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**Hundred-Year Storm**

**Josée Lafrenière**

**A Thesis**

**in**

**the Department**

**of English**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements**

**for the Degree of Magisteriate in Arts at**

**Concordia University,**

**Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

**May 2002**

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## ABSTRACT

### Hundred-Year Storm

Josée Lafrenière

This novel is set in a traditionally agricultural town in Francophone Northern Ontario. The death of a local woman sets in motion a series of incidents that affect the lives of other villagers, particularly the two female protagonists. As the two women make parallel movements to more independent lives, they discover a series of documents pertaining to the past of some of the town's residents. Their understanding of the town's history and of their place within its social order are brought into question. This story explores issues of shifting roles and notions of belonging in a town whose culture is in flux from the older, traditional French-Canadian culture to a contemporary one, influenced by English Canada and American-style media.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In memory of my father, Aimé Lafrenière, and with gratitude to my grandmother, Anne-Marie Charlebois. Much of my knowledge about the historical time periods in this book comes from their storytelling, as does my love of story.

Heartfelt thanks to my thesis advisor, Terry Byrnes, who was supportive of me and my work, and always had a good story to offer. Thanks to Luc Lepage, Ian Silliker, David Silliker and Dale Silliker for their patient answers to my questions about hunting and firearms. Thanks to Dr. D'Arcy Gagnon for advice on medical conditions, and to Julie Lafrenière for the legalities of inheritance. Thanks to Brian for answering questions about police procedures for missing children. Père Côté's beliefs about lycanthropy and witchcraft are inspired by H. Sidky's fascinating *Witchcraft, Lycanthropy, Drugs, and Disease: An Anthropological Study of the European Witch-Hunts*. My mother, Berthe Lafrenière advised me on subjects ranging from church history to grouse skinning to roofing shingles. Thanks to Joshua Knelman for insisting on reading.

Darlene Silliker, Sylvie Lafrenière, Julie Lafrenière & Steve Mason, Roxane Lafrenière, and Alex Lafrenière rearranged their schedules to offer babysitting, readings, and support, particularly during the difficult final stretch. Many, many thanks. I owe a greater debt than I can express here to my mother. Without her stalwart assistance this project would simply not have been completed.

With gratitude and love always to Dale Silliker, whose belief in me was steadfast.

For Simon.

## Chapter 1

### Return to Pointe-Mouillée

Cécile Desrosiers returned to Pointe-Mouillée on the Sunday after the big storm. She arrived during the hush before Mass, when the townspeople who would be attending were still eating their breakfasts or getting dressed, focussed on a quiet Sunday routine that, in an hour, would be stirred by the call of the church bells. Those living on the outskirts of the village would need no more than fifteen minutes to get to the church on foot, since it was located at the centre of the village, as though the houses surrounding the limestone church had grown out of it, layer upon layer of skin, laid out in a roughly ovoid pattern. Other churchgoers, living outside the little town, on farms or in the cottages lining the rocky shores of Lake Wabigwani would make the drive slowly, imbued with a slow Sunday morning feeling of dreaminess.

For just a moment, while Cécile drove through the quiet town, that dreamy feeling almost settled in her muscles, tense and focussed from the hour-and-a-half drive from Sudbury, which she had driven too fast. Tense also because of her return to Pointe-Mouillée and to the lodge. She looked around nervously, but the streets were deserted.

Fleur de Lys Cabins was a kilometre outside the village. Slowly, she drove through town, past the hotel, past the church and the *Magasin Général*, past the post office, past the docks. As she made the right turn onto *le chemin du lac*, she could see the waves of Lake Wabigwani, grey in the morning light. She knew that if she slowed down before the stand of trees on the lakeside obscured her view, and if she narrowed her eyes, she would see, at the apex of a stretch of land forming the other side of the

circular bay along which the road ran, the lodge's large white sign by the docks. But that morning Cécile did not slow down, did not look.

She drove, eyes focussed on the road's packed mud and gravel, making an exercise of caution, watchful for small, darting animals or birds. When she reached the turn for the lodge, she made it without looking at the hand-painted wooden arrow pointing out the small road, which had sprouted long grass in the centre between the gravel ruts for wheels.

Cécile stopped the truck to unlock the gate and, in a rush, the autumn scent of the place overwhelmed her, grass, rotting leaves, pine needles, water, but also something else that belonged to the lodge itself: its precise blend of trees – maple, birch, and pine – of the rock outcrop baking in the sun, of the weeds that collect on the beach near the docks, of the stained wood that made up the cabins, the docks and boats, and of the musty smells of the old barn and sheds. She hesitated. Something else too, seemed to make up the smell, something uncomfortably her own, as though she could smell a former version of herself still present in the place. And of Ti-Jean. She swung the gate open and, leaving the truck, walked onto the grounds of Fleur de Lys Cabins.

"The place looks like hell," Cécile said out loud as she walked toward the log cabin, near the entrance of the lodge. In truth, the place looked much better than she had expected, but the words had been lying in wait on the tip of her tongue during the drive from Sudbury so, despite her relief at her first glance of the lodge, the words had spilled out anyway. She stopped to survey the territory.

The maple next to the cabin was still green but with touches of blush that reminded her of a ripening apple whose tartness she could almost taste. She saw a vinyl-covered kitchen chair lying on its side, half-hanging off the end of the porch, its

legs caught on one of the supporting beams. The flower pattern on the vinyl chair was faded, or was she just imagining that it used to be brighter? The porch was half-buried in leaves, some with the same blushing green as those on the maple, others brown and soggy, like those covering the road and the lawn, which had grown long and wild. Broken branches lay in the grass and on the gravel drive, as well as on the cabin roof.

Dry leaves rustled and pine needles whispered breathily in the morning breeze. From the shed on the other side of the drive, the hinges on the hanging sign squeaked as it rocked back and forth. The surface of the sign was plastered with dirt and pine needles. She could still make out the large letters of "Fleur de Lys Cabins," but below that, the list of services from "Housekeeping" to "Live Bait" was unreadable.

She exhaled and felt a wave of dizziness as the dread she'd felt, imagining that the house or perhaps the whole lodge had been carried away by the storm, left her in a rush. Her home was still there, still standing, intact. She grimaced at the word, "home" and remembered how easily, after the funeral, she'd packed a suitcase and gone to her mother's, barely remembering to unplug the answering machine and lock the gate on her way out. She'd felt no connection or responsibility for this place, she'd had no plans. She'd been gone almost a year.

In Sudbury, Cécile had stayed with her mother, Kathleen, who still lived in the apartment in the *Moulin à Fleur* district where Cécile had grown up. In all the time that Cécile was there, her mother never spoke of Ti-Jean's death or of Cécile's sadness though, at the beginning, she'd treated Cécile like an invalid, "Don't tire yourself out. I'll do the dishes. In your condition, you have to save your strength."

At first, Cécile had refused her mother's care. "I'm not pregnant, Mom, I'm a widow." She'd capitulated when she remembered that her mother had been pregnant

when she herself was widowed thirty-five years before. Cécile stayed in bed, crying, sleeping sometimes fifteen hours a day. Her mother brought her trays with tea and toast, soup and bread, cookies and milk. She tried watching television but found she couldn't concentrate on the images flashing at her. Instead, she would watch her mother in the armchair across the room, crocheting, watching, as she had done for as long as Cécile could remember. The sight of her mother's crochet hook darting in and out of her *ouvrage* would leave Cécile panting, feeling short of breath.

To dissipate the anxiety she felt, Cécile had started taking walks around the *Moulin à Fleur* because everything there had remained mostly the same over the years — the apartments, the gas stations, hotels, the dirty snow, and, looming above, the ancient chalk-coloured granary that gave the district its name. She walked, measuring the amount of change that had touched every building since her youth. Some days, the new, brightly-lit gas station with its 24 hour convenience store was intolerably sad because it had gradually, over the space of many years, engulfed Lagacé's Gas Bar, which had been there when she was a child. Other days, the granaries depressed her with their timelessness, their imperviousness to change. When she walked, she forgot her own breathing, forgot to notice if it was irregular or too shallow. When the weather got warmer, she walked farther through downtown, to Minnow Lake, Gatchell, to New Sudbury, or to the beach at Bell Park, looking for new things to see, her eyes and emotions thawing with the ice and snow.

One late summer day, as she'd been getting ready to walk to the beach, stuffing her swimsuit into her backpack, her mother, standing at the sink, washing dishes, had said quietly, "You know, you can keep yourself busy doing nothing for a long time."

At her mother's in Sudbury, Cécile had occasionally thought about the lodge, worried that she hadn't left a closed sign on the gate, or checked the cabins that they rented out to tourists to make sure they had been locked, or because she'd had no idea what kind of money was being automatically withdrawn from the Fleur de Lys bank account to pay the bills. Some days, she wasn't even sure she had locked the main cabin door. Their door. The knowledge that the lodge was her responsibility had kept her from acting on half-formed plans to reapply for her job teaching Geography at a local French high school. But her concerns about the lodge had remained aimless, unable to fix themselves onto action, like when she used to think about the destruction of wetlands, or about whether she would get varicose veins like her mother's.

Cécile shook her head. She knew she mustn't stand there thinking for too long. Being motionless left her prey to paralysing memories. What she wanted now was to have a day where everything happened as expected, where she would wake up knowing what needed to be done, a day with no questions. A day so comfortable, she would not even notice it. She hoped that working on the lodge would give it to her. The first thing to do, she decided, was to assess the damage.

She strode past their cabin. "That's for later," she grumbled. "I can't deal with that first thing."

She walked up the steep gravel road that climbed *le rocher*, the large flat plateau of speckled pink and black granite bedrock that plunged into Lake Wabigwani. Twelve tourist cabins were lined up on both sides of the road, which traced an uneven crescent over the surface of the rock. The gravel road was covered with pine needles and branches, evidence of the storm. As she climbed the incline, the muscles in her legs

pulled, and her breath came from deeper within her body, as it always did when she walked, and she relaxed.

As she caught sight of the first cabin through the trees, Cécile whispered under her breath, "Yuck." Though the cabins were built from logs like the house, instead of having been stained a natural wood tone, the tourist cabins had been painted a dark brown that she'd found ugly from the first time Ti-Jean had shown her the lodge, not long before they were married. "Bear-fur brown," Ti-Jean had called it, speaking in that mixture of French and French-accented English that was particular to many Northern Ontario towns.

"More like bear-shit brown," she'd replied, laughing.

Painting the cabins was what she had thought ought to be done first, she remembered as she turned onto the path leading to the door of Cabin Number One. There had not been time to paint the cabins that first spring, before the wedding; then, the tourist season had begun with its round of endless chores. After the tourists had stopped coming, in the late autumn, she and Ti-Jean had winterized the cabins, repaired them, locked them up. They'd taken the boats out of the water, serviced outboard motors, repaired the roof on the barn. When the snow had come, it had been too late to paint, and, by then, Cécile, glad for a break, had lost all interest in taking on additional jobs. The second year had begun much like the first.

