

# Trouble at Wild River

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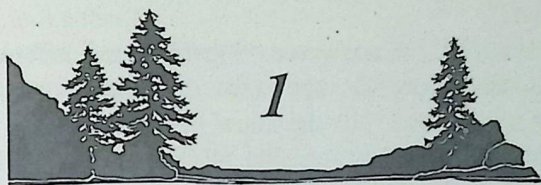


**ADVENTURES**  
OF THE **NORTHWOODS**

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## *Mysterious Noises*

In the glow of the lantern Katherine O'Connell's deep blue eyes sparkled. As she brushed aside the black hair escaping her braid, she looked ahead. Wildfire, the mare, trotted easily over the patches of snow, pulling the farm wagon in which Kate rode.

Far above, a lopsided moon lit the sky. On that cloudless March night the stars shone brightly, seeming just beyond the treetops. Sitting between her stepbrother Anders and their friend Erik Lundgren, Kate felt warm and safe.

Then, as Anders directed Wildfire onto a trail through the woods, an owl hooted. From off in the distance the call came—each note a lonesome cry. Kate shivered, but not from cold.

As the mare stretched out her legs, long shadows fell across the path. Like pointing fingers, pine branches reached toward the wagon, almost touching Kate.

Soon the call came again. Whoo, whoo, whoo, whoo—whoo, whoo, whoo, whoo-ah!

"That's not an owl," Erik said in the quiet that followed.

"It isn't?" asked Kate. "Then what is it?"

"Someone signaling." The lantern Erik held cast a flickering light on his brown hair. But certainty filled his eyes. "Shhhhhh!"

Anders reined in the mare, and the hooting seemed closer this time.

"It's a barred owl," Anders said as the call faded away.

"No, it's not," Erik sounded sure of himself. "It's someone talking through the woods."

Anders laughed. "I thought Kate was the one with a big imagination."

"She is," said Erik. "This isn't imagination. It's real."

"Yah, sure," Anders told him. "You betcha." He flicked the reins across Wildfire's back, and the mare stepped out.

But Kate felt curious. "Erik, how do you know? Why do you think it's not an owl?"

"I can't explain it," he answered. "I just hear the difference."

As Wildfire trotted on, Kate stared into the darkness, hoping to catch a glimpse of a large owl. Yet she knew Erik was seldom wrong. His ability in music helped him recognize other sounds as well.

"If it's not an owl, what is it?" Kate asked.

"You mean who is it," said Anders. "Who is creeping around in the depths of night? Who is ready to snatch you from this wagon?"

"Oh, Anders!" Since coming to northwest Wisconsin, Kate had fought against her fear of the nighttime woods. Yet she didn't want to admit that fear to this stepbrother who was also thirteen. Like Erik, Anders was six feet tall and broad-shouldered from farm work.

Pretending she wasn't afraid, Kate gazed up into branches still bare of leaves. No large owl flew from tree to tree.

In that March of 1907, the northwest Wisconsin days had been warm. Yet the nights dropped below freezing, providing perfect weather for a strong flow of sap from the sugar maples. For two weeks farmers and their families had worked hard, collecting the thin sap and boiling it down.

Dark came early to these woods, and Kate felt concerned that she'd miss what she wanted to see. "You're sure Joe's grandmother will still be making syrup?" Kate looked forward to meeting the Chippewa family.

"Yup," Anders told her. "He said his grandma would work late. She'll be finishing up for the day."

Joe's grandparents owned a farm on Trade River. Anders and Erik had known the Indian boy for some time, but Kate was new to the area. A year before, her mother had married Anders' father, and Mama and Kate moved from Minneapolis to Windy Hill Farm.

"Why does the Cloud family use trees near here?" Kate asked.

"They don't have sugar maples on their own land," Erik told her. "Usually they tap trees closer to home. This year Mrs. Cloud asked a farmer near Big Wood Lake if she could use his maples. When she gets done, she'll give him syrup and candy."

A grin crossed her brother's face. "You know, Kate, you can help Joe with all the work. That is, if you can keep up to him."

By now Kate knew Anders well enough to see through most of his teasing. Still she was curious. "What does he do?"

"Gathers wood to keep the fire going. Collects pails filled with sap. Brings 'em to the fire."

"It's hard work," said Erik. "Joe's brothers help too. They start when the sap begins running in the morning and keep on till it slows down at night."

As Anders directed the mare into the ruts of yet another trail, Kate asked, "Where are you going?"

Anders flicked the reins. "Taking a shortcut along the lake."

"With all the warm weather, it might be mucky in there," Erik warned.

Anders acted as if he didn't hear. Before long, the trees on either side of the path thinned out. Wildfire slowed her pace and stepped gingerly. Suddenly she sank knee-deep into mud.

Nervously the mare tossed her head. Anders clucked to her. "You're all right," Anders called, his voice soothing. "C'mon, girl. Giddyup!"

Wildfire turned her ears to the sound of his voice and lunged into the harness. The wagon jerked forward as the wheels churned through the mud.

As they moved more and more slowly, Kate grew impatient. "We'll be too late!" she said to Anders.

Her tall, blond brother paid no attention. At last they came to an open area with no trees. Here and there patches of snow remained on the ice of Big Wood Lake.

A large black heap loomed up in the darkness. Soon Kate saw more dark shapes along the shore. As they drew closer, she realized what they were—great piles of neatly stacked logs.

During the winter, farmers around the lake worked hard, cutting trees on their land. By selling the logs to a large company, the men earned money they needed for their families.

"When the ice goes out, the farmers will open the dam," Erik pointed into the darkness. "The logs will go out of Big Wood Lake, through the dam, and down the Wood River to the St. Croix."\*

Kate knew that the St. Croix River marked the border between Wisconsin and Minnesota. Once there, the logs floated downstream to sawmills at Stillwater, Minnesota.

Just then Anders stopped the mare, turned his head, and listened.

Quickly Erik blew out the flame of the lantern. "Shhhhhh!" he warned.

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\*The river used as a boundary between Minnesota and Wisconsin is pronounced "Saint Kroy."

Anders slipped to the ground and slogged forward in the mud. Standing next to Wildfire's head, he laid his hand on her neck.

A moment later Kate heard what she'd missed before. From a short distance away came a strange sound. What was it?

When Erik dropped down from the wagon, she knew he'd heard the same thing. Kate followed him, leaping over the mud in the track to walk on firmer ground near the trees.

Soon they came even with where Anders stood holding Wildfire's bridle. When Wildfire moved restlessly, Anders laid his fingers across her muzzle.

