

A black and white photograph of a bride's hands holding a bouquet of flowers. The bride is wearing a white wedding dress with a lace cuff and a pearl bracelet. Her hands are adorned with several rings. The bouquet features peach-colored roses, white daisies, and silver ribbons. The title "Meant To Be" is overlaid in orange text at the top.

# Meant To Be

Ruth Ann Nordin

## Stuck in a jail in 1898...

A door opened and Ted and Megan turned their attention to the marshal who stepped into the building with two women in tow. The women gasped. One placed her hand over her eyes and the other put her hand over her mouth.

The woman who held her hand over her eyes also held an ankle-length brown dress. She crept forward until her outstretched hand hit the bars of Megan's cell. "Please, put this on."

Megan grumbled but snatched the dress from her.

"Tell me when you're decent," the woman said. "Aaron, don't you dare look at her!"

The marshal shrugged and turned around so his back was to them. "I wasn't looking at her."

"Well, there's no need to fight temptation."

When Megan finished buttoning the dress, Ted hid his laughter as she grunted in disgust. The dress hung on her like a frumpy blanket. He knew she hated it but to her credit, she cheerfully announced that she was decent.

The women breathed an audible sigh of relief. The marshal also turned but gave no indication as to what his thoughts were.

Esther pointed to the marshal. "Send for the preacher at once."

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## Meant To Be

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Ruth Ann Nordin

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This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described herein are imaginary and are not intended to refer to specific places or living persons. The opinions expressed in this manuscript are solely the opinions of the author and do not represent the opinions or thoughts of the publisher.

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Dedicated to Nancy Munson who has been a real blessing in my life.

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For more information about her books, please visit  
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# Chapter One



Present Day  
Jacob Innovative Creations  
Twenty-Third Floor  
Minneapolis, Minnesota  
4:30pm

*I am a thief.* The self-accusation hit Cole Hunter hard as he slipped the time travel device into his suit pocket.

Ignoring his racing heart, he glanced at his two partners who sat at the table in the center of the room. They read through the contract that Christian Jacob gave them to sign. They might've been the ones who created a time machine the size of a cell phone, but Christian Jacob would take the credit. Though to be fair, it was his theories that made time travel possible. Once the world found out, Christian would be the richest man on earth.

Cole quickly shut the empty case and shoved it into the safe. He slammed the safe shut and spun the combination lock.

There. No one would be the wiser. It was Friday afternoon. As soon as Monday morning came, he'd return the time travel device and Christian could see the fruits of their labor. Cole just needed to borrow it. One weekend. One weekend with the device and all of his problems would be solved. That's all he needed. Surely, that didn't make him a real thief. Not since he planned to return it.

"Hey Cole, come over here and sign line two," Blake Landon called out from where he was sitting at the table. "You won't get paid without your signature."

Clearing his throat, Cole nodded and walked over to Blake and Janet Cummins. Hoping they wouldn't notice his trembling hands, he leaned over the table and signed the document. A momentary flicker of guilt swept through him. Maybe he should put it back.

"Are you okay, buddy?" Blake asked him, a concerned look on his face.

Cole straightened up and adjusted his suit jacket, hoping no one saw the bulge in his pocket and suspect the truth. Shrugging, he replied, "Oh, you know how it is. Ex-wife, alimony, riding on the edge of bankruptcy. What more could a man ask for?"

"Once we get this to the boss, all your troubles will be over. We'll be loaded."

*Not when Evelyn finds out and takes my part of the profit away.* Deciding to keep the thought to himself, he simply nodded. "I better head out. I have a meeting with the lawyer."

Janet smiled sympathetically. "Hang in there. Things will get better."

He adjusted his suit jacket again. Did they see the sweat lining his brow? He hoped not. "You're probably right." He said it to appease her. She seemed to think that everything worked out for the best, no matter how dour the situation actually was. What was the point in reminding her that real life was nothing like the

## Meant To Be

romance novels she read where people found their true love and lived happily ever after?

After saying good-bye, he slipped out of the room and hastened down the long, sparse corridor. A guard sat at the end of it, his chair right by the door and the security camera. Cole swallowed the nervous lump in his throat. Did the guard see him steal the time travel device?

The guard held an automobile magazine, his gaze focused on the article he was reading.

Cole breathed a sigh of relief. Good. Once again, the guard was showing the world just how lazy he could be. This time, it worked to Cole's advantage. As long as Blake and Janet didn't check the safe, he was going to pull this off.

Once he reached the door, he pulled out his identification card and swiped it. The door unlocked. He gladly left the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor. He was free to use the JIC Time Machine. A couple of hours and he would be done. He'd be rich enough to retire at his own private island where no one would ever bother him again.

Then, maybe then, he could finally be happy.

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Jacob Innovative Creations  
Fourth Floor  
4:45pm

Ted Jacob rubbed his eyes. He sat in front of his computer, and he had a headset on. Currently, he was assisting a customer with another software issue. It was his job, after all, but why did he feel out of place, as if he didn't belong there?

The woman, on the other end of the call, continued her spiel. "My husband can't get the video to show up when he does his calls. Are you sure there isn't something wrong with the video phone?"

“That’s why I’m going through this checklist with you, ma’am,” he reminded her.

The woman had a tendency to go off-tangent. Just a moment ago, she’d been rambling on about her cat. Now she was back on topic.

“Did you make sure the computer screen is turned on?”

“Of course, it’s on. What do you take me for? An idiot?”

“No, ma’am. It’s just at the top of the list of things I need to confirm.”

“What’s your name?” she demanded.

He blinked. What did he say to upset her? Shifting uneasily in his seat, he said, “My name is Ted Jacob, Mrs. Carroll.”

“Jacob’s your last name?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“As in Jacob Innovative Creations?”

He closed his eyes, already knowing what she’d say next, for he’d heard it a million times. “No. I am not related to Christian Jacob. I just work here.”

“That’s an odd coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Not really. Minneapolis is a big place.” He leaned back in his chair and tossed his rubber stress ball into the air.

“Are you sure? You should check your genealogy. You might be a distant relative or something. Heck, you could get a better position over there if you find out you’re a long lost relative.”

He caught the ball and squeezed it in his hands. “Mrs. Carroll, will you check your USB port to see if your video phone is plugged into the computer?”

She paused, as if startled by the change in subject but agreed to do it. “Hold on. I got to get under the computer desk and check. Now, you won’t hang up on me, will you?”

“No, ma’am, I won’t.” He tossed the ball into the air, glad she forgot that she’d been irritated with him just moments before.

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“I hope not because I was put on hold for twenty minutes before I got through to you.”

He caught the ball. “We apologize for the wait, and I assure you, I will still be here when you get back on the phone.”

While she set the phone down, he chuckled. Despite his initial annoyance with Mrs. Carroll, he couldn’t deny that she was probably a nice woman.

His thoughts drifted to the upcoming trip with his girlfriend. Well, she wasn’t exactly his girlfriend. They’d known each other for a year, and he thought of her as a good friend. Since he heard the best wives were women who were friends first, he thought it would be a good idea to ask her out. Only, he hadn’t expected her to invite him to Libby, Montana to visit her family. The thought weirded him out a little bit. He feared that this meant she assumed he’d marry her.

But would that be a bad thing? He was already thirty-three and tired of being single. He wanted to settle down and get married. Maybe Amanda was the one for him. He’d never know if he didn’t see if something romantic could happen between them. Just because there was no spark now, it didn’t mean it would always be that way.

Still, he wondered if her interest in him stemmed solely from the fact that she was a single mother who wanted a father for her five-year-old son. But what if he was only interested in her because he wanted a wife?

Ted glanced at the time on his phone. So far, he’d been on the call with Mrs. Carroll for twenty minutes.

Bored, he picked up his plaque, but his eyes weren’t on the award congratulating him on his customer service skills. Instead, he studied his reflection. His sun-streaked brown hair fell an inch past his collar. His hazel eyes stared back at him. Though vanity wasn’t on his list of faults, he liked what he saw. Sure, he lacked the drop dead gorgeous appeal of some Hollywood actors, but he managed well enough. Why couldn’t he attract more women?

Setting down the award, he let out a long sigh. What was taking Mrs. Carroll so long?

He put the ball on his head and spun around to see if he could keep it steady. Since he forgot to take off his headset, the cord jerked his head back. Shocked, he lost his balance and fell back, taking his chair with him as he landed on the floor.

He scrambled to his feet, frantically glancing around. He sighed when no one came to see what caused the loud thud and placed the headset back on his head. He put the chair back into place and sat down. His face hot from embarrassment, he turned to the computer monitor. He was still connected to the caller.

“Mrs. Carroll, are you there?”

She didn’t respond, but her humming told him that he hadn’t lost his connection.

“Psst.”

He looked up.

Tony peered over the edge of the wall. “I just got done with my last call. Are you done?”

“Almost.”

“Do you want a box of girl scout cookies?”

“No way, Tony. You already got me to buy four boxes for your daughter’s troop.”

“I’m giving this one away for free.”

Ted raised an eyebrow. “No kidding?”

“Nope. If I eat another cookie, I’ll barf. Here you go.” He threw the box in Ted’s direction.

Ted caught it before it flew past his head. “A warning would be nice.”

“Oh, I was just waiting to see if you’d fall flat on your butt again.”

He groaned. “Saw that, did you?”

Snickering, he replied, “I might have done some minor investigation.”

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Ted set the green box of mint cookies by the computer in front of him, pretending he didn't feel self-conscious. Tapping his fingers on the smooth table, he said, "I'll be over to your cube when I'm done with this call. Then we can meet up with Mark and John and carpool home."

"Alright." Tony disappeared for a moment but shot back up. "I almost forgot. Did you get one of these?"

Ted's eyes narrowed at the yellow brochure with a picture of Christian Jacob on it. "No, I didn't. What is it?"

"Christian Jacob's biography. Did you know that his ancestor, Paul Jacob, was a visionary? He talked about the possibilities of time travel. Of course, no one took him seriously back then, but his three sons, Paul Jr., Ralph, and Tim, created a company to test out their inventions that led to things like the television and cell phones. Anyway, since then, the whole company's expanded into the great corporation we work at today, with Christian as the president."

Ted yawned. He picked up the open soda can and gulped the rest of it down, hoping the caffeine would keep him awake. "I can't believe you're interested in that stuff."

"Why not?" Tony handed him the brochure. "Christian says he's going to walk in Paul's footsteps and make time travel possible."

Ted shook his head. "I heard some rumors floating around about the secret project upstairs, but come on, Tony. This stuff is science fiction."

"I'm sure that's what people said about rockets before one launched into space."

Before Ted could reply, Mrs. Carroll's voice interrupted him. "You know what? I hadn't plugged it in, just like you said. I can't believe it. Isn't that a riot?"

Ted put the brochure into the pocket of his jacket that was by the computer monitor. "That kind of thing happens all the time, ma'am."

“Really?”

Sadly, yes. He was amazed at how people could miss the obvious. “You’re in good company.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I hate technology. Sometimes I’d just love to go back to simpler times. You know, when people rode horses and didn’t have to worry about things like cars breaking down on them or getting computers and video phones to work right.”

*And when they didn’t have plumbing, electricity, or phones.* He had no desire to live in the past. The present suited him just fine. He glanced at the clock and realized he could go home. He remained on the line long enough to make sure that Mrs. Carroll’s video phone worked. Then he logged out of the JIC system.

“Are you ready?” Tony asked, standing by the entrance of Ted’s cube.

Ted nodded and put on his JIC jacket. “Just how many girl scout cookie boxes do you have left?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Let’s just say that my wife wanted to make sure our daughter got the badge she wanted.”

“I can always give a couple to Amanda.” Ted threw the JIC cap on his head. “She loves those things.”

Tony crossed his arms. “Then why didn’t you buy some for her?”

“I did. But the cookies ended up getting eaten before they made it to her apartment.”

“How chivalrous of you.”

“This one is going to her for sure.” Ted tucked it under his arm and stepped out of the cubicle.

Tony walked next to him down the row of identical blue cubicles and shook his head. “I should have made you buy it.”

“Look, if I had the money, I would have bought more. You know pay day isn’t until next Friday, and I only have enough money for this trip to Montana with Amanda.”

“I know. Still, you could have ordered in advance.”

## Meant To Be

“I didn’t have money then either.”

“You never have money.”

That, unfortunately, was true. Ted did a lousy job of saving cash.

He and Tony took the elevator to the first floor. Once the doors opened, they made their way to the front entrance.

Tony glanced at his watch. “John and Mark are always late.”

“At least it’s Friday.”

“True.”

“Stop him!” someone yelled.

Ted barely had time to glance over his shoulder when someone bumped into him. He stumbled back but managed not to fall. He watched as a man in a suit ran out of the building.

“Run! Get him!”

The security guard chased the man out of the building and down the street. A well-dressed man, who Ted recognized as Blake Landon, followed close behind. Before Ted could blink, two more security guards joined the pursuit.

Ted was too stunned to move. “Who ran into me?”

“Dr. Hunter,” Tony replied.

“Cole Hunter from upstairs?”

“The same.”

Ted heard Cole’s name mentioned often at the employee meetings. He also heard about the other two people Cole worked with, but the only one he had actually seen had been Blake. His supervisor often used the three as examples of model employees. “The cream of the crop,” his supervisor repeated until Ted couldn’t take it anymore and tuned him out. Well, it didn’t look like Dr. Hunter was in that special category anymore.

Tony patted him on the back. “And you said nothing exciting ever happens here.”

Ted grinned, his body relaxing. “That’ll teach me to say that in the future.”

Noticing John and Mark leaving the elevator, Ted motioned to them, glad that this marked the beginning of his week's vacation. Tomorrow, he'd be on the train heading to Montana. Maybe he'd discover that spark with Amanda during the trip. He hoped so. He certainly didn't want to settle for second best.

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Present Day  
Early the next morning  
Indianapolis, Indiana

Megan Crane sat at the train station and felt the ever increasing sense of dread tighten her stomach. Did she really want to do this? She could turn back and go home. She bit her lower lip and stared at the ring on her finger. Then she looked at Mike Romano who read his stock market report. She nearly gagged. Could there be anything more boring than obsessing over the stock market? If she heard the words NASDAQ or Dow Jones one more time, she might scream. Then she'd blow it and Mike would end the engagement.

Megan winced. Mike was a good man. He was intelligent and he had a good paying job. There was nothing wrong with him. *But he's boring.* She closed her eyes, willing the unbidden thought away. No, he wasn't boring. He was stable, secure, predictable...

*End it, Megan. You don't love him. Do you really want to hurt him by marrying him?*

She glanced at her mother who was on the other side of her. Maybe she should tell her mother. She took a deep breath. "Mom, I need to talk to you."

"What is it, Megan?" her mother asked.

"Can we talk in private?"

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Her expression uncertain, the woman stood up.

Despite her sudden wave of nausea, Megan got out of her seat, said 'excuse me' to Mike who didn't bother to look up from his paper, and led her mother to a vacant corner of the room. She braced herself. If it were anyone but her mother, this would be easy. "I don't love him, and I don't think he loves me."

The woman sighed. "We've talked about this before. Remember? Love doesn't solve everything. You need to be practical. Will love put food on the table? Will love pay the bills? No, it won't. Besides, you might grow to love him."

"What if I don't?"

"Then you can at least be content."

Megan cringed. Content? That sounded...boring.

Her mother opened her purse and pulled out a piece of paper. Opening it, she asked, "Do you remember this letter you wrote me after Shane broke your heart? Hmm?"

Oh no. The letter. The one Megan wrote when she was thirty. The one that now sealed her fate.

Her mother read it to her. "Dear Mom. I don't know why I always end up picking such losers. It seems that no matter what I do, I end up with someone who can't take responsibility for his life. As it turns out, I found out that Shane is still living with his parents and his big goal in life is to play video games all day while I support him. I ended the engagement tonight. What am I going to do? I need your help. Please help me pick the right one. I'll do whatever you say this time. Love, Megan."

"I know what the letter says."

"Apparently, you needed reminding." She tucked the letter back into her purse and gave her a sympathetic look. "Marrying a man who is the life of a party isn't the way to go. You've spent your life so far dating men who were exciting and fun. Where did that get you? Heartache and disappointment. Just like with Shane. Now, let's not repeat your mistakes again. Looks and personality aren't everything. You need a man who is secure, who

has a strong work ethic, and who acts like an adult. Megan, look. I want what's best for you."

"I know."

"Sweetie, it's already April. You'll be thirty-five in July. That's only three months away. Remember how much you told me you wanted children?"

Megan blinked back her tears and nodded.

"Well, you're not going to get them unless you settle down and get married. When you were in your twenties, you had time to be patient and wait for the right one. But this is real life. Your fairytale prince isn't coming. You need to start using your head instead of your heart. And if you don't love or feel loved by Michael, then put all of that love into your children."

"You and dad loved each other."

"Yes, we did. We were lucky." She smiled at her. "I want what's best for you. Michael is a good man. He'll treat you well."

"You're right, Mom. I can't do better than him."

"Give it time. You'll be happy with him."

The Amtrak pulled into the station.

"Now, when you get to Seattle to see his parents, be sure to agree with them. You want to start your relationship with them on the right foot. In-law problems are one of the main causes of divorce." She hugged her, and Megan hugged her back, taking comfort in the warm embrace.

"I love you, Mom."

"I love you too."

"Thanks."

She smiled. "What are mothers for?"

Megan returned her smile. More hopeful, she turned back to Mike and picked up her purse and said good-bye to her mother. From here on out, she'd find reasons to appreciate Mike instead of comparing him to what she typically found appealing in men. Her mother was right. She was thirty-four and needed to be serious about life and marriage.

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Mike folded the paper and stood up. "Are you ready?"  
She nodded and followed him onto the train.

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That evening  
Present Day  
Minneapolis

Ted set his suitcase down and knocked on Amanda's apartment door. When she opened the door, tears were running down her cheeks.

"Oh Ted, thank goodness you're here." She pulled him in and shut the door behind him.

"What's wrong?" he asked her, immediately concerned. He glanced in the direction of an older woman who stood in the living room, a frown on her face and her arms crossed. He looked for five-year-old Benjamin but didn't find him. He tensed. "Is it Benny? Is he sick?"

"No. Benny's fine." Amanda took a kleenex from the coffee table and blew her nose. "He's spending the week with his father." She motioned to the woman. "Mrs. Stone wants the rent and I don't have the money. Can you help me out?"

He knew Amanda had just spent the last evening out with her friends at a bar. She had money then. Instead of saying this, he dug into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. It looked like he would have to put his train ticket on the credit card.

"Will this cover it?" he asked the apartment manager.

The woman still looked upset but took it. "This will pay for it." She nodded. "But son, maybe you'd do better to find another girlfriend."

He watched as the woman left.

"Thank you, Ted. You're like a guardian angel."

"I wanted to make sure that Benny had a home to come home to," he notified her. "I thought you said you had enough money for rent and going out with your friends last night."

"I thought I did. Honest. Ted, are you mad at me? You know, I can pay you back once Nick sends the child support check."

"No. Don't worry about it. I just want you to have enough money to pay your bills in the future."

She smiled. She seemed a little too eager to agree with him, and he wondered why. She'd been agreeable when they were friends, and he'd bailed her out a couple of times, but he'd never paid her rent. Maybe she was embarrassed.

His heart softened. "You need to take care of you and Benny. Okay?"

"Of course," she sweetly said. "You're a good man, Ted. I'm looking forward to introducing you to my family. I know they'll love you. Who knows? Maybe you'll be seeing more of them in the future."

He wasn't sure how to respond to that, so he didn't.

She picked up her tote bag and flung it over her shoulder. "This should be fun, huh?" She gave him a sly look. "You know, we do have an extra half hour before we have to leave." She walked over to him, letting her hips sway a little more than usual. When she reached him, she pulled on his jacket. "I could make paying my rent worth your while."

He shoved her hand away. "You've got to be kidding me. I'm not Nick." He couldn't believe she even made the offer. That never happened before, and it only angered him that it happened now.

Her eyes grew wide and she backed off. "I'm sorry. Please don't be upset. I won't do it again."

Maybe she didn't know better. Maybe all the men had treated her that way. "Look, that's not what I'm about, okay? I'm

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Ted. The same guy who's been your friend for the past year. I haven't changed."

She blushed, looking contrite. "I'll remember that in the future."

Feeling better, he nodded. "Are you ready?"

She said yes and they left for the train station.

## Chapter Two



An Hour Later  
Train Station  
Minneapolis

Cole lowered the red cap over his forehead and stood on the platform with the other passengers, doing his best to blend into the background. His fake brown beard itched, but it did the trick. He wore thick glasses and a plaid red and white shirt with blue jeans. The time travel device was safe in his pocket. Time. He just needed to buy some time. He chuckled at the irony. Here he was, in the possession of a time machine, and he was desperate to buy enough time to figure out Christian's password.

Again, he cursed his luck. Leave it to Christian Jacob to program a security code into the device before the contract was even signed. What did it matter to Christian anyway? The man was a millionaire. He had a mansion, lots of cars, his own tennis court, a pool, and everything else a rich man could want. He even

## Meant To Be

had a wife and two kids. How he managed to be rich and happily married, Cole didn't understand. Some men just had the luck of the draw, he guessed.

Some men were born into privilege and wealth and enjoyed the happily ever after fantasy. But then there were other men. Men like Cole who struggled to make it but got tripped up when he realized that his wife played him for a fool. Cole's frown deepened. Not everyone could have it all. And apparently, that sentiment trickled right down to a single password to stop Cole from achieving happiness.

No. Not this time. This time Cole was going to get lucky, even if he had to make his own luck. He wasn't going to shrivel up and cower in the corner anymore and watch while other men enjoyed their lives. This time, it was his turn.

The train pulled to a stop and he stood back while a familiar man boarded the train with a woman. The man wore a JIC jacket. No wonder he looked familiar! Cole had bumped into him yesterday afternoon in his pursuit to escape Blake who'd discovered that the JIC Time Machine was missing. Cole thought he'd lost Blake by going down some stairs and up the elevator and running through different floors, but he hadn't. Blake had managed to keep up with him up until midnight when Cole finally hid in a dumpster.

He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. So this was what his life had come to. Being a fugitive and hiding in trash. Well, so be it. Once he discovered the secret code, he'd type it in and then he'd be right back on track. He just had to figure out how.

Opening his eyes, he followed an elderly couple onto the train and handed the conductor his ticket.

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On the same train

Megan came out of a fitful sleep. Despite the silence around her and the darkness outside, she couldn't get comfortable. She turned in her seat. Her neck ached in protest.

"Ow." She jerked up and rubbed her neck, hoping to massage the kinks out.

As she did this, she noticed that the seat next to her was empty. Where had Mike gone? It wasn't like him to leave without telling her where he was going.

The train came to a stop, and all she saw was a small train station with a few people on the platform. There wasn't even a sign telling her where they were. She pulled out the purse next to her and took out the itinerary. Checking her watch, she saw that it was two in the morning. She read the itinerary and saw that she was about an hour outside of Fargo, North Dakota.

She put the itinerary back in her purse and wondered what to do for entertainment. She'd brought a book, but it turned out to be a dud so she really didn't feel like reading it. She stood up, her back and bottom sore, and stepped into the aisle. She held onto the seats so she wouldn't lose her balance. Looking down at her wrinkled black shirt and navy blue cotton shorts, she smoothed them out the best she could.

Her stomach growled, and she knew she'd better take care of that problem before she looked for Mike.

She made it to the snack car and approached the counter.

The skinny young man hopped off the stool and smiled at her. "What can I get for you?"

"I'll take Seattle at the next stop," she said.

He gave her a look that told her he didn't get her joke.

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That was just as well. It was lame. Clearing her throat, she pointed to the chips. "I'll take one bag of those and a soda."

He nodded and retrieved the items she requested.

She handed him some money before she turned her attention to the tables and chairs. There were four tables altogether, and two were taken, so she opted for the vacant one that looked the cleanest. She sat down. Sometimes wearing shorts was a liability, like in this case when the cold chair touched the back of her thighs, making her momentarily shiver.

Opening the package of potato chips, she scanned the other people in the small car. At one table, an elderly man read a book, and at another table, a man and a woman sat across from each other and talked.

Though she tried not to listen, their conversation was much more entertaining than staring into the darkness outside the window.

"If you don't want to check out the Libby dam, that's okay," the woman said.

"You didn't give me a chance to answer the question," the man replied.

"Ted, it's okay. We don't have to go there."

The man named Ted had his back turned to Megan, but Megan could tell by his stiff posture that his companion annoyed him.

"I was going to say that I want to see it," he assured her.

"Really?" The woman's eyes widened, as if she was surprised.

Megan had to admit that the woman had terrific green eyes, unlike Megan's boring brown ones. Then again, Megan enjoyed being a blond, so she'd have dull brown eyes if it meant she could be a sunny blond. A momentary longing came over her. Her father nicknamed her 'sunny girl' when she was a child. She wished he was still alive. Taking a deep breath to steady her emotions, she tuned into the conversation at the other table. Fine.

So it made her an eavesdropper. At least it took her mind off missing her father. For some reason, knowing he wasn't going to be at the wedding to give her away made her want to cry.

The man named Ted set down his soda. "I've never been to Montana. It'll be nice to check out the scenery."

A huge smile lit up the woman's face. "Well, great!"

Megan's attention shifted to the old man as he stood up. He exited the car, leaving the styrofoam cup on the table.

To her surprise, Ted stood up, picked up his wrappers, torn up napkin, and soda cans, and tossed them in the trash. After a glance at the styrofoam cup, he disposed of that too. That was nice of him. It wasn't often she saw someone cleaning up after someone else. On his way back to his seat, she noted the light stubble on his strong jaw. A blue JIC cap covered most of his brown hair, and he had broad shoulders and narrow waist. Tearing her gaze from him before he noticed her staring at him, she turned her attention back to the bag of chips and finished eating. She shouldn't be attracted to another man when she was engaged.

After he sat down, he asked his companion, "Where do you want to go?"

The brunette shrugged as she twirled her hair around her index finger. "Where do you want to go?"

"We've already done the stuff I want to do. Now it's your turn."

"But I'm happy to do whatever you want. I'm not picky."

Megan bit back her chuckle at his loud sigh.

"Please make a decision," he softly said. "You used to do that when we were friends."

"But I'm fine doing anything you want. Really."

Megan drank the rest of her soda before she got up and placed her items in the trash. It was time to find Mike.

She made her way back to her seat and frowned when she realized that Mike hadn't returned yet. She wondered where he

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could be. She tapped her fingernails on the seat next to her. She thought of all the places he might go. He liked the observation lounge. Maybe she'd find him there.

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Cole found an empty seat and sat in it. He'd been moving all over the train car, finding a place where he could hide out. Once settled into his seat, he pulled out the handheld travel device to make sure everything worked as it should. All he needed was the password. He glanced at his watch. Thirty minutes outside of Fargo. Taking a deep breath, he noted the tension in his muscles. Drumming his fingers on the armrest, he ran through a list of possible passwords that his employer might plug into the device.

A movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention. He glanced up. His breath stuck in his throat. How did Blake Landon track him down? Sliding the device under his jacket, he turned his face to the window, hoping his partner wouldn't notice him. Cole relaxed as Blake moved further down the aisle.

The kid in the seat across from Cole sneezed.

Blake glanced over his shoulder.

Cole froze. The moment spanned into an agonizing minute as Cole watched Blake frown in his direction. He held his breath, praying that Blake would turn and continue his search down the train car.

But Blake didn't.

To Cole's horror, Blake spun on his heel and hastened toward him. Cole jumped out of his seat and rushed down the opposite side of the car, his fingers clenching the device. *Password. If I can figure out the password, I can escape!* Bumping into an elderly fat man, he shoved him into Blake's path, giving up on any notion of hiding the device or his disguise as his cap fell off.

A woman sitting in a seat pointed at Cole. "Paul? What's going on?"

"How would I know?" her companion replied. "Maybe he had the special in the dining car."

*Paul. Paul was Christian's great-grandfather. Could Paul be the password?* As Cole made his way down the coach car, he decided to try it.

In the observation car, Megan peered down at Mike and another woman who appeared to be finding immense satisfaction in exchanging spit. Clearing her throat, she waited for them to notice her. She didn't have to wait long.

He turned his head in her direction and jerked away from the pretty redhead. He adjusted his glasses and wiped his hands on his slacks. Gulping, he said, "It's not what it looks like."

"Oh, what a relief. Here I thought you were shoving your tongue down this woman's throat." She got a mild sense of satisfaction in watching the other woman blush in shame.

Mike blinked three times, his face getting paler with each passing second. "Julian is a friend I knew years ago. She just got out of a bad relationship. I was comforting her. I didn't plan this."

Megan set her hands on her hips. "Well, she must feel very comforted now!" She grunted under her breath. Noting the people who turned to stare at them, she snapped, "What are you looking at?"

Most of them had the decency to turn back to whatever they had been doing. Only two snickered at her. Ignoring them, she forced her attention back to the pond scum.

Mike's mouth formed an 'o' before he winced. Throwing his hands up in the air, he said, "Okay. I was kissing her."

Stiffly smiling, she asked, "Guess what happens now?"

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He shrugged. "What?"

"We're over!"

She didn't care that she screamed. He was lucky she didn't throw something at him. The jerk! Here she was, ready to turn thirty-five, her biological clock ticking against her, and the one man who passed all of her mother's stupid qualifications ruined everything for her. Her dreams of a husband and children vanished and all she had left was another wasted year of her life! Curse him!

Spinning on her heel, she stormed up the aisle.

"Can I have the ring back?"

She stopped. Her mouth formed a tight line and her nostrils flared. Looking at the chubby young man who held a book, probably pretending to read it since it was upside down, she tapped him on the shoulder. His eyes widened and he dropped the book.

She bent to retrieve it. "May I borrow this?"

He nodded.

Grasping the book in her hands, she stomped to her fiancé and smacked him on the side of the head. His glasses fell off his face and landed on the carpet in front of him.

"Hey!" he shouted. "There's no need to get violent."

"You're lucky this is all I'm going to do to you, pal!" She held up her hand and inspected the diamond. It sparkled in the moonlight. She couldn't decide if it mocked her or applauded her. "This ring is for pain and suffering. I'm going to hawk this baby."

She shot Jillian a nasty look before she hastened back down the aisle. Muttering a thank you to the chubby man, she threw the book in his direction and marched forward, deciding to

get off the train at Fargo. She'd find the first flight home and put this horrible mess behind her.

Just as she made it to the snack area, she saw a man in a plaid red and white shirt racing toward her. Startled, she stilled her movements.

The man named Ted, who she'd seen earlier, emerged from the snack car. His traveling companion followed behind him but remained out of the aisle. Before Megan could warn him to stay back, the bearded man ran into her, shoving her against Ted. A fourth man rammed into them, causing them all to fall to the floor. Megan fell on top of Ted while the other two fell on top of her. She closed her eyes from the impact. The next thing she knew, the two men got off of her and sprinted down the aisle.

Opening her eyes, she pushed off the red carpet and got to her feet, stumbling as the train swayed her off balance. The thick cigar smoke stung her eyes. She rubbed her eyes and coughed. She couldn't remember being accosted by this much smoke since she went to a bar a decade ago.

"What on earth...?"

She recognized the voice of the man next to her. Darting a glance in Ted's direction, she noticed that he examined their surroundings. Wondering what held his interest, she blinked back her tears and froze. They stood in the middle of the aisle of what looked like...

She shook her head and rubbed her eyes again. It couldn't be. There was no way! Opening them, her jaw dropped. *This isn't possible.* Though the words cycled through her mind, she couldn't deny what she saw. It was no longer night. It was day!

Sunlight poured through the windows and onto the women who whispered to each other and placed their hands over their children's eyes. She looked down at her shirt and shorts and then back at them. They wore dresses that covered them from their necks all the way down to their ankles. Not a single woman wore pants or shorts. They also wore hats or bonnets.

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A man snickered at her and that's when she realized that over half the male passengers leered at her, openly enjoying the view of her bare calves. Feeling oddly exposed, she dodged behind Ted to hide herself from the men. She had her back to two women who motioned for her to get away from them, but she refused to budge. She was safer with them at her backside than in front of the latches.

When the train lurched to the side, she wrapped her arms around Ted's waist. This made him lose his balance so he reached out to the seat in front of him to steady them both.

"Shameful," the woman behind her muttered to her friend. "Now I'll have to go to church and confess to the priest."

"Where did she and her lover come from?" the other one wondered.

"I don't know. It's like they appeared right out of thin air."

Studying the cramped train car, Megan realized it had to be an older version of the one she had just been riding. The car contained a good number of passengers so that the car was almost full. Some people returned to their conversations while others continued to stare...and leer...or shake their heads at her.

A movement caught her attention. She looked at the man on her right who tipped his hat to her. "You can sit here." He winked and patted the empty seat next to him.

Shuddering, she pressed her face into Ted's jacket. She felt a strange calm at the outdoorsy smell of the cologne he wore. He seemed to be the only solid thing she had to hold onto, and since he didn't tell her to let go, she remained still.

The train slowed to a stop, making her sway again. She tightened her hold on him, using more force than she planned. "Sorry," she mumbled, pulling away once she could stand on her own.

"It's okay," he assured her.

"Fargo, North Dakota!" the conductor yelled.

Ted hastened to the exit, and she followed, eager to get off the train and find out what was going on. As soon as she set foot on the platform, more people stopped to stare or snicker at her. She ignored them. When she saw the sign on the platform, she gasped. Ted uttered a curse word, one which she agreed with since it described their predicament to a "T".

The sign on the platform read *Northern Pacific Railway. Welcome to Fargo!*

Between the clothes people wore, the look of the train, and the building, it didn't take a genius to figure out that they had somehow traveled back in time. But how far back? That was the immediate question. She paid no mind to the hollers from a couple of men as she ran into the station. Her eyes scanned the dim room until she found a newsstand. Rushing to it, she slapped the counter to get the balding fat man's attention. It worked. The man, who had been kneeling in front of a stack of newspapers, looked up at her.

"What year is it?" she demanded.

He furrowed his eyebrows at her.

"Never mind."

She snatched a paper and searched for the date. Her heart leapt into her throat.

Ted hurried over to her, tipping his blue cap back.

She knew what he wanted to know, so she handed him the paper before he could ask for it.

The newspaper man grabbed the paper from Ted. "That ain't free."

Ted faced her. "Saturday, April 23, 1898?"

What could she say? She was as baffled as he was.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "How did this happen?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

Bald guy poked her in the arm. "You touch it, you buy it." He turned his palm up and wiggled his fingers at her. "Pony up."

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Groaning, she rummaged in her pocket and threw a dollar bill at him, not realizing her mistake until he growled at her.

“You joshing me?”

“I don’t have anything else to give you.” Seriously, if she knew she’d end up in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when she boarded the train, she would have prepared for it. How? She didn’t exactly know, but she could have done something.

He took a deep breath and hollered, “Marshal! I need a marshal!”

Ted sighed. “Look, she’s not trying to rob you. You have your paper. All we wanted to know was the date.”

“Then pay for it!”

“I would if I had 1898 currency. But I don’t.”

“Marshal!”

She huffed. “We did nothing wrong. You have no right to call the cops.”

Someone sauntered her way.

She jerked at the smiling stranger who fiddled with the gold pocket watch in his hand. His slick black hair matched his thin mustache that he had curled at the ends. She could feel him undressing her with his eyes. *Oh great. Another creep.* Crossing her arms in a pathetic attempt to conceal the curve of her breasts, she edged closer to Ted.

“Are you on your way to Madam Constance’s bordello?” the creep asked.

Shaking her head, she asked, “Madame Constance’s what?”

Balding guy grabbed creepy guy’s suit jacket. “She ain’t going nowhere ‘till I get paid.”

“I’m sure she can oblige you in non-monetary ways.”

The meaning of the creep’s words sunk in. He reached for her arm, so she slapped his hand. “Don’t touch me!”

“If you didn’t want to be touched, then why are you wearing undergarments?”

“Undergarments?”

He motioned to her clothes. “Sure. You don’t see any other woman wearing those things, do you?”

“Where I come from, I am fully dressed.”

“And where would that be?” another man asked from the edge of the group of ten men who had gathered in a circle nearby to watch her.

Ted took off his jacket and draped it over her shoulders. She zipped it up. Good heavens, she actually felt like she wore nothing but a bra and panties with the way these latches ogled her. She silently thanked Ted as he stepped in front of her so the men couldn’t see her.

Ted made a shooing motion with his hands. “Okay. The show’s over. Be gone.”

She peered around his arm and watched the men leave, most of them grumbling.

A clean shaven man wearing a burgundy vest with a silver star attached to it marched up to them. He tipped his brown hat and set his hand on his holster. “Someone call for me?”

The balding man hurried to the marshal’s side. “I did. Those two stole from me.”

“We did not,” Ted argued.

“They did. They looked at the paper. Then they didn’t pay for it.”

“We just wanted to know the date.”

“And you got it. Now pony up.”

“We would if we could.” Ted took off his cap and ruffled his hair. “We don’t want any trouble.”

The marshal released his hold on the holster. “You two don’t look like trouble.”

Megan closed her eyes. At least someone was showing some common sense.

“However,” he continued as he studied her, “I can’t let you loose in town dressed in nothing but unmentionables. It

## Meant To Be

wouldn't be right. And you," he turned to Ted, "need to go to the bordello if you wish to engage in this kind of behavior."

Ted tensed. "You've got to be kidding me. I don't even know her."

"I am not a prostitute," she hissed.

The marshal raised an eyebrow. "Could've fooled me."

Baldy handed the marshal the dollar bill she gave him.

"Look at that. She called this money."

The marshal frowned. "This is suspicious."

"Didn't I tell ya?"

Nodding, the marshal pointed to them. "You're coming with me."

"To jail?" Ted asked.

"I have to check this out."

"No way!" she protested.

"My word is law, ma'am. Either you come with me willingly or I drag you in. Which do you prefer?"

Her gaze shifted to the other two men. Baldy had a smug smile on his face. Ted rolled his eyes but didn't protest.

She groaned. "Fine. I'll go. But no one's touching me."

## Chapter Three



Saturday, April 23, 1898

4pm

Fargo, North Dakota

Ted put his head in his hands, not believing what was happening to him. Or to the woman who traveled in time with him, for that matter. How did they even arrive in the past? He wanted to deny it, to think it was a horrible dream, but each time he pinched himself, he knew he was awake. So now he found himself in one cell while she was locked in another one. Since she was a woman, the marshal insisted she get the cell that was vacant. Lucky him, it meant he had to share his small space with a drunk who snored on the cot.

Ted shifted on the hardwood floor, his bottom sore from spending the past hour on it. His back was to the bars, the metal pressing into him. He didn't care. He had to think. How did he travel back to April 23, 1898? How could he return to his correct

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time? He thought long and hard. At least, he tried to think long and hard. It was almost impossible to think of anything when his traveling companion insisted on screaming for the marshal every five minutes.

She found a tin cup that had been left on the floor and strummed it against the bars. "I demand a lawyer! Do you hear me, Marshal? I'm an American citizen and I know my rights."

Ted groaned. How did the drunk sleep through this racket? The headache in Ted's head intensified with each slide of that obnoxious cup. "Will you please stop?" he finally asked when he couldn't take it anymore.

She paused and looked at him from the cell adjoining his. "We need to fight this injustice. We don't belong here. We haven't done anything wrong."

"I know. But for some reason, we're stuck in this time period, and we need to figure out how to get back."

She pressed her forehead against the bars and sighed. "If I knew how we got here, then it'd help."

He saw the flicker of fear in her eyes and couldn't help but sympathize with her. Well, of course, he sympathized. He was in the same spot she was! He rubbed his temples. "I don't know what to do. Neither one of us woke up this morning with a plan to come here."

"At least you're fully dressed."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're fully dressed too." When he saw her motion to her shorts, he grinned. "Right. You're not fully dressed for 1898."

She groaned. "I'm glad you're finding humor in this situation."

"Would you like to wear my jacket? You could wrap it around your waist."

"You wouldn't mind? I do feel exposed."

She glanced at her legs. He glanced at them too. They were nice legs. Long and slender. His eyes traveled back up to

her face. She was pretty. Shoulder-length blond hair with straight bangs, brown eyes, and rosy lips. The rest of her looked just as good. She had curves everywhere a woman should have curves. Yes, he decided. She looked very nice.

She cleared her throat.

He blinked and stood up. His cheeks grew warm as he shrugged off his jacket. He hadn't meant to stare at her. He handed her the jacket.

She wrapped his jacket around her waist. "My name is Megan Crane."

"Ted Jacob. So where were you headed when we were on the train?"

"Seattle. You?"

"Libby, Montana."

"Haven't heard of it."

"Not many people have. It's small."

A door opened and they turned their attention to the marshal who stepped into the building with two women in tow. The women gasped. One placed her hand over her eyes and the other put her hand over her mouth.

Megan rolled her eyes. Ted wished he could jump into the cell with her and block her from their view. He appreciated the fact that the marshal had the decency to avert his gaze from her. Though Ted didn't know her, he felt protective of her, almost as if she was his sister. Well, maybe not a sister. That would be going too far. She was much too attractive to be a sister.