She stopped suddenly, a few steps before the door of Cabin Number One. She remembered the *To Do* list pinned on the bulletin board next to the telephone in their own cabin. At that moment, the most unbelievable thing of all was that she could walk into the cabin and see on the list, written in his loopy, schoolteacher writing, the title, *À faire éventuellement*, and, under it, the entry, "Paint the cabins a less fecal colour." She



wanted to run, to see the note immediately, to devour it, rub it on her skin. She remembered a time fishing in the boat with Ti-Jean. It had been a cloudy day but, suddenly, the sun emerged from the clouds and lit up the water surface, which had seemed flat and dark, but now became translucent. Below them, she saw a mossy underwater rock stretching out as far as she could see, with shadows suggesting that the rocks continued their underwater plunge far beyond. A topography of the same scale as the land revealed itself to her and she had felt dizzy, floating on top of it in the boat, its shadow hovering underwater like the shadow of a cloud. She felt dizzy. Concentrate, she told herself. She willed one foot forward.

Cabin Number One smelled musty and damp. Had it smelled like that when they first opened it up in the spring? She walked through the kitchen, the bedrooms, and into the living-room. She was glad there was no damage. The cabin had always been her favourite. It was built at the edge of the plateau, where the rock face fell straight down into the water. A balcony at the front of the cabin looked out over the lake. From the bottom of the cliff, the cabin seemed perched precariously on the edge, and from its balcony, it seemed to hang in thin air. Cécile opened the door onto the balcony, but the vertigo of her last memory still fresh in her mind, she stopped in the doorway. In the distance, Lake Wabigwani grew luminously blue in patches as the sun emerged from behind a mass of grey cloud. In the still, brownish water along the shore, she could see the town of Pointe-Mouillée fuzzily reflected in the water, framed by the green and still-tentative red of maple, the gold, amber, and rusty browns of birch and oak, the dark black-green of pine and cedar. She heard the sound of church bells calling out the ten o'clock mass. The town, she thought, seemed idyllic.

It had been explained to Cécile on more than one occasion that Pointe-Mouillée was so named for its location on an irregularly shaped wedge of land bordered by Lake Wabigwani on one side, and *la rivière du Prétendant* on the other. At the point of the wedge, the river drained into the lake. Cécile knew that the town was built on a sediment plain left by the river, and that the same sediment was slowly, in geological time, filling Lake Wabigwani. When she imagined the village perched on this mound of infill material, its human structures seemed transitory, its history recent and thin.

The village on the sediment plain was founded during the settlement of Northerneastern Ontario in the late nineteenth century. Like many of the small towns located around the hubs of Sudbury and North Bay, it was settled by French-speaking farmers from Québec or emigrants from Québec living in the Northern United States — *Canadiens Français*, they all called themselves then. The settlement of Northern Ontario had been promoted by the French-Canadian Catholic Church, which saw the westward movement of its people, and the promotion of large families and agriculture as the road to safeguarding religion and language throughout the British Dominion of Canada.

The story of the beginnings of Pointe-Mouillée was commonly known to all *les villageois*, and had been recounted to Cécile by Ti-Jean. During the Easter holidays in 1887, Samuel Papineau and Théophile Desrosiers, who had been in Chicago one year, working in a factory, returned to their home town of St-Gaston, Québec, where they heard the parish priest talk about the glorious calling of colonization, that hope of the French language and the Catholic religion. Feeling themselves sparkling with divine grace, they decided not to return to the United States of America, but to follow the new railway that had already made its way past Sudbury and was inching its way around

the Great Lakes. They got off the train in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario. They found the town to be quite unlike what they had imagined, since it already boasted a chapel and school run by Jesuits, out of Michaud's General Store. Sturgeon was also home to a hotel, and two steam ship companies operating on Lake Nipissing. It was populated by countless families who had already organized themselves into a social life modelled after the small Québec towns from which they had come, complete with card playing, dances with fiddlers and guitar players, and the drinking of *p'tit blanc*. As well, the town had a considerable and rival English-speaking population who had their own Protestant church and log schoolhouse that reminded Papineau and Desrosiers a little too much of Detroit. They also found that all the lots within close range of the town were being farmed and, since the town was bordered by the Sturgeon River, Lake Nipissing, and the province of Québec, the two men wondered what their next move would be.

Providentially, one night at the hotel, while they ate their supper, they met a prospector, who told them, in English, that he had just come back from a lake the locals called Wabigwani, where there was some flat land that could be used for farming. Their mastery of English being rudimentary despite their work in the northern US, Papineau and Desrosiers weren't sure they'd properly understood the directions given. Nevertheless, the next morning, the two men obtained supplies and some additional, vague directions from old Michaud at the General Store, and headed North-east along logging roads and survey trails. They put their trust in God and in their calling to help colonize the West with French Catholics. They walked for several days amidst swarms of mosquitoes, suffering their martyrdom for the greater glory of God, until they found themselves standing at the head of a cliff overlooking a river, which threw itself into an enormous lake, its waves sparkling blue and white in the sunlight. They had to follow

the riverbank far upstream before they found a place to cross. They hiked back to the lakeshore and, there, they found, just as the trapper had described, a stretch of flat land, not too rocky, with good topsoil. The ferocity of the insects and the difficulty of the journey from Sturgeon Falls convinced them this was the ideal location to colonize. They built a grotto, as a shrine of thanksgiving next to which, years later, their sons would help them build a church. Then, they built a raft to ferry them and their gear back and forth across the river. Eager to begin *le défrichement*, they walked back to Sturgeon Falls to stake their claim.

It was well known by all the subsequent generations of inhabitants of Pointe-Mouillée that, at the land claims office, Papineau and Desrosiers had used their savings from work in the United States to put a down payment of a quarter of the price for a full lot each, a total of 640 acres at 50 cents an acre. Cécile had once heard some kids at the local chip stand joking, in English, that the town was still really worth only eighty bucks.

Cécile continued her inspection of the lodge. In Cabin Four, a large birch branch had broken through one of the bedroom windows. The branch lay on the bed beneath the window, surrounded by glass. The curtains were closed and stained with mud, the wooden window sill and the plank floor were bloated and discoloured, and a strong smell of mildew emanated from the bed. There were bits of whitish bark, rust-coloured pine needles, leaves, and pine cones on the bed and floor.

She sighed with relief. She was braced for fairly extensive damage, either from the year of neglect, or from the hundred-year storm that had washed over Northeastern Ontario the week before. Rivers had flooded their banks, roofs had been torn off barns.

Fallen trees had blocked highways and damaged houses. A story, in *The Sudbury Star*, about a party of boaters lost on Lake Wabigwani had made Cécile decide to return to Pointe-Mouillée. When she'd seen the name of the lake in print, she remembered the metallic smell of the water and the way the sunlight winks on the waves on a summer day and felt, acutely, that she missed the place. At the same time, she knew that the same story would not have had the same effect on her a few months before. Perhaps the time was right.

She was so relieved to see that the damage was repairable that it took her a moment to realize that no light entered through the window. The broken window had been boarded up from the outside. She moved the curtain aside and read, stamped in black ink on the pressboard, *Rochon*, the name of the hardware store in Sturgeon Falls. Blood pounding in her temples, she thought, Ghost.

"Yeah right," she said loudly, and her fear dissipated as she realized who must have done the work. She stared at the boarded-up window. All at once, she was ashamed that she had abandoned the lodge, or rather, that someone had had to make up for her negligence, and that her absence had been noted.

Well, I'm here now, she thought. She strode purposefully out of the cottage but, as she closed the door to the cabin, she gave a quick glance backward, to make sure no one was there.

She took off her jacket. The wind had stilled, and the sun had taken on a summery intensity. As she walked from cabin to cabin, she noticed that a mossy green deposit had collected on some of the outside walls of cabins and outhouses. Pine needles, pine cones, dust, sand, leaves, all this had accumulated on the road, as well as on porches, in rain gutters, on window sills, and in doorways. Inside all the cabins, she

would have to scrub away spider webs, dust and odour. The cabins were almost in as bad a state, after a year, as they had been when Cécile and Ti-Jean had inherited the lodge from *Mononc'* Louis. For at least a year before his death, Louis Desrosiers' strength had been failing him, but he'd refused to admit it, had refused all offers of assistance, and had refused to leave the lodge.

As she toured the property, Cécile found that the greatest damage from the storm was to Cabin Nine, on the northernmost face of the *rocher*, where the roof had collapsed under the weight of a pine. Cécile didn't feel safe entering the cabin, but a look through the cracked front window showed water on the floor, which looked bloated and uneven. As well, the doors to Cabins Seven and Eight – twin cabins, built very near one another, that were often rented as a set to large groups, or to families vacationing together – had been forced, the wood was splintered in the door frames and the doors no longer closed properly. In one of the cabins, the floor was stained with something that had left a lingering, dirty smell, like garbage, but whatever had caused the stain was no longer there.

After she had checked each cabin, Cécile found herself near the docks, in a sheltered inlet of the lake. The air smelled fishy. Two of the three docks were slightly underwater. One had broken in half. The broken-off end had begun to float away but someone had tied it up, weighted it down with cement blocks. The shore near the docks, and toward the beach, was covered with kelp – some brown, some still green – tossed up during the storm and now drying in the sun. Grey foam lined the edge of the water and flies buzzed from the foam to the weeds.

She walked out onto one of the intact docks. Cold water seeped through her sneakers. The bay was overgrown with water lilies and kelp so long it floated on the

surface of the water. In the shallow water near the dock, where the sun was shining, she could see where the rock outcrop, on which the cabins were built, submerged. She could make out the fault line in the stone, which was hairy with algae. Insects with black compact bodies and no visible legs darted back and forth on the water, throwing oval shadows that moved over the surface of the underwater rock. In reality, Cécile knew, water striders had long legs tipped with tiny, waterproof hairs that functioned like snowshoes to allow the insect to tread on the water's surface.

She turned and walked off the dock. At the head of the inlet was the boat house. That's what Ti-Jean had called it, but it was really an old barn, made of weathered grey wood, which still had a lingering odour of hay and animals. The barn had been partly renovated the year before, and a new metallic red roof installed. It was there they kept the boats in winter. At that moment, however, the boats were still all on trestles outside the barn. Except one. She saw the boat lying right-side up in the grass. She stood quietly, waiting for something to happen, or perhaps waiting for some great transformation within herself.

Nothing moved. After a few seconds, she stopped hearing her own heartbeat and became progressively aware of one layer of sound after another. She heard the water lapping against the dock supports, then the wind and bird song. From farther away, came the sound of a motorboat on the lake, a car on the road. Across the lake, from *l'île à Sylvestre*, a chain saw roared to life.

She walked over to the boat. It was full of water. The ubiquitous pine needles and dead insects floated on the surface of the water, and a green slime lining the bottom shimmered in the sun. She sat on the ground; dampness immediately seeped through her jeans. Her shoes were also wet, and she felt suddenly very heavy.

