



The Lucky One

By Kathleen Ernst



HANNEKE BAUER HAD a hard time washing the blood from beneath her fingernails. The water in the tin basin was icy; her fingers chapped and raw from the long, bitter winter. Finally satisfied, she left the kitchen.

When she reached the bedroom, she froze in the doorway. The blood's metallic smell had escaped her scrub brush. Stained sheets waited in one corner. But in the lamp's pale glow, Trudi Moeller dozed in bed like a Madonna. Cradled in her arms: the newborn. Klaus Moeller sat beside his wife and son. His eyes looked wet.

Hanneke swallowed hard. "Herr Moeller. Will you fetch more water?"

Klaus stroked his wife's damp black hair, then his son's cheek. Finally he pushed to his feet. "Of course," he whispered to Hanneke, laying a grateful hand on her arm as he passed.

Hanneke felt something tighten inside, just below her ribs. Whenever she was called to a woman's childbed, there came a moment like this—the work done, the screams a memory, the bed sheets changed, the new mother drowsy—when Hanneke felt her arms grow heavy with longing, and her uterus seemed to

Hanneke felt something tighten inside, just below her ribs. Whenever she was called to a woman's childbed, there came a moment like this—

shrink to a brittle husk inside. Did Trudi understand how lucky she was?

Enough, Hanneke scolded herself. Especially in this house, she should only rejoice for the new mother.

The Moellers kept to themselves, so although Hanneke had lived just three miles away for several years, she didn't know them well. But everyone knew that Trudi's mother had died suddenly before Trudi left for America. Trudi usually wore a mourning brooch made with a lock of her mother's white hair. Some years later, just before Hanneke had herself left Germany and come to the Minnesota prairie, Trudi's first child also died. Six year old Veronica. A daguerreotype of the enchanting girl, framed in gold-plate and glossy gutta percha, sat beside the bed.

Trudi's younger sister, also named Veronica, had traveled from their brother's home in St. Paul to see Trudi through this pregnancy. Just fifteen, Veronica had a quicksilver laugh, bright and fluid. Hanneke had met her six months earlier over sour cream doughnuts at a threshing supper. "Trudi didn't want me to come," Veronica had admitted, her eyes sparkling. "She wrote to say that the farm would be too lonely. So I surprised her!" And in those

golden autumn weeks, Hanneke saw the woman Trudi must have been before her daughter died. Less wary, less hunched. Hanneke had noticed the changes when local women gathered to butcher their geese; when she saw Trudi and Veronica sitting one pew ahead in church, both serene, as if confident that God did indeed have a greater plan.

And then, more tragedy. If only –

"Hanneke." Trudi's eyes were open, and she beckoned. "Come see Jacob."

Hanneke crossed the room and took the chair Klaus had vacated. "He's a fine baby." She resisted her urge to trace his cheekbone, and caress the damp black down on his head.

"A son. I prayed so hard for a son."

"Not –" Hanneke began, then swallowed the question: Not a girl, to replace your two lost Veronicas? But of course, that would be all wrong. A precious daughter, a beloved sister—neither could be replaced.

Trudi's gaze flickered to something behind Hanneke. Then the mother's eyes closed. Hanneke turned and saw Klaus, watching from the doorway. He'd spent most of the previous day there, and the last candle-lit hours of groaning labor, too. Hanneke was used to husbands who waited for news nervously in the barn, or beer-dulled in the kitchen, or even indifferent and well away with distant chores. Klaus had stayed by Trudi.

Such devotion! Hanneke blinked and busied herself, smoothing the new mother's blanket. Once composed, she tiptoed from the room, gesturing Klaus to follow.

"All is well," she told him. "Trudi needs to rest. I'll leave you now."

"No! I'll drive you."

"You need to stay with your wife and son." Hanneke reached for her woolen cape, hanging on a peg near the door. "I'll come back to check on them after I've gotten some sleep."

"At least wait until dawn, then." Klaus shifted his weight from one booted foot to the other. "It's so dark! You could get lost. Like...like my sister-in-law."

"The sky is clear," Hanneke said gently, "and the moon is near full. I'll come to no harm, I promise you."

Again he pressed her arm, an entreaty passing through the thick fingers and calluses of a farmer's hand. "You can't walk

home alone!”

“I can, and I will.” Hanneke smiled to soften the words, but did not leave room for doubt. She pulled on her mittens and opened the door. “Good night, Herr Moeller.”

