

THE  
BELOVED  
WILD

*MELISSA OSTROM*



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS

NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

THE BELOVED WILD. Copyright © 2018 by Melissa Ostrom. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by e-mail at [MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-250-13279-6 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-250-13280-2 (ebook)

Book design by Liz Dresner

Feiwe! and Friends logo designed by Filomena Tuosto

First edition, 2018

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

[fiercereads.com](http://fiercereads.com)

*For Michael, Lily, and Quinn,  
and the happiness we make together*

# PART ONE

# CHAPTER ONE

*A March wind* roared and dipped down the chimney to tease the flames. I welcomed its frigid breath. The fire, combined with the activities of nine people, made an oven of the house. I regretted wearing the winter longies under my skirt. This was no night for woolen flannel.

In preparation for the sugaring, my father and brothers, along with our neighbor Mr. Long, had turned the industry of spile making into a contest, and a continuous shower of sumac shavings fell around the hearth. We would need at least five hundred of these spouts to tap into the maples. I divided my time between helping Mama clean up after supper and returning to the fireside bustle to sweep the floor, deliver mead, collect spiles out of the dust, and turn the metal rods on the coals so they stayed hot, ready to burn out the spouts' centers.

Betsy and Grace, instead of making life easier by lending a

hand, added to my labors. Greatly overestimating my interest in their latest skirmish, my two sisters followed me.

Before I could sidle away again, Betsy grabbed my arm. Her glare, however, was all for Grace. “Last week it was the headache. The week before that she whined about her blood feeling tired. Whoever heard of an eleven-year-old with tired blood? Ha.” Betsy, who was two years older than Grace, stared accusingly at the youngest. “Too weak to do her chores but not so ill to refuse the last cake. She’s not remotely sick.”

Grace, languishing against my shoulder, contradicted her with a series of honking coughs.

“A slight chill is all,” Betsy insisted, speaking louder to drown the hacking. “I caught the liar pinching her cheeks right before Papa returned, hoping to give herself a consumptive air.”

“A talebearer and an actress: Who’s worse?” I swatted Betsy’s leg with the broom. She’d stepped right in my dust pile.

Stumbling out of the way, she said in a vicious rush, “I know what she’s about. She wants Papa to pity her so he’ll let her have her pick of Mitten’s pups.”

“That’s not his way.” I returned the broom to the closet, confronted the maple-sugar buckets strewn by the back door, and began stacking them. “He wouldn’t single her out for a spaniel.”

“But he might let her name them, and she’ll choose stupid names again.” Betsy shot Grace a scornful look. “Mitten. Next we’ll have a Boot and a Pretty Coat and a Sock and—and—a whole trousseau of foolish titles.”

Grace coughed. “You’re so cruel to me. You’ll be sorry about that when I’m dead.”

A call for more mead interrupted Betsy’s retort. I detached my sleeve from her fingers and turned to the Invalid. “Don’t be a

goose. You are getting devilish tedious.” Wrinkling my nose, I filled the mead pitcher. “Plus you reek.”

Grace gave her arm a tentative sniff. “Mama rubbed me down with sulfur and molasses.”

“That explains it.” I picked up the pitcher. “Now move.” The girls shuffled out of my way.

Mama had joined the gathering, her round face rosy and hands placidly folded in her lap. Her small feet kicked back the rocker, and as I turned from Luke’s replenished cup to fill our neighbor’s tankard, she gave me an approving smile. “Harriet’s a great help to me, Mr. Long. She made the bread we ate at supper—always does now, in fact. How she manages such a fine crumb and glossy crust, I don’t know. And she makes that mead at strawberry time. Good, isn’t it?”

Our neighbor took an obliging sip. “Very good.”

“Almost as good as her ginger beer,” Mama added with a meaningful wink and a hand brandished in my direction, like a peddler advertising a shiny pot.

I narrowed my eyes at her.

Mr. Long picked up the spile he’d started. “I think I remember that beer being uncommonly delicious.”

“If inebriation’s your aim,” I said, “you’re in the right company.” Indeed, except for Gideon, my favorite brother and also the only sensible one, the boys looked well on their way to gross drunkenness. “Mead, beer, currant wine”—I topped off Matthew’s drink—“I could run a tavern.”

“*Harriet*,” Mama scolded.

Mr. Long merely smiled and finished his spout.

Passing her on my way to the kitchen, I answered her reproving expression with a grimace.

Mama had abandoned every effort of subtlety. We'd always seen a lot of Mr. Long. He was our nearest neighbor, not yet the age of my oldest brother but already the sole proprietor of a farm larger than our own. His parents had died of influenza almost three years ago. An only child, he'd escaped the contagion's deadly clutches and, afterward, somehow managed his grief and the family farm at the same time. More than managed. The property had thrived under his care. He was still my brothers' close friend, but his greater responsibilities set him apart, made him seem older.

Before he'd turned seventeen last year, my mother had stopped calling him Danny and started addressing him as Mr. Long. "You don't call an accomplished gentleman *Danny*," she'd explained when I had questioned the change. Her deference irked me because she expected me to share it—and because, in recent months, she'd decided to make him her son-in-law with or without my endorsement. She was the one who had invited him to dinner, surely hoping an evening involving whittling spouts would give him the chance to shine, for everyone in Middleton, New Hampshire, knew that Daniel Uriah Long had a special genius for carving wood. It would be impossible not to know this. Each thing he built, from the topmost rafter of his house to the armrest he fashioned for the end of his meetinghouse pew, bore his initials and a date: D.U.L. 1808, D.U.L. 1806, D.U.L. 1809.

There was nothing specifically wrong with Daniel Uriah Long. I'd be the first to admit that he *was* an excellent farmer. And yes, he boasted a strong frame capable of handling the most arduous task, a handsome if reticent face, and expressive gray eyes that showed an appreciation for the absurd even when his unsmiling mouth didn't. As for his initialing, I really couldn't accuse him of vanity, since, in all fairness, most men of my acquaintance signed



their handiwork. In fact, south of us, one whole side of Ebenezer Felde's barn sported, in large letters, his entire last name. Daniel Long was simply a great one for puttering with wood. This, of course, resulted in a surplus of initials.

And those initials, shy of one letter, said it all. His every aspect lacked impetuosity, mystery, devilment. It was difficult to work up a romantic passion for Mr. D.U.L. Yet, inexplicably, he'd managed to stir within his plodding heart an interest in me. It was no secret in Middleton that the man hoped, in the near future, to fix me with his tedious initials.

Just the thought of this expectation raised my hackles. After I finally folded the towel in the kitchen and joined the fireside circle, now raucous with my brothers' ditties, I was feeling particularly mulish and shook my head when Papa requested a song.

The scent of singed sumac hung in the air. Plenty of spiles filled the few maple-sugar buckets between Matthew and Gideon, but Mr. Long continued to whittle away at one, from time to time answering a question or sharing a brief observation, usually without looking up. In the reddish light, I could see that along the spout he'd carved a tiny but intricate leafy vine. "Rather fancy for a spout, isn't it, Danny?"

My father frowned at my waspish tone, but Mr. Long nodded. "Habit."

His mildness goaded me to add, "You forgot to etch in your initials."

Quick as a snap, his eyes met mine. "So I did." He rectified the omission and held out the spout. "For you."

Surprised by the gesture, I didn't immediately take it. Then, just as I leaned forward to accept the gift, he retrieved it, leaving my hand dangling stupidly.

