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CHAPTER 1

*Hope, Kansas
June 1866*

A SUDDEN, high-pitched cry caught Lily Nolan's attention. She sucked in a breath. A baby? Somewhere in the growing darkness, a baby was crying. Lily pushed aside the tent flap and stepped outside, listening. There it came again! Weak but insistent, the wail curled into the marrow of Lily's bones.

Abigail, she thought. Oh, my darling Abby!

No. That wasn't possible, was it? Abby was gone, buried in a little wooden box at the edge of Topeka. But whose baby was crying? Why didn't the mother rock the child?

Lily's body contracted and began to ache in response to the baby's cries. Could the voice be Abby's, calling to her mother from the spirit world? Beatrice had tried to assure Lily that the baby was an angel now, a soul drifting in the great unseen, a messenger who would come to her with hope and comfort from beyond. But this cry sounded so real. And so near.

Lily stepped out into the tall prairie grass. In the distance she could see the town of Hope, Kansas—little more than a mercantile, a smithy, a newly built church, and a few shabby soddies. Women wearing homespun dresses, men in tattered trousers, and barefoot children moved down dirt paths toward the main road. Seeking entertainment or hoping for a cure for some unnamed

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trouble, they came to the traveling show, just as such people did in every town across the country.

Clutching the velvet cape of her fortune-teller's costume closer about her, Lily concentrated on Beatrice's speech. "Are you sad and blue?" the woman called. "Does your heart ache, your blood race, your liver leap, and your stomach churn? Is your hair limp? Do your feet hurt? Are your fingers stiff? Whatever ails you, come and find the answers to your troubles!"

Lily knew it would be a while before "Madame Zahara" started peddling elixir, and even longer before she would send customers to the tent to have their fortunes told. With the cry of the baby haunting her, Lily gathered up her skirts and set off through the grass. If she could find the child's mother and gain permission to hold the infant for a few moments—maybe even kiss the soft cheek or sing a little lullaby—perhaps then she could stop aching so for Abby. Maybe she could find reason to go on.

Just a week ago, while the traveling show was camped on the outskirts of Topeka, an epidemic of diphtheria had swept through the city. With it came the nightmare of fever, listlessness, and the panicked struggle for breath. Though diphtheria was known as a childhood illness, the strain that tore through Topeka grew especially virulent and soon began to claim adults. Scores had died, young and old alike.

Lily pressed her knuckles against her lips to hold back a sob. After two days of unbearable suffering, her precious Abigail had slipped away forever. Before long Lily's husband had also succumbed—Ted Nolan, the dashing but lazy fellow she had married to escape her sanctimonious and abusive father. Hours after the women had buried Ted, diphtheria claimed the traveling show's manager, Jakov Kasmarzik. In a panic, Beatrice had loaded as much of the show's gear as she could into one of their two wagons and headed west, with Lily barely able to function in her grief. Now the two women were trying to fill all the roles of the traveling

show, hoping to earn their way to California. Or at least that was Beatrice's plan. Lily had no intention of going to California, but she didn't think Beatrice needed to know that yet.

"Would you take a look at that gaudy wagon, Caitrin," commented a woman strolling with her three companions just ahead of Lily. She wore her rich brown hair piled on her head, and the bulge beneath her dress gave evidence that soon she would bear a child. "Dr. Kasmarzik's Traveling Show," she read from the sign painted on the wagon where Madame Zahara proclaimed her message. "Fine Theater, Singing, Juggling! Featuring Dr. Kasmarzik's Patented Elixir. Cures Guaranteed!"

"Aye, Rosie," the other woman in the group chimed in, "and my own father was a leprechaun."

With a giggle, the one called Rosie read from the sign Beatrice had put up, its black canvas painted with silver stars: "Madame Zahara—Fortunes Told! Palms, Tea Leaves, and Tarot Cards Read! Now that sounds interesting. I've always wanted to visit a traveling show. What do you think, Seth? Could we stop at the show before we go and listen to the preacher?"

Lily frowned at the woman's mention of the traveling preacher who was running a stiff competition for Dr. Kasmarzik's Traveling Show. Who did the fellow think he was, this Reverend Elijah Book, scaring off business and ruining her chances of a good evening's income? Lily could see him, outlined by the golds and pinks of the setting sun, as he raised his hands to beckon the gathering crowd. No wonder the women came, dragging their husbands behind them. The preacher was as good-looking a fellow as Lily had ever seen.

Straight and tall, with deeply tanned skin and piercing blue eyes, he towered over his congregation like a stately cottonwood tree. Rather than a fine silk top hat, the preacher wore a brown Stetson that perched just above his dark brows and straight slash of a nose. In a blue chambray shirt, worn denim

trousers, and scuffed leather boots, he looked like he ought to be rounding up strays on a Texas cattle ranch. But there he stood, waving his big black Bible and barking out Scripture like John the Baptist himself.

Lily glared at him. Three or four months more with the traveling show and she would have enough money for a train ticket to Philadelphia. Though she had fled her pious father almost two years before and had vowed never to return, now Lily was determined to journey back to the big brownstone that once had been her home. The consequences would be severe, she knew, but her future with the show held no hope at all.

