



Mail Order Mittens (Brides of Alaska #2 | Brides of Beckham #68)

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Category: Historical

Description: Maggie O'Malley hates her dead-end job at a hotel, but she has no other choice, needing to provide for herself. When she receives a letter from her friend Belle, who has moved to Alaska as a mail-order bride, suggesting she enter a marriage of convenience in the same way, she knows she doesn't have the courage to do so.

James Hunter sees the love shared between his best friend, Everett, and Everett's mail-order bride, Belle. He's alone when he's not at work, and during the long winter nights. He decides to write a letter to Elizabeth Tandy, requesting a mail-order bride. His finances are tight, but he knows he can support one more person.

When Maggie suddenly loses her job, she decides to see the matchmaker, hoping she will be able to make the journey. Upon meeting James, she realizes he's a good man, and she's pleased with the decision she's made.

After they arrive in Yeti, Alaska, they run into an obstacle that makes both of them reconsider their decision to marry. Maggie is uncertain about whether the long journey to Alaska was worth it. Will they be able to come to a compromise that will satisfy them both?

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Maggie O'Malley sank to her bed to read the letter she'd received from her closest friend, Belle Montgomery...no, wait. Her name was Belle Thompson now. She'd recently left for Alaska to be a mail-order bride.

As Maggie unfolded the letter, she said a silent prayer that her friend was all right. Alaska sounded a bit too...wild for Maggie's tastes.

My Dearest Maggie

Life in Alaska is amazing. It's a beautiful, wonderful place, full of trees and wildlife.

I spend my days doing whatever I like. Today I foraged for berries, baked muffins and bread to sell at the general store here in town, and I cooked supper for my husband and myself.

Tomorrow I'll spend all day turning the berries into jams and pie filling that I'll then can and they'll feed us through the winter.

My husband, Everett, is a kind man, and I am so pleased I agreed to marry him.

I am one of only two women in town. The other is the wife of the store owner, and her name is Katie.

She's as sweet as they come, and she sells anything I care to make in the store for the men who work for the lumber mill.

Truly, the only thing I'm missing here is you.

Everett's closest friend is looking for a wife, and he plans to write to Elizabeth Tandy to find a bride.

I'm hoping that bride will be you. Will you go see her?

Nothing would make me happier, and you could work for yourself, and not keep working for that hotel.

I know you dream of marrying someday, just as I did. Why not embark on the adventure of a lifetime? Remember how we once joked that we would marry brothers, and our children would grow up together? James and Everett may not be brothers, but we could still raise our children together.

Please consider this idea. I'll send a letter with news next week, but for now, think about how free you'd be in Alaska.

All my love,

Belle

Maggie read the letter once more. Belle was a great deal bolder than Maggie, and the idea of traveling to a faraway place to marry a stranger was frightening. Knowing Belle would be on the other end of the journey would help some, but she still wasn't certain she could do it.

Here, she had a job, and there were no true unknowns. She worked, ate, and lived at the hotel where she and Belle had met years before. How could she leave her life behind to step into an unfamiliar situation?

She loved the idea of being with Belle, but knowing her friend, she was shooting her own supper before cooking it. Maggie had no outdoor skills. No, she didn't think it

was possible for her to be brave enough to make that journey.

M AGGIE PUT THE PLATES for one of her tables on a tray to carry out to the restaurant.

The same four men came in every week, always requesting her as their waitress.

She didn't enjoy serving them because one of the men was very flirtatious and had made lewd comments on several occasions.

But they did tip well, and she saved all her tips for a rainy day.

When she reached the table, she plastered a smile on her face and set two of the plates down. As she reached for the third plate, the man who flirted with her so much, pinched her bottom.

She squealed and the tray slipped from her hand, dumping the hot contents into the lap of the man she so disliked. She apologized for her accident immediately, and brought towels to clean everything up, but the damage was done.

Her manager asked to speak with her just before the hotel restaurant closed, but she knew what was coming. "Maggie, you've always worked hard, and you've been a good employee. It's hard to believe you would dump an entire tray of food onto the lap of a man, simply because he smiled at you."

Maggie felt her Irish temper rise. "He pinched my bottom! I didn't mean to dump it, but he startled me, and I jumped, accidentally spilling the food left on the tray."

"He and his friends have been good customers here for years. Maggie, I need to let

you go. I'm sure you understand that we need to maintain our reputation with the people of Beckham."

"But where will I go?" she asked, frightened. Yes, she had a little money set aside, but certainly not enough to last. What could she do?

"I'm afraid that's your problem. But you need to be out of the hotel by the end of the day tomorrow." He took some money from his desk drawer. "This is your severance. I wish you luck."

Maggie stood still for a moment, staring at Calvin. She could see he wasn't going to change his mind, so she walked out of the room and to her room in the servants' quarters, located in the basement of the hotel.

Once there, she paced the room, trying to come up with a logical solution to her problem. Oh, if only Belle were there to talk to her about it all.

And then her gaze landed on the letter she'd received from Belle the day before. The letter all but begging her to give up her life in Beckham and move to Alaska.

She sat down on the bed and let the tears trickle down her face for a moment. Fear consumed her. But there didn't seem to be a choice. She would see Elizabeth Tandy tomorrow, and hopefully, she would be off to Alaska soon.

Oh, how she hated cold weather.

T HE FOLLOWING MORNING , as soon as it was a respectable hour, Maggie walked the short distance to Rock Creek Road, where she knew Elizabeth Tandy lived.

Belle had told her all about the kind-hearted woman, and she prayed that Mrs. Tandy would be just as kind to her.

Perhaps she had an opening in her own staff, and Maggie wouldn't have to make the long voyage to Alaska.

Taking a deep breath, she knocked on the door, waiting until a tall man with blond hair opened it.

"Hello. I'm here to see Mrs. Tandy." It took every bit of her courage to ask to see the woman.

How on earth was she going to be able to travel across the country on her own to marry a man she'd never met?

She wanted to turn around and go back to the hotel, where everything was familiar, but she couldn't force herself to do it.

"Yes, of course. Follow me."

The man led her down the hall and to the last door on the left. "Elizabeth? There's someone here to see you."

Elizabeth got to her feet. "I'm Elizabeth Tandy."

Maggie opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She cleared her throat and tried again. "I'm Maggie O'Malley. Belle Mont—Belle Thompson told me to come see you."

Elizabeth's entire face lit up. "Oh, Belle is such a dear woman. Come in!" She looked at the man. "Bernard, would you mind bringing tea and cookies?" After he'd left, she

gestured to the sofa. “Have a seat.”

Maggie did as she was told, wondering how to begin the conversation.

When they’d sat in silence for a bit, Elizabeth took charge. “Are you here to become a mail-order bride?”

Maggie nodded. “I guess I am.”

“Well, I got two letters yesterday, one from Belle, and one from James Hunter, who is from the same town in Alaska as Everett. I’d love for you to read his letter if you’d like.”

Maggie nodded, unable to voice her thoughts, but she took the letter from Elizabeth’s outstretched hand.

Dear Mrs. Tandy,

I am not certain what you wish to know about me, but I will do my best. I will give you some basic details about myself in hopes that you can find a woman who will be right for me. Forgive the smudged ink as I cut my hand today, and it is heavily bandaged—one of the dangers of being a logger.

1. I was born in Washington, though Yeti has claimed me since it was three cabins and a prayer. I am 30 years old, stand just over six feet, and can lift the better part of a felled spruce when pressed.

2. I have no family to speak of, not since my mother died, but I have made my own: a stray dog that comes around sometimes named Georgie, a few good men, and the woods. I was raised by a couple who needed help with their workload, and though the food was plentiful, there was a lack of true caring.

3. I own a cabin that is barely insulated, but works well enough and a patch of land bordering the river. My means are modest, but I have little debt and no patience for lies.

If you will allow me to skip the formalities, I will tell you exactly what I want in a bride.

I have seen what happens to men who grow old alone.

My bunkmate, years ago, was one such man.

He talked only to his hounds and the trees, and when he finally left us, there was not a soul to notice his absence until the first thaw.

I will not end that way, nor do I wish it for any woman you send west.

I suppose what I am saying is, I am looking for someone with the strength to keep on trying, even on the days when the wind is spiteful and the room is dark.

I will try to tell you the qualities I would like in a bride, though it makes me feel like a fool.

Courage, first. Not the kind in dime novels, but the sort that keeps a person from leaving the table until the work is done, even when no one is watching.

A sense of humor, because there will be days here that test every other virtue.

Some ability with hearth and home, though if she cannot cook, I will teach her. (Or we will eat charred meat until one of us learns.) he doesn't cook and on,y eats jerky and hard tack

And kindness. Not just to me, but to neighbors, to strangers, even to the stray animals that wander through from time to time.

If it helps your search, I have never been married. Nor have I fathered any children. There are no debts attached to my name, and my only vice is coffee and, if I am truthful, sometimes impatience.

If you need a story to share with any prospective bride, you can tell her I once lost an entire week's worth of food to a black bear and learned only that next time I would rather share than eat alone.

I trust your judgment, Mrs. Tandy. If you can find me a bride with a heart and a mind like Belle's, I will see to it she never lacks for warmth or laughter.

Thank you for giving hope to the men who live at the edge of the world.

Sincerely,

James Hunter.

Maggie read the letter once more, but her eyes kept going back to one word. Courage. She was not a courageous person. Perhaps she could pretend to be courageous, but then she wouldn't be honest to him or herself.

"I don't fit his requirements," Maggie said softly.

Elizabeth frowned. "You can't cook?"

"Oh, I cook very well. I'm not courageous. I was afraid to even come here."

"But you did come here. Courage doesn't mean you never feel fear. It means you face

your fears.”

Maggie shook her head. “No, I came here out of desperation.” She quickly described what had happened the previous day. “I have nowhere to go.”

“So, you faced your fears, and you came here anyway. No matter how afraid you were. That’s courage, Maggie.”

“Perhaps.” Maggie wasn’t sure she agreed with Elizabeth, but she could understand her side of the discussion.

“When do you have to be out of the hotel?” Elizabeth asked. “Sorry if I seem to know too much about you...Belle told me you were her friend and talked about you frequently.”

“Today.”

Bernard stepped into the room then with tea and cookies. “Bernard, I’m going to need you to take Miss O’Malley to the hotel where she works and bring her and her things back here. She’ll be staying with us for a bit.”

Bernard didn’t seem to think it was odd that Elizabeth would make a statement like that about a woman he’d just met. “Yes, of course.”

“We’ll talk more when you return.”

Maggie eyed the cookies on the table between her and Elizabeth, and she grabbed one quickly.

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed. “You haven’t eaten today, have you?”

Maggie looked down with embarrassment, shaking her head. “The hotel only feeds its employees, and I’m no longer employed there.”

“We’ll have tea before you go then,” Elizabeth said. She seemed to think it was perfectly normal to help others. Maggie was impressed by the woman, though she should have expected it with the way Belle had talked about Elizabeth.

They ate their cookies while they talked about the subject of courage. “Do you think you could go to Alaska? I know it’s a long journey, but you would only do the first half of it alone, and then James would meet you. Did you get a letter from Belle about her journey?”

“Yes, and it sounded very difficult.”

“It was difficult, but she did it, and she was pleased she had. Wouldn’t you like to start your family close to Belle? To have your children grow up together?”

Maggie sighed. “It’s something we always talked about.”

“I think you need to consider going. You have a home here for as long as you need it, but you’ll be happier if you’re on your own.”

Maggie nodded. “I suppose I would. I just feel like I’d be deceiving him. Are you certain I wouldn’t?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Very certain. You may be afraid, but you are facing your fears. That means you’re courageous.”

“I’ll do it then. Do I write him a letter?”

“Yes. Thankfully, the mail system is faster than all the twists and turns you’ll be

taking to get there. I'll have my husband set the entire trip up for you."

"I'd appreciate that. Will I stay with your friend Harriett the same way Belle did?"

"If you'd like to," Elizabeth said.

"I think I'd like a break in the middle of the journey." Though the idea of staying with strangers was a bit frightening, she knew it would be all right. Belle had liked the woman. That made it all fine in Maggie's eyes. She would deal with the new people when she faced them.

She knew the journey would be difficult, but Elizabeth had a great deal of faith in her, and that made her feel more confident herself.

She had no idea why, but there was a tingling of anticipation in her gut.

She was moving to Alaska, marrying, and reuniting with her dear friend. What more could she ask of life?

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After weeks of journeying , on trains and then two different ships, Maggie woke early on the day she knew she would meet the man who would be her husband.

James had said he would be waiting for her in Skagway, and then they would walk together to Lake Bennett and then up the Yukon River by boat.

It would be an arduous journey, as she had read in Belle's letters.

When she disembarked the ship, she had all of her belongings in one carpet bag. She felt as if she was an orphan, trying to find a home...a family. Having experienced just such a thing, it was hard to do it all over again.

She stood looking through the crowd, wishing she knew exactly who she was looking for, but it didn't take long for a man to approach her. "Maggie?" he asked. The man was tall with dark hair and brown eyes, and he was just about the most handsome man she'd ever seen.

She nodded, feeling shy and more than a little afraid. "I'm Maggie."

"James," he said simply, reaching to take her bag from her.

"I have a preacher waiting for us." He didn't offer his arm, or say anything else, and she immediately worried she wasn't what he wanted in a wife.

She wasn't pretty enough. She wasn't smart enough.

No matter what, she wasn't enough. She never had been.

She followed him docilely to the preacher, who didn't waste a moment on small talk. Two minutes later, she was married, and her husband was kissing her cheek.

Immediately she knew he must be repulsed by her, or he would have kissed her lips. What had she done? She knew she hadn't bathed since Ketchikan, but that wasn't her fault. Baths hadn't been available on the ship.

Without a word, he turned and led her toward a forest path. "We'll walk this until we get to Lake Bennett and take a boat from there. I know you must be tired, but we don't have time to waste if we want to make it to Yeti before the first freeze."

"It's only September..."

"We usually have frost by mid-September."

