

STEVEN HUNTER

**THE IRON
PROMISE**

Copyright © 2017 by Steven Hunter

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means without the written permission of the author.

Contact and book order information

Steven Hunter

Riverstone Press

Box 114

Big Lake Ranch, BC, Canada V0L1G0

250 243- 2380

stevehunter34@gmail.com

ISBN Ebook – 978-0-9917071-4-0

Paperback – 978-0-9917071-3-3

Disclaimer - While the Canadian history contained in this book is as true as the writer could ascertain through research its absolute accuracy cannot be guaranteed. It never can. Expert historians are everywhere. The story and the characters are all products of the writer's imagination and any resemblance to actual people, places or circumstances is purely coincidental

FICTION, CANADIAN HISTORY, ABORIGINAL, DISRUPTIONS CAUSED BY
COLONIAL FORCES

Cover photos by Steven Hunter

Cover design by Iryna Spica

Typeset in *Plantin* at SpicaBookDesign

Printed in Canada by Island Blue Book Printing,

Victoria B.C.

For my daughter Stephanie



Table of Contents

PART ONE

Rescue and Remorse	3
Lingering Despair	27
Search	59
The Coast	94
Victoria	115
Turning the Tables	166
The Bar C	183
Summer on the North Trail	198
In Search of a Mountain Pass	211
Fort Edmonton	231
The Carlton Trail	255
Fort Garry	273
The Banker's Man	301
A Fool's Promenade	325

PART TWO

Olivia	337
Voyage.	357
Paris	374
Return to St. Marcus	436

PART THREE

Long Rivers.	453
The Bishop's Game.	468
The Path of Progress.	477
Near the Eastern Shore	500

PART FOUR. PROMISE

The End of the Line	549
Meadowlark	558
Return to the Bar 'C'	572
Epilog. The Principle of Sacrifice	579

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Rescue and Remorse

On the high edge of a slope, overlooking grasslands that fall away to the west toward the river, a solitary Ponderosa pine presides over the valley. A gnarled root exposed by erosion and burrowing animals thrusts into the air and arcs back into the earth, a bony finger of the great hand that holds the aging giant fast to the ridge. The tree leans toward the downhill side, a lean that's the beginning of the inevitable fall at the end of its time there. In thirty or forty more years the tilt of its massive trunk will reach so far down the slope it will either uproot the tired brown hand that sustains it or snap under its own weight in an eruption of twisting, fracturing wood.

For now it towers above two women sitting on the broad root that offers a bench where they can sit and talk and think. They gaze toward the river with their backs to the morning sun. Heavy brown and yellow bark warms in the spring air and the wide ledge of pasture below is beginning to reveal a carpet of green spreading through the dead straw, the remains of last year's field. Dry grass rustles in the wind. Nearby, a swollen stream gurgles across the field heading for the river.

The women's shoulders touch. They hold their hands in their laps. One, who seems to be doing the talking, rests her head against the rough bark of the tree as she speaks. The other, not really a woman yet, not quite, has turned toward the speaker and she seems attentive to every word. A story is being recalled in complete privacy.

"I'm so glad they found you," says Rose "and that you're all right."

“Yes, I’m okay. We were in the mountains hunting and trapping just trying to get enough to eat and the sickness didn’t find us,” says her young sister Raven. “They sent cousin Dexter. I don’t know how he knew where to look but he found us. He told us that there was much sickness and dying and that you had stayed to help with the elders and then got sick as well. He said that you were okay here at the ranch but you were still weak and needed me. He brought me here.”

“Yes, Rider sent word for him to go and find you. I’m happy that you’ve come Raven. I must tell you of things that have happened.”

“Yes Rose, tell me.”

“I’ll try. There are things you must know. You were with auntie Camille a long time. I’m so glad you’re here now.

“I remember the last day. It was bitter cold. The sky was white and grey and there was no sound except the wind in the bare poplars, their branches scratching and whispering. It smelled like snow and I knew a storm was coming. It smelled like snow and it smelled like death. I know both of those smells well now.

“I was slowly freezing. The burning fever inside me wasn’t enough to warm my skin. I had only a canvas wrapped around us and my furs, which had gotten wet trying to get water, were frozen to my body. For days no one had been strong enough to gather wood for a fire.

“Oh Raven, there were mounds of snow everywhere covering the bodies of our relatives. There were bits of torn canvas and soiled blankets lying useless in the snow. Here and there I could see a brown arm or leg uncovered lying with the branches and sticks on the ground. By the frozen black coals of a fire that hadn’t burned for days lay two of our elders, side by side, holding hands. I may have been the only one left alive, me and one other.”

“Who was it Rose?”

“Listen, I’ll tell you.

