

Chapter One

One way Martha wanted me out of her kitchen, but another way she didn't want me burning wood to keep just myself warm. Best would have been if I'd died, I guess, but there wasn't much chance of that, not right off anyway, since I lived a healthy country life and was fairly young, and unmarried. Next best was to make me want to die, but I had enough spite in me to want to live, usually.

Martha was my brother Edward's wife. Edward, by the terms of my father's will, was my keeper. I had half of the house and the furnishings thereof, and the use of the central hallway to get there, which shows that my father knew how much help brotherly love needs for the long haul. I had food, firewood, carded wool, summer cloth, shoes, and rides to church spelled out for me. I was to have, always, the milk of two good cows so I could make cheese for income. My father wrote careful instructions for me about what legal actions to take if Edward or his heirs should ever refuse me these things. Their inheritance depended on giving me mine.

But there was nothing all my father's care could do to make them love me.

I think Edward did love me, a little, but Martha had to come first. That was just practical. He had his daily peace to hope for, and his children to protect. I didn't expect him to take my side. I wasn't even sure I had a side.

What made me hard to defend was that I couldn't say what I wanted. I could say what I didn't want, and maybe that's a start but no more than a start. For instance, I was still young enough to think

of marriage, at least to a widower, but I'd never noticed that marriage made anybody else feel better, and I was modest enough to know that it would be no different for me. And where other young women could be deceived from having just their parents to judge marriage by, I had what could be called special information: I had Edward and Martha, my age (just about), and close up, and daily.

Well, if a woman's not going to want marriage, she'd best get busy and want to be a schoolmarm or hire herself out as an embroiderer. All I wanted to be was a painter, but how are you going to admit a conceited think like that to people who are forever taunting you about picking up airs at boarding school? I could just barely admit it to myself.

All winter I'd helped with the work, but there's an air you can have even while working that makes people call you lazy anyway. I'd shelled corn, cut and salted meat, strung fruit, boiled soap, made candles. I do want it understood that I really worked. I'm a little touchy on the point. But now it was January and those big tasks were done. Now there were only the endless daily things, like sewing and spinning and cooking and milking, which couldn't in the nature of things get caught up with, and I wanted a day to myself.

That was why Martha wanted me dead. She didn't get a day, or so much as a minute. "Nobody else has time to make pictures," she said.

"Nobody else knows how," I said, kind of quizzing. I wasn't set yet in my mind to do the picture. It wasn't clear yet, and it had to be. You can't risk paper until it's clear. "Lot's Wife Looking Back" was what I had in mind. It would be fun to catch her just turning to salt, half salt, half woman. Bottom half salt, dress and all. Green tears falling in rows out of her indigo eyes. Lot stalking off sternly, not looking. Then off in the background Sodom and Gomorrah, a little clump of houses, going up in one big flame like a torch.

I looked at the kitchen fire to see again how flames went. A very little bit of blue right at the bottom, and then yellow. "Fire's not red,"

I said. "Why, for goodness sake, fire's not red!"

"Any fool knows fire's red," Martha said, slaving away. She always became a pitiful drudge whenever I thought to make a picture.

The youngsters sided with me, such as could talk. "Look, Mama! Aunt Patience is right! Fire's yellow!" They only jangled Martha more and didn't help me. She wouldn't look at the fire. She swatted them for sassing and then glared at me to make me feel guilty for getting them swatted.

By then I was thinking about whether to put tiny curtains at the windows of Sodom and Gomorrah, and maybe tiny flowerpots. And should I make people running and carrying things? No, God wouldn't let that happen. If You're going to destroy somebody, You don't let him run out whole-skinned and healthy and carrying something. That wouldn't count as destroying. It would hardly hurt at all.

But already I knew I couldn't do the picture, not here anyway. The walking baby, little Betty, hadn't yet been broken of reaching out for things. Well, I know there's nothing to do about a baby that reaches out but whack its hand, but that's a process I don't like to have to be witness to, and most of all I don't like to be the cause of it, which I would be if I set out a row of bottles filled with beautiful colors. Even a fairly big child, fully broken in, might forget himself and reach out for a sight like that.

I was thinking I might go to my own place and never mind about wasting heat, when the dogs barked and we heard the chain of a sled clanking in the yard. "Ho Buck, ho Bright!" someone called. It sounded like a woman, but it could have been a boy whose voice hadn't changed. Pretty soon there came a knock at the door. Martha went. The same voice said, "Where you want this put? It's the firewood Mr. White asked from us."

"Out front."

"Would you look and say it's half a cord?"

"It's half a cord," Martha said, and slammed the door fast. She was just one thoroughly scandalized woman, breathing but excited

too, I could tell, and blushing red. “I never,” she said.

Then she couldn’t understand why the children wanted to rush right out to see. She whacked them and got them bawling and then whacked them for bawling.

“Who’s out there? What’s the matter?” I asked.

I’d have got a whack too, but I was just about Martha’s size and she knew she’d get a good one back.

“Never mind,” she snapped.