His mouth quivered. He suppressed the smile and murmured, “Perhaps I ought to carve your initials in it as well, since it will be yours.” He raised his eyebrows expectantly.

I folded my arms. “I doubt there’s room for anything else on the little thing.”

“I’ll squeeze them in. It’s *H* then . . . ?”

“S,” I offered grudgingly.

“*H.S.W.*, Harriet S. Winter,” he said evenly as he carved. “What is the *S* for? Sarah? Sally?”

I tightened my mouth and shook my head. I despised my middle name. If only the *S* did stand for Sarah or Sally.

Betsy the Tattler, sitting at Papa’s feet, offered, “Submit. That’s what it stands for.”

For the first time that night, Mr. Long laughed. “*Submit*. Oh, that’s rich.” As he presented the spout, he asked, still grinning, “And do you?”

I took it with a slow, ungracious show of disinterest but answered curtly and quickly enough: “No. Never.”

## CHAPTER TWO

*I woke early* the next morning. Dawn began to drift into the loft, reversing the darkness, like a tea un-steeping itself. Sliding out from under the quilts, I took care not to disturb my sisters' slumber, then made use of the chamber pot and broke the ice in the pitcher to wash my hands and face. The brisk water swiped away the vestiges of sleep. With a shiver, I hurried out of my nightdress, slipped speedily into my clothes, and climbed down the ladder plank to the keeping room.

My father, kneeling by the hearth, was kindling the fire. He smiled at me over his shoulder. "Morning, kitten."

I greeted him with a kiss on his bristled cheek.

Mama glanced up from the potatoes she was chopping. "At least two of our six rise to work in this house, David."

Papa stood and dusted his knees. "The boys likely wore themselves out looking to the fences yesterday."

I sniffed. *Looking to the fences*. Was that cant for drinking oneself into a stupor? I plucked my apron from its hook and pulled it over my head.

A wet snore erupted from the borning room, where Matthew and Luke slept.

Mama and I grinned at each other.

“They’re pretty well knocked up,” she murmured, scooping handfuls of potatoes and transferring them to the soup pot. “But Gideon’s out and making ready to haul the dead hickory that fell by the pond. Want to eat and take him his breakfast?”

“Certainly.” We could have the chance to talk. My brother seemed distracted lately. I wondered why. “I’ll take mine and have it with him.”

“Don’t linger.” Mama gave the pot a stir. “You didn’t finish your Latin yesterday.”

I made a face. We lived too far from town to attend school, so our mother educated us, which I didn’t mind when the subject was geometry, history, logic, or literature. Latin was another matter. I hated it. Sighing, I tied the apron strings at my waist and, without bothering to repair my braid, hurriedly wrapped a half-dozen warm biscuits in a towel and donned my cape.

A cold westerly wind whipped me the second I stepped outside. After tucking the bundled biscuits against my stomach, I tightened the cape around me with my free hand and made my way toward the pond. The straggly remains of Mama’s kitchen garden occupied the yard closest to the door, but along the rotting ropes of squash vines, snowdrops bloomed: harbingers of spring. I stooped to admire the little white bells before continuing, first circling the well sweep, then passing the shed. Only small patches of snow dotted the property, but frost furred the ground. Under

my boots, the matted grass crunched and, all the way to the stand of uncut timber, gleamed like silver in the early sunlight.

I passed the barn and climbed over the stone fence. Gideon stood far beyond the pond, near the burial place. He was a familiar figure even from this distance, with his peculiar forward slouch, like a man always heading into an impossible wind. Overhead, pink edged the clouds, and, encircling us, mountains towered like blue giants curled in sleep, great guardians of whatever fantastical lands and seas rippled out on their other sides. I inhaled deeply, glad to escape the house, liking the brisk air that stung my lungs. It was a glorious morning.

I tossed him a biscuit half by way of hello.

He caught it with his left hand. “Thank you”—he wrinkled his nose at the honey on his palm—“for making me sticky.”

Smiling, I perched on the toppled hickory he’d already trimmed for hauling. “So what’s the problem? You’ve been moping all week.”

He shrugged and ate the biscuit half in two bites. “Not moping. Just thinking.” He wiped his palm on his trousers; then, with the ease of practice, he sank his ax into a stump before sitting next to me, shoving his dusky fringe from his forehead, and inhaling appreciatively.

“Here.”

The biscuits were still warm, their split centers luscious with melted butter and golden honey. Gideon groaned as he bit into another one.

“Thinking about what?”

“The Genesee Valley.”

I stilled. I’d heard about the Genesee Valley. Its wilderness. Its availability for purchase.

After hazarding a peek my way, he gazed around at the beautiful morning. “If this were all mine, Harry, I’d never go. But it isn’t. Plenty of New Englanders are already emigrating, pushing the bounds of civilization and improving the territories in western New York. And why not? Farms have crowded this area. The soil is thin, the forests gone, wild game rare. Out that way, land—fertile, forested land—is selling cheap. Prodigiously cheap. I can save enough money in less than a year to purchase a hundred acres from the Holland Land Company.”

His vehemence astonished me. When I recovered, I demanded, “What good are a hundred acres of friendless, strange wilderness?”

“Sounds like heaven,” he answered bluntly. “A land thick with virgin forest, all species of wood, and mine, mine, mine: completely mine, not a single brother to work for or share my parcel with.”

“‘All species of wood,’” I muttered. “You sound like our whit-tling neighbor.”

Gideon grinned. “Daniel Long undoubtedly would appreciate the rich variety of so many trees. I wonder if he’d sell his farm and commence a pioneer life with me.”

“You’d make a lovely couple.” I shoved the biscuit bundle into his arms and stood.

My mind whirled. I replayed his words, sensibly argued but nevertheless impossible for me to process. His enthusiastic reasoning so thoroughly twisted my expectations, what I understood to be my past, present, and future, that I wouldn’t have been surprised if the cardinal on the hemlock overhead suddenly took flight upside down. Gid was my best friend. Home meant Gid. Where would I be without him?

I wandered to the burial plot and leaned against a post.

Without turning, I said, "I guess you've made up your mind." *With no thought to my feelings.*

He must have heard the hurt in my voice because he said in a cajoling way, "What can a youngest son hope for here? The rockiest, scantest portion of a mountain? A stretch of bog and clay? Should I try my hand at preaching to earn a living?" He appeared at my side and frowned over the fence. "I don't belong in a place if there's no room for me there."

"You belong with your family, and family always makes room."

He grunted and folded his arms.

Opposite the fence, two dozen grave markers faced us like grim pages in an unfinished book. The inscribed names reflected my ancestors, not Gideon's. By blood we weren't siblings or even half siblings. I was the single product of my father's first marriage, and Gideon the youngest of his mother's. Only Grace and Betsy could call our current parents their own.

By long habit, my eyes immediately found my birth mother's marker: MRS. SUBMIT FAITHFUL WINTER, WIFE TO MR. DAVID WINTER, DEC'D OCT'R 10 1792 IN YE 18 OF HER AGE.

I had been taught little more about my mother than what these shallowly inscribed details provided. My father, while far from coldhearted, was not sentimental. He never led me to believe he still mourned his loss and certainly didn't wallow in romantic recollections. Plus, his second wife, hardworking, cheerful, handy in the kitchen, and quick with the needle, well pleased him, as she did all of us. She was the only mother I'd ever known, and I loved her as if she were the one who'd borne me.

But I frequently wondered about this Submit Faithful Winter.

