



Mail Order Merge (Brides of Beckham #61)

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Category: Historical

Description: Erna Brown is thrilled to have made it to the highly anticipated matchmaking dance in Texas. And when she crosses paths with Joel, she has a strong feeling that they will make a great couple.

Joel Trinity decides to humor his friends and attend a matchmaking dance. Little does he know, he will find the love of his life when he sets eyes on Erna. After sharing a few dances and engaging in delightful conversations, they make the decision to tie the knot that very evening.

Despite their limited financial resources, they work together to create a fulfilling life for themselves. However, when a fire ravages a significant portion of their ranch's grazing land, they are faced with the challenge of rebuilding.

Will they be able to maintain their happiness as a couple? Or will this financial setback tear them apart?

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Erna Brown and her sisters approached the dance hall with hearts fluttering. Erna's fingers intertwined with Faith's, her only biological sister in the group, their clasped hands swinging slightly between them.

"Here we are," Erna whispered, her eyes sparkling with the promise of the evening as they stepped onto the wooden porch of the church-turned-dance-hall.

"Think you'll meet someone special tonight?" Faith teased, her voice light as she nudged Erna playfully.

"Maybe," Erna replied, her cheeks warming at the thought. She patted her neatly pinned hair and smoothed out the front of her dress, a simple but lovely patterned cotton that danced around her ankles.

As they entered the hall, the thrum of fiddle music greeted them, lively and inviting. The room was filled with laughter and the shuffling of boots on the polished floorboards. Erna's gaze swept across the sea of faces, looking for one that might hold a spark of interest.

"Quite the crowd," Erna murmured, her anticipation building like the crescendo of the music. Faith nodded, her eyes also scanning the room, always supportive, always understanding.

"Let's have fun, Erna. That's what matters," Faith said, a reassuring smile gracing her lips.

Erna took a deep breath, the scent of sawdust and sweet perfumes mingling in the air.

With each step, she felt more at ease, the excitement of new beginnings coursing through her veins. Tonight was not just about finding love; it was about joy, companionship, and the simple pleasure of a dance shared among family.

Erna wove through the throng of people with her sisters. Amy's gentle demeanor was a calming presence, her soft laughter bubbling up like a sweet melody. Brenda, ever the beauty, drew admiring glances with her confident stride, while Cassandra's curiosity had her peering over at the musicians, analyzing their technique.

"Mind the step, Deborah," Erna called softly, as the youngest almost tripped in her excitement. Deborah's giggle was a clear bell in the din, and her eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Always looking out for us, aren't you?" Gail remarked with a grin, flexing her strong fingers that more often played in earth than piano keys.

"Someone has to," Erna replied, her tone light, sharing a knowing look with Faith, who squeezed her hand reassuringly.

Hannah, quiet and observant, leaned close to whisper, "I reckon we'll have a grand time tonight." Imogene nodded eagerly.

"Let's find ourselves some partners, then," Brenda said, her voice cutting clear and decisive through the clamor.

Erna's smile widened, and she stepped forward to greet a group of young men leaning against the wall. "Evening, gentlemen," she said, her brown eyes lit with friendliness.

"Care to honor me with a dance?" asked a gentleman with a hopeful look.

“Of course,” she agreed, and they spun into the lively set. As the fiddle soared, Erna danced with ease, her dress swishing around her ankles. She laughed when the gentleman attempted a complicated step and nearly stumbled, but she caught him with grace.

“Seems I’m no match for your skills,” he said, his embarrassment fading under her good-natured chuckle.

“Keep practicing. You’ll outstep us all yet,” Erna encouraged before they parted ways with a friendly nod.

As the night unfolded, Erna floated from partner to partner, each dance a new conversation, a shared laugh, a moment of connection. She became a part of the rhythm of the room, of the heart of the community. And though she knew not what the future held, Erna reveled in the joy of the dance and the warmth of the bonds that tied her to this place and these people.

Amid the laughter and fiddle music, Erna squeezed Faith’s hand with a sisterly affection that spoke volumes. They watched as Amy twirled by with a tall cowboy, her giggles almost louder than the music. Deborah and Cassandra were deep in conversation with a pair of brothers from a neighboring ranch, their heads close together as they shared stories. Brenda flitted from one group to another, her laughter a bright trail behind her.

“Erna, you’re next with Mr. Jenkins,” Gail called out, already keeping score of who had danced with whom. A nod and a playful wink were all the encouragement Erna needed before she made her way to the dance floor again.

“Mind your step, Genie,” Hannah cautioned gently as Imogene adjusted the skirt of her soft pink dress, a gift from the women at church. With youthful exuberance, Imogene beamed at her, the brightness of her smile rivaling the lanterns overhead.

“Thank you, Hannah! I’ll be fine,” Imogene chirped, eager to join in the dance. She stepped forward, but in her excitement, caught the edge of her hem under the heel of her boot. Time seemed to slow as Genie’s arms flailed, seeking balance that eluded her. With a gasp from the crowd, she tumbled, landing in an unceremonious heap on the wooden floor.

“Oh, Genie!” Faith exclaimed, rushing to her side along with the rest of the sisters. Erna knelt beside her fallen sibling, concern etched across her features.

“Are you hurt?” Erna asked, scanning Imogene for injuries.

Imogene sat up, brushing off her skirts with a sheepish grin. “Just my pride, I think,” she admitted. The room held its breath for a moment longer, then erupted into supportive applause as Genie stood with the help of her sisters.

“Let’s get you fixed up,” Hannah said, leading Imogene to a chair. In no time, the sisters formed a protective circle, Erna kneeling to smooth out the crumpled hem while Faith fetched a glass of water.

“Next time, I’ll pick a shorter dress... or taller boots,” Imogene said, her cheerful spirit unbroken. The sisters chuckled, easing the tension with light-hearted banter.

“Or maybe just watch where those happy feet are taking you,” Brenda teased, winking at Imogene.

“Absolutely,” Erna agreed, her hands deft from years of mending clothes and spirits alike. “But where’s the fun without a little adventure?”

“Exactly!” Imogene beamed, accepting the hand Erna offered to help her back up. “Now, who’s ready for another dance?”

“Careful now,” Gail said as they returned to the throng, “We’ve only got so many dresses to spare.”

As the music swelled once more, the sisters joined arms, their unity unshaken by the minor mishap. Together, they stepped back into the dance, their joy infectious and their bond as steadfast as ever.

As Erna moved through the throng of dancers with her sisters, her gaze landed on a new face—a man standing at the edge of the festivities, watching the celebration with an air of quiet contentment.

“Who’s that?” Faith whispered, following Erna’s line of sight.

“Let’s find out,” Erna said, a spark of curiosity lighting up her eyes.

They wove through couples spinning to a lively tune, and as they approached, the man’s features came into clearer view. Tall and solidly built, he had the look of someone who wasn’t a stranger to hard work. His eyes, sharp and observant, seemed to hold stories of their own—stories Erna found herself wanting to hear.

“Evening,” Erna greeted, her voice steady but friendly.

“Evening, ma’am,” the man replied, tipping his hat in a gesture of respect. “I’m Joel Trinity.”

“Erna Brown.” She offered him her hand. His grip was firm and sure, yet there was gentleness in his touch that surprised her.

“Enjoying the dance?” she asked, a subtle invitation hanging between them.

“I am, but I reckon it’d be better if I were partaking in it,” Joel confessed with a half-

smile that softened his stern expression.

“Then why stand on the sidelines?” Erna tilted her head, challenging him playfully.

“Suppose I haven’t found the right partner,” he said, his gaze holding hers steadily.

“Maybe you have now.” The words slipped from Erna’s lips before she could think better of them, but she didn’t regret them. There was something about Joel that felt... right.

“Is that so?” Joel’s smile grew. “Well, Miss Brown, do you enjoy keeping house and cooking?”

“Every chance I get,” Erna answered, surprised by his question. “How did you know?”

“I didn’t. I just wanted to make sure.” He looked her up and down. “Do you bake as well?”

“Right again, Mr. Trinity.” Erna’s cheeks warmed with pleasure at being understood so quickly. “And you?”

“I enjoy my land and my cattle. I’m a rancher,” Joel said, looking down at his calloused palms. “I’m building a dream with these two hands.”

“Sounds like a story worth hearing,” Erna said earnestly. “Perhaps while we dance?”

Joel extended his arm. “It would be my pleasure.”

As they stepped onto the dance floor, the room seemed to blur around them. They moved together, two kindred spirits sharing the simple joy of connection. And as the

music played on, Erna knew that this dance was just the beginning.

Erna found herself swept into the rhythm of a dance by Joel's confident lead. Twirling under his arm, she couldn't suppress a giggle as her skirt billowed around her.

"Ever herd cattle in a dress like that?" Joel asked, his eyes twinkling.

"Can't say I have," Erna laughed, matching his light-hearted tone. "Do you think it would give me an edge?"

"Perhaps," he conceded with mock seriousness. "It might dazzle them into submission."

"Or send them running for the hills," she countered, her own eyes filled with humor.

"Then it's settled," Joel said, spinning her once more before catching her hand and pulling her close. "You're to wear it next time we round them up."

"Only if you promise not to step on my toes," Erna teased back.

"I think I'd be too busy watching the dress to mind your toes," Joel replied, the laughter in his voice making her heart skip a beat.

As the song came to an end, Erna clapped her hands, still caught up in the thrill of their playful banter. She sought out her sisters, who were gathered at the side of the dance floor, faces flushed with delight.

"Erna, you looked like you were having the time of your life!" Faith exclaimed, squeezing her twin's hands.

“Joel has quite the sense of humor,” Erna shared, her gaze drifting to where Joel had stepped aside to allow another eager bachelor to ask for a dance. “He’s a man full of surprises.”

“Seems like he’s got a good hold on you, too,” Amy observed, nudging Erna playfully.

“Let’s just say, he’s an excellent dance partner,” Erna replied, the warmth in her cheeks betraying her growing affection.

“Come, let’s all join in the next one!” Cassandra urged, and soon they were moving together, a cascade of skirts and laughter blending into the music and festivities.

Erna danced with her sisters. They moved as one, a circle of love and support. The night was alive with possibility, and as Erna glanced over at Joel, her smile deepened.

“Looks like this dance might just be the start of something special,” Gail shouted over the music, and Erna nodded, her heart soaring with agreement.

The lively tune of the fiddle tapered into a soft hum, and the dancers slowed to a halt. Erna’s eyes met Joel’s from across the room, his lopsided grin sending an expectant flutter through her chest. He tipped his hat in her direction, a silent invitation that quickened her pulse.

“Erna, look, he’s coming over!” Faith whispered, giving her sister a gentle push forward.

“Go on,” Hannah said, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

With hesitant steps, Erna made her way toward Joel. Joel’s confident stride closed the distance between them with ease.

“Miss Erna,” he said, his voice warm, “would you honor me with a stroll outside? The evening is too fine to waste solely on dancing.”

“Would I ever,” Erna replied, her words laced with a thrill she couldn’t contain.

They stepped through the dance hall doors, the night air caressing their faces. The stars seemed to twinkle with approval, and the moon cast a gentle glow on the path ahead.

“Quite the night, isn’t it?” Joel remarked, his arm brushing against hers.

“Sure is,” Erna agreed, her gaze lingering on the way the moonlight played upon his features. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen stars shine so bright.”

“Nor have I,” Joel said, stopping in his tracks. He turned, facing her with an earnestness that stilled the night. “Erna, there’s something I’d like to—”

A distant call interrupted him, a voice summoning them back to the dance hall. Joel’s brow furrowed slightly, a silent apology in his eyes.

“That’s Mrs. Jackson. She was the matron at the foundling home where I was raised. Guess we need to head back,” Erna suggested, though her heart yearned to hear what he had been about to say.

“Of course,” Joel replied, offering his arm. “But this isn’t the end of our conversation, Erna. Not by a long shot.”

As they walked back, the music swelled—a promise that filled the space between them. Erna felt the edges of a beginning, a story waiting to be told. And as the chapter closed, with her hand resting lightly on Joel’s arm, the possibility of what lay ahead was enough to leave anyone’s heart dancing in anticipation.

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“Joel Trinity, look at you blushin’!” called out one of Joel’s friends, a lanky fellow by the name of Tom, as he slapped Joel heartily on the back.

“Caught you strollin’ arm-in-arm with one of those girls who came for the dance, we did,” said another, Hank, whose grin spread wide beneath his bushy mustache. The group of men huddled around Joel, elbowing each other with playful camaraderie.

“Aw, stop it,” Joel replied, the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth despite his efforts to remain stoic. “There’s no harm in a walk.”

“Walk today, weddin’ tomorrow!” Tom teased, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

“Maybe you’re not too far off,” Joel retorted, tipping his hat back on his head with a confident air. “I’ve got plans to marry that girl.”

The men exchanged surprised glances, their teasing faltering into silence before they all told him she was pretty and would make a good wife.

“Never pictured ol’ Joel settlin’ down,” Hank said, his voice warm with genuine happiness for his friend.

“Neither did I,” Joel admitted, “but Erna... she’s different.”

JOEL EXCUSED HIMSELF from the group, scanning the crowd until he spotted Erna standing alone by the refreshment table. Her twin, Faith, was nowhere in sight, likely off charming some other young man with her easy laugh and bright eyes.

“Erna?” Joel called gently as he approached her.

She turned, and in the softening light, her face seemed to glow with a quiet grace that made Joel’s heart beat faster. “Joel,” she said, a small smile playing on her lips.

“Would you honor me with another dance?” he asked, extending his hand toward her.

“Of course, Joel,” Erna replied, placing her hand in his. Her fingers felt delicate yet strong in his calloused grip.

They walked together to the makeshift dance floor where couples were already swaying to a lilting melody. Joel led Erna into a gentle two-step, mindful of the rhythm and of the woman in his arms. As they moved across the floor, Joel couldn’t help but feel that every step was bringing him closer to a future he suddenly wanted more than anything.

“Thank you for the dance,” Erna whispered.

“Thank you for saying yes,” Joel replied.

The warm breeze that carried the sound of fiddles and laughter did little to cool the flush on Erna’s cheeks as she swayed gently in Joel’s arms. The two moved through the steps of the dance, lost in a world of their own in the middle of the jovial crowd.

“Always had a feeling I’d find someone who understood what it was like,” Joel began, his voice low and tinged with the sincerity of shared hardships. “Growing up without a family.”

Erna looked up at him, her smile soft but her eyes shining with a mixture of empathy and strength. “It does shape you in a different way, doesn’t it? Makes you appreciate things more... like finding a kindred spirit.”

“Exactly,” Joel nodded. “And here we are, dancing under the same stars that must’ve watched over us when we were nothing but lonely orphans.”

“It’s funny how life brings people together,” she mused, her hand resting comfortably in his. “At least, I had my twin sister Faith.”

“Twin? Which one is your twin?” He looked around at all the girls who had traveled together from the foundling home. They were easy to spot, since they were the only young, marriageable women there.

“Your smile, Erna,” he said abruptly, as if the words couldn’t be contained, “it’s like the first light of dawn after a dark night. Just radiant.”

Erna’s cheeks reddened further, but her smile widened, unaffected and genuine. “Thank you, Joel. You have a way of making a girl feel... seen. And your kindness, well, it’s like a gentle river that soothes the rough stones over time.”

Joel felt a warmth spread through his chest, a sense of rightness unlike anything he’d known before. As they continued to dance, he knew that this was exactly where he was meant to be – here with Erna, sharing smiles and a dance that felt like a promise of tomorrow.

Music filled the air, a lively tune that seemed to make the wooden floorboards of the church spring to life beneath the dancers’ feet. Erna was in Joel’s arms, and together they moved with a quiet grace.

“Joel,” Erna laughed, her voice light as the skirt of her dress swirled around her, “you sure know how to lead a girl in a two-step.”

He grinned, the corners of his eyes crinkling with delight. “Only when the girl is as easy to dance with as you are, Erna. Feels like we’re dancing on clouds.”

The warmth of the summer evening wrapped around them like a soft shawl as they twirled and stepped. The lanterns hung around the room cast a golden glow, illuminating Erna's face, turning it into something ethereal.

"Erna," he began, his voice steady despite the thunderous beating of his heart. He wished Mrs. Jackson had given him more time to talk to her privately. "I've been doing some thinking."

She tilted her head, curiosity lighting up her eyes. "Oh? And what might that be about?"

"About us," he said. His hand tightened gently around hers. "We haven't known each other long, but I think I've seen enough to know what I want."

"Is that so?" she asked, a playful note in her voice, though her heartbeat quickened at his serious tone.

"Yup." He took a deep breath. "Erna, I want you to marry me."

The music played on, but for a moment, it seemed to fade into the background. Her step faltered just a hair, surprise flickering across her features before she regained her composure, the ever-present smile never leaving her lips.

"Joel Trinity," she said, "that's quite the bold statement."

"Maybe so," he admitted. "But when something feels this right, you don't let it pass you by. I know life's dealt us both tough hands, but together, I think we could make a good one."

She looked up at him, searching his eyes, finding nothing but earnest honesty. There was a certain comfort in the solidity of his presence, a promise of steadfastness that

she'd never dared to hope for.

"Life does love to surprise us," Erna mused. The song ended, but they hardly noticed, still locked in their shared space.

Erna's gaze held steady on Joel, the twinkling lanterns above casting a soft glow over his earnest face. The music had ceased, leaving a quiet hum of night sounds to fill the space between them. She could feel the warmth of his calloused hand still resting in hers.

"Joel," Erna began, her voice tinged with a cautious wonder, "you're asking for forever and we only met a few hours ago."

"Forever's what I'm aiming for," Joel replied, the corners of his mouth lifting ever so slightly.

