



IN THE WAKE OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION,
CHRISTMAS IS A TIME OF HOPE & REBIRTH

A CARLENE HAVEL
Sharecropper
Christmas

A SHARECROPPER CHRISTMAS

Carlene Havel

Copyright 2013 Carlene Havel
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
Cover Art by Joan Alley

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are the product of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Published by Prism Book Group
ISBN- 978-1-940099-22-4 First Edition, 2013
Published in the United States of America
Contact info: contact@prismbookgroup.com
<http://www.prismbookgroup.com>

CHAPTER ONE

Herbert's voice radiated excitement. "Alice, I found a job!"

"Good," she replied. Work explained the bottle of milk in his hand. "What kind of job?"

"Farming," he said with a big smile. "Something I know how to do for a change."

She couldn't let herself get too enthused. This opportunity could fall through like too many others. "For how long?"

"It's permanent!" Herbert grabbed her hands and attempted to swing her into a dance step. When Alice resisted, he dropped her hands and continued. "I ran into old man Sweeney a little while ago. He found out the tenants deserted one of his farms. They didn't give him any notice, just packed up and left in the middle of the night. Mr. Sweeney told me I can work his place on the thirds and fourths."

"When do you start?" Alice asked cautiously.

"As soon as possible," Herbert said. "Mr. Sweeney needs somebody right away so he can quit worrying about paying someone to milk the cows every morning. We can pack up tonight and head south right after church tomorrow. Monday morning I will milk and start plowing. I have it in my mind to grow some winter vegetables, and I want to get you and the kids settled into the house as quick as I can."

"There's a house?"

"Yes. It's a regular working farm, just like...just like any farm would be. Fifty acres, with a house and a barn and its own windmill. Our prayers have been answered, Alice. Praise God!"

"A house," she repeated, determined not to cry. Five years ago, Alice never dreamed she could be excited about sharecropping. When she and Herbert married, Alice knew she would have to work hard—all farmers' wives faced that

prospect. Yet she never expected to be turned out of their home with little more than the clothes on their backs. Herbert made a good crop in 1929, the year after they were married. Even though the news about the stock market was grim, traders in Europe and New York City seemed to have no connection to a West Texas cotton farmer. Soon, however, the price of cotton fell so dramatically that Herbert's sales at the local gin didn't cover his investment in seed and materials. The only way to recover was to have a good crop, and the only way to finance the effort was to mortgage the farm. In 1933, the bank foreclosed.

As more and more farmers and business owners faced bankruptcy, desperation stalked every household. Alice and Herbert took shelter with various relatives for a month or two at a time after they lost their land. They tried to make themselves useful guests, Herbert tinkering, repairing, and chopping firewood to earn their keep. Alice made sure she did the lion's share of the housework, although she often felt some folks took unfair advantage. Her parents, Charley and Myrtle Smith, were in no position to help, having lost their meager savings when the bank failed. There was no possibility the Smiths' tiny house could accommodate Alice's family. Her sister Frances had already moved back home, bringing her husband and three children. Uncle John camped out on a cot in the Smiths' kitchen. After they wore out their welcome with relatives, Alice sneaked her family's few belongings into the far corner of an isolated warehouse, while Herbert continued his frantic search for work.

With his usual optimism, Herbert assured Alice every day that he would soon find a steady job. Then everything would be all right. Early each morning, he went to a vacant lot where unemployed men waited for a chance to earn a day or two of wages doing odd jobs. Herbert brought home barely enough to keep his family fed by hauling furniture, picking cotton, or repairing farm equipment. Although he never turned down any kind of work, there were too many days when he stood in the vacant lot from early in the morning until late afternoon, only to return home empty-handed.

Meanwhile, Alice used her mother's treadle sewing machine and all the used bed sheets she could beg to stitch

together a tent. It was finished in the nick of time. When the trucking foreman found the Shoemakers in his warehouse, he ordered them to vacate the premises immediately. Herbert cut cedar posts and somehow managed to get a second-hand tarp to throw over the makeshift tent in case of rain. They made their home outside town at the bend of the river, along with other hard-luck families and a sprinkling of hobos. After months of living in a tent, the prospect of a house sounded almost too good to be true.

