

The Solace of Stars: A Hanneke Bauer Mystery

By Kathleen Ernst

Chapter 1

"I do hope there won't be trouble at the market today," Hanneke murmured to Jacobine Ketzler. They were perched on the back of the Ketzler family's small buckboard wagon, legs dangling as Jacobine's mother slowly drove through Watertown's crowded streets.

Jacobine sighed. "Frau Bauer, it seems there always is."

Wishing she had not spoken, Hanneke patted the girl's hand. Jacobine was a shy young woman with a sweet smile, flaxen braids, and a faint sprinkling of freckles over her nose. She had sapphire eyes that seemed too large for her face, and an earnest air that Hanneke usually found endearing. Today, however, those eyes were anxious.

Although only four months had passed since the May day Hanneke had ended her long journey from Prussia's Pomeranian region to Wisconsin, she knew more than she wished about dangerous resentments simmering in her new community. Striving for a lighter tone she said, "Well, men will undoubtedly bluster. I suppose that's inevitable with so many people in town."

Hanneke had traveled to the Viehmarket, held every second Tuesday, with Jacobine and her parents, Karoline and August. The Ketzlers had picked Hanneke up at her Plum

Bottom Road farm before dawn. Although she lived only a few miles from Watertown, Hanneke was grateful. On Market Day the roads leading into town were busy with farmers driving cattle, horse breeders leading prancing Morgans or plodding Percherons, and wagons carrying rural families with produce. Sometimes Ho-Chunk or Pottawatomie Indians walked to town with furs or pouches of herbs to sell. Tinkers tramped past bent forward, hands gripping the straps of their heavy pack baskets. Women cradled smaller baskets of eggs, or herded geese with long, thin sticks.

It was nice to have a ride on Market Day.

"I shall ignore any commotion," Jacobine said stoutly. "All that should concern us today is selling as much as we can."

The Ketzlers had brought Karoline's tinware to sell, and Hanneke traveled with two carpet bags that held knitted goods. Since her financial situation might best be described as "precarious," she did indeed need to focus today on attracting customers.

She pressed her lips into a tight line, feeling the familiar fingers of worry and grief clutch the back of her neck. When the year 1855 began, she'd had the highest of hopes for a peaceful future in America with a good husband, a productive farm to call their own, and—God willing—children. Instead, upon arrival she'd discovered that her husband Fridolin was dead. The farm she'd inherited was more burden than blessing. Some Yankees did not welcome German-speaking people to the area. As if that weren't enough, America was tearing itself apart over the vile issue of human slavery, and—

The cart lurched, jolting Hanneke from her gloomy reverie. Karoline had found a place to park on Market Street beside an elderly couple selling rutabagas and mangels.

As Karoline guided the horse to the hitching post, a woman on foot flapped a blanket down on the far side to claim her own space.

August, a handsome man with wheat-colored hair and piercing gaze, surveyed the busy street. He didn't know how to read, but could calculate in his head how many cords of wood were needed for winter or how many bundles of wheat his wagon could carry. "This is a good spot, Karoline. I predict you'll do well."

"That would be wonderful." Karoline rolled her shoulders to ease aching muscles.

As Hanneke and Jacobine slid to their feet, a man with gray-streaked dark hair dangling past his shoulders ambled down the street. When he noticed the Ketzlers he stopped, pulled off his hat, and waved it at Karoline. "What are you doing here? You should be selling butter, not stealing a man's livelihood!"

The outburst was delivered in a Pomeranian dialect. And here I was worried about Yankee antagonism, Hanneke thought.

Karoline shook her head with disgust. August, however, boiled from the wagon. "Wulff! *Du Sohn einer Hündin!* Move on before I kick you down the street."

"Big words from a man who lets his wife wear the trousers," Wulff retorted. He reminded Hanneke of a banty rooster, small of stature but ready for a fight. "You might as well put on an apron!"

Jacobine made a strangled cry. Karoline scrambled down and tried to grab her husband's arm. "August, don't!"

He shook her off and stalked into the street. Although his left arm dangled uselessly at his side, he grabbed the smaller man's shirt in his right hand.