The handful of letters and numbers, encircled with a scroll border and topped with a winged skull and crossed bones, told a sad story. The most telling detail, of course, was her death date. It coincided precisely with my birthday.

The other headstones looked similar to hers, all jutting out of the winter-ravaged ground, as if this ragged oval plot were the mouth of the earth, baring its teeth. The predominant surname was Knowles, my birth mother's maiden name. She had been the last Knowles in these parts, and my father, having married and outlived her, had inherited her home: the land, the house, and this, all that was left of her family's remains.

More females than males occupied the lot, since many a Knowles man had lived to enjoy two, even three, wives in succession. The women's names, especially Patience, Thankful, Mercy, and Temperance, either amused or piqued me, depending on my mood. Today I found them thoroughly irritating. Every man got to be himself, a plain Richard or a regular Edward. These women, however, had to grow up lugging around the weighty expectations tied to whatever names their parents had chosen for them.

"'Mrs. Hope, wife to Mr. James Knowles, deceased June 17, 1775, aged nineteen years.' That was my mother's mother. Hope." I sniffed. "All these women could play a part in an allegory."

"An ironic one, considering when your grandmother passed away. Hope died fast."

"They all do." I scanned the markers. Hardly a woman buried here lived to see her twenty-first year. "A stranger might gather each married a bluebeard."

With his best Scottish burr, Gideon sang softly, "'Loup off the steed,' says false Sir John. 'Your bridal bed you see. For I have drowned seven young ladies. The eighth one you shall be.'"



“Very nice. Of course, in the tale, the last bride’s brother gallops to the castle to rescue her and dispatches the monster in the process. I suppose, since my favorite brother plans to pioneer in the wilds of the Genesee Valley, I’ll end up like all the others in here: young and dead.” I shot him a sour look. “Perhaps you’ll return for a visit after your first great harvest. You can rest a pumpkin on my little plot as a token of remembrance.”

He nodded and took a step back, resting a heel on his sleigh. “You are excessively fond of pumpkin pie. Ouch.” He rubbed his arm where I pinched him. “Don’t be dramatic, Harry. Chances are you won’t marry a wife killer.” He waved an airy hand to indicate the crowded little lot. “Disease probably scotched most of the unfortunates here.”

“Note their ages, stupid. The women obviously died giving birth to their babes.”

“Well, you can’t blame the poor husbands for that.”

“Who else would I blame?”

He looked stumped for a moment. “A drunk midwife?”

“No.” I slowly shook my head. “Childbirth’s a common way for a woman to die.” I eyed the excess of female appellations on the markers and added dryly, “Particularly in my family. According to Old Nancy in the village, my birth mother was very slight, not made for easy birthing.”

He gave my back a brisk pat and, as one determined to look on the bright side, said, “But she was also a noted beauty.”

I grunted. If there was one thing I had learned about Submit Faithful Winter, it was that. Among family and acquaintances, I’d frequently heard about the Knowles women’s famous beauty. Apparently, it was inheritable. Until I came along. I was a typical Winter: spare, pale, and lanky.

“Cheer up, Harry. I can’t see you suffering the same fate. You’re almost as tall as me—certainly no slip of a girl.”

I tapped the top of his head. “*Almost?* I’m just as tall.”

“But with more bones than skin, as Papa says.” He smirked.

“He makes me sound like a walking skeleton.”

“Yes. Rather. But you’ve got a lot of yellow hair and an interesting face,” he said before ruining the already-tepid compliment with “though your mouth is too wide and your eyes too big. And you could better mind that sharp tongue of yours if you tried.” He grinned. “Otherwise, though, I think you’re perfect.”

I snorted.

“So does Daniel Long.”

I glared toward Mount Chester. Mr. Long’s estate was nestled at its foot. “Too bad Mama can’t take a second husband. She holds His Dullness in such high esteem.”

Gideon smiled at me quizzically. “I can’t understand why you don’t. He’s an honest friend, kind, industrious, fair, generous, intelligent—”

“Handsome?”

He refused to rise to the bait. “Sure. Handsome as well. Frankly, I like him vastly better than our brothers. I don’t know why you don’t.”

I shrugged. How did I explain a reaction I couldn’t entirely reason for myself? Perhaps it had something to do with getting written into someone else’s story, without a chance to tell my own. “I’m handy; that’s all. A practical way to bridge the two farms.”

“You underestimate Daniel Long.”

“Is it wrong to want something more than practicality in a marriage?”

“If you think that’s all he sees in you, you’re foolish.” Then, with a sidelong twinkle: “Not to mention rhetorical.” He started making his way back to the downed hickory.

“I suppose you, with your frontier ambitions, are the only one of us who gets to choose excitement.”

“Mr. Long has the best farm in these parts. If I were a woman and he proposed, I’d marry him faster than Luke can tipple a bottle of rum.”

I smiled. “Faster than Matthew can hazard his new boots at the card table?”

“Faster than Betsy can spill a sacred secret.”

“Even faster than Grace can snuffle her way into a hot mustard footbath?”

Grinning, he retrieved his ax from the trunk. “Even faster than that. Anyway, I’d like to see you good and settled before I leave next March.”

*Before I leave next March.* The words stole the smile from my face.

Gideon was more than the brother who matched me in age, nature, and size. He was my best friend. We’d grown up shadowing each other, collecting tadpoles in the stream, playing one-a-cat, racing our sleds in the winter. We hadn’t been grown long enough for me to forget our childhood games. Contemplating losing him pained me. I turned away to hide the sting of tears, and for a moment the mountains blurred into the clouds above them. I blinked and took a steady breath.

But when I could see clearly again, the range persisted in looking strange. Though yet like lolling giants, the rocky formations no longer seemed to guard the faraway lands. Rather, they struck me as a meaner front: the stern keepers of here.

I shivered. Wishing I'd remembered my mittens to stave off the nip of the March morning, I fisted my hands under the cape and slid them into my apron's front pocket.

There I encountered something hard. Taking hold of it, I realized it was the spile Mr. Long had carved for me. I must have stashed it in the pocket and forgotten it.

I brought the spile out into the daylight, ran a finger over the intricate vine, and turned the spout to find his initials. Just as I was about to stuff it back into my pocket and return to the house, the other set of initials seized my attention. "*What?* The devil!"

Gideon, roping the hickory onto the sleigh, looked up.

I stomped to his side and, borrowing from our older brothers' vocabulary, muttered a string of what I reckoned must be terrible expletives.

He took the spile I'd thrust in his face and straightened. Instead of sharing my indignation, he threw back his head and laughed.

"I don't find presumptuousness amusing." I snatched the spout out of his hand.

As far as I was concerned, there wasn't an ounce of humor in Mr. Long's making my last initial an *L* instead of a *W*.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Besides warning me* to keep his secret to myself, Gideon didn't discuss his pioneer plans in the following weeks. Silent as he remained on the matter, however, his discontentment with his present situation became increasingly noticeable. He wasn't sullen, but more and more he found ways to detach himself from the other men's labors. For instance, he left the splitting of rails to Papa and our brothers and chose to work in the woodlot by himself, felling a fine oak and preparing it for spring seasoning with nobody's help but that provided by Trouble the ox.

He chose the oak with floor timbers in mind. For a long time now, Mama had spoken wistfully of a good wooden floor to replace our hard-packed dirt one. Gideon confessed to me he planned to make the oak-plank flooring a parting gift for her. I didn't want to hear this—nor whatever he had in mind for *my* farewell present. Nothing could reconcile me to his leaving.

