

# A Thousand Little Blessings

Claire Sanders

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## **A Thousand Little Blessings**

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Cover Art by Nicola Martinez

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC  
[www.pelicanbookgroup.com](http://www.pelicanbookgroup.com) PO Box 1738 \*Aztec, NM \* 87410

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### **Publishing History**

First White Rose Edition, 2014

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-409-1

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-408-4

**Published in the United States of America**

## Dedication

*For Kristin Morris*

*God is a refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in  
times of trouble. ~ Psalms 46*



# 1

*Burnet, Texas - March 1919*

Henrietta Davis clenched her jaw and forced herself to look at the casket. The spray of yellow roses covering her mother's final resting place was oddly cheerful for such a somber occasion. Not even her mother's favorite flower could lessen the shock that quaked through Etta's soul. Her mother's life had been whisked away like a fragile blossom before a bitter winter wind, leaving Etta grasping for the cherished flower and finding nothing but cold air.

Reverend Martin stood in the Davis family cemetery and read from his dog-eared Bible in the same deep voice Etta heard every Sunday morning. The reassuring words stilled her trembling hands. Her mother was with her Lord, surrounded by love and reunited with her parents and grandparents. But the words did little to relieve the cold stone of grief lodged beneath Etta's heart.

Next to her, Etta's father shifted in the rickety folding chair the funeral home had supplied. Henry Davis had donned his most stoic face that morning, giving no hint of the keening grief she'd heard coming from his bedroom a few nights ago.

It was early spring, a time when birds sang with renewed vigor and dormant trees budded in promise.

But her father and she weren't thinking about new

life. They were burying the person who'd given them love, comfort, and joy.

Etta's nose tingled, a sure sign tears were imminent. She took a deep breath and steeled herself. She wouldn't embarrass her father by crying. He'd schooled her to portray their family as upright members of the community, always in control, never fodder for the town gossips. She raised her lace handkerchief and sniffed.

Her mother's best friend, Sara Benson, leaned against Etta's right shoulder. "It's almost over. Almost."

Etta nodded slightly and lifted her gaze. Through the black netting attached to her broad-brimmed hat, the cloud-dotted sky shone. How many times had her mother encouraged her to daydream on early spring days such as this? "What about that cloud?" she'd ask, her face as animated as a child's. "It looks like an elephant."

"No," Etta would disagree. "It's a poodle with a leash."

"It's an elepoodle," her mother would pronounce, as though her word was the last to be uttered on the subject. "What? You've never heard of an elepoodle? They're native to Finland." Then she'd dissolve into girlish giggles and dare Etta to find another imaginary animal.

Etta's father cleared his throat and stood. Was the service already over? He shook Rev. Martin's hand and then crooked his elbow toward his daughter. Etta slipped her arm through his and walked down the gently sloping hill. Decorum surrounded her father like heavily-starched linen as they made their way toward the house.

Fellow mourners trailed after them.

Etta would be expected to fill her mother's role as hostess, a job for which she felt woefully unprepared. How could she smile and chit-chat when all she wanted to do was crawl under the covers? Her queasy stomach clutched as she pasted a false smile on her face and stepped through the door.

Two middle-aged ladies dressed in black pushed themselves up from generously upholstered chairs in the parlor. The two matrons formed the church bereavement committee, a detail Etta had forgotten amidst the confusion of the week.

Mrs. Henrichson approached with open arms. "You poor thing. Come and sit down. We've got everything under control."

Mrs. Stoutman nodded vigorously, causing the black feathers on her hat to quiver. "Don't worry about a thing, Henrietta. We found your mother's china and set out refreshments."

Etta allowed Mrs. Henrichson to lead her to the dining room table. Her grandmother's antique gold-rimmed plates held slices of cake and finger sandwiches. A silver coffeepot and a crystal pitcher of lemonade sat nearby.