“I was propped up against a tree and I could hardly keep my eyes open. It was growing late in the day and snow was beginning to fall when I heard the sound of an approaching wagon. My throat was swollen and sore and dry. I couldn’t call to them.

“A man and a woman drew closer and stopped to look at the camp.”

“Now that is one hell of a sorry sight ain’t it Helen?” said the man.

“He was bundled in an overcoat and scarf and he wore a black hat with a wide round brim.”

“Bernard,” said the woman, “we should stop and see if there’s anyone left we can help.”

“I ain’t goin anywheres near them corpses and you ain’t neither woman. They got the pox and if there’s anyone left, they’re done for.”

“The woman climbed down from the wagon and began looking around the camp. I tried to call to her but I was too weak. When she came close the baby whimpered.”

“What, a baby? What baby Rose?”

“My baby Raven, your niece.”

“But when, how...”

“Please just listen Raven. I can only do this once.

“The woman knelt beside us and pulled back the tarp to see the baby. Olivia is her name. The woman said that she would get her husband to help but he was shouting at her to get in the wagon.

“Leave her be dammit! She’s too far gone. Just get in the damn wagon.”

“Bernard, there’s a baby!”

“I managed to whisper to her. “Please, you can’t help me. Help my baby. Take her, please,” I begged.

“She went to the wagon and brought me water and a blanket. She poured the water down my throat and covered me with the blanket. Then she took my baby.”

“Dammit woman, of all the fool things,” shouted the man.

“He called her a bitch Raven. For saving a baby’s life, my baby’s life, he called her a bitch. How could I have given my daughter away to such a man.”

“But Rose, it was the only thing you could do.”

“In moments they disappeared behind falling snow. I don’t remember anything after that. Olivia was gone. I wanted to die there with our lost relatives. How could I live and they not?”

“Somehow I survived the night. I guess the blanket and being covered in snow kept me alive.”

“But Rose, what about the baby? Tell me about her. Who’s the baby’s father?”

“I will tell you, but only if you promise not to tell anyone else.”

“Why? Someone might be able to help us get her back.”

“No Raven. I’m afraid she’s gone. I have no idea who those people were, where they came from or where they were going. You and I are the only ones alive that know about her. I’m sorry Raven. I shouldn’t have even told you but the burden of such a secret is hard for me to carry alone. It won’t do any good to tell others. It will only cause them pain as well. Now Raven, do you promise?”

“Yes Rose, I do. I’m happy to share the weight of your secret. Tell me.”

“Thank you. Until you came, Raven, I used to come alone to this place to cry.”

“Now we can cry together,” says her young sister.

“Yes, and the others, uncle Louis, Lavinia and Rider will think that our tears are for those lives that are now in the past and of course they are, including Olivia.”

“Stop it Rosie. I’m going to cry right now and I think if I do, I won’t be able to stop.”

“Yes, but let me tell you about her. She was born in our family’s pit house at our winter village early last year. She was such a good

baby, seldom crying and her eyes were wide all the time watching me, watching everything and everyone. There was so much love in our family for her. When she was just a few months old she began to laugh. She laughed all the time and she brought much joy to us all. She went with me to our summer camps, to the berry patch and up and down our family trails. I couldn't wait for you to come home and finally meet her."

"Oh Rose, you must have been so happy. Now tell me, who is the father?"

"Remember your promise."

"Yes, all right."

"Rider Valcourt is Olivia's father."

"What, how could that be?"

"It's true."

"But how could he be? He's been gone so long."

"Yes, he was gone for nearly two years, working for survey crews trying to find a route for something called a railway to pass through the mountains and reach all the way to the ocean. He knows nothing about the baby."

"What? Rose, you've got to tell him. Maybe he can get her back."

"No Raven, he doesn't need the pain of a father who's lost his only child. We must protect him from that. He must not find out."



Rider Valcourt, stands in the stirrups and peers into the death of a camp. He's dressed in fur leggings and a fur lined buckskin coat embroidered with colourful designs across his shoulders. A red and white sash holds the coat snug to his tall frame.

He climbs off the big roan and begins to inspect the camp, uncovering bodies. Smallpox has decimated the camp. He recognizes a few by name. Finally, he finds the one he's looking for.

"Rose, Rose."

He can scarcely hear her rasping breath but he feels a faint pulse.

“Rose, it’s me Rider. I’ve come for you. I’m going to take you home. Live Rose, please, live.”

He pours some water in her mouth. She coughs and moans.

“You’re going to be okay. I’ve come for you. Live Rose, please live.”

He covers her with his fur bedroll and works fast building a fire. It seems like it takes forever before there’s any warmth. The day is fading as he searches the camp for anything that might help them through the night. He finds the remnants of a frozen canvas and puts it by the fire to thaw. By the time he’s gathered enough wood to last until morning the canvas has softened.

