

## Episode Thirty-nine ♦ *Harvest Festival*

“All able bodied people east to the firebreak.” Sandra directed a small group. “Yes, women will help with the bucket brigade.”

Anita accepted George’s help climbing down from the wagon. “Should we have brought our buckets?” she asked then glanced at the glowing sky in the east.

He shrugged.

“You’re pregnant, right?” Sandra approached. “Inside the meetinghouse to help care for the little ones.”

Anita started toward the building; George grabbed her arm. She stopped and looked over her shoulder at him. He said, “Know I don’t want to be anywhere else.”

Her heart relaxed, she turned and embraced him. “You be careful tonight.”

“Okay,” he said. “Is there something I should know?”

She thought for a moment, a bit unsure what he needed to hear, and said, “You’ll be fine. Just come home.”



Nine days had gone by quickly after one long, terrible night. “It was the worst range fire I can remember,” an old, old man had said. There was much debate on that, but many agreed Anita’s warning led to better preparations. Some were certain her prophecy saved Red Cloud.

A couple days after the fire, George had returned home following a day spent with the schoolchildren preparing the pageant. He had rushed and was short of breath. “The Dagfrids – Egor, his wife, Tyler, an aunt, and some kids are in Red Cloud – lost everything. About half dead. Priorby looted, burnt, razed. Livestock stolen or slaughtered. Survivors scattered.”

Anita hurt for those who protected and helped her, wanting to be there for the Dagfrids. “What can we do? What do they need?”

“They’re being looked after.” George had smiled. “It’s amazing. Red Cloud opens arms and accepts those in need.”

After the fire, more goods came to the soddy: feather pillows, an elk skin blanket, canned fruit and vegetables, a bag of beans, a very pregnant cow. If things worked out as planned, the heifer would be nursing before Anita was due. At first Anita figured these items arrived because Harvest Festival approached. Then people came with questions. “Will I have a boy or girl?” “My parents are getting up there in years. How much longer?” “Will we have more rain next year?” “Whom should I marry?”

Anita explained she didn’t have the answers. Occasionally she touched a hand and had a flash of sight. “Watch winter illness closely or you might lose him.” But usually she had to send the asker away with hope. “Does it really matter if it’s a boy or girl if you love the baby?”

“Can’t you read some bones or something?” a woman asked. Anita shook her head.

Anita looked around the small room, starting to feel a bit cramped by the things people brought her in anticipation of answers and reassurance.

One afternoon, while George was at the meetinghouse rehearsing with the children, Janelle Foster came with some tea, cakes, and most importantly, dressmaking pins. Janelle said, "It's really a beautiful dress. Very elegant. You'll be the belle, I promise."

Anita took a bite of a small spice cake. "Should I wear something else? I mean, if it's too much."

"Of course not! It's lovely and different. All the women will adore it and want to copy it for next year. Now how about putting it on and I'll pin it for alteration." As Janelle helped adjust and pin the untapered bodice and puffy sleeves on the yellow cretonne dress from Hannibal, she said, "I don't know how to ask this and I know it's silly, but what I want to know is, Terence had quite a thing for another girl in town when we were growing up." She looked away.

Anita guessed at the question but preferred it be asked outright. "Yes?"

"Well, it's just, he's gone all day long. How do I know – for certain – he's not straying?"

Anita took her friend by the wrists. "The answer's in your heart. A wife always knows."



"It's not that much farther," Jose said to Anita, both perched on the wagon's bench. Next to George, in the back of the Gonzalvos' wagon, was Clearie's pack filled with things they'd need during the four days in town. Rosie huddled with the small children under a blanket.

"I can't believe he walks to town every day." Anita shook her head. "It's so far."

The bright morning sun glittered on the frosty, dead grass. Leaves had turned yellow, orange, red and dropped to the earth. Within the firebreak, from the Gonzalvos' house into Red Cloud, fire consumed nothing. George had reported close calls on the eastern side of town; there the bucket brigade made the difference. Outside the ring the fire consumed all and continued to the north and west. Some unharvested grain had been lost.

In town, walking to the Wanamakers' home, George said to Anita, "Just like the market. In the free settlement."

"How do you mean?" Anita asked.

"Organized chaos. So many people. Yet there's a place for everyone and everyone knows what to do."

She knew her face had one of those looks; she did not get his comment. "What about the animals?"

"Terence, Jose, Beto, and I will take turns going out and tending them twice a day. We'll just have to watch and see what happens. Wow. Our first Harvest Festival in Red Cloud!" As usual, George was happy and excited.

"My back hurts," Anita said. "I need to sit. That wagon ride didn't help."

"We're almost there," he said.

Aida Wanamaker stood at the door, wiping her hands on a towel. “Welcome. You’ll share the kid’s room with another couple.”



