

A man in a brown cowboy hat, a light-colored shirt, and a dark vest is embracing a woman from behind. The woman has long, wavy blonde hair and is wearing a white long-sleeved blouse with a high collar and a long, flowing purple skirt. They are standing in a field of green grass and pink flowers, with a dirt path leading into the distance under a blue sky with soft clouds. The scene is framed by decorative white scrollwork in the corners.

Mail
Order
Mirage

*A
Brides of Beckham
Story*

Kirsten
Osbourne

USA TODAY bestselling author

Chapter One

Ethel Brown walked toward the orphanage there in Beckham, Massachusetts, where she'd been volunteering since she'd finished school four years before. She smiled at all the same people and waved at the wagons driving through town.

Oh, how she longed for a different life. One where she could create a whole new world around her, and not do the same things day after day, month after month, and year after year.

At the orphanage were all the same children she worked with daily. She helped the girls plant, weed, water, and harvest a garden every summer, and now it was harvest time again. She showed them all the right way to harvest the raspberries and blackberries that were ready, and later that day, she would show them how to can the berries, just like she'd shown them last year, and the year before that.

Her life was just a series of repetitious cycles. Sundays she always went to church, and her mother tried to spot a young man she hadn't already rejected as one she didn't want to marry. Monday through Friday, she worked with the girls in

the orphanage, sometimes working in the garden, sometimes cooking with them, and sometimes sewing with them. She got excited when she was allowed to help them clean windows because it was something different.

Saturday nights were always filled with some sort of party or soiree. She truthfully hated parties. She was expected to dance with the most eligible young man there, who usually bored her to tears. Sometimes her mother dragged her all the way to Boston in hopes of finding her someone who wouldn't make her want to sleep in the middle of the dancefloor.

Day after day. Week after week. Month after month. Year after year. Nothing ever changed in Ethel's life, and she needed something different. She wanted to go west for adventure. She wanted to go to Europe and meet new people, who spoke in all the foreign tongues her mother had made her learn.

That day, she and the girls picked all the berries they could find. "We're doing something new today," Ethel announced. "We're going to combine the blackberries and raspberries into one jam. It's going to be delicious."

The girls all shrugged, and she realized they were in endless cycles as well. It would be so wonderful to be able to

do different things once in a while. She'd seen many girls about town riding bicycles, and she'd thought about getting one herself, but her mother had told her that she absolutely couldn't get one.

Nothing would ever change.

As she walked home that afternoon, she passed her neighbor's house. Elizabeth Tandy and her husband Bernard were well-known throughout the region for sending women off to marry strangers in the west. The idea had never been appealing to Ethel, but that afternoon, there was nothing more appealing.

She stopped in front of the house for a moment, and then, gathering all her courage, she marched right up to the front door, and she knocked loudly.

Mr. Tandy was the one who opened the door. "Miss Brown."

"Mr. Tandy," she replied. "I would like to see your wife about going West as a mail-order bride. Does she have a bit of time for me?"

"Oh, of course, she does!" Mr. Tandy said, opening the door wide. He walked to the end of the hall and opened the

last door on the left. “Elizabeth, Miss Ethel Brown is here to see you.”

“Cookies and tea, please,” Mrs. Tandy said as her husband closed the door softly.

Ethel took a seat on the sofa across from Mrs. Tandy’s desk. “I want to be a mail-order bride,” she said.

Mrs. Tandy studied her for a moment. “Why?”

Ethel sighed. “Nothing ever changes here. Today is Monday, and I’ve done the same thing I do every other Monday of the year. I just...I need to do something different than what I’m doing.”

“I can understand that,” Mrs. Tandy said. “I even have a letter from a gentleman who I think might suit you.” She flipped through a stack of letters on her desk. “Ahh...here we go. Walter.”

Ethel took the letter that was offered her, and she read through it carefully, wanting to make sure there were no signs of this being a person she didn’t want to meet.

Dear Potential Bride,

I trust this letter finds you in good spirits. My name is Walter Prewitt, a humble rancher here in

Montana. I find myself reaching out to you with a proposition, not of business, but of the heart.

As I pen this letter, I am in my cabin at the end of a long day out on the range. My life is simple yet fulfilling, filled with hard work and the rewards it reaps. But at the end of the day, I miss having someone to talk to. To share my life with.

I have many reasons for seeking a bride. For one, I desire the warmth of shared conversation and laughter, to have someone to share the day's tales with. The silence of the plains can be deafening, and the echo of a lone voice just sounds pitiful.

Secondly, I believe in the strength found in partnership. As a rancher, my days are replete with challenges - tending to the cattle, mending fences, battling the harsh Montana weather. A helping hand would be more than welcome, not merely for the chores, but to share my burdens and triumphs.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I seek love. The kind of love that warms you on a cold winter's night. I seek a partner to share in life's joys and sorrows.

Life on the ranch is not easy, but it holds a unique charm. The sunsets here are unrivaled. The air is crisp and clean, filled with the scent of fresh hay and wildflowers. Each day brings with it a sense of fulfillment that only honest hard work can provide.

In you, I hope to find a companion. I offer you a life filled with honest work and simple pleasures, which will hopefully lead first to friendship, and then to love.

I eagerly await your response, hoping this letter finds you well and willing to consider life here in Montana with me. Please use the telegraph to reply to me, as I would love to have you here as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Walter

As she read the letter again, Ethel could see the small cabin he called home, and she could imagine the sunsets from rocking chairs at the front of that cabin. It was so different than the life she led there in Beckham, which is why it seemed absolutely perfect in her mind. "I want to marry him," she said simply.

Elizabeth Tandy smiled. "I'll send him a telegram today."

"Can I leave tomorrow?" Even as Ethel knew it was irresponsible, she had to get away from her life, which was nothing but repetition.

Elizabeth frowned. "Have you spoken with your mother about this?"

Ethel shook her head. "No, and I don't intend to. She would lock me in my room. I'm going to leave a letter on my pillow for her to find after I'm gone."

"Are you really that unhappy with your life?"

"I don't think I can bear another week," Ethel replied simply.

"All right. I'll see to getting you a train ticket for the first train out tomorrow, which will be eight in the morning. Would you like me to send Bernard to pick you up and take you to the station?"

Ethel thought for a moment, but she shook her head. "I won't be taking a great deal. I can carry what I need to the station."

Bernard came in then with cookies and tea. “Oh, thank you,” Ethel said, reaching for a cookie. Her mind was already focused on what she would absolutely need to take with her, and she knew how she would handle things. It would be easy. Her mother never rose until noon anyway.

Elizabeth quickly wrote out something on a piece of paper. “I’ll get this to the telegraph office as soon as possible,” she said.

“Perfect. I like the idea of being a rancher’s wife. Every day a little different than the day before.”

“I hope it’s everything you’re looking for,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “You could marry a farmer around here and get the same effect.”

“No. I’m ready to make a journey across our country.”

“All right.” Elizabeth seemed a bit skeptical, but she agreed, which was all that Ethel needed from her.

Shortly after, Ethel said goodbye and headed to her house, only two doors down. Her mother would be worried about her, as she was later than expected. Why she wasn’t allowed to live her own life, Ethel wasn’t sure, but her mother was determined to see her married well.

And she would be married well...in Montana.

After calming her mother down, she planned to go upstairs and pack. "I ran into a friend on my walk home. You have to stop thinking of me as a small child who will get lost. I speak six languages, and I am able to do many more things than you can imagine. Do you know I know how to make jam, and I can take a bunch of old clothes, cut them up, and make a beautiful quilt from them?"

Her mother nodded. "Of course, I know those things about you. You're my daughter, and I know everything about you."

Ethel simply smiled. "I'm going to go to my room until supper. I'm a bit tired." Glancing at the clock on the wall, she saw she had two hours until supper. That would give her enough time to choose what she would take to Montana and what she would leave behind.

Up in her room, she looked through every dress in her wardrobe. One seemed casual enough to use as a Sunday dress in the West, but only one. She would take all of her day dresses that she wore while she was working in the orphanage. And she found one of her Saturday day dresses that would be good for Sundays. Perfect. Two Sunday dresses and five-

weekday dresses. Surely that would be enough. Carrying all ten of the dresses she wore to the orphanage would be a bit too much.

She carefully selected some of her more expensive jewelry to take, not planning to wear it, but if she and Walt experienced financial difficulties later on, they could sell what she had for a good price. At least she hoped they could.

The following morning, she had all of her belongings in two carpet bags, and when she reached the train station, she was surprised to see Elizabeth. “I got you a sleeper car. I thought it would be nice for you not to be crammed in with everyone.”

Elizabeth held out her ticket, and Ethel took it with a smile. “Thank you.”

“Remember, if your life in Montana turns bad for any reason, you can always come back. I would even pay for your return ticket.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I sure hope you’ll be fine. Or your mother will kill me.”

Ethel laughed softly. “She wouldn’t ever do anything that could risk her having to spend time in prison.”

“Very true.” Elizabeth watched as Ethel stood when her train was called. “Be Happy.”

Ethel nodded, smiling. If all else failed, she’d go to Europe. She was certain she had enough money in jewelry to go in style. “Thank you for all you’ve done for me.” With those words, Ethel turned and walked toward the train, so happy to say goodbye to Beckham, Massachusetts, and her life there. It was time for a new life, and she was ready to live it.

Days later, Ethel stood on the train platform in Argyle, Montana, looking around trying to find Walt. He had to be there somewhere.

Finally, a man approached her. She couldn’t see his face or even the color of his hair due to a cowboy hat riding low over his brow. He stopped in front of her. “Ethel?”

She nodded and smiled. “You must be Walt.”

The man nodded, studying her. “I am. Preacher’s waiting for us.”

He took her bags from her, carrying them to his wagon which was parked a short distance away. “Are these filled with

books?” he asked.

“No. Not books, though I wish I’d brought one. It’s amazing how very long that train ride was.”

He put her bags into the back of the wagon and helped her up. “Let’s get married.”

Ethel wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting, but Walt definitely wasn’t it. This man didn’t seem to even know how to smile, and he’d seemed so friendly in his letter. She almost questioned if he’d even written it.

“How far away is the preacher?” she asked.

“Twenty miles,” he responded. “I live pretty far out, and I wanted my preacher to be the one to marry us.”

“How long will it take to get to your cabin?” she asked, surprised that he was so far away from the town where he’d told her to go.

“About three hours,” he said. “I don’t come to town real often. There’s a small town and general store out near where I live, and that’s where the preacher is as well. It’s only about an hour to there from where I live.”

“I hadn’t realized we’d be so remote!”

“I hope you don’t think spending all your time with other women is a necessity, because the only woman close is Widow Danbury, and she’s anything but friendly.”

“No, I had enough of the social scene back in Massachusetts,” she said softly. “It’s beautiful out here. Plains as far as the eye can see.”

“Which is why it’s a perfect location for a ranch,” he said. “I love what I do, and I wouldn’t be able to do it half as well anywhere else in the world.”

“I’m glad you’ve found a home that suits you so well. I’m sure I’ll feel the same as soon as I get settled in.”

“Good,” he said. “Why did you want to be a mail-order bride?” he asked. He’d expected a woman who was too ugly to get a man, and she was not that at all. She had a good personality as well. He wasn’t complaining, of course, but she was definitely not what he’d thought would be stepping off that train.

“I was bored. My mother wanted me to marry a wealthy man and they all bored me to tears. I’d volunteer at the orphanage in town five days per week, and the weekends would be spent with my mother, trying to find a husband who

suit me. There were many who she thought would suit me, but none of them did.”

“And you don’t think you’ll be bored on a ranch doing the same things day after day?” he asked.

“Will I be able to choose the things I do? Can I cook what I want to cook and clean what I want to clean?”

He nodded. “I suppose so.”

“Then it will be better than living doing what I’m told all the time. I don’t mind hard work. In fact, I like it. But I don’t like having to do exactly what I’m told to do.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind,” he said, glancing at her for a moment. “Wedding will have to be quick. I still have my milking to do.”

“Why would a rancher milk cows?” she asked. “I thought that you only raised your cattle for beef.”

“But I do use milk,” he said. “So the milk has to come from somewhere.”

She nodded. She should have known. The orphanage had done the same.

Chapter Two

After a very awkward and mostly silent wagon ride, Walter pulls over in front of a house in the tiny town of Daffodil, Montana. Walt helped Ethel to her feet. “Parsonage is here,” he said, taking her hand and half-dragging her to the house.

He was in such a hurry, which Ethel found frustrating. “The cows won’t die if we’re ten minutes late.”

He shook his head. What did a girl like her know about cows anyway? Nothing, as far as he was concerned.

An older woman with a sweet smile opened the door. “You looking for the preacher?” she asked.

Walt nodded. “He knew I’d be coming by around now for my wedding,” Walt said.

She stepped aside and held the door wider. “I’ll just go get him.”

Being left alone with Walt again had Ethel scrambling for a topic of conversation. “This is a nice parsonage,” she finally said. The man was virtually impossible to talk to.

He nodded. “Yup. Don’t expect to be living in a house this nice,” he said.

She smiled sweetly. “All right. I really don’t mind what our house looks like,” she said.

He looked at her skeptically, and she was about to reinforce what she’d said when the pastor and his wife walked into the room. “Walt, it’s good to see you. And this is your bride?”

Walt nodded. “This is Ethel Brown. She’s come all the way from Massachusetts to marry me and join our little community here.”

“Well, we’re pleased to have you, Miss Brown. Although, I’m going to forget that name as quickly as I can and remember to call you Mrs. Prewitt. I always get confused when a couple marries, and I have to change what I call the lady.”

She smiled. “I’ll remind you if you forget. Don’t worry, my feelings won’t be hurt.”

