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The following afternoon, Lars and Marnie held hands beneath a wisteria-covered bower at Dogwood Corners while Pastor Whitting joined them in holy matrimony.

Ilsa stood next to Marnie as her attendant while Kade served as Lars' attendant. Sadie and Noah fidgeted beside them, happy smiles on their faces as they witnessed the exchange of vows.

The past twenty-four hours had been like a wonderful dream for Marnie. After they shared their exciting news with family and friends, Ilsa insisted on giving both Marnie and Sadie dresses she'd recently made for them in secret. The gowns were perfect for wedding attire. Nora took charge of baking a layered white cake while Aundy gathered flowers for bouquets and decorations.

Caterina was the one who suggested they wed beneath the bower of wisteria. The lavender blooms provided a perfect backdrop for the ceremony.

Although Lars and Marnie envisioned only a handful of people attending their wedding, several dozen gathered on the back lawn of Dogwood Corners to celebrate their nuptials.

However, as Garrett walked Marnie down the aisle, she didn't notice the guests. Her gaze rested on the handsome man who'd restored her hope and rescued her from herself.

Adamant she would not cry, Marnie blinked back her tears and offered Lars a tender look as Garrett passed her over to his keeping.

Vaguely aware of Tony taking photographs, Aundy sniffing as she held Sophie, and Caterina shushing her boys when they begged to stand next to their father, Marnie focused her attention on the words the pastor asked her to repeat.

At the end of the brief but heartfelt ceremony, Lars' eyes twinkled with mischief when Pastor Whitting gave him permission to kiss his bride.

He took a step closer to her, wrapping a brawny arm around her waist while his other hand caressed her cheek. "The first of many kisses between man and wife," he whispered, and lowered his head.

"Give her a good one, Lars!" Noah cheered, making everyone laugh.

Lars glanced down at the boy and winked. "I plan on it, son." True to his word, Lars kissed her ardently, making it clear he was wholly entranced with his bride. Finally, he raised his head with a cocky grin.

Pink blossoms bloomed in Marnie's cheeks as some of the men whistled and clapped.

"Please join us for a delicious meal," Lars said, inviting the attendees to tables set up on the side of the house beneath the shade of the trees.

After the meal was eaten and most of the cake had been consumed, Marnie and Lars walked around the yard, speaking to each guest, thanking them for coming.

Much to her surprise, Lars had invited her friends from Miss Clementine's place. Gertie, Daisy, Lewis and Miss Clementine herself arrived just before the ceremony began. Pleased to see them, Marnie hugged them all again.

"I dun tol' ya, sweet pea, ya jes needed to look in the right place to find the right man." Gertie grinned and hugged Marnie again. "Look what a fine one ya dun found."

Marnie looked up at Lars with her heart in her eyes. "I certainly did, Gertie."

"We must get back to town, but I am truly happy for you, Marnie. May you have a lifetime of happiness together," Miss Clementine said, giving Marnie another hug and handing Lars a paper-wrapped parcel. "That's a little gift from me to you, Mr. Thorsen."

"Thank you, ma'am." Lars tipped his head to Miss Clementine.

Together, he and Marnie watched them leave. Before long, the rest of the guests departed. Noah went with Caterina and Kade while Aundy and Garrett took Sadie and Sophie home with them.

Soon, Marnie and Lars were alone at Dogwood Corners. Shea and Arthur Meade volunteered to stay at Marnie's apartment in town for the night, leaving the entire house to the newlywed couple.

Eager to make the most of their time together, Lars swept Marnie into his arms and carried her up the broad steps to the front door.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Thorsen," he said, toeing the door open and stepping inside the grand entry foyer.

Marnie wasn't sure she'd ever grow accustomed to living in such a luxurious house, but she looked forward to the opportunity.

"I can't quite believe this is all real," she said as Lars used his boot heel to close the door.

A bouquet of fragrant flowers filled the air with a spicy scent from a round table near the door. Marnie looked around, admiring the shiny wood of the stairs to the gleam on the polished floors. "Arthur and Shea certainly do a wonderful job of caring for Dogwood Corners."

"They do," Lars agreed. He took a step toward the stairs then stopped. "Do you need anything to eat, something to drink?"

"No, sugar, I'm just fine." She kissed his cheek. "I'm so, so happy to be here with you."

Flames flickered in Lars' blue eyes. "In that case..." He hurried up the stairs with her.

Marnie laughed and lightly tapped his shoulder. "You crazy man! Put me down before you injure yourself carrying me up all these stairs."

