

## GRASSLANDS, CHAPTER ONE

Minutes before the rushing waters of Skull Creek closed over Charity Tait Copeland's head, she was feeling anything but charitable toward her new husband.

Their wagon had been bouncing across the windswept prairie for hours, much to her displeasure. "Charles, the wind is so dreadfully harsh. Must we really do this?"

He set his jaw in the maddening way that she already recognized. "Labour for the Lord is never labour in vain, Charity. Can you not look around and admire His majesty at work?"

Any landscape painter would have been enchanted by the play of light on the surrounding plain, rolling out to the distant horizon in every direction. As the breeze danced across the grasslands, the rippling waves were magically transformed from pale yellow to dull gold and back again. The shifting sea was broken here and there with clumps of sagebrush, their feathery fronds gleaming like molten silver in the spring sunshine. Patches of snow still clung to the tawny grass.

However, Charity was no artist. "There's nothing to see here but grass."

Charles clicked his tongue with impatience. "Look at the sky, my dear—it's the very dome of Heaven itself!"

She cast a quick glance into the brilliant universe above, almost brazen in its blueness, and pulled her broad-brimmed hat down over her eyes. "It's too bright. It makes me feel dizzy."

Her husband didn't speak again. He could not deny that their passage was torturous. They were following a faint trail marked with muddy ruts that had frozen and thawed several times, leaving deep gouges in the sod.

Their rented buckboard was a lightweight four-wheeled vehicle, an open box with a wooden plank for a seat, drawn by a two-horse team. Lacking springs, the wagon jolted over every ridge and clump of grass. Charity was tossed from side to side, hanging onto the bench with one hand and her hat with the other. Her face was buffeted by the stiff April breeze that carried the metallic scent of the melting snow. Her creamy complexion would be ruined.

Charles, however, was unlikely to turn back.

Only three weeks into their hasty marriage, Charity had come to the rude realization that he was unlikely to indulge her wishes. Her newly-ordained husband was deeply committed to serving a higher power than herself—namely, God. After their long journey from England into this unbelievably bleak and treeless hinterland, first by steamship and then by rail, Charity had welcomed a stop in the new community of Maple Creek. Their purpose: to meet the small but devout Wesleyan Methodist congregation.

Charity had hoped to spend several nights there in the one and only hotel, revelling in the comfort of a bed that was neither swaying in the ocean billows nor bouncing over the jointed steel railway tracks. But when Charles learned that one of their members had recently given birth to twins, the mother still abed and the infants not yet brought into a state of grace, he was determined to baptise them—hence this unexpected side trip to a ranch thirty miles distant.

Charity had objected vociferously, but her new husband was indifferent to her pleas. She tried punishing him with her silence, had spoken exactly seven words at breakfast, but he hadn't even noticed. His mind was not on

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earthly matters.

After another three hours during which even Charles was shifting on the unforgiving bench, Skull Creek suddenly opened up right before them. Deep ravines, called coulees by the locals, snaked their way through the flat prairie, invisible until you were almost on top of them. The trail led straight down the steep bank into the water, marking the ford, the only place for miles where it was shallow enough to cross.

It wasn't shallow now. The creek was bulging at its banks with spring runoff. The livery stable owner had warned them that a recent chinook, a warm wind from the western Rocky Mountains, had swept through the area and caused an early thaw, but her husband paid no heed, unable to imagine a flood in this barren land.

Yet here it was, a raging torrent of muddy water. Shrubs grew thickly along both sides of the ravine, almost submerged. The creek carried all kinds of natural flotsam, clumps of dead vegetation, and even a few good-sized branches—although there wasn't a tree in sight.

Charles drew the team to a halt and studied the creek. The rutted trail rose from the bank on the other side, temptingly close. "Why are we stopping?" Charity asked.

"Can't you see?" Charles didn't hide his frustration. "I'm not sure we can get across."

At this, Charity began to weep with frustration and fatigue. There was nothing artificial about her tears this time. She was tired and hungry and her shapely backside was bruised. The ranch was only two miles away, on the other side of the creek. She had never seen a ranch house, but she was sure it would offer some of the creature comforts—including a padded armchair and a cup of strong tea.

"Charles, we can't possibly get back to the hotel before dark! Do you want us to spend the night out here?"

Still he hesitated. Her manipulative skills honed by years of experience, Charity conceived the one thing that might influence him. "Think of those helpless little souls, waiting for your holy blessing!"

Charles bowed his head as if in prayer. "Your faith does you credit, Charity. God sent this trial to test our resolve, and we shall not be found wanting." He took a deep breath and snapped the reins. "Hyaw! Get along there!"

The team broke into a trot and followed the ruts over the edge of the bank. The buckboard tilted forward on its downhill passage. As the horses dragged it into the water, the swirling torrent reached the wheel hubs. Charity clutched the bench with both hands as they moved toward the centre of the creek.

The horses were up to their bellies now and the wagon was still sinking. The muddy water rose to the plank where her dainty high heels rested. She felt another spurt of anger at Charles. She was wearing her favourite shoes, the ones with the silver buckles, and the leather would be ruined if they got wet. With an exclamation of annoyance, she lifted her feet.

The motion threw her off balance just as a sudden surge of water raised the right wheels off the creek bottom and the wagon tilted sideways. Her hat went spinning into the air. Charity let go of the bench to make a wild grab for it, and plunged headfirst into the rushing torrent. She broke the surface, gasping and spluttering, just in time to see Charles toss aside the lines with a shout and leap into the creek after her. He disappeared beneath the roiling water.

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Already forty yards downstream and being swept rapidly away, Charity managed to grab a heavy branch and hang on. She looked over her shoulder and saw the horses, plunging and rearing through the creek, their eyes frantic with fear, still heaving the wagon behind them.

Of Charles there was no sign at all.

Charity tried to call out, but a sudden whirlpool sucked her under, and her mouth filled with icy water. Her body was numbed by the melted snow and could barely move her arms. Her legs were useless, wrapped tightly in the folds of her heavy woollen skirt. Lifting her face above the surface, she took one last breath. She saw the ragged banks racing past, and the cruel blue dome of heaven overhead.

As she was sucked into the murky depths, her last thought was of her shoes.

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