

*A Husband for
Margaret*

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A Husband for Margaret
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Chapter One



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Two weeks after Tom and Jessica got married

*M*argaret Williams adjusted her hat for what seemed to be the hundredth time. She took another good look at her reflection in the mirror before she glanced at her newly married friend, Jessica. In no way, did she share the blond's outstanding beauty.

Jessica Larson lifted the pearl necklace from Margaret's jewelry box. "This will look nice with the white ribbon in your hat."

"It'll do."

She turned so that Jessica could slip it around her neck and fasten it. Afterwards, she spread Margaret's brown hair around her shoulders. "You look perfect!"

Perfect? Not quite. But she did look pretty. At least, she thought so. Hopefully Paul Connealy would think so. She wondered if it was wise to ask Jessica to join her and her parents

when he was due to come into the train station. What if he saw Jessica and was disappointed when he realized he'd be marrying Margaret instead? But Jessica was her dearest friend, and there was no way she could face this day without her.

Margaret's mother knocked on her bedroom door.

She glanced at the clock on her wall. Was it time to leave already? Wiping her sweaty hands on the skirt of her dress, she said, "Maybe posting an ad for a husband wasn't a good idea."

Her mother opened the door while Jessica offered a reassuring smile. "You'll be fine. We'll be there."

"Will Tom be coming?" Margaret asked. Maybe if Tom was with Jessica, Paul wouldn't pay her much attention. Then he wouldn't be busy comparing Margaret to her friend.

"I already told you he can't. He's planting corn. It's busy this time of year."

Of course. Just her luck. Jessica should have married after planting season. But she couldn't fault her friend for wanting to marry sooner rather than later. Margaret had been anxious to meet Paul. He seemed like a nice man from the two letters he'd sent. Now that the day was here though, she had the urge to hide back in her bed and forget this whole thing.

Her mother came in and picked up the two letters from the dresser. "You may need these."

Margaret directed her gaze to her. "Oh, I told him I'd be wearing blue, and that I'd be with my family and friend."

"Alright." The older woman set them back on the dresser. "It's up to you. Your father, sister and I will be out front."

Margaret nodded and picked up the brush to make her hair look just a little bit better.

Jessica laughed. "I know what you're going through."

She glanced at her friend. "You knew Tom before you married him."

"Fine. So I don't know exactly what you're going through, but you're not marrying Paul today. You're going to meet him."

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“Yes, that is true.”

“Everything will work out.”

“It’s easy for someone who’s not in the situation to say that.”

“Well, we already know he’s got great taste. He had the sense to answer your ad.”

She chuckled. It was no wonder why she wanted Jessica there. Her friend knew the right words to make her feel better. “And he does sound like a nice man, don’t you think?”

“I sure do.”

“He’s a farmer too. Is it hard to be a farmer’s wife?”

“I don’t think so. They work hard, but then again, what woman doesn’t?”

Margaret nodded. Being married was good for her friend. Jessica seemed to blossom under the love Tom gave her. Did love do that to every woman? But did asking for a husband in the unconventional way she had promise love? She glanced at the letters. Paul seemed like the kind of man she could fall in love with. But would he love her?

Things would be much easier if one of the better men in Omaha would have simply taken note of her. Then she’d at least know that she’d be marrying someone who loved her already. She pushed aside a flicker of irritation and turned to the door.

“I suppose we should go,” Margaret said.

Jessica smiled and gave her a quick hug. “It’ll be fine. Try not to worry too much.”

With a slight eye roll, she joined her friend and departed from her room.

Joseph Connealy grunted as his three-year-old son jumped on his lap to slap one of his brothers across the head.

The wounded brother, of course, let out a high pitch wail.

Brother number three promptly smacked the three year old, and the youngest brother barely stirred from his slumber, proving that two year olds could sleep through anything as long as they spent most of the night running up and down the aisle.

A very tired Joseph barked out, "Enough!" and the three boys immediately stopped their bickering. Joseph had no idea the train ride would be this long. Sure, it didn't seem like it'd be much when he packed their things and lugged them all to the station in Dayton. But now that they'd been traveling for what seemed like years, he was ready to get off the train, hand them to Margaret Williams, and hightail it right back to Ohio.

Of course, he wouldn't do that to the poor woman. They were his children, after all. But they sure did need a mother in the worst possible way. And *he* needed them to have a mother as well. He could only pray she'd be willing to marry him instead of his brother.

"Are we there yet?" Doug, the seven year old, asked.

"Almost," Joseph mumbled, closing his eyes. His head hurt.

"But you said that an hour ago," Doug whined.

"Compared to when we started, we were almost there."

"And now?"

"We're even closer."

"How much closer?"

"Five minutes," he guessed. At least, based on the itinerary, they should be ready to pull into the Omaha train station. *Dear God, let the itinerary be right. My sanity depends on it.*

"How long is five minutes?" Bob, the six year old, asked.

"I don't know," Joseph said.

"How come you don't know?" Doug asked.

"I do know. I just don't know how to explain it so you'll understand," Joseph clarified.

"Is five minutes long?" Doug asked.

"No."

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Then Charles leaned his head back and knocked his father in the jaw.

Joseph grumbled and rubbed the sore spot. "Alright. Five minutes is long."

"Longer than an hour?" Bob pressed.

The train finally—mercifully—began to slow, and Joseph breathed a loud sigh of relief. God did answer prayers!

"We're here!" Doug cried out and jumped up on the seat.

"Sit down!" Joseph yanked on the boy's collar until the lad obeyed. "The train hasn't stopped yet. And remember what I said. Stay with me. You can't go running off with all these people. I might lose you."

Doug groaned but stayed seated.

Bob shook a sleeping Ben. "We're here!" he yelled in his brother's ear.

"He's not deaf," Joseph said, pressing his hand over his own ear to get it to stop ringing. How a little kid could manage that high of a pitch, he'd never understand.

"I can't wait to meet our new ma," Bob told Doug. "You think she can make cookies?"

"Course she can. All mothers make cookies," Doug said. "And pies."

"Ooh! Pies. Pa, is she gonna bring a pie?"

Joseph shook his head. "She's not even expecting us. She's expecting your uncle Paul. Now, I want you all to be on your best behavior. If you act up, she might not want to go through with this." Good Lord, the last thing he needed was to scare the woman off.

"Don't she know we're coming?" Doug asked, his eyes wide.

"No."

"Why not?"

He glanced at the child who, in many ways, looked just like his mother with his blue eyes and blond hair. He was curious

like her too. Joseph shrugged. "I don't know. I thought it was best this way." Which wasn't entirely true, but he saw no sense in explaining that to a child. The situation was complicated enough without trying to go into detail about it. "Look, your uncle can't be here."

"Cause he's dead," Bob said.

"Right. So I figured if this nice woman is looking for a family to care for, who better than you boys?" He *really* hoped she'd understand and be willing to go through with this because if she didn't... He glanced at his four boys who were busy shoving at each other and laughing. One, predictably, got hurt in the play and started bellowing. If she didn't marry him, he might go insane. There was no way he could keep raising these kids by himself. One year was one year too many.

The train came to a stop and Doug bolted out of his seat, nearly tripping a man who was walking down the aisle.

"Stay with me, boys," Joseph ordered.

Doug's shoulders slumped as he returned to the seat.

"Take your toys." He pointed to the floor and seats which had *'Kids were here'* written all over it. "And watch out for other people," he added.

The other passengers struggled to squeeze around the seven and six year olds who scrambled to get in the aisle to grab the toy trains that had rolled under the seat. Well, he couldn't blame the boys for trying. He set Charles next to Ben who looked as if he could easily go back to sleep. Except, Charles wouldn't let him. He sat on Ben's face and giggled.

Margaret Williams is going to take one look at these kids and order me back on the train. I just know it.

He grabbed the bag which contained enough clothes and supplies for the kids and a change of clothes for himself. Then he pulled Charles off of Ben and set him on his feet next to Doug and Bob whose arms were full of toys.

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“Watch Charles so he doesn’t run off,” he told Doug and Bob. With the travel bag in one hand, he scooped a still sleepy Ben into his arm and motioned down the aisle. “Go.”

The boys turned and, probably because they were eager to be off the train, actually walked in single file to get off.

Well, here goes nothing, Joseph thought as he followed them down the aisle.

Chapter Two



*M*argaret's heart beat refused to slow down as people were quickly coming off the train. Paul would be among them...unless he decided not to come at the last minute. And if he did that... She didn't want to think about it. Finding a husband had been hard enough without something like that happening. No. She would be positive. Paul would be coming off that train. She'd marry him, and they'd start a life together. They'd have children and grow old with their grandchildren coming to visit. The plan was simple. There wasn't anything that was going to mess it up.

She took a deep breath as the station filled up with a sea of unfamiliar faces. "I didn't realize it got this busy," she whispered to Jessica.

Jessica shrugged. "Me neither. My pa once said that it was the hub of railroad activity, but I thought he was exaggerating."

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"I'm bored. When is he going to get over here?" Margaret's thirteen-year-old sister asked.

Margaret glanced at her parents. "Why did we have to bring her?"

Her mother sighed. "This young man you're going to marry should meet everyone in the family."

"But all she's done since we left the house is complain," Margaret said.

"Your sister has a point," her father told Charlotte. "This is a big day for Margaret. Be good."

Charlotte rolled her eyes but stopped whining.

Jessica nudged Margaret in the side. "Maybe that's him. He looks like he's searching for someone."

Margaret turned her attention to a good looking man holding a child. "No. Paul doesn't have any children." Her gaze swept the room. A part of her got dizzy from the swarm of people buzzing around them.

To her surprise, a boy ran over to her. "Are you Margaret Williams?"

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Uh...yes. Do I know your parents?" She didn't recall ever seeing him before. Not that she made it a habit of being around children.

The boy waved to someone in the crowd. "Pa! She's over here!"

Her eyes grew wide. *Pa? She's over here?* Whatever did that mean? Paul made it clear that he had no children. So who was this child and why did he pick her out? She glanced at Jessica who looked equally uncertain about this.

The man holding a child saw the boy and motioned to two children before heading in their direction. As soon as he reached them, he said, "Doug, I told you to stay with me."

"Sorry, Pa," he replied, appearing to be appropriately contrite. "I saw the blue dress and hat. It's her."

A knot twisted in Margaret's stomach. This couldn't be Paul. He decided not to come. She just knew it! Even her parents and sister seemed apprehensive about this.

The man focused on Margaret and offered a smile. "Pardon me, but are you Margaret Williams?"

"Well..." She took in the four boys who stared at her with a mixture of hope and curiosity. The knot grew tighter. Just what did this man and these kids want with her?

"Yes, she is," Jessica finally said.

The statement startled Margaret so she gave a slight jerk. Clearing her throat, she added, "Yes." She took a deep breath. Something wasn't right. Did Paul lie to her? "I'm her."

"My name is Joseph Connealy. I'm Paul's older brother. You see, Paul was going to come but—"

Oh great. Here it came. Margaret braced herself for whatever excuse he'd give her.

"Paul's horse got spooked and he fell off." He glanced at the children. "I'd rather not go into detail, but we had to bury him two weeks ago."

It took a moment for his words to sink in, and when they finally did, her countenance fell. So Paul couldn't come, even if he wanted to. She supposed she should feel better. It wasn't like Paul rejected her or anything. He died. There was no way he could come now.

Joseph cleared his throat.

Breaking out of her thoughts, she directed her attention to him.

"Anyway, my wife passed away a year ago, and I knew Paul was coming out to meet you so I thought maybe you'd be willing to marry me instead."

The first thing she did was lower her gaze to the children. There were four of them—if she counted right—and they were all staring at her with wide smiles on their faces. She couldn't be sure, but it seemed as if they had rehearsed this moment.

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“What adorable boys,” Jessica said, breaking the awkward silence. “What are their names?” she asked Joseph.

“This is Doug,” Joseph began. “He’s seven. That is Bob, and he’s six. Then Charles is three, and Ben is two.”

“Those are fine names,” Jessica replied. “It’s a shame they had to lose their mother.”

Margaret caught Jessica’s sad expression and knew her friend was pleading with her to marry this man. Margaret broke eye contact with her friend and glanced at her family who looked equally sorrowful over his story. She wasn’t sure what she should do. True, Joseph losing his wife who left him with four boys was heartbreaking in its own way, but there were *four boys* he was asking her to be a mother to. Being a mother right away wasn’t something she anticipated when she posted the ad. And even if these boys seemed well behaved and friendly, she didn’t know the first thing about being a mother. Not really. Though her sister was considerably younger than her, she didn’t raise her sister.

“Oh, do it,” Jessica whispered in her ear. “Those poor boys need a woman to care for them.”

Margaret gave her friend a ‘hush’ look before she studied the boys who remained quiet and still. She wasn’t sure what to make of them. They just kept smiling at her, and as innocent as they seemed, she sensed that she was being set up for something. Surely, kids didn’t behave this well on a regular basis. She wiped the sweat off her forehead. Was she really up for this?

“Maybe you should think about it,” her father told her. “After all, you didn’t plan to marry Paul today.” He looked at Joseph. “We were going to arrange for the wedding first. We figured we’d wait a week.”

A flicker of disappointment crossed Joseph’s features but he nodded. “That’s fine. What do you think, Margaret?”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. A week. In that time, she could possibly adjust to this situation. *Maybe*. She examined the four boys. *Or maybe not*. Then she looked at Joseph

who was a handsome man who obviously cared for his children and would probably make a good husband. *So maybe.* Then one of the kids named Bob or Doug—she couldn't remember which—sneezed into his hand before he wiped it on his brother's shirt. She cringed. *Or maybe not.*

"Well," her father interrupted, "we don't have to make a decision right now. We should give Margaret time to think about it."

"Yes," Margaret quickly said. Her eyes grew wide when she realized they might misunderstand her to mean that she'd marry Joseph and take on the responsibility of four—four!—boys. "Yes, I'll think about it."

It wasn't the answer he wanted, Margaret realized when she looked from the boys and back to their father, but in no way was she prepared for this. Beside her, Jessica smiled at the boys. Had this been Jessica, Jessica would have married Joseph right away—if for no other reason than to be a mother to the children. Well, there was no doubt about it. Jessica was, and always would be, better than Margaret. Margaret simply did not have it in her to embrace this right away...if ever.

Her father turned to Joseph and the boys. "You all must be tired after the long trip. Let's go find your luggage and get you settled into a motel. I can't have you sleeping under the same roof as my daughter unless you're married to her."

Jessica shook her head. "You can't confine children to a motel. I know! They can stay with Tom's parents. They have enough room for all of you, and since they live on a farm, there's plenty of room to play."

"A farm?" one of the older boys asked. "Uncle Paul had a farm. Are there horses out there?"

"There sure are," Jessica replied.

"I don't know," Joseph said. "There's a lot of us."

Jessica laughed and waved her hand. "The Larsons are used to a lot of people. Why, there are five kids in that family,

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except most of them are grown up and have their own places. And they are planting beans and corn. If you want to do something in return for food and lodging, I'm sure they could use the extra help."

Joseph relaxed. "If we can earn our keep, then it'd work. Doug and Bob used to help their uncle in the fields."

She clapped her hands and laughed. "Then it's settled."

One of the boys jumped up and down. "We get to stay on the farm! Can we ride horses too?"

Jessica nodded. "After all the work is done, Bob."

It was official. Jessica was better than her, Margaret thought. She even knew which kid was which. No wonder all the men wanted to be with Jessica instead of her. Jessica was more likeable, more attractive, more... Well, just more everything!

But she couldn't compare herself to Jessica. No matter how tempting it was, especially at times like this.

"We got to meet Tom's parents at the wedding," Margaret's mother told Joseph. "They adore children. They have a couple of grandchildren. I believe their oldest son has twin boys."

"Richard has two boys and one girl. The twins are three and the girl is only five months old," Jessica clarified. "Tom's sister, Sally, just found out she's expecting her first child."

"No older kids?" one of Joseph's boys asked Jessica.

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not. But you're seven and Bob is six, so you already have someone close to your age to play with."

As much as Margaret liked her friend, she was starting to wish she hadn't brought her along. The boys were already falling in love with her. She sighed in despair. It was a sign. Paul's death, Joseph coming out with a bunch of kids, and Jessica getting along wonderfully with them... It was all a sign. And it pointed to one conclusion: Margaret wasn't meant to get married. Most women married and went on to lead very happy lives. But not

every woman got married. And apparently, Margaret was doomed to be one of them.

As she watched the two older boys animatedly talk to Jessica who led them all to the luggage area, she knew there was nothing she had to offer children. Joseph would just have to find another woman in the area, go back home or post his own ad for a wife. Because nothing was convincing her that she was the right one for him and his children.

Margaret rolled her eyes. Why fight fate? She was just meant to be single forever, and she was sure that before long, Joseph would realize it too.

Chapter Three



*M*argaret picked up the letters Paul had written her and read them in the privacy of her bedroom. Why did he have to fall off his horse? Why did he even have to ride a horse? *Because that's what farmers do. Riding horses is part of their job.* With a heavy sigh, she settled back on her bed and stared at the ceiling.

It didn't seem fair. In fact, the more bad things happened to her, the more convinced she was that she was cursed. Paul seemed like a nice man. He'd made her laugh with some of his comments, so he obviously had a great sense of humor. Her big worry had been that he'd see her with Jessica and find her lacking. Not once did it occur to her that he'd suffer a fatal accident. She knew she should feel sorry for him. He was dead after all. But the selfish part of her couldn't help but wonder why he couldn't have been more careful on the dumb animal.

Why me? Of all the men out there, why did the one who actually wanted to come out and marry her have to die? Well, she

supposed that wasn't entirely true. His brother had come out asking to marry her. *Because he has four boys who need a mother.* It had nothing to do with her.

She picked up Paul's second letter and read the part where he told her that she sounded like someone he could enjoy being married to. He liked how sensible she was. He hadn't seen her but already liked her because she was straight forward. What other man had taken the time to find out anything about her? None.

It was enough to make her want to cry, even though she wasn't one to give into tears. Tears were far too impractical because they didn't solve anything.

Giving another heavy sigh, she rolled over and stared out her window. She didn't feel like meeting Joseph tomorrow but knew she would. He came all the way out here. It wouldn't be right to not open the door when he came. But did she really have to marry him just because he arrived? She had no idea he was coming. He didn't even write to let her know for goodness' sakes! She didn't owe him anything. Just because Jessica would've married him, it didn't mean she had to.

Surely in good time, he'd find a woman like Jessica and get her to take on the responsibility of four boys. Margaret was certain that most women would readily agree to it. He wouldn't have to wait long before he found one. Maybe she'd offer to help him find one. Yes, that would work. Then she wouldn't have to feel guilty when she told him there was no way she could handle four children. It was one thing to have one child at a time and slowly adjust to a full house, but being thrown into it all at once was way too much of a shock.

She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Such was life. Not everyone was meant to be happy.

"Margaret?"

She turned her head so she could see her mother standing in the doorway. "What?"

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“Today didn’t go as you thought it would.”

That was stating the obvious. Margaret bit back the sarcastic comment. She shouldn’t let her foul mood affect her behavior.

Her mother came into the room and sat on the edge of the bed. “Sometimes life doesn’t turn out the way we think it will, but it could mean that better things are at the door.”

Rolling her eyes, Margaret stared back at the ceiling. Like she needed a pep talk right now! What she needed was to go back in time and warn Paul not to ride his stupid horse.

“I know this is hard for you,” her mother continued. She reached out and lightly rubbed Margaret’s arm. “I certainly didn’t expect a widower with four children to come off that train either. It caught us all by surprise.”