He forced his mind onto the marshal and the two horrified women. The woman who held her hand over her eyes also held an ankle-length brown dress. She crept forward until her outstretched hand hit the bars of Megan's cell. "Please, put this on."

Megan grumbled but snatched the dress from her.

"Tell me when you're decent," the woman said. "Aaron, don't you dare look at her!"

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The marshal shrugged and turned around so his back was to them. "I wasn't looking at her."

"Well, there's no need to fight temptation."

Ted almost felt as if he should also turn around since the other woman promptly turned as well, but Megan kept her shirt and shorts on. She handed him his jacket and stepped into the dress. He didn't think anything of it, but he reasoned that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this was tame compared to the kind of things he'd seen on TV. Usually, women took stuff off.

When she finished buttoning the dress, he hid his laughter as she grunted in disgust. The dress hung on her like a frumpy blanket. He knew she hated it but to her credit, she cheerfully announced that she was decent.

The women breathed an audible sigh of relief. The marshal also turned but gave no indication as to what his thoughts were.

The woman who had handed her the dress spoke. "My name is Esther Thomas, and this is my sister Miriam Smith. Marshal Aaron Thomas is my husband." She came closer, her short and stocky frame giving her the appearance of waddling toward the blond. She had big blue eyes and a kind smile. "I don't come here to judge you. I just want to do what's right."

Megan's eyebrows furrowed but she smiled. "That sounds...good."

Megan darted a look in his direction and he shrugged. What man understood women when they plotted anything? Such guesswork did not appeal to him.

Miriam, a thinner version of her older sister, bobbed her head up and down like one of the bobble heads of a baseball player he had put on his desk at work. "Good. We are very pleased you agree. It really is the best thing."

Esther pointed to the marshal. "Send for the preacher at once."

"Preacher?"

The question, asked by both him and Megan, echoed in the still room, waking the drunk who snorted and sat up, rubbing his round tummy.

Ted ignored him. He turned back to the sisters. "Are you talking about marriage?"

Marshal Thomas made his way to the door, off to do his wife's bidding.

Marriage? Now? To...Megan? Whoever *Megan* was.

Esther gave a curt nod and straightened her blue hat. "Of course. It is only proper."

He shook his head. "No way! There's no way I'm going to marry her!" What if she turned out to be another Amanda? Needy and too agreeable. He couldn't commit himself to someone like that.

Megan glared at him, as if he'd just paid her a tremendous insult. "I'm already engaged, thank you very much." Looking back at the sisters, she straightened her back and lifted her chin. "I'm not marrying him. My mother will never approve of his kind."

He frowned and wrapped a hand on the bar next to him. "What do you mean, 'my kind'?"

The drunk stood up and stretched, his vocal yawn blocking half of her response, which Ted figured had to be condescending by the way her eyes swept up and down his body as if he just walked out of a garbage heap.

"What?" he demanded once the drunk grew silent.

"I'm not repeating myself," she snapped.

Miriam brought her hand to her cheek, looking startled. "This isn't good. We can't have the bride and groom arguing. The preacher won't like that at all."

Esther shook her head at her sister. "What else can we expect? He wanted to use her body, not marry her. Naturally, he'd protest. But," she turned her piercing eyes in his direction, "it's time we cleaned up the filth in this city. Fargo has more than

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enough prostitutes and customers. What we need are more men and women coming together in the bonds of holy matrimony. It's time we got back to what made this nation great! The husband and wife. The family unit."

"But we weren't having sex," Megan protested, her hands on her hips.

Esther's face softened as she looked at Megan. "Then it's fortunate for you that we stopped him before he took your virginity."

He couldn't believe his ears. Of course, they would assume he instigated the whole thing. "I wasn't going to have sex with her. I don't even know her. She followed me off the train."

The drunk snorted.

A glance over his shoulder showed Ted that the drunk didn't believe him either.

"I wasn't chasing you," Megan snapped at him.

Ted's hand squeezed the bar. "I didn't say you were. I said you followed me off the train."

"To find out where we were, not to *follow you*."

"Right. Because you would never be seen with *my kind*." Whatever that snide remark meant.

She shrugged. "It's nothing personal. It's just that my mother would never approve."

He huffed, liking her less and less the more she talked.

Esther folded her hands in front of her waist and took a deep breath. "Regardless, you two must marry."

"Over my dead body," he argued.

"I'll marry her," the drunk intervened.

Megan shuddered and backed away from him as he stumbled to the bars separating their cells.

Ted got a cruel sense of satisfaction in watching her squirm. It served her right after she put him down. In fact, it would do her good to know that other men out there came even lower on the 'ideal man' scale than he did. "You know, that's not

a bad idea. Since she's still a virgin"--he rolled his eyes--"then it doesn't matter who she makes miserable for the rest of her life."

Megan gasped. "Are you implying I'm not a virgin?"

"With the way you're dressed?"

Esther and Miriam gave solemn nods to each other, probably agreeing with his statement, and he crossed his arms, feeling better after the way she put him down.

The drunk burped. "I don't mind marrying a used woman. As long as she can cook and clean." He peered at her through his puffy red eyes. "You do cook and clean, don't you?"

She jutted her chin out and inhaled, an action which pronounced her already generous breasts, an action which also drew Ted's attention, despite his sudden dislike of her. She might be an uppity princess, but she was a *very* good looking one.

"No," she said, her tone firm. "I don't know how to cook or clean."

The drunk's eyes remained on her bosom. "I don't mind. I'll marry you anyway."

Ted just bet he'd marry her anyway! The way the sloppy and dirty man drooled over her had him reconsidering her fate. Could he really condemn her to a life with such a creepy guy?

Miriam clapped her hands together. "Now listen here!"

Startled, Ted did as she ordered. The others obeyed as well.

Miriam pointed a bony finger in Ted's direction. "You will marry her. It's time you owned up to your responsibilities, mister. Women are not objects. They are human beings. We are God fearing women who will not tolerate any mistreatment. Now, when that preacher comes, you'll do right by her." Then she stormed up to Megan and stuck her hand through the bars so she could point that same accusing finger in Megan's startled face. "And you will marry him. Just because he doesn't come from money, it doesn't mean you'll disgrace your mother. You've

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already disgraced her when you went in public without clothes on.”

Ted’s face grew red. So that’s what Megan meant when she said she wouldn’t marry *his kind*. What a snob! Before he could tell little Miss Perfect what he thought of her, the jailhouse door opened and the marshal led an older man into the small building. The older man carried a Bible in his hand and had a big grin on his face. As if this was a happy occasion!

Marshal Thomas motioned to the preacher. “This is Alex Miller. Alex, these two are here to get hitched.”

“Oh no, we’re not.” Ted ignored Miriam’s pointy finger which she shoved in his face. “I’ve done nothing with that woman, nor do I have any desire to. So if you’ll let me go-”

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join this man and woman in holy matrimony.”

Ted’s jaw dropped as the preacher began the ceremony without even flinching. He couldn’t be serious! “Like I was saying,” he yelled over the preacher.

Megan picked up the tin can from the floor and banged it on the bars, shouting, “No. I do not!”

And yet, the preacher continued, as if he hadn’t heard a single word of their fervent protests. Ted grabbed the bars and shook them, knowing the bars wouldn’t give but attempting to escape anyway. When the preacher reached the point asking him if he’d take Megan to be his wife, he emphatically said, “No!”

Preacher Miller turned to Megan and asked her if she’d take him to be her husband. Panicking and angry, Ted tried to grab the Bible out of the preacher’s hand but the older man swiftly dodged Ted’s outstretched arm. Curse the bars that imprisoned him! If he could yank the preacher and knock him off his feet, he’d prevent this catastrophe from happening.

But it wasn’t meant to be.

The preacher smiled, pronounced them man and wife and had the marshal and Esther sign the document. Ted and Megan

stared in silence as the couple wrote their names on the white piece of paper resting on the marshal's messy desk.

Finally, Ted found his voice. "This isn't legal! That document doesn't bind me to..." he motioned to the outraged blond "...to her."

"My name is Megan Crane."

He shrugged and rolled his eyes. Like he cared!

"You are married," the preacher said, returning to them.

Megan blanched. "No, we're not. We never agreed to it." Then she growled.

Ted couldn't believe his ears. The woman actually growled! Good grief! She was no better than a rapid dog. Ted could not, in any circumstance, live with a vicious, snooty woman, no matter how attractive she appeared with her golden waves in disarray as she vehemently shook her head and stomped around her cell. Maybe she was more like a hungry bear that just woke up after a long winter's slumber. If someone let her loose, she might start tearing into anyone who got in her way.

The preacher, however, seemed unconcerned by her rebellious display. "Sure, you married under protest, but you are married before God and man."

Ted huffed. Why should the preacher care? He wasn't chained to her for the rest of his life! Ted's future of endless suffering loomed before him. Tears did not come easily to him, but he had to choke back a sob on this event.

Esther's lips formed a thin line and she shook her head in grave disapproval. "The more I hear, the worse this gets. It's a good thing we're making you two do right."

Ted groaned and jerked his thumb toward Megan who banged the tin cup on the bars. "Look at her! She's a monster! You can't confine me to *that*." He might be six-feet-two-inches tall and she might be five-feet-six, but she was beginning to scare him with her erratic behavior.

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The preacher sighed. "You should have thought of that before you took away her innocence. Now, what's your name?"

"I'm not a monster," Megan protested. "I'm trying to get out of here."

"By banging a cup on the bars?" Ted asked.

She stopped and inspected the dented cup in her hand. She grunted and tossed the cup aside, letting it fall in a series of clanks as it rolled on the floor. Then she stomped over to the cot, plopped down on it and buried her face in her hands.

"Your name?" the preacher softly asked.

Ted sighed, knowing he'd lost the battle. "Ted Jacob."

She lifted her head. "As in Jacob Innovative Creations?"

He bit back a sarcastic reply. Oh, so now that she thought he was somebody important, she found a reason to be civil to him. He smiled, enjoying the moment where he'd pop her bubble of hope. "You'd really like that, wouldn't you? To be married to one of the country's richest men. Well, this isn't your day, sweetheart. I am not related to Christian Jacob. The last name is a coincidence. I'm a computer software representative. That means I work in a small cubicle with a million other people. I guess fate played a sick joke on you, huh?"

Her nose wrinkled. "I don't care either way. It was a question. Nothing more."

"Right." Like he believed that one.

"What's a computer soft..." Miriam shook her head. "What's your job again?"

He caught himself before he repeated his job title. Computers and software programs had no place in this time period. "Never mind."

The marshal fingered his gun and studied him. "You are an odd one. I'm not sure what to do with you."

Ted's gaze drifted to the man's thumb as it caressed the butt of his Colt 45. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he wondered what he said that irritated the marshal.

The preacher slapped the marshal on the back. "It's taken care of, Thomas. We've done right and made them an honest couple."

The marshal relaxed.

Ted felt the tension leave his muscles. Marshal Thomas didn't like him, and he probably didn't like Megan either. They *were* different. The marshal picked up on that and had a healthy dose of skepticism.

The preacher beamed at Ted and Megan. "Since this is your wedding day, we'll let you go. Where do you live?"

Ted stayed still, knowing very well that he couldn't say he lived in the future.

"Nowhere," Megan blurted out, finally standing up.

The drunk, who had been silent the whole time, spoke up. "You can stay at my place."

She skirted away from him.

"No doing, Hal," the marshal said in a low voice.

Hal pouted but didn't protest.

"In that case," the preacher began, his round face looking jubilant at the news, "I have the perfect place in mind for a newly married couple."

*Oh no.* Ted grimaced. Whatever the man had planned, it couldn't be good.

## Chapter Four



Cole's breaths came short and quick as he leapt off the train. The rush of hot air blasted his body in the freefall. He saw the ground coming before he slammed into the tall grass. Tucking the travel device to his chest, he cushioned it as he tumbled down the hill. He grunted from the impact of jabbing rocks and thick twigs that punctured his clothes. Gravity pulled him further down and he rolled with the carefree abandon he'd long since given up in childhood.

Did Blake follow?

The question haunted him, though he couldn't check. The world spun fast around him in shades of yellow, blue, and green. When he finally stopped, he laid still for a moment, willing the dizziness to pass. He closed his eyes and listened for sounds of someone nearby. Birds chirped and the wind ruffled the tall grass. No footsteps. No breathing except his own.

Opening his eyes, he lifted his head, noting the green grass. The sunlight beat down on him, making him squint. Tentative, he pushed himself up, his body protesting from the

bruises already forming on his skin. No matter. He'd tend to his wounds later. Right now he had to verify that Blake hadn't followed him off the train.

His eyes traced the incline of the gentle slope. The train tracks ran parallel to the river behind him. He sighed with relief. He was alone. Pulling out his time travel device, he checked to make sure he hadn't damaged it in the fall.

"Yes!"

Then he frowned.

"No."

He didn't have the chip that made the actual traveling part of time travel possible. Everything else supported it. Where could that chip be? His eyes swept the tall grass that swayed in the breeze. Wow. It could be anywhere.

Then he recalled the energy signature and did a quick scan for the half-inch round chip. He blinked and banged the instrument, immediately sorry he did so since it meant he could damage the device. This was no toy, and he had no desire to remain in the same time period where Blake could track him down and drag him back to Christian Jacob and the cops.

Calming his racing heart, he punched the miniature keypad until the electronic signature told him that the chip he needed was in Fargo, North Dakota. He gritted his teeth. He had to find out how far he was from that city. Sighing, he tucked the device into his pocket and started his ascent up the hill. He'd follow the train tracks until he reached the next town. Then he could find out where he was and what year he'd accidentally entered when Blake tackled him on the train. When he retrieved the chip, he'd be able to go to any time he wanted...and stay there for the rest of his life.

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## Meant To Be

Miriam and Esther seemed especially pleased with themselves as they showed Megan and Ted the two bedroom house that Old Milly Madison had up for rent.

"It's got a pump right here in the kitchen," Miriam said as she walked over to the sink. She pumped the handle and clear water poured into the sink. "It's easy to use too, not like mine. Mine sticks every so often when I try to get the handle back up."

"We'll have to take care of that." Esther nodded and motioned to Megan and Ted who stood still, silently watching as the sisters enthusiastically showed them the kitchen. "Come on."

Since Ted didn't budge, Megan sighed and obliged the poor woman. After all, Esther was being friendly. The small window overlooked the backyard. Before Megan could take adequate inventory of the acreage, Esther grabbed her hand.

"And look at this cookstove! It's only five years old," she rambled, her face flushed and her chubby hands opening the small door.

Megan bent down and frowned. Exactly how did a woman work this thing? And what exactly was she looking at?

Esther opened the smaller door next to it. "The wonderful thing is that you can put wood chips or coal in here."

Megan bit back the shiver of panic that coursed through her. These women couldn't expect her to *cook* food with this...antique contraption. She stood up and glanced from one expectant face to another. What did they want her to say?

"Oh good, Meg," Ted spoke up, "it's what you always wanted! Too bad there's not the servant to go with it."

She pierced him a dirty look. What was his problem anyway?

"Now, now," Esther soothed, patting Megan on the arm. She nodded in Ted's direction. "You are the head of the household. That means you are to treat her with respect. I know it's difficult for a man of your reputation to be respectful to

women of her reputation, but for now on, you are going to do the Christian thing.”

“Oh,” Miriam clapped her hands, directing their attention to her. “That reminds me. Church is at ten, and then you will come over to my house for lunch.”

Esther nodded. “She lives with our parents. It’ll be a good chance for you to meet them.” She paused and glanced at the ceiling, as if thinking of something. Then she continued, “I’ll come by at nine to take you both to church. Then you’ll know where it is in the future.”

Future. Megan wished she could go back there. No. She *would* go back there. It was just a matter of when...and how.

Miriam motioned to the cupboard and the shelves. “I’ll bring over some dishes and cups. We’ll say it’s your wedding gift.”

There was that word again. *Wedding*. Sure, she wanted to get married, but not like this! And not to him. She glanced at Ted who checked out the sparse parlor with two wooden rocking chairs and a big window overlooking the large yard. He placed his face in his hands and groaned.

She knew the feeling. Returning her attention to Miriam and Esther who led her up the narrow staircase where the two bedrooms were, she noted the bed in each room. Thank goodness because she had no intention of sleeping with Ted! She sighed. Well, for the time being, she’d make the best of it. What else could she do?

She joined them as they showed her the small dining room with a table long enough to seat six people and a wooden chair for each spot. That was when she realized that people in the late 1890s did without a lot of comfort. She had taken her recliner, her couch, her air mattress, and cushioned kitchen chairs for granted.

As soon as they walked outside, she caught sight of Ted talking to Richie Madison, who was Milly’s twenty-five-year-old

## Meant To Be

grandson. Ignoring them, she wandered the length of the porch which wrapped around half the house. She noticed that the white paint along the house was peeling. Grass and weeds suffocated any flowers that tried to thrive in the hostile environment. It did need some work. She stopped herself. Yes, it did need work...but not *her* work. Once she figured out how to get back to her correct time, this would be a bad memory.

Sunlight graced the acreage that looked as removed from civilization as one could get. The river edged their property, Esther had said, and as Megan examined the land at the back of the house, she saw where the slope declined to the flowing water. The Red River. Last year there had been a flood, but the house remained far above ground to avoid damage. Or at least, that's what Esther said.

Megan turned her attention to more pressing matters. Though she'd never been in one, she knew the little wooden building the size of a closet was an outhouse. She shuddered. Why couldn't she have ended up in the past when they had flushing toilets in the house? Clenching her jaw, she debated whether or not to relieve her full bladder. Curse it all! If she'd been a man, she could just go anywhere. But a woman had to sit down to go to the bathroom!

"Mrs. Jacob!" Miriam called out as Megan tapped the porch rail with her long fingernails. "Mrs. Jacob."

Megan jerked when someone touched her. She turned her head and saw Miriam move in front of her.

"Sorry. I called your name."

Right. *Mrs. Jacob*. What a creepy sound.

"Would you like to eat dinner at my house? We don't expect you to cook without any food." She smiled and folded her hands in front of her, as if praying Megan would say yes.

"Well..." Megan paused. Could an outhouse be called a bathroom in this time period? She had no idea, so she pointed to the outhouse. "I need to take care of some personal business."

Miriam blushed. “Oh, of course! I’ll let you tend to your needs at the privy.” She scooted away from her.

Privy. Right. She’d have to remember that. Megan hobbled to the small building, feeling as if her bladder would burst at any moment. She winced as the door creaked. The first thing she noticed was the smell. Placing her hand over her nose, she forced back the urge to gag. This had to be the crudest thing she’d ever done. Yes, people in her time camped and did their business in the wilderness, but she wasn’t one of them.

She wanted to leave, but if she didn’t go, she’d soil her clothes! She stepped back outside and shut the door, taking a deep breath of fresh air. She could do this. Her ancestors did this every day they lived! Brave souls. She inhaled again and held her breath. Then she flung the door open and stepped to the wooden bench with a hole cut into it. She pulled up the awkward dress and worked the belt on her shorts loose, her fingers anxious since she wanted to be quick. If she didn’t work fast enough, she’d have to breathe this rancid air. She unzipped her shorts and shoved them and her underwear to her knees. Then she sat down, shivering as a blast of wind blew up her bare bottom. Trying not to think about where she was, she released her bladder.

What should have taken a couple of seconds seemed to take forever as she listened to the sound of her urine splattering the dirt in the hole someone had dug long ago. She didn’t want to breathe, and she fought it, even when her lungs burned. Then someone knocked on the door and she gasped for air. The putrid smell invaded her senses and her eyes watered. This had to be the most disgusting thing she’d ever done in her entire life!

“What do you want?” she yelled as she frantically searched for toilet paper. ‘Toilet paper? In 1898? Oh great. What could she wipe with?

“I have some papers for you,” Miriam called from the other side of the door.

## Meant To Be

“Papers?” Is that what Miriam thought she needed?  
Reading material?

“To wipe with.”

The meaning dawned on her. *Thank you, Lord, for Miriam’s quick thinking!* “Give them to me.”

Miriam cracked the door open and shoved the papers at her.

Megan gladly accepted them, said thank you and set the pile of magazines by her on the long bench. After she heard Miriam’s retreating footsteps on the grass, she tore some pages from the top magazine and wiped. When she was done, she emerged from the privy, feeling better but also dirty. Where did one wash their hands after this? Or, worse yet, what if they didn’t wash their hands at all?

Miriam waited a few feet away from the outhouse. “Here’s soap.” Miriam handed her the bar.

Relieved, Megan took it and followed Miriam to the pump where she washed her hands.

“It sure is peaceful out here,” Miriam said. “Are you ready to eat?”

She dried her hands on the towel the woman handed her. “Yes.” She’d feel more optimistic on a full stomach, she decided.

Once they returned to the porch, she noticed that Richie continued to talk to Ted who kept shaking his head and mumbling something about bad luck under his breath. She rolled her eyes. As if arriving in Fargo in 1898 and getting married was on her “to do” list that morning!

“So that’s all you need to know about Ray’s farm,” Richie concluded and slapped Ted on the back, causing him to stumble forward. He laughed. “You’ve got to toughen up. Farm work will do that for you.”

“Farm work?” Megan asked.

“Yes,” Esther said. “Ray could use another hand on the farm and Richie will get your husband a job. Ray lives that way.”

She pointed to the west. “He’s only a few miles away, which makes this place ideal. Isn’t it terrific how God works things out? Everything is looking better already for you two.” She gave a contented sigh and waved the group toward her. “Come on. Let’s get some grub.”

Miriam giggled and whispered, “That’s her joke. She can’t handle the fact that I’m a better cook than her.”

Megan resigned herself to the task at hand and stuck with Miriam who talked enough so that she could think. Now, just how was she going to get out of this mess?

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Ted fell onto the thin mattress in the second bedroom, glad that he didn’t have to share it with Miss Prissy Megan. The woman shouldn’t get on his nerves, but he realized why she irked him as much as she did. How many women had he come across who didn’t want to go out with him because he didn’t make *enough money*, whatever that meant. He worked hard at his job. Sure, he got bored sitting on the phone, listening to people complain about the software on their computer. Who wouldn’t after dealing with it for eight to nine hours a day, five days a week? He made a decent wage and could live comfortably off of it. So he wasn’t a CEO or some other important executive in the company, but he could do worse. He could be a lazy person who didn’t work at all. Some men wanted women to support them.

He punched his pillow in aggravation before he settled his head back on it. He’d seen the engagement ring on Megan’s finger. The size of the diamond meant she had a fiancé who earned the same amount of money in one month that he earned in half a year. The guy had to be loaded, which explained her aversion to him. He shrugged. Not that he would consider her anyway, even if she was good looking.

## Meant To Be

He wondered why Megan's opinion mattered to him. It wasn't like she mattered or anything. Sighing, he watched the shadows on the ceiling. At least the breeze drifting in through the open window helped calm his anger.

He finally fell asleep and the stream of sunlight hitting his eyes woke him in the morning. He got up and put on his clothes, feeling disgusting since he'd worn them yesterday. But what else could he do?

After a quick visit to the outhouse, he entered through the kitchen door and saw that Megan sat in the parlor. She wore her shirt and shorts and was peering out the window. He debated whether or not he should talk to her. Surely, she wanted to get back to their correct time as much as he did, and there was that saying, "Two heads are better than one." Maybe together, they could figure out how to get back to the future.

He lumbered forward until he came to the small table separating the two rocking chairs. Reluctant, he sat in the empty rocking chair and looked out the window, wondering what held her fascination out there. All he saw was grass, a clear blue sky and a deer leaping along the property.

She leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. "Soon I'll have to put on that awful dress."

Shrugging, he said, "It won't be for long. We just need to figure out how to get out of here."

"That's true. I was thinking the train might be the answer."

He nodded. "I was thinking the same thing. But I guess we'll have to wait until we have enough money to buy train tickets."

"We can get money today."

Now this he was something he had to hear. "How?"

"I'm hawking my ring." She held up her hand and waved her ring finger.

He furrowed his eyebrows. "Are you sure that's a good idea? Your fiancé won't be happy about that."

"Well, I don't have a fiancé anymore, do I?"

He blinked. "Oh come on. Once we get back to our time, we won't be married."

She leaned forward, placing her elbows on her knees and shook her head. "That's not what I meant. I caught my fiancé kissing another woman right before you bumped into me."

"No kidding?"

She shot him a 'do I look like I'm kidding' look. Then she peered out the window again. "As far as I'm concerned, this ring is payment for the year I wasted on him."

"It doesn't sound like you loved him."

Still refusing to meet his gaze, she replied, "My mother loved him. I wanted to make her happy."

Surprised, he glanced at his watch which hadn't worked ever since they traveled in time. He wondered if he could sell it. Probably not. It was a cheap brand he bought at a retail store.

Megan stood up and took the awkward dress off the hook by the door. At least she had something respectable to show up in. Glancing at his jeans and t-shirt, he knew that his clothes would not suffice in an old fashioned church. What could he do about it? He had no money and no way to get new clothes, so for the time being, he was stuck looking odd.

He tried to hide his humor as she squirmed into the bulky dress, but she saw his smirk and rolled her eyes. Whether he liked it or not, he was stuck with her for however long it took for them to get back home, so he might as well do what he could to get along with her. Bickering wouldn't do them any good. It could even delay their progress.

Taking a deep breath, he eased out of the chair so he could face her.

She blinked as he stepped forward.

## Meant To Be

"I'm not going to bite," he promised, wondering why she looked apprehensive.

"Well, one can't tell what you'll do. Your opinion of me is low enough as it is." She tied the strings of her bonnet under her chin.

"And you're just as delightful," he quipped, immediately wishing he hadn't. He was trying to make things better, but so far, he'd made them worse. "Look. I'm sorry, alright? We both want to return home."

She nodded, though the hesitant expression on her face didn't falter. "True."

"We can accomplish that goal better if we put aside our personal opinions of each other and work together."

A smile crossed her face. "What are you? A team empowerment supervisor?"

"Very funny."

"I wasn't trying to be funny." She turned back to the window. "Oh great. They're coming."

"You thought they wouldn't?"

"I hoped they'd forget about us."

He scoffed. That showed how little she knew. Miriam and Esther reminded him of Tony. That guy always kept his word. If he said he'd do something or be somewhere, it'd take a freak accident to stop him. And on a beautiful April morning with the sun shining, birds chirping and squirrels playing, unexpected absences didn't happen.

"Well, at least we'll get lunch after the service." Megan straightened her back and strode toward the door.

"Let's just hope we'll be long gone before dinner."

"You'd better hope that," she agreed, putting her hand on the brass doorknob, "because I can't cook anything I can't microwave."

Cute, he thought, his lips curled up in amusement. She assumed she'd be the cook. Little did she know that he found his

way around the kitchen quite well, thanks to his five year job as a chef. Fortunately, he'd also paid attention yesterday when Miriam made the meal and her sister gushed on and on about the cookstove's wonderful features.

Megan turned the knob and opened the wood door.

He inwardly cringed. Great. The marshal stood right there on the porch beside Esther who hugged Megan as if they'd known each other their entire lives. Aaron simply narrowed his eyes at Ted, but Ted refused to let the lawman know he intimidated him.

Instead, he stepped forward to shake his hand. "How are you this morning, Marshal?"

The clean shaven man's grip tightened a bit, probably a subtle warning to notify Ted that he was wary of him. "Good. And you?"

"I've been better." He wiped his hand on the backside of his jeans. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to shave. Or dress properly. Are you sure you want me in church?"

"Now don't you try getting out of it," Esther intervened. "It doesn't matter what you look like. God can take you as you are."

That was all well to say but when they got to church, Ted noticed that all of the men wore their best suits. Everyone stared at him, so he had a hard time following Aaron, Esther and Megan to the pew. He knew how he looked from their perspective, a sinner of the worst sort. Maybe they thought he'd been drinking at the bar the night before or doing some other wicked deed. It wasn't like going to church in the future when wearing jeans and t-shirts was acceptable.

He sat next to Megan, keeping a safe distance from her. Unfortunately, Richie showed up and squeezed himself into the pew, forcing Ted to press up against Megan.

"Give me some room," she hissed in his ear.

"I can't. I'm trapped. It's either you or Richie."

## Meant To Be

"Then choose him."

"I will not."

"You like him."

"But you're a woman, and there's a big difference." He ignored her and her soft side that pressed against his. Regardless of how much she irritated him, he'd rather cozy up to her than Richie!

She wiggled but couldn't budge from her spot next to Esther, so she crossed her arms and looked forward.

Richie leaned over and said, "You two make a happy couple."

Ted hid his grimace. The man was nuts.

"So I'll see you at Ray's farm bright and early tomorrow. I think you'll enjoy riding a horse."

"Nothing doing, Richie," Esther admonished, peering around Megan who kept her eyes fixed on the pulpit. "He needs to get clothes. Then he can do the farming come Tuesday."

Ted remained still, lest he shake his head in protest. Once he and Megan went back to the train, they'd figure out a way back home. And that would be after lunch. His growling stomach insisted he eat, and he had a church service to muddle through first. Not that he was opposed to church. He was just opposed being hungry for a couple of hours.

"Tuesday then," Richie consented.

The people stood up and Ted joined them and started lip-synching the words to the hymns.

## Chapter Five



Cole wiped the water from his lips. The cool river satisfied his thirst, but hunger remained another problem. He'd spent most of the night walking but managed to sleep in the barren fields in this godforsaken land. He stayed near the train tracks and continued to keep guard, especially when a train passed by. But Blake didn't show up and that gave him one thing to be grateful for. What he needed now was a decent meal and to find out where he was. He hoped that Fargo wasn't too far away. Last check at the time travel device showed him that the chip hadn't budged from its location, and that was a good thing. Once he found it, he'd put it back to where it belonged. Then what? Where would he go?

He stood up from the sandy bank of the river and glanced at the train tracks about a mile away. Maybe he'd follow the river. It seemed to run parallel to the tracks. Then he could drink whenever he got thirsty. When the tracks veered away from the water, he'd walk along them again.

The trek was a hard and long one. The sun beat down on his head. He'd lost his hat in the train. His face heated from the

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glare of the sun, and he knew a sunburn was inevitable. His legs grew sore from the endless miles he walked, making his pace slower than he wished. Birds offered their melodic consolations for his plight, but his aching body refused to be comforted. Instead, he trudged forward, ignoring the sting on the soles of his feet or his breaths as they became shallow from pressing on.

He'd focus on his goal. He'd find the chip and go to the 1950's. Then he'd make a new name for himself. He'd become someone important, gain wealth, maybe even get some fame. The 50's had the conveniences he enjoyed and no one would know him, so he'd be safe. The 50's were a good time, he decided. It was the flourishing period of America. He'd know what was to come and know how to deal with it. Then he'd die, safe in his bed in another country. Maybe Canada. Some place where he could remain out of Christian Jacob's reach.

At least he finally had a plan. Now all he had to do was find the chip and he'd follow through with it.

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Megan decided eating lunch before going to the train station was a smart move. However, staying and listening to Miriam and Esther talk in the parlor about buying clothes from the mercantile was not as smart. Their enthusiasm did little to motivate any excitement on her part. She just wanted to get home, and not the antique one they'd given her and Ted to rent. Which reminded her...She also wanted out of this farce called a marriage.

She could hear her mother now. "Ted Jacob isn't the best one for you. Why, just look at the way Ted pals around with people. He's the life of the party, and you've dated plenty of those men in your time, haven't you? Not a single one turned out to be responsible."

She glanced out the parlor window and saw Ted talking to a couple of men. He threw back his head and laughed. She shook her head. He seemed abnormally happy to be stuck in this time period. Already, the other men had befriended him. Well, maybe all the men except for the marshal who'd left to take care of a complaint. Still, Richie talked to him, and Ted obliged him as if they were old friends. Yes, she'd done her time with fun, easygoing men who could fit in anywhere at a moment's notice. She recalled all the other guys she'd dated who'd impressed her with their outgoing personalities. She'd been drawn to them like a moth to a flame. Only, she got burned when she realized that was all those guys had to offer.

She grunted. Had Mike been any better? Not only had he been boring but he'd kissed an old girlfriend on his way to announce his engagement to Megan. They were going to Seattle so she could meet his family. Then he had to go and ruin it by cheating on her. Sure, he had money and a secure job, but what good was that when he ripped her heart to pieces?

Well, that wasn't the truth. Not really. Yes, the rejection stung. Being dumped was never pleasant. But she felt a surprising sense of relief. Now she didn't have to be tied down to a man her mother wanted instead of who she wanted. That was good. And she'd return home, tell her mother what a loser Mike turned out to be, and commit herself to a life of singlehood. She didn't need a man to be happy. She'd be fine all by herself. As for children...Well, she just wasn't meant to have them. She swallowed the lump in her throat and forced her attention back to Esther and Miriam.

"I think sensible colors like browns, dark greens and dark blues are more practical," Esther said.

"But she'll want to look pretty for her husband. I think pinks and yellows might be more becoming...and romantic," Miriam argued.

## Meant To Be

“Let’s ask her what she wants.” Esther turned to her, her hands folded in her lap. “What colors suit you?”

Megan sighed, knowing she had to play along as if she’d still be here tomorrow. “I like a variety but if I had to choose, I want pink.”

“Ah ha!” Miriam clapped her hands and bounced in her chair. “Pink will look good on you too.”

Megan glanced out the window and saw Ted laughing at something else Richie said. At least he could find something to laugh about in this situation. Deciding she’d visited the past long enough, she stood up and stretched, feigning a yawn. “I’m tired. I need to go home.”

“Tired?” Miriam frowned. “Didn’t you sleep well last night?”

Esther nudged her in the arm. “That’s personal.”

Megan’s cheeks flushed when she realized Esther assumed she spent the night with Ted. She didn’t consider herself to be a prude but still...She decided to play along. Giving what she considered a girlish giggle, she pressed a hand to her cheek. “I’d better go see him.”

She still couldn’t bring herself to say Ted’s name. Maybe he shouldn’t irk her so, but he had the audacity to imply that she slept around with his ‘virgin’ remark when they were in prison. That had been the final straw to her bad day. Not that today was much better, but at least she didn’t catch Mike kissing someone else. He ought to be happy right now...settling into Seattle with his family, introducing them to the true love of his life.

She had enough. When she got back home, she’d live her life for herself instead of for others. No more would she waste her time trying to please people who couldn’t be pleased.

Miriam surprised her when she wrapped her arm around hers and led her to the front door. “I think marriage is a lovely institution.”

Esther stood and placed her dark hat on her head. "It's one that we have a duty to uphold. And yes, it is lovely."

"I can't wait until it's my turn to marry." Miriam sighed before she opened the door and waved to Ted. "I hope you don't mind that we took your bride from you for the hour."

Richie and Ted turned from the buckboard wagon, and there was no mistaking the way Ted flinched.

"Oh, Miriam," Megan began, "do you know a place where I can sell a ring?"

"Why would you want to get rid of jewelry?" Esther asked.

Megan jumped, not expecting the other woman to be right behind her.

Esther stood primly before her, her hands clasped together as they held her purse by its strap.

"The ring has no meaning to me," Megan replied, shoving the wayward strand of her hair back under her bonnet, noting that Richie directed Ted's attention to the two brown horses in front of the wagon.

"Was it a payment for your...services?" Miriam whispered.

"No!"

"Please don't take offense." Miriam blushed but continued to look her in the eye. "I heard that soiled doves can make a decent salary."

"Unless they are under the thumb of their master," Esther snapped, frowning in grave disapproval. "Really, Miriam. How did you find out so much about whores?"

Her sister shrugged. "I talked to a soiled dove one time when she was on her way out of town."

"That being the case, it's still best to keep away from such discussions. The last thing you want to do is get involved in a bordello. Am I right, Megan?"

## Meant To Be

“Esther, give me some credit,” Miriam intervened, turning Esther’s attention back to her, much to Megan’s relief. “I wouldn’t do that. She and I were bored, so we talked.”

“There are some things you shouldn’t be curious about.”

“I wasn’t curious. I just thought the woman was nice. We had a good discussion, and most of it had nothing to do with her business. Believe it or not, she was well-read and we spent the bulk of our time talking about literature.”

“I’m sure.” Esther’s sarcastic tone left no doubts as to her thoughts on the subject.

Miriam shook her head, clearly agitated. “You’ll have to forgive her, Megan. She doesn’t get much enjoyment out of life.”

Esther gasped. “Enjoyment? Is that what you think those poor women go through when men use their bodies?” She nudged Megan in the arm. “Set her straight for me, will you? Tell her how degraded your profession made you feel.”

Megan groaned. “It didn’t make me feel anything because I’m not a prostitute.”

“That’s true. You’re not one anymore. You’ve been rescued from that miserable life.”

“Look, Ted and I weren’t going to sleep together. We didn’t even know each other. I got stranded on a train and I didn’t have time to put on a dress, but I left the train so I could figure out where I was.” That was partially true. She couldn’t exactly come out and say she was from the future. “Ted happened to follow me into the train station and we both wanted the newspaper when your husband arrived.”

“So, you were in a sleeping car and didn’t have time to put on a dress?”

That sounded as good an excuse as any so Megan agreed to it. “Yes. We weren’t about to fornicate.”

“Hmm...” Esther sighed, as if debating the proper course of action. “I suppose there’s nothing we can do about it now.

You are married to Ted, and since you consummated the marriage-”

“But we didn’t,” Megan quickly interjected, hoping this might be an easy out for her. “We slept in separate rooms.”

Esther smirked. “I wasn’t born yesterday. I know that a man can’t keep his hands off a woman’s body when he’s in the same house with her in the dark.”

Miriam pressed her hand to her heart and leaned forward. “Are they as ravenous as that soiled dove said?”

“No,” Esther replied. “Not ravenous. But there is a sense of...urgency about them.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me this before?”

“Because it’s not the kind of conversation we should be having.” Esther straightened her back and waved to the men. “Let’s not dilly dally. We have things to do before the day is over.”

“But I need to find someone who’ll buy my ring,” Megan insisted, not moving from her spot.

Esther shook her head. “You won’t find anyone like that on a Sunday. Businesses are closed.”

Of course, she spoke the truth. Megan had forgotten that in 1898, businesses did close on Sundays. “Then where can I go tomorrow?”

“We’ll take you to Lee Griffith first thing tomorrow. He’s an honest man.”

Miriam leaned forward to ask, “So, may I ask who gave you the ring?”

“A man who proposed to me and then dumped me for someone else,” Megan replied, noting the bitterness in her tone.

“Dumped? You mean, he literally picked you up and threw you down?”

“No. I meant that he ended the engagement.”

Miriam offered her a sympathetic look. “How dreadful.”

## Meant To Be

Esther waved her hand. "It's not dreadful. Better to find out before you say your vows what kind of man took to courting you."

"So, you didn't know Ted?" Miriam asked.

Megan felt like screaming. Miriam was just now getting that?

Esther gave Miriam a pointed look. "Well, she does now, at least in the Biblical sense. There's no undoing what God's joined together."

Megan started to correct her but stopped. What did it matter? She'd be out of there as soon as she could buy a train ticket, which would be tomorrow. Not soon enough but she could bear one more day in this time.

Esther hugged her sister. "We'll be here early in the morning." Turning to Megan, she motioned her to the wagon. "We'd best be on our way. I have your measurements to take down before I make supper."

Megan said good-bye to Miriam and followed the woman to the wagon. "Measurements?"

"Sure. We need to know exactly what size you are for the clothes we'll get tomorrow."

She nodded and got ready to hop up into the second row of seats.

Esther clucked her tongue and shook her head. "You poor thing. What you need to learn is chivalry. It's only right that you are treated with respect." She slapped Ted on the arm.

Ted jerked back, looking shocked.

Undaunted, she said, "You obviously don't know anything about manners. When your wife needs to get into the wagon, you help her in." She waved toward Megan and stared pointedly at him. "She's waiting."

Ted's eyes met Megan's and she shrugged. What could she say? In their time, women didn't expect men to assist them with anything.

He walked over to her, his expression uneasy. He glanced from her to the wagon. "I'm not really sure where to touch you."

Esther scoffed. "After your wedding night, you're claiming that? You have much to learn. It's a good thing I'm here or else poor Megan would have to deal with a brute for the rest of her life." She took one of his hands and placed it in Megan's. Then she put his other hand on the small of Megan's back. "There. Now push her up."

Megan's back grew warm from his touch. Ignoring the way her skin tingled, she placed her hand up on the seat and set her foot on the floor of the buckboard. She pushed up with her foot and slipped.

His hand went from her back to her bottom. Then he steadied her and practically threw her up into the seat.

"Not so rough," Megan replied, gathering what little dignity she could from the humiliation of almost falling flat on her back in the grass.

Esther sighed. "Ted, that kind of touching will have to wait until you're alone with her tonight."

"I didn't do it on purpose," he snapped at both women. "My hand slipped."

Esther raised an eyebrow. "Of course."