Lily heard the woman's husband, Seth, give a grunt of disgust. "This little town has had enough troubles without a bunch of ne'er-do-wells looking to skin the locals."

"Aye," the Irishwoman agreed. "These sorts of people wander through Ireland in bright caravans, selling useless potions and swindling innocents of their hard-earned coins. The doctors are bad, and the fortune-tellers are worse. But 'tis the actors who cause all the bawdy revelry."

Behind them Lily bristled. It was true that Dr. Kasmarzik's potion, which sold for ten cents a bottle, was nothing more than a mixture of corn syrup, vinegar, peppermint oil, and a dash of turpentine. But her acting had never caused one moment of bawdiness. She performed selections from Shakespeare and the poets of Europe. She played the melodeon and sang arias from the great operas. Educated at the finest school for young ladies in Philadelphia, she brought culture and dignity to Dr. Kasmarzik's show. If customers did sometimes get out of hand, it certainly wasn't due to her performances.

"I've seen whole villages run amok when the traveling caravans passed through," the flame-haired Caitrin continued. "Husbands neglect their chores, and their wives form long lines at the fortune-teller's wagon. Children roam about neglected and hungry. On top

of all that, the members of the traveling shows usually manage to steal anything left unattended.”

Of all the gall, Lily thought, clenching her teeth. How dare these provincial prairie hens accuse her of thievery! She considered passing around them, but they continued on in the direction of the baby’s cries, so she followed.

The preacher had managed to draw a bigger crowd than Madame Zahara, Lily realized. At thirty-five, Beatrice Waldowski cast a commanding presence in her flowing robes, long raven hair, crimson lips, and sultry brown eyes outlined in black kohl. Lily was never sure whether it was Madame Zahara’s mystic predictions or the intimidating woman herself who struck awe in the hearts of the most rough-hewn customers. Whatever it was brought them back night after night to spend their coins at her table.

But now she had stiff competition. The preacher had spread open his Bible in his big hand and was holding it out toward the people like a plate of tempting hors d’oeuvres. The evening breeze riffled the thin pages, lifting and turning them one at a time, but the preacher didn’t seem to notice. He just kept right on talking, reciting the story of Nicodemus’s visit to Jesus in the middle of the night.

Lily shook her head. How many times had she heard *that* sermon? She could probably preach it with as much accuracy as she could recite Jakov Kasmarzik’s opening act for the traveling show. Before long the preacher would announce those familiar words, “For God so loved the world—”

Ha, Lily thought. If God loved the world so much, why had he allowed her father to beat her black and blue while her mother stood by wringing her hands and doing nothing? Why had God let Ted and Jakov die of diphtheria? Why had he snatched away helpless little Abigail? For that matter, why was God permitting that poor baby in the distance to go on crying unattended? Couldn’t any of these pious Crawthumpers hear the child’s sobs?

To her, the baby's wails sounded as loud and demanding as the clanging bells of a fire wagon.

"Do you suppose Madame Zahara really can tell a person what's going to happen, Caitie?" The woman named Rosie paused to look back at the tent where Lily's table was set up. "Do you think she might know whether I'm bearing a boy or a girl?"

When the two couples halted at the edge of the crowd, Lily tried to move around them, but they were blocking her path. The preacher had packed the people as close around him as oysters in a can. Rooted to the ground, the crowd gaped upward as the man expounded on his text.

"You'll not set foot near that wagon, Rosie," Caitrin said in a loud whisper. "Sure you recall the very words of Scripture about such devilry."

"I do not. I've been to church all my life, and I don't recall anyone ever saying it was wrong to visit a fortune-teller."

"It's in the middle of Deuteronomy, Rosie," Seth drawled. "I remember reading it that time you made me search for the verse about foundlings."

"I declare," Rosie muttered. "One of these days Deuteronomy is going to do me in."

Lily searched for another way through the crowd as Caitrin pulled a small Bible from her pocket and scanned the pages. "Here 'tis. 'There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire,'" she read in a low voice, "'or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord.'"

"Well, for Pete's sakey," Rosie whispered. "I had no idea."

Lily pinched her lips and tapped the woman on the shoulder. "Excuse me," she said. "Could you step aside, ma'am? I'm trying to find that crying baby."

Brown eyes focused on Lily, roving from her white blond hair down the purple velvet cape to the tips of her scuffed brown boots. “Oh, have you lost your baby?”

Lily swallowed as the question stabbed through her. “Oh,” she breathed. “Yes, I’ve lost . . . lost my baby. My Abigail.”

“I can hear her crying,” Rosie whispered. “Where did you leave your child?”

“I don’t . . . don’t know where she is.” Lily shook her head. That wasn’t what she meant to say. She knew Abigail was buried in the little box. The wooden box. “I need my baby. I can’t . . . I can’t stop hearing the cries.”

“We’ll find your daughter,” Rosie said, taking Lily’s hand. “Come on, Caitrin. Let’s help this poor woman look for her baby. In the crush of people, the dear child could get hurt. Seth, you and Jack stay right here. We’ll be back in a minute.”

