

ALMOST HOME

by

Lois Carroll

ISBN 1-55316-132-7

Published by LTDBooks

www.ltdbooks.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any person or persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Almost Home by Lois Carroll

ISBN 1-55316-132-7

Published by LTDBooks

www.ltdbooks.com

Copyright © 2004 Lois Carroll

Artwork copyright © 2004 Trace Edward Zaber

Published in Canada by LTDBooks, 200 North Service Road West, Unit 1, Suite 301, Oakville, ON L6M 2Y1

All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written consent of the publisher is an infringement of the copyright law.

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Carroll, Lois

Almost home [electronic resource] / Lois Carroll.

ISBN 1-55316-132-7

I. Title.

PS3603.A77AA64 2004813'.6C2004-902399-3

Author's Note:

In 1860 the United States Congress passed the Homestead Act. It declared that any U.S. citizen, or any alien intending to become a citizen, could have 160 acres of western lands absolutely free (except for a registration fee) provided he would make certain improvements and live on the tract for a specified number of years. The Act offered thousands of individuals and families an opportunity for what they saw as a better life. The first homestead in Dakota Territory that lay within present-day North Dakota was registered in 1868.

Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Excerpt from The Wishing Tree](#)

[Excerpt from The Marriage Committee](#)

[About The Author](#)

[Publisher info:](#)

[Chapter One](#)

March 1865 - Philadelphia

"Mama, what's wrong? What is it?" Melissa Whitaker cried as she burst into the parlor. "I heard you crying out. Is the pain in your belly back again?"

"Lissa, what are we going to do?" Sobs shook her mother Elizabeth's frail body. Tears slid over her cheeks and darkened spots on her blue blouse.

Lissa had never seen her mother in such a state. "Shall I fetch the doctor, Mama?" Lissa asked, hoping her mother would finally seek a doctor's help for whatever had ailed her for months now.

Her mama's rocking chair stilled. "No! No doctor," she cried, covering her ears from hearing more of the idea. Gray strands fell loose from the tight bun that normally held every hair in strict order.

Cook stood beside her mistress, patting her shoulder ineffectually with one hand as she worried her long white apron with the other. Her eyes were wide with fright as she looked to Lissa in an unspoken appeal to do something--anything--to care for her mother.

"Mama? Please, tell me what's wrong," Lissa said firmly, kneeling before her mother and gently tugging her hands away from her ears.

"Tell her. Tell her that her papa's workshop's on fire!" Cook cried out when the older woman failed to respond.

Lissa jumped to her feet and grabbed Cook's thick arm. "Papa's business? On fire?"

"Yes, Miss Lissa. The man what come tell us, fears all is lost," Cook elaborated in a rush, fanning her own face with the bottom of her apron stretched taut between her hands.

"Mama, I'm going down there. There must be something I can do."

"Wally was driving the delivery wagon today, Miss Lissa. He must be helpin' too," the cook told her. Lissa nodded and turned to her mother.

"Don't worry, Mama. Cook will be with you," she promised. "And I'll be back as quick as I can."

"Don't you fret none about your mama," Cook called out. "I stay here 'til you gets home."

"Thank you." Lissa pulled on her blue bonnet and tied it snugly to control her long raven-colored curls. She wrapped her navy wool cape around her shoulders and pulled on her matching gloves as she dashed down the hall. Her mother's sobs rose in volume as Lissa ran out the door, but they did not deter her. She folded the cape double over her chest against the cold as she raced down the road toward her father's furniture workshop.

Heading downhill toward the flames and smoke lighting the darkening late afternoon sky, Lissa lifted the front of her skirts and ran as fast as she could, mindless of the stones jabbing her feet through the soft leather soles of her shoes. Rapid breathing was difficult with her tight corset, and she wished she had tied the horrid binder more loosely that morning.

The heat and smell from the acrid smoke blowing uphill stung her eyes, and she could see the fire was well beyond stopping. The crackling roar thundered in her ears. She leaned against a storefront and clutched the painful stitch in her side as she caught her breath.

The warehouse next door to the furniture shop was engulfed in flames too. Her papa's livery behind them with its straw must have been quick to go. Its walls had already collapsed and burned into a pile of glowing embers. Lissa hoped the horses were safe with Wally. The pair of grays had been faithful workers, pulling the delivery wagon for many years.

Men, women, and children labored up the hill in their flight from the fire. They carried all they could away from the flames that threatened their homes and businesses.

"Good thing the wind is dying down," she heard one man say. "Maybe it won't take the whole town now."

"I surely do hope so, 'cause my Jake is down there manning a bucket," a woman added.

Others tried to comfort the woman by saying he was certainly right. But judging by the sparks that rose high in the air and danced in every direction above the flames, Lissa could not agree.

She hurried closer, making her way against the tide of refugees. A tall man in a knit cap directed a bucket brigade that snaked up from the river, but the intense heat forced the front of the line to stop far back from the flaming structures. Their current goal appeared to be watering down all the nearby shops and row houses as the sparks hit. Some on the roofs, others in the street, the men were all in their shirtsleeves despite the winter-like March day. Their bodies were blackened with soot and streaked with sweat from their exertion. Lissa strained to see her father among them, but could not.

A man passed, pulling a handcart piled high with furniture and possessions wrapped in bed sheets. A woman walked beside him, her arms full of dishes and a candlestick she must have grabbed off a table as they ran out of their endangered home.

"Have you seen my father, Charles Whitaker?" Lissa called out.

The man shook his head. "Don't want to see him neither. It's his shop what started all this."

Lissa gasped.

"And look at us now. We'll be livin' on the street if they don't get it stopped."

"Papa couldn't have started it," she cried as she turned and fled from the angry barbs.

Cutting across the flow of people to the corner, she saw her brother driving the delivery wagon pulled by the two grays, up the road from the fire. People clutching their belongings filled the open-top wagon, while others hurried along behind. Wally, his feet braced against the front of the wagon for added strength, struggled to control the panicking horses.

"I'll be back for more," he shouted as the horses passed her.

"Good." Lissa ran to help a mother who was carrying a child on her hip and a large bag over her opposite shoulder.

"My Harry. I can't find my Harry," the sobbing woman cried.

"Let me help with that," Lissa offered.

The woman jerked back the bag Lissa was trying to lift from her grasp. "Forget about me. Please, mistress, just find my little Harry. I thought he was next to me and now he's gone. And I can't go back with the babe."

Lissa looked at the tide of humanity flowing past them. "I'll find him," she vowed as she ran closer to the fire.

She called out the child's name and looked carefully at both sides of the road. She had not yet spotted the missing child when Wally and the now empty wagon pulled up beside her.

Their father ran to meet him, and Lissa mumbled a prayer of thanks that he wasn't hurt. "Hurry! We can't stop until everyone is out!" He seized the lead gray's bridle to turn the team.

"I came to help," Lissa shouted over the roar of the fire.

"You got to get soaked down first," Wally ordered before her father could respond.

In a short detour to a horse trough, she wet down her cape, tied it back on over her shivering shoulders, and ran after them.

Once the horses were turned around so they faced away from the flames to keep them calmer, Wally set the wagon brake and jumped down to hold them. As Lissa approached the wagon, the tall man she had seen directing the bucket brigade ran over and helped load goods and people into the wagon. His muscles rolled under his sweat-soaked shirt as he worked. His gaze swung to meet hers. In two long strides he stood before her. Without a word, he placed his hands on her waist and lifted her into the air toward the wagon.

She pounded on his hard upper arms. "No, stop! Put me down. I'm here to help, not to escape the flames." She didn't recognize him, but with ash and soot smudged over his face and beard, and his hair covered with a knit cap, it was hard to tell who he was. Lissa looked into his pale blue eyes and felt a strange new fire lick at her belly. She'd never seen eyes like those before.

He paused, holding her in the air as if she weighed nothing, and then lowered her to the ground. A small smile curled the edges of his full lips as a gleam of respect flashed in his eyes, and then he turned away to help others in need.

A small voice crying, "Mama!" jerked Lissa's attention from the strong man's back to the reality of what she was doing there.

"Harry! Harry, is that you? Where are you?" She wove her way through the crowd toward the child's cries. "Harry? Are you Harry?"

The tearful child nodded. "I can't find my mama."

"I know where your mama is. She asked me to find you. Come on. I'll take you to her."

The child's face brightened a little and he allowed Lissa to pick him up.

"Look out! Run for it!" several people shouted at once.

Lissa wrapped her wet cape around the child and ran up the hill. Behind her, the burning two-story wall of a seedy inn fell onto the road at the edge of the fire. The timbers split upon landing, shooting flaming slivers like arrows in every direction. The bucket brigade changed direction to wet down the new danger to the buildings across the wide muddy road. The water hissed as steam rose with the smoke and heat.

"You found him. Harry, oh, my Harry," the child's mother exclaimed as she dropped her bag and clutched the child, kissing him over and over.

"You can manage from here?" Lissa asked.

"Yes, and thank you." She grabbed her bag and made sure Harry was in front of her as she made her way farther up the hill to safety.

Lissa ran back down to where her help was needed. Hours later, they were evacuating the last of the able-bodied and the injured. By then, she was happy for her heavy layers of petticoats after all; strips ripped from the fine linen ruffles came in handy for bandaging burns and blisters.

* * *

As Lars Oleson loaded the furniture wagon one last time, the abused muscles in his back and shoulders cramped painfully. After his ship from Norway had landed in Philadelphia, all he'd wanted to do was buy tools from Charles Whitaker's shop and head west to Dakota Territory. But he could not turn his back on the men when the fire erupted in his presence. He had stashed his heavy wool coat and his saddlebags containing all he owned under the driver's bench of the furniture delivery wagon and asked the boy driving it to keep an eye on them.

Now, as the first hint of dawn lightened the sky, had there been yet another wagon to load, he did not think he could help. His lungs burned from the smoke he had inhaled, and everything he touched was left with blood from his hands. The minute the wagon pulled away, the tall slender girl who had been laboring all night with the rest of them tugged on his arm until he stopped and turned to her.

"Let me see your hands," she ordered.

He looked into her clear gray eyes and could not look away. He lifted his aching hands with the palms up and she gasped. Many of the huge blisters rising from burned and abused pads had broken. His hands were bloody masses of torn flesh. Very painful masses, he realized, now that he paused and thought about them.

He was startled to see tears welling in her eyes. The thought she would weep for him softened something deep inside him. She looked up to meet his gaze, and he knew she could see the pain he was feeling. Just as quickly he shuttered his gaze.

"I must get back to work," he insisted more gruffly than he intended. The sooner they finished all they could do, the sooner he could head west.

She grabbed his wrist and pulled him aside with surprising strength. "Not until I tend to your hands."

He smiled behind her back at her determination. He wondered who she was and why her parents--or husband, he added as he readjusted his estimate of her age--had allowed her to stay in this dangerous area so near the fire.

She had lost the frothy bonnet she had been wearing when he first saw her. Her long dark tresses lay wet and plastered against her back. A torn length of ribbon, probably from the hat, tied them out of her way. Her cape and dress were torn and filthy, and he had seen her flip up her skirt to rip a ruffle from her petticoat for bandages more than once. Lars could only conclude that, despite her initial rich appearance, she lived in the area and was helping friends and neighbors. He had to admire her for all she had done, and despite a covering of ash and grime, he thought her beautiful.

She had only a bucket of brackish water from the river with which to wash his hands. He sucked in a quick breath between his teeth as she poured some water over them and gently wiped away the blood. He tried to concentrate on how soft her hand felt holding his, rather than on the pain. Providing him a brief glance of a shapely but muddy ankle, she lifted her skirt and ripped the last ruffle from the bottom of her petticoat. Tearing it in two pieces, she carefully wrapped the linen strips around and around his hands before tying each off at his wrists.

She cradled his hands in hers as if they were precious to her. "You'll want to clean these better and put on salve as soon as you can." She looked up to meet his gaze. "And you must stop using your hands now."

"I--"

"You must," she pleaded with so much concern in her voice that he smiled.

"Thank you," he said softly. He lifted his hands from hers. "I stop when no more need my help."

Charles Whitaker shouted for help and Lars turned to go back to work. Moments later he looked back to see the girl hailed in a different direction to help a woman whose bundle had ripped open, and he did not see her again that night. Just as the firefighters' energy reached a dangerous low, the fire was finally contained with the aid of a freezing rain.

Lars retrieved his goods from the wagon and followed the road away from the charred remains of businesses and homes. He would have been in dire circumstances if he had not found an innkeeper grateful for his help rescuing a brother and his family from the fire--his hands were so swollen and painful,

he could not even feed himself. By the following night he had a deep cough from breathing in smoke that would not be silenced. He slept day and night, to awaken only when the innkeeper or his wife brought him food or a change of dressing for his hands.

Days turned into weeks as Lars healed, and with each passing day, his impatience grew. His thoughts calmed only when they wandered to the ebony-haired beauty in the blue dress that matched her bright eyes. He wished he had learned her name, not that it would have mattered. He would leave town the moment he could handle reins with assurance. He would never meet the angel of mercy again. But then, why would he want to? Next summer his uncle was sending two girls all the way from Norway for him and his brother to wed in their new homesteads in Dakota Territory.

Chapter Two

Several days later, Lissa was the last to arrive for a family meeting in the parlor her father had converted to his office. Entering the room silently, she saw that her father stood by the large stone fireplace that dominated one wall. He leaned on the thick pine mantle and stared into the flames. The heavy drapes had been opened to admit the bright early spring sunlight, yet the room felt cold and damp. Winter did not seem to want to end this year. The smell of smoke filled the room from the tools in the corner cabinet that had been saved from the fire.

Lissa closed the paneled pine door behind her back and paused a moment to watch her father pull his pipe from his vest pocket and relight it with a tinder from the fire. He tossed the twig into the flames and stared at it as it burned. Recently, she had noticed him staring in the same way at the sky long after the sun had set. She had begun to worry about him and wondered why he had not gotten to the task of rebuilding his workshop since the fire. Without the furniture business, what would they ever do?

Lissa's mother sat in the first seat in a semi-circle of straight back chairs pulled from around the table and set facing the fire. Lissa had noticed changes in her since the fire too. The more distant her pa had gotten, the worse her mother's health had become. The pristine white apron covering her gray dress made her face look even paler than usual. The handkerchief she worried between her trembling fingers had been nearly shredded to bits. Lissa suspected by her red eyes and damp cheeks that her mother knew what Pa was about to tell them all, and didn't like it.

Wally sat in the third seat, leaving the center one empty for Lissa. He was rubbing a small wooden top he had carved against his sleeve. He had a knack for making the tops perfectly balanced so they seemed to spin forever. He decorated each with clever and intricate carvings on the sides and was very proud of his accomplishments, but his papa wasn't. Many of the tops had been carved during the time Wally was supposed to have been learning the furniture-making business, not the toy-making trade, and the sight of a top or any of the other toys in Wally's handmade collection never failed to anger his father.

The top caught on the cuff of Wally's shirt and flipped out of his hand. It bounced on the chair between his legs. Wally caught it before it fell to the floor. He looked up, grinning at his save.

"Put that toy away," their pa snapped unnecessarily loud. "You are too old to play with such things. It's time you acted more like a man."

Wishing she had made her move to sit while her father's attention was on the fire, Lissa hurried toward her chair. She kept her head down so she would not make eye contact with him. She didn't want to feel the brunt of his anger.

"About time you got here, Lissa," her father snapped. "Where have you been?"

"Sorry, Papa." She slipped into the empty chair. "I was in my room sewing while I had the daylight." She bowed her head again quickly and muttered, "Cook just now told me you wanted to see me."

"Yes, yes," he mumbled, dismissing her excuse. "Well, you won't need to be sewing on anything for your wedding now."

She jerked her head up, but he'd already looked back into the fire. "But, Papa, if I'm to be married this fall, Jeffrey said--"

"Enough of that talk," Charles said with his hand up to stop her. "I don't want to hear another word about that lazybones boy or any marriage."

Lissa rebounded against the ladder-back of her chair as if his hand and not his hurtful words had struck her. She looked at her mother, who refused to meet her gaze. Lissa knew now that whatever her father had to say would only make the situation worse.

He cleared his throat and tapped his pipe against his palm to empty it into the fire. "Now then. Let's get on with it. I've brought you all together to tell you of my plan."

Lissa brightened again, expecting to hear her father's plans to rebuild the workshop. However, when her mama shook her head and buried her face in her apron, Lissa wondered if she was not being too optimistic. Her father seemed no closer to accepting the loss of his building, the wood, and especially many of his tools.

"Before I begin, you must know that I will always bear the burden of guilt for the destruction of other peoples' businesses and homes."

"There's no way you could have known the workshop would burn." Lissa adjusted the patchwork quilt that lay over her mother's legs for added warmth. The damp chill always compounded whatever ailed her belly.

"You saw all those people fleeing up the hill like ants rushing from a torched mound. Wally, and Lissa, I was quite proud of you. You stayed to the end, helping people move out, and then returned to help move back the fortunate ones who didn't lose their homes. You have my thanks for your help and devotion."

"No one blames you for the accident," Wally offered.

"Some do because the dolt who started the fire worked for me," Lissa's papa said hoarsely.

"And he will bear the horrid scars of his error for life if he lives, and most doubt that he will, Papa." Taking a deep breath, Lissa added softly, "When will you get started at rebuilding?"

"I can't rebuild," he replied forcefully. "I just can't. A man my age shouldn't be starting over from the same beginning point a second time." He ran his hand through his graying hair. "If I had only been more attentive, we wouldn't be in the fix we're in."

"Charles, you must stop blaming yourself," his wife managed to say.

"I should have smelled trouble when that Jefferson boy came to work for me. Remember, Wally, on the day of the fire when you had just left on the huge delivery with my apprentice? Well, I told the new boy to sweep the floor clean of the wood shavings and sawdust." He shook his head. "The boy tossed the first pan of debris into the fire and watched it burst into flames with a bang. He actually laughed."

"Oh, dear." Lissa's mother's shoulders slumped forward as she crossed her arms protectively over her stomach.

"I turned to reprimand the boy and instruct him in the fire dangers of sawdust when the door opened and a man entered the shop. I got to talking with him and forgot all about warning the boy."

"You couldn't very well ignore a customer," Lissa told him.

Her father looked down at the warming fire and shook his head. "But he wasn't a customer at all."

"What did he want then? Did you know him, Papa?"

"No, I'd never seen him before. But I'll never forget what we talked about. Before I explain my plan for us, I want to tell you all about what he said that day."

* * *

"What can I do for you?" Charles said with a friendly smile for the tall man who had just entered his workshop.

"My name is Lars Oleson. I come from Norway." He pulled his cap from his head and stuffed it into his heavy wool coat pocket. He set his saddlebags on the floor beside him.

"You've come a long way to find my shop," Charles replied with a laugh.

The man smiled. "Ya, but my journey is only half done."

"Well, traveler, what can I do to help with your long journey?"

"Tools," he replied. "My brother in Dakota Territory. I promise bring tools. And some nails, if they not too dear."

Oleson seemed like every other settler moving west to find something more than he already had in the East or back in his homeland. Now that the War Between the States was winding down, Charles had read in the Daily Evening Bulletin that more and more men, many with their families, were leaving their homes to find their future out west. Years before, the government had even built the National Road west from Cumberland to near the Mississippi River in Illinois to accommodate the travelers and all the teamsters moving freight west along with them. The paper had said that despite war damage to the road, it was busier than ever.

"Philadelphia is a big place," Oleson continued. "Where I get good strong tools for building my new home at a fair price?"

Any potential furniture sale evaporated. Nonetheless Charles introduced himself and spent the next few minutes explaining exactly where Oleson could buy the finest tools at the best price.

"Where'd you say you're heading?" one of the men in the shop asked out of curiosity.

"Dakota Territory. Much snow like in Norway. My older brother, Ingor, he go last spring, but I not go until now. I work more to pay for ocean passage. Now I go west too." He grinned, his chest rising in pride.

"That's a fer piece to go," the other joiner said. "I heard tell it's so cold up there that your breath freezes before you can catch it." The men laughed at his jest. "What do you want to go all the way out there for?"

"Good land is free for the taking," Oleson insisted. "Ingor says soil in Red River Valley is so rich it's black as coal."

"And them red Indians out there would slit your throat for a plug of tobacco or a bottle of whiskey."

Oleson shrugged. "But land good. A man can make a good life for a family. I get a farm. Then my uncle send a wife from Norway to marry me. She be happy with the farm and with me." He winked at the men, who laughed again.

"Dakota Territory, huh?" Charles tucked his thumbs in his vest and tried to imagine what it would be like to be free from his encumbrances so he could move west. He also wondered why he had not found such a responsible and hard-working man to marry his daughter. Lissa's tastes seemed to rest on the boys who were more interested in how their cravat was tied, or how much money there would be in her dowry, than how to work to earn a living.

"You thinking of all the folks who would be needing furniture out there?" one of the men asked Charles.

Charles laughed, but the idea of starting a new life in the Dakota Territory intrigued him. He tamped it down with visions of his ill wife, his daughter who had reached marriage age with no prospects he approved of, and his young son who would rather whittle toys than learn the furniture-making trade. He sighed when he pictured what they would think of the idea of selling the workshop, packing up, and heading west to Dakota Territory.

"Well, I leave you to your work," Oleson said. "Thank you for the advice. Maybe someday I can help you." He shook Charles's hand and pulled his saddlebags strap onto his shoulder and walked toward the door. The other men followed him to get out of the way of the boy sweeping the last section of the wide floor.

Charles wished him good luck as did the other men, but before Oleson could respond, an earth-shaking explosion boomed behind them, throwing the men against the large door.

The boy had thrown all the sawdust into the stove at once. The explosive force ripped off the iron-stove door and split open the chimney pipe. The bright sparks of flaming dust and shavings showered down like Chinese fireworks. They could barely see the boy lying motionless on the floor through the flames.

While one man ran to sound the alarm and get help, the other men had only minutes to drag out the hapless boy's unconscious body and save as many tools and pieces of equipment as they could manage before the building was totally engulfed in flames. By then they knew there would be no stopping the fire.

* * *

Lissa handed her papa the glass of water he had requested after telling them the tale of what had started the fire. She returned to her seat by her mother, who was silently weeping.

"Mama, whatever Papa's plan for the workshop is, it can't be anything but good," she murmured. Her mother always got sicker when she was upset, and Lissa wanted her mother to be well. She couldn't bear to see her in so much pain.

Her papa rose and set the empty glass on the mantle. "Now then, I've gathered you all here because I've made a decision that will change our lives for the better." He absently drew on the empty pipe and made a face of displeasure at the taste. He cleared his throat and continued. "I made my living in the lost workshop and so did poor Matthew. He's been an able apprentice for several years now, and I'm confident he will be able to rebuild and carry on without me. He has already found a backer who has helped him buy the property from me." He clapped his hands and spread them at his sides. "So, as you see, my responsibilities here in Philadelphia end." He refilled his pipe as casually as if he were discussing the weather on a fine summer's day.

"Matthew is to carry on without you?" Lissa wondered what he was talking about. Nothing seemed to make sense. "But why, Papa?" She looked to her mother, who stared into the fire without blinking.

He lit his pipe and continued only after he had taken several quick puffs, blowing the spicy smoke over their heads. "My new design for our lives is perfect. I'm taking the unfortunate accident at the shop and turning it into the possibility for an adventure." He smiled broadly, looking like a pleased father who has just given his children exactly what they wanted for Christmas.

"An adventure?" Wally laughed. "But Papa, you've never sought out an adventure. You're happy with making your furniture and not much else."

"Yes, my boy. You have always sought out enough adventure for all of us. Now, with nothing more than the tools saved from the fire, plus the wagon and horses, I see a chance to begin again in a better place. We begin our preparations tomorrow."

"Preparations for what, Papa?" Lissa asked.

He looked at the seated trio who were all staring at him. "Strengthening our wagon for starters. We'll want to add solid, higher sides to it, and a stronger box. Wally, you'll be helping me with that, and no excuses now. Lissa, you will help your mother decide what clothing and food we need to bring. Pack the pots and tin plates you will need to cook over an outdoor fire in a separate box so we can get at them for each meal."

"Outdoor fire? Are we going to build a summer kitchen?" Lissa was excited at the prospect of keeping the house cooler in the summers.

Her father gave no sign he'd even heard his daughter's question. "You'll each be very limited in what you can take with you. I've already talked to Cook, and she will not be coming, but we can manage without her." He looked at Lissa. "I don't know how much your mother can do, so you will learn to cook and all the rest that needs to be done by doing most of it yourself."

"But Cook--"

Charles interrupted her. "The delivery wagon is not overly large. As soon as we get to Lancaster County, we'll purchase a Conestoga wagon with a tall bonnet over the top and plenty of room inside.

That's where they are made and hopefully it'll cost less to buy there. For the foreseeable future, the Conestoga will be our home."

"Our home?" Lissa cried, her panic evident in her raised voice. "Why live in a wagon? This is our home."

Lissa's mother gave in to her tears again and buried her face in her apron. Lissa put her arm around her shoulders and murmured comforting words, but they had no effect on her uncontrollable sobs.

"This is not our home for much longer," her papa declared. "I've already arranged to sell it. I told them we would leave as soon as the wagon was reinforced and packed. You need only take serviceable clothes. No need for fancy dresses."

Lissa's heart raced. She felt her world slipping out from under her. Tears stung her eyes. "Papa, what do you mean? I need my green taffeta for the party to announce my engagement. Jeffrey says--"

"Engagement? To Jeffrey? Bah!" Lissa gasped at the venom in her father's voice. "You'll forget him soon enough."

"Forget him?" Her mouth was suddenly dry and her heart pounded in her ears. "We're to be married this fall."

Her pa shook his head. "No, not anymore. I sent for him yesterday and informed him of my plan. He said he has no interest in going with us, and I told him leaving you here alone is out of the question. The boy is not much older than you are and hardly capable of providing for you. Besides, I need you with us to help your mother. You know she's not well."

"Please, Mama, tell him I can't possibly go." Her only response from her mama was more sobs.

"Don't worry, my dear," her father answered with at least an attempt at softening his voice. "There are plenty of men where we're going, and they would be lucky to get a wife as lovely and hard working as you. I'll find you a good husband." He smiled down at her, looking proud for having solved her problem.

Lissa had heard enough. She jumped to her feet and shouted at her father for the first time in her life. "I don't want you to pick my husband. I want to choose the man I'm to marry, or...or I won't marry at all!" Seeing the shocked and dangerous look on her father's face, she promptly sat down again and burst into tears.

Wally stared at the two sobbing women, a deep frown on his face. "Where are we going, Pa? Once we get the wagon shored up, I mean. What's to become of us?"

Their father's face brightened with a broad smile at his son's interest. His chest puffed out, and he rested his fists on his hips. "Dakota, boy. We're going west to Dakota Territory. There's land to be had, and a man and his family can have plenty of room to move around. We can get a fresh start with the business out there. The war in the south will be over soon, and by leaving now we'll get a head start on families who will go west then. Once we're there we can build a workshop and start making furniture in no time. People will seek us out from miles around."

"Must we leave so quickly?" Wally asked.

The women looked up, tears glistening on their cheeks, listening for the answer.

"We must leave Philadelphia as soon as we can in order to get to Dakota well before the snow flies next winter. I'd hate to have to live in the wagon for the winter too."

"We can't live in a wagon in winter," Lissa cried out. "We'll freeze to death."

"That's why we must hurry. I've already sent the letter ordering a new wagon in Conestoga. Now let's get packing. Remember, we can take only what we can fit in the delivery wagon."

A trio of shocked cries erupted.

"It's better this way," Charles insisted, putting down their objections before hearing them. "You'll see. When we get the bigger wagon, we'll have more room inside than most folks because we don't need to take everything we own. When we get there, I can make all we need to fill our house. Traveling will be more comfortable. You'll see." With confidence that his announcement would make everyone happy, a satisfied smile spread across his face.

"Charles, do you really think the delivery wagon will hold all we need?" his wife asked in a trembling voice.

"I'll be happy to give up the stiff-collared shirts you make me wear to church," Wally volunteered before his father could answer. "There can't be no call to wear those out west."

A new look of determination tightened their mother's red face. "Charles, tell him that's not true. We are not going to leave all remnants of civilization behind." Some of the stiffening went out of her voice as she added, "We owe it to our children to be sure they know how to conduct themselves as a lady and a gentleman. And we must be mindful of Lissa's reputation."

"Now, Elizabeth. They know how to behave, and there's not much call for dress shirts when you're working on your land." Both women objected this time. "All right. One trunk. That's all you should need for your fancy clothes. The Dakota Territory is wide open to folks like us who want to homestead. We'll get us a piece of prime farmland to grow what we need to live on and make furniture to sell. We'll have a grand life. You'll see."

"But you're not a farmer, Pa," Lissa insisted. "We don't know how to raise crops."

"We know how to tend our vegetable garden. We've all done that for years. A farm is just a big garden. We own two sturdy horses now, and we'll be getting two more to help pull the new bigger wagon. They can be taught to pull a plow next spring."

Wide-eyed and grinning, Wally jumped up from the edge of his chair. "Will we see buffalo, Pa?"

"Hundreds of them, my boy. Why, I hear the grassland looks black with them running thick." Wally cheered. "A nice buffalo blanket will keep you warm as toast next winter, Elizabeth," he added as an afterthought with a smile. "Once we have the Conestoga, you'll see I was right to reject the idea of traveling west by train or canal. Though they are faster as far as they go, the price is too costly." He patted his wife on her shoulder, but she did not look reassured. "Now let's get packing. No sense wasting the time left in this day."

Wally jumped up and ran from the room with a hoot of joy. Lissa patted her mother's arm and rose to leave without any of the enthusiasm her brother had shown.

"There is one more thing, Lissa, now that your brother has gone," her pa added. "Your mother and I have discussed it, and she feels you are old enough and responsible enough to help guard our family welfare."

Lissa frowned. "What do you mean?"

He cleared his throat. "Well, as you know, I had just delivered a large order of furniture before the fire, and what with the payment for the lot from Matthew and then this house, ah, I have considerable cash money that we will be taking with us. As there are no banks in the Dakota Territory as yet, we must guard our own wealth."

"But how can I help?"

Her father's cheeks reddened a bit. He fumbled with his pipe and then looked to his wife for assistance. "You tell her. I shouldn't have to talk about such things." He turned to the fire.

Lissa's mother looked at Lissa and straightened, wiping her eyes on her apron. "What your father is trying to say is that you and I, in addition to himself, will be carrying most of our money hidden on our persons."

"I can't see myself carrying a reticule all the way across to the western wilderness, Mama," Lissa complained.

"No, dear." She glanced up at Charles, who kept his gaze fixed on the flames. "Your father has asked us to sew rows of coins into our...our corsets. Carrying the money in such a way will insure its safety."

"But the corset is too stiff already," Lissa whined.

Her father whirled around to face them. "Then a few rows of coins sewed into it won't make much difference," he said with a finality that told the women the conversation was over.

"You can help me sew them in tomorrow," her mama said with a pat on her arm.

"Yes, Mama," she said obediently.

Just how much more horrible could this trip get? How Lissa longed to meet the man who had given her father the wild idea of moving west to Dakota Territory. He had ruined her life and stolen her marriage to Jeffrey. If their paths ever crossed, she would give him a tongue-lashing he would not soon forget. It was just as well that they would never meet.

Jeffrey had abandoned her, and she would have to assign him to her past. That was quickly done, and a good deal more easily than she would have thought. Maybe she had never loved him after all. She had thought him cute and their stolen kisses had been exciting. She sighed. She tried to resign herself to her father's wishes. It would mean a great deal of work, but there was definitely something exciting about the prospect of seeing places she had never seen before. But the unknown could be quite frightening as well.

Without Cook's help on the trail, Lissa would have to take over her responsibilities. She was used to taking care of her mama because she had been ill for months. And Wally could be a help too, even with the nearly five years difference in their age. Lissa was not afraid of hard work; she was used to it. Hard work would fill many lonely hours on the trail.

And given no other choice, what else could she do?

* * *

While his family packed up their goods, Charles managed to close out his business affairs in Philadelphia. He spent several days helping Matthew's crew build a new workshop. He felt a good deal better about the whole situation and knew the crew could easily finish the rest of the construction in short order.

The fire had destroyed Charles's workbenches, but his men and Mr. Oleson had grabbed many of his tools when it became obvious the fire was out of control. They also rescued a small, multiple-drawer cabinet filled with precious nails, knobs, small hinges, and the like. They were all useful as Charles constructed sturdy wooden crates to carry all their goods.

Not knowing if they would be available out west, he acquired extra saw blades, hammers, and carving tools, planning to make the handles when they arrived at their destination. He oiled the tools then wrapped them in rags. After loading the iron stove onto the wagon over the axle, he packed the tools inside for the trip.

He would allow the family to take only a few pieces of furniture. "I'll build all you want when we get there," he had promised them again. They would keep the finest pieces made of cherry and walnut.

Elizabeth insisted they keep the chest of drawers Charles's father had made for them for a wedding present. "When I saw our things together in that chest of drawers, I felt truly wed," she said with a shy smile. "I know your father would want one of the children to have it."

Charles smiled and held out his hand to her. She placed her slender one in his and rose. He gathered her tenderly into his arms. "You may take Pa's chest," he promised after placing a kiss on the top of her head. "But kindly make sure every inch of the drawers is full before it goes into the wagon."

One of the first drawers to be filled was the bottom one assigned to Lissa. She carefully packed in all the linens she had spent the past two years stitching for her married life. The event of her wedding seemed impossible now, but as long as the bottom drawer was full of her beautiful things, she could have hope.

Excited about the move, Wally asked questions at every opportunity. "Dakota Territory is big. Where are we going to live?"

"We'll know it when we see it," was all the answer his pa could give, other than to say they were going to follow near to Lewis and Clark's footsteps.

"I'm going to be an explorer," Wally announced to anyone who would listen. As he packed, he stuffed his artfully carved toys into each pocket and fold in his clothes. He hoped folks would like to buy his toys for their children out in Dakota Territory. When he refused to relinquish his shirt for washing, his mother learned he had already packed all the rest of his clothes. She had to convince him to leave more than one set of clothes out to wear until they left.

Lissa accompanied her mother to the greengrocer's where Jeffrey, the owner's son, was employed. Upon seeing her, he went into the back room under the guise of having work to do there. They never spoke. She was realistic enough to see him for the immature coward he was. He had fooled her into thinking what she had felt for him was love. She wouldn't be fooled again. But losing him also meant she lost her only hope of rescue from going west.

With no experience living anywhere other than Philadelphia, she wondered how they were going to manage in the wilderness where there would be no city conveniences.

With each passing day Lissa's mother looked more worried and even paler. She tried to smile as strangers as well as friends bought the goods and furniture they had decided not to take west. Each excursion away from the house exhausted her more, so Lissa did the final shopping for the trip's victuals. Cook had found employment with another family, but agreed to stay on until they left. Lissa was thankful because she ended up doing most of the kitchen packing with only Cook to help while her mother rested.

The good china and glassware were buried in barrels of dried peas and beans for safekeeping. If they used some of the dried vegetables on the trip, they would have to be replaced to keep the dishes safe. Then they would have them for their first winter in Dakota after they unpacked.

Lissa's father oversaw packing a few panes of glass in a crate filled with sawdust. They did not want to use beans in case the glass broke.

"I couldn't bear a house without a glass window," her mother had said longingly when the matter was first discussed.

Her papa flinched at the word house, but made no further comment. "Glass is very dear for windows and not at all warm, but we'll manage," he said simply.

"And the sawdust will help keep us warm next winter," Wally suggested. "As long as we burn it in smaller amounts than at the workshop last month!" he added with a laugh.

Their father hadn't laughed at his jest, but Lissa was happy he had not become angry at the comment this time.

"There is fuel for the fires on the prairie," their papa explained. "Wood is dear, but they gather buffalo dung once it's dried. They call them buffalo chips, and burn them like wood."

Lissa groaned and decided she would rather put on another coat indoors than even consider handling such materials. "But, Papa, if there are too few trees to burn to keep us warm, how can you build a house or make furniture?"

Her father glared at her and continued taking apart the trestle table they were taking with them. The parts could be stacked in the wagon more easily than a whole table, and putting it back together at journey's end would be easy. Lissa soon forgot that her question had gone unanswered in the rush of activity.

While they had the availability of cobblers, they bought warm boots for the coming winter and sturdy walking shoes for everyone.

"I can't be seen in those," Lissa claimed when she saw the boots her pa expected her to wear on the journey. "They look like something Wally would wear." But deep in her heart, she knew she would end up wearing them rather than ruin her soft leather dress slippers.

She saw no end to the indignities she would be made to suffer, and all for the sake of...Well, she wasn't sure what it was all for, because she was certain they were abandoning the best life they could have anywhere. They were leaving all their friends and the home they had lived in since she was a baby. They were depriving her of her only chance to marry a civilized man. She was certain of that too. The stories friends told her of men out west were just not to be believed. The men were dirty, had no manners and

wore long, unkempt beards, probably like the man at the fire. She couldn't picture herself being courted by such a man and shuddered at the thought of kissing lips buried in the midst of all that hair.

* * *

On April 9th their packing came to a temporary halt. A grin such as they hadn't seen in months filled Charles's face. "All of Philadelphia has learned that General Lee had surrendered to General Grant at the Appomattox Courthouse. The war is over. People are celebrating in the streets."

"Oh, Charles, the war is truly over," Elizabeth said, smiling as well.

"I thought the war would last long enough for me to get older and join," Wally lamented.

Elizabeth gasped at the thought.

"There will be many southern families going west now too. Their homes have been destroyed or taken from them," Charles noted. "They will have nothing but dreams of a better life."

"They'll need furniture, won't they, Pa?" Wally asked hopefully.

Charles frowned. "I don't know what many of them would use for coin to pay for it. The war has left folks on both sides with little or nothing." He sighed. "We are very fortunate, but that means we will have to be more mindful to protect what we have." He looked at Lissa and Elizabeth with a meaningful expression on his face that was to remind them of the part they would play in safeguarding the money they would carry.

The family renewed their efforts for the move. As fast as Charles and Wally made square wooden crates, the women filled them. But their hammers were silent when on Sunday, April 16th, Charles assembled his family in the parlor before leaving for church services. "I have gathered you to give you the worst of news." His family looked up expectantly. He took a deep breath before going on. "After holding our country together through the war, President Lincoln has been assassinated."

"Charles, what does this mean? Is there an uprising?" Elizabeth asked. "Oh, I thought the war was over."

"I know nothing more than he was shot at close range Friday evening while attending a play at Ford's Theater in Washington."

The family sat in stunned silence until Charles roused them to go to church to pray for Lincoln's soul. What would become of the country now? What if they started their journey and war broke out again?

That night, all their belongings were packed into the delivery wagon that stood beside their house in readiness.

"We leave at first light," Charles announced.

Chapter Three

The clouds covered the sun and any warmth it might have given the travelers as they began their journey. Lissa and her mother huddled with one blanket wrapped around their shoulders and another over their

legs as they sat on the driver's seat beside her papa. Wally rode at the rear of the wagon. They could not see him over the mound of packed furniture, crates, and barrels between them. Though her father had reinforced the wagon, every new creak deepened the worry lines on her mama's face.

Lissa was happy to leave at first light when few of their neighbors would see them go. Her friends had been unable to understand why her father wanted to leave the comforts of living in a fine city like Philadelphia and go out west where one would fear for one's very life. She had not been able to explain it either, but unkind thoughts for the man who'd enticed her father to leave stubbornly stayed with her.

Now she watched the horses' hooves plod along the track in the hard packed turnpike heading west across Pennsylvania. It seemed to take forever for each tree to pass by and disappear behind them.

"We'll get there today, won't we, Papa?" she asked as she lost sight of the last houses of Philadelphia. "To where we'll get the bigger wagon?"

Charles laughed. "It won't be today. There are a few mountains between us and Conestoga." He made it sound like it would take forever.

"I wish we knew someone else going west," Lissa said. "It will be very lonely."

"We'll meet up with others just like us. Once we get to the National Road, there will be more wagons than we want around us."

Lissa looked down to see that her mother dozed lightly, her head against her husband's shoulder. Lissa pulled up the blanket that had slipped from her mama's arms. "Will the new wagon be warm enough for Mama?"

"Warm and dry. It's a fine wagon, I hear. The canvas bonnet rests on curved ribs and goes so high up you'll be able to stand up inside. There will be room to carry the water barrel, the toolbox, a spare axle and wheel, and such mounted on the outside. Then we can make sleeping space on the inside for rainy nights."

Rain. Lissa had not thought about what they would do if it rained. She soon learned. They would get wet, that's what they would do.

"Shouldn't we have taken the train? They run all the way to Chicago, Papa. That would be better than riding in a wagon."

"And more expensive. And you would not have been able to bring half of what you have back there." He jerked his thumb toward the wagonload behind him.

"But the ride would have been more comfortable," Lissa added.

Careful not to wake her mother who needed more and more naps lately, Lissa shifted her weight to relieve the pounding on her backside from the wooden bench seat. She was already sore. How would she manage it for the weeks and even months ahead of them?

Once their pa suggested later that morning that Lissa and Wally would warm up if they walked instead of staying on the wagon, there had been no escape from exhaustion. Lissa had never walked so much in one day in her life. Her feet quickly felt so cold that she hardly noticed all the sore places that rubbed her new ugly boots. She was glad her long skirt covered them from view, though her skirt got more muddy as the

miles passed. But she supposed it really did not matter. Other than a few farmers' wagons and some teamsters with their big freight wagons going west at a faster rate, they saw no one. And those travelers did not notice what her skirt or shoes looked like.

Lissa's mother had tried to walk alongside her children for a time, but quickly became too weak to continue. The forced ride in the wagon was jolting, and she appeared to suffer all the more for it. She had her arms wrapped protectively around her stomach all the time now. Lissa prevailed upon her pa to slow the wagon's rate for her mother's sake. They bounced over just as many holes and rocks, but the slower ride felt less jarring.

The first day of travel ended with Lissa too tired to eat, much less cook it first. They ate cold biscuits and bacon slices Cook had prepared before she left. None of the family had any trouble sleeping that night—even on the hard damp ground. They had hoped to stay at an inn, but darkness overcame them more quickly than they had expected and with no inn in sight. Then at first light, Lissa's papa wanted them all awake and moving.

"You see? A room at an inn would have been a waste of money," he'd insisted.

Lissa could only hope that considering her mother's delicate health, they would not keep this pace up for long. She seemed too ill to recover from even the little walking she had accomplished the first day out.

The bottoms of their dresses were dirty and in danger of wearing out from the constant rubbing on the dirt and coarse blades of grass and prickly weeds as they walked beside the road. Her mother had no trouble persuading Lissa to help take up their hems a few inches the following day. Sewing was not easy while moving, not even a simple double row of straight stitches. However, they kept at it until they each had shorter skirts and petticoats to wear.

Before they started out the following morning, Lissa had quickly washed the mud from their previous day's long skirts and petticoats, and her ma tucked them under the tie-down ropes on the sides of the wagon to dry as they traveled. Lissa found traveling with the shorter skirt and without a heavy petticoat to be chilly but easier going. She felt the heat rise in her cheeks, however, when anyone from a passing wagon saw the display of drying laundry. The women put the petticoats back on for warmth as soon as they dried.

Lissa wished to remove her tight corset that weighed her down with all the coins they had sewed into it. She could feel the bottom of the stays chafing and digging in at her waist more each day. But her parents were adamant. Lissa understood their concern and bent to their wishes without argument. She was young and healthy and could manage, but she could not understand why her mother continued to wear hers when it obviously pained her so. When the bumps were particularly bad, she saw tears gathering in her mother's eyes.

Her father had granted them a later start the third morning as if to reward them. Lissa did not know if it was the few more minutes to get ready or the sun shining after a night of rain that put them all in a better mood. But it was short lived.

"When we reach the upward slope of these hills, all but your mama must walk to lessen the load," their pa told them. "We must save the horses. You're welcome to ride on the way down."

Lissa tried not to think of how hard mountains would be to cross as she trudged along. She concentrated on the beautiful spring day, but doing so slowed her steps, and she fell behind as the wagon lumbered up a long steep hill. Walking at a slower pace, she felt for the first time since leaving their home that she

could enjoy herself a little.

Spring flowers dotted the grass beside the road. Thinking flowers would cheer her mother up, she set about to gather a bouquet. Looking down the road when her hand was filled with fragrant blooms, she was surprised to see neither her family, nor the team of horses, nor the creaking wagon carrying all they owned. All she saw was the road disappearing over the crest of a steep hill. Without realizing it, she had lagged dangerously far behind. She was alone and not a little frightened.

"Wait! Wait for me!" she shouted to no avail. She looked around and could see nothing threatening. But what dangers did the woods on each side of the road hold? Her fear turned her hands to ice. She picked up her skirt and petticoats and ran toward the distant rise in the road. The layers of ruffled linen tangled around her legs and slowed her down like an anchor. Her stiff corset felt tight and heavy, making her strain for each breath. She loosened her bonnet and let it fall onto her back, but her thick raven-colored hair absorbed even more of the sun's heat. She felt hotter than before and reluctantly tied the pale-green confection back in place.

Her pace decreased as she made progress up the hill. She walked beside the road, hoping to avoid the muddy ruts in the dirt. Without pausing, she shielded her eyes from the bright sun with her hand and stretched her neck, trying to spot the wagon. On the next step her foot slid into a hole and twisted as she was thrown forward. She shrieked in pain and threw her arms out to break her fall as she hit the ground hard. Sputtering as she lifted her face from the damp grass, she rose onto her hands and knees and eased her foot from the hole. She felt foolish in the pose, much like a dog that had stepped in a puddle and was shaking water from its hind leg. She gingerly wiggled the foot to test it and winced at the pain that shot up her leg.

At that moment the earth began to shake beneath her palms, and she froze. She could hear horses riding hard down the pike directly toward her from the east. Terrified because her family was nowhere in sight, she crouched down, hid her face in her hands, and squeezed her eyes shut. Wearing a green dress that matched her hat, she could only hope she might be overlooked in the tall grass.

But instead of passing by, the horses stopped at her side. Her heart ceased to beat and she forgot how to breathe. She did not dare open her eyes to see her fate. She was certain she was about to be killed. Or worse.

"I hear your scream. You are hurt?" a strangely familiar deep male voice with a thick strange accent asked.

Startled by the unexpected concern in his voice, she shifted to sit on one hip and looked up. An ominous mounted figure loomed over her. Alone, he sat on the fiercest looking black horse Lissa had ever seen. The only mark to temper his evil appearance was an unusual white patch oddly situated on the side of his head. Both the rider and the horse looked huge. She quickly scooted back from them, but knew she did not stand a chance of escaping. The blood deserted her cheeks.

"You are hurt?" the man repeated. "Or you lose something that makes you crawl in grass?" A smile broke out on his arrogant face. Or it would have been arrogant, she was certain, if it had not been covered with a long, wind-blown, reddish-blond beard.

She shook her head, but did not speak. She had made little progress away from him in the thick grass. Desperate, she tried to push away faster, digging in the soft earth with her heels, but winced at the pain in her injured ankle. By then her skirt had risen high enough to expose her ugly boots and he'd noticed. She tipped her knees to the ground and yanked it down to cover them.

He sat with his arm casually leaning on the pommel and watched her every move. His horse blew and dipped his head to munch on the grass, as did the packhorse she now noticed was tethered to it. With no effort the man swung his leg over the horse's neck and slid to the ground, never having taken his gaze from her.

His face, hidden behind that atrocious beard, looked wild enough to scare any gentlewoman like her. She should have felt afraid, but somehow she could not think badly of a man with such sparkling, clear blue eyes as looked down into hers. Why, they almost looked familiar, but her fright at the moment hindered her memory.

He squatted at her side, his thigh muscles stretching tight the fabric of his denim trousers. He stared at her strangely for a few moments and smiled more broadly as if he somehow had recognized her. When she did nothing but look up in confusion, he politely pulled on his sweat-stained, wide-brimmed hat, settling it even lower over his long blond hair that brushed his broad shoulders.

"Your ankle. It hurts?" he asked as he absently plucked the blades of grass from her boot peeking out from under her skirt.

She swallowed against the dryness she felt in her throat, but could not engage her voice to respond. He switched to speaking in a melodious language as he loosened the ties and slipped her boot off. Though she did not understand them, the words sounded soothing and almost mesmerizing. With one hand under her ankle, he used the other to gauge the swelling and rotate her foot. Her breath caught at his touch.

"You not cry out in pain by now, so your ankle not broken. Is fine, I think," he announced as he pressed upward on her toes. She sucked in air between her clenched teeth at the pain, and he added, "Well, almost fine, a little hurt."

She swallowed and finally gathered up her nerve to speak. "Yes," she managed. "I...I didn't break it or anything."

"Ya." He slid the boot back on her foot and laced it comfortably loose.

"Thank you," she muttered, swiping her hands together to remove the debris. It fell onto her skirt and when she brushed it away, she only succeeded in pressing the dirt into the weave. "Oh, the dirt never ends," she complained.

"Here. These are yours?" He handed her the bunch of flowers that had flown from her grip when she fell.

"Yes, thank you. They're for my mother, but they don't look so pretty now that I've crushed them."

He laughed, a warm sound that resonated deep in his broad chest. "Come, child. I help you up."

Without waiting even a moment for her response, he rose and leaned down to place his large hands under her armpits. She had no choice but to put her hands on his arms as he lifted her off the ground. He set her on her feet on the road well away from the animal burrow that had trapped her foot. As he released her, his palms brushed against the sides of her breasts. A sudden rush of heat deep inside her necessitated a deep breath to steady her breathing.

"Thank you for your assistance, sir, but I'll have you know I am most certainly not a child." She jerked her hands from his rock-hard arms below the rolled-up sleeves of his plaid shirt where they had rested

too long. She rubbed her palms on her skirt to rid them of a lingering ticklish sensation from touching the light hairs on his arms.

"Ya, I notice that now." He grinned again for a moment, but as her cheeks heated at his rude announcement, he smoothed his beard and frowned at her. "What I cannot see, is why you here all alone. You live nearby?" Smirking, he twisted his neck to search the woods for a cabin.

She shook her head. "No, I...I'm traveling with my family." She straightened her hat and realized he was several inches taller than her exceptional height. He stood well over six feet. She found herself wondering what it would be like not to have to look down at her partner if they danced.

"Traveling? You not stay close to your wagon? Even a child knows to do that."

She snorted at the disgust in his voice. "Why I am here, is none of your concern, sir." She turned and took a step toward the wagon. Landing firmly on her sore ankle, she felt it give way beneath her. She would have fallen if he had not caught her by wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her against his muscular chest.

For a moment she could think only of his hard body pressed against her back, the strong arms encircling her, and the fragrance of man, horse, and sun that filled her nostrils. Strange foreign sensations invaded her limbs, making them feel warm and heavy. Allowing her temper to flare would be safer than continuing to feel so oddly. She forced herself to stiffen her spine.

"Sir! Take your hands off me." She slapped at his arms.

"Ya." He waited to remove them though, until she regained her balance on two feet. "Try again to walk. Easy now."

"Lissa!" Wally, her younger brother, shouted as he ran back down the road toward them.

The stranger had the gall to casually wave to the boy. She pushed away from him with such force she threw herself off balance and landed hard on her aching foot again. She cried out in pain and frustration. Even with Wally heading their way, the man steadied her again, but with his hand on her upper arm this time.

"Hey, what are you doing way out here?" the boy called. "What's going on?"

"Nothing is going on." Lissa jerked her arm free of the man's grip.

"Pa stopped and sent me back to find you. You all right, Lissa?" the boy asked, reaching her side. He leaned over and rested his hands on his thighs, breathing fast to recuperate from his run.

"Yes, ah...I fell, and...and this man helped me up." She motioned toward the grinning man behind her. He had done her a kindness after all. She did not want Wally to think badly of him, despite his wild looks. And despite the fact that he'd touched her as no other man ever had.

Swallowing hard and trying his best to breathe normally, Wally stepped between her and the Good Samaritan. "What were you doing out here snooping behind our wagon, stranger?" he asked in an artificially deep voice as if he were playacting.

Lissa smiled, assuming he was attempting to appear older, but noticed neither Wally nor the stranger

tried to hide their amusement.

"What is snooping?" the man asked.

"It means sticking your nose where it ain't wanted," Wally countered with more bravado.

The man touched his nose and looked down at it, his eyes nearly crossing. The beginnings of a smile grew to a wide grin. "My nose is right where I want it."

Lissa groaned even as Wally laughed and tried to speak. Lissa did not give him a chance. This nonsense had to stop. "The man was just trying to help me. He's no snoop. In fact, he was...he was kind to help me." She brushed at the dirt still on her skirt and slouched a little so the hem would hide her awful brown boots.

Wally hitched up his trousers, looser after days of walking, but that made them look too short. Lissa hadn't noticed how tall he was getting lately. "Well, sis, at least you've been rescued by a man practiced in coming to folks' aid." He shook the man's hand more familiarly than Lissa felt was warranted. "Good to see you again. I hardly recognized you." He turned to Lissa. "Pa wants to know what you were doing so far back. You're supposed to stay with the wagon."

"I just tell her the same thing."

She felt the man's visual inspection from her head to toe as surely as if he had slid his fingers along the entire length of her body. She stepped back to escape the strange feeling and crossed her arms over her midriff.

"For being my big sister, she does some crazy things sometimes."

"Your sister? Hmmm. Now I understand, but she not so big," the man concluded with a wink for her.

She felt a softening in her heart at his conclusion. She had always towered over all the other girls in Philadelphia. Her father said it was the Dutch blood in her. But for just a few moments, it was very nice to think of herself as not big. She remained troubled at how Wally talked to the man as if he knew him. If she had ever been introduced to the blond giant, she knew she would not have forgotten.

The man's expression sobered. "You not get too far behind wagon again. You get hurt and no one knows until is too late for you."

Lissa's good mood popped like a bubble floating in the washtub. She wasn't about to let a stranger tell her where to walk. "Really, sir, what I do is none of your concern. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"Then how come you needed his help?" Wally asked, taking the man's side.

The man held up his hand, palm out. "No, your sister is right. She not my concern, but she should be careful. It not wise to be far from wagon where no one protect her."

"I know that." Her chin rose. "But the hills of Pennsylvania are hardly dangerous."

A look of annoyance crossed his face, but before he could comment, they heard Lissa's father shouting at them from the crest of the hill ahead.

Wally waved. "Let's catch up to our parents."

"Ya, sure," the rider agreed, looking at Lissa, not Wally. "I return this beautiful child who wanders so far from wagon."

She jammed her fisted hands on her hips and drew a deep breath to object to being called a child a second time.

"You can walk now?" he asked, sweeter than molasses, his gaze holding hers and stopping her retort.

"Of course I can." She gave him her back as she started toward the wagon. She winced with each careful step, but kept limping along.

Leading his horses, he fell into step beside her. "You do not wish to say that your ankle hurts?"

"No, I do not wish to say that my ankle hurts," she mocked without looking at him.

He shrugged.

In the next minute Lissa considerably softened each step on her injured ankle. She longed to remove her water-stiffened boots.

"Sis, you're limping. Did you truly get hurt back there?"

"Ya, she get hurt, but she not wish to say that," the man said with exaggerated seriousness.

Lissa spun around to tell him just what she thought of his intrusion in her problems when a pain shot up her leg from her ankle. She cried out and fell, or at least she would have fallen, if he had not caught her with his large hands around her midriff.

In one fluid motion, he lifted her to sit sideways on his saddle. Without waiting for her to get settled, he took both of her hands and set them on the pommel. "There. You hang on tight," he ordered, his hand still covering hers.

"I assure you, I can ride a horse without your help." She slapped away his hand and leaned down to pat the horse's neck.

"Not my horse." He said something in his native tongue to the horse. The huge animal swung his head around toward her legs. Lissa talked softly to him and stroked his neck. He did not look so fierce from up here. "He is trained to allow no one else on his back, but as long as I am here, Thunder will let you stay." He picked up the reins and, ignoring her completely, walked next to Wally whose hero worship was evident in his face.

"What kind of name for a horse is Thunder?" the boy asked.

"It is best I know when English is new. Thunder is sound of his hooves on ground when he bucks off anyone but me who tries to ride him." The man laughed and glanced up at Lissa. His white teeth flashed against his lightly tanned skin. She looked away, but could not deny a feeling of delight each time she saw his handsome smile that put a sparkle in his eyes. She could not help but think he might be quite good looking without that awful beard.

"Thunder sure is big," Wally said. "As big as the pair we have pulling our wagon."

The man scratched the horse's forelock. "Ya, and he must do work of two horses when we get to Dakota Territory."

"Say, that's where we're headed," Wally responded excitedly. "Pa says we'll explore the way Lewis and Clark did."

"Then you go farther west than me. I go north on the Red River to my brother's cabin."

"We don't know where we're headed, but Pa says when we get to where we're going, we'll know it."

The man stopped walking. Frowning at that logic, he looked from Wally to Lissa and then at the wagon where their parents stood watching them approach. He shook his head, but said nothing more on the subject as he fell back into step beside Wally.

"Pa, he rescued Lissa when she fell down back a ways," Wally announced minutes later.

"He didn't rescue me from anything," Lissa snapped. When she saw a sudden frown on her mother's face, she softened the rude harshness in her voice. "He merely allowed me to ride his horse instead of walking on my tender ankle that I twisted, and for that I thank you, sir," she added as her manners won out.

Her father shook the man's hand and greeted him warmly. "Lars Oleson. I never expected to see you here."

Far too high to jump down from the saddle, Lissa was annoyed at having to wait until after her father had introduced his wife.

"When I see her, I did not realize this was your daughter." Oleson turned back to her. Only then did he lift her down with a hand more properly on each side of her waist. The stays in her corset dug into her flesh under his grip and pressed up against her breasts. His gaze darted to the pronounced mounds that now pressed outward against the fabric of her dress. Why, just knowing the man had looked at them on purpose made her feel all hot inside, and angry at his boldness.

He put her down only to sweep her up in his arms against his broad chest and carry her to the wagon as if she were as light as a bolt of cloth. He set her down on the driver's seat, and she scooted over to the center. She had no interest in maintaining contact with such a crude man. She much preferred more polished eastern gentlemen like gentle Jeffrey with his much softer arms and clean-shaven face.

So why couldn't she keep her eyes off the play of the muscles under his shirt as he turned away to allow her mother to step closer to the wagon? And why did he look more familiar? She was certain she had never heard his name before.

"Are you all right?" Lissa's mama asked her daughter.

Lissa looked down to find all three in her family staring at her. "Yes, of course I am." She pulled the boot from her aching foot, then tugged off her stocking to see how badly her ankle was bruised. It already looked red and blue. She looked up again and saw Mr. Oleson watching her every move with a strange attentive look on his face that she had never seen before on a man. She could not identify it and did not

understand the way it made her feel. Her hands stilled as she let her skirt fall over her bare foot. His gaze rose to meet hers and held it for a few moments before he politely helped her mother up into the seat.

"She'll be fine, just fine, but we do thank you, son, for giving her transport," Lissa's father said. "I am in your debt again."

"You tell her it not safe to walk so far behind," Oleson suggested.

"Aw, I know I should," her father admitted. "But there's so much to do for the horses and looking out for the right road. I haven't time to tend the children. But, Elizabeth, you hear that? He has given you some good advice. You must see to it that the children don't fall behind."

"Papa, I am not a child," Lissa insisted. "I am an affianced woman, and I do not need Mr. Oleson's advice on how to travel across these God-forsaken hills."

"You mind your language, young lady," her father warned sternly. "And you can stop talking about that 'affianced' business. That's past and gone. You know that."

She turned away in frustration and embarrassment, but not before she saw the knowing look on Oleson's face. Affianced was apparently a word he knew.

"Pa, he's headed out to Dakota Territory too," Wally said excitedly.

"Of course he is. Don't you see? He planted the seed in my head about going west. He's the man I told you came into the shop just before the fire. If it wasn't for him, we wouldn't be here today."

Lissa gasped and jerked around to meet Oleson's gaze.

Now it all came back to her. Lissa had seen his blue eyes before, but then they'd sparkled in a face and beard blackened with dirt and soot. She'd watched his bulging muscles as he'd helped all those people at the fire. She had never guessed his hair was blond or that he was so handsome. Her heart sank. He was the one who had ruined her life! How could a man who had done so much good, aided so many people, be the devil responsible for planting the idea of traveling west in her father's head?

She pointed an accusing finger at him. "You?"

Chapter Four

"You're the man responsible for my having to leave my home and all my friends?" Lissa's voice rose in volume as she spoke. "You're the reason I lost a comfortable life, with my future assured with a wedding to Jeffrey, and suddenly was plunged into an existence where everything is different to the point of being frightening and hopeless?" She swiped at the tears that escaped down her cheeks without pausing. "If you hadn't fed such ideas to Papa, I wouldn't be sitting here on this old wagon miles from home, my ankle aching, my muscles tired, and my skin drying out like an old lady's from being outside all day in the sun and wind."

"Melissa!" her father called sharply, halting her tirade. When he used her full name, she knew he was especially displeased.

Her gaze never wavered, still locked on Oleson's. At that moment there was not a man alive she detested more. She closed her eyes against the sight of him and tipped her face to the heavens. "Oh, if only there hadn't been the fire."

She drew in a quick breath as her memory of his hard work at the fire came back, and she revisited his pain. "Your hands," she said suddenly, twisting around to face him again. At once concerned, she reached down for his arms and pulled his hands palms up for her inspection. Why hadn't she noticed them before? "Oh, they are still red and angry looking. Do they hurt you?" She slid the pads of her fingers lightly over his palms and fingers.

He closed his warm hands around her fingers, but only for a moment before he dropped them and stepped back. With a quick glance at her father, he managed, "No, not much any more," after clearing his throat. "And I thank you for wrapping them for me after the fire."

"Say, did you ever find the tools you were looking for that day you came into my shop?" her pa asked.

"Ya, after my hands heal enough to hold reins once more. But I not know the cost of such tools is so high. I stay in Philadelphia to work off some of cost before I could buy them."

"So that's why you're not farther west by now."

Lars nodded and looked up at Lissa. "I must say I'm sorry. I never guess I make you so unhappy. You were very brave the day of the fire. You help much to rescue people and care for those who were hurt."

Lissa felt warmth inch up her neck to her cheeks. "That's kind of you to say so. They owe more thanks to you," she said, her ire gone.

"You can be sure I don't blame you for the idea of going west. I thank you," her papa said. "Until my shop burned, I never had any thought to do so. But after the fire, I couldn't get all that you said about the West out of my head."

"But traveling west with your family is not easy. Rebuilding the workshop much better," suggested Lars.

"No, that life is behind us now," Lissa's pa insisted at once. "I know it's slow and hard going, but when we get the new wagon, we can go faster." He explained his plan to pick up the wagon he'd ordered in Conestoga. "I have hopes of getting there tomorrow."

"Ya. I hope they have good food. I tired of my own cooking already," Lars admitted with a laugh.

Lissa could not help but notice his nice smile. It made his eyes even brighter and made her want to smile too. She looked away and resolved not to look at him again. She did not want to like what she saw. Besides, looking at the man made her feel warm all over.

"Mr. Oleson has family in Dakota Territory, Pa," Wally said eagerly.

"That's right, your brother. Where's he at again?"

"He trades furs north of Fort Abercrombie near the Red River of the North. And, please--you call me Lars."

"Well, I'll be, Lars. Maybe we will meet again."

Lars laughed. "It is big country to cross, and my brother is expecting me soon. Once I've bought supplies in Conestoga, I must move faster." He swung into the saddle. He pulled the deep crown of his hat down firmly over his forehead so it would not blow off. "I give you all a good day and a good journey." He clucked at his horse as he tapped his flanks with his heels. Thunder leaped into motion, the packhorse right behind him.

"Good luck, son," Lissa's father called after him.

The man and horses crested the nearby hill and vanished.

"Do you really think we'll ever run into him again, Pa?" Wally's eyes were wide with excitement.

"Maybe in Conestoga, if we hurry. In Dakota Territory if he needs furniture and picks our shop, we just might see him again, but traveling alone on horseback, he'll get there a good deal faster than we will." He slapped the lead horse's rump to force the team into motion. They sped up for a few paces and then settled back into the same steady but slow walk.

Lissa rubbed her aching ankle. It looked purple and more swollen. Why'd I have to go and twist this ankle anyway? I'd rather walk with Wally than smell those horses and have these flies buzzing around me.

"Say, why'd you tell Lars that you were affianced?" Wally called with a grin. He was not deterred by the glaring look she sent him. "Pa said he put a stop to it."

Lissa straightened. "What do you know about it? You're merely a child."

"You act like you're worried you'll dry up out in the prairie all alone the rest of your life," Wally countered.

"Don't you worry, Lissa. I'll find you a good man out west to marry," her father insisted brightly.

"Papa, no! Don't even think that. If all the men out west are like Lars and as...as..." She hardly knew where to begin to list the man's shortcomings.

"As big and strong and capable of taking good care of you?" her pa finished for her with a knowing smirk on his face.

"No, that is not what I meant." She folded her hands across her lap and leaned back, vowing to remain silent.

"She doesn't know what she means. She's just worried she'll be an old maid," Wally explained with a laugh.

Lissa gasped and spread her hand over her heart as if to manually regulate its fast rate. "Me? An old maid? Well...well..." She slapped her mouth shut as tears burned in her eyes. Suddenly the prospects of being an old maid seemed very real. One glance at Wally's triumphant grin made her finally retort, "There are worse things than being on my own."

"My sister, the old maid," Wally teased with glee.

Lissa clapped her hands over her ears, but that did nothing to shut out the sounds and his laughter.

"You don't have to worry, Lissa," her papa offered. "You have us to take care of you."

* * *

"Pa, look!" Wally shouted excitedly.

"What is it now?" his father asked with a sigh.

"That's the town of Conestoga, ain't it?"

"Reckon so. We were farther along than I thought."

"We're here!" Lissa shouted as she hugged her mother.

"How come we came all this way to get the new wagon, Pa? This town ain't even as big as Philadelphia," Wally said.

"No city is that big on our entire route," their father responded with new energy.

"We can stay long enough for Mama to rest up and to take a hot bath, can't we, Papa?" Lissa asked hopefully. Her brother shuddered at the mention of a bath, and Lissa laughed.

Her smile disappeared when her father turned and she saw his face. He was barely controlling his temper. "And which would you rather have--a hot bath or a warm place to live next winter in Dakota? A wasted day could make all the difference in the big snows."

"But Papa," she complained. "I need a bath. This heavy corset is tight, and it's making my skin all prickly and red."

Before her father could comment, Lissa's mother put her arm around her daughter and hushed her. "It will take them some time to take delivery of the new wagon and load it," she said softly. "We'll see if we can find somewhere to clean up while they're busy."

The huge sign Wagons painted on the side of a large barn-like structure was easy to pick out, and as Lissa suspected, that was the place where her father reined in the horses. His feet had not even touched the ground before he was issuing orders to everyone. Wally was to stay with him while he completed the transactions necessary to buy the new wagon. Their mother was to replenish any supplies that were low. "Lissa, I don't want you wandering around alone. You stay with your mother and don't let her carry anything too heavy," he added.

Lissa had been interested in remaining with the men long enough to see the new wagon, until Wally spotted Lars approaching from the opposite direction.

"Lars," Wally called with a wave. "You must have found good food to have stayed this long."

Lissa punched his arm. "Don't attract his attention. I thought we'd escaped him."

"What's wrong with him? We owe him a lot for his help at the fire," Wally replied, but after only a moment his face brightened with a grin. "I know. You don't like him 'cause he didn't swoon at your feet when he saw you."

"He's just a big, bossy Norseman. I much prefer a more refined city man."

Lars reined in Thunder and dismounted, throwing the reins over the hitching rail. He tipped his hat to Lissa and her mother. "I just leaving when I see you. Thunder holds me up. He throw a shoe and I must wait for new one."

"Good day, Mr. Oleson. You will have to excuse us," Lissa said coolly, not wanting to remain in the man's presence. "I must accompany my mother to the mercantile." Without a look back, she took her mother's arm and hurried her across the street.

"That was hardly polite, dear," her mama admonished. "He didn't even get another word in."

"I don't like the way that man looks at me," Lissa confided.

"How does he look at you?" She turned to study her daughter's face.

"I don't know. He makes me feel all strange inside when I know his eyes are on me. I just don't like it."

Her mama smiled and patted Lissa's arm. "Some day you will, my dear. Some day soon, I expect."

* * *

Inside the mercantile they were directed to the boarding house in the next block where for a few cents a female traveler could enjoy a private hot bath.

"I'd like to soak in here all afternoon," Lissa said a little later, stepping into the tub. "Just look at what that horrid corset is doing to my skin. It's all red."

"You have a good soak, and we'll put salve on you the next chance we get."

Lissa slid as low in the shallow tub as she could to enjoy the warm water.

Instead of taking a bath, her mother stepped behind a folding screen and washed using a bowl and a pitcher of warm water.

"Are you sure you don't want to soak in a bath, Mama?"

"No, I...I'm on the rag just now so it's not the right time for a bath."

Lissa understood that during her monthlies she would not want to sit in a tub. Maybe they could stop in a town next week. A nice warm bath might be good for whatever ailed her mother.

Washing her hair, Lissa cried out when the soap got into her eye. She splashed water on her face, but the water was all soapy. Her mother, already dressed and ready to go, came to her rescue with a pitcher of clean water and poured it over her head. She passed Lissa a large cloth for drying.

"Lissa, we'd best hurry back to see if your father and Wally are ready to go. With Lars there to help, they'll pack the new wagon much faster."

Lissa twisted her hair up in the drying cloth for the time being and began dressing. Her shift was soiled

and damp with sweat. Not having brought a clean one, she decided to leave it off. It might even be cooler without it, and no one would be the wiser. "Do I have to wear this heavy thing?" she asked as she wrapped the corset in place. "Why can't Papa hide the coins in the wagon?"

"Lissa!" Her mother jerked the laces tight. "You're not to speak of it."

"Not so tight. The coins are so heavy that I walk all day without breathing."

Lissa's ma scowled but loosened the laces. Close to her ear, she advised, "You mind your tongue."

Lissa ignored her and dropped first the petticoats, and then her skirt over her head. "I do believe I'd be only half as tired if I didn't have the weight of the coins to carry."