There her mother went again—referring to the surprise. Margaret figured by now, her mother had done that a good ten times. Mostly on the way home and now in her bedroom. Well, she might as well add to it. “Yes, it was a surprise.” One huge, gigantic, colossal surprise! She dared a look in her mother’s direction. “Do you think I’m mean for not wanting to marry him?”

“I think you should get to know him before making that decision.”

“What’s there to know? He wants a mother for his kids. Did you see how many there are?”

She chuckled. “Of course, I did. I’m not blind.”

“I’m not heartless, Ma. I feel sorry for him. I can’t imagine trying to take care of four children all by myself. He does need a mother for them.”

She smiled. “He’s been married before so he knows there’s more to a marriage than taking care of children.”

“Oh, I know. There’s having a woman who’ll cook and clean and do his laundry too.”

“Paul would’ve asked you to do the same thing.”

Margaret groaned and threw the pillow over her face. “I don’t want logic right now. I just want to wallow in misery.”

“I know.” She lifted the pillow from her daughter’s face. “And I’ll let you enjoy every second of it for the rest of today. But—” she gave her a pointed look—“I expect you to wake up tomorrow with the notion that you will at least get to know Joseph when you see him. Marriage isn’t all about chores and children. It’s about the sharing of your life with someone else.”

“I knew you wanted grandchildren, but I didn’t realize you wanted a whole lot of them at one time.”

Laughing, she gently placed the pillow back over Margaret’s face. “It’s more than children or grandchildren. It’s about seeing my daughter happy. I think Joseph is a nice man.”

“He’s old.”

“Thirty isn’t old.”

“He’s ten years older than me.” She gasped and sat up. The pillow fell to her lap. “His oldest child is seven. I was thirteen when that kid was born.”

“That means you’re still older and able to provide a stern look of authority over the youngster.”

Grumbling, Margaret laid back in the bed and returned the pillow to her face. She was beginning to wish she hadn’t posted an ad at all. This was a mess. Her mother wouldn’t be happy if she decided not to marry Joseph. But so what? It was Margaret’s life, not her mother’s.

“Give it a good night’s sleep,” her mother advised.

Margaret felt the bed shift, notifying her that her mother stood up.

“Things always look better after a good night’s sleep.”

When her mother left the room, Margaret pulled the pillow off of her face and let out a sigh of despair.

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The next afternoon, Margaret glanced at the clock above the fireplace and cringed. Joseph was due any minute. She turned her gaze to the window and peered out of it. There was no sign of him yet. She exhaled, relieved.

Her mother entered the parlor. "It'll be a nice day to go for a walk."

Margaret turned from the window and asked, "Will you come along?"

Her mother chuckled. "Of course not. You need to get to know him, and that isn't going to happen unless you two can talk alone."

Margaret fought the urge to groan and sat down in a chair. She put her face in her hands. She had no idea what she could say to him that might be of any interest. After all, she had no experience with children. What in the world could she possibly have to offer him? Well, except for being a mother to his brood of offspring. She shuddered. Four boys. Not even a girl among them! She knew absolutely nothing about boys—or men for that matter.

"He's here," her mother called out.

She didn't look up right away. Instead, she listened as her mother opened the front door and greeted him. This, she was sure, was going to be a disaster. The only saving grace was that he didn't plan to bring his children with him. She looked up then, making sure no kids came running into the house. It was just him. Good. At least that would make things less awkward.

She cleared her throat and stood up. "Ma thought it'd be a good idea if we went for a walk." She glanced at her mother and shot her a pleading look to join them.

"I need to get down to the mercantile," her mother said. "Take your time."

Margaret inwardly groaned. Too bad her sister was in school because if she wasn't, Margaret would ask her to come

along. It'd be much better if one other person was there to help break the tension.

"It is a nice day for a walk," Joseph said, offering a tentative smile.

Perhaps this wasn't any easier for him than it was for her. As strange as it was, that actually made her feel better. "Alright." She followed him out to the porch.

"Have a good time!" her mother said.

Margaret knew her mother meant well but was too nervous to respond. Instead, she shut the door and crossed her arms because she couldn't figure out what else to do with them.

"Where do you usually go for a walk around here?" he asked.

"Umm..." She debated whether to go to the park or through town. "I think the park will be good since the weather is nice."

He nodded and followed her down the porch steps.

She glanced back once and saw her mother watching them from the parlor window. "*I need to go to the mercantile*" *my left foot*, Margaret thought. Her mother had done her weekly shopping two days ago. Reluctant, she turned her attention to Joseph. She couldn't bring herself to look at him as they strolled down the sidewalk that led to the park. Clearing her throat, she got ready to speak. She had to tell him the truth, and the sooner she did it, the better.

With a heavy sigh, she said, "I'm not the kind of person who believes in wasting her time. I agreed to meet with you today because my parents insisted on it. But to tell you the truth, I don't think I have what it takes to raise four boys. I mean, if I was their mother, it would be different. I'd be able to get used to them one at a time. This whole thing with all of them at once... Well..." She shrugged. "It's too much."

There. She said it. Stopping, she waited to see if he would want to continue the walk—and listen to her go into more detail

on her decision—or if he'd want to stop wasting his time with her and find a woman who would be happy to take on him and his children.

“It's been nine years since I courted a woman, so I'm a bit rusty at this. But I got a chance to read your letters, and I thought you sounded like a woman I could get along well with.” He shifted from one foot to the other. “It's true I could use a mother for my children, and I do want her to be good to them. I also want a woman who'll make a good companion.”

She lifted her head and took a good look at him. So it did matter to him who he married. Then he wasn't just hoping to *settle* for her. That made her feel better about everything. “Well, I suppose we could talk.”

His body relaxed. “I like your straightforwardness,” he admitted with a smile.

As they resumed their stroll down the sidewalk, she replied, “I don't see the point in not saying what I mean. Too many people can take advantage of someone who's afraid to say no.”

He chuckled. “That's especially true of children. And don't think saying ‘no’ once is enough.”

“I don't know the first thing about children. My sister might be eight years younger than me, but I didn't do much with her.”

“I wouldn't expect you to do everything yourself. I didn't realize how much work it is to take care of them until my wife passed away.”

As they crossed the street, she asked, “How did she die?”

“She got sick and never recovered.”

There was a hint of sorrow in his voice, so she ventured, “You must have loved her.”

“I did. We grew up together. I think we always knew we'd get married.” He looked at her. “I don't mean to ramble on

about her. I am interested in learning about you and having you learn about me.”

Maybe her mother was right. Maybe he did know there was more to a marriage than taking care of the children. “What do you want to know about me?”

He put his hands in his pockets and studied the ground for a moment. “I read the letters you sent Paul. When he told me he was coming out here, he showed them to me,” he quickly explained, as if he expected her to be upset.

“I assumed you read them if you knew I was looking for a husband.” As soon as she said those words, she wished she could take them back. She sounded desperate. What woman worth marrying had to post an ad for a husband? None of her friends had to stoop to such measures. They had men to choose from. How she wished the same had been the case for her. Refusing to look at him in case he picked up on the frustration and shame in her eyes, she added, “I just figured you had to find out about me that way. You don’t seem like the kind of man who searches through the paper looking for a wife.”

“It never occurred to me.”

Of course not. He was gorgeous.

“You see, I assumed that all the ads were men looking for women,” he continued. “So Paul happened to find your ad and told me about it. I thought he had a good idea, so I went and looked through the other ads but didn’t find any others.”

Her cheeks grew even warmer, something she didn’t think possible since she was embarrassed enough as it was. No other woman in the country had the problem she did. Terrific. Wonderful. Perfect. She crossed her arms and tried not to groan.

“When your first letter came, he brought it out for me to read, and I thought he’d do well to marry you,” he said.

She examined him to determine whether he was just telling her this so she’d agree to take on the task of raising his army of children, but he seemed sincere.

A Husband for Margaret

He shrugged and glanced at her. "In fact, there was a part of me that envied him. He saw your ad first. It wouldn't have been right to intervene, so I stayed out of it."

"Really?" she asked in a hopeful tone. She wanted to slap herself for saying that. Could she sound even more eager for a man to be interested in her if she tried?

He grinned. "Is that so hard to believe?"

She decided not to answer that in case she made an even bigger fool of herself.

"I didn't want Paul to die. It's a shame a man has to go before he has a chance to live and see what life has to offer. I thought you'd make him happy."

Her unease was starting to ebb. She realized that they had already traveled half the length of the park. Spotting a bench, she asked, "Would you like to sit for awhile? It's such a nice day that it'd be a shame to hurry back inside."

He nodded and waited for her to sit before he sat beside her. "I'm sorry I didn't write. I wanted to ask if you'd allow me to come in Paul's place, but I knew that I'd get here before the letter did."

"I understand." Paul's death was unexpected. Who could have seen it happening, especially when he was twenty-two? He should have had many more years left. "I'm sorry that happened to him. He seemed like a nice man from what I read in the letters."

"He was."

"It must have been a rough couple of years for you. First your wife...then your brother..." Here young people were dying, and she spent her time complaining because she didn't have a group of men wanting to court her. In reality, her problems were insignificant. At least she was alive to have those problems. And here was a man who'd seen more than his share of sorrows. Though the task of taking on four boys still made her head spin, she figured he could use some help with them. A man trying to

support children while being the sole parent had to be rough. Praying she wouldn't regret this, she said, "I'll marry you, Joseph."

He blinked as if he couldn't believe it.

A smile tugged at her lips. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"Actually, yes. I know I shocked you by coming out with four boys."

"And you said you will help me with them? You won't leave me to do all the work?"

"No. I know how difficult it is to raise them alone."

"I'll hold you to your word."

Now he was the one who smiled. "I have no doubt of that."

Her body relaxed. Perhaps this would work out after all. Yes, he wasn't Paul, but he seemed like someone she could enjoy spending her life with. And he had said some of the nicest things a man ever said to her. "Should we plan on a week from now?"

"That should give me enough time to find a place. I'm a journalist, so we'll be in town."

"I'd prefer living in town. In fact, you see that house over there?" She pointed to the white house with blue trim not too far from where they sat. "When I was a child, I had this dream of living there." She giggled. "I don't know why. There are better houses in town, but it just seems like a cozy place." Clearing her throat, she continued, "I recall Paul writing that you worked at a newspaper office. Was it hard to leave?"

"More so for the boys than for me. I suspect it'll take them time to adjust."

She nodded. Even if she agreed to marry him and be their mother, it was still a frightening prospect. She wondered just what, exactly, she was getting herself into.

Chapter Four



Joseph put on his tie and adjusted it. He examined his reflection in the small mirror above the dresser. After all these years, he had to go through something of a courting process. He forgot how intimidating the whole thing could be. Hannah might have been his childhood friend, but the minute he realized that friendship had grown into something more, he experienced the anxious excitement of being with her. Having been married to her, however, made those memories fade.

And now that he was meeting another woman with the same intent, all those past sensations came crashing down on him with full force. He decided that he wasn't an enthusiast of this stage of the relationship. Yes, it was exciting, but it was also downright agonizing.

He combed his hair—again—and wondered if there was anything else he could do to look his best. He glanced at his travel bag sitting in the corner of the room he shared with the two

and three year olds. He was looking forward to finding a house in town. As much as he appreciated the Larson's hospitality, he wanted to get back to living in his own home.

Today, Margaret was coming out. He'd thought of taking the children into town to see her, but he didn't have the desire to travel alone with them ever again. Maybe if the time to get to town didn't take more than a good hour, but after being on the train for days on end with them, he'd had enough. Nope. Next time those boys went to town, it'd be when he married Margaret.

Thankfully, she agreed to be his wife. He didn't know what he said that convinced her to do it, but he was glad she changed her mind. Margaret seemed ideal for him. Practical, honest, dependable... In some ways, she was like Hannah, but in other ways, not so much. He didn't expect her to fill Hannah's shoes. No one would replace her. But he had no doubt she'd carve out her own special place in his heart.

He couldn't see himself having a future with Debra. Debra might have made a good mother. Certainly, she was willing, but he meant what he told Margaret. He didn't want to marry anyone. He wanted to marry someone he could enjoy the kind of friendship and love he had enjoyed with Hannah.

All he had to do was get through the awkward stage of not knowing exactly what to say. Taking a deep breath, he steadied his nerves and turned his attention to the screaming children downstairs. Those children, of course, were his. The Larson children were all grown up. They might have had grandchildren who were as full of energy as his own kids, but those kids went home with their parents. Sometimes, Joseph missed the quiet.

He went down the stairs and saw that Mrs. Larson was playing with his youngest two. His older two boys helped Jenny Larson, the fifteen year old, with breakfast.

Mrs. Larson looked over at him and motioned to the chair. "I was just getting ready to call the men in. It's going to be a busy day again." She ruffled Charles' and Ben's hair. "I just love

being a grandmother. I can't wait for Jessica and Tom to have their first child."

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Ma, you already have grandchildren."

"I know but what's the harm in having more?" She winked at the boys. "A woman can never have too many grandchildren."

Jenny let out a low groan before she turned back to the skillet.

"You have some fine boys," Mrs. Larson told Joseph.

"Thank you, ma'am." He saw that Doug and Bob were setting the dishes out. "Good job, boys."

"Pull up a seat," she said as she set Ben and Charles in their chairs.

Ben squealed with glee and banged the tray on his highchair.

Charles climbed onto Joseph's lap and grabbed a fork from Doug before he could set it on the table. "Ork!" he proudly stated while he waved it around.

Joseph dodged it and took it from him. "The fork goes on the table until we eat, Charles." He set it next to the plate.

"This brings back so many memories." Mrs. Larson dabbed her eyes with the edge of her apron. "Jenny, don't you remember the time when Joel was a baby and you taught him the word 'fork'?"

"That's when I was thinking of being a teacher," Jenny said, her exasperation evident in her voice. "Ma, this is ridiculous. Everything these kids do remind you of when the rest of us were little."

Bob sneezed and wiped his nose on the back of Doug's shirt.

"Gross!" Doug pushed him back.

Jenny motioned to them. "I saw Joel and Tom doing the very same thing last month. You don't have to worry. Your sons will always be little kids."

Mrs. Larson sighed. "It's been awfully quiet in this house since Tom left."

"He still comes by." Jenny clapped her hands. "Oh, Jessica's bringing Margaret out. Jessica will want to see the new pattern for the shirt I want to make her!"

Joseph's ears perked up. Did that mean he'd get some time alone with Margaret? He hadn't had that opportunity since he walked with her at the park. The other times he'd seen her, her parents had been there. He hoped the others would find something else to do while Margaret was there. Of course, the boys would be with them, but it would be the six of them after they got married. And as long as the boys played nicely, then it might happen.

Glancing at Doug and Bob, he said, "You remember what I told you about being on your best behavior when Miss Williams is here?"

Doug nodded. "Course we will, Pa. We want a ma."

"Good. That means there's no fighting, and you have to help keep Charles and Ben out of trouble."

"We can do that."

"We want a ma so she can make pie!" Bob said.

"Your new ma isn't only there to make you pies," Joseph replied.

"Oh, we know that." A sad look crossed Doug's face. "We remember our real ma. Will Miss Williams be like her?"

"Not exactly like her," Joseph told him. "Some things will be the same. Others will be different. No two people are alike."

"But she does make pie, right?" Bob asked.

"Yes, she does."

Doug's mood brightened. "Can she make cookies?"

"Well, yes, she did mention making those too," Joseph said.

"And I bet she won't burn 'em like Pa does," Bob told Doug.

A Husband for Margaret

“That wasn’t my fault,” Joseph inserted. “If I hadn’t been changing a diaper and trying to break up you two fighting, those cookies would’ve been just fine. Now sit down and get ready to eat.”

They obeyed him.

“We’ll be real good, Pa,” Doug assured him. “Don’t you worry none.”

Joseph could only hope they would follow through on that promise. The last thing he wanted to do was scare Margaret off.

Margaret got out of Jessica’s buggy and scanned the Larson property. The men were hard at work in the fields with their horses and plows. She looked at her friend who set the brake. “Do you like being out on a farm?”

“It’s alright,” Jessica replied. “It’s more work than being in town was, but it’s good work. It certainly beats having to be with Peter and his dreadful mother.” She smiled and looked out in the distance. “I do enjoy being with Tom.”

She rolled her eyes but grinned. “I know. He’s all you talk about.”

“Oh, I talk about other things.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Didn’t I just mention working on a farm and Peter and his mother?”

“Because I asked a question.”

“Well, not everyone hides their enthusiasm as well as you do.”

Margaret waited for Jessica to get out of the buggy before she said, “I show my feelings.”

“Yes, but no one would know you’re excited about today.” Jessica nudged her in the side. “It’s alright for you to look excited.”

She shrugged.

“I hope you let Joseph know you enjoy being with him. Men need to know we like having them around.”

Margaret sighed. “I don’t know.”

Jessica gave her a good look. “You don’t know what? Are you having doubts about him?”

“No, it’s not that.” Unable to look her friend in the eye, she studied her fingernails. “He almost seems too good to be true, that’s all. I can’t help but feel that something bad is going to happen.”

“Well, there are four boys.”

“It’s not even that.” She took a deep breath and set her hands at her sides so she’d stop picking at her nails. She hated that nervous habit. “It’s just... It’s going too smoothly, don’t you think?”

“Seriously, Margaret.” Jessica chuckled. “You are the only person I know who can’t accept the fact that something good is happening to her. You need to lighten up. Not everything is gloom and doom. Why, you have me for a friend, and we’ve known each other since kindergarten.”

“Yes, but everything good happens to you. You’re like a good luck charm. You smile and the sun shines.”

Jessica laughed even harder.

Breaking into a sly smile, she pointed to the sky. “Oh look. That cloud is leaving. Jessica laughed, so it’s time to make more room for the sun.”

“So that’s why I’m your matron of honor at your wedding. You want to make sure it doesn’t rain.”

They paused while Joel approached them. “I came to take care of the horses,” he said.

“Thank you,” Jessica replied.

They watched in silence as he unhitched the steeds.

He glanced over at them with an uneasy expression on his face. “You weren’t talking about me, were you?”

A Husband for Margaret

Jessica blinked. “Of course not, Joel. We were just discussing some personal things.”

Still looking uncertain, he nodded and took the animals to the pasture.

Margaret raised an eyebrow. “You know he’s going to spend the rest of the day wondering if we were talking about him.”

Jessica’s eyes widened. “I assured him we weren’t.”

“He didn’t believe you.”

She sighed and shrugged. “I can’t help what he does or doesn’t think.” She waved her hand in his direction. “He’ll be fine.” Taking her friend by the elbow, she led her to the porch. “Aren’t you glad we’re here? You’ll get to see Joseph.”

She cleared her throat. And the next time she saw him, she’d be walking down the aisle to be his wife. It was happening much too fast. But what could she expect? When she posted the ad, she knew it’d be a week after the man got there that she’d be marrying him. It wasn’t like any of the other bachelors in the area were asking to court her for a good year before they wanted to be her husband. Nope. She was left to unorthodox methods to secure her future.

But did that really matter? The point was she was finally getting married. Jessica was right, of course. She needed to learn to stop second guessing everything. Things were going to be fine. Nothing bad was going to happen. She was going to meet Joseph and the boys today and get ready for her wedding tomorrow. Then the next day, she’d get married and have a family. A house full of boys and a man to take care of.

She wiped her hands on her skirt. Five men. Sure, it was a lot—a lot more than she expected—but she could do it. She could. At least, she was sure she could.

“Come on.” Jessica prompted her forward. “I’m going to be in the house. That means only good things will happen in there.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

Margaret chuckled and put her foot on the first step. *Here goes nothing.*

Chapter Five



The front door burst open and two boys came barreling toward Margaret. “Ma! Ma!”

She turned to see who in the world they were talking about for a split second before she remembered that she was going to be their mother in two short days.

