

What Once Was Lost





Kim Vogel Sawyer



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For the posse— We aren't "blood kin," but we are family.



A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.

—Proverbs 16:9

Chapter 1

Brambleville, Kansas Mid-February, 1890

men." Her prayer complete, Christina Willems raised her head. Even after a full year of leading the residents of the poor farm in saying grace, she gave a little start as her gaze fell on Papa's empty chair at the far end of the table. Loneliness smote her, as familiar as the smooth maple tabletop beneath her folded hands. Would she ever adjust to her dear father's absence?

To cover the rush of melancholy, she reached for the closest serving bowl, which was heaped with snowy mashed potatoes, and forced a smile. "Herman, would you please carve the goose? Louisa did such a beautiful job roasting it. I'm eager to see if it tastes as good as it looks."

Louisa McLain, one of the two widowed sisters-in-law who had lived beneath the poor farm's roof for the past four years, tittered at Christina's compliment. "Now, Christina, you know roasting a goose is a simple task. But bringing one down so we can all enjoy such a treat? We owe Wes our thanks for his skill with a shotgun."

Wes Duncan's wide, boyish face blushed scarlet, and he ducked his head but not before he flashed Louisa a shy grin.

Herman Schwartz took the carving knife and fork and rose slowly, his arthritic joints unfolding by increments. Light from the brass gas lamp hanging above the table flashed on the knife's blade as he pressed it to the goose's crispy skin. While Herman carved, the others began passing around the bowls of potatoes, gravy, and home-canned vegetables grown in their own garden.

Young Francis Deaton watched Herman's progress with unblinking eyes, licking his lips in anticipation. He nudged his sister, Laura, with his elbow. "Lookit that, Laura. Finally get somethin' 'sides pork for supper! Ain't it gonna be good?"

His mother set down the bowl of boiled carrots and gave the back of Francis's head a light whack. Francis yelped and rubbed the spot as Alice shook her finger in her son's face. "Shame on you. We should be thankful for every bit of food the good Lord sees fit to give us, whether it be goose, pork, or gruel. Now apologize to Miss Willems for complaining."

Francis, his lips set in a pout, mumbled, "Sorry, Miss Willems."

Christina accepted the boy's apology with a nod and a smile. She well understood Francis's delight in the succulent goose. The poor farm residents consumed a steady diet of pork because pigs were the most economical animals to raise and butcher. They hadn't enjoyed a meal such as this in months—not since she'd evicted a ne'er-do-well named Hamilton Dresden for trying to sneak into Alice's room one night. The man had been lazy, shirking jobs rather than contributing to the poor farm's subsistence, but he'd been handy with a rifle, and their table had benefited from his good aim. Yet she didn't regret sending him packing. She'd rather eat beans and bacon seven days a week and feel that her charges were safe than enjoy wild game and have to worry about illicit shenanigans.

Their plates full, everyone picked up their forks and partook of the feast. While they ate, easy conversation floated around the table, covering the whine of a cold wind outside. It sounded as if a storm was brewing, but Christina had no concerns. The sturdy limestone construction of the towering three-story house could withstand Kansas wind, rain, hail, and snow. How she loved this house and the security it provided her and the needy individuals who resided beneath the roof of the Brambleville Asylum for the Poor. And what a unique group of needy now filled the chairs.

Louisa assisted Tommy Kilgore, the little blind boy who'd been deposited on the poor farm steps two years ago, and her sister-in-law, Rose, saw to the seven-year-old orphaned twins, Joe and Florie Alexander. Their newest arrival, a quiet young woman named Cora Jennings, who claimed her mother had cast her out, slipped from her chair and circled the table, refilling coffee cups.

On the opposite side of the long table, Wes helped himself to a second serving of corn and then ladled more gravy on Harriet Schwartz's plate. Observing the simple-minded man's solicitude for the elderly woman, Christina couldn't help but smile. Then she swallowed a chuckle when Francis stole a piece of meat from his sister's plate, earning a reprimand from his mother.

Christina held her fork idle beside her plate and simply basked in the feeling of family represented by this ragtag assortment of discarded humanity. Love swelled in her breast for every one of the people sharing her table, from chubby little Joe to gray-headed Herman. *Oh, Father...* A prayer formed effortlessly within her heart. *Thank You that even though Mama and Papa are with You now instead of with me, I am not alone. I will always have my residents who bring me such joy and fulfillment.*

"Miss Willems?" Wes's voice pulled Christina from her reflections. "Ain't there no bread? Need it to soak up my gravy."

