

## Chapter 1

### The Day the Sun Stopped Shining

It was one of those days in early spring when everything is so breathtakingly beautiful, it would seem that nothing could go wrong. The gossamer tint of the sunrise was just wafting across the sky; a meadowlark gracefully soared into the air, cascading a musical scale skyward. My spirit lifted up, up with each lilting note.

My heart swelled with peace and happiness as I watched Tom, my husband, walk briskly across the alfalfa field to join Eric Johnson at the logging site.

Tom had big dreams of making extra money logging the majestic pines that grew straight and tall on forty acres of our section of land.

“We can pay off the mortgage, maybe even build a bedroom for Aaron,” he had said when offered a price too good to refuse for the timber.

I picked a fading blossom from the soft blanket of yellow roses that tumbled over the back fence. We could certainly use that other bedroom. Aaron had outgrown the goldfish, frogs, and all the other things a seven-year-old brother like Darcy collected.

I was still picking off the faded roses when I saw Eric Johnson’s truck bouncing up our lane. Eric was our friend and closest neighbor. I could tell there was something wrong by the way he was driving up the rutted road in total disregard of the many rocks and chuckholes. He didn’t slow down until he brought the truck to a quivering stop beside the fence.

“Tom has been hurt!” he said as he jumped from the truck.

I stood frozen, mute with fear. Eric took my arm firmly, his face white and stern. “You can’t fall apart, Kate; Tom needs you. We have to go to the hospital.”

“Hospital!” I gasped.

Eric nodded. “Doctor Coltin couldn’t do much for Tom at his office.”

Aaron stepped out on the porch, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He saw Eric and heard the fear in my voice.

“Where’s Dad?” he asked, leaping down the steps.

“Your father is in the hospital,” Eric said. “There was an accident in the woods.”

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I found my voice: “Aaron, you and Wanda will have to do the chores and look after Darcy. Eric is taking me to the hospital.” I hugged Aaron to me for a moment; I could feel the fear in his tense young body.

“Dad will be all right, won’t he?” His eyes pleaded with me for assurance.

“We will leave it in God’s hands,” I said, giving him another hug and hurrying to the truck.

I could hardly believe my eyes as I stood beside Tom’s bed in the hospital. This wasn’t the man who earlier that morning had been so filled with life and health. His face resembled gray paper, and his dark eyes were rolled back until they were colorless.

In a daze I signed the necessary papers and watched as Tom was wheeled into surgery. After the big swinging doors closed behind him, Eric led me back to the small waiting room. “I wish my mother were here,” I said.

“I could go and get her, but I don’t want to leave you here alone,” Eric said thoughtfully.

“I’ll be all right,” I promised.

Assured that I would be fine, Eric went after Mother.

I picked up a magazine and, finding a quiet spot by the window, sat down to read. Two hours passed, and the magazine lay on my lap with the same picture on the front page still staring up at me. I turned to put the magazine back and saw the dear face that had always been there for me in times of need. My mother’s arms stretched out to me, and I ran into them. She was holding me in her warm embrace when the doctor, still in surgical gown and cap, came to tell me that Tom had died in surgery.

My mind raced with silent questions to God as Eric drove us home. I saw the children at the door and wondered how I could ever tell them their father was gone. As I stepped up on the porch, Darcy flung his arms around my waist. I saw Mother look over at Aaron, who was holding onto the door like he might fall if he took his hand away.

“You and Wanda take Darcy upstairs,” Mother told Aaron.

“We’ll be up in a minute to talk to you.”

Aaron scooped Darcy up in his arms, and Wanda followed, their slumped forms a study in grief.

“Oh, Mother,” I sobbed, “how can I ever tell them?”

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She patted and rubbed my heaving shoulders. "There won't be much more to tell," she said softly. "They've read all the answers in our faces."

I slumped down in the nearest chair and buried my face in my hands. "What am I going to do now?"

Eric, who had been twisting his hat in his suntanned hands and looking miserable, came over and put his arm around my shoulders. "I will come over and do any chore you or the children can't manage."

"You know I'll stay until you decide what you want to do about the farm," Mother said softly.

I went through the ordeal of the funeral like one in a trance. I was only too willing to let others take care of the arrangements that had to be made. It was my dear mother and Eric who stood by my side and handled everything for me. Eric took over all the farm work that the children and I couldn't handle. Friends and neighbors came to offer condolences and help. The weeks passed quickly.

Every morning, Wanda and Aaron caught the school bus at the end of the lane to go to the high school in town. Darcy was still attending the rural school about a mile from the farm. Tom used to take him to school on his way to work, but now Darcy was walking. When I worried about him, Mother insisted, "It's nice weather, and the walk won't hurt him. In bad weather I can take him in the car."

Darcy didn't seem to mind the walk through the woods to the schoolhouse. There was only one problem. No matter how early I started Darcy out for school, he always managed to be late.

One morning I wiped the steam-covered windowpane and watched as he scuffed across the yard, swinging his lunch pail. Surely, I worried, he would be on time this morning. Normally, a brisk walk would take anyone to the school house in twenty minutes. The hour I was giving him this morning should be more than enough.

My thoughts were still with him as I returned to bouncing the wooden dasher in the old crockery churn. Of course, Darcy was only seven, yet it wasn't too soon to think about molding his character. He was a good little fellow, but he had such a lackadaisical air about him. Start him on a chore, and it wasn't long before he would be involved with something else, completely forgetful of his first task.

