

Spring Blessings
Rusty Bucket Book Three

By

Joannie Kay

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Chapter One

Rusty Bucket

January 3, 1875

“Clay, if anything was wrong, Rachel would come and tell us.” The man was going crazy while waiting for his child to be born, and Lance was just about ready to plant a fist on his friend’s jaw and knock him out until the delivery was over. It would probably be the kindest thing he could do under the circumstances. Clay had lost both of his sisters in childbirth and he was terrified of losing Mary. Neither Doc nor Rachel predicted a problem with Mary giving birth, but the man was slowly going crazy.

“Why is Doc letting her suffer so?” Clay angrily demanded, jumping to his feet, and grabbing his gun. “I’m going to go in there and—”

Lance knocked his friend out with one solid blow to the jaw, and caught him before he fell to the floor. He swung Clay around and made him comfortable on the sofa, hoping that Mary had the baby before Clay woke up. Lance could only pray that *he* held up better when it was his turn to do the waiting.

Clay woke up just in time to hear a baby crying, and a few minutes later Rachel came out into the parlor and smiled at him. “Mary would like to see you now, Clay.” He tore out of the room like he was being chased, and Rachel giggled.

“Don’t laugh, little girl,” Lance warned in a mock stern voice. “I had to slug him to put him out of his misery. He was going to shoot your father because ‘he is prolonging Mary’s suffering’. I decided that saying ‘sorry’ for knocking him out would be preferable to burying your father.”

“Oh my! Poor Clay. He really was afraid, wasn’t he? He was so white when he came to get us. Mary has been trying so hard not to cry out because she didn’t want him to fear for her.”

“He was terrified,” Lance agreed. “How is Mary?” he questioned.

“She is just fine. She and Clay have a baby boy, very healthy, and a big boy. He is going to take after his papa.”

“And your papa? How is he doing? I hated to run him out in the middle of the night.”

“He is used to it, darling.” She kissed him. “I’m going to put on some soup so that Mary doesn’t need to worry about food for a day or two.”

“I already fixed some food, trying to keep Clay busy. I put him to cutting up vegetables, and I thought he was going to cut off his fingers. I finally took the knife from him, and had him stir the pot to keep him occupied.” He smiled, and then admitted, “The worst part of all of this is worrying if I’ll be just as bad as Clay when you are going through childbirth.”

“You will be. Fathers are notorious for being basket cases.” She giggled at his horrified expression. “I am going to get some soup for Mary to eat, then I want her to rest. I think you, my darling, should get on back to the hotel and relieve Neal.”

“Try not to stay too long, sweetheart. You need rest too.” She was so big it was difficult to believe she still had two months before her due date. Doc had told him that he thought she’d miscounted, but Rachel was stubborn and insisted she was correct.

“Sally Brice will be over later to give Mary some help. I will come home then,” she promised.

Clay came out of the bedroom, carrying his son in the cradle of his arms. “Thank you, Rachel. This is the best thing ever. Thank you for making sure Mary survived.” His eyes filled with tears. “I don’t know if I can put her through this again.”

“Mary wants more children. She is perfectly healthy.”

“Doc said the same, but I hated seeing her in pain.”

“She was very brave. She’s tougher than she looks,” Rachel told him. “She did well, Clay.”

“I don’t think *I* am tough enough to go through that again,” he admitted, then looked at Lance. “Thanks, friend. I lost my head for a while there.”

“You will do the same for me if necessary.”

“I will; I promise.” He patted his son, and said, “Would you like to see him?”

“You bet.” Lance was nervous, but he took the baby in his large hands and gently held him. “He’s precious, my friend.”

“His name is Adam. That was my pa’s name, and it was also Mary’s brother’s name. We lost both of them too soon.”

“Hello, little Adam. I’m your Uncle Lance,” he told the infant, who was sleeping.

“There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for my little family,” Clay told them. “If not for you and Rachel, this moment would never have happened and this little guy wouldn’t have been born. I owe you my lifelong gratitude.”