Joseph showed up in the doorway, holding the youngest in one arm and held the door open with his free hand. “Doug, Bob, remember what I said.”

Doug and Bob immediately stopped bouncing around her and clasped their hands behind their backs.

“We’re glad you’re here,” one of them said.

“Thank you,” she replied and tried to remember who was the oldest. “Bob?”

“No, I’m Bob,” the other said.

She gave them a timid smile. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid I’m not very good with recalling names.”

“That’s alright.” Bob took her hand and led her up the steps. “Sometimes we forget things too. Don’t we, Doug?”

“Sure do,” Doug said as he took her other hand. “I forget to put my toys away all the time.”

“Shh...” Bob told his brother. “You know what Pa said.”

“Oh, right.” Doug’s cheeks grew pink. He peered up at her. “We won’t forget to be good today.”

Bob groaned.

They made it to the front door.

“Here she is, Pa,” Bob unnecessarily stated.

“I see that.” Joseph moved aside so they could enter the house. He smiled at Margaret. “I’m glad you came.”

Margaret’s face flushed. He really was a good looking man. She wondered why none of the women back at his hometown were lining up to marry him as soon as he became available.

“We’re glad too,” Doug said.

“You already said that,” Bob replied.

“So?”

“It’s fine.” Margaret squeezed their hands. “I don’t mind hearing it again.”

Doug grinned at her. “We miss having a ma.”

“Do you make cookies?” Bob asked.

She nodded. “From time to time.”

The boys giggled.

Joseph sighed but smiled at her. “They don’t care much for what I can make.” He motioned to the couch. “Would you like to sit? I can get you something to drink if you want.”

“Oh, I’ll do that,” Jessica intervened as she brushed past Margaret to get inside the house.

Margaret glanced at her friend. In all the excitement, she forgot Jessica was behind her.

A Husband for Margaret

“Besides,” Jessica added as she took off her bonnet, “this will be a good excuse to see Jenny. I’ll be back.” She patted Margaret on the shoulder. “Enjoy yourself,” she whispered.

Margaret turned to Joseph and smiled. Every time she was near him those crazy butterflies wrecked havoc on her stomach. She didn’t know how she was supposed to get used to being around him.

“Will you have a seat?” he asked.

“Have a seat!” Bob pulled on her hand and led her to the couch.

Before she knew it, the two boys pushed her onto the couch. The fourth boy, who’d been quietly playing with some blocks in the corner of the room, stopped building his tower and stared at her. Uncertain of what to do about being watched with such intensity, she shifted her gaze back to the others in the room.

“Did you have a good ride out here?” Joseph asked as he sat beside her.

“Yes, I did. The weather is perfect this time of year,” she replied, aware that Bob and Doug stood by her. She looked at them and saw that they were content to watch her and smile. She blinked. Somehow, this didn’t seem like normal childhood behavior. “Don’t you two want to play?” Isn’t that what children did? Play?

“We’re fine,” Bob replied, rocking back and forth on the heels of his feet.

“They’re excited to meet you.” Joseph shifted on the couch so that he could put the boy he was holding on his other leg. “Ben is shy.”

She knew the feeling, so she had one thing in common with the boy. She didn’t remember Ben’s age, but since he was the smallest, he was the youngest. *Ben is the youngest. Then there’s Doug, the oldest, and Bob, the next in line.* She glanced at the boy still staring at her. She’d have to pay attention to what the others called him because she didn’t remember his name either.

“I got hired at the paper in town,” Joseph said. “I start work on Monday. It’s not a full-time position, so I picked up a second job at the mercantile making deliveries. I’ll make enough to support us, but I’m afraid things will be tight, at least until I can find a better second job.”

“But we can still have cookies and pie, right Pa?” Bob asked, looking startled.

“Yes.”

Doug and Bob visibly relaxed.

She couldn’t deny that this aspect of the children amused her.

“However,” Joseph continued, directing her attention back to him, “I did purchase that home you said you liked.”

Her ears perked up at this announcement. “The one on the edge of the park with the blue trim?”

Smiling, he nodded. “I thought you might like to hear that.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” She turned to Doug and Bob. “It has a nice backyard for you to play in.”

They nodded but just stood quietly by her side with their hands behind their backs.

She was beginning to feel like an animal at an auction. She figured that the boys would be curious about her, but she didn’t expect all four of them to be fascinated enough to watch her every move.

“We’ll be good,” Bob said.

“Yes,” Doug agreed. “We hardly cause any problems at all.”

“And the ones we do cause, we can correct.”

“I don’t expect you to be perfect,” she told them.

Joseph sighed. “I asked them to be on their best behavior while you’re here. Why don’t you two go play with Charles?”

A Husband for Margaret

Charles. So that was the boy sitting in the corner. She mentally repeated each boy's name in her head so she wouldn't forget again.

"Yes, Pa," they both said and rushed over to sit by their younger brother.

"It takes them awhile to get used to new people," Joseph explained.

"It takes me awhile to do that too." She spread her skirt out, still feeling nervous but not quite as much now that all but one boy—Ben—had stopped watching her. "I suppose you'll miss working at the paper where you used to live. You said you worked there full-time?"

"Yes, I did. But it was a bigger area, so there were more opportunities."

"I know the owner of the mercantile. He's nice. I don't expect you to have any problems with him."

"He seemed reasonable when I talked to him. I suppose in a place this small, it's only logical that everyone knows everyone else."

"Yes. Sometimes it's a good thing."

He raised an eyebrow. "And at others?"

A smile tugged at her lips. "There's always one or two people you don't want to come across."

"That's true no matter where you are."

"Really? You mean there's someone from Dayton you'd rather not deal with?"

Before he could answer, Jessica and Jenny came into the parlor carrying a tray full of cups. "Anyone thirsty for lemonade?" Jessica asked.

"Me, me, me!"

All but Ben ran over to them to grab a cup and gulp their drinks down.

Bob glanced over and nudged his brothers. After whispering something to them, they each thanked Jessica and Jenny and quietly sat back down in the corner to keep playing.

Margaret thought the whole thing was odd. Did they always behave like this or were they trying to warm her up for taking on the role as their mother, who would obviously be baking pies and cookies, before they showed her what they were *really* like?

Jessica approached them. “Would you like some lemonade?”

Joseph nodded and took a cup. “Thank you.” He shifted so that Ben was sitting up straight. “Here you go.”

Margaret didn’t know how Ben managed it, but he drank half the cup without taking his eyes off of her. She gave him an uneasy smile. Just what did he find so fascinating about her? Wasn’t she just like any other woman? Or maybe it was because he didn’t remember his real mother, so he wasn’t used to having a woman around. But if that was true, then why didn’t he bother staring at Jenny or Jessica?

“Looks like Ben was thirstier than he let on,” Jessica commented with a chuckle.

Margaret wondered how it was possible that Jessica could meet these boys one time at a train station and remember their names.

“Margaret?” Jessica asked, lifting the remaining full cup off the tray.

“No thanks,” Margaret didn’t trust her trembling hands. All she needed was to slip and get lemonade all over her clothes or all over someone else. “I’m fine.”

Joseph finished the rest of his cup and gave it to Jessica. “I must admit it’s peaceful out here. In some ways, it reminds me of my brother’s place, except his house wasn’t nearly as nice.”

Jenny sighed. “Don’t think my brothers don’t try to make it a bachelor’s home.”

A Husband for Margaret

Jessica grinned. “That’s why men need women.” Turning to Joseph and Margaret, she said, “We’ll be back soon to see if you six need anything else.”

After Jessica and Jenny left, Margaret glanced at Ben who was still watching her. She couldn’t remember the last time she held a child. Her sister, after all, was already thirteen. But Ben looked like a good boy to start with. “May I hold him?”

“Sure.” Joseph lifted the boy from his lap and handed him to her.

She wondered if Ben would protest but he didn’t. To her surprise, he snuggled into her arms and rested his head against her shoulder. The simple action startled her. She didn’t think it’d feel so nice to hold a child. And the fact that Ben trusted her enough to close his eyes touched her heart. It was, perhaps, one of the loveliest things that ever happened to her.

She glanced at the three boys playing quietly in the corner of the room. Doug and Bob seemed to be making up a game with the blocks, and Charles sat by them but was content to stick to his own group of toys. The poor boys probably missed their mother. She didn’t know if Charles was old enough to remember her when she passed away, but the oldest two would have been.

“It must be hard to raise them by yourself,” she told Joseph.

“That’s not the only reason I want to get married,” he softly said.

She turned her attention to him.

“Your friend is right, you know. About men needing women. True, we are messy creatures when left to our own devices, but even with children, it can get lonely. There’s an emptiness that only a woman can fill.”

She didn’t know why his words should make her body tingle as if he’d touched her. Despite the heat rising in her cheeks, she confessed, “A woman needs a man too, Joseph. And...”—her gaze went back to the four boys—“I used to dream about being a

wife and mother when I was a little girl. I think just about every girl imagines that one time or another. Do boys ever imagine being a husband and father when they grow up?"

He chuckled. "I'd like to say yes, but the truth is when I was a boy, I was too busy playing cowboys and Indians to think of the future."

"I thought you always knew you were going to marry your first wife?"

"Well, to a point. But I never thought about it. I just took it for granted."

"Oh. I had all the details planned out for my wedding and the names and genders of my children picked out."

"My first wife did too, though she did later tell me that she wasn't sure if I was the one or not."

"Is that the way it is then for men and women? Men go along life and one day decide on who they'll marry while women figure out the wedding and children and just hope the man comes along with it?"

"I don't know if that's how it is for everyone, but it's been my experience." He inched closer to her so he could put his arm around her shoulders. "I like you, Margaret. I've liked you ever since I read those letters. I hope you never think that I settled for you because I couldn't find someone else. Even if a man needs a woman, he needs the right one."

Tears filled her eyes, but she quickly blinked them away. "I like you too, Joseph."

He leaned forward and kissed her.

A round of 'ewe's came from two very disgusted boys who stopped playing to watch them.

He looked at his sons and said, "Someday, this will be one of your favorite things to do."

Bob rolled his eyes. "I don't think so, Pa."

Doug shook his head in silent agreement to Bob's declaration.

A Husband for Margaret

Joseph shrugged. “What did I tell you?” he told her. “Boys just don’t think that far into the future.”

She giggled, even as her lips still tingled from his kiss and her heart thumped madly in her chest. Well, as a girl, she’d played out her first kiss many times in her mind, and she had to admit, the kiss he’d just given her was even better than anything she could dream up. She settled against him and realized that Ben had fallen asleep.

A man and four boys. A full house, yes. But she bet it’d be a happy one.

Chapter Six



Margaret arranged the flowers in the bouquet Jessica would hold. “I’m almost done. I want your thoughts on this.”

Her sister yawned. “I think the last two times you did that were fine.”

“Are you even looking?” Margaret glanced at the clock and sighed. The hour was late, but she couldn’t relax. She was getting married tomorrow at eleven. How was she supposed to sleep? She had a ton of things to do. “Please tell me what you think, Charlotte. Your bouquet will look the same.”

“I don’t care how my bouquet looks.”

“I just want everything to be perfect.” She’d spent years preparing for this moment. She couldn’t stop until she was done. “I’ll tell you what. If you *really* look at this bouquet and tell me what you think, I’ll let you go to bed.”

Her sister wearily turned her gaze to the flowers. “They’re fine.”

A Husband for Margaret

“A good fine or a bad fine?”

“There’s not a difference.”

“Yes there is.”

Charlotte stood up from the chair in the parlor. “I can’t keep my eyes open.”

Margaret realized that there was no way she would get a good, solid answer from her, so she waved for her to go to bed. “Alright. But please wear the blue bow tomorrow.”

She grimaced but nodded.

Once again, Margaret wished that Jessica still lived in town. Jessica had a great eye for style, and as much as Charlotte tried to help her, she wasn’t any better at making things look their best than Margaret was. But Charlotte was such a tomboy anyway. Margaret was lucky her sister would wear the bow. That agreement alone had taken Margaret a good two hours of pleading and doing all her chores. She shook her head and rubbed her eyes. It had been a long and tiring day. Who knew planning a wedding could be so hectic?

She set the bouquet on the table and studied all the flowers in the three bouquets that were neatly set out in a row. The light from the candle gave her the impression of softness. Perhaps she should have opted for an evening wedding ceremony. She did like the effect candlelight had on things. But she didn’t want to have the boys stay up past their bedtime, so she chose eleven in the morning. By then, everyone should be fed and ready to enjoy the day.

Peering out the window, she wondered if it was going to rain. The night sky was clear. Not a cloud in sight. With any luck, tomorrow would be a nice sunny day. She asked for an outside wedding. If it rained, they’d have to go inside the church. She admonished herself for assuming that just because it was her wedding day that it would rain. *Everything will be fine. Nothing’s going to go wrong.* Her mother was right. She had to stop finding reasons to worry.

She thought over the other tasks she had to do but couldn't think of anything she could do that night. Everything else, like her hair and putting on her dress, would have to wait until morning.

With nothing else to do but wait, she went to bed. She closed her eyes but didn't sleep. Instead, she played through the wedding ceremony over and over. This would be the day she'd remember for the rest of her life. And it was going to be perfect.

By the time ten o'clock came the next morning, Margaret was a bundle of nerves.

Jessica laughed and forced her to sit in the small room in the back of the church. "I can't do your hair if you keep bouncing around."

She fidgeted and leaned forward so she could look out the small window. "It's a lovely day, don't you think?"

Jessica pulled her back so she sat up straight. "Yes. It's not even windy. You picked the perfect spring day to have a wedding, and I bet it didn't even have anything to do with me."

She chuckled and glanced over her shoulder while Jessica pulled her hair back with some pins lying on the round table beside them. "But having you here doesn't hurt."

Though Jessica rolled her eyes, she didn't hide her amusement. "Yes. I made sure the clouds went away. It took a lot of work to do so I better get the slice of cake with the biggest rose on it. You know how much I love roses."

"Sure, as long as they're pink and red."

Margaret giggled but resisted the urge to get up and check the length of her dress. As much as she checked the job she'd done on altering her mother's wedding gown, she still wondered if she did a good job. She took a deep breath. *Relax. It's fine. Everything's fine.*

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Jessica stuck another pin into her hair. "I saw Peter James' mother the other day, and she was wearing red and pink roses in her hat."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope." She took two daisies from the table and wove them into Margaret's hair. "I couldn't believe it either, but she said the colors looked much better on her than on wedding decorations."

She rolled her eyes. "Of course. Everything looks better on Connie James. It really is a good thing you married Tom instead. I met Tom's mother, and she's actually pretty nice."

"Yes, she is. She lets Tom make his own decisions."

A smile tugged at Margaret's lips as she glanced at her friend. "Don't you mean that she lets you make decisions for Tom?"

Jessica gasped. "I have no idea what you mean!"

"Oh come on. I saw that pretty buggy you had him buy. No man would pick that."

She playfully nudged Margaret in the shoulder before she turned her face forward so she could put another pin into her hair. "That buggy is the one that got us here today, so you better watch your tongue."

"Well, I don't think four little boys will be caught dead in something that feminine. You better hope you have some girls."

"Don't think we aren't working on that." Jessica finished with her hair and handed her a handheld mirror. "There. What do you think?"

Margaret hardly recognized the person staring back at her. "The daisies are perfect. I don't know how you do it, but you always make everything look better than they are."

Jessica clucked her tongue. "Enough of that. You are a pretty woman, and it's about time you admitted it."

Margaret shrugged and put the mirror down. She peered out the window and saw that Joseph and his sons were getting

assembled. Her heart beat faster at the sight of him. Looking at him made her weak in the knees. She wondered if she would ever get over that initial feeling of awe whenever she saw him.

Charlotte approached the oldest two boys—Doug and Bob—and gave them each a basket full of flower petals. They gagged but didn't toss the offensive 'girly' baskets to the ground. Margaret chuckled. She didn't think the boys would be delighted to scatter the petals on the ground, but Jessica had insisted it would be pretty to decorate the grass for the occasion.

"I really do hope you have girls," she told Jessica who was putting daisies into her own hair. "I don't think you'd know what to do with a boy."

If Jessica heard her, she chose to ignore the comment, so Margaret stood up and inspected her off-white gown. She always thought her mother's dress was beautiful and was glad she chose to wear it.

Someone knocked on the door.

Since Jessica was busy, Margaret picked up her bouquet and opened the door. "Hi, Pa."

He smiled at her. "Joseph's going to be very happy when he sees you. You've turned into a lovely young woman."

"See?" Jessica added, giving her a pointed look as she slipped another daisy into her hair.

It was hard to appreciate a compliment when her stomach was all twisted in knots. Margaret simply nodded her thanks and took a deep breath. She hoped she didn't end up falling flat on her face out there. So far, everything was turning out much better than she planned. Right now, the only thing that could screw it up was her.

They waited until Jessica was done before they went to the entrance of the church. She put her arm through her father's and waited. Charlotte, Doug and Bob ran over to them, and Jessica handed the extra bouquet to Charlotte. The poor boys still looked as if holding the baskets was akin to being asked to put a bow in

their hair. Margaret thought about telling them that they could put them down, but then the groomsmen headed their way.

This was it. In a brief period of time, she would be Mrs. Joseph Connealy. *Margaret Connealy*. She thought that sounded rather pleasant.

Glancing at the lawn, she saw that the group of fifty people found their seats as the preacher and Joseph stood in their positions. Ben and Charles sat with her mother, and for the moment, they remained good.

Tom Larson whistled at Jessica. “You’re even better than the day we got married.”

She giggled as she took his arm. “You’re so sweet.” Then she kissed his cheek.

Joel Larson took Charlotte by the arm and rolled his eyes. “They act like that all the time. A person could lose their lunch watching this.”

Charlotte seemed amused. “Then be glad we don’t eat until after the wedding.”

Tom and Jessica led them toward the assembly of guests who turned to watch. Joel and Charlotte followed. Doug and Bob dutifully took out handfuls of petals and threw them into the air as if they couldn’t get rid of them fast enough.

One of her father’s friends began playing a sweet melody on his fiddle once they made it to the place where she would begin her wedding march. Margaret glanced at her father who patted her hand. She gave him a shaky smile. She still couldn’t believe this was really happening—and to her of all people.

Tom and Jessica didn’t make it three paces to the preacher when a woman ran up to Margaret. “Thank goodness I got here in time!”

Margaret frowned. “Do I know you?” she whispered, aware that Joel and Charlotte had begun their stroll.

Doug and Bob glanced over their shoulders and gasped. “Miss Potter?”

Ignoring the boys, the woman told Margaret, “You can’t marry Joseph. He’s supposed to marry me.”

Margaret spent a good five seconds staring at the woman and wondering who she was and why she’d make such a wild accusation. The person up front stopped playing the fiddle and murmurs came from the guests. And still, she couldn’t adequately decide how to proceed. Miss Potter, whoever she was, didn’t help further the discussion either, for she stared right back at Margaret and crossed her arms as if the matter was settled. Finally, Margaret turned to Doug and Bob for help.

“That’s the lady who wants to marry Pa,” Bob said. “But Pa didn’t want her.”

Miss Potter gasped. “You can’t say that. Your pa thought I was taken with another gent. That’s why he left.”

“That’s not what Pa said.”

“What do you know? You’re just a child.”

Margaret frowned. “Children know enough to know what their father wants.”

Miss Potter smiled at her and used a tone that one would liken to a woman using with a child. “Children may think they know things, but a grown man does not disclose his most intimate feelings for a lady.”

Doug scowled at the woman. “If Pa wanted to marry you, he wouldn’t have come here to marry Miss Williams.”

“That’s telling her, Doug,” Bob agreed. “Pa doesn’t like you.”

