



A Home
in
Drayton
Valley

Kim Vogel
A Novel by
Sawyer



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The poem Tarsie sings in Chapter 8 is from “The Last Rose of Summer” by Thomas Moore.

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For *Deena*,
who knows without doubt
“. . . it was then that You carried me.”

*“Fear not: for I have redeemed thee,
I have called thee by thy name;
thou art mine.
When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee;
and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee:
when thou walkest through the fire,
thou shalt not be burned;
neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.
For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy
One of Israel, thy Saviour . . .
Fear not: for I am with thee.”*

Isaiah 43:1–3, 5

 1 

NEW YORK CITY
MARCH 1880

Tarsie Raines clutched the collar of her cloak beneath her chin and prayed the gusts of wind tugging at the patched bombazine wouldn't carry her away like a kite before she reached her destination. Dark clouds hovered above the rooftops, promising a shower and giving the filthy city streets a gray cast that masked the midmorning hour.

The heels of her shoes *tick-tocked* against the cobblestone, steady as a clock's pendulum, despite having to wend between vendors' carts, groups of begging urchins, and the endless throngs of milling humanity. Odors—fish, rotting vegetables, bodies too long unbathed—assaulted her nose, stirred by the damp breeze whisking from the bay. Her cloak slipped from her shoulder and its tail slapped the leg of a man leaning negligently on a rickety stair railing. She jerked the fabric back into place but not before the man sent a leering grin that traveled from her unraveling braid to the scuffed toes of her well-worn boots. Tarsie hugged the leather pouch containing her herbal cures to her bodice and shivered, but not from cold.

How she wanted out of this city! Mary did, too. *Oh, Lord, please . . .*

The prayer, a helpless plea, winged from her heart as more than a dozen others had since she'd found the tattered copy of James Redpath's *Handbook of Kansas* in an alley a week ago. Although her deepest yearnings found no utterance, she trusted that the Lord she loved and served could read the wordless groanings of her heart and would answer in a way perfect for Mary. But so much rested on Mary's husband, Joss, and what he would say. And Joss had no use for the Lord.

The first cool raindrops plopped onto the dirt-crusting cobblestone as Tarsie reached the brick tenement that housed Mary's family. She darted inside, grateful to have escaped a dousing. Her wool-and-cotton cloak was far too heavy for balmy springtime. But Tarsie owned no other covering, so she wore the cloak year-round. It helped hide the sad dress beneath it.

Tarsie made her way up the narrow concrete stairway littered with food scraps, crumpled paper, and animal droppings. Somewhere in the building, a baby's weak cry tore at Tarsie's heart. Such suffering. Wasn't there a better life waiting elsewhere? Her fingers curled around the booklet in her pocket. Yes, a better life awaited . . . in Kansas. Somehow she must convince Joss of that truth.

The door to the Brubachers' apartment stood open, inviting Tarsie's entrance as it always did on Wednesdays. The children, Emmy and Nathaniel, dashed to greet her the moment she stepped over the threshold. Tarsie gave the towheaded pair a hug, then glanced around the sparsely furnished but clean room. "Where's your mama?" Tarsie hoped her friend hadn't ventured out for shopping. The rain would surely bring on another cold, and Mary's weakened lungs couldn't abide one more illness. Tarsie marveled that the woman had survived the winter.

"Sweepin'," Nathaniel said, tucking a finger into his mouth.

Five-year-old Emmy wrinkled her nose at her little brother. “*Sull*-eeping.” She squared her skinny shoulders and beamed at Tarsie. “I fixed biscuits an’ jam for Nattie an’ me. Mama said I’m her best helper.”

Tarsie gave the little girl’s tangled hair a pat and managed a smile, but inwardly she quaked. If Mary still lay in bed, something was amiss. With trembling hands, she draped her cloak over the single chair in the room. “You two stay out here and play quietly. I’ll be seein’ to your mama.” She pinched the precious pouch between her elbow and ribs and scurried into the sleeping room beyond the living quarters, certain the children would obey. They were bonny youngsters—in all the months Tarsie had visited, she’d rarely found a need to scold them.

As the children had indicated, Mary lay on the lumpy bed that filled the corner of the small room, eyes closed and lips slightly parted. The pale pallor of her skin concerned Tarsie, as did the sheen of perspiration on her brow. Another fever? Tarsie sat on the edge of the bed, causing the springs to creak. Mary’s eyes fluttered open as Tarsie placed the back of her hand gently against the woman’s moist forehead.

The heat from Mary’s skin seared Tarsie’s flesh. Her heart tripped in worry, but she clicked her tongue on her teeth and shook her head, assuming a teasing tone. “Look at you now, sound asleep in the middle of the mornin’. Such a lazy one you are.”

The corners of Mary’s mouth twitched upward in a feeble smile. “So you don’t agree I’ve earned a rest after doing laundry yesterday for my own family plus four others?” A sigh heaved, carried on a wheezing breath. “I have two more loads to do today, though, so I should rise.”

