



TAMING
THE
TWISTED 2
RECONSTRUCTING RAIN

JODIE TOOHEY



TAMING THE TWISTED 2 RECONSTRUCTING RAIN

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Wordsy Woman Press

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Thank you to my husband for supporting my dream and allowing me to be the real me. Thank you also to my children, mom, family, and friends who also may not completely understand me, but who support and love me nonetheless.

Dedicated to Lyle Ernst (1938-2016).

In addition to being a great fellow author who was fun to be around,

Lyle was an enthusiastic beta/test reader for the first *Taming the Twisted*, and it was probably mostly at his behest that I rearranged my writing projects to get this sequel finished.

Thank you, Lyle, and rest in peace.

PART ONE
CHAPTER ONE

Wednesday, June 17, 1862

For the fourth morning in a row, Alice was left to watch her twin brothers, Samuel and David, as her older sister, Abigail, left the breakfast eggs sizzling in the pan and ran to the outhouse. This time, Alice followed her. As she got closer, she could hear the barking sound that signaled violent vomiting. She waited, facing the door with her arms crossed.

Abigail emerged, her face white and drawn.

“I’m sorry. Did you need to go?” Abigail asked.

“I’m going to get the doctor.”

“No!”

“Why not? You’ve done this all week. Something must be wrong.”

“Nothing is wrong.” Abigail put her hand on Alice’s shoulder. “I’m fine.”

“But...”

“No. I don’t need the doctor. And if you tell him, you’re going to be in big trouble.”

“If you’re fine, why do you care?”

“Just do as I tell you.”

Alice puffed and stomped back to the house. She worried, but she didn’t want to get in trouble with Abigail, so she lied about needing to pick up supplies for a surprise dessert at the store and went to town to ask her best friend, Lucy, her opinion, planning to next try the doctor if Lucy didn’t know. Lucy had warmed to Abigail in the year and a half since Lucy’s mother admitted to killing Marty Cranson, who died at the same time as but not because of the June 3, 1860, tornado, but their friendship had not been completely repaired. Alice looked for any possible way to include Lucy in her life in an effort to keep the positive momentum moving. She loved Lucy, and she was the only real friend she’d made since moving to Camanche. As she walked toward town, she thought about those first tense days after Lucy’s mother, Pamela Mackenrow, was sent to the asylum.

The early new-autumn chill had scraped Alice’s cheeks. It had only been two weeks since Lucy’s mother admitted to killing Marty Cranson, but the Mackenrow house already looked faded and lifeless. Lucy hadn’t been to school. Alice’s fist shook as she knocked on the door jamb, wondering if the scenario of rage and tears she had imagined would play out. She rubbed her fingers over her palm to try to dry the sweat that had formed on it. A burst of wind scattered a pile of crisp leaves, and she smelled a hint of fresh tea. She heard movement on the door’s other side and sucked in her breath.

Mr. Mackenrow opened the door. The whites of his eyes were striped with red lines and the odor of whiskey drifted out.

He rubbed his eyes. “Alice, so nice of you to stop by.”

“May I ... May I speak with Lucy, please?”

Mr. Mackenrow closed the door and disappeared into the house, returning a minute later. “I’m sorry. Lucy isn’t feeling well. You understand why. She’s not up to visitors today.”

“Alright. Shall I come by tomorrow?”

James shook his head.

“Next week after school?”

“Lucy will likely be feeling poorly for quite a while. When she goes back to school, she’ll be ready for visitors.”

Alice shook her head, trying to hold back the tears. “Is there anything I can do? Do you need anything from the store?”

“No, thank you. I’ll tell Lucy you said hello.”

“And that I miss her?”

James nodded and closed the door. The click sounded hollow in the chilly fall air.

After that, Alice waited until the last possible moment before going into school and studied the clock until it was too late for Lucy to arrive on time. Part of it was concern over her friend’s wellbeing. Alice remembered what it was like after her parents had died in the tornado; she’d felt like she was in an unreal fog for weeks, her head full like when she was ill or deep into a strange dream. But part of it was curiosity; Alice had heard stories about the asylums and she wondered if Lucy had been there yet.

