

**AGAINST THE CURRENT:  
A HISTORICAL NOVEL AND TEACHING UNIT  
AUTHORED FOR USE IN AN INTEGRATED  
JUNIOR HIGH CLASSROOM**

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**MASTER OF EDUCATION**

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For my family

**Education is not the answer. It helps you identify the questions.**

*Against the Current* is the story of a young voyageur with the Hudson's Bay Company. He travels with Governor George Simpson on his famous 1828 journey from York Factory on the Hudson Bay to Fort Langley on the Fraser River. When he begins the 3000 mile canoe voyage he is a boy, fifteen years old, and full of energy and independence. But paddling against the current sixteen hours a day takes its toll on him, and he recognizes that physical strength is not enough to get him through the journey. Along the way, he is confronted by murderous voyageur, who threatens both him and his friends. He must take action to save lives and prove the guilt of his aggressor. The conflict in the wilderness of Canada's fur trade teaches him about the importance of friendship and cooperation. It complements Social 8B, Canada to 1860 well.

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## Prologue

August, 1828

“Harder! Harder! You need to paddle a damn might harder than that if we’re going to keep up with the Governor’s canoe,” the Steersman yelled. Sweat from a hard day’s work streamed from my face. My muscles ached from yesterday’s portage, but yet I needed to push my sore arms more to keep up the Governor’s break-neck pace. His canoe was in front of us about seventy-five feet, and you could see his frustration every time he turned his head and saw our canoe drop farther back.

“What’s your problem, Taylor? You gotta use those little lumps in your arms you call muscles!” The Steersman focused his anger on me for the first time today. I knew he was right. I wasn’t able to pound out the sixty strokes per-minute rate. A hard pace called for us to paddle forty strokes every minute. That was the pace set for every other voyageur journey that anyone in my canoe could remember. Maybe you’d get up to sixty in a race with another canoe to see which crew was faster. To attempt to keep this pace up for a voyage from York Factory in Hudson’s Bay to Fort Langley on the mouth of the Fraser River on the west coast was outrageous.

I pleaded with my fatigued arms to keep up the pace by tightening my grip on the oar, but they could do no more. Yesterday’s carrying of two ninety-pound packs across the twelve mile portage had sapped my body of all its energy. My arms, numb from the pain of paddling hung like hundred-pound weights at the side of my body. They would no longer follow my command.

The Steersman eyed me with a bloodshot glare. “The only dead weight we need on this canoe is the stores we can eat,” he raged. Before I could increase my pace I heard his paddle leave the water and crash against the left side of my face. I dared not look back as I felt the blood trickle down my cheek. I didn’t dare to let my hands leave the paddle to comfort my face. If I stopped to soak up the blood, I would certainly get another blow from the Steersman’s oar. I re-focused on the rhythm the rest of the crew was setting, and dug my oar into the cold morning water of the Athabasca River.

The air was unusually crisp for early August. Being this far north the trees along the bank would soon start turning colour. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Archibald McDonald, one of the leaders of the voyage, counting the number of beaver swimming along shore. He was muttering something to himself about a good season in pelts. I quickly returned my attention to the rhythm of my oar before I received another swipe from the Steersman’s paddle.

When we started our journey on July 12, 1828, the air was warm and our bodies were fresh. All of the voyageurs in the canoe were eager to be part of the Simpson voyage to the outer reaches of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s territory. The bowsman at the front of the canoe and the steersman at the back were supposed to be the best in the country. Even the four Mileux, who sat in the middle of the canoe and supplied the lion’s share of power, were hand picked by the Governor himself.

Now 18 days and 1200 miles later, I was regretting my decision to join up with Governor George Simpson’s voyage. We were not even halfway through the 3000 mile journey. As my body found cadence in the water, and the Steersman found someone else to terrorize, I thought about my brother. I wondered how he was doing with the farm my parents left to him. Did he

still think of me? Did my parents think about that night six months ago when I left the safety of their home to become a voyageur?

## Chapter One: The Inheritance

December, 1827

“Why can’t we each have half of the farm?” I questioned my parents. This discussion obviously pained my father as he faced the window, his back towards me. I didn’t know if anger or the bite of cold turned his face and cheeks red. The single pane glass did little to keep out December’s harsh wind. Especially since the house was unsheltered from the freezing winter gusts.

Our farm was located twelve miles North of Montreal. A dirt cart track allowed only infrequent visits to the city. Never in winter. Once a month when it was warm. Freezing Arctic winds had long since made travel impossible, trapping the four of us in our home for the long, cold winter. Only my father ventured out to the barn to feed the livestock, and to bring back some firewood that my older brother chopped last October.

My brother Terrance turned into a man last summer. His slender frame took on bulk as he worked alongside of our father. I knew that my mother was proud of my brother. It was in the way she looked at him, not as a son who needed to be directed or checked up on. There was more admiration in her glances now. Terrance started to say things about needing more hay for the animals this winter, and mother would listen to him. With me it was always the same response, “Let’s see what your father says.” No longer were we just two brothers, a couple of years apart in age, playing in the field, directed by chores, not by responsibility. At seventeen,

Terrance had now a higher importance to his thoughts and actions. Instead of playing explorers with me, where I liked to be Henry Hudson because he had a strait and a bay named after him, Terrance would insist on helping in the field.

At supper time I would tell a story about the pond out at Simmer's Bend, like how Suzi lost her top jumping in and she turned all red, and my parents would find that funny. Mom and dad would laugh out loud when I said, "her face turned red too." Terrance would blush. At the time I didn't know why. When Terrance joked about the warm weather or the hail out at Mclean's place my parents would do more than just laugh. They would listen. They listened by looking at him and nodding their heads every time he paused to eat, encouraging him to carry on with his story. They listened by connecting part of their own experiences to his story.

"Remember when we got hail 'bout ten years ago," they would say, or "Hope it don't get too warm this summer, we need some rain."

They never asked me what I thought about the weather. Hell, they never even asked me what I thought about the expression on Suzi Brown's face when I looked at her waist deep in slough water, tight lipped, face redder than fire. She screamed at me, "You should turn around like a gentleman when a lady has an accident."

I said, "I ain't no gentleman, an' you ain't no lady." Actually, from what I saw, she was.

My parents laughed again. I loved making them laugh. Sometimes my Dad coughed up a pea because he laughed so hard. Terrance just sat there and blushed a little more. I teased, "Terry, from the way you're looking, you might just have a crush on that Brown girl. Terry," I paused more for effect, "Do you looovvvve 'er?"

Usually when I teased him about girls, we would just end up on the floor wrestling. Because Terrance was bigger and stronger, I would wait for father to break us up. If it was a real

fight we'd just end up in our room or get extra chores to work off all the extra energy that mom said we had. This time it was different. Terrance didn't respond. He just sat there red faced, with his head kind of tilted to the table, like he was ashamed of something. It was mother who jumped in to defend him, "Well, he's got to start thinking about those things," she smoothed over.

What things did he have to think about? I saw unfold before me the separation of two friends into two brothers: Terry leaving me behind. I hated that.

I didn't notice the loneliness until I caught them holding each other out behind the large wooden shed that we were building out back of the house. I'd never kissed a girl on purpose before, if you don't count the teasing game that Joan Beck played behind the church three years ago. She had said, "I bet you won't."

I did.

The hearing about it from all of the other Sunday school girls was my punishment.

I was always too busy with guy things to care much about girls. Stuff like killing frogs down at the brook. I liked to see if a toad could beat a frog in jumping if he had only one leg, or if tadpoles could make it back into the water from being placed an inch on shore.

Now, at fifteen, I was old enough to be told the truth. I guess I never thought much about where I would live when I grew up. I always kind of expected that Terrance and I would live on the farm forever. I always thought that it would always be ours. Not his.

My mother's tear streaked face told the truth that bitter December night. I lost my innocence. Mother told me about Terrance and Susanna's impending wedding. Since when was she Susan Brown and not Suzi? The Suzi of my childhood. The Suzi who had freckles and two long pony-tails that I would dunk in the ink wells at school. The Suzi who I watched go through

puberty in Grade Six. She was the first girl in our class to get zits. Somehow I missed the change into a young woman, to the Susanna of Terrance's future.

Terrance was soon to be eighteen and would need a place to raise his family. Mom and Dad would be moving out to the new house that we were building on the farm. I thought it was for guests. I thought the structure was going to be used for play, or for animals, not for my removal.

It was then that father turned from the frost-coated window and told me that I needed to move on with my life. I heard my parents tell me to get away from them. I heard that I was not as important as my older brother. I heard that there were plenty of jobs in Montreal, and that someday I would find a nice girl, like Suzi, and settle down. Rage filled up inside me. I expressed my anger through swearing, through pounding my fists on the door and my father's chest, and finally through tears. I cried in my mother's arms for the last time that night, while she soothed me with words of comfort. "You'll do all right. You're intelligent. You're very strong..."

It was through my anger that I left home that January. After reading a poster about the Hudson's Bay Company, and learning that a voyageur was a strong man who was suited for the rugged reception of the North. I took the chance.

## Chapter Two: The Hudson's Bay Co.

January, 1828

I felt inadequate as I sat in the Montreal recruiting office of the Hudson's Bay Company. The smoke-filled room was packed with nervous boys who tried to act like men. I was one of them. I hoped that my large size would more than make up for what I lacked in experience. To the left of me sat two younger boys. One was a little taller and quick-mouthed.

"You know what H.B.C. stands for on that sign behind the desk?" the taller boy quizzed the other one. It seemed to me that they were friends. I, too, saw the gold letters that symbolized the importance of the company to the fur trading industry. Friends of mine used to soak up the stories of heroic adventures that the fur traders would tell when they came to Montreal. I never actually met a trader, but the stories that my friends would share coloured my impression of their hermit-like existence.

"Henry's Brutal Company," the smaller, more timid boy guessed.

One tale that I remember to this day was about a trapper named Gurshmund. Trappers never seemed to have last names. Gurshmund was out one day checking his line when he was attacked by a cougar. I remember a long drawn out description about how the cougar attacked and bit clean through Gurshmund's pant leg, exposing torn flesh. There was a lot of blood. Blood from his leg. Blood from his arm, that was nearly ripped from its socket in the beast's second charge. Blood from the rabbit that was in the trap, still alive, within arm's reach. Blood, as he let the rabbit out from the trap with his walking stick that he used to check snare lines, in the hope that it would divert the cougar's attention. It did. And finally blood as Gurshmund shot the animal before it could fully devour the fleeing hare.

“Hudson’s Bountiful Commonwealth,” the smaller boy ventured a second time.

I remember how that tale was brought to a climax when my friend Stuart ended his story by showing me a half-eaten rabbit carcass that he swung from behind his back. I didn’t know after the addition of the body, half-gutted, if that story was real. I remember how real Stuart’s little brother thought it was when we told him by the campfire one summer evening. I swear his scream could be heard all over the ridge that night. My parents laughed at that story too, before they caught themselves and reminded me that it was not nice to scare young kids.

“Hudson’s Bourgeois Convoys?” was the timid lad’s third try.

“No, Henry Hudson had nothin’ to do with the company,” the other boy corrected.

The suggestion of the bourgeois brought back school memories where I learned about the voyageurs. The bourgeois was the leader of the expedition, and usually sat in the middle of the canoe. In addition to running the voyage he would be the judge if there were any disputes. Because there were no police in the vast North, the bourgeois had a lot of power. The position that I was applying for was Milieu. These people were the engine of the canoe. They worked the rapids and closely followed the directions of the steersman. My head swelled up with thoughts of my strength being tested against the unknown wilderness.

“Here British Concurred!” suggested the young man, clearly reaching now for any kind of answer.

“No.”

“What then?”

“Here Before Christ. The Company has been around almost two hundred years.”

“Adam Taylor,” a grubby man announced.

The man and the table he was sitting at didn't match. The table was a finely polished oak with hand carved legs. It looked like the type that could be found in a governor's residence, or a fine hotel. The interviewer was large and muscular, and his manners were abrupt and lacked the culture of the furniture he was now sitting at.

"Adam Taylor, says here ye know how to read 'n write." The man spoke with a thick Scottish accent.

There was a large gash across his left cheek. It looked like it was fresh because scar tissue had not yet covered it. Whiskers overwhelmed the lower half of his face. His body reeked of a mixture of alcohol and sweat. Even given the early hour of the day, I thought that the brew scent dominated. While his brown deer-skin shirt was dirty, it was in good repair.

His eyes were sharp and clear blue. His voice was thick and grizzled when he spoke. It may have been from lack of use or overuse, I couldn't be sure. He didn't waste words on conversation.

"Yer a weee bit young, are ye not?"

I lied that I was well over seventeen. I was just going to turn sixteen. He obviously wasn't convinced.

"Yer got any canoooin' experience?"

"Yes," I answered. Actually, I tried to make one a couple of summers ago. It didn't float. Stuart and I couldn't find enough bark to cover the frame that we carved out of pine. We also had trouble molding it to the frame. We didn't know that the bark needed to be soaked first in order to make it soft enough to bend. Stuart didn't know that the seams of bark that we had sewn together from twine had to be gummed up with tree sap to keep out the water.

My attention returned to the interview. I could see disbelief in his face as his eyes narrowed to a piercing glare. I shifted uneasily in my chair.

“Dooo yer know what you’re gettin’ inta’ laddy?”

I did know what I was doing. I was running away from a family that had no room for me. I was running away from a place that held no future for me. I blocked out those painful memories.

He leaned forward in his chair. His voice was stiff. “The H.B.C. ain’t nooo baby-sitter,” he preached, leaning his elbows in the hard mahogany surface. His eyes shot through me.

This interview was going seriously wrong. I needed to say something that would change the focus from my age to my strengths. What were my strengths? I was having trouble identifying them myself. It was like the job I was applying for was at the top of a rope that I was climbing. I was starting to lose my grip. My arms were tiring, and I was starting to slip further and further from my goal.

“I’m smart,” I pushed out of my lips. I hadn’t even planned to say that. Who needs brains on a canoe?

“Can yer count?” He leaned back in his chair.

I felt a glimmer of hope open up. My confidence returned as my voice strengthened.

“Test me,” I countered.

“180 by 4.”

“720,” I shot back.

“I’m strong, too.” I wanted to use the momentum that I had gained to my full advantage.

The interviewer’s eyes suddenly turned to ice.

“Cann yer strength move a boulder when you’re rushin’ towards it in a fully packed canoe?”

I was losing ground. His voice sharpened.

“Can yer strength stop a tree from fallin’ cross yer bow?” He pounded a fist down on the table that bolted me upright in my chair.

“Can yer strength stop an early freeze-up that leaves you and yer crew to die half-way up this side of the Rockies? Nooo, yer strength can’t do that, but yer brains can.” By the time he was finished he was standing over the table with his tight-fisted knuckles pressed hard against the wood.

“You can count, but do yer got any smarts in that puny ‘ead of yers?”

“I got smarts,” my voice weakened. I was shocked to see that his speech had affected me so much. I paused and breathed deep. “An’, I got strength. I can carry twice my weight.” This was the last chance I had to show him that I had what it took to be a voyageur.

He sat down again. He seemed to relax a bit.

“This job’ll either kill ya, or make yer into a man,” he said as he pushed a lump of tobacco into his mouth leaving a blob of it behind on the table. He didn’t notice. “An’ right now I would say the odds of yer survivin’ ‘r less than fifty percent.”

“I want the job.” I wanted there to be conviction in my voice.

“Are ya willin’ to die for this job?”

I recognized that this was the point of no return. I needed to go all the way.

“Yes.”

“Okay that’s what I needed to ‘ear.” He shoved a contract in front of me.

“I’ll save you the time of readin’ it. Ya get £25<sup>1</sup> a year, one ‘n a half rods of trade cloth, a pair of shoes, a towline, two bars of soap, an’ a pound o’ tobacco. The Company expects full loyalty; no tradin’ on the side. When yer not in the canoe you’ll either be carrying it or sleepin’ under it. During freeze-up you’ll be runnin’ a dog team between York Factory n’ Norway House. Do ya understand?”

I nodded my head in agreement. “Yes.”

“I need to fill out this Personal Inventory Record, so the Company knows what yer own comin’ in. ...So what do yer got?” Anxiety wrinkled his face as a bunch more boys shuffled in the room. “I ain’t got ull day.”

“I don’t own anything,” I answered.

“Do yer own any valuables, like diamonds, or rubies?”

“No.”

“Do ya’ have a watch?”

“No.” On the farm there was no need for a watch. The sun told us the time. When it was high in the sky that meant that it was time for lunch. When it set, it was time for bed.

He carved a line through the page with a quill pen, and signed at the bottom. “I’m signing this to say that ya told me that yer bringing nothing into the Company.”

For a fleeting moment I thought that my family was poor, and that maybe all of the other boys in the room owned something.

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<sup>1</sup>The £ is the symbol for the British currency. It was used in Canada during the time of the fur trade.

When he finished signing he spat a gob of saliva into a worn tin can beside the desk, and looked up at me. There was no judgment in his expression.

“It’s just a form,” I thought.

“Yer signin’ up for three winters of service not including this one. Most sign at the bottom with an X.”

I signed my full name.

### **Chapter Three: York Factory**

**July, 1828**

The rain pounded on the tent that I called home. The worn canvas only protected our heads from the wetness; it did nothing for our feet. Water relentlessly invaded our sleeping area, leaving us with a floor of mud. We tried to use timber to shore up holes along the floor where the canvas flap met the ground, but the sheer volume of water always found new ways into the tent. The deep heavy muck that it created attached itself to everything. My leather moccasins had tripled in weight. My feet hadn’t been dry for ten days. The weather left its mark on everything.

“Johnny’s been taken into the fort,” Gabriel, a fellow voyageur, announced as he lifted the flap of the tent to come in.

“That makes three of us that have gotten sick so far,” I answered. The voyageurs were not allowed inside of York Factory. We had to camp outside the fort with the few Indian traders who either remained to do business or couldn’t leave on account of the rain.

York Factory was the largest trading post for the Hudson’s Bay Company. It was located on the South-West corner of the Hudson Bay, at the mouth of the Hayes River. It was called a factory solely because it was the residence of the Chief Factor who was the person in charge of the fort. The factory, or as we called it, Fort York, was surrounded by a tall wall made from the de-barked trunks of pine trees. They were all lashed together and allowed for a single arched gate that opened near the water’s edge. From where our tents were I could see three main buildings facing the water with two smaller ones on each side. The center building was larger than the rest. When the Governor wasn’t visiting, the Chief Factor of the fort resided there. In front of the Governor’s residence was a mast that was staked into the ground as it would be on a ship. From the mast the Union Jack proudly flew.

The fort’s security was usually tight. With the Governor-in-Chief of the Hudson’s Bay Company present the security was even better. Instead of just one guard posted at the main gate, there were four men and a cannon protecting it. The voyageurs were usually allowed to buy fresh food from inside the fort. With Governor Simpson there a store was set up outside the fort. All food and supplies had to be bought from its bare-bones inventory.

Governor Simpson was known for his tough-handed nature. I saw his party arrive at the fort eight days ago. Simpson’s voyageurs were freshly shaven which was strange for a crew that had just spent twenty days on the river. When his canoe was just about to land, a strange sound came from the canoe behind his. The sound was worse than a screaming cat, and four times as loud. It had a melody to it so I knew it wasn’t a crazed wolf. It came from the second canoe.

Some guy dressed in a red skirt with a pattern on it was holding a bag made from green cloth that he was squeezing between his left elbow and his side. He had three long wooden tubes that were held together by a colourful piece of two-inch wide material. The longest tube had three sections that were separated by white bands of ivory. His hands were fooling with a similar tube by his mid-section. I later found out that Governor Simpson always liked to be piped in where ever he went, and that the instrument that was being played was called the bagpipes. I supposed that it was a Scottish instrument that was meant to scare away the enemy. It sure frightened the dogs that ran about and barked at the high pitched sound.

It was when the music stopped that I got my first look at who my fellow voyageurs rumored was “The Little Emperor.”

I first saw him when he stepped out of the canoe. He was a pale white man with small precise features. His red hair curled from ear to ear and left a bald spot that stretched from his forehead back. He had long sideburns that widened beneath his ears, and were attached by a narrow band of hair that stretched around the back of his head. His appearance was very formal and it commanded the attention of all those who watched from shore.

Simpson was at York Factory organizing an expedition to Fort Langley on the West coast. I wanted to be on that journey, because he was going where few people had ever travelled.

I, however, was awaiting my first expedition up the Hayes River to Oxford House to pick up some beaver pelts that had been traded over the winter. The route was short and was designed to break in new recruits. The other three members of the expedition, Gabriel, Scott and Daniel all bunked with me. Gabriel, while physically smaller than me, was two years older. He was a Metis who came to York Factory from the Red River settlement. He was one of many Metis who collectively called themselves Voyageurs. He had the dark skin of his Cree mother,

whom he claimed was the most beautiful women in the West. Gabriel also never attempted to hide his quick temper, that he credited to his French father. He constantly fought with other voyageurs, and usually ended up on the losing side. His body was always covered with bruises and nicks.

“What’s that cut on your wrist?” I said, noticing fresh blood on the cuff of his sleeve.

“Some fool’s taken my playing cards.” He instinctively tried to rub the inch-long cut, then winced at the pain.

“You don’t own any cards.” We had long since known what each other owned. “You don’t even play cards,” I paused. “Well.” Gabriel always lost when we played with my cards, and I was slowly collecting the beads of a necklace that he wore under his faded leather jacket. He only had a few left that I could see around his neck. There was one especially that I liked. Gabriel claimed it to be a genuine emerald. It shone a brilliant green. This stone was always proudly displayed high around his neck. I remember him telling me that it was his mother’s. Gabriel never liked playing cards for fun, so he insisted on betting. He never gambled the emerald.

“Won ‘em last night,” he defended. “And some bastard’s gone and taken them. I saw the deck this morning over in one of the Simpson tents, and when I tried to get them back, this greasy bugger pulled a knife and crossed my hand with it. See.” He pulled the sleeve of his jacket up to his elbow and revealed a two-inch long gash. It was still fresh with blood and needed to be wrapped.

“How did you know they were your cards if you had them less that a day?” I grabbed my only clean bandanna and motioned the cut closer. “You should get this looked at,” I recommended.

“Ahhh, it’s just a scratch, it’ll heal,” he winced as the cloth touched the wound. “I knew that the cards were mine because they were red, and tied together with a blue ribbon. They had to be mine.

“And these cards that the other fellow had?” I prodded him for further details.

“He was playing a game of whist with ‘em.” Whist was a card game where all of the cards were dealt and the first player who laid them all down won.

“You tried to grab your cards when he was playing a game with them. You’re lucky to be alive.”

Gabriel pulled his hand away in objection to what I said, “What do you mean? Don’t you think that they were my cards? Do you think I would take cards in the middle of a game if they weren’t mine?”

I brought his hand closer by jerking the ends of the bandanna back, “Do you want this tied or not?”

Gabriel was a very emotional person who acted first and thought later. It was obvious to me that he didn’t think about what might happen if you ripped a deck of cards away from people playing with money.

“You’re lucky that’s all that happened to you. How many people were at the table?” I continued.

“Just two.”

“Did you see the ribbon?” I tied up the bandage.

“Yeah, stop treating me like a fool,” he frowned. “It was beside his coins.”

“What did you do then, just grab the cards and run out of the tent?” My interest was raised. Gabriel was annoyed with my constant questioning.

“Well,” he paused. “I politely went up to the table, and in my nicest voice,” he raised his voice to give me the full effect, “Mr. Delmore Sir, might I inn-connn-venn-ience you for a moment. I recognize those cards from a previous engagement” The sarcasm dripped from his voice. “Prettittty Please, might I have them back.”

“What did you really say?” I interrupted. At this point Gabriel was doing a ballerina dance around the tent.

“I took out my knife, when I saw them on the table, and I said, Who’s stolen my cards? That was when that mean badger Delmore smiled, and told his partner-in-crime that if a person showed his knife, he’d better be ready to use it. Then in a blind of speed he swung around at me. I didn’t even see that he had a knife in his right hand. When I looked down at my hand it was bleedin’. He then told me to get out of his tent. Then he went back to playing cards like I hadn’t been there at all.”

“You don’t cross Delmore,” I finished.

“I’m going to get that Delmore back,” said Gabriel, his body tightened with determination.

“I wouldn’t mess with him if I were you, Gabriel. I’ve heard he’s killed a man before.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll take care of myself,” Gabriel said in a quieter tone.

All of us voyageurs were getting a little edgy. Being active, it was difficult for us to stay in one spot for a long time. I passed time decorating my paddle with paint that I had borrowed from another voyageur. Using my bone knife I carefully etched the outline of an eagle on one side. Its long wings stretched to the tapered grip of the oak paddle. I then painted the body of the eagle brown, and left its legs and head clear. Except for the handle I painted the rest of the

paddle a bright red. On the top of the grip I carved the initials F.F. standing for FLIGHT FREEDOM.