What am I supposed to do with this? she thought. Is it rotten? How will I fix it? She wondered about the other boats. They would surely be damaged if they spent another winter outside. She didn't even know if the boats should be brought in yet, since the hunting tourists often wanted to rent them. Would she even get any tourists this year? She thought about the cabins needing repair, the broken docks, the boats.

Then, unbidden, the memory of her final moments in Pointe-Mouillée returned to her. After the burial of Ti-Jean's body in the local cemetery, there had been a luncheon in the church basement. After the meal, she had been overwhelmed with the smell of baked beans and too many people. As she walked toward the door, thinking only of the tangy November air outside, she passed table after table of people talking, laughing, whispering. At one of the tables was a youth group that called itself *Les Troubadours*. Ti-Jean had been working with them to prepare a historical play for the town's centennial celebrations in 1998. As she passed them, she realized they were talking in English. It occurred to her that many of the groups she had passed had also been conversing in English. Despite Ti-Jean's constant efforts to promote French in the goddamned town. She put her hands on the table of *les Troubadours* and leaned over them. They looked up at her expectantly.

Afterward, she did not remember what she had said. Her memories were focussed on the pitch of her own voice, which she had, at the time, found shocking, hysterical, and the face of one boy—it was one of the Guy boys she remembered—handsome, dark-skinned, dark-haired. As she had ranted at them, his face closed up like a fist. For a moment, she had wondered if he would hit her, but then had realized, with a surprising clarity, that his anger was directed at himself. Trembling, she had



practically run out of the hall. She'd gone to the cabin, packed some things, and driven to her mother's in Sudbury.

"I can't," she whispered and, hearing her own voice, quiet in the susurrations of the trees and birds, water and life all around her, quiet but still alive, alone and pitiable, her grief returned, a familiar hard knot between her breasts.

She thought, I should sell the lodge. Let someone else be in this place instead of me.

She looked up, expecting a reply. She could see her 4x4 parked at the gate. She turned and saw the cabin where she and Ti-Jean had lived, where she had felt, for the first time in her life, her own body firmly planted on the ground, her body in constant contact with another person, with her surroundings. She remembered how she used to drift off to sleep, letting her mind's eye drift upward until she could see the lake, the prickly pattern of the shores turning into forest, and there, slightly outside the village, the cabin where Ti-Jean and she were curled up for sleep on a small bed. So much space to fill and they slept spooned into one another. Like kittens sleeping piled on top of each other in a single corner of a cardboard box. She knew she would not leave. Even if now, she would sleep alone. This place was her connection to Ti-Jean, and now that she had been here, she felt the lodge taking hold of her, like some root growing out of the soil and wrapping itself around her body.

A gold birch leaf drifted past her, and settled in the boat. She said, "You bastard." She stood up with a groan and wiped off her butt with her hands. As she walked to the porch of the house, she picked up the fallen chair, tearing off the spider webs that spanned from chair to wall, then unlocked the door. Stepped in. The cabin

smelled musty, so it smelled less like Ti-Jean than she had expected it to. She relaxed a little and looked around. There were dirty dishes in the sink, a few cups, a plate, some spoons.

I can't believe I left without washing those, she thought, wrinkling her nose. She heard the scuttle of a mouse, rattling metal pots in the cupboard. The window pane was grimy and long pine needles blew in from the window sill when she pulled up the heavy window, but the air, fresh and welcome, made the curtains flutter. A fly buzzed past her head and landed on an unread newspaper on the table. She walked across the room and, warily, avoiding the *To Do* list, looked up a phone number pinned on the bulletin board. She made a call.

Afterward, quickly, before she could change her mind, she fished her car keys from her pocket and headed for the door. So she'd believe it, she said out loud, "I'm going to the store. But I'm coming right back."

## Chapter 2 After Mass

That day, *le Magasin Général Leduc et Fils* opened for business after Mass, as usual. As on most autumn Sundays, Fleurette Desrosiers was tending to the customers alone since the store was open only for the hour following *la Grand' Messe*. As far as Fleurette knew, the store had always opened on Sunday after Mass. She'd been reminded that morning of the force that habit carried.

As she announced the total, she turned to face *le vieux* Sylvestre across the checkout counter. His face always reminded her of a child's drawing; round head, large eyes set wide apart, which gave him a perpetually surprised look, and pupils that didn't look at once in the same direction. At the moment, he was an angry red, which made the white stubble on his chin and cheeks stand out. He stuttered with rage. A single bead of white spittle formed in one corner of his mouth.

Fleurette sighed and waited for Sylvestre's complaint, and again wondered why Ghyslain didn't come out to help her. The least he could do, she felt, was help with the bagging.

Sylvestre finally spat, "*L-L-Les co-co-co-commerçants!* All out to ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-cheat us." She tried not to roll her eyes. *Le vieux* had been a regular customer of the *Magasin Général* since the time Fleurette's mother had stood at the cash register, and he would surely be back in a few days.

Sylvestre was Fleurette's second unpleasant encounter with a customer that morning. Hervé Leblanc had been more polite than Sylvestre when he'd told Fleurette she'd forgotten to save him a newspaper, but he had still, unnecessarily, pointed out that his was clearly one of only two names on the reservation list for the Sunday paper,

and that Rosa Lefebvre's was the other. She'd blushed fiercely at that, so he had called her *ma belle* and said that he understood. "Everyone is a little upset today."

Fleurette didn't ask *le vieux* which item he felt was overpriced; she assumed that the mistake was hers. She tried to be charitable. Maybe he hadn't heard, since he never went to church. And besides, she just wanted him gone, so she offered him a fifteen percent discount on his order. In the back of her mind, she rehearsed the speech she would give Ghyslain if he objected to the discount.

On Sundays, while Fleurette tended to the customers, her father and Ghyslain worked out the weekly orders in the back office. This Sunday, however, there had been more customers than Fleurette ever remembered seeing after the Labour Day weekend. They had run out of eggs after only half an hour, and not long after that, of the bread that Fleurette had baked the day before. After having made the decision to open the store, as usual, Fleurette's father, Marcel, and Ghyslain had, as usual, disappeared into the office. This had left her to deal with complaints and listen to the constant flow of small talk about Rosa Lefebvre.

Fleurette had been uneasy about opening the store because of Rosa, and had told her husband so as they walked from the church to the store. "Maybe we should just go home," she had said to Ghyslain. "I don't think it's right to open the store, to make money so soon after... It's not decent."

"But people expect us to be open. That's why we're here. If they need eggs, we're here to sell them eggs," he'd argued, walking quickly down *la rue de l'Église*. Even though people were coming out of the church, the street was so quiet that Fleurette could hear Ghyslain's corduroy pant legs rubbing together. The rushed, self-important sound made her want to scream.

She'd turned to her father for support, but Marcel Leduc was walking a few meters away from them, as though distancing himself from Fleurette and Ghyslain as a couple, or perhaps only from their disagreement.

"What do you think, *Papa?*" she'd asked him anyway.

"We have to open the store," Marcel had said quietly, not looking at her. "People can come in or they can choose not to, but we will open the store. What they think of us is their own business."

She had not been thinking of the town's opinion and was stung that he would think so. She walked along sullenly and watched her father open the front door with a key from his crowded key ring. Marcel had walked in purposefully, heading toward the back of the store to disable the alarm system. She'd gone in and turned her back to them wordlessly, taking her place at the cash register to sort the float money left in the till the previous evening.

While Fleurette had been eyeing Ghyslain, who trailed after Marcel to the back office, the first customer had entered, and after that, it had been like the July long weekend, the height of the tourist season. In July, however, there were always at least three people working the store. Today, they'd come in such rapid succession that she hadn't had a moment to step out from behind the cash to ask Ghyslain's help. Though she was furious that her husband hadn't come out from the back room to offer help, a nagging voice reminded her that he couldn't have known she would need it, that on autumn Sundays, few customers usually straggled in to buy last-minute supplies for family breakfasts or dinners. At this time of year, there were usually few summer tourists left, and the wave of hunting tourists had not begun. Most customers came from church, still dressed up. Everyone moved slowly, smiling, joining conversations that

had begun on the church *perron*: the weather, the fields, fishing and hunting stories, gossip, news. Small groups of people would coalesce near the checkout counter, or by the doors, then dissolve, to be replaced by others.

With twenty minutes left before closing time, the flow of customers was easing off. Only Suong Guy stood at the cash, but Fleurette could sense, rather than see, several customers still in the aisles of the store. Her jaws ached from the effort of making sympathetic grimaces and mouthing soothing words, a feeling she remembered from funerals. She smiled at Suong anyway.

*"Bonjour Suong. Yes, yes, a terrible thing,"* she murmured as she rang up a frozen box of egg substitute, some American bacon, and a loaf of commercial white bread. "Next week, we'll be sure to order extra," she heard herself saying, though she knew they wouldn't, that this week they were selling more eggs and more of everything because of what had happened to Rosa Lefebvre. People came to the store because they needed to talk about it, and while they were here, they shopped.

Disasters are good for business, she thought wryly, thinking back to the big storm that had swept through the area a few days before. When the highway had been washed out, they had doubled their sales, because the inhabitants of Pointe-Mouillée couldn't travel to Sturgeon Falls or North Bay, where the prices were cheaper. She felt a pang of guilt as she remembered that the Guy family had not fared so well in the storm. As Fleurette handed Suong her change, she tried to smile more sympathetically. She often wondered what life was like for Suong, who had replied to a magazine ad offering a North American husband, and found herself living on a small farm, in a small town in Northern Ontario.

As Suong, unsmiling, picked up her plastic bags of goods, Ghyslain suddenly appeared behind the counter and whispered to Fleurette that they had run out of eggs.

She hissed at him, not caring who heard her, "No kidding! Where the hell have you been?"

His lower lip curled outward, like a pouting child's. The full wetness of his lips repulsed her. Without a word, he turned on his heel and walked out of the store's front door. In the ensuing silence, she became aware that a group of women had gathered between the checkout counter and the exit, and were now speaking in semi-hushed voices. Her ears tuned themselves in to their conversation: "...such a terrible thing."

She turned to look at them. The women looked like a matched set. They were all shorter than Fleurette and wider. They had the same lumpy, shapeless figure as most of the town's older women, the same figure that Fleurette's two grandmothers had had, the same figure that Fleurette was well on her way to getting, and the one her mother had not lived long enough to achieve. Of the five women in the group, Alma St-Amant was much thinner, but she was hunched over, leaning on her cane. Since her return from a lengthy stay at the hospital a few months before, she was confined to the bottom floor of her own house. The other women huddled around Alma, surrounding her with concern. Each woman, save Alma, clutched a dark purse in one hand, and, in the other, a white plastic bag, printed with *Magasin Général Leduc*. They all wore neutral-coloured, all-weather coats that were unbuttoned in the unexpected heat of the early September day. Fleurette herself was feeling flushed in the long-sleeved blouse she had worn to church that morning when the weather had been cool and overcast. When they had emerged from church, the sun had been out and shining as though it were the height of summer.

"I was sitting right behind her," Mme Cyr was saying.