Even now, a year and a half later, she still didn’t know if Lucy had ever gone to the asylum to visit her mother. Their rare visits seemed to be better when they’d both pretended to forget they’d ever had mothers. This made her think of her own mother, ripped away as suddenly as Lucy’s, but at least Lucy’s mother was alive. And her father.

There were still mornings Alice awoke, expecting him to jump out from the other side of a wall, the memory enough to take her from rubbing her sleepy eyes to fully awake. Having Marshall there was nice, but he wasn’t a father. Though he worked and eased the burden of caring for the family, farm, and home, he felt more like an older brother. Many nights, she lay awake clutching her blanket to her chin, every

creak and groan or animal talk startling her away from sleep. The only cure seemed to be running through her days as hard as possible so she fell into bed too exhausted to hear anything.

The sun beat down on Alice's head, tiring her now as she reached the first row of neat houses along the Mackenrow's street. Her thoughts drifted back to Lucy and those first weeks after her world was turned upside down to more closely match Alice's.

It was a Tuesday in mid-November 1860, when Lucy returned to school. Alice had stopped watching the clock or waiting so long to go in as the weather got colder with winter on its way. She was reviewing her spelling words when she heard a commotion toward the back of the school room. She turned, but it took a moment for her to register it was Lucy. She looked so much older with her hair up in an adult twist and her hands primly folded together in front of her. But she was still Lucy and the excitement of having her best friend back at school bubbled inside. Alice ran to Lucy and threw her arms around her. Lucy hugged her back, but stiffly, and Alice could feel her bones through her thin skin.

What a different day it was compared to that day. As cold as the wind was that day, it was now warm on Alice's cheeks. It took so much time, but Lucy slowly came around. She tried again to break through the Sunday before the religious Thanksgiving observance that same year.

Alice approached Lucy after church. "Would you like to come over this afternoon to work on needlepoint?"

"No, thank you. I need to make my father dinner."

"You could come out after dinner. Or I could even help you."

"It's alright," Mr. Mackenrow said. "Go on ahead with Alice. I'm rather tired and I'm not hungry anyway, so I think I'll just relax this afternoon. I don't need a big Sunday dinner. I can find something to eat."

Lucy shrugged her shoulders. She was quiet on the walk to Alice's house.

Alice had tried to talk to her while they worked on their samplers. "Was it difficult to go back to school?" she asked.

"A little."

"If you're behind, I can help you catch up."

"I'm nearly all caught up. I worked on my studies while I was at home."

"Have you noticed the new boy, Ian?"

"Yes, I spoke to him once or twice."

"I think he likes you."

"Maybe."

Alice considered drawing Lucy out by asking her how she felt about Ian, but she seemed to be concentrating on her sampler.

"I just finished reading the best book. It was *The Marble Faun*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, about four artists in Italy. Abigail and I got so intrigued by it that we read every night until we could barely hold our eyes open. We finally finished it last night."

"Uh huh."

"I suppose once they're married, those things will be over. At least Marshall will be there, too. I don't know why Abigail gets so in a fix about the wedding. It will just be our family and Mrs. Alban – and you. You're invited if you'd like to come. Do you think you will come?"

Alice turned toward Lucy, barely rocking in her chair, concentrating on her project. The fire crackled, and Alice could feel the warming air reddening her cheeks. She continued. "Anyway, Abigail says the reading helps her to relax so she can sleep at night. I suppose after the wedding, she won't have anything to fret over." Alice turned

her attention to her needlework, hoping that Lucy would take the chance to contribute to the conversation, but she didn't. "Have you read any good books lately?"

"No. Outside of the housework and homework, I haven't had any time to read."

"Perhaps you and your father could take turns reading to each other in the evenings like Abigail and me."

"Perhaps."

"I could loan you the one we just finished if you like."

