



Touched

By Candace Simar

Emma Wilson added flour to the lump of dough on her kitchen table. Sweat dripped from her face and a pesky fly buzzed around her ears. If she hurried, she might finish the kneading before the baby woke up from his nap. If she did everything right, she might gather cucumbers before Selmer returned from town. She punched and rolled the dough, shooping flies as she worked. She would make pickles when it was cool enough to light the stove. She hoped it would be cooler by then.

The sound of a horse's hooves and a creaking harness raised a warning bark from Rex. The dog's commotion woke the baby.

Emma peeked out the kitchen curtain and glimpsed a sulky at the front stoop. Must be some kind of drummer, though the man carried no sample bag. He removed his hat and mopped his face with a handkerchief. Heat waves shimmered off the fields of wheat and corn. The horse lolled his tongue and snorted. Emma had used the last of the water from the trough for the washing.

Good Lord, of all times for company. Emma took a breath, wiped her hands on a dish towel, and fetched the screaming baby.

"Hush," Emma said. She needed a quarter hour to change and nurse the baby. She glanced out the bedroom window and counted the heads of children playing by the corncrib. Ezra was naked again and wallowed in a puddle like a hog. She depended on nine-year-old Marvin to keep watch over him and the two girls. The girls never wandered, but five-year-old Ezra couldn't be trusted a minute.

A sharp rap at the door and then another. Rex barked a frenzy. The baby screeched.

Doctor Gamla once said that if you can't go around something, hike up your petticoats and plow straight ahead.

Emma crooned and bounced the baby on her hip as she

tossed a dish towel over the bread dough. She pushed a stray lock behind her ear. She looked a sight.

Emma opened the door. "Quiet, Rex!" The dog jumped between Emma and the stranger. Rex was a good judge of character, at least that's what Selmer said.

The visitor was neither old nor young, fat nor thin, short nor tall, and his smile showed a lot of teeth. "I'm Pastor Prince, the new minister replacing Pastor Tingvald." He stretched out his hand. "I'm visiting everyone in the parish."

Emma reached to shake but pulled back when she noticed the bread dough stuck between her fingers. "Forgive me, Parson. You've interrupted my kneading bowl."

The baby yelled to nurse, pulling at Emma's buttons and pounding on her chest. Emma pointed the parson to a kitchen chair and found a cracker for the baby to gnaw. It didn't remedy the dirty diaper.

"Teething," Emma said, not exactly the truth but at least an explanation. "You missed my husband. He went into town for parts. Harvest time, you know." The coffeepot was empty as was the water bucket. She had nothing baked. The preacher would have to go without the customary coffee and cookies. The children shrieked in the distance and Emma hoped with all her might they didn't come marching into the house.

"Hot weather we're having, missus," Pastor Prince said. He danced his handkerchief in front of his face like a fan, or maybe because of the diaper odor. "I had no idea North Dakota would be so intemperate. Back in Wisconsin we enjoyed the moderating wind off Lake Superior. Let us pray for rain to end this heatwave."

Rain would be a disaster. The binder crew charged by the day and required dry weather.

The baby howled. Rex growled. Emma felt paralyzed with helplessness. She had to nurse the baby.

"You've caught me at a bad time," she said. A decent person would leave.

"I'll get to the point. We're having a Sunday school picnic on Sunday afternoon. It's a chance for us to get acquainted." He showed more teeth. "I'm here to invite your family and ask you to bring pies for the ice cream social afterward."

A scarlet fever epidemic had closed Sunday school for the summer. Doctor Gamla urged everyone to keep their

children home until the pestilence passed. The old doctor woman recommended special caution for Ezra, still puny from last year's pneumonia.

The preacher must be unaware of the epidemic.

"With the scarlet fever going round, we're staying close to home. For all our children's sake, of course, but our Ezra is . . ." Emma fished for the right words to describe her young son. "He's small for his age, and a little . . . backward," she said, settling on a word that put Ezra in a better light. She hated the word *retarded*.

"I saw your children from the road," Pastor Prince said. "They look healthy enough."

Emma swallowed hard. "We're trying to keep it that way," she said. "The epidemic . . ."

