking back at her, he smiled. “Let’s get to it.”

Then he barreled in her direction. He expected her to move out of his way when he purposely tumbled forward, but she didn’t so he had to roll to the side and ended up hitting his head on the side of the couch.

“Are you alright?” she asked as she knelt next to him.

He rubbed his temple which was sore. That wasn’t supposed to happen. Oh well. He might as well play along. “The shakes. I told you it comes and goes without warning.”

She reached for his hand and helped him up. “I should get something for you to put on your head.”

“Nah. This happens all the time. I’m just lucky it did no real damage like that time when I got hurt somewhere important.”

“Where would that be?”

He covered his face, as if ashamed, but what he really needed to do was focus so he wouldn’t laugh at her stunned expression. “I don’t wish to impose on the sensibilities of a lady.” When he settled down the urge to giggle, he held his hands out to her. “Are you ready to dance?”

She looked hesitant but nodded and joined him in the center of the room.

He had to admit that she could play along well on this thing. He wondered how long it would take before she called in her friends...or how long it would take them to magically show up.

Apparently, he needed to go with a new tactic. He pulled her close to him, thinking for sure that Peter ought to be rushing into the room at full speed. But he didn't.

"You can't hold a woman this close," she said, her face bright red. "It's not appropriate." She stepped back and set one hand on his shoulder and the other in his hand. "There. That's better."

Not really. He rather fancied the other way better but knew that she was right. Still, that should have had a fiancé seething. Just how far were they going to let him take this?

"Follow my lead," she instructed. She began to hum and stepped to the side.

Instinctively, he did as she requested. "You have a nice voice. Do you sing?"

"Mostly to myself."

"Let me hear you sing."

She smiled but didn't look at him. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

Because she was too shy about it. That was something he understood all too well, but he wanted to hear her so he nudged the small of her back and grinned. "Come on. Just a line."

She looked like she was considering it.

"I'll tell you what. I'll sing first." Now when it came to singing, he didn't have to pretend to be bad. It came naturally

to him. When he hit a high note, his voice cracked and she momentarily winced. He stopped singing. “Sorry.”

He paused and listened for anyone laughing but no one was. Peter and Margaret were pretty good at hiding themselves. If he didn’t know better, he’d really believe that it was just him and Jessica in the vicinity.

Jessica took a deep breath and then quietly sang a tune, taking his mind off the window and wondering if Peter and Margaret were listening from outside the house. He stared at her in awe. She could do more than hold a tune. She made shivers run up and down his spine. When she glanced up at him, she stopped, seeming self-conscious.

“You have a beautiful voice,” he whispered, not intending for anyone but her to hear that.

“Thank you.”

It suddenly occurred to him that had this been a sincere offer from her to teach him how to dance, it might be the right moment to tell her how pretty she was. But this was all a ruse, and because of that, he couldn’t adequately enjoy the moment. He didn’t have the heart to physically toss her around to show her just how badly he could dance. Not after the nice moment they’d just shared...or rather the nice moment he just shared with her.

He released her and finally said, “I know what’s going on. I’m not stupid.”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “What are you talking about?”

Just how long was she going to let this game continue? “You know, I may have my bad moments but at least I don’t make fun of other people.”

“I don’t understand.”

She was a good actress, but he wasn’t falling for it. He stomped over to the window, moved back the curtains and leaned out. Hmm... No one was hiding in the bushes.

“What are you doing?” she asked, sounding bewildered.

He turned to the room and peered behind a chair that was in the corner. Nope. Not there either.

“Tom, are you feeling alright?”

He ignored her and went to the hallway and yanked the closet door open. No one was in there. It was just a bunch of coats and shoes. Where else could Peter and Margaret be?

Jessica ran over to him. “What are you looking for?”

“Where are they?” he demanded, no longer amused.

“Who?”

“You know who.”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t ask.”

Fine. So she was going to see how far he’d take this. Well, he’d do something that was guaranteed to get Peter running out of his hiding place. Tom pulled Jessica into his arms and kissed her. It was a bold move, one he’d never take under any ordinary circumstance, but this wasn’t any ordinary circumstance. He expected her to fight against him or slap him

or...something to protest. But she didn't. Instead, she actually seemed to melt into his arms. And neither Peter nor Margaret ran out to stop him either. Why were they all letting him kiss Jessica like this? Her lips were soft and warm. And he was way too excited about it.

He ended the kiss...something that intrinsically pained him to do...and yelled out, "Come out, come out wherever you are!"

Jessica shook her head, as if breaking out from a trance and asked, "Who are you talking to?"

"Did someone call for me?" her mother called out from up the stairs.

He turned his head in the direction of the woman who peered around the banister at the top of the staircase.

"No, Ma. At least, I don't think so." Jessica looked at him. "Did you mean her?"

He sighed. "You mean to tell me that Peter James and Margaret Williams aren't here?" he yelled out.

"Peter is out shopping with his mother for the tablecloths for the reception," her mother said. "Margaret isn't due by until this evening for supper."

"What reception?" he tested.

"The wedding reception of course. What other reception would a fiancé be planning for?"

He glanced around the house. It did seem awfully quiet, and he didn't think the mother would lie about something like this. He gave Jessica a wary look. "You're engaged?"

Her eyes grew wide. “Didn’t you know that?”

He didn’t like the sudden turn of events. It didn’t go exactly the way he planned. He had no idea how to get out of this except to play along...and then get the heck out of there as soon as possible to avoid any further embarrassment! He threw back his head and laughed. “Of course, I did. I mean, who doesn’t? It’s all over town.”

“Yes. I thought everyone knew too,” she stated, seeming uncertain.

“Well, my little brother didn’t, but he doesn’t pay attention to what goes on.” He glanced at his watch. “Wow. Is it that late already? I forgot that I have to be back at the farm in an hour. I better get home before I...” Okay. There was no way he was going to say ‘get in trouble’ because that would imply he was a kid. He cleared his throat. “I need to repair a fence. I can’t have the cattle running all over the place, you know.”

“But what about learning to dance? And lunch?” Jessica pressed as he ran to grab his hat.

He plopped it on his head. “You taught me to dance.”

“Well...” She glanced at the parlor. “Not really.”

“Sure you did. You did great. Really.” He clapped his hands together. “Good luck on the wedding. I’m sure it’ll be a great time.”

She grabbed his arm before he exited the parlor. “Tom, won’t you at least grab a quick bite to eat before you leave? You can’t repair a fence on an empty stomach.”

He had to get out of there. He didn't know if she was going to catch on to what he'd been doing, but he didn't want to find out. "I can't. Really, I got to go." He turned to leave.

"But--"

"Thank you for everything, Jessica. And thank you, Mrs. Reynolds."

He tipped his hat and hurried out of there. It wasn't until he made it to his horse that he allowed himself to take a deep breath and exhale. If there was anything more humiliating that he could do, he didn't know what it could be. He quickly hopped on the steed and rode out of town.

Chapter Seven

Jessica sat across from Peter the next evening at supper. His mother had invited her over to discuss the wedding, but Jessica had a hard time concentrating on anything that Connie James was saying. All she could think about was Tom's kiss. Her cheeks still warmed at the memory. She didn't know how to get Tom off her mind. It all seemed like a dream, and yet, she could still feel his lips against hers.

"I think an assortment of white and pink napkins will do well too," Peter agreed with his mother.

Jessica blinked and forced her attention to the two people chatting in the dining room. "Pink and white?"

Peter smiled and nodded. "Mother decided that those colors would suit for the wedding."

"They are so pretty when they're together," Connie added.

"But I thought we agreed on red and pink," Jessica told Peter.

Peter shrugged. "We'll still have pink. What does it matter what the other color is?"

"You're having a winter wedding," Connie inserted as she lifted a glass of wine to her lips. "White goes much better with the season. And if it snows, it'll be especially appropriate."

Jessica glanced at Peter who bit into his steak as if nothing was wrong. She then turned back to his mother who sipped the

wine. “I already told Margaret and Wendy to weave red roses into their pink dresses.”

She set the glass down and patted her hand. “That’s not a problem, dear. I explained the change, and they took the red roses out. They’ll be putting in white roses instead. So you see, everything is in order.”

“I like red.” She looked at Peter who didn’t even seem to notice the conversation going on in front of him. She nudged him under the table with her foot.

He jerked his head in her direction.

“Peter, don’t you agree with me about the red color?” Jessica sweetly asked.

He sighed. “It’s just one color.”

“Yes, and it’s my wedding.”

Connie cleared her throat. “But your mother can’t afford to pay for it. Remember, I’m the one with the bill. Since that is the case, I believe I’m owed a few allowances.”

“You wouldn’t have to pay for anything if you’d let me have a simple ceremony,” Jessica argued.

“Please, let’s not fight,” Peter interjected. “It’s unbecoming. The point is that we’re going to be a family, and since that is the case, we need to get along.”

Jessica resisted the urge to kick him in the shin...but just barely. She’d already consented to the elaborate wedding and reception because his mother knew a lot of “important” people who were particular about formal ceremonies and how things should or

should not be done. Jessica had met a few of those people and realized that life would go much easier for Connie if she was able to present an elaborate wedding. But there was a time when enough was enough. Or at least, there should be.

“I’m sure we can reach a compromise,” he said, wiping his mouth with a napkin before he set it back on his lap.

Jessica wasn’t sure where he was going with this, so she twirled the fork in her hand and waited for him to continue.

“Mother, Jessica has conceded to your desire for a nice wedding. Jessica, my mother has agreed to pay for such a wedding. So this is what I propose. One of you will decide the colors for the ceremony and the other will decide the colors for the reception. That way you both get what you want.”

His mother sighed and gave a slight nod. “That sounds fair. Jessica?”

Jessica still didn’t like it, but what could she say? The wedding wasn’t really even hers at this point. Sure, she was the one getting married, but this was apparently about Connie James impressing her friends—and that made it Connie’s special day. Besides, it was just colors. What did it matter if something was red or white? “Alright,” she finally relented.

Connie beamed at her and squeezed her arm. “My son is lucky to have you.”

Jessica returned her smile but didn’t feel the enthusiasm behind it. Is this what life was going to be like with Peter? She looked at her plate of half-eaten steak and potatoes and beans. Connie wasn’t mean to her, but there was something confining about being in the woman’s presence. It wasn’t something she

noticed right away. But the more time she spent with them, the clearer it was becoming that something seemed off.

Could it be Tom's kiss? She quickly looked up at Peter who was laughing at one of his mother's jokes. Peter had never kissed her like that. Her face flushed and her heart beat faster as she recalled the warmth of Tom's lips on hers. He was strong too. She felt safe and protected in his embrace.

Taking a deep breath, she willed the thought aside and finished the meal. Jessica wondered if the woman would be telling them where to live too? At this point, Jessica would like to move outside of Omaha.

Maybe this is a mistake. She looked at Peter and his mother. He pulled out Connie's chair before he walked over to her and pulled out her chair. Why hadn't she noticed that before? Did he always do things for his mother first?