“And why are you still takin’ in laundry?” Tarsie scowled, all pretense at teasing forgotten. “Didn’t I tell you the lye fumes an’ plungin’ your hands again an’ again into water

isn't good for you? If you're wantin' to get better for good, you cannot—”

Mary struggled to prop herself up with her elbows. “I have to work, Tarsie. I've told you so.” Her arms gave way, and she collapsed against the soiled pillows.

“Well, you won't be doin' any laundry today.” Tarsie flopped her age-worn pouch open. Her most valuable possession, she always kept her great-aunt's medicinal pouch with her. She never knew when the cures inside might offer comfort and healing to some poor soul. The cures had been used for Mary more than anyone else. If only something in the leather pouch would heal Mary for good.

Tarsie's fingers sought the small packet of holy basil. The herb had effectively reduced Mary's fever in the past. “I'm thinkin' this new illness ought to tell you leanin' over a wash-tub does you no good.”

“It wasn't doing the wash that caused my sickness,” Mary said.

Tarsie whisked a glance around the room and noted the window opened at least six inches. She pointed. “Did Joss leave the windows open all night again? I've told you, the night air . . .” Tarsie shook her head, too frustrated to continue. She stomped to the window and gave it a push that settled the frame against the sill with a thump. Sometimes she wondered if Joss had no interest in keeping his wife healthy. He stubbornly refused to follow any of her directions. Hands on hips, she faced Mary. “I'll be havin' a chat with him, an'—”

“No.” Mary's voice, although weak, sounded firm. “He works so hard during the day. He needs his rest, and he sleeps better with a little cool air in his face.”

Tears pricked Tarsie's eyes. Mary was the most giving, unselfish person she'd ever known. Why couldn't Joss pander to Mary the way she pandered to him? She moved to the bed

and seated herself again. “But what of you? Is your sleep not important?”

“I’ll be all right.” Mary’s chapped lips curved into a weary smile. “You’ll make me well again, as you always do.”

Oh, how Tarsie prayed Mary’s words proved true. She loved this dear woman—had ever since their very first meeting across the apple vendor’s cart on the street not quite a year ago. God had orchestrated the crossing of their paths days after she’d laid her great-aunt to rest, just at the time Tarsie desperately needed a friend. Her eyes slipped closed. *Help me get Mary out of this city, Lord—away from its damp breezes that bother her lungs an’ from the vermin that crawl through her bed at night. Help me send her to a better place . . . even if it means I never see her again.*

She rose, holding the little drawstring bag of crushed holy basil in her fist. “Then I better be brewin’ you some tea that’ll rid you of the fever, hmm?”

Mary’s hand snaked out and curled around Tarsie’s wrist. “And something for my strength? So I can work this afternoon?”

Tarsie frowned. “You can’t be up workin’—not when you’re sick. The people can wait for their wash.”

“But they won’t wait.” Desperation colored Mary’s voice. “They’ll find someone else to do their washing, and I’ll lose the money.”

“Joss earns a decent wage at the docks. You shouldn’t need to be worryin’ about money.”

Mary pursed her lips and turned her face away, falling silent. Rain splatted against the closed window, and the children’s muffled voices carried from the other room. Tarsie hated hurting her friend, but she knew Joss squandered a fair amount of his wage in the drinking and gambling saloons that lined the docks. If he used his money for his family instead, they could live in a better apartment and Mary would have no need to bring in extra funds.

The booklet in her pocket pressed against her thigh, reminding her of Kansas and fresh opportunities. Away from New York and the immoral businesses that tempted coins from a man's purse, would Joss finally become the kind of husband and father Mary and the children needed? She ought to brew the tea, but she sank back down on the mattress and took Mary's hand. The hot, dry skin with its calluses and broken, brittle nails pained Tarsie. A gentle soul like Mary deserved so much better than she presently received.

"Mary, I know you're wantin' to leave this city—you've told me often how you pray more than dirty streets an' a lifetime of living near the docks for your wee ones."

Mary shifted her face to meet Tarsie's gaze. Longing glimmered in her blue eyes, the wordless beseeching creating an ache in the center of Tarsie's chest.

Tarsie pulled the yellowed *Handbook of Kansas* from her pocket and opened it. "Listen . . ." She began to read. "Drayton Valley, it is admitted by everyone, has the best rock-bound landing, and is the best town site on the Missouri River. We say to the emigrant, come to Drayton Valley; believe as we do, that it is destined to be the great emporium of the upper Missouri."

Mary plucked the booklet from Tarsie's hands and squinted at the cover. Her brows crunched low. "Kansas?"

"To be sure." Tarsie's heart pounded, hope swelling. She jabbed her finger at a paragraph farther down the page. "See there? It speaks of the busy steamboat trade. Joss knows dock work, so he'd surely find a job. A town of two thousand, Mary, instead of this crowded, dirty city. Wouldn't it be a fine place for you an' for Emmy an' wee Nathaniel? And maybe . . . maybe . . ." She swallowed. How she hated to remind Mary of Joss's shortcomings, but her Bible taught her to always speak truth. "Far from here, maybe Joss'll lose his taste for frequenting the saloons."

Mary sucked in her lower lip. A single tear trickled down her wan cheek.

