

Praise for
Dandelions on the Wind

“Like a warm breeze ripples across a lake, *Dandelions on the Wind* offers a gentle crossing in this first-in-a-series novel. Mona Hodgson gives readers characters we care about, a bit of intrigue, love, and a satisfying ending that promises more in the second series book. Well done!”

—JANE KIRKPATRICK, best-selling author of *Where Lilacs Still Bloom*

“Filled with true-to-life characters and fascinating historical details, *Dandelions on the Wind* is a heartwarming story of second chances in the turbulent days immediately after the Civil War. Don’t miss this, the first of Mona Hodgson’s The Quilted Heart trilogy. If you’re like me, you’ll be waiting eagerly for the second.”

—AMANDA CABOT, author of *Waiting for Spring*

“*Dandelions on the Wind* is a sweet tale about the merging of two hurting hearts. The characters drew me, and I can’t wait to read more about their lives...and their love!”

—TRICIA GOYER, best-selling author of thirty-three novels, including *The Memory Jar*

“In *Dandelions on the Wind*, Mona Hodgson weaves a tale of broken promises, wounded hearts...and the power of forgiveness—a heartwarming reminder that we walk by faith, not by sight. Maren is a heroine you’ll cheer for!”

—CAROL COX, author of *Love in Disguise* and *Trouble in Store*

Dandelions on the Wind

The Quilted Heart

Novella One

Mona Hodgson

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All Scripture quotations or paraphrases are taken from the King James Version.

This is a work of fiction. Apart from well-known people, events, and locales that figure into the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*Dedicated with love to my Aunt Marion, Aunt Pauline, and Aunt Nellie May,
all living well with Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP)*

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.
Psalm 119:105

One

Saint Charles, Missouri, 1865

Never mind that four months had passed since General Lee's surrender. Maren never walked the apple orchard or the wheat field without careful watch for bushwhackers and jayhawkers. Four-year-old Gabi held tight to Maren's hand while they followed Gabi's grandmother to the field. When Mrs. Brantenberg's walking stick sprung a branch in her path, the child's gaze darted up the lane toward the orchard then back to the farmhouse and across the hillock to the five acres of wheat.

"Are they coming again, Miss Maren?" Dread strained Gabi's voice.

Maren drew in a deep breath in the hopes it would remove any tension from her own voice. "The war is over, little one." *We should be safe.* "God is with us. Like *Oma* said, 'Fear is not of the Lord. We cannot live in fear. We must trust God.'"

Gabi gave a quick nod, then began swinging Maren's hand at her side.

Fear is not of the Lord. We cannot live in fear. We must trust God.

Maren willed her shoulders to relax into the child's playful arm swinging. Still, she'd heard too many stories about raiders from the women in the quilting circle to let down her guard. To believe the fighting would ever end. The memories of the Union jayhawkers traipsing through the orchard picking apples and taking the steer from the pastures remained fresh in her mind too. She glanced toward the cabin at the far corner of the property, past the orchard. Now empty. She'd only heard about the Confederate bushwhackers who had raided the farm last year, but little Gabi remembered.

Maren fanned the side of her bonnet against her ear to cool the onslaught of hot August air. Thankfully, she saw no sign of trespassers today. And if any outlaws did show their faces, Mrs. Brantenberg had her stick ready with a stack of sorrows backing it up.

Mrs. Brantenberg stopped at the edge of the field. This close, Maren could see that two women didn't do as even a job of planting as she and her father had in the old country.

Gabi stepped up to the three-foot-high lawn, giggling. "They have whiskers like the cats do." Her hands brushed the tips of the wheat stalks.

Bent, the widow plucked one head and rolled the grains between her fingers.

Maren did the same on the thinner area, where the stalks didn't reach as high. The grain was soft and green inside. She didn't need to taste it to know it'd be bitter. "Still a ways to go here."

When a covey of bobwhites exploded from within the crop, Gabi cried out and fell to the ground.

Maren bent over the child. "Just thieving fly-by-nights. They learned their lesson, didn't they?"

Gabi nodded. "They scared me."

"Didn't do my heart any good either." Mrs. Brantenberg patted her chest. Then, smiling, she pressed the tip of her stick to the ground. "The wheat on the north end turned golden first. It's more likely to be ready in just a few more days."

Gabi's little hand slid into Maren's. Together, they tromped around the stand of shimmering stems, the whiskers tickling Maren's arms.

This wasn't the home Maren expected while traveling on the boat from Denmark four years ago. But back then, she'd still had more of her sight. Eight months ago, when the family that had taken her in gave up and moved away, Mrs. Brantenberg brought her out to the farm and provided her work in exchange for room and board. The widow, her granddaughter, and the quilting circle were her family here in America, but she missed her mum, her sister, and her little brother, left behind in the old country.