“As we owe you for saving Papa’s life, Clay. We were meant to be family, and we are,” Rachel responded.

“Amen. Thank you, honey.” He looked at Lance. “You’ll have your own one of these in a few weeks, friend. Now give me mine back.” He was joking, but Lance handed Adam back to his father before taking a deep breath and forcing himself to relax.

“How did you get so good with babies, Clay? You’re a natural with him.”

“I’ve been practicing on every baby in town ever since Mary told me she was expecting. I want to do everything right.”

“You will be a great father, Clay,” Rachel assured him with a smile.

Lance kissed his wife goodbye and then hurried back to the hotel. Neal was happy to see him since he was hungry as could be. Lance thanked him for working overtime, and gave him some money. “Use this to buy yourself a good meal, Neal. You deserve it.”

“Thanks, boss. I wasn’t complaining. I’m happy to help out.” Neal was sincere, and Lance was happy that his wife liked young Neal. She’d had reservations about hiring the young man because of his age, but he’d proven to be quite dependable and capable of handling problems that came up with the guests every so often.

Lance told Arnie the news about Clay and Mary’s son when he stopped by and the sheriff was pleased and said he would go to see the baby in a day or two. Once they talked about the baby, Arnie said, “I got some news you need to be aware of, Lance. Misty Feathers has a twin sister who has been locked up in an insane asylum since before Misty died. She and a friend of hers managed to escape, and the head doctor there says that Molly Feathers is fixated on getting even for her sister’s death. She blames Rachel. Keeping Rachel at home with you would be a

good idea, although we both know that is impossible considering how well she obeys. But, maybe she will now that she is with child?" Arnie was always ready to give the redhead another chance. He liked her, and she invited him to supper at least once a week.

"Where is the asylum located?" Lance asked.

"In Ohio," Arnie answered. "The odds of Molly Feathers and her friend making it here are pretty darn slim, but thought you should know just in case."

"Thanks for letting me know, Arnie. I agree with you, the odds are slim that she could travel all the way here to Rusty Bucket, but I'll keep an eye out."

* * *

Lance was to recall those words a few weeks later when Rachel didn't come home from her father's house when she promised she would. He asked Iris to watch over the desk, and went to claim his wife. She was working much too hard, and he was going to need to swat her bottom if she didn't start taking some time out for herself to rest. His father-in-law should know better, Lance fumed. He walked into the large house. Dottie came from the kitchen to see who it was. "Hello, Dottie," he spoke politely. "Where is Rachel? I thought Doc would send her home by now."

"He did, Lance. Caleb went out on a maternity call three hours ago, and Rachel left the same time he did. She said she was going straight home. Perhaps she stopped to see Mary and the baby?" Dottie suggested.

"Thank you, Dottie," he replied with a smile for his stepmother-in-law. She was a fine woman, and she made Doc happy, which, in turn, made his own sweet wife happy. He headed out again.

Lance tapped lightly on the door of Clay and Mary's home, and Clay answered almost immediately. "Do you have a certain little redhead visiting?"

"Rachel isn't here, my friend." When Clay saw the worry on Lance's face, he asked, "What's wrong?"

Lance said, "Dottie said that Rachel left Doc's house three hours ago, telling her she was going straight home, but she didn't arrive."

Clay nodded, then said, "I'll tell Mary, and help you search." He hurried to tell his wife about Rachel, then grabbed his gun belt and strapped it on, checking, as he always did, that his weapon was loaded and ready to go. His instincts were telling him that the little redhead was in serious trouble. He offered a quiet prayer for Rachel's safety, and ran to join Lance.

The men searched the entire town, Arnie joining in on the search, as well as Timothy Brice. No one had seen Rachel since she was in her father's home, serving as his nurse.