Tarsie squeezed her friend's hand. "It'd be a healin' place for you. For all of you. I feel it in the very center of my soul."

Mary pulled her hand free and rolled to her side, taking the booklet with her. "Brew my tea, please, Tarsie."

With a sigh, Tarsie scuffed to the main room, where the children played in the middle of the floor with a simple doll made of rags and a tumble of discarded chunks of wood. She paused long enough to praise them for being so good, then tossed a scoop of coal into the stove's belly and poured the remaining water from a bucket beside the stove into a pan. While the water heated, she hurried to the rain barrels behind the building to refill the bucket.

To her relief, all four barrels were half full. With the morning's steady rainfall, they'd easily overflow by midafternoon, guaranteeing more than enough water for her to fill a tub and do the laundry Mary had promised to customers. Trudging up the three flights of stairs with the full bucket gripped in both hands, she wondered how Mary in her weakened state had managed to make this trek so many times. Why didn't Joss insist she rest?

Back in the apartment, Tarsie steeped the tea and carried a mugful of the strong-smelling brew to Mary. Expecting to find her sleeping, she gave a jolt when she spotted Mary propped against the pillows, the *Handbook of Kansas* open beneath her palms.

Mary looked up at Tarsie and released a sigh. "I've been reading. And praying." Tears flooded her eyes. "Tarsie, this place . . . the town called Drayton Valley . . . it seems to be everything I want for my family. So far from here . . ." Her gaze drifted to the window, where raindrops chased each other down the cracked pane.

Tarsie scooted to the edge of the bed and pressed the mug

into Mary's hands. "Drink." She waited until Mary took a hesitant sip of the steaming liquid, hiding a smile at her friend's grimace. The tea tasted dreadful, but it worked, and that was what mattered. Retrieving the booklet from the rumpled bed cover, Tarsie held it tight between her fingers. "After I found this book lying in an alley last week, the pages wavin' in the wind as if beckonin' to me, I did some checking at the railroad station. A man there told me groups leave New York on the iron horse every week to join up with wagon trains headin' for Kansas towns. I wrote his name in the back of the book, see?" She indicated the back cover, where her pencil smudgings spelled the name *Charles Driscoll*. "He can tell Joss everything that needs knowin' about joinin' one of the wagon trains that'd take you to Drayton Valley."

"It'll cost so dear," Mary whispered.

Tarsie swallowed. She'd done little else but think of how to help Mary since she'd found the book. She prayed her friend would be able to set aside her fierce pride and accept Tarsie's help. Slipping to her knees beside the bed, she cradled the booklet beneath her chin and offered her most imploring look. "I've been savin' up the money from my sewing. I want you to take it, to use it to help pay for—"

Mary's eyes flew wide. "No!"

Tarsie ignored the fierce objection. "—whatever your family needs to get established in a better place. I'm all alone. I have no need for more'n what I already have."

Images of the filthy street, the leering men, the hopelessness that permeated the tenements flooded Tarsie's mind, but she pushed them resolutely aside. Mary had offered friendship when no one else extended so much as a kind glance in her direction. As much as Tarsie longed for escape, Mary *needed* escape. The city would kill Mary one day.

Tarsie gulped down her own desire to flee this vile place

and gazed fervently into her friend's tear-filled eyes. "Don't rob me of the blessing of helping one who's so dear to me." Behind her, the patter of little feet signaled that Emmy and Nathaniel had tired of being left alone. They charged into the room and flung themselves onto the foot of the bed, giggling and wrestling like a pair of puppies. Tarsie flicked a smile in their direction before looking at Mary again. "Let me help send you an' these precious wee ones to a place where happiness dwells."

Mary's warm gaze embraced her children. The stubborn lines around her mouth softened, and she released a deep sigh. "Oh, Tarsie, how would I have managed this past year without you?" She stretched out one hand and cupped Tarsie's jaw. "My angel . . . that's what you've been." Her hand fell away. "I feel a tug toward Drayton Valley, I won't deny it. But I can't take your hard-earned money."

"But—"

Mary shook her head, her forehead pinching. "There's no use hoping, Tarsie. Joss . . ." She sighed. "He'll never leave New York City."

Tarsie pushed to her feet and strode stiffly from the room, leaving Mary and the children alone. She crossed to the window and stood before the rain-speckled glass, peering into the narrow alleyway between the buildings. A sad view. An empty view. So different from the green fields and wide, sunshiny sky of her native Ireland. So many years had passed, she barely remembered the place of her birth or the ones who had birthed her. She'd planned to save enough money to get her and Great-Aunt Vangie back to Ireland one day, but for what purpose?

Ma and Da had passed when Tarsie was but a small child. Aunt Vangie now lay in a pauper's grave. No whitewashed cottage with thatched roof awaited her return no matter how many times Tarsie tried to imagine it. Her life was here now.

She was young and strong and could make the most of it. But Mary needed more.

Giggles carried from the sleeping room, followed by Mary's soft reprimand. She sounded tired. Would she last through another damp New York spring? Tarsie's heart caught.