Jessica managed through helping Connie with the dishes, acting as pleasant as she could despite the growing sense of doom that hovered in the air around her. Then she sat with Peter and his mother for a mind-numbing hour, not even sure of what they were talking about. She wanted to see Tom again. But would that be a good idea? She wasn't even sure what yesterday had been about. He seemed upset with her for something. He thought she'd brought Peter and Margaret over and hid them in her house. That much was obvious. But why would he think that?

She had no idea what Tom had been thinking, or why he made up all that talk about his parents feeding him or him having a condition called the shakes. At first, she actually believed him. But after his inquiry into Peter and Margaret, it dawned on her that he'd made up those lies. But why? And how was she

going to find out? She would have to talk to him. That was the only way she was going to get an answer to her questions.

When it came time for Peter to walk Jessica home, she breathed a sigh of relief and let Peter help her put her shawl around her shoulders.

“I’ll see you next week, my dear,” Connie told her and hugged her. “We’ll take a look at what decorations we’ll have for the tables at the reception.”

Jessica forced another smile. “Sounds fun.”

After Connie gave Peter a hug, Peter took Jessica by the arm and led her down the porch steps. “This was a lovely night, was it not?”

They reached the sidewalk and she noticed that Connie was inside the house. “Kiss me.”

He chuckled. “What?”

“I want you to kiss me, and not one of those polite kisses either. Show me how you feel for me in the kiss.”

“But we’re out...in public.”

“It’s dark and no one is outside.”

“It doesn’t seem appropriate.”

“So?”

“Aren’t you concerned about your reputation?” he asked.

“What is one kiss?”

Was it really because he was concerned about someone seeing them kiss or was it because he didn't wish to kiss her? What was wrong with him? Shouldn't he be eager to kiss her? Tom hadn't held back from it...even if his motives might not have been because he actually wanted to kiss her. What were his motives anyway? She sighed. There was no doubt about it. She'd have to see Tom tomorrow.

"Alright," Peter said. "You're right." He lowered his head and kissed her.

She stood there, waiting for something to warm her, to let her know that she wasn't making a mistake in marrying Peter. She should get some feeling—a sense of peace—about the wedding. But she didn't. She just felt more confused...and restless. His kiss was nothing like Tom's, and it worried her.

When he pulled away, he smiled and softly said, "That was nice."

Nice. Somehow, she didn't think a passionate kiss should seem 'nice'. She smiled at him and joined him as he walked her home.

Chapter Eight

Tom swung the reaper and cut through a few cornstalks when his father yelled out that cattle were approaching. He immediately threw the stalks onto the pile he'd accumulated and joined Dave and Joel as they emerged from the field.

"Craftsman, what are you thinking in letting your cattle go free through here?" his father yelled at their neighbor.

"I didn't do it on purpose," Neil Craftsman argued.

Jimmy Parson stormed over to them. "How are we supposed to get the crops in on time when we have cattle to tend to?"

Neil's face grew red. "I didn't open the gate and set them free."

"No, but you don't mend your fence when it needs it either," Jimmy said.

"I just bought the place. How am I supposed to know there's a defect somewhere in the fence? I haven't had time to examine it."

"Look," Tom's father inserted, "standing around here and arguing isn't going to solve anything. Let's divide up. Half of us will take care of the cattle and the other half will continue on here."

Jimmy nodded. "Since this is your land, you stay here and make sure none of the cattle do any damage to your crops. I'll go with Neil and take care of the animals."

“I’ll go too,” Tom offered.

“That’s a good idea,” his father said. “Tom’s great with the lasso. Why, he can catch anything that moves.”

“Too bad that can’t be said for women,” Joel whispered to Dave who chuckled.

Tom shot them a glaring look but they’d already returned to their row of crops.

“The cattle are down by the beans,” their father said.

While Jimmy and Neil went to their horses, Tom made his way to the barn. “I’ll catch up to you,” he called out to them, knowing it was going to take longer to retrieve his horse than it was going to take for them to head out.

He found his steed standing idly in the grassy pasture, seeming to be content to stare at the low hills in the distance. Sometimes Tom felt the same way. All he wanted to do was be off by himself and just be at peace with everything around him. Such peace, however, wasn’t possible as long as his brothers insisted on giving him a hard time. He took the bridle and put it on his horse. The horse looked disappointed to be disturbed.

“I know. I told you that you’d have the whole day to relax, but it turns out I need you to work. Here.” He stopped at the barrel beside the barn door and picked out an apple. “Maybe this will help.”

The animal eagerly ate so he picked out another one.

“You can’t enjoy it that much if you go too fast,” he warned.

“He’s probably hoping that you’ll give him the whole barrel’s worth.”

Startled, he turned around and saw that Jessica was there. Right there. In front of him. He saw that she’d taken a buggy out to his place. But why? “Did I leave something at your house?”
Besides my pride?

“No,” she replied, looking down at her hands. She shrugged. “I just thought that there were some unanswered questions.”

“Oh?”

“Well, yes. I mean, I didn’t have anyone but my mother there at the house when you came over, and yet you think I did. Why?”

“I guess I thought it was odd that a woman who was engaged would have me over.”

She sighed. “Apparently, a lot of people thought the same thing. But I told Peter and he didn’t care.”

He rolled his eyes. “No man wants his fiancée to be with another man, especially if they’re dancing.”

“I’m just saying that is how he responded. You can choose to believe that or not.”

Now he was really confused, but then he thought it wasn’t his business. He turned back to the horse and led it into the barn. “I have to help rein in some stray cattle. Look, whatever’s bothering you, don’t worry about it. Everything’s fine, alright?”

“You mean, you’re going to go out in the fields...on that horse?”

He tied the horse to the post in the center of the barn and walked over to the large closet. “That’s the idea. I sure can’t catch them by running on foot.”

She giggled and he cracked a smile. “Can I come along?” she asked.

“What?”

She motioned to the horse. “I’ve only ridden a horse a couple of times, but it would be fun to go out again.”

“This isn’t a leisurely trot. I’ll be riding that horse hard.” He grabbed for the saddle but she placed a hand on his arm. The action startled him, though in a good way. He recalled how nice it had been to kiss her. Nice? It was incredible!

“That sounds exciting,” she said, her eyes lit up with obvious enthusiasm. “Can I ride with you?”

“But this isn’t fun. It’s work.”

She removed her hand from his arm and shrugged. “I don’t mind. I’d like to see what it is you do out here. Please?”

He did want her to stick around. He really wanted to spend time with her. But... “What about Peter?”

“We’d be doing this as friends. I mean, unless you thought...I mean...You knew I was engaged, so you didn’t think that I—”

“No,” he lied. “But it’s still not right. The least you can do is have Peter join us.”

She sighed and then smiled. “What if one of your brothers come along? Or even one of your sisters? You do have a sister or two? What about Jenny?”

How was it possible that she knew more about him than he ever knew about her? “Well, alright. But you’ll have to ride with her. There’s no way you’re riding on the horse with me.” It was hard enough to concentrate on anything when she was near him, and he needed a clear head for roping any cattle. “Deal?”

She nodded. “It’s a deal.”

He was ready to tell her that she’d need to borrow one of his sister’s riding skirts, but she already had a pair on. “Why didn’t you just ride a horse out here instead of taking that buggy?”

“My mother hates it when I ride a horse. She thinks it’s unladylike.”

So maybe she just came out to ride a horse. Maybe it had nothing to do with him. The thought stung, but he ignored it. He had work to do. He could worry about everything else later. “Alright. Hang on and I’ll get Jenny.” He didn’t bother waiting for her reply as he jogged to the house.

Chapter Nine

Jessica wondered if she was being smart in asking to join Tom, but she wanted to speak with him. She just wasn't sure what she wanted to speak with him about. She smiled at Jenny as Tom saddled up two more horses and set Jessica's horses out to the small gated area so they could rest and eat.

"I hope I'm not intruding," Jessica softly told Jenny, not wishing for Tom to overhear.

"Nah. Neil Craftsman's cattle get loose a lot. They pretty much all go down the same path too. Afterwards, Jimmy will probably recommend they find the troubled spot in the fence and fix it. I figure I better go anyway. The men will be hungry and want to eat something."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that. Let me help you. It is the least I can do since everyone will show me how this..." Jessica paused, not knowing what to call chasing cattle around and brining them home. "Well, I've never seen anything like this, so I asked Tom if I could watch. There's really so little of farm living I know about."

Jenny smiled. "It's not that exciting, but I certainly don't mind coming along. It's a nice break from being stuck in the kitchen all day."

Jessica nodded, not really sure of what else to say.

"Tom, I swear you have got to be the slowest person alive," a lanky youth said, sauntering into the barn. He didn't even look

in Jenny and Jessica's direction. "What are you doing? Have you lost your marbles or something? Why are you saddling three horses? Dave and I aren't going with you."

"I'm taking Jenny and Jessica with me. Jessica wants to see how we round up cattle."

The boy laughed. "Oh Tom. Doesn't this just beat all? You don't need to make up these silly lies to save your pride. We all know that there's no way Jessica would venture out here to see you when she's got Peter."

Jenny cleared her throat.

As soon as the boy turned around, his face turned bright red.

"We have a guest, Joel," Jenny said, sweetly smiling. "Her name is Jessica Reynolds. Jessica, this is our youngest brother, Joel. Sometimes we call him 'foot in the mouth' Larson. Don't worry though. His jaw doesn't usually hang that low."

Sensing that Tom had been getting some grief over her...for whatever reason, Jessica walked up to Joel and said, "Hello, Joel. Will you be joining us?"

"Uh...uh..." he stammered.

Another young man entered the barn, and Jessica assumed that this was another brother since they shared the same blond hair and good looks.

"Pa thinks maybe I should go lasso the cattle up since you're taking so long, Tom." He stopped as soon as he saw her. "Jessica? What are you doing here?"

“Never mind all that,” Tom called out. “We have work to do. Don’t send Pa.” He brought the horses over to them. “Here’s the horses. Jessica, do you need help getting on the horse?”

She glanced at the two brothers who were staring at her as if they couldn’t believe their eyes. She then looked at Jenny who looked as if she was ready to burst into a fit of giggles. Jessica didn’t know exactly what was going on, but it did occur to her that the two brothers had somehow given Tom a hard time about finding a woman. So she went over to Tom and said she needed help, even though she really didn’t.

Before he took her hand, she kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you, Tom.” Then she let him help her into the saddle. She smiled at the three bewildered siblings. “Tom’s such a nice person. All the ladies think so.”

She glanced at Joel who hadn’t budged an inch. The other brother just shrugged and helped Jenny up onto her horse.

Tom grabbed his lasso and hopped on his horse. The graceful movement of the action startled her, though she hoped she didn’t show it. For some reason, she assumed that Tom would have to give it a few tries before he succeeded.

“Are we ready?” Tom asked her and Jenny.

“I sure am.” Jenny looked at Jessica. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been riding in the fields.”

“I’ve only ridden in town,” Jessica admitted.

“Well, you’re in for a treat. The view is much better out here.”

They followed Tom who had to stop his horse when they got close to the exit. “Joel, you’re blocking my way.”

“I got it,” the older brother said.