“Well, I’m sure glad to hear that. I am very bad with names, but I’ll always remember your face.” He looked between the two of them. “Shall we get started?”

There was no ring, and no fuss involved in the wedding. They were married before she could even think of a reason to protest. And for some reason, this no longer felt right as it had back in Beckham.

When the preacher said, “You may kiss the bride,” she got the distinct impression Walt didn’t want to kiss her. Considering how many boys had stolen kisses over the years, she found his behavior quite odd.

Finally, he brushed his lips across hers, pulling away as soon as he had. “We need to hurry back to the ranch. Cows are surely missing their milking.”

The preacher nodded. “I was raised on a dairy farm, so I know exactly what you mean. Your whole day revolves around your animals’ care.”

Walt nodded as he grabbed Ethel’s hand and hurried her out the door and to the wagon. “Do we need supplies?” she asked, spotting the general store in town.

“We do, but there’s no time today. You’ll have to drive into town tomorrow.”

“By myself?” she asked. She’d never driven, and he was asking her to drive two hours round trip, all alone.

He sighed. “Let’s stop now. I was really hoping you’d be a bit more...independent.”

She shook her head. The man had no manners. “I’ll work on that.” And she would. She’d figure out how to hitch up the team the first chance she got, but from what she understood, there wouldn’t be many chances. Taking care of a house would take all of her time. It had taken six servants to do all that needed to be done at her home in Beckham. And she was only one person.

He stopped at the store. “You have ten minutes. I’ll get the coffee, a bag of flour, and one of sugar. You handle the rest.”

She had no idea what he needed! She had to assume he had pots and pans, and she ordered salt, some other spices, and chicken for their supper that night. She’d figure out what else they needed and make a trip to town as soon as she figured out how to hitch up the wagon. Walt simply could not be the same man who had sent that sweet letter!

She had everything she needed on the counter in two minutes, and she let him handle paying for the groceries while she carried the spices out to the wagon. Hopefully when he

realized she wasn't worthless, he would be easier for her to deal with.

He carried the flour and sugar out to the wagon and went back for the coffee. By the time he brought the coffee out, she was on the seat of the wagon and ready to go. He looked in her direction. "That was fast. Thank you."

Between Daffodil and the ranch, there was little to say. They passed by a body of water, and she wanted to ask its name, but she was just fed up with him and his attitude toward her. She had traveled for days to come to Montana and marry him, and the least he could do was be polite to her.

When they reached the ranch, she looked around, expecting there to be many buildings littering the landscape. But there was one small cabin and an outbuilding that she had to assume was the barn.

She didn't wait for him to help her down, but gathered her skirts in one hand and jumped. She walked to the back of the wagon and took the chicken, and the spices and carried them all into the house. She'd have to do a quick inventory to see what she could make, but at least she had the meat they needed to get started.

While he carried in the few things they'd purchased, she looked through his larder, and then climbed down into the cellar. He certainly wasn't what she would consider well-stocked, but he had some potatoes and some carrots. She could easily make a meal of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and carrots. If that wasn't good enough for him, he could drive right back into town and get what he wanted to eat.

It was already close to supper time, so she got to work immediately, making a mental note of the things that would need to be scrubbed the following day. The floor was first on her list, but nothing in the tiny kitchen was particularly clean.

There was a pump, which she was thankful for, and a stove, similar to the one she'd cooked on in the orphanage. She would be able to easily make meals. There was even a small ice box, which made her smile. That would make things a great deal easier in the kitchen.

He carried in a large pail of milk and set it on the counter. "If you need milk to finish up supper, it's there."

"I've not started supper yet. I was seeing what other ingredients you had in the house that I could use for supper."

"So it's going to be a long time yet?" he asked, seeming grumpier than ever.

“It’ll probably be around an hour. I’m going to fry the chicken and make mashed potatoes, gravy, and carrots. I hope that suits you.”

He just grunted and walked back outside. She had to wonder how long it had been since the man had eaten. He seemed awfully crabby, and she had no desire to spend time with him.

She quickly peeled the potatoes, putting them on to boil, and then she fried up the chicken. She would use the chicken pieces to make her gravy, and he would howl at the moon her gravy was so good.

Obviously, she wouldn’t be cooking anything fancy in his small cabin, but she had only ever cooked at the orphanage, so she had no idea how to make anything fancy anyway.

He came back into the house as she was putting the last of the chicken onto a plate, ready to be served.

She mashed the potatoes and made the gravy, taking the carrots and putting them into a serving bowl. Then she scrubbed the table, getting all of the dust and grime off of it, putting it all on the table with two plates, with forks and knives. “Do you want milk or coffee with your supper?”

“Milk,” he said.

She poured two glasses of milk and sat at the table with him, waiting as he said a prayer before she served herself.

He took his first bite of chicken and closed his eyes as he ate it. “This is delicious,” he said. “I guess I didn’t think you’d be able to cook. You seem like you were born wealthy.”

“I was,” she said calmly, “but I never would have come West to marry if I didn’t have the housekeeping and cooking skills necessary. I never cooked in my own home, but I believe I told you I volunteered in an orphanage. It was my job to teach the girls there to cook, garden, and sew. I was always excited for cleaning days because they were at least different.”

“How did you learn to cook so well?” he asked, taking another huge bite of his chicken.

“I had the cook at our house teach me to make several simple meals so I could teach the orphans,” she said. “And then I bought myself a book of simple receipts, and I’ve been following the receipts ever since. I think cooking is easy if you learn a few basic things and you build on your cooking skills from there.”

He took his first bite of the mashed potatoes with her chicken gravy, and he sighed. "I'm sorry. I thought you wouldn't be able to make meals that would satisfy me, and you've shown me how very wrong I was. You are an excellent cook."

She smiled. "Thank you."

"I'll butcher a steer tomorrow, and we can use the meat for whatever you want to make in the next couple of weeks."

"That sounds good to me," she said. "I am partial to beef."

"If you cook everything as well as you do this chicken, I'll be on my knees begging for my favorite meals within a day or two. This is truly one of the best meals I've ever eaten."

"Good," she said. "Maybe you'll stop underestimating me then."

"I'm going to try."

"There was no time to make dessert tonight, but do you prefer cake or pie?" She made both equally well, though they hadn't been things she had a chance to make for the orphans often. Instead, she'd talked their cook into showing her how to

make desserts, and she had made several cakes and pies for her family's meals without her mother even realizing.

"Cake," he said. "Tell me you like to bake cake."

"I do. Very much so. I'll try to make at least two desserts per week, and we can spread them out among the days. What do you like to eat for breakfast?"

"About all I know how to make for breakfast is oatmeal and toast, so that's what I've had every morning for the six years I've lived here in Montana. I would appreciate anything other than oatmeal and toast."

Ethel laughed softly. "Yes, of course. Would you be fine if I made eggs and toast?"

He nodded. "I only had toast on the days when I'd been to town recently. I can't make my own bread."

"And you like to have fresh bread? Will I be making you lunches?"

"I love fresh bread, and yes, I'll come home for lunch most days. I prefer to eat right at noon. When I get too hungry, I get very cranky." Walt shook his head as he said it.

"I've noticed," she said drily. "Did you not take lunch with you to the train station?"

He shook his head. "I meant to, but I ended up leaving a little later than planned, and there was no time to make anything."

Ethel sighed. "And you didn't think that information would help me deal with you?" she asked.

"I didn't even think of telling you," he said. "I'm sorry."

"I'll know to make sure all meals are right on time in the future. Is half past five good for breakfast?"

He nodded emphatically. "That's perfect."

"And noon for lunch. Five-thirty for supper?" she asked.

He nodded. "That's perfect."

"Then meals will be ready at those times." Ethel took another bite of her mashed potatoes and gravy, realizing that her gravy was better than ever. Perhaps it was because she'd used milk and not water. With the orphans, there had never been enough milk to go around.

"I haven't poked around yet, but is this all there is to the cabin? Other than the cellar of course?"

He nodded. "It is. I plan to build a bigger house, but it'll be at least next summer before I'll have the money for

lumber.”

She nodded. “That doesn’t bother me. Where should I sleep though?” She’d noticed a large bed on the opposite end of the cabin from the kitchen, knowing it must be his bed. But was he ready to share that bed with her already?

“With me,” Walt said simply. “We’re married, and that gives me certain rights regarding your body.”

Ethel nodded. “I wasn’t certain if you liked me enough to want those rights.”

“I really am sorry about how grumpy I was. I should have been a few minutes late, but taken a lunch. I can see that now.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you should carry an emergency sandwich at all times, and if you get the least bit hungry, you should make use of that sandwich.”

He grinned, fully able to laugh at himself. “All right. I’ll do that.”

“It might be smarter to take jerky. Do you have any?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No, they haven’t had it at the store lately.”

“I’ll make some from the steer you butcher tomorrow. Then you’ll always have something to keep you from getting grumpy.”

He covered her hand with his. “I would happily carry your emergency jerky everywhere.”

Chapter Three

After she'd finished up the supper dishes, Ethel sat with Walt at the table with a pen and paper. "Let's talk meals you enjoy."

He chuckled. "I was raised to eat everything on my plate. It doesn't matter what you cook for me. I've even eaten Rocky Mountain oysters, though they're not a favorite."

"I've never heard of them?" she said. "I do enjoy oysters on occasion."

He smiled. "Rocky Mountain oysters are bull testes."

Her eyes widened. "Of all the things my mother would not want me to know, that tops the list. Perhaps you can tell me about other things my mother wouldn't want me to know."

He laughed. "I'll work on that."

She was truly surprised that he seemed like a completely different person now that he'd eaten. What an odd thing to become angry with everyone around when you were hungry. She certainly hoped she'd never be that way.

“I like to do flap jacks and johnny cakes, and French toast, and eggs with potatoes and bacon for breakfast. Any of those things unappealing?” she asked.

He shook his head. “All sound delicious.”

“What about a coffee cake? Maybe some bacon on the side?”

He nodded. “That sounds good too.”

“Do you butcher hogs, or should I go to the store for pork?” She knew he ran a cattle ranch, but that didn’t mean he didn’t also have a few hogs to butcher, or even some chickens for eggs and meat.

He nodded. “I do raise hogs. I typically have a sow and a boar that I keep, and I butcher all the babies in the fall. The cellar is cold enough that the bacon lasts all year.”

“Am I going to need to process meat?”

He shrugged. “I’ll want you to salt some pork for winter. But mostly I’ll bring it to you as roasts or bacon or whatever is needed. Have you processed meat before?”

“I’ve done some salting, and I’ve made canned goods from meat when necessary. I prefer not to have to, but if it’s

part of my job as a wife of the West, then I'll do it with a smile on my face."

He had to admit, if only to himself, that she had a very good attitude about her chores. "I've got some bacon down in the cellar now, so you can just use that. I typically cut off a chunk and carry it up, so I can burn it and then not eat it."

She grinned. "You've never made bacon you liked?"

He shook his head. "Not something I'm good at, I'm afraid."

"I'll see what I can do with it. Do you ever sell your hogs? Or give a portion to someone who is willing to process them for you?"

Walt shook his head. "I haven't in the past, but I have more hogs this year than ever before. We could try that if you'd like."

She nodded. "And you'll still be eating more pork than you ever have before, since you just burn it." Ethel looked down at her list. "Chickens?"

"I have a portion of the barn I use for chickens. I have just been raising them and selling them, but I would love it if

you'd use the eggs and maybe even butcher some of the pullets.”

She made a face when he said the word butcher. She wouldn't refuse though. “I can easily use the eggs in my cooking. Butchering pullets may be a little beyond my scope, but perhaps we could make a similar deal to the one we make with the hogs. One chicken for every five butchered or something.”

He studied her for a moment. “If I butcher them all for you, would you make me more of your fried chicken?”

She nodded. “I'd be happy to.”

“I'll be the one processing chickens then. No problem there.”

She laughed softly. “I'd like to know what all you expect from me other than cooking and cleaning.” She could already see that she would need to wash the bedding. It didn't look like anyone had done anything with it in over a year, which turned her stomach just a bit.

“Well, I expect pleasure in bed from you,” he said. “I didn't get married just so someone would cook and clean for me.”

She nodded. “Yes, of course. We’re married, so I expect that.”

“Tonight?” he asked.

She frowned at him. “What about tonight?”

“Do you expect us to find pleasure together tonight?”

She shrugged. “I hadn’t really thought of it. Do you want to?”

He nodded emphatically. “I expected an ugly woman to get off that train, that I wouldn’t really be attracted to, and I still planned to have a wedding night. You’re beautiful. I want to make love with you every night.”

“All right,” she said softly, trying to act like he was asking for something perfectly normal. “I’m sure you want me to do laundry. What else?”

He shrugged. “There are lots of potlucks at church. Cook for them, and we’ll go to the dances they have.”

“I’d enjoy that,” she said, hoping what she was saying was true. She really didn’t know how much she’d enjoy dancing with him. She certainly hadn’t enjoyed dancing with the men she knew back East. Of course, she’d done that under

duress, and with him, it should be pleasurable. She hoped it would anyway.

“I guess those are mostly your tasks until the babies start coming, and then you’ll be expected to care for them. Would you be willing to search for eggs?” he asked.

“Oh, of course. I consider gathering eggs to be women’s work.”

“Good. And I may need you out on the range on occasion. I have two young men who work with me, but sometimes we need a fourth pair of hands. At least until you’re expecting anyway.”

“How many children do you want?” she asked. She’d always envisioned herself with a houseful and she hoped he felt the same way about children that she did.

“Oh, a dozen or so. I’m eighth in a family of twelve children, so a dozen sounds right to me. Do you have brothers or sisters?”

“I had a brother who died when we were children. I think that’s why my mother dotes on me the way she does.”

