



Chapter One

The Preacher's Bride

By Jody Hedlund

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*Bedford, England
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The babe's crying would rip her heart to shreds if she had to listen to it one more minute.

Elizabeth Whitbread shoved open the parlor door and barged inside.

"We need a wet nurse or the babe will die," she said, meeting the startled gazes of the women surrounding the deathbed of Mary Costin.

"Exactly what do you think you are doing?" Mrs. Grew dropped the long winding sheet and started toward her. "Get out this instant. You are not permitted in here."

"The babe's been crying all morning. He needs help." Elizabeth moved toward the low rocking cradle shoved into a corner of the small room. "I'll hold him and attempt to comfort him."

Mrs. Grew stepped in front of her, intersecting her path. She held her shoulders straight and her chin high. "No one is welcome in the parlor for the laying out. Only those of our congregation specified by Sister Costin herself before she died."

"I won't disturb your preparations, to besure." Elizabeth nodded at Sister Norton and the others who had stopped washing the body to stare at her. She'd participated in laying-out rituals before—on her own mother. But the work of preparing the dead body didn't interest her now.

"I only want to help with the babe."

"We do not need any assistance."

"The crying must be a distraction. I'll take him into the other room of the cottage—"

"Sister Whitbread," Mrs. Grew said louder, "we can do nothing more for the child. He will tire himself eventually."

Elizabeth spotted a wooden flask on the floor next to the cradle. "I'll try feeding him."

"Each of these women, including myself, has already attempted to suckle him from the bottle. What makes you think you can succeed where no other has?"

"He won't take it, the poor dear," Sister Norton said. She clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "The poor, poor dear needs his mother's milk, and it's long gone."

Elizabeth's gaze trailed to the face of Sister Costin, the pale skin draped over sharp bones. She followed the length of the arm hanging over the edge of the bed, the whiteness of the skin broken by the long dark cut from the bloodletting.

The parish bells of nearby St. Cuthbert had ceased their tolling only a short time ago, but Mary Costin's life had been counted as dead for more than a fortnight, ever since she'd birthed

the babe and caught the fever. Few women survived childbed fever—even fewer newborns lived without their mothers.

Elizabeth faltered and tucked a stray wisp of hair back under her coif. Did she think she could calm the babe when none of these experienced Puritan matrons could?

His cries tore at her heart again. “The babe is in desperate need of a wet nurse.”

“We are quite aware of that,” Mrs. Grew replied. “Do you hold us in such low esteem to think we would not have begun the search by now?”

“Then why hasn’t one been found? In all of Bedford there must be many nursing mothers.”

“You do not know anything about these matters. Moreover, they are not your concern. You must leave the room immediately. Your presence is entirely inappropriate.”

She *had* overstepped the boundaries of propriety by entering, but she’d only thought to help. ’Twas not a punishable offense to offer one’s aid, was it?

Mrs. Grew regarded her with narrowed eyes and pinched lips, her body tight with displeasure.

She supposed to a woman of Mrs. Grew’s high social standing and wealth, rules took precedence. But this time couldn’t she make an exception and let her stay? “I’m sorry, Mrs. Grew. ’Twasn’t my intent to disrupt you. I don’t have your great experience or your natural way with infants. But I thought perchance I could be of service in some small way.”

“Your service would be better spent outside with the others in fasting and prayer.” Mrs. Grew’s glare moved from her to the door.

Elizabeth glanced at the cradle. How could she go back outside and pray with the infant’s wails echoing through her head? She had failed to focus before. Over and over she had asked the Lord to provide someone to help the babe. Finally, she’d decided the Lord would have *her* be that someone.

“Come, my dear.” Sister Norton left the bedside and approached Elizabeth. “Mrs. Grew is right. You ought not be in here.” The tall widow tugged on the white falling bands at her neck and then scratched at the red ring left by the collar. Her look pleaded with Elizabeth to cooperate with Mrs. Grew, whose husband was not only the town alderman but also an elder, one of the founding members of their congregation. They all knew Mrs. Grew was not the sort of woman one should offend.

“Very well. But I don’t understand why you won’t let me try. I can’t make matters worse than they already are.”

Mrs. Grew drew herself up. “I have always thought highly of your father. I had believed him to have respectful and obedient daughters.” She turned to the body and picked up the winding sheet. “Perhaps I have been mistaken in my view.”

Sister Norton touched Elizabeth’s elbow.

Elizabeth swallowed her response; she didn’t want to bring dishonor to her father.

“I’ll escort Sister Whitbread out.” Sister Norton tugged Elizabeth toward the door.

Elizabeth followed. The babe’s cries clung to her, begging for her attention.

“My dear,” said the older woman, once she had closed the door and they stood in the cramped main room of the Costin cottage, “Mrs. Grew has done all she can to help that baby. She’s sensitive about the situation.”