It is sobering to realize that you will have to raise children alone. Their father had been such a hardworking man. "Salt of the earth," the neighbors had said, after he was gone. I was proud to hear my

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neighbors refer to my husband in that fashion, but what, I wondered, would Darcy's reputation be?

Late to school... late to school... late to school the dasher in the old churn seemed to say. I thought of the note that Lester Clark, the schoolteacher, had sent home the previous evening with Darcy.

"It's important for students to arrive on time, Mrs. Gills," he had written. "Darcy has been tardy every day this week."

On sudden impulse, I removed my apron and ran across the yard, scattering lazy hens in my haste. Late every single day this week! Why, it was actually a disgrace! I would see to it that he got to school on time today. The shortcut to the country road went through the woods, and I walked carefully over the narrow, pine-needle-covered trail. I was mildly surprised at the mellow wood scent I'd forgotten in the past busy weeks.

I saw Darcy beside the creek, battered lunch pail at one side, wholly absorbed with something in the water. Exasperation rose in me. That explained why he was always late!

A footfall betrayed me, and he turned his round, snub-nosed face forward me. The shock of rust-brown hair was in his eyes again. He was an odd little miniature of his father.

"Ssh!" he said. "Look!"

There was movement in the underbrush across the creek, and a muskrat swam out to eye us curiously.

"Ho, you," Darcy called. "What'cha catch this morning?"

The small animal turned and leisurely coasted back to its hiding place on the opposite bank.

"I see him every day," Darcy explained, as if that ended the matter. "Sometimes I toss pebbles and he swims over and it's sort'a like a game..." The glance he gave me was not entirely approving. "He's scared of you, though. I guess he doesn't like grown-ups."

"Doesn't he, though! Well, I think we'd better pick up our lunch pail, Darcy Gills, and get along to school!"

"Oh, school, well - s'long, Mom."

"I'll just go along a stretch, Young Man." The lecture I had planned didn't materialize. He looked so small and vulnerable.

He trudged along beside me, up and along the pine scented path. It was pleasant in the woods, I was forced to admit, scarcely aware that I was walking more slowly.

Suddenly, I realized that my son was not beside me.

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“Darcy! Darcy Gills!” I shouted. I walked back down the path and saw him squatting, his head low over the trail. I went over to see what he was watching with such intense interest. A few shiny black ants traveled up and down imperceptible highways, meeting, touching, and hurrying on again.

Darcy opened his lunch pail, crumbled a part of a sandwich for the ants, and absentmindedly munched the remainder.

“Got something else to show you, Mom,” he said after a while. He went ahead of me to a clearing where a fallen pine had started its slow process of decay.

“Over here in these bushes, Mom!”

I caught my breath at the sight of the web, glistening in the morning sunlight, patterned with perfect delicacy.

“Now watch, Mom!” He tossed a rolled-up leaf into the web so that it hung, trembling slightly, on the silvery tracing.

I hardly breathed as I watched; a brown spider danced as though on a tightrope.

“He likes flies.” Darcy’s hand flashed in the air near the log. He brought it close to the web and released the insect.

“The spider eats flies, and frogs eat spiders, and snakes eat frogs,” he explained soberly. “That’s nat’chrul history, Mom.”

“Yes,” I said. “I suppose it is.”

Tom came into my thoughts, and I recalled a summer day spent with him on a wooded hillside. I remembered the way his curly hair fell unheeded over one brown eye and his deep, thoughtful voice as he drew a small rectangle into the leaf-rich loam.

“If every man could have one acre of the Lord’s good earth, there might be hope for peace in all the world.”

There came the distant tolling of a bell.

Darcy gave a small cry. “Oh, Mom, the school bell!”

“Hurry,” I cried, shoving the lunch pail at him. “Oh, Darling, run. You’re going to be late again!”

I watched the small puffs of dust as his feet scampered to the country road and raced around the turn.

I walked slowly back and sat on the log. The spider was gone. The web was as it had been - silvery with dew.

“If every man owned a single acre of the Lord’s good earth - ” Dear God, I thought, let Darcy grow up to be just the same.

When Darcy returned from school that evening, Gram asked, “Did you make it to school on time today?”

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“Barely,” Darcy said, flashing me an elfish grin.

Gram led him to the old blackboard that hung over the kitchen counter. It was used for keeping records of the coming events around the farm.

The entry “Silly Bidy - Sept. 10,” indicated that the bantam hen’s eggs would hatch the tenth of September. Now, Gram wrote Darcy’s name on the board. Then, taking a new piece of chalk from her apron pocket, she drew a star at the end of his name. She gave him a hug and said, “We will add a star for each day you are not tardy. The first week you get all stars, we will do something to celebrate.”

“What’ll we do?” Darcy asked, his eyes sparkling.

“Oh, I’ll think of something you’ll like,” Gram said. “Maybe I’ll take you to the sale barn with me some Thursday evening.”

“Can I buy something?” Darcy asked.

“Maybe,” Gram replied.

Other stars were added to the blackboard that fall - stars for hated chores done without complaining or a high mark on a report card - while I drifted and pondered how I was going to handle my own problems. I knew I had to decide whether to keep or to sell the farm. Still, day after day, I procrastinated.