Megan sat up and wished for this trip to be over. She'd rather ride in the buggy that Esther's husband had brought out. Richie's buckboard wasn't nearly as easy to get into, and she dreaded the process of getting off. She didn't blame Ted for what happened. She knew it had been an accident.

Richie helped Esther in next to her, making the process look easier than Megan found it. Esther smiled and patted her hand. "Don't give up hope. I'm sure Ted will be a gentleman someday."

Ted rolled his eyes but didn't comment as he joined Richie up front.

## Meant To Be

After Richie grabbed the reins and urged the horses forward, he rambled on about the farmhands at Ray's farm. It became clear to Megan that Richie was the big gossip of the area. Listening to him reminded her of watching soap operas with her mother while growing up.

Esther, who apparently noticed this too, tapped Richie on the shoulder. "Please wait until I'm not around to be a busybody."

Megan silently thanked her. She didn't care to listen to this either. Turning her attention to the houses lining the block, she noted the children playing in the yards while mothers talked to their neighbors. The men sat on porches, leaving the women to catch any children that ran into the streets. A couple of children darted in front of riders who had to rein their horses back so they didn't plow into the youngsters. As a mother apologized to one rider, Megan watched as one of the horses lifted its tail and went to the bathroom right there in the street.

She cringed. Now that was something no one ever saw in the movies. By the looks of the dusty street, she realized that someone had to clean the waste up. She shivered. How awful it would be to have that job!

Richie stopped the wagon in front of a green house with white trim. "Well, here we are!"

Esther turned to her. "This is my home. You will be staying here tonight."

Ted whirled around in his seat to face Esther. "What?"

"The hour is getting late and it's going to be time for supper soon," she explained in a very matter-of-fact tone that left no room for argument. "Then it'll be too late to take you home. You'll stay in the guest bedroom."

Ted moved his mouth but didn't speak.

Megan sighed. "It's just as well. I don't feel like going all the way back to that house." Plus, she'd be right here in town to visit Lee Griffith about hawking her ring.

Richie hopped out of the wagon with surprising ease. His tall and lanky frame made him light on his feet, or so it seemed.

Esther held out her hand and allowed him to help her down. Then she stared expectantly at Ted.

“But...” His gaze shifted from Esther to Megan and then to Richie.

Richie chuckled. “Come on down.”

Ted groaned but got off the wagon. He stood in front of Megan and held his hands out to her. “If I touch something I shouldn’t because you slip, it’s not my fault.”

“I’m not stupid. I know it was an accident,” she whispered as she grasped his arms and practically jumped into them.

“Yeah, well your friend doesn’t agree,” he quietly replied. He set her down.

“That’s because she assumes we actually slept together last night.”

He blanched.

How nice. The thought of sleeping with her repulsed him! She’d been insulted in her time, but this was a new one. Even couldn’t-be-faithful-Mike tried to get her into his bed. “Thanks,” she snapped and took a step away from him. As she stepped forward, her foot caught on the hem of the dress and she fell on the dirt road, coughing as the dust swirled around her face.

Ted reached down to help her, and though he tried to hide his laughter, she saw his body shake with merriment.

She shoved him away. “I can do it myself.” Irritated, she pushed her body off the ground. Thankfully, she hadn’t landed on a lovely pile of horse droppings. She brushed the dirt off the dress as best as she could.

Esther hurried to her and supported her so that she didn’t trip again when the awful dress wrapped itself around her ankles.

Megan gritted her teeth. If she could wear her shorts and a shirt in public, this whole fiasco would never have happened.

## Meant To Be

She couldn't wait to get out of this time. Then she could return to her life of normalcy.

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Ted sat across from Aaron at the square kitchen table. Esther sat on his left and Megan sat on his right. Esther made pot roast with vegetables, dumplings, and apple pie. The meal was one of the best he'd ever eaten. A kerosene lamp sitting on the counter by the cookstove gave off enough light so he could see everything he was eating. Evening sunlight filtered through the sheer window curtains, creating what should have been a relaxing and warm atmosphere.

And it would have been an ideal setting had Aaron not been staring at him with the intensity of a cat planning its next move on trapping the mouse. Ted, of course, knew he was the mouse. Ted raised the fork full of hot apple pie to his mouth and forced himself to eat it. Having an appetite when being scrutinized seemed downright impossible but with each hard swallow, he'd managed it. Now that he'd done his duty, he put his fork on his plate and wiped his mouth with the neatly folded cloth napkin embroidered with the initials AT.

"That was a good meal," Ted told Esther, reluctant to take his eyes off of Aaron's piercing stare. Didn't Aaron ever blink? Taking a deep breath, he nodded and patted his stomach. "Yep. A good meal."

Esther smiled and gave a curt nod. "Thank you."

Megan sipped her water and placed her glass by her empty plate. "I have to agree with Ted. You did an excellent job."

Esther's smile grew wider. "Don't you fret about cooking. I can come out and teach you how to do it. Just stick with easy stuff, like slicing bread and hard boiled eggs until you learn how to cook without starting a fire."

Megan's cheeks grew pink and she shrugged.

Ted thought it best to keep Megan away from the kitchen as soon as he saw the flames shoot up from the skillet, though he still couldn't figure out how she started the fire. "I can cook," he told her. "So there's no need to worry about it."

Aaron's frown deepened as he drummed his fingers on the table. "What kind of man cooks?"

Ted returned his focus on him, hoping he looked brave enough to confront a whole army of irritable marshals. "I worked in a restaurant for five years. And I did pretty well, if I may say so."

He shook his head. "Cooking is woman's work."

"It's true," Esther agreed. "Now that you're a married man, you need to do your duty and your wife needs to do hers. You work and provide the shelter."

"You bring food home and she cooks it up," Aaron finished.

"Not if she's starting fires I won't." Ted refused to back down to him.

Megan crossed her arms and huffed. "Are you telling me what I can and cannot do?"

He shrugged. "You yourself said you couldn't cook this morning. I'd think you'd be delighted by this."

"But I don't like being told what to do."

"A man rules the house," Aaron told her. Looking at Ted, he said, "You'd do well to remember that before you get a rebellion on your hands."

Frustrated, Ted glared at him. So what if Marshal Thompson was worse than his last supervisor who thought he knew everything there was to know about anything. Ted had enough of the marshal's intimidation tactics and wouldn't give in on this issue. "If I'm the man of the house, then I say what goes on in it. And as far as I'm concerned, Megan's banned from the kitchen."

## Meant To Be

The three gasped, each for different reasons, he was sure, but still, what they formed was a collective gasp. Well, let them deal with the news however they wanted to. He stood up. He'd had enough of this conversation, if it could be called that.

"I'm ready to retire for the night," he announced. "If you'll give me a ride home—"

"Oh no," Esther argued, quickly getting to her feet. "It's much too late for us to be taking someone out to the country. You and your wife will stay in the guest bedroom."

Megan bolted to her feet. "You have two extra rooms, don't you?"

"You're a married couple," she said, wringing her hands and looking frantic. "It'd be wrong for you to sleep apart."

"Maybe we should get a room at the hotel," Ted told Megan.

Megan shook her head. "With what money? I haven't sold the ring yet."

Oh. That did pose a problem. They couldn't stay there for free and they didn't have their own transportation.

"The matter is settled," Esther said, gaining back the usual calm and poise he'd come to expect from her. "You will stay in the guest bedroom. The sheets are clean and there are even new pillows on the bed. I think you'll find the accommodations to your liking."

"Is there room for someone to sleep on the floor?" Megan asked.

"You mean that you'll sleep on the floor?" Ted clarified, upset that she'd volunteer him for that task.

"No. You're the man, so you get to sleep on the hard surface."

Aaron smirked as he looked at Ted. "What's wrong? You can't control *that* part of your relationship either?"

Ted gritted his teeth and grabbed Megan's hand. "We'll sleep in bed together." Ignoring Megan's protest, he looked at Esther. "Where's the bedroom?"

Esther swiftly walked past them and he turned to follow. He had to keep a strong hold on Megan's hand to take her along, but he had no intention of putting up with the marshal's cutting remarks anymore. At least not for the rest of the night.

Esther led them up the narrow staircase until they reached the first door on the right. "This will be your room for tonight. But it's still early. Maybe we should go back down for some coffee or to talk."

"Nope," he said, his tone firm. He nearly dragged Megan into the room and held onto her so she couldn't escape. "I want to get to bed, and I want my wife with me. Thank you, Esther. We'll see you in the morning."

Before she could respond, he shut the door.

Megan finally pulled her hand out of his and glared at him. "That was rude!"

"I don't want to go back down there and talk to them. Do you?"

She sighed and sat at the foot of the bed. "I don't know. Esther's actually nice, even if she does have some funny ideas."

"Old fashioned ideas, you mean."

"Given the time period, it's par for the course."

"Which puts you under my authority, doesn't it?" He knew she'd never go for that, which was why he said it. The moment her face grew red, he knew he'd made his point. "Are you ready to go back to the future?"

"Yes." She dug into her dress pocket and pulled out the ring. "Once I sell this, we'll get our train tickets and be out of here."

"You're going to buy me a train ticket?" he softly asked.

"Well, I can't leave you here, can I?"

He sat next to her. "Thanks."

## Meant To Be

“It’s nothing. Really, you should thank Mike for buying it.”

“Was that his name?”

She nodded, turning the ring over with her fingers, seeming to be content to inspect it.

Not knowing what else to say, he examined the small room. The bed took up most of the space but there was a good-sized wardrobe and a washstand too. There was probably even enough space for him to sleep at the foot of the bed.

“I’ll tell you what,” he began, tapping his shoe on the soft blue rug which would be comfortable enough for one night’s sleep. “I’ll sleep on the floor.”

Relief flashed across her face. “Really?”

“Really.” He smiled at her. “We’ll be out of this mess soon enough. Why don’t we just let bygones be bygones and move on? I don’t want to argue with you.”

“We haven’t been arguing.”

“Maybe not outright but you have to admit, things haven’t been ideal.”

“Only because you made that snide comment regarding my virginity.”

Was that why he bothered her? “I thought you didn’t like my job.”

She gave him a ‘you’re crazy’ look. “No. I don’t care what you do for a living. I just didn’t like your insinuation that I slept around.”

“Well...” He shrugged. “I assumed that you weren’t a virgin because none of the women I ever dated were.”

“There are adult female virgins in the future.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.” She slid the ring off her finger and put it on the washstand, next to the basin and pitcher of water. “Though don’t think I didn’t have my offers.”

“I’m sure you did.” She certainly was attractive enough.

She went to the window and moved aside the thick curtain. "I see the train station in that direction." She pointed out the window. "I guess we'll have to go with Esther and Miriam to the mercantile for clothes first."

"You'll have to do that," he corrected her, leaning back on the bed. "Richie's going to come by and take me to buy clothes fit for farm work."

"As soon as we meet up again, we'll go the train station. Does that sound like a good plan?"

He nodded. "I don't see any other choice."

She breathed a sigh of relief and turned her attention to him, letting the curtain fall back into place. "I miss indoor toilets and electricity."

"Me too." Standing up, he gathered a pillow and a blanket to take to the floor. "I especially miss my music."

She grinned. "Let me guess. Alternative music?"

"No. Country."

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "You don't strike me as a cowboy."

"I'm not. You don't to have to be a cowboy to like country music."

Unbuttoning her dress, she said, "I hadn't met anyone who likes country music."

"There's a first time for everything." He took his shoes off and set them by the door. "What kind of music do you listen to?"

"Pop and rock."

He chuckled. "That's typical of your type."

She paused as she was about to lift the dress over her head. "My type?"

"Preppy. Your clothes scream it."

Removing the dress, she folded it and placed it on the end of the bed. "I'm just not a jeans person, that's all. Not everyone likes denim."

"I love it."

## Meant To Be

“Obviously.” She turned down the light blanket and sheet and fluffed her pillow. “I can’t wait to sleep in my pajamas again. I’m sick of sleeping with my clothes on. I feel disgusting.”

He glanced at her as he settled on the floor. “You wore your clothes to bed last night?”

“Of course. I didn’t know if I could trust you or not. For all I knew, you would have come into my bedroom thinking something was going to happen.”

He laughed, unable to hide his amusement. “And I slept in the buff.”

Her jaw dropped and her hands stilled on her shoes that she had taken off. “You’re kidding?”

“Nope.”

“But weren’t you worried?”

Cute. Yes, she was cute. “Meg, the truth is that a man doesn’t mind if a woman slips into his bed.”

Rolling her eyes, she slipped under the covers. “Naturally. What was I thinking?”

“Come on. I knew you weren’t going to come into my room.” Though it might have been exciting. Still, it had been highly unlikely. “Besides, I’m wearing my clothes tonight, aren’t I?” He motioned to his shirt and jeans. “That should be a warning to not take advantage of the situation.”

“Ha ha. I’ll try to keep my hands to myself.”

He laid back in his “bed”. The sunset still lit the room but he found it soothing. He thought of Amanda, realizing that she probably decided to date him because she had gone through a divorce and thought he’d provide a stable influence for her son. He’d accepted it, but having been forced to marry someone he didn’t want taught him that he didn’t want to be someone’s safety net. He wanted to be his *real* wife’s first choice.

He placed his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. Tomorrow would be the beginning of the rest of his life. Once he returned to the future, he’d no longer be married because they

would have technically been dead for decades. So he'd be single again. Then he'd start searching the Internet for the right woman. Tony often recommended it, and he had nothing to lose in trying it. As his thoughts drifted to how he'd start taking chances instead of living life in the same boring and predictable routine he'd become accustomed to, he fell asleep.

## Chapter Six



Cole finally arrived in a small town. The saloon was swinging with life, despite the fact that it was Sunday. Apparently, people didn't mind going to church in the morning as long as they could live it up at night. Cole grinned. His kind of crowd.

He made his way forward, glad for a chance to sit and relax, get some beer and find lodging. But first, he had to find out where he was. So far the chip remained in Fargo. As long as it stayed there, he'd be in good shape.

Licking his lips, he determined how he might get money. He couldn't exactly get his night's lodging for free. He crossed the distance to the saloon. Upon entering the smoky establishment, he scanned the tables and found two with men playing poker. He pulled out his wedding band. The useless piece of junk that it was. It had no meaning for him anymore, but he carried it with him because he knew whatever time period he went to, gold could be sold. And a gold ring could be used to start a hand at a poker game. He flipped the ring and sat at the bar.

"What'll you have?" the bartender asked.

“Nothing at the moment.” He watched the two poker tables.

“There’s a one drink minimum.”

Cole sighed. “Do you have change for a gold ring?”

The young man’s eyes grew wide. “You rich or somethin’?”

Not by a long shot, but he realized in 1898, a gold ring was valuable. “Actually, I’m here to play a few rounds of poker. I figured this would get me a good spot, don’t you?”

The man grinned. “I tell you what. When you win your first game, pony up.” He filled a glass full of beer and plopped it on the bar.

“Will do.”

Cole took the cool glass and took a long swallow, enjoying the way the liquid tasted. It’d been a long time since he drank beer. He fiddled with the ring absentmindedly while he studied the poker players, hoping to detect their weaknesses. Now, poker was something he did plenty of, and he had no doubts that he could outdo these amateurs.

One of the prostitutes approached him and gave him a flirtatious smile. “What’s your pleasure, mister?”

He took his eyes off the men so he could appreciate the assets she was more than willing to show the world. The low cut red satin dress left very little to the imagination. A smile formed across his lips and he looked at her eyes.

“Money,” he replied, turning his attention back to the tables.

She giggled and pressed herself against him. “You can have me too...if the price is right.” Her gaze lowered to his ring.

She was so much like his ex-wife that she disgusted him. But he supposed that was part of her job. He took another drink of beer. “Sweetie, I’m a travelin’ man.”

“I noticed you’re not from here.”

“No. I’m not. Tell me, what’s this town called?”

## Meant To Be

“Devils Lake.”

Good. Now he knew where he was, and he could be on his way to Fargo. He stood up and left her standing there, watching him, or rather she watched his money. He wasn't going to waste his money on her, no matter how tempting her flesh was. He was here to make money and keep it. Before the night was up, all the coins on the tables would belong to him.

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Megan woke up to the sound of something, or someone, rummaging through the room. Startled, her eyelids flew open and she bolted up in bed. The moonlight streaming through the space between the curtains and the window revealed the intruder. A big dog sniffed around Ted's head. Rubbing her eyes, she wondered if she was still dreaming, but another look at the foot of the bed showed her that a harry dog was indeed trudging through the room. She leapt out of bed and shoed the dog to the open door but it licked Ted's face.

Ted sputtered and sat up. “What's happening?”

“There's a dog in here,” she whispered.

Ted wiped his face on the sleeve of his shirt and glanced at the mutt. The dog, in return, laid down next to him.

“You can't stay,” he told the animal. “I have to sleep here.”

The dog settled his head on Ted's leg and whined.

Megan sighed. There wasn't enough room for him and the dog on the floor. “Come on. You can sleep in the bed.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It doesn't look comfortable on the floor anyway. This bed is big enough for both of us.”

He stood up, grabbed his pillow and walked to the vacant side of the bed. The dog curled up on the floor, looking as content as a dog could possibly be.

"I bet he sleeps in this room every night," Megan said as she scooted back into her place on the mattress.

"Why didn't Aaron and Esther tell us they had a dog?" He laid next to her and yawned.

"Maybe they were going to before you slammed the door in her face."

"I didn't mean to be rude. I just got tired of dealing with the marshal. The guy hates me."

She laughed under her breath. "He does not."

"Yes, he does. I know when someone has it in for me, and Aaron fits the bill."

"Why would he hate you?"

"Because I'm strange, and let's face it, I am. I don't belong in this time period. The way I talk, the way I act, the way I do things is not typical of what a man does in this century. He notices that. I think he's waiting for me to slip up so he can send me back to prison."

She folded her arms over her stomach and stared at the ceiling. "As long as he doesn't find out we're from the future, you'll be okay. With any luck, we'll be out of here soon anyway."

"I hope so."

A light snoring drifted from the foot of the bed.

Megan smiled. "That was one tired dog."

He chuckled. "I think he's a friendly one."

"He seems to be."

He rolled over onto his side, facing away from her. "Thanks for letting me sleep here. That floor wasn't that comfortable."

"Then it seems like the dog did you a favor." She closed her eyes. It was nice to know he really wasn't going to try anything with her. She realized that she could trust him, and she liked that. Also, she found it soothing to sleep next to him. In a new environment, it helped to feel another person's warmth,

## Meant To Be

especially when that someone was as much a stranger to the past as she was. “Good night,” she whispered.

“Night.”

Soon she fell asleep. When she woke again, it was dawn and someone knocked on the door. The dog jumped up and ran over to the door to turn the doorknob. So that was how he got in last night. Megan shook her head in amazement at the dog’s resourcefulness. The door opened and he pushed it further apart until he could leave the room. His paws tapped the hardwood floor as he bounded down the steps.

When she saw Esther give a cautious glance inside the room, she quickly shoved the blanket up to her neck, knowing the woman would freak if she found her in her shirt and shorts again. “Good morning,” Megan greeted. She moved the blanket over Ted’s chest so Esther wouldn’t realize he slept in his clothes. If Esther was intent on believing they were a normal married couple, she might as well play along. She rubbed Ted’s shoulder. “Honey, it’s morning.”

He let out a low sigh before he opened his eyes. “Oh, Esther!”

He moved to sit up but Megan stopped him by placing her hand on his arm. All they needed was for the blanket to fall to his waist and the woman would give them grief over their inactivity in the bedroom.

When he glanced at Megan, she smiled and shook her head. “Esther’s come to wake us up. Isn’t that nice?”

Esther cleared her throat, her face redder than Megan thought humanly possible. “Forgive me. I didn’t realize you’d still be asleep.” She backed away from the door, paused, and reached for the doorknob. “I’ll leave you two alone.”

“We’ll be down soon,” Megan promised. Once the door was shut, she breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ll be glad to get out of here.” She released her hold on him and sat up.

“You and me both.” He pulled back the blanket and sheet and stretched. “But I guess we got lucky. I mean, here we are without money, and she and Miriam have given us food and a place to sleep.”

“And all we had to do was get married.” She laughed. “You know, it is funny.”

“Yeah. In our time, no one cares if someone is married or not.”

“Did you have a girlfriend you lived with?”

“No. I always wanted a wife, not a live-in girlfriend.” He retrieved his shoes and slipped them on. “Not that I went out with anyone long enough to propose but still...”

“What about that woman you were on the train with? In the snack car.”

He shrugged. “She was more interested in my paycheck than me. We’d been friends for a long time. I heard that you should marry a woman who’s a friend first. It betters your chances of a lasting marriage. But she made a better friend than a girlfriend.”

She didn’t know why she should be pleased to know he hadn’t had a serious relationship so she shoved the curious notion aside.

He stood up and studied her, his hands on his hips. “How did you know I have a girlfriend?”

Her cheeks warmed. “I saw you with her in the snack car on the train. I was by myself and I heard you two talking.”

“Well, it couldn’t have been anything interesting. I don’t know why, but as soon as I took her out on a date, she got needy and boring.”

“I gathered that from your conversation.”

He sat on the bed.

She couldn’t tell if he was amused or annoyed. His slight grin could mean either emotion.

“What did you hear?” he pressed.

## Meant To Be

“She wanted to do whatever you wanted to do. I believe the Libby dam was mentioned.”

His face broke into a large grin. “I thought I recognized you. I remember you. You looked lonely.”

“Lonely?” She thought she had looked bored, not lonely. She frowned. She didn’t like the thought of looking lonely. Did that make her desperate?

“I didn’t mean to upset you. I just assumed it was because you were sitting by yourself. Most people have that lonely look when they’re alone. It’s not a big deal.”

No, maybe it wasn’t a big deal, but he’d been right. Despite her relationship with Mike, she did feel lonely when they were together. Maybe being with someone wasn’t the same thing as belonging with someone.

Ted patted her on the arm. “What’d you say? You ready to get this day started?”

She nodded. “Might as well.” She grabbed her ring and threw on the dress, wishing she could shower first. Then she put on her loafers and joined him down the stairs.

As soon as Aaron saw them, he sat at the kitchen table and asked his wife, “Can I eat now?”

Esther shot him a reprimanding look. “There’s no need to be rude.”

“I wouldn’t be rude if I wasn’t starving to death.”

“You are in no such danger.” She smiled at Megan and Ted. “You’ll have to forgive him. He’s usually agreeable.”

Ted didn’t look convinced of that but sat down.

The dog settled next to him.

Megan eased into her own seat, wondering why the dog was so attracted to Ted. “You must be good with animals.”

Ted patted the dog’s head, and the dog wagged his tail, obviously happy with the attention. Ted grinned. “I grew up with a dog.”

Esther took her skillet and set portions of scrambled eggs and bacon on everyone's plates. They bowed their heads to say grace and then started to eat.

Aaron grabbed a fresh slice of bread from the center of the table where a stack of slices waited for them. He buttered his slice and motioned to Ted with his dull knife. "I never saw a dog take a liking to a man the way Buddy's taken a liking to you."

Ted scratched the animal behind his ears. "He's a friendly one."

"You want him?" Aaron took a bite of his bread.

"Isn't he yours?" Ted asked.

Megan picked up her fork and poked a good heaping of scrambled eggs and took a bite, noting the hint of salt and cheese in them.

Aaron swallowed and took a large drink from his cup of coffee. "No. That mutt followed me home one day, and I didn't have the heart to turn him loose. He spends his days outdoors but comes home at nightfall, eats and sleeps. Then he leaves after breakfast. One can only imagine what he does during the day."

"He's quite the mystery," Esther added. "I have yet to figure him out."

"A dog can be useful out there at your new home," Aaron continued. "He'd probably be good at hunting rabbits and such."

Megan wrinkled her nose. "I'm not having rabbits for pets."

Aaron chuckled at her. "Rabbits are for meat. You eat them."

He couldn't be serious! She wasn't a vegetarian, but she didn't want to eat a cute little bunny.

Esther wiped the sides of her mouth with her napkin and put the cloth back on her lap. "They can be tasty if you season them right. I'll give you a recipe for rabbit stew."

Megan glanced at Ted who seemed as opposed to eating rabbits as she was, but it'd be easier to take the recipe than to get

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into another debate over what was expected of her. "Alright," she finally consented.

"You want him?" Aaron asked, pointing at the dog.

"No," Ted replied. "I'm sorry, but I can't."

"Let me know if you change your mind. He's sure taken a shining to you."

The dog rested his head on Ted's leg and peered up at him with sad eyes.

"What do you feed him?" Ted wondered.

"Table scraps," Esther said. "We wait until we're done and give him leftovers."

Ted brought a strip of bacon up to his mouth and halted when the dog whined. "I hope it's alright if I feed him while I eat." Without waiting for their response, he bit into half the bacon and let the dog have the other half.

During the course of the meal, Megan and Ted took turns feeding the animal whose gusto for food surprised her. At one point, Buddy got so excited, he bumped into her. As she jerked back, the ring fell out of the pocket on her dress and rolled onto the floor. Before she had a chance to pick it up, the dog licked it off the floor and swallowed it.

"No!" Megan leapt out of the chair and pried the dog's mouth open. Curse it all! His mouth was empty. The stupid animal ate her ring! "Someone get me a knife!"

"Why?" Ted asked.

She held onto the animal as it struggled to jump up and lick her face. "I'm going to rip his stomach open and get my ring back."

Esther gasped and brought her hand to her throat.

Aaron laughed.

Ted shot up from his seat and hugged the dog. "You can't do that. He didn't know what he was doing."

"But I need that ring, Ted. We both do. How else are we supposed to get money to-" She stopped and looked at Esther

and Aaron who watched them with intense interest, especially Aaron who narrowed his eyes at her. She bit her lower lip as she debated how to handle this. “We need money. That ring was all I had.”

Esther shook her head. “No, it isn’t. I’m sending you home with enough food to last until Ted gets paid. And we’ll get you both clothes and some furnishings today.”

Aaron frowned. “And where are we going to get all the money for this?”

“From the charity collection at the church. We need to give to those in need, and if there’s anyone with needs, it’s them.” She motioned to them, as if forgetting they stood across from her. “I’d rather be giving to our community than to some out-of-state place anyway.”

Aaron’s shoulders relaxed. “Alright.”

“So you have nothing to worry about. Your wallet is safe.”

“I work hard for my money.”

She patted his hand. “Of course you do, dear.”

Megan gave Ted a pleading look. “That ring is worth a lot of money.”

“We’ll make do,” Ted replied, and the dog was, once again, wagging his tail, as if he understood that his life had been spared. “I guess we’ll just have to stick around a little longer.”

“Stick around where?” Aaron demanded, not looking at all pleased. “You don’t mean this house, do you?”

Esther huffed and threw her napkin on the table. “That’s it, Mr. Thompson. You go head right on over to work because if I have to put up with your rudeness one more minute, I’m liable to do something I’ll regret. And that wouldn’t make me a good witness for the Lord.” She stood up and pulled his chair from the table. “Now get going.”

He glowered at Ted and Megan.

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Megan stepped back. Okay. So Ted wasn't imagining the marshal's disapproval.

"You two are up to something," he told them. "I know it, and I'll find out what it is if it's the last thing I do."

As he turned to leave, Esther asked, "Aren't you going to kiss me good-bye?"

He groaned, spun around, gave her a quick kiss, and stormed out the door.

She waved her hand. "Don't worry about him. He's just moody today. He's always moody when he has to pay the bills and Monday is bill day."

Megan glanced at Ted who didn't look any more convinced than she was.

Someone knocked on the screen door.

"Good morning, Miriam and Richie! Come on in," Esther called out, a wide smile on her face. "As soon as I clean up, we'll head out for a day of shopping."

Megan snarled at the dumb dog before she pitched in to help Esther.

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The next day found Ted at Ray Gordon's farm. Richie had picked him up in his wagon, which was good since Ted didn't know how to ride a horse...not that he had a horse. He didn't have money for food, let alone an animal, though he had agreed to take the dog. Despite the fact that it upset Megan to have the animal nearby, he figured she'd get over the ring incident soon enough. At least he hoped so. She did glare at the dog a couple of times during breakfast.

Two men walked over to them, so Ted took that as his cue to hop down from the wagon. The landscape spanned before him in patches of brown plowed dirt and grassy fields. He wondered what his job would be.

Richie stood beside him and motioned to the short but muscular men. "This is Ray," he motioned to the brunette, "and this is his cousin, Joel," he motioned to the redhead.

Ted smiled and shook their hands, noting that they were in their forties. "I'm Ted Jacob."

Richie patted him on the back, but this time Ted braced for the impact and didn't lurch forward. "He just got married."

"Joining the ranks of the married men, huh?" Ray replied. "Wives are great, aren't they? They cook for you."

"Clean for you," Joel added. "Do your laundry."

"Marriage is great," Ray agreed, nodding. "Especially the honeymoon." He winked at Ted.

"I have to find me a wife," Richie said.

The men chuckled, so Ted laughed too. Yes, a honeymoon spent in separate beds. Wasn't that what every man wanted? Except he wouldn't define his marriage to Megan as a real marriage. Being forced into it was a different matter.

"Stop embarrassing him," Richie said. "We need to give him the tour. Over there is Ray's house."

Ted saw the two-story yellow house with three kids running around the front yard.

"And there's the barn," Richie continued, pointing to the red barn that was probably half a mile from the house. "The cattle are in the pasture out thataway and there are the crops, or rather that is where the crops will be once harvest comes. That's it. Tour is done."

Ted nodded. "Looks simple enough. I don't think I'll get lost."

"Do you know how to ride a horse?" Ray asked.

"No, I don't."

"Then that'll be the first order of business."

That's what Ted figured. He'd never been close to a horse until he showed up in 1898. They didn't look that scary, so he

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figured he might enjoy the chance to ride one because as soon as he returned to his own time, he'd be back to driving cars.

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While Ted spent his first day on the farm, Megan reluctantly joined Miriam in setting up her new "home". Not that she considered this two bedroom house just a few miles out of town home, but Miriam apparently did and was delighted to decorate the place with her.

Miriam unfolded the white tablecloth with sunflowers sewn onto it. Megan cleaned off the large wooden dining table so her new friend could cover it with the soft cloth. Then they worked on hanging up the yellow curtains. Afterwards, they cleaned the window and swept the hardwood floor. That completed the dining room.

"It's my favorite room in the house," Miriam cheerfully stated as she picked up the broom and dustpan. "And yellow is such a beautiful color."

Megan smiled. She had to agree with the woman's assessment. Yellow did suit the room, and she figured it matched Miriam's sunny personality. She still had a hard time believing that Miriam and Esther were sisters. No two people could be more different, though she liked Esther too.

Following Miriam to the kitchen, Megan dumped the dirty rags on the small kitchen table. Whereas the dining room table could seat six people, this one could only seat four. The cookstove stood before her, as imposing as it had been the first time she'd laid eyes on it. She wondered if Ted really could cook. If she could get out of that horrible detail, she'd gladly do it.

Miriam pulled out a stack of new plates and bowls from a box. "We'll put these in this cupboard over here. The mugs can hang on these hooks." She motioned to the row of hooks under

the shelf where the plates and bowls would go. "I think you'll enjoy this kitchen."

*Not if I can help it.* Megan simply smiled. Thankfully, Esther's food gifts would last her and Ted a week. That'd be long enough for him to get paid and then they could hightail it to the train station and get out of here. So all of this decorating was really a waste of time. But she didn't have the heart to disappoint Miriam who obviously enjoyed this. That was why she went along with it, pretending that she and Ted would stay married in this little house and start a family. It's what the others expected, and in ordinary circumstances, it's what would've happened. But these were not ordinary circumstances.

Miriam finished putting the dishes away.

Realizing how lazy she must look, Megan quickly retrieved the light green curtains from another box and scooted the wooden chair to the window so she could put them up. Her green dress fit much better than the brown one had, and she didn't feel so dirty now that she'd had a bath in the river out back, but she did miss her shirt and shorts. It was easier to do any kind of housework in shorts.

The breeze drifting in through the open window helped to cool Megan's hot skin. Though bras weren't a piece from this time period, she wore hers. She couldn't bring herself to wear a chemise or petticoats. No one could tell she only wore panties and a bra under her dress anyway. So why torture herself with extra layers in the warm weather if she didn't have to?

As Miriam set the utensils away, she asked, "May I ask you a question?"

Megan pulled the curtains through the rod. "Sure."

"Are you...content with Ted?"

Megan stopped and peered down at the woman who kept her attention on the forks she put in a drawer. A grin crossed her face. "I could have done worse. He's better than Mike."

Miriam looked up at her. "Mike?"

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“He was the fiancé I told you about.”

“Oh.” She nodded. Finished with the utensils, she went to the box and took out the mugs. “So, is it nice to be married?”

“Doesn’t your sister tell you?”

She shrugged as she put the mugs on their respective hooks. “She tells me that marriage is an honorable institution.”

“And?”

“And that’s it.”

Keenly interested in this discussion now, Megan quickly finished pulling the rest of the curtain through the rod. “Does she love Aaron?”

“I think so.”

She set the rod in its correct place and hopped off the chair so she and Miriam could talk. She hadn’t had a close friend to talk to about anything in the two years since her best friend died. She motioned for Miriam to sit. “What if she doesn’t?”

“But she must. Or else she wouldn’t have married him.”

“Did she and Aaron date for long?” she asked as she sat next to her.

“Date?”

That’s right. Date was a contemporary term. Megan searched her mind for the right term. Unable to find it, she clarified, “She must have known Aaron for a long time before they got married.”

“Yes, she did. We all grew up together. He lived next door. Our parents used to say that they’d end up together and so they did.”

“They married because they were expected to?”

She shrugged, her hands in her lap. “I suppose so.”

“And what about you? Are you expected to marry someone?”

“No. Aaron was the youngest child, and he’s two years older than Esther. She’s five years older than me.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty.”

That explained why Megan felt old next to the two sisters.

“I worry that I will never get married. I’m getting old, you know.”

Megan laughed. How absurd! Miriam could be a college student for goodness sakes! She noted Miriam’s tense expression and realized that Miriam took this issue with grave sincerity. “How old are women when they usually marry?”

“Some marry as young as sixteen but most marry at eighteen.”

That was insane! How was someone that young supposed to know what she wanted in life, let alone know who she should share that life with? When Megan was that old, her biggest concern was what to wear or which friends to hang out with or what to choose as her college major. She couldn’t imagine having to marry that young. But people didn’t live as long as people in her time expected to, so maybe procreation took precedence over finding one’s individual potential.

Miriam leaned forward, as if ready to reveal a deep, dark secret. “I want to marry for love, but I don’t know who will have me.”

“You don’t know who will have you?” Megan repeated, in a mixture of shock and outrage. Didn’t the poor young woman know her worth?

“I’m not the prettiest face around,” she said.

“Nonsense. You are fine.”

“I look like a doll. My face is too round and my nose is too small.”

“You have a heart-shaped face. You’re cute.”

“But I look younger than I really am. Maybe that turns men away.”

Megan sighed. “Miriam, you have a lot to learn. First, men are attracted to women who are interested in them. Find a man who shares your interests and talk to him about it.”

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“Oh, and I pretend I don’t know anything so he can teach me something new!”

Miriam looked so pleased by the deduction that Megan almost kept her mouth shut. Almost. Megan groaned. “You shouldn’t have to pretend to be something you’re not.” Even as she said it, she felt as if she were preaching to herself. After all, hadn’t she feigned interest in the stock market and cooking to please Mike? And just what had that done for her? He went and kissed someone else anyway. Upset, she nodded to Miriam. “Be yourself. If he’s not interested in you the way you are, then he’s not worth your time. Remember, you’re talking about spending the rest of your life with him. Do you want someone who thinks you’re dumb?”

Miriam frowned. “I didn’t think of it that way.”

“It’s easy to forget that it’s more important to make sure you find the right man instead of finding a man. There’s a difference. One is going to make you happy. Another is going to get you married but you may end up miserable.”

*Like I almost ended up.* For once, Megan thanked Jullian for kissing Mike. Maybe she’d end up alone. But was that the worst thing that could happen to her? Would she really rather spend her life with someone who didn’t love her, or even cheated on her? Mike probably would have cheated on her, and if she had kids with him, then what? Did she want her children to have to spend half of their time with her and the other half with him and his new girlfriend or wife?

Megan slapped the table, making Miriam jump. “Don’t settle for anything but the best. You deserve better than that!”

“I won’t!” she swore, her eyes wide.

“Good.”

Miriam grabbed her hand. “Will you help me find him? Whoever he is?”

Could she do that in one week? Well, why not try? “Yes but on one condition.”

“What is it?”

“You have to be honest about what you think of him. I don’t want to tell you who you should marry. That needs to be your decision, and it must come from the heart.”

“I can do that.”

“No asking for me to give you a list of things you should look for.” Megan’s mother had done that for her, and look at the grief it’d given her.

“Agreed.”

Miriam watched her as if determining if that was all, so Megan said, “That’s it.”

She squeezed Megan’s hand before letting it go. “Thank you! Esther keeps saying I need to leave it up to God’s timing, but I have to admit that I’m getting impatient.”

That sounded like something Esther would say. “Well, there’s another saying that is just as important.”

“Really? What’s that?”

“When you ask God for something, be prepared to do the work to get it. Men don’t just fall into your lap. You’ve got to get out there and find them.”

Excited, they made plans to do just that.

## Chapter Seven



Cole put on his new clothes, figuring it was time to be on his way. He'd made a small fortune playing cards and was ready to go.

After he washed his face, he picked up the time travel device and inspected the whereabouts of the chip. The energy signature notified him that the chip hadn't budged from Fargo, which meant there was no immediate hurry to get to it. Good. He didn't want to risk losing it. But still, he'd lingered on in Devils Lake long enough.

He slipped his shoes on and glanced out the window of the inn. Several men argued and horses paraded their riders down the street. Not much action.

He placed his new Stetson hat on his head and grinned at his reflection. No need to keep wearing the false itchy beard when he had a new one growing in just fine. He straightened his vest, grabbed his travel bag, and left the room. He lumbered down the stairs, not wishing to appear eager to get somewhere, in case he aroused someone's suspicions.

He gave the innkeeper some money and left the inn. *Fargo, here I come.* A new wave of excitement coursed through him as he made his way to the train station. All he had to do was board the next train and in a matter of hours, he'd have the chip back. Then it was smooth sailing from there. He didn't even have to limit himself to one time period. He could travel for the rest of his life. Exploring different places and seeing history firsthand would provide ample opportunity for adventure. He'd gain wealth in the process since he knew where to find gold in California and Alaska. He could even seek out the caves in Africa for precious stones. Yes, the future was looking bright.

He reached the train station and paid for his ticket. Whistling, he took his ticket and sat down for the half hour wait until the train was due to pull in. He picked up a newspaper that he found sitting on the vacant seat next to him. It was dated a few days back, but he figured the news was still current enough that he might learn something. He didn't get halfway through the paper when he saw an article that caught his attention.

Shifting in his seat, he examined the details and came to the conclusion that the "odd woman wearing undergarments she called a shirt and shorts who handed someone a counterfeit 21<sup>st</sup> century dollar bill" was from the future. The woman and her male accomplice were sent to prison but later released and married. The marshal, Aaron Thompson, said the couple seemed unusual but he didn't think they were a threat.

As Cole folded the paper and set it down on the seat, he concluded that those two had been the couple he bumped into when Blake attacked him. That was when he went back in time, and since he brought Blake with him, it made sense that the couple came with him too. Furthermore, it made sense that either the man or the woman had the chip. They probably didn't know what the chip was for, but one of them had it.

The man's name was Ted Jacob and the woman's name was Megan Crane. Well, she'd be Megan Jacob now. So when he

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got to Fargo, all he had to do was find out where Ted and Megan were staying. Then he'd convince them to give him the chip. Maybe he'd offer to take them back to the future and they could be safe there while he took the time travel device and went somewhere else. That way, no one would get hurt. He liked that plan.

As someone announced the arrival of the train, he stood up and grabbed his travel bag. He got in line with the other passengers waiting to board the train. The process of waiting for passengers to get off was a slow one, but he waited patiently. Just as he got ready to move forward, he caught sight of Blake who knelt in front of the train window, peering out at the people on the platform.

Uttering a curse word, Cole took a step back, bumping into a woman with a baby who cried. Even above the noise of talking people, Blake's attention went to the baby and, in the span of a second, he saw Cole. Cole bolted for the exit of the train station. He knew Blake would get off the train and hunt him down. But he couldn't let Blake catch up to him, no matter what. He'd come too far to let Blake undo his hard work. One way or another, he'd avoid Blake and find his way to that chip...or he'd die trying.

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On Friday, Megan groaned in aggravation as she pulled the stupid shirt through the wringer. Sweat stuck to her like a thick layer of grease. After this, she was going to take a nice, long bath in the river. She'd given up on wearing a dress while she washed clothes. She wore nothing, and that was the only way she managed to wash clothes in the hot kitchen. Fortunately, being isolated from others made it easy to run around in the nude. She cranked the handle on the wringer and grunted as Ted's shirt

finally gave. She took it and hung it on the back of the kitchen chair.

