



The Quilted Heart 

RIPPLES
ALONG THE SHORE

MONA HODGSON

Praise for
Dandelions on the Wind
The Quilted Heart, Novella One

“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*

Praise for
Bending Toward the Sun
The Quilted Heart, Novella Two

“Mona Hodgson’s *Bending Toward the Sun* captures Saint Charles following the Civil War so well. Quaid returns home—a man changed by the war. Emilie is a delight—a young woman pursuing her education, who knows her own mind. And even though the war has changed so many things, this story reminds us that some things, like love, never change.”

—DORRIS KEEVEN-FRANKE, archivist, Saint Charles County Historical Society

“Mona Hodgson has written a warm, tender tale of family loyalties and forbidden love. When Emilie’s father objects to her seeing the handsome McFarland boy, recently returned from war, the couple struggles to do the right thing. But they are about to discover that God has another plan. Filled with charming characters and godly themes, this heartwarming story is pure delight.”

—MARGARET BROWNLEY, *New York Times* best-selling author of A Rocky Creek Romance Series and the Brides of Last Chance Ranch Series

“With believable characters, an historic setting, and a gripping love story, Mona Hodgson gives the reader an uplifting account of a time when our country was recovering from a dark period and looking forward to a brighter future.”

—MARTHA ROGERS, author of the Winds Across the Prairie Series and the best-selling *Christmas at Holly Hill*

Ripples Along the Shore

The Quilted Heart

Novella Three

Mona Hodgson



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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

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Other Books by Mona Hodgson

Caroline's story is dedicated to all of my readers who have been widowed; who have found themselves looking for a new normal, one without the physical presence of their beloved spouse.

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

—James 4:10

One

The side-paddles of the *New Era* churned the waters of the Missouri River while perplexing thoughts and feelings washed over Caroline. Standing on the crowded deck, she pulled her cape tight and looked toward the stretch of snowy shoreline that fronted Saint Charles. Her sister would be awaiting her return, along with her two nieces and nephew. It had already been two months since she'd received the letter from the Department of War with word of Phillip's demise. Now that her aunt also had passed, they were all the family she had left.

Aunt Inez had bequeathed her home and worldly possessions to the sisters, and Jewell wouldn't have denied Caroline had she wished to stay in Memphis. But why would she stay? At least in Saint Charles, she had Jewell and the quilting circle—Emilie, Maren, Mrs. Brantenberg, Hattie, and all of the other women who had befriended her.

Caroline glanced toward the upper deck where the dapper fellow with a handlebar mustache stood. Looking her way, he brushed the brim of his white top hat. She smiled, then pressed her gloved hand to her warming face. Lewis G. Whibley had been the first man to flatter her since Phillip had left for the war.

And she couldn't escape the irony of the vessel's name for her voyage: the *New Era*. She had indeed been ushered into change. 1866. The New Year had dawned last week, and it was high time she had something—or someone—new to think about. Mr. Whibley seemed a perfect fit for that order; however, he had no plans to disembark. Caroline was more than a little tempted to remain on the boat herself. If she hadn't wired Jewell of her passage and return today—

“Yoo-hoo, Mrs. Milburn!”

Caroline recognized the voice of the woman who had seated herself at her meal table earlier in the afternoon. “Mrs. Kamden.”

“We'll reach shore soon, you know.” The woman now stood beside her at the gate.

Swallowing her amusement with the woman's knack for stating the obvious, Caroline tried to ignore the furtive glances of the stately man standing at the upper railing, a mere fifteen feet away. “Indeed, we will, ma'am. Will your son be waiting for you?”

Mrs. Kamden adjusted the hat that crowned her silver hair. “My daughter-in-law, actually. Ian is a wheelwright, which makes him a busy man.”

“That makes perfect sense with so many folks readying wagons for the trail.” It was contagious—now *she* was stating the obvious. More than a little distracted, Caroline turned away from her view of the deck above her, focusing on the approaching shoreline.

The petite woman pushed round spectacles up the bridge of her narrow nose. “You mentioned having a sister in Saint Charles?”

“Yes. Jewell. She lives there with her husband and three children.”

“Are they planning to go?”

“Go?”

“Why, west, of course.”

Of course. Caroline hadn't discussed with her sister the possibility of going west. She'd left for Tennessee soon after the wagon train hubbub started. No need to talk about it,

anyway. Doing something so daring would require her brother-in-law to possess at least a small measure of gumption. She scolded herself for her sour outlook on the man. He was, after all, married to her sister.

“I don’t know that my sister and her family have any plans to join the caravan.”

“I told you I’m going to Idaho with my son?”

Caroline nodded. That would be a cramped wagon...no matter how big it was. Her son and daughter-in-law had five children.

“It’s a mite brisk out here, but I didn’t want to miss the excitement of reaching the shore.” Mrs. Kamden pressed her hand to the knit scarf encircling her neck. “It may be forward of me to ask, but what are you going to do...now that you’re a widow?”

