

AMERICAN CHILDHOOD

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Nadya Rybak was five years old when she realized that her family was not like other families. She was in the crossroads store, staring at the jars of candy on the high shelf behind the counter and wondering if her father might buy her a peppermint stick to suck during the wagon ride home. It was late spring in Missouri, and the wooden floorboards were warm against her bare feet.

She liked the store. The clutter of boxes and barrels intrigued her. Interesting smells clung to them: jerked beef, clarified butter, pickles, and spices. Her father leaned against the wooden counter in the back, talking with Mr. Evans, the storekeeper, about Indian trouble up north. Two fur traders had been killed the month before. Mr. Evans blamed all the trouble on whiskey and whiskey peddlers, and Nadya's father agreed.

Nadya's mother and Mrs. Evans sat on a bench near shelves that held bolts of fabric and sewing notions. A three-month-old issue of *Godey's Ladies Book*, worn from handling, lay open on Mrs. Evans's lap. Lottie Evans, a wide-eyed three-year-old, sat at her mother's feet, staring at Nadya. One chubby hand clutched her mother's skirt. She was fascinated by the older girl, but had not yet gathered her courage to approach.

A bearded man came in the door and threw a bundle of furs onto the counter. Nadya stared up at him with interest. He was a very shaggy man: his beard was long and unkempt; his hair needed cutting. He was wearing a buckskin coat, homespun pants, and a shirt that hadn't been changed any too recently. There hung about him—mingling with the usual man-smells of chewing tobacco, whiskey, and sweat—a strong smell of many animals. She smelled bear and deer and buffalo and beaver, but what caught her attention was the faint smell of wolf.

The man leaned against the counter, evidently content to wait for the storekeeper's attention. He glanced down at Nadya. "Hello there, young'un."

"Hello."

The wolf smell came from the bundle of furs on the counter.

"You know, I've got a little sister back in New York that's not much older than you."

Nadya considered this gravely, but didn't say anything.

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for my papa."

"Looked like you were watching those jars of candy back there." She nodded, and the man grinned. "Thought so. Well, maybe when I trade these furs, I'll buy you a piece of candy. Would you like that?"

Nadya nodded solemnly. She watched the man untie the rope that bound the furs together and spread the furs on the counter. She could smell wolf more strongly now. Emboldened by the man's grin, she reached up and touched one of the furs, a soft pelt the color of butter.

"That's a painter," the man said. "A mountain cat." He let her stroke the soft tawny fur, then lifted it aside. "Now here's a beaver pelt. Some fine gentleman in New York City will be wearing a hat made from that soon enough."

The man lifted the beaver pelt aside, revealing a fur that gave off a warm, reassuring scent, the scent of Nadya's mother on certain nights. Nadya reached up hesitantly to stroke the soft pelt. A layer of stiff gray guard hairs lay atop an undercoat of soft fur. She stroked the fur backwards to reveal the soft undercoat, and the long gray guard hairs tickled her hand.

"This 'un, I'll sell for the bounty," the man said. He lifted the fur off the counter and held it down where she could see it better. Where the animal's head should have been, there was a mask with vacant holes in place of eyes. The ears were shriveled; they had been pressed flat by the weight of the other furs.

Nadya stared at the empty eye-holes and took a step back, dropping her hand to her side. "Where did you get it?" she asked, suddenly wary. Until she saw that eyeless mask, she had not thought about where the fur had come from.

"From a wolf bigger than you are." He shook the pelt and the fur rippled. "Saw her prowling around the edge of my camp and got her with a single shot. Right through the head."

Nadya took another step back, glaring at the man.

"What's the matter, young'un? She's dead. Can't hurt you now."

"You shouldn't have done that," she cried shrilly. "You shouldn't have shot her."

She fled across the store to hide behind her mother's long skirt. Her mother put her hand on Nadya's head. "What is it, child? What's the matter?"

"He killed her. That man." Nadya pointed across the store at the bewildered trapper, who still held the wolf skin.

"I didn't mean to scare her, missus," he said apologetically. "I was just showing her some furs."

"It's all right," her mother said. She stooped and put her arm around Nadya's shoulders. She spoke softly. "Come, Nadya. We'll go out to the wagon to wait for Papa."

"Why did he kill the wolf, mama?"

"Hush," her mother said. "Hush now."

Nadya's mother took her hand and led her out the door. Nadya walked by her mother's side, carefully placing herself between her mother and the man who killed wolves. She would protect her mother.

"I didn't mean to scare her," he was saying.

Then they were out in the sunshine, away from the comforting and horrifying scent of the wolf fur. Nadya sat on the wagon seat and her mother explained, very softly, that the wolf the man had killed was not a person—not like Mama or Papa. That wolf was an animal, and it was not murder to kill it.

But her mother's voice trembled when she talked and she held Nadya's hand a little too tightly. Nadya knew that her mother was afraid of the man too. When her father came out of the store, he brought a new ax head, a box of supplies, and a few hard candies to comfort Nadya.

"He's a bad man," Nadya told her father.

"He just doesn't understand," her father said.

Nadya shook her head stubbornly. The world, which had always seemed so safe and secure, was suddenly a frightening place. She sucked on a hard candy and clung to her mother's hand, convinced that her father was wrong.

Dmitri Rybak, Nadya's father, had emigrated to America from a small Polish village. Marietta, her mother, had come from France. They had met in St. Louis, fallen in love, and moved West, looking for land where they could live their lives undisturbed.

At that time, Missouri had been a state for only a few years. According to the unreliable census figures of the time, the state had a population of 66,000 (not counting Indians or Negroes) scattered over its 69,000 or so square miles. Most of the folks were clustered along the Mississippi River. Only a few had ventured westward—trappers and traders and soldiers, for the most part.

Nadya's parents had settled on the Osage River in the southwest portion of the state, a hilly region of creeks and springs and few settlers. When they settled, there had been a trading post located where the river was shallow enough to ford. The Evans's store stood there now.

When Nadya was three, the mountain man who had run the trading post had moved on, selling his ramshackle building to Mr. Evans, who had improved and expanded the store to serve the needs of the farmers who were moving into the area. By the time Nadya was five, a tiny settlement had grown up around the store, including a blacksmith shop, a tavern, and a few houses.

After meeting the trapper in the store, Nadya became more careful of people outside her family, less willing to talk with strangers. On the whole her new shyness affected her life relatively little—few strangers happened by their farm. And for the most part, Nadya's childhood was happy.

On long winter nights, when the farmyard was dusted with snow and hickory logs burning in the fireplace warmed the cabin, Dmitri taught her to read the *Farmer's Almanack*. They leaned over the book, huddling close to the pool of light cast by a wick burning in a cup of bear oil. Her father stumbled over the difficult words, but he persisted, determined that Nadya learn. While they labored over the book (learning that turnips should be planted in the dark of the moon and that a silver coin, placed in a butter churn, will help the butter come), Marietta watched from the fireside, mending or knitting.

With a pen made from a wild turkey quill, Dmitri taught Nadya to write. By the wavering light, Nadya painstakingly made marks on bark that her father had peeled from the shagbark hickory tree. She learned to write her name in English. Her father could write in another alphabet as well—the alphabet he had learned when he was a boy. But he only taught her the English writing, saying that she was an American and she should

write as the Americans did.

When Nadya's lessons were done, she would ask for a story.

"A story?" her father would say. "It's too late for a story." But he always smiled when he said it was too late.

"It's not too late," she would say. "There's time. Please, Papa. Just one story."

"Maybe there's time for one, Dmitri," Marietta would say. Then Dmitri would put aside the pen and the Almanack and he would lift his hands so that the light from the burning wick made wavering shadows on the deerskin that her mother had stretched across the window to keep the drafts out. The shadows that Nadya's father made with his hands were magical.

"Once upon a time, there was a man," her father said, and the shadows of his hands became the silhouette of a man's head—a man with a jutting chin and a big nose. "He lived in a cabin on the edge of the forest. And there was a rabbit who came to eat the vegetables in his garden." The shadows shifted and changed, becoming a rabbit that wiggled its nose and made Nadya giggle. "Every night the rabbit came and ate from the man's garden."

Dmitri told of how the man built a scarecrow to fool the rabbit. The rabbit ignored the scarecrow—it kept on hopping into the garden and eating all the vegetables. The man tried to keep the rabbit away by sitting in the garden all night long, but he always fell asleep. The shadow man snored noisily, and that made Nadya laugh.

"But," Nadya's father said, "on the night when the moon was full, the man changed."

Nadya watched with fascination as the shadow man shifted and became a wolf, a fierce shadow head that snapped at the air and lifted its snout to howl. The wolf chased the rabbit through the forest, growling and snapping.

"All night long, the wolf chased the rabbit and the rabbit ran from the wolf. When the moon set and the sun came up, the rabbit hid in its burrow, afraid to go near the man's garden. And the wolf became a man again."

Nadya watched the shadow wolf give way to the shadow man. Sometimes the shadow man sang a song and sometimes he howled like a wolf. Then Nadya and her mother howled too. If they howled long and hard, the wild wolves that lived in the forest heard them and joined in.

The story was always a little different, but it always involved the shadow man and the shadow wolf. Nadya never grew tired of watching one become the other.

Of course, on nights when the moon was full, there were no lessons and no stories. In the summer, there were romps, where her mother and father, in their other form, would play tag with Nadya in the farmyard by the cabin door. In the winter, the she-wolf would cuddle Nadya, letting the child stroke her soft fur and snuggle against her warm belly. When Nadya was seven years old—old enough to be trusted to stay away from the fire—her mother and father would go running at night, leaving her alone until morning. She was lonely then, sad that she could not go running with her parents. But her mother told her that when she grew up, she would Change when the full moon rose. And then they would run together. She had to be content with that.

Since Nadya had no brothers and sisters, she helped her mother and father in equal part: doing womanly chores with her mother and helping her father with the farming, acting more like a son to her father than a daughter. When she was nine years old, she helped her father plow. Her job was to ride the mule to steady it while her father rode the plow. She loved that—the aroma of the newly turned earth, the warmth of the mule beneath her, the solid shifting of the animal's muscles as it strained to pull the plow through the soil. Her father whistled and shouted to the mule, and sang folk songs in French and Polish.

The summer that she was ten, her father taught her to shoot. As a target, he set a pinecone on a stump in the field. All that first week, he took her down to the field in the early evening. She would hold the rifle to her shoulder and practice pointing it at the pinecone and pulling the trigger.

After a week of sighting on the pinecone, he let her try shooting with powder. The first time she tried, the kick of the explosion bruised her shoulder and nearly knocked her down. But she was not frightened and she tried it again and again, until she could hit the pinecone square with every shot. She hunted squirrels in the forest near the house, aiming for the bark just below the animal's feet. The shot shattered the bark and the concussion killed the squirrel, leaving the meat untouched.

As she grew older, she and her father went hunting for larger game. At night, they hunted deer, mesmerizing the animals with a torch made from a pine knot or a rag soaked in bear oil and lashed to a stick. By day, they hunted turkey or bear, in season.

Nadya's long skirts were a hindrance when she went hunting, rustling against the grass and catching on every burr and thorn. Over her mother's protests, she stitched herself a pair of homespun trousers. "There is no one here to see," her father said. "Let the girl be comfortable."

Nadya was a good hunter—she had a better eye than her father, and she brought in most of the meat for the family table. In the fall of her twelfth year, determined to earn a rifle of her own, she hunted bears for their skins and oil and meat.

She always wore a dress to town—her mother insisted on that. One Sunday afternoon, Nadya and her father took the bear oil and skins to the store and offered them in trade for a new, muzzle-loading Hawkins rifle. Mr. Evans accepted the trade, but seemed puzzled when Nadya lifted the gun from the counter and sighted along its barrel. He frowned at Dmitri. "You're letting your daughter choose your rifle?" he murmured.

"Her rifle," Dmitri corrected. "She killed the bears. Only seems right she should choose the rifle. After all, she's a better shot than I am."

The men who were lounging by the Franklin stove glanced up. "The girl killed eight bears?" one man asked.

"Ten," Dmitri said. "We kept the skins and meat from two for our own use."

"D'you mind if I try it?" Nadya asked Mr. Evans.

"As you like," he said.

They stepped onto the porch of the store, with Nadya carrying the rifle easily at her side. The men from the store followed. Nadya loaded the rifle, carefully pouring black powder into the barrel, tamping it in place, inserting cotton wadding and a bullet. She looked around then, searching for a target.

"You see that nail in the fence across the way," said one of the loiterers from the store. "I knew a man in Kentucky who could hit a nail like that and drive it home."

Nadya glanced at the man's grinning face. He was laughing at her, and she did not like it. She squinted at the fence across the road, where the rusty head of a nail protruded from a post. "All right," she said easily, lifted the rifle, and fired a single shot. The nail disappeared into the wood, leaving a dark hole where the bullet had struck.

"This rifle will do," Nadya said to her father. They returned to the store, leaving the loiterers staring at the fence.

In her fourteenth year, Nadya noticed that the world was changing around her. It began when the bargers started calling to her. She had heard people at the store say that the men who steered flatboats down the river were a bad lot—drinking, fighting, and stealing when they could. But Nadya had always liked the look of them. They seemed so much at ease floating down river, leaning back among the crates of apples and barrels of salt pork, playing the harmonica or singing. She had always waved at the bargers, and they had always waved back. But in her fourteenth year, they started shouting when they waved. "Come along with us, little sweetheart!" There was something leering and wicked in the way they said it, and she stopped waving after that.