“I hear the wee one now,” Caitrin said, in a strong Irish lilt. “’Tis on the other side beyond the Reverend Book. Let’s go around the crowd.”

Lily tried to force down the tears that welled unexpectedly in her eyes as the two women began to move her toward the sound she had been following. She wanted to tell them it wasn’t Abigail, that her baby was dead, that this was some other woman’s child. But the preacher’s voice rang too loudly, hammering every word into the silence like a nail into a coffin.

“Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God!” he thundered. Lily huddled down between Rosie and Caitrin as they pressed her through the throng. “How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?”

No, Lily thought. Abby was dead, and she could never be born a second time. Only once would that precious newborn be laid on her mother’s exhausted body. Only once would Lily feel the gentle pressure of the baby’s weight in her arms, the nuzzle of a pink cheek, the grip of tiny fingers. Abby was lost. Lost forever.

"I've found her!" Rosie cried, dragging Lily toward a leather saddlebag hanging on the side of a horse that had been hobbled near the road. Within the pouch, something pushed, wriggled, and flailed as a cacophony of desperate cries drifted into the evening air. "Here's your baby!"

"Abigail?" Lily whispered, approaching the bag. Her heart faltered as she laid her hand on the soft leather. At her touch, the wailing ceased. But this couldn't be Abby. There must be another mother nearby. Some woman had left her baby in this bag. But why?

"Goodness gracious," Rosie said, "why did you put your daughter into a saddlebag? That's no place for a baby."

"No, I—" The baby began to wail again, cutting off her words.

"Why don't you take the poor little thing out and feed her? I grew up in an orphanage, and I've taken care of many a baby. I can almost bet your sweet Abigail is wet and hungry."

Hardly able to make herself breathe, Lily drew open the leather pouch and slipped her hands around the warm, damp little body. Oh, Abigail! The baby felt just like Abby . . . only smaller . . . newer. She lifted the squirming bundle out of the bag and tucked it against her neck. The child's soft lips immediately began to root hungrily.

"Aw, she's precious!" Rosie cried. "But she looks like she's half starved. You'd better feed her."

"Aye, sit here on this blanket," Caitrin spoke up, guiding Lily to a square of brightly woven wool stripes spread beneath a spindly tree. "Is this your camp? Here, I'll put the pillow behind your back. There now, little Abigail is so hungry she can hardly bear it. Sure she's all wrinkled up like a newborn! How old is she?"

Lily couldn't make herself speak. The kicking baby clung to her, sobbing in anguish as she tucked it beneath the purple cape. Where was the child's mother? She was the one who should be feeding this baby.

"Do you need help with your buttons?" Rosie asked, kneeling on the blanket.

“No, I can . . . I can do this.” Lily couldn’t hold back her tears as she performed the familiar motions of slipping apart the row of buttons, untying her camisole ribbon, and nestling the baby close. The moment the child began to nurse, all crying ceased, and the tiny legs curled into a ball.

“Abigail was famished!” Rosie said with a laugh. “Goodness, I don’t believe she’d been fed for hours.”

“Whisht, Rosie,” Caitrin murmured. “The lady’s still weeping, can’t you see? There now, madam, you’ve got your baby once again. The wee thing will forget all about her hunger in a moment, and the pair of you can have a good night’s rest.”

Lily tried to stop crying. Truly she did. But as the baby drank milk meant for little Abby, her pain and longing only intensified. All around her, the world drifted away—the two caring women, the rough blanket, even the preacher, whose voice droned like the hum of a lazy bee. The baby’s fingers were splayed across the bodice of Lily’s dress, and she knew they were not Abby’s fingers. The tiny head wreathed in a cloud of dark curls bore no resemblance to Abby with her golden wisps. The face was smaller, the cheeks sunken, the skin wrinkled. Abigail had been plump and round, at four months the picture of health. This was not Abby.

“She’s still crying,” Rosie whispered to Caitrin. “I hate to leave her alone like this.”

The Irishwoman glanced over her shoulder. “The preaching’s nearly finished for the evening, so it is. Sure we’d best get back to our men.” She laid a hand on Lily’s arm. “Are you all right? I know you’re not from one of the homesteads around Hope, so you must have come traveling our way. Perhaps Rosie and I could have a look in the crowd for your husband.”

“My husband is dead,” Lily whispered as she cupped the baby’s tiny head. The child was still nursing as though every drop of milk must be drained into her tiny, shrunken stomach. Lily shifted the

baby into her other arm, and the child began to suckle again. "Three days ago. He's buried near Topeka. My daughter lies beside him."

"Your daughter?"

Lily brushed her damp cheek. "I buried her in a wooden box."

"Oh, dear," Rosie said. "I'm so sorry. No wonder you're upset—a husband and a daughter both gone. I couldn't imagine how any woman could forget where she'd put her baby, but now I see you've been through a terrible trial. If I lost Seth and Chipper, I'd be just wild with grief. I couldn't bear it. Oh, honey, do you and little Abigail need a place to sleep tonight? I hate to think of you out here on the prairie with nothing but a blanket and that old horse. Seth and I have a great big house, lots of space, and we'd be glad to put you and your daughter up for the night."