Winter clung to March. Just as the green spears of daffodils nosed through the ground behind the toolshed and we began to smile hopefully at the cloudless skies and believe the worst of the weather had ended, we woke to a snow thick as a curtain. The spell persisted for the last three days of the month. Mama grew impatient with the men crowding the house, getting in the way of our spinning, and making a mess by the hearth with their tool sharpening.

Finally a northerly kicked at the trees, and though the temperature didn't rise above forty degrees by day, neither did it sink below twenty at night. On a morning in early April, after breakfast, Papa stood in the open doorway, peered at the sky, and held out a hand for a moment as if weighing the wind. He shut the door and returned to his chair. "Sap will be flowing properly now."

Sharp freezes at night, free thaws by midmorning: sugaring time. Its arrival, more than all the green shoots and tweeting birds, foretold spring.

Matthew greeted the announcement with a holler. My sisters cheered. Quite literally, there was no sweeter time: the sap collecting and boiling, then the sampling and celebrating. Sugaring was work, but of a social kind, for some of our neighbors would aid us in the enterprise.

I didn't doubt all of us felt the thrill of anticipation. But Gideon stood so quickly his chair tipped over. He pounded across the room and wrenched open the door, apparently to see for himself the day's conditions.

When he turned, his face was alive with excitement. "Shall I ride to the Welds place and let them know?"

"Certainly." Papa pulled on his boots. "Tell Robert he can take home a tub of sweetening for pay if he joins us."

Betsy studied Gideon with a sly smile. "I'm sure the pretty cousin staying with them also might like to earn a sugar bucket. We can always use some help tending to the stirring and boiling."

Mama nodded complacently. Already my older brothers were rushing to catch up with Papa, shrugging on their coats and mumbling about checking on the firewood supply in the sugarhouse. I rose hurriedly, too.

Gideon's reaction to Betsy's comment, however, stopped me in my tracks. She'd meant to tease him with the reference to Robert's cousin, and I could tell she'd succeeded. He looked irked and flushed, like she'd guessed something he wanted to keep private.

I stared at him dumbly. *Another* secret? I tried to dredge up a recollection of this new neighbor. She hadn't been in Middleton long enough for me to meet her more than once, and that had been at meeting. Since the Welds family sat in a pew behind ours, I'd failed to get a good look at her. I only vaguely recalled a dab of a girl, red-cheeked and curly-haired. Yet I suspected from Gideon's expression that he'd attended to her much more closely.

How closely? Had he seen her since then? If so, was she a passing interest or more than that? And just how did she figure into his frontiersman scheme?

It took a whole week to get some answers. Half of it we spent at our farm, the other at Mr. Long's. But whether at our sugarhouse or his, the days matched: the men, bundled in coats and fur caps, disappeared into the woods, driving their ox-pulled sleds, and every few hours returned, their barrels brimming with sap. They'd stop at our bonfire to drain the contents into the cauldron, then head back to the woods.

Mostly, the womenfolk stayed near the kettle—me, Mama, my sisters, and the Weldses' cousin, Rachel. Stirring the sap and adding wood to keep the fire going for a steady boil didn't require much focus; I was given the freedom to imitate nosy Betsy and, during the few times when Gideon's and Rachel's paths crossed, examine the subjects' faces to see what kind of romance was brewing between the Winter and Welds households.

But whenever Gideon made a visit to contribute his full barrel, he neither stole more than a searing glance at this girl nor uttered a single word. It was impossible to determine their degree of familiarity.

Still, during the week, I had plenty of time to examine our new neighbor. I decided I couldn't like her.

She was missish.

Her responses to Betsy's inquisitions invited this conclusion. Running the long-handled ladle over the bubbling surface to skim the sap, my sister would ask questions: "So, from what parts did your parents come, Rachel?" "Have you any siblings?" "Do you like Middleton?" "Isn't your cousin Ed the most half-witted fellow you ever met?" "Did you leave behind a beau?" "Would you settle in this country for good, do you think?"

We didn't call Betsy the Intelligencer for nothing.

Rachel's answers disclosed that she was an orphan, with no nearer relatives than the Weldses. During the year after her parents' passing, she'd stayed in Massachusetts, working as a spinning girl for the prosperous family that owned the mill before saving enough to pay for her stage fare and traveling to the Weldses. The new living arrangement, she confided, was a happier circumstance, since the Weldses, though poor, were a cheerful bunch. "And I do love caring for the babes, cuddling their precious persons,



telling them fairy tales, and teaching them games. They're the dearest things, round and romping. Full of juice! I adore children."

Her glowing recital happened to coincide with one of Mr. Long's appearances, so he was present when I grunted and remarked, "You're in the right place, then. The Welds house veritably teems with brats." Ten in all: the four youngest of whom made for a daily hell of snotty noses, soiled diapers, sticky hands, cries, accidents, and constant demands. I shuddered.

Catching my expression, Mr. Long's mouth quivered. But he mostly attended to the cauldron, ladling sap and watching it closely as he poured it back in a slow trickle. He handed Betsy the wooden utensil. "Too thin yet." Then, to Rachel: "I'm sure Mrs. Welds appreciates your help."

Rachel, blushing prettily, gave a modest little shrug.

Mama, who'd been bestowing an approving smile on the paragon of would-be motherhood, turned to Mr. Long. "A large family's a blessing. Just wait until all of those Weldses grow up. So many helping hands would make short work of this business." She tilted her head to indicate our sugaring. After casting a sidelong peek my way, she inquired innocently, "Do you think you'll be wanting a big family yourself, Mr. Long?"

*For heaven's sake.* I flared my eyes at her.

He answered blandly, "Oh, without a doubt. I should guess ten or eleven children."

"*Eleven,*" I gasped. So I was to be a broodmare? Not if I could help it. I glared at him. "Why not make it a round dozen?"

His mouth curved for an instant before straightening. "Good thinking."

Grace began moaning by the stacked wood, complaining about a bellyache.

Mama glanced distractedly her way. "What now, child?"

She whimpered and rubbed her stomach. "I don't feel at all myself. What if I'm getting a touch of the influenza?"

With a frown, Mama hurried to her youngest and relieved her of her armful of wood, while Betsy exclaimed into the cauldron's steam, "Fiddle! Miss Lazy needs a touch of the switch; that's what she ought to be getting." She passed me the ladle and strode, arms folded, to Mama's side, sneering, "I'd like to know how many times she's spilled syrup onto the snow for sampling. Bet she made herself sick on candy."

Rachel smiled indulgently at my obnoxious sisters.

Mr. Long, used to their squabbles, was looking at the sky, his expression content. "As long as we keep getting these light snow-falls, the sap will run. We might be sugaring off into next week." He tugged on his mittens and winked at me. "Keep stirring, Harriet Submit Winter." He pronounced my name succinctly, as though he was savoring every single syllable.

I gripped the ladle. How gratifying it'd feel to thwack him over the head with it.

"Oh." Rachel fixed me with her round blue eyes. Those eyes annoyed me. They were so perpetually surprised. "Is that your full name? Very pretty."

I muttered a thank-you and said to Mr. Long's parting back, "Yes, Harriet Winter, not Harriet *Linter*. Too bad your spelling isn't as good as your whittling, Mr. Long."

He turned to flash me a grin. "Perhaps you can stitch me an alphabet sampler, and I can work on my letters."