I chose the eagle because it was always my favorite animal. The summer I remember best was the one where my brother Terrance and I brought home a baby eagle that we had rescued. I first saw the eagle by the river where we were swimming. It made a squealing sound. It sounded a lot bigger than it was. It had broken its wing and was circling on the ground. Terrance said that it would die if we didn't do something, so we took it home. Mom bandaged its wing up and we fed it scraps of chicken and the occasional gopher tail. I even caught a mouse once and fed it live to him.

Terrance built a cage out of an old crate we had kicking around the farm. I named him Flight. I didn't like the name at first, but I refused to name him Sam, or Spot, or anything like that. We knew that in order for him to survive that he would have to be able to live independently of us, and that meant that he had to be able to fly. So I named him what he needed to become. Terrance didn't like the name and refused to call him by it. Instead he just called him "the bird."

"Hey let's go feed the bird," he would say to me. Everybody else in our family called the bird Flight. Sometimes I would try to play with Flight by having him follow me around the yard. Terrance said I had to be careful because the baby eagle depended on us for its survival. I had never thought of an eagle like that. I always thought of them as being strong and free. Terrance said that it was our job to help him heal so that he would eventually become strong enough to hunt on his own.

One day while we were feeding Flight I saw another eagle soaring high up in the sky. I asked Terrance if maybe that bird up in the sky was looking out for this little eagle. He said that

eagles soar high above the ground just to hunt. I was caught up in a romantic idea that somehow that eagle that I saw high up in the sky might be looking after this little one getting better in the cage. And if he was looking after that little eagle, he might be looking after us. Terrance said that I was stupid and that no eagle was looking out for us. I asked Terrance if he could read that eagle's mind, and he said that he couldn't. Then how did Terrance know exactly what that eagle was doing in the sky? Sometimes Mom went over to Mr. and Mrs. Simmer's place just to keep them company because they're old and going to die soon. She never intended to bring home that jam that Mrs. Simmer tucked into her purse. And if I had said to mom, "So I see that you went over to Simmer's to get more jam," she would have'd hit me so hard I would have been knocked into tomorrow for accusing her of being greedy. Maybe we shouldn't assume that just because we see that eagle with food in its mouth that it spends all its time hunting.

The freedom part of FLIGHT FREEDOM also came from my experience nursing Flight back to health. All throughout that summer we spent our time gathering food for him. I had no idea that such a small bird could eat so much. After a while Terrance said that we had to wean the bird off of our help. In order to do that we needed to get him strong again. Eventually, I got Flight to follow a dead gopher I dragged on a string behind me. After three weeks, he would work his wings and get off the ground for short distances and pounce on the gopher. When he did that for the first time I knew that I was doing the right thing.

"To have freedom without strength would leave Flight defenseless against the harsh realities of nature," Terrance said to me the first time he saw Flight get off the ground.

One day late in August, Terrance made up his mind that he would take Flight back to the river and let him go. He said that it was time for him to be on his own. He said that Flight was not a pet, like our dog Sam. He said that in rescuing Flight we also had the responsibility to set

him free. I was never so angry with my brother as on that day. I was the one who found Flight. I was the one who convinced Mom to let him stay in our home when Dad said it wasn't a good idea. And, I was the one who fed him and played with him most of the time. I would have let him go when I was ready. My brother had no right to let him go behind my back.

The rain continued to fall, and Gabriel wasn't able to let go of the playing card incident. Delmore didn't help either.

"Have you heard the news," Gabriel started as we inched our way up the line to the canteen.

"No, I'm not the social light, you are, and I've got the wrists to prove it," I joked. Gabriel didn't see the humour in my comment and ignored it.

"The Governor's been here only a short time, and already he's given the boot to one of his Chief Factors. Some guy from another fort," Gabriel smiled, proud that he could tell the news to someone who didn't know it already.

"Yeah, so what's that got to do with me?" I questioned.

"Nothing. But don't you care 'bout world news? This is big stuff. The guy's whole family was hauled in to hear the news." My interest rose, and the line inched forward again.

Some guy behind us belched. It smelled of rotten pork.

"And this stuff's happenin' right in our back yard. I heard that he had to travel a thousand miles to get here. Are you listening? The guy brings his family on a trip of a thousand miles here and back to get the news that he's fired. You'd think that they'd send a letter or something."

It did make sense that they should send a letter, or something.

“They brought him here so that he would hear it from Simpson’s lips. Can you believe that?”

“I’m telling you because they’re leaving today to go back to their fort. You should see their maid. She’s beautiful.” Gabriel exaggerated the word beautiful to fourteen syllables.

The line-up to the canteen inched forward again.

“Those could be their canoes getting ready now. See,” he said as he pointed to two canoes being carried from the fort to the river. Men with supplies followed.

“Could be,” I ended the conversation.

Just then Delmore and another man approached us from the end of the line. I had never seen Delmore up close, and I was surprised to see how incredibly strong he was. His arms were huge and they didn’t match the rest of his body. Every muscle in his arms bulged out. It looked like he could break rocks with his fingers. His red flannel shirt was loosely tucked in and covered up a large v-shaped chest. The sleeves were rolled up and tight around the top of his biceps. His face was not pretty. His greasy hair was gathered beneath a handkerchief that was tied at the back in a common voyageur style. Out from the back of his head was a pony tail tied with a piece of dirty blue ribbon. It was unkempt and hung down to the middle of his back. As he approached us I noticed something unusual about his face. His nose had possibly been broken in a fight of some type and was bent over to the left side of his face. As he approached the canteen he made no attempt to avoid Gabriel. When I saw what was approaching I tried to get in the way so that Gabriel would not see him, but my attempts were futile.

“Hey, there’s that kid who’s so tricky with the knife.” The sarcasm oozed from Delmore’s mouth. “Maybe he’s going to teach us some new trick. Come on boy, show us your stuff.”

I had never known Gabriel to resist a challenge, but I sensed that he knew what Delmore was trying to draw him into. Gabriel remained silent, but stepped out and glared at his aggressor.

“Does he talk?” Delmore joked to a similarly dressed man who walked beside him.

“Maybe he doesn’t have a tongue,” his friend played along.

“Well the little snake sure did last night when he tried to disturb our game.”

The emotion was building up in Gabriel. His face was red with anger. His sharp wit couldn’t resist the taunting.

“That sure is a pretty ribbon in your hair Delmore. Did some fairy give it to you?”

Gabriel started.

“I told you it could talk,” Delmore stopped and was facing Gabriel with about two feet between them.

“Do you think it could show us a knife trick now?” Delmore was taking his time engaging his opponent.

“I got some nice brown leather strapping that you could use in your hair if you want to steal that too,” Gabriel needled. Being accused of theft was not to be taken lightly. When you travel so closely with other men the crime of theft was severely punished. The physical punishment usually involved a group beating that would end your ability to be on an expedition. The emotional punishment was far worse. Trust was of great importance to any voyageur. You had to trust not only your belongings with your fellow travelers but your life also. One false move on a rapid could send you over the canoe crashing into jagged rock that had been cut razor sharp by the torrent of water. If the boulders didn’t kill you that current would.

Delmore, aware that the crowd around the canteen was listening, moved in closer.

“You wouldn’t be the first smart-assed kid to have his heart stopped by my blade,” the smile disappeared from his mouth. Delmore shifted position and revealed a long curved knife. His long leathery fingers played with the sheath.

Gabriel would not give up. “The only thing intimidatin’ ‘bout you is yer smell.”

Delmore’s voice hissed, “You’re rappin’ your tongue round your neck, boy.” His intense eyes held Gabriel tight.

A chuckle came out of Gabriel’s lips that confirmed he had the upper hand. He crossed his hands comfortably on his chest and held Delmore’s glare.

“You getting closer to dance with me, or steal my knife,” Gabriel was going to play this game till the end.

Delmore’s black teeth were clinched tight and framed a part of his lip that was torn off. At that point his mouth turned into whiskers, through which you could see saliva escaping only to be slopped back up by the edge of his tongue.

Then, like a cat on a mouse, Delmore sprang. His left hand left the sheath and seized Gabriel’s throat with such speed that it sent him back a step. Normally, a backwards step would be enough to release the grip, but Delmore’s long fingers were wrapped round to the back of his neck. His enormous arms then pulled Gabriel’s squirming body to within an inch of his face.

“Do you like my smell now?” There was no hint of play in Delmore’s voice.

Gabriel squirmed and gurgled, unable to speak. All confidence was replaced with fear.

“I can’t hear you,” Delmore hissed and lifted his victim off the ground by the throat.

Gabriel’s face turned from red to bright pink as he struggled to speak. His arms and legs flailed searching for some kind of a brace. Delmore’s grip held tight.

I watched Gabriel's head turn from pink to a deep shade of purple. His legs and arms moved with less ambition. Terror was etched in his eyes.

I tightened my fist and positioned myself closer to Delmore. Then just as I was about to send my fist into his side, his grip released and sent Gabriel limply to the muddy ground gasping for breath. He rubbed his throat and slipped in the mud as he struggled to get up.

"You just don't get it, do you!" Delmore yelled. With as swift an action he drove his boot smashing into the side of Gabriel's head. His body spun around and hit the ground. Blood trickled from his nose and mouth. He did not get up.

Delmore stepped back and eyed me, "Your fists won't help your friend as much as your arms. Get him outta my sight!" With that he turned away and walked easily to the canteen.

#### Chapter Four: Governor Simpson

The next day I saw her. I was walking by the canoes that Gabriel and I saw being placed in the river yesterday.

"So are you with our journey?" she questioned, as she set down a load of gear by the canoe.

"No, I'm on a short voyage to Oxford house," I answered. She was beautiful. She had piercing blue eyes.

"Oh," she paused, and touched the side of her face with her long slender finger. "You must be new."

“Yeah, I just started last January.” Her voice was smooth and richly supported by a British accent. She wore a brown dress. Its plain appearance only enhanced her innocent oval face, and slender defined features. She shifted uneasily from my stare, and I quickly searched for something to say.

“So, do you need any help carrying your gear from the fort?” I looked back to see the boarding party making its way to the shore.

“No, I’m just waiting to board. It’s a pity you’re not part of our canoe,” she stated as she lightly touched my arm.

My insides just about erupted, as I felt her fingers. My stomach felt like it was going to blow and I suddenly felt hot. I moved my arm, and she quickly pulled away her fingers. Surprise lit up her face. I felt angry with myself. Why did I pull back my arm? As the members of the boarding party were being lifted into the canoes, she stepped back and started towards the canoes.

“Will you lift me into the canoe?” She asked, her tone was playful.

“You bet,” I responded. I tried not to sound too excited. Her fragrance hypnotized me as I got close to lift her. My body shook when she put her arm around my neck and I carried her to the canoe. It was a couple of seconds that seemed to last a year. I could feel the warmth of her body as it touched me, the back of her waist against my right arm, my left arm under her legs, my chest against her side. It was a feeling that I had never experienced before. A strange feeling of sadness overwhelmed me as her canoe pushed from shore and made its way up the river. I didn’t even ask her what her name was.

The welt on the side of Gabriel’s head started to show signs of healing the next day. His ego was quite another story. He was humiliated by his inability to forecast Delmore’s actions.

“I should ‘of pulled my knife,” Gabriel remarked as he massaged his sore neck.

“You’d be dead then. Why can’t you admit when you’ve been beaten. Take your lumps and forget it,” I urged. There was no way that Gabriel could even begin to get even with someone like Delmore.

“A man steals my cards, strangles me and kicks the side of my face in, and I should forget it. Maybe I should go right over to his tent and thank him for the wonderful gift,” Gabriel argued.

“Only if you want to end up dead,” I returned. “Delmore’s a man who’s unpredictable. You don’t make enemies with an insane man.”

“Watch and learn. I won’t be out-done by some half-wit with tree-trunk arms.” Gabriel got up, checked his balance and tried a few steps. I was more worried about his attitude than his injuries. Gabriel was as hot-headed as anyone I knew.

“I saw the family leave the fort yesterday,” I searched for a new topic of conversation.

“Yeah so...,” Gabriel showed his disinterest.

“Well, you were right. They all left in two canoes. The father looked very sad. There was no fanfare or anything.”

Gabriel bit on the change of subject. “Did you see the girl?”

“I saw her. She’s okay. Out of our league, that’s for sure,” I continued. “When did you see her?”

“I helped Johnny to the fort when he fell sick, and she was going into the door beside the doctor’s office. It looked like she was carrying a lot of baby stuff. She was pretty. Brown curly hair, dark blue eyes, I remember it as if I saw her a minute ago.”

“Well she’s gone now,” I remarked. “Her canoe left a couple of hours ago.”

“That’s too bad. I would have liked to get to know her better,” Gabriel concluded. I didn’t mention the conversation that we had, or that I helped her into the canoe. Somehow I felt uncomfortable sharing those details with Gabriel.

\* \* \*

The weather started to change that afternoon. The rain slowed to a drizzle and the edge of the eastern sky showed a seam with blue light looking through. My trip should be leaving in a day or two if the rain lets up.

A voice bellowed outside of the tents, “Get out of your tents and line up for inspection!”

I wandered outside of the tent to see what was the matter. Men from Governor Simpson’s tents were lining up in front of the canteen. I grabbed one of Simpson’s voyageurs and asked him what the noise was all about.

“It’s Simpson. He wants to make sure that his hand-picked team of rowers is ready to go,” he told me as he fumbled with his shirt. “Lizzard’s the name.” His slim muscular features showed that he was a voyageur for quite some time. On his head he wore a checkered bandanna that covered his long black hair. It hung down the middle of his back and was gathered into the familiar ponytail that voyageurs sported. His features were hard, but his smile was genuine, as he extended a friendly hand towards me.

“Taylor, Adam Taylor,” I said and shook his hand. His grip was firm but not overpowering. He looked to me to be about my age, but with the experience of someone much older.

“Be glad that you’re not on the Simpson expedition.”

“Why not? The best voyageurs are supposed to be part of the Simpson expedition,” I questioned.

“Simpson’s mad. He works his crews sixty strokes a minute,” Lizzard tucked in the tail of his shirt and motioned to leave.

“See you ‘round Taylor,” he half ran to an opening in the line-up that was forming.

“I could do sixty strokes a minute,” I thought to myself.

Voyageurs could do a great many things but lining up like soldiers wasn’t one of them. The line, if you could call it that, curved back to the tents. It looked more like a snake than a straight line. Half of the men didn’t have shirts.

A burly man dressed in a uniform marched out and stood erect in front of the collection of men.

“Men, Aaa-tenn-shun!” he commanded.

The voyageurs didn’t respond.

“Men, AAA-Tenn-Shun!” he repeated even louder.

“You must be new here,” one of the voyagers from the back of the line shouted. The group laughed. The face of the uniformed man reddened.

“What do you think we are, the Queen’s own troops?” the same voyager continued.

“This is not a tea party,” the uniformed man bellowed for control. “If the lot of you expect fair treatment on the river, that starts now. TOE THE LINE NOW!”

A shuffling motion by many of the voyageurs showed their submission. This was followed by grunting and a bit of shoving. I stood behind by my tent interested to see what would happen next.

When there was a definite improvement in the shape of the line, the uniformed man marched back into the fort.

The voyageurs waited. The drizzle stopped and the temperature started to rise. The voyageurs continued to wait.

“What are we waiting here for?” the familiar voice started up again.

“Ah, shut your flap,” another voice directed his comment towards the first. “You keep talkin’ and we’ll lose our tobacco rights.”

Many of the voyageurs started shuffling their feet.

Just when it seemed that the voyageurs would break up and go back to their tents, Simpson walked smartly out of the fort, followed by two other gentlemen. One was the man in the uniform. Simpson walked up to the first person in the line, stopped and looked the voyageur from head to toe. His intense blue eyes could have melted steel.

“Name?” Simpson ordered.

“Jones, Sir.”

“Jones, you need to shave, and sew a button on that shirt.”

He walked up to the next man. “Name?”

Walker, Governor.”

“Walker, you need to wash more often. I won’t have dirty men on my expedition.”

Simpson approached the man who has previously thrown out the sharp comments.

“Name.”

“Abraham, what’s yours?” the man did not sense Simpson’s formality.

Simpson’s face was stone.

“Are you having difficulty hearing me?” Simpson stood motionless.

“Nope, my hearing is just fine. How’s yours?” the man continued. He shook his head around looking for the laughing support of his fellow voyageurs. The group was silent.

Simpson motioned back to the man in the uniform, “Take this man away, he won’t be coming on the expedition,” Simpson said without a hint of emotion.

“Let’s see, we’ll need someone to replace him. YOU! Yes you, what’s your name?”

The Governor was staring right at me. He waived his hand once to signal to me.

“Taylor, Sir.”

“Taylor, get over her and let me have a look at you.”

I obeyed his order, and tried to look not too excited.

“Taylor, at least you know how to dress. How much experience do you have?”

“I’ve rowed lots,” I lied, “And I’d like to go with you,” For an instant I thought that my excitement betrayed the experience that I said I had.

The man accompanying Simpson spoke up, “He’s too young. He doesn’t have the experience to make it to Lake Athabasca, let alone the Pacific.”

“Archibald, what do you know about Taylor?”

“Let’s see here…” Archibald flipped through a bunch of papers, “There it is… His application says that he’s from a farm outside Montreal, and that he’s good with numbers.”

“I started out in a counting house in London,” Simpson’s eyes sparkled. “You ever hear of Graham, Simpson and Wedderburn? They import sugar.”

“No sir I haven’t,” I responded not knowing whether to tell the truth or lie.

“Well, there’s no reason why you should have now is there,” Simpson explained.

“You’re part of the expedition,” he finished. “Put him with the faster canoe Archibald. They’ll help him out for the first stretch of river,” he instructed, and then went on and asked the name of the next voyageur.

## Chapter Five: Missing

After Simpson finished his inspection the men spent the rest of the afternoon getting their gear ready, preparing the canoes, and loading supplies into ninety-pound packs. I was directed to help with the packing of the food that needed to be set out to dry since the rain had stopped. The bundles of food were heavy.

“Why do all of these packages have to be the same weight?” I asked Lizzard who stuffed dry goods into a pack.

“It’s because the bosses want to know if we’re stealing any of the food. You see, if each of the packages weights the same, it’s easy to tell if supplies have been taken out of one. It’ll be lighter than the rest,” he said, as he lifted a full pack and put it on a scale. “Eighty-seven pounds. Hmmmm, it needs three more pounds” he muttered to himself and tucked in another package and then sewed it up.

He continued, “The other reason is if the packs are too heavy you won’t be able to carry them.”

“Them?” I questioned.

“Yeah, them.” His chuckle revealed a good sense of humour, “Each Voyageur is responsible for carrying two packs, one-hundred and eighty pounds, over the portages. “You’re lucky that the canoes will be light.”

“You call fifty packs of food and gear light?” I said, my face was marked with surprise.

“Yeah, usually we have to take along cargo too. You know, supplies for the trading posts or pelts collected by trappers. That would normally account for over half of the canoe’s weight. Now that would slow down the portages.”

I knew that a portage was the distance that the canoe had to be carried over land. Sometimes it was because the rapids were too great for the canoe, or the men, to handle. Other times it was because the canoe simply ran out of river, and had to be carried to a new one. In this expedition there were many portages. Some of them were very short, perhaps a few feet, while the longest portage was twelve miles.

As the sun drifted across the sky and the day warmed, some of the men worked on the canoes. They used a thick gum called pitch to strengthen the light bark. Birch bark was used to make these canoes because of its weight and it was slow to rot. It was also chosen because it could handle the extreme frost of the northern climate. These canoes were originally created by the Algonquins. The men also applied spruce gum to the seams to make them waterproof. The result was a lightweight canoe that could be easily carried, yet strong enough to carry up to a ton and a half of cargo.

The canoes, if cared for, lasted many seasons. If one was wrecked, some of the voyageurs were skilled enough to make new ones. All that was needed was an ax, a bent knife and a square. First a cedar skeleton was made by splitting and carving trees. Strips of birch bark were then wrapped around the frame. The bark was soaked and heated to make it easier to mold.

Ash trees were carved to shape the ribs that were then placed into the frame. Finally, the bark was sewn together using tree root as the strong thread, and gum was used to caulk the seams where the bark was sewn together. The problem with having to make a new canoe was the amount of time needed to cut and shape the bark to the frame. There were several canoes at various stages of completion scattered around the fort.

We were leaving tomorrow if the weather held. When we weren't packing equipment or mending the two canoes that we were taking, we were packing our own clothes and gear. When I finished with Lizzard I went to my tent to get my gear together and bundle it into one of the ninety-pound packs. Gabriel was still in his bunk. The red welt on the side of his face had taken on a purple colour, and had swollen since I last saw him.

"So I heard that you were chosen to go on the Simpson voyage," he began. Behind his confidence I detected a hint of jealousy. "Why'd you go and do that? You know Delmore's goin' to be on one of those boats."

"Simpson chose me. It could have been you standing by the tent," I defended. "No, but you had to shoot off about those damn cards. It's as if you just wanted to exercise your superior wit on him," I knew that I had said enough. The colour of the rest of Gabriel's face started to match the colour of the bruise.

"Don't you worry about me," Gabriel continued, "I'll even the score between me and that four-breathin' latrine licker."

"You'd better let this one go. I don't think he's playin' the same game you are," I warned.

"Butt Breath doesn't know what I've got planned for him tonight." With that he held up a noose that he made from some rope that was lying around in the tent.

“You’re an idiot,” I responded, throwing off his warped sense of humour. I grabbed my bag and made my way to the door of the tent. “Gabriel, this guy’s trouble. You better realize that you’re the fish and he’s the grizzly bear. Don’t go jumpin’ out of the water and teasing him anymore.” I left the tent and Gabriel behind.

Just after supper some of the men started a game of cards. I went back to my tent tired from the day’s activities. I also had to put the final coat of resin on my paddle to protect the paint from the water. It was wonderful to hear birds singing rather than the rain that I had endured for so long. As the sun set against the darkened shape of the fort, crickets began to accompany me as I rubbed my paddle. In the distance I heard the laughing and shouting of the card game. I thought about what I had said to Gabriel, and wondered where he was. The last time I saw Gabriel was in the supper line. So far he had kept his distance from Delmore. I thought about joining the card game but the day’s hard work had sapped all my strength, so I decided to go to bed early.

That night I dreamt about rowing my canoe. We were on a peaceful lake that was calm and easy to row in. The water then turned to current and I could hear the steersman shouting the cadence urging us to row faster. The other men in the boat started singing in a rhythm that eased the rowing. The lake narrowed to a river as the pace quickened.

The river then increased in speed again and we paddled hard to work our way up it. The white crests of current slapped against our canoe. The steersman’s shouting became more intense as the men sang louder. By this time I was struggling with my paddle and not able to keep up to the steersman’s frantic pace. The river’s current gained more momentum, and as the shore line neared I could see large boulders jutting from the water.

Then without warning, I felt a thud against the side of my head. It felt like a boot or something made from wood. I was hit so hard I fell from my place in the canoe into the icy mountain stream. I screamed for help as the canoe passed me, but to no avail. Delmore gave me a smile that exposed his long-since rotten teeth.

I sprang up. My blanket stuck to my damp body. Then I realized that it was just a dream. Somewhere between slumber and consciousness the scream echoed in the distance. I wiped cold sweat from my head and laid back down uneasy to continue my previous dream. The night was still except for the occasional cry of a coyote. I rolled my head over and searched for the familiar snore of my bunk mates. The other two were safe and sound happily drinking up the night's rest. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw that Gabriel's bunk was empty.

## Chapter Six: The Departure

"Get out of bed, you bunch of lazy beggars!" a voice yelled into the dark. I rolled over not believing that anyone would be so stupid as to awaken us at such an hour.

"It's twelve-thirty and time to hit the river!" that voice continued. I was sure that there had to be a mistake. No voyage would start at such an hour. But I heard no shouts of silence from the bodies inside the tents. Instead there were shuffles of obedience from outside as men started to stretch and move about. In my disbelief I got out of bed and looked outside. The sun had not even risen yet. There was a shadow of people carrying packs and making their way to the shore.

It was then that I remembered Gabriel. I rushed inside and examined his bunk. It was empty. Glancing around the tent I saw no sign that he had been back at all last evening.

I rushed up to another bunk, shook Daniel to a minimal level of awareness and questioned him about seeing Gabriel. He swore, said that he had not seen Gabriel, and turned his back to me.

“Let’s go, the count is fifteen. I need eighteen men for these canoes,” the yelling voice started to show anxiety.

After the other occupant of my tent responded in a similar manner, I concluded that something must have happened to Gabriel. I frantically searched my memory for the last time I saw him. It was after supper. I remembered that he had asked one of our other room mates for a deck of cards. I asked him where he was going, but he didn’t respond. It was obvious that he was still angry about what I said about Delmore.

