

SECRETS OF A QUILT

Margaret led a quiet life in the small village of Wadsworth. Her parents had passed away two years earlier, leaving her with a modest house on two acres at the village limits. With two brothers lost in the war and no surviving aunts or uncles, she often felt lonely, in the family sense. Sure, she had acquaintances at the office where she worked and then there were the ladies at the church quilting circle, but the holidays sometimes led to periods of sadness.

One fine autumn day, when the wind blew crisp, and the trees flashed their brilliant hues of scarlet and orange, Margaret decided to take in fall's beauty and walk the half mile to her weekly quilt guild meeting. Not gorgeous by the world's often skewed view, she could still turn a head when she walked into town. As she rounded the corner at Mather's Pharmacy, she came to an abrupt stop. Getting off the afternoon bus from Quincy, a tall, handsome man in an army uniform caught her eye. Quite possibly, he caught a little part of her heart as well. The soldier walked across the street to Johnson's Hotel and disappeared inside. Margaret smiled and continued her walk to the church.

Time at the quilt guild often flew by for Margaret. She enjoyed the camaraderie of others as they worked on a common charitable cause. Of course, it made her feel good when everyone marveled at the product of her nimble fingers and creative eye. At the meeting's end, Margaret packed her satchel and started the walk home. When she reached the corner of Oak and Maple, the young woman crossed to the other side of the street and walked in front of Johnson's Hotel. A curious move if you consider that one block later, she would only have to cross the street again to get back to her house.

Walking in the door to her house, Margaret turned on the living room light and picked up Smokey the cat. Not two minutes later, the front doorbell rang. Opening up the front door, she found the tall soldier whom she had seen in town.

"Miss Rose," he said. "My name is Eric Fleming. I am on leave for a couple of days, and I just had to stop by and see you."

"I ... I'm sorry," Margaret stammered. "Do I know you?"

"No, Miss Rose, we've never met. I served alongside your brother Nathan for two years. He often talked about his beautiful young sister back

home, and I had to see if his description was accurate.”

“And was it?”

“Not hardly. He grossly understated your beauty.”

“Eric Fleming,” she said softly to herself.

“Eric Fleming. Oh! Flem?”

“Yes, ma’am. That’s me.”

“Sure, he mentioned you often in his letters. It’s a pleasure to meet you, except that I feel like I already know a lot about you.”

“Nathan was a genuine hero, Miss Rose. I do miss him.”

“Yes, I do, too. You know our brother Kyle also died over there.”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s been a tough time. Well, listen, besides having the opportunity to meet a beautiful young woman, I have another reason for stopping by.”

“And what might that be?” asked Margaret, coyly.

“Nathan cherished the quilt you sent him. He always made sure I noticed the fine handiwork that his ‘beautiful young sister back home’ had done. I

did notice. In fact, I studied it so much that it seemed like I knew every stitch.” Pausing for a few seconds, Eric continued, “I have a favor to ask of you. I was wondering if you could make a quilt for me?”

“Sure, Eric. I’d be happy to make one for you.”

“There is a catch, though, Miss Rose. I need to have it by tomorrow evening when I leave.”

“Eric, I’m sorry. That’s just not possible in such a short time.”

“I know it’s a huge thing to ask, but it is very important to me. I have a drawing here of exactly what I want. I also have an envelope here that contains five-hundred dollars that I want you to have.”

“Eric, you don’t have to pay me. That’s not the point. It’s a matter of time.”

“I know, but in this case, we can just call it a little extra jam on the bread, so to speak. Seriously, can you do it?”

“Show me the drawing.”

“The fabric can be anything, but the design must match the drawing exactly. The stitches must be precisely placed.”

“Well, the design is simple enough, but it is an odd mix of solid, four-patch, nine-patch, and flying geese blocks. Do the stitches have to be this exact pattern and length?”

“Yes, Miss Rose.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday. I would have to miss church.”

“I’m sure the Lord would understand on this.”

“Okay, Eric. I will do the best I can. There is one thing, though.”

“And that would be, Miss Rose?” the soldier asked.

“No more Miss Rose. It’s Margaret, okay?”

“I can do that, Margaret. I know you have a lot of work to do, so I am going to get out of your way. If you need me to get anything for you, just call me at the hotel.”

“I should be fine. I’ve got a large stash of supplies.”

At eight o’clock on Sunday morning, Margaret found the soldier at her front door with breakfast in hand. He set the table for her and served her the morning meal. Then he left. At noon and at six

o'clock that evening, Eric returned with lunch and dinner, respectfully. She felt she could live with such amenities.

Margaret buried her last stitch at nine o'clock that evening with the soldier looking over her shoulder. Having studied every stitch and block compared to the drawing, Eric pronounced her a miracle worker of the first order. He folded the quilt and put it in his suitcase.

“One day you will know how much this means to me, Margaret. Until then, this will have to do.”

She felt small and fragile as the soldier wrapped his big arms around her.

“And, of course, there is this envelope, too,” Eric reminded her.