In the stillness Kate heard the mysterious noise again.

Wildfire stomped her foot. Anders quieted her, then led her off the path. In the light of the moon Kate saw him tie the mare's lead rope to a tree. Wildfire began eating the brown grass that reached through the little snow that remained.

When Anders returned to them, Erik took the lead. By now Kate felt curious. What was going on? Why were the boys being so careful? She felt afraid to speak, even in a whisper.

Erik reached the first pile of logs and waited until Kate and Anders caught up. Though the boys were six feet tall, the logs towered above them. From somewhere beyond, the sound came clearly.

Then Erik moved on, a dark shadow walking without sound. As Kate and Anders followed, the soft ground deadened their footsteps. When they reached the next pile of logs, they again stopped to listen.

This time Kate recognized the sound of sawing wood. But why would anyone work in the dark? What was he trying to hide?

Pushing aside her uneasiness, Kate followed Erik to the third pile of logs. This one was smaller. In spite of her short height, Kate looked over it.

Not far away, a lantern sat on the ground. The light of its flame reflected on a nearby saw.

A man dressed in dark clothes crouched close to still another pile of logs. He worked quickly, filling a gunnysack with slices of wood from the ground.

When the sack bulged, the man closed and tied it. Then he picked up a tool with a wooden handle. *What is it?* Kate wondered. *An ax?*

As the man moved closer to the lantern, Kate had a better look at the tool he was using. It seemed different from an ax—more like a small sledgehammer.

Taking a stand near the end of the logs, he swung the hammer. In

the crisp night air, iron thudded against wood. Again and again the man swung, striking the end of one log after another.

After a time he straightened up. Turning his head, he seemed to listen. In that instant Wildfire whinnied.

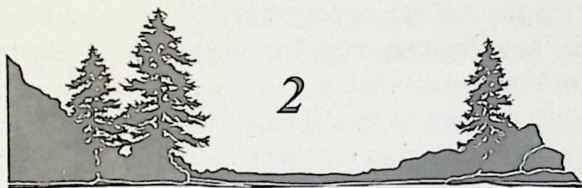
The man leaped over to the lantern and blew out the flame. In the darkness Kate heard running footsteps. Then all was quiet.

Struggling to see beyond the small flame that danced before her eyes, Kate blinked. Anders darted forward, and she followed.

Erik ran one way, Kate another, and Anders a third, searching as quickly as they could without a light. Yet they found no dark shape kneeling down, trying to hide within the shelter of the logs. Whoever had been there was gone.

Then Kate heard a noise farther off. "Over there!" she called.

As she raced toward the sound, she rounded a great pile of logs. One log stuck out farther than the others and caught her in the chest. Kate's arms flew up, and she fell backward into the darkness.



## *The Timber Swindler*

The next instant Kate landed hard. *I can't breathe*, she thought. *I can't catch my breath.*

For what seemed an eternity she lay still, too stunned to move. Then Erik called, "Kate, where are you?"

She heard his voice, but could not speak.

Erik knelt down, close to her head. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

But Kate couldn't answer.

"Knocked the wind out of her," Anders said.

Kate groaned and finally drew a long, ragged breath. From a short distance away she heard a quick movement. Was the man escaping?

Then Kate felt the damp ground on which she lay. The cold mud crept through her long stockings and dress.

Turning her head, she opened her eyes. In the light of the moon she saw how scared Erik and Anders looked.

Erik helped her sit up.

"What were you doing?" demanded Anders. "Don't you know that's a good way to get hurt?"

Kate flinched at the sound of her brother's voice. It made no difference that he always talked that way when he was upset. Hearing him, Kate felt even worse.

"I got hurt all right," she muttered when she could speak.

"I mean *really* hurt," Anders grumbled. "What were you thinking, running after that man? What if he decided to go after *you*?"

She hadn't been thinking. Kate knew that. She just wanted to make sure the man didn't get away. Yet she didn't care to admit her mistake to Anders.

Slowly she stood up. Bending over, she tried to brush the dirt off her coat and long stockings.

As she wavered, Erik caught her hand. "Be quiet, Anders," he said. "She knows it was a stupid move."

"Stupid, was it?" Kate was returning to normal. She dropped Erik's hand, wanting no more of his help.

Anders hurried to the wagon and returned with the farm lantern. Erik lit it again, and the two boys searched the area. After studying the ends of the logs, they walked in a circle, holding out the light.

Soon the lantern bobbed away. Kate started to follow, then realized she still felt shaken from the jarring she'd taken.

As the light disappeared, Kate trembled. Were the boys finding footprints in the soft ground? She didn't like being all alone. What if the man came back?

When the minutes stretched long, Kate returned to the wagon and climbed up to the high spring seat. Looking about, she gazed up at the night sky and the lopsided moon. Right now she'd welcome an owl with its large feathery body passing between the tall trees.

A cold wind blew from the lake, and she wrapped a warm blanket around her. From somewhere behind the wagon, a branch snapped. Kate jumped.

Twisting around, she saw the glow of a lantern pierce the darkness. Two dark shapes separated from the trees. When Anders and Erik stepped out, Kate felt relieved.

"We followed quite a ways," Erik told her. "But we lost him when the ground got hard."

The two boys climbed into the wagon, and Anders clucked to Wildfire. As they started off once more, he looked down at Kate. "Because of you, that man got away."

"Because of *me*!" Angry now, Kate flipped her long braid over her shoulder. "Because of Wildfire, you mean. She whinnied."

"If you hadn't landed flat on your back, we could have kept up with him," Anders said.

It was true, Kate knew, and she probably felt sorrier than anyone. But Anders upset her, and she didn't want to take all the blame. "What was that man doing?"

"Stealing logs," Anders growled.

"Stealing logs? How do you know?"

"Remember the sawing we heard?" Erik asked. "The man was cutting thin slices off the end of each log. Looked like he had a gunnysack—"

"For picking up the pieces," Kate said. Until now, she hadn't under-

stood all that was happening. She knew only that whatever the man was doing, it had to be wrong. He was trying too hard to keep it a secret.

"Why did he hit the logs with a sledgehammer?" she asked.

"It wasn't a sledge." Anders urged Wildfire ahead. Here the trail was firmer, and the mare moved faster.

"It's a smaller hammer," Erik said. "It's smaller and lighter and called a stamp hammer. On both sides of the iron head there's a raised design that makes a mark."

"Like the brand ranchers use on cattle?"

