

If you want to find yourself immersed in time, in a story that will capture your heart, you'll love *Wilderness Wife*.

~ USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR SUSAN MAY WARREN

In *Wilderness Wife*, author Delores Topliff deftly blends together fiction with her love for North American frontier history in the early 1800s. Topliff pens the story of Marguerite McLoughlin, a remarkable woman who faced heartbreak when she was abandoned by her first husband and separated from her son. Determined to make a life for herself and her three daughters, Marguerite discovered an unexpected destiny.

~ BETH K. VOGT, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF THE THATCHER SISTERS SERIES

*Wilderness Wife* is an intriguing story of strength, perseverance, and sustaining faith set in a time of great challenge and change. Readers will be won by Marguerite's devotion to family and God, and will root—as I did!—for her happily ever after

~ KIM VOGEL SAWYER, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *FREEDOM'S SONG*

*Wilderness*  
**WIFE**

A Novel By  
**DELORES TOPLIFF**



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*Wilderness Wife* is Historical Fiction. The author researched the lives of Marguerite and John McLoughlin, their children, Marguerite's first husband, Alex MacKay, Lord Selkirk, Governor Semple, and many other prominent figures and events extensively. More minor characters and events are fictional but represent the history and society of that time.

*To Jesus who put love for story in my heart, gave me amazing teachers, and stories worth telling.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I loved growing up in the shadow of Fort Vancouver built by Dr. John & Marguerite McLoughlin. John's influence is widely known. His half-native wife, Marguerite's, courage and example are inspiring. Together they changed North America. I'm privileged to tell her story. I'm thankful for the wonderful friends and family I will always have in the area and for great teachers along the way, especially incredible Jane Weber who launched me into creative writing and showed me the kind of teacher I wanted to be.

Thanks to editors Erin Howard and Kim Vogel Sawyer for telling me which elements didn't work when I got too bogged in history and suggesting paths that did. You've made this a better book and me a better writer.

Thank you, readers, for embracing my first two books, *Books Afloat* and *Christmas Tree Wars*. I hope you enjoy this as much and welcome *Strong Currents*, next in the *Columbia River Undercurrents* series next November.

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Many say writing is a lonely journey. I don't find it so. I've met some of my best life friends at Christian Writing Retreats, Conferences, and in mentoring groups.

I benefitted from (and now own) many fine books about the McLoughlins and have loved visits and conversations that

triggered further research. Visits to Fort William Historical Park in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada and surrounding areas helped set Marguerite's scenes in my heart along with frequent times at Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, Vancouver, Washington and the final McLoughlin home in Oregon City, Oregon, both part of the U.S. National Park Service. Other important locations are the Minnesota Historical Society's North West Company Fur Post now the Snake River Fur Post in Pine City, Minnesota, and beautiful Grand Portage National Monument, Grand Portage, Minnesota, also part of the U.S. National Park Service. Those visits and discussions with staff made this book richer.

# 1



*Indian Country, Central Canada, 1810*

I kneel at the river cleaning the fish our Tom catches for our winter supply. For weeks the children and I have listened for the musket shots my husband will fire from the river bend to signal his return. Icy weather will come soon. Each day our children ask, “Is Father all right, Mama?”

“Of course,” I say, trying to sound confident. “Few men have his skills.”

But then, although I hear no sound except the river’s music and see no shadow on my path, I sense human eyes. My hand flies to my throat as Alex MacKay stands before me, his arms crossed, his bearded face intense under his shaggy blond hair.

After ten months of being away, my explorer husband is back.

“Alex! You’re home.” I plunge my tanned hands into the river’s icy current to rinse them, then rub them dry on my rough skirt as I scramble to my feet. He stands unsmiling and

unmoving as I rush forward and fling my arms around him in case he's an apparition that may vanish if I don't take hold.

"Hello, Marguerite."

I reach up and smother him with kisses. "Why didn't you send word? Or fire your musket from the river bend for your hero's welcome?"

"I wanted to surprise you."

"Tom ran to the river bend twice this morning and offered to go farther. I'll call the children." As I lift a hand to my mouth, Alex grips my wrist.

"Not yet. We must talk. You *are* beautiful. I wish to remember you as you are."

"Remember me? Must you leave again? Does Mackenzie require another journey?"

"Not Mackenzie." He stomps one boot against a stone, freeing a dirt clod from his heel. "Helping him makes me famous too. He brags that no one possesses my wilderness skills. We've done what no other man achieved and proved it by carving our names and date on a boulder by the Pacific." His eyes gleam. "It doesn't hurt that he's my cousin either."

"We're so proud." I hug him again, but seeing his expressionless face, I release him. Success with Mackenzie has changed him. I easily read the woodland around me—today's frost-touched crimson foliage announces winter soon—but can't read my husband's face. "Alex, what's wrong?"

"With Mackenzie knighted, I'm also sought after. I must go to Montréal."

"So far?" I glance toward our cabin. "Then we must prepare."

"No. I can't take you or the girls—only Thomas."

"For how long?"

"As long as it takes. This is my chance for fame."

"Tom's only eleven. Do your parents need support? Is that



it? We'll all go. I'll care for them." I have heard of my husband's parents but am not sure they know of me.

Alex bristles, pushing a hand through the shaggy hair I love to caress. "Marguerite, you don't understand."

My clenched hands fall to my side. "Then help me."

"I must secure my fortune. And his."