Then a Yankee peddler stopped at the farm to show her mother his stock of sewing notions and such. He gave Nadya a blue satin ribbon for no reason at all. He said that it would look pretty in her dark hair, and when he held it up so that she could see it, his smell changed ever so slightly. She did not know what to say. He watched her so intently, like a hungry dog with its eye on the hockcakes. When her mother nudged her, she thanked him awkwardly.

After dinner that night, Nadya's mother brought out her cards. She kept them wrapped in a silk scarf on the same shelf with the Bible and the *Farmer's Almanack*. Nadya knew the cards well: when she was a child, she had often played with them, fingering their gilded edges and admiring the pictures of strange people in strange costumes. She would sort the cards according to suit: separating the swords, the coins, the wands, and the cups, and setting aside the special cards that did not fall into any suit. The words on these cards were written in French: *Le Diable*, The Devil; *Le Monde*, The World; *Le Mat*, the Fool.

Her mother did not read the cards often. But when there was a decision to be made—like whether to plant early or wait—she would lay the cards on the rough wood of the table, studying the bright pictures. She would shake her head over certain cards—a burning tower, a man hanging upside down—while she and Dmitri conferred in soft murmurs.

That night, when Dmitri went out to check on the cattle, Nadya's mother beckoned Nadya to sit beside her. "That trader," her mother said, "You caught his eye." She unwrapped the cards and spread the silk scarf on the table. "What did you think of that?"

Nadya shifted uncomfortably on the wooden chair. "I didn't like the way he watched me."

"He wanted you," she said. "The way a man wants a woman. It's that simple."

Nadya looked down at her hands, suddenly shy. Her mother had always talked of such things matter of factly, without shame.

"I'd guess that the Change will be coming to you with the next full moon," her mother said. She sat back in her chair, holding the cards loosely in her lap. "With the Change, there comes a power. Being wanted—that's part of the power. You need to understand that men will admire you, men will lust after you."

Nadya looked up at her mother's serene face. "What do I do about that?" Nadya asked.

Her mother smiled. "Don't look so worried, *cherie*. This is not a bad thing." She shuffled the cards, her eyes on Nadya. "We will read the cards for guidance." When Nadya cut the deck, her mother restacked the cards and began to lay them face-up on the scarf in a cross-shaped pattern. "You are strong-minded—that's bad and good. Bad because it will lead you into trouble; good because it will keep the trouble from overwhelming you."

Nadya studied the cards. In the center of the pattern was the ten of coins, a card that pictured a happy family gathered together. The ten of coins was crossed and half-covered by *La Lune*, The Moon. On this card, two dogs howled at a frowning moon. There were other cards she recognized. In her future was the knight of swords, charging rashly forward on a gray horse. She saw *Le Diable*, a frightening figure with a man and a woman in chains at his feet; *La Mort*, a skeleton clutching a sickle; *La Maison Dieu*, a castle struck by lightning.

"Ah," her mother said softly. "Perhaps this is not the best time for a reading."

"Tell me what it is, Mama."

Her mother stared at the cards. "Pain and destruction."

"When is it coming?" Nadya looked at the door, as if expecting the Devil to walk through it. "What can I do?"

"It is coming with a young man," her mother said. "He charges forward—reckless and brash—and he carries death in his hands."

Her mother dealt more cards, still shaking her head. "We will try again on another day," she said at last. She swept the cards from the scarf and shuffled them together.

That night, Nadya heard her mother and father murmuring softly by

the fireside. Nadya listened, but she could not make out the words.

Three days later, when the full moon rose over the forest, the Change came to Nadya. She went running with her mother and father, and life was never the same after that.

Back in 1823, Mr. Hekiziah Jones attended a Methodist revival, a tent meeting that had brought in hundreds of devout Christians and an equal number of curiosity seekers from surrounding towns. Mr. Jones fell into the second category—a hard-drinking young man, he hoped to have a little fun and maybe win a few Christians over to the ways of sin.

Mr. Jones drank a great deal on Saturday night. On Sunday morning, overcome with a hangover and influenced by the persuasive sermon of a Methodist preacher, he renounced the Devil, swore that he would never again touch the demon rum, and, just incidentally, proposed to Cordelia Walker, a twenty-eight-year-old woman who had given up all hope of matrimony. Before Mr. Jones could change his mind, the preacher married the happy couple to the cheers of the crowd.

The first two vows were transitory—Mr. Jones returned to sin and drinking as soon as he possibly could. But the new Mrs. Jones was not so easily dismissed. Determined to save Mr. Jones' soul, she made an honest man of him—a farmer, no less. They emigrated to Kentucky, where he scratched out a living on a poor farm and Mrs. Jones bore him four strapping sons. Mrs. Jones' oldest son, Rufus, took after his father in his fondness for drinking and hunting and gambling and womanizing.

The year that Nadya turned eighteen, the Jones family emigrated again, this time to Missouri. That spring, the Jones family attended the wedding of Zillah Shaw, daughter of a prosperous farmer, to Samuel Prentice, a lanky farmboy.

The celebration was in the barn, which had been cleared of livestock for the occasion. The dirt floor was strewn with clean straw. Rufus Jones stood by the open door with a group of men. They passed a green jug of Mr. Shaw's fine home-brewed whiskey from hand to hand. The sun was setting and Rufus' shadow stretched all the way across the open floor of the barn.

The women were clearing away the remnants of the wedding feast. Children were running around the barn floor, whooping like Indians, and four young dogs were chasing them. At the far end of the barn, a fiddler was tuning his instrument for the dance to come. The air smelled of

smoke, venison, and manure.

Rufus took a pull on the whiskey jug to ward off the evening chill, then passed the jug to his father. Hekiziah took a long pull, swallowing several times before he paused for breath. "Those are almighty ugly dogs," he said, squinting his good eye at the young hounds that romped with the children. Hekiziah had lost his other eye in a fight with an eye-gouging boatman before Rufus was born. He wore a patch over the empty socket.

"If they take after their mama, they'll be fine hunters," Mr. Shaw said. "She's as fine a bitch as ever treed a painter."

Hekiziah took another pull from the bottle, then reluctantly passed it to the next man. "That so? You do much hunting in these parts?"

Mr. Shaw nodded, taking the bait. "Not much choice in the matter. Man's got to hunt to keep the varmints out of his stock."

Rufus had heard this conversation before. By the time the bottle was empty, he guessed that his father would have turned the conversation from hunting to shooting and from shooting to who was the best shot. Soon enough, there would be talk of a shooting match with, most likely, a bottle of whiskey as the prize. Rufus was a good shot, and Hekiziah took advantage of that skill whenever he could.

Rufus made himself comfortable, leaning back against the barn wall and watching the girls primp and flutter around the fiddler. Mrs. Jones had taught Rufus to be polite and soft-spoken with the ladies. His father had taught him to get away with whatever he could. The combination was dangerous. In Kentucky, he had courted the sweet young daughter of a nearby farmer, taking her berry-picking in the warm days of Indian summer. He had left Kentucky just in time to avoid the consequences of those berry-picking expeditions.

The fiddler finished his tuning and played a reel. Rufus watched as the dancers formed two lines, stamping their feet in time with the music. Light from the setting sun faded. After the third dance, two of the older Shaw boys climbed into the rafters to light lanterns filled with bear oil. The burning wicks cast pools of yellow light, leaving only the corners in shadow.

It took a bit longer than Rufus expected for talk to turn to a shooting match. Mr. Shaw talked about a painter hunt last fall and about a wolf pack that roved along the river the winter just past. But eventually Hekiziah brought the conversation around.

"I reckon it's the water of Kaintuck," Hekiziah said. "Don't rightly know

what else it could be. It must be something that makes the hunters of that state the sharpest-eyed riflemen around."

Mr. Shaw frowned and shook his head. His cheeks and nose were ruddy from drinking. "That just ain't so, Hekiziah. Why my own boys are sharp as any you'll find in Kentucky."

"I'd have to put that to the test before I could agree," Hekiziah said easily. "My boy Rufus is a right fine shot." He hefted the whiskey bottle, which had returned to his hand and lingered there. "Maybe a shooting match could settle the matter."

"All right then, a shooting match," Mr. Shaw agreed. His voice was loud and a little slurred. "With a bottle of whiskey to the winner." He glanced down. Two of the young dogs were wrestling on the barn floor. "And the pick of the litter as well."

"What's the target?" Rufus asked quietly.

Mr. Shaw glanced out the barn door at the dark fields. "A candle-snuffing, I'd say. That sit well with you?"

Rufus shrugged. "One target is as good as another."

In a snuffing contest, the target was the flame of a candle. The idea was not to snuff the candle out—that would be too easy a shot. Instead, the marksman had to shoot away the snuff, the charred part of the candle's wick, without putting out the flame. When the snuff was removed, the flame would brighten. Shoot too close to the candle, and the flame would die. Shoot too far away, and you would miss the wick altogether.

"Boys!" Mr. Shaw shouted over the music of the fiddle. He stamped his feet and shouted again. "Boys, listen here!" The fiddler stopped playing in the middle of a dance. "We're having a shooting match. Mr. Jones here says that his boys from Kentucky can beat anyone from Missouri hands down. Adam, run to the house and fetch a candle. Jack! William! All the rest of you! Get your rifles."

The young men who had been dancing abandoned their partners and scattered to fetch their rifles. When Adam returned with a tallow candle, Mr. Shaw took a flaming torch from the cooking fire and led the way out into the fields. Rufus walked at his father's side. The ground was damp and the air held the scent of spring growth. The sky was overcast. Moonlight illuminated the clouds from behind, creating a silvery patch of light in the eastern sky.

Like many settlers, Mr. Shaw had cleared new land by girdling the trees—removing a strip of bark all around the trunk. Without the bark, the

tree died, and the settler cut it down. In the spring, when the ground was soft, the farmer grubbed out the stumps. In Mr. Shaw's field, the stumps of girdled trees—now stripped of all their bark and pale in the torchlight—stood as a reminder of the forest that had once covered his

Grass had sprouted between the stumps. Beyond the field, where the uncleared forest stood, the darkness grew thicker. A chorus of crickets, singing in the field and the forest, almost drowned out the fiddle music from the barn.

Mr. Shaw led the way to the far side of the field, where a low, flat-topped stump stood on the edge of the forest. He wedged the candle into a crack in the stump and lit the wick with his torch. He gave Adam the torch. "Now you stay here, boy," he advised his son. "Call out when the snuff is long enough for shooting, then get back."

The men moved away from the stump, walking toward the barn until Mr. Shaw said, "That'll do." In the still air, the candle flame stood steady, a sliver of yellow light against the darkness of the forest.

"Three shots apiece," Hekiziah suggested, and Mr. Shaw agreed.

Jack, Mr. Shaw's oldest son, took the first shot, standing with his feet spread wide, his rifle set firmly against his shoulder. His shot went high—the distant flame flickered as the ball passed over. The chorus of crickets fell silent for a moment, and then began again, as loud as before.

Jack paused to reload. His second shot was low, cutting the wick and putting out the candle. While Adam was relighting the candle, Jack took a pull from the whiskey jug.

"Move farther away from there," Jack called to Adam when the candle was burning once again. "That damned torch is blinding me."

He took his third shot and the flame flickered and then brightened.

"Dead on!" Adam called.

Jack grinned at his father and the others. "Who'll be next?" he asked.

One by one, the other men shot. Several missed the candle with all three shots. Two others snuffed the candle one time out of three.

Rufus did not shoot until all the others had taken their turns. Then he lifted his rifle and squinted at the candle. In the blue heart of the flame, the charred portion of the wick curled in a long crescent.

He held his breath, steadying the rifle and sighting on that dark crescent. His first shot was perfect: the flame brightened and he smiled as he set the rifle down and reloaded.

"Fool's luck," he said to Mr. Shaw, before Mr. Shaw could say the same to him.

He took a pull from the whiskey bottle while he waited for the candle to burn down. The men around him were quiet. In the field and woods around them, crickets sang in a relentless chorus. "Ready!" Adam called at last.

Rufus lifted his rifle to his shoulder and squeezed off the second shot. The candle flickered—a miss.

"Your luck is passing," Mr. Shaw said in a good-natured tone.

"One more shot," Hekiziah said. "Give the boy a fair chance."

Rufus reloaded and lifted his rifle for the last shot. He braced himself, setting his feet wide apart and sighting carefully. The candle flickered and brightened for the second time.

Hekiziah whooped and clapped Rufus on the back. "Fine shooting, son. Almighty fine shooting. Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Shaw?"

Hekiziah held his hand out to Mr. Shaw, but Mr. Shaw just frowned at him, shaking his head like a bull disturbed by flies. He squinted at the men around him.

"We're not quite done," Mr. Shaw said in a belligerent tone. "There's one other who ought to shoot. One other who ain't here. You just hold on. You all just wait here."

He left them standing in the field and hurried in the direction of the barn. The cloud cover had broken and the half moon cast an uncertain light over the group. Rufus looked around at the others. By the moonlight, he could see them grinning, as if at a private joke.

"Who is he getting?" Hekiziah asked Jack uneasily. "Seems like most every man came with us."

"You just wait," Jack said. "You'll see. Best shot in these parts."

A few minutes later, Rufus saw three figures emerge from the barn and come across the field. As they approached, he realized that one of them was a woman. Her dark hair was braided and the braids were tied with ribbons and coiled on her head. With her left hand, she held her skirt so that the hem could not drag in the mud. She walked with a careful, mincing step, as if she were unaccustomed to wearing shoes. Under her right arm, she carried a muzzle-loading rifle. Another man, a farmer with a broad peasant face, followed behind Mr. Shaw and the woman.

Mr. Shaw performed introductions. "Mr. Jones, this is Miss Nadya

Rybak and her father, Mr. Dmitri Rybak. It seemed to me that Miss Rybak should take a turn."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Rybak," Hekiziah said uncertainly.