“Where is the farm?” Alice asked.

“Not too far,” Herbert replied. “Garza’s Crossing, only a little piece south of San Antonio.”

It would be nice to stay closer to her hometown, but Alice made no complaint. The thought of living in a house took precedence over everything else. What a relief it would be for her baby not to be born in the tent city during the winter.

“Are we going to have milk tonight?” asked five-year-old James.

“Yes, son,” Alice replied. “Milk for supper with your soup. Doesn’t that sound good?”

James nodded solemnly. He reached a finger to touch the cold bottle in his father’s hand, as if to verify it was real.

“Who loaned you the wagon and mule?” Alice asked.

“Mr. Sweeney had them in town, but they belong out at the farm we’re taking over.”

“Are we moving to a house, Mama?” James asked.

“Yes.” Alice smoothed his blond hair. “A farmhouse.”

“David.” James held his three-year-old brother’s face in both hands. “We’re going to live in a house again.”

CHAPTER TWO

The family arose before dawn to prepare for their move. Herbert took the tent loose from its makeshift frame while Alice folded it as neatly as she could. Herbert piled their sparse collection of pots, dishes, and clothing on top of the cedar tent posts in the wagon bed. Then he covered everything with the tarp and lifted his sleepy sons into a small space reserved for them. With arms folded, Alice surveyed the bare spot where their tent used to stand. "I reckon we need to stop by Mama and Papa's after church and say goodbye. Maybe Mama will let us have a few chickens."

"That would be mighty fine," Herbert said. "We can't stay long though, because we need to get to Garza's Crossing before dark."

Herbert helped Alice climb up to the wagon seat, no easy task for a short pregnant woman, for the ride to church. After Pastor Denton grew too old and blind to shepherd his flock, Jasper Reynolds had agreed to stand in until a full-time minister could be called as pastor. By the time a pulpit search committee was formed, the church found it could no longer afford to pay a minister's salary. So Reynolds farmed all week, devoting Sundays to preaching and visiting the sick.

"Good morning, Brother Shoemaker," Jasper Reynolds said. "Sister Shoemaker. Nice wagon you have there."

"Thank you, Pastor. Belongs to Mr. Sweeney. I'm going to start sharecropping for him."

"Praise God!" Jasper said.

"Amen," Herbert replied. "How are you and your family this fine morning?"

"Tolerably well, thank you. The weather's holding good for late October, ain't it? We're due a good cold snap any time,

though, maybe a freeze coming on. You and the young 'un getting along all right, Sister Shoemaker?"

"Yes, thank you," Alice answered, embarrassed at the slightest reference to her pregnancy.

"As I said, I'll be working Mr. Sweeney's farm over near Garza's Crossing." Herbert fiddled with the strap of his overalls. "I reckon the wife and I will move our letter to a church down that way next Sunday."

"Sure hate to see you folks leave us," Jasper said. "But I understand the situation. Times are hard, sure enough. God has poured out His wrath as a judgment on us—not that we don't deserve it."

Try as she might, Alice could not keep her mind on the rambling sermon. Her only thought was that this Sunday represented a form of deliverance for her. Although she and Herbert would no longer live among friends and family, she would also never have to hear another sermon from the mouth of Jasper Reynolds. Perhaps Herbert was accurate in his belief that every situation contained some cause for rejoicing, if only she would examine it closely enough.

Before she knew what was happening, Herbert had her hand, leading her forward, with James and David following behind. At the front of the church, Herbert turned to face the congregation. Alice did the same, wishing with all her heart that everyone's attention could be focused somewhere other than on her family. Herbert was presentable in his white, starched shirt and striped overalls. However, her expectant stomach pushed against the flour-sack fabric of her faded Sunday dress. Even in this impoverished crowd, Alice knew her barefoot boys' clothing looked shabby.

