

Addie

Addie slid through the forest as silent as a lynx, her beaded moccasins muffling her footfalls. The young stag wasn't as quiet. When it vanished from sight, she could track it by the crackle of autumn leaves under its hooves. Finally, it stopped to feed and she closed the gap between them until she could see it, small antlers lowered as it tugged at a patch of grass not yet brown and withered.

Addie eased the bow from her back, notched an arrow, and took aim. The buck's head jerked up. She loosed the arrow, but it was too late—the buck was in flight. Addie fired a second but too quickly, spurred by frustration and anger, the arrow lodging in a nearby maple.

When the crash of the fleeing deer subsided, she peered around the dawn-lit forest. Something had startled the beast and it hadn't been her. She would never have been so careless.

Addie pulled her coat tighter against the chill. The jacket was too small for her now—she'd grown nearly a half foot in the past year—but she refused to let Preacher and Sophia buy one from the traders. She wanted to make one exactly the same way, doing everything from killing the deer and mink to curing the leather to sewing the cloth. There was not another twelve-year-old in Chestnut Hill who could claim the same. Not a *girl* of any age. Her parents may not have given her much, but they'd taught her to look after herself.

They'd also taught her—unintentionally—how to sense danger. So now, after the buck had bolted, she went still and listened. She paid particular attention to noises from the north, upwind of the deer, presuming it was a scent that had startled it. After a few moments, she heard the tramp of boots on a well-packed path.

Addie eased her bow onto her shoulder and pulled her skinning knife from its sheath. Then she slunk soundlessly through the woods. She knew exactly where to go—there was only one trodden path in the area, used by the villagers to get to the lake. When she was near enough to see figures, she crouched behind a low bush.

It was two men. One middle-aged, perhaps thirty, the other so ancient that even with a cane and the younger man's arm, he shuffled along. Neither was from the village. A hundred people lived in Chestnut Hill and Addie knew every one. The only travelers they saw were trappers and traders, and precious few of either so deep in the forest, three days' ride from Toronto. These men were neither traders nor trappers. Settlers, then? Lured north by the promise of land or work on the railroad or in the mines? Settlers needed supplies, though, and these men carried only packs on their backs. No wagon. No cart. Not even horses.

And where had they come from? The road lay on the other side. The men headed toward town on a path that only led from the lake. Trappers did come through the forest, but she saw no sign of such gear on these men. They hadn't come *across* the lake—it was too small, with no settlements nearby save Chestnut Hill.

Addie slipped through the forest to get a closer look. Both men had short hair and neatly trimmed beards. Though they wore long coats, she could see their

clothing underneath. White shirts and black trousers. They looked as if they were heading to church.

Missionaries. That's what they had to be. Perhaps they'd been traveling on foot from Greenville, ten miles away, and gotten lost in the forest, taking the first well-trodden path they saw. It didn't matter *where* they had come from, only that they were heading to Chestnut Hill.

How would Preacher feel about other men of faith in his town? She ought to warn him. With any luck, they'd just be passing through. Chestnut Hill might not even allow them to stay, given that it still reeled from the tragedy that had Addie out in the woods, avoiding the glowers and glares of villagers, blaming her for the simple fact that she lived. That she'd survived.

She was about to start back when the younger man looked straight at her. She froze, telling herself she was mistaken; there was no way he could have heard her, no way he could see her now, dressed in brown behind the dying leaves of a cranberry bush. But he didn't simply glance her way. His eyes bore straight into hers, and when they did, she swore her heart stopped.

"You there," he called. "Girl."

How could he tell she was a girl? She was dressed as a boy, in trousers, her dark hair pulled back.

"Girl," he called again. "We're heading to Chestnut Hill. Is this the way?"

Her parents had taught her to look after herself because no one else would do it for her. She knew now they'd been wrong—and so she did try to be kind, to be helpful as Preacher and Sophia counseled. Yet even as she spurred herself to step

from behind the bush and lead this man to Chestnut Hill, she looked into his eyes and she could not move, could not speak.

The man released his grip on his elder's arm and started toward her.

"We're here to help, child," he said, his voice low and soothing, like Preacher coaxing Sophia's cat from under the porch. "We know what Chestnut Hill has suffered and we wish to—"

Addie bolted from her hiding place, running back toward the village like she had a black bear on her tail.