"Mother never used these dishes," Etta began and then censored herself. Her mother had cherished each dish as a memento of her own mother and kept them stored away, never to be endangered by careless hands. But it seemed trivial to make a fuss over dishes when the ladies had come to help. "Oh, it's all right. Thank you for taking care of everything."

A crescendo of noise swept into the dining room as friends and family made their way to the refreshments.

Her father shouldered his way through the crowd, shaking hands and nodding before exiting through the casement doors that led to the side courtyard.

Another tug of sympathy wrenched Etta's heart.

Her father must want to get away from the crowd as much as she did. Her guests were quite content visiting with each other. Perhaps she could shirk her hostess duties for a few minutes. She forced herself to walk slowly up the polished oak stairs, but once out of sight, she ran into the quiet stillness of her bedroom.

After closing the door, she placed a hand on her roiling stomach and blew out a breath. How long would the guests stay? An hour? Two? She removed her hat and gloves, laid them on her dresser, and then, crossed to the windows that overlooked the courtyard.

Through the massive limbs of the live oak, Etta watched her father. He slumped in the wicker chair, slowly rubbing his left temple. She'd bring him some pills to relieve the pain as soon as she got downstairs. A soft knock sounded on her door. "Come in, Rosa."

"It's not Rosa. It's me." Sara entered the room carrying a cup and saucer. "Rosa's in the kitchen. Do you need her?"

"No. I'll be down in a few minutes. I just wanted to..uh...to take off my hat and gloves."

Sara patted Etta's arm. "I know, honey. Stay up here as long as you need. I brought you some coffee. Two sugars, no cream, just the way you like it."

"Thank you. You know me so well."

"Course I do. I was there on the day you were born."

Sara was unlike her mother in so many ways, yet the two women had been best friends for years. Etta's mother had been fair-haired and petite, but Sara was as



tall as most men and her hair was as black as the jet beads she wore around her neck.

Etta sipped the hot coffee and returned her gaze to the courtyard. Several men had joined her father. "I'm worried about Papa."

Sara leaned against the window frame. "Me, too. I wish he'd take some time off, but knowing him, he'll be at the bank tomorrow."

Several automobiles drove up and more people piled out.

"I can't believe how many people are here. Seems as though the whole town is parked in our front yard."

"Lots of people want to pay their respects. Catherine will be missed." Sara pursed her lips in a sign of disapproval. "I see your Uncle Carl decided to show up. You'd think he'd make it to the services for his only sister. But then, he's always been more interested in fun than in paying his respects. That man thrives on being the main attraction of whatever social circus he can find."

Etta choked on the coffee.

Sara's description of Uncle Carl was almost identical to her father's. More than once Papa had referred to her uncle as "the family clown."

Sara patted Etta's back. "You OK, honey?"

Etta nodded and cleared her throat. "I'd best go downstairs."

Sara brushed her fingertips through Etta's hair. "You're so pale. Why don't you lie down for a while? I'll bring you something to eat."

Etta leaned her head toward the older woman's shoulder, willing to surrender her constraint for a moment of maternal affection, but the unmistakable crash of dropped dishes jerked her to full attention. "I

should go," Etta said as she brushed her hands down her black serge skirt. "I'm sure Rosa needs help."

Sara reached for her, but Etta couldn't give in to her desire for comfort. One kind touch and her false bravado would collapse.

The family's housekeeper stood at the sink, elbow deep in suds while Mrs. Stoutman and Mrs. Henrichson threw away broken pieces of china. Rosa's dark brows were drawn into a fierce scowl, an ominous portent of the scolding brewing in her mind.

Although she didn't think it was possible, Etta's heart fell even further as she looked at the ruined dishes. "Thank you so much, Mrs. Stoutman. I'll finish this." Etta set her cup and saucer on the counter and took the broom and dustpan from the large-bosomed woman. "You, too, Mrs. Henrichson. It's so kind of you to help at a time like this."