Margaret figured it was wrong, but she caught herself enjoying the way the two boys could stand up to Miss Potter. Surely if she was going to be their mother, she’d insist that they treat Miss Potter the respect due to an adult. But she couldn’t admonish the children. Not really. At least, not if she wanted to be sincere. This woman, after all, had barged in on *her* wedding and was threatening to destroy *her* perfect day. This was the one

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day in her entire life that was supposed to be absolutely perfect. And this rude individual was trying to interfere with it!

Miss Potter narrowed her eyes at the boys. “You are in desperate need of a mother.” She turned her gaze to Margaret. “One who knows enough to put a stop to your ugly words. Really, if these were my children, then I would not tolerate such insolence.”

Margaret shrugged. “Boys will speak their minds.”

“Not when I’m around, they won’t.”

Joel hastened over to them. “Is there going to be a fight?”

Miss Potter cringed. “Women do not fight. They merely quarrel.”

“What’s the difference?” he asked.

“None,” Margaret replied. She turned to her father. “Let’s get this wedding underway.” She didn’t care who Miss Potter was. Joseph came to marry her, and by golly, she was going to marry him regardless of what Miss Potter or anyone thought!

Miss Potter pulled her arm and spoke through gritted teeth. “He is to marry me.”

By now Margaret’s temper was starting to come to a boil. “Get your hand off of me or I’ll...”

“What? You’ll what?” Joel asked, practically jumping up and down with excitement.

“Leave our ma alone!” Bob yelled out. “Pa doesn’t want you and neither do we!”

Miss Potter glared at Bob. “You’re just a child. You don’t know what you want.”

“When I was a child, I knew what I wanted,” Margaret snapped. “And I assure you, they know what they want too.”

Joseph broke through the crowd that had gathered around them and jerked back. “Debra?” he asked in a tone that seemed to be the perfect blend between shock and horror.

Well, that was all Margaret needed to know that the boys told the truth. Whoever this Debra Potter was, Joseph had no desire to marry her.

Debra's demeanor changed in an instant. "Joseph, how nice it is to see you. I came just in time."

He stood there for a moment as if he couldn't believe what was happening and finally said, "Yes, you did." He stood beside Margaret and put his arm around her shoulders. "You came in time to see me get married. Will you be having a seat on my side?"

Debra pressed a hand to her heart before she let out a chuckle. "Oh, you must think I'm still entertaining the affections of Bernard Winslow. I assure you that I am not."

Out of the corner of her eye, Margaret saw Bob roll his eyes at Doug who snickered. She wondered about the exchange but gave it little thought as Joseph replied to Debra's announcement.

"I'm sorry it didn't work between you, but I don't see what that has to do with this wedding." He gave Margaret's shoulders a slight squeeze and glanced at her, "Shall we get this started?"

"Yes," Margaret agreed. She saw no reason to draw this whole thing out. After all, this was her day by golly, and she was going to enjoy it, even if it killed her! "Get on back up to the preacher and I'll be there."

Looking relieved, Joseph quickly obeyed.

Though she knew it was a bad example in front of the boys, she stuck her tongue out at an angry Debra. As she figured, Bob and Doug giggled at what she knew to be a childish display. Oh well. Maybe it would be good for them to know that even adults had their moments. She tapped them on the shoulders and said, "Go on ahead and my pa and I'll follow you."

They went to stand in front of her.

“Wait.” Margaret grabbed the baskets and handed them to Debra. “You may do the honors if you don’t want to take a seat.”

Doug and Bob looked very happy to get rid of those baskets and marched down the aisle as the fiddler began playing the tune.

“This isn’t over,” Debra hissed.

“It is for you,” Margaret said.

And that was all she would say to this horrible person who made it a point to come all the way to Omaha just so she could try to ruin her wedding day. The woman had a lot of nerve, but in no way was Margaret going to run off in defeat just because Debra Potter was no longer *entertaining the affections of Bernard Winslow*. Nope. For now on, she’d ignore the unwanted guest. She had much more important things to attend to. Like walking down the aisle. She followed her father’s lead, aware that Debra watched her, probably glaring and seething. But she’d give Debra no more thought.

Instead, she turned her gaze to Joseph. Her heart sped up at the sight of him. So what if Debra was there, looming in the background? If nothing else, this was proof that Joseph meant it when he told her that it did matter to him *who* he married. And that made her feel pretty good. Other men might have felt that marrying her meant settling for second best but Joseph didn’t. As long as he didn’t, then who cared what anyone else thought?

By the time she made it to Joseph, she could hardly hear what the preacher was saying. This was it. She, Margaret Williams, was actually getting married. The day she’d dreamed about since she was a little girl was finally coming to pass. True, the day had not included someone trying to stop it, but it was happening nonetheless—and that’s what mattered.

She glanced at Joseph and saw him smile at her. The happy look on his face put her at ease, but only slightly. It was impossible to fully relax when people sat and watched everything that was going on.

When the preacher began to speak, she made an effort to pay attention but couldn't—not really. However, when he asked if anyone had any objections, she looked over her shoulder to see if Debra would intervene. Even Joseph took a moment to glance back. But she wasn't there. A quick scan of the area assured Margaret that the woman was, indeed, gone. She wondered about it. Surely, Debra wasn't going to leave them alone. In Margaret's experience, people like Miss Potter didn't give up that easily.

The preacher spoke again, continuing the ceremony, so she dutifully turned her attention back to him. It puzzled her. Maybe it shouldn't. Maybe it was in her nature to second guess everything and believe the worst, but she couldn't get rid of the nagging feeling that she hadn't seen the last of Debra Potter.

What could Debra do at this point anyway? Joseph was getting married. Margaret snuck a peek at Jessica who smiled at her. So her friend didn't think there might be a backlash from the incident that just happened?

The ceremony continued as uneventfully as it had in her dreams. She and Joseph said their vows and kissed. In one instant she went from being Margaret Williams to being Mrs. Joseph Connealy. Doug and Bob ran over to her and gave her a hug.

"We're sure glad you made that woman go away," Bob said.

"Alright," Joseph said. "We have to walk back down the aisle. Then you can talk to her all you want."

She followed Joseph's lead and stepped forward, accidentally bumping into Doug who jumped in front of her.

"You have to watch where you're going," Joseph told him with a chuckle in his voice.

"Oh, Pa. Doug is clumsy," Bob replied. He looked at her. "You get used to it."

"I'm not clumsy," Doug said, narrowing his eyes at his brother.

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“Fight later.” Joseph pointed down the aisle. “Right now, walk.”

They stopped their bickering and obeyed.

As they passed her parents, Margaret saw that Ben and Charles had gotten fidgety on their chairs, so she decided they might as well get up. She might not be familiar with children, but from what she did know, she suspected they had a hard time sitting still for any length of time. She motioned for Charles to join Joseph while she picked up Ben.

She smiled and told Joseph, “If we’re going to be a family, we might as well walk down the aisle together.”

He returned her smile and nodded before they continued past the guests.

Chapter Seven



*M*argaret thought the day went well despite Miss Potter's arrival. She wanted to ask Joseph about the woman, but the guests surrounded them during the potluck lunch. She kept expecting the woman to pop up again, which she never did. Even so, she couldn't fully enjoy the day. It was a strange thing really, for as soon as the vows were said and everyone started to go home after wishing them well, it occurred to her that this was the beginning of her life with Joseph. And that meant this wedding day led to a wedding night.

Why the thought hadn't occurred to her sooner, she didn't know. Perhaps it was the thought of being a mother right away. Or maybe it was because she was too busy thinking of the wedding day and making sure everything was as perfect as could be. Either way, it was on her mind now, and the closer evening came, the harder it was to push it aside.

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Her mother had explained the facts to her and advised her to relax. Relaxing, after all, helped to ease a woman's body so it wasn't as uncomfortable for her first time. Now, if she could just will herself to relax, then things would be fine. But that proved to be a futile endeavor. In fact, the more she tried to relax, the more tense she became.

At least the process of taking her things to her new home distracted her enough so she didn't insist on staying with her parents. It also helped that this was the home she used to admire as a child. Even if she was apprehensive about being a wife, the house was absolutely charming—more so than she remembered. She did so want to live in it.

The walk to the place was a mere three blocks from the one she grew up in. Her father and Joseph carried the bulk of her clothing and grooming supplies, and all she carried was a travel bag, which didn't weigh much at all. She didn't realize she had so little possessions to her name. Was that all her life was summed up in? Two armfuls and a travel bag's worth of contents? Just what had she been doing with her life up to that point? Wearing clothes and brushing her hair?

One moment she was a girl dreaming of house and home and suddenly she was a woman with those dreams fulfilled. And even though she wanted to properly enjoy this moment, doubt nagged at her. Was she ready for this?

Before she knew it, they stopped at the front door. Bob opened it up and barged through with the other children in tow. She was beginning to understand that even though Bob was the second child, he was the one who took charge and spoke his mind whenever he felt like it. Doug was more reserved but took his duties seriously. As for Charles and Ben... They were still too young for her to determine how they would be.

Her father followed the children and set her things in the parlor.

Joseph asked her to wait at the doorway, ran inside the house to place the things he carried down, and headed back over to her. "I want to carry you over the threshold."

Her father chuckled as he walked past them. "I'll leave you to yourselves." He gave her a hug. "I'm proud of you, Margaret. You'll make a fine wife and mother."

"Thank you, Pa," she said, partly startled since she wasn't used to hearing such sentiments from her father. But the words meant the world to her, and she was glad he said them.

Once he bounded down the porch steps, Joseph turned to her and smiled. "Are you ready to enter your new home, Mrs. Connealy?"

"Come on in, Ma!" Bob called out from where he sat on the couch in the parlor. "We checked for vermin."

"Yep," Doug agreed from beside Bob. "There's nothing to make you scream."

She chuckled. "That's always a good thing."

"You ready?" Joseph asked.

She nodded and let him pick her up. Her cheeks grew warm. He was solid and strong, and she rather enjoyed being in his arms like this.

"Don't drop our new ma!" Bob warned as Joseph crossed the threshold.

Charles watched them as he sat beside a sleepy Ben who was lying on the floor in front of the couch.

"It looks like someone's had a busy day," Margaret commented, pointing to the two boys who looked exhausted.

"We should get you all down to bed," Joseph agreed before he set her down.

Her heart fluttered with a strange nervous excitement. Did he take her innocent statement to mean that she was eager to be alone with him? That wasn't what she meant, but he was already across the room and lifting Ben. She wiped her hands on her dress. It was no big deal really. Every wife did this. She

recalled how happy Jessica looked a week after she married Tom. Her other friends seemed just as happy. That meant that this was a good thing. They didn't have to say it. It was in the way they talked and acted.

She continued to repeat this to herself, assuring herself that her nerves would be settled soon enough. While Joseph took the youngest two to their beds, Doug and Bob helped her with her items. They surprised her because she didn't expect them to be concerned with making sure all her things were put away where they belonged.

But when Bob mentioned that they wanted to make sure she was in a good mood so she'd make them lots of cookies and pies, she realized this was really a set-up. Amused, she made a mental note to start in on those treats once she was able to go to the mercantile to buy the items she'd need. She couldn't blame the boys. Didn't all children enjoy dessert? She paused as she placed her extra pair of shoes under the bed. Actually, adults enjoyed the sweets just as much. Children, it seemed, were just more obvious about it.

Joseph entered the room and waved to Doug and Bob. "Time for bed."

The knot in her stomach tightened. Once they were in bed, then there was nothing stopping her husband from... She took a deep breath to settle her nerves. There would be nothing to stop him from doing what husbands had been doing with their wives since people existed. She wondered if other women experienced the same mixture of curiosity, excitement and apprehension as she was at this very moment.

Well, one thing she knew for sure was that she needed to get out of her clothes. She decided she'd do that while Joseph was putting Doug and Bob to bed. She had a hard time going through the simple task because her hands kept slipping on her buttons, but she didn't want him to come back and catch her without her clothes on. Of course, that was ridiculous. He was about to be

intimate with her, and they weren't going to have clothes on anyway. Still, she couldn't bring herself to stand naked in front of him, so as soon as she threw her clothes onto the small chair by the window, she slipped under the bed covers and waited.

She heard the sound of his footsteps across the hardwood floor in the hallway before he entered the room. Without thinking, she pulled the cover up to her chin and gripped the blanket as if her life depended on it. All of her efforts to assure herself that she'd be fine went right out the window.

Joseph offered a soft smile and closed the door behind him.

She inhaled and slowly exhaled. For some reason, this room didn't seem so small when the boys were in here.

"All things considered, I think the day went well. I'm sorry Debra came. That wasn't something I enjoyed."

She gathered that much, and though it was on the tip of her tongue to ask more about the rude woman, he took off his tie, signaling an instant change in mood. Suddenly, any mention of Debra just wouldn't do for the rest of the night.

He started to unbutton his shirt. "You're a good woman, Margaret. I'm glad you agreed to marry me."

He took his shirt off and she wondered if he was going to fully undress in front of her, a prospect which intrigued her as much as it terrified her. But he dimmed the light on the kerosene lamp until the room was dark. She heard him shuffling around and swallowed the lump in her throat. Alright. This was it.

He lifted the blanket and sheet and slid in next to her. She jerked when he reached for her, and he chuckled. "I promise it's not scary."

"I'm not scared," she squeaked. Her cheeks flushed. How could her voice betray her like that?

"I remember the first time Hannah and I were together. There's a lot of uncertainty involved."

"For her?"

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He settled next to her and pulled her into his arms. “And for me.”

“You?”

“I didn’t know what I was doing,” he softly admitted, his breath on her cheek. “I worried she might find me lacking.”

“It’s hard to believe you could be lacking in anything.”

He let out a slight laugh. “She said the same thing, but she ended up showing me how to do some things better.”

Even if her heart was pounding with anxiety, her eyebrows furrowed. His comment peaked her interest. “Some things?”

His lips brushed her cheek. “I know you’re not Hannah. You don’t need to think I’ll compare you to her.”

“I didn’t think that to begin with,” she replied, aware that the movement of his hand which ran up and down her arm in slow, methodical strokes was relaxing her.

“Good. I know we rushed into this marriage.”

“Which is what happens when a woman asks for a man to come out west to marry her.”

“That’s what attracted me to you in the letters you wrote to my brother, you know. You’re so matter of fact about things.”

Though she could only make out the shadow of his face, she detected the smile in his voice. She grinned. “Some people don’t like that about me.”

“You’re kidding?” he whispered before he kissed the corner of her mouth.

She cleared her throat. “No.” There went her shaky voice again, but this time she couldn’t decide if it was from nerves or the thrill of being kissed again.

When his mouth descended on hers, she forgot all about their conversation. Suddenly, her attention was drawn specifically to him. He shifted closer to her, closing the small gap that had been between them just moments before. His skin was warm against hers, and she didn’t have to know the exact difference

between a man and a woman to know what was pressing into her hip. Her hands tightened on the sheet.

He lifted his head. "It'll help if you relax," he softly said.

"I can't will the nerves away."

"Maybe not, but I bet I can help." He pried her hands off the sheet and kissed her palms before he held her hands. "You are now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. I won't do anything to hurt you. It might be uncomfortable this time, but I'll do what I can to ease that part."

"Uncomfortable?"

He sighed. "I'm just making it worse." He waited for a moment and asked, "Would you rather wait? Maybe this day's been too much. We can lay here and talk. There is more we could learn about each other, and then you might be more comfortable with this."

His concern touched her and she loosened her grip on his hands. "You would wait, wouldn't you?"

"I don't want this to be a bad experience for you, Margaret. This is one of the better parts of a marital relationship, and I want you to look forward to it."

She let go of one of his hands and slowly brought her hand up his arm, noting the strength there, and stopped her exploration at his shoulder. It was strange to be touching a man this way, this intimately, and yet it was wonderful at the same time. She licked her lower lip and dared to say, "I do like kissing you. Can we do more of that?"

"Of course."

He leaned forward and brought his lips to hers. Her toes tingled from the simple action. His actions were gentle. In no way did she feel rushed or compelled to continue, and that fact alone served to relax her further. She responded to him and followed his lead when he wanted to deepen the kiss. While he still held her hand, his other hand rested on the small of her back and massaged her with soothing circular motions.

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The tension eased from her in slow increments, and this time when she felt his arousal press against her, she didn't shy away. He continued to kiss her, still gentle even as she became aware of his growing passion. And, surprisingly, she realized her body was beginning to anticipate what was to come.

For once in her life, she decided she wouldn't analyze things. She would let her feelings lead the way. She wiggled closer to him and brought her hand to his jaw, noting the roughness of it. That surprised her since he made it a point to shave, but she supposed that if a man had to keep shaving, it was because the hair wanted to grow back. It was a reminder of how he was a man and she was a woman.

He groaned and shifted so that she ended up on her back. While he continued to kiss her, his hand slid up her side until it cupped her breast. The action sent a spark through her. Now, this wasn't so bad, she decided. She hadn't imagined what it'd be like for a man to touch her like this. Part of her thought she'd be horrified, but instead, she found it rather pleasing and wished for him to continue.

She released his other hand so she could explore his chest, tracking more differences between them. She couldn't bring herself to study all of him. Not yet. She was doing good to touch his bare skin. These things didn't have to be rushed. They had plenty of time to learn each other. She was content with what she was learning for now.

His mouth left hers, and she let out a contented sigh as he kissed her neck. She waited in expectation for him to kiss her breasts and moaned when he did. She sensed his excitement and squeezed his shoulders to let him know she felt it too. These sensations may not have been new to him but they were to her, and she found it hard to focus on anything but what her body wanted to happen. It seemed that her flesh knew what to do, and she parted her legs for him before he caressed the area with his hand.

His mouth returned to hers as he slid a finger into her. She gasped in surprise but pulled him closer for the kiss. The last of her anxiety departed. She moved her hips to encourage him to tease her with his finger. He continued to caress her, and she moaned and wiggled against him, savoring the moment. Even as she wished it would go on forever, she needed to find completion in what he was doing. When she came near her peak, she let out a soft cry and gave into the waves of pleasure that engulfed her.

Before she had time to reason what was happening, he shifted so he could enter her. The suddenness of the movement might have startled her had she not been otherwise distracted. She noted the slight sting and discomfort as he began moving inside her, but he kissed her again and the flicker of tension subsided. In short time, the discomfort gave way to a pleasurable sensation.

He traced her lips with his tongue, murmured her name, and then buried his face in the nape of her neck as he continued moving inside of her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and shifted against him so that he could go deeper into her. She knew it was over as soon as he stilled and grew taut. The moment seemed to be suspended in time—as sweet as it was gratifying. And when he relaxed, she held him to her, aware of how fast his heart was beating.

She closed her eyes and rested her cheek against his. So this was what she feared. She smiled at the silliness of it all. At least now she knew, and next time she could truly look forward to it. And she knew he was right. This was going to be one of the better parts of their marriage.

Chapter Eight



The next morning, Margaret peered out the parlor window of her new home. Just as she remembered from childhood, the view of the park was lovely. She recalled coming to this house twice with her mother. The elderly couple who owned this place was nice folk, the kind who set out cookies and let a child enjoy the swing on the front porch. She frowned. The swing was no longer there, probably due to years of wear. She wondered if Joseph would put another one up. The front yard was just the right size for little boys to run and play, and if they ventured to the park, she could still keep an eye on them.

Summer was fast approaching. That meant lazy days and lots of outdoor time for rambunctious children. The ideal time to install that swing would be now. She glanced at the boys who already seemed restless inside the place. Joseph had been busy getting the house ready for her, but their furnishings were still few at the moment. The only two items in the parlor were a couch

and a small table. Beds, a couple of dressers, a kitchen table and chairs were about it for the rest of the house, but it would suit for now. She and Joseph had the rest of their lives to fill the place. Thankfully, she knew a few people in town who didn't need their old furniture anymore. Perhaps taking used furniture wasn't something every new bride dreamed of, but as she watched the youngest boy jumping on the couch, she decided used furniture was good for children.