"I suppose."

Alice ran upstairs to get the book from those she'd lined up on her floor beneath her window. *One day, I'll get a real bookcase*, she thought. But that wanting didn't temper her excitement at finally finding something over which she and Lucy could connect again. Alice rushed back down the stairs with the book and held it out to Lucy, who looked up, distracted.

"Oh," she said. "I'm in the middle of an important stitch."

Alice lay the book softly next to Lucy's chair and sat down in her own place. The rest of the afternoon passed in near silence.

Alice was thankful she was assured a better reception as she knocked on Lucy's door these many months later. Lucy opened it, her red hair pulled together at the back of her head.

"Alice! Is everything alright? I wasn't expecting you today."

"Yes, well, I don't know." Alice told Lucy about the sudden sickness that seemed to grip her sister like clockwork every morning.

"Maybe you should talk to Dr. Ireland."

“That’s what I was thinking. I tried to get her to go see him, but she wouldn’t. She said she would be fine and that she had too much to do.”

“I know. Let’s go ask Mrs. Alban,” Lucy said.

Mrs. Alban hired Abigail on for sewing when she got busy repairing and replacing everyone’s clothing after the tornado destroyed so much of people’s belongings. Since then, she’d become like part of their family.

“Great idea. She always knows what to do, and she’s always happy to get company.”

“And maybe she has some lemonade.”

The girls knocked together on Mrs. Alban’s door. Alice’s mouth watered, anticipating the hoped-for lemonade.

Mrs. Alban beamed as she opened the door. “Alice. Lucy. What are you doing here? Abigail isn’t working today.”

“We know,” Alice said. “We came to see you, that is, if you’re up for visitors.”

“Of course. Come in. Would you girls like some lemonade? I just squeezed a fresh batch.”

Lucy and Alice exchanged a knowing glance. “Yes, please,” they said in unison.

Alice savored the tart liquid and felt the grains of the not-yet-dissolved sugar against the roof of her mouth as she rubbed them with her tongue. She felt the cold of the ice-cooled liquid flow down her throat.

The girls enjoyed their lemonade as Mrs. Alban chatted about the challenges of her latest sewing project. “How is everyone at home?” she finally asked, turning toward Alice. “Are those brothers of yours staying out of trouble?”

“Yes, ma’am. But...”

“What is it, dear?”

Alice took a deep breath and set her glass of lemonade by her feet. “It’s Abigail. She’s been getting terribly ill each morning. I’ve tried to get her to see the doctor, but she says she always feels better by lunch time.”

Mrs. Alban grinned. “I’ve been waiting for this,” she said wistfully.

“So you know what it is?”

“Yes, I remember it very well with my son. I was so ill every day for months, but it was all worth it in the end.”

Alice looked at Lucy to see the confusion on Lucy’s face that Alice could feel on her own.

Mrs. Alban said, “I do believe you are about to become an auntie, Alice.”

“What?”

“It sounds to me like Abigail is in the family way. With child.” She whispered the last phrase.

“Oh.” Alice suddenly felt embarrassed; she knew how babies were made.

After finishing their lemonade, the girls left. Alice dropped Lucy off at her house and was almost to the edge of town before she remembered the surprise dessert she was supposed to be making. She went back to the store, got the ingredients, and tried to concentrate on the upcoming baby part of the whole business with her sister. She thought back to the day Abigail and Marshall were married on Saturday, December 15, 1860.

Snowflakes had drifted by the windows, but it was warm in the church with the candles burning. In the back room where Alice tried to put the finishing touches on Abigail's elaborate twist, frost etched the window, reminding Alice of the lace delicately sewn along the perimeter of their grandmother's handkerchief, which Abigail would carry down the aisle. It was faintly stained in one corner from where it had glued in the mud after being swept out of the house during the tornado, but folded, the stain was hidden.

Abigail's eyes darted from window to window. "Stop moving until I get the pins in place," Alice said.