“The count is sixteen. These canoes aren’t going to paddle themselves!” The voice showed a sense of urgency.

“What are you doing?” Lizzard threw open the tent flap. “We need to be on the shore. There’s no time to waste.”

“Have you seen Gabriel?” I was almost sick with concern.

“No! Adam, we need to go now. Who knows what the consequences of being late for Simpson are.

He picked up the gear that I had dropped in my search for Gabriel and started for the shore. “It’s now or never. You’ve got to look out for yourself,” Lizzard started to run to the canoes that were loaded and waited at the shore. The men started to climb aboard.

I neared hysteria as I ran a circle around all of the tents and searched for even the slightest clue of his disappearance.

“You, boy. Get into your canoe or I’ll use your head as a paddle!” a booming voice commanded. I turned suddenly to see Mr. McDonald, Mr. Simpson’s assistant coming towards me.

When he was within earshot I muttered something about my missing friend, but it must have been incomprehensible. Mr. McDonald grabbed my arm and shook it violently.

“Take it from me, boy, you don’t want Mr. Simpson to single you out,” he recommended.

“My friend,” I continued, “I think that he’s been murdered.

“Those are strong words. How do you know that?”

“His name is Gabriel, and he didn’t go to bed last night.” At that thought, I wondered myself about the assumptions I was making.

“You can’t delay the voyage on just that. Mr. Simpson will be out soon. You look like you’re smart enough to know when you don’t have anything to go on here. Now get to your canoe!” McDonald ordered.

I reluctantly obeyed, grabbed my paddle from the side of my tent and made my way to the shore.

I had jumped to conclusions. I had my friend killed, and had Delmore, who I figured was guilty, hanged. Gabriel was probably just out pouting in the woods, trying to make me feel guilty for yelling at him.

I found my position in the faster canoe, surprised and relieved to find Lizzard positioned to my right.

“You just made it,” Lizzard criticized.

“I just jumped to a bunch of conclusions. He’ll be about. It’s too bad I can’t say good-bye to him.” I gasped for breath, positioned myself in the canoe and placed my paddle on my knees.

Mr. Simpson came out of the fort. He was accompanied by fourteen shareholders of the Hudson’s Bay Company. The officer-in-charge of the fort walked to his right. To his left was Mr. McDonald. Following the V.I.P’s were about as many fort clerks. When the party arrived at the shore there were several handshakes and good-byes.

Mr. Simpson stepped into the other canoe followed by his aide who played the bagpipes.

“That’s Colin Fraser,” Lizzard whispered to me. “I met him last night while he was practicin’ killing that cat he calls an instrument. You know what he had to do to get the job of piping for the Governor?” My curiosity was stirred.

“What?” The piper stopped playing and was lifted into the canoe.

“He had to walk in front of a carriage for twenty miles. Twenty miles, and he had to play all the way without stopping. Without stopping.” Lizzard was clearly impressed.

“You two quit the conversation, and watch for my command,” the steersman grumbled, for he too had to keep his voice down during the ceremony.

My attention focused on the boarding ceremony. Mr. Simpson was making his last good-byes. Mr. McDonald stepped into my canoe and sat directly in front of me. As he sat down he turned and faced me, “Glad to see that you thought this through,” he said just before he shuffled around and faced forward.

When Mr. Simpson was settled in his canoe, I nearly jumped out of my seat when seven loud cannon blasts saluted our departure.

“It’s okay,” Lizzard reassured, “They always do this for his voyages.

As we pulled away from the shore one of the V.I.P’s lead three cheers and shouted, “Hip, Hip,” and the rest of the land party yelled, “Hooray.” All of the men but one cheered and waved his hands in the air. He was down by the shoreline, and waded into the water up to his waist.

On the command of the bowsman we set our paddles into the water and pushed off the shore. Mr. Simpson’s canoe took the lead and set the pace. Our canoe followed close after in the wake of water left by its tail.

As our bowsman shouted the cadence that set our pace, our paddles hit the water falling into line. It felt good to be apart of such an important voyage. While pushing my paddle into the water I looked back towards shore to see what the man who was in the water was concerned about. He was now joined by two other men who helped drag something black that was submerged in the water. I turned around to get a better look at what they were doing. My face filled with horror as they made their gruesome discovery.

“What is it?” Lizzard asked.

“The shore party just pulled Gabriel’s body out of the river.”

## **Chapter Seven: The Requirements**

“How can you accuse Delmore of murder?” Lizzard questioned, as he settled his paddle on the bank during our first lunch break.

From the position of the sun I could tell that it was almost eight am. We had been paddling hard for seven hours. It seemed like an early time to eat lunch.

“Didn’t you see the departure party pull ‘em out of the river?” I remarked out of ear-shot of the other voyageurs. I had let the thought of Gabriel’s death boil in me since we left. I didn’t dare say anything about it on the canoe because I was worried that other people might overhear. I finally had to tell someone before my insides blew up from anger.

“Yeah I saw ‘em,” Lizzard agreed. “The whole canoe watched the body gettin’ dragged out.” Lizzard played with his pipe, pushing down the tobacco and inhaling to check the suction. After he concluded that it was all right he used a flint to light it. “I mean, how do ya’ know Delmore murdered your friend?”

That was the first time I had thought about actual proof. I suddenly realized that I had none. My friend drowned after having a fight with a voyageur. That was it. I didn’t even know if his death was an accident or intentional.

Lizzard noticed the surprise on my face and continued. “He might ‘of wandered out by the river late last night. An’ while he was walkin’ he might of slipped, hit his head and fell in. The current would of carried him out. It happens all the time, especially at night,” Lizzard concluded.

I felt myself agreeing with him, as I questioned my previous assumption, “You may be right. I sure don’t have enough evidence to go running to McDonald. I’d get thrown off the voyage.”

“Look ‘ere,” Lizzard reassured, “You need to worry less about your dead friend and more about your rowin’ speed. I’ve had to let up so that the canoe don’t go crooked,” Lizzard confessed.

The rest of the voyageurs were finishing up and heading back towards the shoreline. The packs that had been taken off were now being re-loaded on to the canoes. Lizzard took a final puff from his pipe, stood up and started to make his way to the canoe.

“Give me your honest opinion. Do you think that Delmore murdered Gabriel?” I turned to face Lizzard. He tapped on his pipe on his shoe to empty out the ashes, and stuffed it into his shirt pocket.

“I don’t know you well enough to give you my honest opinion,” Lizzard half-joked and avoided my gaze. I didn’t let up.

“Well, do you think that he’s capable of it?” I pressed on.

“Now that’s a different question. Delmore is known for two things: ‘is strength and ‘is temper. ‘E killed a man a while back. It came out that ‘e was defending himself. The guy supposedly came at ‘im with a knife.” Lizzard paused and checked his pockets for his flint and stone. He found it, and then relaxed. Then he spoke, “So, to answer your question, yes ‘e’s capable of killin’.”

Then he looked directly at me, “An’ if you don’t want him to kill again you’d better drop this pursuit.” He then attempted to lighten the conversation, “You got too much time to think on the river. Don’t let your mind rot on evil.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. I had to stop these thoughts from eating me up.

He wrapped his strong arm around me in a half-hug as we made our way back to the canoes.

\* \* \*

The river was faster now and we needed to pull the canoe from the shore. McDonald called this a half-portage. The voyageurs called it a decharge. Only McDonald, the steersman

and the gear remained inside of the canoe. All the rest of us manned a rope and pulled the canoe from the shore. It was a lot slower than paddling, but it was a lot faster than a portage where we had to pull everything out of the water.

A little while later we reached a less steep stretch of river and we were able to get back inside the canoe. I remembered what Lizzard said to me about having to let up. So I was determined to keep up with the rest of the crew. As I rowed, the rhythm of the paddling grew on me and made the effort easier. My arms were limber and flowed with the river.

The river itself was a deep blue colour. As I looked more towards shore the colour transformed to a lighter blue. It was kind of a cross between a light blue and an aqua colour. It was beautiful. Along the bank was a forest rich in spruce and fir trees. Occasionally there was a small section of birch trees in the mostly coniferous forest. One time I saw a beaver make its way across the river in front of the canoe.

When I pointed it out to Lizzard he chuckled, "He's lucky we're just passing through."

Along the way we passed a convoy of large canoes on route to York Factory. They were much larger than the ones that we rode in. Each canoe was powered by several men with very long wooden paddles.

"What kind of canoes are those?" I asked Lizzard.

"Count your lucky stars that we aren't on those boats. They're called York boats, and they're mainly used for heavy cargo. You should try one of those on a portage. Because of the weight of the cargo and furs they have to be dragged along the shore."

"Why are they called York Boats?" I asked.

"Because of where they're destined. Most York Boats are takin' tradin' goods to York Factory." Lizzard finished.

After a while, one of the voyagers started to sing to the cadence of the paddling. The song was simple and designed to pass the boredom that came with endless hours of rowing.

Life's real great on the Hayes,  
Rowing just to pass the days,  
River's uphill but not that steep,  
It's easy so we don't peep.

They then started on a verse:

Our canoe's light and easy to carry,  
makes it easy and not so hairy,  
'like to paddle it makes my day,  
I don't know any other way.

My paddle found the rhythm as they repeated the chorus. I found my mouth moving to the words of the song, and soon I was singing along.

Life's better on the Hayes,  
Nelson's steeper takes more days,  
Pullin' the boat is better than carry,  
Far as that goes we're more merry.

After we repeated the chorus again a fellow voyageur created another verse. His voice was raspy, but it kept up the rhythm.

The first portage was not that hard,  
tough if you are a lard,  
carry the gear upon my back,  
strength is not what I lack.

By the end of the song I was singing as loud as anyone else. I even thought of a verse to add, but I was not willing to sing it out loud.

## Chapter Eight: The Lesson

As we travelled farther West into territory that I did not recognize, my interest in geography grew. Mr. McDonald, because he sat in front of us, overheard me asking questions to Lizzard about where we were, and about the land. He seemed to take a liking to me from that point on, because he would often make a point of explaining to me where we were and how far we had travelled. He also knew how high we were above the ocean. Sometimes after writing in his journal he would give me a lesson on the names of places that we travelled through. He knew a tremendous amount about the Hudson's Bay trading posts and the rivers that were used to travel to and from them. Lizzard had long since become disinterested in McDonald's lectures and looked towards the river when ever he sensed a talk coming on. Unlike the other voyageurs I soaked up the knowledge and was interested in his explanation of river currents and rock formations. I especially enjoyed his endless supply of stories about the history of the Company and its battles to develop fur trading in the West.

On July 17th. we landed at Oxford House. It was a small trading post that was situated on the shores of Oxford Lake. There, we exchanged the pemmican we had started out with for food that wasn't so stale. The next day we started on the Echimamish River.

"Taylor, you're going to like this next stretch of river," McDonald turned his head sideways.

I looked at the fantastic landscape as McDonald explained to me why the Echimamish River was famous. Lizzard suddenly became very interested in his paddle. His head gave me the already all-too-common shake that signaled, "Here we go again." I didn't care. I enjoyed his

stories because they had depth and weren't just a bunch of facts thrown together making a dirty joke that the voyageurs liked to tell.

At first I didn't understand the significance of a river that hardly had any water in it. We had great difficulty keeping the canoe afloat. I grimaced every time the bottom of the canoe scraped the river floor.

"It's also called 'The River That Flows Both Ways,'" McDonald began. "Usually a river that flows both East and West has to cross over a continental divide. We will hit the continental divide when we cross the Rocky Mountains. At that point the river will stop flowing to the East from the mountains and start flowing West towards the Pacific Ocean. That's why we have to paddle upstream most of this journey. The rivers that we're travelling on mostly start in the mountains and make their way to the ocean."

We reached a place that McDonald called, "Painted Stone Portage."

"How do we get a river that flows both East and West out here in the middle of the prairies? There are no mountains for a thousand miles," I questioned.

"Beavers make the river flow both ways," McDonald added.

He pointed to a hump of sticks and logs in the river ahead. It was a beaver dam.

"Without these dams there would be no water in the river and it would be impossible to get our canoes to Norway House from here. The dams keep the water from flowing out of the river."

We approached the dam, hopped out and lifted the canoe up and over top of it.

McDonald was right. The river on the other side of the dam flowed away from us to the West. This was the first time that we had the current, if you could call it that, with us. It felt kind of good.

McDonald said no more, and started making ticks in the margins of his journal presumably to count the beaver.

As I watched the beaver make their way to and from the dam, I thought that it was strange how the Hudson's Bay Company depended on the beaver dams to keep the water in this river, and at the same time, the Company trapped and killed the beaver to sell.

## **Chapter Nine: Test of Strength**

**August, 1828**

"Harder! Harder! You need to paddle a damn might harder than that if you want to keep up with the Governor's canoe," Delmore yelled. Sweat from a hard day's work streamed from his face. My muscles ached from yesterday's portage. The Governor's canoe was in front of us about seventy-five feet, and you could see frustration in his gestures every time he turned and checked out our position.

Delmore went out of his way to make my life difficult. I was always the one to get singled out first when the canoe was going too slow and the Governor's canoe got too far ahead of us.

"He sure has a mean streak in him doesn't he," Lizzard commented, his voice low.

"No," I smiled. "I think he's in a good mood compared to yesterday."

"Why does he always seem to pick on you?"

"Just lucky I guess," I wanted to stop the conversation before Delmore could pick up on what we were saying. He had ears like a deer.

“My ears are burnin’,” Delmore interrupted, confirming my suspicion. “Get rowin’ or I’ll double your portage weight.”

Lizzard nodded his head confirming my opinion, and we both dug our oars into the water.

Since yesterday’s portage I didn’t want to see another one for a while. We had just finished the Methy portage; the longest one of the journey. Carrying one-hundred and eighty pounds for eight hours was the toughest thing that I had yet done. My body still ached from the tremendous physical strain of balancing all of the weight with a leather strap that stretched from the bottom of the lower of the two packs around to my forehead. The other voyageurs seemed to like the portage, because their hands were free to stuff their pipes with tobacco. I used my hands to take some of the pressure from my forehead by gripping the balancing strap.

To Delmore, one-hundred and eight pounds was nothing. During the Methy portage he carried two extra bundles for a total of three-hundred and sixty pounds for the whole twelve miles. He lifted one with each arm by straps that were firmly tied to them. He made sure that everyone saw that he carried the most weight. For that, he earned himself two extra silver dollars.

He didn’t need to carry the extra bundles because there were Indians waiting for us when arrived at the portage. They were willing to help him with the bundles, but he would have nothing to do with that. He stuffed his already huge ego a little more by carrying more than anyone else did.

We were allowed to rest only once about eight miles into the portage. It was a longer break and allowed for lunch. We stopped at a small lake which was about a mile across. We ate lunch on its white sandy beaches. I relaxed in the shade of a jack pine, and spoke little because I

was so tired. Many of the voyageurs swam in the lake. I just washed my face to get some brief relief from the day's intense heat.

The first part of the portage was relatively flat and made the walk easier. The last part of the portage was another matter. The path suddenly dived and offered a view of what McDonald called the Clearwater Valley. The view was spectacular of the narrow river valley. I could see for thirty miles down the valley. The drop was dramatic. We struggled with our packs as we descended hundreds of feet to get to the awaiting river.

"This is the only West-flowing river from Lake Winnipeg," Mr. McDonald mentioned as we finally placed our canoe in the cool water of Clearwater River.

"You men get the rest of the day off because you worked so hard during the portage," the Governor congratulated when all of the voyagers reached the river. "We'll also sleep a little later tomorrow," he finished.

While Lizzard and I rested by the canoe, the fact that we were not departing until later tomorrow was a signal to Delmore to pull out his playing cards.

\* \* \*

The next day Delmore was in his usual bad mood. This time I knew that it wasn't something that I had done. Lizzard told me that he lost most of the extra money that he earned in yesterday's game of whist. While he didn't forget to pick on me, he spent most of the day harassing Stew, the poor fellow who was unlucky enough to win the two silver dollars from him.

We left the Clearwater River and entered the Debris River. It actually is called the Embarras River, and is littered with debris. Wood and tree roots often obstructed the voyage, and were the cause of a few portages over jammed logs.

“You might ‘ave a tricky hand in cards,” Delmore poked, “But yer arms are letting this canoe down. Get up with the cadence!”

“There’s nothing wrong with my arms,” Stew contested. “I’m doing my share. If we go any faster we’ll tear the bottom from this canoe.”

“Yer share is taking the canoe too far to the left. We’d ‘of hit that log if I wasn’t paddlin’ myself on the yer side!” Delmore yelled back.

“I’m strong enough to keep any canoe in line,” Stew’s confidence was unmistakable.

I glanced back to see that the game had left Delmore’s face. He smiled no longer at the little game he was playing. Stewart did not look back and kept up a steady pace.

McDonald glanced back to share an annoyed look with Delmore. On the water, Delmore was the steersman and never let his command of the canoe falter for a second. McDonald said nothing and returned to counting the water fowl.

The steersman was positioned at the back of the canoe. Like his title, he was responsible for directing the canoe along the river. On the long, wide stretches of river the steersman would sit on the high back of the canoe and lazily drag his nine-foot paddle in the water behind. He earned his money on the narrow sections where the river bent and curved in all directions. It was his talent that saved hours of canoe mending by skillfully steering the canoe away from the jagged rocks that river sharpened along the shore-line.

The steersman was aided in directing the canoe by the bowsman, who manned the front of the canoe. He would yell back directions to the steersman about the path ahead. His main job was to look out for shallow rocks that the steersman couldn’t see. The shallow rock was the most damaging, and had ruined many a canoe before its time. While the men could help the steersman with the rock along the shore or the large boulders that jutted out of the river, only the

bowsman could see the shallow rock that laid just under the surface of the water. When the bowsman saw a trouble spot ahead he shouted back to the steersman. The bowsman would sometimes point at the section of river that he wanted the canoe to avoid. Because of his position at the front of the canoe his paddle alone would not have enough force to guide the canoe and avoid the danger. The steersman would take over at this point and ram his paddle into the water and maneuver the canoe around an object he could not see.

Delmore was extremely good at reading his bowsman's directions. Before the direction could be yelled out, Delmore had his oar in the water back paddling. It was like he could read the bowsman's mind and reacted to even the slightest gesture. Because of Delmore's expert steersmanship our canoe didn't need as much repair work. The rowers from the other canoe would often spend their breaks working the spruce gum into holes that were caused by river rock. Our canoe only needed its seams reinforced every second day. All birch canoes needed this done because of the stress caused by the cargo and the men's' weight.

On the river, Delmore was in charge. The voyageurs knew it, and McDonald seemed to know it. While McDonald might shoot a look of displeasure at Delmore when the posturing went on for too long, he never voiced that displeasure. After McDonald looked back at Delmore, he would turn around and write in his journal, or turn the page in a book that he was reading. Delmore was careful too. He never carried on his criticism after McDonald turned around. Often he was skillful enough to engineer his last cut-down just as McDonald shifted his position to turn around and give Delmore his look of dissatisfaction. Most of the time McDonald seemed unconcerned with matters that affected the running of the canoe.

This was one of the few times that Delmore went on even after McDonald turned around. It was probably because of the card game.

“Stew, why don’t you prove that you’re not all wind and enter into a little wager?”

Delmore had something new up his sleeve.

Stew’s guard was clearly up, “What do you have in mind?” he said carefully.

Everyone on the canoe was listening. Even McDonald’s ears perked up, though he didn’t acknowledge the conversation.

“Just for sport let’s ‘ave an arm wrestle at the next break,” Delmore challenged.

The trap was set. Everyone knew that Delmore’s strength was enormous. Stew’s physical size was about the same as Delmore’s, but up to that point it was nothing he made a big deal about. Stew was silent. He undoubtedly knew that he had been drawn into a trap. It was a no win situation. If Stew loses, he becomes another victim who falls beneath Delmore on the ‘most man’ scale. When someone loses to Delmore they are subjected to constant ridicule and harassment. Delmore doesn’t let people forget that he beat them. If Stew wins, he beats his superior, who is a worse loser than winner. It would surely send him to the top of Delmore’s hate list. Delmore liked to give the job of patching the canoe to people he didn’t like. I had sure done my share of working the spruce pitch into the bark. It was a job that took hours. My hands were covered with pitch for days because it would not come off, and no tools could be used to work the gum in because the bark was so fragile.

“My, you sure are slow in answerin’.” Delmore’s voice showed his annoyance.

“Ah you’d just beat me anyway,” Stew conceded.

“You can’t give up without tryin’,” Delmore encouraged.

Stew fell silent again. Instead of talking, he dug his paddle hard into the river. The rest of us had just about stopped working and watched the conversation with great interest.

“What’s your problem?” Delmore prodded, “You scared to have a little match-up with me?”

Stew was cornered. There was nowhere for him to go.

“I’ll do it,” his voice gave a weak surrender.

“The rest of you’d better get your attention back to the river!” Delmore commanded obviously content with his accomplishment.

By the time the next smoke-break arrived, all of the voyageurs knew of the challenge that Delmore issued. The voyageurs from the other canoe had already stuffed their pipes and run from their canoe. They almost forgot to carry Mr. Simpson to shore. One of the voyageurs had to go back to the canoe and get him and his bagpipe player. Mr. Simpson was angry that a voyageur would so easily forget his duty to the Bourgeois in the face of a stupid wager. While the rest of us watched on eagerly as Delmore piled up two bundles to make a table base, neither Mr. Simpson nor Mr. McDonald would dignify the competition with their presence. Instead, McDonald preferred to inspect the local terrain for animal habitat. Simpson insisted that his correspondence table be set up before the competition so that he could write letters back to York Factory.

Delmore rocked the bundles of supplies to make sure they were sturdy enough.

“We’re needin’ to have somethin’ hard on top,” he concluded. Delmore then signaled for two men to bring their oars over to the platform. The oars had a solid flat surface that was wide enough to place an arm upon. The men holding them added to the stability of the make-shift table. The two men faced each other and held the paddles by the handle grips.

Delmore and Stew opposed each other and rolled up their right sleeves. Stew’s arms were a lot larger than he let on by his attitude on the canoe. There was a murmur while the

spectators took sides. From the talk that I heard Delmore was the heavy favorite. I guessed that it must be his speed that put him at an advantage because they both had about the same size arms. Stew was a little larger in his chest, and perhaps weighed slightly more.

Lizzard and I stood beside each other and close to the action.

“I’ll take Stew,” I poked Lizzard in the ribs with my elbow.

“He needs a prayer against Delmore’s experience,” Lizzard returned.

“They’re about the same size,” I continued enjoying the jostling.

“Size don’t matter if one of ‘em is loaded with gunpowder,” Lizzard finished.

I got the point. And watched as Fraser blew up his bagpipes and played a tune he called “Black Bear.” During the music Delmore and Stew took their places by digging their feet into the soft soil that made up the shore-line of the river.

When they joined their wrists another voyageur tied them up with one of the leather carrying straps. Fraser sensed that they were about to begin and released the pressure from the instrument and the music stopped immediately. All of the spectators were quiet as one of the paddle-holders started to count to three.

“ONE.”

Delmore focused his eyes on his opponent and I remembered a similar look when he held Gabriel by the neck.

“TWO.”

Both arm wrestlers shifted their weight to their left leg and stared at each other as if in a pre-wrestle showdown. Delmore moved in closer, his head was almost touching one of the paddle handles. The intensity was almost unbearable.

“THREE.”

There was an explosion of energy as Delmore surged his arm towards himself. He gave a loud yell as he transferred his weight up to his right arm. The skin around his arm sculpted itself to the large muscles beneath, as his arm pressed forward. From his actions, it was clear that Delmore was going for the quick victory as he relied on his speed off the mark to catch his opponent off guard.

Stew's arm puffed up as he offered resistance to Delmore's sudden burst of aggression. The blood vessels in his arms came to the surface just under the skin. They were large and round as they pumped energy to his hand. Large cannonball biceps formed on his arm and signaled that Delmore would not easily have his way.

While Stew was losing slightly, Delmore's eyes flashed an expression of surprise that he had not already won. Stew also saw the glance, and took the opportunity to pull his arm to a vertical position and gained back the ground that he previously had lost.

The crowd also sensed Delmore's frustration and jumped in to encourage him on. Those sounds soon died out as Stew's face took on a new shade of deep red and he shot a boost of energy to his arm and gained the advantage.

Perspiration formed on Delmore's forehead. His expression tightened up. The muscles on his neck bulged and reddened as he searched his body for more power.

He found it. His arm boomed and his whole body tightened as he shot from the losing side of the table to push Stew just about down to the surface.

Stew yelped at the suddenness of Delmore's actions. And searched deep for resources.

He found none.

“Die Bastard!” Delmore yelled, as he slammed Stew’s hand into the paddle. He immediately stood up victorious. After the hands were untied, Delmore held his arms up and paraded around the audience to a chorus of backslaps and congratulations. Fraser started another tune on the pipes and followed Delmore on his parade.

