

RIVER WANDERER

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RIVER WANDERER

Chapter I: Captured

This was Harriet’s favorite spot on the river. A tall oak tree leaned out over the banks. It had been leaning there for as long as anyone could remember, and it would probably be the 1800’s before it finally fell into the water. That did not prevent her friends from trying to scare her when she was young, shouting that the tree was falling, just as she was moving onto a limb.

They did scare her at first. She had been too short to reach the higher branches for support, and the sight of the water below had made her legs unsteady. The first few times had been awful, but by the end of the summer she could walk without holding on to anything.

That was years ago. Those same friends would now be at the Waltonville Fourth of July picnic, and Rodger would certainly be among them. She could still feel his

hands on her breasts, and remembered well the warm sensation that had surged through her body. If the touch had surprised her, the sensations had been unsettling.

It was not until her blouse fell to the ground that she returned to her senses. Then she fought with the hands that were pulling at her skirt. By the time she freed herself and picked up her blouse, she was furious with Rodger for putting her in this position, and he was angry as well. They parted with harsh words and hurt feelings, all stewing beneath faces that pretended nothing had happened.

That had been yesterday, and she was not prepared to see Rodger anytime soon. Their friends would guess that something had happened and she would not be able to face them if they discovered the truth. So she told her parents that she did not feel well and would come to the picnic later if she felt better.

Soon after her parents had left, Harriet ran through the woods until she reached this place of quiet and solitude. Rodger might come looking for her but it would be an hour before he would arrive, even if he came here directly. She had time to swim and dry herself in the sun if she began promptly.

The young woman quickly undressed in the shade of the oak tree. Climbing onto the limb that stretched out over the water, she stopped to search the woods for any signs of another person. It was very quiet; even the wind was still.

The river reflected the limb perfectly, as well as her naked body. Grabbing an overhanging branch, she twisted and turned so that she could see herself from several angles. The breasts that Rodger had fondled stood round and firm above a slender waist and round hips. Below the flat muscles of her stomach was the tender area that Rodger had groped for but never reached. Her legs were spread apart, opening the

area that Rodger would have tried to penetrate. She drew them closer, then spread them wide, curious to see areas which she had only felt before.

It was clearly a woman's figure, now, after years of being teased about looking like a boy. Part of the teasing resulted from her playing with the boys long after her girlfriends had retreated into dresses. She liked to run, to swim and hunt animals in the woods. After several years of prodding, her father taught her how to shoot with a rifle. By that time, she had already mastered the bow and arrow and could track as well as anyone in the village.

Nature, however, had taken its course and by the time she was fourteen, neither she nor the boys could ignore the differences. The following two years had been a continuous lecture on how a lady should act. She should not, for instance, jump naked into a river and crawl up onto the grass to be dried by the sun. Even running through the woods was condemned as acting like a savage. Well, today she intended to act as a savage and they could all suffocate at the picnic in their proper clothes.

After several minutes of gazing at her reflection, Harriet dove into the water, feeling the cool liquid surround and caress her limbs. It had been a long time since the water had touched her bare skin. Slowly she allowed it to lift her to the surface. Taking a quick breath, she moved toward the center of the stream.

The strong current demanded hard strokes. She thrashed at the water as if she was striking Rodger for his indiscretion. Next she thrashed against her parents, her minister, and her friends, angry that they would shame her for enjoying the pleasures of her body. After fifteen minutes of hard swimming, she allowed the river to carry her

gently back to her starting place. The muscles of her arms and legs were weary, but her anger was exhausted and a peace began to spread through her tired body.

Wind Seeker knew that he was approaching a settlement. Something was drawing him to this place. Perhaps he was being true to his name: seeking to discover changes that most of his people preferred to ignore. For whatever reason, he had paddled up this small stream after traveling days upon the Juniata and Susquehanna Rivers. Soldiers and trappers plied those rivers, challenging his skills at traveling undetected. They serviced the newer settlements that lay close to his village. He would like to see an older settlement and observe the ways of the people who lived there.

His paddle moved quickly and quietly through the water. Eyes and ears were alert for any sign or warning that settlers might be near. A splash rang out from a bend in the stream ahead. Quickly, he turned his canoe and paddled toward the right shore, bringing the boat closer to the source of the splash. Crossing to the far shore presented too great a risk of being seen.

As he reached the shore, he heard more splashes - the sounds of someone swimming. Taking only his war club, he moved carefully toward the sound. A hill gave him a perch from which he could look down upon the stream. His ears had told him that it was a solitary swimmer. His eyes told him that the swimmer was a young woman, moving strongly against the current. He watched her for several moments, marveling at her strength and courage. In those few moments, he decided to take her captive.

Walking wide of the area, he carefully listened for signs of companions. The woods were silent and the birds were singing freely. The woman appeared to be alone.

Moving down to the banks of the river, he found the place where she had left her clothes. He had no intention of disturbing them. Friends of the woman would see them and think that she had drowned. For him, the clothes marked the spot where the woman would return after her swim. He walked a short distance upstream and found a place where he could watch and enter the water quickly. He would capture her before she could reach the oak tree.

Harriet was floating peacefully on her back when she heard a splash. She let her feet fall forward, dipping her head beneath the water. When she surfaced, she turned in the direction of the sound and saw a strong young man swimming toward her. Thinking that it was Rodger, she angrily began to swim toward him. Then she stopped, remembering that the young man's head was shaved, except for a strip of hair reaching from his forehead to the nape of his neck. This was no friend; it was a young brave.

Turning in the water, she tried to swim directly into shore, but that only brought her closer to the swimmer. In desperation, she turned again and started for the opposite shore. Despite her strongest strokes, the brave was closing the distance between them and she was nearly exhausted. Twenty feet from shore, she felt his hand strike against her ankle. She used all the strength that remained to reach the shallow water where she staggered to her feet. The brave was right behind her. Within moments she felt his arms around her thighs and she fell with a thud upon the bank.

The fall left her breathless and incapable of resisting the hands that pulled her arms behind her back. Leather cords bound her wrists before she had enough breath to

cry out. A single cry escaped her lips, only to be muffled by the wet strands of hair that were forced into her mouth.

Strong arms grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back into the water. Her captor cupped one hand beneath her chin, forcing her to float on her back and kick her legs to keep her nose out of the water. That was the only way that she could breathe. Hard strokes moved them to the center of the stream, where the current carried them past the oak tree and around a bend. More hard strokes brought them both to the shore.

Harriet struggled to gain her feet as her captor pulled her out of the water. His hands twisted her about and lifted her by the hips until she bent double over his shoulder. No amount of twisting kept him from carrying her to the brush where he had stowed his canoe and back to the water as he dragged the canoe after him.

At the edge of the water he dropped her onto the ground and turned her onto her stomach. He knelt upon her thighs, keeping her body pressed to the ground. His practiced hands wound another leather thong around her ankles, leaving her completely helpless.

Once inside that boat, she had little hope of being rescued, but with her hands and ankles tied, she had no means of escape. Her only hope was that someone would come along while they were still on shore, but no one would come looking for her for more than an hour.

His strong arms lifted her off the ground and laid her in the canoe. There he covered her with a blanket, so that Harriet could neither see nor move. She felt the canoe being pulled into the water, but from that point onward she had little sense of

where she was. If they continued downstream, they would soon enter the Susquehanna River. Someone might see them if they stayed long on that big, open waterway, but she expected that they would soon be on a tributary leading back into the hills. Exhaustion soon pushed these thoughts from her mind. The warmth of the blanket and the steady motion of the canoe soon pulled her into sleep.

Wind Seeker paddled quickly, aided by the current of the small river. Swatara was the name his people gave it. It was as wide as thirty canoes but not wide enough to escape an arrow from either shore. The guns of the settlers could cross it easily. His safety depended upon speed and silence.

There was little movement from his captive. Sleep made her breath slow and easy. If she stayed still, he could reach the big river by noon. There he would turn upstream and paddle toward the islands in the middle of the river. The islands would be a place to rest and to avoid being sighted from the shore.

The trees along the Swatara slid by quietly. Many moons would pass before he could again wander among them. If he had thought of that when he first spotted the young woman, he would not have taken her captive. The warrior in him had taken charge. The wanderer would have to wait.

The wanderer had been in charge for many years. Few in his village even called him a warrior, even though he had earned that right four years earlier. Their memories of his first raid were fading quickly.

He had captured a young woman then as well. His eyes discovered signs of her presence as his two companions ran noisily ahead. She was a wanderer like himself,

so it was easy to find the place where she hid. A rabbit skin muffled her cries as he bound her arms and legs.

Two screams had escaped the rabbit fur as she struggled against him. The screams brought his companions running back and warned the woman's village of their presence. The raiders moved quickly to the place where they had hid their canoe, each taking a turn at carrying the captive.

His village had celebrated their arrival. Rarely did young braves return from their first raid with a captive. The chief was unusually pleased because his brother had lost a wife over the winter. The captive became the brother's new wife and by the next winter she was carrying his child.

Wind Seeker had come upon her in the woods, her pregnant body moving heavily through the trees. Her eyes were filled with sadness, not reproach. She longed to be a wanderer, not a wife. Those eyes still haunted Wind Seeker. They followed him on the next raid and he resolved to avoid more raids in the future.

The big river brought his thoughts back to the present. He stopped along the bank to scout it. His captive was as quiet as the Swatara. The big river was as quiet as his captive. He used the quiet to cross to the other side of the river and begin the long journey upstream.

Harriet awoke when the canoe came to a sudden stop. Her captor pulled away the blanket. Trees towered above her, their leaves blocking the sun and revealing glimpses of blue sky. Her captor towered over her as well. With his hands he signaled

that he would remove the knot of hair from her mouth if she promised to stay quiet. She emphatically agreed and breathed deeply when her mouth was cleared of hair.

A strong arm slid beneath her shoulders and another behind her knees. In a moment she was lifted out of the boat and onto the shore. Stealthily she searched for familiar landmarks as her captor untied her ankles. The search was fruitless. Nothing was familiar. They were on an island, probably one of the dozens lying upstream on the Susquehanna. She had heard about them from trappers but had never been that far upstream herself.

Her captor untied her hands and signaled for her to stand. That took several moments as circulation returned to hands and feet. She could feel his eyes on her as she walked over to some trees to relieve herself. To her surprise, he walked over and squatted next to her. When both were done, he began to cover the area with matted leaves. To her further surprise, she began to help and followed willingly when he returned to the stream to wash. Sharing a basic human function had created a bond between them, however thin that bond might be. I want him to trust me, she told herself, so I can escape when he's not watching. Secretly, she doubted that he would not be watching if there was ever a chance to escape.

Standing next to him in the water, she suddenly felt very naked. Rodger would love to be here, she thought to herself. She had fought desperately to keep him from seeing her naked. Her captor, of course, was just as naked and she would have enjoyed his nakedness if she were not so frightened of him. Watching him wash in the stream had dissolved much of her fright. The terror had gone but she still watched his

every move. Tonight I'll be his bride, she thought, and terror quickly returned. The curious part of her wondered how it would feel.

Her captor did not share her ambivalence. His every move exuded confidence in what needed to be done and in his ability to do it. Water streamed from his skin as he walked over to the canoe. She marveled at his well-muscled body as it reached into the boat and pulled out a net. Motioning for her to follow, he walked over to a sandbar that stretched toward the next island. The river had cut a deep channel through the sandbar, stretching nearly five feet across. Her captor leaped it without effort, holding one end of the net. She held the other end, admiring his agility and giving up any thought of outrunning him.

