



Inspirational
Western Historical

JANIS JAKES

A Rose in
Winter

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Dedication

To my friend and co-laborer, Jimmie.
Thank you for all you do to bring characters to life.

A NEW HEART ALSO WILL I GIVE YOU, AND A
NEW SPIRIT WILL I PUT WITHIN YOU: AND I
WILL TAKE AWAY THE STONY HEART OUT OF
YOUR FLESH, AND I WILL GIVE YOU AN HEART
OF FLESH. (EZEKIEL 36:26)

1

The basket in Lucy's hand grew heavy as she stood in the cold air outside the home of Elton and Rebecca McElroy.

"Lucy never did have a lick of sense," Elton said from beyond the cabin's threshold. "Tell her to close the blasted door before she freezes us alive."

She bristled. Elton had been an ornery little boy, and he was even more so as an adult. Why on earth Rebecca had married him baffled Lucy.

His petite wife paid him no mind, ushering Lucy inside with a wave of her hand. "You shouldn't have come in the dark. Not with this weather."

"I'm surprised Matthew didn't put up a fuss." Elton shook his head. "With all the trouble brewing—"

Lucy cringed. If she heard one more word about *the trouble* she might just scream. The only trouble she'd seen so far came from men who wanted to shoot first and ask questions later.

“Please don’t start that again.” Rebecca frowned. “You’ll scare the girls.”

Lucy removed her mantle, draping it on the hook by the door. Melting snowflakes dotted the wool with remnants of white dusting her boots. She was glad to see the color had returned to Rebecca’s cheeks. “Good to see you out of bed.”

Rebecca lay her hand across her belly. “This baby is taking all there is of me.” A smile lifted the edges of her lips as she glanced at the basket. “I can’t tell you how much this means.”

Despite Elton’s presence, Lucy found the cabin’s atmosphere welcoming. The red-orange fire crackled in the hearth, its flames flickering in a playful dance. The dull smell of candle wax lingered about in a faint haze. The three-year-old twin girls played on the rug in front of a single rocking chair—stacking cups and giggling when their makeshift boulders fell over.

Lucy unwrapped the basket and set it on the table, pulling out a core of cheese, several hearty slices of cured ham, and an apple pie—courtesy of her own hands. The scent of cinnamon and baked apples burst into the room.

Rebecca inhaled. “Now that smells heavenly.” She began pulling plates from the cupboard, looking over her shoulder. “I’ve been craving apple pie something fierce. How’d you know?”

“What’s the matter, Lucy?” Elton rose from the chair and stood to his full height. He was a tall man with a wide chest and a solidness about him gained from pushing a plow, chopping wood, and swinging a

hammer. "Think I don't know how to care for my own family? Think I'd let us all starve?"

Lucy steeled her shoulders. Did every encounter with Elton have to go this way? "Of course you can take care of your family." She didn't flinch. "I wanted to do something kind for a friend. That's all."

"A thank you would be nice, Elton." Rebecca's gaze toward her husband was filled with annoyance.

He grumbled something that didn't sound close to thank you and then turned to stoke the fire.

Twin girls toddled over, both with shiny noses, red cheeks, and natural waves framing delicate features. They struggled to pull themselves up into chairs.

Lucy's heart warmed at the joy she saw upon such precious faces. Any irritation she felt toward Elton faded into a bittersweet longing. Oh, how she hungered for children of her own! The familiar pain burrowed itself into her bosom—a thorn within an open wound.

"Would you like to join us?" Rebecca's words snapped Lucy back to the moment at hand.

"No, thank you," she said. "Matthew wasn't well when I left. I need to get back."

"I pray he's not coming down with the flu," Rebecca said. "The Junipers are already bedridden."

Elton crossed the room in slow steps, reached above the door, and pulled one of his rifles off the gun rack. "I'll walk you home."

Lucy's brow dipped in a frown. "No, really, that's not necessary."

"I ain't letting Matthew Shaw's wife walk home alone in the dark," he said. "What type of neighbor would that make me?"

"I walked myself here without any problem," Lucy replied, feeling flustered. "There's no need for an escort."

Elton pecked his wife on the cheek and turned back to Lucy. "What are you waitin' on? Let's go."

