One

Dawn broke across the Tenmile Range in fiery slashes of red—flaming streaks the color of blood. Sunrise was always violent in the high country. There were no pink-edged clouds or pale patches of lavender. Such softness wouldn't be right in that raw landscape where men in their stampede for precious metals churned up the mountain streams until they were trickles of water through mounds of yellow waste rock, and scraped the thin topsoil from the land, leaving it naked, bare of anything that grew.

Tired as she was, Gracy Brookens stopped her buggy to admire the sweep of color that crept over the dark humps of mountains to the east and cast light onto the tips of the peaks with their honeycombed drifts of snow from last winter—or the winter before. It was past starshine now, and the red slashes were edged with gold richer than anything that ever came out of a

Tenmile mine. Swatches of blue the color of columbines seeped into the red. The glory of the sky told Gracy there was a Holy Spirit in that land of greed and struggle, particularly on a morning when she had just birthed a baby in Mayflower Gulch. Not that she needed convincing. The birth of a baby was proof enough. Every baby, she believed, was a miracle of God.

The infant had been a tiny thing, no bigger than a gray squirrel, most likely conceived in a mountain meadow, born in a hewn-log cabin with nary a window and only a dirt floor for him to crawl on. He'd be bred in the trees and rocks of the mountain peaks, like any other wild thing, brought up by the girl and boy who were only half grown themselves, young as Gracy's Jeff. It wasn't an easy life ahead. The baby had been born to poverty, would know disease and death, harshness and cold before he was grown, and likely, he wouldn't have much book learning. But he'd have love. Those two who formed him out of themselves had love enough to sell.

Gracy smiled to remember how the boy had hovered around his wife. Most men didn't want a thing to do with a lying-in. Once the labor pains started, a man usually taken out, rushing off to the mountain edge where he couldn't hear the screams. A man would find a bottle and sit with his friends, talking big, feeling he'd already done his part. Starting the baby had been up to him, but birthing was a woman's job. No need for him to be there. After the child was delivered, the father would amble back, chest out, brash, bragging about the fine young thing he'd whelped, as if he'd done it all himself, saying every now and then, "Well, God!"

But this new father was different. He'd come himself for Gracy, had run all the way down the mountain for her, run back and reached the cabin even before she'd arrived in her buggy. Then he'd refused to leave. Gracy didn't want husbands in the way, although at times she thought the men ought to know what their pleasure cost their wives. It would do for them to hear the cries, the calls for help, and to know the pain. Still, men got in the way, were clumsy in their attempts to help, offered her advice, as if she hadn't already delivered hundreds, maybe thousands, of babies and lost only a handful. She remembered those infants who hadn't taken a breath, some named, most not. She remembered the women who died, too. Every one of those deaths was an ache on her heart, a dark shadow. But it was the ones who lived that Gracy always kept in her mind as she coached a woman in the delivery. The baby who'd been born that day would live. Gracy knew that by his lusty cry. She didn't know what he'd been named, did not know the names of the boy and girl, either. She'd never seen either one of them before that night, and there hadn't been time for introductions. It was that way sometimes.

The boy had stayed by his wife's side, rubbing her back and whispering words of love as she twisted in pain and begged Gracy to make the baby go away. It hadn't been such a long labor, but the girl was wore out even before the time came for her to push. The boy, too. She was too young, too much a girl for childbirth, and the boy had promised he'd never again put her through such pain. Gracy had smiled at that. It was never a promise to be kept.

When the pains slacked off, the boy built up the fire and heated more water. He warmed the soft rags set aside to swaddle the baby, even offered to make tea for Gracy. The thoughtfulness touched her. She'd wanted a cup and half thought to say yes before she remembered how poor the two of them were. The tea was dear bought and should be saved for the girl.

"We've no money to pay you," the boy said. "But I noticed your cabin needs chinking, and I'm right smart at it. There's nary a breeze that comes through these logs." He nodded at the walls made of logs squared off and fitted tight, chinked with mud and burro dung, and tried not to sound proud. "And she knows where the best raspberries grow. We'll bring you a pail come raspberrying time. Or a pie. She makes it better than anybody, that one."