The water pressed hard against the net, forcing her to use both hands and frequently shift her weight against its pull. Her captor had no such difficulty and seemed amused at her struggles. Secretly she hoped that he smiled at the sight of her body as much as at her awkwardness. Mercifully, it was not long before fish filled the net.

Harriet used her captor's knife to scale the fish. He had not hesitated a moment in giving it to her, no doubt confident that he could defend against any attack she might try. Unless she surprised him, any attack would be hopeless. She would be a good squaw until she made her escape. Within an hour, the fish were cooked and eaten and no trace remained of the fireplace. No detail escaped her captor. Her own escape would be very difficult.

Leaving the island, the two paddled until sunset. Harriet far preferred paddling to lying bound in the bottom of the boat. Nonetheless, that was how she passed the settlement at Clarks Ferry. The canoe was well up on the Juniata River before her

captor untied her and put the paddle back into her hands. She had heard stories of this river. Its headwaters were far to the west, far from the land she called home.

As the sun descended in the western sky, she felt its golden rays reflecting off her bare skin. She also felt that each stroke of the paddle was taking her farther and farther from any hope of rescue. There were small settlements along this river but she knew that her captor would prevent her from seeing any of them.

The rays of the setting sun brought memories of her parents. By now they would be giving up their search and walking back to an empty cabin. Most likely they thought her drowned. None would suspect her capture. No Indian canoe had been seen on Swatara Creek in her memory. It was better that they thought her drowned. It would break their hearts to know that their daughter would be lying naked with an Indian brave. The approaching shore made it impossible to push away those thoughts. Lying naked with any man was frightening. Few women spoke of it. Lying with a savage was terrifying.

Wind Seeker pulled the canoe onto the shore. His captive promptly stepped out of the boat and helped him carry it beneath the trees. This pleased him: she was learning quickly and responded promptly to his hand signals. Her eyes, however, glistened with tears.

Those eyes haunted him as he prepared the camp. Like the other woman he had captured, she would be a prize for the chief or an honored warrior. She would not feel honored. The sadness would never leave her eyes and they would never leave his dreams.

He watched his captive closely as she ate the remnants of the afternoon's fish and relieved herself. The men of his village would find her attractive and she was strong enough for the work of a squaw. That would raise his stature in the village and he might be offered a young bride. That was foolishness, he reminded himself. No family wanted a wanderer to marry their daughter. They wanted a husband who would be a good provider. Perhaps he should keep the woman for himself and have a companion for his wanderings.

Before going to sleep, he bound her hands behind her back. To his surprise, she began to sob. No village woman would act this way, no matter how heavy her sorrow. He put his arm around her as if she were a child but the sobbing continued. To his further surprise, she stiffened suddenly when his hand touched her breast. In his village, the unmarried women welcomed the touch of the young men and were quick to respond to it. This woman sobbed at his touch. Perhaps she would not be a cherished prize and he would be forced to take her back. Then he would be doubly shamed: once for being a wanderer and once for capturing a useless prize. No woman would have him for a husband. Turning his back to his captive, he wrestled with these troubling thoughts.

Harriet responded with a long sigh. An enormous tension drained from her body and she began to breath more easily. He did not intend to rape her, she realized suddenly. Her relief, however, did not allow sleep to overcome the discomforts of lying with bound hands on the hard ground, pressed against the bare flesh of a strong young brave. It was the first time that she had felt the bare limbs of a man against her own

bare flesh. How long could he lie next to his captive without ravishing her, she wondered. How long could she lie next to him without wanting him inside her? That was a very wicked thought. What would her parents think if they heard it?

Those thoughts would not go away. Neither would the touch of his bare body. A single blanket shielded them from the cold night air and they pressed together for needed warmth. If her hands were free, they would be wrapped around his waist.

Sometime in the night she must have dozed, because she was awakened in the morning by the sudden movement of her bedmate. He rose to a sitting position and stared in the direction of the river. Then he knotted her hair, thrust the knot into her mouth, and turned her onto her stomach. His hand rested upon her bound wrists, making it impossible for her to move.

The reason for all this became apparent in a few moments. Two men were paddling down the river in a canoe. Harriet's heart began to pound. This would be her chance to escape. She could not scream and could barely move, but she could twist and turn and make enough of a commotion to draw their attention.



Chapter II: The Journey

As the trappers came closer, Harriet could hear their conversation.

“How much more ‘till we come to that settlement?”

“We should reach it by midmorning.”

“What do you think? Should we shack up in some farmhouse? We can have our fun with the wife, then scalp the family the next morning - make it look like Indians done it.”

“And we’ll find a hangman’s noose when we reach the settlement. Wait ‘till we’re on our way back before you start your games.”

Fear knotted Harriet’s stomach. Those men brought rape and death, not safety. She stayed absolutely still until long after the canoe had rounded the bend in the river, but with the passing of the canoe passed any hope of escaping on her own. She would have to follow the river to find her way back, and would be easy prey for trappers such as these.

Wind Seeker sensed the change in her mood. He could not understand the words of the white men, but their tone was chilling. His captive could understand them, and she became absolutely still, like a rabbit running into a fox. When the men were safely gone, he untied her hands and led her on a search for berries. He doubted that she would do anything that might draw the attention of those strangers.

The trappers would be back. It would not take them long to reach the settlement that he had paddled past the day before. Without the captive paddling, his progress

had been slow. The canoe moved more quickly when he untied her hands and gave her a paddle. Not as quickly as two trappers, he reminded himself. There was no telling when they would return and he would need a good hiding place to avoid them.

The woman moved slowly through the woods. Her hands brushed away stray limbs with unconscious ease but her feet hesitated before accepting any weight. Without moccasins she would have a hard time moving through the trees. He could trade a deer for moccasins at his village but that might take more time than he had before the trappers returned. Better to keep her feet bare until they were far from any settlements. He would keep the rest of her bare as well. Already she had given up her earlier attempts to cover her breasts and female parts with her hands. Perhaps she would soon learn to welcome his touch, like any normal squaw.

Harriet thought about the two trappers as she picked her way gingerly through the berry patches. A chill ran through her body each time their words came to mind. They would be having their fun with her if she tried to escape along the river.

Her progress through the woods was slow without shoes or clothes. A path would help but there was none to be seen. A path helps if you know where it goes, she reminded herself. She would be quickly lost in these woods, no matter where she went. Her captor, by contrast, moved quickly and confidently. Too quickly, she reflected. It would be months before she was able to keep up with him. Escaping from him through the woods was out of the question.

She followed him into a patch of strawberries. He removed his breechcloth and, folding it in half, made a sack by holding the four corners together. In a moment, Harriet

was holding the sack and taking the strawberries that he gathered. Hard as she tried, she could not stop glancing at his male member. He enjoys being naked, she thought to herself. No doubt he expects that I enjoy it as well. She remembered that Indian women wore only short skirts during the summer months.

Why had he captured her, she wondered. He had many opportunities to ravage her, but she remained untouched. As her eye strayed back to his male member, she wondered how it would feel inside her womb. Those are wicked thoughts, she quickly reminded herself.

Suddenly she felt a tight knot in her stomach, remembering the stories she heard from trappers. Captured white women were tortured horribly unless they consented to be slaves. He was taking her to his village for a life of slavery. That explained why she hadn't been raped. Her new master would be angry if a young brave used his slave. Perhaps she should seduce her captor. That might save her from a life of slavery. More wicked thoughts – she should be ashamed of wanting to seduce him. But her life was over if he took her to his village.

She would be the perfect squaw: carrying his strawberries, cleaning his breechcloth, paddling his canoe. And giving him pleasures at night – more wicked thoughts she tried to suppress. Give him pleasures and you'll be carrying his child, she reminded herself. Better carrying his child than being an old chief's slave, said another voice inside her head.

This internal argument continued through the morning, while they caught fish, and into the afternoon, while they cooked them. Late in the afternoon they loaded the

boat and continued the journey upstream. The sun had set when they passed the next settlement, so there was no need to hide the captive.

When she saw the lights in the cabin windows, Harriet thought briefly of crying out, but a cry from the dark brought fear, not rescue. The settlers would bar their doors and sit all night with rifles in their hands. Only in the morning would they investigate what they heard in the night. By then, she and her captor would be miles away.

A cry would do nothing but anger her captor. She had worked hard to please him, at first out of fear and later to encourage decent treatment. His treatment had been decent and she did not want that to change. She made not a sound and continued to paddle, but each stroke took her farther from home and any chance of escape.

Wind Seeker watched his captive as they passed the settlement in the dark. He would tip the canoe if she cried out. The water would muffle her shouts. It pleased him that she remained silent. She seemed to accept being a captive, but then he remembered the tears from the prior night. Perhaps she needed time to learn the ways of his people. He could teach her before bringing her to the village. Then she would be a prize, not a burden. All the village would praise him for the honor he had brought them.

He would be given a wife and the responsibility to provide for her. That would be a light burden: he hunted better than any man in the village. Each night he would bring his catch home to his wife and lay by her side. Each morning he would walk into the woods, but go only the distance he could return before dark. He knew that distance and had explored every rock and tree within it.

His wife might not insist that he stay so close, he mused. She might encourage him to explore new lands, even if it took weeks to return. Then he remembered the words of the clan mother, warning him that no woman would marry a wanderer. No woman of his village would do it, but his captive might. She seemed to enjoy the travels. Perhaps she was a wanderer like himself.

His mind was wandering again. That was the price of traveling at night. The reward was passing settlements undisturbed. In two days they would be beyond the settlements. In four days they would reach his village. On the third day they would be in his land, the frontier between his people and the settlers. They would stay there until he taught the captive the ways of his people.

In the darkness, his captive was only a form. The pale skin and hair darkened in the shadows and she looked like a woman of his village. A village woman would wear a skirt. Removing the skirt would be an invitation to share pleasures. This woman cringed from the pleasures. Perhaps that was the way of her people. It was something more he needed to teach her. She appeared to learn quickly. Her paddling had improved through the night. His people would be pleased that she paddled almost as well as a village woman.

The moon broke through a cloud and flooded the stream with its light. The canoe was resting in an eddy created by a cluster of rocks in the center of the river. Harriet had taken advantage of the break by stretching out in the bottom of the boat. The darkness had enveloped her and she felt privacy for the first time since her capture. As

the moon broke through the clouds, it illuminated her entire body. Instinctively she covered her breasts with her arms.

Be the perfect squaw, she told herself. Let him see you. Slowly she resumed her stretching and observed the smile on her captor's face. He moved toward her and placed his hand inside her legs. She froze at his touch and he withdrew his hand. Let him touch you, she scolded herself. Her right foot obediently touched his leg, inviting him to touch her again. His hand returned, stroking gently. It continued to stroke as she shook with sobs, as if to reassure her that she had nothing to fear.

Harriet had determined to be the perfect squaw but her fears broke through that determination. Her captor's touch evoked every childhood dread of being ravaged by savages. Her desire to be touched evoked scornful disapproval from every face that she imagined. The faces of her friends were cruel. Those of her parents were tearful and sad.

Her captor's gentle stroking brought her back from her fearful visions. She smiled at him, though tears still streamed down her face, and took his hand and kissed it. That was the only way she could thank him for his kindness.

Wind Seeker returned his captive's smile. The settlers must be full of fears, he thought to himself. This one struggled against them but a moon might pass before she was able to experience pleasures. He remembered the strong swimmer thrashing against the current of the stream. She had strength enough to be a squaw but would need time to find it.