“Makes sense,” he said.

She stood up and put her list onto the counter, knowing what she wanted to tackle the next day. It was going to be a busy few weeks until she was happy with the house, but she was happy to be able to do it.

“I believe I’ll get ready for bed,” she said. She wished he would leave the house for a few minutes so she could put her things away and get into her nightgown, but it didn’t look like he was going anywhere.

He nodded. “I should too then.”

He went to a chest of drawers in one corner of the cabin and he pulled out a nightshirt. “It’s probably dumb for us to dress for bed because I just plan on undressing us anyway,” he said.

Ethel shrugged. “I’m not going to bother then,” she said. “I’ll just get undressed and get into bed that way.”

“Can I undress you?” he asked. “I’ve always dreamed of what it would be like to undress a woman.”

She nodded. It sounded to her like Walt had just about as much experience sexually as she had, which was absolutely none.

She turned to him, and he unbuttoned the front of her dress, while she stood still. It felt so odd to let a man undress her, but her maid back home had done it often. What was the difference?

When he'd pushed her dress off her shoulders, and she stood in just her corset, drawers, and petticoat, he took off his own shirt and pushed his pants to the floor. It was so odd to her that she was letting him undress her, but she said nothing. Why bother?

He turned her around and undid her corset, and she breathed a heavy sigh of relief when he pushed it to the floor. She'd been taught long before that a proper woman never left home without her corset, but she hoped he felt differently. Working around the house with a corset on would be difficult. She'd been known to slip away at the orphanage and remove her corset so she could do her work better.

It took him only moments to get her petticoat and drawers off, and then she stood naked in front of him. Thankfully, they'd already turned down the lanterns, and he couldn't see her well. Her mother had always made it seem like it was all right if her husband touched her, but if he saw her wearing nothing, then the world would end.

As she stood before him, he stripped down to nothing, and she was well aware when his pants were gone. Now she wanted to see him but didn't know how he would feel about such a thing. Unfortunately, the moon was just a sliver and provided no light through the window.

When he reached for her, and his hand covered her breast for the first time, she was surprised at how it made her feel. She'd expected to find his touch distasteful after the way her mother had talked about what was involved, but she didn't. It felt good, and she arched her body against his palm. "That feels good!" she said.

He chuckled. "It's supposed to feel good."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"I'm positive," he whispered, leaning down and catching her lips with his.

Within moments, they were both on the bed, and his hands seemed to be everywhere. When they moved between the juncture of her thighs, she couldn't help but writhe against him.

"My mother told me no one man or woman should ever touch me there, but most especially myself. But I like it. A lot.

Is that all right?"

He chuckled softly. "It's more than all right. I hope you'll enjoy everything we do together."

"I hope so too," she said, shaking her head. It felt so odd, but so good, and it was like he was causing a hole deep within her that only he could fill.

When he joined their bodies together, she let out a gasp of pain, but then it just felt good. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he started to move within her, enjoying every stroke of his body within her.

When he had finished, and rolled to his side, she followed him over. She may not have liked the grumpy man who met her at the train station, but she liked his body, and she liked the way he touched her. Maybe marriage wouldn't be so bad after all.

She woke up early the following morning, her body still feeling as if she was on Massachusetts time. Ethel quickly dressed and went into the kitchen to start breakfast, planning to use the leftover potatoes from the previous night to make fried potatoes, and she would fix eggs and bacon to go with

them. There was no bread around for toast, and she quickly made herself a note to make bread in a little while, but first, she went to the cellar, found the bacon, and cut off a chunk, which she would cut into strips when she got back upstairs.

When she got back to the kitchen, she could see he was already gone, probably milking the cows. She needed to gather a few eggs, so she hurried out to the barn and walked to him, pulling his head down for a kiss. “Good morning, Walt,” she whispered. “Where are the chickens? I thought we’d have some eggs for breakfast.”

He pointed to a basket hanging on the wall, and she went over to find eggs the chickens had laid. It was a little silly the places she found them, but she decided if the chickens weren’t sitting on them, then they were fine for her cooking.

Back inside, she got breakfast ready and had it on the table shortly after he came back inside. She noticed he had said nothing so far, and she was sure it was because he was already crabby because he hadn’t eaten yet.

As soon as food was on the table, he reached for it, filling his plate. She sat beside him after delivering coffee for both of them. “Are you always crabby in the mornings?” she

asked casually. Surely if she learned when he was crabby and when he wasn't, they would get along much better.

“It’s a hunger thing again,” he said. “I’ll be happy once I get food in me.”

“By all means, let’s eat then.”

They held hands as he prayed, and then he practically shoveled the first few bites of food into his mouth. “I don’t want you kissing me when I can’t do anything about it,” he finally said.

“What do you mean?” she asked. What kind of man said something like that to his wife? She’d been so convinced he was the man for her, but he must have written his letter to her right after eating.

“You kissed me in the barn, at the start of our day. I can’t make love with you until tonight, so I’d rather you didn’t do that anymore.”

“Are you joking?” she asked. He was proving to be very difficult to be around.

Walt shook his head. “No. I think we should keep our kissing to just before bed, so I don’t get all excited and have nothing I can do about it.”

“Maybe we should just plan on having sex when you come home for lunch? Would that be better?”

He thought about it for a moment. “That would work, but still don’t kiss me in the mornings then. And make lunch something quick so I’ll have time to...you know...do it.”

“I’m not sure I appreciate you right now,” she said, eating one piece of crispy bacon. She liked hers so crispy it was almost burnt.

“You’ll understand someday, I hope. Men don’t like to want to do things when they can’t.”

“I see,” she said, shaking her head. How she was going to be able to get along with the persnickety man was still a mystery to her, but she would do her best.

“I’ll be back at lunchtime,” he said, standing up. “I have some fence work to do with my men this morning, and I’ll butcher the steer this afternoon. Will that give you enough time to cook something?”

She bit her lip. “Cut me off a couple of steaks and I’ll make those. They won’t have to be bled as long.” As much as she hated the slaughtering part of ranch work, she’d had to

help several times at the orphanage. Now it would have to be a part of her life.

Chapter Four

As soon as Walt was gone for the day, Ethel mixed up the dough for a few loaves of bread, and while it was rising, she found all the dirty laundry, which was a lot less than she'd thought it would be, and she carried it outside. After boiling a large pot of water to wash the clothes in, she got everything washed and on the line.

When she went back inside, the bread was ready to be punched down and divided into loaf pans.

With that done, she baked a cake and made some frosting to go with it. Then she went downstairs to try to find something for their lunch. She decided to simply make a few more slices of bacon and have bacon sandwiches.

The bread was finished just before noon, and she cut off six generous slices, buttering them all on one side, and adding the bacon. It was waiting on the table when he walked inside, and he smiled, sitting down to refuel.

“Looks good. You are a much better bacon cook than I am.”

She laughed. “It sounds to me like most people are much better bacon cooks than you.”

He nodded emphatically. “And that’s why I needed a wife. Someone who would wash the dishes and cook the bacon.”

She sat with him and they ate their sandwiches in mostly silence. “I’ll get you the steaks around four if that’s early enough.”

She nodded. “Definitely. Do you like baked potatoes with your steak?”

“Sure. I’d be happy to eat whatever you made.”

“I thought we could have baked potatoes, green beans, and bread with the steaks.”

“And is there a cake?” he asked. “I think I smell a cake.”

Ethel nodded, shaking her head. “Yes, there’s a cake. I think the trick to keeping you happy is going to be always feeding you as much as I can,” she said.

Walt nodded. “Food is the way to happiness. There’s no doubt in my mind about that.”

“I’ll remember that.” She was thinking of all the things she could do with beef, and she was actually feeling good about getting a whole cow at once. It would make it so she had choices in what she could make. She would always remember the humble orphans who ate beans for most meals, and though she wasn’t a particular fan of beans, she would make sure they had them at least once per month. Too much meat made a person pretentious.

He brought her the steaks at four as promised, and she added salt and pepper and threw them on the stove. She put the potatoes into the oven to bake, after thoroughly piercing them with a fork. She would never forget the only time she’d forgotten to pierce them because the potatoes had blown up in the oven, and she’d had to scrounge to find something else for the orphans to eat. She was never going to do that again.

She’d brought in all the laundry just before he’d brought her the steaks, so it was all folded, and the bed was made with clean, fresh sheets. Now, she simply wanted to make curtains. Surely, he would be willing to take her to town to buy the fabric for them.

When he came in, his clothes had blood all over them. “Don’t you wear an apron when you slaughter animals?” Ethel

asked.

He shook his head. “No, only women wear aprons.”

She sighed. “I’ll have to soak those clothes right away. Would you change before supper, so I will have a better chance of getting your clothes clean.”

He frowned, looking down at himself. “I suppose I can do that,” Walt said, but he was obviously annoyed that supper was being detained. The man really was all about food.

As soon as he was wearing clean clothes, she took the others and put them into a pot of water to soak overnight. Apparently, she was doing laundry again tomorrow. It hadn’t been her plan to work on laundry every day, but she was willing if that’s what it took.

When she sat down at the table, his prayer only took a few seconds. He was obviously too busy worrying about feeding his belly to thank his Maker.

He put one of the steaks on his plate, added a potato, and then a pile of green beans. She buttered a couple of pieces of bread for him while he started shoveling the food into his mouth. “Every meal is like you haven’t eaten in months!” she said.

He nodded. "I know. I get so hungry!"

The man was lean and muscular, and she couldn't imagine what it would be like to eat as much as he did and stay so thin, but there was no doubt in her mind that he worked off the food he ate.

"What's on your agenda for tomorrow?" she asked.

"More fences. Finishing up the steer and bringing all the meat inside. If you could make me some jerky so I can have it with me to fight off the hungries, that would be wonderful."

"I'll work on that tomorrow," she said. "And I'll make a roast for supper. Does that sound good?"

He nodded. "There are some ripe raspberries that grow naturally on the other side of the barn if you want to do anything with them."

"Oh, I'll pick them tomorrow then. You like raspberry jam, I hope?"

He nodded. "And I do love pie. I just prefer cake."

She shook her head. "I think what you really needed out here is a full-time cook."

Walt tilted his head to one side, a grin on his face. "Probably. But I'm glad I got you instead."

Unfortunately, Ethel didn't feel like she could say that yet. She liked how she felt when he touched her, and she liked being around him for the most part. But liked him? She wasn't at all sure about that yet.

After supper she washed the dishes, and he paced at the table. She finally, after hearing his footsteps for a good ten minutes, turned around. "Why are you pacing?"

"I'm just ready for bed, and I want you to hurry."

She laughed softly. She had enjoyed their time in bed together the previous night, but she wasn't certain if it was all she wanted to do with him. Perhaps the man could find some other things to do with his time other than eat and enjoy his time in bed with her. Surely there was more most men could do.

When she'd put the last dish away, he took her hand and led her to the bed, quickly divesting them of their clothing. "I think I might like this more than I enjoy eating," he said.

She shook her head. "I'm not certain such a thing is possible. You love eating too much."

"That might be true."

The following morning, she brought up the idea of buying fabric for curtains. “I don’t think the fabric would cost much, and I could make something that would really make the cabin more inviting.”

He tilted his head to one side. “Have you ever driven a wagon?”

She shook her head. “No. But I can learn quickly.”

He sighed dramatically. “I’ll get my men working, and I’ll drive you to town.”

“I don’t want you to have to waste your day doing something like that for me,” she said. There were a few other things she needed from town as well, including some plain white linen so she could make herself a couple of aprons. She only had the one she’d used at the orphanage, but she got so filthy with all the cleaning she was doing, and she wanted him to have one as well. For butchering. She wasn’t certain she’d be able to convince him to wear it, but she was going to try.

“I’ll take you,” he said. “You cook for me and make me feel good in bed. I should take you to town.”

Ethel thought the man was the most unmannerly human being alive, but he did make her feel good. Perhaps that would

be enough. For now, it was all she had.

He left immediately after breakfast to give his men their instructions, and then he hitched up the wagon. “Usually, I only go to town on Sundays,” he told her.

“And what do you do when you need to buy something from the store?” she asked.

“I use the Sears and Roebuck catalog, of course. They’re cheaper than the store is anyway.”

She laughed. “But sometimes, you need to buy things right away that can’t wait for Sears to deliver.”

“Not very often,” he said, flashing his teeth at her in a grin. “I think you’re going to be a good wife to have around.”

“I sure hope so.”

As they drove, he told her more about the ranch, and how much he loved it. “I knew from the time I was a little boy that I wanted a ranch of my own. My father was a coal miner in Kentucky, and we were dirt poor. As soon as I was old enough to work in the mine, I saved half of what I made, giving my father the other half. When I had enough saved to come out here, that’s exactly what I did. I even read books about ranching as a kid.”

“I didn’t know any of that.”

“Yeah, and we never seemed to have enough to eat, so I told my ma that when I had enough money to eat three meals a day, I would know I was truly rich.”

“And now you have that money,” she said softly.

He nodded. “I can tell you were raised differently. You didn’t have to work and you volunteered instead. Well, that’s just fine, but I’m not any less than you because I was poor and you were rich.”

She shook her head, amazed at the way his mind worked, or didn’t as the case may be. “I would never think you were less than me. I came out here to live the life I wanted to live and get out from under my mother’s thumb. I want to be here.”

He frowned at her. “I guess. I hope you still feel that way in a month or in two years when you have a little one pulling on your skirts.”

“I want children,” she said softly. “Just because I didn’t grow up with a houseful of siblings doesn’t mean I won’t be happy to have several children of my own.”

“There’s not a school close,” he said. “Nearest is at the church in Daffodil. Do you think you can teach the children?”