Christina gave a rueful shake of her head. "No. We used the last of it at lunch. But don't worry. I mixed dough this afternoon, and before I retire this evening, I'll bake enough loaves to carry us through the coming week. We'll have bread with every meal tomorrow."

Rose turned her pert gaze in Christina's direction. "Would you like my help with the bread baking?"

The residents shared the operations of the poor farm to the extent their age and abilities allowed. Despite Rose's perky tone, her shoulders drooped with tiredness from dusting furniture and mopping the oak floors of the rambling house that afternoon. Christina squeezed the older woman's hand. "Bless you for your willingness, but I'll see to the bread making myself. And I'll see to the supper cleanup, as well." A soft mutter of protests rose, but Christina waved her hands and stilled the voices. "No, no, you've all done more than enough work today."

The others returned to eating with no further arguments. Satisfied, Christina pressed her fork into the mound of potatoes on her plate. Ultimately, the Brambleville Asylum for the Poor was her responsibility, just as it had once been her father's. She would honor his memory by meeting the needs of her charges as well as Papa had.

"Miss Willems. Miss Willems, wake up..."

The persistent voice cut through Christina's dreams, rousing her from a sound sleep. She blinked into the gray-shrouded room. A small shape in a white nightshirt, giving the appearance of an apparition, leaned over her bed. One of the children. Although weary, Christina chose a kind tone. "Yes, who is it?"

Hands pawed at the edge of the mattress. "It's me, ma'am."

Tommy... He no doubt needed someone to escort him to the outhouse. "Couldn't you rouse Francis?" Although Christina had assigned Francis the task of being Tommy's eyes, the nine-year-old often shirked his duty. Especially at night.

"No, ma'am. C'mon. We gotta hurry." Urgency underscored Tommy's tone. Pushing aside her covers, she swung her bare feet over the edge of the mattress. The boy danced in place as she tugged on her robe over her nightgown and stuck her feet into her unbuttoned shoes. Regardless of Tommy's need, the February night was cold. Finally she took his arm. "All right, Tommy, let's go to the outhouse."

He pulled loose, stumbling sideways. "No! We gotta get everybody out!"

Fuzzy-headed from exhaustion—she'd plodded up the two flights of stairs to her attic room and tumbled into bed well after midnight—Christina caught hold of Tommy's shoulders and gave him an impatient shake. "Tommy, you aren't making sense. What—"

"I smell smoke! There's a fire." Hysteria raised the boy's pitch and volume. He clutched at her hands with icy fingers. "Please, ma'am, we gotta get everybody an' get out!" Frowning, Christina sniffed the air. Only a slight hint of charred wood teased her nostrils. Tommy's sense of smell was heightened—certainly a result of his inability to see. She'd kept the stove burning late. In all likelihood the boy smelled the leftover coals and mistakenly believed a fire raged. She adopted a soothing tone. "Calm down, Tommy. I'm sure—"

"Miss Willems, please..." The boy began to sob, his body quivering. "We gotta get out, ma'am. We gotta get out *now*!"

As Christina began to offer more assurance, a screech rent the air, followed by a shout. "Fire! Fire!" The clatter of footsteps sounded on the stairs. Then Cora burst into the room and threw herself against Christina. "Kitchen's on fire!" she gasped.

Chills exploded across Christina's body. Curling one hand around Tommy's thin arm and the other around Cora's shoulder, she aimed both of them toward the gaping door. At the top of narrow stairway leading to the second floor, she pressed Tommy into Cora's care. "Take him out and stay outside. I'll get the others." Trusting Cora to follow her directions, she hurried down the stairs. Papa's silver watch, which hung on a chain around her neck, bounced painfully against her chest, and she paused to tuck it beneath the neck of her gown before proceeding.

Her worn soles slid on the smooth wooden steps, but she kept her footing and charged through the upstairs hallway, banging on doors and hollering, "Fire! Grab whatever you can and get out! Everyone out!"

Doors popped open. Panicked voices filled the air. The pounding of feet on pine floorboards competed with cries of alarm. Assured that everyone was alerted and moving, Christina hurried to the ground floor. Smoke created a murky curtain, but she fought her way through it and flung the front door open. Frigid night air swept in, blessedly sweet, but a *whoosh* sounded from the opposite side of the house. Flames exploded behind the kitchen doorway, then attacked the wooden frame, taking on the appearance of dancing tongues. Would the floorboards catch fire and carry those hungry flames to the front door?

Her ears ringing with the fierce beating of her heart, Christina waved to the people on the stairs. "Hurry! Hurry!"

Louisa and Rose hastened past with clothing draped over their arms. Alice and her children followed, also carrying an assortment of pants, shirts, and dresses, the sleeves of which dangled toward the floor, threatening to trip them. Joe and Florie trailed Alice's family. Empty-handed, the pair wailed and clung to each other. Florie reached for Christina.

