

# Fervent Charity

together by fate  
bound by friendship

PAULETTE  
CALLEN



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## *Dedication*

In memory of my grandmother, Pauline Sirien Magnus, who told me the stories, and Cindy Poulson, who allowed me to re-tell her those stories on a bus ride to New Jersey.

And for Greg.

## *Author's Note*

This book is dedicated to the horses—all of them. Throughout history, we have used them and abused them. We still do. They have served us with devotion and deserve better than being forced to race and to pull carriages through city traffic. They deserve better than being hunted down in their wild herds because we think the land can't support so many of them, while what the earth can't support is so many of *us*. They deserve better than to be slaughtered for food. My grandmother loved horses and knew them well. She passed this love on to me, perhaps through blood, perhaps through her stories. I am only here on this planet as the person I am because a horse named Dolly saved her life when she was a tot. In gratitude, I offer up this Buddhist metta practice for them.

May all horses be happy and free from suffering and fear.

May all horses be healthy and free from illness and injury.

May all horses be safe and free from harm.

May all horses live with ease.

God knows, they deserve it.

## *Acknowledgments*

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*And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.*

**–I Peter 4:8–  
King James Bible**

## *Prologue: November 1899*

Walking was easier once they were out on the frozen lake where ankle-deep waves of snow alternated with strips of unevenly powdered opaque ice—its bumps and ridges attested to the struggle: Crow Kills did not go meekly to its winter rest.

The blizzard had swept the ice, banking tons of snow along the shoreline and in the trees. Only one who knew about the cabin and recognized the particularities of the two barren cottonwoods projecting through the highest drift like old bony hands grabbing at the sky would know that a human dwelling was there.

The man stopped.

The boy said, “There is no smoke.”

Little Bull, chief of the Red Sand Tribe of the Dakotah Sioux, and his son Leonard unstrapped the shovels they’d carried on their backs and began to dig. In spite of the cold, both were sweating when they finally reached the door and made an opening wide enough to step into. Little Bull pulled at the door, then pried it open with his shovel. Not wanting to



break the door, he pulled it slowly; its creaking shattered the frozen silence like the cry of an injured crow, until the opening was wide enough for him to squeeze through. In the dark, the cold cut deeper. Leonard slipped in behind him. The only light was the little that came in with them.

When his eyes adjusted to the dark, Little Bull went to the old woman seated at the table. He took her hands in his. She seemed lifeless, but he did not feel himself in the presence of death. “Make the fire, Son.”

Little Bull half carried, half dragged the old woman to the bed in the corner, covered her with blankets and began to rub her hands and feet.

## *Chapter 1: April 1900*

Lena Kaiser gave birth on the dining room table presided over by the horse doctor while her husband lay passed out on the living room floor. Will Kaiser had come home drunk to find his wife in labor and had stayed ambulatory just long enough to make it to Gudierian's Harness and Tack Shop and back.

She would have been more comfortable on the floor, or standing up clutching the back of a chair, which is how they found her, but Harlan Gudierian made her lie down on the table so he would not strain his back while he fished around inside her.

Between waves of pain, Lena cried out for Gustie, for Alvinia, for her mother, but her mother was dead and Lena feared that she soon would be too.

The screen door opened a crack. Kermit Torgerson stuck his head in, turned tail, and ran all the way home. "Ma! Something bad is happening at Kaiser's." He gulped a deep breath. "Mrs. Kaiser is hollering something awful."

“Is Doc Moody there?” Alvinia wiped her floury hands on a dish towel.

“I didn’t see him. All I saw was Mr. Gudierian.”

“Gudierian?” Alvinia fairly roared the name as she tore off her apron and flung it across a chair. “Go find Doc Moody and don’t come back till you’ve got him.”

“Yes, Mama.” The boy hit the screen door running. It banged shut behind him.

Eight of Alvinia’s ten children were gathered around the table. “Vernon, are Brownie and Popper still hitched to the wagon?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Bring them around for me, Son. Alice, get my bag. You and Betty are coming with me. Lavonne, stay here with the little ones and tell Daddy where we are when he comes home for dinner. Boil up the potatoes and don’t let the roast dry out. We probably won’t be home till late. Malverne—you run now and get Mary Kaiser and then go to the depot. Tell Willie to telegraph Joe Gruba in Wheat Lake for Gustie. Tell him Mrs. Kaiser is having her baby. Tell him Will Kaiser will pay him for it tomorrow.”