"September?" September was usually still warm in Massachusetts, and the idea of living in cold so much of the year wasn't exactly appealing.

He nodded, stopping to untie a mule from a tree. He put her bag with his own and tied it to the pack animal. "I'd like to cover at least fifteen miles before sunset."

"Fifteen miles?" she asked, shocked that he wanted to walk that far in a single day.

"It'll be twenty per day after today. We really can't dawdle."

Maggie felt like it was all she could do to keep up with him as they trudged along the trail that had obviously been traveled by many before them.

He had them walk for a short while after sunset, until it was too dark to keep going, and then he stopped, immediately setting up camp without a word.

While he set up a piece of oil cloth as a covering, she found some sticks and made a campfire.

She had just gotten it going when he sank down beside her.

“I’m sorry today was so hard. This journey is going to be difficult.

Don’t worry about cooking on our journey.

I have some hard tack and some jerky for us, and that will get us through.”

It was the most he’d said to her. “All right. I’ll happily take the night off cooking.”

He grinned. “I’m sure you’re exhausted. How did you do on the ships? Everett told me that Belle spent the whole time sick.”

“Oh, well, it wasn’t that bad for me. I was a little queasy for the first day, and the rest was smooth sailing.”

“Glad to hear it.” He opened a packet of something covered in oil cloth and gave her some of the meal he’d planned. “I know this isn’t exactly tasty, but I think you need rest more than a three-course meal.”

“I would agree with that.” She took a deep breath. “How is Belle doing? I haven’t heard from her since she wrote me and told me to see the matchmaker.”

“She’s well. In the family way, and she seems very happy about that fact.”

Maggie smiled. “Belle has always wanted at least a dozen children. We always said we’d live close and our children would be each other’s best friends.”

“Well, that’s what will happen, I think. Everett and I are good friends. We started the lumber operation together, but I was stupid and ran off to make my fortune from gold. Then I returned to him and had to beg for a job.”

“That’s not stupid!” she said. “You were seeking your fortune. There’s no harm in that.”

“I’d be much better off if I’d stayed in Yeti. I can’t undo the past though.”

“I don’t need a fortune,” she said softly. “I’ve never had much. I was orphaned as a young child, and I never had much after that. The orphanage where I was raised was good to us, but...it wasn’t the same as having a family.”

“I was orphaned as well. I ended up being fostered to an older couple who needed help with the farm chores. They provided food and shelter, and I worked to pay them back.” He shrugged.

“I understand completely. At least we married, and we can understand where each other is coming from.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to be so pretty,” James said, staring off into the distance. “Belle told me you had red hair and you were of Irish descent, but she never mentioned that you were a sight to behold.”

Maggie blushed, looking down at her hands. “I don’t consider myself pretty. You should have seen my mother. I still think she was the most beautiful woman in all of New England.”

“Sounds like the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” he said. He looked at her, noting that she was feeling shy. “May I kiss you? A real kiss?”

Maggie looked up at him for a moment, both embarrassed and excited at the prospect of a real kiss from him. She had been very disappointed with the kiss on her cheek after their wedding, and she didn't even know why! "Yes, of course. You're my husband."

He frowned. "I want you to agree for me to kiss you because you want to be kissed, and not because it's your duty. Maybe tomorrow."

She could sense his disappointment and shook her head. "I want you to kiss me. I...I was a little upset that you only kissed my cheek after the wedding."

"Really?" he asked.

At her nod, he leaned close and brushed his lips quickly across hers. When she leaned toward him, he deepened the kiss, his hands stroking up and down her sides. The passion between them was instant and intense.

When he finally broke away, he looked into her eyes. "You make me feel so much more than I imagined."

"I do?" she asked, a bit startled. She was just plain Maggie, not someone special.

"You do." He rubbed his hand over his face and into his hair. "I don't want our wedding night to be on the ground, but...I want our wedding night." He sighed. "I'll give you a few days to adjust to the journey and all the walking, but then I think...if you're willing..."

"Let's see how we feel in those few days," she said softly. She was willing right then and there, but more out of a sense of duty. She had a feeling she would want more from him if she gave it a little time.

“That sounds good. But I can tell you now, I won’t be keeping my lips off you.”

She laughed softly. “I wouldn’t ask you to.”

He put the fire out and stood. “It’s time to sleep. We want to be walking as soon as the sun rises tomorrow. We have a long way to go, and not much time to get there.”

“Breakfast?” she asked.

He shook his head. “More jerky and hard tack. There’ll be time to cook when we get to Yeti.

You haven’t experienced an Alaskan winter yet.

We need to beat the first storm. The first frost would be better, but that will be pushing it.

I’m sorry that we have to move so quickly.

We should have had you wait to come until after the first thaw, but.

..I didn’t want to spend another winter alone. ”

“Don’t worry about me. Remember, I’m used to working a lot of hours on my feet every week. I’ll be fine. I won’t like it, but I can do it without complaint.”

“I would appreciate that,” he said, grinning at her. “I brought enough blankets for us each to have two. We’ll be going to higher altitudes, and we’ll need extra. Hopefully by the time it gets really cold, you won’t mind sharing with me.”

She smiled. “I’d share with you tonight.”

“That sounds good to me.” They moved into the makeshift tent and snuggled down together with two blankets covering them. They both slept fully clothed, as it seemed to make the most sense since they were sleeping in the wilderness.

True to his word, James woke Maggie before dawn the following morning. They ate a quick breakfast of hardtack and jerky and were on their way. She could tell he was walking slower than he usually would to suit her, and she said, “We can walk faster than this.”

“Are you certain?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes, I’ll be fine.”

He picked up the pace, and she easily matched his. “Tell me about what happened after your parents died.”

Knowing he’d had a similar experience made it much easier to talk about. “My father died before I was born. Mother died when I was seven. I went to an orphanage after that, and I lived there until I turned sixteen and I was old enough to leave.” She shrugged. “

It wasn’t the kind of home I’d had as a small child, but at least I wasn’t totally alone. The matron helped me get the job as a waitress when it was time for me to leave, and I’ve worked at the same hotel since.”

“I’m glad you didn’t mind leaving your job to marry me.”

She bit her lip for a moment, wondering how to respond to that. “The day before I went to see Elizabeth Tandy, I spilled a tray full of food on a regular customer of the hotel. I was fired that day. I’m not sure I would have been able to work up the courage to see Mrs. Tandy otherwise.”

He looked at her with surprise. “Had you ever spilled food on someone that way before?”

She shook her head. “I hadn’t. And I wouldn’t have that time if the man hadn’t pinched my bottom. It surprised me, and I jumped. He was always flirtatious, but he’d never done anything like that before.”

“No wonder you spilled on him. Did you tell your boss about the pinch?” he asked.

“Yes, of course. He told me I was still in the wrong for spilling. It was time for me to leave.”

“I want to go to Massachusetts and hurt the man who dared touch you without your permission.”

“Why? It would do no good. I’m certain he’s pinching someone else’s bottom now.” She sighed. “He watched my friend Sally as well as me. I warned her that he may become physical before I left.”

“Perhaps we can find someone for Sally to marry as well. Then she wouldn’t have to deal with customers putting their hands on her.”

“I’ll write her to see if she’s interested. I’m certain it would have to be next year. Would it even be possible to travel to Yeti in the winter?” she asked.

“By sled dog. But it would be dangerous. The cold would be fatal to many people.”

“Probably best for her to wait until spring then.”

“Definitely.” He pulled at the donkey’s lead as the animal protested the climb.

“What about you? What happened with your parents?”

“My parents were killed in a fire. My father got me out and went back for my mother, and they both died. I was ten. I spent some time in an orphanage, and then when I was thirteen, an older couple came to the orphanage and chose me to work for them because I looked strong. That was the end of my schooling, and I stayed with them until I was old enough to be on my own. They weren’t unkind, but they didn’t treat me with love either.

It was just a work arrangement for them. ”

“Do you resent them?” she asked.

James looked at her with surprise. “Of course not. They gave me a home and didn’t beat me. What more could an orphan ask for?”

“I suppose you’re right.” The climb at that point was becoming more intense, and he offered a hand to help her. “This part of the journey should take a week up to twelve days. I’m hoping we can do it in a week.”

She nodded. “I’m willing to push as hard as you are to get there.” She couldn’t wait to hug Belle. It had been far too long since they’d seen one another.

“Then let’s plan on stopping only at night when we need to. We’ll journey through lunch and not take a break during the day as most travelers would.”

“That sounds fine. We can eat while we walk. I’ll be sore, but I’ll live.”

“If it gets to be too much, I want you to tell me.”

“All right,” Maggie said, but she knew she wouldn’t be the one to delay their arrival

in Yeti. She would push just as hard as he did, no matter how tired and sore she became.

At night, when they camped, they would hold one another close, but no intimacy took place. They were both too tired.

They made it to Lake Bennett in seven days, and retrieved the boat he'd hidden upriver. "Now our legs will get a rest, but we'll be rowing. We'll only stop at night," he told her.

She nodded. She was so tired she couldn't see straight, but if she needed to row, she would row. Getting to Yeti would have to be their first priority.

As they rowed along the Yukon River, they saw bears, moose, and other wildlife along the way.

Each critter excited Maggie, surprising her.

She was usually afraid of anything new. Maybe she did have the courage Elizabeth had said was inside her.

She was certain the next few weeks would let her know for certain.

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When they finally reached the point where they got off the river, Maggie was exhausted mentally and physically.

She had enjoyed her time getting to know James, but she was all talked out.

So many hours spent on the river, with nothing to do but chat, and she felt like she knew him inside and out.

Fortunately, she liked the man she'd married.

They still hadn't been intimate. They were in such a hurry to beat the frost that he'd decided it was best to wait, but he'd made it clear as soon as they reached Yeti, they would be making love.

It was only one day's walk from the river to Yeti, and they camped at the river when they reached the spot he was looking for. She had no idea how he could tell this spot in the river from all the others they'd passed, but it seemed to be second nature for him.

When they woke their last night on the trail, the air was frigid.

Cold enough that Maggie was worried about getting there before her hands froze.

To her surprise, James had a pair of thick, fur-lined mittens for her.

"I was hoping I could save them for a gift for the first time I make you angry, but it seems like you need them today."

She laughed. “Do you plan on angering me often?”

He shrugged. “I’m not perfect.”

“Neither am I. I don’t expect anything I can’t give.”

“Glad to hear it!”

He set a brisker pace than he had at the beginning of their trek, and she could tell he was energized by the idea of being home. “I can’t keep up,” she finally said, embarrassed to have to admit it.

“I’m sorry. We’re just so close.”

“I wish the fire were burning in your cabin when we reach it. I know that won’t be the case, but it would be wonderful.”

He frowned. “I’ll take you to Belle, and you and she can catch up while I light the fire. She or Everett can bring you by after thirty minutes or so. It won’t be warm, but the chill will be lessened.”

“That would be wonderful if you don’t mind. I can’t wait to see Belle.”

“I understand completely.”

As they drew close, he turned off to the left and led her to a small cabin with pretty curtains at the windows. There was a plume of smoke billowing out of the chimney. He knocked once, and Belle opened the door, standing there for a moment looking at her friend.

“You made it!” Belle grabbed Maggie in a tight embrace. “Oh, you’re frozen. Get in

here and warm up a little.”

James watched the two women together for a moment. “I’m going to go start the fire at home. Can you bring her in about thirty minutes or so?”

Belle shook her head. “No, you two are staying for supper. Everett told me you weren’t planning on eating anything but jerky and hardtack the whole way. I refuse to allow you to feed my friend any more of that. I have a big pot of duck and dumplings on the stove.”

“Duck and dumplings?” Maggie asked, giggling at the name of the dish.

“Our chickens are egg-layers. I’ll be butchering four or five next week, but for any other chicken dish I want, I’ve learned that mallards are similar in taste.”

“Does Everett do the hunting for you? Or do you buy the ducks from somewhere?”

“Everett hunts when he has time, but I usually go alone while he’s at work.”

Maggie’s eyes widened. “You hunt?”

Belle laughed. “I told you that I grew up having to provide meals for my family. Did you think that only meant cooking?”

“I guess I never really thought about it.” Maggie shook her head. “I’m not sure I could do that. But I’m not surprised that you have taken to it ”

“You could. I don’t think you felt like you could come here and look at you now! You made that journey mostly alone. Were you afraid?”

James kissed Maggie on the cheek. “I’ll let you two catch up. I’ll be back in an hour.

Will that give you enough time to put supper on the table?"

Belle nodded. "Yes. Thank you for bringing her, James."

"You can't thank me for bringing her. I need to thank you for helping us find each other."

Belle grinned. "Well, you got her here safely, and that's all I wanted."

After James left, Maggie stood. "How can I help with supper?"

"You can keep me company. I remember how tiring that trip was, and I wasn't traveling in the cold. You rest while I cook."

"But..."

"I enjoy cooking. You know that."

Maggie reluctantly sat back down. "Do you enjoy being married?"

Belle nodded. "I do. So much! And I'm expecting."

"You are? Oh, that's wonderful! I guess I need to follow your lead so our children can play together." Maggie pretended to be surprised. She knew Belle would rather deliver the news herself than have James tell her.

"I guess you do!"

Maggie talked about her trip while Belle told her about the town. "There's a small store. I bake bread and sweets for them to sell. The men go nuts over anything that is premade."

“I was hoping I could do that to earn a little extra. I’ll have to think of something else.”

“No, you won’t. There’s never quite enough to go around. There are so many bachelors living and working in this area. And they are all hungry. All the time. They all hurry to the store on their breaks to try to be the first to buy what I make.”

Maggie smiled. “So, if I did some baking and sold it, you wouldn’t feel like I was trying to compete with you?”

“Not at all! I’ll even give you pointers on what the men have liked best since I’ve been here.”

“That would be wonderful. And maybe you can show me how to clean an animal once it’s been killed...”

“I would love to do that. There’s good foraging here in the summer.

We can still find a few things, like Eskimo potatoes.

They aren’t what we’d call potatoes, but they can be found on the riverbanks and in open meadows.