The apartment door banged open, and Mary's husband stepped into the room. Tall and raw-boned, Joss Brubacher filled the doorway. Whipping off his hat, he sent water droplets across the clean floor. In two wide strides, he reached the stove and peered into the pot. Then he sent a scowl in Tarsie's direction. "No lunch ready? Where's Mary?" He started toward the sleeping room, but Tarsie darted across the floor and blocked his progress.

Although he frowned at her, silently demanding she move aside, she held her ground. Looking into his sunburnt, irritated face, she said, "Sit down, Joss. I have need of talkin' to you."

❁ 2 ❁

Joss balled his hands into fists and planted them on his hips. Just what did this little Irish snip think she was doing, delivering orders? He followed demands at the dock—he had to if he wanted to keep his job—but this was his home. Here, he was in command.

“Lemme by.”

Mary’s friend lifted her chin. “I’ll not be budgin’.”

“You can move or I’ll move you.” An idle threat. In his thirty years of life, Joss had never raised his hand to a woman, and he wouldn’t now. But she didn’t know that.

“Not ’til you’ve listened to me.”

Men quaked beneath Joss’s scowl. The girl’s refusal to kowtow earned a grudging admiration, but he didn’t have time to argue with her. Thirty minutes—that’s all he got for a midday break. If Mary didn’t fetch his dinner soon, he’d have to return to the docks hungry. And Joss had vowed a long time ago he’d never face hunger again.

He tried to step around her, but quick as a cat she blocked his passage. He tried the other way. With a nimble leap, she waylaid him again. He released a grunt. Had he ever met a more stubborn female? “Girl, I—”

“My name is Tarsie, as you well know, Joss Brubacher. I’ll be thanking you to make use of it. Now . . . if I fix you

some sandwiches, will you hush your bluster and hear what I have to say?”

His stomach rumbled. If it meant getting fed, he could listen. He stomped to the trestle table in the corner and plopped onto a bench. “Hurry, then. I don’t have time to yammer.”

Tarsie gathered items from the little cupboard in the corner and set her hands to work slathering butter on halved biscuits. She layered the biscuits with cheese and slices of meat leftover from last night’s beef tongue, then carried a tin plate stacked with the biscuit sandwiches to the table. Plunking the plate before him, she sat on the opposite bench and folded her hands.

Joss reached for a biscuit, but Tarsie began to pray, freezing his hand mid-reach.

“Our lovin’ Father in heaven, we thank Thee for giving us our daily bread. Bless this food that it might bring nourishment. Please grant listening ears and a sensible spirit”—she peeked at him through one squinted eye. He snapped his eyes closed—“so we might do what’s most pleasin’ to You. Amen.”

He opened his eyes and quirked a brow at her. Was she finished?

She pointed to the plate. “Eat now.”

He needed no further prompting.

“Your Mary is sick again.”

The dry biscuit tried to stick in Joss’s gullet. His Mary was always sick. Hadn’t he worried having children would bring ruination? Day after day, his own father had told him kids were the scourge of a man’s life, but Mary had insisted on birthing five of them. Three hadn’t lived past the suckling age, and the two who’d managed to survive drained her of energy. His chest constricted. If only she’d listened to him . . .

He jammed another biscuit in his mouth and spoke around the lump. “So doctor her.”

“I’ve given her my herbal medicine, just as I’ve been doing these past months. But she’s in need of more.”

Defensiveness raised the fine hairs on the back of Joss’s neck. He did his best by Mary. “You think I can afford a real sawbones on my measly wage? It’s all I can do to pay for our apartment, food, and shoes for those kids.” He yanked up another biscuit and took a mighty chomp.

Tarsie’s fine eyebrows pulled into a frown. “Didn’t I ask you to listen? Hush now.”

With his mouth full, Joss couldn’t snarl. But he could scowl. So he did. Fiercely.

But Tarsie didn’t cringe. To his consternation, she didn’t even blink. “I wasn’t speakin’ of calling in a doctor. When I say she’s needin’ more, I’m meaning she needs clean air, a bed free of vermin, a home away from the crowded city. You’ve already buried three wee ones, Joss Brubacher, an’ if you don’t get your Mary to a better place, you’ll be burying her, as well. Is that what you want?”

The biscuit turned to sawdust in Joss’s mouth. Although two more sandwiches remained on the plate, he pushed it aside. In a lifetime of disappointment and misfortune, Joss had found only one good: Mary. The thought of putting her in the ground sickened him. How dare this girl—this self-possessed stranger—try to frighten him? He jolted to his feet, the bench legs screeching against the planked floor, and pointed his finger at her face. “I’m done listening.”

She leaped up as well. “But—”

“No more!” He thundered the words, and finally the girl ceased her blather. With firm stomps against the floorboards, he charged into the sleeping room. He swept his arm, silently commanding the youngsters to leave the room. They skittered out the door. Dropping to one knee beside the bed, he took his wife’s hand. As always, the difference between his wide, thick palm and her fragile, slender fingers gave him

pause. Such a delicate, lovely woman, his Mary. He didn't deserve her.

He looked into her pale face, and Tarsie's statement swirled through his mind. "*You'll be burying her, as well.*" Anger rose in his chest, pushing the fear away. "Sick again?" Worry tangled his tonsils into a knot, and the words came out harsh. An imitation of his father's voice.