She saw Abigail's jaw stiffen. "I'm sorry," Abigail said. "I just wonder..."

"Wonder what?"

"I wonder if ..." Abigail clenched her fists together and dropped them into her lap. "Oh, nothing. Marshall is a good man, isn't he?"

Alice slid the last hair pin over Abigail's smooth, black hair, and then stood in front of her sister. "Of course I think Marshall is a good man. Don't you remember how I wanted him for my own husband when I was a little girl?"

Abigail's face softened. "Little girl? It was last summer."

Alice stood straight and stiff, trying to appear taller. "Well, I've grown up a lot since then." She took the mirror they had brought from home and held it in front of Abigail's face. "There, all done. What do you think?"

Abigail took the mirror and turned her head from side to side. "Wow, Alice. It looks wonderful. Thank you."

The minister's voice carried around the wall. "It's almost time. Are we ready?"

Alice looked at Abigail. "Well? Are we ready?"

Abigail nodded her head in agreement.

Alice watched Abigail walk down the aisle in their mother's wedding dress and thought Abigail looked beautiful, despite how she and Mrs. Alban had to add pieces to make the gown fit Abigail's wider waist. They'd assured Alice not to worry, that the dress could be easily taken back in when it came time for Alice to wear it, but Alice wasn't worried. Months ago, she had picked out a dress from Lucy's mother's *Godey's Lady's Book*, carefully tearing the page from the magazine so Mrs. Mackenrow wouldn't notice it was gone. She'd folded and tucked it between the pages of her diary. She was not sure that she ever wanted to be married, but if she did, she wanted to wear that dress.

It was a small ceremony. Alice stood next to Abigail while Samuel and David served as best men beside Marshall. Mrs. Alban had been invited, but she insisted she'd better stay at home to get the cake and punch ready for after the ceremony. The reverend performed the service; the twins scrunched their faces and giggled when he said Marshall could kiss the bride. After that, they all walked over to Mrs. Alban's to enjoy cake and warm punch.

That night, as Alice lay in bed and heard what should have been her mother's and father's door close behind Marshall and Abigail, she felt irritated, but knowing it was silly, she let the feeling fade away as she drifted to sleep.

Now, a year and a half later, remembering Abigail's condition, a shudder gripped her body as the thought of what else they may have been doing in her parents' bed popped into her head, but she pushed it away and concentrated on being an aunt. *I really do have a surprise dessert to make for supper now*, she thought. *I wonder how long it will take Abigail to realize that rather than playing mother to her sister and brothers, she'll be a real mother?*

CHAPTER TWO

Tuesday, July 22, 1862

The family gathered around the table for supper: roast chicken, potatoes, and mashed carrots. Abigail seemed to be eating constantly and she was getting bigger, so Alice wondered if she was finally going to tell them about the baby. Abigail had announced earlier they were all to be home on time for supper because she had something to tell them. Her cheeks were flushed, and she ate as if she hadn't just eaten a biscuit just an hour before. Alice watched her sister, waiting for an indication the news was coming.

Abigail put down her fork and opened her mouth. This is it, Alice thought, but before Abigail could get any words out, Marshall interrupted without looking up from his plate.

"I heard that today Mr. Lincoln put out a call for 300,000 men to join the fight to preserve the Union," Marshall said. He put a spoonful of potatoes in this mouth, chewed, and swallowed. "I was thinking I would volunteer."

"You can't," Abigail said.

"Why?"

"I need you here."

“It’s only for a little while. You’ll manage; wives all over the country are managing without their men.”

“I don’t even know why we’re fighting the southern states. If they don’t want to be a part of our country any more, we should just let them leave peacefully.”

“It’s not that simple, Abigail.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“It’s the principle of it all. They are traitors revolting against their own government because they didn’t get their way. We need them and they need us. We must preserve the Union. Every man who is able is going to help.”

“You just can’t go, that’s all.”

“But Abigail, I haven’t heard a good reason.”