That's quite enough, Hanneke thought, and hurried after him. "August!" she snapped. "Stop this. You're upsetting your daughter."

He didn't look at her, but after a few tense moments, he shoved Wulff away. "If you ever speak to my wife again," he growled, "I'll make you sorry you were born."

Wulff grinned, unafraid and unrepentant. After tugging his shirt and vest into place, he walked away.

Karoline was waiting by the wagon, hands planted on her hips. "Well," she observed coldly, "that accomplished nothing."

August scowled at his wife. "I won't stand silent in the face of insults! And I don't need either one of you—"his gesture included Hanneke—"telling me what needs doing!" He grabbed a tin dipper from the wagon and hurled it to the ground with a harsh clang. Hanneke winced.

Karoline advanced on him, chin thrust high. "Walk away, August. Don't come back until you can speak with a civil tongue."

Hanneke took Jacobine's hand, fearing worse to come. Karoline stood unblinking, mouth pressed in a tight line. August's face remained a thundercloud.

"Guten Morgen, my friends."

Hanneke hadn't noticed the approach of Hans Goetsch, a thin, bushy-bearded cabbage farmer who lived near her and the Ketzlers. Hans and his wife Elizabeth were well-respected elders in the Pomeranian community.

"I'm in town to buy sheep dip and pickling salt, but I've got time to see the sights." Hans clapped a hand on August's shoulder. "I would be grateful for your company. As Proverbs says, friendship refreshes the soul. Shall we go?"

Although phrased as a question, Hanneke could tell that it was not. August must have understood that too, for he nodded grudgingly.

Karoline watched them walk away. “I don’t think anyone but Hans could have managed that. He and August have been friends for a long time.” She exhaled a slow breath. “Hans stops by every few days. Sometimes he asks for August’s help with a chore that can be done one-handed. Other times they play draughts or just sit and talk. His visits help.”

Hanneke put a hand on her friend’s arm. “I’m so sorry.”

Shame, fatigue, and a flash of bitterness flickered over Karoline’s face before she composed herself. “August is having a bad time, through no fault of his own.”

“What just happened wasn’t Papa’s fault either.” Jacobine wiped her eyes on her apron. “Herr Wulff provoked him.”

Hanneke had never seen Wulff before. “What under Heaven compelled the man to hurl such insults?”

“Folks say Caspar Wulff has always been disagreeable, but he does bear a special grudge against me.” Karoline sounded weary. “He’s a tinsmith, you see. He’s got a shop in Lebanon.” She waved a hand toward the northeast. “Before I set up, he was the only German smith in the area.”

“Ah.” Now Hanneke understood. Karoline had grown up helping her father craft tin in Pomerania, and the two had immigrated a decade earlier. She’d inherited his tools, and after August was injured, she’d set up a shop of her own. Apparently Herr Wulff didn’t appreciate competition. Especially from a woman.

Karoline thumbed a tear from Jacobine's cheek. "Don't fret, *Schatzi*. Let's get busy. Shoppers are passing and we aren't prepared."

Hanneke pitched in too, happy to help arrange the tinware before preparing her own items. Her favorite piece—the one she secretly coveted—was a large scone with three candleholders.

Although Karoline could fashion anything needed, and did exquisite pierced tin designs when appropriate, she also specialized in designing decorative cutters that bakers used to shape gingersnaps or sugar cakes into tulips, rabbits, and other figures. Each bore her personal maker's mark, a tiny flower tapped into the tin with a curved punch.

Her newest offering was extra-special: half a dozen heart-shaped cutters of descending size nesting in a pretty heart-shaped box. She arranged those on a black cloth while Jacobine arranged the single cutters in a wide, flat basket. Hanneke hung several lanterns from the side of the wagon, and positioned candle sconces and a teapot on crates.

Karoline stood back, considered, nodded. "That'll do."

Hanneke folded a blanket over the back of the buckboard and laid out her knitting samples. Her best business came from bachelor laborers who appreciated thick, plain socks. Still, she made time for fine work—partly to attract new and wealthier customers, and partly because she had no choice. Knitting was as essential to her as breathing. Designing and creating intricate shawls, collars, and other delicate items pleased her. I do believe I might have gone mad these past months without the knitting, Hanneke thought as she draped around her shoulders a lace capelet edged with Saxon braids.

