

One



CAROLINE'S WRIST TURNED and flicked as the steel tongue of her crochet hook dipped in and out, mirroring the movement of the fiddle's bow. With each note, the white thread licked a warm line across her finger. Her pattern had just begun to repeat, chorus-like, as the tune ended. She smoothed the frilled cluster of scallops against her cuff and smiled. So long as she could keep ahead of the mending, a pair of lace wrists would freshen her second-best blue wool before snowmelt. There would be no time for a collar—once the trees began to bud, she must turn her hands to the tedious seams of a new set of diapers, bonnets, and gowns.

Charles rested the fiddle on his knees and primed himself with a breath.

“What is it, Charles?” Caroline asked, plucking a slouching festoon of thread into place.

“I've had an offer for this place,” he said.

Caroline's hook stilled. “An offer?”

“Gustafson's agreed to pay one thousand twelve dollars and fifty cents for our half of this quarter section.”

The sum swept her mind clean as a gust of wind. “My goodness,” she said. One thousand twelve dollars. And the delightful absurdity of fifty cents besides, like a sprinkling of sugar. They could use it to buy a week's worth of satin hair ribbons for Mary and Laura. “Oh, Charles.” Caroline clasped her hands before her lips to hide their eager trembling. “And the same for Henry and Polly's half?”

Charles grimaced. “Gustafson can only afford eighty acres. Your

brother isn't going."

Going. The image her mind had already begun to embroider unraveled. Such foolish greed; she had let herself imagine that money as though it were sitting in her lap, beneath this very roof—not as the lever that would pry her loose of it.

She need not ask where they would go. All winter long Charles had talked of Kansas, its free, level land and bountiful game. Even Mary and little Laura could repeat his reveries of the mighty jackrabbits and treeless acreage as easily as the words of "The Gypsy King." The West was a song Charles wanted a hand in composing.

A subtle tightening, as though she were taking hold of the cabin and everything in it, passed over her. To move westward was nothing new, but always, she had traveled from the sanctuary of one family to another; from Ma and Papa Frederick's house in Concord to Father and Mother Ingalls's farm, and from there to this quarter section they had bought together with Henry and Polly, just seven miles east of the Mississippi.

And yet beneath that apprehension, a twinkle of excitement. Caroline remembered the thrill, after three years of married life spent under others' roofs, of buying this place and making of it a home all their own. Within six months she had been pregnant. How might it feel to do the same on land that bore no mark of another family? Such a place would belong more thoroughly to them than anything had before.

"We stake our claim, make improvements on the land while Gustafson makes his payments, and by the time the Indians move on we can clear the mortgage on this place and preempt a full one hundred sixty acres with upward of five hundred dollars left to spare," Charles went on, pulling a blue handbill from his pocket. "The settlers put up such a fuss that the government's finally reneged on the railroad interests. The Indian Territory is there for the taking—a dollar and a quarter an acre. We only have to be there when the land opens up. The sooner we arrive, the sooner we've put in our fourteen months' residency." He

leaned forward for her reply.

The arithmetic alone spoke for itself: twice the acreage, none of the debt. Cash in hand, where before they had banked with pelts and crops. She should not hesitate at such a gain. Yet how to weigh that against losses that could not be measured? Departing before the Mississippi thawed would not leave time enough to bid her own mother goodbye. She did not answer yes or no. “We will have an increase in the family well before then,” she said instead.

Caroline tucked her lips together. She had not intended to tell him for another month yet, not until she was certain the child was safely rooted. But Charles looked at her as though it were the first time, and she went rosy in the glow of his happiness. “When?” he asked.

“Before harvest.”

He combed his fingers through his whiskers. “Should we wait?”

Her conscience rippled. She could say yes, and he would give her the year at least, restaking himself to this land without question or complaint. Another year with her sisters and brother, with Mother and Father Ingalls, with plenty of time to visit Ma and Papa Frederick one more time. One final time. Were she to answer on behalf of the coming child, it might even be an unselfish thing to ask. Yet she’d had no sense of its presence—only the absence of her monthly courses coupled with an unaccountable warmth in her hands and feet—nothing to signal it as separate from herself.

Caroline’s eyes roved over the place where her china shepherdess stood gazing down from the mantel. The silken glaze of her painted dress and body seemed at once so hard and smooth as to render the little woman untouchable. If she indulged herself by claiming this time, Caroline thought, Charles would treat her with almost unbearable awe and deference. No matter that carrying a child made her feel no more fragile than a churn full of cream. Staying would only make for a year shadowed with lasts—one vast goodbye shattered over innumerable small moments. “Better to travel now,” she decided. “It will only be

harder if we wait.”