"Friends, I want you all to come by and extend the right hand of fellowship to the Shoemaker family. They're leaving us to move to Garza's Crossing, and I know we're all going to miss them." The song leader's wife played a hymn on the pump organ while most everyone filed by to say a word of farewell.

As soon as Bertha Cooper enveloped her in an embrace, Alice began to cry. Herbert passed her his white cotton handkerchief, put his left arm around her, and kept shaking

hands with his right. "We'll be back someday, God willing," he assured everyone.

Several men clapped Herbert on the shoulder and congratulated him for finding steady work. "Don't suppose you need a hired hand?" Barney Jackson asked.

"Not right away," Herbert replied. "But I'll keep you in mind if we start to need help."

Alice's cousin Henrietta Wilcox was the last person in line. "I'll sure miss seeing you and Herbert in church every Sunday, Alice," Henrietta said, tears streaming down her face.

"I just got stopped crying," Alice said. "Don't go getting me started again."

"I'm sorry, but you are the only church-going kinfolks I have." Henrietta smiled and wiped her eyes. "Who's going to help you when the baby comes?"

"Maybe Mama or Frances," Alice said, although the relationship with her sister was always strained.

"Well, if they can't come, you get word to me." Henrietta hugged Alice and kissed her cheek. "You take care of this girl," she said as she shook Herbert's hand.

"Yes, ma'am. I surely will do that."

CHAPTER THREE

Alice spit on Herbert's handkerchief and used it to scrub a spot on James' neck. "Ow!" he complained.

"You can't go to your grandma's house with a dirty neck," Alice said. "I don't know how you manage to get so filthy at church."

"Do we have to kiss them?" David asked.

"Of course you do." Alice brushed dust from the boy's overalls. "They're your grandparents."

David ducked his head. "They smell bad."

"That's because Grandma dips snuff and Grandpa chews tobacco," James said.

"Herbert, see to your sons," Alice insisted.

"Now, sweetheart, what James said is true. Myrt does dip, and the only time Charlie is without a plug is when he's smoking."

Alice ignored her husband's remark. "I expect you boys to show respect to your grandparents," she said. "That means hugging and kissing without making any faces. Otherwise, you'll be in trouble when I get you home. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am," James said.

"David?" Alice pinched the boy's ear.

"Ouch! Yes, ma'am," he said.

"That's better."

Herbert jumped down from the wagon seat and helped Alice alight. He lifted David from the wagon bed, while James scampered to the ground on his own.

Alice put her hands at her waist and leaned backward. The Smiths lived in the house they bought when they moved to town years ago. Four scrawny peach trees stood on the packed earth of the shallow front yard. Round metal fasteners were scattered across the exterior walls of the house to hold the black tarpaper

covering in place. Myrtle Smith threw open the front door and stepped outside. “There’s my babies!” she shouted. “Come here and give me some sugar.”

James raced into his grandmother’s open arms, while David ambled behind him. Myrtle kissed each child noisily. “You have two fine boys here,” she said.

“Thank you,” Alice replied. She stepped onto the stoop. Herbert stood on the landing, since no standing room remained on the porch.

“Come on in and rest your weary bones.”

Alice decided to break the news right away. “Mama, Herbert got a job sharecropping for old Mr. Sweeney.”

“Well, now.” Myrtle stepped back and opened the squeaky screen door. “What do you know about that?”

“Only thing is, we have to move down to Garza’s Crossing, where the farm is.” Alice moved inside the house. “Hello, Papa, Frances, Arnold.” While greetings were exchanged all around, she began to feel mildly nauseated from the smell of stale tobacco. She looked for a place to sit, but the four straight-back chairs were already occupied by her father, uncle, brother-in-law, and sister. The remaining living room furniture consisted of an iron stove and a double bed. Alice considered whether she should dare to sit on Frances’ bed without being invited to do so, and decided against it. She’d come to the Smiths’ house to accomplish two things—to say goodbye and to take home some chickens. She would not jeopardize the latter goal by starting an argument with her sister.