She wasn't looking at him. Her eyes were on the distant candle flame.

"Now, Miss Nadya," Mr. Shaw was saying. "You see that candle over there." He explained the rules of the contest and she listened, nodding to show that she understood. Then she glanced at her father and he nodded approval.

"It's ready," Adam called from his post by the candle. In the distance, Rufus could see the bobbing torch as the boy moved to a safe distance.

"Shoot when you're ready, Miss Nadya," Mr. Shaw said.

She planted her feet wide, getting a secure footing on the rough ground. She put her rifle to her shoulder, then frowned and lowered it again. She murmured something to her father—Rufus could not make out the words—and Mr. Rybat shrugged. She handed him the rifle and bent to unlace her shoes. That done, she pulled the shoes off and stood barefoot on the cold ground. She nodded with satisfaction and took her rifle, lifting it with greater confidence than before.

The rifle was barely to her shoulder when she squeezed off the first shot. The flame flickered and then flared brightly.

Nadya took the rifle from her shoulder and waited for the snuff to grow long enough to shoot again. The men waited in silence, looking away into the darkness. Mr. Rybak stood at his daughter's side.

The woman glanced in Rufus's direction, catching him staring. Rather than dropping her eyes, she returned his stare. Her eyes were dark in the moonlight.

"Ready," Adam called out, and Nadya turned to face the candle. Again, she set her feet carefully and lifted the rifle smoothly to her shoulder. A faint breath of wind toyed with the wisps of hair that had escaped her braids. In the distance, the candle flame flickered and threatened to go out. She waited with the rifle at her shoulder until the flame steadied. Her second shot was as good as the first. The flame brightened and burned white.

She did not fidget as she waited for the flame to burn away the wick so that she could shoot again. She lowered the rifle and stood at ease, ignoring the men around her. The whiskey bottle passed from hand to hand. Mr. Rybak took a pull, then touched Nadya's arm. She wet her lips, glanced at the candle, then accepted the bottle and drank. She handed the

bottle to Rufus. Her fingers brushed his as he took the bottle—a warm touch in the cool night air.

The candle burned low and Adam called out that she could shoot again. Rufus watched her lift the rifle a third time.

Her third shot was perfect—straight through the snuff. "Good shooting," Mr. Shaw exclaimed. "Fine shooting. Well worth a jug of whiskey, Miss Nadya."

The men returned to the barn in a knot of excitement and noise. Rufus walked with the others, avoiding his father. Hekiziah did not like to be disappointed and Rufus thought it just as well to stay out of his way for a time. He also wanted to get a look at Nadya Rybak in a better light.

In the barn, the table had been cleared away and the fiddler was just starting a tune. A line of couples was forming for a reel, but Nadya was not among them. Rufus looked for her, strolling around the dance floor and peering into the shadowy corners. He tipped his hat to the group of young women who had gathered in one corner. There were some pretty girls there, but he had his mind fixed on Miss Nadya. He made his way to the corner of the barn where the men were drinking.

"I don't see Miss Nadya," he said to Tom Williams, the son of the man who ran the blacksmith shop in town.

Tom shrugged. "I don't believe I've ever seen her dancing. I suppose she doesn't care for it."

"Have you ever tried to persuade her to change her mind? She's a handsome girl," Rufus said.

Tom looked startled. "I never thought of that. I reckon she is. But I expect that trying to change her mind is a waste of time. She's an odd one. Standoffish."

"You think so? I'd wager that I could change her mind."

"You think so? I doubt it."

"How about betting four bits on the proposition. If I don't have her out there dancing by the end of the evening, you win."

Tom nodded. "I'll take you up on that."

"Than I guess I'll see if I can find her." Rufus took a gourd cup and a bottle of cider, crossed the barn to the open door, and stepped outside.

The barnyard was crowded with the farm wagons that had carried the guests to the celebration. He strolled among the wagons. On the far side of the barnyard, he saw a woman leaning against the split rail fence, gazing

into the empty field. She turned her head as he approached, and he recognized Nadya Rybak.

"How do, Miss Nadya," Rufus said. "We haven't been properly introduced. I'm Rufus Jones. My father just bought some land by the river not far from here."

"How do," she said politely.

"That was fine shooting. Congratulations."

"Thank you." Her voice was even; she did not seem particularly interested in talking with him.

"I've never known such a pretty girl to be such a fine shot." He poured cider into the cup. "Would you care for a drink of cider? Shooting is thirsty work."

She studied his face, then accepted the cup. By her expression, he guessed that she was not used to flattery. He leaned against the railing beside her. "Mr. Shaw was pleased that you won," he said.

She shook her head. "Not at all. He was pleased that you lost. He's a stiff-necked old Yankee."

He grinned. She was plain-spoken enough. "But surely you're no Yankee."

She shrugged. "We're foreigners, by his lights. But he'd rather lose to a foreigner than a man from Kentucky."

"Well, if I had to lose to someone, I'm happy to lose to you, Miss Nadya. Have you picked out your prize yet?"

She frowned and returned the cup to him. "Mr. Shaw gave me a bottle of whiskey."

"He also promised the pick of the litter. You can get yourself a dog."

She shook her head. "I don't care for dogs."

"Mr. Shaw makes great claims for these dogs. Fine hunters, he says. Perhaps your father. . . ."

"My father won't have a dog on the place. He likes them no better than I do."

Rufus shook his head, amazed. Just about every frontier farm had a few dogs around—to warn against intruders, to bark when varmints attacked the livestock. "I had heard you were a hunter. I'm surprised any hunter would turn down a dog."

"I hunt alone," she said. "I don't need a yapping dog to scare away the game." He drained the cup, filled it again, and offered it to her. She took it from his hand.

"I had hoped I might have the honor of a dance," he said.

She shook her head. "I don't care to dance."

"That's kind of you. I'm sure if you elected to dance, you'd put the others girls to shame."

She looked away from him, gazing out at the open field once again. He thought he might have overdone the flattery, but then she spoke softly. "Never learned how."

"Never learned how to dance? Why that's foolish. You move with such a natural grace. You could learn all you needed in a minute." He hesitated, then said, "I could teach you right now, if you'd like."

She glanced at his face.

"Right now," he said, setting the cider jug on the ground and balancing the cup on the fence post. He held his arms out to her. "It won't take a minute."

"I can't," she said, standing with her back to the fence.

"Listen to the music," he said, tapping his foot in time to the fiddle tune. "Here now: I'll bow to you." He bent at the waist, grinning at her.

"And you curtsy to me." She bobbed in an awkward curtsy. "Give me your hand and we'll begin."

She reached out and he took her hands in his. Her hands were small and warm, rough from farm work.

"Tap your foot along with the music," he said. "That's good. Now we step forward and back. That's right. Now left hand circle." He held one hand and led her in a circle. "Right hand circle." Again, she followed obediently. "Swing your partner." He swung her, keeping time with the distant fiddle. "Very good. Promenade now." He pulled her into the promenade position and led her around a farm wagon. Her body was warm against his side.

She was a cooperative partner, moving with him easily. "You're a fine dancer," he said when the music ended.

She smiled at him for the first time. Her face was a little flushed, and a few more wisps of hair had escaped her braids. She looked charming. "You think so?"

"Without a doubt. You come to it naturally. Why don't you come inside and we can join the others."

She shook her head. "I don't care to."

The music started again, a slow tune in a waltz time. He cocked his head to listen. "I'll teach you a dance that's all the rage in Paris," he said. "A dancing teacher who was passing through Kentucky taught it to me. Would you like to learn it?"

He smiled at her. The dancing teacher had told him that the waltz was a fine excuse to hold a girl closer than propriety would ordinarily allow. She held out her hands, and he pulled her close, slipping one arm around her waist and holding her other hand in his.

"Now step as I do. One, two, three; one, two, three; one, two, three. . . ."

She was so close that he could feel the warmth of her body. Just a few thin layers of cloth separated his hand from her waist. Her face was just inches from his.

He stopped counting and began to hum softly along with the fiddle tune. Perhaps he couldn't persuade her to dance with him in the barn. But he might persuade her to spend a little time with him alone. That would be worth losing the wager. He adjusted his hand at her waist, pulling her a little closer.

Nadya stopped in mid-step and pulled away. "I'd best be going," she said suddenly.

"In the middle of a dance?" he said.

She took two steps back. "Yes. I think it's best." She wet her lips. "Thank you for teaching me." She stooped by the fence and retrieved her shoes.

"I would be happy to continue the lesson. I wish you wouldn't run off."

She shook her head and cast a quick look over her shoulder at barn. "I must be going." She turned away, then hesitated and turned back. "If you would like the dog Mr. Shaw promised to me, you are welcome to have it. You can tell him I said so."

She hurried away then, carrying her shoes. She did not look back.

Rufus watched her go, cursing his bad luck. After a bit, he wandered back into the barn. A few moments later, Tom found him in the shadows, watching the dancers.

"No luck," Tom said. "I told you she didn't care for it."

Rufus fished in his pocket and silently paid Tom the money he owed.

A week later, on the day of the full moon, Nadya was in the garden, chopping at weeds with a grubbing hoe and loosening the soil for the spring planting. The breeze was warm and the newly turned soil reeked of rotting leaves and grubs—rich, inviting smells.

"Hello, the house!" She heard a man's voice calling and straightened from her hoeing, grateful for the interruption. She saw a man riding into the farmyard on a gray horse.

Nadya hurried toward the cabin. By the time she reached the farmyard, Rufus Jones had tied his horse to the split rail fence and was greeting her mother politely. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Rybak," he was saying. "How do you do, Miss Nadya?"

Nadya nodded a greeting. Rufus had been hunting and he gave her mother one of the two turkey hens that hung from his saddle. He was saying something about his father feeling a mite poorly and about how Mrs. Evans in the store thought Mrs. Rybak might have a remedy that would ease his stomach.

Nadya's mother nodded, allowing that she had some herbs that might help. She dried her hands on her apron. "I'll get them right away."

"Would you like some tea?" Nadya asked Rufus. She glanced at her mother.

"Don't you want to hurry home to bring the herbs to your father?" her mother asked, frowning at Nadya.

"He was sleeping when I left," Rufus said. "Surely it won't hurt just to stop for a cup of tea. Just to be neighborly."

"Of course not," Nadya said. "Just sit a spell, and then go back."

"Of course," her mother said. There was starch in her voice. "That would be lovely." She looked at Nadya thoughtfully. "Perhaps you'd best go fetch some water from the spring. Mr. Jones, come and sit down."

"Oh, I'll help Miss Nadya with the water," he said quickly.

"Don't be foolish, Mr. Jones," Nadya's mother said sharply. Then she smiled and spoke in a soothing tone. "You are our guest. Come and sit."

"I must insist," Rufus said. "My mother has taught me to help out whenever I visit. If Miss Nadya can show me the way to the spring, I'll carry the buckets."

"Here's the bucket." Nadya picked up the wooden bucket that stood by

the door. "I'll show you the way." She started away down the path.

"Fine weather, ain't it?" Rufus said.

Nadya nodded. She had wanted to be alone with Rufus again, but now she did not know what to say. She glanced back to see her mother standing by the cabin door, her hands knotted in her apron. She sensed something waiting under the surface, something surprising and new. When Rufus glanced at her, she felt a flush of warmth on her face.

"Here—I'll carry that." He took the bucket from her hand and she felt his warm fingers brush against hers. The sensation was disturbing. When she was younger, she had walked along the top rail of the split rail fence, balancing carefully. The feeling in her stomach reminded her of the inevitable moment when she teetered, just for a moment, before falling. She was losing her balance, teetering on an edge that she could not even see.

A moment later, he held his free hand out to her, offering to help her over a muddy patch. She hesitated. She walked this path a dozen times a day and never needed anyone's help. But she wanted to see how his touch affected the feeling in her stomach. She took his hand. The feeling in her stomach intensified: a strange fluttering, almost like hunger, but not quite.

She knew about sex. She had seen the hog mating with the sow in the mud of the barnyard and she had seen a stallion mount a mare down at the livery stable. Once, in the dusty road by the store, she had seen the blacksmith's dog and the storekeeper's bitch stuck together. The bitch had snapped and snarled and tried to run away, but the dog had clung to her, hugging her from behind. The two of them yelped and growled and scrabbled in the dust.

Mrs. Evans had shooed Nadya inside just as Mr. Evans threw a bucket of water over the pair. The two animals split up and ran helter-skelter in different directions. Just before Mrs. Evans blocked Nadya's view, she caught a glimpse of the dog's shiny penis, bright red between his bowed black legs.

When Nadya had asked her mother about the dogs, her mother had explained. She told Nadya about men and women, giving biological details about what goes where. Nadya had thought the whole thing quite unlikely: why would anyone do such an odd thing?

Just a month after the incident with the dogs, Nadya's friend Lottie Evans had loaned Nadya a book in which a young man carries off a young woman and does something scandalous to her. Unlike her mother's talk,

the book lacked all details. But it made up for the lack of details with its breathless tone and florid language that spoke of dark passion and hot love and fevered kisses. Lottie had told Nadya to hide the book from her mother, and so she did. She read it down by the river. When she read the book, she found herself curling up her legs and rocking to and fro. Something was happening. Her nipples grew tight and she felt a new warmth between her legs. She did not understand why that should be.

When her father stripped for the Change, she had seen his cock and balls, hanging softly between his legs. She thought little of that, even after reading Lottie's book. She thought all the fuss about nakedness and sin and love was nonsense; it had nothing to do with her. And so the feeling that came when Rufus' hand touched hers took her by surprise. The feeling in her stomach reminded her of reading Lottie's book by the river. Something was happening.

"You're surprised to see me," Rufus said.