She nodded, her little hand quivering within his grasp. "I'm sorry, Joss."

"That Irish friend of yours demands I take you out of the city." Releasing a derisive grunt, he shook his head. "Where does she think we'd go?"

Mary's free hand slipped from beneath the rumpled bedcovers. She held out a small book, its cover stained and torn. She pushed the book open with her thumb, revealing one dog-eared page. "To a place called Drayton Valley. In Kansas." Her expression turned dreamy.

Joss stared at the page where tiny lines and squiggles marched in straight rows. His inability to make sense of the marks reminded him of his insignificance. Another wave of anger rolled through his gut. He snatched the book from Mary's hand. "Why does she plant ideas in your head?"

He started to fling the book across the room, but Mary's fingers curled around his wrist. "Joss, please—" A coughing spell cut her words short. Joss gritted his teeth, watching helplessly as she struggled to bring the cough to an end. Finally she flopped back on the pillow, spent. Tears swam in her eyes as she begged, "Please think about it. The town has active docks where you could work. But we'd be away from the . . ." Her voice dropped to a rasping whisper. "Saloons." Her fingers tightened on his wrist, her strength surprising him. "You aren't your pa, Joss. You don't need the drink. Or the gambling. But as long as we stay here, it will always pull at you."

Of course it would. What else did he know? He had no other securities. Except Mary.

She went on, her voice dropping so low he had to strain to hear her. "Promise me you'll think about it. Please?"

Pa's voice echoed from the past. "*Never make a promise, boy. Who keeps 'em? Nobody. Promises disappoint.*" Joss made promises, but only to people who didn't matter to him. He pulled his arm free of her grip and set his jaw.

The hopeful light in her eyes dimmed, and Joss looked away to avoid witnessing a flood of tears. His gaze landed on the elaborately carved clock on the dresser. He hissed through his teeth. Late! Ignoring Mary's soft sniffles, his children's wistful farewells, and the Irish girl's disapproving frown, he charged out of the apartment, down the stairs, and into the street. Not until he neared the dock did he realize he still held the Kansas book in his fist.

With a muffled oath, he gave the book a toss. No sense keeping something that would only encourage Mary to dream about what could never be.



The six o'clock whistle signaled the end of the working day. Joss plopped the fifty-pound burlap bag of seed corn from his shoulder onto the stack and brushed his palms together, dispelling dust. He fell in line with the other jostling men, listening but not adding to their ribald comments. He hoped Tarsie's cures had worked well enough to get Mary out of that bed. Worried him to see her laid so low. And he needed a good meal.

"Brubacher!" His boss's voice blasted over the other noises. "Wait up."

Joss shifted out of the flow and turned to face the man, holding back an annoyed grunt.

"You still owe fifteen minutes."

Joss frowned.

Marsden raised one eyebrow. “Thought I didn’t see you creep in late after the dinner break, huh? Well, if you wanna draw a full day’s wage, you hafta give a full day’s work. So head back up there and finish unloading that corn.”

Joss bristled, but he couldn’t argue. Not with the boss man. But he let his bootheels show his aggravation, thumping them good and hard as he returned to the end of the pier and yanked up a bag by its tied corners. Thirteen years on this job—thirteen years of showing up day after day, no matter the weather, even headachy and sick from too much drink the night before—and they couldn’t allow him one time of showing up late?

Marsden stood watching, boots widespread, a timepiece pinched between his fingers. Joss gritted his teeth and held his grumbles inside as he hauled the remaining bags of corn from their spot on the pier’s end to the waiting wagon. Finally Marsden barked, “Good enough. You can go.”

Joss let the final bag slide from his fingers and drop beside the wagon. Without even a glance in his boss’s direction, he aimed his feet for home. But Marsden’s hand bolted out and captured Joss’s shirtsleeve.

“Got a message for you from Lanker.”

Joss’s mouth went dry, but he held his shoulders erect and set his face in a disinterested sneer. “That so?”

“Uh-huh. Said he’ll be here on payday, an’ he expects every penny. No more delays.”

With a little shake of his arm, Joss freed himself from Marsden’s grip. If only he could rid himself of the gambler’s hold as easily. He forced a wry chuckle. “If you’re servin’ as one of Lanker’s errand boys, you must owe him, too.”

Marsden blanched. “You know as well as I do nobody crosses Lanker—not if they wanna see tomorrow.” He glanced around as if seeking listening ears. “How much you in for?”

Joss clamped his teeth together. Too much. More than he could possibly repay. What had compelled him to join that game last month? Stupid, stupid, stupid. “Enough.”

Marsden clicked his tongue on his teeth. “I don’t envy you, Brubacher. Come next Friday, you best be ready to hand over your wages.” His gaze whisked from Joss’s scuffed boot toes to his little wool cap. “Even a fella as big as you won’t be standing when his gang is finished with you. Lanker gets his due one way or another.”

Joss didn’t need the reminder. “Can I go now?”

Marsden waved his hand in dismissal. “See you tomorrow. On time.”