Caroline’s stomach knotted. *Widow*. She’d always allocated that awful label to women for whom she felt pity.

The woman’s question, however, did deserve thought. What was she going to do without Phillip? She’d been living with Jewell and Jack for nearly six months. It was one thing to stay with them while waiting for an answer concerning Phillip’s fate, but now that she knew... She met Mrs. Kamden’s brown-eyed gaze and shrugged. “I haven’t yet come to a decision. There was no time for such ponderings while caring for my aunt.”

“But now that your aunt has passed—may the good Lord rest her soul in peace—you’ll be ready for a change, won’t you?”

Had her brother-in-law paid this woman to encourage her to move out? A juvenile notion, but he’d made it clear that having another adult taking up space in their modest house—and dividing his wife’s attention—was a hardship.

Caroline sighed. She did need to do something with her life, but what?

“When Mr. Kamden died from the cholera, I wasn’t as young as you. Nor was I as handsome.” The older woman glanced upstairs. “You’ll have no trouble turning the head of a suitable man. Why, you’re already drawing such attentions.”

The woman’s nervous giggle tensed Caroline’s shoulders. No one could take Phillip’s place in her heart. “I’m not seeking a replacement for my husband.”

“Perhaps you should, dear.”

Perhaps she should. Unlike her forthright deck companion, Caroline didn’t have a son to set her in a wagon and take her to Oregon.

Thankfully, Mrs. Kamden became distracted as the boat reversed its paddles. The *New Era* gently nudged the shore and the stage swung out to meet the riverbank.

Caroline’s family awaited her at the edge of the mud. Emilie Heinrich stood with Jewell and the children, all of them waving. She directed the deckhand to her trunk and followed it down the stage. When the gangly young man set her trunk off to the side in the snow, she pulled a coin from her seam pocket and thanked him for his help.

“Auntie Carol-i!” Her skirt churning, her four-year-old niece darted across the muddy bank to the end of the ramp.

Caroline set her valise on top of the trunk and swung Mary into her arms.

“I miss you much.” Her youngest niece planted wet kisses on her cheek.

Resisting the impulse to wipe the wetness from her face, Caroline tapped Mary's button nose. "I missed you too. It's good to see you." That much was true. She hadn't said it was good to *be back*.

Cora latched on to Caroline's leg. "I thought you weren't coming home."

Jewell sighed, fluttering the wisps of hair on her forehead. "I said it time and again—your aunt Caroline was needed in Memphis to care for Aunt Inez." Her voice quivered. "Of course she came back."

"She has nowhere else to go." There, she'd finished Jewell's statement for her.

Jewell's eyes widened. "Saint Charles is your home. You needn't go anywhere else. This is where you belong."

Where she belonged. Another topic to add to the list of things she and Jewell needed to discuss. Later. Alone.

Eight-year-old Gilbert slid her valise off the trunk. "Aunt Caroline, lots of folks are forming a wagon train come spring. You could take a wagon west."

While her nephew's matter-of-fact suggestion made Caroline smile, a frown creased her sister's brow.

Jewell pressed her shawl to her middle. "Of all the outlandish things to say! Treks across the wilderness are for men with strong constitutions."

Not for widows, who apparently lack the disposition.

Before Caroline or her nephew could respond, Emilie cleared her throat. "I was on my way to the Queensware Emporium when I happened upon Jewell and the children."

Caroline smiled. "Looking for a wedding dress, are you?"

Blushing, Emilie clasped her hands at her chin. "The wedding is next month."

"I'm glad to hear you and Quaid are still getting along."

Emilie nodded, rubbing her gloved hands together.

"Quaid is actually the real reason Emilie came with us." Jewell cocked her head toward a cluster of freight wagons.

Caroline raised an eyebrow. "A-a-a-h."

"He's working in the woodshop today, not driving the wagon." Emilie stepped forward and enveloped Caroline in a warm embrace. "I really did come to see you. I was sorry to hear about your aunt's passing."

"Thank you. But with me living in Philadelphia, Jewell had spent much more time with her." Caroline reached out and squeezed her sister's hand.

Jewell glanced at the trunk, then at the riverbank toward her house. "I should've brought the wagon."

"I returned with a few of Aunt Inez's memorables."

Jewell nodded. "You managed to sell the rest of her belongings?"

"I did. And her house." Which meant she and Jewell would both have a bit of money...until Jack learned of his wife's modest inheritance.

"I wouldn't have known where to start." Jewell's eyes moistened. "The children and I will go to the livery and fetch the horse and wagon."

“We could be home and seated at the dinner table with the time that would take.” Caroline grasped the leather strap on one end of her trunk. “It’d be easier and faster to carry it ourselves.”

“I can make myself useful.” Emilie lifted the other end and peered up at her.