"Sort of. But ranchers use a hot iron to mark an animal's hide. Loggers pound their mark on the end of a log."

As the boys talked, Kate learned that every farmer who sent logs down the river, as well as every logging company, had their own special mark. In the light of the lantern she saw Erik's eyes.

"Loggers get paid according to how many logs come in with their mark," he explained.

"So the man is a timber swindler," Kate said slowly. "He pretends something that isn't his belongs to him."

Erik nodded. "And the farmers who work hard cutting down trees won't get paid for their logs. It's the same as stealing money from them."

Kate breathed deeply, and knew she was back to normal. At the same time, just thinking about the swindler made her afraid. What would he try to do next?

Before long, Erik leaped down from the wagon to open a gate. As they rode through a pasture, the woods thinned out. A fire glowed in the darkness.

As they drew closer, Kate saw four upright poles at the corners of the fire. Between them stretched other poles that crossed above the flames. From this framework a number of chains hung down. One held a huge iron kettle. Other chains held smaller kettles and pails.

An Indian woman wearing a long dress stirred the contents of the largest kettle. When Anders stopped Wildfire, a slender youth of about fourteen came forward.

"Joe, meet Kate," Anders said.

In the light of the lantern the boy grinned. With black hair and dancing black eyes, he looked athletic and strong.

"C'mon with us," Anders told him. As Wildfire trotted through the pasture into the farmyard, Joe ran next to the wagon.

At the hitching rail Kate climbed down and started for the house. Erik stayed close by and made sure she felt all right.

When Anders knocked, young children opened the door and went to find their father.

"Come in," the man said. "We're just having coffee."

Kate, Anders, and Erik followed him into the kitchen where a second man and two women sat at a round table. As they looked toward Kate, they stopped talking.

Just then Kate noticed a tall man standing along the wall. His head reached more than a foot above the doorway.

"Big Gust!" Kate exclaimed. She was surprised to see the seven-foot, six-inch-tall Swede. "I forgot that your sister lives near here."

As marshal in the nearby village of Grantsburg, Big Gust had helped Kate and Anders solve a mystery more than once. Now a welcome grin lit the giant's face.

"*God dag, god dag,*" he said. It sounded like "Good dog," but Kate knew it was the Swedish hello.

When Big Gust glanced beyond her to the boys, his smile faded. In the next moment he moved around the table to talk with Kate, Anders, and Erik.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

For the first time Kate realized how she looked. Small pieces of wood clung to her coat. Here and there smudges of dirt darkened the cloth, as well as her stockings and dress. She stepped back, wishing she could hide.

But Big Gust immediately followed the boys outside. As Kate joined them, Anders spoke quickly, telling the marshal what had happened.

Big Gust wasted no time. His deep voice rumbled as he said, "Just a minute," and hurried back into the house. When Gust returned, he wore his coat and brought the two men Kate had seen. The marshal towered over both of them.

Kate and the boys hurried toward Wildfire. As Kate climbed up and sat down on the high seat, Anders spoke sharply. "You're not going with us."

"Yes, I am," answered Kate.

"No, you're not," said her brother.

Then Erik came alongside, and Kate turned to him. "I can go, can't I?"

Erik shook his head. "It's not safe."

Kate couldn't believe what she was hearing. "I was in on the beginning. Why can't I go now?"

Anders climbed up beside her. "This is just for men."

"For men!" Kate sputtered. "You and Erik aren't men!"

"Yah, but we are!" Raising one arm, Anders flexed his muscles.

"We're in a hurry, Kate," said Erik as he waited for her to get down.

Kate glanced toward Joe, who stood a short way off. She felt embarrassed at being treated like a baby. "Why can't I go?" she asked her brother.

"Because you might get hurt again." Erik looked at her steadily.

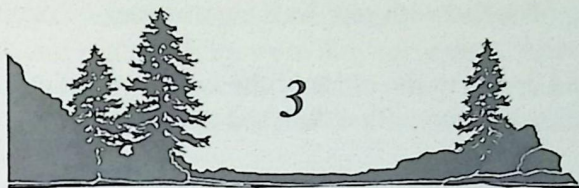
Knowing that she had no choice, Kate climbed down. She started for the house with her back stiff and straight. Yet when she heard Anders cluck to Wildfire, her curiosity proved too much.

Kate looked around to see the spirited black horse take the lead. Another wagon with Big Gust and the two men followed.

Then Joe bounded across the yard. His feet were swift and light and skimmed the patches of snow. As Anders entered the trail into the woods, the boy caught up and ran alongside.

*He runs as swift as a deer*, Kate thought as she watched Joe. Already she understood why Anders and Erik liked him.

Then the wagons disappeared from sight. Again Kate longed to be with them, to see what was happening. Had the timber swindler returned to the logs? Or was he, even now, hiding somewhere among the trees?



## *Kate's Choice*

Trying to push aside her disappointment, Kate followed the trail the wagons had taken out of the farmyard. With each step she wondered where the swindler was now. Then she wondered about the men and boys. *Are they headed into danger?*

Walking quickly through the pasture, Kate soon saw flames leaping upward in the darkness. In spite of everything that had happened, she felt excited about watching Joe's family make syrup.

When she reached the fire, she found children of all sizes gathered around Joe's grandmother. Eagerly they waited for the syrup to boil down into candy.

As Kate watched, Mrs. Cloud took smaller pails from chains hanging above the sides of the fire. From these she poured sap into the large black kettle hanging over the center.

Erik had told Kate it took more than thirty pails of sap—perhaps even forty—to make one pail of syrup. But that was all she knew.

"How do you get sap from the trees?" Kate asked Mrs. Cloud.

The grandmother looked her way without speaking. Yet Kate felt sure that she heard.

Kate opened her mouth to speak again and just as quickly closed it. As though it were yesterday, she remembered her first day at Spirit Lake School. She'd been the only one unable to speak Swedish. Now she wondered, *Does Mrs. Cloud speak a language I don't understand?* Kate wished she knew the words to use.

"I'm Katherine O'Connell," she said finally.

Mrs. Cloud pointed to herself. "Katherine."

Kate felt confused. "Katherine O'Connell," she repeated, pointing to her own self.

The grandmother broke into a smile. "Katherine Cloud," she said.

"Really?" Kate asked. "*You're Katherine too?*"

Her eyes sparkling with laughter, Mrs. Cloud nodded.

Just then a boy of nine or ten brought in wood for the fire. A younger boy carried pails filled with sap. As Kate watched, he emptied the sap into a large stock tank.