"I *hate* stitchery."

"I imagine you'd rather be hard at work distilling strong spirits." He delivered a sigh in the new girl's direction and explained,

“Miss Winter plans to open a tavern when she grows up. Someday. Hopefully.” His expression clarified that the last two words modified the growing, not the tavern opening.

I shook the ladle threateningly in the air.

Rachel, ever wide-eyed, made a perfect O with her mouth, then said doubtfully, “I wonder your parents would let you.”

He clucked. “Yes, well, she’s their cross to bear. If only she’d give needlework a try. Most girls happily *submit* to that labor.” He shook his head and ambled toward the sled.

I growled, but before I could lash him with a retort, he’d started talking to his young cousin, Jeb.

And Rachel was chattering again.

“So you dislike stitchery? Do you mean that truly? I find plying a needle a very productive activity. Quite soothing, too, and almost as pleasant as singing.” She bent to nudge another piece of firewood into the flames. When she straightened, her hand fluttered up to smooth a curl from her forehead. “I’ve never known a Linter, but back in Juneville, I knew a Linton—many Lintons, in fact. Rather friendly, the Lintons—or Mrs. Linton, at least. I would have rather hired myself out as her dairymaid than as Mrs. Walkley’s spinning girl, except the Lintons got the notion to make the great trek westward. The morning they departed, Mrs. Linton gave me a gift of some fine lace and made me promise, when I was finally in the position of exploring the legendary Genesee Valley myself, that I’d indulge her with a visit, and she said I’d be welcome to stay as long as I liked. I nearly joined her then and there, for to see a whole caravan readying for departure—the wagons weighted with furniture and farm equipment, the livestock tethered and nervous, the dogs yapping—oh, it filled me with such great excitement, and I—”

“Did you say the Genesee Valley?”

“Yes. Wondrously rich land, I hear.” She glanced around, as if to ensure no one was eavesdropping, then added in a near whisper, “Cousin Robert and Cousin Ed are keen on the notion of journeying there as well.” A small frown creased her forehead. “Nothing official yet, of course. They haven’t even told their folks—avoiding their mother’s tears and opposition as long as possible, I imagine. I learned of it by chance, actually. But they’ve extended the invitation to me, and I couldn’t be more grateful.”

I stared at her for a moment. “Ah.”

And to myself: *Aha!*

## CHAPTER FOUR

*One need not* grow up with or live for any great length of time in close proximity to five other children to learn this: There is never anything so desirable as that which is desired by another. Mention a hankering for the last potato in the pot, and before you know it, every other young person just *has* to have that potato or risk death from the craving.

Betsy and Grace fought over a rag doll for the better part of a year until they tore it in half. Matthew and Luke, to this day, vied for the same coffee cup. Gideon's situation always proved particularly treacherous. This youngest and smallest son could not compete with the meaty-armed, thick-fisted oafs who comprised our brothers. He learned early on to make silent his joys and discoveries. An unusual rock worth keeping was quietly palmed and furtively pocketed.

Chances were that *this*, more than anything, explained his reticence around Rachel. A show of proprietary fascination would have incited our brothers' competitive urges. If one weren't I (the person who knew Gideon best) or Betsy (our family's version of a Bow Street runner), one probably wouldn't discern any particular interest on Gideon's part in this person who, as far as I was concerned, sported more hair than wit.

Of course, this unfortunate aspect of human nature also explained his reluctance to disclose his pioneer plans to the family. Sure, he didn't want to upset Mama too soon. But he also didn't want to plant a seed of interest in Luke's skull. He might decide to join him, and Gid wanted this adventure all for himself.

On the evening of the last day of sugaring, when Daniel Long's great room filled with spit-shined boots and Sunday-best skirts, when maple cakes (baked by Widow Barnes, Mr. Long's housekeeper) fragrancd the air, and when sleigh bells heralded each new arrival outside while laughter and the fiddler's string tuning stirred the interior, only Betsy and I probably detected anything peculiar about Gideon. If his cheeks looked ruddier than usual, well, many of us were a bit blistered from a week of working in the cold wind and tending to a big fire.

So, with Rachel, he did not behave like a dog guarding a ham bone. Not overtly. He escorted her to the dance floor just once: for a cotillion. His bow was polite, his conversation (at least that which I managed to overhear) punctilious. Afterward, he walked her to a chair and procured a glass of currant wine for her. He observed every nicety with this new neighbor. He even promptly released her to her next partner. Then, making his way around the couples who were arranging themselves in the new set, he

quite rightly asked a languishing Mildred, the doctor's homeliest daughter, if she'd favor him with a dance.

Yet I saw past the pose. He breathed a mite too quickly and watched the rosy, laughing Rachel rather too closely. He was like a cloud hiding a bolt of lightning.

And I could tell that Gideon, in some strange and secretive and un-Gideon way, was utterly shattered.

I didn't demur when various Middleton boys asked me to dance, not even when Mr. Long was the one asking. Frankly, I was too distracted to devise a tart rejoinder and perform my customary show of churlishness. I stood up for most of the dances but didn't do so very gracefully, too busy spying on my brother to attend to the steps.

Before the last reel ended, Mr. Long, my partner, blew a long-suffering sigh and shuffled me off the dance floor.

I blinked at him in surprise. "Are you winded, Mr. Long?"

He drew me to a chair near the punch bowl. "No. Injured. You keep stomping on my feet." He passed me a cup of punch and stood by my chair, watching me in amusement as I quaffed it. Then he glanced at Gideon, who was leaning against the wall and doing his best not to glare at Robert, who danced with the gaily giggling Rachel.

Mr. Long's expression turned thoughtful. "Ah." He gave me a sympathetic smile. "You're worrying about losing your best friend." Absently, he reached down and brushed a strand of my hair behind my ear.

I gaped at him. The impulsive gesture obviously surprised him as much as it did me. For a moment he didn't seem to know what to say or where to look, and finally he simply tucked his hand in his armpit, as if not trusting it to stay put.

He cleared his throat, and after a minute the awkwardness passed. I resumed frowning at Gideon and wishing the boy hadn't turned into such a ridiculous fool.

Mr. Long handed me a second cup of punch. "Poor Harriet," he mused quietly. "It's hard getting older."

Bluebirds arrived, Easter Sunday came and went, rain turned parts of the farm into watering holes, the brook rose and flooded, a spell of sunshine dried the worst of the muck, spring plowing began, many ripped seams were mended, many stockings were darned, many wristbands were stitched, and all of April passed before Gideon mentioned the Genesee Valley again, saying a little about the Welds brothers, verifying their similar pioneer plans, and mentioning how much money they'd already put aside, enough to allow them to leave for the wilderness months before he would.

All of this sounded like a preface. Sure enough, he asked abruptly, "What do you think about their cousin, Rachel?"

I worried the flattened end of a nail with my thumb. We were in the forge barn, where he was making nails to improve his savings. Though we all had chores that contributed to the family's earnings and helped maintain the farm, if we chose to do more than we were assigned, we could make spending cash, what Mama called "pin money." Gid hid his personal savings under the plank where I stood. The pile of coins was growing into quite the cache. After a moment of silence, while I deliberated telling him my true opinion, I tossed the nail in the pile and shrugged. "She's pretty."

"Yes, very pretty," he sighed, and hammered a nail rod to a point with unnecessary force. "Every Middleton boy thinks so."

