



CHRISTMAS ROSES

AMANDA CABOT



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For Stephen Joseph Tayntor,
whose questions about his great-grandmother
helped inspire this story. Thanks, Steve!

I



OCTOBER 1882, WYOMING TERRITORY

“Emma needs a father.”

“And I need a husband.” Celia Anderson sighed as she completed the sentence. It wasn’t the first time the parson’s wife had pronounced those words. In fact, they were becoming a regular refrain. Celia poured her visitor a cup of coffee, managing a smile as she touched the delicate rose-patterned china that had been her most prized wedding gift. Though they sat in the kitchen so that Celia could watch the children, Bertha Pearson’s position in Easton society, not to mention the fact that she was Celia’s dearest friend, meant that her coffee was served in china rather than the everyday crockery.

“I know you mean well, Bertha, but I’m not ready to remarry.” She refused to add the thought that had haunted her for the past year. Bertha would only disagree, probably vehemently, if Celia admitted that she wasn’t certain she would ever be ready.

She looked around the room where she had spent so many

hours since this house had become her home. With an oversized range dominating one wall and a long counter with a sink nestled under the sole window, the kitchen was designed to accommodate a large family or, in Celia's case, a business establishment. The thought that she might have to sell it caused more sleepless nights than Celia could count, but she refused to think about that now. She had a guest to entertain.

"Running the boardinghouse and taking care of Emma and Aaron keep me plenty busy." Aaron, the young child whose father paid Celia to take care of him during the day, looked up and giggled at the sound of his name but soon returned to playing with his blocks, his brown hair falling over his eyes as he concentrated on building a tower. "I don't have time for a husband," Celia added. She feigned a shudder as she said, "All that extra laundry."

Raising both hands in the universal sign for surrender, Bertha conceded the point. "All right." Though gray threaded the auburn locks and she was plumper than fashion demanded, the parson's wife was still a striking woman with her bright hair and green eyes, so different from Celia's own pale blonde tresses and blue eyes. "It's simply that Reverend Pearson and I worry about you." Bertha nodded at Emma, who had fallen asleep in the clothes basket that served as a bassinet. "We want this precious little girl to have everything she deserves, and we think you should be as happy as we are."

"Not all marriages are as happy as yours," Celia said as calmly as she could. Josef had never once looked at her the way Reverend Pearson looked at his wife, as if the world were a much better place, simply because Bertha was there. Celia

did not doubt that Josef had cared for her, but caring was not the same thing as love.

“It may have taken you and Josef longer to start a family than some couples, but you were blessed with Emma.” A touch of sadness colored Bertha’s voice, and she reached for her coffee to disguise her discomfort. Though the Pearsons had been married for thirty years, they were childless, a state that Bertha admitted still pained them.

As if on cue, Celia’s little blessing wakened and began to cough. “She’s been crankier than normal this morning with this cough. I think she may have a bit of a fever too.” Celia rose to draw her daughter into her arms, crooning softly as she rocked the child. Did all mothers worry as much as she did, or were her concerns magnified by the fact that Emma was her long-awaited child and, in all likelihood, the only one she would have? Celia didn’t know. All she knew was that she worried. Though she reminded herself that Emma was a healthy six-month-old girl, she couldn’t stop the fears from creeping in when something was even slightly amiss.

“It’s probably nothing more than a cold, but I don’t think I should go to the meeting.” Celia patted Emma’s back. “I don’t want to disappoint Aaron, though. He’s been looking forward to the ride.” The women of Easton were all traveling to the neighboring town of Cedarville to plan the two communities’ joint Thanksgiving celebration, giving Aaron a rare opportunity to ride in a buggy. Celia raised a questioning eyebrow as she looked at her friend. “Would you take Aaron with you?”

Bertha’s smile was little less than a grin, for she loved the youngster as much as Celia did and sought opportunities to spend time with him. “Of course.” She took a final swallow of

coffee before standing. “Let’s get your coat, Aaron. You and I are going for a ride.”

“Mrs. Celia?”

When Celia shook her head, the boy’s normally sunny face turned bright red as he scrunched his nose and narrowed his eyes. “No!” he wailed. “I wanna stay with Mrs. Celia.” It was the prelude to a full-fledged tantrum. Though rare, they were decidedly unpleasant, leaving both Celia and her charge exhausted in the aftermath.

