

THE
Backcountry
BRIDES
COLLECTION

8 Eighteenth-Century Women Seek Love on Colonial America's Frontier

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COLLECTION

Shannon McNear, Carrie Fancett Pagels,
Angela K. Couch, Debra E. Marvin,
Gabrielle Meyer, Jennifer Hudson Taylor,
Pegg Thomas, Denise Weimer

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*Shenandoah
Hearts*

by Carrie Fancett Pagels

Dedication

To Jeffrey D. and Clark J. Pagels
and to my Shenandoah ancestors

Acknowledgments

Thank you Jesus, God, and Holy Spirit for making my writing ministry possible!

I'm grateful for my son and husband for understanding and letting me use some of my limited energy for what God has called me to do.

Thank you to my amazing critique partner, Kathleen Maher.

Appreciation to Andrea Stephens for being my Beta reader!

A group hug to my Pagels Pals team.

I've had this dream of a colonial collection of backwoods/backcountry brides for a long time—ever since I started the *Colonial American Christian Fiction* blog many years ago. What an absolute delight to have that dream become a reality; thanks to the amazing authors who have come in on this collection! So happy to have both longtime *Colonial Quills* blog members Shannon McNear, Jennifer Hudson Taylor, and Debra E. Marvin, as well as newer members Pegg Thomas, Gabrielle Meyer, Angela Couch, and Denise Weimer.

Thank you to my agent, Joyce Hart, for her assistance
and to Becky Germany for helping us achieve this vision!

I “borrowed” a lot of names in this story. My orthopedic doctor, who keeps me mobile, makes an appearance as fort surgeon. My cousin Scott Davis got a twist on his name, which is used for the wagon master. Real-life Lieutenant Colonel Matthew Ruckman's name is used for a militia member, and his son's name for his fictional son in this story. Neighbor Donna Lilly's namesake gives my hero some advice. And there are more! Thank you all!

Author's Note

Eighteenth-century Virginia residents were happy to welcome settlers to their backcountry, even if they didn't share in the Commonwealth's mandated Anglican religion. Newcomers put a physical barrier between the primarily coastal residents and the Native Americans and French who dwelt farther inland. At the time of this story (and until the Civil War), Virginia also included West Virginia and other wide swaths of land farther west. When reference is made to the characters in my story going on a mission to check on the Foyles in the far-western reaches of Virginia, that mission was to what is now West Virginia. Although the Foyles were a real family and an actual expedition was made to their home, this event is fictionalized in my story. According to Norman L. Baker's book *French & Indian War: In Frederick County, Virginia*, the attack on the Foyle family was even noted on maps of the day.

Long rifles, rather than muskets, were in use in the backcountry during this time frame by Germans and other immigrant people whose gunsmiths brought this technology with them.

My Roush ancestors lived in the Shenandoah Valley during this time frame. One of my ancestors was born in Fort Holman. Our *Colonial Quills* authors, Susan Craft, Carla Olson Gade, Elaine Marie Cooper, Kathleen L. Maher, Pat Iacuzzi, Lynne Squire, Kelly Long, and Dina Sleiman, participated with me in a Christmas serial story set at the fictional "Fort Providence" in the Shenandoah Valley. You may enjoy stopping by www.ColonialQuills.com and looking for our anthology and reading that before reading my novella.

Prologue

Philadelphia
1753

Ladysmith, you have a gentleman caller—maybe two.” The voice of her employer, Jacob Owens, held a slight tease. Heart lurching against her chest, Magdalene dropped the large silver spoon she’d been engraving. She covered it with a polishing cloth and rose from her workbench in the back of the Owens’ store. Her hands shook as she rose, and she fumbled to place them in the heavy work pockets which hung over her apron from a band tied around her waist. She parted the heavy brocade curtains that separated her work nook from the front and stepped through, inhaling the scent of peppermint and cinnamon.

She met Jacob’s inquisitive gaze and tried to assume an innocent face. For surely, she shouldn’t have been daydreaming and engraving “Magdalene and Jacob” on the large spoon, even if she had paid for the piece from her earnings.