George sat with Anita and the Fosters in the back of the meetinghouse. At a single table in the front sat eight people: five had been overseers for the past year and three were storytellers. The storytellers took mental notes, remembering for the town, and were frequently called on to speak of the past.

The chair stood. “Every resident twenty-five or older will approach the council.”

George leaned over to Janelle and asked, “Does that include us?”

“No,” Janelle said. “You’re not residents, like children, you can speak in meeting but can’t vote yet. After a year, the citizens will have to consent to make you full residents.”

George thought he understood. He watched as, row by row, the adults stood and walked to the front of the hall.

Each man and woman approached the table, offering a wooden card to the overseers. Most cards were put in a box, but occasionally one of the storytellers would say something like, “Allen Chen served as overseer three years ago.” Then the chair would say, “Allen Chen, thank you for your service, you are excused.”

George was struck by the gravity in the room. No one seemed impatient though the whole procedure took hours. He squirmed on the bench, maybe once too often. Most residents were quiet and contemplative. Occasionally short conversations took place, especially with children as they were not excused from attending.

Terence said, “This selection process is one of our most important rituals. This and consenting.”

“So what happens when all the cards are collected?” asked Anita.

“Each of the current overseers draws a card,” said Terence. “Those five will be overseers for the coming year.”

“Who gets what job?” asked George.

“All ten – this year and next’s – will make a recommendation at the start of tomorrow’s meeting. Then the community consents.”

Realizing any adult could serve, George asked, “What if someone isn’t suited to the task?”

Terence’s eyes narrowed, but Janelle said, “Past overseers always help.”

Meg offered her card.

“Margaret Agnodice, as town midwife you are ineligible to serve as overseer. Thank you for your service.”



After drawing the names the community spent a quiet night eating the traditional small meal of bread and milk. The following night the pageant was held: the young entertained and recounted a history of Red Cloud. The final night everyone came to the hall wearing their best. At one end food covered tables, benches hugged the walls, the center was cleared for dancing, musicians played at the other end, but the hall remained undecorated.

Anita sat on a bench next to Bethan. “Congratulations. So what does the overseer of industry and trade do?”

Bethan smiled but Anita sensed tension. “I’ll coordinate with people like the weavers and blacksmiths. It’ll be my job to see they have the supplies they need.”

“Sounds important, are you excited or a bit worried?”

“I’m happy to serve, but it’s a lot of responsibility.” Bethan touched the sleeve of Anita’s dress. “You look good in yellow.”

Anita smiled. “Just wish I wasn’t so pregnant.”

“When are you due?”

“February.”

Bethan’s eyebrows pinched together.

“Oh, I forgot,” said Anita. “The Red Cloud calendar still confuses me.”

“It’s simple. Tomorrow is the first day of the new year. Every fifteenth day is meeting and the end of a cycle.”

Guessing it was now late October – she hadn’t seen a calendar since leaving Hannibal – Anita counted out the months, doubled it, and subtracted one. “In about seven cycles.”

The band started to play again; the music fast, folksy.

“Everyone loved the pageant last night. By the way, where’s George?” asked Bethan.

“He should be back any time. It was his turn to care for the animals this afternoon.”

“I see. Have you danced yet?”

Anita shook her head.

“Do you waltz? It’s the only dance I can do besides that really slow, hold’er close dance.”

“I can.”

“Then may I have the next waltz?”

Anita’s face flushed and she struggled for a good answer. It had been many years since a woman had asked her to dance, and then they were both schoolgirls.

“Don’t worry, Meg doesn’t get jealous and she hates the waltz.”

“Of, of course,” said Anita. “I’d like that. Will you lead?”

Bethan smiled.

As the waltz – all Anita knew was it wasn't *The Blue Danube* – ended, Anita thanked Bethan and they returned to the bench at the side of the meetinghouse. “Does everything in town happen here?”

“Pretty much.” Bethan smiled and looked past Anita. “If you'll excuse me.” Bethan stood.

The musicians, all neighbors from Red Cloud, slowed and softened the music. The song was familiar.

Anita turned, saw him walking toward her, really noticing George for the first time. He wore his Hannibal dungarees, a clean white shirt, and the dress vest with his pocket watch chain threaded through the bottom buttonhole. His gait was confident and that ever-present smile announced joy and satisfaction.

George held out a hand. “May I have this dance Mrs. Winston?”

She took it. “Yes, Mr. Winston.” She was tired but didn't care. It was easy to ignore the aching back and sore feet.

He held her close but with enough room for the baby and breath, his right hand firm in the small of her back, his left hand clasped her right, both held together at their shoulders. As a light tear drifted over each cheek, her spirit soared. She asked, “What's this song?”

“*Moon River.*”

He hummed along softly, there for her, supporting and caring, and she knew. He would be a good father.



**Episode Forty Coming 29 October 2014**

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