Hoping to forestall the wailing and flailing, Celia took a step closer to Aaron. “I need a big boy to help me,” she said, emphasizing the adjective. Tall for his age and as stocky as his father, Aaron was already a big boy, and there were few things he enjoyed more than being reminded of it. “Someone has to go with Mrs. Pearson. You see, I need someone to tell the other ladies I’ll bring a pound cake. It’s very important.”

As she had hoped, Aaron’s face returned to its normal color, curiosity replacing rage. “Pound cake. Can you remember that?” When he nodded, Celia patted his shoulder. “Thank you, Aaron. I trust you to deliver my message.”

As the boy scampered away to retrieve his coat, Bertha laughed. “No wonder Jacob wants to marry you. You handle Aaron better than Rachel did.”

“Nonsense.” Celia wasn’t certain what bothered her more, the notion of Jacob wanting to marry her or the comparison to his late wife. She wasn’t at all like Rachel Bender, and—as she had told Bertha—she wasn’t ready to marry Jacob or anyone. “It’s simply that Aaron’s a year older now. That’s why he listens to me.” There was nothing to be gained by mentioning that

though Rachel had been the most beautiful woman in Easton, she had cuddled her son.

As she waved good-bye to Bertha and Aaron, Celia tried not to frown. She didn't want to think about Aaron and his father, especially not today when Emma needed her. Though she'd made light of it to Bertha, the cough worried Celia. Cradling the baby in her arms, she paced slowly from one side of the kitchen to the other. It was only when Emma was once more asleep in her bassinette and Celia was washing the china that the thoughts returned. Though it had started as nothing more than a business transaction—minding Aaron during the day in exchange for some much-needed money—the motherless child had made his way into her heart. But just because she cared deeply for the little boy did not mean Celia wanted to marry his father.

The only reason she had agreed that Aaron and his father, along with Frank Tyson, the owner of Easton's general store, could take supper with her and her boarders was that there were so few boarders. Since Mr. Mortenson had decided that copper mining was not for him and left town two weeks earlier, Celia had only one paying guest. That wasn't enough. The money she earned by feeding the two other men and caring for Aaron helped cover her costs, but only barely. As a result, though she wouldn't admit it to Bertha, there were days when Celia feared that her plan to earn a living by running a boardinghouse was destined for failure.

She dried the second cup, smiling as she always did at the sight of the pink roses apparently blooming around the side. Practical Josef had called the china a shocking waste of money, but Celia had been adamant. When her parents had given her the

money they had saved for Celia's wedding, Mama had insisted that it should be spent on something their daughter wanted. Rose-patterned china might be an extravagance, particularly now that she was a widow struggling to pay her bills, but the pretty dishes never failed to boost Celia's spirits.

"I'll find a way," Celia told her sleeping daughter. Was it her imagination that Emma's face seemed more flushed? Perhaps it was the warmth of the kitchen. When she had carefully returned the china to its place in the dining room, Celia left the door open, letting cool air flow into the kitchen.

Even one more boarder would make a big difference, but at this time of the year, it was unlikely anyone would be coming to Easton. Somehow, Celia would have to make do until spring. Though she wished she could confide her worries to Bertha, Celia knew better. The parson's wife would propose her favorite solution: marriage. She would even suggest possible suitors. It was Bertha's theory that Jacob and Frank had asked to take meals here because they harbored romantic notions toward Celia.

That was nonsense. At least Celia thought it was. She had seen no sign of anything resembling affection coming from either of the men, but when she'd mentioned that to Bertha, the older woman had countered by claiming that they were waiting for her year of deep mourning to end. The time of black, as Celia's mother had referred to it, was over. It had been thirteen months since Josef had been killed bringing copper out of the mine, more than six months since Emma's birth. Celia's life was settled, and if it wasn't perfect, well . . . a husband wasn't the answer.

Two hours later she hoisted Emma into her high chair, frowning a little when the child began to cough again. “Dinner’s ready, sweetie. I made your favorite: peas.” But though Emma normally relished the mashed vegetable, today she batted at the spoon and refused to open her mouth other than to cough.

Celia frowned again. There was no doubt about it. The cough was worse. Though she had hoped that the morning nap would cure it, it had not. Celia gathered her daughter into her arms and walked the few steps to the storage room that she’d turned into Emma’s daytime nursery, settling into the rocking chair. Rocking was the one thing she was certain would calm Emma, but even that failed, and it took a full hour before Emma drifted off to sleep.