Spinning on his worn heel, Joss took his leave. Damp air scented with fish and salt chilled him, and he jammed his hands into his jacket pockets. His fingertips encountered a few coins. As if of their own accord, his feet slowed. An idea filled the back of his mind. One lucky roll. That’s all he needed to turn those cents into dollars. If he had to hand Lanker his entire pay envelope on Friday, he’d need something to carry his family through the next weeks. Even though his stomach rumbled, he changed direction and entered the closest saloon. One he rarely frequented. Safer to go where he wasn’t known, just in case some of Lanker’s men loitered about. They’d rid him of his meager coins if they caught sight of him.

An hour later, raucous laughter chased Joss from the saloon. One of the revelers staggered to the doorway after him, his foul breath wafting to Joss’s nostrils. “You need to find a differ’nt game if you can’t toss dice any better’n that.”

Joss whirled, his fists clenched. “Leave me be.”

The man’s eyes widened in mock innocence. “Just givin’ you some advice, friend.” He offered a taunting grin. “You sure could use it.”

Joss raised his fists. “I’m not your friend, and I don’t want your advice.”

The drunken man took a stumbling step in reverse, holding up both palms. “Awright, awright.” He raised his bony shoulders in a shrug. “Don’t gotta get sore, fella. Shee, some people can’t take help when it’s bein’ offered.” He turned a clumsy half circle and reentered the saloon, muttering.

Shoulders hunched and fists tucked in his empty pockets, Joss scuffed his way along the docks. He was in no hurry to get home. Mary would take one look at him and know where he’d been. The hurt in her eyes always stung more than his pa’s belt ever had. His stomach churned. Partly from hunger, partly from worry. So far he’d managed to hold Lanker at bay by handing over a portion of his pay and promising more the next week. But next Friday, his time was up. He owed Lanker. He owed the tenement owner. And Mary would need money to buy food. Could he sell something? The only thing left of value was the mantel clock Mary’s grandfather had brought over from England. Mary wouldn’t part with it—and even if she did, no pawnshop owner would give him what he needed to pay his debt to Lanker.

Mary’d done her best over the years to convince Joss that God would meet their needs. But no God—not even if He was as loving and giving as his wife proclaimed—would help a man who’d done as many wrongs as Joss Brubacher.

With a strangled moan, Joss kicked at a clump of papers lying along the filthy boardwalk. He expected them to separate and scatter in the wind, but instead the entire clump rolled over twice and then settled with a stained, worn, brown cover facing up. Joss sucked in a breath—Mary’s book about Kansas.

He bent over and yanked it up. His cold fingers trembled as he clung to the book. Maybe there was an answer to his problem.

❁ 3 ❁

The pain that never left Mary's side stabbed as she bent over the children's sleeping mats and tucked a soft quilt beneath their chins. *Strength, Father*, her heart begged as she forced a smile to her lips. "Sleep well now."

Emmy and Nathaniel murmured a sleepy response, and their eyes slipped closed, thick lashes casting shadows on their rounded cheeks. Mary's heart swelled as a lump filled her throat. Such beautiful children. Such blessings.

Mary struggled upright. The pain intensified with the movement. She ground her teeth together to hold back a moan. Each day the burden of pain, which had begun in her right breast more than a year ago and trailed beneath her arm and into her ribs over the ensuing months, became harder to bear. Having watched her own mother travel this pathway—although the pain had found Mary years earlier than it had gripped Mama—she knew what awaited.

Strength, Father.

Clutching her threadbare robe around her shoulders, she scuffed to the main room of the apartment and sank down at the trestle table. She rested her elbows on the scrubbed, scarred surface and let her face drop into her hands. How much time did she have? Weeks? Months, maybe? She hadn't yet told Tarsie about the pain that held her captive. Her friend

would try her best to cure her, but Mary knew far too well there was no cure for this illness. It would take her soon enough. No need to leave Tarsie feeling guilty for something over which she had no control.

Tarsie had called Kansas the place where happiness dwelled. Mary's gaze drifted to the doorway of the sleeping room. She envisioned Emmy and Nathaniel, snuggled together on their mat, blond, curly heads tipped close. The children deserved a place of joy. Somehow, she had to get them out of this tenement before her time to leave the earth came. Her head low, she began to pray, asking God to protect her children, to move in her husband's heart, to make it possible for the ones she loved more than life itself to find joy together when she could no longer be with them.

Lost in her prayer, she gave a start when someone viciously wrenched the doorknob. Then a voice called, "Mary? Unlock the door." *Joss*. Releasing an involuntary groan, she pushed herself off the bench and shuffled to open the door. She searched *Joss's* face as he entered the apartment, seeking signs that he'd been imbibing liquor. Seeing none, she nearly sagged in relief.

"You missed your supper. Sit down. I'll get you a plate."

Joss's heels dragged on the floor as he crossed to the table and eased himself onto the waiting bench. She sensed his eyes following her as she scooped beans seasoned with pork fat onto a speckled plate. One biscuit from yesterday's baking remained in the tin, so she tucked it next to the beans. Such a sad offering for a man who'd spent his day laboring.