If you’d like, I’ll show you what they look like, and you can do some foraging with me.

I’ve also been finding lingonberries. They’re tart, but with a little sugar, they make a fine jam. ”

“Have you tried selling jam at the store?” Maggie worried that having an extra mouth to feed would be too much for James’s finances, and she wanted to help in any way

she could.

“Yes! And the men buy it out within a few hours. Seriously. Anything you feel like cooking or baking, the men will buy, and Katie, the shopkeeper who has become a dear friend, will sell it and keep a small portion of your profits. I don’t know if James has hens, but I sell our eggs and surplus milk to the store as well.

It works out well for Katie, and it makes me happy to contribute in some way.

I’m not sure if I can keep it up once the baby comes, but I will certainly try. ”

Maggie nodded. “What about sewing?” Maggie enjoyed cooking, but sewing was her true love.

“I haven’t done any sewing for the store yet, but Katie and I have talked about it, and she has said she could easily sell anything I want to sew. I prefer knitting so I’ve sold some hats and mittens. The men love them.”

“Maybe I’ll sew and let you do the cooking and baking.”

“Or we could do the cooking and baking together.” Belle turned away from the stove. “I’m so glad you’re here, and there’s another woman in town. There were only two of us, and there are no children at all. Katie’s daughter married and moved to Seattle.”

“So, there are really only two women in town?”

“Three now that you’re here.” Belle stirred the dumplings. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“I think I am too. I just hope James is always as kind as he was on our journey here.”

“I hope so as well. I’ve never seen him get angry over anything. He seems very even-

tempered. But I've never lived with him."

"Well, that's good to hear!" Maggie looked down at her hands. It was strange for her to remain idle. "I should be doing something. Are you certain I can't help?"

"Do you want to set the table? There's nothing else to do to get supper ready. Oh, you could slice the bread as well."

Maggie jumped up and did as she was asked. "James said that he and Everett started the lumber operation together, but that he let Everett buy him out when he decided to become a prospector."

"Yes, that's how I understand it."

At the sound of the door, Maggie looked to see a man she'd never met come inside, followed by James.

Belle hurried to the man, raising her face for his kiss. Maggie had never seen her friend look happier or more content. She seemed to love Everett and her life in Alaska.

Belle turned back to her friend. "Maggie, this is my husband, Everett."

"It's nice to meet you," Maggie said softly.

"And you," Everett said. "I've heard a lot about you. Belle has been looking forward to your arrival."

"She's already made me feel quite welcome."

"I'm sure she's going to talk you into going on her foraging adventures with her. Do

you hunt as well?" he asked.

Maggie shook her head, stifling a laugh. "I would be afraid to even touch a rifle."

James stepped up behind Maggie and put his hands on her shoulders. "I'll teach you to hunt if you'd like."

Wrinkling her nose, Maggie declined. "I don't think I could ever hunt. I'm impressed that Belle does though."

"I'll hunt when I'm off work then. We'll need food stores before winter sets in."

"This isn't winter?" Maggie asked. It was already cold enough that she couldn't imagine if this wasn't at least the beginning of winter.

"Not at all," Everett said. "We have a few weeks yet to finish foraging. You're not going to be forced to eat tinned food all winter."

"I've put up enough food for three families for winter," Belle said, shrugging. "I wanted to make sure we were prepared, and I know we are. We're happy to share."

"I'll find some way to trade," Maggie said, not wanting to be in her friend's debt. "I can let your dresses out and do many other things."

"I may take you up on that," Belle said. "You can use my sewing machine. Sewing has never been something I enjoy much. The machine does make it less of a burden though."

When they sat down for supper, Everett said a prayer over the meal, thanking God for Maggie's safe arrival.

After her first bite of supper, Maggie smiled. “It does taste almost exactly like chicken and dumplings. I need you to teach me to make this!”

“I’ll do it happily. It’s easy to hunt mallards in late June and early July. Perhaps you can pick wild strawberries for me, and I’ll hunt for you.”

“That sounds like a perfect arrangement. And I’ll do a kitchen garden of course.”

James shook his head. “We don’t have a large enough property for a kitchen garden.”

“Our property is big enough for two. And that way we can work in the garden together. The men work a lot of hours, and I think we’ll be much happier spending our days together.”

James cocked his head to one side. “Did you clean my cabin while I was gone?”

Belle shrugged. “I thought it would be nice for Maggie to come home to a house that had already gone through its fall cleaning. Now she won’t have to go to the trouble to do it herself.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have!” Maggie insisted.

“It was a labor of love,” Belle responded. “You have clean sheets and a clean quilt. I think I would have felt the need to stay up all night doing the laundry.”

“Thank you, Belle.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“If I come over in the morning, will you take me to the store?” After Belle nodded, Maggie looked at James. “Do you have flour and sugar, and all those little things I’ll

need?”

James shook his head. “I’ve subsisted on hardtack and beef jerky. The only time I’ve gotten real meals is when I was invited here or to the Johnsons.”

“The Johnsons?” Maggie asked.

“They are the proprietors of the store here in town.”

“I see. They sound like good people. Belle has told me a great deal about Mrs. Johnson, but she uses her first name.”

“Yes, they’ve become quite close since Belle arrived,” Everett said. “I’m sure Belle will introduce you around and get you acclimated to our little town. We have Sunday service at the Johnsons. There’s no church, so we study a chapter per week.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Maggie said, excited about a time for worship and socializing.

After Maggie had eaten two bowls of the duck and dumplings, she pushed her bowl away. “This was delicious, Belle. I had no idea you were such a good cook.”

Belle smiled. “I have always enjoyed cooking.”

“And you were allowed to help Chef Andre in the kitchen often. I’m sure you learned a great deal from him.”

“In some ways,” Belle said. “He liked to make every meal fancy. The idea of him cooking something like duck and dumplings is simply ridiculous.”

“You’re right. I was always glad simpler meals were provided to the staff.”

“I was as well. It was a difficult place to work at times, but we were fed and housed. I don’t think we could have asked for more.”

Maggie shook her head. “I would have asked to not have my bottom pinched.”

“What?” Belle asked, obviously shocked.

Maggie told the story of the incident and her subsequent dismissal. “I don’t know that I would have had the courage to go see Elizabeth if that hadn’t happened.”

“Well, I’m glad you did see her. Mr. Templeton should be ashamed that he dismissed you instead of standing behind you.” Belle shook her head. “I’m thrilled I’m not working there any longer. My new boss is very kind.”

Everett laughed at that. “I’m not sure who you think your boss is, but I hope you don’t mean me. I don’t want to take on the responsibility of employing a woman who does what she pleases when she pleases.”

Maggie could see clearly that it was all Belle could do not to giggle. “I do a lot of things, but I don’t tend to run amok.”

“No, but I never know if I’m going to arrive home to fifty jars of jam or a deer hanging from a tree.”

“I don’t want you to get bored with me, darling...”

Maggie loved the relationship between the two, and she was just about to say so when James stood. “We need to be going. I’m exhausted.”

Maggie was disappointed, but she knew she would be able to see Belle the following day. “I should help with the dishes before we leave.”

Belle shook her head. “No, that journey was no picnic. Go home and get a good night’s sleep. I’ll be here tomorrow, and we’ll make our plans to take over the world.”

Maggie grinned. Belle was never boring.

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Almost as soon as they were in their cabin, Maggie and James fell asleep. When Maggie woke it was already light out, and she felt bad that breakfast wasn't ready for James yet. But then she noticed he was still sleeping as well.

She crept out of bed and searched the tiny kitchen area for something she could cook, but there was nothing. The cupboards were completely bare.

There was a soft rap on the door, and she hurried to see who would be there so early.

She wasn't at all surprised to see Belle standing there in a thick fur coat with a basket over her arm.

"I realized after you left that you wouldn't have anything to make for breakfast. I put this together for you.

Don't forget to come see me so I can take you to the store later. "

Maggie took the basket that was thrust at her and watched as her friend hurried away, her feet making prints in the frost. She wanted to yell thank you after Belle, but she didn't want to wake James until she had breakfast ready for him.

She set the basket on the counter and looked through it. There was a bottle of milk with a cork stopper, a dozen eggs, a loaf of bread, sugar, cinnamon, maple syrup, and flour. Belle had even included a ball of butter.

After removing the bag of flour, she found a slab of bacon beneath it. She had choices about what she could make, and though she felt bad for leaning on her friend, she was

happy to have something to cook.

She quickly whipped up scrambled eggs and bacon, toasting some of the bread to go along with it. At the same time, she put a pot of coffee on the stove, having found coffee beans to be the only thing in the house besides hardtack and jerky.

She was serving the plates as she heard James stir. She set them both on the table and poured two cups of coffee.

James sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes. "You cooked?" he asked.

"Belle came by with a basket of ingredients to make breakfast with."

"We could have just had hardtack and jerky," he said. "You look tired."

"I am, but I need to adjust to getting up in the mornings to fix you breakfast before you head to work." She frowned. "What should I make for your lunch?"

"Oh, you don't need to go to the trouble..."

"I'll make you a few bacon sandwiches," she said, refusing to listen to him tell her not to make his lunch. He would be hungry after a morning of chopping trees.

They had a quiet breakfast, and she wondered how to bring up going to the store. "Belle is going to take me to the store today."

He nodded. "You'll like Mrs. Johnson."

"I'm sure I will. Belle seems to think a lot of her." She bit her lip. "I was thinking of doing what Belle does and baking for the store to sell. Would you mind?"

He frowned. "I suppose I wouldn't, but don't wear yourself out. Belle seems to have an endless surplus of energy, but I'm sure she gets very tired."

"We both worked twelve-hour days regularly. I would get bored if my hands were idle. The cabin is as neat as it can be. I'll do the dishes, but after that, I won't need to do anything until supper."

"I'm sure Belle will have you out hunting and foraging with her. She's taken to Alaskan life in a wonderful way, making the most of what she can gather from the land."

"We'll see what happens. I do think I'll be doing some sewing for her to trade for food for the winter."

He frowned. "You don't have to work for everything. I can provide." Just barely, but he could. They would make ends meet.

"I won't do more than I can reasonably do. I don't want to have nothing to do."

"I don't see that being a problem for you."

After James had left for work with the sandwiches she'd prepared wrapped in oil cloth and in a lunch pail, she quickly did the dishes and bundled up before walking to Belle's cabin, returning the basket the food had been delivered in.

"Thank you so much for thinking of us for breakfast. James seems to think eating hardtack and jerky is enough for every meal, but I'm a little fussier than that. After eating it the whole way here, I don't ever want to look at hardtack again."

Belle smiled. "We had more time to get here, and though we moved quickly, we had time to make our meals. I'm not a picky eater, but I think I would have gone crazy

eating only those two things the whole way.

” She talked as she put on her coat, taking a rifle from the wall.

“I’ll show you where to get berries and Eskimo potatoes, and I’ll shoot while you forage.

But first, we’ll go to the store. I’ve done my baking for the day, and I need to take the extra eggs. ”

Maggie took a basket of fresh-baked goods and an empty basket while Belle carried the eggs, had the rifle slung over her shoulder, and carried an empty basket as well.

Maggie could tell Belle had a knife stuck in her boot, and she felt like she was in a different world. Belle seemed so different here. In Massachusetts, her hair had always been in a perfect bun. Here...Her hair was a bit wild. Half down and half up. Belle even looked different!

The walk to the store was a short one, and Maggie was surprised that there were five or six men in the store, obviously waiting for Belle to arrive. They opened the door wide and immediately started asking what Belle had baked.

“Did you make those snickerdoodles I like?” one man asked.

“Any pies in there?” another asked.

“I just want to get one of those loaves of bread!”

Maggie shook her head. Belle was right. They could use another woman baking every day.

Walking to the front of the store, Belle set the egg basket down, and an older plump woman lifted the towel covering the eggs. She counted. "There are fewer than usual today!"

"I shared with Maggie and James. They finally made it to town last night." Belle nodded toward Maggie. "This is my friend, Maggie. Maggie, this is Katie Johnson, my first Alaskan friend."

"It's good to meet you, Maggie. If you bake, think about making some extra for the store. You can see the men standing around waiting to see what I put out to sell." Katie sighed. "You can wait another minute or two!" she said to a man who looked like he was going to snatch the basket Maggie held.

"I'm happy to meet you as well, Mrs. Johnson. Belle has told me all about you."

"Call me Katie." Katie took the basket from Maggie. "Looks like you got your wish, Isaiah. Snickerdoodles." She took the loaves of bread and cookies from the basket. "I'll put this on your account," she said to Belle.

"Thank you." Belle went to a shelf. "I'm running low on flour again. I guess that's what happens when you bake for the whole town."

"I guess so," Katie said, grinning.

Maggie nodded. "I think I'll be baking as well. I was worried I'd be competing with Belle, but..."

"Oh, you won't. Trust me!" Katie said. "Half the men who come in here don't get to buy any of Belle's treats. They go home sad and disappointed."

"Well, we don't want that! If I bake five loaves of bread per day, and maybe a pie or

two, would that be too much?" Maggie asked.

Katie laughed. "You could bake three times that and not make too much."

"I suppose I need to buy some flour and sugar and...well, I probably need a little of everything."

Katie pursed her lips. "Since you'll be baking for the store, why don't I open credit for you? I'll do as I do with Belle and let you take what you need, and when your food sells, I'll take off what you owe. Does that make sense?"

"That would suit me perfectly. I sew. Would there be any point in making items for the store?"

"As long as you make things in men's sizes, I'm sure I'll be able to sell them. Flannel shirts are what most men around here wear. Belle's making socks and mittens. I'd much rather buy from the two of you because then I don't have to pay the crazy shipping costs, and I can sell for less."

"I'll get right on it then. Belle is going to show me where to forage today."

"But only because Katie showed me where to forage when I first arrived," Belle responded.

"You girls have fun. And remember, I'll take anything extra you have. I could use it for the store."

"I'd love some more of your lingonberry jam," one of the men who had been listening said.

"I'll do my best!" Belle responded.