With a quick look at her watch, Celia hurried upstairs. Today was the day she changed her boarders’ sheets. Normally she completed that task soon after breakfast, but Bertha’s visit and Emma’s crankiness had kept her downstairs. The sole good thing she could say about having only one boarder was that it would take her no more than a few minutes to clean his room.

She hurried, filled by an urgency she couldn’t explain, and it was less than ten minutes later that she descended the stairs, dirty sheets in her arms.

Croak! The sound came from Emma. Dropping the sheets, Celia raced back into the storage room. For a second she stood motionless, shocked by the sight of her daughter with a horribly flushed face.

Emma’s cry was sharp and shrill, punctuated by another croaking cough.

“Oh, Emma!” Celia swept her baby into her arms, patting

her on the back in a vain attempt to stop her coughing. “What’s wrong, sweetie?” In response, Emma took another shallow breath before emitting that dreadful croaking sound. “Oh, Emma!” Celia sank onto the chair, then opened her daughter’s mouth. Perhaps she had somehow put an object into her mouth and that was causing the choking sounds. But Emma’s mouth was empty, and her throat showed no sign of inflammation.

As another cough racked her daughter’s frame, Celia’s arms began to tremble with fear. This was no simple cold. A cold didn’t cause a cough like this. A cold didn’t make a child’s breathing labored. Something was terribly wrong. Celia bit her lip to avoid crying out. She had to help Emma, but what could she do? The doctor had been called into the hills to help an old hermit. The other women were all in Cedarville, planning the Thanksgiving celebration. Celia was on her own with no idea how to help her suffering child.

“Emma, sweetie, I love you.” She crooned the words as she rocked her baby, trying to remember what her mother had done when she had a cough. Vaguely she recalled honey in tea, but Bertha had said babies weren’t supposed to eat honey. As she eyed a jar of honey, Celia shook her head. Even if it wouldn’t harm her, Emma was coughing so badly that it was unlikely she would be able to swallow anything.

If she hadn’t closed her ears when the other women had spoken of their children’s ailments, not wanting to be reminded that she had no babies of her own, she would know what to do. Now she was helpless. Celia had lost Josef, and thanks to her stubborn pride, she might lose their daughter.

Help me, Lord. Save my baby.



Mark Williams reined in his horse, pausing at the top of the rise to look at the small town. It had been two years, three months, seventeen days, and more miles and towns than he could count. Each time, the lead he followed had seemed promising. Each time, it had turned into a dead end. While it seemed unlikely that the man he sought would have come to a copper mining town in eastern Wyoming, that was the only lead Mark had, and so here he was, staring at a village that couldn't boast more than 150 people. Nestled in a small valley, Easton consisted of one main street with a couple tracks that could hardly be dignified with the term "street" leading off to the east. From his position on the rise, it appeared that the majority of the buildings were of frame construction, although the one with the steeple was white stone, perhaps the same limestone he'd seen at Fort Laramie.

"C'mon, Charcoal." Mark leaned forward and patted his horse's neck. For more than two years, Charcoal had been his only friend, listening to him grumble about the dead ends while he carried Mark and a pair of panniers laden with tools from town to town. "We might as well see if the old man is here." The Kansas wheat farmer who had scratched his head in amazement that someone had come looking for Abe Williams after all those years had claimed that Abe had headed West when he heard there were fortunes to be made in Colorado and Wyoming. "Just as well," the farmer had told Mark. "Abe was a right friendly one, but he weren't cut out for farming. I don't reckon he cared for it."

Or for fathering. Mark wouldn't think about that now. There'd be time enough to hear the excuses once he found the

man who'd abandoned his wife and newborn son. To distract himself from the thoughts that still caused his stomach to clench, Mark studied the town he was approaching. It was more attractive than he'd thought, except for the gash in the earth that marked the entrance to the mine. Nothing could make that pretty, but the buildings were well cared for, despite the copper-colored dust that marred once-pristine paint finishes. There was no escaping dust with the Wyoming wind. Mark suspected that it permeated just about everything, leaving its characteristic color in every crease and wrinkle of a man's face and giving all the women's hair a reddish tinge.