She planted a kiss on his temple, inhaling his unique aroma of sweat, sea, and musky skin as she placed the plate in front of him. He picked up the fork, but then sat with it in his fist, staring at the beans.

"Aren't you hungry?" She ran her fingers through his thick hair. She'd always loved *Joss's* hair—thick and dark and laden

with natural waves that rolled away from his forehead like the ocean rolled toward shore. But also soft. Surprisingly so, considering how gruff he could be. But she understood his crustiness was a mask—a barrier he used to protect himself. Although at times she longed for tenderness, she loved him anyway, because she knew he loved her the best way he knew how. What would he do when she was gone? Her fingers coiled around the silken strands and clung.

He dropped the fork and reached up to grasp one of her exploring hands. With a tug, he drew her onto the bench beside him. “Mary, tell me . . . about Kansas.” He slapped the little book onto the table.

Although his tone sounded more weary than eager, her heart leaped with hope. She sought the section Tarsie had pointed out about Drayton Valley and read slowly, emphasizing the points she thought Joss would find the most interesting. While she read, she couldn’t help imagining her children running along a grassy riverbank or ambling toward a little schoolhouse, slates tucked in the bends of their arms. She pictured Joss coming home at the end of the day, tired but smiling, satisfied with the toil of his hands, his eyes clear and his face tanned from the sun. But she didn’t put herself in the fanciful imaginings.

She finished reading every detail, then told Joss about the man at the railroad who could help them purchase tickets. Placing her hand over his, she sighed. “Doesn’t it sound like a fine place, Joss? A place for a family to prosper.” Slipping her eyes closed, she allowed one more picture to form in her mind—of Joss leading the children up the steps of a clapboard chapel. Tears stung behind her closed lids. *It could happen, Lord, couldn’t it?*

“It’s far away from here, this Kansas?” Joss’s low, serious tone drew Mary’s focus.

“Yes, Joss. Far away.”

His jaw jutted. “This, then, is what you want?”

Mary held her breath, afraid she might still be caught in her wistful dreaming. Her vocal cords seemed tangled in knots, unable to deliver words, so she gave a nod.

Joss’s head sagged. “But money for tickets . . . I don’t have it.”

As much as Mary wished she could refuse Tarsie’s offer to give over her saved earnings, she wouldn’t be taking it for herself. This was for her children. For Joss. For a better, richer, more joyful life. She could swallow her pride for the sake of her loved ones. She only prayed Joss’s pride, which was much larger than hers, could be overcome.

In a mere whisper, she said, “I do.”

His head shot up, one wavy strand of dark hair flopping across his forehead. “You have money?”

The glimmer in his eyes frightened her. Desperation tinged with fury. But she couldn’t retreat now. “Y-yes.”

“How much?”

Tarsie hadn’t mentioned an amount, but she had indicated she’d spoken to the railroad man and knew her funds were adequate for the journey. Mary chose a simple reply. “Enough.”

“Fetch it for me.”

“I . . . can’t. It isn’t here.”

“Where is it?”

Mary swallowed. “Tarsie has it.” Should she tell him it was Tarsie’s money, not hers? But Tarsie was willing to give it to her, which made it hers, didn’t it? Her pain-muddled brain tried to reason, but rational thought wouldn’t form.

Joss chewed his lower lip, his gaze aimed somewhere behind Mary’s shoulder. She’d learned over their years together that it was best to let Joss ruminate. If she pushed him, his defenses would rise. While he thought, she prayed, and after several silent minutes he blew out a mighty breath.

Face still averted, he said, “Pack, then. We’ll go.”

With a joyous cry, Mary threw herself into Joss’s arms. The sudden movement brought a new, excruciating crush of pain. She muffled her gasp with his shoulder. He’d change his mind if he knew how sick she was. And she couldn’t let him turn back now. Struggling against waves of nausea, she forced herself to speak. “I can be ready by Monday if need be.”

“Monday, then.”

Joss’s arms held her tight, the pressure painful but still welcome. He so rarely cradled her, seemingly afraid of gentleness being misconstrued as weakness. She relished the feel of his firm, sturdy arms encircling her frame, and although the pain continued to stab with a ferocity that brought tears to her eyes, she refused to wriggle loose of his snug embrace. Mary sighed in contentment as Joss ran his big, warm hands up and down her spine.

With a final pat on her back, he disengaged himself from her hold. He picked up his fork, scooped a bite, and swallowed. “I’ll go to Tarsie’s after I finish work tomorrow and get the money so I can purchase tickets.”

“That’s a fine idea.” Mary drew in a slow breath, gathering courage. Her next request would surely be met with resistance, but somehow she had to convince him. “And . . . would you tell her to pack, too?”

The fork clattered to the tabletop as Joss spun to face her. “Why?”

Tarsie had no family, nothing to hold her here. And Tarsie loved Mary. Tarsie would do anything to honor her friend—Mary knew this from the depth of her soul. Did Joss love Mary enough to honor her desire? She tested his love with a simple statement. “Tarsie must come with us. I won’t go without her. I . . . I need her, Joss.”

And you and the children will need her soon, too.