As soon as she could, Alice suggested taking the children out to the backyard. That left Herbert to visit with the grownups. She suspected Herb would dislike being confined to a room that reeked of tobacco, but she knew he would enjoy the conversation. She often said her husband would talk to a fence post if given half a chance.

Frances remained indoors while Alice and Myrtle went into the backyard with Alice’s boys and Frances’ three daughters.

“Mama, Joanie pinched me,” James complained.

Before Alice could respond, Myrtle snapped, “Don’t be a tattletale.”

"I'm hungry," David said.

"We'll eat after a while." Alice brushed David's hand away. "Now that we have a place to live, I could take care of my chickens, Mama."

Myrtle noisily drew in a breath. "I don't know as I can separate out them chickens you left here from those me and Frances raised."

"It really doesn't matter which is which, but I sure would like to have a couple of laying hens and a rooster," Alice persisted.

"A couple?" Myrtle glanced toward her back screen door.

"Four, maybe."

"Mama, can I go inside where Papa is?" David asked, tugging at Alice's dress.

"Yes. Go," she replied. Turning back to her mother, Alice said, "Herbert and I left two dozen chickens here when we lost the farm."

"Well, that was some time back. You've come over and helped us eat some of them since then." Myrtle pulled a small tin from her bosom and put a pinch of snuff inside her lip. "I been letting Frances have half of the egg money. She'll be powerfully mad if I let any of them chickens get away."

Alice waited until she was sure she could prevent anger from filtering into her voice. "Blame me. You can tell Frances I said I was taking them, but you never said it was all right. James, come here."

James came running. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Go get that stack of flour sacks from the wagon and bring them here, all of them. Don't go through the house," she said, as she turned her son by his shoulders. "Go around by the side yard. Hurry up, now."

Alice tossed a handful of feed to the ground as she went into the chicken coop. She picked up the hens as swiftly as possible to minimize their clucking. Holding the feet together, she thrust a flour sack over each hen's head. She swiftly pulled the bag over the feet and secured the opening with a length of rope she'd packed inside each sack earlier. Alice was glad she'd put the hens in the wagon before tackling the rooster. He resisted her

grasp noisily, grazing her wrist with one of his sharp claws. Alice winced but held on and managed to get the flour sack over the rooster's head. As she wrapped the sturdy rope around the mouth of the sack and the rooster's legs, Frances stepped onto the back porch. With hands on her hips, she asked, "What's got my chickens all riled up?"

"I'm taking some of them home," Alice announced. She returned Frances' glare. "They're all mine, but I'm only taking a few."

"Are you going to stand for that, Mama?" Frances demanded, still standing on the stoop.

"I reckon Herbert and Alice did give me them birds in the first place," Myrtle replied. She looked down and shifted her feet.

Frances whirled and flounced back inside the house. As she went in, little David brushed past her coming out. "Papa's smoking a cigarette!" he shouted as soon as he cleared the door.

"Tell him it's time to go home," Alice said. "Come on, James." She held the bound rooster at arm's length, both to avoid his talons and to keep from dripping blood on her Sunday dress. "Goodbye, Mama," she said to Myrtle. "I'll get back over here as much as I can. Maybe you can come and help me when the baby's born."

Myrtle's eyes still rested on the door through which Frances had disappeared. "We'll see."

Alice walked through the narrow strip of yard at the side of the house. "Goodbye Papa, Frances, Arnold, Uncle John," she said through the open window. "Let's go, Herbert. We got to get these boys something to eat."

Myrtle followed behind her daughter. "I figured you had dinner after church," she said.

Alice put the rooster in the wagon bed and found a rag for her bleeding wrist. "Now, Mama, when could we have had dinner? You know how longwinded Brother Reynolds is. Besides, you know good and well Herbert doesn't have the money to take us to a café."

Herbert ambled out the front door, carrying David in his arms. He held the door open, still conducting a conversation with

someone inside. "Herbert!" Alice said. "Come on. Let's go. Get in the wagon, James."

"I'm coming, dear," Herbert said without making a move. He was still talking when Alice went to the porch, took his arm, and practically dragged him away.