"That's enough, Ben," she said and pulled the energetic toddler off the sofa. She set him on the floor. "Let's not destroy things until we've had them for awhile." Then she paused. Just how long was "awhile" to a child? And just how much would a two year old understand if she explained it anyway? Finally, she said, "Jump outside instead."

She urged the boy toward the kitchen where Bob and Doug had set out the utensils and dishes. They were currently sitting around the table and openly drooling at the pancakes, eggs, and hash browns on it.

"Can we eat now?" Bob asked, grabbing his stomach. "I'm starving."

"Me too," Doug agreed.

"No," she said and set Ben into the highchair. "You have to wait for your pa and Charles." She picked up the wooden tray and turned it over. "How does this thing work anyway?"

Ben giggled and tried to hop back onto the floor, but she stopped him.

Bob got off his chair and went over to her. He took the tray and, in one swift motion, locked the tray into place. "There." Then he promptly returned to his seat.

"It's easy," Doug said.

She rolled her eyes. "Sure, it is." *If you've done it a bunch of times already.* "You'll have to show me later." Her own growling stomach notified her that she wasn't in the mood to go through a step-by-step instruction on getting the tray in place. She would

wait. She turned to the pitcher on the work table and filled the glasses with water. “I’ll make tea punch later today. Water is boring.”

“Tea punch?” Bob’s eyes lit up. “We haven’t had that since Ma died. Our other ‘ma’, I mean.”

She turned her gaze to him and smiled. “I’m sure she did a fine job of making it.”

Joseph entered the kitchen, carrying Charles with him. “Well, he didn’t want to use the privy or chamber pot. I’m afraid you’re stuck with diapering another one. Got enough cloths ready?”

The question wasn’t how many clean cloths she had on hand; it was if she could get them to stay on right. She glanced at Doug who had worked through the process with Ben. As long as he continued to help, she could manage it. Not feeling as brave as she sounded, she replied, “I’ll be fine.”

He set Charles in the chair next to Doug and went over to kiss her. “You look wonderful this morning.”

The way he smiled at her made the heat rise in her cheeks. Even if he didn’t say it, she knew the message in his eyes—he couldn’t wait for night to come. Clearing her throat, she decided that she couldn’t keep looking at him and sound calm. The boys were just children, after all, and they didn’t need to know how his touch and kiss affected her.

“Breakfast is ready,” she said.

She cleared her throat again. So that wasn’t as smooth as she’d planned. She was doing just fine until he entered the room. Now she was a bundle of nerves. And she couldn’t wait until they were alone either. But now it was day and time to focus on the tasks at hand.

“It looks great,” Joseph replied.

“Can we eat now? I’m going to die if I don’t get some food!” Bob groaned and clutched his stomach again.

“You are not going to die.” Joseph turned to the work table to collect the glasses and helped her set out their drinks.

“Ma’s going to make tea punch today!” Doug said as he took the cup of water Margaret handed him.

“That will be a treat,” Joseph said. “We haven’t had that in a long time. I tried to make it once, but I couldn’t remember the right amount of rich sweet cream to use.”

“A half pint if you use a pint and a half of tea,” Margaret replied.

“We’re sure glad you’re here,” Bob piped up. “He can’t make tea punch or cook right.”

“You survived, didn’t you?” Joseph asked, grinning despite his reproving tone.

“Barely,” Bob teased.

Margaret sat down and waited for Joseph to sit and say grace before she allowed the boys to start passing the plates around, careful that Ben and Charles didn’t grab them. She didn’t know how much they would eat so she let Joseph select their portions.

“I’m looking forward to tomorrow when I start at the paper,” Joseph told her from across the table as he cut into his eggs.

“Are you staying here today, Pa?” Doug asked.

“No. I have to deliver supplies for the mercantile.” He took a bite of his food and swallowed before telling her, “I agree with Bob. The food is much better now that you’re cooking it.”

“Thank you,” Margaret replied, glad he approved.

“I like it too!” Bob and Doug added.

“And thank you,” she told them before she handed Ben a pancake which he ripped apart with his hands. Startled, she pulled his hands down from his face so he didn’t stuff his mouth.

Joseph chuckled. “I should have sat next to him.”

A Husband for Margaret

“Well, I have to learn how to do this sooner or later,” she said as she removed all the pieces he’d made and gave him one that was safe. “There. He won’t choke on that.”

“He’s such a baby,” Bob said, shaking his head and rolling his eyes before he gulped down some water.

“You did the same thing at his age,” Joseph pointedly replied. “I remember the first time your ma left me alone to feed you. I gave you oatmeal and a spoon. You got food everywhere.”

“Oh no, not this story again,” Bob muttered to her.

She winked at him. “Thankfully, you’re a big boy now.”

“It’s amazing we survived at all under Pa’s care,” Doug added with a hint of amusement in his eyes. “All we ate was oatmeal.”

“Oatmeal’s easy,” Joseph said.

Bob looked at her. “You see why we needed a ma?”

“Now, your pa does a lot too,” she argued. “Why, today he’s going to deliver things, and then he’ll get paid. That’s how you can get food on your plate, you know. Not everyone grows their own food. Some day you’ll be the ones going out and making money to buy food at the mercantile.” Her gaze turned to Joseph. “Will you be gone all day?”

“Only until three,” he replied.

“Can we come?” Bob asked.

“I’m afraid not. Work isn’t a place for children.”

“You took us to the newspaper office in Dayton.”

Joseph cut into his pancakes. “Yes, but that was only when your uncle and grandparents couldn’t watch you. And there was no way I was going to let Miss Potter do it.”

That caught Margaret’s attention. She handed Ben another piece of pancake. “What is it about her you don’t like?”

Joseph’s eyebrows furrowed, as if he was trying to decide the best way to answer her. Fiddling with his fork, he shrugged. “I’m not sure. I just knew she was never meant to be my next wife, that’s all.”

“She’s mean, Pa,” Bob said. “She’s nice to you, but she hates us.”

“Yep,” Doug agreed, polishing off his plate. “She said we were meant to be seen and not heard.” He turned his head in Margaret’s direction. “Can you imagine that?”

Joseph cleared his throat and looked at her. “Hannah, Debra, and I grew up together, and I married Hannah.”

“That’s our first ma,” Bob unnecessarily said.

Joseph didn’t need to add anymore. Margaret got the picture. Debra had wanted to marry Joseph, but Hannah did instead. Naturally, she thought it was her turn, and now Margaret was the new Hannah.

Even if Joseph didn’t seem to welcome Debra’s attentions, Margaret thought it might be flattering, at the very least, to have two women wishing to be with him at the same time. Margaret knew that had been one of her childhood fantasies. Two young men trying to woo her. She’d struggle to choose the right one, but she figured she’d have a wonderful time making that agonizing decision.

Surely, Joseph must have enjoyed it to a point? She thought to ask what it was like. Jessica said she hated it because it meant she had to hurt someone’s feelings. She wondered if Joseph thought the same before he married Hannah. No. Probably not. He just knew he’d marry her. She still didn’t understand how a man could possibly know something that important early on in his life.

Joseph finished his meal and stood up. “I hate to rush, but I just noticed the time. I don’t want to be late on my first day.”

She blinked and turned her attention to her plate. She glanced around and noticed that she was the only person who wasn’t almost done. Standing up, she decided to finish up her plate once everyone else was taken care of. She set her plate and glass by the sink. “I hope you have a good day.”

A Husband for Margaret

“It’ll be fine.” He placed his dishes in the sink and looked at her. “You think you can manage?” He directed his gaze to the four boys who finished their food with amazing gusto.

“Sure. They’re well behaved,” she replied.

Even as she tried to sound confident, she couldn’t deny the underlying sense of apprehension that crept over her. But she wasn’t sure about the wedding night and that turned out alright. She had no doubt that today would too. It was just a matter of jumping in and doing it.

He didn’t look convinced. “I probably should have asked Ralph Lindon if I could start later this week.”

“You don’t think I can do it?” she asked, surprised that the notion stung her as much as it did. If there was one thing she knew, it was that she didn’t collapse under pressure. Maybe she’d have her moments of weakness, but deep down, she was tough as nails.

Leaning forward, he kissed her. “I didn’t mean to imply that. I remember what it was like for me my first day with them and no one to help. They aren’t as easy as they look.”

“What are you saying, Pa?” Bob asked, letting his fork clatter onto his plate. “Haven’t we been good?”

“We’ve been on our best behavior, just like you ordered,” Doug agreed, looking as indignant as a seven year old could get.

“That’s what I’m worried about,” Joseph mumbled under his breath. Giving them a critical eye, he told them, “And it better stay that way.”

“We’ll help Ma,” Doug said. “We know she can’t do it all herself.”

Margaret’s jaw dropped. What?

“If she can’t manage, we’ll go to the post office and get you,” Doug continued.

“Mercantile,” Bob corrected. “He’s not a post master.”

“Oh, right. Mercantile.” Doug grinned widely at her. “You don’t have to worry. We’ll help.”

She sighed but turned so they wouldn't see her roll her eyes. She was a grown woman for goodness' sakes! Besides, her mother lived three blocks away...should things get out of hand. But she was determined it wouldn't.

Joseph placed his hand on the small of her back and kissed her cheek. "I meant no disrespect and neither do the boys."

Her frustration cooled. "Alright." She gave him a hug. "We'll see you at three."

"Have a good day. Bye, boys."

"Bye, Pa!" Bob yelled as he jumped up from the table, knocking the chair over in the process.

Doug called out to Bob as he bolted for the steps. "You got to stay and help Ma!"

"Oh. Yes." Bob dutifully returned to the table and picked up his dishes.

With a loud sigh, Joseph strode to the front door and grabbed his hat off a hook. "I think it's you who needs a good day," he called out to Margaret as he left.

Ben giggled and grabbed for the tablecloth and pulled on it.

Margaret ran over to him and stopped him before he could drag the remaining dishes so that they fell to the floor.

"Ma, Charles needs a washing." Doug held up Charles' yolk covered hands.

"Just his hands," Bob added.

"Here. Let's go to the pump," Doug told Charles as he practically dragged his brother off his chair.

Charles tripped and fell to the floor. He let out a loud wail, and it was in that instant, Margaret truly began to understand how much work four little boys could be.

Chapter Nine



*B*y the time Margaret got the children out of the house and to the park, she was ready to sit down at the bench. It wasn't that the morning had been a bad one. But she was tired. She considered that some of her exhaustion was due to the little sleep she'd gotten for the past two nights. The night before her wedding, she couldn't sleep much, and last night had been her wedding night. Naturally, all of that led to her inability to sleep.

Now that she was married, she could get settled into a routine, which meant she could relax. It was after lunch, Ben and Charles had been changed, and Bob had found the soccer ball he'd packed. So now the boys were ready to run around and play in the grass.

She sat down on the first bench she found and exhaled. It felt good to get off her feet. It was 1:30. In an hour and a half, Joseph would come home. She glanced over her shoulder and

smiled. Her new home was as quaint as she remembered, and she knew she was going to enjoy living there.

She turned her attention back to the four boys who had gathered around her. Ben bent down to retrieve a rock off the ground and seemed particularly interested in inspecting it. Charles held onto her skirt but watched his older two brothers.

“We should play in that spot,” Bob told Doug, motioning to the patch of grass not too far from her. He glanced at her. “Will you watch us?”

“Yes,” she replied. What else would she do?

“Great. Come on, Doug.”

The two older boys darted for the field, but Ben and Charles remained by her. She picked them up and set them on the bench with her. Ben, however, squirmed right back down to see if he could find more rocks. Charles snuggled up to her, so she put an arm around him. It would take them time to adjust to being with her and their new home.

“Ma! Over here!” Bob called out.

Taking her eyes off of Charles, she looked at Bob who dropped the rubber ball on the ground. He gave her a big smile before he kicked it. Doug didn’t seem as intent on having her watch him while he managed to steal the ball from Bob.

For the moment, no one needed anything. They were content and peaceful. With a sigh, she grinned in amusement as Doug and Bob showed off their skills. She had to admit they were cute.

Ben nudged her in the knee so she glanced at him. He held out a handful of the rocks he’d collected. She wasn’t sure what to do so she waited. Then he dumped the rocks into her lap and resumed his search for more of them. She frowned. Exactly what did he plan to do with them? And how many did he plan to gather?

“I see you went ahead and married *my* Joseph,” came an all-too-familiar voice.

A Husband for Margaret

Margaret's skin bristled. She shouldn't be surprised that Debra Potter decided to stick around, but there was nothing Debra could do at this point. "Why are you here?" Might as well come right out and ask the obvious.

Debra sat next to Margaret and adjusted her hat. She patted Ben on the head. "Hello there, Benny."

"His name isn't Benny. It's Ben," Margaret snapped. "And I don't recall inviting you to sit with me."

She shrugged and tugged on the sleeves of her dress. "I don't recall asking."

Margaret's cheeks flushed with anger.

"As for Benny... I've been calling him that ever since he was born." She shot Margaret a pointed look. "I was there when all of these children were born. I know them better than you do."

"I don't see what that has to do with anything. Joseph made his choice—"

"As silly as it was."

"Silly or not, the matter is done. There's no going back and undoing any of it."

"It's not fair." Debra crossed her arms and glared at her. "I've known him forever. I grew up with him. I used to bake him cookies and give him a cool glass of lemonade when it was hot outside. I was always there to offer him anything he needed."

"So you made a pest of yourself."

She gasped and put her hand up to her throat. "Why, I did no such thing."

Margaret shook her head. "I wonder what Hannah thought."

"Hannah was my dearest, closest friend."

"I'm sure." Margaret didn't hide her sarcasm. If Debra was this annoying to her—a stranger, then she had no doubt she was unbearable to poor Hannah.

"It's true."

Margaret rolled her eyes.

“Fine. Don’t believe me. But I’ll tell you something. It was her dying wish that I’d take care of Joseph and his children. Do you think it’s right to interfere with a woman’s dying wish?”

“Joseph is an adult. He can make his own decisions.”

Ben placed another handful of rocks into Margaret’s lap and resumed his search for more. This time, however, the quest took him further from the bench, which was a good thing, Margaret decided, because it meant that he didn’t have to bear the ravings of the lunatic sitting next to her.

Margaret nudged Charles. “Why don’t you play ball with Doug and Bob?”

Charles seemed reluctant but got off the bench and took his time going to the two boys who laughed as they kicked the ball down the lawn.

Margaret turned so she was facing her opponent. “I don’t know what you hope to accomplish by bugging me. The vows have been said and the marriage sealed, so there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Debra frowned. “You’ll give up. I’ve seen how much work those children are, and you’ll run off as soon as things get rough.”

“You underestimate me. I’m not one to give up easily.”

“You don’t know a thing about children. You’re in over your head. Right now, they’re on their best behavior because you’re new. But what’ll happen when they get used to having you around?”

“Then I’ll also get used to them and be able to adjust accordingly.”

Debra cackled as if that was the funniest thing she’d ever heard. “Oh my dear, Margie—”

“Margaret.”

She shrugged. “You are quite the optimist, aren’t you?”

Hardly. But what did Debra know about her? It wasn’t that Margaret considered herself a pessimist. No. She rather

fancied the term ‘realist’ to describe her. But she did know the proper term to describe a woman like Debra who insisted on wiggling into another woman’s marriage. Being a lady, of course, held Margaret’s tongue in check. Taking a deep breath, she finally said, “You are welcome to leave.”

From across the field, Charles let out a loud scream while Bob pushed him to the ground.

Startled, Margaret bolted to her feet. The rocks on her skirt went tumbling onto the grass, and Ben, who had just collected another handful and was on his way back to her, dropped his new rocks to the ground, threw back his head, and wailed in utter despair.

“What did you do that for?” Margaret asked Bob who held onto the ball.

“He isn’t in the game!” Bob called out.

“I told him to go over there and play with you.”

“You did? But why? He’s just three. He can’t play good.”

“But you’re his brother.”

He looked at her as if he had no idea why that should make any difference.

“Just play with him,” she said. “You’re brothers and that makes you friends.”

Doug and Bob glanced at each other and shook their heads.

“Do it!” she demanded.

Bob sighed and dropped the ball in front of Charles who stopped screaming and grabbed it.

From behind her, Debra chuckled. “You really are not prepared for this.”

“Don’t you have someone else you can annoy?” Margaret snapped.

Then she spun on her heel and picked up a still wailing Ben who pointed to the rocks. Sighing, she placed him back

down and helped him collect his rocks. She handed them to him, relieved that he was, once again, smiling, and led him back to the bench. She gritted her teeth when she realized Miss Potter was watching everything in obvious amusement.

She didn't know whether she should find another bench or haul the boys back home. Another part of her wondered why she should have to go anywhere. She'd been here first. Debra was the one who interfered in this pleasant afternoon. Crossing her arms, she narrowed her eyes at the other woman and got ready for a confrontation of the likes which Debra had never seen.

Just as she was about to let Miss Potter have it, a rubber ball hit her in the backside and a boy tackled her. She stumbled and, unable to find her footing, fell back until she landed in the grass.

A shrill laugh cut through the apologies of Bob and Charles. Ignoring them, she turned her attention to Connie James and groaned. As if it wasn't bad enough to fall in front of Debra! She had to deal with prissy Connie James too?

Bob and Doug held their hands out to Margaret. "We're sorry, Ma," Bob said. "Can we help you up?"

Connie nudged her good friend, Maureen Brown, in the side and whispered something in her ear.

Debra glanced at Connie and then turned her attention back to Margaret and snickered.

Face flushed with anger, Margaret decided she'd had enough. She got to her feet and straightened her skirt. "If you have a comment to make, the least you can do is say it to my face."

Debra's eyebrows rose, as if surprised.

Connie and Maureen looked at Margaret.

"Well?" Margaret demanded, not hiding the irritation in her voice. When they didn't speak, she continued, "If you have the nerve to laugh and whisper in front of me, then you might as well get on with it!"

A Husband for Margaret

“Don’t give our ma trouble,” Bob said, clinging to her hand.

Debra frowned.

“Yeah,” Doug agreed. “We like our new ma. She made cookies and tea punch.”

Then Debra grinned. “Bribing them to be good, are we?”

Connie shook her head. “Giving children sweets. I hope you gave them something healthy like an apple while you were filling them up with sugar.”

“I suppose that is how she gets them to behave,” Debra said.

Connie and Maureen turned appreciative gazes in Miss Potter’s direction. “An astute observation,” Connie said.

“Very,” Maureen agreed.

Debra shot Margaret a triumphant look.

Bob moved so he was in front of Margaret. “We don’t care what you think. She’s a good ma.”

Connie clucked her tongue. “That boy has a mouth on him.”

“Disrespectful,” Maureen said.

“They wouldn’t do that if they were mine,” Debra added.

“My Peter never spoke that way when he was that age,” Connie said. “In fact, he doesn’t do that now as an adult. Mrs. Connealy, you would do well to keep those children in line.”

“To be fair to her,” Debra began, “she had them thrust upon her when she posted an ad for a husband. She is ill-equipped for motherhood.”

Connie frowned. “What kind of woman has to post an ad for a man? I heard this was the case but thought it was mere hearsay.”

“It’s sad, Connie,” Maureen told her friend. “There’s no need to remind her to the depths she had to go to in order to secure a man.”

“I just never heard of that being necessary, that’s all.” Connie shrugged. “Poor thing, really.”

Margaret gritted her teeth and got ready to tell all three hags exactly what they could do with their opinions when Doug tugged on her hand.

“Uh...Ma?”

She looked down at him.

“I think Charles needs a bath,” he said.

She turned around and noticed that Charles’ recent bowel movement was trickling down his leg.