She nodded. “Yes, I’m certain I can. I speak several languages, and I can teach the girls the basics of being a wife. You can teach the boys to ranch as soon as they’re big enough. I can easily teach them to read, write, and do arithmetic. Maybe I should let them choose a language and teach it to them.”

“Why can you speak so many languages?” he asked.

She sighed. “My mother thought it was only proper for a young lady to be able to speak in several different foreign tongues. She thought I wouldn’t be able to marry well if I only spoke English. So I speak English, French, German, Spanish, and Norwegian. She chose Norwegian because one of the maids spoke it and she didn’t have to pay extra for the lessons.”

He shook his head. “And you don’t mind that there’s no one here to speak those languages with?”

She shrugged. “I’ll get your Sears and Roebuck catalog and order books in foreign languages, so I can read them. That’s good enough for me.”

“I don’t know if you should be wasting that kind of education being a rancher’s wife.”

“I don’t know why not? I don’t feel like I’m wasting anything. I am using so many things I’ve learned here.”

“I guess.”

When they got to town, he let her choose the things she wanted. “Just put them on my account,” he said.

She nodded, finding a pretty fabric with a floral print for the curtains. It just seemed perfect to her. Then she chose a few more seasonings and she purchased two more bread pans. The man ate bread like it was the only thing that kept him alive.

Carrying all those things out to the wagon, she climbed up beside him. “That’s all I need.”

“Next time you want to come to town, make a list for a few days, and we’ll get it all at once.” He obviously didn’t think that she’d bought enough to make it worth their while.

“I will,” she agreed.

When they got back to the ranch, she threw a quick lunch together, and they ate together. As soon as he was done,

he hurried outside to do whatever work he thought needed to be done. She'd lost track.

She washed his clothes from the day before, mixed the dough for five loaves of bread, which should keep him going a little longer, and then she finished scrubbing the walls.

When that task was complete, she sat at the table and carefully sewed the curtains. She only finished enough for one window, and there were four, so she knew she'd be sewing for a few days, but just hanging that one over the kitchen window brightened up the cabin so much.

It felt good to put her own mark on the cabin, so she could feel at home.

For supper, she made a pot roast with potatoes, onions, and carrots, and she served it with more of the fresh bread. The man seemed to inhale the bread, not even chewing the individual bites. He had gone through an entire loaf at a meal before, and she knew it would be good if she could keep him full for longer. His mood stayed so much more even.

When he came in for supper, he smiled. "I'm going through a lot more butter with all this bread. I have a churn somewhere."

She nodded. "I'll churn butter. I do like to have it when I cook, and for putting on bread and pancakes."

"Then I'll get it for you." He grinned at her. "Who would have thought a rich girl from the East could be such a good wife?"

Ethel smiled sweetly. "I knew I would be. I'm glad you're finally understanding that I'm a good wife."

"Oh, I knew you were a good wife the first time we... you know."

She wanted to roll her eyes, but her mother had drilled it into her head that rolling her eyes was improper. Rolling her eyes did seem to be the only proper response though.

Chapter Five

Ethel enjoyed church on Sunday. The preacher who had married them did a good job of spreading the message. This week he talked about the roles of husbands and wives, and she could see Walt puff up as the preacher talked about all the things a wife should do.

She sat quietly listening, mentally preparing for him to tell her all the ways she should improve on their way home. As much as she enjoyed Walt's attention in bed, she wasn't liking the man very much, and she knew that had to change.

When they reached the wagon after church, he helped her into it. "I really like that dress," he said. "It's pretty fancy for these parts, but it looks good on you."

She smiled. "Thank you."

The preacher had talked about men complimenting their wives. Maybe he'd listened to the part about husbands more carefully than she realized.

He got into the wagon beside her, and she could see he was fighting his hunger putting him in one of his bad moods. She pulled a piece of bread and some jerky from an oil cloth

bag she'd put under the seat. "Eat before we go," she said softly.

His eyes lit up when he saw the food. "With you around, I'll never be in a bad mood again," he said, eating the food she'd thought to bring. "Did you want some?" he asked, after he'd polished it all off.

She shook her head. "No, thank you. But there's more if you feel your mood slipping. I have a roast in the oven at home, all nice and warm and ready to eat. So you don't want to ruin your appetite, but you can have whatever it takes to keep your mood up."

He smiled. "Thank you for realizing what I needed for my moodiness and just providing it." He shook his head. "You know, I listened to everything the pastor said about being a good husband, and I realized I don't even do half of it. But when he talked about being a good wife, I couldn't think of a single thing you do wrong. I need to work on being a better husband to you."

She looked at him in surprise. "Really?" she asked. She thought she could be more loving when he had his moods, but instead, she just did all she could to prevent them. "I noticed

things I do wrong.” She didn’t mention that she had noticed many things he did wrong.

“Well, I can’t think of a thing you do wrong. Well, maybe more sweets would be nice...”

She shook her head, laughing. “I spent the whole week putting up jam and making pie filling. It might be nice to make a jelly roll today.”

“I’ve never had a jelly roll,” he said, but his mouth was already watering at the idea of something sweet.

“That’s what I’ll make then. I made it with the orphans once, and they begged for more. Of course, there wasn’t enough jam to make a second one. I only brought enough for the one.”

“You brought jam from your house?” he asked.

She nodded. “Sometimes I felt that the orphans should have more. Well, I always felt they should have more, but my mother would have been very angry if I’d done it often.”

“Your mother wasn’t generous?” he asked.

“Oh, she was generous with me. She didn’t think I should spend the time I did with the orphans. She wanted me

to stay home and go to an endless round of lunches and socials with her. I wanted to do some good for the community.”

“I thought most rich people wanted to throw their money around to seem powerful?”

She laughed. “My mother was not like that. She never once volunteered. She simply wanted to enjoy her life as a woman of means. I should write her and tell her I’m all right.”

“Why wouldn’t you be all right?” he asked, frowning.

“When I decided to come here, I left a letter on my pillow for my mother, instead of talking to her about it. She would have found a way to lock me in my room so I couldn’t leave. I had no desire to stay. I left before she woke up.”

“What about your father?” he asked. “I’ve never heard you mention him.”

“Father is very involved in his business ventures. I would see him while we were at church and for supper most evenings. He had nothing to do with me, and I really had nothing to do with him. Mother controlled everything.”

“That’s sad,” he said. “My father kept me going when I was having a difficult day.”

She shrugged. “That’s not how I was raised.”

Walt didn't like the idea that she hadn't told her parents that she was going to marry and let them weigh in on the matter. His parents had been part of his plans the entire time. "I do think you should write them and let them know you're all right then," he said softly. "How would you feel if our child did that?"

She shrugged. "I wouldn't like it of course, but I don't think I'd try to control my children to begin with. Mother should have given me more freedom. She would panic if I came home from working at the orphanage a little late, when she knew I walked back and forth and could easily run into an old school chum at any time."

"You didn't go off to school?" he asked.

"After I turned thirteen, I was sent off to school, which is where I made some real friends. But there are still the friends I knew when I was a little girl going to the town school there in Beckham."

He shook his head. "I don't want your parents to think you were coerced to marry me. Please send them a letter."

She nodded. "I will. I can see it's important to you."

"It is," he said.

When they arrived home, they had their lunch, and then Ethel started work on the jelly roll. Walt spent time at the table doing some whittling, and he seemed content to sit there while she worked.

“We’re just having more roast and potatoes for supper,” she told him. “I don’t plan to cook another big meal.”

He nodded. “That’s fine. As long as we’re having that jelly roll for dessert.”

She nodded. “We are.” She carefully spread some of the raspberry jam she’d made that week across the thin layer of sponge cake she’d prepared. When she rolled it all up into one beautiful log, he was impressed.

“I think maybe we should try it now.”

She shook her head. “You and your intense need for food. I want to make some whipped cream to go on top of it if we decide we need it,” she said. “Let me do that, and we’ll each try a small piece.”

“You’re the best wife ever!” he said, smiling happily.

“Why don’t you get the plates down while I whip the cream?” she asked.

He frowned. “But that’s women’s work.”

Ethel smiled sweetly. “It is women’s work. But this woman isn’t going to have a lot of energy for making pies and cakes if she doesn’t get at least a little help from the man who wants all sweets in the world.”

“Good point,” he said, going to the cabinet and getting two small plates as well as forks for them both. He then took a large serrated knife out and put it next to the jelly roll. “That knife should cut it easily.”

“Thank you. Did your penis shrink away and fall off when you did that?” she asked.

He frowned. “No...”

“Then I suppose you could get plates the next time I need them as well.” She turned her back to him to hide her smile. He needed to be trained to be a good husband. She could see that now.

Perhaps at her finishing school, she should have been taught how to train a husband to act appropriately instead of how to direct a maid in cooking and serving a four-course meal. She knew the training of the husband would be a great deal more valuable to her.

When she served the jelly roll, he exclaimed at how wonderful it was. “And we could do this with any flavor of jam or jelly, right?” he asked.

She nodded. “But at the moment, we only have raspberry jam.”

He stood. “I’ll be back in time for supper.”

“Where are you going?” she asked.

He didn’t respond, instead going out to the barn, and she saw him leave on a horse a short while later. The man had lost his mind. She was certain of it.

While he was gone, she hemmed the last of the curtains and hung them, really liking how the little cabin looked with the pretty curtains. She had enough fabric left that she planned to make a tablecloth out of some of the white fabric, but she would trim the edges with the floral fabric, leaving her with a beautiful tablecloth that would match the curtains.

When Walt came back thirty minutes later, he brought in several jars of different flavors of jam. “Widow Danbury puts up many different kinds of preserves, but then she sells them to anyone willing to pay for them. Now we have different kinds of jelly for our jelly rolls.”

Ethel couldn't help but laugh. The man's entire life revolved around eating, and she thought it was a very good thing she'd married him already knowing how to cook. If she hadn't known how, she would have had a very steep learning curve with a grumpy husband over her shoulder every step of the way.

"I'll make another jelly roll tomorrow, if you'd like," she said. "But know we're going to go through a lot more sugar and flour than you're expecting."

He frowned but then shrugged. "I'll have my pay from selling our steers in a few weeks," he said. "Then we'll get what we need."

"All right," she said sweetly, wondering how on earth this man had survived with no one to cook for him.

By the end of the week, they'd had five different types of jelly rolls, and he proclaimed each one better than the last. Saturday night as he polished off the blueberry roll, he grinned at her. "We are going to need more jam."

She shook her head. "I made a great deal of raspberry jam. Perhaps I could ask at church if anyone would like to trade for another flavor they made."

He nodded emphatically. “I think that’s a wonderful idea. And there’s a grove of apples on my land as well. We haven’t done one with apple yet.”

“If you’ll show me where they are, I’ll pick some. I can make some applesauce and can it as well. That will give you something else sweet.”

“I’ll take you there after supper, and I’ll even help you harvest them.”

“Well, aren’t you just a gentleman?” she asked, shaking her head. It was impossible to keep up with his hunger and sweet tooth. She hoped she could just send an apple some days. Surely that would be enough to keep him full between meals.

As soon as she’d finished washing dishes, he took her for a walk, holding her hand in one hand, and two large baskets in the other. “I love apples,” he said as they walked.

“And anything else that’s even the slightest bit sweet,” she said.

He nodded. “You know me well already.”

“When will there be a pot luck or social at the church?” she asked. It was already September, and if Montana was

anything like Massachusetts, the dances and socials would be common in the fall, after the harvest was all in.

“In a few weeks,” he said. “Preacher tries to give us enough time to harvest our crops before he expects us to come to church on Saturday nights.”

She nodded. “All right. We can do that.”

When they reached the apples, he climbed one of the trees, while she picked the fruit from the low-hanging branches. She didn't mind making preserves or applesauce with low-hanging fruit.

They walked back to the house with two huge baskets full of apples. “I'll probably come back tomorrow and get more,” she said. She couldn't even see that any of the apples had been harvested by looking at the trees.

“Tomorrow's Sunday,” he reminded her. “We'll both come back.”

“Sounds good to me,” she said with a smile. It was good to see him help her a little more when he wasn't working on the ranch.

At church, she talked to many of the women about having a jelly and jam exchange, and everyone seemed to like

the idea. “I got here late enough in the year, that I’m only going to have apple jelly and raspberry jam. I would love it if I could trade for something else.”

One of the other young wives, Hope, nodded. “My raspberries were all eaten by birds this year. I would love to trade blackberry jam and nectarine jelly for some raspberry. Those are my family’s favorite.”

Several of them agreed to bring what they were willing to trade the following week. Ethel was excited at the prospect of having several different types of preserves for Walt. He would just sit and eat them with a spoon if she left them out.

On their way home from church, she gave him bread and some jerky as she had the week before. “I talked to different women, who are all eager to do an exchange for different kinds of preserves,” she said, smiling.

“But then we’ll have less of the ones you made,” Walt said. “I want all of theirs and all of ours.”

She sighed. “It doesn’t work that way. If you want to give me some money to buy a few extra, I’d sure be willing to do that, but for the most part, we’re going to be trading.”

“All right,” he said. “Would five dollars be enough?”

She gaped at him. He wasn't one to spend money frivolously. "I think it would. I'm not sure if anyone will be willing to sell." She wouldn't sell the raspberry jam she'd made for anything. Too much hard work had gone into those preserves. Now, she would be willing to trade because she knew it would make Walt happy, but selling was absolutely out of the question. "Perhaps you could show me where Widow Danbury lives, and I'll befriend her."

"No one can befriend her. She doesn't like people," he said.

"I can try. I'll buy more of what she has with that five dollars."

He thought about it for a moment and then nodded. "I guess that would be all right then."

"In other words, you're willing for me to do whatever I have to do in the quest for sweets for you."

