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Chapter 1: The Eve of the Funeral

"No, don't leave." Sam clawed at his blankets and croaked, "Stay with me. I need you here."

I frowned. "I need to see if Patricia is awake."

The last few weeks had been difficult. Sam had needed, no, demanded, that I stay beside him. I was weary of the struggle to care for him and still find time to meet the needs of all the children. He became agitated and irritated when he wanted something when I was busy with the baby or giving ten-year-old Charlie a reassuring hug. I patted his hand and tucked the blankets around him.

"Sam, I'll be right back. I need to see if Patricia is awake."

He clung to me so I sat back down to wait for him to doze off, listening for Patricia's whimpers. Last night when I tried to sleep in the chair, Sam's moans and cries startled me awake. When I thought how little time I had left with him, my whole body shook and my heart went cold. He was burning up, so I folded down the covers and mopped his brow with cool water. Later he was chilled and shivering, grabbing at the covers to try to get warm again.

Today, the sun had brought some warmth to the crisp cool air. I needed to breathe and Sam's blankets needed to be aired out and the soiled bedding washed. He had dozed off again. Patricia was still napping.

Daniel hollered, "Water's hot, Ma!" As I came outside with the bedding, I paused to smell the coolness before walking toward the tub, which sat in the middle of the yard on a large brown rock. That rock had been flattened and smoothed by the wind and rain of a thousand winters. Daniel, at sixteen the oldest of my children, was pouring hot water into the tub.

He smiled down at me. He'd shot up so in the last year and now stands so tall, I have to throw my head back to look up at him. I smiled at his lanky frame. How awkward he seemed suddenly, trying to get comfortable in his tall body and big feet.

I put my hands into the water. "Ah, feels good." I began to wash the bedding and some of the boys' shirts. "Daniel, will you and Joe wring these out and hang them up? They'll dry quickly with the sun out. This air sucks moisture from everything."

He nodded, grabbing the clothes to wring them out. He was my willing helper, taking over the chores that I could no longer do. I wondered if he was beginning to be resentful. He had his father's quiet way and keen eye, noticing the slight

expressions that flash in someone's eyes or the movement of the brush that hid the jack rabbit he might bring home for dinner.

Daniel kept a lot to himself. I knew I would need to probe to find out how he was feeling, but I was too preoccupied to talk to him now. As I strode across the yard to return to Sam's bedside, I thought about how thankful I was for Daniel's calm and easy way with the little ones. He adored the baby. She quieted right down when he gathered her in his long arms to coo and tickle her. He guided and protected Petey, who is weak and small for a four-year-old after a long bout with rheumatic fever. But he was not so good with Joe and Charlie.

"Joe, come and help with the laundry," Daniel yelled.

"Doin' somethin' else," Joe hollered back.

"Dammit Joe, why are ya so difficult? Both of us need to help Ma. Not just me."

"All right, I'm comin.' But don't yell at me." Joe still resented Daniel ordering him around just like he did when he was four.

I paused at the door, hesitant to leave the cool fresh air. My eyes needed to adjust to the darkness. Although the lantern shed some light, I had to be careful. I put each foot on the narrow steps carved from the hard soil. I tended to lose my balance easily as I made my way into our underground home. And there was nothing for me to grab if I tripped.

Before going into the cave-like room in the back where Sam slept, I heard the whimpers and rustling of Patricia, waking up from her nap. Anxious to avoid disturbing Sam, I picked her up before she could cry.

"You're such an easy baby," I murmured to Patricia. "I'm so happy to have a girl after four boys." She smiled up at me as if she was in on my secret. "You are such a pretty girl." My love welled up and a tear dropped on her pale delicate face. Her dark eyes blinked with puzzlement. "I'm just lovin' you," I reassured her. As she nuzzled to find my left breast, I wondered how long my milk would last.

As I entered his room, filled with the stale smells of sweat, urine and sickness, Sam began mumbling again, then he cried out, "I won't answer! I won't answer. I am married..." His voice trailed off to a mumble again and I caught what sounded like my name, "Sarah Armstrong Martin."

"What's that about?" I wondered aloud.

I hobbled quickly toward the bed, a thin mattress we brought with us from Oklahoma, worried that it is close to the end. I pulled a quilt around Sam's shoulders, held his hand and soothed his brow while I continued to nurse Patricia. He lay still now. Only his hands twitched occasionally. I studied him, listening to his labored breathing. His body was small and frail under the blanket. His skin drooped from his jaw. His eyes have sunk into his face, which was lined with the ravages of constant pain. They fluttered open, looking at me in recognition for a moment. Then they closed, and with a release of breath, he was gone.

I sat quietly nursing Patricia, unable to move. My mind was empty. My heart ached. He was gone.

Finally, I got up to tell the children. After some tears, hugs and reassurance, I sent them all with Daniel into town for some supplies. I needed some time alone.

cope without him?

I straightened up remembering how I had steeled myself against my fear of being alone when we lived in Oklahoma. I had learned to cope with his long absences to meet with the government agent about his Veteran's pension. I reminded myself, that I had also loved my independence when I was young. Now, as I thought back to those times alone in Oklahoma facing the challenges of sick children, wandering livestock or bitter winter storms, I felt a calm and growing confidence that I could handle this challenge.