He had no opportunity to judge the validity of that supposition, for the main street was emptier than he'd expected. At this time of day, women often strolled a town's streets, visiting friends or shopping at the mercantile. Today, however, Easton seemed almost deserted. Judging from the sound of metal clanking, the livery was in operation, and what appeared to be the only store in town was open, its plate-glass window filled with an array of goods designed to attract shoppers. A fancy hat perched next to a pair of sturdy boots might lure adults, while half a dozen marbles spilling from a bag would appeal to youngsters.

With Charcoal tethered to the hitching post, Mark entered the general store, pausing to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. That was one thing about Wyoming. The sky was brighter and bluer than anywhere he'd been. And, though there was no denying its beauty, there were times it almost hurt a man's eyes.

"Can I help you, sir?" A boy Mark guessed to be no more than twelve or thirteen came out from behind the counter, the curiosity in his expression suggesting that visitors were rare.

“I’m looking for a place to stay.” Perhaps he should have asked about his father first. That’s what he’d always done when he’d entered a new place, but something—perhaps fear of what he would learn—held him back. It was midafternoon, Mark reasoned. Even if Abe Williams was here, chances were good he was working in the mine, and that meant he wouldn’t be aboveground for hours, perhaps not even before the sunset. There was no way around it. Mark would be staying here tonight, and though he had spent countless nights sleeping under the stars, he preferred a bed. He’d find one, then look for Abe.

The boy shook his head. “We ain’t got no hotel, but you might wanna talk to Widow Anderson. She opened a boardinghouse back ten or eleven months ago, and everybody knows it ain’t full. I reckon she’d let you stay for a night or two.”

When Mark raised an eyebrow in a silent request for directions, the boy continued. “You cain’t miss it. It’s the biggest house in town. Just follow the road. It’s on the right side.”

The boy had not exaggerated. The boardinghouse that appeared to be the last sign of civilization before the street turned into a narrow trail that disappeared into the forest was at least three times the size of the other houses in Easton. The only two-story building in town, it had a mansard roof and was graced with a wraparound porch. A swing twice as long as the one where his mother had read him stories creaked in the wind, the reddish dust on its seat telling Mark it had been days since anyone had relaxed there. And that was a shame, because the swing had a view of one of the prettiest landscapes Mark had encountered. Though the deciduous trees had shed their leaves, the hills were dotted with the deep green of junipers and pines,

interspersed with the unmistakable gray-green of sagebrushes, all framed by that brilliant blue sky. No one would mistake this for the Ohio farm where he'd grown up, yet there was something about this little town that reminded Mark of home.

Perhaps that was what had drawn Abe here. Mark frowned as he dismounted. It was difficult to imagine his father choosing to spend days underground. In the years he'd spent searching for him, Mark had discovered that Abe Williams had worked on a barge plying the Mississippi. He'd herded cattle in Texas, panned for silver in Colorado, and farmed in Kansas. There had been a dozen other stops along the way. Different states and territories, different occupations. The one constant was that everything had involved being outdoors. The picture Mark had formed was of a man who loved adventure and who would try almost anything . . . except settling down or being cooped up indoors. If his father wouldn't even work as a blacksmith, mining must be unbearable. Had desperation driven him here, or hadn't he realized what copper mining entailed? By this time tomorrow, Mark would have his answers. He'd know whether Abe Williams was living in Easton. In the meantime, he needed to arrange for a room and board and get Charcoal settled in at the livery.

After tying Charcoal to the front porch, Mark climbed the four steps and knocked on the door. No answer. "Mrs. Anderson?" His call elicited the same response: silence. Perhaps the proprietor had stepped out. Feeling more than a little awkward, Mark turned the knob and pushed the door open, frowning when he noticed that it had settled, causing it to stick. A minute with a plane would fix that.

“Mrs. Anderson?” He took a few steps into what was obviously the parlor of a woman who liked roses. The walls were papered with a pattern of large overblown roses; someone had stitched a circlet of roses on the footstool, and the china vase that stood on a small table was decorated with a perfect red rosebud. No one was in the room. Remembering the empty street and store, Mark wondered if the women of the town might be engaged in a quilting bee or some other female pursuit.

And then he heard it: a painful cough and an even more alarming shrill cry. Following the sounds through the dining room and kitchen, he found himself in a small room. The stacks of canned goods lining one wall would have made him call it a storage room, were it not for the presence of an oak rocking chair and a laundry basket lined with soft blankets. Bemused by the unexpected furnishings, Mark stared at the most beautiful young woman he’d ever seen, a woman who was cradling a desperately ill child.