Hope leaped like a blaze in a wind. So Rachel was much



admired? Good. Perhaps she was a flirt, and Gideon would grow disgusted with her. Or maybe some richer Middleton boy would pursue and win her, and my brother would decide the Genesee Valley didn't sound so wonderful after all. I didn't say anything else, about Rachel or Gid's pioneering, and to my relief, the conversation waned.

I was not the kind of person to handle a problem. I ignored it and prayed it'd disappear.

But this problem didn't, as I learned the first Sabbath in May, after meeting.

The Sunday started so well. Spring was new enough that I hadn't forgotten what the meetinghouse was like in winter. How wonderful not to haul foot stoves into the unheated church, not to watch Pastor's stormed message make clouds in the bitter air around his red face, not to shiver in our muffs and under our furs for the wearying hours of worship, not to bite into half-frozen communion bread, and not to fear that the icy baptismal waters were going to smite the unfortunate wintertime newborns with a deadly chill.

The day was blissfully mild. I felt unencumbered. Free.

It was even warm enough for some of the Middleton folks to walk barefoot to the meetinghouse and thus save the shine on their shoes. They waited until they reached the doorway to slip them on and button them.

Those of us who lived too far away to walk traveled on horseback or in carriages and wagons. We arrived just as the Weldses did, and though my older brothers jumped out of the wagon and rushed to the fence where the horses were hitched so they could examine a neighbor's new bay, Gideon quickly strode to greet the Weldses. Looking extraordinarily pleased, he lent Rachel

his hand to help her step down to the rutted road, before any other young man could beat him to it.

Overhead, a hawk wrote curvy letters across the blue sky in soaring sweeps, looking more like a creature playing than hunting. With the help of the wind, the trees and bushes dotting the yards twitched their young leaves like frisky colts. Early miniature irises, ice blue, formed a pretty trim around the white church. The blacksmith shop was quiet, the tavern windows dark. No vendors cried their wares, and no spinning wheels whirred. Besides murmured conversations and the occasional caw of a crow, the only sounds to disturb the Sunday peace came from approaching parishioners, their wagon wheels crunching the gravel on the roads and, upon reaching the bridge, thundering the loose planks.

It was too fine a day to rush into the church. Folks dallied outside, shaking hands, inquiring after one another's farms and relatives. Some loitered by the fence; others strolled across the scruffy grass into the graveyard. Children played on the ground and promptly reversed the positive effects of their Saturday night washings by digging into the flower borders and yanking loose fat worms.

When at last we shuffled in, most of us had worked out the worst of our fidgets, and the congregation settled down to listen to Pastor Cartwright's morning-long sermon with good grace.

Though he kept us on our knees for one too many interminable prayers, we enjoyed some distractions. Mama brought a store of nuts and dried fruits for munching. Mr. Underwood entertained us with his amazing spitting skill, shooting his tobacco juice down the middle aisle, sometimes as far as the altar. Once, the dogs in the neighborhood set up a racket; then, as if led by a singing

master, in one accord they started to howl. And halfway through the service, Widow Harrison, who lived behind the church, popped out of her pew to try to capture one of her chickens, which had wandered through the open doorway. Whenever she got close enough to seize it, the hen eluded her with a *brawk!* and a nervous flapping of wings. The fun came to an end when the bird clumsily flew up and landed on the pulpit. The reverend trapped its legs in a speedily shut Bible.

Finally we sang the closing hymn, received the benediction, and went outside. We lived too far away to commit our afternoon to the second round of worship. Stretching our stiff muscles and blinking at the noon-high sun, we prepared to leave. I was looking forward to a few hours of rest. But then three things happened to ruin what promised to be a perfectly lovely day.

First, after climbing into the wagon and sitting back to wait for the rest of my family, I spotted Matthew and immediately noticed something strange in my oldest brother's demeanor. He detached himself from the crowd by the church doors, looked carefully behind him, and sidled to the end of the fence. Then followed this worrisome sight: Matthew and Isaac Rush deep in conversation. Rush was the worst gamester in Middleton and the man most responsible for arranging the various local gambling parties and blood sports. Mothers, in particular, despised the man. He all too efficiently encouraged their boys to empty their pockets in wasteful plays for money stakes.

The Winters didn't have the luxury of a fortune to gamble away, but there was no mistaking the secretive passing of a fat purse that took place between my brother and Mr. Rush. How in heaven's name had Matthew scraped together such a bundle? Even if he'd set aside a year's worth of pin money, he never would

have saved that much, not unless he'd gotten lucky at the card tables and managed to grow his cash. If that was the case, it was a short-lived luck. The money was gone now.

After sliding the purse into his coat, Mr. Rush wandered across the street. Then my oldest brother trudged back to the meeting-house. No one, not even our sister Grace, could have worn a sicklier visage. His skin was pasty white, and his eyes, as soon as they met mine, bulged in alarm. He immediately looked away and veered toward the crowd outside the doors.

Where this money had come from, how much it amounted to, and why it had left Matthew's possession were worrisome questions. They made me extremely uneasy. No one but I, however, seemed to have witnessed what had happened. Indeed Matthew and Mr. Rush had enjoyed almost complete privacy in their exchange. That was because of the second shocker.

After the service, nearly the entire congregation had flitted toward a carriage to welcome the late-arriving Goodrich family. I had heard about the Goodriches. I knew Mr. Goodrich had inherited the mill and was already stirring Middleton's curiosity with his plans for improvements. What I hadn't known was that Mr. Goodrich, besides sporting a single son, had fathered a pack of beautiful daughters. From my wagon perch, I could examine all of them: five elegantly dressed, prettily mannered, fashionably dark-haired, dark-eyed beauties.

Mr. Long already seemed on very good terms with the oldest. Similarly tall and handsome, they stood facing each other right outside the meetinghouse doorway like a newly married couple. Though I couldn't discern the particulars of their conversation, they obviously spoke naturally, like good friends. And, every so often, Miss Goodrich's laughter trilled like a merry bell.

I sniffed and folded my arms. It was a wonder she found anything to amuse her in Mr. D.U.L.'s conversation. She was probably as foolish as Rachel Welds.

And that was the third circumstance: Rachel. She had also squeezed her presence into the welcoming crowd, but as she turned away from two of the Goodrich girls, she ran smack into my brother.

Luke, not Gideon.

A teasing encounter ensued. Luke joked. Rachel tittered and blushed. Luke joked again. Rachel tittered some more. And directly behind Luke, Gideon stood and seethed.

Poor Gid. He was a mite short for Rachel to spot behind the beefy Luke and too worshipful by far to engage her in the kind of breezy flirtation Luke was so good at.

Worst of all was Luke's expression of intrigue. Rachel had captured his notice. Gideon, standing stiffly behind the bold Luke, was probably recollecting every instance his older brother had wrangled something dear from him: the favorite pup, the favorite piglet, the favorite toy, the favorite treat.

Stiffly, Gideon turned and stomped to the wagon. Perhaps the sympathy I felt for him was written across my face, because he quickly looked away from me and busied himself by hitching the oxen.

After climbing into the wagon, he sat heavily, hunched and somber, his eyes downcast, his hands loosely folded. We observed the silence until the crowd began dispersing. I noted with a sensation as sharp as vinegar how charmingly Mr. Long took Miss Goodrich's hand as they said their good-byes. I supposed he saved his great store of sarcasm just for me.

Gideon's sigh interrupted my peevish thoughts. He began

talking, softly but earnestly. “I’m tired of wanting things I can’t have, Harry. I need my own place and can almost afford it. I hope you understand why I have to leave.” The entire time he spoke, he stared straight ahead, eyes burning, face rigid.