With my fingertip I melted myself a peephole in the frost on the window quarrel, but the woodpile was too far around and I couldn’t see.

“Is it a woman or a boy?” I asked.

“Never you mind,” Martha said.

“If it’s a woman, I’ll get Tobe to unload that wood and ask her to come in,” I said. Tobe was Edward’s hired man.

“She don’t set no foot in this house,” Martha said.

“So it’s a she! Do you know her?”

“No, and I’m not about to. I heard about her. That’s enough. And I’m not about to have my youngsters see her. This a Christian home.”

I’d heard, too, about Sarah Dowling, and I wanted, after all these years as almost her neighbor, to get a look at her.

“She’ll have to come in,” I said. “She’ll be here at dinnertime.”

“Then she can go home and put a dress on first,” Martha said. “It’s in the Bible. Not that *she’d* know that.”

That roused the children again. They were wild to see. Poor lambs.

It breaks my heart to think of childhood, everybody bigger and whacking and shouting and teaching you not to reach for anything or look at anything, and not letting up on you till you get over wanting to.

I think that when Martha was a baby she had a little less natural interest than some. As for me, well, my father never put his whole

back behind breaking me. They say he spoiled me, sending me off to school, and before that he'd made my mother give me candles to read by and draw by, even though they were very expensive in those days. If he was late getting in, she'd never give me the candle, but knowing he was on my side made me strong. If one of your folks will back you up, you don't get broken.

So I guess it was my father, even in his grave, who made me able to stand against Martha when I should have been a timid slave thankful to breathe. My mind cleared and I knew just what to do. I took myself a shovelful of coals from the kitchen fire, not looking at Martha, and with my jaw set I marched myself over to my part of the house and I built a fire in my own kitchen.

It wasn't a kitchen to compare with Martha's. You couldn't cook for reapers in it, but I had no ambitions along that line. The fireplace was adequate, with a good draught. There was no oven, but I had a big iron kettle with a good snug lid that baked just fine.

My father had built my kitchen for me late, when he was drawing up his will and admitting to himself that I would never marry. I think he didn't want me to. He told me, during that time, that he'd never met the man he'd be willing to turn me over to, to obey and scurry for. He said he'd thought for sure I'd be a boy, from the way I shook my mother, and when I wasn't his heart nearly broke for me, wondering how someone with all that go could stand to be a woman. He'd said he'd half hoped naming me Patience would help a little. I suppose he wouldn't have said all that if he hadn't known he was dying.



When I had my fire going strong, I sat and looked at it. Yellow and blue, mostly yellow. And I thought what to feed this wicked Sarah Dowling who'd enlivened a January morning for dull Martha.

I should say that this was not by any means the first time I'd flounced out of Martha's kitchen. The issue had never before been

whether to shut out someone with an errand on the place at meal-time, but every few weeks we'd reach a breaking point about something. So I was pretty good at flouncing, and the main thing is, I had some food on hand at my place. First time, I'd had to go back in a few hours to get food. That was hard on my stiff neck and taught me a lesson. So I had flour, meal, salt pork, lard, dried fruit, sugar, salt, a few things like that on hand.

I could have stayed in my own place happily forever, but, admit it or not, Martha needed me. I'd stay away a few days, making pictures and sewing, singing little songs to myself, and then one morning Edward would come by and say, "Martha's ailing. Can you help out?" so I'd go back. That hurt *her* stiff neck.

But she ailed a lot and had to bend. She longed for a real servant, an orphan girl maybe, that she could beat and that had no other place to go. Edward, with so much land and a flourishing mill, could have afforded to get her one. But he didn't think of it himself, and when asked to he got bullheaded and wouldn't. "There are four women in this house already," he liked to say, ignoring that one was me, and two were infants under five, and the fourth was always on one side or the other of childbed.

When my kitchen was warm enough to make asking someone into it a kindness, I put on my cloak and went out. It was a mean day, windy and bitter, with little hard snowflakes – more grains of ice than snow – driving hard along the ground. I clutched my hood around my face, immediately cold, and hurried out front to Edward's huge, show-off woodpile.

There stood the Dowling sled, weathered to silver-gray like an old house without a trace of paint left on it, and two unmatched mongrel oxen breathing out clouds of steam. On top of the load of wood was a person. I took Martha's word that it was a woman, but I think Martha was very clever to know in a flash like that, especially without looking. I had to study to see the femaleness. But it was Sarah Dowling, dressed just as her reputation claimed, in boots, breeches,

jerkin, fur mittens, fur hat with a scarf tied over it to cover her ears. She was throwing wood off the load, fast, making a steady thunder of thumps.

I thought she was snooting me, because she didn't miss a thump when I walked up. I was feeling responsible for Martha and expecting to be snooted. But I only hadn't been noticed. When I called up, "You could put your cattle in the barn," the thumps stopped fast enough. Sarah straightened up and looked down at me.

I like to remember that, how she looked down.

She is tall, and standing on the load put her even higher above me.

Her eyes are a clear bright hazel, and she looked down at me.

She has a narrow longish face. Her hair is brown. I could see a little of it along her forehead, under her hat.