"Can't say it doesn't scare me," she said. "But maybe... maybe it's the good kind of scared."

"Scared means it matters," he said simply, squeezing her hand. "And you, Erna, you matter to me more than anything."

As she looked up at him, her thoughts raced through the possibilities, the shared dreams, the dance of a life that could be theirs.

"All right, Joel Trinity," Erna finally said. "Yes, I'll marry you. Let's take that leap and see where we land."

His eyes brightened, mirroring the stars above, and a laugh escaped him, rich and full of joy. "This feels so right," he said.

They stood there, two souls brought together by chance and now bound by choice, their future as wide and promising as the open plains that stretched beyond the horizon.

Joel's hand found Erna's as they weaved through the crowd. The church was full, but he was certain they could find Pastor Kauffman. Erna's heart pounded like the hooves of wild mustangs racing across the plains.

"Do you think he'll mind doing it now?" Erna whispered.

"Amos? That man's always got one eye open for folks in need," Joel replied.

"Joel, Erna, are you coming to me so you can get married?" Amos asked, a grin spreading across his face. "If so, you're the fifth couple I've married tonight." He shook his head. "I may just marry tonight as well!"

"Pastor," Joel began, "we've got a favor to ask of you."

"Seems we can't wait another minute," Erna chimed in, her cheeks flushed with excitement. "We want to get married. Tonight, if you'd be willing."

Amos's eyes softened, and the hint of a smile played on his lips. "Well then," he said, stepping aside, "let's not waste another minute."

Joel and Erna stood at the altar, hands joined, facing each other with wide, expectant smiles. Amos took his place before them, opening the good book with practiced ease.

"Dear friends," he began, his voice steady and warm, "we are gathered here to join these two in holy matrimony. Joel, Erna, are you prepared to enter into this covenant?"

“We are,” they answered together.

“Then repeat after me,” Amos instructed.

“I, Joel, take thee, Erna, to be my wedded wife...”

“I, Erna, take thee, Joel, to be my wedded husband...”

“By the power vested in me,” Amos declared, “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.”

As Joel dipped Erna slightly, pressing his lips to hers, cheers erupted from the crowd still there for the dance, drawn by the unmistakable air of romance. Their kiss was the kind that spoke of new beginnings, of shared dreams, and the unspoken understanding that no matter where life led them, they would travel it side by side.

“Mrs. Trinity,” Joel murmured, his voice brimming with pride and wonder.

“Mr. Trinity,” Erna replied, her laughter mingling with the lingering echoes of their friends’ applause.

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With their vows freshly exchanged, Joel Trinity clasped Erna Brown's hand, signaling it was time to leave.

"Let's head on out," he said.

Erna nodded, her eyes bright with excitement. She turned to Faith, who was standing by with a quilt she had stitched together with love. "Faith," Erna called out softly, her steps quickening toward her twin. They embraced tightly, the bond of sisterhood evident in the silent exchange of smiles and tears.

"Take care of him," Faith whispered, smoothing a stray curl behind Erna's ear. "And more importantly, make him take care of you."

"I will," Erna promised, pulling back just enough to look into Faith's eyes, "and you take care of everyone else, like you always do," Erna added with a gentle laugh.

Faith nodded, her own laughter mingling with Erna's as they shared a knowing glance. With one last squeeze, Erna turned away, the skirts of her simple wedding dress swishing softly against the grass.

Joel and Erna set off side by side, leaving the warmth of the gathering behind them. The half-mile to Joel's ranch stretched out, a path they would now walk together. The air was dense with the heat of a Texas summer evening.

"Seems like just yesterday I was baking bread for the bakery in town, and now here I am, walking with my husband," Erna mused aloud, her voice filled with wonder.

“Life has its turns and twists,” Joel replied, his thumb caressing the back of her hand. “Never thought I’d find someone who’d want to share mine.”

They talked about everything—the sky, so vast and filled with stars, the future, uncertain but promising; and the small joys of everyday life. They spoke of the ranch, the children she loved and hoped to have, and the crafts that filled her quiet moments.

“Ever ridden a horse at full gallop?” Joel asked, a smile playing on his lips.

“Can’t say I have,” Erna replied, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“Well, we’ll have to change that,” he declared, a note of excitement in his voice.

“Only if you try your hand at baking,” she teased.

“I can do that,” he said, “but I warn you, I’m not much good in the kitchen.”

“Then it’s good you have me,” she said.

Erna stepped into the modest homestead, her eyes wide with both surprise and delight. It was clear from the outset that Joel’s living space was designed more for function than comfort—a single room serving as kitchen, bedroom, and living area all in one.

She smiled, not at all dismayed by the sight. Already, her mind was abuzz with ideas to make this space their own. “I can hang curtains here,” she mused aloud, touching the window frame gently, “and maybe some flowers on the table.” Her fingers traced the rough wood of the table, envisioning it covered with a clean cloth and a freshly baked pie in the center.

“Needs a woman’s touch, I’m sure,” Joel said, somewhat sheepishly as he watched

her take it all in. His hands found their way to his hips, and he looked around as if seeing the place through her eyes for the first time.

“It does,” Erna agreed, her voice filled with a quiet excitement. “But you’re in luck because I’m a woman!”

He laughed and opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, a collie bounded into the room, its tail wagging furiously. His intelligent eyes immediately sought out Joel for approval before turning to inspect the newcomer.

“Erna, this is Prince,” Joel introduced with a hint of pride in his voice. “He’s been with me since he was just a pup.”

“Hello, Prince,” Erna greeted the dog, kneeling to offer a hand. Prince sniffed it cautiously then gave a gentle lick, accepting her presence. Erna laughed, the sound light and genuine, as she scratched behind Prince’s ears. “Aren’t you a sweet thing?”

“Thinks he runs the ranch,” Joel commented, but there was no annoyance in his tone. Instead, there was an affectionate note that suggested Prince was more partner than pet.

“Looks like I have two boys to look after now,” she teased, standing up and dusting off her skirt. “But I think I’m up to the challenge.”

“Something tells me you are,” Joel agreed, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smile.

Erna’s eyes scanned the room, a soft smile playing on her lips as she imagined all the ways she could brighten up the modest space. Her gaze landed on the bed, its sheets wrinkled and speckled with traces of the day’s work. With a gentle determination, she began rummaging through the wooden trunk at the foot of the bed, searching for something clean to sleep on.

“Found them!” she exclaimed, pulling out a pair of scarcely used sheets that still held the scent of fresh cotton. Shaking them open, she couldn’t help but feel a surge of contentment. It was a small task, changing the bed linens, but it symbolized the start of her new life here with Joel. Erna knew the days ahead would be filled with chores, but the thought of caring for Joel, of making this house a home, brought her an unexpected joy.

Joel watched her with a mixture of admiration and sheepishness. “I reckon I should’ve cleaned up some before bringing you here,” he said, scratching the back of his neck. The disarray of his home seemed more apparent now, in the presence of someone who saw more than four walls and a roof.

Erna glanced up from tucking the corners of the sheet, her laughter light and easy. “Joel, if I wanted a man who kept a tidy house, I’d have married the town barber,” she teased. “But then, I wouldn’t have had the pleasure of fixing it up myself.”

“Guess you’re stuck with me and my mess, then,” Joel replied, the hint of a grin breaking through.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Erna answered with sincerity, smoothing out the last wrinkle on the bed.

Joel’s eyes softened as he stepped closer, the lines of worry that furrowed his brow moments earlier smoothing out. He reached for Erna with a hesitant but sure touch, wrapping his arms around her in a careful embrace. Drawing her near, he bent his head and pressed his lips to hers—a kiss that held the promise of new beginnings. It was only their second kiss, but it stirred the air around them with the sweet scent of hope.

“I’m just... so darn happy you said yes,” Joel whispered against her lips.

Erna's cheeks flushed with warmth as she pulled back slightly, her gaze searching his. "This is all so new to me," she confessed, her voice steady though her heart raced. "But tell me, Joel, do you want me out there with you on the ranch? Or would you rather I focus on making this house more... habitable?"

He chuckled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Erna, you've already made this place brighter just by stepping into it. I won't pretend I know the first thing about making a home cozy. I'll handle the cattle and fences. You do whatever your heart tells you." His thumb brushed her cheek, a tender gesture that spoke volumes.

"Then I'll start here," Erna decided with a nod, her own hands finding their way to rest against his chest. "I want to build something beautiful with you, Joel."

"Sounds perfect," Joel agreed, his smile genuine, eyes lit up with the thought of a shared future.

Joel's laughter echoed in the modest expanse of the homestead, warm and inviting as the Texas sun. "Erna, I reckon you'll be doing me a favor just by putting your touch on this place. I can handle the ranch work well enough on my own."

"Then I shall make it my mission to turn this house into a home," Erna declared with determined enthusiasm, already envisioning the curtains she would sew and the garden she would plant.

The room was filled with the golden hue of late afternoon light as Erna explored her new surroundings. It was a simple space, but it was theirs. She could feel Joel's eyes on her, a mixture of pride and something deeper in his gaze. He stepped closer, the floorboards creaking under his weight, the proximity sending a flutter through her.

"Never had much need for more than a roof and walls," he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. "But having you here... it makes me want more."

“More?” Erna’s question hung between them, laden with unspoken promises.

“More,” Joel affirmed, closing the distance between them. His hands were gentle as they traced her face, cupping her cheeks. The world seemed to hold its breath as their lips met again, the kiss deepening, growing more urgent.

Erna felt a surge of passion, the kind that had been whispered about behind barn doors and beneath quilts at night. Joel’s touch was tentative at first, exploring, but there was an undercurrent of strength in his fingers as they found the buttons of her dress. Her heart raced with each piece of fabric he peeled away, revealing the pale skin beneath.

“Erna,” he breathed, his voice shaking with desire.

“Joel,” she replied, her own hands working at the fastenings of his shirt, eager to discover the man she had married. As they undressed each other, there was a feeling of discovery, of charting unknown territories neither had dared to explore before.

The bed was a simple affair, but it became their sanctuary as they came together with a tenderness that belied their inexperience. Erna’s passion was a revelation to her – she had never imagined the depths of her own longing, the fierce joy of being wanted and held so completely.

Joel moved with a care that spoke volumes of his respect for her, his strong hands guiding and supporting her as they found a rhythm all their own. Their breaths mingled, soft moans escaped in the quiet room, and the heat of summer outside was nothing compared to the fire they found together.

Afterward, Joel and Erna lay entwined. They were silent now, the urgency of their earlier passions giving way to a gentle fatigue.

“Never knew it could be like this,” Joel murmured, his voice tinged with wonder. His arms, strong from years of ranch work, held Erna as if she were something precious.

“Me neither,” Erna confessed, her head resting on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

“Reckon we’ll have to get used to all sorts of new things together,” he said, his thumb tracing small circles on her back.

“Sounds nice,” she replied simply, a smile playing on her lips even as her eyelids grew heavy.

“Nice and more,” Joel added, his own smile hidden in the darkness.

“Good,” she sighed. The warmth of him was a comfort she hadn’t known she’d craved.

As she fell asleep, she dreamed of a life with him. Of children and laughter. Of work and play. A full life with this man was suddenly the most important thing in her world.

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Before the sun was even up the following morning, Erna tiptoed outside. The air was already warming up. Texas summers brought soul-crushing heat that made her want to hide under a rock. And she'd only experienced June so far. Surely July and August would be even worse. She adjusted the simple cotton dress she wore, anticipation quickening her steps toward the barn.

"Let's see what we have here," she murmured, peering into the chicken coop. Her nimble fingers, so used to kneading dough and crafting small trinkets, now deftly gathered eggs, cradling them like precious gems in the folds of her apron. "One, two, three... perfect."

The barn loomed ahead, its doors slightly ajar. Erna's eyes scanned the shadows inside until they landed on the gentle bovine who was tethered there. As she approached, the cow looked at her with an expression that seemed almost welcoming. "Well, hello there," she greeted, her voice a soothing whisper. With practiced ease, she settled onto the milking stool and began the rhythmic work of drawing milk. The warm liquid splashed into the pail, its sound a comforting melody in the quiet barn.

Beside the cow, a calf nudged her elbow gently, seeking attention. Erna couldn't help but chuckle, her touch gentle as she patted its head. "You'll grow big and strong in no time," she promised, imagining the delicious meals she could prepare with the bounty this ranch provided.

She thought of the breakfast she would make, picturing Joel's reaction when he tasted her cooking. A surge of joy filled her chest. This was her life now – caring, nurturing, and loving in the simplest of ways. Erna knew she had much to learn about this place, about her new role, but the warmth of the approaching day mirrored the optimism

blooming in her heart.

JOEL STIRRED IN THE bed, the sheets cool against his skin. He blinked his eyes open to find the other side of the mattress empty, the quilt neatly folded back in place. The stillness of the house wrapped around him like a shroud. Pushing himself up, he frowned and listened for any sound that might tell him where Erna had gone.

“Erna?” His voice, rough with sleep, filled the air, but no answer came. With a growing unease, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and reached for his trousers. He dressed quickly, his movements brusque, as thoughts raced through his mind. Had she regretted their hasty union? No, that couldn’t be—Erna wasn’t one to flee from her commitments.

He strode to the door, unlatching it with a flick of his wrist. Just as he was about to step outside, the sound of the front door creaking open halted him. There she stood, framed by the morning light, her cheeks flushed from the heat and her hair tousled by the breeze.

“Joel!” Erna exclaimed, a hint of breathlessness in her voice. She stepped inside, balancing a basket filled with eggs and a pail of milk so fresh it still carried the sweet scent of the barn. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you woke. Breakfast—”

“Shh, Erna,” Joel interrupted gently, his frown softening into a smile. “You don’t need to explain.” He took in the sight of her, the earnest concern in her eyes, the way she cradled the produce like precious gems. It was clear she had been up with the dawn, eager to care for him. His heart swelled at the gesture, and in that moment, he knew just how lucky he was.

“Let’s get to cooking then,” she said, her voice tinged with relief as she set down her morning’s work on the kitchen table.

Joel nodded, the corners of his eyes crinkling with affection. “I can’t wait to taste what you’ve made.”

Erna cracked eggs with a practiced flick of her wrists, the yolks landing perfectly in the sizzling skillet. Beside them, strips of bacon shrunk and curled as they crisped up, their rich aroma filling the small kitchen. She glanced at the empty bread box, a pang of disappointment fleeting across her face. “I’ll bake some bread today,” she murmured to herself, determined to fill the house with the smell of freshly baked loaves.

Joel watched her from his seat at the wooden table, his hunger growing with each sizzle and pop from the stove. “Smells good,” he said, his voice warm like the morning sun streaming through the window.

“Thank you,” Erna replied with a smile, turning to look at him. “Will you be coming back for lunch?” She plated the eggs and bacon and set it before him. The simple meal was made with care, and it was all they needed.

“Sure thing,” Joel answered, tucking into his breakfast. “What’s on your agenda today?”

Erna wiped her hands on her apron, her movements full of purpose. “Well, after breakfast, I plan on giving this place a real good scrubbing.” She surveyed the cozy room with an appraising eye. “Then, there’s laundry that won’t wash itself, and like I said, I want to get some bread baking.”

“Sounds like a full day,” he commented between mouthfuls.

She nodded, already listing the tasks in her mind. “A busy day keeps the heart happy,” Erna said, echoing a saying she had learned from Mrs. Jackson.

“Can’t argue with that,” Joel agreed, his eyes softening as he watched her bustling about. “I’ll be back at noon then.”

“Perfect,” Erna replied, her heart light with the promise of the day ahead.

Joel pushed back from the table, his chair scraping softly against the worn wooden floor. Erna watched him stand, his broad shoulders casting a long shadow in the golden light of morning. He glanced at her, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, and she felt a flutter in her chest.

“Erna,” he said, the word less a name and more a tender caress. With two long strides, he was at her side by the sink, where she’d been rinsing their breakfast dishes. She turned to face him, the porcelain plate slipping from her fingers and clinking gently back into the basin.

“Joel?” Her voice held a question, but her eyes were bright with anticipation.

He didn’t answer with words. Instead, he reached for her, his hands finding the small of her back and drawing her close. The warmth of his body enveloped her, and she lifted her face to meet his gaze. And then, his lips found hers—a kiss that was both a promise and a claim, fervent and filled with the heat of the Texas summer.

When they finally parted, breathless and flushed, Joel rested his forehead against hers. “Make sure you take a break today, all right? Don’t work yourself too hard.” His voice was low, tinged with concern and affection.

“I will,” she promised, her heart racing from the kiss.

“Good.” He gave her a last quick peck on the lips before stepping away. “I’ll see you at lunch.”

“See you then,” Erna replied, her words light as air.

She followed him to the door, watching as he donned his hat and stepped out into the bright morning. Leaning against the doorjamb, Erna couldn’t help but let her mind wander to dreams of the days ahead—days filled with the laughter of children they might have, the scent of fresh bread baking in the oven, and the feel of Joel’s arms around her when the sun dipped below the horizon.

“Always this wonderful,” she whispered to herself, a smile playing on her lips as she watched him walk away. The dust kicked up by his boots shimmered in the sunlight, and Erna thought that, perhaps, this was what happiness looked like—a trail of dust under a vast Texas sky and a house soon to be filled with love.

Erna scrubbed the laundry with vigor. The wooden tub before her was filled with soap bubbles. She hummed a cheerful tune, one her mother used to sing while tending to chores back home.

The house, though small, required a thorough hand to chase away the dust and cobwebs that had settled in its corners. Erna danced from room to room with her duster, each flick of her wrist sending particles into the air, sparkling like tiny diamonds before they vanished. She paused occasionally to straighten a picture frame or fluff a pillow, ensuring every detail spoke of care.