Lily could feel that the baby had finally drifted off to sleep, warm and content at last. "No, no, you don't understand," she murmured, drawing the tiny form out from beneath the purple cape and gazing down at the child's blissful face. "This is . . . this is going to be all right. In a moment, I'll leave."

"Leave?" Caitrin exclaimed. "But 'tis almost fully dark now. You're a nursing mother and a *frainey* one at that. Sure you can't be tramping down the road in the middle of the night."

"Hey!" The preacher's voice pealed out like a clap of thunder. "What's going on here?"

Lily's head snapped up. Just beyond the blanket stood the two men who had accompanied Rosie and Caitrin. Between them, his boots planted a pace apart on the prairie grass, towered the preacher. He swept off his Stetson, took a step toward the women, and punched the air with his forefinger.

"Look here, lady," he snarled at Lily. "I don't know who you are or what you're up to, but you'd better hand over my baby. I've been given two jobs to do in this world. One of them is to preach the gospel. And the other is to take care of Samuel."

"Samuel?" Rosie and Caitrin said in unison. "*Samuel?*"

Prairie Storm

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Lily Nolan has more Bible verses memorized than most Christians, more than Elijah himself. She also knows hymns. What effect does this knowledge have on her spiritually?
2. The main spiritual issue for Lily is “Did the Bible offer even a single promise of God’s abiding shelter at *all* times through *all* things?” How does the story answer this question?
3. Lily can’t understand, at first, why Elijah would go through all the trouble to take care of the baby Samuel. What motivates Elijah to make that commitment? How does Lily herself eventually become attached to Samuel?
4. Lily believes that Beatrice is her friend. What is the real dynamic going on in that relationship? What kind of spiritual beliefs does Beatrice hold? Why is this attractive to Lily? How does she break free finally?
5. What attraction does the prospect of going to China hold for Elijah? How does he come to realize that God has called him to Hope, Kansas?
6. Describe the spiritual struggles Lily and Elijah each experience when they are so afraid they will lose Samuel. How does this affect their spiritual growth?
7. How does Lily help Samuel spiritually, even before she makes her own commitment to Christ? Can God use unbelievers in a person’s life to help him or her grow spiritually? Why or why not?

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8. Elijah's torment is that he loves Lily, but she's not a believer (at least he doesn't know for a while even after she commits her life to Christ), so he knows he must not marry her. Everyone else seems to think Elijah should marry Lily. Is his struggle a valid one?
9. What is it about Elijah and his faith that helps Lily see the truth of the gospel?
10. Lily struggles in the end with whether to obey her father's wishes. She concludes that she should. Is she right in this? When does the command, "Children, obey your parents" no longer apply, if ever?
11. How does Lily find healing from her past? How does her father find healing?
12. A running theme throughout this story is God's wisdom vs. human wisdom. Beatrice persuades Lily that the only person she can trust and rely upon is herself. Her father has ideas about what is best for Elijah, Lily, and the baby. Discuss the contrasts between God's ways and human ways in this story, and how the story illustrates the true wisdom of humility, repentance, and trusting God.

The Christmas Bride

CHAPTER 1

*Hope, Kansas
September 1866*

I AM THE happiness of all the town!" Rolf Rustemeyer pushed back his chair and held up an envelope so the townsfolk gathered in Lucy's Bakeshop could see it. Even the postmaster, who was sampling one of the proprietor's famous cinnamon rolls, paused to stare at the big German farmer.

"You mean to say you have happy news for all the town," Rosie Hunter said, laying her hand on Rolf's arm to soften her correction.

"Ja," he said, beaming. "Happy news for the town. I have a letter from my home in the Old Country. Soon, I am marrying the Christmas bride."

Lucy Cornwall studied Rolf through the glass pane of the counter as she arranged the morning's display of sticky rolls. She thought the blond farmer had it right the first time. Rolf Rustemeyer *was* the happiness of the town of Hope. A frown never shadowed the man's face, a word of anger never crossed his lips, and he was always ready with cheerful encouragement or a helping hand for his neighbors. He strode into her bakeshop each morning before dawn and announced that it was going to be a very "goot" day. And usually, while Rolf Rustemeyer was around, it was.

"My father sends to me this letter," he continued, displaying the crisp white sheet of paper for everyone to admire. "In summer, I was writing to him. I tell my father I am too much alone. No wife, no childrens. I tell him to find me a wife."

"But what about Widow Hudson?" Seth Hunter asked. As Rosie's husband and mayor of Hope, he kept up with most of the town's goings-on. "I recall a picnic last summer when you were dancing with Violet Hudson and three or four of her children."

"Mrs. Hudson moved already to Topeka," Rolf said. "She sells her farm to me and goes away with her husband's parents."

At this news, Lucy turned to her wooden bins and scooped out a measure of oatmeal. She was pleased to hear that Rolf had acquired more property. The German had become the largest landowner in the county, and certainly the wealthiest. And she had to admit she was glad that his efforts to court the Widow Hudson were at an end. Violet was a sweet woman, but Rolf deserved someone younger . . . more gentle. . . .