He nodded emphatically. "You're the best wife ever."

Chapter Six

All that week, Ethel worked on apples. She made applesauce, apple pie filling, and jelly. She felt like apples were coming out her ears by Saturday evening, when she served an apple jelly roll to Walt.

“It’s not as pretty as the others, but it tastes just as good,” was his response.

“It’s sweet, so you love it. I understand,” she said.

He grinned. “And it’s so much better when you ice it or add whipped cream.” He caught her hand and pulled her into his lap, even though she was attempting to clear the table.

“I try to do at least one of those,” she said. “I’ve thought about a runny icing or super thick whipped cream, so you could dip it. Does that sound good?”

“Oh, yes!” He kissed her cheek. “When I first saw you, I was convinced you wouldn’t be able to do all the cooking and all the cleaning and still attend your wifely duties, but you are simply amazing.”

She grinned at him, not sure if she should be annoyed or flattered. “I need to get the table cleared and the dishes done.

Then I need to decide which of the canned goods I'm taking to church tomorrow to trade."

He frowned. "Are you sure you can't just take some money and buy what the other women made?"

"I know of at least one family who wants some of the raspberry jam I put up. I promise I won't get rid of all of it. And I worked all week on the apples, but there are still plenty more I could harvest."

He grinned. "I do like all the apples you've canned. And taking one with me every morning to work has been helping a lot too."

"I'm going to make apple muffins for breakfast in the morning. I'll take an extra for before church, and jerky and a muffin for after church."

"How did I get so lucky to find a woman like you?" he asked.

She laughed and went into the kitchen to see to the dishes. The cellar had shelves along each wall, and the shelves were filling up with all of the canned goods she was putting up. When she put in a kitchen garden the next year, she knew she'd need a lot more.

Filling a basket with the jams, jellies, and pie fillings, she added a jelly roll she'd made just for good trading. Hopefully, she would be able to come home with lots of things she could use to make Walt treats, though he did seem to think he should have jelly rolls with every meal. She wasn't certain it had been a good idea to make it for him the first time. Now he seemed to think he needed it.

Once the basket was ready, she set it beside the front door, so it would be ready to take to church the next morning. "Is there anything in that basket that shouldn't be?" he asked.

"I think we might get better trades by trading just one of the jelly rolls. It's made with raspberry so I can make plenty more just like it," she said.

He frowned. "But...I want the jelly roll."

"I'll make more," she promised.

He sat for a moment staring at the basket like a petulant child. "It just doesn't seem right that your baking isn't all for me."

She sighed. "If you'll help me pick apples again tomorrow, I'll make you a raspberry jelly roll tomorrow."

He nodded. "That sounds fair."

Ethel was really worried about her husband at times. With eleven siblings, she would have thought he'd have learned to share as a child, but apparently not.

The following morning, after breakfast, she packed up several of the muffins she made for the trip to town. "Are those for me?" he asked.

"I made an extra dozen to trade at church today. I'm taking two for you as well, but not in the basket with the things I want to trade."

He nodded reluctantly. "Why does it seem like you're taking all the good stuff to trade and I'm being left with nothing?"

"I have no idea," she said. "I told you I'd make two sweet treats per week, and here you are, having had one per day for over a week, and you are upset that I'm going to trade some sweets for jam to make you more sweets!"

"I brought five dollars in change," he said. "You pay whatever you think the jams and jellies are worth."

She nodded, trying to smile sweetly, but there were times...

He put the basket into the back of the wagon, and she wore her favorite Saturday dress from home. “You look beautiful,” he said as he climbed into the wagon beside her. “One more month and I’m sending my steer on the train to Cheyenne, where they’ll be sold for top dollar. It’s been a good year.”

“Good,” she said. “The work you’ve put into this place is very apparent. I want to add a kitchen garden for next summer.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. Could you grow strawberries? I love strawberries.”

She smiled. “Yes, we’ll grow strawberries, carrots, potatoes, more raspberries, blackberries, watermelon, and anything else you can think of that you must have as part of your diet.”

“I’ll make you a list,” he said, only half-joking.

“I’m going to need more jars if I’m going to do a lot more with the apples. I brought all of the apple jelly and applesauce and apple pie filling I’ve made, knowing I can easily make more. That little grove of apple trees is really producing a lot of apples.”

“Good. I won’t worry that you’re letting all my applesauce go then.”

When they got to church, she left the basket in the wagon, feeling it would be more appropriate to do their exchange after church. It always took Walt a few minutes to eat before they went home anyway.

After the service, all of the women gathered around her. “I left my jars in the wagon,” Ethel said. “I’m excited all of you are interested in trading. Could we meet outside and get our trading done?”

The other women seemed as excited as Ethel felt. While Walt sat in the wagon and ate his muffin and jerky, the women all worked on trades. She got four jars of blueberry jam in exchange for the apple muffins and a promise she would bring the receipt to church the following week. And then she traded a dozen jars of blackberry jam for the jelly roll, again agreeing to bring the receipt to church.

When she said she had the money for some jars as well, the other women really got excited. They went home with dozens of jars of jam, and Walt was happy as a lark. She traded several jars of raspberry for nectarine jelly, and all of

the apple jelly and applesauce to various different women. They had a good variety by the time they left.

As they drove home, Walt grinned at her. “This was a brilliant idea.”

She nodded. “We have nothing apple left, but we’ll harvest some more apples this afternoon, and I’ll get our stockpile built back up. I do still want to meet Widow Danbury. Do you remember what she charges for each jar of preserves?”

“A nickel a jar, and that feels outrageous to me.”

“I spent as much as ten cents per jar at the church just now, so I will walk to her place and buy as much as she’ll sell to me.”

He looked at her for a moment and nodded. “I’ll give you twenty dollars, and you can buy whatever you want with it.”

“I don’t think even you can eat four hundred jars of jam and jelly in the next year. So let’s plan on five dollars, and that will get us a hundred jars.”

He frowned. “But if I want to eat a jelly roll every day for a year...”

“Your appetite is going to be the death of me.”

“You love cooking for me,” he said, looking at her with wide eyes.

She groaned. “I do enjoy cooking, but a jelly roll per day is a bit excessive for anyone.”

He grunted. “Fine. Whatever you say.”

He didn't unhitch the wagon after church, planning to just drive to the grove of apple trees. That way they could stand in the wagon and reach fruit that was higher in the trees, and they could carry more back to the house. From the sound of things, she'd sold every single jar of apple anything she'd made that week, and they would have to completely replenish.

For lunch, she made a simple stew that had been on the stove at a low temperature since they'd left that morning. She served a fresh loaf of bread along with the stew, and she planned to serve the jelly roll as dessert.

So as soon as the lunch dishes were done, they went back to the apple trees, and they picked as many apples as they could. The back of the wagon filled up quickly, and she shook her head. “I think I should plant a few more apple trees, and I

know I want more raspberry bushes. I should be able to keep you happy with the jelly rolls this year.”

“Do you think you can make more tomorrow?”

She sighed. “Tomorrow I will be making all of the apple things that I made last week. You’re going to have to wait for a day or two for more jelly rolls.”

“But...”

“I’ll make some applesauce to tide you over. And I need more jars. I’m absolutely amazed at how many jars I’m going through,” she said.

“Do we need to go to the store for more jars?” he asked. He looked particularly annoyed by the very idea.

“Not only for jars. We need more flour and sugar if you’re going to keep having sweets every time you want them.”

He nodded. “And I need my sweets, so we’ll go in the morning. Does that work for you?”

She nodded. “As long as I can get the laundry on the line before we leave,” she said. “Could you take me by the Widow Danbury’s house to talk to her about buying some of her preserves while we’re out?”

He nodded. "I suppose I can."

"I need to write a letter to my mother this evening to mail while we're in town," she said.

"You haven't done that yet?" It still bothered Walt that she'd left with only a note on her pillow. Her mother and father deserved to know that she was doing all right and hadn't married a bad person.

She shook her head, moving to the front of the wagon. "I will do it tonight." Ethel understood his concern, but she knew he didn't understand why she was so reluctant to mail her parents. He hadn't grown up as she did.

He helped her carry apples into the house by the basketful before he unhitched the wagon and put it in the barn for the night. He hoped she could recreate the magic she'd made with the other apples, but he had no idea how easy it would be to do. He could barely keep himself alive with his own cooking.

So once the supper dishes were done, and she had a big pot of applesauce going on the stove, she sat at the table and wrote the letter to her mother, hating that she would feel the need to give her mother her location.

Dear Mother,

I'm settled into my new home and my marriage here in Daffodil, Montana. I have married a rancher, who has the most incredible sweet tooth of anyone I've ever met. The man needs to be fed ten times a day.

I know you're unhappy with me for leaving as abruptly as I did, but there was never going to be a man who moved in your social circles who I was willing to marry. Walt, my new husband, is a good man, and we get along very well.

We have a small ranch in the middle of nowhere, and it's lovely to be able to choose what I want to do when I wake up in the morning. I've spent a great deal of time harvesting raspberries and apples since arriving and putting them up for the winter. My husband has an affinity for my jelly rolls, and I find myself making them almost daily.

Please give my love to Father. And please don't worry about me any longer. Address any letters to me to General Delivery, Daffodil, Montana. My new last name is Prewitt. I will answer them when I receive them, but we only get into town every couple of

weeks or so, other than for church. We can't pick up mail when we're there for church of course.

This will go out tomorrow, as we will be in town buying more jars for canning all of the apples we picked today.

All my love,

Ethel

She carefully read over her letter to make sure it sounded upbeat and cheery. Her mother would have a fit if she worried something was wrong with her.

When she went to bed that night, Ethel felt like sending the letter was the right thing to do. It wasn't something she wanted to do, but it was necessary for her mother's peace of mind.

As she snuggled with her husband, she thought about how different her life was in Montana than it had been in Massachusetts, and she realized she was happier in Montana. Much happier. No longer was she being dragged from social event to social event. No longer did she feel as if she was living under the watchful eye of someone who didn't trust her to do what was right.

As her apple-filled day turned into apple-filled dreams, she knew that she had done the right thing by moving to Montana, and it didn't really matter if her mother believed that or not. She was happy to live in a place where she had freedoms she hadn't had in Massachusetts.

For the first time in her life, she felt as if she was where she needed to be. As she lay there, listening to Walt snore softly, she thought about how happy she was there. If only she could spend a little less time baking, her life would be perfect. Of course, then his life wouldn't be perfect, and he needed to come first in her mind. And she would make sure he did.

Chapter Seven

On the way to town the following morning, they talked about what they each had planned for the week. “Will you need more help picking apples?” he asked.

“I shouldn’t. I cannot imagine needing to make any more jelly or apple pie filling than we have apples for now. Truly, we have been blessed with apples.”

He frowned. “But we shouldn’t let it go to waste, should we?”

“I don’t know that I can do much more with the apples. I guess if you want to buy me another twelve dozen canning jars, but then you’ll have mostly apple for the year.”

He pursed his lips, thinking about it. “I feel bad leaving apples that we could have used and letting them go to waste.”

She sighed. “I don’t know what I should do about that, but I’ve already done so much. I guess I haven’t made any apple butter.”

“And I do like apple butter...”

She groaned. “I’ll make you a deal. I’ll make whatever I can with the apples. If you want more, you can pick them and bring them to me, and I’ll make more with them. I do like to make apple crisps as well.”

Ethel knew he had no idea of the sheer amount of work that went into processing apples, but she was just as certain he didn’t care. He wanted to benefit from her work, but he didn’t want to help her.

Walt nodded. “Yes, I’ll agree to that. I’ll pick what I can, and you can process it. And I think I do want apple butter.”

She managed to stifle the groan that wanted to come out. They were going to need so many jars and so much sugar. She had a feeling if she made sugar water and put a funnel in Walt’s mouth to pour it into, he would be deliriously happy.

At the store, she got three fifty-pound bags of sugar, twelve dozen canning jars, and another fifty-pound bag of flour. The proprietor was an older gentleman. “My wife traded blueberry jam for your jelly rolls yesterday. If you ever make some extras, we could sure sell them in the store.”

“I don’t think I’ll have the time to do that. I need to be a full-time baker just to keep Walt happy.”

The man chuckled. "I can certainly believe that."

They stopped to see the Widow Danbury not far from the ranch. The two of them went to the door together, and they discussed what they needed in the way of jams and jellies. Mrs. Danbury opened her cellar and led Walt and Ethel down to where she kept her jams and jellies.

"How much?" Ethel asked. "You have so many to choose from."

"A nickel each," the woman said. "Are you looking to buy many?"

"Walt wants all of the jam in Montana because I've been making him jelly rolls, and he can't seem to stop eating them."

Mrs. Danbury laughed. "That sounds like a man. My husband was like that as well. If it was sweet, he was going to eat it, and that's all there was to it."

"I guess I should be content knowing that I'm keeping him happy."

"That's easier said than done, though, isn't it?" Mrs. Danbury shook her head. "My grandchildren come to visit, and the first thing they do is pick through all my jars, so they

can decide what they want to keep and what they don't care for."

"I don't have many jars of blackberry jam, so I think I would like to buy a couple dozen of those, if you don't mind."

"All of these are for sale. I'm thrilled to sell you as many as you want."

"Oh, good. It's becoming impossible to keep this man in jelly rolls."

"You'll have to share your receipt for those," Mrs. Danbury said.

"I'd be glad to."

It took Walt three trips up the stairs to carry all their purchases to the wagon. "I'm so glad I got to meet you," Ethel said. "I may have to come back for more."

"Oh, I saw the way your man's eyes lit up when you were picking jellies out. You'll be back."

Ethel laughed. "I really don't know how we'd make it through the winter without your hard work."