Bob’s eyes widened. “Oh, we forgot to tell you. He’s allergic to cow’s milk. He can have goat’s milk though.”

With little else to do but take care of the immediate problem, Margaret picked up Ben who had a few pebbles in his mouth. Startled, she swept the small rocks out of it. He, naturally, didn’t like this because he threw his head back and cried right into her ear. She braced herself against the loud screaming and went over to Charles so she could take his hand.

“Let’s go home,” she told him.

“We’ll help you, Ma!” Doug said.

“Yep.” Bob added, tucking the ball under his arm. “We’ve been through this before. We’ll show you how to give him a bath.”

Aware that they had an audience and deciding not to lose her temper in front of the children, Margaret led everyone back to the house which was, thankfully, across the street so Charles didn’t get too messy. She could feel the women’s disapproving eyes bearing into her back.

Even as her face flushed red with anger, she felt tears sting her eyes. But she refused to let them see how their words affected her. One thing she knew was that it was a mistake to let anyone know how much they could hurt her because then they’d know her weakness. If Debra Potter knew her weakness, she would undoubtedly use that to her advantage in the future. And if there

A Husband for Margaret

was one thing she wouldn't give Debra Potter, it was more ammunition for her attacks.

Once she got the boys into the house, she opted to close the door quietly, even though she wanted to slam it in frustration. As great as the temptation was to look back and through the window to see if they were still watching, she didn't. Nor would the children give her time to. While Doug ran to retrieve the tub, Charles bent down to touch his wet pants. Well, it was time to get to work.

She made a mental note to never give Charles cow milk again.

Chapter Ten



*M*argaret wiped the sweat from her brow as she bathed Charles. Charles giggled, filled the cup with water, and dumped it on his head. This sent him into another round of giggles before he filled the cup again. She breathed a sigh of relief and turned from the metal tub set to the side of the kitchen.

“Doug, can you hand me that towel?” she called out.

She went to the other tub and added more soap to the hot water before she scrubbed Charles’ pants on the washboard.

Doug dutifully came over to her with the towel in his hands.

She motioned for him to give the towel to Charles when Bob came running into the room. “Ben’s on the work table!”

A glance over her shoulder showed her that, sure enough, Ben had dragged a chair across the floor and was standing up on the table. Without a thought, she dropped the pants and rushed to get Ben down, but it was too late. He’d already reached up on

a nearby shelf and pulled down the canister of sugar. As she pulled it out of his arms, the lid popped off and some of the brown sugar settled to the table and floor. Before Ben could bend down to lick it off the table, she put the canister down, picked him up and placed him in the highchair.

“Doug, how do I get this tray in?” she asked.

She struggled to make the thing fit, even as Ben squirmed out of his seat. She grunted and set him back down just in time for Doug to reach her and latch the tray into place. She took a deep breath to settle her nerves. Alright. She’d get Charles out of the bath and dressed. Then she’d tackle the sugar.

“Uh...Ma?” Bob placed Charles’ new clothes on the kitchen table.

“What?” She spun around in time to see Bob pointing to Charles who was dumping cupfuls of water out of the tub. “Charles! Stop!”

She avoided the sugar-coated floor and hastened to the happy boy.

“Here’s the towel, Ma.” Doug shoved it in her face as she took the cup from Charles.

She stared at the towel and tried to decide what to do first. Did she take care of Charles or the large puddle on the floor? Everything was happening so fast. If everything would just stop for one moment, she could figure out how to best do what and in what order.

“Get more towels for Ma,” Doug told Bob.

Bob bounded out of the room, and before she could warn him to avoid the sugar, he jumped over the spot. She breathed a sigh of relief. At least one thing was going right! The last thing she needed was to track sugar through the house. She took the towel and mopped up the floor as best as she could. Then when Bob returned, once again jumping over the sugar, she got Charles out of the tub and dried him off.

Someone knocked on the front door and she groaned. Of all times, why did someone have to stop by now?

"I'll get it, Ma!" Doug bounded out of the kitchen.

She wiped the sweat from her face with the towel and threw it down so she could put a clean diaper on Charles. Granted, the kitchen table probably wasn't the best place to do this, but the floor was still damp.

Bob shook his head. "You pinned it in wrong. It should go the other way."

Sighing, she removed the safety pin and turned it over so she could insert it through the cloth. Sure enough, the hold was more secure. She picked up the other safety pin and got ready to put it into the other piece of the cloth at Charles' hip when a man and woman entered the kitchen.

"They said they have some pots you will want to buy," Doug said, following them.

"What?" Margaret pricked her finger, rubbed it against her thumb, and tried to get the pin through the fabric again. She glanced at the couple. "May I help you?"

The woman raised her eyebrows. "Is that child still in diapers?"

Margaret immediately felt like shoving the couple out of the house. Really, wasn't she having enough to deal with without putting up with the woman's shocked tone? She finished fastening the pin and gave the woman a look she was sure expressed her annoyance at the question. "Did you come here to ask what I do with my children?"

"No," Doug piped up. "They want to sell you pots."

The man smiled. "We apologize, ma'am. The boy is right. We represent the Anderson Kitchen Supply Company, and we thought you might be interested in new cookware."

Charles sat up, so she quickly grabbed a shirt and put his arms through the sleeves.

“I have enough pots,” she replied, wishing they would leave.

“We offer more than that,” the man continued. “We also sell baking pans and kettles.”

The woman nodded. “We also offer pot hooks. I notice you don’t have any in this kitchen. If you had some hooks, it would clear up some of that shelf space. I have a couple I use in my own kitchen, and I don’t know what I’d do without them.”

“It does save up a lot of room,” the man agreed.

Margaret buttoned the boy’s shirt, glad that her focus was on the task at hand because, otherwise, she might not be able to hold her temper in check. She hated salespeople. If she wanted to buy kitchenware, she’d go to the mercantile.

Doug and Bob stared at the couple while Ben made raspberry noises.

“I am fine with what I have,” she finally said, realizing she had to say something. She stood Charles on his feet and got the pants ready for him to put on. He held onto her shoulders as she instructed him to place his foot into the pants. “I don’t need the extra room.”

“May I check your cookware?” the woman asked, already stepping to the side of the table and toward the shelves.

“No!” Margaret took Charles into her arms, even as his pants dangled on him, so she could dart in front of the irritating woman. “I’m sorry, but in case you haven’t noticed, I’m busy. I have a houseful of children to take care of, and the last thing I need is for you to go through here and tell me what’s wrong with my pots and pans.”

The woman’s eyes grew wide and she let out a light gasp. “I certainly didn’t imply to overstep my bounds. I thought as a woman who does a lot of cooking, I might offer some advice on a better set of cookware.”

Charles kicked his legs until the pants flew off of him and onto the sugar that was still on a part of the floor.

“Oh my,” the woman said, just noticing the mess. “You certainly do have your hands full. Are you sure you can handle all of this? I do know a nanny who might be a big help.”

That’s it. Margaret couldn’t take it anymore. “I would be able to do this if I didn’t have unwanted company trying to sell me something I don’t need or want.”

The woman blanched. “There’s no need to be rude.”

“Rude? You come in here and insult the way I take care of my children while you try to make a sale, and you call me rude?”

The woman stared at her as if she couldn’t believe her ears.

The man cleared his throat. “We’ll leave you to your work, ma’am.” He took something out of his briefcase. “You might like to check our catalogue. At your convenience of course.” He set it on the kitchen table. “Come along, Mildred. We’ll try the house next door.”

Mildred gave one last look around the room and muttered, “My children were out of diapers when they were two,” before she left the house with the man.

“I’ll get one of Ben’s pants, Ma. Charles can still fit ‘em.” Bob ran off down the hall.

“I can wash up the pants,” Doug said. “I helped Pa with this. I know what to do.”

Overwhelmed, she glanced around the kitchen. Never in her entire life had she ever felt that everything was out of control.

Bob returned with the pants. “I’ll watch him, Ma. Go ahead and clean up the sugar.”

She stared at Bob as he told his younger brother to hold onto him so he could help him into the small pants. Then she turned her gaze to Doug who started scrubbing the pants along the washboard. Ben banged on his highchair but laughed when Charles fell down while Bob tried to get the pants around his

A Husband for Margaret

waist. Finally, she went to the drawer and pulled out a clean cloth. As she pumped the water to wet it down, her tears started to fall.

When Joseph came home, he noticed that everything seemed to be in order. Doug and Bob were quietly playing on the porch with some jacks. The house was quiet.

“Is everything alright?” he asked his sons.

“Sure, Pa,” Bob said. “We helped Ma, just like you said.”

For some reason, something seemed to be off. “Where is she?”

Doug shrugged. “She said she needed a moment alone. We promised to play nicely out here, so she let us out.”

“Where are Charles and Ben?” he asked.

“Sleeping. They just settled down.”

“You boys be good out here.”

“Of course, we will, Pa. Ma’s gone through enough.”

That’s what he was afraid of. Joseph entered the house and hung his hat on the hook by the door. He shouldn’t have gone to work until Margaret had time to adjust to being a mother. At the time he agreed to start right away, his sole thought was getting a steady paycheck as soon as possible.

“Margaret?” he called out as he walked through the house. Everything was in order. The parlor and kitchen were clean. He glanced in the children’s room and saw that Charles and Ben were fast asleep. He wasn’t surprised since they had a busy day with the wedding and stayed up later than usual last night. He turned his attention to his bedroom. “Margaret?”

She quickly turned over on the bed so he couldn’t see her face.

He wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard a snuffle. Sighing, he went over to the bed and walked to her side, but she turned the

other way, blocking his view of her face. He sat down behind her and touched her shoulder. "Margaret, what is it?"

She shook her head and buried her face into her pillow.

"Margaret?" he softly asked.

"I'm a failure," came a muffled sob.

"No, you're not."

"You weren't here."

She started rambling, but he couldn't make out what she was saying into her pillow so he gently rolled her over. "What happened?"

She brought a well-used handkerchief to her eyes and dabbed them. "Who is Debra Potter?"

The question surprised him. "Did she come over here?"

"She found me and the boys at the park and gave me a hard time. Why does she want to marry you so badly?"

He groaned. "I hoped she would leave town since we married." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. When it came to Debra, it seemed that a headache was inevitable. "I don't know why she wants to marry me. Hannah never liked her. We all grew up together, but Hannah made it a point to avoid her. I didn't even know she was interested in me until I started courting Hannah."

"Did you ever tell her that you don't want her?"

"Well, I proposed to Hannah instead of her, and I married you yesterday. I don't know how much more obvious I can be in how I feel about her."

Though he dreaded it, it looked like he was going to have to find her and tell her to go back to Ohio. Just the thought of seeing her made him queasy. What did he ever do to deserve being followed by a woman who couldn't take no for an answer?

He rubbed Margaret's arms. "I'll see what I can do about getting rid of her. Did she mention where she's staying?"

"No. And I don't care."

A Husband for Margaret

He offered her a sympathetic smile. “Did anything else go wrong today?”

She shrugged and sniffled again. “There were a couple of other women who came by the park, and—” Her lower lip quivered as tears filled her eyes. “I’m not a good mother.”

He dug into his breast pocket and pulled out a clean handkerchief to give her. “Why do you say that?”

“Well...” She took the handkerchief and wept into it. “So much happened so fast. I thought I had control over everything. But then Charles had an accident, Ben got into the canister of sugar, and Bob and Doug tried to help but things just got worse. Then people came by to sell cookware, and the woman suggested I needed a nanny. I can’t do anything right.”

“Everyone’s settled down now,” he softly said, lightly brushing some stray strands of hair from her face. “You succeeded, sweetheart.”

“Oh sure. Just in time for you to come home.”

He laughed. “Hannah used to say the boys had a way of knowing when I was going to be here because things fell into place right before I walked through the front door.”

“She’s right. They do know, and what’s scary is that I didn’t even have to tell them.”

Sighing in sympathy, he helped her sit up. He gathered her into his arms and let her lean against him. “I’ve been there. I know what it’s like. You did better than I did the first time I had to be alone with them.”

She glanced up at him. “Really?”

“Yes. You have the house looking nice and everyone is clean. When it was me and the boys, I didn’t get around to feeding them supper until nine at night. I spent so many hours running after them. I don’t know how you women do it.”

She wiped her nose with the handkerchief. “You’re not just saying this to make me feel better?”

“No, I’m not. It’s not easy to take care of four children. The kids are happy and the house is in order. You did well today.”

She relaxed and smiled. “They are good boys. Even with the way everything was around here, they were trying to help me, especially Doug and Bob.”

“Well, they want to make their ma happy.” He kissed her cheek and stroked her back. “It’ll get better as you get used to it.”

“You think so?”

“It did for me. And I had no idea what I was doing.” He cupped her face in his hands. “You did great, Margaret. Try not to be so hard on yourself, alright?”

She nodded. “I’ll try.”

“Good.” He gave her a kiss, and since the boys weren’t around, he lingered at her lips. She was such a good woman, and it occurred to him that she didn’t know her worth. When he ended the kiss, he said, “I don’t trust my children with just anyone. Their well-being was my biggest concern, and now yours is too. I’m sorry Debra gave you a hard time. If I see her, I’ll tell her to go back to Ohio.”

“Thank you, Joseph.”

“I’ll have Sunday off, and we can all go out to the park as a family.”

“I’d like that.”

The front door opened and Bob and Doug entered the house and talked about what they thought their new ma would make for supper.

She chuckled. “Their minds are always on food.”

“They’re growing boys.” He grinned at her, glad to see her happy again. After he helped her to her feet, he gave her a quick kiss. “I’ll keep the boys out of your hair while you cook.”

She thanked him again, and they left the bedroom.

Chapter Eleven



Two days later, Margaret was sitting on the porch swing Joseph had put up, and she had Ben and Charles down for a nap while Doug and Bob were playing tag in the front yard. She had decided to work on sewing a pattern into one of the pillowcases she was making for her new family. She thought Bob might like a design of his soccer ball, so she was currently filling in that pattern with her brown thread. Next, she would sew his name into it.

“Hello, Doug and Bob,” a familiar voice called out.

Margaret looked up and smiled as Jessica waved to the boys and walked up the porch steps. She moved aside and placed her sewing basket next to her feet. “I didn’t think you’d be in town this soon,” she told Jessica. “I’ve hardly seen you since you married Tom.”

Jessica’s face glowed as she sat next to her. “I just found out I’m expecting a baby!”

Margaret’s jaw dropped. “So soon?”

“It’s been a month.”

“Well...yes...but that hardly seems like enough time.”

She giggled. “It is though. I missed my monthly flow. I was supposed to get it yesterday, but it’s still not here.”

“You might be late.”

“No.” She waved her hand and shook her head. “I’ve never been late.” Grabbing Margaret’s arm, she squealed, “Isn’t this exciting? Maybe you’ll soon be expecting too! Then we’ll have our children together.”

Margaret’s eyes grew wide in horror. Her gaze darted to Doug and Bob and she thought of the two sleeping inside the house. Oh goodness. She was doing good to handle the ones she already had. The last thing she needed was another one!

Jessica gave a contented sigh and sat back in the swing. “You must have a wonderful time out here.”

It took her a moment to respond as she thought over her friend’s statement. “It is wonderful,” she admitted, glancing at the pillowcase in her hands. She recalled how excited the boys were to see that they were going to have their very own pillowcases. She smiled at the memory. “They are terrific children.” And they were. They didn’t knowingly get into trouble and did all they could to help her. “But sometimes, I get overwhelmed. It’s a lot of work.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“It’s exhausting at times. I don’t regret my decision, but I don’t know if I could handle another one.”

Jessica placed her hand on her arm and squeezed it. “God won’t give you anymore than you can handle.”

“You weren’t here a couple days ago when that horrible Miss Potter, Connie James, and Maureen Brown insinuated that I was a horrible mother.”

“Miss Potter? Didn’t she go back home?”

“Not yet. She thinks I’ll take off running and leave her with Joseph.”

“Why, that’s horrible!”

“I saw her at the park an hour ago, probably seeing if I was there to badger.” Her cheeks flushed with a mixture of shame and anger. She purposely avoided the park just because she didn’t want another confrontation, and she couldn’t remember a time in her life when she let anyone keep her at home. “I wish she would go. Joseph ran into her yesterday and suggested she return to Ohio, but she’s taken a job cleaning houses.” Her frown deepened. “I wish I knew what I could do to get rid of her.”

Jessica sighed and patted her hand. “I’m sorry, Margaret.”

“Why? It’s not your fault.”

“You know what I mean. I hate to see you upset.”

She pulled the needle through the pillow case and shrugged. “I thought my problems would be over when I finally married, but who can anticipate a Debra Potter?” She sighed and glanced at her friend. “You’re lucky that Tom didn’t have any other women chasing him.”

“How were you to know this would happen?”

She couldn’t know, she realized. Neither could Joseph. What other woman made the trip across the country to pursue a man who didn’t want her? In many ways, Debra spooked her. “That woman needs another man to latch onto.”

“She needs someone she can control,” Jessica added. “Then she can spend all her time bending him to her will.”

“Joseph would never allow it. Don’t get me wrong. He’s a wonderful man, but I can’t see him letting anyone dictate his life for him.” Which was exactly the way a man should be. How else could he be the head of the household? And since he managed to lead with gentleness and care, Margaret certainly had no complaints. “He’s worth it though. I mean, having Debra lurking around, just waiting for me to bolt out of here. It isn’t what a wife dreams of, but if this is the worst of it, I suppose I’m doing pretty good.”

Jessica looked amused.

Margaret furrowed her eyebrows. "What?"

"You were looking at the glass half full instead of half empty. I never thought I'd see the day when that happened."

Margaret playfully swatted her friend on the arm. "Oh, really. I'm not that bad."

"No?"

"No. Granted, I have my moments, but I can see the good side to things."

"I suppose now that you're happily married that's the case. It's amazing what love can do for a woman, isn't it?"

Margaret felt a grin tug at her lips as she shrugged.

"Anyway, I ran into Connie James on my way here. She caught me coming out of the doctor's office and guessed why I was there."

She put the pillowcase down and looked at her friend in interest. "And?"

"She insinuated that this child should have been her grandchild. You know, she might have accepted my marriage to Tom on the surface, but I don't think she ever forgave me for it. Even if her son didn't love me, she wanted grandchildren in the worst way."

"Well, be glad you're not giving her grandchildren. That woman is absolutely dreadful. She'd be dictating what you can do with them and when," Margaret said, recalling the way Connie mocked her mothering skills at the park. "What Connie needs is a daughter-in-law who'll put her in her place." Then her eyes lit up and she nudged Jessica in the side. "I bet that Debra Potter would give her a run for her money!"

Jessica gasped. "Oh, you can't mean to stick Connie James with the likes of Debra."

"Why not?"

"Well, it's...it's..." Jessica shrugged.

"I think in some ways, Debra might force the old coot to relinquish the stronghold on her son, don't you agree?" Granted,

it would probably be a transfer of control. Peter would still be under a woman's thumb. She furrowed her eyebrows. "Don't you think Peter likes to be told what to do? I mean, he's not exactly eager to cut those apron strings, is he? Some people actually prefer to have their lives mapped out for them."

"I'm not going to be any part of this, Margaret."

"Fine. Then don't be a part of it."

For Jessica, it wasn't a big deal. But Jessica didn't have to deal with a woman who had the desire to break up her marriage and run around telling other people how incompetent Margaret was as a mother. Margaret figured if she could get Debra's mind off of Joseph, then the other pieces would naturally fall into place. What Debra needed was a man who'd be happy with a woman like her. It was just a matter of how Margaret could get the ball rolling.

Groaning, Jessica crossed her arms and shook her head. "I don't know if I like that look on your face."

