



*Oswell City, Iowa*

S tars studded the sky and a ribbon of crimson glowed on the western horizon. Activity around the Oswell City train depot waned as people met up with relatives and business associates. Thumps from inside the building indicated the shutting down of a busy terminal for the night. A drawer closed. Heavy items—crates maybe—thudded to the floor. Men’s voices droned through the walls. Lights switched off. A door opened then closed. The premises fell silent except for the rasping of locusts in a nearby tree.

Lacy left the bench she’d been sitting on as she waited for Rose and Mr. Van Drunen. Surely they’d think to come to the train depot to find her. Mr. Van Drunen had mentioned the luggage. It would have to get collected and brought along to the home of Rose’s aunt. What if they’d already arrived in town and forgotten about her? Maybe Rose was at her aunt’s this very minute enjoying a comfortable chair and a good visit.

Lacy should go there and meet Rose. But she didn’t know Rose’s aunt and uncle. Neither did she know how to find their

home. If the large house in the orchard Rose spoke of was anywhere around, she'd go there. But from her friend's description, it was way out in the country, too far for a young lady to walk at this time of night.

A lamp glowed in a window of the hotel. She had no money to stay there, but maybe someone could give her directions. With a sigh, Lacy picked up her damaged satchel. Heat flushed through her. Who did he think he was? Mr. Van Drunen might have picked her up off the street and bought her supper, but he drove his car right over her Angel Frame!

Her parents should be told that their special gift to her had been destroyed. Except she couldn't bear the thought of doing so. Her tragic news would surely hurt them as much as it hurt her.

Lacy's feet dragged as she walked down the street. If only she hadn't tripped on that curb. Then her satchel wouldn't have flown into the line of traffic. The damage Mr. Van Drunen had done that day was unfair, not only to her but to her family who sacrificed so much. And now he was on the loose somewhere in this dark night with her best friend. He might harm Rose in some way if he got in a wreck or stopped for a drink or went off course and never drove her to this town at all.

Why, oh why, did Lacy allow Rose to travel with a stranger? She should have insisted that Rose take the train, even if she would have had to wait until morning. But Mr. Van Drunen would have known her plans and probably demanded to pay for her hotel and another train ticket just as he'd done with the bill for their supper.

Lacy gritted her teeth. Now she disliked him not only for the damage he'd done with his car, but for the indebtedness she and Rose owed him. Frustrating man!

Few times in her young life had she grown so angry with anyone. At least her disgust with him would keep her out of trouble. Dad's prayers were working. If only he'd pray for Rose

too. She might be in trouble if she was still in Mr. Van Drunen's company.

Lamps in the hotel's window cast a shaft of light over her traveling suit. Grime streaked her jacket and skirt. She was in no condition to walk into the lobby of a hotel. Halting, she turned around. Where could she go in this town at this time of night?

The church steeple caught her attention. Maybe she dared to search for Miss Millerson. If she'd married a preacher, then she would live in a house close to the church. Lacy trudged down the street in that direction. If only her clothes were clean. She'd prefer not to meet her teacher looking as if she really had been run over.

At the intersection, she crossed the street and strolled past the dark church building on the corner. The brick house next door had a light glowing in one of its windows. Lacy ventured across the lawn. Maybe this was where Miss Millerson lived. Or if it wasn't her house, maybe the people living there would be nice enough to tell her where to find her teacher.

Lacy held her breath and knocked on the door. A tall, blond-haired man opened it. He held an adorable baby girl at his shoulder.

Recognition flowed through her like warm sunlight. Mr. De Witt. It had to be him. Memories of a party the Silver Grove students held at their school so many years ago came rushing back to her. He'd been there, and he'd taught her how to play croquet. He'd also visited with her brother Cal over the following winter helping him understand the call to preach the gospel. A smile broke out on Lacy's face.

"Logan, who's at the door?" A voice Lacy knew and loved floated from the room beyond.