“Your brother is here.” He lifted his chin over his shoulder. “Up front picking a treat from the candy.”

“And the other person?” She frowned. There was no gentleman caller in her life, save for this handsome Welshman, her employer. And even then, he’d never declared any intentions toward her.

“That wagon master, Davis, is waiting for you on the walkway.”

How embarrassing. Mama and Papa had demanded her answer last night about whether she’d relocate with them to the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia or not. Magdalene had begged for one more day to make her decision, hoping that Jacob would finally profess his feelings toward her. “I will speak with him and be right back.”

He frowned. “Mr. Davis isn’t known for making social calls during the day.”

No, he wasn’t. Scott Williams Davis, their three-surname wagon master, was a tight-lipped man who kept to himself. “I’m sure this won’t take long.”

She removed her heavy apron and set it aside then exited the room, Jacob holding back the curtain for her and casting a skeptical glance her way. What should she tell the wagon master? Her entire family was headed for the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. Already three of her seven brothers had established a large cabin for them and had completed all the fences and brought in some livestock. Mother and Father had already begun packing their belongings. The remaining four brothers were assisting, and all were excited to go.

“How much candy should I let Michi have?” Jacob smiled. He knew how much her youngest brother loved treats.

“Only a couple of the sweets from the jar this time, *ja*?” She grinned back at him, and stifled the longing to reach out and squeeze his hand with affection. She’d been trained as a silversmith by her grandfather in Germany, but it was Jacob who’d brought out the artistry in her work. Jacob who’d helped her see how much people enjoyed her creations. And Jacob who had convinced Papa that he’d only have her work in his shop on days when Mama wasn’t feeling so poorly.

Jacob gave her a salute and she laughed. His older brother, an officer in the military, had visited recently. Surely Colonel Dafydd Owens wasn’t putting ideas of army service into Jacob’s head, was he? The only thing Jacob had mentioned about his brother was his complaint that Dafydd addressed him by their father’s Welsh version of his name, *Jago*.

As she passed Michi, Magdalene leaned in and kissed the top of his reddish-brown hair. He smelled of grass, sweat, and sugar. “How is Mama, little brother?”

“Fine.”

So he wasn’t at Owens’ Shoppe for Mama. “Anything wrong?”

“*Nein*. I just brought Mr. Davis to you.”

“Oh?” Why was the wagon master pushing her so hard to make a decision that he’d disturb her at work?



When Magda exited his shop, she took a bit of Jacob’s heart with her. He stood for a moment, staring through the wavy glass that he was fortunate to have in his storefront. This lull in activity, right after lunchtime, was a welcome time during which he’d normally be reconciling his ledgers. Would he now have to reconcile himself with losing her?

Footfalls behind him announced that Michi was wandering the store, something Magda had been firm that he mustn’t do. The lad pushed aside the curtains to the back.

“Michi?”

“Hmm?” The boy entered Magda’s workroom.

“You belong out front, remember?”

“Just looking.”

The door opened and Mrs. Lilly entered, swinging her empty basket from one arm and adjusting her panniers with the other as she gracefully made her way to the display of teacups on the far wall.

“Good day, Mrs. Lilly.”

“Good day, Mr. Owens.” She inclined her head to the row of china cups and saucers she’d been admiring the previous day. “I’m going to make my choice.”

Something clanged onto the floor in the back. “Excuse me for a moment.” Jacob hurried toward Magda’s workspace.

By the time he got there, Michi was standing, hands clasped behind his back and rocking side to side.

“What fell?”

“Nothing.” Michi’s lips pulled in tight.

“All right, but come on out of there.” Drawing in a deep breath, Jacob gently touched the boy’s thin shoulder and directed him out of the room.

This child, more than any of the Sehler brothers, reminded Jacob of his oldest brother, Llywellyn, whose mind was ever inquisitive. Even now, Llywellyn searched the Shenandoah Valley for the right spot to mine and to build a large forge. Between Llywellyn’s constant pleas for Jacob to join him and Dafydd’s warnings of a militia buildup needed in that region, Jacob was torn. Should he continue to run this prosperous store, or was it time to move on? Magda was doing so well with her designs. And if it wasn’t for the emotional reserve she’d always shown him, he’d have asked to court her long ago.