Mrs. Cloud spoke to the older of the two boys, using another language. When the grandmother finished speaking, the boy turned to Kate.

"Mamana speaks Chippewa," he said in English.

"*Mamana?*" Kate asked. It was a new word for her.

"It means *my mother*," he explained. "Our mother calls our grandmother that, and so do we. What do you want?"

Again Kate wished she knew the language. She felt grateful someone could translate. "I want to know how she makes maple syrup and candy."

Turning back to Mamana, he spoke rapidly. When Mrs. Cloud glanced toward the woods, the boy gave Kate a couple of pails and took one for himself. Carrying a farm lantern, he headed for the trees.

"Who are you?" Kate asked, as she followed him.

"I'm Peter," he said. Though shorter than Kate, he seemed taller because of the way he carried himself.

Soon they reached the sugar maples. Holding out the lantern, Peter explained how they cut a diagonal slit in each tree from which they collected sap. They inserted a small narrow trough just below the newly made opening.

The sap had stopped dripping for the night, but Kate saw a clear thin liquid in the birchbark container below the wooden trough.

Peter explained that not everyone tapped trees in this way. Some families pushed out the soft center of a sumac branch to use a tube instead of a trough.

The boy went from tree to tree. Each time he found a full container, he poured the sap into one of the pails they carried.

"You're Joe's brother?" Kate asked, as they started back to the others.

When Peter nodded, his eyes glowed with pride. "Joe runs miles without stopping."

"Miles?" asked Kate, curious how far Joe could go.

"Many, many miles," Peter said. "He runs faster than anyone I know."

Kate was sure that Peter's pride was more than a young boy bragging about his older brother. "Are you a good runner too?" she asked.

"Not as fast as Joe," Peter answered. "But I will be."

For the rest of the way, he told her everything he knew about his big brother. As she listened to Peter, Kate wondered what had happened to Joe and Erik and Anders. Why were they taking so long?

When Kate and Peter reached the fire, they emptied the sap they carried into the large stock tank. Then they joined the children gathered around Mrs. Cloud.

Before long the grandmother strained the syrup she had cooked down and filled several large containers. Using a long paddle, she continued stirring the contents of the biggest kettle. When the syrup thickened even more, the moment the children had been waiting for arrived.

With a wooden ladle, Mrs. Cloud poured some of the thick syrup into small containers. She poured other syrup into a clean patch of snow. Soon the snow hardened the syrup into candy.

The minute it was cool enough to eat, Peter gave Kate a piece. As her mouth closed around the maple candy, she wondered if she had ever tasted anything so delicious.

When she finished eating, Kate walked over to the woman who still worked by the fire. "Mrs. Cloud," she said. "Mrs. *Katherine* Cloud."

A glint of laughter lit the grandmother's eyes.

"The candy is very good," said Kate, and she was sure Mamana understood.

By the time the wagons returned, it was late. "We'll post a watch every night," Kate heard one of the men say to Big Gust.

"Hop in!" Anders told Kate.

"What happened?" she asked, as they headed back over the trail.

"Nothing." Anders sounded tired and discouraged.

"What do you mean?"

"We stopped quite a ways off and left the horses. But there must have been a bear around—"

"A bear?" When Kate lived in Minneapolis her friend Sarah Livingston told her there would be bears in these woods. Ever since moving to northwest Wisconsin, Kate had expected to see one.

"Whatever it was, it spooked the horses," Anders said. "One of the men stayed with them, but right after we left, Wildfire started thrashing around. She snorted and made all kinds of noises. I ran back to her, but it was too late."

"Too late for what?"

Anders sighed. "If the timber swindler came back, he sure wasn't around when we got there. He had plenty of time to clean up anything we missed."

"Whoever the man is, he's mighty tricky," said Erik. "And dangerous."

"Did the owl hoot again?" Kate asked.

"Yup," Erik told her. "But this time it was real."

"Oh, Erik! Are you sure you can tell the difference?"

"I'm sure," Erik said quietly. "Even Anders agreed with me."

When they pulled into the Windy Hill farmyard, the boys worked together to unhitch Wildfire.

As Anders headed toward the barn, Kate spoke softly, hoping he wouldn't hear. "I'm sorry, Erik. I'm sorry that the swindler got away because of me."

"That's all right," he said. "Any one of us could have fallen."

Anders turned back. "We could have, but we didn't."

A surge of anger rushed through Kate. Flipping her long braid over her shoulder, she hurried off. By the time she reached the kitchen door, she'd made up her mind. From now on, she'd do her best not to be left out of anything. From now on, she'd prove to Anders she could keep up with him or any other boy.

\* \* \* \* \*

At breakfast the next morning Kate and Anders told the Nordstrom family about the timber swindler. As they sat around the kitchen table, they spoke in English, but five-year-old Tina, who had not yet learned English in school, seemed to understand. With white-blond hair wisping around her face, she looked from Kate to Anders, her blue eyes wide.

Nine-year-old Lars listened to every word without speaking. As usual, a tuft of red hair stood up at the back of his head. Beneath his freckles, he still looked pale from his bout with pneumonia.

Except for a question now and then, Mama remained silent. Even this early in the day, she had combed her golden hair upward, piling it on top of her head.

*Mama's pretty*, thought Kate. Her mother moved slowly these days. Beneath Mama's large apron and the blue dress that matched her eyes, the baby she expected had grown large.

As Anders talked, Kate watched her mother. Though it had been just a year ago, it seemed a long time since she and Mama lived in Minneapolis. It was even longer since Daddy O'Connell died in a construction accident. But Kate remembered those days well. She remembered how often she woke up to hear Mama crying in the night.

Now whenever Mama looked at Papa Nordstrom, her eyes seemed to glow. Even her smile looked soft.

When Anders finished talking, Papa had the most questions. With a frown on his bearded face, he asked Anders to go back over the details.

"You actually saw the man cut off an end from each log?"

"We couldn't see that, but we heard it," Anders said. "We watched him put thin slices of wood into a sack. We think he stirred the dirt around, because we couldn't find sawdust."

"And there was a new mark on the end of the logs?"

"You betcha," said Anders. "When we went back, Big Gust and the other men checked the mark. None of the farmers who log around there use the one we saw."

"Well, I suppose the first thing to do is to warn the mill people at Stillwater. Find out who registered the false end mark."

"Big Gust said the same thing. He'll talk to Charlie Saunders."

"The county sheriff?" asked Mama.