In the kitchen, the aroma of baking bread began to fill the space, warm and inviting. The dough had risen nicely, and now, golden loaves baked in the oven, their crusts turning a perfect shade of brown. Eggs sizzled beside strips of bacon on the stove, adding to the symphony of scents that promised a hearty meal.

With the table set and the food ready, Erna wiped her hands on her apron and stepped back to admire her handiwork. A sense of accomplishment bloomed within her chest, a little warmth that spread to her smile.

The creak of the door heralded Joel's return, and he stepped inside, the lines of hard work already etched onto his face softening at the sight that greeted him. "Smells like heaven in here," he declared, his voice a familiar rumble that sent a tremor of joy through Erna's heart.

"Thought you might be hungry."

Joel's eyes roamed over the spread, landing on the fresh bread with an appreciation that went beyond the visual. He took a deep breath, letting the scent of the lunch she prepared fill his senses. "Never thought I'd be coming home to this," he said, the edges of his lips curving upward.

Erna served the plates, her movements efficient yet filled with care. "I'll need to go to the store soon, though," she mentioned between bites. "We're low on a few things."

"Saturday," Joel nodded, his affirmation brief but filled with the promise of companionship. "I'll take you."

"Thank you, Joel." Gratitude laced her words, and in her heart, she added a silent note of thanks for more than just the trip to the store—for the life they were beginning to build, one day, one meal, one shared moment at a time.

The lunch plates lay clean on the drying rack, and with a satisfied nod, Erna slipped out the back door. The sun was high in the sky, its rays warm on her skin as she made her way across the yard to the barn. She paused at the entrance, the scent of hay and aged wood greeting her like an old friend.

Inside, shafts of light pierced through gaps in the walls, casting patterns on the dusty floor. Erna's gaze swept over the space, searching for something, anything that might be of use. She spied a stack of old wood tucked in the corner, covered in a thick layer of dust and cobwebs.

“Hello, what do we have here?” she murmured to herself, curiosity lighting her eyes. She approached the pile and crouched down, running her fingers over the rough surface of the top plank. Not sure what their former purpose had been, she saw potential in their sturdy form.

“Maybe...” Erna’s voice trailed off as ideas began to swirl in her mind. She could almost see the shapes of little toys or perhaps even picture frames fashioned from this forgotten lumber. With Joel working so hard on the farm, she felt a tug in her chest to contribute more to their new life together. Crafting small items to sell in town might just be the way to do it.

“Could make something pretty,” she whispered, envisioning her hands shaping the wood into something valuable. It would be a surprise for Joel, a way to show him her gratitude not just in words but in deeds.

“All right then,” she decided with a determined nod. Her fingers traced the grain of the wood one last time before she stood up, brushing her hands against her apron. “Let’s see what you and I can create together.”

Erna glanced back toward the house, picturing Joel’s smile when he would find out about her little project. With a heart full of hope and hands ready to work, she set about gathering the wood, already planning her next trip to town—not just for supplies, but maybe, just maybe, to offer something of her own making to the world.

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Erna's arms wrapped around the stray pieces of wood as she hefted them across the room. Her brow furrowed in concentration, she carefully positioned each plank and stick against the wall, creating a neat stack that transformed one corner of the house into a makeshift lumberyard. The wood carried the scent of earth and age, a smell that mingled with the aroma of fresh-baked bread and herbs from her earlier efforts in the kitchen. She stepped back to admire her handiwork, her mind already churning with possibilities – perhaps a picture frame or maybe even a small stool.

Erna turned her attention to the supper table. She laid out plates and utensils with practiced ease, arranging a simple meal of stew and homemade bread. A warm breeze wafted through, carrying the distant lowing of cattle, a reminder of the wide-open spaces just beyond the door.

The screen door creaked, announcing Joel's return. His large frame filled the doorway, his shadow falling across the room like an evening shroud. "What's all this?" he asked, nodding toward the organized wood.

Erna, wiping her hands on her apron, glanced at the corner. "Found it in the barn," she said, her tone light as she moved to serve him a bowl of stew. "Got to thinking about crafts I could make. Maybe sell them at the market."

"Crafts, huh?" Joel took a seat. He eyed the woodpile again, a hint of a smile tugging at his lips. "You're full of surprises, Erna."

"Life's too short for boredom," she said with a grin, taking the seat opposite him. "And besides, I've always enjoyed making something beautiful out of nothing much."

Joel chuckled, taking a hearty bite of his bread. “I can’t wait to see what you come up with.”

The clink of porcelain and the swish of water filled the air as Erna finished with the last of the dishes. She dried her hands on a towel and turned to find Joel, who had been quietly observing her from the doorway.

“Supper was delicious,” he said, breaking the silence with his deep, comforting drawl.

“Thank you, Joel.” Erna smiled. “I’m glad you liked it.”

They moved to the sitting area, taking their usual seats on either side of the fireplace. Thank heavens he didn’t feel the need to keep the fire going on summer evenings. The heat from the stove was more than enough. In the quiet that followed, they found themselves speaking of dreams and plans, the kind of talk that drew people closer, weaving their lives together one thread at a time.

“I’ve always wanted a house full of laughter and little feet,” Erna confided, a wistful tone in her voice.

Joel nodded, his brown eyes reflecting a spark of something akin to joy. “Children, huh?” He glanced around the modest living space, his mind already turning over the logistics. “We’ll need more room for that. I can build an addition to the house, keep the ranch running too.”

Erna watched him, admiration in her gaze. “You’d do that? For our family?”

“Of course,” he replied.

They sat in comfortable silence, just enjoying each other’s company. Joel’s eyes

wandered through the home they shared, noting the changes that had come with Erna's touch. The once dull wooden floors now gleamed, and every surface was free of dust.

"Place looks different already," he mused. "Cleaner. Brighter."

"Still needs a woman's touch," Erna teased gently, her eyes dancing with the vision of what could be.

"Guess we'll see about that when we drive the cattle to town," Joel said, thinking of the funds they would need for any further improvements. "Should have enough then to make this place shine like you want."

Erna's expression softened. "It's not about the shine, Joel. It's about making it ours. Building a life together, here."

"And so we will," he affirmed, reaching across to take her hand, his large fingers enveloping hers with a tender strength that spoke volumes.

"And in the meantime, I'll do what I can with what I find sitting around," she said, squeezing his hand, her heart full as she watched him. She was glad she'd found the courage to approach him at the dance before someone else had.

JOEL'S HANDS MOVED methodically, a small knife moving between his fingers as he whittled away at the piece of wood resting in his palm. Shavings curled and fell like autumn leaves to the floor, piling up by his boots. The evening sun cast long shadows through the open window, the light playing over the quiet determination etched into his features.

"See this here?" Joel held up the emerging figure for Erna to see. "Sometimes, I swear the wood whispers its secrets, telling me there's a creature trapped inside, just

waiting to be found.”

Erna watched him, her eyes reflecting the last golden rays of daylight. She laughed. “I know exactly what you mean,” she said, her gaze shifting to the pile of unused lumber she had organized earlier. “Give me a piece of wood, and before you know it, it’ll be a spoon or a trinket box.”

“Is that so?” Joel asked, his voice rich with amusement. He set aside his work, looking at her with an expression of fond curiosity. “Looks like we’ve got more in common than we thought.”

“Seems like it.” Erna smiled. “Who’d have guessed?”

“Who indeed,” Joel mused, picking up another block of wood. His thumb brushed over the rough surface, feeling for the shape hidden within. “Maybe you can show me one of your creations.” He handed her the block of wood, not sure what she’d do.

“Maybe I will,” she replied. She took the block and walked to the kitchen for a small knife. He only had two knives, so it was easy to choose. She’d never whittled, but she was going to give it a shot. Why not?

JOEL SET HIS LATEST whittled figure on the mantel. The sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm amber glow through the windows of the house. He turned to Erna, his brown eyes reflecting the last light of day.

“Erna,” he said, his deep voice softening, “I reckon it’s time for bed.”

His hand reached out, gently cupping her cheek, and drew her into a kiss that held the promise of their newfound connection.

Erna’s heart fluttered like a caught butterfly in her chest. His lips were tender against

hers, a contrast to the calloused hands that now cradled her face. She could smell the earth on him, the sweet scent of hay from the fields, mixed with the faint trace of leather from his work gloves.

“Already?” she teased, her voice barely above a whisper, betraying the anticipation building within her.

“Yep,” Joel replied, his thumb brushing a stray lock of hair back from her forehead. “Long day tomorrow, and I want us rested.” But his eyes, dark and inviting, told a different story—one of a night that was just beginning.

With a delicate tug, he led her to their bed, where the quilt she had spread out that morning lay smooth and inviting.

Joel scooped Erna into his arms. She laughed, the sound mingling with the creak of the wooden floorboards under his solid frame. With ease, he laid her down on the bed, the mattress dipping beneath their combined weight.

“Easy there,” Erna said.

“Only for you,” he answered, his smile hidden as he bent to kiss her again.

Their kisses grew more fervent, a dance of lips and tongues that spoke of finally given voice. His hands roamed over her, mapping the contours of her body with a reverence that made her skin tingle. The world beyond their little house fell away, leaving only the two of them, entwined in the soft glow of the oil lamp by the bedside.

Erna’s fingers traced the muscles of Joel’s back, feeling the power beneath his shirt. She marveled at the gentle way this man, who could break wild horses and carry heavy loads with ease, touched her with such care, as if she were something precious.

Clothes became confining, discarded piece by piece with an urgency that surprised her. Skin met skin, hot to the touch, and their breaths came faster. Joel's kisses trailed down her neck, sending shivers through her body.

"Erna," he murmured against her skin, his voice thick with emotion.

"Joel," she whispered back, her hands tangling in his dark hair.

They moved together, a rhythm as old as the land itself, each seeking and finding the fulfillment of unvoiced dreams.

Erna lay in his arms afterward, her head pillowed on his shoulder, her hand tracing a pattern on his chest.

The night air was still, the only sound the soft rustle of the cottonwood tree outside their window. Joel's breathing was steady, a comforting rhythm against Erna's cheek. She marveled at the warmth that emanated from his body, the solidness of his frame beside hers in the narrow bed.

"Erna," Joel's voice broke the silence, low and intimate. "I never imagined... I never thought I could feel like this."

His vulnerability touched her heart, and she lifted her head to meet his gaze in the dimly lit room. His brown eyes held a mix of wonder and tenderness that made her chest ache with emotion.

"I feel it too, Joel," she whispered, her fingers trailing lightly over his chest. "I never knew... I never dared to hope for this."

He drew her closer, wrapping his strong arms around her as if afraid she might slip away in the night. The weight of his feelings settled over her like a warm blanket,

grounding her in the reality of their shared bond. In that moment, Erna felt the depth of their connection, a profound sense of belonging that surpassed anything she had ever dreamed.

As the night wore on, crickets sang in the distance, their chorus weaving a melody that serenaded the small house. The gentle rise and fall of Joel's chest beneath her head lulled Erna into a state of contentment, each breath a reminder of the life they were building together.

In the quiet intimacy of their room, Erna found herself immersed in a sea of emotions, her heart overflowing with gratitude for the man who lay beside her.

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Erna stood before the woodpile, her gaze lingering on the rough-hewn logs and planks stacked haphazardly against the wall.

“Wouldn’t this make the sweetest dollhouse?” she murmured to herself, recalling the delicate structure she and Faith had once admired at Emily’s home. A pang of sadness tugged at her heart as she remembered the day they were turned away, their status as orphans like a scarlet letter barring them from play.

But that was then, and this was now. Erna’s hands itched to create something beautiful, something that would bring joy to another child’s life. With a determined nod, she began sorting through the wood, selecting pieces that whispered promises of tiny rooms and miniature furniture.

Her chores for the day had been done swiftly, the floors swept until they shone, and the bed made, crisp and clean.

“And I made a cake,” Erna said out loud, though there was no one around to hear. “A good, sweet end for supper.” She allowed herself a small smile, knowing well that dessert was her own brand of magic. Amy was a wonderful baker as well, but Erna made the best cakes around.

Erna set to work. Her fingers moved skillfully over the wood, each piece finding its place as if guided by an unseen hand. She saw it all in her mind’s eye: the welcoming front door, the cozy parlor, the little kitchen where countless imaginary feasts would be prepared.

“Like it’s been waiting just for me to bring it to life,” she whispered, her voice filled

with wonder. It felt right, this project, like a piece of her was coming alive with every nail hammered and every board set into place.

As she worked, the dollhouse began to take shape, each line and angle a testament to her vision and dedication. It wasn't just wood and nails; it was hope and dreams crafted by caring hands—a future gift that held the promise of laughter and love.

“Supper won't make itself, though,” she reminded herself, glancing toward the house where the cake sat, fragrant and golden. But as she stood, looking at the burgeoning dollhouse, she knew it would be more than worth the effort.

“Tomorrow,” Erna decided, “I'll find paints and wallpaper. It will be the prettiest little house anyone ever did see.” Her heart swelled with anticipation. Erna felt certain that this dollhouse would bring joy not just to a child, but to her own spirit as well.

Erna's fingers danced over the miniature wooden beams, her mind adrift in a sea of shavings and sawdust. She was so engrossed in fitting the tiny rafters of the dollhouse attic that the rumble of her empty stomach barely registered.

“Land sakes, it's nearly suppertime,” Erna muttered to herself, reluctantly setting aside her tools. She brushed the curls back from her forehead, leaving a smudge of sawdust on her fair skin. The cake, while a sweet treat, wouldn't do for a full meal, and her thoughts turned to what she could whip up quickly.

With purpose, Erna rose to her feet, her gaze lingering on the skeleton of the dollhouse. It was coming together just as she had imagined; each wall stood sturdy and ready for the adornments she'd envisioned. A little money from her last job before leaving for Texas still nestled in the corner of her trunk, enough to buy pots of paint and rolls of delicate wallpaper to breathe color into the tiny home.

She smiled, picturing the finished product: the pastel walls, the windows framed with lace curtains fluttering in an imagined breeze. “It’ll be a sight to behold,” she promised the unfinished structure. She thought it would be good to ask her sister Cassandra to start saving tiny bits of lace that went on her dresses. She wanted to put as little money into the project as possible.

In the kitchen, Erna moved with practiced efficiency, lighting the stove and fetching the necessary ingredients. As she peeled potatoes and seasoned them alongside a chicken destined for frying, her mind wandered back to the dollhouse. The thought of it, complete and vibrant, sitting in the hands of a child filled with delight, warmed her heart like the oven’s growing heat.

“Soon,” she said aloud, “I’ll make it fit for a princess.”

Even as she busied herself with supper preparations, the vision of the dollhouse, resplendent in its imagined glory, stayed with her, a steady beacon guiding her through the evening chores. And though the work was far from done, the joy of creation, of bringing a dream to life, made every moment, every choice, feel like a step toward something beautiful.

Erna hummed a soft tune as she stood by the stove, the sizzle of chicken filling the air with a mouthwatering aroma. She flicked her wrist, turning the pieces in the pan with a practiced ease, and glanced over at the pot where potatoes bubbled away, soon to be mashed with butter and love.

The front door creaked open, and Joel’s dusty boots thumped against the wooden floorboards. He removed his hat, a day’s labor etched in the lines of his face, but his eyes twinkled when the scent reached him. “Well now,” he said with a grin that crinkled the corners of his eyes, “how’d you know fried chicken’s my favorite?”

“Call it a lucky guess,” Erna replied with a playful shrug, spooning out the golden-

brown chicken onto a platter.

They sat down at the table, the evening light casting a warm glow through the window. Joel's gaze wandered, landing on the wooden frame taking shape on the sideboard. "What's this you're making?" he asked between bites, nodding toward the dollhouse skeleton.

Erna's eyes lit up. "It's going to be a dollhouse." She took a sip of water before continuing. "When I was younger, Faith and I had a friend, Emily. Her mother let us play with her beautiful dollhouse just once." A shadow of sorrow crossed her face at the memory. "After she found out we were orphans, she wouldn't let us near her daughter."

Joel's expression softened, his fork pausing mid-air. "That's rough," he said gently. "But look at you now, making your own. It's gonna be something special, Erna."

"Thank you, Joel," she smiled, the warmth returning to her cheeks. "I hope it will bring joy to another little girl someday."

Joel leaned back in his chair, a satisfied look on his face after the last bite of supper. "A dollhouse, huh? That's a fine idea," he said. "Tell you what, I can whittle a little dog and a family to go with it."

Erna's face brightened at the thought. "Really? Oh, Joel, that would be wonderful!" She pictured the tiny wooden figures, her creative mind already envisioning their painted clothes and smiling faces.

Just then, Prince, Joel's loyal mutt, sauntered up and nudged Joel's knee with his snout, eyes beseeching. Joel grinned and slipped a small piece of chicken under the table. Erna tsked, wagging a playful finger. "Don't spoil him, or he'll never learn."

“Can’t help it,” Joel chuckled, scratching behind Prince’s ear. “He’s got charm like someone else I know.”

With the remnants of their meal cleared away, Erna plunged her hands into the sudsy water, scrubbing dishes clean with rhythmic strokes. From the corner of her eye, she watched Joel select a piece of wood from the pile, his strong hands turning it over, measuring its potential.

She dried the last dish and turned her attention back to the dollhouse. With every placement of wood and every mental note for the decorations, her heart swelled. She could already see the lace curtains hanging from the tiny windows, and the delicate china dishes set upon the miniature dining table.

“Need any help there?” Joel called out, without looking up from his careful carving.

“I’ve got it, but thank you,” Erna answered, her voice laced with excitement. “This is going to be the prettiest house far and wide.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” Joel replied, his focus unwavering as he began to shape the form of a dog. Prince lay on the floor in front of him, and he would occasionally look up to make sure he was getting the details right.

