



VEIL OF FIRE
by Marlo Schalesky

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{ Chapter One }

Sometimes, when the wind blows just right over the fields, I can still smell the spice of her perfume. Sometimes, when the dandelion seeds dip and twirl across the sky, I see the way the silk slipped through her fingers, how the needle flashed in her hands. In and out. In and out. The seam straight, perfect. I pause to listen to the warble of a common loon, and in it hear the soft echo of her laughter. Lilted. Faint. Fading.

Then the sky turns dark. The wind stills. The bird is silenced. And in that moment, I am returned to the day my world burned. The day that changed everything I am, everything I was.

Listen, the silence whispers.

See, the darkness beckons.

So I wait. I remember. And in that quiet, in-between place, she lives again.

September 1, 1894

Darkness oozed through the windows and settled in the crevices of the sewing room. It weighted Nora's shoulders and pressed like a cloth over her mouth and nose. She straightened, drew a deep breath, and coughed.

"You okay, Mama?" Ellie shifted her feet on the chair.

The needle paused in Nora's hand. She glanced up at her daughter, standing on the chair above her. "Hold still, punkin, or you'll be tippin' over like a kettle of tea."

Ellie snickered.

Nora grinned into the gray-blue eyes of her daughter. "And no giggling either, or the hem will be crooked." The gray fabric brought out the flecks of dark blue in Ellie's eyes, making them appear old for a girl of twelve.

"You almost done?" Wheat-colored hair bobbed over thin shoulders and dropped over the dress's front, still loose on a chest teetering on the brink of womanhood.

"Just a few more stitches."

"You were giving me that look again."

"Look?"

"You know."

Nora smiled and lowered her gaze. How could she help but look? Among stacks of folded taffeta, Swiss muslin, and pongee, baskets of thread, drawers overflowing with pressed lace, Ellie was the only thing of real beauty in the room. But she didn't know it. Not yet. Nora bent over the dress's hem and pulled the needle through the soft fabric. The silk was smooth to her touch, like the feel of water lapping her fingers on a warm day. Warm, like today. Too warm for September.

The darkness deepened. She squinted at the seam and cleared her throat. "Strange day, ain't it? Like the light's a-choking on the air."

Ellie let out a long breath. "Light can't choke. That's silly."

Nora swallowed her laugh as the needle dipped into the hem. "Then you explain it. Was bright as a bead this morning."

"Well, now it's as dark as ... dark as ... well, it's real dark."

"Yep, dark as dead coals after a campfire. That it is."

"And it stinks like old fire too."

Nora sat back on her heels, flicked the bottom of the dress, and watched as the silk settled into elegant folds. "Probably just Mr. Strom clearing his land. Don't pay it no never mind." She turned her daughter toward the mirror on the far side of the room.

For a moment, they each stared at the dress's reflection. Gray silk fell in a straight panel in the front and bunched in demure waves in the back. Simple, stylish, wasp-waisted with gigot sleeves.

"It's beautiful, ain't it?"

"The best I've done."

"Is it a traveling dress?"

"Yep."

"Who for? Not that snooty Mrs. Jensen?"

"Be nice."

"Is it?"

Nora sighed. "Not this one, punkin. This one is for someone special."

"Who? Tell me. Miss Winnie? Mrs. MacAllister? Miss Blackstone?"

"No."

"Someone new then? Someone who can pay for an expensive dress like this?"

"This dress I'm giving away."

Ellie gasped. "But Mama, the others, they won't like that. They'll stop ordering dresses if they know you're sewing a dress for a regular person. You know they will. You always said ..."

"I know what I said."

"But ... then who ..."

Silence settled between them.

Finally, Nora stood and touched the silk with her fingertips. "You'll know when the time comes, child." Her voice lowered. "Everybody will know."

"If you say so, Mama." She rubbed a bit of lace between her fingers. "Anyone would be beautiful in this dress."

Nora's gaze rose to capture her daughter's. "Clothes don't make the person, Ellie Jean. But people don't know that. Sometimes it's just the clothes they see. Sometimes they see truth only if it's dressed up pretty."

"Is that why you make dresses, Mama?"

Nora laughed. "Come here." She lifted a hand and helped Ellie down from the chair. Then she brushed back a stray hair from her daughter's forehead. "I make dresses so we can eat, and keep this house, and live. But this dress is different. It's special. And it's worth the risk."

Ellie's brows drew together in a knot. "Why?"

Nora ran her fingers over the dress's scalloped collar. "Because this here's a freedom dress. For someone who needs to be free."