"Outside!" Christina commanded, giving the little girl a push toward the porch. She longed to comfort the distraught child, but comforting would have to wait—safety came first. Fear turned her mouth to cotton, but she continued to encourage her charges to hurry, hurry.

Cora, clothing draped over her shoulder, thumped down the stairs with Tommy hanging on her arm. As the pair passed, Christina said, "Get buckets from the barn and start a bucket brigade. Alice, Louisa, and Rose will help you." Cora shot Christina a look of abject anguish, but she nodded as she stumbled out the door. Christina tried to count the number of people in the yard, but the darkness hindered her. Who hadn't yet escaped?

Heavy footsteps captured her attention, and she turned to spot Wes clopping down the stairs in his ungainly lope. He'd taken the time to dress, but his suspenders hung beside his knees, and his feet were bare. He reached the doorway and paused beside Christina, his wild-eyed gaze searching the yard. Then he grabbed the doorjamb with both hands. "Where's Herman? An' Harriet?"

Only two people slept on the main floor of the poor farm residence— Herman and Harriet Schwartz. Herman's advanced arthritis made climbing the stairs too difficult for him. Christina had been pleased to offer the elderly couple the small room, tucked beside the added-on kitchen as quarters for a maid.

She clapped her hands to her cheeks in horror. The kitchen was completely engulfed. She wouldn't be able to reach their room without running through the flames. "Oh, Lord, no...please, no," she moaned as helplessness sagged her shoulders.

Realization registered on Wes's square face. Although he was more than twenty years old, his simple mind gave him the reckless impulsivity of a child. With a strangled cry, he pushed off from the doorframe and scrambled in the direction of the kitchen. "Herman! Harriet!"

Christina raced after him and caught the back of his flannel shirt. "Wes! No!" He struggled against her grip, drawing her along with him. They tussled so close to the crackling flames that the heat scorched Christina's face and her body even through her heavy robe. Gasping for breath, she tried valiantly to pull Wes back, but he was too strong for her. He broke free and stumbled to the doorway with its dancing circle of fire.

Chapter 2

es stood illuminated by the bright flames, shoulders heaving and hands flying erratically as if swatting at bats, while ribbons of orange and yellow snaked their way up the varnished wood trim on either side of the door. His anguished wails carried over the crackle and snap of the flames. "Herman! Harriet!"

Choking on the smoke, Christina staggered after him. She wrapped both arms around his middle and tugged. Although he continued to cry in harsh, hiccuping sobs, he allowed her to draw him through the sitting room and into the yard, where they collapsed—Christina half on top of Wes's inert form—on the snow-dusted grass. Her lungs ached from breathing smoke, and her heart ached at the thought of dear Herman and Harriet trapped in their room, helpless against the onslaught. She squeezed her eyes shut and battled the desire to join Wes in wails of sorrow.

"M-Miss Willems? You will be all right?"

At the sound of the gravelly, weak voice, Christina lifted her head from Wes's shoulder. Herman stood a few feet away, his wrinkled face wreathed in worry. Harriet hovered near her husband, wringing her hands. Christina let out a gasp of relief and joy.

"Soon as we smell smoke, I push the missis out the window. Then I fall out behind her." He touched a bleeding scrape on his forehead, wincing. "I want to tell you the place, it is burning, but the stairs... All I could do just to walk 'round the house to the front."

Wes jolted upright, pushing Christina aside, and staggered across the grass. He threw his arms around Herman and buried his head in the curve of Herman's shoulder, sobbing. Christina crossed to Harriet and folded the

woman in an embrace. *Thank You, Lord. Thank You...* Relief at finding the couple safe nearly buckled her knees. But she couldn't collapse. She had work to do.

She grabbed Wes's sleeve again and gave a mighty yank. "Come help with the buckets, Wes!"

Harriet and Herman took charge of the children, and Christina and Wes raced behind the house. Cora, Louisa, Rose, and Alice had formed a line with Cora closest to the flames and Alice at the well. Wes took over dropping the empty buckets into the well's depths and hauling them up, and Christina joined Cora at the front of the line. Christina's arms ached, but she continued tossing bucketfuls of icy water onto the blazing walls until the roar died and only red-orange eyes of embers glowed from the charred shell of the kitchen.

With a heaving sigh, she let the last bucket fall from her numb hands and then sank onto the cold ground. Immediately the poor farm residents surrounded her. Florie and Joe dropped into her lap and clung. Hands patted her shoulders, and fingers clutched her arms. A chorus of voices—some crying, others comforting—filled her ears. In a huddled mass they held on to one another as the wintry wind chilled their frames.