He leaned back, grinning, until the chair was on tiptoe. Her news had dyed the fabric of the coming year twice as brightly for Charles. He took up the fiddle and played softly, so as not to wake the girls.

*There's a land that is fairer than day
And by faith we can see it afar.
For the Father waits over the way
To prepare us a dwelling place there.*

Caroline laid her morsel of lace aside and rocked herself deeply into the long notes.

Two



“LONG AS THOSE hickory bows are curing, I might as well make a trip into town,” Charles said, shrugging into his overcoat. “We still need oakum to caulk the wagon box and canvas for a cover.”

“Get a good heavy needle and plenty of stout linen thread,” Caroline reminded him. “And check the post office,” she added, silly as it was. The letter she’d sent into town with Henry the week before could hardly have reached her mother in Concord by now. Charles winked and shut the door, whistling.

Caroline stood in the middle of the big room with a burst of breath puffing out her cheeks. Charles always saw the beginning of a new start, never the loose ends of the old one that must be fastened off.

The cabin had not seemed overlarge before, but it was more than would fit in a wagon box—the straw ticks alone would fill a third of it. Every object she laid eyes on suddenly demanded a decision of her. To look at it all at once made her mind swarm. One thing at a time, Caroline told herself. She pulled the red-checked cloth from the table, and the shepherdess from the mantel. Some few things, at least, there was no question about.

IN THE BEDROOM, Caroline opened her trunk and lifted the upper tray out onto the bed. In one of its shallow compartments lay the glass ambrotype portraits from their courting and marriage, and her three schoolbooks. She opened the reader. Its cardboard cover shielded her certificate of good behavior and the little handwritten booklet of poems she’d sewn together as a youth. She slipped a fingernail between its

leaves and parted the pages. “Blue Juniata” stood out in Charles’s writing. She smiled, remembering the cornhusking dance where she had first heard Charles play the tune. He had not sung the words correctly, and she had been so bold as to tell him so. “That’s the way we Ingallses sang it back East,” he’d said, and his eyes twinkled at her. They’d twinkled again when she asked him to inscribe his version in her booklet. “Now no matter which way I sing it, it’ll be by the book,” he’d teased.

She did not hear Mary and Laura come pattering down from the attic until they stood in the doorway.

“What are you doing, Ma?” Mary asked. “Can we help?”

“May we,” she reminded, secreting the fragile booklet back into the reader.

“May we, Ma?”

Laura was already peering over the rim of the trunk. A flash of frustration licked at Caroline’s throat. She could not let children of five and three pack her best things, yet they would make themselves busy getting underfoot if she did not give them something to do. She smoothed back a sigh. “Very well. Mary, please bring me the scrap bag, and Laura, you may fetch the newspapers.”

INTO THE BOTTOM of the trunk went her books, together with the family Bible and the volume of Sunday school lessons her mother had given her. The lap desk just snugged in beside them. Caroline slipped the ambrotypes beneath the trunk’s lid and cushioned them with a length of flannel Mary fished from the scrap bag.

“Now, Laura, we must fill all the cracks and corners with newspaper. Pack them tightly, so nothing can wiggle.”

While Laura crumpled and crammed newsprint into every cranny, Caroline showed Mary how to roll the silver spoons up in squares of felt. The girls occupied, she packed a sturdy cardboard box with her thin china teacups, leaving a hollow in the center for the shepherdess. When Laura finished, Caroline folded her wholecloth wedding quilt

with the red stitching and squared it over the layer of books.

“Now Mary and Laura, please bring me the good pillows.” She let them put one at each end of the trunk, then nested the box of porcelain amongst the goose down. Her pearl-handled pen and the breast pins she slipped into the red Morocco pocketbook before tucking it into the lid compartment.

The delaine, shrouded in soft brown paper and tied with string, came last of all.

“Please, Ma, can’t we see the delaine?” Laura begged. Her mouth fairly watered for its strawberry-shaped buttons.

Caroline could not help remembering her mother’s broad hands sewing those buttons onto the rich green basque by lamplight. Just now, she did not want to unwrap that memory any further, even for her girls.

“Not today.”

“Aw, Ma, please?”

Caroline raised an eyebrow. “Laura.” Her tone dwindled the child into a half-hearted pout.