Margaret turned wide, innocent eyes in her friend's direction. "What look?"

"You know what look I'm talking about. It was the same look you had when you were ready to get even with Phillip McPherson in grade school."

"I got even with him because he put that rat in your desk."

"Yes. And that's how we became such good friends."

Margaret smiled, her mood improving. "Well, someone had to put him in his place. He didn't mess with you after that."

She sighed. "I suppose I owe you one. You got rid of my bully. It's only fair I help you get rid of yours."

Her eyes lit up. "Really?"

"A woman trying to break up my friend's marriage has it coming. But I do feel a tad bit bad for Connie. Sure, the woman is unbearable, but at least she doesn't go barging into people's weddings and trying to convince the bride to get out of her way."

“Oh, Connie will be fine.” Margaret glanced at Doug and Bob as they kicked the ball back and forth. She knew they’d love nothing more than to be assured that Miss Potter wouldn’t be a problem anymore. “I wonder...”

“What?” Jessica sat up straight and leaned forward. “What do you wonder?”

She turned her attention back to her friend. “You know, I will say one thing about children. They can be a big help when they don’t want something, and the last thing they want is Debra around. I bet they wouldn’t mind helping me get her out of their lives for good.”

“Must you involve the children?”

A grin spread across Margaret’s face. “Oh, you bet. She wants to be a mother so badly. I wonder what she’d do if she got the chance. How well would she really handle it?”

Looking uncertain, Jessica said, “What are you thinking?”

Excited, Margaret began to tell her friend her plan.

Chapter Twelve



Two weeks later, Margaret glanced at the four boys as she put on her hat. “Now, you’re sure you know what to do.”

Bob finished putting on his shoes and stood up in the parlor. “Sure, Ma. We can be obnoxious. It’s easy.”

Doug crossed his arms, looking skeptical. “Miss Potter wants Pa. I don’t know if this will work.”

Margaret picked up Ben before he could go running off into the kitchen. “Has she ever taken care of you boys before?”

“No,” Bob said. “Pa wouldn’t let her.”

Perfect. Margaret had gathered as much, but it was nice to get that clarified. She grinned. She couldn’t wait to see how well Debra handled four small rambunctious boys. “You promise not to be on your best behavior like you did with me when I first became your ma?”

“We’re still being good, aren’t we?” Bob asked.

“Not as good as you were that first week but yes. You’re all good boys. Your pa and your first ma did a good job.”

And really, she had no reason to complain. It was still a lot of work—at times overwhelming—but she managed through it. Ben wrapped his arms around her neck and kissed her cheek. She grinned and hugged him back. And this was what made it worthwhile.

Doug grimaced. “I hate being around Miss Potter. Are you sure this will work?”

“Just how bad can you be?” Margaret asked.

“We can be very bad if it means getting her to leave you and Pa alone,” Bob quickly assured her. “When Charles and Ben get into things, we’ll find other things to do.”

“Yeah. We’re not helping her like we did with you,” Doug added.

She raised an eyebrow. “You only help half the time.”

“See? We’ve practiced!” Bob smiled as if that had, indeed, been the plan all along.

“If you say so...” She patted Charles on the arm. When he turned from staring out the front window, she motioned for him to go to the door. “Alright. This is it. The more annoying you can be, the sooner she’ll send for me.”

“That can’t come soon enough,” Doug muttered.

“Why, Doug, that is very kind of you to say.” She opened the screen door and let them step onto the porch before she shut the door behind her. “You know,” she continued, looking at the pessimistic seven year old, “I’m a lot like you. I have a hard time thinking things will work out until they do. That’s why I wasn’t sure about marrying your pa.”

“You weren’t sure about him?” Doug wondered.

“Well, I wasn’t sure if I could handle taking care of all of you. But it’s worked out, hasn’t it?”

“It has,” Bob eagerly replied. He patted his stomach. “And we’ll get cookies for scaring off Miss Potter, right?”

A Husband for Margaret

She chuckled. “Right.” Shaking her head, she started down the porch steps. These boys would do anything if it meant they could have a treat.

The walk down the block to the business district was a pleasant one. The weather was breezy and the sun warmed things up nicely. It was one of those days where she’d love to sit outside and watch the boys play. And she figured if the plan went smoothly, she would be able to do just that soon enough.

“Bob!” she called out to the boy who started across the street without looking both ways. “Get back here and wait for the rest of us.”

“Oh, sorry.” He returned to the edge of the street and waited for them to catch up to him. Looking both ways, he hollered, “No one’s coming!”

“Then we can go,” she replied.

Holding on Ben’s and Charles’ hands, she followed Bob and Doug across the street and motioned for the boys to go left. She smiled at Jessica who waited for them.

As soon as Margaret was in front of the mercantile, Jessica said, “Debra’s at Mrs. Lonny’s house.”

“Is she almost done cleaning it?” Margaret asked.

“I think so. I asked Mrs. Lonny when I could come over for tea, and she said fifteen minutes. That was ten minutes ago.”

“Good. Then it shouldn’t be a long wait.”

Bob tugged on Margaret’s arm. “Can we get a piece of candy?”

“I already promised cookies when we’re done,” she replied.

“I know but I need something sweet now.”

With an inspired look on his face, Doug added, “We’ll make sure it’s sticky and touch her with dirty fingers.”

“Yeah,” Bob agreed. “This will be even better than the time we left those fingerprints for you to clean up on the walls.”

“What?” Jessica asked.

“Two days ago, they got syrup all over the hallway walls,” Margaret told her. “That stuff isn’t easy to clean up.”

Bob shrugged. “We forgot to wash our hands after breakfast.”

“Because you were in a hurry to go outside to play,” she added, good-naturedly. “You didn’t even help me with Charles or Ben.”

“Because we know you can do it.” Bob patted her on the arm. “You’re good at being a ma now.”

“Yep,” Doug agreed. “But we’ll try to help too.”

Margaret figured it was because they were comfortable with her now and took it as a compliment for that reason. But even so, she made sure to add, “Yes, you will still need to help me.”

“We can help if we have candy,” Bob said, looking up at her with wide, hopeful eyes. “Miss Potter doesn’t like sticky fingers.”

“I see your point.” Margaret dug into her purse and handed each boy a small coin. “This better be good.”

“It will be.”

The two boys took the coins and ran into the mercantile. Charles looked as if he was ready to cry, so she called out, “Get something for Charles too!”

That’s all she needed. A screaming child *before* she got to Debra. She knew she was asking for messy children and lots of clean up, but it’d be worth it to get the woman away from her and her family.

Jessica turned from the entrance of the mercantile and offered a wicked smile in Margaret’s direction. “I’ll go pay Mrs. Lonny a visit.”

Margaret nodded. It was time to put her plan into action. As she waited for Doug and Bob to return so she could walk by the boarding house where Debra was staying, she peered into the mercantile. Just what could be taking those boys so long?

A Husband for Margaret

“Hi there, honey. Did you come to do some shopping?”

She spun on her heel, surprised to see Joseph pulling up a horse and wagon in front of the building. “Isn’t today the day you work at the paper?”

“It was supposed to be but Alan’s no longer sick, so I’m back to part-time work over there.” He pulled the brake before getting down. “I’ve been running all over the place, making deliveries and such.” He glanced up and down the boardwalk as he stepped onto it. “Where are the oldest two?”

“Oh. Um...Getting candy.” Her face flushed. Running into him hadn’t been a part of her plan. In fact, she hadn’t told him anything about it. She didn’t think he’d be pleased, but she couldn’t think of any other way to get rid of Debra.

“Pa!” Ben held his hands up.

Joseph bent down and picked up him. “Hey there, peewee.”

She glanced back into the store where Doug and Bob were sorting through the candy display with eager eyes. Just how hard could it be for them to pick out something sticky?

“If you want to shop, I can put your purchase in with the other goods I need to deliver and take you and the boys home,” Joseph said. “They might like a wagon ride.”

“Yay!” Charles agreed, as if on cue.

“Oh, that’s alright,” she quickly replied, her mind anxiously trying to think up a good excuse. “Actually, we were going out for a walk. It’s such a lovely day. It’d be a shame to waste it.”

“It is a beautiful day,” he agreed. “I bet I could take a lunch break and walk with you all.”

“What?” Her eyes grew wide.

“Our house isn’t that far. I’ll have some leftovers. It’ll save on time.”

“But...”

“Podder,” Charles said.

She shot the boy a startled look. If she wasn't careful, the kids would rat her out! "I thought I'd go see Jessica. She's in town today, and we already ate so you should get some of that great pot roast over at the restaurant down that way." She pointed in the opposite direction of the way she expected Debra to be coming.

His face fell. "I suppose I could. You already had lunch?"

"Yes. You didn't miss anything. They were just sandwiches. Boring and bland." She waved her hand and shook her head. "It's not worth the walk home for."

"I don't think your sandwiches are boring or bland."

She inwardly groaned. "Well, these are. I don't put anything good on them. Just a slap of cheese."

"And tomado," Charles added.

"You mean like the sandwich you made on Monday? That was good," Joseph said. "You even baked the bread."

She resisted the urge to put her hand over Charles' mouth so he wouldn't cause her anymore problems.

"But if you have plans to meet your friend, then I can have one of your delicious sandwiches some other time," Joseph said, setting Ben on his feet. "I'll see you when I get home."

Overwhelmed with relief, she laughed. "I'll make you something better than a sandwich."

Giving them a smile, he nodded and went into the store where Doug and Bob were finally paying for their pieces of candy from an amused looking Ralph Lindon who waved to Joseph as soon as he noticed him.

She tensed. Would Doug and Bob give her plan away? She purposely held off on telling them what she wanted until Joseph left for work that morning. Only, he was supposed to work at the paper, not at the mercantile! Otherwise, she would have picked a different street to walk down.

A Husband for Margaret

She bit her lower lip and glanced down the street. No sign of Debra yet. This whole plan was going to go awry if those two boys didn't get out of that store soon.

Doug and Bob talked to their father, and Bob pointed to Margaret and smiled excitedly. Her heart beat frantically in her chest. Oh no. This couldn't be good. Not with the way Bob patted his stomach and pointed to his piece of candy. He was giving her away. She just knew it! And that was when she learned the cold, hard truth. Kids didn't know how to keep a secret.

Chapter Thirteen



Joseph looked over his shoulder and gave her a look of disbelief. Then he said something to the two boys and the three of them headed in her direction. Her hold tightened on Charles' and Ben's hands. Her stomach tensed. She glanced down the street. No sign of Debra Potter.

As soon as Joseph and the boys exited the place, she blurted out, "I can explain."

"I won't allow my children to be with Debra," he said, his tone unusually firm.

She blinked and it took her a good moment before she came up with the perfect response. "Well, these are my children too. That means half the decision goes to me."

"What?"

"When I married you, I became their mother, and that means I get half-rights to deciding what will and will not happen

with them.” She narrowed her eyes at him, daring him to challenge her.

He placed his hands on his hips and met her challenge. “I will take care of Debra.”

“So I keep hearing, but she still makes it a point to come by the park or find me in town to bother me.”

“Ignore her. That’s what Hannah did.”

“Well, I am not Hannah. If you wanted a woman who would handle things Hannah’s way, then you should have married someone just like her.”

He gave a low grunt and looked at the boys who watched them in open fascination. Sighing, he dug into his pocket and gave Doug and Bob one coin each. “Get some more candy.”

“Yes,” Margaret quickly agreed. “And make sure it’s nice and sticky for that horrible Miss Potter.”

“Margaret,” he said through clenched teeth.

Paying no mind to the warning in his tone, she added, “Make it bright too. Something that will show up on a nice dress and be hard to wash out.”

Bob grabbed Doug’s hand and dragged him into the store. “We can get a whole bunch with this coin!”

“But I want to see who’ll win,” Doug argued, unable to stop Bob from shoving him into the doorway.

“Ma, of course.”

Not hiding her smile, she said, “That decides it. We’re doing this my way.”

Taking her by the arm, Joseph led her and the other two boys to a spot further down the boardwalk where they could have some privacy. She continued to hold onto Charles and Ben, taking small comfort in the contact. This was her first confrontation with her husband, and even though she didn’t enjoy it, she was not going to let this issue go. Debra had to be removed from her life, and the sooner, the better.

Appearing as if he had to think over his next words with great care, Joseph finally said, “Debra is my problem. I’ll deal with her.”

“Fine. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll do what I did before. I’ll tell her that you and I are happy and that I will not leave you. Then I’ll suggest she return to Ohio.”

“That’s such a great plan, Joseph. I wonder why it didn’t work the first time?”

“Must you be sarcastic?”

“In this instance, you bet.”

He looked exasperated.

“So Hannah ignored her, and Debra still bothered her, correct?”

He shrugged. “Not so much once the children were born.”

“But I bet she made her life miserable. And before you argue with me, remember that I am a woman and know what it’s like when a woman is after her husband.”

“I never cheated on Hannah and I won’t cheat on you.”

“You’re missing the point. A woman like Debra is a thorn in my side, and the only way to deal with a thorn is to remove it. She won’t go as long as we’re nice to her. What she needs is some shaking up.”

His eyes grew wide. “You’re not going to hurt her?”

“Oh, of course not. I am a lady, after all.” Sure, she’d had her not so ladylike moments in the past, but she never physically attacked anyone. “What I’m going to do is let the kids at her. They can cause a lot of trouble when they want, and I suspect once she gets time with them, she’ll run off screaming.”

He cringed. “But they’re my children.”

“Our children,” she corrected him. Then, realizing this tactic wasn’t working, she opted for another. She gave a slight shrug. “Alright. Fine. I’ll forget the whole thing.”

A Husband for Margaret

He seemed unsure. “Really?”

“Yes. I mean, sooner or later, she’s bound to leave you alone. Someday you’ll die. For sure, she’ll give up then, even if she does stalk your tombstone. At least you’ll be dead and unaware of it. Or I could die. Then you could either post an ad for another wife or search for one like you found me. You know how well moving to another town works. Go for that. Maybe next time, she won’t follow you.”

Grimacing, he consented, “You win. Bob’s right. You win.”

“Good.” She exhaled, feeling her tension subside. Now that this matter was established, she could go about her plan. “You don’t need to fret so much. I won’t be that far away.”

“Exactly what is the plan?”

Her plan had been to tell Debra she needed to make an emergency run to help her ailing mother, but when Margaret caught sight of Debra heading their way and Doug and Bob waiting outside the mercantile with a handful of candy, a better one came to mind.

“Get back to work.” She shot Bob a meaningful look. “Get your pa back in there.”

“I can do that without your help,” Joseph muttered. Even if he agreed to it, it was evident he wasn’t thrilled with the idea.

Bob stopped sucking on a piece of hard candy and yelled out, “Mr. Lindon, Pa’s not working!”

Margaret saw that Debra was in hearing distance. “Play along,” she whispered to Joseph. In a louder voice, she said, “I just can’t take it anymore! I’m moving back home to my parents.” She let go of Charles’ and Ben’s hands and threw her hands up in the air. “You don’t need a wife. You need a maid!”

Ralph stepped out of the mercantile and called out, “Connealy, I’m paying you to work, not gossip.”

Debra, Margaret noticed, had stilled her steps and watched them with open curiosity.

“Fine,” Margaret told a bewildered Joseph, “I suppose you’re strapped to your job.” Then she turned to Debra and gasped. “Oh, what a God send!” She reached for Charles and Ben and hurried them over to the startled woman. “I’ve decided you’re right. You can have Joseph. It’s ‘Hannah this’ and ‘Hannah that’. It’s enough to make a woman scream.” She glanced at the children.

Bob stuck his tongue out at Margaret. “We don’t want you anyway.”

Debra brought her hand up to her mouth and gasped.

“I don’t know what kind of woman Hannah was, but she didn’t teach those children any manners. They’ve been flippanant ever since the wedding.” Margaret nudged Charles and Ben toward the other woman. “I hope you mean it. You know. About being able to discipline them and all. I give up.” She wiped her hands and gave a loud sigh. “What a relief! I feel so free.” She patted Debra on the back, purposely using more force than necessary but not hurting her. “Good luck. You’ll need it.”

“Margaret-” Joseph began.

“Enough dilly dallyin’. I need you to deliver those barrels for me. Pronto,” Ralph ordered.

Margaret glanced at Ralph who winked at her while Bob snickered. Debra was too busy watching Joseph to notice the silent messages exchanged around her. Margaret hid her smile. That particular kid was much too clever for his own good. She didn’t know how Bob got Ralph to join in, but she could ask later.

Joseph gave Margaret a wary look before he stepped toward the mercantile entrance.

Debra made a move to get close to him, but he edged away from her like a scared little mouse and scurried into his safe hole—the mercantile. Margaret rolled her eyes. If that was how Joseph and Hannah handled Debra—by always running from her—it was no wonder Debra wouldn’t leave.

A Husband for Margaret

Bob yanked on Debra's dress with his sticky hand. Debra yelped but Bob didn't let go. "We want the park, new Ma."

"Yeah! We sure do!" Doug chimed in. "Please take us."

"Please!" Bob added.

Soon, Debra was surrounded by a chorus of pleas to go to the park.

"Better you than me," Margaret enthusiastically said and headed off down the boardwalk.

She breathed a sigh of relief. Good. Joseph hadn't stopped her. The plan was still in motion and now she could enact the next part.

Chapter Fourteen



*M*argaret made her way to Connie James' residence but didn't go up to the porch. Instead, she sat on a bench nearby and waited for Jessica to finish her brief visit with Mrs. Lonny. She rehashed exactly what she planned to say when Jessica lured the woman out of her house.

It wasn't too long before Jessica rounded the corner of the block. Margaret stood and hurried to the house next to Connie's so that Connie wouldn't see her. Jessica knocked on the door, holding a quilt that Mrs. Lonny wanted to give Connie. Even if Connie could grieve some people, she managed to be popular. Margaret would never understand it, but then, this served her purpose for this particular moment and she'd use it.

When Connie opened the door, Margaret took a deep breath, straightened her shirt, and got ready for her part. She slipped back onto the sidewalk and pretended to be surprised to see Jessica and Connie.

A Husband for Margaret

“Good afternoon, ladies,” Margaret called out as cheerfully as she could manage. Without waiting for an invitation to join them, she walked up the steps of Connie’s porch and gave a contented sigh. “Isn’t it a wonderful day? It’s just the right day for a nice stroll in the park.”

Connie slowly took the quilt from Jessica and said, “Where are those children?”

“What children?” Margaret asked, adjusting her hat. Folding her hands, she looked pointedly at Connie and waited for her to respond.

“The four boys you’re now a mother to,” Connie reminded her, as if she couldn’t believe she had to spell it out.

She laughed and waved her hand. “Oh, those little hellions? I decided that Miss Potter can have them.”

“You what?” Jessica asked in feigned horror.

Margaret shrugged. “It just didn’t work out. I’m going to post an ad for another man. This time, if one comes off the train with a child, I’m going to send him right back home.”

Connie clucked her tongue and shook her head. “I must say that is in poor taste. You made your vows, and now you’re stuck.”

Margaret shrugged. “Vows are made to be broken.”

Jessica sighed. “That’s horrible.”

Connie nodded. “A woman doesn’t shirk her responsibilities. It’s up to you to be their mother, even if they aren’t as good as my Peter.”

“Speaking of which,” Jessica began, “how is he doing these days?”

“Oh, he’s managing. You broke his heart, you know. The poor man doesn’t come out and say it, but he needs a good woman to cook his meals, clean his house, and have his children.”

Margaret took that as her cue. “Where could such a woman be?”

Connie narrowed her eyes at her. “Certainly not you.”

Margaret scoffed. As if she'd ever be with Connie's son! She might have been desperate, but she wasn't stupid.

"I heard that Debra Potter is available," Jessica chimed in. "She cleans Mrs. Lonny's place."

