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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.