Eldon and Ira, the two youngest boys, watched wide-eyed as chairs scraped the floor and their older siblings scrambled to

obey their mother. Kirstin, still in her highchair, banged her tin cup loudly so as to be part of the excitement.

Alvinia Torgerson was a large, pretty-faced woman, strong and light on her feet. As soon as her last instruction was given, she was out the door, her midwife's bag in hand, followed by her two eldest daughters. Betty took the reins and galloped the team toward the south of town.

The Torgerson women entered Lena's house quietly. Alvinia paused in the doorway between kitchen and dining room, surveying the scene. Lena's still, small form was lying on the table, covered by the tablecloth. Beside her lay a bloody newborn still connected to the afterbirth. Gudierian's hands and arms were bloody as a butcher's, and his eyes flicked back and forth in panic. When they came to rest on Alvinia, they widened in fear, then closed in relief. He stepped aside.

Only Lena's lips moved as Alvinia lifted the tablecloth. She saw more blood, way too much. "Get me some ice, Alice."

Lena tried to speak, but Alvinia hushed her. "Don't you worry now, Lena. From here on in, me and my girls've got you. We've got you."

Alvinia tied and cut the umbilical cord and then handed the baby over to Betty. Alice hammered furiously at a chunk of ice she had pulled out of Lena's ice box. Alvinia filled a basin with

hot water from the cook stove's reservoir. The two sisters exchanged glances. Their mother's nose and ears had turned bright red, and her pale blue eyes had darkened two shades. Alvinia was in a rage. They did not often see her like this. They maintained a respectful silence.

Alvinia carried her basin back into the dining room where Harlan Gudierian still stood, his bloody arms hanging limply at his side. "Harlan, get out of here." She jerked her head toward Will Kaiser's sprawled figure. "Take him with you. You can clean up outside at the well."

"He's too heavy. I can't lift him." Harlan was bigger than Will, but the excess was in fat, not muscle, and much of it, it seemed to Betty and Alice, was in his head. No one ever talked back to Alvinia.

"Then drag him!"

"Where to?"

"I don't give a tinker's damn where to! Leave him in the barn or get Sheriff Sully to throw him in jail where he belongs—and you with him!"

Harlan Gudierian shuffled into the living room and began to study the physics of moving Will Kaiser.

The infant squawked.

"Is she all right, Betty?"

“Fine, Mama. Just fine.”

“Lena, you hear that?” Alvinia removed the bloody tablecloth and began cutting away Lena’s dress. “Your baby’s all right. You have a little girl.”

Mary Kaiser, Lena’s sister-in-law, arrived, stepping over Will as Harlan Gudierian dragged him by his feet out the front door. She hardly took notice—she had stepped over Will Kaiser before, almost everyone in town had once or twice—but when she saw Lena looking more dead than alive, she gasped, “Oh, dear Mother of God! Tell me what to do, Alvinia.”

“Rip up a sheet into squares about yay big.” By the time Mary had torn a sheet, Alice had pounded the ice into a snow-like consistency. Alvinia made small pockets of crushed ice from the squares of cloth and packed Lena’s womb to stanch the bleeding. Rivulets of tears streamed from the outside corners of Lena’s eyes. She whispered, “Stuffed like a chicken.”

“Now, you hush.” Alvinia dabbed the tears away with a piece of leftover sheet and touched Lena’s cheek soothingly with the palm of her plump hand.

She and Mary washed Lena carefully and patted her dry. Mary found her nightgown and they slipped it over her head. “It’s all we can do. Let’s get her to bed.”

Alvinia lifted Lena in her arms and carried her into the bedroom. They tucked her under thick covers.

Lena whispered, “I want my baby.”

Betty brought the infant, clean and wrapped in a soft blanket, and placed her in Lena’s arms.

~\* \* \*~

The wind swirled through the branches of naked cottonwoods, laid low the stiff brown slough grasses, ran its unhindered course over fallow fields, and raised the gooseflesh on Will Kaiser’s naked torso as he washed himself in the icy stream of well water. The morning was too cold for an outdoor bath. He had come to with a fuzzy, throbbing head and unsteady gait, but when Will rattled the screen door of his own house, Alvinia would not let him in. Before he turned away, he asked, “Is Lena doing okay?”

“Barely. No thanks to you.” Alvinia shut the door in his face.

Giving up on the thin pump stream, Will plunged his head up to his shoulders into the horse trough and then gripped the rim of the trough and shook himself like a dog. Water flew out of his hair and ears.

The screen door flapped shut behind him. He cocked his head to see out of his good eye the tall, slender woman approaching him on his right. The shrill sun glinted off her glasses. Over one arm was draped a clean shirt and a towel and in her hand she held a cup. In her other hand she carried a pot of steaming coffee.