“Thanks, Dave.”

Jessica made a mental note on the names. Jenny, Joel and Dave. She just hoped she remembered which one was Joel and which one was Dave the next time she saw them. They looked so much alike.

After Dave pulled Joel to the side, the three headed out on their horses. Jessica kept pace with the two siblings, but she had to concentrate. The landscape wasn't as smooth as what she was used to so she continually shifted her balance to compensate for the horse's movements. Once she noticed Tom rush forward, she glanced at Jenny who slowed her horse. Jessica followed Jenny's lead and watched as Tom chased down a stray cow.

Jenny moved her horse to close the gap between them. “Neil and Jimmy are over there.”

Jessica's attention turned to the left and she saw two men surrounding a group of about ten cattle. The dog in the rear barked. The group moved at a slow pace. Glancing in Tom's direction, she saw the cow run from him. He swung the rope over his head and caught it. Again, she wondered why she assumed that he'd miss on his first attempt. Was her perception of him directly related to how he acted at the barn gathering?

She looked at Jenny. “Does he handle cattle well?”

“Oh, Tom's one of the best. Whenever there's stray cattle, he's the first one people ask for help.”

“Really?”

Jenny giggled, as if she understood Jessica's shock. "He's only clumsy when he's nervous. Out here, he's comfortable."

"Is he comfortable farming too?"

"Yes. He's only uncomfortable around a woman he's not related to. But you can see how he is when he's focused."

Jessica returned her gaze to Tom and saw him take the rebellious cow back to the group. It did impress her to watch how the men worked as a team. While a couple kept the herd moving, the third would hunt down and retrieve another one they found. More often than not, Tom would be the one to chase it down and bring it to the group. She supposed she should have gotten bored with the process, but she was too fascinated as she watched Tom. His movements were fluid, and it intrigued her that a man could be so in tune with his steed. If only Margaret and the other women could see him now. They might not react so poorly to his offer to dance.

She frowned. It was better they didn't find out. She definitely had to talk to him because if that kiss he gave her was an indicator of something he might feel for her, then she needed to find out before she proceeded further with her engagement.

"It looks like they got everything under control," Jenny said. "Let's head over to Neil's home and make them something to eat."

Jessica nodded and joined her, leaving the men to lead the herd back to Neil's property. When they arrived at Neil's house, she hesitated. She heard of sod houses but hadn't seen one. It seemed to her that a house made of straw and dirt couldn't be too comfortable.

She glanced at Jenny as they got down from their horses. "Do farmers live in this kind of house?"

"Most of them do. My parents finally built a house made of wood a year ago."

"Tom still lives with you...at your parents' home, right?"

"Yes, but he's talking about getting his own home before December." She laughed. "He'd better get a move on it though. It's already the second of October." Jenny took Jessica's horse's reins. "I'll take care of him. Why don't you go into the house and get things ready."

"Is Tom going to have a sod house?"

"Yes. He can't afford to make one out of wood." Jenny shrugged. "He's been holding off on getting his own home because he isn't married yet, but with the way Joel bothers him, I think he's itching to get out on his own."

Jessica watched as Jenny took the horses to the pasture behind the barn. She tried to visualize herself living in a sod house. Peter had already set out a cute little home in town. How much different would her life be if she were to marry Tom instead? She sighed and rolled her eyes. Tom gave her one kiss and she was thinking of marriage? It was ridiculous. Who knew what his motives were or even if it would work out between them?

She slowly made her way to the sod house and opened the door. It was small. She only saw enough room for a bed and a small cookstove with two shelves along the wall. Would this be something she could get used to? But as she thought about it, the sod house didn't look so bad. It didn't come with a man who did his mother's bidding all the time. Or would it? Just

what was Tom's relationship to his parents like? There were so many things to consider in this whole thing.

Well, there was nothing to consider until she talked to Tom, and she decided she would talk to him before the day was over because this cycle of wondering was going to drive her insane.

Chapter Ten

“Hey Tom,” Neil began as he, Tom, and Jimmy walked back to their horses after having a light lunch, “are you courting Jessica?”

I wish. “No,” Tom replied. “She’s engaged to Peter what’s-his-name.”

“You mean, Connie James’ son?” Jimmy asked.

“That’s the one. Peter James is his name,” Tom said. He followed the other two to the barn and got his horse out of one of the stalls. “Neil, you seem to take better care of this barn than you do your own house.”

Neil shrugged as he gathered his bridle to put on his steed. “I just sleep there.”

Jimmy looked at Neil. “You do take good care of this barn. Why don’t you take care of your fence the same way?”

Neil groaned. “I’m getting to that. Right now I’ve been putting all my time into the harvest. That takes a full day, you know.”

“I do know, but we just lost half the day in chasing down your cattle.”

“I’ll check the rest of the fence for anymore tears, but that means I won’t be coming out to your place tomorrow until afternoon.”

“It’s worth it.”

While the two rambled on, Tom glanced over his shoulder and saw Jessica and Jenny laughing as they sat on their horses. For a moment—just a moment—he imagined what it would be like if Jessica was always with them, helping the other women make food for the men during the harvest, always giving him kisses on the cheek, always being by his side... He sighed. Okay. So he got it. She hadn’t been making him the butt of a joke when he went to see her a couple days ago. He understood that now. But why was she here? Didn’t Peter even care that she was gone?

“You have to get on the horse before you can ride out of here,” Jimmy told Tom.

Tom turned his attention to his stallion and got into the saddle. “I’m coming.” He urged the horse forward and followed them out of the barn.

To his surprise, Jessica waited for him while Jenny rode ahead with Jimmy and Neil. Jessica rode beside him. “I enjoyed watching you out there.”

He glanced at her. “Really?” What was so special about watching him round up cattle?

She smiled and shrugged. “I guess it was nice to get a look at what you do.”

“Oh, I don’t do that all the time. Most of the time, I’m in the fields, except in winter when there’s nothing going on.”

“Well, then what do you do during the winter months?”

“Mostly stay inside and keep warm, though if there’s something that needs fixing around the house, that’s the time to do it. Of course, the animals always need to be cared for.”

“That sounds good.”

He nodded, not sure of what to add to the conversation. For some reason, the actual day to day activities seemed more interesting when he was doing them instead of talking about them. Finally, he asked, “Is your mother really alright with you being out here?”

“I told her that I needed to apologize to you. I don’t know what I did or said that gave you the impression that I had Peter or Margaret hiding somewhere when you came over, but I am sorry.”

His face grew warm from embarrassment. “You don’t need to apologize.”

“Is that why you kissed me? Because you thought I had them over?”

“Well, I thought that if Peter was there, he wouldn’t keep hiding if another man kissed you. I mean, I know I wouldn’t if I were him.”

“So, if you didn’t think he was there, then you wouldn’t have kissed me?”

He laughed, more from the touchy topic than from amusement. One bad thing about being out of earshot of everyone else was that he couldn’t ask someone else a question and cut off this particular topic. No. He was stuck with this conversation whether he liked it or not. And he didn’t like it. He didn’t think she had any dubious motives, but he didn’t need to take

another blow to his pride either. He took a deep breath as he contemplated which answer to give that would do the least amount of damage. "I knew you were engaged, so no, I wouldn't have kissed you."

"And if I wasn't engaged?"

Of course, I would have kissed you. A man would have to be dead to not want to kiss you. But he didn't dare say that. Instead, he said, "What difference does it make? You are engaged."

She didn't seem happy with his answer but she nodded. "You're right. I guess it really doesn't matter."

"Right." And really, it didn't. Years from now when she was living in Peter's house and caring for his children and welcoming him home from work with those sweet lips, this conversation would be long forgotten.

Jenny pulled back her horse until they caught up to her. "The snack we made isn't very filling. Jessica, why don't you stay for supper?"

Tom shot his sister a 'what are you doing?' look, but she kept her eyes on Jessica.

Jessica looked between them. "I don't know. I just came out to talk for a little bit. I didn't intend to stay this long."

"Is your mother expecting you back home then?" Jenny asked.

"Well, no. Not really."

What did that mean? Tom turned his attention to her.

“Would you like me to stay for supper?” Jessica asked him.

Why was she asking him? Tom didn’t know what to say. He did like being around her, but she was engaged. Shouldn’t she be wanting to spend the evening with Peter? Unless...He glanced at Jenny. Maybe the two of them were becoming friends. They did spend four hours together, talking and laughing. He got a queasy feeling in his stomach. Was she going to be coming out and visiting Jenny after she married Peter?

“Tom?” Jessica asked.

He looked at her. This was getting to be unbearable. He knew he didn’t have a chance with her, and yet she seemed to be looking at him as if he did. He shook his head to clear it. This was ridiculous. He knew he wasn’t good with women, but it never occurred to him how much he misunderstood them.

Jenny leaned forward and nearly slapped him on the arm. “Tom?”

“Not so rough,” he snapped.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I slipped.”

He studied her expression and determined that she was telling him the truth. Besides, it wasn’t Jenny who gave him problems. Joel was the usual culprit. “I don’t think it’s up to me whether Jessica stays or not,” he finally said. “I’m not the one who’s making the meal.”

Why Jessica looked disappointed, he didn’t know. But what he did know was that he didn’t feel like trying to figure women out. Getting his own house was no longer an option. It was a

mandate. Then he wouldn't have to watch Jessica come out to see Jenny.

As if on cue, Jenny happily said, "Then it's official, Jessica. You are going to stay for supper!"

Well, at least the men and women separated out this time of year, so he wouldn't actually have to be with Jessica. The thought was both relieving and depressing, and he didn't know what to do about it.

By the time they got back to his property, he nearly raced his horse to the barn. As predicted, Joel was hanging around and taking a break. Joel looked for just about any excuse to avoid farm work. Tom couldn't tell if that was because Joel was opposed to farming or work in general. But right now he didn't care.

He got off the horse and handed the reins to Joel who was mindlessly using a stick to scribble in the dirt of the barn floor.

"What are you doing?" Joel asked, jumping up.

"Take care of this horse. I got to use the outhouse."

Okay. So that was a lie, but he didn't feel like being around Jessica and she was due in the barn in less than a minute. Before Joel could protest, he ran off.

Chapter Eleven

“You did what?” Margaret asked the next day.

Jessica stopped walking along the edge of the park and gently nudged her shocked friend forward. “It was nothing. Really. Absolutely nothing happened.”

Nothing interesting enough to talk about anyway, which was why she didn’t want to tell Margaret anything about going out to see Tom at all. Except Margaret had come by to see her and found out from her mother. Not that her mother approved, but nothing happened so how could anyone get upset about it?

Margaret groaned but walked in step with her friend. “Why did you do it?”

“I had to find out.”

“Find out what?”

Jessica tucked loose strands of hair behind her ear. “Find out if there could be something...between us.”

Margaret raised an eyebrow. “And?”

She sighed. “I already told you. Nothing.”

“Hmm...But you want there to be something.”

“What I want doesn’t matter.”

“No?”

“No.”

“So...are you still going to marry Peter?”