Michi took two steps forward and pointed outside. “Look! I think Mr. Davis is finally proposing to her!”

What? Heat seared Jacob’s chest.

Mrs. Lilly turned to watch too.

Was Davis the reason for Magda’s reticence toward Jacob? Was it, as little Michi had been insisting all along, that Magda wasn’t interested in Jacob as a suitor—that she had another intended suitor who was approved by their parents? Now, right outside his business, the wagon master, who had to be twice Magda’s age, pressed his tricornered cap to his chest, leaning in earnestly to speak with Magda.

She didn’t reply. *Thank God.*

Michi pushed past Jacob and went out to join the two. He whispered something in his sister’s ear. She glanced toward the building and, spotting Jacob, stared for a moment, longing on her face. Yet she was apparently about to commit herself to this much older man. Granted, Davis was well-off and attractive to the ladies, but Magda had never spoken of him, other than very recently. And even then, it was only in relation to the plans her family had to go with this man at the lead, to the Shenandoah Valley.

Magda slowly redirected her attention to Davis and then nodded.

Jacob’s gut clenched.

Mrs. Lilly sighed. “That was not a very gentlemanly way of making a proposal of marriage, was it?”

“I couldn’t agree more, ma’am.”

Outside, the little scene continued to unfold as Michi threw his arms around his sister, kissed her, and then jumped up and down. Davis smiled and wrapped his arms

around brother and sister for a moment. That was the oddest sort of proposal Jacob could imagine. But since he himself had made none at all, what did he really know? And since he couldn't hear him, perhaps Davis had waxed eloquent and made all manner of pretty speeches to the woman Jacob cared for so deeply.

One thing was for sure and for certain. Life would never be the same once Magda left Philadelphia.

"Sometimes, young man, you have to fight for what you want." Mrs. Lilly's clipped words caught Jacob's attention and he turned to face her. But her gaze was so fixed on Jacob it didn't seem she was referring to Mr. Davis.

"Ma'am?"

"I have eyes in my head, Mr. Owens. Certainly you do too." She smiled and nodded at Magda as she reentered the shop. "That is all I shall say about the matter. I believe the rest is up to you."

Chapter 1

*Shenandoah Valley, Virginia
Late January, 1754*

Rolling blue hills rose up in the distance, the sight of them still thrilling to Magdalene after all these months. Papa slowed the horses and Magdalene clutched the rifle on her lap. The first day they spied the Blue Ridge Mountains from their wagon train, Mr. Davis had bid them stop and set up camp. What a glorious feast for the eyes. They were almost to their destination. And that's when she'd finally humbled herself and said her apologies to Jacob and given him her thanks.

Who'd have thought that her employer and friend could have rescued her from so much misfortune over the course of their journey? The first time was Jacob's own fault, though. Magdalene had been in the back of her family's wagon, searching for a big kettle to put over the fire, when she'd heard Jacob's distinctively lyrical Welsh-accented voice. She'd been so startled he was there that she'd fallen backwards—right into his arms. He'd held her there for what seemed like the longest time, looking down at her like she was a long-lost treasure. Then Michi had come looking for her, and the kettle, and had yelled at the poor man. Her cheeks heated with the memory of Papa hastening back to check on them as if they were doing something improper.

She cast a glance at her father as he flicked the reins and urged the horses on to the market.

“We'll get all the goods we need, *lieblich*, for a good feast, ja?”

“Ja. It'll be wonderfully good—especially if Widow Martin has the dried apples she promised us at church.” The Sehlers' little German Lutheran church was no building as such. They met in a clockwise fashion in the cabins built in a circle in their settlement, the second one out from Fort Holman. The residents in Mrs. Martin's community, closest to the fort, sometimes joined them, Jacob included.

“Ja.” His lips twitched.

Tomorrow, Jacob was coming to visit, with his officer brother accompanying him. Papa said there was something important to announce. *Was this to finally be the day?*

“The boys are taking turns roasting the pig and your *mutter* feels well enough to bake.”

“Mama does seem happier here.” And more energetic.