Rose too has begun to thaw. Laying her on the blanket by the fire that’s begun to snap with heat, Rider strips the wet furs from her. He examines her naked nearly dead body. Strangely, he notices there are only a dozen or so weeping pox and none of them have burned into her face. Perhaps luck is with her and she’s somehow managed to avoid the full force of the sickness that’s killed all the others.

He pulls some leather straps out of his kit and lashes together the frame of a crude lean to. He positions it so that heat from the fire will be trapped under the canvas cover. Rose’s furs are drying by the fire, still damp but starting to warm. He spreads them over her and as night surrounds the camp he climbs into bed beside her, taking care not to brush up against any of the open sores. He has escaped the sickness so far and he knows that if he comes down with the smallpox now he’ll be no use to anyone. Rose needs him.

At first light Rider is up tending the fire. He boils up some tea and eats some bannock. Rose lies as she has all night and he’s able to do no more than to pour some water into her mouth. This makes her cough and that seems to hurt her but she desperately needs to drink.

He searches for rails that he can make into a travois with the canvas from the lean to. This will be Rose's bed for the three day trip back to the ranch. She's weak and in a bad way but they can't delay leaving for another day. She needs more skilled hands than his and they're almost out of food. As he cuts two thin pine trees with the small axe he carries, he notices an orange growth on the north side of the trunk of an old poplar. He scrapes it into a pouch with his knife and then sweeps away the snow from a rotting stump. He pulls handfuls of thick moss from it and stuffs it inside his coat.

Back at camp Rider boils the orange scrapings until they turn into a coarse brown mash. He wets a clump of moss and begins washing Rose's sores, again taking care not to touch them. Each ball of moss is thrown into the fire when it's done. He dabs the brown paste on Rose's sores with a bit of cloth which he also tosses into the fire afterwards. Finally he washes her face with the rough damp moss.

That's when her eyes open for the first time.

"Rose, Rose, you're going to be okay. It's me, Rider. I'm taking you home. You're going to be okay."

She tries to speak, "Oli..., Oli..."

"Don't try to talk, plenty of time for that later. Here, drink some tea."

She manages three small sips before she coughs and shuts her eyes, her head falling back on the bed.

That night, under the stars, the camp grows very cold. It's as though death has reawakened at the possibility that the one remaining life among his chosen ones might be spared, leaving his task incomplete. The fever returns with a vengeance. In the frigid air Rider uncovers her sweating body bathing her long into the night, melting snow, dampening balls of moss. Finally the fever subsides and she begins to shiver. Covering her up with her

furs, that are finally dry and warm, he falls into bed and a fitful sleep until dawn.

Mist settles on the camp after the clear night and warms the clearing by a few degrees. But soon it becomes a heavy veil through which the sun's rays can't penetrate. Visibility is less than fifty feet. They must get out.

Rider rigs the travois to the roan, roped to the saddle horn. He wraps Rose in the fur blanket and lifts her on to the sling. There's almost no weight left to her. He piles more furs on.

"I hate to tie you up like this but you're so light you'll bounce or roll right off this thing."

"Rider," she looks up at him. "Rider, is that you?"

"Rose. Yes it's me girl. Just gotta' get you snuggled in here nice and comfy like, so you don't fall off. We're goin' home Rosie. Get your rest. Don't try to talk."

The pine tree skids are strong enough to carry Rose but light enough to give a little on the rough wagon road jostling her but not jarring her. Rider carefully guides his horse around boulders, over fallen trees and through narrow ravines.

He finally reins in the roan when light begins to drain from the sky. All three; man, woman and horse are exhausted in their own way. Rider gathers wood leaving Rose on the travois until he has a fire going. As he lights the fire his horse, Steamer, snorts and shakes his head pawing at the snow with heavy hooves. Rider tries to settle him. The horse senses something beyond sight in the woods.

"What's out there boy? Coyotes? Cougar maybe? Don't worry now. We've got my rifle and they won't bother us by the fire. Just settle down now."

He's able to get Rose to drink some water and she even manages most of a cup of tea. Too tired to make a frame for a lean to, he puts Rose on a blanket in the snow beside the fire and props the

sling up over it trying to catch some heat. He crawls under the blanket and sleep overtakes him.

A few hours later he wakes and sees the moonlight filtering through the forest. That's when he hears the wolves. They're gathering for a hunt not far off. Now he knows what made Steamer nervous. He smiles and finds comfort in their eerie song, calling out an ageless summons to the meeting place.