Ellie pulled out of her mother's arms. "A dress can't set no one free."

"And air can't choke." Nora's eyes narrowed as her gaze traveled out the window. "But it does. It does today." She reached out and touched her daughter's chin, raising her face level with her own. She studied the clear blue eyes, the wrinkled brow, the bottom lip caught between her teeth. "There are times you see a hurt and make it better. You can be a friend. You can do for another, make their burden a wee bit lighter. But there are other times, dark times ..." She paused, allowing the silence to grow long. "Sometimes all you can do is give someone a dress. You remember that, Ellie Jean."

"Okay, Ma—"

A sharp cry sliced through the window. Piercing. Fierce. Inhuman.

Nora spun toward the door.

Ellie grabbed her sleeve. "What's wrong with Meri, Mama?"

The horse screamed again.

In five long strides, Nora reached the front door and flung it open. She rushed onto the porch. A hissing rumble, like a thousand cats spitting from fence posts, assaulted Nora's senses. Flecks of gray floated in the dark air. For a moment, Nora stared at the gray specks, spinning, thickening, drifting onto the porch, the railing, her arms. She touched a flake, rubbing it between her fingers. Dust? No. Ash.

Another shriek pierced the air. Ellie grabbed her arm. Fingers dug into Nora's flesh.

"Mama, look."

Nora whirled. Burning heat slapped her face.

Fire charged across the western field toward her. Like a herd of stampeding bulls it snorted its smoke into the nightlike sky. Bucking, twisting, consuming the stalks of wheat in its path until she could see nothing but the flames and the blackness beyond them. Acres of burning wheat. A hundred acres. A thousand, devoured in a sea of undulating red.

Nora stared into the advancing darkness, smelling the bull's bitter breath, captivated by its glowing eyes of flame. Suffocating warmth squeezed her chest, drove the air from her lungs. She gasped for breath and stumbled forward. The fire leapt higher, closer, red tongues licking clouds of ash.

"We have to run, Ellie. We have to go." The words came from somewhere beyond her. From some strange place that denied the nearness of the flame.

Ellie stood frozen, her face pale. Ash settled like fine powder on her nose, cheeks, eyelashes.

Nora leaned over and gripped her daughter's face between her hands, forcing Ellie's eyes to meet hers. "Meri's in the barn. We'll ride her out."

Ellie blinked.

Nora's gaze darted toward the town. Even from this distance, she could see fire snaking through the streets, sending up long trails of black smoke. Her stomach churned. Morrison Hotel, Hanson's Opera House, Cowan Drug Store. All gone. Her gaze swung north. There, Brennan's Lumber Mill spat shimmering flames into the sky. And beyond it, the Grindstone River gleamed. A mile, maybe more. But they could make it.

"Mama, are we gonna die?"

Nora grabbed Ellie's wrist and pulled her toward the barn. "Not today. We got a straight shot to the river."

Ellie yanked her arm away. "No, Mama, look."

"Come on."

"No. Not the river."

Nora slowed. Her eyes narrowed, stung. She wiped the ash from them and looked again. *Oh no ...* The river was burning. Flames swirled over its surface and shot ribbons of light into the blackness. *Sawdust from the mill. Oh God ...*

Then she heard it. Two sharp blasts of a train's whistle. The Number Four had come.

Nora squinted through the dimness, searching the west side of town for the shadowed speck that was the train. But the day was too black, the air too thick. The slithering path of tracks ran to the east of her farm. They could follow it, find the train.

“Hurry.” She ran to the barn and threw the crossbar from the door. Heat scorched through the thin cotton of her dress. She dared not look back. Dared not see how close the fire had come.

The barn door swung open. Nora rushed through with Ellie behind her. “The bride. Quickly.”

Ellie raced toward the post.

Meri kicked the side of the stall. Her whinny pierced the smoke.

“Easy, girl.” Nora edged into the stall. Her heart hammered in her ears.

Meri threw her head, eyes wild.

Ellie thrust the bridle into Nora’s hands. The metal was hot against her skin, but not burning. Not yet. Nora shoved the bit into the horse’s mouth and threw the reins over her withers.

She hitched up her skirt then flung herself onto the horse’s back. Meri’s hoof scraped at the stall’s floor. Nora hoisted Ellie in front of her. She kicked open the stall door, and in a breath, Meri surged through the opening, into the barn, out the main door.

There, not thirty yards before them, an inferno raged. Fire blazed from the farmhouse roof, shooting jagged shards of flame to the ground below. Nora sucked in her breath. Ash burned her throat. A moment later, the porch caved inward, losing itself in a ball of fire. Sparks flew upward, bursting with brilliant light.