Mrs. Stoutman pulled Etta's head down to her shoulder. "Oh, Henrietta, I know you're going to miss your momma. Sometimes I still pine for my momma, and she's been gone for nearly thirty years."

Etta's nose itched dangerously from Mrs. Stoutman's honeysuckle-scented talc. She sniffed in an effort to stifle the sneeze, and Mrs. Henrichson threw her arms around Etta, sandwiching her between the two matrons. "Go ahead and cry all you want," Mrs. Henrichson said. "Nobody would fault you for crying on a day like this."

"I'm all right." Etta's voice was muffled between the women's soft bodies. "Just let me get these broken dishes cleaned up." She struggled to escape, but the two ladies crowded closer.

"You're so lucky you still have your mother," Mrs. Stoutman said to Mrs. Henrichson. "There's nothing

worse than burying your mother."

"I know that's true," Mrs. Henrichson replied. "I remember your mother's funeral as if it was yesterday. So many flowers."

As the two ladies talked on, Etta slid slowly toward the floor until she was free of their suffocating condolences. Breathing deeply, she backed away from the pair and picked up the largest pieces of broken china.

Mrs. Stoutman retrieved a tray of finger sandwiches. "How many pies do we have left?"

"Only three." Mrs. Henrichson slid an apple pie onto a silver platter. "Maybe I should cut thinner slices."

Mrs. Stoutman backed through the kitchen's swinging door. "Good idea."

Etta's shoulders slumped in relief once the ladies left the kitchen. She wanted her normal life back. She wanted her mother.

Rosa touched Etta's arm. "Are you all right, *mija*?"

As Etta looked into Rosa's kind, dark eyes, gratitude welled in her soul. *Mija*. Rosa had used that endearment since she'd first come to work for her family fifteen years ago. Did Rosa really think of Etta as her daughter? "I'll be all right. Don't worry." Etta emptied the dust pan. "Let me help you with the dishes."

Rosa made a clucking noise with her tongue. "No, no. Why don't you check on your Papa? Bring him some coffee."

Etta tied a white linen hostess apron around her waist, slipped a small tin of pain reliever into the pocket, and prepared a tray.

Her father and four other men sat in wicker chairs

beneath the live oaks that shaded the house. As she approached, all of the men stood.

"Keep your seats, gentlemen. I've brought fresh coffee. Who would like a refill?"

Judge Thompson raised his cup and saucer. "Right here, Henrietta. I was just telling your father what a lovely service your mother had."

Etta set the tray on the wicker table and turned to fill his cup. "Thank you, Judge." She turned to the man on his right. "What about you, Mr. Mayor?"

Edgar Robinson rubbed his balding head. "I probably shouldn't but...oh, go ahead, fill 'er up."

Etta complied and moved on to James Moore, owner of the largest store in town.

Mr. Moore put his hand over his cup. "None for me, Henrietta. If I drink any more I'll be awake until three in the morning."

She moved to her father's side and offered him the pills. He shook his head, declining the medication, but held up his cup for more coffee.

The youngest of the men stood. "Why don't you take my chair, Miss Davis?"

Etta smiled at William Clark, the county prosecutor. He had a reputation as a tenacious lawyer with a notable record of convictions, but his round baby face and blond hair gave him the appearance of a young boy, rather than a determined officer of the law. "Thank you, Mr. Clark." She returned the coffeepot to the tray and settled into the chair.

The men were curiously quiet. Perhaps her presence put a damper on their conversation, but she'd sat in on many of their meetings before. The four men formed the bank's Board of Directors.

Etta studied her father. His graying hair was

combed as meticulously as usual, and his starched collar showed no sign of wilting, but his face bore witness to his grief. The lines on his forehead had deepened and his usual quick smile had abandoned him. He rubbed a palm along the crease in his trousers and broke the silence. "I plan to stay home tomorrow. I have quite a bit of correspondence to catch up on. I'll be in the office the next day."