"That's so."

"I'd hoped you'd be glad."

She said nothing, concentrating on the feel of the cool dirt beneath her bare feet. Like walking on the fence. She did not want to fall.

"Aren't you glad?" he asked.

"I'm glad," she said. Her voice was soft and she didn't sound sure.

They had reached the spring. A small wooden shelter covered the pool and two log steps led down to the water's edge. "I'd best get the water," she said. "My feet are bare, and you don't want to get your boots wet." She took the bucket from him and went down to the bottom step, where the water lapped at her feet. She stooped to fill the bucket, holding her skirt up out of the way.

"You look beautiful," he said, gazing down at her.

She straightened up, holding the bucket, and frowned at him. "You are a very strange man."

"Why do you say that?"

She stood by the cool water, studying his face. "Because you say I'm beautiful."

"You are."

She shook her head ever so slightly. Her mother was beautiful, Nadya knew that. But Nadya had studied her own face in the looking glass. It was a wide face, like her father's, and her hair was too wild to tame with

braids and hairpins. She knew that she was not beautiful.

"You were the prettiest girl at the wedding."

"The best shot," she corrected.

"That too."

She shook her head and climbed the steps. He stood on the path, blocking her way.

Lottie and other girls talked about young men and dresses and dances and maybe getting married. Nadya had listened to the girls talk, but she had always known she was not like those girls.

When she reached the top step, she turned to tell him that he should go and talk to Lottie or one of the others, and leave her alone. Before she could speak, he kissed her. The kiss was awkward at first—lips bumping against lips. But she did not pull away, and he kissed her again, this time lifting his hand to touch her cheek. His lips were soft. His hand moved from her cheek to stroke her neck. The touch, more than the kiss, made her catch her breath.

He kissed her again, and she could feel the warmth of him through the thin calico of her dress. She could feel a trembling deep inside herself, so deep that the vibration did not reach the surface. She lifted her hand to touch his cheek, where she could feel the stubble of a beard, clean-shaven that morning. His smell changed, just as it had when they danced together at the wedding. She knew the smell of sex: a warm muskiness that clung to her mother on certain mornings. She could smell the muskiness in the air. His hand, moving downward, touched her breast, stroking gently over the fabric and coming to rest at her waist.

She stepped back. "Mama will wonder where we have been. We'd best go back." He grinned at her, showing white teeth.

They had tea, and Nadya listened to her mother and Rufus talk about the weather, the plowing, his father's aching stomach, his family and their journey westward. Rufus' scent overpowered the familiar smell of the herbs that hung from the pegs in the wall. Rufus talked with her mother, but every now and again, Nadya caught him glancing in her direction.

When he left, Nadya waved goodbye and watched him go.

Her mother frowned at her. "You've taken a fancy to this young man, haven't you? Look at me, *cherie*. Let me see your face." Nadya looked up and her mother nodded.

"He taught me to waltz at the wedding," Nadya said. She held out her

arms and took a few steps, whirling as she stepped. "He put his arm around me and we danced together."

"Yes," her mother said. "What do you think he wants?"

Nadya dropped her hands. Thinking about Rufus made her cheeks grow hot. "To kiss me, I reckon."

"To kiss you, to hug you, to run his hands over your body, to lie with you." Her mother's tone was matter-of-fact. "I have told you how it is between men and women." She stood in front of Nadya and took her daughter's hands. "And you want him to do that."

"I don't know," Nadya said. "I want..." She shook her head, thinking about the warmth of Rufus' body, so close to hers. "I don't know what I want."

"There is nothing wrong with wanting a man," Nadya's mother said. "In our family, the blood has always run hot." She hesitated, studying Nadya's face. "But this man—he is not good for you. This man is dangerous."

Nadya pulled her hands away from her mother's. "What do you mean?"

"Remember the cards? A young man, fair-haired, reckless. He brings misfortune to you and to us. Remember."

"Not Rufus," Nadya said. "He won't bring misfortune."

"Listen to me, Nadya," her mother said. "You must listen. Do not go with this man."

Nadya hung her head, looking down at the porch. "I am listening," she said sullenly.

"Do you understand?"

"I understand." Nadya understood, but she did not agree.

"That's good. Now here is Papa, coming in from the fields. Put aside your work and let us prepare for the Change."

Preparing for the Change was not so different from their regular evening chores. They simply began the work early, so that they would be ready when the sun set. Nadya's father milked the cow and fed the mule; Nadya called the hogs and chased the chickens into their coop for the night. Nadya's mother prepared a simple meal of hoecake and ham; she thought it best to change with a little food in the belly—not too much, and not too little. She put the remaining food out of reach of any varmints that might come to the unoccupied cabin and carefully banked the fire so that

she could easily revive it when they returned, weary and cold from the night in the forest.

When the sun dipped near the horizon, Nadya stepped out on the front porch. Their cabin faced east and the porch was already in shadow. Nadya pulled off her dress, hung it from a peg beside the cabin door, and waited for her parents.

She could hear her parents murmuring inside the cabin, but the words were already starting to sound like meaningless babble. She could feel the moon rising, a tugging that she felt in her belly and her crotch.

Nadya rubbed her hands over the goose bumps on her naked arms and shivered. Her father said something and mother laughed. She heard the rustling of clothing.

"The sun is setting," Nadya said, and she heard her mother's hand on the door latch.

"We are here," her mother said. Her hair was loose, falling in dark waves down her back.

The Change came.

It began with warmth, as if the moonlight on her skin carried the heat of the tropical sun. But the warmth came from within her, not from outside. She could feel her heart beating and her blood surging through her body, pounding in her veins and arteries. The moon pulled on her blood as it pulled on the ocean: she was caught in a tide, a riptide that she was powerless to resist. Her body burned with the heat and she breathed faster. There was something she wanted, something she needed—she knew that, though she could not describe what that something was.

She could not tell if the feeling was pleasure or pain. These words did not apply. With each Change, she felt a new intensity (surely it could not have felt like this on the last full moon). She felt like she might be dying or she might, at last, be coming to life. In that moment, the two seemed much the same. And maybe she wanted to stop, she wanted to call out "No, no, no, this is too much, I can't. . . , I won't. . . ." But what it was that she couldn't or wouldn't do was lost in clouds and darkness, because no words came. Words were going away, rushing away, a babble that no longer had meaning or value. She was poised on the brink, on the knife's edge, at the precipice of the mountain, at the edge of the cliff.

And when the Change came at last, it came with an inexorable rush. Her body made its decision and the part of her that thought and talked and planned and believed that it controlled so much, that part was carried

along, like a straw in the river's current. There was no stopping the river, no turning back.

That was what the Change was like. And when it was over, she stood on four legs instead of two; her body was covered with fur; her ears caught the rustling of a mouse under the porch. But all that was not important. What was important was the Change itself, the moment of shifting, the malleability of the flesh, the decision of the body.

A family of wolves stood on the porch, gazing out at the forest. The wolf that had been Nadya sniffed the breeze, then the handle of the bucket by the cabin door. The scent that clung to the handle made the young wolf whimper low in her throat. She explored the farmyard, stopping to sniff deeply by the split rail fence where Rufus had tied his horse.

The male wolf trotted to the edge of the forest, where he lifted his head and sampled the air. He headed along a deer trail, not looking back to see if the others followed. The older female started after the male, then looked back at the young female and made an encouraging sound in her throat. The young wolf ignored the older female and continued sniffing at the grass by the fence. The older female whimpered again, but the younger wolf set off on her own path, following the scent in the grass. The wolf that was Nadya was old enough to wander away from the pack if she would, and the female let her go, following her mate and letting her daughter find her own way.

Nadya came back to her human form on the porch of the farmhouse. The taste of blood was in her mouth. She rubbed her hand across her face, and looked at it. Flecks of dark brown dotted the skin. Dried blood. She could hear her mother in the cabin, breaking kindling to add to the fire.

Nadya blinked in the morning light, trying to remember the night. Memories of the Change faded like dreams; memories of the Change did not fit well in the human brain. The colors were wrong; the smells didn't match the human memory of smells. At best, she could recapture only fragments of the night.

She remembered sheep, bleating sheep that ran from her. She could not help but chase the clumsy creatures, so fat and foolish and warm. She cut a fat ewe from the herd and chased it along a fence, tearing at its haunches and tasting its blood. It cried out, a silly bleating that made her heart beat faster, and she tore at it again. Dark streaks of blood colored the pale fleece, and still the ewe ran. She tore at its legs until it stumbled

and then she was on it, bowling it over and ripping at its belly. The blood was warm on her face, splashing over her body, filling her nose with its dark scent.

She remembered a sound—the sharp crack of gunfire, the acrid scent of gunpowder, cutting through the alluring aroma of blood. She heard shouting and more gunfire. She ran then, her fear overcoming her taste for the hunt.

Nadya sat on the porch, the taste of blood still on her lips. Her father stood in the doorway to the cabin. "Little one," he said to her. "Where did you go last night? You left us." His tone was reproachful.

Nadya hung her head. "I guess ... I reckon I must have followed Rufus home."

Her father wet his lips, looking worried. "I smell blood. That's not good. Not good at all."

Her mother came from the cabin, carrying a basin of water, warmed on the fire. She stood on the porch, watching as Nadya splashed the warm water on her face and arms. She put her arm around Nadya's father. "She's home safe, Dmitri. That's what's important."

He shook his head. "Did they fire at you?" he asked her.

"I think so." Nadya kept her eyes on the water. The blood had colored it pale pink.

"They will come for us with guns," he said. "They will hunt us through the forest with dogs and guns."

"No, Dmitri," her mother said. "Don't be so excited. It will be all right."

Nadya's father turned away and went back into the cabin. Nadya's mother stroked her hair. "It will be all right, *cherie*. I think it will be all right." But the smell of her father's fear lingered in the air.

Just two weeks later, Mrs. Evans had a quilting bee to make a new quilt for Lottie's older sister, who was engaged to Judd Collins. Nadya's mother woke that morning feeling poorly, and so Nadya went alone, riding the mule the five miles to town.

Lottie greeted Nadya in the yard. "Nadya," she called. "I'm so glad you're here. They've been teasing me so." She tucked her hand companionably into the crook of Nadya's arm. "They've been teasing me about when I'll be getting married."

Lottie had grown up to become a rosy-cheeked young woman with blonde hair that invariably escaped her ribbons and pins. Wisps of hair curled at the nape of her neck. The youngest of three sisters, she came in for more than her share of teasing.

"Didn't your mother come?" she asked Nadya.

"She's feeling poorly," Nadya said. "I came by myself."

"You're so brave," Lottie said. "I wouldn't want to come so far by myself."

Nadya shrugged.

"There'll be a dance at Mary Sue's wedding," Lottie said. Lottie lowered her voice. "I asked Mary Sue to make sure Silas Whitman was coming. I danced with him at Zillah's wedding. And Mary Sue told Mama and now they're all teasing me. You won't tease me, will you?"

Nadya shook her head. She never had to say much around Lottie; Lottie did the talking for both of them.

"Is there anyone you're sweet on, Nadya?"

"Rufus Jones came visiting a few days back," Nadya admitted softly.

"He came visiting?" Lottie's eyes widened with excitement. "Oh, Nadya, he didn't."

Nadya nodded. "He sure did."

Lottie wet her lips. "Mrs. Jones is here, helping with the quilting." She made a face. "She doesn't approve of dancing at weddings. I don't think she likes anyone to have any fun."

"Nadya!" Mrs. Evans called from the doorway. "How nice to see you. Isn't your mother with you?"

"My mama was feeling poorly," Nadya said softly. "She told me to give you her love."

"You came all this way alone?" Mrs. Evans shook her head and clicked her tongue. "My goodness—this is no time for a girl to be gallivanting about alone. Now you come on in and sit down here."

The Evanses had a fine house, with four separate rooms and a puncheon floor in the parlor. Mrs. Evans had a dozen store-bought chairs and a mantelpiece clock. On the wall of the parlor there was a looking glass and a hair wreath that Mrs. Evans had woven from the tresses of departed relations: from each of her three children who had died young, from her own mother and father. The puncheon floor was covered with a real

machine-woven carpet, not a rag rug.

The quilt frame stretched the width of the parlor, leaving just enough space at the sides for women to sit beside it. The room was already crowded: Mrs. Shaw and her daughter Zillah sat on one side of the quilt, Mrs. Whitman and her daughter sat on the other. Mrs. Jones sat at the far end of the quilt frame, enthroned in one of Mrs. Evans's best chairs. Mary Sue sat beside her. Lottie sat on a stool at one corner and Nadya sat beside her and Mrs. Evans.

The quilt, an intricate design of bright calico diamonds, was stretched on the frame. Nadya threaded a needle and began stitching the brightly colored patchwork to the padded lining.

"Nadya rode from her house alone," Mrs. Evans announced to the others.

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Whitman murmured. "Hadn't you heard about the wolves?" The Whitmans had moved to Missouri from Connecticut just a year before, and Mrs. Whitman was still very nervous about wild animals and Indians.

Nadya shook her head. "What about wolves?"

Mrs. Whitman clapped her hands. "Wolves attacked the Jones' farm! Mrs. Jones, you must tell the child."

Mrs. Jones looked up from her stitching and smiled grimly. "I woke in the night to the sound of our sheep, bleating in terror. A pack of wolves had attacked our flock. Ravening beasts from the depths of the forest dragging down the innocent lambs. Rufus chased them away with a shot, but not before the wolves had killed our fattest ewe." She shook her head. "The poor defenseless creature never had a chance."

Nadya ducked her head and kept her eyes on her stitching.

"Oh, you must have been so frightened," Mrs. Whitman said. "When I hear wolves howling, the sound sends chills up my spine. It's as if the Devil himself was out there, crying for blood."