Mrs. Danbury's face grew serious. "I know this is your first winter here, but you can expect our first freeze any day

now. If there are more fruits you want to harvest, it's time to do it."

"Thank you for that advice. I'll have to bring you an apple pie soon."

"Apple?" Mrs. Danbury asked. "I don't have any apple trees. If you have any extra apples when you're finished, I'd sure take some. Or some preserves. I do love apple jelly on my toast in the mornings."

Ethel smiled. "I'll make you a gift basket. I'm doing applesauce, apple pie filling, apple jelly, and apple butter. But we have more apples than one person can put up."

"Well, why don't I just come and help you then?" Mrs. Danbury looked truly excited at the idea of the two of them working together.

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to do that!"

"You'll share your receipt for jelly rolls and a bit of the jelly with me, right?"

"Of course!"

"Then let's go. Your man can bring me home when he finishes work for the day."

“Sounds good. I’m sure he won’t mind. Would you like to have lunch with us?”

“Oh, that would be wonderful. I eat so many meals alone that I would be honored to share one with you.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” Ethel said. “I have a beef pot pie in the ice box, just waiting to be baked. I’ll start that when we get home, and then I’ll start peeling apples. You would be shocked if you could see the sheer amount of apples that need to be processed.”

“It sounds like I may be needed all week!” Mrs. Danbury looked so excited that even if Ethel hadn’t needed the help, she wouldn’t have told her.

When they got out to the wagon, Ethel explained that Mrs. Danbury was going to help her with the processing of the apples. He nodded. “Sounds good to me. That means more apple pies and more apple jelly rolls.”

Ethel and Mrs. Danbury exchanged a look, and suddenly the older woman was laughing so hard it didn’t look as if she could stop. Ethel found herself laughing as well. According to her mother, laughing was better than rolling her eyes.

When they got to the house, Ethel hurried inside while Walt was helping Mrs. Danbury to the ground. Ethel put the pie in the oven, and then she looked around to make sure everything was neat and tidy. It all was, and she wondered what she was worried about.

While they waited for the pie to bake, Walt carried in all their purchases from the day, including what they'd purchased from Mrs. Danbury herself.

Then Mrs. Danbury started looking around, and she saw all the baskets of apples waiting to be processed. "Oh, dear! You do need help!" Mrs. Danbury said. "I'll start peeling apples while we wait for that pie to be ready."

"I'm going to join you in just a minute," Ethel said. "I hope you'll try a piece of jelly roll as dessert. Then you'll know if you like my receipt or not."

Mrs. Danbury smiled. "I would like that a great deal."

While the two women peeled apple after apple, Walt carried in the big bags of sugar and flour. "What's for supper?" he asked.

"We haven't even had lunch yet," Ethel said, tossing him an apple, and he happily crunched into it. "You're going

to need to take Mrs. Danbury home after you're finished with work for the day."

"I'll do that," he said.

That day they were able to make twenty jars of apple butter, and they canned another fifty jars of applesauce. "It's a good thing you got more jars today," Mrs. Danbury said. "I don't think I've ever seen so many apples."

Ethel kept her face straight as she said, "Walt is convinced it would be wasteful to leave any apples on the trees, so he's going to harvest whatever is left on his own, and I promised to process it all."

"You are a better wife than I ever dreamed of being," Mrs. Danbury said. "You are taking care of that man in a way even a mother wouldn't."

"It's my job as his wife to keep him comfortable and content," Ethel said. "I enjoy cooking a great deal, but I think cooking for him may be the death of me."

Mrs. Danbury laughed. "Sounds like he's a special kind of hungry."

"Definitely." Ethel got up to check the pot pie, realizing it was done. She took it out of the oven and set it on the edge

of the stove where it wouldn't get too hot.

She cleared the table of the apples they'd already peeled and set it. Mrs. Danbury, being a woman and understanding the work involved, asked how she could help.

"There's nothing to do but set the table, and that's almost done. I put some coffee on when we got home. Would you like a cup? I can offer coffee, water, or milk."

"Milk would be wonderful. I haven't had it in ages since my hands hurt too much to milk the cows in the cold weather."

"Milk it is! I'll even send a pitcher of it home with you, if you'd like. We end up feeding some of it to the pigs and chickens every day."

"I would be thrilled if you sent some home with me. You're a good neighbor to have, Ethel."

Ethel smiled. "I certainly try to be." She cut four slices of pie, and served one each to her and Mrs. Danbury and two to Walt, who spotted that she was serving and immediately washed his hands.

When he was seated, Ethel served everyone and poured coffee for her and Walt and a glass of milk for Mrs. Danbury. As soon as they'd prayed, Ethel asked, "So you can't milk

cows any longer. Are there any other chores you need done that you can't do? You need to be asking us for help when necessary. We are your closest neighbors."

Mrs. Danbury smiled. "Most other things I can do, or my grandchildren visit once a month and do for me. The girls make sure the house sparkles, and the boys get the yard looking good. I sold off most of my land to your husband when he moved here, so I don't have to worry about a large plot of land anymore."

"I didn't know that!" Ethel said. "I feel like I'm coming in during the middle of everyone's stories, and I don't have all the information from the beginning."

Mrs. Danbury laughed. "Most people around here like to talk, so you'll be caught up in no time."

While they'd been talking, Walt had eaten both pieces of the pie Ethel had served, and he held out his plate for more. "One piece or two?" she asked.

He held up two fingers, and Ethel cut two pieces for him, sitting back down and taking her first bite of her piece. "This is delicious," Mrs. Danbury said. "Now, I'm going to need a receipt for your beef pot pie."

“I’ll write it down before Walt takes you home,” Ethel promised. She’d made many beef pot pies at the orphanage because they could make the meat stretch easier by adding more vegetables.

“Your mother must be an excellent cook!” Mrs. Danbury said.

Ethel laughed. “My mother couldn’t cook a meal if there was a gun held to her head. She couldn’t even clean a room properly. There have always been servants to do for her.”

“Then where did you learn to cook?” Mrs. Danbury asked, obviously intrigued.

“I volunteered for an orphanage in Massachusetts before I came here. One of my tasks was cooking with the orphans, so I had our family cook teach me the basics, and from there, I taught the orphans. It’s not nearly as difficult as it would be if I hadn’t had the attention of our cook. She was truly marvelous, and made me feel as if I could cook anything.”

Walt paused in eating with his fork in the air. “There are things you can’t cook?” He looked perplexed by the idea.

“There are things I’ve never attempted to cook, so those are the things I’m talking about.” His wide-eyed look amused

Ethel a great deal, but she didn't dare laugh at him.

“What's for supper?” he asked.

She'd been planning to make the pot pie last for two meals, but that obviously wouldn't work. “How would you feel about pork with potatoes and carrots?” she asked. She had all of those things in the basement waiting to be cooked, and then she wouldn't have to worry about them. She could put all in one pot, and they would cook while she worked on processing apples with Mrs. Danbury.

He nodded. “With gravy?”

“Yes, with gravy.”

“And a jelly roll for dessert?”

“Only if you're willing to eat apple jelly,” she said. “I'm not opening a jar that took someone a long time to can, just so you can have a jelly roll at a time when you have jelly rolls growing out of your ears.”

He had finished eating, and he sprang to his feet. “Apple is perfect. I love apple jelly!” And then he was gone.

Ethel looked at Mrs. Danbury and shook her head. “Do you think he'll ever be satisfied?” she asked.

Mrs. Danbury shook her head. “No, I don’t believe he will. Do you pack him snacks for while he works?”

Ethel nodded. “I send him with an apple and jerky every morning and every afternoon. Otherwise, he gets too cranky to be around.”

“You do have your work cut out for you. But anytime you have a big cooking day with preserves or anything else for that matter, send him to get me. I’m happy to help, and it’s nice to have another woman around for company. I see so few people since I had to quit hitching up the horses.”

“I wondered why I hadn’t seen you at church,” Ethel said. “You don’t seem like a nonbeliever. Would you go with us if we stopped to get you on Sunday mornings?”

Mrs. Danbury had tears in her eyes as she nodded. “Then I would be able to talk to people. My grandchildren make sure I have everything I need, but...They don’t seem to understand I need people around me as well.”

“Then we’ll work together as often as we can, and we’ll stop to get you for church on Sundays.”

“You don’t mind spending your time with an old woman like me?”

“I think you are a joy to be around. I get lonely too.”

The rest of the day, other than the few minutes it took to get the pork in the oven, was spent working on the preserves. There was so much to do, and even with two of them, they spent the whole day just working on apple jelly. When they had it all canned and ready to be taken to the cellar, Mrs. Danbury sat down, looking tired, while Ethel packed all the jars carefully into a crate that she'd have Walt carry down later. He'd gotten much better about helping with chores like that after she'd pointed out that his penis hadn't fallen off from doing women's work.

“Would you like to stay for supper, Mrs. Danbury?” Ethel asked as she wiped down the counters and the table, where there had been some spilling.

Mrs. Danbury shook her head. “No, I should be getting home. All that work plumb wore me out.”

Ethel smiled. “But it's a good tired, isn't it?” She packed up a basket for the older woman to take home with her, filling it with six jars of the apple jelly they'd made, a jar of applesauce, a portion of the jelly roll she'd made for supper, and she even slipped in the last two pieces of the pot pie from lunch.

When she put the basket on the table in front of Mrs. Danbury, the older woman smiled. “You even included supper for me tonight.”

“Of course, I did. Thank you so much for all your help today.”

“What are we making tomorrow?” Mrs. Danbury asked.

“I think tomorrow will be pie filling,” Ethel said. “But if you don’t feel like you can do it, you are not obligated. I’d love to have you, but I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I promise I won’t come if I don’t think I can help. But...I may come and just keep you company, if you wouldn’t mind that.”

“That would be fine. Even if you wanted to work for an hour and sit for two hours, I’d have help. And either way, I’d have company, and I think that’s what we both need the most.”

Ethel actually hadn’t felt lonely in the time she’d been in Montana, but that was all right. Mrs. Danbury was lonely, and she had a way of fixing that. She’d always had a great deal of compassion for the elderly.

Chapter Eight

As soon as Mrs. Danbury left to go home, Ethel made the gravy. She liked the idea of the older woman helping her with the processing of all the apples, but if it was easier for her to just sit and chat, Ethel wouldn't tell her no.

They'd gotten a great deal more done that day than she ever would have been able to do alone, and she was pleased. It had gone very well, and they had enough apple jelly to last until the next autumn, and she was sure that would have Walt very happy.

By the time Walt returned, the table was set and supper was on. She'd poured them each a glass of milk, and she'd even cut the jelly roll and had some small plates there to eat it on.

When Walt walked inside the house, he had a huge smile on his face. "She loves you. I have never seen that grumpy woman so happy."

Ethel smiled. "She's lonely. She doesn't have much to do, and she hasn't had anyone to talk to but her grandchildren

for years. We're going to start driving her to and from church on Sundays."

He nodded. "We can do that."

"And I'd like you to fetch her before you head out tomorrow morning. That way, if she feels up to helping me with the apple pie filling tomorrow, she can do that, but if she doesn't, she can sit and talk to me while I work tomorrow. She has a great many stories to tell."

He frowned. "I never stopped to listen to them."

"That's all right. I'll listen enough for both of us."

He washed his hands and sat down at the table, looking out over what looked to be an incredible meal. "No bread?" he asked.

She blinked a few times. "I didn't have time today. But I did put up enough apple jelly to last us until next fall."

"I guess that's all right then."

"I'll make sure to get the bread mixed while you're fetching Mrs. Danbury in the morning, and then I'll for sure get it done. I'm sorry, but there just aren't enough hours in the day sometimes."

“I understand,” he said, but he did look slightly disappointed.

“But I made the jelly roll,” she told him.

His face transformed to one of utter delight. “You do know how to take care of me.”

Ethel nodded. “It’s my job, and I will always do my best at it.”

He went for more apples after supper, and she didn’t let herself think about how much work was still involved. The man was insatiable about his food, and though she was glad she was so crucial to his life, it would be nice to have a minute or two to sit down.

Mrs. Danbury came over every day that week, and though some days she could do very little, she was always willing to sit and peel apples while they talked. It was a rare moment when Ethel had a chance to say something, but that was all right. She knew the older woman had a great deal of stories bottled up inside her, and she couldn’t wait to share them all.

By Sunday, Ethel had processed all the apples, including the last ones Walt had picked from the trees. There

was so much she was certain even Walt couldn't eat it all in a year, but she didn't want to tell him that. He'd take it as a challenge.

Many hours had been spent the night before writing down receipts that had been promised to different ladies at church, and she'd made sure to write extra receipts because she knew when she delivered the ones she had, more people would want them.

They left ten minutes early for church and stopped at Mrs. Danbury's house. The older woman came out of her house wearing a very pretty dress and had a beautiful shawl spread over her shoulders. "Oh, you look so pretty this morning, Mrs. Danbury. Did you make that shawl?"

Mrs. Danbury nodded happily. "I did."

"Is it knitted or crocheted?" Ethel knew that people did both with yarn and came up with beautiful projects, but she'd never learned either.

"It's crocheted," Mrs. Danbury said. "Have you never learned to crochet?" She looked genuinely astonished that Ethel didn't seem to know how to do it.

“There was no one to teach me,” Ethel said softly. “I would love to learn though.”

“And you will,” Mrs. Danbury said. “Do we have more apples to put up?”

Ethel smiled. “We’re finished with apples for the year. I don’t think even Walt could eat all we have available.”

“Is that a challenge?” Walt asked.

Ethel sighed. “No, it’s not. You may not take it as one.”

Mrs. Danbury laughed. “I’m going to teach you to crochet and knit this week.”