The evening passed, the only sounds being the occasional cluck from the hens settling outside and the soft scrape of Joel’s knife against wood. Erna hummed a tune under her breath, her fingers dancing along the dollhouse frame, each movement filled with purpose and joy. The idea of filling the dollhouse with life grew more thrilling with each passing moment, and she couldn’t wait to see it complete.

Erna glanced over her shoulder, catching the flicker of lamplight against Joel’s intent face. His hands, calloused from years of labor, worked a small piece of wood with careful precision. She wiped a stray curl from her forehead and moved closer, drawn

by the emerging shape of a tiny dog.

“Look at that,” she breathed, leaning in to admire his handiwork. “You’ve got a real touch, Joel.”

He looked up, a hint of pride lighting his eyes. “Well, it ain’t much yet, but it’ll resemble a dog soon enough.” Holding out the partially whittled figure, he allowed her to take it from him for a closer inspection.

“More than that, it’s going to be perfect,” Erna said with certainty, tracing the lines that suggested the dog’s form. It was then that she took the knife from his grasp, a playful spark in her gaze. Without hesitation, she settled herself onto his lap, the warmth of his body a solid comfort against her.

“Thank you for this, Joel,” she murmured, tucking her head under his chin. “For helping bring my dream to life.”

“Anything for you, Erna,” he replied, his voice a low rumble as his arms encircled her waist. “Besides, I’m enjoying it too.”

They stayed like that for a moment longer, two souls entwined in the quiet of the evening, sharing in the simple joy of creation. As dusk deepened into night, they rose together, the unfinished dog set aside for tomorrow’s endeavors.

The bed was cool and inviting, made neatly made with quilts Erna had stitched herself as she daydreamed about the day she’d marry. They slipped beneath the covers, bodies drawing close in the familiar dance of shared warmth and whispered endearments.

“Goodnight, Joel,” Erna whispered, her words feather-light as sleep began to pull her under.

“Night, Erna,” he responded, his breath a steady rhythm against her neck.

In the sanctuary of dreams, Erna wandered through a sunlit room where laughter echoed off the walls. A little girl with bright eyes clapped her hands, her joy infectious as she beheld the completed dollhouse. It was a vision of happiness, a future promise woven from wood and hope, and Erna slept soundly, cradled in the arms of the man who made such dreams possible.

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Early the next morning, Erna tied her bonnet under her chin and joined Joel outside. With a smile lighting up her face, she stepped beside him, ready for their trip to the general store.

“Looks like it’ll be another scorcher,” Joel observed, squinting at the horizon where the sun peeked over, casting long shadows on the dusty road ahead.

“Is it every anything else in the summer in Texas?” Erna asked.

Joel chuckled. “Not really. And I’ve lived here my whole life. It didn’t bother me much when I was little, and I just deal with it. My job is outside, no matter what season it is.”

They ambled along, side by side, the horse’s hooves thudding rhythmically against the compacted earth. As ranches dotted the landscape, it made sense for the store to be nestled among them—like a well at the center of a thirsty circle.

Joel cleared his throat, his hand tightening momentarily on the reins. “We’ll need to be mindful of our spending today, Erna. Just the essentials.”

“Of course, Joel. Flour, sugar, yeast... I’ve got meals planned out for the week.” Her voice was light, but attentive, fingers laced together as if holding the list in her hands.

He glanced over at her, noting the determined set of her jaw. “You won’t hear any complaints from me about tight purse strings. Makes the treats all the sweeter when we do have them.”

“Appreciate that,” he said, relief softening the lines around his eyes. “I just want to make sure we’re set for the coming weeks.”

“Wouldn’t dream of letting us go without,” she assured him.

They rode in silence for a bit before she spoke again. “Joel,” she said, “I saved up for a bit from my job at the bakery—I’ll use it to buy the things I need for the dollhouse. But if we’re running low, I’ve got no qualms using that money for our provisions.”

Joel’s gaze fixed on the road ahead, and a shadow seemed to pass over his face. The offer, so innocently made, had inadvertently struck a chord.

“Erna,” he said, his voice rough like the gravel under their wheels, “that’s kind of you, but it’s not necessary. We’ll manage with what I’ve put aside. Your money should go toward your projects.”

She studied his profile, the strong line of his jaw set firm against any hint of charity. It wasn’t pride that made him refuse—it was something deeper, a profound sense of responsibility he held.

“I didn’t mean to overstep,” she said softly, regret lacing her words. “I just wanted to help is all.”

He met her eyes then, and she saw the embarrassment there, a rare vulnerability that he seldom showed. “No need to apologize. It was a sweet offer, Erna. I just want to take care of things, you know?”

“Of course, I do,” she replied, offering him a smile that held both understanding and respect. As the carriage trundled on, Erna leaned back against the seat, her thoughts turning to the dollhouse and the intricate work that awaited her hands. She felt a quiet determination settle in her heart, a promise to herself that she would find a way to

contribute, to make their shared life not just manageable, but abundant.

Joel stopped the wagon and set the brake in front of the store. He got out and helped Erna down. “Do you need my help?” he asked softly.

She shook her head. “No, I think I can handle it.”

He followed her anyway, ready to carry anything she chose to purchase.`

Erna stepped into the general store, her gaze immediately drawn to a corner where rolls of wallpaper stood like soldiers at attention. She picked one, the pattern delicate and subtle—a perfect backdrop for the miniature abode that occupied her dreams and waking hours. She could almost envision the tiny rooms coming to life beneath her careful touch.

“Joel, look at this,” she said, holding up the roll for him to see. “This will make the parlor look so inviting.”

He nodded, a half-smile on his face. “Sure is pretty. Just like you,” he commented, a gentle tease in his voice that made her heart flutter unexpectedly.

She laughed, rolling her eyes at his compliment, but inside, warmth bloomed. Her fingers brushed over the selection of paints, settling on a soft ivory and a pale rose hue, also choosing a white paint for the outside of the house, and a brown for the cabinets. “And these will complement it just right.”

“Sounds good, Erna. Just remember our budget now,” Joel reminded gently, not wanting to dampen her spirits but aware of their financial constraints.

“I know,” she replied with a nod. She added a few tiny scraps of lace and a swath of fabric for curtains to her basket, her mind already sewing them together in intricate

patterns. As she calculated the cost, a pang of guilt tugged at her. “I can’t keep spending like this,” she murmured, more to herself than to Joel. “Cassandra would have some ideas. I’ll speak with her soon.”

Joel merely squeezed her shoulder in silent support, his presence a steady comfort beside her.

Turning her attention to the foodstuffs, Erna began to peruse the shelves with an eagle eye. Flour, sugar, a bit of salt pork—she tallied prices and measured quantities against the meals she planned in her head. The kitchen at home was her domain, where she conjured simple yet hearty fare that filled the belly and warmed the soul.

“Beans are on sale,” she noted, adding a sack to the basket.

“Smart thinking,” Joel approved, watching as she deliberated over a basket of apples. “Get enough for a cake? I love apple cake!”

“Maybe two,” she quipped, the corners of her mouth turning up. “If I ration the sugar right.”

“I know whatever you bake, I will love it,” he said, and she knew he meant it.

“Then let’s hope they bring in some sweetness for us too,” she replied, her tone light but her thoughts already flickering to the dollhouse, the cake, and all the small things that wove their lives together, day by day.

As they left the store, their steps matched and easy, Erna felt a sense of contentment settle around her. It wasn’t grandeur she sought, but the simple joy of crafting a life with Joel, of finding beauty in the everyday, and of nurturing the love that seemed to grow between them, as natural and enduring as the Texas land they called home.

Erna adjusted herself on the wagon seat, stealing glances at Joel's profile. He looked just a bit sad, and she had to wonder if it was her offer to help pay for their food.

"Joel," she said, "about earlier, offering to chip in for the food... I'm sorry if it upset you. I just wanted to help is all."

He glanced over, the sunlight catching in his eyes and making them shine like molten copper. "Erna, don't fret about it," he said, the corners of his lips tilting up ever so slightly. "It was a kind offer." His arm found its way around her shoulders, pulling her close against the fabric of his work-worn shirt. She leaned into the strength of his embrace, feeling the steady thump of his heart beneath her cheek.

"Thank you," she whispered, allowing a moment of silence to pass between them.

When they got to the ranch, Joel headed out to tend to the chores, leaving Erna with the dollhouse that sat waiting in the parlor. She rolled up her sleeves, eyeing the miniature structure with renewed determination.

She hummed a tune, one that Mrs. Jackson used to sing, as she worked the tiny brush along the edges of the walls, infusing them with color. The dollhouse transformed under her careful touch, blooming with promise. It wasn't just about the money it would bring. It was about proving to herself, and maybe to Joel, that she could contribute to their life together in ways beyond cakes and suppers.

"Perfect," she murmured, standing back to admire her handiwork.

The screen door creaked as Joel stepped into the kitchen, dust swirling in a dance behind him from his day's labor. The aroma of roasted chicken and fresh-baked bread greeted him like an old friend, and there she was—Erna, aproned and flour-dusted, the very picture of domestic grace.

“Smells like heaven in here,” Joel said, his rough hands finding their way to her waist as he peered over her shoulder at the feast on the table.

“Sit down before it gets cold,” Erna replied with a smile, her heart skipping a beat at the familiar warmth of his touch. She watched him take his place at the head of the table, his presence transforming the simple room into something that felt like home.

“Thank you, darling,” he said, a tired but genuine gratitude in his voice.

“Of course,” she said, serving him a generous portion. They ate mostly in comfortable silence, save for the soft clinking of cutlery and the occasional compliment to the chef.

After supper, they retreated to their respective corners of the modest house. Joel worked on mending a saddle by the fireplace, his large fingers deftly working the leather. Meanwhile, Erna returned to the dollhouse, the intricate details demanding all of her attention.

“Looks real nice, what you’re doing there,” Joel called out, without looking up from his task.

“Thank you,” Erna blushed, pleased by his notice. “I’m hoping it’ll catch someone’s eye in town.”

“Bound to,” Joel assured her, glancing up with a confident nod.

The quiet hours waned, and the coolness of the Texas night seeped through the walls. They put away their crafts, the space between them filled with the unspoken agreement of their nightly ritual. Their love was a silent conversation, one spoken in the language of touch and tender looks.

There, beneath simple cotton sheets, they found each other. Two souls entwined, seeking comfort and connection. It was love made manifest, as natural and essential as the rain to the parched earth.

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Erna's heart swelled as the familiar sight of her sisters came into view. She rushed forward, her arms wide, embracing each sister in turn. Then she saw Hannah, whose serene eyes held a secret.

"Married to the pastor?" Erna exclaimed, her voice tinged with disbelief as she took in Hannah's modest wedding band.

Hannah met her gaze, a small smile dancing on her lips. "Yes, can you believe it?" Her tone was light, betraying none of the gravity one might expect from such a revelation.

"Of all people," Erna mused, shaking her head but unable to suppress the grin that followed. "You're full of surprises."

"Life is peculiar like that," Hannah replied, her fingers absentmindedly playing with the delicate lace at her collar.

The conversation lingered in Erna's mind as she returned to the ranch later that day with Joel at her side. They stood side by side before the weather-beaten fence, tools in hand, ready to mend what the storm had broken.

"Hand me that hammer, would you?" Joel's voice cut through the stillness, low and steady.

"Here you go," Erna said, passing him the tool. Their fingers brushed briefly, sending a jolt of warmth up her arm.

“Thanks,” he nodded, his focus returning to the splintered wood. Together, they worked in comfortable silence, measuring, cutting, and nailing with an ease born of mutual understanding.

“Looks good,” Erna said, stepping back to admire their handiwork.

“Couldn’t have done it without you,” Joel replied, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

“Teamwork,” she said.

“With my very favorite teammate,” Joel agreed, his gaze locking with hers for a moment longer than necessary.

ERNA HOISTED THE WATERING can, her brows furrowed in concentration as she tended to the berry bushes that lined the edge of the ranch. Joel was beside her, his hands deft as he pruned and picked the ripest of the fruits.

“Careful there,” he teased, a playful glint in his eye as he watched her wrestle with the spout. “Wouldn’t want to give these bushes more than they bargained for.”

“Nor you,” she replied with a laugh, but just as the words left her mouth, her grip slipped. Water cascaded over the rim, drenching not only the earth but Joel’s boots and trousers as well.

“Erna!” he exclaimed, more in amusement than dismay.

“Joel! I’m so sorry!” But Erna couldn’t help the laughter bubbling up inside her. Joel stood there, dripping and surprised, before his own chuckles joined hers. It was an unexpected shower on a hot Texas day, and the coolness was almost welcome.

“Looks like I got my share of watering too,” Joel shook his leg, sending droplets flying.

“Guess it’s time for a break anyway,” Erna suggested, still giggling as she set the can down. They left the bushes behind, half-soaked but spirits undampened.

Under a large oak tree, its branches a canopy against the midday sun, Erna spread a checkered cloth. She brought out bread she had baked earlier, along with slices of ham, and a jar of sweet preserves made from last year’s berries.

“Nothing like fresh bread,” Joel said appreciatively, taking a bite and nodding to her. “You’ve got a talent, Erna.”

“Thank you,” she said, pleased by the compliment.

They shared a smile. Sunlight filtered through the leaves above, dappling their faces with patches of warmth. The simple meal, the quiet rustle of the oak tree, and the gentle cadence of their conversation wove together into a tapestry of comfort and camaraderie.

“Days like this,” Joel said, looking out at the expanse of their land, “make all the hard work worth it.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Erna said, her heart full. There was something about sharing a meal outside that made her feel anchored, connected — not just to the land, but to the man sitting across from her.

ERNA WIPED HER HANDS on her apron as she pulled the steaming cake from the oven, the sweet aroma of baked apples filling the air. She set it on the windowsill to cool, a small triumph in her day’s work.

“Smells like heaven,” Joel remarked, coming into the kitchen with a hint of dust still clinging to his shirt. He’d been out tending to the horses, but the scent of fresh cake had lured him back inside.

“Fresh from our orchard,” Erna said with a smile, slicing into the cake. “I thought we deserved a treat after all that fence mending.”

Joel’s face lit up like the Fourth of July. He took a bite, and his eyes closed in appreciation. “Erna, you’ve outdone yourself,” he murmured, savoring the taste.

“Thank you” Erna replied, watching him with a mixture of pride and affection. This simple act of baking felt like an extension of herself, a way to nourish both body and spirit within their home.

As they sat down at the old wooden table, Joel’s expression shifted. The jovial light in his eyes dimmed as he traced the grain of the wood with his finger, gathering his thoughts.

“Growing up without a real family was tough,” he started, his voice lower now. “I didn’t have much, didn’t have anyone to teach me about... well, anything.” Joel paused, his shoulders hunched as if the weight of those memories bore down on him even now.

“Must have been real lonely,” Erna said softly, reaching across the table to lay her hand over his. Her touch was gentle, meant to soothe as much as to connect.

“Lonely doesn’t quite cover it,” he admitted, looking at their intertwined fingers. “But I learned to make do. To be strong.”

“And you are,” Erna said earnestly. “Strongest man I know.”

“Strength isn’t just about muscle, though,” Joel said, a wistful note creeping into his voice. “It’s about having someone who cares whether you come back at the end of the day. Someone who bakes you a cake just because.”

Erna squeezed his hand. “You’ll always have that now, Joel. You’re not alone anymore.”

He looked at her then, really looked, and whatever walls he’d built around himself seemed to crumble just a bit. “Thanks to you, Erna.”

“I’m your wife. I do what any loving wife would do,” she replied, meaning every word.

ERNA HELD A SKEIN OF colorful yarn in her hands, the afternoon sun casting a warm glow over the wooden porch where she sat. Joel watched her with a mix of curiosity and admiration as she began to weave the strands together. “Now, you see,” she explained, “you gotta start with a simple knot like this.”

“Simple for you, maybe,” Joel chuckled, taking the yarn she handed him. His large, calloused fingers fumbled slightly with the delicate thread.

“Here, let me show you.” Erna’s voice was patient as she guided his hands, tying the first knot. “You’ll get the hang of it.”

Joel studied their joined hands. “I think you could make just about anything with those hands of yours,” he said, genuinely impressed.

She laughed, a light, easy sound that made the corners of his eyes crinkle with delight. “Just wait until you see the finished product. It’s all about practice.”

“Then I’m in good hands, aren’t I?” Joel said, attempting another knot and

succeeding this time. He looked up at her with a boyish grin.

“Very good hands,” she confirmed, returning his smile.

As the day melted into evening, they sat side by side on the creaky porch swing, a half-finished woven basket between them. The sky shifted from blue to softer shades of pink and orange as the sun dipped toward the horizon.

“Would you look at that sunset,” Erna murmured, leaning back against the swing, the project momentarily forgotten.

“Never gets old, does it?” Joel replied quietly, his gaze fixed on the painting unfolding in the sky.

“Feels like God’s just showing off sometimes,” she said with a gentle laugh, tilting her head to rest against his shoulder.

“Maybe so,” Joel agreed, his voice a low rumble next to her ear. “But I reckon he’s got every right to.”

ERNA PACED THE DUSTY ground, eyeing the horseshoe in her hand with a mixture of determination and mischief. Joel stood opposite her, leaning against the wooden post that marked the pit, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Ready to admit defeat?” he called out, his voice laced with playful challenge.

“Ha! I never admit defeat,” Erna shot back, her eyes sparkling with competitive spirit. She swung her arm and released the horseshoe, watching it arc gracefully through the air and land with a satisfying clink around the stake. “Beat that!”

Joel pushed off from the post and strode over to take his turn, rolling up the sleeves of

his shirt. He picked up a horseshoe, weighing it thoughtfully in his hand before mimicking Erna's stance. With a flick of his wrist, the horseshoe spun toward its target, landing neatly beside Erna's but not quite encircling the stake.