“Ja. The hills remind her of the Old Country.”

Did it also remind her of all the wars there? Magdalene shivered and drew her wool blanket farther up on her lap.

The wheels creaked over the frozen earth, and soon they were to the next settlement, populated by another twenty German and English families. This village too had set up their homes to face in, but formed a square, with their market taking place in the center the first Wednesday of the month.

Some of the cabins were wide and low while others stood two stories and yet others were only a single room deep.

A flash of red near a far cabin caught Magdalene’s eye. “Soldiers, Papa.”

“Ja, they like to know what is going on in each settlement.”

The redcoats were a reminder of the threats the settlers faced on the frontier. Her heartbeat sped up as she considered what could happen to them if they were attacked.



“Making an offer of marriage now is ludicrous.” Dafydd paced the wooden floor of their quarters. A thin beam of sunlight pierced the keeping room’s single window.

“Should you wait any longer?” Not when tensions with the French and the Indians were likely to resurface in the spring, as Jacob had been repeatedly told by Dafydd himself, scouts, and army personnel. “Things are at a lull, finally.”

“Do you believe this quiet will persist?” His brother laughed. “Have you any idea the distress Charity shall feel if I am killed?”

“This is why you have not yet proposed marriage to Widow Martin?” Jacob sat down on one of the upholstered chairs he’d brought with him from Philadelphia.

“Do you think she’d like to be twice a widow, Jago? Dafydd’s harsh tone held a bitterness Jacob had never heard before.

“You’re God now?” Daffyd was sounding like their father, and even using Jacob’s Welsh name as Father did. “You know this?”

Dafydd rubbed his arms and continued pacing, his boots thumping on the wide planks of the wooden floor and then hushing as he crossed the carpet to the fireplace. He lifted a log from the woodpile and set it atop the others in the fireplace, the bottom logs blazing red into coals.

“I don’t want to chance it.” Dafydd turned and scowled. “I believe someone else recently spoke those words.”

“I was tired.” And they were speaking in generalities. “It’s different for you. You know Mrs. Martin cares for you and she is without a protector.” Whereas Magda and he had not had any private moments together since they’d arrived. She was constantly surrounded by her brothers. If only he’d used their quiet times at work in Philadelphia to tell her how he felt. Even so, her youngest brother never lost an

opportunity to conjecture why Magda would prefer a German husband rather than a Welshman. That being the case, why did she and her family encourage the wagon master's friendship? Davis was a fellow Welshman. And wouldn't little Michi be surprised to know that Jacob was a quarter German and named for his maternal grandfather? Mother had gotten her way with Jacob's name, but Father had prevailed with the rest, giving them Welsh names.

"You're almost thirty years yourself, with no room to be lecturing me about marrying."

Twenty-eight wasn't thirty years, but Jacob wouldn't belabor the point. If Mother hadn't died so young, would he and Dafydd have married earlier? "Maybe our sisters had the right of it—marrying young and beginning their families."

"Agreed. I'm going to speak with Charity today. But first I shall practice my speech."

Jacob chuckled. "We're too much alike in this way. You're overthinking. Just speak from your heart."

Dafydd's mouth opened, but then he clamped his lips tightly together and went to the oak desk by the window and sat down. He dipped his quill pen into the inkwell and commenced writing what was sure to be an eloquent and masterful speech.



Papa secured the wagon and helped Magdalene down. Their breath made puffs swirl around them in the chill air. He patted her shoulder. "I'm going to get Mr. Davis and I will be right back."

She couldn't help grinning. Mr. Davis had been pining over Mrs. Martin for months. A widower himself, it was surprising the man had been married before. He was so quiet and reserved, how had Mr. Davis gotten the words out for a proposal? If rumors were to be believed, his wife's father had chosen him over her other suitors because he thought Davis, an expert marksman, could protect her better. If such were the means of qualifying for marriage, then Jacob surely would be her top choice, for he'd proven to be a crack shot with the militia.

A gust of icy wind assailed her as she approached the widow's door. Magdalene tugged her wool cloak tighter around her shoulders. Before she could knock, the door opened.