"Can I count on you for three pies? Mrs. Ellingson signed up for baked beans. Mrs. Barry promises fried chicken. Mrs. Scrimshaw will make potato salad and Mrs. Rorvig will provide fixings for ice cream and lemonade." He smacked his lips. "The whole town will be there."

A picnic. Ice cream. A chance to see neighbors. Emma hadn't been off the farm for almost three months. The temptation dangled like a dream. Doctor Gamla's warning brought Emma back to her senses. A taste of ice cream was not worth a funeral.

"We're staying home until the sickness passes," she said with a shake of her head. "Sorry to miss it."

The teeth hid behind a distinct frown. The sounds of laughing children floated through the window. Rex growled at her feet.

"The Good Book promises protection from pestilence. And if your boy is feeble minded, all the more reason for him to play with children his own age," Parson Prince said, showing his teeth again. "Don't live in fear, my good woman."

She was not his good woman. God had not spared Libby Morgan's baby. Her friend was a good person, a church member, and yet her baby died from scarlet fever.

The baby threw the cracker on the floor and grabbed her buttons. He banged his head against her chest and reached inside her dress. He wouldn't wait any longer.

"I'm sorry, but we won't attend the picnic."

The teeth vanished. "Don't be the missing link in our chain of fellowship, Mrs. Wilson."

Of all the nerve. She gathered strength to mind her manners. "Thank you for your visit." Her face burned and she no longer made any attempt to quell the baby's howls.

Pastor Prince looked around as if waiting for cookies, got up from his chair and headed out the door. He paused and

handed her an engraved calling card that read *Reverend Eliphatheth Prince*. Emma stood in the doorway, holding the card and screaming baby as he hitched his trousers and climbed into his sulky.

Emma counted heads. The girls slopped happily in their mud pies. Ezra raced toward the house with Marvin in close pursuit. Ezra, covered in mud and nothing else, ran alongside the preacher's sulky, waving until the horse pulled ahead and beyond reach.

Emma's face burned. Naked and covered in mud. What must he think of them? He had no idea how busy she was with five children and the farm chores. He had no idea how hard it was to be Ezra's mother. Ezra was more trouble than ten children.

Last week Ezra stuffed kernels of dried corn up his nose. Emma held the boy down while Selmer removed the kernels with tweezers. Ezra screamed as if he were being scalped by Red Indians, but immediately returned to the corncrib and stuffed his nose again. Selmer's spanking did nothing but cause another tantrum.

Ezra was different from any child she had ever known, but she wouldn't risk losing him to scarlet fever.

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Light touched Ezra's yellow hair like sun on water. His thin legs churned across the grassy field, and Marvin followed on his heels. The prairie appeared flat and empty, but there were a million dips and hiding places. This time of year, the cornfield might swallow a little boy forever. Especially a boy like Ezra who refused to answer to his name.

This was not the life she wanted for her children, but it was the best she and Selmer could provide. The farm required all of Selmer's attention. Emma's garden and chickens fed them through the winter. She had to can and preserve to survive. That left Marvin to watch over the little ones. It wasn't fair, but it was reality.

Pastor Tingvald closed the church back in May when the epidemic first started. The dear man said that a child's life was more important than human schedules. Of course, Pastor Tingvald and his wife lost a son many years ago. He

knew no one fully recovered from such tragedy.

How Emma had wept at the news of the preacher's unexpected death. They had not attended his funeral, although it felt wrong to stay home.

Emma settled in the rocking chair to nurse the starving baby. Lordy, Lordy, she had enough to do in this heat without more baking, especially with cucumbers to pickle and beans to can. Not to mention the binding crew. Emma swiped an angry tear on her cheek. Why did the town women with so few outside chores bring the easiest items? Mrs. Rorvig down for lemonade? Emma swallowed hard.

She wouldn't bring pies, weak link or not. The baby finished nursing with a contented burp. Emma placed him on the floor with a wooden spoon to keep him occupied. He banged it on the floor, chortled with surprise, and banged it again.

Rex barked. Emma looked out the door. Old Doctor Gamla climbed down from an old pony nearly as ancient as she. Rex wagged his tail. She wasn't really a doctor, but everyone depended on her for help in time of sickness or childbed. Marvin and Ezra hurried to pat the mule.