She came to his side and without a word offered him the towel. Now he remembered passing her black mare stalled next to his gelding in the barn. As he dried himself he said, “’lo, Gus. Alvinia wouldn’t let me in.”

“I overheard. I was in the bedroom with Lena.”

“Lena all right?”

Gustie sucked her lower lip. “I think she will be.” She sensed he was afraid to ask the next question. She reassured him, “The baby is fine. You have a daughter.”

Will held the towel to his face. When he finally lowered his hands, Gustie took the towel and gave him the shirt.

“How long you been here?” he asked.

“Since just before dawn. Alvinia and the girls have been here all night. So was Mary, but when I got here, she went home to fix Walter’s breakfast.”

“Doc ever show up?”



“This morning. He’d been out at the Grode place. He gave Lena something for pain. He’ll be back this evening.”

Will’s large hands were clumsy with the buttons of his shirt. He left the bottom two undone and tucked the shirt into his trousers. “I really did it this time, didn’t I?”

“I’m afraid so.” Gustie poured coffee into a cup and gave it to him. She set the pot down on the overturned washtub next to the trough and perched on the rim of the trough. Will, still unsteady in spite of the icy water and bracing wind, sat down heavily on the tub. He ran his fingers through his wet hair, smoothing it down with the palms of his hands. He winced and felt for a tender spot on the back of his head. “How’d I get this bump on my head?”

“Harlan dragged you out of the house yesterday. I guess you got knocked around some.”

Will took a sip of his coffee and winced again. “This is *your* coffee.” He gave Gustie a lean smile. “You could stand a pitchfork in it.”

Gustie nodded and grinned back. The wind had loosened strands from the mass of brown hair piled on top of her head and was whipping them across her face. She tried to tuck them back under her hairpins.

“You don’t look so hot,” he said, taking another sip.

“I was at Crow Kills. I rode all night to get here.”

“Figured.” He nodded.

She countered with, “You look like something mucked out of the barn.”

“Feel like it.” Then, his voice husky with misery, he asked, “What am I going to do?”

She considered him sadly. In spite of everything, Gustie liked Will Kaiser. She casually plucked a bit of lint off the dark fabric of her split skirt. “My grandfather used to drink himself sick. He was a good man, otherwise. I wish I could have done something for him. But I was a child then.” Gustie’s eyes met Will’s for a moment. His hands were shaking so badly he couldn’t pour himself a second cup of coffee. She did it for him.

The sound of the door opening and closing and girls’ voices carried to them over the wind as Alvinia and her daughters came out of the house. Will didn’t look up. Gustie watched them climb into their wagon. This time, Alvinia took the reins, driving the team in a circle stopping in front of Gustie and Will. Her face bore the strain of the long night, but her rage was still in full flare. She looked down on him. “Will Kaiser, a woman is not a horse. But a man can sure be a horse’s ass.”

She snapped the reins over the rumps of her horses and the wagon jumped behind the team.

Will raised his head and watched them go.

“Alvinia saved Lena’s life, Will.”

“Yup. I know.” He drained his cup and shook out the dregs on the grass.

Gustie stood. “Let’s go in and introduce you to your daughter.”

~\* \* \*~

The sun, bright and climbing, had little warming effect on the chilly April wind that scudded across the prairie and rattled the shutters on Mary Kaiser’s house. Winter clung to the earth in dull patches of snow and ice and could still rise again in force, unmindful even of the bells of Easter.

Mary sat alone in her chair by the window, looking out. She kissed the crucifix and made the sign of the cross: *In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*

Her fingers traveled the rosary, the string of beads as familiar as the road home. She sat like this every day, praying with devotion, but today she prayed with a special intention.

Mary had had her share of attending at bedsides, but yesterday, seeing her sister-in-law lying still, white-lipped, and helpless, had shaken her. She offered up today's Rosary for the wellbeing of Lena and her baby.

