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CHAPTER 1

*Hope, Kansas
October 1865*

THERE'S not a good heart among those folks," Jack Cornwall muttered as he led his horse across the bridge away from Hope. "Not a one."

With icy claws of pain gripping his wounded shoulder, Jack staggered down the road that would take him to Topeka. A chill wind whistled eastward across the Kansas prairie. He swung around and glared into the night, as if by sheer willpower he could intimidate the coming storm into retreat. Heedless, a frigid gust whipped beneath his lapels and ballooned his battered leather jacket.

Gritting his teeth, Jack stopped and bent over, fighting nausea. The stallion edged forward to nuzzle his master's neck with a velvet nose. A low snuffling conveyed the creature's unease at this midnight journey. Jack ran a hand down the coarse mane as he fought the reality that assailed him.

He had lost everything he'd ever fought for, everything he'd ever loved. His home. The Cornwall family farm. His sister Mary. Five of the men in his battalion—including his closest friend. The Confederacy and its goal of a new and vital nation. And now his little nephew, Chipper.

The darkness surrounding the man swirled through his thoughts. Hunger twisted his stomach. Thirst parched his tongue.

PRAIRIE FIRE

If he blacked out now—here—far from warmth, he might never make it back to his parents' home in Missouri. He tugged on Scratch's reins. The horse needed shelter from the autumn wind. They both craved decent food and a place to rest. But where?

The prairie dwellers who had dug their homes out of the Kansas sod despised Jack, and even now he tasted their hatred in the blood on his tongue. Earlier that evening the residents of Hope had gathered to cheer their neighbor Seth Hunter in the fistfight. The outcome ended any chance Jack had of taking Chipper back to Missouri. With his jaw nearly busted and his shoulder half torn apart, Jack had been forced to surrender. The crowd had parted, watched him pass, and then clamored around Seth with whoops of victory.

"Ah, forget the whole confounded bunch of 'em," Jack snarled. Then he gave a bitter laugh. "*Hope*. Yeah, sure."

A short distance down the road, a soddy formed a low hump in the endless, bleak stretch of tall prairie grass. Jack knew from hearsay that the homesteaders Jimmy O'Toole and his wife, Sheena, were his enemy Hunter's close friends, and this evening they were away at the dance. He doubted they would permit him to spend a night at their place. Not only were they loyal to their neighbor, but the O'Tooles lived with a passel of kids and relatives in the little soddy. The crowd itself would make a visitor unwelcome.

Jack snorted at the thought of the O'Toole family. Bunch of Irish street rats. Street rats turned prairie dogs. The image amused him, but his grin sent a stabbing pain through his jaw. Had Hunter broken the bone after all? Jack prodded the muscle and sinew beneath his roughly whiskered skin. Nah, it wasn't busted. Bruised, though. He'd be surprised if he didn't lose a tooth or two.

Checking his shoulder, Jack discovered that the bullet wound he'd suffered two months before had torn open during the fistfight. With all the travel he'd been doing, the blasted thing had never had a chance to heal right. Now blood seeped through his shirt and made his fingers sticky.

“Scratch,” he said, eyeing the ramshackle barn near the soddy, “like it or not, the O’Tooles are fixing to have company. If you promise to keep quiet, I’ll fetch you some fresh water and maybe even a few oats.”

It didn’t take Jack long to slip into Jimmy O’Toole’s barn, tend to the horse, and locate a pile of hay in a back corner. He had half a mind to raid the nearby soddy for food, but he and his Confederate vigilante buddies had already run into trouble with the law. He didn’t like the idea of landing himself in a Kansas jail. Bad enough to trespass into somebody’s barn—he’d already been doing a good bit of that during the months of tracking his nephew. But busting into their house and taking their food was another matter. Yankee soldiers once had pillaged his home. Jack Cornwall would never sink so low.

He pried off his boots, stretched out on the hay, and shut his eyes. His shoulder burned like fire. If the injury didn’t heal right, what would it mean to his dream of starting a blacksmithing business? How would he be able to work . . . take care of his parents . . . take care of Lucy . . . sweet, gray-eyed Lucy . . . ?

“I never saw such a *ballyhooly* in all my life,” a woman’s voice announced suddenly in the darkness—barely fifteen feet from where Jack lay. “Did you, Erinn? Now tell me the truth.”

Jack stiffened and reached for his pistol.