Then she appeared. Her golden hair glowed in the lamp-light. Deep blue eyes full of compassion stared at Lacy. Her mouth dropped open as recognition dawned on her too.

“Why, it’s Lacy Jones. It has to be you.” Miss Millerson’s hands flew to her cheeks. “What are you doing in Oswell City? Oh, my goodness! What a surprise!”

“Then I have the right house?” Lacy gestured to the couple in the doorway.

“Yes. Oh, it’s so good to see you. Come in. Come in.” Mrs. De Witt backed away as her husband stepped to the side for Lacy to enter.

She stepped into the hall. A dining room and kitchen were visible off to the left. A stairway rose a short distance away to the right. The home appeared cheery and comfortable with its elegant furniture, rugs, and children’s toys scattered about.

“You look as though you’ve been in an accident. Are you hurt?” Mrs. De Witt studied her jacket and skirt.

“I tripped and fell before boarding the train in Des Moines. I look much worse than I feel.” Lacy made an attempt at a smile.

Mrs. De Witt’s expression relaxed a bit. “Well, come right this way.” She took Lacy’s hat and satchel before Mr. De Witt led her to the parlor.

“I ... I hope I’m not keeping you up by arriving so late. I didn’t want to bother you, but I don’t know anyone else in town.” Lacy sat in a chair near the fireplace and settled her hands on her skirt, right over one of the worst splotches.

“The boys are in bed, but Logan was rocking Sara, so we weren’t ready to go to sleep yet.” Mrs. De Witt sat on the sofa and looked at Lacy. “It’s so good to see you again. How are you? What brings you to Oswell City?”

“I am well, thank you. I graduated from high school in May.”

“You did?” Mrs. De Witt clasped her hands. “What an accomplishment! Congratulations.”

“Thanks. I’m traveling with a friend from high school, Rose Harper. She’s from Meadow Creek. You might know her. She

went by Agnes in school, but now she wants to be called Rose.” Lacy glanced over at Mr. De Witt in the rocking chair with his small daughter. Her heavy lids were lowering over her eyes as the gentle sway of the chair lulled her to sleep. She looked content and safe.

A wave of homesickness rolled over Lacy. She gulped. Better not give into that. This visit to a new town was her chance to spend time with her teacher and maybe even find a way to make something of herself.

“Agnes is in town too? I can’t wait to see her.” Mrs. De Witt clasped her hands over her knee.

Lacy pulled her gaze away from Mr. De Witt. “Agnes, or rather Rose, she’s staying with her aunt so that she can attend the college in Clear Brook.”

“That’s wonderful. What will she be studying?”

“She wants to be a teacher. Like you.”

“I’m so honored.” Mrs. De Witt glanced over at her husband and received a wink from him. “She wants people to call her Rose, you say?” Mrs. De Witt returned her attention to Lacy.

“Yes.”

“I’ll try to remember. I knew her as Agnes, so I might slip up from time to time.” Mrs. De Witt smiled. “Where is she? Did she come with you?” Mrs. De Witt glanced out the window.

“No ... I mean ... yes. I mean ...” Lacy pushed her hair off her forehead. Where did she begin to explain? She took a deep breath. “Rose and I got separated in Des Moines when we had to switch trains. She lost her ticket so caught a ride with someone.”

“Oh, really? I wonder who that would be.” Mr. De Witt commented with interest lifting his voice.

“It doesn’t matter.” The damage done to her picture frame hurt too much, and the separation from her friend left her vulnerable and alone. Talking about the whole episode and Mr. Van Drunen’s role in it would add to her agitation.

Starting now, she would do her absolute best to forget all about it. "She'll arrive eventually. She might even be in town now."

A tense silence descended on the room. Mrs. De Witt bit her lip as though she feared she might say the wrong thing.

Lacy straightened and changed the subject. "Could you please tell me where Helen Brinks lives? That is where Rose and I will be staying."