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell... The wooden beads soothed her hand as the words soothed her heart...on the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*

After all these years of faithfulness, Mary's fingers moved as nimbly as her babka's had. Even toward the end, hardly able to do anything else, her eyes closed, her lips just trembling the prayers, her grandmother's skeletal fingers could still play out the beads fluently. In her grandmother's final hour, the child Mary whispered, "Let the Rosary take you to heaven, Babka." And it did. *I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. Amen.*

Someday, she thought, the Rosary would do the same for her; but now it was Mary's anchor to life, her sustenance, and, along with the two rose bushes outside her house, her connection to her beloved grandmother. *Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name; Thy kingdom come...* Mary spun the words out in her mind. The repetition was not meaningless. The sense of each word, of each prayer, was planted deeply in her heart and flowered in their continuous flow, like Babka's roses transforming sunlight into blush and fragrance. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.* Mary nodded her head on the sacred name as her prayers and thoughts continued, uninterrupted. She could see the rose bushes through the window—twiggy stumps covered with straw and tarpaulin, and in her mind's eye could see their summer plumage—the one bearing crimson blossoms; the other, mauve which aged through the summer to magenta. These same two bushes had survived the journey with Mary's grandparents from Poland, bloomed in prairie earth, and again survived freezing winters, drought, and a blight of grasshoppers that utterly consumed everything else. Babka had covered the two bushes, and without sleep fought the swarming plague for three days with broom and fire.

The wheat was lost, and the garden. Only the roses were saved, and Babka's family decided she was crazy. Little Mary knew that Babka was as sane as all the saints. *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

A few years after Babka's death, the roses survived another transplanting when she married Walter Kaiser and moved to town. Mary nurtured them, worried over them, and loved them like children. *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.*

Mary moved into the next decade of the Rosary and hoped for a wind that would carry warmer weather, weather with no mean surprises, when she could carefully remove the bed of straw that had sheltered her roses all winter and work some sheep manure into the soil. Sheep manure was not as readily plentiful as horse or cow dung but it was better, Babka insisted on that. So Walter rode far from his rounds as a well driller to find farmers that raised a sheep or two, collecting manure for his wife's roses.

Mary's devotion to her religion, to her roses, and to the memory of her grandmother sprang from one root. The child who traversed the swamp to look after Babka, learned to tend

the roses, say the Rosary, and pay devotion to the Blessed Mother—all from this old Polish woman who wore bangle earrings and treasured flowers more than food.

*Hail Mary, full of grace...*

Mary brought her soup or bread, emptied her chamber pot, washed her bowl, and brushed her hair. On warm days, before Babka became too sick to leave her bed, they sat outside between the rose bushes. Later, Mary sat on the bed with her, and they did the beads and said the prayers. The sound of the words, over and over, like the lapping of waves, transported them—above the smells of sickness and old age, the urine-soaked rags, the unwashed body, the hunger that seemed always to gnaw at them—to a place where death seemed like an invitation to something better. *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

Mary told Gustie how she crossed the slough. “It was Babka’s good luck that it never got too deep. The water was never above my knees. Mostly it was just mud squishing around my ankles. I liked it best in the winter, though, when I could walk on the ice.” Besides Walter, Gustie was the only person who knew about her babka. Augusta Roemer was the only friend Mary had ever had.

*Hail Mary, full of Grace...*

“When Babka died, I took her rosary and her prayer book. It’s in Polish. I can’t read it.” *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us...* “Babka said that flowers bring life. When she first came to this country as a girl, she said, the prairie was quiet. There was just the tall grass—grass as high as a pony’s back—and the wind. All grass, no trees...no birds except during migrations. Everybody said it was the grain crops and then the trees that brought the insects and birds and the life to the prairie, but Babka said it was the flowers. Only flowers, with their color and perfume, could do that.”



## *Chapter 2: May 1900*

Alvinia was favored with light blue eyes and corn silk hair, traits she had given to each of her children. She was sixteen when she gave birth to Betty, her first child. Leaving her comfortable Minnesota home at fifteen to traipse off with Carl Torgerson had been a reckless and foolish thing to do, and Alvinia had not regretted it for a moment. Carl had been the hired man on her father's farm and five years her senior. When her parents found out that Alvinia and Carl had gotten married at the city hall, they carried on so, that the newlyweds started west, with Carl working whenever he could. It took them two years and two children to get as far as Charity, South Dakota. Elef Erdahl, the butcher, hired Carl and, more or less, adopted the young family as his own. When Elef, an old bachelor, died, he left his business to Carl who made the most of it.

Carl Torgerson was a man with no education who had been taught to read and write by his young wife. He was an orphan who treasured his family, a man with no prospects who had turned a modest butcher business into a prospering enterprise.

The first in Charity to avail himself of electricity for profit, he installed freezers, which he rented out to people to keep their meat. With his freezers came ice cream. In the last year, he had added on to his establishment a comfortable parlor where people could enjoy a hot cup of coffee and a cold dish of ice cream served up by one of the smiling Torgerson children.