Gracy wondered where they'd get the money for the sugar, but she said, "Pay enough," and indeed, it was better than what she got from some. Cash money, even the two dollars she charged for a birthing, was hard to come by, and she didn't always receive it. She'd have attended the girl anyway, of course. You couldn't turn down a mother, especially one giving birth to her first. So Gracy might have told the boy she didn't expect anything from him, because they didn't have anything. The bed was spread with balsam for a mattress, and a stove had been fashioned from an oil drum. Still, those two wouldn't take charity. Gracy would have to warn the women in her Swandyke quilting group about that. They'd want to help, to bring their broth and stews, their tiny quilts and shirts. They would mean well. But they'd have to be humble. They'd have to say it would

be a kindness to take the soup off their hands for they'd made too much and it would spoil. And it would pleasure them to see that blanket wrapped around another baby, would make them remember when their own were young. Would you bring us that joy? Oh, those two wouldn't take a thing if they thought it was charity.

When Gracy had lifted the sheet that was draped over the girl's legs, the boy had glanced away, ashamed as if it wasn't right to look at his wife like that.

"Ah, now," Gracy had said. "The baby's crowning."

"What?" the boy asked.

"Crowning. It means you can see the head. It's coming now. Look you."

And despite his reluctance, the boy had sent a sideward glance between his wife's legs and stood transfixed.

"Push," Gracy ordered, as the girl struggled and gripped the iron bars of the bed, the only piece of furniture in the room that was not made by hand—the boy's hand, most likely. The bed was old, the bars twisted, the brass on the knobs worn off. They'd probably found it in a deserted cabin or at the dump. "Push."

The girl pushed, her face contorting, sweat pouring off her body. She twisted, rattling the newspapers that had been spread beneath her on the bed.

The boy gripped his wife's arm, tears running down his cheeks. "Come on, honeygirl," he whispered. He glanced at Gracy, but she paid him no attention.

"Push. Oh, you're doing a fine job. You're such a good girl," Gracy coached.

"It hurts," the girl had whimpered. But she didn't ask Gracy to make it stop that time.

"Again," Gracy said, and the head popped out. "There it is. Oh, you are doing finely, the best I ever saw. You are made for babies. Push again."

The girl clutched the bars of the bed and gritted her teeth, and the baby's shoulders emerged.

"Once more," Gracy said, and the baby slipped from the girl's body. Gracy caught it in her worn hands and raised her head to smile at the new mother.

"Is my wife all right?" the boy asked.

Gracy liked that about a man, when he asked about his wife even before he'd looked to see if the baby was boy or girl.

"She is fine. She will be a strong mother."

The girl raised her head and asked, "The baby?"

"A boychild. A perfect boychild," Gracy said as she held the tiny thing in her hands, wiping it with a cloth. Reaching for the strong linen thread that lay in the basin of hot water, she'd asked the boy, "Would you like to tie it off, the cord?" She didn't always ask, but the boy had been so loving. He would be a good father.

He dipped his hands into the hot water, soaped them up, rinsed and dried them. Then as Gracy folded over the cord, the boy wrapped the linen thread around it and cut the cord with a pair of silver scissors shaped like a stork. Gracy wrapped a belly band around the infant and started to put him into the wooden box that would serve as a cradle, but instead she said, "You hold him whilst I care for your wife." She handed the baby to the father

to hold while she wrapped the afterbirth in newspaper and set it aside. The boy could burn it in the fireplace, or maybe he'd bury it. Some did. They said it made roses grow. When all was finished, Gracy asked the girl if she knew about nursing.

"I reckon I do. Ma had eleven, and I was the oldest but one."

Gracy nodded, then told the girl what to do if her milk failed to come in, gave her advice on caring for herself. She set a packet of herbs on the table and asked the boy to make a tea of them for his wife. Was there someone who would help? she asked. Her sister would come, the girl said, from over the range. The sister had had a presentiment and sent word she'd arrive just after sunup. Until then, the boy said proudly, he would take care of everything.

"You'll do finely then. I'll stop by later on to make sure everything is all right," Gracy said. She picked up the soiled rags, the ones the girl herself had set aside for the birthing. She'd launder them and bring them back. There were no sheets on the bed, just a striped tick filled with dried meadow grass with newspapers spread over it. She crumpled the papers and handed them to the boy to throw into the stove, then told him to freshen the grass in the tick when he had a minute.