As they left the store, Maggie whispered, “There’s no way we can make enough to keep all the men happy, is there?”

“Not unless we stop taking care of our homes and cooking for our husbands,” Belle replied.

“Well, then I think they’ll have to be satisfied with whatever we can manage.”

“Trust me. They will.”

As they walked, Belle talked about where to find different foods. “This being my first year here, I don’t think we would have eaten anything but tinned foods if Katie hadn’t taught me to forage.”

“I’m glad she did then. It seems that you’ve built quite a reputation.”

“It’s a good thing we both enjoy cooking and baking, isn’t it?”

” Belle pointed to a clearing in the forested area north of town.

“We’re going there. I’ll show you the berries and how to spot the Eskimo potatoes, and then I’m going to hunt.

I saw three deer the last time I was here, but I didn’t have my rifle.

I’m hungry for a big pot of venison stew. ”

“Oh, that does sound good. I wonder if we could sell something like stew to the men?”

Belle tilted her head to one side, thinking about it. “I think we could talk to Everett

and see if he would allow one or both of us to go to the lumberyard at a designated time and serve stew to the men. It would be a lot of work, but it could be done.”

Maggie nodded. “I’ll think on it. I know James isn’t a man of means, and I don’t want to be a burden on him.”

Belle shook her head. “You could never be a burden, Maggie.”

“I hope not,” Maggie replied.

Belle quickly showed Maggie the unfamiliar berries and showed her how to identify and dig up the Eskimo potatoes. “Thankfully, the potatoes are available all summer. I was certain they’d be gone by now, but we can still harvest them.”

Maggie nodded, grasping a basket and getting to work on the berries. She planned to spend an hour or so on berries and then switch to the strange-looking potatoes.

Belle wandered off, and Maggie continued her foraging.

She was certain if Belle was able to shoot a deer, she would share, and she planned to share her bounty as well.

It wasn’t long before Maggie heard a single gunshot.

She finished picking the berry bush she was working on and went in the direction of the shot.

She found Belle field dressing the deer she’d shot. “That’s a huge one!”

Belle grinned. “That’ll feed both of our homes for a while. We’ll split up the meat if you’ll share your berries and potatoes.”

“That’s a deal I can easily agree with.”

Together, they worked on the deer, dragging it back to Belle’s cabin. They strung it up from a tree, head down, so the blood could drain properly. “Would you like to have venison stew with us this evening?”

“I think I would.” Maggie felt odd leaving the entrails of the deer behind, but she knew it would be too difficult to transport otherwise.

They spent the rest of the day working on the deer, carefully cutting it into chunks and carrying it into a small structure Everett had made for keeping animals out of their meat stores.

“With as cold as it already is, the meat will stay frozen here, so we don’t need to worry about turning it into jerky or salting it heavily. ”

“Is that what this building is for?” Maggie asked, looking around.

“Yes. Everett built it for me over the summer so I would be able to store enough meat for winter. I’ve really only barely started using it.”

“I wonder if James would build one for me?” Maggie knew there was little room on James’s property for things like that, but she had a feeling he would be willing to do what it took for fresh meat.

“I don’t know. You should ask him. Or you can just use our storage. I want this thing full.”

Maggie shook her head. “I’m surprised at how easily you’ve adjusted to this lifestyle.”

“My life growing up wasn’t terribly different. Once my mother died, I was the one to find forage, keep a kitchen garden, and hunt. I did fish some, but I don’t particularly like the taste of fish. I’d eat it if that’s what we had, but I prefer other types of meat.”

“I had no idea you were raised to do those things. We did a lot of gardening and preserving at the orphanage, but we weren’t hunting and foraging.”

“You’ll learn quickly, Maggie. There’s no doubt in my mind.”

Maggie smiled, wondering if her friend was right. She couldn’t imagine being the one to shoot a deer, but with trades, it would work out.

They took a quick break for lunch, having the leftovers from the night before. “What do you send with Everett for his lunches?” Maggie asked.

“I usually send a portion of what I served the night before. Today, he took some of the duck and dumplings.”

“I’ll remember that. I didn’t know what to do for James, so I made him bacon sandwiches.”

“That’s what you had on hand. I’m sure you’ll provide different things when you can.”

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After the deer was cut into meal-sized pieces and Belle had a stew on the stove, Maggie went home to bathe and wait for James to let him know they were eating with the Thompsons.

When James came in, he frowned at the stove. "You're not cooking?" He'd expected her to have supper on the table for him.

"Belle and I spent the day foraging and hunting. We're using potatoes that I found and the deer she shot, and we're having a venison stew for supper. Belle cooked and invited us over."

He sighed. "I do want some time alone with my bride from time to time."

Maggie bit her lip. "I thought you'd want to go. I can make something for us."

"No, you've already agreed. But I want us to have time together this evening after supper. So as soon as the dishes are done, we'll head back here."

"I'm sorry I didn't do what you wanted."

"I should have told you. We'll get used to each other's likes and dislikes. We're home now, and it's very different from traveling. We'll have to settle into a routine that will make us both happy."

Maggie nodded. "I met Mrs. Johnson today. I was surprised at how pushy the men were about what they want Belle to make next. I'm looking forward to contributing to our income by doing some baking of my own." She told him what she and Belle had

discussed about taking stew to the men during the day.

“Absolutely not. I don’t want the men ogling my wife.” James sighed. “When Everett scolded Belle in public, the men all fought over who would marry her when she divorced him. It was crazy. I don’t think we need to go through that.”

“I had no idea!”

“You should ask her about it. I’m sure she would tell you.” He washed his hands and face. “Well, I suppose we should go to supper.”

Maggie put on her coat and the mittens he’d given her. “I love these mittens. Where did you get them?”

“I traded for them with one of the Eskimos at Lake Bennett. They are always willing to make a trade.”

“What did you trade for them?” she asked.

“I took some pelts with me. I try to always take something if I know I’m going to be in the vicinity.”

“That sounds smart.” She wondered if he’d hunted for the pelts. “The little building Everett built for keeping food cold during the winter...Do you think you could build one?”

He shook his head. “There’s not enough room on the property.”

She sighed. “Belle said we could share hers if you said that. But it makes it a little harder.”

“It’ll be fine,” he said. “I have a feeling you and Belle will be spending a great deal of time together anyway.”

“Yes, we probably will. We did at the hotel as well. We tried to work the same parties so there would be a smiling face that we knew.”

“How long did the two of you work together?” he asked.

“Four years. The work was hard, and the days were long. I do have a little money saved up though. I’ll make sure to give it to you when we get home.”

“No, that’s your money. I’ll provide for us.”

The man was stubborn. “I’d like to contribute.”

“No, thank you.”

“So, if I earn money baking or sewing, you won’t let me use it for us?” Maggie wondered what was wrong with him.

“If you earn money, it will be yours to do with as you please.” James wanted to tell her that a man provided for his family, and the woman stayed home with the children, but he wasn’t sure how she’d react. That was all right, though. She’d come around to his way of thinking soon enough.

They’d reached the Thompsons’ cabin, and he rapped on the door. Everett opened it immediately. “Welcome!”

“I hope you don’t mind us coming for supper two nights in a row. The ladies decided, and I didn’t know until I got home,” James said.

“I’m always happy when you come to supper,” Everett responded.

Maggie wanted to pull Belle away from the men and talk to her about the small disagreement she and James had just had, but the house was too small. Belle’s cabin was almost as small as the one she was sharing with James. It didn’t matter, though. She’d talk to her tomorrow.

“Supper’s ready,” Belle said.

“I’ll set the table,” Maggie replied, falling into working with Belle as if they’d been doing it for years...because they had.

After supper, Maggie helped with the dishes, wiping them and putting them away while Belle washed them. As soon as they were finished, James insisted they go home. “I’m still tired from the trip. I wish my boss was nicer and let me have the day off.”

Everett laughed. “He’s a mean one, isn’t he?”

James nodded. “Very mean. I’m not sure how Belle puts up with him.”

“Belle loves him, and love covers a multitude of sins,” Belle said, walking them to the door.

Maggie smiled. “I’ll be over tomorrow morning, after I finish my baking.”

“I look forward to it!” Belle said. “There are only a few more days of foraging this year. I’ll forage tomorrow as well. I’ll go back to hunting after we’ve harvested all we can.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Maggie said.

She and James walked home in silence, the only sound their footsteps on the frosted ground.

As soon as the door closed behind them, James removed his coat and invited her to sit at the table with him. "I know Belle is always trying to earn extra money, but I don't expect that from you."

Maggie frowned. "But I enjoy the work. I can either make enough jam for us for six years, or I can make enough for us to have some and the men at the mine to have some to purchase."

"You're not going to see things my way, are you?"

"Probably not."

He frowned. "I thought I was getting a sweet, obedient wife."

"I don't know what gave you that idea. Perhaps you want to trade me in for another bride?" She had no idea where the courage to say such a thing came from, but the words were tumbling out of her mouth before she had a chance to stifle them.

He gave her a stern look. "But I like you!"

"Then my need to make money won't bother you too much because it's part of me."

"What am I going to do with you?"

She put her arms around him and pressed her lips to his, initiating a kiss for the first time. "Kiss me?" she asked.

"Oh, I will not argue with that idea." He pulled her closer, his hands roaming over her

back and making her jump when he cupped her bottom.

She put all her focus into the kiss, wanting to be closer to him. When he unbuttoned the back of her dress, she didn't protest. Instead, she moved her hands to the buttons on his flannel shirt. She made quick work of them and pushed the garment off his shoulders.

When her dress was pooled at her feet, he scooped her into his arms and carried her to their bed, placing her there and following her down.

His lips never left hers as his hands explored her body, touching her in places she didn't even dare touch herself. He covered her body with his, pressing between her legs.

She gasped and moved with him, pleased that they were finally making love. She wanted a baby after all, and she knew this was how it happened.

What surprised Maggie about it all was that the more he moved, the better it felt. She knew she must be a wanton woman, but she liked this. She liked it a lot!

When he finished, he slumped beside her and moved his arm up over his forehead. She moved to him, resting her head on his shoulder. "That was...fun. We should do it often," she said, surprising herself.

He grinned but said nothing. He was keeping this wife. No matter how stubborn she was.

B ELLE AND MAGGIE SPENT the rest of the week foraging.

They would each do some baking as soon as their husbands left for the day, but then they would meet at Belle's house at ten in the morning.

From there, they would go to the store to give Katie what they'd made that morning, and order any supplies they needed before going to a clearing—a different one each day—and find whatever they could.

By the end of the week, the berries still on the vine were not good to eat, so they spent Friday afternoon making jam together at Belle's.

“What are we going to do with two hundred jars of lingonberry jam?” Maggie asked.

“We'll each keep twenty-four jars, so we can have two per month. Then we'll sell the other one hundred fifty-two jars to the store. Katie will have them all sold by the end of the day, and we can order what we want with the money we made.”

Maggie laughed. “I like making money this way. It's so much better than cleaning rooms or serving at the hotel.”

“I do too. I think Everett is a bit confused as to why I keep doing it, but I've always earned a wage. Why would I stop now?”

“So, what will we do tomorrow?” Maggie asked.

“The men are off work tomorrow. I'm not sure what you and James will do, but Everett and I plan on butchering some of the chickens.”

“Then you can make chicken and dumplings and not always duck and dumplings.”

Belle laughed. “My thoughts exactly. Though, I think I've started liking duck and dumplings more than I ever liked chicken and dumplings.

” Belle put several of the jars into a basket.

“Let’s walk back to the store with some of the jam.

It’ll make the men happier this weekend, and then Everett will be happier come Monday. ”

“And James will too! What a brilliant plan.” Maggie followed suit and filled a basket with jam jars. “It’s going to take a lot of trips to the store this way.”

“I have a little wagon Everett made for me. We can pull that full of jam on Monday. For now, I just want the men to have a little taste of what’s to come.”

Maggie felt light on her feet as they walked to the store. The men would be home in another hour or two, but for now, she was spending time with her friend doing whatever they wanted. And earning money for doing it!

When they arrived at the store, Katie was alone. She got to her feet when she saw them. “Oh, what have you brought me?” she asked.

“Lingonberry jam,” Belle responded. “We have lots and lots more, and we’ll bring it Monday, but this will keep you going for the weekend.”

Katie looked into the baskets and quickly removed three jars from each.

“Bernard is partial to lingonberry jam. These jars are for us, and then I’ll sneak some more when you bring more.

” She opened her cash box and handed them each some coins.

“There. I’ll put the amount for the other jars on your accounts. ”

Maggie bit her lip. "I've noticed James's shirts are worn. Would you have some flannel for me to make him some new shirts?"

"I do!" Katie led them to the three colors of flannel she had on hand. "Most of the men buy their shirts, but I keep flannel around for any project I feel like doing."

Maggie chose two colors and had the fabric cut. She returned the coins to Katie. "If that's not enough..."

"It's more than enough!" Katie told her. "And now when the men get off work, I'll have some jam to sell. Oh, I'm excited!"

"You're free to use my sewing machine if you want," Belle told Maggie. "I don't know how quickly you want it done, but I do know James's birthday is in early October."

"I didn't know!" Maggie said, a bit shocked with herself. "What kind of woman doesn't know her own husband's birthday?"

"One who just barely met and married him," Belle responded.

"I will be using your machine then," Maggie said. "James will have two new shirts for his birthday."

"I'm making him some mittens," Belle said.

Katie shook her head at the two of them. "You are just what this town needed. Both of you."

Maggie laughed. "I'm learning from Belle."

“If you decide you like making shirts, let me know. I know the men around here would love to buy them.”

Maggie nodded. “I do enjoy sewing. I will let you know when I do.”

Maggie and Belle headed back to Belle’s house. “I don’t know what I’ll make for supper,” Maggie said, frowning.

“Take some of the venison. You helped with it, so part of it belongs to you.”

“Are you certain?”

“I am. And now that the forage has dried up, I’ll be doing more hunting, and I hope you’ll be helping me again. It was so much easier with two of us to share the burden.”

“Did I really help that much?”