"Has your father really found you a wife, Rolf?" Rosie asked.

"Ja." He scrutinized the letter again. "Ingrid Volkart is her name. She is living near Heidelberg with her mother and father and three sisters and six brothers."

"But, Rolf, do you know this woman?"

"Not yet. She comes by the boat and the train at Christmas-time. Then we marry." He picked up his coffee mug and took a long swallow. "Goot, Miss Cornwall. Very goot!"

Lucy knew she was blushing as she kneaded the dough for the oatmeal buns she sold by the dozen. Why couldn't she say something to him in response? What kept her tongue frozen like a slab of winter beef? She could feel the eyes of everyone in the shop, so she turned quickly to look for her rolling pin.

"Ahh," Rolf said, setting down the mug. "And now, sun is coming up. Cows want to be milked. Chickens giving eggs. I better to go home."

"Rolf." Rosie caught his arm. "How soon will this Ingrid Volkart be here? Should we plan a wedding for you? What if you don't like her? And how will you—"

"I don't know answers," the farmer said. "God has the goot plan

for Rolf Rustemeyer. When I make plans for myself in these matters, it does not go so fine. A while back, I try to marry with you, remember, Mrs. Hunter?"

Rosie smiled and took her husband's hand. She was due to deliver their first child within the month. "But God had a different plan," she said softly.

"Ja, and then I think maybe to marry Caitrin Murphy. But she marries with Jack Cornwall, there." He pointed at Lucy's brother, whose Irish wife was next door opening the mercantile for business.

"After that, I try the Widow Hudson." Rolf raked his fingers through his thick blond hair. "Is no goot for me to make plans, you see? Better to let God be the boss of it."

"But, Rolf, how can you marry a woman you don't even know?"

"Did Adam know Eve? They get along OK, I think." He frowned. "Maybe one or two small problems."

"Oh, Rolf, you've worked so hard to learn English, and you've built up such a fine farm. Why don't you marry a nice American girl?"

"Who, Mrs. Hunter? Who I shall marry?" He lifted his arms and spread them wide. "No one is here. No one!"

He started across the floor, his heavy leather boots thudding on the wooden planks. Grabbing his coat, he tossed it over one shoulder. Then he turned and looked directly at Lucy.

"Very goot cinnamon rolls today, Miss Cornwall," he said. "You are the best baker in all of Kansas."

Lucy couldn't bring herself to face him, so she nodded in acknowledgment of his compliment as he walked out the door. Yes, Rolf liked her cinnamon rolls and her coffee. He liked the sunny bakeshop with its cluster of round tables. He liked the blue gingham tablecloths and the shiny glass counter and the oven filled with fragrant breads. He even liked Lucy.

She pinched off a ball of oatmeal dough and rolled it into a bun

as her morning customers began to don their hats and coats. Everyone in town liked Lucy. But they were wary of her, too, she knew. They all were aware of her troubled past—how she had been attacked by soldiers during the war and had given birth to a baby as the result of that violation. They knew that the child had been given up for adoption. And they knew that for months afterward, Lucy Cornwall had not been in her right mind.

Now, she wrapped a dish towel around her hand and opened the oven door to slide in the pan of buns. She wasn't so deeply troubled these days—not so others would notice, anyway—but the townspeople remembered how she had scrubbed her flesh raw in an effort to rid herself of the stains the soldiers had left on her. They recalled the way she had thrown herself in front of a stagecoach. They knew about the time she had waded into the freezing waters of Bluestem Creek, determined to end the torment of her bleak, black life.

But things had changed. Though her past had been difficult, Lucy had found a new sense of peace and joy. Strong, determined, and filled with hope, she could see that God was caring for her. With the encouragement of Rosie and Caitrin, Lucy had set up her bakery. Now she spent most of each day away from the Cornwall family's soddy, far from the bitter unhappiness of her mother, who had yet to accept the death of her husband, the loss of their Missouri farm during the War Between the States, and the attack on her daughter. Free to experiment in her new kitchen, Lucy had begun baking up such succulent treats that nearly the whole town turned out early each morning to eat breakfast and purchase fresh breads for the day's meals. She found pleasure in her accomplishments, and she looked forward to what each new day might bring. In the past few months, Lucy had joined the church choir, stitched herself three bright calico dresses, and learned how to weave colorful ribbons through her brown hair.

This Christmas, she had decided, was going to be the best ever. She would trim her shop with swags of fresh pine boughs, set pretty red candles on every table, and bake dozens of cookies for the town's children to decorate. Excitement filled her as she thought of the money sack, heavy with coins, under her counter. Lucy planned to buy a length of red velvet and sew herself a beautiful, full-skirted gown. With the rest of the money, she would purchase a new hunting knife for her brother, a gilt-framed mirror for Caitrin, and the rose-bedecked hat that her mother had so admired in the mercantile. Lucy could hardly wait.

"Oatmeal?" Rosie asked, leaning against the counter to peer into the empty mixing bowl. "Oh, Lucy, you know how I adore your oatmeal buns. Seth, let's buy some. We can eat them with the chicken I'll be frying up for dinner. When will they come out of the oven, Lucy?"