* * *

Rachel immediately recognized where she was when she came to. She couldn't understand why no one wanted to purchase the old Jenson ranch, but it was still abandoned after all this time. The room she was in was a bedroom, whether upstairs or downstairs, Rachel didn't know for sure. Her hands and feet were tied, and there was a gag around her mouth so she couldn't speak. She had no idea who had kidnapped her, or why, but she couldn't help but fear for her unborn child. Surely the man who grabbed her realized that she was pregnant? If he wanted money for ransom, he was out of luck. Neither her husband nor her father was wealthy. Moments later she heard footsteps coming up a staircase, and realized she was in an upstairs bedroom, one on the corner of the house, since there were two walls with windows.

The door to the bedroom opened, and a woman who looked like Misty Flowers walked in, hatred shining from her eyes. “Are you awake, Rachel?” she asked, her voice flat and showing no emotion whatsoever. “Yes, you are. I am going to make you suffer like you made my twin suffer. She lost her baby because of you, and you will lose your baby. I must do this.” She abruptly turned around and marched from the room.

Rachel cautioned herself not to give in to fear. Lance would miss her; he would find her. In the meantime, she was the one who had to protect her child. She put her mind to working at the ropes binding her hands. She had to get herself out of this mess, and soon. She was in labor, and had been since earlier that day. Rachel hadn’t told her father because she didn’t want him to worry about her when he had another woman in labor. She had intended to send Lance for Mary when she got home. Now, she had to deal with this situation before she could have her baby.

Every so often, either the man or Misty’s twin sister came to look in on her and make threats. She knew they meant to terrorize her, and it was working. Her hands and feet were tied, and her contractions were regular, about five minutes apart, and growing stronger. Rachel was frightened for her child, and she hoped that Lance had missed her by now and was searching for her. She needed him.

* * *

“Yes, sir, Mr. Underwood,” a little boy answered. “The man said Mrs. Underwood fainted, and he was taking her home.” He looked up at Lance. “Was he lying?”

“Yes, son, he was. Please tell me everything you remember.” Lance and Clay listened to every word the little boy had to say, and were surprised at all of the little details he shared. He even knew which way the man took Rachel. “Gordon, thank you for your help.”

The two men took off running to saddle their horses. Lance was pretty sure he knew where the man took Rachel. He offered a prayer for her safety, and prayed she wouldn’t do anything rash that could get her, or the baby, injured or killed.

“Is that the same place the Andersons took my Mary?” Clay asked quietly.

“I hope and pray that is where they took Rachel. I don’t have the first clue where else to look,” Lance admitted. His eyes were covered with a sheen of moisture. “Do you think she knows I am looking for her? That man took her hours ago. Hours.”

“Rachel is smart; she’ll do like Mary did. We’ll rescue her, man.”

“We have to. She is my life.”

* * *

“How does it feel to know that your baby will pay the price for my twin’s life, Rachel? Why did you shoot her? She never harmed you in any way. I hate you so much. I don’t like to hurt women, so I hope your baby is a boy. Yes, it has to be a boy. I hate men.” With those ominous words, Misty’s twin ran from the room, and Rachel prayed again that Lance would come and save her. The contractions were much closer now, and she had to force herself to relax to ease the pain.

Rachel finally managed to free her wrists, and without hesitation, she started working on the rope around her ankles. It didn’t take nearly as long to get the ropes undone when she could see what she was doing. Last of all, she reached for the gag, and heard footsteps approaching. She got back into position, hoping they would think she was still tied and leave her alone. She had another contraction; it was much harder than the last one, and there wasn’t as long in between.

“I just can’t make up my mind,” she heard Misty’s sister say. “She shot Misty, but that would be too fast. I want her to suffer.”

“Use a knife, then, Molly,” a male voice answered. “It would take her a long time to bleed to death.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Why don’t you let me take her?” he whined. “I could make sure it hurt.”

“No rape. I told you that. Getting raped hurts the soul. God don’t forgive that.”

“Molly, those men were bad, not you.”

“That ain’t what Pa said. He whipped me for laying with ‘em.”