She buttoned her blouse and looking up, she was startled to watch her mother tiptoe to the door, her index finger against her lips.

"The bath felt wonderful," her ma said in a louder-than-normal voice facing the door. With no warning, she yanked open the door. The ragged servant boy, who had carried in the kettles of hot water, fell into the room.

"Beg pardon, missus. Would you be needing more water?" he asked as he recovered from the surprise.

"No, that will be all, thank you. As soon as we've gathered our things, we'll be leaving."

"Yes, missus. I'll tell the proprietor. She be wanting to know." The boy ran out nearly as suddenly as he had entered the room.

"Let's hurry." Lissa's mother gathered their wraps, showing more strength than Lissa had seen in her in some time.

Lissa wished she had stopped talking the first time her mother said to. She just had a willful streak in her that didn't let up sometimes. And now the boy had heard her talking about the money, and she could only pray he would not tell anyone.

"I wish we had more time to dry my hair." She remembered Cook always said that if she washed hers any time but summer when it could dry quickly, she would catch her death. Lissa could only hope it was not true. For speed's sake she braided her damp hair in one long braid that fell forward over her shoulder, instead of fastening it up on her head. Her blue blouse darkened in a stripe where her braid rested.

Down at the front desk, they settled their bill. That done, they walked out and down the street as quickly as possible without attracting attention, Lissa supporting her mother's arm. The older woman looked pale and was biting down on her lips drawn in between her teeth. Lissa felt her lean more heavily as she walked with a bent-over stance.

"I'm sorry, Mama," Lissa whispered. "I wouldn't have mentioned the coins, if I'd known anyone would hear me."

"Shush! All the times your father told you not to say one word about the money, and you not only mention it, you tell anyone who could overhear you exactly where it is hidden. We thought we could trust you."

"You can, Mama. I'm sorry. I promise I won't mention it again."

"We didn't even tell Wally," she continued, as if she hadn't heard the promise. "If you thought you were old enough to marry this fall, you should be old enough to realize the importance of keeping such a secret."

"I'm sorry, Mama." She tugged at the front of her corset, hoping no one noticed.

They stopped on the boardwalk. Her mother gripped her arm firmly. "Lissa, there is something important you need to learn before you can become a woman."

Lissa looked down into her mother's hazel eyes. She noticed how many new wrinkles were tucked in the corners there and around her mouth that she always kept so tightly clamped against pain.

"A woman must work harder and endure more than you can imagine. Until you are willing to take on all the responsibility given to you without complaint, you are still a child."

Lissa felt shame and guilt in the form of tears in her eyes. She nodded and hugged her mother, ignoring the glares from a couple passing them on the boardwalk. "I understand, Mama. I truly do. I am not a child, and I'll prove it to you and to Pa." She sniffled and smiled. "And to Wally, and...and even to that Mr. Oleson if I have to."

Her mother laughed with her, and they continued to the mercantile. Taking only minutes to purchase honey, coffee, and a few other additions to their supplies, the women crossed to where their delivery wagon had stood. They were shocked to see it on the ground in pieces. Unable to understand, they quickened their steps.

Lissa's father, Wally, and Lars were prying loose the planks, dismantling their delivery wagon floor. Two of the four wheels leaned against the hitching rail next to a mountain of their belongings. Lissa added the foodstuffs in her arms to those in one of the crates.

Her mama called out over the hammering and squeaking of wood, "Charles, what is the meaning of this? Why are you destroying the delivery wagon when you could have sold it?"

Lissa jumped as her father threw down his hammer and strode toward his wife. "Well, isn't it obvious?" he asked in an angry tone. "While you two were off doing heaven knows what, I was trying to sell the delivery wagon. Well, let me tell you, buying the new one I ordered was easy enough, but when I tried to bargain the old one in a trade, they wouldn't have it. Why, the new one and two more horses to pull it took more coin than I ever imagined."

"But you're breaking the old one apart. It's not worth anything to sell if there's nothing left of it."

"I'll not leave it here for these vultures to use without paying for it, and we can't very well pull one this big behind the new one," he shouted.

Lissa saw the blood vessels stand out on her father's forehead. She had never seen him so angry. But as she watched he took a deep breath and tried to calm down.

"You'll see. The wood will be worth a great deal to us in the prairie. It'll be good to have planed boards ready to use when we arrive."

"Of course, Charles," her mama said in a calming voice. "I understand. How can we help?"

"You had best sit yourself down and rest," he told her. "You look peaked. Here, I have your rocking chair waiting for you in the shade."

They walked to the new wagon where the maple chair he'd made for her sat under a huge oak whose leaf buds were beginning to unfurl. As Lissa trailed behind them, she could see the bonnet over the wagon had been pulled forward midway to open up the rear.

"You can tend to your mother while we finish here," her father ordered Lissa as he returned to work.

"Yes, Papa." Thinking of her new vow to accept more responsibility, she added, "Is there nothing I can do to help you?"

He shook his head without even a glance in her direction. The women watched as Wally and her pa held the wheels and Lars lifted away the freed axle. He laid it by the other and nodded to the women in passing. Wally returned to lay the loosened planks down in the Conestoga like a very large wooden puzzle, forming a new layered floor.

"Lissa," her father called when the last pieces had been separated. "You can help now by gathering any nails and hardware we dropped in the dirt. They're too dear to lose."

Lissa jumped up and pulled up the hem of the apron she wore to keep her skirt clean. Creating a large pocket, she dropped in all the nails she could find. As she looked down to add the last of them, two large hands filled her field of vision. They were tanned and light hairs dusted the back and on up the bare arms. Her fingers tingled, remembering how hard and strong those hands had felt on her waist.

Lars separated his fingers and allowed his handful of nails to fall into her apron. "Your father will be thankful to have these."

"Yes, thank you," she replied hoarsely. "And thank you for the help you gave him."

He nodded and his gaze followed her braid from her waist up until his gaze met hers. "Your hair. It is so long."

He picked up the braid at her neck and ran his fingers along its length until it dropped. Lissa could feel the skin on her breast tighten as his knuckles brushed over it so lightly she was not sure she had not imagined it.

"It is wet."

"Yes, ah...I just had a bath and washed it."

At the mention of her bath, the blue of Lars's eyes turned dark like the ocean on a stormy day. Lissa felt her cheeks warm. Why had she shared that intimate information with him? She did not want him to even know about her bathing, much less think about it as he watched her. She swallowed hard and turned away. As she twisted, her breasts rubbed against her blouse, making the hardened tips stand out against the fabric.

"Where should I put these, Papa?" she called, her voice breaking.

Lissa's father pointed toward the open drawer in the little cabinet rescued from his workshop fire. The front was dark where it had been scorched. As she tried to slide the nails from her apron into a drawer, she dropped two. Before she could retrieve them, Lars picked them up and held her hand as he laid the nails on her palm, his fingers brushing across the sensitive skin.

She had to clear her throat to speak. "Thank you again, Mr. Oleson," she said when he made no move to release her hand. He smiled then and dropped his hands to his side. Her hand felt cool without his warmth. She slammed the drawer shut and had to grab the little cabinet when it started to tip over backward.

"Yes, we all thank you again." Lissa's father wiped his brow and returned the dirty handkerchief to his pocket. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't still been in town. After all this trouble, you're not even tempted to drive a wagon, I'll bet."

"For me, riding Thunder is much faster. I promise my brother I come this summer." He surveyed all the goods left to be packed. "You have much work left. I help and then leave. I can get in miles before dark."

"Yes, we want to get started too," Lissa's mama urged.

Wally frowned at his mother's unusual request. "Can't we eat a real dinner here in town, Pa?"

"Wally, I think your mother is right. We should move on," their pa called with a laugh. "But I have to admit I thought you all would be begging me to stay here for the night. I'm glad to see you have come to appreciate the fact that we have a great deal of ground to cover and not many months left for the task."

Their mother frowned and signaled her husband to step closer where no one would overhear her. "That's not why we're interested in moving on. You see, while we were...were getting cleaned up, Lissa happened to mention her...well, the extra weight she and I are carrying. She said that carrying it made the walk much hotter and..."

"She talked about the...She said her...Where were you? How could you allow her to say anything?" he sputtered without giving his wife any opportunity to reply until he ran out of steam.

"I didn't allow any such thing," she whispered firmly in her own defense. "But the sooner we absent ourselves from here, the better it will be. The servant boy had eyes as big as saucers when I caught him listening at the door. If he has friends who are interested in what we carry, we might have more trouble than we bargained for."

Their father needed no more encouragement. He began issuing orders to Lars and Wally about how the delivery wagon's axles and wheels were to be lashed to the side of the Conestoga along with the water barrel, the plow, and toolbox. "We may be thankful we have the extra wheels and axles by the end of the trip."

Wally had finished laying the planks on the wagon bottom, leaving the top layer level as any wood floor. The men lifted the crates and barrels inside. Several planks were lashed from side to side, creating a flat surface over the iron cook stove that was packed over the front axle. When Wally climbed up and announced how well he could see out the front, Charles left the wide shelf clear. Above them, he braced two planks across the front edge of the wagon to make a bench for anyone wanting a view out ahead.

"This will work well when it's raining and the driver doesn't want to get so wet," Wally suggested with a grin.

The tailgate from the delivery wagon had been saved in one piece and was placed atop wooden crates along the side of the wagon to create a seat inside under the canvas top.

"Having a place to sit under cover from the rain will be wonderful," Lissa added. "Any more rain like the showers we came through, and I'd be willing to sit on anything as long as it was inside the wagon, but we can pad it with those." She climbed into the wagon and Wally tossed her all the bedrolls and quilts she had pointed to. She spread them out on the makeshift tailgate bench, and tied them to keep them in place to make a padded seat. At night they could merely be untied.

"You can lie down here as we travel when you need to, Mama," Lissa volunteered.

After the rest of the furniture was packed in the wagon or lashed to the outsides, their mother's chair was set in the open space left at the back. In addition to the other prepared spots, the open path down the center of the floor was wide enough to sleep on if necessary.

"Though I hated to part with so much, I can see we are fortunate we didn't bring any more furniture," their ma allowed. "I thank you for the space to rest."

"One wagon we saw passing had furniture filling the whole inside and more tied on the outside," Wally noted. "Everybody had to walk."

"Those folks will leave pieces beside the road when their horses or oxen get too tired pulling it all," Lars offered. "My brother see English cabinets in teepees that the Sioux picked up along the road."

"Or they stole it," Wally put in.

"That's enough, Wally," his father ordered. "You can't hope to be friendly with someone and talk about them like that before you even meet them. You hustle and fill the water barrel with fresh water now that it's lashed to the side."

"Yes, sir."

The stableman brought out the two horses their pa had bought with the wagon. After the water barrel was full, Wally made certain all the horses had one last drink. Harnessing them up on either side of the new longer tongue required all the men.

The dirty brown coats on the new horses did not reflect good care. Lissa worried that they looked thinner than she thought was good for horses about to pull a wagon across country. The bigger, stronger grays were not used to being harnessed with other horses, and her father had put them in the lead positions. The horses were skittish and the men sometimes fed the leathers through the wrong rings. Redoing it took extra time and caused frayed tempers.

"Mama, how will we manage all this when Lars is long gone?" Lissa asked after watching the long process.

"We women will learn to help too," she replied.

Lissa understood that meant this was the beginning of even more responsibility for her. She tried to smile

and nodded.

The packing finally done, Lars shook hands with their father and wished them all a safe trip. He thanked him again and offered to pay him for his help, but Lars refused.

"I hope we meet up again," Wally told him as Lars tightened the cinch on his saddle. "But not so you can help us," he added quickly when Lars frowned at him. "So we might get a chance to help you."

"The boy's right. We are in your debt," their father said. "You have come to our rescue twice now."

"Plus rescuing Lissa," Wally added.

Lars laughed. "We meet again only if something go wrong for me. I don't wish that." He swung up onto Thunder's back. "Have a safe trip, ma'am," he said to their mother as he checked the reins to the packhorse.

With no warning to allow Lissa time to prepare for his strange effect on her, his gaze met hers. She felt pinned in place. He tipped his head slightly. "Miss Whitaker. I hope you find a life you can like." He gave her no time to respond. Pressing the balls of his feet against the stirrups, he dug his heels into the horse's flanks.

"Good luck, son," Lissa's pa called after him.

Thunder rose onto his hind legs and pawed the air. His hooves pounded down to earth. Startled, Lissa leaped backward and rammed into the hitching rail. She was, for the first time, thankful for the coin-lined corset that protected her from any bruising to her back. She watched Lars ride down the length of the street and turn out of sight. He never looked back. And it was just as well. She would not have wanted a man like that to know that she had watched him go.

Once the canvas bonnet was tied back in place, and the washtub Wally had forgotten secured on the side, Lissa's pa made one more circle around the wagon to check that everything else was fastened down. He put his harness-repairing tools in the jockey box mounted on the outside near the front. The driver could reach it from the ground or from the bench seat they built into the front, and there was still room for the long leather holster by the driver's seat that held their papa's rifle--their only firearm. The women made one last stop at the necessary out behind the livery. Their skirts rose in the wind and made the horses more skittish as they passed.

"Get inside the wagon with your mother," Lissa's father ordered as he passed the women. "No sense announcing that it's you leaving town, the girl who can't stop talking about things she shouldn't talk about."

Lissa felt her father's reprimand as strongly as if he had slapped her. She climbed inside and sat at the rear beside her mother's chair for the exodus from town. As the wagon moved down the street, she could not help noticing two men watching them from beside the livery. They were looking right at her. They were smiling--and they weren't pleasant smiles.

Chapter Five

Conestoga disappeared behind the eastern horizon as the Whitakers' new wagon creaked westward. Two more horses in the team meant twice as much work driving them, but it also meant they traveled at a

faster rate.

"Do you think we can travel as fast as Lars, Pa?" Wally asked.

Charles chuckled at the thought. "The only chance we got to keep up with him is today. If he stops to set up camp before dark, and we keep going till we can't see, we might come close."

Charles walked beside the lead horse or rode it when he needed a rest from walking. Wally walked with him and when he rode, Wally climbed into the wagon and sat on the driver's bench unless the dust the horses raised was blowing that way. Then they drew the front of the bonnet closed and tied it down.

Hours later, Lissa called out, "Isn't it time to stop for supper, Pa?"

Her father did not turn back to reply. "I want to get as far as possible from anyone who heard what you talked about back there. You'll have to content yourself with fixing the vittles by the light of the campfire."

Unused to getting so many reprimands for one mistake, especially in front of her brother, Lissa hung her head and went back to her mother's side. Wally looked from her to their pa, but neither offered him an explanation of what was happening. The team kept moving until nearly pitch dark when they spotted a stream near the road. The wind had not died down at all when Lissa's pa pulled the wagon off the road for the night. With Wally's help, he unhitched the team. After feeding and watering them, which took longer than they expected, they tied them to a picket line for the night.

Lissa felt confident she could start the fire, but her father told her she first had to dig a pit for it, to keep it out of the wind. Nonetheless, she scrambled to find firewood the minute they stopped and had a pot of coffee made by the time the men joined her. Her mother seemed to feel a little better. The padded bench inside the wagon had allowed her the luxury of a long nap as they traveled, and she came to sit by the fire.

Lissa fried bacon while she baked fresh biscuits in the cast iron Dutch oven. She was thankful for all the days she had watched Cook while trying to get warm by the big kitchen fire. Cook used to tell Lissa she would need to know how to cook for a husband some day. Lissa sighed. That was one need that did not seem near enough to even think about.

After supper their mother washed their tin plates and cups with water from the barrel. Without being asked, Lissa dried and put them away in the box in the wagon. The wind had turned icy cold and whistled through the trees along the stream. Lissa heard sounds in the woods around them and wished she could get used to them. They made her nervous and even frightened her. She did not like feeling that way night after night.

Wally, ready for sleep, sat on in his bedroll, whittling a new toy. A series of rings lined a center post that flared out at each end, all carved from one piece of wood. Lissa found it amazing because it looked like it had to have been put together after the individual pieces were carved. The strange sounding nights on the lonely hills did not seem to bother him any.

Holding her wool cloak tight around her, she took her turn after her mother at relieving herself just beyond the light of the fire. She had adjusted her skirts and stepped back toward the light when suddenly a hand covered her mouth and another whipped around her waist and yanked her off the ground. Panicked, she twisted and fought, biting at the big masculine hand on her face. Shod in her heavy walking boots, she kicked at his shins. His hand slipped from her mouth as the man grunted in pain when she made repeated sharp contact. She screamed with all her might.

She figured the man had to be after the gold she carried in her corset. Her loose tongue had brought him after her, and she had never felt so frightened or so guilty for inviting the terror. And she had never been more determined to escape. He raised his hand to shut her up again, but she bit it as hard as she could, this time tasting blood. He cried out in pain and loosened his hold on her. She twisted in his grip and elbowed him in the side of the neck as she screamed again. He bent forward and she pounded on his head. He began calling her names she would not ever repeat, but she kept on screaming and kicking and punching.

In moments she saw Wally and her father silhouetted against the fire, running toward her. Then the ground shook. Shocked by that on top of being attacked, she looked up to see Thunder crash through the underbrush and slide to a stop in front of her.

"What the--?" was all the man could say before Lars leaped from the saddle and connected his fist with the man's ear as he tried to duck from the swing aimed at his jaw.

Lissa ran toward her father. Safe in his arms, she looked back as Lars dropped a second intruder with one blow to his jaw. She had not even been aware a second man was there. Lars pulled the revolvers from the men's side holsters, and handed one to her father. He tucked the other in the back of his belt.

Suddenly the little boy, who had listened at the door during their bath in the boarding house, ran out from the darkness and began beating on Lars's chest. "Get away from him. You hurt my pap. I'll get you for that."

Lars recovered from his surprise and picked up the boy by the back of his shirt and held him at arm's length where his blows and kicks found no targets. The men on the ground groaned.

"Have you rope?" Lars asked.

"Indeed we have," Lissa's pa replied. "Get him the lighter coil beneath the driver's bench," he ordered Wally.

Lars shook the little boy who was still struggling to hit him. "Stop that. You kick me or hit me, and I'll hit your pa again. You got that, boy?"

"You don't scare me," the boy insisted.

"Good, but you're not the one I'm going to hit. Your pa is. Now, if I put you down, will you stay put?" The child looked from Lars to his father and back again. "It would be no good for little boy to be alone out in these hills all at night."

"I ain't alone. I come with my pap." He pointed at one of the men on the ground.

"Well, if you want to leave with him in the morning, then you stay where I tell you to. Got that?"

The boy nodded and Lars set him down. He ran over and crouched beside his father.

Wally returned with the rope. "It took me longer 'cause I had to tell Ma what was happening. I told her not to worry, that we had everything under control."

Lissa's father handed the gun to her before he and Wally tied the men's hands behind their backs. They

all walked back to the campfire, Lars in the rear, leading his horse. Lissa's pa ordered the men to sit against a tree wide enough for them both to lean on, and Wally tied their ankles together and then tied the rope around them and the tree.

"Make it a good knot that will stay tight," their papa ordered.

"Like I do...er, like I did on the furniture we delivered," Wally replied proudly.

His father nodded. "Now you, boy. Do we have to tie you up?" The boy's lower lip jutted out, and he said nothing. "Reckon we have to then. Cross your arms over each other."

"Pa, don't hurt the boy," Lissa urged.

He ignored her remark and tied the boy's crossed arms together hands to elbows in front of his chest so he could not get his hands together to untie the men. "There. That ought to do it."

Lars turned to the men. "You have horses out there that need tending?" One of the men looked at Lars and then away again, saying nothing. "I would hate to have to hurt this boy just to make him tell me about the horses."

"You can't be so heartless as to hurt the boy," Lissa cried.

Lars ignored her. He pulled the boy to his feet and held him by his upper arm. "It will hurt when I break it, but you are young. It will heal quickly."

Lissa gasped. Tears gathered in the boy's eyes and his lower lip trembled, but he did not speak. It was his pap who finally admitted to having horses and noting their location.

Lars set the boy beside his father again. He looked at Lissa, who was holding the revolver with both hands, her finger nowhere near the trigger, the barrel pointed at the ground. "You have any idea how to use that?"

She straightened in momentary defiance but shook her head. "No."

"Gud i himmel!" Lars looked at her father with total disgust written all over his face. He mounted Thunder and turned him into the woods in the direction of the intruders' horses.

"What should I do with this?" she called after him, but he said nothing. She stomped her foot, but waited there, gun in hand. He returned in minutes and secured the robbers' horses within sight.

"I'll go get my bedroll," he called to Lissa's father. "I think you need help keeping watch tonight." He leaped onto Thunder's back and disappeared once more beyond the firelight.

The gun weighing heavily in her hand, Lissa stomped over to her pa. "Papa, how could you let that man treat us that way? Am I supposed to stand here all night with this heavy gun?" She held it out at arm's length, dangling from her fingers. "You're not letting him come back and stay with us, are you?"

"How do we know these men are the only ones following us? Are you and your mother going to feel safe after Wally or I fall asleep?"

Lissa could not answer affirmatively.

Lars returned and settled his horses for the night. Lissa stormed over to him and held the revolver out as if it were something rotten she could not wait to be rid of. And it was. Facing him, she thrust the gun toward him, the barrel pointing right between his legs. "Here!"

Lars looked from the gun to the part of his anatomy he would most likely lose if the gun went off, and then to her. "You sure you don't know how to use that?" he asked with a strange sparkle in his eyes.

"No, and I don't want to know how. Take it back."

He glanced at her father with another look of disbelief. He swung her arm to the side slightly so the barrel was not pointed at him. "I have my own. You keep it. And learn to use it," he ordered firmly. "Moving west is not like going to a tea party."

"Charles, he can't be serious," Lissa's mother said from her chair in the wagon. "Our daughter should not have to fire a gun."

"Now, Mother, I think he has a good idea. No telling when a lady might have to use a firearm out west to protect herself or her family." Lissa's mama shuddered and pulled the canvas down without another word. Her husband's word was law.

"We turn in now," Lars announced. "Morning comes with a storm."

"Now he can even predict the weather," Lissa mumbled as she climbed into the wagon to sleep near her mother. "There's no end to what he can do." She stowed the gun and stretched out under her quilt on the floor.

The men checked their guns, setting them on the ground beside their bedrolls for the night. Lissa's pa added one or two more logs to the fire and a number of small branches to be sure they caught.

"Pappy, I'm cold," the boy said.

"Yeah. What about us? It's getting cold out here," his pap said.

"You should have thought about that before you brought your boy out here to rob these good folks," Lars responded as he lay down and drew up his blanket over his hips.

"But, Pappy, I'm really cold," the boy said in a small voice that verbalized his shivering.

"Move closer to me," his pap told him.

Lissa couldn't take any more. She pulled one of their older quilts from the trunk and climbed down from the wagon. She marched straight over to the boy who was huddled between the men. She spread the quilt out over the three of them, swung around on her heel, and marched back to her spot in the wagon, feeling Lars's gaze on her every inch of the way.

Not another word was spoken by anyone that night.

By morning Lissa's head ached and her stomach roiled. The reality of the danger she'd been in the previous evening had kept her awake much of the night. As if that hadn't been enough, thunder toward morning had robbed her of what little sleep she might have been able to get. She opened the flaps on the

rear of the wagon and looked out into a wet campsite.

Her father and Wally were already harnessing the horses to the tongue of the wagon. Her mother shook out the quilts the men had used overnight and hung them over the back of the wagon to dry.

Lissa's gaze jumped to the tree where the men who had assaulted her had been tied. She saw nothing but an area of dry matted grass.

She gasped and climbed from the wagon. "Where are they? Where are the men you tied up?"

"No need to worry about them. Lars took care of them at first light." Lissa's father passed with the last horse to harness.

"What do you mean?" She jammed her fists on her hips. "Did that big brute hurt that little boy?"

Wally shrugged. "How can you think that of him? He saddled up their horses and took them out of the camp heading east. Said to take his pack animal with us. He's got her all packed up, and he'll meet up with us later. Said he's gonna give you a lesson on handling a revolver before he goes on ahead."

"Really! I don't see how I could ever want to fire one of those. He can give you lessons. You and Papa can handle that sort of thing."

"Your father is right, Lissa." Her mother accepted Lissa's hand to help her down to the ground. "Now that I've thought about it, Lars does have a good idea. It couldn't hurt for you to know how to use a revolver."

"Well, I can learn without that man's help," Lissa said firmly.

"Seems to me that you're getting all flustered about a man who just may have saved your life last night, young lady," her father said. "You had better be thanking him instead of hoping you never see him again."

Lissa felt deflated. Her father was right. She was being ungrateful and rude, but there was something about Lars that kept her on the edge of her temper. As they broke their fast, she decided she did owe Lars thanks, but he irritated her no end. She really didn't know why, except that Lars was unlike any man she'd ever met. He unnerved her, and she didn't like it.

By the time she'd washed and dried the plates and put them away, she'd decided to admit she owed him thanks. "I'll thank him, but Pa, please don't encourage him to stay. We can do fine without him."

"He saved Pa a lot of money when he showed up in Conestoga," Wally told her. "He knew what he was talking about and got Pa a better price on the horses. Been years since Pa had bought any. He didn't know what they should cost."

She groaned in disgust. "How could I ever have doubted?" she asked dramatically with her arms spread out. "He must be a Norse god. Is there nothing he can't do? Maybe I should just lie down at his feet like a virgin sacrifice." Her mother gasped while her father and Wally stared at her with wide eyes and open mouths.

"Ah, Lissa," Wally said.

"All right, all right," she snapped. "We all owe Mr. Oaf-son thanks. But that doesn't change the fact that

he's big and fierce looking with that straggly beard covering his face. He would probably be very nice looking without it. But he sticks his nose in where it doesn't belong."

Assuming the silence in the others was because they couldn't refute what she'd said, she turned to march to the woods to find a tree wide enough to give her some privacy. Instead, she found herself face to face with Lars. He was leaning against a small tree with a broad grin on his face. She could tell at once that he'd been listening to her tirade. She looked back over her shoulder and watched her pa help his wife into the wagon. They might have warned her. She felt the heat of embarrassment tint her cheeks.

"Oh-leh-son," he said slowly as if she had not purposely mispronounced it.

She nodded and walked past him, deeper into the woods. Her big mouth had gotten her into trouble again.

He followed her. "You think my beard is awful looking?" He scratched his cheek, tangling the hairs even more.

"Yes. No, I was just upset. I didn't mean what I said. And you weren't supposed to be listening," she added forcefully.

"Ah, I understand you would not want me to hear you want to give yourself to me as a virgin."

She gasped. "That's not what I said."

They walked a few yards farther. "You do think I would be nice looking without a beard, but I wasn't supposed to hear?"

"No. Yes. If you shaved it off, you would probably be passable."

"Passable. What is that? I not know that word."

"I mean you would probably be nearly nice looking without that windblown mat covering your face."

"Nearly nice looking, but not nice looking." The corners of his lips lifted in a hint of a grin.

"I don't know. No, I'm sorry. You'd be good looking. Oh, just forget what I said."

Unable to hold it back any longer, he laughed. "No, that is good to know. When my bride comes next year from Norway, she will be happy to see that I am nearly nice looking, or maybe good looking."

Lissa's gaze snapped up to meet his. "You're married?"

His expression sobered as their gazes locked. "You sound worried."

She raised her chin and looked away from his mesmerizing eyes. "I am most certainly not worried. I'll leave that to your wife."

"You can be at ease. I am not yet wedded, not until I reach the Red River where my brother is. Two brides come next year for us when we have homes built. Then we start family."

Lissa did not know why she felt angry and happy all at the same time. It was no concern of hers whether

this man was married or not. "What's your bride's name?" she heard herself asking. She met his gaze once more when he did not respond.

He looked away this time, toeing the dirt beneath his boot. "I not know." He took a few steps farther from the campfire that was sending smoke their way.

Lissa followed. "How could you not know your bride's name? Don't you remember it?"

"I not meet her yet." He shrugged. "My uncle in Norway pick the brides, and we marry the one who pleases us most."

She gaped at him. "How can you marry someone you don't love? Why, you won't even know her. You might not even like her." She detested the idea of her parents picking a husband for her. She would rather be an old maid, but Lars shrugged, seemingly content not to have the responsibility of picking his own bride.

She shook her head. "I don't understand how anyone could want to marry someone they didn't love and who didn't love them," she added softly, more to herself than to him. "What kind of a life could that be without love?" She looked up and saw his face was void of any expression. Maybe he didn't like the idea so much after all, but he had no choice. "Well, I hope you will work it out and both be very happy. And now if you will excuse me."

She turned to walk away from him, but he reached out so quickly to stop her that she never saw his hand until it locked around her upper arm and spun her back directly in front of him.

"You not go so far from camp."

"I certainly will when I need privacy."

"You need another school lesson, I think. Your father does not teach you, so I will."

"There is nothing I want to learn from you. Now take your hand off my arm." She didn't want it there anymore because it tingled from his touch.

Instead of removing his arm, he slid his thumb up and down the sensitive inside of her upper arm in a way that made her belly flutter. "Soon you see more wagons. Then other settlers may help protect you when you need it. Your scream is good and loud enough for anyone to hear. I heard you from my camp down the road. But traveling with only your family, you have no one who knows how to protect you."

"My father and brother..."

He laughed at the thought. "Unless your father finds you a strong husband fast who can shoot straight and guard you and your mother, you must learn to protect yourself."

"I've heard enough of this." She jerked her arm free and strode deeper into the trees.

With just two long strides, he stepped in front of her. He grabbed hold of her braid on the back of her head and turned her face up to his. "Lesson number one: do not walk out of sight and sound of the camp like this again. Not ever," he said slowly and deliberately.

"Ouch. You're pulling my hair." She raised both arms and tried to pry up his fingers to free her hair. "I

don't need to listen to your lessons. Besides, there are times when a woman needs privacy from others. And I can take care of myself. I am not a child."

He looked down, his gaze resting an uncomfortable length of time on her breasts that were pushed up because her hands were still over her head. The fluttery sensation she had felt turned to a burning one. She dropped her arms down to her sides, and his gaze rose to meet hers.

"If hostile gets you, you will wish you just a child--a very young child of five or six that he might leave alone. But at your age..." He paused and she thought she saw real concern in his face. "You are beautiful woman. A hostile would not give you a chance to scream or kick loose like that fool did last night."

"You're just trying to frighten me. I'll have you know that I'm very capable of--"

In less than a blink of an eye, he crushed her against his chest, her arms pinned to her sides. Leaning his shoulder against a tree, he wrapped a leg around hers to keep them still before she had even thought of kicking him. Every inch of their bodies touched in firm contact. The next moment, his mouth covered hers.

She was so shocked she was unable to react. He ground her lips against her teeth painfully. She turned her face, trying to escape the onslaught. He slid his hand from her braid to grasp her chin to hold it still, and suddenly, the pain disappeared. He softened his kiss and her movements to free herself worked with the kiss instead of against it. She twisted in his hold and felt her breasts swell as they rubbed against him. Was it possible they felt good pressed against his hard chest? She froze, not knowing what to do as the kiss took on a new life of its own. Her legs felt weak and she wished her arms were free to wrap around him to hold on.

When the kiss became more pleasurable than it ever had been painful, he lifted his face an inch or two. He looked almost as surprised as she felt. She opened her mouth to draw air into her crushed lungs, and he stole the chance to kiss her more deeply.

His kiss was nothing like the few she'd gotten from Jeffrey. Lars plundered her open mouth with his tongue and curled it around hers until she felt they were dancing. He groaned as he shifted his hands and settled her more comfortably against his hardening body. She hadn't registered the fact that her arms were free, and yet she raised them to circle his waist. She wanted to press her body all around his, to surround and hold him.

Suddenly she felt her hands jerked free. On legs unable to support her, she fell and landed on her backside. Lars had released her and strode away without a word. She tugged at the front of her corset and gasped for air to cool the burning in her lungs. Managing to get to her feet, she leaned a hand against the tree to support her trembling limbs. She watched Lars through the woods as he crossed the camp toward Thunder. After calling a few words to her father, he mounted and departed at the same fast pace as he had in town. Didn't the man know that his horses would last longer if he wasn't in such a hurry all the time? He apparently didn't, but Lissa felt much better by replacing all the new warm feelings that had been swirling inside her from his kisses with the anger she felt for the way the man apparently treated his animals. That was a much easier emotion for her to understand.

After taking care of the reason she had walked into the trees in the first place, she returned to camp and thoroughly washed her face. She even found a splintered stick and rubbed her teeth clean. She wanted to wash away all the memories of that man's kisses.

But she would remember two lessons that the whole incident had taught her. First, despite her unusual

height, a man was much stronger and could completely disable her. That thought was more than a little frightening. And second, she would always remember the warm fluttery feelings that his kisses left within her. But from now on she would be on the lookout. Lars had robbed her of two kisses, and he would not get another. He could wait for his Norwegian bride and steal them from her.

As the wagon set out, she found solace sitting beside her dozing mother inside. Thinking back over recent events and dreams of her future, she tiptoed forward to the chest of drawers and eased open the bottom drawer. With sacks of grain for the horses pressed against the front, it would only slide out an inch or two.

She slipped her fingers in the opening and ran them over the tightly packed linens and sighed. She had been sewing on those linens for years, always thinking she would someday fall in love and marry. She closed her eyes and dreamed of such happiness again.

The wagon lurched as the wheel rose sharply over a rock and the drawer slammed against her fingers. She cried out and jerked her hand free as the drawer shut. Everything seemed to be working against her, but she would not be deterred. She was going to wed a fine gentleman someday and live in the East where people were civilized. She would never allow her father to find a husband for her in the wild West. His idea of an ideal husband would be a man like Lars Oleson, and she wasn't about to be wed to any scruffy settler who never shaved.

However, at that moment she found it quite annoying that the image of the fine-gentleman groom that her imagination served up had Lars's probing eyes and thick blond hair. She punched at the hard sack of grain that pressed against her back.

"What's that man doing to me?" she whimpered, but no one heard her.

* * *

"Pa, ain't we going too fast?" Wally called out as the horses galloped downhill. "We're rolling faster than they can gallop."

"The brake," Charles shouted. "We've got to use the brake to slow us down." He scrambled into the driver's seat from a crate at Elizabeth's side where he had been sitting. "Damn, we got to slow it down." He pulled at the ties holding down the front of the canvas.

The canvas snapped free in the wind and flew open. Charles lunged for the brake and pulled. Lissa climbed forward to help.

"Here. Pull on these and don't let them go no matter what happens." Wally passed her the reins. She kneeled behind the bench and took the leathers, wrapping them around her hands for a better hold. And then she pulled with all her might.

Wally climbed past her and pushed against the brake while Charles pulled from the other side. The moment the brake took hold and began slowing the wagon, the horses shot ahead at the same speed, jerking the reins with them.

The reins yanked Lissa's arms forward over the front of the wagon. Her midriff hit hard against the back edge of the driver's bench, knocking the air out of her lungs. But catching her bent knees under the planks, she hung on for her life and pulled hard as she could. Gasping for air to refill her starved lungs, she succeeded in inhaling the dust the horses raised behind them.

"It's working! We're slowing up," Charles called out, his foot still braced against the wagon to keep the pressure on the brake. Looking over his shoulder, he discovered Lissa stretched out from the wagon, hanging on by her thighs against the inside of the seat.

"Damnation, Lissa, why didn't you call out for help? Wally, grab those reins with her and pull."

Wally swung onto the seat, but with one leg inside the wagon for balance. He reached down just beyond Lissa's hands and pulled on the reins with her.

Coughing and choking, trying to catch her breath, she managed to rise onto her knees. But looking ahead, she forgot about breathing again. "Pa, there's a wagon stopped on the road," she screamed. "The space is too narrow. We're going to run into it."

Thinking fast, Wally separated the reins and pulled one side shorter. "Hold those looser," he called to Lissa.

She leaned forward to let some slack in them and glanced out to the side. She saw nothing--just air. The road they were on through the pass had the mountain on one side and nothing but a sheer drop-off on the other.

"Pa, there's no room to pull around them," Wally shouted. "We've got to stop or we'll go over the edge."

"No time," Charles grunted, pulling even harder on the brake. The veins in his forehead stood out and his face reddened.

"Charles!" Elizabeth screamed from the rear of the wagon.

"Wally, pull harder on your reins. We've got to turn them closer to the mountain side," Charles shouted.

Wally and Charles cried, "Whoa!" to the horses, but with all the noise their pounding hooves and the clanking harnesses made, on top of the banging of the wagon and the bouncing contents, they couldn't hear and kept galloping.

"Charles, are we slowing?" Elizabeth called. "Tell me we're slowing."

"Them folks are just standing there watching us come!" Wally swung his arm broadly to the side to move them out of the way.

"Whoa, Lady. Whoa, Prince," Charles shouted. "Whoa!"

Their inside wheels ran a ways up on the embankment, tilting the wagon at a dangerous angle. Wally was thrown against Lissa, who in turn hit the side of the wagon.

"We'll tip over!" Elizabeth screamed.

Chapter Six

Lissa hung on to the reins and prayed.

With only a few yards between them and the other wagon, the calmer grays finally responded to the tight reins and pleading by her father and Wally, and slowed. The people in the road jumped out of the way, and Lady and Prince stayed far enough to the inside to have inches to spare as their wagon pulled past the stopped one.

Lissa's pa hung on to the brake even though his feet slid out from under him. Though they couldn't turn back to see what happened, they heard crates shifting from one side and crashing into the other as they rode tipped to one side. Lissa's mother suddenly cried out.

A hundred feet farther, the road curved and rose back up the side of another mountain. On the level portion before the rise, the exhausted horses stopped. Blowing hard, they trembled from the exertion. They foamed at the mouth, and their coats were white with frothy sweat where the harness rubbed against them.

Not taking any chances, Lissa's father tied the brake on as tight as he could and knotted the reins around it. He helped his children back onto their feet before he and Wally climbed down the front to calm the horses.

Lissa bit her lip against the pain and gathered the nerve to look at her hands. They were red and turning purplish from being crushed in the loop of the reins. Deep grooves furrowed the fleshy part where the leather straps had pressed so tightly. She tried to bend the fingers and found that she could. She was relieved to think that meant no broken bones though she could feel her hands swelling more. Despite the pain, she felt proud of being able to help.

"Charles," her ma called weakly.

"Mama!" She hurried back to find her mother had been thrown to the floor where she lay curled up. Lissa helped her up onto the tailgate bed still lashed in position. She had never seen her mother look so pale.

"My chest," her mother whispered as she sat down. She coughed and reached to hold her left arm against her side. "I can't breathe. My shoulder...my arm hurts too."

"Just lie back, Mama," Lissa urged. "That's right. The wagon is stopped now, so there's no more worry."

"My arm. The pain goes across my chest and down my arm."

Lissa brushed the loose hairs off her mother's forehead. "Take a deep breath, Mama, and then we'll try to move your arm. You must have hurt your shoulder when you were thrown to the floor."

Her mama gasped for breath. "I thought we would all die," she said haltingly.

"Can you move your arm?"

She raised her arm and made a fist. "Yes. Nothing's broken. But the pain feels like my chest is tied up too tight." She laid her hand over her chest as tears welled in her eyes. "What have we done coming west? What have we done?"

"Nothing, Mama. It's all fine now." Lissa patted her hand. "Next time we won't let them go downhill so

fast." She tried to smile, but her mother's eyes were closed, her face drawn, her lips pressed tightly together.

Her father stuck his head in the opening in the bonnet at the rear of the wagon. "You both all right in here?"

"Mama got thrown to the floor. Her shoulder hurts, but nothing's broken."

Charles looked at his wife, but didn't speak directly to her. "Wally and I are going back to see how the folks are in the stopped wagon."

"You mean to tell them what we think of their stopping on such a narrow spot in the road."

Their father punched Wally's shoulder, quieting him and sending him ahead down the road. "We won't be long, and the horses need a rest anyway."

He was gone before Lissa could tell him how hurt she thought her mother was. She was a little relieved that soon her breathing seemed to come easier. "Feeling better, Mama?"

"I'm used to pain, and this too shall pass. This too shall pass."

"I'll loosen the top buttons on your blouse. Then you can breathe even easier, you'll see."

She squeezed Lissa's hand. "Thank you, Lissa. I'm sorry I'm so ill all the time."

"Don't even think about it, Mama. Just rest." She spread a quilt over her mother's legs and tucked it in under her arms. "Is the pain in your chest better?"

"Yes. It's a little better. My hand feels numb, but that's better than hurting." Her eyes drifted shut.

"You sleep now while the wagon's still."

Lissa straightened and rubbed her sore midriff. She loosened her corset enough to see her skin was turning blue from the bruising on a line a couple of inches below her breasts. She took a deep breath and felt no additional pain. "At least I didn't break a rib or a bone in my hand." Relieved, she was nonetheless thankful her breasts hadn't hit the bench. She tied up the corset again, though even looser than before.

"What was that, dear?" her ma asked without even opening her eyes.

"Nothing I can't handle, Mama," she replied, buttoning up her blouse. "Go back to sleep. It's nothing at all."

Lissa felt confidence blooming within her. She had thought that by complaining and acting angry all the time, she might get her way and head back east. With the life-threatening events of the past few minutes, she could see she'd been very wrong. She and her family were going west and they didn't need a child to drag them down. They needed her to be a woman willing to accept more than her share of responsibility. Lars had been right. She hadn't been paying attention to the dangers around them because she'd been too self-centered. The minutes she had spent in his arms taught her she was a woman and not a girl anymore. The time had come for her to act grown up and accept what she couldn't change. She vowed then and there to do her best willingly.

And who knew, she might even be happy living in Dakota Territory.

* * *

Lissa had to admit having a wagon with a protective canvas bonnet high over the top was their salvation in the stormy weather that began as they left the mountains. They learned quickly that if they didn't touch the canvas, it did a good job of keeping them dry. But touch it, even though it was tightly woven and waxed, and the rain poured in. She hated to think what they would have done without it. Her mother had been able to remain dry and warm all day. Each rainy night the whole family slept with their bedrolls spread inside.

Their father had wanted to give Lissa and Wally the lessons with the revolver since Lars had never done so, but he couldn't in the rain. Lissa was happy to put off the shooting lessons. She'd had enough of lessons--especially Lars's with the kisses before he rode off. She wanted to feel glad that he never came back, but somehow she didn't. What she felt was more akin to sadness.

In the meantime, the two guns Lars had taken from the robbers were wrapped in clean flour sacks along with the extra bullets from their gun belts. She didn't want to use one of the guns, but she was strangely comforted that they were in the wagon. She would learn before they entered dangerous territory.

The horses struggled to pull the wagon through the wet mud. They were already tired from days crossing the rolling hills and now their hooves sank deeper into the muck with each step. The pike didn't appear to be maintained at all. Lissa's father learned the hard way that large puddles of water had to be dodged because they couldn't determine how deep they were. They had hit one that could have broken the axle if they'd been going any faster. The men took turns walking beside the grays, tugging the harness this way and that to lead them around the potential trouble spots.

Though weaker than ever and still feeling intermittent pains in her chest, Lissa's mother had insisted when the rain got worse that the men wear the oiled-cloth ponchos she and Lissa had fashioned by cutting head holes in squares from the delivery-wagon oiled cloth cover. Although these kept them a bit drier, they just seemed to flap in the wind and get in the way so much they weren't worth wearing. The flapping frightened the horses that were nervous enough already with the thunder and lightning.

After their father slipped in the mud and took a tumble backward, lining the inside of his poncho with as much mud as he had splashed on the outside, he gave up. He tugged it off and tossed it up to Wally who stuffed it into the wagon behind the driver's seat. They kept on moving despite the incessant rain.

It was still coming down later when Lissa had to answer nature's call. She waited as long as she could, but leaving the wagon for a few minutes was a matter of necessity. She wished she hadn't had so much water to drink at their last stop. There was no putting it off any longer.

"Don't worry about me, Mama. I'll be fine."

Lissa tied her bonnet tight and pulled a shawl over her shoulders to help keep her dry. By the time she had finished what she set out to do and caught up with the wagon again, her dress and undergarments were soaked through. With no one to notice or care, she lifted her skirts the best she could and trudged on.

"Aren't you coming back inside to dry out?" Elizabeth called to her.

"It's easy to jump down from the wagon, but climbing back up would be nearly impossible. My skirt is

heavy with mud and rain."

"I don't think I have the strength to help you up."

"That's all right, Mama. I'm not too cold and the rain has let up a bit. I'll walk for a while."

She tried to walk in the flat track left by the wagon wheels, but they quickly filled up with rainwater and became extremely slippery. It wasn't long before she slipped and fell to her hands and knees in the muck.

"Lissa!" her mother shouted.

Muddy, wet, and cold, Lissa struggled to her feet and ran to hold the rear of the wagon for support.

"I'm all right, Mama, but how long must we go on?" she shouted over the sounds of the raindrops splatting like a drum on the tightly stretched canvas. "This road is a danger to the horses with the slippery mud and all the holes. They could have broken a leg in that last one. It was so deep someone filled it with logs. Why doesn't Papa stop? Can't you persuade him?"

Her mother blinked away the rain blowing in on her face through the opening in the bonnet. "You know he won't listen to me. He just insists we should be farther west by now. So as long as there is daylight, he'll keep going."

Stepping up to walk on higher ground beside the track, Lissa rubbed her palms against her skirt to clean them. With the front of her skirt mud-covered from having fallen, her efforts failed. Desperate to rid herself of the mud, she grabbed her skirt at her knees and held it out for the steady rain to rinse clean. Her mother laughed with her as they watched splotches of cleaned fabric appear.

"You close the canvas and sit down to rest, Mama. I'm too muddy to get inside now. I'm going up front and walk with Papa."

"You're not cold? You don't want to get in and change into something dry?"

"I'm fine for a while, and maybe when Papa sees how I look he'll agree to stop." Her mama frowned. Not giving her a chance to object, Lissa ran alongside the wagon. To keep from slipping, she hung on to the spare wheels from the delivery wagon, the water barrel, and the tied-on farming tools, and made her way to the front.

Wally looked down at her from his perch on the driver's bench when she reached up to hold on to the front end of the wagon for support. "You look as miserable as I feel," he told her.

"Isn't there any way to stop him?" she asked in a voice just loud enough for Wally to hear. She nodded toward their father, who walked alongside the lead horses, head bent against the rain.

"Pa, these horses can't go no farther," Wally called out. "Walking is dangerous in this slick mud. We gotta to stop, or they could get hurt. Then what will happen to us?"

"What's next?" their pa shot back over his shoulder. "We stop to soak your aching feet in the streams and wrap them against blisters. We stop because the ride is too rough for your mother who's not feeling well, or when a straw hat to keep the sun off has blown away. It took forever to get through the mountains with helping those folks stopped on the road with a cracked axle. Now it's only been a couple of hours since we stopped for nooning, and we are close to the same place. But still you insist we should

stop because you've suddenly become an expert on horses and fear for their lives."

Startled by the raised voice, the horse beside Lissa's father neighed and threw his head up, jerking the harness strap from his hand. He grabbed for the harness and got his hat knocked into the mud. He slapped it against his thigh to remove some of the muddy water, but only smeared it around. He pushed the hair from his forehead with his bent arm and put his hat back on.

"Maybe you are right," he said, sounding defeated. He looked on both sides of the road ahead. "The only cover is in those trees. Wally, climb down here and take Lady's lead there on the other side. We'll turn them together to keep them calm." Wally jumped down with a splash, a big grin spreading across his face as he winked at Lissa.

"Let's hope there's a stream in those trees where we can clean up," Lissa called over the noise of the rain on the restless horses' backs and the rattling of the harness.

"How about hoping we can get dried out?" her mother called from inside.

"Lissa, get ready to pull the brake on," her papa called.

She climbed up on the wheel hub and pulled on the brake when her pa called out to set it. Balancing there, she hung on until he came to tie it in place.

Wally was walking backward, pulling on the horse's harness to unfasten it, when suddenly his foot slipped out from under him. His arms shot out, but with a startled cry, he sat down hard in the mud with a splash. Swearing words Lissa had never heard him use, he quickly rolled to the side to avoid the horses' hooves. She was amazed her father said nothing about Wally's language. They were all too cold, wet, and miserable to care. On his second try, coated with mud from head to toe, Wally managed to stand and resume his chore.

By the time the horses were fed and tied for the night, the trio had little need of a stream. The rain poured down and washed most of the mud from their hands and clothes--above their ankles at least.

"Let's hope tomorrow brings better weather," their father said as he worked with Wally to place rocks on both sides of the wheels to insure the wagon wouldn't roll either direction if the brake failed. "Traveling in rain only makes it tougher."

Lissa and Wally untied the washtub and set it out at the rear to collect rainwater. Then in turn, they each retreated into the wagon and changed out of their wet clothes. They dropped the muddy garments into the tub on the ground outside to be washed when the rain stopped--if it stopped.

Supper that night consisted of the last of the damp biscuits left from the day before along with some dried beef jerky and cheese. They sat in the wagon on the crates and sacks, making themselves as comfortable as possible. The only source of light and heat was the hurricane lamp.

"You'll have to drink water because we'll never get a fire going in this rain," Elizabeth informed her husband.

"We could set a fire under the wagon where it wouldn't get rained on," Wally offered with a grin.

"And then we burn up all that's left of what we own," his father shouted with no humor. "Is that what you want? To be left with nothing?"

Wally was too startled by his father's sudden outburst to speak.

"He was just funning a little to make us all feel better," their mother insisted quietly.

"We're all cold and damp," Lissa complained. "I put on clean clothes, but I feel almost as wet as I did outside. I wish we were home."

"Home? What home? This new wagon is your home. Until we get to the place where we can build a new home, this wagon is all we have." Lissa's father stuffed the last of his biscuit into his mouth and chewed it steadily as he looked out the narrow slit in the rear canvas at the rain.

The women silently cleared away the crumbs and pulled the bedrolls and quilts from the trunk.

"At least the wind has quieted," he added in a brighter voice after a time. "Maybe tomorrow we'll see the sun."

Exhausted by the man-size jobs placed upon his slender young body, Wally had almost fallen asleep leaning against the chest of drawers. His father roused him and told him to bed down on the planks over the stove.

"I know we're all wet and tired," Charles said to his wife who sat shivering in a shawl. "We'll rise with the first light and move on." He smiled at her and held her hand between his. "We'll stop tomorrow in Pittsburgh and stay at an inn. I must find a farrier to look at the new horses' shoes. While I'm doing that, you and the children can have a warm bath. A good warm meal will fix what ails us all."

"Oh, thank you, Charles," his wife said softly. "We can ask the innkeeper about the roads ahead."

"That we can. Pittsburgh is where we pick up the road to the southwest that will meet up with the National Pike in the middle of Ohio."

"If the rain keeps up, I hope road is better than this narrow one."

"It should be, but with the war and the troops moving back and forth..." Lissa's father completed his sentence with a shrug. "The teamsters I've talked to say the roads are all bad. The government scraped together enough money to build the National Road, but now they have no money to repair it." He sighed and looked at his wife's worried frown. "Don't you worry, dear. This is a sturdy new wagon, and we won't let a few holes in the road stop us."

Lissa's ma quickly agreed with her husband as she always did. Tonight Lissa wouldn't have wanted it any other way. She felt as if she saw her father, really saw him, for the first time. He wasn't ancient, but in the light of the lantern, his face was that of an old man. His constant worries were etched into frown lines that never left his forehead. Had they been there in Philadelphia as he'd built the beautiful as well as useful furniture to support them? After the fire that took his workshop, yes, but before? Had they gotten worse when her mother's health had begun to rapidly decline?

Curled up in her quilt on the floor beside her husband, Lissa's mama looked worse. Lissa could see what little strength she had was waning. Most of the time she struggled to put up a good front, but nothing could cover the lines that pain and worry had etched in her face.

Lissa rolled over on her tailgate bed, careful not to touch the canvas over her. She winced at the pain still

in her hands as she pulled the quilt up over her shoulders. At least the wagon wouldn't be as cold tonight with all four of them inside.

As she fell asleep, she vowed that tomorrow she would find more ways to help her parents and lessen their burdens. She'd been deprived of a wedding and the chance for a family of her own, but she'd do her best to care for the family she'd had all her life.

* * *

Charles had a choice of inns along the turnpike and chose one that recommended a blacksmith not too distant who could check the shoes on his horses. They had been told that inns of all sorts, as well as stores stocking foodstuffs, and even blacksmith shops, had been established with regular frequency on the National Road. The roads so far had few inns to choose from except when they neared a larger town. There were even some so-called inns that didn't even bother with serving food or having beds for weary travelers. They only served liquor, a quicker and easier way to make money.

The whitewashed clapboard walls and wide fence on the White Fence Inn looked well cared for. A small garden by the entrance showed the promise of flowers while rows of new shoots filled a large kitchen garden nearer the stables. The delicious fragrance of food from the open door drew them in.

Charles had pulled the wagon around a curved drive into the yard where it would be safe. After taking out their carpetbags containing the clean clothes they would put on after their baths, they tied the bonnet closed tightly to discourage prying eyes or would-be thieves. The innkeeper showed them to a room with a gable window over the yard where they could keep an eye on the wagon. They were fortunate to have the room just for them as the inn wasn't as busy as it could have been. Instead of strangers doubling up with their family, they each found a spot on the big rope-sprung bed.

Charles ordered their supper to be served later in the dining room. While the women enjoyed their turns in a warm bath, he and Wally led the horses to have their shoes inspected while the smithy was still at his shop.

"I can nail this loose one on again, but the broken one will need to be replaced. You're lucky you didn't have problems with that one."

"I knew he was favoring it, and I can use a little good luck," Charles responded with a laugh.

As the smithy worked, Charles and Wally admired the iron hinges and implements that sat on the farrier's bench in various states of completion.

"I hope there's a good man in Dakota Territory who can make such straight hinges for me," Charles commented.

"There will be blacksmiths there, won't there, Pa?" Wally asked.

Charles frowned, troubled by his son's innocent but important question. The fact was he didn't know what to expect when he got to the Dakota Territory. Not that he would ever say that to his family, but he worried constantly that he was leading them into a situation beyond his ken. There were even days when he wished he'd never talked to Lars about the Dakota Territory at all.

Earlier, he had thought about going back. He could start over and build furniture again. It was something he knew how to do. He was good at it, in fact. But he knew very little about moving a family across the

states into unsettled territory. What did he know of hostiles on murdering rampages, or people starving because they ran out of food or money on the trail? He had even heard of a family found frozen, huddled together in their wagon last winter. And yet here he was leading his family into that world of danger.

He looked over at Wally who was patting the horses on the neck and talking to them to keep them calm while the blacksmith worked. He worried about Wally and his sister and wondered how they would take to life out west.

He walked over to stand beside Wally. "You...You're good at working with the horses, son."

Wally's face brightened at the compliment. "Thanks, Pa. Take good care of them and they'll take us where we want to go. Ain't that right, Pa?"

"I hope so. I hope so."

"Say, Pa," Wally said hesitantly.

Charles's gaze met Wally's. "What is it?"

"Well, I was just wondering. Ma...Well, she seems to be getting sicker and sicker. She's gonna be all right, ain't she?"

Charles sighed. "Every single day we've traveled, I've prayed her health would improve." He missed her help and encouragement even if he had never told her. "I was so sure the fresh air and excitement would go a long way to making her feel better instead of sitting about the house and dwelling on what ails her."

For months, he'd assumed she had some passing woman troubles that would go away with time. But what did he know about that? It was certainly not something a woman would ever talk about with a man, not even her husband. Elizabeth was getting older, and he had heard women changed a great deal as they aged. He just wished that whatever was happening, she would get it over and done with. He hated to see her in so much pain all the time. It made him feel utterly helpless.

"But instead of getting better in the fresh air, she looks paler each day," Wally said. "Ain't there nothing you can do?"

"She refused to see a doctor in Philadelphia." Charles didn't expect to have any better luck getting her to see one on the trail. "We'll just have to wait for whatever ails her to go away."

"What if it don't?" Wally asked in a soft voice.

Charles wouldn't allow himself to think that she might not get well, or that he had made the wrong decision to move her west. It was too late for such regrets.

"She'll get better, you'll see," he predicted in his firmest voice so the boy wouldn't worry so about his mother. He had to remain confident to show his family he'd made the right decision.

"Pa, he's done and needs to be paid," Wally called.

After payment and thanks were taken care of, Charles and Wally led the horses back to the stable at the inn. Earlier there had been a steady flow of teamsters passing by, but now that it neared suppertime, the number fell off.

"Do you think they drive their freight wagons all the way to Dakota, Pa?" Wally asked.

"Not sure, but I don't imagine they go all the way," he answered. "That's why we spent weeks packing everything we would need to live on once we get there."

"I sure hope we didn't forget anything," Wally said with a grin.

"Me too," Charles replied. There would be no going back for it.

At the inn they handed the horses over to the stable boy who, despite his small size, handled the big animals with expertise. "Be sure they're fed well," Charles directed. "They have to work hard each day." The boy promised they would be as they left to join the women in the inn.

"Do I have to take a bath, Pa? I wash my face and hands when Ma tells me to."

"You know the answer to that one. Your mother won't stand for less than a full bath in a tub now that we have the chance, so you might as well resign yourself to it."

Charles didn't know about Wally, but soaking in the tub felt wonderful on his stiff muscles and aching back. He wasn't used to so much walking or riding on horseback. He welcomed the soak in the tub behind the folding screen by the fire, and hoped washing his hair wouldn't turn out to be bad for his health. It was too muddy to pass up the opportunity.

All freshly bathed and in clean clothes, the family ate supper in the public dining room, sitting on long backless benches on either side of the wide-plank tables. The innkeeper's wife and daughter delivered large platters and bowls of food to the middle of the table where everyone could reach them. They dined on stew of venison with great amounts of potatoes, onions, and carrots from last year's kitchen garden. Large loaves of bread were left for the diners to tear apart with their hands. The chunks worked very well for sopping up the gravy in the bottom of the stew bowl.

"Here's a plate of chicken pieces that I fried the way of a woman I met from Virginia," the innkeeper's wife announced. "It's crispy and quite different from anything you've prepared for the family, I'll warrant."

"I hope this coating on the outside isn't some poison the south is sending out to get even with us for losing the war," one of the men at another table joked.

Some people laughed, but others appeared sorry to be reminded of the war. Two men drinking ale by the fire paled and finished their drinks in short order before heading right up to their room. If they had been from the south, they were the only ones in the room and must have felt outnumbered.

"If you don't eat too much, I have a berry cobbler for dessert made with our strawberry preserves," their hostess announced.

The guests ate their way through every bit of cobbler she brought in. The glasses were refilled, and the fire fed to ward off the evening chill. Charles filled his pipe, and Wally jumped up to light a reed in the fireplace for his father to use. Charles leaned against the wall next to his seat and looked content.

"This is wonderful. I wish we could stay in an inn every night," Lissa said.

"We would soon run out of money," her mother whispered.

"And from what I hear of the road ahead, we would run out of inns," Charles added in a normal voice.

Elizabeth smiled and rose from the table. "I'll go to our room with the children. You won't be long, will you?"

Chapter Seven

Charles assured her he wouldn't stay long by the fire. After they left, he moved to a wingback chair closer to the hearth. Much more comfortable than the bench, the chair lured him to spend as much time as he dared in pleasant conversation with strangers before he returned to their room. Tempting as it was to stay longer, he needed all the rest he could get before their early start the next day.

He had heard enough sobering news, however, to make him decide they had one important stop to make in the morning before they left town. He was going to buy more bullets for the revolvers Lars had taken from the would-be robbers. All the talk before the fireplace had been about men ahead on the road taking what they wanted on the strength of the gun in their hand. With all that he and his family owned in the world packed into their wagon, he wasn't going to take any chances that other men might want to take it all from them.

* * *

Charles looked forward to picking up the National Road in Columbus, Ohio. But as they traveled down the lesser road to meet it, Columbus seemed far away indeed.

"Do you suppose Lars is already past the Mississippi?" Wally asked one morning.

"His horse was fast, certainly faster than a wagon, but he couldn't fly," Charles responded with a laugh. Lissa snorted at his comment about the Norseman flying.

Another Conestoga wagon overtook theirs. Their fine matched team of six horses looked capable of running the entire distance to the western prairies. Their driver rode the lead horse and reined them in when they were alongside, as did Charles.

"You seem to be in a mighty big hurry, friend," Charles posed.

"I give you a good day. I'm Jay Steward, and that there's my wife Fern and our two younguns." The man nodded toward three heads that poked out of the bonnet at the front of their wagon.

Charles introduced himself and his family.

"Where you heading?" Wally asked.

"Colorado Territory. We figure to join us up with a wagon train out of St. Louis heading west. From what I hear, it ain't safe to travel alone fer much longer."

"These parts of Ohio seem safe enough if one is watchful."

Steward looked at his wife and then back at Charles. "Hell, I don't know, mister. I just learned in town

back there that up ahead we get to a stretch where the road narrows and the rocks and woods are close by on each side. Don't stop for nobody around there, even if they look to be in trouble. I heard tell there's a feller in those parts who takes a-likin' to what's yours and tries to make it his, if you get my meaning. I heard tell he won't stop at nothing. He even pushed his wife in front of a wagon so they'd stop. Then he robbed 'em."

"Can't something be done about him?" Wally asked.

The man shrugged. "The law is stretched pretty thin between all these little farm towns. The army's too busy mopping up down south, though you may run into some regiments moving north to man the forts again. It's up to us to take care of our own, so watch yourself."

Charles nodded and straightened. "Preciate the suggestion, friend."

"Good luck to ya," Steward shouted as he dug his heels into his horse's side. The wagon disappeared over the next rolling hill in short order.

Charles followed suit, albeit at a slower pace, after ordering his family to ride inside until they were past the narrows. "That way we can move faster. And it'll be better if you women stay out of sight."

"Charles, you don't think there will be trouble, do you?" Elizabeth asked, her hands already twisting her skirt.

"Nothing we can't handle," Charles assured her, patting the rifle that rode in the long leather holster in the front of the wagon.

"We'll be fine, Mama," Lissa said as she climbed in the wagon. "Isn't this nice? We don't have to worry about that hot sun beating down on us." She removed her bonnet and continued to divert her mother's attention in a conversation she designed to ease her worries. "One of these days my skin is going to feel like leather and look like it too." She laughed with her mother at the silly idea.

Over her mother's shoulder, she saw her father lean over to Wally on the seat beside him and whisper something in his ear. Wally glanced back at the women and then nodded to his father. Turning on the bench seat, he climbed into the wagon and opened the box that held the revolvers. He lifted one out from the flour sack wrapping, and loaded it just as her father had taught both of them on the evenings that they could stop early enough to practice. Wally climbed back into the driver's seat beside his pa, who took the gun and tucked it into his belt.

Lissa frowned, remembering the shooting lessons. The tremendous noise was deafening, but she was thankful her papa had taught them instead of Lars. Having that man looking over her shoulder at each movement would have been unnerving. She could imagine him standing behind her with his hands sliding over her arms, showing her how to hold the gun up in front of her. She trembled suddenly at the thought of leaning back against his hard chest.

"Lissa, what is it?" her mother asked. "You can't be shivering from the cold."

"No, I'm not cold in this heat, Mama. I was just thinking of the shooting lessons that Pa gave us. I think I was shaking a bit with laughter. Only once did we hit a moving rabbit."

Her ma laughed with Lissa. "Charles said you shut your eyes before you squeezed the trigger. You might consider keeping them open."

Lissa smiled. That was the first time she'd heard her mother attempt any humor in months. "I guess I should have known I couldn't hit anything with my eyes shut."

"What's that awful stench, Pa?" Wally asked. He pulled his shirt collar up over his face to help filter out the smell.

A moment later the breeze brought the odor to the women inside the wagon. "Oooohh, it's awful. I've never smelled the likes of it," Lissa said.

"Something's been dead a while in the hot sun," the father told them. He snapped the reins and for a minute or so the horses sped up, but then they fell back into their steady walk.

Lissa looked out the back of the wagon and noticed how close the trees were to the road. She was startled when a huge boulder appeared next to them as the road fed into a narrows.

"Pa, that smell ain't going away," Wally complained.

"Can't we go faster to get past it?" Lissa called.

Her father, who had been searching both sides of the road, said, "Whatever it is, it's got to be of a good size to smell that bad."

Wally suddenly pointed ahead of the wagon. "Look, Pa!" he shouted.

Startled by his shout, the horses shied and sped up for a brief time again. The narrow passage had spooked even them. When they sped up unexpectedly, Wally tumbled backward off the backless bench seat into the wagon. He clambered up on the packed goods, and rose to stand behind his father, steadying himself with a good grip on his shoulders.

"Steady now," their pa shouted as he regained control of the nervous beasts. "What are you yelling about, son?"

"There, look!" He pointed into the woods. "Ain't that Lars's packhorse?"

Lissa's father strained his neck to see. "Could be what's left of it," he countered.

Lissa scrambled up to the front of the wagon in time to see the dead animal a few feet from the road. "How can you tell for sure it was his?" she asked, wanting to know with an urgency she could not comprehend.

"No telling. Maybe it ain't even his horse. Lots of horses look alike, you know."

"Nah, that was his all right," Wally said confidently. "You could tell by the big white feet and the patchy gray color."

Lissa saw her pa give Wally a stern look to shut him up, but it was too late. They all understood that it was Lars's horse that lay dead beside the rocks in the narrows.

"Pa, what could have happened?" Wally asked.

"What are we going to do? What if Lars met with an accident?" Lissa asked at the same time.

"Aw, now we don't know that anything needs to be done," her father said. "The horse could have up and died, and he just left him there. It was stripped of his bags and all, and there's no sign of trouble."

They approached a stretch of the road where the woods had been cleared so the area seemed more open. A rundown, two-room farmhouse with a small barn set back a couple hundred feet in the cleared area.

"Is that the end of the narrows?" Lissa asked.

Before her pa could respond, Wally patted his shoulder excitedly. "Pa, there's Thunder. I know it's him. I'd know his white patch on the side of his head anywhere."

Their father squinted to identify the horse tied to a post in the farmyard. "You're right, Wally. Can't be no other. Do you see Lars?"

"No, but why would Lars leave him tied in the hot sun?"

"He wouldn't." He reined in the horses to slow them.

"What is it, Charles?" Mama asked from her chair in the rear.

"I don't know just what to make of it, but if we heed that fella's warning back there, we won't stop to find out."

"But Pa, after all that Lars did for us...", Wally began.

Lissa saw movement near the barn and poked Wally to quiet him. "Somebody's coming out. Is it Lars?" She leaned forward with her hands on her father's shoulders for a better view. "No."

A skinny man, armed with a whip, walked toward the horse. Without a glance at the road where the Whitakers' Conestoga now stood silent, he raised the whip and commenced to beat the horse. Hobbled to stand on only three legs and tied with his head low to the stake, Thunder pawed the air with his one free front leg. He screamed and sidestepped away from the man, but the whipping did not stop.

"Pa, we've got to do something!" Lissa cried. "He's hurting that beautiful animal." Tears burned in her eyes as Lissa watched the powerful animal suffer.

"Pa, she's right," Wally concluded. "We gotta stop him. Lars would never allow that."

Lissa leaned out of the wagon next to her father. "Stop that!" she screamed. "Leave that horse alone!"

The man turned in the direction of the road, and he discovered them watching him.

"You've done it now." Left no choice, her father didn't hesitate. He slapped the reins and turned the horses toward the farmyard, circling around Thunder and not stopping until the team was headed back toward the road. Slipping the gun from his belt, he handed it to Wally. "Keep this down out of sight in case we need it."

Without waiting for instructions, Lissa ducked under the canvas and lifted out the remaining revolver.

She slid the action open and dropped in the bullets from the bag in the bottom of the box.

"What are you doing?" her mama asked, her icy hands clutching Lissa's arm.

"I'm going to see if Lars needs our help this time." Lissa slid the gun into her dress pocket and kept her hand on the grip. She was ready to climb out the back by the time her father pulled the wagon to a stop.

"Stop what you're doing, Mister," Wally shouted.

"You get the hell out of here," the man ordered. His ill-fitting trousers were held up with a rope tied over one shoulder. His shirt was sewed shut where the buttons had long since fallen off. It looked like he had been wearing it for months. "This damn horse won't let me on his back, and I'll whip him until he does. And you got no call to come in here to try to tell me what to do with my horse."

"Whatever you think he's done, he don't deserve such treatment," Wally countered as he climbed down behind his father. "And he ain't your horse."

Empowered by her concern for Thunder and a powerful yearning to know what had happened to Lars, Lissa jumped down and strode up behind them. She noticed Wally had stuck a revolver into the back of his belt where it was out of sight but handy.

"Lissa," her mama called in a panic. "Get back here. Let the men handle this."

"You stay in the wagon with your mother, Lissa," her pa agreed.

But she had already crossed the farmyard to Thunder's side. Blood ran from the slashes on his shoulder and back and from the corners of his mouth where the bit had torn the tender flesh. His eyes were wide with fright. She talked constantly to gentle the animal as she pulled several loops in the reins loose from the stake so he could raise his head.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Get your hands off my horse, missy. Get back on your wagon and get the hell out of here afore I give you a taste of this too." The man held up the whip to threaten her. Lissa didn't stop. She proceeded to untie the hobble.

"Touch her with that and you'll regret it," Charles warned.

The man backed across the worn dirt track toward the front door of his house.

"Where'd you get that horse, mister?" Charles dogged his every step.

"I don't recall hearing that anyone made you sheriff around here. He's mine and that's all you need to know."

"He's not yours," Wally shouted. "He belongs to Lars Oleson, and so did the packhorse we saw dead on the trail back a ways."

"I don't know nothing about a dead mare," the man claimed.

"If you don't, then how come you know it was a mare?" Wally asked, his voice deep with anger.

The man had reached the broken step that led to the porch of his shack. Charles casually put his hand

on Wally's shoulder to hold him in place, and then slid his hand down his back to retrieve the gun from Wally's belt.

"You know our friend, Lars?" Stepping away from Wally and raising the gun in front of him, he pointed it at the farmer. "Don't move no farther, mister," Charles ordered forcefully.

The farmer stopped and put his hands out from his sides. His sudden toothless grin did nothing to improve his looks. A sudden pounding from inside the small house drew all their attention. The farmer looked nervously from the house to the gun and back.