Judge Thompson's bushy white eyebrows drew together. "Don't rush it, Henry. The bank's not going anywhere."

"The judge is right," Mayor Robinson said. "The bank will run as smoothly as ever until you come back."

"I need to keep busy," Papa said. "Otherwise..."

"Perhaps you'd like some time to work with your horses," William Clark suggested. "My mother says you're sure to win top prize at the Travis County show this summer."

Etta sent silent thanks to William. Her father's only interest outside the bank was his Arabians, and William had hit just the right note to lift his mood.

"I hope you're right about that," Papa answered. "My wife used to say my horses were as beautiful as a well-kept secret. My stallion--"

"Here you all are!" Everyone turned to see who had hailed them in such a jolly manner. Uncle Carl lifted a hand in greeting. "I see you're enjoying this beautiful spring weather."

The men sighed unanimously as they turned their attention away from Carl.

Oblivious to their unenthusiastic response, Uncle Carl pulled a small side table into the circle and sat on it. He looked like a parrot in a group of crows. All the

men had dressed in black, but Carl sported a beige suit with a bright blue vest. His sharp-pointed shoes were polished so brightly they reflected the sunlight. "What were you all talking about?"

Mayor Robinson answered first. "We were just advising Henry to take a few days off."

"I hope you do," Carl said to Henry as he straightened the blue bow tie that matched his vest. "I'm simply bereft at having lost my dear sister. I can hardly imagine going back to work right away. You take your time, Henry. I'll take care of any business that can't wait until you return."

The members of the board exchanged gazes.

"Carl," her father said, "would you please carry that tray to the kitchen for Etta?"

"Of course." Carl smoothed his sandy-blond hair and lifted the tray. "You coming, Etta?"

Her father's request was as transparent as a liar's promise, but Carl didn't see through his ploy to get him to leave.

Etta trailed Carl into the kitchen.

Most of the visitors had left, and the women of the Bereavement Committee were packing up.

"Thank you, ladies," she said. "My father and I appreciate your help."

Carl placed a hand over his heart. "Losing someone is never easy, but the kindness of neighbors eases the pain."

Mayor Robinson's wife slipped her arm around the crook of Carl's elbow. "I know you'll miss your only sister. We'll all miss Catherine."

The other ladies made noises of assent.

Sara Benson held out her arms the way a hen uses its wings to gather chicks. "Time for us to leave, ladies."

Etta and Henry need their rest now."

"Allow me to carry those boxes," Carl said to Mrs. Stoutman. "I'll be leaving as well, Etta," he said over his shoulder. "But I'll call tomorrow to see how you and Henry are doing."

Etta accompanied them to the front door, thanked them again, and watched them drive away. When the last automobile had disappeared, she slumped against the door frame and allowed the quiet to seep into her bones. Things would never be the same without her mother, but at least she and her father could relax now that everyone had left.

Sara walked through the front parlor and hurried to Etta's side. "Oh, Etta. Are you all right?"

Etta straightened her spine and faced the other woman. "I'm fine."

Sara wrapped her arms around Etta's shoulders and held her close. "I know I'm not your mother, but I hope you'll call when you need something. I'm only a few minutes away."

Etta returned Sara's embrace, glad to have her mother's best friend looking out for her. Sara had been part of her mother's life as long as Etta could remember. She'd often traveled to Pennsylvania with her mother to visit Etta at school, and her mother's letters always contained news about what she and Sara were working on. They co-chaired church committees, worked on numerous fund-raising campaigns for the town library, and hosted one social after another. If Etta could step away from her own sorrow, she'd surely see how sorely Sara grieved the loss of her best friend. "Thank you for all your help, Sara. I couldn't have handled everything without you."

"I don't believe that for a second, but it's the least I

could do. Would you like to walk over to my house? We could have a cup of tea and a long talk, or simply sit and do nothing."

Sara's house was only five minutes away, but even that short walk seemed overwhelming. "Maybe later. I want to make sure Papa gets some rest."