“It weren’t like that.”

“Ain’t what Pa said. You leave, Obe. I want to think on hurting Rachel.”

Rachel jumped when the gag was suddenly jerked off. “I want to hear you beg for your baby’s life, Rachel. Maybe I’ll just forgive you?” She pondered her words.

“Molly, I didn’t shoot Misty. It was Jared, and it was an accident. Papa and I tried to save Misty and her baby, but she’d lost too much blood. She also didn’t want to live without Jared.” Rachel hurried to explain. She was going to deliver soon, and she couldn’t permit them to harm her or the baby.

“You’re lying!” Molly screamed angrily. “Jared loved Misty; he wouldn’t shoot her!”

“It was an accident; he certainly didn’t do it on purpose. Jared was upset that I stopped the bank robbery, and he fumbled his gun. It went off, and the bullet struck Misty. Jared was devastated, then angry. He turned to kill me, and Lance and Arnie shot him. Molly, Papa worked and worked, trying to save Misty. After she lost the baby, she didn’t want to live. She simply gave up and went to sleep.”

“Nobody told me it was an accident,” Molly whispered, confused.

“I’m so sorry. It must be hard for you. Twins are so close.”

“We were until the night I— I don’t want to talk about those men. They hurt me, but Misty didn’t understand. She thought I should have enjoyed it, but I didn’t. It hurt.”

“Those men were wrong to hurt you like that. It wasn’t your fault. Your pa was wrong.”

“Do you think so?”

“I know so. My papa would tell you the same thing.”

The door to the bedroom flew open and Lance burst through, gun in hand. Molly screamed, and Rachel awkwardly jumped up to grab her and hug her. “You’re safe, Molly. You’re safe. Lance, darling, please put your gun away. Lance was worried about me, Molly. He didn’t know that you misunderstood about Misty.”

“I don’t want to be hurt again!” she whimpered.

“Lance won’t harm you. He is a good man.” She looked at her husband. “Sweetheart, please tell Molly that she is safe.”

“Molly, I won’t hurt you. I was afraid for my wife, but I can see that she is safe.”

“I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t take her baby. She said Jared shot Misty by accident. Is that true?”

“Yes, it is. We carried Misty to the doctor, and he tried to save her and the baby, but she lost a lot of blood. Doc said she just gave up. You’re safe now. Thank you for not harming Rachel,” he added emotionally.

“She is nice.”

Clay came running.

“Clay, put your gun away now. Molly is afraid of men.” Lance warned his friend.

Clay holstered his gun. "I won't hurt you, Molly. I'm a friend of Rachel's. Arnie is downstairs," he explained to Lance. "Let's all go downstairs. Your friend is crying and afraid, Molly."

"Obe won't hurt no one unless I tell him. He ain't right in the head."

Rachel couldn't help smiling, but she bravely held Molly's hand and walked her downstairs. Arnie was standing there, looking at the crying Obe in dismay. "Rachel, are you all right?" he gruffly demanded.

"Yes, Arnie. I'm just fine. Thank you all for coming for me." She needed to lie down and give birth. Another contraction hit hard, and she would have fallen if not for Lance catching her and lifting her in his arms. "There's no time to get home, Lance," she said calmly once the contraction passed. "Clay, find a pot, scrub it out well, then boil some water, please. Lance, take me back upstairs," she pleaded.

"I can take these two and give you some privacy, Rachel," the sheriff offered. He would send Doc too.

"Arnie, Molly is afraid of men."

"Well, I sure wouldn't hurt her; you know that!" He was aggravated with the redhead.

"Yes, I know that, but Molly doesn't know you like I do."

"Molly, I swear before our God that I won't hurt you. I've known Rachel all my life, and she will vouch for me," Arnie said solemnly.

"I want to go back home, Molly," Obe sobbed.

"I do, too, Obe. Misty is really dead, ain't she?"

"Yes," Rachel spoke gently, and Molly cried.