Stew remained at the table and slowly unwrapped his wrist. The red on his face dimmed slightly, and he slowly stood up and rubbed his arm in defeat.

“You gave him a good battle,” I reassured, as I made my way towards him.

“Not good enough,” Stew sighed. He unrolled his shirt sleeve and attempted to cover his disappointment.

“It sounds to me like you really expected to win,” I inquired.

“I thought I had a chance. I used to be pretty good at arm twisting.”

“Delmore had a lot to lose. Could you imagine how you’d be treated if you’d won?” I consoled.

“I’ll win next time,” Stew confided. “I just didn’t expect that second burst of energy. If I could have held that off I don’t think that he had any more in him.” Stew flexed his hand to return some of the blood that had been taken away by the leather bandage.

“You don’t want to wrestle him again, do you?” I questioned.

“No, not really. I just thought that I could have won.”

Delmore had made his circle and came back to the table and faced the loser.

“Don’t you want to congratulate the champion?” Delmore grinned.

“You beat me. Do you want to humiliate me, too?” Stew looked up as he gripped one of the bundles, picked it up and started carrying it towards the canoes.

Delmore was suddenly furious again. He picked up the other bundle and heaved it at Stew. The bundle struck Stew in the back and sent him to the ground. Before he had time to get up Delmore was on top of him throwing an angry volley of fists down on Stew's face.

Simpson saw what had happened and ran over to the two who were a mess of arms and legs in the muddy mixture of wet soil and grass.

"Stop this now!" He commanded. Delmore stopped, and instantly recognized the authority in Simpson's voice.

"Delmore, I'll not have this behavior from one of my steersman. I don't care how good of a steersman you are."

"Yes, Sir, I'm sorry. It won't happen again." Delmore was a master at damage control. He lowered his head as a sign of respect for Simpson's authority.

"Back to the canoes. We've got a long day ahead of us. These two men just added two hours to it." Simpson passed judgment on the two wrestlers. There was a grunt of disapproval that immediately turned into movement towards the boats.

I held out my hand to help Stew up from the ground.

Delmore pushed me aside. "If he can't get up by himself, he shouldn't get up at all."

Stew quickly got to his feet not willing to test Delmore's predictability.

"Taylor," Delmore grinned, "You seem to be sidin' with all the losers. Maybe next you'll take Stew's place." He brushed by Stew causing him to step back.

"You seem a little nervous," Delmore suggested as he bumped his elbow into Stew's chest, and continued walking towards shore.

"Congratulations," Stew submitted.

## Chapter Ten: The Surprise

Over the next many days my muscles and my mind grew. The long, hard half-portages, followed by lugging close to two-hundred pounds had its effect on my body. My arms gained in size and allowed me to easily carry gear over many portages. Along with my arms my chest expanded making my tunic tight. The incredible physical labour flattened my stomach that used to carry my excess weight. I started to look more like my fellow voyageurs than the schoolmates I left behind in Lower Canada.

As much as I hated to say it, Delmore was right to be concerned about our canoe not being able to keep up with the other one. The day after the arm wrestle Governor Simpson exchanged two of our rowers with two faster ones from his canoe. Stew was one of the rowers to go. For a moment I thought that Lizzard would also be taken, but the governor took the rower who was two positions in front of me, just ahead of Mr. McDonald.

After that our canoe was faster, but I thought that it had more to do with Delmore's increase in cadence than the new oars in the water. At this point I didn't mind the increase in speed. I was now able to keep up and I enjoyed the exercise that it gave my body.

We arrived at the Pembina River just before supper and stopped there to eat. After we unloaded the canoes I sat on the bank of the river with Lizzard. We ate fast because we were not used to having much time. The Governor ordered a longer rest because his canoe was damaged by rock. Some of the voyageurs started the repair work while the others found a quiet place to catch up on some sleep.

“Come on, let’s see what’s around here,” Lizzard suggested and walked towards the dense evergreens that started about twenty feet from shore.

I started after him as he disappeared into the forest.

Neither of us saw Delmore eyeing us from a half-sleeping position.

“Wow it sure is hard to make a way through these trees,” I complained.

“Don’t be a baby,” Lizzard teased.

It was nice to stretch my legs, after being in the canoe all day.

The trees in this area were tall. We could barely make out the sky. As we ventured farther into the wood much of the light we enjoyed by the shore was lost. I squinted and waited for my eyes to adjust.

“Sure is dark here.” Lizzard agreed with what I thought.

Lizzard stopped and pointed at the ground.

“Look at those tracks,” Lizzard directed, “I think they belong to a fox.”

I bent down and touched the indents made in the soft soil. Lizzard knew a lot more about the wild than I did.

“They go that way,” he said as he pointed to the right.

“Let’s follow, maybe we can get something better tastin’ to eat,” I suggested, and pushed a branch out of the way and uncovered the fox’s trail.

Just as I stepped on a twig that snapped, I stopped.

“Did you hear that?” Lizzard stopped and listened too.

“No, I heard nothin’,” he answered.

“I thought it was behind us.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” Lizzard pressed on and disappeared down the fox’s trail.

I followed.

“Your mind’s playin’ tricks on you,” Lizzard advised.

“See there, the fox started to run. You can tell because the tracks get farther apart.”

Lizzard looked closely at the trail which was harder to see now. “We must have scared him.

Come on we need to hurry if we’re going to catch him.”

I heard another noise. This one didn’t seem like it came from behind. Lizzard picked up the pace. If I didn’t walk faster he would disappear in the trees ahead. I walked faster and closed the distance between us.

Lizzard heard the sound too.

“It must be that fox just up ahead.”

A snap echoed in the woods. We both heard that. It was unmistakable.

Lizzard shook it off, “It could be anything.”

“Yeah right, anything.”

That was when we made our discovery.

“Oh, man does that ever look disgusting,” Lizzard said, as he stopped in his tracks.

With wide eyes we looked at what must have been the remains of what made the tracks we discovered.

“See I told you it was a fox,” Lizzard chuckled.

“Yeah, a dead fox,” I paused. “It looks fresh.”

The blood still dripped from the torn carcass. It’s head had been torn off, and its ribs were separated and insides half eaten.

“You know Lizzard...as much as I would like to eat a fox, I don’t feel so good about this. I wonder if that fox broke into a run because of us?” my voice trailed off.

My companion’s mouth opened to respond when my question was answered.

A roar cut to my spine and sent my hair on end as if it tried to run from my body. Just beyond the half-devoured carcass a huge cougar crouched, ready to spring. Its large mouth revealed clenched teeth. Its eyes were fixed upon us.

We followed the tracks to get dinner and we were about to become one ourselves. Lizzard unsheathed a medium sized knife and swung it at the cat. It responded with another roar and slashed its paw in the air about five feet in front of us.

Instinctively we backed up, as the cat approached.

It stepped over the fox’s body and made a small jump ahead.

Lizzard swung the knife again and just missed its nose. The cat then lunged wildly at Lizzard.

He fell backwards, and the knife fell from his hand as he stumbled. The cougar batted Lizzard’s left foot with its paw, and cleared a path to his leg. It surged ahead and sunk its teeth deep into his leg. Lizzard screamed in agony. I jumped for the knife and was about to plant it in the cougar’s back.

I hear a blast from behind me and watched as the cat released its grip. Another blast sounded and the cougar’s head dropped to the ground dead.

“Yer ‘bout a hair away from death,” Delmore yelled as he placed two pistols back into his belt.

Lizzard pulled himself away from the cat’s body.

“Don’t worry, he’s dead,” Delmore declared more to boost himself than to reassure my wounded partner.

“You shouldn’t be out this far from shore. Who knows what kinda’ trouble ya’ could run into,” Delmore continued his sermon. “Yer lucky McDonald directed me to come an’ bring you two back. If I’d come out here on my own I might ‘of missed the cat.”

I took off my shirt and folded it up to make a bandage for Lizzard’s leg. Delmore did not offer to help. As I patched his leg, Delmore picked up the dead cat, threw it over his shoulder.

“I’ll see you back at the shore.” Delmore started walking. After two steps, he stopped and turned around. “Next time don’t take just a pig stabber,” he said pointing to the knife I had in my hand. “You need some real ammo.” He waived his pistol, turned around and continued on his way, the cougar’s head swaying over his back between his shoulder blades.

Lizzard pulled himself to his feet and I pulled his left arm over my shoulder. We struggled to get back to the canoes.

## Chapter Eleven: The Massacre

“Lizzard, your leg all right?” I inquired the next morning. The sun had just risen and I guessed the time to be about four-o-clock. Lizzard frequently checked his leg and rubbed it with his left hand. A new bandage was placed on when we got back to the shore by Dr. Hamlyn who accompanied us on the voyage. He usually sat in front of Lizzard, and to the right of Mr. McDonald. He said that Lizzard was lucky to still have his leg. The cat’s teeth just missed a major blood vessel that fueled his leg and foot.

“It’s gettin’ a bit better.”

Dr. Hamlyn turned around, “Could have lost his leg.”

“If Delmore had not followed us into the woods he would be dead,” I thought.

We just entered the mouth of Lake Athabasca. Fortunately for Lizzard there were no portages. We spent most of the day polling our way across the lake. Paddles would have been useless because we could not keep up to the current. Large lakes were a voyageur’s worst nightmare. This was because of the large waves that came with these lakes. If the wind was strong a small canoe could be whipped around like a fly in a hurricane. We were careful to keep close to the shore because of the strong head wind that threatened to tip our canoe and its contents.

“Careful to keep your tongue in the middle of your mouth,” Mr. McDonald half-joked as the canoe lunged to the left by a wave that was a quarter paddle in height. “The wind’s picking up.”

Ahead, Mr. Simpson’s canoe pulled up on a small island.

“What’s he doing?” I questioned Lizzard.

“It looks like it’s time to get cleaned up,” Lizzard answered.

On the island we changed into our best clothes. Each of us had to include a change of clothes that we would wear only when we arrived at H.B.C. forts.

“I want you all to wash and shave before we get to Fort Chipewyan,” Mr. Simpson commanded, as we dug into the forty pounds of luggage each of us were allowed to bring.

After I changed I helped Lizzard getting on his pants. We then piled into our canoes and paddled the short distance to Fort Chipewyan.

Our canoes were greeted by several Indian traders who gathered outside the walls of the fort. They especially wanted to welcome Mr. Simpson, their old trader, back to the area. They exchanged gifts. Mr. Simpson gave them a small amount of tobacco and ammunition. That evening a ceremony was held that made the Governor an honorary chief of their tribe. Over the next few days Mr. Simpson met with many of the local Indians and traders, and he installed Mr. Heron as Chief Factor of the fort. The old Chief Factor was to accompany us, family and all, to the Pacific.

“I can’t believe it,” Lizzard protested. “A woman and child are comin’ with us. They’re too fragile.”

“I don’t know. I’ve seen some pretty tough women.” I remembered, Suzie Brown pounding me to smithereens when I told her that I wanted to play the part of Henry Hudson. I never thought of my mother as being a weak woman.

“Yeah but a family, and they have to ride with us. I guess your history lessons will be over because McDonald and the Doctor will be travellin’ in Simpson’s canoe,” Lizzard teased.

“I can see you agree,” Lizzard continued. “You don’t like the idea of women on the canoe either.”

“I’m just going to miss my education from Mr. McDonald,” I covered up.

\* \* \*

The next day another canoe pulled up with supplies and mail. It seemed that the Governor was always sending or responding to letters that came. About every two days a canoe would intercept us with mail for the Governor. When we set up camp or took a break, Simpson insisted that his table be set up first so that he could read and write letters.

Lizzard saw the mail boat too. He asked me if I would write a letter to his family since he didn't know how to write.

“How did you sign your contract with the Hudson's Bay Company when you joined up?” I inquired.

“I just used a big “X” and the man printed my name beneath it. That's how everybody does it, Taylor.”

“Have you ever sent a letter to your family before?”

“No,” Frustration started to cloud his eyes, but I had to ask the last question.

“When was the last time you saw your family?”

Absent minded he dabbed his finger in the corner of his eye. He noticed me watching and quickly recovered. “Five years ago I left my family at Ft. Garry and came to work for the H.B.C.”

I thought I heard a slight quiver in his voice. I told him the story about my brother Terrance, my mother who made the best pumpkin pie, and my father who could fix anything. I was surprised to hear such fond memories come from my mouth, given the reasons for my leaving.

Lizzard told me about his mom. He didn't have a dad. He described how his younger sister always got him into trouble by teasing him 'till he got so angry that he chased her back to her mother, and she would lie that he was picking on her. He told me that Lizzard wasn't his real name. It was a nickname that his older brother gave him because he was always bringing in reptiles into the house. Even his sister called him Lizzard. He thought that it was her revenge because he stuffed a harmless garden snake down her back and then grabbed her by the waist so

that she couldn't untuck her shirt to get rid of it. His mother always called him William. He preferred Lizzard.

I spent the rest of that afternoon following Lizzard around the outside of the compound. He couldn't dictate sitting down so I had to write following him around. I finally told him to walk around the table while I sat down because I hadn't had much practice writing over the past several months. When he finished talking I wrote his name out on a piece of paper and he copied it for the signature.

"I have to learn how to do that sometime," he concluded. On the envelope I printed, Mrs. Redwater, Ft. Garry, and then underneath that I wrote, Red River Settlement. Lizzard gummed the envelope and went to the mail canoe to post it.

\* \* \*

Mr. Simpson had a lot of business to do at Fort Chipewyan. Mr. McDonald came out to our tents and told us that we would be staying three more days. We celebrated that night. There was a lot to do during the day, like disassemble the packs and including new provisions in the repacking. The canoes also needed to be repaired because of the trouble we had coming down the Clearwater River valley. One of the canoes had been dropped and its side was nearly sheered off. It was a wonder that it made it to the fort in one piece.

We also had to pack the McGill gear. They took no furniture, but they wanted to take a huge one-hundred and fifteen pound chest on the canoe. It wasn't until Mr. McDonald told his wife that all of the clothes and provisions needed to go into ninety-pound bundles, that she agreed to let us repack it. He also pointed out that everything would have to be carried up and then down the Rocky Mountains. They had a lot of stuff. While taking clothing out of the chest and repacking it one of the voyageurs found some woman's underclothes and promptly placed it

on his head and wore it like a cap. He danced around the tents. When he came near me I snatched it off, and joked that his wife was due to come out and supervise the repacking. It was that sort of thing that she probably wanted to prevent.

That night I sat around the fire with the rest of the voyageurs. Some of the older voyageurs told stories about other expeditions they had been on and great things that they had done in the past. I thought that this expedition was kind of a great thing to be on. I lost count of the stories about Grizzly bears that had been killed by using only a voyageurs bare hands.

It had been a month since we left York Factory and I had sat by my last fire. I realized that I liked to watch the fire dance up and down a piece of wood. As the wood burned it told a story. Its story was similar to mine since I joined up with the Hudson's Bay Company. When a log was thrown into the fire you can still see its shape. The bark was still there. The piece of wood still had colour and texture. When I started I was different from the other voyageurs. I looked different, and I felt different.

After a while the long red fingers of fire started to reach out and heat the wood. It was slow at first as the flames licked the new fuel and tasted its flavour. Then at some point the flames stopped being that of the fire's and the new wood started to burn on its own. Its colour changed from brown to a darker red. The new piece of wood slowly transformed from a fresh log to just another piece of wood that fueled the fire. As that piece of wood experienced the heat it changed and became the source of the heat by turning into the red coals that dropped to the bottom of the fire. Its colour changed again into a brilliant red with dark edges that glowed. The red flames that danced around at the top of the fire were not present at the bottom of the fire. These flames were replaced by the hotter blue flame that were the furnace of the fire.

It's like the fire is the Bay Co., and the fresh logs are the new recruits. At the beginning I didn't know what it was like to become a Voyageur. I could as easily have gone into the army or something else. Now, sitting around the fire I felt like one of the voyageurs. My wood was starting to burn and change colour, and I even looked like one of them, with a handkerchief around my head, and my hair growing and gathered in the back with a piece of string. I didn't have the experience of the older voyageurs who could negotiate the river by memory and instinct, but I was becoming more like them. I don't know if I wanted people to see me first as a voyageur or as Adam Taylor.

Sitting by the fire always made me think about stuff like that.

Just as the last of the I-killed-a-bear stories was finished an older voyageur asked if we'd heard about the massacre at Long Sault Rapids. Some of the voyageurs had but he went on to tell it anyway.

"'Bout two-hundred years ago," he began, "at a place along the St. Lawrence river called the Long Sault Rapids..."

"Is this going to be one of the scary stories?" another voyageur teased.

The older voyageur jumped up. "You makin' fun of this here legend?" His posture beamed anger. He kicked his shoe and shot a burning coal from the fire at the questioner. The younger voyageur jumped back to avoid being burned.

"I'll burn you like that coal if you make light of our history." Another voyageur stood up, patted the upset man on the back.

"Get on with the story. The rest of us want to hear it," he consoled. The older man realized that the rest of the voyageurs were waiting for the story. He became nervous and quickly looked for his seat.

“The fire of the company may not have caught onto you yet, but it will. Pretty soon all you’ll know is the company, just like the rest of us. It’ll be your life.” He sat back down, his face still consumed with anger. “This story was first told by one of the founders of the company. Yeah, Pierre Radisson himself discovered the traces on the shores of Long Sault Rapids,” his voice trailed off as he attempted to regain his train of thought.

“The leader’s name was Dollard. Adam Dollard.”

“He had a good first name,” I thought. I didn’t want to get hot coals kicked at me too.

“He was runnin’ his boats down the St. Lawrence because he’d heard word that the Iroquois were planning to attack Montreal. He needed strong fighting men to help prevent the attack. Did he go to the trappers to get strong men? No.” He paused for effect. “Did he go to the militia for men to defend the fort? No.” His voice grew stronger as he continued. “He went to the voyageurs for strong, loyal men who had the discipline to protect the fort.” There was a thunderous cheer from all around the camp fire that went on for some time.

When the foot stomping and cheering subsided the voyageur continued. “In 1660 Dollard and seventeen voyageurs were nearing the rapids when they encountered a war party making its way to Montreal. The battle lasted for seven days until the last of the voyageurs was killed. Dollard gave his life, but he successfully discouraged an attack on Montreal. And who did it for him?” his voice rose as he finished his question.

“THE VOYAGEURS!” All around the campfire cheered.

“Who saved Montreal?”

“THE VOYAGEURS!” the cheering grew louder.

“And who are the most fierce warriors of the wilderness?” his voice rasped with conviction.

“THE VOYAGEURS!” And at that there was a sudden outbreak of hollering, singing and dancing around the fire. I joined in, caught up in the emotion of the moment. It felt good to be a part of such a proud heritage. It was a heritage that had its roots woven into the very fabric of the Hudson’s Bay Company.

## Chapter Twelve: Nottingham House

The next morning was chilly. I could see my breath hang in the air for some time. The sun broke the horizon and started to burn off the dew that moistened the ground. If it was going to be a normal day of rowing, my tunic would provide enough warmth until my body stretched into action. Most of my voyageur friends enjoyed the rare opportunity they had to sleep in. Even Lizzard chose to roll over rather than watching the day begin.

There was a chorus of birds celebrating the arrival of the sun, as I flexed my arms and stretched them one at a time into the air. A yawn started from the back of my throat and expanded my mouth to a large oval shape. Along the shore toads noisily feasted on a new hatch of tiny flies that hovered just over the water. Close to the shore I recognized a familiar person sitting on a log and intently looking through an eye glass towards the South West.

“Beautiful morning,” I started.

“Yes it is,” Mr. McDonald put down the telescope and busily wrote in a notebook that I did not recognize as the one he used on the canoe. “When the sun comes up from the East it gives me the perfect opportunity to view English Island, off to the right.” He stretched his arm to point off to the right. “Can you see it?”

I could just make out what looked like another piece of shoreline. A fog was just lifting up from the shore and it revealed an old wooden structure. “Is that an island?” I questioned.

McDonald finished writing and picked up his eye glass again. “It’s difficult to make out the island from here, but it was the site of the first Bay Company fort in the area. It was called Nottingham House.

“If Nottingham House was a Hudson’s Bay Company fort then what was Fort Chipewyan,” I asked, looking back at the structure behind us. I immediately thought that it was a bad question, because Fort Chipewyan was probably the new larger fort and Nottingham House was just old, or small, or something.

“That’s an excellent question,” McDonald remarked.

I hid my surprise by staring intently in the direction of the island.

“Fort Chipewyan was originally a fort for a rival trading company called the North West Company. Both of the companies merged in 1821 and became what we now know as the Hudson’s Bay Company.” He paused and lowered his eye glass. “Here, take a look.” I looked through the glass at an old wooden structure on the island. The sun worked its way up the sky and continued to burn off the morning haze. “Does anybody live there?”

“Another excellent question.” McDonald took back the eye glass. “The Company had a fine man named Peter Fidler build the structure in order to compete with the North West Company. You see, the Hudson’s Bay Company didn’t have much action up in this corner of the world. The North West Company was pulling furs out of this area like you wouldn’t believe. So in 1802 Fidler, his Cree wife, and sixteen canoemen came up to this area with five canoes. Fidler first wanted to set up shop beside Fort Chipewyan, but because of a lack of good housing timber he was forced to build the structure that we see on English Island.”

McDonald focused on the island through the eye glass. “See the building to the left of the main house,” he passed the glass back to me.

The main house was a wooden structure with two doors and five small windows that had shutters attached to each side. Its roof was made from wooden shingles that had faded a lot over the years. On top of each row of shingles was a long wooden beam that was designed to hold the shingles on the roof. McDonald later explained that the wind up here was fierce and could rip the roof off a house if it was not built solid enough.

The structure that Mr. McDonald wanted me to look at was a small wooden shed to the north of the main house. On its door a large XY was painted. It was otherwise very similar to the main house.

“See the XY on the door.” His arm pointed enthusiastically in the house’s direction. “That house was built by the North West Company to keep track of what we were doing.”

“Why does it have an XY on the door? Shouldn’t it be a NW if it belonged to the North West Company.” I was confused.

“Taylor, you’re full of excellent questions.” He took back his eye glass and placed it back in its long circular case. The North West Company actually split into two companies. The other was the New North West Company. To keep its goods separated from the old company the New North West Company used the next two letters of the alphabet following W as their sign. That is why there is an XY on the look-out house over there,” McDonald concluded.

“Why was Nottingham House abandoned?”

Mr. McDonald looked more reflective, and carefully chose his words. “You see, this was one of the trading battles we lost. We’re not proud of it and Fidler did as fine a job as anyone could have. The trade got fierce in the second and third year. Fidler was doing okay until the

competition turned ugly. His supplies were constantly looted, sometimes to the extent that the Fidlers worried about making it through the winter. Canoes full of H.B.C. furs were intercepted and destroyed when they left Nottingham House. On one occasion the family dog was taken and eaten just outside the house. We had to pull Fidler for fear of his personal safety and because we just weren't making any money from it."

"It sounds like it got very nasty up here." I tried to absorb all that I had heard.

"A lot of dedicated people died for the sake of this." He pointed to the soft brownish red beaver fur that covered his journal, and stared off towards the island. As if a new thought entered his mind he jerked his head down to his journal and started to write again. That signaled that it was time for me to leave.

\* \* \*

I spent the rest of the morning working on the canoes. Mr. Simpson saw the way that I decorated my paddle, and put me in charge of repainting the bows of both canoes. I was allowed a lot more creativity on my paddle. Each of the Hudson's Bay Canoes had to be identically painted. Simpson said that it was important that the company had a strong presence in the North. The symbols on the canoes were about the only sign that we belonged to the H.B.C.

The bow of the canoe takes most of nature's punishment during an expedition. Most of the paint had long since been scraped off by tree branches encountered during the frequent portages. The red and white paint that was left had faded beyond recognition by a combination of water and sun.

I painted the base of each of the canoes white that curved down along one of the gummed seams. Then using the same colour I painted a large circle at the end. The whole white section measured about three feet. The white wash dried quickly. By the time I finished all four canoes

I went back to the first one and painted a red ensign in the middle of the bow. The ensign measured one and a half feet from one end of the maple leaf to the other.

In the afternoon I then painted the initials of the Hudson's Bay Company with white paint in the middle of the red ensigns. I ran out of paint on the second canoe. One of the other voyageurs said that I needed to get the paint from inside the fort. I had never been inside Fort Chipewyan before so I didn't know exactly where to get the paint from. I looked around for Mr. McDonald or another familiar face for directions.

I saw Mr. McDonald talking to another man when I approached.

"Do you know where I can find some more white paint for the canoes?" I asked.

"Taylor," McDonald welcomed my interruption. "McGill, this is the boy that I told you about. He's the one who's so interested in the history of the H.B.C."

"Well, it's good to meet you," the other man stuck out his hand at me. "So you're a keen one?" He then turned back to McDonald. "So what's a bright one like this lad doin' painting canoes?" McGill smiled.