"I heard the wagon. A welcome sound." The tiny woman gestured for Magdalene to enter.

The scent of cinnamon and apples filled the square room, which was dominated by the fireplace. A heavy iron trivet propped on the hearth held a bubbling apple pie.

"Come in. Have a seat." Mrs. Martin pointed to a wingback chair upholstered in a dark green and blue brocade.

"That is just like one I saw in Mr. Owens' shop in Philadelphia."

“One and the same.” The older woman smiled and adjusted the creamy lace fichu at her bodice. “He gave it to me—from his own cabin mind you—when he saw that my rocking chair had broken.”

That was Jacob. Kind and considerate. How many times had his father, the previous proprietor of the shop, fussed at Jacob that he shouldn’t charge people less just because they were widowed or poor? And Jacob always set aside lightly damaged, but still-good merchandise, to distribute to those in need.

The widow’s brow furrowed as she glanced out the window. “I thought Mr. Davis would have arrived by now.”

“My father should be here soon.”

“Is he bringing Mr. Davis?”

“He is.”

Mrs. Martin looked as skittish as a young colt. “Might I ask a favor?” Her peridot eyes widened.

Magdalene stiffened. The last favor she’d done, for one of her brothers, had resulted in Papa almost putting a switch to Michi’s behind for the prank he’d pulled with her unwitting assistance. “What is it?”

“Could you possibly take something over to Jacob Owens and his brother for me?”

“Are they here today?” Jacob had been gone so often with his suttler duties, supplying the forts, and his brother off with the army, that she’d not expected to see them. Hope rose and her heart began beating faster.

“Yes, I saw them earlier and promised them cornbread.”

“If only I could have mine turn out like yours does.”

“It’s the corn I mix into the mush.”

“Food is the way to a man’s heart, that is what Mama says.” Not that Magdalene’s cooking was anything special.

Mrs. Martin’s cheeks pinked up. “Oh, I’m not trying to sweeten either Owens man up. Heavens, they are both a decade or more younger than myself.”

“I did not mean that. I was just commenting.”

The woman sank into the other upholstered chair. “I hope Colonel Owens doesn’t think I’ve meant anything by my gifts of food.”

“He is a military officer and I’m sure grateful for any cooking you do for him.”

Mrs. Martin pulled at her lacy-edged fichu again. “What I really wish is for Mr. Davis to finally speak plain with me.”

“That is why Papa is bringing him.”

“Can you leave us alone for a little bit?” Her cheeks were rosy and her eyes wide. “Can you make an excuse?”

“I will manage it.” Magdalene looked toward the table and saw the golden square of bread. “I will take the cornbread to the Owens brothers and say it is for Jacob since he’d fussed over it at our last dinner when you were there.”

“Yes, that would be good.”

Magdalene was happy to oblige Mrs. Martin. Her calling on Jacob and Dafydd wouldn't seem so bold if she were bringing a gift at the behest of Mrs. Martin.

“I will send your father over to help Matthew Ruckman with the new gun rack he is building.”

Magdalene cringed. They'd never had the need of rifles over the door in Philadelphia.



The rap at the door caused Jacob to cease polishing his long rifle. He set it on the table and answered the door.

Magda stood there holding a plate, a towel beneath it. He inhaled the scent of fresh cornbread. The rosy color of her cape complimented the wind-induced blush in her cheeks. Rooted to the spot, he drank the sight of her in. She was so beautiful. So sweet. So kind.

“May I enter?” She chuckled, as though she might have read his thoughts.

“Certainly!” He waved her inside. A gust of chill wind accompanied her before he closed and barred the door.

She removed her hood, revealing a mass of reddish-gold hair. Had she left her tresses unbraided deliberately? He stifled the desire to reach out and lift a stray lock that would likely feel as silky as it looked. He swallowed hard.

“Widow Martin sent this for you, Jacob.” Magda cocked her head at him, a glimmer of humor in her eyes.

His brother clomped heavily across the wood floor, like an oaf instead of the officer he was. He stretched out his hands. “Miss Sehler, I believe that is for me.”

Jacob gave a short laugh. “It is for me, but I will share.”