Fleurette knew she meant Rosa Lefebvre and the morning's events played themselves out again in her mind. It had happened in the post-sermon quiet. Père Côté had been standing in the pulpit, head lowered, praying silently after an apocalyptic sermon, in which he'd used the previous week's storm as a mild example of the scourges that will be visited on faithless humanity. In the pews, the congregation sat quiet, squirming under the wrathful eye of God, and thoughts of breakfast. Fleurette had been trying to remember if there were any blueberry muffins left in the bakery from the night before. Her stomach grumbled loudly. She flushed, wondering who had heard, when suddenly, a voice — Adèle Denis's, though she hadn't known it at the time — cried out, "Oh!" very loudly, from somewhere ahead of the pew where Fleurette sat between Ghyslain and her father.

The ensuing events she remembered in slow motion, like in a movie. She'd looked up and seen Père Côté frowning in his pulpit, and thought his disapproval was directed at her noisy stomach.

Then, Mlle Denis cried out again, "*Ma soeur!*" The whole congregation stirred as one, turning toward the sound.

Adèle Denis cried out once again, the sound piercing through the muffled movement of people turning, whispered questions. Fleurette remembered her words exactly, as well as the sound of her voice, the sound of something breaking. "*Mon Dieu! Aidez-moi!*"

As the hold of the unusual broke the resisting rhythm of the habitual, the movie shifted into fast-forward. Fleurette was feeling like she'd just dived into the lake on a too-early summer's day, the sudden shock taking her breath away. She took hold of



Ghyslain's elbow. He looked down. He looked up. She leaned over his lap to see, but people were rushing toward Rosa Lefebvre and Mlle Denis, so she didn't get a good look right away. Père Côté appeared between the pews, making his way through the crowd. Docteur Gagnon was there too, saying, "*Attention! Attention!*" People standing in the aisle moved aside to let them through. Half-standing now, Fleurette saw the doctor take hold of Mme Lefebvre's shoulders and lay her down on the floor in the aisle. Her skin was bluish against the green and red linoleum tiles. The doctor's voice rang out, obscenely loud, "*Morte.*" Père Côté said something she didn't hear, and some of the men who were nearby picked up Rosa Lefebvre's body.

She saw them clearly as they passed by her pew, the priest and the doctor following the men—Cam Caron, Bernard Savard and his brother Aldéa—who were having trouble holding Rosa. Her arms and legs kept flopping out of their grasp. Mlle Denis was pale and striding alongside Mme Lefebvre's body. She watched Adèle Denis rearrange Rosa's skirt, which had slid up her legs. She was sobbing softly, "*Ma pauvre Rosa.*"

Binou Coutu was asking her something.

"Hmmm?" Fleurette asked. "Pardon?"

"*Un paquet d'mes regulars, please,*" he repeated, his voice like a car rolling slowly over gravel.

Fleurette turned, reached out toward the cigarette display case, but, as her fingers were pulling out a red package from one of the stacks, Coutu clucked and said, "*Non, non. King size! Are you losing your memory?*" He chuckled.

"Sorry," Fleurette whispered, as she placed a king-sized package of cigarettes on the counter. "I'm a bit distracted today." She punched some keys on the cash register.

"That's understandable," he said. "Everyone's a little rattled, eh?"

She handed him his change and tried to smile, but her face froze. Too much forced smiling. Again, she thought of funerals and had the urge to run. She scanned the store for customers then turned to look at the door, which was swinging shut behind Binou. As she sized up the possibilities for escape, looking for Ghyslain through the glass door, she caught another snippet of conversation from the women near the door.

"She's going straight to Heaven," a voice said. Fleurette wasn't sure which of the women had said it. Did they think dying in a church qualified someone for immediate salvation? How well did any of these old women know Rosa Lefebvre anyway?

She heaved a box of tomatoes off a wooden stool and sat down. She rubbed her eyes and sighed, tried to focus her mind on being angry with Ghyslain — where the hell had he gone? — but her mind kept returning to Rosa.

Rosa was a quiet person, she thought, and realized what an absurd statement it was. Fleurette had probably seen the woman every day of her thirty years and she knew things about her, but even that amounted to little. Most of it was the kind of family history that most people knew about everybody. Rosa had been married to Adèle Denis's half-brother, Paul Lefebvre. Adèle and Rosa had lived together since Paul's death. Fleurette wasn't sure how long ago that had been, but it was as long as she could remember. Rosa and Adèle were, had always been, in her mind *les vieilles filles*. That was the role they had always played for her. She had accepted it unquestioningly. When she tried to think of either of them as an individual, she found herself baffled, confused.

When Fleurette was younger, when she believed that much of life was about sex, she'd accepted that, perhaps, some women who never chose marriage, who lived together into old age, were gay, but Rosa and Adèle had never fit in that category. She found it impossible to link the short-haired, black-clad lesbians she saw on her college campus with the nun-like existence of the women who lived across *la rue de l'Église*. That was how she thought of them, asexual, like nuns.

She knew without thinking about it that, in the history of all small towns across French Canada, there had been men and women who never married and were an accepted part of village life. In a society whose existence was so enmeshed with the Catholic Church, where duty lay either in marriage and reproduction, or in religious calling, the lives of such people fit into neither category, so were considered apart. Unmarried men traditionally worked as lumberjacks, dock men, hired hands, *des jobbeurs, des coureurs de bois*, hunters and trappers. In their youth, these figures were considered romantic, believed to lead lives of freedom, travel, irresponsibility, drink, and promiscuity. *Les vieux garçons* were those who never outgrew this stage. However, it was generally perceived by the townspeople, and by Fleurette herself, that most *vieilles filles* came into their prolonged unmarried status through unmarriageability due to lack of physical beauty or because of some character flaw. Fleurette had always accepted that these women were not sexually active, but desirous of it, and that this, in turn, soured their character, and they became *des vieilles filles enragées*—ravenous and mad old maids. Other women remained unmarried out of some devotion to looking after family members, such as elderly parents or sick siblings. These were more highly considered and their status was accepted as a type of religious vocation. They were regarded as halfway to a nun, but it remained that they had not become nuns, and thus,

were failures of a sort. Adèle Denis fit into this last category since she had come to help care for her ailing brother. Fleurette was not certain why, but she had always lumped Rosa Lefebvre into this social category, though she had been married. She was a widow, really. *Pas une vieille fille*. Perhaps she had always assumed that Rosa and Adèle were taking care of one other. She squirmed on her seat.

Fleurette reviewed what she knew about Rosa. She wasn't a good cook. She knew that much. That's why Mlle Denis did most of the cooking, and all of their shopping. Despite that, Rosa Lefebvre came every day to the store to buy the newspaper. She was on the list, and they reserved a paper for her every day.

We used to, Fleurette thought. She imagined herself scratching Rosa's name from the sheet of paper that was kept folded, under the till. Mme Lefebvre had once mentioned to Fleurette that reading the news was a habit she had picked up from her grandmother. When she came to buy the paper, Rosa also bought a chocolate bar. Different kinds, but always a big one, with nuts. She did this every day.

There were a few days when Rosa hadn't bought chocolate, perhaps a dozen in all, Fleurette supposed. She had never asked her why she hadn't bought chocolate on those days. She hadn't wanted Mme Lefebvre to think she had noticed her sweet habit. Now, she wished she had asked. Then, she would have known one little, secret thing about her.

What she knew didn't amount to much else. Rosa Lefebvre went to church every morning. Fleurette used to see her leaving her house, which was across the street from Fleurette's and behind the store. They would smile politely and wave from across the street. That was all.

Now, instead of seeing Mme Lefebvre brushing snow off the porch, or hurrying toward the church, she would just remember. She would remember that when the men carried her out of the church, her skirt rode up and Fleurette caught sight of her legs. Her nylon knee-highs had rolled down to her ankles, revealing white legs with blue veins like rivers on a map. Old lady legs. That hadn't surprised Fleurette, but she'd been shocked that her calves were covered with long, dark hair, like a man's legs, in miniature. Animal legs. Suddenly, Rosa Lefebvre had seemed strange, unfamiliar, and even thinking of it now made Fleurette feel uncomfortable, like she hadn't known her at all.

Fleurette looked around. The group of ladies was still standing next to the door. She heard them say, "Ernest Deschamps" —Ghyslaine's father's name—but before she could make out why they were talking about him, Estelle Caron came to the counter. She was trying to hold back three of her children, whose hands were grabbing at the candy in the display below the counter. Estelle's eyes were shadowed; they seemed set deep in her skull. Whatever order she had managed to comb and spray into her unruly curls that morning had been shaken out by small hands. She snapped, "*Non. Non. Non. Non. Non.* We're going to have lunch soon."

She turned to Fleurette and added in a voice that was still testy and motherly, "Fleurette, I've asked you before. Can't you do something about this candy?"

Fleurette got up off her stool, and shrugged. She did not feel up to a debate with Estelle Caron this morning. "I'll talk to *Papa* about it again," she said, trying to be both pacifying and noncommittal. Estelle and Cam Caron bought six litres of milk every day for their six children, as well as food.

“They’re regular customers,” Fleurette had brought up half-heartedly to her father and Ghyslain during one Sunday brunch, not long before. “The least we could do is move the candy away from the counter.”

Despite her sympathy for Estelle’s struggles with her children, Fleurette knew the business reason for leaving the candy where it was. Her father and Ghyslain had brought up those reasons, their tones indulgent and unreachable, the way they always were when she brought up any subject relating to children. Her face had flamed; she could almost hear their thoughts, “How would you know about children?”

She rang up Estelle’s milk, pancake mix, maple-flavoured syrup, and jumbo pack of toilet paper. Amidst the squabbling of her children, Fleurette heard Estelle sigh loudly.

“Where’s the baby?” Fleurette asked gently.

Estelle made a vague nod toward the door, where the old ladies were still standing. “At home with my eldest. Cam isn’t back from Sturgeon yet,” she said in a low voice, as though it were a secret.

Then, as she was picking up her groceries and shepherding her children back to the door – “*Allez-y. Dans l’char tou’l’monde!*” – she turned to whisper to Fleurette, “*Ah oui.* After church, we drove back to the farm... Bernadette had to pee... While we were there, you’ll never guess who called.” She paused for effect.

Fleurette waited, too tired to feign interest in gossip.

Estelle announced, “Ti-Jean’s Cécile. She’s back. She called this morning to talk to Cam.”

Before Fleurette could react, one of the Caron children pushed open the door and toddled out into the parking lot. Estelle ran after him, throwing a quick “Bye!” over her shoulder.

Fleurette opened the cash and looked down at the money, thinking, I should count it. I should close up the store. Instead, she remembered Cécile. It was almost two years before, Fleurette was sure of it because the bakery had just been built. It was one of the first times she’d baked bread and she was doing it very carefully, checking the procedure in the instruction book that had come with the bread oven.