Alvinia had seen in this quiet, unremarkable looking man, a vein of gold. He had never told her he loved her. But she felt loved. His reticence complemented her ebullience, and their children fell in between their two extremes of temperament. Alvinia was also aware of how simply lucky she had been. Every young woman marries a man in whom she has high hopes. Not every man is able to fulfill those hopes as well as Carl had.

Lena, nursing her baby in the chair across the room from Alvinia, was a case in point. Will was a hard-working man. And a hard-drinking man. Lena had certainly not bargained for that when she married him. But things happen and people change. An accident at a drilling site lost him an eye in the same year that an altercation with his brother Oscar robbed him of the hearing in one ear. Those two disabilities coming upon him all at once started him on the drink. He hadn't been able to leave it alone for long since.

Lena's home was tiny. Alvinia, used to larger spaces, felt like she was in a doll's house. Lena's immaculate housekeeping and her skill with a needle didn't conceal her poverty. Will made a decent living, but most of his money ended up with Leroy, the local tavern keeper. To Leroy's credit, he threw Will out more often than he invited him to stay.

But Alvinia and Lena were discussing Betty, not their husbands. Lena was saying, "Betty is a sensible girl."

"I know, but she's so taken with this boy..." Alvinia shook her head and watched Kirstin happily thumping the floor with chubby hands and feet.

"You don't think she'll get herself in a family way, do you?"

Alvinia was silent.

"Well, if that's what you're worried about, you'd better let them get married. 'Better to marry than to burn.' Martin Luther said that. And he ran off with a nun! Ha!" Lena caressed the infant's forehead with her finger. "If you don't give them your blessing, Alvinia, they'll just run off like you and Carl did. Come to think of it, you two haven't done so badly."

"This is different." Alvinia's lips clamped together in a hard line.

“Wirkus’s have that farm. It’ll be Pauly’s one day.”

“Farm! Half of it’s a slough and the other half’s a rock patch. They barely scratch a living out of that place. And they’re Catholic! I don’t want Betty leaving our church.”

“Maybe Pauly will join ours.”

“You know that won’t happen. You know how the Catholics are.”

“You should watch how he treats her,” Lena added, trying to be helpful. Then she said, “The two of them might make something of that place.”

“I don’t want her marrying a polack and living on a rock patch, Lena! She’s a beautiful girl. She was first in her class. She can do better. We hoped to send her on to do something with her music, but we just couldn’t manage it.” Alvinia’s voice broke, and she busied herself with reaching into a voluminous pocket and taking out a ball of red yarn, which she passed down to Kirstin. The ball became a fascinating point of interest to the child who stopped abusing Lena’s floorboards. “So, Lena, how are you getting along?”

“I’m sure grateful for your girls, Alvinia. I don’t know what I’d do without them. Wish I could do something for them.”

“There’s nothing they need doing. So, don’t you worry about it.”

“They’ve been doing all my washing and ironing and cleaning my house...that must mean more work for you at home. You don’t have them to help you. I feel bad.”

“Now you listen. Carl and I came here with not two pennies to rub together. People helped us all along the way. That’s the way it is. Or if it isn’t, it should be. And I have Malverne and Lavonne at home who are good help to me.”

“Mary has been here every day, too, to make sure I get a little nap in the afternoon. She’s turned out to be a real brick.” Lena felt a lump rising in her throat so she changed the subject. “What do you hear from Severn?”

“Got a letter yesterday.” Alvinia puffed with pride at the mention of her oldest son. “He’s too busy to be homesick. Doc Moody did a wonderful thing for Severn, getting him a scholarship.”

“He’ll make a good doctor. He has a nice way about him.”

Lena felt sorry for Alvinia that someone hadn’t been able to give Betty the same kind of help to go off and study music that Doc Moody had given to Severn. But Betty already played the piano like nobody’s business, so she did all right.

The baby had her fill. Lena tucked her breast inside her dress and did up her buttons.

Alvinia held out her arms. “Give me that chicken and you have your dinner.”

“Can I fix you something?”

“No. I ate with Carl at the shop before I came over.”

“Then just have a piece of pie with me and a cup of coffee so I don’t have to eat by myself.”

“Never turn down a piece of your pie, Lena. But you know you don’t have to bake. I’ll be happy to send...”

“Oh, fiddlesticks! I can bake a few pies. I’m not as lazy as all that!”

Alvinia followed Lena into the kitchen with Gracia in her arms and Kirstin toddling after, still clutching her ball of yarn.

Lena dished up a slice of apple pie for Alvinia, home-made bread covered with clotted soured cream and sugar for herself, and a black coffee for them both. “Now, what can I get for you, Precious?” Lena bent down and touched Kirstin’s nose with her finger.