Dafydd's tawny brows knit together. “Mrs. Martin sent that for Jacob? Are you sure you understood her?”

“My hearing is perfectly fine.” Magda glanced around the room. “Where should I set the cornbread?”

“That small table by the fire.” Dafydd's voice had assumed the snobbish British tone he used with underlings.

“I shall take it.” Jacob stepped closer and reached for the plate. This near, he could see how Magda's dark eyelashes formed tiny star-like tips around her blue eyes. The warmth of the plate between them was nothing like the heat which seared his heart. He took the cornbread, his fingers brushing her gloved hands.

“Thank you.”

Jacob set the plate down on the side table. “May I take your cloak?”

She chewed her lower lip. “Yes, thank you, but I can only stay a bit. Papa and I are visiting Mrs. Martin.”

Jacob assisted her out of her cloak, enjoying the close proximity. He leaned in toward her back and inhaled the soft floral scent that wafted from her neck. He likely smelled of smoke, leather, and the salted ham that he and Dafydd had consumed for their meager breakfast.

Magda removed her gloves, a gift from him the previous winter, and handed them to him. He set them atop the pegged shelf which held the coats.

“Do come sit down, Miss Sehler.” Dafydd waved toward one of the chairs. “Get us some tea, will you, Jacob?”

Jacob grimaced, grateful his back was turned to the two. He wasn’t his brother’s servant and didn’t appreciate being treated as one.

After pouring tea and adding honey to Miss Sehler’s cup, Jacob set the floral-trimmed china cup and saucer before her on the low table.

“Thank you.” She looked up at him, her smile inviting.

“At your service, ma’am.” He bowed and she laughed.

“Where’s mine, Jago?” His brother barked his order.

Jacob scowled.

Magda sat erect as any noblewoman. “This may be an auspicious day for Mrs. Martin.”

“Why’s that?” Dafydd sipped his tea.

“I believe Mr. Davis is about to finally propose.”

Dafydd’s tea spewed past his lips and he set his cup, jangling hard, into its saucer on the table. “What?”

Joy and relief surged through Jacob. But he couldn’t, and wouldn’t, display his glee before his brother. That would be like rubbing salt into the wounds of someone who suffered, and the Bible warned against such behavior. Still, in his heart he could rejoice.

“Is that so?” Jacob set his tea down too, the contents sloshing onto the plate beneath it. “Mr. Davis is to wed Mrs. Martin?” *And not Magda?*

Relief coursed through him and he drew in a deep restorative breath, the black tea’s scent a comfort. *But poor Dafydd.*

His brother shot up. “But she is mine!”

Jacob stood, positioning himself between his brother and Magda. He attempted a laugh, which emerged as a short cough. “What my brother means is that Charity Martin has so well supplied him with excellent victuals that he fears Mr. Davis will put a stop to that.”

He turned toward his brother, who was staring out the window. If Jacob knew anything, it was that Dafydd most feared losing face in front of people. He reached out and squeezed his brother’s red-coated shoulders. “Am I not right, brother?”

“Aye, you’ve got the right of it.” Dafydd’s hushed voice, his words, were almost believable.

“But we have Miss Sehler here to help us out.”

Jacob turned to see her shocked expression.

But she recovered quickly. “Ja, we will cook for you all day tomorrow, in fact, so don’t be disheartened, Colonel Owens.”

Disheartened was far from how Jacob felt.

“Oh, I’m not.” Dafydd met his gaze. “Just concerned about our upcoming journey to the far-western regions of the Commonwealth.”

The army’s mission was to affirm the veracity of the reports that the Foyle family had indeed been slaughtered the previous year as reported.

“And the militia shall accompany us.” Dafydd looked pointedly at Jacob. “Just in case.”

Leave it to Dafydd to squash Jacob’s joy.