Cécile was lingering in one of the aisles of the *magasin*, the middle aisle that runs down from the bakery. She was moving slowly, staring fixedly at a soup can, but not putting it into her basket. Fleurette stood still, sure that Cécile wasn’t aware of her. As she stared, she realized that Cécile wasn’t really looking at the can, but down the aisle toward the meat counter. From her vantage point, Fleurette could not see if Cécile was looking at anything in particular, or if she was simply staring off into space. Daydreaming. Fleurette imagined that she was thinking about Ti-Jean, maybe trying to conjure the feeling, the exact weight and temperature, the texture of his fingers sliding up her thigh the night before, that morning perhaps.

Fleurette blushed but did not take her eyes off Cécile. Her eyes were dark, almost black, and fringed with heavy lashes that made her look sleepy, or as though her eyes were closed even when open. Her hair, a glossy black, was tucked behind one ear on one side. On the far side, it hung down behind her face in an arc, like a crow’s wing. Fleurette was surprised that she was beautiful. She had not thought before that she was beautiful.

She had an air of concentration about her; her forehead was pinched, her eyebrows in a V. With her shuttered eyes and lips pressed together, Cécile's thoughts seemed unreachable. Fleurette had a strong desire to touch her on the shoulder. She had thought, If I touched her softly, then perhaps magically, Cécile wouldn't notice, and if I whispered, 'What are you thinking?' then, perhaps she would answer.

The group of ladies edged toward the door and Fleurette started when she heard one of them — she thought it was Mme St-Amant — saying with a sigh, "What a glorious death."

Henriette Cyr pushed the door open, then paused and turned to Fleurette, "*Mes sympathies* to your husband, Fleurette."

The other women murmured assent, "*Oui, oui... Mes sympathies... Poor Ghyslain.*"

As the women moved toward the door, Alma St-Amant stopped and said, as though in reply to Fleurette's unanswered question, "Rosa was his half-sister." She said it so quietly that Fleurette wasn't sure if the old woman had meant it for Fleurette to hear, or if she'd been mumbling to herself.

She watched the glass door close behind them, leaned over to watch them disperse in the parking lot, and slowly disappear in different directions. She hadn't even thought about Rosa being Ghyslain's half-sister. They hadn't acted like family; they had so little in common. She had been raised by her grandparents, she had been married by the time Ghyslain was born. Fleurette wasn't even sure that Ghyslain ever thought about it himself. She didn't think he had invited Rosa to their wedding.



Chyslain. After Rosa's body had been carried out of the church, the massive wooden doors had closed, and everyone had stood frozen in the aisles, in the pews, facing the back of the church. It had been so quiet, no one crying, everyone stunned and not knowing what to do. At the time, Fleurette was feeling almost cheered by the excitement of the event in a way that made her uncomfortable.

She'd thought, Maybe it's because *la Messe* never finished. She'd recited to herself the closing formula. She'd closed her eyes and imagined Père Côté's voice saying, "*Allez dans la paix du Christ.*"

After this self-blessing, she'd opened her eyes again and looked up at Chyslain. He stood next to her, looking at the doors fixedly, as though willing them to open again. The muscles in his jaw clenched and unclenched, clenched again. Fleurette felt guilty for the almost thrill she was getting from the tragedy.

Then, someone had moved out of a back pew and opened one of the doors. It opened with a groan and let in a shaft of dusty sunlight that made a rectangle on the floor. It was Gareau who had broken the spell, she remembered. She'd been surprised to see him in church at all.

Once he had opened the door, everyone followed. But it wasn't like most Sundays, when the congregation bursts out of the doors with Amens still ringing in their ears, smiling and greeting each other, laughing and shaking hands, lingering on the stoop even when it is cold. People just silently filed out, hushed, the guilty caught in the act.

Chyslain, Fleurette and Marcel had not even looked at each other or spoken until they were down the road, near the *magasin*.

Remembering this, standing in the now-quiet store, Fleurette was convinced that the silence in the church had been because the presence of death had reminded everyone of something they had lost, or feared losing. She walked over to the door to turn over the Open sign; she still had to balance the till and bring it to her father in the office before going home to make lunch. Through the glass door, she saw a red 4x4 pull up into the parking lot. She paused a moment, at once knowing it and not recognizing it. She felt her face grow warm when she saw Cécile's short legs turn out, then jump down.

Fleurette moved quickly away from the door and back to her position at the cash to wait for Cécile.

### Chapter 3 Loup-garou

Hours after her trip to the *magasin*, Cécile woke up on the couch with a start. The television was on but there was only static on the screen. It took her a moment to get her bearings and when she realized she was in her cabin in Pointe-Mouillée, she felt herself really wake up. The clock on the VCR said 03:39 AM.

She picked up the remote control and turned off the television. At first, the absence of the static filled her ears and she heard nothing, but soon, her ears began to pick up sounds coming from outside the cabin. For a moment, she considered turning the television back on; at least the sound offered a shield from unidentified sounds, an auditory envelope to wrap around herself.

There was a full glass of vodka on the coffee table. She carried it to the kitchen and threw out its contents. She thought about brushing her teeth but decided against going into the bathroom. She locked the front door and listened to the sound of her own stocking feet padding softly on the floor as she walked through the cabin, turning off all the lights.

In her own dresser drawer, she found a pair of her flannel pyjamas. Most of her clothing had been left here, and was now waiting for her to pull it on like an old skin. Ti-Jean's dresser stood next to hers, its contents also looking like they were waiting.

She got into bed, on her side of the bed, but did not know whether it was worse to face the empty side of the bed, or to have the emptiness behind her, like a cold wind on her neck, so she lay on her back. After a moment, she switched pillows, and turned to rest her face on Ti-Jean's feather pillow. She inhaled but all she smelled was a damp mustiness. She switched back to her own foam pillow and turned onto her back again.

An almost complete blackness surrounded her. She could make out the window on the wall on Ti-Jean's side of the bed, since the curtains were open. The only light entering the room was from the moon, which she could not see, but she could see tree branches swaying in the wind, alternating between glistening light and dark.

She wasn't sleepy, and she had to use the toilet, but did not want to get up. She lay there, staring into the darkness of the cabin with ferocity, willing the blind darkness to give way to subtle shades of black. After a time, she made out the door frame, the hulking shape of the twin dressers in a single lumpish shadow, and she relaxed a little. She hoped for sleep, but when the garbage can next to the maple trees fell over with a clang, she felt her body go hot. Her mind raced. Raccoons, she thought frantically. Probably raccoons.

Her ears were tuned in to the sounds of the night outside the cabin: the constant whisper of the wind, a pine cone falling on the roof, frogs and crickets, small animals moving through leaves. The Fleur de Lys sign was squeaking on its hinges and there was scurrying in the wall behind the bed — mice. She tried to concentrate on a list of things she should accomplish the next day, until she heard a single high-pitched howl — coyote or a wolf? — coming from the wooded area adjoining the docking bay. She shivered. In a few moments, a chorus of other howls joined in.

She had been afraid at night when Ti-Jean was there too, but never in the cabin, only when she'd gone alone outside, at night, to put out the garbage, or to go join Ti-Jean working in the garage or in one of the cabins. This fear began after she got married. Before, she had often gone hiking and camping, sometimes alone, and had never felt fear. But after she and Ti-Jean moved into the lodge, every time she stepped out of the cabin at night, she would feel her scalp knit itself together, and her mind

would scream, turn back turn back turn back. Her eyes would try to pierce the dark, expecting to see the threat that was waiting for her, something animal, something wild that would devour her, annihilate her, extinguish her. Her limbs felt like they were gathering themselves for flight, but she held them back, walked slowly, glancing back at the lighted windows of the house. She would plan: I could run into the shed; I could run back to the house; I could lock myself in the car; I could scream until Ti-Jean heard. Would he hear or was he too far? What if he was not safe? Her eyes would dart around, looking for a weapon, scanning the ground for a stick, a stray shovel or rake. I should carry a knife, she told herself. She imagined plunging a blade into warm sticky flesh and fur. She imagined teeth and glowing eyes in the dark. Then she would run.

She would find Ti-Jean working in the dark, or the partial light of a lantern, bringing in oars or motors, or locking up boats for the night, and in his presence, these fears would recede, and she wouldn't tell him she had been afraid.

Once, she had asked him, "Won't you wait for me? I don't really like walking by myself at night."

Ti-Jean had laughed, "*Are you afraid of le loup-garou?*"

After that, her fear had a name.

They are outside on the docks, bringing lifejackets into the boathouse, chaining the boats for the night. The round lantern sits on the planks, throwing a swaying column of light onto the water. Cécile stands at the front of one of the boats, piling orange vests onto the dock. Ti-Jean squats at the back of another boat, moored across from hers. He is turned away; she can't see his face or hands. From out of the darkness, the sound of his voice is accompanied by that of a heavy chain grinding through a metal

ring on the dock, then splashing in the water. “You know Julien Gareau? He owns the big farm up on *le rang* Gareau ...” Ti-Jean calls the local roads *rangs*, the way his grandmother did, and the way some of the older villagers still do. Cécile knows *le rang* Gareau; it is the next one after *le rang* Desrosiers, which was named after Ti-Jean’s paternal ancestors.

“Is he the one growing canola?” she asks.

“Yep. In the yellow house just off the highway, before the bridge. Well, the rumour was that his grandfather, Jean-Baptiste Gareau, was *un loup-garou*.”

“What!” She stands still, holding a life-vest, and waits, listening.

“My grandmother—you never met *Grand-maman Bibi*, but she was quite a storyteller. This happened when she was just a girl, just around the time the town was being built up. She lived outside the town, on *le rang* St-Amant, just across the river from Jean-Baptiste Gareau’s. It’s the same land that Julien Gareau still farms now. One winter they were having trouble with a pack of wolves that would come out at night and kill *le bétail*. Everyone was losing cows and chickens.

“Once, my grandmother was playing near the barn alone, because her brothers and sisters had gone sliding on a hill at the edge of the field, and had told her she was too small to go with them. It was broad daylight, but she saw a wolf come out of the forest at the back of the field, at a fierce pace, running like it was being chased by the devil himself. —Go ahead and laugh. That’s the way she told it. She swore she saw this. —The wolf jumped onto a cow in the field, grabbed it by the neck and dragged it back into the woods with its jaws.

“Now, of course, no ordinary wolf would be that bold or that strong, so the rumour started going around that it was a *loup-garou*. My grandmother was asked to

tell her story over and over to all the neighbours, and to the priest. She said that people who had already heard the story would come to hear her tell it again.

“Well, it came to be known that everyone was losing *bétail* except Gareau. None of his cows or sheep or even chickens went missing. He himself bragged about it one day at the church.”

Ti-Jean pauses. She hears the padlock snap. “Notice also how the name Gareau sounds like ‘garou.’ *Loup-garou*. Hmmm.” She hears the smile in his voice.

“Oh jeez!” Cécile exclaims, punctuating her groan by throwing the lifejacket down on the planks.

“Just think about what that meant to people, though,” Ti-Jean insists.

“As the situation worsened, everyone was afraid to go out at night — *pour faire le train*—and more and more animals were disappearing or being mauled by ... whatever... People started to avoid Gareau and to treat him with suspicion...”

“Poor guy!” Cécile interrupts.