I tremble, like I am seven again seeing Father shot to death by a trading partner as Mother and I stand helpless. Except this death is happening now.

"What of our daughters? And me?"

He shrugs, his face impatient.

"You and they belong here in Indian Country. When they are older, I'll try to arrange good marriages for all three."

My lips form words, but my heart is stone. "Alex, what are you saying?"

The light in his blue eyes dims, as if he sinks beneath ocean waves. The right half of his mouth lifts in the crooked smile he uses when he knows his words will hurt. "It's plain enough. You're lovely but of mixed race. Tom has your father's and my lighter coloring and European features. He will be accepted."

"By people who are not family?" I tug his unyielding arm.

"Each man gets one chance in life to be something. I won't waste mine."

I release him to barricade my arms across my chest. "They are your daughters, and I—I am your wife."

He barks a hollow laugh. "My wilderness wife—a *façon du nord* frontier marriage recognized in this wilderness, but not legal in Montréal. Most North West Company men, including your father, left families behind to come west. I was young and unmarried when I came. I love you, Marguerite, but it's time to choose my society wife."

"Do I not matter to you?" His words attack like diving ravens. I tug my hair as my head pounds with confusion.

“Ours was a trading post contract, not the binding vows of a clergyman or priest.”

I mask my emotions, but tears wet my cheeks. “There was none, only the fort clerk, but our vows meant much to me. As you said they did to you.”

“They were enough then, and you’ve done me much good.” He speaks with his detached voice that can drive me almost mad. “Mackenzie being knighted makes my fortunes rise.”

He pulls me into the crook of his arm, but I resist.

“You’re the best thing I’ve known, but this part of my life is over.”

Alex has always been ambitious, but this sinks in. He is leaving us as completely as Father did. I cannot breathe. I see and hear Father dying again, smell the blood, taste the horror that he’s never coming back.

No. There must be something I can do to keep him. “Why, Alex? Our girls love you.”

“And I love them. Perhaps one day you can visit me in Montréal, although I could not acknowledge you. Thomas will find better prospects there than he could have here.”

Fire scorches my breast as his hand strokes my coppery arm. He steadies me as I stagger. “Marguerite, it is sad. If only society were kinder.”

“If only *you* were kinder.” I shake off his hand. “I’ve seen you free screaming rabbits from snares because you felt sorry for them. Won’t you spare us?”

“I wish I could. Please don’t make this hard.” His eyes warm with approval at seeing the new moose hide stretched nearby. “That’s a fine animal. You’re as good a shot as ever.”

Alex is fortunate I do not aim my musket at him.

He surveys the rainbow trout Tom brought from the creek. “Those are large fish.”

“He’s downstream catching more.” I point that direction.

“Every morning he has searched for you—twice today.” I gesture to a tall grove of evergreens. “Our girls are there picking cranberries and chirping like birds. Give your special call.”

He shakes his head. “Not yet. First, walk with me to the house. Cook these splendid fish while I explain the generous arrangements I’ve made.”

“Without you.” I search his eyes, trying to recognize the man I married.

He cups my chin and studies my face. “You often speak of Sault Sainte Marie, your favorite childhood home. I’ve arranged for canoes to take you there. Your old friend, Peter Arndt, is in charge of the fort. I’ll send enough funds for you to start over. You won’t be destitute. Please make our parting sweet. Don’t be sad in front of the children. I’m doing what I must.”

I try to rush ahead to our cabin, but he holds me back with his hand on my waist.

“Is my travel trunk still in the attic? Tom and I will leave in the morning.”

I almost stumble. “You will take my son from me that fast?”

“Snow will come soon.” He kicks dirt free from his other boot and points its toe at crimson bushes by our cabin door, their leaves curling with frost.

“Yes, your trunk is stored there.” I spit the words, sounding like the hoarse woodland spirits my Cree mother described.

He shakes his head. “Don’t take this so hard. I’ll call the children now. We’ll talk more tonight.” He lifts a hand to his mouth and gives the sharp cry of a hawk.

“Father’s home!” our girls shriek. They come running, bringing heaped baskets of wine-colored berries.

Tom rushes to us carrying a bigger stringer of fish. As the children embrace their father, I try to calm myself. Perhaps

Alex did not explain himself well but has a plan that will not destroy our family.

After enjoying his favorite braised trout and fried crispy potatoes, Alex pushes back from the table and pats his stomach. “Wonderful! As tasty as always. We don’t get food like this while exploring.”

“Mama is a good cook.” Tom’s pleased smile tears my heart.

Alex gazes fondly at our children. Soon he climbs the ladder near our fireplace and lowers down his trunk, then digs through its layers. He reaches in and removes woodland treasures he once gathered—a cunning whistle, a reed flute, the beaded belt my mother made him. He gives those to our girls. The city clothes he has not used for years are at the bottom. He lifts them now and shakes them free of dust.

“Girls, Thomas and I go to Montréal tomorrow.”

“On an adventure?” Tom’s face brightens.

“A grand adventure. We will have fun.” Alex flashes his winning smile. “Take your best clothes but leave everything else. We’ll buy new things there.”

“When will we return?” Thomas asks.

“I’m not sure. We have much to pursue.”

As night settles and all four children go upstairs to their beds, I linger in our living room rubbing imaginary dust from the silver wedding candlestick that gleams on our fireplace mantel.

Alex stands in our doorway. “Come to bed, Marguerite.”