Returning to the washtub full of hot soapy water, she pulled out her shorts and scrubbed them against the ridged surface of the washboard. She gritted her teeth, hating the task. Why did she complain about doing laundry when she had a washer and dryer in her apartment? If only she'd realized how good she had it! How did her ancestors put up with this hard work and aggravation? Because they didn't know any better, she realized. Once she felt that her shorts were clean enough, she rinsed them and pulled them through the wringer.

Good. Now that she was done with the shorts, she had finished all the clothes. She took a deep breath and placed all the wet clothes in a basket which she carried to the backyard. The warm sunlight beat down on her but the wind cooled her off.

Once she finished hanging the clothes to dry, she took a bar of soap, a towel and a new outfit. Then she went to the river to bathe. A group of trees surrounded the small inlet, giving her privacy. She swam a couple of laps before she washed her hair and body. She wanted to be ready for the dance that night.

Ted had told her that Ray liked to hold dances at his farm every couple of weeks. Megan decided that since Ray had some single farmhands, then Miriam might meet someone. It was the least she could do before she and Ted went to the train station tomorrow. She'd like to think that she might do something good for Miriam before she left.

When she put on her new pink dress, she returned to the house. She brushed her hair and put it into a braid. She found the small mirror in her room on her dresser and inspected her reflection. Though she had no one to impress, she still wanted to look her best.

To her surprise, Ted arrived before Miriam did. She bounded down the steps and greeted him and Richie as they walked through the front door.

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Richie stopped as soon as he saw her. He took his hat off and smiled. "You sure are looking fine today, Mrs. Jacob."

If Richie hadn't been in his twenties, she would have been flattered. She found his crush on her to be equivalent to that of a school boy. "Thank you for the compliment, Richie. You can call me Megan."

"I think you'll stick with Mrs. Jacob," Ted told Richie.

She blinked and gave Ted a curious look. After they returned to their own time tomorrow, she wouldn't be Mrs. Jacob anymore, so she didn't know why it mattered. Shrugging off the question, she left the kitchen and went to the parlor window, watching for Miriam to arrive in her buggy.

"Where's Buddy?" Ted asked as he walked over to her.

She shrugged. "Who knows? That dog runs off most of the time during the day. I guess he knows I'd take that ring if I had the chance."

"He's probably gotten rid of it by now."

Shuddering at the thought of her expensive ring stuck in dog droppings out there somewhere in the fields, she resigned herself to giving up on ever finding it.

"I saw that you washed the clothes. Was that hard?"

She glanced at him. "The worst. I can't wait until we're home. I won't complain about cleaning clothes or dishes ever again."

"I would have helped you."

"You wash clothes with your wife?" Richie asked Ted.

They turned to face the man who'd snuck up behind them.

"I haven't yet," Ted replied. "We've only been married for a week."

"Six days to be exact," she added. "But who's counting?" she joked when the two men looked at her.

Richie scratched his head. "I don't think any of the husbands do laundry."

Of course, he didn't, Megan realized. Because in the late 1800s women had to do everything in the house. She shook her head at the unfairness of this time. She was exhausted, but she still had to go out to a supper and a barn dance where she'd most likely have to help clean up while the men sat back and talked. She'd never been a full-blown feminist before, but she was beginning to feel a special bond with all those women who paved the way for equal rights.

Megan looked out the window and saw Miriam. "She's here!"

Before either man had the chance to ask who she referred to, she ran out the front door and waved to her friend. Oh good! Miriam wore a lovely yellow dress and had a nice ribbon in her hair, just as they discussed. She looked so cute. Megan thought the men would like it too. She ran to the buggy as Miriam pulled up to the front of the house and came to a stop.

"Miriam, you look terrific!"

Miriam blushed and smiled. "I do feel pretty."

"That's because you are. Come on down. The men are getting ready."

Miriam set the brake and climbed down from the buggy. "I've never been to a supper and barn dance before. I hope it's alright that I brought an apple pie."

Megan frowned. "You made something to bring?" Should she have done that too?

"It's just a little something."

"Yes but you made the crust too, right?"

"Is there another way to make it?"

Megan sighed. Great. So women made things for the supper...and from scratch.

Miriam clasped her hands together, her body trembling with excitement. "I've got these fluttery feelings in my stomach. I don't know if I can eat anything."

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Taking her mind off her lack of foresight, she urged the younger woman to walk to the house with her. "Ted's friend is here. I think we should see what he says."

"Ted's friend? You mean Richie?"

"That's the one. Come along."

"But I've seen Richie before. We aren't friends but we know each other well enough that he won't notice me."

"That was before you got all dressed up."

"I don't think it'll matter."

"You don't know unless you try. Come on."

Miriam shrugged and joined her.

When they entered the house, Megan saw Richie sitting in the chair in the parlor. He stood up as soon as he saw them.

"Good afternoon, Miss Smith. Are you going to Ray's farm?" Richie asked as he straightened his vest.

"Yes," Miriam replied. "Megan invited me."

Megan peered around the doorway and saw that the kitchen was empty. "Where's Ted?"

"Oh, he went upstairs to change. He said he couldn't show up with dirt on his clothes after seeing you all dressed up."

Megan nodded. That made sense. She would have done the same thing if she'd been him. "Do you go to these suppers and dances much?" she asked Richie.

"Most of the time," he replied. "I don't like my own cooking."

She grinned. "So you go to eat rather than dance?"

He laughed. "I hadn't thought about it, but you're right. I don't do much dancing. If I dance, it tends to be a friendly one. Most of the women there are either married, too old, or too young for me."

"What is the selection of men like?"

He furrowed his eyebrows. "With all due respect, Mrs. Jacob, shouldn't you keep your focus on your husband?"

Megan's cheeks grew warm. Did he really think she was looking for a man to fool around with? "Not for me," she quickly clarified. "For--"

"It was just an innocent question," Miriam interrupted. "We'd also like to know how many children attend."

Megan wondered why the woman felt the need to fib. In fact, if Richie knew that Miriam was looking for a man, he might take a second look at her.

"I'd say that there are roughly twenty men and ten kids."

"How many are single?" Megan pressed.

He shot her another wary look.

She sighed. "And how many are married?"

"I'd say five are single, myself included."

Miriam smiled but Megan doubted Richie noted her pleasure since he kept staring at Megan. Megan decided to let the matter go. Whatever Richie thought, or didn't think, was none of her concern.

Ted walked into the room wearing denim pants, a light blue shirt and a brown vest. His sun-streaked brown hair was neatly combed. Megan didn't want to stare but he looked amazing.

He put his brown hat on and turned to the group. "Are you all ready to go?"

"I know I am," Richie replied, putting on his hat.

Megan blinked. "Oh. Ted, did you know that people take food to these things?"

"Some do. Some don't." He sauntered out of the parlor and went into the kitchen.

Curious, she watched him as he took something down from one of the shelves.

When he returned with a covered dish, she asked, "What's that?"

"Oh, it's just something I put together. It's a peach cobbler."

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Richie shook his head. "I still can't get over the fact that you cook."

Neither could Megan. "When did you make it?"

"Last night. I couldn't sleep so I came down here to cook."

So that was why it smelled so nice in the house when she woke up.

"You couldn't sleep, so you cooked?" Richie asked, a bewildered look on his face. "Why did you leave your bed?"

"I wore Meg out," Ted lied. "I had to let the little woman rest." Before Megan could argue, Ted took her by the arm and led her to the front door. "After you, honey."

"Ted," she warned.

"We'll say you made this." He handed her the dish. Turning to Richie and Miriam, he waved them to the door. "Richie, why don't you take Miriam in the buggy? I'll take Meg in the wagon."

Realizing that Ted wanted Richie to think he had sexual prowess, she held her tongue and carried the dish to the wagon. At least Ted made something. Thank goodness. Now she didn't have to be the odd woman out.

The ride to the farm was pleasant enough. Richie and Miriam rode in front of them, so Megan couldn't tell if Miriam enjoyed the ride or not. Megan had assumed that she'd be riding with Miriam and Ted would ride with Richie. But she figured since Miriam and Richie already knew each other, this worked well enough.

During their ride, Ted told her about making a lasso for the first time that day.

Holding onto the dish, she asked, "Do you like working out there?"

He seemed to think about her question for a moment. "Actually, I do. It's good to get outside and work with my hands."

She looked at him, noting the slight grin on his face. He enjoyed working at Ray's farm. "What other jobs have you had? I know you did computer software support and cooking."

"I've done a lot of odds and ends. I mowed lawns, painted, delivered newspapers, and did oil changes in cars."

"How long did you work at Jacob Innovative Creations?"

"Seven years. So, what about you? What job are you going back to when we return home?"

"I'm a receptionist at a chiropractor's office."

He turned down a well-used path in the grass, and she took note of the house, barn, and pasture up ahead.

"Do you like your job?" Ted asked.

She held onto the side of her seat to keep her balance. "I like it well enough to stay there. I got the job out of college. Do you like answering phones?"

He chuckled. "Only when the caller doesn't give me grief."

"Does that happen often?"

"Some days are better than others. Most of the callers are nice, but I'd say about a couple calls a month end up being unpleasant. You'd be surprised at how many people think it's my fault that their equipment isn't working right." He pulled the wagon up to a red barn. "Well, here we are. Do you dance?"

"I do okay. You?"

"Not so well. Will I embarrass you tonight?"

She laughed at his contrite expression. "I doubt it. I'm the kind of person who slaps her fiancé with a book in front of other people because he's kissing another woman."

He raised an eyebrow. "Where did that happen?"

"On the train, right before we traveled back in time."

"Well, if he kissed another woman while going out with you, then he deserved it." He jumped off the wagon and walked over to her. "Though I have to say I feel sorry for him."

## Meant To Be

She put the dish on the floor of the wagon and let him help her down. “Why is that?”

He set her feet on the ground. “The poor guy is obviously stupid to let someone like you go. Richie’s right, you know. You are pretty.”

She didn’t know what to say. The compliment was so unexpected, not to mention wonderful.

He retrieved the dish and turned to Richie and Miriam as they approached them.

“It sure is a great evening for getting together with the neighbors,” Richie said. He held Miriam’s pie. “Did you know Miriam made apple pie?”

“No, I didn’t. You’ll have to give me your recipe before the night is over,” Ted told Miriam.

“Plan to spend more sleepless nights in the kitchen?” Richie joked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do.”

“You are odd.”

While Richie and Ted exchanged quips, Miriam stood by Megan’s side. “I’m nervous,” Miriam admitted, her hands pushing back stray strands of hair the wind blew into her face. “I forgot to tell you that Esther doesn’t know I came, so please don’t tell her.”

“I wondered why she wasn’t with you,” Megan replied.

“I’ve done things her way long enough. I’ll never find a man if I don’t do something different.”

“Sometimes you have to think outside the box.”

Miriam furrowed her eyebrows. “What does a box have to do with this?”

Realizing her mistake, she quickly added, “You know, we should go in and see who’s here. Then if you find someone who appeals to you, we can make our way over to him and talk to him.”

She pressed a hand to her cheek. “Oh, I couldn’t be that bold.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll do it for you.”

Megan took her by the arm and led her inside the barn where women gathered around a couple of tables to set down the food they made. The men cleared the center of the barn, making sure the animals were taken to their stalls or taken outside to provide room for dancing. The children ran around or chased the cats to pet them. Megan took in the scene, and she had to admit that the atmosphere was festive.

Ted and Richie came into the barn and walked over to them.

“You’ll probably want to go over there with this,” Ted told Megan as he handed her the cobbler he’d made.

“Thank you.” Megan took the dish, grateful that he thought to make the dish so she didn’t have to feel left out.

“And here is your pie,” Richie told Miriam. “I can’t wait to sample a bite.”

Miriam took the pie and smiled.

Once the men left to help with the animals, Megan nudged Miriam in the side. “So, which one do you like best?”

Miriam spent another minute scanning the men as they rushed to complete their tasks. Finally, she said, “I like the one pulling the dog out of the horse’s stall.”

Megan’s eyes turned to the tall, broad-shouldered blond with a mustache. He wore denims and a checkered black and green shirt. She noted that all the men wore denims. Who knew jeans were so popular back then? Or now? She shook her head. It was still hard to believe she was in the past. And that sobering thought gave birth to the reality that when she was born, these people were already dead. But here they were, the past come to life. She’d read about this time period in history books while in school, and it didn’t once occur to her that the people she read about were like the ones she was interacting with now. For some reason, they’d seem so far removed that they were just names on paper.

## Meant To Be

And that gave her a chilling feeling, for a hundred years from her time, that's all she'd be too. Just another name on a piece of paper, or drifting through cyberspace, or whatever the technology would be at that time. Someone might even read about her. And what would they think? Would they stop to think that she had her hopes, her dreams, her heartaches, her joys?

Miriam called her name.

Megan blinked and turned back to her new friend, aware that as soon as she returned to the future, this lovely woman standing before her would have passed away. She'd have to look up the records for Miriam Smith and see if she ever did get married. Did she have children? Grandchildren and great-grandchildren? Maybe Megan had interacted with this woman's descendant and didn't even know it.

"We should put these over there," Miriam said. She pointed to a short, chubby blond who looked to be five months pregnant. "That is Claire Gordon. She's Ray's wife. I know her from the sewing circle. She's your age and those five kids with the blond hair are hers."

Megan's mouth nearly dropped open. Claire was thirty-four and had five children and one on the way? Well, it made sense, didn't it? If women married early and they didn't have birth control like they did in Megan's time, they'd have a lot of children. A careful examination of the young faces around her who wiped a snotty nose or hugged a wailing child reminded Megan of her biological clock which ticked loudly in her ears.

She hated this. Hated the reminder that she was losing time to have a child. In order to have a child, she needed to find the man to marry. And she was no closer to finding him than she was a year ago when she'd met Mike. Closing her eyes for a moment so she could force back the urge to cry, she took a deep breath. Once she could safely breathe without choking on a tear, she opened her eyes and joined Miriam at the table.

As Megan set the cobbler down, Miriam introduced her to Claire who, in turn, introduced her and Miriam to the other women. There were twelve women who were older than Megan, and they made Megan feel better about being older than average.

“You’re Ted Jacob’s wife?” a lady with gray hair asked.

“Yes.”

“Ted’s a hard worker. Even when he doesn’t get something right the first time, he keeps on trying.”

Claire smiled. “That’s Ray’s mother. She has a soft spot for anyone who can fall off the horse and get right back on.”

“Ted fell off a horse?” Megan asked. Why hadn’t Ted mentioned it?

“He didn’t get hurt,” Ray’s mother said. “He may have been startled, but he picked up his hat, dusted his pants, and went right back on the steed. That’s when I knew we had a good worker.”

Claire giggled before she turned to the group of men and rang the cow bell. Everyone in the room grew quiet as they waited for her to speak. Once she instructed everyone to take a seat, Ray’s family led the group in prayer. Then everyone ate their meal.

## Chapter Eight



After the meal, Megan pitched in to help the women collect the dishes, noting that the men stayed conveniently out of the way so they could sit around and talk. She frowned. Taking a good look at the women who seemed content to take the dishes to the house to clean, she crossed her arms. The men took the time to eat the food. The least they could do was take the dishes to the house and clean the tables and put the tables and benches away. But no. They simply stood or walked around and gabbed.

Miriam nudged her in the side. “I’ll clean that for you.”

Megan’s eyes lowered to the baking dish in her hands. True, Ted cooked the cobbler. She couldn’t fault him so much for avoiding the clean up, but from the way Richie talked, she doubted that other men pitched in to help with any of the housework. Well, maybe she could do something about that. She handed Miriam the dish.

Miriam went to the house.

Megan shook her head, her jaw clenching tighter as she took in the way the women either hastened to go back and forth

for the dishes or wiped the tables with soap and water. That was it. She couldn't take this anymore. She spun on her heel and approached the closest group of men. She cleared her throat and tapped her foot on the barn floor.

The four men, who seemed to be Richie's age, stopped conversing and looked at her, as if surprised to see her invade their little group.

"The women are working hard," she said.

They gave her a blank look. Did they even hear her?

"I don't think the women should do all the work," she pointed out.

Finally, one of the men said, "That's their job."

Her eyes grew wide. "What?"

"The women always do that."

"And you men never once offered to help?"

"Why should we?" a redhead asked. "We work in the fields all day."

"And they cook and clean all day," she replied. "Some of them even watch the children."

"Because that's their job," the blond said, as if he were talking to a five year old. "We work outside. They work inside. We take care of the animals and fields. They take care of the house and children."

"Haven't you noticed that when you were growing up?" the redhead asked.

Sticking her chin up in the air, she coolly replied, "For your information, my father helped my mother out. They made a schedule of who did what and when. It was a very orderly system, and you'd do well to learn from it."

They burst out into laughter.

She gasped, appalled that they would show such disdain for her wishes.

## Meant To Be

"It's no wonder that Ted had to be forced into marrying you," the redhead said as he wiped the tears from his eyes. "Oh goodness. You're an unusual one."

Her cheeks grew warm. "Excuse me but what I am talking about is respect."

That made them laugh even harder, which she didn't think was possible considering the way two of them bent over and slapped their hands on their knees.

"Hey, Charles," the blond called out to another group of men. "You've got to hear this!"

She glared at the blond. "You have no right to treat me like a child."

The redhead shook his head. "He's not."

Placing her hands on her hips, she narrowed her eyes at him. "I know when someone's making fun of me."

The blond patted her head. "We think you're adorable. We heard you wear undergarments in public, so it stands to reason you have some peculiar ideas."

She shoved his hand away. "What I am talking about is respect. If that's a new concept to you, it's because you're a bunch of Neanderthals."

The redhead scrunched his nose. "A bunch of what?"

The one called Charles and two older men came over to them. Charles looked at the blond. "What'd ya want?"

The blond motioned to her. "She thinks we need to wash dishes and clean the tables."

Charles glanced at her as if she grew a second head. "You joshing us?"

The man standing next to Charles leaned forward and studied her for a moment. She met his gaze and stood her ground. She wouldn't back down to any of them!

He turned to his friends and shrugged. "I think she's serious. She's got the look of a viper in her eyes. You'd better watch out or she'll strike you."

"Ma'am," Charles began, tipping his hat slightly back so she had a clear view of his eyes, "there is a division of labor. Now, I don't know how things were done where you come from, but in Fargo, the men and women have different roles."

The blond nodded. "Exactly."

"The women are happy. We're happy. There's no sense in making trouble. My recommendation is for you to do your part and help them."

She motioned to the women and snapped, "Look at them! They're sweaty and exhausted."

"And what are you doing to help?"

"Getting you men to do your part."

"Our part? Ben, Lenny and I are fixin' to get the fiddle and banjos ready for the dance. We're doing our part."

"And you expect them to dance?"

"Of course. They like to dance."

"They'll be too tired to dance."

"They haven't been too tired before. They won't be now." Charles sighed and glanced at the rafters before setting his gaze back on her. "You've got a lot to learn about being a wife."

"He said it," the blond agreed. "You may be pretty but you got a lot to learn."

By now she was so mad that her body trembled. How dare they talk down to her as if she were a moron? "Don't you love your wives?" she demanded, eyeing all the slime balls who snickered at her.

"Well, I'm not married," Charles replied.

"Really? What a surprise." Sarcasm dripped from her voice.

"I may not be married, but I understand how marriage works. Men provide for the women. That's our role. And in return, women take care of the men."

"You mean they cater to your every whim? They're slaves in your homes!"

## Meant To Be

“Hey! That’s not true. We don’t treat them like that.”

“Hmph. You could’ve fooled me.”

Ted and Richie hurried over to her.

“Megan, what’s going on?” Ted asked, his gaze switching between her and the men.

She turned to him, grateful he came to her rescue when he did. Now here was a man from her time period who’d understand how barbaric these miserable oafs were being! “I asked them to help the women clean up and they refused.”

The blond leaned forward and slowly said, “Because that’s their job.” Once again, he was talking to her as if she were a wayward child. “Men have no place in the kitchen.”

“That’s ludicrous,” she spat. “Men can belong in the kitchen, right Ted?” Ignoring the half-amused, half-annoyed expressions on the men’s faces, she looked at him, waiting for his agreement.

“Uh...” He winced. “Do we have to discuss this now? I mean, the women are almost done anyway and then we can get to the dancing.”

She couldn’t believe her ears. “Ted?” Her tone came out as a warning.

“Ted?” Charles asked, raising an eyebrow in a challenge.

She huffed. “Don’t let them bully you.”

Charles chuckled under his breath.

“I feel sorry for your wives,” she told the group. “While you were sitting on your butts, they were slaving away to make your meals. You could do your part. Why, Ted made the cobbler.”

The men gasped as if they were one collective entity.

Ted looked at her in disbelief.

A man nearly choked on the straw he’d been chewing on. “Ted, tell us she’s lying.”

Richie clucked his tongue. “Mrs. Jacob, it’s not very nice to pick on your husband like that.”

Ted directed his attention to the men who waited for his answer.

*Come on, Ted, back me up here.* She put her hands on her hips and willed him to defend her. The seconds ticked like a resounding gong in her head. And the longer it took for him to speak, the deeper the feeling of dread welled in the pit of her stomach. He wasn't going to defend her. He was going to defend the barbarians!

Even as Ted smiled at her, she knew she'd hate what was coming. "Honey," he began, "you made a wonderful dessert. Why don't you take credit for it?"

She grunted. "If you know what's good for you, you won't come near me ever again." Spinning on her heel, she stormed up to Miriam who had just finished putting a bench against the barn wall. She grabbed Miriam's arm and pulled her to the open door.

"Wha-What's going on?" Miriam stammered as she stumbled to keep up with Megan's angry pace.

"We're leaving, that's what's going on."

Miriam dug her heels into the ground. "But I'm supposed to talk to that man I wanted to meet. I believe his name is Jason. He's the one you said you'd introduce me to. Remember?"

Megan stopped and looked at the men. They all looked immensely pleased with themselves, and Ted, the no good rat he turned out to be, joined them in their laughter. Laughter at her expense, no doubt! Turning to Miriam, she said, "You don't need Jason. He's a jerk."

Another round of laughter erupted from the group.

"In fact, they're all jerks. You can do much better than this." She dragged Miriam out of the barn and to the buggy. "Where's the horse?"

"Richie took it to the fenced area over there," Miriam replied, motioning to the fence.

Megan groaned. "Can you get it?"

## Meant To Be

"The men do that."

"So?"

She licked her lips and shrugged. "I suppose we can do it. Megan, what happened in there?"

"I'm too upset to discuss it. I need to relax before I can even bear to mention it."

Miriam looked like she was ready to protest but obviously decided against it since she shut her mouth.

Satisfied that at least one thing was going right tonight, she led Miriam to the fence. To her surprise, and dismay, Ted came out of the barn and ran over to them.

He had nerve! She intentionally turned her back on him.

"Megan, wait." He jumped in front of her.

Startled, she stepped back. "Get out of my way, traitor."

He sighed. "I'm sorry."

Raising an eyebrow, she asked, "Does that mean you're willing to go in there and tell them you made the cobbler?"

"It's not that easy."

"Sure it is. You just say, 'I made the cobbler' and that's it."

"No, it's not it, Megan. You don't understand. I work with those guys. I don't want to be the laughingstock of the farm. It's been a rough week. I got enough teasing when I fumbled up on the horses. I finally earned their approval today when I lassoed two cattle."

"You're right. We're back in high school and must fit in with the popular crowd." She didn't hide her sarcasm.

Miriam excused herself and went to the buggy to wait.

He gave her a pleading look. "Granted, it seems childish to want to belong here since we're going back home tomorrow, but I want my last night here to be a good one. I mean, we're in the past. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity."

"Good. At least there's a bright side to all of this. Now, move so I can get Miriam's horse."

His eyes grew wide. "Why?"

She pushed past him but he jumped in front of her again. "I don't want to be here. Maybe you enjoy playing with them, but I don't."

He rubbed his eyes. "Megan, please don't do this."

"Do what, Ted?"

"Do the same thing you did in the jailhouse when you kept banging that cup on the bars."

"And what same thing is that?"

"Making a bigger deal out of something than it needs to be. Look, this is only one night, and whether you want to hear it or not, those men do work hard. They get up at sunrise and work until sunset, except for tonight when they take time to have some fun. It's not as bad as you're making it out to be. They love their wives and children."

"They have a funny way of showing it."

Ted sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "To someone in our time period, yes. You're right. But in this time with the way things are, this is normal. You have to understand that the roles of men and women were different back then. I mean, in this time. Now. Then. Whatever." He threw his hands up in the air. "You can't compare those men to the men you're used to."

"Thank goodness for small favors. I'm glad I wasn't born in this time. It's horrible for women."

"Is it really?"

"Yes."

"The people thought I was taking advantage of you and they forced me to do right by you. That doesn't happen in our time. I could have used you and walked away without any repercussions."

She rolled her eyes. "That is comparing apples to oranges."

## Meant To Be

“No, it’s not. There’s a sense of protection these people have when it comes to women that doesn’t exist in our time. Men feel bound by honor to make sure women are safe.”

Shaking her head, she waved his theories off. “I’m not interested in this conversation. I just want to go back to the house, get a good night’s sleep and get back to my apartment where I can watch TV and surf the Internet. Then I can put this whole miserable experience behind me.” She crossed her arms. “So, are you going to get the horse hooked up or am I?”

He stared at her for a moment, as if trying to figure out what else to say, before he groaned and threw his hands up in the air again. “You’re impossible! Alright. Fine. I’ll do it, but I’m doing it because you’d hurt yourself.”

She scoffed.

“You don’t know anything about horses. You don’t know how to handle them,” he reminded her.

“Then I’m lucky to have you here, aren’t I?” she retorted as he retrieved Miriam’s horse. “Granted, you won’t back me up when you’re in front of the guys, but as soon as we’re alone, you’re on my side, doing everything you can to keep me safe. Yes, this is wonderful. I just love being a woman in this time period.”

She grunted again and stomped over to Miriam who stood next to the buggy. Miriam’s worried expression calmed her enough so that she could talk without yelling.

“He’s getting the horse,” she said.

Miriam nodded. The music started in the barn, and Megan caught the flicker of interest in Miriam’s eyes.

Megan shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “You can find men in other places. You don’t have to look for one here. Who wants a farmer or a farmhand anyway? They work all the time. They get up with the sun and work until sunset. What kind of life is that? You’d be stuck alone a lot. It’d be much better to have a man who works in town, one who’ll come

home around five every night and spend a good amount of time with you.”

“Farmers and farmhands work long and hard in the spring, summer and fall, but they have winters to spend lots of time at home,” Miriam said. “Perhaps that will make up for the three busy seasons.”

Megan gave a bitter laugh. “Oh sure. That’s even better. Then when they’re around the house all winter long, they can lounge around all day and get in your way. I’m telling you, Miriam, you don’t want a man to be up in your business all the time because he’s bored. You need time to be alone and get a break. Men are horribly demanding. Why Mike used to call me all the time and keep me up until late at night talking about...” She paused, knowing she couldn’t say Internet stocks. Inspired, she continued, “Well, he talked about money. I like money as much as the next person, but he really overdid it. Sometimes I thought he loved money more than me.” Which might’ve been an accurate assessment, as she looked back on that relationship.

Ted led the horse to the buggy and looked at Megan. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Hitch it up,” she ordered. She returned her focus to the bewildered woman next to her. “Men can get in the way of peace and quiet. Think about it. What if you ended up with someone like Richie? He’s a real blabbermouth. Can you imagine what your winters would be like? You’d need to stuff something in your ears just to get silence.”

“But if someone like him came home every evening, then I’d have to put up with it every day,” Miriam pointed out.

Megan considered her logic and decided she was right. “That’s why you’re better off staying single. Why deal with the misery if you don’t have to?”

“Wow, thanks a lot,” Ted interjected, sounding offended.

“It’s no secret that we were forced to marry,” she quipped.

“That’s the only way a man would marry you.”

## Meant To Be

She gasped. "It is not!"

"Want to bet?" Ted finished hooking the horse up and shot her an amused look. "If memory serves, your fiancé bailed out on you to be with someone else. I think he realized how difficult you'd be to deal with."

"I am not difficult!" she yelled, drawing attention from a couple of children who ran around the yard.

Miriam hastened into the buggy. "I'm ready to go."

Megan huffed and climbed into the buggy, sitting next to Miriam who accepted the reins from Ted. Megan refused to look at Ted, the traitor. Of course, he'd stick with the men. Didn't all men stick together regardless of what their girlfriends and wives thought? It was so typical. And irritating. As Miriam clicked the reins and the horse moved forward, she decided that being single for the rest of her life might actually be a blessing in disguise. And she looked forward to returning to that single life as soon as she hopped on the train.

## Chapter Nine



Cole gasped, out of breath from the swim down Devils Lake. He pulled himself up on the bank, careful to hold the time travel device above the water so it wouldn't get wet. That had been a feat in and of itself, but he managed it. He fell on the grass and rested on his stomach. His lungs hurt from the exertion of the chase, and he was drenched from the shoulders down but he did it. Blake had lost him at some point in the frantic swim.

The moonlight lit the night and when he managed a good, deep breath, he rolled onto his back, holding the device close to his side, still careful to keep it dry. Above him were stars and the nearly full moon. He was, once again, stuck in the wilderness, outside of any town, and he'd dropped his travel bag in his effort to avoid Blake. If he could just keep going, stay one step ahead of the other man, he'd be set. All he needed was to find that chip and he'd be on his way. No one would be the wiser, and who would believe Blake if he told people the truth? They'd assume he was a madman. Heck, they might even put him away in an institution.

## Meant To Be

His pulse back to normal, he sat up and saw Blake further down the grassy field. Though Blake was on the other side of the lake, he walked in Cole's direction. Cole got on his belly and crawled away, veering off to the side so he'd end up going perpendicular to Blake's route. As much as he wanted to stay close to a water source, he couldn't afford to do it.

*Stupid, Blake. You're really stupid. If you'd just let the matter alone, you'd be safely back home with your family.* But he had to pursue Cole and go back into the past, and now look where it got him. Running through uninhabited territory along a lake in the middle of the night, searching for a fugitive who only wanted compensation for all the misery life had dealt him.

Well, so be it. Cole would have to leave him here when he traveled to another time. And all because Blake had to play hero. Stupid. There was no doubt about it. The man was just plain stupid.

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Ted wasn't surprised to find that Megan wasn't at their rented house. He figured that she'd bum a ride with Miriam into town. But he was surprised that she fed the dog on her way out. He talked Richie into staying in his home Friday night so Richie could take him into town on Saturday. If he planned to stay for any length of time, he'd purchase a horse and buggy. It was the same as being without a car. He felt helpless to do anything or go anywhere. Fortunately, Richie was a good sport about things and stayed.

The next morning, the dog laid in the back of the wagon as they went to town. Ted looked at the mutt and realized he was going to miss him. Buddy had become a friend in the short week, but Ted didn't belong in this time. He had a life to live in the future, even if it wasn't as fun as being here.

Richie pulled the geldings to a stop in front of Miriam's residence. "I should go in too. Megan and Miriam were in such a hurry to get back last night, Miriam left her dish behind."

"In all fairness, Megan was the one rushing her." He jumped off the wagon and motioned for Buddy to wait for them. "Richie, will you take Buddy?"

Richie looked at the dog before he got down from the wagon. "Why?"

"Well, I never intended to keep him forever," Ted hedged. It was the truth, though if he'd been in the future, he'd have kept the canine. "I figured I'd give him a place to stay for awhile."

"Megan can't stand him, huh?"

He shrugged. "It's no secret that she tolerates him."

Richie grabbed the dish and joined Ted as they walked to the front of Miriam's house. "I understand. The last thing you need to do is upset Megan again. It's no way to start a marriage."

Ted nodded and knocked on the front door. He'd never seen a woman as upset as Megan had been. In some ways, it was refreshing. His past girlfriends had gone along with whatever he wanted. He could probably enjoy Megan's company if they kept in touch after returning home.

As soon as Megan opened the door, she scowled at him.

Then again, maybe hell would freeze over before she'd willingly talk to him.

Esther caught sight of him and ran up to the door. "Come in, Ted. Oh, hello, Richie. You can come in too."

Megan groaned but didn't say anything.

Ted preceded Richie into the parlor. Miriam got up from a chair where she talked to her parents.

"I'll make some coffee," their mother offered, standing up.

"I'll make sure your horses get some water to drink," their father told Richie.

## Meant To Be

Once Miriam, Esther, Megan, Ted, and Richie were alone in the parlor, Richie handed the pie dish to Miriam. "You didn't get a chance to bring this back, so I brought it for you," he explained.

Miriam smiled as she took it. "Thank you, Richie." She held it for a moment, glanced around, and sighed. "I'll put this away." She moved to the parlor door.

"Can I help?" he asked.

She blinked and turned to him. "I'm just going to put it in the kitchen."

His cheeks flushed. "I can put it up on the shelf for you if it's too high to reach. Besides," he glanced at Esther, Ted, and Megan, "I think I'd interfere if I stayed."

Esther nodded. "That's wise thinking, Richie. What I have to say doesn't concern you."

Ted stared at the older sister, suddenly feeling as if he were a young boy ready for a scolding, and Esther stood with her back straight and her chin high, as if she were the teacher. Megan rolled her eyes and plopped in a chair. Apparently, she'd already been subjected to Esther's lecture, whatever *that lecture* was.

Once the three of them were alone, Esther motioned for Ted to sit in the chair next to Megan. Though he realized he was an adult, one who was older than Esther in fact, he quietly obeyed her. There was something in the way she acted that didn't leave room for argument.

She took a deep breath and let out a long sigh before she shook her head. "Ted, I implore you to be patient with your wife. It is obvious her mother failed to show her what her place is in a marriage."

He nearly fell off the chair and onto the floor. He expected the woman to criticize him, not back him up. No wonder Megan scowled at him.

“Nevertheless,” Esther continued, her expression filled with sympathy, “I will take it upon myself to instruct your wife in the way she’s supposed to act. It may take time, but she’ll learn.”

Ted glanced at Megan who stared at the floor. She sat back, arms crossed, her legs crossed and one of her legs swinging in irritation. He winced on her behalf. He could only imagine what her morning had been like with Esther ‘instructing’ her.

Esther clasped her hands together. “Unfortunately, you have not been helping her.”

Ted’s head shot toward Esther.

She shook her finger at him. “I know about the cobbler you made. You are forbidden to do any cooking for now on. You must let her do the cooking so she can learn how to do it. The best way to help others is to let them help themselves.”

This conversation was pointless. After all, once he and Megan got on the train, they’d return to their correct time and Esther’s plan wouldn’t come to fruition, so he nodded his agreement. He noticed Megan glaring at him but kept his eyes focused on Esther.

Esther paced in front of them, her steps quick as she spun and turned around. “There are some things a man and a woman can do to ease into marriage. Now, I realize this is a new thing for you, and you didn’t ask to be married. However, marriage is an honorable institution and deserves all the support it can get. I’m married. I know how hard it can be, but there are rewards. Megan, it may not seem like it but men like to be taken care of, and who better to care for them than their own wives? Women care for their husbands by cooking for them, keeping the house clean, and doing their laundry. In return, men offer women their protection and security. Since you’re married, you won’t have to sell your body to make ends meet. Ted’s found a good job. Ray Gordon is one of the best farmers in the area, and he’s a fair and generous employer.”

## Meant To Be

Ted couldn't argue with her analysis regarding Ray. He did like working for the man. A momentary flicker of grief passed through him at the thought of leaving his farmhand job, but a quick reminder that he didn't belong in this time renewed his determination to leave. He glanced at the clock on the mantle above the fireplace. Good. He and Megan had plenty of time to get to the train station.

Esther patted Ted on the back, startling him. "Ted will do you good, Megan. Richie says he's a fine man, and Richie is a good judge of character." She leaned down and looked at him. "You will be a faithful husband, won't you Ted?"

This was ridiculous, but for the sake of his sanity, he obliged the misguided woman. "I will be a faithful husband."

Apparently satisfied, Esther stood back up and clapped her hands. "Very good." She walked over to Megan. "Megan, no one blames you for being a prostitute. You had no family or friends. It's obvious you were alone and scared. What else does a woman do when she needs a roof over her head and food in her tummy? But that's why I wanted to see you marry him. I want to make sure you have someone who'll take care of you too." Giving Megan a couple of pats on the shoulder, Esther smiled. "This is the best thing for both of you. I just know that once you get used to each other, everything will be wonderful. Marriage is work but it's worth it."

Ted slapped his knee and nodded. "You know what, Esther. You're right. We're lucky you came along when you did." He ignored Megan's gasp. "I do want to make a good home and I can't think of anyone better to do that with than Megan. Now, if you don't mind, I think I'll take her shopping so she can pick out a new..." Good grief. What did women buy when they shopped? He shrugged. "I'll let her decide when we get to the general store."

Esther smiled. "Good for you, Ted. That is a good way to start this marriage off on the right foot."

One look at Megan's rigid body told him that she wasn't at all happy with the outcome of this conversation. "I saw a toy train you might want to buy," he said, hoping she'd read into his code.

Fortunately, she did. Jumping up from the chair, she hurried to the door. "Yes. I do want to get that train."

Esther frowned. "What is so important about a toy train?"

"It's a wedding gift," he lied. "I thought it might be nice since we met on the train." Okay, so that was a half-truth.

Esther's frown turned back into a smile. "When you return, we'll have lunch and then you can get some food from the general store. Then we'll take you home. We'll have to get you two a wagon and a horse. That way, you can have transportation. Actually, we might be able to get you set up before you go home."

Even if Esther had her quirks, her heart was in the right place. Ted simply thanked her and joined Megan who was already on the porch, looking as if she were ready to run all the way to the train station. After they made it down the porch steps and to the sidewalk, he breathed a sigh of relief. They were almost home.

"Do you remember the train number we were on?" he asked.

Megan stared straight ahead, her cheeks still flushed with anger, but she managed a curt "Yes" before she looked both ways and then crossed the street.

He followed her, careful to avoid the horse droppings that littered the dusty streets. He reached the sidewalk. "Meg, come on. Give me a break."

She whirled around to face him.

He bumped into her before he had time to stop.

"You enjoyed that back there, didn't you?" she asked, her hands on her hips.

"I just told Esther what she wanted to hear so that we could get out of there."

## Meant To Be

“And it seems to me you didn’t have any trouble doing that.”

Sighing, he relented. “I thought she had some good things to say.”

“Of course you did. After all, what am I but a slave to do your bidding?”

“She didn’t tell you to be a slave.” He grabbed her arm to stop her as she took a step away from him. “Look, all she did was point out that marriage is a win-win situation if both parties work together. It’s like any relationship. If you divide up the workload, it works.”

“Hmm...My part has me sweating in the kitchen, cooking and doing laundry and making sure the house is all sparkling clean. Then I’m supposed to put on a smile and act like I’m happy to see you.”

“I don’t know what your problem is. I’m the one who’s been cooking.”

She jerked her arm away from him. “And then you denied it in front of the guys.”

“You bet I did. Do you have any idea how embarrassing that was for me when you told them I made the cobbler?”

“I don’t understand why it was a big deal. No one thinks anything of a man cooking.”

“Not in the future. But here in the past? Megan, this is not the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are things men and women do, and men don’t cook.”

“I bet there are some that do,” she replied, the fire still burning in her eyes.

Oh, for goodness’ sakes. This woman was on a crusade, and she wasn’t going to give up until he admitted defeat. He considered relenting until he examined the tight line on her lips, her furrowed eyebrows, and her flaring nostrils. Fine. He could meet her challenge.

"If other men are cooking, their wives know better than to yap it all over town," he retorted. "You humiliated me in front of the men I work with."

"Worked." She pointed her finger at him. "That's past tense."

He shoved her hand aside. "Don't point your finger at me."

"I'll do anything I want to." She pointed it at him again. "You don't own me."

"I do while we're in the past, honey. I'm your husband, remember? I've had all I can take of this." He grabbed her hand and led her down the sidewalk. "What you fail to realize is that it doesn't matter whether or not I cooked. It was my last night here and I wanted to enjoy it."

"And did you?" she sarcastically asked as she struggled to keep up with him.

"No, not really." How could he fully enjoy himself at a barn dance without a woman to dance with?

"Well, like you said, it doesn't matter because you'll never have to see them again."

Her nonchalant attitude bothered him. He stopped and turned to her. "You don't get it. That was the only time we had to go to a barn dance and you ruined it for me."

She shrugged, as if she didn't care. "Don't act surprised. My fiancé dumped me because I was difficult."

Ouch. He winced. He recalled saying those words to her in the heat of anger, but he hadn't realized how much they must've hurt until she repeated them to him. "I'm sorry I said that."

A moment past and her face softened. "And I'm sorry I told the men you made the cobbler, though I honestly didn't think I'd embarrass you."

His hold on her hand relaxed. "Thanks."

"I'll be glad to get back home, won't you?"

## Meant To Be

He glanced around, noting the houses that lined the streets, the horses pulling buggies and wagons, the children playing in the yards and the people stopping to talk. It was hard to believe they'd arrived here last week. For some reason, he felt as if he'd always been here, as if this was where he was meant to be. "I don't know. I kind of like it here."