“Yes!” Belle told her. “I couldn’t have done it all on my own.”

“Will you only hunt deer?” Maggie asked.

“I’ll hunt just about anything. I save the bullets for the deer, but I can do some bow hunting for rabbits and smaller game. I draw my line at bears though. I have no desire to kill and skin a bear.”

“It would be a lot of meat though...”

“So are deer.”

When they reached Belle’s house, Maggie chose some of the venison for her supper before heading home. She wasn’t certain what she wanted to do with it, but she was

thinking about a roast with some of the Eskimo potatoes. She was surprised at how much she enjoyed them.

As soon as she was home, she hid the flannel under her nightgowns. She was quite certain James would never look there.

Then she set about cooking supper. Soon, James would be home, and they would have two whole days together. She was surprised at how very excited she was by the prospect.

Being married was a great deal more enjoyable than she'd imagined.

The matron who had run their orphanage had made marital relations sound like the most horrible thing imaginable.

Maggie thought for a moment about how funny it would be to write the matron a letter, telling her how much she enjoyed being with her husband, but she knew the matron wouldn't find the letter funny at all. Some people had no sense of humor...

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On Saturday, Maggie and James spent the day outside.

James chopped wood for their fireplace for the winter while Maggie gathered the wood and carried as much back to the cabin as she could.

She made trip after trip, not minding the hard work at all because she was spending time with James as she did it.

Just before going home, James found a rabbit in one of the snares he'd set, and Maggie was thrilled to have fresh meat for supper.

While she cooked, James sat at the table whittling, something she hadn't seen him do before. "What are you making?" she asked.

He shrugged. "The wood hasn't told me yet, but it will. It always does."

"Have you always whittled?" she asked, having noticed small woodland creatures all over the house, some just stuffed in a chest and not displayed. She hoped to make a shelf for the creatures as a Christmas gift.

"It was something I learned from Mr. Carver, the farmer who took me in. He was very patient in teaching me how to make just about anything."

"He sounds like he was a good man."

"He was." James looked back down at the wood, obviously not wanting to talk about the Carvers any longer.

“What is your favorite meal?” she asked, hoping she could make him something he loved sometime soon. He didn’t seem fussy, but she wanted to do something special for him.

He shrugged. “Fried chicken is a particular favorite of mine. My ma made it all the time before she died.”

Maggie immediately wondered if she could talk Belle into trading a chicken for something. She had no idea what, though, so she’d have to wait and see. “Dessert?” she asked.

He thought about that one. “I really like the strawberry shortcakes that Belle made this summer. All the men fought over them.”

“That sounds delicious. I’ll make certain to get her receipt.”

“There was even a fight in the store one day. Everett was angry that all of his men were at the store waiting for Belle to deliver the sweets, and they were supposed to be at the lumberyard. He said something to her in public, and she was embarrassed. One of the men decided she’d divorce him over it, and he let her know that he wouldn’t mind marrying a woman who’d been divorced. Everett was not happy.”

“I’m sure he wasn’t. Is that why you don’t want me to sell stew at the lumberyard?”

“That’s part of it, but mostly, I want you to trust me to provide for us.”

Maggie turned from the food she was making. “I do trust you! I don’t want to be a burden, and if I can help, I feel like I should.”

He stayed silent in answer to that, continuing his whittling. He thought maybe this would be a rabbit, but he simply wasn’t sure yet.

After supper, he mentioned they would be going to the church service at the Johnsons the following day. "I'm glad there will be a way to worship with others here. I worried there would be no church."

"Well, there isn't exactly a church. No one preaches, but Mr. Johnson goes over some Bible verses with us every week.

We all read it in advance, and then we discuss it.

It's not what most people think of when they talk about church, but it works for us.

"He hid a yawn. "This has been a tough week. I think I'm heading to bed early tonight. "

"I'll join you!" she said enthusiastically.

"I will not complain a bit about that."

BELLE AND EVERETT HAD them over for lunch after the Sunday service. The men talked about the hunting they still needed to do before it became too cold to do much.

Belle smiled. "I plan on hunting this week."

James looked at Maggie. "You sure you don't want to hunt? I have a bow and arrow you'd be welcome to use."

"I don't think so. I don't mind helping Belle with the animal after it's been shot, but I don't want to shoot them myself." She pursed her lips. "And why use a bow and

arrow and not a rifle?"

"Ammunition is very expensive here," Everett said. "I almost always use a bow and arrow, and even Belle usually does, unless she's going for large game. She's a good hunter."

"Belle's good at everything," Maggie said. "It's one of the things I most admire about her."

"I hope you're right. I'm worried about whether or not I'll be a good mother," Belle said.

"I can't believe you're nervous about that. You raised your younger brothers and sisters."

"I did. But...I never felt like I was good at taking care of them. They didn't respect me as they did my father."

That confused Maggie because she knew Belle's father hadn't been respectable at all. "I'm sure it was because you were their sister."

"Perhaps," Belle said, getting to her feet. She began clearing the table, so Maggie jumped up to help.

"Thank you for inviting us for another meal. Maybe next Sunday, the two of you will join us at our place." Maggie wanted to repay her friend's kindness.

"We'd love to!" Belle responded.

Maggie wasn't certain what she'd cook. Perhaps she would need to have Belle teach her to hunt that week after all. She couldn't serve hardtack and jerky, and she wasn't

about to feed them only baked goods.

She was lost in thought as she washed the dishes. She'd have to talk to James about meat. He would know better than she did.

To her surprise, James and Everett put on their coats. "We're going to see if we can get a deer or two," James said. "Everett is going to let us use part of their cold house."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Belle had already told Maggie they could use it, but she knew James would want to hear it from Everett.

After the men had left, Maggie said, "I hope you know how much I appreciate all you've done to help us out."

"Oh, I plan to force you to help me once the baby comes. We'll always help one another." Belle finished washing the plate in her hands. "I received a letter from Sally yesterday."

"Sally? From the hotel?"

Belle nodded. "She wants to know if there are any other men in the area who need wives."

"I have an odd feeling there are..."

"Oh, there definitely are. I've had Everett post Elizabeth's address at the mill. I'll write to her and tell her to talk to Elizabeth. You and she got along well, didn't you?"

"We did. I wasn't as close to her as I am to you, but we worked well together and occasionally talked outside of work." Maggie tilted her head to one side. "Do you

have someone in mind for her?”

“Not at all. I will let her take her chances with a groom. That’s what I did.”

“But you made sure I married James...”

“I needed you to be married to Everett’s best friend. It only makes sense.”

“Are you still planning on hunting most of the week?” Maggie asked.

“That depends on whether the men come home with anything or not. We may be working on cutting up the meat all day tomorrow. Well, all afternoon. We know the morning will be spent baking. I’m going to bake snickerdoodles tomorrow. Do you know what you’ll make?”

“I was thinking I’d use the lingonberry jam we just made and make jelly rolls. They’ve always been a favorite of mine.”

“Perfect. Then the men get a choice between fruity and cinnamony...I don’t think that’s a word, but I think it should be. Don’t you?”

“Shakespeare made up his own words all the time. I think we should be able to as well.”

“I think so. Cinnamony is now a word.” Maggie looked at Belle. “Do you think we could make a shelf before Christmas? Maybe you could get the lumber from Everett and ask him not to tell James? I’m happy to pay for it.”

“I’m sure we could. Why?”

“James whittles the most beautiful little animals. I want a shelf for him to display

them. I've found them all over the house. In drawers, under the bed, and in a trunk. They need to be displayed!"

"I want to see one!"

"I'll bring one tomorrow. Or I can show you when you come over next week."

"Whichever. I'd be happy to help you make the shelf though."

"Thank you!"

The men didn't return for a good long while, and the women mended Everett's stockings while they waited. "I swear the man didn't have a single item of clothing without holes when I arrived!" Belle said, shaking her head.

"James is the same. I'm going to make the shirts and slowly replace everything he owns. I've patched what I can."

"It's going to take time. And soon I'll be sewing for the baby! I'm saving that for the dreadfully cold winter months. I know I haven't spent a winter here yet, and I really can't say I've experienced this dreadful cold, but I've read about it, and Katie has talked about it. "

"We both know that winter is going to be brutal. I just don't want to dwell on it too much. I'm glad our homes are so close. Then I can come over and visit, and we can sew together, or you can knit while I sew."

"And we can both bake a ridiculous number of loaves of bread every day. Katie keeps telling me that we're improving the lives of all the men in town. I guess it's true."

Maggie smiled. "You know it's true. You can tell by the sheer number of men who

are in the store when we make our deliveries in the mornings.”

When the men came back, they had smiles on their faces. “Were you able to shoot a deer?” Belle asked.

“We shot two of them. They’re hanging in trees outside,” Everett said.

“Then we’re working on meat tomorrow and not hunting,” Belle said. “Did you each shoot one?”

“James got both,” Everett said. “But we’re splitting the meat equally. Same as we’re splitting the meat from the deer you got early in the week.”

“And we’re splitting all of our forage,” Belle said. “I’m so happy to have more venison for the winter! And the chickens that we butchered yesterday. We’re going to be well-fed.”

“I’m sending two chickens home with you,” Everett said to Maggie. “And come spring, we’re going to make sure you have chicks, so you can start your own coop.”

“We don’t have room,” James said automatically. It seemed to be his response to everything.

“The land bordering yours to the east is mine. Build a coop.” Everett wasn’t taking no for an answer.

James shrugged. “I guess.”

“I think we will be adding another room onto the cabin in the spring. We’ll need more room once the baby gets here. Can I hire you to help me?”

“I’ll help you, but you won’t be paying me,” James insisted.

“Sometimes, I think you’re the most stubborn person I ever met, but then I get a look at myself in a mirror.”

“There’s a lot of truth to that,” James said.

“Do you think the deer will be safe overnight?” Belle asked. “Or should we go work on them now?”

“They should be fine. We tied them up high enough that the wolves won’t get them.” Everett shook his head. “This area is getting populated enough we’re not seeing them often anymore.”

“That’s a good thing,” Maggie said. “I don’t fancy myself as Little Red Riding Hood.”

James looked at Maggie and shook his head. “We need to be getting home. Tomorrow is Monday.”

“I used to dread Mondays. Now, I don’t mind any day of the week. I love the work I’m doing.”

“Well, my boss is a bit of a slave driver...”

“Am not!” Everett said. “Go away. I won’t be insulted in my own home.” The words were harsh, but the twinkle in Everett’s eyes told Maggie that he was content to be called anything by James. The two men truly had a special relationship.

As they walked home, James held Maggie’s hand.

“Today was a good day,” she said. “Every day here has been good though. I’m working as hard as I worked in Massachusetts, but I get to choose what I want to do.

If I want to stay home and sew, I can. If I want to bake, I can.

It’s wonderful! I love being married to you! ”

He chuckled. “And I love being married to you. I know getting here wasn’t easy, but it was worth it. For me at least.”

“And for me. I wouldn’t want to go on that journey again, but I’m glad I made it.”

She truly couldn’t believe how content their marriage had made her. She was happy for the first time in her memory. Oh, there’d been moments of happiness, but she felt as if she would never be sad again.

Once they were home, she fixed a quick supper, and they talked about their plans for the week. He told her he would be working at the sawmill that week and not out cutting down trees. “Which do you prefer?” she asked.

“In the summer, I like to be outside cutting trees. In the winter, I’m much happier staying inside and working in the sawmill.

I ran everything for Everett while he was traveling to bring Belle here.

I liked that best. I could kick myself for selling my half of the business.

I’m sure Everett would let me buy in again, but I don’t have the money.

I spent it all trying to find my fortune. ”

“Maybe if we work together, we could make enough that you could do it. Right now, everything I make is going as credit to the store, but I could ask for that to change, and I don’t think Mrs. Johnson would mind.

” Maggie liked the idea of helping him reach his dream.

“It would probably take a few years, but I enjoy hard work.”

He shook his head, as she’d expected. “I’m the man, and I will provide for my family. I don’t want to hear anything else about it.”

She sighed. “Well, Everett was right about one thing today. You are a stubborn man.”

“Proud of it too.”

Maggie couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d said, and she decided she was going to make it happen. She would find a way to buy his half of the lumber operation back. Whether he liked it or not.

She thought back to being afraid to come to Alaska, and she realized she’d changed. She was stronger now, and she was determined. James would have to deal with her help with their finances. That’s all there was to it.

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By the first snowfall, the cold house was half full of meat for the winter. Belle and the men hunted often, and Maggie would do her share by helping butcher and portion out the meat.

“Are you planning to keep hunting even though there’s snow?” Maggie asked Belle, surveying the building with pride.

“Until this little building is full, I’ll be hunting as much as I can. I feel much safer knowing that we’ll have plenty of meat for winter.”

“I wish James was open to us making meals and taking them to the lumberyard for the men for lunch. We could make more money that way. I’m working hard to save money, and that would help.”

Belle looked at Maggie. “James doesn’t like you earning money, does he?”

“He seems to be embarrassed of all I’m doing for us.

Well, he’s fine if I work with you or him to get meat ready for storage, but he doesn’t like it if I’m doing something with an intent to make money.

I asked him why it’s all right for you and not for me, but he simply said it was because Everett doesn’t need you to, which makes no sense.

Does he mean that he needs me to make money but still doesn’t want me to do it? ”

“I will never understand a man’s mind,” Belle said, shaking her head. “I wish I could

explain it.”

“Me too,” Maggie said, following Belle back to the cabin. “What do you want to do for the rest of the afternoon? Do you need to rest?”

Belle laughed. “When have you known me to need rest?”

“Well, you are resting for two now...”

“I get plenty of rest. I want to get the pair of mittens I’m working on done before it’s time to make supper. I’d love it if you stayed and kept me company.”

“I brought the shirts I’m making for James, hoping there would be time to work on them. It’s so much easier to have someone to speak with while I work.”

“I think so too,” Belle said. “And it feels so much less like work and more like fun.”

Two hours later, Maggie folded the second shirt. “Finally done. I need to iron them, but I’ll do that in the morning before I come over.”