When I follow, he closes the door behind us. As he reaches for me, I whisper, “What about our marriage contract?”

He sighs, his forehead scar vivid. “Please understand. These have been good years. You’ve given me much. Don’t be sad.” He kisses my cold cheek as one comforts a crying child. “I’ll never forget and always wish my future could include you,

but I can't have two families, now can I?" He strokes my arm. "I ache for you when I'm away."

"And I for you, but how can you ask such a thing?" I must not let my hunger for him betray me now. I bite my lip and taste hot coppery salt.

A frown unites his eyebrows. "Because I am your wilderness husband."

My heart pounds. I pull away before my emotions unravel. "Seventeen years is payment enough. Besides, the time of women is upon me." God, forgive my lie.

"I didn't want it to be like this." His hand drops, and his voice carries disappointment.

As he climbs into bed and pulls the blanket to his chin, I flee to our living room, taking refuge in the maple rocking chair he carved for me to soothe our babies. My mind wars until I fall into a restless sleep.

In my dream, a fully rigged sailing ship races to escape a massive storm on tossing seas. It struggles to reach shore but flounders and breaks apart on jagged rocks. The man at the wheel turns my way, and I see Alex, the zigzag scar on his forehead white with strain. His blue eyes flash a desperate message I cannot read.

*"Jump, Alex. Jump!"*

He throws his shoulder against the wheel to change course, but wild waves splinter the deck and swallow ship, crew, and Alex, the last man to go down. Debris and oil stains ripple the water that calms at last. White seagulls circle and cry overhead.

Bolting upright, my breath comes in labored pants. I add a log to the fire and begin this morning's tasks. I cook a hearty breakfast before rousing Alex and Tom. While they eat, I mend Tom's coat and pack food for their journey. We say little. Miraculously, our girls still sleep.

“*Au revoir*, Marguerite. I’ll send word when I can.” Alex pecks my cheek and heads off without looking back. I hug Tom fiercely until he pulls free to catch his long-legged father, not realizing there’s no promise we will see each other again.

Everything in me aches like a bird whose nest is robbed of its young. Can nothing end my pain? As a half-breed woman, I have no rights apart from my husband. *Dear God—fight for me!*

In our bedroom, I take our marriage contract from the wooden box Alex carved as my wedding gift. Worthless paper? I had believed it to be so much more. Now I want to tear it to shreds. But what if he changes his mind and returns? Instead, I slide the paper back into its box.

Perhaps I should have expected problems, knowing how poorly many North West Company men treat their wilderness wives. Many left families behind in eastern Canada when coming here. Most never returned, yet Montréal is where men must go for promotion and advancement.

Alex had been young and single when he chose me. He said he was happy with me, and I believed him. Kneeling by the bed still warm from his body, prayer spills from my lips. “Lord, my father taught me to trust You. You knew when I married that this day would come. Give me wisdom and help me understand the dream You gave. Keep Alex and Tom safe. Keep me strong for our girls. Don’t let me fail them.”

Tears prickle my eyes. I choke back sobs our girls must not hear. My jaws clench as heat blisters my heart. My hands fist until my fingernails cut my palms.

*Lord, never leave us—like Alex, like Father ...*

My father had no choice. I will not let Alex’s decision destroy us. Although my married life has ended, our daughters born of this failed marriage must not feel abandoned. My mind recalls this morning’s vivid dream that seems more real than this gray day. I repeat my prayer, proclaiming my trust in God.

Even if hungry rocks beneath the ocean's tossing surface devour our family, surely God will show a way to survive.

When at last I rise, a stronger woman gazes back from my mirror. She resembles my mother, but greater resolve shines from her eyes. I think she is a woman who will not easily give up.





# 2



Songbirds greet this morning as they do each day, unaware that there is no cause to sing. The sun follows its familiar arc above the horizon. *Lord, give me the right words for the girls. Hold our hearts in Your hands. I cannot fail.*

Our eldest wakes first. Marie's face puckers when she descends the stairs and sees Alex and Tom are gone.

"How can they have left when I heard nothing? I wanted to hug them. It might be months before they're home—maybe summer."

"Or even longer, dear." I slide my arm around her waist. "There is much Father hopes to accomplish."

Her green agate eyes narrow. "He didn't say when he'd return, did he? What aren't you telling me?"

"He wants us to leave here and winter at Sault Sainte Marie."

"What? Leave our home? Why can't we stay here?" Her nose wrinkles as if she smells spoiled food.

"He prefers it. I loved it there and it will be a joy to show

you that place. Your father is gifted. After his great success with Mackenzie, many doors are open.”

Understanding pinches her face. “Those doors are open for Tom but not us? Not for you?” With an intake of breath, she hurls herself against me, and her tears soak the front of my dress. Finally, she leans back and studies my face. “Did he make any promises?”

As a knife twists my heart, I can’t hold back tears. I won’t lie but may soften the truth. “It is too soon to know his future, so he didn’t promise. If he stays in Montréal, he will try to have you girls visit.”

“But not you? Nothing will be the same, will it?” She grips my hand. “I am sorry, Mother. No wonder you looked sad last night.”

“I hoped you wouldn’t see.” I stroke her chestnut hair and use my thumb to wipe the last tears trailing her cheeks. “With his plans uncertain, I don’t know how much to tell your sisters.”