“She can have some of my pie.” Alvinia settled in comfortably with Gracia in one arm and Kirstin leaning into her knee. She gave Kirstin the first bite of pie off her fork. “I saw Oscar and Nyla at the shop this morning,” Alvinia said.

“They were picking up a couple packages of meat. Nyla sure looks tough.” She enjoyed the next forkful of pie herself. “What do you put in your pies, Lena? They are always better than mine.”

“They are no better than yours. You always like something better when you didn’t have to make it yourself. I know I do. Except for Ma’s cooking.”

“Is Nyla sick?”

“I think Ma is just working her to death. And she doesn’t have the gumption to say no.”

“I see them going in and out over at Gertrude’s. They’re not still living there, are they?”

“You bet they are! Ma whines whenever Nyla says she wants to go home, and Oscar doesn’t mind because he’s got two women waiting on him now instead of just one. He’s something, that one! He doesn’t care how much extra work it is for Nyla in that big house or that she might not want to live with her mother-in-law.”

“Well, Gertrude is what? In her seventies? She needs somebody to look after her.”

“Fiddlesticks!” Lena spat out in disgust. “There’s nothing wrong with that old battleax that a good swift kick in the bloomers couldn’t fix.”

Alvinia stifled a laugh behind her hand. Anybody who knew Lena knew that she was not fond of her mother-in-law, Gertrude Kaiser.

“Will looks in on her and so do Mary and Walter. I go over once in a while, not so often now since Gracia was born, and she sure doesn’t hurt herself getting over here to see her only grandchild. I’d go over there more often if I knew she gave a snap about Gracia, but she doesn’t. Walter told me that she said to him and Mary once that she wasn’t taking care of any more babies. That she’d brought up four and that was enough. The idea! That I would want her to take care of my baby! I’ve never asked her and I never would.

“I felt sorry for her after Pa was killed, but she’s so kind of hard like. She’s not easy to be nice to. But she’s Will’s mother...” Lena shrugged and took a big bite of her cream-soaked bread. “I feel bad for Nyla, but she’s going to be stuck as long as she doesn’t put her foot down. That’s what I had to do with Will. Oh, he’s good to his mother and there’s nothing wrong in that. But we’re not going to run over there every time she has a pain. Especially since I know she’s strong as an ox.” Lena did a good job of eating and talking at the same time. She finished her bread and cream, cut a slice of pie for herself, and continued.



“She can just sit over there being a sour puss with that sour-puss Oscar. I don’t know how Mary stands to be around them but she goes over every day.” Lena remembered finding her mother-in-law, alone, swathed in black taffeta, sitting like a fat spider in the web of her cluttered house the day that Pa’s body had been found in the barn. For a while, Lena even suspected her, like a spider, of killing her mate. It turned out that she hadn’t, but the nasty old thing had sat there, rocking back and forth, mewling about Will having done it. Lena had never forgotten how quick she had been to throw Will to the dogs. She had not forgotten and she had not forgiven. Ma Kaiser had remained in her widow’s weeds and tried to draw her children in and had succeeded in entrapping Oscar and Nyla. Lena didn’t care about Oscar one way or the other, and when she thought of Nyla, she just shuddered. Better Nyla than herself.

Alvinia had heard Lena go on about her in-laws before, especially her mother-in-law, and she sympathized. Even though Gertrude had always been, as Lena said, cold and stand-offish, after old man Kaiser’s death, Alvinia, as Gertrude’s nearest neighbor, had extended herself, visiting her with gifts of food, produce from her garden, and a little conversation. She was always received with an irritability that bordered on

suspicion, even hostility. Alvinia gave up her neighborly overtures.

Gracia had fallen asleep in Alvinia's arms. She carried her back to the living room and laid her in her cradle, covered her up with the crocheted blanket that Lena had made, and took Kirstin by the hand.

"I think I'll get back. See what kind of trouble my chicks have gotten into. Thank you for the pie, Lena." Smiling, Alvinia wagged her finger at Lena. "I still think you put something in your pies that I don't."

Lena just shook her head and laughed. "Thank you for stopping by." She chucked Kirsten under the chin. "Bye now, Precious."

"I'll be sending one of my chicks over to check on you. Lena, you say something now if you need anything. You hear me?"

"I will, Alvinia. I will."

"And say hello to Gustie for me. I haven't seen much of her lately."

"I'll do that. Bye bye now."