“We all expected the fight.” The second voice was much younger. A little girl. “All summer that wicked Jack Cornwall has been trying to make off with Chipper. Mama said Mr. Cornwall followed our Seth and Rosie the whole way from Missouri, so he did.”

“Bad as Mr. Cornwall may be,” the woman said, “we’re to follow the good Lord’s example of forgiveness. Jesus spent many hours in the company of the wicked, and his compassion helped them see the error of their ways. He never turned his back on a person, no matter how evil—and neither should we.”

"If you turn your back on Jack Cornwall, he's likely to shoot you in it!"

"Aye, I can't deny 'tis a good thing he's gone."

So the O'Tooles had returned from the celebration. Jack had been expecting them, of course, but not in the barn. Not tonight. The family lived so close to the Hunter homestead they could have walked the short distance with ease. So what business did these two females have wandering around in the black night with not even a lantern between them?

"Shall I fetch a lamp from the soddy, Auntie Caitrin?" the younger girl asked. "It's so dark in here."

Jack shook his head. *No. Say no.*

"Yes, indeed," Caitrin said brightly. "I thought the moon would be enough to see by, but that wind has brought in too many clouds. You and I might be out in the barn all night fumbling with the latches on my trunk."

"Aye then, I'll be back in a flash."

"Take care now, Erinn! Don't run!"

Jack heard the child's footsteps on the beaten earth of the barn floor as she dashed toward the soddy. From his position on the hay, he studied the shadowed silhouette moving through the gloom. The woman was tall, straight, and as big around the middle as a freight wagon. It appeared she was expecting twins.

"Too ra loo ra," she sang, her voice meandering between words and humming. She bent over a large square trunk below the barn window, then she straightened again. "Too ra lay . . . Now where did I lay that pink bonnet?"

She waddled straight across the floor and stopped in front of the hay pile. Jack held his breath, willing himself to remain motionless. Leaning down, the woman began to grope around in the darkness. Her hand brushed against the toe of his boot, and she jerked backward.

"Oh, my goodness—"

“Don’t scream.” He caught the hem of her skirt. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Who-who-who—”

“Nobody. Just a traveler. I need a place to sleep.”

“Take your hands off my—”

“Auntie Caitrin?” The child’s voice sounded at the barn door. “I’ve brought the lamp.”

“Don’t let the girl see me,” Jack hissed. “Send her away.”

The woman wavered. “But I—”

“Let me rest in your barn tonight,” he went on, “and I’ll be on my way at dawn. I’m wounded.”

He could hear her breath heavy in her throat. “Are you . . . are you that man? That Cornwall?”

“Auntie Caitrin?” the child called again. “Where are you? Even with the lamp, I can’t find you.”

“Protect me tonight,” Jack whispered. “I’ll never trouble you again.”

Caitrin squared her shoulders. “I’m here, Erinn my love,” she called. “Set the lamp on the shelf there by the barn door, and then you’d better go back to the house. ’Tis so late I’ve decided to repack the trunk myself. I’ll be home in time to hear your papa read the Bible.”

“But I wanted to help you.”

As the light moved closer, Caitrin suddenly dropped the bulk of her immense girth on top of Jack—a pile of dresses and petticoats! He stared in surprise as a lithe woman danced across the barn and swept the lamp away from the child.

“There now, will you disobey your auntie, Erinn?” Caitrin said. “Scuttle back to the soddy, and tell your mama I’d adore a cup of hot tea before bed. Sure we’ll work on my trunk tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow I have chores!”

“We’ll look through it right after lunch, so we will. I’ll show you

all my gowns and hats. I promise.” Caitrin set her hands on her hips. “Now to bed with you, my sweet colleen.”

“Oh, but you said—”

“Indeed I did, and my word is my vow. I wasn’t thinking about the hour.” She lowered her voice and cast a glance in the direction of the hay pile and the intruder shrouded in darkness. “What if there’s a *pooka* in the barn?”

Erinn threw her arms around her aunt’s waist. “Oh, Auntie Caitie! Could it be? I’m terrified of goblins!”

“Now then, I’m only teasing. Of course there’s naught to fear. We’ve the good Lord with us always, and his strength is our shield. But ’tis never wise to wander about in the night. Go set the kettle on the stove to boil—there’s a good girl. I’ll be home before you can wink twice.”