When they resumed their journey up the river, his captive showed her strength. They did not stop until dawn and she paddled without interruption. Despite her weariness, she helped him hide the canoe in some bushes near the water. Only when he made a bed with his blanket did she collapse in exhaustion.

Harriet awoke to the warm stroking of a hand between her legs. The warmth spread through her body as she passed from dreams into wakefulness. In her dreams it was Rodger's hand. As her eyes opened, she saw it was her captor's. Let him see that you are enjoying it, she told herself. He has seen your tears. Show him your smiles. She focused on the warmth and a smile slowly spread across her face. The feelings that Rodger had stirred came back, only stronger. Her captor smiled as her body began to respond but he slowed the stroking until her breathing returned to normal.

Why did he stop, Harriet wondered. Is he playing with me like a cat plays with a mouse? He did not appear to be playing. Instead, he set about to catch enough fish for another day's journey. It was just past noon, Harriet judged from the position of the sun. She looked for a shaded place where she could hold the net. Her skin would darken in time. Until it did, she needed to avoid the sun. Miraculously, she was able to explain that to her captor with hand signals.

Wind Seeker was pleased with his captive. She worked well about the camp and was learning to enjoy his touch. He would work slowly with her until his touch brought pleasure instead of fear. In a moon she would learn to be a squaw and to take her

place among the women of his village. Until then, she would wander through the woods with him. That seemed a wise decision as he watched her cook the fish.

His doubts came with the darkness. The chief would be angry that he had not returned before making use of the captive. No warrior would be honored to take the wife of a young brave. The clan mother would be angry as well, judging that he preferred the captive to the women of his village. It might be wiser to return directly to his village and face his shame when the captive sobbed at a warrior's touch.

Another choice was to take her for his wife. They could wander the woods until she was big with child. No man in the village would claim a right to her when she carried another's child. The clan mother would be angry with him but she would help the woman with the birth. His hunting would bring enough food for the woman, the child, and many others, so the village would be happy. When the child was old enough, they could return to the woods.

They would reach his village in three days. In two days he would need to make the decision. Much depended on the woman. She must learn to welcome his touch. If she learned quickly, they would go directly to his village. If she did not, they would stay in the woods until she carried his child.

The third day of travel was hard on Harriet. Her home seemed a world away. If people still searched for her, they would not come this far upstream. Only trappers and Indians traveled these waters. Her captor's village would not be far and he had shown little interest in having her for himself. Each stroke of the paddle brought her closer to a life of slavery.

Perhaps it would not be her entire life. Each year, the settlers moved farther west. When they reached her captor's village, wherever that might be, someone would ransom her. They would ransom her children as well and she would return to Waltonville. There would be sadness in her parents' eyes as they helped her raise her children. She could see the looks of pity from her parents' friends and the looks of scorn from her own friends. Would anyone accept her children? Was there any man who would take her for a wife? Would it be different if she escaped before bearing children? Who would marry an Indian squaw?

That last question lay like lead within her stomach. If she escaped tonight, all would call her an Indian squaw. None would believe that she did not carry her captor's seed. Her friends would give her pity. Everyone else would treat her with contempt.

Those thoughts brought hard, rapid strokes of the paddle. Those strokes took her farther and farther from Waltonville. She never fit there anyway. Her joy was to run through the woods, not walk to church in a dress. This was her third day of being naked. She longed for a shirt and trousers, but never a dress.

What would her new home be like, she wondered. Suddenly she felt a strong desire to stay with her captor and never see his village. He seemed pleased with her, pleased in every way but one.

When they stopped to rest on an island, she turned toward her captor and stretched out in the bottom of the boat. Her foot brushed against his leg, inviting him to touch her. His hand had brought her pleasure this morning. She grasped it as it slid between her legs and pulled it to the place of pleasure. Her captor smiled as he massaged that tender area. The pleasures of the morning returned quickly. Harriet

closed her eyes and moaned softly at the gentle stroking. She opened them again when her captor pulled away. He was smiling at her and she beamed back at him. She must have pleased him, she thought. The stroking had lasted far longer than the morning's brief initiation. It had been wonderfully long.

He was preparing her to be his bride, she decided, as they continued on their journey. That thought brought relief as well as tension. He would not give up his bride to another man, she assured herself. No other brave would want her when she ceased to be a virgin, just as no settler would want her when she became an Indian squaw. Fear knotted her stomach as she struggled with the enormous step she was about to take. I have no choice, she thought, as she stroked the water hard. For long minutes she thought of nothing but stroking the water. Hard, rapid strokes broke most of the tension. Slow, smoother strokes created a soothing rhythm. By the time they stopped again, she was looking forward to more pleasures.

Wind Seeker stroked his captive each time they stopped to rest. Each time he repeated the prior strokes, then explored a new place to touch. The familiar places brought smiles and moans of pleasure. The new places raised sudden tension but calm and pleasure returned with repeated stroking.

She is letting go her fears, he thought with satisfaction. The strength he had seen just before her capture had clearly returned. By the following day, she would be ready for presentation to his village.

By the following day, Harriet was ready to be his bride. She wondered why he had not yet entered her. Perhaps he was preparing her to be someone else's bride. Thus far, she had passively accepted his attentions. That would change, she resolved as they paddled to the shore in the first light of morning. He will be in my arms before dawn.



Chapter III: New Bonds

Harriet watched the sun rise as she lay beside her captor. Twice he had entered her. The first time was fast and painful. The second time was pleurably slow. Her body was still awash in the wonderful sensations and she greeted the sun with a bright smile.

It had been easier than she had feared. He had stroked every part of her body until she moaned at his slightest touch. Then he pulled away quickly and turned his back to her. She sensed his need and quickly turned toward him, letting her hand slide along his hip until it found the knot that held his breechcloth. As her hand untied the knot, he twisted onto his back and let the cloth pull away. For a moment, both gazed at his erect member, then let it find the place it longed for.

She went to sleep with his seed deep within her womb. Her dreams relived the gentle stroking and the firmness of him inside her. When a familiar hand pulled her out of sleep, she wrapped her arms around him. As his member rose, she mounted it and rode and rode until he filled her a third time.

Wind Seeker took his captive back to the river so they could wash. She plunged into the water and swam hard against the current. He entered the water himself when she stopped and turned toward him. Unlike the day of her capture, she swam straight to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. He laughed and carried her back to the shore. When he put her down, she danced for him, turning frequently so that the rays of

the afternoon sun could reflect off her wet skin. He then danced for her, letting the sun reflect off his strong limbs.

In the late afternoon he took her hunting. Without instruction, she walked ahead and far to the side, so that she could chase the game in his direction. Sighting a fox, she stood still and pointed. It was too far to shoot so they both chased after it. She found its den, so they both set a trap and waited. The fox was caught by the time the sun reached the tops of the trees.

Wind Seeker watched as she proudly carried their catch back to the camp and cooked the meat while he worked on the skin. It would make a fine present, he mused. It would make a better present of his captive. The village had seen many captives but none had worn a fox skin. It would take several days to cure the skin and that would give him time to enjoy the woman.

The woman sang softly as she prepared the food. Her hands moved skillfully over the carcass, removing the entrails and tying the legs to a long stick for roasting over the fire. She appeared to enjoy the hunt and the roaming through the woods. Preparing the food must also be a pleasure because she smiled as she sang. Her smile widened when she caught him watching her and was just as wide when he caught her watching him. She would make a fine wife.

At the end of her song, Wind Searcher began to chant. The woman took a leg and thigh of the fox and sat down next to him, trying to hear the words. There was a refrain that he repeated several times. She tried to sing it as well. He laughed at her efforts, then slowly mouthed the words so that she could learn them. He did not tell her that it was a warrior's song and that no village woman would ever sing it. While the fox

skin cured, he would teach her the words of his people. That would increase her value as a captive.

He let his hand wander between her legs as she sang. Her free hand guided it toward the place of pleasures, so different from her response the day he captured her. Any warrior would be glad to have her for a wife. He would be glad to share pleasures with her tonight and in the morning as well. Giving her up to another warrior would not be easy.

Three days later, the fox skin was cured and cut into a skirt. Harriet had mimicked the skirts she had seen village women wear. When she tried it on, her captor gave an approving nod. That was enough for her to dance about him till she dropped. It was the first clothing she had worn in a week and she was proud that the first skin they had trapped was used to make her clothing.

She was also proud that her captor had picked her up and set her down upon his blanket. She gladly removed the skirt to let him play with her.

In another day, the skins of two rabbits would be ready to be made into moccasins. It would take a day to make them but she already dreamed of running through the woods with the moccasins on her feet. He would see the kind of hunter she was then. Right now, he would see the kind of lover he had captured.

Wind Seeker had not wanted to stay this long beside the river, but in two days his captive would have moccasins. She would be ready to present to his chief. The village would marvel at her fox skirt and rabbit moccasins and the many words that she had

learned. That brought a smile to his face. The next thought brought a frown. They would think she had been with him for a moon and wonder how many times he had planted her with his seed. In two days he would not be able to count the times. How would they treat his captive then? Would they give her back to him? He would be pleased if they did. So pleased that he thought of keeping her for himself. He had two days to decide.

The next day, he saw the two trappers paddling toward their camp. They would see the skins stretched on the rocks by the river, and come to investigate with their long guns. Even without their guns, he had little chance of defeating two experienced fighters.

The woman saw the trappers as well and became visibly frightened. Wind Seeker went to her and used his hands to describe his plan.

Harriet scrambled to the riverbank, far enough downstream so that their camp was out of sight. She was naked and distraught and waved frantically at the trappers. As she stood on the shore, looking fearfully back at the woods, the canoe turned toward her. Both trappers were bare to the waist, and their burly figures loomed larger as the canoe reached the shore.

“Help! Please help me! I’ve been captured by an Indian.”

“Where is he girl?”

“He’s back there in the woods. I think he went hunting.”

“Well now, won’t we have a surprise for him when he returns? Meantime, we’ll have some fun with his squaw.” The two men had landed and one had grabbed Harriet

by her arm. He twisted it until she gasped in pain, then ordered her to lie down upon the bank.

“You just lie down here, bitch, and spread your legs nice and wide. We don’t get a chance to see something this nice very often.” He pulled her hair until she fell upon her back, then pinioned her hands above her head. His free hand covered her mouth in case she tried to scream.

The second man removed his breeches and positioned himself between Harriet’s legs. As he looked down upon the struggling woman, the first arrow entered his chest. He stood stunned, but bent double when the second struck his stomach.

Wind Seeker’s third arrow entered the back of the man holding Harriet. The fourth found his chest as the man turned in the direction of his attacker.

As the two men doubled beneath the blows of the arrows, Wind Seeker sprang from the woods and brought his war club down upon the head of each trapper. The blows crushed their skulls and brought the battle to a quick end.

Harriet watched the trappers fall with enormous relief. She ran to Wind Seeker and hugged him, pressing his strong limbs to her bare flesh. As she held him tight, sobs began to rack her body. The first came from fright, the next from anger, then relief. The final tears came from loss, borne of the realization that she would be thought of as a traitor by her own people. The man in her arms held her future, just as she held his seed.