He guessed her to be in her midtwenties, perhaps a year or two less than his own twenty-six. With hair as golden as a ripe ear of corn and eyes as deep a blue as the Wyoming sky, her face would have been one to fuel a man’s dreams were it not for the panic that drained it of all color. Where was Widow Anderson, and why wasn’t she helping her boarder care for this child? The baby’s face was alarmingly red, and the cough that wracked its body tore at Mark’s heart.

“Help me!” the woman cried, her eyes moving frantically from Mark to the child in her arms. “Help my baby! She can’t breathe.” Though the woman’s voice was shrill with fear, Mark detected a slight accent, as if English were her second language.

“Where’s the doctor?” Mark had learned a thing or two about emergency care during his travels, but he was no substitute for a trained physician.

“He’s gone. Everyone’s gone.”

That left Mark, and judging from the baby’s labored breathing and the peculiar cough, there was no time to lose. “Where’s your vinegar?”

The woman stared at him as if he’d lost his senses but gestured toward a jug on the floor.

“Your daughter needs vinegar steam.” As he’d traveled, Mark had seen the difference humidity made. While some claimed that the desert cured many ailments, there were other problems, including coughs like this, that benefited from extremely moist environments. “I’m going to boil water and make a tent for you.”

The mother appeared confused, as if she’d never heard of a steam tent. It didn’t matter. That was the only thing Mark knew to do when someone had trouble breathing. If his suppositions were correct and this was croup, the vinegar would relieve the congestion or whatever it was that was causing the horrible cough and the labored breathing. “I’ll call you when I’m ready,” he promised. “Just hold your baby.”

Though the woman’s lips moved, no sound came out, and Mark suspected she was praying. That couldn’t hurt, but a doctor would be better.

He hurried back into the kitchen and looked around. Thank goodness the kettle was filled with water. He’d need more, but this would get them started. While he waited for the water to boil, he searched for a tub to hold it and something to serve as the tent. Though he’d hoped for blankets, the pile of sheets that

he found on the floor in the laundry room would have to do. He'd use the kitchen worktable as his platform.

"All right. Bring your daughter into the kitchen," Mark said when he'd arranged everything. He pointed toward the stool he'd placed next to the table. "I want you to sit here and hold her over the water. Keep her face as close to the steam as you can." When the woman was settled, he draped the sheet over her and the baby. Though the pungent smell of vinegar filled the room, he didn't know whether he had added enough. Only time would tell. "I'll start more water heating."

Mark lost count of the number of times he emptied the tub and refilled it with steaming water. Each time he worked the handle on the old pump, he hoped it would remain attached, for there was no time to repair it today. Each time he placed another piece of wood inside the stove, he hoped it would be the last one he needed, for the supply was dwindling. And each time he pulled back the sheets to empty and refill the tub, he looked at the child, searching for a sign that the treatment was working.

It was odd. He ought to be tired. Even before he'd arrived in Easton, it had been a long day, for he'd left well before dawn and had ridden hard to reach the small town. But now he felt no fatigue, nothing but the sensation that he was more alive than he'd been in years, perhaps ever.

Though the mother said little, Mark saw the lines on her face begin to ease as the afternoon passed. She had noticed what he had, that the coughing spells seemed less frequent and less intense. It was perhaps an hour later that the woman smiled. "She's breathing normally," she said, pushing the now-soggy

sheets aside. She rose and held the child in her arms, this time cradling her rather than suspending her over the tub. The baby's face was still rosy, but the alarming flush had faded. "I don't know how to thank you," the mother said, her voice husky with emotion. "You were the answer to prayer."

Mark blinked. It was the first time anyone had called him the answer to anything, especially prayer.



"You saved my baby." Celia's arms shook so badly she could barely hold Emma. It wasn't simply the strain of the hours she had spent keeping her suspended over the steaming tub that had taken its toll on her. Somehow the aftermath seemed worse, draining every ounce of strength from her, leaving her as limp as an overcooked carrot.

The stranger looked at her with gray eyes that seemed to understand. "Here, let me hold her. Why don't you sit down?" He gestured toward a chair on the opposite side of the table. Unlike the stool where she'd been perched for hours, it had a back to support her.