"Watch out," Doctor Gamla warned. "Bruno is mean-tempered on the best of days. He'll take a bite out of you if you get too close." Her voice wheezed with age, and she held a gnarled hand to her stooped back.

Marvin backed away, but Ezra leaned close to the pony. Bruno snapped his teeth and Ezra stuck a wounded finger into his mouth with a howl.

"That's what you get," Emma said. "Marvin, pump water for the poor horse and bring a bucket into the kitchen. Ezra, quit your crying and put your clothes on."

Doctor Gamla's face pruned with wrinkles, and she reeked of camphor and garlic from an asphidity bag hanging around her neck to prevent sickness. Though she was as old as Methuselah, she still helped wherever she was needed.

"Come in," Emma said. "I was hoping to see you."

"Is someone sick?" Doctor Gamla looked from the baby to Marvin and Ezra. Her eyes always surprised Emma with their blue brilliance. "One of the girls?"

"No," Emma said. "We're fine. I'm just lonesome for a little company."

Emma motioned the old woman to a chair and resumed her kneading.

"Goodness me," Doctor Gamla said. She fanned a face as pasty white as the dough on the table. "Met the new preacher on the road. He's going house-to-house to drum up a church picnic."

"He was here," Emma said.

"I told him flat out that no one in their right mind would picnic in the middle of an epidemic," Doctor Gamla said. "The Jorgenson children have it and the Harrington boy lost his hearing."

"What did he say to that?" Emma thumped the dough and placed it in the bowl with a towel over the top for flies. The air was thick with them this time of the year.

"He said God was bigger than pestilence." Doctor Gamla twisted her mouth and filled her cheek with her tongue. "I told him that the God I know gives people common sense."

Marvin splashed the bucket down by the table. Ezra held the screen door wide. He stood naked as a jay bird.

"Shut the door for the flies," Emma said. "Help your brother find his clothes." She took a glass from the shelf. The boys ran off. "It's been too hot to fire the stove for coffee."

"Cold well water is the best there is," Doctor Gamla said. She drained the glass and Emma refilled it. The baby banged the spoon on the floor with a grin.

"I'm drowning in work here," Emma said. "Binders coming tomorrow and the threshers close after. The garden is coming in and on top of it all, the preacher wants pies for the picnic."

Doctor Gamla pursed her lips. Emma swatted flies and the baby threw the spoon across the floor with a clatter.

"And Ezra," Emma said. She retrieved the spoon for the baby. "You know how he is." Her voice trailed off.

Doctor Gamla emptied her glass. "What did you tell the preacher?"

"We wouldn't be coming," Emma said. "Even without the fever, harvest time makes it impossible to get away."

The old woman wiped her lip with the back of her hand. She rocked back and forth in her chair. Her widow's weeds shined with wear.

"I need your advice," Emma said. "Or better yet one of your cures. I'm doing something wrong. No matter how hard I work I can't keep up with everything to do."

The old woman closed her eyes. Emma went to the door and counted heads again. When she returned, the old woman dozed by the table with her chin on her chest. The baby slammed the spoon, waking the old woman with a start.

"Slow down," Doctor Gamla said. "Even a turtle gets there by putting one foot in front of the other."

Emma nodded. The old woman meant well, but Emma would have to move faster than a turtle to keep ahead during harvest.

Doctor Gamla creaked to her feet and stretched her back. Emma followed her outside and helped the woman onto her pony. Doctor Gamla clucked her tongue and started Bruno toward the road. The children squealed from the puddle. Ezra was still naked. The old woman turned around in her saddle.

"Bake the damn pies," Doctor Gamla said. "Preachers come and go, but your neighbors are forever. Don't make hard feelings."

Emma snorted. Over her dead body.

Heat lightning started around suppertime, flickering like a ring of fire around the farm. Ezra pointed to the lights, clapping his hands and making the high-pitched squeal that meant he was happy.

"We don't need to go into town for fireworks," Selmer said. "Mother Nature is putting on a Fourth of July celebration right here on the farm."

