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**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.