With tears starting out of her eyes, Abigail choked out, her face bright red, “Because I’m ... I’m having your baby.” She pushed her plate toward the middle of the table, gravy splashing out onto the good tablecloth. She wiped her eyes with her napkin. “Besides, we haven’t even been married for two years. I don’t understand why you want to leave me already. What’s wrong with me? Why does everyone I love want to leave me?”

Marshall softened and led Abigail by her elbow out of the room. Alice heard him whisper to her, “You know that it’s not true that everyone you love wants to leave you. Your parents didn’t choose to leave you, and I feel like I don’t have a choice either. This is something I feel like I must do. And I’ll be back, I promise. Mr. Lincoln says that getting more men will turn the tide. How long before the baby comes?”

“I saw Dr. Ireland today. He says about six months.”

“I’ll surely be back by then. You’ll see, it’ll be alright.”

Abigail and Marshall returned to the table, her eyes blotchy and swollen. The rest of the meal passed in silence.

Nobody said anything about the baby until they were done and gathering the dishes, when Samuel asked, “What will the baby be? A sister or brother?”

Abigail dropped the dishes into the dish pan and ran upstairs. Marshall followed, undoubtedly to console her.

Alice told the boys, “No, the baby will be your niece or nephew. You’re going to be uncles.” They looked confused. “Do you remember Uncle Peter from Pennsylvania?”

They couldn’t have, but pretended they did. Alice smiled at their vivid imaginations, but inside, her chest tightened and her stomach turned. She should have been relieved that the secret of the new baby was out and she was going to be an aunt, but instead, she grieved her world turning upside down again.

Alice stood next to Abigail, resting her hand on her shoulder, her arm draped across her back. It was a typical hot mid-August day.

“It’s only for a little while,” she heard Abigail whisper.

“That’s right. He’ll be back in two weeks.”

Abigail’s head snapped toward Alice, her eyes glared, and she shrugged away from her. Alice sighed and let Abigail go back into the house in peace. It wouldn’t do any good to argue; ever since Marshall said he was volunteering for the Union, nothing said to Abigail seemed to register anyway. She’d spent the last few weeks switching between lying in her bed staring at the wall and running to the outhouse being sick. As if the load of responsibilities had never gotten better, Alice and Marshall automatically took over the chores. Sometimes as they laughed at Samuel’s and David’s antics at the supper table; it felt a bit like they were a married couple, and it was nice. But then Marshall

would carry a plate up to Abigail and spend the rest of the evening sitting vigil. Alice cleaned the dishes, put the boys to bed, and read one of her father's books until the sunlight disappeared into dusk, and even the lamplight wasn't enough to allow her to make out the words on the pages. She'd fall asleep imagining a faceless husband's arms wrapped around her.

Two weeks later, on Friday, Alice woke to the sounds of clanking pots below her. She dressed. Her alarm weakened when she peeked into her parents' bedroom and saw the bed empty and neatly made. Downstairs, Abigail burrowed into a lower cupboard, the curtain hung to hide the dishes behind it draped over Abigail's head.

"What are you doing?" Alice asked.

Abigail jumped, bumping her head.

"I'm sorry," Alice said, "I didn't mean ..."

Abigail extracted herself and laughed as she stood. "It's alright. Did you ask me something?"

"Yes. What are you doing?"

"He's coming home today, so I was cleaning. I want everything to be perfect when Jo ... Marshall gets here."

Alice considered pressing Abigail's near miss-speak, but afraid she'd drive her sister back to her room, she let it go. "I'll help," she chose instead. "What can I do? Should I sweep?"

Abigail approached Alice and placed her hands on her shoulders, a shy grin and blush spreading across her face. "There is something very important you can do for me," she said, lowering her face to stare at the floor.

"What is it?" Abigail had never had a problem with asking for her help before.

Abigail stepped back and crossed her arms in front of her chest. “I’ve already been to see Mrs. Alban this morning. She said it would be alright with her if you and the boys spent the night at her house ...”

“But why?”