The child detached herself from her aunt and raced out of the barn, pigtailed flying behind her. The woman strode to the back of the building and held the lamp aloft, bathing Jack in its soft yellow light.

“Now then, *pooka*,” she said. “What do you mean by trespassing into Jimmy O’Toole’s barn?”

Clutching his shoulder, Jack struggled to his feet. “Look, I said I wouldn’t cause you any trouble.”

“No trouble? You’re Cornwall himself, are you not? Sure you’re the very devil who caused such a ruction with our Seth tonight. You’re the wicked fellow who’s been chasing after poor little Chipper and trying to steal him away from his rightful papa.”

She held the lamp higher. “Look at you standing there with your rifle and pistol and a knife stuck through your belt. Why then, Mr. Cornwall, you’re trouble itself. You’re the very man who—” Frowning, she peered at him. “Are you bleeding, sir?”

Jack glanced at his shoulder. “The fistfight tonight. An old wound tore open. A few weeks back your precious Seth Hunter pulled a gun on me. He shot me.”

“Of course he did,” she retorted. “As I recall the story, you were trying to shoot him first. Oh, this is an abominable situation. How can I go off to my tea and my warm bed if I must leave you out here bleeding? How can I sleep in God’s peace tonight if I’ve abandoned one of his creations to a night of pain? Wicked though you are—and just one glance at your woeful condition confirms it—I can see I’m to play the Good Samaritan. Sit down, Mr. Cornwall.”

With a firm shove on his chest, she pushed him down onto a milking stool. Then she hung the lamp on a nail that protruded from one of the barn’s rough-hewn beams. Seizing his collar, she ordered, “Take off your jacket, sir. Quickly now, I don’t have all evening. If you want Jimmy O’Toole traipsing out here with his shotgun, just dawdle.”

Jack had barely begun to struggle out of his jacket when the woman grabbed a lapel and yanked off the garment. She took one look at his tattered shirt and seeping wound, and she clapped her hands against her cheeks. “But this is terrible, sir! Is the ball still in your shoulder?”

“No, it came out the other side.”

He bent forward to show her the even greater wound on his back. At the sight, she gasped and sank to the floor, her purple-red silk skirts puffing around her. Covering her face with her hands, she let out a moan.

“Wouldn’t you know?” she mumbled. “Papa was a fishmonger, and I nearly swooned every time he gutted one of those poor . . . miserable . . . And now this. Now *you*.”

Jack studied the mass of auburn curls gathered at the woman’s crown. Her hair was crusted with little trinkets—paste diamonds, silver butterflies, bits of ribbon. A delicate gold necklace hung with a heavy pearl draped around her long white neck. The scent of sweet flowers drifted up from her silk gown. Jack swallowed.

A beautiful woman. Jewels. A dark night. Common sense told him to take advantage of the turn of events. At the very least, he

should snap the choker from her neck and ride away on his horse. If it was genuine, the pearl alone would feed him from here to Kansas City.

So why did he want to stroke a hand down the woman's back, whisper reassuring words, fetch her a drink of cool water?

"Ma'am?" he began, reaching out to her.

She pushed his hand away. "No, I can do this. Truly I can. And I will *not* swoon." Getting to her feet, she gathered up the clothing she had dropped earlier. "First I must pack the trunk as I promised Erinn. Then I'll fetch you something. Water. Medicine. Heaven help me," she moaned as she threw her garments into the open trunk, "I am not a nurse. What to do? Sheena would know, but of course I can't—"

"Ma'am," Jack cut into her agonized monologue as he rose to his feet again. "I'm not asking you to do anything for me. Just leave me alone here. Let me rest. I'll be gone at dawn."

She slammed down the lid of her trunk and faced him. "How can I leave you here with such grave injuries? I am Caitrin Murphy. I would never walk away from a person in need."

"Yeah, well I'm Jack Cornwall, and I don't need anything from anybody."

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "Everyone needs *something*. You more than most, I should think. Even if you didn't have that . . . that awful bleeding shoulder . . . you're clearly in need of a good hot meal. Clean clothes. A haircut. A razor."

She took a step closer and looked him up and down. "Mr. Cornwall, if the condition of your flesh is any indication of the state of your soul, you are in need of a thorough cleansing both inside and out."

"What?" he said in disbelief. "Who gave you the say-so to judge me?"