Chapter 2

The scent of roasted pork filled the Sehlers' yard, and with the wind lifting, likely the whole settlement, inviting friends to join them later. Magdalene crossed to the barn to feed her dog. This was supposed to be a day of celebration, but the pup didn't know that Jacob's brother had ruined the day for her. Clovis's long curly tail wagged in anticipation of the treat she had hidden in her pocket. She bent and rubbed the top of his silky head and handed him the big beef bone to gnaw on. They'd adopted the black-and-tan shepherding dog from a family friend, Guillame Richelieu. Formerly a French aristocrat, and for a time a French soldier in New France, Guy had left the army and become a scout—some said a spy. He should be back any day now from meeting with Colonel Christy in Philadelphia.

Michi lumbered across the yard, arms stacked high with firewood. "Clovis has earned his treat, and I hope I do too." Guy had named the dog for a French king, and Clovis had well earned his name, making the sheep in the field his obedient subjects.

"Ja, *bruder*, you may have a *Springerle* now, maybe two." Magda tamped down a grin. At the rate Michi was growing, it was all she and Mama could do to keep him from being hungry all the time.

He stopped walking. "Did you make them?"

Magdalene scowled at him as Clovis slumped down at her feet. "You saw Mama prepare them a few weeks ago." Time enough for them to become tender.

"Oh ja, that is right." He continued walking toward the house.

Bruders.

"I guess I can eat them then," Michi called over his shoulder.

Why was it she could repair intricate silver pieces and yet she couldn't get her baking to turn out right? Maybe her brothers were right—maybe it was her failed pastries and strudels that kept her from marrying. Or was it that she had eyes for no one but her employer, the man who'd honed her skills as a craftswoman? Or as a lady smith, which he enjoyed calling her in private.

Would Jacob return from the scouting mission to locate the Foyles? Or rather, their remains? Would he and the others be attacked? Would Indians attack them while they slept as they had reportedly done to the Foyles? Magdalene shivered as

another gust of wind ruffled her heavy shawl. A nip of icy snow portended a coming storm. Maybe the colonel wouldn't take the men further west.

Clovis got up and pranced off toward the barn, more like a pony than a canine, and Magdalene followed across the yard, the wind slowing but pushing her skirts up around her ankles.

Just outside the barn, Papa, Franz, and Norbert had set up their sausage-stuffing operation. "Good morning, Magda, *meine kleine Tochter*."

"I'm no more a little daughter, Papa." She kissed his cheek.

The scents of onion, garlic, and a multitude of pungent spices permeated the air. Norbert smiled at her in that way of his that she'd missed when they'd been apart—a grin that suggested he always had a secret, even if he didn't. Franz, who always kept busy and didn't even wear a cloak this chilly day, continued chopping pork slabs into small pieces.

Papa set his cleaver down on the block. "I will keep calling you my little daughter even when your hair is white like mine is getting."

"Or until you have a little girl of your own." Norbert winked at her. "I think Guy is due back soon. Maybe you can get him to settle here."

Franz laughed but kept chopping. Sweat soaked the front of his linsey-woolsey shirt, the one she'd sewn for him for Christmas. "If our *Schwester* threatens Guillaume that he won't get to see Clovis anymore unless he marries her, that could secure *Ein Heiratsantrag*."

Scowling at him, Magda moved closer and pinched his arm. "That pup is important to him, but not enough to make a proposal of marriage when he is already married."

Papa ceased stuffing sausage mixture into the casing. Norbert looked up from chopping meat into tiny pieces. The two exchanged a guilty look.

Magdalene cocked her head at them. "I've seen the miniature portrait he carries of his beautiful redheaded wife and his child. So don't be talking foolish when the poor man does return."

The three Sehler men's lips quirked. They weren't normally at a loss for a retort.

"So you did not know?" Magda sighed as another puff of mountain air swirled around her. "Men."

Franz finally stopped hacking at the meat. "He is widowed, Schwester. And childless."

"What?" Guy had lost his wife and child?

Papa raised a sausage-smear hand. "Speak no more of this. We have much work to do."

"Yes, Papa." She cast a sideways glance at Norbert, and his tight features revealed he wished to say much more.

"The newly engaged couple should enjoy their feast." Papa's pronouncement

meant that she must not dwell on Guy's loss. Not now.

"Yes, Papa."

"I'm sure a number of our neighbors will attend also." Norbert smirked.

