

ONE

THE HARD-RED CLODS OF Oklahoma dirt cascading onto the baby's pine coffin devastated Avery. She would never forget the sound. Nor would she soon forget the blue lips of her pale little brother, the swarms of sympathetic faces, the guilt she felt over her attempts to squeeze in Bible school homework, and the wails of her momma. But the thud of the dirt was the worst.

Avery couldn't recall the last time she'd felt happy. But today promised to be different. Today might turn out to be glorious.

Tugging at her cheeks stiffly, as if ill acquainted with this unfamiliar expression, her lips stretched into a smile. This was a long-gone sensation. Spreading wide her arms, she reached for the prairie sky, staring up into the deep blue vault. Beside her, Daddy softly chuckled.

It was a blessing to be out under the bright sunlight rather than sitting in the darkened house with Momma. And now that she'd cracked wide, Avery couldn't seem to stop smiling.

The past weeks since baby Russell's death had been difficult and Momma inconsolable. Since the railroad ran nearby, all but Floyd had come by train to Kingman, Kansas, home of Grandma and Grandpa Slaughter, hoping family would help put them back together. The boys' shouts of laughter sounded from behind the barn. They were in the garden with Grandpa, needing this escape, too. Momma remained safely in Grandma's care.

The familiar niggling of guilt sprang up now that Avery was going out, but Daddy had insisted she accompany him to buy horses. He was always considerate like that. She had needed a break. Avery sucked in a deep breath, relaxed her shoulders, and swung her arms freely as they headed into town.