“What harm could come from holding the babe? Even if he continues to cry, at least he’ll know some measure of care.”

“You would have done no harm except to wound Mrs. Grew’s pride, to chance your succeeding where she has failed.”

Elizabeth shook her head in frustration. She glanced at her father with his baker's bow-legged stance and cane and then at the other men of the congregation as they now talked quietly amongst themselves. Of what consequence was the woman's pride when the babe's life was in jeopardy? Surely God cared more about the babe. Surely the men would too.

Most of the men stood and a few sat on the sparse furnishings, their doublets unbuttoned, their broad-brimmed hats discarded in the stuffy warmth of the room. They styled their hair the same—long enough to reach their shoulders but short enough for them to have earned the nickname Roundheads by fashionable Royalists who wore their hair much longer, with curls and lovelocks.

She didn't spot the dark copper flame of Brother Costin's hair. It usually lit a room like a torch, just as his presence, the fire of his spirit, sparked the room with energy. Wherever Brother Costin went, whatever he did, people flocked to him and vied to speak with him. She couldn't remember seeing him without a crowd surrounding him. She'd heard that even throughout the other small boroughs and hamlets of the Bedfordshire countryside, his preaching drew multitudes. Some said he was even beginning to attract people from London—at least three days away by carriage.

Of course he had never drawn *her*. She concerned herself with people in need—the poor, the sick, the helpless—not important preachers who had equally important friends.

"They began the search for a wet nurse two days ago," Sister Norton said in a hushed voice.

"They haven't found one yet?"

"Not one of our kind. Margaret Bird has green sickness. Agnes Leith is weaning. Sister Smythe is newly expecting and has lost her milk. No one else meets Mrs. Grew's standards."

"But the babe won't last the day if something isn't done. All of the women are saying this."

"Ah, ah. Poor, poor baby. The women are right. He'll soon join his mother."

The cries of the babe drifted under the parlor door.

Did Sister Costin, on the brink of paradise, look down on her neglected babe? Was she listening to his hungry wails, her heart breaking as she watched him starve to death?

"Can we do nothing else for him?"

Sister Norton stretched her long neck and peered around before leaning into Elizabeth. "Perchance *you* could find a wet nurse."

Elizabeth met the old woman's gaze. "Are you suggesting I defy Mrs. Grew?"

"No, no, my dear." Sister Norton shook her head. "Not defy. *Convince*. Surely you must know a nursing woman among the poor who would be grateful for the work?"

Elizabeth's mind raced among the possibilities of the women who lived in cottages and above warehouses near the River Ouse.

"If you found someone and brought her here, I'm sure you would be able to *convince* Mrs. Grew into letting the poor woman suffice as wet nurse until a more permanent arrangement could be found."

"I'm not sure I could convince Mrs. Grew of anything."

"You have a way with words, my dear. If anyone can do it, you can." Sister Norton squeezed her hand. "It's worth a try. And if we fail, then we are no worse off than we are now."

Elizabeth picked her way through the slops that littered Calts Lane. In the heat of the May afternoon, the putrid smell of rotting food combined with the acrid stench of urine from the nearby ditches. She breathed through her mouth to avoid gagging.

During the late spring and early summer months the smells worsened. While Bedford was the largest village of the county, it was still small enough that any time the wind swelled, the rankness of the open sewage pit overpowered the scent of baking bread at her father's bakehouse on High Street across town from the SaffronDitch.

"I don't understand how this is going to help matters." Catherine followed her through the muck, her petticoat bunched in her hands.

"I should've brought Anne with me," Elizabeth said. "She doesn't complain."

"I wouldn't need to complain if this place wasn't so filthy and smelly."

"You wouldn't need to complain if you stopped thinking about yourself all of the time."

"Forgive me for not being a saint like you."

Elizabeth bit back a retort. Sparring words with her sister would only lead to sin. The girl had grumbled the moment Elizabeth pulled her away from the women of the congregation who'd gathered to pray. Since the bells tolled Mary Costin's death, the women had resorted to more talking than praying—especially Catherine.

"No one can be as good as you, Elizabeth. You're practically the perfect Puritan."

Elizabeth stopped at the bottom of one of the warehouses and glanced up the steps. In places, boards were missing. Those that remained were thin and sagging.

"Stay here and be quiet."

"I don't know why it was necessary for me to come with you if you're going to abandon me."

"You'll be safer out here, unless, of course, you wake Fulke with all your whining."

Fear flitted across Catherine's delicate features.

Elizabeth started up the steps and began praying. She was sure Lucy Clarke wasn't the type of poor woman Sister Norton had in mind, but the others she'd visited had either been too sick or drunk.

