

Dawn of Day

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PART ONE

***Henrietta's Story:
Bibles, Rifles
and a Painting***



CHAPTER 1

***The Story of the
Old Stone Church***

Wabaunsee, Kansas, August 26, 1932

“You best git yourself back here,” I hollered, “and ride beside me like Mama said!”

Irma Jean rounded the corner by the Old Stone Church, pulled hard on the reins and brought Trixie to a halt. She grinned and waved in my direction then stuck out her tongue. She slipped off her pony’s bare back and tossed the bridle reins over the hitching post.

“Come *on*, slowpoke,” she sang at me as I pulled up beside Trixie.

My little sister is six years old and hates it when Mama asks me to watch her, but our parents won’t let her go riding alone.

Irma Jean skipped across the churchyard, her short blonde hair bouncing in time with her dancing cowboy boots. I dismounted, tied up my horse, and brushed the dust from my dungarees. Mama had pulled my own mop of sandy hair firmly back in a stubby pony tail, but I tucked a few

strays behind my ears. I followed Irma Jean over to the big locust tree where our neighbor sat in front of her easel.

“Hi, Maude!” Irma Jean greeted her. “Whatcha paintin’?”

“Well, good morning, Irma Jean, Henrietta.” Maude reached over and gave us each a quick hug. She removed her wire-rimmed glasses and wiped the lenses on the hem of her flowered dress. After replacing them on her face, she patted her silver curls and adjusted her paint-spattered smock. “I’m painting a picture of the church for Old Settler’s Day on Sunday. What do you think?”

“Mmm, that’s nice.” Irma Jean’s blue eyes slipped across the canvas and landed on Maude’s face. “But you know that picture you painted for us, Maude, the one of Grandma and Grandpa’s ol’ stone house? Well, Daddy hung it over our fireplace and it sure looks good. You even put my climbin’ tree in it!”

She plopped on the ground and pulled off her boots. Irma Jean went barefoot whenever she could get away with it.

“Irma Jean,” I scolded, “you should call her Miss Mitchell.” She turned to me and her face scrunched up, which meant “you’re not my mother.” “Don’t give me that look,” I told her firmly. “I’m almost

thirteen and it is the older sisters' job to teach you some manners when Mama's not around. When I was your age, Myra taught me things like that. Only I was much easier to teach than you are."

A smile spread across Maude's face. "That's all right, Henrietta. I don't mind you girls calling me Maude." She turned back to my sister. "I'm glad you liked the painting, Irma Jean. I hope to display it in my art show next month if your parents will let me borrow it for a while."

Irma Jean stretched her skinny neck forward and squinted at the painting. She twisted around to look at Maude's horse and wagon, then pointed her finger and said, "Hey, Maude, isn't that your horse, right there?" Thankfully, she pulled her finger back just before it made contact with the fresh paint.

"It certainly is," Maude answered. "You're very observant, young lady." Maude also pointed at a spot on the painting. "And that wagon is the very same one my daddy used when he transported runaway slaves."

"Runaway slaves?" Irma Jean's face scrunched up again. "What's a bunch of slaves got to do with your wagon?"

We heard the front door of the church open and our Aunt Jo appeared. She was

pretty tall anyway, but her rigid posture made her seem even taller. There was a good breeze but the starched ash gray dress she wore barely moved as she marched toward us. Her hair matched the color of her dress and was held in place by a nearly invisible hair net. She walked straight and sharp, her shiny black shoes clickity-clacking over the stone path. She pushed her black metal rimmed glasses back up on her nose with a bony finger. Irma Jean raised her chin and cocked her head to one side, giving our aunt her most courageous big girl stare. As usual, Aunt Jo ignored her.

“Are you about done, Maude?” she asked. “Mel wants to take our photograph with the Sharps rifles and the Bible for the photo display.”

I sniffed and thought I was going to sneeze. Even Maude’s oil paints couldn’t overpower the scent of Aunt Jo’s stale rose perfume. I pinched my nose, willing the sensation to pass. I’d found it was usually best to avoid Aunt Jo’s notice, but I needn’t have worried since she ignored me, too. Even though we are blood relatives, Aunt Jo usually never talks to anyone in the family—even Daddy, her own brother. We hardly ever saw her, and that was fine with us girls,

because whenever we did, she always acted mad at us even when we hadn't done anything wrong.

"I could definitely use a break," Maude said, standing up and stretching. "Duty calls, girls," Maude continued, "but I promise to tell you about the wagon in a little bit. Don't go away."

I nodded my head. "Sure, Maude."

Maude set her paint pallet on the chair and stuck her paintbrush in a pile of blue goo in the middle of it. Looking down at her wrinkled and smudged painting clothes she added, "I'm not exactly dressed for picture taking, Jo."

"Just remove that thing and you'll pass," Aunt Jo ordered like she was a general inspecting the troops.

Both women stood tall, straight, and eye to eye. But Aunt Jo reminded me of a soldier at attention, while Maude looked like she might once have been a Gibson Girl in one of Mama's catalogs. Maude lifted her hand to her forehead and saluted Aunt Jo, then turned, winked and gave me a grin that plumped her rosy cheeks like a pair of ripe cherries. I tried not to smile since Aunt Jo could still see my face, but it was nice to watch someone who wasn't intimidated by my aunt.