*Say hello to Gustie.* Well, that was nice of Alvinia, since Lena knew Alvinia didn't care a lot for Gustie, but Gustie was Lena's friend so she made allowances.

Lena Kaiser and Augusta Roemer were about as different from one another as two women could be. Yet, they shared a love of horses and a sense of humor that flared up out of nowhere over trifles, and for awhile, they had also shared a condition unusual for women of their age: childlessness. After Gracia was born, however, things had not been the same between them. Lena was busy now with the baby, and while Gustie helped her with shopping and a bit of cleaning when she was in Charity, she was spending at least half of her time on the reservation, something Lena still couldn't understand. Lena didn't like Indians. *No matter what you do for them*, she thought, *they always end up back in a tipi.* Of course, allowances could be made for Jordis, who had a college education. But that just proved Lena's point. Jordis, with her college education, was where? Living in a shack with an old Indian woman back on the reservation and succeeding apparently in dragging Gustie down with her. Lena tried to shake such thoughts out of her head, but they stuck there. She couldn't help it, even though Jordis had suffered on Lena's behalf. Well, she reasoned, that wasn't really true. Gustie had

come in just in time to save Lena's life and Jordis had just got in the way. Technically, Jordis had suffered for Gustie, not Lena. And no matter what, she didn't like Gustie spending so much time out there with the Indians. It didn't look right.

She heard a squeak from the living room. Gracia was awake again already. She put a spoonful of pie in her mouth and savored it. Yes, her pies were better than anybody else's. It was the tablespoon of whiskey that she sprinkled over the layer of sugar that did the trick. She licked her lips and went to pick up her baby.

### *Chapter 3: June 1900*

The prairie was in one of its bad moods: the heavens grumbled and shot forth an occasional thin slice of lightning the way a cat flashes a claw. Gustie liked weather and preferred stormy to fair. It was more interesting. But she had learned not to challenge or take casually the prairie's temperament. Dakota winters brought death to the careless, the unfortunate, and the foolhardy; lightning killed and started fires; summer storms spawned deadly tornadoes. As with capricious cats, one rarely knew if the weather would actually bite or slink off to reappear docile and caressing.

With Biddie tucked in at Koenig's livery stable, Gustie relaxed in the cozy comfort of Olna's Kitchen. The smells of baking rolls and pies, roasting chicken, and the continuously brewing coffee made Charity's one cafe a pleasant place to be on a dark afternoon.

Gustie pulled aside the blue-checked window curtain. The sidewalk was deserted. Across the street a dim light glowed behind the window of the Stone County Gazette. The shadowy

forms of Arnold and Janelle Prieb moved within. The train whistle announced the arrival of the east-bound freight train. Arnold and Janelle paused to listen. Moments later, a light flickered behind the smaller window next door. Emil Mundt, Charity's postmaster, was getting ready for the first mailbag of the day.

Gustie sipped her coffee and waited. Jack Mohs came trotting up the street with the mailbag slung over his shoulder. He dropped it off with Emil, pausing for only a moment's greeting as he did every morning but Sunday, and sprinted back to the depot for his next assignment.

The street was again deserted. The sound of the departing train whistle lingered, caught in the thickening storm-dark air.

Suddenly, Mary Kaiser filled the frame of the window. Head down against the rising wind, and staying close to the buildings, she made her way north. She stopped, startled to see eyes looking at her through the glass. Gustie smiled quickly and Mary's face relaxed. She turned around and walked the few steps back to the door of the cafe. The bell on the door jingled as she came in. Cold and wind had heightened the color in her cheeks; the light rain beginning to fall had coated her skin, making her complexion dewy.

Mary Kaiser was remarkably beautiful. Gustie wondered if anyone else noticed. “Mary, what are you doing out on such a day?”

She pulled off her headscarf, sat down at Gustie’s table, and smoothed her black hair away from her face. Her dark eyes were bright. Beauty was seldom spoken of here, where people considered a clean house, a kind heart, and well behaved children greater assets in a woman. “I stopped by Lena’s this morning. She was up all night with the baby. I watched Gracia so she could rest awhile. I’m trying to get home before the storm hits.” She asked Gustie with some alarm, “You’re not going to try to make it home are you?”

“No, I’m waiting it out here.”

A crack of thunder made them both jump. Mary laughed shyly. “Maybe I’ll wait with you.”

“Good. You can join me for dinner. I haven’t ordered yet. Is Gracia all right?”

“Oh, she’s fine. A little restless. She was sleeping when I left.”