Florie twisted around and cupped Christina's face in her small hands. "Miss Willems,"—tears streaked the child's round cheeks—"where're we gonna live now?"

Christina drew in a ragged breath. She searched her mind for an answer but found nothing that would offer even a smidgen of consolation to the bereft souls shivering in the February air. She hung her head, closing her eyes against the sting of tears. What should I do? Oh, Papa, how I wish God had answered my prayers to heal you from that respiratory illness. I need you now...

"Miss Willems, I'm c-c-cold." Joe hugged himself and burrowed against Christina's side. "Can we go in?"

Christina glanced at the shivering bunch. Their nightclothes offered no protection from the cold. They needed shelter or they might all fall ill. The house's sturdy limestone walls had prevented the fire from consuming more than the wood-framed addition, but smoke would penetrate every room. They shouldn't go inside. There was only one other place of refuge.

She gently set the twins aside and struggled to her feet. "Let's go to the barn." She herded the group across the hard-packed, uneven yard to the large rock structure at the back corner of the property. When she and her father had moved into the house eighteen years ago, following Mama's death, Papa had bemoaned the distance between the house and the barn, stating how much smarter the Russian Mennonites were to build a barn attached to the house for ease in caring for the animals. Christina had agreed with Papa then, but now she thanked God the original owners hadn't followed the Russian Mennonite practice. If the barn had filled with smoke, too, they'd have nowhere to go.

The barn's interior, redolent of fragrant hay and musky animal scent, offered immediate comfort. Its walls of thick limestone blocks held the wind at bay, and Christina instantly felt warmer even though her breath hung in a little cloud before her face. She turned to Wes. "Can you light a lantern, please?"

At the spark from the flint, little Florie began to cry again and buried her face against Christina's middle. Christina understood—the tiny flicker on the lantern's wick now seemed sinister after witnessing the ravenous flames devouring the kitchen. But they'd need light to get settled, so she gave Florie a few consoling pats and told Wes, "Put the lantern on its hook there. Thank you. Now, everyone, gather near."

The others shuffled close. Their expectant faces looked at Christina, awaiting her directions. Tiredness—and responsibility—weighted her shoulders. They depended on her. She had to do something to assure them they'd all be fine. But where could she find assurance when only hopelessness crowded her troubled mind? Papa's voice crept through her memory. "When in doubt, Christina, go to the Father. He alone has the answers to life's ponderings."

She pulled in a shuddering breath—how her chest ached—and held her hands out to the two standing closest. Florie took one, Louisa the other. With-

out a word of instruction, they formed a circle and bowed their heads in readiness for Christina's petitions to the Lord.

"Heavenly Father...," her voice rasped, the words scraping painfully against her dry throat. "Thank You for Your hand of protection and for allowing us to escape." A murmur swept through the small throng—thank-yous and soft sobs. "You brought us safely from the fire, and now we trust You to continue to shelter us, just as You have in the past." She injected confidence in her tone even as her insides trembled. They couldn't live in the barn! "Please guide us"—*Oh, Lord, please, please!*—"and meet our needs. I place Herman and Harriet, Alice, Laura, and Francis, Louisa and Rose, Cora, Florie and Joe, Wes, and Tommy in Your capable, caring hands. In Your Son's precious name, I pray. Amen."

A chorus of *amens* echoed. Then Florie tugged on Christina's hand. "Miss Willems, you didn't say your name."

Puzzled, Christina frowned at the child.

The little girl pursed her lips. "You put all of us in God's hands, but you didn't put you in His hands."

The child's innocent statement raised a warmth in the center of Christina's chest. Peace flooded her, bringing a rush of grateful tears. She gave Florie a hug. "Honey, I'm always in God's hands." She swept a glance across the sad faces. "We all are." She straightened, drawing on the strength her father had taught her was always available. "Alice, I know you carried out some clothing. Can you dole out articles to everyone? We need to wear something warmer than nightclothes if we're to spend the night out here."

The thin-faced woman's eyes lit, seemingly relieved to have something to do. "Surely, Miss Willems." Alice bustled to the pile of garments lying on the barn floor. Her children and the Alexander twins scampered after her, their bare feet scuffing up bits of hay.

Louisa McLain leaned close to Christina and whispered, "Rose and I carted out clothes, too, and we can share with Harriet, of course, if need be.

But I got a look at the things Alice brought, and they're mostly for youngsters. None of us thought to grab shoes, and we don't have anything at all for the menfolk, I'm afraid."