“Alice,” Abigail said, shaking her head. “I haven’t seen my husband for two weeks. We need some time alone together.”

“Oh.” Now it was Alice’s turn to redden. “Samuel and David have been marking the days until Marshall comes ...”

“I know. It’s only for tonight. You and the boys can come back tomorrow morning, as soon as the sun rises if you like.”

Alice packed a bag of things they’d need for a night away from home, and as soon as she could get them ready, she took the twins to Mrs. Alban’s, leaving Abigail to her cleaning. They enjoyed their time at Mrs. Alban’s, and the hours flew by with lemonade, sweets, and games, not slowing until Mrs. Alban slumped in her chair, snoring as popcorn tipped out of her bowl onto the floor. They giggled as they picked up the mess, covered Mrs. Alban with a blanket, and crept in to crowd themselves into what used to be Mrs. Alban’s son’s bed to sleep. Alice was still staring at the ceiling when she heard Mrs. Alban shuffle to her own bedroom next door.

She wondered about Abigail and if she fully realized that Marshall would be leaving again in less than two days, and this time it would be for much longer than two weeks. She began to dread the work she knew was coming as Abigail retreated into herself. She fell asleep as the dark began to lighten to blue, imagining leaning into a strong shoulder belonging to someone who could take her away and take care of her for a change.

They enjoyed the weekend; Sunday arrived too soon. Dark clouds approached from the west and faint thunder rumbled. It was terrible timing as Marshall prepared to join the Iowa 20th Infantry on its way to Davenport. The family drove the buckboard to town, loaded in the back with the children and Marshall’s pack of clothes, paper,

stamps, mess kit, tent muslin, canteen, and other necessities. Marshall drove until they got to the meeting place. He handed Abigail the reins and she slid over on the seat. Abigail looked straight ahead as Marshall reached over the buckboard's side and grabbed his bags. He stepped away, Abigail clicked the reins, and they drove to park the horses at the designated spot down the block.

It pained Alice to see her sister so sad, crying as Marshall hugged her goodbye and said, "I'll be back before you'll even miss me."

He hugged Alice, who barely held in her tears, and shook Samuel's and David's hands. Mrs. Alban was also there; she said not to worry, that she'd take good care of his family. Alice still didn't quite understand why he was going when it obviously hurt him so much, but she thought maybe she'd understand when she got older.

The drummers tapped on their drums and the buglers played as they marched south out of town toward Davenport and preparations to head to the front lines.

The next morning, Alice knocked softly on Abigail's door before entering the room. It was dark with the shades pulled. "Abigail, supper's ready."

"I'm not hungry."

"But the baby. You have to eat."

"I'll get something later. I just feel so weak and tired all of the time from the baby."

"Are you sure it's just the baby?"

"Yes. Please let me rest."

Alice pulled the door shut and joined her brothers for supper.

"Abigail's not coming," Samuel said.

"No, she said she'd eat later and to get started without her."

On this night, Alice felt sorry for Abigail. As she ate, she thought about how hard it must be to have so many responsibilities, with a baby on the way and no husband around. But Alice also became angry with her, thinking about the responsibilities that had fallen on her all day. Then Alice thought about how she'd feel if the husband she just married and got in the family way with decided to leave her all alone, and she'd feel sorry for her sister again. At least Abigail was married; she'd always wanted that.

CHAPTER THREE

Friday, September 12, 1862

Lucy sat on the school steps eating her lunch. Alice sat down next to her. She unwrapped her ham pieces, broke off a piece of biscuit, and popped them together into her mouth.

“It’s starting to look like fall,” she said. “The tree leaves are starting to change color. I just love how beautiful it is in the fall.”

Lucy’s eyes flared toward Alice.

“Oh, that’s right. I’m sorry.”

The girls went back to eating quietly.

“I’m free after school for a little while. I was thinking we could go for a walk,” Alice said.

“I can’t. I need to fold the laundry I hung this morning and get supper started for Father.”

“I could help you. I have plenty of experience.”

