

CHAPTER IX

Pierre sat bolt upright. He was alone in the Cenis dwelling house, but outside, people were shouting, and someone screamed. There was a pounding of feet on the ground and the pounding of a drum somewhere in the distance, growing nearer.

Pierre's heart was pounding, too. What was it? Trembling, he swung his legs over the side of the bed platform, and the buffalo robes slid to the floor. He tried to stand, but his legs gave way, and he found himself sitting on the packed dirt floor beside the buffalo robes.

"Père Anastase!" he called.

No one answered.

Pierre began to crawl toward the leather-hinged door. Outside, the noise increased. He could make out a rhythmic chant, sung in women's voices and punctuated by anguished screams. He heard someone laugh. He dragged himself across the floor, past the low-burning fire.

Every few feet he had to stop to rest. His arms and legs quivered, and his breath came in labored gasps. He realized once again that he was naked and glanced about for something to cover him. A man's coat hung over the edge of a bed, but it was a distance away, an eternity away.

He would just look out the door. No one would see him. He began to crawl again.

His head was throbbing, but he caught his breath, then pushed on the door with all his might. It seemed as heavy as a gate of oak, though he saw it was only thatched grass on a framework of slender poles. It moved a hand's span. He put his face to the opening and looked out into the torchlit night.

At first he saw only feet and legs. Moccasined feet and brown, muscular legs and the long black skirts of women. He faced an open courtyard, and across it was a building as large as a good-sized Canadian barn, set above a courtyard on a platform of packed earth. It was lit by torches and a great fire burning before it. Was it their holy building? Their . . . temple? Or perhaps the dwelling house of their priests or chief?

The women were crowded around something, while the men stood back, watching. Pierre saw that many of the women brandished pointed sticks and jabbed them toward the center of their circle. They were screaming and chanting. There was a shriek, and the women laughed and surged together.

Pierre pulled himself up on the door frame and tottered there, his eye to the opening. He craned his neck. The women wore skins and feathers, and in the firelight their sweating faces were ghoulish with paint and tattoos.

Then, for an instant, they moved apart. Something crouched in their midst. An animal? But human hands covered its head, running with blood.

A woman with a flint knife leaped forward, grabbed one of the hands and hacked off a finger. A ghastly scream. A spurt of blood. The knife woman waved her trophy in triumph, and the crowd surged inward again, obscuring the bloody, broken, moaning *thing*.

But Pierre was already turning his head away, the gorge rising in his throat. He spewed bile onto the earthen floor.

They were barbarians, these Indians!

Pierre's legs failed him again, and he crumpled to the ground. He buried his face in his arms.

Savages!

It was the young Indian woman who found him there, the woman Père Anastase had called "good."

"*Ay'shab!*" she cried.

Then her hands were on him, her arms around him. She was scolding, just as Maman would have scolded, sharply and gently both. The woman half carried him back to the bed, and he smelled her sweat and dust and smoke in her hair.

He could not stop shivering. His teeth chattered, and his skin shrank from her touch. She pulled the warm buffalo robe over him, tucking it under his chin. She brought coals from the fire to place under his bed, and he felt the heat rise beneath him, but still he shivered. He clamped his teeth together.

"*Laissez-moi tranquille,*" he hissed. "Leave me be!"

But, of course, she did not understand. She bent over the fire, placing something in the coals, and then she came back to him. She put her hand on his forehead and smoothed his hair. She murmured low in her throat.

Pierre did not want to be comforted, not by her. He could still see in his mind's eye the bloody, moaning *thing* in the courtyard, the bloodthirsty faces of the women. Had this young woman been among them? Her face was smudged, her hair disheveled. Of course she had!

In a moment she brought him a warm drink.

Pierre did not want a drink from *her* hand! But his throat was parched, and he could feel the emptiness of his belly, its quivering emptiness.

She helped him to lift his head and held the gourd to his lips. It was the drink he had had before. He felt it flow down his throat, warm his belly.

The woman still murmured, a crooning sound. As she lowered his head to the bed, he could not help but look into her eyes, and all he saw there was compassion.

But she had been with the women in the courtyard! Doing unspeakable things. Surely she had been there . . .

Once again the young woman smoothed his hair, and her hand felt like the hand of Maman.

Pierre turned his head away.

It was near dawn when the others staggered into the dwelling. Pierre had tossed between waking and sleep, unable to clear his head of what he had seen. Now his eyes felt filled with sand, his head throbbed so he could not order his thoughts, save one. He had made a mistake! He could not dwell with these savages for another day.

But would his own people take him with them? He had seen the look of relief in Père Anastase's eyes when he said that he would stay. A boy as sick and weak as he was only a burden. And, if they agreed to take him, could he rise from this bed?

It was Meunier who came to sit beside him. The others, Père Anastase, Monsieur Joutel, the abbé, and Colin, fell upon their beds, which were ranged, as Pierre's was, around the walls of the dwelling house.

"They said you had wakened, *mon brave*," Meunier whispered. "Forgive me for not coming sooner. We were required at the feasting

in honor of the Ceniz victory. The Indians are well satisfied with the effect of our guns on their enemies, and English Jem's boastfulness knows no bounds."

Pierre stared at the dark silhouette of his friend. He could see only the gleam of Meunier's eyes, but he felt the familiar reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Did you. . . Did you fight?"

"Alongside English Jem? Not likely, even were I well enough!"

Ah, yes. Meunier had been ill. Père Anastase had said. Where was he, then, when the women . . . ?

"Meunier, they were torturing someone . . . outside this house . . . I saw . . ."

He put his hand over his eyes.

"I am sorry you saw that. It was a woman of the enemy, unable to keep up when they fled. She had a newborn child. The Ceniz captured her and turned her over to their women."

"But . . . But, Meunier, it was inhuman!" Pierre was aghast at Meunier's matter-of-fact tone.

Meunier nodded. The low fire hissed. Père Anastase began to snore.

"I must sleep, Pierre," Meunier said, stirring. "I perish with fatigue. Only I wanted to tell you I am glad you will stay here with me. It will be good to have a comrade."

Pierre could not catch his breath.

"You will stay . . ." He choked. "You will stay with these savages after . . ."

"After?" Meunier said. "You mean after we have seen their savagery? But, *mon brave*, we stayed with Duhaut and his cronies after they butchered our leader."

Pierre shuddered. "I . . . I was ill," he stammered.

“The Cenis are no more savage than we are, I think,” Meunier said. “Indeed, it was one of us, I am told, who killed that woman’s infant before her eyes. The Cenis will do *us* no harm, I wager. They seem to think it an honor to host us, I know not why. Perhaps because of our guns. I will take advantage of their hospitality, *mon brave*. I want to live, and I do not believe those who set out for New France will ever arrive there.”

“But they must,” Pierre croaked.

“Well, perhaps . . . But I am sick of the trail, and you, Pierre, are too weak to travel, I think.”

Pierre could not deny it. He turned his head back and forth, trying to think of some other way . . .

“If I do not go to New France, I must go back to the settlement, to my family. I can help them ”

“Sleep, *mon brave*,” Meunier whispered. “We will talk again tomorrow.”

His soft footsteps retreated across the earthen floor. The willow-branch frame of his bed sighed. Then there was no sound, save the fire’s soft crackle and the priest’s snore.