

AT HOME IN *Beldon Grove*
BOOK 2

THE
PROMISE
of MORNING

ANN
SHOREY



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Beldon Grove, Illinois
March 1846

Ellie Craig brushed the last leaf from the surface of a granite marker embedded in the soft earth. “There, Lizzie.” She crooned her daughter’s name. “Isn’t that better?”

She dropped an empty tow sack in front of the next stone to protect her skirt, then lowered herself to her knees. “Mama’s here, Susanna.”

While her hands busied themselves pulling out dead grass that surrounded the gray-flecked slab, Ellie tried to remember what Susanna had looked like. Two months old she’d been, and never strong. Just like Georgie, who rested next to his sisters under the third inscribed stone.

Tugging at the muddy sack, she moved to her son’s grave. She shook her head and let the tears fall. “Ah, Georgie, my precious little boy.” Ellie kept her voice to a whisper. “Such hair you had—so bright, like a new penny. But you left me too, didn’t you?”

Meager sunshine washed over the three rectangular stones lying

in a neat row in front of her muddy boots. A cool breeze blew past, slipping with little sound through the still-leafless hickory trees surrounding the cemetery. Ellie shivered and tucked her arms under her shawl.

Her husband, Matthew, called from the wagon where he waited with ten-month-old Julia. Using the folded sack, she rubbed mud from her hands while she picked her way back to the road. Melted snow, followed by heavy spring rains, left some of the burial mounds looking like small islands in a boggy marsh. Ellie's foot slipped, and she grabbed at a cross-topped obelisk inscribed "Beloved Parents" with the names and dates of birth and death of the deceased couple listed on the sides. For a moment she stood motionless, buffeted by painful memories.

"Ellie?"

"Coming."

Matthew stood next to their wagon, bent over to hold Julia's hand. He glanced up at Ellie, his face lit with pleasure. His eyes still held the warmth that had drawn her to him fourteen years ago.

"Look—she's been standing and walking while we waited for you."

Ellie gasped and ran to the toddler. She snatched her off her feet and glared at Matthew. "She could have fallen under the horse's hooves and been trampled. Whatever possessed you?"

Frightened by the sharp words, Julia wailed.

"Now see what you've done." Ellie flounced past Matthew's waiting hand and attempted to climb into the wagon with the child in her arms.

"Stop it." He placed his broad hands at her waist and lifted her onto the step. Once she was settled he held her in his steady gaze. "Don't you think I'm just as careful as you are with this one?"

He climbed up, sat next to her, and took Julia in his lap, dangling

his pocket watch in front of her face. She stopped crying and grabbed for the golden prize.

Ellie kept her head down and picked at a thread in the skirt of her cinnamon-colored wool dress. “You don’t know what it’s like to watch her as each day goes by, praying she will live to grow up.”

“I do know. And I can tell you exactly how many more days she has lived than Lizzie did—sixty-three. And tomorrow it will be sixty-four.” He handed Julia back. “Every hair on her head is precious to me. But so are our other children.” Matthew wrapped the reins around his hand, but left the brake locked in place. “Look at me.”

She turned toward him.

“You must let some time pass before we come here again. With every visit you leave more of yourself behind.” He raised his hands in a gesture of helplessness and then let them drop to his thighs. “I’m afraid one day I won’t get you back at all.” The horse stirred in its traces, rocking the wagon.

Ellie heard Matthew’s words as though they came from a great distance. She hugged Julia tighter and studied her husband’s face. His brown eyes reflected distress. She slid next to him, leaning into the warmth of his body. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. It’s just . . . among the graves . . . I think of everyone I’ve lost.”

He squeezed her knee with his free hand. “All the more reason to stay away from here.” He flicked the reins over Samson’s broad back.

The wagon rolled north on the track that led toward the community of Beldon Grove. Afternoon light glinted off windows of a new house being built at the corner of Cemetery Road and Adams Street.

Matthew cleared his throat. “Do you still want to go to Molly’s to work on her quilt?”

“Yes. Jimmy and Johnny can take care of things at home a little longer. One of them can always go get Aunt Ruby if they need help.”

“Can’t imagine what kind of help two thirteen-year-olds would need from your aunt.”

