

Episode Thirty-six ♦ *Carl Marpole*

“You’re absolutely sure there’s nothing to worry about?” Anita looked into Auntie Meg’s brown eyes, needing support. Graying hair cut short, Meg was twenty years Anita’s senior, her easy-going directness comforting. Especially now. Anita wanted reassurance she hadn’t made a mistake coming west.

Meg smiled, accentuating lines around her eyes and mouth. Hand resting on Anita’s knee, Meg said, “Absolutely. My only concern is you’re a bit underweight for a woman entering her fifth month, but life on the road does that. On a positive note, you’ve stayed active and are in good shape. So no, and I’ll say it again, you’ve absolutely nothing to worry about.”

Meg stood, walked through a shaft of late afternoon sun, and picked up a small towel to dab her forehead and neck. “It’s warm. Is it true buildings in the east are always the same temperature?”

Anita nodded. “Yes, but I lived in a house like this one. Small and comfortable until the warmest part of the day.”

“Dinner’ll be ready in ten minutes.” Bethan’s voice came from another room.

“Wash up and I’ll see if I can find that husband of yours. You’ve good news to share.” Meg left the bedroom.

Anita’s emotions flagged at that one word: husband. She’d yet to mention that she and George weren’t married nor was he the father. She still hoped to find that man here in Red Cloud.

It was easy to take George’s support for granted; he’d been with her across half a continent. When she proposed he stay in Saint Jo, he insisted on continuing the journey. It was too much to expect him to stay. There would always be something – another Clearie – to draw his attention. If George needed freedom, this was the perfect time for him to go.

A gentle knock on the door.

“Come in George.”

He nudged the door open but didn’t enter the bedroom they shared. “How did it go?”

“Meg says I’m a bit underweight but otherwise fine. There’s nothing to worry about.” She wanted that to end the conversation. “Did you wash up?”

“That’s wonderful!” George bounced towards her but stopped abruptly, as if he’d wanted to hug her but changed his mind. “Never been around a pregnancy.”

“None of your coworkers were ever pregnant?”

“Sure. But they were coworkers. Not close.”

With such a relaxed manner George had no trouble getting along with people on the trip, but she sensed he had few good friends, other than Willem, back in Hartfield.

“Figured you were fine. Quite healthy.” He smiled, cheeks large and full. He stepped over to the window, then to the washbasin, and back to Anita. Arms floating around him, like he’d drunk too much champagne, forgotten the steps but was too giddy to care, making up his own dance. “Such wonderful news.”

She smiled, warmed by his enthusiasm.

“I’ll go down. Washed already,” he said, leaving, humming, the tune familiar though she didn’t know its name.

Alone in the room, she walked to the washbasin, poured a bit of water, and opened the top buttons of her shirt. A few splashes on the face and neck, the cool water refreshed.



Anita walked around Meg and Bethan’s porch. George helped the women arrange plates on the small, square table. “You’re just in time,” said Bethan, a smile on her face. “That’s everything. Have a seat.” Linen napkins matched the tablecloth.

Anita sat across from Meg with George to her left and Bethan to her right. From the porch they looked across the vegetable and flower gardens, past trees, to other houses where children played on porches or families dined in the open air. Chickens pecked and scratched. All they needed was a breeze.

Bethan, brown hair bobbed and less tanned than Meg, handed the bowl of green salad with beans and corn to Anita. “Help yourself.” Spoons clinked against serving bowls then forks against plates. They were too busy eating to talk. It had been many hours since lunch. Bethan broke the lull. “You’re hoping to find a friend in Red Cloud, right?”

George nodded.

“What’s his name?” Bethan asked.

George rested his fist on the table, empty fork sticking up over his plate. He chewed a mouthful of salad and didn’t answer.

Anita said, “He’s from the east. Like us.”

“I take it he might have traveled under an assumed name?” Meg raised an eyebrow. “Don’t worry, people leaving the Confederation do so for many reasons. Some reinvent themselves. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Realizing she trusted Meg with her pregnancy, Anita shared his first name with the women. “Willem.” She put a slice of cheese on a piece of freshly-baked brown bread.

Bethan asked, “When did he leave?”

“Don’t remember the exact day,” Anita said, “but it was mid-May.”

Bethan looked at Meg. “When did that couple arrive?”

“Three months ago?” Meg shrugged then cut a piece of sectioned muskmelon with her fork. “Don’t remember exactly and no idea where from.”

George swallowed, head bobbing a few times, one eyebrow higher than the other. “Seems too soon. Considering how long it took us.”

“True, but he had a plan,” Anita said.

“What were their names?” Meg asked. “Maypole?”

“His was Carl Marpole. She was Ruth something. Can’t remember what.”

“Right.” Bethan nodded.

“So they weren’t married?” asked Anita, curious, but not quite hopeful. Rethinking the question she said, “Never mind. Our friend traveled alone.”

George, nose pointed at his plate, lifted his eyes to look at her. “Probably.”