“I’m just about finished as well. What are you planning to bake in the morning?”

“I’ve been pondering that. I think I’m going to make a few small sponge cakes and a dozen loaves of bread, ten to sell, and two for James and myself.”

“Sounds good. If you’re doing cakes, I’ll bake a few pies. Then everyone can be happy.”

“Do you really think we can ever make everyone happy?”

Belle laughed. “Probably not. But we can try!”

“Do you think fresh butter would sell? I need to churn some, and I’d rather make a big batch.”

“I’m sure it will. I haven’t tried yet, but I’ve thought about it.” Belle paused. “What are you planning for the money you’re earning?”

“There’s something James wants to purchase but doesn’t have the money for. I’m hoping I can make up the difference.”

Belle looked curious, but she didn’t ask more. “I should start supper,” she said.

Maggie got to her feet. “I need to do the same. I think I’ll make your duck and dumplings receipt.”

“I never thought it would catch on, but we certainly enjoy it!”

As Maggie bundled up for the walk home, she couldn’t help but wonder how James would react when she presented him with a large sum of money. It would take her a while, she knew, but the baked goods were sold at a premium, and she knew it was only a matter of time.

On her walk home, she envisioned how excited James would be that he could buy his way back into the lumber business.

Of course, he could also be upset with her for earning money when he’d asked her not to.

Either way, she would make it work for them.

Because everything she did was to help them both.

As soon as she was home, she rekindled the fire in the stove and stoked the fireplace. She waited until the air was warmer before removing her coat. She was surprised at how cold she was. She'd grown up in Massachusetts, which was one of the coldest states, but this was so much colder.

When it was warm enough, she began the process of boiling the duck for dumplings.

The ducks that had stayed for the winter—she had seen some fly south—all seemed to be extra plump and perfect for eating.

James had shot several with a bow and arrow the previous weekend, and she was making the most of having fresh poultry.

By the time James arrived home for the day, the cabin was warm and their meal was ready, the savory aroma filling the room.

“Something smells delicious!” James said as he removed his coat, hat, scarf, and mittens.

He'd already kicked off his boots and left them on the doorstep as he did every day.

He would bring them in and put them in front of the fire before breakfast, and they would be warmed before it was time for him to leave for work.

“I'm making Belle's receipt for duck and dumplings. It's my first time to try it, so if it's not perfect, you can't get angry!”

“I don't get angry when you do something less than perfect.” He kissed her nose before moving on to wash his hands.

“Supper will be ready in a minute or two. How was work?” she asked.

“Busy. I was out cutting down trees today, but I’ll be back in the sawmill tomorrow.” He sank down into one of the kitchen chairs. “Everett felt the need to have wood in his hands, so he worked the sawmill today.”

“I know he doesn’t feel like he can work there often. He must finally be caught up with his bookwork.”

James shook his head. “There’s no such thing as being caught up with bookwork, but he said he couldn’t spend another minute cooped up in the office. Sometimes I like to be out cutting wood, so it all works out.”

“Does he ever have you help with the bookwork?” she asked.

James shook his head. “I did over the summer, but that’s the only time since I started working for him. I used to be the one to do all the bookwork.”

“Is it hard to work for an operation you were once part-owner of?”

“Sometimes. It’s good that Everett and I get along so well. If we didn’t, it would be much harder.”

“Hopefully, we’ll be able to save enough money for you to buy your share back.”

He looked at her for a moment, narrowing his eyes. “You mean, hopefully I will be able to save enough. I’m not using your money.”

She nodded, not being willing to have the same old argument again. There was no point to her making money if he wasn’t going to use it. She’d find a way.

That night, she lay awake long after he’d gone to sleep. She wished he would understand that she was going to earn money regardless, and he might as well use it

for things they needed.

THE MORNING OF HIS birthday, Maggie made certain she was up early to make James his favorite breakfast. She had a package wrapped in brown paper next to his plate at the table, and when he saw it, his eyes widened. “How did you know it was my birthday?” He knew they’d never discussed it.

She grinned at him. “Belle told me.”

“I didn’t know Belle knew my birthday!”

“I’m sure Everett told her. Open it!”

He carefully untied the string holding the package closed and looked at the contents of the gift. “Shirts? You made me shirts?”

She nodded. “Do you like them?”

He shook one out and looked at it, immediately standing, stripping off the shirt he was wearing, and putting the new one on. “It fits perfectly.”

“I used an old shirt with holes in it for a pattern. It was tucked away at the bottom of your drawer. I thought if you’d worn it that much, you must like the fit.”

He walked to her and leaned down to kiss her softly. “I love it. Thank you.”

“I’m glad! When I purchased the fabric to make them, Belle told me your birthday was coming up, so I waited to give them to you until your birthday.”

“Where did you get the money for the fabric?” he asked.

“I had some money when I arrived,” she said honestly. She didn’t bother to tell him that she had used money she earned from her baking for the shirts. Why would she? She knew how he felt about her earning money.

“I wish you hadn’t used your own money. You’re always welcome to put things we need on our account at the store.”

“I’ll remember that.” She had to bite her tongue and remind herself that she wasn’t going to argue with him on his birthday. “Sit down! I made eggs, bacon, and pancakes for breakfast. You told me once that was your favorite breakfast.”

She poured each of them a cup of coffee and carried their plates to the table. She’d already filled them. “What are you doing at work today?” she asked.

“It’s a mill day for me. There’s an order due tomorrow, and Everett is in a mood, worried we won’t have it done on time. He gets like this with every large order we get.”

“Do you know why?”

James shrugged. “He likes to control everything. When it was just the two of us, it was easier for him. We would get the trees cut and fill the orders together. Now, he feels like he’s relying on everyone else, and it doesn’t work well for him. It makes him uptight.”

“I can understand that. If you’re used to taking care of everything yourself, it must be strange to have that power taken away from you.”

“I guess.” James shrugged. “I wish I could help him remain calm with it all, but I

don't know how. I simply do the job he tells me to do, and I get it done as quickly as I can."

"Do you think you'll need to work late?" she asked, wondering about supper.

"Probably. Expect me when you see me, and not a minute before."

"I'll probably make a soup that can simmer on the stove until you get here then. Does that work for you?"

"Hot food after a day of working in the cold? That works just fine for me."

After he'd left, Maggie cleaned up after their meal and did her daily baking before setting out for Belle's cabin. When she arrived, Belle looked pale. "Are you all right?" Maggie asked.

"Morning sickness. I'll be fine for a week or two, but then it hits again."

"Is there anything I can do?" Maggie felt helpless as she looked at her friend.

"No, I'll be fine in an hour or two. My baking is done. Maybe you could make two trips to the store this morning? One with your items to sell, and one with mine? That'll give me time for the ginger tea to calm my stomach."

"All right. I'll be back in a bit."

Maggie took her own baskets of goodies to the store first. She'd never gone in alone, and it felt strange.

The men were crowded around, wondering what she'd brought as usual. "Where's Mrs. Thompson?" one asked.

“She’s not feeling well this morning. I’ll bring what she made in a bit,” Maggie responded, feeling particularly brave for talking to the men without Belle at her side.

She carried her baskets to the counter where Katie was waiting to see what she’d brought. “Muffins?” Katie asked. “We haven’t had muffins in a long while. I’m sure the men will enjoy these.” As she pulled loaves of bread from the basket, she continued. “What’s wrong with Belle?”

“Morning sickness. She says she’ll be good for a week or two, and then it starts up again.”

“The worse the morning sickness, the better chance the baby will be all right,” Katie said, repeating something Maggie had heard many women say.

“Is there a doctor or midwife here?” Maggie asked, realizing for the first time she didn’t know who would deliver Belle’s baby, or her own when the time came.

“I’ll be her midwife,” Katie said. “I worked with a midwife in Washington before we moved here.”

“Oh, that’s good. I was worried I’d need to do it, and I have no idea what’s involved.”

Katie laughed. “Don’t you worry. I’ll be there for her, and for you when it’s your time.”

“Glad to hear it!” Maggie watched as Katie made a note on the ledger she kept for her. “I’m going to hurry back to Belle and bring her baked goods next.”

“I’ll see you again in a few minutes then.”

Maggie hurried back to Belle, realizing it had started to snow while she was in the store. She loved snow. She loved how the world smelled right before the snow started. She loved how the world looked covered in snow. It seemed early in the year for snow, but that was all right by her.

Belle was still sitting at the table, looking paler than ever when Maggie arrived. “Are you certain I can’t do anything to help you?”

“Just take what I made. And the eggs. Take the eggs.”

“How about some dry toast when I get back?”

“That sounds perfect.”

Maggie walked back to the store, realizing the snow was coming down harder. She hoped she wouldn’t have to stay inside, but it seemed like this snow might become a full-fledged blizzard.

After dropping everything at the store, she carried Belle’s empty baskets to her cabin. “Toast?” she asked as she walked in.

Belle was on her feet. “No need. It’s passed. Thankfully, it doesn’t last long when it hits. I remember my mother when she was pregnant with my younger siblings. If she woke up sick, it lasted all day long.”

“That sounds terrible,” Maggie said. “Maybe I don’t want children after all.”

Belle laughed. “It’ll be worth it. I’m sure of it.”

They spent most of the day in the quiet of Belle’s cabin, working on various projects.

Belle worked on making more hats and mittens for the store to sell, while Maggie worked on making a tiny gown for Belle's baby.

She felt like she should be making money, but she wanted her friend's baby to be well-dressed.

It was tough trying to decide what she should do.

All through the day, it snowed. By the time it was time to head home to cook supper, Maggie was a little worried about the walk to her cabin. "I hope the snow hasn't gotten too deep to walk through."

"You should have James make you some snowshoes," Belle commented.

"That's a good idea. I'll talk to him about it tonight." She pulled on her coat, scarf, hat, and mittens. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Be careful walking home. And if it doesn't look safe to be out in the morning, stay home. I'd rather spend our days together, but not if you're going to get stuck in the snow."

"I'll be careful." With that, Maggie started the short trek home, feeling a bit like she was walking in a land of fairies with all the snow. The only thing that kept her from feeling like it was truly magical was how cold she was. Winter was going to be difficult.

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Maggie started a big pot of soup as soon as she got home. Once it was simmering she baked James a cake. She worried a bit about James coming home in the snow, but she knew he was used to Alaska winters, even when they started in the fall.

It was several hours later when James arrived home, covered in snow from head to toe. She hurried to him when he came in, taking his coat and hat to dry them in front of the fireplace. “Did you get the order done today?” she asked.

He nodded, looking more tired than she’d ever seen him. “We did. I’m pretty sure we won’t be working tomorrow with this storm, but we’ll see. It seems to be getting worse by the minute.”

“What do you do when you can’t work?” she asked.

“I usually do more whittling,” he said. “I enjoy working with my hands.”

“The soup is ready, and I put a pot of coffee on, thinking you may need it to warm up.”

“I appreciate it,” he said, washing his hands. He sat down at the table, and she took him coffee and a big bowl of soup along with some of the bread she’d made that morning. “I’ve been thinking about coming home to hot soup all day.”

She sat down across from him, and he took her hand before saying grace.

He’d finished two bowls of soup before he felt ready to say anything else.

“We really pushed to get the job done today. Everett and I worked in the mill while the men cut trees. We were very efficient, and I think Everett’s mind is at ease now. What did you do today?”

“I did my baking this morning and spent the rest of the day with Belle. She wasn’t feeling well so we stayed in.

” She omitted taking things to the store to sell because she knew he didn’t like to hear about that part of her days.

“I took a walk in the snow just as it started coming down, and it was so beautiful. I do love snow.”

“I’m glad you took a little time to walk in it then. I have a feeling this is going to be a bad storm. I didn’t see a single critter outside today as I walked home. That’s usually a sign of just how bad a storm will be.”

“Tomorrow’s Friday,” she said. “If it turns ugly, we don’t have to be anywhere for a couple of days. There’s enough food in the house to last until Monday. It should be just fine.”

“Do we have enough firewood inside?” he asked.

“I carried several armloads in while the soup cooked. I thought we might need them if the storm kept going.”

“Good,” he said. “I’ll go out and get more as we need it, but it sounds like you did what you could to prepare us.”

“I tried.”

“What will you do if the storm won’t let us leave tomorrow?” he asked.

“I’m working on a gown for Belle’s baby. I have the fabric for two more as well. And I’ve purchased some flannel for diapers for her. If we’re stuck inside, I won’t run out of things to do.”

“Good. There’s nothing worse than sitting and watching the snowfall, wondering if you’ll ever be able to leave your house again.”

“I agree. We had hard winters in Massachusetts too.” Maggie looked at James with a twinkle in her eye. “I suppose there are other things the two of us could get up to together as well.”

He laughed. “I like the way you think...”

“I hope you also like cake. Your birthday can’t pass without a piece of cake.”

As soon as the supper dishes were washed and put away, they retired for the night. Before falling asleep, Maggie said a silent prayer that the storm wouldn’t be as bad as they were thinking it would be.

IT WAS QUIET WHEN MAGGIE woke the following morning. The wind was no longer howling as it had been. She reached for James’s arm and realized he was already out of bed. “Is everything all right?” she asked.

“I think so. It’s still snowing, but the winds have died down.”

“Do you think you can work?”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t think it’s safe to go out in it. Even with the winds lower, it’s hard to see with the sheer amount of snow still falling. It’ll be better if we stay inside and keep warm.”

“All right,” she said. She would miss the income she’d have made that day, but it was all right. She’d make it up another day.

She got up and dressed, immediately starting breakfast while James sat at the table whittling by lamp light. “Did you ever decide what you are making?” she asked.

He looked down at the wood in his hands. “It’s a rabbit in mid-hop.”

“I can’t wait to see it when it’s done!”

“I can’t either. I never know exactly how something will look until I’ve finished it.”

“We need to find a way to display your animals. You are truly gifted.”

He shrugged. “I never thought so, but thank you.”

“I wonder if there’s somewhere we could sell them.”

“No one would want to buy them. Besides, I like to have them all here. I feel like Noah, surrounded by animals.”