And that ability to choose, she reminded herself as the door shut firmly behind her, is the silk lining of spinsterhood’s thin cape. She did not have a husband and children. She did have free will.

Moonglow on deep snow lent the night a luminescence. As Hanneke began trudging home, she was careful to follow the rutted tracks worn by sleigh runners. She paused only once, just before the road curved into a woodlot, looking back at the shadowed half-timbered house; the stable and huge grain barn hulking beyond. An unexpected shiver that had nothing to do with the temperature rippled over Hanneke’s skin. The

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farmstead looked tranquil in the moonlight. But somewhere beneath that quilt of snow lay an unmarked grave.

Hanneke had heard the whispered tales soon after arriving in Brown County. Trudi had been so crazed with grief when her daughter succumbed to a brief but brutal fever that she’d made Klaus bury their child secretly on their farm before the priest could object and demand a churchyard funeral. Hanneke had visited the Moellers several times—to help scutch flax, to fetch the kraut tamp she’d hired Klaus to make—and she couldn’t stop wondering. There, beneath the gentle maple? Or there, beside the roses grown from a cutting from Germany? “Trudi won’t speak of it,” Anna Schmidt, Hanneke’s closest neighbor, had told her.

And now—Hanneke let her gaze linger on the frozen acres of wind-carved snow beyond the outbuildings. Somewhere beneath the drifts lay another body. Another Veronica, Trudi’s laughing sister, who’d disappeared during a sudden, fierce November blizzard.

Otto Schmidt, Anna’s husband, had helped search. “Trudi said her sister went out to the stable to milk,” he’d told Anna and Hanneke. “I don’t know what Klaus

was thinking, letting a young woman head out like that! Of course, it was different in the old country. Everything closed up. Here, there’s so much space, the buildings all apart...” He’d spread his hands. “In a blizzard, it’s not hard to lose sight of where you’re going. Poor girl, she might have missed the stable by a whisker and never known it. We criss-crossed the fields without finding a trace.”

But they would, Hanneke thought, and abruptly turned back toward home. Thank God the newborn Jacob seemed strong. Trudi would need her boy, and all the care her husband could give her. When the snow melted, someone would find Veronica.

And it might not be too long, now. Hanneke had been inside with Trudi all day, but the comb of wicked icicles hanging from the eaves above the bedroom window had dripped incessantly beyond the pane. Even now, long past sundown, the night felt raw and damp. Before Hanneke was halfway home the wet cold had seeped through her cape. Her fingers ached inside their thick mittens. Her toes burned, then went numb, inside their thick stockings and sturdy clogs. She’d been foolish, perhaps, to refuse Klaus’s offer of a ride. But it was usually easier to struggle through a task alone than to accept help and company, only to lose them again.

The afternoon’s thaw had re-sculpted the landscape, coating the drifts with a glistening glaze of ice. Hanneke’s shoes crunched in the ruts. More than once she kept her balance only by windmilling her arms. The prairie between the farmsteads was the tractless tallgrass common to southern Minnesota, but tonight there was no wind—a rare blessing. And the night’s utter stillness held neither the certain loneliness of her own frigid house or the nagging discomfort that came from plunging into another family’s home through the intensely personal hours of childbirth.

She passed the Schmidt place and was almost home when a sudden flash of light caught her eye. She stopped, retraced a few steps. Yes, there—a glint, tiny but sharper than its surroundings. Some bauble dropped and forgotten by young lovers courting by sleigh? No, the diminutive sparkle was off the road, where the snow was untouched.

Hanneke stepped cautiously from the

track into snow drifted higher than her knees. This was harder going, the pretty glaze now a slippery crust. She floundered nearer, frowning, still puzzled. She was almost upon the strange glint before her brain perceived the other shape, dull white rising from icy sheen. The tip of a tree branch, scoured barkless and wind-tumbled out to the prairie?

Squinting, Hanneke leaned close. Again, that tiny flash—the wink of moonlight on gold. A gold ring. But how did a gold ring get caught on a twig—

Gott in Himmel.

Hanneke jerked back violently, falling, breaking the crust and half-burying herself. Cold snow fell down her collar. Hot, bitter bile rose in her throat.

The gold ring was on a woman’s finger. The tree branch was in fact a woman’s frozen hand, reaching from the snow.

Two hours later, the body of Trudi’s sister Veronica lay curled on the daybed in Hanneke’s parlor.