As the wagon rolled south, Alice passed out cold biscuits for dinner. "Were you smoking, Herbert?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said with a grin. "Charley offered to roll me a cigarette. So I took him up on it. I haven't had a smoke in nigh onto a year."

"Papa and Mama spend too much money on tobacco," Alice replied.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alice sat up, stretched, and yawned. Herbert was nowhere in sight. She guessed he was already working in the field. How like him to let her and the boys sleep late after getting to bed after midnight. Pulling on her shoes, she dug her house dress and apron from the pile of clothing. She retrieved her hair pins from the mantle, braided her waist-length hair, and wrapped the long braid into a bun. Then she began to survey her new dwelling.

The house was what some folks might call a shack. A rectangular structure with a wooden porch running its full length, the house rested on a foundation of piers set about eighteen inches off the ground. The interior was one long room, with a single door connecting to the front porch. A massive stone fireplace with a raised hearth sat directly across from the entrance, and each of the side walls held a window. Wooden shutters could be closed over the window openings in case of rain or cold, since there was no glass. Any paint the house ever had was long since worn away. The wooden walls, floor, and porch were a uniformly weather-beaten grayish-brown. Cracks between the wooden planks of the exterior walls were big enough to let in the breeze, sunlight, and insects. The only furniture was an iron bed frame pushed into a corner by the fireplace, opposite where Herbert placed their mattress on the floor last night.

Although the morning coolness hung in the air, Alice opened the shutters, both to catch a cross-draft and to let in additional light. There was no screen, but she pulled the front door wide open anyway. She stepped onto the porch, shaded by the overhanging tin roof. Alice gingerly kicked at the neatly stacked pile of kindling. When no varmints leapt out of the woodpile, she brought two sticks of wood inside. She thought briefly of the wood-burning cook stove left behind at her lost

farm, wondering if some other woman was using it to make breakfast this morning. With a sigh, Alice started a fire. Herbert frequently reminded her to give thanks in all circumstances. She considered it a great improvement to live in a house, any house, even this one. Plus she could now prepare meals in a fireplace rather than over a campfire outside a tent.

“Wake up, boys. You’ve slept long enough,” she said. James stirred and rubbed his eyes while David turned and pulled the sheet over his head. “Come on, up and at ’em.” She tugged on David’s foot until he roused. Then she took tin plates and dished up a serving of cornmeal mush for each of her sons. While the boys sat cross-legged on the floor and ate, Alice smoothed the quilt on the mattress her family shared. She and Herbert slept with their heads at one end. James and David crept under the covers at the foot, positioning themselves on either side of their father’s long legs. She told herself she should be thankful this crowded arrangement kept everyone’s feet warm.

Alice sent James to fetch wood from the porch and stack it by the fireplace. As she expected, Herbert soon came in from the field for breakfast. “I saw smoke from the fireplace,” he said. “So I figured you were stirring. Give me some sugar.” He kissed Alice and sat on the hearth. “This is pretty good land, rocky though. Lord willing, we’ll make real good crops this spring. A third of fifty acres would be mighty fine.” Thirds and fourths were common arrangements for sharecroppers—with two thirds of what the land produced and three fourths of the livestock going to the landlord.

“How many cows are there?” Alice asked.

“Four,” Herbert answered between bites of his corn meal mush. “Jerseys. I milked them before I started plowing this morning. Mr. Sweeney said the Williamsons had some regular dairy customers before they up and left town. Maybe I can get a route set up this afternoon, and start delivering milk tomorrow morning.”

Cows meant a continuous supply of milk for the family through the barren winter months. “There is a churn sitting by the side of the house,” Alice said. “I’ll get it cleaned up and make some butter.”

“Jersey milk is good and rich.” Herbert scraped the last of his breakfast from the plate and then licked it clean. He stood and beckoned to the children. “All right, boys. Come on with me now. I’m going to put you to work carrying rocks out of the field while I plow.”