She grimaced. "Speak for yourself."

"I thought I was."

Her lips curved up. "Touché."

Dragging his attention from his surroundings, he faced her. "Where do you live?"

She blinked. "What?"

"In the future. Where do you live?"

"Indianapolis."

"I'm not too far from you. I'm in Minneapolis."

"I notice those cities rhyme."

Still holding her hand, he led her in a leisurely stroll. "Do you have an email address?"

"Who doesn't?"

"Well, will you tell me what it is?"

She glanced at him, her expression full of curiosity. "Why?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you?" This was hard enough without having to be obvious. When she didn't respond, he hedged, "I want to keep in touch. It's not every day I get stranded in the past with a woman and then have to marry her. I thought it might be fun to laugh about this after we get back."

"I guess that'd be okay."

He didn't know how to take that. She didn't seem excited by the prospect. Then again, maybe she didn't feel the same way he did. It was hard to explain but he thought they made a good match. Why, he wasn't sure. She was nothing like him. He'd never go up to a group of people and demand they do something or bang the bars of a jail cell to get the marshal's attention. But at

least she saw something she considered to be an injustice and did something about it. He had to admire her for her ability to speak up, especially when no one ran to her defense.

They reached the train station and he let go of her hand so he could dig into his back pocket and pull out the money Ray had given him. Once he paid for their train tickets, they sat on a wooden bench and waited for the train to arrive.

She glanced over her shoulder and whispered, "Remember that newspaper guy who got us in jail?"

Ted nodded.

"He's staring at us."

He turned to look at the bald man but she yanked on his shirt sleeve. "Don't look."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want him to know we're talking about him."

"Maybe if I stare back, he'll mind his own business."

"No," she protested, settling her back against the bench, the side of her body pressing nicely against his. "It doesn't matter. I just want to get out of here. Do you think we should stand in the middle of the aisle where we were when we traveled here?"

"That's the most logical thing to do."

"Then we'll do that."

The train arrived and as soon as the conductor called for people to board, they did.

"Did you bring any luggage with you?" the conductor asked as tore their tickets in half.

"Oh," Ted began, trying to think of a good excuse.

"We're not going that far," Megan filled in.

He silently thanked her for her quick thinking.

Since the train was heading east, they sat down and waited until the train was about to reach the point where the time travel happened. They stood up in the aisle, ignoring the questioning

## Meant To Be

looks from the other passengers. The good thing was that Megan was fully dressed this time, so she didn't have men leering at her.

As the train continued down the track and they held onto the seats to steady their balance, he waited for them to be transported to the Amtrak they'd been riding a week before. But it never happened. They waited for another ten minutes. Nothing. They remained in the same train, stuck in the past, still attracting the same strange looks from several passengers, though most of them had turned to something else. They returned to their seats.

He peered out the window, wondering what went wrong.

"Hey," she started, placing her hand on his arm, "maybe we were supposed to be going west toward Fargo, instead of east."

He turned to her in interest. "That is the direction we were heading when it happened. Okay. Let's try it."

And so they did. But it didn't work. As they got off the train in Fargo, Ted actually experienced an odd sense of relief.

Megan, however, wasn't happy at all with the turn of events. She slumped forward on the bench and put her head in her hands.

Sitting next to her, he rubbed her back and leaned close to her. "We'll figure it out."

"I don't want to be stranded here." Her voice cracked, and he realized she was crying.

"It's not that bad." When she didn't respond, he softly asked, "Is it?"

"I don't like it here."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to be who others want me to be."

"Then don't."

She didn't respond.

He sighed, wishing there was something he could say to ease her mind. Unable to think of anything, he continued to rub

her back. He didn't understand why their trip back to the future didn't work. Then he recalled that they had been thrown together. Someone had run into them. It all happened so fast that he wouldn't recognize who'd run into them. But that didn't matter. It wasn't like he had to worry about the man who'd plowed into them. And it wasn't like that man had anything to do with their time travel. Whatever it was, it had to be an abnormality in the space-time continuum.

When she sat up, wiping the tears from her cheeks, he asked, "Do you feel better?"

"No. But I guess we're stuck here, whether we like it or not."

She stood up, looking as if she'd been sentenced to a lifetime of misery. Considering that this meant they'd have to stay married, he wondered if he was part of the reason she was depressed. He decided not to dwell on that.

"We'd better shop for groceries," she glumly said. "But I'm not cooking. I don't care what Esther says. I'm no good in the kitchen and I never will be."

"I'll cook," he assured her as he stood next to her. "And it'll be our secret."

She nodded and they left the train station.

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Two weeks later, Esther threw a lid on top of the flames of a burning skillet. Miriam rushed to the cupboard and grabbed a container of baking soda. Opening the lid, she threw the baking soda at the curtains that had caught fire as well. Once the small grease fire was out, Esther placed her hand over her heart and stumbled to the kitchen chair. She sat down and gasped for air.

Megan, too stunned to speak, simply stood to the side of the cookstove, holding the spatula tightly in her hand.

## Meant To Be

Shooting a sympathetic look at Megan, Miriam grabbed a cup of water and gave it to Esther to drink.

Esther gulped the water and set the cup on the table, her hands trembling. "I give up. I can't do it."

Miriam hurried to Megan and took the spatula and set it in the sink. "Come on. Sit."

"That's a good idea. Get her far away from the cookstove," Esther agreed, waving them over.

Megan finally found her voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to start another fire." She sat across from Esther and placed her hands in her lap. She never knew fire could spread so fast. "I tried to watch the skillet this time."

"It's not your fault," Esther quickly assured her. "You aren't meant to cook. It's not what God wants, and I'm tired of fighting Him. I should have known the night you made us sick from your first meal that it wasn't going to work out. I'm not going to be bullheaded anymore. Ted will have to cook for now on. We just won't tell anyone."

"Yes, that's probably best."

Ted actually seemed to enjoy it, and he was good. Despite Megan's failures, she thought it was sweet that Esther had spent a good two weeks faithfully coming out to instruct her. Megan tried to succeed, but no matter what she did, something went wrong.

"At least you can do laundry and clean the house," Miriam said, smiling in her usual cheerful fashion.

Megan nodded.

Esther took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "We'll just have to convince Ted that you can do other things to be a good wife. Cleaning and laundry are admirable." She tapped her fingers on the table. "I know! We'll teach you how to sew!"

"Sew?" Megan dumbly asked. The woman couldn't be serious. She'd never even sewed a button on a shirt, let alone sew clothes.

"That could be your hidden talent."

"No, it's not."

"Have you tried it?"

"No."

Miriam's jaw dropped. "You've never sewn anything?"

"I haven't had a need to," Megan answered, wondering why it was such a big deal. Did all women in 1898 have to make clothes? Weren't there enough clothes in the mercantile to relieve women of that burden? Really, there seemed to be enough catalogues in that place for people to order clothes.

"Buying clothes can get expensive," Miriam softly stated.

"Just what exactly did your parents do?" Esther asked, leaning forward in interest.

Megan shrugged. "My mother was a teacher and my father was a..." She paused and studied their curious expressions. She couldn't exactly say x-ray technician, could she? Did they have those in this time period? She decided on something vague. "He worked for a doctor."

"Hmm," Esther replied. "I wonder why your mother never taught you to cook or sew."

"And what was she doing teaching?" Miriam asked. "Did she quit once she married your father?"

"No. She worked after she married him."

"Surely, she quit once you were born," Miriam insisted, holding onto the back of the chair in front of her.

"No. She worked the whole time I grew up."

Esther glanced at Miriam and shook her head, as if she couldn't believe her ears. Megan couldn't understand why the women found this news so shocking. Surely, there were women who worked in this time period.

Miriam pulled out the chair and sat down. She took Megan's hands in hers and gave a gentle squeeze. "Who cooked and cleaned and sewed clothes for you while you grew up?"

"My parents. Well, no one sewed," Megan explained.

## Meant To Be

“They must have had someone in your town who did those things,” Esther said, quick to make a judgment.

Megan realized that it was easier to let Esther fill in the blanks so she didn’t have to be grilled anymore. It was rough to keep explaining her life to these women. If she wasn’t careful, she’d end up slipping and reveal the future to them.

“We’re here to help you,” Miriam said. “Don’t be shy about asking for help.”

“Okay,” Megan agreed, knowing what was coming next.

Esther stood up and picked up her purse. “We need to make a trip into town to gather some sewing supplies.” She glanced at the cookstove. “We’ll also pick up another skillet.” Her gaze drifted up to the half-burned curtains. “Our first project will be making curtains.”

Mindful of her duty to humor the women, Megan joined them to the front door. She motioned for the dog to go outside. She refused to let Buddy stay in the house while she wasn’t there to make sure he didn’t use her clean floors as a toilet. Buddy obeyed and she patted him on the head before joining the women in the wagon to go to town.

## Chapter Ten



Cole was exhausted. In his escape from Blake, he'd lost track of where he was and ended up walking along the flat prairie for days. He wasn't sure how much time passed. The days and nights blended together as he traveled the uninhabited land. He drank rain water and managed to kill a couple of prairie dogs to eat. The grassy land became his bed. The howls of the coyotes no longer woke him at night. The wind cooled the heat from the May sun. His skin was already sunburned, and more often than not, the thirst bothered him much more than his blistering feet and aching legs. But still, he pressed on, knowing that he had to find that chip. The only saving grace he had was the time travel device which showed him the way to Fargo. As long as he traveled the path, he'd get to his destination.

Another night and day passed without any rain, and the prairie dogs did little to alleviate his nagging thirst. At the end of the next day, he collapsed.

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## Meant To Be

Ted couldn't believe he'd let Megan talk him into wearing the skirt she was making. It was after supper, and the sun was setting. Streams of the remaining sunlight filtered through the lacy white curtains that Miriam helped Megan create. He wanted to check on his new horse in the barn out back, but instead of feeding the gelding, he was in the parlor, holding the skirt up to his waist.

Megan wanted to figure out a good length for it, and so he waited as she stuck pins to designate where the hem would be. He never felt so ridiculous in his entire life. Why had he agreed to this again? Oh yeah. He wanted her to go to the barn dance that upcoming Friday, and there was no other way she'd go unless he did this for her. He suddenly questioned whether or not he wanted to go to the supper and dance that badly.

He stood on a chair while she made a slow circle around him.

"I'm almost done," she told him. She put another pin in place.

"Good because it's hard to stay still this long." That wasn't why he wanted to be done. He wanted to get off the chair and feel like a man again.

"Well, I have to admit that I actually like sewing this skirt," she said as she pulled part of the skirt toward her. "Good. It's straight. I don't want one side of the skirt to be lower than the other. That's why I chose the plaid pattern. As long as I stay along the lines, I'll be doing it right."

"Isn't this going to be too short?" He noticed that women wore skirts and dresses that reached their ankles.

"Yes but June will be here next week and that means it's going to be hot. I want to be cool. At least, as cool as possible. Besides, I'll just wear this skirt around here. Believe me, I wouldn't dare wear this in public. I had enough of men staring at me when I wore the shorts."

He chuckled at the memory.

"I'm glad someone can find amusement in it."

He shrugged. "At least it turned out alright."

"I don't know. We still haven't figured out how to get back home." She stuck in another pin and reached in her small basket for another one.

"Are you still eager to get back?"

"Of course. Aren't you?"

He decided not to respond.

"I miss TVs and computers," she said. "I also miss the ability to wear shorts without making people think the worst."

"It's not so bad here."

"No, I guess it's not, but like my father always said, 'It's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there'."

He looked out the window in front of him and noted the fields that had turned green due to the rainfall they'd had that month. Whenever he took a moment to study the land, he felt as if everything was right with the world. Streaks of pinks, yellows and purples painted the sky, giving him the view that no artist could master. Everything was so peaceful out here. It was the perfect place to live.

"I have two more pins to go and then I'm done," she told him.

"What if we can't get back? What if we have to stay here for the rest of our lives? Can you learn to be content?"

She glanced up at him, brushing back her bangs. "I'm not giving up on getting back until all my resources have been exhausted."

"You're really going to keep going on the train every weekend?"

Picking up a pin, she folded back a piece of the cotton gray and pink fabric and made sure it was even with the rest of the skirt. "Maybe it doesn't work every Saturday. Maybe the moon

## Meant To Be

has to be aligned just right to create some sort of wormhole or something.”

He sighed. He’d gone along with her every Saturday. Not because he wanted to return to the future but because he didn’t want to live without her. He criticized himself for getting attached to her like he had. She’d laugh if she knew how important she’d become to him in the short time they’d known each other.

She stuck the pin in and picked up another one from the basket. “This is the last one and then you can go back to being a boy,” she joked.

“That’s good. Someone needs to be the man of the house.”

She smiled but didn’t respond. Once she finished, she stood straight up. “There. I think this will work.”

“How long is it supposed to be?”

“It’ll go past my knees but above the ankles.”

He stepped out of the skirt and handed it to her. “Are you going to hem it tonight?”

“I thought I’d get a head start on it.” She collected the basket of sewing supplies and went to the rocking chair by the window. Setting the basket on the small round table next to her, she sat down and put the skirt in her lap. “I’m going to make some more shorts once I get the hang of this. Shorts will be more of a challenge.”

The idea of seeing in her shorts shouldn’t have been as intriguing as it suddenly seemed. He’d seen women in shorts all of his life, and most of the shorts were shorter than the pair she had. Still, there was something about seeing her legs exposed that excited him. Shrugging the thought off, he slipped his boots on by the front door.

“Are you going to check on Independence?”

“Yes. I have to make sure he gets enough to eat.”

She glanced up from the needle and thread, and he noted the twinkle in her eyes. "You better be careful. Buddy will get jealous."

He grinned as he opened the front door. Buddy jumped up from the porch step and ran over to him. "He's helping me."

"He follows you, you mean."

The dog barked and wagged his tail, eager for Ted to go outside.

"You know what they say, a dog is a man's best friend," he said.

"Hmm...You have your best friend but I don't have mine."

He raised an eyebrow. "Meaning?"

"Diamonds. A dog is a man's best friend and a diamond is a woman's best friend." She motioned to the happy mutt. "And it seems to me that your best friend ate mine up."

The dog barked again, pawing at the screen door.

"I'm coming." With one last look at her as she pulled the thread through the eye of the needle, he promised, "I'll get you another best friend as soon as I save the money."

She looked up, her eyes wide with surprise, but he closed the door before she had a chance to respond.

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The first thing Megan thought when she and Ted arrived at Ray's barn the following Friday was that she didn't want to be there. Charles, the obvious leader of the group of Neanderthals, snickered as soon as Ted pulled their horse and buggy next to Esther and Aaron who'd insisted on taking Miriam so Esther could keep a careful eye on her little sister.

Megan still recalled how appalled Esther had been when Miriam let it slip that she hoped to talk to Jason, the man who'd caught her attention the last time. Megan promised to get them

## Meant To Be

talking this time. Promising Miriam such a thing had seemed easy enough in the safety of her home, but now, as she took in the stares and grins of the men as they gathered around Charles, she had the sudden urge to flee.

Ted hopped out of the buggy and actually seemed to skip with joy as he made his way to her. How was it possible that a grown man could enjoy a social activity with the enthusiasm a little boy showed on Christmas morning?

She placed her hand over her stomach. She prayed she wouldn't vomit.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

No. But she took a deep breath, steadied her shaking hands, and steeled her resolve. She'd do this for Miriam...and Ted, of course. He'd been a good sport about wearing the skirt so she could make it the length she wanted. And Miriam...Well, how else was she going to find a husband? Church was like a miniature Noah's Ark with people paired up with their spouses, and the poor girl was terribly shy. She barely said boo to the couple of men who'd said hello when Megan joined Miriam and Esther in town earlier that week. Yes. She had to do this for Miriam. And, to a lesser extent, for Ted.

He took her hand and helped her down. "I'll stay by your side all night, if it'll help you feel better."

"I don't need you to hold my hand." She looked at his hand that was wrapped around hers. "I meant figuratively," she clarified. She did kind of like it when he held her hand. She noticed a blister along the inside of his thumb. Removing her hand from his, she inspected it. "Does it hurt?"

"Only when I use a rope."

"You should have told me you had this. I would've gotten something to make it heal faster when I was in town today."

He shrugged. "I'm fine. I've suffered worse."

She released his hand and nodded. Though she couldn't be sure, she thought he appreciated her concern.

Charles walked over to them and pointed to the dish on the buggy seat. "Is that Ted's fancy work again?"

The men around him laughed.

Megan narrowed her eyes at him.

"You better watch out," the annoying blond said, laughing. "She's got the look of a rattler ready to strike."

"That's enough, you two," Ted interrupted the men before she could give them a piece of her mind. "Megan made this all by herself, but there was something she put in it. Now, I can't say for sure what it was, but I think she offered a bit to the mouse that was in our food cabinet."

Charles scoffed.

Playing along, she smiled sweetly and held the dish to him. "I made it especially for you."

He glanced at the dish and then back at her. Looking uncertain, he looked over at Ted who innocently shrugged. Then a sly smile formed on his lips. "I wouldn't touch anything you made, ma'am. Word is, you nearly burned down the kitchen. Who knows what you'd do to a man's stomach?"

"Charles, I think you should back off," Ted said, his tone firm.

"For you, I will," he told Ted. "Come on, men. We have to get the barn cleared for the supper." Glancing back at Megan, he added, "We wouldn't want to be accused of dawdling when there's work to be done."

She huffed and gripped the edges of the metal dish. "I don't understand it, Ted. Why are you friends with him?"

"I'm not. He owns the farm in that direction."

"Is he Ray's friend?"

"I think so, but I don't see him much. I spend most of my time with Richie and Lou."

That made her feel better. Seriously, she couldn't imagine a worst specimen for mankind.

## Meant To Be

Esther strode over to them as Miriam followed, close behind. “Who is this man that my sister wants to meet?”

Ted excused himself and joined Richie who had just arrived in his wagon. Aaron passed by and shook hands with some of the men who lingered outside the barn.

“Well?” Esther said, her hands folded in front of her.

Megan felt much better now that her friends were here. Maybe she could enjoy the night after all. She smiled at Esther’s quirky behavior. “Is everything in your life business?”

Esther blinked and shook her head. “What?”

“I couldn’t help but notice that you approach everything in life as if it’s a chore.”

“I do not. There are many things I enjoy.”

Miriam laughed. “She’s right. She enjoys hard work.”

Esther shot her an accusing look. “Hard work is good for the soul. It’s the antidote to laziness.”

“While that’s true,” Megan relented, “fun balances people out. You should enjoy yourself tonight and dance with Aaron.”

“I’m not here to have fun. I’m here to see who might be my brother-in-law someday.”

“Okay.” Megan waved the woman forward and entered the crowded barn where people rushed to get ready for the potluck supper. “Over there is Jason Hensley. Before this night is over, he’ll know that Miriam is alive.”

Esther looked at her as if she’d grown a second head. “Of course, Miriam is alive. She’s breathing, isn’t she?”

Realizing her mistake, Megan quickly explained, “It’s a figure of speech. It means that he’ll know she exists.”

“Why wouldn’t she exist? I can see her and talk to her. I can even touch her.” She poked her sister in the arm. “I don’t understand you sometimes, Megan. Your speech is uncanny.”

“Yes.” Megan sighed. “It is.”

Miriam turned to Esther. “The point is that she’ll find a way to introduce us. Then maybe he’ll ask to court me.”

"I already knew that," Esther snapped as she adjusted her bonnet. "What do you take me for? A simpleton?"

"No. Just a lost cause." Megan knew she wouldn't understand her joke so she left the two women and made a beeline for Jason who was using a pitchfork to toss hay into the horses' troughs.

Jason swung the pitchfork in her direction. Startled, she backed up a step and fell into the pile of hay he'd been gathering the horses' feed from.

"Oh! I'm sorry." He put the pitchfork down and reached for her hand to pull her up. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." She brushed the hay off of her dress the best she could before directing her attention to him. "I notice you're wearing spurs on your boots and wanted to ask about them." Well, that wasn't true, but she had to come up with something to discuss so it wouldn't be apparent that she was trying to fix him up with Miriam. She glanced at Miriam and Esther who kept their distance but watched everything she was doing. Turning back to Jason, she smiled. "So, I always wondered why cowboys wear spurs."

He looked at his spurs and returned her smile. "They direct the horse to move when I need him to."

"Really? Do you just nudge the horse with them?"

"Yep. They reinforce commands, but I'm careful when I use them. I don't want to hurt the horse."

"Exactly what are the commands?" Not that she cared but it was breaking the ice and she hoped to find a way to ease into introducing him to Miriam.

"Some are basic. Go forward, go left, go right, go lateral, go back."

"How exciting," she lied. How she missed cars! "Is it hard to learn to ride a horse?"

"No. I realize that women don't often ride them but some do. Ray's wife is an expert horse rider."

## Meant To Be

"I couldn't imagine riding a horse," she honestly said. "It's too scary to be on top of something you can't control."

He chuckled and adjusted his brown hat. "Nonsense. Anyone can learn to ride. If you have a well-trained horse, learning isn't a problem. You just need confidence, that's all."

Megan was getting frustrated. This wasn't exactly conducive to an introduction. She decided she'd have to make one of her own. "Miriam, my friend over there," she waved at her friend who quickly looked away, "wants to learn to ride a horse but she can't find anyone to teach her."

"I have a great idea. Why don't I teach you and then you can teach her?"

She stared at him, not sure why he'd make such a ridiculous offer. Why go about it in such a complicated way? It'd be much easier for him to teach Miriam himself.

Richie ran up to her, gasping for air. "Mrs. Jacob, *your husband* asked me to come and get you."

She rolled her eyes. "Can't it wait? I'm doing something important here."

"No, it can't." Why did Richie look like he was ready to panic?

Jason frowned at her. "You're married?"

She sighed. "Yes. It was something we were both forced into. It's a long and boring story."

"Anyway, she needs to go." Richie yanked her arm.

"Ow!" she protested.

"It can't wait."

She almost tripped twice in an effort to keep up with him, and he wouldn't let go of her arm until they stood in front of Ted who placed a barrel outside by the barn door.

"There. We got plenty of water for the animals," Ted said, rubbing his hands together. "What's next?"

Richie shoved her in Ted's direction. "You need to spend time with your wife." Then he walked off.

Ted stared after him. "What did he mean by that?"

She shook her head. "Who knows? Something is seriously wrong with him."

He sighed. "He can be odd."

"I think I'll go back in. See you when supper's ready."

He nodded and put the lid on the barrel.

She entered the barn and headed over to Esther and Miriam who were helping the women set up the food on the table. She decided to pitch in and do some work too. At least the men were doing their part at this stage of the game. Charles was laughing with some of his faithful followers at the horse stalls. She noted that Aaron was one of his cronies.

She turned to Esther. "Is Aaron friends with Charles?"

Esther finished laying out the cloth napkins and glanced at the group Megan motioned to. "I'm not sure if 'friends' is the right word, but they do know each other."

"Do you like Charles?"

"I hadn't thought about it. He's a law abiding citizen, and he's helped a couple of farmers rein in their wayward cattle. I suppose he's alright."

Wonderful. Charles was a good guy, except for when it came to her. Not that she could stand him either but still...it wasn't fun to be ridiculed.

Megan unwrapped the pie that Ted made and set the dish in the center of the table. She walked over to Miriam. "I was just about to get Jason to offer to give you horse riding lessons when Richie butted in and ruined it."

"Butted?" Miriam asked.

"Interfered."

Miriam nodded. "I already know how to ride a horse."

"Yes, but Jason doesn't have to know that. I figure that if he gave you horse riding lessons, then it would be a good way for you to spend time with him."

## Meant To Be

Miriam's eyes lit up and she clapped her hands together. "That's brilliant!"

"I thought so too. And it would have gone according to plan."

"Except for Richie."

"Right. I don't know why he felt the need to interfere."

"I saw him drag you away. He seemed quite insistent."

"Pushy, you mean."

Miriam giggled. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say he had fire ants in his pants."

Megan laughed at the image. "You're awful!"

She sobered. "I'm sorry."

"No. I meant...Well, where I come from, it's a term of endearment."

"Where do you come from?"

Megan decided she could tell her the truth. "Indiana."

"I haven't been outside of Fargo. Do you miss your home?"

"Yes, I do."

Miriam pulled out a chair as everyone got ready to eat. "I hope that you will find a home here, with us."

Megan glanced around the barn and watched as the men and women assembled at the tables. Aaron joined Esther and pulled out her chair for her. As Megan began to pull out her chair, Esther tapped her hand.

"Let your husband do that for you," Esther said. "It's his duty." Then she sat in her chair.

Megan sighed but waited for Ted to arrive. She didn't know why, but it pleased her that she didn't have to ask him to pull out the chair for her. Then he sat on her right. She insisted that Miriam sit to her left so she could offer suggestions on how they could get her and Jason to get together to dance.

As she ate, she couldn't help but think of the work that waited for the women. The men would get to rest and talk while

the women cleaned the mess everyone was making. It was hard to sit and eat, knowing all of this, and a glance in Charles' direction only upset her all the more.

There was no doubt about it. That particular man was a creep. Not only that, but he was disgusting. He ate with his mouth open and burped. She cringed. He looked her way, and probably noticing her repulsion, he grinned and burped again.

She quickly turned her attention to Miriam. "Whatever you do, don't pick Charles. I don't care who else you choose, but that man won't treat you right. You deserve someone who knows how to treat a woman with respect."

Esther leaned across Miriam and smiled at Megan. "I'm glad to hear you talk this way, Megan. It is important to choose the right man, and the right one will show a woman proper respect." She nodded. "You've come a long way in a short period of time."

Recalling how everyone assumed she'd been a prostitute, Megan's cheeks flushed. When would that insinuation die down?

Esther turned back to Aaron.

As if Miriam could read Megan's mind, she offered an understanding smile. "Coming from Esther, that's a compliment."

"I gathered that much."

"Try not to let it trouble you. You can't do anything about the past. All you can do is focus on where you're going." She bit into her biscuit, swallowed and added, "It's nice having you here. I feel as if we've been friends forever."

Megan's heart softened, for she felt the same way about Miriam. She couldn't recall a time when she'd felt a stronger bond of friendship. Did she really want to go back to her own time? She shook the thought off. Of course, she did. She didn't belong here. Who knew what stipulations were involved in time travel? She was trying not to change the future, but a part of her worried that she might inadvertently do something to screw things up.

## Meant To Be

Poking her potato with her fork, she forced that fear aside. She chewed the salty spud, barely tasting it. Her stomach twisted in crazy knots. Between Charles and the implications of time travel, her appetite had plummeted.

“Do you want a slice of pie?”

But Megan had more to think about than Charles, time traveling and eventually saying good-bye to Miriam. She thought of her mother and her friends. They missed her. She did miss them too, but probably not as much as she should.

“Megan.”

Blinking, she quickly swallowed the potato and looked over at Ted. “What?”

“Do you want a piece of pie?” He held out the round dish holding the apple pie. “I want to make sure you get a piece before the guys gobble it all up.”

She looked at the untouched fried chicken on her plate. She could hardly stomach another bite of anything. “No thanks.”

He nodded and set the dish on the table where several men grabbed their slices. “They can be real animals sometimes.”

She chuckled. Yes, they could. But she had to admit that most of them were good guys.

“It’s nice to see you laugh,” he said. “You’ve been looking glum. Is something wrong?”

Shrugging, she lied, “No. I’m just homesick.”

His smile faltered. “Right.”

Richie called out to him so their conversation ended.

Megan turned back to her plate and forced down the rest of the chicken.

After everyone finished eating, she stood up and did her part to help the women, gritting her teeth whenever she had to pass Charles and his snickering group of followers. Charles didn’t do it when Ted was nearby, but as soon as Ted was out of hearing range, Charles would “cheer” her on for working.

"It's good to see a woman knowing her place," he commented, leaning against the wall by the barn door. "Next thing I know, you'll be barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen."

His cronies laughed under their breaths.

She stopped by the door, ready to slap him, when another tactic came to mind. She turned to him and smiled as sweetly as she could. "I notice you don't have a woman by your side." She glanced around the barn. "What a shame. I mean, there are some unattached women who are in your age range. And it's hard to miss a man like you. Your dirty clothes, foul body odor, your crooked teeth...Gee, I can't figure out why you came here by yourself."

He frowned and straightened up. Narrowing his eyes at her, he said, "You'd better watch it."

"Or what?" she challenged. "You're going to threaten to breathe on me and knock me over with your bad breath?"

The blond and redhead attempted to cover up their laughter by coughing.

Charles pointed his finger at her. "There's something odd about you. You're not right. I know it."

Ted hurried over to them. "Is there something wrong?"

Charles immediately put his hand down and shrugged. "No, nothing's wrong. She was just asking us which way to the kitchen."

She could play along. "And that is where you'll find the outhouse." She motioned to the small wooden building. "That way, you don't have to keep going behind the bushes like an animal."

He scowled at her, but she smiled back. It was just like her father always said, 'Never let them see you sweat.'

Ted sighed. "Leave her alone, Charles."

Now Charles turned his piercing green eyes on Ted. "I suggest you keep her in line. She has no business meddling with the way things are."

## Meant To Be

Ted stepped between her and Charles, and though she couldn't see his expression, his shoulders were tense. "Is that a threat?"

"It's a warning. We don't want the likes of her dictating her beliefs on proper women folk."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"You know what I mean."

"Maybe. But I want to hear you say it before I punch you out."

Ray let out a loud whistle. "Who's ready to dance?"

Despite the fact that several people had watched the exchange between Charles and Ted, they dutifully turned to Ray and clapped their hands in agreement.

"Good," Ray called out from the center of the room. "Men, gather your ladies and let's have a good time. And remember, no fighting on my property." He looked directly at Ted and Charles. "I don't want to clean the blood."

A couple of people laughed and Megan felt the mounting tension ease.

Ted turned to her. "Do you want to dance?"

She agreed, not bothering to look back at Charles who'd just stay there with his creepy friends. It wasn't like he was going to dance with anyone, so all he could do was watch. That fact did provide a sense of satisfaction. Okay. So it was childish to be smug about having a date when Charles didn't. Still, the women in this town were much better off avoiding him altogether. She could only imagine what a brute he'd be as a husband.

The thought made her shudder. Talk about having to serve a man from sunup to sundown...and then in bed. Ick. With his grimy, smelly body in the bed with her. She thanked the Lord that such a fate was not hers. At least Ted was clean and nice. Not that theirs was a real marriage. As soon as they got back home, their lives would return to normal.

Bringing her thoughts back to the dance, she accepted his hand and went to the center of the barn where couples gathered to square dance.

Ted was enjoying the dance more than he should, especially considering the fact that he had two left feet and occasionally stepped on Megan's toes. But he liked holding her. She was warm and soft, and more often than not, she'd take the lead and show him how to move his feet. After a couple of dances, he went to get something for the two of them to drink. Dancing, he learned, made a person thirsty.

Richie sat next to Abe near the table where people got their refreshments.

"Why aren't you dancing?" Ted asked them.

"We're watching people," Richie replied.

"Oh yeah? Anything interesting?" Ted scanned the pitchers of punch, coffee and water. He wondered what Megan wanted. He hadn't thought to ask. He glanced over his shoulder and saw her talking to Miriam and Esther. Aaron stood next to his wife, looking bored.

"Actually, there is something funny," Richie said.

Curious, Ted turned to his friend. "What's that?"

"Charles is going around and asking the men if he stinks."

Ted laughed. "Why is he doing that?"

Abe shrugged, chuckling. "We don't know but it's hilarious. All the men are steering clear of him."

Ted didn't blame them. Something wasn't right with a man wanting other men to sniff him. He turned his attention back to the table and decided to get punch. Taking the ladle, he scooped up a good portion of the pink liquid and poured it into a glass cup.

"Ted, you should be careful," Richie said.

"Afraid I'll spill punch all over the table?"

"No, not that. It's your wife."

## Meant To Be

He arched an eyebrow and looked at his concerned friend. "What about her?"

Richie let out a long sigh and paused, as if carefully weighing his words. "She seems to be a little too friendly."

"How so?" he demanded, his voice tense.

"She talks to other men."

"And usually gets in trouble. In case you haven't noticed, she's riled up Charles and his friends."

"I'm not talking about her odd views on how men and women should be. I'm talking about how she goes out of her way to talk to Jason."

"Jason Hensley?"

"Is there another?"

Ted looked back and saw that Megan, Miriam, Esther and Aaron were talking to Jason. But it appeared as if Megan was introducing him to Miriam. He waved his hand. "Oh that. Megan's trying to get Miriam a husband."

Richie frowned and tipped back his hat. "Miriam's looking to get married?"

"You know how women are. They like to play matchmaker. There's nothing to worry about."

Abe nudged Richie in the side. "You better make your move before Jason snatches her away."

Richie shook his head and settled his hands on his knees. "He's not interested in Miriam."

Concerned, Ted took another look at the group huddled by the side of the dance floor. Jason appeared to be leaning toward Megan, but then, in the next instance, he took Miriam by the arm and led her to a group of people getting ready to square dance. Relieved, Ted smiled at the men he worked with. "There you go. He's whisked Miriam onto the dance floor."

"I told you that you should've asked Miriam to accompany you tonight," Abe said.

“And what good would that have done? She’d have said no.”

“Are you sure?”

“She’s not interested in me.”

Ted picked up the cups and examined his crestfallen friend. “I didn’t know you liked Miriam that way.”

Richie shrugged as he studied his hands which were folded in his lap. “I didn’t either until I saw her the last time she came here.”

“Then go over there and dance with her,” Abe pressed, motioning to the square dances. “Join in the next set.”

“With who? Jason’s already dancing with her.”

“Go with Megan,” Ted said.

“I don’t know,” Richie slowly stated, his gaze shifting between Ted and Megan. “You should go over to her before she dances with someone else.”

“She didn’t want to come tonight. She just did it as a favor to me.”

“Favor?” Abe asked. “What for?”

“Never mind that.” Like he’d tell them he wore a skirt! Hell had a better chance of freezing over before that ever happened. “Anyway, I should go back to her. Come and dance if you want. Otherwise, you run the risk of ending up like Charles.”

“That’s true,” Abe added, laughing. “Then you’ll be the one going around and asking men if women won’t go near you because you stink.”

“Alright, alright. I’ll go.” Richie stood up.

Ted led him to Megan who sat in a chair on the outskirts of the dance floor. Ted sat next to her and motioned for Richie to sit next to him, which his friend did.

“Meg,” Ted began as he handed her a cup, “will you dance with Richie when the next square dance starts?”

Richie’s face turned red. “I could ask her, thank you very much.”

## Meant To Be

“Does it really matter?” Ted asked. Without waiting for a response, he turned back to Megan. “What do you think?”

A slight grimace crossed her face, and fortunately, Richie was too busy watching Miriam to notice it. Ted breathed a sigh of relief. Though Megan hadn’t voiced a single complaint about Richie, Richie might take her grimace the wrong way.

“My feet are sore,” she whispered so Richie wouldn’t overhear.

“I’m sorry.” He knew that much was true. He’d stepped on them enough.

“Can’t he find someone else to dance with?”

“No.”

She sighed and leaned back in her chair. She took a sip of punch and set the cup in her lap. “A square dance?”

He nodded.

“Okay. But I am sore, Ted. As fun as it is to dance with you, I’m tired. It’s been a long day.”

He hid his disappointment. He’d hoped to dance with her again but realized that wasn’t going to happen. “We’ll leave after you dance with Richie,” he whispered.

The man at the front of the barn stopped playing his fiddle and the people stopped dancing. They clapped and asked for another round of square dancing.

Megan stood up and approached Richie. “Do you want to dance with me?”

Though he blushed, he agreed and they joined the square where Miriam and Jason waited for the music to start.

Ted watched them as they danced, noting with a twinge of envy that Richie danced much better than he did, and he was able to lead Megan in the instructions as they moved through the square and switched couples. When it came time for Jason to dance with Megan, Ted’s eyebrows furrowed. Something in the way Jason smiled at her made him uneasy. And wasn’t she enjoying it a little too much? He couldn’t tell for sure, but what if

Richie was right? What if Jason was more interested in Megan than he was in Miriam? What if Megan liked him too?

He shifted in his chair, resisting the urge to pull her out of the square. She wanted to go back to the future. Surely, she wouldn't be entertaining romantic thoughts about a man in this time if she continued to go to the train in hopes of time traveling again. But she hadn't met Jason until tonight.

Jason touched the small of her back, and Ted bolted to his feet. He couldn't sit idly by and let another man hit on his wife, even if their marriage wasn't real. He stormed toward their square and was halfway there when they switched partners again. He stopped, his heart still pounding fiercely in his chest, but he was relieved that she danced with one of the other men who didn't seem to overstep his bounds. Ted stepped back, suddenly feeling self-conscious about standing in the middle of the dancing area and waited for the dance to be done. As soon as it was, he marched over to Megan.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked her.

She brushed the bangs from her eyes. "Did you want to dance one last dance? We can dance in this square." Her face was flushed from the exertion of dancing...or from being close to Jason. Perhaps, she wanted to linger because of him.

He glanced at Jason who watched them. There was no doubt about it. The snake was making a move into Ted's territory, and he didn't like it one bit.

He swept her up in his arms. "We need to get you off your feet, honey," he said in a suggestive tone. Ignoring the way she stiffened against him, he turned to the group. "I'm sorry to leave so abruptly, but I promised her I'd take *real* good care of her tonight."

Jason's eyebrows rose.

*That's right, Jason. Assume I'm going to take her home and make made passionate love to her.* Satisfied, he carried her out of the barn.

## Meant To Be

There. That ought to set the snake slithering far away from Megan!

## Chapter Eleven



Cole opened his eyes and noticed the shaft of sunlight that streamed through the curtains in the window and fell across the small one room cabin. There was a bed, a cookstove, a small table, two chairs, and a closed trunk. Where was he? He lifted his head, noting the stiff muscles in his neck. Groaning, he rubbed the back of his neck while he wondered how he got there. His body ached, and his skin felt hot. One look at his hands revealed that his sunburn was so bad that his skin had formed blisters. His face must be just as bad, if not worse.

He tried to stand but the room spun and he fell back onto the thin mattress. He pressed his fingers over his eyes and willed his equilibrium to return.

“You mustn’t get up before you’re ready,” a woman told him.

Removing his hands from his eyes, he blinked at the image before him. Her golden hair was pulled back in a bun, but stray strands fell over her shoulders in winding curls. The sunlight behind her gave him the impression that she had a halo around

## Meant To Be

her head. For all he knew, she was an angel, though he'd doubted he deserved a pleasant afterlife, not after all he'd done.

He took a deep breath and watched her as she dipped a cloth into a bowl that was on the small dresser beside the bed and wrung out the water. She placed the cool towel on his forehead and smiled. He frowned, unable to remember the last time someone smiled at him like that, as if his life was of any worth.

"You've been unconscious for four days," she said.

"Four days?" He gasped and tried to sit up but another wave of dizziness stopped him.

"I found you in the fields up north that way." She pointed out the small window. "I feared you wouldn't survive."

"Four days?" he dumbly repeated, unable to believe this was happening to him. Then he realized he was naked. "Where are my pants? Where's my...?" He couldn't say time traveling device, so he opted for asking, "Where's the thing I had in my pocket?"

"Everything you had is in the dresser drawer." She gave him an amused smile. "You have no need to worry. I had a husband. I know what a man looks like when he doesn't have clothes on."

"You *had* a husband?"

"He passed away a year ago. We came out here to build a home and to farm, but he got sick our first winter here." She sighed and swallowed the lump in her throat. "It wasn't meant to be, I guess."

"Then what are you doing here? Don't you have relatives to go to?"

"No. I didn't have any family. I was a mail-order bride, and he lived out here, far from anywhere."

"So how have you managed all by yourself?"

"I learned to grow a good-sized garden. I make it to town a couple times a year and I have a cellar to keep foods from rotting. It's nothing fancy, mind you, but it works."

“You came from back east?”

“Rhode Island.”

“That’s a lot different from here.”

She laughed, the sound reminding him of wind chimes. “It’s another world out there.”

His gaze fell to his body. “Do you make it a habit of taking men into your home and undressing them?”

“Believe it or not, you’re the first person I’ve come across in eight months. I found you laying face down in the fields.”

“And you carried me here?”

Still grinning, she shook her head. “You are an odd man. How do you think I’d manage a feat like that when you’re a foot taller than me? I put you on my steed and brought you here. I was on my way to town. I’ll make another attempt when you’re well enough.”

He couldn’t stop the smile forming on his lips. “You still haven’t explained why I’m naked.”

“That’s simple. You had a fever, so I had to keep you cool. Your fever broke last night. I hoped it meant you would wake up today.” She removed the cloth from his forehead. “Do you need to use the privy?”

His eyebrows furrowed. “The what?”

“Do you need to urinate?”

He blinked, surprised and intrigued by her straightforwardness. He hadn’t met a single female in this time period who hadn’t blushed at the thought of mentioning personal business or undressing. At least no respectable woman. This woman, who looked at him now with her pretty blue eyes, was a lady. There was no mistaking her proper upbringing. What on earth was she doing saving someone like him?