"Helen and Lester? They live two blocks over on Third Street. A white two-story house. Easy to find," Mr. De Witt said.

"Thanks." Lacy stood. "I've so enjoyed seeing you again. I'd really love to visit some more. You see, I came along with Rose for the very reason of finding you. I'm glad my surprise arrival tonight wasn't too disruptive."

"Please don't go, Lacy. It's getting late. Why don't you stay with us tonight? You can look up the Brinks in the morning." Mr. De Witt glanced at his wife.

"Use the guest room. It's down the hall next to the bathroom. Have breakfast with us in the morning. Then you can go find your friend," Mrs. De Witt said.

"I couldn't possibly impose on you." Lacy shook her head.

"You wouldn't be imposing. We'd love to have you." Mrs. De Witt stood and rested her hands on Lacy's shoulders.

Putting an end to this long and painful day sounded nice. And staying here, with so much time to spend with Mrs. De Witt would be luxury.

"Simon and John would love to meet you. If you stayed, you could see them at breakfast." Mr. De Witt's smile was hard to resist.

She'd love to meet Mrs. De Witt's children. They were probably smart and well-behaved with a woman like her as their mother.

"Well, all right. I could use some cleaning up." Lacy fanned out her skirt putting the grime on full display.

“Go and help yourself to the bathroom. I’ll give you a nightgown to wear.” Mrs. De Witt pointed down the hall.

“Thank you.” Lacy rushed away and entered the guest room. A bed with a quilt in shades of blues, a dresser, and a small bookcase furnished the room. Lacy lit the lamp and proceeded to undress. If only Rose could see her now—not just visiting with Mrs. De Witt but staying with her.

Her journey had known its share of struggle, but the welcome she received made up for the disappointments. Well, almost. The sight of the grime on her skirt sent a pang of anger through her. The kindness of the De Witts could not subdue her dislike of Mr. Van Drunen. If that man truly lived here like he said he did, then she had someone to guard against, a man she didn’t dare trust.

Lacy finished her preparations for sleep with a strategy for staying out of his way forming in her mind.



“GOOD MORNING. We’re so glad to have you join us for breakfast.” Mrs. De Witt smiled at Lacy. “Here. Take this seat.” She gestured to an empty chair at the dining room table.

Lacy slipped onto the chair as two energetic toddlers entered the room with their father. One of them he carried in his arms. The other little boy skipped along at his side.

“We have a visitor today,” Mr. De Witt said as he settled the toddler he carried in a chair.

“Who are you?” The little boy standing at his father’s side pointed at Lacy.

“Now, John. Give your mother a chance to introduce her.” Mr. De Witt pulled a chair out for John and helped him get seated.

“Mama?” Fear entered John’s eyes as he looked to his mother.

“Don’t worry. This is Miss Lacy Jones from Silver Grove. She was one of my students when I taught school there.” Mrs. De Witt poured a small amount of orange juice into John’s glass.

“You may call me Lacy.” She smiled at the little boy.

“Wacy.” The other toddler echoed.

Lacy laughed. “That’s right.”

John straightened. “I can say it better. It goes like this, Simon.” John made a show of sticking his tongue out. “See? L – L – Lacy.” He giggled and his brother shared the laugh with him.

“John is already aspiring to be a teacher like his mother.” Mr. De Witt tousled his son’s hair as he sat next to him.

“Hey!” John smiled and reached up to catch Mr. De Witt’s hand.

“Now that you’ve met the professor of the family, say ‘hello’ to his unlucky student, his twin brother Simon.” Mr. De Witt pointed at the little boy he’d carried into the room.

Lacy waved. “Hello, Simon.”

He stuck his tongue out like his brother had done to demonstrate the *L* syllable, grinned and then said, “Wacy.”

Everyone laughed. Simon joined in and then stuck his tongue out again.