Anders nodded. "Charlie will talk to someone at the mill. But Big Gust knew it might not do a bit of good. The swindler probably gave a false name. And now he knows we've seen what he's doing. If he's smart, he'll change the mark he uses."

Papa sighed. "If the thief isn't caught, farmers are going to lose a lot of money—money they really need. What's more, I don't like having a timber swindler wandering around the woods."

"We'll stay close to the house, Carl," Mama quickly assured him. "And before long the little one will come."

Papa smiled, and the frown on his face disappeared. "Yah. Soon we'll have another Nordstrom."

Tina looked at Mama and spoke quickly in Swedish. Kate understood Tina's question: "Do you think it'll be a boy or a girl?"

Mama's gentle smile erased the tired lines around her eyes. "We'll take whatever God gives us. And we'll be thankful."

"Are you hoping for a girl?" Lars asked Kate.

"For sure," she answered. "No more brothers!"

But Anders broke in. "No more *sisters*, you mean!"

"No more *brothers*!" Kate insisted. "Lars is fine, but you're—" She stopped, trying to think of a name she could say in front of Mama and Papa.

Mama held up her hands. "Stop it! Stop it! We'll be grateful if we have a healthy normal baby. That's what you should want too."

Anders pushed his chair away from the table. "Don't want any more dumb girls."

"Anders." Papa spoke sternly. "I don't want to hear you talk about a dumb girl again. And I want you to show respect for your mother."

The tall blond boy closed his mouth. But when Papa stood up to take the Bible from the shelf, Anders tipped back in his chair. Behind his father's back, he smirked at Kate.

Kate turned her head and pretended she didn't see. Once again she felt last night's rush of anger. As Papa read the chapter for that day, her thoughts leaped far away. It wasn't hard to remember what she'd decided.

*I'll show Anders, she promised herself. Whatever he tries, I'll do better. I'll prove a girl can do anything as well as a boy.*

A moment later Papa closed the Bible, and Kate realized she hadn't heard a word he read.

When Papa finished praying, Mama stayed in her chair instead of starting to work as she usually did. "I wonder," she said quietly, looking at Papa. "I wonder if I've really forgiven my little brother. It still hurts so much when I remember what he did."

As though it were yesterday, Kate thought back to January and the letter Mama had received from Sweden. For days she had walked around, looking sad.

"My little brother Ben," Mama said now. "He did something he never should have done."

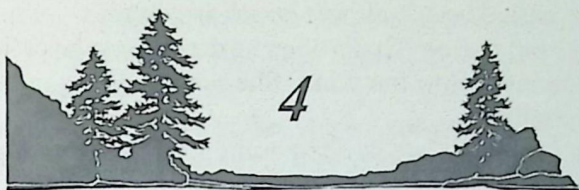
Tears welled up in her eyes. Impatiently she brushed them away. "Stealing from a shopkeeper. Running off, no one knows where. Such a black spot on our good family name."

Mama sighed. Placing both hands on the table, she lifted herself from her chair.

As Mama walked over to the cookstove, Kate watched her heavy steps. Until the past few months Kate had never seen her mother look awkward. Any day now the baby would be born.

Thinking about it, Kate felt uneasy. Out here in the country, far away from doctors, it was sometimes hard to get help. If possible, Erik's mother would come. As a midwife, she often helped women have babies. But what if she didn't get here in time?

As Kate washed breakfast dishes, she tried to push aside her uneasiness. Yet one thought kept going around in her mind. *What if something goes wrong?*



## *Surprise for Mama*

As soon as Kate finished the dishes, she went outside to pump fresh water and carry it to the chickens.

When Anders found her near the barn, he pushed back his cap and grinned. "Papa says I'm not supposed to call you a dumb girl. So I won't. I'll just treat you like one."

Kate gasped. "I don't have words to describe you," she sputtered.

Anders laughed. "Well, I can tell you what to say—about yourself, I mean."

Throwing back her shoulders, Kate lifted her chin. *How can I possibly get even?* she wondered. With her head high, she stalked to the house.

At lunchtime she glared at Anders, but refused to speak to him. Every time he spoke, Kate looked down at her plate. When the family finished eating and only she and Mama were left, Kate tried to escape.

Her mother's voice called her back. "Kate!"

Slowly Kate turned.

"Don't go out the door without forgiving the one who hurt you."

"Oh, Mama! Anders is always looking for ways to be mean! I don't want to forgive him."

"If you don't, it'll hurt you even more than it does him."

Kate groaned. "How can I possibly forgive him?"

A smile lit Mama's face. "You choose to forgive."

A lump the size of a walnut tightened Kate's throat. "It's all right for you," she said. The words spilled out before she could call them back. "You don't have to live with your brother every day."

"You don't think it costs me anything? To forgive my brother, I mean?" Mama's voice was still quiet, but sparks lit her eyes.

As Kate escaped down the trail to Spirit Lake School, her mother's words seemed to follow her. The more Kate thought about Anders, the more upset she became. "Stupid boy!" she said aloud.

The next moment she caught her breath. She had called Anders the very name he called her! It almost struck her funny.

Almost, but not quite. "That's what he deserves to be called!" Kate's angry voice shouted into the wind. She wasn't going to forgive him. Not until *he* changed.

*Choose to forgive?* Kate scoffed at the idea. But she couldn't push aside the awful way she felt.

Later that afternoon Kate walked the long trail to the main road and the mailbox. She found just one letter—an envelope addressed to Mrs. Ingrid Lindblom O'Connell Nordstrom. Someone certainly knew all of Mama's names.

The letter was written in a script that looked as though its writer lived in Sweden. But there was no return address. And the postmark read, "Duluth, Minnesota."

Kate hurried home with the letter. She found Mama sitting with Anders and Papa at the kitchen table.

Mama looked at the postmark, then turned the letter over in her hands. "Who can it be?" she asked.

"Well, maybe you should open it," Papa said gently. "I think you'll find out."

Mama laughed. "Yah, Carl, you might be right."

As Papa emptied his coffee into a saucer, Mama poured another cup for herself. Then she slit the envelope open with a knife and pulled out the single sheet of paper.

Mama glanced down at the signature. Her smile disappeared.

"It's Ben," she said, and her voice trembled. "My little brother Bernhard."

Kate bit her lip. She remembered how many times Mama had been upset because of Ben. As far as her mother knew, no one had heard from him since he ran away.

As Mama read the letter, her lips moved, but no sound escaped. When she looked up, tears stood in her eyes. Quickly she brushed them away.

Mama shook her head, as though not believing what she'd seen. "I must read it to you."