"You don't weight as much as a sack of feed and I kind of like having you snuggled up close in arms." Lars used his elbow to push open the door to the master suite and stepped inside.

Marnie had taken a quick look through the house the previous day, but she'd been so excited about marrying Lars, she hadn't paid any mind to the bedrooms.

Now, though, as Lars carried her into the expansive room, she sucked in a gulp of air at her exquisite surroundings. The room was bigger than the entire apartment above Ilsa's store.

White curtains billowed in the breeze blowing in the windows and open door that led to a balcony. Soft carpeting covered the floor. In addition to a huge bed covered in expensive cream-colored linens, there was a desk and chair, a sofa, a rocking chair, tables and lamps. A bookshelf sat against one wall with Marnie's bright pink chair beside it.

"You brought my chair?" She turned her gaze from the room to her husband.

“Sure did.” Lars set her on her feet and grinned. “Like I said yesterday, it won’t take long for you to fill all the bedrooms with youngsters. We’re gonna need a place to get away from all the craziness of this house and running an orphanage. I want this room to be our haven, a place where we can escape the world and rest in each other.”

“I like the sound of that,” Marnie said, standing on her tiptoes and pulling Lars’ mouth down to meet hers.

Lost for several long moments in the fervent exchange, he raised his head and grinned at her. “You might want to check out the rest of our haven.” He pointed to a door across the room.

Marnie opened it and fought back the urge to clap her hands in glee. The large bathroom held the biggest bathtub she’d ever seen, along with every modern convenience anyone could want. “Oh, Lars, this is amazing.”

He slipped his arms around her waist from behind and kissed her neck. “I think we’ll put that tub to good use.”

Nearly overcome with emotions, with her longing for the gentle, caring man who’d changed her life, Marnie turned around and smiled at him. “Are you going to open the gift from Miss Clementine?”

Lars had left the parcel on a table downstairs. The last thing he wanted to do was leave her long enough to retrieve it. “Can’t it wait until later?”

Marnie shrugged. “Don’t you think it’s odd she said the gift was for you? I’m just curious to see what it could possibly be.”

To humor his bride, Lars nodded his head. “I’ll fetch it, but don’t you dare run off anywhere.”

“I won’t move an inch,” Marnie said, offering him a flirtatious smile as he raced out the door. Giggles burst out of her as she listened to him thud down the stairs. His boots clattered across the entry floor then she heard the sound of him charging upstairs.

He rushed into the room, only slightly winded, holding the present in his hand. At the wild look in his eyes, she laughed. “I dare you to do that when the children are here.”

“Maybe I will,” he said, casting a teasing smile her way as he walked across the room and handed her the paper-wrapped parcel. “You open it.”

“Nope. Miss Clementine said it was for you.” Marnie shoved her hands behind her back and shook her head. “You open it.”

Lars yanked off the ribbon and tore away the paper. The pale pink lace and satin creation in his hands brought a broad smile to his face. He held it out and took a step closer to Marnie. “Well, sweet thing, now I know why she said this was for me.” Wagging his eyebrows, he held the outfit out to her.

“My gracious!” Marnie said, shocked at the gift. She’d sold all of her working girl outfits, determined to put every bit of that life behind her. The scandalous piece of clothing Lars held in his hands was nicer than anything she’d ever owned in her days as a harlot, and much more revealing. “No proper lady would be caught dead in that!”

Lars chuckled. “That’s why I’m extremely glad you’re alive and well, Marnie. I look forward to seeing you wear this, when it’s just the two of us here in this room.” He tossed the outfit onto a chair and took a step closer to his wife. “However, right now, I’m much more interested in seeing you without that gorgeous dress on.”

Despite the years she’d spent as a soiled dove, Marnie blushed at Lars’ words and the look of pure wanting in his eyes.

The moment she ducked her head, he tipped her chin up with his index finger and grinned again. “Don’t you go getting embarrassed, wife of mine. Not now. Not ever. I love you for who you are, who you’ll become.”

He turned her around and slowly unfastened the buttons on the back of her gown. “I love you, Marnie, with my whole heart.” He pushed her dress off her arms, watching it slide to the floor before he stepped around her and gave her a roguish smile. “And I greatly look forward to loving every bit of you.”

“Lars,” Marnie whispered, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him down for a deep, passionate kiss. “You’re far, far better than any dream I’ve ever had, and I promise to spend the rest of my life loving you with all my heart. Thank you for giving me the gift of your love, sugar.”

“I’m just getting started, sweet thing.” Lars swept her into his arms again, into the beginning of their future together.

*The End*