"I put my faith in the Lord," Mrs. Jones said staunchly. "The Devil has no power over a true Christian."

Nadya neatly stitched around a red calico diamond. It seemed to her that rifles would do a better job of driving a wolf away than Mrs. Jones's prayers, but she did not think it would be wise to mention that.

"So you can see that this is no time for you to be wandering about by yourself," Mrs. Evans said to Nadya. "I'll have one of the boys escort you

home."

"I heard that there was a preacher down river in White's Landing a few days back," Mrs. Shaw said, changing the subject. "Reverend William Cooper is his name. They say he can exhort the bark off a tree. He'll be here next Sunday."

The last great wave of camp meetings had ended back in the 1820s, but even in the 1840s, the Methodists had their circuit riders, preachers on horseback who traveled from one frontier settlement to the next, calling the wrath of God on sinners, warning of the coming Judgment Day, and saving souls where they could. A preacher with the power of exhortation could call the Spirit of the Lord upon the Assembly, causing men and women to jerk wildly to and fro, to fall on all fours and bark like dogs, to weep and cry and shout in languages that no American could understand.

The women talked for a time about the preacher.

"I don't know if Mr. Shaw will come to hear a preacher," Mrs. Shaw murmured. The last preacher to visit the community had been a Baptist, traveling by flatboat. He held a Sunday service by the riverside and dunked half a dozen farmers. Mr. Shaw's dunking had given him a fierce case of the grippe.

Mrs. Jones straightened her back, looking even more formidable. "It's our Christian duty to attend this meeting," she said. "I will bring all my boys."

The mention of Mrs. Jones's boys brought the conversation back to Mary Sue's marriage. As they worked, the older women talked about the dress Mary Sue would wear and about the latest fashions in *Godey's Ladies Book*. Mary Sue talked about all the people who would be coming to the wedding and the dance.

They chatted amiably until teatime. After eating, they returned to their work.

"Take smaller stitches, Lottie," Mrs. Evans admonished her daughter. "Look at Nadya's stitches. See how small and tight they are."

Nadya glanced up at her friend with a sympathetic expression. Her own hands were tired from the careful work.

"Maybe Lottie and Nadya should fetch some water for another pot of tea," Mrs. Shaw suggested kindly. "I'll finish up that corner."

Lottie and Nadya wasted no time hurrying out of the house. They took two buckets from beside the door and strolled down to the pump. "So now that you know about the wolves, aren't you scared about riding around

alone?" Lottie asked.

"Nope," Nadya said. "A wolf ain't going to bother with me."

Lottie shook her head. "You'd best be careful, Nadya. One of my brothers will ride home with you."

Nadya frowned. "What's your brother going to do that I couldn't do myself?"

"Well, he'd shoot any wolf that came after you."

"So? I'm a better shot than any of your brothers. I could shoot a wolf myself, if it came to that."

Lottie shook her head at Nadya's audacity. "I'd be so scared."

Nadya shrugged. "I've shot deer. I've shot bear. I can take care of myself."

"I guess so," Lottie said doubtfully. Then she brightened, changing the subject. "Do you reckon that Rufus will come to fetch his mother?"

Nadya shrugged. "I reckon so." She had wondered that herself. The thought of Rufus alarmed her more than all the talk of the wolves. She looked down at the path.

"When he came visiting, what happened?" Lottie asked.

"He talked to my mama for a while about herbs for Mr. Jones. And he came with me to the spring to fetch water."

Lottie stopped and stared at Nadya. "Nadya, you're blushing. I've never seen you blush before."

Nadya scuffed her bare foot in the dust.

"What happened? Did he hold your hand? Did he kiss you?"

Nadya nodded. "He held my hand. And then he kissed me."

"Oh, Nadya. Was it like in the book? Did you swoon in his arms?"

Nadya remembered the moment by the spring. "It's more like standing on top of the barn roof, wondering if you're going to fall."

"I've never done that," Lottie said.

"Or standing on the bluff over the river, looking at the current below. That current could sweep you away and you'd never get back again." Nadya shook her head. "Don't know that I like it."

"It's so exciting, Nadya. I hope that Silas Whitman comes visiting me. What did you say to him?"

"I hardly talked at all," Nadya confessed. "I didn't know what to say."

"That's all right," Lottie said. "My sister Mary Sue says that you don't have to talk much. I asked her, and she said that all you have to do when you're sitting with a man is to tell him how wonderful he is, and that's enough. Like this." They had reached the pump. Lottie set down her bucket and took Nadya's hand in hers. "Oh, Rufus—I feel so safe with you here. You're so strong and brave."

Nadya frowned at her. "That's silly, Lottie. He doesn't make me feel safe."

"But you could say he did, couldn't you?" Lottie held the bucket while

Nadya pumped the water. "Mary Sue says that men like to hear things like that."

Lottie set down her bucket and held Nadya's under the rush of water. Nadya continued pumping, considering what Lottie had said. She had nothing against lying, but this seemed like a foolish thing to lie about. "I don't know why he would make me feel safe," Nadya said. "I can shoot as well as he can. Seems like he ought to tell me that I make him feel safe."

"Oh, Nadya, don't you go around saying things like that. He tells you that you're pretty and you tell him that he's strong. That's what Mary Sue says," Lottie spoke with the superior wisdom of a girl who had older sisters.

"My mama says he's dangerous," Nadya said hesitantly.

"How exciting!" Lottie danced in a little circle. "I don't see how you can be so calm about it. If it was me, I'd be beside myself."

"We'd best get back with the water," Nadya said.

As they walked back toward the house, Lottie did most of the talking. "I can help you fix your hair for Mary Sue's wedding. We can put it up like the picture I saw in *Godey's Ladies Book*. You'll look so fine. But you have to promise that you won't get into a shooting match or anything like that."

Nadya walked at Lottie's side. Her friend's excitement made her uneasy. She was not sure how she felt about Rufus, but Lottie seemed certain that she should be happy.

They returned to the cabin and built up the fire to boil water for tea. The quilt was almost done—all that remained was the edging, and Zillah and Mary Sue and Mrs. Evans would manage that.

Lottie had just made a pot of tea when the dogs began barking outside. "Hello!" A man's voice called from the farmyard. "Hello, ladies!"

Mr. Whitman had come to escort Mrs. Whitman and her daughters home. He had a cup of tea with the women, and while they were drinking it, Mr. Evans and his sons returned from fishing, carrying a string of catfish. Then Rufus Jones and his brother Moses appeared in the doorway. Rufus took off his hat and smiled at all the women. It seemed to Nadya that his eyes lingered on her.

Mrs. Evans insisted that Nadya accompany Mrs. Jones and her sons to the fork in the trail that led to the Rybak house. Then Rufus would escort Nadya to her door. "We just can't be too careful," Mrs. Evans said.

Nadya protested, but Mrs. Jones hushed her with a wave of a hand. "Of course you will come with us. I'll have no more said about it."

Nadya rode with Mrs. Jones in the farm wagon for the first few miles. Her mule was tied on behind the wagon. As they bumped over the rough trail, Mrs. Jones lectured Nadya on the dangers of wandering through the forest alone. Nadya remained silent, watching Rufus's back. He sat on the driver's seat, eyes on the trail ahead.

At the fork in the road, Moses took the reins. Rufus swung down from the driver's seat and untied Nadya's mule from the back of the wagon.

Nadya jumped down from the wagon before he could help her, not wanting to touch his hand.

"You hurry home, Rufus," Mrs. Jones said to her son.

Rufus touched his hat to his mother and waved as the horse pulled the wagon down the main trail.

"It's a pleasure to have your company again so soon," Rufus said. The wagon reached a bend in the trail and Rufus waved to his mother as the trail took her out of sight. Then he reached out and took Nadya's hand. "I had hoped I might see you today."

"I was glad to see you too," Nadya said. She wasn't certain of the truth of her words until after she said them. He squeezed her hand.

"Come on," he said, and they started in the direction of the Rybak farm.

The trail followed the river, more or less. Sometimes, it ran alongside the water, and sometimes it snaked between the trees, avoiding the brambles and thickets at the river's edge.

Nadya walked silently at his side. It was strange, having his hand in hers. Overhead, squirrels chattered and barked at them.

"Here—stop a bit," he said. He let go of her hand and stepped to where a dogwood tree was blooming. He picked a pale blossom and returned to

her side. "These would look nice in your hair," he said, and reached up to tuck the flower behind her ear. He stepped back and looked at her. "It suits you," he said. "You look very pretty." She returned his stare, still silent.

"You're such a quiet one," he said. "Don't you like flowers?"

"I like flowers."

He hesitated. "I know a place not far from here, down by the river, where there's a beautiful patch of flowers. Would you like to see it?" His scent had changed—she could smell the muskiness of sex.

"All right," she said. "I'd like to."

He took her hand again, holding it tighter than before, and led her off the main trail, along a deer path that led through the trees and downward toward the river. Partway down, out of sight of the trail, he tied the mule to a tree.

The path led to a secluded hollow where the grass was already thick and green. A redbud tree bloomed on the river bank, its flowers brilliant against the spring greenery. He held her hand and led her to where the sheltering branch of a willow blocked the view of the river. The tree formed a great room, carpeted with ferns and perfumed with the fragrance of the flowers and plants.

"I found this when I was hunting," he said. "It's a beautiful place, isn't it?" He looked down at her and wet his lips. "I hoped you would come here with me." Then he reached out and put his arms around her.

She could feel the warmth of his skin through her dress; she could smell his sweat—a complex musky smell mingled with the aroma of tobacco. She tilted her head to look up into his face and he kissed her as he had at the spring.

She sensed the thing that waited beneath the surface, like the currents that boiled in the river. There was a mystery here, something that went beyond the farm animals mating in the barnyard. She had listened to the cats yowling at night. The female in heat made a low moaning sound that contained both pleading and threat. She understood that sound now.

"Here," he said, releasing her. "Let's sit in the grass. That would be fine." He led her to a place where the grass was soft. She sat there, her bare feet pulled up under her dress and her arms wrapped around her knees. He sat beside her and put his arm around her shoulders.

"I should have known you would come here with me," he said then. "You aren't like the other girls."

She nodded. She knew that was true: the other girls didn't hunt and shoot—but she wondered what that had to do with sitting beside him by the river. He kissed her lightly. His arm dropped from her shoulder to her waist. His other hand caressed her thigh through the fabric of her dress and her petticoat. He lifted his eyes to her face. "I love you, Nadya." His hand continued to stroke her thigh.

"My mama says that you're dangerous," she said.

"Your mama doesn't like you playing with the boys. But I think you like me." He kissed her again. "Don't you? I believe that I love you, Nadya?"

She ignored the question. "Your mother told me about the wolves that killed your sheep the other night."

"Ah, sweet Nadya—are you afraid of wolves?" He tightened the arm that encircled her shoulders. "I'll keep you safe. I'll kill any wolf that comes near us."

"No!" she said, starting to pull away. "You mustn't."

"What is it, Nadya?" He reached out and held her tighter. "What is it?"

"You mustn't kill wolves," she said. "You've got to promise me that."

He laughed. "Does it worry you that I hunt for wolves? Well then, I won't go hunting for wolves if that makes you unhappy." His face relaxed and his hand resumed its movement on her thigh. "Now don't you believe that I love you, Nadya?"

Her body believed him. When he kissed her, she responded. She felt his hand on her thigh, lifting her dress so that he could stroke the bare skin. He kept kissing her, giving her no chance to answer his question, but she did not mind that. There was a warmth in her body, a kind of tingling that felt like the coming of the Change, only different. His body pressed against hers, pushing her back on the grass. One of his hands fumbled at the buttons of her dress; the other slid higher between her thighs. She was not wearing any underwear, and his hand explored the warmth between her legs. She made a sound—almost a growl like the cats in the barn—and he pressed his fingers harder against her.

"Oh, Nadya, I can't stop myself." He was on top of her now, fumbling with the buttons of his trousers. His hand was fumbling with the buttons on the front of her dress. The tingling was growing greater, spreading through her body. He moaned, pressing against her.

Rufus pushed his leg between her thighs, spreading her legs apart. The movement of his leg made her squirm as the tingling grew stronger. It was frightening, this feeling, but she welcomed it at the same time. She

wanted something that she could not name.

Abruptly, he shoved himself between her thighs and thrust into her. She cried out, startled. There was a sensation of tearing and wetness and a sudden pain that mingled with the warmth and tingling. He thrust again and then came quickly, collapsing against her with a moan. She moved her hips against him, trying to shift him so that the tingling sensations would return, but he did not move, lying atop her like a dead man. "Oh," he moaned, "Oh, Nadya."

He rolled off her and lay in the grass, staring up at the sky. His penis glistened in the late afternoon sunlight. Streaked with semen and blood, it had started to droop. She reached between her own legs, and her fingers came away touched with blood. But even so, there was still pleasure in her own touch.

He looked over at her, propping himself up on one elbow. The top of her dress gaped open and her nipples were crinkled and brown in the sun. Her skirt was bunched around her waist. He reached over and tugged on her dress, pulling the fabric so that it covered her breasts. "You'd best cover yourself," he said.

"Why?"

He shook his head as if she should not have asked, and frowned. As she watched, he started to button his trousers.

She put her hand on his to stop him. "No," she said. Her dress gaped when she moved, exposing her breasts once again. She slipped her hand beneath his and into his trousers. He made a sound, the beginning of a protest, but it died in his throat. His cock was warm in her hand; the skin so soft and smooth. She slid her hand lower, cupping his balls and feeling his rough pubic hair against her fingers. One hand was on his cock, the other was between her own legs, teasing the slippery folds, pressing into her body.