As Mama read aloud, she translated into English for Kate.

Dear Sister Ingrid:

You may be surprised to hear from your youngest brother. I admit I am afraid to write to you. However, you may know the worst about me already.

Eight months ago I stole money from a shopkeeper in our hometown. I had the America fever and ran away. I went over the mountains to Norway. There I bought a ticket and took a ship to New York.

While on the ship I suffered a terrible sickness. I nearly died, but I came to myself. I was ashamed of the bad thing I did. When I reached America, I found a job on the docks. I earned the money to repay the shopkeeper and set that right.

I am deeply sorry I disgraced our family name. I have asked God's forgiveness, and now I ask yours. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?

I am now working in Duluth, Minnesota, and have learned that you live not too far distant. I want to see you, but am afraid you do not want to see me.

People tell me I can cross the St. Croix River at Tennessee Flats near Grantsburg. I will come to the top of the hill on the Minnesota side of the river. I will be there at sundown, 28 March 1907. If you are there to meet me, I will know you want to see me. If you are not there, I will go away and never trouble you again.

Your youngest brother  
Bernhard

This time as Mama looked up, she smiled through her tears. "My little brother! Of course, I want to see him!"

Papa's eyes looked thoughtful. "What's the postmark on the letter?"

Mama turned the envelope over. "February 20th."

"That's over a month ago!" exclaimed Papa. "How can a letter take so long to come from Duluth?"

"And today is March 26th!" Suddenly Mama returned to earth. "March 28th is only two days away. We need to get ready!"

Papa shook his head. "A woman who could have a baby at any moment should travel all the way to the St. Croix River?"

"My little brother will be waiting for me," answered Mama. "He'll think I do not care. He'll go away, never to return again."

"Yah, that is true," Papa said, stroking his long brown beard. "But you shall not be there. What if your time comes while you are on the road?"

"I'll go instead of Mama," Kate said quickly. "Anders and I can meet Ben."

Anders grinned. "We'll take Wildfire. If we start early tomorrow, it'll be easy to reach Tennessee Flats by sundown the next day."

"Yah, it might work," said Papa slowly. "Then I can stay with Mama. I'll be here if the baby comes."

"Good! Then it's all settled!" exclaimed Anders. "We'll get ready right away." He started toward the door.

"Just a minute, Anders." Mama's voice called him back. "You can go. But I want you to ask Erik if he can go with you. Kate will stay here."

"Stay *here*?" Kate jumped up so fast that her chair tipped over. She couldn't believe Mama's words.

"Certainly." Mama's voice sounded as though her mind were made up. "I don't want you running around with a timber swindler hiding in the bushes."

"Oh, Mama!" Kate wailed. She looked toward Anders, hoping for his support.

But no responding grin lit his face. Instead, a strange expression darkened his blue eyes.

An awful thought crossed Kate's mind. What if—

From across the room Anders looked at Kate. Their gaze met. Was he wondering the same thing?

Slowly Kate picked up her chair and sat down. As Mama poured Papa another cup of coffee, Kate tried to think things through.

She decided to try again. "Mama, what if something goes wrong?"

"That's what I'm afraid of." Mama's voice sounded brisk.

Kate bit her tongue. She had certainly found a bad way to start. On her next try she was more careful. "Mama, you know I'm good at figuring things out—if there's a mystery or something."

Mama nodded. "Yah." She couldn't deny that.

"If something goes wrong, I can help Anders decide what to do."

Anders made a choking sound.

Kate glared at him. "Maybe I can think of something he wouldn't."

When Mama did not speak, Kate rushed on. "It's really important that we get there in time. If we miss your little brother, even by fifteen minutes, you'll never hear from him again."

"Yah." Again the tears welled up in Mama's eyes. "How awful it

would be for him to think that. To think I do not have it in my heart to forgive him."

Kate nodded. "It would wreck Ben's whole life. So I'll help Anders find him."

Anders cleared his throat, but Kate refused to look at him.

Mama sat quietly, thinking about it. "You're right, Kate, two heads are better than one."

Kate sighed with relief.

But Mama wasn't finished. "Anders, you go over and talk to Erik."

Mama turned back to Kate. "If Erik can go, it should be his head and not yours."

"Oh, Mama!" Kate wailed again.

But her mother's mind was made up, and Kate knew it wouldn't do a bit of good to say more. As Anders headed out the door, she pulled on her coat and followed him.

"I want to go with you," Kate said when safely away from the house. "Tell Erik I want to meet Mama's little brother."

Anders pushed back his thatch of blond hair. "Remember, Kate. Mama's little brother is now eighteen years old."

Again Kate felt uneasy. She remembered the strange expression she'd seen on Anders' face. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" she asked.

Her brother shrugged. "Well, depends." The look in his eyes told Kate that Anders was more concerned than he sounded.

He started for the barn, then stopped and came back. "Are you wondering if Mama's brother has already crossed the river?"



## *Papa's Warning*

Kate felt as if a cold March wind had struck her. That's what she was wondering, all right. Even though she and Anders were alone, she spoke softly. "Anders, do you suppose Ben is the timber swindler?"

"I don't know," he said. "Can you remember anything to give us a clue?"

"How the swindler looked, you mean?"

"Yup." For once Anders sounded serious. "It was pretty dark," he said.

"I think he was tall," answered Kate. "And thin. Not heavy around the middle."

"That's what I thought too." Anders squinted into the morning sunlight instead of looking at Kate. "You know what that means."

"I'm afraid so." Kate spoke in a low voice, as if even the nearby bushes could hear. "Some older men stay thin. But some look more—more—heavysset."

"Broad through the shoulders," said Anders. "And thick through the middle."

Kate giggled, but the laughter died on her lips. "The swindler was thin through the waist, wasn't he?"

"But strong in the shoulders," said Anders. "So he could be most any age."

"I think there's something we need to know." Kate spoke slowly. "If we find out that Ben is the swindler, would Mama—" She stopped, hating to even ask the question.

Anders finished for her. "Would Mama want us to bring him home?"

Looking as if he disliked the idea as much as Kate, Anders walked back with her to the kitchen. When he opened the door, Mama and Papa were still at the table. They looked startled, as though they had suddenly stopped talking.

Anders joined them at the table. "Mama, do you have any idea what your brother looks like now?"

Mama glanced at Papa before she answered. "The most recent picture was taken—" Mama stopped to think. "Probably six years ago."

"It's in the trunk?" Kate headed for the dining room.

"On the right side," Mama called after her. "Near the bottom."

