

ELLA by Nancy Fraser

EXCERPT

Over the course of the next five days, both she and Thomas took turns working with Connor to learn the most efficient way of harnessing the four large Percheron horses to the wagon. Then, right on schedule, they pulled the oversized, custom-made, wagon out into the yard behind the farmhouse.

Connor had attached the canvas cover at the last minute, the enclosure making the huge prairie-schooner all the more impressive. Her father had truly outdone himself with the vessel they'd christened Miller's Folly.

"It's time to finish loading everything so we can get on the road," Ella announced, her words sending all three children scurrying toward their rooms in search of their belongings.

"I've loaded the food stores into the bottom bins so you won't have to lift them down. You can just open the lid and scoop out what you need," Connor reminded her. "Your sewing supplies are in the smaller bin right above your treadle machine."

"You've anchored it to the side of the wagon?"

"As tight as I could. You'll still need to be careful because it's heavy. Make sure you check the ropes every day to see that the knot is taut."

"I will. I promise." The very last thing she wanted was to damage the one thing she'd need in order to earn money for her family once they'd reached their new home.

"I've stored the horses' supplemental feed in the compartments father built along the outside of the wagon, and placed an extra set of tack in the compartment under the wagon bed next to the water barrels."

"Are you sure you're okay with my selling the horses once we've reached our destination? After all, they were left to you too."

Connor slid his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to his side. "I got the farm as my part of our inheritance. You wanted the deed, the wagon, and the horses, so they're yours. I'd bet you'll get a pretty penny for them—and the wagon—once you no longer need them anymore."

"I'd like to hang onto the wagon, if I can," she admitted. "As a memento of sorts, I suppose."

"Whatever you decide is up to you. Heaven knows there's enough hardwood in that thing to heat a small hearth for months."

She swatted at his arm. "I'll not be burning it either, no matter what."

By half-past eight, with everything loaded, and hugs given to their aunt, Jacob and Callie held out their arms for Connor to boost them into the back of the wagon before he closed and tied down the flaps. Thomas took his seat at the front, next to his mother.

"If it feels like the horses are getting away from you, pull them up as best as you can," Connor instructed. "Are you sure I can't ride in the wagon with you?"

"I need to know I can do this myself, without you there to grab the reins away from me."

Connor's deep chuckle was his first show of humor in days. "Fine, but I'll be right behind you."

"You really don't have to follow us all the way to St. Joseph," she reminded him. "It's only a day's ride. We'll be there by nightfall."

"I'm not doing this for you," he clarified. "It's for me. I'd worry myself to an early grave if I let you go off not knowing for sure you could handle the team."

"Well then, mount up, because I'm pulling out." Ella snapped the reins, and the horses surged forward. The wagon shuddered, then settled, the big wheels rolling smoothly over the dirt.