"But Pa," Marvin said. "It's August."

"So it is," Selmer said. "Close enough."

After supper, Selmer scooped Ezra into his arms and took him outside, holding tight lest the boy make a run for it. Ezra reached with both hands, grunting and straining to touch the lightning. Selmer lifted the boy to his shoulders, Ezra's legs dangling down the front of his chest. Ezra squealed to go higher.

Emma popped the girls in the washtub. Pickle brine simmered on the back burner. It was hot enough to melt the butter in the dish. She took the loaves out of the oven and put a cake in before she tucked the girls into bed. Ezra's squeals sounded from the porch.

"Enough," Selmer said. "You're getting too heavy for your papa." He lowered Ezra to the stoop and pulled out his pipe. The odor of tobacco blended with the spicy brine simmering on the stove.

"Time for baths, boys, and then bed." Selmer eyed the sky as he spoke. "Potatoes are growing out your ears."

Ezra's squeals turned to howls. Selmer oversaw the baths and herded the boys into bed. The girls were already asleep.

Emma scrubbed cucumbers as clouds swirled in grays and greens. Heat lightning never let up and a steady rumbling surrounded them. The air felt like water, and for once, the prairie wind was still.

"It's too hot to sleep," Marvin said from the bedroom.

"Leave the window open if the bugs aren't too bad," Emma said. Gray exhaustion sharpened her voice. Marvin was a good boy. She softened her tone. "Tomorrow morning I'll

let you chop the heads off the pullets. You're old enough to help with the butchering." To feed extra men meant a long day in the kitchen. At least the bread was baked and there would be cake for dessert.

She lit the lamp.

"Eerie," Selmer said. "Dark clouds from the northwest. Could be hail. Or a cyclone."

Their mutual worry lay silent between them. *Dear God, not the wheat.* Everything depended on the harvest.

"Think we should head to the cellar?" She hated to wake the children unless it was a true emergency.

"Not yet," Selmer said, but he propped open the trapdoor in the corner of the kitchen and lit the second lamp. A root cellar under the house was their hidey-hole from twisters. "It might go north of us."

Together, they finished the cucumbers. Selmer kept glancing out the window to check the weather. Emma scalded a crock and packed the cucumbers as she told Selmer about the preacher's visit.

"A picnic in the middle of an epidemic. Can you believe it?" Emma said.

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"I saw Jeffers Morgan at the mill," Selmer said. "Little Ulysses is back to full strength." Selmer paused. "He just shook his head when I asked about Libby."

"How would any mother endure the loss of a child?" Emma said. She would write a letter and post it by mail. Poor Libby needed a friend.

"Makes no sense for a picnic this time of year, fever or no fever," Selmer said. "Who has time to lollygag in the churchyard with crops in the field? If the wheat shocks are done tomorrow the threshers will come on Monday."

Emma swallowed hard. She'd be baking pies, all right, but not for a picnic.

"The preacher said I was living in fear," Emma said. The words brought a bad taste to her mouth. "He wasn't chary with advice. You should have seen us. The kids slogged in

mud, Ezra running naked after the sulky, I looked a fright, the baby howled and wanted to nurse, and Rex didn't like the man at all."

"Rex knows," Selmer said. "He always does."

A rumble of thunder and a jagged bolt of lightning pierced the sky.

"You have enough to do," Selmer said. "Let the preacher bake his own pies, if he's so set on having them. I'll stop by the parsonage and tell him that Mrs. Selmer Wilson is indisposed and unable to accommodate."

"Be sure to leave an engraved calling card," Emma said with a giggle. Selmer always made her laugh. "He'll still expect pies."

"I'll box his ears if he makes a fuss," Selmer said. He feinted boxing moves around the kitchen. "Doctor Gamla said that Pearl Ellingson works out as a chore girl sometimes."

Emma knew Pearl from church, a quiet girl who helped her mother with the younger children. "You saw Doctor Gamla?"

Selmer nodded. "Met her on the road. She'll make arrangements for Pearl to come by tomorrow and stay until the threshers are gone."

Bless Doctor Gamla. Extravagant, but a great help to have help for a few days. Emma blinked a tear.