Once setup was complete, shoppers kept them busy. Karoline was a shrewd haggler, sensing when to push harder and when to acquiesce. Hanneke didn't particularly enjoy bartering, but it was always impressive to watch her friend conduct business.

"Gracious," Karoline murmured when they had a mid-morning lull. She looked satisfied, though.

Jacobine added a few cutters to the display, filling gaps left by purchases. Although always polite and helpful with customers, she'd been unusually subdued since August's altercation with Wulff.

Hanneke didn't like seeing her downcast. "Your shawl truly suits you, Jacobine," she observed, tipping her in in honest admiration. "You did a fine job with it." The design was simple, but Jacobine had created a lovely striped design of brown and gold-dyed wool. She ducked her head at the compliment, but looked pleased.

Karoline reached into her drawstring money bag and brought out some coins. "Jacobine? I'd like you to purchase a small bottle of Pectoral Syrup of Horehound at Schubert's Drug Store. After that, find the peanut vendor and bring us back a treat."

Jacobine brightened. "*Danke, Mutti.*" Using a shiny basin as an impromptu mirror, she checked her appearance before walking away.

"Are you struggling with a cough, Karoline?" Hanneke asked.

"*Nein.*" Some of the tension eased from Karoline's face. "Have you seen the new drug store clerk? The dark-haired boy with the spectacles? His name is Gottlieb Nass, and I believe he's interested in Jacobine."

"I believe she's interested as well," Hanneke observed, pleased. "I've never seen her primp before."

“It would be a good match.” Karoline pinched her mouth tight for a moment. “I don’t want to rush anything, but she will be sixteen soon.”

Within the Pomeranian community, young people who turned sixteen were considered adults, mature enough to marry. “I can’t imagine Jacobine lacking suitors,” Hanneke said honestly. She’s sweet, industrious, and accomplished.”

Karoline smiled, but only briefly. “I do worry about her. She and August have always shared a special bond, but since the accident...”

Hanneke nodded. The previous winter, while harvesting timber, several logs slipped from August’s sled as he roped them in place. His right arm had been crushed and the broken bones had not healed well.

“I wish you’d met him before. He’s a good man at heart.” Karoline lifted her palms helplessly. “Now he can’t provide for his family. A man can’t manage a farm one-handed.”

“That’s a heavy burden for any man,” Hanneke agreed soberly.

“We’ve faced our share of hardships over the years. We lost a lot of stock a decade ago in a barn fire. It was devastating, but August never gave in to despair. When I lost three babies in a row, he was my strength.” Karoline’s eyes were shadowed with hurt and bewilderment. “I don’t recognize the man he’s become.”

Karoline had never confided so much before. Hanneke didn’t want to press the bounds of friendship, but she couldn’t ignore the opening. “How bad have things gotten? If you ever need help—”

“I can handle August.” Karoline’s voice was clipped, as if regretting her rare display of vulnerability. Then she managed a tired smile. “You’ve already helped more than you know by teaching Jacobine to knit.”

The first time Hanneke had visited the tin shop, she’d offered to trade a shawl for a candle sconce. Karoline had agreed, and was so pleased with the finished piece that she asked if Hanneke would be willing to teach Jacobine to knit in exchange for chores or errands. Soon Jacobine was walking to Hanneke’s farm twice a week.

Now Hanneke smiled. “I enjoy Jacobine’s visits immensely. She’s become quite dear to me.”

“Every girl needs a skill, and Jacobine has no particular interest in tinwork. Besides, it’s a dying trade.”

“Your work is lovely!” Hanneke protested.

Karoline considered the gleaming wares. “I do take satisfaction in it,” she said quietly. “Tin smithing brings back good childhood memories. My father welcomed my interest, even though some smiths criticized him for encouraging a daughter.”

“Men can be *such* fools.” Hanneke pursed her lips in exasperation. Karoline was fortunate to have a skill. Her tinwork would not solve the family’s financial worries, but it helped.

