



A NOVEL

IF  
IT  
RAINS

JENNIFER L.  
WRIGHT

## PRAISE FOR *IF IT RAINS*

“Reminiscent of the striking narrative of Delia Owens and with the poetic grace of Julie Cantrell, Wright exhibits an inimitable voice and pitch-perfect historical acumen. Wholly immersive and gorgeously spun, there is a classic resonance to this treatise on belonging and family with a wonderful homage to L. Frank Baum as two sisters find themselves and each other against seemingly insurmountable odds. One of the freshest debuts I have read in an age by a uniquely talented author to watch!”

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“Set against the suffocating cloud of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl, *If It Rains* is an unforgettable debut. Wright’s evocative descriptions of grief and grace will echo with readers long after the last page has been turned.”

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among Sheaves*

“*If It Rains* transports you so fully, you catch yourself gasping for breath and praying for rain alongside the characters. And the characters! Each one is multilayered and intriguing; sisters Kathryn and Melissa are loyal but complicated, sincere but imperfect—and fiercely lovable. As they cling to courage and fight for faith, you find yourself doing the same. Their story stays with you long after you reach ‘The End.’”

ELIZABETH LAING THOMPSON, author of *All the Feels* and  
the *When God Says* series



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*For Jesus, who changed everything*

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*“And now I bring the firstfruits of the soil  
that you, O LORD, have given me.”*

DEUTERONOMY 26:10



CHAPTER ONE

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# KATHRYN

Helen lost her third baby on the day of my sister's wedding.

I'd tried to tell Melissa. Told her Helen was too pregnant, the late-April sky was too ripe, and—most of all—that getting married was a stupid idea anyway. She told me to stop being hateful and help her with her dress. Her *dress*. All this dirt and dead crops, and what she cared about was looking pretty for Henry.

Sure enough, the sky turned black by midafternoon. But not from rain. It was never from rain anymore. The wedding party scattered before they so much as cut that ridiculous white cake. A few escaped to their cars; the luckiest were able to start them before static cut the ignition. Even then, not many would make it home. Most would pass the storm stuck in a

sand drift. At least the wedding would give them something to talk about while they waited. Rubberneckers, all of 'em.

We didn't even have it that good. We would have to walk. Pa's truck hadn't started for weeks. Too much dust or not enough gas. Or both. Sure, we could have stayed at the Mayfields'. Waited it out like the other sheep. But I would rather chance a duster than spend another second with the new Mr. and Mrs. Mayfield. So I left. Pa and Helen followed.

A cloud of earth swallowed me when I stepped out the front door. Melissa had tried to make her old pink dress look new for me, but the fabric was still thin. Nothing she could do about that. I pulled it up over my mouth and nose, gagging on the cheap perfume Helen had doused me in that morning. "I won't have you smelling like a pig even if you insist on looking like one," she'd said. "Not today." Like it even mattered.

Helen slowed us. Her stomach threw off her balance in the wind, making the two-mile walk home seem longer. If not for Pa, I would have trudged ahead. Forget her. But I couldn't leave Pa. He was all I had left now. And since he insisted on helping his wife, I knew I had to be the one to count fence posts or we'd miss the house completely.

House. We hadn't had a house since Ma died. Sometimes the blood won't come out, Pa said, even when you can't see it no more. But the dugout was good enough. Cool in the summer, warm in the winter. And at least it kept the wind out.

"Get that sheet under the door."

I did as I was told, eyes stinging, trying not to listen to Helen's moans and wheezes. Did she have to make all that *noise*? The whistling, the scratching, the rattling—I could

take the storm. But *this*? It was her own fault for making us go to that circus wedding. A woman in her condition weren't in no fit state to be walking. Come to think of it, it was Melissa's fault, too, for having a wedding in the first place.

Helen's voice, desperate in the darkness. "James."

I felt around until I found the cabinet door, pulling a rumpled sheet from within. Two steps over was the water bucket; then it was eleven steps back to the door. Listening to Pa fumble for the lantern, I punched at the wet sheet, willing it into the cracks. The sooner it was in there, the sooner I could plug my ears. The door popped and creaked like a monster was seeping into the very boards. I missed Melissa already.

The stench of kerosene and a sudden flare of light. Helen stood at the table, clutching her swollen belly. Her eyes were shut, hair matted to her forehead. "James—" she started again but broke off as if strangled. At her feet, water began to pool, thick and shiny in the flickering light. The soft dripping was louder than the storm raging just outside our walls.

I squeezed the sheet in my hand, feeling my fingernails penetrate the thin fabric. It wasn't the baby. It couldn't be the baby. It was too early.

But it was always too early.

Dirt lay in the creases of Pa's face and coated his thinning hair. His eyes were red with grit. Yes, grit. There was no way he was crying. Helen just had an accident, that's all. She couldn't make it to the outhouse in all this dust.

We stood silent, staring, unable or unwilling to accept the injustice of truth, as if remaining where we were would change

it somehow. For minutes or for hours. It was impossible to tell. And then, with the faintest of sobs, Helen made it real.

Pa pushed past me, grabbing her arm to steady her as another pain twisted her face. "I have to go get Emmalou." His voice betrayed none of the panic twitching his eye. "Kath, you'll need to stay—"

"No!" The word slipped from my lips before I could stop it. Loudly. Urgently. "I'll get Mrs. Patton. You stay."

Outside, the wind roared, but my plea hung heavy and immovable in the airless dugout. Pa cleared his throat. Helen shifted where she stood, one hand gripping the table, the other rubbing the sweat-caked dust on her brow. She very purposefully didn't look at me. She didn't need to. I already knew.

The only thing stronger than her aversion to my help was her memory.