After the children and Herbert went to the field, Alice drew water from the tank of the windmill in back of the house. She set some dried pinto beans to soak in her big iron cooking pot. Then she gave up trying to hold back her tears, letting them flow while she went to the barn to fetch cream for butter.

I should be grateful for this house, even if it is the ugliest place I’ve ever seen.

The double barn doors creaked noisily on their rusty hinges. As the sunlight invaded the dark corners, the relaxed housekeeping habits of the previous tenants became obvious. Although the farm had only four cows now, there were stalls for ten. One vacant stall contained a stack of old newspapers, while another was filled with a haphazard pile of lumber. As Alice surveyed the space, she saw rolled-up chicken wire, lengths of rope, and milk cans strewn here and there. She surmised Herbert must have started putting the barn in order, since the areas around the entrance and the active stalls were neat and clean.

Alice always found a barn a refuge, a peaceful place during the day while the dairy stock grazed in the pasture. The familiar scents took her back to her childhood on her family’s farm, before her father sold his land for enough money to buy a house and a barber shop in town. Her sisters disliked animals and teased Alice for her love of cows. Frances and Mary were particularly amused when she confessed she enjoyed the smell of the livestock. She took one last look around the quiet barn and returned to the house with the can of cream to be churned into butter.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Hello, I’m your neighbor, Victoria Breinig. We live down the road about a half a mile.” The tall, thin woman standing on Alice’s porch had dark hair and warm brown eyes. Her thick chestnut braids were pulled across her head from ear to ear, creating a tiara-like appearance. “I’m sorry I didn’t get over here sooner. I got busy, and time just slipped away.”

“Please come in.” Alice stood aside from the door. “I’m Alice Shoemaker, and I’m so pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise, I’m sure. Shoemaker,” Victoria repeated. “English name?”

“Yes. My husband’s grandparents came from Cornwall.” Alice was careful not to mention her own parents were of Irish descent, with a touch of Comanche blood on her father’s side. “Won’t you sit down?”

Too late, Alice remembered she had no chairs.

“I brought you a quart of peaches,” Victoria said. “My daughter and I did a lot of canning this summer.” Her brown eyes darted here and there. Finally she took a seat on the raised hearth and removed her bonnet. Alice sat on the opposite end of the fireplace, carefully placing the quart jar of peaches beside her. She wished she had some coffee to offer her guest.

“I didn’t think old Mr. Sweeney would ever sell this farm,” Mrs. Breinig said.

Alice felt her face warming. “Herbert—my husband—is sharecropping for Mr. Sweeney. Would you like a glass of buttermilk, Mrs. Breinig?”

“Please call me Victoria. We are neighbors, after all. I don’t believe I’d care for anything to drink, thank you. Do you have children?”

“We do,” Alice replied. She could not keep herself from smiling at the thought of her little boys. “We have two sons.

James is five, and David is three, almost four. Now, as you can see, I'm in the family way again. What about you?"

"Willard and I have six children. My daughter, Catherine, is seventeen. The younger boys are eight and up, all two years apart—George, Ellwood, Martin, and William. They help Will run the farm. Our oldest son, Willard Junior, is married and lives in Garza's Crossing. He has a good job working for the railroad. I keep hoping he and his wife will make me a grandmother. When do you expect your little bundle from Heaven?" Victoria asked.

"Mid-January, nearest I can reckon." Alice smiled again.

"Are you hoping for a little girl this time?"

Alice longed for a daughter, but she didn't want to say so. It might seem as if she would be unappreciative if God blessed her with another son. "Oh, as long as I have a healthy baby, I'll be pleased," she replied.

"Every baby is a joy," Victoria said, absently brushing cinders from the hearth with one hand. "I wouldn't take anything for my kids. Do you have family near here?"

Alice tucked a wisp of escaping hair behind her ear. "Herbert's mother and father passed away before we married. My folks live in Von Ormy. We used to live near enough to visit them at least once a month, but I guess I won't see them that often now." The story would get out anyway, Alice thought. *I may as well be the one to tell it.* "We lost the farm Herbert's father left him. I was beginning to worry he would never find work again. We appreciate Mr. Sweeney giving my husband the chance to sharecrop here."