Rufus moaned and his eyes half-closed. He put one hand on her breast and started to move toward her, as if to roll on top of her again.

"No," she said. "Not that way." She pushed him so that he lay flat on his back. Before he could move again, she threw a leg over his and straddled him. His cock was erect now, and she rubbed it against herself, directing its movement with her hand.

With her free hand, she lifted Rufus' hand to her breast, relishing the feel of his rough skin against her nipple. His eyes were open now; he looked surprised, a little confused. She rubbed herself up and down, then

lifted herself and slipped his cock inside her. With her hand, she continued to rub the hard knot of flesh in the midst of the folds where the tingling seemed to center. She growled, a sound that rumbled from her throat without her thought or will. She squeezed her eyes closed, shutting out the brightness of the sunlight that filtered through the willow leaves. She bent so that her breasts rubbed against his chest and she nipped at his shoulder, rocking back and forth faster now, still faster.

She arched her back, and the pleasure was so intense it was nearly pain. She felt him inside her, squeezed by the spasms of her muscles. A great wave pulsed within her, beginning between her legs and spreading outward. Pleasure, urgency, darkness, and warmth—a confusion of sensations that left her gasping and limp.

"Ah," she said. "Ah, Rufus." She opened her eyes then, and looked down at him.

His eyes were open and he was watching her. He wasn't smiling; she could not read his expression. His cock was growing soft within her, so she slipped off him and lay beside him in the grass, where she could watch his face. He looked up at the sky.

"What are you thinking?" she asked him.

He kept looking at the sky. "You're not like the other girls."

She smiled. "That's so. You already told me that."

"It's not proper. You shouldn't. . . ." He hesitated. "You oughtn't act like that."

"Like what?"

He shook his head and frowned at her. "Girls don't act like that. You're very bold."

She continued to smile. "And so are you."

He reached out and tugged her dress down so that it covered her. "We'd best be getting home."

She watched him sit up and hurriedly button his trousers and tuck his shirt. He did not look at her again. She made no move to dress herself, just studied him, trying to understand his expression. He smelled of sex and anger and fear. She did not understand the anger or the fear. What had frightened him?

He glanced down at her. "Button yourself," he said roughly. "Cover yourself and act decent."

She sat up then, pulling her skirt down to cover her legs and slowly

buttoning her dress.

"Come along," he said, and led the way back up to where the mule was tied. He did not take her hand. He accompanied her home, but did not linger to have tea or talk with her parents, leaving her at the doorstep and hurrying away into the forest as if he were suddenly afraid of her.

The next Sunday morning, Nadya and her family went to town. The mule had thrown a shoe and her father was taking it to the blacksmith.

The bench in front of the general store was crowded with loafing men: trappers, come to town to trade and drink; a rough looking crew from the barge that was tied at the crossing; a few farmers. Nadya saw Mr. Jones among them but looked for Rufus in vain. A green jug was passing from hand to hand, and Nadya could smell the sharp scent of chewing tobacco.

Nadya's father pulled the farm wagon to the side of the dirt street. He stopped by the bench to chat with the men, while Nadya and her mother went into the store.

Mr. Evans was counting out nutmegs and cinnamon sticks for Mrs. Walker, and the spices perfumed the air. Mrs. Evans was helping Mrs. Jones, who had just purchased a length of plain red calico for new shirts for her sons. "Those boys are almighty rough on clothes," she was saying to Mrs. Evans. "I pity the girl that marries Rufus. She'll be sewing her fingers to the bone just to keep him in shirts."

Mrs. Evans looked up and greeted Nadya and her mother. "Morning, Mrs. Rybak, Miss Nadya. How are you today?"

Mrs. Jones studied the pair of them. "Morning, Mrs. Rybak," Mrs. Jones said. "How nice to see you again. Did Nadya tell you that the tea you sent was a great help to Mr. Jones?"

"I'm pleased to hear it, Mrs. Jones." Nadya watched in silence. She knew that her mother did not care for Mrs. Jones, but she smiled as if Mrs. Jones were a friend. "It is really the simplest thing to make. If you like, I can show you the herbs that I use."

"Mr. Jones won't be needing the remedy again. He told me that very morning that he had sworn off the demon whiskey and would drink only healthful beverages from that day on."

Nadya wondered at that. She was certain that Mr. Jones had been among the loiterers on the porch. In her experience, a jug being passed on the porch of a store rarely contained healthful beverages. But she held her

tongue and listened while her mother murmured polite congratulations.

"I do hope that you and your family will be attending the services by the river this afternoon," Mrs. Jones said. "Reverend William Cooper, a preacher of fine repute, has come to speak to us of the ways of sin. My family will be there."

"What denomination is the preacher?" Nadya's mother asked. Nadya knew this was simply politeness. If the preacher were a Baptist, Nadya's mother would claim to be strictly Methodist. If he were a Methodist, she might declare herself a Baptist. One way or the other, she would politely evade the preaching.

"He is a man of God," Mrs. Jones declared. "I don't know more than that. But that is all I need to know. All Christians are brothers under the skin."

Nadya's mother nodded thoughtfully. "Thank you so much for telling us about it. Perhaps we will see you there."

Mrs. Jones took the calico that Mrs. Evans had folded neatly. "Now I must be going, to tell others that we are blessed with a preacher this Sunday. Perhaps some of those who prefer dancing to praying will come and see the evil of their ways. I will see you by the river." She left the store without looking back.

Nadya's mother and Mrs. Evans exchanged glances. "She's enough to give being a Christian a bad name," Mrs. Evans murmured, and Nadya's mother laughed.

"I hear that she scolded Mrs. Shaw for allowing dancing and drinking at the wedding," Nadya's mother said softly.

"I hear the same. But Mr. Jones and his sons were drinking and dancing with the rest of them."

Nadya's mother smiled and shrugged. "Ah, but you heard what Mrs. Jones said. Mr. Jones has declared he will only drink healthful beverages."

Mrs. Evans laughed. "Ah, but whiskey can be medicinal, and surely that's a healthful thing."

"And dancing is fine exercise, and that is needed for health as well," Nadya's mother replied.

"Of course," Mrs. Evans said. "I should have thought of that. And all Mr. Jones's gasconading about what fine shots his boys are, that's exercise for the lungs."

The women laughed softly.

"And so what is it that brings you to town?" Mrs. Evans asked.

"Nadya thought she'd sew a new dress to wear to Mary Sue's wedding, so we have come for calico."

"A new dress?" Mrs. Evans smiled at Nadya. "Miss Nadya, you're not buying black powder and lead shot? You're becoming a lady."

Nadya blushed and looked down at her feet.

"Here now, Nadya, I have some lovely cloth to choose from." Mrs. Evans pulled bolt after bolt from the shelves, placing them on the table for Nadya's examination. Nadya favored a length of fine dark blue cloth, patterned with tiny red roses.

"The color complements your complexion," Mrs. Evans said. "And it won't show the dirt."

Nadya's mother fingered the cloth, testing the weave. "It seems quite sturdy," she said.

"Oh, it will wear well, I'm sure of that."

While Mrs. Evans was cutting and folding the cloth, Lottie came into the store from the back. The mothers remained in the store, chatting about remedies and recipes, but Nadya and Lottie escaped to the outside.

Nadya's father was sitting on the porch. The two young women lingered for a moment, to see if the men were talking about anything interesting. Mr. Walker was holding a penny paper that had just come in from Philadelphia. "It's a brand new party for new times," he was saying. "Call themselves the Native Americans. They have no use for Papists, and I'll go along with that. Take those Irishmen, fresh off the boat. You can scarcely understand a word that comes out of their mouths." He slapped the paper against his thigh. "Keep America for Americans. That's what I say."

"Keep America for the Americans," Nadya's father said slowly, repeating the words as if he had not heard them right. His Polish accent grew thicker, as it always did when he was upset. "Twenty years, I have been in this country. I would guess that I am an American. But these people would say I ain't." Mr. Walker started to interrupt, but Nadya's father kept going. "America is for all types of men from all different countries. That's what makes this country strong."

"Next thing you know, you'll be saying we should set free the slaves," Mr. Jones said.

"Come on," Lottie whispered to Nadya. "They're just talking politics. Let's go." They walked down the dusty street, and Lottie companionably

linked her arm in Nadya's.

"Do you want to go down to the river?" Lottie asked. "Mrs. Jones said there'd be a preacher talking about God."

"I don't know," Nadya said, looking doubtful. "I'd better ask my mama."

"Oh, come on. Let's just go. Your mama will be glad you are hearing the word of God. Besides, maybe Rufus and Silas will be there."

"All right," Nadya said. "I'll go."

Arm in arm, they strolled to the river crossing. As they grew closer, they could make out muddled singing. The tune was familiar, a popular song modified to match a holier set of words.

They followed the sound to the river bank, where a small hollow created a natural amphitheater. William Cooper stood above the crowd, on the stump of an oak tree. A group of farmers and folks from town stood near the stump, watching the preacher with anticipation and doing their best to sing the hymn. Mrs. Jones was in the front of the group, her raised hand beating the rhythm of the hymn in the air, like a dutiful singing teacher. Her voice rang above the others, a sturdy contralto that made up in volume what it lacked in grace. "He comes! He comes! The Judge severe! The Seventh Trumpet speaks him near. His lightnings flash; His thunders roll. How welcome to the faithful soul." Nadya didn't see Rufus anywhere.

On the far side of the hollow there was a clump of rivermen. They weren't singing. Rather, they watched the preacher in silence, chewing tobacco.

The hymn droned to a close, Mrs. Jones singing the last line as a determined solo. The preacher lifted his Bible and read in a sonorous voice. "Serve the Lord with gladness: come before His presence with singing. Know ye that the Lord He is God: it is He hath made us; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture."

Nadya frowned at that—she did not think much of sheep and she would rather not be called one. But no one else in the crowd seemed to mind.

The preacher closed the book with a snap and looked at the people gathered around him. "Brothers and sisters," he said to them. "We are the people of the Lord, we are His sheep. But I see many sheep that have strayed from the flock, lambs that are in danger from the wolves of Satan that linger outside the pasture gate. I see men who gamble, and men who curse and take the name of their Lord in vain, and men who lie and cheat and steal. I see women who wear gaudy clothing, women who are proud of

their outward show, caring not for their inner beauty. How many of you could hold your heads up and walk through the pasture gates into Heaven?" He looked out at the crowd, and a man in the front row spat a stream of tobacco juice over the river bank.

"Brothers and sisters," the preacher said. "I was a sinner too. Listen to me, brothers and sisters, for I was once like you. And then I found the love of the Lord."

"I'd sooner have the love of a good woman," called out one of the rivermen in the back, and his companions laughed.

"That way lies the path to Hell," the preacher shouted back.

"That way lies the path to glory," called the man, and again his friends laughed, slapping him on the back. "Have you ever walked that path, Preacher?"

"I walk the path of the Lord," the preacher said. "I follow the word of the Lord. You must listen to me." He brandished his Bible over his head, swayed as if he were about to fall from the stump, and he steadied himself. His eyes were blinking furiously. "You must listen," he cried, but Nadya could barely hear his voice over the catcalls of the rivermen.

"Listen," the preacher shouted. Then he tilted back his head and howled, a piercing wail that cut through the laughter of the hecklers. Mrs. Jones took a step back, startled by the howl, her hands suddenly still, clasped together as if in prayer. The preacher tilted back his head and howled again. When he stopped, the crowd was silent, watching him to see what would happen next.

"I hear you howling like the beasts you are," he snarled at the rivermen. "I hear you growling and snapping like the wolves of the forest. I hear you and the Lord hears you, and He judges you, as I am not fit to judge.

"Why have you come to this barren wilderness, brothers and sisters? Why have you come to this howling land, where wild beasts shriek in the night, where savage Indians lurk in the darkness?" He waited a moment, then filled the silence with a shout. "You have come here at the command of the Lord!"

"Not likely," yelled a riverman, but the preacher lifted his hands up over his head, waving the Bible as if it were a club.

"The Good Book commands us to be fruitful and multiply, to replenish the earth and subdue it," the preacher cried. "Our Lord commands us to have dominion over every living thing that moveth on the face of the earth. The Lord asks this of us, he sends us into the wilderness to claim it for His

own. You have come to take this land for the Lord."

"Amen!" called a farmer who stood near Nadya. "Amen!"

"This land, this wild and desolate land—it can strike despair into a man's heart." The preacher's voice dropped. "I know it, brothers and sisters, for my own heart has been laid low by loneliness and fear. My own heart has ached for the comforts of civilization." He lowered his hands, bringing his Bible to his chest. "Just a few nights ago, brothers and sisters, when I lay shivering in the cold and the rain, I thought of turning my back on this land. I thought of returning to my home in Connecticut, of seeking an easier life, a life where a man can eat a fine dinner and sleep in a warm bed." His head was bowed and his tone was that of a man confiding his secret thoughts. "And I prayed to the Lord to send me a sign. Tell me what to do, oh Lord. Help me find the way."

He lifted his head. "In the darkness, wolves howled—a dreadful howling, like the shrieking of the souls burning in hell, doomed for all eternity to be wrapped in sheets of fire and brimstone."

Nadya glanced at Lottie, who was listening with rapt attention. "I always thought the wolves sounded nice," she murmured to Lottie. "Like singing."

"Hush," Lottie said. "I'm listening."

"You have heard the beasts, brothers and sisters, I know you have heard them," the preacher said. "Damned souls, spawn of Satan—they howl their anguish at the sky and turn, in anger, on the righteous children of the Lord. Imagine this sound—but imagine it near to you, as near to you as I am standing. The beasts were all around me, shrieking in anger and calling for blood."