“Silly boy,” Mrs. De Witt said in a voice filled with affection. She glanced at Lacy while she pointed at her husband. “Simon is the one in the family who takes after his father.”

“Two of a kind.” Mr. De Witt grinned at his son.

Simon giggled and covered his eyes with his hands.

Sara banged a small spoon on the tray of her highchair as if calling an unruly meeting to order.

“Your sister has the right idea. Let’s settle down so we can pray.” Mr. De Witt bowed his head.

When the meal started, Mrs. De Witt looked at Lacy. “How did you sleep last night?”



“Very well. I appreciate you allowing me the use of your guest room.” Lacy cut up her pancake and poured syrup on it.

“I didn’t want to send you upstairs. That’s where the children’s rooms are. We could have put you on the cot in Sara’s room, but the guest room all to yourself is so much nicer.” Mrs. De Witt fed Sara small bites of a pancake.

Lacy’s thoughts wandered to questions about Rose’s aunt. She might not have space for two girls to stay with her. Offering the room to Rose made the most sense. Rose was the one staying in town to go to college. She was the girl Helen Brinks had invited. Not Lacy. Her visit to Oswell City might get cut much shorter than she wanted if the Brinks had no room for her.

“Why don’t we go with you over to the Brinks’? I’d love to see Agnes again,” Mrs. De Witt washed sticky syrup from little hands and faces now that breakfast was finished. She hadn’t remembered Agnes’s wish to be called by her middle name.

Lacy bit her lip against pointing out the mistake. She had a feeling Agnes Rose Harper should get prepared for much more of that.

“I’d like for you to come. Can I help you get the children ready to go?” Lacy watched the little girl reaching for her mother as a sign she wanted out of her highchair.

“Sara needs her bonnet. Go ahead and put it on while I help the boys with their shoes. It’s in her room.” Mrs. De Witt pointed to the stairs.

Lacy picked the little girl up and followed Mrs. De Witt’s directions. The stairs looked new with highly polished wood gleaming in the morning sunlight. Fresh painted walls and stylish carpet on the floors of the bedrooms matched the new look of the stairway. With the latest addition of the baby girl to the family, it made sense to Lacy that the home had acquired a recent addition to make space for the children.

She found the bonnet on a hook near the crib and tied it

under the little girl's chin. "There we go, Sara. All ready for a walk outside." She was rewarded with a smile.

Lacy and Sara returned downstairs as Mrs. De Witt tied the last shoestring on Simon's shoe. John had both of his shoes on and was hopping around in the hallway eager to get moving. Sara traveled in a buggy. Simon and John ran on ahead. They skipped, threw stones into the street, or waved at the vehicles passing by.

"Good morning," Mrs. De Witt said when Helen Brinks answered her knock.

"Oh! Mrs. De Witt, good morning. I didn't know you'd come calling on me." Helen's eyes widened as she opened the door and let them in.

"I won't stay long. I've brought a friend with me. Her name is Lacy Jones. She's traveling with your niece. Lacy got into town last night. Has Rose arrived yet?" Mrs. De Witt looked down the hall.

"Yes. She got here after dark. Lester is at the train station now fetching the luggage. I'll get her." Helen turned away and called for Rose.

"Hi, Rose. Did your trip go well?" Lacy asked when her friend appeared.

"Couldn't have been better. We looked for you at the train station as soon as we got into town, but we didn't find you, so we came here. I thought maybe you got a room at the hotel." Rose's gaze shifted to Mrs. De Witt and her eyes grew round with pleasure. "Miss Millerson?"

"I stayed with her last night," Lacy said.

"You must be little Agnes Harper from Meadow Creek. My, how you've grown into a pretty young lady. I should probably call you Rose. Lacy said you don't want to be known as Agnes anymore." Mrs. De Witt laid her hand on Rose's shoulder.

"That's right. It's so good to see you again. Did Lacy tell you I want to be a teacher? That's why I'm in town."