"I always speak my mind. Now sit down." She pushed him back onto the stool. "Wait here."

Lifting her skirts, the woman stalked out of the barn. The scent of her fragrance lingered a moment in the air. Jack drank it in as he reflected on how long he'd been without female company. Too long. During the war, he'd spent months at a time on active duty or living in the woods with his vigilante friends and struggling to keep the Confederate cause alive. Then he had returned to find his home burned and the family farm sold to a Yankee out of failure to pay taxes. Mary was dead, Lucy suffering, and Chipper stolen away by a man who claimed to be his father. There had been no time for courting.

The auburn-haired beauty who had penetrated Jack's solitude stirred something inside him. Women had a certain softness about them, he recalled. A musical sound to their voices. A magic to their walk. He remembered now the whisper of silk skirts against petticoats. The fragility of a single curl at rest against a blushing cheek. The touch of a slender finger to the hollow of an ivory throat.

Miss Caitrin Murphy was certainly among the prettiest women Jack had ever seen. In fact, she might be perfect—except for that tongue of fire. Clearly she was no velvet-petaled flower just waiting to be plucked. The woman had thorns. Sharp, prickly spikes. She had labeled him wicked. Called him trouble. *Sit down, Mr. Cornwall. Wait here, Mr. Cornwall. Don't be ridiculous.* And what was that business about his soul needing a good cleansing?

High and mighty is what she was. Bossy, too. Just the sort of female to avoid.

"Now then, Mr. Cornwall," Caitrin Murphy said as she stepped into the barn, a wicker basket looped over one arm and a pail of water in the other hand. "I shall set you right, as a good Christian woman should. And then I'll rejoice at the sight of your backside heading out of Kansas."

"My pleasure," Jack returned. "I wouldn't live in a place like this for love nor money."

“And we wouldn’t want you.” She set down the pail and basket. “All the talk in the soddy is about you, so it is. ‘That wicked Jack Cornwall attacked our Seth and tried to steal little Chipper,’ says Sheena. ‘Good riddance to bad rummage,’ says Jimmy. You can thank the good Lord there’s a flurry of tucking the wee *brablins* into bed or I’d never have made off with this food. Here, I brought you a loaf of bread, some apple cider, and a sausage.”

She set the food in Jack’s lap and busied herself with the water pail. He stared for a moment in disbelief. He had left home with twelve dollars in his pocket. When that ran out, he had resorted to eating what he could shoot or pick from kitchen gardens. But fresh bread? A whole sausage? And apple cider?

He picked up the loaf and tore off a hunk. The yeasty aroma beckoned, the crisp brown crust crackled, the center was spongy to his touch. He put the chunk in his mouth and closed his eyes. *Bread.*

“You like it?” Caitrin asked.

When he looked up, she was studying him, her head tilted and her eyes shining. Green eyes. Long dark lashes. He took another bite.

“It’s good,” he said.

“I baked it myself.” Her lips curved into an impish smile. “Wouldn’t my sister have a fine fit if she knew I was feeding our bread to Jack Cornwall? Sheena and I bake the loaves for sale, you see. There’s a little mercantile across Bluestem Creek on the Hunter homestead. Rosie and I market goods to the travelers passing down the road.”

“Rosie?”

“Rosie Mills. She’s to be Seth’s wife, so she is.”

“Wife?” Jack frowned, thinking of his sister Mary and how deeply—and foolishly—she had loved Seth Hunter.

“Sure it happened tonight after the *ballyhooly* died down,” Caitrin explained. “Rosie loved Seth all summer, and he loved her,

too. But they were both too blind and stubborn to admit it. This evening she tried to leave on the stagecoach, but Seth fetched her back again and announced to everyone that she was to be his wife. So all is well, and in a few weeks' time, Seth will have a lovely wife, and Chipper will have a mama to call his very own."

Jack stiffened. "Chipper's mama—his *one and only* mama—was my sister Mary."

Caitrin wrung out a rag and took a step closer. "Take off your shirt, Mr. Cornwall. And while you do, I trust you will bring to mind the sad circumstance of your sister's death. Seth told us about the loss of his wife and your sister, and I'm sorry for it. But life does not always unfold as we wish."

"What do *you* know about life?"

