
MAGGIE'S MATCH

A Strong Man's Hand - Book One

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

Maggie Maxwell finished sweeping the broad front porch and straightened, gazing up and down the quiet early morning street. Most of the quaint little shops were still dark, waiting for the day to begin. The aroma of coffee brewing and pastry baking began to drift from the door behind her, and she headed inside to check the oven. While her sticky buns finished baking, she mixed up a batch of salted caramel brownies and slid the pan into the second oven. Bread dough was rising in a large covered bowl, and two trays of fresh oatmeal raisin cookies were cooling on racks. With the sticky buns out of the oven and the timer set, she poured a cup of coffee and went back to the porch, settling into a rocking chair with her coffee. The first cup of the day and the quiet promise of the spring morning were among her favorite pleasures.

Later, back in the bakery, Maggie pulled the brownies out of the oven and mixed up blueberry muffins and chocolate chip cookies. She could hear hints of the town waking up and carried her second cup of coffee out to the porch. She smiled when she heard stirring in the shop next to the bakery. The craft and gift

shop and the bakery shared the same building, and the arrangement worked well for both shops.

"Good morning, Maggie. You're never going to let me be the first one to get to work, are you?"

Maggie smiled. "Believe me, if I could get all this baking done in half the time, I'd be glad to be the second one to work."

GG Beauchamp chuckled and settled into a chair. "What's in the oven this morning?"

"Brownies and muffins right now. I have sticky buns still warm."

"Ooh, twist my arm," GG breathed.

"Okay, we'll both have one."

Maggie brought out the pastries and fresh coffee and settled down with her friend and landlady, enjoying the unseasonably warm spring morning and catching up on the small town gossip. The little town in southern Indiana was surrounded on three sides by the state forest that was a favorite of horseback riders. With miles of trails, woods, and hills, the park provided campgrounds for the riders, and the tiny town was a spot that the trail riders loved. The shops were in old wooden buildings, the sidewalks were wood, and there were plenty of hitching posts along the main street.

The sound of hooves made both women smile.

"Here come the ladies," Maggie said.

A few minutes later, they could see three horses heading toward them at a leisurely walk. The women riding them were all in their sixties and chattered to each other as they made their way towards the bakery. After pulling to a stop, they dismounted and secured their horses to the hitching post, calling greetings to Maggie and GG.

"Good morning, ladies," Maggie called. "Coffee today?"

"Of course!" they chorused.

One of the ladies peered at the plate in front of GG. "Is that a sticky bun?"

"Yes, ma'am. Would you like one with your coffee?"

"Absolutely!"

One of the other ladies said, "You better give us each one of those."

The ladies settled around one of the small tables on the porch while Maggie went after sticky buns and coffee. The three ladies had lived in Boone, Indiana all their lives and they had been fast friends for as long as they could remember. Ella Cole was married to her high school sweetheart, Glen, who was the town's only lawyer. Mamie Harper was married to Jefferson Harper, who had been the local doctor until he had retired several years before. Maureen "Mo" Chapin had been married to Henry Chapin, who farmed and bred horses until he had passed away nearly fifteen years before. Her heart had stayed with him ever since.

Maggie brought out a tray full of pastries and coffee and served the ladies. She laid three carrots on the table and said, "And here's a treat for the boys."

Mamie said, "Oh, bless your heart, Maggie, you never forget the horses, do you?"

"Now, who could forget those gorgeous guys?" she said with a laugh.

The chatter continued until the ladies had finished their treats and then rose to start out on their morning ride. They called out goodbyes as they mounted up.

"We'll be back in a few hours and ready for a cold drink," Ella called.

"See you then," Maggie answered with a wave.

GG rose and said, "I'd better get in and get to work; I've got things to unpack. Thanks for the breakfast, it was delicious as always."

"Anytime, and I have to get busy, too," Maggie cleared the table and walked inside, humming to herself.

The morning flew by, busy with customers and conversation.

There was a stream of morning regulars and a few visitors who indulged in baked goodies and coffee and then wandered off to browse the shops. Maggie baked bread and prepped for lunch, stopping just long enough to get off her feet and sip a cold bottle of water. She had a quiet hour or so between morning pastries and the lunch crowd. Until Sarah Shepard rushed into the bakery in a panic.

"Maggie, I need your help! My mother just called; she and my aunt are going to be at my house in an hour to discuss my cousin's baby shower!"

"All right, calm down, what do you need? It's just baby shower talk, right?"

"Yes but she's going to expect tea and cookies and a pretty table, and I'm no good at that kind of thing! I'd put out a bag of chips and a bowl of salsa, and she would be just speechless with shock at my lack of hostessing ability!" Sarah was torn between poking fun at herself and melting down into a real panic.

"Well, come on in, and we'll fix you right up." Maggie patted her shoulder reassuringly.

Maggie boxed up an assortment of cookies, muffins, and freshly assembled lemon tarts. She loaned Sarah a pretty teapot and an assortment of teas to go with them.

"Now, just arrange them on your prettiest tray and set out these cups and saucers and little dessert plates. You've got plenty of spring flowers right outside your back door, and I know you can make a nice arrangement for your table, and, voila! You're all set."

"Oh, girl, you're a lifesaver! Make me up a bill and I'll pay you when I bring back the dishes and teapot later." Sarah scurried off to arrange her goodies.