Wind Seeker felt the woman’s need to be held and comforted, and waited for her sobs to stop before addressing the matters at hand. Crows were circling overhead,

anxious to feed upon the two dead bodies. The birds would be visible from horizon to horizon and would be certain to draw attention. As the woman watched, he stripped the bodies of clothes and ornaments. Then he signaled the woman to help him empty the trappers' canoe. This took some time because they had brought many goods for trading. The young brave loaded the bodies into the empty canoe and paddled it to the center of the river. There he let it drift, hoping that it would travel miles before running aground. If no one chased away the birds for several days, none would be able to recognize the trappers.

When Wind Seeker swam to shore, he signaled to the still startled woman to help load his own canoe with the trappers' goods. The two worked quickly, anxious to be away from this place of fear and death. They added the skins and the lone blanket, then set out upon the water.

Two miles upstream they came to a tributary. This was the pathway to Wind Seeker's land, the area between the settlements and the villages. It would be many moons before he returned to his village, long after news of the traders' deaths had spread throughout the valley.



Chapter IV: The Wilderness

Harriet paddled hard, hoping that they moved away from her captor's village. For two days there were no signs of villages and no signs of settlements. While her eyes searched the stream, her mind saw the two trappers: paddling toward her as she called to them from the shore; leering at her as they pinned her to the ground; lying stripped and dead inside the canoe. She could still feel the fear as they came to the shore, the terror as they pulled her to the ground, and the relief as their bodies drifted downstream.

The event forever changed her thoughts about her captor. He was now her protector, the one that had saved her from two horrible men. As long as she was in this wilderness, she wanted to be by his side.

Would she ever be anywhere else, she wondered. If she escaped to a settlement, she would be forever treated as an Indian squaw. Not forever, she reminded herself, only until they hung her for the death of the two trappers. She had drawn them into a trap and had given them no warning of their danger. They had given no warning of their intent to rape her, but she knew they would try it when they saw her naked. She was glad the trap had worked. They had deserved their fate and she was safer for it. The settlers, on the other hand, would never forgive her for siding with an Indian and helping him kill two trappers.

Her captor was intent on moving quickly and she helped in any way she could. They paddled from dawn until dusk, with only brief stops to rest. When they stopped against some rocks in the middle of the stream, she stretched out in the bottom of the boat. He enjoyed watching her stretch, even though she now wore a skirt and moccasins.

That evening they lay against each other without any move toward lovemaking. Harriet was too tired and her captor was too attentive to the sounds around them. She listened to those sounds while she felt his bare skin pressed against her own. The touch of bare skin pushed away the loneliness that haunted her during the day. The dawn brought sight of a land that her parents would never see and that she could never leave.

Her captor rose with the dawn and she rose with him. Spreading his net between them, they fished the stream until they caught enough for the day's journey. Harriet cleaned the fish with her captor's knife while he scouted the area. Only when he returned did they make their only fire for the day. They cooked the fish and ate half. The remainder was saved for the day's journey.

On the fourth morning, after loading the canoe, they carried it up a steep bank instead of putting it on the water. It took all of Harriet's strength to carry it two hundred feet. She rested while her captor unloaded the canoe and hoisted it upon his shoulders. Then she followed him farther up the hill, carrying one of the many bundles the traders had brought. He carried the canoe another two hundred feet and hid it within a thicket of bushes. Her bundle was placed in a clearing, several hundred feet above the bushes. For the remainder of the morning, they hauled the bundles they had left behind, up to the clearing. Only then did they feel safe enough to examine the trappers' bundles.

For Harriet, it was a treasure of items that would allow her to live in the woods: needles, thread, scissors, bolts of cotton and wool, blankets, and metal pots. For Wind Seeker, there were knives, spools of rope, and a large quantity of beads and ornaments

for trading. This was in addition to the rifles and ammunition that the traders had brought for their own use.

Harriet showed her captor how to load the rifles and took him hunting. She was careful not to shoot until they reached a valley several miles from their campsite. Her first shot struck a deer. As the animal lay dying, her captor used one of the trappers' knives to cut its throat. The noise of the shot had scattered all the game within the valley so she made targets out of rocks and branches. On his sixth shot, her captor hit one of the targets. That was as much noise as they dared to make so Harriet carried the rifles back to the camp while her captor carried the deer.

Harriet used another of the trappers' knives to skin the deer. When she was done, she gave it back to her captor but he returned it with a leather sheaf. The significance of the gift was not lost on Harriet. It was a tool to be shared with a partner. A slave meant for another man would never receive a knife. It was also a weapon that could be used against him while he slept. He would give it only to someone he trusted.

The knife brought other changes. Her captor attached his sheath to the thin cord that served as the belt for his breechcloth. That kept the knife by his hip, ready for use. Her fox skin skirt had no belt. It wrapped around her waist with the loose ends tucked at the side. No village woman would wear it with a belt. No village woman would be running through the woods, for that matter. A breechcloth would be better for running through the woods and she could use the cord to hold her knife. She would save the skirt for visits to the villages.

Wind Seeker had other concerns on his mind. These were the hills known to him and few others. Raiding parties came this way before the peace with the settlers. Trappers still came this way as they carried the trade between the villages and the settlements. None stayed long enough to learn the rocks and trees and to follow the animals. None but himself – this was his land. He had expected the hills to calm him, to show him the way to make peace with his village. Instead, his thoughts flew about like a heron that had been startled by a canoe.

The trappers had not come into these hills but they haunted every creek and valley. He could not return to his village with their deaths upon his hands. His presence would risk the safety of the entire village.

This is where the settlers would hunt him, just as he hunted the deer and the pheasants. He would be the target of their rifles. The woman would teach him to use the rifles. The musket balls would travel far and keep his enemies at bay.

It was strange that his safety now depended upon his captive. She would have been a fine prize if he could have taken her to his village. She worked hard and gave many pleasures. Now he would not enter the village until it was time for the birth of his child. Then she would be his wife.

It pleased him to have a wife that hunted and roamed the woods with him. Village women were stronger and had more skills with furs and leathers, but they did not hunt and knew nothing of rifles.

Wind Seeker knew little of the skills of a squaw, so he had no hope of teaching them to his captive. It was hard enough to teach her the ways he did know. He showed her how to scrape and dry a deerskin. She learned that well enough. She cut the skin

to make him a short, sleeveless garment she called a vest. The skin yielded a vest for herself as well and a long, thin strip she used as a breechcloth. No village woman would wear such garments but she danced about the camp so he could see her in them.

She was more skilled with the clothes they had taken from the trappers. These were cut and re-sewn to fit the two of them. They would be fine garments when the winds blew cold. The remnants she made into belts and straps and thongs.

What would a hunting party think when they saw her wear a vest or saw the two of them in trappers clothes? The raiders might think them prizes to be taken to the trappers or trophies to be taken back to their own village. They would think that no matter what we wear, Wind Seeker assured himself. Both trappers and raiders were threats to be avoided.

They would move deeper into the hills, he decided. Too many traveled the great rivers. In the hills, they could watch for intruders from the settlements and the villages. In three days they would reach a small creek that was far from the villages and the settlements. There they could hunt and find shelter.

Harriet lost track of the number of days they camped along the small creek. It had been enough time to sew beads on the vests that she had made. It had also been a time for sharing pleasures with her captor. They played with each other in the morning after their hunt and at night beneath the stars. Each time had its own sweetness. In the morning she loved to dance and tease until he grabbed her and pulled her to his blanket. At night, she explored every inch of his strong body and

invited him to explore every inch of hers. No doubt she already carried his child and she dreamed of the day when her body would show signs of it.

She had no qualms about leaving this camp, knowing that they would come back to it. They had found a place to hide the beads and blankets brought by the trappers. Each hiding place assured her that her new home would not be in some Indian village. Her captor was at home in the woods and the woods were the only place that she could now call home.

When they left the camp, her captor saw the advantage of the vest that she had made for him. It left his arms free but protected his shoulders from the strap of the two muskets that he carried. It provided the same protection from the bowstring. Harriet also carried a bow and quiver of arrows and her vest provided the same protection. It also covered her breasts, something that brought Harriet comfort and her captor bewilderment.

Her captor had made the bow and arrows while she worked with the skins and leather clothes. The bow had taken many days. She enjoyed watching him work with the wood and at the pleasure he found from his new knife. He let her help with the arrows and laughed at her first attempts. She laughed as well, seeing that they were too crooked to be of use.

They traveled during the warm hours surrounding noon. The trees protected Harriet's not yet brown skin. She enjoyed the shade and the cool breeze that blew through the trees. She also enjoyed the freedom of moving with bare arms and legs. The bulky clothes of the settlement would not be missed.

Harriet gathered herbs and fruit as they traveled. Her captor gathered stones and feathers. All landed in the sack in which she carried a pot and their sole blanket.

The sun was still high in the sky when they stopped to camp. Her captor seemed more concerned with scouting dangers than covering distance. In a moon they scouted a dozen campsites.

In a moon, Harriet experienced many changes. The first came when she menstruated on schedule. She had assumed, when her captor had first entered her, that she was carrying his child. The menstrual blood dissolved that assumption. Her captor saw it just after she did. A glow drained from her face as the drops reached the ground. Until she bore his child, he could dispose of her as he liked.

For two days she walked by herself, not wanting to see his eyes and the distance she expected. For two nights she slept next to him without any attempt at lovemaking. On the third morning, she started to look at him. To her surprise, there was no sign of disgust or impatience. He showed her two plants and gave names to them. Gratefully, she repeated the names and walked close by his side. Did he not care if she carried his child? Perhaps he realized that children come in their own time. Her own parents were married five years before she was born and she was their only child. She might have to wait as long to have a child of her own.

Fortunately, her captor was willing to wait, for now. That night, she made love to him under the stars and again in the morning before they rose to hunt. She would bear his children when they came. Until they came, she would be the perfect squaw.

She became the perfect scout as well. When they approached a settlement, she had him wait until dinnertime before approaching the town. Dinner drew everyone in

from the fields and the woods. Soldiers would eat early, she knew, and trappers would hawk their wares until the last soul had gone inside. Both would be standing outside while others ate. Within minutes she could tell if soldiers or trappers were about. They would leave at the first sign of trappers or soldiers. If the town was quiet, they would stay nearby for days.

By the end of a moon, her appearance had changed. The sun had darkened her skin and she had begun to braid her hair as village women did. What would the settlers think if they saw her, she wondered. From a distance she looked like a young squaw. Only up close did her brown hair and blue eyes betray her origins. Her arms and legs were stronger now but she lacked the fullness of a woman living in a village or a settlement. The woods provided a lean diet.

Her skill with the bow and arrow rivaled those of her captor. The arrow that brings down a deer can bring down a brave, she reflected. Her captor trusted her with his life, just as she trusted him. A woman who roams the woods with weapons is not a captive, she realized, and a woman who is free to give or withhold her pleasures is not a slave. Her captor was now her lover. It was time for her to call him that.

She did not call him anything, of course. Their words were limited to basic things. The nouns named plants, animals, and tools; captor, lover, and husband had not been learned. The verbs were hunt, fish, pack, stop, stay quiet; love, enjoy, want and need were still unknown. She knew the words required of a squaw. She needed to learn the words of a wife.

During the second moon, she learned to be a lover. When they stopped in the evening, she would wash naked in a nearby stream, in full sight of her lover. Then she

would work about the camp until the warm air dried her skin. Only when the sun dropped behind the hills would she wrap herself in the blanket that she would share with her lover while they ate. After the meal, she danced naked in the moonlight, using slow, sensuous movements to display her supple body. She danced until her lover rose and lifted her onto the blanket.