I said what I knew he needed to hear. “Yes, Gid, I understand.”

But I didn’t say what I’d started thinking. *Maybe I need the same. Maybe there’s nothing—and no one—here for me, either. Maybe I’ll go with you.*

# CHAPTER FIVE

*Though the idea* of joining Gideon had initially sprung like an inspired and viable course of action, it almost as quickly lost its appeal. In fact, I felt ill simply thinking about leaving Middleton. Home became a cherished picture constantly adorning my thoughts. The fact that in this vision, among my family and the rolling, springtime landscape, Mr. Long had also begun to appear . . .

Well. That was a development I preferred not to ponder.

Chores prevented me from dwelling too deeply on this disturbing shift in my sentiments. It was May, and May didn't wait for humans to exercise their feelings. May could care less about a person's hopes and fears. May was the season of the plow.

The month began with a warm spell, and the men spent the first week after that fateful Sunday turning the soil, letting what hid all winter long greet the sun and saturate the air with the scent

of earth. The following Monday, they began planting the Indian corn.

That day, in an hour of rare harmony, Betsy and Grace talked gaily while taking turns at the butter churn. I listened from where I stood over the stew pot. Their conversation made my mouth water, for what they anticipated was true: Mama would contrive some *very* good things with the results of this planting, from johnnycakes to Indian pudding. Luke, having returned to the house to collect the ax handle he'd left seasoning on the spit hooks, leaned over the girls to add his own personal vision of paradise: "And don't forget the corn whiskey."

By midweek, the weather took a turn for the worse. Nevertheless, Mama, who wore out the almanac in her efforts to time our planting according to the constellations, put me to work in the kitchen garden. The moon had begun to decrease, and she insisted it was time to commence the radishes.

"What difference does it make?" The afternoon was wet, yet here I was, planting radishes and looking as mud-caked as a freshly dug root vegetable.

"Radishes taper downward, dear," she murmured. She was just as damp as I was and on her knees two rows over, worrying about the progress of her peas and searching their curly tendrils for blight. "You need to plant them downward at the decrease of the moon."

A strand of wet hair had plastered itself across my face. I peeled it away and muttered, "Stuff and nonsense." But I kept digging.

By the end of the week, the garden was planted. I resumed my inside chores, the ones that kept me busy regardless of the season.

The men, in contrast, had few consistent labors. Their duties



changed according to nature's whims and schedule, and in May, nature demanded a lot. This was a good thing, particularly for Matthew. As the month progressed, between the cooking, mending, and scrubbing, in the early mornings and the late evenings, I kept an eye on my oldest brother. I hadn't forgotten what I'd witnessed at the beginning of May. It was a relief the plowing and planting yoked him to the land. He had no time to ride to town, neither to work extra jobs nor to squander his earnings at the card tables with the likes of Isaac Rush.

That changed toward the end of the month. Most of the planting was done, a worrisome circumstance when it came to Matthew, who started slipping to town again, but a good thing for Gideon, who could now steal away from the farm to improve his savings. I helped. It was pole-wood season, for the trees were vibrant with sap, and their busily spreading bark was easily removed. Gid and I cut long poles from the hickory and white oak saplings in the woodlot's lowland, then kept most of them soft for splitting and pounding by fixing them under rocks in the rushing stream. Armfuls of splint wood and hoop poles promised a fair bit of money from the town cooper, but we wasted a few of our poles on swordfights. Gid usually managed more hits than I did, but I almost always got my revenge by pushing him into the creek. I would have liked to have devoted more of our time to fun, but he wasn't as easy to tease into foolery as he'd been in the past. He was on a mission.

His single-mindedness influenced me, and I also ensured some personal savings by turning splinters into baskets. Mama approved of these endeavors. Perhaps she thought my newfound interest in moneymaking reflected a womanly impulse to supply myself with a dowry.

Marriage, however, had never seemed less likely.

The fact was, Mr. Long didn't appear as interested in me as he once had. This turn of events occupied my thoughts as I spent the final week of May weaving baskets.

He still passed a great deal of time with us, or at least with the men. Like most farming neighbors, we lent our aid to him to quicken an industry, and he reciprocated. Though Papa and my brothers had handled without assistance the cultivation of the corn—hoeing, weeding, and hilling it—Mr. Long and his cousin Jeb had helped my family with the more arduous task of stump pulling in the field my father wanted widened. In return, my brothers had sharpened their froes and split enough wood shingles for Mr. Long to use to replace his bark roof.

But our neighbor's recent weeks were not all work and no pleasure. If Betsy could be counted as a reliable source of information, he was also spending a fair share of his time in Middleton with the Goodriches.

I refused to feel betrayed when it came to Mr. Long. If he wanted to bestow his precious person on a pack of silly town girls, that was fine with me. Let them grow bored watching him whittle every handy piece of wood. No doubt, when he got to know them well enough, he'd make them the new objects of his caustic comments and observations. I couldn't care half a farthing.

My mother, unfortunately, could.

June arrived and brought with it bright, cheerful weather. Mama, in contrast, was pure gloom and doom. Betsy, who enjoyed accompanying Papa whenever he had business in town, started bringing back interesting news regarding Mr. Long. The gossip vexed Mama. Her worries made the strawberry season, normally quite

a lovely time, a painful period of ominous predictions and gentle scolds.

We began picking the fruit in the middle of the month, and on the first day of this endeavor, Mama sighed, “Those Goodrich girls are very ladylike.” She cast a disapproving frown at my dirty apron.

I shrugged. Given our enterprise, I wasn’t sure how she expected me to preserve an immaculate appearance. We were in the meadow, foraging diligently for the wild berries—or at least Mama and I were. Grace was just eating them.

Betsy, intent on witnessing the mild lecture Mama was dealing me, mostly stalked us.

I gave her a mean look. “Go away, Miss Nosy.”

“I hear the oldest plays the pianoforte,” Mama continued, dropping a handful of sweet red fruits in her bucket. She shook her head slowly and tragically, as though the Goodrich chit’s accomplishment bespoke automatic victory in the matrimonial contest. All hope was lost.

She interspersed the subsequent strawberry-related activities with additional details, all sighed mournfully. “Those girls’ dresses are store-bought,” she moaned through the mashing for jam. “The oldest girl paints—in *oils*, no less,” she groaned through the strawberry bread mixing.

Halfway through preparing berries for drying and tea making, she stopped and demanded, “Do you know what the Goodriches have in their parlor?”

“A pianoforte?” I was nipping the caps off the berries with vicious pleasure, like a vengeful peasant beheading greedy aristocrats. Indeed, my hands were stained a bloody red.

“Well, yes,” Mama said impatiently, as she arranged another

capless strawberry on the clothed table. "But also a sofa. A real sofa!"

*As opposed to a fake one*, I supposed.

I tried not to let her death-tolling headshakes perturb me.

Her funereal fixation on the supremacy of the Goodrich girls' upbringing and talents persisted and reached a climax on the day of the strawberry festival. It was held every year during the strawberry moon, but this time, the prosperous Goodrich family had offered to throw open their grand doors and host the evening's ball.

I dreaded it.

After trimming my best gown in new lace, yanking the brush through my snarls, dressing my hair, and smoothing and patting and circling me, Mama took a step back and scrutinized my appearance with the fierceness of a military leader strategizing an ambush. Then she leaned forward and pinched my cheeks.