“If you are too ill, you may use this container.” She picked up an empty jug by the bed.

“No. I can go outside.” He wondered if she even had a place to go to the bathroom. He carefully sat up, noticing the pile

## Meant To Be

of newspapers underneath him. He didn't even want to know how she managed to keep him dry and clean. Those details were best left to her and her alone. When he no longer felt dizzy, he stumbled out of the bed.

She quickly set the jug on the floor and placed his arm around her shoulders to steady him. "I can help you. I might be a woman but I'm not useless."

He glanced at her. "Of that, I have no doubt." Any woman who could survive out here had to be tough.

Once outside, he squinted in the sun. He saw the flat landscape. A small wood barn was close to the one room cabin. A well stood a half acre from the cabin, and she had worked on a garden where she grew her food. A few trees that produced apples surrounded the cabin. She showed him where the cellar was and walked him to the outhouse.

"I'll wait out here."

Despite his uneasy feeling about having a woman being nearby when he answered nature's call, he went into the wooden building and relieved his bladder. Once he was done, he came back out. Now that his full bladder was no longer an issue, he could tend to other matters, the first being his lack of clothing and getting his hands back on that time traveling device.

"Can I get dressed?" he asked.

"Of course. I'll help you back to the house and then you can get your clothes. Then I'll make you some soup."

"Will you take me to town? I need to get on a train to Fargo."

"I'll take you but I need you to rest up first. You're in no shape to travel for two days."

"Two days?"

"That's how long it takes me to get to town. That's why I don't make the trip very often."

He sighed. He was losing time. Well, it wasn't like he didn't have a time machine. Realizing there was nothing else to do for the moment, he walked with her to the cabin.

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Megan couldn't go on like this, hoping and praying that she'd find a way back home. Every Saturday she came to town to ride the stupid train only to remain in 1898, and this last run through was the final straw. She sank into the seat of the train after another failed attempt.

Ted sat next to her, trying to comfort her by rubbing her arm, but she didn't want to be comforted. She wanted to wake up at home and have this be one bizarre dream. She turned to the window, mindlessly watching the passing fields of gold and greens. Crying did no good. Screaming did no good. Running around and jumping up and down like an idiot didn't do any good. Even bumping into Ted, like she had when they traveled back into the past, didn't work. They'd done everything they could think of and exhausted every idea.

Doomed. They were doomed to spend the rest of their lives in the past. God only knew the destruction they would cause, lingering in a time period that they weren't meant to be in. She didn't even want to think about it. She pressed her forehead against the warm window and swallowed the sob that threatened to break forth.

He leaned close to her. "We'll just make a home here. It's not that bad. Things could be worse."

He said those words every time, and every time, she resisted. Maybe it was time to stop resisting. They would live the rest of their lives during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As long as they kept a low profile and didn't make any big changes to the past, then they should be alright. *The future* should be alright.

## Meant To Be

She took a deep breath and rested her head against the back of the seat. Fargo would be coming up soon. She saw the familiar barn with its brown frame with a busted window. Today, the horse grazed the grass in the fenced area. The old farmer collected eggs from the hen house. At least he looked happy this afternoon. He'd look sad most of the time she saw him. She shook her head. She'd definitely been on this route way too many times if the farmer seemed like a familiar friend.

Turning to Ted, she said, "I give up. It's in the middle of July and we're still here. I guess I might as well get used to it."

He put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to him. "That's the spirit."

"You're happy about this." It was a silly statement. She knew he'd grown used to this time, Fargo, and the people. She knew he enjoyed working on Ray's farm more than he enjoyed any of the other jobs he'd ever had. But what about the people they knew in their time? "Don't you miss your family and friends?"

His smile faltered. "Sometimes."

She looked out the window again, not really seeing the homesteads in her view. Instead, she thought of her mother and her friends. She wouldn't ever see them again. "What do you think they say happened to us?" She turned her attention back to him and waited for his answer.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I assume they think we're missing. Witnesses were on the Amtrak. I'm sure someone saw us disappear."

She groaned and rubbed her temples. "Who's going to believe that?"

"Well, the train car was full."

"They probably convinced themselves that they imagined us disappearing. They probably say that we just walked off and didn't come back."

"What does it matter? We can't do anything about it."

He was right. She knew he was right. There wouldn't be any way for someone to travel back in time to get them. They were stuck. Like it or not, this was their new home.

The train came to a stop.

The conductor made his all-too-familiar announcement. "Fargo, North Dakota!"

She reluctantly followed Ted off the train. As she stepped onto the platform, she gave one last look at the train. How did they get to the past? What was it about the train that could transport people through time? She wished she knew. If she could tap into whatever disturbance in the space-time continuum that existed on that train, she could return home.

No. Her home was no longer in the future. It was in the past. This was her home now. She'd live the rest of her life here, doing as little as possible to disrupt the fragile balance of order, and she'd die here. Only, she'd be born in the future. The thought was an eerie one. She would die before she was born. Shivering, she turned to Ted.

"It won't be that bad," he softly told her. "Who knows? In a couple of years, you might even like it here."

Sighing, she crossed her arms and strolled beside him as they made their way to the wagon he'd recently bought. "It's not that I don't like it here," she informed him as he helped her onto the seat.

He remained close to her and looked up at her. "What bothers you? The people we used to know who are back in our time?"

"Somewhat. But..."

"But what?"

She took a deep breath and leaned forward so no one would overhear them. "What if we do something to screw up future events?"

To her surprise, he smiled. "I doubt that average everyday Americans like us are going to mess up the future."

## Meant To Be

“It could happen.”

“How?”

She struggled to think of a possible scenario but couldn’t.

He backed away from her. “We’ll be fine. Everything will be as it’s meant to be. You’ll see.”

“When? In the future when I’m a little girl?”

He shot her a ‘get serious’ look but didn’t say anything.

She waited for him to get into his side of the wagon. Once he was next to her, she said, “We’ve interacted with a lot of people.”

He clicked the reins and the geldings moved forward. He glanced at her. “So?”

“What if we said or did something that’s changed them? What if they do something that they weren’t meant to do because they talked to us?”

He laughed as he turned the horses down the dusty street. “You mean like Charles bathing and brushing his teeth?”

She grimaced. “He needed to do that anyway. No, what I mean is what if we changed the course of someone’s life in a major way?” She gasped and grabbed his arm.

“What?” He pulled back on the reins so the horses came to a stop. He scanned the road. “I don’t see anyone in the street.”

“Oh. No, you’re not about to run someone over,” she assured him. As soon as the horses moved again, she continued, “I introduced Miriam to Jason. What if I wasn’t supposed to do that?”

“Are you sure Jason knows that you were introducing him to Miriam?”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh come on, Ted. You aren’t still on that whole ‘Jason was coming onto me’ thing, are you?”

“I saw the way he was looking at you.”

“Whatever. It doesn’t matter. The point is that Miriam would never have gone to that barn dance if it hadn’t been for me.

And then she wouldn't have met Jason. What if they weren't supposed to meet?"

"Just don't interact with Jason."

"The damage has already been done. He and Miriam already know each other." She placed her hands over her nervous stomach. "They might get married. Then there might be children. What if someone else was supposed to be the father of those children? What if someone isn't going to be born because of me?"

"What if it doesn't work out and she marries someone else?" He shook his head. "You're taking this way too far. Just because they danced a couple of times, it doesn't mean they're headed for the altar."

"A dance may be the beginning."

He let out a loud sigh. "What's the point in worrying about this? What's done is done. You can't undo it."

Now she felt worse! What damage had she done without meaning to? She decided that she would have to avoid influencing the world around her. It was of the utmost importance that she stick to herself as much as possible. While they continued their journey to what was to be their permanent residence, she made plans regarding her new non-interference policy. Fortunately, she lived out of town. That made her job easier.

As they neared the house, he cleared his throat and shifted next to her.

Having learned those actions indicated his desire to speak, she turned to him. "Is something on your mind?"

He hesitated a moment, his eyes fixed on the path ahead of them. "Yes. Actually, there is."

She waited for him to continue but he didn't, so she pressed, "Well?"

He took a deep breath. "Well, since we're here, in this time, then I think we should settle into this life."

## Meant To Be

"I was thinking the same thing."

"Good. I think we should buy the house and repaint it."

It was a logical plan, she realized. "Okay." It was cheaper in the long run to buy the house than to rent it for the rest of their lives.

"And..."

She looked at him, wondering why he paused. "What in the world has gotten into you, Ted? If you want to say something, just say it."

"Well, we are married."

"I know." Where was he going with this?

"Maybe it's time we acted like a married couple."

"I thought we were," she said.

He shifted again and glanced in her direction. "No. I mean, maybe we should...you know..."

She was beginning to get impatient. If he had something to say, he needed to come right out and say it. "I know what, Ted?"

His face grew bright red before he said, "We should be married. Share a bedroom."

His meaning sunk into her and her jaw dropped. "Oh, no way!"

"Why not?" he snapped, looking both hurt and angry at the same time.

"Because we'd risk a pregnancy."

"So?"

"So? Haven't you been listening to anything I've been saying for the past hour? I already goofed up with Miriam and Jason. Do you honestly think I'm going to bring a person into this world who isn't meant to be born? Can you imagine the ramifications?"

"You're taking this too seriously."

"I don't think you're being serious enough. Really Ted, we need to be careful."

His hands were tight as he held the reins but his voice remained calm. "What if we use protection?"

"In 1898?"

"They have condoms."

She rolled her eyes.

"I'm telling you the truth. They're made of pig skin instead of latex."

She cringed. A condom made from a pig? "Gross."

"Okay. That's out. What about withdrawal? I could pull out."

"Enough!" She threw her hands up and covered her ears. "Don't you know that condoms and pulling out aren't one hundred percent effective? The only way to ensure that a pregnancy doesn't happen is abstinence."

"I don't want to live the rest of my life like that, Megan. What's the point in being married if we're not going to have sex?"

"Look, if we were in our own time period and if we were married, we'd be doing it. But we're not in our time period. You can't let your male urges warp your thinking. We have the future to think about here. The fate of humanity rests on our shoulders. It's a grave responsibility, and I, for one, am not going to shirk my duty."

They arrived at the house so she quickly jumped down from the wagon. The sooner she ended this discussion, the better.

"What am I supposed to do?" he asked her.

She placed her hands on her hips and looked up at him. "We have to do what's right. I expect you to be honorable and do your part. You'll just have to take care of whatever you need to do by yourself. Now, we won't talk about this anymore."

She turned and hurried into the house. Men! They lacked the common sense God gave a turnip. Here she and Ted were, stuck in the past, their actions ultimately threatening to change the course of the future, and all he could think about was sex. How typical. Who cared if they had a kid who might end up blowing

## Meant To Be

up the world? Not that she could imagine raising a child who would destroy other people, but did Hitler's mother know who she was raising? The thought gave her chills. Suddenly, the future seemed like a scary thing.

## Chapter Twelve



Cole checked the time travel device and realized he still had a far way to go before he got to Fargo, unless he could hop a train. He sighed and put the device in the drawer under his clean shirt. For the time being, he wore the clothes that Penelope's deceased husband wore. The man had been shorter than Cole, but the clothes and pants fit well enough. He sighed and shut the drawer. He had to get to Fargo.

Penelope entered the cabin, carrying a jar of pickles. "I remember you said you liked these." She motioned to the jar and placed it on the table. "I will be going to town in a couple weeks. I'm running out of supplies."

He nodded. He knew the time was nearing when he'd leave. He'd been anticipating it for the past month, but now that it was close to coming, he didn't experience the relief he expected. Which was ridiculous, of course. He had no reason to stay. He certainly had no business staying, not with a woman as good as Penelope.

## Meant To Be

She grabbed a pot from the shelf and set it on the cookstove. "I thought I'd make stew. We still have rabbit meat to eat."

"That sounds good. I'll take care of the horses." It was the least he could do, especially for everything she'd done for him. "I'll be back."

She smiled as he left.

He pushed aside the twinge of guilt. He didn't deserve one of her smiles. Penelope was much too trusting of strangers. A woman who could bear the harsh winters of this land should have been more careful when selecting a man to heal, feed and clothe. Someone like Blake would have been a better choice.

He made it to the well and released the rope, watching as the bucket descended into the dark hole. Where was Blake anyway? His eyes swept his surroundings and not a single person could be seen for miles in any direction. For the moment, he was safe. But he had to get to Fargo. There was no doubt about it. The sooner he left this homestead, the better both he and Penelope would be.

As long as Blake didn't find him before he found the chip, everything could be set back in order. He could dig for gold out in California in 1848 and strike it rich. He'd never have to worry about money ever again. He could even come to this time and give Penelope money to make sure she'd never have to work hard another day in her life. There were many things money could buy, many things it could provide, and he'd make sure to return her kindness when he could.

He retrieved the bucket full of cool water and carried it to the barn where the horses waited in the stalls he reinforced. He poured the water into the trough where the horses quickly approached. He turned to the straw that he'd brought up from the cellar and put it in another trough for them to eat.

Penelope could use another barn. As it was, the weather had beaten the roof down, and if he hadn't repaired it, it would've

fallen within the year. There was no doubt about it. The woman needed money to build things that would last. Her husband might have been a good man, but he didn't know much about building or maintaining his things.

Yes, Cole would get that gold and come back to give her some of it. But he wouldn't tell her it was from him. She seemed to think he was a good man, the kind she could take home to meet her mother, and as foolish as it was, he liked her version of him. The last thing he wanted to do was destroy it. That was when he made his decision. He would place the gold near the well. If he buried it but let a piece of it stick out of the ground where she usually stood, then she'd find it and dig it up. She'd assumed she discovered it and all would be well. Yes, that's what he'd do.

When he returned to the house, she was stirring the pot. He took a moment to study her. She had her back turned to him. The blue dress she wore had faded flowers on it and was frayed at the edges. He sighed. Not only did she need a better house and barn, the poor woman needed clothes that could sustain the elements of life out here, in the middle of nowhere. Her mattress was thin, and despite the discomfort, she didn't voice a single complaint. He actually preferred his blanket on the floor. She needed a good quality bed. It didn't have to be fancy. Then his eyes took in the single pot. What woman wouldn't want more cooking supplies? He examined the whole cabin and shook his head. There seemed to be no end to the things she needed. But with enough gold, her problems would be solved.

She peered over her shoulder and frowned. "Are you feeling ill?"

"No. I feel fine." But, in a way, that was a lie. He did get sick to his stomach when he thought of how she'd been living over the past year. He lumbered to the chair at the table and sat down. "Penelope, can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

## Meant To Be

“When your husband died, didn’t any men come by to see you?” It seemed to him that as soon as the bachelors discovered her availability, they would have been beating down the door to marry her.

She shrugged and kept her eyes on the stew. “Men wish to have children to carry on their name. I had an accident when I was a girl. I can’t have children.”

He noted the sadness in her voice and the slumping of her shoulders. “Even so, I’m sure you had some who were interested,” he softly said.

She shook her head.

“Then why did your husband marry you?”

She didn’t respond. Instead, she continued to stir the pot.

“Penelope?”

Sighing, she touched her cheeks with her free hand, and he wondered if she was crying. She took a deep breath. “I didn’t tell him.” She spoke so low that he could barely hear her.

“But you told the other men?”

“I hated myself for lying. I couldn’t do it again.”

“And when none of them came to see you, did you wish you hadn’t told the truth?”

She softly laughed. “No. I felt better having been honest. It was hard keeping it from Randy.”

So that was her husband’s name. Not that he cared. He rather preferred to think of Randy as the unnamed man who’d long since been removed from her life. He chastised himself for such thinking. Shifting in his chair, he cleared his throat. “You never know. One of the men might come to see you someday. Not all men value a woman based on whether or not she can give him children.”

She looked at him, and he quickly lowered his eyes. A moment of tense silence passed before she spoke. “I can’t open the jar. Will you do it?” She motioned to the sealed jar of pickles on the table in front of him.

More than happy to do anything for her, he nodded and did as she asked.

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Ted finally decided that Megan was nuttier than a fruit cake. Two weeks had passed and she refused to leave the house. She wouldn't even venture into town to shop or go to church. It was insane. She even spent entire days in her bed, just laying still and staring at the ceiling.

He came home from work one evening and found her laying in bed, huddled under a blanket--despite the oppressive heat!--and asked her what she was doing.

"I'm doing my best to avoid changing the future," she answered, as if it was obvious.

"So you're going to stop living?" he asked.

"No. I'm just keeping to myself."

"Well, when you decide to enjoy life again, Miriam would like to see you. Apparently, you won't even see your friends."

"I can't afford to see them."

He rolled his eyes and left. What was the point? The woman was nutty. Nuttier than a fruitcake!

And what was even worse was that he actually believed that once she gave up on the notion of returning to the future, she'd be willing to make their marriage real. He never once suspected that she'd retreat like a turtle hiding in its shell.

He bounded down the steps and entered the parlor. He shrugged when Miriam looked up at him. "I'm sorry. She refuses to go anywhere or see anyone."

Miriam frowned. "Did I say something to upset her?"

He sighed and ran his hand through his damp hair. "No. It's just the way Meg is. She's come to terms with the fact that she's going to stay here, married to me, and she doesn't like it." There. As hard as it was to admit, at least he finally said it.

## Meant To Be

He plopped in a chair, wishing the Megan who had that fire in her would return. He missed her passion, her enthusiasm, her spunk. Now all she wanted to do was wait to die. What was the sense in that?

And that's when he made a decision. "We need to force her out of her funk."

Miriam frowned. "Funk?"

"Bad mood."

"Oh." She nodded but still looked uncertain.

He stood back up. "Go up there and talk to her."

She pressed her hand over her heart. "But it's not my place to go into your bedroom."

Right. Everyone assumed he and Megan shared a bed. That was a nice little fantasy he wouldn't mind making real, but that seemed as likely to happen as him finding out how they ended up in the past to begin with.

"I'll get her and bring her down," he offered.

He strode out of the room and up the steps. Megan still laid on her bed, wrapped up in a blanket. Her eyes widened when he entered the room. He went straight to her and picked her up.

"What are you doing?" she gasped, struggling to get out of his arms.

"Giving you your life back," he said.

Her efforts to gain her freedom resulted in her getting tangled up in the blanket.

"You'll thank me for this someday."

That said, he spun on his heel and carried her to the parlor where an astonished Miriam watched as he sat in the chair and settled Megan on his lap. He knew if he let her go, she'd bolt for the steps. This way, she had to stay with them. She struggled against him for a good minute before she grunted and rested against him. He could barely see her eyes since her blanket was wrapped around her head.

"Megan, did I upset you?" Miriam asked as she straightened in her chair. Her shoes tapped the floor, revealing her nervousness.

Megan's body relaxed. "No. I...I don't feel well."

"Ted told me you've been in a bad mood."

Megan glared at him. "What?"

"Isn't it the truth?" He took a closer look at her. Was she sweating? "Isn't it hot in there?"

"What do you care?" she snapped.

"Believe it or not, I do care. A lot."

She huffed and turned her attention to Miriam. "I have to stay to myself, Miriam. It's not safe for me to be around you or anyone. No one's done anything to upset me. This is something I have to sort through on my own."

"Surely, we can help," Miriam suggested.

"You're right," he told Miriam. "We can help, and we will." He looked at Megan who scowled at him. "You've kept to yourself long enough. That's it. On Sunday, we're going to church. Together."

Miriam clapped in excitement. "Then we can go to my house and have lunch. It'll be good, Megan. I'll even make those mashed potatoes and gravy you like."

Ted grinned and hugged his wife. "There you go, honey. There's no harm in eating, is there? I can't wait."

Miriam stood up, looking relieved. "Everything will be fine, Megan. I promise."

From inside her cocoon, Megan softly groaned.

Miriam left and Ted released his hold on Megan who scrambled off of his lap and ran up the stairs and slammed her bedroom door shut. Ted sighed, wondering what in the world it was going to take to bring her out of her self-imposed prison.

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## Meant To Be

Megan sat in the corner of the parlor, trying to disappear into her chair as best as she could while Miriam, Esther and their mother discussed ideas on making a quilt for Ray's wife who was due to give birth next month. Megan sat and nodded, agreeing to whatever they wanted to do with the blanket. Though what colors and designs to put on the quilt weren't life altering decisions, she still didn't want to interfere.

A boom of laughter from outside directed her attention to the open window. She leaned forward and shook her head at the sight of Ted talking to Richie about almost being run over by one of Ray's bulls. Why didn't Ted understand the severity of the situation? He seemed to think that he could do whatever he wanted to in this time without messing up the future. She closed her eyes and asked God to forgive him for his folly.

"Megan? Megan?" Esther snapped her fingers in front of her face.

Startled, Megan jerked back. She didn't realize that Esther had walked over to her.

Esther sighed. "Will you tell us what's caused you to ignore us? If we've done something to upset you, the least you can do is tell us what it is."

"I don't belong here," Megan said, not willing to tell them why but willing to tell them this much. "I need to keep to myself."

Esther's expression softened. She pulled up another chair and took her hands in hers. "Do you think that we cast judgment upon you because of what you did before you married Ted?"

Megan blinked. The woman's gentleness and concern warmed her heart. Who knew Esther had a soft side to her? "No. Well, maybe a little."

"I'm sorry. But I know now that I misunderstood the situation. Have I continued to make you feel like you were a whore?"

"No, you haven't."

“Then what’s troubling you?”

Megan glanced at Miriam and their mother who quietly watched the exchange, both of them probably wondering the same thing. She sighed. “I just don’t belong here.”

“You mean, here in this house?”

“No. I mean, here in Fargo. Here with Ted.”

Understanding lit up Esther’s eyes. “Oh. You’re having marital problems.”

“Surely, we can resolve that,” Miriam said, getting up from her chair and kneeling by Megan’s chair. “Our mother and Esther are married. Maybe they can offer some insight that will help you.”

“I don’t know,” Megan replied, wary. “I think I should end the marriage.”

Esther’s face grew white and she placed her hand over her heart. “What? Why?”

“Because we shouldn’t be married. It’s dangerous.”

“Marriage is an honorable institution. There’s nothing dangerous about it.”

Megan inwardly groaned. How could the women understand? She couldn’t tell them that she came to the past with him, nor could she explain how dangerous it was for her and Ted to be in the same house together. She longed to join him in bed but didn’t dare. She feared it was only a matter of time before she broke down and did it...unless she managed to find a way out of this sticky predicament.

Miriam placed her hand on Megan’s arm. “I may not understand men, but I believe Ted is fond of you.”

“That’s an understatement,” Esther added. “He’s like a little puppy around you.” Then she grinned. “It’s endearing.”

“But it’s not meant to be,” Megan insisted, feeling suffocated by the women who closed in around her. “I’m going to petition for an annulment.”

Esther frowned. “A what?”

## Meant To Be

“An annulment.”

“But you can’t do that.”

“I can if we haven’t been...together.” There was no way Megan would say the word ‘sex’ in front of Esther. The woman blushed even from the mention of kissing.

Though Esther’s touch remained gentle, her tone grew firm. “You mean to tell me that you’ve been shirking your wifely duties?”

“Why? Is it terrible?” Miriam gasped.

Esther scoffed. “There’s nothing terrible about it. Well, there is the first time but after that, there’s no pain.”

Miriam’s eyes grew wide. “Pain?”

“More like a sting. Hardly worth noting.”

Their mother bolted out of her chair and slammed the window shut, making them jump. “I will not have this kind of talk going on where people can listen. You’re ladies and you need to keep such discussions private. Come and get me when you’re done.” She hastened out of the room.

Megan watched the woman as she shut the parlor door. She didn’t think anyone was more scared about the subject of sex than Esther, but apparently, she was wrong, and the fact that Esther remained seated shocked her. Miriam had always been more open to such discussions, but Esther had been tight-lipped the entire time Megan had known her. At least, she had been up until now.

Miriam turned to Esther. “I had no idea you enjoyed it.”

Esther waved her hand. “It’s not something a woman mentions. It’s like anything else you do. It’s just a part of life.”

“A very interesting part,” Miriam commented.

“And what are you doing being so interested in it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I suppose it’s just that I have these...physical desires-”

“I’m sorry I asked,” Esther interrupted, cutting her off. She looked at Megan, her expression solemn. “The point is that

you are married. God expects you to go to bed with your husband. This is about doing what's right. Listen, if you're afraid of it, there's no need to be. Sure, I was scared of it my first time, but Aaron was gentle with me and I got through it. It wasn't as bad as I feared. Sometimes, I wonder how I managed without it. So you can't let the unknown keep you from doing the right thing."

Megan groaned and stood up. "That's just it. I am doing the right thing."

"I don't understand."

"No, you don't. And I can't tell you. This is why I can't be coming over and visiting." She paced back and forth in front of them. "I'm not supposed to be here, and I'm not supposed to be married to Ted. It's all wrong, and I don't know how to make it right."

"But why?" Miriam asked, standing up and staring at her.

"I can't tell you. As it is, I said too much." She wrung her hands. Oh, she was making things worse by talking to them! She needed to shut up before it was too late. "I need to go."

Despite their protests, she ran out of the room and out of the house. She found Ted and Richie who were checking the horseshoe on Richie's steed. She poked Ted in the back. Ted immediately jerked up and Richie looked in her direction.

"I need to go home," she told Ted. "Now."

Before either man could speak, she hurried to the wagon she and Ted shared and jumped into it. Esther and Miriam came running out of the house just as Ted reached the wagon. Megan crossed her arms. How was she supposed to keep to herself when no one left her alone? This whole thing was impossible!

"Ted, don't you dare take her home!" Esther ordered.

"I want to leave," Megan demanded, willing him to obey her.

But something in Esther's tone convinced Ted to back away because he didn't get into the wagon.

## Meant To Be

Megan gritted her teeth. Since when did Esther's words mean more than hers? "Ted!" she snapped.

Esther motioned to Richie. "Show Miriam your horse. I need to talk to Ted and Megan, and what I'm going to discuss is not meant for untried ears."

Megan's jaw dropped. Oh, she wouldn't! Not in front of Ted!

Miriam frowned and placed her hands on her hips. "I may not have experience in this area, but I am not naïve."

"When you're married, we can include you," Esther replied, shooing her away with her hand.

"You just wait, Esther. One of these days, I'll leave you out of something important. Then we'll see how much you like it."

"This is for your own good. You needn't be curious about things until the time is right."

Miriam's mouth formed a tight line but she stomped over to Richie.

Nodding in satisfaction, Esther turned back to them. "Good. Now, before I begin, I want you to know that what we discuss will be between us. I don't believe in gossip."

Ted frowned. "Gossip about what?" He looked at Megan, his eyebrows furrowed.

"Nothing! Get up here and let's go home," Megan insisted.

Esther glared at him. "Do no such thing. You ought to know that she's determined to end your marriage."

Megan couldn't tell if he looked shocked or angry.

"What?" he practically yelled.

Okay. So he was angry. "There's no point in it, Ted, and you know it," Megan said. "And you know why."

"No, Megan. I don't," he replied, his voice sharp and his eyes piercing.

Esther cleared her throat and neatly folded her hands at her waist. "Good. I'm glad to see that you're being reasonable, Ted. I can tell that you are doing your part to ensure this marriage lasts, and I applaud you for your efforts."

Megan grunted and turned her attention to the horse pulling a buggy down the street. Just because they stood near her, it didn't mean she had to listen to them.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news," Esther told Ted, "but your wife wants an annulment."

Megan watched as the driver of the buggy came closer. She squinted. The person looked familiar, but it was hard to see his face around the horse's bobbing head.

"We're not getting an annulment, Megan," he sternly said.

She intentionally kept her eyes focused on the buggy.

"I'm afraid you'll have to do better than that," Esther said.

"Now, I'm not a big proponent of making a woman do anything she's not comfortable with, but there comes a time when you have to put your foot down. As the head of the household, you need to assert your right to consummate the marriage."

"I can't believe this, Megan. You told her that too?"

"No one blames you, Ted. You've been patient with her. You can't help it that she's as bullheaded as they come."

Megan cringed. Oh great. The rider of the buggy was none other than Aaron. This was just what they needed. A fourth party, fifth if one counted Miriam, involved in this pointless discussion. Since Ted and Esther were busy talking to each other, they didn't notice Aaron pull to a stop by the wagon.

"Uh...Esther," Megan warned.

"Not now, Megan. Ted, my suggestion is that you give her a soothing bath," Esther instructed a red-faced Ted. "It might ease her nerves. Then when she's relaxed, take her to bed and get this marriage consummated."

Aaron stepped down from the buggy.

## Meant To Be

“Esther,” Megan warned again but the woman ignored her.

“The more relaxed a woman is, the easier her first time will be,” Esther concluded, looking very pleased with herself for giving him instructions on how to approach the situation.

“Did I hear right?” Aaron grinned at Ted. “You couldn’t do the job?”

Esther and Ted jerked as soon as he spoke. Then they glanced at Megan.

“I tried to tell you he was here,” Megan said, feeling triumphant, even though it was a small win. Still, that showed them that they’d do well to listen to her in the future!

“Ted, do I need to have a little talk with you about certain facts of life?” Aaron asked, a low chuckle rumbling deep in his throat.

“No,” Ted snapped.

Esther shook her head. “You don’t need to patronize him, Aaron. He’s got a resistant wife. It’s not his fault.”

Aaron tipped back his hat and laughed. “Then his technique is wrong. No wonder you had to seek the services of a prostitute.”

“Oh for goodness sakes. I already explained that we misunderstood that one,” Esther said. “Don’t you pay attention when I talk?”

“I much prefer what you do when we’re in bed, sweetheart.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “You know what I mean, Ted?” He put his hand over his mouth. “Oops. I forgot. No, you wouldn’t know, would you?”

Esther shot him a disapproving look. “You better watch it or you’ll be sleeping on the couch.”

He immediately stopped laughing. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Don’t press it, mister. I don’t want to hear this thing spread around town.”

“Come on, Esther. You know I’m not one to gossip.”

“You shouldn’t even make fun of Ted. I told you, it’s not him. Megan is convinced that they don’t belong together. She wants an annulment.”

“An annulment?” Aaron’s voice was so loud that even Miriam and Richie turned their attention to him.

Esther groaned and put her hands over her face. “You and your big mouth. I swear, sometimes your voice can carry for miles.”

“Sorry,” he whispered.

Richie ran over to them, Miriam following close behind. “What’s this we hear about an annulment? Aaron, Esther, how can this be?”

Aaron scoffed. “Not me and her. Ted and Megan are the ones getting an annulment.”

“But why?” Richie asked. “It’s not Jason Hensley, is it?”

Irritated, Megan jumped down from the wagon, almost knocking Ted and Miriam over. “I’ve had all I can take of this. You all need to butt out of my personal life.”

“Butt out?” Miriam asked.

“It means to leave me alone.” She let out a loud sigh and glared at each person who stared at her. “I don’t need to explain myself to you. There are some things that are meant to be and some things that are not. I don’t belong here. I don’t know why or how I ended up here-”

“You came off the train,” Aaron interrupted. “With Ted.”

Rolling her eyes, she continued. “Never mind. Suffice it to say that I’m going home.” She turned and grabbed the edge of the wagon and pulled herself into it, feeling like a fool as her foot slipped and she almost went tumbling to the ground. Mustering every ounce of self-respect she could, she shot Ted a wary look. “Are you coming or are you staying?”

Ted crossed his arms, a scowl on his face. “You’re not getting back unless I take you.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Says who?”

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“Says me. You haven’t handled a horse before, let alone two horses pulling a wagon.”

If there was one thing Megan couldn’t resist, it was showing someone how poorly they judged her. She snatched the reins. “Oh yeah? Watch me.”

She clicked the reins and waited. Nothing happened.

Looking amused, Aaron walked over to her side and undid the brake. “There. Now the wheels aren’t locked.”

She gritted her teeth, her face flushed at the snickers from her audience. She clicked the reins again and the geldings moved forward. She gasped and struggled to steady her balance as the wagon swayed under her. Dear Lord above, how was someone supposed to steer horses and stay seated at the same time? Her grip on the reins tightened as the horses lugged the wagon down the road, dust swirling around their feet. She grimaced and swallowed hard. An intersection was coming up, and she needed to take a left. But how in the world did one steer animals?

She had watched Ted steer the horses. What was it he did when he wanted them to go in a certain direction? Biting her lower lip, she pulled the left rein back. She nearly cheered when the horses went left. But her small victory was short-lived, for the next thing she knew, they marched right in front of another horse-drawn wagon.

“Ah. Okay,” she mumbled. “I can handle this.”

She pulled the right rein, which turned out to be the wrong signal, for the horses veered to the right. She gulped. Now her horses were directly in front of another person’s horses and wagon.

“Hey! Move out of the way,” the man on the other wagon barked at her.

“I’m trying!” she retorted.

She shifted the reins to the other side. The horses changed their course, and she lost her balance. Letting go of the reins with one hand, she grabbed the seat to regain her balance

and the horses picked up their pace. What in the world were these beasts doing?

"Pull the reins toward you!" Ted yelled.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw that Ted, Richie, and Aaron were running after her.

A kid screamed.

Megan turned her attention back to the horses and also screamed.

The horses were barreling toward an elderly woman who was working in her flowerbed. The woman saw her, tossed the weeds she had been pulling, and leapt into her bushes to avoid being run over. A cat on her front porch screeched and bolted across the yard and up the tree. Megan tried to stop the horses. She moved the reins left and right, up and down, and finally back, but the horses didn't stop until they crashed into the porch. The stop came so abruptly that Megan flew through the air and landed, face first, on the flowers. In the aftermath of the accident, the horses simply neighed, as if laughing at her pathetic attempt at driving a wagon.

Megan lifted her head and spit a daisy out of her mouth.

Ted reached her first. He knelt by her. "Are you okay?" he asked, gasping for air.

"I think so," she muttered as he helped her up. She brushed the flowers off her dress before she mentally searched for any injured parts on her. "I'm a little sore." But that was nothing compared to her wounded pride, which she decided not to mention.

The old woman struggled in the bushes, and as soon as Ted saw her, he helped her out.

Richie and Aaron caught up to them, also out of breath.

The woman shoved Ted away and retrieved her hat. Plopping it on her head, she shook a finger at Megan. "You shouldn't be around horses."

## Meant To Be

Megan's cheeks grew hot. What could she say? The woman was right.

The woman looked at Aaron. "I see that badge on your vest. You must be the marshal."

"Yes, ma'am," Aaron replied.

"Then you're my witness. I want you to arrest her at once," she ordered.

Ted groaned. "Please, Mrs..."

"Baxter."

"Mrs. Baxter, we're sorry. My wife lost control of the horses. It was an accident. She didn't mean to harm anything."

"I don't care. She needs to be off the street. Your wife is a menace to society. Going around town, haphazardly riding wagons and scaring poor, defenseless women and their cats...Why, she's likely to kill someone. She needs to be safely behind bars."

Megan decided she'd had enough. "Now listen here. We'll fix the damages, and that's good enough. As for driving a wagon, I've learned my lesson. I won't do it again."

"I don't know. You don't look trustworthy." The woman scanned her from head to toe. "I have a feeling you act first and think later. This trip to prison will do you good."

"No! I refuse to go to prison, you old hag."

"Who are you calling an old hag?" The woman lifted her nose and narrowed her eyes at her. "I know who you are. I saw you in the newspaper. You're the prostitute who carried around counterfeit money."

"I'm not a prostitute, and it wasn't counterfeit money!"

The cat dropped from the tree and landed on Megan's shoulders, digging its claws into her skin. Megan screamed and tried to shake the cat off of her. She tried to catch her footing, tripped, and bumped into the woman who fell to the ground. The cat jumped off of her and ran under the porch.

“Arrest her, Marshal!” The woman pointed an accusing finger at Megan. “The whore attacked me. Again.”

“The whore? Again?” Megan demanded, clenching her fists.

“Look at her. Even now, she’s attacking me with her evil eyes.”

“I’ll show you an attack.” Megan got ready to pull out the woman’s hair but Ted grabbed her. “Let me at her!” she hissed.

“No. You’re making things worse than they are.” Ted grunted as she stepped on his foot and elbowed him in the side. Unfortunately, his hold remained firm.

Man, Ted was stronger than he looked!

“Mrs. Jacob, you are being disruptive. I’m going to put you in jail until you settle down,” Aaron said. “I can’t have you assaulting people.”

And so, Aaron actually arrested her, and Ted carried her to the jailhouse. Megan couldn’t believe it. She fought and screamed the best she could, but she was no match for Ted. The man was a formidable wall of steel.

While she sat, alone, in her cell, she glared at Ted who stood on the other side of the bars, a free man.

“Aren’t you going to pay my bail?” she asked.

“Nope.” He inspected his hat for a moment before he placed it on his head.

“Why not?”

“Because I had time to think about what you said. You know, about how we shouldn’t interfere with people’s lives and all.”

Her back stiffened. She wasn’t going to like this. She just *knew* she wasn’t going to like this one bit!

“Well, the truth is, you’re right,” he continued, using a nonchalant tone that drove her crazy. “Look at what happened today. You’ve made me the laughingstock in front of the men, again, and you nearly injured a poor, little old lady.”

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“I didn’t do that on purpose.”

“Still, the fact remains that had you not been here, none of it would’ve happened. It seems to me that you’re dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“Dangerous.” He nodded. “I’m not the one creating problems. You are. So, I agree with you. You should have as little interaction with other people as possible.” He glanced at the bars. “And what better place than to keep you here where you’ll do the least amount of damage?”

“How long are you going to leave me here?”

“Seven days. That’s your sentencing. By then, I should have the money to pay Mrs. Baxter and you’ll be released.”

“You can’t leave me here.” She bolted from the bench and grabbed the bars. “You can’t do this to me, Ted!”

“And you can’t keep making me out to be a fool, Megan.”

Then he lowered the brim of his hat over his forehead and stomped out of the building. She yelled her frustrations but Aaron quickly slipped out of the jailhouse so she was left alone.

## Chapter Thirteen



Cole studied Penelope's profile as she steered the wagon into town. He wanted to remember her, to sear her beauty into his memory forever. He'd miss her when he left. It was a real shame that they weren't allotted more time together. Had she been born in his time, or he born in hers, perhaps things would have ended differently.

He decided that he could at least load her wagon full of supplies before he left. She stopped the horses in front of the general store, and he got out first so he could help her down.

She took his hand and thanked him.

When they entered the store, she gave the owner a list of supplies she needed, and Cole helped the owner fill her wagon. Once Cole loaded the last box, he glanced at the train station.

"When is the next train due to leave for Fargo?" he asked the owner.

"About an hour from now."

"Thanks."

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Cole stood by the wagon, watching Penelope fiddle with her long sleeves as she waited for him. She looked at him and he sensed the unspoken question in her eyes. She'd asked him if he'd be returning with her, but he hadn't said. He couldn't. His future wasn't here with her, and if she knew what kind of man he was, she wouldn't have him.

He'd anticipated getting back on the train, but now he dreaded it. Taking a deep breath, he approached her. "Would you like to get something to eat? It's been a long time since you've been to a restaurant."

It wasn't what she wanted to hear, he knew, but she nodded and strolled with him to the restaurant. During their meal, they didn't say much to each other. He couldn't think of anything to talk about. How did a man say, "I think I'm falling in love with you but I can't stay" to the most wonderful woman in the world? He couldn't, so he didn't. He lingered for as long as he dared, but the hour came to a close and he needed to get on the train. This was where they were meant to part. She'd go her way. He'd go his. And he'd dream of her every night for the rest of his life, wondering if she would think of him and wondering if she found a good man, a decent man, to marry.

He walked her back to the wagon, and she turned to him. The wind blew the stray strands of her hair around her head. Her blue eyes looked up at him. He tried to stop himself, wanted to stop, but he couldn't. He closed his eyes and kissed her. Her lips were soft, the softest he'd ever felt on a woman. And despite the fact that they were in public in the late 1800's, he took her in his arms and deepened the kiss. She responded to him, matching his passion with hers, and he marveled that he could mean so much to her in the short time they'd known each other.

He reluctantly let her go, aware of the stares from onlookers.

She smiled at him. "Cole, we can find a preacher and get married. I hoped you loved me, and I love you too."

He almost said yes and took her to the first preacher they could find but then he caught sight of his reflection in the store window and remembered who he was.

"I can't," he softly said, hating the words even as he spoke them. He saw the hurt in her eyes and quickly looked away. "You'll do better without me."

"You're wrong." She moved close to him and rested her hand on his arm. "Please stay."

He winced. "I have to go. I don't belong here. I'm sorry."

Before she could further protest, he strode away from her. He knew she watched him, but he refused to look back because he knew if he did, he'd end up running back to her. His hand wrapped around the time travel device in his pocket. Fargo. He had to get to Fargo. He entered the train station. It was small but Blake was nowhere in sight, and the train came to a stop.

He glanced out the window and clenched his jaw, refusing to let the image of Penelope still watching him change his mind. He'd come too far to turn back now. He'd find a way to make it up to her. He'd bury the gold where she could find it. Her future would be secure. He'd do one thing right in life before he died.