Their lovemaking became more playful. They explored new ways to give each other pleasure and spent hours enjoying the touch of strong limbs and bare skin. In the morning, the first one to wake would stroke the other into consciousness. The sleeping partner would keep eyes shut to prolong the stroking. This continued until one lost patience and began lovemaking in earnest. At first, the brave was the one to lose patience; later, Harriet was the one to move vigorously along the path of pleasure.

The pleasure was a surprise to Harriet. She had been taught that lovemaking was a painful duty that a wife owed her husband in exchange for his protection. Instead, her body came alive with the most exquisite feelings she had ever experienced. Would she ever have felt this way if she had remained with Rodger, she wondered. Rodger was in another world, she reminded herself. People in that world did not run wild through the woods or dance naked in the moonlight.

One afternoon, she danced naked under the sun within sight of a settlement. They came atop a hill that overlooked a broad valley. In the distance they could see chimneys, a sure sign of a settlement. It was too early to scout the village, so they retreated to a place beneath the trees. Harriet laid their blanket upon a bed of pine needles and laid down to rest. Her lover sat beside her, keeping watch. She tried to

sleep but her eyes kept glancing at his strong body. Her fingers began to stroke his hip, then found their way to the knot that secured his belt.

As his breechcloth fell away, her lover turned upon his temptress and untied her belt. A wrestling match ensued, leaving both naked and glistening with sweat. A passionate dance followed until Harriet was filled with her lover's seed.

They stayed in each other's arms for most of the afternoon. When they finally rose, Harriet danced upon the grassy hill, in full view of the distant settlement. It was a dance of freedom, showing the settlement a wildness that it would never allow. It was a dance of passion, showing her lover her desire to be his wife.

The dancer leaped and twirled in a large circle, allowing her feet to connect with the earth and her skin to feel the warmth of the sun. After leaping and turning wildly, she circled her lover with slower, more sensuous movements. Thrusting her hips from side to side, she let the sway of her arms and legs surround him with ever changing views of her slender limbs. With a final spurt of energy, she spun away from his appreciative gaze and leaped about the circle one last time. When the circle brought her back before her lover, she collapsed onto her knees, her body glistening with sweat.

Now it was his turn to dance. She watched as his sleek, naked limbs traced the same circle, bending low then leaping high. His strong thighs pushed his body high into the air. His muscular arms and shoulders carved the sky, creating images of strength and freedom and oneness with the earth. He lifted her onto his shoulders, and danced around the circle three more times. Harriet wrapped her legs around his chest and raised her arms to the sun. Floating above the earth, the trees and the sky twirled about her, welcoming the young woman to her new home

Chapter V: Intruders

From a distant hill, a lone hunter saw a naked man and woman dancing upon a hillside. Carefully, he moved in their direction, keeping a screen of trees between himself and the dancers. Harold Blackman assumed that the two figures were Indians, since no Christian would dance in the sunlight without clothes. He could shoot the brave and have the woman to himself, but the two began moving away from him. If it were earlier in the day, he might pursue them, but he wanted to get back to familiar territory before the woods grew dark.

He would ask at the settlement whether anyone knew of a brave and his squaw living near about. If no one had, he might bring his son Rodger back with him. The boy had been in a fog since that Andrews girl had disappeared. He kept saying that she was too good a swimmer to drown, and may have been captured by Indians. Harold had talked to two trappers, just to put the boy's mind at ease. They had not seen anyone for several days and would have heard of a young girl passing near. The boy still was not satisfied. That young squaw would take his mind off things - maybe make a man of him.

* * *

"Wind Seeker...his name is Wind Seeker." It was several mornings after she had first seen the settlement. Harriet was accompanying her lover on a perimeter search - traveling in a wide circle around the camp and looking for signs of other humans. A similar search was conducted in the evening before a fire was lit. On this morning, Harriet had finally discovered her lover's name. He had given her the word for wind,

then the word for searching. Finally, he spoke both words together and pointed to himself. Harriet repeated the words and began calling him by that name.

He then looked at her, expecting to learn her name. She tried desperately to think of words that could combine to make "Harriet," then gave it up and named herself River Wanderer. That is what she was doing and had wanted to do most of her life.

With a new name, she could be a new person. She would enjoy her body and not be ashamed of it. She would enjoy Wind Seeker's body and not be ashamed of her enjoyment. She would be his wife and partner without concern for the disapproval of the people who had raised her. She would live and die as a woman of the woods, and not a woman of the settlements.

She wondered what the people of the settlements would think when they saw her. They would be scandalized at her scant clothing and bewildered by her love for Wind Seeker. They can stay in their settlements, she told herself. She would raise her child in the woods.

The woods in front of her held two deer. They were standing very still with their ears pricked up. Were they hearing some intruder, she wondered. Quickly she retraced her steps, hoping to catch up with Wind Seeker who was moving in the opposite direction. She began to run but did not dare to call him. As she came over the crest of a hill, she nearly ran into him.

His finger was at his lips and his senses were alert. Silently, River Wanderer loaded the two muskets while her companion climbed onto a tall rock and looked about. When the muskets were ready, he climbed down and signaled that the rock would be the place for her to stay.

The woman waited until Wind Seeker was out of sight. He was circling cautiously toward the place where she had seen the deer. She circled toward the same place, but in the opposite direction. She carried the rifle he had left her, as well a sheath full of arrows and a sharp knife.

River Wanderer had not gone far before she heard the sound of men trampling through the woods. She retreated quickly so that they would not discover her presence. Behind her was an outcropping of limestone that formed the crest of the ridge. She climbed over the rocks and ran along their base, trying to outflank the intruders. When they reached the crest, she was thirty yards off to the side. Crouching behind a large rock, she stayed out of sight, but well within earshot.

“We’ll rest here a bit - give you and your son a breather. I don’t suppose you’re familiar with these parts.”

“No, I can’t say that I’ve been this far west. Taking a huntin’ trip to teach my boy something about the woods - didn’t expect to run into a couple of Indians.”

“Don’t know that we can find them for you. The nearest tribe’s pretty far away. My guess is they’re a couple of renegades - did somethin’ wrong so they’re livin’ in the woods on their own. What made you interested in them, anyway?”

“My boy thinks that a sweetheart of his was kidnapped by an Indian.”

“If she was, chances are she is either a squaw or dead.”

“I try to tell him that, but he can’t get her out of his mind.”

“Well, boy, you have a lot to learn. First thing you need to know is that you don’t go messing with an Indian’s squaw unless the Indian’s dead. The second is that if you

see an Indian at all, you shoot first and ask questions later. Two friends of ours ran into a raiding party a few months back, and all that was left of them was their carcasses.”

So far, River Wanderer had only heard the voices of two men, one of whom sounded like Harold Blackman, Rodger’s father. Suddenly she felt a wave of fear and shame that knotted her stomach. If they saw her, they would try to take her back to her parents. Even if she succeeded in resisting those efforts, they would report to the entire settlement that she was running naked in the woods with a savage. The knot in her stomach tightened when she heard Rodger’s voice.

“I didn’t come to kill anyone. I came to find Harriet. If she’s not with this Indian, he may know where she is.”

“You’ll be dead, boy, before you get any information out of a renegade. I’ll tell you what we can do. Sam and I will take care of this Indian and grab his squaw. Then you and your pappy can ask her all the questions you want before we have some fun with her.” This was a fourth voice. It sounded like Rodger and his father were with two trappers.

“From what I saw of her, she’s a beauty. She was riding on the shoulders of that Indian without a stitch on her. If I weren’t a married man, I’d like a piece of her myself.” It was Rodger’s father, again. He had seen her dancing with Wind Seeker. Any thought she had of declaring her presence and facing their scorn, quickly evaporated.

“Well, we’re not going to see anyone sittin’ here. Let’s fan out along this ridge and head toward a creek that lies down the hill a way. If they aren’t making camp there, we can make camp ourselves and cover more territory in the mornin’.”

“Right, Sam. Mr. Blackman, you and your boy go off to the left, keepin’ thirty yards between you. Sam and I will take the right. Keep us in sight and you won’t get lost and won’t get ambushed. Does that boy of yours know how to shoot?”

“Sure he does, and he’ll do himself proud. Come on, Rodger.”

River Wanderer would be within sight of the trappers as soon as they crossed the ridge. She needed to move to the other side of the rock without drawing attention. When she heard the men begin to stand and collect their gear, she made her move. The rock concealed her from sight, and the little noise she made was lost amidst their commotion. As she had hoped, the trappers crossed the ridge before spreading out along the hillside. The two trappers moving to the right were well below the ridge by the time they moved in her direction.

She did not move again until she could no longer hear the men. Carefully she moved around the rock, so that it would be between herself and the intruders. When she reached the other side, she saw Wind Seeker, who had been watching her cautious movements with approval. He signaled to go back to their camp, which lay farther up the ridge. When they got there, they quickly packed and traveled the way the trappers had come.

By evening, they reached a stream and found the place where two canoes were hidden in the trees. The trappers had used only a few pine boughs, enough to conceal them from someone passing on the stream. Wind Seeker found them within a few minutes and removed the supplies, which were mostly food for the return journey. With a knife, he pried off the braces supporting the sides of each boat. Then, with River Wanderer holding the boats upside down, he hurled a large rock through the bottom of

each and covered them again with the pine boughs. The intruders would have to walk home and they would need to scavenge for food along the way. It would be a long time before they made their way back.

The two did not sleep there. Instead, they used the night to put more distance between themselves and the intruders. Not until the following evening did they stop to rest, by which time they were several valleys away from the holed canoes.

River Wanderer was exhausted from the long hike. When she awoke in the morning, the sun was high in the sky. She was grateful for the sleep and even more grateful for having avoided a confrontation with Rodger and his father. Letting the blanket fall away, she closed her eyes and felt the sun's rays on her bare skin. She knew that there would be times when she missed Rodger and life in the village. This morning, she was delighted to be lying beneath the trees, bathed in warm air and the sounds of the forest. In a few minutes, she would rise and find the man who had brought her into the woods.

He found her first and brought two fish to clean for breakfast. Before he could place them on the grass, she gave him a long hug. He kissed her lips and shoulders, as much as he could manage with the fish in one hand. She took the fish and cleaned them while he started the fire. As she worked, she tried to translate the conversations she had heard upon the ridge. With lots of hand motions, she was able to convey the threats the trappers had made. Her efforts collapsed when she searched for the words for farmer and son. Explaining her relationship with Rodger was far beyond her abilities. She would learn, she told herself. She would find the words to describe love and give them all to Wind Seeker.

Wind Seeker enjoyed her efforts at talking. His own thoughts, however, were far from the trappers. The equinox was approaching and they would need to prepare for winter. He thought of all the campsites they had made, but the place that kept returning to his mind was the stream bank where they had holed the two canoes. If the trappers returned, they would come back to that place. It's better to see your enemies than to jump at shadows, he told himself. It would be easy to remain hidden while the intruders stumbled off into the woods. They would lose their canoes a second time.

River Wanderer was surprised when they started back toward the area of the intruders. Wind Seeker was as confident as ever so she had to trust that he knew what he was doing. Her own instincts would be to travel as far from that place as possible. The thought of meeting Rodger and her father again sent shivers down her spine. Meeting the trappers again would be just as chilling but she would have no qualms in making them the target of her musket or her bow. She could never bring herself to hurt Rodger and she would respect his father unless he moved against her. If they met, both would try to take her back to the settlement and use whatever force they needed.