“If you like,” Lucy said, tucking her lunch wrappings into her pail. “I need to go,” she said, walking toward the outhouse.

After school, Alice grabbed her things and walked out the door, expecting Lucy to be waiting for her, but she wasn’t there. Alice looked

up and saw her halfway across the school yard, heading toward her house.

“Lucy, wait,” she called, running to catch up with her. “I was coming with you, remember?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry. I forgot,” Lucy said.

“What should we do first? Fold the clothes or start supper?”

“I’m making beef stew, so it would probably be best to get that started first.”

“Great. I can help you chop vegetables.”

“Alright.”

Alice followed Lucy down to the cellar where Lucy silently handed the potatoes and carrots to her. All Alice could hear were the sounds of their knives hitting the cutting boards as they sliced through potatoes, carrots, onion, and beef. They slid the ingredients off the boards with the backs of their knives and they splashed into the broth Lucy had already seasoned. Alice placed their cutting board and knives in the wash tub while Lucy tested the broth and added more seasonings. When she was done, Lucy went outside to the clothes line without saying a word to Alice.

What is the matter with her? Alice thought. I’ve been nothing but nice and helpful to her, and she just keeps getting colder and colder. Alice went outside and took a place beside Lucy. She took a pair of James’ jeans off the line and shook them before folding them.

“It sure is cold out here,” she said.

Lucy looked at her sideways, the sun sparkling through her strands of red hair.

“Not the weather,” Alice said. “I mean the way you’re treating me.” Alice laughed, but Lucy gave no indication of understanding the attempt at a joke. “Are you angry with me?”

Lucy shrugged.

“What have I done?”

“It wasn’t what you did.”

“Then what is it? Tell me.”

Lucy turned, and the wind caught her hair, blowing it so it looked like flames were shooting out of her head. “It’s your sister. If it wasn’t for her, my mother would be here, and I wouldn’t be stuck with all this housework. You keep coming around, acting like I should be able to play and do things like we used to, but because of your sister, I can’t.”

“I’m sorry that your mother killed Marty Cranson. My sister didn’t make her do it; she just convinced your mother to tell the truth. I have a lot of work to do at home, too, you know. Both my parents died, if you remember. And Abigail’s husband is off doing his patriotic duty. The way I see it, you’re better off. You only have your father to care for while I have two young boys and another baby on the way. And your mother is still alive.”

Tears gathered in the corners of Lucy’s green eyes. “Go away,” she said. “My father didn’t enlist because he didn’t want to leave me all alone.”

“Lucy, I didn’t mean ...”

“I know what they say about him. I hear them whisper as I walk by.” Lucy’s eyes flared in anger again. “But thanks to your family, my father is unable to serve his country.”

“You blame me for that, too?”

“Just go,” Lucy said. “Leave me alone.”

Alice wept all the way home. She’d hated hurting Lucy, but what she’d said was true. She’d thought life would take on some sort of normalcy when Abigail and Marshall were married, and it did for a

while. But, oh, how things change. Now her days were filled with taking care of children and the house, and in a few short months, all of it would increase when the baby came. Alice watched a flock of geese fly overhead, their V-formation pointing south. *How I wish I could go with them*, she thought.

“The end.” Alice read the last of a serial of a mystery story in the weekly newspaper. “Wow. Can you imagine? I don’t know if I could ever kill anyone.”

“The only real experience I have with it, of course, is with Pamela. It seems that rarely do we hear that the person who murdered someone was purely evil. They usually seem to be mentally off or mad in some way. Like Pamela. Marty Cranson did a terrible thing to her, and it made her mind sick. Pamela was never nice to me, but I don’t think she is evil.” Abigail rubbed her hands over her middle, which was starting to protrude.

“No,” Alice said. “I was completely shocked to hear she’d confessed to killing Marty. I’d never known her to be violent. She wouldn’t even swat a fly in her house, but would go to great pains to swish it outside.”