Jessica knew this question was coming. Her mother had asked the same thing. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

Startled, Jessica quickly glanced around. Good. No one seemed to notice. She ushered her friend to the nearest park bench so they could sit. “Not so loud,” she whispered. She shrugged. “I don’t know. I can’t even remember why I agreed to marry him to begin with.”

“Because you loved him.”

“Is that what I said?”

“Well...” Margaret frowned and thought it over. “You must have at some point. Otherwise, why would you accept his proposal?”

“Maybe for the same reason he asked. We were expected to.”

“Your mother isn’t pushing you to marry him.”

“No, she’s not. But it just seemed logical. I mean, how long have we all known each other?”

“Our entire lives.” Margaret sat back and looked at the trees in front of them. “Peter asked you. He didn’t ask me.”

“Does that upset you?”

“I guess it did at first. I mean, you were always prettier than me, so men notice you more than they notice me. But then I

saw the way he acts with his mother and decided I was actually lucky to be off the hook.”

“I’ve thought the same thing.”

She scoffed. “That I was prettier than you?”

Jessica shook her head and smiled. “There’s nothing wrong with the way you look. You’re cute.”

“But not gorgeous.”

“Well, you have a better figure than me. Sometimes I think it would be nice to have a full bust size.”

“I guess we both have things about ourselves we don’t like so much, huh?”

“It’s called being human. No one is perfect.”

Margaret nodded. “True. But still, you can find a husband and I can’t.”

“What about Ethan? Hasn’t he talked to you since the square dance?”

“Oh, he did. He wanted to know if you were available.”

Jessica winced. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. You can’t help it if men fall over themselves to speak to you.” She giggled. “Literally. Do you remember Brian?”

“I asked you to never bring him up again.”

“I know but...Wow. Whatever was he about?”

Jessica chuckled. “Didn’t he ask to court you after that?”

“Yes, but he was too strange.”

“So you could get a husband if you wanted. You just don’t want to settle.”

“Because I might get the wrong one.”

Jessica pulled an imaginary piece of lint off her blouse. “And I don’t want to marry the wrong one either.” She took a deep breath, realizing that as soon as she said it, it would be official. “I’m afraid Peter’s the wrong one.”

“And to think just a minute ago you didn’t know if you should still marry him or not,” Margaret mused.

“My thoughts are jumbled up.”

“Well, let me help unjumble them for you. Go tell Peter the engagement is off. I suspect you’ll be happier once you don’t have to deal with him and his mother.”

That was true, and even if Jessica liked his mother, she didn’t know if she could go through the rest of her life feeling as if she had to fight her for Peter’s attention. She hadn’t even realized how much it bothered her until the last time she went to his mother’s to have dinner. “You’re right.” She took a deep breath. “I’ll go talk to him after he gets off work.”

And that meant her decision was made. She just hoped she wouldn’t regret it.

When Jessica returned home, she was surprised to see Tom sitting on the porch swing. She climbed the steps slowly, unsure of what to say.

As soon as he saw her, he jumped up and knocked something off the swing. "Sorry." He picked it up and held it out to her.

She took the small box. "Did you come bearing gifts again?" she asked, grinning.

"Oh. It's not from me, not this time." He cleared his throat and motioned to it. "Jenny thought you might like it."

"Jenny?" She glanced around. "Is she here?"

"No. She had to stay at the farm and help with the cooking and... Well...you got to see how it is out there."

She nodded and lifted the lid of the box. She smiled. "Did she make this herself?" She took out the broach in the shape of a butterfly.

"She stayed up late." He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. "It looks like you two got along great yesterday."

"Yes. I like her. Tell her thanks for me, will you?" She put the broach back into the box and set the lid back on it.

"I'll be sure to do that."

"Would you like to come in?"

He fiddled with his hat. "I-I don't know."

"I promise that Peter and Margaret aren't hiding in there," she teased.

He blushed. “Yes, well, about that...Um...”

She couldn’t believe this was the same Tom Larson who had kissed her or lassoed cattle. “Are you sure you won’t have something to eat before you go back home? My mother and I can even tie you to the chair and feed you in case you get the shakes.”

Laughing, he put his hat back on and put his hands into his pockets. “Right. I forgot about that.”

“Well, I guess I can’t blame you for suspecting that something was up. But I’m going to see Peter tonight.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” She decided she might as well tell him the truth and see if anything would come of it. “I’ve decided I’m not marrying him.”

“Oh?”

She thought she caught a spark of interest, so she pressed further. “I thought about it and I don’t think that we suit each other.” She shrugged. “So I’m just going to let him know.”

He took a step forward and tripped.

She managed to catch him before he fell face first on the porch. She stumbled back until he stood up.

“Oh gosh. I’m sorry.” He reached out and took the dented box from her. “Here. Let me fix that.”

As soon as she remembered that the broach had a pin stuck to the back of it, she said, “No. It’s just a box.” She took it back

and opened it. Sure enough the pin was sticking out. All she needed was for him to jab himself with it. She adjusted the brooch so that the pin was safely out of the way. As she did, she saw a note. She glanced up at Tom who was straightening his hat. "Will you have a seat in the parlor? I'll put this away in my bedroom and then be right out to see you."

He nodded and followed her into the house.

She expected him to trip over the threshold but he didn't. Instead he turned to shut the door and ended up walking into the hat rack. She hid her laughter by covering it up with a cough. It was a good thing he didn't bump into things when he was doing his job. "I'll be right back."

He steadied the hat rack and set his hat on it.

"Jessica? Is that you?" her mother called from the kitchen.

"Yes," she replied. "We have company."

"Really? Who?"

"Tom Larson," she quickly answered before she hurried to her room.

She knew what was coming even before she heard the footsteps coming her way. She set the box on her dresser and took out the note. It was from Jenny, just as she suspected.

Tom would kill me if he knew I wrote this, but he's sweet on you. Won't you consider him instead of Peter? It'd be nice to have you for a sister-in-law.

Jenny

She hid the note before her mother appeared in her doorway.

“Jessica, what is that boy doing back here?”

“I invited him for dinner.” Jessica took off her bonnet and brushed her hair. She couldn’t believe she was actually trembling with excitement. She’d never felt this flustered over being around Peter.

Her mother shook her head. “With things all up in the air about Peter, do you think this is wise?”

“Oh, I spoke with Margaret today and we agreed that Peter would be much better off if he married his mother.”

“You didn’t say those words!” she hissed and glanced over her shoulder as if afraid Tom could hear them. She quickly entered the room and shut the door.

“No, we didn’t use those exact words, but you have to admit that he doesn’t love me, not the way he should.”

Her mother sighed. “I admit that he seems a little too devoted to his mother.”

“A little? He won’t sneeze without her permission.” Jessica examined the ribbons Tom had given her. She finally picked one and put it into her hair.

“Marriage can seem long with a man attached to his mother’s apron strings. Perhaps Peter isn’t ready to get married yet.”

“I think his mother is, but I agree he isn’t.”

“And are you sure that Tom is ready?”

“Well, he is itching to get his own place, and that place happens to be a good distance from his parents. Jenny told me all about it. She said that he’s even started plans on making a house out there.”

“You’re not marrying anyone right away. I have to get to know this boy. You can’t be rushing for the altar yet, young lady.”

Jessica pinched her cheeks to make them a rosy color.

“I insist that you court for a year.”

She stopped and looked at her mother. “A year? But he’ll be doing next year’s harvest by then.”

“Well, you’re not marrying him this winter. You have to get to know him first. You have to make sure he’s the right one.”

That was true. “Let’s see. What about June? The planting will be done by then.”

“What about next winter?”

She groaned. “That’s a long time.”

“Only to a young woman. Time goes faster as you get older. The year will pass before I have time to blink.”

“What about early September? Right before the harvest?”

The woman crossed her arms. “I suppose that’s close enough to a full year. Alright.”

She smiled and got ready to leave the bedroom.

Her mother stepped in front of the door. “This conversation is hypothetical. You haven’t even called off your engagement to Peter.”

“I’ll do that after dinner.”

“And you don’t know that things will work out with Tom. Sure, he’s a good boy, but you have to get to know him.”

“That’s what this next year is for.”

“And,” she continued as Jessica reached for the doorknob, “you have to wait and see if he wants to marry you. Don’t go putting the cart before the horse.”

Jessica paused. Her mother was right. She couldn’t be sure what he wanted until he told her. “Then I’ll have to find out.”

“Make sure you do.” She stepped aside. “Now, you go pay attention to him while I finish up with dinner. But in the future if he comes over, you will have to be sure that he arrives when you’re done helping me in the kitchen.”

“I didn’t ask him to come by. He just showed up.”

“I know, but you need to do some cooking to show him that you’ll be a good wife. The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. That’s how I got your father to marry me.”

“Your point is noted.”

“Good. There will be plenty of time to visit with him after the meal.”

“Is that all?”

Her mother seemed to think it over before she nodded. “Yes.”

Jessica opened the door and left the room, only having a vague notion of how to proceed. She found Tom looking out the window. She stepped forward and cleared her throat.

He turned his head in her direction and almost bumped into the rocking chair behind him.

“You know, we’re going to have to do something about your anxiety,” she said as she walked up to him. “I promise I’m not scary.”

He laughed. “I’m not scared of you.”

She shot a questioning look at the way he gripped the chair. His knuckles were turning white.

“Alright. Maybe I am...a little bit.”

“You weren’t scared the last time you kissed me. Of course, that was when you thought I had Margaret and Peter hiding in this house.”

He chuckled. “That is silly, isn’t it? I don’t know what I was thinking.”

She grinned. “Is that the only way I can get you to kiss me?”

“W-What do you mean?”

“Well, you never did answer my question.”

“Y-Yes, I did.”

“Not really. I asked you if I wasn’t engaged, would you kiss me? All you said was that I was engaged so it was pointless to answer the question. Now I’m not engaged. So...” She took a

step closer to him so that they were almost touching. “Would you have kissed me that day if I hadn’t been engaged?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.” Clearing his throat, he took a step back. “I guess it would have depended on how things went.”

She forced aside her irritation and took another step forward. “Let’s say things went well. Let’s say you had a lovely meal and we had a wonderful conversation. What then?”

He backed up again and this time his back hit the wall.

At least she had him cornered. She approached him. “You’re hard to nail down, Tom. All I asked was a simple question.”

“No. No, it isn’t an easy question.”

“Sure it is. It’s a yes or no question.”

“But...I mean...there are too many ways you can take that answer, and depending on how you take that answer, things could be bad.”

“Bad? Bad for who?”

“For me.” He blinked. “Or you. Or Peter. Or-”

“You know what I think?” she interrupted, feeling like this had gone on long enough. Really, he’d let this continue all night if he could, and she wanted her answer right now.

“No.” He cleared his throat. “What do you think?”

“I think you talk too much.” Then, in a bold move that even surprised her for she would never do such a thing with Peter, she closed the gap between them and kissed him.

She felt his shock before he relaxed and finally returned her kiss.

She pulled back and asked, “Now, if I hadn’t been engaged, would you have kissed me that day?”

A smile widened on his face. “You bet.” He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. “And this is just how I would’ve done it!”

She closed her eyes and enjoyed his kiss.