"Looks like we've got ourselves a game," he said, a hint of admiration in his voice for her skill.

"Seems so," Erna agreed, her lips curving into a triumphant smile.

They continued in rounds, laughter echoing across the ranch as each tried to outdo the other.

As the final round drew to a close, Erna emerged victorious, her last toss securing the winning point. She did a little victory dance, her laughter mingling with the evening breeze.

"All right, all right, you win," Joel said, chuckling. "You've got quite the arm there, Erna."

"Thank you kindly, sir," she responded with an exaggerated curtsy. "Now, how about we call it a day?"

"Only if you grant me one dance," Joel offered, holding out his hand. "To celebrate your victory, of course."

Erna nodded, placing her hand in his. They moved inside to the small living room, where the waning light filtered through the curtains, casting a soft glow on the wooden floor.

"Music, ma'am?" Joel asked, as they found their position, his hand resting lightly on her waist.

“Allow me,” Erna replied, clearing her throat before humming a slow, sweet melody—one Mrs. Jackson used to sing. Her voice was soft but carried enough tune for them to sway gently in time with the rhythm.

As they danced, Erna rested her head against Joel’s shoulder, feeling the steady beat of his heart through the fabric of his shirt. There was something tender in the way he led her, careful and attentive to her every move. They turned slowly, wrapped in the harmony of the moment, the world beyond their quiet cocoon fading away.

“Erna,” Joel murmured, his breath warm against her ear. “I reckon this is far better than any victory at horseshoes.”

“It is,” she whispered back, her heart fluttering at the closeness between them. “Far better.”

ERNA TIPTOED ACROSS the wooden floorboards of the kitchen, a sly smile playing on her lips as she balanced the freshly baked cake in her hands.

“Joel,” she called out. “Could you come here for a moment?”

From the porch outside, the sound of boots against wood approached, and Joel appeared in the doorway, his brow raised in mild curiosity. “What’s all this now?” he asked, eyeing the cake.

“Surprise!” Erna announced with a flourish, presenting the confectionery masterpiece to him. It was a simple creation by most standards, but the careful icing and the way the cinnamon mixed with the sugar spoke volumes of her efforts. “Your favorite, if I’m not mistaken.”

Joel’s eyes lit up like the stars that would soon pepper the evening sky. “Well, I’ll be,” he said, a chuckle escaping him. He moved closer, admiring the cake. “Erna, this

is something else. Thank you kindly.”

“Go on, have a taste,” she urged, handing him a fork.

He obliged, cutting a modest piece and bringing it to his mouth. His eyes closed, savoring the familiar flavor, then opened to meet hers with unspoken gratitude. “Perfect, just perfect.”

“Then it was worth every minute spent in the kitchen,” Erna said, her heart swelling at his enjoyment.

“Speaking of perfect,” Joel said, wiping a crumb from the corner of his mouth, “how about we finish up with that dollhouse? The little folks are waiting for their final touch.”

“Lead the way.” She grinned, setting the cake aside for later.

The tiny wooden figures were lined up like silent spectators, awaiting their colorful details. Joel picked up a small brush, his large hands surprisingly nimble as he dipped it into a pot of paint.

“Like this?” he asked, his concentration etched into the furrow of his brows as he attempted to color the miniature dog with careful strokes.

“Exactly,” Erna encouraged, watching him bring the tiny creature to life. “Remember, the smallest details make the grandest difference.”

“Never knew painting dogs could be so...” Joel searched for the word, “...delicate.”

“Everything has its art,” Erna replied, pleased with his progress. “Even ranch life.”

“Guess you’re right.” Joel nodded, adding another stroke of brown to the dog’s back. “And you, Erna Brown, are quite the artist.”

“Thank you, Joel. But today, you’re the artist, and I must say, you’ve got quite the knack for it.”

When he’d finished the dog, he showed it to Prince, who barked at it as if to say it was good.

The moon hung low in the night sky, casting a gentle glow through the window of the small bedroom where Erna and Joel lay side by side. A soft breeze carried the scent of blooming nightflowers and fresh hay as it whispered through the curtains.

“Joel?” Erna’s voice was a mere murmur, barely louder than the rustling leaves outside.

“Mhm?” Joel responded, his tone warm and drowsy.

“Did you ever dream about this? Lying here, I mean, with someone at your side?”

Joel turned his head to face her, their noses almost touching. “Can’t say I did,” he confessed. “But now, I can’t imagine anything better.”

Erna’s lips curved into a smile, her eyes reflecting the contentment that swelled within her. “I used to dream about traveling to far-off places. Paris, London...”

“Is that so?” Joel’s thumb grazed her hand gently, tracing the lines of her palm. “And now?”

“Now,” she paused, her gaze locked onto his, “I dream about planting a cherry orchard out back. Watching the trees grow year after year.”

“An cherry orchard, huh?” He chuckled softly. “That sounds good. And I think black cherry trees grow well in this are!”

“And you, Joel? What do you see in our future?” Her question was light, tinged with curiosity.

“Us,” he said simply. “Just us, building a life together. Maybe a couple of little ones running around the ranch.”

“Little ones?” Erna echoed, her heart skipping a beat.

“Sure,” he replied, his voice steady and sure. “If you’d like that.”

“I would,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. “Very much.”

“Goodnight, Erna,” Joel murmured, his breath tickling her ear.

“Goodnight, Joel,” she replied, nestling closer to him.

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Erna waved her sister Faith over to the porch where the summer breeze offered a small respite from the Texas heat. "Come sit, Faith," Erna called out cheerfully, patting the seat next to her on the wooden bench. She brushed off the remnants of her baking efforts and presented a plate piled high with slices of sponge cake, their golden crusts promising a sweetness within.

"I've something special to show you." Erna's eyes sparkled with excitement.

Faith eased herself down onto the bench, smoothing the fabric of her skirt with practiced hands. She picked up a slice of cake, admiring the fluffy texture before taking a dainty bite. "What is it that you're so eager to share?" she asked, her voice filled with curiosity.

"Wait and see." Erna led her sister into the cozy parlor, where the dollhouse stood proudly on a table by the window. It was a miniature marvel, crafted with care and imbued with the dreams of childhood.

"Isn't she a beauty?" Erna beamed, her fingers hovering over the dollhouse as if reluctant to disturb the tiny world she had created.

"Erna, it's wonderful! It reminds me of Emily's dollhouse. Remember that one time we got to play with it?" Faith's neat brows rose in admiration. Her gaze roamed over each detail—the shingled roof, the delicate curtains framing the windows, and the front door that opened to reveal a world in miniature.

"See here," Erna said, pointing to the kitchen inside the dollhouse, where a set of tiny dishes and tin cups were arranged with precision. "I ordered these all the way from

England with the money I saved from working.”

“Such attention to detail,” Faith murmured, her fingertips brushing against the furniture. “You’ve outdone yourself.”

“Thank you, Faith. That means the world, coming from you.” Erna paused, her lips curving into a smile tinged with a hint of sadness. “I’m planning to sell it.”

“Are you sure?” Faith looked at her sister, searching her face for signs of doubt.

“Quite sure. I think it’s time for it to bring joy to a little girl.” Erna’s tone held firm resolve, though her heart twinged at the thought of parting with the dollhouse.

“Then whoever gets this will be mighty lucky indeed,” Faith affirmed, wrapping an arm around Erna’s shoulders in a gesture of sisterly support. “It’s truly beautiful.”

“Means more than you know, hearing you say that.” Erna leaned into the embrace, her spirits buoyed by her sister’s approval. Together, they stood in companionable silence, two halves of the same whole, contemplating the future of the tiny world before them.

“Married life sure has its perks, doesn’t it?” Faith said, a twinkle in her eye, “Like having the time to perfect cake recipes.”

Erna chuckled, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. “I’d say so. Joel enjoys my baking, and I enjoy the smiles it brings.”

“Speaking of joys,” Faith started, setting down her fork and leaning forward with interest, “have you thought about where you’ll try to sell the dollhouse?”

“I have,” Erna nodded, her gaze drifting toward the miniature abode on the

mantelpiece. “I will take it to the general store in town. The owner told me he’d be happy to sell it if it’s high enough quality.”

Faith glanced at the dollhouse, her eyes softening. “You’ll make some little girl very happy.”

“Hope so.” Erna sipped her tea, the steam warming her cheeks. “I want it to mean as much to her as it made to me as I built it. I’ve worked on it for a few weeks now.”

“Wait, Erna,” Faith said suddenly, her hand reaching out to touch Erna’s arm. “Before you take it to the store, could you give me a week?”

Erna turned her head, puzzlement knitting her brows. “A week? Whatever for?”

Faith’s lips curled into a secretive smile, and she shook her head gently. “Can’t tell you just yet, but trust me. Please?”

“All right, a week it is.” Erna couldn’t help but mirror her sister’s smile, curiosity bubbling within her. “But you’ll have to spill the beans sooner or later.”

“You’ll see,” Faith replied, the promise hanging between them like a silent pact.

Erna brushed a stray crumb from her skirt, the last vestige of their pleasant tea. “So, Faith,” she began with an earnest tilt to her voice, “how about we have Sunday dinner after church? I’ve been meaning to get better acquainted with Kane.”

“Kane would love that,” Faith replied, her eyes sparkling with the mention of her husband’s name. “He’s quite the storyteller. You’ll like him, I’m sure. And we’ll do it at my place.”

“I don’t mind cooking,” Erna said, anticipation lighting her features.

Faith shook her head. “You invited me for a lovely tea. It’s time for you to come to my place.

Erna nodded. “It’s settled then. Sunday it is.”

Erna watched her sister depart, and she turned a critical eye to the dollhouse, thinking there was more to be done.

She fetched a small basket of colorful scraps and settled by the window where the light was generous. Threading a needle, she began the meticulous work of fashioning miniature garments for the wooden dolls. Her nimble fingers found the task challenging. The tiny collars and cuffs tested her patience. But the satisfaction of seeing the dresses take shape spurred her on, each delicate stitch a promise of added value to the little house.

“Imagine,” Erna whispered to herself, picturing a child’s delight, “a complete family, all dressed up and nowhere to go but someone’s loving home.” She let out a soft chuckle, her heart swelling at the thought. Each tiny button sewn, every minuscule hem folded, brought her closer to fulfilling that dream—for the dollhouse and perhaps, in some small way, for herself.

ERNA STOOD IN FRONT of the stove, the simmering aroma of beef stew filling the kitchen. She hummed a cheerful tune, her spoon stirring through the thickening broth with an easy rhythm. Joel leaned against the doorway, watching her sway gently to the music in her head.

“Joel, you won’t believe how excited Faith was to see the dollhouse,” Erna said without turning, her voice bubbling with enthusiasm. “She’s invited us for Sunday dinner this Sunday after church, and we’re having dinner at their place.”

“Is that so?” Joel pushed himself off the frame, his boots clicking on the wooden

floor as he approached. He rested his hands on her shoulders, feeling the warmth from the stove on his forearms.

“Uh-huh. It’ll be nice to sit down with them, don’t you think?” Erna glanced up at him, her eyes shining with excitement. “I can’t wait to meet Kane properly.”

Joel grinned, his thumb brushing against her collarbone. “You’re all lit up like the Fourth of July. It’s good seeing you so happy.”

“Faith is thinking up some kind of surprise,” she continued, stirring the pot once more before covering it. “She wouldn’t spill a bean about it, but I reckon it’s something wonderful.”

“Does Faith have a knack for surprises?” Joel’s grin widened, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Well, then, Sunday it is. I’m sure whatever she’s planning will be worth the wait.”

“Absolutely,” Erna agreed, leaning back into his embrace for a moment before she checked on the cornbread in the oven. “And with your stories and her plans, it’s bound to be an afternoon to remember.”

“Stories, huh? I suppose I better think up a few good ones then,” Joel teased, releasing her as she pulled out the golden-brown loaf.

“Only the best,” Erna shot back playfully, placing the bread on the counter. “For my sister and her new husband.”

“Only the best,” Joel echoed, his smile lingering as he watched Erna move about the kitchen.

ERNA SCRAPED THE LAST of the gravy onto her plate, savoring the rich flavors

of the hearty stew she'd made. Joel sat across from her, his fork pausing mid-air as he watched her with a fondness that warmed her more than the summer heat outside.

"Joel, would you like the last biscuit?" Erna offered, breaking the comfortable silence that had settled between them.

"I'm fuller than a tick on a hound," Joel chuckled, pushing his plate away. "But I wouldn't say no to watching you work on those little clothes."

Erna's eyes twinkled as she stood to clear the table, her hands deftly stacking the dishes. "You sure know how to charm a lady," she teased, shaking her head at his country wit.

"Only my lady," Joel retorted, standing up to help her. Together, they made quick work of the cleanup, moving in an easy rhythm.

Once the kitchen was tidy, Erna retrieved the miniature garments and the dollhouse from the parlor, setting them out on the table where they ate. She threaded a needle with practiced ease, her fingers nimbly folding the tiny fabric into a dress fit for the smallest of wooden ladies.

"Let me try something," Joel said, reaching for a block of wood and a carving knife. He began to shape it, his large hands surprisingly gentle as he worked to create a small feline companion for the dollhouse family.

"Look at you, making a cat," Erna laughed softly, her gaze flitting between her sewing and his crafting. "Who knew you had such a soft touch?"

"Learned from the best," Joel replied without looking up, his focus intent on getting the ears just right.

They worked side by side, the only sounds in the room the occasional snip of Erna's scissors and the scrape of Joel's knife. As twilight deepened into night, Erna held up a finished blue gingham dress, satisfaction beaming in her eyes.

"Isn't it just the cutest thing?" she cooed, holding the dress up against one of the dolls.

"Sure is," Joel agreed, holding up his creation. "And this cat isn't half bad either."

"Better than half bad, I'd say," Erna corrected him, admiring the tiny leather cat. "You've got quite the talent, Mr. Trinity."

"Guess we make a good team, huh?" Joel said, his tone affectionate and proud.

"Best team there is," Erna responded, her heart full.

The clock chimed late, and they realized the hour had slipped away from them. They tidied their crafts with reluctant hands, neither wanting to end the simple joy of creating together.

"Time for bed, I guess," Joel observed, stretching his arms above his head.

"Seems so," Erna replied, stifling a yawn.

Erna slid under the covers while Joel turned down the lamp. The darkness enveloped them like a blanket, but it was the shared gratitude that truly embraced them.

"Goodnight, Erna," Joel whispered, his voice low and soothing.

"Goodnight, love," Erna murmured back. The word hung in the air, simple yet profound.

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Erna and Joel made their way to Kane and Faith's house. Thankfully, it was early October, and the heat wasn't as bad as it had been, though it still felt like summer to Erna. Church had left them both with a feeling of contentment that only the promise of a hearty Sunday dinner could enhance.

"I'm looking forward to getting to know your sister," Joel remarked as he held the door open for Erna.

"You'll love her," Erna said, stepping into the cool foyer, where the smells of roasted meat and fresh bread were already making her mouth water.

As they settled around the dining table, the conversation flowed freely, punctuated by laughter and the clinking of cutlery. Joel leaned back in his chair, a twinkle in his eyes, ready to regale them with a tale.

"I need to tell y'all about the time I tried to break in that wild stallion over at the Murphy ranch?" Joel began, his hands animating the story as he spoke of the obstinate beast with a fondness in his voice that drew chuckles from around the table.

"Sounds like you met your match," Kane jested, his own laugh rich and full.

"Maybe so," Joel conceded, "but by the end, we came to an understanding, him and me."

They ate heartily, enjoying the simple pleasures of good food and better company. Afterward, Erna and Faith cleared the dishes, hands moving in sync as only twins could. The clatter of porcelain and the splash of water accompanied their quiet

conversation about patterns and stitches - the language of sisters who shared a lifetime of memories.

Once the last dish was dried and put away, Faith's face lit up with excitement. "Erna, wait till you see what I've got for you," she said, fetching a small bundle from the other room.

Unwrapping it, she revealed four tiny quilts, each a masterpiece of miniature stitching. The colors were vibrant, the patterns intricate, and Erna's fingers traced the delicate work with awe.

"Faith, they're beautiful," Erna breathed out, her voice thick with admiration and affection. She wrapped her sister in a grateful hug, feeling the love that had been sewn into the tiny quilts.

"Joel, come look at these," Erna called, beckoning him over with a smile.

He ambled over, nodding appreciatively as he inspected the handiwork. "Faith, these are something special. You've got a real gift," Joel said earnestly, his straightforward praise ringing with sincerity.

"Thank you, Joel," Faith replied, her cheeks flushed with pleasure at the compliment.

"Can't wait to see them on the dollhouse beds," Erna said, already picturing the tiny bedrooms brought to life by these glorious additions. She'd made sweet covers for each bed, but these were so much better. She'd include both when she sold the dollhouse.

"Your dolls will be sleeping in style," Joel chuckled, imagining the delight of children's faces when they would play with such treasures.

Erna shuffled the deck of cards with practiced ease, the soft slap of paper against wood punctuating the quiet hum of the house.

“Your deal, sis,” Faith said with a smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she glanced at Erna.

“All right, let’s see if Joel’s luck holds out,” Erna replied, dealing the cards deftly into four piles. Joel leaned back in his chair, a playful glint in his eye.

“Remember, darling, I’m just full of surprises,” he teased, picking up his hand and fanning the cards before him.

Laughter mingled with the clinking of glasses. The game progressed amid light-hearted banter, with Kane throwing down his cards at one point and declaring, “I think these hands are better suited for roping than card playing,” which only elicited more chuckles.