Anita wanted to tell him to keep his mouth shut but settled for a furrowed brow and another forkful of salad.

“It doesn’t sound like him,” George said, picking up a piece of cheese.

“Well, if he’s here, you’ll see him at meeting.” Bethan bit into a boiled egg.

“The community gathers every fifteenth day. It’s rare for anyone to miss. Someone from every household must attend,” said Meg. “That’s enough for me, I need to watch my weight, but help yourselves to more. There’s plenty.” She poured some water into her glass.

Bethan looked at Meg and shook her head. “You go on about your weight so. Tell her,” she looked to Anita, “she looks big because she works hard. She’s strong as half the men in town.”

Meg took a sip of water. “True. My busiest season is starting. That’s when the babies come. Rest of the year’s pretty quiet so I do whatever needs doing to contribute.”

Anita was unsure why babies came in the fall but decided not to admit it, just like she thought it better not to ask how long these women had been together. They dressed similar, both wearing dungarees though Bethan opted for sandals and pastel blouses; Meg, work boots and shirts.

Meg continued. “After we get you two settled somewhere – by the way, do you think we should introduce them to Sandra?”

Nodding, Bethan said, “I’ll see her tomorrow.” She set down her fork. “She’ll know about housing, that is, if you’ve decided to stay.”

Anita looked to George. He nodded then she nodded too.

“Once we get you two settled, you’ll need to think about contributing to the community,” Meg said.

“Happy to contribute.” Anita wiped her mouth and chin with her napkin.

Bethan asked, “What skills do you have?”

“I’m an accountant.” George looked at their hosts, frowned, and shook his head. “Not much need for auditors here.”

“I can sew,” said Anita.

Bethan smiled, shaking her head gently. “Lot’s of us sew.”

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George, Anita, and Bethan walked down the dirt street to Sandra’s home. Three children, all under ten, played on the porch as Bethan knocked on the doorframe.

A woman – about George’s age, wearing a faded indigo dress – wiped her hands on a white apron. “Have a seat around the side. I’ll get something to drink.”

He followed Bethan’s lead around the porch and sat with Anita on a twig settee. Bethan took one of two chairs on either side. Sandra set a tray with a pitcher and glasses on a corner table. “Kids, come have a drink.” She poured a golden brown liquid into each glass. “I hope you like cider.”

“We do. Thank you,” Anita said.

After finishing their cider, Bethan made introductions, and the kids disappeared around the corner. “They want to stay in Red Cloud. Any ideas about housing?”

Sandra sighed and leaned back in her chair. “That’s not an easy one. We’ve only one place that might be available and it isn’t much.” She looked at George and Anita. “Has Bethan explained about meeting?”

“I haven’t. Not fully.”

“Well, all decisions are made communally, by consent whenever consensus isn’t possible. If I knew the Tomcyck place was vacant...”

“You mean the Marpole’s are gone?” asked Bethan.

“That’s just it. They weren’t at last meeting and people have been saying they left with that nomadic band that rode through.”

“Huh. They were barely here two months.”

Anita, like George, listened.

“But that means their place might be available,” said Bethan.

“Probably. Frankly, there’s not much demand for it and I doubt the town will build for new people.”

“Could we see it?” asked Anita.

“You can, but I stress, I cannot make promises. A decision about housing has to come before the entire town at meeting.”

Anita and George nodded. “Okay.”

“It wouldn’t hurt for you to look at it,” Sandra said shrugging. “I don’t know what else to suggest. Meg will need your extra room come September.”

Bethan looked to George and Anita. “She uses the room you’re in for expectant mothers.”

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The next day, a couple minutes after leaving the road, Bethan pulled on the reins of the small horse-drawn gig. They stopped next to a large kitchen garden. “I said it was a trip. Sure you want to be so far out of town? There’s only one family past this place but at least you have access to irrigation water.”

Anita looked around. The garden was a bit overgrown. “But where’s the house?”

“They’re called soddies though only the front of this one is made of sod.” Bethan pointed to a small mound. “Hello? Anyone here?”

“And the rest?” asked George.

“Dug out of a small hill.”

Anita looked at the mound. There were two openings – a doorway and small window – both open. Outside the slatted wood door stood a bell the size of her head.

Bethan got down, called again, and smiled. “No one’s home.”

George helped Anita down before heading to the door. She walked through the garden. It felt familiar – how things were inter-planted – reminding her of the land she worked with Willem. Then she saw a purple tomato. Willem’s favorite.

She passed the gig on her way towards the door. Just inside, in the dark, she could hear George breathing. Anita waited for her eyes to adjust. She didn’t want to admit disappointment. The walls and floor of the single room were dirt. Someone had made furniture – bed, table, chairs, and shelves – out of rough-milled timber and thin logs.

George held something. A metal box the size of his fist. Willem had one just like it. He stored tea in it. This one was a bit more dented than she remembered.

“It’s empty.” He opened it. “But you can still smell the tea.”

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