Her eyes flashed as he shrugged off his shirt and tossed it onto the hay pile. "I know a great deal about life," she said. "Life is about losing, letting go, and moving on. I have lost more than a man like you could ever understand. I have lost love. Hope. Dreams. Everything I had lived for. But I did not go off in a rage of bitterness and revenge as you did, Mr. Cornwall. I am Caitrin Murphy. You destroy. I create."

She pursed her lips and began washing the bloody wound on Jack's shoulder. At the touch of the wet rag, flames of pain tore through his flesh, searing deeply into muscle and bone. He knotted his fists and stared down at the tips of Caitrin Murphy's shiny black slippers. Could this sharp-tongued snippet of a woman possibly be right? Had his life become a path of vengeance and destruction—a path so narrow he could find no room to turn around?

"You're a fiery little thing, you know that?" he said. "Aren't you the least bit afraid of me . . . big ol' blazing Jack Cornwall roaring into town and scaring the living daylights out of everybody?"

She gave a shrug as she began working on his back. "Fiery Caitrin Murphy and blazing Jack Cornwall. Sure we're a matched pair, the two of us. But where I've given myself to God to be used

as his refining fire, you're naught but a swirling, raging, blustering prairie fire bent on destroying everything in sight."

"Fire's fire," Jack hurled back. "I'm a blacksmith by trade, and I know my business. Don't pride yourself, Sparky. One flicker of that refiner's fire can set a prairie aflame."

"Or draw precious gold from raw ore. 'Tis all in how a person chooses to make use of his fiery spirit, Mr. Cornwall. A contained blaze is a good thing, but you're a wildfire out of control. You need taming."

"Fight fire with fire, as they say." He touched the woman's arm. "Maybe you want to try taming me, Miss Murphy?"

"Wicked man. 'Tis no wonder they call you a devil." She pushed his hand away, rinsed the rag, and began to wash again. "This wound is frightful. Sure you must get yourself to a doctor, Mr. Cornwall. You might lose this arm, and then where will you be with your blacksmithing?"

"I don't need a doctor. Couldn't pay one even if I did."

"You have no money? But what have you been doing all the years before now?"

"Fighting."

"A soldier? Then a doctor will surely see you at no charge. You did battle for the honor and glory of your country."

"I'm a Confederate. I fought to save the South from the aggression of Yankees like Seth Hunter. No Kansas abolitionist doctor will treat the likes of me."

"Well, I've just come from Ireland, and I don't know much about your war and your silly politics." She dropped the stained rag back into the bucket. "But I do know you'll find better medicine at an apothecary than you will on Jimmy O'Toole's homestead. Here's a salve he uses on his sheep when they've got the fly. You must keep it near and use it often. And I brought clean bandages."

Jack studied the pile of lace-edged fabric strips she pulled out of

her basket. "These are bandages? They look more like handkerchiefs."

"They were once a petticoat stitched by my own hand and edged in fine Irish lace. I could find nothing else to serve the purpose."

She handed Jack a swath of white linen and a crock of salve. "You tore up your petticoat?" he asked.

"'Twas an earthly treasure." With a shrug, she took his elbow and unhooked the lamp. "Come with me, Mr. Cornwall. You must sleep in safe hiding tonight. Perhaps Jimmy will take it into his head to check on his mules. Here's a little storage room the dear man built for me under the loft. We take more goods in trade than we can possibly display in the mercantile, so I use this room to stockpile the surplus. By the by, I shall thank you not to steal any of our inventory tomorrow when you leave. I keep careful records, and I shall know what's missing."

Using the key that hung from a ribbon around her neck, she unlocked the door to a tiny room stacked with bulky flour sacks and tinned goods. After spreading a pallet of quilts on the floor, she arranged a few things beside it. The bandages, salve, sausage, and bread she set into the basket. Then she rummaged around in her storage boxes and took down a comb, a razor, a small hand mirror, and a cake of soap. Finally, she lifted the lid of a square biscuit tin.

"Take this, Mr. Cornwall," she said, bringing out a handful of money and setting it into his palm. "It's my part of the earnings from the mercantile. I haven't much use for it out here on the prairie. Get yourself to a doctor, sir."

Caitrin turned toward the door, but Jack stepped in front of it, blocking her path. A look of dismay crossed her face as she realized he had trapped her inside the room. The light in her green eyes faded . . . to be replaced by a flicker of fear that Jack had seen all too often in his years on the battlefield. He didn't budge.