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Ted returned to town the following Thursday, chastising himself for being eager to see Megan. After all, she told Esther and Miriam that she wanted an annulment. As if being married to him was the worst thing that happened to her! He hoped that spending a week in jail knocked some sense into her. Maybe she'd appreciate him now that she spent some time alone.

He stopped at Mrs. Baxter's house and paid for the damages before he went to the jail. Aaron was leaning back in his chair with his feet propped up on the desk and his hat hanging over his eyes. Ted couldn't be sure, but he thought he heard the

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man snoring. So much for a lawman protecting and serving the community.

Ted tapped the man's boots.

Aaron immediately woke up. His feet hit the floor and he sat up straight within a second.

Ted blinked in surprise. He had to admit that Aaron had amazing reflexes. "Sleeping on the job?"

The marshal scoffed. "I was testing you."

"Sure," he sarcastically replied.

"I wanted to see if you'd steal my keys and help your wife escape."

"I'm not stupid."

Now Aaron was the one who smirked. "That's what you think."

"And what, exactly, is that supposed to mean?"

He stood up and gathered the keys resting on his desk. "It means that your wife is not happy with you."

"What else is new?"

"I don't mean that she's upset. I mean that she's fuming. I think I even saw foam coming out of her mouth."

Ted rolled his eyes. Leave it to Aaron to give him a hard time. "I got paid today, so I gave the money to Mrs. Baxter. Now I'm here to take Megan home, which you said I could do once Mrs. Baxter got paid."

"Fine. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Ted followed the marshal to the cell where Megan slept.

"It's the only time she's quiet," Aaron whispered. He slipped the key into the lock and turned it. "Rise and shine, Mrs. Jacob. You're free!" He opened the door.

Megan stirred on her cot.

Ted smiled at the sight of her. *She's such a beautiful woman.*

Her eyelids fluttered open and she sat up. As soon as she saw him, she glared at him.

Surprised, he stepped back. Okay. Maybe she was a little upset.

"I can't believe you actually left me here all week, Ted!"

He nudged Aaron in the side. "Do you think we should keep her locked up for another week? You know, until she calms down?"

"Don't you dare!" She raced out of the cell and slapped Ted.

"What's that for?" Ted demanded, pressing his hand to his cheek.

"For leaving me here to rot, you jerk!" Then she slapped Aaron. "And that's for refusing Esther and Miriam's offer to pay my bail."

She stormed past them.

Ted went after her. "You're welcome," he said, letting his irritation flow out of his voice.

She continued her fast pace but glanced over her shoulder. "Do I need to thank you?"

"Yes. I kept you safe from the world. You know, so you wouldn't cause any major destruction to the future." Since his legs were longer than hers, he was able to catch up to her before she reached the wagon. "Now I'm here to take you home where I can lock you in your bedroom."

She shot him a dirty look before she grabbed the seat of the wagon and pulled herself up. Her foot slipped and she groaned. "I'm a woman, you know."

He crossed his arms and shrugged. "So?"

Though she gripped the seat so hard her knuckles turned white, he could tell that she was going to fall. He waited for her to ask him for help. All she had to do was say one nice word to him, and he'd gladly assist her. But it appeared that she was too stubborn for such a feat, and so she lost her grip and fell onto the dusty road.

She coughed as the dust circulated around her.

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Cursing his soft heart, he picked her up and placed her on the wagon seat.

“Get away from me!”

He released her, and though she ordered him to do it, she must not have prepared for it since she tumbled against him.

She groaned and struggled to maintain her balance. When she finally found it, she wiped her dusty hands on her dress. “I feel disgusting. I haven’t bathed in over a week.”

“Well,” he began, patting her leg, “if you ask nice enough, I’ll take care of that for you.”

She shoved his hand away. “I can do it myself.”

“You can’t get home by yourself. Do you want to stay here in town?” He set a hand on his hip and waited for her to respond.

“No. I want to go home. All of my clean clothes are there.”

“Then you’d better be nice to me or I might dump you off in a field somewhere on the way back.”

She gasped and turned to him. “You wouldn’t!”

He shrugged. No, he wouldn’t, but she didn’t have to know that. “I left you in prison, didn’t I?”

“You’re a despicable man.”

He walked to his side of the wagon. “I’ve been called worse.”

“I just bet you have. I wish I could talk to all of your ex-girlfriends. I’m sure we’d have a lot in common.”

“Yes, you would.” He hopped up in the seat and leaned so close to her that she shifted back. “None of you had sex with me.”

“That’s all you men want. Well, if it’s that important to you, then release me from this marriage and go find someone who’s willing to marry you and have all your babies who will eventually ruin mankind because they weren’t supposed to be born.”

“You know, I should annul this marriage. It’s not a real one anyway.”

She nodded. “That’s my thinking on it too.”

“No. You’re thinking on it is that we might have a kid who’s going to blow up the world.”

She turned from him so that he got a good look at her rigid back.

He released the brake and picked up the reins. “I have a surprise for you, honey. I’m staying married to you just so I can annoy you every day for the rest of your life.”

The horses moved forward.

She didn’t respond, so he focused on the road.

Why did he think that she’d be happy to see him? Why did he think she’d see the error of her ways and realize that she couldn’t hide from the world for the rest of her life? Why did he think she might want to live a normal and happy life with him? And, the most pressing question of all, why did he love her?

As soon as he stopped in front of their house, she scrambled out of the wagon and ran into the home, ignoring a barking Buddy who seemed happy to see her. Wow. She hadn’t been home for one second before she returned to her hide-from-the-world routine. He was actually impressed that she could move so fast. If she took track in high school, she probably left everyone else in the dust.

After he put the horses in the barn, he went to the house which he and Richie finished painting yesterday. He thought she might like to see it looking brand new. He’d even gotten rid of the weeds around the place. But no, she didn’t notice his efforts to make her happy.

He crossed the threshold and searched for her. To his surprise, she wasn’t anywhere in the house. She couldn’t just get up and leave. The walk to town would take forever. Even she wasn’t *that* ambitious.

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Then he realized that she was either taking a bath in the river or was in the outhouse. Well, he'd let her be alone so she could cool down. In the meantime, he decided to cook dinner. Thirty minutes passed and she still hadn't returned. Maybe she did start a hike into town.

Just as he thought he'd go and check out the river, she returned with her shirt and shorts on and her damp hair falling nicely around her shoulders. She carried a towel, her dirty dress and a bar of soap.

"What are you wearing?" he asked, turning from the cookstove where he was frying steaks.

"The same clothes I wore when we got here. You know, 21<sup>st</sup> century clothes."

"Why?"

"Because it's July, and I'm burning up. I can't keep wearing a long dress all the time. If I'm in town, I'll wear it, but when it's just us out here, I'm wearing something comfortable and light."

"But...You can't."

"Why not?"

How could he explain it to her? He couldn't exactly tell her that looking at her bare legs and the shirt that hugged her breasts gave him an erection. He didn't understand why it should arouse him. He'd seen women dressed in shorts and shirts all the time while growing up, and it wasn't like she was wearing short shorts. She was wearing modest clothing. Except, after being surrounded by women whose dresses covered them from their necks to their ankles, he didn't expect to see any of them in shorts and a shirt.

He sighed and flipped the steaks over. "You just can't. We don't live in the future anymore."

"This is my house too, Ted. If I want to wear this, I will."

"But it's like you're wearing nothing."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Don't do this."

“Do what?”

She opened her eyes and gave him a pleading look. “Sound like everyone else in this time. I can’t take it.”

“I think we’re going to have to adjust to how they do things. We are a part of this time now.”

“Maybe, but I don’t have to suffer through it. I’m tired of sweating all the time.” She walked toward the staircase before she glanced back at him. “End of discussion.”

He shouldn’t have been surprised. Of course, she’d insist on wearing whatever she wanted. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. If he could have sex with her, then he could enjoy the view. As it was though, she was going to send him to an early grave.

## Chapter Fourteen



The next day, Megan decided to wash the clothes in the river. The August sun beat down on her, and what she needed was to use the most efficient method for doing the dreaded chore. Being inside a hot kitchen doing laundry, wringing the clothes and scrubbing them, was the last thing she wanted to do. If she was going to suffer through this, she wanted to be as cool as possible. Still in her shorts and shirt, she lugged the basket full of dirty clothes to the river with her soap. She heard of women beating clothes on rocks and washing them that way, and though she considered using rocks, she dragged the washboard along.

She dumped the laundry on the river bank and took the washboard and soap with her into the gentle current. The cool temperature of the water was just the thing her hot skin needed. She set upon her task, scrubbing each item on the washboard before rinsing it in the river and wringing it by hand. Then she tossed it in the basket. Once she was done with all the clothes, she'd hang them up on the clothesline. Just as she finished wringing the last shirt, Ted called out to her.

She glanced over her shoulder and grumbled. Couldn't he leave her alone? Hadn't she put up with enough humiliation because of him? What other man left his wife in prison for a week? He was lucky she was doing his laundry, and the only reason she did that was because he still cooked for her.

"I can carry that basket for you," he offered as he reached the riverbank.

She hesitated but then realized she'd be stupid to take on the task by herself. Wet clothes meant a heavy load. "Alright."

"Don't sound too enthusiastic."

She cleared her throat and let out a high-pitched sickeningly sweet reply. "Alright."

He gave her a pointed look. "Ha ha." He picked up the basket.

She put her shoes back on and gathered the washboard and soap. "What are you doing home so early?" she asked as she walked with him across the field.

"I've been told to go home and work on my marriage. Apparently, word has spread about your wanting an annulment."

"I didn't spread it. I was caged in a cell."

"Honey, you cage yourself in our home. What makes you think a cell is any different? Besides the bars, that is."

"I'm not caging myself in. I just did laundry."

"By yourself. You refuse to interact with anyone," he said.

"That's not true. I'm interacting with you, aren't I?"

"Only because I live here. You have to deal with me whether you like it or not."

She sighed. "And I don't like it." That was a lie. She did like him. She liked him way too much.

"I thought that being in prison would show you what you're doing by cutting yourself off from your friends. They miss you, you know."

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They reached the clothesline where a bucket of clothespins waited for her. He put the basket on the ground, and she picked up a shirt and some pins.

"I don't want to interfere in their lives," she said, hanging up the shirt despite her shaking hands. She hated it when they had this discussion. It was just a bitter reminder of the things she had to give up in order to keep the future right on course.

"Don't you think we're here for a reason?"

She shook her head and laughed. "No. We're here because of some sick cosmic joke."

"I don't believe that. I think we're meant to be here."

She picked up a dress and pinned it to the line. "If we were meant to be here, we would have been born in this time."

"Miracles happen all the time. Maybe this is ours."

She paused and gave him a good look. "You think being trapped here is a miracle?"

His eyes met hers, and her breath caught in her throat. She couldn't recall a time when any man looked at her with such tenderness.

"I never would have met you any other way," he whispered. "In case you're wondering why I haven't given you the annulment, it's because I want to be with you. As much as you drive me crazy, I love you."

"I drive you crazy?"

"Yes. Crazy."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "That's not exactly a shining endorsement."

"It is. None of the other women I went out with were as feisty as you." He leaned forward and smiled. "I happen to like that about you."

She didn't know how to respond. What man liked a woman who gave him a hard time? Maybe *he* was the one who was crazy. She pinned up a pair of pants.

“Here. I’ll help.” He reached in and grabbed another shirt and a pair of his underwear and hung them on the line.

She hesitated to speak but she needed to confide in someone, and he was the only one for miles. She took a deep breath and concentrated on hanging up the stockings. “Monday was my birthday.”

He stopped and peered over the line at her. “Really? Why didn’t you say anything?”

Shrugging, she finished with the stockings and bent down to grab his socks. “No one was there to celebrate the day.”

He went under the line and stood next to her. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t a very nice birthday gift I gave you, was it?”

Pretending that his concern didn’t affect her as much as it did, she blinked back her tears and hung up the socks. “It wasn’t a big deal. I mean, once a woman turns twenty-nine, birthdays become a liability.”

“That’s not true.” He looked her up and down. “How old are you anyway?”

“Thirty-five.”

“Huh. And here I thought you were forty.”

She gasped and got ready to clobber him with one of the socks.

He held up his hand to stop her and laughed. “Come on, Meg. I knew you weren’t forty. I thought you were in your early thirties. I wouldn’t have guessed you were thirty-five.”

She relaxed. “You’re telling me the truth?”

“Yes.” He leaned forward and kissed her.

She took a step back, blushing despite herself. It wasn’t that she didn’t like the kiss. She did. She just didn’t expect it. “What was that for?”

“It’s your birthday kiss. Every year, you get a kiss.”

“No. You get a birthday spanking. You know, you get a light tap on the butt for every year of your life, plus one to grow on.”

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“My mistake.”

She bent down to get the last item of clothing and felt his hand rub her behind. She jerked up and pressed her hand where his had just been. “You’re taking way too many liberties, Ted.”

“Too many liberties? With my wife? Isn’t that an oxymoron?”

“We were forced to marry.”

“So? That doesn’t make it any less real.”

She shook her head and pinned the skirt on the line. “There. All done.”

“You did a great job.”

When she looked at him and saw his expression, she realized he was telling her the truth. “Thank you.”

“I know all this work hasn’t been easy for you. It’s not like you have a washer and dryer. I also like the shirt you made me.” He smiled at her. “I appreciate your work.”

Feeling unexpectedly shy, she smiled in return. “Thank you. Again. And thanks for cooking.”

“Well, if I didn’t, I think Esther would have my hide. The woman has changed her opinion on the man cooking. She now thinks that in our case, it’s a necessity.”

Megan laughed and threw the washboard and soap into the empty basket. “That’s because I almost burned the kitchen down. After the third time, she gave up.”

He chuckled and picked up the basket. “I wish I’d been there to see it.”

She strolled with him toward the house. “It’s probably better you didn’t. I’m sure Esther wouldn’t want anyone to find out she knows a couple of colorful words.”

“Esther cussed?”

“To be fair, her dress did catch fire.”

Once his laughter died down, he asked, “Do you forgive me for letting you spend a week in prison?”

She stepped onto the porch and petted the dog. "I guess so. Are you going to do that again?"

"No. I promise."

"Okay."

He opened the door for her. "Ladies first."

She entered the house with Buddy at her feet. "I do admit that I like this part of living in the past. It's too bad men in our time didn't open doors for women."

He grinned and went into the house, letting the screen door shut behind him. "Me too. If you ask me, the men in the future are missing out."

"On treating women with respect?"

"No. On watching them walk." He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "You have a lovely backside."

Her jaw dropped as he walked past her and went into the kitchen. Well, maybe men *weren't* such gentlemen in 1898 after all.

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Megan couldn't believe it. An hour later, Ted hooked up the horses to the wagon.

"You're actually going to the potluck and dance without me?"

He clapped his hands together and turned from the wagon. "Yep." Then he strode to the well.

"Why?" she asked, following him.

"Because I refuse to sit out the rest of my life. I plan to enjoy the time I have."

"But you can't show up without me."

He washed his hands. "Why not?"

"Because I'm your wife. It wouldn't look right."

"Fine. Then come along. Stop hiding in the shadows all the time." He walked over to her and patted her arm. "Live."

She glanced at her shorts. "I'd have to change."

## Meant To Be

"Then change. I'll wait."

She bit her lower lip. Did she dare? "Are Esther and Miriam going to be there?"

"Yes, but Miriam's going with Richie."

She blinked in surprise. "Richie?"

"Yes, Richie. As it turns out, after you ran into Mrs. Baxter's porch, they stayed to talk to Mrs. Baxter to calm her down, and the woman invited them for supper. She made a comment about them being a nice looking couple, and they decided she was right."

Megan closed her eyes and groaned. "I've changed the future."

He shot her a pointed look. "You did nothing of the sort. Richie's been in love with Miriam since she first went to that barn dance. It's about time he got the courage to do something about it." He finished and went to the barn.

She followed him. "Don't you see? If I hadn't run into Mrs. Baxter's house, this wouldn't have happened. This wasn't meant to be."

"Are you suggesting that they shouldn't be together?" he asked as he closed the stall doors.

"If they were, then it should have happened without me. We're dangerous, Ted!"

"You might be dangerous, but I'm not. I'm not the one going around causing trouble."

She felt sick again. What if Miriam wasn't supposed to be with Richie? What if she was supposed to be alone? Or with someone else? And just how long could she resist her desire for Ted? She knew he wanted to be with her, and God help her but she wanted to be with him too.

"We have to get an annulment, Ted."

His amused expression turned dark. He stormed over to her. Startled, she stepped back, but he took her in his arms. "I'm tired of hearing this. We are not getting an annulment, and you

can't keep on imprisoning yourself. You have to enjoy life while you have it. And I want to enjoy my life with you. Do you want to be with me?"

"It doesn't matter what I want. I can't fight temptation with my hand in the cookie jar." She realized her mistake too late. Now he knew the truth!

She wanted to retreat and hide in her bed, but he kissed her and all thoughts of fleeing departed from her mind. Oh how she'd longed for this!

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pressed her body against his, relishing in the solid feel of him. His body was so different from hers, and she liked it. Everything about him screamed male. The stubble on his face, the strength in his arms, the broad shoulders, and that male part of him that clued her into just how much he wanted her. She liked all of it. She moaned and ran her fingers through the hair at the base of his neck. He removed his hat, granting her better access to his silky brown strands.

His mouth left hers and traveled down her neck. She tilted her head back. Though she felt weak in the knees, he supported her so she could remain standing. This was wrong. She shouldn't be doing this. She knew where it was leading. But for the life of her, she couldn't remember why this was a bad idea. All she could do was feel. Feel the way her skin tingled where he kissed her. Feel the way her nipples hardened as her arousal increased. She opened her eyes, trying to get her brain back into gear, but then he brought his mouth to hers and she gave in to the thrill of the moment.

She'd been kissed before, but this was different. It communicated a passion that none of the others had. He wanted her. He didn't just want sex. He wanted all of her. And she loved him for that. Her carefully concealed feelings came rushing out. She parted her lips and he accepted her invitation. His tongue brushed hers ever so lightly, as if asking for her permission

## Meant To Be

to do this. She moaned and encouraged him to continue. She'd spent her entire life waiting for this moment, and she couldn't think of anyone better to do it with than Ted.

He pulled back from her, his breathing heavy, and he started to unbutton his shirt.

"Maybe we should do this in the house," she suggested, glancing uneasily at the floor. There really wasn't a clean spot to make love on.

"I don't want you to change your mind," he said, tossing his shirt aside. He reached for her and kissed her again.

Now this was ridiculous! She refused to have sex in the barn...at least for her first time. She turned her head and tried to ignore the way his hands cupped her bottom which made her ache for him even more.

"Ted, I can't do it out here."

"But I don't want to lose the moment," he mumbled into her neck.

"You won't. Really, if you want to lose the moment, then this is the best way to do it."

He groaned as if he was in pain but lifted her up in his arms and carried her to the house. Had she not been with him, she wouldn't have believed a man could move so fast. As he carried her up the stairs, he said, "You can't change your mind. You promised."

She grinned. "Will it kill you if I do change my mind?"

"Yes."

She blinked at his serious tone. For goodness sakes. She knew that was a lie, but she was flattered that he needed her with the kind of intensity that demanded immediate satisfaction. He reached her bedroom and set her on her feet. Then he kissed her again, in an apparent attempt to get her fully back in the mood.

She couldn't stop herself from laughing.

He frowned at her. "What? Is my technique wrong?"

"No. It's just that you're acting like a horny teenager."

He shrugged and pulled her shirt over her head. "That's how I'm feeling. You've been parading around here with that shirt and these shorts. What did you expect?"

"There's nothing wrong with my clothes," she insisted while he slid her shorts and underwear off. She flushed at the warmth of his hands on her bare skin. Suddenly, she didn't feel like laughing anymore.

"Take your bra off, honey. There's no way I can figure that thing out."

The order should have offended her. Had he done it at any other time, she would have been properly annoyed, but in this case, it excited her. She obeyed while he took his pants off.

As soon as they were both naked, he practically threw her on the bed and kissed her again. His hands were everywhere, caressing every inch of her body, exploring regions that no one had touched before. Even with the hint of impatience in his movements, he remained gentle. He fondled her breasts, something she found particularly delightful. Then he reached between her legs and she spread them, her body screaming for him to keep going.

Somewhere, in the back of her mind, something was warning her to stop. It was the same nagging voice she'd heard in the barn, but it got muffled beneath her moans and pleas for Ted to continue. She was beyond sense or reason.

When he stopped, she grabbed his hand. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to enter you," he said, as if he was surprised that he had to explain it to her.

"No. Not yet." She brought his hand back to where it had been. "Please, don't stop."

Understanding lit his eyes and he resumed his stroking, letting her lead him until she climaxed. As her body was still enjoying the bliss he'd given her, she encouraged him to enter her, wanting to feel him inside her. The initial pressure from his

## Meant To Be

arousal caused her slight discomfort, so she adjusted her hips and raised them to better accommodate his entry. He eased into her, the sensation creating a slight pain but mostly, it brought her pleasure. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he groaned. He managed several thrusts before he released his seed into her. Afterward, he settled onto her and she embraced him. They remained in each other's arms for a good minute before he spoke.

"I thought it was going to last longer than that."

She gave him a knowing grin. "Kind of makes it seem like a waste of time, doesn't it?"

"Hush your tongue. Next time, it'll be longer. I just needed to get that first time out of my system."

"I'm not complaining. I had fun."

He brushed her lips with his in a lingering kiss when the door downstairs opened.

"Is anyone here?" someone called out.

Ted quickly jumped out of the bed, yelled out, "I'll be there in a minute!" and shut the door. Then he picked up his boxers and pants and hopped into them.

"Well, hurry up. If we're late, then all the good food will be gone," Richie shouted from the parlor.

"What is he doing here?" Megan asked as she ran to her wardrobe to find a suitable dress to wear.

"I don't know."

She decided to wear the pink dress. "I'm going to need a few minutes to get ready."

"Okay. We'll be waiting." He quickly left, shutting the door behind him.

## Chapter Fifteen



Ted made his way down the steps, buttoning the shirt he'd found in his room. He saw that Richie was in the parlor, thumbing through a book. "Nice of you to knock."

Richie glanced up at him. "I did knock. If your dog hadn't been out in the fields doing who knows what, he would've let you know I was here."

He figured that Richie was telling the truth. He doubted that he would have heard Richie while he was in Megan's bedroom. He took a good look at his friend. "You didn't hear anything up there, did you?"

He raised his eyebrows and gave an innocent shrug. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Ted didn't believe him, and he supposed he should've been embarrassed, except now Richie had proof that Ted and Megan had indeed consummated the marriage and now Richie and the other farmhands could leave him alone about it. Even so, he made a mental note to lock the front door in the future.

## Meant To Be

Deciding to change topics, Ted asked, "Aren't you supposed to be taking Miriam tonight?"

He placed the book back on the small bookshelf. "I am. She had to take care of some personal business in the privy. She'll be here soon. She wanted to stop by and see if Megan's coming."

"She's coming," Ted moved the curtain and looked out the window. "What are Esther and Aaron doing in the backseat of your wagon?"

"Oh. Esther insisted on chaperoning. She said that until I marry her sister, I have no right to be alone with her."

"And you brought everyone here?"

"Miriam really wanted to see Megan. She hasn't seen Megan for awhile and wants to talk to her. Do you mind riding in my wagon with me, Esther and Aaron while Miriam takes your wagon over there?"

Ted grimaced at the thought of being around Aaron, but he knew that Megan missed Miriam and Esther's visits so he'd deal with the overbearing marshal. "Alright."

"Good."

Footsteps alerted him to Megan's entrance in the parlor, and he smiled at the sight of her. She wore her hair back, and her pink dress made her cheeks rosy. Of course, she could still be flushed from their activity upstairs. He rather liked that reasoning better. She finally belonged to him, and all the annulment talk and hiding herself from the world would come to an end.

"You're beautiful," he told her.

She smiled shyly at him. "Thanks."

"Miriam's anxious to see you. Do you mind riding with her in our wagon? I was thinking of going with Richie and the marshal and Esther."

"Why don't you ever call him Aaron?"

"Because he's not a friend."

"Aaron's a good guy," Richie said.

"He's an intimidating one," Ted corrected as he peeked out the window where Esther rambled on to her husband who looked bored. Even when he was bored, he had a scowl on his face.

Megan tapped Ted on the arm.

He turned to her. "What?"

"I was just saying that I'll miss you."

He grinned. "We'll be following you."

She shrugged. "I know, but it'll be nice to dance with you." She left the house just as Miriam climbed the porch steps.

"It's nice to see things are as they should be," Richie commented.

"Yes," Ted agreed. "We're getting along great."

"I know. I heard."

He frowned at him. "You better watch yourself, Richie. I'll start setting traps around this house in case you decide to come in uninvited again. If I'd been expecting you, I guarantee you that you wouldn't have been able to barge in."

"Look, I'm happy for you." He walked out of the house with Ted. "I worried that things weren't going to work out, but now that things are as they should be, I can relax."

Ted shook his head, wondering why his friend chose to worry about things that had nothing to do with him. He shut the door and went down the steps. "You're strange." He glanced over at his wagon and stopped when he saw Megan fiddling with the brake. "What are you doing?" he asked as he ran over to her.

Megan and Miriam looked up from where they sat in the wagon.

"Miriam's just showing me how to use the brake," Megan replied.

"You're not driving this thing, are you?"

"Really, Ted. Do you think I'm that stupid? I'm not going to drive a wagon until I learn how. Miriam's giving me my first lesson."

## Meant To Be

He shifted from one foot to the other. "I don't know. It's not as easy as a car. I mean, the horses have a mind of their own."

"You don't think I can do it?"

"Well, maybe with lots of lessons and lots of practice."

"I look forward to being instructed." She winked at him.

He blinked, wondering if there was a double meaning in that statement.

Miriam smiled and looked at Ted and Megan. "It's nice to see that you two worked things out."

"Yeah," he began, nodding, "it's amazing what happens when a husband sticks his wife in prison."

Megan rolled her eyes.

"What's this?" Miriam reached under the seat and pulled out Ted's jacket. "Oh! I remember this. You had it on when you came to town."

"I forgot I put it there after the cool morning in June," Ted remarked, surprised that it was dry after the rainstorms the wagon had been through, but it had been protected by the seat.

Miriam read the letters on the back of the blue polyester jacket. "What does JIC stand for?"

"Jacob Innovative Creations," Megan replied.

"Jacob? That's your last name," Miriam said. "Did your family own the business?"

Ted never thought he'd have to answer this question here, in the past, of all places. "No. It was another Jacob."

"Oh. So, what is it?" Miriam asked.

"A place that made inventions for things that people used around their homes," Megan said. "The company pretty much gobbled up its competitors."

"That's because the company knew how to treat their customers right," Ted said. "The employees were treated well too."

Megan smiled in amusement. "You sound like one of the commercials I saw on TV."

"TV?" Miriam asked, looking back and forth between them.

"Uh...It's nothing you need to concern yourself with." Megan quickly took the jacket and shoved it back under the seat. "We should get going."

Relieved, Ted agreed and went to the buckboard where Esther was still rambling on. Aaron yawned. When Ted realized she talked about different herbs to plant in the garden for the following year, he couldn't help but smile. That's why the marshal looked like he was in pain. It was a small justice for all the snickering Ted had endured from the marshal, but he'd take whatever he could get.

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Cole stood behind a group of trees clustered around the barn. He couldn't make out everything the six people said, but he watched them anyway. As they rode off the property, his eyes drifted to the time travel device in his hand. There was no doubt about it. The chip was in the wagon with the two women. He had no choice but to follow them. He walked to the horse he hid behind the barn and hopped up on it. Had it not been for Penelope's horses, he wouldn't have learned how to ride a steed.

His hands tightened on the reins, and he swallowed the bitter lump in his throat. Regret stabbed him with a force that threatened to take his breath away. He had to leave her. He didn't deserve her. He was a liar and a thief. She could do better. She would do better. Surely, any man worthy of her would be smart enough to marry her. He clenched his teeth, cursing the lucky jerk who managed to win her affections. She'd spend the rest of her life smiling at him, tending to his wounds, taking care of him, loving him...

## Meant To Be

He didn't want to think about it. He'd had enough regrets to last a lifetime. He'd chosen a gold digger to share his life with. His ex-wife saw his salary and figured she could have his wallet and his brother. He'd been so naïve to believe that she loved him. The signs were there. Looking back, he recognized them. The separate bank account, the weekend to "spas" so she could relax, the child who looked too much like his brother...Even after learning that Ian wasn't his son and divorcing her, she continually wanted more money. The woman was never satisfied. She wronged him and the judge took her side.

He didn't want to think about it. The past was behind him, or in front of him, depending on how one wanted to look at it. He'd press on. Move forward. As long as he got that chip, he could insert it into the device and go to any time he wanted. Determination settled back into his bones and he urged the horse to a trot, keeping a safe distance from the group of six people in front of him.

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Megan had a hard time concentrating on anything Miriam was telling her during the potluck supper. Ted sat next to her, and all she could think about was how close they were. He'd made love to her, and her skin still tingled in the places he'd touched her with his hands.

Hands that were now ripping the fried chicken apart. She cringed. The man was an animal. He practically wolfed down his meal. She couldn't believe this was the same person who gave her such a wonderful experience just an hour and a half ago.

Miriam tapped her on the arm.

Startled, she turned back to her friend. "What did you say?"

Miriam smiled. "You're preoccupied tonight."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

Esther glanced at her from across the table and arched her eyebrow.

Megan shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Esther might be a church going woman who stuck adherently to propriety when she wasn't on fire, but the woman figured out much more than she let on. If Megan guessed right, Esther knew that Megan and Ted had finally consummated their marriage.

"Anyway, we're trying to help Claire come up with a name for her next child," Miriam said, dipping her spoon into the pudding.

Megan's gaze drifted to Ray's wife who laughed at something Ray whispered to her. Megan knew the perfect name for a boy. "Paul."

Ted cleared his throat and looked at her. "Paul?"

"It was my father's name."

He set the drumstick down and frowned. "That name is familiar."

"I wouldn't know why. We don't know anyone with that name in this place." She turned back to Miriam. "I miss my father. He died shortly before I turned eighteen."

Miriam smiled. "It sounds like you had a close relationship with him."

Beside her, Ted shrugged and picked up a biscuit and started chewing on it.

Megan shook her head, wondering where he put all the food. He wasn't even chubby. How could he eat like that and stay fit? Sighing, she directed her attention to Miriam. "My father and I enjoyed the same things. In some ways, I was a tomboy. I grew up fishing, playing ball, and watching him at the race track."

"He raced horses?"

Megan paused. She meant car races, but she realized she couldn't say that. So she opted to let Miriam think of horses. "When I became a teenager, I began to like girly things, and even though we didn't do as much as we used to, he was still my best

## Meant To Be

friend.” She laughed. “I still remember how he scared my boyfriends. He made sure they didn’t try to do anything they shouldn’t. He had the roar of a lion but the heart of a teddy bear.”

“A what?”

“A teddy bear.”

Miriam frowned and shook her head.

Didn’t they have teddy bears in this time? “He had a soft heart,” Megan finally explained.

Still looking uncertain, Miriam nodded. “You must miss him.”

Her smile faltered. “Every day.”

Miriam placed her hand on her arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Maybe you should name your child after him. You know, if you have a boy.”

Esther set her cup down. “You could name the child Paula if you have a girl.”

A child? That was when Megan remembered why it was a bad idea for her and Ted to have sex. Oh crap! She grabbed Ted’s arm, inadvertently digging her nails into his skin.

He dropped his biscuit and yelled out in pain.

“Ted? Can I speak to you?” she asked him, still clutching his arm.

“Will you let go of me?”

She immediately took her hand away, noting the blood that her fingernails made. “I’m sorry.” She splashed water on her napkin and pressed it over the wound.

Esther raised her eyebrows. “Megan, are you feeling well?”

Megan glanced around the table and noticed that several people looked in her direction. “I’m fine,” she said over the wild thumping of her heart. “Go on and enjoy your meal. We’ll be back.” She stood up and clutched Ted’s elbow. “Come on.”

He wiped his mouth and hands with a napkin and obediently followed her out of the barn where they could be alone.

She took a deep breath so she wouldn't vomit.

"What's going on?" he asked, keeping his voice low enough so no one would hear them. "You act like you saw a ghost in there."

"Oh Ted, we're in trouble." She swallowed hard, forcing the bile back down her throat. This wasn't good. She was going to throw up if she didn't watch it.

He took her by the arms, his touch firm but gentle. "What is it?" He stared at her, and she picked up the panic in his eyes.

She glanced around. Good. No one could hear them. "What if I'm pregnant?"

He just stood there and stared at her for a good couple of seconds before he relaxed. "I thought something serious happened." He let go of her and released his breath. "Don't scare me like that ever again."

"This is serious, Ted. We might have just changed the course of human history."

He groaned. "Please tell me you're not in this funk again."

"What funk?"

"The whole 'oh no the world's coming to an end because I interfered with the past' funk."

She crossed her arms and glared at him. "I don't see how you can take this so lightly. I'm sick over this and you're acting as if I'm worried over nothing."

"How many times do we have to have this conversation?" He gave her a pointed look. "You already know what I think about it."

There was only one thing to do. She hated to do it too. She found that she enjoyed it and hated to give it up, but she had to stop this before it went any further. "We can't have sex again."

His eyes grew wide and he gasped. "What?"

## Meant To Be

“We can’t risk it, Ted. It’s just not right.”

“No. I’m willing to put up with all your other quirks, but there is no way I’m doing that. Besides, if you are pregnant, then it’s too late to do anything about it.”

“I know,” she cried, ready to pull her hair out. The least she could have done was insist that he pull out. “Sex is awful. It makes you forget everything.”

She pressed her hand to her abdomen. Did she just feel a flutter? She clutched her stomach. Maybe she already had morning sickness. She really did feel like she was going to vomit. This wasn’t good. It wasn’t good at all. She groaned and put her face in her hands.

“This is getting annoying,” he said, obviously exasperated.

“Will you still be saying that in May or June when I have a child?”

“May. May 1899.” He snapped his fingers. “I know where I’ve seen the name Paul!”

As he ran off to their wagon, she ran to the bushes and threw up. After she finished emptying the contents of her stomach, he returned to her.

He cringed when he saw her and the bushes. “Wow. That Claire Gordon needs to watch how much seasoning she puts in her sauce,” he joked.

She shot him a dirty look. “Must you be insensitive?”

“I have good news for you. You haven’t done anything to destroy the future. Come here.”

Her body trembled but she managed to make her way to his side without stumbling. “What is it?”

He coughed and motioned for her to back up. “Your breath stinks.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “Well, you did this to me.”

“Fair enough. Still, could you breathe in that direction?”

She sighed and faced the barn door.

“Okay. Let me find it.” He pulled a yellow brochure from his jacket pocket. Something silver fell out of the folded paper. He bent down and picked it up.

“What’s that?” she asked, examining the strange round object that didn’t look bigger than a pinky nail.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen it before.” He shrugged and slipped it into the pocket of his pants. “Oh well.” He opened the brochure. “Ah ha! There it is! Paul Jacob, born May 4, 1899. Isn’t this great?”

“What is that?” She snatched the brochure out of his hands and studied the cover of the smiling man who wore a business suit. “Christian Jacob’s Biography?”

“Yeah. Christian is the president of Jacob Innovative Creations. That’s where I worked.” He paused. “Well, what do you know? I am related to him after all.”

She had no idea what he was talking about. She opened it up. “So, this goes back to Paul Jacob?”

“Paul. Paul is your father’s name. We’re going to have a son and name him Paul. Don’t you see what this means?”

She ignored his enthusiasm. “There are other Pauls out there.”

“Ones named Paul Jacob who just so happened to be born on May 4, 1899 in Fargo, North Dakota?”

A twinge of excitement fluttered through her. “I admit that it’s a surprising coincidence.”

“It’s not a coincidence and you know it. What other Jacobs live in Fargo?”

Her mind raced through everyone she’d heard of who lived in Fargo. “None.”

“Except for us. And I wouldn’t have picked the name Paul. That’s your doing.”

She struggled to grasp the meaning of his words. “So, you think that we’re Paul’s parents?”

“Isn’t it obvious that we are?”

## Meant To Be

A small smile formed on her lips as she got used to the idea. “And we are supposed to be here? In this time?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. We’re not here by mistake. Everything we’ve done and will do is going keep the future as it’s supposed to be.”

She read the brochure, partly in shock and partly in excitement. Was she really reading about her descendants? “It says that Paul had two brothers, but he’s the one who went on to begin a small inventing business, inspired by his parents who told him about the possibility of time travel.” She looked at Ted. “Why did you tell him about time travel?”

“Why do you assume it was me who spilled the beans? Maybe it was you.”

“Are you kidding? I’m much too responsible to do that.”

“The brochure says ‘parents’. That’s plural. That means you did it too.”

“Probably because I had to cover for you.”

He threw his hands up in the air. “Does it really matter? Everything turned out okay. Christian was still born and he inherited the family corporation, and I got hired so I could end up back in time with you. So it all happened as it was supposed to. Who knows? If Paul wasn’t told anything about time travel, he might not have started inventing things.” He took the brochure from her and scanned it. “It says that he created the parts that eventually got put into televisions, washers, driers, and microwaves.”

She nodded. “Good for him. I miss having a washer and dryer.”

“That must’ve been your influence then.”

“And I suppose you’re responsible for the television and microwave?”

He looked very pleased with the thought. “Probably. Yeah.”

She shook her head but laughed. “What a relief.”

“And look here.” He pointed to the first paragraph. “It says that we’re going to have two kids after Paul’s born.”

“Boys,” she noted, grinning. “Oh Ted, I’m going to be a mother!” She hugged him tightly to her, giggling as he spun her around. When he set her back on her feet, she said, “I was worried, you know.”

“Worried about what? Me?”

“No. When I was in prison and I turned thirty-five, I thought I’d never have children.” She choked up, and even though she tried to hold back her tears, she couldn’t. When he took her in his arms, she cried harder. “I was willing to marry anyone to have children. I didn’t love Mike. I was just afraid that if I didn’t marry him, then I’d never find someone. And then you came along and...” She clung to him, unable to finish her sentence.

“I love you too, Meg,” he whispered, kissing the top of her head.

She stayed in his embrace, enjoying the security and warmth of his arms. Her mother would be appalled that she was with Ted. Her mother always hoped she’d marry someone who was on his way to being rich, but in being with Ted, Megan had learned that the value of a man didn’t come from how much he made but in how well he loved her. Besides her father, no man had actually cared for her the way Ted did. Who else would put up with her ‘quirky’ behaviors?

After a good minute passed, she pulled back and tucked the brochure into her pocket. “We need to keep this in a safe place. It wouldn’t be right for anyone to find it.”

“If you really want to play it safe, you’d burn it.”

He was right. She knew he was right. But she couldn’t bring herself to do it. She liked knowing how her children and their children would fare.

“Are you ready to go back inside and finish the meal?” he asked, brushing the remaining tears from her face.

## Meant To Be

“Yes. But I have to clean out my mouth first. I feel gross.”

“I can imagine.”

After she cleaned her teeth, they finished their meal.

## Chapter Sixteen



Once the meal was over, the men scurried from the tables, and once again, the women began to clean up. From the wall nearby, Charles and his cronies smirked in her direction.

Narrowing her eyes, she stormed up to them. “Do you have a problem?”

“No, but it seems that you do. I can see that you don’t like having to do the work.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him. “So, you make it a point to watch me?”

He shrugged. “You stand out like a sore thumb.”

“I notice that you took the time to bathe. It’s too bad you didn’t wash out your personality while you were at it.”

“You talk big for a woman who can’t control her husband. Even he won’t pitch in to help with the dishes.”

Oh, the man was an irritable buffoon! She clenched her fists. She’d had it with his snide comments and mocking glances whenever she went to these barn dances. If she was going to stay in this time, she couldn’t allow this to continue. Just as she was

## Meant To Be

ready to yell at him and really let him have it, another idea came to her. Why not prove that she could get the men to help? Nagging at them hadn't worked. But then, her dad used to say you could catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. She decided it was time to take her dad's advice.

"Just wait and see," she told him.

He sneered and chewed on a piece of hay. "This ought to be interesting."

"Oh, it will be." She turned and marched to Esther and Miriam who were gathering dirty plates. "Do you really want to do all this work while the men sit back and do nothing?"

Esther straightened and furrowed her eyebrows. "What are you talking about?"

"You're not going to leave early again, are you?" Miriam asked. "I wanted us to do a square dance together."

"No, I'm staying. But I'm not going to let this injustice continue. The men claim they work all day and are tired. Well, don't we work just as hard? Sure, we're not out in the fields, but we clean their clothes and their home and cook for them." She paused. "Well, most of us do."

"What's your point?" Esther wondered, setting the plate back down on the table as a couple of other women directed their attention to her.

Megan had to strike while the iron was hot. She glanced at Charles and his group who seemed amused. Then she studied the women. "Is it fair that you spend all this time cooking and setting up this potluck just to have the men gulp all the food down and then retreat to their corners while you do all the work? Then they expect you to have the energy to dance?"

