

Chapter 1

It was in the spring of 1841 that I left home for the first and last time.

I had turned seventeen the previous winter, and now that Sarah, the next oldest after me, was fifteen and able take care of the four younger ones, I couldn't long remain at home, another hungry mouth for Momma and Poppa to worry about.

So it came as no surprise to me that March day when Momma sat me down and said that it was time for me to be going out on my own. There were tears in her eyes when she told me because Momma always thought of me more as a friend than a daughter. She'd been only seventeen when I was born, and we'd worked side by side on the farm and in the kitchen for as long as I could remember. I might have been losing a home, but Momma was losing the closest friend she'd ever had.

"We'd hoped that you might have plans to marry by now," she said, brushing away the tears that had reached her cheeks.

I shook my head.

To be sure, last fall Tom Dawkins had come by our small farm more often than his passing through the neighborhood on the way to his job as a bank clerk might justify. And his farewells to me on the front porch long after the rest of the family had gone about their business were lengthy and filled with a great deal of talk about banking and his future in it. He would run his fingers nervously around the brim of his hat when he talked about himself, glancing up at me shyly from time to time as if trying to read from my face what I was thinking.

One evening when Momma invited him to stay for supper, our good-byes took us long past twilight. Standing together next to his rented carriage, he asked if he might kiss me. Even now, over twenty years later,

sitting here and looking down on a busy Boston street, if I close my eyes and breathe softly, I can smell the leather of the carriage seat behind my head and the slightly musty aroma of his wool suit as he leaned forward and placed his lips against mine.

I had sometimes wondered, as all girls must, what it would be like the first time I was kissed by a boy. Most memorable to me now is the way my eyes crossed blurring the image of his face as his lips approached mine. I recall thinking at that very moment that when people kiss they often do not see each other clearly. But overall, I decided that it was a pleasant sensation, and I wouldn't mind doing it again some time. The earnest expression on Tom's face as he drew back should have made me suspect, however, that his thoughts were of a deeper kind.

This was borne out the next afternoon when Tom returned in the same carriage and suit. He asked my parents if he could take me for a ride. Joyful at the thought of any variation from the routine of life on the farm, I quickly changed into my best gingham, not noticing the keenness of expression on the faces of Momma, Poppa, and Sarah.

We had traveled about two miles when Tom pulled off onto a grassy verge. He suggested that we might rest for a while under a large maple. I was about to object that, since we had not been out long, there was surely no need to rest the horse or ourselves, when I noted an unusual determination in his face. This led me to believe that rest was not his only reason for stopping, so I remained silent.

Once settled under the tree, Tom seized both my hands so ardently that I thought he was going to kiss me again. Two kisses in two days seemed quite a lot, but I planned no objections. Instead of moving his face close to mine, however, he looked over my shoulder at the horizon as if seeking a sign of the future weather. I watched the Queen Anne's lace dancing in the field behind him.

"Miss Taylor," he began, his eyes finally seeking mine. His voice had become deep and formal like the one the pastor used on Sunday when speaking from the pulpit.

"You must know by now that I have come to greatly enjoy our conversations and the interest you have shown in my plans for the future."

I nodded politely.

"It has come to my attention that second floor lodgings across the street from the bank have recently become available."

"Have they indeed?"

"They are very spacious with a markedly sunny exposure and large windows in the sitting room."

"How nice," I said sincerely. The small openings that passed for windows in the farmhouse let in precious little sun or air.

"And since these lodgings are directly across the street from the bank, I would be able to come home for noon meal every day. My desk is even visible from the front window."

"Oh," I exclaimed, "are you planning to rent these rooms for yourself? I did not understand that."

Tom stared at me intently as if I were some sort of marvel.

"Abigail, I was hoping that you would be willing to share them with me as my wife."

The raucous cries of one crow arguing with another gave me an excuse to gaze off into the woods to compose myself.

"I have received assurances that I will be given an extra four dollars a month beginning in a fortnight," he said in a rush. "And, as you know, my future with the bank guarantees that I will be able to comfortably support a wife and children." He paused for a moment to take a breath, then went on, "If that is your concern."

I had already seen some pain in my life. The death of a brother while but an infant had etched lines in my mother's face that I knew would never be erased. And the loss of my favorite cat to a marauding fox had made me cry until I thought my chest

would burst. But until I looked into Tom's eyes, filled with hope for the future, and told him as gently as I could that I was sorry, but he had misunderstood my feelings for him, I had never consciously inflicted great pain on another.

His expression of incomprehension and the heavy silence of the mercifully brief ride home gave me cause to consider how often two people may talk of the same things while still holding to different meanings.

You must think me a very silly girl not to have guessed Tom Dawkin's intentions. In my own defense, I can only say that by working side-by-side with Momma for so many years I had come to think of myself as being quite self-sufficient. Unwittingly my mother had taught me pride, and I considered myself a woman who was not interested in having just any man as a husband.

Even at the village school, which I had attended religiously up to this year, I had spent little time with my fellow students. Mr. McGowan, our old and very learned schoolmaster, had taken me aside and given me private lessons from his own small library once he became aware of my intellectual turn of mind. When I had finally left school he had smiled sadly and said that aside from not having any Greek or Latin, I was as well read as many lads going on to Harvard.

In any event, my previous life led me to think of Tom as a friend whom I might occasionally kiss, but I was certainly not prepared to consider him for a relationship that was in any way more important than this.

Once back home, Tom, to his credit, helped me down from the carriage and escorted me to the front door. It was I who bolted inside at the sight of my father coming around the side of a house with a congratulatory smile already forming on his lips.

Father spent the rest of the day silently working around the farm with the same expression as when Agnes, our best milk cow, had died. It was left to mother to take me aside later that evening.

"Tom is a good man," she began, as we sat alone around the worn oak table, Sarah having been deputized to keep the other children at bay. "We hoped that since you had spent a good deal of time with him that you might have feelings for each other."

When I said nothing, she went on. "He has a good job. When we sent you to the village school and you took so quickly to learning to read and write, we'd hoped you'd marry a man who could do the same."

I nodded.

My mother held out her rawboned hands, worn tools that she used to help keep both the family and farm together.

"I'd hoped you'd marry someone who didn't work the land. Someone who could set you up in town where all you'd have to do is cook, clean, and look after the children."

"I know, Momma."

"Why won't you marry Tom?" she asked gently, more puzzled than angry.

For the first but by no means the last time in my life, I experienced the crushing inadequacy of my words to match my thoughts. How could I explain to her that the vision of spending day after day across the street from the bank, leading a life in tune with the rhythms of Tom's arrivals for dinner and his occasional waves from behind his desk, left me breathless with fear?

How could I explain to this woman who sat across from me, bent over by daily work and care, that the relative comfort of a life with Tom was a prospect that created a deep, soul-numbing panic in me? As the consumptive on her deathbed slowly feels her lungs fill with fluid and foresees her end, so surely did I know that I would drown in such a life.

"I can't explain, Momma," I said. "It's just not enough."

She gave me a long look, then nodded as if my answer might have made sense to her at one time.

Three months later I traveled the fifteen miles to Concord to take up work as a servant in the home of Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson.