“Tell me something, Miss Caitrin Murphy,” he said. He held up the wad of folded bills. “Why? Why’d you do this?”

“I told you, I . . . I have little use for money.”

“I don’t believe that.” He took a step toward her. “Nobody does something for nothing. What’s your motive?”

She swallowed hard. “Mr. Cornwall, I must go. Sheena will be looking for me. If Jimmy finds you—”

“Tell me!” He grabbed her wrist. “Nobody ever gave me anything for free. Now why’d you do it? Tell me.”

“Because . . . because I found you here . . . and you’d been injured.”

“Pity?”

“Only the weak are to be pitied.” As she said the words, a strength seemed to fill her, and she lifted her chin. “I helped you because I am a child of God, and so are you. You were created for good, for a future and a hope. Though you may have burned out of control in your life, you are still precious to the Father. And because of him—with his love—I love you, Mr. Cornwall.”

Before he could respond, she slipped around him and squeezed through the door. Jack stood for a moment, stunned, as if a bolt of lightning had shot through his head and come right out his boots. And then he shook off the daze, made a dash across the barn floor, and caught the woman by her arm.

Clapping her hand over her mouth, she stifled a cry. Her eyes widened in fear, and a curl of auburn hair tumbled to her shoulder. Jack didn’t care if he scared her. Didn’t care what she thought. Didn’t care about anything but knowing. Knowing for sure.

“What did you say?” he demanded.

Breathing hard, she searched his face. “I said, you are precious to the Father.”

“Not that part. What you said after. Say it.”

“With the Father’s love, I . . . I love you.”

“Again.”

“Why must I? Surely you’ve heard those words before!”

He stared at her, tongue-tied, trying to make sense of things. And then her face softened. The tension slipped off her shoulders.

“Oh, Mr. Cornwall,” she murmured. Reaching out to him, she touched his injured shoulder with her fingers, and then she ran their tips down the length of his bare arm. Her green eyes softened and filled with a warm light that radiated to the smile on her lips.

“You are precious to the Father, Mr. Cornwall,” she said, squeezing his hand. “Hear the words and believe them in your heart. You are precious, and with his love, I love you. *I love you.*”

She held the lamp before her as she turned again. Then she moved away from him, out of the barn, out of reach. The golden light faded, and he was left again in darkness.

AN INTERVIEW WITH
CATHERINE PALMER

Jack and Caitrin have such fiery personalities! How did you create such a strong heroine? Does she reflect your own personality?

I knew I needed a very strong woman to play a part in the redemption of Jack Cornwall, and I'm sure there's more than a little of me in Caitrin's character. My ancestors hail from the southern part of Ireland, near the town of Tipperary. The Cummins blood in my veins must be pretty fiery, because my husband regularly refers to me as his "headstrong tempestuous vixen"! When my parents took my sister and me to Ireland many years ago, I got to kiss the famous Blarney Stone. Maybe that's why I'm such a storyteller!

How did you come up with the name Caitrin for the heroine?

I keep several name-your-baby books on my shelves. I've always loved the name Caitrin, which is an Irish version of my own name.

What's your favorite part of *Prairie Fire*?

I really enjoyed writing about Jack hiding in the O'Tooles' barn. Poor Caitrin! She really was faced with a dilemma, wasn't she? There's nothing more fun than a secret, and when it involves forbidden romance, it's even more delicious.

Probably the thing I laugh about the most when I think of *Prairie Fire* is an observation my wonderful copy editor, Jan, made upon reading my original fire scene. I've learned in the past few years that I have a big problem envisioning numbers, calendars, space, and time—which is one of the many reasons I'm so grateful for my editors. It seems that early in the story, I had described the

soddy as containing a “narrow bed.” Then during the fire scene, I kept bringing in one victim after another and putting them in that bed! Jan and I still have a chuckle about all those people I piled up in that narrow bed.

Have you received a lot of letters from readers? What’s their most common question/suggestion/challenge about this series/book?

I’ve received more letters from this series than from any other—and that’s a lot! Rosie seems to be a favorite character, and readers wanted to hear more about her life with Seth. Though I focused on other characters in the rest of the series, I was pleased to be able to track Rosie and Seth through their marriage and the birth of their baby.