At the top she stopped before a door hanging from the upper hinge and crooked in its frame. She put her ear to the crack and listened. The silence that greeted her was a good sign. It meant Fulke was sleeping off a stupor.

She pushed the door wide enough to squeeze through. A sliver of light stole between the room's only shutters, and it illuminated Fulke, who was sprawled on a boarded bed. The shallow wooden box had broken and fallen to the floor. Straw spilled out of wide holes in the mattress.

"Lucy?"

A woman on the bed shuffled.

"Lucy, it's me, Elizabeth Whitbread."

The woman extracted herself from Fulke and sat up. She straightened her bodice and pulled down her petticoat.

Warmth rushed through Elizabeth's cheeks, and her gaze darted to the children sleeping under tattered blankets, to the broken stool in the corner, to the cracked mug by her foot—everywhere but to Lucy and the bed.

Lucy's bare feet padded almost soundlessly across the room. The woman brushed past her and maneuvered outside.

Elizabeth followed.

In the sunshine Lucy squinted and raised her hand to shield her eyes and hide the black laceration on her forehead. The sleeve of her bodice shifted to reveal greenish purple patches on her arm.

Elizabeth hesitated. Not only was Lucy battered, she was dirtier and more disheveled than she remembered. Her long red hair hung loose and tangled. Sweat smeared soot on her cheeks, and brown drops of dried blood dotted her gray petticoat.

What would Sister Norton and Mrs. Grew think of such a ragged woman? But what about the baby and his ever weakening cry? What choice did she have?

“Lucy, I need a wet nurse.”

“You, miss? Didn’t know you had a baby. Didn’t know at all.”

“It’s for Brother Costin. His wife died this morning. Her babe, not even three weeks old, will die too if you don’t come feed him.”

“Me, miss?”

“His life depends on you, Lucy. You must come with me right away.”

Lucy scratched her head, her scalp festering with sores from lice.

“The babe needs you.”

“But Fulke’s home—see? An’ he won’t take kindly to finding me gone.”

Elizabeth didn’t have to imagine what Fulke was capable of doing to this woman. Once he’d beaten Lucy with the broad side of a shovel because she’d been visiting a neighbor instead of being home to greet him.

She didn’t want to put the woman in more peril. Lucy already had enough.

And yet, the babe’s life was at stake. Perhaps if they were quick enough . . .

“Fulke is sleeping off last night’s drunkenness,” Elizabeth said. “If we hurry, you’ll be able to return before he awakes. And besides, how could he object to the extra earnings you’ll bring him?”

Lucy scraped her scalp again. “Mayhap he don’t need to know about the earnings.”

“I don’t think it would be wise to hide earnings from him. If he finds out, he’ll vent his anger on your head again.”

“I’ll be careful. And it’d be more for the children—see?”

Elizabeth nodded. The hungry look in Lucy’s eyes was always magnified in the children’s. Each Sabbath morn when she distributed the stale loaves that hadn’t sold, Lucy’s children and others of the neighborhood clamored around her for anything she would give them. Elizabeth couldn’t deny they would benefit from more.

“Let’s make haste.” Elizabeth started down the steps.

Lucy trailed after her. “I’ll need to get back before the children awake.”

“Then we’ll run.” ’Twas no secret Lucy gave her children a sleeping cordial when Fulke was home. It contained the increasingly popular opium poppy mixed with spices and dissolved in wine. Many of the poor used it and not just for their children.

When they reached the bottom, Catherine stopped fidgeting with her coif and the loose tendrils she was curling around her fingers to form ringlets by her cheeks. “This is to be Thomas Costin’s wet nurse? You cannot be serious.”

“I’m sure you remember Lucy Clarke?” Elizabeth narrowed her eyes.

“How do you do, miss?” Lucy fixed her gaze on the street and bent her head in deference.

“She is not appropriate. Not in the least.”

“Lucy has a nursing babe. She has milk. She *is* most certainly appropriate.”

“She’s utterly filthy. Her condition is deplorable.”

“For shame, Catherine,” Elizabeth said. “We cannot all lay claim to your beauty.”

Catherine smoothed a hand over the spotless apron covering her petticoat. “There are some who don’t even try.” She looked pointedly at Elizabeth’s smudged apron.

“There are *some* who shun vanity.”

“It’s not vain to take care with one’s appearance.”

“ ’Tis entirely vain to be thinking of the outward appearance of this woman at a time when the babe’s life doesn’t depend upon it in the least.”

As usual, her response left Catherine sputtering, unable to find a suitable retort.

“Now, shall we go?” Elizabeth smiled at Lucy.

The woman didn’t smile back. “The others won’t like me either, will they?”

“ ’Tis no matter. You’re desperately needed to save this babe’s life. Remember that.”

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