Joel pushed back from the table and stretched. “Kane, how about we take a stroll? I can see the ladies have things they want to talk about,” he suggested, rolling his shoulders.

“Sounds good,” Kane agreed, standing up. “Don’t go starting another round without us now.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Erna replied with mock solemnity, watching as the two men disappeared out the door.

In their absence, Faith began stacking the cards neatly, her fingers moving with the same precision she used for her quilting. She turned to Erna, her expression contemplative. “They’ll be driving the cattle into town in a few weeks,” she remarked, almost to herself.

“Is that so?” Erna’s interest was piqued, and a hint of concern flickered across her face. “You worried at all?”

“Nah, they’ve done it plenty of times before,” Faith said, brushing away the concern with a wave of her hand. “But you know me—I’ll be a little anxious till they’re safely back.”

“True enough,” Erna nodded, understanding the unspoken bond of worry that knitted the community together whenever their men faced the perils of the trail.

“Let’s just hope the weather holds,” Faith added, a hopeful lilt in her voice.

“You should come stay with me, and we’ll be anxious together,” Erna said, her thoughts drifting to Joel’s safe return. She couldn’t help but feel a swell of pride for the hard work and dedication he showed, just as she knew Faith felt for Kane.

“Time enough to fret when they set off,” she said finally. “For now, let’s just enjoy this lovely evening.”

Erna and Joel stepped out into the cooling air, her hand finding its place in his. Their shadows stretched long on the dusty path leading home.

“Faith’s quilts were something else, weren’t they?” Erna said, her voice carrying the warmth of the afternoon well spent.

“Sure were,” Joel agreed, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “Makes me think we ought to show off your baking next time. Have them over.”

Erna’s laughter tinkled like wind chimes in a soft breeze. “You just want another one of my apple cakes.”

“Can’t blame a man for having good taste,” he teased back, the corners of his eyes crinkling with mirth.

THE FIRST LIGHT OF dawn cast a golden hue over the countryside as Erna and Joel prepared for their early venture into town. The dollhouse sat majestically on their table, the miniature world crafted by their hands ready to find a new place. Erna adjusted the tiny chest filled with figures clothed in scraps of fabric that had once been dresses and shirts.

“Look at this little fellow,” Joel said, picking up a miniature cowboy. “Reminds me of my first time herding cattle.”

With a fond smile, Erna replied, “Maybe he’ll inspire someone else’s dreams, just like you did.”

“Could be.” He placed the figure gently back into the chest.

“Did you remember the curtains?” Joel asked, glancing around for the final touch Erna had painstakingly added to every window of the house.

“Of course,” she said, patting the small bundle wrapped neatly beside the chest. “Two sets for each window. We want it to feel like home, don’t we?”

“Nothing less,” he nodded, pride evident in his voice.

Together, they carried their creation out to the wagon. The drive to the store was made mostly in silence, each of them excited about the beautiful house they’d made.

“Ready?” Joel asked as they approached their destination, the general store where all manner of goods changed hands.

“Ready,” Erna affirmed, her heart fluttering with anticipation. This was more than just a dollhouse—it was a piece of their life together, a shared dream taking form.

Joel’s arms cradled the dollhouse with care, and Erna trailed just behind, her own trunk of handmade treasures gripped firmly in her hands. The bell above the general store’s entrance announced their arrival, a cheerful jingle that matched Erna’s hopeful heart.

“Morning, Mr. Haskins,” Joel greeted as he maneuvered the miniature home onto the counter.

“Goodness gracious!” the store owner exclaimed, his eyes widening at the sight of the intricately crafted dollhouse. “Erna, did you do all this?”

“Joel helped quite a bit,” Erna said, unable to suppress her smile. “It was a joint effort.”

Mr. Haskins ran a worn hand along the shingled roof, peering into the tiny windows. “Well, I’ll be,” he murmured before straightening up. “I’ll give you twenty dollars for it—no, I can’t rightly sell this. My daughter would never forgive me if I let such a treasure slip through my fingers.”

“Twenty dollars?” Erna’s voice was barely above a whisper, but her eyes sparkled like the morning dew on prairie grass.

Joel’s firm nod sealed the deal, and with Mr. Haskins making a note on his ledger, giving them a credit for whatever they needed, the transaction was complete.

“Let’s get our provisions, darling,” Joel said, the corners of his mouth turned up in a rare, easy grin.

As they filled their basket with flour, sugar, and other staples, Erna's spirits soared. She was more than Faith's twin, more than the girl who cut hair or baked the town's favorite pastries. Today, she was a contributor, a true partner in their little enterprise.

Stepping out into the street, groceries in tow, Erna couldn't contain her joy. Her hand found Joel's, their fingers intertwining naturally.

"Seems like we make a good team, Mrs. Trinity," Joel remarked, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

"Seems like it, Mr. Trinity," she agreed, grinning. Together, they set off toward the life they were building—one tiny, lovingly crafted piece at a time.

ERNA'S BOOTS SCUFFED the dirt path leading to their homestead, her heart light as a cotton cloud in the Texas sky. Joel's silhouette against the setting sun was that of a diligent man, his posture speaking of unspoken promises and a future as vast as the ranch they tended.

"Got to check on the cattle," he called over his shoulder. Erna nodded, her own smile steadfast as she watched him disappear into the sprawling fields.

Turning her attention to the task at hand, Erna rummaged through the woodpile inside the barn. Her fingers danced over the rough textures, selecting pieces with the right grain and sturdiness. The money from the dollhouse had sparked more than just joy. It ignited a flame of purpose within her. Each splinter and knot in the wood whispered potential, and she gathered them like treasures, envisioning the next miniature creation already taking shape in her mind.

Erna dusted off her apron and made her way inside. Humming a tune that echoed the day's victories, she set about making an apple cake. She cut the apples up into small pieces. Adding the cinnamon and sugar to the apples, she smiled, happy there was a

little extra sugar to add for a change.

She had just popped the cake out of the oven when she heard Joel open the door.

“Smells like heaven in here,” Joel’s voice drifted in from the doorway.

“Wait till you taste it,” Erna said with a wink.

The clink of forks against plates filled the cozy kitchen as Erna and Joel sat down for supper. A gentle breeze wafted through the open window, carrying with it the scent of the apple cake cooling on the windowsill.

“This is delicious,” Joel complimented, his fork spearing another piece of chicken.

Erna beamed at him, her cheeks warmed by more than just the heat from the stove. “I was thinking,” she started, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear, “with the money from the dollhouse, I could start on a new one. We had so much fun making it, and we sold it for a good amount.”

Joel chewed thoughtfully, his eyes lighting up with interest. “That’s a fine idea. And I think I’ll carve the next family for you.” He set his fork down, his gaze meeting hers across the table. “Might not be much for sewing and quilting, but I can whittle a figure well enough.”

Her heart skipped a beat, not just from the tender look in his eyes, but also from the joy that bubbled up inside her knowing he shared in her passion. “Would you?” Erna grinned, her hands clasping together in excitement. “That would be wonderful!”

“Then it’s settled.” Joel’s voice carried a cheerful certainty. “We’ll make it a project together.”

“Can’t wait to see those little figures,” Erna said, picturing the tiny wooden people that would soon populate the dollhouses they’d create side by side.

“Neither can I,” Joel replied, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Neither can I.”

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With the dawn casting a warm glow over the vast Texan landscape, the men mounted their horses and herded the cattle toward Fort Worth.

“All right, let’s get to work,” Faith said, rolling up the sleeves of her simple cotton dress. Her eyes sparkled with purpose as she glanced at the dollhouse that sat on the wooden kitchen table.

“Imagine the stories these little rooms could tell,” Erna mused, handing her twin an assortment of colorful fabric scraps.

“Every good story needs a cozy home,” replied Faith, her nimble fingers already at work, crafting tiny, precise stitches.

Erna watched for a moment, admiring Faith’s dedication to her craft. Then, with a smile tugging at her lips, she turned her attention to carving miniature wooden chairs small enough to fit within the palm of her hand.

“Looks good, Faith,” Erna said after a while, her voice light as she inspected a minuscule quilt adorned with delicate patterns.

“Thanks, Erna. Your chairs will make the parlor just perfect.” Faith held up the quilt against the dollhouse, imagining the warmth it would bring to the tiny space.

The sisters worked side by side, exchanging casual banter and laughter as they lost themselves in the tasks at hand. With each stitch and whittle, the little house came alive, its rooms slowly filling with the evidence of their shared labor and love.

“Erna, pass me that blue ribbon, will you?” Faith asked, reaching out without looking up from her sewing.

“Here you go,” Erna said, placing the silky strip beside her sister. “Blue curtains will look lovely in the bedroom.”

“Nothing but the best for our dollhouse family,” Faith declared, her hands deftly creating pleats in the fabric.

“Joel’s going to be surprised with how much we’ve gotten done,” Erna commented with a hint of pride.

“Let’s hope he approves of our interior decorating skills,” Faith teased, winking at her sister.

Erna reached up plucking a ripe apple from one of the apple trees behind the house. The orchard around them was alive with the sound of leaves rustling in the breeze, the distant laughter of Ruby and Priscilla as they played among the trees. Amy had sent them over after school to play and help with the harvest.

“Got another one!” Faith called out from a few rows over, her voice tinged with triumph.

“Add it to the basket,” Erna replied, smiling. “We’ll have enough for a whole battalion of pies at this rate.”

They worked all afternoon, moving methodically through the rows of trees. Apples of all shades, from blushing reds to sunny yellows, filled their baskets and the air with the sweet scent of harvest.

Later, in the kitchen, the sisters peeled and cored the apples, the steady rhythm of

their knives a comforting backdrop to their chatter. They prepared apple sauce, the mix simmering on the stove, and rolled out dough for the pie fillings.

“Remember how Mrs. Jackson used to make her crusts?” Faith mused, pressing the tines of a fork along the edge of the dough.

“Like it was yesterday,” Erna said, her eyes distant but gleaming. “She’d say, The secret’s in the butter.”

“More like the love,” Faith countered, and they both chuckled.

As night fell, the sisters found themselves sharing a bed, the coolness of the October evening creeping in through the window. They lay side by side, a quilt pulled up to their chins, talking about everything and nothing at all. Their voices were soft but filled with laughter, each story and memory weaving them closer together.

“Feels like we’ve been here forever,” Erna whispered.

“Only since June,” Faith reminded her softly. “But it does feel longer, doesn’t it?”

“Time’s funny like that.” Erna turned to face her sister in the dim light. “I’m glad you’re here with me.”

“Where else would I be?” Faith replied, her voice laced with affection.

As the morning sun painted the Texas sky with hues of pink and orange, Erna and Faith bustled about the kitchen, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingling with the scent of baked apples. Erna reached for the jar of cinnamon, while Faith meticulously arranged the tiny quilts she had crafted for the dollhouse.

“Jane’s surely having the time of her life,” Faith said with a playful smirk, her nimble

fingers smoothing out the miniature bedding. “She’s got cowboys lined up like cattle at auction, each one hoping to be her chosen.”

Erna chuckled, adding a dash of cinnamon to the apple filling. “And here we thought moving to Texas would calm her wild spirit. Seems she’s more a prima donna than usual.”

“She is!” Faith agreed, her eyes crinkling with mirth. “Susan says that she’s enjoying the courting games, making each suitor prove his worth. She’s living quite the merry life with Susan and David Dailey.”

“Good for her,” Erna said, her voice laced with genuine happiness for their sister. “Love should be a choice, not a chore.”

The days passed in a comfortable routine until the sound of horses’ hooves signaled the return of the men. Faith glanced out the window, excitement lighting up her face. “They’re back!”

Erna wiped her hands on her apron and followed Faith outside. The dust settled around the weary travelers as they dismounted, their faces etched with the fatigue of the journey but brightened by success.

“Joel!” Erna called out, her heart skipping a beat at the sight of him.

“Erna,” Joel greeted, his voice gravelly but warm. He took her hands in his, the roughness of his work-worn skin a stark contrast to her softness. “It was a good drive. We got a fair price for the herd.”

“Thank the Lord,” Erna breathed out, relief washing over her. “I knew you’d do well.”

“Couldn’t have done it without thinking of coming home to you,” Joel confessed, his sharp eyes softening with affection.

With a knowing smile, Faith slipped away, leaving the couple to their quiet reunion.

The aroma of stewed beef and fresh-baked cornbread filled the kitchen as Erna set the last steaming dish on the worn wooden table. Joel, freshly scrubbed from the trail dust, sat down with a contented sigh.

“Smells like heaven, Erna,” he said, his stomach rumbling in anticipation.

“Wait till you taste it,” she replied with a twinkle in her eye. They joined hands, and Erna offered a brief prayer of thanks before they began to eat.

Between mouthfuls, Erna chattered about the past few days. “Faith and I finished the curtains for the dollhouse living room,” she explained, gesturing toward the miniature abode on the sideboard. “And she’s made the tiniest quilts you ever saw.”

Joel listened, nodding as he chewed. His gaze wandered over to the dollhouse, admiring the tiny stitches and vibrant fabric of the curtains adorning the little windows. The care and detail spoke of Faith’s talent and Erna’s guiding hand.

“Sounds like y’all had a fine time,” Joel said, scooping up another forkful of potatoes.

“We did,” Erna agreed, laughter bubbling up. “We even made enough apple pie filling to last us through winter!”

As supper wound down, Joel rose and ambled over to inspect the dollhouse more closely. He tilted his head, taking in the miniature world that his wife and sister-in-law had brought to life. “You’ve got a knack for making things beautiful, Erna,” he remarked with genuine admiration.

Erna blushed at the praise. “Thank you, Joel. It keeps my hands busy and my heart light.”

Silence fell comfortably between them, the kind only shared by two people who understood each other without words. The day’s fatigue began to pull at their limbs, and they decided to retire early.

In the privacy of their small bedroom, tender kisses and gentle caresses rekindled the warmth of their connection. As they moved together in the quiet rhythm of love, Erna felt the certainty of her place in the world.

Lying beside him in the afterglow, she whispered into the darkness, “I was meant to be yours, Joel.”

“And I yours, Erna,” Joel murmured back, pulling her close. In the sanctuary of their embrace, they drifted off to sleep under the vast Texas stars, secure in their love and the simple joys of their life together.

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The sun hung low in the sky, casting a golden haze over the Trinity ranch as the day waned into late afternoon. Erna, her hands working deftly as she made tiny pieces of fruit for the dollhouse, sat on the porch enjoying the lazy hum of cicadas when the quiet was shattered by the sound of frantic footsteps.

“Joel! Joel, help!” Deborah’s voice, laced with panic, cut through the serene air. Her dress, usually so neat, was wrinkled and dust-covered as she stumbled up the path to where Erna sat, wide-eyed.

“What in the world?” Erna murmured to herself, setting aside her work. She rose to her feet just as Joel burst from the barn, his brow furrowed in concern.

“Deborah? What’s wrong?” Joel called out, moving quickly toward the distressed young woman.

“Please, it’s urgent!” Deborah managed between ragged breaths, her normally timid nature overtaken by sheer desperation.

Without another word, Joel turned on his heel and strode back to the stable. Erna followed, her heart pounding with worry for both her sister and her husband. She arrived at the stable entry just in time to see Joel swing onto his horse, the animal’s sides heaving in anticipation.

“Joel, wait! What happened?” Erna asked, chasing after him, but Joel was already spurring his mount forward, the urgency in Deborah’s plea propelling him onward.

“No time, Erna. I’ll be back soon,” Joel called over his shoulder, leaving Erna

clutching the wooden fence post, her knuckles white.

“Deborah, tell me what’s going on!” Erna insisted, turning to her sister who seemed to be regaining her composure, though her blue eyes still held fear.

“I...I have to get back,” Deborah stuttered, looking past Erna, her gaze fixed on the cloud of dust Joel left behind.

Left to her own devices, Erna’s imagination spun wild scenarios as she paced the length of the porch, her worries multiplying with each passing hour. The shadows lengthened and merged, and the ranch lamps flickered to life as night embraced the land.

“Shoulda heard something by now,” Erna muttered to herself, her attempts at optimism waning. She hugged her arms around her middle, trying to quell the unease that gnawed at her.

“Joel’s smart and strong. He’ll be fine,” she whispered into the darkness, more to convince herself than out of any real certainty.

It was late when the sound of horse hooves finally broke the evening’s silence. Erna, who had been sitting on the porch step with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, stood abruptly, her heart pounding in her chest.

“Joel!” she called out as her husband dismounted wearily. The lantern light illuminated his face, showing the lines of strain around his eyes.

“Outsiders,” Joel said curtly, his voice betraying his fatigue. He quickly went to work removing the horse’s saddle and wiping him down. “They’re causing trouble at Aaron and Deborah’s place.”

“Are you all right? What kind of trouble?” Erna asked, her worry for him shifting to alarm for her sister and brother-in-law.

Joel waved a dismissive hand as he trudged closer. “Nothing we can’t handle. Aaron needs men to stand with him, is all.”

Erna frowned, not convinced, but knew better than to press Joel for details when he was this worn down. Instead, she reached out and took his hand, leading him inside.

Over the next few days, tension hummed through the air like a taut wire. The sisters met up more often than usual, their conversations a mix of hushed tones and reassuring smiles. Erna and Deborah would sit on Erna’s porch, knitting needles clicking softly as they kept an eye on the horizon.

“Joel says it could turn into a range war,” Erna shared quietly one afternoon as Deborah added another row to her scarf.

Deborah looked up, her hands stilling for a moment. “I pray it doesn’t come to that,” she murmured, her gaze drifting off toward the dusty road that led to their homes.

“Me too,” Erna agreed, reaching over to give Deborah’s hand a gentle squeeze. “But no matter what happens, we’ll face it together.”