"That's good advice for you, too." Sara kissed Etta's forehead and stepped through the front door. "I'll check on you both tomorrow."

After watching Sara make her way to the footbridge connecting the Benson property to the Davis land, Etta closed the front door and walked quietly to the wall of windows in the dining room. Her father sat by himself in the courtyard, his head resting in his hand. "Help my Papa, Lord," she whispered. "Only You know the depth of his grief. Only You can alleviate his pain."

Etta's footsteps echoed on the stairs as she made her way to her bedroom. She'd wanted the visitors to leave, but now that the house was silent, the hollow feeling at the pit of her stomach intensified. Her mother's gentle presence was gone from the house but not from her heart. She'd see her mother again someday, but Etta dreaded the years of sorrow that lay ahead of her.

At the top of the staircase, Etta came face-to-face with the closed door of her mother's sewing room. A shaft of afternoon sunlight blinded her as she swung the door open, and her mother's scent, a blend of lavender and vanilla, wafted around her. A man's unfinished dressing gown lay on a table, probably a gift for her father, and piles of folded fabric were stacked on a ladder-back chair. How her mother had loved to sew. Etta knew little more than how to hem a



skirt or mend a torn seam, but her mother had loved to design everything from evening gowns to curtains.

Etta sat at the machine and ran her fingers over a stack of blue and white quilt squares. Her mother hadn't made many quilts, but she did occasionally join Sara's quilting bees when the ladies of the church gathered to make one as a way to raise funds.

Etta caressed her cheek with one quilt square. Just last week, her mother had been her usual busy self, softly singing a hymn as she arranged yellow roses in a crystal vase. This week, she was gone, one of the many victims snatched away by Spanish influenza.

How long would it take until grief loosened its jagged talons? If Etta could open a doorway to heaven, she'd step right in, pay a visit, and then return to her normal life. She yearned for her mother's loving touch, but she wouldn't feel it again for many, many years.



Lantana shrubs brushed the hem of Etta's brown cotton work skirt as she stepped into her mother's flower garden the next morning. So much needed to be done. She retrieved hand pruners from her basket of tools and began to deadhead the yellow roses.

From the nearby stable, horses sounded their morning greetings as her father led them from their stalls and turned them out to pasture. He allowed no one to care for his prize-winning Arabians except himself, a task which included mucking their stalls. Her father, who was seldom seen wearing anything other than a three-piece suit, donned work pants and a chambray shirt to work in the stable.

Etta pulled on her mother's gardening gloves and

dropped to her knees. Nettles grew beneath the bright green foliage of Mexican heather, and she'd learned the hard way that pulling them with bare hands would lead to painful stinging. Growing flowers was yet another skill she'd neglected to learn. But then, she'd never had to work for her mother's affection and approval. Her mother's esteem had been given as freely as the air she breathed.

If only her father's approval could be so easy to attain. It was no secret he'd wanted a son to carry on his name and his business. But complications from Etta's birth had sealed her mother's womb. She was his only heir, and, although he'd provided for her care and education, it had been her mother who'd lavished love and affection.

Etta rested on her heels and watched the antics of the half-feral cats that made the stable their home. As a child, Etta had begged for a kitten as a pet, but her father hadn't allowed that indulgence. "No animals in the house," he'd pronounced in his strictest voice.

"Except for little monkeys," her mother had said with a wink and a hug, soothing away the hurt of her father's denial.

A painful yearning rose from Etta's heart to her throat, and she wiped away tears with the back of her gloved hand. "Am I still your little monkey, Momma?" she whispered.

No answer came, but the horses neighed loudly as they cavorted around the large field. The bay stallion, Antares, made his way to the lead mare, Mira. He nuzzled her neck and huffed a loud breath. Mira shook her head and turned away from him, but the stallion was undaunted. He repeated the action with the three other mares.