“I have to do my fall cleaning this week,” Ethel said. “Now that we’ve finished the processing for the year, I want to have my house as clean as possible. Then we’ll do that next week.”

Mrs. Danbury frowned. “Well, I don’t have the strength to clean much, but I’d sure like to keep you company while you get the cabin under control.”

“I would adore that. You’re my first friend out here, and I’m so happy to have found you.”

Ethel pretended she didn’t see the tears in the older woman’s eyes. It didn’t hurt her to be kind to the older

woman, but it made such a difference in Mrs. Danbury's life. She could see it.

At church, Mrs. Danbury sat with the other widows. There was a small group of them that sat together every week, and they all welcomed Mrs. Danbury back to their fold.

Ethel was so happy to see the older woman with her friends. She hurried around giving receipts to the women who had asked for them and was empty-handed by the time she took her seat beside Walt.

“Did you give all of those receipts away?” he asked.

She nodded. “Now I don't have to worry about sharing receipts for a while. At least I hope I don't.”

The sermon that day was on loving thy neighbor, and Walt looked prouder and prouder with each word the preacher spoke. After church, Walt leaned down to Ethel and whispered, “You are exactly what the preacher was talking about today. You have loved thy neighbor in a way I never would have even thought of.”

“I just do what I think is right,” she said, feeling a bit embarrassed by the compliment.

He shook his head. "I'm going to go eat my jerky and my apple."

She nodded, not planning to leave until Mrs. Danbury was finished talking to everyone around her. Her neighbor was in her element, and she wasn't about to drag her away.

The preacher's wife appeared by Ethel. "I want to thank you for ensuring Mrs. Danbury gets to church. She's been sorely missed around here."

"Just being neighborly," Ethel said.

"This week we start our quilting. All the women in the congregation are invited, and we get together at one-thirty every Wednesday afternoon. Perhaps you could bring Mrs. Danbury if you could get away. I've heard rumors about what it takes to feed your husband, so I'll understand if you can't leave."

Ethel nodded. "I'll talk to him. I can have lunch waiting for him with no problem, but I'm not sure he'll want me driving this far."

"You just come if you can."

"I will. And I promise, if I am able to come, Mrs. Danbury will be at my side."

“I’m so glad you’ve moved here and joined our congregation.” With that, the preacher’s wife, whose name Ethel still didn’t know, turned and walked away.

Ethel took the moment to go out to the wagon where Walt was eating and talk to him about the quilting circle. She’d never done anything like it, but it sounded like fun to her, and she knew it would be a great way to get to know the other ladies in the area.

She got into the wagon and sat beside him, noting that his jerky was mostly gone. “I have something I want to ask you about. There’s a quilting circle at the church every Wednesday afternoon. I would like to learn to drive so I can come and bring Mrs. Danbury.”

He frowned. “What about my lunch? And supper?”

She smiled. “I’ll make your lunch before I go, and I’ll make sure I have something mostly ready for supper. I can have a pot pie ready to put into the oven as soon as I get home.”

Finally, he nodded. “All right. I think you should have some time to get to know the other ladies around here.”

She kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Walt!”

He smiled happily, thrilled he could make her happy for once. He knew she went out of her way to make sure he always had good food to eat, so he could make sacrifices for once.

A moment later, Mrs. Danbury hurried out of the church. “Oh, you’re still here!”

Ethel smiled as Walt got down to help the older lady up. “We wouldn’t leave you. I just wanted to make sure it was all right with Walt if I drove us to the quilting circle on Wednesday afternoons, and he thinks it’s a great idea.”

“Us?” Mrs. Danbury asked, her eyes filling with tears once again. “You thought of me?”

Ethel nodded. “The preacher’s wife invited me personally, and she told me to be sure to bring you. I wasn’t the only one thinking of you.”

“Oh, it does my heart good to know I’m not forgotten.”

“You are not!” Ethel said emphatically.

Walt got back into the wagon. “Let’s head home!”

“What are your plans for the afternoon?” Mrs. Danbury asked.

“I’m going to do the laundry today, so I don’t need to worry about it tomorrow, and I need to make supper of course.”

“And a jelly roll!” Walt said.

“I was thinking of making a cake today.”

He frowned. “I’d rather have a jelly roll.”

“I guess I’m making a jelly roll.” Ethel shook her head. “I’ve never known anyone who loved jelly rolls like Walt does. I will probably start on my fall cleaning today as well. I had it planned out to spend the whole week on it, but if we’re going to be at the quilting circle, I should make sure I get it started today.”

Mrs. Danbury smiled. “If only I still had the energy I had when I was your age!”

“Would you like to come for Sunday dinner?” Ethel asked.

Mrs. Danbury thought about it for a moment. “No, I think I’ll go home today. You should have some time with your husband on Sundays with as hard as you both work all week. Thank you for inviting me though.”

“I’m so happy you’re my friend!” Ethel said.

“I couldn’t have asked for a better friend,” Mrs. Danbury said. “I’ll be waiting tomorrow morning for Walt to come and fetch me, and I’ll do some to help, but mostly I will keep you company all week as you get your fall cleaning done.”

“I couldn’t ask for more,” Ethel said. She loved how willing to do everything her friend was, but she certainly understood the limitations she must have as an older woman.

They dropped Mrs. Danbury at her home with a promise to be back for her the next morning.

“I cannot believe how much you enjoy being with that cantankerous old woman,” Walt said as they drove the short distance from Mrs. Danbury’s to their own house.

Ethel laughed. “She’s never been the least bit cantankerous around me. Unlike my husband who gets crabby when he doesn’t get to eat every five minutes.”

He laughed. “You’ve solved that problem, haven’t you?”

“I do seem to have made it so you are less cranky around me. Having you in a good mood is worth the extra work I put in to make that happen.”

The rest of the day was spent cooking, baking, doing laundry, and washing down the walls on one side of the cabin. There was so much work to be done that week, that Ethel felt overwhelmed, but she would work hard to get the week started right because she truly wanted to be able to take Mrs. Danbury quilting, where her friends would be on Wednesday. The sweet woman deserved a great deal more time and effort than her grandchildren were able to give her.

Chapter Nine

With very little help from Mrs. Danbury, Ethel was able to keep to her schedule, and have all of her Wednesday chores done before lunch. Walt had given her a quick driving lesson the previous evening, and the wagon stood ready for them to drive to town.

“I’m taking one of my jelly rolls for a sweet treat for us all,” Ethel said. “It can be cut as thin as it needs to be so everyone can have some.”

“That’s a wonderful idea. We always used to have coffee for our quilting afternoons, and I wouldn’t be surprised if someone else brought a treat as well,” Mrs. Danbury told her.

Ethel had made sandwiches for lunch that day, and there was enough food left for Walt to make himself two more sandwiches if the two she’d made weren’t enough. She and Mrs. Danbury ate before Walt arrived home for lunch, and they left shortly after he got there.

“And you have something planned for supper?” he called as she and Mrs. Danbury went to the wagon.

“Yes, there’s a pot pie in the ice box that I’ll put in the oven as soon as I get home.”

“I’ll make sure I eat a little extra jerky!” he called back.

The two of them set out for Daffodil, and Mrs. Danbury was positively giddy. “I haven’t been to a quilting circle in so long, I’m not sure I’ll remember how to use my needle,” she said.

Ethel nodded. “I’ve never been to one, and I’m excited to see how I like it. I’m just glad Walt didn’t spot the jelly roll I’m taking to town. He would have been so disappointed that it wasn’t for him.”

“I have never in my life seen a man eat the way he does. And he works so hard, he seems slimmer by the day.”

“I know,” Ethel said. “But food for today is taken care of, so I don’t need to worry about that as we drive to town.”

The quilting circle was all Ethel had thought it would be and more. So many stories were told as they all took their portion of the quilt and applied their needles and thread.

One other woman had brought a cake, and Ethel brought her jelly roll. The preacher’s wife suggested they start

a sign-up sheet for which weeks they would bring treats, so the burden wouldn't always be on the same people.

Ethel put her name in for the following week, and she was happy she did. She did enjoy baking and having someone new try the treats she made.

After the circle was over, Ethel and Mrs. Danbury set out for home. While the circle had only lasted two hours, they had talked for a short while after, and Ethel knew she wouldn't be home in time to have supper on the table at five-thirty. Thankfully, she'd made several loaves of bread that morning. Walt could gnaw on one while she got supper ready.

She stopped at Mrs. Danbury's to drop her off and then drove as quickly as she could to the house. She didn't want Mrs. Danbury to realize that she was running late.

When she walked in the door, Walt wasn't there yet, and she built the fire up a bit more, and she added the pie for supper. Then she did the lunch dishes, hating that she'd waited so long to wash them. She preferred to have all the dishes washed before she even thought about the next meal.

When Walt walked in, she had four pieces of bread cut and buttered for him. "Supper is going to be a bit later than usual, but I have some bread for you to eat while we wait."

He nodded, reaching for the plate where she'd piled his slices. "How was the quilting circle?"

"It was so much fun. I've never done anything like that before, and I was surprised at how willing to work together the women were. It was truly a bright spot in my day," she said.

"I'm glad you liked it. I take it that means you'll go back next week?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'll need to work harder to make the food work out and have it done for you while you're gone, but I do want to go every week."

He shook his head. "You had bread waiting. I'll be fine until supper is ready," he told her.

"There's still a basket of apples down in the cellar if you want something sweet as well."

"And a jelly roll for dessert?" he asked.

She nodded. "There's always a jelly roll for dessert," she told him with a smile.

"That's all I need to be happy," he said, grinning at her.

The following week, while Ethel was gone for the quilting circle, Walt decided it was time to give in and wear his winter gloves. He had no idea where Ethel would have put them as she'd completely rearranged the house to suit her better.

He ended up looking in one of her carpet bags that was shoved way under the bed, thinking she may be using it for storage of winter things. Her system made no sense to him, so he was simply searching everywhere.

When he pulled the carpet bag out, he didn't think it could be the right place because there was something heavy in it, but he looked anyway. He stared in shock at what he found there. He didn't have an eye for jewelry, but even to his untrained eye, he knew he was looking at a fortune in necklaces, bracelets, rings, and earrings. He'd never seen anything like it.

He pushed the bag back under the bed, but not out of his mind. He couldn't find his gloves that day, but he knew he'd found something important.

All the while he worked for the rest of the day, the bag of jewelry was all he could think about. Was she thinking about leaving him? It was the only reason he could think of

that she would have brought all those expensive things and not told him. Why would she stay when she could be living a life of luxury instead of merely surviving in a tiny cabin with him?

Surely, she would have said something if they were not there for her to be able to leave.

It was all he could think about all day. Nothing else was able to penetrate through the wall of the jewelry. He worked harder than ever before, trying to throw himself into the physical work of the ranch, so he wouldn't think so much about her leaving him, but it was the only thing that stuck with him.

And to his surprise, he wasn't worried about who would feed him if she left. He was more worried about what he would do without her. His bed would be lonely, sure, but more than that, his life would be lonely.

He hadn't really thought about how he felt about Ethel until he realized she could leave him at any moment. How would he keep going with the love of his life gone to do whatever she wanted to do that didn't include cooking for a crazy man who thought about nothing but food and sweets? Nothing but where his next meal came from?

With all the languages she spoke, her talents were wasted on the frontier with him. She should be traveling Europe and buying expensive dresses and gowns. She should be dining with princes and kings and going to endless rounds of parties.

It didn't matter to him that she'd told him she'd come West to escape the endless round of parties her mother thought she should attend. She had a way to escape him, and the very idea of her leaving him turned his stomach. He didn't want to eat. He'd never been able to even think such a thing before, but without her, life wasn't worth going on. He wanted her to stay and have children with him.

Not run away and do whatever she wished. He'd thought she was there forever, and would never be able to leave. The money that jewelry could bring in was something completely different.

When he went home from work that evening, and found her standing over the stove, frying up something for their supper, and she smiled at him, he was sure it was her last night with him. She'd leave, and he'd spend the rest of his life alone, pining for the wife she'd been.

He didn't even care what she was making for supper, and that was a clear indication to him that he was in love, and he had to find a way to keep her with him. But she had to want to be there, and not stay as his prisoner.

"I thought I'd do fried eggs, potatoes, and bacon for supper. I know it's not what I usually make, and I'm sorry for that. I do have fresh bread, and I'll make toast to go with it," she promised.

He nodded. "I'd like that." Instead of sitting down immediately, he washed his hands. "Is there anything you need me to carry down to the cellar?" he asked.

"No," Ethel said. "All the preserves are down there already. I made a blueberry jelly roll tonight. I hope you'll be happy with that."

"Of course," he said. "You know I'm happy with anything you cook, but especially jelly rolls. Though, if you want to take a break from making sweets all the time you can. I feel like I've been too demanding."

Ethel stared at him in shock. "Who are you?" she asked softly.

He chuckled. “I know I obsess over sweets, but you shouldn’t have to do extra work just because I like them so much.” He wasn’t even hungry for them at the moment. Instead, he wanted his beautiful wife to agree to stay.

“I don’t mind making you jelly rolls,” she said softly. “I tease you about them because they’re all you talk about, but you work hard, and you deserve a treat as often as I can make them.”

She put their meal on the table and sat down beside him. “Is there something else going on? Are you upset about something? Are you getting sick?”

He shook his head, taking her hand in his before praying. “Heavenly Father, I ask that you bless this meal, and bless the wonderful woman who made it. Help her to know how very much I care about her in a way that’s not at all linked with food. I pray all this in the name of your son, Jesus, Amen.”

She looked at him for a moment longer than was normal after he’d finished the prayer. He filled his plate, only taking half the amount as usual because he wanted there to be enough for her, and he mostly felt like he ate everything, and she was left to lick the dish clean to have what she wanted.