Erna’s heart skipped a beat at the distant crack of gunfire that shattered the afternoon calm. She dropped her knitting and stood up from the porch swing, shielding her eyes against the sun to see better. Off toward the west, where the sky met the land, a plume of smoke unfurled like a dark flag.

“Deborah, look!” she called out, pointing toward the horizon.

Deborah set aside her scarf, her blue eyes wide with alarm. “That can’t be good,” she

whispered, clutching the fabric of her dress.

“Joel said they might come,” Erna said, trying to keep the tremble from her voice. “The outsiders.”

“Let’s hope it’s just a small brush fire,” Deborah replied, though her tone held little conviction.

As the sisters stood there, helpless spectators to the unfolding drama, more shots rang out. The fire continued to grow, its bright flames licking the sky as if taunting them.

“Come on,” Erna said with sudden resolve. “We need to find the others. We’ve got to do something.”

They hurried inside, abandoning their afternoon of knitting for the urgency of action. The two women knew that every moment mattered now, and their feet pounded the wooden floorboards as they gathered water and supplies.

Hours dragged by, each minute heavier than the last, until finally, dust-covered riders approached in the twilight. Joel was among them, his face grim and his shoulders slumped in a way that made Erna’s stomach knot with worry.

“Joel!” she called out, running to meet him. “What happened?”

“Outsiders,” he said curtly, dismounting with an exhausted groan. “It was a distraction. While we were putting out the fire, they hit Aaron’s place hard.”

Erna felt Deborah’s hand grip hers, squeezing tight enough to hurt. “Aaron?” Deborah’s voice was barely a whisper, laced with fear.

“Wounded,” Joel replied. “But alive. You should’ve seen your sister, Erna. Deborah

fought like a wildcat, defending the ranch till we got there.”

“Is he—will he be okay?” Erna asked, her voice cracking.

“Doc’s with him now,” Joel said, offering what reassurance he could. “She held down the fort, literally. Sheriff came and took them away, every one of them wounded. Your sister can shoot!”

IT WASN’T UNTIL THE following day, that Joel found Erna sitting alone on the porch steps. His silhouette was stooped, a stark contrast to his usual sturdy posture.

“Erna,” Joel began, his voice catching in his throat, “the fire was a ruse. It burned through our grazing land.”

Erna’s heart lurched. She rose to stand beside him, reaching out to grasp his hand. “How bad?”

“Bad enough,” Joel admitted, staring out at the charred expanse where lush grass once waved under the Texas sky. “Took me six years to save for that land. It was supposed to be our future.”

“Joel,” Erna said softly, squeezing his hand. “We can handle this.”

Joel’s gaze lingered on the scorched earth that stretched before them. All he could see were his shattered dreams. He turned to Erna, the furrow in his brow deepening. “Erna, there’s not much left for us here. Not now. Maybe you should head over to Faith and Kane’s place for a spell. Just until I figure things out.”

“Joel, I’m not leaving you to shoulder this alone.”

“Times are lean,” he insisted, his voice a gruff murmur that matched the rustling of

the charred prairie grass. “I can’t promise you more than hard work and longer days.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” Erna’s smile broke through the worry that creased her face, as warm and inviting as the smell of fresh bread from her oven. “Hard work never scared me, Joel Trinity. And as for longer days...” She leaned closer, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “It just means more time with you.”

Joel chuckled despite the weight on his shoulders. “You’re a stubborn woman, Erna.”

“Only about the important things,” she said. “Joel, we’re a team.” Erna’s hand found his as they stood by the corral under the vast Texas sky, still flushed with the day’s relentless heat. “Nothing will change that, not fire, nor drought, nor outsiders.”

Joel looked down at their interlocked fingers, the lines in his face softening. “Erna, it isn’t right for you to stay in this mess. You deserve...”

“Deserve?” Erna cut him off, shaking her head. “I don’t care about what I deserve. I care about us, and right now, us means sticking together.”

Erna argued until she was blue in the face, but nothing worked. The next morning she packed a small suitcase. She hesitated, then reached for the miniature dollhouse that sat atop the dresser.

“Thought you might want this over there,” Joel said from the doorway, watching as she tucked the dollhouse under her arm.

“Thanks, Joel.” Her eyes met his, a silent promise passing between them. “Won’t be but a few days. Just until the dust settles.”

“Take your time, Erna. Faith and Kane will look after you,” he replied, the corners of his mouth lifting in a half-smile.

With a nod, Erna made her way across the yard, the dollhouse secure in her grasp. Joel had already hitched the wagon up, and she put the house in the back, placing it carefully.

“Erna!” Faith called out from the porch as she approached, her voice carrying the same light-heartedness it always did.

“Hey, Faith,” Erna responded, stepping onto the wooden boards of the porch with a reassuring creak. “Brought my dollhouse. Figured I could use the distraction.”

“Perfect,” Faith said, opening the door wider. “We’ll set you up right here by the window. Best light for painting those tiny shutters, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” Erna agreed, placing the dollhouse on the table Faith had cleared.

She looked at the dollhouse, and then out the window at her husband as he drove away. She understood why he wanted her there, but she wanted to be with him. He must not feel as much for her as she did for him.

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Erna perched on the edge of a wooden chair by the window, her gaze drifting over the vast expanse of rolling plains that stretched beyond Faith and Kane's homestead. The landscape, usually so comforting with its endless waves of golden grass, seemed today to accentuate the chasm between her and Joel.

"Erna, honey, you'll wear a hole in that floor if you keep pacing," Faith's gentle voice cut through the stillness, laced with concern.

Erna offered a faint smile, her eyes never leaving the horizon. "Just thinking is all," she murmured, her fingers tracing the delicate patterns on the glass pane.

"Joel's just as lost without you, I'm sure," Faith said, sitting beside her twin with a quilt square in hand, the needle gliding effortlessly through the fabric.

A sigh escaped Erna's lips, a whisper of the ache that clung to her chest. "I miss him, Faith. More than I thought possible."

Meanwhile, a short distance away, Joel leaned against a sturdy fence post, his broad shoulders slumped under the weight of solitude. The ranch, once a symbol of his dreams fulfilled, now felt like an empty shell.

"I don't think I can do this," he muttered to himself, the words rough around the edges but steeped in regret. His calloused hands clenched into fists, then relaxed as he remembered her laughter, bright and clear like the tinkling of a bell.

Joel straightened up and wiped the back of his hand across his brow. He turned and gazed at the small house, each window reflecting the setting sun like a beacon of

hope.

ERNA brOWN SAT AT THE edge of her sister's bed, fingers absently tracing the delicate embroidery of the quilt covering it.

"Joel's smile," she murmured, allowing herself a small smile in return. That grin of his could cut through any worry, make the world seem right for a while.

At the ranch, miles apart from Erna, Joel Trinity stood alone in what remained of their ranch. His eyes traced the charred remains where his cattle had thrived. He thought for a moment about asking for help from Erna's sisters' husbands, but he knew they were stretched thin helping Aaron while he was in the hospital. He ran a hand over the rough wood of the fence.

"She always had the gentlest touch," he thought, recalling how Erna's fingers felt against his skin—soft, caring, bringing joy into simple moments. Their small crafts scattered around the house had been tokens of that tenderness. She was gone, but he knew she'd be back because she couldn't leave anything half-done. Not his Erna!

"Did she think I saw her as fragile?" Joel wondered, his thoughts drifting back to the day the fires came, licking at the edges of their land, consuming everything in its path. He'd been off trying to help Aaron, and he'd let his own lands burn.

"Could I have protected her better?" Joel asked, kicking at the scorched earth. His past, filled with hardship, had taught him to be tough. But providing for Erna meant more than just hard work—it meant creating a sanctuary for them both. Had his hands, so accustomed to the struggle, failed to build the security she deserved?

He let out a sigh that stirred the dust at his feet, pondering the distance between them—not just the physical distance, but the spaces in their hearts. "I should've told her more... about how she made this place a home."

As the last rays of sunlight faded, Erna rose from the bed, her resolve strengthening like the evening stars appearing one by one. “I won’t be the delicate flower,” she whispered, daring to believe they could weather any storm together.

Joel lifted his gaze to the emerging night sky, a quiet promise forming in his chest. “I’ll rebuild, for us,” he vowed, the spark of hope flickering anew.

“I’VE GOT TO FIX THIS ,” Erna whispered to herself, the determination in her words stronger than the doubt that shadowed them. She loved her husband, and there was no real reason for them to be apart.

Meanwhile, Joel leaned on an old fence post, the wood rough against his calloused palm. The setting sun cast long shadows across the land, painting everything in hues of orange and purple. It was quiet without Erna’s presence. He closed his eyes, letting the memories flood in. He could almost hear her laughter. A hint of a smile tugged at his lips, but it soon faded, the reality of their separation settling back in.

“Can’t let pride stand in the way anymore,” he said out loud to the open fields, as if speaking the words might make them more real.

Back at Faith’s house, Erna’s heart ached with each beat. Why couldn’t he see she was strong enough to be there working to get the ranch back in order with him?

“Enough of this nonsense,” she resolved, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear, just as Joel liked it.

Joel rubbed his forehead, his thoughts turning inward. “Time to talk, really talk,” he decided, his voice firm against the whispering wind.

ERNA PERCHED ON THE edge of a quilt-covered bed. Faith had always been the one with an eye for sewing. It was nice to be with her sister, but not under these

circumstances. She needed to go home.

Erna's heart ached, yearning for the familiar cadence of Joel's footsteps approaching, a sound that promised the end of another day's labor and the beginning of an evening's peace.

JOEL LOOKED OUT OVER his land. The ranch, once teeming with life and laughter, now stood desolate. He cast a glance at the scorched fields, the charred remains of their hard work and shared hopes. Regret sat heavy on his shoulders, a burden that bowed his head and furrowed his brow.

A gust of wind stirred the air, carrying whispers of sorrow across the plains. Joel closed his eyes. The longing for Erna's presence, the gentle caress of her hand against his cheek, gnawed at his insides like a hunger he could never satisfy.

"Erna," he said, the name coming out like a prayer. Without Erna, the ranch was just land, the house just timber and nails. She was the heartbeat of it all.

ERNA'S FINGERS PAUSED on the damp cloth she had been using to dab at her eyes. She took a deep breath, the kind that reached down to her very soul, and let it out slowly, as if expelling the doubt that had clouded her heart. The Texas sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of fiery orange and soft pink, a daily masterpiece that whispered promises of new beginnings.

"Enough tears," she murmured to herself. Her resolve hardened like the crust on her famous peach pies. She loved Joel. And love was worth fighting for.

Joel stood tall against the backdrop of their ranch. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, not in anger, but with a newfound resolve. The wind tousled his hair, carrying away the last traces of his hesitation. "I'll bring her back," he vowed to the open land, "even if it's the last thing I do."

Back at Faith's home, Erna sat at the sturdy oak desk, the blank paper before her as daunting as the chasm between her and Joel. But as she dipped her pen in ink, her heart guided her hand. Words poured forth, simple yet sincere, each one a stitch meant to mend the fabric of their marriage.

"Dear Joel," she began, her script wobbly but determined, "I've been thinking about us..."

Joel didn't waste a moment. He strode purposefully toward the stable, the gravel crunching under his boots.

"Come on, boy," he said, patting his horse's neck as he saddled up. With one foot in the stirrup, he swung onto the horse's back, setting his sights on the place where his heart remained, with Erna. The journey ahead might be fraught with obstacles, but his path was clear.

As the final word of her letter took shape, Erna felt a weight lift off her shoulders. "Together, we can weather any storm," she wrote, sealing the envelope with a hope that fluttered like a candle flame in the dark.

Underneath the emerging stars, Joel urged his horse forward. The steady rhythm of hooves on the earth matched the beat of determination in his chest.

"Wait for me, Erna," Joel whispered to the night.

Joel strode with purpose toward Faith and Kane's home after securing his horse. His hat shielded his eyes from the glare of the setting sun, but nothing could dim the spark of hope that ignited within him. Each step felt lighter than the last, his heart beating a rhythm of eagerness to see Erna again.

"Almost there," he said, adjusting the collar of his shirt.

Back at Faith's house, Erna clasped her hands together, willing them to still. A gentle knock at the door jolted her from her thoughts. Her breath hitched as she moved toward it, her fingers trembling slightly as they reached for the doorknob.

"Joel," she whispered before even opening the door.

And there he was, standing before her, a mixture of dust and determination etched onto his face. Their eyes locked, a silent conversation passing between them. He'd only dropped her at Faith's a week before, but it felt like a lifetime.

"Erna," Joel said, his voice rough with emotion. "You have to come home."

Erna replied, "I can be packed in a minute."

They stepped toward each other tentatively, as if afraid that the moment was too fragile to bear the weight of their hopes.

"Let's do this together," Joel offered, his eyes earnest and searching.

"Yes," Erna agreed. "We can do anything if we both work toward it."

"Tomorrow's a new day," Erna said, her spirit lifting.

"And we'll face it side by side," Joel added.

Erna hurried into the bedroom she'd been occupying, quickly packing her things. Home sounded like the most wonderful word in the world. That and Joel.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:19 am

Erna sat across from Joel. Their chairs were pulled close, shoulders almost touching, as they leaned over a mess of papers that told a grim tale: bills unpaid, loans coming due, and the very real possibility of losing the ranch.

“Joel,” Erna’s voice broke the silence, tinged with worry yet threaded with an undercurrent of resolve. “We can’t let them take the ranch. There’s got to be something we can do.”

Joel rubbed a calloused hand across his stubbled jaw, eyes scanning the numbers that refused to add up in their favor. “I know, Erna. We’ll think of something.”

Erna reached out, her fingers brushing against his as she tapped a column of figures. “I could bake cakes, cookies... pastries even. Everyone always says they like my treats best when I take them to church socials.”

Her eyes shone with a mixture of excitement and pride. Baking was more than just a task for Erna; it was an art she had honed since she was knee-high to a grasshopper, watching her mother stir and measure in this very kitchen.

“Your baking does have a way of making people smile,” Joel conceded with a nod, the corners of his mouth inching upward. “Sell them at the market, you think? There’s a market twice a month near the church. We could do that and see what happens.”

“Exactly!” Erna clapped her hands together. “And not just any cakes, Joel. The best darn cakes in Texas. Our neighbors can’t get enough of them. Imagine what strangers will think!”

The idea seemed to spark something in Joel, a glint of enthusiasm in his keen eyes. “Strangers with full wallets,” he mused, allowing himself a moment to picture the ranch free of debt, their future secure once more.

“Then it’s settled.” Erna’s words felt like the first drop of rain after a long drought. “I’ll start first thing tomorrow. We’ll show that bank we’re made of sterner stuff.”

“Fort Worth won’t know what hit it,” Joel agreed, and for the first time in weeks, the kitchen was filled with laughter instead of sighs.

Joel leaned back in his chair and studied Erna. “Erna,” he began, his voice steady with resolve, “your hands don’t just craft magic in the oven. What about those little dolls you make? The ones Faith’s always fussing over?”

Erna’s brows lifted at the suggestion. A smile, quick and genuine, broke across her face. “The dolls?” she echoed, her hands instinctively smoothing the apron that bore witness to her culinary exploits.

“Yes,” Joel said, enthusiasm building in his tone. “They could sit pretty next to your pastries. Folks love things crafted with care and attention. It’s personal, like.”

“Handmade dolls and pastries...” Erna mused, picturing the array of colorful fabrics and the scent of sugar and spice mingling together. If you’ll carve the dolls, I’ll paint them and dress them.”

“All right then,” he said, reaching for a fresh sheet of paper. “Let’s figure this out.”

Together they hunched over the table. Erna sketched out simple designs for the dolls—each with a unique dress and tiny features—while Joel listed the materials they’d need: wood, fabric scraps, yarn, and ribbon.

“Can’t be too pricey,” Joel pointed out, tapping the ledger with a calloused finger. “We need to turn a profit if this is gonna save the ranch.”

“Of course,” Erna agreed readily. She chewed on the end of her pencil, a habit from her school days when a problem needed solving. “But we want them to feel special, too. Each doll will have its own story, something to give it character. And each will come with three dresses and a nightgown. One for Sundays and two for every day.”

“Stories sell,” Joel nodded approvingly. His smile was rare, but it warmed Erna’s heart more than the setting sun ever could. “And your treats speak for themselves.”

“I’ll use the leftover fabric from Cassandra’s projects. She constantly has pieces that are too small for a real dress. I can make good use of those pieces. Though I may have to fight Faith for them!”

“Good thinking,” Joel said, pride lighting up his eyes. He reached over and squeezed Erna’s hand briefly. “And I say we set fair prices but leave room for haggling. Makes people feel like they’re getting a bargain.”

“Perfect.” Erna scribbled down a few numbers, her mind already racing ahead to the market day. The gentle clink of their wedding bands touching was like a bell of agreement.

“Let’s shake them up at the market, Erna,” Joel said, standing up to stretch his long legs.

ERNA TIED HER APRON strings in a neat bow at the back and set to work. Joel watched her for a moment with an unreadable expression before slipping out to gather supplies.

“Flour, sugar, eggs... and love,” Erna muttered to herself as she measured ingredients

with practiced ease. Her hands moved deftly, sifting, stirring, and pouring, each movement a step toward their salvation. The oven's heat couldn't rival the fire in her spirit.

"Smells like heaven in here," Joel's voice rumbled from the doorway, his arms laden with fabrics and threads.

"Wait till you taste it," Erna said, sparing him a quick smile before turning her attention back to the mixing bowl.

Joel leaned against the doorframe, watching her. "You're amazing, you know that?"

"Flattery won't get you a free sample," she teased, although the twinkle in her eye said otherwise.