Many readers loved the character of Lucy Cornwall, whom I introduced in *Prairie Fire* and continued in *Prairie Storm* and *Prairie Christmas*. They appreciated the fact that I wrote about a mentally ill character who was so appealing and was not stereotyped in any way.

Several people who read *Prairie Storm* wrote to tell me about their own painful church experiences. I was pleased to learn that this story had brought them a measure of healing.

Lots of readers wanted to suggest new books. Many asked about Rolf Rustemeyer and Lucy Cornwall, so of course, I had to give the readers *Prairie Christmas*. Others suggested characters who could move to Hope—a sheriff, a schoolteacher, etc. And some even gave me title ideas such as *Prairie Victory* and *Prairie Home*.

There’s nothing I love more than opening a packet of letters that has been forwarded to me from the publisher. In these letters, readers share with me their hearts—hopes, sorrows, dreams, fears. The letters help me see that I am achieving my ministry goal of becoming God’s tool as he uses my words for his glory. They also give me a sense of what people are wanting to read about, and that helps me as I plan new books.

Prairie Fire

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Caitrin extend kindness in word and deed to Jack Cornwall? What effect does this have on him?
2. What causes Jack's change of heart? How does God draw Jack to himself?
3. Why does Rosie stand up for Jack and convince Seth to give him a chance?
4. In chapter 6, Sheena tells Caitrin, "That's the trouble with you. You see things for what they could be, not for what they are." Caitrin points out that that kind of thinking is what causes transformation. Who is right, in your opinion? Is Sheena right when she says one can't change people? that you have to accept them as they are?
5. At one point, Caitrin is so frustrated with her circumstances that she throws a plate against the wall as she complains to God. Is it okay to be mad at God for one's lot in life? Why or why not?
6. Jack says that Caitrin was sent to him by God to show him what God and love are like. This scares Caitrin, who tells him not to look to her, an imperfect person, to understand God. Who is right? How does God use imperfect people to show who he is and what he is like?

PRAIRIE FIRE

7. What is the real cause of Lucy's mental problems? Does the way her brother and mother treat her help her or hurt her? What finally sets her free?
8. Jack thinks he knows what God wants of his people. What is it? Is he right? How does the story prove it?
9. Fire is a recurring theme in this book. Discuss how this image of fire plays out in Jack's and Caitrin's personalities, in their relationship, and in the plot.
10. The town of Hope prays for the rain they so desperately need. What does God send? Does he answer their prayer?
11. In this story, what is the source of prejudice? What is the result of prejudice? How is it overcome?



Prairie Recipes
from
CATHERNE PALMER

Chicken Stew

In a soddy or a chuck wagon, stew made an easy and welcome supper. Vegetables could be added when available, and seasonings were uncomplicated. This recipe originates in New Mexico, which is known as "short-grass prairie." The stew has a special treat at the bottom of the bowl, so watch out for surprised faces!

2 lbs. chicken (whole or breasts)	2 cups roasted green chiles, peeled and chopped
3 yellow onions, chopped	24-oz. can of tomatoes (diced or chopped)
8 garlic cloves, peeled and chopped	1 tsp. salt or to taste
8 oz. chicken broth	½ lb. Monterey Jack cheese

Place chiles and tomatoes in a bowl together so juices can mingle while chicken is cooking.

Put chicken, onions, garlic, and broth in a large pot. Add water (or more broth) to cover ingredients. Cover pot and simmer slowly for 1–1½ hours or until chicken is cooked.

Remove chicken and let it cool enough to remove meat from bones. Chop and return chicken to broth mixture. Add chile/tomato mixture and salt. Cover and simmer for about 1 hour.

Cut cheese into cubes and place in bottom of bowls. Pour stew into each bowl.

Irish Sweet Soda Bread

I like to imagine Caitrin and Sheena mixing this delicious bread in their soddy.

Mix:

3 cups flour

½ cup sugar

1 tbsp. baking powder

1 tsp. baking soda

½ tsp. salt

With your hands, rub in:

4 tbsp. unsalted butter

Add:

2 tbsp. caraway seeds

1 cup raisins

Whisk together then add to dry mixture:

1 cup buttermilk (the essential ingredient!)

1 egg

Mix with spatula, gently press together with hands, fold over onto work surface. Make a round loaf. Press top and cut an X across the top with knife.

Bake at 400° on middle rack for 30–40 minutes until lightly browned on top. Lower the heat if it begins to get too dark.