“She did. I’m so happy that you are able to attend college. Good for you.”

“Are these your children?” Rose glanced around at the small visitors.

“Sara is in the buggy. Simon and John are twins. They are four years old.”

“Oh, my goodness. So good to meet you all.” Rose smiled at them and then turned to Lacy. “Come on. I’ll help you get settled before Uncle Lester comes with your luggage.” Rose led the way down the hall.

“Rose?” Her aunt’s voice followed them. “Where are you going? I only have one spare room. Surely you know that.”

Rose frowned. “But I wrote to you and told you a friend was coming with me.”

“I wrote back to let you know that I don’t have room for another person to stay here. She could for one night, maybe, but not for as long as you’d requested.” Helen settled her hands on her hips.

“Oh, I got that letter,” Rose said with a wave of her hand. “But I know you keep house at the orchard. Since you didn’t have room here, then I thought starting tomorrow you could give Lacy a room there.”

Helen twisted her hands in her apron. “No, I’m afraid I can’t. The house at the orchard is full, you see. A new highway is going in south of here, so the church decided to give the rooms to the construction crew. I’m sorry, girls. Lacy can stay tonight but she’ll have to make other arrangements for a longer visit. Maybe she can get a room at the hotel. Lester’s brother owns it. I could talk to him.”

Lacy’s jaw dropped. Rose was usually a reliable friend. Why had she made this empty promise to Lacy and her parents guaranteeing a place to stay? “Rose, you knew I don’t have the money to afford a hotel room. Not even for one night.”

“But Aunt Helen always has room. She wrote Mama about

how large the house in the orchard is.” Rose’s voice grew louder and faster as she looked from Lacy to Helen.

“Now, settle down. It isn’t your fault. I should have thought to explain in the letter about the construction crew. It just never occurred to me that you were considering a room there for your friend.” Helen rubbed her forehead.

“She can stay with me,” Mrs. De Witt motioned in the direction of her house as she turned to Lacy. “We’d love to have you. Really. Use our guest room.”

The invitation sounded like a beautiful piece of music to Lacy’s ears. She’d love nothing more than to be in Mrs. De Witt’s home watching her, listening to her, and learning from her. But she shouldn’t allow it. She’d come with Rose to seek out opportunity and make her own way, not to depend on other people to take care of her.

“I couldn’t impose on you like that. You have a family. I fear I would just be in the way.”

Mrs. De Witt laid her hand on Lacy’s arm. “You would be one of us. I can’t imagine quiet, shy Lacy Jones ever getting in anyone’s way.”

The whole story hadn’t yet been told to Mrs. De Witt. She didn’t know that Lacy had already gotten in someone’s way. A fall into the street had put her in the path of the reckless Mr. Van Drunen. He lived in this town. Maybe Mrs. De Witt’s words would act as a sort of shield preventing Lacy from coming near him again.

“Go ahead and stay with the minister and his wife,” Helen urged. “They live close by. You’ll still be able to see Rose anytime you want.”

Lacy looked from her to Mrs. De Witt. Both women smiled at her with their brows raised high in anticipation.

She sighed. “All right. Thank you, Mrs. De Witt. I’ll go back home with you.”

Mrs. De Witt hugged her.

“I’m sorry about the misunderstanding.” Rose’s voice pleaded with Lacy not to get upset.

“It worked out.” Better than Lacy dared to hope. Rose’s lack of planning had led to the best possible arrangement.

“I’ll send Lester over with your suitcase.” Helen waved at Lacy as she followed Mrs. De Witt out the door.

The children enjoyed the time outdoors running and jumping and playing games on the walk back to the parsonage. Sara kept up a stream of jabber as she pointed to birds and flowers from her place in the buggy.

Lacy’s thoughts strayed. She’d decided on a whim to travel with a friend to Oswell City. Now she’d stay in the home of her beloved teacher and husband. She would have to write to Cal and tell him all about it.