The girls were silent for a long moment, watching the clouds drift in front of the stars.

Finally, Abigail broke the silence. “Sometimes I worry if I may be mad.” She stared at her belly as if she could see through it to the baby growing inside.

Alice looked at her, confused.

“Not enough to kill, mind you. But I see all the ladies in town rushing to the post office every day, hoping for a letter from their husbands or beaus on the front lines. But it isn’t my husband I’m looking to receive a letter from. It’s Joseph.”

Alice unfolded her legs and stomped her feet on the step below. “That coward. How could you even think kindly of him at all after what he did?”

“I don’t know. I just keep wondering why he left and didn’t say goodbye like he said he would. I wonder if his parents were actually ill, or if he decided he didn’t love me anymore, so he just made it up to get away from me. He had to have heard about the tornado. Why did he never ask about my health? Did he care that little for me?”

Alice tried to think of an explanation. “I think there isn’t any way to know, Abigail. Remember how Mother and Father always used to tell us when we fell and skinned our knee or if someone hurt our feelings with something they said, or if something didn’t turn out the way we’d hoped, that it was God’s plan? That there was a good reason things happened the way they did. We just don’t know what that reason is.”

“I remember.”

“Maybe that’s what happened here. God must have had a reason. Maybe it’s so you and Marshall could find each other. So maybe you can have a family with him.”

“Perhaps.” Abigail got up, walked a few feet from the house, and looked up at the sky. “I find myself thinking of Joseph at night when I’m trying to fall asleep. Is he even under the same sky as me anymore? I wonder what it would be like if he came back.” She swept her arm across her body like she were showing off the porch. “What if he showed up right here, right now on this porch? He started to build this porch. It’s all so strange. I don’t know what I’d really do if he came back. I’ve gone through every scenario in my mind. In some of them, I’m overjoyed and filled with a rush of love. Other times, I’m angry and I push him away. What do you think that means?”

“Perhaps it means you are as afraid of seeing him again as you are of never seeing him again.”

“It’s possible.”

“What about Marshall?”

“I love Marshall, of course. But the feelings I had for Joseph are still here. I still feel them the same as I did those years ago. I love Marshall. But it’s not the same.” Abigail sighed as she sat back down next to Alice. “When the ladies in town get a letter from their men, they are so happy. They clutch the letters to their bosoms with tears streaming down their cheeks. I feel so guilty because I feel a bit disappointed the letter is from Marshall instead of Joseph. As I read, it’s like I’m reading the newspaper. Maybe I’m a terrible person.”

“No, that’s not it.” Alice patted her sister’s back and smiled at her.

Abigail half-smiled back. “Are you certain?”

“Yes. It’s a hard time. People react to things differently. It’ll be all right. You’ll see.”

“I hope so.” Abigail yawned. “I’m tired. I think I’ll go to bed before I feel wide awake again.” She stood up and stretched. “Are you coming?”

“I think I’ll sit out here a little longer,” Alice said. “I’m not that tired yet.”

“Make sure you lock up when you come in.”

“I will.”

Alice thought about what her sister had said. If Abigail were mad, then she was likely in just as sad a shape. Since Lucy stopped speaking to her, some of the other girls from school had started to notice and they’d tried to be nice to her. Alice was polite, but she refused their invitations. She’d lost her parents and Lucy. And then Marshall, whom she’d been fond of since they’d found him injured in the field the morning after the tornado. When she thought of sharing secrets with these girls, she thought about how she’d feel if she lost them, and she couldn’t bear to face that pain again. Even with her brothers, she had always

been an affectionate sibling, kissing, hugging, and cuddling them. But now she tried to keep her interactions with them more distanced. She took care of them, but did her best not to make them too important in her life. *If something is your whole life, it only hurts that much more when you lose it*, she thought. She wondered if that might be why Abigail focused on missing Joseph instead of her own husband. Maybe since she'd already lost Joseph, it was easier to dwell on that rather than thinking of what she'd do if she lost Marshall, too.

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