She sighs. “Maybe he wants us closer to populated areas while he’s away. And then if he returns, the girls are spared grief. If not—time will make things clear.”

I hold this girl-woman in my arms and tuck her head under my chin like a mother bird shelters the young in her nest. God has given my girl wisdom beyond her fourteen years. Marie and I cling until we hear little Catherine fuss in her sleep. Soon Nancy comes downstairs carrying five-year-old Catherine wrapped in her yellow-and-blue patchwork quilt. Catherine’s almost blonde curls are so much like Alex, I catch my breath and grasp the table to steady myself. Nancy’s auburn coloring matches the gleam in her eye. Sturdy and always craving excitement, she’ll take this change in stride. Both girls yawn and stretch, neither expressing surprise to see their father and brother gone so early.

Marie is the most like me and the nearest grown, a little mother to her sisters. Her expressive eyes watch me silently with concern. She starts a pot of oatmeal while I explain that we'll spend this winter elsewhere. Then, to remove the worry from their faces, I say, "I saved some chocolate for a Christmas treat. Since Father begins a new adventure now, and we do, too, we will enjoy this today."

"Hurray!" Nancy shouts.

Catherine echoes, "Hurray!"

The promise of hot chocolate makes Marie smile. She looks up from stirring our porridge and rests the hand-carved wooden spoon across the pot's rim. "That sounds wonderful, Mother, a perfect start to our day."

"Yes, and I'll make plenty." I serve fragrant steaming cups and tell the younger girls we will visit my parents' best friend, Peter Arndt, at Sault Sainte Marie until Father and Tom return. That's enough truth for now. "We will leave most supplies here for travelers who pass through and face emergencies, but we'll take the essentials we will need through the winter. Finding food and shelter can save lives you know. You've heard your father's and my survival stories."

"We love them." Marie lifts her eyebrows, and her eyes glint green. "Maybe this trip will help our courage grow too."

"But not too much. We'll have our own small adventure but I want our travel to go well. Your father is suited to high adventure." Even as I say those words, I wonder how I ever believed our life here would be enough to hold Alex. I should have known from the beginning he would pursue greater things. I force a smile.

"You're brave, too, Mama." My lively Nancy's look of admiration warms my cheeks. "You shot that big moose and saved us when our canoe capsized."

"Thank you, love. That's what mothers do. I'm assigning

tasks to prepare for our travel. Marie, please collect the bedding and school supplies. Nancy, please pack enough winter and summer clothes for you and Catherine in case we're away that long. Please also help her choose a few favorite toys while I pack pans and dishes."

"How will we travel?" Nancy's eyes grow bright with excitement. Of my three girls, she's my adventurer.

"Father made arrangements as he passed the fort west of us. Freight canoes carrying beaver pelts east before winter have saved space for us." I scan our living room and frown. "Probably very little space. That's why we can only take basics plus a few treasures to remind us of home." I'm thankful that my daughters show excitement for what lies ahead instead of sorrow for what we leave behind. Their cheerful hearts make our tasks easier.

The next morning, as mist still rises from the river, we hear singing before we see voyageurs swing into view in two large canoes bearing North West Company insignia. With joyful cries, the men sweep off their red caps and bend low in greeting. The tall one in charge says, "Madame Marguerite, I doubt you remember, but I am Marcel Dubois. Long ago I worked with your father one season. What a fine man. I am sorry for his terrible death and will help you in all ways I can."

"*Merci.*" His kindness makes my eyes dampen. I don't recall him, but his manner reminds me so much of Father that I feel sweet sadness. He helps select a few traps and tools to take while I cook up our remaining food.

Dubois surveys our piled bundles and says, "Be sure to include your medical supplies. Your skill is badly needed."

The afternoon sun sinks fast this time of year. The men dig into my hearty servings of moose roast and Indian bread topped with cranberry jam or maple syrup. Later, they sing

voyageur songs that give my girls glimpses of my childhood. I join in.

Suddenly birds hush, the sun sets, and it is night.

“If we may spread our bedrolls by your fire, we will rest well and load your goods for travel early tomorrow.”

“*Mais oui, Monsieur.* And we’ll take this extra food for our journey.”

He tips his cap and pats his stomach. “*Merci, Madame MacKay.* You are as gracious as your mother.”

“I hope so. Call me Marguerite.”

“As you wish.” His eyes light. “Carrying food will speed our travels. The wise ones in the villages warn that bitter cold comes soon. We must go before ice chokes the channels.”



The next morning as we load canoes, the last skeins of geese fly southward, honking through pale skies as dense gray clouds pile up in the north. I point them out.

Dubois nods. “*Alors,* I see them too. We must start.”

Every day we wear more layers of clothes to stay warm. Our daily routine sees the men bend horizontal over their paddles, digging deep in the current where the water has enough depth to thrust canoes forward. Where it is shallow, our canoes sometimes scrape stones in stream beds. Then, if we risk getting stuck on rocks or bogged in mud, we draw canoes and bundles out of the water. The men lift our vessels over their heads and with heavy loads walk along deer trails parallel to stream edges until the water deepens again. They call this *portage*.

One settlement on Lake Superior is named Grand Portage. It is rich in game and has many navigable channels to the interior. We spend a day near the settlement to rest and gather

fresh meat—fish, frogs, snared rabbits, a deer. That evening a fat, lazy bear pads past us on its way to hibernation. The tall man lifts his musket and fires as fast as ever my father did. We enjoy sweet, tasty flesh that night with its nourishing fat. All through the night, we roast meat strips over fires to carry with us.

