



The Edge of Light

By Ann Shorey

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CHAPTER ONE—ST. LAWRENCEVILLE, MISSOURI

JULY 1838

Molly McGarvie struggled to stand, the weight of her pregnancy an anchor fastening her to the ground. “Maybe Samuel’s back. It’s been almost three weeks.”

Betsy walked to her mistress and extended a hand, pulling Molly to her feet. “Don’t get your hopes up. Mr. Samuel said he was fixing to be gone a month.”

“I worry something might happen to him.”

“You’re borrowing trouble. Ain’t nothing ever happened before, has it?”

Molly shook her head. “No. But I still want him home.” She smiled at the sight of her three children napping on a coverlet spread over the grass. Late afternoon sun angled through the grove of redbud trees, painting shadow pictures across their faces. “James. Franklin. Luellen. Time to wake up. We don’t want to be out after dark.” Sleepy-eyed, they tottered to their feet.

“Wolves come in the dark, don’t they, Mama?” Three-year-old Luellen’s voice climbed a scale of apprehension.

Molly leaned forward and stroked the black curls that fringed her daughter’s face. “Don’t be afraid. We’ll be home in plenty of time.”

Luellen jutted her chin in the air. “I’m not afraid.”

Molly shook her head. “I should’ve named you ‘Mary, Mary, quite contrary.’” She took Luellen’s hand and started along the track toward their cabin. Betsy gathered the picnic basket and blankets and fell in behind them on the dusty trail. Like puppies, the boys chased each other in circles at the rear of the procession.

When she crested the hill above the settlement, Molly spotted their buckboard outside the stable. "Samuel's back!" She dropped Luellen's hand and hurried down the path.

Once in front of the cabin, she looked past the buckboard and saw her husband in the stable tending to his horse. She hastened toward him. "What a wonderful surprise! You're early."

Samuel met Molly near the opening of the three-sided log structure, part of the black gelding's harness draped over one shoulder. He cupped his free hand around the back of her head and kissed the place on her forehead where her black hair grew in a widow's peak. "You're a sight for sore eyes, Wife. Soon's I finish with Captain I'll be up to the house."

"I'll wait." Molly rested against a bag of grain while her husband hung the traces over a peg. She loved watching his long-fingered, broad-palmed hands as he worked. Molly believed there was nothing he couldn't accomplish with the strength hidden inside them.

"You finished building the courthouse quicker than you thought. I'm glad."

"It's not done yet." Samuel swayed slightly when he squatted to unfasten Captain's bellyband and hip straps. "When I was on the scaffold this morning, my legs all of a sudden give out. Would of fell off, but my helper grabbed hold of me and got me down. I left him to finish the job and come on home."

Molly felt a prickle of alarm. "What's wrong?"

"Don't know. Got sick to my stomach a couple times on the way." He hung the pieces of tack on another peg.

She reached up and felt his forehead. "You have a fever! Let's get you to bed—the boys can feed the horse."

"Aw, Molly, don't—" He doubled over with a grunt of pain. Clutching his abdomen, he pushed past her and ran behind the stable.

She heard violent retching. Her sons ran across the packed earth in front of their cabin, trailed by Luellen.

Franklin raced past her, headed inside the stable. "Where's Papa?"

Molly caught the back of her younger son's shirt and tugged him away from the log shelter. "Papa's sick. You stay here." She looked at Betsy. "Help me get Samuel inside."

"Where's he at?"

"Behind the stable."

Betsy faced James. “You watch the chil’ren for a few minutes. I’ll be back directly.”

James reached for Luellen’s hand, but she sidled away. Her lower lip protruded. “I want to see Papa.”

“Not now.” Molly’s expression left no room for argument.

When the two women reached Samuel, they found him on his hands and knees. Between them they managed to help him to his feet. Once he started across the barnyard, he jerked free and stumbled toward the open door of their one-room cabin.

Molly’s heart raced as she followed his unsteady progress. *What’s wrong?*

He stopped and rested his head against the doorframe. A sheen of sweat covered his face.

Molly wrapped an arm around his waist. “Let me help you.” It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness inside. The small window under the loft allowed only a thin rib of light through its thick panes. Half supporting, half pushing, Molly guided her husband around a long puncheon table toward the sleeping area under the open stairway.

She rolled the patchwork coverlet back, revealing a linen sheet wrapped over a feather tick. Samuel sat on the edge, slumped like a puppet without strings.

The younger children followed them into the cabin. “Papa?”

Molly blocked their path. “I told you Papa’s sick. You go outside with Betsy.” James hovered near the door, a worried expression on his face. “Son, go fetch Dr. Carson.”

“No! Doc Carson’s a quack.” Samuel’s voice sounded raspy. “Get the new doc . . .” He paused, forehead wrinkled. “Spengler, I think his name is.”

“Spengler’s in Fox River. James is only eight—he can’t go that far by himself. Besides, Dr. Carson helped when Luellen had asthma, didn’t he?”

Samuel doubled up, gasping. “Get the chamber pot, quick!”

Molly grabbed it just as he leaned over and vomited a stream of yellow bile. When James hesitated at the door she said, “Go! Now! Get Dr. Carson and tell him to hurry.”

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