Chapter Twelve

Jessica took a deep breath and knocked on Connie James' door. She already tried the apartment where Peter was living, but since he wasn't there, she thought he might be here. And as soon as he opened the front door, she realized she was right.

"Oh, good evening, Jessica," he said. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Peter? Is that Jessica?" his mother called from another room.

"Yes."

"Good! Bid her to come right in!"

"Well, you heard Mother. Come on in."

Jessica hesitated. "I don't think so, Peter. I need to speak with you alone. Maybe..." She didn't want to take him to her house where her mother would feel compelled to keep him for a drink or snack. She glanced at the rocking chairs on the porch. "We should talk out here."

"But it's chilly out."

"It's not too bad. I just wearing a shawl."

He looked uneasy. "Yes, but you don't catch ill as easily as I do."

She sighed. Maybe she should just tell him here. It wasn't like she had a long message for him. All she needed to do was tell

him that she was going to marry Tom Larson instead. Really, the whole thing could be said in less than a minute. Straightening her back, she said, "Never mind. What I have to say won't take long anyway. You see, I-"

His mother ran up to the door before Jessica had a chance to continue. She reached out and grabbed Jessica by the hand. "I'm so glad you're here! I was ready to send Peter on a search for you. Now come along. I have something very important to discuss."

"But-" Jessica began.

"This simply can't wait. I've been at my wits end trying to find the best solution. You have to help. Peter keeps saying that it's up to me, but I don't know what to do. I'm a complete mess, I tell you!"

Jessica glanced back at Peter who shrugged and shut the door.

Connie led her to the kitchen and showed her two sets of napkins. With a loud sigh, she pointed to them. "For our wedding reception, I just don't know which pattern to go with. Which do you think would compliment my pink dress better: the flower petals or the whole rose? You do know which pink dress I'm talking about, don't you? It has those little white pearls along the neckline."

She stared at the woman in disbelief. "I said I wanted plain pink napkins."

"These are pink."

"But they have pictures sewn into them. The plain ones were cheaper."

Connie shrugged. "What do you care? I bought them."

"We already have patterns on the tablecloths!"

"Which is why we need something on the napkins as well. That Maureen had colorful leaves sewn onto her daughter's napkins, and I won't let her show me up."

"I don't care how Maureen does things. This is my wedding and—" She stopped. Wait. This wasn't *her* wedding. Not anymore. Calming down, she continued, "Actually, you know what? It doesn't matter. In fact, there's not even going to be a wedding."

Peter's eyes grew wide.

Connie pressed a hand to her heart. "I will not allow you to elope."

"Mother's right. We need to do things the right way."

"Then feel free to do them however you wish, but I am not getting married. I..." Now, this part wasn't going to be easy. "That is to say that I have decided Peter—" she glanced at him—"I mean, you—" she returned her gaze to Connie—"and I don't make a good match. I don't believe this is a cordial arrangement." There. She said it.

Connie gasped and motioned for Peter to catch her before she fell back.

He dutifully did as prompted and looked at Jessica. "I don't understand. We are a good match."

“No, not really.” She glanced at the way he helped his mother sit down and fanned her. She bit back the urge to insist he marry his mother and said, “I rather fancy Tom Larson.”

“Tom Larson?” he repeated, dumbfounded.

“The farmer’s son?” Connie asked.

“Yes. Tom Larson.” She fingered her shawl, wondering if this was a good time to make her exit. She certainly wasn’t going to be popular with these two anymore. “I thank you both for your kindness and hope you well in life.”

As she made her way out of the kitchen, Connie called out, “Peter, stop her!”

Jessica rolled her eyes as he obeyed. Getting out of this trap of a marriage to Peter James was the best thing she ever did for herself. Tom might be clumsy but at least he could think for himself!

Peter caught up to her as she reached the front door. “I’m sure we can work things out. Maybe we could meet tomorrow and further discuss this.”

“No. Peter, there’s nothing to discuss.”

“But Mother worked so hard on putting this wedding together. You will disappoint her.”

Her face flushed in anger. “Your mother is exactly why this will never work. You don’t love me, nor do I love you. You need to find a woman you want instead of letting your mother pick her for you. Now, please, let me go home.”

He looked as if he were going to protest but nodded. “Very well.” He opened the door just in time for Connie to run out of the kitchen.

Connie grabbed Jessica’s arm and, with big tears forming in her eyes, said, “Surely, you want a life better than what a farmer can give you. Peter’s going places. He’s already gotten a fine promotion at work.”

“Mother—” Peter began.

“You can’t do this to us, Jessica.” The woman choked on a sob and brought a handkerchief to her mouth. “However will I find another daughter-in-law who my friends will approve of?”

Jessica rolled her eyes, though the woman was too busy sobbing to notice. “Ma wants me home.” Then she quickly slipped out the door before Connie could grab her again. *Thank goodness that’s over!*

Tom whistled all the way home. Jessica was going to actually let him court her! She even kissed him. Did life get any better than this?

As soon as he got home, he figured he should talk to his father. If he was going to be taking a bride, he needed a home to bring her to. There was no way he was going to stick around this place. Not with his irritating little brothers hovering around to cause trouble or embarrass him.

Once he unsaddled the horse and put him in the stall for the night, he ran into the kitchen where his mother and sister were washing dishes.

“You’re late,” his mother said. “I got a plate of leftovers on the table if you’re still hungry.”

“Oh well, I ate at Jessica’s,” he replied.

Jenny stopped drying a plate. “So the evening went well then?”

“It sure did. I’m courting her now!” His chest puffed up with pride. Imagine...someone like him courting someone like Jessica.

“Good,” Jenny said. “I think she’d be a fun sister-in-law.”

Their mother groaned. “No one is married yet. Don’t go jumping the gun.”

“Who’s jumping the gun? If she agreed to let him court her, then it’s a done deal.”

“Jenny.”

Noting the warning tone in their mother’s voice, Tom asked, “Where’s Pa? I want to talk to him about getting my own house.”

“He’s in the parlor playing cards with your brothers.”

“Great!” He hurried down the hall and stopped as soon as he reached the threshold of the entertainment room where his pa, Dave, and Joel studied their cards in silence. “Pa, can I talk to you?”

Joel looked up from his hand and sighed. “How rude, Tom. You can see we’re in the middle of a game.”

“But this is important. Pa?”

Their father glanced up and nodded. "Alright. Come on in and pull up a seat. We got room for one more."

Joel grumbled under his breath but moved to make room for his brother at the round card table.

Tom shook his head. "I'd rather talk alone."

That statement got both Dave and Joel to turn from their cards in interest.

"Pa?" Tom asked.

His father nodded and threw his cards down. "The pot is all yours," he told Dave and Joel.

"Yipee," Joel muttered to Dave. "Whatever will we do with unlimited peanuts?"

Ignoring the sarcastic remark, his father walked with Tom outside so they could have some privacy on the porch.

Once they sat in their chairs, Tom spoke. "You remember Jessica Reynolds, don't you?"

"Yes. She was the only new person who's been out here."

"Well, she and I are courting!"

"Sure," Joel called out, obviously not believing him.

Startled, Tom jumped out of his chair and saw that the parlor window was open. Oh great! Just what he needed: more teasing from his little brother. "Can't we get rid of him?"

"Dave, close the window," their pa called out.

Tom waited until Dave complied before he turned back to his pa. Satisfied, he sat back down and continued, "So, when can I get that house that you were talking about?"

"I suppose in a month once the harvest is over."

"And I can pay you back, a little at a time?"

He nodded. "That'd be fine."

Tom slapped his knee in excitement. "Great!"

"Now, you just started courting the girl when? Tonight?"

"Yep."

"Well, I can tell your anxious to marry her, but you can't rush into this. Marriage is a lifetime decision."

"I know." And Jessica was the right one. He just knew it!

"And you're not going to propose until next summer at the soonest."

He frowned. "That long?"

"That's when planting will be done. Then you can marry after the harvest."

"But that's too long."

"You only say that because you're young."

"How old were you when you married Ma?"

He sighed and dug out his pipe. "That's beside the point."

"If memory serves, you were eighteen."

“People married earlier back then.” He lit his pipe and started smoking.

“That’s not true. Some eighteen year olds marry.”

“But you’ve only known her for what? A week?”

Shifting in his chair, he shrugged. “About that. Maybe longer.”

“I grew up with your ma. We were friends before we learned how to walk.” A smile crossed his face and he got that nostalgic look in his eye that alerted Tom that he’d be in for a good hour’s worth of memories if he didn’t bolt. “I still remember when I first realized I loved her. We were twelve and-”

“I think Ma’s calling for me.” Tom stood up and straightened his vest. “Thanks for the talk, and I can’t wait to get started on that house. Bye.” Then he entered the house before his father could call him back out.

As he passed the parlor, Joel snickered behind his cards.

He stopped. “I can’t wait until I’m out of here.”

“Me neither,” Joel replied. “It’s hard living with the way you smell, not to mention how loud you snore. Maybe I’ll finally be able to get a good night’s sleep around here.”

“You ever wonder why Ma and Pa never had any children after you were born? It’s because they didn’t want to make another mistake.”

Joel gasped. “Ma! Tom’s being mean again!”

“What? You can give out the insults but you can’t take it?”

“I can handle them just fine. I don’t want you to run out of ideas, that’s all.”

He rolled his eyes. “You got anything to add, Dave?”

Dave glanced up from his cards and smiled. “Gin.” He set the cards down and grabbed the peanuts from the center of the table. “I’m going to my room to read.”

“You’re no fun, Dave,” Joel replied.

“Really,” Tom agreed. “You’re much too serious.”

Dave shrugged and left the parlor.

Joel’s eyebrow rose. “Think you can beat me at Gin?”

Tom snorted. “Of course, I can.”

“Fine. Prove it.” He picked up the cards so he could shuffle them.

Tom sat in the seat Dave had been in and got ready for the next hand.

Chapter Thirteen

A week later when Tom arrived at her house, Jessica asked him if he wanted to take a quick stroll through the park before supper. “The air isn’t too chilly yet, and I do love the smell of the fall weather, don’t you?”

He stood in front of her door and furrowed his eyebrows. “You notice the way things smell?”

She adjusted her shawl before she stepped out of the house. “Well sure. Don’t you?”

“No. Not really.” He rubbed the back of his neck and lowered his head.

She thought he took a moment to sniff himself. “Um...Tom, are you alright?”

“What?” His head snapped back up and he straightened. “Oh, yes. I’m fine. It’s just something Joel said. Anyway, let’s go for a walk.”

She chuckled as she shut the door and joined him down the porch steps. He was so odd in some ways, and yet, she couldn’t help but enjoy that about him. He didn’t pretend to be something he wasn’t. He was simple and easy to please. After dealing with Peter and his mother, she learned that simple and easy to please were ideal traits.

They turned down the sidewalk that led to the park, and she said, “I’m glad you could get the afternoon to come see me.”

“It’ll be easier to come to town during the winter.” He paused. “Unless it snows a lot. I hope it doesn’t snow a lot.”

“I hope it doesn’t either.”