When my girls shiver in the cold, Dubois shakes out the bear's thick, hairy hide. "Spread this over your laps. This will be better once it dries and cures, but the hair gives warmth even now."

On our thirteenth travel day, the river tumbles fast between high rock cliffs that almost block the sun. We are nearly to where the current shoots forward fast again to a wider place when a boulder tumbles down. It narrowly misses the front canoe but slaps the river near us into a frenzy of frothing waves that bring us close to capsizing. Several bundles tip out. As we grab for them, little Catherine slips over the gunwale and disappears beneath the water.

"Secours! Help!" I scream and dive in. I clutch her dress and pull her close despite the shocking cold, but I cannot reach our canoe or shore. "Secours!" I cry again as my head pops up for a single breath of air. Will our lives end here? Has God brought us this far to be lost?

Somehow our steersman paddles our canoe to the last massive rock before the river shoots forward into a whirlpool guarding the lake. How he did it, I will never know. He had God's help. Soon, Catherine and I wash up against the canoe and see concerned faces cry out and hands grapple for us until we are caught. We are tossed up onto a wonderful soft bank of green moss, water streaming from us. We are like drowned rats, but we thank God for our lives.

We stop early that night because all are exhausted and

several of us need dry clothes. We linger contentedly over our meal and find our bedrolls early.

“Thank you for saving me, Mama,” Catherine says, her trusting blue eyes fixed on me. “I knew you would.”

I say the same to our Lord above and to those who helped us. Although I wanted to save her with all of my heart, I didn’t have the strength to rescue her alone.

I hold her close, inhaling her little girl smell as she sleeps, feeling her soft breath on my neck. I feel guilty enjoying her sweetness when Alex cannot, but the Lord reminds me that parents who steadfastly go through hard times with children deserve to enjoy the good times too. Where is Alex tonight? Does he know his flesh and blood nearly perished today? Or has he put aside thought of us like discarding a worn coat for a new one? Unable to sleep, I gaze long at the glittering stars overhead for a long time, giving thanks.



After fifteen days of exhausting travel, familiar log buildings swing into view along the river that joins Lake Superior with Huron. In some ways, coming to Sault Sainte Marie means returning home. Yet no married woman wants to be sent back home by her husband like damaged goods. As paddlers guide our freight canoes through boiling rapids, their paddles splash, making my daughters shriek and grab their skirts. I consider screaming, too, but with shame at being shipped here like unclaimed baggage.

Peter Arndt, the kindly old factor who manages this fort, begins slicing away my shame from the instant he sees us. “Marguerite! Girls! God be praised. I’d do a welcome dance if these old legs would permit it.”

He pushes the log stockade gates wide open, then limps forward, shouting orders to buckskin-clad men. “Ring our church bell. Fire both cannons.” The heavy bronze bell clangs out deep tones followed by two four-pounder cannons booming twice across the water, and I picture St. Peter himself throwing open heaven’s gates to make our entrance wonderful. This good man makes my three girls laugh and brings a smile to my face too—my first since Catherine and I were pulled from the river.

Peter kisses my cheeks and clasps me in a warm hug. “Marguerite, angel of God, how the years have flown. And now you bring these lovely daughters, such precious beauties.”

I tower above him. Have I grown so tall, or has age diminished him? “Peter, thank you for—”

“For receiving a great gift? Nonsense.” He waves me quiet, sending workers to help the voyageurs carry our luggage and bundles. His weathered face glows as he ushers us through the fort’s entrance, although moisture shines in his eyes. “How wonderful you’re here. I’ve talked of nothing else for days. Have I, Jules?”

A mountain of a man grunts under my largest trunk. “*C’est vrai*. That’s true. Of nothing else.”

“Take them to our guest quarters tonight. Tomorrow I’ll show Marguerite and the girls around so they can choose which rooms best please them.” He turns to me. “Remember when you and your parents first came? You were a charming child the size of your youngest.” He places one hand on Catherine’s head, while his other grasps his cane. “I was young and strong then.” He sighs so sadly, we all laugh.

“Those years were paradise, Peter. I wish we had never left.”

“Your father did what he believed right.” His chin trembles. “But his death was a tragic blow to all of us.”

I shudder, and my voice drops as I recall that horrid scene.



“Mother began dying the moment she lost him.”

“Of course.” His tongue gives a comforting cluck. “Our priests promise eternal fire to men like those who betrayed and struck down your father. By the saints, I pray it’s true. Now I’m blessed you’re here with your lovely daughters, exquisite dolls with flashing eyes.” He bends and studies their faces. “Do you girls sing like your beautiful mama? *Alors*, she could sing like an angel from heaven! I hope you still do, Marguerite.”

My daughters smile shyly. Nancy says, “She does, she does.”

Peter’s joy warms the winter in my heart. “God bless you, Peter. You could make dead stones live.”

His eyes sparkle. “Then God be praised, for that is my hope. And your youngest? The very image of you at that age.” He pats her honey-brown hair, nearly as light as Tom’s. If Alex had noticed her complexion, he might have taken Catherine, too, unless he didn’t want to bother with a girl.

“Let me introduce them. My oldest is Marie.” I urge her forward and note she surpasses him in height. “At fourteen, she is nearly grown.”

“A true beauty,” he says, gallantly kissing her hand in an old-world gesture.