Tarsie snipped the thread with her teeth and let the heavy velvet skirt flop across her lap. She'd finished with hours to spare before the Saturday-morning deadline. She sent up a silent prayer of gratitude then balled her hands into fists and stretched, releasing the tense muscles in her shoulders.

In a chair across the table, one of her roommates, Agnes, lifted her gaze from the camisole in her hands and sent Tarsie a narrow-eyed scowl. "All done? I wish I could sew as quickly as you. Mr. Garvey always berates me for being behind quota."

Their boss was a stern taskmaster, and often Tarsie's heart lurched in sympathy for workers forced to endure the sharp side of his tongue. But sometimes, Tarsie had to admit, Agnes deserved it. Of the six young women who shared the little apartment and worked as seamstresses for August Garvey, Agnes was the only one to fall below expectations. Mostly because she piddled rather than used her time wisely, claiming the work "boring." But Tarsie's Bible admonished her to work as unto the Lord rather than men. Her conscience wouldn't allow her to shirk, no matter how uninteresting the task.

Tarsie rose and shook out the skirt, admiring the glint of deep purple in the lantern light. "Speed comes with practice, Agnes. You'll be catchin' on soon enough, I'm sure."

Agnes sniffed and leaned back over the camisole.

Tarsie folded the skirt and laid it carefully on her chair. Massaging her lower back, she moved to the stove. A peek in the tall enamel pot revealed at least a cupful of brackish liquid. She poured it into a tin mug and raised it to her lips, grimacing as the bitter brew hit her tongue. The coffee had sat on the back of the stove all day, gaining strength, and the taste turned her stomach, but she drank it anyway. Her empty stomach needed filling. After draining the mug, she carried it and the pot to the dry sink where more dirty mugs, plates, and silverware waited in a basin.

When Mr. Garvey had assigned the girls to this apartment in his building, he'd instructed them to take turns with house-keeping, each pulling an equal share. But she'd discovered the other girls could ignore piles of dirty dishes, crumb-scattered floors, and dust-covered furniture. So frequently, Tarsie—the eldest of the girls at twenty-four—performed the others' tasks rather than live in a messy apartment. She couldn't prevent rodents and vermin from creeping in under the door or from holes in the walls, but she could at least make it harder for them to hide by keeping things tidy.

She picked up the water bucket and headed for the door, intending to venture to the pump in the alley. When she opened the door she discovered a large man, fist upraised, on the opposite side of the threshold. She let out a squawk of surprise and nearly threw the bucket at him. But then lantern light from the apartment reached his face, and she blew out a breath of relief.

“Joss Brubacher, you came close to scaring the life out of me. Why've you come?” A second bout of fear—this one much more intense—gripped her. She grabbed his shirtfront and dragged him through the doorway, her heart pounding.

The other girls paused in their stitching, curious gazes aimed at Tarsie and their unexpected visitor. Joss swept from his head the little plaid hat he always wore and flicked a glance at the circle of seamstresses. Apparently intimidated by his unsmiling countenance, they bent back over their work. But their usual chatter ceased, and Tarsie sensed their ears tuned to her conversation with Joss.

“Is it Mary? Should I fetch my medicinal herbs?” Thank goodness she'd finished that skirt early. She'd be free to go with Joss if need be. She turned toward the sleeping room, ready to retrieve the leather pouch of cures.

Joss held out his hand, sealing her in place. “Mary's fine. Least, as fine as she ever is.” His brow crunched—in worry or

consternation? Mary claimed Joss cared beneath his bluster, but Tarsie wasn't so sure. He was a difficult man to read. "But we're leaving come Monday. For Kansas."

Tarsie clasped her hands beneath her chin and gasped. "Oh, praise be!"

"So we're needing the money . . . for tickets and such."

Joy exploded through Tarsie's middle. A miracle! She was witnessing a miracle! She waved both hands at Joss, encouraging him to wait. "I'll be gettin' it for you. Stay right here."

She dashed to the sleeping room, aware of six pairs of eyes staring after her. Dropping to her knees beside her cot, she lifted the lumpy mattress and pulled out a woolen stocking containing the carefully hoarded bounty of nearly eight years' labor. Bouncing to her feet, she darted to Joss and jammed the sock at him. "There you are. Thank you for agreein'." She'd never have imagined Joss Brubacher accepting her help. His willingness to do so—to set aside his fierce pride—softened her toward him. He did care for Mary. He *did*.

He gave her a puzzled look, but he took the stocking and shoved the wad into his jacket pocket. She expected him to take his leave, but instead he twiddled the hat in his hand and stared off to the side. From the circle of girls, a nervous titter sounded. It seemed to bring Joss to life. He jerked his face around to scowl down at Tarsie.

"As I said, we're leaving come Monday. I'm hoping to get us tickets on the eight o'clock train to Chicago. So be packed and at the station early. Only take what you can't do without. One trunk—that's it. Won't be space for frippery." He snorted. "Won't hardly be space for the *people* I need to take, but Mary says she won't go without you. So . . ." He slapped the hat onto his head. "Be there." He turned and stomped off, disappearing into the shadows of the hallway.