"Now, lookie here, you got no call to pull a gun on me, mister," he insisted. "I ain't armed and..."

They all turned toward the house when they heard a deep muffled cry. Seconds later they heard it again.

"Sounds like somebody inside the house is trying to get our attention. We ought to go see who it is." Charles walked slowly toward the man, Wally right behind him.

"You ain't welcome in there."

With the men's attention diverted, Lissa quickly finished untying Thunder's hobbled leg and led him to the rear of the wagon where she tied the reins to an iron ring. Her hand back on the handle of the gun in her pocket, she ducked under his neck and caught up to the men.

"Clara," the farmer shouted over his shoulder. "Get out here and tell these fine folks that nothin' is wrong."

From inside more mumbled cries could be heard.

"Wally, open the door real careful like. We'll all go inside and see for ourselves," Lissa's pa ordered firmly. Once the three men entered, Lissa followed them inside.

"Clara, git out here. We got company," the farmer shouted, though anyone in the small two-room house could have heard him if he had talked in a whisper.

Lissa looked around the room that served as the kitchen and living area. "Pa, there's a shotgun over the door."

Her pa sidestepped and reached up for it. "And it's loaded." He stood with a firearm in each hand.

"Clara, git out here this minute or you'll wish you had," the man yelled.

The door to the second room that Lissa guessed was a bedroom slowly opened. A barefoot, thin woman who looked no older than Lissa, stepped forward. Though partially hidden by the door, Lissa could see that her clothes hung from her shoulders and accentuated her gaunt figure. Her hair was dirty and looked as if it hadn't been combed in weeks. Upon closer inspection Lissa noticed a black eye and bruises on her arms evident below the torn-off sleeves of her dress.

In one swift jerk the farmer reached out for her arm and pulled her to him, holding her in front of him as a shield. "You wouldn't shoot a woman, would you, mister?"

The door she released opened to where the floor had swelled and wedged it in place.

"Lars!" Wally cried. "He's tied up on the bed."

"Careful now!" their pa shouted, stopping him from entering the second room. "We don't know who else is in there."

Lars lay tied to the bed by his wrists and ankles. Blood covered his hair, the side of his face, and the dirty bedding beneath his head. He turned to her and tried to talk through the cloth covering his mouth. Tears burned in Lissa's eyes at the sight.

"I can see all the corners, Pa. Ain't nobody else there," Wally assured him.

Lissa needed no more encouragement. She ran to Lars's side and untied the filthy gag. "Lars, what have they done to you?" She smoothed down his beard and cradled his face in her hands.

He groaned. "Lissa?"

She released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "What do you mean, frightening us this way?" Aware she still held his face, she brought her hands to her waist.

Wally pulled his knife from his boot and cut the ropes holding Lars down.

"When did you start carrying a knife in your boot?" Lissa asked, caught off guard by her little brother's adult behavior.

"Since Lars taught me how," he said proudly.

They helped Lars sit up and rub feeling back into his blue hands and feet.

"My boots." Lars pointed to the end of the bed. He winced in pain at the movement.

Wally retrieved the boots and looked inside. "Your knife ain't in that one," he pointed out.

"I saw the woman put in drawer." He pointed to the chest of drawers. Grunting with pain, he used that arm to cradle his other that he hadn't moved. Wally found the knife in the top drawer and returned it to Lars's boot before he helped pull the boots onto Lars's feet.

"Thunder," Lars said as he tried to stand. "Is he hurt? I hear him scream. That bastard already killed my packhorse."

"The slimy worm was whipping Thunder," Lissa said.

"You good for nothing..." Lars leaped toward the farmer. Overcome by nausea and weakness, he grabbed the doorframe between the two rooms. The farmer laughed.

"Take it easy," Lissa insisted. "We got here soon enough so it's nothing that won't heal with time." She ducked under his raised arm and wrapped hers around his waist to steady him. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

"Thanks. My head..."

"Help him into our wagon," their father ordered Wally. "We'll sort this out when we're well away from here." He kept the guns trained on the farmer and the woman as they all walked out.

Lars directed his path to Thunder and wrapped his arm around his neck. It was hard to tell which was happier to see the other. "I hate to tie him with his bloody mouth, but there's no other way until we get away from here." Lars wiped his forehead on his sleeve. It turned red with fresh blood.

Wally helped Lars inside. Lissa was thankful he had one arm he could use to pull himself up, because as big as he was, they could never have gotten him up that high.

Elizabeth was telling him where he should lie down when he suddenly shouted, "Wait! My gear. My tools. That bastard take all I own. He put in barn."

Charles nodded to Wally, and it didn't take long before he and Lissa had all Lars's gear and saddles stashed inside the wagon.

At Elizabeth's instructions, Wally filled an enameled pitcher with water from the barrel and handed it to her before he climbed up onto the driver's seat beside Charles. Charles passed the revolver to Wally who held it pointed at the couple on the ground.

"My son's awful anxious to shoot that thing, so I wouldn't move 'til we get out of sight if I were you," Charles told them. "I'll leave your shotgun with the sheriff in the next town down the road. I think he'll be mighty interested in hearing Lars's story."

The man raised his fist and swore to get even. Wally grinned and aimed the gun at them with both hands as Charles whistled and called out to the horses. Fresher after the brief rest they'd had, they bolted into a trot, for the first time running together easily as a team. Inside the wagon, Lissa and Elizabeth knelt beside Lars as he lay on folded quilts piled on the tailgate bed.

"My head feels like hit with timber big enough to hold up whole house," Lars said.

"With all this blood, he must have smashed your skull wide open." Elizabeth rinsed the cloth in the basin that Lissa held out for her and continued wiping up the blood.

Lars's eyes floated shut for long periods as they worked on him. He managed to turn his head when Elizabeth needed him to. After cleaning his face and hair, Elizabeth laid a clean damp cloth across his forehead. "That ought to feel better." She patted his shoulder.

Lars groaned in pain.

"You need to let me see that shoulder," Elizabeth insisted. "Lissa, you'll have to sit here beside him and help hold him upright while I get his shirt off."

Lissa sat beside his hip facing him. Her thigh warmed where it touched his, but there was no room to move away.

"This is hardly proper to undress a man who's not your husband, but I can see that moving west makes many changes in the way a woman has to live," Elizabeth told her.

Lissa blushed but said nothing. There was too much to do for this man, to worry about what was proper. "We can get the sleeve off his good arm first, Mama." She unbuttoned his shirt and lifted that arm

up around her neck to hold on and help lift him to a seated position. Once he was upright, she pulled the shirt off his good arm.

Intent on helping, Lissa didn't look at Lars's face until it was mere inches from hers. Their gazes locked for a few moments until the pain of moving made him shut his eyes and clench his jaw in an effort not to cry out. He leaned forward and Lissa pressed her hand on his back to hold him up. His chest pushed against her, and she liked the feeling in her crushed breasts. His head leaned against the side of hers. She felt his scratchy beard against her cheek and neck. She closed her eyes at the pleasurable rush she felt.

Her mother slid the shirt across Lars's back and yanked it from his trousers. Without realizing it, she pulled it from a wound on his shoulder blade where it had been stuck to the dried blood. Pouring clean water into the bowl, she washed the blood from his back.

Lars groaned and breathed more rapidly. He straightened, tensing against the pain. Lissa absorbed his pain and tears welled again in her eyes. He leaned more heavily on her, resting his cheek on her shoulder. His warm breaths on the side of her neck raised gooseflesh on her skin. The wagon lurched to one side. His swollen shoulder twisted. He cried out with few sharp words in his native tongue, and slumped more heavily against her. Lissa wrapped both arms around him and held him in an upright position.

"What did they do to you? There's even small stones under the skin." Her ma's voice cracked with emotion as she picked them out and washed the scrapes with fresh water.

"I too heavy to lift after he knock me out with the timber," Lars told her through gritted teeth without raising his head. "They tie rope from my wrist to the pommel on Thunder's saddle and drag me behind him to the farm house from road where they shoot my mare when she rear up."

Lissa laid her cheek against his and her tears fell into his hair. She couldn't believe such cruelty. She rubbed his back in comforting little circles away from where her mother worked. "Mama is very good with doctoring," she said in a much weaker voice than she had expected. She lifted her head and cleared her throat to sound more encouraging. "And don't worry about Thunder. You'll be up and back riding him in no time."

Lars lifted his head to gaze into her eyes. As she watched, his face seemed to relax into a small smile. The wagon lurched and Lars slumped against her with a grunt. This time he was a dead weight in her arms.

"He passed out, Mama. I'm having trouble holding him up." His weight had forced her to lean back. His face came to rest on the mounds of her breasts above her dress. Her breath was trapped in her lungs, and she felt a new warmth cover her, as if she had sat too near the fire. No man had ever touched her breasts before Lars, and she could feel the tips hardening.

"At least he won't suffer for a while now." Oblivious to what Lissa was feeling, her mother patted Lars's shoulder dry and covered it with salve and a dressing. "I've done all I can for his back. Let's lay him down."

* * *

"Look, there's that wagon up ahead that warned us about the narrows," Wally called out.

"At the rate they were galloping, I though they'd be clear to St. Louis by now," Charles said as he slowed the horses.

Lissa and her mama laid Lars down as gently as they could while Charles reined the horses to a standstill next to the other wagon. He set the brake and wrapped the reins around the handle before he stepped to the axle hub and then jumped to the ground with Wally right behind him.

Steward had been checking his horses, but walked right toward them. His wife and their two children, who looked to be much younger than Wally, stood back shyly beside the wagon.

"I thought we'd best wait and make sure you got through the narrows," Steward said. "Hell, you took so long we was beginning to worry."

"Mighty friendly of you. And we want to thank you again. You saved our hides with your warning, and you may have saved the life of our friend we've got in the back."

Charles led him to the rear of the wagon. "That stinking dead horse back there was our friend's, and that farmer had him tied up in his cabin." Charles pulled back one side of the canvas to see inside. "How's Lars doing?"

"Thankfully, he passed out. A man shouldn't have to go through what he went through. That farmer dragged that poor boy all the way to his cabin and may have broken his shoulder."

Tears welled in Lissa's eyes as she finished washing Lars's arms and hands and laid a clean cool cloth on his head.

"His shoulder's not right, Charles, but I don't know what to do." Elizabeth eased into her rocker at the rear to rest.

"Maybe I can help?" Steward offered. "I was assigned to hospital duty for two years before my time in the army was up." He and Charles climbed inside to see for themselves.

"She injured too?" Steward pointed to Lissa kneeling beside Lars.

Lissa looked down to discover the bodice of her dress red with blood. "It's from him, Pa."

"Go clean yourself," Charles said softly.

She grabbed the cloth from the bowl and went to the rear of the wagon to wash it off.

Steward knelt next to Lars and studied the awkward angle at which his shoulder rested. He pressed his shoulder with his fingers.

"I seen 'em like that afore," he told them. "That arm bone is jerked clean out of the joint. Needs to be put back, is all." He made a fist with one hand and hit it into the curved palm of the other. "Just pop it back in."

"Can you do it?" Charles asked.

Without bothering to answer, Steward moved closer to Lars until his knee was against the side of his chest.

"Hell, yes. Can you give me a hand here, Charley?"

Wally laughed at hearing his father's name altered to suit the stranger.

"You can help too, boy," Jay told him. He ordered them to brace Lars's body against the crates so it wouldn't move. "And you can hold your man's head," he told Lissa. "Sit right there and hold him tight. Don't want to have to do this more than once."

Lissa opened her mouth, but she didn't get a chance to speak.

"And you can pray he don't come to 'til we're done," Steward added to Elizabeth.

Lissa cradled Lars's head with a hand on each side of his jaw. "Like this?"

"That's just fine." Steward got a good grip on Lars's arm just under the armpit and studied the angle of his shoulder again. "Hold on to that other arm now," he ordered Charles as he raised his booted foot to rest against Lars's ribs just under his arm.

It took two tries, but on the second jerk, the shoulder popped back into the socket with a sickening crunch. Lissa shut her eyes and swallowed against the bile that rose into her throat. Lars tried to toss his head as she held him.

"He's gonna need this here arm tied to his waist and not moved for three or four weeks. I seen men who tried to get back to work too soon, and they had no end of trouble from their shoulder."

Steward looked up at Lissa, and she swiped at the tears on her cheeks with the back of her sleeve.

"You make sure your man don't rush into thinking his shoulder is healed now," he told her.

"Oh, but he's not--"

Charles didn't give her a chance to finish explaining. He called to Elizabeth who was talking with Mrs. Steward and the children.

"You got something we can bandage this boy up with so that he can't move his arm?"

Elizabeth responded immediately as Charles thanked Steward, and the three men climbed out of the wagon. She reached into the quilting box and pulled out an old calico dress she had worn out years before. "He's not going to like wearing red checks, but this is the only thing that's got a piece long enough to wrap around that big chest of his."

Using her sewing scissors, Elizabeth carefully cut bands several inches wide from the skirt. "There, that ought to do it," she said after having tied them firmly together.

She had to call Wally for help lifting Lars's dead weight, but the three of them held his reset arm against his chest and bound it there. Elizabeth brought the bindings over his scraped shoulder and tied off the end. When they laid him back against the folded quilt, he moaned.

"Maybe he's coming to," Lissa said hopefully. She looked up as Elizabeth wiped her blood-smeared cheek. "His head," Lissa explained simply and turned Lars's head to show Elizabeth the injury. "It's still bleeding. Can't we do something?"

Chapter Eight

"Mama, what can we do to stop the bleeding?" Lissa asked. "Lars can't go on bleeding like that."

"You're right. We've got to stitch it to staunch the flow. He's lost a lot of blood already and that's not good for anyone."

While Lissa cleaned away the fresh blood, her ma dug in the sewing box for her precious little box of needles. "Wally, you go tell your pa that we can't move for a while. We can't be sewing up his head with the wagon bouncing all around." Wally leaped at the chance to leave the women to do what needed to be done without his help. "And pull back the bonnet canvas more to give us better light."

Handing Lissa the sewing scissors, she said, "You cut his hair away from around the gash and clean it up good. We got to be able to see to sew."

Lissa cut the long hair and was dismayed when the blood tangled the cut hair with the rest and pulled against the wound, making it bleed more. She looked up to see her ma had stopped trying to thread the needle. Her hand was shaking.

"Let me thread that needle for you, Mama."

"I'm tired, that's all."

"I know, Mama. I can do it for you. There's nothing to it."

"But you never sewed up a body before."

Lissa jerked her head up. "You want me to do the sewing too? I meant I'd thread the needle for you."

"You can do the sewing better than me. And right now, it's the man lying in the wagon we got to be thinking about, not you or me. Otherwise, you wouldn't be in here helping at all. Back home...ah, back in Philadelphia, I wouldn't have ever permitted you to help me remove the man's shirt or to hold his head against your bosom."

Lissa's cheeks warmed. "But, Ma, he didn't know any of that happened. He wasn't awake."

"I know. I know. Just get on with it. You need to get a good enough hold of the flesh on each side to tie it closed so the stitches don't rip out. And after you tie it, leave the end hanging down a little on each stitch. We'll need to cut them out in a week or two when they get to itching him good. That means they're healed, and you want something left there to tug on so as you can cut and pull them out."

Lissa's mama continued with her directions as Lissa sewed the wide gash closed. Her own hands shook at first, but once she had managed the first stitch, she was able to finish smoothly.

"Pretty as anything you sewed for your trousseau." She smiled as she put away the needle and scissors after cleaning off the blood.

"When will he wake up?" Lissa asked as she wrapped clean strips of cloth around his head.

"When he's good and ready."

The women could hear the Stewards' wagon pull away and Lissa wasn't surprised when her father looked in the rear slit in the bonnet. "Can we get going now?"

"Could we make this nooning and eat a meal while we're stopped? He really shouldn't be moved for a while."

"I suppose you're right," Lissa's pa said, offering a hand to help his wife down. "I reckon it's safe. That fella won't be coming after us since I have his shotgun." He reached back for the box that held the plates and the food planned for the noon meal.

"I'll come help as soon as I change and clean up," Lissa offered.

"No, you sit with him a while and make sure the stitching stemmed the blood flow. Mind you, we have to keep a close eye on him now. I'll put some water on and see if we can get some willow bark tea in him. If he comes down with a fever, we got our work cut out for us."

Lissa changed quickly out of his sight in case he came to, and then sat beside his head. She ran her fingers over his beard to smooth it down, praying that he wouldn't get the fever. Having done all she knew to do, she laid her hand gently over his on his chest and stared at his face.

How had she ever come to care so much what happened to him when he annoyed her so much every time they spoke to each other?

* * *

Lars fought to be free, pulling against the constraints that held him captive. He twisted and turned but could not get loose. He felt like a roasting pig on a spit. The pain that gripped his shoulder only got worse with each movement. He was burning up and figured hostiles must have tied him to a stake in the sun to bake.

But just when he felt ready to give up and let the heat win, a soft caress bathed him in cool comfort and gave him the strength to continue fighting the burning demons that threatened to consume him alive.

He dreamed of a caring angel who watched over him. Her beautiful, sleek black tresses, so different from the blonde hair he was used to seeing on women in Norway, teased his bare torso as she wiped his dry hot face with cool moisture. Once he could have sworn that his angel leaned down and kissed him, but that was not possible. Her lips tasted too sweet to be real.

When the angel spoke to him and called his name, Lars fought the demons that stabbed his shoulder with hot pokers and struggled to go to her. His head pounded like a hundred horses kicking him at once. He tried, but he could not move against the restraints that held him in place.

Too hot, he had to escape the heat. He had to find Charles and his family and warn them about the deranged farmer. Charles did not seem capable of caring for his own family and had to be warned. They should never have left Philadelphia. Blundering along the roads west, Charles would never suspect that a farmer would attack him. Lars had not even suspected he could. He had stopped to help an injured woman, or so he thought, and nearly gotten himself killed like his packhorse.

Or was he dead already? If he was, he was burning in hell. If he was not, he had to find Lissa to warn

her. He did not want to be dead because he needed to have her safe. He had to live to find her, warn her, protect her.

He cared what happened to her, enough to give him strength to fight on against the demons dragging him into the darkness.

* * *

"He just lies there burning up," Charles explained to a doctor in Columbus. "His temperature started to rise so we stopped at a couple small towns on the way here, but there was no doctor in either one."

"Yes, yes. How long he's been like this?" the doctor asked after feeling his head and putting his ear to his chest.

"We rescued him two and a half days ago. We were lucky to get help on the trail from a fella who knew how to put his shoulder back to rights. The women here have been trying to keep him cool with wet cloths and the like."

"He eat or drink much?" he asked.

"We try to give him water and a little broth," Lissa answered. "And willow bark tea. He drinks some, but he doesn't really wake up and most of it dribbled into his beard."

"I have something I can give you that will help with the pain when he wakes. Otherwise keep doing as you are, ma'am," the doctor said to Lissa. "He'll wake when he's ready. If he don't..." He shrugged. "Come inside and I'll give you the laudanum," he added as Charles gave him a hand down.

"Good. I have another matter I'd like to discuss with you as well," Charles said after he had turned his back to his family. The doctor nodded and they strode into his office.

Elizabeth checked the food box to see if they needed anything from the general store just down the street. She decided they didn't need to take the time now.

Lissa climbed back to her place beside Lars now that the doctor had vacated it. She wiped his face with a cool cloth. The side of his head and eye had been purplish-blue, but finally the hues were starting to lighten to yellows and browns.

Wally returned from the doctor's well with the last pail of fresh water that refilled their water barrel. He leaned against the back of the wagon and watched the people moving on the streets of Columbus. "Will you look at that wagon?" he asked with an awe-filled voice as the conveyance he'd noted rolled by. "They got the canvas over their wagon all painted up with pretty pictures." He looked up at the bonnet covering their wagon. "All we got on the bonnet are streaks of dirt left after the rain."

"Well, I'll tell you what, Wallace," Elizabeth said, tying the object of his scrutiny back to allow in more air. "You tell me when the day arrives that you have the paint, the talent to spread it in pretty pictures, and the time free from your chores to do the painting. When that day comes, we'll ask your pa about painting the wagon."

"Paint the wagon?" Charles asked as he approached with two bottles in his hand. He handed them to Lissa and gave her the doctor's instructions about the dose for Lars. She wrapped the bottles to keep them from breaking on the rough ride, and stored them safely.

"Don't you think we could paint the canvas, Pa?"

"That's as foolish as carving all them toys you work so hard on each night."

"Aw, Pa, that wagon over there looks nice, and I thought it might cheer Mama up," Wally said, sounding quite contrite. "And don't forget that a farmer gave us a dozen eggs and a round of bread in trade for the top I carved with little letters around the top."

Charles climbed onto the driver's bench and motioned to Wally to join him. "I know, son," he allowed as he laced the reins between his fingers. "That was a good trade."

Wally grinned with happiness. His father had finally admitted that some worth existed in the wooden toys he created.

"Tell you what. You take a good look at that painted cover as we pass it," Charles added as he slapped the reins and shouted to stir the horses into action.

"Yeah, I see it."

"Notice how the canvas sags between the places where the paint is laid on? Seems to me if they stretched that tight to tie it against a storm now, it would rip."

"And if they don't stretch it tight, the places that sag are going to leak in the next rain," Wally proudly concluded.

Charles nodded and grinned.

"Now you've got the idea," Charles said, proudly patting his son on the back.

The five miles they eventually covered before they stopped for the night seemed like a lot more. Lissa rode in the wagon with Elizabeth to care for Lars and watch to see if he woke. She clung to the crates to keep from being bounced from side to side, and wondered how her mother could bear riding inside all the time. She concluded the jostling of the wagon must be what was making her stomach pains even worse lately.

They ate leftover cold biscuits with some bacon Lissa fried for supper. Bacon-fat gravy made the dry biscuits more tolerable. Though they didn't need the illumination of the fire with daylight lasting longer into the evening, they kept it going and added wet grass and leaves to make smoke. That was the only relief they had found from the insects that wanted to feast on their flesh. Lissa and her ma washed up the tin plates and cups and turned their attention back to Lars.

"I'll hold his head up so you can spoon some of this jerky broth in his mouth," her mama said.

Lissa did her best, but her mother quickly tired supporting Lars's head. To relieve her so she could get ready to retire for the night, Lissa forced another folded quilt behind his shoulders and head to hold them steady. Lars moaned in pain with the movement, and the women smiled at each other. Each sign of consciousness was encouraging as far as they were concerned.

Elizabeth had heard tales of what gentlewomen had been forced to do when nursing injured men during the War Between the States. She vowed that her daughter would not be given such intimate duties under

any circumstances. The men continued to help with such necessities when asked. Elizabeth had Lissa's reputation to think of, even if it was in danger by spending so much time with a strange man in their wagon. But who would know that? And Lissa was happy to help, knowing that Elizabeth was sometimes too weak to even feed herself.

Lissa gave Lars a minute to settle into the new position before resuming her attempts at feeding him. But time and time again, the broth that didn't make it into his mouth slid out of the spoon into his full beard where it was impossible to mop up.

"He's not getting much of it into his belly," Lissa complained. "It's just spilling into that awful beard, and cleaning that thing is as hard as cleaning the blood from his hair was. That took me ages and pails of water. Just ask Wally. He had to fetch them all."

"I can see he's swallowing some," Elizabeth said from her view in her chair.

"If he didn't have this face full of hair, he'd be a lot easier to take care of," Lissa concluded as she patted his beard with a folded cloth to soak up more spilled soup.

Elizabeth looked from Lars to her daughter and back. "You're right. Get the sewing basket."

Lissa reached behind her and pulled out the basket. She opened it and held it out to Elizabeth who moved to sit on a crate near Lars's shoulder. "Now's as good a time as any for you to learn how to shave a man. Better than most, in fact, 'cause he's unconscious." Elizabeth smiled, and she realized how seldom she felt happy any more.

Carefully following her mother's directions, Lissa pulled the lantern closer for added light and cut the beard as close to his skin as she could. "There, that's about all I can get with the scissors. He looks like a different man already."

"Now comes the hard part," Elizabeth told her. She lathered up the soap in Charles's shaving cup and covered Lars's cheeks, chin, and neck. "You got to soap it good. I wish we had hot water. It makes the beard softer to cut and lets the razor slide nice and easy."

Elizabeth asked Charles to strop the razor for them. He stayed to supervise and soon Wally was watching too. Elizabeth began on one cheek, and slowly the uneven stubble disappeared.

"What's he going to say when he wakes up, Ma?" Wally asked with a snicker. "He was partial to his beard, the way he stroked it all the time. Ain't he gonna be mad when he finds it gone?"

"We'll worry about what he thinks about being clean shaven if he...I mean, when he wakes up." She handed the razor to Lissa. "You try it now on that side. Keep hugging his cheek with the blade so you don't slice off more than you want."

"Yeah. He's lost enough blood already," Wally joked.

Charles ran his fingers over the fuzz that was appearing on Wally's cheeks. "And I suppose you want to get in line for the barber?" he asked with a laugh.

"Aw, Pa," Wally complained at the teasing.

Lissa pressed her lips together in concentration and carefully slid the razor over Lars's cheek, wiping off

the soap after each stripe.

"Hold his chin tipped up so you got no folds in his neck," Elizabeth urged.

"He wouldn't take to you slitting his throat," Wally said with a grin.

Lissa frowned at her brother, but he didn't lose any interest in watching. She pushed down the quilt behind Lars's neck and gently tipped his head back farther before she dispatched the remaining hairs from his neck. She ran her fingers over his cheeks to check for missed spots. She loved the feel of his skin. She decided that without his beard he was more than merely nice looking. His strong chin and inviting lips made him very good looking, in fact.

"This should be cooler for him," she said encouragingly as she finally cleaned and put away the razor.

"And if we do have to bury him, he'll look a damn site prettier when the good Lord sees him," Lissa's pa added, staring at Lars's unmoving form.

Lissa gasped, her hand pausing from wiping away the last of the soap. "Pa, he's not going to die, is he?" Lissa asked in little more than a whisper. Her voice felt blocked by a huge lump that had just appeared in her throat.

"Not everyone you take good care of recovers, Lissa," her father said much more kindly. "You'd best remember that. It doesn't mean that you don't try, but you can't go on thinking that you can save everyone you want. Sometimes you can't even save the people you love the most. Life doesn't work that way--especially not on the trail."

"We've all worked so hard to make him well again," her mama said. "It's up to the good Lord now."

A lone tear cascaded down Lissa's cheek and landed on Lars's chest. She lowered her head and could say nothing. She couldn't bear to think about him dying.

"But if you keep up your good care, I reckon he's got a better chance than most," her pa added more cheerfully. "He's very lucky we spotted Thunder, or he'd be under a pile of rocks by now for sure." He offered his hand to help his wife to the ground. He reached back to take the lantern with them for their trips away from the campfire to answer nature's last call of the evening.

"Don't stay up too long now, Lissa," he pa cautioned. "It's almost dark. Your bedroll is by the fire with all of ours. As long as the weather is good, it ain't right for you or Elizabeth to be in there with him. Wally, close the canvas to keep out the insects even though he can't feel them biting. Lissa can tie it down the last flap when she climbs out."

"I'll be along shortly," Lissa promised. "It's so hot in here I want to wipe his face once more."

Little light penetrated the bonnet. Lissa dipped the cloth into the basin of water and wiped his hot face and neck, feeling her way more than seeing it. She was encouraged by the fact that at least his fever didn't seem to be getting any worse. "Lars, please wake up," she whispered.

As she stroked his forehead, a little sigh escaped his lips. She couldn't resist the temptation to run the soft pads of her fingertips over the fullness of his lips. They puckered as if he felt what she was doing and wanted to kiss her fingertips.

"Lars, you just gotta wake up. I heard Pa tell Mama that if you don't wake up soon, you might never wake up. And you just can't die. You just can't. I have to tell you I'm sorry. I wasn't very nice to you and I was wrong. I was fighting against everything because I didn't want to leave the city. Then you came along. We have so much to thank you for, for helping at the fire, for helping me when I sprained my ankle, and for all the help in Conestoga. Please don't die."

Struck by a sudden fervor she couldn't understand, she leaned down and soundly kissed him. She was startled when she felt some resistance in his lips and raised her head a few inches to study his face for signs he was waking up.

"Lars?" She saw no response in the unconscious man, but in the dim light she couldn't be certain.

"Leave him be, child," her father called to her. "Come on, so we can all get some sleep."

"On my way, Papa." She draped a light quilt over Lars to keep off the biting insects and left.

Being a nursemaid that particular evening had been hard work and kept her awake with her heart pounding rapidly long into the night.

* * *

The ruckus during the night began as a rumble, but soon became a cacophony of sounds that even included cooking pots clanking together. The deep brusque words in Norwegian quickly identified the source of the racket as Lars trying to sit up and kicking over the box of cooking pans.

Three Whitakers leaped from their bedrolls and raced to the wagon.

"What the devil is going on?" Charles bounded up on the rear supports and swung into the wagon.

Elizabeth, moving more slowly, lit a kerosene lantern and carried it to the wagon. Charles held it high to see in the opening in the bonnet.

Totally confused, Lars sat tugging at the binding holding his arm to his chest. He saw Charles appear at the rear of the wagon and he froze. "You? You keep me prisoner?"

"Stop him before he does his shoulder more harm," Elizabeth called to Charles.

Lissa didn't wait another moment. She climbed inside and knelt at Lars's side. She grabbed his wrists and tried to hold him still. "You're not to pull on that binding, Mr. Oleson," she ordered in no uncertain terms. "You hear me? You'll undo all the good we've been trying to do for you for days."

Lars watched in open-mouthed surprise as Lissa pressed his chest back to make him lie down again. She wrapped the binding back in place. Her long hair fell across his chest as she reached over him for the end to tie it securely again.

"Glad you're finally awake," Wally cried from his perch on the back of the wagon where he sat with one leg over the sideboard, the lantern held high in his hand.

"And before you decide your head itches," Lissa continued to Lars with authority, "I'll tell you that you're not to get any notion to scratch it."

"Lissa's done some right pretty stitching on your scalp, and she'd get mad if you wrecked it," Wally told him with a grin.

"I had to do something to stop the bleeding," she tried to explain. "And the stitches will make it heal faster."

She pushed loose hairs from his forehead and felt his skin. Next she laid her hand on his bare chest above the wrappings. His muscles tensed under her palm. "You don't feel as feverish as you have been. That's good." She smiled. "Your fever broke."

Lars's stunned gaze locked on hers. He raised his hand to cover hers, but she slid hers out from under it with a quick glance back at Charles. Lars went to stroke his beard, as was his habit, and froze when his hand touched a stubbly chin.

"What have you done with my beard?" he shouted.

Lissa's smile wavered. "I...We hoped you wouldn't notice so soon."

He jerked his hand to his head, fearing he was bald as an egg.

"Don't worry. I didn't shave your head--except where I had to sew you up."

He winced when he touched the stitched area and used a couple of Norwegian words he was happy she could not translate.

"Now you know exactly where you shouldn't itch," Wally put in with a laugh.

"We're sure glad you woke up," Charles said. "I never knew a man could sleep so much."

Lars rubbed his face all over and felt no particular pain except a little tenderness near his eye. "Was my face injured too?"

"Your beard was getting full of soup, and there was a lot of blood from the cut on your head. We tried to feed you, but..." Lissa's helpful words of explanation died out when Lars attempted to pull himself up.

"Charles, he must rest," Elizabeth put in.

"No call to get up now," Charles insisted. "It's a couple hours to first light. We could all use some more sleep, even if you've had enough."

"No, you not understand. I must get up." Lars glanced nervously at Lissa. "You must understand, I need to...to..."

Charles finally caught on that he wanted to tend to personal needs he was not up to mentioning in front of the women. "I'll help you down," he volunteered, ordering the women back to their bedrolls as he helped Lars to the ground. As a dizzy spell nearly toppled him, Lars accepted Charles's arm. As they walked Charles told him all that had happened.

"A week? I have been lying in that wagon that long?"

Charles only nodded, but from the other side of the fire, Thunder neighed at hearing his master's voice.

Lars finished behind the tree and made his way directly to Thunder. He was happy and very relieved to see the animal looked healthy and unharmed. He stroked his head and neck and spoke to him in his native tongue. He ran his hand down his back and stopped when he discovered the wounds.

"Lissa put salve on those whip lashes that farmer gave him, and he seems to be doing fine," Charles told him before he could ask. "Wally fashioned that rope halter to tie him behind the wagon each day so his mouth could heal from jerking to get free. It'll be tender for a while, but you won't be riding him until your disjointed shoulder is healed. The doctor said that would take nearly a month before you could start to use that arm."

"Doctor? A month!" Lars wrapped his good arm over the horse's neck as a wave of nausea and dizziness hit. "I must sit down." He leaned heavily on Charles as they went toward the wagon.

"Once you pull a shoulder out of place, it has to heal or it could slip out again. You don't want that," Charles explained.

"But so much time," Lars said, shaking his head. He paused beside the campfire at the foot of Lissa's bedroll. She had returned to it and sat facing the fire.

"And the angel I dream takes care of me? That is you?" She pressed her lips together and looked down, but not before Lars saw her darkening cheeks.

"We all cared for you, though she was the one who sat by you most of the days," Elizabeth assured him. "And don't worry, we will continue to care for you until you are able to travel on your own."

Lars inhaled deeply and looked at the bindings that had restricted the expansion of his chest.

"I know you want to get loose of that, but your shoulder must have more rest without moving it in order to heal," Elizabeth continued with a concerned smile. "But it will take only a few more days until the stitches in your scalp can come out," she added more brightly.

"Where are we?" Lars asked.

"Nearly all the way across Ohio," Wally said proudly.

"Is not enough. What will my brother think?"

His gaze went to Lissa. Her hair fell loosely over her shoulders. The campfire reflected bright highlights on each dark wave. Her soft cheeks glowed. If Ingor got one look at her, his brother would understand why he was later than expected.

But how could he stay close by to this angel he had been trying so hard to forget?

* * *

Lissa concentrated on taking one step and then another. Anything to take her mind off how tired she was.

"Lissa, do you hear that awful sound?" Wally called.

She wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her sleeve and pulled her straw hat back on in order to shade her face. "Wally, we're walking beside a creaking wagon. All the rings on the horses' harnesses are nearly loud as a tinker's wagon. My own breathing and heartbeat pound in my ears from walking so fast. How can I hear anything else?"

Wally reached for her arm to stop her forward movement. "No, listen." He turned his head toward a line of trees clumped along what was probably a small stream a couple hundred yards away.

Lissa followed his cue. They listened and looked for movement among the branches. "Do you think it's hostiles?" she squeaked, her voice suddenly stolen by fear.

Wally looked up at her and grinned. "Just like a woman to think that. This is eastern Indiana, for Pete's sake. You're safe."

"Yes, as long as Lars is still with us." Lissa glanced forward at the man walking beside her father. "He knows how to shoot anything that threatens us."

"We'll be safe even after he moves on. We have the guns Lars took off those no-account men who tried to steal the gold off you."

Lissa gaped at her brother. "How do you know about the gold? Pa decided you were too young to be told about it."

"I hear most everything you all talk about," he admitted with a toothy grin. "And you used to complain about how hot it is to wear such a heavy corset almost every day." He stopped, his stance alert. His attention was once more drawn toward the trees when they heard bleating again. "There it is again."

"Yes, I heard it that time. Come on." She picked up her skirts and ran toward the horses. "Pa, you gotta stop."

"What's got you two in a lather now?" he asked, sounding annoyed. Lars, walking at their father's side, said nothing, but also waited for the explanation.

"Listen. Can't you hear it? There's something or someone hurt over there. They're crying out something awful."

Their pa pulled on the reins and ordered the horses to stop beside the road. They seemed quite content to have the opportunity to stop their trek for a snack of the thick summer grasses through which they were plodding. Pa set the brake, and circled the wagon to where the others were standing.

"There it is again. Did you hear it, Pa?" Wally asked, excitement evident in his voice.

Chapter Nine

"It's coming from down there," Lissa offered.

"I hear it. I hear it. Seems to be more than one of them. You all wait here while we go check it out," Charles said, referring to himself and Lars.

"I want to go too," Wally said eagerly.

"And who will protect your mother and sister while we're gone? Remember the trouble Lars got into thinking he was helping someone who'd been hurt. This could be a trap too."

"Aw, Pa, can't I go with you? The women won't see no harm here."

"Can't be sure, son. There's a lot of folks going west who might take a liking to that big new wagon of ours."

Wally looked up at the wagon that had made their journey much easier. His gaze fell to the ground. "I'll stay here then," he mumbled, obviously wanting to go investigate the strange crying rather than guard two women and a wagon.

"Keep an eye on Thunder too," Lars asked. "The sound is probably a cornered animal."

"Don't you want to take one of them revolvers, Pa?" Wally asked as the men started toward the wailing.

"This one will do just fine if we need one." Lars patted the revolver on his hip. He wore the holster all the time now.

Elizabeth woke at the lack of motion and asked what was happening. After hearing the explanation, none of them could take their eyes off the men's progress toward the trees. When they disappeared behind the trunks, Wally climbed up and stood on the driver's bench to catch a glimpse of them.

"There's Pa over there." Wally pointed west a little from the place he had entered the trees. "Lars is right behind him, but I can't figure what he's doing bent over."

Lissa climbed up on the axle hub of the bigger wheel. "He didn't hurt his shoulder again, did he?"

"What's Charles carrying?" Lissa's ma asked.

"It's a gray animal of some sort," Wally cried out.

"Why would he bring it back with him?"

"Oh, it's a lamb." Lissa jumped down and ran toward her father. "Oh, Papa, he's so sweet."

She took the lamb into her own arms, giving her pa a chance to stop and wipe his brow. He was breathing hard and sweating a great deal from the exertion.

"And Lars is herding two more," Wally shouted as he ran to help.

"This one hurt his leg. Mind those burrs, Lissa," her pa warned, pulling the offending prickly pods from his vest. "Them sheep were so tangled up in a briar patch back there they couldn't get free."

"Where do you suppose they came from, Pa?"

"Hard to tell. We've seen some folks taking their herds west. They could have lost a few, or there might be a farm around here with sheep grazing and these wandered off. We'll take them with us and ask at the next farm. If they don't belong there, lamb would be sweet in your stew pot when we run out of other

grub."

Lissa gasped. "You can't mean to eat this precious animal."

"Now, honey, you can't go making good eating animals into friends or members of the family. If you want, though, you can clean the sheep up some so we don't get scratched handling them."

Lissa didn't need any more encouragement. "And I'll see what needs to be done for his leg." Her arms already ached from carrying the weight of the lamb. She was glad to set it down beside the wagon. The other two soon joined him, and Wally gave each one a drink of water. He handed the injured one up to Lissa in the wagon. Then their father whistled and ordered the horses back into a steady pace.

Lissa worked in the open space in the back of the wagon beside her mother's chair. Bribing each lamb into behaving with a handful of grain she'd smuggled from the feed sacks, she cleaned the one's scratched leg and picked the worst of the offending weeds from each lamb's wool coat.

Wally walked near the rear of the wagon, herding the others. Making the sheep move in the desired direction was one thing, but keeping them moving was another matter. He soon discovered that if he kept the ewe moving with the wagon, her twin lambs wouldn't stray far.

Lars had decided to try his hand at riding Thunder, instead of walking with Charles. He rode near the rear of the wagon and watched the proceedings with open amusement.

"If we kept the lambs," Lissa proposed to anyone within earshot, "we would have wool next spring. That would come in handy for making warm coats or blankets."

"But you have to feed and protect them all winter. How you do that with no grass?" Lars asked.

"Heavens, isn't there grass in Dakota Territory?"

"Well, there is grass, but under snow that is sometimes up to here." Lars held his hand across his chest to mark the snow height.

Lissa shrugged. "I know nothing of sheep herding, but Mama's spinning wheel is on the wagon. We have no loom, but as artful a furniture maker as Papa is, I know he could create just the loom we would need. I just thought the wool would be good to have."

"A loom is big," Lars countered. "Won't fit in little sod house."

Lissa wasn't going to let Lars sadden her with his constant objections, so she hurried on without truly listening to his description of the house. "I could knit scarves and heavy sweaters for the whole family from wool. We brought knitting needles. They take no space at all." Anything she proposed was better than picturing a big pot of lamb stew cooking over a campfire. "The sheep could stay in the stable with the horses."

Lars shook his head. "You will be lucky to have space in the soddy for the horses and your family."

"Soddy?" she asked, handing the last cleaned lamb to Wally.

"Ya. My brother writes to me that this is what settlers call their sod house."

"Oh, but we will have a house made of wood, not dirty sod. I can't imagine how a house made of sod could be the least bit comfortable to live in."

Lars laughed. "The first time the Dakota wind blows across the prairie, you will be glad you have a sod house. The walls are almost as thick as your arm is long. They keep out the cold and snow. The floors are packed earth. You can sweep out the dirt, splash on some water, and when it is dry the floor is clean and hard as a wood floor."

Lissa stared in disbelief. "And the horses? They stay with the people?"

Lars shrugged and then winced in pain. He laid the reins over Thunder's neck and rubbed his aching injured shoulder. "It hard work to cut soil never touched before by plow. You need to build a sod shelter for the horses attached to soddy where you live. They will grow good thick coats to keep warm."

Lissa shook her head and idly shook the lamb's wool and debris from her apron over the back of the wagon. "That's hard to imagine. Everything is so much harder than I thought it would be." Her statement was not a complaint, just a conclusion.

"You'll do fine, little one, just fine," Lars said.

She smiled as his compliment flowed over her like warm cream over bread pudding. She was still smiling a few minutes later when she climbed out of the wagon to take a turn at carrying the little lambs.

* * *

As May gave way to June, the sloping hills of Indiana soon became the grassy prairies of Illinois. Wagons traveling west became more numerous on the road. While they weren't in an official wagon train, the Whitakers traveled on a regular basis with the same wagons close by. St. Louis seemed so near and yet so far.

The rivers they crossed posed one of their greatest challenges. It had been a spring with little rain, so fording the rivers hadn't been difficult because of the shallow depth of the water. What had been difficult were the charges that the landowners extorted from the travelers crossing on their bridge or ferry. The fare at one point brought the Whitaker wagon to a halt.

Two brothers, if their relation could be guessed from the same greasy red hair and missing front teeth on each, had pulled large stones into a row across the now-shallow river. Smaller rock had filled in behind them, making an ideal place to ford the river safely. They had built a small shelter and gate beside it and earned what they could from the passing travelers who used their crossing.

"You can't mean to charge us two dollars to cross," Charles insisted when they demanded the fee.

"Yup. Dollar for the wagon, dollar for the horses, and it'll be fifty cents for the big guy on the black horse," the surly looking man said. His brother leaned against a sapling near the road and grinned.

Lars had heard enough. He did not want to pay the exorbitant fee even if he could have afforded it.

"Hey, fella, where you going?" one of the men shouted after him.

Lars ignored the question. While Charles continued to argue with the pair, he turned Thunder downstream along the worn rock shore and studied the river. Upstream of the crossing, the trees came

right to the water, but downstream of the road, the tree stand stopped some distance from the river. Dry pebbly soil stretched on both sides along the wide flood plain.

The same small rocks stretched across the riverbed, but a deep channel had cut close to the shore where the river turned a gentle curve. But south of the curve, the riverbed flattened out again. He urged Thunder into the water to test the bottom and found it firm. Crossing there would be easy and safe. He returned to the wagon, studying the shore as he rode.

His face reddened, Charles's arms flailed in the air and his voice rose in volume and pitch as his argument with the brothers escalated. Another wagon carrying a family of settlers who could not afford the fee had pulled up behind. The man stood beside Charles, shouting his own vitriolic comments. Wally stood beside the horses to keep them calm.

Lars rode Thunder to the group of men and slid from the saddle. "You have axe?" he asked of Charles.

"I wouldn't be without one," he replied.

"Good. Get it out," Lars urged as he faced the river men. "We won't pay your fees because we won't be needing your ford," he announced to the brothers.

Wally produced the axe and the men followed Lars downstream. A few branches leaned too low over the shore for the wagons to pass. They quickly dispatched them after surveying the crossing beyond the bend and agreeing with Lars's assessment of it.

Returning to the wagons, the heads of the families turned their horses and rode downstream. They crossed without incident, but still heard the angry curses of the river men as the wagons pulled up the western bank and over to the road west. After pulling back on the road, the men stopped the wagons.

"I don't know what we would have done if your husband hadn't found a safe crossing at no cost," a woman said to Lissa while the men checked for damage from the crossing. She stood beside the road and gently rubbed her abdomen, swollen with child.

Lissa frowned, but didn't know what to say. It wasn't the first time someone had assumed Lars to be her husband. Hearing such a comment always made her bristle. He was just the type of man her father would love to see her wed, but she was returning east as soon as she could. Lars would feel as out of place living back east as a bird with his wings clipped.

Since it wasn't likely they would meet this family again, she didn't correct the error in the woman's conclusion about her and Lars. But it gave her an odd feeling to be considered a married lady. More and more lately, she pictured herself as an old maid.

"With the baby coming, we got to save every penny we can to get a house up quick."

"Where are you folks heading?" Wally asked eagerly.

"Minnesota. My sister is there, and she tells me there's lots of water and good rich land for farming," the woman said with an excited smile.

Lissa couldn't imagine anything harder than being with child and walking so far into an unknown future.

The day that Lars was able to saddle his horse without the aid of a boulder to step on was the day he began his preparations to leave the Whitakers' care. He had worked out a way to keep his upper arm down, while raising the saddle with his lower arm as far as he could despite the pain. He used his other arm to throw it the rest of the way onto Thunder's back. It meant he had to circle the horse to straighten it before he tightened the cinch, but he didn't seem to care. He just wanted to get west.

The first morning he accomplished the task alone, he rode ahead to check out towns and farms on the trail until he found a pack animal he could afford to buy.

Returning to the wagon that evening with a dirt-encrusted mare, he spent the next few evenings cleaning her up and repacking his goods. Unable to watch him, Lissa cleaned up after supper and sat by the fire where Wally and her father were working together to fix a strap on the harness that had broken that afternoon. Her mama had already retired to her bed in the wagon. She spent more and more time there. She only left the wagon now when she absolutely had to.

"Pa, I'm worried about Mama," Lissa said softly. "She seems to be getting worse. She lies down and hardly gets up any more."

"She is feeling more poorly after seeing what the farmer did to Lars. She tired herself out, that's all," her pa assured her.

Thinking back on the whole event, Lissa concluded he was very wrong. Elizabeth had done little to care for Lars. Lissa had stitched him up, changed his bandages, even bathed him as far as she could by removing only his shirt. It had been Lissa, not Elizabeth, who had responded to his moans with a cool cloth on his forehead. Sitting behind him with his head leaning against her breasts, she had hand-fed him broth to keep his strength up, and urged him to drink the willow bark tea to bring the fever down. She'd been the one to clip each of the stitches and pull out the threads when the gash on his head had healed.

She remembered tears for his pain had fallen down her cheeks as she worked. When Lars had seen the tears, he'd wiped them away tenderly with the backs of his fingers. But when he'd appeared ready to comment on them, she'd quickly talked of something else and broke the mood.

Lissa's pa told her she had done a fine job. "I knew you could do the nursing he needed," he said, wrapping his arm around her shoulders for a brief hug. "I told Elizabeth that you would be a big help if you put your mind to it."

The new feelings of being capable of doing something important felt good. Lissa actually liked feeling needed by her family, and it was clear as the fresh water in the creeks they bathed in on the trail that she was needed even more now with her mother's ailing belly keeping her abed.

Lissa worried about her, but she had no idea what to do except convince her father to have her ma see a doctor. So far her mother had refused, saying it was just a pain that would go away with rest. But it had been bothering her since before they left home, and it showed no signs of going away--only of getting worse. If her husband had been ill, she would have taken him straight to a doctor. But Lissa's mother said there was nothing the doctor could do for her.

Lissa reached for a handful of dry pine needles and idly tossed them into the fire, enjoying the way they sparked and burned so quickly.

"You could get burned playing with fire," Lars said suddenly from behind her.

She started with a little cry of surprise and then laughed, looking up at him. He had walked up close behind her, and she hadn't heard him. She'd been staring into the fire, thinking about him so hard she should have known he was near. He pulled the hat from his head and rotated it over his fingers as if checking the leather band.

"Are you all ready to leave in the morning?" she asked into the awkward silence.

"Ya, it is middle of June already. I must make better time on Thunder. I cannot wait longer for my strength to return."

"I know you don't want your brother to worry, but I'm worried that you'll use your shoulder too much and too soon."

Lars lowered himself to sit on the log beside her. "You should not worry about me."

He hooked his hat over his bent knee and tucked the thumb of his injured arm into his belt so the arm rested against his torso as it would in a sling. He did that to protect it most of the time. Lissa could see that it still bothered him to use it, but he wasn't willing to show any weakness. Truly worried about him, she had to be content that he was at least trying to favor it.

"You're letting your beard grow back."

He smiled and the stubble glowed red in the firelight. "Keeps the sun off." He stared into the fire for a few moments and then turned to look at her again. "I must tell you something I told your father," he said, sounding as if he wished he did not have to say anything about it. "He asked me not to tell your mother, but I hope he tells her so she is ready too."

Lissa frowned but remained silent, giving him all the time he needed to find the English words to tell her. She could not imagine what it would be that made him appear so serious.

"The farmer who sell me the new packhorse is making wooden shutters to fit his windows. He has rifle near him as he works in field."

"Not very friendly of him," Lissa said.

He shook his head. "No, he say he rather sell me the horse than lose it to renegades. He say hostiles steal all they want in area. And...and he say women are not safe with them around."

"In Illinois? I thought the hostiles were all well west of here."

He reached out as if to touch her arm, but pulled his hand back. "Lissa, keep a revolver close by you all the time. Make sure it is loaded. You know how to use it."

She nodded. Practicing with the revolver was something Wally, Lars, and Lissa did most evenings to give Lars something to do as his shoulder healed. She could shoot as well as Wally now and better than her own father, who'd only practiced with them once.

"And give one to your mother to have near her in the wagon."

"Mama wouldn't know what to do with it," she told him. "Papa and Wally can protect us."

He grunted. "If she needs to use it, she will know what to do." He ran his hand over his beard as if it were long and he had to smooth it down as before. "Lissa, a woman on the trail must be able to protect herself. Promise me you will keep a gun with you. If not for you, do it for me." He gaze held hers.

"Yes, all right," she promised, wondering why he would be so interested in what happened to her. She heard the crackling of the fire beside them and saw the flames reflected in his eyes.

"Here." He lifted a box of bullets to fit the revolver from his shirt pocket and laid it in her palm that she extended to him.

"But I'm sure I won't need them."

"I hope you never do, little one," he said softly, placing it on her palm and curling her fingers up over the box.

He rose and went to help check on the horses as he had every night. Lissa swatted a buzzing insect that was aiming to bite her forehead and decided that despite the heat, she would sleep in the wagon with her mother. She didn't want to sleep in her bedroll where she could see Lars as he slept. Tonight, even after watching him sleep all the time he was unconscious, she felt it too intimate to watch any longer. He was putting more physical distance between them, and she had to put him far from her thoughts as well. She didn't want to think all the thoughts that she knew would fill her head and make her sadder when he left for good in the morning.

* * *

"You sure you got everything you're gonna need?" Wally asked as he watched Lars pack the last ammunition box on top of his spare shirt in his saddlebags where they would be handy.

"Ya," he replied, turning to Lissa's mother, who sat watching from her chair in the back of the wagon. "Thank you for caring for me so long. You all have given me much. I know I owe you my life."

She smiled. "Now you mind that shoulder of yours. Give it more time to heal," she advised as she handed him a cloth with several biscuits wrapped inside.

Lars smelled the bundle and grinned. "I will long remember your biscuits. I may never taste one as good again when these are gone."

Lissa glanced up and waited for her mother to correct his wrong assumption, but she didn't. Lissa had made those biscuits, not her mama who stood there smiling and enjoying his attentions. A smile graced her mother's face so seldom Lissa remained silent. Lars walked around the horse. He reached down to pick up the reins and laid them over the horse's neck.

Lissa was stroking Thunder's neck. "Good-bye, you handsome horse. I'll miss all the time I spent brushing you."

"I will have long talk with Thunder. I tell him again that he not allow anyone to get close to him as you do. A man who allows himself to get so close to you would find it impossible to leave." His grin disappeared and his gaze locked on hers. "Thank you for all you do to make me well." He rubbed his chin. "But if I burn in the sun, I wish very much you not cut off my beard." They laughed. Hidden from the others by his horse, he leaned closer suddenly and kissed her cheek. "And thank you for biscuits. I know

you made them," he whispered.

Lissa grinned, unaccountably happy that he knew, and that he had said something about the biscuits.

Lars swung into the saddle and thanked the others again. He checked the reins of the packhorse tied to his saddle.

"She's not the packhorse your other one was," Wally said. "But she cleaned up nice."

"And she'll go the distance," Lars assured him. "That's what is important. A man must find a filly that will go the distance."

With one last glance at Lissa, Lars pulled Thunder's reins to the side to turn him and rode west with the sun on his back. He never looked back, never saw the tears escaping Lissa's eyes.

* * *

With Lars no longer traveling with them, Lissa's mother seemed to give in to her exhaustion. Lissa noticed she looked paler and paler each day while the rest of them were getting darker and darker in the summer sun. As the wagon bumped and lurched over the road, she even cried out at times, unable to restrain the audible evidence of her pain.

Lissa noticed something else much more disturbing. She knew very little about what happened to a woman's body as she aged, but her mother's seemed to be working overtime in some areas. While Lissa needed rags, or dry grasses, or even pussy willow fluff wrapped in cloth to absorb her feminine flow only once a month for a few days, her mother was in constant need of them.

Her mama's appetite had been lessening since they left Philadelphia, but now it was close to impossible to get her to eat. Just as her mother had left the care of Lars to Lissa, she was now leaving the cooking and the cleaning completely up to her too. Lissa didn't mind having the extra chores as much as she minded not knowing what was wrong with her mother, or what to do to make her well. Who could she talk to about it? Trying to understand, she decided to ask her mother directly.

"Mama, is it your illness that makes you need so many rags?"

"That's enough out of you, young lady," her mother snapped. "That is not a question that a proper girl should ask anyone, much less her mother."

Lissa felt chastised, but not at all satisfied with the answer. Unable to go on not understanding, she approached her father one evening. He was checking the picket line the horses and lambs were tied to that allowed them to feed on the lush grasses without running off.

"Can I help, Papa? I finished the dishes and the bedrolls are all shaken out."

Her pa smiled at her and wiped his brow on his sleeve as he walked to her side. He patted her cheek with his rough and dry hands. "You're such a big help to your mama and me." He leaned over and kissed her forehead lightly.

Lissa couldn't remember the last time her father had kissed her. She smiled and felt her cheeks warm. Not wanting to break the tenuous tie between them, she linked her fingers over his elbow as they walked back toward the fire. "Papa," she said tentatively.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked in a voice that suddenly sounded very tired.

"Oh, it's nothing," she said, changing her mind about asking. She didn't want to worry him more. But what of her own worry? She had to learn if her mother would ever get better. "At least I hope it's nothing."

He stopped and turned to her. "What? What is nothing?"

Seeing concern in her eyes, she blurted it out. "It's Mama. I'm worried about her. She...well, I'm just worried she's so ill, that's all."

Her pa looked toward the wagon and then down at his daughter. He nodded and heaved a sigh. "I'm worried too," he finally admitted.

"When will she get better? She seems to be in constant pain and getting weaker every day, but she won't say anything about what can be done for her."

He fidgeted with pulling down his rolled-up sleeves to keep the biting insects off his arms. "If she doesn't want to talk about it, we must respect her wishes in the matter. Sometimes a woman is ailing, and it's too personal to discuss with anyone."

"But shouldn't we take her to a doctor?"

He shook his head. "I tried to get her to talk to the doctor when Lars was injured, but she wouldn't hear of it. She refuses to let a doctor touch her."

"But if he could make her well..."

"Just let her be. We have to trust that she knows what's best for her. In the meantime, the doctor did give me that second bottle of laudanum when I mentioned her pain to him."

"You told him about Mama?"

"I just described how she was in pain much of the time, and he gave me a bottle for her too."

"Does Mama know this?"

He nodded. "A woman's trouble is not something she would talk about with a man. Your mother can't hide her pain, and yet I'm not supposed to notice anything amiss. When I tried to give her this before, she said she would have no part of medicine from a doctor. But if you see the pain becomes too much, you give her some, or at least ask her if she wants it. Maybe she'll take it from you."

"Isn't there something that can be done to take whatever causes the pain away?"

"I wish there was, but what can we do? Even the doctor said he probably couldn't help her if she'd let him."

Wally approached them from his quest for green wood to keep the fire smoking all night to repel insects. Lissa's pa wished her a good night, a signal that Wally wasn't to be confided in about his mother. Lissa climbed in the wagon where she'd slept lately with her mother.

Her mother had changed her clothes as she seemed to do often lately. She quickly stuffed the dress under her straw filled pallet when she saw Lissa.

"I'll take the dress and put it with these others that I can wash in the morning," Lissa began.

"No! No need for you to take that dress," she insisted angrily.

Lissa didn't understand her anger. "But if I wash these things in the morning, we can hang them on the wagon to dry as we travel."

"Just never mind." She pulled a light quilt over herself. "Take care of the lantern."

Lissa blew out the lantern and stretched out on her pallet. She listened as her mother rolled over on her side, and sat up when she gasped in pain.

"Mama," she asked as she fumbled to light the lantern again. Turning the knob for better light, she looked over at her mother. She was curled up on her side, her hands clutching the quilt over her stomach. Tears dropped onto the pillow roll under her head.

"Mama, you must tell me. What is wrong? And what can we do to help you get better?"

She looked up at her and opened her mouth as if to answer. Changing her mind, she closed it. After a few moments, she said, "It's just my time, that's all. My own Mama went this way, so I can't see as I have any choice. She gritted her teeth against the pain and so can I." She groaned as a pain hit her.

"I'm going to get Papa. He's--"

"No." She reached out to take Lissa's arm to stop her from passing. "I'll not have a man meddling into what ails me."

"But he's not just any man. He's your husband, the father of your children."

"Hush that kind of talk."

"But we have something to help with the pain, if you want it. He got it from the doctor who saw Lars."

Her mother's hold on her arm was steady for a few seconds and then relaxed as her hand slid off. Lissa didn't wait for any other encouragement. She found the bottle and gave the ailing woman a spoonful.

"Is that the medicine Lars didn't use?" she asked.

"Yes, and Papa asked the doctor for an extra bottle for you, Mama," Lissa explained softly, hoping her quiet words wouldn't upset her mother more than she was already. "He hates to see you ill."

Her mother groaned with embarrassment. "How could he even mention my troubles?"

"He loves you, and he's very worried about you. It's hurting us all to see you suffer so. I wish we'd never left Philadelphia. Maybe if we'd stayed--"

"Hush now. That kind of talk won't do nobody good at this late date. We had nothing left back there

after the fire, and starting out fresh in Dakota Territory will be better than trying to rebuild. I know it will."

"I just wish there was a way I could take all the pain away for you." Lissa's throat felt sore and swollen. Tears welled in her eyes as she watched her mother blink slowly.

Her mama smiled and closed her eyes.

Lissa wiped the tears that blurred her vision and straightened her mother's quilt. The corner of the dress shoved under her pallet caught her eye. Carefully, so as not to wake her mother, she pulled it out so the pallet would not feel lumpy.

The dress and the petticoat stuffed inside were bright red with a large patch of blood on the back just like the other dresses she had found and washed in the cold stream with lye soap. Lissa felt she was helping by cleaning her clothes and returning them to her drawer without mentioning them. If only she could wash away the illness that caused the pain and constant bleeding.

Lissa knew so little about a woman's body that she couldn't even guess what was wrong. A few years ago her mother had shown her how to deal with her monthlies, and said she would learn anything else she needed to know about the ways of a man and woman from her husband.

How long her mother could go on bleeding so much?

Lissa wrapped the bottle in a cloth to keep it safe and slipped it into the medicine box. She was the only one who opened that box now. She would have the bottles handy to give to her mother to take away more of the pain.

Chapter Ten

"It's so hot under the canvas. Why don't you stay out here for a while?" Lissa asked her mother on one of her rare evening forays out of the wagon. "Why not sit there and lean against the big rock? We can talk while I get supper."

She looked at Lissa for a moment as if she hadn't understood a word she had said. Her face was pale and drawn and she seemed to stare into the distance until someone caught her attention. She'd been that way since beginning the doses of painkiller.

Wally and their pa were just approaching the campfire after settling the horses for the night. "That bacon smells good," Wally volunteered.

Their mama turned her head slowly and stared at the others as if in a stupor--which she was. Each day she took more and more laudanum. Their father had even stopped to buy another bottle. Mama shivered as her husband took her arm and led her to the large rock where she could sit down.

"Are you cold, my dear?" he asked kindly. She shook her head, but said nothing.

Tears stung Lissa's eyes. She hated to see her mother like this. She didn't suffer nearly as much from the pain as before, but she was as unsure on her feet as the men who staggered in the street after drinking all evening. She even slurred her words when she talked.

Lissa turned the bacon in the pan and gave the frying potatoes a stir. She set out the corn bread she had made that morning. With the good size fire going all night to ward off insects, Lissa took advantage of the glowing embers to make biscuits or corn bread every morning she could. That meant nooning and supper were easier and faster.

Her father seemed obsessed with getting the chores down to a minimum with only three to do them. He even sold two of the sheep they had found because he said he wasn't going to stop any more for them when they ran off. He said he kept the one lamb to have for food if the need arose.

Lissa and Wally took turns making sure the lamb kept up with the wagon. They even sneaked it inside the wagon during the rains. Neither of them wanted it turned into lamb stew which Charles said it would if it slowed them down once more.

"That tasted as good as it smelled," Wally said of the supper when they were done. "You're getting better as a cook, Lissa."

She smiled at him. "Seems to me you're getting better at eating too."

"You forgot to clean the skillet," Wally told Lissa as she put the cleaned tin plates away in the box for him to carry to the wagon. "It's still on the rocks over the fire."

"I guess my mind was elsewhere," she said. "I haven't even poured out the grease."

"I'll get it for you," Elizabeth offered suddenly. As if she were as well as the rest of them, she rose from the rock where she had remained throughout supper and got to the fire first. She doubled the fabric of her apron around the handle to protect her hand from getting burned and lifted the heavy pan from the rock. Instead of pouring the melted bacon fat into the crock to be saved to use for frying future meals, she stood holding the skillet. She stared at it as if she couldn't remember what to do next.

"The crock is on your right beside the fire," Lissa's pa reminded her.

But instead of stepping to it, she suddenly clutched her chest with her free hand and cried out in pain. Unable to keep her hold on the skillet, she dropped it right into the fire. When it hit the flaming logs, the bacon grease inside splashed out. Hot fat splashed onto the front of her apron while the rest poured into the fire, making it flare up. Instantly, the flames sizzled and leaped high into the air.

Too shocked to move, Lissa's mother cried out in pain and plucked at her hot grease-soaked skirts, lifting them from her legs. In doing so, she flipped them within reach of the grease-fed fire, and they burst into flames. The hungry fire consuming the grease flew up the front of her apron.

Lissa and her family raced to help. Lissa's father pulled her mother away from the campfire and slapped at the flames on her apron with his hands. Wally threw handfuls of dirt to smother the flames while Lissa grabbed the pan of dishwater and doused the remaining flames on her ma's skirts. Wally took the pan and ran to the water barrel to refill it to douse the burning grease on the ground outside the fire ring.

His arm around her, Lissa's pa carried and much as led his wife toward a boulder she could sit on. Lissa was untying her burned apron when suddenly the poor woman dragged in a shallow breath with great difficulty. She gasped, clutched her chest with both hands, and stilled.

"Mama!" Lissa dropped the apron.

Her mother stared straight ahead, unseeing, a moment longer and then crumpled into her husband's arms. He was able to lift her and laid her on the grass as gently as he could. He knelt beside her and called her name. When she didn't move, he pressed his ear against her chest to listen for a sign of life and called out to her again. Sitting back on his heels, he laid his burned hands palm up on his thighs and lifted his face to the heavens with his eyes closed.

Wally and Lissa fell to their knees beside her. "Mama. Mama," Wally cried.

"Papa? Is she...?"

He shook his head slowly. "She's gone. Her heart just gave out. Get me her quilt."

Wally wiped tears from his cheeks onto his sleeve and ran to get the quilt. His father laid it over his mother's body.

"No, Pa, how can she be gone? We got the flames out," Wally insisted. He pulled the quilt back from his mother's face.

"Yes, we did. You both did just the right thing." He looked back down at the quilt and then pulled it back up over her head too. "But she wasn't well. She just wasn't strong enough to make it through this." Wincing when he touched his hands to her body, he rose and extended his arms to lift his wife.

"Papa, your hands!" Lissa cried, seeing the blisters appearing on the red seared flesh. "I'll get the salve," she volunteered, already running toward the wagon.

Wally ran for more clean water, and he dipped his father's burned hands into it to clean off the ashes that clung to the burned bacon grease on them. Lissa gently covered the burns with salve and wrapped them in strips of clean cloth.

Her pa thanked her and looked around. "We'll lay her to rest there by those trees," he announced softly. "I ain't taking her into town to have anyone gawk at her, and we don't want any animals nosing around. Let's get to it."

With only one shovel, Wally and Lissa took turns digging the grave after insisting their father not use his burned hands. Instead, he returned to his wife's body and prepared it for burial. Lissa helped him at one point to dress her in her best dress. She noted her mother no longer wore her coin-lined corset. Worried, she asked her pa where it was.

"She hasn't worn it in weeks because it pained her too much. It's in the chest in the wagon."

Lissa was glad her mother had been spared that discomfort at least.

When the hole was dug, they gently lowered her into her grave. Their father tucked the quilt all around her as he might put a child to bed. The trio stood by the grave and stared into it. The colors of the quilt blurred in their tears.

"That's all we can do for her," their pa said finally. He insisted on helping to cover the body, but his hands hurt too greatly to do much shoveling.

The soil created a mound the length of the grave. Though it was very dark by then, the three mourners hunted for rocks as big as they could carry to cover the grave. "Good. They'll keep animals from pawing

at the earth," Charles told his children, who had been horrified at the thought.

They stared at the grave as if none of them knew what to do next because they did not, and they did not want to leave.

"She suffered so much pain in life, Papa. Why did God make her suffer in death too?" Lissa asked, her voice no more than a hoarse whisper.

Her pa put his arm around her shoulders, offering his own shoulder for her to cry on. "I don't know, but maybe dying quick this way was suffering less. She was in a lot less pain than dying slowly from what ailed her."

The siblings hung on to that thought and felt some measure of comfort in it.

"We should have a service over the grave for her. But we will do it in the morning." Lissa and Wally agreed easily.

The campfire was nearly out when they returned. In silent agreement, they left everything as it was and slept in the wagon.

At morning's first light, they ate a handful of the berries they had picked the day before, and the men split the one remaining biscuit. Lissa felt too upset to eat anything more.

They returned to their mother's grave and said their last good-byes. Lissa began singing the only hymn she could remember that she felt was appropriate. "When they call the roll up yonder, I'll be there," she sang, her voice breaking on each line. Wally and her pa joined her with the words they could manage. Lissa's papa brought out the family Bible, and he read what he considered his wife's favorite passage, the twenty-third psalm. Wally's contribution to the little service was a few wild flowers he laid on the stones over the grave.

"Shouldn't we make a cross or something to mark the grave, Papa?" Lissa asked.

He shook his head. "I'd just as soon not call attention to it. Her pain is gone, and she can find peace among these trees now." He turned to his children, both of whom wept quietly, their tears streaking their cheeks. "You can't allow the events of last night to drag you into a deep sadness. Your mother wouldn't have wanted that."

Wally and Lissa nodded and struggled to stop their tears.

"We'll stay here a day more. My hands are too tender to control the horses, but by tomorrow the pain should be less. We need to think ahead and use this time to prepare to move faster to make up for our slow rate of travel this far."

For the rest of the day, Wally acted as his father's hands as he checked the wagon and harnesses and cared for the horses. Lissa cleaned up the campfire area and remade the fire after cleaning the frying pan. While corn bread baked in the Dutch oven, she checked all the food stocks. She had already been doing the cooking for each meal except the few times they had stopped at an inn instead of cooking in the rain. Now she would need to keep track of what they needed to buy as they passed through the few towns remaining on the trail before they entered the undeveloped area. To be caught without food there would be dangerous.

After nooning, Wally managed to snare a rabbit that Lissa fried for their supper. "How did you learn to do that?" she wanted to know as he prepared the snare to set again.

Wally shrugged. "Lars taught me while his shoulder mended."

Lars. She had gone for days without thinking about him, but at the mention of his name, she couldn't help but wonder where he was. She smiled, thinking how much easier today would have been with his strong shoulder to lean on and the warmth of his hand over hers.

That evening Lissa and Wally rearranged a few things in the wagon to make more comfortable sleeping room for three. Lissa could sleep on the tailgate bed, while Wally and their father could sleep on the floor now that their mother's chair had been tied on top of the chest to get it out of the way for the remainder of the journey.

In the morning the men harnessed the horses while Lissa circled the campfire area to be sure they hadn't left anything. Seeing where her mother had fallen, she burst into tears again. Besides leaving their mother in a grave, Lissa and her brother were leaving behind their innocence and naïveté. By necessity they would take control of a greater share in their destiny, and Lissa hoped they would become even more caring to those in pain. She knew how much the loss hurt.

"Come on," her father called to her. "We'd best leave."

Lissa and Wally looked back over their shoulders to memorize what their mother's grave looked like because they knew they would never see it again. They all rode in the wagon that morning, even the lamb. It was as if they all wanted to escape the scene of their mother's demise by traveling far away as quickly as possible.

Life on the trail had gotten harder than Lissa ever thought it could. She couldn't imagine it getting worse.

* * *

"There certainly seems to be a lot of people going west," Lissa noted in the heavy traffic of wagons on the road in the week following her mother's passing.

"Pa, they won't run out of room in Dakota Territory before we get there, will they?" Wally said with a frown as he walked beside the lead horse that his father rode.

Their pa smiled and looked at Wally. "No, son. There's more than enough land for us all." He looked down at his burned hands and straightened the cloth that covered the remaining blisters to keep them clean.