“And this is Nancy, age twelve.”

“*Enchantée*.” He clicks his heels together.

Nancy’s eyes widen in ecstasy. “Mama, is he a king?”

“Almost,” I say.

Peter roars with laughter. “No, child. But I recognize royalty when I see it and have planned a welcome you won’t forget. Cook prepares a feast—roast ducks with savory rice and cranberries. And a surprise dessert with candied nuts and apples.”

All three daughters nearly swoon.

I urge my baby forward. “The baby, Catherine—”

“Me not a baby, Mama.” She frowns and shakes her tawny curls above her golden-bronze complexion.

I smile. “—is five years old and growing up entirely too fast.”

Peter lifts her in the air, converting her frown to delight, and then lowers her and reaches for me. “Marguerite, having you come restores these tired bones. And your daughters—there is so much of you in them, how could they not be wonderful?”

“You praise me too much.” I duck my head.

“No, not enough.” He gestures to a nearby alcove. “You girls may wash here, and I’ll show you a room where you may rest until dinner if you wish.”

“We’ll wash,” Marie says, “but show us the room later. We’re too excited to rest and want to explore.”

As they step to the alcove, he leans closer, his voice sober. “I know Alex has gone and taken Tom.”

“That’s true.” I turn to hide my sudden sheen of tears.

“Then God be merciful. I find it hard to forgive any man who leaves you and takes your son.”

“I pray and hope one day he—”

There’s sudden loud confusion outside. Two workmen rush forward, supporting a third man who sags between them with blood gushing through his split pant leg. One calls, “Where’s the good doctor? Is he here? Gaston has chopped himself.”

“Doctor McLoughlin left for the river to go to his next post.” Peter gestures to his helper. “Jules, run fast and try to catch him. You two, take Gaston to the dispensary.”

Apparently having heard the excitement, my girls return. The girls and I follow the helpers carrying the injured man. We enter a treatment room, and they lift him onto a table. I get a good look at his injury and wince.

I whip my shawl from my shoulders. “He needs a tourniquet. Girls, go outside and pray.” They’ve seen many wilderness crises, but I will spare them seeing this much blood.

A tall man with a lion’s mane of hair bursts into the room carrying a black doctor’s bag. He grabs a knife and slits open more of Gaston’s pant leg, revealing a deep, nasty gash.

“The log was hollow, and I struck a wasp nest.” Gaston grimaces in pain. “Their sudden stings made me lose aim. Save me, Doctor. I can’t be an invalid.”

“Of course you can’t, but first I must stop your blood loss.” He twists my shawl tighter, pressing hard until the bleeding slows. “Now, I need fresh water, alcohol, and clean bandages.”

Peter scurries and gives orders while McLoughlin probes, Gaston clutches the table with both hands and groans, “*Mon Dieu*, my God, have mercy.”

“I know it hurts but lie still, man. I must work fast. Remember, pain proves you are alive.”

“Then that is good.” The poor man grunts louder still.

“Swallow this,” Peter says, offering Gaston an evil-smelling jug of alcohol.

He greedily swallows, his face ghastly white.

“Thank God it’s a clean wound.” McLoughlin dips his needle and thread in cleansing iodine. “Keep him still. These straps will secure his arms. Jules, you’re strong enough to anchor his good leg and restrain his injured one so I can work.” The doctor begins stitching muscle and flesh together while Jules holds Gaston down. “Peter, grip the wound flaps together while I suture.”

Peter backs away. “I cannot. My hands are palsied.”

“Let me help.” I step forward.

The doctor pauses, and his dove-gray eyes appraise me. “Are you sure? Many women faint.”

“I do not.” I soap my hands in water and press the wound’s cleansed edges together firmly as the doctor resumes stitching.

He studies me more closely. “You’ve assisted medical men before?”

“Not trained medical men, just wilderness people.”

“Ah, you are Madame MacKay. Peter announced your coming. All of Canada praises your husband.”

Perhaps the doctor makes small talk to keep me calm, but his words wound. I incline my head. “As he deserves.”

“When does he return?”

“He ... Uh ...” My eyes burn, and I cannot breathe. I fan the sliced area with one hand to prevent two large black flies buzzing overhead from landing and then grip the wound edges tighter.

The good doctor looks my way and then re-threads his needle, but he lacks enough suture to close the gash. “Have you more, Peter? This cut is long, and I’m out of material. Do you have silk? Any kind of thread? Next season’s supplies hadn’t reached Fort William when I came through.”

Peter grimaced. “I’m sorry, John. Nothing.”

I always carry split moose sinew in my supplies for that purpose. I call to Marie through the doorway, “Bring my red sewing bag. And witch hazel leaves to slow the bleeding.”

Minutes later, she rushes in with my kit, offering its packet of strong glistening sinew as thin as catgut.

McLoughlin stares open-mouthed at the smooth white coil.

“It’s something I improvised,” I explain.

“Improvised? Perfect, Madame.” His luminous eyes are thoughtful as he closes the wound, the smooth thin cord following his needle in and out before he ties off each knot. I hand him scissors as he clips and then repeats the process each time. As he finishes stitching, when there is little skin left for

me to grasp, his hand brushes mine. The smell of him is clean and fresh, like the split heart of a pine log in winter when its resin knot explodes in flame in the fireplace. Something frozen in me yearns for the comfort of home and a fireplace. I shake myself. Those days are over for me.