She laughed. “Imagine how big that boat must have been.”

“I’m not sure I even want to think about it.”

They passed the day with him carving his rabbit, and her working on the gown for Belle’s baby. When she grew tired of sewing, she worked on crocheting a hat. With

winter upon them, she was certain some of the men around town would need new hats.

“I have some rabbit for supper tonight,” she said when it was time to start supper. “I can fry it or make it into stew.”

“Stew sounds better. With as cold as it is outside, I like to have soups and stews a lot.”

“Stew it is.” She got up and started supper. While she was working, he checked the wood pile and decided to bring in a few more armloads of wood. It would have to dry before they could burn it, so it would be best if it was in the house for a while.

When supper was ready, he carried his own bowl of stew to the table. “I don’t think I realized how much I missed good home cooking until you started cooking for me. It’s nice to have a break from hardtack and jerky.”

“If I live to be a hundred, I don’t ever want to have to eat hardtack and jerky again,” she said. “I had more than enough of it on our journey here. If I hadn’t been so hungry, I would have stopped eating altogether.”

He laughed. “It’s been my main diet for years.”

“And I don’t know how it didn’t make you crazy,” she said. “I must confess to being spoiled. We had someone to cook for us at the hotel, and we had a good variety of meals.”

“Are you glad you don’t work there anymore?” he asked.

She nodded. “I don’t think I would have left if I hadn’t been fired, but I’m so glad I did. I’d rather be married to you than work for that place any day.”

“But I think you must still work as hard as you did there.”

“I do. But...I get to choose what I’ll do each day. I bake in the mornings, and then I have the rest of the day free to forage, or cook, or clean, or sew... I feel truly free in a way I never felt free at the hotel.”

“I can understand that. I work hard all week, and then I work on the weekends as well, but on the weekends, I do the work that I want to do. It’s nice to have choices.”

“I feel bad that I wasn’t able to take anything to the store today. The men count on the food Belle and I provide.”

“They can have hardtack and jerky for a few days. It won’t hurt them one bit.”

“I guess not,” she said. “I shouldn’t feel responsible for all the men in town.”

“No, you really shouldn’t. You’re responsible for feeding me and no one else.”

She smiled at him. “You are my first priority. The other men don’t matter at all when I compare them with you.”

“Then why do you work so hard to feed them?” he asked.

“Because I need to always be productive. I’ve been employed for a number of years, and I don’t think I’d be satisfied not working. And there’s a need here. I feel like I’m doing something good for people.”

“And doing good makes you feel better about yourself?” he asked, knowing that’s how he’d always been.

“Yes!”

“All right then.” He looked at the rabbit he’d been carving which was still on the table near his plate. “Do you really think my carvings are good enough to sell?”

“I do! Not here, but sending them back to the states would make them easy to sell, I think. People love things like that.”

He nodded. “Maybe I’ll look into it.”

“Would you let me send a letter or two about it? I knew a few people back in Beckham that may know how to sell them, or at least be able to find out.”

“That would be fine,” he said. He wanted to give her everything she could ever want, and making more money would be key.

After supper, she spent some time crocheting a hat to sell to the store while he worked more on the rabbit. It was already taking shape, and it was easy to tell what it would be when he finished.

“What did you do on days when you were snowed in before I came here?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I carved mostly. It’s something I’m very passionate about.”

“I can see why. You are very talented.”

“You know what? You’re good for me. You make me feel better about myself than I have in years.”

“Why would you feel bad about yourself?” she asked.

“I feel like I was stupid to go off and try to make it as a prospector. I should have stayed with Everett, and then I would still be part owner. I just feel like I made the

biggest mistake of my life, and I'll always be trying to make up for it."

"I can understand that. But I don't think it was a mistake. If you hadn't gone, would you still wonder what would have happened if you did?"

"I never thought of that. Yes, I would probably still be dreaming of going off and making my fortune." He set his knife down. "I took a chance, and though it didn't work out, I think it was good for me."

"See? It wasn't the biggest mistake of your life. You needed to go to become the man you are now. And I like the man you are now a great deal."

"I thought you would think I was less of a man for missing out on the lumber operation. But you think more of me?" He had never considered she would understand his need to go find gold.

"I'm glad you got it out of your system. I wouldn't want to wake up in a month or two and find out you wanted to leave. Now you know what it's like to be a prospector and it's not a life you want."

"I like the way you think," he said, reaching for her hand.

She put down her crocheting and walked around the table to sit on his lap, kissing him passionately. "I like everything about you."

It took only a few moments for them to realize they no longer wanted to be at the table together. Soon, they were on their way to bed, taking each other's clothes off as they walked.

"I think I like having a wife," he said much later as she lay snuggled in his arms.

“I know I like having a husband,” she said. “It’s so much better than dreading my work every day and worrying about who would come in that I would have to serve. I truly liked cleaning rooms so much more because I didn’t have to deal with people as much. It was simply cleaning and moving on.”

“I understand. I don’t mind having to talk to people, but I think I would be intimidated in your position. Especially since the men would touch you and you couldn’t do anything about it.” He kissed the top of her head. “I wouldn’t mind traveling to Massachusetts and punching that man in the face.”

“It wouldn’t do any good. I’m away from there now, and I barely even think about it anymore. And maybe you should thank him. I wouldn’t have ever found the courage to leave my job if I hadn’t been forced.”

He pursed his lips, thinking about it. “Perhaps you’re right. But I’m not going to travel that far to thank him and not also hit him. I would need to hit him for touching my wife.”

“I suppose you would.”

“If the snow lets up tomorrow, I’ll go out hunting. It would be good to have another deer or two in the cold house for winter. I don’t intend to go hungry. Though, we could always fall back on—”

“Hardtack and jerky? No. I’m never eating it again!”

He chuckled. “What a finicky woman you are.”

“Finicky? For not wanting to eat tasteless hardtack for every meal? At least I enjoyed the jerky. Having a break from it is just what I need.”

“If I go hunting tomorrow, will you bake for the store?”

She nodded. “I will. Does that bother you?”

“I don’t think it does. I’m not sure why.” But he knew. It didn’t bother him that she wanted to make money because she didn’t blame him for going off to be a prospector for a year. She didn’t think less of him for not having more money, so he wouldn’t complain when she earned some herself.

He hugged her tightly for a moment. “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

“Goodnight,” she whispered, the word ‘sweetheart’ rolling over and over in her mind. She was someone’s sweetheart.

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Thankfully, the weather was much better the following day, and James was able to go hunting.

While he was out, Maggie baked three pies, six loaves of bread, and four dozen cookies.

She didn't bother going to Belle's knowing Everett was probably home for the weekend, and walked to the store on her own.

She plopped her baskets on the counter, and Katie smiled as she peeked under the cloths covering them. "I didn't think you'd be coming with anything today. Thank you! Men have been in and out all morning asking if there was anything baked."

"Sorry, I'm late then! James was home all day yesterday, and I knew he wouldn't want me baking." Maggie lowered her voice. "He doesn't like me doing this very much."

Katie shook her head. "He'll be pleased when he sees how much you're making."

"I'm not certain of that, but I hope so."

Katie opened her cash box and handed Maggie some money. "You never make big purchases, so I'm giving you this in cash. You have a good deal of credit left."

"Thank you!" Maggie said, excited that she was getting paid when she did what she felt like doing.

On the way home, Maggie thought about how to give the money to James, and she decided she would simply slip it into the drawer where he kept his cash. Hopefully, he wouldn't notice there was more there than he remembered.

He wasn't home yet when she arrived, so she put the money with his and quickly shut the door. Then she went about starting lunch. She knew he'd be back soon, and hunting made him hungry.

When he returned, it was with a smile on his face. "Everett went out with me, and we shot a deer. It's hanging at their place. Do you want to go over there with me and help cut it up?"

"I'd love to. I made some stew for lunch. Are you hungry?"

He nodded. "I am. We'll eat quickly and then head over."

As they ate, he talked enthusiastically about his morning hunt. "Everett shot several mallards, and I got a buck.

"So, we'll be having buck and duck for supper?" she asked, hiding a grin.

He chuckled. "I don't think we'll have them for the same meal, but I like the way you think."

After the meal, she quickly washed the dishes, and they went to Belle's. To Maggie's surprise, Belle wasn't outside helping Everett. "Where's Belle?" she asked, looking around.

"Inside. She's not having a good day. Morning sickness is bad today."

"I'll go check on her and then come out to help," Maggie replied.

She hurried into the cabin and saw Belle, looking a little green around the gills. “Tea and dry toast?” Maggie asked.

Belle nodded. “I tried to make it for myself, but just standing made it so much worse.”

Maggie got to work, as comfortable in Belle’s kitchen as she was in her own. “What else can I do?”

“If I’m not better in an hour or two, I’m going to ask you to fix supper for us,” Belle said. “I hate not doing it myself, but I don’t think I have a choice today.”

“Absolutely,” Maggie said, putting the tea in front of her friend. “Toast is in the oven. It’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

Belle took a sip of the tea. “You remembered the ginger!”

“Of course, I did.” Maggie sat down across from her friend. “Katie paid me today. She said I’m not buying enough in the store for all my credit to be used up. James keeps telling me he doesn’t want the money, so I put it with his cash. Do you think he’ll notice?”

Belle nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“Well, I guess we’ll argue about it when he does.” Maggie sighed. She wanted to help, but she didn’t want to fight her husband every step of the way.

“I’m sorry he doesn’t make it easier for you.”

“Me too.” Maggie got to her feet to get the toast from the oven and put it on a plate, carrying it to her friend. “You eat that. I’m going to go out and see what I can do to

help the men with their game.”

“I want venison stew for supper. Will you make sure to cut some of the venison into small pieces for me? I always ask Everett, but he makes them about three times the size I want.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Maggie replied, wrapping her scarf around her neck.

When she got out to the cold house, the men were inside cutting the meat from the deer into chunks. “I need one big piece to cut up for stew.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Everett said.

“Belle asked me to do it, and she’s done so much for me, I don’t want to disappoint her.” Maggie hoped Everett would believe her because she didn’t want to tell him that Belle didn’t like the way he did it.

Everett shook his head and gave her a piece of meat, and she painstakingly cut it into small bite-sized pieces. “Aren’t those too small?” Everett asked.

Maggie shook her head. “No, they’re easier to work with when they’re this size.” There. She’d told him he was doing it wrong without admitting she knew he was doing it wrong. Surely that would save his male pride.

“I’ll have to change the way I do things then,” Everett said.

“Do you like them that small for stew?” James asked.

Maggie nodded. “Yes, then I don’t have to cut them even more when it’s time to make them for a meal.”

“I suppose you’re right,” James said, seeming a bit confused about the whole thing.

“How was Belle feeling when you were inside?” Everett asked.

“Poorly. I made her some tea with ginger and dry toast. It seems to ease her stomach when she’s feeling this way.”

“I never would have thought of that,” Everett said. “I guess that’s why she needed you around.”

“Katie would have told you to do the same thing.”

Everett nodded. “I guess she would. She’s going to deliver the baby, you know.”

“I do. I’d like to be there to help as well.”

“Good. I’d prefer to hide somewhere while it’s happening.”

Maggie laughed. “You do that. You can hide at our place with James. Or at work. You could go to work if that made you happy.”

James shrugged. “I have no intention of being anywhere close when any baby is born. Perhaps the two of us should make a pact to always hide somewhere together when a baby is coming—mine or yours.”

“Sounds good to me,” Everett replied. “I am excited to hold him for the first time.”

“What if he’s a she?” Maggie asked as she carefully wrapped the meat she’d cut into brown paper.

“Then I’ll be happy to hold her. Either way. I’m sure this won’t be our only child.”

“Belle and I always talked about our children growing up and marrying. Maybe that will happen.”

James shook his head. “Our first child isn’t even conceived yet, and you’re planning its future? I’m not sure that’s the right thing to do.”

“I’m sure it is,” Maggie responded with a grin.

Belle opened the door and stepped inside. “The tea and toast helped a lot. I think I can help with the meat now.”

“I just finished some stew meat for you,” Maggie said. “Do you want to work on the mallards while the men finish up with the buck?”

“That would be good. Let’s cut the mallards into small pieces too. It’ll be nice to have them already cut for my dumplings.”

The four of them worked well together. Belle and Maggie cut the mallards carefully, and they made several packages of them, dividing them up between families and putting them on opposite sides of the cold house.

They’d decided the east side was for Maggie and James while the west side was for Belle and Everett. It made things much easier that way.

“What are you going to bake on Monday?” Belle asked Maggie. “Other than bread, of course.”

“I thought I’d make some thumbprint cookies. The matron at the orphanage was Swedish, and she made them all the time. Of course, she called them hollongrotter . They’re still a favorite of mine, and I haven’t had them since I left the orphanage.”

“I’ve never had them. Make a dozen extra for Everett and me?” Belle grinned. “I’m craving sweets. It’s all I want to eat when I’m not sick to my stomach.”

“I’ll make a dozen for the two of you and six dozen for the store. Lingonberry jam should be delicious in them. What about you? What will you bake?”

“I think I’m going to do bread and cinnamon rolls with frosting. I can already taste them.”

Maggie pursed her lips as she studied her friend. “Do I need to start making extra of everything so you can have some?”

“That would be good...”

Everett sighed. “I hope you’re not going to stop cooking and just feed me sweets.”

“I wouldn’t think of it!” Belle said, grinning at her husband. “I get all the sweets, and you get the real food.”

James laughed, looking between the two of them. “Maggie, I’m not certain it’s a good idea for you to have a baby...we’ll find one in an orphanage.”

Maggie wrinkled her nose at James. “Oh, I’m having babies. Many. At least a dozen.”

“Where will we put them all?” he asked, eyes wide.

“No idea. That’s your job.”

They all laughed as they finished up the work. “Do you want to stay for supper?” Belle asked.

Maggie looked at James, who shook his head. “Not tonight. And we’d like you both to come over after church in the morning.

“I guess I need to come up with something to feed you!” Maggie said. “Oh, I know!”