“Coffee’s ready,” Hanneke said, turning from the cooking nook in her kitchen with the pot. Sheriff Peter Lang sat slouched at her table. His farm abutted Hanneke’s land, and he rented most of her fields. Acres of wheat and a chronically ill wife kept him busy enough without the occasional trouble that required his legal authority. Still, he was a friend, really. Someone Hanneke trusted. She’d even thought that perhaps, if his wife died...

Lang accepted the steaming cup. “Thank you.” His breath puffed white.

Hanneke poured herself a cup, cradling it gratefully between her mittened hands before taking a sip. She had dreaded coming home to a dark, cold, empty house. She had never imagined *this*, though—a man in her kitchen and a body in her parlor. Hanneke put the cup down abruptly, seeing again Veronica’s white marble face emerge as the sheriff had dug her from the snow.

“Are you all right?”

“That poor girl...” Hanneke met Lang’s gaze. “She’d walked almost three miles through a blizzard! Why did she come so far?”

Sheriff Lang slumped lower in his chair. “She obviously got lost in the storm.”

“But Veronica died just off the road.”

Hanneke shuddered as she imagined all the

people—herself included—who had blithely passed within feet of the body during these relentless weeks of bitter cold and snow. “If she had been traveling from Trudi and Klaus’s farm, she would have passed the Schmidt place before getting to mine.”

“Perhaps it was sheer coincidence, her dying by the road. Perhaps she just wandered overland through the storm until her strength deserted her.”

“That seems a fantastical coincidence, surely.”

Dawn spilled in the windows like cream as the sheriff regarded her. “The body has been found,” he said finally. “That’s all that matters. At least Trudi and Klaus can bury her now.” Lang drained his cup. “When it’s full light, I’ll borrow a sleigh big enough to carry the body over with some decorum. My cutter won’t do. Now, though, I best get started toward their place. They deserve to know.” He sighed. “Will you come? It’s good to have a neighbor-woman on hand when the sheriff arrives with bad news.”

“Yes, of course,” Hanneke murmured. “And later, I’ll lay the girl out. Trudi must know that I’ll tend her sister with care.”

“At least Trudi has the new baby,” Sheriff Lang said. “And Klaus. I never saw a man dote so on his wife.”

“Trudi’s lucky in that,” Hanneke agreed.

After Lang left to fetch his horse and cutter, Hanneke walked into the parlor. Something bothered her, something undefined. She added another log to the tiny corner stove. She’d already lit candles. Veronica’s frozen skin was so white it was hard to remember the rosy-cheeked girl she’d been.

Hanneke slowly crouched by the daybed. She pulled off her mittens. Veronica was wrapped in a thick cape of green wool, and it took Hanneke several minutes to work the clumsy brass closures. Finally she managed, and opened the cape. The ring—a tiny circlet worn on one pinkie—blinked at her.

Veronica wore a pretty blue dress. Hanneke smoothed the fabric. It was a fine dress, really. As nice as her own Sunday best. How kind of Veronica to help with chores, wearing such a dress! Hanneke imagined her laughing, waving her pregnant sister back into a chair. “I’ll take care of the cows,” she might have said. “No point in you going out in the snow.” For the snow must have already been falling if it was blowing so hard that Veronica had lost

her way. Or had Veronica done the milking first, and opened the door to find the house lost in a howling swirl of white?

“So, why didn’t you wait out the storm in the stable?” Hanneke murmured. “Or at least tie a rope around your waist before leaving?”

No answer, of course. Hanneke gave the skirt a final tug...and her fingers found something hard and lumpy beneath the wool. A pocket. Should she leave this for Trudi? No. Better to have everything tended to.

Hanneke pulled the pocket open, then scraped its contents into her own lap. She stared as coins clinked against her apron. A quick finger touched them as she counted: almost three dollars. A lot of money for a girl to carry. Especially as she headed to a milking stool.

There was one more item besides, a lump wrapped in a handkerchief. Hanneke unwrapped the treasure and found a mourning brooch. A twist of white hair was captured beneath glass on a black background, encased in a thin gold frame. “Ah,” she breathed softly. The brooch was identical to the one she’d often seen Trudi wearing.

But beneath the brooch lay something else: a single black curl.

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This was troubling. Hanneke eyed the curl, the brooch, and the coins for a long moment.

Then she put them on the table. She’d find the appropriate moment to give them to Trudi. And she’d swallow her questions, too. What was the use of wondering? All she could do for either the dead girl or her grieving sister was to lay Veronica out sweetly for burial.