I jerked back.

She followed me and took hold of my cheeks again. "Just trying to give you a little color, dear."

"Ow!"

Whether my bruised cheeks maintained their artificial blush all the way to town, I couldn't say. But the circumstances at the Goodrich house cheered Mama immensely.

At least initially.

Within minutes of our arrival, while I was still gaping in speechless wonder at the six-piece orchestra, the chandelier that sported more blazing candles than the Winter household lit in an entire year, and an actual French dance master liltily calling

out the figures, Mr. Long secured my first dance. He teased me in his usual fashion whenever the cotillion brought us face-to-face. I fired back sharp retorts. We resumed our raillery as though several weeks hadn't slipped past us with nary a conversation.

But afterward he danced with many others, including the three oldest Goodrich girls. He acted just as politely charming with them as he had with me—and (if their laughter was any indication) equally teasing. In fact, he struck me as shockingly popular with the ladies. Practically a *flirt*. The official beau of the ball! So busily occupied did the Middleton maidens keep him, he couldn't bother chatting with members of his own sex. The only man with whom he talked was Mr. Goodrich. I overheard some of this conversation and discovered that Mr. Long was doing work for the older gentleman, specifically helping him harness the mill wheel's power and improve the business's efficiency by building additional machines.

My location on the famous Goodrich sofa put me in a position to learn this information. Rachel Welds briefly stopped by and tried to engage me in a nonsensical chat about ribbons before admiring my sprig muslin gown and delivering the dubious compliment that I reminded her of the beautiful, young sunburst locust tree that stood “grandly tall and golden and perfectly straight” outside the front door of her former Massachusetts home. Then she flitted away.

I heaved a sigh of relief. I wasn't good at girlish gab. Girlish anything, really. Feeling awkward, out of place, grotesquely long, and as wooden as a sunburst locust, I glanced down at myself, wondering how it was that my birth mother had been a famed beauty while her sole child had turned out like a clumsy filly, all skinny legs.

I was sitting hunched over my cup, sipping (gulping) some thankfully potent punch, watching the dancers, and, in the short lulls between the songs, listening to Mr. Long and Mr. Goodrich chat about cogs, hammers, and bellows a few yards away, when Gideon appeared and settled beside me.

He looked happier than usual. I assumed this was because he'd danced twice with Rachel, two times more than Luke, who'd failed so far to outmaneuver the other swains intent on winning her hand. Plus, Rachel had arranged in the topknot of her hair a lush, red flower that looked suspiciously like one of Mama's peonies. I wondered if Gideon had ridden all the way to the Welds house earlier in the day to give her a bouquet of the June blossoms.

My brother's eyes followed his love interest's progress across the floor in the contra dance. I studied the floor for a different reason. Mr. Long had just joined the dance, this time leading the oldest Goodrich daughter. Hadn't he danced with her once already? Miss Goodrich laughed her little silver-bell-tinkling laugh. I made a face at the couple. Heavens, they were awfully familiar. Perhaps seriously familiar. Maybe they planned to announce their engagement tonight at the end of the festivities. Well, I'd be the first to stand and cheer.

"Strange to think this could be the last civilized event I attend before I leave," Gid said.

I tore my eyes off Mr. Long and shook my head. "There'll be a few more dance assemblies before March. And even on the frontier, folks surely scrape up some reels. As long as there are people, there'll be music and dancing." I cast a critical eye around the Goodriches' immense parlor, swollen with the millings of laughing ladies and gentlemen in their Sunday best and wastefully

aglow in countless candles. “Though probably not in such a fancy setting.”

“I’ll miss these occasions. Our neighbors, our friends. You, especially, Harry.”

“Well, you don’t need to miss me.” *Because I’m not sticking around here, either.* Mama had hardworking (if tediously inquisitive) Betsy to help her. Papa didn’t require me to darn his socks; even sickly Grace could do that. And Mr. Long . . . he obviously wouldn’t miss me. Why stay and witness his and Miss Goodrich’s courtship?

Yet I hesitated to declare my intention to leave. Home, home, home: It still held me in its familiar embrace. Plus, as busy as I’d been sentimentalizing Middleton, I hadn’t thought of a good way to disclose to Gid my idea of leaving it, to frame this agenda in such a manner to make it sound reasonable.

But perhaps, while the music and dancing afforded us a measure of privacy, now would be the time to speak. Staring straight ahead, squashing my reservations, I blurted, “You don’t need to miss me because I’m going with you.”

He turned to face me. A while passed before he stammered, “But—but—there’s Mama and the girls and—and what about him?” He waved a wild hand toward Mr. Long, deep in conversation with Miss Goodrich.

My mouth tightened. “What about him?” I glared at our neighbor. He aggravated me to no end, first assiduously attending to me for months—nay, years!—and so faithfully it seemed all of Middleton shared an understanding of our pending nuptials, then thoroughly ignoring me, to the extent that, for the past six weeks, I had been forced to endure an onslaught of pitying glances every Sabbath at meeting.

And then here, tonight: starting off with his old friendly jabs and jokes then promptly ditching me for the rest of the evening.

I felt toyed with. That I'd taken him for granted in the past and thus earned this treatment, I didn't want to admit. I longed to show him—and everyone—that I was my own woman, quite capable of orchestrating my future without anyone's help. I wasn't going to hang around to see if our neighbor thought I was good enough for him. I wasn't going to linger just to get tossed aside. Either way, the waiting made me a loser. Staying in Middleton would be like the quadrille now under way: a perfectly sedate dance, politely dictated by custom, all figured out step by step, up one long line and down another. Fine but predictable. Someone else had made up the dance. I shouldn't have to follow the steps.

I wanted an adventure, too.

Gideon was looking doubtful. "I don't think our parents will let you."

"Well, for that matter, you don't know if they'll let *you*. And if they do, they might be grateful to me for agreeing to go with you. After all, who'll set up your housekeeping while you're working on your parcel, chopping down trees, and taming the wilderness?"

His gaze drifted toward Rachel.

I snorted. "I won't interfere with your romance, Gid. Go ahead and court her. If she agrees to marry you, after the happy occasion I'll leave you two to your love nest." I knew I sounded sour, but I couldn't help it. I had never imagined Gideon would prove so susceptible to a ninny. Most likely, after the featherbrain lost her youthful shine, he'd find her to be a terribly dull companion. I folded my arms. "Regardless, I can't see marriage happening



before you've cleared enough land to build a house and grow something."

He nodded slowly. I could tell he was mulling over my points and finding them sound. "That's decent of you, Harry. I'd sure love your company. Truthfully, leaving you behind was the one consideration spoiling my anticipation." His smile turned tentative. "But if things work out with Miss Welds and me . . ." He cleared his throat, stared at his boots, and finished awkwardly, "Where would you go?"

"Back to Middleton, I guess."

Even as I said this, I couldn't really believe it. What would home be like without my best chum? The farm I knew featured Gideon racing me, coming to my aid when one of our brothers tormented me, making me laugh during the most boring activity. His absence would more than sadden me; it would permanently alter my world, turn it barren and cheerless and unfamiliar, as if a person hadn't gone missing but a whole chunk of the landscape had disappeared—a big mountain, an entire stream.

My gaze found Mr. Long. He was leading Miss Goodrich from the dance floor and looking pleased. With her, probably. I experienced a sinking sensation. Once Gid left, I'd never find anyone to fill the void. Better that I go with him.