He offered to hitch the horse to the buggy, but Gracy told him to stay where he was, and he turned back to his wife. Gracy could hitch that old horse in the dark and often did. She gathered her things and slipped through the doorway. Outside, in the false dawn as she hitched Buddy, the gray horse, to the buggy, she wondered if those two even noticed she was gone.

The way near the cabin was steep, not even a washboard road but a slip of a trail, impassable for a buggy in winter and

treacherous even in summer. But Buddy was sure-footed, would know the way home if she fell asleep.

Gracy leaned back against the seat now but did not think of sleeping. It had been a good birth, an easy one, although the girl wouldn't think so. Gracy wondered what number it was. She should have kept track of the babies she'd delivered, but she hadn't. She didn't even remember the number of ones who had died, and she thanked God this wasn't one of them.

A little brightness came into the sky now, the sun lighting the tips of everlasting snow on the farthest peaks, shining on the late crimson-tipped Indian paintbrush and tiny yellow wildflowers that shone like drops of molten gold in the green carpet of grass. It was a sunrise that seemed to last forever. Gracy passed a spread of stalks with bright pink blooms, the flowers the women called summer's-half-over. She'd seen them in the moonlight the night before and would have stopped to pick a bouquet for the girl, but she hadn't wanted to waste the time. She wouldn't pick them for herself, because she had flowers at home.

Gracy was good at growing things, making them thrive—flowers and babies, although not her own. She and Daniel had lost too many, poor halfway-built things that had grown inside her for only a few weeks or months. Those who had made it hadn't lived long. One had died at four weeks, another at two months. Emma, though, had lived four years, and Gracy had thought the girl was safe, perhaps because she wasn't Gracy's own flesh and blood but a weak baby given to her because the mother had had too many others to raise.

But Emma wasn't safe. She came down with a fever, cough-

ing until her throat and tongue were bloody. In her delirium, she grasped Gracy, but her tiny hands could not hold on. So Gracy caught up the child in her strong arms and held her through the night, until the child crossed over. Gracy was bowed down with grief then. Sweet Emma was as much a part of the woman as if she'd given birth to the girl herself. The child already knew the names of herbs Gracy collected and would have been trained up to follow in Gracy's footsteps as a midwife and healer. Of all of the babies given to her—her own and the sickly castoffs—only Jeff had thrived, born more than sixteen years before. Gracy was almost fifty then. The irony of it, Gracy thought. Jeff had come along when she'd given up on ever mothering a child again. And he was the one who had lived!

The heavens lightened, and the red streaks softened, filling the sky between the mountain ranges with color. The sunrise never failed to thrill Gracy, especially in the mornings when she was returning from a birthing. Babies, it seemed, liked to be born in the dark. She stopped the buggy at the overlook, Buddy waiting patiently, for the old horse was used to Gracy's fits and starts. She tightened the shawl around her, because even in midsummer, the nights were cold, and she shivered as she got down from the carriage and peered out over the valley, across to Turnbull Mountain. The morning light shone on the glory holes that pitted it, their golden waste rock spilling over the hillside.

She could make out the miners climbing up to the Buckbush and the Tiger for the morning shift. She saw a prospector with his burro make his way across the mountain, headed for somewhere along the Tenmile Range. He might have been Daniel, but

Gracy knew he wasn't. Daniel would be gone a week or two, maybe more, and he'd said the night before when she had been rousted from bed that he wouldn't go until she returned. He wouldn't just leave out without a good-bye.

He'd come home from prospecting the week before, his pockets filled with ore to be tested. The assay had shown promise, and Daniel had said he thought this would be his strike. He said that every year, and he always believed it, never more so than now when their days were growing shorter.

Silver had been discovered over the mountains in Leadville in 1875, five years earlier, and although the Tenmile was gold country, Daniel now hunted for both metals, hoping to find blossom rock, which was what they called an outcropping of ore. He worked the mines on Turnbull Mountain in the winter, but come summer, he was off. Gracy kept her thoughts to herself. She would not dash his hopes that the next strike of his pick would open up a gold or a silver vein, just as she had never lost hope that each of the babies she'd borne would live. And there was hope. Each of them had struck gold before.