The rumbling grew closer, and wind fluttered the curtains. Emma's dress hung sticky with sweat. She stuffed dill and garlic cloves into the giant crock. Selmer came behind and wrapped his arms around her waist. He kissed the back of her sweaty neck. He smelled of sweat and tobacco. Heat radiated from his body. Emma leaned into him.

"A picnic would be nice," Emma said. "How long has it been since we've had ice cream?"

"When I sell the wheat, I'll buy two blocks of ice from Old Man Jenkins. Maybe three. We'll gorge on ice cream until we freeze our stomachs."

"Oh you." Emma wiggled out of his grip. She poured boiling brine over the filled crock. Vinegar and spices filled the room. Emma fixed the lid and Selmer pulled the crock to the corner of the kitchen opposite the trapdoor. They would move it to the cellar after the pickles had time to ferment. How good they would taste in the dead of winter.

"Finished," Emma said. Another crack of thunder. Selmer pulled back the curtain. Heat lightning continued its constant flicker. "Now to clean up the kitchen before bed."

"No, you won't," Selmer said. "There's water in the tub, though it's thick as mud. Take a bath while I finish up for you. Pretend I'm Pearl Ellingson here as your chore girl."

Emma's eyes welled with emotion. Selmer was up at first

light milking the cow and working the fields. He shouldn't be doing her work too. She started to protest.

"Nonsense," Selmer said. "The baby is still nursing. You shouldn't work so hard. Doctor Gamla said."

"You're a good man," she said. "I think I'll keep you."

She undressed and eased into the cool water. "You're right." She splashed water over her back and neck. If only the tub were large enough to stretch her legs. "It's heavenly."

This was her favorite time. The kids asleep and Selmer in from the fields. Every day blurred with diapers and laundry and dishes. Sometimes she forgot how lucky she was. She had a loving husband and five healthy children. It was easy to focus on Ezra and his backwardness, but she must remember to put it in perspective. She had five children. Not just Ezra.

She climbed out of the tub and slipped into a clean nightgown. Lightning flickered brighter than the lamp. Selmer stripped off his clothes and stepped into the washtub.

"When we sell the wheat, I'll buy a porcelain bathtub, one big enough for both of us," he said with a grin. "One with claw feet, like we saw at the fair last year."

Emma chuckled. "You need indoor plumbing for one of those," she said. The new wooden house was enough. They couldn't afford plumbing. They didn't need it.

"I built this house," Selmer said. "Next will be indoor plumbing. It depends on the wheat."

A sudden wind slammed the front door. Thunder cracked and the baby screamed. Lightning stabbed through the night sky, brightening the room for a brief moment. The rain started, first heavy drops on the roof and then a steady deluge. Selmer swore and climbed out of the tub. He pulled a shirt over his head and hurried to close windows. Emma fetched the baby before he woke the whole house.

"Where's Ezra?" Selmer's voice was almost drowned out by the drumming rain. "He's not in his bed."

"Look under the bed," Emma said. "Or he's hiding in a corner somewhere."

A blast of winds rattled the roof and explosions of thunder cracked near the house. "Best go into the cellar," Selmer said. More thunder. "Children, wake up!"

Emma snatched the lamp off the table and carried it with the baby down into the cellar. It stank of dirt and mold. Spiderwebs draped from the floor above them. At least it was cooler.

Marvin stumbled after her and Emma plopped the baby into his arms. The girls peeked over the edge of the trapdoor, too sleepy and confused to understand, but

fearful of spiders. Selmer lifted them down and Emma held them close. Loud roars of thunder and clashes of lightning lit up the kitchen until shafts of light shone down through the cracks in the floor. The girls saw a spider and began to cry.

"Hush now," Emma said. "It's only a storm."

"I need the lamp to look for him," Selmer said. "He's got to be hiding somewhere."

"He was standing by the window watching the lightning," Marvin said. "I told him to get back to bed."

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"Don't recall the name. I came out to visit a lawyer friend of mine a year before that, he's retired, and he had gotten a really good deal on a very big place. Saw the potential."

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The window left open. Ezra, her little monkey, could have crawled outside with ease. Selmer was heading out into the storm.