"You've to start somewhere. The paint is around that corner and in the General Store. Just let them know that it's for the Simpson expedition." McDonald pointed over towards a corner of the fort.

I thanked them for the directions. I had not expected the compliment, and it made me feel uneasy. I half-jogged away eager to get out of their line of sight. When I turned the corner I ran into someone carrying a bundle of laundry. The laundry was stacked so high that I couldn't see who it was. The person carrying the laundry obviously couldn't see where she was going.

"You shouldn't carry so much dirty clothes that you can't see where your going," I started. The best defense was a good offense.

“I could see. You’re the one who came ‘round the corner looking backwards,” a female voice countered from beneath a pile of white sheets.

I thought I detected a slight English accent in her voice.

“Now look what you’ve done,” she protested as she dug her way from under the pile.

“Now they’re all dusty.”

As she tore the last sheet that hid her face my heart stopped. The cold sweat that I experienced once before overwhelmed my body. It was the same girl I helped into the canoe at Fort York.

“What are you standin’ there like a totem pole for?” her voice hinted anger.

“I...uh...I, was looking for paint.” I had lost total voice control now. I felt like a puppet and someone else controlled the strings.

“Paint! You’re lookin’ for paint?” she asked, as she jammed the sheets back into the basket. “Thanks for the help!” she huffed.

I stood there like a zombie unable to move. I just stared like an idiot. Then it sank in, she wanted me to help her. How stupid could I be? As I bent down to assist she pulled the basket of clothes away.

“I don’t need it now.” She was right. All of the clothes were gathered in a pile. I wondered how such a large pile could be carried by just one basket.

“Excuse me,” she struggled with the basket. “The clothesline’s just behind you.”

I looked over my shoulder and saw a line against the wall behind me. I moved out of her way, not knowing how to repair the damage that I had just done.

“Thank you,” her voice strained under the weight of the clothes. “Paint’s over in the corner.”

“Paint?” I had completely forgotten why I was here. “Oh paint. Yes, the paint. It’s just over in the corner.” Now I had just confirmed that I had no brain.

“That’s what I just said,” she huffed as she set down the basket and began to inspect the sheets for dirt.

I turned and walked towards the store for paint. I couldn’t believe that one minute I could be complimented for my brains and the next feel like a babbling idiot.

### Chapter Thirteen: The Buttertub

My head was in a mist when I finished the lettering on the canoe. Lizzard walked up.

“The front of the canoe looks all right,” he commented.

“I hope so. I’ve been working on it all day,” I said as I cleaned the brush I was using for the letters. I stood back and admired my work. It did look good.

“Let’s go eat. The hunting party killed a moose and they’re roasting it over the fire right now.”

I welcomed Lizzard’s invitation. It would take my mind off the girl and how I had made a fool of myself. I didn’t even find out her name. She didn’t even remember me from Fort York. How could I ever forget her?

I followed Lizzard to the blazing fire pit. About two feet above the fire a portion of charred moose’s carcass hung on a spit. The spit was constructed from two six-inch logs that had been pounded into the ground. The end of the logs formed a Y shape, and were opposite each other with the fire in the middle. On top of the y-shaped logs was a longer log that was

stuck through the middle of the carcass. A fellow voyageur turned a hand crank that was constructed on one end by nailing another smaller log at a ninety-degree angle to the longer one that ran over the fire. To that a final handle was. By the time we got to the pit the body was already charred black from the high flames.

We sat well back from the heat. Many of the voyageurs also sat around the fire.

“Have you ever eaten moose before?” Lizzard asked.

“Nope, we ate mostly pigs and chickens back on the farm,” I replied. The smell greeted my nostrils as I realized that I was really hungry. I hadn’t eaten all day.

“It kind of tastes like beef, but a little wilder,” he answered. “We don’t get to eat much of this meat. It’s usually reserved for the Bourgeois.”

I couldn’t wait to taste it.

“Who’s this we have here?” Delmore’s comment was more of a statement than a question. “His majesty has bestowed us with his presence.”

I was careful of Delmore’s approach. He was a powder keg looking for a flame. “What do you want Delmore?”

“From you?” he said as he came nearer. The smell of liquor oozed from his body.

“Nothing.”

He swayed back and forth from the effects of the alcohol. His balance was affected, but his focus wasn’t. “I want to know...,” he took another swig from a jug that he carried with his index finger and cradled on his elbow when he drank. “How you breath with your nose so far up McDonald’s rear end?”

A comment like that one was difficult to ignore. Lizzard started in, “Leave ‘m alone.”

“No, that’s all right. I can handle this on my own.” I waved Lizzard out of it. “Delmore say what you got to say and get it over with.” I thought that the only way to deal with Delmore was to be direct. Matching wits with him probably got my friend killed, and I didn’t want to follow in his foot steps.

“I guess you have to use your mouth to breath if your nose is busy,” Delmore continued, unaffected by what I said. “Only thing is...do you every take your nose out to wash it?”

“Delmore, does this have to do with McDonald?” I stayed with my original plan.

Delmore ignored what I said, took another longer drink, and wiped off his mouth with the sleeve of his left hand. He stumbled back a step when he lowered the jug, but quickly recovered. His focus was intense.

I stood up opposite him, and matched his glare. “You think that I’m getting friendly with McDonald? So, what difference does it make to you?” I wanted to advance this as quickly as possible. Playing this game at Delmore’s speed only played into his hand.

Delmore decided to answer my question. “It makes plenty of difference as long as I’m the one running the boat.”

Now I was finding out what was bothering him.

“When I got a little paddler spending more time learnin’ about the history of the world then leaning into his oar.”

“I’m doin’ my share,” I objected.

“How would you know? When your nose is so low to the seat in front you can’t keep your eyes on the paddle.”

My body filled with anger. I worked hard keep up my part.

“You don’t see it, Taylor. Your little friendship with McDonald undermines my authority.” He stopped and tipped the bottle towards his mouth again. This time he stood as steady as a rock.

“My suggestion, is that you get your learnin’ from me and not the Bourgeois.” Delmore swung the bottle to another voyageur who eagerly took a drink.

I could see what was coming and I looked around for something to defend myself with. There was nothing. There was only one way to handle this. I turned slowly turned around to face Delmore. My fist tightened behind my back.

“Look Delmore....I know that you’re upset but I’m not going to...” and before I finished saying the word fight I drove my fist into the side of his face. I was surprised at the power that my arm had in it. My fist landed square on his jaw. Back at home a punch like that would’ve floored a person.

Delmore stood there unmoved by the punch. He raised his hand to the part of his face I had struck and rubbed it lightly.

“Is that all you got?” His hand left his face and formed a fist. All signs of intoxication had by now left his body. “Well I’m going to give you an education here and now, boy.”

He pushed me back with his right arm that he kept low. My eyes were defending against his left hand by his face. I stumbled over the log that was behind me and fell to the ground. I rolled over on my left shoulder as Delmore dived on top of me. My quick action save me from having Delmore’s weight on me, and I scrambled to my knees.

Delmore realized that I was one move ahead of him, and he jumped to his feet. “You can take your beatin’ now or...” he hesitated. “NOW!” I felt his boot strike my side. The force of his kick sent me to the ground again. He kicked a second time with greater force. This time he

aimed for my head. I sat up. His foot just grazed my ear. Delmore expected to connect with his second kick and the momentum set his body into the air following his foot. He hit the ground. Surprise lit up his face.

I saw my opening. I jumped on top of him and punched his head with all my force. This time his head was shot to the side with my fist. My knees pinned his arms down as he struggled to get free. I hammered him again, and saw a small amount of red gather in his twisted nose. My confidence strengthened as his arms lifted up and then fell back to the ground.

“Wait. I’ve had enough,” Delmore appealed.

I paused, my fist loaded.

Pausing was the wrong thing to do, because when I pulled my fist back to consider his plea, his feet shot up from behind and grabbed my head. I was twisted backwards, my head crashed to the ground.

In an instant Delmore was on top of me and there was a relentless barrage of fists to my head. I struggled to free my arms but it was no use. Delmore had reversed my hold and sat on my chest. His knees held down my arms and forced them to flop helplessly beside my head. He leaned forward so that I couldn’t get my feet up around his head.

“First lesson,” he started. “You need to subtract your attention from McDonald.” With that he smacked the side of my face with his left open hand. My head slammed to the right into the dirt. I felt my face swell in response to the blow.

“Second lesson,” his voice raised. “I would appreciate you adding more force to your paddle.” His right had struck my head. The side of my face throbbed with pain. I was defenseless.

“Leave him alone,” Lizzard yelled and stepped forward.

“I’ll do you too!” Delmore shouted. It was so loud that it startled Lizzard.

Delmore continued, “Lesson three,” his face returned to mine with a renewed intensity.

“You need to multiply your loyalty to who?” he questioned.

I didn’t recognize his question.

“Who?” his eyes turned to steel as he raised his voice.

I remained silent. My pride wouldn’t play his game.

His face reddened. Anger sent blood vessels to the front of his forehead.

“WHO!” He slowly closed his fist on finger at a time. “Last chance…” his voice lilted up and to drippy mock. He raised his fist to head level.

“Stop!” another voice commanded Delmore’s attention. He straightened his back just enough, and I shot my feet around his head. With all my might I pulled Delmore’s head down to the ground. The back of his head cracked on a rock.

I jumped on him and struck his face hard with my fist. Blood flowed freely from his nose.

“Taylor,” this voice was familiar. It was Lizzard who shouted at me and pulled me swinging off of Delmore. Lizzard turned my shoulders so that I could see Simpson running from the fort in our direction.

“He’s the one who yelled at you,” Lizzard handed me a rag to sop up my bloody nose. It stung to the touch, and I wondered if it was broken.

Delmore quickly got up and dusted himself off. A voyageur offered him a handkerchief, but he refused, and instead wiped his nose with the cuff of his shirt.

“What’s going on here?” Simpson sounded, and commanded everyone’s obedience. He didn’t wait for an answer.

“Delmore, what is happening here?” Simpson stopped directly in front of my aggressor.

Delmore was quick to recover. “Taylor stole some kit out of my tent, and I had to teach ‘em that it’s not right.”

Simpson shot his attention to me, “Is that right Taylor? What did you take from Delmore?”

I recognized my position. To tell the truth would surely land me in hot water with my fellow voyageurs. My loyalty was supposed to be to my colleagues, and who knows what river they would drag me out of if I said that Delmore was a drunken murderer. I remained silent.

Delmore knew that he’d won and piped up. “Last night he went through my clothes and took this.” He thrust his hand into my right shirt pocket and pulled out the remains of the necklace that I had won from Gabriel.

“How did he know that I had Gabriel’s necklace in that pocket,” I thought to myself.

Delmore stepped away from me towards Simpson, “You see it matches the part that I have here. With his back to me he showed the evidence that confirmed my guilt. I could see Simpson nodding his head in agreement.

“Taylor you’ll spend the rest of this stop in the Buttertub.” Simpson said his verdict loud enough so that everyone could hear. “You men,” and he pointed to Lizzard and another voyageur, “Bring him to the fort.”

As quickly as he arrived he bolted around and half-jogged back to the fort.

Delmore turned around, a crooked smile covered his face.

“Let’s go eat,” he sounded to the rest of the voyageurs. Then he stopped in front of me, his mouth was so close he could have easily taken a chunk off my nose. His voice low but serious.

“Class dismissed, Taylor.”

When they closed the door to the Buttertub I was left in complete darkness. I felt the cold wooden walls made from logs that were lashed together with rope. The cracks in the logs were covered with hard-dried mud on the outside so that no darkness could escape. The walls formed a small square that allowed me only to twist right and left. A forward step in any direction would be stopped by an opposite wall. I had barely enough room to bring my hands up to my face. They could only be stretched if placed by my sides and forced in a downward motion. The ceiling was the distance from my elbow to my wrist above my head. I could neither bend down nor jump up very far. There was no chair for me to sit in. Any relief for my legs had to be sought by leaning on the walls.

My face ached as I squeezed my hand up to rub it. My nose was plugged with dried blood from the fight and made it necessary to breath from my mouth. I had never seen a Buttertub before, but Lizzard told me a story about a voyageur named Alexander who was thrown in the tub for trading on the side. Alexander would take some of the furs that were supposed to go to the H.B.C. and sell them himself and pocket the money. He spent twenty days in the disgusting dungeon. It almost killed him. He was released only after he agreed to sign a three year contract to be a voyageur.

I pounded on the door. “Let me out to go to the outhouse!”

There was no response. The answer came from the stench that invaded my nostrils once they cleared. The mushy stuff that my bare feet were clumping around in was not mud. My insides started to rise and I switched to breathing through my nose. I immediately wished that my nose was still plugged.

Time passed very slowly as I waited out my sentence. When I forgot to breath through my mouth I was instantly reminded of my mistake by the overwhelming reek of human waste. I was resolute not to relieve myself the way that others had in the past.

I focused my mind on matters other than the Buttertub. I wondered how Delmore knew that I had part of Gabriel's necklace. Either he had taken the part of the necklace I had won from Gabriel when we played cards, or Delmore had taken it from Gabriel before his death. If Delmore had taken the beads from Gabriel it would almost certainly prove that he was connected somehow with his death.

But how could I know if Delmore got the necklace from Gabriel? I suddenly remembered Gabriel's emerald that he wore around his neck. If Delmore had the emerald, that would tell me that he stole the necklace from Gabriel. It would also reveal something about what Delmore knew about Gabriel's death.

There was a second issue that concerned me more. Why had Delmore set up the whole fight? He must have thought through what he was going to do before he came up to me with the jug of booze. It would have been easy to know when Simpson would come out of the fort. He was always giving new instructions to the men. The question stirred over and over in my mind. "Why would Delmore set me up?"

Then the answer came to me. Delmore's little math lesson didn't escape me. He was concerned about the amount of time I was spending talking to McDonald. By luring me into a

fight he accomplished two things. He first beat me up, which was something that Delmore liked to do. He liked the game that is played before the fight, the wit involved that decides the reasons for the fight. He did the same with Gabriel in the canteen line-up. I fell into the same trap. I banged my head against the wall of the Buttertub. How stupid I had been.

The second thing was that he discredited me in the eyes of McDonald and Simpson by accusing me of stealing the necklace. Delmore didn't like the relationship that had developed between us, and thought that it threatened his superiority in the canoe. No wonder he didn't discipline me when I was talking to McDonald.

From all my reflecting on what had happened one conclusion was engraved in my mind. Delmore was not only trouble, he was very smart, and shouldn't be underestimated.

A while later there was a knock at the door followed by a whisper. "Adam, you in there?"

The voice was Lizzard's.

"Yeah it's this one," I returned.

A moment later the door cracked open.

"Boy it stinks," Lizzard commented, "You should have gone before you got here."

I laughed. The light hurt my eyes and I squinted to see him.

"I've gotta be quick. It cost me my moose dinner to be here," Lizzard confessed. His hand moved nervously around his bandanna.

"You know Taylor, you gotta find a way to work this out with Delmore," Lizzard suggested.

"What'da ya mean. You were there. I didn't start the fight."

“That’s not what I mean. It’s the cause of the fight that I’m worried about. This stuff between you two’ll come to a head if you don’t do somethin’. Look, it’s a small canoe and we all depend on each other every day to survive,” Lizzard continued. “I depend on you to do your share on your side of the canoe, and you count on Delmore to keep us out of the rocks.”

“Get to the point.” I hated getting lectured to.

“Grow up.” Lizzard raised his voice. “That’s my point. There’s a more important purpose here, and it has to do with all of the other lives on the canoe. Don’t let your little conflict put others in danger. It’s important that we get along.”

“I get your point,” I huffed feeling kind of like Lizzard was blaming me for Delmore’s volcanic temper.

“Here,” he shoved the bandanna into my hands. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He closed the door and locked it. I then heard his footsteps lighten as he got further from my cell.

I opened up the bandanna to find a large portion of roasted moose meat. Despite the cell’s aroma, it tasted good.

#### **Chapter Fourteen: Anna Rown**

I could barely walk when I was let out of the Buttertub. The guards had to lift me out from my cell and escort me by holding my arms around their necks. As I neared the gate I saw the girl that I bumped into yesterday. She was carrying another basket of dirty clothes. She saw

me and quickly turned away and hurried into a door. I presumed it was door to where she lived. I wished that she hadn't seen me.

My legs came back to me as we neared the gate. It was a good thing too, because they released their grip when they arrived.

"Sorry fella'. That's as far as we go. The rest you got to make on your own." One of them said, and they turned around and went back into the fort.

The first few steps were the hardest. My feet occasionally failed to obey me and I fell to the ground. After a few more stumbles control slowly returned to my legs and I could walk with a noticeable limp. The limp was a result of my legs being inactive for so long. After a few more steps, feeling started to return to my left leg in the form of sharp pins that again sent me to ground in agonizing pain.

The pain was relieved somewhat when I rubbed my thigh, and I was able to make it back to my tent. I noticed Voyageurs were busily packing their gear. Many of them had been delegated to help out with packing the canoes. I was thankful that Delmore was nowhere to be seen. Lizzard greeted me at the door.

"Bout last night," Lizzard started.

Before he could continue I interrupted. "You don't have to say another word. I understand your point." I entered the tent. "You're right. The canoe needs to run smoothly more than I need to get even with Delmore about last night's fight."

"Boy, do you stink!" Lizzard held his nose with one hand and slapped me on the back with the other. "I packed all your stuff, because we're pushing off soon." I looked around the tent to see my gear piled next to his. "Why don't you go clean yourself up in the lake," Lizzard

suggested and pushed a bar of soap and a change of clothes at me. “If I have to sit beside you on the canoe, I don’t want to have to smell you too. You look bad enough.”

I smiled at his suggestion and took the soap and clothes. Behind the fort was a shallow pond that was fed by Lake Athabasca. I piled my clothes on a rock that bordered the pond. The water was cold to the touch and I had to ease myself in. My thigh tightened as I guided it in. Gradually my body became accustomed to the cooler temperature and I reached for the soap that I placed beside my clothes. It lathered up quickly and easily cleaned off the grime that I had collected in the Buttertub. I dove under the surface to wet my hair and lathered it up scrubbing my fingers through my long hair. My ponytail now reached half-way down my back. I was glad to have my ponytail to protect my head and back from the bite of the river flies. I dunked my head again and soaped up my hair and face a second time.

Through the suds I saw a bush shuffle in front of me. “Friend or foe,” I called out, and attempted to clear the soap from my eyes. It stung as I only succeeded at pushing some of the foam into my eyes. I waved my hands as I heard a familiar voice. It was Anna, the girl I knocked over in the fort.

“It all depends on who you ask,” she answered, as she placed a basket of sheets on the ground. A wooden wash-board was by the side of the lake. She picked it up and braced it on a rock beside the pond.

I dove into the water to clear my eyes. When I came above the water I kneeled down so that the water came up to my chest. “Can’t you see that I’m doing something. Give me some privacy.”

“Forget it,” she disagreed. “I have to be on the canoe in less than an hour, and this stuff has to be washed before then.” She took a shirt from the basket, dipped it in the water and began

to scrub it rigorously over the metal ridges of the wash-board. Her speech did not interrupt her work. "I remember you from York Factory," she stated.

"You do?" I tried to keep the surprise from my voice. I edged my way towards my clothes. "Do you come here often to spy on men while they wash?" I asked as I quickly made for my clothes.

"I already told you I ain't spyin'. And from what I saw you aren't quite a man yet," she joked. "So what's it like in the Buttertub? I heard you were in there for the whole night."

"Crappy," I responded wittily. "There's no toilet in there." I buttoned up my pants and came out from behind the bush. I slipped my arms inside the sleeves of my tunic.

"Ahhhh you have a sense of humour," she laughed, obviously quick-witted herself. I'm Anna, Anna B. Rown. The B stands for Beatrice." She held up the shirt that she was washing and looked it over to see if it was clean. Confident in her effort she rolled it up and squeezed out the excess water. She grabbed another article of clothing and dipped it in the water. Her English accent was thick and rich. "So what's your name?"

"Adam Taylor," I responded, "and I don't have an initial." I buttoned up my shirt and tried to comb my hair back with my fingers. I picked up my dirty clothes, "While you're at it will you wash my clothes too?"

"I'm a maid, not a slave," Anna frowned. "Actually I'm a nanny."

I picked up my bar of soap and rubbed it into my shirt. "I'm sorry about bumping in to you yesterday. I was just in a hurry to get my paint and get back to my canoe." I rinsed my shirt in clean water and then wrung it out. I then placed it on a rock to dry. I took up the pants and did the same. I was feeling a lot more relaxed now around this girl who just yesterday made my heart jump out of its skin. "So will you be on the Simpson canoes?"

“Yes, we’re continuing West with him. Mr. McGill is leaving this post.” Her voice was like honey.

“I know, he was fired. That’s too bad,” I consoled.

“What do you mean fired. He’s not been fired.” Her accent grew richer when she got angry. I wondered if she came here from England, or if she picked up the accent from her parents. “Does everyone who leaves a post get fired?”

“I thought that was why he was in York Factory. Simpson fired him.” After I spoke I wished that I’d never listened to Gabriel about McGill.

Just then a distant voice interrupted. “Anna, it’s just about time to leave. Are you finished with the clothes?”

“Just about,” she called back. “I don’t know if they’ll have time to dry before they get packed.”

“Hurry up and get back to the fort. The baby’s going to need to be changed before we leave,” the voice concluded.

I finished wringing out my pants and picked up my shirt ready to leave. “Looks like you got your work cut out for you. It looks like it might rain.” I pointed towards some dark clouds that had formed in the Northern sky. “See you at the canoe.”

“You mean you’ll be on the same journey?” she inquired. I thought I detected a slight interest in her voice, but it quickly disappeared as she focused her attention on the laundry.

“Of course, I’m a voyageur,” I responded.

## Chapter Fifteen: The Departure

“Taylor, what’d you do to this canoe?” Delmore questioned. “It looks like you just splashed paint on it. Did ya’ even use a brush?”

“The paint’s all right,” I defended. In the back of my mind was what Lizzard had said to me the night before. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Anna walked up carrying supplies that had to be packed in the canoe. Delmore’s eyes shifted from the canoe to her.

“You sure are somethin’ to look at,” Delmore said, as he rubbed the paint on the side of the canoe. His eyes caught hers and then slowly moved from her head to her feet. His long gaze made Anna shift uneasily as she set the supplies beside the canoe. Delmore saw her reaction and continued, “Honey, I can think of a lot of things to do to ya’ if I ran into you in the dark.”

I fle the need to say something. He had threatened her with his last comment. At the same time I didn’t want to upset our already volcanic relationship. I remained silent.

Anne’s face reddened as she glanced at me. Her look questioned my silence. Delmore’s mouth widened and revealed his tobacco stained teeth.

“How ‘bout it? Maybe later we can get together?” Delmore continued. Anna was visibly upset and stumbled back, eager to get away from Delmore.

“I have to get back,” she stammered, turned around and hurried away.

I was instantly ashamed for not saying anything to defend Anna. How could I have let Delmore talk that way to Anna? Regardless of Lizzard’s advice my silence failed to show any concern for Anna. I needed to say something.

“Delmore, I don’t think that you should harass McGill’s maid.” I tried to be rational.

Delmore slowly rose from the side of the canoe. He took his time to respond. "Taylor," He started and spat a black blob of chewed tobacco by my foot. "Me an' this girl has nothin' to do with you." He took a step closer. I just about backed up, but caught myself before I did.

"You got no right makin' that girl feel like that," I protested

"Taylor, you think a couple of lucky punches by the fire the other night git's you the right to tell me what to do." Delmore stepped closer. "Did ya forget your math lesson already?" My body pulled me back to get out of Delmore's reach, but my head won out and I stood firm.

"You ain't got no right to threaten that girl." I stepped closer to him to show my resolve. His eyes were unconcerned with my actions, as they tightened to a pin-like focus.

"Only way me and that girl ain't going to meet later on is if you stop me right here an' now." His voice returned to a grisly challenge, as he lifted his shirt and uncovered his knife. His eyes locked on mine as his right thumb unbuckled the leather safety strap that kept the blade in its sheath. "You man enough to defend her honour," he challenged.

"Delmore," a voice yelled in our direction. "You finished with those canoes?" The voice belonged to McDonald. "I need you to get the cargo ready for loadin'."

"Delmore re-snapped his knife and took a step back. "I guess yer just a boy who thinks he can let anything spew from 'is mouth without havin' to back it up." Delmore spat again. "Hold on t' yer belt, I'll be right there," he yelled back to McDonald, as he stepped back from me. I took a deep breath, and relaxed a bit. As I glanced down I saw a wad of black grainy spit that slowly started to slide off my toe.