As they reached the park, he glanced her way. “Next month, my family’s going to help me build a house. You saw one like it. Remember Neil’s place?”

“Yes.”

“It’ll be like that.”

She grinned. “You already said that.”

“Oh, did I?” His cheeks grew red.

“But I don’t mind. I like hearing about—” She stopped herself before she said *our home*. Her mother was right. She had no business rushing things or assuming he’d propose. Still, she thought it was pretty much a done deal, and it was just a matter of time before they exchanged vows. Ideally, the vows would be exchanged in a small gathering of people with nothing more than a potluck supper afterwards. After Connie James, she had no desire for anything elaborate ever again. Clearing her throat, she said, “I like hearing about your home.”

“It’ll be close to water, and there will be lots of land all around. Well, you know what it was like out there.”

“Yes.” She scanned the colorful leaves on the trees and thought of having an apple tree. She’d always wanted an apple tree where she could pick fresh apples in her own yard. “Do you have any apple trees out there?”

“I don’t know. There are a couple of trees in the section of land I’m going to buy.”

“Oh. When I was a little girl, I hoped to make fresh apple pie for my husband.”

“Pie? Well, if there aren’t any apple trees out there, I’ll make sure to plant some,” he quickly said.

She hid her grin. So she was right. The formality of a proposal would come soon enough. And now she had to learn to make pie as well as her mother did.

“Jenny’s anxious to see you,” he stated. “I should take you back out there once the activity dies down.”

“I like Jenny. It’d be nice to see her again. Will you tell her I said hi?”

He nodded.

Jessica glanced away from Tom and halted her steps.

Pausing, he turned back and asked, “What’s wrong?”

She winced. It was just her luck. In all the time Peter was courting her, she never once ran into his mother in the park, and now that the engagement was over, her first trip out here would lead her to Connie James. And Connie was with Maureen. Looking at a confused Tom, she said, “Maybe we should go back. I think that supper might be ready sooner than I thought.”

She managed a slight turn before Connie called out to her. “Jessica, dear? Is that you?”

Jessica rolled her eyes. The woman knew very well it was her! Great. Now she was trapped. "Let's get this over with," she whispered to Tom before she headed down the path to meet up with Connie and Maureen.

"Who are they?" he asked as he picked up his pace to keep up with her.

"The woman wearing the green dress is Peter's mother."

He slowed. "His mother?"

The two women were quickly approaching, so all she could do was offer an apologetic smile.

"Jessica," Maureen began, "you look good this afternoon."

"Yes, you certainly do," Connie added.

Taking a deep breath, Jessica forced her feet to remain still. "Thank you. You two look good as well." She knew the introductions had to be made, so she motioned to Tom. "This is Tom Larson. Tom, this is Connie James and her friend, Maureen Brown."

Maureen gave a curt nod. "How do you do?"

Tom shifted from one foot to the other. "Um...I'm fine. I guess."

Her eyebrows rose. "You guess you're fine? Don't you know either way?"

"Well..." He cleared his throat. "I am. I'm fine."

Connie shot Maureen a look that Jessica knew didn't mean well for Tom. Sighing, she said, "Tom is taking a break from harvesting. It's a lot of work for farmers this time of year."

"Yes," Maureen replied. "Farming is a necessity those on the lower end must bear."

"Peter got a job promotion, you know," Connie told Maureen.

She gasped in surprise. "Did he now?"

"Yes. He has his own office and everything."

"My, my, my. That boy is certainly going places."

"That he is." Connie sighed with contentment. "He makes a mother proud."

"And proud you should be, Connie."

Jessica glanced around them, wondering if there was anything—another person passing by or an animal—that might serve as a good distraction...or as a means of escape. She actually preferred the latter.

Maureen turned to Tom. "Have you given thought to real work?"

"I already do real work," he said, his cheeks growing pink.

Jessica couldn't decide if he was angry or embarrassed, but it didn't matter. "He does work hard. Peter goes in at eight and leaves at five, but Tom works from sunup to sundown."

"No time for a wife then," Connie remarked, giving Jessica a pointed look.

“And for minimal pay,” Maureen added.

“Do you really believe you can support a wife and any children you may have?” Connie asked Tom.

Jessica could only stare at the woman in horror. Not for a single minute did she ever think Peter’s mother could be this rude!

Tom looked taken aback by the question before he cleared his throat. “My father owns a farm and has done a fine job of raising me and my four siblings.”

Maureen looked him up and down in obvious disapproval. “At least your clothes don’t have any holes in them.”

Jessica scrambled for something to say but her mind drew a complete blank.

“Why would we have holes in our clothes?” Tom asked, even as he shifted again from one foot to another.

Maureen looked as if his question surprised her. “Don’t farmers’ wives spend their free time sewing patches onto their children’s pants?”

“No.”

“Well, just what do they do?” Connie asked.

Before he could answer, a squirrel darted across his path. He was in the process of shifting to his other foot—again—when he tripped on the squirrel and fell forward.

Maureen gasped and stepped back just in time for the startled squirrel to leap onto Connie who lost her balance and fell on her

rear end in a puddle. The squirrel bounced off Connie's hat and raced up the nearest tree.

Jessica clasped her hand over her mouth to stifle her giggles.

"Oh! Are you alright?" Tom asked, reaching out to help Connie up.

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked and slapped his hand away.

Maureen offered her hand, which the woman accepted, and helped brush the leaves off her wet skirt. "You should change at once."

Red faced, Connie nodded. "Yes. I must." She adjusted her hat and straightened her shawl. Lifting her chin up, she told Tom and Jessica, "It seems that I am in need of a new dress. Good day to you both."

"Well, shoot, my ma doesn't bother changing when squirrels jump on her. She just laughs and plays in the fields with them," Tom replied. "Says it's good for the soul to get along with the critters."

Jessica glanced at Tom. Was he being serious?

Maureen blinked. "She doesn't do such a vile thing."

He shrugged. "You wanted to know what farmers' wives did."

Connie huffed. "There's no need to be flippant." She shot Jessica a meaningful look. "Peter is always polite." Then she pressed forward and hobbled down the sidewalk with Maureen who talked to her in soothing tones.

Tom sighed. "I probably wasn't as gentlemanly as I should have been."

Jessica burst out laughing. "Are you kidding? That was great." Then she quickly sobered. "Your ma doesn't allow critters into the house, does she?"

"That depends on what you call a critter. Some days she says that my brothers are no better than a pack of wild animals."

She smiled. "Who knew you had it in you?"

"Had what in me?"

"That you had such wit."

A slow grin crossed his face. "There's lots you don't know about me."

"I look forward to finding out," she shyly replied.

"Mind if I take your arm?"

"No."

He gently took her by the elbow and they continued their walk.

Chapter Fourteen

Jessica's mother rolled her eyes when Jessica lifted her new veil for her to inspect. "You've only been courting for one month. It's much too soon to think of weddings."

Jessica set the veil back on her lap. "He's going to propose. It's just a matter of when."

"And 'when' isn't going to happen any time soon."

Rolling her eyes, Jessica turned her attention back to pulling the pink thread through the needle.

Her mother crossed the parlor and fiddled with the curtains. "I notice you put in red and pink roses."

"Of course. I asked him what he thought of those colors, and he said they were fine."

"You didn't tell him what you were doing with those colors, did you?" She put a hand on her hip and studied her daughter with a disapproving look.

"No. I just said I liked those colors together, that's all."

"Hmm..." Her mother didn't look convinced.

Shrugging, she tied the thread and got ready to add more to the rose she'd just started on her veil.

"The poor boy doesn't stand a chance."

She gasped. “Why would marrying me be a burden to him?”

“I didn’t say it would be a burden. I feel bad because he doesn’t have a chance.”

“Why would he want a chance to avoid marriage to me?”

“You know what I mean.” She chuckled as she shook her head. “I hope you’re letting him believe that he’s the one leading this relationship.”

“You know I do. I learned from watching you. You made Pa think he made the big decisions around here.”

“He did make the big decisions.”

“Deciding what to eat for supper is not a big decision,” Jessica said.

“It sure was. It made a huge difference as to how long I spent in the kitchen each day.”

Jessica laughed. “If you say so.”

Before her mother could protest, there was a knock at the door. She glanced out the window. “We’re not done with this conversation, young lady.”

“Who is it?”

“Margaret.”

“Oh good! I want to talk to her about putting those red roses back onto her bridesmaid gown.”

Her mother groaned but opened the front door. “Come on in, Margaret. The bride is right over there.”

“The bride?” Margaret entered the parlor and looked at Jessica. “Did Tom propose already?”

“No,” her mother said. “But he certainly would have if Jessica here had her way.”

“He’s planting apple trees for me,” Jessica told Margaret.

Margaret’s eyes grew wide. “Is he really?”

Jessica’s mother frowned. “Just what is so important about that?”

“Nothing. It’s just nice to have fresh apples, that’s all,” Jessica quickly answered.

Giving a loud sigh, her mother said, “I suppose ignorance, in this case, is bliss. I’ll be in the kitchen.”

“I’ll join you soon,” Jessica promised. She glanced at her friend. “Will you stay for supper?”

“I suppose I can.” Margaret took off her coat and hung it on the hook by the door. “So, you’re really going to marry Tom?”

“It’s a sure thing. He’s a lot better than Peter, and the best part is Tom’s mother isn’t controlling like Connie is.”

“So he isn’t clumsy all the time?” She sat across from Jessica and folded her hands in her lap.

“He’s clumsy when he’s nervous. Otherwise, he handles himself quite well.”

“Is he nervous around you?”

“Only when I go to kiss him.”

She gasped. “Who would have thought you could be so bold!”

Jessica giggled. “What? If I waited for him to make the first move, it’d never happen.” And how delightful those kisses were. She supposed that it was unladylike to instigate kisses, but the reward was well worth it—and he certainly didn’t seem to mind. “I’ve never felt a desire to kiss Peter like I do to kiss Tom.”

“You never smiled as much when you were with Peter, so obviously, you’re better off.”

She blinked in surprise. “Then you no longer detest Tom?”

“I never detested him,” Margaret argued. “I just wondered how he could possibly be near a woman without knocking her over. Plus, I thought you loved Peter and didn’t think it was right for you to entertain Tom while you were engaged. But since I realized how things really were between you and Peter...” She shrugged. “Well, what’s the point in fighting fate, right?”

“Right.”

“And since things do look promising between you and Tom, I’ll remove the white roses on my dress and replace them with the red ones.”

“Thank you.”

Margaret chuckled. “You know, Connie’s sorely disappointed. She’s been bedridden.”

Jessica glanced up from her veil. “Is she sick?”

“Crying. You ruined her special day, you know.”

Forcing aside the urge to roll her eyes, Jessica returned her attention to pulling the thread through the veil. "I'm sure she'll find another woman to marry her son."

"Sadly, it won't be him making that choice."

"It wasn't his choice to pick me either. I didn't realize it at the time, but she was the one who selected me."

"I wonder what kind of woman he might pick if he had the choice."