I said again, "You could put your cattle in the barn. They shouldn't have to stand in this for nothing."

She smiled a little, just the corner of her mouth up. "You're not the one I talked to before."

"No," I said. "That was my brother's wife." I had my chin tipped up. In a minute I noticed I had my mouth open a little. Gawking, I guess I was. To end that, I said, "I'm the old-maid aunt."

And that amazing girl up there smiled, a real one this time, both corners up, a big smile, a little too big maybe, a little out of proportion for such a narrow face. A smile like that could break a face in such weather.

"This house has two ladies, so hop down. I'll tell the hired man to take your cattle in and finish up this wood. You're coming in with me to warm up."

She said, "He can take them in, but I got a job here."

She was set. "I cut this wood. This part's easy," she said.

I couldn't budge her. Tobe took her cattle to the barn. I told her which door to come in when the dinner horn blew, and went back to my kitchen.



For dinner we had johnnycake and dried-apple applesauce and fried salt pork and tea. It pleased me very much to see her liking it all, eating fast but neatly. I thought of all the other foods I knew how to make, that she might like too. I wished to make them for her. She had so little the air of ever having been indulged. Surely a few small coddlings wouldn't spoil her or undermine her capable ways.

I was still eating when she finished. She put her cheek against her fist and watched me and smiled at me. I saw where any extended amount of that would give me trouble swallowing.

Indoors, she looked womanly. Lots of women are tall. Her face is fine and sweet, crowned with a coiled braid. Her breeches didn't hide how soft she is below. Maybe they even brought it out. She is also soft above.

"I should admit something," she said. My mind leaped to ideas I won't tell, but all she admitted was that she could have finished stacking that firewood and been gone by dinnertime. "I wanted to see your place inside," she said. "I never been in such a place before."

"Look around," I said, and finished my meal more easily while she walked around my kitchen. She touched my pots, hefted my tools, stroked my plastered walls, sniffed my herbs, gave my spinning wheel a whirl, all with such darling curiosity.

"This is fine," she said, without any envy, so I showed her my parlor and bedchamber too, though they were cold as outdoors.

I think I had more for myself alone than Sarah's whole family had, but since she wasn't envious I could take pleasure in showing things to her.

My pictures were in the parlor, some on the wall, some in a stack. She was delighted with them. Though shivering almost as hard as I was, she couldn't stop looking at them.

Nobody since my father had been interested in them, and when

Sarah was I found that I'd been lonesome.

"Look at that!" she'd say, and point to some little part I'd taken pains over. She laughed at all the little jokes I'd painted in. It was hard to hide how vain that made me, and then I thought, why should I hide it, from her? I gathered up all of the pictures and we went back to the kitchen and sat on the bench together beside the fire. I watched her eyes moving to every part of a picture, and when she smiled or changed expression at all I'd say, "What's that?" and demand that she point to the part that did it to her. Besides, I liked her hand, liked to make her point it.

"I haven't had anyone to look at them," I said, to excuse my vanity, but I didn't need to because she didn't hold it against me. In fact, she seemed vain in my behalf, as though anything good I did was to her credit, and I began to wonder how I'd been keeping on without her and without even knowing that she would someday come.

Reluctantly she put the pictures aside. "I got to get along," she said. "I can't gab all afternoon, like womenfolk." She stood up and looked down at me. "I never wanted to till now," she said.

"Do you always work like this?" I asked, carefully. I didn't want to say what other people said. I supposed she was touchy.

She was far from touchy. "Yup. I'm Pa's boy. He couldn't get a boy the regular way. Kept getting girls. So he picked me out to be boy because I was biggest." Her voice was so cheerful it made me think perhaps she didn't even know that she was outrageous.

"Oldest?" I asked.

"No. Biggest."

Cautiously I asked, "Do you like it?"

"Being biggest? There's not much I can do about it."

"Being boy."

"Well, all told, it's best, I expect. Anyhow it seems natural now. I been at it twelve years. I'm twenty-one now. I like being outside. I couldn't've fetched the wood today if I wasn't a boy. I wouldn't be here with you."

“You’ll have to change when you get married,” I said, thinking how everyone must say that to her and how she must hate it.

She didn’t seem to. She just said, “Don’t figure to get married,” which was what I wanted her to say because I didn’t want that long light step made heavy with child and that strong neck bent.

“But unless your father’s well-to-do –” I began, knowing her father wasn’t at all, of course.

“I figure to take up land and make me a place,” she said.

“Alone?” I asked.

Her face got a stubborn look. “I’m strong,” she said, and pushed up her sleeve and hardened her muscle for me. I reached up and touched, just a touch. A strong arm, but not a man’s.

“Very good,” I said, but she saw my doubts and they hurt her.

“I think on going but I never told it before. I was scared people would say I couldn’t. Do you think I can’t?”

Let somebody else tell her. I wouldn’t.

“No, I think you can,” I said, working hard to make my face and voice sincere.

Her smile made my lie worthwhile. “I want to live nice, and free, and snug. I think on it.”