Rebecca leaned over, whispering into Lucy's ear. "He's trying to be a gentleman. Best he knows how. Let him."

With a steady but agile gait, Elton led the way through the darkness. His feet crunched into the snow, and his large frame broke frozen tree twigs like a bull snapping sticks of hay. He didn't seem to consider that she walked several steps behind him and had to scurry across slippery ground to keep up with his long-legged strides.

He muttered a few words to himself along the way but said nothing to her as they cut a path through the snowy veil. They made their way across the icy wooden bridge leading to the valley where she and Matthew had claimed their homestead.

They'd topped the incline with her cabin in sight when he stopped, letting her catch up. The snow was coming down hard now—pelting them both with white flakes.

"Thank you, Elton," she said, catching her breath. "I'll be sure and tell Matthew—"

"I'm not done. I said I'd walk you home, and I intend to do just that."

“You should head back. Your wife could go into labor any second.”

Perhaps that was stretching it a bit but it was not an impossibility. Rebecca was overdue. She’d birthed the twins with a fair amount of trouble, and there was no reason to think this babe would be any different. For her sake, he needed to remain nearby.

Elton started down the incline toward their cabin, ignoring her protests. Lucy resisted the urge to kick him in the back of the knees and send him rolling down the hill. She’d never met a more stubborn man.

Why Matthew liked him so much, she wasn’t sure. Said he was a man of his word and of noble character, but all she ever saw was a grumpy grizzly who refused even a morsel of kindness.

A loud whistle burst through Elton’s lips as they approached the cabin. He slowed his steps as if waiting for Matthew to come outside. Lucy drew up next to Elton. She was surprised her husband did not appear.

The faint glow from the hearth’s fire shone within the cabin, and smoke rolled in hazy wisps from the chimney. A white blanket of snow lay draped about the ground and the rooftop. By morning, several inches would accumulate. Already it looked pristine and peaceful.

After a few more steps and another whistle, Elton glanced her way with a frown. “Resting, you say?”

“Yes. He was tired. That’s the reason I came without him.”

He nodded as they approached the steps. Lucy walked up first, but Elton brushed past her and opened

the door before she could go inside. He froze in the doorway, preventing her from entering her own house.

She stared up in confusion at his solid shoulders. "Elton McElroy, what in the world—"

"Lucy..." he began, his voice fading into a whisper. "Wait outside."

Her insides twisted about in an angry, fearful knot. "Wait outside for what?"

"Matthew—he's gone."

2

“Gone?” His words stunned her. Where would he go? “Matthew wouldn’t venture out in this weather.”

“I mean, he’s no longer with us.” A faint sigh lifted then dropped his shoulders. “I’m sorry, Lucy.” His voice had taken on a tender tone contrary to his usual demeanor. “Matthew has passed away.”

Lucy shoved past Elton, now angry at his nonsense. Her stare locked on Matthew and her heart slammed into her chest. He sat in a chair with his head thrown back—his lips blue, eyes opened wide, and mouth agape.

Her hand rose to her lips to stifle a scream as her mind scrambled to catch up with reality. She ran to her husband’s side, falling upon her knees with quaking limbs. The rapid thump of blood coursed through her temples. Tumultuous thoughts tried to make sense of something that made no sense at all. She’d left him resting in a rocker and now —

No! *It couldn’t be.*

She shook Matthew’s shoulder, determined to wake him. “Matthew!”

He remained stiff. Cold. Gone.

Lucy shook him harder. “Matthew Shaw! Wake up this second!”

Every ounce of common sense told her Matthew wasn't coming back, but her soul refused to accept what her mind already knew. Her heart clung to the belief that if she waited a few more seconds, her husband would take a breath and—

"It was his heart," Elton said in a flat tone. "He made me promise not to tell."

"That's a lie," Lucy said, standing up and walking toward Elton with fists clenched at her side. Tears poured down her cheeks. "Matthew was not sick a day of his life. He was strong, hard-working, and a fine husband. He's resting, I tell you!"

Elton looked away with such sorrow, the truth of his words struck her like stones.

Oh, how she wished she'd known how near death loomed! Each day would have been a treasure. Each moment would have been precious.

Matthew could have worn his muddy boots into the cabin every single day. He could have spilled flour on the floor a hundred times over. He could have hung his dirty clothes over the bedpost from morning until night. He could have...