"Times are hard." Victoria pursed her lips and nodded. "We barely made ends meet the last few years. I pray we can hold onto our land, but..." Her voice faded away. The woman shook her head as if to clear her thoughts. "We planned for all of our sons to finish high school and maybe even go to college. But there's so much work to be done, and we can't afford hired hands anymore. Martin and William have already quit going to school, and I don't know if the little boys will be able to go back in the fall." Victoria covered her face with her hands and began to sob.

“Don’t cry,” Alice said. She moved next to Victoria and put her arm around the older woman’s shoulders.

“I’m sorry.” Victoria pulled a lace-trimmed handkerchief from inside her cuff and wiped her tears. “I came to say hello and now I’m making a fool of myself.”

Alice fought to keep herself from crying along with her neighbor. “It’s all right.” She squeezed Victoria’s shoulders in a half-hug. “I understand. We don’t mind scrimping, but we don’t want our children to do without.”

“We were doing so well until this crash thing happened,” Victoria said with a trembling voice. “A couple of years ago, county agents came out and shot our cattle. They said the government decided there was too much livestock, and that’s why the economy was in such bad shape.”

“How awful,” Alice said. “You know, when I feel sad, Herbert reminds me that we are supposed to give thanks in all things. That’s somewhere in the Bible, but I don’t remember exactly where. Herbert knows a lot about the Bible.” She took her arm from Victoria’s shoulder. “I try really hard, but I haven’t felt thankful in a long time. If God really cares about us, I don’t see how He could let the bank take away our farm.”

Victoria turned to look directly into Alice’s face. After a moment, she said, “I thought maybe I was the only one who felt that way. I can’t even find the words to pray anymore. I don’t know what to say.” She sat up straight. “You must never tell anyone I said that. Willard would be so embarrassed to find my faith is faltering.”

“It’s our secret,” Alice replied.

“I’ve got to get back and make sure Catherine has dinner ready on time.” She wiped her eyes again. “Here I am feeling sorry for myself when you’ve lost your land. I’m so ashamed. Please forgive me.”

“Nothing to forgive.” Alice patted her new friend’s hand. “Promise you’ll come and visit me as often as you can. I know I’ll get lonesome so far from my kinfolks.”

“I will do that.” Victoria put on her sun bonnet and tied it tightly under her chin. “If you ever need anything, let me know.”

“Thank you,” Alice said. “I will.”

CHAPTER SIX

“Look what I have,” Herbert announced. Alice looked up to see her husband carrying ladder-back chairs into the house. “I guess the people who moved out didn’t want to take these with them. They were piled up beyond the fence out yonder in the pasture.”

There was a time when Alice wouldn’t have permitted such battered furniture in her house. She inspected the chairs one by one. “The frames are sturdy. Maybe I can fix up something to cover these holes,” she said, sticking her hand through a sizeable opening in a chair’s original cane bottom.

In the next few days, Herbert built a rough eating table from the cedar posts that once supported their tent. Alice fastened ropes across the chair bottoms and then covered the seats with thick, hand-quilted cushions. She inspected the iron bedstead the previous tenants left behind. It certainly seemed to be serviceable. Taking a handsaw to boards she’d found in the barn, she cut wooden slats to support her mattress. The sawed ends of the slats were somewhat rough, but Alice decided that wouldn’t matter because they wouldn’t be exposed. The sawing took some effort, but she didn’t want to ask Herbert to perform work she could get done by herself. Her husband already had enough to do, managing the farm work without hired hands.

After Saturday night supper, Herbert brought the big, round tin washtub into the house and poured water in it to a depth of three or four inches. Alice heated water in pots in the fireplace, adding hot water to the tub to remove the chill from the family’s weekly bath. Herbert took the boys outside while Alice had the first bath. She enjoyed the warmth of the water, soaking until she began to feel guilty. She stepped out of the tub and dried her body. After hastily slipping on her long-sleeved flannel nightgown, she opened the door and called out, “Your turn,