\* \* \*

Later as I approached the canoe I saw Lizzard loading the new supplies for the next leg of our journey. Delmore was again busy inspecting the canoes. He continued his criticism of the

poor quality of painting that went in to refinishing them, but I let it pass this time. We all got into our canoes as the bagpipes sounded the arrival of the boarding party. After the all-too-familiar speeches and cannon blasts that followed every Simpson departure, we pushed off and started up the Peace River.

Mr. McGill sat directly in front of me. His wife sat to his right. Anna and McGill's infant sat in front of them. Anna carefully avoided Delmore's eyes. Mrs. McGill was constantly prodding and poking the baby to see if it was handling the journey all right. When Anna finally handed the baby back to the Mrs. he began to cry. I think that it might have been either Fraser's bagpipes in Simpson's canoe or the bugle in ours that upset the little fellow. The baby would not be outdone by any music, and his wail overpowered both of the instruments. Mr. McGill finally convinced the bugler to stop, but the baby still kept crying. Even our singing couldn't draw the little thing into slumber. The mother was so frustrated that she handed the baby back to Anna, and she managed to rock the baby gently to sleep despite the noise from the instruments.

I wasn't sure what caused the rowing to be harder. It could have been the extra bodies in the canoe. We had never travelled with so many people before. It could have been the current. From the last part of the from the Methy portage the current was with us. While Lake Athabasca was difficult to pole because the waves from the lake beat the sides of the canoe, it didn't seem as difficult as this. The rowing might be harder because I hadn't rowed for four days. One of those days was spent with my body motionless and my arms captive at my side. I was out of shape, and that was probably the largest cause of my problem. I dug my paddle into the current and joined in with the singing to get the rhythm of the river.

Little baby sleepin' hush, hush, hush  
No small baby weapin' hush, hush, hush  
Keepin' down our speakin' hush, hush, hush

Make our paddles creepin, hush, hush, hush

Steersman is a bindin, hush, hush, hush  
Peace river is windin' hush, hush, hush  
Us voyageurs are findin' hush, hush, hush  
None of us are mindin' hush, hush, hush

Each time we said hush our paddles dipped into the Peace River. The baby slept through the singing. I think Mrs. McGill was surprised to hear us sing without swearing, and we kept on singing for what seemed hours. I slowly got the rhythm back and the muscles in my arms flexed as they remembered the different strokes required to make the canoe go up stream.

Later in the day I noticed dark clouds forming above us. An hour later a light rain started to fall. I could see that Mr. Simpson's canoe, ahead of us was speeding up. I hoped that we could avoid the heavy rain that the dense clouds predicted. As the rain started to fall harder, the baby woke up and started his all-too familiar wail. Anna wrapped the bottom of her dress around him to keep him dry.

Mr. Simpson's canoe pulled up to the shore. All of the men jumped out and had most of the gear unloaded before the canoe touched the shore line. As the canoe neared the edge, the voyageurs ran, jumped and hopped through the water and grabbed bundles. Then just as the canoe was about to hit the shore, two voyageurs lifted the empty canoe and gently set it upside down on the ground. The birch bark never touched soil.

The rain continued to fall as we attempted to do the same. When we neared the shore all of the voyageurs bounced out of the canoe. The McGill's and Anna stayed put and needed to be carried to shore. We all grabbed as many bundles as we could and splashed our way to shore. I went back to carry Mrs. McGill. The rain started to fall harder. I don't think that she liked the idea of being carried because she squirmed so much. When we neared the shore she burst out.

“My umbrella, I’m getting wet in this rain, I need to get my umbrella,” She screamed into my ear.

“Mrs. McGill, I’ll go back for your umbrella as soon as I get you to shore.” I tried to reason.

“Can’t you see I’m getting wet!” She demanded. “I need my umbrella.”

With that she sent her feet flailing into the air. Her hands pounded my back, and she continued to scream. I decided that I needed to get to shore as fast as I could so I tried to hop through the water. Then she shifted her weight trying to influence my direction. The combination of weight shift and hop made me lose my balance, and we hit the water. Her voice then turned angry as she rose in the water, her dress was soaked and her hat had fallen off. “I’ll have your half-wit head for this.”

I just turned my back to her and made my way to shore. I wanted to tell her that it was her fault, but I didn’t. She jumped and hopped to get within striking distance with the long cord of her purse. She swung it violently above her head and splashed the water near to me as I easily kept out of purse reach. Then, on one of the back swings the cord of her purse couldn’t handle the stress of its water-logged contents and snapped sending the purse out to the middle of the river. The current quickly swallowed it up.

When she finally got to shore all of the voyageurs cheered and thanked her for the entertaining show. That didn’t help her mood. She stomped over to me and demanded that I go and retrieve her bag. It was her husband who told her that she was at fault. Another voyageur, who helped bring the canoe ashore brought her umbrella to her, and she promptly threw it to the ground and said that she didn’t need it anymore. She sat on a log in the pouring rain and pouted

while we set up their tent. That was the last time I carried her to shore. I guess Lizzard had a more gentle touch.

That evening the rain flowed like a river to the ground. There was no refuge from the wet. I slept alongside Lizzard. Our heads took what little protection the overturned canoe would offer. Because of space limits, the voyageurs were never afforded the luxury of a tent. In addition, daylight was so valuable for travelling it was never given up for making a shelter to sleep under. Most of the nights were pleasant so we didn't mind sleeping under the stars, and we were usually too tired by then anyway to worry about it.

I could usually sleep anywhere, but the combination of thunder that cracked towards the mountains and baby crying made it difficult. When I finally did drift off I dreamt that something quickly shuffled across my shoulder. It started at my elbow, and scurried down the small of my back. In my dream, when I twisted my back, it jumped off. At morning I glanced down at my moccasins and discover that my dream was real. A mouse had eaten my laces. The leather was chewed clear up to the eyelets that the laces were threaded through.

\* \* \*

Over the next few days we had to increase our speed in order to keep ahead of the current. As we neared the mountains the river bobbed and weaved in front of us. The Peace River didn't increase much in elevation and there were few obstacles. So, we sang and paddled and enjoyed the better weather. As the expedition made its way further up the Peace, I noticed some mountains to our right.

"Hey Lizzard, do you know anything about those mountains?" I questioned.

"How would I know. They're tall. Perhaps they're called the Tall-To-The-Right Mountains." Lizzard didn't like me asking him questions. He just liked to keep things simple.

When it came time to paddle he did. When it came time to portage he did that, too. One thing Lizzard loved to do was sing. When we began the practice of the River Choir, he would sing his lungs out. It didn't matter to him if he was off key. Once in a while he even added a verse or two to the song we created as we paddled.

I came up with the name River Choir, and the rest of the voyageurs accepted it right away. We even started yelling "Choir practice" when we thought it was time to sing.

Mr. McGill turned around. His wife turned to stone and looked straight ahead.

"To our right are the Caribou Mountains." He stated.

"Why do you think that they're called that?" I continued the conversation.

Just then Lizzard jumped in, "Because lots of Caribou live in them."

Mr. McGill ignored both of our comments. "Beyond those mountains you'll find the coldest land in the world. In fact it stays frozen most of the year up there." He was enjoying his explanation so much that he shifted his body to follow his head, and just about tipped over the canoe. At that Delmore piped up, "Okay boys, let's keep this canoe above the river."

McGill continued, "You could walk along the land for thousands of miles, and then stop and not know if you're on land or ocean.

"Ocean!" The word just jumped out of my mouth.

"The Arctic Ocean is up there, and it stays frozen for most of the year."

"It doesn't sound like a place where I would want to live." I tried to finish the conversation because I could feel Delmore's eyes burning a hole in my back. I shifted in my seat uneasily and that sent the canoe rocking.

Mrs. McGill suddenly turned around and shot me her, die-now look. "Would you stop rocking this canoe. You'll make the baby sick," she ordered.

To me, she looked a little green herself. Her face had lost its usual animation and colour. I could tell she was going to be sick pretty soon. I took out a spare handkerchief and tucked it under my butt.

“OK, that’s enough Taylor,” Delmore joined in from behind. “If you shift in your seat again, I’ll hammer you with the end of my paddle.”

Just as Delmore finished his reprimand, Mrs. McGill’s cheeks puffed out and her back straightened. A look of anguish covered her face. I shoved the handkerchief into her hand, just as she gasped for breath. Her whole body trembled and her head nodded slightly forward. She rushed the handkerchief to her mouth just as a combination of green vegetables mixed with thick saliva spewed out. She filled the rag. Her head repeated the process again and a similar mixture followed. The third time she crouched over down close to the floor of the canoe and coughing replaced the fluid. She slowly recovered, checked her balance by placing her hand on the rim of the canoe, and straightened up. The rest of the crew suddenly shifted their attention back to the river when she became aware of her surroundings. Even Anna, who had a look of horror on her face when the Mrs. puked, turned around and immediately and gave all her attention to the baby.

Later on she washed the rag by dipping it into the river, wrung it out and placed it on the seat between Mr. McGill and her to dry. That evening she presented it to me nicely folded.

“Thank you for giving me your handkerchief,” she began her apology. “It saved me from dirtying my dress.”

“That’s okay. I saw that you needed it.” I tossed my head and looked away uncomfortably. Her voice was pleasant and her eyes sought to meet mine. Her soft side penetrated me.

“You really are rather observant,” she complimented, then recognized that I was uneasy and turned around.

## Chapter Sixteen: Pemmican

On August twenty-eighth we reached the trading post of Dunvegan. From this point, on I could see that the river would rise. That would make for two obstacles; elevation and current. The elevation meant that we would be portaging the canoe up many water falls, as we climbed the mountainside. While some of the voyageurs mended and applied gum to the canoes, I was directed to make more pemmican for our journey.

“I don’t know how to make this it,” I confessed to Lizzard.

“Don’t worry, once you know what’s in it, you’ll hate it as much as I do,” Lizzard said, as he continued soaking a piece of birch in the river. He softened it up for the repair work he was about to do. Satisfied with the flexibility of the bark, Lizzard went over to the canoe that he was working on.

Until I had to make it I had actually liked the jerky-like substance. It had fed us for most of the journey. Pemmican tasted like dried buffalo meat which was its main ingredient.

I saw a large mound of dried meat beside a table, and made my way over to it. Behind the table stood one of the members of the local tribe that Simpson had arranged to meet us along the journey and provide us with food.

“Hi, I’m William Flattened Tail,” the man greeted in broken English. “Just call me Wil”

“Adam Taylor,” I returned. “So it looks like we’re in charge of making the Pemmican.”

Wil had tanned leathery skin. As an member of the Beaver Tribe, he had worked for the trading post for the past three summers. He hunted and trapped the rich beaver pelts that this area was known for. His hands and eyes worked fast as they made the familiar food. I gave him a blank stare.

“You know what to do?” Will smiled, and his hands stopped working.

“No, I mean yes.” Actually I didn’t know. “I don’t know how to make pemmican,” I confessed.

“Pemmican is easy. I show you,” he smiled again and immediately his hands went to work. Into a coarse wooden bowl he threw what looked like strips of dried meat.

“Buffalo? Do you know the buffalo?” Wil asked.

“Yes buffalo. I’ve seen a buffalo before,” I answered.

His able fingers worked the dried buffalo into a powder. He used something that looked like a wooden spoon to squish the meat against the side of the bowl. Will did this quickly by turning the bowl on the table as he mashed the meat. In a few seconds he had a small amount of powder sitting in the bottom of his bowl. I was slower in tearing the dried meat apart, and Wil waited patiently until I worked the meat into a powder similar to his.

“Fat,” Wil pointed out as he picked up a large metal pot that contained liquid. I noticed several more similar pots sitting over a nearby fire.

“Fat,” I repeated, as I watched him pour a small amount of the warm substance into the bowl. He mixed it in using his spoon. After he worked at it a bit, he then added more fat. There was about an equal amount of both fat and meat in the bowl. When the mixture had the consistency of bread dough, Wil turned the bowl over and out dropped its contents. He then pressed it flat with the palm of his hand. Finally he placed it to the side to dry.

“Easy,” he said after he finished his lesson.

I had to agree that it was a simple process, but I was concerned about where the fat came from.

Working together we soon had a large pile of pemmican drying on the table.

“Why is the name of your tribe the Beaver?” I asked.

Animation lit up his weathered features. “Because we eat beaver.” With that he made a beaver slapping the water illustration with his hand in case I had never seen a beaver before.

After I heard the answer I thought that it was a stupid question.

Wil continued, “We call ourselves Dunneza. Means our people.” He waved his hands as he spoke. “Your people,” and he pointed at me, “found us eating tail flappin’ swim-walkers and called us Beaver people.”

Anna came by a while later with a basket of blue berries.

“Here,” she said, “Mr. McDonald wanted me to add these to the pemmican. It’ll make it taste better.” Her eyes smiled as she put the basket down on the table. She rubbed my shoulder as she walked by.

As the pemmican cooled I could see why it was the ideal food for traders. It was easy to make, and because the end product was dried, it stored for a long time and didn’t spoil. You didn’t have to worry about crushing it if you were in the canoe. Another reason was that the thin strips were easy to eat and it contained all the nutrition that you needed to survive. Pemmican was also eaten quickly and you didn’t have to stop the canoe to make a fire.

After we finished making the pemmican, I had to admit that the berry filled ones did look better to eat even though I couldn’t quite get used to the huge amount of fat they contained disgusted me. We placed them into ninety-pound bags made from buffalo hides and sewed them

shut. In the day that Wil and I had been working we managed to make fourteen bags of pemmican. It was enough food for us to continue our journey.

When I finished making the pemmican I saw Anna sitting by the river dipping her bare feet into the current. Even though she was in my canoe, we had not spoken about the incident with Delmore. She must have thought I was a jerk for not sticking up for her in front of Delmore. I sensed that she was uneasy around me. She sure made my insides turn to butterflies. My stomach seemed to knot-up every time I stopped to talk to her.

“Look, I’m sorry about what happened at the canoe with Delmore,” I blurted out.

“What do you have to be sorry about?” Her voice was soft as silk.

“I should have said something to Delmore when he was being rude to you,” I admitted.

Anna slowly turned her attention to me.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. You can’t control what Delmore says, and after spending that night in the Buttertub, I don’t think that you should tangle with him. Anyway, nothing came of it, so don’t worry. Just sit down beside me and enjoy this wonderful country,” she said.

“This country is beautiful,” she said, as I kneeled down. Her gaze focused on the river.

“Yeah, beautiful, and hard to travel by canoe,” I responded. I sat down on the shore beside her as I saw an eagle high in the distant sky. I pointed it out to Anna who shifted her attention.

“It’s beautiful, the way it just sits up there in the sky,” Anna said, as she shielded her eyes from the reflection in the river. “I wish I could just fly away sometimes. You know, be independent. What does it do up there?”

“It might have some responsibilities,” I answered. “It might be hunting while it soars.”

The eagle circled, flapped its wings once or twice, and continued to soar.

“Do you think that it might be looking out for us?” she asked. “You know, kind of watching out for us.”

“Funny, I used to ask my brother that same question,” I answered. “He said that when an eagle soars it is hunting.”

Anna shrugged her shoulders in disappointment. Just then a nearby splashing sound brought our attention back to the river.

“Over there,” she pointed. Even her fingers attracted me. It was weird. Her finger singled out a section of the river just across from us where the edge of the bank jutted out. At first glance it looked like a normal bend in the river, but the collection of logs, twigs and mud gave the beaver lodge away. Up stream from the lodge, I made out the sleek features of a beaver that was quietly gnawing a piece of willow branch that jutted out from the shore. Only the beaver’s head was above water, and its fur was matted back. This made its body look much smaller than when it was dry. The beaver disappeared under the water, and reappeared a little farther up stream.

One of the voyageurs from Simpson’s canoe had already crossed the river and carefully made his way upstream.

“What’s he doing?” Anna’s eyebrows drew together.

“It looks to me like he wants beaver steak for supper.”

The voyageur carried a paddle and stopped. He listened just downstream from the lodge.

I pointed upstream to the beaver Anna and I were watching. The voyageur saw me point and moved in that direction.

“What are you doing?” Anna frowned, and slapped my hand out of the air. She was cute even when she was angry. “It’s cute.”

“It’s dinner,” I corrected. “And it’s the reason we are carrying thousands of pounds of stuff over a mountain range.”

By the water where the voyageur was standing, a beaver stopped nibbling. Anna and I hadn’t seen this one before. Now I knew why the voyageur had stopped.

The beaver, aware of the voyageur’s presence, backed away from the shore, and towards his lodge.

“See,” Anna remarked triumphantly, “He got away!”

“How do you know it’s a he?” I questioned.

The voyageur travelled a bit upstream following the beaver. The beaver appeared ready to dive. It raised up its hind section and dunked its head under the water. But it didn’t dive. Instead the beaver lifted its large flat tail out of the water and slapped it down again. The resulting sound was a deep loud splash. It was like a large boulder dropped into a lake.

“What’s it doing that for?” Anna asked surprised at the amount of noise that was made by the animal.

“It’s a danger signal. It’s probably warning the other beaver upstream that there is danger in the area. Beavers depend on one other for preservation.” We looked upstream for the other beaver, but it had submerged. The first beaver returned to the half-chewed log again. That was not a good move because the voyageur had stopped just above it, and held the paddle high above its head. Just as the voyageur was about to strike, there was another splashing sound and the beaver disappeared under the water.

“It must have been the other beaver that splashed this time,” I commented.

“See, they’re protecting each other.” Anna’s concern lifted momentarily. There was a softness to her voice that echoed what the beavers had just done for each other.

The voyageur perched himself on a thick branch that reached part way over the river. With one hand holding the paddle, and the other holding a branch, he scanned the water for the beaver.

“That beaver can stay under for a long time,” I told Anna. “Up to ten minutes.”

“I hope he swims away.” Anna privately cheered.

As I sat looking at the other shoreline, I felt a nudge at the back of my elbow. Before I knew it Anna’s hand poked through. She let her hand drape over my forearm. She seemed a lot more relaxed than I was. My heart went crazy, and my stomach flip-flopped. I did like the warmth of her skin as it touched mine. Anna just looked straight ahead at the unfolding action across the river. I could no longer focus on the beaver’s dilemma. I tried to speak.

“Did you know that beavers could stay under water for a ten minutes?”

“You just said that,” Anna smiled.

At that point I decided to keep my mouth shut for fear that something else stupid would come out. Just then the beaver surfaced.

“It’s neat how they depend on each other. If I were them I would swim away,” Anna remarked, as she tugged my arm closer to her.

“By protecting each other they’re able to survive.” I was able to say one thing without having my lips betray me.

“Do you think there’s little beavers in the den?” She questioned.

“Probably,” I answered. “Look over there by the lodge where the other beaver surfaced.”

Anna leaned into my arm as I pointed.

“I see,” she said.

The second beaver started beating its tail on the water wildly. As soon as it surfaced it gave another loud splash. The voyageur leaned out far from the branch and held the paddle high up in the air ready to strike.

“No,” Anna cried silently.

As the first beaver swam slowly into the range of the paddle the second beaver splashed again. The voyageur swung the paddle violently down striking the surface of the water. As he carried through the force of his swing he lost his balance. He plunged into the river.

The first beaver came up by the other one, and seemed to watch as the voyageur’s arms flailed in the water. The voyageur swore as he watched his paddle float down the river.

We laughed out loud. When he saw us sitting on the shore, the voyageur’s arms flailed some more and he swore at us.

I didn’t know what I was cheering for more, the beavers or my new-found relationship.

### **Chapter Seventeen: Portage**

Over the next few days Anna was as friendly as ever. I told her about being from Montreal, and she told me what it was like to live in London. Her father used to own a farm, but because it was not large enough to make a profit he was forced sell it. Then the family moved to London, and her father found a job in a textile factory.

“So how did you come to be a nanny at a H.B.C. fort?” I nudged her to tell me more.

The sun slowly sank in the western sky as we sat close to each other beside a camp fire. The wood cracked and popped. The other voyageurs sang and passed around jugs of rum. I think that the rum only served to increase the volume of their singing. The McGills and their baby were sound asleep in their tent from which a constant snoring sound could be heard. Then the conversation and singing died down.

Anna turned to me and said, “My father’s boss forced him to bring us to his factory when I was fourteen and my sister was twelve. The work was easy at first. My sister Sara and I both thought it was a game just sweeping and cleaning up offices. But later on, we were forced to work late into the evenings. I still didn’t mind, because I knew that the little money that we made really helped out our parents. My father still didn’t like it much.” When Anna finished, her head lowered and her voice softened to a whisper. The other voyageurs paid no attention.

“Is that it?” I shrugged, “You worked at a factory?” The story seemed to be incomplete. I continued, “I told you that I left home because my parents didn’t want me, because there was no place for me. Why did you leave London?” Once I finished speaking I wasn’t sure from her expression that I wanted to hear the answer. A voyageur threw another log into the blaze. I thought I heard an eagle scream. I looked up into the night’s sky.

“What are you lookin’ at?” her voice lightened.

“Oh nothing. I just thought I heard something.” I changed the subject back. “Why did you move from London?”

“Well,” Anna continued, all life was absent from her voice. “Sara was responsible for cleaning Mr. Tannin’s office. Every day she had to clean the top of his desk, change the ink well and empty the trash. He was never in his office when she went in there to clean. The light was

off. Because we cleaned late in the day after school, there were very few managers in the factory.” Anna’s voice became shaky, and I could barely hear her speak. I moved closer.

“You cleaned Tannin’s office?”

“No, Sara did,” she corrected. “Sara hummed when she worked, she was a happy girl. Never did anything to hurt anybody. She wouldn’t kill a fly.” Her eyes started to cloud up.

“Look I don’t need to know,” I said. This conversation wasn’t supposed to be this serious.

“No, I want to tell you.” Her voice was resolute.

“Tannin didn’t go home that night.” The tears in Anna’s eyes started to flow. “He was waiting in his office for her.” Anna used her whole hand to wipe away the tears but it did little good. “I walked with Sara right by his office. If only I had gone in with her....I could have prevented...” Anna’s voice croaked with sadness, and she had to stop talking to regain control. Her lips quivered as she gasped for breath.

She suddenly got up and started walking towards the shore. I went after her. Jokes and calls from the other voyageurs rang out in the night air.

I was soon swallowed by darkness, and I squinted to see Anna. She was sitting along the shore. I sat down beside her. Her tears had stopped. We sat for a while listening to the river until she spoke again:

“I went on down the hall to clean the other offices, and I heard noises. I thought she was just singing, and sometimes she had conversations with herself, you know like she was pretending to be a maid for a royal family.” She imitated someone royal, “Would you like your tea now sir,” I chuckled at her accent because it was so easy for her to do.

“I was down at the end of the hall when I heard her scream. I could barely hear it because the factory machines made so much noise in the factory.” The sobs returned. This time Anna didn’t try to stop them. They poured down her face and fell into the night. The reflection of the moon lit up her tear-stained face. Her hands shook, and she took a deep breath. She faltered, then began speaking again: “I thought that something was wrong. I walked back in her direction, and I heard her scream. I ran to the office she was cleaning, and the light was on. In the coloured glass window I could make out the shape of a man. It was Mr. Tannin. The door was locked. I yelled and pounded on the door, but he wouldn’t stop. I ran to the factory floor and yelled for help, but I couldn’t see anyone. The sound of the machines beat out my screams. I ran back and the door was open. I saw my sister crying in the corner all curled up like a play doll.”

I put my arm around Anna for support. There was nothing else I could do.

The river soothed us as we sat silent and stared into the water.

Awhile later she concluded, “My father wouldn’t let us go back to the factory to work, and we didn’t have enough money to survive. I read in a paper that nannies were needed over here and I asked my parents if I could go. Father said no at first. But soon it got so bad we ran out of food. With winter coming, they let me go,” she said softly.

\* \* \*

“The way I see it, there are three rules to portagin’,” Lizzard explained as we unloaded the canoe, and ran the gear to shore. It was the fifth of September according to McDonald who always kept track of these things, and was amazed at how fast we were moving.

“I can’t believe this.” I remembered him saying, “We’re going to be swimming in the Pacific in under a month.” Sittin’ on top of a mountain, I couldn’t believe it either.

“Lizzard, wrap my trumpline around that bundle of pemmican will you?” I asked, as I climbed on shore and tested the weight of the bundle. It was just about full. The one-hundred and eighty pound weight was easier to lift now. Over the many portages that we had done, my back became much stronger. My neck muscles gained the most bulk. They had thickened under the weight of the supporting strap that balanced the heavy bundles. My legs also strengthened from the strange rabbit-like running that I developed to best carry the weight. When the journey started I carried all of the weight using only my back. I found that if I leaned forward and ran, the load was more over my legs and easier to carry. If I added a kind of running to that posture, then the momentum that the weight afforded helped move me forward. Some of the voyageurs tried this approach and soon we were all running, arms pumping with our loads. Mr. McDonald thought that this had cut our portage time in half. I told him that it was just easier to do.

Lizzard grabbed my strap and wound it around my bundle. He then swung it up and over my head. I grabbed the trumpline and placed it on my forehead.