Over it all Caroline smoothed the red-checked tablecloth, then lowered in the tray and latched the lid. *Tck* went the latch, and the band of tension broke from her chest. “There now,” she said, and felt herself smiling. “Thank you, Mary and Laura.” With such things out of sight, she could begin imagining them elsewhere and other people’s possessions in their places.

BY THE TIME Charles came back from town, she had packed one of their two carpetbags tight with trousers, calico shirts and dresses, sun-bonnets, and cotton stockings. At the bottom waited her maternity and nursing corsets with the baby gowns Mary and Laura hadn’t worn out. The other would hold their spare sets of woolens, along with their nightclothes and underthings. At the sound of his boots on the floor, the girls abandoned their half-folded pile of dishcloths, napkins, and towels

and scampered to him for their treats.

“Sweets to the sweet,” he said, handing them each a sugared ginger cookie. “And something for your ma.” A quick little inhale betrayed Caroline’s hopes for a letter. She looked up eagerly as Charles flopped a drab bundle tied with twine from his shoulder onto the bed. The *whoosh* of its landing fluttered her stacks of linens.

“There you are, Caroline—thirty yards of osnaburg canvas and the stoutest thread goods in Pepin.”

She sat back on her heels. “Thirty yards!”

“Fellow in the dry-goods shop said four widths ought to be enough to stretch over the wagon bows, and it’ll have to be double thick. Need extra to double-sack all our dry provisions besides. How long will it take to make?” Charles asked. “Lake Pepin’s solid as a window pane, but the cold can’t hold out too much longer.”

Three doubled seams more than twice as long as she was tall, plus the hemming and the sacks. If each stitch were a mile, her needle could carry them to Kansas and back dozens of times over. Caroline’s fingers cramped to think of it. “No longer than it will take you to bend those hickory bows and fit up the wagon,” she told him.

He chucked her under the chin. “Got some extra crates for packing, too,” he said.

ON MENDING DAY, she gave herself over entirely to the wagon cover. Laid flat, it stretched from one side of the big room to the other. In the time it took Caroline to fetch her papers of pins, Laura had already taken to tunneling under the carpet of canvas.

“Mary, be a good girl and take Laura upstairs to play with your paper ladies,” Caroline said after she’d scolded Laura. “There isn’t space to have you underfoot down here. If you play nicely until I’ve finished, you may cook a doll supper for Nettie on the stove tonight.”

Mary needed no more enticement than that. She took her sister by the hand and marched Laura to the ladder. Caroline straightened the

lengths of fabric and settled down to her long chore. With every stitch she pictured the journey in her mind, envisioning the views the hem now before her would soon frame.

When the pads of her thumb and forefinger grew ruttled from the press of the needle, Caroline laid the canvas aside to dip the steel knives and forks in soda water and roll them in flannel to keep against rust, or to melt rosin and lard together to grease the outside of the bake oven, the iron spider, and Charles's tools. With the leftovers she would water-proof their boots and shoes.

By noontime the close of the center seam was less than an arm's length away. She might have finished it before dinner, if not for a burrowing sensation low in her middle that would not be ignored. Caroline pinned her needle carefully over her last stitch and stepped out from under the stiff blanket of fabric. Her forearms were heavy with fatigue from holding the everlasting seam at eye level.

"Girls," she called up the ladder into the attic, "I'm going to the necessary. Keep away from the fireplace and cookstove until I come back."

"Yes, Ma," they sang out.

It took longer than she intended; where before the slight pressure of her womb had driven her to the chamber pail three and four times between breakfast and dinner, now the child had taken to making her bowels costive.

She could not hear the girls' voices overhead as she stripped off her shawl and mittens in the narrow corridor that led in from the back door. A twist of unease tickled the place she had just voided. "Mary? Laura?" she called. Giggles in return, muffled. Caroline cocked her head, not entirely relieved. "Girls? What are you up to?"

She strode into the big room and stopped short. Her rocking chair stood twisted halfway around, bare of its canvas cloak—they'd dragged the wagon cover over the table and benches and made themselves a tent of it. Her needle dangled in a widening gap that formed the flap of their door.

Caroline threw up her hands and dropped into the rocker. *A woman can resolve that, whatever happens, she will not speak till she can do it in a calm and gentle manner*, she recited to herself as she waited for the flare of temper to ebb. *Perfect silence is a safe resort, when such control cannot be attained*. “Come out of there, the both of you,” she said evenly after another moment.