“When my father and I immigrated, we discovered that while German smiths were still using stakes and hand tools, American smiths were investing in hand-cranked machines to speed up the work. They charged less than my father did. Now manufactured tin items are available in stores. My only hope comes from specialty items.”

Hanneke sighed. "I do understand." She also had to be clever about making her handiwork distinctive enough to catch attention.

"By the time my father died, most of his jobs involved roof and gutter work, stovepipes, things like that. It broke his heart, I think." She sighed. "I expect that's why Caspar Wulff was so angry when I started my business."

A woman stopped by the wagon, lingering over the cutters, and Karoline turned away to assist. Just as well, Hanneke thought. They'd had enough gloomy conversation for one day.

Jacobine soon returned with three paper cones filled with boiled peanuts. They nibbled in between greeting shoppers. August did not return.

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At midday, when the biggest crush was past, Karoline turned to Hanneke. "Do you want to visit Angela?"

"We can manage," Jacobine agreed, before popping the last bite of a cheese sandwich into her mouth.

Hanneke had already sold all of her socks and taken orders for two shawls. "*Danke*," she said gratefully. "If you need to leave before I return, I'll walk home."

It felt good to wander through the crowd, knitting, nodding to a few acquaintances. She liked seeing friends exchange happy greetings, liked watching farmwomen bicker over squash and early apples, liked banishing the loneliness that too often edged close. The day was noisy with children's laughter, vendors' cries, shouts from drivers trying to maneuver vehicles through the crowd, snatches of different languages and dialects. Most of her neighbors spoke some form of *Plattdeutsch*—the "Low German" common to

Pomerania and other areas of Prussia's northern lowlands—but today she also caught bits of the *Hochdeutsche* spoken by Bavarians, Hessians, and other highlanders. Mixed among them were Yankees and a few free Negroes. Irish, Welsh, and Bohemians had also started settlements in the area. Sometimes Hanneke didn't recognize the language overheard in snatches of conversation.

She paused at the next corner, where a small crowd had gathered around a shabbily-dressed red-haired man giving an animated speech from a mounting block. "We must resolve to take action!" he asserted, opening his arms to encompass all.

Nearby, a middle-aged woman with dried manure on her hem crossed her arms. "Who's this, now?"

The man behind her leaned forward and spoke in accented but passable German. "That, madam, is Carl Schurz. He and his wife are recent and welcome additions to Watertown."

Hanneke eyed the informant. The silver-haired man wore a brocade vest. It was not every day she heard a well-to-do Yankee speak positively of newly-arrived Europeans.

"Good German farmers, we are an enlightened people!" Herr Schurz proclaimed. "Despite what the immigration pamphlets promised, we know that the American Constitution is imperfect. There are two currents running through this society—one essentially democratic, the other essentially aristocratic. Sordid greed is crushing this country's love of principle!" Herr Schurz paused to adjust his spectacles, surveying his audience. "A disgraceful scourge has become to many Americans a great economical, moral, and political blessing. I speak of slavery!"

Hanneke's eyes widened and her hands stilled. She'd never heard anyone denounce that evil publicly.

Some of the listeners shook their heads, muttered, wandered away. One farmer shouted, "Most of us have all we can manage to put food on the table! We don't have the luxury of putting on frock coats and talking about fancy ideals."

"My friend," Carl Schurz countered, "ideals are like stars. We never reach them, but like mariners of the sea, we chart our course by them."

"*Oh*," Hanneke whispered, feeling a sudden stab of grief. They punctuated her life, but unpredictably. She glanced at the sky. *Fridolin, how I wish you were here.*

Her husband didn't answer. Instead someone hollered, "You damn Krauts should mind your own business!"

The man's vitriolic tone provoked in Hanneke an uneasy shudder. Stopping to listen had been a mistake.

Unperturbed, Schurz eagerly rubbed his hands together. "This outrage is everyone's business! I invite anyone interested in discussing this topic to join me at the Buena Vista."

Hanneke turned and walked briskly away. Although she longed to hear more from this Carl Schurz, it would be unwise. Showing interest in his abolitionist ideals could, for her, prompt a tragedy.