The stove was finally throwing heat. Hanneke put a firm hand on Veronica’s shoulder, hoping she could ease the body from its protective curl. It wasn’t ready to relax, not yet—but the clumsy effort did reveal something unexpected. Pinned to Veronica’s bodice, previously hidden, was a mourning brooch bearing a white curl. It was identical to the one Hanneke had found tucked into the dead girl’s pocket.

A few minutes later, Hanneke wrapped

herself in her cloak and stepped into Sheriff Lang’s cutter. It was small, as he’d said—better suited to courting than the bearing of bad news. She was aware of his warm bulk beside her. As the cutter lurched forward, she told him what she’d found.

“What does it matter?” he asked. “A few coins, a mourning brooch. You can return them to Trudi.”

“No, two mourning brooches,” Hanneke said. “I think that’s odd. I’d like to stop at the place where I found the body. Just for a moment. We might have missed something.”

He gave her a long look. “Very well.”

Hanneke had already returned to the spot once, and stood watching numbly as Sheriff Lang dug Veronica from the snow. This time she dropped to her knees and scrabbled in the nearby drifts. A few minutes later she rose empty-handed, brushing ice crystals from her skirt and cloak. Veronica had evidently not been carrying anything when she’d finally staggered and fallen. Hanneke tilted her head, eyes narrowed, considering. Then she climbed back into the cutter. “Nothing.”

“What did you think you’d find?” he asked, as they set out again.

“A carpetbag, or maybe a bundle. I thought she might be running away.”

“Fraulein Bauer,” he said. “Perhaps you think too much.”

Hanneke pressed her lips into a tight line. As they jolted down the road she thought of her brother’s wife, back in Germany. “Of course you’re not married,” she’d once told Hanneke. “What man would want a wife who thinks so much?”

Now, Hanneke lifted her chin. It was bad enough that she remained a spinster even here, where men desperately needed help-mates. She was not willing to stop thinking as well.

Because Trudi was still in bed, Hanneke delivered the news. Trudi took it hard. Hanneke spent an awkward moment watching Trudi weep, and watching Klaus trying vainly to give comfort, before leaving them alone. She heard the ring of ax on block in the back yard, and found Sheriff Lang splitting kindling.

“How is Trudi?” he asked.

Hanneke thrust her hands into her armpits. The sun might melt away more

snow later, but the morning was still frigid. “Not good. She surely knew it was coming, but...”

He reached for another log to split. “It’s still a shock, I imagine.”

Hanneke wondered if he was thinking of his own wife, fading away. “Yes.”

“Klaus is with her?”

“Yes.” Klaus, ever protective. Klaus...perhaps jealous, too? Had Klaus been jealous of the obvious deep bond between Trudi and her sister?

“I’ll check on them,” Hanneke said, studying the sheriff. Dark smudges shadowed his eyes. “Do you mind staying a few minutes more?”

He positioned the log, raised the ax, brought it down with a mighty blow. “All right.”

“Thank you.” Hanneke nodded, then climbed the steps and let herself in the back door.

In the bedroom, Trudi lay curled on one side. Klaus sat beside her, rubbing her back. He was murmuring something, his tone cajoling. Baby Jacob slept in his cradle.

When Klaus glanced up, Hanneke beckoned him back to the kitchen. “I didn’t want to leave without knowing how you’re both doing,” she told him.

“That’s very kind,” he murmured, giving her shoulder a squeeze. “You must be exhausted. I don’t expect you got the sleep you went home for.”

“How is Trudi?”

“Grieving.” He hesitated. “I’m grateful that Veronica was found, of course! But I wish Trudi didn’t have to confront this right now.”

“I’ll go see her. Perhaps you can help Sheriff Lang at the woodpile. We’ll want to keep the house warm for Trudi and Jacob.”

But Klaus Moeller followed her into the bedroom. “My wife needs *me*,” he said stubbornly.

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Trudi rolled over. “Hanneke?” she whispered. “Where is she?”

“At my house, for now. I’ve tended her the best I could. She’s wearing a lovely blue wool dress, but would you prefer something else? Her best dress, perhaps? Did you keep her things?”

“I did keep her things, but—no.” Trudi looked away. “The blue dress will be fine.”

So, Hanneke thought. The blue dress likely was Sunday best.

“And don’t fetch the priest,” Trudi added. “I won’t have it.”

“I worry about her grief,” Klaus murmured. “I don’t know what to do for her!” His voice rose, cracking on the final word.