Mama had brought this trunk from Sweden at the age of seventeen. On the flat top stood a photograph. Picking it up, Kate studied the faces. She knew the story of the picture well.

Mama's parents sat in the center, surrounded by Mama's five sisters and two brothers. The youngest sister held a framed photograph of Mama.

"So I could still be part of the family," Mama often explained. Soon after coming to America, she'd had the photo taken and sent to her family.

Now Mama's youngest brother interested Kate most—little Bernhard. Two and a half years old at the time his sister arrived in America, he looked blond and chubby and happy.

Kate stared at Ben's round boyish face. How could a boy like that steal from a shopkeeper?

Setting the family photo aside, Kate opened the trunk and searched for the more recent picture of Ben. It was far down, beneath blankets and towels. *Bernhard Lindblom*, it said on the back, along with the date, 1901.

Ben was still blond, but now he had stretched up. Ben's grin reminded Kate of Anders.

When Kate brought the picture to her mother, Mama gazed at the face without speaking. "Yah, Ben's tall," she said at last. "Like my Papa."

"And thin," said Anders, looking over Mama's shoulder.

"And thin." Mama bit her lip, as though it hurt to look at her brother.

"He's starting to get broad shoulders," Papa said.

"Yah, from the farm work," Mama answered. "Always there was more work than money. The farm was too small for a big family. Papa and Mama worked night and day, but it wasn't enough."

Then Kate noticed something she hadn't seen in the earlier picture. "Ben has a scar on his chin."

Mama looked closer. "You're right, Kate. Something must have happened to him between the two pictures."

As Mama set the picture down, Anders turned to Kate. "You ask," he said.

"No, you." Kate dreaded the idea.

"It's *your* job." Anders sounded unwilling to give in.

"It's *yours*," Kate answered.

Anders shook his head. "She's *your* mother."

Mama looked from one to the other. Her eyes flashed. "And I hope I'm *your* mother, too, Anders. Even though I'm the second one."

Anders flushed, and Mama turned back to Kate. "Now tell me. Just what are you and Anders talking about?"

Kate cleared her throat. "About Ben, Mama." But she couldn't go on.

"Ahhhh!" A light entered Mama's eyes. "Are you wondering if he's the timber swindler?"

Kate felt the warmth of embarrassment creep into her face.

Mama nodded, as if she had her answer. "Carl and I just talked about it." Mama glanced toward Papa, as though needing his support. "We wondered if Ben has already crossed to this side of the St. Croix River."

Mama bit her lip. In her eyes there was something even greater than hurt. Was it worry? Or more? To Kate it seemed as if her mother's heart were being squeezed. Unable to bear the pain in Mama's eyes, Kate looked away.

For long minutes no one spoke. In the stillness Kate heard the tick of the clock in the dining room. Then a piece of wood dropped in the cookstove.

"I want to believe," Mama said at last. She wiped her hand across her eyes.

After a moment she went on. "No, it's more than that. I *do* believe Ben meant what he said in the letter."

Mama drew a deep breath. "When Ben says he's sorry, I have to believe he means it. I have to believe he's changed, unless he shows me he hasn't."

When Mama spoke again, her voice sounded stronger. "Whatever Ben did in Sweden, it's over. It's over because I forgive him."

Grasping the edge of the table, Mama pulled herself up. As she walked from the room, her back was straight, but her shoulders trembled.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Anders returned from talking to Erik, Kate heard the good

news. Mr. Lundgren and Erik's older brother were gone, so Erik needed to stay home to do chores.

Mama gave permission for Kate to go with Anders, but a troubled look shadowed her blue eyes. "Anders, there's something you have to promise me," she said.

"Sure, Mama. What is it?" His lopsided grin told Kate that he knew what was coming.

"I want you to promise that you'll take good care of your sister."

Anders lifted his right hand and did his best to put on a straight face. "I solemnly swear, Mama. I'm very good at taking care of Kate."

"I want you to do more than that," Papa added. "I want you to promise that no matter what happens, the two of you stay together."

Anders' smirk disappeared. "Yes, Papa," he said solemnly.

Mr. Nordstrom turned to Kate. "You promise?"

"I promise." Kate looked at Papa because she refused to look at Anders.

When Kate hurried to her room, she felt excited. She had gotten what she wanted, after all. She could go to meet Ben. And there was something more. *I'll prove to Anders I can keep up with anything he needs to do.*

As Kate packed her other dress and a warm sweater, she looked forward to going to Grantsburg. The Nordstrom family traveled the eleven long miles only when there was a real need.

*What will it be like?* Kate wondered, as she thought about going five miles beyond the village. Kate had been to the St. Croix River only once—when coming to live at Windy Hill Farm.

Now Kate wished that Erik were going along. It was always fun being with him. Yet something else bothered Kate much more.

During the late afternoon, she and Mama worked together, preparing supper. For a time the two of them were alone. Kate cracked butternuts and watched for her chance. Finally she asked, "Mama?"

"Yah?"

Kate looked at a nutshell instead of her mother. "What if the baby comes while I'm gone?"

A smile lit Mama's eyes. "Then I'll have a little one for you when you get back."

"That's not what I mean." Kate tried to choose her words carefully. "What will happen when the baby is born?"

Mama looked surprised. "Why, you know. Papa will go for Erik's mother. She's a good midwife and has promised to help me."

Again Kate hesitated. "I know Mrs. Lundgren is a good midwife, but—" Kate stopped, then went on. "What if—" Once more, words failed her.

Mama sat down next to Kate. "What if something goes wrong? Is that what you're asking?"

Unable to look into Mama's eyes, Kate nodded.

Mama reached out, putting her hand on Kate's arm. When she spoke her voice was gentle. "You're right, Kate, sometimes things go wrong. Out here in the country, I'm far from help. I know that."

"I'm afraid, Mama," Kate whispered.

"Afraid that something will happen to me, yah?"

"Yah." The word sounded strange, coming from Kate. "If something goes wrong, would having a baby be worth it?"

"I believe God wants me to have this new life," Mama said. "I need to trust that He'll take care of me."

Mama took Kate's hand. "Here, Kate. Feel the baby's foot."

At one side there was an extra bulge in Mama's large stomach. As Kate touched that place, she felt a small kick.

Kate laughed, but her mother looked serious. "That's what it's like," Mama said. "That's what it's like to know a little heart beats beneath my ribs."

Mama patted her stomach. "In the whole world there's no other baby who will be exactly like this one. I'm the only person who can give this little one life."