Having other settlers traveling the road was a godsend to Lissa who liked having them to talk to each day at their nooning. Chatting helped get past the tragedy of her mother's death, and she learned ways to make their travels more comfortable from the other women. She learned to wrap thick cornbread dough around a green cut branch for each of them. They turned it slowly as it cooked over the fire. The bread was ready to eat much quicker than cooking it in the big cast iron pan, and there was no pan to clean.

"How're your hands, Pa?" Lissa called from the other side of the wagon where she walked leading the lamb by a rope tied around his neck.

"The tender spots have all stopped hurting and none of 'em festered. I can't ask for better than that."

"Are all these folks going north like us?" Wally asked.

"Don't think so. This trail across Illinois leads to St. Louis for folks going straight west to Colorado. Others could be heading north to Wisconsin, but most going that way would have turned toward Chicago instead of crossing the state this far south."

Some folks had small herds of cows with them. Lissa traded baked green-apples for milk and even cheese. She made them with a little sugar and a bit of cinnamon from the spice box. She wrapped the seasoned apples in a short dough and closed the top over like a small package. Then she baked them until they were brown and the apple juice bubbled out the folds. Once they were cool, they could be eaten by hand or with a fork and plate, when there was time. Everyone loved them, and she was always able to barter with as many extras as she could bake.

Wally got into bartering with other settlers too. His hand-carved toys were popular with parents whose little children were always looking for something to do, often getting into trouble. Even the adults were fascinated with the row of rings he had carved on the narrowed center of a branch. They thought he had placed the rings on a stick and then glued on wider ends. They were stunned to learn it had all been one branch when he began.

"Are we going to St. Louis?" Wally wanted to know.

"We have a choice of following one of the rivers northwest across the state, or going to St. Louis and then heading north along the great Mississippi River."

"Which are we gonna do, Pa?"

"I reckon where we go will depend on what we hear about what's going on northwest of here. Now the war is over, the army is moving northwest to man the forts and to build new ones. I heard one of the units is moving north just west of here. I'm hoping we'll learn more tonight."

"I hear the Mississippi is the biggest river that we gotta cross."

"Crossing any river can be hard or easy depending on the conditions. We got a couple more to cross before we get to that one."

News that the army was somewhere nearby traveled fast between the wagons. Charles stopped for the night in a good-sized encampment of wagons. Finding a spot not too far from a river beyond the other wagons, he set the brake. Wally looked forward to watering the horses in the river instead of carrying water to the campsite.

Lissa tied the lamb to a tree in a grassy area so it wouldn't wander off. Once the lamb was secured, she reached for the leather strap she used for her first duty at each stop--gathering firewood. With all the dead trees near the river from floods, she wouldn't have a hard time of it. She hadn't left yet when the man from the nearest wagon walked toward them.

"Howdy, ma'am. Name's Ben Laslow," the man said in an accent that announced he was from the south. "That's my wife, Annie." He pointed to his wife who stood shyly by their campfire with a girl about ten years old. "That there's our daughter, Susie."

Charles introduced himself and Lissa and Wally.

Laslow asked where they were headed as he helped Charles and Wally unharness and water the horses. While the men held the reins and talked about where they had come from, Wally poured pails of water over the horses to cool them and to wash off the dust of the trail. He rubbed each one down with a rag. He seemed to enjoy getting wet and cool himself in the process.

He asked Charles if he had heard about the Indian trouble and he shook his head. "Hell, then you ain't heard of the band of renegades out robbing folks just north of here?"

"We ain't heard nothing of them," Wally volunteered. "But you should have seen the farmer in Ohio--"

"Mind where you throw that water," Charles reminded him sharply, effectively cutting off Wally's story. "What about this band of Indians?"

"Sheriff said they're the bunch who broke out of jail south of here. They're bent on getting even with all whites for the ones who locked 'em up. They already burned a farmhouse to the ground when the farmer shot at them. When he and his family ran out at the last minute to escape the flames, they shot the couple and their daughter too." He glanced at Lissa and realized she had heard what he said. "Beg pardon, ma'am, but it's a good thing they kilt her too, if you ask me. No self-respecting woman or child would want to live to be captured."

Lissa suddenly leaned on the wagon wheel for support when her legs felt no stronger than thick molasses in the springtime. That poor girl, she thought. The tears that came so easily since her mother's passing burned in her eyes. She tried to blink them away.

"We'll keep an eye out for 'em," her pa said. "Thanks for the warning."

"If I see 'em, I'm going to shoot first and worry about it later."

Lissa's father looked back at the wagon just as Lissa wiped tears from her cheeks with her apron. He leaned toward Laslow. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't say any more about the bunch to my family. They just lost their mother a short while ago, and I don't want to worry them none."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. How'd she die?"

Carrying the ration of grain for the horses, Wally approached them as the question hung in the air unanswered. Lissa's pa turned to help Wally fill the feed bags and hang one on each animal's head. Laslow went on talking about other events.

Lissa had gathered wood and rocks for the fire near where the men were talking and continued to listen to all they said. She started the fire and fanned it gently so the larger kindling would catch.

"I'm sorry if my husband upset you," a soft voice said behind her.

She whirled around to find Laslow's wife and daughter standing there. Lissa tried to smile.

"No, I was just..." She couldn't go on with the story of her mother. The sad-faced girl was looking up at her. "My name's Lissa. What's yours?" she asked with a smile for the child.

The girl stepped shyly behind her mother and clung to her apron without speaking.

"Ain't she the shy one? She's Susie. I'm Annie. She's just the opposite of her pa." She smiled down at her daughter and hugged her shoulders. "He does the talking for all of us, don't he?"

The child looked up at her mother, but her face didn't change from its glum look. Only when she turned and watched the lamb chomp on the grass did the corners of her mouth turn up a little.

"Would you like to see my lamb? We rescued her when she was caught in a briar patch."

The girl nodded, but still hadn't said a word. Lissa held out her hand toward the child. "Come on. I'll introduce you." The girl looked from her hand to Lissa's face.

Her mother got impatient and pushed the child toward her. "Go see the lamb. It won't hurt you."

Lissa dropped her hand and smiled. She led the way toward the lamb and Susie followed behind her. Lissa sat on the ground and pulled up a clump of grass and held it out to the lamb. "I taught her to eat the grass I give her," Lissa said. "My pa says the lamb is more like a pet than she should be. We used to have three, but he just let me keep one." She reached up and scratched the lamb's ears and neck. "Would you like to pet her?"

Susie nodded and reached over to touch the lamb. "Can I feed her too?" she asked in a small voice.

Happy the child had spoken to her, Lissa assured her it would be fine.

"Susie's taken a shine to you," Annie said over her shoulder. "I thank you for spending the time with her."

"We're just having fun playing with my lamb," Lissa said with a smile for the child.

"She's just scared what with all the tales her pa tells us."

Lissa rose. "You go ahead and play with the lamb. I've got to get supper started." Susie started to back away. "The lamb loves it when you pet her," Lissa said to urge her to stay and have more fun.

"That's fine, honey child. I'll call you when I need you," Annie assured. "I got to go stir the stew pot."

Susie stayed, but her wary eyes watched Lissa as she went about their evening chores. When the men had finished tethering the horses in a grassy area, they came back to the campfire that Lissa had going. She offered them coffee.

"Thanks, but I got to get over to check on our oxen." He spotted Susie and braced his hands on his hips. He bellowed, "What are you doing over here? Why ain't you helping your mama?"

The child had been sitting peacefully petting the lamb that had lain down beside her. At the shock of her father's voice, the child's head jerked up with a look of terror. The lamb bolted to its feet and ran away to the limits of her leash, her body jerking around when the rope pulled tight.

"Damn it, you git back by your mama and stay there," he ordered. In tears, the child ran toward her wagon. "I don't want no hostiles getting you. I'd rather see you dead than have that happen."

"Please, you're scaring the child," Lissa said.

"She should be scared of them damned heathens."

"But you can't mean what you said. You can't wish the child dead."

Ben Laslow glared at Lissa. "I don't need to listen to any woman trying to tell me what I mean. But you mark my words, missy. If them hostiles get a hold of you, you'll rather be dead than suffer what they do to you, or the humiliation of everyone knowing one of them touched you." His gaze scorched her body from head to toe before he turned and strode to his wagon. His shouted orders to his wife and child could be heard until after dark.

About the same time, the noise an army attachment made when it arrived at the campsite alerted all the families. At first light they gathered to hear the news from the major. "We've been chasing that band of redskins that broke out of jail."

"Did you find 'em?" someone shouted.

"Their trail was easy enough to follow," the major went on. "They're going north, probably heading for the territories."

"Did you get near 'em?" the settler asked with more urgency.

The major nodded. "We cut their number considerably, thanks to a settler they were mixing it up with when we came upon them. He was traveling alone, and they thought to pick him off easy. But after what we give 'em, they'll need to heal and regroup before they can do any more damage."

"What about the settler?" Laslow asked.

"We brung him back with us," the major continued. "He took an arrow in the shoulder. Would have scalped him, if we hadn't come along with our guns blazing. Good thing 'cause them murdering redskins would have loved a scalp of long blond hair."

The major was interrupted by a disruption in the army's horse corral they had fashioned with ropes running between nearby trees. A huge black stallion took exception to a soldier trying to move him. His hooves flailed in the air as he reared up. Other soldiers gathered around the ropes, urging their buddy on to bend the horse to his will.

"Pa, look at the white spot on the side of his head," Wally insisted.

Lissa gasped. "No, God, please no. It can't be him. Not again," she prayed desperately. The trio ran toward the corral with the other settlers. In the next second, she knew. "Pa, it is Thunder. It was Lars who was attacked by the Indians and nearly killed."

"Pa, that's Thunder, all right. We gotta do something," Wally urged.

Thunder's hoof had made sharp contact with the soldier's arm. He yelped and ran from the corral, cradling his injured arm. "I ain't going back in there," he insisted.

The major approached and examined his arm. "It ain't broke," he announced. "Now you men get back to work. The damn horse can stay where he is. You've got rifles to clean and supply wagons to organize. We'll set out again in one hour."

"Major," Lissa's father called out. "We know that horse." The major turned back and her pa introduced

himself. "We know the fella you brought back, if that's his horse--that and the mare over there," he said, picking out Lars's packhorse from the army issue.

"They sure are. That being the case, I think you'd better take a look at him," the major decided. "Maybe he'll respond to your voice since he knows ya. He won't wake up for us."

Lissa followed the men into one of the large army tents. It smelled of damp canvas, mold, and blood. She swallowed hard against a wave of nausea that rose to her throat.

Injured men lay in four cots that lined one wall of the tent. In the far one, Lars lay unmoving. Her heart pounded and her breathing sped up. She darted around the men and knelt beside him. "Lars, oh, Lars, what have you gotten into this time?" She brushed his hair back and laid her hand on his forehead. He was warm, but she laid her hand on his chest and felt a steady strong heartbeat. Lifting her hand, she saw it was red with blood. She unbuttoned his shirt and exposed his chest. Blood seeped from dressing the medic had wrapped around him. She clutched the sides of his shirt as if clinging to it would keep him from dying.

"Seems she does know him," the major said with a knowing smile after having watched her open his shirt and examine him.

Lissa's papa nodded. "I thought he'd be near to Dakota Territory by now."

"Maybe he would have been if them Indians hadn't pinned him down. A feller shouldn't be traveling alone, specially a foreigner who don't know the lay of the land. They're too trusting."

"He needs a clean dressing on his wound," Lissa called from the cot. "When was the last time someone gave him a drink?"

The major shrugged. "We did the best we could for him. We put alum on the hole to cut the bleeding, but I couldn't spare a man just to hand-feed him. We got to move out tomorrow."

Lissa rose and turned to face the major. "Then carry him to our wagon. Please. I'll take care of him," she announced and prayed her father would go along with the idea.

Chapter Eleven

"We can't leave him here to die," Lissa urged. "The major said they don't have time to care for him."

"You sure you want to take on the responsibility of caring for him without your mother to help?" Her father's gaze held hers.

"I'll help her, Pa," Wally volunteered.

"Would that be satisfactory, Major?"

He shrugged. "I'll see to it at once. Could you manage to handle that horse too?" the major asked. "He might be a lot happier with someone he knows."

Lissa smiled and rose. "If your men will move him to our wagon, Wally and I will move the horses."

"Done. My men will move all his packs too. He didn't let them Indians get a thing that was his. I just hope they don't yet claim his life."

In less than an hour, the soldiers had carried Lars to their wagon on a litter, and laid him on the pallet where he had recuperated before. Lissa's pa supervised stashing all his goods in the wagon.

While they moved Lars, Wally and Lissa entered the corral. Soldiers lined the ropes in case they were needed. With slow but deliberate movements, she calmed Thunder with a constant stream of quiet talk. He seemed very interested in her hands, nosing them and nodding his big head. She knew he smelled Lars's scent on her. "He's too sick to come see you himself, big fella, but you'll see him soon enough." She grasped the reins the soldier had earlier abandoned.

Wally caught the mare and led her out of the corral first. Thunder seemed happy to follow as long as the soldiers stayed clear of him. Back at their wagon, they tied the horses to a sturdy rope stretched between two trees so they could munch on the thick grass that the lamb was enjoying.

"Don't worry about the horses, Lissa. I'll get water and feed for 'em," Wally promised. "You go take care of Lars."

She smiled her thanks and ran to the wagon. After washing her hands, she lifted a pail of clean water to the edge and climbed inside, lowering the pail beside Lars. She would have to clean him up first to see how deep the injury was. Her heart raced at the prospect of her hands gliding over his hard body. At once she felt ashamed for thinking of her own pleasure instead of concerning herself with him.

Her father had remained with him. "No sign of waking yet. I took off his shirt. They had just cut away the sleeve. I cut the rest off."

"Thank you, Pa. Could you help me turn him to see where the arrow came out his back?"

Working together, they discovered the arrow had gone all the way through in the muscle at the top of his shoulder. After holding Lars while Lissa washed his back, her pa laid him down and turned away to tie down his packs so they wouldn't shift as they traveled.

Lissa washed Lars's chest and arms, and placed more alum on the wounds to draw the soft tissues together and control the bleeding. A cloth band looped under his armpit held the dressing in place. When she brushed his hair out of her way, she discovered a lump on the side of his head.

"Pa, this lump on his head is probably the reason he's not awake. The skin's not broken, so that's good." She prayed his unconscious state wasn't because he'd already lost too much blood.

Finished with all she knew to do for him, she raised a light quilt to his neck to cover his bare torso. She felt his forehead and then his heartbeat.

"He doesn't seem to be too warm, Pa. His heartbeat is steady and the wounds aren't festering. That's a good sign. I've done the best I could, but I'm not sure what the arrow hit inside. I don't think it was low enough to break a bone. If he would just wake up..." Her lower lip quivered and her voice failed her. Overcome with worry about Lars, she burst into tears, burying her face in her hands.

"Lissa." Her papa gathered her in his arms and held her tenderly. "You gotta know he may not be able to recover. He... Well, if he does wake up... We'll take care of him."

She swiped at her cheeks with her sleeves. "Look how much he helped us. This good man never harmed anyone, Pa. How come so many bad things happen to him?"

"I don't know, honey. It sure don't seem fair, but he ain't alone having bad things happening to him. You've seen the graves, including your dear mother's, along the road. Traveling alone increased his odds for trouble, but the long road west ain't easy for anyone."

Lissa felt a renewed sting of tears in her eyes, but blinked fast in an attempt to stop them. "I know, Pa, but he's the one I care about."

"Yes, I thought as much," he replied. "Why don't you sit with him a while until you're feeling better?" She nodded and he moved to leave the wagon. He stopped at the back, but did not turn to face her. "Um, you don't have your mother here to protect your reputation any more. Folks are gonna question whether this is right, an unwed girl taking care of him alone and all." He held up his hand to stop her objection. "I just thought I'd mention it so you wouldn't be hurt by what they might say. People are of a mind out here that everything should be proper, and they'll go a long way to see that it is. It seems their way of hanging on to the civilization they left to come west."

"I think taking care of him is more important than what they think of me, don't you, Pa?"

"Yes, I do. Let us know if you need anything. And if he needs, well, you know from before there are times I'll have to help him, so just call me."

"Thanks, Pa. I will."

Lars moaned and rolled his head from side to side.

"There, you see? It won't be long until he wakes up," her father said, a smile on his face.

"I hope so, Pa. I truly do."

"I'll get Wally to help me get a meal for us all so you can stay with him."

"The traveling won't be good..."

Charles didn't let her finish. "I know. I know. You want to stay here a day or two." He sighed and shook his head. "I do believe that if it hadn't been for your ill mother making us travel slow so the ride would be smoother, and Lars being injured in Ohio so that we stayed in one place nearly a week, why, we'd be close to Dakota Territory by now ourselves."

"Lars thought he would be closer by now too. Will we turn and head north soon? Are we close?"

"I ain't sure, but the major warned us against turning north here, at least not until we get word them renegades have been caught. I'd rather be safe, even if it means we winter over somewhere and continue on north in the spring. I'd rather do that than live in this wagon in the cold up there." He climbed down from the wagon and called for Wally.

Lissa was stunned. It was only July. She couldn't believe their journey might not end this fall. Her mind raced to figure out anything she could do to speed them up. She tugged at the heavy corset that she wore continually. She hated putting it back on after she got an opportunity to bathe. Now in the hottest part of

the summer, it was torture to wear. Her skin was a permanent color of mottled red, and where the stays and rows of coins poked her, the skin looked blistered. But this was no time to think of herself. She looked down at the unconscious form next to her.

"You won't get to your brother's by the time the snow flies, if you don't wake up quick," she said to Lars as she wiped his face with a cool cloth. "He'll be worried about you. And right now, I'm worried too. You've got to wake up, Lars. That big head of yours just has to be hard enough to take the blows. It's got to be."

* * *

The light hurt his eyes. Lars had never had such an ache in his head--except when that horse-thieving farmer in Ohio hit him with a pole thick enough to hold up a barn. He'd brought that on by letting his attention wander to remembering the pretty girl in the grass of Pennsylvania, with her pert little backside sticking up like a flag that had made him stop.

He groaned and tried to raise his arm to cover his eyes. His shoulder was on fire and pain shot across his chest.

Arrows. He'd been shot by those thieving Indians. Where were they now? He popped his eyes open, but nothing came into focus. He reached up to push away something that covered his forehead. Next to him a figure moved. They had shot him, and now they were coming to scalp him. Lars lunged for the figure and rolled off onto a hard floor with a thud. He grunted as pain shot through his shoulder.

"Lars!" a strange high-pitched voice cried.

He blinked his eyes, trying to focus, but the pain pulsed in his head and filled his vision with sparks of light. The figure under him struggled to get away. Lars held on with one arm. His other hurt too much to move, but he didn't have much strength. Holding his attacker down with the weight on his body, he grabbed the varmint's throat and squeezed.

"Lars...", the high voice said, struggling to get the word out past his vice-like grip. "Lars, stop! You're hurting me."

He stilled. "How do you know my name?" He lowered his face so he could rub the sweat from his eyes on his sleeve. He struggled to raise his head again and finally could make out the face inches below his.

"Lissa?" He saw the face of his rescuing angel, and he had just tried to kill her. He jerked his hand from her throat and leaned his elbow on the floor. "You?" He gave into his exhaustion and dropped his forehead to her shoulder. She smelled like warm sunshine. "What are you doing sneaking up on me? I could have killed you."

"Sneaking up? I've spent most of two days sitting next to you trying to take care of you while you decided whether you were going to wake up and join the living or not."

He tried to push up on his good arm and swore in Norwegian when he got nowhere.

"What is it? Your shoulder? Did you open the wounds?" She wiggled her arm free from under him and laid her hand on his aching shoulder blade and checked it for fresh blood. Her thigh moved against him as she twisted and evoked an intimate movement in his groin that startled him. How could his body be reacting to how much he wanted her when he was in such pain? His gaze darted to her face, but she did

not seem to notice the movement against her thigh. Or she chose to ignore it.

His breathing was going lickety-split, and he felt dizzy. His head was pounding, but he was alive, thanks in no little part, he was certain, to her. And there he was, lying right on top of her, feeling every soft, luscious inch of her, and yet she did not cry out for help. "I do not scare you, overpowering you like this?"

She frowned. "Did you know I was sitting beside you when you first woke?"

He shook his head and immediately regretted it because of the pain. He shut his eyes and waited a moment for the pounding to pass. "No, I thought you were one of the Indians who shot me."

"That's what I figured. That's why you didn't frighten me." She grinned broadly. "But I sure am thankful you recognized me before you strangled me."

"Me too." He stared into her pale gray eyes and thought how much they looked like the smooth surface of a clear lake just as dawn breaks. Her hand rested against his chest and he wondered if she realized she was making little movements with her fingers. What would she do if she slid her fingers to the hard nubs she had made of his nipples?

"Can you get up, or should I call Pa to help?"

"No," he said more sharply than he had intended. "I think I can do it. Give me a minute," he urged. He took another minute to enjoy the soft curves he felt pressed against him. When his body hardened more, he forced himself to move away from the beautiful temptation. He pushed on the floor and raised himself up on one hand and his knees. His arm, tired from supporting him, trembled.

"Um...You'd better move off of me and get back on the pallet before you collapse." She raised her hand to brush aside his hair and feel his cheek with her palm. She laughed softly, but her smile did not reach her eyes. "Besides, if Pa catches us like this, you'll be marrying me in the morning and that would be a great disappointment to the bride you have coming from Norway next spring."

Lars had to laugh despite his pain. "Ya, you right about that." Marrying him was the last thing this beautiful angel of mercy would want. All he did was cause her trouble and more work.

He noticed her lower lip quivering. Shuffling backward on his knees, he worked hard to ignore the fact that one of his knees was between her thighs. As quickly as he could, he pulled himself up to the pallet. Too tired to do otherwise, he lay down.

Lissa rose quickly. She brushed off her skirt and long apron as she moved to the rear of the wagon. "You must be thirsty. Do you feel hungry?" she asked as she poured water into a tin cup from a pitcher.

"Enough to eat a whole steer."

She grinned, holding the cup to his lips. He put his hand over hers to tip it. "That's a good sign. I'll fix you something bland to eat until we're sure you're up to eating more. But you feel all right? And...and things don't look all blurred to you?"

"Just a headache and my shoulder is on fire."

Her breath caught and her smile disappeared in an instant. Her eyes swam with tears.

"What's wrong? What did I say?"

She jerked her hand from under his on the cup, and it bounced to the floor of the wagon. "Nothing. It's nothing."

He caught her wrist and wouldn't let her escape. "Tell me. What makes you unhappy so suddenly?" She lifted the corner of her apron to pat the corners of her eyes. He took her hand and held it against his chest. "Tell me," he insisted. He drew her down to sit beside him, her hip nestled against his waist.

"You...you mentioned being on fire, and it all came back to me in an instant. You had no way of knowing, but since we saw you last, Mama...Mama died. Her heart gave out when her apron caught on fire, and...and she collapsed. It all happened so fast, but she was gone."

Ignoring the pain, he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her down against his chest. He splayed his fingers over her back until he felt her relax against him. "Lissa, I'm so sorry. Your mother was a good person and did much to help me." Stroking her back in little circles, he held her as she wept quietly. "I know you miss her."

"Yes. Very much." Lissa straightened and dabbed at her damp cheeks again. "Oh, dear," she said as she smoothed her apron. "I must look a sight."

"You look beautiful to me." He cradled her jaw in his palm and wiped the last trailing tear from her cheek with his thumb.

"No one ever told me that before," she said innocently.

"You not mean that." He slipped his fingers into her soft hair.

She nodded. "All the boys back east said was how tall I am." She smiled. "Thank you for the nicest compliment I ever got." His gaze locked on hers, and she was frightened he would kiss her--frightened how it would make her feel. Frightened she would like it even more than before. Frightened because it wouldn't matter. She would only lose him again when he was healed and road on ahead.

"You should rest now." She took his hand in hers and laid it on his chest. "You don't want to start those holes bleeding again. I'll go see about getting some broth for you to drink."

"Wait. I must know. Can you tell me how in this big country, I ended up in your wagon with an aching head and shoulder again?"

She laughed. "Having an aching head and shoulder is getting to be a habit with you."

"A habit I want to break right now. It hurts too much."

"And it can't be good for your head," she added. "Not even for a stubborn Norwegian like you."

"My brother always said I was so hard-headed that my head was the best place to hit me."

They laughed together, but sobered quickly. "I have a feeling I owe the fact I'm alive to you--again."

"Well, not just me. The United States Army rescued you this time. The major said they crossed the river

and came up behind you right when you were being attacked. He said the Indians had been drinking. If they hadn't been drunk, the arrows would have finished you off." She went on to explain the rest.

"How did the army know you knew me?"

"Thunder saved you again. There couldn't be two horses like him."

"Thunder!" He tried to sit up. "Is he hurt?"

She quickly pressed on his good shoulder to get him to lie down again. "No, no, he's fine. He comes through these scrapes better than you do, so don't worry. He let me water and feed him while we waited at the campsite a day to see if you would wake up. But Pa said we should move on, so this morning I tied him on the back of the wagon like before. I talk to him and with you inside he seems happy to follow."

"All my goods. My brother won't be able to build if I do not bring the tools," he said sadly.

"Lars," she said softly. His gaze met hers and then followed her pointed finger toward the front of the wagon where he saw all his saddlebags and bedroll. "It's all there, and your packhorse is tied on the back with Thunder. Your brother won't be unhappy with you."

His grin stretched from ear to ear. He reached up and grasped the back of her neck and pulled her down to him for a warm but quick kiss. "How can I thank you all again? I owe you and your family so much." He released her and ran his hand over his face and down over his beard. "And you did not shave off my beard this time."

She laughed freely with him this time. "I didn't dare shave you again."

"Lissa, come take your turn," Wally whined from behind the slowly moving wagon. "I need a rest. Let me sit with Lars for a while. I'll call you if he wakes up."

Lissa smiled. "I must go and lead the lamb so Wally can ride for a while and rest. You can surprise him by letting him know you're awake. If you need anything, just ask him."

Readying herself to stand up, she leaned her hands on the edge of the crates that held his pallet. Lars knew this moment might be their last alone now that the rest of the family would learn he had awakened. He reached up to hold her face close.

"Thank you, Lissa," he said softly.

She smiled sweetly, and he looked longingly at her lips. He could not resist his surprising need to touch them and gently pulled her to him until their lips met. The meeting was soft and heartfelt this time. He pressed and twisted his lips against hers until he felt her begin to respond. For a few moments longer, they each gave and took great pleasure from the kiss.

When he loosened his hold, she lifted her head. Her cheeks were flushed. Despite the fact he had no right to want her close, he slid his hand onto her shoulder to keep her near a little longer. "Once I'm back on my feet," he began to explain. "I mean, if I do not see you again after I leave, I want you to know I never forget you and what you do for me."

She smiled, but he could see her lower lip quivered even more than before. Slipping out from under his

hand, she rose quickly and disappeared out the opening in the canvas at the rear of the wagon without replying. Damn. Why did the thought of healing fast and hurrying on to his brother's cabin make him feel so sad?

* * *

"We're down to the bottom of the barrel for dinner tonight," Lissa complained that evening as she served the last of the pork.

"There are farms around here that got hogs. We ought to be able to buy us one, shouldn't we, Pa?" Wally asked.

"You reckon you'd know how to pot it, Lissa?" her father asked. "I thought Cook did that."

"Mama and I always helped so we could get the meat into the crock and seal it with sizzling fat real quick. I think I could do it, but it would take most of a day to cut it up and cook it even with help." She glared at Wally meaningfully.

"We're moving so slow to give Lars a smoother ride that it wouldn't matter much if we stopped for a day."

"He'd be much more comfortable resting in a still wagon, that's for sure. The wounds still tend to bleed again where the road is rough and he's tossed about in there," Lissa said.

"Sure would be good to have fresh pork chops," Wally put in.

By noon they had found a farmer more than happy to sell them a good size porker. He even slaughtered it for them and helped lift it so their pa could tie it to the side of the wagon until they reached a clear stream the farmer had suggested as a good place to do the potting. There was deadwood in the trees and lots of clean fresh water. They tied the lamb where he could reach grass and water and set to work building a fire.

Their father had pulled the wagon onto a level place in the shade of some huge oaks so Lars would be more comfortable than in the sun. He pulled back the canvas over a couple of ribs to allow a breeze inside the wagon.

Lissa climbed in to check Lars's wounds and handed the empty meat crock out to Wally. He carried it to the stream for her, and after she scrubbed it good, he set it near the campfire that had burned down to good hot coals. The men had skinned the pig and cut the carcass into quarters. Working with one at a time, they sliced it into smaller pieces for frying.

Lissa had put the coffeepot back on the fire with just water in it to boil. "Pour that boiling water in the crock around the sides to get it hot," she told Wally. "Dump it out careful like so you don't get burned, and it'll be dry by the time the fat is melted here."

She took chunks of the fat first and cut them up small and dropped them into the heavy cast iron fry pan. Balancing the pan on three rocks in the fire, she cooked the fat until it melted. Holding back a few uncooked pieces with her wooden spoon, she poured the sizzling fat into the clean dry crock. It coated the entire bottom, but it took another pan of fat to get it deep enough to begin on the meat.

As the afternoon sun heated her back, the fire threatened to cook her front. She wiped the sweat from

her forehead onto her sleeve and pulled her bonnet back down to shade her face. She cooked piece after piece of pork and spread them evenly in the crock, filling in the spaces around them with more melted fat.

"Sure wish we could smoke some bacon or a nice ham." Wally grinned at his memories of the good meats.

"I don't mind stopping for an afternoon, but I'm not stopping for weeks to smoke bacon that we can buy in any general store this time of the year. Every farmer is trying to sell off the animals he don't want to keep all winter."

When Lissa's father helped Lars from the wagon for his afternoon trek into the woods to answer nature's call, they paused by the fire. "Sure smells good," Lars said to Lissa.

"Have some pork cracklings," Wally offered, holding out his greasy handful.

Lars took a few and ate them with relish. "These are good."

"We gonna have pork chops for supper?" Wally asked eagerly.

"I don't see why not," Lissa replied as she jerked her arm back and rubbed her burned skin where the spattering fat had hit her. "If you'll peel the potatoes, that is," she added to Wally.

"Aw, do I have to?" he whined.

"Seems like the least you could do after all your sister is doing," their father called.

Another layer of meat covered with melted fat, Lissa slid more slabs of fresh pork steak into the fry pan. "I'll wrap those last ones up for supper in the cotton cloth over there. Hand it to me, will you?" she asked Wally.

When she turned from the fire to take the cloth, it wasn't Wally but Lars who stood with the cloth in his hand. "Thanks. You feeling better?"

"Better each time I move around, but I still get lightheaded," Lars admitted.

"You lost a lot of blood. I couldn't stitch your wounds to stop it because they're too deep. They have to heal from the inside out. You had us all worried."

He nodded.

Wally set a crate not far from the fire. "Here, Lars. You can sit on this."

"Thanks." The big man lowered himself down while cradling his sore arm in his other hand. "My family back in Norway not store meat this way so much. It is cold there, and we dig hole in the ground and keep meat there in big crocks. It's cold all year down there."

"Like a root cellar."

"Ya, too bad they don't make wagons with cellars," he jested.

"Now I know you're truly feeling better when you can make a joke," Lissa told him.

"Thanks to you," he said softly, his gaze holding hers.

"Where do you want the hide?" Wally asked as he and his pa cleaned up the planks they had used as a cutting board.

Lissa jerked her head around. She had trouble concentrating when she looked into Lars's eyes. That fluttery feeling filled her insides like a hundred butterflies taking wing all at once. "Do we still have the brains?"

"They're here. You want to cook them too?"

"No, but if you want the hide tanned, I'll need them."

Her pa shrugged. "It might work out here. We watched Teddy doing it next door often enough to know how. I could make a frame to stretch it on but seems to me the wheels we have tied on the side of the wagon would make good stretchers. We might as well try as long as it don't take more time."

"Wally, take the hide to the stream and wash it good," Lissa said. "Use the rocks to scrape at anything left on it. We can work together to stretch it as soon as I get this cleaned up."

"I wish I could help," Lars put in. "I feel useless sitting here while you do all the work."

"Your work is to get your strength back." She tied a cloth over the crock to keep out insects. "Besides, I'm all done."

They rose and he reached out to grab her shoulder to steady himself when he swayed.

"Whoa." She moved quickly and put her arms around him to walk with him back to the wagon. She did it so often, she really did not think about how it looked to anyone else. Touching and helping Lars felt so natural and right to her that she even blushed less frequently. "You didn't look so good for a minute or so over there. Feeling better now?"

He looked down at her and smiled. "Much better now, thanks."

She became very aware of his warm arm across her shoulders. "You really should try to sleep some more while we're not moving. You need all the rest you can get."

"Thanks. I will," he said softly. His gaze moved to her lips, and Lissa thought he was going to kiss her. Instead, he turned away to reach for the wagon with his good arm. She could have sworn that what she felt was disappointment. She helped him into the wagon and went to finish cleaning up the greasy mess. That was safer than staying in the wagon with him and wishing he had kissed her.

Her hands, dry from weeks of traveling and hard work, felt good with the grease on them. Felt good, that is, until later when she decided to take fuller advantage of the stop and wash clothes. She convinced everyone to change, and took the dirty garments to the stream. Scrubbing them on the washboard in the cold water cooled her off some, but not as much as bathing there before she changed her own clothes to wash them last. When she had everything drying over a rope strung between trees, she checked on Lars. He was sleeping soundly and didn't need her help.

She was exhausted, but still looked for work. If she kept busy, she didn't have to think about the strange feelings she got every time that tall man came near her. More importantly, she didn't have to think about the fact he would leave them as soon as he could. But as she lay in her bedroll that night on the ground, that was all she could think of.

By the next morning the heavy crock of meat and fat had solidified in the cool of the night. Charles and Wally hefted it into the back of the wagon. Now they would have pork to eat for weeks. Each time she took meat from the crock she would just fill the hole again with melted fat, and the meat would be preserved until she needed more.

Lars rose that morning and broke his fast beside the fire with the rest of them. Lissa could see the undisturbed rest he had gotten had done him a world of good. It was hard not to feel sadder because that meant he would be leaving sooner. And she could see the last thing he wanted to do was stay longer with them.

Chapter Twelve

"But if we follow this road all the way to St. Louis, we'll be going south before we turn north. We'll be adding miles."

Lissa listened as Lars explained the route during their nooning at the Springfield cut-off. His shoulder was far from healed, but it was good enough to make him antsy about heading north. "We should take this road north now," he told her father. "We can skirt around Springfield and head northwest."

"The major said we would be a lot safer if we waited to turn north at St. Louis. There, we can join up with other folks and form a wagon train. We'll have safety in numbers. Once we get past Illinois, we don't want to be traveling alone."

Lars grunted and rubbed his aching upper arm. "Ya."

"Pa, didn't the Laslows head north from that camp where the army joined us?"

"Yes. But they left before light when the army couldn't stop them. If they hadn't been camped right next to us, I wouldn't have woke up to see 'em leave."

"I heard Mrs. Laslow say she thought they should wait until the army moved north to take care of the renegades and make it safe," Wally reported. "He yelled they were from Georgia, and no Yank major was going to tell him what to do."

"At this rate we'll never get north," Lars complained. "All four of us can shoot if we get into trouble. Besides, what's left of that band is probably in Wisconsin or even Canada by now."

"We can all watch for them and not let them get a jump on us, Pa," Wally proposed boldly.

"But the major said..."

"Summer is going fast," Lars pointed out without waiting for him to finish. "But if you folks are not setting your sights on Dakota Territory, just tell me. I make it on my own."

"No, you can't," Lissa cried. Realizing that her loud voice caused everyone to look at her, she lowered her head to hide the warmth she felt color her cheeks. "I just meant that I've worked so hard to make you well that I'd hate to see you try too much so soon."

Lars pulled off his hat and ran his hand across the top of his head to push his long hair back. Reaching down for his hat, the hair fell forward again. He shook his head back and slammed his hat back on his head. "Hell, I can't even get my hat on right with only one hand."

"Then you shouldn't think of traveling on your own yet," Lissa said. "You help a lot even with one good arm, and fixing food for one more is no trouble."

"Hell, I like having you with us," Wally said excitedly, mimicking the use of Lars's profanity.

"Watch your language, boy," his father ordered.

"Yes, sir," he mumbled, his head down with embarrassment from the reprimand in front of Lars, who stifled a smile at the boy's discomfort.

Their father rose and stretched. "Maybe I am being overly careful. I guess that with all the towns dotting the roads, we would be safe enough."

"We must make sure we have ammunition for all the revolvers and rifles," Lars insisted. "If I hadn't run out, I wouldn't have been in trouble."

"We can surely find what we need in Springfield."

"Yahoo!" Wally shouted out. "We're northward bound!"

The horses had been napping and lurched against their harnesses at his shouts. Charles called out for them to whoa and hurried to calm them.

Lars rose from the rock and placed his hand on Wally's shoulder. "Two best things you do traveling across unknown territory are: one, make sure you always have enough food, water, and ammunition," he said sternly, "and two, be quiet." He raised his hand and knocked Wally's hat off to soften the reprimand.

"Taking on extra water isn't a bad idea," Lissa's father said as he kicked dirt on the fire. "The ground is dry. Seems like it hasn't rained here in weeks, but that's good for the farmers bringing in the harvest."

Lissa climbed aboard to stow the food supplies. Wally and Lars walked beside the wagon with the lamb as Lissa's father slapped the reins on the horses' rumps and pulled hard to the right to turn them north onto the Springfield Road.

* * *

"Pa, what are all these wagons waiting for?" Lissa asked one afternoon as they pulled up at the end of a long line parked on the road.

"Can't see a river from here, but I reckon they're all waiting to cross," her father said from his vantage point standing on the wheel hub.

He climbed up to take the reins and pulled the wagon into the line. The men checked the ropes to be

sure everything tied on their wagon was secure. Her papa would drive while Lissa sat alone in the wagon. Lars planned to ride Thunder across while Wally rode his packhorse. While they waited for the settlers ahead of them with a dozen or so head of cattle to cross, the men gathered to share tales of what they'd heard happened on the trail ahead. Several had heard of children and women being stolen by the Indians, never to be seen again or found dead and mutilated.

Lars saw Lissa duck into the wagon and knew she had heard everything they had said. When the group broke up, he climbed into the wagon after her. He could see her eyes glisten with unshed tears. He gathered her to his chest and she went willingly, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Nothing like that will ever happen to you. I promise."

"How dare you make me such a promise?" she cried, leaning back and looking up to meet his gaze. "You won't even be here."

Lars felt stunned. She was right. No man could promise to keep her safe and she knew it--especially him. He would be gone.

"We're ready to move out," her pa called as he climbed into the driver's seat.

Lissa turned away from Lars's arms. He sat on the back edge of the wagon and swung his legs out to jump down. Lissa's soft words stopped him. "Lars," Lissa said, moving toward him. "I..." She swallowed. "Even though you can't keep your promise, it was comforting to hear."

He nodded and whistled for Thunder. When the horse was beside him, he jumped into the saddle. Wally handed her the lamb and leaped onto the packhorse. They rode ahead beside the wagon team.

Lissa looked out the bonnet opening in back and noticed the wind had picked up. It seemed to her that the rain-swollen river was much higher than when they'd gotten in line to cross. Rain must have fallen upstream. The rocks that had been exposed were hidden now under the swirling water. The wagon lurched to one side as they rolled down the bank, and she grabbed the back to hang on.

With one arm in a sling, Lars hadn't tied down the canvas after climbing from the wagon. Wanting to keep water from splashing inside, Lissa leaned out to catch the corner that flapped in the wind. The wagon rolled in the river, and she looked down to see cold muddy water flowing past at a good clip.

She heard men shouting at each other as the frightened cattle belonging with the wagon that crossed ahead of them turned in the water and would not go toward the opposite bank. A settler on a horse going after the cattle splashed water on Lissa. She cried out in surprise and then laughed. Her blouse was soaked, but after the heat and humidity of the past month, it felt good.

But the water had splashed into the wagon too. She didn't want wet victuals so she leaned out again in another try to catch the corner of the canvas. She missed it and lunged farther for another try just as the wagon wheel dropped off a rock and threw her sideways. She lost her grip on the wooden side, and overbalanced, she toppled out of the wagon into the raging river with a scream.

She hit the water headfirst. She kicked at the water frantically to right herself and managed to get her face out with her toes on the bottom. She wiped the water from her face and saw the wagon moving away from her.

"Wait!" Lissa cried. "Wait for me."

Hearing shouts behind her, she turned to discover the horses pulling the next wagon bearing down on her, their nostrils flared, their eyes wide with fear. She lunged sideways to get out of their way and the current caught her long skirts. She righted herself and took careful steps, following the wagon deeper into the rain-swollen river. She braced herself against the current only to be thrown back when the next wagon blocked the flow as it passed and sent the water swirling around her. Knocked off her feet, she paddled frantically to get her head above the water to breathe, but couldn't get purchase on the bottom. It was too deep.

A settler's shrill whistle at the cattle still not across registered just as a cow swimming beside her knocked into her shoulder, sending her above the water. She gasped for air and kicked and pawed against the flow that drew her downstream in front of another cow mooing as it swam across the current.

Seizing the only opportunity available to her, she put all her strength into a dive for the cow's tail. The effort gained her a mouth full of water, and she sputtered and coughed as she pulled down on the tail and raised her face into the air. She and her savior cow were in the center where the river was deepest as it raced to join the Mississippi. She felt her body float with the current as she hung on for dear life.

She gasped for air and strained to keep her face above the water. She heard shouts, but couldn't make out what they said. The cow pulling her across mooed loudly, but kept swimming toward the west shore. She felt the moment the cow's feet touched the bottom. She pushed her feet straight down to stand too, and let go of the tail. She should have touched the bottom as the cow had, but her long billowing skirts acted like an underwater sail and pulled her downstream, back in the swiftly moving water. Her head remained above water long enough to scream, but then unable to inhale, she was pulled under once more.

She slapped and kicked at the water as she rolled with the current. She reached for the daylight she saw, but it was always just out of her reach. Her empty lungs were burning, and she was desperate to draw in air.

A dark shadow suddenly covered the daylight above her, and she knew her life was over. She ceased her struggle and the water seemed to lift her. The last thing she was aware of was her dress catching on something. Then everything went black.

* * *

Lars checked the horses one last time and joined Wally and Charles by the campfire. They had only gone a few hundred yards upstream and made camp. All the afternoon and evening had passed and he still couldn't get over the shock of seeing Lissa floating facedown in the water with her arms spread out and her full skirts snagged on a tree that had fallen across the river. His heart raced and his chest felt tight just thinking about it.

"Pa, how long is she gonna sleep?" Wally sat on his bedroll beside the campfire.

"She'll wake up when she's had enough rest," his father said in subdued tones.

Wally extinguished the lantern and hung it on the wagon before he stretched out on his bedroll. "Sure was great how Lars grabbed her and threw her over Thunder's neck."

Lars sat down on a log beside Charles who was idly breaking up a branch and throwing the pieces into the fire. The pain the rescue caused his shoulder was better than the pain he had felt in his heart at almost losing Lissa.

"Yes," Charles agreed. "It didn't do your shoulder any favor, but I want to thank you again for saving my daughter's life. Judging by how much water she coughed up, she wouldn't have lasted another second."

"You never would have done it without a strong horse like Thunder." Wally stretched out. "I hope I can have a horse like that someday." He yawned and closed his eyes.

"I should check on Lissa," Charles admitted with a yawn. "But we haven't heard a sound from her, and I don't think I could climb up into that wagon as tired as I am." He stretched out on his bedroll and looked over at Wally. He was already asleep.

"Been a tiring day for everyone," Lars concluded. "Would you like me to look in on her?" he heard himself adding.

"Good idea," Charles said as his eyes drifted shut.

Lars felt his heart speed up as he crossed to the wagon and climbed as the best he could with one arm. He wished he'd had another shirt to change into. There was blood on this one where his arrow wound had opened when he'd used both arms to pull her from the river, and he didn't want to upset Lissa when she woke and saw it.

And she would wake up. She had to.

In the light from the campfire, he could see no change. Her long dark lashes lay still on her cheeks as her breasts rose and fell with each breath. He remembered the deep fear he'd felt when he yanked her from the water. Her dress had torn in his grip, but her iron-like corset had saved her life. If it had given way in his tenuous hold on the top of the thing, she might not be alive now.

One of the other settler's wives had helped get her out of the wet clothes and into a dry chemise and dress. Lars smiled as he remembered the lecture the woman had given Charles about allowing her to wear such a heavy undergarment in the heat of the summer.

Charles gave the helpful woman a look that told her to mind her own business and pulled Lissa's wet clothes from her arms. He stowed them in the jockey box and jumped into the driver's seat to get the wagon out of the way of others crossing the river behind them. After they made camp, he took the corset and stuffed it into the chest of drawers before hanging out Lissa's other clothes to dry on the ropes on the side of the wagon.

Lars had felt that corset and had a good idea why Charles was so protective of it. Knowing that Lissa wore it, he thought more highly of her family devotion. She had to be suffering with that thing on, yet she wore it anyway.

"Lissa," he said softly, shaking her shoulder gently. "You must wake up."

He couldn't bear the thought of her not waking up. He had begun to realize just how much he cared what happened to her. He knelt beside her and brushed the locks of her hair off her forehead. "I'll bet you did this for me time and time again," he told her in whispered tones. He lifted a few of the long strands and rubbed them gently between his fingers. "Your hair is soft and silky." He kissed her cheek and sighed. "You sleep well and get your strength back."

She suddenly took a deep breath and shuddered, releasing the air from her lungs. Lars watched for a

minute or two to see if she would awaken. Deciding she would not, he stroked her cheek with the backs of his finger.

"Good night, my little one," he said as he leaned down to kiss her once on her lips. He felt them quiver and respond for a moment. He savored the moment as another to remember in the cold Dakota nights for years to come, and headed for his bedroll.

* * *

"That coffee smells good," Lissa said as she climbed out of the wagon the next morning. It had taken a while to find where her father had put her corset. Though still damp, she had tied it on and got back into the dress someone had put on her the day before.

"You're awake!" Wally cried, a grin spreading ear to ear.

She looked around to see they had camped off the road by the water. She shuddered when she thought of being in the river and thinking she would drown. She took care of a very urgent call from nature and returned to accept a cup of the hot brew from her father.

"Lars tried his hand at flapjacks this morning. We took our time and waited a bit to see if you would wake up."

"You can sleep in any morning if Lars will fix these," Wally said around a mouthful of food.

Lars handed her a plate of flapjacks and a bowl of gooseberries. "Good morning. Wally found these by the stream. They are sour but very good, I think."

She thanked him and sat with her back against a tree as she enjoyed the break to her long fast. "Mmmm. Very sour, but very good," she said with a grin.

"Ain't you gonna thank Lars for saving your life?" Wally asked. "You should have seen him. He heard you scream, but Pa and I didn't. He turned Thunder back into the river and carried you out draped over his lap." Wally laughed. "And then you got sick all over Thunder's side and Lars's leg." He laughed harder. "You really made a mess."

"Wallace, that's enough," his father ordered.

Lissa felt her face warm more with each comment. She looked down at her half-empty plate. "I've lost my appetite."

Lars poured himself a cup of coffee and crossed to sit beside her. "Don't be a silly child. Eat your breakfast."

"I'm not a child," she began strongly, but then the wind left her sails. "But I am sorry about being sick on you," she added without looking at Lars.

"Don't even think about it. You nearly drowned. You not know what you do. And Thunder enjoys the bath and rub down to clean up."

"And I can wash your clothes," she said, finally looking up at him. From the way he was sitting, she noticed the blood on his shirt over his wounds. "Oh, Lars, you're bleeding again."

"Again? Charles think it stopped."

She set her plate down and rose. "Take your shirt off," she ordered, helping him pull it from his trousers without a thought to what she was doing. He started to object and then smiled as he pulled his good arm out of one sleeve, then slipped it off the other one. Lissa could feel his muscles quiver under her fingers as she lifted the dressings and pressed gently around each wound.

"They have stopped bleeding," she announced, her fingers still pressing near the larger one. "And I don't feel any festering around them. I guess the blood on your shirt is all from yesterday."

He looked at her hand resting on his chest and then at her. She jerked her hand back as if she had been burned. "Ah, let me put on a new dressing and you can put your shirt back on."

Another covered wagon pulled up at the stream. The man jumped down and talked to Lissa's papa while his wife carried pails of water from the stream to their water barrel on the side of their wagon.

As soon as Lissa had replaced the dressing, Lars rose and put his shirt back on. She helped him get his injured arm into the sleeve. He went over to talk to the other settlers while she finished her flapjacks and berries. She took a pail of dirty dishes and cups to the stream to wash just as the other family finished carrying their water.

The wife greeted her as she helped her small son back into their wagon. "We saw how muddy the river was from the wagons crossing and decided to fill our barrel over here where it's cleaner. Your paw was just telling us you took a tumble into the river and were rescued by your young man. Lucky for you he was nearby."

"Yes," Lissa said, not correcting the way the woman had referred to her young man. Lars did not belong to her, and he never could, because he was promised to a woman in Norway whose name he didn't even know.

As they were loading up the men's bedrolls and the breakfast things, Lissa's pa insisted she ride inside for a day or two until she got her strength up. Bumpy as the ride was, she wasn't sure if that was better or worse than walking. She did enjoy being able to take a nap; that seemed to help the tired feeling she'd had since nearly drowning.

Wally was happy to ride on the driver's bench, so that meant that except at stops when the lamb was taken out, it got to ride inside too. Lars was working the strength back into his arms by riding Thunder, but had refused to chase after the lamb. He flatly told Lissa he was no shepherd.

"Won't be long 'til we see the Mississippi. Then we follow it north and cross over where it's shallower," her pa told her as he slapped the reins and shouted the horses into motion. "And it won't be right after a heavy rain upstream."

* * *

"Are you going to leave us in the morning?" Lissa asked as she finished the dishes from supper later that week.

Lars met her gaze steadily for a few moments and then went back to cleaning his revolver and checking the straps that would hold his bullets on his belt. "No, not tomorrow, but soon."

Lissa's throat felt tight. She should feel happy for his being well enough to travel alone again. He had healed well and would soon join his brother.

"It's August first already." She sighed. "Papa said we would need time to build our house in Dakota Territory before the snows came. I thought we'd be there by now."

He nodded and smiled a quick smile. "I thought so too. My brother will be worried."

"Yes, you keep saying that, but you needed to take the time to heal."

She set the plates in the box in the wagon and returned to sit by the fire. She noted her father was checking the tethers on the horses and Wally was happily whittling at one of his many toys.

"Thank you for all the help you've been to Pa. It hasn't been easy for him since Mama died. Having you with us has been good for him."

Lars watched Lissa's pa for a few moments, looking as if he were weighing his words. "I don't think he knew how hard the settler's life would be."

"I know I didn't," she admitted easily. "None of us did."

"I'm sorry for making more work for you caring for me." She felt her cheeks warm. "Once you're in new home, it be better. Your father has real talent for making furniture. The pieces in wagon are...are..." He smiled. "I don't know the words, but they very good to look at. The wood is smooth as a...Well, it is very smooth."

"I think Wally will be good at woodworking too." She looked over at him where he sat by the fire, whittling. "Oh, I know he makes toys and that upsets Papa, but I've seen him create intricate carvings on furniture and fit a dovetail as good as any man."

"Your family will do well, wherever you settle," Lars said.

Lissa thought he couldn't make it any clearer to her that he didn't expect to ever know where they settled. She blinked at the tears that stung her eyes. "The wind is really picking up. Feels like rain. I'd better check the bonnet for anything touching it that will allow rain to pour in." She turned to leave, but he rose quickly and caught her arm and held it.

"Lissa," he said softly.

She turned her head back to see him studying her face and wished she had moved more quickly. Tears continued to well in her eyes, and she worried that one might fall and give her feelings away. She didn't want to hear him say thank you, or good-bye, or anything else. Hearing them on the day he chose to leave would be hard enough on her. She didn't want their farewells to begin tonight and drag out until he left. She blinked rapidly. "I really have to check the tie-downs," she said firmly, turning out of his hold. "Good night."

The wind billowed her skirts as she climbed into the wagon. Her pa was already checking the ropes. He had mentioned the dark sky when he chose their campsite. "I hear August storms can be mighty strong in these parts. Maybe we should plan on sleeping under the rock outcroppings beyond the trees up there where we can stay dry." He pointed to huge boulders above the tree stand. "The wagon will be fine in

this low area where it's parked."

"Can't we sleep under the wagon?" Wally asked.

"I don't know," Lars put in, watching the clouds race by in the evening sky.

"Papa, it's so cold all of a sudden," Lissa shouted against the increasingly strong wind. She looked for a warmer shawl.

"You'd better get out our coats," he called to her. "This storm might have hail. Wally, you get in there and help her find them coats fast." He obeyed and together they removed the coats from the trunk. They each pulled on their own and handed their father's out to him.

"Wally, I have a wool jacket in that big leather bag," Lars called. "Can you throw it to me?" As Wally tossed it out, the hail began to fall, slowly at first and small in size. In a minute, the balls were large, and they were thundering down. The temperature dropped even faster.

"The horses!" Lars ran to Thunder and his mare and led them under the overhanging rocks, tying their reins around a fallen tree.

Wally and Charles followed with the two grays.

"I'll go get the other two," Lars called.

"Ow, Pa, help me," Lissa called. She had her arms full of the bedrolls and extra quilts and had caught her skirt on the wagon when she tried to climb down. The hail bounced off her back. She wrapped her arm over her head to protect it, but she lost hold of the rolls.

"I'll get her," Lars yelled. "You get the horses."

Lifting Lissa with his good arm around her middle, he scooped up the bedrolls that she had dropped, and ran back to the outcropping just as lightning struck a nearby tree. He set her down as a branch as thick as a small tree crashed through to the forest floor behind them. Other branches swayed dangerously above them in the strong wind.

Lissa's father fought to lead the remaining two frightened horses to the safer position. Lars ran to help him. The men leaned into the wind that was the strongest Lissa had ever felt.

The frightened horses near her stamped and fought at their tethers. They stood with their hindquarters sticking out from under the overhang where the hail continued to pelt them. Wally pulled one end of the fallen tree to which they were tethered in under the overhang farther to get them out of the weather.

Though it was suddenly dark as night, Lars and Lissa's pa still managed to tie up the last two horses. Lars stood on the tree trunk and talked to the horses to calm them. But with each strike of lightning, they acted up even more. Their eyes bulged wildly, their nostrils flared, they neighed into the wind.

"Pa, look, the wagon! The bonnet's weighed down by the hail," Wally suddenly shouted. "The wind will tear it to shreds."

In the next lightning flash, they squinted to see that the middle bows holding up the canvas had broken under the weight of the hail. It had piled up and pulled the other bows toward the center. One end of the

canvas had ripped loose and flapped furiously in the wind.

"I'll take care of it." Their father shouted something else as he took off running in that direction, but they couldn't hear because of a new loud roaring that filled their ears.

"Pa, no!" Lissa screamed. "Come back! Come back!"

The horses screamed with her. The roaring was louder than anything Lissa had ever heard. She ducked her face and put her hands over her ears.

"A horse is loose!" Wally yelled.

Chapter Thirteen

One of the two horses Charles had bought in Pennsylvania had broken loose and ran after Charles through the stand of trees toward the wagon.

"Pa!" Wally cried. He pulled out of Lissa's hold to get the horse.

Lars grabbed the back of his coat and pulled him down to the ground beside Lissa and spread his body over both of theirs.

"Stay down and hang on to each other," he shouted inches from their ears. The roar muffled his words. He pulled their heads down so their faces were covered by his chest and ducked his own.

The tornado roared past them. Bouncing to the ground at the edge of the stand of trees, it swept up Charles along with several trees. The horse that had followed Charles screamed as it was sucked into the black funnel along with the terrified lamb that had been tied to a tree. They all disappeared.

Rising again for a time, the black arm of wind touched down again beside the next curve in the road. It picked up a wagon, spun it around high in the air and slammed it back to earth near where it had stood. The evil wind gave no chance of survival to the settler family crouched inside. They had come all the way from war-torn Kentucky to find a better life in the open wind-swept prairies and now had no life at all.

Lissa, Wally, and Lars remained clinging to each other under the safety of the overhanging rocks with the five horses that calmed somewhat when the hail and roaring wind stopped. They had escaped the black arm of death that had whirled to earth.

Despite a steady rain that fell for a time in the silent aftermath, the trio hunted for Charles. Calling his name long into the night, they were finally forced to give up and vowed to begin again at first light when they could see to pick their way through the fallen trees and debris.

Returning to the campsite after the unsuccessful search, Lissa realized the lamb was gone. She ran to where it had been tied and found only the frayed rope still looped around the tree. Losing the sweet animal she had rescued and come to love was the breaking point of her composure. Overwhelmed by her grief for her father, she sank to her knees and sobbed, burying her face in her hands.

Lars walked up behind her and gently lifted her into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his waist and wept with her head leaning against his chest. He kissed the top of her head and laid his cheek there.

He silently held her until she could weep no more.

Keeping his comforting arm around her, Lars guided her to the stone outcropping where Wally had cried himself to sleep in his bedroll that had been spread out side by side to the other two. Lars sat down facing Wally, and pulling on her hand, urged Lissa to lie between them. He pulled up the quilts over them both. Though it meant lying on his sore shoulder, he lay facing her and opened his arms to her. Needing the comfort he offered, she slid into his arms and lay against him. That was as much they could do for each other, and it had to be enough to get them through the night.

At first light, Lars insisted Lissa stay in camp to untie and remove the canvas on the wagon while he and Wally searched in the tornado's path for Charles's body. She knew he was trying to spare her from the horrid scene. Toward noon they found him after spotting the blue in his shirt. They had to use the harnessed horses to haul away trees piled like matchsticks over his broken body.

Back at camp Lissa asked Lars to check her father's clothing for whatever he thought they should keep before they buried him in the wooded area. He never mentioned what he had found. She saw Wally stuff something in the chest of drawers and trusted that Lars knew what they would want to keep.

Lissa's throat was too sore from crying to sing even one hymn as they stood around the grave. She laid some white daisies on the stones. She had found them growing at the edge of the woods as if there hadn't been a storm the night before at all. "He's with Mama now," she offered, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Their journey is over." Wally nodded but couldn't speak.

Lars reminded them how much Charles had loved his family. "He wanted what he thought was best for you."

"I wish I'd worked harder in the workshop for him," Wally said softly.

Lissa sniffled and laid her hand on her brother's arm. "I think that deep down Papa admired the toys you could make so effortlessly. He said he knew you would make beautiful carvings for the furniture when you set your mind to it."

Wally's face brightened. "He did?"

"Yes, he did," she replied.

"And he was thankful to you for all your help, Lissa," Lars insisted softly. "You took over all the work for Elizabeth and he couldn't have made it this far without you."

"I did what I could, but I had a lot to learn."

Silently then, they stared at the pile of rocks decorated with the limp flowers and then their brief service was over. They walked to the campsite littered with broken branches. They all pitched in to remove enough to clear where they wanted to walk.

The task of cleaning up and repairing the wagon had to begin at once. Wally and Lars first spread out the bonnet to dry in the warm afternoon sun that mocked the weather the night before. They did the same for the carpetbags of clothing that had gotten soaked.

Lissa checked the food supplies next and made biscuits and corn bread out of the wet flour and cornmeal from the top of the barrels. At least it wouldn't go to waste even though it might get stale before

they ate it all. Though the wood was green, there was plenty of it downed by the storm for a big fire.

They were fortunate that only two of the bows that held up the bonnet had broken beyond repair. The others had been lifted out of their brace and laid flat, but not damaged. Wally found saplings felled by the storm and did a good job making new bows to replace the broken ones.

"Papa would have been proud of you," Lissa told him again, watching the two men attach them so they could dry curved in place. Wally managed a bit of a smile.

While the biscuits were baking, she found the sewing box and began to repair the tears in the canvas bonnet. The work wasn't done until the next day when the three of them worked together to stretch the canvas over the bows again and tie it down to the sideboards. Her fingers hurt to touch from sewing the whole previous day, and she soon lost the strength in her hands she needed to grip and pull the cloth. When one of the sewed patches ripped open again, Lissa burst into tears.

"I'll get it," Lars offered.

Totally distraught over her father's death plus the condition of their goods, Lissa stamped to the rear of the wagon, wiping her tears on her sleeve. "I can do it. I am not totally helpless just because I'm female. And you don't need to start doing everything for us," she said heatedly. She pulled out the sewing box again and re-sewed the tear, paying less attention to the looks of the stitches this time and more attention to their strength.

With the wagon covered, they turned their efforts to repairing the harness that had been blown into nearby trees which kept it from being swept away, but didn't prevent straps from breaking as they flapped in the roaring wind. Wally and Lars lined up the correct straps and punched the holes while Lissa sewed them together with leather strips cut from broken pieces.

Lars announced his packhorse would be hitched with the others in place of the horse lost in the storm. The mare didn't seem to like it any more than carrying packs on her back, but she didn't fight the idea when they tried to pull the wagon from the muddy depression to a higher and drier spot.

Instead of being under cover of the trees, the new area was barren of anything but grasses and weeds with prickly pods that soon dotted their clothes. The more they pulled from their clothes, the more that seemed to take their place. When the heavy coats they had worn were dry, Lissa brushed them and packed them away.

"May not be long until we need them again. The weather can turn cold quickly," Lars said.

"How can you think of cold weather when it's as hot now as it's been all summer?" Lissa complained.

"After tornado comes heat. Don't count on it to continue."

"I hope it doesn't," she grumbled, lifting one shoulder to move her raw skin within her corset. She wished she didn't sweat as much. Then her skin wouldn't be as sore under the air-blocking garment.

"Then I won't have to haul so much water," Wally offered. "We sure use a lot of it when it's hot." He picked up two pails. "I'm going to the river to fill these. Think I just might accidentally fall in to cool off while I'm at it."

"You be careful," Lissa admonished quickly as he blatantly ignored her warning and strode down the hill

toward the water's edge.

"He'll be fine," Lars assured her.

With the back of her hand, she pushed back her hair that had fallen from its nest on top her head, and wiped the perspiration from her brow on her sleeve. She tugged again at her corset that she had worn all summer and winced. With both her parents gone, but not having decided what to do next, it was more important than ever to protect their money. She pulled the front away and fanned air beneath it with her hand.

"What are you doing?"

Lars's harsh words behind her caused her to jump. Her corset rubbed on one of the sores and caused a sharp intake of air.

Lars reached for her upper arm and pulled her up. "What's wrong with you--there?" he asked, pointing to her midriff.

"Nothing that I want to talk to you about." He glared at her, but she looked away. "Just sort of blisters that hurt once in a while."

"Why blisters?" he pried, his eyes narrowing.

His gaze raised goosebumps on her skin and she raised her chin defiantly. "That is none of your concern." She turned away.

Lars stepped up behind her and gripped her waist and midriff in his big hands and squeezed, his fingers boldly probing to feel what was under her dress.

She cried out in pain and bent at the waist. "Ow. That hurts. Stop it."

"You wear this still? They took it off you after you nearly drowned and Charles put in chest. I thought that was end of it."

"I can't leave it off. What if we're robbed?"

He tapped a row of coins in her corset with his fingernail. "You are wrapped in metal. Take that off right now."

"I will not and keep your hands off me. You have no right to touch me that way."

"I take the right. You remove that thing, or I will."

Her mouth opened in a shocked gasp, but she didn't move. "You wouldn't dare."

He reached for her waist to pull her closer and she cried out. Tears welled in her eyes. "You are in pain."

"What do you care?"

"You know I care," he spat out. Anger flared in his eyes at her accusation. "Are you going to take it off?"

"No!"

He reached for the top button of her bodice and undid it. She pulled at his wrists, but she couldn't stop him. The second button opened.

"Stop it! I'll scream for Wally."

He was on the fourth button and could see the shadow of her cleavage when he stopped. He had to swallow before he spoke. "Are you going to take it off?"

"All right, but I'll do it myself. I should put more salve on before we start out anyway. It's worse since I got so wet in the storm the other night." She stomped over to the wagon and climbed in. Unbuttoning the rest of the row of tiny buttons, she slipped off her blouse. How cool she felt already. She struggled to get the laces loose on the corset. The knot had been secured in place for weeks and wouldn't come undone.

"Have you got it off?" Lars called from the back of the wagon.

"Not yet," she groused. "I can't undo the knot."

He was into the wagon with one leap, the knife from his boot in his hand.

Her eyes wide with fright, she backed away from him until her calves against a crate stopped her. "What are you going to do to me?"

He stopped, realizing he was frightening her. He dropped his hand to his side in disgust. "What do you think? That I would hurt you or ravish you here after all you have done for me? And with your brother due back any moment?"

Hearing his disbelieving voice, she let down her guard and pointed to the stubborn knot. Before she realized her mistake, he grabbed her corset ties and sliced them through. The corset thudded on the floor, releasing her full breasts from their grimy stiff prison. Naked to the waist, she sighed with relief only to gasp when she remembered he stood there staring at her.

"Gud i himmel! What have you done to yourself? There's even blood on you."

Shocked by the pain and embarrassment beyond the ability to do more than gasp, she covered her breasts with her hands, closed her eyes and whirled around. She felt hot all over and couldn't bear the thought of his seeing her half naked.

"Do not move one little bit. I be right back."

She opened her eyes and watched over her shoulder as he jumped from the wagon. She heard him getting a pitcher of water from the barrel. A moment later, before she had a chance to find something else to put on, he returned. He pulled open the chest drawers one after another.

"Stop that. What are you looking for?"

With no concern for the hours it had taken her to embroider the border, he pulled a pillowslip from the bottom drawer.

"That's..."

He shoved it into the pitcher to wet it. Dropping to his knees, he gently washed the sores on her back and sides. He said nothing except to order her to turn as he worked until she had turned all the way around and stood facing him as he washed below her breasts that were covered only with her hands.

"Move your hands," he ordered as he leaned over and rinsed the cloth.

Tears of humiliation were streaming down her cheeks. She swallowed a sob and shook her head but couldn't speak. Only then did he look up at her face. He sat back on his heels, shaking his head. He rinsed the cloth once more and tucked it over her arm.

"Here. You clean your own breasts." She turned her back to him again and gently wiped her sore skin with the cool cloth. "Where is salve you use?"

She nodded toward the box where her mother had kept her healing herbs and salves. "In there." Using the wet and bloody pillowslip to cover her breasts, she picked out the small tin from the box he held open for her. "This one." She stabbed at her tears with the back of her hand and willed them to stop.

"Good. Just think of me as a doctor," he said as he spread salve on the sores with trembling fingers.

"I would never stand naked before a doctor," she told him sharply.

He sighed and continued to apply the salve ever so gently. "Then pretend I am your husband."

She spun around to face him. "I wouldn't be standing half naked in front of my husband in broad daylight either."

He laughed and pulled the pillowslip off. She crossed her arms over her breasts to cover them, but he continued to apply the salve as if it did not matter. "If he was half a man, he'd have you naked as often as he could--day and night."

She gasped. Her cheeks had been warm before, but now they burned. "He would do no such thing," she insisted firmly.

"Then he is a fool," he said softly, his gaze meeting hers. "A damned fool."

He rose abruptly and handed her the tin. "You can finish. And don't put that thing on again," he ordered, pointing at the corset. "Find any place in here to hide the coins, but I mean it. Don't put it on again--ever."

Her chin rose, but she got no chance to object. He grasped her jaw in hand and held her gaze. "If you do, I take it off, and I not let you put any clothes back on until those sores heal."

She closed her eyes tightly and clenched her teeth. He released her jaw and moments later, she heard him jump from the wagon without another word. She rushed to spread the rest of the salve under her breasts with salve and pull on a clean shift over her head. Struck by how cool and wonderful it felt to be free of the corset, she waited until she heard Wally return with the water before slipping on a clean blouse and tucking it into her skirt. Lars had not returned and was nowhere in sight.

"I'm getting supper on," she said, striving for a casual voice. "Have you seen Lars? He won't want to miss a meal."

"He's down at the river," Wally answered. "He jumped in with all his clothes on. Said he needed to cool off too."

Lars returned from his swim and changed into dry clothes just in time to eat.

After the supper was cleared away, all three of them repacked the wagon. They kept the clear space down the center of the wagon. Without discussing the arrangement, she knew the men's bedrolls would fit on the floor, and she would sleep above them on the tailgate pallet.

She viewed the arrangement and remembered her father's concern over her reputation when Lars was traveling with them. What would people think now? What kind of life could she lead once people learned how they had traveled sleeping together in the wagon? She shuddered to think what they would say if anyone ever knew she had stood before him bared to the waist. Her cheeks warmed just thinking about it.

They had been repairing and packing with one unspoken goal in mind--to continue traveling to the northwest. When all was ready and they had said good-bye at their father's grave one last time, Lissa still couldn't resign herself to going through with it.

"Wait. I can't do it. I can't go on with you--just the three of us. I can't travel with you two and no parent or other woman as chaperone. It just isn't proper."

Lars had started to move away from the grave and stopped with his back to her. He slowly turned his hat in his hand.

"Wally and I have friends in Philadelphia," she continued. "We can find shelter with them, and Wally can get a job at the workshop that Papa's apprentice began when we left."

"That's foolishness," Lars retorted, turning to face them. He slammed his fists on his hips and surveyed the two of them. "The two of you would never make it back there."

He stepped closer to her. Wally's gaze jerked nervously from him to Lissa and back.

"We go on together--all three of us, and as to your concerns," he said, his face just inches from hers, "you have nothing to fear from me. When we get to my brother's cabin, I decide what to do with you both."

"You? You'll decide? Who gave you the right to decide anything for us?" she shouted, her finger poking into his chest.

He grabbed her hand and held it against his heart. "Nobody gives me the right, Miss Whitaker, I earn it. Hell, if it wasn't for me, you two and all your horses would have been blown away with your father."

Lissa's breath caught in a sob. Tears escaped down her cheeks. She jerked her hand free of his and swung it in an arc, intending to slap his face. He caught her wrist and held it against his chest once more.

"Maybe that's what I wish had happened instead of having to go on alone with you!"

