

P R O L O G U E

Oregon

1864

Emily Wainwright Todd stood facing the rough doorway of the little cabin, willing herself to go inside. Behind her, the world huddled, gray and still, under the cold hard dome of winter. She could hear the ring of pickaxes from mines in the nearby mountains, the sound carrying for miles in the crystalline air. She rested her forehead against the cold doorframe and wished she could go back in time. She wouldn't repeat the mistakes that had brought her here. If only she knew what to do. In the three days since Samuel's death, she had been carried on the momentum of the funeral preparations. Now he was buried in the hard winter ground, and the neighbors were gone, returned to their unaltered lives. She was left to navigate hers without benefit of compass or map.

Her hands were numb from the cold: as numb as she felt inside. She would freeze if she stood out here any longer. But she couldn't make herself take that step. It

was too monumental. If only there were a ritual for such moments, when something as ordinary as entering a room seemed charged with meaning. But the time had come. Unless she wanted the neighbors to find her frozen body, she couldn't put it off any longer. She took a deep breath, opened the door, and stepped inside. She was twenty-eight years old, and, for the first time in her life, utterly alone.

She closed the door behind her and looked around, unsure of what to do next. The cabin was frigid – she could see her breath coming in white puffs. She went to the cast iron stove and peered inside: weak embers flickered in a pile of spent cinders. If she worked quickly she could revive them. She pulled the three-legged stool under her and carefully blew on the embers. They glowed beneath fluttering grey ash.

She fed kindling into the stove's belly, grateful to have the next few moments decided for her. On any other day she'd have been preparing the mid-day meal for Samuel when he came in from the fields. She'd be spared that chore for a while: her table groaned under the weight of covered dishes brought by her neighbors, more than enough to see her through the next few rugged days. Like her, most of them were scraping by, even more so in winter. She knew well what their generosity had cost them.

She also knew that the few souls who had braved the bitter February wind at Auburn Cemetery had come out of respect for her. Samuel had made few friends in the short time they'd lived in the Blue Mountains of Oregon: he'd kept to himself and preferred that she do the same. She'd rewarded the mourners with a brief service. Why make them stand in the cold and sing hymns for someone they barely knew? She'd watched impassively as the men strained to dig Samuel's grave in the frozen earth: their efforts would soon be over, while her struggle was just beginning. Few could survive alone in this harsh land, let alone a woman. They must assume it was only a matter of time before she packed up and returned to her family in Illinois.

She laid a small log on the fire and watched the clinging lichens burst into flame. The woody fragrance embraced her like an old friend as the crackling fire grew, magical and alive.

Fool! You're wasting the flame.

She clamped her hands over her ears in despair: it was Samuel's voice, lodged forever in her mind. She had instinctively braced herself for it. His harsh judgment would live in her head for all eternity. She would never be free.

She closed the grate and stood wearily, wiping her hands on her cloak. The sight of Samuel's rocking

chair, cold and still, loomed before her. She shuddered and looked away, only to see his overalls hanging on a peg by the sleeping loft. Suddenly, she saw him in her mind's eye, as clearly as if he were alive: descending the ladder, jerking his sweat-stained overalls over his lean body, damning her with his dark, accusing eyes. His hateful presence permeated the space as it had in life, his contempt as solid as the table that stood in the center of the room. She had to gather every bit of her waning strength to keep from running out the door and fleeing to the frozen mountains.

She forced herself toward the kitchen, where she picked up the dipper with trembling hands and filled the iron kettle. The last time Andrew was here, before the funeral, he'd braved the icy yard and filled two buckets from the well. She had enough water to last several days. It was a small gesture, but so thoughtful. She would not waste his kindness. She would make herself a cup of tea. Then she would calm herself, and she would think.

Tapping her foot, waiting for the water to boil, she lifted the cover on a casserole. It was a meat pie. The savory aroma made her swoon. When had she last eaten? Ravenous, she grabbed a spoon. The tender crust shattered as she broke through it. She scooped up a huge mouthful and brought the quivering spoon to her lips.

Her mouth watered in anticipation.

Then she stopped.

She would not behave like a savage just because she was alone. She would eat when her tea was properly brewed. With calm determination, she cut a slice of pie, placed it on a tin plate, and set it on the stove to warm.

Her cloak and bonnet now felt stifling in the toasty cabin. She went to hang them up and tripped over Samuel's cot: the bed where he had drawn his last shuddering breath. For a moment she stood shivering, despite the rising fire. Then, on impulse, she plucked Samuel's overalls from the peg, dropped them onto the cot, and shoved the whole mess into a dark corner. She arranged her cloak and bonnet on the peg and stepped back to study her handiwork. *The first small change*, she thought. *The first of many.*

Feeling undressed without an apron, she tied a reasonably clean one over her dress. How unnatural the women at the funeral had looked without their aprons! Samuel would certainly have approved. He'd never tired of complaining at the sight of her stained and tattered aprons. Well, he'd never have to see this one again, would he?

At last the water boiled merrily on the stove. She measured a heaping spoonful of dried chamomile flowers and another of dried lemon balm into her one remaining

china cup, poured boiling water over the herbs, and watched as golden swirls infused the water. Then she covered the cup with a plate and forced herself to wait five full minutes for the tea to steep. She needed it strong. Maybe later she'd take one of her tinctures to help her sleep. It wasn't that she was afraid. This wouldn't be her first night sleeping alone in the cabin. But the thought that no one would ever again be coming home to her, not even Samuel, made her feel as desolate as if she were on the moon. If she didn't sleep, she'd spend the night straining for the sound of absent footsteps, consumed by the crushing reality of her isolation.

When her tea was ready, Emily picked up the warm plate with a flour-sack towel and carried it to Samuel's rocking chair, the most comfortable seat in the cabin, until now forbidden to her. She started to sit but wavered. "This is my chair now," she said to the empty room, "if there be no objections."

Hearing none, she eased into the chair. Sitting in Samuel's place seemed wrong, but she forced herself to stay. She raised a mouthful of the long-awaited pie to her lips. The silky richness of pork and winter vegetables burst in her mouth. *This must be from Vina Norman*, she thought. *Bless your soul, dear friend.*

Emily savored her meal, and took her time over her

tea. She could do this. She could eat this meal, drink this tea. She could do this one, small thing. And perhaps if she did enough small things, she'd figure out what to do with the rest of her life.