"Stay with the children," Selmer said. "Ezra must have sneaked outside."

"I'll go with you," Emma screamed over the storm. Bolts of lightning exploded nearby. The rain pounded on the roof, a steady drumming that grew louder with each passing minute. An empty bushel basket slammed against the window.

"No," Selmer said. "The children need you."

The children needed their father too. They all did.

A sickening feeling shut off her breath. The wheat. Ezra lost in the storm. He would be terrified. Emma climbed back down the ladder "Lord, Lord," she whispered as she put the baby to nurse. "I'll bake pies for the church, only let him be found. And spare the wheat." She had no other words.

The girls drifted to sleep against her legs, and the baby nursed. Marvin looked over the edge of the trapdoor.

"It's not raining as hard," he said. "Can I go out and help Papa? Ezra might be under the corncrib. It's my fault. I should have . . ."

"It's not your fault." Marvin shouldn't carry the responsibility of his brother. "Papa and Ezra are most likely waiting out the storm in the barn with Rex."

But Emma couldn't stifle the niggles of worry in the back of her mind. A boy in the cornfield. The storm had moved to the east. A strange calm settled around them.

"You stay with the girls, and I'll see what's happening," Emma said. She imagined Ezra curled up in the middle of the corn, waking up and not knowing which way to go. It had happened to a neighbor boy when she was a girl. The child was lost until the corn pickers stumbled across the body weeks later.

Emma climbed the ladder, holding the sleeping baby in the crook of her arm. She laid the baby in the crib and opened the window allowing a cool breeze to blow across her face. Emma breathed it in, thanking God that their house was still standing, asking for Ezra to be found and their crops spared.

"Mama," Marvin called from the cellar. "Can we come upstairs?"

"Yes," Emma said. "It's over."

She threw a shawl over her shoulders and slipped into her shoes. She stepped outside. Sometimes a storm sounded worse than it was.

Rex nuzzled her leg. Selmer came toward the house carrying the sleeping boy. "Guess where he was," Selmer said. "Found him curled up in the doghouse with Rex. Stark naked and dead to the world."

Emma's hands shook and her voice trembled. "What are we going to do with him? That boy will be the death of me. I can't watch him every minute. Marvin can't be expected..."

"It will be all right," Selmer said. "We'll make it somehow. God wouldn't have sent him to us if we couldn't raise him. That's what Pastor Tingvald told me."

Emma put a hand to her throat and breathed cold, fresh air.

"It was the lights," Selmer said. He leaned over and kissed Ezra's forehead. "He loved those flashing lights."

"And the wheat?" Her voice tuned tight as a high note on a fiddle. "Did we lose the wheat? Tell me the truth."

"Rain but no hail," Selmer said. "I think we'll be all right."

"And the binder crew?"

"Not tomorrow," Selmer said. "But the next day, Lord willing." He carried the sleeping boy into the house.

Emma slumped on the front steps. She couldn't stop her tears. Rex nuzzled her face as if reassuring her that he had been watching Ezra the whole time. The air felt delicious after the oppressive heat of the day. The preacher's prayers answered. Her prayer answered.

"Thank you," she whispered into the night. Far to the east the storm thundered. "Spare them too," she said. "Spare us all."

"Coming to bed?" Selmer said from the doorway. "I'll go to town in the morning for that part from the blacksmith. Another day before the binders come gives me a chance to

get things in order. I'll pick up Pearl on my way home.”

Emma didn't answer. She watched the stars pop out overhead.

The stove was hot, and it wouldn't take her long to roll out the dough. There were dried apples and she had plenty of lard. If she baked pies tonight, she wouldn't have to heat up the kitchen tomorrow. Selmer could drop them off at the parsonage when he went into town.

She would put one foot in front of the other, even though she was as slow as a turtle. She would get there in the end. It would be all right.

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Candace Simar likes to imagine how things might have been. Her historical novels and short stories delve deeply into her Scandinavian heritage and the history of Minnesota and North Dakota. Her work has been recognized by Western Writers of America, Women Writing the West, Will Rogers Medallion Awards and Western Fictioneers. Candace lives in Minnesota.