"Who knows?" And who cared? Then she glanced up at her friend. "You aren't thinking of—"

"Oh, of course not!" Margaret shivered. "I watched what you went through, and there's no way I'd deal with that. But I was thinking of taking your advice."

"Really? What advice is that?"

Her cheeks grew pink as she fiddled with her skirt. "To post an ad for a mail-order husband."

Jessica nearly dropped her veil. "An ad for a husband?"

"Is that really so unusual?"

"Well..." Jessica thought about it. "I don't recall seeing any of those ads, but once in awhile, I hear of a woman out west posting for one. Mostly, they have children and need a man for financial support and protection. But I don't see why a single woman can't post for one. Actually, there's no reason why a woman can't take matters into her own hands and post an ad. After all, men do it all the time. It's only fair a woman be granted the same right." She finished sewing one of her rose

petals before she looked back at Margaret. “Have you posted the ad yet?”

“No, not yet. I was hoping you could help me. I don’t know what to write.”

She smiled. “I’d be delighted to help.”

Margaret relaxed and smiled back. “It’s scary but also exciting.”

“We’ll get started on it once I finish this rose,” Jessica promised.

Then she picked up the pace on getting her work done. It was an exciting prospect to find a suitable husband for Margaret, and she couldn’t wait to see what type of men would respond to a woman asking for a husband. She hoped there would be some good ones to choose from. And, as an added benefit, she’d get to see her dearest friend get married too.

Tom stacked another dirt brick onto the wall that would finish the last side of his new home. “You did mix the dirt with the right amount of straw, didn’t you?” he asked Joel who was snickering beside him.

Joel turned to him with wide eyes. “Of course I did. The sooner I get rid of you, the better.”

“Then why do you keep laughing?”

Joel patted the brick in front of him. “You really believe you’re going to marry Jessica.”

He rolled his eyes. “Just don’t mess up the bricks, alright? If you do and this house becomes one muddy heap, I’ll be moving back. And I’ll be sure to sleep in your room too. I wouldn’t want you to miss out on my stinky snoring self.”

He gasped. “You wouldn’t!”

“As long as my house remains intact, I won’t have to. So be sure you do a good job. Your peace of mind depends on it.”

“You really know how to play dirty.”

Tom shrugged. “You’ll thank me when I’m living here.”

Their father came up to them and smiled. “This place is coming along just fine. We should be done before Christmas.”

Joel breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s exactly what I wanted for Christmas. And to think I wondered if God answered prayers.”

“Ha ha,” Tom replied. Even if his brother was being his usual pesky self, Tom didn’t mind. He was building this home for him and Jessica. It was too bad he couldn’t bring her with him when he moved in. But he’d wait, just as his father suggested.

“Are you going to see Jessica tonight?” his father asked.

“She did invite me over for supper,” Tom replied. “I told her that I’d try to make it. I wasn’t sure how late we’d be working.”

“We’re making good progress. Go on and see her.”

Joel rubbed his flat stomach. “That means more pot roast for me! I’m hungry enough to eat a horse.”

“All you ever do is eat,” Tom said. “I’m surprised you’re not rolling on over back home.”

“Now, Tom, you ate a lot when you were his age too,” their father intervened with a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. “Your poor ma can’t keep enough food on the table to handle all you boys. Frankly, I’m looking forward to the day when all of you are out of the house.”

Joel shook his head and glanced at Tom. “And to think we gave him the best part of our lives.”

Tom gave Joel’s shoulder a firm pat. “Don’t worry. Someday you’ll get to move out too.” He looked at his father. “Do you think this is good for today?”

“Sure is. Tomorrow we start on the roof.”

“Great!” Tom couldn’t wait to see Jessica.

Joel pinched his nose. “Make sure you clean up before you go see her.”

Dave came from his side of the house. “Is there anymore to do today?”

“No,” Joel answered. “We’re getting ready to dump Tom into the tub so he doesn’t embarrass himself in front of Jessica.”

“The house is going to be quiet without you there, Tom,” their father said.

“Yep,” Dave began, “I don’t know what Joel’s going to do without you.”

Before anyone could reply, Dave started loading the supplies to take into the newly built barn on the property.

Joel glanced at Tom and their father. “Between us, I don’t know how any woman’s going to handle being married to Dave. He’s so boring.”

“No kidding,” Tom agreed before he turned to get his things put away for the night.

Chapter Fifteen

Jessica put a bow in her hair and inspected her reflection. Tom may not come over but then again, he might. He told her he'd be busy working on their home. *Their* home. She loved the sound of that. Alright. So in fairness, he hadn't used the word "their", but it was implied. After all, he had planted apple trees for her. It was just a matter of time before she used those apples for baking.

Her mother happened to pass by her bedroom as Jessica checked the butterfly broach Jenny had made for her. She glanced up at her mother and smiled. "Isn't this a pretty broach? Jenny does have a talent for this kind of thing."

"I'm surprised you didn't mention Tom."

"Why would I? He didn't make it."

"Maybe not, but ever since he started courting you, you've been talking nonstop about him," she said with a trace of humor in her voice.

"I'm not that bad."

Her mother raised an eyebrow. "Oh no?"

She grinned. "No. I talk about Margaret. She and I worked on that ad. She's posting for a husband, you know."

"So I've been told."

“Well, that proves it. I can talk about things other than Tom.”

“Except when you discuss Margaret looking for a husband, you usually finish the conversation by asking if there might be a double wedding. You seem to think you can get married before planting season begins, if your plan for Margaret’s man to arrive around that time and the double wedding come to pass.”

She sighed. “What is wrong with marrying before he plants?”

“It seems to me that last time we had this conversation you mentioned marrying in June.”

“If I do that, I can’t wear the dress I already made. It has long and thick sleeves.”

“Roll them up.”

“So you’re saying I no longer have to wait until September?” she asked, excited.

Her mother’s eyes grew wide as she gave a sharp intake of breath. “You’ll be the death of me yet,” she muttered as she hurried off down the hallway.

“I’ll take that as a yes!” Jessica called out.

The woman grumbled but didn’t stop.

Smiling, Jessica picked up her brush. She hoped Tom would show up tonight. It was hard to be away from him. This feeling of missing a man as much as she missed Tom was new to her. Not once did she ever have the intense longing for Peter that she had for Tom. She sighed and brushed her hair. It was the most wonderful feeling in the whole world.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts of a lovely spring wedding. Oh good! Tom did make it after all! She quickly placed her brush down and pinched her cheeks. She inspected her reflection and grinned. Perfect.

She rushed out of her room, nearly knocking her mother over as the older woman left the parlor. “Sorry, Ma,” she quickly called out before she opened the door. To her surprise, Tom wasn’t on the porch. It was Peter. She blinked several times before she finally asked, “Peter, what are you doing here?” Of all the people who could be knocking on her front door, he was the last one she expected.

He took off his hat. “May I come in?”

She wanted to say no and shut the door, but that would be terribly rude. Reluctant, she nodded and moved aside so he could enter the entryway.

Her mother walked toward them, looking as uncertain as Jessica felt. “Good evening, Peter,” she greeted, offering a polite smile. “Would you like something to eat or drink?”

“I’m fine, ma’am. Thank you.” He turned to Jessica. “Can I talk to you in the parlor?”

Jessica glanced at her mother who gave a slight shrug. Though her pulse picked up with nervous dread, she said, “Of course.”

As he stepped into the parlor, her mother told her, “I’ll leave you two alone. If you need me, just holler.”

Jessica wanted to protest and insist the other woman stay with her, but this was for her to deal with. Taking a deep breath, she gathered her courage and followed him into the room. She sat

in a chair and folded her hands in her lap. “What do you wish to discuss?”

He sat in the other chair and fiddled with the hat in his hands. “My mother is distraught.”

After a few seconds, his meaning sunk in. “Your mother sent you here?”

“No. Not exactly.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

He cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. “It wasn’t that bad with me, was it?”

“What?”

“I thought it might be good if we decided to marry after all.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Good for who?”

“Everyone.”

“You mean, it’d be good for her. Then she could have her special day.” Stumping her foot on the floor, she glared at him. “This is why it didn’t work, Peter. It was always about her. She put you up to this, didn’t she?”

“No. She doesn’t know I’m here.”

She couldn’t decide if that was true or not. He’d say just about anything for his mother’s sake. “You don’t need to appease her. What you need is a backbone. Who cares what she thinks? If she wants a special day, let her get married.”

“Have a heart. She’s going through a rough time, and-”

“Have a heart? Have a heart! I didn’t exchange vows with you yet. I had every right to back out of the engagement. Frankly, you need to be a man and find the woman you want to marry instead of letting your mother make that decision for you.”

“Jessica-”

“I’m not done.” She stood up and paced back and forth. “It’s obvious we don’t belong together. Thankfully, we figured it out before we said, ‘I do’. You agree with me on this. And yet, you are going to let your mother’s sour mood compel you to make the worst decision of your life. I don’t understand you, Peter.”

Looking bewildered, he moved his lips but no sound came out.

She stopped and pointed to the door. “Maybe the next woman you find won’t mind playing second fiddle to your mother, but there’s no way I’m going to take that role. I’m going to marry Tom.” She waited for him to say something, but he seemed as if he couldn’t think of anything. Deciding this indicated that they were done, she stomped to the front door. “I’ve had enough of this nonsense. You need to either find a woman who’ll do whatever your mother wants or grow a backbone and determine your own fate.” She threw the door open and someone fell to the floor. She gasped. “Mrs. James?”

Connie quickly got to her feet and placed her hat back on her head.

“What are you doing here?” Jessica demanded.

“You are making a huge mistake,” the woman said. “Peter is a fine young man. He has a good job, a good home, and a caring heart. You can’t do any better than him.”

Jessica turned her face to the kitchen. Now it was time to call in for reinforcements. “Ma!”

Her mother ran out of the kitchen and jerked when she saw Connie.

“Talk sense into her,” Jessica pleaded. “She won’t leave me alone. She even sent Peter over here to convince me to marry him.”

“Mrs. James,” her mother began as she approached the other woman, “perhaps we should sit down and discuss this.”

“Discuss what?” Connie asked. “That your daughter is throwing her life away? She could have my son. She doesn’t need to settle for the likes of Tom Larson.”

“I believe that is her decision.”

“But you’re her mother. It’s your job to prevent her from making ghastly mistakes.”

“What is a grassy mistake?” someone asked.

The three women turned their attention to Joel who sauntered into the house.

“I said ‘ghastly mistake’,” Connie said, cringing as he bent down to pick off a piece of clumped dirt from his boot and flung it out onto the porch. “It means a horrible mistake.”

“Hey, what do you know? Learn something new every day.” Wiping his hand on his pants, he glanced around the hallway and parlor. “Don’t you all sit when you visit?”

They stood in silence for a good moment before Jessica decided to answer. "Well, we aren't visiting. Not really."

Rubbing the back of his neck, he shrugged. "Alright. You townsfolk are strange if this is how you meet up. But I'm here to see Tom. Pa needs his horse so I came to switch 'em out for shoeing."

"Switch what out for what?" Connie asked.