“You can go make some hot tea,” Hanneke said firmly. She held his gaze this time, waiting until he disappeared before leaning close to the woman in the bed. “Trudi,” she whispered. “I must talk with you.”

For a moment she thought Trudi wouldn’t respond. Finally the other woman laboriously pushed herself up. Hanneke tucked an extra pillow behind Trudi’s back.

“The sheriff said you found my sister. Almost to your place.”

“Yes. And that seemed...odd, to me.”

Trudi fingered a tiny hole in the worn linen sheet.

Hanneke had rehearsed her words; still, it was hard to know where to start. “Shall I cut a lock of your sister’s hair? You could make a mourning brooch.”

“Yes, I suppose I’d like that.”

“I know how much you prize the mourning brooch made with a lock of your mother’s hair. And I imagine Veronica treasured hers as well.”

“Yes. Of course.”

Klaus returned, empty-handed. He came to the bed and brushed a strand of hair from Trudi’s forehead. “I’m glad to see you sitting up, *liebchen*.”

“The tea?” Hanneke asked.

“I put the pot over the fire. It will boil soon enough.”

Hanneke pressed her lips together, then stood. “I’ll just tend to it, shall I?”

In the kitchen, she added a stick to the fire, then slipped back outside. “Sheriff Lang.”

He put the ax aside. “Is everything all right?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Hanneke shivered. She should have grabbed her cloak. “I’ve a favor to ask.”

“Yes?”

“I’d like you to call Klaus outside. Keep him busy for a few moments.”

His eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Because I need to talk with Trudi. Alone.”

“I’ve no reason to ask a man to leave his wife’s side when she’s just had bad news—and that on top of a birthing,” Lang objected.

“I’m asking you to *think* of a reason,” Hanneke said. And to trust me, she added silently. Trust me, as I would trust you.

“And I’ll ask again: why?”

Hanneke studied his face. He was tired. He was probably worried about his ill wife and his own chores, and eager to be done with this business. “I’m not sure,” she said finally. “But I promise you, I’ll tell you when I *know*. For now, I’m asking you to please, just do as I ask.”

She didn’t dare wait for his response, and instead went back inside. Steam was rising from the tin pot on the stove. She heard the ring of Lang’s ax as she brewed Trudi a cup of tea. Well, she’d tried.

Back in the bedroom, she handed Trudi the mug. “Sip this. It can only help.”

Trudi had almost finished the tea when Hanneke heard the back door open. Sheriff Lang’s footsteps stopped just outside the bedroom door. “Klaus? Can you come outside?”

Klaus frowned. “My wife needs me. What do you want?”

“A private word.”

Klaus hesitated, then bent to kiss Trudi’s forehead. “I won’t be gone for long, *liebchen*. Remember that. I won’t be far away.”

Hanneke waited until the men were outside before speaking. “Trudi. Tell me about the two mourning brooches.”

“There’s little to tell.” Trudi swirled the dregs of tea in her mug. “When my mother died, we cut locks of her hair. My brother got a watch fob. I had mine and Veronica’s made into brooches.”

“I know you treasure yours. I’ve seen you wear it often. But not lately. Where is your mourning brooch, Trudi?”

Trudi stared down at the mug.

Hanneke felt the seconds ticking by with a growing sense of urgency. “When I tended to Veronica’s body, I noticed she was wearing her brooch. But I found a second brooch, wrapped in a handkerchief,

tucked into her pocket. I also found a lock of *your* hair.”

Trudi’s eyes went glassy with tears before she hid them beneath the crook of one arm.

Hanneke could hear the men’s voices from outside, and glanced over her shoulder. No telling how long the sheriff would keep Klaus occupied. “I wondered why Veronica had both mourning brooches, of course. I wondered why she was wearing her best dress to go milk cows, and why she carried money as well. At first I thought, might Veronica have been running away? Did she take money and the jewelry and —”

“No!” Trudi dropped her arm. “She didn’t want to go.”

Ah, there it was. “Did Klaus ask her to leave?” Hanneke asked quietly. “Was he jealous of the attachment between you two? His affection for you is so strong. . . .”

A tear rolled down Trudi’s cheek. “I told her to leave! I forced her go. I sent her to you.”

Hanneke sat back, blinking. “To me? Why?”

“Because you’re the only wise woman I know. The only woman who hasn’t let herself be trapped.”