A smile lit Ellie’s face. “You’re right. More than likely, she’d be sending for them.”

Chuckling, Matthew headed for his sister’s house. When the wagon rolled to a stop, Molly’s oldest daughter, eleven-year-old Luellen, dashed out to greet them.

“Mama! Uncle Matthew and Aunt Ellie are here,” she called.

Molly appeared in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. “I thought I noticed you driving by earlier.”

After Matthew helped Ellie and Julia from the wagon, Molly joined them, slipping an arm around Ellie’s shoulders. “You went to the cemetery again.”

Ellie nodded, her momentary good humor submerged by a fresh wave of grief. Grateful for Molly’s understanding, she followed her indoors.

“Sit.” Molly pointed at one of the chairs that lined the plank table in her kitchen. She patted Ellie’s back, then turned toward the work counter. “Karl set up the quilt frame in the back room for us. I put the top in, but it’ll wait. There’s coffee left from dinner and I just took a tin of tea cakes out of the oven.”

Ellie noticed the tiny grin that hovered at the corner of Molly’s mouth. “It seems you’re enjoying your new range.”

“I am. Karl says I’m going to make us fat with my baking, but it’s such a pleasure to have a real oven after cooking over an open hearth all my life.” Molly moved to the brickset range that had been built into the former fireplace recess. She lifted a towel from a hook on the wall and used it to protect her hands when she removed the coffee boiler from one of the range eyes.

Matthew sniffed the air. “Smells good in here.” He stepped behind Molly and grabbed two of the warm tea cakes. “I’ll take these to Doc. Does he have patients with him?”

“No. Lily’s back there, though.” Molly smiled as she mentioned her youngest child. “He told her she could help him this afternoon—doing what, I can’t imagine.” She pointed down the hallway at the office door. “Go on back. He’ll be glad to see you.”

Ellie watched her husband enter Karl’s office. Once the door closed behind him, she turned back to Molly. “You’ve been blessed to marry someone who’s so good to your children. It doesn’t always work out that way.”

Luellen spoke up before Molly could reply. “It’s hard to remember when Papa Karl wasn’t our papa. James and Franklin remember our real father, but I was too little when he died.” She straightened, clearly pleased to be part of the women’s conversation.

“It has been a long time,” Ellie said, standing Julia on the floor.

Luellen jumped to her feet and clasped the toddler’s hand. “Can I take her in the back room? I’ll let her play with my dolls.”

Ellie fixed a cautioning glance on her niece. “Mind you, don’t let her hurt herself.”

“You can trust me. I’ll be careful.”

Molly placed pewter mugs of coffee on the table and pushed a tray heaped with tea cakes in Ellie’s direction. “Have one. You’ll feel better.”

Ellie picked up one of the soft cakes and nibbled at one edge. The rich caraway-flavored treat melted on her tongue. *Mmm*. She finished it and reached for another. When she picked up a third cake, Molly leaned across the table and touched her arm.

“What’s wrong? It’s more than just the visit to the cemetery, isn’t it?”

Ellie returned the sweet to the tray, arranging it into a spiral pattern with the others. Not looking up from her task, she said, "Being at the cemetery, seeing all those headstones . . . I thought about my mother and father. They were gone before I knew them. And now my babies . . ." Ellie glanced up, then stacked three cakes in the center of the spiral. She tilted her head to study the effect.

Molly cleared her throat to speak.

Ellie ignored her. "I was so lonely growing up. Aunt Ruby and Uncle Arthur were good to me—and still are—but it wasn't like having real parents." Her voice trembled, and she fought to get it under control. "I've always wanted a home where no one would ever leave me. I used to dream—" Heat flooded her face. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's got into me today."

"You never told me you felt like this."

A tear slipped down Ellie's cheek. "Why did my babies have to die? And my parents?"

"Only God knows the answer."

"You've no idea how it feels to lose three infants, one after the other. I spend every moment watching Julia and praying the Lord will let her live."

"All your children need you, not just Julia. Maria's only eight. You shouldn't leave so much of the cooking and cleaning in her hands."

"Matthew's been talking to you, hasn't he?"

Molly's silence answered for her.