“The first rule is that a portage has to be the shortest distance between two bodies of water,” Lizzard instructed. I wondered how long he had been thinking about these rules.

“The second rule is that a portage has to be at the lowest level,” he said as he lifted the second bundle and placed it on the first. I had to agree with him on that. The portage we did at Methy Lake was a lot easier. I had an easier time breathing even though I was less fit then. I wondered if the air was different up on top of a mountain than down at sea level.

“And third?” I questioned.

Lizzard continued, “Avoid soft ground, because I hate sinking into mud when I’m loaded down.”

“Sounds good Lizzard,” I complimented as I lifted his pack up to his back.

The baby kept Anna so busy that we weren’t able to talk much over the next few days. Mrs. McGill was always fussing about something. If it wasn’t the crying, it was the food or the laundry. It seemed that anytime we stopped, Anna was washing clothes. In the canoe it seemed like the baby cried constantly. Anna said that it was because he was teething.

As we started down the portage, Anna carried the baby up ahead of us. “I’ll probably pass ‘em in no time,” I thought as I started my half-run and pumped my arms to get a rhythm. Perspiration soon beaded my forehead, and my arms and legs were wet with effort. I could hear Lizzard’s puffing close behind me.

“Hey, Taylor,” Lizzard paused between the words to get a breath of air. “I guess this breaks the rule about the height of a portage.”

“We haven’t broken that one before.” I was already running short of breath. “Lizzard, how far is this portage supposed to be?”

“About....a...half-mile.” The pause between his words grew longer.

“At least we won’t break the rule about the distance,” I was growing tired fast, and wondered if I could make the whole portage without a break.

“Is there even a trail here?” I called back, but Lizzard didn’t respond. He was probably just trying to save his energy. The trees were getting closer together and started to hit the side of my bundles. It slowed me down because I had a hard time keeping a run going with trees jumping in the way. I could hear Lizzard grunting behind me.

“Did you say something?” he sputtered. His face was soaked with sweat.

“Yeah, I can’t find a trail here. I think that you should make that one of your rules.” I blew out hard. “There, now you have a fourth rule!”

Just then I felt my feet sink.

“Oh no, I think that makes two out of the rules that we broke in one portage. I have a bad feeling about this,” I said.

Up ahead Mr. McDonald shouted, “This is the worst road in Christendom.” I was surprised to hear him use such strong language.

My half-run turned into a muddy crawl. There was no way to make any time on this trail. For a portage route it looked like it had never been travelled before. It was very frustrating. The perspiration that gathered on my forehead turned into rivers of sweat. My whole body was soaked, as I lifted my feet through the mud.

“Ouch, watch that branch!” Lizzard complained.

“Don’t follow so close. These branches are whipping against me, too,” I replied.

“Are you ready to stop and rest?” I asked, turning my body half a step back towards Lizzard. It was impossible to turn my head because of the leather strap against it.

“No, are you?”

“Nope, I just wanted to know if you needed a rest,” I teased. “I can hear you huffin’ pretty good back there.”

“Huffin’! You sound like a wind storm with the noise that you’re making.” Lizzard read the tone of my voice.

“Yeah, it sounds like your going to die if we don’t stop. I’m just worried about you.” I teased as I increased the pace to see if he could keep up.

“Don’t worry about me. At least I’m in good shape.” Lizzard seemed to have little problem keeping up.

“Is this pace too fast for you? I could slow it down if you’re having trouble keeping up.”

I went as fast as I could in the muck. I had to keep my hands out in front of me to keep the branches out of my face.

“No problem. Watch out I’m closing in on you,” Lizzard said.

I could hear Lizzard’s voice right behind me. I wondered how he was keeping the branches out of his face. That was when I felt my feet give out from under me. I tripped on a log and tumbled head over heels. My packs crashed down to the ground around me. Stuck in the mud. Then Lizzard hit. He was going as fast a pace as I was. When he tripped over me his whole body was in the air for a split second. His bundles crashed into mine, one just missed my head by a fraction of an inch. Lizzard plowed head-first into me.

“What are you doing laying down on the trail?” he laughed.

“Waiting for you.” I laughed too.

Putting out so much energy at the beginning of the portage was not a good idea. The rest of the mile went very slowly, and we had to stop and rest frequently. When we finally got to the end of the portage, everybody else had already eaten, and were sitting down relaxing.

When I finished the trail I threw down my bundles and collapsed by a group of voyageurs. My head was floating from exhaustion. I closed my eyes and hoped that someone would bring me a drink of water. As I rested I heard Mr. McDonald’s voice approach.

“Delmore, I was following you on the trail,” he began. I looked up and saw that I crashed right beside the world’s ugliest human, and I didn’t have the strength to move. Instead I sat and waited for Lizzard to finish the trail.

“Yeah I remember you behind me,” Delmore grunted.

“I think you dropped this on the ground.” McDonald held out his open hand with an object that I couldn’t see.

“Yeah it’s mine. My mother gave it to me years ago.” Delmore held out his open hand. “It must have dropped out of my pocket.”

McDonald dropped the object into Delmore’s hand. “It sure is a beautiful stone,” he commented, as Delmore quickly stuffed the stone into the pocket of his tunic.

“Stone,” I repeated to myself. My eyes were still shut to shield out the sun.

McDonald continued obviously interested, “Is it an emerald?”

## Chapter Eighteen: New Caledonia

On Friday September twelfth, we paddled into McLeod’s Lake.

“Some people still call this Trout Lake, because of the size of fish you can pull out of here,” Mr. McGill remarked, and shifted his position towards me.

“Did you know that this is one of the largest beaver producing areas on the continent for its size?” He continued, not trying to conceal his enthusiasm.

“No I didn’t,” I said, careful to keep up the pace that Delmore set. I looked around the lake and saw a number of beaver lodges along the shore, where I could also make out several trails that led around the lake. I presumed that these were used by the trappers who set snares to catch the beaver. Mr. McGill turned around and settled back into his seat.

“Let’s go fishin’ and see if we can get a trout,” Lizzard said. He had obviously listened to McGill’s comments.

“Sure,” I answered.

Even Delmore was listening. “Is fishing the only fun that you can come up with?” he interrupted. Delmore’s comment confirmed that the canoe was not a safe place to talk.

When we arrived at shore Simpson gathered everyone together. With McDonald and Fraser, the bag pipe player, with him he announced:

“We will be spending the day here. I want all of you to clean up and prepare you clothes for our arrival at Fort St. James.” He looked around to see if everybody was listening. “Men you need to cut off your beards tonight so that you won’t have that much to shave tomorrow.”

As he said that, I rubbed my smooth face.

“I guess that won’t be a problem for you,” said Lizzard as he jabbed his elbow into my side.

Just as Simpson was finishing his speech, I pulled Lizzard close.

“I need to talk to you,” I urged.

Lizzard pulled away, “Talk, I’m right here.”

I walked away from the group towards a trail that led around the lake.

“Remember Gabriel, the guy whose body they pulled out of the water at Fort York?”

“Yeah, so?” Lizzard showed his impatience with my actions.

“Well, you said that I had no proof that Delmore committed the murder.”

Still not serious, Lizzard said, “Did a little bird drop the murder weapon into your hand?”

He pointed to a bird soaring high in the sky.

“No! Will you listen to me!”

“Okay, what do you have?” Lizzard folded his arms and waited.

“Well Gabriel had this large green emerald when we were at York Factory. He showed it to me. He always wore it around his neck.” I looked at Lizzard who stood unmoved at what I said. “Well yesterday McDonald saw Delmore drop the emerald, and I saw McDonald give it back to him.”

“How do you know that it’s not his stone?”

“Well Gabriel’s had a hole on each side where the necklace was treaded through. If the one that’s in Delmore’s pocket has those same holes I’d say that makes him suspicious.”

“How are we going to get the stone to look at it?” Lizzard started to come on side.

“The way I see it, the only chance we have is to search his tunic while he shaves. That might be pretty soon.” I looked back and saw voyageurs taking their packs from where they had been unloaded. Many of the voyageurs walked towards the shore with knives in their hands.

“We’ll just have to stay close to Delmore,” I said. We left the path and went back to grab our gear.

I spotted Delmore over by the lake. He walked along the shore past a couple of voyageurs who were taking knives out of their packs. Delmore found a spot along the shore and took out a long sharp knife. He unbuttoned his tunic and hung it from a branch.

“You go distract him while I get search his tunic,” I said to Lizzard, “Go shave beside him.” I urged and stroked my hairless face to show him that I couldn’t do it. Lizzard reluctantly cleared a spot next to Delmore and started to shave. I saw that Delmore was shaving quickly so I didn’t have much time.

I walked along the shore behind Delmore and stopped as I got within arm’s reach of his shirt. Delmore was still shaving. I reached out with one arm to his top right pocket. My eyes focused on him as I plunged my hand into the pocket. It was empty. Delmore rinsed off his

whiskers from the knife. He then returned the knife to his face. My hand felt along the fabric searching for another pocket. I found the left one and dug my hand in. I felt something hard and round. I smiled as I pulled it out. It was a pebble. Lizzard glanced my way, careful not to distract Delmore. I shrugged my shoulder at him. I felt for other pockets at the bottom of his shirt. Delmore coughed and pulled the knife away from his face. His attention shifted away from shaving. I froze. The next few seconds passed like hours. Finally, he dipped the knife again in the cold lake and continued shaving. I felt another pocket on the inside of his shirt. I searched for an opening. Delmore stopped his knife about an inch from his face. He looked down at the ground. My hand found the opening of the pocket. Delmore started to turn around.

“OUCH!” Lizzard yelled. Delmore shifted his posture to see what Lizzard was complaining about.

“Shave much?” Delmore commented.

I pulled my hand out of the empty pocket and made my way back to the canoes. A few minutes later Lizzard approached.

“Well it wasn’t in his shirt,” I said, as Lizzard put his knife back in his bag.

“I got cut for nothing.”

“I’m sure he’s got it somewhere. Probably in his bag.”

“I’m not looking for it! I’m out of your plan to catch this guy,” Lizzard said. “I’m goin’ fishing.” He dug in his gear and pulled out a small box of hooks with a piece of line wrapped around it, and turned to go to the shore.

Lizzard was right. It was too dangerous to go through another voyageurs bag in broad daylight. Anyway, I didn’t think that Delmore would keep something like that in his gear. It was too valuable. I grabbed my line and hooks and went to the lake as well.

## Chapter Nineteen: Assault

I racked my brains trying to think of how I could get that emerald from Delmore. I knew that I couldn't ask Lizzard to help any more, and there was nothing more that I could do that day. Delmore had disappeared from where he was shaving, and I knew that if I searched for him, it would make him suspicious of me.

Along the trail, I spotted several leg-hold traps that the trappers had set to catch beaver. There was one on the edge of the trail. It snapped shut when I kicked it out of the way. I found a beautiful sheltered spot. I brought along my paddle to use as a fishing pole. I dug a small hole in the flat end of the oar with my knife and threaded my line through it. To the hook I attached a small lump of pemmican. There was a small piece of berry that I punched through the end that kept it on. I dropped my line in and checked it to make sure that the hook was deep enough. I relaxed and rested my back on a tree, and gazed up at the sky. High up in the sky an eagle soared. I wondered if it was the same bird that Lizzard pointed to earlier. The eagle barely moved its wings as it circled around the Northern part of the lake. "Maybe he's fishing, too," I thought.

A little while later Anna came by with a basket of laundry.

"I'm looking for a quiet place to wash these," she said as she held up a stained white diaper.

"Not near me," I joked and pinched my nose. "You'll spook the fish."

“Looks like it’s not just the fish that’ll get spooked,” she joked, smiled good-bye, and continued down the trail. “I’ll be just down the path. Why don’t you come for a visit later?” she called back.

“Sure, as long as you don’t mind the smell of fish, ‘cause I’ll have plenty of ‘em.”

Then I remembered the traps. “Hey Anna,” I called, my tone was more serious. “Watch out for those traps. I found one further back on the trail.”

“I will,” she yelled and then turned around and disappeared down the path.

Just as I started to relax the end of my line jerked and nearly pulled the paddle that I held loosely in my hand. I grabbed it with both of my hands and pulled the paddle up. The eagle screeched above as if happy with my catch. As I pulled the paddle up again, the line went soft. “At least something likes the taste of pemmican,” I muttered to myself. I re-baited my hook and tossed it back into the water with a wide swing of my paddle, and waited. I watched the sun slowly move across the horizon, and the eagle continued to soar. “Watcha lookin’ for?” I thought to myself. “Are you fishin’ too?”

“So, you catch anything?” a voice behind me inquired. It was Mr. McDonald.

“No, just a bite,” I answered.

“Have you seen Delmore?”

“No, not since I saw him shaving about an hour ago. He was down the lake that way.” I pointed over towards the canoes.

“If you see him tell him that I’m looking for him. Mr. Simpson wants to see something he’s got.”

“I’ll tell him if I see him,” I grabbed my paddle with both hands, and Mr. McDonald back-tracked his way to the canoes.

I settled in to fish again when I heard a noise high above. I looked up and the eagle screeched again. “You’re only supposed to call when I catch a fish,” I said out loud, and turned my attention back to the lake. The end of my paddle jerked down and I pulled up hard. “Wow! This is a big one.”

I stood up to get better leverage on the paddle. The eagle cried even louder as I looked up. It was lower than before. I pulled harder, and the line went soft again. I thought that I had lost him, and just as I relaxed my grip I felt a pull that made me take a step forward. Just as I yanked the paddle hard towards the shore, the line snapped off right at the tip of the paddle.

I looked up to see the eagle in a straight dive for the lake. “I guess my brother’s right after all. He’s not up there to protect us,” I said to myself. “He’s fishin’ just like I am.”

Suddenly, the bird dropped from the sky like a rock. It’s claws were pushed out beneath him reaching for the water. Just above the water he screamed again, spread his wings and aborted his attack. “You’ll never catch any fish if you keep warning them before you hit the water,” I said to the bird as it glided towards shore.

I heard another scream from over in the direction where the eagle had drifted. It wasn’t the eagle’s screech this time. It seemed human and came from down the lake where Anna had gone. I climbed to the trail and ran in the direction that I heard the yell. “She must have caught herself in one of the beaver traps,” I thought.

“Anna!” I called. There was no response. If Anna was trapped she would have answered my call. My heart was in my mouth, as my feet raced along the trail. I looked down and saw my paddle in my hand.

Another scream echoed from up ahead and terror gripped my body. I had to get to her. Just then a branch that stuck out along the trail caught my foot and sent me crashing to the

ground. I struggled to get up. My pants had become tangled in the branch. I pulled hard, and the material ripped and released my leg. I jumped to my feet and ran.

I heard another muffled scream, followed by another low, gruff voice.

“Shut up!” it commanded.

It was Delmore.

I shook with rage as I rounded the trail to find Delmore sitting on her chest. His left hand covered her mouth, while his right hand held her hands firmly in the dirt above her head. Her legs flailed and struggled to kick.

“GET OFF HER!” I yelled at Delmore. His back was towards me.

Delmore didn't seem that concerned with my presence. Her eyes were filled with horror as they locked with mine.

“She's mine. Get lost!” He snarled.

“GET OFF HER!” I screamed at him.

“This occasion doesn't involve you Taylor,” his greasy hand left her mouth and tore at her clothing. “If you don't get out of here I'll kill you like I did your poor friend. Only difference is your death'll be a lot more painful. At least your friend drowned quickly.”

Anna screamed and struggled to get loose, but her hands were pinned down by his arms.

I held the paddle high above my head.

“GET THE HELL OFF HER!” I lifted the paddle back high above my head.

Delmore turned to see what I was doing and put his massive right arm in the air to defend against the paddle.

When he released Anna's arms she dug her nails deep into his face. Delmore's face twisted in pain as he re-focused his attention back on his victim.

Just as he was about to strike her, I drove the paddle down on his back. Delmore turned over sideways and rolled off of Anna, but he quickly recovered. By the time I could raise the paddle again Delmore was on his knees. His hands searched his belt line. When he found a leather sheath it was empty. All three of us found the knife at the same time. It was on the ground just out of Delmore's reach. He paused trying to distract me.

"You're going to look worse than Gabriel when I finish with you," he said, as he shuffled his knees towards the knife. Anna dove for it and pushed it towards me. I saw my chance.

"Why you little...," Delmore yelled with anger etched in every muscle in his face. He dove to grab her, and I swung the paddle down hard. The blow sent his head backwards as he collapsed on the ground. He didn't stay there long and quickly got to his feet.

"You man enough to play fair?" Blood trickled from where the paddle had struck his head. He stepped carefully towards me. "Gimme the paddle boy."

I lunged the oar at his stomach. It was a mistake. Delmore's swift hands grabbed the flat surface, and with a sudden action he pulled it out of my hands and threw it into the bush.

"Now the odds are even." He bent down and snatched up the knife. "I'm not known for playin' fair."

I stepped back and tried to gain some time to think. Anna struggled to get to the trail.

"Stay there!" He ordered as he waved the knife at her throat. "I'm not finished with you yet."

While he was distracted by Anna, I saw my only chance. I ran at him and grabbed the hand with the knife. We both fell to the ground. I heard a tearing sound, and looked over to see the knife had punctured my left arm. A mixture of blood and mud dirtied the sleeve of my tunic. His hand still held the knife, and my hands were glued to his arm. Delmore's other hand

punched my head. I felt my grip starting to loosen. With a final jerk he pulled his hands free. He held the knife.

We both jumped to our feet and faced each other. As I grabbed my bleeding arm I saw a piece of metal. It sparkled on the ground behind Delmore. It was one of the leg hold traps that I saw earlier on the trail.

“Oh, is the little boy cut? Let’s get one on the other arm to match.” He swung the knife. It just missed my chest.

I could see that another step back would set Delmore’s foot in the trap.

“Where’s Gabriel’s emerald?” I questioned. I stalled for time.

Delmore’s eyes locked on mine as he pulled a large green stone from his pants pocket. “Right here. What good does a gem like this do for a dead man,” he replied, as he held it up to eye level. Delmore then dropped the stone on the ground and challenged my eyes to follow it. I didn’t dare lose eye contact. I had a trick of my own to try.

“Delmore, don’t step back. There’s a trap behind your left foot,” I warned. My eyes dared him to look down. Delmore detected the challenge in my voice. I hoped that he would take the bait.

“Oh is there now?” he said as he lifted his leg and leaned backwards. “You must think that I’m a real idiot!”

Just as he finished talking, his foot triggered the trap. Its long sharp jaws snapped round his ankle and dug into the flesh of his leg. The knife fell from Delmore’s grip as he hit the ground and gave a loud scream. He tried to pull his leg free, but movement only made the iron jaws tighten. The trap was secured to the ground by a long chain and spike. The anger in

Delmore's face was replaced with pain, as he crumbled to the ground. Anna grabbed the knife off the ground, and came to my side.

"Should of listened to me," I smiled as I picked up the emerald. I rolled it over in my hand and revealed two holes on either side of it.

"What's going on here?" a familiar voice sounded from behind. Mr. McDonald approached us with a pistol in his hand. Delmore groaned on the ground unable to free his leg from the trap.

"I heard your yell down the path, but I see you don't need me anymore," McDonald shook his pistol at Delmore.

"We do need you," I said and tossed the emerald to McDonald. "That stone belonged to a friend of mine who was murdered back at York Factory."

"Is that the fellow whose body was recovered from Hayes river back at York Factory?" McDonald questioned.

"Yes, his name was Gabriel, and this man murdered him," I said as I pointed to Delmore. "My friend also owned that emerald. It was on his body before he died."

"Well the stone will be listed on Gabriel's personal inventory form." McDonald watched as Delmore struggled to his knees. "Get up! It looks like you're guilty of two crimes," McDonald ordered, as he twisted the pistol at him.

## Chapter Twenty: Fort St. James

September, 1828

“Taylor, you need to paddle harder to keep up. You’re letting this canoe down!” the voice of the steersman ordered.

I dug my paddle deep into the river. After yesterday’s rest my arms were strong. It felt good to stretch my muscles. They obeyed the action of the oar. The eagle carved into my paddle had gone through a lot over the past two months. At Fort York it was innocent, fresh and untested. Now its wood was water-faded and chips and cuts now marked its edges. Even the eagle had not been unaffected by the wildness of nature. The image was no less striking for it had been deeply carved into the hard wood, but the river’s erosion had softened those same indents and blended them into the wood. No longer was it a carving of an eagle on a paddle, as Simpson had referred to it. It was a paddle with an eagle decoration.

I remember when I first decorated my paddle, I wanted the eagle to stand out. I wanted other voyageurs to notice my eagle. I wanted my paddle to be different. Now two months, and two and a half thousand miles later I noticed several things. The more that my paddle experienced the voyage and did its part to push our canoe forward, the less it became a work of art that I wanted people to notice. It became a paddle, one of many in the canoe. It did its best work when it was accompanied by other paddles to the cadence set by the steersman. Lizzard said to me early in the voyage that a single paddle will always make a large canoe go in circles. I had to admit that some of the times I worked against the efforts of the other rowers in the canoe. I thought that I could paddle the canoe on my own. I now realized that my paddle

needed the others to send the canoe forward. It takes more than one paddle to make a canoe go upstream.

As the voyage progressed, I found myself noticing the decorations that other voyageurs had put on their paddles. When I took the time to look, I found that they were as decorative and intricately designed as mine. Because mine was new it stood out, different from the rest. It would have been easy to think that mine was better because it was different.

“What’s your problem Taylor? Your paddle’s only half in the water. That paddle ain’t useful unless it’s used,” the steersman commanded. I looked back at Lizzard, who replaced Delmore as the steersman. Lizzard was promoted to steersman by McDonald.

Delmore was arrested for murdering Gabriel and what he did to Anna. I was glad to see him finally face justice for what he’d done. I was also happy to see that a dear friend’s murder did not go unsolved. Anna, upon hearing him confess to killing Gabriel, was the last bit of proof that Simpson needed to put him under arrest.

Anna still sported a bruise under her left eye, and I caught her rubbing it even though she said it didn’t hurt. Much of her attention was now focused on the baby whose teeth started to come through last night. He cried all the time now. I would too if I had bone breaking the skin in my mouth. Anna taught me that babies have different cries for different things. They cry when they need milk. They cry a cranky little cry when they’re tired. They cry a loud wailin’ cry when they have pain. I joked with her; “And it’s the parents who cry when they have to be changed.” It’s funny. I thought that a cry was just a cry, but when I listened to the baby, I did hear a difference in the sound of its cry.

Beside me sat a new voyageur who replaced Lizzard. He had a fresh face, unscathed by the extreme weather. I asked him about his paddle when he approached the canoe for the first

time. He was obviously excited to show it off. It displayed a beautiful carving of a grizzly. He must have spent days painting the colourful golden brown of its fur. The paws of the grizzly reached up the handle and proudly displayed its long sharp claws.

“So, what do ya think of my paddle?” He lifted it out of the water so that I could see its decoration.

“The paddle I like best is one that knows it’s part of a team,” I responded, and dug my oar into the water to find the rhythm of the canoe. His expression told me that he didn’t totally understand what I meant. With a confused look on his face he started to paddle too.

I knew that the McGills’ would get off at Fort St. James. That was about a day away from where we were, the highest point above the ocean that we would reach on the expedition. It was also where we would start canoeing downstream. Mr. McDonald said that we’d be doing a lot of portages because waterfalls obstructed most of the river from that point on. At least it wouldn’t be an uphill battle.

Anna was planning to get off with the McGills’. They still needed her, and she needed the money. I knew that a piece of me would be gone when I wouldn’t be able to hold her anymore. I wouldn’t have someone to tell my secret feelings to. I felt as if I would have to put that part of my life back in a bottle and cork it tight. When we talked about it she had cried, and strangely, seeing her cry kind of made me feel good, knowing that she would miss me too.

The journey had shown me that it was important to know when you’re going against the current. When I began the journey, I made the mistake of thinking that all I needed was strength and independence to survive. Being part of the journey taught me that life was like being part of a team. I depended on all of the other members of the canoe for my survival, as much as they needed me for theirs. If I took that responsibility lightly by not working hard or not paying

attention to the river, I placed their lives in danger. I guess that's what Lizzard was really trying to say back when I was locked up in the Buttertub.

As the banks of the river drew closer, I thought about my contract with the Hudson's Bay Company. I liked being a voyageur and I intended to see that three-year obligation through to the end. It was a good, simple life, where a hard day's work always rewarded you with the river you left behind.

I could see up ahead that we were coming to another portage. The river narrowed, large rocks lined the sides. There was no clear way up if we stayed on the water. Along the side of the river a trail followed the shoreline up.

"Looks like another portage," I motioned to the new guy. His face was covered with sweat, and his arms looked like they could barely hold a paddle.

"Good, I need a break." The corners of his mouth curved up to reveal a fragile smile. "I don't know if I can keep up this incredible pace," he continued as he wiped his sweat soaked face.