"Lissa, please," Wally pleaded hoarsely. "You don't mean it." He turned to Lars. "She doesn't mean it, Lars."

"No? If it wasn't for Lars telling Pa about going west, we wouldn't be here at all and neither of our parents would be dead."

Lars released her wrist, pushing it aside. She took a few steps back to regain her balance. Without a word, he strode to the wagon. His lips were a thin line and every muscle looked tight. While the siblings followed more slowly, he stroked Thunder's neck and checked his lead tied to the rear of the wagon.

"Lissa didn't really mean that, Lars. She just seems very upset with you the last day or two," Wally said softly from behind him. "She's just scared and...and so am I. We owe you a lot. Ma and Pa died trying to get us to Dakota Territory. We owe it to them to go on."

"We are all upset over your parents' deaths," Lars replied.

As she strode by them, Lissa wiped her angry tears on the quilt she wore wrapped around her for warmth. She felt cold despite the August warm temperatures. She drew in a shuddering deep breath as Lars thanked Wally for being honest with him.

"Time to get on the road," Lars added more loudly for her benefit. He walked toward the pair of grays and Wally went with him.

Being a woman in the group, Lissa knew she wasn't to be given any choice but to go with them.

And in her heart she wanted to be with Lars, but not on these terms. Not as a burden to him. She needed him to want her to be with him.

* * *

Few settlers were traveling north. Most headed straight west to Colorado or California. The route north quickly took them out of the area that had been hit by the tornado, but not before they passed others who had suffered the storm's fury. Not far down the road, they passed evidence of a wagon completely smashed by the winds. Pieces of canvas and articles of clothing still hung from the trees left standing, while splintered wood and personal items littered the ground. Two of the wagon wheels had been driven into the earth up to their axles. Four graves could be seen in a row beyond the debris. One of the crudely made crosses had tipped over. As their wagon kept moving down the road, Wally jumped down and ran to straighten the cross. He braced it with rocks and then ran to catch up. Lissa had watched from the back of the wagon and smiled as she gave him a hand up.

In the next little town, several damaged wagons stood waiting to be repaired. Lissa felt fortunate to have Lars's strength and Wally's ability with wood to solve their problems. Families sat waiting near their wagons, all with the same wide-eyed, glassy stares on their faces.

As they traveled, the temperatures were hot during the day and only moderate at night. No rain beyond the tornado area meant that the fields were dry, and dust blew freely. They stayed as close to the river as the terrain allowed. The trees and shrubs there broke the sandy blast. To fight breathing the blowing dirt, Lissa fashioned a triangle of fabric to tie across her face as the men did with their kerchiefs.

"Now I look like a real cowboy," Wally announced happily, but his joy was short lived when he doubled over with a dusty cough.

Despite the dust storms, the dry air was just what Lissa needed to heal the abused skin on her midriff. She loved not having the constricting corset on and felt freer than ever. She hadn't realized how close she

had come to having some of the worst sores go putrid. After thinking about what might have happened, she concentrated on taking better care of herself. She couldn't bear the thought of Wally being left alone in the world. At least they had each other.

Though the farmers could have done better with less wind, they were happy for the dry weather to harvest the last of their crops. As she had emptied grain sacks on the trail, Lissa had saved each one. With grain plentiful now, the farmers were happy to refill them for a lower than usual price. The horses would be fed this winter.

"Do you think we need so much?" Wally had asked when Lars bargained for extra bags of oats.

"Knowing the horses are fed this winter is good," he explained. "As long as we have the room, we buy grain while we can because we not know what we run into."

The temperature was already dropping, though there still was no rain. The days were moderate, but the nights were now cold. Lissa enlisted Wally's help to cut dry grass to fill pallets to insulate against the cold ground as they slept.

The mills they passed were few and far between, but they filled the barrels of flour and corn meal when they had the chance. Lissa wondered how long it would last. She wished she had more experience in planning food supplies, but all she could do was guess. She was determined to prove to Lars that she and Wally could be self-sufficient. Then he would leave them to make their own way, and they could all get on with their lives.

The towns along the Mississippi were small and didn't offer much in the way of specialty goods. But Lissa was able to restock their supply of sugar, bacon, and extra salt for curing meat that fall. She found some potatoes, turnips, and carrots that would come in handy for stews. Though Lars considered it a waste of her money, she bought honey and a sack of apples that she carefully packed one by one in dry straw. Lissa hadn't lost hope that they could get their house built and the food inside before it froze or rotted.

Game was plentiful. Following the road just above the tree line where the rolling fields met the sandy flats of the flood plain, Lars was able to shoot two deer. Lissa prepared the meat for storage in salt after he gutted them. The three of them enjoyed the prospect of fried venison as a change from pork.

Lissa scraped and treated deer hides so they could use the leather as she had with the pig she'd potted. By that point, her hands were red and cracked like a washerwoman's. She spread some lard on them, but that made them greasy and too slippery to handle anything. At least her midriff had healed. She had applied the salve a couple more times--without any help. That seemed to do the trick. She couldn't finish the chore without feeling warm all over at remembering Lars's long fingers touching her so gently. She suspected that just wearing a clean shift and loose blouse to cover the tender skin went a long way to making it feel better. But she hoped she had guessed right about where to hide the coins she cut from the corset before burning the hopelessly stained garment.

Since Lars's encounter with the renegade band, they had seen few Indians. Most had been in towns begging for food in various states of drunkenness. So Lissa was surprised when one night two Indians boldly rode into their camp and sat on their horses at the edge of the firelight.

Lars and Wally leaped for their guns. Aiming them at the visitors, they stood on each side of Lissa and waited.

The man sat straight and proud on his horse, one hand holding the reins of his own horse, and the other holding the reins of the second horse and resting unthreateningly on his thigh.

The second Indian was a woman. She was partially covered with a blanket that she clutched between her breasts with one hand while her other arm wrapped around her large belly swollen with child. Her face was damp with sweat. As they watched she leaned forward and bowed her head, fighting the pain that circled her middle. She bit her lips between her teeth, but uttered no sound.

The male dropped his reins and pointed to the fire and then to his mouth. "Food," he grunted.

The woman strained against another pain and glanced at the man. He shook his head and looked back at Lars.

"Dear heavens," Lissa exclaimed, finally understanding. "She's birthing a baby on a horse."

Chapter Fourteen

With no fear for her own well being, Lissa strode to the Indian woman. The man on the horse leaned forward to keep her in his line of sight. "Let me help you," she said. "Do you speak English?"

The woman looked at the man again and back at Lissa. Before she could say a word, another pain struck. She muttered a few words in her native tongue, and the man slid from his horse and went to her side. Seeing the Indian approach Lissa, Lars lifted his rifle and walked toward the trio. When the woman saw the rifle, she said something to the man. He turned to stand between Lars and his woman, his feet apart, ready to fight.

"Men!" Lissa complained. "Put that thing away. This woman is having her baby right now, and all you can think about is guns and proving who's stronger." She jabbed the Indian in his shoulder, diverting his attention from watching Lars. "Pay no mind to him. Help me get your wife down from the horse. She should be lying down."

The pregnant woman moaned with pain, spurring the man to lift her to the ground. Lissa took her arm and led her nearer the fire.

"Sit here where it's warmer. Do you speak English?" she asked.

"A little."

"Good. My name's Lissa. What's yours?"

"Me Walks in Flowers." She embraced her stomach as another pain struck.

"You lie down here. I must tell you I've never had a baby so you'll have to tell me what I can do to help you."

The woman looked at the three men who stood nearby staring at them. Lissa could only imagine how upsetting it would be to have a child with three men looking on. "Wally, you get me the bag of clean cloths." She looked up at Lars. "And can't you and the soon-to-be papa find something else to do than watch?"

"I stay with her," the Indian insisted.

Lissa smiled. "You speak English too. Good, now don't you worry. You can sit over there with Lars. Have a cup of coffee."

Wally returned from the wagon with the cloths. Lissa set them beside the tree against which Walks in Flowers was leaning. She used the top one to gently wipe the woman face.

"It come now," the laboring woman announced. "Help me up."

"Help you up? Shouldn't you lie down? I heard ladies in Philadelphia always have their babies in bed. It's not proper..."

But Walks in Flowers wasn't listening. She reached up for Lissa's shoulder, leaving her no choice but to help her rise. Walks in Flowers turned her side to the fire and the log where the men sat staring at their every move.

"Lissa?" Lars asked gently. She knew he was asking if she needed any help. That was a laugh. She had never had a baby herself, and she wasn't even quite sure how one got born. She could only watch as the woman pulled her doeskin dress up to the top of her thighs and settled on her haunches, her straight back pressing against a tree. With her blanket draped around her, at least she was screened from the men's glances.

Lissa wiped her brow again and Walks in Flowers took the cloth from her and placed it between her teeth as another pain struck. Seconds later when the next pain gripped her, she bit down, scrunched up her face and pushed. Lissa heard a sudden rush of water from between her legs and watched as it soaked into the dirt.

"Oh, dear," Lissa said, not understanding. "What's happening? What should I do?"

Unable to talk with the cloth in her mouth, the woman pointed to the stack of clean cloths. Lissa grabbed them and knelt beside her again. After the next pain, Walks in Flowers picked out the largest and opened it out. Inching sideways, away from the wet spot, but still leaning on the tree, she spread the cloth between her legs.

As Lissa watched in naïve fascination, a tiny head slowly appeared between her thighs, and with another groaning push, a baby boy lay on the cloth. Not liking his recent treatment or the cold, he wailed loudly. While the men laughed and congratulated the new father, another push and a bloody mass to which the cord was attached, fell beside it.

"Oh, dear. There's a lot of blood. Is everything all right?" Lissa hadn't expected so much blood, but it didn't seem to worry the woman. "Are you all right?"

Panting from her labor, Walks in Flowers lowered herself to her knees. Lissa laid clean cloths over the baby to protect him from the cold air, and the new mother used the cloths to clean and dry the baby.

Approaching silently, the new father squatted beside them. Lissa couldn't understand what he said, but the smile on his face told her he was pleased with his son. Walks in Flowers said something that made him cut a leather strip from the fringe on his vest and give it to her. She tied the cord near the baby's stomach and her mate cut it with his knife. Pausing only to sheath his knife, the brave reached down for

the child and held him high in the air. He spoke proudly to the heavens in his native tongue.

Lissa could not abide such treatment of a newborn baby. She rose and held out another of the clean cloths. "You stop that this minute. He's going to catch his death in this night air."

The startled father stopped and lowered the baby. Lissa took advantage of his disbelief to take the baby and wrap him in the cloth.

"Wally, bring me the small quilt Mama always had over her lap," she ordered.

Wally retrieved it for her. While Walks in Flowers used other cloths to clean herself and absorb her continuing flow, Lissa diapered the baby and bundled him up in her mother's small quilt.

Rising with the child, she turned to the man who had watched her every move. "Kindly help your wife to sit closer to the fire so she'll be warm."

The woman leaned against a tree by the fire with her blanket wrapped around her. The blanket was filthy and Lissa hated to bring the baby near it, but she had no choice.

"I know it's important to feed a baby right away," Lissa said. "At least that's what I heard Cook say once when she was telling Mama about her daughter's baby."

"Yes, feed baby." Walks in Flowers smiled and tugged at the ties that held the front of her dress together to expose her breast.

Lissa looked up to see all the men watching her every move. She never would understand a man's fascination with a woman's breasts. She reached over to pull the blanket forward on the woman's shoulder as a screen and rose to stand between her and the men. "You must have something better to do than to watch this woman feed her baby," she told them.

Tiny sucking and slurping noises came from behind her. She glanced back, but then turned and watched in utter fascination as the rosebud mouth wrapped around as much of the breast as he could draw in. There was to be no worry about this baby not eating as there had been about Cook's granddaughter.

"We should offer our guests food. Have you eaten your supper?" Lissa asked of Walks in Flowers.

She shook her head. "Us hungry."

Lissa didn't hesitate. "Wally, you get out the frying pan. Lars, will you slice off two more venison steaks?" She crossed to the fire, added some more logs and lifted the coffeepot. "Would you like some coffee? It's still warm."

The man grunted, and Lissa took that for a yes answer. Before long, he and his wife were eating their venison to which Lissa added the rest of the biscuits and two apples. She held the sleeping baby in her arms as they ate. She had never seen anyone eat as much or as fast as the pair did. Why, anyone would think they hadn't eaten in a week.

As Lissa was stacking up the pans and dishes, she heard a rumbling on the road coming from the east. "Is that a wagon coming? There's a moon to see by, but who would be traveling at this hour?"

Lars and Wally were already up and striding toward the road, their guns in their hands.

She craned her neck to see the people in the lantern hung on the approaching wagon. "It's probably another family traveling late, trying to make up time," she said to comfort Walks in Flowers and her husband. When she turned back to smile at them, they were gone.

She gasped and looked left and right. The Indians were nowhere to be seen, nor were their horses. In a few seconds flat, they had mounted and ridden off. They must have left the baby bundled in the quilt because it was gone too. So was the joint from which Lars had cut the two steaks. Lissa frowned at the thievery, but if it meant feeding the new mother, she didn't think it mattered all that much. Enough venison remained to last a long time. Happily nothing else was missing but a few soiled cloths.

If it weren't for the bloody wet spot by the tree, the couple might never have been there at all. As the approaching wagon pulled off the road near theirs, Lissa kicked dry dirt over the spot. Not quite knowing why, she dropped a handful of fallen leaves on top to hide any remaining evidence of the visitors. She could easily explain the blood on her apron as being venison blood.

Returning to the fire, she greeted the weary newcomers with a smile. The settlers, a young couple expecting a child in two months or so, had been afraid to stop and camp alone. They had kept on going until they saw the campfire. They hadn't eaten since nooning, so Lissa added more sticks to the fire and began fixing a third supper.

What an evening this was turning out to be. She had just met a young woman whom she liked at once. She had seen Indians close up and found them to be anything but the red murderers men called them. And she had seen a baby born and now knew how they came into the world, though she was anything but clear on how they were created in the first place.

She couldn't get over feeling she had witnessed something very special. She wondered if she would ever be blessed with a child of her own. The possibility seemed remote.

* * *

Though Lissa, Lars and Wally made more stops to hunt and take on provisions, they felt an urgency to keep moving to the northwest. They traveled with six other wagons now. The train of wagons grew from the night the Indian baby was born when Will and Rosemary Grant drove into their camp in the moonlight. The wagons traveled together because they all felt safer. Rumors of more Indians in the area abounded.

"If we get as far as New Ulm or Fort Ridgely in Minnesota before the snow comes, we'll be happy," Henry, one of the other settlers, said one night. "At least we'll be safe staying there for the winter."

After their individual suppers, the men, women, and children gathered each night around a central campfire in the middle of the circle of wagons that they formed for protection. The farther they got from towns, the more danger existed from Indians who were fighting to stop the advance of the white settlers. The men and a few dogs kept careful watch.

"I hear the Injuns are putting up a fight to keep their land north of Fort Sully in Dakota Territory," Will said one night by the fire.

"But we aren't going to Dakota Territory. We're going to Minnesota to settle there," Rosemary added.

"I don't want Rosemary traveling when her time comes," Will told them proudly.

"We met up with the major leading a unit heading up there," Lars said. "They delayed by the renegades, but they up there by now."

"Them Sioux are stirring things up to the north. Sioux are fierce fighters," another said, shaking his head.

"If you ask me, the man was right who said the only good Indian is a dead one," a third said.

"You can't mean that all of them are bad. I've...", Lissa began.

Lars laughed and cut her off with a hand on her shoulder. "The lady always wants to think good of people, no matter who they are."

Lissa looked up at him over her shoulder. He was looking at the other people and didn't meet her gaze. Why had he stopped her from telling them about the Indian couple who came into their camp?

"That's fine to think good of white folks, but there ain't nothing good about those murdering cutthroats," Henry insisted.

Henry's child ran to his wife Ethel, crying at the sharp tone of her papa's voice. Ethel elbowed him in the ribs. "See what you started, Henry. You men are frightening the children with such talk."

Henry stood and stretched. "Too bad talking about the Indians won't get rid of them. Best turn in now. We'll want to be heading out at first light. Days are getting mighty short for making any good mileage."

Ethel rose along with all the others and gathered her three children and headed toward their own wagon. Many of the men got their bedrolls to sleep by one of the campfires to keep watch.

One of the women stopped as she passed Lissa. "I wish there was something good about them redmen. Well, good night to you, your husband, and the boy," she said with a smile.

Lissa's head jerked up, and she opened her mouth to deny that Lars was her husband. She didn't realize Lars still stood behind her. She jumped when he laid his hands on her shoulders possessively and bid the woman a good night. When Lissa shook her head, he squeezed her shoulder almost to the point of pain. She kept quiet.

Once the woman was gone, he released her and she jumped up. He put his arm around her waist and practically lifted her from the ground and carried her to the wagon on his hip.

"What do you think you're doing? Put me down," she whispered angrily, but too softly for the others to hear.

Instead of answering, he set her down at the rear of the wagon and immediately pulled her into his arms, kissing her mouth that she had opened with surprise. He took full advantage of the situation and explored her mouth with his tongue. She was too startled to fight him off. Just when she started to feel the warming and delightful effects from his kiss and softened her lips, he lifted his face an inch from hers.

"Don't say another word. Your father warned you about protecting your reputation, and you'd best think on that now. Believe me. These folks thinking we're married will make their treatment of you a lot more polite."

"But I am not..." He shut her up with another kiss. He slid his tongue along her lower lip, and she opened again to him. A minute later, her saying, "I don't need...", gained the same delicious result. With her hands on his chest, she could feel his heart beating as fast as her own. She rose on her toes, offering him more. Somehow wanting more.

"Think of the other women and children and wait 'til you get her in the wagon." Henry growled as he walked to his wagon from a trip to relieve himself.

Lissa froze. Lars lifted his head and nodded silently to the meddling old man. He kept his arms around her, holding her head against his chest until Henry was well past their wagon.

"Now climb into that wagon and don't say another word tonight," Lars said softly into her ear. "You can yell at me all you want tomorrow when no one else can hear."

Lissa pressed her lips together. She could see the wisdom in what he had done, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of knowing it. She would also never tell him how much she had enjoyed his kisses. No telling what the man would do if he knew.

* * *

Lars saddled Thunder a few mornings later instead of tying him on the back of the wagon. "Henry says this is a good place to cross the Mississippi. I ride ahead with others to check it out."

"Fine," Lissa said sadly. "I'll tell Wally where you are when he gets back." She slapped the victuals box lid shut and twisted around to lean against the side of the wagon with a big sigh.

Thunder pranced in place as Lars kept him reined in as he watched her. He looked toward the other wagons and saw that the men had not yet gathered. He could afford another minute or two to find out what was wrong. He slid off his horse without taking his eyes off of Lissa. She stood there splitting a piece of prairie grass into long strips and watching them blow away on the wind.

He draped Thunder's reins over a spoke on the front wheel and walked to her side. "What's wrong?"

She started at the sound of his voice and straightened. "Wrong? Nothing is wrong."

He looked around to check if she did indeed have nothing better to be doing at the moment. "I can see that. You always stand and sigh when you could be putting out the campfire or folding the quilts."

Leaning his arm against the wagon near her head, he shoved his other hand into his denim trouser pocket. "So tell me. What is wrong?"

"It's nothing." She shook her head, but stopped when he lifted her chin with a finger so she was forced to meet his gaze. "I mean, it's just that..."

"Yes?" he prompted.

She let the air from her lungs with a huge rush. "Today's my birthday, that's all. A woman can have a moment to herself on her birthday, can't she?"

Lars smiled, dropping his finger, but he wished he had known about her birthday. "How old are you?"

"A gentleman doesn't ask a lady her age."

"I not a gentleman. How old?"

"Eighteen." She made a face to tell him she hadn't been happy sharing the news. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

"Really? You're not that much older than I am and yet you've done so much and come from so far."

He straightened and shrugged. "I come from a small village in Norway. When I was about Wally's age, my father was lost at sea during a storm that sank the fishing boat. After that my brother and I have to learn to do everything to make money for food for us and our mother. We fish and do some farming. We learn to build houses and barns. Then mother died. That's when Ingor came to America--to Dakota Territory. He write that I should come too."

"I've never been out of the United States, but I guess I've had to learn a lot during the past few months too."

He watched her for a few moments as she toyed with the hem on her apron. "Why didn't you say something?" He toed the dirt and cursed himself for not knowing. "I wish I had a gift for your birthday to cheer you up."

"Oh, no," she said quickly with a smile. "You don't need to think that. You've given me so much already."

He snorted. "What do I give you but more work?"

"You taught me how to shoot, how to protect a campfire from the wind. You've protected me after...well, for weeks now, and you even made me quit wearing that ghastly corset. That was a big gift." She felt her cheeks warm and was glad they stood close beside the wagon where others could not see her.

He laughed and shook his head. "And I suppose by nearly dying twice and letting you practice on me, I taught you how to keep a man alive."

She laughed as he intended. She looked at him oddly and he wondered what was going on in that lovely head. "Will you answer a question and not get angry?"

He shrugged. "You can ask."

She took a deep breath as if she needed fortification to ask her question. His gaze jerked to her blouse where he watched the fabric stretch tight over her full breasts. He felt a stirring and raised one heel to catch a spoke on the wheel beside her to disguise the altered appearance of the front of his trousers. "Tell me, how could you, a man who is so capable of taking care of himself, get into such trouble, and do it twice?"

Damned if he did not feel color rise in his own cheeks. He pulled off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Well?" she prompted.

"Do you really want to know?"

"I wouldn't have asked otherwise."

He nodded and jammed his hat back on his head. "I was not paying attention to what is going on around me," he finally admitted. He picked up a twig and began to peel off the bark.

"What were you thinking about?"

He shook his head and looked away. She put her hand on his forearm and he looked back, meeting her gaze. "I...I think about a black-haired beauty I discovered curled in the grass like a puppy. I never see any woman so beautiful in Norway. I couldn't forget her."

She swallowed hard. "Ah, how many woman do you know with black hair?" she asked in an aspirate voice.

"Only one worth thinking about. She does much for me and now I not even have birthday gift for her. I wish I could find a perfect flower to give her for her soft hair."

"No, you mustn't think you owe me anything. Why you've even taught me how to--" She stopped suddenly and he watched as color rose up her neck and tinted her cheeks. He wondered what she had been about to say. "Anyway, all we do is delay you from joining your brother," she added, looking away.

He watched her avoid his gaze. "What else is it that I teach you?" he asked softly. She stifled a smile and blushed deeper.

"Let me guess." He cradled her jaw and turned her head toward him. "Happy birthday, my little one."

He leaned down slowly to give her a chance to move away and kissed her when she didn't. He had intended it to be a gentle little kiss, but it grew into something more before he could check himself. She raised her arms around his neck and opened to him like a tulip blossom welcoming first light each day. He pulled her against his body and dipped his tongue into the sweetness she offered him.

"Hey, what's going on?" Wally asked as he strode up to them. He might as well have dumped a pail of cold river water on them. They both straightened guiltily. Lars stepped away and held his hat in front of him to hide his reaction to her body pressed against his.

"Nothing," Lissa told him. "Nothing at all."

Lars felt badly for her embarrassment, but did not regret the kiss one bit. "I...I was just wishing your sister a happy birthday." He kept his back to Wally and kicked dirt into the fire in preparation to dousing it.

Wally grinned broadly. "You knew too?"

Lissa turned to Wally. "You mean you know it's my birthday today?"

"Sure." He pulled something from his shirt pocket. "I went to ask one of the ladies to help me with the bow on this. I made it for you for your birthday." In his outstretched arm was a lovely necklace made of wooden beads, each with miniature flowers carved around it. He had dyed the beads yellow and hung

them on a piece of red ribbon.

Lissa took the necklace from him and slipped it over her head. "Oh, Wally, it's beautiful." She hugged her brother and kissed his cheek.

"Aw, cut it out," he urged, wiping his cheek on his sleeve. "A simple thank you was enough."

She laughed. "It's truly beautiful. Thank you."

"I got the idea to make it yellow when those seeds we came on by the road a few days ago turned the mud on our boots yellow. I smashed some up in a little water and rubbed it on each one." He laughed and held up his hands. That's how my fingers got yellow. "I hope it don't rub onto your dress now," he added.

"I don't care if it does," she replied with a smile. "Thank you." She reached to give him another hug and he backed away.

"I don't need no more hugs," he insisted. "If you want to hug somebody, hug him," he added, pointing to Lars. "He sure seems to like it."

She shook her head and blushed again. "Well, thank you both for your birthday gifts."

"Hey, what did you give her?"

Lars shifted his weight to his other foot. "I..."

"Aw, you just gave her a kiss, didn't ya?" Wally laughed and shook his head. "You old guys have it easy."

Lars braced his hands on his hips, ready to object to being called old, when Henry called from the group of mounted men. "You coming to check for a crossing point, Lars?"

"Be right there," he called, welcoming the chance to escape. "Wally, you check every connection on the harnesses. Check the doubletree too. Make sure no rings are loose. This is a big river, and we don't want to lose control of horses in the water."

He mounted Thunder and lifted the reins before he turned to Lissa. "You be sure anything you don't want to get wet is packed up high and tied down real good. It pays to be careful."

She nodded. He smiled and leaned down with his arm on the pommel of his saddle. "This time you're crossing with Wally on the driver's bench. I'll be on Thunder next to the lead horse. And no one is going to fall in."

Her brow knit in a frown. "You're going to let Wally drive the horses across?"

"In case you hadn't noticed, your brother is more a man than a boy now. He'll do just fine. Besides, you'll be next to him if he needs help."

As Lars rode off with the others, Lissa looked at Wally who was already busy checking the harnesses--really looked at him for the first time. Yes, she had taken in her father's denim trousers for Wally to wear after his wore out. She remembered registering surprise at the time that she did not have to

take the hems up too. Somehow she didn't realize that meant he was as tall as her pa was then, and he had filled out a good deal too. He wore his father's vest now, and she could see that his shoulders were much broader than before. She shouldn't have been surprised. Even she had developed more muscles from all the walking and hard work.

She felt comforted knowing that Wally was already bigger and stronger, and no longer a child. He would certainly be able to make a living for the two of them when they moved back east in the spring. There would be no reason to continue being a burden on Lars once winter passed. She would certainly leave for Philadelphia long before his Norwegian bride arrived.

* * *

Crossing the Mississippi turned out to be uneventful though noisy, with all the horsemen whistling and yelling to move the wagons and stock across. Traveling together now, all the settlers pitched in to help each other across. Completing the task took the better part of a day. They stayed that night near the west side of the river and were all on their way, heading northwest across the Iowa prairie the following morning.

They were thankful they had already crossed the river because as the wagons circled to make camp that night, an icy rain began to fall. They sat in the wagons to eat, but before the plates were washed, two of the other settlers came with Henry to talk to Lars.

Henry introduced one man as James Wilton. He looked frightened, and Lissa couldn't imagine what had happened.

"Mrs. Oleson," he said politely, tipping his hat to her.

Lissa jerked her gaze to meet Lars's, but she bit her tongue and said nothing to deny the title. Lars got the men's attention off her by asking what the problem was that brought them.

"I've been watching a crack in one of my axles," James explained. "I thought it was just the wood drying out. We banded it with strap iron for strength, but the crack only gets longer."

"Coming over the river, he hit a rock and the split went nearly clear across," his companion offered.

"And you not think it will hold?" Lars asked.

"I looked at it myself," Henry confided. "If we had to escape from hostiles and the axle was stressed with that kind of hard running, I think it would break. Then we'd be stuck in the wilderness with no way to fix it."

"The question is, do we stop and fix it or keep going slow and easy, and hope it never breaks?" James asked. "I don't know what to do, and with what your brother wrote you about where we're going, I wanted to ask you."

"We go look at it," Lars proposed. His brother had written so little about the land they had to cover to get to Dakota Territory and yet the others were depending on him. He wanted to help where he could and hoped that trusting him was the wise thing for the others to do.

As the men left to inspect the axle, Lissa couldn't help but feel sorry for James Wilton's family. When she saw Lars's face as he strode back to the wagon alone, she knew an unhappy conclusion had been

reached.

"The axle?"

"The snow of last night is already melting, but it's getting close to the time that snow will stay on the ground. The road will freeze, deep ruts and all. Driving a wagon with a cracked axle spells disaster on such roads," Lars explained.

"What about the axles from Papa's delivery wagon?"

Lars shook his head. "I thought about that, but we measured and they not fit."

"What will they do? Where can they go?"

Chapter Fifteen

"The Wiltons remain in the nearest town or settlement that offers them a place to stay. By the time they replace the axle and put the wagon back together again..." Lars ended with a shrug. What more could he say? It was almost too late for all of them to go on west.

"The Wiltons are destined to stay in Iowa for the winter, aren't they?"

"They are safer here than caught halfway to Dakota."

Lissa nodded. "How did they take the decision?"

Lars shook his head and sat on the fallen log beside where the fire had been. He pulled off his hat and rotated it over his fingers. "How does any man take the fact that the dream he has held above all others may never come true because a piece of wood cracked?"

She sensed he was talking about more than the Wilton's cracked axle. Lars's own dreams were threatened because she and her brother were slowing him down. "And his family?" she asked softly.

"They looked like we told them there would be no Christmas this year."

Lissa laid her hand on his shoulder for some measure of comfort. "I'm sorry you had to be the one to tell them. The other settlers look to you to make the decisions for the whole train now, don't they?"

"I didn't ask them to," he said angrily. "They think because Ingor is already in Dakota Territory that I know all about how best to get there." He ran his hand through his hair and tugged his hat back in place. "All I wanted to do was to ride in peace to my brother's place, and now look at me. I'm responsible for six wagons full of people and a dozen cattle besides."

But Lissa couldn't look at him. She jerked back her hand. She knew he wouldn't want any measure of comfort from the woman whose family had ruined his life and burdened him with the responsibility of an unwed woman and a boy who could do little more than carve toys.

"We won't hold you up a moment longer," she said coolly. "Wally is almost done with the horses."

As she ran to tell Wally they were ready to leave, she heard Lars heave a sigh. They could not get to Dakota Territory fast enough to suit her. He'd mentioned Fort Abercrombie. She hoped she and Wally could stay there for the winter. Then Lars could go on his own way to his brother's cabin.

She and Wally wouldn't stand in his way. And they would do just fine without him.

* * *

"Will ya look at all that dust rising back there." Wally looked back over the five wagons that traveled in the line behind them now that the Wiltons had dropped out.

Lissa and he were walking on the west side of the horses to avoid breathing in the blowing dirt raised by horses' hooves and wagon wheels. The thick dust created a horizontal brown cloud extending a long way east from the trail.

Wally pulled down the kerchief that covered the lower half of his face and wiped his nose on his sleeve as he studied the rising dust behind them. "Hey, Lars," he called to get his attention where he rode on Thunder ahead of the wagon and out of the dust.

Lars turned in his saddle and looked back. Wally pointed behind them. "What's that second puff of dust coming from? It's not as big as the one our wagons are making, but it's heading in our direction instead of floating away--and fast."

Lissa stepped onto a cross-member of the wagon and hung on to a bow to steady herself for a better view. "Dear heaven, it's not another tornado, is it?" she cried out to Lars who rode back past her.

"No, it can't be that with a clear blue sky," he assured her. "I go see what it is."

"Be careful," she called after him, but she didn't think he had heard her.

"Do you think we should keep moving?" Wally asked her.

"We keep moving until Lars tells us to stop. You were at the meeting when everyone voted him the official wagon master." Lissa smiled as she watched her brother run ahead to walk beside the lead horses. Her heart swelled as she realized how much he had matured in the past few months.

After checking on the mysterious cloud once more, she jumped down to walk with Wally, but looked back when she heard shouts and whistling from behind them. She saw Lars racing to the head of the train with his arm raised in the position that meant stop. Wally reined in the horses and stood facing them with a tight hold on the reins.

"What raised the dust?" Wally called.

"Another wagon," he said with a broad grin. "They are from Norway and they move fast to catch us! I get news of town near where I am a boy."

"Is it a family?" Lissa asked, smiling. "Are they going to Dakota Territory too?"

"No and yes," he responded with a laugh. "I tell you all about it at the nooning." He turned in the saddle to Wally. "Lead the horses up to those trees. They will give us all some shade while we stop. I want all the families to meet the new men."

Before she could ask more about the men, he reined Thunder around and took off at a gallop toward the rear of the train. Wally obeyed his directive right away, shouting and whistling the horses back into motion.

Until her curiosity could be fed with information, Lissa couldn't help but wonder if there were women in the new wagon. Or were they all men? Her heart sped up at the possibility of having more strong arms to quickly build houses when they arrived in the Dakota Territory. Maybe they would lend a hand to Wally and her so they wouldn't be such a burden on Lars.

She didn't see the new folks until she had the nooning prepared. She and several of the other women took advantage of the fruit-laden apple trees they discovered. She wondered if John Chapman, who everyone seemed to know as Johnny Appleseed, had planted them as he had moved west from Ohio across the plains.

Having cut up several apples, she cooked them down while she fried a tall stack of flapjacks. She and Wally were near to eating without Lars when he finally returned to their wagon. He brought the new men with him. The newcomers were brothers, and though a year separated them, they looked enough alike to be twins. They were Erik and Hendrick, nicknamed Hank by someone in New York, Andersen. Lars introduced her and Wally to the brothers. From there the conversation dissolved into a stream of Norwegian.

The Andersen brothers laughed often, making the skin beside their blue eyes crinkle. Lissa figured they laughed a lot because there were little white lines in the middle of the crinkles where the skin was always buried in the fold and didn't get suntanned like the rest of their faces. They had beards like Lars, each one as tangled as the other's. Their hair was reddish blond and hung out beneath their hats. Having given them the once over, she suddenly realized they were doing the same with her. Knowing they were talking about her without her understanding what they were saying raised her ire.

"Are you going to eat or not?" she snapped.

Clearly startled by her tone of voice, Lars looked at her, but she did not meet his gaze. She busied herself lifting the freshly baked flapjacks from the flat fry pan into the Dutch oven near the fire where she had kept the others warm.

"Ya, we eat," he told her. "And I tell my new friends they can eat with us. That is all right with you, no?"

No, it's not, she wanted to say, but that was hardly hospitable of her. "That's fine. Wally, get out two more tin plates and forks."

Fifteen minutes later every flapjack and every piece of sweetened apple had disappeared. But Lissa's plate was still clean from having been untouched. She had fried up every drop of the batter, but the men, including her brother, who excitedly listened to Lars's translation of their conversation, had eaten it all. None of them even noticed she had nothing to eat because she was cooking and serving all the time.

To make matters worse, she had just taken the pots from the fire to cool so she could clean them when Ethel came by with her oldest daughter of about fifteen or sixteen who carried four small pieces of sweet cornbread with molasses.

"I know how much you young men can eat," Ethel said, pushing her daughter forward so she would hold out the plate for each man to take a piece. When she circled back past Lissa, the plate was empty.

"Sorry we didn't have more," Ethel added for her benefit.

The men all smiled at Ethel's blonde daughter, and Lars translated the questions the new men asked her and her mother.

"We'd better get back to our wagon," Ethel said eventually. "I wouldn't want to hold the wagon train up."

The men watched them go with their backs to Lissa. Lars said good-bye to Erik and Hank and finally turned back to her.

"Ready to pull out?" he asked easily.

Lissa moaned and cleaned up the meal as quickly as she could. She did manage to eke a few pieces of apple from the bottom of the pot. And thanks to Wally being too engrossed in what the men had to say, she ate the remainder of his last flapjack that sat on his plate.

While Lars checked to see that the other wagons were ready to leave, Wally brought pails of water from the clear stream to add to the water barrel while they had the chance. When Lars rode back past them to lead the way, Lissa was still hungry, but she was ready to leave.

* * *

A few dry days later, another cloud of dust appeared on the horizon, west of the wagon train. Too large to be rising from a wagon or even two, it warranted checking out. Lars and Will were to ride out to investigate, leaving the wagon train with orders to keep moving north.

"We'll see what it is and meet you at those trees west of the hilly area up there," Lars told the gathered settlers. "If that's as good a spot as any to camp, you might as well settle in for the night there, if you arrive before we do."

"Let's hope there's some water there," Henry said. "Our barrel is about empty. I can't get over how long it's been since the last rain."

"If there's no water by the trees, we search for some," Lars promised.

Will kissed Rosemary good-bye and pulled himself onto his horse. Lars said a few words privately to Wally and then swung into his saddle. Before they had gone far, each family had returned to their wagon and the procession began to move north.

Lissa ran ahead to walk beside Wally next to the lead horse in their team. "What did Lars say to you before he left?" she asked with no pretenses.

He shrugged and didn't reply.

"Wallace, what did he say? I have a right to know. Did he say what he thought the dust was from?"

Wally shook his head. "No, he said that if he didn't come back and we needed help, we should ask the Andersen brothers. He said they would take care of us."

Her heart leaped, and she swallowed past a huge lump in her throat. "If he didn't come back?" she asked softly. She hadn't given a thought to his not coming back, but looked back at the plume of dust. It

was getting wider and seemed more dark gray now than a dusty brown. Riding on the southwest wind, it was heading in their direction.

She shook her head and didn't want to think of Lars not coming back. He'd suffered enough on this trip already. But the nerve of the man, saying the Andersen brothers would take care of them. She and Wally could take care of themselves.

"Here they come," Wally shouted, breaking into her reverie.

"Thank goodness." She smiled with relief that Lars wasn't hurt or missing. He and Will were riding hard and waving their hats. At first she thought they were just waving hello, but they wouldn't do that, she decided. "Something is wrong."

"What do you think it is? Should I stop?" Wally asked.

Lissa shook her head. "No, they're waving us on. I think they want us to pick up the pace."

Wally studied the approaching riders for a moment and then whistled, urging the horses into a faster walk. When Lars reached their sides minutes later, he slapped the rump of the nearest gray and yelled at them to get them moving even faster.

"Get in the wagon and get it moving. That's not dust. It's a prairie fire and it's coming right at us!"

As he rode back to tell the other settlers, Wally climbed onto the driver's seat and Lissa into the back. Yelling and whistling, he ordered the team to a trot.

The other wagons followed suit, and in moments the whole train sped north. The MacDonald men whistled and shouted at their cattle, urging them to run as well, but some turned away from the wagons. Unable to take the time to round them up, they had little choice but to hope they could collect them later when they knew the wagons and families were safe.

Lissa climbed forward and crouched behind Wally. She hung onto the plank seat to keep her balance, and peered ahead, trying to locate the telltale signs that water might be there. They were coming out of a flat area, heading for hills. From what she had learned so far on the trek west, their best bet for finding water would be at the base of the hills where trees grew.

The closer they got to the hills, the taller they looked--too tall to drive a wagon over. And the closer the smoke came. They could smell it now as the flames eagerly devoured the tall dry prairie grass.

Moments later, they were aware of other horses beside theirs. Henry had his team at a gallop and was overtaking them. There was little in the open prairie to hinder either wagon except occasional rocks or animal holes. Looking back, Lissa saw other wagons pull ahead as well. None of them wanted to be a straggler that the fire might pick off.

Their own horses were older and tired. Wally held the team at a trot.

"What's wrong? Why are they getting ahead of us?" Lissa shouted.

"Our team can't keep up that pace. If one of them keels over, we won't get anywhere."

Lissa watched the other wagons pass them and her alarm grew. When the last wagon, the one belonging

to the Andersen brothers came alongside, it remained there. One of them yelled something, but she couldn't hear over the noise of the teams. But the smile on the man's face was reassuring.

When the wagons ahead veered to the east, Lissa became alarmed. Only when she saw Lars standing tall in his stirrups and waving at them to turn, did she breathe again. They traveled a few hundred more feet into the rocky area at the base of the hills. Little grass grew here and Lissa knew that if they had a chance to escape the flames anywhere, this would be it.

But more welcome than the sight of sparse vegetation was the foamy white of a waterfall tumbling down from an outcropping on the hill. The wagons splashed through the stream at the base and pulled up.

There was little time for thought--only action. Grabbing pails of water from the stream, the settlers wet down the canvas of their bonnets to protect it from flying sparks. The MacDonalds drove the cattle that remained beyond the wagons and were relieved to see the others running toward them ahead of the smoke.

Lissa helped the women gather the children and lead them up the hill into the rocks. Huddled under wet blankets and quilts, they waited.

They could hear the roar of the fire as it approached. The sound reminded Lissa of the thunderous roar of the tornado. They could see the tall grass flame up as the line of fire and smoke moved steadily across the acres.

The men began to soak everything a second time because the drying wind was evaporating the evidence of their first efforts. Having no children of her own to watch or comfort, Lissa ran to do what she could to help. Lars ordered her to go back with the other women.

"I can help. I can lift a pail," she insisted.

"Your dress. It will burn. Go back," he yelled.

Instead of obeying, she walked into the stream and sat down, splashing the cold water all over her person. Soaked to the skin, she rose awkwardly and rejoined the men, her heavy wet skirts dripping. As the men tossed the water toward the fire, they threw the buckets behind them and accepted the next full pail. Lissa ran to retrieve the empty buckets and carry them back to the stream where they could be filled and passed down the line again.

As the flames neared them, the wind changed direction this way and that, as if at a whim. Sparks flew up in spirals and some landed on the wagon bonnets behind the line of men.

"That wagon's on fire," Lissa screamed as she turned to carry back two more empty pails.

The men spun around and doused all the bonnets again. The fire was easily extinguished, but the smoke was thicker than ever. Coughing, their eyes burning, they kept on working with their neckerchiefs raised against the smoke as they had been against the dust. When sparks jumped the wet area and started the grass on fire near the wagons, men used their jackets, blankets, and even their hats to slap at the flames.

Lissa didn't need to rewet her skirts when the heat of the nearing fire would have dried them. The pails of water she hefted splashed on her enough to keep her soaked. She was running back to the stream with two more empty pails when she noticed sparks had set a blaze on the grass closer to the hill where the children were.

"The hill behind us," she yelled as she scooped two pails full of as much water as she could carry and ran toward the flames. She threw on the water, but the flames kept moving. She grabbed the front of her skirt and raised it to untie her petticoat. Stepping out of it, she grabbed the waistband and slapped at the advancing flames with the wet fabric. Others quickly joined her and the patch was extinguished.

Breathing hard, she tossed aside the scorched petticoat and retrieved the pails she had dropped. She was running back to the creek for more water when she realized the wind had turned. She whirled around toward the others. "The wind!" she cried. "It's coming out of the north."

The men stopped the bucket brigade, and the cheers that rose told her they agreed. Pushed back by the wind onto the path it had already burned, the flames were quickly extinguished.

Wally ran to Lissa side. "We did it. We're safe now," he said as they hugged.

"I hope we never have another fire to fight," Lissa said, holding onto his broad shoulders for a moment longer. "I was so scared."

"I never knew it to look at you." Lars put his hand on her shoulder and spun her around for a huge hug. "Are you all right? You didn't get burned?" he asked with real concern in his eyes. He set her down and framed her face with his hands.

Her arms still around his waist, she smiled and felt the warm glow of his attention. "I'm fine."

He leaned down and kissed her soundly and then lifted her in a big hug again. He only put her down when a laughing stream of Norwegian coming from the Andersen brothers caught his attention. All the settlers had gathered behind them. They shook each others' hands and slapped each other on the back. Wives and children embraced their husbands and fathers, all thankful to be alive.

Except for a few holes the flying sparks put in the bonnets, and some blistered hands from passing heavy pails of water, no one was badly injured. No property was lost to the fire, save a couple of hats and jackets plus Lissa's petticoat that had burned while being used to stamp out the flames.

It wasn't until much later after the wagons moved into a circle and camp was set up for the night that Lissa learned her face sported Lars's black handprints, one on each side of her jaw. She laughed at how silly she must have looked, but treasured the kisses he had given her.

* * *

The morning after the fire, the settlers got a surprise. They rose to find a five-inch blanket of snow on the ground.

"This is only the first week in September. How can it be snowing?" Lissa asked as she emerged from the wagon.

Lars laughed. "I do my best to protect you, but I cannot control the weather." He leaned over to help her clear the fire circle.

"How will I...?" she began.

She stopped when a ball of snow hit Lars squarely on the seat of his trousers. He straightened and

whirled around to see Wally and another boy of about the same age peeking from behind the other boy's wagon. Lars leaned down to get a big handful of snow and took off after them. All three laughed as he caught them and rubbed the cold white stuff into their hair.

"Stop. Stop," Wally cried. "At least I didn't hit you in your bad shoulder."

Lars stopped for a moment to consider that kindness, and it was all the boys needed. They took off again and worked their mischief with snowballs on other unsuspecting settlers.

In the meantime, Lissa was discovering that finding dry wood wasn't easy. Lars returned to their campsite, brushing the snow from his wool jacket and his hair. His face was red with the cold and exertion of chasing the boys. He was grinning broadly, and that made Lissa want to smile too.

"It is good to see the boys having fun, no?" Lars asked as he knocked snow from a downed branch near her and broke it to pieces over his thigh.

"Yes," she had to admit. "Wally hasn't laughed like that since...Well, it's been a long time, and he's too young to be serious all the time. He's still a boy."

"Sometimes age has little to do with being a man. Wally left the home he knew all his life, and lost both his parents. He is man in your family now. Playing here in first snow may be his last chance to be a boy."

"It isn't fair," she countered, blinking against the tears in her eyes that she wanted to blame on the snow and not on the loss of innocence she felt for both her and Wally.

Lars nodded. "It isn't fair that you must cook for all of us and wash and mend our clothes." He set down the wood near the fire circle and faced her. "It isn't fair that your dreams of marrying the boy in Philadelphia will never come true. And all the hard work ahead for you and Wally isn't fair. It just is."

She closed her eyes for several moments, hoping to contain the moisture that filled them and nodded. "I know. I'm getting used to not having a choice in matters, but I don't have to like it."

Lars stepped to her side and wiped away a tear that escaped down her cheek with his cold thumb. "No, you don't. But I hope that for all the bad that happens, life gives you something better. You deserve it."

She smiled and sniffled away her tears. "Thank you."

"Life should give you something good to make you smile like that more often. You have a beautiful smile."

She laughed. "You're just saying that because you want me to hurry up and fix breakfast."

As if on cue, Wally ran back to the campsite. "Where's breakfast? I'm starved."

"Grrrr," Lissa growled as she headed for the victuals. "Men! All you think about is eating."

She set about getting the coffee made and missed seeing the smile on Lars's face and the shake of his head that said her assumption was not correct.

Later, the happy shouts of the children playing in the snow brought a smile back to Lissa's face as she cleaned up after the meal. She'd had to make a second pot of coffee when all the men gravitated to her

campsite and talked about the route ahead.

"This snow could be a sign of an early winter," Will said, worry etching wrinkles on his brow. "With Rosemary in a family way, I have to think of her comfort. She's feeling poorly after that bumpy race to get ahead of the prairie fire."

Henry pulled off his hat and scratched the back of his head. "I reckon I thought we were all determined to get to the Red River of the North, but you could head straight west from here and stay at Fort Randall for the winter."

"Say, that's right. You go straight west 'til you pick up the Missouri River. Then follow that to the fort," one of the other men explained. "They're sure to have a doctor there too."

"It's hard to know if we'd be better off staying with you or going west from here," Will told them. He looked at the sky and then down, shaking his head. "I don't know what to do."

"We scouted ahead yesterday," Lars offered. "There's a town about ten miles north along the river this creek feeds into. Why don't we stay together until then and ask about the two routes? They should be able to tell us if there's trouble on the trail."

"That's a good idea," Henry said with a smile. "Then you don't have to decide all on your own," he added to Will.

"I'll tell Rosemary and see if she's ready again for travel." Will turned and took a step or two and turned back. "Course, if she ain't up to traveling, I guess we wait here 'til she is, or at least follow to town at a slower pace."

The men mumbled their understanding, and Will took off with a firmer step.

"Now everyone else is going to stay together, ain't we?" Henry asked, looking around the group. "There are no other babies about to be born?" He looked pointedly at Lissa. She opened her mouth and gasped. Her cheeks colored.

"We'll all stick it out," someone said.

The other men nodded, and the group dispersed. Erik and Hank stayed behind for a translation of the meeting from Lars as usual. Lissa suspected they understood more English than they let on, but they didn't speak it often. When they did, they only used two or three words strung together.

Embarrassed by Henry's direct question to her about being with child, she left them to their session and completed her check of the campsite which included folding the clothes she'd washed the day before.

"Thank you--wash shirt," Hank said as he walked up behind her.

She smiled to encourage his English usage. "I was happy to help."

He grinned broadly. "You help Hank much."

She laughed. "Your English is getting good."

"Very big trouble." He frowned. "Words hard to find in head."

"Hard to remember," she prompted. He nodded vigorously, making her laugh yet again.

Lars strode to them and stood with his hands on his hips. "You two have time to laugh and joke? We leave camp. You should get ready," Lars said suddenly in a tone a good deal sharper than she liked. He finished with something even sharper in Norwegian.

"Everyone may have voted you wagon master, but that doesn't give you the right to talk to us in that angry tone. Hank was just thanking me for washing his shirt."

"Brother shirt too. He thank you much," Hank put in with a grin.

"Take your shirts and--" Lars stopped and switched again to his native language, leaving Lissa in the dark as to what he said.

"What are you telling him?"

Chapter Sixteen

Lars did not tell her what he had said, but the result was that Hank looked from him to Lissa and then back. He said something, pointed at Lissa, and then said a few more words in a more angry tone. With one more glance at Lissa, he tipped his hat and strode back to his wagon, the last in line.

"Check firearms," Lars said as Wally came to stand beside Lissa, ready to leave. "We go into Sioux country and must watch for trouble." Lars strode off to mount Thunder.

"Has he got a burr under his saddle?" Wally asked. "I heard them arguing all the way to the stream."

"I don't know what was wrong, and I guess I never will unless I learn Norwegian."

"The way they were both looking at you, I'd say you had some part in their arguing."

"Me? What did I do?"

Wally shrugged. "Maybe it's what they'd like you to do." He laughed. "Or maybe it's just that they both like you."

Lissa couldn't stop thinking about the argument as they set out. Lars stayed out ahead of the train, scouting the trail, but the ten miles to town was fairly easy going. They arrived about noon. As the town was small, the wagons pulled to a stop before a church on the edge of town. The men planned to walk on into town to gather information while the women prepared the nooning meal.

Lissa had forgotten it was Sunday until she heard the congregation singing "Onward Christian Soldiers." She hummed along to the tune.

"Oh, we're too late," Ethel said.

Lissa looked back to see her and Henry rushing with their children toward the church. Just as they passed Lissa, people streamed from the church.

"See? The service is over," Ethel added.

"Then can we eat lunch instead?" one of her children asked. "I'm hungry."

The others chorused their agreement about the same time as some of the townsfolk started walking toward the wagons.

"We heard you coming up the road," a man said. "You gave us a scare until Pete stuck his head out the door to make sure you weren't a band of Indians coming into town."

"Indians? Riding into town for trouble?" Henry asked. "Are they that bold now?"

Several of the other settlers had left their wives and children at their wagons to prepare the food while they walked over to talk.

"Oh, there's a few Indians in town already, but the only trouble they've caused so far is annoying people by begging for food."

"The army's moving their people west, and the stragglers have nothing left," one of the townsmen explained.

"That doesn't give them the right to sit around all day or to come to my door and beg," one of the townswomen insisted. She pulled her young daughter to her side. "I worry every minute what they're going to do next."

"Any Indians on the move between here and Fort Ridgely?" Lars asked.

"I gotta tell you, there are a couple bands hitting the army outposts and wagon trains like yours between here and the Red River."

Lars asked more questions about where they had heard the Indians were last sighted and talked it over with the other settlers.

"I walked down to the general store, and it's closed up," Wally offered as he approached the group.

"That's my store," a stocky man who looked very uncomfortable in his white collared shirt said. "I'll be open as soon as I've had my dinner."

"Good," Lars told him. "I hope you've got ammunition."

"That I have," he promised. "Why don't you come on over in about an hour?"

The men agreed, and the group began to break up when the preacher came out of the church. He carried a carpetbag in one hand and a large Bible in the other.

"I knew you would come," he said loudly as he approached the wagons. "I just knew the Lord would provide."

Lissa, Ethel, and Henry stopped their progress toward their wagon as did a few of the others, but no one seemed to know what he meant.

"I did. I knew you would come. My work here is done, and the Lord has sent you to deliver me safely to my next destination. Reverend Thomas Bascom, at your service." The reverend dropped his bag at his side and nodded his head toward the women.

Ethel hurried toward him, her hands extended to take his. "Oh, reverend, it's been weeks of lonely traveling with no comfort available to us from a man of the cloth such as yourself. It is such a pleasure to meet you."

"You are too kind, dear lady."

He chatted with Ethel and the others in turn as Ethel introduced everyone still standing there. "And this is Mrs. Oleson. Her husband Lars is our wagon master."

Lissa didn't have time to figure out what to say because the reverend went right on.

"I just told the congregation this morning that it was time for me to be moving on. The Lord is sending me north to save the poor redskinned heathens there from sin. I shall bring them up the straight and narrow path to see the Light." He raised his arm to the sky. "Praise the Lord."

"Praise the Lord indeed," Ethel responded.

"Thank you. Thank you," the reverend replied. "Now. Which one of your fine folks has room for me in your wagon?" He looked from one to the other as if he fully expected someone to offer him a free ride.

Lissa was too shocked to answer, but fortunately Ethel spoke up.

"We'd be delighted to have you travel with us, Reverend, though, of course, you'll be walking like the rest of us rather than riding."

"Except if a fire chases us again," one of her children put in.

"Yes," Ethel said, patting the child on the head. "We all rode on the wagon then because we couldn't walk as fast as the horses could run."

"Come with us, Reverend," Henry said, slapping the man on his back. "We had hoped to catch the end of your service just now. Perhaps you can say a few words for us before we pull out." He looked back to Lars. "How long before we leave?"

"Less than an hour now 'til the store opens. Won't take long in there. Say, an hour and a half?"

Henry nodded and turned to catch up with his family.

Lissa watched them go, a frown knitting her brow. She didn't know what to make of the reverend traveling with them. She felt her cheeks warm, remembering Ethel introducing her to the reverend as Lars's wife. She hadn't been bothered by other people thinking they were married, but telling a man of the cloth? That was like lying to God or something. What would she do now? She looked over at Lars to find him standing there staring at her with a frown on his forehead.

"We need to talk," he said before he followed the others back to the campsite.

* * *

Lissa finished her shopping at the small general store in record time. Until the others finished and returned to their wagons, the train couldn't resume their trek. She took advantage of the free time to stow the food and extra ammunition. Humming the hymn she had heard from the church, she shook out the bedrolls and quilts and refolded them. She was concentrating on her work to such a degree that she didn't hear Lars until he had climbed into the wagon and sat down between the canvas sides on the tail.

"Lissa."

Startled, she spun around and laid her hand against her rapidly beating heart.

"Do I frighten you? I'm sorry," he said, looking very apologetic.

She smiled, shaking her head. "No, you just startled me. I thought you were saddling Thunder."

He nodded. "I was." He glanced out the open area in the rear canvas to check on the other returning settlers. "I...I want to talk to you."

"Of course, what is it?" she asked. She sat on the foot of the pallet that formed her bed and folded her hands in her lap. Not working, she felt chilled and pulled her heavy wool shawl around her shoulders.

Lars rotated his hat on his fingers, as was his habit. He didn't look up at her.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, unable to hide the concern in her voice. "Has something happened to Wally?"

He looked at her then and raised his hand to stop her questions. "No, no," he said. "Nothing like that. He's just not back from town yet. He'll be along." He set down his hat on a crate and took a deep breath as if to fortify himself. "I think I should not be sharing this wagon."

"After all you've done for us, I certainly don't mind."

"That is no reason, and besides, you do so much for me. You cook, you sew my shirt when I rip the sleeve." He looked around the narrow wagon. "You even shake out my bedroll for me."

"Women's work is never done, my mother always told me," she said with a little nervous laugh, unable to meet his gaze.

"But you are not my woman and..."

Lissa jumped to her feet. "I know that and I'll thank you to..."

Lars leaped up to face her and placed the fingers of one hand over her mouth and the other on her shoulder to keep her from moving away. "Please, the others return, and they will hear you. Henry is to come get me when all ready to go."

Tears burned in Lissa's eyes at the thought of his leaving them. She would feel so lost without him in her life. But that was what she wanted, right? For her and Wally to be on their own?

"I don't know what you want to do, but I won't stop you if you don't want to stay. I'm not forcing you to

remain with us. Wally drives our horses all the time now that you scout ahead on the trail so much. We can get along just fine without you." Tears that had welled in her eyes escaped down her cheeks.

Lars cradled her jaw with his hands and wiped away the tears with his thumbs. "Little one, I don't want you hurt or angry with me. I think I must say it wrong."

"Say it wrong? No, I understood what you said. You don't want to travel with us any more. Then go. There's no reason to stay. We aren't married, so you don't have to stay."

He shook his head. "No, what I'm saying is I should have married you right away after your father died instead of you traveling with me unmarried. I know what other people would think of you."

"That's no reason to marry me after all this time living together."

"No reason to marry after all this time?" Henry repeated loudly from outside the wagon. "What's that she's saying?"

"Gud i himmel!" Lars exclaimed under his breath. He dropped his hands from her shoulders and strode to the rear of the wagon, where he jumped out to the ground.

"You mean she ain't really your wife? Ethel come over here," Henry called. "Reverend Bascom, come see what you make of this."

Lissa took a deep breath and walked to the rear. "No, we are not wed. Lars is a friend. He has a wife coming from..."

"Heaven help us, it's worse than I thought. You're already married, and you're taking advantage of this poor woman and her brother. This is outrageous, sir. I'm..."

"Think of the children! Desist any further talk, sir," Reverend Bascom pleaded dramatically.

"You don't understand. I not married to anyone," Lars insisted. He drew himself up to his fullest height and peered down at the reverend. "And I take advantage of no one."

"He's helped us so much since our parents died," Lissa put in for him. "I owe him a lot for helping us get this far."

"You don't have to sleep with the man because you feel you owe him for his help," Henry shouted. He turned to glare at Lars. "And you, sir, are not half the man I thought you were for expecting her to perform for you."

"Perform? Oh, Henry, what is this?" Ethel asked, having just returned from ushering the children out of earshot. He filled her in on what he had overheard. He didn't mention the fact the whole argument started because he had been listening through the canvas to hear what was not meant for his ears.

"What this 'perform' mean?" Lars asked, turning to Lissa for help with English while the others talked among themselves.

She raised her fingers to cool her warm cheeks and couldn't meet his gaze. "I...I'm not sure, but I think he thinks I...that I do, ah, things for you that I shouldn't do unless we were married." She continued to Henry who had finished telling Ethel his discovery. "You really don't understand. You overheard

something you weren't meant to hear."

"You cannot keep such a secret from the Lord," the reverend said. "He sees all that you do."

"Amen, and the fact remains that the two of you aren't married and yet you travel together as man and wife," Henry insisted hotly. "This cannot continue."

"The wagon master must set the example for the whole wagon train. What about the other women and the children?" Ethel asked.

"You are living in sin, and we can't have that a day longer," from the reverend.

"Sin? No, no," Lissa tried to say, but no one was looking her way. Other families were gathering to hear what was happening. She sank down onto a crate and put her face in her hands.

"Just look at that poor child," Ethel insisted. "There, there, dearie." She turned to Lars. "How could you?"

"I didn't...", Lars got in.

"We're not listening to what you didn't do," Henry said hotly.

"You are going to do what's right by her here, and right now, for everyone's sake. You will marry this girl at once," the reverend concluded. He looked around and found heads bobbing in support of his idea.

Lissa's head snapped up. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She gripped the side of the wagon so tightly her fingertips turned white.

"A wedding?" someone asked.

"Yes, within the hour," Ethel told them with pride. She sounded as if Lissa had asked her to announce the event. She turned back to her husband. "I can't believe such behavior--and right under our noses, Henry." He turned to comfort his wife.

"I must prepare for the ceremony," the reverend insisted. "We'll hold it right out here in the open before God and all your friends." He spread out his arms to include everyone present in the sweep, and looked at Lars and Lissa with a broad smile.

Lissa was too stunned to speak. She had tried to defend Lars, who had acted as a gentleman all the time he was with them, but they wouldn't listen. She dropped her face on her hands to hide in shame. This was all her fault. She was the one who had acted the part of the wanton. She had bathed his half-naked body when he was burning up with the fever. She had cradled his head between her breasts for hours to soften the bouncing of the wagon after he was injured. She even had kissed him when he was unconscious. Though she wanted to think it was because she felt some reaction and thought it might aid his awaking, she knew her desire had led her to allow his kisses since he had been awake too. She was the sinful one, and maybe her sins were catching up with her.

Now instead of giving her more opportunity to defend his actions, they were insisting he marry her at once. And they hadn't even thought to ask her what she wanted. She gathered up the nerve to look at Lars who was still arguing with Henry and the others who stood around him. Heavens, if she had to pick a husband, it certainly wouldn't be one who didn't want to marry her because he already had a bride

coming from the old country next spring.

The next thing Lissa knew, Ethel and one of the other women climbed in the wagon. They stood on either side of her. "Henry, get those men away from here. We need a little privacy to prepare the bride."

The men led Lars away, but she could still hear their arguments, though she couldn't make out their words. She looked up at the women. "What? What do you want?"

"We're going to help you dress up a bit. You want to look nice because a girl should remember her wedding day as being special."

"No, you don't understand."

"There will be plenty of time for explaining things later," Ethel said as she started to look around the wagon. Lissa had never allowed anyone else except the doctor inside. They pulled her to her feet and removed her apron. "Now you must have a pretty dress in here somewhere."

"A few." Lissa pointed to her trunk of fancy clothes she hadn't opened since they left Philadelphia. "I can't get those out on the trail."

"Nonsense," Ethel said, pulling open the trunk. She lifted out Lissa's favorite, an emerald taffeta gown.

"You couldn't have picked one more out of place. I can't wear that," Lissa insisted.

"Won't hurt to wear a pretty dress like this one for an hour. Why the green color looks right pretty with your eyes," the other woman insisted. Lissa couldn't remember her name, but knew she was Jake's wife.

"What about her hair?" Ethel asked.

The other woman smiled. "It's so pretty. Let's just brush it and leave it down."

Ethel laughed. "Good idea." She reached into Lissa's bag for her brush and dragged it through her long waves.

Tears burned in Lissa's eyes from the pulled hair as she acted out what felt like a nightmare. "Please, you can't do this to Lars. He doesn't want to marry me."

"Of course not," Ethel snapped. "What man would want to be tied down when he can get the goods and stay free?" She reached up and pinched Lissa's cheeks--hard, as if that, in addition to getting married, was punishment. "There, now you're rosy cheeked. Come on. The men are waiting for us. Henry must have it all set by now."

The other women climbed from the wagon, but Lissa noticed the wind had come up and the temperature had dropped. Seizing the opportunity, she grabbed her cape and shrugged it on to hide her dress that stood out in stark contrast to the calico and gingham, serviceable and sturdy, cotton dresses all the other women wore. She took her shawl and draped it over her head to keep her loose hair from flying all over once she climbed down.

Clutching her cape closed between her breasts with one hand and the shawl with her other, Lissa could do nothing but walk when the women pulled her by her upper arms to join the men.

When they stopped, she couldn't look at any of them. She stared at her own serviceable boots and almost laughed at the contrast between them and her party dress. Two dark boots moved to stand beside her, and she knew they were Lars's. She heard his angry sigh, but he made no attempt to touch her. He was furious, she knew. The black encased legs that faced them had to belong to the preacher. He intoned a few words to the settlers gathered around them.

"Get on with it. Feels like a storm is coming," Henry insisted.

Cutting the service short, the reverend asked Lars, "Do you take this woman to be your wife?"

"Ya," he answered curtly.

Lissa closed her eyes against the anger he packed into even that one word. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye and trailed down her cheek.

"And do you take this here man to be your husband and obey him in all things?"

She held her breath, unable to say the words that would tie Lars to her when she knew he wanted to be free. Needing air, she gulped in a breath with a sob and nearly choked on it.

"What did you say?" the preacher asked.

"She said yes. What did you expect her to say?" Henry said impatiently from somewhere close behind her.

"Well, then, I guess the rest is up to me. So I now pronounce you man and wife."

The settlers cheered and clapped. They slapped Lars on the back, pushing him against her. He straightened and stepped away from her, apparently not wanting to come into even casual contact with her. She heard running footfalls and everyone was quiet.

"What's going on? What did I miss?"

Wally! Lissa looked up. He hadn't returned from town with the others, and only now joined the group.

"What's going on?" he asked innocently.

Henry laughed and slapped him on the back. "We just had a wedding. Your sister just married Lars here."

Wally looked at Lissa. "Married him? Is that true, Lissa?"

Lissa raised her gaze to meet his and opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She gasped in a quick breath, but didn't get a chance to try again.

"It's true all right," the preacher insisted. "They're now Mr. and Mrs. Olson."

"Oleson," Lars corrected firmly, adding the missing middle syllable to his name.

"Hey, ain't you gonna kiss the bride?" one of the men called out.

Someone grabbed Lissa by the shoulders and turned her to face her new husband. She felt their cold rough fingers under her chin tipping her face up so she had no choice but to meet Lars's gaze. He looked so angry it sickened her. She felt lightheaded and lost her grip on her shawl. He caught it.

"Well, kiss her or I'll do it fer ya," someone called out, making the others laugh.

Lissa's vision blurred, and she closed her eyes as Lars leaned down to her and kissed her forehead.

"Aw, kiss her right," a man shouted. "Or do you want me to?"

She felt the blood drain from her head as the settlers cheered again. No, this couldn't be happening. This circus wasn't really her wedding day. But the cheering around her didn't stop. She felt Lars tip her face up to his once more before his warm lips brushed over hers for a moment or two.

"No," she whispered as she welcomed the black oblivion that crept over her. Her knees gave way and she slumped against the man who was now her husband.

Lars caught her as she fainted. He lifted her into his arms and headed for the wagon.

"He's taking her into the wagon already," someone crudely remarked with a laugh.

He whirled around to face the gathering. "You had your fun. Now it is over. We pull out in ten minutes and anyone who not ready gets left behind." The settlers scattered, everyone complaining about his shouting and bad temper.

His gaze found Wally's. "Wally, come take care of your sister. I'm going to pack my saddle bags, and once we get this train moving, I'm riding on ahead to scout the trail."

* * *

"How do you feel?" Lissa heard Wally call back from the driver's seat. After recovering from her faint as Lars laid her on her pallet in the wagon, she'd stayed there after he left. Rolling over, she'd found welcome solace in sleep. Apparently Wally had assumed the responsibility of watching her until she woke.

She sat up and pushed off the quilt someone had spread over her. "The jostling of this wagon makes my head feel like it will explode. It's pounding harder than the horses' hooves."

"We'll be stopping for supper soon if my empty stomach is any gauge," Wally said over his shoulder.

She swung her feet off her raised bed and saw that she was wearing the green taffeta dress. The whole fiasco of the forced wedding rushed back. She pressed her temples with the fingers of both hands and massaged them, but nothing would lessen the pain of the memory of Lars's face as they were pronounced man and wife.

"I'm going to get out of this dress," she called to Wally so he would give her privacy by not looking back. "I think I'll burn it the next chance I get," she mumbled to herself as she stepped out of the garment. The chill in the air raised goosebumps before she managed to pull on her blue gingham dress. She buttoned it to her neck and put on her apron that Ethel had tossed in the victuals box when they had made her change her clothes. She tried to smooth the wrinkles, but quickly gave it up as a lost cause.

She picked up the mound of crinkling taffeta from the floor and made her way to the front of the wagon where the trunk of clothes she hadn't expected to need on the trail was tied. She lifted the top, stuffed the dress in and let the top slam shut with a loud bang.

"You got me," Wally shouted with a laugh, pretending to have been shot. "Say, are you dressed yet?"

"Yes." She slid her shawl around her shoulders and climbed over the planks tied on the cast iron stove, and sat next to Wally with her legs pointed back instead of forward like his.

"So, how are you doing, Mrs. Oleson?"

She punched his shoulder. "That's not funny," she said angrily. "I'm no more his wife than Ethel is."

"Say now, I don't see as how marrying Lars is all that bad."

"You can say that because you're not the one forced to marry him. The last thing he wants is to be tied down to me." She looked around ahead of the horses and couldn't see the man under discussion. "Where is he anyway?"

Wally shook his head. "I have no idea. Once you were settled and the wagons were moving, he just told me not to worry. He promised to look after us as usual, and then he took off to scout on ahead. I haven't seen him since."

"How do you know where to go?"

"He told me to follow north along that river back there and if it turned, I should stay the course north. We picked up this road back a ways, and it heads fairly well north, so I've been following it. Passed a farm back while you were asleep, but we didn't stop seeing as how we just got supplies in town."

She looked at her brother. There was no little boy left in him now after all these months on the trail. "I...I wanted to ask why you weren't at my...at the wedding?"

"Hell, I wish I had been. If you didn't want to marry the man, I would have put a stop to it."

"Thanks," she said, laying her hand on his arm. "Where were you?"

He turned to grin at her. "I was still in town. I sold eleven of my toys that I carved on the road." He patted his pocket that jingled with coins. "And I traded one for something for you. Now I guess it can be a wedding present."

"I knew your toys were special. What did you trade for?"

"I put it in the bag with the rest of my things. Go ahead and get it."

Lissa climbed back and pulled open the tie at the top of the bag. Inside were five or six toys already finished, and the one Wally was currently working on. She could smell the fresh wood, but she thought she could also smell roses. She pushed aside a top and there in the bottom corner of the bag laid a bar of rose-scented soap. She lifted it with care and raised it to her nose to take a deep breath. "Oh, Wally, where did you ever find such a lovely thing?"

"It was at the general store. Last one he had."

"Thank you." She replaced the bag and clutched the soap against her chin so she could go on inhaling the fragrance. She crossed to the chest of drawers and pulled out the bottom drawer. The last time she had opened it, she'd replaced the bloodstained pillowslip Lars had used to wash her midriff. She had managed to get it clean only after repeated washings with the lye soap. The colors of her stitches had faded and run in the process, but she wasn't about to throw it out.