There isn't much change in Rose's condition in the morning. How long can she last like this? He gives her a drink of cold water to sooth the burning in her throat and he makes a mash of bannock and water and tries to get her to eat. She manages to swallow a few spoonfuls but that's all.

Rider knows the day's ride will be rough. The steep hill where they'll drop off the plateau is going to be icy and treacherous. He recalls that a string of lakes run parallel to the wagon road not far to the west. They should be frozen solid this time of the year. If he can find his way to them it will be easy going on the flat snow-covered ice. On the other hand, if for some reason the water is open he'll have wasted the better part of a day getting there and then turning back. He decides it's a gamble they must take.

Early in the day they find a game trail heading west toward the lakes. If moose can get through the bush on it, they can too. With the exception of a few fallen trees across the trail, the way isn't too difficult. The gamble pays off. By mid day they're looking south down the narrow expanse of a long snow covered lake. They stop at the edge. Rider makes a small fire and gives Rose more water and a small amount of mashed bannock.

"Rider, where are we?"

"Well, good morning. Feelin' better? We're about to make tracks down this lake. If I'm right, it'll take us more than half the way home."

"No Rider, the ice isn't safe."

“Sure it is. There’s moose tracks all over it. We have to chance it Rose.”

The big roan starts acting jittery and won’t have anything to do with the plan. He’s never been out on lake ice but he instinctively knows what will happen if they break through.

“Come on Steamer, it’s okay.”

Rider dismounts, takes the reins in his hand, and steps out onto the ice. He tugs at the lines urging his horse to follow. Steamer takes a few cautious steps onto the lake.

At the worst possible moment there’s a violent snapping sound as a crack in the ice checks from one side of the lake to the other. Steamer rears and pulls back.

“It’s okay it’s just the ice heaving. It’s a good sign. It means it’s still thick.”

He says this as much for Rose as the frightened horse. Gradually he coaxes the roan out onto the lake and begins to lead him on foot. After a few minutes Steamer settles down but he’s still nervous about something. Rider climbs into the saddle and nudges his horse into a walk taking care not to go too fast in case the horse’s heavy hooves plunge through the snow onto bare ice and send them sprawling.

Suddenly, to his right, a wolf lopes along about fifty feet away. On his left, another. Behind them, two more. Rider realizes that his horse is jittery for a reason. Steamer senses the wolves and somehow knows that out in the open on the ice there’s no defense. Wolves run their prey to the point of exhaustion and then move in for the kill. Nonetheless an attack is unlikely. Rider has never heard of a wolf attack on a man but he’s heard tales about wolves following people on the trail. Wolves chase, it’s their nature. His rifle is in the scabbard on his saddle and he unties the strap on the butt just in case.

For over an hour their unlikely troop proceeds down the lake, Rider reassuring his horse whose ears are flat, snorting his

discontent at the wolves trotting along beside and behind them. They make good time and near the end of the lake Rider spots a trail that leads off in the direction of the wagon road. Not far off a stream runs out of the lake through a frozen swamp at the end. There's probably another lake not too far away but the moving water in the stream might lead to thin ice or no ice at all.

He decides on his course and turns to check on Rose. One of the wolves sniffs at the foot of the sling. Rider yells and goes for his rifle but there's no need. The wolf, getting a sniff of the blankets wants no part of them. He sneezes, shakes his head and as if on some sort of signal the pack trots off into the swamp.

Steamer watches and gives a final snort.

The trail isn't as well worn as the one before and it amounts to no more than deep tracks in the snow made by moose. The tracks make a sudden turn away from the direction of the wagon road and off toward a patch of poplar trees.

Their course leads them through a stand of fir where the snow grows deeper and deeper. Only the tops of Steamers legs are above the snow. The travois poles sink and the snow starts to pile up on Rose. She's still strapped in and helpless to clear the snow from her face. Nearly spent, the horse stumbles in a snowdrift on the lee side of a low ridge. The sling comes loose and slices into the drift on its side plunging Rose's face deep into it.

Rider jumps from Steamer as the horse struggles to regain his footing. Waist deep, he plows toward Rose who has sunk out of sight. He gropes until he finds her and yanks the sling out of the drift. He sweeps the snow off her face.

"Rose, Rose."

No answer.

"Rose, are you all right?"

She opens her eyes and in a rasp says, "After this, nothing can kill me."

Rider laughs aloud. He falls to his knees raises his fists to the sky, tips his head back and calls out, shouting, roaring at death, daring him to do his worst because no matter what he will not be defeated. He will not let Rose go.

Then he kneels quietly beside her.

“Rosie, you are one tough Indian.”