She lifted her chin, speaking words from an empty well. "His heart?"

Elton's shoulders sunk as his head bobbed.

She pushed away the tears with the sweep of her hand. "Why didn't he tell me?"

"He didn't want to worry you. That's all he ever said." He turned a damp gaze toward her. "He knew the time was near."

She lowered her gaze. The cabin floor at her feet

lay wet from her tears. Somehow, she felt cheated. Matthew should have told her. They were best friends and lovers. Yet, he'd kept this one thing—the most important thing—from her.

Instead, he'd shared the truth about his health with a neighbor. And, not just any neighbor. He'd shared it with a neighbor she could barely tolerate.

"Leave me be, Elton," she said, her chin quivering but heart resolute. "I need to be alone with my husband."

"Lucy—"

She could feel the hardness within her stare—one that dared him to stay. "I need to tell him I love him and—" She wiped her cheek once again. "Much more." When he stood still, she spoke between gritted teeth. "Please..."

He nodded and turned his back, walking out the door without another word.

What will I do now, Lord? And, why didn't You warn me? I didn't get to say good-bye. You could have prepared my heart. You could have done something to soften the blow. Instead, I find him like this! Why, Lord? Why?

She knew there were no answers—at least none that made sense. He was too young. She was too young. They had too many years ahead of them. This could not be their end.

Except it was, and Lucy had never felt more lost and alone.

~*~

Lucy stood beside Bea Sloan, another friend and good neighbor to Rebecca. They'd been here for too long, too long for Rebecca to labor with bringing her child into the world.

"Push!" Midwife Murphy was the best in three counties—a robust woman with rosy cheeks, black hair sprinkled with silver, matronly hips, and the disposition of an old mother hen. She knew her business and challenged anyone who said otherwise. Even old Doc Martindale seemed to respect her and give her space to do her job.

Elton had enlisted the midwife's help when Rebecca first started with labor pains. He'd said he intended on having a son this time, and his wife needed help bringing such a big boy into the world.

"Come on now, Rebecca," the midwife's voice boomed. "You're acting as if you've never done this before. You gotta push."

"Look at her," Lucy said, fear nestling into her bosom. She sat on the bed opposite Midwife Murphy, and stared down into Rebecca's worn features. "She's weak and pale as a bird born before its time."

For almost two days, Rebecca had pushed, groaned, and fought the pain. Now, she looked like a woman who'd given up.

"I already tried to turn the babe," Midwife Murphy said. "I'm not strong enough."

"There's gotta be something we can do," Bea said. Elton had recruited her to help, too. She was plain as the day was long and thin as a rail but stronger than she looked and kinder than most. "We can't just let

her—”

Lucy frowned, and sent Bea an expression meant to stop her in mid-sentence.

Two weeks had passed since she'd laid Matthew to rest, and her heart lay in shreds. Yet here she was—thanks to Elton. He'd rode up on his horse and demanded she come. Since he'd agreed to help with her fields, it didn't seem proper to refuse him. And she loved Rebecca. If she could help, even in her grief, she would.

“Elton needs to get Doc Martindale,” Lucy said, knowing Midwife Murphy might not like hearing her thoughts but too worried to keep them to herself. She reached over, laying a cool rag across Rebecca's forehead.

The room had a strange odor to it—a mixture of fresh sweat and candle wax from the night before. In the other room, she could hear the twins cry while Elton tried to console them.

“She's not got much fight left,” Lucy said.

Midwife Murphy hesitated, nodded once, and then rose from Rebecca's side. She walked outside the door, saying hushed words to Elton before returning. “He's leaving now.”

“I don't think he's gonna make it back in time,” Bea said.

“Don't talk like that,” Lucy whispered in urgency. “She'll be fine. Let her rest, and when the doctor gets here—”

A frail hand fell across Lucy's own. She looked into Rebecca's face, surprised to see her eyes open.

“Take care of my babies.”

“What?” Lucy shook her head in confusion.

“When I’m gone,” Rebecca said. “Take care of my babies.”

“You’ll take care of your own babies,” Lucy said in an adamant tone. “Hold on until the doctor comes.”

“I don’t think my baby’s alive,” Rebecca said, choking back a sob. “He’s too still.”