Ellie sneezed. The sound mixed with the roar and cackle of flame.

Heat seared Nora’s cheeks, crept down to her stomach, set her heart afire.

The horse spun and sped from the flames. The ground flashed beneath them. Nora’s eyes fixed on the town. Through the darkness, the opry house blazed orange. The school crumbled to nothing but a shell spitting flame. And the depot ... even the depot was burning.

Nora leaned low over Ellie, her body protecting her child from the heat. She peered over her shoulder. Behind them, like a line of soldiers, the fire advanced,

swords of flame shimmering, slashing. The branches of the old birch tree glowed red and orange against the sky. Flames crackled, even louder than the hiss of wind in her ears. A sound like bitter laughter, like the cries of devils. Her hands shook on the reins. Tears streamed across her temples. How could fire move so fast?

Another sharp whistle scraped her nerves. They'd never make it. The train was too far, the fire too swift.

Oh God, help ... Ellie ...

Heat blasted Nora's skin. Ellie's body shuddered against her. Her child, her beautiful girl ...

Nora focused again on the town, barely visible through the ash-stained air. Nearer, nearer, the fire at their heels, beside them, before them, ambushing her from every side. She swallowed, the taste of smoke sour in her mouth. With one hand, she rubbed the cinders from her eyes. They were almost there. The horse swung north, racing now along the town's edge.

From the corner of her vision, the Presbyterian church burned like an immense funeral pyre. The steeple flared upward then crumbled into the flames below. The wind rose like a cyclone, tearing at her blouse, scraping against her eyes. The sky turned black. The air thickened.

Before her, the mercantile's walls crumbled, revealing the store's contents before the whole building burst into flame. She reined toward the tracks. The ties burned in stripes of orange flame.

Ahead and to the left, the livery barn burst into a ball of flame. A horse spurted from the burning door. He galloped wildly down the roadway, his tail held out like a smoking musket, the sound of his hoofbeats lost in the roar of flames.

The blacksmith stumbled from the livery just as the outer walls melted behind him. "Jonas." The name tore from her lips.

The man looked up. Then fell. And the fire consumed him.

Nora ripped her gaze from the sight. Her eyes teared as she squinted through the smoke. Ahead, red flame belched from the depot. And beside it, like a black shadow, the train was pulling away.

Terror stuck in Nora's sternum. Her heels dug into Meri's sides. Faster. Faster. Was that her voice screeching in her ears, ripping through the dryness in her throat?

The fire roared closer, blocking her vision of the town, until she could see nothing but smoke billowing, rails burning in fiery lines, and waves of ash falling so thick that she could taste nothing else, smell nothing but the acrid stench. In a moment, the whole world reduced to a tunnel of smoke, ash, and fire, with hope in the form of a retreating train engine, moving backward along the tracks.

Then in the dimness, figures emerged from the smoke. Screams pierced the darkness. Townspeople ran, dashed toward the train. A man with a bundle in his arms bolted toward her, his face obscured by ash. The bundle wailed. The blanket fell away. Nora's heart slammed against her throat. She reached out. But the man stumbled and fell behind, the baby's cry lost in the roar of flames.

For a moment, she tried to turn back, but Meri wouldn't slow. The horse was wild now, racing with fear as its whip, terror as the spurs that dug into its sides. Wind whipped Nora's hair as the air scorched her lungs. Ellie threw up her arm, shielding her head against the embers that spun past them. Pinpricks of fire jabbed into Nora's face, her hands, her legs. She gritted her teeth against the pain, her eyes focused on the train. They were gaining on it. Closer, closer. They could make it still.

Fire licked at the train's sides. Hooves thundered beneath them. The sound pounded in her head, growing louder, drowning out the shouts of the townspeople, obscuring the inferno's howl.

Meri pulled behind the train, then drew even with the last car. Arms reached from the window openings. White eyes stared from blackened faces. Hands flailed toward them. Mouths shouted words she couldn't hear, couldn't understand. Fingers grabbed for Ellie.

"Mama!" Ellie's cry sank like a dagger in Nora's heart. For a moment she clutched her daughter close, smelled the ash in her hair, felt the warmth of her body against her skin.

Then Nora dropped the reins, reached around Ellie's waist, and thrust the girl toward the train's window.

Hands grabbed Ellie and dragged her inside.

Arms stretched toward Nora. Someone pulled at her sleeve. Meri swerved. The fingers slipped away.

And Nora knew nothing but the sharp embrace of the flames.

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