She watched him push his food around on his plate, letting it slowly grow cold. “What’s wrong with you tonight?” she asked, reaching over to touch the back of her hand to Walt’s forehead. “You don’t feel warm.”

“There’s nothing wrong. I just realized that I’m asking you to do a great deal more work than most newlyweds have to do. Just processing all of those apples was ridiculous.”

She wasn’t certain what to say to him. “Are you not hungry?”

He shrugged. “I’m really not tonight.” His stomach growled loudly at that moment belying his claim. “Okay, I’m a little hungry.”

He focused on his meal after that, making sure to eat enough that his stomach wouldn’t start fussing again.

While she did the dishes, he watched her, realizing that the quality of her every day clothes was better than the quality of his Sunday clothes. She never should have married a man on the edge of the frontier, who had to work so many hours a day for his living. She deserved better, and he realized that he was going to have to be the one to give her a nudge, and send her in the right direction.

After the dishes were done, he invited her to sit with him. “I know I’m a lot of work. I do. But I don’t want to lose you. I worry that you’ll leave me and go on to live the life you should have lived. But life wouldn’t be special without you.”

She frowned, confused over why he was saying all this. He’d always been thankful for the meals she made, but never like this. It was as if something had happened to transform the man into someone else.

“I don’t have any plans to go anywhere,” she said softly. “I’m enjoying all the time in town with the quilting circle. You know I enjoy myself with you at night. There’s nothing about you that doesn’t make me happy, so I’m not certain why you’re so worried about this.”

He shrugged. “I just know you are lonely.”

“I am lonely. Sometimes. One of the women in church has a kitten she said I could have. Would you mind if I got a kitten? Then I wouldn’t be nearly as lonely.” Not that she’d really been lonely since Mrs. Danbury had started coming over every day.

He thought for a moment. He wasn’t fond of having pets in the house, but if a kitten would make it harder for her to go, then he was all for it. “A house cat?” he asked.

She nodded. "I've never been allowed to have a pet, and I think a kitten would make me very happy." Whatever he had going on at that moment, she was certain that a kitten wasn't too much to ask.

"Get a kitten. As soon as it's ready. Did she say how old it was?"

Ethel nodded. "She said four weeks."

"It'll need its mama for another couple of weeks, but you are more than welcome to bring it home after that. Would that make you happy?" he asked.

"I'm not sure where this is coming from, Walt, but I am happy. Would I be a little happier with a kitten? Sure, I would. But I'm not unhappy. I'm much happier here than I was back in Beckham."

He wished he could believe her. But a kitten would be harder to leave than a man who needed to be fed every few hours. Surely she would stay once she had a kitten.

"Did you ever receive a letter back from your mother?" he asked.

Ethel shook her head. "I half expect her to be there every time I go to town."

“How would you feel about that?” Walt asked, looking very concerned.

“About like you feel when I tell you I didn’t bother to make supper or jelly rolls.”

“That bad?”

Chapter Ten

The following week, Mrs. Danbury finally got Ethel to sit down long enough to teach her to crochet. But as soon as Ethel sat, she handed her a small package wrapped in brown paper.

“What’s this?” Ethel asked, surprised.

“Open it and see!” Mrs. Danbury was smiling, and it was infectious as far as Ethel was concerned. She loved seeing her friend happy.

Ethel opened it slowly, realizing no one had ever really given her gifts that were wrapped. As a child, she’d simply been handed things her mother wanted her to have. She untied the strings that held the paper in place and then she opened the paper.

Inside was a shawl almost exactly like the one Mrs. Danbury had worn, and she’d admired so much.

“It’s beautiful!”

“You like it?”

“I love it! Oh, thank you, Mrs. Danbury. I’ll wear it with pride.” Ethel leaned forward and hugged her friend. This simple gift meant more to her than all the jewelry she’d ever owned put together. Because the jewelry was purchased to help her project an image, while the shawl was made with love.

She caught on to crocheting quite easily and smiled at the easy, repetitive motions. “I like this!” she said.

Mrs. Danbury smiled. “Good. Your husband needs a new scarf. You should make him one for Christmas.”

“Well, right now, I can make a chain. Perhaps you can teach me to turn this chain into a scarf.”

“I would be honored.”

Most of her week was spent cooking and cleaning, but Ethel made sure she had an hour each day for Mrs. Danbury to work with her on her crocheting. She knew it made the old lady happy to be able to pass on something she was so skilled at doing.

They had their first bad snowstorm of the winter that weekend, and Sunday morning, Ethel woke up, looking out the window. “I don’t think we can go to church today.”

Walt shook his head. “No, I don’t think we can either.”

She shrugged. “That’s all right. A day when we’re trapped inside is a good day for baking.”

While he sat and whittled the day away, she baked six loaves of bread, one of which disappeared with lunch, and two jelly rolls. “You can eat as much jelly roll as you want today. We don’t have to save any of it for tomorrow,” she said.

“Now, that’s an idea that I will cherish.” He caught her hand when she moved close to where he was sitting. “You need a break. Do you ever lie down in the middle of the day?”

“Of course not. I wouldn’t get anything done that way.”

“Well, I’m thinking about taking a short nap, and I think maybe you should join me.” He pulled her to his lap and kissed her neck, just where he knew it would turn her into a puddle of longing.

“Are you saying I shouldn’t bake today, and I should spend the afternoon frittering away the time in bed with you?”

He nodded emphatically. “I’m hungry again, but it’s not my usual hunger.”

“I see that.” She pressed her lips to his, kissing him back. Ethel decided to throw caution to the wind. She didn’t

need to be baking, and she knew they would both be much happier if they spent a little time rolling around in bed together.

Usually, their lovemaking was a very serious affair, and he was focused on what he was doing, but that afternoon, they laughed more in their bed than they had the entire time they'd been married.

Afterward, she lay on her back breathing heavily. "Now I'm too tired to fix supper. We'll have to only eat jelly rolls for the rest of the day."

"You mean it?" he asked, his eyes lit up like a small boy who had just been told he didn't have to go to bed that night.

She laughed. "I don't suppose it would kill us to have jelly rolls for supper. I did make two."

"Can we have one now?" he asked.

She glanced at the alarm clock beside their bed. "I think we could have one now." It was already after four, and they had two jelly rolls to make it through til morning, when they may or may not be able to leave the house. It was still snowing heavily.

"I need to get out and milk," he said.

“Now?” she asked, looking out the window and seeing nothing but white.

“The cows need it. It’s part of being a rancher, I’m afraid.” He stood up and pulled his pants on. “But I feel energized to do whatever I should because I had a wonderful time rolling around in the sheets with my beautiful wife.”

She shook her head. While he was out working, she pulled her nightgown over her head and went into the kitchen, slicing up the blueberry jelly roll she’d made a few hours earlier. She had a blackberry roll as well, but she would serve that later.

He came in after a short while, but there was snow sticking to his hair. He looked a fright. “You look like you’ve turned into a snowman,” she said grinning at him.

He chuckled. “When my older sister was courting, my older brothers built anatomically correct snowmen and had them facing the road where her beau was picking her up. She was not amused, but I sure was.”

“That’s terrible! You need to promise me you will not encourage our sons to do anything like that to our daughters.” She finished cutting the first jelly roll and took two pieces for herself and gave him a plateful.

“Children? Do you think you’ll be here long enough for us to have children?” he asked, looking sad.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she asked. “Our wedding vows say til death do us part, and we spoke those words as vows to each other and to God. I’ll be here until death do us part.”

He nodded, but still looked perplexed. “Then why is there jewelry hidden under our bed? You’re not planning to leave at the first available opportunity?”

She gaped at him for a moment and shook her head. “Of course not! I brought that jewelry in case we faced financial hardship in the future. I thought it would be nice to have something to fall back on if we had a disease affecting the herd or if our house burned down. The jewels are to make sure our future is as smooth as it can be.”

He blinked a few times. “So you’re not planning to go to Europe and dine with kings and princes to avoid being married to me and living the harsh life the West demands of women?”

She shook her head. “I’m not. Why would I leave the man I love to go and eat with kings and princes? I think they’d be awfully haughty and difficult to be around, don’t you?”

“I never thought of it that way. I never thought of it at all, until I saw your jewelry, and then I couldn’t figure out why a woman like you would stay with a man like me. I’m so demanding, and I get grumpy when there’s no food around.”

“That’s why it’s my job to ensure there’s always food around. Do I wish you were a little less crabby between meals? Of course, I do. But I wouldn’t trade you for all of the men in the world who don’t get cranky. You’re the one I chose, and the one I will happily grow old with.”

He stared at her for a moment as if he was trying to decide if she was telling him the truth or not. Finally, he said, “I love you, and I didn’t know I loved you until I worried you’d leave.”

“Stop worrying,” Ethel said, putting her hand in his. “It’s not every man I’d eat jelly rolls for supper with. Or roll around in the sheets with in the middle of the day. That’s only you.”

He smiled, leaning toward her and kissing her softly. “We’re going to be all right, aren’t we?”

“We are. And it doesn’t even matter what my mother’s letter says when it finally comes. I’ve made a choice, and it

was the choice of an adult and not a child. No one can unmake the choice.”

“I hope not.” Walt grinned at her. “When do you think you’re going to have one of those babies we were talking about?” he asked, picking up his fork and digging into his first jelly roll of the night.

“I don’t know. I’ve been wondering if I’m expecting now, but I’m giving it a couple of more weeks until I start to dream about it too much.”

He smiled at her, reaching out to stroke her cheek. “You’re something else, Mrs. Prewitt.”

“And you’re tough to fill up, but you make me smile.”

He chuckled. “I’m glad there was a snowstorm today so we could just spend time together and talk. And I get to quit worrying that you’ll leave me.”

“What would I do when I want to bake if I didn’t live with you?” she asked. “I’d have to give my food to people in the streets, and that would never do.”

Epilogue

Six months later, there was no longer any doubt that Ethel was expecting. She was very well rounded at that point, and Walt was happier than ever that Mrs. Danbury spent the days with her. He worried less when he knew that another woman was around.

There had been a few terse letters sent between Ethel and her mother, and just in the last letter, Ethel had admitted she was expecting.

It was late April when he went to town to get flannel for her to make diapers, and he was given a letter meant for his wife.

When he got home, he gave it to her, and then he took Mrs. Danbury home. She wasn't nearly as cranky as he'd once thought she was, and she'd become a wonderful companion for Ethel, who still made jelly rolls at least three times a week.

While Walt was on his drive to Mrs. Danbury's, Ethel read the letter from her mother.

My Dearest Ethel,

As I sit by the window, looking out upon the snow-covered lawns of our home, my thoughts are filled with you. How I miss you, my dear daughter.

I received your letter yesterday, the words bringing a rush of emotions. A grandmother! The thought makes my heart flutter with joy and anticipation. Yet, it also brings a pang of sadness, for I wish I could be there with you during this special time.

Oh, Ethel, how I remember when you were just a little girl, twirling around in your frilly gowns, your laughter echoing through the halls of our home. Your spirit was always so wild and free, When you chose to leave it all behind, to run off to the West to marry, I confess it broke my heart. But as I read your letters, filled with tales of love and adventure, I know in my heart that you made the right choice.

You have always been one to follow your heart, my darling, and for that, I am so very proud. You have chosen a life of love over a life of luxury, and that shows incredible strength and courage. And now, as you embark on the beautiful journey of motherhood, I want you to know how deeply I admire you.

Becoming a mother will be a journey filled with countless joys and challenges. There will be days when your heart will brim with love so profound it leaves you breathless, and days when the weight of responsibility will feel heavy on your shoulders. But through it all, remember this—you are stronger than you think, braver than you believe, and loved more than you can possibly imagine.

I wish I could be there with you, to hold your hand as you step into this new chapter of your life. But know that even though miles separate us, you are always in my heart. And when the day comes when I can finally hold my grandchild in my arms, know that it will be one of the happiest moments of my life.

Until then, take care of yourself, my dear Ethel. Cherish these precious moments and look forward to the beautiful journey ahead. You are going to be a wonderful mother, just as you have been a wonderful daughter.

With all my love,

Mother

By the time Ethel finished reading the letter, she was sobbing softly. Never had she believed her mother would be so kind and comforting to her. Suddenly, she missed home with every fiber of her being, and she wanted her mother beside her in the last days before the baby arrived.

She put her pen to paper, and explained exactly that, hoping against hope, that her mother would put herself on a train and end up in Daffodil, Montana, where she could be there for the birth of her first grandchild.

More than anything, she wanted to have a little boy, and she would name him Christopher after her brother who had died in childhood. Perhaps her mother would be able to let go of some of her grief if there was another Christopher in her life.

When Walt came into the cabin and saw her crying moments later, he looked angry enough to make the trip to Massachusetts and deal with her mother himself.

She shook her head. “No, Walt. The letter was beautiful. She’s so excited to be a grandmother, and I’m just filled with homesickness for a moment. I don’t want to go back to my old life, but I’d like to bring my mother here for the birth of the baby.”

He nodded. “My mother has offered to come and help, but if your mother wants to come, then she should be the one here.”

Ethel laughed. “My mother would be absolutely useless. She can’t cook. She can’t clean. She couldn’t even darn a sock. No, invite your mother, so we can have the help we’ll need.”

Two months later, Ethel held her newborn son in her arms. He had all ten fingers and ten toes, and he was perfect in her eyes. Little Christopher.

When Walt joined her on their bed and stared down into the baby’s face, she watched him. He looked utterly amazed that the two of them had made such a beautiful child together. “Christopher Lucas,” he said.

Ethel nodded. “Yes, it suits him, doesn’t it?”

Walt nodded. “It does. I wonder if he’ll like jelly rolls.”