“Maybe he’s tired, too,” Lucy said.

“He? Everyone’s already decided we’re having a boy,” Midwife Murphy said. “I’ve delivered some mighty big girls, too. Just you wait, and we’ll all see together. Who knows—maybe you’re having another set of twins. Boys this time...”

Rebecca closed her eyelids and seemed to rest. Lucy reached up with her hand, wiping the tears from her friend’s ashen face with a gentle touch. When Rebecca’s breathing softened into shallow snores, Lucy left to check on the twins.

The girls sat at the table, both holding blankets in their laps. A mixture of confusion and fear rested upon small faces. The sight hurt Lucy’s heart. She knew it would hurt Rebecca’s heart, too, if she could see their vulnerable state. Lucy glanced from one small face to the other, offering an encouraging smile. “Are you hungry?”

Faith stared.

Grace frowned.

She rolled up her sleeves. “How about oats with blueberries?” They both nodded, and she made quick work of it, not ceasing to pray for their mother.

In the other room, she could hear singing, knowing the ladies were trying to comfort Rebecca. Lucy fought back the tears. She could not let the girls see her cry.

Lord, please don't let Rebecca die. Her girls need her. Her husband needs her. And, Lord, I need her. Bring Elton back quick and the doctor with him.

The late afternoon sun rested high in the winter sky when Doc Martindale walked in the door with Elton behind him. He held a black satchel and a stern expression. Without saying a word, Lucy followed him into the bedroom, closing the door behind her. Doc Martindale gave Midwife Murphy a nod of recognition and then pulled smelling salts out of his bag.

He waved the salts under Rebecca's nose, watching without emotion as she sprang to life. "All right now, let's have us a baby."

The doctor reached under the covers, groaning as he tried to shift the child's position. "This one's gonna be strong." He groaned again and sweat popped out upon his brow as he tried to move the baby. His gaze darted about the room, and a look of nervousness appeared where confidence had reigned seconds before. "One more time. Bear with me."

"I can't," Rebecca cried. "It hurts."

Doc Martindale ignored her, using his hands to attempt to reposition the baby.

Bea covered her face with her palms.

Lucy bowed her head in silent prayer.

Midwife Murphy reached out, taking Rebecca's hand and letting her squeeze with what little strength

she had left as she cried out in pain.

"Got him!" Doc Martindale announced with a sudden rush of joy.

Rebecca's back arched, she wailed, and then pushed, lifting herself upward. The midwife and Bea helped keep her steady as she gave one solid thrust.

A loud cry announced the birth of a baby boy—pink, healthy, and demanding.

"Thank You, Lord," Lucy said, looking toward the heavens and wiping away tears of joy.

Rebecca smiled, taking the baby and pulling him against her breast even as the doctor and midwife began to clean, snip, and congratulate one another.

Lucy walked out the door, looking upon Elton's face. He was almost as pale as his wife. "Samuel has arrived. Healthy, loud, and strong as an ox. Your wife is doing well."

His shoulders lowered, and for a moment, he looked as if he might crumble to the ground. It was a sight she never thought she'd see. Elton McElroy almost fainting, right there in front of a woman. She began to laugh, not caring one bit that he didn't appear to notice.

3

"I'm moving to South Carolina and will live with my aunt," Lucy said, sipping coffee with Rebecca at the table. She held Samuel so Rebecca could relax. The girls played near their feet with corncob dolls wearing gingham aprons. "Her arthritis is bothering her more these days, and she needs help. She can afford a caregiver but said she'd prefer to pay a family member."

"You're moving?" Rebecca's features twisted. "Away?"

"It's too painful seeing Matthew in every corner of the cabin. I'm worried if I stay, I'll die of a broken heart."

"Oh, Lucy..." Rebecca reached out, laying her hand upon Lucy's own. "South Carolina is so far from Arkansas. I'll never get to see you." Then, without taking a breath, "It must be lonely all by yourself in the cabin. But in time—"

"I know," Lucy interrupted. "Time is the great healer, or so they say. But it's not just that. There's so much work to do, and I can't do everything."

Rebecca's eyes glistened from barely contained tears. "Elton can help. He doesn't mind."

He'd already helped more than she wanted, no