"Not long." Lucy dipped a rag in her wash bucket. She liked to keep her counters clean. "Why don't you send Chipper down later? I'll put some buns in a basket for you."

"Would you do that? Lucy, you're so sweet." Rosie rubbed her hands over her swollen stomach. "Oh, I feel like I'm just ready to pop. And would you look at that? Seth's gone out the door without even thinking of me. He and your brother are all caught up in their plans for building the new school. Caitrin is longing to teach, but she can't do that and run the mercantile, too. Besides, I suspect she'll be in the family way before long. I've told Seth a hundred times that we need to find a spinster for the teaching job."

"That's true," Lucy said.

"What do you think of Rolf's announcement? A bride from Germany! I'll have to start teaching English lessons all over again. Well, Lucy, it's been a wonderful start to the morning, hasn't it? I'll send Chipper down the hill for the buns. I can't wait!"

Rosie waddled across to the coatrack. Lucy watched her lift a heavy woolen shawl and slip it around her shoulders. Sometimes

Lucy recalled the months of her own pregnancy. She had loved the tiny life growing inside her. And at the same time, she had feared it might be a hideous growth, a kind of cancer that a great evil had planted inside her. But she had knitted eight pairs of booties, and she had stitched every yard of flannel she could purchase into tiny gowns and blankets. She had ached to hold her baby in her arms. And other times she had longed to rip it out of her body. It was the symbol of every pain and torment that had been visited on her.

Even now that her life had taken on such joy, there were times when Lucy found herself wondering what had happened to her baby. Lucy prayed daily for her child. Somewhere deep in her heart, she nurtured the dream that she might one day be reunited with her daughter.

“Look at that husband of mine,” Rosie said. “He’s halfway up the hill with Jack Cornwall. You’d never know they were once mortal enemies.”

“God has worked miracles in Hope,” Lucy said.

“Now isn’t that the truth? When I think of all the things that have happened here, I just have to fall on my knees in gratitude. The way God gave Chipper back to Seth was truly a wonder. Then Jack Cornwall hid in the O’Tooles’ barn and fell in love with Caitrin. And who would have thought a prairie fire would turn Jimmy O’Toole to Jesus? That’s not even to mention the way your mother and Sheena O’Toole have come to—”

She stopped speaking and let out a yelp like a wounded pup. Lucy turned from checking on the oatmeal buns to find Rosie in a heap beside the front door.

“Oh, Lucy!” Rosie was clutching her skirts. “Something’s happening to me. There’s water everywhere! Where’s Seth . . . where’s . . . oh, no!”

Lucy hurried around the counter and sank to the floor beside the young woman. “Don’t worry, Rosie. It’s all right. Didn’t

Sheena tell you about the water breaking? Sometimes it happens first, and that means the baby's on the way for certain."

Rosie was gasping for air. "But there's so much of it!"

"More than you'd suppose. Calm yourself, now. I'll fetch Seth."

"Wait, Lucy, don't leave me!" Rosie grabbed her hand and squeezed hard. "It hurts. My whole stomach hurts. It's so tight, like there's a big leather band around it. I'm afraid!"

"No, no. That's just the way it's supposed to feel. Stretch your legs out now. Lean back against the wall. There you go—"

"Oh, oh, ohhh!" Blue eyes wide, Rosie stared at Lucy. "What if the baby's born right here on the bakeshop floor? What if something terrible happens? What if—"

"Close your eyes, Rosie, and take a deep breath. Remember God is here with you right now. He's watching over you and your baby." Lucy stroked her hand across her friend's damp forehead. "That's right. Try to breathe. Now, remember, it usually takes a long time to birth the first baby. You'll be home in your own bed long before your little one shows his pretty face to the world."

"The pain's going away now." Rosie's eyes fluttered open. "I feel better. I feel like I can—"

"I forget my bread!" Rolf Rustemeyer announced, barging into the bake shop and swinging the front door into Lucy. "How am I eating my sandwich without the bread?"

He stopped, stared at the empty counter, then noticed the two figures at his feet. His tanned face went ashen.

"Mrs. Hunter! You are not well?"

"It's the baby," Lucy said softly, rubbing her shoulder where the door had hit her. "Mr. Rustemeyer, please go and fetch Mr. Hunter right away."

"But what is this wet on the floor and the skirt? She's bleeding?"

"Oh, I'm mortified!" Rosie cried. "Rolf, stop staring at me. Go away!"

"Never. I carry you to your house!" Before either woman could

speak, he scooped Rosie into his huge arms and strode out the door. Lucy scampered beside him, frightened her friend would have another pain. What if Rosie cried out and Rolf dropped her?

“Put me down this instant, you great shaggy bear!” Rosie pounded on Rolf’s chest with her bare fists, but he kept walking. “I want my husband. Lucy, where’s Seth?”

“What’s the matter with Rosie?” Caitrin Cornwall raced out of the mercantile, her bonnet ribbons flying. “I heard the shouting. Is it the baby?”

“It’s the baby,” Rosie wailed. “Make Rolf put me down!”