I rocked quietly now, continuing to feel the mixture of relief, sadness, resentment and fear. I felt the smoothness of the jade in my apron pocket again. It had rough edges which Sam had compared to himself.

Soon the children would be home from town and Patricia would wake from her afternoon nap. The familiar knot in my back tightened. Being a woman alone with five children would be hard. It would be even harder to make ends meet. Would we even have enough to eat? Could I keep Daniel, Joe and Charlie from going off on their own and maybe getting into trouble? But I couldn't let myself get discouraged. They're good boys.

I reassured myself that I could handle this. I had to. I sat up straight. Together, as a family, we would be strong.

Chapter 3: The Funeral

I had awakened with that knot in my back again and my stomach was churning. As I dressed, brushed my hair and wound it up on my head, a shiver moved through me. I wasn't sure if it was the cold or the emptiness that lay ahead.

I had coaxed the fire awake, blowing on it and throwing on some cow chips. Now, it burned with enthusiasm, warming up the room. All three boys reached out stiff fingers toward the heat while the body of their father lay covered by a quilt next to the wall. As I took a fresh batch of biscuits out of the oven, Daniel grabbed one and popped the whole thing in his mouth. The other boys copied their older brother.

"Where are your manners?" I demanded. Then I reminded myself they had just lost their father and I gave them a forgiving smile.

We sat around the table sharing fresh, warm milk and dunking biscuits. Patricia was sitting on my lap sucking on her fingers. When they'd finished eating, Petey asked, "Where did Papa go if he's dead?" It was a question I'd been dreading.

"He didn't go anywhere," Daniel said, jumping in before I could respond. "His body died. He can't go anywhere."

"But," Charlie said, his forehead was wrinkled in puzzlement, "what's it mean to go

to Heaven? Maybe he's in Heaven."

"What's 'aven?" Petey asked.

I set my cup of tea on the table. "God, who created everything, including us, gives us a period of time on earth," I said. "When our time's up, our bodies die because our hearts stop beating. That's what happened to Papa. His heart stopped beating."

I needed to pause to hold myself together. I resented that I even had to have this conversation. I'd always relied on Sam's wisdom for questions like these. But now he was gone. I glanced at Sam's body then I looked at the boys. Daniel gazed at me with anticipation. Joe looked bored and stared off into empty space. Charlie's eyes were wide with curiosity while Petey was looking at me patiently, still waiting to learn about heaven.

I took a gulp of my tea and then plunged on. "The spirit that lives inside our bodies doesn't die like our bodies. It goes to live with God."

"So that's what Heaven is... living with God?" Charlie looked relieved.

"Yeah," Joe said, grinning as he looked over at Papa's body. "Up in the sky...that's where Pa is."

Daniel frowned. "Don't be funny, Joe."

"I want my Papa," Petey wailed.

"Petey, come here," I said, handing Patricia to Daniel and then gathering up Petey on my lap, rocking back and forth, soothing him, lightly rubbing his back.

"We all miss Papa," I said as I looked at my boys. Tears were silently rolling down Joe's and Charlie's faces. Daniel's face scrunched up and the tears soon welled up in his eyes and spilled onto his cheeks too. I opened my arms to gather them all in, swallowing hard. Then I let my own tears flow.

"But Ma, how're we going to make it?" Daniel cried. "We can't grow anything on this land!"

Petey's sobs had turned to hiccups now and the other boys were sniffing.

I needed to be strong. I sat up straight, breathed deeply and looked at each of my children. "I don't know for sure, but I do know this—we will be together and we will all be strong for each other." I paused and took a breath. "Now, let's get cleaned up and get dressed to go into town for the funeral."

I moved slowly to prepare to leave. My arthritis had gotten worse since Sam got sick and it was taking longer for my joints to loosen this morning. I felt very stiff.

“Joe, come and help me carry Pa out to the wagon,” Daniel said.

Joe nodded his head and they prepared to carry their father to the wagon wrapped in one of my quilts.

“I want to help.” Charlie went over to Sam’s feet and grasped them. They lifted him gingerly at first. They seemed to assume he would be heavy—after all he had been a big man. But his illness had whittled him down to nothing. They were able to lift him easily.

After a brief service, Preacher Van led the small gathering in the Lord’s Prayer. With the final “Amen,” I prepared myself to receive the condolences from the few families who had come. They were all kind and well-meaning people. I wondered how it would feel to stay here among them in New Mexico.

Many of them asked me about my plans and I found myself repeating, “I haven’t decided yet.” Then Mrs. Argon came over and said to me in a loud whisper, “My dear, you shouldn’t stay here. All the wives will worry every time you speak to their men. No one will trust you as a widow woman.”

I winced and turned away.

Preacher Van overheard her cutting remark and hurried over. “Mrs. Martin, you know you are welcome to stay. Not everyone feels that way.” He paused. “Still, you might be better off with your family in Nebraska.”

I pulled my shawl around me and tried to swallow the ache in my throat as I stepped cautiously toward the wagon. The boys were waiting, shifting from one foot to another, shivering from the cold.

“I hate this place,” Daniel said, pounding his fist on the wagon.

“Me too,” Joe added as he walked away from his brothers.

“But where can we go?” Charlie whined.

“Oh, be quiet!” Daniel hissed.

I knew they didn’t like it here, but did I really want to take my family on the long perilous journey back to Nebraska?