Her brother knew how she and Mama didn't do well with unexpected guests. Had he invited more? If so, that meant more cooking, baking, and cleaning, plus she required a bath and had to tame her thick hair into something manageable. She'd wanted to do something special since Jacob was coming, but now she might only have time for a braid. Maybe she'd have Mama help her. And what about her clothes? She needed to air her best shift, her new gown, her best petticoat, and lace sleeves. But there was no time to wash anything but her fichu to give it time to dry. She didn't want to get into an argument with Norbert right now by asking if he was just aggravating her by implying more guests were coming.

Franz transferred the chopped pork from the board to a large bowl and frowned at her. "You'd best get busy."



"You look beautiful." Mama patted Magdalene's shoulder, tears in her eyes. If only those tears were from happiness instead of the pain that was etched in her features.

"Thank you. But you've done too much to help me, Mama." Magdalene fluffed the goose-down pillow on her parents' bed. "Lie back down and I will come get you when our guests arrive."

As she descended to the dining area, Magda's brothers' voices carried up the stairs.

"Ja."

"Nein!"

"Ja!"

Something crashed to the floor. Grabbing her skirts and pulling them out of the way, Magda quickly made it to the first floor of the cabin, where she saw an upturned tray and broken pastries littering the floorboards between nine-year-old Michi and fourteen-year-old Christof.

"*Was ist das?*" What were they doing?

To her horror, the cabin door opened and Jacob and his brother Dafydd entered, Papa ushering them in as Clovis shot past them. The dog greedily devoured the meat-and-cheese-stuffed tarts that Mama and she had so painstakingly assembled that afternoon.

"Nein, Clovis, nein!" Magdalene's shouts and her brothers' efforts to corral the dog were to no avail as her father helped the Owens brothers remove their cloaks.

Finally, Dafydd whistled and Clovis listened, stopping long enough to lick his greasy muzzle. *Naughty pup.*

Jacob took several long-legged strides to join her. Tonight he wore buff-colored

wool breeches instead of his more recent attire of buckskins, and a navy coat, which he used to wear in Philadelphia. The familiarity of his shop attire made her smile despite Clovis's mischief. Jacob leaned in close enough that she could inhale his bayberry scent. "Well, they do look rather tasty."

"Even squashed and half-consumed?" She poked his chest.

He pulled back and laughed.

She chuckled too. "We have more, so you will have to see for yourself what enticed that pup."

Patting his flat stomach, Jacob nodded. "Let me help you bring them out."

He followed her to the back, his jaw dropping when he saw the number of platters. "Are you feeding the army?"

"No, but Mrs. Martin and Mr. Davis are coming."

"Ah, I hear they are to be congratulated."

"Yes." If only she and Jacob were the ones to be congratulated.

"My brother is quite put out still."

So maybe there was more to Dafydd's distress the previous day. "Does he care for Mrs. Martin?"



A muscle in Jacob's jaw jumped. Dafydd would be upset if Jacob shared his secret admiration for the widow and his plans for her, now destroyed. "I'd best not say."

A knowing gleam shone in Magda's intense cornflower-blue eyes. "You don't have to. But it is first come, first served, for marriages out here. Like eating at our table, with all my bruders grabbing the food."

Was that a nudge from her? Now that Davis was out of the running, that put Jacob back on track. "I think I understand."

"Could you help me carry the sausages and the potatoes out to the tables?"

Soon the pair had the two large parallel tables, each flanked by benches, loaded down with potatoes, ham slices, gravy bowls, platters of corn muffins, and green beans. Meanwhile, the scent of apple pies beckoned a return trip to the back.

Mr. Davis was assisting Mrs. Martin with her cloak as Johan Rousch and his eldest, a son, arrived. Johan carried an armful of tanned hides, and the child held a basket covered with a towel.

Magda's father led them in. "*Danke*, Johan, these are beautiful." He took the hides and laid them across a nearby chair, the flickering firelight dancing on the smooth leather.

"Your boys helped. You should thank them too." The tall golden-haired man grinned at Norbert, who was nearly his height.

Mr. Sehler turned and nodded at his sons. "Ja, *gute Arbeit*."

Good work indeed, from the look of the leather. Such would have brought a