"Wouldn't dream of it." He chuckled, setting down the materials on the nearby table before rolling up his sleeves. "I'll earn my keep."

As the day wore on, the scent of vanilla and cinnamon wove through the air, mingling with the earthy tones of the ranch. Cookies lined the counters in disciplined rows, cakes cooled on wire racks, and pastries waited their turn to be filled with sweetened fruit.

"Looks like we've got enough to feed an army," Joel observed, admiring the spread.

"Good," Erna replied, brushing flour off her hands. "We'll need all the help we can get if we're going to save this place."

"Erna, we'll never back down from a challenge." Joel's question hung between them, not needing an answer.

As evening approached, the kitchen transformed into a production line of delectable treats.

“Tomorrow, we show Fort Worth what we’re made of,” Erna declared, her eyes shining with determination.

JOEL CLEARED A CORNER of the sitting area of the house. With careful hands, he arranged the tools and materials Erna would need: spools of thread, scraps of colorful fabric, the wooden block which he would start with.

“Never figured I’d be any good at this,” Joel mused aloud, securing a workspace with sturdy planks of wood that had seen better days.

“Your hands are capable of more than you give them credit for,” Erna called from the kitchen. “Maybe we should sell a few of your animals on the mantle. I love them all, but you can always make more.”

“Guess we’ll find out soon enough,” he replied with a grin, testing the sturdiness of the makeshift table before him.

Erna emerged from the kitchen, her apron dusted with flour, and inspected the newly established workshop with an approving nod. “Perfect. We’ll make quite the team, you and I.”

Together, they sat down, Erna’s skilled fingers guiding the cloth as Joel’s steadier ones carved the dolls’ bodies, ensuring each one was made just right to withstand the eager clutches of children. They worked in comfortable silence, punctuated by the occasional soft chuckle.

As the evening wore on, they turned their attention to packaging. Joel watched as Erna wrapped each baked good with the same tenderness she afforded the dolls. She

chose paper and ribbons that complemented the colors of the cookies and cakes.

“Let’s add labels,” she suggested, her eyes bright. “We’ll give them names, make them special.”

“Sweet Sally for the cinnamon swirls?” Joel offered, his handwriting steady as he inked the tags.

“Perfect,” Erna laughed, sticking the label onto the package. “And for the dolls?”

“Brave Beatrice,” he decided, affixing a tag to a doll with a crooked grin. “Looks like she’s ready for adventure.”

“Much like us,” Erna agreed, sealing another package with a bit of adhesive. Their products, a collection of love and labor, sat ready for the world to see—their beauty far more than skin deep.

With each treat and toy they prepared, their bond seemed to deepen, their resolve to save their ranch solidifying with every ribbon tied, every label pressed into place.

“Tomorrow, we’re going to make a difference,” Erna said, stacking the last of the packages neatly.

THE FIRST RAYS OF DAWN crept over the horizon, casting a soft golden glow on the weathered boards of the barn. Erna Brown, apron tied neatly around her waist and a hopeful glimmer in her eyes, carefully placed the final batch of Sweet Sally cinnamon swirls into a woven basket. Beside her, Joel secured the last of the Brave Beatrice dolls atop a pile of packages in the back of their wagon. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. It was still hot and it was already November!

“Joel, do you think we’ve made enough?” Erna asked, her voice laced with both

excitement and a hint of concern.

“Let’s hope it’s more about quality than quantity,” Joel replied with a reassuring smile, admiring the array of homemade goods that represented not only hours of labor but also their shared dreams.

With everything loaded, they climbed onto the wagon, the leather reins familiar in Joel’s calloused hands. The wooden wheels creaked as they rolled down the dusty path toward the market.

Upon arrival, they found their designated spot—a cozy corner that seemed to welcome them with open arms. Joel unfolded a table with practiced ease while Erna draped a checkered cloth over it, transforming the simple setup into a charming display.

“Looks like home,” Erna said, placing the baskets of baked goods at the front.

“Better. It looks like hope,” Joel countered, standing back to admire their handiwork. Together, they arranged the crafts, the handmade dolls peering out at passersby with eyes full of silent stories.

“Think they’ll like Brave Beatrice?” Erna teased, her laughter light as the morning breeze that played with strands of her hair.

“Who wouldn’t?” Joel quipped back. “She’s got character, just like us.”

They worked side by side, each treat and trinket positioned with care, inviting curious glances from early shoppers. Erna’s cheeks flushed with pride, and Joel couldn’t help but share in her infectious enthusiasm.

As people began to meander over, drawn by the allure of fresh pastries and unique

crafts, Erna leaned close to Joel. “This is it,” she whispered, a twinkle of anticipation in her eyes.

“Yep,” he whispered back, his hand finding hers for a brief, comforting squeeze. “We’re ready.”

Erna smiled at the cluster of customers gathered around their booth. “Y’all have to try my pecan pie cookies,” she said, her voice as warm as the oven that had baked them. “They’ve got a bit of the ranch in every bite.”

“Is that so?” one matronly woman asked, her eyes twinkling with interest as she accepted a sample.

“Sure is,” Erna replied, her hands deftly arranging the pastries on a platter. “Pecans picked right from our trees. And this here’s Missy,” she continued, lifting a doll dressed in a tiny apron. “Each one’s got its own name and story, and comes with two dresses and a nightgown.”

“That’s precious,” another customer chimed in, her fingers brushing against the doll’s yarn hair.

Joel, standing sentinel by the cash box, couldn’t help but let a small smile grace his lips at the sight. He took the money handed to him, offering back change with a nod. “Appreciate it,” he said, his voice firm but friendly.

Their stall became a hub of laughter and chatter. Joel’s efficient management kept the line moving, while Erna’s anecdotes about her creations wove a spell over the crowd.

“Never knew you could tell tales as well as bake,” an elderly gent commented, a chuckle escaping his weathered lips as he pointed to a craft.

“Got lots of practice telling stories to the dog while baking,” Erna confessed with a playful tilt of her head.

The community buzzed around them like bees to a hive, each person drawn to the honest charm of home-cooked treats and hand-sewn crafts. The air was thick with the scent of sugar and fabric, the sounds of commerce and companionship intermingling under the unforgiving sun.

“Seems like they can’t get enough of your pies and dolls,” Joel observed during a rare lull, his gaze sweeping over the dwindling stacks of goods.

“Or your handy work,” Erna countered, her eyes alight with gratitude. “Couldn’t have done it without your help, Joel.”

“Likewise,” he said.

Erna smiled as another satisfied customer walked away, biting into a slice of apple pie that was just this morning a part of the rolling hills of golden dough in her kitchen. Joel, his hands adept at collecting coins and making change, nodded in approval at their coordinated dance of labor.

“Need more cinnamon twists out here,” Erna called over her shoulder, already turning back to the boxes they’d brought packed with treats.

“Got it,” Joel replied, stacking coins with a rhythmic clink. He reached into the wagon, his sturdy arms pulling out the requested pastries with ease.

“Here you go—fresh from the oven,” she said with a smile, handing a twist to a little girl whose eyes sparkled at the sight of the sugared treat.

“Thank you kindly, ma’am!” the child beamed, skipping away.

“Keep them coming,” Joel encouraged, watching the line of customers ebb and flow like the nearby river.

“Can’t believe how fast they’re selling,” Erna marveled, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “Feels like Christmas came early.”

“Your baking’s better than any holiday,” he said, earning a blush and a laugh from Erna.

As shadows lengthened and the sun dipped low, signaling the day’s end, the crowd thinned out. Erna and Joel sat side by side on the tailgate of their wagon, counting the day’s earnings. Coins shone like bits of hope in Joel’s calloused palms.

“Look at this, Erna,” he said, voice tinged with disbelief. “This is more than I make in a month.”

Her fingers, still dusted with flour, danced over the bills and coins, tallying up totals that exceeded even her most optimistic estimations. “It’s enough, Joel. It’s enough to keep the bank at bay,” she whispered.

Joel met her gaze, the sharpness in his eyes now softened by the amber glow of twilight. “All thanks to you, your baking, and those crafts of yours,” he said, his voice steady and sure.

“Couldn’t have done it without you,” she returned, her hand finding his. Their fingers intertwined, a tangible sign of their unity. “We make quite the team, don’t we?”

“More than quite,” he agreed, a half-smile playing on his lips.

ERNA FOLDED THE LAST of the unsold linens, her hands moving with practiced ease. Beside her, Joel carefully placed the remaining dolls into a wooden crate, his

movements deliberate and gentle.

“Seems like these will be ready for the next market,” Erna said with a hopeful lilt in her voice, eyeing the small pile of goods they hadn’t sold that day.

“Sure does,” Joel replied. “And maybe some new ones too, if your hands can keep up with your spirit. I think the Brave Beatrice and the Sweet Sally were our two best sellers. We’ll have to focus on those for next time. And I can eat everything that didn’t sell. I do have a hankering for your baking!”

“Flatterer,” Erna chided with a mock sternness that quickly melted into warmth. “But thank you. It means the world to me, seeing people enjoy my treats.”

“Deserved praise, not flattery,” Joel corrected, his tone earnest. “You’ve got a gift, Erna.”

Together, they secured the goods, ensuring nothing would shift during the ride home. The market square around them buzzed with the sounds of other vendors finishing up for the day, but Erna only had eyes for the man beside her—the man who had become her partner in every sense.

“Look at all we’ve accomplished today,” she said, gesturing to the nearly empty wagon. “We’re really doing it, Joel. We’re saving our ranch.”

“I really believe we will,” Joel said, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

“Your belief made it real,” she countered, squeezing back.

With the wagon packed, Joel offered his hand to help Erna up onto the seat. They settled in, side by side, the leads lying comfortably in Joel’s grasp.

“Ready to head home, Mrs. Trinity?” he asked, the title still fresh and cherished between them.

“Ready, Mr. Trinity,” Erna replied, a contented sigh escaping her lips. Erna leaned into Joel’s side, her head coming to rest against his shoulder.

“Tomorrow’s another day,” she murmured, her voice filled with optimism. “More baking, more crafting... more dreaming.”

“More living,” Joel added, his voice steady as the horizon line.

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After the final hymn resonated through the quaint chapel, Erna folded her hands demurely as she and Joel stepped out into the bright light of the afternoon.

“Shall we get home then?” Joel’s voice cut through the lingering church bells, his tone practical yet tinged with an underlying warmth.

“Absolutely,” Erna replied, dusting off her skirt gently. They made their way back to the modest homestead they had been nurturing together.

Seated at the sturdy kitchen table, papers and figures spread before them like a map of their journey, Erna pulled out the worn ledger while Joel leaned in, a pencil poised between his fingers.

“Let’s see here,” Erna murmured, her eyes scanning the columns of numbers. “With the market takings and what we’ve saved, I think...”

Joel nodded along, calculating silently. His brow furrowed not from worry but concentration.

“Looks like we can cover the bank payment next month,” he said finally, the corners of his lips lifting slightly.

Erna’s face brightened, a flush of relief and joy coloring her cheeks. She reached across the table, placing her hand atop Joel’s calloused one.

“And if the bakery keeps doing well at the market...” Her words trailed off, but the hope in her eyes completed the sentence.

“Then we’ll be more than all right,” Joel finished for her, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. “We’re a good team, Erna.”

“Joel,” she began, her voice tinged with a mix of amazement and tenderness, “I just knew we could make it work.”

He looked up from the papers, his sharp eyes meeting hers. A small, proud smile tugged at the corner of his lips, a rare sight that never failed to quicken Erna’s heartbeat.

“Is that so?” Joel asked.

“Sure is,” Erna affirmed, her hands folding over her apron. “That day at the dance, when I first saw you... I had no idea then.” A blush crept up her cheeks as she spoke, “But I’m so happy it’s you I walked up to. Never in my life did I think I could love someone the way I love you.”

Joel pushed his chair back and stood, crossing the distance between them in two long strides. His hands found her shoulders, strong and reassuring. “Erna,” he said, his voice low and full of emotion, “I love you too.”

In that simple confession, a weight lifted off both their hearts. They embraced, holding each other close, the world outside their little haven momentarily forgotten.

“Everything’s gonna be all right,” Erna whispered against his chest.

“Everything’s already perfect,” Joel whispered back, sealing their moment with a kiss atop her head.

And just like that, as they stood wrapped in each other’s arms, they knew. All was indeed well with the world.

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Thirteen years later

Erna's eyes fluttered open. The quilt beneath her and Joel, hand-stitched with patterns of wildflowers and love knots, lay in a comfortable tangle around their waists.

"Morning," Joel murmured, his eyes twinkling with the same mirth that had first drawn her to him at the dance all those years ago.

"Morning," Erna replied, her heart swelling as the sound of laughter drifted in through the window—a symphony of joy played by their four children.

Outside, Judy and Rudy were embroiled in some pretend adventure, their voices pealing like church bells in the crisp air. Sally's giggles punctuated the twins' declarations while little Beatrice, now seven and braver with each passing day, tried to keep up with her older siblings.

"Sounds like they're rounding up a storm," Joel said.

"Or chasing dreams," Erna added, smiling at the sight of their children immersed in play.

They rose from bed, their movements synchronized in the silent language of a shared life. The wooden floorboards were cool underfoot as they padded toward the kitchen, where the aroma of fresh bread and bacon beckoned.

"Look who's here!" Judy exclaimed as her parents entered the room. The twelve-year-old's eyes sparkled with the same light that Erna saw in Joel's.

“Did you catch any bandits?” Joel asked, ruffling Rudy’s hair, which always seemed to stand on end like tumbleweeds.

“Only the fiercest,” Rudy boasted, puffing out his chest.

“Mama, I helped too!” Sally chimed in, her nine-year-old pride shining bright as the skillet on the stove.

“And I was the lookout!” Beatrice piped up, not to be left behind.

“Best lookout west of the Mississippi,” Erna confirmed, placing a kiss atop Beatrice’s head.

The table was soon laden with steaming plates, and they all gathered round, hands reaching, passing, and serving in a familiar dance. Stories of the previous day’s exploits tumbled out between mouthfuls.

“Remember when Rudy got stuck in the hayloft?” Judy teased, eliciting a blush from her twin.

“Hey, I was rescuing your doll,” Rudy defended, though his grin betrayed him.

“Only ‘cause you threw it up there!” Sally pointed out, and they all laughed, the sound filling the house.

“All right, all right,” Joel said, his eyes crinkling with amusement. “Let’s give Rudy a break. Today, he might just save us all from a real bandit.”

“Or a herd of wild coyotes,” Erna added, winking at her children who erupted into another round of laughter.

“Can we have pie for breakfast tomorrow if I catch one?” Beatrice asked, her big eyes

hopeful.

“Tell you what,” Erna said, her heart warmed by the simple joys of their life together, “catch a coyote, and I’ll bake you two pies.”

“Deal!” Beatrice declared, and they shook on it, her tiny hand enveloped by Erna’s loving grasp.

THE TRINITY FAMILY found a shaded spot beneath a sprawling oak tree. A quilt, hand-stitched by Erna with scraps from each of their lives, lay sprawled over the grass. Joel lifted the wicker basket and set it down with a care that spoke of years spent nurturing what mattered most to him.

“Look at this,” Erna said, her voice tinged with a softness reserved for moments like these. She leaned into Joel, shoulder to shoulder. “It’s like we’re living in one of those fairy tales I used to dream about as a girl.”

Joel grinned, his eyes scanning the horizon before settling back on her face. “Yeah, but every fairy tale has its dragons,” he replied, his voice carrying the rasp of dust and wind. “We’ve had our share to slay, haven’t we?”

“More than our share,” she agreed, watching as Judy and Rudy chased each other around a cluster of daisies, Sally close behind with Beatrice running after her, trying to keep up. The laughter of their children was sweeter to her ears than any melody.

“Remember when the well went dry?” Joel asked, pulling a loaf of bread from the basket and breaking it in half.

“Or the year the locusts took nearly every crop...” Erna added, accepting the piece of bread he offered.

“Yet here we are,” Joel said with a chuckle, spreading the blanket of nostalgia aside

for the moment. “Still standing, still together.”

“Because of you,” Erna said, reaching out to squeeze his hand. “Your strength kept us going.”

“And your love made it all worthwhile,” Joel replied, his gaze holding hers. “Every storm weathered, every hardship... It brought us closer.”

“Made us stronger,” she whispered, leaning in to rest her head against his sturdy shoulder.

“Mama, look! I caught a lizard!” Beatrice’s voice cut through their memories, her small hands cupped around a wriggling green prize.

“Let’s see!” Erna responded, her motherly instincts kicking in as she turned toward her youngest with an encouraging smile. Joel chuckled and followed suit, ready to marvel at his daughter’s discovery.

As they settled down to their meal, the simplicity of the spread laid out before them was a feast in its own right: fresh bread from Erna’s oven, preserves from last summer’s peaches, slices of ham from the smokehouse, and a jug of sweet tea to wash it all down. They filled their plates, the bounty a testament to their hard work and resilience.

“Pa, can I have some more bread?” Rudy asked, his energetic form finally taking a pause.

“Of course, son,” Joel answered, passing the loaf. “You eat like you’re going to grow another foot overnight.”

“Hope so!” Rudy exclaimed, aiming for a future as tall and proud as his father.

“Me too!” chimed in Judy, not one to be left behind.

Erna watched her family, her heart swelling with pride and love. These were the treasures no bank could measure, the wealth she counted every night before sleep claimed her.

“Here’s to us,” Joel toasted, lifting his glass of tea.

“To us,” Erna echoed, her voice a murmur carried away on the gentle breeze.

In that moment, with the sun warming their skin and the sound of their children’s joy punctuating the air, Erna and Joel savored the simple pleasures of their life. It was a reminder that, no matter the trials they faced, their love and companionship were the true cornerstones of their home.