"Just remember, it's all of our jobs to help this go canoe against the current," I smiled back at him, as I dug my paddle into the river.

## Fact and Fiction

In the creation of this novel fictional characters have been woven into a historical incident. While the purpose of marrying fact and fiction is to engage young readers in Canadian historical events, it is important to distinguish between what really happened in 1828 and what was the imagination of the author.

Governor George Simpson was the actual Governor-In-Chief of the Hudson's Bay Company, and led a canoe voyage from York Factory to Fort Langley from July to October in 1828. His second-in-command for that journey was Archibald McDonald, who was later appointed to the post of Chief Factor for Ft. Langley. McDonald recorded the voyage in a journal that was first published in 1872. McDonald's story serves as the framework from which this story is told. For example, on August 9, 1828, McDonald wrote in his journal that they, "Killed a cat." In the story that was the same location where Delmore shot the lion and saved Lizzard's life.

The history of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company that McDonald tells Taylor in chapter twelve is true. Peter Fidler did set up Nottingham House on Lake Athabasca to try to compete with the North West Company in 1802. At the time of the 1828 journey, however, McDonald recorded that all that remained of Nottingham House was the foundation. In the novel McDonald shows Adam Taylor the entire structure, as he explained Fidler's conflict with the North West Company.

The only other non-fictional characters in this novel were Fraser, the bagpipe player, and Dr. Hamlyn. The account of how Fraser interviewed for the job of piper is real. Further, research uncovered his actual bagpipes allowing them to be accurately described in chapter three.

All of the other characters are fictional, and were designed to be the messengers of history to young readers. The conflict between Adam Taylor and Delmore is fiction. There is no hint that there was any conflict on the voyage except for an incident where one voyageur accused another of, “tampering with his wife.”

The geography and the history is real, as researched by the author and retold through the eyes of Adam Taylor. The rich history of the Hudson’s Bay Company contained within the pages of this story is real. The Hudson’s Bay Company needs no fiction to illuminate its important place in Canada’s history.

*Teaching Unit*  
*for the Novel*  
*Against the Current*

## *Rationale*

One of the important issues for me in teaching junior high students is having a classroom that is highly motivational, while retaining enough content to transform students educationally. Activities that have not been planned out in terms of their educational value are, just that: activities. Teachers in a social studies classroom fall prey too often to textbook teaching that introduces factual based material to kids. This unemotional approach fails to connect kids to the real stuff of history, of geography, of social studies. Getting kids to connect with Japan, Brazil, or the C.I.S. , needs to have more than text books supplemented by illegally taped videos. This unit helps because it allows students to identify with a fictional character and to learn about Canada's history through a novel.

## *About the Novel Format*

I have chosen to complete a novel for two reasons. First, it allows me to tell students about history through a story format. While it is important to maintain the accuracy of historical fact, there is still a place for an interesting format, with a fictional plot, and characters. In this case I have chosen the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company's trip from Fort York to Fort Langley in 1828. Also, the novel structure allows teachers to integrate the unit with Language Arts.

## *About Writing a Novel*

The reason for writing a novel is simple. I wanted to write one. I also wanted to write about something that interested me. I have a love for history and enjoy finding out about specific facts regarding Canada's history. The project allowed me to learn about a very interesting character in Canada's history. George Simpson was a person that I had never heard of until I started research for the novel. Through the process of creating this novel I have found out much about him. Further, I have found many occasions to introduce this extraordinary man to the students I teach. It has made one aspect of Canadian history to me personal because I've spent a lot of time doing novel homework. I think this process has made me a better teacher. I have a personal belief that students I teach learn more about stuff that I'm really interested in. I have a lot of background information, and I have more enthusiasm about the topic.

## *About Integration of Language Arts and Social Studies*

Combining language and social is not new to me. Many of my more in-depth projects combine the two classes. One of the obvious benefits is the amount of time it makes available to the project. Another benefit is the kind of time that can be used. When the two classes are combined the amount of time spent on the project is intensified. Students are allowed to spend more time over a shorter period on the project. Hence, the class is more interested, I have found, because they spend weeks, not months on the theme.

Integration also allows students to see the importance of language in social studies. Studying the content of a novel for the history is not isolated from studying the structure of a novel, i.e. how it is written. A well written novel is a better learning tool than a poorly written one. Students can not only learn from the history written into the novel, but they can study how the history is told through point of view. What bias there is in telling the story through the eyes of a teenage boy of European decent can be analyzed by breaking down the characters. Further, at a higher synthesis level the information contained within this novel can be compared and contrasted to how historical information is told from the students' text material or supplementary print media. Integration is something that has been used in elementary classrooms for years. We should not be so married to our disciplines as to disregard the utility of relating the two classes every so often.

## *About the Structure of the Unit*

I have structured this unit in a way that makes sense to the format of the novel. To proceed in any way other than the order of the novel would violate the structure of the novel. The essence of plot must be allowed to

engage students. They must not be directed to flip about the chapters in a non-sequential way using some contrived theme. The themes are contained within the pages, and the order is obvious. That is why I have placed chapter one at the beginning. To start with a theme like setting and jump from chapter three to ten would likely confuse the students and cause them to lose interest in the entire project. We don't ourselves read novels that way, and we shouldn't expect children to either.

The structure of the unit must be taken from the novel. Students must be able to see the message being taught. For example, if a lesson's objective is to teach what a personification is there should be examples of personifications in the novel. Further, those examples should be able to be made clear to student. If there are no strong examples of personification in the novel, then it should not be taught using the novel. The teacher must also be able to see the lesson being taught in the novel. If my lesson plans for students to learn about metaphors in chapter three, and the teacher can see none, then my lesson plan should be disregarded and something else should be taught. A lesson should not be taught because there is an accompanying worksheet that can be easily copied and distributed. It would be better to have the students just read the chapter and to discuss it generally then to fudge through something that is not apparent to the teacher.

### *Objectives of the Novel Unit*

#### *Social Studies 8*

- learn about the geography of Western Canada
- study the role of the Hudson's Bay Company in exploring Canada
- study the relationship between fur trading and the exploration and setting up of trade routes in Canada
- study the flow of water ways in Canada, and understand how important they were to Canada's development of trade routes
- study the lifestyles of the voyageurs and their importance to Canada's early trade
- work though and understand vocabulary like topography, latitude, longitude, elevation
- get an idea of what life was like back in the early 1800's
- learn how long it took early traders to travel across Canada
- learn about the importance of the canoe in early trading patterns
- learn about Governor Simpson, and Archibald McDonald
- learn the location and function of the early trading posts of the Hudson's Bay Company
- identify the rivalry between the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company

#### *Language Arts 8*

- study the structure of a novel
- learn about the plot of the novel and how it is structured
- study character, what makes a character interesting and believable
- look at the connections between how a character acts, dresses and speaks and how that character is developed
- identify how setting is written into a novel, and how the weaving of setting can add to the elements of plot and character
- develop vocabulary that helps to better understand Canada's history
- engage in a historical fiction, and better understand how it can instruct about Canadian history
- develop better writing, reading and speaking skills
- develop listening skills by working with other students and exchanging ideas
- understand the importance of dialogue in advancing the action of a story
- develop better spelling skills through using the novel to create lists of words that are used in the novel
- develop reading skills through reading for extended periods of time
- improve writing skills by writing a historical fiction story based upon a time period that interests them

## *The Unit*

*Lesson*  
*One*

**SS1**  
**Introduction to Canadian Geography**  
**Guiding Question**  
What are some of the different aspects of Canadian Geography? Mountains, rivers, lakes,  
**Activity**  
Using an atlas locate, name and draw in Canada's mountain ranges, rivers (the major ones) and lakes.  
**Evaluation:**  
/5 location and titling  
/5 colouring  
/10 total

*Lesson*  
*Two*

**SS2 Chapters 1-2**  
**History of Canadian Geography**  
**Guiding Question**  
What was known about the geography of Canada in the early 1800's  
**Activity**  
Read the first chapter orally to the students.  
Write a journal entry as the main character about the geography he sees in the first chapter.  
**Evaluation**  
/5 for journal entry including information about geography  
total /5

*Lesson*

**SS3 Chapters 3-4**  
**History of the Hudson's Bay Company(HBC)**

**LA1**  
**Introduction to the Novel**  
Pre-reading activity  
**Guiding Question**  
What does the title of the novel tell you about what the novel could be about?  
**Vocabulary/Spelling**  
copyright, historical fiction  
**Activity**  
From the novel jacket and abstract on the back cover speculate about the following:  
characters, setting, plot  
What questions would you ask if you were a journalist conducting an interview about this novel and you had not yet read it?  
**Evaluation**  
/5 speculation about plot, setting, and characters a sentence about each  
/5 total  
**LA2 Chapters 1-2**  
**Flashback used in a novel**  
**Guiding Question**  
How does the author effectively use flashback in the second chapter of the novel?  
**Vocabulary/Spelling**  
flashback, character, protagonist, antagonist, Montreal  
**Activity**  
Read the second chapter of the novel.  
Discuss the meaning of flashback, and answer the following questions:  
1. How does the author use flashback in this chapter?  
2. In what way does the use of flashback make the protagonist stronger?  
3. What information does the author give you about the protagonist, and how does that information make the actions of the main character more believable?  
4. What kind of person is the protagonist? Give specific examples used in the text.  
5. What questions does the author leave you with when you finish reading the second chapter?  
**Evaluation**  
/5 answering the questions in complete sentences  
/5 total  
**LA3 Chapters 3-4**  
**Governor Simpson**

### Three

#### Guiding Question

How did the HBC affect the history of Canada?

#### Activity

Read Chapter Three of novel

In groups of two have students write a one-page report investigating the Hudson's Bay Company Colour a map of Canada showing the territory that the HBC had control of during the time the novel took place.

#### Evaluation

/5 report

/5 coloured illustration

/10 total

### Lesson Four

#### SS4 Chapters 5-6

#### How Voyages were Started

#### Guiding Question

What were some of traditions that surrounded the beginning of a voyage?

#### Activity

Read Chapters 5-6

The celebration for the leaving canoes was researched and taken from the way that Governor Simpson actually started his voyages. Create a dramatization of a celebration that would be used for a similarly voyage now-a-days. Do the following in order to accomplish that goal:

- ◆ get into groups of three
- ◆ write an outline script that would decide the kind of voyage
- ◆ practice the script
- ◆ include three traditions that would be included in the celebration, and have reasons for them
- ◆ perform the script
- ◆ discuss the numerous reasons for the traditions and relate them to the novel

#### Evaluation

/5 group effort

/5 celebration and 3 traditions

/10 total

#### Guiding Question

What are some of the characters like who meet Adam Taylor? What does Adam think of them? How do they add to Adam's character?

#### Vocabulary/Spelling

humiliation, canteen, inspection, expedition

#### Activity

Read Chapter four in groups of three. Students pick a passage in either Chapter 3 or 4 and read it in character to the rest of the class. The reading should be no more than 3 minutes in duration. Either the teacher or one of the people in the group can be the narrator. The other group members must choose a voice to read the passage in.

#### Evaluation

/5 effort to choose a voice and maintain it during the reading.

/5 total

#### LA4 Chapters 5-6

Conflict in the novel

#### Guiding Question

How does the conflict add to the plot of the novel?

#### Vocabulary/Spelling

resin, portage, consequences, incomprehensible

#### Activity

Read Chapters 5-6

Create a relationship/conflict web (Example Appendix two) between the different characters that describes the relationships among them.

Write an opinion essay on the following topic:

**Conflict is developed solely through the relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist.** The essays should be five paragraphs in length and should follow the following format:

- ◆ 1st paragraph give the introduction and three reasons supporting the author's position.
- ◆ 2nd. Paragraph explain the first reason.
- ◆ 3rd. Paragraph explain the second reason.
- ◆ 4th. Paragraph explain the third reason.
- ◆ 5th. Paragraph is the conclusion and summary of the three supporting reasons.

#### Evaluation

/5 essay

/5 grammar

/5 mechanics

/15 total

*Lesson*  
*Five*

**SS5 Chapters 7-8**  
**Continental Divide**

**Guiding Question**

What is continental divide and how did that affect Simpson's journey?

**Activity**

Read Chapters 7-8.

Explore the connection between continental divide and river flow.

-rivers flow downhill

-rivers tend to flow away from continental divides  
complete a cross-section sketch of the elevation of Canada with a legend indicating the elevation  
write a paragraph about what the journey would be like for Simpson's crew

**Evaluation**

/5 for coloured sketch

/5 paragraph with generalizations about journey and continental divide

/10 total

*Lesson*  
*Six*

**SS6 Chapter 9**  
**Portages**

**Guiding Question**

What is a portage? What role did they play in the river travel? How did portages impact the type of canoe that could be used and what equipment could be taken?

**Activity**

Read Chapter Nine

Define portage, and discuss the different types of portages brought up in the novel.

On a map of northern Canada locate the route that the Simpson Voyage took by drawing in the rivers. Use a different colour for each river.

Draw in the locations where the voyageurs would need to have portages.

Write a journal entry as a voyageur involved in a portage and reflect on the things that would make a voyage more difficult.

**Evaluation**

/5 coloured map of river systems and portages of Simpson journey

/5 for journal entry as a voyageur. Entry should show an understanding of how terrain, climate etc., would make a portage difficult.

/10 total

*Lesson*

**SS7 Chapters 10-14**  
**History of the Hudson's Bay Company**

**LA5 Chapters 7-8**  
**River Poetry**

**Guiding Question**

What kind of poetry might be sung on a river voyage?

**Vocabulary/Spelling**

rhyme, rhythm, metre, theme

**Activity**

Read Chapters 7-8.

Write a river rap that the voyageurs might have sung on the journey. The meaning of the poem must be about something relevant to the voyageurs' journey. Include at least three pieces of information from the chapters in the rap. Raps will be performed in groups of two, and for the rest of the class.

**Evaluation**

/5 river rap poem five stanzas

/5 performance for the rest of the class effort

/10 total

**LA6 Chapter 9**

**Guiding Question**

What is flashback? What does it add to the novel?

**Vocabulary/Spelling**

spectators, perspiration, murmur, competition.

**Activity**

Read Chapter Nine

Define the term flashback, and discuss how it is used in this novel.

Reading comprehension questions

1. Why does Delmore get angry with Taylor in the first part of the chapter?
2. What is the name of the portage that the voyageurs had to cross?
3. Why was the portage not as difficult as it could have been for the voyageurs?
4. Why did Delmore challenge Stew to an arm wrestle?
5. What did Simpson think of the wrestling?

**Evaluation**

/5 Reading comprehension questions

/5 total

**LA7 Chapters 10-14**  
**Rising Action and Plot Development**

**Guiding Question**

What were some of the events that make up the history of the HBC?

**Activity**

Read Chapters 10-14.

Make a chart of the historical incidents that are explained in those chapters, i.e. the conflict between the HBC and the North West Company, the massacre on the Long Sault Rapids, the Butter tub, and distinguish between what is fact and what is fiction.

Choose one of the historical events and write a brief report on it. The report will be shared with the rest of the class. The report must contain the following sections: Explanation of the event; Other information found relating to the even; Explanation of what is factual about the even in the novel and what is fiction. The length of the report should be about two pages.

**Evaluation**

/5 section on event

/5 section on research information

/5 fact and fiction

/15 total

**SS8 Chapters 15-17**

**Food of the Fur Trade**

**Guiding Question**

What was the food that voyageurs ate on the river?

**Activity**

Read Chapters 15-17.

In groups of two create a pemmican variety that we would use in our geographical area. Each variety must have at least three ingredients and be justified as being from this area. The foods could be demonstrated in a cooking show style for the rest of the class.

Write a recipe that explains the pemmican and how it is from this area.

**Evaluation**

/5 demonstration

/5 recipe with justification

/10 total

**SS9 Chapters 18-20**

**Conclusion: Economics of the Fur Trade.**

**Guiding Question**

**Guiding Question**

What techniques have the author used to increase the suspense in the novel

**Vocabulary/Spelling**

bourgeois, Chipewyan, ensign, expedition, abandoned, shingles

**Activity**

Read Chapters 10-14.

In groups of three read the above chapters with a view of choosing a scene that can be dramatized for the rest of the class. Re-write the scene in play format with the names of the characters in the margin, and the dialogue to the right of the name. See appendix three for an example. Each group must complete a script (two pages) and perform it for the rest of the class.

**Evaluation**

/5 script in play format

/5 dramatization

/10 total

**LA8 Chapters 15-17**

**More Poetry on the River**

**Guiding Question**

How does poetry help to establish mood in Chapter 15?

**Vocabulary/Spelling**

harass, rational, tobacco, refinishing, bagpipes, elevation, upstream

**Activity**

Read Chapters 15-17

Create a poem that might be sung on the river by the voyageurs. Remember that the voyageurs also have a sensitive side. The poem must have at least six verses, may be funny, and contain information from the novel. These can be read to the rest of class.

**Evaluation**

/5 poem six stanzas

/5 total

**LA9 Chapters 18-20**

**Climax and Deneaumont**

**Guiding Question**

How did the HBC use voyages like the Simpson one to make money?

**Activity**

Read Chapters 18-20

Prepare a role-play in groups of two. One person is a voyageur and has just been brought to the present time. The other is an interviewer and is completing a documentary on how this voyageur made his living. The interview must have a written script that describes the plan of the role-play. There must be at least five questions and the interview should be about two minutes in length.

**Evaluation**

/5 interview script

/5 total

How does the author make the climax interesting?  
Does it resolve all of the conflicts?

**Vocabulary/Spelling**

exhaustion, confirmed, suspicious, reluctantly, massive

**Activity**

Read Chapters 18-20

Discuss where students think the climax is. Most will probably say that it's in Chapter Nineteen.

In an essay describe how the climax resolves the different conflicts in the novel. Give information about the following ones: Delmore Vs Adam; Anna Vs Delmore; Anna Vs Adam; Adam Vs himself; Adam Vs nature. Are all of these conflict resolved in Chapter Nineteen.

Write a sequel to this novel. Where might it be set? Who would be the characters? What might be the conflict? Write a lead-in for this sequel?

See Appendix Four for student worksheet.

Design a jacket cover that illustrates what the novel is about. What characters would you include in the illustrations? What scene would you choose to illustrate?

**Evaluation**

/5 essay on conflict

/5 Sequel worksheet

/5 cover jacket design

/15 total

## *Appendices*

*Appendix One*

Map of Canada

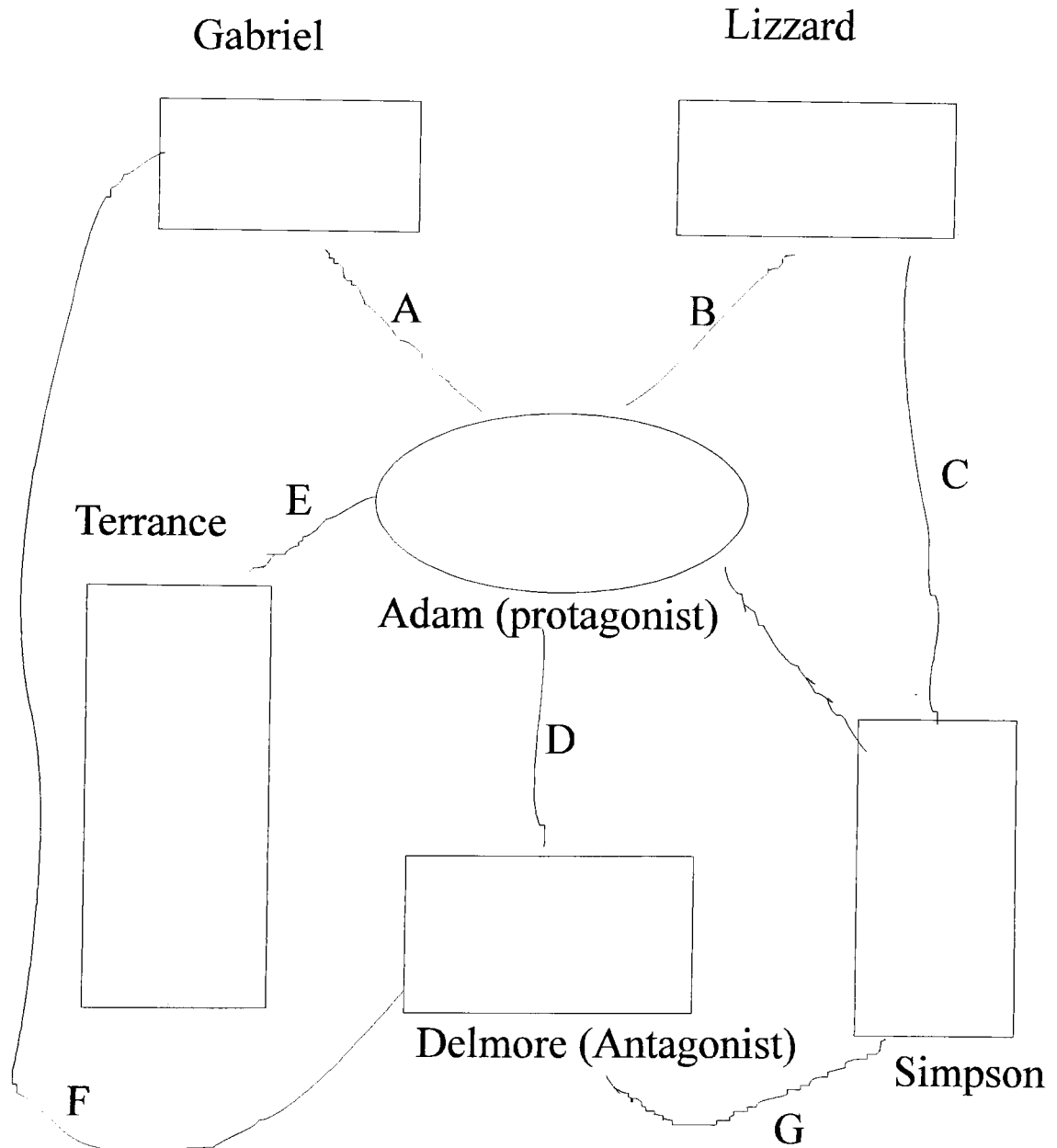
Social Studies Lesson One



*Appendix Two*

Example of a Conflict/Relationship Web  
Language Arts Lesson Four

# Relationship Web



1. For each of the letters describe the relationship between the two characters.
2. In each box describe the personality qualities that the relationships describe. For example, the relationship between Delmore and Simpson is professional, Delmore is a Steersman on one of the canoes. A characteristic of Delmore that might be placed in the box is that he's a very skilled Steersman.

*Appendix Three*

Example of play format  
Language Arts Lesson Seven

This scene was taken from chapter two. Note the structure of the play with the name of the speaker to the left, and the dialogue to the right. In this example the stage directions are italics and left justified. There may be minor changes to the dialogue to make the flow natural.

Interviewer                      Adam Taylor

*Adam approaches the man and sits in the chair opposite him.*

Interviewer                      Adam Taylor, says 'ere ye knows 'ow to read 'n write.

*The interviewer rubs a long scare on his cheek and brings his hand down to his unshaved chin.*

Interviewer                      Yer a weee bit young, ain't ya.

*He writes a quick note and returns his gaze to Adam who is starting to get nervous.*

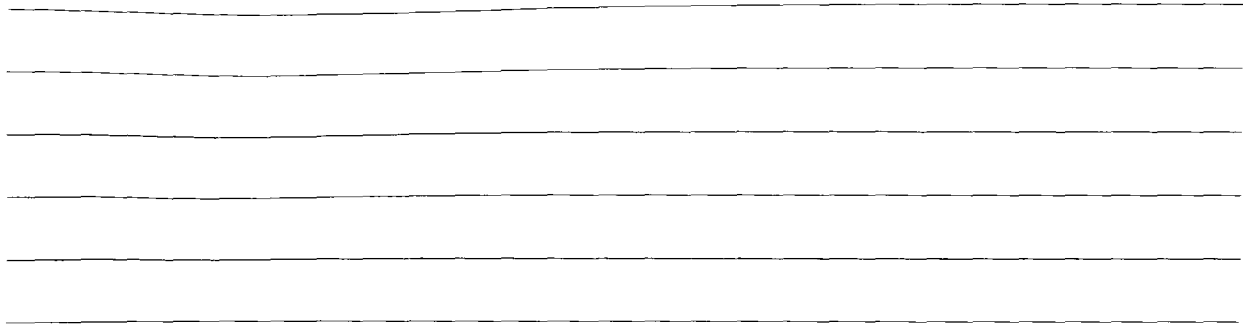
Interviewer                      Yer got any canooein' experience?

Adam                              Yes. *(Pause)* I made one once with a friend over the summer.

*The interviewer leaned foreword. His elbows on the table.*

Interviewer                      Dooo yer know what you're gettin' inta' laddy?





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