Connie's ears perked in interest. "Mrs. Lonny let her clean her home?"

"She sure did. I had tea with her just a few moments ago, right after Miss Potter left that house. They seemed to get along well."

Connie seemed to consider Jessica's statement.

"Debra Potter is dreadful," Margaret argued. "Any woman who follows a man across state lines isn't right in the head."

"Come now, Margaret," Jessica admonished. "Mrs. Lonny has nothing but good things to say on her behalf, and you know how particular Mrs. Lonny can be. Why, if she approves of Debra, then Debra would make an excellent addition to someone's family."

Margaret and Jessica turned their gazes to Connie at that moment, and Margaret wondered if Connie would take the bait.

"Mrs. Lonny's opinion carries a lot of weight in this town," Connie said, studying the patterns on the quilt.

"That's the truth of it," Jessica agreed. "She wanted that church painted a nice pearly white and that's the color it is today."

Margaret shrugged. "I suppose Miss Potter would make a fine wife and daughter-in-law to the right family. However, this is not my concern. She is with Joseph's boys at the park, and I'm sure that she'll be a wonderful wife and mother to that chaotic group."

Connie placed the quilt down on the small table by the front door and grabbed her hat. "I hate to rush you two young ladies, but I need to run an errand."

"Oh really?" Jessica looked disappointed. "Well, I'm sorry about Peter."

A Husband for Margaret

Margaret shot her friend a ‘that’s overboard’ look, but Jessica ignored her and watched as Connie put the hat on her head.

“Peter will be fine,” Connie said as she walked onto the porch and shut the door behind her. “Things work out for the best.” She patted Jessica’s hand. “Don’t you trouble yourself. You made a mistake, but there’s nothing to be done about it now. I hold no ill will toward you and neither does he.” Turning to Margaret, Connie asked, “Which park did Miss Potter go to?”

“The one right across from my house,” Margaret replied. When Connie appeared as if she had no idea what Margaret meant, she added, “It’s the one closest to the mercantile.”

“Oh! That one. A lovely spot.” Connie patted both women on the shoulder. “I don’t mean to keep you. Go on ahead and do whatever it is you two do.” Then she bounded down the steps and walked toward the park in long, purposeful strides.

Jessica tapped her foot on the porch. “I don’t know whether to feel sorry for Connie or Debra.”

Margaret rolled her eyes. “They’ll be fine. In fact, they’re going to be very happy. A pair could not be more happily matched.”

“But it’s Peter that Debra’s supposed to be marrying.”

“He’s already married to his mother. This will be an extension of that. I’m telling you Jessica, Peter will like this too. Now, he’ll never have to choose between his mother and another woman again. They’ll work together and decide what he’ll do. It’s perfect.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I am.” Margaret tried to decide when she should head on over to the park to make sure the final pieces fell into place. “I think I’ll go around this block two times and head on back home.”

“You’re not picking up any grocery items like you originally planned?”

“No. I opted for a change in those plans,” Margaret replied. “Thank you for coming through, Jessica.”

“Now we’re even,” Jessica said, smiling.

“Even.”

Then, without a look back, Margaret headed for the sidewalk.

Chapter Fifteen



*B*y the time Margaret made it to the block the outskirts of the park, she didn't know whether to be amused or upset. Joseph had taken it upon himself to hide behind a large tree so he could watch Debra try to talk to Connie while the four boys gave her a hard time. Ben and Charles were crying. Debra held Ben in one arm and bent to pat Charles on the back. Margaret didn't see Doug or Bob right away but quickly noticed that they were in a tree not too far from where Debra sat. She hoped those two knew what they were doing. She made them promise to stick to trees with low branches, and this one seemed safe enough.

But she had more pressing matters to attend to with the man hiding behind another tree. She glanced around and saw that the mercantile wagon was conveniently parked down another street. She shook her head and quietly snuck up behind Joseph before she tapped him on the shoulder.

He jerked around, looking like a kid stuck with his hand in the cookie jar. “It’s not what it looks like.”

Crossing her arms, she glared at him. “Really?”

Straightening up, he cleared his throat—probably trying to save the last shred of male dignity he had left—and said, “I wanted to see what you had planned.”

“Um hmm,” she replied, not believing him.

He sighed. “Fine. A part of me doesn’t trust Debra with the children. I want to make sure they’re alright.” He glanced over his shoulder at Doug and Bob who were calling out to Debra as they swung from the low branches and kicked at each other. “You’re fine with them being in a tree like that?”

Margaret shrugged. “If they fall, the most they’ll get is a couple of bruises.”

“Hannah wouldn’t let them up there, but I always thought that they should. Boys need to climb and feel a sense of danger.”

“Are you avoiding the topic?” She lowered her arms, feeling some of her annoyance settle at the compliment he’d given her, even if it was a roundabout one.

“I really am curious about what you’re going to do. You never told me what it is.”

She studied him, trying to determine his level of sincerity.

Debra shrieked when Bob kicked Doug and Doug fell to the ground, wailing and clutching his arm.

Margaret forced back the laugh as Charles clung to Debra’s dress and Ben grabbed her hat and flung it to the ground. Ben stopped crying and giggled. Connie rushed to retrieve the hat as it blew across the grass. Bob ran off from the tree before Debra could reach Doug who continued to howl as if he were mortally wounded.

“Was that part of the plan?” Joseph asked.

Margaret decided to reveal that much to him. “I told Charles to stay with Debra. As for Ben, he clings to anyone if there’s a new person around, so I knew she’d have to hold him.

A Husband for Margaret

Doug and Bob asked if they could climb a tree as long as they stayed on the lower branches. Then Doug and Bob thought it would be fun to scare Debra by falling and getting hurt, though Doug is really overdoing it.”

“And the other woman?” he pressed.

“That’s Connie James. She happens to have an available son who is Debra’s age.”

“Oh.” His eyes lit up with understanding. “I see. That’s not a bad plan.”

“Thank you.”

Debra bent down to console Doug, but he only wailed louder and cried for Margaret.

“Those boys have grown attached to you,” Joseph commented, pleased.

“I’ve grown rather fond of them as well.” She gave him a pointed look. “I’m dismayed you didn’t trust me in doing what’s best for them.” When she realized Bob was carrying something she didn’t recognize, she patted him on the arm. “We’ll discuss this later. I need to go.”

Margaret emerged from behind the tree and slipped onto the pathway lining the park grounds. When she realized Bob carried an empty wasp’s nest, she stopped for a moment to dumbly watch everyone.

Connie returned with the hat just as Bob reached Debra. Holding out the nest, he asked, “Can I take this home?”

Debra glanced at him, saw it, and screamed.

Bob dropped it in her lap and threw his hands up in the air. “Sorry!”

Debra quickly set Ben on the ground and bolted to her feet as she shook her dress that was marred with streaks of purple and red candy.

Biting her tongue so she wouldn’t burst out laughing, Margaret made her way to them.

“It’s empty!” Bob called out above Debra’s shrill screams. “There’s nothing in there.”

“Yeah,” Doug added, standing up. “And I’m alright. See? I can move my arm just fine.”

Debra grunted in disgust and scampered away from the nest which remained on the ground.

“Ma!” Charles and Ben said as soon as they saw Margaret.

“I am not your mother!” Debra hissed. “I would never be a mother to the likes of you boys.”

“We knew you didn’t like us,” Bob replied.

“Insolent children,” Connie told Debra.

“So I gather you’re not interested in Joseph then?” Margaret asked Debra, stepping right up to everyone. She bent down to pick up Ben and held onto Charles’ hand.

Debra’s face was flushed and she anxiously tucked in stray strands of hair under her hat. “No man is worth all this trouble.” She glanced at the boys and shuddered. “I don’t know how you put up with this, but they obviously need someone to...to...”

“See them to adulthood with as few scrapes as possible,” Connie inserted.

Sighing, Debra nodded. “I’m not up for the task. Perhaps if I had them one at a time... But not like this!”

“That’s the only way to do it,” Connie agreed. “These children are already set in their ways. Margaret, it’s not in my nature to intrude on the affairs of other women, but you did make your vows before God, and it would be wise to keep them.”

“I agree. I’m sorry, Margaret,” Debra said. “I won’t bother you or Joseph ever again.”

Margaret’s eyes grew wide in surprise. Debra Potter was apologizing to her?

“Apparently, my ways are too refined to handle these children,” Debra added.

“A truer statement has never been said,” Connie agreed. “You know, I raised my Peter to be a most upstanding citizen of

this community, and he never did dastardly things like climb a tree or get his hands sticky with candy.” She glanced at Bob who held his hands up and grinned. Shaking her head, she said, “Those children are beyond refinement, Debra. What you need is a man who doesn’t have any yet. Then you marry him and when you do have them, you can start to train them from the very beginning on how to properly behave.”

“Yes, Mrs. James. I gather you’re right.”

“I am. I’m a mother. I know these things. I have a feeling there are better things in your future.” Connie smiled and patted Debra’s hand. “You know, I would be honored if you’d come by my house for a nice dinner tonight.”

Debra looked at her dress and shook her head. “I couldn’t possibly come tonight.”

“Then tomorrow?”

“Yes. That will be fine.”

Grinning from ear to ear, Connie turned to Margaret and said, “Now, you do what’s right and take care of these children.”

Margaret pretended to think about it. “Well...alright. You’ve convinced me. I’ll stay with Joseph.”

Connie nodded. “Good. Do your duty.”

“And good luck,” Debra added with a slight shake of her head as she glanced at the children.

Connie and Debra strolled off together, already discussing Mrs. Lonny and how they knew the woman.

Margaret waited until Connie and Debra were out of hearing distance before she gave the four children a big hug. “You all were wonderful!”

“It worked, just like you said!” Bob cheered.

“It did,” Doug added, amazed.

“You bet it did,” she said. “I knew that Miss Potter was all talk. When push came to shove, she backed off. She won’t be a problem anymore.”

“And we get cookies?” Bob pressed.

“Of course, you do,” she replied, looking over her shoulder to see if Joseph would venture over to them. Sure enough, he was heading in their direction. “You go on and play with Charles and Ben right over there. I need to talk to your pa for a moment.”

They obeyed and she turned her attention to a bewildered looking Joseph. “It worked.”

“Of course, it did.” She raised her eyebrow. “Now, will you trust me to do what’s best for these children?”

“Our children. And yes.” He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. “I’m sorry I gave you a hard time.”

She pretended to think it over and smiled. “As long as it doesn’t happen again, I can overlook this incident.”

“It’ll never happen again.”

“Good.” She jabbed him in the side. “You better get back to work. I didn’t marry you so you could run about town and see what mischief I’m up to.”

He chuckled. “Yes, dear.” He leaned forward and whispered, “You do know I love you, don’t you?”

Blushing, she replied, “I love you too.”

After he gave her another kiss on the cheek, he went over to the boys, and she caught a sudden notion that it might possibly be nice to have another child to welcome into the family. The thought caught her by surprise. She must be crazy to anticipate another one when her hands were already full, but she reasoned that what this family desperately needed was a girl or two to help even things out. As it was, she was horribly outnumbered by the boys.

Yes, she decided. Now that she got the Debra Potter situation resolved, it was time to move onto the next mission: a girl.

Chapter Sixteen



One year later

*M*argaret set down the pancakes on the table already filled with enough food to feed an army. Charles and Ben hovered nearby, watching everything she did with unbridled interest. One boy even patted his stomach in anticipation for the feast to come.

“You boys eat all the time, but looking at your hungry stares, one would swear I never feed you,” she commented with a shake of her head. “When your sister is old enough, it’ll be nice to have her help in here.”

She went over to the open kitchen window and saw that Doug was chasing Bob around the backyard.

“Breakfast is ready!” she called out.

They immediately stopped, cheered as if this was a grand old event, and ran to the kitchen door.

She rolled her eyes. Seriously, she fed them every meal and even gave out snacks. Turning to Charles and Ben, she helped them into their chairs and began dishing out their portions of the meal.

Joseph entered the kitchen just in time to be bombarded by Doug and Bob who pushed him aside so they could sit at their places. “You need to be careful,” he admonished them. “I’m carrying your sister.”

“Sorry, Pa,” Bob said.

“I’ll take her.” Margaret took the one month old girl and cradled her in her arms. Looking at Joseph, she said, “This is the big day.”

Joseph gave her a kiss and nodded. “I’m not going to miss working at the mercantile.”

“I’m excited for you,” she admitted. She knew how much working at the paper meant to him, and now he could work there full-time. “Well, you better sit down and eat so you have your energy for the day.”

They all sat down, waited for him to say grace, and then they began their meal.

She smiled at her daughter who stared back at the four boys who ate as if they hadn’t eaten in years. “You’ll have to get used to it, Charlotte. Your brothers are animals.”

“Hey!” Doug protested before he stuffed a waffle in his mouth.

“We’re not animals,” Bob agreed. He poured syrup on his eggs and then dug into them.

“I swear, Bob,” she began, “if it doesn’t have sugar on it, you won’t touch it.”

“Aren’t you going to eat anything?” Joseph asked her as he spread butter on his pancakes.

“I already did.” She learned that it was best to eat ahead of time because this crowd was too much to keep up with and eat. There was always someone who needed something.

A Husband for Margaret

Bob, like usual, was done first, so she put Charlotte down in the basinet in the corner of the room and helped him clean up. He brought his plate and cup to her and she washed them as he washed his hands. The process went unusually smooth that morning. She realized that this was going to be one of those good days. Each kid got done, one at a time with Ben taking the longest as he tore apart everything, carefully inspected it, and then took small bites of it. Ben was working on his last piece of toast when Joseph stood up.

He brought his dish and cup to the sink before kissing her good-bye. "Have a good day."

"You too," she replied as she washed his dishes.

After he left, Ben was done and she instructed Doug to wipe down the table and Bob to pull in the chairs. Charles bent over the basinet and made funny faces at Charlotte who turned her wide eyes in his direction.

"She's just a baby," Bob told Charles. "She doesn't know what you're doing."

Margaret brought Ben to the sink and washed him up. "I'm sure she's enjoying it," she told Bob who didn't look convinced.

Once the boys were clean and the kitchen in order, she decided to take them to the park across the street. This year Charles was four, so Doug and Bob declared that he was old enough to play ball with them. Ben, however, was still too young, but she gave him his own ball to toss around. Ben had gotten comfortable with her enough by now, so he often ran off to play with Charles or by himself.

They went onto the porch, and she set a gurgling Charlotte into the baby carriage and placed the rattle in the child's hand. Charlotte squealed and shook it. Margaret smiled and tapped her daughter's nose.

"You fuss over her too much," Bob said, holding his ball under his arm.

“That’s because I’m going to need her help keeping you boys in line,” Margaret told him. “I need her on my side.”

Doug closed the screen door. “Women like babies, Bob. It can’t be helped.”

“Babies are cuddly and cute,” Margaret replied. “They’re meant to be fussed over.”

Doug and Bob grimaced so she ran over to them and hugged them.

“Oh gross!” Bob shrieked while Doug grunted.

“You boys need fussing from time to time too. But not as much as girls, I’m sure.” She nearly got tackled by Charles and Ben who decided to take that moment to rush in to hug her. Laughing, she tickled the four delighted boys before she realized that if she did this too long, she’d have no energy to walk around the park. “Alright, alright.” She stood up straight and took a deep breath. “I promised Jessica I’d meet her in fifteen minutes, so we better go.”

Doug and Bob shot across the yard and made it to the park before she could get the baby carriage to the ground. Charles and Ben were trailing after their older brothers, but Ben tripped and fell. Ben cried and waited for her to come over to him.

She stopped pushing the carriage and knelt beside him. Pulling up his pants, she saw the pink knee and patted it. “You’ll be fine. No blood. See?”

Ben inspected his injury with tear-filled eyes. Assured that he was going to be alright, he nodded and stood up. She kissed him on the top of his head and noted he didn’t take offense to it.

“At least you’re still young enough to enjoy some motherly affection,” she commented.

He smiled at her and took a step forward.

“Um...Ben? The ball?” She motioned to the brown ball in the grass.

“Oh!” He ran over to retrieve it and came back to her. “It’s my ball.”

A Husband for Margaret

“Yes, it is.”

They walked to the park where his brothers were already kicking their own ball around.

“Not their ball,” Ben said, holding up his ball.

“Nope. That is all yours.”

He nodded and hugged it. “All mine.”

She chuckled and stopped at a bench. “Yes, it is. Now, go on and play. I need to take a break. You boys wear me out.”

She sat down and waited for Jessica to arrive. As tired as she was, she couldn’t deny that she was happy.

Jessica came along about ten minutes later, holding her four month old daughter.

Margaret’s eyebrows furrowed. “You didn’t bring her in a carriage? Aren’t your arms sore?”

“Nelly’s not heavy,” Jessica replied as she sat beside her and set the girl on her lap so she could sit up and study her surroundings.

“She looks so big from the last time I saw her.” She glanced at her own daughter who had fallen asleep. “I suppose it won’t be long before Charlotte’s off running around with her older brothers. I kind of enjoy babies.”

“Me too. But that’s why we can have more than one, and then, after that, we get grandchildren!”

Margaret laughed. “You are always thinking ahead, aren’t you?”

“I take time to enjoy the moment too.”

“Yes. I know you do. How are things with Tom?”

“They’re fine. I think he’d like a boy some day, but he was tickled pink when he first saw Nelly.”

“I think men like the idea of having a son to follow in their footsteps.”

“How did Joseph feel about having a girl?”

“He was relieved. He said at least a girl won’t pee in his face if he changes her diaper.”

Jessica gasped. "He changes diapers?"

Margaret smiled. "He had to do that and more with Ben and Charles before he married me."

"But now he has you to do that."

"Maybe. But if he wants me to have the time to cook, he has to chip in and help. You think I can handle all these children without a helping hand?"

Jessica seemed to think about it.

"You just wait until you have a couple more children and talk to me about what is and isn't a man's job in the house."

She sighed. "You're probably right."

Two distinct sets of laughter caught Margaret's attention. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Peter with Debra and his mother. They had apparently decided to take a stroll through the park, and Debra held his arm on one side while his mother held his arm on the other.

Margaret nudged Jessica in the side.

Jessica looked up from fussing over her baby and turned her gaze in the direction Margaret motioned to.

"I know just the color that will suit your new home," Connie said to Debra. "Yellow."

Debra nodded. "A cheery yellow might work. It certainly is a friendly color."

"That it is."

"And the fence needs to be white. I always wanted a white picket fence," Debra added. "It's been a childhood dream."

Connie turned her attention to Peter and said, "That settles it. You'll paint the house yellow and the fence white."

Margaret wondered how he'd take this apparent running of his life, and maybe she shouldn't have been surprised when he simply smiled and agreed to what his mother and his wife wanted. In fact, she couldn't recall a time when Peter James looked happier.

A Husband for Margaret

The three passed Margaret and Jessica with a polite greeting that the two women returned. Then they continued to their conversation to discuss the types of flowers Debra would plant in the front yard.

Margaret and Jessica watched them for a good minute before Margaret turned to her friend and said, "There goes the most content man in the world."

Jessica shook her head. "I don't believe it. Those three get along beautifully, don't they?"

"A better match was never made," Margaret agreed.

"I guess you showed the rest of us."

"Meaning?"

"To be honest, I thought it wasn't going to work. I thought Connie or Debra would be miserable, but they're not."

"Nope."

"I suppose you knew what you were doing when you got Debra and Connie together."

"I like to think I know something about people and how they think. Debra and Connie needed each other, and Peter needed a wife who could be friends with his mother."

Jessica chuckled. "Remind me to never doubt you again."

Margaret grinned. "Oh, I'll be sure to do that."

The two women turned their attention back to their children and enjoyed the rest of the afternoon.



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