She could feel the shame in their eyes as they took her back to the settlement. Her shame would pale to that of her parents as they learned the details of her captivity. And how would her parents feel as she walked to the gallows? The gallows she could face. The sorrow and confusion of her parents could not be faced. How could she explain that she was not a captive? Could they ever understand her joy of walking

naked through the woods, of having a wild and wonderful lover, of raising children to be wild and free? Could she explain it to herself? Did she really feel at home in the wild?

They approached the site of the holed canoes as they would a salt lick. Like hunters hoping to surprise a deer, they moved from tree to tree, careful to avoid stepping on twigs or dry leaves. Keeping fifty feet apart, their ears listened for strange sounds and their eyes scanned for strange movements.

I am a huntress, River Wanderer told herself. Her senses were alert and she used all of her skill to advance silently and undetected. She loved being the huntress and treasured her hunts with Wind Seeker. His skills far surpassed any she had learned and she was proud to be his partner.

Fifty feet away, she saw his hand rise in a signal for caution. She waited for him to advance, then went slowly forward herself. For a minute she heard only the beating of her heart, then came the sounds of far-off shouting. Her instincts were to move quickly to the sound, but Wind Seeker continued to hold up his hand as a sign of caution. As they advanced steadily toward the crest of the hill, it became clear that the sounds were coming from the valley below.

Wind Seeker stopped at the crest of the hill and listened. River Wanderer listened as well. The two trappers were cursing whoever had holed their canoes. They threatened to skin alive the ones that had stolen their food and promised to eat Rodger and his father if the culprits were not found. Suddenly, she remembered that her partner could not understand what was being said. She signaled him to wait and joined him at the crest.

“The trappers are angry,” she managed to say with words and gestures. She then listened to the argument about where the culprits must have gone and how long it would take to catch them. Since they had searched for an hour and found no signs of the culprits, it was decided to abandon the search and head for the nearest settlement. Without canoes or food, that would take several days. This afternoon, two would fish the stream and the trappers would hunt for game. Unless they found signs of the culprits, they would leave in the morning.

River Wanderer translated as best as she could. She made it clear that the trappers would be hunting these hills. Her partner understood and started walking back down the hill. He made no effort to move silently. He’s stepping on every twig he sees, River Wanderer observed. He wants to make noise to scare away the game. As long as he kept walking, she realized, he would be too far from the trappers to be seen or heard. Soon she began to step on the twigs herself. By evening, they had reached the camp they had left when they first encountered the intruders.

This camp was high on the ridge, a safe refuge from those who traveled the streams and valleys. A small spring provided water and the woods were full of game. Wind Seeker and River Wanderer made no effort to hunt. They ate the food they had taken from the intruders.

In the morning, after extinguishing any signs of their camp, they retraced their steps back to the holed canoes. This time, there were no angry voices when they approached the river. The trappers had abandoned their camp and many of the items they had brought for trade. These included blankets, fishing line and hooks, rope, oilcloth, flint, hunting knives, and an assortment of beads.

As River Wanderer began to sort through the items, Wind Seeker took his bow and arrows and disappeared into the woods. He would scout the area for any signs of the trappers. She would lure the trappers into the clearing if they remained within sight of the camp. To add to the lure, she removed her clothes and washed in the stream before setting fishing lines. Nearby, she cleared a site for a lean-to, using the oilcloth for protection against the wind and the rain. The lean-to faced east so that the hillside could protect it from the western winds. It was close enough to the water to see the fishing lines grow taut when a fish swallowed a hook.

There were no signs of trappers. Wind Seeker returned in late afternoon, happy to see the lean-to and to smell the cooking fish. He set about repairing the two holed canoes. In a moon, both would be ready for traveling on the water. Before then, the trappers would return.



Chapter VI: The Attack

“War party!” Wind Seeker’s stark warning sent chills through his companion’s frame. The leather shirt and breeches protected her from the brisk October wind but nothing protected her from the fear of losing the home she had been building. The shelter of pine boughs and bark could be replaced but the stores of food and furs could not.

Wind Seeker picked up his musket and powder horn and signaled for her to follow. He’s chosen not to flee, she thought with satisfaction. Within a minute she had her own weapons and was following after him. That means there will be a fight, she realized as fear knotted her stomach.

They hid themselves in the woods above a bend in the stream. The stream was forty feet wide at this point. The war party would be well within musket range when it reached the bend. In the distance, River Wanderer could see three approaching canoes. To her surprise, the paddlers were white trappers, not Indian braves. Why does he think they are a war party, she wondered. Then she saw that the canoes carried no bundles of goods for trading. Instead, the barrels of muskets lay close at hand, ready to be grabbed at a moment’s notice.

“The campsite’s just around that bend,” shouted a man in the lead boat. River Wanderer recognized his voice. He had been with Rodger and his father; this was the one that planned to rape her.

“Stop your shouting,” his companion called back. “They’ll hear you a mile away!”

“If they’re that close, we’ll catch them soon enough. They’re shacked up on the ridge somewhere, probably smoking meat for the winter. We’ll find them easy enough and make good use of the squaw while we torture the brave.”

“Don’t know which I’ll enjoy more. The farmer said the squaw’s a beauty.”

River Wanderer heard the click of a musket hammer. Wind Seeker was preparing to shoot. She put her hand on the cocked hammer and pointed to herself: she would be the one to shoot the muskets.

Her first shot was at the front paddler in the lead canoe, the one who planned to rape her. It struck him square in the chest and the impact carried him over the side of the canoe. His weight tipped the small boat so that both paddlers landed in the water.

By the time she had picked up the second musket, the two remaining canoes had turned towards her and the front paddlers were pointing muskets in her direction. She picked the biggest target and fired. The shot landed in her target’s belly and he fell back into the bottom of the boat.

As the capsized boat floated down the stream, those in the two that remained upright back-paddled frantically until they reached the opposite shore. Wind Seeker ran after the capsized boat. The wounded trapper hung to its bow and his healthy comrade kicked desperately to bring it to the near shore. The boat floated a hundred yards downstream before their feet touched the muddy river bottom. Pulling the swamped boat onto the shore, the healthy trapper turned just as Wind Seeker broke from the trees with his war club in hand. The club took only moments to do its deadly work.

River Wanderer had stayed behind to reload the muskets. She had barely finished when she heard the death cries of the two trappers. Two shots from the far

shore followed quickly. With relief, she saw Wind Seeker run back into the woods. By the time he returned, three trappers had launched a canoe and were moving toward her with determined strokes. The woman fired her first musket before they were ten feet from the far shore. The middle paddler rose with a howl, holding his hip. That was enough movement to tip the canoe and send all three into the water.

Falling into the water was a tragedy for the trappers. They were wet and cold and their muskets and powder were soaked. Their only hope of getting warm was to light a fire or paddle hard down stream. Either action would make them easy targets for their assailants.

On the opposite shore, the sight of the trappers flailing about in the water brought a welcome release of tension. Six attackers had come with muskets. Two were dead, two wounded, and two wet and cold. The danger had not gone: there was one remaining musket that was dry enough to shoot. The swift stream kept that danger on the far shore and River Wanderer's marksmanship kept the attackers from crossing it.

Sounds of an argument floated across the stream. The wounded trappers wanted sole possession of the two dry blankets and demanded a fire to keep them warm. The two healthy ones refused to make a fire, saying that it would make them easy targets. The argument ended as the wounded men became delirious, filling the air with random curses and complaints.

Tension returned to the near side of the stream. The two wounded trappers posed no threat. The two healthy ones did and there was no sound from them. Wind Seeker rose and began to move upstream toward the shelter and the sandbar that lay below it. It was the only place where a crossing could be made without a canoe and the

two healthy trappers might be making their way toward it. He left his musket with the woman, knowing that she could protect herself against any that tried to cross by canoe.

The sun was nearing the treetops when he noticed movement on the far shore. Two trappers approached the sandbar; only one carried a musket. They stood at the edge of the trees, studying the crossing. Four channels cut through the sandbar. A shallow channel hugged each shore and two deep ones were in the center. The two men waded across the first channel and stopped at the second, which was six feet wide. The lead trapper handed his musket and powder horn to his companion and jumped. He plunged into the water two feet from the side of the channel and stroked frantically to reach it. When he crawled onto the sandbar, he was shaking noticeably.

“Hand me the musket and be quick about it,” he called to the other trapper. His voice was louder than it needed to be to avoid detection.

“Keep your voice down,” the other grumbled, also louder than was prudent. He was shaking as well and had difficulty handing the musket across the six-foot channel. His effort to jump across was no more successful than his companion’s.

Wind Seeker waited until the second trapper climbed out of the water. Both men were shaking violently and looking at the ten-foot channel that faced them. The cold water had sapped their strength and their judgment. They would need to swim to get across and the musket and powder would get wet as they made the attempt.

The first arrow struck as they stared at the ten-foot channel. The lead trapper doubled over as the arrow entered his stomach, and fell into the water. His companion fired erratically into the woods, then collapsed with the second arrow deep in his chest.

River Wanderer jumped at the sound of the musket shot. It had shattered the stillness that followed when the wounded trappers lost consciousness. She sprang to her feet, carrying both muskets, but slowed as she reached the bend in the stream, convinced that the shot had struck Wind Seeker. He would need her help if he was still alive and she would need all her skill to defeat the two trappers.

A moment later, she saw that her fears were empty. The current carried two bodies around the bend of the stream and Wind Seeker was striding toward her. The muskets fell from her hands and her arms wrapped around his chest. He held her as she pressed her face against his shoulder and sobbed with relief.

“Two remain,” she told him when the sobs had stopped. He nodded and began to run downstream. River Wanderer picked up the muskets and followed. They reached the place where the first two trappers had died before the second two floated past. Working quickly, they launched the abandoned canoe and intercepted the two floating corpses. With hard paddling, they brought the bodies to the shore and set out again. The two wounded trappers remained a threat and the falling sun left little time to deal with it.

Wind Seeker angled the canoe so that the current ferried it across to the other side. They alighted quickly. River Wanderer still carried the two muskets, though their weight made it difficult to keep up with her partner. It would have been wiser to have left the muskets on the opposite shore. The dead men could not fire them and the remaining trappers would have to cross the stream to get to them. She had told herself that before getting into the canoe but her hands still clutched the muskets tightly. The weapons had been her protection and she had no intention of putting them down.

When she caught up with Wind Seeker, he was staring at a makeshift campsite. The salvaged contents of the tipped canoes lay scattered about and two still bodies lay beneath blankets. He pointed to the place where his companion should stand and waited until she reached it. River Wanderer propped one musket up against a tree and raised the other to her shoulder. She had a clear shot at both trappers and was prepared to shoot the first that moved.

None moved. Wind Seeker brought his war club down on the head of each man, but both were already dead.

It was late at night before they returned to their shelter. The six corpses had been stripped and hauled to the middle of the stream where the current carried them away. Two canoes held the clothes, weapons and gear of the trappers. The third towed them to the sandbar. When the canoes were safely ashore, the two victors climbed the hill to their shelter and collapsed in each other's arms.

"You shoot well." Wind Seeker's words rang with contentment. He had just finished a breakfast made from the trappers' food and he gazed down at the spoils of yesterday's battle.

"My father taught me to shoot," River Wanderer replied in a series of words and gestures that conveyed her meaning. "He taught me to shoot animals, not men," she added.

"Men are taught to be warriors," he responded. "Women fight to protect their hearth."