\* \* \* \* \*

That evening Papa sat down at the kitchen table to help Anders and Kate plan their trip.

"You'll have terrible mud for at least part of the way," Papa said. "But you've got two good days to travel. When you get to Grantsburg, go to Walfrid Johnson's and ask if you can stay overnight."

As he finished sharpening a pencil, Papa put down his knife. "If you get up early the next morning, you should have more than enough time to find Ben."

Papa started drawing a map. "There's no bridge over the Wood River between Grantsburg and the St. Croix."

Papa drew a jiggly line showing the Wood River as it flowed through the north side of the village.

"That means you have to cross on the bridge in Grantsburg. Then go north until you turn left here."

Papa drew another line. "If you follow this road, you'll find a bridge across Sand Creek. Someone cut down two big trees and laid them from bank to bank. Small poles cross the trees. They're enough so that Wildfire's hoofs won't go through."

"Won't the creek be frozen?" Kate asked.

"Aw, Kate," said Anders. "Every one knows that if a crick flows fast, it won't freeze in winter." He tipped his head slightly, as though trying to say something without words.

Kate looked beyond Anders to the wood cookstove. Mama stood there, baking cookies for them to take along. She seemed to be listening.

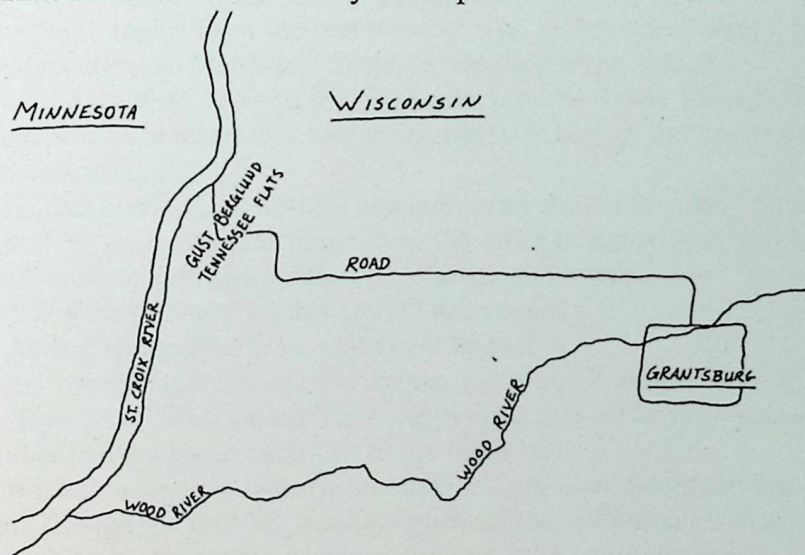
Papa extended a line across the creek. "Keep on this road. Then take a right and a left. You're going west, then north, then west again."

Anders nodded, and Papa began writing. "You'll come to the Berglund farm. Near his house take the trail into the woods, and you'll end up at Tennessee Flats."

"Tennessee Flats?" asked Kate.

"The first settler in that area was a man named Isaac Tennessee."

Kate leaned forward to study the map.



Papa pointed to an area near the St. Croix River. "In the early days people traveled up the Wisconsin side of the river and forded it there."

"What do you mean?" Kate asked. In spite of her desire to make the trip, she was starting to wonder about all that could happen.

"They crossed it," Papa explained. "There's no bridge there, but the river is wide and shallow. In summer there are ferries at other places along the St. Croix. But people used to walk over at Tennessee Flats, or take a team of horses. They stayed on the west side of the river to go to Duluth."

Anders tipped back in his chair, as though sure that he knew the way. "So we cross the river at Tennessee Flats."

As Mama walked into the dining room, Papa lowered his voice. "I hope so."

"What do you mean, you hope so?" asked Kate, her voice just as quiet.

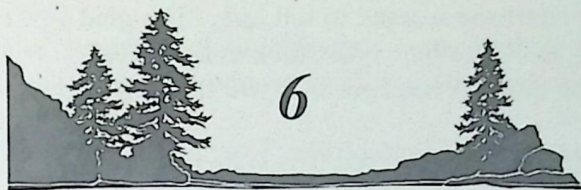
Papa sighed and ran his fingers through his beard. "If the river is still frozen, you'll have no trouble crossing over. If not—"

Anders nodded as his gaze met his father's.

"If not what?" Kate whispered.

"I don't want your mother to worry," said Papa. "She's got enough on her mind right now."

He looked first at Anders, then at Kate. "If the ice has gone out, you'll be in trouble. Big trouble."



## *Growing Evidence*

The next morning Kate awoke with a feeling of excitement in her bones. As she went outside, the sun peeked over the horizon.

Already Anders had backed Wildfire between the shafts of the wagon. The mare's black coat and white socks shone in the early light.

The farm wagon looked like an oblong box with the large wooden wheels in back bigger than those in front. Kate climbed up into the wagon bed.

Anders handed her Mama's two baskets of food. Kate knew what they contained—enough of her mother's good brown bread to last for four days, apples from the barrel in the root cellar, carrot sticks, and oatmeal cookies. Mama had made certain they'd eat well.

Carefully Kate covered the food with a heavy horse blanket. She could only hope that if it rained, the blanket would keep the sandwiches and cookies dry.

Anders handed up a wooden box with extra clothes for each of them, as well as more blankets made from the hides of animals. A tool box came next, as well as a hatchet, ax, shovel, and bucket.

"Why do you need all this stuff?" Kate asked.

Anders shrugged. "Well, you never know."

As they finished loading the wagon, Lars started across the yard.

"Bye, Lars," Kate called. Then she jumped down. Her nine-year-old brother had gotten up early just to see them off.

With a coat pulled over his nightshirt, Lars wore boots too big for him. Though the morning sunlight showed the whiteness of his face, Kate felt grateful for his growing strength. She couldn't take that for granted. Not anymore.

"You're a good brother, Lars," she said quietly when Anders went to the other side of the wagon.

Lars flushed. "Yah, sure." He sounded like Anders. Yet his eyes shone, as though Kate's words meant something to him.

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When Mama receives word that her brother Ben wants to visit, suspicion turns toward him. While living in Sweden, Ben stole money from a shopkeeper, then disappeared. Could he be the thief discovered the night before?

Ben's letter gives them only two days to meet him. If they don't, Ben will leave, never to be seen by the family again. With Mama's baby coming soon, Kate and Anders must cross the St. Croix River without their father's help. How can they escape danger, find Ben, and offer Mama's forgiveness before the sun goes down?

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