At last they make it to the wagon road and the way grows easier. They camp at a spot that looks like it’s been used recently and it’s not far from where Rider thinks the road begins to climb down from the plateau. There’s even some left over wood in camp and he soon has a fire crackling. A whiskey jack flutters from branch to branch around the clearing, hoping for scraps. Steamer paws at the snow in search of forage. Never was there a horse with a bigger heart.

Rider feeds Rose the last of their bannock. Tea is all that’s left. Stars fill the sky and it’s getting cold. It’s a good thing. The hill won’t be as slippery. They must make the ranch tomorrow.



Rider is up before first light. It’s warmed up and a dusting of snow covers the camp. With the last of the leaves in his pouch he makes a strong tea, wakes Rose and carefully, feeding her small sips, gives most of it to her.

He makes haste to break camp. If it begins to thaw, the road will be deadly with melting ice.

He rigs the travois to Steamer and rides the short distance to the top of the hill. Sensing the danger, his horse balks at the descent on the icy road. Rider dismounts and leads him slowly down the high side of the trail where the horse’s hooves crunch on a thin layer of snow giving them the slightest grip. Half way to the first switchback the big horse slips and goes down hard on a knee. He panics and scrambles to regain his purchase on the icy trail, his feet flying in all directions. He finally steadies himself. Rose moans in pain. It’s too dangerous.

Rider unhitches the sling and lashes his axe to the cross piece in the back so that the axe will drag sideways on the ice acting as a brake. He lifts the front of the travois and begins to pull Rose and the sling down the road by hand, the axe blade dragging on the ice, holding him back, stopping him from sliding but making him work to haul her forward. Steamer follows, gingerly placing his feet making sure that he won't skid again. It's slow hard work but by mid morning they're on the last slope to the valley bottom.

They rest there a while before hitching the travois back to Steamer.

"Rider, what's happening, where are we?" Rose asks rasping from her bed.

"We did it Rose, we made it."

"Are we at the ranch?"

"No, but we will be by sundown. By tonight you'll be in good hands. Here, drink some water."

Relieved to be off the treacherous hill and recognizing familiar terrain Steamer sets a good pace. Feed and water are not far off.

It's warmer in the valley and parts of the road are bare to the dirt. In another couple of days they'd be dragging Rose's sling through mud.

At last, true to his words, as the sun begins to set, they're within view of the ranch house.

"Hello! Hey! We're back. Hello!"

Lavinia runs out to meet them at the gate.

"Rider, at last, what's happening. Who's that?"

"It's Rose, you know Rose Wilson. I found her. She's sick. Everyone else was dead. You've got to help her auntie."

Lavinia Chartrand, the Stl'atl'imx wife of Rider's uncle Louis Chartrand doesn't waste time with words. In a glance she understands the situation.

"You okay? You look okay," she says to Rider.

“Yeah, beat up some and real hungry but I’m okay”

“Good. I was worried. She can’t come in the house, not yet. Take her over to the barn. I need to get some things.”



The house at the Bar C ranch sits watching over the grasslands rolling down from the forest and over spring streams jostling through the open hillside, spilling toward the Fraser River. Louis Chartrand is well known in this country, as a supplier of beef and farrier services to those passing along what was, only a few years ago, the trail to the Cariboo goldfields. Now it’s just another road to the coast. As a young man Chartrand followed the tradition of the fur trade. He travelled as a packer and voyageur from the Red River country up the Saskatchewan River working for the Hudson’s Bay Company. He spent time at the fort in Edmonton before making his way to Fort St. James. He worked up and down the Fraser River for a few years until he fell in love with the land around Lillooet. When the gold rush began he saw the potential for a ranch in the area he so cherished and when the opportunity presented itself he pre-empted the largest parcel he could. He still runs about one hundred and fifty head of cattle, down from the three hundred he had when the rush was in full swing.

He met Lavinia at a celebration thrown in his honour by her father, chief Leland Towers. Chartrand had startled the crowd that day by taking first place in a highly publicized cross country horse race. He had overtaken the favourite, who was riding Cap’n Heraldson’s bay, on ‘Suicide Hill’ while bearing down on the homestretch.

Through his union with Lavinia, an alliance was formed between the Chartrands and the local Nation, a relationship destined to transcend the tests of time and the passing of the gold rush.

Tonight, like most evenings, except in the dead of winter, he stands with his hands on the railing of his porch looking out at his

spread, smoking his pipe, thinking about where the future might lie. Calving is over and his herd is spread across the pasture with their newborns. Grass grows quickly this time of the year.

He wonders if there will ever really be a railway from coast to coast, passing by somewhere not too far away, heading for the Pacific.

Rider joins him.

“Good year so far uncle Louis. Pasture looks in good shape. Only lost a couple of calves this season.”