Jacob whimpered from his cradle. Trudi eased the infant up as Hanneke struggled to make sense of her words. The men’s voices seemed to be rising. “Tell me,” she commanded.

Trudi nestled Jacob at her breast. “Veronica had to leave because of Klaus. He’d been watching her. Touching her—oh, just in passing. But one day I looked in her eyes and knew. I knew he’d pressed too far. She didn’t want to tell me, but I made her talk. He hadn’t hurt her. Not yet. But I wouldn’t have my sister suffer as my daughter did.”

“As your daughter did. . . .” Something sick and sour rose in Hanneke’s throat again, as if she had stumbled over a second body.

“My little girl is not dead,” Trudi said, her voice flat and cold as granite. “But she was damaged.”

“Not dead?”

Trudi gripped Hanneke’s wrist with surprising strength. “You must not tell anyone! When Klaus took his wheat to St. Paul that autumn, I dug a grave near the dahlias, and filled it again. Klaus thinks our daughter died of the fever, and that I buried her.”

Hanneke tried to take this in, to under-

stand. “So where —”

“You know Frau Kappel, in town? Her sister is a nun, did you know that? She had been visiting, but I knew she was traveling back to the convent that day. I waited for her by the road. I told her what had happened. And I gave my sweet Veronica up, so she could be safe.”

“Safe from *Klaus*?” Hanneke rubbed her forehead. It seemed impossible. And yet. . . she remembered how Klaus had touched *her*. Casually, but with more familiarity than was customary.

“You don’t believe me.” Trudi gave a weary laugh. “But it’s true. You can’t imagine what I’ve endured at the hands of that man.”

“But—but Trudi, if Klaus has been so abusive, why not tell someone?”

Trudi stared at Jacob. “Who? My parents are dead. My brother is busy with his own family in the city.”

“The priest —”

“The *priest*? I tried, long ago. He told me to be a good wife and submit to my husband’s wishes in all things.”

Hanneke’s hands clenched in her skirt. “Sheriff Lang, then.”

“Do you think he’d believe me over Klaus?” She touched her infant’s ear; his tiny, perfect fingers.

“The sheriff is a good man,” Hanneke began, but her voice faltered. “You—you could have left yourself, then.”

“How? I’d managed to hide away a few coins from selling goose livers in town, that’s all. Hardly enough to live on.”

“You could have come to me!”

“And Klaus would have committed me to an asylum. He’s told me as much, many times. I can’t let that happen. I hope to see my daughter again one day. And now I have my boy to raise.” Trudi kissed his cheek.

“But—but why did Veronica have to leave right *then*? Why couldn’t it wait?” Hanneke struggled to hold in tears. “You sent that poor girl into a storm! She froze to death!”

Trudi swiped at her eyes, but spoke quietly. “I had no choice. We only had a few minutes alone that day because a neighbor fetched Klaus to help lift some furniture from his wagon. I gave my sister the lock of my hair for remembrance, and my mourning brooch to pass to my daughter, and the few coins I’d hidden. I saw the storm brewing, but who could have known it would

blow so fierce, so fast? No, Veronica had to go right then. If she hadn’t left when she did, it might have been too late.”

“But now your sister is *dead*!”

Trudi finally looked up from her baby. “My sister is the lucky one.”

The back door banged open and a gust of wind blew chill into the bedroom. Klaus hurried in and crouched beside the bed. “Ah, *liebchen*,” he murmured. “You are so beautiful. You and my fine son.”

Hanneke rose and walked stiffly from the room. She poked at the kitchen fire, straightened a crooked towel. She put her cloak on, and her mittens. Then she opened the back door and went outside.

Sheriff Lang was waiting. “Well?”

Hanneke had promised him that she’d share what she learned. She opened her mouth, closed it again. *Gott in Himmel*.

Lang’s eyebrows rose. “So, what is it? It was no easy task keeping Klaus out here as long as I did. I need to take care of the body, and to check on my wife. Do you have something to tell me?”

I’m so tired, Hanneke thought. She was torn between what might be. . . and what was.

“Fraulein?”

“I’ve nothing to tell you,” she said finally.

He shook his head—half disgusted, half weary.

“You go ahead,” she told him. “I’ll walk after all.”

As Hanneke began trudging home, she tried to empty her mind of the sheriff, of Trudi, of Klaus. I have nothing left, she thought. Not even the dream.

But. . . no. That wasn’t quite true. She did not have a husband and children. She did have free will. And her own cozy home was waiting.