Maggie had to rush a little, herself, before lunch customers began to drift in, but by midafternoon, her day was winding down and she settled down with a cold glass of tea and a wedge of her asparagus quiche. The ladies had ridden back and had

their iced tea with sandwiches and soup. Theirs was a routine that Maggie could count on except on the rainy, muddy days that the ladies had decided they were no longer obliged to ride through.

GG joined Maggie on the porch and waved her to stay in her seat.

"I'll help myself to some tea; you sit still."

"How was your day?" Maggie asked, finishing her lunch.

"It was quiet, but I had a group who came shopping while their hubbies were fishing. One of them bought the painting of Main Street that Alicia Tyler did last fall. She didn't even try to negotiate on the price, just fell right in love with it." GG nearly purred with contentment.

"That's fabulous! Although, I was awfully fond of that painting, myself."

GG confided, "I'm pretty sure she had some prints done. It was just such a nice view of the town."

Just then, Sarah pulled up to the curb and hopped out of her little SUV. She unloaded a box of dishes and the teapot, chattering the whole time.

"Oh, Maggie, everything was perfect! My mama was so impressed and my aunt stuffed herself so much, she nearly fell asleep in her chair. You make sure you charge me for renting your dishes and teapot; it was worth every penny!"

Maggie laughed. "That's not necessary; you only had them for a few hours."

Sarah took a breath and asked, "Well, then, how about catering the baby shower? They enjoyed themselves so much that they decided the shower should be at my house. I have the date and a backup date, right here."

Maggie glanced at the note with the dates and did a quick mental search. "Sure, that's far enough out that I'm sure I can handle it. Let's sit down with the calendar and figure out what you want to serve. Thursday afternoon, after lunch?"

Sarah beamed. "Perfect! I'll be here by two. I can wait if you're not quite finished."

After Sarah left, Maggie grinned victoriously, "Well, this has been a good day for both of us, GG."

GG nodded. "Makes a nice start to the week. Speaking of which, tomorrow is the town planning meeting. You'll be there, right?"

"Oh, yes, I'm doing cookies and coffee, as usual. And I'd better get back to work, I've got cleaning up to do and a little prep work for tomorrow."

"All right, I'll see you in the morning. Have a nice evening."

When she was finally finished, Maggie drove the short distance to her little house at the end of one of the side streets and sighed as she always did, in pure contentment at the sight of the pretty, soft gray house with its white trim and shutters. The back yard was large, enclosed with a white board fence, and the woods started just a little beyond the back fence. It was a dead end street, so it had the feel of being a little country property instead of just a few blocks from Main Street. She could hear the stream gurgling if she listened closely, and the air was full of birdsong. She unlocked the front door and thought idly once again about how good it would be to have a nice, friendly dog wagging his tail at her entrance. She put her bundles down in the sunny kitchen and opened the back door to let the gentle breeze in through the screen.

Maggie had wandered into town one day, a year before, during her aimless travels in search of a place to settle. She had spent her early life in Nebraska, where she had been raised in the foster care system for as long as she could remember. Her life had been uneventful; she had gotten her education and been raised by decent families who had been kind enough. She had never suffered the horror stories that were often told about foster care, but she had also never had the closeness that she imagined she would have in a "real" family. After she graduated from high

school, she worked in restaurants while she got her college degree in business management. She worked in steadily better restaurants, starting in a small diner and ending in an upscale, highly rated restaurant, where she was assistant to the head chef, who took her firmly under his wing and was a wonderful teacher. Maggie believed her working life had given her as much, if not more, of an education than the degree she had worked so hard for.

The day she had driven into Boone had changed her life. She was charmed by the rustic, old fashioned look of the main street, slowing to a crawl to soak it all in. Then, the ladies had come riding their horses toward her right down the middle of Main Street, and she was lost. She knew from that second that she had found the place she wanted to live. She parked the car and followed the ladies into the cafe they had tied their horses in front of. She struck up a conversation with them over coffee and they pointed her in the direction of GG Beauchamp's gift shop, where she spent the rest of the morning deep in conversation. At the end of that conversation, Maggie had the beginnings of a new life.

GG showed her the shop next door, which had been a bakery once, in the past, and vacant since the owner had moved off to Chicago to take care of her ailing mother. Maggie had spent the past years scrimping and saving every penny she could from her first part time job in high school all the way through her last job at the lovely restaurant. Her chef mentor had sent her off with a nice parting bonus and a set of excellent knives with the admonishment that he expected to hear from her once she had made her mark in the cooking world. Before the day was over, Maggie and GG had settled on an agreement that worked for them both. Maggie took a room in the tiny inn at the end of Main Street and started work the very next day, getting her bakery and lunch spot set up. By the end of the week, she had met the local real estate agent who was managing the little gray house and signed

the lease. There was an absentee owner, who left the property in the competent hands of the realtor and rarely remembered to check in on his little house in Boone, Indiana.

Maggie had settled into life in the picturesque town as if she had spent all her days there. She named her bakery The Artful Oven, to fit in with the rest of the artsy-craftsy little town. Her business thrived, and she made friends and set down roots that she realized she had longed for most of her life. Her days were full, she had a small town type of social life, and she felt herself a real part of the community she had fallen in love with. If, sometimes, she still felt that there was yet an empty place to fill, she told herself she just hadn't gotten there yet and went on with her busy days with the confidence that it would come in its own good time.