“So far so good,” says Chartrand not turning his head, still deep in thought. “Rider, I’ve been hearing some things, some of them not good. I’m going to have to leave the ranch for a while, see what I can find out. If you can stay and look after the place for a couple of weeks I think I’ll take a wagon with some of those furs that our friends brought us from the north trap line and make a trip down to the coast.”

“What kind of things have you been hearing uncle Louis?”

“I’m worried about what’s going on back home. I think there’s some kind of trouble brewing between our people there and the new Canadian government back east. Anyhow, we need some supplies and it’s settled down since the calving’s done. You okay with this?”

“Sure, of course. Those are my people too. I want to know what’s going on.”

Chartrand smiles, “You know, now that I take a good look at you there’s a lot of resemblance between you and my sister. She’d be proud of you Rider. Do you think about her much?”

“Thanks uncle Louis, I think about her a lot. I don’t really remember much of those days though.”

“No, I suppose not. You were too young when she died. I’m just glad you remind me of her once in a while.”

“We’ll look after the place. Rosie is getting stronger all the time and she’ll be a big help to Lavinia.”

“You look out for that girl. She may be getting stronger but still.... Just watch out for her okay.”

“I will, course I will.”



One evening, days after Chartrand’s departure for the coast, a shadow sits on the gnarled root of the Ponderosa. Her shoulders sag and she quakes with tears. Another shadow slowly approaches from behind and places a hand on the girl’s shoulder. The girl isn’t startled. It’s as though she’s been expecting the other.

“I wondered where you’d gone Raven. I finally realized you must have come here. I thought we were going to share our sorrows with each other. Why did you come alone?”

Raven grew still.

“Yes, I know Rose, but I have tears of my own to cry. They’re not secret. You know them. They’re your tears too. Sometimes I just like to be alone with them. I feel closer to the memories when I’m alone. I’m glad you’ve come though. Sit with me Rose.”

Rose sits down and puts her arm around her sister. A light wind from the west blows the hushing sound of the Fraser River to their ears. An early star blinks low over distant mountain tops announcing a late frost. A calf bawls from the darkening pasture below.

“You’re a wise girl Raven, wise beyond your years. I like to be alone at times too; to remember, to think, sometimes to dream of what could have been.”

“Won’t you change your mind Rose, about telling Rider?”

“No, I mustn’t. I can’t. I can’t bring this sorrow down on him.”

“But Rose, one day he’ll find out on his own. There are others still alive that know about your baby. He’ll find out from them”

Rose starts to cry.

“I should never have let her go! If I could have held on for one more day it would all be different. If I tell him now he might be angry with me. He might send us away.”

“He would never do that Rose. In a time when we’ve lost so many, how can we not take the chance to find her? Rider has you. He has his family he can turn to. His people are strong. They’ll help.”

They sit and watch the star getting brighter over the mountains. Two bats flutter and swoop round and round the tree.

Rose laughs, “You’re probably the only one left in this world that I would let scold me. Imagine, the voice of a young girl speaking words like an elder. You’ve seen too much Raven. You shouldn’t have to think of these things.”

“Keeping a secret isn’t going to make it better. Grandmother taught us that. Keeping secrets from those close to us will hurt us. I remember her words now.”

“I’ll think about it,” says Rose.

The old tree isn’t far from the ranch house and they walk hand in hand back to find Rider leaning on the porch railing looking out, watching them, in much the same way his uncle Louis does. Not saying a word Lavinia stands beside him, a little behind him, watching too.



Days grow into weeks. Rose tries to lose herself in the tasks that are now hers to perform on the ranch. Having lived a life of fishing, hunting and gathering food there’s much to learn about the growing of cows and the dozen hogs that loaf in the pigpen, squealing to life each time she passes by, hoping for a handout of grain or a gallon of milk. Chickens roam the barnyard hiding their eggs under bushes or in the tack shed. She knows these places now and rarely misses an egg for her basket.

At first it seems so foreign to her, raising animals for food and money. Food comes from the forests and rivers and will always be there for the harvest. At least that was true not long ago.

She’d been frightened and disgusted by the pigs and their habits. She thought them crude, ugly and stupid.

“Not true,” Rider had told her. “They’re smart, clean and love to have fun. Watch this.”

He tied a bag full of burlap sacks into a ball and tossed it into the pen. The hogs instantly made a game out of bunting the ball with their snouts, squealing with delight, each trying to win the treasure for himself.

“It’s all a matter of how you look at something,” he told Rose. “Strange is not stupid, just different.”

More lessons were revealed to her at the ranch, little by little each day.

But her study of the barnyard and her diligence with the chores were not enough to push Olivia out of her mind. As her body grows stronger her sense of futility over getting Olivia back begins to pass. There are many evenings at the Ponderosa with Raven, although sometimes she chooses to be alone.