The promise to bring her family to America had disappeared, right along with Orvie Christensen. Lying in bed at night, all she thought about was going home to Denmark. But the only jobs she'd been able to find during the war barely covered her living expenses, with nothing left over to save for the cost of travel. Yet how could she stay not knowing how long she'd have vision enough to work on the farm? She needed to make the long passage home while she could see well enough not to be a burden.

About twenty yards from the north end, Mrs. Brantenberg stopped and they repeated the testing process. This time, when the grain separated between Maren's fingers, she bit into a kernel and nodded to the widow.

Gabi stretched onto her tiptoes. "Is it sweet?"

Mrs. Brantenberg pulled another head from the stock and handed it to Gabi. "What do you think, *Liebling*?"

The *little one* rolled a kernel out of its sheath and bit into it like she'd seen Maren do. "Not sweet like Mr. Heinrich's rock candy. Tastes like dirt."

Mrs. Brantenberg giggled. "Well, most of us agree then—this section is nearly ready." She waved along the northern edge. "Monday, the three of us will begin harvesting."

Gabi's stomach growled and she giggled. "The bear in my belly is hungry now."

They all laughed. Even in the midst of work and careful watch, the child had a knack for easing their tension.

"It has been too long since breakfast. Gabi and I will fix us all an early supper while you tend the animals."

"Yes ma'am."

As the trio walked back toward the farmhouse and barn, the sinking sun began casting shadows on the path. Maren's deteriorating sight robbed her of colors in low light, leaving everything tinted in gray. Now she knew the trouble her father had suffered in his blindness. Her own stomach growling, she picked up her pace, hoping to reach the familiar inner yard before there was too little light to define the path. They'd worked in the vegetable garden right through the noonday mealtime, and she had chores yet to do before she could settle into the house for supper.

At the arbor, Mrs. Brantenberg and Gabi headed toward the house while Maren continued to the chicken yard. She needed to find a job in town where she could earn enough money to start saving for her return to Denmark. But they had the wheat fields to harvest this month, and then the twenty acres of apples would be ripe a few weeks after that. How could she even think of leaving the widow and dear Gabi alone out here?

"Shoo. Shoo." She spoke the words as much to her own thoughts as she did to the chickens pecking at her bootlaces. She reached into the scrap bucket hanging on a nail and tossed handfuls of potato peelings and grain in a wide arc. The cackling chickens scattered to be first to the bounty.

Inside the stifling hot coop, Maren dodged the roost and reached into the first of the five nests along the back wall. After all the eggs were gathered, she felt for the pole and ducked under it, taking

the most direct route out of the smelly henhouse. Protecting her face with her hand, she stepped into the chicken yard, through the gate, and into the ruts leading to the barn. The parching wind stung her eyes and whipped her apron.

She folded one of the double-hinged barn doors and clamped it open, then stepped inside, squinting against the near darkness. The strong, sweet smell of the hay filled her nostrils. The cow scent was strong too, but not so sweet. Both reminded her of the farm her family had lost in Copenhagen. And the farm Orvie had promised her in his letters.

After Maren hung the basket of eggs by the door, she climbed the wooden steps to the hayloft. Cows bawled and horses whinnied below. Hay needed to be tugged from a stack and tossed over the edge into the swinging mangers at the stalls, then repeated on the other side. When she'd flung hay into Duden's and Boone's stalls, she dropped a couple forkfuls onto the center of the barn floor. At the top of the ladder, Maren brushed her hands together to dislodge any remaining hay stems from her woolen gloves before climbing down. Her plan was to feed the hogs and mules, milk the two cows, and then go inside for supper. She had planted her boots on the first two rungs of the ladder when a raspy baritone voice split the still air.

"Good day, ma'am."

Maren jerked and her boot slipped, causing her chin to strike a step. Wincing, she released her grip and fell backward. Fear caught a scream in her throat. The fresh pile of hay on the floor broke her fall, but still she landed flat on her back. She fought to recover her breath and gather her wits. A staccato heartbeat pounded in her ears. She didn't associate the deep voice with anyone who belonged on the farm.

Blinking, she willed her eyes to focus in her limited circle of vision. Brown curls swerved every which way on the head of a man she did not recognize. Scrambling to right herself, she edged toward the wall near the cow stall.

"Ma'am." A Union accent. Not one of Mrs. Brantenberg's German neighbors. "Are you well?"

"Yes." She felt along the wall for a makeshift weapon. When she found the shovel, she lifted it off its nail and held it across herself.

"I mean you no harm."

Holding the shovel steady, Maren widened her shoulders and raised her smarting chin.

"I apologize. I didn't—"

"Didn't what, sir?" This man may be harmless, but he was no less a nuisance. "You did not mean to burst into my barn and cause me to take a topple?"

"You're not Mrs. Brantenberg." It wasn't a question.

Did he know Mrs. Brantenberg, or had someone in town told him to expect an older woman?

"I am Maren Jensen." She couldn't make out his facial features in the shadows, but she did see one arm in a sling. That could be a ruse. "And you are?" Silence ticked off the seconds.