"Tom already has the horse with the new horseshoes on. So I got to switch." He peered around Jessica's shoulder and into the parlor. "Isn't he here yet? He bolted out to town as soon as he washed up."

Jessica's heart leapt. That meant Tom did plan to see her tonight!

"Is Tom allowed to be here?" Joel asked.

"Of course, he is," Jessica said at the same moment that Connie said, "No."

Joel blinked in surprise.

Jessica glared at Connie. "I'm not marrying Peter."

"So it's true?" Joel asked. He shifted from one foot to another, and another clump of dried mud fell off his boot. Snatching it up, he threw it outside. "Tom wasn't just making up tall tales?"

Connie shot Joel a scolding look. "Tom is going to ruin Jessica's life. If her mother would be sensible, the poor thing wouldn't suffer with your kind."

Jessica's mother stiffened and straightened her shirt. "I allow her the freedom to make her own decisions...and to be honest, I kind of like Tom."

"Really?" Joel asked as if he couldn't believe it.

"But Peter better suits her," Connie said, ignoring Joel.

"That's not for us to say," Jessica's mother replied.

Jessica groaned. "Peter doesn't want to marry me either, Mrs. James." She glanced at Peter—who remained sitting in silence in the parlor. "Tell her!"

He paled and shook his head.

She nudged her mother. "You see what I mean?"

Her mother nodded. "Mrs. James, no woman wants to be married to her husband's mother."

Connie pressed a hand to her heart. "Peter, they are being cruel to me!"

He obediently stood and went to her side.

Seriously, the man needed a good kick in the behind, Jessica thought in disgust.

Jessica's mother sighed and kindly said, "Neither Peter nor Jessica were happy. This is better for everyone."

Connie grabbed the handkerchief Peter held out to her and dabbed tears from her eyes. "I had my heart set on a wedding. Maureen was impressed, and she's hard to please, you know. Now everything's ruined and I'm the laughing stock of the town."

“You’re not the laughing stock of the town,” she soothed.

“You don’t understand. I spent hours planning out every little detail. All my work is gone, and there’s nothing I can do to get it back.”

Joel threw back his head and laughed. “You all are a hoot. Who’d have thought Tom could cause so many problems?”

Tom knocked on the open door and cautiously peered into the entryway. “Is this a bad time?”

Joel waved him in. “Heck no. Things are just getting good.”

“Watch your language, young man.” Connie pressed her hands to her ears. “There are ladies present.”

Peter, looking mighty uncomfortable, told his mother, “Perhaps we should leave.”

“No!” She uncovered her ears and pointed to Tom. “This is all your fault. If you’d just stayed out of town, I’d still be having my wedding.”

“Would you listen to yourself?” Jessica’s mother asked. “This is not your wedding. You’re not the bride. You’re the groom’s mother.” She stopped and glanced around at those watching her. “I mean, of course, that you aren’t the groom’s mother. Tom’s mother is the groom’s mother. Uh...That is to say if they get married. Not to say that anything is set yet. So...well...you’re Peter’s mother and Peter’s no longer getting married, which makes this whole thing a useless debate anyway.” She grunted and threw her hands up in the air. “Well, you know what I mean.”

Jessica nodded. “Ma is right. Tom’s mother is the groom’s mother now.”

“Jessica!” her mother warned.

She shrugged. “Just trying to clear up any confusion.”

“No, you’re not. You’re trying to sneak your wedding past me, and I won’t have it.”

“It’s as good as done.”

Joel cleared his throat. “You know that Tom is right here, don’t you?”

They stopped and turned to Tom whose eyebrows rose in interest. Jessica’s face grew warm. It wasn’t a good thing that she seemed that eager in front of him.

“I got a response!” someone yelled out.

Everyone’s attention turned to the door, giving Jessica a much needed reprieve from her slip of the tongue.

Margaret ran into the crowded hallway and held up a letter. “I think this is the one!” She nearly bumped into Joel. “Oh!” She quickly went over to Jessica and stared at her audience. “What’s going on?”

“Never mind all that,” Jessica replied, eager to switch topics. “What do you have there?” She pointed to the letter in Margaret’s hand.

Margaret’s gaze lowered to the piece of paper. “Someone answered my ad.”

“Already?”

“I know. I didn’t expect an answer this soon either, but he sounds like a good one. Read it and tell me what you think.”

Jessica took the letter.

Connie groaned. “We have more important things to discuss right now.”

“No, we don’t,” Jessica said. “It’s over.”

“What do you know? You’re still a child,” Connie replied. “You don’t know what’s good for you. You’re marrying Peter.”

“Oh, no she’s not,” Tom said. He pushed through the group and put his arm around Jessica’s shoulders. “She’s marrying me.”

“I am!” Jessica added. A quick look at her mother’s exasperated expression made her decide to change her tone. Glancing at Tom, she asked, “I am?”

“Well, if you want to,” he replied.

She counted to three so she wouldn’t seem too anxious. “Yes, I do.”

He smiled and squeezed her shoulders. “There,” he told Connie. “It’s all settled.”

“I don’t believe it,” Joel mumbled, shaking his head. “How did Tom pull it off?”

Connie turned to Peter. “Aren’t you going to stop this?”

Peter sighed. “Jessica’s right, Mother. It’s not meant to be between us.”

She sobbed into her handkerchief. "All my hard work is for nothing."

"Why don't you just have a Christmas party for your friends?" Tom asked. "That way, you still get to have your gathering."

"That's a great idea, Tom," Peter said. "You can still show Maureen the white roses you made out of those cloth napkins."

Connie stopped crying and glanced at Peter. "That might work."

Looking relieved, he replied, "It would work very well. Maureen will be green with envy."

"She will be, won't she?" She smiled. "I suppose this might work after all."

"And it will truly be your day."

She clapped her hands. "We must continue our planning. And we should send out invitations. December is quickly approaching! Come along, Peter. We must get things ready."

After they left, Joel wearily sighed and told Tom, "Just when things were getting good, you had to spoil it. Couldn't you have bit your tongue for another two minutes?"

"What are you doing here?" Tom asked.

"Oh, Pa sent me to get your horse. You do want new horseshoes on it, don't you?"

"Yes. Alright. Take it and go."

“Alright. If that woman comes back, let me know how it goes.” Joel brushed off a piece of dirt that was stuck to his shirt sleeve. “Your house is awful, Tom. I can’t get it all off of me.”

“Don’t dirty up this house.” Tom picked up the small dirt clod and shoved his brother out the door. “Go home and take a bath.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Once Joel headed down the porch steps and Tom threw the dirt into the trashcan, Jessica relaxed. Thank goodness Connie James wouldn’t cause her any more problems. And she got a proposal from Tom.

She smiled widely and glanced at her mother who mouthed, “Spring.”

“Before planting,” Jessica mouthed back.

Her mother rolled her eyes but didn’t argue. Instead, she said, “Since we’re all here, let’s eat. Supper’s getting cold.”

Jessica winked at Margaret before she turned to Tom. “I even made apple pie. I hope you like it.”

“I sure do,” Tom replied, returning to her side. “Apple pie is a favorite for us Larsons.”

Jessica hoped she did a good job on the pie. At least it hadn’t burnt. Well, she was about to find out. She glanced at the letter. “Margaret, you’ll have to tell us about this one. Is he the first one who sent a reply?”

“Yes. He’s twenty-two and never been married. He’s been looking to come out west to farm.”

“There’s plenty of good land here,” Tom said. “It rains just fine and there’s plenty of sun too. The only thing he’ll have to worry about is the wind. Sometimes that can be unforgiving. One year, my pa lost some good corn from wind damage. But there are good and bad things no matter where a person goes.”

“But if you like the one you’re with, it makes it all the better,” Jessica added.

He grinned at her. “No truer words were ever said.”

Blushing, she returned his smile.

Her mother headed for the kitchen. “Well, come along. The food’s not going to come out here to meet you.”

The others obeyed and followed her to the kitchen.

Epilogue

April 5, 1869

Jessica examined her reflection in the mirror. Her wedding dress turned out even better than she hoped.

Margaret entered the room. “Here are your flowers.”

Jessica took the red roses and smelled them before she placed them on the chair. “Perfect. And they match those in your dress.” She wrapped a pink ribbon around her hair before she put the veil on her head. “It really is a magical day, Margaret. Just wait until that mail-order husband of yours comes in.”

“Two weeks from now,” her friend said, adjusting the thin material of the veil around Jessica’s shoulders. “I don’t know if I’m ready. All this time I’ve watched you and our other friends getting ready for marriage, and now that it’ll be my turn soon, I’m a nervous wreck.”

“Just wait until your wedding day. It gets worse. I couldn’t eat a thing this morning.”

“No one can tell you’re nervous.”

Wendy entered the small room. “Everyone’s ready. Tom’s got a wide smile on his face. I’ve never seen a happier groom.”

At the mention of his name, Jessica’s cheeks flushed. She couldn’t imagine that there’d been a happier bride either, but

she kept the thought to herself. Instead, she picked up the roses. "I'm ready too."

She followed her friends out the door and went to the church entryway where the groomsmen waited.

As Joel took Wendy's arm, he glanced at Jessica and shook his head. "I still can't understand why someone as good looking as you would marry my brother."

"Love is blind," Wendy joked.

"I reckon so."

Margaret turned and gave Jessica a quick hug. "Good luck up there."

"Thank you," Jessica whispered.

Margaret took Dave's arm and walked down the aisle.

That left Jessica with her uncle.

"Your ma's proud of you," he said.

"I think she did a decent job of raising me."

He chuckled. "You've got a lot of your father in you. I'm sorry he couldn't be here to see this day."

She quenched the swell of sorrow that threatened to spoil her mood.

"Maybe you'll give Tom a daughter. Then maybe he can give her away when it's her turn to marry."

"Maybe."

The music from the organ changed, signaling it was her turn to walk down the aisle. She took his arm and steadied her feet. The last thing she wanted to do was trip on her gown. She heard rumors that Tom had knocked over some candles earlier, and all she needed was to add to the discord.

Her uncle took a step forward, and she joined him. Though the butterflies in her stomach grew more active, she made it down to the altar without any mishap. She looked over at Tom and smiled. When her uncle handed her to him, her heart beat with excitement.

She knew Tom well enough by now to know he was even more nervous than she was, so she squeezed his arm reassuringly and whispered, "It'll be over soon."

He gulped but didn't reply.

They turned their attention to the preacher. Tom bumbled a bit through his vows, and even she messed up a couple of times. But they managed through it.

"I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride," the preacher said.

Tom lifted her veil. "You're one beautiful bride."

Her smile grew wider and she whispered, "That's because I'm your bride, Tom." And then she leaned forward to kiss him.

Coming soon...

A Husband for Margaret

When Margaret Williams posted an ad for a husband, she expected Paul Connealy to arrive. But Paul couldn't make it because of a fatal accident. However, Paul had a brother and that brother needed a wife in the worst possible way.

Joseph Connealy jumped at the chance to marry Margaret. Sure, he didn't know her, but he saw her ad and figured she'd suit him just fine. His only hope was that when he arrived, she'd accept his proposal...and his four young boys that came with it.



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