It’s on one of these nights when she sits alone, the night before Louis Chartrand returns from the coast, that she decides it’s wrong for her to withhold the truth of Olivia from Rider. And it’s wrong to force her sister to unwillingly keep such a secret.



The next morning she rides with Rider to check the south fence line. Lavinia has taught her how to ride with only a blanket draped over her horse and a rope for reins, according to the custom of her people. She’s comfortable alongside Rider as long as the going isn’t too rough.

At the edge of a stream they stop to rest. The horses drink and Rose pulls some bannock from her bag. She takes the blanket from her horse and spreads it on the fallen needles of a big pine that grows beside the creek. She sits on it and watches as Rider takes a fishing line from his pack and begins digging in the soft earth at the foot of a rotten stump. She can smell the dirt and feel the sun on her face. Great white boats sail through the blue sky and she shuts her eyes thinking of what she’s about to say.

As soon as the line hits the water Rider feels the tug of a trout. In a few more seconds he holds a dangling fish flipping and bouncing for Rose to see. She jumps up, running to him to see the catch. She cleans that one and soon three more that Rider lifts onto the bank.

They pack the fish away and Rider lies on his back on the blanket. Rose sits beside him, her arms wrapped around her knees.

“How are you feelin’ these days Rosie?”

“Oh, most days I feel pretty good. Sometimes I still get tired. I guess I don’t have all my strength back yet.”

“You look well Rose, darn fine as a matter of fact. When you think of it, most people wouldn’t have made it. Now here we are. I love to hear you laugh.”

“Rider, there’s something I have to tell you.”

“Sure, go ahead Rosie.”

“It’s not that easy. I still don’t know what to say or how to say it. It might make you angry with me and I ... oh so don’t want to cause you any hurt.”

“Oh oh, I don’t like the sound of this..”

“No, no, but maybe I should just keep it to myself. Telling you isn’t going to change anything and it might make you hate me. I couldn’t bear that.”

“For god’s sake Rose you can’t stop there. What is it?”

“Well, Rider, you see, there were two of us alive the day before you found me at our camp.”

“No there wasn’t. I checked every body real carefully. There was just you Rose.”

“No, there was one other.”

“What do you mean, there couldn’t have been.”

“There was a baby Rider, my baby.”

“Baby, there was no baby. Your baby? What?”

Rose bursts into tears throwing herself on Rider, her cries muffled by his chest. He holds her tight trying to grasp what she’s telling him.

After a minute she tears herself away from him and, not speaking, sits rocking, with her head resting on her arms that hold her knees.

“I gave the baby away. Some people came by the camp. I was dying. I begged the woman to take my baby. I begged! It was her only chance. I knew I couldn’t last much longer. If I had only known you were coming.”

Rose throws her face to the sky and wails great sobs finally releasing the welling tears that had built up these last weeks. Rider sits beside her with his arm around her in silence as she cries.”

“Oh Rose, I can’t imagine how this could.... Who were they Rose? We can get the baby back.”

“I don’t know who they were. I didn’t get a good look at them. I was so sick.”

“Baby, I didn’t know you had a baby. Who’s the fa..., no, it doesn’t matter. Is he still alive?

Rose is silent, her face pressed into her arms.

“Okay, you told me. That’s done. Here, let me wash your face.”

Rose sighs. “You’re not angry at me.”

“Angry, what for? I can’t think of anything worse than losing a child. You had no choice Rose. You did the only thing you could do to save that baby’s life.”

“Yes, but if I could have held on for one more day....”

“It doesn’t matter, you couldn’t. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Rider helps Rose up. She kneels beside the stream and washes her face. They mount up again and ride through the water towards the south fence of the Bar C. Except for the splashing of the horses and the song of a meadowlark they are silent with their thoughts. Rose is afraid to tell the rest.



Arriving back at the ranch house late in the afternoon, they find that uncle Louis has returned. His horse is in the corral and he sits with Lavinia, each with a cup of tea in hand.

“Louis! Welcome home Uncle Louis.”

“Good to be back Rider. Well miss Rosie, I see you’re doing better. Where’d you learn to ride like that?”

“Lavinia taught me.”

“Sure, I showed her a few things,” smiles Lavinia. “She’s a fast learner. I thought she was getting bored here. Go put the horses away. I hope there’s some trout in that sack. Dinner is almost ready but it needs a little extra something.”

“Got em right here auntie, enough for all of us.”

At the table after dinner, as Rose and Raven clean up, Rider turns to his uncle,

“C’mon Uncle Louis, tell us about the trip. What did you find out?”

“Well, I probably heard all I needed to and then some. Listen close, I’ll tell you what I know.