He removed his cap and moved closer. "People call me Woolly."

While repositioning her heavy weapon, Maren blinked to focus her vision. Her employer had never mentioned anyone named Woolly. If he wasn't a troublemaker, he had to be a drifter looking for work. And with her own work to finish, she had no time to waste. "You'll find Mrs. Brantenberg at the house."

"Thank you." His voice held a pleasant tone, although it sounded a bit gravelly, like he'd been out in the wind for a long spell. She should be nicer to the gentleman, but she couldn't afford to be. Chores were obligatory. Niceties with strange men were not.

He turned to leave the barn and quickly faded into the darkness. Maren lowered the shovel and listened as the door closed behind him. If she ever did have a home of her own, it wouldn't sit beside a well-traveled road. Especially not during or immediately following a war.

Woolly felt like the prodigal son in the New Testament. Except it was his daughter, not his father, he was coming home to. He followed the path from the barn to the front of the brick Georgian-style plantation house. Its fluted porch columns needed whitewashing. The shutters framing the double-hung sash windows needed attention too. When the wind caught his kepi, he pulled the cap tight onto his forehead. The smell of fresh bread wafted on the breeze, taunting his hunger. He couldn't say how long it'd been since he'd dined on anything but hardtack or bully soup.

Now that he was home, he had a lot to catch up on. But this wasn't a Bible story, and he wasn't a beloved son.

He stopped at the bottom of the steps. If nothing else, perhaps his mother-in-law would let him stay long enough to meet the little girl he and Gretchen had created on this very farm, and to make a few repairs around the place. He owed her that much. And more than he could ever repay. He couldn't change the past four years. Not for Mother Brantenberg. Not for his daughter. Not for himself.

"Oma!"

The strained little voice drew his gaze to the window for a glimpse of sunny round cheeks framed in heaps of brown curls. Like his own. Tears stung his sleep-deprived eyes.

"A man, Oma."

"*Blieben sie ich zurück, Liebling.* Behind me." He recognized the voice, and the endearing term. Mother Brantenberg was protecting her *little one*. His little one.

He removed his cap, then spoke through the closed door. "Greetings, Mrs. Brantenberg."

The door opened just wide enough for him to see the woman's face. She gasped. "It is you." Her color matched what was left of the whitewash on the door that stood between them, and her foot didn't budge from its crossed position behind the door. Mother Brantenberg studied him, her gaze resting on the cloth that tethered his left arm to his neck. "You are hurt?"

"I got my arm caught in a rope whilst loading a barge and pulled my shoulder out of place."

His mother-in-law opened the door, but she hadn't spoken of his identity. He so desperately wanted the child hiding in the skirts to know her father had returned home. But at least for now, he was only a visitor. Inside, good smells and memories of happier times hit him, and his stomach rumbled while his heart wrenched.

He glanced from the woman to the child, who stepped out from behind her. He held out his right hand to her. "And who is this?"

The little one leaned against her grandmother, dipping her chin and peering up at him with wide eyes. "I am Gabi."

Short for Gabrielle—the name he and Gretchen had discussed for a girl. Gabi's face was a sweet miniature of her mother's. "What a lovely name." He hoped his smile hid the pain.

"Thank you." Gabi curtsied like a princess, then pointed to the soiled cloth that cupped his elbow. "Does it hurt?"

“It isn’t so bad anymore. Thank you.” His daughter was already four years old, and so grown up. He turned to his mother-in-law. “The arm should be workable in another day or two. I can start on repairs soon. Harvest?”

His mother-in-law huffed. Wrinkles framed her face. She still wore her hair parted down the middle with a braid, now white, encircling her head. But her eyes had dulled.

“Mister.” Gabi’s sweet voice cut into his thought. “What’s your name?”

“Woolly.” Mrs. Brantenberg rested her hand on Gabi’s head. “His name is Woolly.”

That’s what Gretchen had called him the first time they’d met on her father’s farm.

Gabi swayed side-to-side like she had music in her. “Woolly like a lamb?”

“Yes.” He pointed at his head. “My hair is curly like lamb’s wool.”

“Mine too.” Gabi patted her hair.

Woolly nodded, afraid to speak, sure the truth would come out before Mother Brantenberg was ready to reclaim him as family.

Mother Brantenberg glanced toward the washstand at the top of the staircase. “It is time to wash for supper, Liebling.”

Gabi offered him a forlorn glance, and sighing, she marched up the stairs.

His mother-in-law studied him. “I did not expect your return.”

“I had to come see my daughter. I should never have left you.” He glimpsed the staircase and the little round cheeks pressed between the white oak spindles. The light in Gabi’s eyes pierced the darkness in his heart...until he returned his attention to his mother-in-law. Mrs. Brantenberg looked as if she’d just gulped camp coffee. A look that said he’d not be staying for supper.