“Well, that poor guy died during this time, under suspicious circumstances. His wife said that he was cleaning his gun and it went off. It blew his leg off, and he bled to death. But people in the village had been shooting at wolves, and they wondered if one of them hadn’t shot the *loup-garou*, out of sheer luck. People were pretty relieved about this, and some even went to his funeral, out of pity for the widow, but when the situation did not change after Jean-Baptiste’s death, people started speculating that Gareau had turned someone into a *loup-garou* before his death.”

“*Turned* someone?” she asks in a mocking voice.

“It was well-known that you could turn someone into a werewolf by biting them. And before his death, the only people who had been in contact with Gareau were

his family. So suspicion fell on Mme Gareau herself, who started to act strangely when she came to town, which was rarely.”

“Well, no kidding. She was probably pissed off that her family was outcast and that no one came to her poor husband’s funeral. For crying out loud!”

“Don’t tell me. I’m just telling it the way my grandmother told it. She had tons of stories like this. Anyway, suspicion fell on Mme Gareau and on her teen-aged son, Alphonse. He would have been Julien’s father.

“At that point, the local men started to organize vigil groups. Farmers would go out every night armed with guns and knives and axes and pitchforks. They would ride around making noise and looking for wolves to kill. They killed quite a few and, eventually, the whole cattle-killing thing stopped. Both Mme Gareau herself, and her son survived.

“But, my grandmother said, people thought it was because their cover had been blown. That they stopped doing so much killing in the area. Maybe they went looking for victims down by Sturgeon Falls or something. ”

“Or maybe the whole thing was a load of crap,” Cécile says disdainfully, stepping lightly out of the boat. All the same, she looks around. The darkness outside the lantern’s halo is impenetrable. She feels fear settling on her, heavy and chill, like a wet snow.

Ti-Jean hops onto the dock and into another boat. His footsteps on the wood planks echo over the water. She follows, walking silently.

“How come Mme Gareau and her son stuck around?” she asks.

“Maybe they didn’t have anywhere better to go. Maybe they always meant to leave... Who knows? The son, Alphonse, went off to World War I and came back with a



wife. Julien was born shortly after. *Very* shortly after, my grandmother says. But both parents died during *la fièvre espagnole*, and Julien was raised by his grandmother. *C'était pas des voisineux*. They kept to themselves. Julien never married. He's always been kind of an outcast. Probably the werewolf shunning just carried on, from generation to generation. I'm sure most people don't even know why Gareau is an outcast. They just know he's strange."

"I wonder if Gareau remembers," she says quietly.

Shortly after Ti-Jean had told her the story of the *loup-garou*, Cécile had seen Julien Gareau at the *Magasin Général*. She had stood watching him while she pretended to be reading the ingredient list on a box of cereal. With gnarled, hairy hands, dirty fingernails, he picked up a package of ground beef from the meat counter. His hair, and the stubble on his face, were black, peppered with grey. His large body seemed powerful, and his weather-darkened skin contrasted with pale, cold blue eyes. If his grandfather had looked anything like him, Cécile could see why those rumours had started. While she watched, he brought the package of meat to his face and sniffed deeply and loudly. Cécile felt a current of electric fear go through her body. She stood rooted in place while he looked up at her, unsmiling, then walked away, eyes hard as marbles.

A sound, a rustle followed by a clank, and Cécile jumped out of bed. She turned on the bedroom light. Quickly, she walked through the cabin and turned on all the lights, and CBC radio. She went back to her bed and cried, without allowing her emotions to run away with her, afraid of the level of inactivity she'd experienced at her

mother's. Only after she'd cried, and with noise and light dispelling her fears, did she manage to relax enough to sleep. She woke at dawn, as relieved to see the sun as though he'd been someone come to keep her company. She got up to make coffee for Cam.

## Chapter 4

### Cleanup

The sun, still low on the horizon, shone brightly but hadn't yet dispelled the previous night's chill. Cécile followed Cam's gaze up the trunk of the large white pine whose top half had broken off in the storm. On its way down onto the roof of Cabin Number Nine, the massive, twenty-foot length of tree had torn off most of the branches on one side of a neighbouring pine. This neighbour had weathered the impact and remained standing, but on the side where it was bare of branches, there were deep gouges running down the bark, and the underlying wood flesh stood out, as exposed and startling as any wound. Some of the evergreen branches, whether from the tree that had fallen or from the one that still stood, hung suspended in the tangle of branches of a small stand of white birch about six feet away.

The broken trunk was a foot in diameter at the break, maybe two. The roots of the broken pine remained firmly planted in the ground and, at eye level, the trunk shot straight up, looking healthy and normal, but twenty feet up, it ended abruptly. The break was so clean that it resembled a snapped twig. Cécile's eyes quivered and reduced the massive tree to a branch until she lost perspective and, dizzy, had to look down.

Cam Caron walked over to the cabin, his face serious, assessing the damage to the roof.

"That must have been some storm," she said.

He came to stand next to her and looked up at the tree again, mumbling, "Still, it must have been rotten if it broke like that. The rest of it will have to come down, I guess."

"What was it like?" she asked. She watched him frown, working out her meaning. His hair in the morning sunlight was a reddish blond that looked like it was part of the foliage, the yellow birch and red maple. She shivered, pulled her gloves out of her jacket pockets.

"I mean the storm," she added, finally.

The frown relaxed. "Oh."

He paused for a moment and Cécile wondered if he would tell her what he'd thought she meant. He stood, arms crossed, looking down at the roots of the tree with interest, as though there were something there that she couldn't see.

Cécile had not foreseen the tension that hung between them, unacknowledged. When Cam had arrived that morning, stepped out of his truck at six o'clock in the morning, he hadn't even acknowledged that she'd been gone a year. He'd walked around the house, looking for signs of damage.

"How's the house on the inside?" he'd asked.

"Fine. No problem," she'd replied.

"Good." He'd stood below the porch, not climbing the stairs to come in. She'd made a pot of coffee for them, but, suddenly uncomfortable, did not offer him any. Now she wondered whether she should have called him at all. When she'd telephoned him the day before, she hadn't thought it through. It's what Ti-Jean would have done. During their year at the lodge together, Cam's presence had been ordinary, an almost daily occurrence. He had worked with Ti-Jean, he would lunch with them, and sometimes stay for dinner too. A few times, they had gone for dinner at Cam and Estelle's. Estelle had brought over jam in the summer and *ketchup vert* in the fall.

Now, while Cécile listened to Cam describe the storm for her, she watched his eyes move between the tree and the cabin, avoiding hers. “Wednesday, around two o’clock, I guess—I was working on the roof of the shed behind our house—I saw thunder clouds on the horizon, huge, shaped like a ship, and moving fast toward us. Within ten or fifteen minutes, the whole sky was black. Well, dark grey. Like lead. I didn’t have time to finish putting plastic on the roof. There wouldn’t have been much point even if I had. The wind was so strong, it took the whole shed down.

“At one point, I looked up and the clouds in the distance looked like a couple of huge fingers reaching down, down. One of the fingers got almost to the tops of the trees, then it seemed to change its mind. It pulled up. Within a minute, I was hit by rain, hail, thunder, lightning. Mario Guy’s tractor was hit by lightning and caught fire. He heard the sound and ran out of the house, but by the time he’d reached it, the fire had spread into the hay and his barn was on fire. Barn’s gone. He lost some animals too.”

He told his story in one breath, like a story he’d told many times.

He doesn’t want to be here, Cécile thought suddenly, and with despair, realized that she needed him. Who else would she call for help?

As though he had heard her, Cam looked up. “I can ask my cousin Bâtard...” His voice trailed off for a moment, as though wondering if she knew who he meant and, when she nodded, he continued. “I think he’s free right now. I can ask him to help me get that thing off the roof and fix it too. Then, after, there’s the docks and the boats to deal with...”

He stopped, shrugged, his tone of voice shifting from that of someone taking charge to a more tentative one, “...if you want.”

He sniffed and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his hunting vest, waiting for her answer. The gesture was one she had often seen Ti-Jean make. It was a signal of impatience and, at the same time, a resignation to waiting, a yielding. It was a gesture that probably had echoes in other moments like this one that had taken place around Pointe-Mouillée for a hundred years. It was as much a part of this place as the lake and the trees, and it made Cécile feel uneasy that she was outside enough to recognize it, that she couldn't call such a gesture hers. It reminded her of how she used to meet people in town and they would ask her where Ti-Jean was, as though she had no right to be there without him.

It was like the day before, when she had gone to the *Magasin Général* to buy some supplies, Fleurette Deschamps had asked, "Are you back to stay?" As though she were surprised that Cécile would even consider it.

"I'm not sure," Cécile had replied defensively.

Fleurette had merely said, "Oh," and plopped down onto a stool behind the checkout counter. Fleurette's wide hips were planted on the wooden stool that seemed an extension of her body. She looked rooted in place, her body shaped more like the other bodies in the village than Cécile's own small, boyish build. *Habitante*, she thought with envy. From her position behind the checkout counter of the town's only store, Fleurette reigned. She was the hub around which all activities revolved. Watching her sitting there, looking like a statue, a monument, made Cécile's eyes burn as she forgot to blink.

After a moment, Fleurette had added, "That's good," but then had stood up and turned her back to Cécile to flip the sign in the door to "Closed."

Remembering it, Cécile blinked, feeling anger at the snub. This is my place now, she thought uncomfortably, though she still felt as though the place belonged to Ti-Jean's family.

"When can you start?" Cécile asked Cam.

"I need a couple of days to finish up some work," he said as they walked back to his truck. As they passed Cabin Number Four, she remembered the boarded-up window.

"Hey, Cam, thanks for looking out for the cabins when I was gone."

He blushed. "Don't worry about it."

The blush triggered a memory that she had completely put out of her mind. When Ti-Jean had first introduced Cam to her, he'd similarly blushed a deep red. He'd looked familiar to Cécile, but she wasn't able to say how she knew him. When Cam didn't say anything, she'd assumed she was mistaken.

Then, Ti-Jean had invited Cam to stay for lunch, but Cam had stood, hesitating, in the doorway. "*Entre. Entre,*" Ti-Jean had said, grinning broadly.

Cam had taken off his baseball cap, and run his hand through his head of flattened curls, and she'd known. About five years before, she'd gone to an outdoor concert at Bell Park in Sudbury and met a man. They'd stood near each other, dancing, rubbing shoulders. He'd shared the contents of a wineskin hidden under his jean jacket. Afterward, they'd gone out for a few beers. They'd spent the night in a smelly downtown hotel room because she lived with her mother and he'd said he was staying with a friend who wasn't feeling well. He'd interested her. He was intense, his body self-contained, with no superfluous movements. He gave the impression of an enormous amount of energy packed tightly into his body, a coil ready to spring. They'd

made love the whole night, athletic and tireless, the thought of which made Cécile, standing across from him in the little cabin's kitchen, blush in turn. She'd caught his eye and knew he remembered, but since he didn't say anything, she didn't either.