"She never liked me no more after the men hurt me."

"No one is going to hurt you again, Molly. You are safe with all of us, especially Arnie. He won't hurt you."

"I believe you, Rachel. You're nice."

After Arnie left with Molly and Obe, Lance carried Rachel upstairs and carefully laid her on the bed where she'd been a prisoner.

"Undress me quickly, darling. We'll wrap the baby in my petticoats."

Lance hurried to do as she said, with her cooperating as much as possible. "How long have you been in labor?" he asked.

"Since mid-morning," she answered. "Papa was so busy, and I was fine. Then he was called out to deliver a baby, and I didn't want him to worry. I had plenty of time yet. I was on my way—" Another contraction hit hard, and this time she was panting to breathe through the pain. "—to send you for Mary when that man grabbed me." She grimaced in pain. When the contraction passed, Rachel said, "Lance, wash your hands. Hurry. I need to push, but you need to make sure I'm dilated far enough."

He ran out to do as she said, and then raced back upstairs, telling Clay to bring the water when it was ready. Lance did as Rachel instructed, and then listened as she calmly told him what he would need to do.

* * *

Caleb was at the sheriff's office when Arnie arrived. "Doc, Rachel is having her baby out at the old Jenson place. Lance and Clay are there."

"I'm on my way." Caleb ran to his buggy and took off at a brisk pace, praying he would get there to help if there was trouble. His only child and grandchild were at risk, and he knew how quickly something could go wrong. She was delivering a good three weeks early!

* * *

Arnie had a woman come in to be with Molly, and once he was positive that Molly felt safe, Arnie sent a telegram to alert authorities that Obe and Molly were found and wanted to go home. The answer came quickly. The asylum was sending nurses to bring them back to Ohio. They asked Arnie to keep them locked up as both were considered dangerous. Obe had killed his family, and Molly had murdered men, thinking they were going to hurt her. For some strange reason, the two had bonded, and weren't frightened of each other. Arnie went back to the jail and warned Martha. They decided between the two of them, that he would take care of Obe and she would only care for Molly.

"How did you two make it all the way here from Ohio?" Arnie asked them.

"By train; we hid in a car filled with cattle," Obe explained.

"How did you get food?"

"I offered to clean kitchens in exchange for food," Molly told him. "People were nice to us. Obe didn't let men close to me," she explained. "I'm too afraid."

"Your home is sending two nurses for you," he assured them.

"I thought Rachel killed Misty," Molly said flatly.

"No, she didn't. It was Jared Cane. Rachel stopped the bank robbery, and Jared was mad at her. He went for his gun, but something happened; he nearly dropped his gun and when he grabbed for it, it went off. The bullet struck Misty. Lance and I shot Jared and we took Misty to Doc. Doc is a fine man, and he did everything he could to save Misty, but she went to God instead."

"Misty was my twin. She wasn't nice all the time. She robbed banks with Jared, and that is stealing and against the ten commandments. Pa said she'd go to Hell. He said we were both damned." Molly started crying. "I don't want to die. I didn't want them men to hurt me!" She kept saying that over and over and Obe covered his ears with his hands. He was crying too.

* * *

"I'm sorry it hurts so much, honey." Lance was nearly beside himself with worry for his wife and child. He was a poor substitute for a doctor, but Rachel kept encouraging him and telling him he was doing fine. She appeared to have faith in him, and Lance was determined not to let her down.

Clay knocked on the door. Lance got up to open the door, and his friend was white as could be. "How is she, Lance?" Clay had tears in his eyes.

"I'm fine, Clay. Stop worrying now. I'm healthy as can be."

"All right, honey," he answered. "I've got the water, and it is cooling now. I have an extra clean shirt in my saddlebags. We can tear it up and use it to bathe the baby," he offered.

"Thanks, Clay," Lance agreed. Clay took off running to get the shirt.

"Lance!" Rachel gasped, knowing the baby was coming right now!