Half a dozen stragglers joined the crowd, attracted by the howling and shouting.

"I lifted my head from my prayer, brothers and sisters, and I saw the eyes of wolves—great yellow eyes that flashed in the firelight, the eyes of devils glaring from the darkness. Demons from Hell, clad in the guise of wolves. Each as big as a man, grinning at me, showing their teeth and snarling."

Mrs. Jones fell to her knees, clasping her hands in prayer. "Save us, Lord, from the demons of Satan," she wailed.

"What did I do, brothers and sisters?" the preacher was saying. "What could I do against the demons of Satan?" He lifted his Bible, to remind them of its presence. "I trusted in the power of the Lord." A chorus of

fervent "Amens" drowned out the hooting of the hecklers. "Here it is, brothers and sisters, here is my weapon—the word of the Lord. I lifted this Holy Book so that the beasts could see it, could tremble before the truth of the Lord. And I called out to the Lord. I called to Him: 'May the spirit come down, may it come like a fire, may it come in streams of fire, fire of the Lord come down and free the earth of this pestilence.' "

Three more women at the front of the crowd knelt together, rocking back and forth in time with the preacher's words. Whenever he paused for breath, they chorused "Amen." The men in the front were shifting from foot to foot, swaying in time with the kneeling women.

"The very air around me trembled," the preacher said. "I felt the power, the power, the power of sanctification. In the light of the burning fire, I saw a great figure—an angel standing in the flame with a sword that was also a flame." He spoke with unshakeable confidence, lifting his hand as if to show the Lord's angel to anyone who could see.

"The angel lifted his sword, holding it high so that it blazed and lit the forest all around, bringing the glory of God to the darkness. And the demon wolf leaped to do battle with the messenger of the Lord. I could hear the sword crackle as it passed through the air, I could smell the brimstone when it touched the demon wolf. And the monsters fled, banished into the darkness.

"I stood in the darkness before the angel and I heard the angel speak to me. 'Take this land for the Lord,' the angel said to me. 'Drive the Devil from this wilderness.' "

"Praise the Lord," Mrs. Jones shouted, and the others took up the words. "Praise the Lord!"

The preacher raised his voice, thundering over the moaning and shouting. "Take this land, brothers and sisters! Drive out the Devil! You must kill the demon wolf wherever you find him. Kill the spawn of Satan. Drive him from this fair land that it may belong to the Lord."

"Drive out the Devil!" Mrs. Jones cried. "Drive him out!"

The preacher glared at the crowd, sweeping Nadya and Lottie with his gaze. "Listen to the message of the angel of God," he cried. "There are some among you who have not accepted the power of the Lord. They think that they can make peace with the Devil. I tell these sinners that Hell stands ready to receive them. Hell opens its yawning mouth to receive them. Repent, or you will spend your eternity burning in the pit.

Repent!"

Two women in the front row had been taken by the Holy Spirit—they lay on the ground, jerking and moaning uncontrollably. Others were falling to their knees, calling out to the Lord to save them.

"There is no peace with the Devil! There is no concord between the wolf and the lamb. Let us pray, brothers and sisters, let us pray that the spirit of fire will come to us and set us ablaze with the glory of the Lord." He bowed his head, lowering his voice. "Let us pray that we triumph over the demon wolf, let us take this land for the Lord, let us bring civilization to this howling wilderness. Pray with me, brothers and sisters. Pray with me and bring the power of the Lord to this land."

He bowed his head for a moment, then began a hymn, a sweet slow song that asked Jesus to watch over the wandering sheep. Nadya watched as the preacher walked among the men and women who knelt on the grassy ground. He laid a hand on one woman's head, patted another man on the shoulder. The two women who had been taken by the spirit lay in the grass, resting quietly now.

"Come on," Lottie said. "Let's go and get him to bless us."

"I don't want to," Nadya said, hanging back.

Lottie glanced at her. "What's the matter? Come on." She looked back toward the preacher. "There's Silas. We can go talk to him."

Nadya shook her head. "I have to go find my mama," she said. "She won't know where I am." She was trembling. She turned away from her friend, hurrying up the slope to the store.

On her way back to the store, Nadya met her father. "Papa, they are talking of hunting wolves."

She thought he might be angry—angry with the people for talking of hunting, angry with her for killing the sheep at the Jones farm—but he just looked at her sadly and took her hand. "We'd best be going home, Nadya. This is no place for us just now."

That week, Dmitri began building a wagon to carry his family West. Marietta protested, saying that the madness would pass, but she could not dissuade her husband. He said that they had lingered too long already. There were too many people in Missouri. They needed to go West, where there was open land and forests.

Midway through the week, Hekiziah Jones stopped by the Rybak farm. "Hello," he called out. "Hello, neighbor."

Dmitri was trimming and smoothing a length of oak to make a spare axle for the wagon that would carry them westward. He had spent the morning reinforcing the wagonbed with oak planks. Dmitri glanced up from his work when Jones rode into the farmyard, reined in his horse, and swung down from the saddle. "What's all this? You emigrating?" Jones asked, staring at the wagon. "Soon as we can," Dmitri said.

Jones considered the wagon, then glanced around the farmyard. "I hadn't heard tell that your farm was for sale."

"You're hearing it now," Dmitri said. The man stank of unwashed clothing, chewing tobacco, and alcohol—hard cider, by the smell. "Too crowded here. Time to move on."

Jones nodded and thoughtfully shifted the wad of chewing tobacco that was tucked in his lip. "Reasonable piece of land. Maybe I'll make you an offer. You in a hurry to sell?"

Dmitri studied Jones's face. "Two dollars an acre. Hard currency."

Jones shifted the wad of tobacco again and spat a stream of brown juice. "Ain't easy to come by so much hard currency."

"Ain't easy to be a farmer," Dmitri said.

"I might manage a dollar an acre."

Dmitri continued smoothing the oak shaft. Two dollars an acre for cleared land was already a bargain. Dmitri would need the hard currency once they reached Oregon. He would sell for less only if he had to. "I reckon I'll wait until someone with a better understanding of the value of land comes along," he said slowly.

"Suit yourself," Jones said easily. "Suit yourself. I came to invite you for some hunting Saturday next. Me and my boys gonna kill the varmints that killed my sheep. Some other folks will be joining us. We'll be gathering at the saloon. Thought you might like to come along." Jones grinned, showing crooked, tobacco-stained teeth. "A little whiskey and a little hunting. And the preacher's coming along to give us his blessing. A fine sporting afternoon."

The full moon was Sunday night. Saturday's hunt offered no danger to Dmitri's family. He looked up from the axle. "Strange thing, Mr. Jones," he said. "We never had wolf trouble around here before. Maybe you should keep better watch on those sheep of yours."

Jones's smile faltered. "What's that?" he said.

"Never had any trouble with wolves," Dmitri said. "They never bothered

my stock. Maybe you'd be better off bringing your sheep in at night."

Jones scowled. "What's that you're saying? You saying we shouldn't hunt those varmints?"

"Don't see that you have any call to," Dmitri said. "Don't see the need."

"You're saying you won't go hunting?"

"I'm saying I'll have nothing to do with your sporting day. Won't slaughter animals that never did me no harm. Won't sell my land for less than it's worth." Dmitri was a patient man. He grew angry slowly. But the full moon was near, and this man threatened his family so casually, so confidently, insolently chewing his tobacco and eyeing Dmitri's land. Dmitri shifted his weight, setting his feet wide apart. He hefted the axle in his hands, shifting the heavy shaft so that he could swing it as a club. He bared his teeth in a ferocious grin. "I'd suggest you get yourself off my land. You'd best hurry."

Jones eyed the axle and hurried to mount his horse. He jerked on the reins and kicked the horse savagely. Dmitri returned to his work, relieved that the hunt would be on Saturday. They were safe for this full moon.

Over dinner that night, Dmitri told his wife and daughter about the coming hunt. The sun was near setting. Its light shone through the open windows. There was no other light; they were saving oil for the journey. "Hekiziah Jones said they would have a hunt this Saturday," he told them. "They want to kill the wolves that killed their sheep."

Nadya shook her head. "That can't be so," she said. "Rufus said that he wouldn't hunt wolves."

Dmitri studied his daughter's face. "When did he do that?"

Nadya would not meet his eyes. "When I asked him," she said. Her voice had an edge to it, a slight tremor of contained emotion. "He said he wouldn't hunt wolves."

"When was that?" Dmitri asked. "When did you ask him?"

"When he brought me home from the quilting." Still, she would not meet his eyes.

"Look at me, Nadya," he said angrily. "Why won't you look at me?"

"She's upset, Dmitri," her mother said softly.

He looked at his wife. "What do you know about this?"

Nadya stood up and headed for the cabin door.

"Where are you going, Nadya?" Dmitri asked, shocked at her behavior.

"I'd best check to see that the chickens are locked up for the night," she said, and rushed away.

Dmitri turned to his wife, shaking his head. "What is all this about?" He was bewildered by his daughter's tears.

His wife took his hand in both of hers. "She can't hear you. She can only hear the roar of the blood rushing in her ears. She is growing up." She lifted her eyes to meet his. "Do you remember how hard that was?"

"That boy and his family—they're no friends of ours. The father is a drunkard; the mother is a zealot. The son is a gambler. He means her no good."

"I know that. I read the cards. I told her that she shouldn't love this boy. I told her to take care. Might as well tell the river not to flow downhill." She released his hand. "What else can we do? Lock our daughter up? Deny her nature?" She shook her head. "We must hurry to build the wagon and prepare for our journey. She will be very sad when we go, but on the trail to Oregon, she will forget him." She smiled at her husband. "Be happy that we have time to prepare. She will survive the pain of heartbreak as we all have before her."

Dmitri shook his head slowly. He pushed himself away from the table and went to the door. By the light of the moon, he could see Nadya standing at the edge of the forest, leaning against the split rail fence. He went to stand at her side.

"Hello, Nadya," he said softly.

"Hello, Papa."

The moonlight was bright enough to cast shadows. "Do you remember," Dmitri asked, "when I used to tell you stories with shadows?"

"I remember," Nadya said softly. She kept her face turned away so that he could not see her eyes.

"They were lies, those stories," Dmitri said. He hesitated, wishing that he could see her face. "In my stories, the wolf always wins. That's a lie."

"But the wolf could win, Papa. Don't you think? I think the wolf could win."

"The hunters win. They always have and they always will."

Nadya turned to face him then. Her jaw was set and her expression was stubborn. "Rufus said he wouldn't hunt wolves. He won't let them go hunting," she said.

Dmitri hesitated. "I'm not the only one who lies."

She turned her face to the forest again.

"The Oregon Territory is a beautiful land," he said. "Acres and acres of rich land, with never a person nearby. That's the place for us. We'll be emigrating as soon as the wagon's done." She didn't answer.

"We will be happy there. Far from all the hunters and fools. Are you listening to me?" She didn't answer.

At last, he sighed heavily. "Come inside when you get cold," he told her, and stamped back into the warmth of the cabin. When she came back inside to sit by the fire, he ignored her, talking with Marietta about the things they would need for the trip, telling her about the route that they would follow. Nadya climbed to her bed in the loft, but he kept up the cheerful conversation, knowing that she would hear him, hoping that she would listen to reason.

The hunt was to be on Saturday, the day before the moon was full. All would have been well, had it not been for the rain. The rain brought bad luck.

Nadya woke on Saturday to the sound of raindrops rattling against the greased paper windows. A thunderstorm had swept in during the night. The wind shook the branches of the trees and the rain hammered down, filling the ditches and gullies to overflowing.

Her parents tried to act as if nothing were wrong. They went about their work, as if this day were like any other. But Nadya could smell the tension in the air.

Sunday morning dawned wet and cold. In the morning, Nadya watched the sky and prayed that the rain would continue. But early in the afternoon, the rain became a drizzle. Water dripped from the branches of the trees, but the sky was clearing.

Nadya sat on the porch, mending a tear in her father's second best pair of trousers. Through the half-opened door, she listened to the murmur of her parents' voices inside the cabin.

"Surely they wouldn't begin a hunt so late in the day," her mother said.

"Depends on how much they've been drinking," her father's voice rumbled. "Depends on how foolish they feel. From what little I've seen of Rufus and Hekiziah Jones, I would guess that they're foolish enough."

Nadya set the mending in her lap. He was wrong about Rufus. He had to be.

"We'd best put some space between ourselves and the town before the moon rises," her father said.

"We can't pack the wagon quickly enough," her mother said. "We haven't time."

"We'll leave the wagon and save our skins. We have no choice."

Nadya knew there would be no hunt. Her father wouldn't believe her, but she knew that Rufus would stop them. He wouldn't allow it. He had said so, down by the river.

But even as she thought about Rufus, she felt uneasy. It would be difficult for him to persuade the others. He might need her help. While her parents argued, she slipped away to the barn, saddled the mule, and headed for town.

When Nadya was eight, her father had built their barn from rough-hewn logs. Neighbors had helped raise the walls and the ridge beam, leaving her father to complete the structure. Nadya's father told her not to climb on the newly erected frame. "It's dangerous," he had said. "You'll fall."

The next day, when her father was out of sight, she climbed to the top of the barn and walked the length of the roof's ridgebeam. She started with confidence, arms extended like a tightrope walker's. She was halfway across when she looked down at the ground far below. In that moment, she swayed, feeling suddenly dizzy. Just before she recovered her balance, she imagined what it would be like to fall, arms flailing at the beam and missing, body tumbling to break on the ground below. Her legs trembled and she could feel her heart pounding. And then, despite the panic, she continued to the far end of the beam.

As she rode the mule into town, she felt as she had when she stood on the ridgebeam. Defiant and frightened. The ground lay far below her, and she did not dare look down.