He removes the tourniquet, reaching for bandages.

“May I offer a leaf poultice for Gaston?”

The doctor looks up. “What kind?”

“Witch hazel helps the blood to clot.”

He nods, then watches as I crush the ribbed leaves in my hand and moisten them into a green herbal skin to cover the wound. I hold it in place as the seepage slows. Next, the doctor applies bandages. After that, he fills a wash basin with clean hot water and rinses his hands before refilling it and offering it to me.

“Madame?”

I feel calmer than I have in days. Helping save someone’s life restores order to the fragments of mine. My stress rinses away with our patient’s blood.

McLoughlin pats Gaston’s shoulder. “You were lucky today, man. You’ll survive more adventures thanks to Madame MacKay’s cleverness. Her tourniquet and suture saved you more than my skill. Keep the wound clean and dry. Perhaps she will check you tomorrow.”

His eyes ask me that favor, and I nod. “Of course.”

“Above all, Gaston, from now on”—McLoughlin’s mouth lifts in an easy smile—“promise you’ll only chop trees, not your leg.”

Gaston grips his hand. “*Mais oui*. I am chief of wooden-headed idiots, am I not?”

“No.” The caregiver’s voice soothes. “It was an accident. You’re not the first man I’ve stitched for that. I fear you won’t be the last.”

“Peter,” Gaston says, “please give the doctor a bottle of rum charged to my account.” His friends help him stand and support him as he leaves, still expressing great thanks.

McLoughlin turns to me and bows at the waist. “You haven’t had professional training, Madame MacKay? Then you are gifted.”

Heat climbs my cheeks. “I’m a simple frontier woman glad to help.”

“The finest I know,” Peter adds. “And a marvel at raising daughters as lovely as herself.”

“So I see.” The doctor views my three daughters as they enter the room and glance at the bloody signs of surgery with no sign of discomfort at all. In truth, they’ve seen such signs often.

I retrieve my stained shawl and rush to leave. “The girls and I will find our quarters where I will launder this.”

“Jules will guide you,” Peter insists. “I’ll call you soon for dinner.”

As I smooth out my rumpled traveling skirt and shepherd my three girls along the path, I hear McLoughlin ask Peter, “Why have I not heard of this remarkable woman before?”

“Because much is made of her husband. Not enough of her.”

My face reddens knowing Peter continues explaining more. Their voices fade as I answer my daughters’ questions, but my mind wonders what McLoughlin will think of me now.

It doesn’t matter. He travels to a new post. While it has been pleasant to meet and work with this man, I am relieved knowing we will not meet again. It would be embarrassing to spend time in his presence now that he knows the circumstances of Alex’s departure. I am happy with the memory of today’s successful medical care.

# 3



**A**t dinner, Peter Arndt stands at the head of the long plank table and turns toward an aged priest. “Thank you, Father Laurier, for blessing our meal. It is good to have you stop on your way to your other parishes. And thank You, blessed Savior, for safely bringing Marguerite and her girls to us. We welcome them with this toast and wish them joy and blessings every day.”

The moisture brimming his eyes brings tears to mine.

“Hear, hear. All rise.” Jules lifts his glass high in my direction and drains the contents. His lips smack, and his cheeks redden.

“Don’t worry, Marguerite,” Peter says with a wink. “Your girls have apple cider to drink while we have harder stuff.”

“Apple spider! Where’s an apple spider?” Young Catherine’s blue eyes widen in horror. Marie has braided a circlet of dried blossoms for Catherine’s hair, making her look like a real princess.

“No, child. It’s a treat Uncle Peter makes from pressed

apples. Something delicious in your glass for children to enjoy.”

She bends and tastes, sipping daintily, but then gulps it all.

“You care for us too well, Peter.” Happiness lightens my voice.

“No. I wish to do more.”

When our stomachs cannot hold more, Peter calls Catherine to him. “Child, sit with me while I flame brandy for our dessert.”

“May I, Mama?”

“Of course.” She rushes past me, skirts rustling, and settles on his lap, trailing the fragrance of dried flowers behind.

“Watch, child. This liquid flames blue when I hold fire near and makes our dessert taste better. Marie and Nancy, you may also come and watch.” He tips a little more brandy over the top of the large bowl. When he strikes a flint, tongues of blue fire dance like Northern Lights before burning out.

“That is beautiful,” Marie says. “May we taste some?”

“Of course.” Peter serves us. “Marie, did you know this fort is named for you?”

She flushes with pleasure. “Is that true, Mama?”

“For you and our Lord’s mother, for whom you are named. Peter, my girls have never seen such treats. They will love you forever.”

“As I hope.” He slaps his other knee and turns to the priest. “Father, forgive me, but I can think of no better way to become immortal.”

Father Laurier spreads his arms wide, his lips widening in an inviting smile. “Jesus gave the example of welcoming little children to Him.”

Across the table, Doctor McLoughlin leans toward me. “Your tourniquet and sinew saved Gaston today, you know.



The way he was bleeding ..." He flinches. "I hate to think how it could have ended."

I shake my head. "It was your skill, Doctor. Wilderness women simply do what we must when there are no doctors near."

"And are knowledgeable and stay calm in crisis. You are remarkable. My uncle, Simon Fraser, is also a physician, but when his dear wife helps, she often becomes dizzy at the sight of blood and requires attention herself." He indulges a fond laugh.