As she sank onto the chair, Celia stared at the man who'd arrived at the exact moment she had needed him. She had always pictured angels as blond and cherubic, with plump cheeks and sweet smiles, but no one would have described this man as a cherub. He was tall, with hair so dark it was almost black and eyes the color of smoke. His angular face with its roughly chiseled features bore no resemblance to Celia's mental image, and yet there was no doubt that he was the answer to her prayer, an angel in human form. "God sent you," Celia said, marveling at the perfect timing.

The way the stranger cleared his throat told her he was uncomfortable, although whether it was by her reference to God or the implied praise wasn't clear. "I wouldn't say that, ma'am," he said, keeping his eyes fixed on Emma rather than meeting Celia's gaze. "I was just passing through town. I needed a place to stay, and the boy at the mercantile told me Widow Anderson might have a room." This time he directed his look at her. "Do you know where she is?"

A bubble of laughter escaped from Celia's mouth. This was no coincidence. God had definitely sent the man to her. She had prayed for another boarder, but he had sent something even better: a boarder who knew how to heal a child. "I'm Celia Anderson," she said, "and my daughter is Emma." It was strange. They had worked together, battling for Emma's life, and yet she didn't know the man's name.

"You're welcome to stay here," she told him. "In fact, I insist that you stay—rent free, of course. It's the least I can do after all you've done for us, Mr. . . ." Celia let her voice trail off, hoping he'd complete the sentence.

"Williams. Mark Williams. It's true I need a room, but I don't want to impose on you, especially today." He looked down at Emma, who had fallen asleep, probably exhausted by her ordeal.

"Nonsense. This is a boardinghouse, and I have plenty of room. There are six bedchambers upstairs, and only one is occupied." Celia rose and took Emma from his arms. "Let me put her to bed, and then I'll show you your room."

There was no question of which one she would give Mr. Williams. Five minutes later, Celia led him upstairs and opened the door to her largest guest chamber. Situated on the front corner

above the dining room, it had windows on two sides, providing a view of both the street and the forest.

Mr. Williams nodded as he looked around. "I'm much obliged, ma'am. This is nicer than anywhere I've slept in years."

And far less than he deserved. "Get yourself settled and then come downstairs. I'll fix you a cup of coffee and some *pepparkakor*."

"Pepper what?"

"*Pepparkakor*. I can tell you're not Swedish. Those are the best spice cookies you'll ever taste. Every woman in Sweden tries to outdo her neighbors, but no one's recipe can compare to my grandmother's." Celia shook her head. "Here I am, bragging about cookies instead of making sure you're comfortable." She looked around, satisfying herself that she had left fresh towels on the bureau. She'd fill the pitcher later. "If there's anything you need, Mr. Williams, just let me know."

"There is something," he said, his eyes lightening as he smiled. "I'd appreciate it if you'd call me Mark. Where I come from, we're not set on formality."

The request was highly unconventional. Although she was on a first-name basis with the women in town and with her boarders, she referred to other men as "mister." Still, Mr. Williams would be here only a day or two. What harm could it cause?

"Certainly, Mark." She gave him a small smile. "And you may call me Celia."

Ten minutes later, she heard his footsteps on the stairway and met him at the base. "Please, have a seat in the parlor." It was her favorite room of the house, filled as it was with reminders of the flowers she had loved from early childhood. When they

were both seated and she'd served him the coffee and cookies she had promised, Celia cleared her throat. She had to let him know how much she appreciated his actions. "I wish there were a way I could thank you for what you did this afternoon. I don't know what I would have done without you." Yes, she did. She would have lost Emma. "You must have children of your own."

Mark's eyebrows rose, and he shook his head. "Fraid not. I'm a bachelor and likely to remain that way."

"Then you have younger siblings."

He shook his head again. "Nope. What makes you think I've been surrounded by children?"

"The way you knew what to do and the ease with which you held Emma. Few men are that comfortable around babies."

Mark took a sip of coffee before he replied. "I've been traveling for the past two years, ever since Ma died. Along the way, I learned to do a lot of things, including caring for sick babies."

Celia wondered where he'd learned that particular skill, but she wouldn't ask. If there was one lesson Mama had taught her, it was not to pry into others' lives. She had already asked too many personal questions.

Mark nodded when she offered him another cookie, then said, "I never saw croup before, but I've heard about it."

"Croup." Remembering the tiny graves in the cemetery that Bertha claimed were the result of croup, Celia shuddered. Were it not for this man, her daughter might have died. "Are you sure you're not a doctor?"

"No doctor, just an itinerant carpenter."