Later, she figured out that, on that night in Sudbury, Cam had already been married ten years, and she understood his silence. She understood also his mood the morning after their lovemaking, his sombre face as they sat in a diner eating breakfast, the evasive quiet that met all her questions, the physical withdrawal of his body from hers, not allowing even an accidental brushing of knees under the diner table, no *effleurance* of hands as the ketchup changed hands.

They walked in silence for a few moments; she could hear the crunching of gravel beneath their feet. Cécile had not thought of their one-night stand since the day Ti-Jean had reintroduced him to her. She'd put it out of her mind telling herself the event was part of the past, and that, in the present, it would hurt so many people. Now, she wondered if Cam was thinking of it too. Now that they were alone together.

Cam's truck was parked in front of the house. It was the blue pickup Ti-Jean had sold him two years before. Cam had repaired the engine, but it now looked as though rust was eating its way through the body.

He opened the truck door, then hesitated. "You heard about Mme Lefebvre?"

"Yes. Sorry. That must have been hard for you... for everyone."

The day before, when Cécile had telephoned Cam, his wife, Estelle, had told her about Rosa's death.

"Ah! Cécile, how are you? Where are you calling from?"

"Here. Fleur de Lys."



"What are you doing out here?"

"I've come to stay."

Pause. "To stay? By yourself?"

"*Écoute*, Estelle, could I speak to Cam? There are some repairs and I need help. I could hire him... If he's not too busy *de c'temps là*."

Estelle had replied slowly, "Cam's not here right now." She'd paused, as though considering how much more to say, then gone on. "Mme Lefebvre died this morning, *pendant la Messe*. Cam went with the doctor to Sturgeon. He helped carry her."

Rosa's death, at almost the same moment as Cécile's arrival in Pointe-Mouillée, struck her again as a particularly inauspicious omen. Her memory of Rosa Lefebvre was vague, a kind of peripheral moment in a memory focussed on Ti-Jean. Most of her memories and feelings about Pointe-Mouillée were structured this way. At the church craft fair, the Christmas after Ti-Jean and she had moved here, he had introduced her to a tiny woman, even more compact than Cécile herself. At first, Cécile had assumed she was a nun, since she wore a plain, A-line skirt, a white shirt, and plain silver cross on a chain around her neck. The base of the cross was caught in the blouse, puckering the fabric between two buttons. However, when she turned slightly, Cécile noticed that the woman's hair was put up into a bun, a thick, winding coil of white. For a moment, she had wondered what it would look like, uncoiled, a long stream of white. While Ti-Jean had flirted playfully with Rosa, her face had gracefully composed itself into coy girlishness, and she'd looked ageless, pretty. Cécile had smiled, thinking that Ti-Jean had the ability to charm everyone. While they were chatting, Cécile had looked at the crafts displayed on Rosa Lefebvre's table, and found curtains, delicately crocheted from

ivory cotton thread. “*Regarde*, Ti-Jean. They look like spider webs. They would look perfect in the kitchen.”

Cam clutched and unclutched the handle of the truck. He said, “You know, in a funeral home, the dead just look asleep.”

Cécile watched his hand. She sensed the shadow of Ti-Jean’s death just below the surface of his words. More unspoken, shared history.

“Tense and asleep at the same time. But Mme Lefebvre was lying on the church floor, her eyes... still open. It looked like she was surprised, like death had taken her by surprise. I guess it always takes us by surprise.”

After Cam had gone, Cécile poured herself some coffee and sat on the porch steps. The air was cold, but a slice of sunlight warmed the steps. Over the constant whispering of wind, she heard the sounds of a honking flock of Canada geese coming from the direction of the lake. Much of the noise, she had read somewhere, was made by the youngest geese on their first migration south, protesting hunger and fatigue.

Winter’s coming, she thought. Time to settle into a winter’s nest. She considered going in to clean her cabin but couldn’t stop thinking about the green towel.

The day before, after she’d come back from the *Magasin Général*, armed with cleaning supplies and mousetraps, she decided to start with the bathroom. In the kitchen, she poured a bucket of soapy water, found the mop, then marched into the bathroom and shut the door behind her.

The towel was bunched up on the floor behind the door, covered with dust and spider webs. It was a deep, forest green that, she remembered, had always bled in the

wash. Ti-Jean's favourite towel. She remembered him stepping out of the shower on the day he died, rubbing his hair with that towel. She had watched him in the mirror as she brushed her teeth at the sink.

Yesterday, mop and pail in hand, she'd looked up and seen her reflection in the same mirror, and glanced behind her where she remembered Ti-Jean standing.

She remembered it so vividly. After he had wiped his hair, he dropped the towel on the floor, and came up behind to kiss her neck. His warm moist skin through her T-shirt. Smell of soap. Her mouth full of toothpaste. Mint.

And she had bristled, moved away from him. "Do you always have to throw your towel on the floor?"

"I'll pick it up later," he'd said laughing and pulling her to him. "When I need to take another shower."

"Well, I'm not picking it up for you," she'd said, pulling away from him.

That whole day, she'd stepped over the towel to get to the toilet, telling herself she wouldn't pick it up. That night, after she had returned from Sturgeon Falls without him, after leaving him lying in a morgue, she had come back to the cabin, to all the uncompleted gestures of Jean Desrosiers' life, spread out, waiting for him to complete them. She had kicked the towel behind the door.

Yesterday, she hadn't been able to bring herself to pick up the towel. If she did, if she picked it up, if she cleaned the cabin, if she threw out his *To Do* list, she would be erasing him, or erasing her memory of him, as though without the cues, she would forget that he had, at one time, been—no, lived—here. She remembered how her mother, when speaking of Cécile's father, had always said, in French, "*Quand ton père*

*vivait*” When your father lived. She gave the word “lived” the weight of action rather than the usual passive state of “being alive.”

Cécile wanted to remember that Ti-Jean had lived, that he had clipped his toenails in the bathroom, that he had shaved over the sink, letting little hairs fall onto the white porcelain, that, when he wrote, his fingers curled around pens tightly, as though his hand was too big, or pens too small and delicate, that his handwriting was surprisingly neat and full of loops. The physical presence of him. She didn’t want to forget any detail. She knew she would.

She hadn’t been able to do anything after that. She’d left the pail and mop in the middle of the bathroom floor, gone to the cupboard in the living-room where they had kept the liquor, and poured herself a glass of vodka, straight, that she then left untouched on the table beside the couch, where she sat watching television. Each time she went to the toilet, she stepped over the mop stretched across the bathroom floor, then returned to the couch to watch Oprah, the soap operas, the game shows, the news, the sitcoms, the police drama, the news again. She had fallen asleep during the news.

From her seat on the porch steps, Cécile drew her coat tighter around her. Her coffee was cold. The slice of sun had moved off the porch and, now in the shade, she was cold. She watched a nuthatch with its red belly and vivid black and white hood doing gravity-defying acrobatics, scampering up and down the rough bark of a red pine. It ran upward and down with the ease of flying. Effortless. When it disappeared into the branches, she stood up wearily and climbed the stairs.

In a kitchen drawer, she found a blank notebook and a garbage bag. In the bathroom, she dumped the bucket of cold soapy water into the tub, and placed it under

a hot tap to refill. She closed the bathroom door, heard her own heart beating against her eardrums. She picked up the towel and fought an urge to put her face into it, to see if she could find a leftover trace of Ti-Jean's soapy body. She shoved it into the bag.

"I can't live in a museum," she mouthed, spotting a dry, brown leaf behind the toilet and wondering how it had gotten there. As she cleaned the bathroom, scrubbed the floor, wiped away spider webs from the corners, dust from the top of the door, mould from the bath tiles, she felt as though she was battling an ecosystem that had taken over the lodge in her absence, insects, animals, plants everywhere. She eradicated them all viciously. Along the baseboards, she looked for signs of mice; last night she heard them scuttling in the walls.

When she was done, she sat at the kitchen table with a notebook. She taped the *To Do* list into the notebook and, watching the crocheted curtains move in the breeze, she wrote:

1. green towel on the bathroom floor
2. bar of green and white striped soap from the soap dish
3. bathroom floor dust: nail clippings? hair? skin?
4. disposable razor with hairs between the blades
5. comb: blue plastic with a sharp handle for parting
6. shaving-cream (lemony) and after-shave (lavender-y)
7. toothbrush: yellow
8. funny toenail-clipper that looks like scissors

She stuck the notebook and pen in her jeans pocket, and lugged the garbage bag through the kitchen toward the door, muscles straining. Its heaviness seemed right, like she was carrying Ti-Jean himself in there.

Under the maple next to the porch, the metal trash can was toppled over. The night before, the sound of it falling over had scared the shit out of her. Raccoons, she told herself. Fortunately, there hadn't been much garbage in there. She quickly returned the spillage to the can, then lifted a heavy rock onto the lid. She stood, considering whether or not raccoons could still get in. Probably, she thought, remembering with awe the time she had gone camping, and a raccoon had opened a cooler tightly-fastened with bungee cords.

She decided she would rather bring Ti-Jean's stuff to the dump today, when she was done cleaning, rather than face seeing his things spread out over the ground by the raccoons. She carried the bag into the truck and went back to cleaning the cabin.

When she'd cleaned the bedroom, the living-room and kitchen, she had seven pages of entries in her notebook, and five garbage bags full of Ti-Jean's things to throw out. She had decided not to give any of it away. She didn't want to be in the parking lot of the *Magasin Général*, and bump into someone wearing Ti-Jean's "I went over Niagara Falls in a barrel" sweatshirt. She lugged the bags out to the truck and heaved them in.

As she drove to the dump, a thought that had been nagging at her all day articulated itself: Who will clean out my things when I die? She wondered who would decide which of her possessions would be put in green garbage bags, which should be saved. Who would want to hide her discarded things far and deep into a landfill so that

they would be spared the sight of them, the remembering? Who would keep the raccoons away from her soap and old socks?

As she turned the 4x4 onto the gravel road leading to the dump, the memory of Fleurette Leduc's face, the day before, formed itself, unbidden, in her mind. Just as Cécile had been leaving the store with her cleaning supplies, Fleurette had asked if Cécile wanted help, "This kind of cleaning is hard work. You might not be able to do it alone."

As she had said it, Fleurette blushed but held Cécile's gaze firmly with her blue eyes. Her cheeks looked like they might always be flushed. She looked like a young girl. The mixture of shyness and sympathy she saw in that face had made Cécile reconsider the anger she'd felt at Fleurette before. As they stood there looking at each other, the moment shifted and Fleurette's gaze had seemed less like sympathy and more like something that wanted to draw her in, and Cécile had felt that if she looked at her one more moment, she would be pulled toward Fleurette like a small moon in the gravitational field of a large planet. She had torn her eyes away and left the store in a hurry, not even offering a response to the other woman's offer.