How easy it was for the horses, Etta mused as she moved to another part of the garden where chickweed had invaded. The Arabians knew their places in the world and managed the give-and-take of equine society. But as a dutiful daughter who worked alongside her father six days a week, Etta was on her way to spinsterhood.

Things could be worse, she reminded herself. The world of finance intrigued her, and maintaining a healthy balance between fiscal risk and security was challenging. If she kept at it, perhaps her father would reward her with more responsibility.

Etta pushed a strand of hair away from her face and watched her father stroke the stallion's neck. She loved the horses almost as much as her father did and often ended the day grooming them by his side. In June, they would travel to the state capital for the annual horse show. It had always been her mother's favorite trip, although Etta suspected her mother went for the many social gatherings rather than anything related to equine husbandry.

Etta repositioned herself near the green shoots of the daffodils. How her mother had loved their cheerful announcements of spring. But as Etta worked in the dirt, a chorus of horse calls pulled her attention back to the pasture.

Antares's head pointed to the sky as he trumpeted one squeal after another and the mares formed a circle. Perhaps they smelled a predator, or one of the horses was hurt.

Etta rose to her feet and scanned the field.

The mares snorted in agitation and moved restlessly in their defensive circle.

Etta dropped the gloves into her basket of tools

and walked down the hill toward the stable. The stallion galloped to the wooden fence and neighed loudly as she approached.

"Papa?" she called as she entered the stable. The opened stall doors and the empty wheelbarrow meant her father was half-finished with his morning chores. "Papa?"

The horses answered, but there was no response from her father.

Etta passed through the stable, opened the gate that lead to the pasture, and closed it behind her.

What was her father doing?

Then Etta recognized a dark shape within the mares' protective circle. "Papa!" The frigid hand of fear grasped her heart as she picked up her skirt and ran.

The mares parted, allowing Etta access to her father. Panic gripped her throat as she dropped to the ground and turned him over.

A deep moan came from his twisted face and his left arm swung wildly.

"What's happened, Papa? Did you fall?"

Her father answered her question with an unintelligible grunt.

"Can you stand, Papa? Or sit up?"

His eyes were dazed and his body rocked from side to side.

Etta slipped her arm beneath his back to help him to a sitting position, but he pushed her away with a wordless groan. She gasped for air as she fought her rising panic. She couldn't leave him alone, but he needed help. The house was too far away for Rosa to hear her shouts. Etta removed a handkerchief from her father's shirt pocket and wiped his face. "I'm going for help, Papa. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Against everything in her heart, she left him in the pasture, the morning sun beating down on him, and ran to the house. "Rosa!" she screamed. "Rosa! Call Dr. Russell!" Etta's dry throat ached from exertion and panic. "Rosa!"

The housekeeper opened the back door and shielded her eyes against the sun. "What's wrong?"

Etta bent at the waist, her hands on her knees, and struggled to catch her breath. "Papa...call Dr. Russell...Papa's had some kind of accident."

Rosa's dark eyes grew wide with alarm. She hustled into the kitchen, leaving Etta panting outside.

Knowing she could count on Rosa to get in touch with the doctor, Etta ran back to where her father lay moaning on the dusty ground. With each step, she sent a desperate prayer heavenward. She couldn't lose her father as well as her mother. No one could expect her to survive such a loss.

The mares had reformed their protective circle, but upon hearing Etta's approach they nickered and disbanded. Etta knelt at her father's side and raised his head until it rested in her lap. His eyes were closed and his breathing labored.

Rosa carried a crockery pitcher and a glass into the pasture and bent over him. "Oh my, Miss Etta. He looks bad. His face is all crooked."

Impatience flared in Etta's chest. The last thing she needed was Rosa's dire prognosis. "Give me some water."

Rosa followed the order, and Etta held the glass to her father's lips. "Papa, here's some water for you. Dr. Russell is on his way. Here, Papa. Drink some water." She tipped the glass into his mouth, but the water ran down his chin. She reached for the handkerchief she'd