Separating the stacks of folded linens, she took one more deep sniff of the soap and slipped it down between the layers. They would all smell so wonderful when she unpacked them.

Climbing back beside Wally, she kissed him on the cheek. "You couldn't have given me a lovelier gift. I wish I had a big tub of hot water to enjoy it right now."

"You'd be a mite cold sitting in one today," Wally said. "But I'm glad you like it. And I'm sorry I wasn't at the camp to help you out."

"I don't think you could have done anything. Lars couldn't even stop them. They were convinced Lars had taken advantage of me, um...as a woman. They said some awful things that just weren't true, but they wouldn't listen to me. And...well, with the preacher right there, they insisted Lars make me an honest woman right away. So now he's tied to me and he's got another bride coming to marry him in the spring."

"He'll figure something out."

"Him? What about me? I never said I'd marry him because he never asked me to, and here I am his wife." A tear suddenly escaped her eye. She batted it away, silently vowing not to cry because it wouldn't help.

"I like Lars. I thought you did too. Being married to him might not be so bad."

"A lot you know about marriage," Lissa snapped.

"Well then, you both will figure out whether you want the marriage to work or not. And don't worry about me. Erik and Hank said I could bunk with them."

She gasped. "No!" she cried, grabbing hold of his arm. "Don't leave me here alone."

"Lissa, you won't be alone. You'll be with your husband."

His words echoed in her thoughts the rest of the day.

Chapter Seventeen

"Circle the wagons up on that rise by the trees," Lars called to Wally when he finally returned to the wagons late that afternoon. After that he was a man of few words because he did not trust himself not to punch a few people in the nose instead of talking to them. He had ridden hard all afternoon, and yet he was still angrier than he could ever remember being. Not even the thieving farmer who'd killed his packhorse and nearly killed him had angered him as much. He'd had his chance to fight back then even though it was small.

But what chance had Lissa had, fighting against the marriage she did not want? None. She had been forced to wed him with no chance to object or even to make it an event worth remembering. None of those settlers gave a damn what she had wanted. They knew nothing of her dreams to return east and marry some gentleman who would give her a home in civilized Philadelphia. Instead she had been tied to a man determined to eke out a living in the uncivilized frontier.

After riding Thunder hard for longer than he should have, Lars had stopped to rest and water the faithful animal. He had pounded on the trunk of a poor tree near the stream. It had not helped his anger though, only hurt his hands. He should have been pounding on himself. He was to blame for his anger. It was his fault. He could have stopped the wedding, but did not.

He had not wanted to. Damn. How could he have been so selfish?

For months now, he had pictured what it would be like to have Lissa as his bride. When he'd ripped the corset from her hot body, he had been so overcome with wanting her that he had nearly lost control and taken her right then. But he saw the sores and knew the pain she must have been suffering, all for the sake of her family's well-being. The kind of woman who would put her family ahead of her own comfort did not deserve to be the object of his lust. She deserved a well-mannered husband who would treat her with dignity and respect, a husband who could give her all the lovely things she deserved, not a sod hut on the lonely prairie. Not a husband who could not speak enough of her language to tell her all the things she would want to hear. She deserved a good deal better than him. All he had ever meant to her was trouble piled high with more work and worry.

Now he could never act the part of a true husband, no matter how much he wanted her. The best he could do was ensure her chance to make her dream come true. He would see to it that she and her brother were safe, warm, and fed over the winter. In the spring he would help them sell off all their goods and the wagon. With that money to start them off, he would deliver them to the nearest railroad station in Minnesota and send them back east where she wanted to live. With their stake of money and her ingenuity, he felt confident they would do just fine.

Until then he would be tortured each day and especially each night, being near to her, yet unable to touch her. He would not touch her because he could not bear to see the fright in her eyes that he had seen when the preacher pronounced them man and wife.

And because he knew very well she had never answered the preacher's question. She'd never said I do. Her choking sob could not be considered an agreement in his eyes. No, she had never agreed to become his wife. To him that meant a real marriage had not taken place.

All evening after the wedding, he had tried not to look at her. Even hidden under her cape, just a glance at her ripe figure and his body betrayed him. They had gotten through supper with as few words as were necessary. He had listened as she moved around the campsite, washing up the tin plates, putting everything away. Paying such close attention to her, he jumped when Wally stepped up behind him.

"I guess I'll come back here for breakfast, huh?"

Lars leaped to his feet and turned to face him. "Where the hell do you think you go?"

Even with only the firelight to see by, Lars could see that Wally was turning an embarrassing shade of red. "Well, I..." He watched Lissa climb from the wagon with a lantern and walk past the other side of the fire into the woods for some privacy. "I figured I'd go bunk with Hank and Erik," Wally managed. "That way you...I mean now that you're..."

Lars turned toward the fire to spare him any more embarrassment. "No need for that. These settlers may think trick they pull on your sister and me today changes things, but no. I'm responsible for getting you both to Dakota Territory. Everything is same as before." He sat back down on the log and tossed a couple of small branches on the fire. "I not want you to worry your sister by not being where she can keep an eye on you."

"But..."

"Gonna be cold tonight with the clear sky. Either bundle up good here by the fire with me, or spread that roll out in the wagon," Lars ordered.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Wally look from the wagon to the fire and back, trying to make up his mind. He chose the fire and spread his bedroll between the fire and a huge oak tree. "Well, then I reckon these oak leaves will make the best cushion to sleep on."

Lissa crossed back toward the wagon on the far side of the fire. Without looking in their direction, she said, "Good night."

"Night, Lissa," Wally responded from deep in his bedroll.

"Night, Mrs. Oleson," Lars said, instantly angry with himself for saying it.

She stopped, and for the first time since their wedding, looked straight at him. With an icy stare, she watched as he lay on the bedroll and pulled the blanket up.

"Sweet dreams," he added.

He heard her stomp into the wagon and smiled.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Wally whispered. "Neither of you are happy about the wedding, and calling her Mrs. Oleson only made her mad."

"I would rather deal with Lissa angry than feeling nothing about anything."

Wally frowned and then a grin sparkled on his face. "Guess you know my sister better than I figured you did."

"Remember you said that." Minutes later he added, "And when we get to Dakota Territory, she can have an annulment if she decides that's what she wants."

"I won't forget you said that either." Wally pulled the blanket up over his head. "Night."

"Good night," Lars answered, but he already knew from his body's reaction to thinking about her all alone in the wagon, that it was not going to be a good night--just a long one. He could not remember ever feeling so cold, and he welcomed the feeling. Sleeping on the hard ground in freezing temperatures served his body right for betraying him. He just wished he knew how to stop it or at least make it less obvious.

* * *

After sleeping so long during the afternoon, Lissa couldn't get to sleep that night either. Cold enough to seek out another quilt, she noticed how dark the canvas stretched overhead was. The campfire must be about out. That would mean that Lars and Wally would be getting mighty cold out there.

Not sleeping anyway, she might as well go add wood now before it went out completely. That would be easier than trying to start a new fire in the morning. She grabbed a quilt to wrap around herself and quietly slipped out the back opening in the canvas. She swung her leg over the side of the wagon and jumped to the ground. Pulling the quilt tight against the cold, she stood still for a few moments to be sure she hadn't awakened anyone and then tiptoed to the fire. She added more wood and then squatted beside the fire to absorb some of the warmth.

"Thank you. That feels good," Lars said softly.

Lissa was so startled that she fell on her backside. Feeling foolish, she quickly got to her feet and brushed off her skirt.

Lars rose up on his elbow. "You hurt?"

"Just my pride. You surprised me, that's all."

He nodded.

"The fire does feel good though."

"Ya. Are you cold in the wagon?"

"Yes. I can't seem to get to sleep." She held her hands out toward the fire to warm them. Her ringless finger mocked her. She twisted her hands together and pulled them against her waist. "Well...", she began as she turned back toward the wagon.

"Sit over here and get warm before you go back." He sat up in the bedroll and scooted over, leaving room for her.

"I don't think--"

"Just for a few minutes until you get warm."

He held his hand out toward her, and to save her life, she couldn't move away. She slid hers into it and allowed him to pull her close where she sat down on the bedroll. He pulled the blanket up around them both, leaving his arm around her shoulders to hold it in place. He wrapped his other hand around hers at her waist.

"Your hands are as cold as mine," she said with a little laugh. "How can you make me warm?"

Lissa could have sworn he stifled a groan, but then he smiled at her. "At least I have put a smile back on your face where it belongs all the time. I am sorry you are so unhappy. But you don't have to worry."

"No?"

He shook his head. "No, nothing will change for us."

She abandoned her smile and met his gaze. "It won't?"

"No. I am not blind, and I see you want to go on as before."

"Oh," she said, looking back at the fire. She didn't know what else to say. How could he be so certain what she wanted when she didn't even know herself?

"Are you getting warmer?" he asked, rubbing her hands.

"Not much. I think the quilt is keeping out the heat since I was so cold to begin with."

Lars rose onto his knees. "Here. I fix that. You lie down, and I'll cover you up good." Without giving her a chance to object, he pressed gently on her shoulders until she lay down on his bedroll. Shifting to sit beside her, he spread her quilt and his blanket over the two of them and lay down beside her.

"There, now you turn toward the fire." She obeyed and bent her knees. "Can you feel the warmth from the fire?" He shifted closer behind her and pulled the covers over their shoulders.

"Yes."

"Let me feel your hands." He slid his hand along her arm to her hands clasped between her breasts.

She opened her hands and wrapped them around his, holding his against her. "This is much warmer," she said a minute or two later. "My shivering has stopped."

"Good." His whisper stirred the hairs near her ear. "Now you can relax and get warm all over." He bent his knees, and she moved her legs so his were folded in behind hers.

"Yes, thank you." Her eyes floated shut.

"Good night, Lissa." He kissed her ever so lightly just under her ear.

She marveled at what a warm sensation that sent through her. He really did know how to warm her up. "Good night, Lars," she whispered as she felt her body relaxing into sleep.

When the noise of the camp woke her up, Lars was nowhere to be seen. But she felt great. The few hours of sleep she'd gotten in his arms were the deepest she'd had in weeks.

She woke Wally and got right to cooking a breakfast. When Lars returned, he and Wally ate as if they hadn't eaten in a week. After burning all night, the fire gave her good coals to bake plenty of biscuits to last a couple of days.

"I've called a meeting of the settlers," Lars said while he checked the wagon as he did every morning.

Wally pitched the bedrolls into the wagon for Lissa to put out of the way. "For everyone?"

Lars paused and looked at Wally and Lissa. "Ya, sure. It would be good for you both to know what might happen."

"Is something gonna happen?" Wally asked eagerly.

"I hope not," Lars said. "I sure do hope not."

Gathering the people south of the wagons where there was some protection from the wind, Lars took a position up on a rock so everyone could see and hear him. Lissa and Wally moved to stand with the others. She craned her neck, looking for Rosemary.

"Who are you looking for, Mrs. Oleson?" Ethel asked with a grin, emphasizing her new name.

Lissa gave her a brief look of displeasure, but wanted no more to be said about the previous day's events.

"I was hoping to see Rosemary. I'm worried how she's getting on."

"Oh, she's not here. She and Will decided to go to Fort Randall for the winter. They headed straight west from town."

Lissa sagged with disappointment. "I didn't get to wish her well or even say good-bye."

"No, you were busy getting dressed to be married and carried off by that handsome husband of yours." Ethel sighed. "I remember when Henry and I were first married. He was so gallant."

Lars called the group to attention. Happy to stop talking about marriage, Lissa turned to listen. He didn't get to say more, however, when one of the children shouted, "Look at all the horses coming our way." A long row of riders, their horses two or three across, appeared in a cloud of dust over the crest of the next hill.

"Arm yourselves until we know who they are," Lars shouted.

Lissa was nearly knocked to the ground as the settlers ran past her to get to their own wagons. The men shouted orders and the women and children screamed in fright and scattered. The women finally managed to hide their children in the wagons, while they and their armed husbands stood outside, their firearms in their hands.

Lars appeared at Lissa's side and held her arm as they ran back to the wagon. He leaped inside and retrieved the revolvers and his rifle. He handed revolvers to Lissa and Wally along with a box of ammunition. He jumped down beside them and checked the revolver he wore on his hip all the time. He slid the shells for the rifle into his coat pocket.

"You both stay here so I know where you are. I go see if Jake sees something in that glass of his."

Jake Wykovski had a spyglass he bragged about buying off a sailor in New York. He climbed up and balanced himself on the corner of his wagon and searched the horizon for the riders. Once he found them, he twisted the end of the spyglass to bring them into focus.

"Who is it?" Henry asked as he tugged on Jake's pant leg with impatience.

"Tarnation, quit your yanking at me, or I'll never get them clear in my sights," Jake yelled.

"That's a flag they're carrying," one of Henry's boys shouted from his vantage point in a wagon. "It's the army coming."

"See that, Jake. The damn kid figured out who it was before you did. You couldn't even see the smoke with the prairie fire either. What good is that thing if you can't see nothing through it?"

Word spread through the camp that it was the army approaching, and in short order, four men were chosen to go with Lars to ride down and talk to the officer in charge.

The men talked while the soldiers took advantage of the short break to dismount for a few minutes. One of the bluecoats pulled a map from his saddlebag and spread it on the ground. After much discussion, he rolled it up and stowed it.

The men shook hands all around before the army mounted their horses and resumed their march. The five settlers returned to the circle of wagons, arriving as the soldiers passed below the rise on which they stood.

Lissa felt proud, seeing Lars had everyone's attention as he filled the rest of the settlers in on what the major had said. She didn't think she had ever known a more responsible man.

"The regiment is on the way to Fort Ridgely."

"They'll keep us safe." Henry patted his wife's arm to reassure her.

"I'm afraid not."

"What do you mean? Why not?"

"The army is steadily pushing the Indians westward. He said they cleared the Santee Sioux out of here a few years back, but there's enough still around to give them trouble. Some are coming down and hitting farms or strings of wagons like ours, taking food, blankets, and the stock, and then heading back north."

"So why can't they ride north with us to keep us safe?"

"Plain and simple, they can't wait for us. They move a lot faster than we do," Lars told him.

"Unless we got a damn fire chasing us," Jake put in. A few settlers laughed, but not for long.

"They'll be moving ahead of us and hopefully no Indians are gonna come in after them, for a while at least."

"But we're on our own," Henry concluded.

"The major said that by his reckoning, we're in Minnesota right now. He showed us a map to find the town on our way to the fort. We follow roads as much as possible from now on because roads mean we are near other people. That's good if we get into trouble."

"If we get snow, that'll be the only way," someone said. "We'd never make it through this high grass with snow and ice on it." Others quickly agreed with him.

"Snow is another problem," Lars continued, "but we must watch for hostiles. From here on, we take turns on watch each night. We must look and listen for anything coming our way. We head north by northwest from here. We keep this river to our right and the hills to our left. And we must stay together. No stragglers, so check your wagons over good. Hank and Erik will be the last wagon so stay ahead of

them."

The settlers all hurried about, packing the last of their goods and gathering their children and animals. Lars nodded to Lissa as she fell into step beside him. "What else did he say?"

He looked at her and then away. "What you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. What else did the major say?"

"Um, he said to pray for rain to keep the dust down. He said the dust from train could be seen for miles."

She nodded. "And?"

He stopped and released an exasperated sigh. He pulled off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. "How do you know he said something else?"

"Because I can see it in the worry lines on your forehead," she said softly, smoothing out the lines with the pads of her fingers.

He captured her hand in his and stared at it. "They couldn't wait because they have orders to get to the fort as fast as they can. Farms and stockades north of there were burned out. More and more people are coming into the fort for the winter. They need more soldiers to assure their safety."

"So hostiles are on the rampage north of the fort?"

"Ya." Keeping her hand in his, he turned and resumed his path to the wagon. "North and northwest."

"That's right where we're going after we leave the fort."

"Ya."

* * *

Apparently Lars wasn't the only one of the men who'd told someone else about the remainder of what the major had said. Families in every wagon carried their firearms and warned their children to stay close by. The MacDonald older boys constantly circled their cattle, keeping them as close to the wagons as possible. They had already lost several on the trail and didn't want to lose any more.

Everywhere she turned, Lissa saw such young children assuming responsibilities of adult proportions. She was proud of Wally and how much he helped Lars. Children on the trail had to grow up fast to survive.

"We won't have to worry about our dust plume now," Lissa noted two days later when rain had fallen steadily all day.

The settlers had managed to get a few fires going under trees where the rain wasn't as heavy, but little more than coffee was hot for supper for any of them.

"If we spread out the oiled cloth over the bedrolls, it will not be as wet," Lars said to Wally.

"You can't mean to sleep out on the wet ground," Lissa responded. "You'll catch your death."

Her gaze met Lars's, and she felt her face blush, remembering a few nights ago when he'd kept her warm on the ground as she slept curled in his arms.

"You'll both sleep in here and so will I. No sense catching the fever just to prove you're not afraid of a little freezing rain." She bit off another bite of biscuit and turned away to chew it.

She chewed through silence until Wally spoke. "Any signs of hostiles on the road ahead?"

Lissa jerked her head around to see Lars's reaction to the question. She'd learned long ago he rarely told the whole story when he had news--especially if it wasn't good news.

Lars shook his head. "Nay, all they hear of is far to the north. The river we're following flows out of a lake ahead. We can cross near there and go on."

Smiling at the way he changed the subject, Lissa listened as Wally asked, "Are we close to Dakota Territory?"

"We stop at Fort Ridgely and then head straight north to Wood Lake. Then we have to go northwest until we hit the Red River of the North. We can cross it there before it widens and follow it north all the way."

"And once we cross it, we're in Dakota Territory, right?" Wally asked eagerly.

Lars nodded. Lissa could see he was struggling to hide a smile at Wally's enthusiasm. Despite his actions that were more manlike every day, she was thankful Lars was still willing to let him act the part of an excited boy.

Once the last cold biscuit had been eaten, she wiped the plates and returned them to the victual box. Wally stretched out on the platform over the iron stove in the front. Lars turned the lamp down to only a flicker and rose from the crate as Lissa headed back past him to her pallet. Maneuvering in the small space between the crates meant their bodies couldn't help but touch as she passed.

She felt her cheeks warm even though the contact had been through layers of clothes. She glanced up to read the expression on his face. Their gazes met, and she couldn't look away.

"Good night," Wally said as he rolled over, facing away from them.

"Good night," she and Lars responded in unison.

Breathing felt impossible. Lissa opened her mouth and struggled to draw in air. Lars's gaze flicked to her lips and only reminded her how wonderful it had felt each time he had kissed her. He slipped his hands inside her open cape and rested them on each side of her ribs.

"And good night to you," he said softly as his lips descended to cover hers.

His kiss wasn't merely wonderful, it was heavenly. She never wanted it to end. She leaned against him and felt his arms go around her and hold her close. She slid her hands around his neck. Just when she raised herself up on her toes to answer the deep need she felt to get closer, he broke off the kiss and buried his face in the side of her neck. She could hear him breathing hard. He felt as breathless as she

did. She smiled.

"This is not what we should be doing if we want things to stay as they were before," he whispered, his hot breath tickling her ear.

"But we kissed before," she insisted in all innocence, kissing his ear.

Lars groaned and swept his lips across her cheek to her mouth. She slid her fingers into his hair and held his head as she opened her mouth to the caresses his tongue gave hers. He slid his hands from her waist to the soft roundness of her backside and lifted her even tighter against him. She felt a throbbing hardness press against her belly. Not understanding why, she wanted to get closer. She wanted his hardness to meld with her softness and somehow be one.

When they both needed to breathe more deeply, the kiss ended, and they clung to each other. After a few moments, Lars relaxed his arms and allowed Lissa to slide down until her toes met the planks on the floor of the wagon. Their gazes met and even in the dim light, she could see he looked troubled.

"Did I do it wrong?" she whispered, her voice broken.

"Oh, Gud i himmel, no," he said in a rush, pulling her hard against him. He rested his cheek against her temple so his lips were over her ear to whisper. "You do nothing wrong. But I think you do not understand what you do to me by kissing so well." He placed a hand in the small of her back and pressed her belly against his swollen manhood.

She buried her face in his neck because she felt too embarrassed to look up at him. "I...I don't know anything about men. I'm sorry if that's a sign that I upset you."

"No, no. It is a sign of how much I want you, but I shouldn't."

"Oh," she replied, trying to understand what he meant. "Do you want to stop kissing me?"

He stilled the small circles his fingers were drawing on her back. "Do you want to stop?"

She drew her head back so she could see his face. She saw only caring and concern. "No," she rasped. "Do you?"

He answered by kissing her again. His lips were gentle and loving, pressing and nipping at hers. He lifted his head and smiled. "But now it would be best if we get some sleep before we do something we both regret later."

She reluctantly lowered her arms and turned to lie down on her pallet. He lifted the quilt over her and leaned down to kiss her forehead. "Sweet dreams," he whispered.

"Yes, good night," she responded.

He spread his bedroll on the planks on the floor beside her and blew out the lantern. Before long she heard his gentle snores joining Wally's as they slept. She remained awake for some time, cold and damp with her back to the canvas. She would much rather sleep with her back tucked against Lars. But he hadn't suggested it and she could only wonder why.

She lay awake, trying to remember all she knew about things male and female. Not much. She wished

she could talk to Walks in Flowers. She would ask more questions, and this time she would get complete answers.

Chapter Eighteen

Lars returned from scouting for a fording point and gathered the men on the rise on the edge of the flood plain of a small river. The wagons waited back a few hundred yards while the men discussed the crossing.

"This state's got hundreds of lakes and rivers," Henry said, scratching his head.

"At least this one has a shallow place," one of the men said.

"And nobody's charging us a damn thing to cross," Jake put in.

"The river's not swollen, but the wagon wheels will sink into the mud on the bottom and get stuck," Lars predicted.

"You can say that again. Took us nearly half a day to pull Henry's wagon out of the muck back at the last one."

"My wheels are narrower than yours, that's all," Henry said in his own defense.

"But trees are growing around here," Lars put in to stop the arguing. "As I see it, we have to cut enough to make a log road over the mud."

"Hell, that'll take a day just to cut the logs," Jake complained.

"Would you rather wait for it to freeze?" someone asked.

"Listen," Lars called out. "I ride up where the river flows from lake and I ride back downstream. This is best place to cross."

"What about turning east here and going around the lake instead of continuing north."

"I don't know. No telling how far we'd have to go, and the farther we go, the higher these hills seem to get," Henry said.

"Tarnation, this is what comes from not having an experienced guide to lead us," Jake groused. "Lars don't know the way any more than we do."

Lars pulled off his hat and hit his thigh with it. "We all saw the major's map. That and what my brother tells me is all I know. We must go north of Wood Lake before we turn west so we don't miss the Red. We must cross this river to find Wood Lake."

"How can you be so all-fired sure we'll know the Red when we see it?" one of the other men asked.

Lars grinned broadly. He relaxed his tense muscles and folded his arms over his chest. "That I know for sure. The Red comes from where the Otter Tail and Bois de Sioux Rivers join up." He paused to get all

their attention. "We will know the Red because from there it flows north."

"North, huh? I'll be damned. Only river I ever heard tell that does that," Jake said.

"That's right. Now, anyone have a better plan?" Lars looked around at each man in the gathering. Every man shook his head.

"Then I guess we'd better get out the axes and saws," Henry concluded.

The group dispersed and set to work cutting young trees and laying them side by side to make a log road over the mud to the river's edge. By the following noon, the logs had been pressed into the mud on both sides. The road was complete.

"Let's bring the wagons down one at a time," Lars ordered.

"Want a test with a light one like ours?" Hank asked. "We not got much inside."

"Might be a good idea," Henry put in.

Lars shrugged. "Fine. Doesn't matter to me who goes first. We all gotta work until every one is across."

Hank and Erik's wagon was much smaller than the Conestogas. It was the size of a delivery wagon, with high sides and a canvas top that had been added for their protection. The bachelors' wagon would be the easiest to pull out if the road did not work as hoped.

Hank drove the wagon along the road and across the river with little difficulty. The opposite bank rose at a steeper angle. He whistled and shouted to encourage his team as they struggled up. Lars and Erik had ridden across, one on each side of the team. They discovered that the wagon wheels only sank a little way into the mud bottom of the river.

Erik gave a whoop of joy at being across. While he and Hank drove the wagon ahead a few hundred yards and unhitched their horses, Lars went right back across the river.

"While we still have hours of light, we'll take the heaviest ones next," Lars told the others waiting to cross.

"That would be mine with all the furniture and goods my wife convinced me she couldn't live without," Henry responded.

"Hank bring his team back across. We harness them in tandem with yours and others to get up the other side easy."

An hour later, Henry's wagon was ready to move. He insisted Ethel and the children wait until the wagon was pulled across before they forded the river.

"We'll take you on horseback," Lars promised when their little girl started to cry. The child hid in her mother's skirts, but looked up at him shyly. "I promise," he said in a softer tone.

"Can I ride with you?" the child asked.

Lars smiled. "Ya, sure." His grin grew in response to the smile on the child's face. He marveled at the

warm feeling the child's smile had given him. He couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to have a child of his own, a little girl with gray eyes and creamy skin like Lissa's. Lars realized what that meant and swore under his breath in Norwegian as he turned to help the next wagon.

Lissa had watched the exchange, and a smile tugged at her own lips. She had noticed before that Lars was good with children. And even this child knew he was a man of his word.

Hitching the second team of horses to each wagon took longer than getting them across the river. Just as everyone was feeling good about how smoothly it was going, rain began to fall. By the time only half of the wagons were across the river, there wasn't a man, woman, or child who wasn't drenched to the skin and shivering with the cold.

Lissa stayed on the south bank to help watch the children as the wagon line moved slowly ahead. She handed them up to Erik and Lars and a few other men who had saddle horses to carry them across. She could see they had a roaring fire going near the wagons on the north side. She looked back at the one remaining wagon. No small children to watch for this one, she thought thankfully. She leaned against a tree, trying to get protection from the rain. Her throat felt sore and she couldn't help but shiver from the cold.

Lightning cracked and thunder boomed just as the last wagon left the log path and entered the river. Frightened, the team reared up and turned. Lars and Erik were in their positions on either side and reached down to grab the reins and get the horses under control. They couldn't slow them, but they at least got them running in the right direction. They took the opposite bank with no trouble and in record time. Staying with the team, the men got them slowed and into position in the circle with the others.

Crossing the river one last time, the men carried the remaining women on their horses. Lissa reached up to grasp Lars's hand. Instead, he leaned over and put his hands under her armpits and lifted her into his lap.

"You're shivering," he said, his brow knit in a frown.

"You mean you're not?" she asked.

He opened the front of his coat and pulled her next to him and then wrapped the front around her as best as he could. She slid her hands around his chest and laid her head against his neck.

"Oh, that's much better, but you'll get all wet."

With his free arm tight around her, Lars directed Thunder across the river to join the others. He slid from the saddle and lifted her into his arms.

"I'm cold, not crippled," she said. "I can walk."

Lars chuckled. "I know you can. Next time you carry me to prove it."

She smiled, but felt too tired to complain. It was rather nice being carried. Wally was in their wagon and had lit the lantern and changed his clothes. Lars swung her in.

"You get out of those wet clothes. I'll go take care of Thunder and be right back."

Wally turned his back as she expected, and Lissa welcomed the chance to put on two petticoats and her

heaviest dress. She pulled on her mother's coat, though it wasn't as thick as her wet one. She wrapped a wool shawl over that. She was still shivering. She held her hands on either side of the lantern glass to warm them.

Lars appeared at the back of the wagon minutes later with a steaming coffeepot in his hands. He handed it in to Wally, who poured three cups of the dark brew.

"Thank you, Ethel," Lars said, sipping some before he shrugged off his coat and spread it out with the rest of the wet clothes at the back. He held the coffee cup and inhaled the steam as Lissa was doing, sitting cross-legged on her pallet.

"Get out of your wet things," Lissa told him, her teeth chattering with each word.

Lars looked at her with a strange look on her face.

"Um," Wally said reflecting his discomfort with the potentially intimate scene. "I'll..." He looked from the opening in the back of the wagon where the rain still streamed down, to his sister.

"He'll change and then you can help me get out the food," Lissa said as if there were no undercurrents to their conversation. "Get back there and change," she added to Lars when he didn't move. She waited for him to pass her and turned her back.

The rain pounding on the bonnet and the occasional thunder were the only sounds as they ate their cold supper. Lars and Lissa sat on her pallet and Wally sat on the crate next to the victual box.

"The bacon may be cold, but it's greasy and makes the dry biscuits slide down easier," Wally said into the silence.

Lissa looked up at him and then laughed. Her laughter ended in coughing. Lars looked at her with a frown and reached out to feel her forehead.

"You feel hot. Are you getting sick from the wet?" he asked.

"I'm too cold to have a fever," she muttered, handing her plate back to Wally who knocked off the crumbs and put it away.

Lars did the same and rose. "We should all bundle up to sleep warm. We can't get sick."

Wally climbed to the front of the wagon and resumed his place on the planks over the stove. Lissa could feel Lars watching her as she tried to cover herself on the pallet. She raised an arm to pull the quilt up and hit the bonnet. Water sprinkled down on them.

"Oh, no." She jumped from the pallet and stood beside him. They watched as water ran in through the canvas for a time before finally slowing. She shivered at the prospect of sleeping there and getting wet again.

Lars stepped by her to grab her grass-filled pallet. He laid it dry side up on the planks that lay down the center of the wagon between the rows of crates. "I can share the dry floor with you. We want no more water in here."

Lissa looked over at Wally, saw his back, and heard his gentle snores. She looked up at Lars and knew

she would be warm and safe with him. She lowered herself onto one hip. He sat behind her with his legs turned the same way and pulled up the blanket. She pulled her quilt from the crate, and he added that on top. Wrapping his arms around her, they lay down.

"This is so soft, not hard like sleeping on the ground."

Lissa laughed and jabbed him lightly with her elbow. "Do you want me to make a pallet for you?"

"No," he said easily. "I share yours." He took her hands in his and nestled in close behind her. "Feeling warmer?"

"No, not yet. But I feel better."

"Ya, me too."

* * *

Two long wet days later, they pulled through the gates of Fort Ridgely. Soldiers were dispatched to help with the horses once the wagons were parked out of the way of the work in the fort.

"You stay with your sister," Lars told Wally when their horses had all been fed and watered. "I'm going to check with the commanding officer."

The major greeted them and offered the families a place to stay indoors instead of in their wagons overnight. But that was not all Lars needed.

"Sir, I need of doctor. My wife is ill. She got cold and wet fording a river two days south of here, and she's feverish and coughing."

"We don't have a doctor here, but I know an Indian woman who's good with herbs and the like. Maybe she could help," he proposed. "Unless you're the type who wants nothing to do with the redskins."

"If she can help Lissa get well, I am grateful no matter who she is."

The major nodded and called for his aide. The soldier got his instructions and left the office. "I'll have the woman come to the barracks." He paused and thought a moment. "Better yet, my second in command is a bachelor and out of the fort on a patrol now. You and your wife can use his quarters." He pointed the location out from the front step. "It's just one room, but you'll be much more comfortable, and there's a big fireplace. I'll send someone over to stoke up a fire."

Lars smiled and shook the man's hand. "Thank you, sir. Thank you."

"I'll send the Indian over soon as my aide finds her," he promised.

Lars ran back to Wally and Lissa who had been shown into the last building in the row of wooden barracks, empty because the fort was lacking enough soldiers to fill them. The other settlers had staked out the large room in areas where each family would have their own space.

Lissa was lying on one of the bunks, her eyes closed. She looked so pale that Lars felt pain shoot through him. He hated the thought that the fever might take her from him. More determined than ever that he would not lose her, he crossed to the bunk.

"The major has given us another room to stay in that will be better for her," he told Wally. "Can you manage here without us?"

Erik and Hank had appeared behind him and had heard his question. They stepped to Wally's side and put a hand on each of his shoulders. "You not worry. We take good care of Wally," they promised. "You take care of Lissa."

Lars pulled the handle of Lissa's bag over his arm and lifted her from the bunk. She barely roused from her slumber--just enough to settle against him and lay her hand on his chest. Wally ran to open the door and close it behind him.

Lars arrived at the new quarters at the same time as the soldier sent to make a fire. A fireplace was centered on one sidewall while a table and two chairs rested in front of the only window, located on the wall beside the door. The far end of the room was filled with a double-sized bed that had a straw-filled mattress suspended on ropes tied within the wooden frame. A small chest of drawers stood beside it with a candle on top.

Lars laid Lissa on the bed and pulled off her cape. Her shoes and wet stockings followed. She curled on her side as he raised the blanket over her, and went right back to sleep.

"She's sick, huh?" the soldier asked. He got the fire started and fanned the flames.

"Ya, she stay out in the rain to help other women and their children."

"You got children?" he asked to make conversation.

Lars shook his head. "No children."

The soldier laughed. "Not yet, anyway." He rose and crossed to the door. "Anything else you need, sir?"

"No, but thank you."

The soldier left and Lars crossed to the fire. He was not sure what was best for Lissa. Should he carry her to lie by the fire, or was the fever making her too warm so that the fire would make her worse? A knock at the door saved him from making any decision. He opened the door and discovered an Indian woman wrapped in a striped blanket standing on the stoop.

"You want help from Indian for sick wife?" she asked.

Lars nodded and stepped aside so she could enter. She hurried to the bed, and Lars strode around to the other side. A small child was bound snugly in a cradle board on the woman's back. Only the child's eyes and nose were visible and a flat projection over his head had even protected him from the falling rain.

The woman felt Lissa's head and listened to her breathe.

"Lars," Lissa mumbled, turning and flopping her arm over the blanket.

Lars sat on the edge of the bed and gently lifted her hand and held it.

"You Lars?" the woman asked.

Lars nodded, and the woman grunted.

"How long she like this?"

"Ah, two days. She got very wet and cold crossing a river. At first I try get her warm because she was cold. Now she burns up."

He watched as the woman pulled a small bag from her belt. She took four tin cups from the shelf over the table and dropped a pinch of something from the bag into each one.

"This for tea to make feel better. She drink all the tea. It take away fever and she be fine."

Lars could not stop the smile that broke across his face. "She be fine? You sure?"

She looked at him a moment and then nodded. "Get water hot and wake her now for first cup. Second cup when you go to sleep. Third in the night and fourth in morning."

He nodded. "Yes, I understand. Anything else I can do?"

"You keep her warm. Fire not do it. She want you." And with that she slipped out the door.

Lars allowed himself a moment to wish that Lissa did want him as he wanted her. Shaking his head to clear it of wishful thinking, he set to work. He took the pitcher from the dry sink and went out for water. As soon as he got some boiling, he filled the first cup the healer had prepared. While it steeped, he lifted Lissa up to lean against him and talked softly to her to wake her up to drink the tea.

"Drink all of it," he encouraged when she wanted to stop drinking and go back to sleep. He finally managed to get her to drink the last drop and set the cup up on the chest. Lissa had fallen back asleep, her head on his chest. He circled her with his arms and leaned back.

Sometime later, a knock at the door woke him.

"Come in," he called, not wanting to move.

The door opened a few inches and Wally stuck his head in. "I...I'm sorry to bother you, but I thought you'd be hungry. All the settlers put what they had into one big pot over the cook's fire, and made stew for everyone. The army cook gave us some bread which was right nice of him."

Wally set the tray on the table and looked at Lissa. "How's she doing?"

Lars eased her head and shoulders onto a pillow and rose. "An Indian woman came with tea that takes fever down."

"Wally, is that you?" Lissa asked hoarsely.

"It's me." He crossed to the bed and sat beside her. "How're ya feeling?"

"Like I'm buried in hot mud," she mumbled.

"I brought you some hot food that'll fix you right up." He turned to Lars. "You be sure to eat it all too. We can't have you getting sick." He walked to the door. "Well, I gotta go. See you in the morning." And with that he was gone.

Lars brought the tray to the chest beside the bed and proceeded to feed Lissa at once. He spooned out mouthfuls for her, faster than she could chew and swallow them.

"Here, I can do that," she said, taking the bowl and spoon from him. "You get yours and eat too."

He reached up for his bowl without moving from her side. His hip pressed against her thigh, and he was only too conscious of the closeness. She wanted to stop eating before her bowl was empty, but Lars knew she'd eaten very little for two days and insisted she finish.

"That was so good," she said, relaxing against the headboard.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"You know, I think I am. I'm still hot." She sat up and tried to pull off her mother's coat that she wore under her cape for extra warmth.

He lifted it off her arms and covered her carefully once she had lain back down. "The fire has warmed the room considerably. Now you should sleep. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Lars hung her coat on the hook by the door and stepped out to find the privy. He welcomed the cold damp air and wished it would cool off parts of him that were getting hotter each moment he had to be alone in the room with Lissa in that big bed. But he did not dawdle in the cold. Despite the situation, he hurried back to her side. As he passed the barracks, it was dark. All the settlers must have been as tired as he was. They were all lucky to get a good night's sleep in a bed for a change.

He stopped. What was he thinking? Lissa was in that bed. She would sleep in it all night, not him. Lord help him, if he got in the bed with her, he would not be thinking about sleeping at all. Damn Henry and the others for pulling off the shotgun wedding. It was a hundred times harder to keep his hands off the woman he desired over all others now that she was legally his wife.

Rain had begun again. Lars hurried along the path. He could not even think about sleeping in that bed with her. But when he entered the room and saw Lissa on the bed shivering, her teeth chattering, he knew he had no choice as to what he needed to do.

"You keep her warm. She want you," the healer had said. And he would, but first came the second cup of medicinal tea.

While he was out of the room, Lissa had managed to sit up and use the chamber pot. She had just crawled back under the covers when he returned and prepared the warm drink for her again. Her hands had been shaking so badly she could not hold the cup steady without his help. She leaned against his chest as before, only this time she wrapped her arms around him inside his vest and held him tight.

"Thank you," she managed. "I think it's working, but one minute I feel like I'm burning up and the next my teeth are chattering. I'm so cold now. Can I sit by the fire?"

He felt the cold of her hands through his shirt. "I've got a better idea. The Indian said I should keep you warm, and you must trust me that it will work."

She smiled and lifted her head from his chest to look up at him. "You know I trust you."

He kissed her gently. "Good." He paused until she nodded. "Take off your dress."

"What?"

"The sooner you get warm, the sooner you stop shivering." Not looking her way, he removed his boots. Slowly and deliberately, he rose and took off his vest and shirt and hung them over the chair with care. Still covered by his long underwear, he undid his belt buckle and stepped out of his trousers. He hung them over the chair too and returned to the bed.

She had been watching him without moving. He sat down beside her thighs and reached over to unbutton the front of her bodice. His fingers were trembling as he fought to control his desire.

"What are you going to do?" she whispered.

"I make you warm so you get well. I worry about you, and when we pull out in the morning, I want to know that you will get well."

Lissa didn't know what to make of it all. The tea had made her feel better, but she was very cold. Before she knew it, Lars was tugging her blouse loose and pulling it off her arms.

"Now lie down." He pulled the blanket to her neck, but pushed it aside at her waist and unbuttoned her skirt. "Lift your hips," he said as he tried to pull it off. Catching on the fullness of her two petticoats, he could not get them to move.

"You have to untie the petticoats too," she squeaked.

He soon discovered how and grasped all three garments in his hands and tugged them down. He pressed his lips hard between his teeth when a glimpse through her shift of the dark shadow between her thighs nearly sent him over the edge. He was thankful that the underwear, bought large to accommodate his broad shoulders, was baggy below the waist. He jerked the skirts from under the covers and laid them across the table beside her blouse. Blowing out the lantern on the table, he slid under the covers beside her.

She watched him, clutching the blanket under her chin. "How are you going to make me warm by taking our clothes off?"

He cleared his throat after his voice seemed to break on his first try at speaking. "The same way I make you warm the nights we slept curled together."

She smiled. "Oh, good," she said, not understanding why she didn't think that was as good as it might have been if he had gone some other route. She rolled onto her side, facing the fire, but away from him. She heard him take a deep breath and bring his chest against her back.

"There--does that feel warm?"

She thought a minute and then answered, "A little. Put your arm around me and let me hold your hand like before." He groaned strangely first, but his hand snaked around her waist. She wrapped her arms around his, holding his hand between her breasts. He said something in Norwegian she didn't understand.

She looked back over her shoulder at him. "Are you all right?"

He swallowed hard and nodded. "Ya, just go to sleep quick."

She turned away and thought a moment. "I would be warmer if I backed up against you so more of us touched."

Without giving him a chance to disallow it, she shot her hips back until they met with his belly. His legs jackknifed up against the back of hers as he sucked in a quick breath.

"That's it. That's much better." She sighed and wiggled a little to settle into a comfortable spot in the lumpy mattress. She felt the same hardness in Lars surging against her backside as the nights they lay on the wagon floor. She had thought about everything she knew that might explain it. She thought about the way the dog her father kept at the workshop always behaved when he got around female dogs. Her father had tried to hide it, but she had seen it happen.

Then there was the trouble the men had with the horses on the trail. What a terrible racket that was. The horses were screaming and their hooves flying. The stallion mounted the mare, his masculine parts huge, but in no time he was off and gone. And she couldn't forget her cat, Ladybelle. She'd had a terrible run-in with the cat next door. They'd fought tooth and claw, but that cat climbed up on Ladybelle anyway. She had screeched something awful as he'd had his way with her. He even bit her to hold her still and then she had run away fast when he was done with her.

All that noise and fighting to get away from the males. The female animals obviously didn't like what they were doing. She didn't expect it would be any better for her when she mated, but she knew the pulsing pressure against her backside meant that Lars was interested in it. Every muscle in his body seemed to be tense. His breathing was anything but steady.

She turned her head so she could see his face in the firelight. "Why do you do that?" she asked softly.

"Do what?" he asked tightly.

She moved her hip against his erection. "That. Why does your body do that when we are close?"

He groaned and turned his face into her hair that lay loose on the pillow. She raised her hand and lifted his hair and tucked it behind his ear so she could see his face again. "I not do it," he rasped.

"What do you mean you don't? I can feel it. Sometimes you are carrying me on your horse, or kissing me, or when we make each other warm, and I can feel it."

He groaned more loudly and rolled away from her onto his back. "I not do it willingly. I try not to."

"Oh, I can understand that," she put in quickly. "With all the screaming and jumping around that the animals do when that happens to them, I can understand why you wouldn't want it to happen."

He rose up on one elbow over her. "Don't want it to happen?" he exploded. "Is my English too bad? Do we talk about the same thing? Of course I want it to happen. I want it to happen since first moment I see you." He slapped his hand over his mouth and fell back down on the bed.

Lissa was amazed and certain that there must be a great deal more to this matter than she had been able to discover from her memory of animal behavior. She rose on her elbow facing him and laid her hand on

his chest. He covered her hand with his and rolled his head over and met her gaze.

"From the first moment?" She watched him nod and thought a moment. "But why? The animals don't seem to want it very much."

Chapter Nineteen

Lars smiled and raised his hand to cradle her face. "I want you so much because we not like animals. I would like making love with you very much, and I make sure you like it too."

"You can do that for me?"

He chuckled. "Yes."

She frowned, not feeling convinced.

"Did you not like my kisses?"

She smiled broadly. "Yes, they're very nice. In fact, I like them more with each one. And they make me warm."

He responded with a laugh. "Then kiss me now and see if you still like it." She looked around the room. "No one else is here to see us or hear us, little one. And we have all night."

She leaned toward him, but realized she couldn't reach his lips with hers. Scooting up higher with her breasts pressed against him, she laid her palm on his cheek to hold his head as she kissed him. A little moan escaped as she raised her face just an inch or two from his. "Yes, I still like that very much." She ran her fingers over his lower lips. "It gives me a funny feeling in my belly. May I do it again?"

"Ya, sure," he said. As they kissed a second time, he rose onto his elbow to take charge of the kiss. She granted him that power over her and lay back down. His tongue danced with hers and left a promise of more as he laid a trail of kisses across her jaw and neck.

"It worked," she said brightly.

He looked at her and frowned. "What worked?"

"You said you could warm me up and you did. I'm not cold anymore, but I do have that feeling in my belly. It sort of feels good."

He smiled. "Ya, good." He toyed with the bow on the front of her shift. "But we should stop your lessons on lovemaking and let you get some sleep."

"Is that what this is? Lovemaking? But why do the animals seem to hate it so?"

"Because they are not people, or maybe they not hate it so much. They are just noisy about it."

"But people wouldn't be noisy."

He shrugged. "They can be. When the moment comes, you will feel such great pleasure filling you, you might want to cry out."

She laughed. "That would never happen."

He shrugged again and laid down on his side with his hand on her midriff, looking at her.

She laid her hand over his and drew little circles in the pale hairs with the pads of her fingers. "What could you ever do that would give me such pleasure that I would want to scream?"

He began duplicating the small circles she drew with his own on her midriff and then on the side of her breasts. As the circumference of his circles grew, she felt her nipples harden and stand up. It was as if they were reaching out to have him stroke them too. She closed her eyes and tossed her head to the side away from him. She felt her cheeks warm as she tried to imagine what that would feel like.

"What are you thinking?" he asked huskily.

"No, it's too embarrassing."

"No, little one. Too much has passed between us in our journey together. There is nothing between us that is embarrassing."

She met his gaze shyly. "Well, I was just imagining what it would feel like if...if you laid your hand over my breast."

He smiled and slid his hand up over a breast. She gasped and bit her lower lip. He toyed with the soft weight in his palm and captured the nipple between his thumb and first finger. "Just like this."

"Oh, my," she whispered, raising her shoulder to get the other breast nearer his warm hand.

"You want me to touch this one too?" he asked.

"Yes, more. I want you to touch me more."

"You see now, don't you?"

She opened her eyes and met his gaze. "See what?"

"See I keep my promises. I tell you I warm you up."

She loved his smile and responded to it with one of her own. "Yes, but you're keeping secrets from me."

He frowned.

"Lars, you know so much more than I do, and yet you're not telling me."

He ran the backs of his knuckles along her cheek. "I not tell you. It is something that you must be shown, but I not do that."

"You mean you don't want to because you know I won't like it. My cat didn't like it."

"No, you will like it. I promise that." He ran his knuckles down the side of her neck and unfolded a finger to dip in the open front of her shift and into the valley between her breasts, his gaze following his finger.

"Then show me."

His gaze met hers and he flattened his hand between her breasts. "That is only something that a man shows his wife. I cannot show you."

"I am your wife. Why can't you show me?"

He sighed and shook his head. "You did not say 'I do' when the preacher asked. You not want me as husband. So I not take your virginity. Such an act cannot be undone."

"So you wish to stop now that my nipples are hard and...and my belly aches, and my head pounds for wanting you to touch me more?"

"No, I wish on every star in the sky that I can make love to you all night, and every night after this one."

Lissa couldn't look away from his gaze. The firelight flickered against the ceiling and put golden highlights in his hair. She reached up to run her fingers into his hair and pulled his head down for a kiss.

Heated minutes later she whispered, "I do."

He smiled.

"And I do want you too," she added.

* * *

A pounding on the door woke them at first light. Lars leaped from bed and pulled on his long underwear. He hopped across the room as he stuffed his legs into his trousers. He swung the door open, ready to jump down the throat of whoever had awakened him in the middle of the night--then he saw that morning had arrived.

Wally stood there with a tray of food for their breakfast. "Maybe when we get to Dakota Territory we could open a restaurant, and I can carry food to the tables." He paraded by Lars to put the tray on the table. "How are you feeling this morning, Lissa?" he asked as he turned toward the bed where she lay.

Lars saw she had pulled the blanket up and clasped it in both hands under her chin. What she couldn't know was that it fell down on each side to expose her creamy bare shoulders.

"Fine," she rasped. Clearing her throat, she added, "I feel much better. Thank you for bringing us something to eat."

Wally hadn't waited to hear all that she said. He turned on his heel and strode toward Lars who stood between him and the door. His face was red and his hands were fisted at his sides. "I trusted you to take care of her, not take advantage of her," he said angrily, standing up to Lars despite the difference in their height. "You said you were going to put us on a train going east come spring."

Lars ran his hand through his hair and slapped it down to his side. "I know, but now I take care of her. I

will always take care of her. She's my wife now."

"But you told me you would have the marriage annulled so you could marry your Norwegian bride and instead, you...you..."

Lars heard Lissa's gasp. "Wally, your sister is truly my wife now, and that not ever change. And I will always take care of her."

Wally stood toe to toe a few moments longer. "Just see that you do," he said as he stormed out of the room.

Lars turned to see that Lissa had curled up into a ball under the blanket. As he approached the bed, he heard her draw in a shuddering breath and knew she was crying but trying to hide it. He grabbed one corner of the blanket and whipped it off her. She sat up like a shot and covered her nakedness with her hands. He cradled her head in his hands and wiped her tears with his thumbs. "You are my wife now. There is no need to hide from me."

"I am your wife now?" she said, wiping away the tears from her cheeks.

"Ya." He smiled as her crying ceased. "Jeg elsker De," he whispered as he lowered his head to kiss her.

Moments later after the kiss deepened, he broke it off reluctantly. "Much as I like to kiss you, Mrs. Oleson, we both must dress and eat. The wagon train might leave without us."

She rose and slipped into her clothes that were dry and warm where Lars had hung them on the chairs before the fire.

"What did you say in Norwegian before you kissed me before?"

Lars did not turn back to her. "It something some lucky Norwegian men say to their wives."

"And do the wives ever say it to their husbands?"

He shrugged. "Only if the husbands are very lucky."

They sat at the table and ate quickly. She drank the final cup of tea, though she said she felt fine without it.

"How did that go again?" she asked.

He didn't pretend not to understand. He looked into her wide eyes and said, "Jeg elsker De."

She attempted to pronounce it and he helped her get it right. "Jeg elsker De," she said again with a big smile for him.

How would he ever tell her that it meant I love you?

* * *

"Wagons, ho," Lars called with a wave of his arm. He led the train out the gates of Fort Ridgely heading northwest. Each family waved good-bye to Henry and Ethel and their children. They were staying a day

or two to rest and then they were going to move east to find a place to settle near a lake.

"Wherever it is, it will be beautiful," Ethel said as they parted.

Henry had thanked Lars for all that he had done for them. "I wish you God's speed."

When the Reverend Bascom learned his hosts were leaving the wagon train and no one else offered him a place in their circle, he chose to stay at the fort. Lars had not argued with him, for he still got angry each time he saw the man.

The wagons followed the ridge above the flood plain of the Minnesota River. They paused at a few farms as they passed, but there was little real news about the whereabouts of any Indians on the warpath. Lars hoped that was good.

It was the first week in October by the time they neared Wood Lake where soldiers from the Fort Ridgely garrison had suppressed the Santee Sioux uprising led by Chief Little Crow a few years earlier.

"This is where we leave you, folks," Jake announced at breakfast a mile or so outside of town. "My wife and I will be heading a little east to find us a pretty spot."

As the settlers said their individual good-byes, one of the women shouted, "There's a horse and rider heading our way--fast."

With only one rider coming, the scramble for firearms was more subdued than when they had first spotted the regiment of soldiers coming their way, but they were cautious nonetheless.

"It's a young fella," Jake called, looking through his spyglass that he kept handy.

The man, who looked to be in his twenties, rode hard right to the wagons and slid from his horse to the ground before the animal came to a stop. He ran into the knot of men watching him. "Damn, am I glad to see you folks. Who's the wagon master? I gotta talk to him."

Everyone turned to look at Lars, who stepped forward. "These folks voted me into that job, but I don't claim to do it by trade or experience."

"Howdy, my name's Jeb Parker and my wife Lucy is in town. Her sister Linda is there too. They is twins." He grinned broadly.

"What's your business with us?" Lars asked.

"Oh, right. Well, we're from Mississipp', and we followed the big river all the way to Minnesota and then headed west. Our home place was burned to the ground down there in '64, and there warn't enough work to go around for all the folks needing it. We up and decided to find a new life out west." He grinned again and looked around, obviously enjoying the audience.

"Your business with us?" Lars prompted.

"Oh, yeah. We ain't got no fancy wagon like you folks, and it's taken us over a year to get this far. We've been in Wood Lake waiting 'til we could get a new wheel built. We cracked the old one so many times that it just couldn't be put back together again. But now that it's fixed, we aim to set out west again. When we heard y'all was going west from here, well, we wondered if we could tag along."

He pulled off his hat. "I'm begging ya to let us join y'all," he went on without giving Lars time to respond. "I don't feel I can handle traveling alone with two women into Indian Territory. My soul would burn in hell for all eternity if I let anything happen to them sweet sisters." He glanced around again with a conspiratorial look on his face. "And if we lived through any trouble, my wife would never let me hear the end of it." He laughed and turned back to Lars. "So what do ya say? Can we join up with you folks?"

Lars looked around to see smiles of agreement on the men's faces. "I don't see why not."

"We could use more hands if we get into trouble," Herb put in.

"Yahoo!" Jeb yelled, waving his hat in the air. "Lucy is going to be so happy. She and Linda have been sewing and doing laundry to help pay for our stay here. They are going to be so happy we are moving on. I'm going to tell 'em right now."

He ran for his horse and swung into the saddle without using the stirrup for a leg up. He straightened in the saddle and grabbed the reins and then froze. A frown erased the grin that had been ear to ear. "Say, we don't have to pay nothing to join up with you, do we? I hear tell that some wagon masters charge a bundle to lead the train."

Lars shook his head. "No money changes hands with us. We all settlers who hope to get where we go safely. Jake and his wife here leave us this morning to stay in Minnesota. You join up." He shrugged. "We help each other."

"Couldn't be better," Jeb said. "When do we leave?"

"We all pick up supplies in town, and we see Jake and his wife off. The stock need day's rest, so we head out tomorrow morning. Are you ready by then?"

"Yes, sir," Jeb replied with a salute. He jerked the reins to one side to turn his horse, and spurred his flanks, putting him into a gallop for the return ride to Wood Lake. His second yahoo could be heard as he disappeared around the bend.

* * *

Calling the settlers to arms and telling them to watch for Indians as they traveled made only some feel better because they were prepared. Most just seemed more nervous. Lars asked Lissa to do her best to encourage the other women to be as aware of their surroundings as the men were. But some of the women were so busy tending their children along with doing all the cooking, cleaning up, getting the bedrolls out each night and putting them away in the morning, plus any laundry they had an opportunity to do, that they hardly had time for anything else.

Lars checked on all the wagons once they were in motion, and returned to the front of the line. Wally was walking beside the lead horse while Lissa sat on the bench in the front to watch ahead. Long tendrils of her hair had broken free of the long braid hanging across her breast. They danced around her face in the breeze. Lars felt his body tighten as he watched her. Because of circumstances, not by choice, they had not made love since they'd left the fort. And he would have to stay away if he did not want to give her a child to bear. He might have already.

He pulled Thunder's reins to slow him. "Steady, boy," he said as he reached for the front of the wagon, and swung out of his saddle onto the bench. She smiled and scooted over to give him room to sit. He

loved the way her face lit up when she smiled. He drew her into the circle of his arms and rewarded her with a kiss. She laid her head against his chest, and they both watched the trail ahead of them for signs of trouble as they trekked on in silence.

Facing the future felt easier now that he was not alone, Lars realized. But he could see it would be a bad idea to be in love with his wife. If he loved her and lost her to illness, or accident, or whatever, the pain would be too great to bear. Better to keep her at arm's length, he decided, but then denied his own decision by keeping his arms around her.

"Are we going to know about an Indian attack before it begins?" Lissa asked.

Lars looked distinctly uncomfortable with the question and stared ahead rather than answering right away.

"I guess I know the answer," she replied to his silence.

"No, I say nothing because you look for answers I not have," he said. He relaxed his hold on her and she swung around to sit facing him. "I get one letter from my brother. A trapper carried it to Minneapolis and somehow it got to me before I left Norway. He says there are often signs beforehand." He shrugged. "But we are always moving. We may see signs left days before and miss new ones."

"So there's nothing we can do?" Lissa asked.

"Not other than keep the guns loaded and be on the lookout."

She slid her arms around his waist and pressed her breasts against his chest. He kissed the top of her head and leaned his cheek on the kiss.

He would have to rethink the policy of not loving his wife. The problem with his reasoning was that it was too late. He already loved her.

* * *

Snow-covered ground made watching for tracks easy. The following evening they could hear animals in the distance.

"Listen!" Lars said in a loud whisper, holding up his hand for silence.

After a moment Wally said, "That's just a coyote or a dog howling."

"Listen!" Lars said again but in a sterner voice, his brows lowered in an angry look.

The animal howls they heard were repeated but from different directions. The first had been from the north. The second and third were from the northwest and then the west. After a few shorter howls, they stopped.

Lars rose and tossed out the remaining contents of his coffee cup. "I'll be back after I check on the lookouts," he said casually as he set his cup on the rock beside where Lissa sat.

Before he could move away, she rose and grabbed his arm. "Those sounds weren't animals, were they?"

He looked at her after a glance at Wally. "No way to tell," he said with a shrug.

"But you think not," she concluded.

He shook his head slowly and laid his hand over hers. "I think they know we come," he said levelly. "There may not be any trouble, but they know now that we are here."

Lissa could tell Lars hadn't wanted to tell them the Indians knew they were there. "Lars," she said, holding his gaze. "We'll be able to help more if we know everything."

"We want to know whatever you know," Wally added.

"You can trust us," she added when he still had not spoken.

"Ya," Lars replied. "You right. I just not want you to worry." He patted her hand and left the circle of light around the fire to check on the men who were taking turns watching for trouble.

Lissa lay awake that night, listening to all the animal sounds. A light rain had started at suppertime that turned to snow overnight. Wally and Lars had stretched the oiled cloth between two young trees to make a lean-to in which to sleep. Lissa always slept on her pallet on the wagon floor where it was warmer and drier.

Having gotten little sleep that night due to the howling, she happily fell right to sleep the next. But in the night she was awakened by footsteps approaching the wagon. She heard a few steps and then they stopped. She held her breath and strained to listen. The footsteps began again, but only for a few steps again before they stopped.

An owl hooted nearby and she jumped, uttering a small cry of surprise that she couldn't stop. The footsteps began again, and she was ready to scream when she saw the shadow on the side of the bonnet. A man stood between the wagon and the fire.

"Are you awake in there?" Lars asked in a quiet voice.

Lissa let out the breath she had been holding. "Yes," she replied with a nervous giggle that relieved some of her tension.

He swung into the rear of the wagon and sat on a crate beside her. "Can't you sleep?" He leaned on his arms resting on his knees so their faces were close.

She smiled. "I was doing fine until I thought I heard an Indian sneaking up on the wagon. I was ready to reach for a gun."

"You heard an Indian?"

"It was you," she said, playfully pushing against his knee.

"Must have been." He took off his hat and set it aside. "I think you would not hear an Indian if he sneaked into camp."

"Oh?" Her voice cracked.

"But I hear they do not attack at night."

"They just howl then to keep me awake and worried." She shivered. "It's really getting cold tonight."

"Ya, the snow stopped and the sky is clear. It's always the coldest when the sky is clear."

"I didn't know that."

Though he was silent, he made no move to leave. He ran his hand through his hair that glistened even in the subdued light from the campfire. His beard was getting long again, though not as long as before she shaved it off. She remembered how the beard had tickled her when they kissed. She licked her lips, remembering how his tasted. "It's as cold as it's been, I guess," she said awkwardly, wanting him terribly but not certain she should.

He reached out and ran the back of his knuckles down her cheek. When his fingertips slid under her chin, he lifted her face to his and kissed her gently. "I...I could try to make it warmer for you," he offered hesitantly. "If you would want me to."

"Yes." She smiled. "I do," she whispered.

He took off his jacket and knelt facing her. "Say that again."

"Say 'I do'?"

"Yes. At our wedding, you not say it. Now you say it. I like to hear you want to be my wife."

"I do," she whispered. "I do. I do." She smiled as the full realization that she did want to be this man's wife came over her. She wanted to be with him here or anywhere, more than she wanted to go back east. She wanted to be his wife in every sense of the word, more than she could imagine with any other man alive.

He smiled and helped her out of her coat. "Then I can make you much warmer than this," he bragged with a grin.

"Like you did at the fort. Can you do that again?" she challenged.

He lay down beside her, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her to him so she lay against him with her head on his shoulder. He carefully pulled up the quilts so they were cocooned together. "You tell me."

"Oh, yes. I'm feeling warmer already," she said, lifting her lips to his.

And some time later when they had dressed again and lay wrapped together under the soft cotton quilts, she felt warm and cozy thanks to Lars.

"Lissa," he whispered just as she was falling asleep.

"Hmm?"

"You will tell me if you are with child?"

Her eyes popped wide open, and she rose to lean on her elbow. "I have not considered that I might be

with child."

"Anytime we are together like this, we might be making a child."

"I...Oh." She pondered that for a moment. "How can I tell until it grows big enough to see my big belly?"

He tugged her back down against him and pulled the quilts over her shoulders. "You know from changes in body like no more monthly flow. I want you to tell me."

She nodded, moving her cheek against his shoulder. What a wonder that would be to have a child growing within her. She snuggled closer, raising her thigh over his. She was picturing a baby with his blond hair and blue eyes as she fell asleep.

It seemed like only moments later when shouts nearby woke her, but the sun had already begun to lighten the sky. Lars jumped up and pulled on his coat and hat as he leaped from the wagon to see what was going on. Lissa spent a few minutes fastening her clothes, brushing her hair and braiding it before she followed him.

The settlers had gathered around Erik and Hank's wagon. The evening before, the two men had come upon some rabbits and managed to kill several. With the cold night ahead of them, they gutted them and hung them from a high branch near the wagon, out of reach of other animals. They had intended to cook and store them in the morning.

"But in morning they gone," Hank was explaining in English that Lissa noticed was improving with each mile.

"Look at this," Erik said, holding up the end of a rope and showing it to everyone.

"It don't look like no animal chewed that off," Jeb concluded.

"It sure don't," Herb added. "It's been cut clean off."

"I want know who take rabbits," Hank insisted. He and Erik looked around the circle of settlers, pausing on each man as if accusing them of stealing the rabbits.

"Now look here," Jeb began. "You can't go accusing any of us of stealing no damn rabbits. We all got grub of our own, and we got no need of your rabbits." Others nodded their agreement.

Lars moved back to the tree where the rabbits had been tied and looked around on the ground. He saw several sets of footprints made by heavy boots such as the settlers wore, but when he moved back into the trees where the snow was less disturbed, he saw footprints that explained it all.

"Here's the answer," he called. The others clamored to see what he had found. "Look at those footprints. Moccasins."

"None of us wear them things," Hank said.

"No--and if we searched each wagon, we'd never find the rabbits either," Lars agreed. "No one here took the rabbits."

"Damn, how'd they get that close without us knowing?" Herb asked as the identity of the thief sank in.

"I heard tell the government was stopping the handouts to force them onto the reservations," Jeb put in. "They beg and steal food in Wood Lake regular like."

"Let's hope that food is all they want from us," Lars said. "Tonight we start doubling the guard, and no more sitting by the fire. We'll walk around when we keep watch, but not always at same pace or direction. If someone is going to steal from us, we won't make it so easy."

Chapter Twenty

"Look at all that dust," Lissa shouted from the driver's bench. She looked along the crest of the hill ahead and saw the wide cloud of dust rising beyond it against a clear blue sky. "Wally, I can feel the ground shake. What is it?"

"I can't tell from here," he called back from beside the grays where he was walking.

She stood up and looked toward the hill, but couldn't tell what was raising the dirt. "Where's Lars?"

Wally shrugged. "He's up ahead like always. I wonder if he can see it."

"I'm going back to ask the others what we should do," she said, but turning back to climb down, she saw Jeb and Hank riding toward her.

"What is it?" she cried as soon as they could hear her. "Can you tell?"

"We can't see nothing but dust," Jeb said. "I reckon you should pull the train up while we go see what it is."

"Watch for Lars," she added. "He's out there somewhere."

"I hope he not in middle of that," Hank said, waving his gloved hand toward the dust.

"Come on," Jeb said, in a hurry as usual. "Let's go see what it is." The two rode ahead at a gallop.

"Rein in the team, Wally." Without waiting for the wagon to stop, she jumped down and waved to the others behind them. They all stopped, but not until they had pulled together into a tight group.

"At the first sign of trouble, we have to circle the wagons," Wally was already calling to the other men. "Get them cattle rounded up."

"What could it be?" Lissa called.

"Don't know, but I'll be thankful if it ain't a hundred redskins on horseback coming our way."

The settlers waited with their gazes locked on the horizon. After nearly an hour, a lone rider came over the crest of the miles-long hill, heading their way.

"It's Jeb," Wally shouted from his new position standing on the driver's bench.

Everyone ran toward him as he approached. Sliding from his saddle before the horse stopped, he ran the rest of the way to meet them.

"You gotta see this," he cried, pointing back over the hill. "Ain't never seen nothing like it. There's hundreds of them. They're all over the place, racing toward the river."

"Who?" the settlers cried in unison.

Jeb laughed. "Why, the buffalo! The far side of that hill is black with them, and they're heading west."

"Get a move on," Hank yelled over his shoulder as he headed for his wagon. "I want see too."

Everyone including Jeb scattered to the wagons. Wally released the brake and ran to mount the lead horse, whistling and shouting the team into motion.

At the crest of the hill, Wally turned his team and took the slope on the far side running parallel with the crest of the hill. His route was the most gradual descent to the river. He reined in the horses near a clump of trees. Lissa had climbed into the driver's seat where she could see what was going on.

She and her brother were so occupied watching the buffalo that they didn't realize that the other wagons hadn't all followed them. One was at that moment tearing down the steeper slope the buffalo had taken.

"Look! That's Jeb, ain't it?" Wally asked.

"He's a bigger fool than I thought," Lissa told him. "What's he trying to do?"

They couldn't tell what he was trying to do, but what he was doing was riding his wagon right toward the herd. Then, as his team of horses neared the buffalo, they seemed to decide they didn't want to go there. They tried turning in two different directions at once despite their rapid speed.

"He'll never turn them," Wally said, climbing up to stand on the seat and holding on to a bonnet rib for balance.

Lissa glanced back to see all the other wagons were stopped and watching Jeb careen down the hill. Jeb braced himself against the front of the wagon, pulling on the reins with all his might to turn the horses. The twins screamed.

By then, the buffalo, notorious for having bad eyesight, could see them coming and scattered north and south, parting for Jeb like the Dead Sea for Moses.

Unable to turn the panicking horses, Jeb gave up and clung to his wife and her sister as the horses took them straight through the herd and into the river where the buffalo had been drinking moments before. Suddenly burdened with extra drag as the wagon wheels sank into the muddy bottom, the horses reared and turned sharply, tipping the wagon over onto its side in the water. Blowing hard, they stood in the belly-deep water unable to move.

The settlers could hear the screams as Jeb, Lucy, and Linda fell into the water upstream of the wagon. They grabbed hold of the canvas, trying to climb up on the wagon side to get out of the freezing water while they could still move.

"They'll freeze. We've got to help."

Hank and some of the men had already mounted their horses to go down for the rescue when Lars and Erik raced to join them. "Keep an eye on that buffalo herd," Lars shouted as the men rode down the hill toward the wagon.

"Look," Wally shouted. "The buffalo are moving back together at the river. They're heading right for the wagon."

Jeb, Lucy, and Linda sat huddled on the upturned side of their wagon. The rescuers rode into the water and lifted the survivors onto their horses. Lars unhitched the team. Once they were free, he mounted Thunder again and led them back up to the bank where he tied them to a tree so they wouldn't run off. Downstream of him, Lissa saw a couple of dozen buffalo leading the herd at a run along the river right toward him.

"Lars," she screamed. "Look out behind you." Helpless, she watched the herd advance. Lars was still securing the team. He had to be warned. "Lars," she screamed again, but he couldn't hear her.

Ready to mount Thunder, he finally looked up and saw the herd advancing. Pulling his revolver, he shot into the air to turn the herd. But the herd was too great in number to be turned by one bullet.

Hearing the shot, the other men, then most of the way up the hill, put their passengers on the ground and turned their horses back down the hill. Raising their guns as they rode, they shot repeatedly until their guns were empty. They shot, not toward the sky this time, but into the lead animals in the charge. The combination of fallen animals and repeated gunfire finally turned the herd. They raced along the river and crossed back to the other side. They didn't stop until they were over the crest of the hill and heading west.

Without slowing down, they had knocked into the wagon repeatedly, breaking it to pieces. As the family's possessions floated free, the buffalo broke crates and dragged loose clothing with them. They ripped the canvas and wide pieces caught on their horns.

Jeb, Lucy, and Linda were too shocked to move from where the riders had dropped them. Some of the women ran with quilts to warm them.

"Wally," Lissa called. "We have to get a fire going to dry them out."

In minutes all the children in the wagon train were gathering dry wood from the trees near which Wally had stopped. They built a good-sized fire, but instead of waiting for the trio's clothes to dry on their backs, other settlers offered them dry clothes. They changed in Hank and Erik's wagon and the women hung their wet clothes on branches near the fire to dry.

After the settlers helped Jeb retrieve as much of the contents of the wagon as they could, it was so late they circled the wagons around the fire for the night. They took care of the horses and then turned to butchering the fallen buffalo. They saved the hides, salting them and rolling them up tight for the time being. They would make warm blankets once they were tanned. The meat was salted and stored in crocks wherever any of the settlers had room, but much of it was wrapped in cloth and hung on the outside of the wagons where it would be cold enough to freeze. The families continued to work together to fry buffalo steaks for supper for everyone.

Hank sought out Linda who was trying to comfort her sister. "I hope I not hurt you on horse," he said, hesitantly offering her a plate of steak.

"Oh, no," Linda quickly replied. "You saved my life, and I'll forever be in your debt." She took the plate and motioned to him to sit beside her.

Hank grinned and lowered his eyes. "I happy to help."

"Well, thank you, for me and for my sister and her husband." She leaned over and kissed Hank's whiskered cheek.

He grinned and Lissa could have sworn he blushed too. The couple continued talking as Lissa walked back to her wagon with Wally, Lars and her steaks on a plate.

"This has been quite a day," she said, sitting to eat her steak after giving the men theirs.

Wally laughed, cutting his meat with the sharp knife he carried in his boot. "I still think it was funny that we were pulling the Parkers' crates out of that river for an hour before Lars realized that the water was flowing north."