"Simon Fraser?" Jules asks. "The famous explorer? Then surely, he and your husband know each other, Madame MacKay."

"Yes, Jules, they do," Peter answers quickly, sparing me. "I can't thank Alex enough for sending Marguerite and the girls here while he has to be away."

"But Mama," Nancy speaks candidly, "Father said he won't—"

"Never mind. Let the grownups talk."

As Peter turns the conversation to winter trapping, McLoughlin's eyes meet mine with compassion. When Catherine's napkin slips and drops under the table, McLoughlin dives for it. "Allow me," he says, but I've already bent, too, and our hands brush, shooting pleasant tingles through me. Am I so starved for affection that a stranger's kindness unnerves me?

"Thank God you hadn't left when we needed you today, Doctor," Peter says again at the meal's end. "Where do you travel next?"

"To Rainy River for personal reasons." Sadness lines his face. "And west from there to see if the Hudson's Bay Company truly plans to import Scottish farmers to confiscate our lands, as rumors say."

Peter gasps. “Surely not.”

“They wouldn’t dare,” Marie interjects. “Father says if they do, it means war.”

“It could,” Peter answers sternly. “We’ve heard the stories, too, but pray they’re untrue.” He turns to my daughters. “Let’s discuss more pleasant things. Your mother says you girls love school, so I offer my services.” He dips his head politely and sweeps his hands to include all those around the table. “You’ll find many fascinating people here willing to help. Not all have book learning, but they all have practical skills.”

“Wonderful,” Nancy says, eyes shining.

“Do you enjoy learning?” McLoughlin studies their faces.

“More than anything,” Marie answers. Her sisters nod.

“When I travel, I carry extra books besides my Bible. And when I leave, I often find homes for them.” His eyes gleam. “Perhaps I can repay your mother’s kindness by giving you a gift.” He turns to me. “With your permission, Madame, my best European history is yours—in honor of your Swiss father who is revered by all North West Company employees. Anyone who knew him remembers and speaks highly of him. His integrity and courage are legendary.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” Warmth heats my neck. “Your words bring joy. My daughters know little of my father. I don’t have a wealth of memories since I was so young, but those I have are strong.” Sadness clogs my voice.

“Only memories? Nothing more?” His eyebrows lift. “I’ve read excellent written accounts. I’ll find copies to bring you next time.” He glances at my daughters. “And more books if you like.”

I lift my hands. “That would be heaven.”

“Return soon, Doctor,” Peter urges. “You don’t come often enough. If only Headquarters would assign you here permanently.”

“Every fort wants physicians, but you know company strategy. They rotate us to give token coverage while reducing costs. Still, I find God often has me at the right place at the right time.”

“As He did today,” Peter agrees, “or we might be arranging Gaston’s funeral.”

Gaston flinches, his bandaged leg propped beside him on a rough bench.

McLoughlin’s eyes twinkle. “But once they hear of Madame MacKay’s skill, they will send for her instead of me or any other physician.”

“Nonsense,” I sputter.

“We won’t tell them.” Peter’s voice is conspiratorial.

The doctor’s joyful laugh surprises me, and I feel myself blush. Laugh lines I had not noticed earlier make his face and eyes fascinating. He is younger than I first thought—and highly skilled for such a young man.

“Madame MacKay,” he says, “it may interest you to know that if Fort William becomes the new interior headquarters as many expect, they will establish a real school with trained teachers from back east.”

“Truly?” One hand flies to my face. “In these wilds?”

“So they say. If that proves true, I will send you word.”

Hope springs in my heart like a bird leaving a temporary nest to migrate home. “That would be a great kindness.”

“But if that means these precious ones leave,” Peter fusses, “I won’t thank you, Doctor. I’ll become a deaf old man incapable of hearing any word that means they might go.”

I place my hand on his arm. “Peter, you are ageless. Wherever we travel from now on, you must retire and come with us.”

“Thank you, child, I will consider that.” His face glows like the harvest moon climbing the dark sky outside these

windows. “You are as gracious as your saintly mother. How proud she would be of you, Marguerite. I am proud for her.” His eyes blink. “But look, Catherine falls asleep in her plate.”

Her chin drops dangerously near her dessert.

Peter starts to rise. “You need rest, and morning comes early. Let me carry her.”

McLoughlin is already on his feet, scooping her up in his strong arms. “I have her, Peter. She’s no trouble. Their guest room is near where I sleep, so I’ll take her.” He shifts Catherine’s slight weight and looks my way. “I leave at first light, Madame MacKay. It has been a pleasure to meet you. May God grant that we meet again.”

“In His time,” I say, and turn to acknowledge the others. “Thank you for this wonderful evening. Father Laurier—Jules—especially you, Peter.”

He points heavenward. “How can we do less when God sends angels to us?”

“Then I thank our Lord most of all. *Bon soir*. Rest well, all.”

Marie, Nancy, and I follow the tall doctor as he leaves the dining room and strides confidently down the path. I marvel that in one-half days’ time, our family’s heartache has been lessened in this safe place where we enjoy the first warm welcoming touches of a new home.

Soon, my daughters’ breathing finds the soft patterns of sleep. Where are Alex and Tom tonight? Will I see them again? I press sobs into my pillow, dreading many empty days ahead. Yet as I think of God’s kindness even today, my tears slow. My last thought before sleep is to wonder if we will ever see Doctor John McLoughlin again.