They made small talk over roast chicken, mashed potatoes, and carrots. Gustie and Mary had become friends when together they had cared for Lena during an illness that had been precipitated by a family tragedy. Mary had surprised Gustie

with her efficiency and willingness to help in an almost unbearable situation, when neither of Lena's sisters could help, or her other sister-in-law, Nyla, would. Gustie knew better than anyone the worth of the woman sitting across from her. While Mary possessed none of Lena's confidence and seemed unaware of her appealing physical presence, her sweetness and beauty were disarming. Gustie could not fathom what she was doing married to Walter Kaiser, who, Gustie thought, resembled a creature crossed between a frog and a banty rooster.

"Mary, are you happy?" While Gustie had often turned the question over in her mind, she was appalled to hear it come out of her mouth.

Mary swallowed a mouthful of pie and looked at Gustie with laughing eyes. She reached across the table and took Gustie's hand. "Oh, Gustie, I like you so much."

"You do?" Gustie had been prepared for *Mind your own business*. "Why?"

"Because you asked, and not because you're nosy. Nobody else has ever cared whether I'm happy or not. At least not enough to try to find out."

"Well, are you?"



“I’m not miserable. And for me, that’s a blessing. Walter has...” Gustie sensed Mary had never put her feelings into words before. “Walter has...allowed me...to not live in misery.”

Mary described a childhood that was little else but wretchedness. Her parents had been unsuited to life on the frontier, cursed each year by bad luck and illness. Of six children, Mary was the sole survivor. “I still remember the smells of sickness and dirt. The barn was never kept clean.” Here she had paused for a long time. “There is nothing worse smelling than a dirty pig barn, Gustie, unless it’s a dying woman who hasn’t bathed in years.”

Gustie, deeply moved, wiped her mouth with a napkin and considered her friend, who was so unaware of how like a rose she really was, having sprouted from a dung heap.

Mary continued, “I was fifteen when Walter came to our place. He’d made some deal with my pa to drill us a well in exchange for some pigs. Then...let’s see... Walter was twenty. He was good-natured. Laughed and talked a lot. Didn’t bother him that nobody talked back. He didn’t seem to notice the squalor of our place. Although, by that time I was older and doing better at keeping things up. Babka was dead and so was my mother. So all I had to do for was my pa and me. But Pa didn’t care what I did, really. Walter came every day for a few

weeks. He had a hard time getting to water. The old well was dried up and I was carrying water from the creek. Finally, he did find water, and after he finished the well, he told Pa that he'd take me instead of the pigs. So my pa said, 'You willin', Mary?' I said I was. Pa was glad. He couldn't spare the pigs." Mary smiled ruefully and stirred cream and sugar into her coffee.

"It's not as bad as it sounds. Without saying much Walter and I had a sort of agreement. I'd never seen many men besides my pa and some of the old farmers who came over once in awhile, mostly for a buryin'. Walter was the only young man I'd ever met. He had a good team of horses that were well fed. He had his equipment and a new buggy. He told me he'd build us a house anywhere I liked. I picked the place close to the church so I can go to Mass every day no matter what the weather. He told me I could have whatever I wanted. He needed a woman in his home to do for him because he didn't want to live with his ma and pa anymore, and if the work was too hard for me, he said I could bring a girl in to help me. I never did. I like taking care of my own things.

"He has always been as good as his word. I have everything I want. My house is beautiful, Gustie. I have real lace curtains. I have two sets of china and crystal glasses that came all the

way from St. Paul. He even moved Babka's roses for me." Her voice trembled. "I have flowers planted all around. Mostly roses, but some peonies, and tulips for the spring. Marigolds for the fall. Come and visit me sometime, Gustie."

"I will, Mary. I certainly will."

"Lena doesn't like me. I know she doesn't. Because I'm Polish and Catholic. Not a good combination if you marry into a German Lutheran family. Oh, it's fine to marry a German if you're Norwegian—like Lena did—but not if you're Polish. But mostly she thinks I'm weak. She didn't have it easy as a girl either, but Lena was strong. She got away and worked, went out on her own. Did you know that when she was fourteen, she rode the train Sunday evenings to Argus to work, and came back Saturday mornings? I could never do that. I could never do what you did, coming out here to a strange place on your own. You and Lena are both brave and strong. I'm not. I need Walter to take care of me. Lena looks down on me for that."

"Why? She has Will."

"That was a love match. From the first. They were crazy about each other. They still are when he's not drinking."

“Walter is...he’s not a drinker. He’s not mean like Oscar. He is...” Mary lifted her eyebrows, smiled enigmatically, and sipped her sweet coffee.

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