"I watch buffalo and want to get out of cold water fast," Lars admitted. "I never look at which way it is moving."

Lissa pulled the boiling coffeepot onto the rocks near the fire to keep it hot, and returned to sit beside him. He offered her his boot knife to cut her steak as he forked a bite of his own into his mouth. "But you're sure it's the Red River?" He nodded. "Then when we cross it, we will truly be in the Dakota Territory?"

He smiled and laid his hand over hers to squeeze it gently. "It is Red River, the one I know that flows north."

"Then we're almost home," she said softly. "Almost home."

* * *

Crossing the Red River was more successful for the wagons the next morning without runaway horses and a herd of buffalo tromping around. However, with the muddy bottom to sink into, the wagons needed a double team to manage. By this time, the train had crossed many rivers, and they had the system well in hand. But it still took another day to cross.

They got a late start though, because all the Parkers' goods had to be loaded onto other wagons. With the recent addition of provisions, plus the buffalo meat, the wagons were all packed solid. The pieces of broken wooden crates were tied on the outside of Hank and Erik's wagon. They would try to salvage them to make new crates, but if not, they would come in handy for firewood.

Lissa no longer had the center of their wagon clear to walk through, only a small area at the rear to sleep on the floor as she and Lars had done. Her cheeks warmed at the thought of that night. Just thinking about the man seemed to warm her all over. And with the temperature as cold as it was, maybe that was a good thing.

The wagons went a little west from the river until they reached the edge of the trees that grew along the banks. There they turned north into the cold wind that swept across the prairie and threatened to tip over the wagons.

A storm rolled in on the wind and snow started falling just as they turned north. Each of the settlers wore their warmest wool coats now as the temperature plummeted. The men tied neckerchiefs over their hats to keep them on in the wind as well as to shelter their exposed ears. Everyone, men and women alike, wore a scarf circled around their necks that they pulled up over their noses to protect their faces from the stinging icy snow. Even on sunny days, after a storm would pass, they would have to use kerchiefs or scarves over their faces to cut the blinding glare from the sun on the snow.

Most of the men wore leather gloves, but few of the women had any at all. Lissa, one of those who did, had only gloves that had been for dress back east, not for warmth. When she went out in Philadelphia in the winter, she most often warmed her hands in a muff, but she couldn't maintain her balance walking over uneven ground with both hands confined in front of her. So she and the others wore their thin gloves and did their best to pull their hands into their sleeves for protection. She wanted to buy a pair of small men's gloves to put on over her cloth ones.

Poorly protected from the weather, they kept walking. It was the physical exercise that kept them from freezing, she was certain.

"Look, there's the buffalo," Wally shouted late that afternoon as they crossed a small rise.

Peering west, they saw the buffalo spread out like a dark blanket that dotted the open plains. The animals walked north, faced into the wind that drove snow into their long shaggy coats.

"How can you see where we're going?" Lissa called to Wally, who sat with a blanket over his legs on the driver's seat.

"Ain't easy," he admitted. "Lars says there's a road following the river that extends north all the way to Winnipeg. The horses will be able to see it even in the snow because the prairie grass is higher on each side. The Red River carts pack it down good taking furs and supplies up and down for as many months as they can travel."

"When do we pick that road up?"

"He's out looking for it. Says there should be a group of settlers near here who get goods from Minneapolis and ship them north."

"Settlers mean buildings. They shouldn't be hard to find."

"You come up here and try to see in this blowing snow. I'm glad I'm not out there. Lars must be frozen on Thunder."

Thinking of Lars freezing somewhere sent shards of pain lancing through Lissa's heart. The harsh wind gusted, slapping the bonnet with loud cracks and rocking the wagon. "We couldn't tip over in this wind, could we?" she shouted against the howling.

Wally shook his head. "Not unless one of our wheels goes into a hole or rises high enough on a rock to shift the weight."

"That's not very comforting," she replied.

"Speaking of comfort, with the ground frozen now, the ride is sure a lot rougher than before," Wally

yelled over his shoulder.

"You don't have to tell me," she answered with a laugh. "I'll be lucky if I don't break a tooth, I'm bouncing so hard back here. But it's better than walking in the blowing snow."

"Our water is probably frozen solid by now."

"How will I make coffee?" she asked. Wally just shrugged.

She didn't imagine he knew any more than she did. They were both learning to exist in the freezing cold as they traveled. At least Lars had experience, coming from a land that had long, cold winters. He had given them all hints on how to dress for extreme cold and wind.

"And this," he'd said that morning before he left to scout ahead, "is only the beginning of the drop in temperature."

Lissa had never experienced anything this cold in Philadelphia. The constant wind made the cold feel much worse. She took a deep breath and wondered if one got used to it. She wore both her petticoats, including the one with holes burned in it from batting at the prairie fire, but the cold still blew up her legs. When she complained, Lars said simply, "Put on Wally's old long underwear."

She knew Wally was wearing the suit his father had bought because he had outgrown the set bought for him. She still laughed at the idea, but it didn't take long before the cold drove her to put them on. They were a vast improvement.

"Someone's ahead, coming on foot, and they're leading a horse," he shouted back. "I'm pulling up. Signal the others."

She climbed to the back of the wagon and pulled aside the canvas. Waving to the next wagon, she saw the driver call back to someone that would signal the wagon behind them, and so on down the line. With visibility poor, Lars had made sure everyone kept abreast of what the lead wagon was doing so there were no pileups.

"I think it's Lars, but why isn't he on Thunder?" Wally called.

Lissa scrambled to the driver's seat and looked out over his shoulder. It definitely was Lars. "Something must have happened to Thunder," she concluded, worried about the horse, but thankful that whatever had happened, Lars seemed to be all right.

Lars strode straight to them. "I'm sure glad to see you. I was getting cold." His nose was red, his beard white with ice, and his jacket coated with snow.

"Are you all right?" Lissa asked.

He nodded. "Just beyond those trees there's a road that goes west a ways. There's a small settlement up there. Thunder threw a shoe, so I didn't go all the way, but I could see the huts."

"He didn't get hurt?" Lissa called.

Lars shook his head. "No, but it's hard riding on frozen ground. He should be all right as long as I'm not on his back. I'll go tell the others where we're heading and get a ride back up here with Erik. You stop if

you can't see the road once you're past the trees. The snow is drifting in good and fast."

"I understand," Wally yelled.

"Give me time to tie Thunder on the back," Lars said as he turned and disappeared.

Moments later he pounded on the side of the wagon, signaling Wally that Thunder was tied on. Wally slapped the reins on the horses' backs. Snow puffed up from the leather straps and quickly blew away as they began to plod on.

"I hope we can wait at the settlement until the storm passes," Lissa put in.

"Or at least until we can see where we're going."

Wally found the road only because the wind was blowing around the trees and across it at the bend where it had blown the dirt surface clean for several feet. He turned the horses and headed west. Not long after the turn, Lars jumped into the wagon from the back of Erik's horse. He called out what Lissa assumed was Norwegian for thanks for the ride, and moved forward to join the siblings. Chunks of snow fell from his coat onto the crates as he moved.

"You look so cold. Your beard and mustache are frozen," Lissa said as he sat beside her. Unable to resist touching his stiff beard, she rose to her knees and tested the frozen tangle.

He pulled off his leather glove to hold her hand and pressed a kiss into her palm. "I am cold," he said with a laugh. "And now you know another reason I keep my beard. It freezes and keeps the wind and blowing snow from my cheeks."

"How big is the settlement where we're headed?" Wally called. "Big enough to have a farrier?"

"I hope so," he replied. He opened his coat and pulled Lissa over to sit with her back against his chest. She spread the quilts over their legs. "I couldn't see any people, but I'm sure they weren't looking for any more wagon trains moving by with winter coming on."

"I sure hope they got someplace warm we can spend the night," Wally said.

"This is new settlement. I don't think they have a hotel," Lars said with a laugh.

"There it is," Wally shouted. "I can see a house, at least I think I can."

Lars and Lissa rose to their knees and leaned over Wally's shoulders to look for themselves.

"Yes, there's two or three. It's good they didn't paint the houses white. We'd never see them," she said with a laugh. The road curved north as they neared the huts built on each side. "There's no lantern light in any of them," Lissa added.

"There are probably no windows to see the light through," Lars explained.

"How dreary," she responded.

"But much warmer," he assured her. "Wally, pull up to the end hut so there's room for the other wagons behind us. That one has a fence for a ways. At least that will be better than nothing for protecting the

stock. With the wagons lined up in front, it will be even more protected."

"Hello in there," the driver of the second wagon in the row shouted.

"Hello," echoed the other drivers.

Lars scrambled to the rear of the wagon and jumped down. Erik had ridden up to meet him and slid to the ground, tying his horse on the wagon beside Thunder.

"Hello," Lars shouted as he and Erik walked toward the middle hut in the row. He knocked on the door, but got no response from that either. They looked up and down the road. No sign of any living thing could be seen.

"Lord help us, maybe the Indians took them all," Lucy called out, her high voice carrying on the wind.

"Maybe it's the fever," her sister shouted. "Or the pox."

Their voices were silenced as Lars stepped to the hut and lifted the latch on a wooden door, the only wood in the hut made of sod. He pulled hard to open the door out into the snow drifted in front of it. He stepped inside, but seconds later stepped out again and strode toward the wagon. "It's too dark to see inside. I need the lantern."

Lissa took down a lantern from where it hung from the top of a bow. She lit it, slid the glass chimney back down in place and adjusted the flame to a good size that would stay lit in the wind. Leaning over the back of the wagon, she handed it to Lars. He strode back to the cabin where Erik waited and they went inside together.

Moments later they came out. Lucy had lit one of their lanterns and handed it to Jeb as he joined the men. The three of them checked out the other low huts as the remaining settlers gathered on the road in the center of the settlement. The snow had about stopped, or maybe it seemed that way because the wind wasn't blowing so fiercely. Lissa felt the tension as they all waited to hear the news.

"No one," Jeb called, beating Lars to the announcement. "There ain't one person in all them huts."

"Nothing but some furniture," Lars confirmed. "There's no food, no clothes, not even a pot on a stove or hanging in a fireplace."

"Where'd they all go?" one of the women asked.

"More important is what are we gonna do?" Lars countered.

* * *

"The walls are made of mud!" Lissa cried, entering the end house she would share with Lars and Wally for the night.

After some discussion, the settlers decided that if sickness or Indians had caused the settlers to leave, there would be evidence of a fight or bedding and clothes abandoned because someone had died in it. But there was none of those things.

The only conclusion they could come to was that the whole population had moved away for some

reason that gave them time to pack. The travelers were far too cold to come up with a better reason. With evening darkness coming fast, it was hard to see anything outside. The men strung a picket out of the wind behind the fence by the end hut and secured the horses and mules. The MacDonalds drove their cattle behind the fence and hoped it would contain them for the night.

Some of the families had to double up in the sod huts as there were not enough to go around. Then each family took enough food for supper and to break their fast in the morning, and their bedrolls, and settled in. Erik and Hank shared a soddy with the Parkers, which didn't surprise Lissa. Hank spent all the time he could with Linda. He seemed very happy that the Parkers and Linda were traveling with them.

The family that had the hardest time was Johnny MacDonald, his wife Kate, and sons Donny and Stu. Keeping their dozen cattle together was close to impossible. Hank and Erik had helped, and Lissa hoped they had them all. The cows didn't have the thick coats that the buffalo had, and she didn't think they would fare well in this weather. But what could they do but go on? Once Lissa got a fire going, she stood in the center of the room and looked all around. The others had given the three of them the smallest hut to themselves. She decided it was because there was no room for anyone else.

A wide rope and plank bed filled the corner while a rough-hewn table and three chairs sat on the opposite side. A few shelves hung on the wall from pegs driven into the sod blocks. Instead of an iron cook stove like the one her family had brought west, the family who lived in this soddy cooked in the fireplace built into the wall. Any pots or dishes they owned had been removed when they left, as had the straw mattress from the bed. They had taken everything but the big bricks of sod.

"Even the ceiling is mud," she noted.

"That's why they call it a soddy," Wally said with a laugh.

"You knew about this? You knew people out here lived in dirt houses and didn't tell me?"

He shrugged. "The men talked about how to make one. Herb didn't think any of us stood a chance of getting one up this late in the year because the ground is frozen."

"Where will we stay this winter?"

"I don't know, but a plow can't cut the sod blocks from frozen ground. We'll have to wait until spring."

A drop of water hit her shoulder, and she looked up to see where it had come from. The sod brick roof rested on planks stretching the span from side to side. Between the earthen bricks, the snow had blown in and collected in clumps that dotted the ceiling. There were even icicles in places.

"The bonnet on our wagon keeps out the snow better than this roof," she complained.

"But it's not as warm," Wally countered.

Lars entered the one-room house, a blast of cold wind coming with him. The flames in the open fireplace danced as the wind shot past them and up the chimney. He pushed the door shut with his hip and slid over the latch with his elbow to hold it closed. Crossing to the table, he set down the box of victuals he had retrieved. Pulling his tied-down hat from his head, he slapped it against his thigh to knock off the caked-on snow.

Lissa slumped into one of the chairs. "What are we going to do?"

"Nothing now," Lars replied. "We eat and try to sleep. The horses are fed and at least out of the worst of wind. We leave at first light."

"Leave? For where?" she asked.

"We not far from Fort Abercrombie. The land is flat so we should be able to make it in one day. There we decide what each family do next."

"And us?" she asked rising quickly from the chair. "What will we do then?"

Lars stopped in his movement reaching for a log for the fire and turned to face her.

"What will we do?" she repeated softly, tears welling in her eyes.

He strode across the small room and grasped her shoulders with his big hands. "We will go on to find my brother. Given good weather, he is just two days north of the fort. He will have a safe and warm place for us to stay until spring when we build our own future."

He pulled her into his arms. She didn't want to leave the comfort and assurance she felt there. But soon she did her best to fix supper. While the biscuits were burned on one side that rested too close to the fire, they were hot and welcome with the fried pork. The buffalo meat had been too frozen to cut. But by stabbing the thick lard in the crock with his knife, Wally had been able to free some chunks of pork. The last of the turnips were frozen too, but Lissa set them by the fire to thaw and then cut them up to add to the meat frying deep in fat. They ended up crunchy and quite tasty.

Working close to the fire, she got warm enough to shed her coat, which the men had already done. They spread them out to dry, with their hats and scarves, over the edge of the planks on the bed. Sitting by the fire, steam rose from their trousers as the snow melted, while across the room near the shelves on the wall, they could still see their breath fog up with every exhale.

They spread all their bedrolls close to the fire. Lissa had melted snow for the morning coffee and enough extra to wash their faces and hands. She hardly recognized her hands as her own. The cracks and dry reddened patches never seemed to go away despite rubbing them with lard. They never seemed to feel warm either.

She was thankful for the soddy's warmth and slipped out of the long underwear she wore. Her skirts would keep her warm enough and she wanted the damp pant legs to dry. She hung them on the back of the chairs facing the fire and looked up to see Lars watching her.

With his back to Wally, who was already sleeping at the far side of the fireplace, he laid leaning on one elbow. He lifted the corner of his quilt, beckoning her to lie with him. She smiled tentatively and crossed the room. Leaving the remainder of her clothes on for warmth, she lay on her back, scooting close to share his warmth. He remained up on his elbow and raised a finger to trace the frown wrinkles on her forehead.

"You are not to worry so much. These little lines don't go away so often now."

"But how can I not worry? We may end up with only our wagon to live in this winter. We'll freeze to death."

He smiled gently and leaned down to kiss her. "I won't let that happen. I will keep you warm, little one."

He'd made her smile and she knew that was one of the reasons she loved him. "Why do you call me that? I'm taller than any other woman I know."

"You littler than me," he replied with a grin and a kiss. "You just right."

He kept his promise to warm her completely as only he could. Under a cloak of silence, they made love, their kisses swallowing the cries of pleasure they both wanted to utter. As they drifted off in sleep lying spoon style, Lissa could almost believe that he would keep them warm in the Dakota winter.

Chapter Twenty-one

Dakota Territory treated them to an early November morning like Lissa had never seen. Not a cloud marred a perfect bright blue sky that seemed to go on forever.

"Wagons, ho," Lars called out when everyone was ready to move out.

Crisp white snow covered everything and made the world look clean and new. Even the ugly sod houses looked inviting with snow decorating the top edge of each sod block like white mortar.

As the settlers loaded their things into the wagons, the snow crunched in the cold. The bright sun turned the surface of the snow into a sheet of diamonds that glistened whichever way you looked. The sun shone so bright, in fact, Lissa squinted and pulled her bonnet down to shade her eyes. Finding the light still too bright, she lifted the scarf she wore over her mouth and nose higher as the men did, until she had only a narrow slit to see through.

While blowing across the road, the wind had left long drifts of deep snow like white fingers on the packed earth. As they clomped through each drift, the horses breathed hard, producing sprays of white clouds.

Wanting to make the fort by dark, which came early, the settlers had decided not to stop at midday. Instead, they pressed on for periods of two or three hours and then rested a short time to give the horses a break before starting again. The more frequent stops allowed the MacDonalds to keep their cattle moving with the train more easily. The snow helped them too, because the cattle stayed in the wagon tracks rather than wandering off the road into deeper snow.

"It's warming up in here," Lissa announced after an hour's travel. "The sun is strong if it can do that."

"You see? With blankets stretched over ribs under canvas to cut the wind more, wagon could be winter home," Lars said.

Lissa's shocked gaze met his.

"We not have to, but I hear of families doing this until they get soddy up."

Lissa couldn't bear the thought. She looked away and stared at the wide expanse ahead of them. To think she had left a comfortable home in Philadelphia for this. She had lost her mother and then her father, only to be told she might be living in their wagon for heaven only knew how long. For months she had

tried to be strong, for her younger brother's sake and for her own. She felt her strength drain away and believed she would have cried if Wally hadn't shouted out that he saw the fort at that moment. She drew in a deep breath and blinked away the tears that threatened. A night at the fort and then only two days until they reached Ingor's place.

She could do this. No matter how dark their circumstances became, she would hope for a better tomorrow. God had given them this magnificent day after the storm. She would take it as a sign that something good would come at the end of their struggles. It had to.

Seeing the soldiers pull open the log double doors and wave them into Fort Abercrombie was most welcome. "You folks can thank your lucky stars you made it this far," one of the men dressed in blue told them as their wagon passed into the fort.

Lissa didn't know if he meant lucky to make it through the storm, or if there was some other threat they had narrowly escaped. Getting the wagons within the walls and backed into a tight formation out of the way took all their attention. With all the brakes set to secure the wagons, the men unharnessed the horses and led them to feed and water. When they were finally able to join the women and children in the mess hall, they were given a bowl of hot soup to warm them up.

"The colonel will see you now," a soldier told Lars.

Lars gulped down the remainder of his soup and signaled to Hank and the other men to join him. The news of what was happening in the area would affect every one of them. They all should be there to hear it.

"It's getting crowded in the fort, but I'm glad you got here. It's the safest place for you," the colonel told them as they gathered in his office. "I won't cushion it for you. We've heard of a large party of Sioux gathering northeast of here. We have a patrol out now to find them, but I can't tell where they're headed or what they're up to."

"And the folks from the settlement south of here?"

"They came inside the walls about a week ago. A farmer was burned out east of here a while back, and until it's safe, they're staying here."

"Then it wasn't cholera or some sickness that left the settlement empty," Jeb concluded with a sigh. "That's a relief."

"Now, about you folks," the colonel continued. "Where are you all heading this time of the year?"

"I don't think we can go any farther," Johnny MacDonald said. "The cattle we still have are losing weight and freezing."

"You're welcome to stay here, but you'll have to earn your keep. We can make some shelter and find hay on the farms nearby in Minnesota for your cattle."

"And if my cows can have the use of that bull your cook has penned up and earmarked for stew, we can promise you milk next year."

The colonel laughed. "If you can get that old bull to perform for your cows, you're more than welcome to him. He wandered our way this summer, and as you said, we've been keeping him for the day we got

hungry enough to eat his tough old hide."

Johnny thanked the colonel profusely and shook his hand briskly like a pump that needed quick priming. Still laughing with joy, he ran to tell his wife and sons they would be staying at the fort until spring.

"I'll be moving on in the morning," Lars said into the silence after his exit. "My brother Ingor is trapper with cabin just two days north of here."

The colonel frowned and swiped his chin with his fingers. "I ain't seen Ingor in some time, I'm afraid. We sent word to the trappers about the Sioux party heading their way, but them trappers is an independent lot. Never know what them boys'll do. Just like 'em to up and head to Winnipeg with a load of furs no matter what the weather."

"I know where cabin is, and we wait for him, if he gone."

"What about the rest of you?" the colonel asked.

"Well, I reckon Marilyn and I and our son would welcome the chance to stay here 'til spring. Then we reckon we'll look around for a good place to homestead," Herb offered.

"We have a few children in the fort. How old is your boy?"

Herb told him.

"Thought he might be school age, but then we ain't got a teacher now. One of the officer's wives does what she can."

"Colonel, what about that settlement to the south?" Hank asked. "When they move back home, will they have room for more?"

"I reckon they do, but you can talk to Morgan Rich about it. He crossed the river from Minnesota just last year and started the Wahpeton settlement. It's only the second white settlement in the territory. T'other one's the old Selkirk settlement. Can't say as I recommend trying to get up north that far through snow with the wagon you're pullin'."

Hank and Erik looked at Lars. "If they let us, the Parkers and us stay in Wahpeton settlement," Hank said.

"He not go far from Linda," Erik teased as he punched his brother's arm. "And Linda not leave sister."

"Wait 'til you find woman. You not want leave too," Hank insisted. He turned back to the colonel. "Where we find Rich fellow?"

The colonel suggested places to look for him, and Hank, Erik, and Jeb Parker left the office.

The colonel nodded and rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know quite where we're going to put all the people we're acquiring, but we'll make do. Right now we're shorthanded and until we get another regiment assigned to us, you'll at least all have beds in the barracks to sleep in. And if a regiment comes yet this winter, we'll figure something else out."

"Thank you, colonel," Lars said.

"And good luck to you," the colonel replied. "Going north from here, you're gonna need it. I wish I could spare a patrol to go with you."

"Ah, Colonel, is best if you not mention the danger to my wife and her brother. They lose both their parents on this journey, and scaring them more not help any."

The colonel took his hand and shook it. "I don't see any reason to mention it either."

Lars thanked the colonel and made his way to the mess hall to find his wife. Ducking to enter the log structure, his gaze fell on Lissa at once. She moved from one family to the next, hugging the women and even the children. He could hear her tell them how happy she was for them. He longed to hear her say she was happy about her own situation. But then she'd never said she loved him. He'd told her, but in language she didn't understand. He didn't want to hear her say she couldn't love him back.

Smiles showed all around at supper that night. The settlers who were staying gave some of their frozen buffalo to the army cook. He made enough food to feed the army and the settlers too. They would be caring for themselves, but for tonight, supper was a joint celebration of their safe arrival.

Sitting at the long tables on backless benches, the settlers dug into the fried breaded buffalo with gravy, potatoes, squash grown right at the fort, and sourdough bread. After dinner two soldiers pulled out a fiddle and a mouth organ and treated them all to music. Before long, the men pushed the tables back, and those that could, danced.

Erik approached Lissa and asked her to dance. "I no good, but fun to try," he said, laughing.

She slipped her hand in his. As her husband showed no signs of asking her to dance, she saw no reason to sit on the sidelines.

"I sure hope you find Ingor real quick," Erik said as they danced around the mess hall plank floor. "Winter no good to go far."

"I'm sure we will," she replied. "Lars said he knows where he is."

The music ended and Erik tightened his grip on her hand when she tried to let go to return to her chair.

"If you need help, you send Wally to get me," he said earnestly. "Lars good man," he insisted when she began to object to needing help. "Sometimes good man not enough."

"Thank you, Erik," she said softly, praying she would never need his help. "You're a true friend."

He looked up behind her and then said quickly, "You remember. Come to me if need help."

She had no chance to thank him or even to say good-bye to him or any of the others. Lars was behind her and placed his possessive hand on her shoulder. "Wally waiting by door. We go now. Leave early in morning and need sleep."

Lissa nodded and went with him. As they left the mess hall, the soldiers began another tune. She glanced over her shoulder and wondered if she would ever see any of these people again.

Lars pulled on her arm, but slowed his pace when she slipped on an icy patch of the shoveled walk and

nearly fell. Wally went inside the barracks. Lars stopped short of the door and held her upper arms. The nearly full moon had risen and seemed as bright as daylight with the snow. She looked up expecting him to speak. The clouds their warm breaths formed mingled between them.

He looked down at her for a few moments. "I...I take good care of you--with my life if I must."

"No," she cried, pressing against him, circling him with her arms. "Not with your life."

"I hope not," he said against her ear. "But Erik is good man. You remember him, like he said, if I get killed."

Tears streamed unchecked down her cheeks. She lifted her head to meet his gaze with hers. "Please don't die on me," she whispered. "We've come so far together. I couldn't go on living if I lost you now."

Their lips met in a soul-searing kiss. And at that moment Lissa knew that she loved Lars with all her heart. But that declaration in English would have to wait until she knew Lars loved her.

"Jeg elsker De."

She smiled and sniffled away her tears. "I don't know what that means because you haven't told me, but if it is, as you say, something happy husbands and wives say to each other, then Jeg elsker De."

Lars laughed and lifted her in a hug and turned around in a circle, swinging her with him as he went. Setting her back down, he smiled. "Some day soon, I tell you what it means."

He put his arm around her and led her into the barracks.

* * *

A teary farewell marked their departure at first light the next morning. Everyone turned out and Lissa couldn't hold back the tears as she watched the fort gates close behind them.

The army farrier had reshod Thunder and checked the team as well. Happy to have his mount again, Lars chose to ride Thunder beside the wagon rather than to sit inside. Lissa watched his shadow cast by the rising sun on the side of the bonnet. The morning was nearly as beautiful as the day before, only colder. The clear moonlit night that passed had heralded the dropping temperature. But at least they didn't have the wind and the snow to contend with.

Few landmarks could be found on the road, but the river down the gradual decline to the east was their guide. Again they used the technique of traveling for a few hours and then resting the horses for a short time before starting out again.

"That's the fastest way to get to Ingor's cabin," Lars said.

Each time they stopped, Lissa climbed out of the wagon to answer nature's call and welcomed the exercise to get the stiffness from her legs that she kept folded under the blanket while in the wagon.

When the sun was high in the sky, Lissa crawled to the rear of the wagon to where the food was stored. She took six thick slices of sourdough bread the army cook had given them that morning and spread them with pork fat from the crock. Putting the slices together with the grease sides touching, she crawled back to the front. She handed one to Wally and reached out to give another to Lars.

Returning to sit on the driver's seat beside Wally, she enjoyed her own sandwich. But she had precious few moments to do it. Ahead of them a strip of trees signaled a stream feeding into the Red where the trees thickened.

"I'll go ahead and see if we can ford the creek here," Lars offered.

Lissa looked up to the north and gasped. She swallowed down her fear and whispered, "No! Lars, look."

Lars looked north and immediately reached for the lead horse's reins and pulled the team up so there would be no need to shout.

The three of them stared wide-eyed beyond the trees where more horses than they could count stood in a long line running south to north. All the mounts faced west and on each was an Indian, a long spear or bow at his side.

"Lord have mercy on us," Wally whispered.

"Lissa, get back in the wagon and check the guns. Give one to Wally." He leaned out of the saddle and reached for her arm so she had to turn back to him. "You remember what I said about keeping one revolver just for yourself, not to use on them. If something happens to both of us, you use it on yourself. Do you understand? You don't want them to take you captive. Promise me you won't let that happen."

She nodded, her lower lip quivering with fear.

"We gonna make a run for it back to the fort?" Wally asked as he raised the reins.

Knowing the horses were too tired and would never make a run to the fort, Lars sat high in his saddle to survey the flat terrain. "The Indians not looking for wagon coming in the winter. We have cover in these trees close to the river. We get into position for running, but be very quiet." Keeping track of any movement the Indians made, he grasped the reins and turned the wagon around so it faced south.

Hoping to hide his black horse behind the white bonnet, he tied him behind the wagon and climbed inside. Moving as quickly as he could, he moved a few crates to form another layer of protection high on the sides.

Wally stepped up to help. "These will be better at stopping arrows," he whispered hopefully.

"Listen," Lissa urged, grabbing Lars's arm to stop his movement.

They all moved to the rear and pulled open the canvas far enough to see. They could hear a low chanting and the beat of drums now. But peering between the trees, they could see the Indians hadn't moved from their long line.

"Look, there's even more of them coming over the river behind the line," Wally whispered, his voice cracking mid-sentence.

As they watched, dozens more horses, some dragging a travois tied on behind, rode up behind the lead line. Many Indians rode two on a horse, often a child in front, while still more trudged along on foot in the snow. When they neared the line, the Indians on the lead horses yelled and hooted, sending shivers down

the settlers' backs. Then the Indians dug their heels into the sides of their mounts and raced west with their spears raised high in the air.

"They got their families with 'em and they ain't coming this way," Wally cried.

"Thank You, Lord," Lissa prayed.

Lars leaped up onto the wagon side to watch. Far ahead of them on the western horizon, he saw dark dots in the snow. "Buffalo hunters," he whispered. "Their families with them to help cut them up after the kill."

The Indians rode hard until they neared the animals, then spread out and circled part of the herd. They threw spears, shot arrows, and fired what guns they had to dispatch the animals. By this time, the rest of the contingent had brought up the rear. Old men, women, and children joined in to help harvesting the meat and hides from the buffalo.

"Quick. Now is our chance to go by," Lars urged. He mounted Thunder and led the team around to face north.

"You're betting they want the buffalo meat for the winter more than they want our scalps," Wally said boldly.

"I'm praying they do," Lars replied. "If they hungry enough to steal rabbits, I think I am right."

Staying as close to the river as possible where the ground was lower, they crossed the frozen creek bed and continued north. They kept moving until dark, counting on the moon for light to feed and picket the horses. As they huddled in the wagon, sharing their warmth, Lissa asked in a whisper, "Did they know we were there?"

"Yes," Lars said after several moments, confirming her suspicions.

No one added another a comment. There was nothing more to say.

* * *

Crossing over the tracks of the dozens of Indians the afternoon before had unnerved Lissa. The horses and wagon had left tracks in the snow too. The Indians would know where they were going. The thought made her feel ill. A wave of nausea rolled over her. She inhaled deeply to settle it and nibbled on the bread that had frozen overnight.

"We ride far yesterday. From description in letter, we make it to Ingor's cabin in daylight today," Lars announced as they started out at first light the next morning.

"That's sweet news to hear," Lissa told him.

"Does Ingor ever have trouble with the Indians?" she gathered up her nerve to ask.

"He spoke of some by name so I not think so."

Lissa wanted to feel more relieved than she actually did after hearing that. "Does he live near other people?"

"No," he answered curtly. When he glanced up at her face, he added, "He has a long trapline. He takes hides to Winnipeg or Minneapolis to trade. He isn't interested in sharing his area with others."

"Oh," she said weakly as he rode ahead to scout.

What would it be like to live in the middle of a frozen plain with no one else around? She shivered at the thought.

The sky had been overcast since they rose that morning and started spitting snow resembling tiny balls of ice. During their first break to rest the horses, they removed the snow from their backs and the top of the bonnet. As they started up again, they soon learned they need not have bothered. The wind out of the northwest picked up and soon it was snowing horizontally instead of vertically. Walking or riding in the blast of icy pellets was so painful that Lars tied Thunder to the downwind side of the wagon and rode inside.

"It can't be much farther, can it?" Wally asked hopefully. He had moved into the wagon and knelt behind the driver's bench to let the seat protect him from the wind.

"If we get to a wide flowing river joining the Red, we've gone too far," Lars explained. "But when we see that river far ahead we look for wide band of trees coming out from it. My brother's cabin is on the south edge of those trees."

"From where I'm sitting, I can't see much more than the horses' backs and blowing snow. If it wasn't for the wind always being on my left, I'd worry we'd left the road."

Lars pulled the quilt off Lissa's pallet and crawled up beside Wally. He wrapped it around Wally, who was shivering so badly his hands holding the reins were noticeably shaking. "You can see ahead a bit between the blows. There, that better?"

"Thanks. Say, isn't that something dark ahead? Could it be the tree line on the river joining the Red?"

"If it is, we'll turn short of trees and follow the line. It should lead right to Ingor's cabin."

Lissa couldn't be left out and crawled forward to kneel on Wally's other side. "I think those are trees, but how do we know they're the ones along the river?"

Before anyone could answer she raised her head and sniffed. "Is that wood smoke?" she asked. The men sniffed the air too, and agreed. "It can't be a prairie fire, so we must be near his cabin."

"I hope so," Lars responded with a grin. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close as they watched over Wally's shoulders.

"Ingor must be very worried about you not being there yet," Lissa said. "He'll be so happy to see you."

Lars's grin broadened. "I be happy to see him too."

"Those trees stretch west as far as I can see. It must be the river," Wally said.

"Pull up and I go see. We not want to turn off the Red River Trail in this storm at the wrong spot." He replaced the tie around his hat to turn the brim down over his ears and pulled on his leather gloves.

The horses neighed and stomped restlessly. The wagon moved forward a foot or so and then stopped.

"Set the brake and keep them calm even if you have to get out and hold their heads," Lars ordered.

Wally nodded.

"Listen for me calling," he added. "If this is spot we turn west, I call to you and then stay out front to watch for cabin."

He crawled to the rear with Lissa right behind him. "Be careful," she said.

He turned back smiling. "Ya." He leaned over and kissed her firmly.

"Your lips are cold," she told him with a grin.

"Not after kissing you."

Once he had jumped out, she pulled the canvas closed and tied it down. She could hear Lars talking to Thunder as they rode ahead. It seemed like only a minute or two later that they heard his shouts and saw him waving.

"I see the river. Westward, ho!"

Wally released the brake and whistled to the horses as he pulled on the reins to turn them. They ducked their heads and plodded their way through the snow. The wind hit the wagon broadside now, rocking it.

"I hope they don't step in a hole," Wally said over his shoulder. "I can't tell what kind of ground we're covering."

"Can you see anything?" Lissa asked.

"Just the tree line we're following. At least it's blocking much of that awful wind."

Lars called out something and Lissa rose on her knees to see out. "What did he say?"

"I couldn't make it out, but I see a cabin."

She peered out over his shoulder and could barely make out a square structure against the white. "Yes! And isn't that another one beyond it?" she asked excitedly.

"Look at how wide the door on the second one is. Probably a prairie version of a barn," Wally suggested when they got closer.

Lissa frowned as her grin disappeared. "But neither one has a window, just the wooden door in the center."

Wally reined the horses in and set the brake when the wagon was directly in front of the cabin. Lissa made it out of the wagon first, with her brother close behind. They joined Lars, who had tied Thunder to a tree out of the wind, as he reached the door. He knocked on the door and called out to see if anyone was home. "Hei. Er noen hjem? Ingor?"

"I think I heard something inside, but I can't be sure," Lissa said.

"Ingor?" Lars shouted again and then waited no longer. He lifted the latch and opened the door. "Gud i himmel," he exclaimed as he rushed inside.

Lissa peered inside. In the light of the glowing coals of a nearly extinguished fire, he saw a man lying on the floor. He was moaning and had not turned his head toward Lars.

"Det er Ingor," Lars shouted. "That's Ingor. Get some light. He's hurt."

Lissa saw a lantern on the table and lit it while Wally stepped around the brothers and added more wood to the fire. Blowing on the embers, he managed to get the fire going to provide both heat and light. She closed the door and returned to kneel by Ingor's head and felt his feverish brow.

Lars whipped off the blanket that Ingor had covering himself and gasped.

A large iron animal trap was clamped over one of Ingor's legs, its pointed teeth digging into his flesh below his knee. Congealed blood soaked his trousers and the floor beneath him.

"My God," Lissa exclaimed. She covered her mouth and swallowed hard against the nausea that gripped her. Unable to stop it, she ran out the door and retched into the snow. She wiped her face with some snow and was relieved that the nausea had passed quickly. She took a deep breath and hurried back inside to help. "Sorry, I'm fine now."

"Must be hurt two, three days ago. We must get trap off," Lars insisted.

Wally reached for the trap and in moving it slightly made Ingor moan loudly in pain. "Don't touch it," Lars shouted. "If we not do this right, we lose our fingers."

He grabbed thick sticks from the supply by the fireplace and slipped them in the trap on either side of Ingor's leg. "We must pry the trap open and hold the logs so if it clamps shut, it won't be on our hands. Lissa, hold his leg so we can slide trap off over his foot."

She lowered herself to her knees, wrapping her fingers around his leg just above the trap. She could feel his knee was swollen and his trousers stiff with dried blood. The men strained to open the jaws of the trap and then slid it across the earth floor toward his foot. In unison they swung the trap across the floor. It snapped shut on the logs, splintering one and clamping down over the other, its teeth buried deep in the green wood.

Freeing his leg earned only a toss of the head from Ingor. Lissa reached up to push his hair from his forehead and lay her hand across it. "He feels warmer than he should for being in a cold cabin."

Lars whipped out his knife from his boot and slit the fabric on Ingor's trousers and long underwear to expose the wounded leg to above the knee. "His leg is broken. Must be straightened to heal or he never walk again."

The odor in the room became more intense with the heat of the fire. Having been unable to move since he had managed to drag himself into the cabin days before, Ingor had had no choice but to soil himself.

"We must clean the wound and him," Lissa said. "Can you get him cleaned up and in clean clothes? Cut

these off if you have to, and throw them outside for now. But try not to move his leg. I'll go get the medicine box and some cloth we can use for dressings. And we'll need splints to hold his leg. Wally, can you cut them?"

The men rose and set to work without a word. Lissa stayed long enough to hold Ingor's head while they worked his coat off his arms, and then she headed for the wagon while they finished undressing him. Her skirts caught the wind like a sail, blowing her sideways and almost toppling her. She welcomed breaths of fresh air to calm her stomach, roiling with worry. She couldn't help but think they might be too late to save Ingor. She'd felt his forehead and knew he was already burning up with fever. And it was her fault. She and her family had held Lars up. If Ingor died, Lars would know it was her fault that he got here too late. He would never forgive her. If she had any hope that their marriage could develop into a real one and that he could learn to love her as she loved him, it would all be lost if Ingor died.

But she had work to do and couldn't spend time on what-ifs. She couldn't have gotten Lars here sooner, but she could try to save Ingor's life so he would have time with his brother. She caught the back hem on her skirt and pulled it between her legs, tucking it under the apron waistband to arrange the fabric more like trousers, and lunged through the drifts.

She patted Thunder's neck as she passed. "Be glad you're out of the worst of the wind. I can't say the same for the team," she told him as she climbed in the wagon. For now, they would have to wait.

She had to move a few crates before getting to the one with the medicine cabinet. She hoped she had enough willow bark left because Ingor would need it for the fever. Maybe there were willows here along the river. But did they grow in this cold?

Grabbing her sewing box, she wrapped it in a well-worn but clean calico dress. She planned to rip it apart to bind the wound and tie his leg to the splints. Taking down a lantern, she hung it on a hook on the outside of the wagon. Wrapping all she carried in her apron, she bit the corners of the hem in her mouth to hold it as she climbed down again. Then getting a good hold on it with one hand, she lifted down the lantern with the other and headed back to the cabin.

"It won't be long before he comes to take care of you, fella," she told Thunder as she tromped by. "He's got to care for his brother first." Thunder snorted and pawed the earth. He tossed his head and snow flew in every direction.

Inside, they had undressed Ingor and cleaned him the best they could before covering him with a clean blanket. "I'll set these clothes outside," Lars offered. "I clean them later." He picked up the bundle and tossed it aside out the door.

Lissa knelt by Ingor's leg and laid out the things from the pouch she had made of her apron. "Wally, can you light this lantern and set it near his leg? And we're going to need warm water."

"Lars thought of that. We've got some snow melting in the stew pot and in the bowl by the fire already." Wally set the lit lantern on the opposite side of Ingor's legs from where she sat.

"Here, get this wet and see if you can find more pots to get more snow melting and make some coffee if you can. Oh, and we have to feed him willow bark tea as soon as we can make it."

Taking the cloth Wally soaked with water, she began cleaning the wounds. They bled a little, having opened while the men undressed him. His calf was darkened and swollen, but there were no traces of red running in ominous lines up his leg that would mean his blood had been poisoned. She felt up and

down the leg bone. "It isn't twisted, but it's crushed. If we are very careful to keep it straight, it might heal that way so he can use it."

With little else to say, they worked together in silence. Lissa put alum on the wounds to get them to close up and stop bleeding after she was satisfied they were clean. Since the trap claws had pushed the flesh in, she chose not to use stitches to close them. She wanted them to be able to heal from the inside out like Lars's arrow wound. She slid the dressing under his knee so she didn't move his leg, then slid it down and wrapped it around the injury.

Wally had found two straight branches and whittled one side flat with his knife. Lissa wrapped the pieces of wood in cloth strips to pad them and asked the men to hold the flat side against the outsides of Ingor's leg. Using strips of calico, she tied the splints on the leg in several places between his ankle and his knee, and again below his foot.

"Now let's get a warm shirt on him and get him into bed before he wakes. He needs to get warm. He's already got a bit of chilblain on his toes."

All three of them had to work together to lift the big man into his bed. He cried out in pain at one point, and they thought he might be coming to.

"Ingor," Lars called, sitting beside him once they had the top half of long underwear and a wool shirt on him. "De ikke kan dø. Ingenikke nå."

Lissa washed the dried blood from her hands and crossed to the bed. "What did you say to him?" she asked softly, placing her hand on Lars's shoulder.

He laid his hand over hers, but did not look up. "I tell him he can't die. Not now."

"We'll do all we can for him. We don't know how long he's been here, but I see no sign of his spine twisting or his jaw locking up."

Lissa looked up to see Lars and Wally looking at her with questioning frowns. "Mama told me to watch for that in you." She looked back at the unconscious patient. "I wish he would wake up so he could eat and drink something to keep up his strength."

"I wish I can tell him that we here," Lars added weakly.

Wally pulled on his coat and tied down his hat over his ears. "I'll go see to the horses and bring in some food. I'm starved."

"I come too," Lars said. After preparing to go outside, he looked back at Ingor and then at Lissa. His face was drawn and pale.

She smiled to try to cheer him. "Don't worry. I'll take good care of him."

"Ya, I know. You as good as any doctor I ever know, or I not be here now. No, you better than doctor. You my healing angel. And I need you now more than ever."

Lissa turned back to the bed to hide her sudden tears. She wanted Lars to need her, but because he loved her, not because his brother needed doctoring. But she could see that was too much to hope for.

The men left and Lissa explored the cabin to see what she had available for fixing a meal. There was a small table, but only one chair made of lashed-together branches. Wally had already upended a thick-cut log for a chair, and she surmised others like that one would do for the rest of them too. Expecting a sod house, she was surprised that the cabin was made of logs and mortared with soil pressed into the spaces between them. But then trees lined both sides of the river here. Pegs driven in all around the room were all Ingor needed instead of cabinets and closets. He hung up everything he wanted to store out of the way.

Covering the remainder of the wall were beautiful fur pelts stretched on wood frames, and even more pelts were piled in the corner of the cabin. She had never seen such beautiful furs--brown with white tips, a shorter grayed brown, some that were all white and a few that were dark and very large. She knew those to be buffalo, but didn't recognize the rest. What she also knew was that any woman in Philadelphia would have loved to have one of them wrapped around her neck or around her hands on a muff.

Next to the outside wall by the table, she saw a trapdoor and lifted it to discover a cache of food stored in a hole in the ground under the cabin. Between what she found there and what she knew was in the wagon, they would be able to survive for weeks. The question was, if they were snowed in, could they survive for the months until spring came?

She rinsed out the cloths they had used to clean Ingor up, but could find no soap to wash out the blood. That would have to wait for soap from the wagon. She took the cleanest and wiped his brow again. "Ingor," she said as she worked. "You must wake up now. I know the pain in your leg must be something awful, but we won't move you again."

She pushed his long hair from his face and tried to smooth his unruly beard. He appeared to be a handsome man, but not as good looking as his younger brother. He had more reddish-blond hair than Lars had on his head and spreading across his chest. She suddenly checked her imagination there and wiped his brow again.

With a deep moan, Ingor tossed his head to the side.

"Yes, that's it. You must wake up. You must be thirsty. Would you like a drink?" She got no reaction this time, but wouldn't give up. "Why don't I just try?"

She rose and poured some of the melted snow from the coffeepot into a cup. She added a pinch of the willow bark and stirred it by swirling the cup. When it had cooled to drinking temperature, she returned to the bed. Wetting the tips of her fingers, she dropped some tea onto his lips. He moved his lips and pressed them together. Encouraged, she continued with greater amounts and in a few minutes, she was spooning it into his mouth.

"That's good. Just a little more now," she said, talking to him as she fed him the rest of the medicinal tea. He was swallowing it although he had yet to open his eyes.

When he finally did, she smiled at how his eyes widened when he saw her. "Ingor, are you really awake?" He frowned and then closed his eyes again. "No, you must stay awake. You must drink more."

He barely opened his eyes and looked at her. "You still here," he rasped.

She laughed. "Yes, I'm still here." She leaned forward and slid her hand under his head. "Here, I'll help you to drink. Lift your head and swallow some of this." She managed to get a little more tea in him before

Lars and Wally came back in and slammed the door against the wind. Lars covered the distance to the bed in three long strides.

"Hold seg borte fra henne. Hun er min!" he said with a false severity.

Ingor's eyes widened. "Hun er en engel fra himmel," he responded, looking at Lissa.

"Ja. Hun er en engel fra himmel, og hun er min." Lars leaned over the bed as the two brothers hugged each other until Ingor grunted in pain and Lars relaxed his hold and straightened.

"What did he say? How was he hurt?" Lissa had understood a few words like heaven, but not all.

Lars shook his head. "How do you trap your own leg? And tell us in English so my wife and her brother Wally can know what you say."

"This angel from heaven your wife?"

"Ya, this is Lissa." Lars stood behind Lissa, his hands possessively on her shoulders.

Ingor stared at Lissa so inquisitively that she felt uncomfortable. "Here, try to drink some more tea." After a few sips, Ingor laid his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes with a sigh.

"How many days ago you do this?" Lars asked.

Ingor twisted his head from one side to the other. "Two, maybe three days. Not know for sure. I drag leg back here."

"Have you eaten?" Lissa asked.

"I eat some jerky, and little coffee in pot I could reach, but when I tried to get more water, I kept passing out."

He looked back at Lissa. "I sorry you find me like this."

"You should be glad we found you. She's good at doctoring," Wally told him. "And if the whole tribe of Indians we passed had found you, you wouldn't be happy."

Ingor laughed. "They find buffalo yet?"

Wally looked surprised. "Well, yes. When we saw 'em, they were all lining up and taking off after 'em."

"Out west, land not flat. Drive 'em off cliff and save spearheads and arrows. I glad they find 'em. They not starve this winter or steal from me." He relaxed and moments later he was asleep.

The smell of food woke Ingor later while the others were eating supper. He shared some of the sourdough flapjacks Lissa had made with the sourdough starter the army cook had given her. She had worried that it was frozen, but the batter bubbled nicely once she'd gotten it warm.

"Dat so good. You sure you wife to Lars?" Ingor asked as she crossed to the bed to pick up his empty plate.

She laughed and pressed her hand on his forehead. "You still feel warm. I'll make you another cup of willow bark tea." She lifted the blanket that covered his injured leg. She didn't like the look of the fluid soaking the dressing. Lifting the dressing from around his leg, she saw that one of the holes left by the trap teeth was even redder than it had been earlier. The flesh around it was puffy and the wound oozed a yellowish liquid. She caught Lars's gaze and he rose and came to her side.

"Can you help me change the dressing?" She pulled the dressing all the way off and went to cut a new one, leaving Lars to examine the wounds. She heard him sigh. He had seen that the wound was festering too.

"What's wrong?" Ingor tried to rise up on his elbows.

Lars straightened and avoided looking at his brother. "It looks a little redder, that's all." He pulled over a chunk of a thick log and sat by his brother's head. "You got any whiskey hidden around here?"

Ingor laughed and flopped back down on the pillow. "Ya, sure. Back of the food hole." He motioned to the trapdoor.

Lissa was returning to the bed, but Lars caught her arm.

"I think you should leave that off for a time. Let it get some air," he said, staring intently into her eyes.

She couldn't decipher what he was trying to say, but she knew he had something planned. She laid the fabric strips on the table and handed two cups to Lars when he retrieved the bottle. She had never seen him drink a drop of liquor and couldn't understand why he would ask for it now. But over the next hour, she and Wally watched as Lars plied his brother with liquor until he passed out, while his own cup was nearly as full as when he started. He shook Ingor's shoulder and called his name. When he got no response, he pulled out his knife and stuck the blade into the red-hot coals of the fire.

"We must open that hole and sear it. If festering gets worse, he will lose his leg."

Lissa had heard of it, but she had never seen it done. "What can I do to help?"

"Can you cut it open and squeeze out the bad blood?"

She nodded. Wally offered her his knife and helped by holding the leg still in case Ingor woke.

"I heard whiskey is good for this," Wally put in. "I saw a man pour it over his hand when he caught it in a saw and ripped it open something awful. He claimed it would heal better that way."

"How was his hand after that?" Lars asked.

"It healed fine."

Lars thought a moment or two and then reached for the bottle. He poured it over the teeth marks and made certain it got in each puncture. Lissa cleaned the festering wound and poured more into that one. Ingor moaned, but thankfully did not wake.

"Stay asleep, Ingor. It's better that way," Lissa urged.

Wrapping the leftover top of the calico dress around his hand, Lars lifted the hot knife from the fire. His

jaw set against the pain he would inflict, he seared the swollen festering flesh. Ingor twisted his head from side to side, but never came to. Lissa raised her apron over her face to filter the horrid smell of burning flesh. She was close to needing to run outside again.

"Now you wrap it," he told Lissa.

When she had the dressing in place, Wally held out the whiskey bottle. She was tempted to drink a mouthful, but soaked the dressing instead.

"We've done all I know how to do. Now it's up to the Lord whether he makes it or not."

Chapter Twenty-two

"If only I get here sooner," Lars lamented, looking down at his unconscious brother.

Tears burned in Lissa's eyes. "I'm sorry we slowed you down," she whispered. She turned away, unable to look at him. He would have been here weeks earlier if he hadn't stayed with her and Wally and brought their wagon all the way. He would have been here sooner and not burdened with a wife and her brother who knew nothing of farming or of trapping, or anything to make a good life in Dakota.

She blew out the lanterns and let the fireplace light the room. Taking her bedroll, she spread it out in the middle of the floor with her feet toward the fire. She wept silently for Ingor, who might not live because of the festering of his wounds, and he might not walk again if he did live. She wept for Lars, who had worked so hard and only wanted to meet up with his brother so they could have a better life than the hard one they led in Norway. And for a while, she wept for herself and all the dreams she'd had for a happy life with Lars and the children they might have. But how happy could he be with her when she had slowed him down almost enough to miss seeing his brother alive?

Minutes later, Wally stretched out between her and the table. She didn't know how much later Lars lay down between her and Ingor's bed, but her tears had dried by then. She had a life to lead that was better than many, and weeping about it didn't make it any easier or happier. Living it and moving on the best she could, did.

Lars still smelled of whiskey, but he was warm against her back when he pulled her against him. She rolled over toward him and welcomed his arms around her. A feeling of desperation hung in the air as they clung to each other. He must have remained awake for a long time, because she knew he was still awake when she finally found sleep.

With no windows to allow sunlight into the room the next morning, the exhausted trio on the floor slept until Ingor's grunts woke them.

"What is it?" Lars asked, rising to stand beside him. "Complaining about no break to your fast already?"

A smile brightened Ingor's face. "Leg hurts, but now not pound like hammer."

Lissa lifted off the blanket and removed the dressing. She looked all around his leg carefully, and saw about the same redness and swelling as the night before. No more holes had festered and the one Lars had seared looked less angry. She looked up and met Lars's gaze as he surveyed his brother's leg. She saw a smile on his face--a real smile that lit the sparkle in his eyes for the first time since they arrived at

the cabin. She laid a clean cloth over the wounds and replaced the blanket to keep him warm. Everyone's relief was palpable.

Lissa walked over to the food stash to begin to prepare breakfast. She heard Lars and Ingor talking in Norwegian while Wally stretched and reluctantly climbed out from his bedroll. Suddenly, the thought of fixing them all something to eat at that moment was just too much.

"I'm going outside." She grabbed her cape and ran to the door.

The wind during the night had whipped around the cabin and cleared an area in front of the door, but she had to step through a drift to reach it. She got no further before she lost the remnants of the previous night's flapjacks. She chided herself for getting sick with worry as she cleaned her face with a handful of snow.

She hugged the cape to her chest and looked around. The only reminder of yesterday's storm--besides the additional five or six inches of snow on the ground--were a few puffy clouds moving in the east. The otherwise clear brilliant blue sky seemed to mock her situation. How could the majestic expanse look so beautiful and unending when living under it meant such harsh and life-threatening conditions? She smiled. Maybe God had put it there to cheer the people as they struggled.

She heard the horses whinny and stomped through the snow to reach them. The other building they had noticed on their arrival was indeed the barn--another log structure about the size of the house. The slanted roof was high in the front and only as tall as she was in the rear.

Lars and Wally had somehow gotten the horses all inside with Ingor's mule on the end. Lissa smiled, thinking how they must have preferred the close quarters where they could share their body heat, to being outside in the snow and wind.

Thunder reached for her and neighed. She rubbed his nose. "How're you doing? I know you're hungry, but Lars will be here soon."

"He's here now."

She whirled around, her hand over her heart. "I didn't hear you coming."

"Snow not crunch as much when it's not so cold." He opened the grain box and began feeding the animals from a wooden pail. "Thank you for your help. You save his life."

"I just did what I could, what I wanted to do to help you." She pulled her cape closer and shivered.

"You are cold? You must be getting wet. This snow is higher than your boots."

She shook her head. "I have Wally's old trousers tucked in them," she said grinning, holding out one leg and lifting her skirt to show him.

He grinned and added more grain to the pail for the next horse. "Wally is frying up some bacon. You should eat."

"Not right away," she hedged. "I'll watch you feed the horses."

Eating was the last thing she wanted to do right now. Much higher on her list was slipping into a hot bath

with the rose-scented soap Wally had given her. She was so absorbed in her dream as she waited for Lars to finish that she was startled when she looked up to see him standing directly in front of her.

He grasped her upper arms. "We would never make it here without you, Lissa." He pulled her against his chest and circled his arms around her back. Her hands clutched her cape at her chest. "You stay strong when you could be weak after your parents die. You encourage Wally and depend on him so he turns from boy to man in one long, hard summer. You make me happy despite not daring to dream you and I marry."

Pleased with what he was saying, she smiled and slid her arms around his waist. "You make it sound like much more than it was. I only did what I had to do, what I wanted to do."

He lowered his head to kiss her, and she rose onto her toes to give herself to the kiss. When their lips parted, he smiled down at her. "Kissing you always makes me warm."

"Thank you, Lars, for staying with us. I wasn't very nice to you sometimes."

"You just sad and upset when parents die."

She nodded. "I still am when I think about how they died. But I must thank you. We never would have made it without you."

"You not rather go back east?"

She thought a moment, shook her head and smiled. "I don't think Wally would go now. No, we'd both rather be here with you."

"I will work hard to make sure you not regret staying with me."

She wanted tell him again that she couldn't regret it, but her stomach was rolling again. The smells in the barn were strong with little ventilation and suddenly she had to have some fresh air. She twisted out of his arms and managed to run outside before she bent over retching. Her stomach was already empty, and other than nausea, she felt fine. She didn't understand being sick. But with a little snow on her face to refresh her, the feeling soon passed as it had earlier.

She had just wiped her heated cheeks when Lars swooped her up into his arms. A big grin spread ear to ear. "You promise to tell me, but you do not," he said with an obviously false sternness. He carried her toward the cabin.

"Tell you what? Put me down. I can walk."

In the snow-free area a few yards from the front of the cabin, he set her down gently. Cradling her jaws in hands, he kissed her forehead. "You promise to tell me when you start my baby."

Her mouth dropped open, and she stared at him. "A baby? Me?" She could feel her cheeks warm and wasn't quite certain if it was from joy or embarrassment. "How can you tell?"

He shrugged. "You get sick in the morning. Marilyn told me at the fort that you were sick when you try to fix the morning meal that day."

She shook her head. "Yes, but I was just worried about finding your brother's cabin before we got lost

in a storm and froze to death."

He frowned, but suddenly grinned. "Then, we wait and see if it happens more. If it does, I think we know for sure, because already your breasts are larger." Lars slid his hands over her breasts before dropping them to his sides and turning toward the door.

She grabbed his sleeve to stop him. "Really?"

He grinned. "Ya. I know that for some time now."

She caught her lower lip between her teeth. She couldn't remember the last time her monthly flow came. She had forgotten all about it with all that had happened. "Wait. We can't say anything to the others."

He frowned. "You not happy with baby?"

"No, I mean yes, but let's wait until we're very sure," she explained.

His face brightened. "Ya, sure," he agreed, laughing as he put his arm around his stunned wife, and ushered her into the cabin.

* * *

Lissa's morning sickness lasted weeks, as she might have known if her mother had lived to talk to her about it. Lars kept his promise to keep quiet about the baby for another week. It was not hard because his brother occupied his thoughts and his time, and the days passed quickly.

Ingor progressed each day and no more wounds had to be reopened, for which Lissa was especially thankful. As he improved, they grew confident the leg would not have to be amputated. It remained to be seen if the bone would heal strong enough so that he could walk on it again.

She finally confided in Wally that she thought she was with child. Excited, he had hugged her and swung her around, only to put her down quickly and apologize for the rough treatment.

"I'm not made of glass," she assured him.

"I'm going to be an uncle," he proclaimed, happy as he could be. He passed long hours in the cabin whittling, and from the way he hid the piece of wood he was working on, she suspected he had begun a toy for the baby.

When Lars made the announcement to his brother, Ingor asked her when the baby would come. The question stopped them in their tracks. Lissa hadn't given it a thought and didn't actually know how to figure it out. The men pooled their scanty knowledge on the subject, and they all concluded that it would be late summer when the babe made his or her appearance.

Lissa wondered often if there would be another woman around then to help her. She couldn't imagine having a baby with just three men to help. But she knew almost nothing of what to expect. To keep from getting anxious, she busied herself altering the cabin to accommodate the four inhabitants. She stacked empty crates on their sides along the kitchen area wall like open cabinets to hold plates and pots and pans. Planks laid across the top gave her a counter to work on as she prepared meals. She swept the dust and dirt from the logs and then swept the floor clean.

"This place never look so good," Ingor told her. He began to worry about his trapline, though it would be a while until he would be able to tend it.

Lars and Wally resumed a more productive and busy life too. They carried in crates of their clothes and the rocking chair so Lissa could sit comfortably. Wally fashioned a pair of crutches so Ingor could get around the cabin. The pair even carried in Great-great-grandpa's chest of drawers. Lissa cleared the drawers for their clothes.

That night she went to the top drawer to retrieve a nightdress. She opened it and saw Lars's shirts stacked beside her blouses, his spare long underwear rolled beside her petticoats. She couldn't have seen a more welcome sight. Their smallclothes belonged together. She and Lars were truly man and wife, not because of the horrid ceremony foisted upon them, or that others thought them wed. Not even because they had made a baby together. They were truly man and wife because they had joined their strengths and shored up each other's weaknesses to face life and to make it the best they could--together.

And yet, she thought as tears stung in her eyes, neither had mentioned love.

Days passed as the men worked unloading much of the wagon, cutting wood for the fire, and feeding and exercising the animals. The more they ate, the more their clothes needed mending and washing, so the busier Lissa stayed. She had little time to worry about the baby. He or she had managed to begin life without her knowing, and she would rely on him or her to continue without her direction.

Able only to watch the activity around him, Ingor became more restless about his trapline. "I gotta get out and check. The pelts won't be worth a damn by this time, if there are any left that other animals or the Indians haven't stolen."

"We do that for you," Lars insisted. "Just tell us where it is."

"Aw, you never find 'em in snow. I go too."

They argued, but in the end Lars and Wally fashioned a one-man sled on two runners with some of the planks from the old delivery wagon. It resembled a travois the Indians used to transport their goods. The padded planks on which Ingor would recline were lashed to two long poles hitched to one of the grays. Wally would ride the other gray with Lars on Thunder.

Though they planned to be gone only for a two or three days, they packed enough food for four in case of trouble. Enough room remained on the sled for any furs that were salvaged. Dressed as warmly as they could, they each wore short cape-style coats over their shoulders that Lissa had sewed together from Ingor's fur pelts. The fur capes extended to below their hips and covered their thighs as they road to keep them dry as well as warm, but not interfere with their movement. They set off at dawn one clear morning to check Ingor's trapline. Lissa had prayed all the night before that they would have clear weather the whole time.

"Don't worry about us. I won't let them step on a trap," Ingor promised Lissa as they left.

She hardly felt reassured.

"You sure you don't want me to stay here with you?" Wally asked.

She shook her head. "I'm going to enjoy a good long soak in the tub with the rose-scented soap you gave me."

Lars pulled her into his arms. "Then maybe I should stay with you," he whispered with a smile that made her cheeks warm.

"You must go to look out for your brother and mine."

He paused long enough to kiss her good-bye. She watched them until they disappeared into the woods, following Ingor's customary path along the river. Now she had two days all to herself-the first such occasion since leaving Philadelphia.

Lars had lifted down the washtub for her, and she set about to heat enough water to make a deep bath. The tub was too small to accommodate all of her at once, but nonetheless, she luxuriated in the warm water with its sweet smell. She only made herself get out when she had added all the remaining hot water, and the water had cooled below the comfortable state. She dressed quickly to stay warm.

Finally, she set about to use the bath water to wash all the dirty clothes that had accumulated. Not wanting to waste her scented soap, she washed her own things first while the scent lingered and then switched to the lye soap. She did the best she could without boiling the clothes as she would if she had a big wash pot on the fire.

She hung the clothes to dry on a rope that Lars had helped her hang across the cabin to hold a quilt that blocked the view for her privacy from the men. She and Lars slept on the floor the other side of the quilt wall from the others. For several nights she rebuffed his advances before she got used to making love in the same room as the other two men. The night she heard them both snoring briskly she could resist no longer. She loved being in Lars's arms and marveled at the sensuous feeling he created within her. He made her body warm even now just thinking about him.

She stopped to eat a little food after finishing the wash and then returned to work. She poured the twice-used water on the freshly swept earth floor as Ingor had explained. By not walking on it until it was dry, she knew she would create a clean, hard-packed surface. She didn't have enough water to get all the way across, but she thought the part she had watered down looked better than it had since they arrived.

She filled the tub with snow and put more near the fire to heat in the coffeepot to finish the floor. Since the child had begun growing within her, she was often tired enough during the day to nap. While the snow melted, she curled up on the bed, loving the softness after sleeping on the floor.

She didn't know how long she had been asleep when a noise woke her. She wasn't alone in the cabin. She froze, not even opening an eye. She pictured the revolver on the end of the mantle near the bed, and planned how to move to get to it quickly. Throwing the quilt back and dropping her feet to the floor, she jumped up. But she saw immediately that she wouldn't need the revolver.

"You did not bar the door," Lars scolded as he hung up his snow-covered coat and the rest of his warm weather gear.

"You came back. What is wrong? Is Wally...?"

He grinned broadly. "Not a thing is wrong. Wally is fine." He rubbed his red hands together and then held them nearer the fire.

"But where are the others?"

"I figure they are near to finishing the first section by now."

"But you came back?"

"Ya." He dipped his fingers into the bath water. "Got any more hot water?"

She jumped up and pulled a shawl around her shoulders. The room was cold from all the frigid air he had brought in with him. She hopped over the clumps of snow he had dropped and stepped into her shoes. "I put water to heat in the coffeepot."

"I can reach it," he said, pouring the hot contents into the tub.

She stood by the tub and watched as he unbuttoned his shirt and tugged it off. His belt and trousers went next. She took each piece of clothing and folded it before she stacked them all on the chair.

He stopped for a moment in his long underwear when he got to the buttonhole she had sewed shut because he had lost the button when it fell off. He waited patiently as she got her sewing scissors and cut it open. Their gazes met after he slipped it off.

"You came back to take a bath?"

"Ya." He leaned down to kiss her, something she had wanted him to do since the moment she discovered he was there. "And to be alone with you."

She wanted to make love with him more at that moment than she ever had. She wanted his muscular body with all the scars that he had earned on their trek west from his wounds. She wanted his kind heart that led him to always look out for her. She truly wanted his love for her even though she made him change his plans. She wanted his child that grew within her and the ones yet to come. And she even wanted his scruffy beard that he would shave off next spring and start to grow all over again for next winter. She wanted and loved this man of the new West with all her heart, and she was content to know he cared at least a little for her.

He sat in the tub and even the cool water didn't reduce the evidence of his desire for her.

"I think we should go to fort for Christmas," he said nonchalantly, but with glance up to see her reaction.

She couldn't contain her broad smile. "The fort?" she whispered as she knelt next to him and washed his body with slow strokes. "Oh, yes. I would like that."

"Ingor says they have good Christmas dinner." She laughed. "And I think you like to talk to other women now that you..." He laid his hand on her belly. "Maybe one of them would come here next summer to be with you."

"Yes. Oh, yes." Tears of joy burned in her eyes as she stopped washing him long enough to kiss him tenderly. Meeting his gaze just inches from his face, she smiled. "You came back."

"And I always will, little one. Jeg elsker De. I love you."

"Is that what that means?"

He smiled. Not giving a thought to how wet she was getting, she threw her arms around him.

"Oh, Lars, I love you so much."

Later that snowy winter night, sated and happier than either had ever thought to be, Lissa and Lars confirmed that being almost home was a great place to be because they were together.

Excerpt from *The Wishing Tree*

By Catherine Snodgrass

ISBN 1-55316-113-0

Copyright © 2003 Catherine Snodgrass

Chapter One

Texas, 1878

Grace Marshall thought she was alone. Her brothers and sisters had left for school hours before. Her mother had taken the wagon to town for supplies. And Pa? He was somewhere on the far side of the empty cornfield knee-deep in muck.

A hot breeze tickled the damp curls sticking to her neck. It wasn't enough to dry the sweat. It never was. Swelter in the summer; freeze in the winter. Work and toil. Everyday. All day. The circle of life...or death. Like a hangman's noose.

She bent to haul yet another piece of laundry from the basket. Lord, how her back ached! Barely kissing twenty and her body was failing her. She tossed the long johns over the line and stabbed them in place with the wooden pin.

There it is again. That feeling that she wasn't alone.

Shielding her eyes against the afternoon sun, she scanned the horizon. She didn't have to look far.

A lone rider watched her from the knoll. Broad, dusty, bedraggled. His black horse looked in better shape than he.

Despite the distance, she felt their gazes lock. It was then he moved, urging his mount forward. He was coming her way, stepping into her world, and somehow Grace sensed her life would never be the same again.

This time the creak of leather reached her. His saddle, the holster strapped to his thigh, those dusty cowboy boots in the stirrups. The stubble of a beard darkened his sun-tanned face. A bedroll was perched on the horse's rear. This man looked like he'd been on the road for a while.

Closer still, other details hit her. The red kerchief tied around his neck. The Colt .45 glinting from his

well-used holster, the hilt of a bowie knife in a scabbard behind that, and the butt of a Winchester rifle rocking along with the stride of the horse.

Grace's heart quickened. What if he were a bank robber or a gunslinger? He had come to their home to steal what little they had. To take advantage of the womenfolk. Why, just the thought of being ravished was enough to make her scream, even if she wasn't quite sure what that meant. All she knew was that it was different than what normally happened between a man and his wife. It was horrible to be ravished. Ma said so. And this man looked like he could crush her with one of those big, powerful hands. He'd haul her to the nearest pile of hay, lift her dress, and...and...

She fanned the heat from her cheeks and reined her thoughts to a standstill. Ma was right. Grace spent too much time reading those blasted dime novels Pa brought home. A waste of precious time and money, Ma said. But Grace had caught Ma devouring the contents on more than one occasion.

Nearly to her, the man tipped the brim of his gray cowboy hat in greeting. "Ma'am. I'm looking for Damon Marshall."

Grace looked up. Eyes a shade darker than the sky studied her. Rider and horse guarded her from the sun. "That'd be my pa."

"Name's Jake Tanner. Mind telling me where I can find him?"

Her gaze fell to the gun in his holster.

"I've been on the road for two days, Miz Marshall. A smart man doesn't travel unarmed. I've just come to collect on a note he gave my brother."

She narrowed her eyes. "Begging your pardon, Mr. Tanner, but you look a little worse for wear for having been on the road only two days."

A hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He scratched at his whiskers to cover it. "Sorry, ma'am. I was out with the herd before heading this way. Didn't think to clean up first."

"You look more like a gunman than a cowboy."

He glanced around the Marshalls's dilapidated farm then crossed his forearms over the saddle horn and leaned forward. "And what kind of notorious act could your farmer father have done to bring a gunman to *this* place?"

Point taken, even if his tone mocked her. Grace pointed to the sprawling field beyond the house. "You'll find him on the far side of the field."

He flicked the brim of his hat once more and nudged his horse in that direction.

Grace pulled a bed sheet from the basket and draped it over the line. Peeking around the edge, she watched Jake move away. He looked as good leaving as he did coming.

The breeze caught the line of clothes and tangled the sheet around her. Grace slapped it down and shoved a pin over the line. The sheet curled around her again. Grace grabbed a fistful and tugged. The line snapped. A full morning's work lay on the grass. Now she'd have to start all over again.

She glanced around. Still alone. No one would know the difference. It was grass, for crying out loud, and she had a lot more work to do.

She plucked the heavy cording from the ground. Weighed down with wet wash, it took two hands to haul it over her shoulder. Stretching on tiptoe, Grace tried to thread the end into the hole on the wooden brace. It might as well have been a needle. The line was too heavy. She was wasting as much time trying to tie the dagblasted thing than she would if she'd taken the wash down in the first place.