"She won't make it," she said finally, defeat souring the edge of her words. "Please . . . not again, James." The last part softer. But not soft enough.

The midwife lived in a small house about three-quarters of a mile south of here, across a stunted wheat field plagued with plow ruts and rabbit holes. Last time it had been clear, not a cloud in the sky, and I'd still failed. And although it wasn't my fault the barbed wire had been covered in dirt, it *was* my fault my brace had gotten tangled and the midwife didn't make it in time. Helen made that perfectly clear. I had killed her baby. She told me so right after we buried her. In a voice low enough Pa couldn't hear but loud enough I would never forget.

"James . . .," Helen whimpered.

There wasn't time to argue about what I could or couldn't do. Not now. I stuffed my pride into the window with another wet blanket and nodded without looking at him. The dust was making my eyes water, too. A scream of wind, a blast of dirt, and he was gone into the storm.

Helen wailed and coughed. Like she was the only one scared.

I rewet the sheet and shoved it beneath the crack of the door again. *This* I could do. Maybe if I kept wetting sheets, she wouldn't ask me to do anything else.

"I need to lay down."

Helen's dress was saturated with sweat, leaving muddy stains under her arms and across her chest. I could see her belly button through the fabric. It was hard and knotted, heaving with each shallow breath.

A sudden gust of wind knocked a spray of dirt against the window, startling us both.

I could make it to the barn. I knew the way, even in a duster. Helen didn't want me here, and Pa would be back soon with the midwife. It was better for everyone if I stayed out of the way. And still I found myself saying, "What . . . what do you want me to do?"

"Water. I need water."

I hobbled to the kitchen area, gasping as a sharp pain shot through my leg. I'd pushed too hard today. The traveling, the wedding . . . I needed to sit down. But I couldn't. Not when Helen was staring at me like that.

Our water bucket was only half-full. Pa would be mad. The last duster had clogged the well, and I was supposed to

pump through it this morning. All this wedding stuff had me distracted. I pulled up a cupful, watching particles float to the bottom. How much water did one need to have a baby?

I returned just as Helen let out another scream. Startled, I dropped the cup. The water bounced against the dirt floor, too hard and dry to soak it in.

“Kathryn.”

The water puddled at my feet, nudging against my shoes.

“Something’s wrong.”

“What—?”

“Come over here. You need to check.”

*Check?* No. No, no, no. She didn’t mean . . . ? “Water. I was gonna get you more.”

Tears rolled down Helen’s gray cheeks. “Kathryn, please. I need you to check. Which way is the baby facing?”

“Facing?”

The water was mud now, holding my feet in place. I wasn’t a midwife or a doctor. And she wasn’t even really family. Just a stepmother. Not that either one of us would ever call her that.

“Please.” She moaned as another pain erupted. It was an eternity before she could speak again. “Something’s wrong.”

Of course something was wrong. Everything about this was wrong. I needed Melissa. She’d helped with the others. I wasn’t supposed to be doing this. I was only fourteen. I knew where babies came from. I’d helped with the cows and pigs before most of them had starved. But this . . .

Was this what it had been like for my mother? Had I made her scream like this before I killed her?

“Please . . .” Helen’s voice was barely above a whisper.

The window rattled. I couldn't look at her; instead I counted my fingers. Right now she needed me. My new brother or sister . . . he or she needed me, too. Needed me to help. Needed me to look. And I just couldn't.

"Kathryn, what do you see? Can you see the head?"

I backed away. I shouldn't be here. I'd only make it worse. Where was Pa? Where was Melissa?

"Kath—" Helen's words choked as another pain gripped her.

I closed my eyes and stumbled backward, smashing into something that hadn't been there just minutes before.

Pa. Pa was back. He grabbed my arms and shook me. "Kathryn, what's happening? What's wrong?"

I couldn't speak. My foot throbbed. Bile pooled in my mouth.

The midwife rushed past us, bag in hand.

Helen shrieked again.

My father dropped my arms, forgetting about me. He ran toward the bed.

Ignoring the protests from my foot, I pushed out the front door, coughing as dirt filled my lungs. But I could breathe out here. Somehow, in the dirt, I could breathe. I felt around blindly until I found the rope leading from our house to the barn. Pulling my dress over my nose and mouth once again, I stumbled through sand drifts until I felt the worn wood of the barn door beneath my fingers and pushed.

The chickens scattered. Our one remaining cow glared.

The lantern gave a comforting glow as I pulled my book from its hiding spot in the rafters. My mother's book, my real

mother, the only thing I had to remember a woman I'd never met. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The book from before Helen. Before the babies. Before the drought.

Melissa's face floated before me in the dark.

*"Now, Kath, listen. You can't talk and listen at the same time."*

*"But I know it already," I said. "I don't even need the book anymore."*

*She sighed and closed the cover, like we hadn't done this a million times before. "Well, if you already know the story, I guess we don't need to read it no more. I'll be going."*

I'd known she wouldn't really leave. She never left. But still I would cry out, beg her to stay, read a few more pages. I'd be quiet and listen, I'd promise. If only she'd stay and read just a little more.

But this time she hadn't stayed. She'd really left. And all I had was my mother's book and this barn, where I could get away from the nightmare she'd left me in.

Dorothy lived in the midst of the great Kansas prairies with Uncle Henry, who was a farmer, and Aunt Em, who was the farmer's wife. Their house was small, for the lumber to build it had to be carried by wagon many miles. . . .

Helen's screams outlasted the wind. By sunrise, the storm had finally passed, leaving dust and death hanging in the air. The house quiet, I retreated from Oz to dig yet another hole in the parched earth near the fence line.