She found Rufus in the tavern, playing cards. She recognized the other men at the table, all of them neighbors: Hekiziah Jones, Tom Williams, Mr. Shaw, Mr. Whitman. Their faces looked unfamiliar in the dim light of the tavern, skin slack with drink, eyes rimmed with red.

Mr. Shaw frowned at her. "What are you doing here?" he asked her. "This is no place for a young lady."

"I came to talk to Rufus." Her voice was strained. The smell of the tavern—tobacco spit, whiskey, and sweat—made her feel sick.

"Does your Papa know you're here?" Mr. Shaw said. "I don't think it's

proper. . . ."

Rufus looked up from his cards and stared at her. She could not read his expression. He tossed his cards face down on the table and pushed back his chair. When he stood, he swayed, unsteady on his feet. "How do, Miss Nadya," he said, his words a little slurred. "I'd be pleased to talk with you. Let's leave these fellas behind."

He took her arm and led her toward the door. Behind her, Nadya heard Tom Williams's voice, but she could not make out the words. All the men laughed—an unfriendly sound containing no merriment.

Outside, the day was clearing. The clouds that had covered the sun had dissipated. Muddy puddles filled the ruts of the dirt track that ran past the tavern's front porch. The livery stable and store had been washed clean; the white facades glistened in the late afternoon sunshine. The street was deserted. "Rufus," she said. "I had to talk to you."

"Darling, I've been thinking about you too," he said. He put his arms around her and started to pull her into an embrace. He reeked of whiskey. "We'll go to the hayloft in the livery stable. No one will bother us there."

She pulled back, shaking his arms off her. "My father said that you were going hunting for wolves."

He frowned. "We have time. They won't go hunting without me." He reached out and took hold of her hand. "I've missed you, Nadya."

"You're going hunting?" she asked. The air seemed suddenly colder. She could feel a trembling that began deep inside her. It had not yet reached the surface.

"Not yet. I tell you, we have time." With his free hand, he fumbled at the buttons on the front of her dress. His fingers were clumsy and the buttons did not cooperate.

"You promised," Nadya said, taking a step back away from him. "You promised you wouldn't hunt wolves."

He stared at her, then burst out laughing. "Not hunt wolves? That's the most damn fool idea I've ever heard."

"You said you wouldn't," she said.

"Never said anything like it," he protested.

"Down by the river," she said. "You promised me you wouldn't hunt wolves."

He was looking at her with the same expression he had worn when she climbed on top of him to satisfy her desire. He was astounded and

bewildered and disapproving. "Nadya, I reckon I got to hunt wolves," he said. "If we don't kill the wolves, they'll kill our sheep. What do those varmints matter to you? Come on, now." He tried to pull her to him. She jerked her wrist away.

"You mustn't kill wolves," she said. "You can't."

He glared at her then. "Don't you tell me what I can't do." His voice had lost its wheedling tone. "Just because we've had a little fun together doesn't mean you can tell me what to do. I'll kill every wolf in the county, if I like."

"But you said..."

"You're a crazy one," he told her. "You don't act like a normal woman. I didn't say nothing about wolves."

"My mother warned me," Nadya said. The trembling had reached the surface. She was cold, very cold, and she could not stop shaking. "She told me that you were dangerous. I should have listened."

She turned away, walking toward the mule that was tied at the hitching post.

"Hold on there," he said. He grabbed her shoulder. As she turned to face him, she lifted an elbow and caught him with a clout on the side of the head. He stumbled and fell.

"Leave me be," she said. "Just leave me be."

She mounted the mule and kicked the beast into a trot. When she was halfway down the street, she glanced back and saw Rufus struggling to his feet. "The weather's clear," he shouted—to the men in the saloon, to Nadya's retreating back. "Let's go hunting. Let's kill some wolves!" She kicked the mule again. The sun was already low in the sky. She could feel the pull of the full moon—a sensation in her belly and her crotch. For the first time, she feared the Change. The ride home was long and she felt sick to her stomach, sick at heart.

As she came into the farmyard, she saw her mother, waiting for her on the porch.

Nadya swung off the mule and ran into her mother's arms. "I saw Rufus," she said. "I saw him and the other men and ..." Then she wept, unable to stop the tears.

Her father put his hand on her shoulder. "Come," he said. "There is little time left." They had only gotten as far as the riverbank when the moon rose.

William Cooper came to the tavern and said a prayer before the hunt began. It was clear from his expression that he disapproved of drinking and gambling. But Rufus guessed that he disapproved of wolves more.

"May the All Mighty God give us strength to overcome the forces of darkness," the preacher prayed. "We come in Your name, to do away with the beasts of waste and desolation that devour Your innocent creatures. We call on You to bless our bullets and guide our aim."

The prayer droned on, and Rufus kept his head bowed. He was thinking of Nadya—still angry that she had pulled away, that she had demanded that he stop the hunt. She was crazy, that was clear. A pretty girl, but crazy. There were many other pretty girls in town.

When Cooper finally wound down, Rufus murmured "Amen." They toasted the preacher a few times. Then there was another delay when the preacher had insisted on coming along. They finally got underway just before sunset. It didn't matter, Rufus figured. The full moon would provide the light they needed. They were all accustomed to night hunting.

The air was crisp and cool, but the glow of the whiskey kept Rufus warm. The hounds set out, and the men followed on horseback. They took the trail north along the river, where Rufus had spotted wolf sign, now and again.

The sun set and the full moon rose. With the setting of the sun, colors faded from the forest: the world was black and white with shades of silver-gray.

At the river, the dogs found a scent, and they gave voice, a deep musical baying that echoed across the valley. Rufus's horse ran ahead of the others, sure-footed even in the darkness. Behind him, Rufus could hear Cooper calling for the Lord's assistance in this hunt against the demons of Satan.

Rufus had never believed in demons, despite his mother's convictions. But he liked hunting and he favored the darkness. He forgot his anger in the excitement. The chill air washed the whiskey fumes away, leaving his head clear.

The river was at flood. The muddy waters swirled around the bases of oak trees that normally stood high on the bank. Once, the dogs lost the trail and cast about frantically, running up and down the riverbank and sniffing the muddy ground. But they found the scent again and coursed along the bank, heading north.

Rufus was in the lead when the hounds' baying grew more frantic. He spurred his tired horse. The dogs had three wolves trapped on a jutting cliff where the river had eaten the bank away. The wolves stood with their backs to the edge, holding off the dogs. As Rufus approached, the biggest wolf rushed the hounds, snapping and snarling.

Rufus waited until the animal broke clear of the pack of hounds and squeezed off a shot. The lead wolf tumbled, somersaulting forward as his front legs went out from under him. Half the dog pack closed in on the fallen wolf; the rest pursued the other two. Rufus reined in his horse and reloaded, then spurred his horse after the pack of hounds.

He caught up with them a short distance away. He could see the two wolves bounding toward the river. He aimed and fired: good shot; one animal fell. The last wolf ran toward the river's edge. He could see it clearly, and he struggled to reload, but his horse shied, spilling the powder. He fumbled with the rifle.

Too late: the animal reached the cliff one leap ahead of the running hounds and launched itself over the edge. The dogs milled in a pack, yelping and snarling. Below, where the river ran like liquid silver in the moonlight, Rufus could see a dark head—the wolf struggling in the current. He did not waste the powder firing at the distant animal, but used the butt of his rifle to club the dogs away from the body of the fallen female.

By the time the other men arrived, the swimming wolf had been carried south by the current. The others built a fire, while Rufus skinned the two carcasses. The two wolves were in fine condition, fat and healthy, with thick fur.

He ran his knife down the female's belly and peeled back the skin, working carefully to avoid spoiling the fur. In the cold night air, steam rose from the body.

The preacher was the last to arrive. He stood by the fire with the others and called for a prayer of thanks. Rufus continued skinning the wolf while the preacher thanked God for their salvation.

After the prayer, Rufus went to work on the male wolf. He could hear the men around the fire talking about the wolf that got away. "It'll drown, sure enough," he heard his father say. The male's body had cooled and Rufus' hands were icy by the time he was done. He bundled the furs, then went to the fire to warm his hands and share the whiskey bottle that was making its way around the circle. Someone was telling a story about another hunt where they had killed four wolves, and someone else told of

wolf hunting on the plains. Tales of blood and excitement.

The moon set and they finished the bottle. Rufus strapped the wolf skins behind his saddle, patting his horse when it shied away from the scent. The day was dawning, gray and dim.

Rufus parted company with the others at the turnoff that led to the Rybak farm and his own family's farm. His father was returning to town to continue the card game they had left. Rufus continued home alone.

Nadya woke to find herself lying by the river at a bend where the current had created a narrow gravel beach. She was naked. Her skin was marked with bruises, streaked with river silt and blood. During the long chase, brambles had slashed her. The dogs had snapped at her feet and legs, leaving bloody gashes behind.

She sat up and hugged her knees for warmth. Early morning: the sun was barely above the horizon. Pale mist rose from the river, shifting and flowing like the water itself. From years of hunting the area, she recognized this stretch of river. She was just a mile or so downstream of the farm.

Her memories were blurred: darkness, panic, pain. Running—she remembered running among the trees, terrified by the baying of the hounds. And shouting—she remembered men's voices, shouting and singing and laughing like devils. Her body remembered the tugging of the river's currents, dragging her this way and that. Her muscles ached—she had fought the current, paddling desperately for this small beach.

She shivered. Where were her parents? That, she did not remember. Perhaps they had been carried further downstream. If that were the case, they would meet her at the farm. Surely, if she found her way to the farm, they would be there.

She clambered up the bank. She was used to going barefoot, but the brambles growing by the river scratched her bare skin and snagged in her hair. Under the oak trees at the top of the bank, the going was easier: last autumn's leaves, now damp and half rotted, were soft underfoot. She forced her tired muscles into a trot, telling herself that she would see her mother and father as soon as she reached the cabin. Of course, they would have to be at the cabin.

She was almost to the cabin when she heard a man shout. She did not recognize the voice exactly. At least, recognition did not penetrate the haze that occupied her mind, a peculiar cloudiness, as if her head were

filled with river mist that ebbed and swirled. But the voice sounded familiar—that voice had called out to the hounds the night before, urging them on. The voice called to her again, and she ran faster, ducking through the trees, ignoring the branches that scratched her legs.

"Mama!" she called as she ran toward the cabin. "Mama! Papa!" The mule grazing in the field lifted its head to watch her.

She pushed the cabin door open. The room was empty, but she snatched her father's rifle from its place beside the door and the powder horn from the peg on the wall. She loaded the rifle quickly, her hands trembling in the cold. She spilled the black powder, but did not stop until she had rammed the bullet into place.

Still naked, she held the loaded rifle. With one foot, she kicked open the cabin door.

She smelled blood. Dried blood, mingled with the scent of wolf. She recognized the man on the horse—vaguely, dimly, through the river mist that filled her head—recognized him by his smell. His name didn't come to her—names were not really important yet. Someday soon, maybe they would be, but just then, names had not returned to her.

But his smell—that she knew. It was the smell of passion and the smell of death. Sex and blood and river water and dogs baying as they rushed through the night, chasing wild things that ran and ran and ran, but never escaped. The smell told her what to do, even before she saw the two bundles of gray fur, tied to the saddle behind him.

"Nadya," the man said, and she lifted the rifle and shot him, point blank, not thinking, not thinking at all.

His horse shied at the sound, and shied again at the sudden limpness of the man in the saddle. The man slumped, then fell, sliding gracelessly to the ground, lying face down with one foot still caught in the stirrup. The smell of fresh blood joined the smell of dried blood, and a brilliant red stain spread across the back of the man's shirt where the bullet had left his body.

Nadya freed the man's foot from the stirrup and let the body lie in the dirt. She spoke soothingly to the horse, murmuring the French endearments with which her mother had once comforted her. She tied the horse to the split rail fence and returned to the cabin. She walked past the body, but did not look at it.

She stirred up the embers and built a fire. She did not think. She built a fire and heated water for tea. She washed herself, using a rag and warm

water to wipe away the dirt and the blood. Even when she put on her hunting trousers and a warm shirt, she could not stop shivering. The cold came from deep inside her.

The water boiled and she made tea, carefully measuring the dried leaves into the pot. Her mother liked her tea just so—Nadya was careful to make it properly, and she sat by the fire, sipping her tea. She caught herself listening for the sound of her parents' footsteps. Her mind shied away from the memory of the two bundles of fur on the back of the horse. She had another cup of tea.

Then she took the shovel and went to a place in the woods where the ground was soft. The horse carried the man's body.

She buried the two bundles of fur side by side in a single grave. She stood by the grave for a time, unable to pray. "I'm sorry," she said at last. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have. ... I didn't mean. . . ." But the words stopped. She bowed her head and stood silent again. "Papa," she said at last. "There was nothing wrong with your stories. They weren't lies. The wolf can win. Just not here. Not now. But somewhere, the wolf can win." Some distance away, she buried the body of the man who had killed her parents. Rufus's body. The name had returned to her with the memory of love and betrayal. But she said nothing over his grave. She had nothing to say to him.

Then she packed a few things: gunpowder, salt, tea, a pot in which to boil water, two blankets, her hunting knife, a hatchet, a pistol. Necessities only.

She closed the door on her way out of the cabin. She lifted the gate that kept the pigs in their pen, shooed the cattle and the mule from the stable. Then she tied her small bundle behind the saddle and mounted.

She turned the horse's head toward the wilderness of the Oregon Territory. America was a big country. Out there, the land was empty; the forests were thick and green. Out there, she would find a place where she could be happy.

She kicked the horse into a trot and rode west, leaving childhood behind.