“What?” Belle asked.

“You’ll see when you get there. It’s another favorite from the orphanage. Mrs. Gustafson made the best meals!”

“Write out the receipt for me then. I’m sure I’ll want it.”

“I will do that!”

On the walk home, James held Maggie’s mittened hand in his own. “What are you making for lunch tomorrow?” he asked.

She smiled. “Mrs. Gustafson used to make a stew, but she’d serve it in bread.

She’d take a loaf and cut it in half lengthwise, small loaves for the younger children, and then she’d stuff it full of the stew.

The flavors would meld into the bread, and we’d eat it that way.

I don’t know if that was a receipt she got from Sweden, or just something she enjoyed cooking. Either way, we all loved it.”

“Sounds interesting. I’m certainly willing to try it!”

“And I’m going to make some of the jam thumbprint cookies for us tomorrow. I don’t think Belle is going to be happy if she has to wait for them.”

He chuckled. "She did seem very excited at the idea of having sweets. Any and all sweets."

"Yes, she's been crazy about them. I wish her stomach wasn't so upset. I'd bake her more."

James nodded. "I hope you don't get sick when you're expecting. Do you know if your mother did?"

She shrugged. "It's not something I ever remember talking about with her. But I remember very little about her except she had the most beautiful red hair."

"Like you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, hers was much prettier."

"What are we going to have for supper tonight?" he asked.

"Fried duck. I don't want to use the chickens Belle gave us yet, and I can't help but wonder how good the duck will be if I fry it as I would a chicken. And I'm going to make mashed potatoes...not Eskimo potatoes either. I'm making the russets Katie gave me from her garden."

"That sounds really good!"

"I hope it is."

When they got home, she got to work cooking their supper right away, while James worked on the rabbit. "I'm close to finishing this one."

"What will you do with it?" she asked.

“Do you really think I could make money selling my carvings?” James seemed a bit nervous asking.

“I really do. Would you like me to write to Elizabeth and see if she knows anything about it? If she doesn’t, she’ll learn. She’s a wonderful person.” Maggie turned away from the stove and looked at him, trying to gauge his reaction.

“Yes, I would like you to do that if you don’t mind.”

“I promised Elizabeth I’d stay in touch, so I’ll write her a letter and include the question. Oh, and I meant to talk to you about one of the girls who Belle and I used to work with. She wants to move here and marry as well. Do you know of anyone who would like a mail-order bride?”

He laughed. “I could go to work, close my eyes and point, and there would be no danger of me finding a man who didn’t want a bride.”

She smiled, imagining the scene as he described it. “Well, pick someone out and tell him to write to Elizabeth!”

“I’ll do that. I know Everett had the address posted, but someone took it. I’ll post it on the wall again. Hopefully, it won’t be stolen this time.”

“Maybe I’ll write out several papers with her address and you can hang them all from the same nail. Then men can take one if they’d like.”

“Not a bad idea at all.”

He finished the rabbit right before supper. “I think it’s done. Tell me what you think.”

Maggie put down the plates she’d been about to carry to the table and hurried over to

look at his rabbit. “Oh, James. It’s perfect! It looks like it’s going to jump right out of my hand!”

“That’s what I was hoping for. You keep that one.”

Maggie looked at him for a moment before clutching the small rabbit to her chest. “Do you mean it?”

He laughed. “It’s just a piece of woo

“It’s so much more than that. I will always treasure this.”

He shook his head, obviously uncomfortable with how excited she was by it. “Is it time to eat yet?” he asked.

With tears prickling her eyes, she hurried back to the counter where she’d set the plates and carried them to the table. “I hope it turned out all right.”

“I’m sure it did.” He looked at the mashed potatoes. “These look delicious. And you made gravy!”

“Shouldn’t I make gravy?” she asked, confused.

“Yes, I love gravy. You’re a much better cook than I expected you to be!”

She shrugged. “I try.”

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Before church the following morning, James looked in the drawer where he kept his money, planning to donate a small amount to the Johnsons to thank them for use of their home every week. He tried to donate at least once a month.

To his surprise, there was a great deal more money in the drawer than he'd had previously. He kept close track of his funds.

He walked up behind Maggie, who was cooking their breakfast. "Is there anything you want to tell me?"

Maggie frowned, shaking her head. "Not that I can think of." She looked at him curiously.

"There's something you don't know about me, Maggie. I always know to the penny how much money I have."

Maggie turned back around, not wanting to face him for this discussion. "Is that so?"

"Why is there more money? I know you've had to buy groceries. There should be less money, not more."

She flipped the pancakes before responding.

"I've worked for years. I've always had an income.

I've saved every penny I could from that income.

I've always feared having nowhere to live and nothing to eat.

"She sighed. "I can't stop working because if I do, something will surely happen.

I feel safe working and making money. I think I would be afraid if I stopped.

I have nothing I need from that money, so it made sense to me to give it to you. "

"You don't think I can support you, do you?"

Maggie flipped the pancakes onto two plates.

"I know you can support me. I don't know if I can give up the fear that if I quit working, I'll be out on the street.

On one hand, I know better. I know you won't let anything happen to me.

On the other hand, the very idea of not making an income, and being able to support myself if something happened to you, frightens me more than I can admit. "

"Then keep your money! We don't need it!"

"But I need to contribute. Don't you see?"

"No, I don't see!" He took his plate from her and carried it to the table. "I don't understand why you can't do this one thing that I ask of you. Stop working or keep your money. I don't need it!"

Maggie set her plate on the table and moved to the seat across from him, not meeting his gaze. "Can't we use it to save money so you can buy back into the lumber operation? Every time you've talked about it, I can tell it's what you want."

“But it’s not. I think it would be nice, but I don’t know that Everett would be willing to sell half back to me. He likes running things on his own. The idea of carving for a living makes me much happier.”

“So, you can carve, and I can cook for the men. Then you don’t have to worry about how quickly you’ll be paid.”

“No, Maggie. I can’t take your money.”

“Is the money you make your money or our money?” she asked.

“It’s ours, but the money you make is yours. I’m finished discussing this.”

“You are a mule-headed man!”

“And you’re the most stubborn woman I’ve ever met in my life!”

The rest of their meal passed in silence. Afterward, she cleaned up and dressed for church. Before they left, James put money on the table. “I want that to be gone the next time I look at the table.”

She didn’t respond and simply stared straight ahead. They walked to the store and went inside together, and they even sat together for the service, but neither would look at the other, both of them so angry.

Maggie had almost forgotten she’d invited Belle and Everett to join them for lunch. Thankfully, she’d made the stew and baked the bread the previous evening, and she was ready to heat it up and serve it in the bread.

Throughout the meal, Everett and Belle tried to make conversation. Afterward, Belle stayed inside to help Maggie with the dishes while both men took their bows and

arrows to do a bit of hunting.

As soon as the men were gone, Belle turned to Maggie. “What is going on? And why is there so much money in the middle of the table?”

Maggie sighed. “My husband is an ignorant fool!”

“All men are.” Belle put her hand on Maggie’s arm. “From the beginning.”

Maggie explained that James had a problem with her earning money because he felt it meant she didn’t have confidence in him to earn a living for them. Belle already knew Maggie’s perspective because they’d known each other for years.

“Yesterday, when Katie gave me cash because my credit at the store was getting so high, I put the money into the drawer where James keeps it. I was hoping he wouldn’t notice and would use whatever was there for what he needed.

When he realized how much more money was there this morning, he shouted at me.

We argued, and he finally dropped the money in the middle of the table and told me to put it away before he saw it again. I’m not touching it.”

Belle shook her head. “So put it away. Save it for the children. Save it for a rainy day. Why does he have to take it?”

“Because he has to understand that I can contribute! We could have a nicer house. We could do many things with the money I make. I don’t know why he can’t see that!”

“And I don’t know why you can’t understand that his pride won’t let him take money from his wife. I understand that you want to earn money. Really, I do. But why does

he need to take that money and use it when you can save it?”

Maggie folded her arms over her chest stubbornly. “Why won’t he?”

“You’re not going to win this argument, Mags. He is too prideful to take it. Put it away. It’s that simple. If you won’t put it away, I will take it and set it aside for you.”

“That might be best,” Maggie said. “Put it somewhere, and when we need money, I’ll come to you. Then we won’t fight about it.”

J AMES STOMPED THROUGH the snow as he and Everett moved toward the clearing they had found was best for hunting in the winter.

“Why are you and Maggie fighting?” Everett asked.

“Who says we are?” James responded, kicking at a snow drift.

“It’s obvious to anyone who knows you.”

“Ever since she got here, she’s been baking for the men in town.

I’ve told her we don’t need the money. I’ve told her that I want to support her.

I’ve told her not to even think about giving me the money.

” James shook his head. “She sneaked it into the drawer where I keep my money. She didn’t think I’d notice.

I’m not stupid. Of course I noticed. Why can’t she do this one little thing I ask? ”

Everett frowned. "You know Maggie was raised in an orphanage and expected to leave when she turned sixteen, right?"

"Yes, she's told me all about it. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Did it ever occur to you that she's frightened of what will happen to her if she doesn't have any money? She's already been in that position. You have to understand her point of view."

"But she's not in that position now. So, she can stop trying to earn money and be content as my wife with the money I earn."

Everett shook his head. "You're being a stubborn fool.

If she works until you start having children, you'll be better off.

Why not accept that and be grateful she's so willing to work?

It doesn't bother me at all that Belle works.

I've heard both her and Maggie say that they don't feel like they work because they have freedom to do what they want. "

"She should be willing to obey me as her husband."

Everett laughed. "I've never known a woman who truly obeyed her husband. Women have thoughts. They should be able to express them and do what they think is best."

James sighed. "You don't understand at all."

MAGGIE TOOK THE MONEY off the table and wrapped a piece of paper around it, noting the amount on the paper. “Here. Just take it. Save it for me when I decide to leave the pig-headed—”

“Maggie! You need to respect your husband.”

“I’m trying!”

Maggie made a pot of tea and served the thumbprint cookies she’d made the night before with them.

“I like them with the lingonberry jam. They are usually made with raspberry jam, but I truly don’t think it matters.

” Her words were forced. She was trying not to let her bad mood and fight with James affect her friendship with Belle.

“They’re delicious. I need—”

Maggie got up and took a piece of paper off the counter, giving it to her friend. “The receipt?”

“Exactly! How did you guess?” Belle read over the paper and nodded. “They’re not difficult at all.”

“No, they’re not. But I think the men will enjoy them. And even if they don’t, I’m glad I made them because I was hungry for them.”

“I’m making them in the morning.” Maggie took a sip of her tea. “Do you give Katie the price of what you’re selling, or does she choose?”

“She chooses. She has a better idea what things should sell for here.”

The door opened then, and James and Everett came inside. James immediately looked at the table and saw that the money was gone, and he looked relieved.

“We got a doe, but we’ve already taken care of it,” Everett said. “And I cut tiny pieces for the stew meat.”

“Thank you for that!” Belle said. “We should be getting home. I haven’t even thought about what to make for supper.”

Everett helped Belle on with her coat. “See you at work tomorrow,” he said to James. “Thanks for the meal, Maggie. It was delicious.”

After they were gone, Maggie stood up and cleared the table from the tea and cookies. She washed out the teapot and waited for James to say something about the money being gone, but when he didn’t, she decided she could be the one to make peace, even though he was the stubborn one.

“Belle told me I’m being stubborn about the money, and I need to stop it,” she said softly.

James grunted. “Everett called me a fool. Said I should understand your past and why you feel as you do.” He swallowed hard. “I am sorry I was so rude to you about it. It touched a sore spot in me.”

“And in me. I need to feel like I’m going to be all right financially. That’s the crux of the matter. But I also need to respect your wishes and not try to force you to take money I’ve earned.” She turned to him and met his eyes. “I am sorry.”

James opened his arms to her, and she flew into them. “I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t

have acted like a pigheaded fool. Money is a touchy subject with me as well. It's just different."

"All is forgiven?" she asked, nestling into his arms.

"All is forgiven. I love you, and I never want us to fight that way again."

"I don't want to fight either." She looked up at him, feeling safe for the first time since that morning. "I love you too, James. With everything inside me."

"Glad to hear it. And you didn't even call me stubborn when you said it. I think things are looking up for us."

Maggie giggled. "I know they are."

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It was early spring when Maggie went to the store and found that she'd received a letter from Massachusetts. It was from Sally, a friend from the hotel who had asked her to find a man for her.

She took the letter to Belle's house and read it aloud to her friend, while Belle nursed little Albert Finn, whom they'd already started calling Bertie.

"She's going to see Elizabeth later this week," Maggie said, rubbing her rounded belly. "James said he knows of at least four men who have written to Elizabeth requesting a bride. I'm sure she'll find one she likes among them. Then we'll have Sally here as well."

"That will be lovely. And she's coming at a better time of year than you did. Traveling in the summer is so much better than traveling in the fall."

"Technically, it was still summer when I arrived, but it sure didn't feel like it."

"Well, I'm glad she's coming. Soon we'll establish our own colony of former Beckhamites here in Yeti."

Maggie giggled. "Katie is going to feel like she's being overwhelmed with us all."

"That's not a bad thing," Belle said. "There are too many unmarried men around here. Of course, the more of the men that marry, the less we'll be needed to bake..."

"Very true. But it will still be nice to have more friends here."

“That it will.”

Maggie looked down at the letter she still clutched in her hands. “I’m going to write Sally back this afternoon. I’m hopeful the letter will arrive before she embarks on her journey.” She sighed. “I’m so glad I’m not going to have to make that journey again. It was long and difficult.”

“I agree.” Belle smiled. “We should start praying for Sally’s safe arrival immediately.”

“Good idea. Hopefully it will go smoothly, and she’ll fall in love with her future husband right away.”

“I don’t know... I don’t think mail-order brides often fall in love with their husbands. It’s usually more of a business arrangement.”

Maggie frowned. “Well, it wasn’t like that for us, and hopefully, it won’t be for Sally either.”

“I hope not. Only happy marriages.”