A pair of hands covered hers. Dark, long-fingered, callused. Startled, she jumped, then craned her neck backward. Jake Tanner. He tied the cord off with nary a blink, standing so close Grace could count the whiskers in his growing beard.

"Ma'am." He tugged the brim of his hat her way, and swung back into the saddle.

He was almost out of hearing range when Grace finally remembered her manners and hollered a thank you. Without turning, he raised his hand in response.

Grace allowed herself a smile. He was just about the best thing she'd seen in Sleepy Eye...ever. She'd be thinking about him for a long time to come. Oh, yes...a *long* time.

* * *

Jake didn't know what made him turn around. The young woman wasn't that much to look at. Of course, it was hard to tell as work-worn as she was right now. She wasn't short or tall--just average. The same could be said of her shape, except that her bosom was lost in that faded gray dress she had on. Patches of it were damp from the wash and clung to her. Even that did nothing to bring out a hint of a figure. Her brown hair defied a thousand pins, strands of it drifting down her neck, around her face, into her eyes. And those eyes, again nothing special-big, round, brown, just like every single head of cattle on his ranch.

So why turn around for another peek?

It didn't matter. Doing so called him back to her side to help her with the broken clothesline.

Thinking about it made Jake smile. She had pluck. He'd give her that. And more common sense than any other woman he'd ever met. Most would have tossed all the laundry back in the tub to wash. A waste of time as far as he was concerned. It was only grass, not a hog wallow. The laundry was on the ground for a total of five seconds. Still clean by his standards. Finally, he'd found a woman who agreed.

He twisted around on the saddle to check again. Yep, there she was hanging clothes as if nothing had happened. She looked like a half-drowned puppy. The laundry fought her in the fast building breeze. She sidestepped it and tripped over her own tub. Jake bit back a laugh as she tumbled to the ground. She glared up at the line of wash, then dusted herself off and went back to it.

Yep, pluck...and determination. From the look of this farm, she needed both. The barn was a little bigger than the clapboard house, but not by much. Both looked like they were held together by will rather than by nails. Jake didn't know how in the world the place held... How many young'uns had A.J. said the Marshalls had? Seven? Plus two adults?

He shook his head. His brother was right. This was a wasted trip. But a debt was a debt and a man had to make good on it. If Jake let Damon Marshall get off without paying, how many others would start to

take advantage? As it stood, he'd had plenty of time to pay for the cow. The damn thing had been with the Marshalls for a year. A.J. should never have let it get this far. But then, they'd had other problems to deal with.

Jake skirted the horse around the field down a narrow road. It was the only place not mired in mud. The field itself, though newly plowed, looked hopeless. Just row upon row of goo and dirt clods. He didn't know how these people were going to carve out a life in this mess. But that's what the weather did to people. A blessing and a curse. Jake knew that all too well.

The land took a gentle slope downward. A line of trees nearby hid the river. This was where Marshall had made his mistake. He'd planted on a flood plain. No man could be that stupid. Jake could only guess that Marshall hoped to take advantage of the water in the dry season by using it to irrigate. But one good downpour even miles upriver could wash it all away.

He and Marshall saw each other at the same time. They both raised their arms in greeting. Marshall dropped the plow harness from his shoulders and started Jake's way.

Jake waited by his horse. He could do little else. There was no place to tie the reins and he wasn't about to destroy Marshall's hard work by tromping the horse over the field.

He watched the man's progress. Every other step sucked his feet into the sludge. In a week, maybe two, the mosquitoes in this place would be eating him alive.

"Hello there, neighbor. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Jake Tanner. My brother, A.J., sold you a cow about a year ago. I've come to collect on the note."

Marshall slowed, his head bent to the task of getting through what remained of the field. The gesture was clear. Marshall didn't have the money. Jake's spirits dipped lower.

Marshall took the last step onto the road, swept his hat off, and mopped the sweat from his forehead with a threadbare piece of gray calico. The same color as the daughter's dress...the same material and in just about the same condition.

"About that...you see..."

Here it comes. Jake didn't want to hear it. Didn't want to put the man through an awkward explanation. A.J. was right. He should have stayed home and let the matter go. True, they needed the money, but not near as much as the Marshalls.

"We've had some rough times this last year. I kinda hoped to get her with calf then sell it to pay the note, but..." He let the excuse die. "I suppose you'll be wanting the cow back. She's a good one. Puts out the sweetest milk."

The last thing Jake needed was another cow. No matter how sweet the milk.

Marshall scuffed the road with his boot. "We really need her for the milk. If I could have a little more time." Forcing a smile, he waved his hand over the field. "I doubled my area. I'm hoping to have a good crop this year."

Jake scanned the rows of clods. Only a miracle would turn this place around. Still, a man had his pride,

and Jake wanted this done. "Do you have something to trade for the cow?"

Marshall scratched his head, then smoothed his hair back in place and hid it under a hat so full of holes Jake doubted its effectiveness. "Got a couple of good layin' hens, but my wife would skin me alive if I gave you one. She sells the extra eggs to the general store. Kept us from starving a time or two."

Awkward. Real awkward. Jake stared down the road in the direction of the cabin. There was a thought. "What about one of your children working off the debt?"

The man gave a nervous laugh. "Out of seven young'uns, I got two boys. One's just about at the age to start helping me. The other one's the baby."

"I wasn't thinking about one of the boys. I've got plenty of ranch hands. What we are shy on are womenfolk. My brother lost his wife last year. The woman we hired to help us is heavy with child and leaving soon." He pointed in the direction of the house. "I was thinking about your daughter."

Marshall's forehead wrinkled. He slapped his hat on. "Grace?"

Grace? Her name was Grace? The image of her falling over the washtub hit Jake. It was all he could do to keep from laughing. "Yes. She looks plenty sturdy."

"She is that. Girl's got a strong back." Marshall mopped his neck. "Real good with the young'uns. A fair cook. A big help to her ma."

"That's what we need. Since you've had the cow a year, she can work a year to pay the debt. If she's willing."

"Oh, she'll do what she's told. Once the year's up?"

Jake thought he heard a different question. Did he have to bring her back? No matter how much help she might be, she was just another mouth to feed. There were other daughters in the house to help out.

"After a year, we'll offer her pay to stay on."

A smile broke the man's weatherworn face. He stuck out his hand. "You got yourself a deal. You'll stay to supper. We'll tell the women afterward and you can head out by first light."

They shook hands to seal the bargain.

Jake smiled. It was a good deal after all. A.J. could eat his words. "Now, Mr. Marshall, if you'll show me a place to tie up my horse, I'll help you with the plowing."

It was hard work to be sure; even Marshall's older boy came out to help after school. By the time they made their way back to the cabin, Jake was ready to call it a day. His mouth watered as he, Marshall, and the boy slipped behind the barn to wash up for supper. Whatever was cooking was heaven-sent. He was hot, dirty, and starved.

"Smells good."

Standing at the rain barrel, Marshall stripped to his waist and poured a ladle of water over his head. The second ladle went down his throat. "Grace makes the evening meal. Girl's a good cook."

"She makes the best biscuits this side of the Mississippi," the boy added. "I could eat a pan all by myself."

Jake could too this evening. He was covered in mud up to his knees. At least he had an extra set of clothes in his bedroll. The boots? Looked like he'd spend as much time cleaning them up as he had plowing. As they were, he'd have to leave them outside the front door and go to supper in his stocking feet. Marshall and the boy did the same thing. Then they crowded around the table to eat.

Fried chicken, corn, biscuits and gravy were piled in the center. Jake caught a whiff of apple pie. His mouth watered in response. Sure beat anything he cooked up.

Grace couldn't help staring at the man across the table from her. He had more manners and patience than anyone she'd ever met. He needed them since her mother sat him between her next younger sisters. They ogled him. Asked him one stupid question after another. Then giggled like the schoolgirls they were. Through it all Jake was a gentleman. He ate the meal Grace cooked like it was the best thing that had ever passed his lips. She was glad she managed to get it on the table without a mishap. Stepping over children-*that* was a miracle.

"So, Mr. Tanner," Ma began, "what brings you to these parts?"

Before he got the chance to answer, Pa broke in. "I bought that cow from his brother last year."

Oh, he was one of *those* Tanners. They had more money than anyone could count. At least that's what Grace had heard.

Ma set her fork aside while Pa sopped up the last of his gravy with a biscuit. She looked sick or like she was going to cry. Grace couldn't tell for sure since she'd never seen her mother do either of those things...unless she was expecting.

Grace glanced around the table. Another baby? That was just what they didn't need.

"Relax, Mother. Everything's taken care of." Her father tilted his chair back on two legs and hooked his thumbs on his suspenders.

He looked mighty proud of himself. But Ma wasn't buying it. She gave him a look that asked what in the world he had done now. Company kept her from demanding to know.

"Grace will be going to work with the Tanners until the debt is paid. They're in need of a woman to run the house and care for the children."

Grace's jaw dropped. She was going to live with the Tanners? Glory be! Fresh cotton sheets every night. Beds so soft you sank into them-alone. She wouldn't have to share with her two sisters anymore. And a house so big you needed a map to get from one room to the next. She couldn't believe her good fortune. Finally, *finally*, she was out of this godforsaken place.

"Absolutely not," her mother said.

Grace's hopes fell with her chin. Her heart squeezed so hard, it was all she could do not to cry. She stared at her tin plate and prayed she wouldn't start blubbering like a baby.

"Leave it to a man to come up with an addle-pated plan like that." Apparently, company manners were no longer important. "Whose idea was this?" Ma's gaze nailed Pa. "Yours?"

He fidgeted in his chair. "Well, no."

Her head whipped around to Jake. "Yours?"

Not as easily blustered-he obviously didn't know her mother-Jake looked her straight on. "Yes, ma'am, it was. You see-"

"Do you have a daughter, Mr. Tanner?"

"No, I-"

"Do you honestly think I would allow my daughter to live with a bunch of cowboys for a year all alone, much less travel with you unchaperoned for...how many days to your ranch?"

"Two, ma'am."

Ah, he was backing down. Not too many people could stand up to Ma when she got going. Not even Pa.

"Two days alone and one night with you on the trail. *Alone*, Mr. Tanner."

He spread his big hands on the table and pressed forward. "Mrs. Marshall, I would never take advantage of any woman. Neither would my brother or any of my men."

Her mother stretched toward him, placing her fingers over his arm. Jake was doomed.

"Mr. Tanner, I have no doubt your word is good. A lesser man would have taken the cow from us and left by now." She leaned back. "Just her living with all those men and traveling with you alone is enough to ruin her reputation. You know how people are-they always think the worse."

"Now, Mother..."

She held up her hand, silencing Pa. "Mr. Tanner, you've offered us an honorable solution to this problem and we are grateful. You have something we need and we have something you need. That's the way of things, isn't it?"

"Well...yes, ma'am."

His response was slow. Grace didn't blame him. He was right to suspect a trap. Experience taught Grace to be careful when her mother used that tone.

"That's what I thought."

She gave him a small smile. She was ready to strike. Grace longed to warn him that something else was coming.

"Then I would expect you to continue to do the honorable thing." Ma pulled in a breath. "Mr. Tanner, the only way my daughter is leaving here with you is if you marry her."

The silence in the house was complete. Not even the crickets dared make a sound. Grace's mouth dropped open. All she could do was stare at her mother.

What was she thinking? She'd only met Jake Tanner hours before. But that wouldn't matter to Ma. She and Pa had never met until they stood before the preacher. That's just how things were done back then. Obviously, it looked like that's how Ma intended things to be done now, too.

Grace dared a look Jake's way. His gaze shifted between her and Ma, then finally settled on her. She was surprised he still sat there. Only his manners kept him from grabbing that cow and heading for home.

She watched him watch her and wondered what he was thinking and why he didn't tell her parents they could go to blue blazes.

He scratched at the stubble on his face, looked at her mother, then her father, and back to her. Then again. Then to every face at that table.

"All right...I'll marry her."

Chapter Two

Jake tore from the house like the hounds of hell snapped at his feet. The last thing he wanted or needed was a wife. But it looked like that's what he was getting. By tomorrow this time he'd be a married man.

He could hear it now. The snickers and jeers. Comments about trading a cow for a wife. He hoped Grace didn't hear any of it. He wouldn't have her hurt. That's what got him into this mess in the first place.

Those big brown eyes of hers did it. Jake never should have looked at her. The second Marshall mentioned she was leaving with him, Grace's eyes lit with excitement and anticipation. Her mother ripped that joy away with the next breath. The expression on Grace's face-no, that wasn't right-her face never gave away her feelings. It was her eyes again. She might have shot her gaze to the plate in front of her, but it wasn't quick enough to hide her pain and the tears that flooded her sight.

To her credit Grace never cried, never said a word. When she pulled her head up, not a trace of disappointment lingered. Then her mother crossed the line she'd been edging toward. Jake knew something was coming, he just didn't expect that.

Anger and shock flickered in Grace's eyes. She almost said something. Almost. Hope kept her quiet. She wanted out. Who could blame her?

Jake scanned the tiny house that served as living quarters for nine. It didn't take more than one pass to see every inch of it. Dark, suffocating, cramped. A sleeping loft had three small beds stuffed into it. The area below had one larger bed shoved in one corner while the opposite end contained kitchen and table.

Then Jake made the mistake of looking at the gaggle of children wedged around that table. His first impression? Hungry. Not for food, though. From the look of the supper table tonight, they might not eat often, but they ate good. Their clothes, while clean, were threadbare, held together by will more than anything else. The longing in their eyes, especially those of the older girls, was for something more. They

wanted escape, freedom from a life that held no pleasure and no hope for any in the future.

Jake compounded his errors by settling his gaze on Grace. Of course she wanted out. Who wouldn't? He hadn't been there a full day and already he was itching to leave. And in her eyes, those cow-brown eyes, Jake finally understood how Laurette felt. That didn't excuse what she did, but he understood it.

He snagged his horse's reins from the hitch and led him to the barn. Thinking about Laurette wasn't going to get him anywhere. That was in the past. It just didn't matter anymore. By tomorrow this time, he'd have a new wife.

Jeremy sure would be tickled when he heard that. The boy wanted a mother. More importantly, he needed a mother. One of his own, not one borrowed from his cousins.

Oh, Emma was a good substitute. His brother couldn't have done better in a wife. But now...well, her death hurt them all. The children, A.J., Jake...yep, the weather could sure wield a double blade. The good rains brought enough sweet grass to drive their herd north. They also brought a twister the likes of which Jake had never seen before.

At least Emma had died in A.J.'s arms. Their last words filled with love-just the way it should be. But A.J. still hadn't recovered, physically or emotionally. Jake wouldn't be surprised if it haunted A.J. the rest of his life. Hardly fair to everyone else, especially the children, but considering how much A.J. had lost, Jake couldn't fault him.

Yep, they needed a woman's touch around the place. Someone to soften the rough edges of life...at least for the children. They needed some order-they were starting to get a little wild. Jake didn't know if Grace was the right woman for the job, but she was better than nothing. At least as his wife, she'd stick around for a while.

Jake laughed at himself. Even he wasn't fool enough to believe she'd stay forever. Laurette had taught him that. If Grace wasn't satisfied with her life now, it was only a matter of time before life on their ranch dragged her down.

Guilt nudged him. Grace was trading one workhouse for another. Things might be better for her there than here, but it was still hard work. How was she going to feel about that?

It didn't matter. She was there to pay off a debt, nothing more. When the year was up, she could go about her business if she wanted. The innocence her mother fretted over intact.

Jake was lucky there. Considering the fact she wasn't much to look at, barely a woman, there wasn't much to tempt him. True, she'd be his wife, easily accessible to his needs. More convenient than hooking up with a woman in Austin. Nicer, too. In the dark, what did it matter?

He slid the saddle from the horse's back and tucked it into a pile of hay near the door. It mattered all right. It mattered a lot. She was coming to their house to work, and that's what she was going to do. If Grace had any trouble understanding that, he'd be glad to set her straight before things got too far out of hand. She was nothing more than an indentured servant, certainly not the type of woman he would take to his bed, much less as his wife.

His conscience laughed at him. *That* was exactly what he was doing. All because a pair of cow-brown eyes tugged at his heart.

* * *

"Grace, quit fidgeting. We've got a lot of work to do before the preacher gets here in the morning. And none of it's going to get done if we don't finish pinning this dress." To drive home her point, her mother jabbed another pin into the material.

"Stop it, Ma." Grace pulled the hem away. The stool teetered beneath her. "This is the silliest thing I've ever heard of. That man doesn't want to marry me."

Her mother pinched another piece of the age-old satin at Grace's waist. "No man wants to get married. And most of them don't know what they want until some woman tells him." She drove in the pin and gathered up another wad.

"By the time we're finished fixing up your old wedding dress, we'll have enough material to make two." Not the right thing to say, but at least her mother stopped long enough to glare at her.

Grace bent down to her level. "Ma, I just met the man. He's a stranger. I don't love him. And he sure doesn't love me."

Oddly, tears flooded her mother's eyes. A rapid flutter of her lids cleared them. She cupped her hand to Grace's cheek. "Ah, sugar, can't you see what I'm trying to do for you? No woman really knows a man until she marries him. Love? It doesn't count near as much as survival. Gracie, the Tanners are rich beyond anyone's dreams. This is a chance for you. He'll be a good match. He's an honorable man. He's an eligible man. Who are you going to marry up with here? Little Timmie Clifford? Old Man Mooney?"

Pausing, she chewed on her lower lip. "Mooney did ask for your hand, you know. Said he liked the way you'd been cleaning house for him and wanted you there permanent."

Grace's stomach turned at the very thought.

"I fought your pa hard on it. I just couldn't see you..."

Grace grabbed her mother's hand in both of hers and kissed her palm. "Ma, I appreciate you wanting the best for me. But I've got to talk to Mr. Tanner...please."

"Oh, all right." She stripped the gown from Grace's shoulders. "Don't be long."

Grace stepped into her day dress and buttoned it as she walked through the door. Once her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Grace headed for the barn. Too late she forgot about the bucket on the edge of the porch. It clattered down the three steps with enough noise to wake the dead-and smacked into one of their cats. The poor cat screeched, jumped straight in the air, and scrambled into a nearby tree. Birds scattered for new cover and squawked all the way.

The barn door squeaked open, shooting a pale shaft of light across the yard. Jake leaned against the doorjamb, a black shadow against the light.

"Are you a danger to others, or just yourself?"

He was laughing at her! Well, she'd heard worse. At least he wasn't fuming. "I need to speak with you, Mr. Tanner."

"Come ahead. I'm just tending to my horse." Jake waited in the doorway until he was sure enough light guided her without mishap. He thought about moving the kerosene lantern closer to the door, but that was courting disaster.

When she was close enough to find a clear path, he returned to brushing down his horse. He wasn't counting on her finding the one thing between them. Sure enough, the second she crossed the threshold her foot caught the saddle. Grace tumbled face first to the floor.

The hard fall knocked the air from Grace's lungs. It seemed forever before she was able to wedge her hands beneath her and push herself up. Jake never made a move to help. Grace didn't know if she was grateful he didn't treat her like porcelain, or angry he didn't rush to a lady's aid. But when she looked up and saw him draped over the back of his horse watching her, she decided irritated suited her just fine.

She shoved herself to her feet. "The least you could do was help me up."

"I think I'm safer over here."

A hint of a smile tugged at his lips. He ran the currycomb across his horse's back. The animal's skin quivered.

"He looks like he really enjoys that." Grace brushed the hay from her dress and eased forward.

"He does."

Grace longed to run her hand down that long, silky neck. "I've never seen a more beautiful animal. What's his name?"

"Uhm...Doesn't have a name." At least not one Jake readily shared since it always generated a fair amount of teasing.

She crept forward. "A horse as fine as he is should have a name. Something powerful like Thunder or Lightning or Breeze...I bet he runs like the wind."

"That he does." Jake tucked the comb into one of the saddlebags draped over the stall. "You wanted to talk?"

Grace watched him check each hoof. Where should she begin? It would be better if his attention was on her, not the horse. This was serious business. This was the rest of their lives.

"It just seems like you agreed to get married mighty quick. Are you really that hard up for a woman at your place?"

"Yes...we are."

He stood, giving her the attention she wanted only minutes before. Now that she had it, now that those deep blue eyes of his were focused on her and her alone, Grace found herself wishing he'd look the other way. Her knees quivered, threatening to make her fall...again.

"It...it just seems to me hiring someone would be a little less...drastic."

"As you recall, I offered to hire you."

"No, you offered to take me in payment for a cow."

"Your father is the one who made the debt. I was just giving him a way to pay it without taking the cow. Marriage was your mother's idea, not mine."

This was getting them nowhere. Jake wasn't making this easy. Grace didn't know what she wanted from him or why she had bothered to come out here.

"It just seems like a mighty big sacrifice. I have a bit I've tucked away over the years. How much was the cow? Maybe I could pay for it. I have what I earned keeping house for the older folks around here."

He moved closer, slowly, like a mountain lion stalking its prey. Grace forced herself to stay in place and keep her gaze fully on his. Every hair on her body prickled to life. She longed to brush the uneasy feeling away, but even that movement seemed too much to ask of herself.

"What about you? As I recall, you did nothing to stop this. You were plenty willing to go along with this until your little attack of conscience brought you out here."

Grace eased back in an effort to put some distance between them. It was no use. He just moved with her. "I was swept away in the rush. Once Ma gets a notion to do something, not much stops her. The important thing is that I'm here now, willing to make it right."

She bumped into the stall. Even that didn't stop Jake. He stood there just beyond her reach. One breath and he could trap her against the wooden slats. Her heart fluttered in a mix of fear and excitement. But Jake held his ground, cornering her simply by being there.

"Quit lying to yourself, Grace."

Her name sounded sweet on his lips. His voice gentle.

"I saw the look in your eyes. You want to leave here so bad you can taste it."

But not this way. It was wrong. Deceitful. The men could talk honor all they wanted, but Grace wasn't without a bit of her own. She forced herself to look into those deep blue eyes of his-eyes that burned through her skin.

"Just tell me how much the cow was and I'll pay for it. You're welcome to everything I've got."

"I don't want your money. I just want you."

Grace curled her fingers into her palms to keep from shaking. "As a housekeeper, not a wife."

"I'll take you however I can get you."

Desperate men did desperate things, but Grace refused to believe that someone as rich as Jake Tanner would have to resort to buying a wife. He could pay a thousand women to come work for them.

"Why me?"

He dropped his head and chuckled. "You're the one whose father owes me money, remember?"

"I'm not stupid, Mr. Tanner. That was the reason I came here in the first place. If it's the money, I'll give it to you. Just tell me how much and we can be done with this."

He pulled a long piece of straw from her hair and stuck it in his mouth. "You might want to call me Jake."

Goodness, he was a trial! Didn't the man see what she was trying to do for him? He rolled the end of that straw between his teeth like he had all the time in the world.

"So the idea of marriage doesn't appeal to you?" he asked.

Truth be told, Grace had never much considered marriage. Oh, she figured she'd get married one day, but since there weren't any eligible men nearby she didn't think beyond that.

"The cow, Mr. Tanner?"

He took his time answering, all the while playing with that straw, looking over her face. Grace was tempted to run to the house, grab her meager stash of coins, throw the pouch at him, and tell him to be on his way just so she could get away from the power in his eyes.

"A hundred dollars. The cow cost a hundred dollars."

Grace's mouth dropped open. That was a fortune! A body would have to work day and night for the rest of her life to get that much money. The hoard of change she had saved over the last several years would barely make a dent.

No wonder her father gave the Tanners a note. What surprised her was that her mother allowed it. They were always hard-pressed for money. No cow was worth that-no matter how sweet the milk. Ma would just trade eggs for milk from someone else's cow. Or did Ma agree, knowing they couldn't pay for the cow and that one of the Tanner men would someday come to collect and Grace would be shoved to them for trade?

No...Ma was tricky all right, but that would have been downright underhanded.

She watched Jake watch her, calmly waiting for her response. What reason would he have to lie?

"I'll tell you what, Grace." He twirled the straw from one side of his mouth to the other. "I know this wasn't exactly what we planned and certainly not what your father and I agreed on, but you want out of here and I need a woman to help out around the ranch. After a year's up and the debt's paid, you can go wherever you want."

Now that raised Grace's hackles. The nerve. He talked about honor, and then offered to shame her with divorce. He probably *did* lie about the cow, but for the life of her Grace didn't know why. No one could be that hard up for a housekeeper.

Forcing herself to remain the lady her mother claimed her to be, Grace stared Jake straight in the eye. "I've got honor too, Mr. Tanner. You marry me tomorrow, you're marrying me for life."

Smiling, he tapped the straw on the end of her nose. "*That's* what I'm counting on, Grace." Then, like a cat gleeful over his catch, he shoved the straw back between his teeth.

If there was any doubt before, Grace had none now. For whatever reason, Jake Tanner lied. And it had better be out of desperation.

"I'll see you get your money's worth for the cow." She brushed by him, and looked back over her shoulder. "Whatever that worth might be. And that straw you're gnawing on? I'd swear I saw one of the dogs peeing on it earlier."

Lifting her skirts, Grace continued. To her satisfaction, she heard him spit. Jake caught up with her before she reached the door. She expected anger, but found humor lighting his face. He braced his arms across the door and blocked her exit.

"I lied." A smile danced in his eyes. "The cow cost a thousand dollars."

Stunned, she drew back. Laughter overcame her. Ducking under his arm, she let it carry her back to the house. It had been a long time since she'd laughed this hard. It had been a long time since she'd laughed at all.

Jake watched her disappear back into the darkness. He was in big trouble. Laughter transformed her. Her skin glowed, her eyes sparkled, and his interest stirred to life.

That wouldn't do. She was coming to work, nothing more. Getting involved would only complicate things. He'd already had one love in his life; he sure as hell didn't need another. Especially considering the first one didn't pan out as he'd planned...dreamed. Never again.

Grace would be a wife in name only. A mother to Jeremy. An aunt to A.J.'s children. A housekeeper-nothing more.

Jake shoved the barn door closed. He should have taken whatever money she had and called the debt paid. No one at home would be any wiser. They could have hired another housekeeper to replace Justina. But he didn't take the chance for freedom. Instead, he lied about the cost of the cow and knew that the only way Grace could pay a debt that grand was by coming with him. Funny thing was, he'd swear she knew he was lying.

He saw the spark of amusement in her eyes as she brushed by. Rather than call him out as a liar, she threw banter his way.

Jake should have let her go. But that light that danced in her eyes, that unexpected jest tugged him around. Before he could stop himself, he was blocking her path, throwing another taunt at her. It wouldn't happen again. Her laughter held too much power over him. This time in this marriage, *he* was going to be the one in control.

His body argued back as he turned down the lantern for the night. The sound of her laughter lingered in the air, haunting the night. If he were smart, he'd saddle up his horse and get the hell out of there.

Jake never claimed to be the smartest man in the world, but there was one thing he could pride himself on-his word. He wasn't going to go back on it now. No matter how much he feared it.

Nope, he was stuck with it...with her. For however long she intended to stay. She was the help, nothing more. As long as he remembered that, he'd be fine.

The sooner they got back to the ranch and away from this smothering, run-down farm he'd have his

work and she would have hers. Days could pass without them crossing paths. Weeks. Months. What Laurette complained about in their marriage, Jake could use as an advantage in this one.

Using his saddle as a pillow, he tucked his hands under his head and allowed himself a smile. Yep, this was going to work out real fine. They'd have a housekeeper. The young'uns would have a woman's touch again. Jeremy would have the mother he longed for. And Jake would never have to worry about being hounded by mothers looking to hitch their daughters to him. Grace was dowdy enough to keep other men at bay. And, frankly, his place *was* better than the life she had here. She might be content for a long time, maybe even forever.

Jake twinged. Forever *was* a long time. A long time to not touch a wife with a golden laugh.

He jumped up and strode toward the cabin. She had to understand this would lead nowhere.

His foot clipped the bucket she'd knocked over before, sending it skittering across the yard. The door creaked open, backlighting Grace in a wash of antique gold.

"Looks like I'm not the only one with two left feet."

"I need to talk to you."

She shut the door behind her and took one step down. Now she was equal to him, eye to eye. A touch away. Jake was grateful the night was a moonless one. Looking at her this closely...

"You understand this is a business arrangement, don't you? Our marriage will be in name only. Nothing more. There will never be any..." Now how could he say they'd never share a bed? She was an innocent. "No children."

In the pale light that filtered through the window, he saw her tilt her head ever so slightly to one side. "You never want a son to carry on your name?"

"I have a son...Jeremy. I am a widower."

"I see."

Was that a catch in her throat? Another blessing for no moonlight. Seeing tears in her eyes right now would destroy all his good intentions, all his self-preservation.

"So you understand? I wanted to make it clear."

"Yes." She swallowed hard. "I heard Pa tell Ma once that a man has needs. Wouldn't you be having needs?"

Jake scratched the back of his head and studied his boots. "Well...yes, ma'am, I suppose I would."

"You wouldn't shame me by taking those needs elsewhere, would you?"

"No...I wouldn't shame you."

"Well...then...there you have it. That should leave no doubt."

Grace turned away and into the house. Oh, but there had been a trace of doubt and of hope. Especially after the little play of words in the barn. Now there was nothing. What could she expect of a man, a stranger who had only ridden into her life hours before?

Ma looked up from her hemming. "What did he want?"

Grace slipped the wedding dress from her mother's fingers. "Just to make sure I understood this was to be in name only. I think he was giving me the chance to call this off."

Her mother grabbed her wrist. "You didn't take it, did you?"

She snapped free of her hold. "No, Ma. The fish is still on the hook."

"Good." Sighing, she leaned back in her chair. "Things will work out. You'll see."

"I'm sure you're right." Nothing could be more wrong. "You look tired, Ma. I'll finish the dress. You take yourself to bed."

Her mother left without argument. So much sewing to do before morning and what was beginning to feel like a jail sentence. She knew she had no place to complain. Other women had it worse than she.

Grace pulled her head up. Jake Tanner better understand a few things too. She tossed the dress to the table and marched to the barn. He jumped to his feet when she swung open the door.

"I expect respect, kindness, and consideration from you, Jake Tanner. I'll not be treated like the hired help, though hired help I might be."

She left the door swinging and stomped back to the house. Once there, Grace lit a second candle and adjusted the dress on her lap. A single tear dropped onto the satin. Then another. Grace let them fall. One good cry and that was it. Her bed was made and she'd lie in it...alone.

* * *

Jake stared at the barn door long after Grace had left. She had fire in her for sure and experience had taught him fire led to passion. It kicked his interest level up another uncomfortable notch. Coupled with the memory of her laughter, Jake was in big trouble.

Excerpt from *The Marriage Committee*

by Catherine Snodgrass

ISBN 1-55316-131-9

Copyright © 2004 Catherine Snodgrass

Chapter 1

Texas, 1880

Belle Marshall forced the grief to the deepest part of her heart. Doc had lived a full life. He had been an old man. His health had been failing for years. He had had a right to pass on. To have continued living with the pain he suffered...Well, she wouldn't wish that on her worst enemy...if she had one. Why wish it for a man she admired beyond words? Still, losing him, no matter how much she had known it was coming, hurt more than she could bear.

She dared a look around. It seemed the whole town was gathered at the graveyard today, except for the Tanner bunch. The cowhands were off with the herd, headed north to Dodge months ago. Her sister and the rest of the Tanners had left for a visit to Virginia last month. They'd be gone until the end of this month. Belle had missed them before they'd been gone a day, but now she ached for their company. She felt lost without them, even in this crowd.

Her gaze wandered from person to person. Everyone had fulfilled one of Doc's last wishes--no one wore black. He'd wanted bright happy colors and he'd got them. Belle had chosen her pink gingham dress with white lace at the hem, neck, and cuffs. Doc had always said it made her look as bright and pretty as one of Mrs. Freebush's roses. Everyone else looked plenty colorful too.

Mr. Cyrus's vest matched the canary yellow in his wife's dress. Mrs. Cyrus fingered the dark green ribbon around her wide waist. Florine Brady had chosen purple satin shot with cream panels. Her husband's string tie was cut from the same cloth. Very nice. Bright. Happy. Doc would have been pleased.

The only exception was Paul Harrington. The preacher was limited in his wardrobe. But he honored Doc's wishes the best way he could--with three daisies threaded through his lapel.

She shifted her gaze back to the Cyruses. Seeing the old couple lean on each other in their grief wrenched Belle's heart. She knew what they were thinking--*We're next*. That's what Mrs. Cyrus had said over Doc's body the night before. Rather than think her selfish, Belle understood the fear and had wrapped an arm around her. It had helped to ease her own fears at the time. But in the warmth of this beautiful summer day, watching the Cyruses support each other, their light blue eyes misty with unshed tears, Belle's agony doubled.

A breeze rustled the leaves in the cottonwoods edging the perimeter of the graveyard. Belle closed her eyes and turned her face into it, shutting out everything but the sound of Paul Harrington's voice. Not too deep, not high pitched, just perfect. She could listen to him talk for hours and never grow tired of hearing him. He caught a person's attention from the first word and held it, which was good for a preacher. Not too many people fell asleep during his sermons.

Belle wondered if it was because he was a young preacher. Most of the ones she'd known in the past were old, definitely set in their ways. They'd tote their bibles around, quoting Gospel in that holier-than-thou manner, and set themselves above their parishioners. Not Paul. He was...well, normal.

He'd make a good father. Belle's eyes flashed open. Where in the world had that come from? Not that she hadn't thought it before. But here? When she was burying her mentor? Doc would have gotten a big chuckle out of that. In fact, he'd have laughed so hard he'd have set off a coughing spell.

Not one to mince words, Doc had never hesitated to point out Belle's interest in the young reverend. She'd be lying if she said that wasn't so. Thank goodness Doc kept his opinions to himself. Seeing that know-it-all look in his old eyes every time Paul came around was bad enough--worse, because each

time Doc would say, *"That fella's sure sweet on you."*

Belle didn't know if that was so or not. Mothers in town certainly noticed his availability. They took every opportunity to parade their daughters in front of him and offer their help at church. But it was Belle he turned to when it came time to organize social events and committees. Yet, in the two years they'd known each other, Paul never so much as hinted their relationship was more than friendship. And he certainly never spoke for her.

It was just as well. Belle had no place in her life for a husband, especially a preacher. They expected traditional wives, and Belle wanted more out of life than that. Not that she didn't want a husband and children one day, but she wanted a man who understood she had needs beyond the boundaries of marriage. As far as she knew, there wasn't a man like that who existed for her--certainly not Paul Harrington. He was about as traditional as a person could get.

She let the sound of his voice drift into her soul while she marveled at the way the sunlight made the gold in his light blond hair sparkle. She'd seen him with his shirtsleeves rolled up, his shoulder muscles flexed against the wood while he leant a hand at a barn raising. He certainly wasn't afraid of hard work. His skin was a light bronze from hours in the sun. What woman wouldn't be interested?

But Doc had opened a world to her that Belle could have only imagined before. She might not be a doctor in the true sense of the word, but everyone knew she'd been Doc's eyes, ears, and hands these last two years. Belle doubted anyone would call her on it now. She was all the town had. A husband would take her away from them.

Maybe that's why no mothers trotted their sons before her. Not that Belle would have noticed. She was always too focused on her work. And she found Paul too much of a distraction as it was. Or maybe Doc wasn't as quiet about his notions as she'd hoped.

Belle's gaze drifted Paul's way. He cradled his bible with those marvelously long fingers--fingers that could dry a child's tears with a tenderness that tugged at Belle's heart. She'd seen those fingers at work and knew they were calloused. But they could right a bow in a little girl's hair with as much skill as they wielded a hammer. And all Belle could wonder was how they'd feel brushed against her cheek.

Paul closed the bible, drew in a breath, and looked right at her. His green eyes mesmerized her, held her in place. They were the color of life itself. She couldn't have moved if a stampede of longhorns were headed her way.

"Belle?" he said.

"Yes?" The word came out in a choked whisper. He wanted something of her.

He glanced toward the grave. Belle's gaze followed. Of course. She was the closest thing Doc had to a relative. By that right alone, she was to toss the first handful of dirt on his coffin.

Heat rose to her cheeks. She was ashamed of herself, letting her mind wander in sinful pursuit while they were burying a good man.

She imagined Doc's hearty laughter over that, his teasing afterward when they were alone. Tears flooded her eyes. She wouldn't cry here. Please, not here. She simply couldn't deal with the sympathy of others right now. She had to hold herself together. God, how she was going to miss the old man.

Clenching her jaw against the grief, Belle squatted down and blindly grabbed a fistful of dark brown earth. Stepping carefully to the edge of the grave, she opened her palm and let the dirt drift from her grasp. It fell to the coffin below like a gentle rain, so much easier to deal with than hearing the clods plunk down harshly.

When the last was gone, Belle stared at her palm. She'd forgotten to take off her gloves. A dark brown stain blotched the ivory. It would take a lot of scrubbing to get it out. Maybe she'd leave it as a reminder of this day--not that she needed any.

Someone else stepped forward. The smack of dirt on the coffin jerked Belle from her daydream. She couldn't watch this, but she couldn't walk away either. She had an obligation to fulfill.

Another person edged forward--Florine, a businesswoman in her own right. She owned one of the best bars in town and did a good job of keeping her girls in line. Belle supposed she had to--Florine was married to Sheriff Bill Brady. Their professions made them an unlikely couple, but they looked like they belonged together--both tall, auburn-haired, slender, with a businesslike approach to life that rarely wavered. No one dared call him Bill or Billy. It was Sheriff or Brady. And God help the soul who used the name Flo. Florine would cut them dead with a glare.

Given her own full name--Mary-Belle Marshall--Belle sympathized with her. It had just taken longer, and the chance to leave home, for Belle to make her wishes known. She never wanted to be Mary-Belle again. That was the past, a different person--someone Belle longed to put far behind her.

Florine draped an arm around Belle and gave her shoulders a squeeze. "He was quite an old fella, wasn't he?"

Belle allowed herself a smile. "Yes, he was. I'll miss him."

But she wouldn't miss the coughing that had wracked his body every time he'd tired himself. Or that rattle in his chest when the days had grown cold; a hack no doctoring had seemed to cure. Or seeing him struggle to move his aching bones across a room. No one knew how much he'd suffered, but Belle would take that news, that promise of silence, to her own grave.

Brady slipped his hand through Florine's arm. "You ladies might want to step back. The edge don't look too stable."

Belle glanced at her feet. Sure enough, a steady shower of dirt drifted down. Florine moved away. Belle followed suit, taking a giant step back. Her heel caught the edge of her dress. She toppled forward and felt the ground crumble beneath her.

The mourners gasped. Belle fanned her arms, then squeezed her eyes shut as she fell into Doc's grave. A hard body slammed against her, knocking the wind from her lungs. Arms wrapped tight around her waist and cushioned her fall.

They hit the coffin hard. Belle heard an "oof" from her hero and opened her eyes. Paul lay beneath her, his face twisted with pain. It passed quickly, yet neither of them dared to move.

"Are you hurt?" he finally asked.

"No. Thanks to you. But I can't say the same for you."

He pulled in a ragged breath. "I'm good. Just hit it harder than I wanted. I need a second."

"I'm afraid I've caused you to break something."

"No...really, Belle. Just be still."

She didn't like the sound of his voice. It was strained, as if agony tore through him. She glanced into his face and saw him staring beyond her into the sky. Belle doubted he was focused on anything.

She shifted to her forearms. Paul grunted, grabbed her waist, and hoisted them both to their feet. "Brady--"

"I got her." Before Belle could protest, Paul had her by the waist again. He lifted, Brady caught her under the arms, and she was on solid ground once more.

Florine and Mrs. Cyrus fussed over her, brushing the dirt from her pink dress. Belle let them. Only a good washing could save this dress now. She watched Paul leap from the grave unassisted, and marveled at his agility.

"At least no one's hurt." A small *tsk* ended Mrs. Cyrus's sentence.

"Only our pride." Paul flicked dirt from his trousers. "Mr. Tucker, you'll be glad to know you've made a sound coffin. It survived the weight of both our bodies full force. Didn't give at all."

Mr. Tucker's wattle jiggled with his nod. "We should get on with it then, before someone else decides to test it out. Been ages since I've seen ground this unstable. Must be from all the rain we've had this year."

"Hold up, Tuck." Brady jerked his head toward Main Street. "We got riders coming."

One by one, people turned for a look. Sure enough, a group of six men were making their way up the main street of Cottonwood Bend.

"Texas rangers." Paul brushed dirt from his sleeve and squared his shoulders, but his narrow gaze never left the approaching men.

Belle shaded her eyes and studied the men. How could Paul tell who they were? Rangers wore no badges. Only the officers carried papers saying who they were. These men looked like tired cowpokes or, worse yet, a band of thieves creeping into town.

Their hats drooped from days exposed to the elements. Dust, dirt, and sweat etched stories into the fabric. The wide brims hid the men's faces from the sun. Their shoulders sagged from exhaustion. And the horses looked like it was all they could do to put one hoof in front of the other.

They ignored the shops and houses along the way. Didn't look at the beautiful little flower gardens behind picket fences. Nor did the hitching posts or shaded boardwalks hold any appeal. They kept on a straight course for the graveyard.

"Stay here."

Paul hurried toward the riders. Brady was close behind. They met the rangers at the steps of the small church not twenty feet away. Several of the riders were wounded--one so badly he could barely seat his

horse. Instinct urged Belle to rush to their aid. Caution kept her in place.

"Can we help you, gentlemen?" Paul asked.

They stared at him, eyes wide, mouths agape. Someone laughed, a hollow sound that echoed his weariness.

The leader swung down. "Well...I'll be switched."

He tilted his hat back with the point of his finger. His dark whiskers matched his eyes. Weary as he looked, amusement still danced in them.

"This just about takes the cake." He shook his head and gave a half-hearted chuckle, then waved his hand to the men behind him. "We got wounded. We need a doctor."

Heads turned Belle's way. Yes...it was her responsibility now. She wasted no time seeing to it.

"Get them over to the office. I'll run ahead and get things ready." Belle lifted her skirts, ready to dash off.

A man on horseback stared down at her. He held his left arm close to his chest. Dried blood soaked his sleeve. "Her? She's the doc?" He snorted. "Ain't no woman gonna doctor me." For emphasis, he spat in the dirt.

Belle lifted her chin and met his glare. "We'll see how you feel when the infection gets so bad you're ready to have that arm cut off." She gave him a wicked smile. "Don't worry, I'll let you pick between the clean saw and the dirty one we use to butcher livestock."

She shifted her attention to the man next to Paul. "The reverend and the sheriff will show you the way. I'll want the worst injured first."

He scratched the dark stubble on his cheek. "That'd be our prisoner. He's a hard one. Can't say his life is worth saving."

Belle drew a deep breath. He held up his palm before her lecture saw the light of day. She tucked it away. She had a feeling she'd need it again real soon.

"But we'll get him to you, ma'am." A hint of a smile danced on his lips. Belle tried not to take offense. She was a woman in a man's world. His attitude was typical of those who didn't know her. She refused to let it keep her from doing her job.

* * *

Paul watched Belle walk away. She had the attention of every man there--even the wounded. And who wouldn't look at the sway of her skirt as she hurried down the boardwalk? Those trim hips of hers had mesmerized him more times than he could count.

Belle Marshall was by far the most beautiful woman he'd ever met, and Paul had met a lot of women in his time. He had been smitten from the instant he'd first seen her two years before. Age and maturity since then made her all the more attractive.

He loved her ready smile; the way her forehead wrinkled between her eyebrows when she concentrated

on work; the light that always sparkled in the depths of her light brown eyes. And her hair...it was enough to drive a man insane--dark brown with hints of red when the sun hit it just right. She always wore it up, never down. He craved to know how long it really was. Seeing those few tendrils that often drifted against the back of her long creamy neck, it was all he could do to keep his fingers from curling around one.

Seeing her so grief stricken today tore at his heart. He longed to hold her close and tell her everything would be all right. Then she'd fallen. His instincts had kicked in. Somehow, Paul managed to jump the width of the grave and catch her. He'd realized then what true agony was.

Never had his body reacted so quickly to a woman's softness. Paul blamed it on the years of abstinence, the years he had wanted her. Then she had levered herself onto her elbows, pressing her stomach right into his problem area. He'd almost lost it right there--like an untried boy. He couldn't have gotten her off him fast enough, and had prayed for something to calm him down before he crawled from the grave.

Paul called himself a fool for loving her. Belle could do a lot better than him. She *deserved* better. There wasn't a night or day that passed without him cursing the demons and the past that kept him from letting her know how he felt.

Oh, there was a time when she had first arrived when he thought he could. Then the Tanners had run into a bit of trouble and the old Paul, the Paul he fought, the Paul he *feared*, had leaped in to help. It shocked him how quickly the ghost of his former self had appeared. Since then, he'd done everything in his power to tamp down passion of any kind. He simply could not afford to be that person anymore. And now his past had just ridden into town.

Brady was the only one in Cottonwood Bend who knew Paul was a former Texas ranger. And he knew why Paul had switched professions. Brady had accepted his decision and offered Paul the chance of a church in this quiet little town once the former preacher had moved on.

But the men before him now...well, that was a painfully different matter. They might not have known about Paul's new line of work, but they sure knew what had happened before he'd dropped out of sight. The way they gabbed when liquored up, it wouldn't be long before the whole town knew. What would the townsfolk think then of their wonderful, kind, thoughtful reverend?

"Paul, what the hell--"

Paul cut Cal Webster off without so much as a glance. "You'll find the doctor's office in the back of the boarding house on the corner, just a block away." He couldn't risk talk out here with the whole town gaping at them. Already they whispered among themselves, and Florine and Mrs. Cyrus were headed his way.

Cal stared at him. His faced screwed up in that funny look he always got when something confused him. Paul noticed he hadn't changed much since he'd seen him four years ago. Of course, it was hard to tell, as dirty as they all were from being on the road.

Stony, Clarence, Sid, and Marty still stared at him. But their gaped-mouth astonishment was gone.

Paul glanced at the sixth man, on horseback between them. His arms were bound at the wrist. Splotches of blood stained his torn clothing. He slumped lower in the saddle with each second that passed. Marty controlled his reins.

Cal tucked his hat back into place and jerked his head toward Stony. "You heard the good reverend. Get the wounded over there and keep a good eye on Jessop."

Paul's lips tightened to a thin line. Which Jessop? Frank? His past was truly slamming him in the face.

Not one for talk, Stony motioned the others on with a flick of his bony hand.

Cal splayed his fingers on his hips, just above his holster. "Sheriff, soon as the little lady's done with our prisoner, we're going to need a sturdy cell for him."

Brady hooked his thumbs in his breeches. "He doesn't look like he's going anywhere. We'll let Miss Marshall decide when it's best to move him."

Florine edged her way up front. "And if you know what's good for you, I wouldn't be calling her little lady around here. People have a lot of respect for her and they won't take kindly to it."

Cal's cheeks reddened, darkening his suntanned face. At least he still had the decency to know his place. He dropped his gaze to the patch of grass nestled against the church steps. "We'll be needing a place for the horses. That stable down the street any good?"

Mrs. Cyrus puffed out her ample chest. "Why, it's the best in town."

Not to mention it was the only one in town.

Cal nodded. "And a place for us to bunk. Which boarding house is the best?"

Paul crossed his arms and rocked on his heels. "Depends on what you're looking for. Busby's has plenty of room this time of year. It has beds and food." Although it took a strong soul to put up with Mrs. Busby's sour disposition.

"If it's whoring you want, Fran's is the place for you. For the right money, she'll rent you a room and all the extras that go with it. If you're looking for a clean bed and good food, then you'll want Cyrus's. That's where you'll find the doctor's office. Big two-story house on the corner. White fence, wide porch, yellow trim."

"Good enough for me." Cal snagged the reins and hauled himself into the saddle. "We need to talk. Catch up on old times."

Paul jerked his thumb toward the graveyard. "We've got a man to bury. We could use an extra hand."

Cal glanced that direction. "I've buried enough men, *Reverend*."

"Then one more shouldn't hurt you."

"You oughta know." He tipped his hat to the ladies, turned his tired horse around, and rode away.

Paul measured each step. Too bad Cal wasn't on his way out of town.

"Whoring?" Florine flicked the back of his head with her fingers. "What kind of talk is that coming from a preacher?"

He smoothed his hair into place and frowned at her. "I'm trying to make a point that we don't want any trouble in our town...from anyone."

Brady scuffed his boots against a tiny patch of grass. "And trouble's just what we're in for if that's really one of the Jessops they've got with them. You know they'll do anything to get one of their own back."

And with the Tanner ranch hands and owners gone, the town didn't have the muscle to protect itself.

Mrs. Cyrus tucked her handkerchief into her sleeve. "Then we'd best be seeing what we can do to help Belle put those rangers on the mend and on their way. Come along, dear."

"You go on. I'll be there shortly." Florine waited until Mrs. Cyrus was halfway down the boardwalk before turning to Paul and Brady. "We've got another problem."

Naturally. Didn't trouble always come in threes? "What's that?" Paul asked.

"Several of the women--most of the women are concerned about the...exposure Belle will receive from men now that Doc is gone."

Brady chuckled. "You mean they're afraid she'll see a naked man."

Florine jabbed an elbow in his ribs. "She's an innocent young woman."

Paul snorted. "Who's been doing Doc's work for him since she got here? I'm sure she's gotten a gander at a man by now." Although the thought didn't sit well with him either.

"But until now, the fine ladies of Cottonwood Bend could convince themselves Doc was handling all the dirty work." Brady laughed. "Now they can't lie to themselves any more."

Florine shot him a glare from the corner of her eye. Gathering her composure, she flashed a sweet smile Paul's way. "It's time Belle was married. It's time you spoke up."

He stumbled back. A punch to the gut would have shocked him less. Even Brady stopped laughing and stared at his wife in stunned silence. Paul found his voice somewhere in his hip pocket. Using it wasn't as easy.

"What?" he choked out.

Florine's mouth tightened. "You heard what I said. People have been talking for years about that puppy dog look you give Belle. They figured you were waiting for her to grow up more. Then they figured you were shy. Now...well, let's just put it this way, Reverend..."

She smoothed her gloves over each finger and avoided his gaze. "Belle is the best thing this town has. We can't lose her. If seeing her married will ease the minds of some of our more prissy residents, then so be it." She dropped her hands and nailed him with a look. "So, what's it going to be?"

Paul's mouth moved but the words wouldn't come.

Florine laced her fingers and tapped her thumbs together. "In other words...we will *not* lose Belle. We can't afford to. And that's exactly what will happen if this matter isn't resolved. First the women will refuse to let their husbands go to her, then they'll refuse to go themselves. And, finally, the children. You

know how people are when they get a notion. So...if you won't speak up, we'll find someone who will."

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. Anger swooped in. He didn't respond well to threats of any kind, no matter how well intentioned. He fought a snarl and looked steadily into Florine's amber-colored eyes. "Then I think you'd best be doing that."

Her eyes widened a fraction. This obviously wasn't something she had anticipated. To her credit, Florine recovered quickly. "Then we shall. In fact, I think we'll form a marriage committee. With the Fourth of July celebration days away, it should fit in quite nicely. Good day, Reverend Harrington."

Her footsteps clicked a hasty retreat down the boardwalk.

Brady gave a low whistle. "Boy-howdy, you've stirred up a hornet's nest now. I'm going to have to hear it tonight."

"I don't like being cornered."

The other man clasped him on the shoulder. "And you're going to like seeing the woman you want married to someone else?"

Paul shrugged his hand away. "It's a bluff. That's all."

Brady stared after his wife. "Florine don't bluff." His voice softened. "Come on, Paul. You can't keep living like this. This isn't you. You want her. Go after her."

"I can't. You know that."

He slowly shook his head, never once breaking eye contact. "No...I don't suppose you can. Living the life of a martyr has too much appeal."

Paul's jaw tightened, so did his fists. "I've got a man to bury." Without another word, he strode back to the graveyard.

>

Chapter 2

Belle had never seen a man so torn up before. He had passed out before he reached the boarding house. It'd taken two men and some measure of badgering from her to get him carried to the doctor's office inside. He never budged, never fought them, just dangled between their arms like a giant rag doll.

Everywhere she looked there was blood. His gray wool breeches and heavy cotton shirt, even his black leather vest, were ripped to shreds. The patches of skin beneath the holes were rubbed raw. She honestly didn't know where to start. Maybe the head ranger was right. Maybe there wasn't much hope of saving him, especially if she was only doing so for a hangman's noose.

She dipped a cloth into the steaming basin of water while she stared at his bruised and swollen face. A week's worth of black prickly whiskers sprouted there. One eye was so swollen, Belle doubted he'd be opening it any time soon. A cut sliced through his eyebrow over the other eye. His breathing was slow

and shallow. Belle was looking at a dead man--one way or the other. The human thing to do was let him go now.

Sighing, she wrung out the cloth and drew it over his face. Doc hadn't taught her to give up on people, no matter how hopeless things seemed.

The door opened. Belle peeked around the privacy screen. She expected Florine and Mrs. Cyrus to be shoving their way into her examining room. Both were overly concerned with how much of these men Belle might get a gander at. She'd already chased them out once with a promise to call them for assistance should the possibility of seeing the man's private parts rear its ugly head. But this intruder was definitely more welcome. Tension seeped from her shoulders.

Paul shut the door behind him. "Do you want me to lock it?"

Belle glanced at the man laid out on the operating bed, then back at Paul. He was just what she needed.

"As long as you stay on this side of the door."

Paul seated the bolt and slipped behind the screen with her. "Undertaker's taking care of Doc. I thought I'd come over to see what I could do for you. Considering how Mrs. Cyrus is fretting in the kitchen, looks like I came none too soon." He stared down at her patient. "Good heavens, he's a mess!"

"He is that."

Paul pulled in a deep breath. "What do you need from me?"

"I need him naked. That's the only way I'm going to be able to see how bad off he is."

Heat rose to her cheeks. Belle cursed the reaction. Innocence be damned--interference was something she simply could not tolerate. She was determined to fight Paul and anyone else on this.

Paul passed a slow gaze over the man, most probably noting the same injuries Belle had. That or he was stalling while he built steam to argue with her. Finally he shifted his gaze her way.

"There's not much left of his clothes as it is. The best thing to do would be to cut them off. You start with his shirt and vest. I'll get the boots. Once you're done, I'll get the breeches while you check out his torso."

Thank heavens there was at least one person left who didn't suddenly treat her with kid gloves. Belle wanted to toss her arms around Paul's neck and hug him right then and there. Instead, she grabbed up shears and cut away what remained of the injured man's shirt and vest.

Paul tugged on the boots. The man groaned and rolled his head to one side. "At least he's got some life left in him."

She slapped the shears into Paul's open palm and wiped a fresh cloth over the man's face. When she got no response, Belle moved to his torso. Deep cuts and scrapes covered him. Dark bruises mottled his ribs. She had to look hard to find some place that wasn't hurt.

"This man took one devil of a fall." Even as she said the words, Belle knew how ridiculous it sounded. This was no mere fall. Someone, or several someones, beat this man to within an inch of his life.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Paul drape a towel over the man's groin.

"Looks like he took a bullet to the thigh." He pointed in that direction then waved his finger toward the man's hip. "Another grazed him here. They aren't fresh wounds either."

Belle could see that. Congealed blood sealed the hip wound and the one on his thigh still oozed. Movement aggravated his body's attempts to heal itself. She pressed her hand against his forehead. It was hot to the touch--hard to tell if it was from his ride in the hot sun or infection from all his injuries.

Mentally she ticked off the list of things she needed to do: the bullet had to come out; he'd have to be swabbed down with a wash for all the cuts and scrapes. As for any internal injuries...She sighed. An herbal tea would help stop any internal bleeding and help him heal, but he certainly wasn't able to drink it at the moment. Someone would have to spoon it down his throat.

She allowed herself a tiny smile. That ought to keep Florine and Mrs. Cyrus busy for awhile and out of her hair. They could give him a sponge bath while they were at it. He sure as heck could use one.

Belle stared at his thigh. The weight of her new responsibilities bore down upon her spirit. She was it. The health and well-being of this town rested on her untrained, inexperienced shoulders. This went far beyond hurts, fevers, ills, childbirth, and rashes.

"What's the matter?"

Her gaze slid Paul's way. "I've never pulled a bullet out of a man before. I never saw Doc do it either."

"Sure you have." His smile bolstered her spirits. "What about when Mrs. Wooster fired a load of birdshot into her husband's rear?"

Belle gave a small laugh. Mrs. Wooster had found her husband indecently engaged with one of Fran's girls from the other end of town. "It was rock salt, and Doc said he deserved to suffer through it."

She glanced at the wound. This was just the beginning. There was so much to consider. "What if he's got a burst appendix? Or something else inside that I don't know about? I can't do this. I'm not a doctor. I--"

"Stop, Belle." He reached for her, hesitated, and dropped his hand to his side. "You can do this. I know you can. Try to think of it as an annoying splinter."

"That's quite a splinter." And she'd be going in blind, poking and prodding. How would she know when she found it?

Paul gave in and wrapped his fingers around her shoulders. "No one's more gentle than you. You won't cause him any more pain than he's already in."

There was one way to make sure of that, but ether was tricky stuff. One time she'd gotten an extra whiff of it, she got so dizzy Doc laughed at her until he cried. And the few times they'd used it, it was pretty clear when the ether took effect. This man was out cold. How would she know when enough was enough?

Paul rubbed his thumb in circles against the top of her shoulder. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were shaking. Belle, it isn't like you to be indecisive."

She blinked, focusing on his features once more. A hint of a furrow tugged his eyebrows together--a mix of worry and confusion. Doc wasn't around to catch her if she faltered, but if truth be told, she'd caught *him* in more than one mistake. She had yet to err. This might be the first time.

Belle cocked her head to one side. She wondered what Paul would do if she reached up and dusted those faint worry lines away with her fingertip. Judging from how quickly he'd set her away from him earlier when they'd fallen in the grave, she'd bet he'd hightail it out of there. Yet here he was still tracing gentle circles against her shoulder.

Belle laughed to herself. Where was her head lately? She wasn't looking for the complications having a man in her life would bring. But each time she looked at Paul...

She drew in a breath and pulled away. Now certainly wasn't the time to deal with this. She had other things that had to be her first concern.

"You're right. It isn't like me. I've fiddled around long enough. It's time to get started. You wash off his thigh. I'm going to make sure he stays unconscious."

* * *

"I told you, ain't no woman gonna see me naked."

Belle's temper hung by a thread. He was the last of her patients, the one least wounded, and the most difficult. He sat in the middle of the examining table, clutching his shirt to his chest like a frightened bride on her wedding night. If she hadn't been so doggone tired, Belle would have laughed.

"I only want that rag you call a shirt. That hardly qualifies as being naked."

Lips pursed, coal-black eyes focused unblinkingly on her, he shook his head. They were getting nowhere fast. The fact that he could lose his arm if not treated couldn't sink in past his fear of a woman seeing even a glimpse of skin. Belle didn't have the breath or energy to reason with him further. He was going to be helped with or without his cooperation.

"Mr. Wickam, you've managed to chase Mrs. Cyrus and Mrs. Brady away, but you can bet I'm not going anywhere. We can do this the easy way or the hard way."

Wickam didn't budge.

"Very well." Belle flicked the buttons on her dark gray duster free from their holes. There was more than one way to skin a cat and Belle wasn't above going the back route if she had to. "I'm going to brew a pot of tea. Would you care for a cup, Mr. Wickam?"

He blinked at her and pulled himself up a notch. Good, she caught him unaware.

"I'm...I'm a coffee man myself, ma'am."

Belle summoned her sweetest smile. "Coffee it is." She hooked her duster on a peg near the door and left, shutting the door quietly behind her.

Quite a crowd had gathered in her kitchen. Florine and Mrs. Cyrus hovered over Daisy, who tried her best to throw together a meal for the unexpected company. She looked close to tears, but the poor little

thing didn't have the heart to chase the other women out of her kitchen. And, even though Daisy answered to Belle, she was smart enough to realize this was Mrs. Cyrus's boarding house, despite the fact she rarely set foot in the place.

The men were oblivious to the activity around them. Paul, Brady, Cal Webster, and Stony sat at the table clutching cups of coffee while they stared at the polished pine. The wounded rangers lounged in the shade of the back porch. Belle saw them through the window. They had kicked back their chairs, shaded their eyes with their hats, and were now snoozing.

She clicked the door to the doctor's office closed. All heads turned her way. "Florine, I'm going to need a bottle of your stoutest whiskey. Daisy, a fresh pot of coffee, please. I'll set the kettle for tea." Each jumped to the task without question.

Webster cocked his chair on its back legs. The wood creaked in protest. "How's Clarence?"

"The chair is not a rocker, Mr. Webster." Belle pushed him into place as she walked by. The legs banged against the wooden floor. The men on the porch jumped up, reaching for weapons that didn't exist.

Paul waved them down. "It's nothing. Go back to sleep."

Muttering unintelligible phrases, they settled down.

"Clarence?" Webster asked again.

"Stubborn." She pumped the kettle full of water and set it on the stove. "But I have a way around that."

"Do you now?" Webster started to tilt his chair back. One look from Belle stopped him.

She liked visitors to be comfortable. But these men weren't normal company. If she didn't set the rules now, they'd run roughshod over the place in the blink of an eye.

Webster laced his hands behind his head. Laughter danced in his dark brown eyes. The humor did nothing to ease the stench that arose from him and his companions. Belle had seen cowboys who had been on the trail for months that weren't this dirty. Skunks smelled sweeter.

"Does your plan involve whiskey, ma'am?"

Paul leaned forward. "Actually, no. Belle normally downs a quart of whiskey after a hard day healing the sick and wounded."

"Two after delivering babies." Brady lifted his mug in mock toast.

Belle smothered the laughter that bubbled up.

"Really?" Webster gave a hearty laugh. "And how does your husband feel about that?"

Mrs. Cyrus just about pounced on the man. In all the years she'd known her, Belle had never seen the woman move so quickly. "Oh...Belle is unwed."

"I...see." Webster kicked back his chair. His gaze shifted over her, appraising her worth like he would horse stock.

Belle longed to double her fist and smack that smug expression off his face. She caught movement under the table. Paul nudged the chair with his foot. Webster flailed his arms for balance and tumbled backward. The clatter roused the men on the porch again. They flashed dirty looks into the kitchen and settled down again.

Webster glared at Paul, righted his chair, and wrapped his fingers over the back. "What was that for?"

"I think you know."

Four simple words spoken with deadly precision. Belle's pulse raced. This wasn't kindly Reverend Harrington. Here was a real glimpse of the man beneath the collar. Belle didn't know if it frightened or intrigued her. She nestled her arms under her bosom, hoping to quell the thud of her heartbeat.

Stony looked them over from under his eyebrows. Pulling in a deep breath, he faced Belle. "Ma'am, I don't know about everyone else, but I sure could use a hot bath and a place to rest. I understand you run the boarding house here."

Belle gave a single nod. "Rooms are two dollars a week. An extra two dollars for three meals a day. An extra dollar for the bath. The bathhouse is out back. You tote your own water. The stove's in the bathhouse. No room until you've bathed."

He swept up his hat as he stood and fished the money from his vest pocket. "Sounds like a deal to me." After placing the coins on the table, he walked on to the bathhouse.

Belle retrieved the money and weighed it in her palm. "Same goes to you and the rest of your men, Mr. Webster. We aren't fancy, but we're clean and we promise a hearty meal. Frankly, you and your men reek."

Ignoring the comment, he jerked his head toward the doctor's office. "What about Jessop? Is he ready to move over to the jail?"

Belle dropped the coins in an old butter crock under the window. "Mr. Jessop's injuries are far too serious. He needs tending, not jostling."

His grip on the chair tightened. "I don't think you understand how dangerous--"

"I wasn't born yesterday, Mr. Webster. The Jessop reputation has managed to filter into even a town as small as ours. But the man in there is hardly a threat to anyone right now. Besides," she held out her hand for the whiskey bottle as Florine walked through the back door, "if all you big brave Texas rangers stay here, who would dare storm the place? The boarding house is better protected than any jail cell would be."

"She got you there, Cal." Brady's laughter roused the two on the porch yet again. Flashing dirty looks toward the house, they shuffled to the shade of the tree in the corner of the yard. There they sank back down to sleep.

Webster stretched to his feet. "I'd swear that somehow I've been flimflammed and hornswoggled. Either way, looks like I'm outnumbered." He wandered to the rack by the back door and retrieved his hat. "Miss Marshall, my men and I will be needing those rooms." He plucked his coins from his vest pocket and placed them on the sink board. "We'll make sure we're all tidied up before we come in. The others

will pay after they've rested."

He flicked the brim of his hat her way. A shower of dust rained down. He shrugged as if to say, "Oh, well," then left.

Belle lifted her eyebrow to the others. "If I'd known it was that easy to get rid of him, I would have insulted him earlier."

Still chuckling, Brady looped his arm through Florine's. "No doubt he's out surveying the town for places to post lookouts. All he had to do was ask. I'd show him every one."

Florine patted his fingers. "But how could you know? You aren't a..." she feigned a gasp, "...Texas ranger."

Brady's laughter shook the room once more. He reached for Mrs. Cyrus's arm. "Come on, ladies. Let's head home and you can tell me about this new committee you gals added for the Fourth of July celebration. Maybe it's something we could interest Cal Webster in joining." He shot a glance over his shoulder to Paul and let the women lead him away.

Paul stared at their departing figures. Surely they were pulling his leg. They couldn't possibly be seriously considering marrying Belle off to someone. And certainly not Cal Webster. He left a line of broken hearts wherever he went and, rumor had it, more than a couple of younguns. Just the thought of children set Cal to twitching.

"What committee are they talking about?"

He shooed the thoughts away and looked at Belle. She stood inches from him, head cocked to one side. A wisp of her dark hair curled against her neck, tempting his finger to nestle inside. The very notion that Cal might touch her in *any* manner set his teeth on edge.

One way to put a stop to all of this was to tell Belle what was afoot. She'd bring their plans to a halt quicker than they could blink an eye. Or would she? Maybe she wanted a husband and family. It seemed that was the goal for most of the women Paul knew. But somehow, Belle had always seemed different, not inclined to look at the young men who vied for her attention.

"Paul...what committee?"

"A stupid one." He snapped to his feet. "I'll tell you about it later." He pointed to the whiskey bottle clutched in her hands. "Save that bribe for later. I'll take care of Clarence."

Paul heard scuffling behind the screen the second he opened the door. Judging from Belle's frustration, he guessed Clarence was gearing up for another battle.

"Relax. It's only me." Two strides took him to the man's side.

Clarence sagged with relief. "Sarge, whew, I thought it was that lady doc again."

"She and I decided I'd take care of you."

Clarence shrugged off his shirt. "I took a knife wound a couple of days ago. Pretty good gash. It's painin' me somethin' fierce."

Paul studied the wound from side to side. Someone had tried to care for it: deep and nasty as it was, no infection had set in. "But not enough to let a doctor take care of it."

"She ain't no ordinary doc. She's a woman." Clarence twisted his face around for a look.

Paul blotted a wet cloth over the wound. "I've never known you to be flustered around a woman. If I recall rightly, you used to be quite a ladies' man."

He chuckled. "Weren't we all? I'd have to say it gets old after a while. The ridin's mighty hard and long. This here's our last run. We're done once we get Jessop turned over. I can't say for the others, but there comes a time when a man starts to lookin' to settle. If you know what I mean."

Paul wrung out the cloth and avoided comment. It was tempting to want a normal life, but he was the last man to consider settling down.

"But there's ladies, and then there's ladies. And Miss Marshall..." Clarence gave a low whistle. "Now there's a package. Pure lady through and through. The kind to make a fella really stand up and take notice. I gotta tell you, Sarge. I been stiff as a board since I first laid eyes on her. Each time she's near me, I feel like a green boy ready to lose myself. I couldn't have her tend me. I just couldn't. You know what I mean?"

Did he ever. Paul could give lessons on how Belle affected a man. There were nights he went to bed hard just from thinking about her, and woke up the same way too. He tortured himself by finding excuses and ways to be around her: always putting her in charge of church activities and fund-raisers; always escorting her to social events around town; always finding some way, any way, to be near her. It was no wonder Florine, Mrs. Cyrus, and the other women expected him to step forward. If only they knew the man he really was--the man he kept hidden. They'd change their minds pretty quick then, and rush their princess back to her tower.

Now that was hardly fair, his conscience chided. Belle never put on airs of any kind. No one put her on a pedestal to be worshipped. They cared about her, loved her...just as he did.

No, not the way he did. He literally ached to have her. It took superhuman effort not to declare himself, not to sweep her into his arms and whirl her around the dance floor time after time, not to pull her into the shadows during a warm summer evening and smother her lips with one kiss after another.

But passion was one of those emotions he had to keep a tight rein on. It belonged to the other Paul, the reckless one. It had no place in his life, not if releasing it would mean letting those other demons out too. It was a chance Paul couldn't risk taking. He was still paying for his past mistakes. A lifetime wasn't enough to make up for what he'd done.

In some respects, he was no better than Cal. Paul had his share of the ladies behind him too. At least he could say in all certainty he hadn't left behind any children like Cal supposedly had. But then, Cal hadn't killed his own sister either.

[About the Author](#)

There are few things that Lois Carroll would rather do than write-especially stories with happy endings.

A supporter of electronic publishing, she's contracted twelve books in that media, and her short stories and non-fiction articles have appeared in more traditional print magazines. Lois, an EPPIE 2000 best ebook of the year finalist, has been writing since her childhood when she received a daily diary as a birthday gift. But she didn't fulfill her dream and start her career as a full-time writer until she was past fifty! Now a wife, mother, and grandmother, she spends time every day at her computer, cooking up sweet and spicy treats like Snowbound, a TARA Award finalist, and Almost Home. Her bachelor's degree is in English Literature and her master's is in Theater. After living in North Dakota for much of her adult life, Lois now lives in the beautiful Finger Lakes region of New York. She invites you to visit her website at http://home.twcny.rr.com/topromances/lois_carroll/

Publisher info:

LTDBooks is the publisher of original fiction in a variety of electronic formats. Selected titles available in trade paperback. At LTDBooks there's something for everyone: from Horror to Historical, Romance to Mystery, Fantasy to Intrigue and everything in between. At LTDBooks the story doesn't have to fit the mold--it just has to be well-told.

www.ltdbooks.com