"Well, he's wrong. The boys help, too. And of course Aunt Ruby comes whenever I ask her."

"Who's at home with them now?"

Ellie stood, her chair screeching against the pine floor boards. "I'm managing fine. It's easy for you to criticize, you with your comfortable life and new husband." Her voice choked.

“Ah, Ellie.” Molly opened her arms.

“Forgive me.” Ellie sniffled and wiped at her wet cheeks with the back of her hand. “I know Samuel’s passing was a dreadful blow, but it’s over for you, don’t you see? You have Karl and a wonderful new life.”

“It’s never over. There will always be a part of me that loves and misses Samuel. But we have to go on.” Molly stepped back, leveling her gaze on Ellie. “It’s been nearly three years since your Lizzie died. Things will get easier. I just know they will.”

The door to Karl’s office opened, and he and Matthew walked the length of the hall to join the women, Lily skipping between them. When they reached the kitchen, Karl bent to kiss Molly’s forehead.

“Came to get a couple more cakes before you ladies eat them all.”

Ellie noticed Karl’s glance sweep over her and knew Matthew had been sharing his concerns with him. Wishing he’d keep their family troubles to himself, she dismissed her own tendency to burden her Aunt Ruby. After all, Ruby listened and sympathized. Karl tried to fix things.

“So, Ellie, how’s Maria doing? Over her sniffles?”

“She’s fine.” Ellie pasted on a smile. “She’s a big help to me in the kitchen and with Julia. I don’t know what—”

A thud and a howl sounded from the next room.

“Julia!” Ellie turned and ran from the kitchen in time to see her baby being helped to her feet by Luellen. Molly’s quilt frame stood behind them, each corner resting on a three-rail ladder-back chair. Loose pieces of fabric, cut into hexagon shapes, were piled in one corner of the muslin top.

Grainy sunshine flowed through the south-facing window. Its

light reflected off Julia's blonde hair and the tears on her round cheeks, making her look like she was made of spun glass.

Luellen turned frightened eyes on Ellie. "She just took a tumble and bumped her head on one of the chairs. She's fine."

Ellie hugged Julia to her chest, feeling a pulse of fear at the sight of an already-purple lump on her forehead. "How do you know she's fine? She could be concussed." She patted the baby's back, trying to shush her.

Luellen hurried to Molly. "Mama, I was watching her. She just fell, all by herself."

Karl joined them and touched Ellie's shoulder. "You know toddlers fall. Don't take on so." He looked at Luellen, who was on the verge of tears. "Come here, Lulie. It wasn't your fault." He slipped an arm around her.

Ellie followed Karl out of the room. When they reached the kitchen, Matthew took Julia from her arms. Her sobs had subsided to an occasional hiccup.

"I know what will make her happy again." Luellen clapped her hands. "Yesterday James found a bee tree in the woods between us and the cemetery. It was full of honey, even after sitting all winter." She opened a cupboard and brought out a stoneware jar. "He took most of it to Mr. Wolcott's store to sell, but left us a fair bit." She placed the jar on the table and looked at Molly. "Can I give them some?"

"Of course."

Luellen bustled to a shelf on the far wall and selected a square crockery dish. She used the side of a basting spoon to cut a chunk of honeycomb, dropping it into the empty container. Then she picked up a teaspoon and scooped it into the honey jar.

"Here's a taste for Julia." She held the spoon out and Julia's mouth opened like a baby bird's. "She likes it. See, no more tears."

Ellie felt a pang of remorse for losing her temper with Luellen. “Thank you. We’ll all enjoy this treat.” She looked at Matthew. “We’d best be getting along. You’ve got a sermon to work on for tomorrow.”

Clouds scudded across the sky as they settled themselves for the trip home. Karl stood next to the step. Ellie braced herself, expecting him to say something more about their older children.

Instead, Karl rested one hand on the side of the wagon, his eyes on Matthew. “Did you see the handbill at Wolcott’s store about a traveling repertory group coming to town? They’re going to do a Shakespeare play.”

Surprised at the change of subject, Ellie shot a glance at Matthew. A play? She waited for the explosion. He’d never bothered to hide his opinion that stage actors were people of loose morals.

His jaw tightened. “When?”