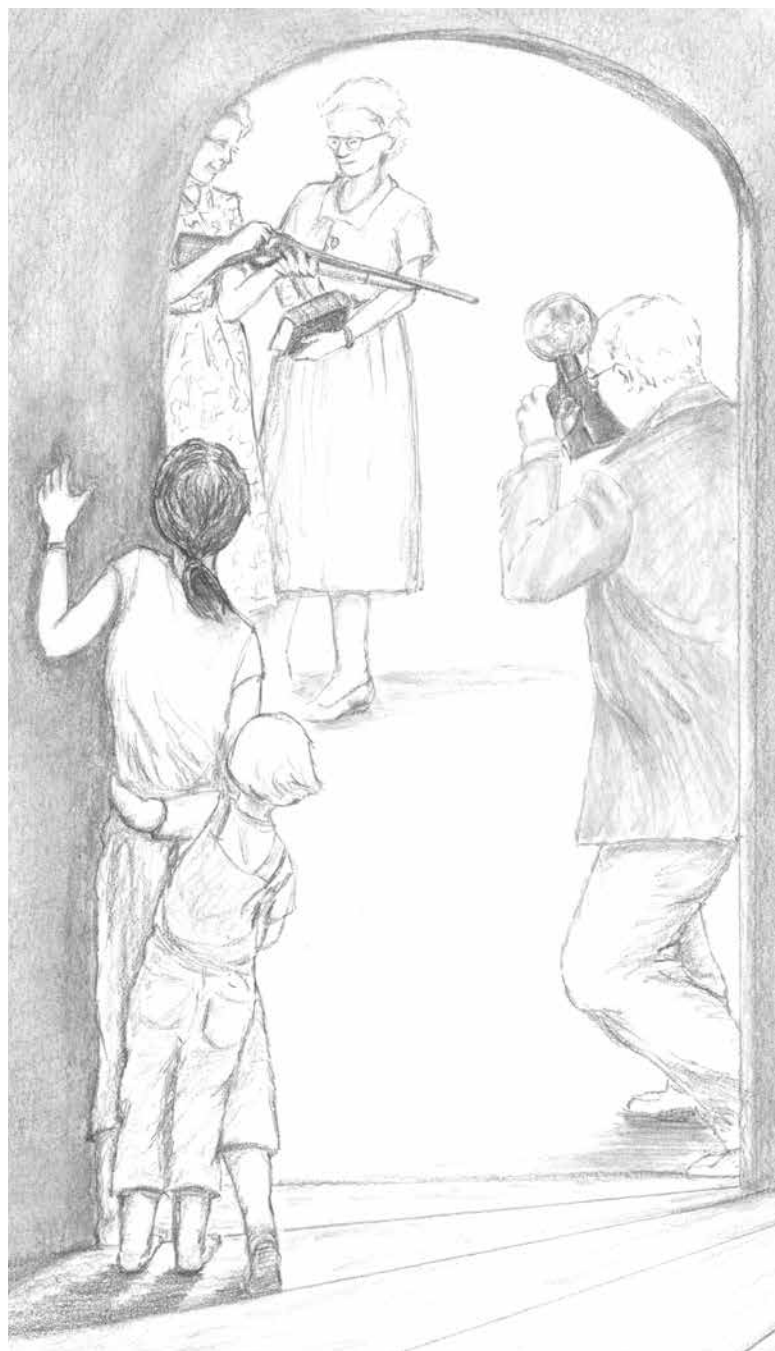
I helped Maude slip out of her smock and she slung it across her chair. Aunt Jo directed her into the church and Irma Jean and I followed them. We tried our best to stay out of the line of sight so maybe Aunt Jo would forget we were there. Several members of the Willing Workers Society were in the front of the sanctuary cleaning and sorting through books, music, and photos.

“Here we are, Mel,” Aunt Jo said in her usual commanding way. “You may immortalize us now with that contraption of yours.”

Mel stopped working on a pile of music and grabbed his boxy camera. “Why don’t you stand out there in the vestibule and I’ll get a shot by this table of memorabilia,” he told them. “Now then, show me how a woman can handle those old carbines.”

Maude and Aunt Jo each picked up one of the guns. I knew Aunt Jo did a lot of hunting with the family when she was younger. She was the only girl in the family and Daddy told us how she always bragged about being as good a shot as her brothers.

I jumped when Irma Jean’s elbow delivered a sharp jab to my thigh. She



grabbed my neck and pulled me down to whisper in my ear.

“We best get clear outta here, Sis. Aunt Jo gots a gun!”

I bit my lips to keep from laughing, although I will admit that being in the same room with Aunt Jo and a rifle was scary. We slowly melted into the stairwell leading to the balcony.

“Let’s get another photo, please,” Mel said, “only this time with one of you holding the Bible.” Aunt Jo picked up the big black book, opened it, and showed it to Maude. A second flash from Mel’s camera lit up the vestibule. He took one more and then laid his camera down. “Thank you very much, ladies. That’s all I need. You can go back to your painting now, Maude.”

Maude laid her rifle on the table and stroked the cover of the Bible Aunt Jo put down beside it. “It’s hard to believe it’s been over seventy-five years since this Bible and rifle arrived from New England with my father,” Maude said. “I am so glad when we met on Decoration Day this year, that we decided to form the Old Settlers’ Association. Now future generations will always remember why and how this church came to be.”

Mama and Daddy had told us a little about the history of the church, but Maude seemed to know more of the story. I wondered what it was.

Aunt Jo and Maude headed outside. Aunt Jo looked back to see if we followed them. She looked like she wanted to say something to Maude that she didn't want me and Irma Jean to hear.

I stopped on the stoop and Irma Jean slipped past me. She disappeared around the corner of the church, making a beeline for the outhouse, the straps of her overalls already flapping loose behind her. I decided to act like I was going along, but once I was out of sight, I backed against the wall and peeked around the corner. I made sure I was still within earshot of Maude and Aunt Jo. I wanted to hear what they had to say.