“Has she started her labor?” Lily Book, the pastor’s wife, stepped through the church door. “I’m on my way!”

As the women of the town fell in behind the German farmer and his burden, Lucy stopped. Now Sheena O’Toole, her sixth baby due at any moment, came tottering across the bridge over the Bluestem. She was waving a handful of diapers and shouting advice as a string of children tried to hold her back by her skirts. Ben Hanks emerged from the smithy, while his wife and mother quickly joined the crowd hurrying up the road toward the Hunter family’s white clapboard house.

Lucy let out a sigh and turned back to her bake shop. She needed to check the oven. Perhaps later she’d make up a basket of warm oatmeal buns and send them to Rosie. And one day, maybe soon, she would get the chance to see the tiny newborn. Perhaps Rosie would even trust Lucy to hold the baby.

“Wait for me!” Sheena called. “Colleen, do stop clutching my skirts. Sure you’ll trip me up any moment.”

Lucy paused for a moment in the door of her little shop. She felt grateful to see the townspeople come together for this event, just as they had rallied to stop a prairie fire, build a church, clean up after a tornado, and for countless other efforts. If the mercantile needed new glass windows, five of the townsmen arrived to install them. If the O’Toole children fell ill with croup, the women of

Hope took turns staying up all night and nursing them back to health. It was a good place, and Lucy thanked God daily for giving her a new life here.

As she started to step into the shop, Lucy noticed Sheena come to a halt and steady herself against the church wall. Bending over, the redheaded woman took several deep breaths as two of her youngsters skipped around her. She pushed their hands away and clutched her belly. Then she sank onto the ground.

“Sheena?” Lucy shouted. “Are you all right?”

“Glory be to God!” Sheena’s face brightened as she spotted Lucy in the distance. “Sure I thought everyone had gone up to the Hunters’ house. Move out of the way, Will, I can’t see Miss Cornwall at all. Lucy, can you come here a moment, my dear? I’m afraid I’ve a bit of a problem.”

Grabbing her skirts, Lucy hurried up the dusty road. She was concerned about her oatmeal buns burning up in the oven, but she knew she must help Sheena first. “Is something wrong, Mrs. O’Toole?”

“Aye, that there is. This baby of mine has made up his wee mind to have a bit of a race with Rosie’s child.”

“A race?”

“He’s wanting to be born, so he is.” Her round face was flushed and beaded with drops of perspiration. “You’ll help me, won’t you, Miss Cornwall?”

“I’ll run for Mr. O’Toole—”

“No time for that. This is my sixth, and it won’t wait for Papa. I can feel the head pushing down already.”

“The head!” Lucy clutched her heart, trying to breathe. “But Mrs. O’Toole—”

“I had pains all night, off and on, but naught to fret about. The running must have hurried the labor.” She grabbed her son’s arm. “Will, take Colleen and run to the farm hot-foot and fetch your papa. That’s a good lad. Miss Cornwall, help me into the church.”

“You can’t have a baby in the church!” Lucy cried.

“Shall I have it here on the road, then?”

Lucy clutched her skirts, paralyzed with uncertainty. Sheena was trying to stand, the children were scampering away, and Lucy longed to race back to her shop where everything was safe. Where she was in control. Where nothing could go wrong.

“Won’t you help me, Lucy?” Sheena asked.

“I . . . I . . .” Lucy couldn’t make herself move.

“Oh, you’re useless, so you are!” Sheena snapped. “I should have known this would happen. Naught to help me but a weak-headed *googeen*. God have mercy!”

She pushed herself to her feet and leaned on the windowsill. Breathing hard, she began to shuffle toward the church door. Lucy bit her lip, praying for courage, fearful she might faint. She needed to go back to her shop. She had to take the oatmeal buns out of the oven. Then she ought to wash the counters. Scrub them until they sparkled.

Groaning in agony, Sheena fought her way to the door. Lucy swallowed. She couldn’t do this. Couldn’t help. Didn’t know how. What if she made a mistake? What if the baby died? What if Sheena died? She should run. Run back down the hill to her shop.

“I can’t . . .” Sheena tugged on the door handle. “’Tis locked, is it? Oh, have mercy on me!”

Lucy gritted her teeth and sent up a desperate prayer for strength: *Father God! Oh, God, please help us! Crying out, shattering the bonds of fear, she lunged at the door. The handle turned. The door swung open. Sheena toppled to the church floor. Lucy fell to her knees beside the woman and threw back her skirts.*

“Are you there, Lucy? Are you there?” Sheena cried. “I must push it out! I’ve no choice!”

“I’m here,” Lucy whispered. “Push, Sheena.”

With a loud wail, she arched her back. Lucy cupped her hands. A small, damp head slipped into her palms.

"'Tis out?" Sheena cried. "Lord have mercy on my soul, I'm dying!"

"Push again!"

This time the baby's shoulders emerged, and then all at once the rest of the tiny body slid out into Lucy's hands. Gripping the slippery baby, she ran her finger around the inside of the rosebud mouth.

"Breathe, child!" Lucy commanded. "Breathe now!"