Caroline smiled. She’d only been gone from Saint Charles six weeks, but she’d missed her friends from the quilting circle. For more reasons than their physical strength. Mrs. Brantenberg and the others had given her a shoulder to cry on and bolstered her faith when it had dwindled.

With Jewell and the children in tow, Caroline and Emilie stepped into the slushy ruts leading up the bank. They hadn’t made it twenty feet when Caroline began to huff and puff. When her shoulder began to cramp, she stopped.

Emilie was accustomed to physical labor, working as she did in her father’s dry goods store and grocery, and didn’t seem burdened by the load in the least.

Gilbert stepped forward. “I can do it, Aunt Caroline.” He wrapped his small hand around the leather strap and heaved. His end of the trunk hopped off the ground, then quickly went back down. “That’s heavy!”

Caroline looked at her sister. “I brought the two brass elephant bookends you liked as a girl.”

A smile bunched Jewell’s cheeks. “I still do.”

“Good, because getting them home isn’t going to be easy.”

“If Quaid’s brother is here, he’ll be happy to deliver the trunk to the house.” Emilie glanced upriver. “Why, there’s Mr. Cowlshaw.”

Caroline’s stomach knotted at the memory of their last encounter in Mrs. Brantenberg’s kitchen. She followed Emilie’s gaze to the brawny man seated atop a buckwagon.

Emilie waved at him like a woman without any sense, then looked back at her. “His timing is nothing short of perfect, wouldn’t you say?”

If that was a romantic notion dancing in Emilie’s brown eyes, Caroline would have no part in it. She’d be better off to walk away from her family, step back onto the *New Era*, and take her chances with Mr. Lewis G. Whibley.

Garrett had been too distracted to notice the gathering of women and children—until Quaid McFarland’s intended waved at him. That’s when he’d seen Mrs. Milburn standing beside a trunk with a gloved hand perched on her waist. He returned Miss Heinrich’s wave as he prodded the horses in that direction. Garrett stopped the wagon beside the shopkeeper’s daughter and the young widow and her family. “Good day, ladies. Children.”

“Good day.” Miss Heinrich and Mrs. Rafferty were the first to return his greeting. The children followed. Mrs. Milburn seemed reluctant to speak, but when he looked directly at her, she finally did.

“Good day, Mr. Cowlshaw. I’m surprised to see you down at the river, with all the westward planning.”

“That’s precisely what brought me here today.”

“Oh?”

He glanced back at Captain Pete's freighter grounded at the shoreline. "Can't go west without a proper wagon and supplies."

She studied the empty wagon bed.

"Neither were on the boat today. Delayed." Garrett set the brake and climbed down from the wagon.

"You're the man who fixed our wheel." The older of the two young Rafferty girls had the same wide-set eyes as Mrs. Milburn. She shifted her attention to her aunt. "Do you like Mr. Cowlshaw now?"

Heat seared Garrett's cheeks, despite the snowy blanket on the ground around him. The impetuous child's statement may have colored Mrs. Milburn's face too, but she'd turned away from him before he could see for himself.

"Cora, dear." The young widow tempered her voice. "It's not a matter of whether or not I like Mr. Cowlshaw. We are scarcely acquainted."

"We know him, Auntie. He's Mr. Rutherford's friend. He lives at Mrs. Brantenberg's farm."

The boy, Gilbert, shifted the valise to his other arm. "It's possible to like someone you just met, if they're likable."

The children clearly liked him. Problem was, in Mrs. Milburn's eyes he was entirely unlikable, and understandably so. He'd fought for the South, then delivered the news of her husband's death. He couldn't expect her to like him.

Her lips pressed together, Mrs. Milburn brushed a red curl the color of sunrise from her face. "You helped us with the wagon wheel last autumn, and it seems we are once again in need of your assistance."

"It would be my pleasure."

"I've been to Memphis to care for my aunt and returned with a heavy load."

He looked at the worn trunk by her side.

"Might you be willing to haul the trunk to my sister's house? It's up the bank a bit." Mrs. Milburn looked up the slope toward a row of small houses in the shadows of the main buildings downtown.

"Consider it done." Had her eyes always been that green? Like sycamore leaves in spring. "I hope she's faring well. Your aunt."

"She passed on."

He removed his slouch hat. "My sympathies. I'm sure you did your best."

"Will it ever be enough?"

A question he knew all too well. "Our best is all we have to offer, ma'am." That's what he'd told himself time and again.

She nodded, her lip quivering, and he had to look away. He darted past her and had the trunk and valise loaded onto the tailgate in no time. This more vulnerable side of the widow tangled his insides.

Caroline Milburn was easier to be around when she had her guard up.



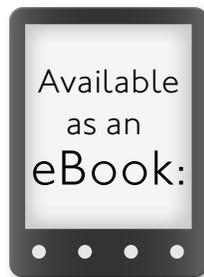
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