“You keep the money, Eric. The quilt is my gift to you.”

“It's a whole lot more than that, Margaret. I've still got time to catch the midnight flyer bus. I will write to you when I get back over there.”

Margaret never heard from the soldier again. She made numerous attempts to find him, but she couldn't get through the cloud of secrecy that

surrounded him. She feared the worst, but the passage of time found her thinking less of it all each day.

One year later to the day, Margaret Rose answered the door to find another soldier standing there.

“Miss Rose, my name is Jack Schmidt. Eric Fleming was a friend of mine.”

Her eyes filled with tears when she heard him say the word “was”.

“I have something that I’m sure Eric would have wanted me to give to you.”

Trying to muster up some vague sense of hope, Margaret managed to ask, “Is Eric alright?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. Eric died two days after he came back. He had just completed his mission and was headed back to camp when his plane came under fire.”

The soldier opened his case and pulled out the quilt that Margaret had made for Eric. He carefully unfolded it, removing a plaque and an envelope that lay tucked inside.

“I’m sorry it took so long to get to you, but as you can see, the envelope only had the name

Margaret on it. I only recently came into possession of the quilt and the plaque. It took me awhile to piece it all together.”

Margaret tried to read the plaque, but she couldn’t stop the tears from clouding her eyes. She asked the soldier to read it for her.

“We, the people of Valeria, give this plaque to Captain Eric Fleming, posthumously, and to the unknown quilter in thanksgiving for all they have done to save our town.”

“I don’t understand,” Margaret said.

“Eric was in Army Intelligence. This quilt you made for him proved to be very special. The layout of the blocks represented troop positions with each block conveying troop strength. The odd stitching pattern that he so carefully had you do is, in fact, Morse code that detailed how to interpret the map. By successfully delivering this quilt to the field commanders, he helped stop the invasion and destruction of the town of Valeria.”

“I always wondered about that stitching.”

“Eric was a bright guy. He figured if he got caught, they would never look at the quilt as something that revealed military plans. Well, ma’am, I’ve got to go. I wish we could have met under

different circumstances. Before I leave, let me just say that you have a tremendous gift and sometimes we don't have any idea where the gifts we're given are going to take us."

When the soldier left, Margaret opened the envelope that came with the quilt. She began to read, "Dear Margaret, I want to thank you once more for the beautiful quilt. Someday maybe you'll come to know that the meaning of your gift encompasses far more than you'd ever imagine. When this ordeal is over, I want to return to Wadsworth and see you again. Until then, I will cherish the memory of that short time for as long as I live. Love, Eric."

Margaret Rose wondered if the love that never returned was all that would ever be for her. A month after that day, a young man bought the 100-acre farm across from her house. Margaret watched as several men helped him unload the truck that carried his worldly goods. She never saw a woman at the house on moving day, so in the back of her mind a seed of interest began to grow. By the third day, she had still not seen a woman around. On Friday, she decided to take over a plate of cookies, just in the spirit of being a good neighbor of course. She put on her favorite flowered

cotton dress, combed her hair back in a little flare, and grabbed the plate of cookies. Just as she opened the front door, she saw the young man coming up her sidewalk. A beautiful raven-haired young woman held onto his arm and laughed at his words. When she saw the young man up close, a flood of emotions rushed at her. The young man who now walked up her sidewalk had been at her door before.

“Good afternoon, Miss Rose,” said the young man. “Do you remember me?”

“Yes, of course, it’s Jack, isn’t it? You were Eric’s friend.”

“Miss Rose, this is Rebecca, the love of my life,” said Jack.

Margaret greeted her with a smile, even though she felt a brief pang of disappointment.

“Miss Rose, my sister, here, has just told me she’s getting married next month, and we thought we would bake some chocolate chip cookies in celebration. But with my novice homemaking skills, I neglected to purchase any sugar. We’d love to have you come over and help us celebrate ... if you could bring your own sugar.”

Her heart leaping at the revelation that Rebecca was his sister, Margaret replied to their invitation, “No, I’m sorry, Jack and Rebecca. I don’t have any more sugar. I used the last I had to make these chocolate chip cookies that I was just getting ready to bring over to you as a welcome.”

The three young people standing at Margaret’s door burst out laughing. A year later, Miss Margaret Rose changed her name to Mrs. Margaret Schmidt. She and Jack had four children—Emil, Dora, William, and Henry.

Margaret never forgot the day that Jack read the plaque dedicated to Eric and the unknown quilter. The quilt has remained in the family ever since. From that day forth, every quilt that Margaret made had a meaning that ran much deeper than what meets the eye. She kept the secrets of each quilt in the secret rooms of her heart.

Although this story dates back many years, it has a connection to the present at St. John. The youngest son of Jack and Margaret Schmidt is my father, Henry Schmidt, and Miss Margaret Rose was indeed my grandmother. The special quilt that Margaret made for Eric hangs in our living room today. The faith foundation instilled in me by my

*parents and grandparents led to my contribution in
the annals of St. John.*

Pastor Arnie Schmidt