River Wanderer smiled. The word was not hearth but that was as close as she could translate the word for fire that warms the shelter. For most of her lover's words, she made no effort to translate. She embraced them as part of her new world. He spoke of her as a village woman and that brought as much warmth to her as the morning fire.

They would have a winter to learn each other's words. He had heard the trappers' words, but had not understood the threats of rape and murder. She had understood them and still felt the fear those threats had spawned. That fear had driven her to shoot the trappers and to make each shot count. Without the threat she would not have fired. Wind Seeker understood that, she suddenly realized. He had called her a village woman, not a warrior.

The trappers' clothes occupied her morning. She worked near the sandbar, cutting the seams of the leather shirts and trousers and soaking the pieces in the shallow channel near the shore. The afternoon sun would dry them. Over the course of the winter, she would cut and sew the pieces to make bags and sheathes for arrows. As she worked, she thought of the men that had worn the clothes. They would not have worn them when they raped her. The thought of the rape banished any guilt she might have felt from shooting them. The guilt would come soon enough, she realized, just as it had after the deaths of the first two trappers. This morning, fear reigned. When the fear passed, guilt would have its day.

After the clothes were draped over rocks to dry, she would attend to the muskets, balls, and powder. All were drying in the sun. The powder would require special handling. She would pulverize it with a stone and refill the dried powder horns. Powder

and musket balls were now more important than a knife or bow. Without her muskets, the trappers would have won.

Keeping the muskets loaded would be a challenge. Only the settlements could provide powder or musket balls and few settlers would trade them to two renegades. They might have to raid a settlement to get them. What would Rodger think if she was captured raiding a settlement? What would her parents think? What did it matter what they thought? The decent people in the settlements would hang her. The trappers and soldiers would rape her and kill her lover. The weapons were her only defense.



Chapter VII: The Raid

“The settlers are preparing for winter. They have much work to do. No one will notice.” Wind Seeker understood the words, but he did not want to believe them. His people raided in the spring and summer, never in the fall or winter. Her people were the same, she explained. In the fall, people thought only of preparing for the winter. They gathered food, mended clothes, and repaired houses. No one thought of raiders, confident that the cold winds would keep them close to home.

Wind Seeker did not think like a raider, even though he was skilled at it. His thoughts were of avoiding danger, a useful skill for one who wandered between two cultures. His partner was a novice but she had planned the entire raid. They would paddle with furs to the settlement at Clarks Ferry and trade them for grain and blankets. At night, they would come back to steal the powder and musket balls.

River Wanderer had planned the raid as she smoked meat and dried fruit for the winter. The need for the raid had been painfully clear when she gathered the powder and musket balls from the dead trappers. Each had brought a dozen musket balls and a powder horn. Each powder horn had fallen into the stream, leaving the powder damp and clumped. She carefully pulverized it and tested the dried powder in a musket. It worked well enough for target practice but was too unpredictable for a battle.

Fresh powder would be needed to repel a new attack. If soldiers came, they would retreat into the hills until they left. If trappers came, the hills would not be safe. Their best defense would be a barrage of musket balls before the trappers reached the

shore. Fresh powder would allow Wind Seeker to practice until he became as accurate with a musket as he was with a bow. It would also be needed if they tried to trade the captured muskets. Many villages would pay a high price for them and they had six to trade.

Stealing the powder would be a challenge. She had never been to Clarks Ferry but knew enough about settlements to plan the raid. There would be an armory for the soldiers assigned to the settlement. The armory would have a powder room and no one would be near it after dark. They would trade their furs and scout the powder room and the routes of escape, then return by foot during the dinner hour. The armory would be a good place to hide and they could carry the powder away during the night. In the morning, people along the shore would see two Indians paddling upstream with a load of grain and blankets. The powder would be hidden underneath.

Planning the raid was one matter; executing it was another. They loaded the best of the furs that they had gathered since the summer. The scarred pelts that remained would still serve to protect them from the winter wind.

Paddling downstream proved considerably easier than the summer's journey against the current. In two days they reached a campsite just west of Clarks Ferry. There they hid their muskets and prepared for the next day's events. River Wanderer used the ashes and charcoal from the campfire to darken her hair and mixed them with bear grease to darken her complexion.

In the morning, they left at dawn and arrived at the settlement while everyone was at breakfast. They spread their furs upon the banks of the stream and waited for the traders to arrive.

The first to arrive were scoundrels who offered far less than the furs were worth. River Wanderer spoke to her partner in his own tongue and allowed Wind Seeker to bargain with his broken English. She had him ask for more grain and blankets than would ever fit in their canoe. The scoundrels laughed at the request and left to get more trinkets for trading.

The honest traders came later in the morning. They offered wheat flour and corn meal in addition to a dozen blankets. When Wind Seeker withheld a beautiful deerskin, they added two barrels of salt pork. The deal was struck before the scoundrels returned.

Few paid attention to River Wanderer who had wrapped herself in a blanket. She kept her eyes cast down and uttered an unbroken stream of words that Wind Seeker appeared to ignore. She gave him a running commentary on the traders and the merits of their offers.

While the traders gathered the grain and salt pork, she wandered with Wind Seeker into the center of the settlement. A street led from the river bank into the town square. Shops lined the street but the square was dominated by a church at its head, a barracks to the left of it and an armory to the right. The powder room was set apart from the armory to protect against any accidental explosion. There were no shops or taverns about the square. As River Wanderer had anticipated, all of the activity after dark would be close to the river. The powder room would disappear into the darkness of the night.

The canoe was loaded by noon and the two began their upstream journey. Within a few hours, they reached the prior night's campsite and worked to hide the

canoe amidst the brush. When the sun reached the treetops, they began the walk back to the settlement, carefully noting the best way to return. They reached the settlement after dusk and found a place in the square to hide. Many dogs barked as they passed but the residents were too occupied with dinner to investigate.

They waited until the last tavern closed before moving toward the powder room. There was a padlock on the door but Wind Seeker pried off the latch with his war club. River Wanderer covered the latch with her blanket to soften any noise her partner made.

The powder room was pitch black, forcing Wind Seeker to grope about until he found a powder keg. River Wanderer moved beside him, looking for musket balls. Her hand found a small keg that was heavy as a rock. She used her knife to pry it open and felt the musket balls inside. She filled two leather sacks with them, one for herself and one for her companion.

Unfortunately, there were no small kegs of powder and the large kegs were too heavy for one person to carry any distance. River Wanderer had anticipated this, bringing a long pole and a hammock she had woven from fragments of rope. The hammock wrapped easily around the keg and the pole slid through its knotted ends. That allowed two people to share the weight of the keg.

Fear slowed the moments spent escaping the settlement. A barking dog and a cautious guard froze their steps for two instants. They moved again when it was clear that the dark had left them undetected. Despite the weight of the keg, they soon reached the protection of the woods.

The weight of the keg forced them to rest several times. The longest rest came before the first light. When the stars began to disappear, they rose and moved quickly to the campsite and uncovered the canoe. Dawn found them on the water, paddling wearily upstream. Wind Seeker stopped several times at large rocks within the stream. He could see the exhaustion in the movements of his partner. Short rests, however, were all they could afford. By noon the entire settlement would be looking for the stolen powder. They needed to be far away by then.

Two hours past noon, the canoe pulled onto a small island near the far shore. A small channel provided a place to hide the canoe from all but the keenest observers. They slept for several hours and ate some dried meat before returning to the stream. By then, the rays of the setting sun were painting the clouds purple.

As the sky darkened, stillness fell upon the stream and the woods around it. The stillness gave River Wanderer time to reflect on the day's events. She had worked hard to appear the lowly and ignorant squaw. She knew from Wind Seeker that squaws were neither ignorant nor lowly. The settlers believed otherwise and she played into their beliefs in the hope of avoiding attention. The scoundrel traders had joked that they would have her for a bag of beads. The honest traders ignored her and focused on the furs.

These may be the only furs we see this winter, they argued amongst themselves. The trappers should have returned by now. If they don't return, these furs will be worth their weight in gold. It had been clear from the argument that they would pay a high price for the furs, so she urged Wind Seeker to hold out for two barrels of salt pork in addition to the grain and blankets. In the end, he got what he demanded.

The trading had required all of her concentration. She was careful to conceal her reactions to what the traders said and only talked to Wind Seeker when the traders argued between themselves. Her greatest fear came when they loaded the canoe. She was surrounded by traders but only minutes away from leaving the settlement without a person suspecting that she was a white woman. The fear proved groundless and she breathed an enormous sigh of relief with each stroke that took her out onto the Juniata River.

Paddling to their campsite and prowling back to the settlement, were both exhilarating. She made each stroke as quiet as the river. As they walked back toward the settlement, she made each step as quiet as the woods. In the woods, she imitated Wind Seeker, tracing his steps and movements. In the settlement, she took the lead, knowing instinctively the places where adults would never look. Maybe I'll forget those things, now that I'm an adult, she thought to herself.

The long wait by the armory gave her more time for such thoughts. For as long as she could remember, she had wanted to be an adult. Many adult things fulfilled the promise of that dream: hunting in the woods with her lover, sharing his bed and his pleasures, making a winter shelter for him.

Other things made her want to be a child again. One of those was seeing the bodies of the six men she had helped to kill. They had washed up onto some shallow rocks at a bend in the stream. Nothing remained but bones and those would be gone before the winter. No one would go looking for them until the cold weather passed. By then there would be nothing left to find.

Trappers died in the woods often enough. Six trappers dying was another matter. Even if they met a raiding party, one or two would be expected to escape and there would be signs of a fierce battle. That would not be the case for these trappers. She and Wind Seeker had retraced their every step to assure that there were no signs of them.

There had been little time to think as they carried away the heavy keg of powder and the musket balls. Her whole body ached from the long portage of the heavy load. She would have a long sleep when they reached the shelter. The thought of the warm blankets sheltered against the wind brought a surge of energy to her paddle.

This would be her first winter outside the comfort of four walls. In the past, her winter excursions into the woods had always ended next to a warm fireplace. This winter, her shelter would be made of bark and pine boughs and the fire would be kept small to avoid too much smoke.

She would miss the comforting warmth of a fireplace and wondered if she would ever see the inside of a cabin again. Only if they're preparing to hang me, she thought to herself. The deaths of eight men were now on her head and there would be more when the rivers thawed in the spring. How had she become an enemy of her own people? She had yet to meet Wind Seeker's people. Would she be an enemy of them as well?

They reached the shelter without incident. Both were exhausted and had barely the strength to hide their canoe. They slept long into the next day and used what daylight remained to find a dry place for the grain and powder.

Chapter VIII: Defending The Hills

The soldiers did not arrive until March. By then, each lover could speak in the other's language and they had made a visit to Wind Seeker's village. They brought six muskets as their peace offering, along with the musket balls and powder horns that the six trappers had brought. The powder horns were filled with dry powder from the raid on Clarks Ferry. River Wanderer gave a demonstration of how to load and shoot the muskets and then gave lessons to the six honored braves who received a musket from the chief.

Wind Seeker remained next to the chief for the entire moon quarter that they stayed in the village. The village women surrounded River Wanderer, anxious to see how she had made the leather shirt and trousers. Within minutes, she was standing naked as they examined her clothes. The children crowded her as well, anxious to touch the curiously pale skin. She waited until each woman had examined the leather garments, then unraveled the seams so that they could see how they were cut and sewn together. Two women helped her sew the pieces back again so that she had something to wear for the evening meal.