They crawled out on hands and knees. “We’re playing ‘going west,’” Laura explained. “I’m Pa, and Mary’s Ma, and this is our wagon.” Laura was so earnest, Caroline pinched back a smile in spite of herself. Mary stood by, sheepish.

Caroline made herself sober. “You know better than to tangle with my mending,” she said, mostly to Mary. “Our wagon cover must have good strong seams to keep us safe and dry. You may not play—”

“Aw, Ma,” Laura mourned.

“Laura. It’s very rude to interrupt. You will have more than enough time to sit under it when we go west.” She looked again toward Mary. “There will be no doll supper tonight.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mary said.

“And no bedtime stories from your pa,” she told Laura. Caroline stood and gathered up the span of canvas. “Now set the table for dinner and sit quietly in your places while I repair this seam.”

Caroline felt as though she needed a good starching. Dinner had not been started, the wagon cover still lay in pieces, and already her body simmered with exhaustion. Well, there was no great loss without some small gain—at least she would not have to hover over the cookstove with Mary and her pattypan.

“READY?” CHARLES ASKED.

Caroline nodded. Together they leaned over the sideboards of the wagon and took the corners of the folded sheet of canvas from Mary’s and Laura’s outstretched hands, pulling it square over the hickory bows.

“Best-looking wagon cover in Wisconsin,” Charles proclaimed. He

tossed Laura and then Mary up over the tailgate and cinched the rear flaps down so tightly they could barely peek through. “There we are—snug as a tent!”

Caroline could not deny it was handsome, all clean and close-fitting as a new bodice. It was easily the largest thing she had ever sewn. And yet it looked to have shrunk. All that canvas, which inside the cabin had seemed vast enough to set a schooner afloat, now enclosed an area barely the size of the pigpen. “I declare, I still don’t know how it’s all going to fit,” Caroline said as the girls ran whooping up and down the length of the wagon box.

“I’m whittling a pair of hooks for my gun. Tell me how many you need, and I’ll make you enough to hang anything you like from the bows.”

“That will do for the carpetbags, but we can’t hang the bedstead and straw ticks.”

“I’ll lay a few boards across the wagon box to make a loft for the straw ticks right behind the spring seat,” Charles said. “The girls and the fiddle can ride there, with the extra provisions stowed underneath.”

But there was still the medicine box of camphor, castor oil, laudanum, and bitter herbs. The willow-bough broom, sewing basket, scrap bag, sadirons, soap and starch; the kerosene, candles, tinderbox, and lamps; the chamber pail. The whole of the pantry must go into the wagon, from the salt and pepper to the churn and dishpan. Always there was something small and essential turning up that must be wedged into a box—packets of seeds, scraps of leather and balls of twine, the little box that held Mary’s rag doll and paper ladies, the matches screwed tightly into a cobalt blue medicine bottle. And yet there must be room for Charles’s things: chains and ropes and picket pins, the metal tools and traps, his lead and patch box and bullet mold. It was a mercy the buckets and washtub could hang outside the wagon.

“Don’t worry about the furniture,” Charles added. “We’ll leave all that. Once we get settled I can make more.”

Caroline pulled her shawl to her chin, stricken. Over and over again she had imagined her things arranged in the new place Charles would build, until the picture felt familiar, almost beckoning. All at once there was no place to spread the red-checked tablecloth, nowhere to prop the pillows in their embroidered shams. Even her cozy vantage point—her rocker before the hearth—now vanished from the image. “That will help,” she said weakly.

Charles loosened the rope and stuck his head inside the wagon. “Any Indians in here?” he called to Mary and Laura. Caroline measured the wagon one last time with her eyes, then left Charles and the girls to their play.

The cabin still smelled of the linseed oil she’d used to cure the canvas. Boxes, crates, and bundles leaned in the corners, encroaching on her sense of order no matter how neatly she stacked them. Turning her back to the disarray, Caroline went to the hearth and lowered herself into the embrace of the rocking chair, listening for the accustomed sigh of the runners across the floorboards. Charles had fashioned this chair for her of sugar maple just before Mary was born. In the last days before the birth, its sway had soothed her nerves as much as it soothed the baby afterward. Beside it sat Charles’s own straight-backed chair and Mary’s and Laura’s little stools, like a wooden family. Charles had built them all, and he would build more. Caroline stroked the arms of her rocker. Her fingers knew the grain of their curves as well as they knew the coiled knot of her own hair. The work of Charles’s hands might make a new chair familiar to her touch, but it would not be the same.