“The Canadians have struck a deal, approved by the British, to buy Rupertsland from the Hudson’s Bay Company. They intend to annex that territory into Canada. Then they’ll hive off the southeastern piece of it and create another province. They’ll call it Manitoba and make it part of their confederation. All this is going on without the consent of the thousands of Métis people that live there. The Métis have let it be known that they will join Canada as a province but they want their rights respected. They’ve formed their own provisional government and have sent a list of demands and conditions under which they’ll agree to join the confederation. The Canadian government has ignored the Métis and has sent out surveyors to parcel up the land they’re on and it will be granted to settlers moving in from the east.

There’s been trouble. The Métis put a stop to the surveyors and captured Fort Garry from the British. There’s been a few armed skirmishes and now the British have sent troops in to disband the Métis and track down their so called rebel leaders. The Métis won’t

stand for this; they won't sit idly by and have their territory handed over to settlers while their demands are ignored by Canada.

The Queen has all but signed the Manitoba Act that brings the province into Canada. This isn't going to stop the Métis. They may lie low for a while but they won't quit. They're taking our land Rider. They're trying to push us out to make room for European settlers who'll farm the land to supply the east with food and other goods, and of course pay taxes."

"But why don't they settle with us? That's our territory and it's Indian territory.

"Exactly Rider, and I don't know the answer. They're busy making treaties with parts of the Indian Nations but not with us.

"Trouble isn't brewing, it's beginning to boil over. The land grab has slowed down some but for who knows how long."

"What's more, now there's talk of running a railway clear across the country, right through the territory, right through buffalo country all the way to the west coast so that British Columbia will sign on to confederation."

Rose catches the look on Lavinia's face and their eyes meet. Lavinia knows what's coming next.

"We've got to help them somehow uncle Louis. We've got to do something."

"I know, I know we do Rider. Those are our people, our relatives, and they need our help."

Lavinia, normally quiet in front of others, including Rider, on matters of domestic priorities is visibly upset.

"Just what do you think you're going to do, leave me here on the farm and go back there to fight the British and the Canadians. Hooray for the Métis. See you later Lavinia Towers. Oh no you don't Louis.

Chartrand pushes his chair back and goes out to the porch without another word. Rider hears him rustling with his pipe tobacco.

Lavinia stomps up the stairs to their room.

“Oh oh, feels like a storm comin’,” says Chartrand.”

Rose steps out onto the porch.

“Rider, I’m going down to sit by the tree. Join me there in a while if you want.”

“Should I come with you Rosie?” asks Raven.

“No, not tonight Raven, please.”

“All right,” says Rider. “I’ll be along in a while. I’ll just have a few more words with uncle Louis.”

Rose makes her way through the dusk of the moonless night. These are things she’s never heard of before: a railway, Canadians, the Métis. What is she to think? This news from the far away world has arrived at their doorstep just as she’s beginning to feel at home. Rider is upset. Now how is she to tell Rider about Olivia?

Finally, a lantern lights the trail.

“Rosie, are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m still waiting here. Come and sit.”

Rider joins Rose on the worn root, puts the lantern beside his boot and snuffs out the flame.

What do you make of this news from your uncle?”

“I can’t say for sure and I don’t think he knows quite what to make of it either but those people back on the prairies, they’re family and there’s trouble headed their way. The settlers are comin’, more and more of them, the buffalo herds are getting smaller. He won’t stay put and watch his relatives and friends being pushed around. He just won’t.”

“Rider, I know you have a lot on your mind tonight but I can’t leave this any longer.”

“What Rose, is there more? This is turning into one heck of a day.”

She pauses. “Olivia... her name is Olivia. She’s your daughter.”

“What? Daughter? My daughter? You mean your baby is my daughter? I’m her father?”

“Yes.”

“How could that be?”

“Remember, that last night before you left to work for the surveyors?”

“Of course I do Rose. I’m the father?”

“I’ve never been with anyone else that way Rider.”

They sit quietly. Rider looks up at the stars.

“I saw them. I remember now Rose. The morning before I found you, I passed a couple in a wagon on the road. The woman held a bundle in her arms. I said hello and she smiled but the guy just stared straight ahead, real unfriendly. It had to be her, Olivia’s her name?”

“It must have been her Rider.”

“My own baby girl went by right under my nose and I didn’t even know it.”

“I’m sorry Rider, I’m so sorry. If I had only known.”

“That may be the only time I’ll ever see her. Rose, I can’t stand the thought. Olivia, my girl? What are we goin’ to do?”

“I don’t know Rider. Now that I see your face I don’t know....”

“There’s only one thing we can do. Get her back.”

“But how Rider? We have no idea where she is or where to begin to look.”

“We’ll find her Rose. I promise.”