The next morning, she astonished the village again when she went with Wind Seeker to hunt. They returned before noon with a deer and two turkeys. In the afternoon, she astonished them again with her ignorance of village customs and the duties of a squaw. Wind Seeker had found a woman who shared his spirit, they said, but not one who could prepare his hearth.

River Wanderer found the village far more complex than she had imagined. The women's tasks were far beyond her skills and the structure of the relationships was too

complex to be understood. As a consequence, she spent most of her time with the young girls, teaching them to use the bow.

When they left, both walked taller and with lighter steps than they had when they arrived. Wind Seeker had honored the village with the muskets and himself with the unusual woman. River Wanderer had found respect, if not acceptance, and a place where she might raise her child when it came.

Thoughts of the village disappeared as the two watched three boats moving up the stream. The first canoe held two trappers. Behind were two long canoes that each held ten soldiers. The soldiers had been expected. Six trappers had disappeared in the fall and the soldiers had come to make the Indians pay. Whether they caught those responsible mattered little. River Wanderer remembered vividly the tales of returning soldiers, bragging about entire villages being overrun. This expedition sought herself and her lover. They would defend themselves and see that no harm came to any village.

The trappers were their chief concern. They waited until the lead boat reached the bend below the sandbar before firing simultaneously. Both musket balls found their marks and the two trappers fell into the chill water.

The closest long boat headed for the overturned canoe. Hands reached out to pull the fallen trappers into the boat. As those reaching out leaned against the gunnel, it slid perilously close to the water line. The wounded men grabbed desperately for the gunnel and nearly pulled it beneath the water. Instinctively, four soldiers threw their weight on the opposite gunnel to keep the boat from swamping. The boat righted itself with a jolt that caused the wounded men to lose their grips. Without the counterbalance

of the wounded trappers, the weight of the four soldiers tipped their side of the boat into the water and swamped it. In an instant, all of the occupants were in the water.

River Wanderer and Wind Seeker had reloaded their muskets but they quickly saw that there was no need to fire them. The second long boat was working desperately to rescue those in the water. It drifted a half-mile downstream before it could pull the two swamped boats to the near shore.

The struggle with the canoes swept away the immediate threat. River Wanderer and Wind Seeker used the respite to return to their shelter and gather provisions for a long journey into the hills. In addition to the muskets, musket balls and powder horns, they carried bows and sheaves of arrows. Both wore leather shirts and trousers and a bear skin vest. Each carried a blanket and a sack filled with dried meat, nuts, and dried fruit.

Wind Seeker moved with his customary speed through the woods, hoping to reach the landing site before the drifting boats. River Wanderer moved with the same speed, after months of following his footsteps. Despite their speed, the boats had landed around a bend in the stream before they could reach the site. They slowed at the sight of soldiers crouching along the shore and scanning the woods for signs of attackers.

The two attackers stayed high on the hill overlooking the bend. They sat quietly and listened to the soldiers. Most of the activity focused on building a fire to warm those who had fallen into the water. Two searched the water for the wounded trappers. Four stood guard around the long canoes and four others began to search the woods for signs of their attackers.

The two who had been looking for the trappers soon joined the four advancing up the hill. As the six approached the two attackers, Wind Seeker notched an arrow and took aim at the leader. River Wanderer sighted on the second in command and released her arrow within a second of her companion's. Both arrows struck their targets in the chest. Both men cried out with pain, drawing attention away from the two archers who were moving farther up the hill. No one tried to follow. Instead, they helped carry their wounded comrades back to the sandbar.

The discussion around the fire became heated and easily drifted up the hill. Many favored getting in the boats and leaving. Others were determined that the two Indians would pay for what they had done. The friends of the wounded soldiers fell into both camps. A gruff voiced soldier ended the argument, saying that he would not lead his men into the woods without a guide and that he would not stay here any longer than he had to.

Shortly after noon, the soldiers put out the fire and got back into the boats. High on the hill, their attackers watched as the boats made their way downstream. Only when there was neither sight nor sound of the departing soldiers, did they move cautiously down the hill to explore the camp. The soldiers had left the dying embers of the fire but little else.

One soldier remained behind. He crouched behind a tree at the base of the hill. Both Wind Seeker and River Wanderer noticed him on their descent. The brave moved to the side to come up behind him. The woman moved slowly straight toward the hiding figure, careful to keep several trees between herself and the soldier.

“Harriet!” the soldier called. A chill ran down River Wanderer’s spine. It was Rodger.

“Stop Wind Seeker. I know him,” she called out. Her companion was within sight of her former boyfriend, and his musket was cocked.

Rodger understood not a word. He recognized Harriet’s voice and heard the cocking of the musket’s hammer. He dropped his own musket and held his hands high. River Wanderer soon stood in front of him with her hands on her hips.

“Why did you come here, Rodger?”

Rodger looked at her defiantly. “To take you back to Waltonville.”

River Wanderer met his gaze. “Did you think I’d come willingly?”

The question stunned her former boyfriend. He lowered his eyes in defeat. “You’ll come to your senses when you get back to Waltonville.”

“I’m in my senses now. You made a mistake coming here. Now that you’re here, we need to figure out how to keep the soldiers from coming back. Are you alone?”

“Yes. I doubt they know I’ve stayed behind.”

Later that evening, the three were sitting inside the shelter, eating fish caught late in the day. It had taken most of the afternoon to reach a lookout point from which the stream could be viewed for miles. When they reached it, they saw the long boats in the distance, still filled with soldiers and still heading downstream.

Sharing a meal with Rodger made River Wanderer feel that she was back in Waltonville. Her anger from the afternoon had mostly subsided. “What do you know of the soldiers, Rodger? Why did they come?”

Rodger relaxed into the familiarity of her conversation. "Six trappers came this way in the fall and none returned. The settlers at Clarks Ferry thought a war party must have done it. They asked for soldiers to find the war party."

"Why did they come this way?"

Rodger warmed to the story. "I told them it must be the same war party that ambushed my dad and me late in the summer. We were up this way searchin' for you. While we were up in the hills, the war party holed the two canoes we brought and stole our food."

Wind Searcher understood none of the conversation, so he picked up a stick that he was whittling into an arrow. River Wanderer gathered the remnants of their meal. "Now the soldiers know it's the two of us and no war party."

Rodger followed her outside. "Two renegades, they're sayin'. They don't know that you're one of them."

River Wanderer stopped. "How did you know that I was one of them?"

"The musket shootin' gave you away." He followed her to the mound where she buried garbage. "The soldiers were amazed that any Indians had muskets and that they could hit someone at a distance. I was just about to tell them about the way you used to shoot. That's when I knew. You were the woman my dad saw dancin' on the hill."

Her anger returned in an instant. "If you knew that, then you knew that there was no reason for you to stay."

Rodger nearly shouted his reply. "There's no reason for you to stay. You can come back with me to Waltonville."

River Wanderer turned away and began to scrape a trench with her knife. "You'd enjoy seeing me hanging from the gallows, no doubt. There's two trappers that didn't come out of the water and two soldiers that may not make it back to Clarks Ferry. That's enough to have me hung."

"I'll tell them that you were forced to do it."

She turned, exasperated. "How can you force a person to hit a moving target at 50 yards? You're thinking with your groin, Rodger, not with your head. If you care for me at all, you can start thinking of saving me from the soldiers. What do they plan to do when they get to Clarks Ferry?"

"They'll find some trappers to act as guides and come back a second time."

River Wanderer rose and walked slowly back to the shelter. "They may have trouble finding trappers. Eight have died already. Return to Clarks Ferry and tell the trappers what happened to the two that came with the soldiers. You can paddle their canoe. That'll make believers of the other trappers."

Rodger followed her inside the shelter. "What do you have against the trappers?"

Her anger washed over him like a wave. "Every trapper I got near planned to rape me. That's reason enough to shoot them. Besides, the trappers can find us in the hills - the soldiers can't unless they're led by trappers."

Rodger was clearly surprised at the vehemence of her reply.

"You've changed a lot, Harriet."

She took a breath. "More than I wanted to, but there's no help for that now. I need to tie your hands so that Wind Seeker and I can get some sleep. First thing in the

morning we'll find that canoe and get you on your way. If you paddle hard, you may catch the soldiers before they reach Clarks Ferry."

Rodger had trouble sleeping with his hands tied behind his back. He had more trouble with the thought of leaving Harriet behind. All of his arguments for her coming with him, nonetheless, had shattered against her fear of being executed. His own dreams shattered against the sounds of lovemaking from his two captors. A troubled night followed and he welcomed the first traces of the morning when light framed the blanket covering the shelter's opening.

Wind Seeker rose first and dressed quickly. Harriet rose without dressing and handed him his weapons. She gave him a long kiss before he disappeared into the stillness of the morning. Pulling a corner of the hanging blanket aside, she let the morning rays wash her body within full sight of her captive.

"This is what you wanted to see, Rodger. Your father got a good look and you deserve one too after all your effort."

Rodger struggled into a sitting position. "This is not the way I wanted to see you."

River Wanderer looked at him for several moments, then sat beside him with her knees drawn up to her chest. "We don't always get what we want. What I wanted seems very far away - a house in the woods, teaching my children to hunt and trap. It's fortunate that my new husband will let me do that. It's unfortunate that I'll never see my family and friends again."

Tears came to her eyes and softened the response on the tip of Rodger's tongue. "You could see them again - many would come to visit you. Where is his village?"

River Wanderer wiped away the tears. "His village will be moving in the spring. Settlers are getting too close. We'll need to follow them because I'm carrying his child. Probably give birth in the summer, but that's a long way off." She took a deep breath. "Right now we need to lead the soldiers away from the village."

Rodger watched as she rose and dressed. When she picked up an iron pot to fetch water, he hinted that he needed to go outside.

River Wanderer laughed. "I need to pee as well. You'll have a hard time with your hands tied. Either wait until Wind Searcher returns or let me pull off your pants."

Rodger blushed, a sure sign that he could not wait much longer. He laid back down and closed his eyes while River Wanderer removed his clothes. Half naked, he scrambled to his feet and followed her outside.

River Wanderer made no effort to lessen his embarrassment, wanting to discourage him from ever returning. Once outside, she pulled his shirt over his head, ignoring his protests. It would only get in the way, she assured him. Grabbing the rope that bound his hands, she led him into the woods and had him watch as she squatted and took care of her own needs. Her watching him squat added to his discomfort and painfully prolonged the process. When he finally rose, she led him down to the stream, saying that she needed to clean him up. The greatest indignity came when she used her hands to clean his private parts. Back in the shelter, she pulled his clothes on and made him lie on his stomach while she prepared breakfast.

"You can keep your musket, Rodger, but your powder and musket balls stay here. Saying that you escaped a renegade and his squaw will get you a lot of sympathy and few questions. Saying that I was the squaw will bring no end to the questions and

countless retellings of the story. There are parts of the story that you won't want to tell but they'll get out some night when you've had too much whiskey. Better to keep it simple and avoid further questions. You'll have enough on your mind explaining how you escaped."

Silence greeted her words, no doubt borne of anger and humiliation. Her heart wanted to comfort him but she could not risk anything that might encourage him to return.

Later that morning, Wind Searcher found the abandoned canoe trapped against a fallen tree. After freeing the canoe, he launched Rodger on the water, headed downstream. River Wanderer watched until he disappeared around the bend, taking with him her last connection to the world of her parents, friends and childhood memories. The trip back to the shelter seemed unusually long. Each step took her deeper into the world that was now her home. Back at the shelter, she joined Wind Seeker in packing what they would need for a long journey into the mountains.