Claire leaned forward. "And once we get home, we have to take care of all the kids and put them to bed while they sit and read the paper."

"Or we have to rub their backs because they're sore from dancing," Esther chimed in.

Claire rubbed her pregnant belly. "We work all day too, and you know, my feet are sore. I want to sit down for awhile and relax before we dance."

Megan nodded. "It's time things changed. It's time the men pitched in to help."

"What should we do?"

Megan searched for Ted and found him sitting on a barrel and laughing with Richie and Ray. "Just follow my lead." He wasn't too far from her, so she figured the women would be able to hear her. She strode over to him and cleared her throat. "Ted?"

The three men looked at her.

"Is something wrong?" Ted asked.

"I thought I saw a rip in your shirt." She leaned over and pulled on the cotton fabric, pretending to search for a tear. "Hmm...I must have been wrong. I guess there's nothing to sew after all." Then she let her hand brush his bicep. She stopped and squeezed his arm. "Wow, Ted. Is it my imagination or are you stronger than you were when we first met?"

A wide grin crossed his face. "You can tell the difference?"

"I sure can." She smiled and whispered in his ear. "I couldn't help but notice how much better looking you are than the other men here, and I bet in no time at all, you'll be stronger than them too."

He blushed and shrugged. "Well, I work hard."

She pulled away from him and nodded. "It shows." She looked back at the women, who were still watching, and winked. Turning back to him, she gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I'm sorry to interrupt you and your friends. I'll let you get back to talking." She stepped back, rubbed her arms and winced.

Ted frowned and stood up. "Are you feeling alright?"

## Meant To Be

She sighed, hesitated for a couple of seconds, and shook her head. "I don't want to trouble you." She turned to go back to the table.

He took her arm and stopped her. "Trouble me. What is it?"

"Well...If you really want to know, some of those pots can get heavy when I have to carry them all the way to the house. And then I have to help scrub down the tables and push them against the wall." She rested her hand on his arm, massaging his bicep. The truth was he did actually have some muscle, and she did enjoy touching him. But she needed to focus. Peering up at him, she smiled. "I should get back and help."

Again, she took a step away from him, and, again, he took her arm.

"No. Wait. You don't need to hurt yourself cleaning up. Why don't you sit down and I'll take care of it?"

Success! Hiding her grin, she bit her lower lip. "I don't know. I mean, all the other men are sitting and talking. I wouldn't want to embarrass you in front of them."

"You won't be. In fact, it would be embarrassing for me to let you carry all those heavy things when you're in pain." He turned to Ray and Richie. "You know, we should help the women. I mean, don't you see the pile of dishes and pots they have to carry?"

Ray nodded, his face concerned as he looked at her. "Do they really hurt your arms?"

"After awhile, yes," she replied. "I imagine it would be worse for me if I was pregnant. Claire hasn't made a single complaint, but I do wonder how she can carry all those dishes and wash them when she's carrying all that weight."

"Huh. I hadn't thought of it that way before." Ray stood up. "I better help her."

"It wouldn't hurt to lend a helping hand," Richie agreed.

Megan refrained from clapping her hands. It worked. It actually worked! Forcing a worried look on her face, she asked, "Are you sure? We don't want to impose."

Ted waved his hand at her. "Who's imposing? We're offering. Now, I want you to sit down and we'll take care of everything. Besides, if I don't use these strong arms for something useful, then what good are they?"

"Oh, well, thanks," she sweetly replied before she sat down.

Ray motioned to the other men. "Come on. Let's give the poor women a break. They've done enough for us today."

Esther, Miriam and Claire followed the men's instructions and sat down next to Megan.

"Exactly what did you say to Ted?" Esther whispered in Megan's ear.

"I just complimented him and told him my arms were sore."

"And it worked?"

"You tell me." Megan pointed to the group of men who gathered around the tables to take care of the dishes while they ordered the women to sit down and relax.

Claire sat on the other side of Megan and giggled. "You have to tell us exactly what you said and what they said."

Megan shot a smug look at Charles who scowled at her before he exited the barn. That would show him to mess with her! Brains won over brawn any day of the week, and regardless of the time period, people liked to hear how great they were. Not that she didn't believe Ted was the most attractive man in the place, because he was. But it sure was nice to know how to get him to take a stand and make the other men fall in line while making it his idea.

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## Meant To Be

Cole cursed his luck. He'd almost had the chip. He'd been so close. He'd been right up to the wagon, ready to take the JIC jacket when that man rushed to retrieve it. Ted was his name. And Ted had talked to a woman named Meg, which had to be short for Megan. Cole remembered reading about them in the newspaper when he was in Devils Lake. Their conversation about time travel only confirmed their identity. He sighed. He didn't want to hurt them. He just wanted the chip, but Ted had slipped it into the pocket of his pants. Did Ted even know what the chip was for?

After the couple returned to the potluck, Cole hid outside the barn. He'd found a small hole to peek into so he could find out what was going on. Megan and Ted were happy together. That much was obvious to anyone who paid half-attention. He bit back the bittersweet memory of Penelope. He imagined that she'd make him as happy as Megan made Ted. No. He wouldn't think of her. He couldn't afford to think of her.

Cole directed his attention to the men who suddenly took over the chore that the women had been doing. He couldn't make out the words that anyone said to each other, except for someone named Ray who told the men to give the women a break. But he did know that Megan instigated it, and he also knew that this irritated the tall man who someone called Charles. The moment Charles stormed out of the barn, Cole knew he had to strike while the time was right.

Cole ran after Charles before he could get to his horse. "Charles!"

Charles turned back and barked, "What do you want?"

He waited until he was in front of Charles before he spoke. "I couldn't help but notice the problem you had back there with Megan."

"Don't say her name."

"Not even if it includes getting even?"

He stopped grabbing the reins to his horse and turned to Cole. "I'm listening."

"Good." Cole tipped his hat back and looked up at the man. It was amazing that Megan had the gumption to stand up to someone who towered over her. One thing was for sure. Cole had to admire her for that. He took a deep breath. "I happen to know that Megan values a small charm. It's round and it's about this big." He used his thumb and index finger to show the height of half an inch. "I bet she'd be distraught if it were to get lost."

Charles scanned him up and down. "And I suppose it's worth a pretty penny?"

"Yes. To be honest, it is. However," he began as he pulled out the gold ring from his pocket, "this is worth a pretty penny too."

"What does this have to do with me?"

"Ted has the charm. He's holding it for her. I bet she'd be real disappointed if he misplaced it, wouldn't you?"

Charles straightened up in interest. "Go on."

"If you bring me that charm, I'll give you this ring." He held it up in the moonlight. "Do we have a deal?"

"That charm can't be worth more than gold."

"Not in all ways, but it does for my intentions."

Charles nodded. "Tonight. After they go home, I'll get it for you."

Cole put the ring in his pocket. "And I'll pay you when you do."

"You'll pay alright because if you don't, I can force it from you."

Cole smiled. "You have nothing to worry about." Soon. Soon he'd have the chip back. Then he'd be a wealthy man.

## Chapter Seventeen



Megan sighed with contentment as Ted kissed her in bed later that night. He held her close to him, his body notifying her that he anticipated what was to come. She discovered that she liked that. It made her feel desirable, and she wanted to feel that way with her husband.

Try as she might though, she couldn't let go of a nagging thought. "Ted?"

"Hmm?" he murmured, nuzzling her neck.

She had to ask it. As much as she dreaded the answer, she had to ask the question or else she wouldn't feel right proceeding. She pulled away from him so she could concentrate. Bracing herself for the answer, she asked, "Do you think I'm manipulative?"

He sighed. "Can't this wait until we're done?"

"No, it can't. Not when I feel guilty."

He raised himself up on an elbow and looked down at her. "Guilty about what?"

The moonlight streaming through the parted curtains showed her that he was concerned. Would he be angry once she told him the truth? She was tempted to forget about it until after they made love. He'd surely be in a better mood by then, but she'd never enjoy this as long as it nagged her. Taking a deep breath, she made her confession.

"Well, I got tired of Charles laughing at me over the fact that you and the other men wouldn't pitch in to help with the dishes after supper, so I sort of lied to you so you'd prove him wrong."

He frowned. "Then you don't think I'm strong or the best looking guy at the barn dance?"

"Oh, I didn't lie about that part. I do think you're stronger now than when we first got here and you are better looking than the other men in town. What I lied about was my arms being sore, and I wasn't tired."

A smile formed on his face, and he drew her closer to him so that their bodies were touching again. "Honey, if bragging me up in front of the guys is manipulation, then I say keep on doing it. Besides, I do agree that it won't kill us men to pitch in and help you ladies out."

She relaxed. "So you forgive me?"

"Does this answer your question?" He kissed her again, this time deepening it.

The dog barked from the parlor, but she ignored him and returned Ted's kiss. Now that the weight of her lie had been lifted off her shoulders, she could get caught up in the moment.

He made love to her, and unlike before, he wasn't in any hurry. His kisses lingered at her breasts. His hands gently caressed her skin as if memorizing every inch of her body. In turn, she also studied him, delighting in her newfound knowledge of what increased his desire for her. Straddling him, she encouraged him to enter her and moved in a way that maximized her pleasure. In the back of her mind, she was aware that Buddy

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was still barking downstairs, but she was enjoying herself too much to care. The dog could wait. She had her husband to enjoy.

When she found her release, she stopped and let out a soft moan. He waited until she leaned forward to kiss him before he rolled on top of her and continued the rhythm she'd used just moments before. Now that her body was satisfied, she became aware of the dog as he kept barking. What in the world was wrong with him? He'd never barked this long before. They did let him out to go to the bathroom before they retired upstairs. Didn't they?

Ted went still, drawing her attention back to what they were doing, and she realized he'd just found his release. Secretly embarrassed by letting the dog distract her, she held him close, noting how her heart beat in rhythm with his.

His breathing still ragged, Ted said, "See? I knew I could last longer."

She hid her amusement. It was cute to know he worried about being a good lover. "You're wonderful, Ted." And that was the truth. She found great pleasure with him, and it wasn't just the orgasm. It was being with someone she loved who treated her well and loved her back. She'd never felt closer to another human being in her entire life. She could be vulnerable and safe. And she liked that. She liked all of it. However, she had to admit the orgasm was the icing on the cake, and she'd happily accept that part of it too.

Ted sighed into the nape of her neck. "I should go see what Buddy wants."

"I don't want you to go. I like being in your arms," she pouted. "Let's just see if he'll stop."

"But he's been barking for a long time."

Ted was right. It was likely that the dog would only continue until he went to see what Buddy wanted.

"Well, hurry back. I don't want to sleep alone."

He smiled and kissed her. "I'll be back before you know it."

As soon as he was out of bed, her arms felt empty. She watched him as he got dressed and threw on his hat.

"You're wearing your hat?"

"He probably needs to go outside. That's why he's at the front door."

She nodded and closed her eyes. The cool summer breeze drifted into the room, so she snuggled under the blanket. Without Ted there, she didn't feel so hot. She listened as Ted opened the front door and Buddy went outside, still barking like crazy.

"Hey, don't go too far!" Ted yelled after the dog. "Oh great. Now I'm going to have to track him down."

Despite the frustration in his voice, Megan chuckled. Within minutes, she fell asleep.

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Cole stared in disbelief as Charles dumped Ted's unconscious body on the floor of the abandoned home that Cole had found.

Charles held out his hand, palm up. "Where's the ring?"

"Are you crazy?" Cole asked as soon as he found his voice. "I didn't ask you to bring Ted. I asked you to bring the charm."

"I couldn't get into the house. That damn dog kept barking. I had to wait until Ted came out. As it was, I had to fend off the dog when he attacked me. I'll tell you, that mutt may not look like much, but he's got it where it counts."

Cole swallowed the lump in his throat and dimmed the light on the kerosene lamp so Ted wouldn't wake up, at least not right away. This wasn't how he planned things to go. Charles was supposed to sneak into Ted's house, find the chip, and bring it to him. Ted wasn't supposed to be directly involved in this. Now,

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as he stared at Ted on the scratched wooden floor, he considered his options.

If Ted woke up and discovered what happened to him or if that wife of his found him missing and sent the marshal to investigate, this could easily turn into a disaster. Then he'd be arrested and sent to prison where he'd be stuck here indefinitely. He might even lose the chip for good and never get out of this time. Or he might never see Penelope again. He shoved the thought aside.

*Great. This was just great.* Anxious, he ran his hands through his hair.

"I brought the chip," Charles said, his tone firm. "That was the deal."

"That deal didn't involve your bringing Ted."

"You didn't say I couldn't." Charles held his hand right under Cole's nose. "Now, hand over the gold ring."

"No. You didn't follow my instructions. Take Ted back and get the charm. Then we'll talk."

Charles scowled and pulled out a gun from his back pocket. "No. We'll talk now."

Cole froze. He didn't want this to get worse than it already was.

"I didn't do this to get even with that bullheaded woman. I did this for the gold. Hand it over and I'll let you live."

Cole dug into his pocket. So much for being in control. He took out the ring, and as he did, the kerosene lamp's light hit the ring, making the gold shine bright. Gold. Almost like the golden hair of an angel. His angel. Penelope. Was this what he'd traded a future with her for? Gold. Something cold and hard, something that could be lost in a split second, something that ultimately didn't matter? It might buy things but things didn't last forever. They certainly didn't satisfy, for no matter how many possessions a man obtained in his life, if he didn't have someone to share those things with, his life remained empty.

“I feel sorry for you,” Cole softly stated as he gave Charles the ring.

“Don’t. I’m not the fool who just lost his gold.” Grinning, he slid it into his pocket. “Nice doing business with you.” Then he left.

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Megan had a dream. She dreamt that she had her hand in a glass of water. When she pulled her hand out of the glass, the water clung to her like sticky goo. She gagged at the feel of it. She went to the sink and pumped the handle so fresh water came out of it. She rubbed her hands with soap and tried to get the gooey sensation off her hand, but no matter how much she scrubbed, she couldn’t do it.

Behind her someone let out a high-pitched whine. She turned but didn’t see anyone. “Who’s there?” she called out.

No one answered. Then she heard a bark.

“Buddy?” she asked as she made her way to the parlor. The dog stood by the door and barked again. “What is it, boy?”

Then he jumped on her.

Shrieking, she woke up with a furry body on top of her. Startled, she rolled away from the slobbering hairy beast and landed on the hard floor. The monster landed on top of her and licked her hair. It took her a moment to realize the beast was Buddy.

“Get away from me,” she ordered.

Buddy backed away and sat.

Grunting, she got off the floor and removed the hair from her eyes. She focused on the dog in the moonlight. “Ted, do you see what your dog is doing to me?” She pointed to the mutt and looked over at where she expected her husband to be.

Only, Ted wasn’t there.

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She rubbed her eyes and willed herself to fully wake up. She looked back at the bed and saw that he still wasn't there. She frowned.

Buddy whined.

She turned her attention back to the dog. "Where is he?"

The dog barked and ran to the door.

She thought that was odd. The dog couldn't possibly understand her question.

Buddy barked again.

"Okay, okay. I'm coming."

She might as well humor the animal, especially since she was wide awake. She put on the clothes she wore earlier that night and followed the dog down the stairs.

"Ted?" she called out.

It wasn't unusual for him to grab a late night snack. She entered the kitchen, and for the first time since Buddy woke her up, she felt an unease settle in her stomach. She ran to the parlor. He wasn't there either.

Buddy ran to the open front door and barked.

She glanced at the clock and saw that it was 3am.

A knock on the doorframe caught her attention. An unfamiliar man stood in the doorway.

"Are you Megan Jacob?"

She tensed. Here she was, in the dark, alone in her house, with a stranger at the door, and he knew her name. She scanned the room, wondering what she could use if she needed to defend herself.

"Who are you?" she asked, purposely avoiding his question.

She wasn't about to tell him anything about herself. For all she knew, he was a serial killer. She stepped toward the round table in the corner of the room. If she could reach the vase, she might be able to knock it on his head if he came after her.

Hopefully, it'd knock him unconscious. At least that's the way it worked in the movies.

"My name is Blake Landon. I work at Jacob Innovative Creations. I came here from the future. I believe you came along with me when I ran into Cole Hunter on the Amtrak. This happened on April 23, and we were close to Fargo, North Dakota at the time."

She stopped inching toward the table. "You couldn't know all of that unless you're telling the truth."

He looked relieved. "I'm not here to hurt you. Cole Hunter stole an invention that he helped me and our partner work on. It's a time traveling device the size of a cell phone. I need to find Cole so I can take it back. It doesn't belong here."

She tried to wrap her mind around what he was saying. "So, when you and Cole bumped into me and Ted, we all went back to this time?"

"Cole activated the device and pressed the button at that moment, so yes, that's what happened."

She broke into laughter. "And all this time, Ted and I assumed there was a wormhole on the train."

He smiled. "I'm sure it was hard to adjust to being here, especially since you didn't know that we made time travel possible."

*That* was an understatement.

He stepped into the room and continued talking. "I managed to track Cole down for awhile but somewhere along the way at Devils Lake, I lost him. I searched everywhere I could think of, and then I remembered that he and I had bumped into two other people. I came here to Fargo to see if anyone unusual arrived here on April 23. The marshal told me that a woman in undergarments and a man with a jacket and cap with the letters JIC came into the train station on that day and handed the newsstand owner a phony dollar bill. After talking to him for awhile, I realized that your undergarments were shorts and a

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short-sleeved shirt. The JIC had to stand for Jacob Innovative Creations. So that is how I found you. I was wondering if you've seen Cole."

He reached into his pocket and produced a photograph. She went up to him and took the picture. It'd been a long time since she'd seen a colored photograph, so she blinked a couple of times to make sure she was seeing it right.

"I haven't seen him," she replied and handed it back to him. "Why would he come here?"

"Well, the fact that I found him in Devils Lake means that he lost a piece of the time travel device. I thought maybe a piece of it fell off and landed on you or Ted. Did you notice anything unusual on your clothes? Or maybe in a pocket?"

She shook her head when she recalled Ted showing her the brochure. He'd not only found the brochure but he found something else. "Wait. He did find something. Neither one of us knew what it was but it was small and round and silver."

"That sounds like it might be part of the device. Do you have it?"

"He put it in the pocket of his pants."

"Great! Can I have that chip? Cole's looking for the piece, and if I have it, he'll have to come to me. Then I can get the device and take us all back to the future."

She sighed. "I wish I could help you but Ted's wearing his pants, and I don't know where he is. In fact, I was looking for him when you came." She looked at Buddy who was whining and staring out the door. "I think the dog is trying to tell me where Ted is."

"Do you mind if I go with you? I'd like to talk to Cole."

"Sure. Come on."

The dog raced down the porch steps and bolted to the field. He turned around and barked at them.

She glanced at the outhouse and the barn. Wouldn't Ted be in one of those places instead? She stepped toward the

outhouse, and Buddy ran over to her and blocked her so she couldn't go any further. Okay. So Ted wasn't in this direction. She made a move to go to the barn, but Buddy stopped her from doing that too. Exasperated, she placed her hand on her hip.

"Fine, Buddy. Where did Ted go?"

The dog happily ran back out into the field.

She turned to Blake. "Apparently, he went that way."

"I brought a horse. We can find him faster if we go on it."

Despite her apprehension she agreed. She didn't relish the thought of riding a horse, but if Ted was in trouble, she'd do it. "Let's go," she agreed.

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Ted slowly gained consciousness. The first thing he noticed was the hard floor beneath him. The second thing he noticed was that someone was digging their hand into the pocket of his pants. Startled, his eyes flew open and he swung his fist into the man's jaw.

The man fell back and looked at him, as if he hadn't expected Ted to punch him.

Ted jumped up, raised his fists, and got ready to fight if necessary. "What's going on? Where am I? Why did you bring me here?"

The man held his hands up and slowly stood. "Look, I don't want a fight. I just want a chip that you have in your pocket."

Ignoring the pain in the back of his head, he demanded, "What chip?"

"The silver chip. It's the size of a fingernail and it's round."

Ted lowered his fists. "Wait a minute. You look familiar."

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“You do too. It took me awhile to figure it out, but you work at Jacob Innovation Creations, don’t you?”

“That’s right. You’re Dr. Hunter. You bumped into me on your way out of the building a couple months ago. That was in April.”

“Yes. Three and a half months ago. Right before we ended up in 1898.”

“Are you the reason Megan and I are here?”

“Yes, I am, but that was an accident. I was trying to go back in time alone. I didn’t mean to take anyone with me.” He dug his hand into his shirt pocket and produced a silver rectangular object. “This is the JIC Time Machine. I helped to create it. When I ran into you on the train, a chip fell out of it and into your pocket. I found you by tracking the energy signature from that chip.”

So it was a time machine that brought him and Megan back. Funny how that didn’t occur to either one of them. Except, one thing didn’t make sense. “If you were able to track the chip, then why did it take you three months to find me?”

“It’s a long story. Let’s just say that I ended up near Devils Lake before I jumped off the train and had a heck of a time getting to Fargo.” He walked over to Ted and showed him the device. “I’ve been having financial problems. I thought if I took this and went back to the California gold rush, then I could recover. I didn’t intend to bring anyone back in time, and I planned to bring this back before anyone knew it was missing. I’m sorry you ended up here.”

“Actually, it was the best thing that ever happened to me.” Ted searched his pocket until he found the smooth metal object. “Why didn’t you just come up to me and ask for this?” He handed Cole the chip. “I would’ve given it back.”

“I didn’t want to get you involved in my problems. I didn’t mean for Charles to strike you on the head and bring you here. He was supposed to slip into your house and get the chip.”

Ted chuckled. "That's why the dog kept barking."

Cole smiled. "Thanks. You know, for not being upset."

He shrugged. "There are worse things that could've happened to me."

Cole inserted the chip into the device and turned it on. He breathed an audible sigh of relief. "It still works. I can take you and Megan back to the future."

"No. We're meant to be here. My last name is Jacob, as in Jacob Innovative Creations."

"I don't follow."

"Well, as it turns out, Christian Jacob is going to be my great-great-grandson."

Understanding lit his eyes. "I recall hearing that Paul Jacob was born in May 1899."

"I'm the only Jacob in Fargo."

Cole laughed. "Now figure that one. I guess you were supposed to come back."

"I don't believe there are coincidences. I think everything happens for a reason."

Cole looked at the time travel device and sighed. "I think you're right."

Footsteps alerted them to someone's presence.

Ted looked at the doorway and saw Charles.

Charles pointed a gun at them and motioned for them to back up. "You know, I got to thinking. If you were willing to give up a gold ring for that charm, then that charm must be especially valuable. So"—he held his hand out, palm up—"hand it over."

## Chapter Eighteen



Megan was never so glad to get off of anything in her entire life. The horse's jarring movements made her legs sore and her teeth hurt from clenching them every time she thought she was going to fall off, which turned out to be about every few seconds. Shaking, she stepped away from the animal and took a deep breath of fresh air to calm her nerves. For as long as she lived, she vowed to never get on a horse again.

Buddy, who led them to this point, panted as he made his way to a row of trees that lined an abandoned property.

Blake tied the horse to a tree before he approached her and spoke, keeping his voice low. "Ted must be in that direction. I'd say it's a sure bet that Cole is with him."

She looked at the shelter belt. "Do you think Cole hurt Ted?"

"I don't know. It's hard to say what frame of mind Cole is in. I don't think he'd hurt anyone, but then again, I didn't think he'd steal either."

She didn't like the sound of that. Pressing her hand on her stomach, she forced the nausea aside. She'd just found Ted and didn't want to live the rest of her life without him. Then she remembered the brochure. Well, of course, Ted was alive and well. She and Ted were supposed to have three children together. That meant whatever happened tonight, it would turn out alright. Feeling as if a huge weight was off her shoulders, she proceeded forward.

"Don't be hasty," Blake warned, grabbing her arm. "We need to be careful."

"I'm going to be fine. Just worry about yourself."

She ran after the dog, her shoes quiet on the grass. She stopped at the evergreen trees and watched as Buddy slipped between them but decided that she wasn't going that route. Instead, she traveled the length of the shelter belt and paused when she reached the end. She glanced over her shoulder and saw that Blake was jogging after her. While she waited for him to catch up to her, she peeked around the tree and frowned.

Through the window of the abandoned cabin, she saw Charles waving something. What was Charles doing there? When she saw that Charles had a gun, she gasped.

She turned to Blake and reached for his shirt sleeve. "We have to help them!"

Charles turned in their direction.

Startled, she ducked behind the trees.

Blake shook his head. "That was close. You have to be careful. He might not kill you, but he could shoot you in the arm or leg."

That was a sobering reminder. The brochure didn't say whether or not she was crippled. That was it. She'd play it safe. Crouching, she snuck over to the cabin, Blake at her heels. The dog sat by the door, quiet but alert. Now how did Buddy know to keep quiet?

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Blake knelt next to her and pulled out a gun. He opened the chamber and rolled his eyes when he saw there were no bullets. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a couple of bullets.

"No, Charles. I'm not giving you this device. It'd be much too dangerous if it got into the wrong hands."

"That's Cole," Blake mouthed to her as he put the bullets in.

She nodded.

"I didn't ask if it was a good idea, did I? I ordered you to hand it over or you'll be making a trip to meet your maker," Charles hissed.

"Be reasonable," Ted said in a soothing voice. "This is a worthless piece of junk. It's not worth going to jail over."

Charles laughed. "I won't be going to jail because I won't get caught."

Blake motioned to her that the gun was ready, so she moved aside and let him creep to the edge of the doorway.

She held her breath.

"I can't let you have it," Cole said, his tone firm.

"Are you willing to die for it?" Charles asked, amused.

Megan heard a click and knew that Charles was ready to shoot. Why wasn't Blake going into the cabin and rescuing Ted and Cole? She shot him an impatient look but he held his hand up to her as a signal to wait. Gritting her teeth, she eased up and peered through the broken window. Ted and Cole had their hands up, and Cole was holding something in his hand. She guessed it was the time machine.

A glance in Blake's direction notified her of the problem. He didn't have a clear view of Charles from where he stood. Well, she could take care of that. She bent down and picked up a rock. She estimated how much force she had to use and threw the rock in Charles' direction. The rock landed on the back of his head.

"Hey!" Charles screamed and turned the gun in her direction.

She ducked just in time to avoid being shot at. The sound of the bullet rang in her ears. *Oh my goodness. That was much too close!*

Blake rushed into the cabin. "Hands up!"

Buddy ran in after him and barked.

Another gun shot went off, prompting her to make a mad dash into the cabin as well. Sure, it was stupid. She wasn't armed and she didn't know if Charles still had the gun or not, but all she could think of was Ted and that Charles might have shot him.

Blake was on the floor, face down and unconscious. She wasn't sure but it looked as if there was some blood pooling beneath him. Ted struggled with Charles to get control of the gun and another shot rang through the air as Charles shot the floorboard.

Cole ran over to Blake and turned him over, calling out his name.

It was up to her. She had to help her husband. She yelled out and jumped on Charles' back. She beat on his head and shoulders. "Let go of the gun, you creep!"

Charles stumbled backward. Ted lost his hold on the gun, and Charles spun around. Screaming, she clung to him and inadvertently covered his eyes. He flung his arms and shot again. This time the bullet struck the window and the remaining glass shattered into a million pieces.

Ted reached out and grabbed for the gun again but he missed.

"Freeze! Don't anybody move!" someone yelled.

Charles swung around again and nearly shot Aaron who dropped to the floor in time to dodge the bullet.

Cole leapt up and grabbed Charles' wrist while Ted snatched the gun out of his grasp.

Aaron jumped back up and rushed toward her and Charles. "Get off of him!" he ordered.

## Meant To Be

She obeyed and fell to the floor with a thud. She winced and rubbed her back. That was the second time tonight she'd battered her poor body by landing on a hard surface.

Aaron pointed the gun at Charles who was panting. "That's enough, Charles." He gasped for air. "I thought there was something suspicious going on when Blake Landon came to talk to me. Now, I know I was wise to follow him out here." He glanced around at everyone in the cabin. "I think all of you have a lot of explaining to do."

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Sunrise came up by the time Ted and Cole finished explaining everything to the marshal in the jailhouse. Charles was confined to a cell, so he wasn't privy to the sensitive information the two men told Aaron who sat back and listened to everything with keen interest.

"I thought there was something odd about you," Aaron told Ted. "Now I know why."

Ted shrugged, unwilling to let the marshal know that he intimidated him, even now. He supposed that he would have to get used to it since he was going to spend the rest of his life here. "It's not like I could come out and tell you everything that happened."

Aaron turned the time travel device over in his hands. "Naturally, I don't understand how this thing works." He raised an eyebrow and looked at Cole. "I don't have any desire to understand it either." He handed the device to Cole. Then he turned his attention to Ted. "So, will you and Megan be staying or going?"

Ted blinked in surprise. "You mean, you're not going to arrest us again?"

"Why? You didn't do anything wrong. Charles was the one who threatened to kill people. He'll be stuck in jail."

Cole inched forward in his chair. "What if he tells people about time travel? It's not a good idea for this information to get into the wrong hands."

Aaron laughed. "Let him. No one's going to believe him. It'll just make him look like a fool, and if there's one thing Charles Nicholas can't stand, it's looking like a fool. You don't have to worry about me either. I won't say a word. As far as I'm concerned, Charles saw that you had gold and got greedy for more."

"Thank you, Marshal."

Ted joined Cole and Aaron in standing up.

After Aaron shook Cole's hand, he turned to shake Ted's hand. "I still don't know about you though."

Ted felt a flicker of irritation before Aaron winked. Ted chuckled. "Well, maybe one of these days, you'll figure me out."

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Megan paced the hospital room, looked out the window, and huffed.

Esther, who sat beside Blake who slept in the hospital bed, shook her head and closed her Bible. "I don't understand why you keep looking out there. The men will come when they're ready."

Megan turned and faced Esther. "I was there. I am a witness to the events, but your husband doesn't care about that."

"It's nothing personal. The men were there too and their testimonies are all Aaron needs."

She crossed her arms. "I don't like it. I should be there."

"You were the only woman there and you managed to cause enough of a ruckus so that Charles couldn't kill anyone. That's quite an accomplishment. Can't you be satisfied with that?"

Megan relaxed. "Well, I was the bravest one there."

## Meant To Be

"I'm sure you were."

"I didn't have a weapon to defend myself, and it's not like I have the strength that a man does."

"True."

She glanced at Esther, wondering if the woman was humoring her, but Esther's face remained expressionless, giving Megan no true indicator as to how she felt. She sighed and sat next to her friend. "I should get used to it. Women are excluded from certain things."

Smiling, Esther patted her hand. "I know that wherever it is you came from, women were allowed more of a say, but is it really that bad in Fargo?"

She thought over Esther's inquiry. "No, it's not, especially when I have a husband who loves me as much as Ted does."

"There you go. Maybe it's not where you are but who you're with that makes all the difference."

She reached out and squeezed Esther's hand. "You're right."

Blake groaned.

Megan leaned forward. "Blake?"

His eyes slowly opened. "I'm not dead?"

"No. The doctor said the bullet went right through your shoulder. You're going to be just fine, but you need to rest up for a few days before you can leave. The doctor needs to make sure you don't come down with an infection."

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Okay."

"It's good to see that you're awake." Esther stood up. "I'll get the nurse."

Once Esther left the room, Megan whispered, "Cole has the time machine, but he said he's going to return it to you. You can return it to the correct time as soon as you are well enough to leave."

He opened his eyes again and smiled. "Good. I hoped he'd do the right thing in the end."

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## Two Weeks Later

Blake, Cole, Megan and Ted stood in an alley close to the train station.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go back?” Blake asked Cole.

Cole tipped his hat back. “I’m sure. There’s nothing waiting for me back there, but I might have something waiting for me here. If I don’t go find out, I’ll always regret it.”

“What do you want me to tell the police?”

He shrugged. “Tell them I’m no longer alive. By the time you get back to the future, it’ll be the truth.”

“I’ll do that.” He shook Cole’s hand. “Good luck.” Then he looked at Ted and Megan. “And you two are sure you want to stay here too?”

“Yes. We’re meant to be here.” Megan caressed the folded letter in her hand. She’d debated whether or not to make this request, and as much as she hated to interfere with time, she hated to leave her mother worrying about her. Taking a deep breath, she held out the letter. “Will you give this to my mother? Her name is Veronica Crane, and she’ll be at the Amtrak station in Indianapolis on April 22 at 6:30 in the morning. That’s when I boarded the train. She has blond hair and will be wearing a green sweater with black slacks.”

“Yes, I will,” Blake promised. He took the letter. “It’s just as well I start there and come off the train in Minneapolis when it’s due to pull in around 11pm. I just have to make sure I don’t bump into myself.”

He programmed the device and disappeared. The three stood still, silent for a moment, before they turned and left the alley. It was weird to know Blake had just traveled into the future

## Meant To Be

in that split second. And Megan realized that by the time her mother got that letter, it would be over a hundred years old.

Cole smiled at them. "Well, I need to catch a train. Thanks, Ted. Thanks, Megan."

They nodded and watched as he made his way down the busy street to the train station.

Next to her, Ted extended his arm to her. "Ready to go home?"

She slipped her hand around the crook of his arm. "Yes. Let's go home."

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### Three Days Later

Cole's heart raced as he pulled back the reins of the horse he had bought in town. He'd sold his ring, something he was glad to do. He might as well put *his* past behind him, but he wondered if he had a future here. He'd spent the past week and a half planning what he'd tell Penelope.

He took his time in getting down from the horse. How could he explain everything to her? Would she even listen? He tied the reins to the post in front of the small barn on her property. Once again, he ran through a list of possible things he could tell her. But would she listen? She had every right to slam the door on his face. Or maybe she'd point his way back to town.

He looked at her cabin. Her door was open because of the hot weather. She didn't even have a screen door to protect her from the mosquitoes. That was something he would have to rectify if she'd allow him back into her life.

He strengthened his resolve. He'd go up to her and beg her to take him back. What did he have to lose?

She came out of the house, wearing male gloves and a hat. He'd been with her long enough to know that she wore those

gloves to weed the garden. He watched her for a moment. She was beautiful. The prairie winds loosened several strands of her hair and made her skirt flap wildly, just as wildly as his heart was beating.

Her eyes met his and she stood still.

It was now or never. He'd come too far to turn back now. He lumbered forward, his steps uncertain but propelling him to her. Taking his hat off, he tried to gauge the reaction on her face. He couldn't tell if she was happy or not. He stopped a foot in front of her, too nervous to get any closer.

*This is it.*

"I'm sorry," he began, his hands trembling. "I shouldn't have left you. I love you, Penelope. I don't deserve you. You're a good woman, but I've made a real mess of my life. I've done things I'm not proud of, and after I tell you what they are, you may not want to be with me. You see, I—"

"Are you married?" she interrupted.

The question surprised him. "No."

"I thought when you left me, it was because you were already married. I thought you had a wife to go back to."

"No. I was married, but I got a divorce two years ago. I caught her sleeping with my brother. But there are other things, things you should know."

She stepped forward, bridging the gap between them. "Cole, I don't care what you've done. I just care about who you are. The past doesn't matter. You can't change it."

He hadn't expected this. He'd hoped, he'd prayed, he'd wished, but he hadn't expected her only concern to be his marital status. Despite his effort to not cry, he felt a tear trickle down his cheek.

Smiling, she reached up and brushed it away.

He took her hand in his and kissed it. "I love you. I want to make a life here with you. Will you come to town with me? We'll leave right away and find that preacher you mentioned."

## Meant To Be

She laughed. "I'll marry you, Cole. But we should have something to eat first. Then we need to get ready for the trip."

"Alright, but let's be quick about it. I've waited too long to meet someone like you, and I don't want to waste any more time."

She kissed him, a gentle kiss, the first of many to come. And the future before him loomed bright.

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October 4, 1899

Megan held five-month-old Paul in her arms. She sat in the chair on the porch and watched the sunset. The diamond on her wedding ring sparkled in the remaining sunlight. She smiled. Sure, the diamond wasn't as big as the one that Buddy swallowed, but she liked it much more because Ted gave it to her.

A horse neighed, breaking her out of her thoughts. She pointed to Ted as he waved to her and rode his horse into the barn. "Your father's home. See?"

The baby, of course, just grunted and went back to sleep. She chuckled. When he got older, he'd be running out to welcome his pa home.

"Megan?" a familiar voice called out to her.

Curious, she stood up and walked the length of the porch until she came to the front door. Her heart skipped a beat. "Mom?"

Beside her mother stood Blake. Still holding a now alert Paul, Megan embraced her mother, letting the tears fall down her cheeks. Blake smiled at them and walked down the porch steps to give them privacy.

"I didn't think I was ever going to see you again," Megan whispered.

Her mother returned her hug, also crying. "My dear, Meg. How I've missed you."

"I missed you too." Reluctant, Megan pulled away. "Did you get my letter from Blake?"

"I did. I had just said good-bye to you and you went on the train when he came up to me. It's been five years for me since that morning. I'm only allowed to stay here for a few minutes, and I can't come see you again. Though we know of time travel, we aren't supposed to interfere with people living in the past. We are to be observers only. And to be honest, I wouldn't have been able to afford the trip, but Blake talked to Christian Jacob, explained who you were, and after Christian searched further back into his genealogy, he allowed Blake to bring me here." She laughed. "I guess being the mother of his great-great-grandmother means I have special privileges."

"Well, if it weren't for us, he wouldn't have been born." Megan smiled widely. "I'm glad to see you."

"It's good to see you too. I wanted to come and ask you how things are. I see that you got the child you wanted."

"Yes, and I got a good husband too." Megan handed Paul to her mother. "I know Ted isn't like Mike, but he treats me very well."

"That's all I truly wanted for you. I'm glad to see that you're happy. And I admit, I chose this time to visit because I knew you'd just had your first child. I also wanted to see you in person. Pictures are fine, of course, but they aren't as good as the real thing."

Megan frowned. "Pictures?"

"Yes." Careful to keep holding Paul who reached for her hair and lightly pulled, she reached into her pocket and handed Megan a photograph.

It was faded with time, but Megan could tell who was in the picture. Ted stood behind her, she was sitting in a chair holding a baby, and two boys sat at her feet.

## Meant To Be

"It was taken in 1903. I keep it on my nightstand in a frame. I wanted to bring it to show you what your future looks like."

Megan laughed and wiped her eyes. She was thrilled but for some reason, she couldn't stop crying. "It's strange to know all of this will happen."

"That's the irony of going back in time, I guess."

Megan gave the picture back to her and studied the joy in her mother's eyes. "What's your life like?"

"I remarried a year ago."

"Did you? Who is he?"

"His name is Aidan Landon. He's Blake's brother. Guess who introduced us?"

Megan laughed again. "Is he good to you?"

"Yes. I missed your father after he passed away. He hasn't taken your father's place, but I love him just as much."

"Good." Megan had feared her mother would spend the rest of her life alone, and now that she knew her mother had someone to care for her, she felt at peace with being separated from her. "I think of you a lot."

"I think of you too. You'll always be my little girl."

Megan glanced over her shoulder and saw Ted making his way toward them. "I want you to meet Ted." When he reached them, she introduced him to her mother.

After a couple of minutes, Blake came up to tell her mother that they had to return to the future. Megan hugged her mother one last time before her mother handed Paul back to her and went to Blake.

"Thank you, Blake," Megan said.

He grinned. "It's the least I could do for the woman who saved my life."

They waved and Megan and Ted waved back.

Once they disappeared, Megan turned to Ted. "She could only come once, and she wanted to see Paul. She knew how much I wanted a child."

"I'm glad you got the chance to see her again," Ted replied, smiling. "It was nice to meet her."

"I think she approved of you."

"I hope so. That sure was nice to see that picture of us, wasn't it?"

"Nice but kind of spooky. I don't think I want to know everything that's going to happen."

He leaned over to kiss her. "Well, it seems to me that Paul has a couple of younger brothers coming. We should probably start on getting them conceived."

She hid her amusement. "My mother just came for a visit and all you can think about is sex."

"Sex? Is that what you think this is all about? For your information, I'm thinking of the future. We have to do our part to make sure Paul gets those brothers. This is serious business. How is that picture taken in 1903 ever going to happen if we don't get those kids born? We can't mess with what's meant to be."

"I'll tell you what. You get supper done and we'll talk about making sure things happen as they are meant to."

"It's a deal."

She watched as he ran into the house to start supper. She sighed and glanced at Paul who babbled at her. "You're right, he does have a strange way of rationalizing things, but at least he cooks. I guess the least I can do is humor him. Besides, I kind of like his cobbler."

Paul giggled and she kissed him on the head before she entered the house to join Ted in the kitchen.

Though Ted hadn't peeked at the other side of that photograph, she had, and one of the things she saw were the names and birthdays of the children. He had a very good chance of reaching his goal that night. After all, Anthony would be born

## Meant To Be

on July 27, 1900. That was approximately nine months from now. And who was she to interfere with the past? If it was meant to be, it was meant to be.