A gasp. A cry. And the baby began to wail. Gray skin flushed bright pink. Tiny arms pumped the air. Feet and legs churned.

"He lives!" Sheena laughed and cried. "Oh, thank you, dear Jesus!"

Lucy laid the baby in Sheena's outstretched arms and let out a deep breath.

It was done. The baby was born. Alive and safe. *Oh, God, thank you! she prayed.*

"'Tis a boy!" Sheena said. "A fine, lusty boy with his papa's bright red hair. We must cut the—"

"Where she is?" Rolf Rustemeyer shouted, plowing through the church door. Colleen clung to his hand and pointed at her mother. "Mrs. O'Toole? What happens to you? The little girl tells me—"

"The baby, I've had my baby!" Sheena was giggling now, kissing her squalling son on his forehead. "Rolf, cut the cord, and then run fetch Jimmy. I must show him this fine new boy of ours. What shall we name him, Lucy? What do you think?"

Lucy swallowed and glanced at Rolf. He was staring at her with a mixture of concern and admiration.

"You do this, Miss Cornwall?" he asked. "You bring this baby out?"

She shook her head. "It was Mrs. O'Toole—"

"Nonsense! I couldn't have done it without Lucy." Sheena took

the German's hand and pulled him close. "Look, Rolf, look at my baby now. What do you think of him, eh? Isn't he grand?"

Lucy took a bit of baker's twine from her apron pocket and tied the baby's cord. Then Rolf slipped his knife from its holder on his belt. As he cut the cord, Lucy took off her apron and wrapped the baby in the soft white cotton. She had just slipped off one of Sheena's petticoats and begun to clean up when Jimmy O'Toole and five O'Toole children burst into the church. "'Tis a boy!" Sheena said as her husband knelt beside her.

"Glory be to God," Jimmy said. "Look, Will and Erinn, you've a new brother, so you have. And what do you think of him? Isn't he a wee thing? Sure you're a grand, elegant woman, Sheena. Why then I'm certain I've never been so happy in all my days."

"You've said that six times over, you silly galoot," she murmured.

"And each time I've meant it. Oh, Sheena, my love."

"Jimmy, Jimmy."

As the family clustered around Sheena, Lucy rose and took a step back. She could see the baby's small pink face, could remember her own daughter pressed against her breast. How long had she held the child? No more than a minute, it seemed. And then her mother had come and pulled the baby away.

"This is a child of sin," she had said. *A child of sin. A child of sin.*

Lucy twisted her damp fingers together. She hadn't meant for the soldiers to find her hiding there in the barn. Hadn't lured them. Hadn't made herself free to them. But they took her, and then her mother took the baby. The child of sin.

Whose sin? Lucy now wanted to ask as she stumbled out the door of the church into the September sunshine. *Forgive me, God! I didn't mean it to happen!*

"Miss Cornwall, you are very goot woman." Rolf Rustemeyer's voice stopped her on the road. "It is brave for you to help Mrs.

O'Toole. And before that you help Mrs. Hunter. Two babies in one day. This is very goot."

Lucy peered through the swirling clouds that filled her thoughts until she could see Rolf's shining hair and bright gray eyes. What was he telling her?

"Me, too," he said. "I help also, *ja?* First I carry Mrs. Hunter to her house. And then I cut the . . . how do you say it?"

Lucy looked into his broad, handsome face. "Cord," she whispered.

"The cord. We are the helpers today, you and me."

Lucy nodded.

"I think, you and me, we are much the same," he went on. "I am big German farmer, not talking goot English. People here are not wanting to be my friend, because they think I am not the same with them. Different, you know?"

"Yes," Lucy said softly.

"And you, too. You are different. Very quiet, not talking, baking bread every day. Not many friends. Why that is?"

She studied his face, the high cheekbones, the strong jaw. Didn't he know she was considered mad? Didn't he see how she sometimes struggled just to get through each day? Of course she had no close friends. People were wary. People were afraid.

"Here is what I think," Rolf said. "I think you and me are different. So, we are the same. You understand?"

"Yes," Lucy said. "I understand."

He smiled at her, a grin that lit up the morning. "Two babies in one day. In Germany, we say *wunderbar*. It means wonderful."

"*Wunderbar*," she repeated.

"*Ja!* You speak German very goot." He glanced at her. "Aha, now you smile. I never see you smile before this day. Maybe you think Rolf Rustemeyer is funny?"

"I think you are *wunderbar*."

THE CHRISTMAS BRIDE

He threw back his head and laughed. "You are *wunderbar!* I am *wunderbar!* Two babies in one day is *wunderbar!*"

Lucy gasped as he took her hands and swung her around in a circle. Boots sending up puffs of dust on the dirt road, he danced a set of intricate steps. Then he kicked up his heels and whirled away.

"Two babies," he shouted as he jigged down the road. "Two babies and *wunderbar* Lucy Cornwall and a Christmas bride coming from Germany to marry with Rolf Rustemeyer! God is goot! God is very goot!"

Lucy sucked down a deep breath. She would have to hurry back to her shop. The oatmeal buns must be burned to cinders.