Christina nibbled her lip. Wes had pulled on britches and a shirt over his long johns before leaving his room, but his bare toes had a bluish hue. Herman and Harriet huddled together in striped nightshirts, thick stockings covering their feet. The men would need britches and shirts, and everyone needed shoes quickly. They couldn't enter the house and scavenge for belongings—it wasn't safe—so the only place to find what she needed was in town.

Although she hated to leave the security of the barn and take the others out into the cold, she had little choice. Needs had to be met, and she couldn't see to them here on the farm.

Christina touched Louisa's arm. "As soon as we've dressed as warmly as possible, I'll have Wes hitch the team. We'll go into town. I'm sure people will offer us refuge until the house can be rebuilt."

Louisa's brow pinched. "I've heard some of the folks in Brambleville weren't too pleased about this fine house being made into a home for the destitute. They might turn us away, just as the innkeeper did to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem."

Indignation raised Christina's chin. Let the townspeople try to leave her charges out in the cold! "I assure you, Louisa, we'll be taken in." She flung her arm around the older woman's shoulders and offered an assuring squeeze. "The good Lord provides a nest for the sparrow, and He won't leave His children in need of shelter."



Worry tried to eat a hole through Christina's stomach as she aimed the wagon north out of town. The *clop*, *clop* of horses' hoofs on frozen ground echoed across the lonely countryside. Only one poor farm inhabitant huddled in the back in the mound of hay—Tommy. Scarred, blind Tommy. Frustration rolled

through her chest. He was just a little boy in need of care. Why did people find it so easy to turn him away?

She flicked the reins, urging the horses to pick up their pace. Dawn would break soon. Already the sky's velvety black was changing to a steel gray in the east. She'd promised the boardinghouse owner that she and Cora would prepare meals for her boarders—starting with today's breakfast—in exchange for a tiny sleeping room. So finding a place for Tommy *soon* was imperative. Lifting her face to the bright moon hovering just above the treetops, she whispered a fervent prayer. "Lord, the mill owner is our last hope. Please soften his heart."

"Ma'am?" Tommy's quavering voice carried on the icy wind.

Without turning around Christina answered. "What do you need, Tommy?" "I'm scared."

So was she. But she couldn't let Tommy know. Clutching the reins with one hand, she reached behind her with the other and found Tommy's head. She gave his tousled hair a gentle stroke. "It'll be all right. You wait and see." Lord, let me be telling this boy the truth. He's already suffered so much loss.

The lane leading to Jonnson Millworks curved to the right, illuminated by the moon shimmering blue on the wisps of remaining snow. With a firm tug on the reins, she guided the horses to take the turn. Minutes later she brought the team to a halt outside a long, nearly flat-pitched house with a railed porch running its full length. Wide, whitewashed boards ran up and down with narrow strips of wood nailed over each seam. Glass windows reflected the muted predawn light. Although far from pretentious, the house looked sturdy and welcoming.

Christina set the brake and held her borrowed skirt above her ankles as she climbed down. She then tapped Tommy's shoulder. "Come on out."

The boy cringed. "You sure I oughta? Might be better if they don't know who's wantin' to stay with 'em."

Pain seared Christina's heart. She resented the way people recoiled from Tommy. The boy couldn't see their reaction, but his acute hearing couldn't miss the startled gasps or dismissive snorts. If Mr. Jonnson also turned him away, what would she do? Tommy had already suffered the loss of his sight, been cast aside by his own family, and been rejected by half the town. How much must a mere boy be forced to bear? Although Mr. Jonnson might very well refuse to harbor the boy when faced with Tommy's limitations, she couldn't try to hide them. It wouldn't be honest.

Very kindly she said, "Come on now."

She led Tommy across a pathway formed of flat gray rocks to the porch. "Step up." The boards, cold and damp from the recent snow, creaked beneath their feet. Even before she raised her fist to knock on the wood door, a voice boomed from inside the house.

"Who's out there?"

At the deep timbre and stern tone, Tommy shrank against Christina. She coiled an arm around the boy's shoulders before answering. "Miss Christina Willems from the Brambleville Asylum for the Poor, Mr. Jonnson. Would you please open the door?"

"What for?"

Christina clenched her teeth. She was cold, tired, heartsore, and swiftly running out of patience. Sending up one more silent prayer for strength—at least the fifteenth since Tommy had awakened her a few hours ago—she gathered her remaining shreds of courage and said, "So I might speak to you without the need to holler."

Silence reigned.

Tommy shivered uncontrollably.

Christina's patience was whisked away on an icy blast of wind. She gave the door a solid thump with her fist. "Sir, will you kindly open this door and allow us entrance? It is cold out here!"



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