Turnbull Mountain came alive now, the night silence broken. She heard the call of men as the late shift came down off the trail. The miners had made it through another night and would be wanting their glass of beer. Gracy was used to seeing men drunk after shift, even when that shift ended at sunrise. From far away came the muffled sound of a dynamite charge and the rhythmic thumping of a stamp mill.

She watched the red streaks in the sky fade to magenta and amethyst and thought again about the young family in Mayflower

Gulch, thanking God the birth had been a good one. Over the years, Gracy had watched too many women die. She thought then of the woman on Potato Mountain who had given birth to her fourth early in the summer. She had three others who were still toddlers at her feet. The birthing had gone well. Gracy had tied the cord and handed the baby to the mother, then gone to call the father. When the two returned, the mother was dead. Had the woman's heart given out or had Gracy done something wrong? she wondered. She wished she could explain it to the husband, who now had four little ones to care for. But she didn't know what had happened. That death and all the others over the years had begun to weigh her down, made her wonder if it was time she stopped delivering babies.

Gracy shook away the thoughts of death as she climbed back into the buggy and flicked the reins. "Time to get home, old horse," she told Buddy, going downslope now. Gracy was tired. Her shoulders hurt, and she hoped Daniel would rub them for her. His fingers were strong, and he would knead her back the way she kneaded bread dough, pushing out the kinks. He'd fix her tea and toast, too, and then she'd put on her nightdress and sleep. Gracy was grateful she could almost always sleep. Later, she might get out her scraps and piece a quilt for the newborn baby, maybe ask one of the women in the sewing group to join her, for there was nothing a woman liked more than making a baby quilt.

As she rode through Swandyke with its buildings scattered along feather-stitched streets, Gracy nodded at each person she passed. She didn't recognize some of them, but she was aware

that everybody knew her, so she didn't want to offend. The horse knew where to go, and without Gracy's prodding, Buddy made his way to the livery stable. He'd been standing in the cold all night and deserved his rest, too, Gracy thought, as she stopped the buggy inside the stable. She was glad the hostler was there. He would unhitch the wagon and feed Buddy for her.

Gracy gathered the birthing rags and the bag she always carried with her and got down from the buggy. "Hello, Earl, I'm back," she called to the stable boy. "Buddy could use a good rubdown if you've the time."

Earl was in conversation with three men, but they stopped talking when Gracy spoke. The men walked toward her.

"These fellows want to see you, missus," Earl said.

Gracy searched her mind. She couldn't recall any babies due just then. But there were always women back in the gulches who didn't call for her until the pains were on them. Well, it couldn't be helped. Worn out as she was, she would go to them. God always gave her strength, although for how much longer, she didn't know. She tired more easily now, and she seemed to dwell more on the hardships of birthings, the pain, the deaths. Those were other reasons she'd begun to think her time as a midwife might be over. Perhaps it was time for someone else to birth the babies, although there was no other midwife in Swandyke. She was the last one. She hadn't mentioned quitting to Daniel yet, but it was on her mind.

She waited for the men to reach her, and then she frowned. She knew them, and none was in need of her services. In fact two of them, the undertaker and the doctor, would have let their wives

die before they called for her. She couldn't imagine what they wanted.

"Missus Brookens," the third man said. She liked him better than the other two, liked him almost as much as she did Daniel. He was the sheriff, John Miller.

Gracy frowned at the "missus." "Why so formal, John?" she asked. She glanced at the two men behind him, angry men who would dance on her grave, and wondered if mischief were afoot.

When the sheriff did not answer but only cleared his throat and looked around him, Gracy said, "Be quick about it. I've just attended a birthing in Mayflower Gulch and need my sleep."

"The baby live, did it?" the undertaker snarled.

Gracy gave a slight nod.

"Well, ain't it the lucky one."

"Ignorance," the doctor added. "Midwifery's naught but ignorance and superstition, if you ask me."

Gracy did not reply to the insults. She wasn't surprised by them. Instead, she asked, "John?"

"I don't like it, don't like it a bit, waiting for you like this, like you was a scoundrel, but it can't be helped."

"What can't be helped?"

He kicked at the straw on the floor of the stable and shook his head. Then he looked square at Gracy. "I got to arrest you for murder, Gracy."

"Murder?"

The sheriff nodded.

Gracy shook her head. What the sheriff said made no sense.