## Chapter 5

### *Magasin*

Fleurette, partly awake, watched as the red numbers on her alarm clock changed to 7:12. She shifted positions. She was uneasy, but it wasn't unusual for her to wake up feeling uneasy. She must have had one of her dreams. She tried not to remember it. She turned onto her back. She remembered then, with some measure of relief that the source of her uneasiness was her encounter with Cécile at the store the day before. Better than one of the dreams, she thought. She never remembered them upon awakening, but they revealed themselves in sudden images during the day, taking her breath away. Worrying about her encounter with Cécile was something new, she almost relished its realness.

It had not gone well. While Cécile had placed cleaning supplies, shelving paper, tea, milk, bread onto the checkout counter, Fleurette had struggled to make conversation. "So are you back to stay, or are you just visiting us for a while?" she'd asked nervously, with what she hoped was a friendly smile, but her cheeks felt all stretched out and she thought she must have grinned like *le chat qui a avalé la souris*. Ever since she had first seen Cécile, so tiny in her bride's dress, walking down the aisle, head held high toward Ti-Jean, Fleurette had wanted to know Cécile, to talk to her. She had invited Cécile and Ti-Jean to supper once, when they had moved into the lodge, but they had spent the evening together, touching, Cécile's head always tilted toward Ti-Jean, her smiles, her gestures, her looks reserved for him only.

After they had left, she had commented to her father and Ghyslain, "How rude. They were all over each other."



Her father had replied, "*Un nouveau ménage*. Newlyweds. They're always like that."

And Fleurette had coloured, knowing that she and Ghyslain had never been like that. Not really.

The day before, in the store, Fleurette had again felt like Cécile was distracted, but this time, Fleurette's words seemed to sink into darkness. Perhaps, she thought, Cécile was so deep in her grief that she had to struggle to listen to what others said. Fleurette wanted to reach her. She had asked again, "Are you here for good?"

After a moment, Cécile had said, "I don't know yet."

She wondered what kinds of decisions Cécile was facing, what kinds of things she thought about; she wanted to know, but how could she ask? She rang up Cécile's purchases while casting sidelong glances at her. She was holding onto the counter, looking down at her hands. Fleurette pretended to look up the price of the untagged sponges in a book of prices that was kept under the counter, all the while telling herself, Say something, say something.

As she took the money from Cécile, their hands touched briefly, and Fleurette said, "You know, it can be hard to face cleaning up like that, all by yourself. If you need help..."

Cécile interrupted and pulled her hand away. "I can manage."

From downstairs, Fleurette heard the ticking of the old clock and the rumbling of the refrigerator. She sat up with a frown; the quality of silence in the old house was unusual. Something was missing. She shifted her weight onto one side to unravel her night-gown, which had twisted around her hips and noticed that Ghyslain's closet door

stood open. There was an empty garment bag lying draped across the chair next to the closet door. Her heart leaped into her throat. He's gone, she thought. He's done it.

She savoured the rush of adrenaline, the euphoria. Then she realized that nothing else was moved. His comb on the dresser. His shoes by the wall. The only thing out of place was the garment bag.

"His suit," she whispered. "He's wearing his good suit."

She got out of bed and padded barefoot down the hall to the top of the stairs. The polished wooden floors felt cool, the feeling of autumn creeping into the house. "Ghyslaine?" she called down the stairs. No answer.

From the bathroom window, she looked out across *la rue de l'Église* to the store. A light was on inside. If Ghyslaine was away somewhere in his suit, then the light must mean her father was getting ready to open the store. Rage squeezed the crown of her head. Ghyslaine had told Marcel what business he had today, but hadn't mentioned it to her. She should be the one opening the store, she thought, hurriedly pulling off her night-gown.

She turned on the shower and stepped in, letting the steaming water hit her full force. She scrubbed savagely with a loofah and tried to remember what Ghyslaine had told her the day before. Had she just not listened?

After closing, Marcel had come home with her for brunch, as he did most Sundays. They'd found Ghyslaine sitting at home in the living-room with a newspaper. Seeing him had put Fleurette in a foul mood. She'd slammed things around in the kitchen while cooking the bacon and eggs, but found she had no appetite. She left the food on the counter and went out to the living-room to announce brunch. Ghyslaine and his father-in-law were sitting at opposite ends of the sofa, each holding a section of the

Saturday paper. Marcel was reading something out loud. Both men were chuckling. Fleurette declared herself sick and went upstairs.

This morning, as she grabbed a towel and dried herself off, she heard herself think, "*Des fois*, I think Ghyslain and *Papa* make the better couple." She realized it wasn't the first time she'd thought this.

The day before, she'd spent the afternoon sleeping; when she'd gotten up to get something to eat, sometime in the evening, the house had been deserted. She'd gone back to bed before Ghyslain returned. Whatever business he had that morning, he hadn't had the opportunity to tell her, or remind her, the day before. She thought, Maybe he left a note.

Fleurette pulled on a dress and walked down the stairs. In the kitchen, she looked in all the obvious places for a note from Ghyslain. Nothing. She decided to skip breakfast and crossed the street to the store with her hair still dripping.

The store's front door was still locked. She used her key to let herself in. Jangling of bells. Her father's voice echoed from the back room across the dusty muteness of the dimly-lit store, "*Allô?*"

"*C'est Fleurette.*" She automatically walked to the till. Her father came out from the back carrying a cotton bag with the float money. "You're early, Fleur," Marcel said.

She took the bag, felt the weight of money at the end of her arm.

"Are you feeling better today?" he asked.

"Do you know where Ghyslain is?" she asked him, her face warm, but not letting her embarrassment stop her.

Marcel raised his left eyebrow, a gesture that had always signalled the approach of a lecture. Lately, though, the look had come frequently, and Fleurette had come to

interpret it as a sign of suspicion regarding the state of Fleurette and Ghyslain's marriage. The fatherly lecture didn't come. He said, "He's gone to Sturgeon Falls to see the lawyer about Rosa Lefebvre."

"Why is he doing that?"

"Chapdelaine telephoned yesterday afternoon while you were sleeping. He said that Ghyslain was named executor and sole beneficiary in Rosa's will. He asked Ghyslain to come see him."

Fleurette shifted the bag onto the counter. Money. She wondered, "Are we... Is Ghyslain inheriting something?"

Marcel's tone of voice was sympathetic, the voice he used when he was babying his only daughter, "Do you want me to open today? You looked so tired and upset yesterday. I guess Ghyslain didn't want to upset you any more than he had to. Why don't you go home and I'll call in Reina Ducharme to work on cash and bake the bread..."

"I'll be all right, *Pa*," she said, feeling suddenly weary. "Anyway, Reina started school last week, remember? I'm sure it will be quiet this morning and I'd rather be at the store than at home doing nothing." They both smiled. Marcel had often said those words himself.

When Fleurette was growing up, her life, like that of her mother's and father's, was a constant shuttle between store and home, back and forth across *la rue de l'Église*. They had lived, then, in the same house where Fleurette and Ghyslain now lived alone, since Marcel had moved into a fancy cottage on the lake. His retirement, he'd called it, but he had never stopped working, had never truly given up the reins to *Leduc et Fils*. Fleurette understood why. She could not imagine her father spending all his days in

that cottage alone, doing... what? Fishing? The thought made her laugh. Her father's idea of fishing had always been to bring a radio onto the lake and play music while he slept in the sun. Thus the shuttle between home and store continued for Marcel and Fleurette. She had always expected her life to continue in this pattern, a well-worn and comfortable path. She'd thought there would have been children walking it with her, but that had not happened.

Fleurette turned away from her father to empty the contents of the bag into the till. She broke open a roll of pennies into the till like she would crack an egg into a bowl, and realized that her father was still standing behind her. "What is Ghyslain inheriting?" she asked.

"We don't know yet what you're inheriting," he said, with a meaningful emphasis on the "you." "That's what Ghyslain's gone to find out. For certain, there's the house."

"The house?" She was shocked. For as long as she could remember, the house Rosa Lefebvre had lived in had been known as *la maison des vieilles filles*, the old maids' house.

The house stood on *la rue de l'Église*, on a lot between the store and the church. It was a big brick house in the style that used to be built for big families, with two gabled windows in front, and a large, shaded porch leading up to the front door, and peonies growing on either side of the stairs. The house was built in 1910 by *un dénommé* Bertrand, the owner of a local, prosperous sawmill. His wife died before the building was completed, and his two grown daughters, who were studying at a religious college in Montreal, returned to live with him. The two women were devoted to their father, and took a vow not to marry while he was still alive, in order to take care

of him in his old age. The old man did not die until the girls were women in their forties. They remained in the house after their father died, until their own deaths. After the death of the younger sister, the house was sold to Paul Lefebvre, Rosa's husband. Ironically, Paul died a few years after moving in, and his half-sister, Adèle Denis had lived there with Rosa for the past forty years.

As a child, Fleurette loved to hear this story from her mother; it never failed to make her happy that the house had remained true to its name, as though it had been faithful to a calling. The house, located across the street from her own home, and behind the store, was a part of Fleurette's visual landscape, though she did not often think of it. She was used to seeing Adèle Denis raking leaves, washing windows, or Rosa Lefebvre working in the garden. Their garden was renowned for its tomatoes. From the window in the employees' washroom, at the back of the store, Fleurette had sometimes seen the women, *les deux vieilles filles*, sitting at a table under a big maple tree, sipping tea. She wondered who would live there now.

She asked her father, "Isn't Mlle Denis inheriting anything?"

"Chapdelaine said that Rosa hadn't updated her will since her husband died thirty-five years ago," Marcel replied. "At that time, the will they both signed stipulated that Ghyslain would inherit if they both died. He's her only living relative in these parts."

"So the will was written when Ghyslain was — what? — a year old?"

"About that," Marcel replied.

Fleurette turned and cracked open a roll of dimes. "Wouldn't she have made another will after she'd been living with Mlle Denis for so long? How long had they been living together?"

"Hmmm..." he calculated, frowning, "Rosa's husband died about thirty-five years ago—the same year your mother and I married. Adèle Denis moved in to help with Paul's illness. So that was in 1962."

"Well, hasn't anyone asked Mlle Denis if there's another will? Surely she's the one who's the most affected by this." Fleurette paused, then added, indignant, "And she was her sister-in-law. That's a relative."

Marcel replied testily, "Well, don't ask me. I guess that's the lawyer's job. I've been dealing with Chapdelaine since I was young. He'll know what to do. But, you know, she was only Paul's half-sister. Maybe that's why... Who knows."

There was a tap on the glass door. Fleurette turned around. There was Binou Coutu, his face pressed up to the window, smiling. From the corner of her eye, Fleurette saw Marcel look at his watch. "It's time," he said, moving to open the door.

Fleurette slammed the cash drawer shut. After Coutu had greeted them and headed for the dairy counter, Marcel Leduc frowned at his daughter and said, "Well, if you're staying, I'm going to drive up to Sturgeon Falls to buy some eggs so we have a little in stock until the delivery on Wednesday."

She watched her father walk out of the store and through the parking lot, to the van with *Magasin Général Leduc & Fils* printed on the side. The silence of the store welled up around her like a sigh. From aisle five, she could hear Coutu shuffling quietly. She reached for a pack of his brand of cigarettes and placed it on the counter.

She hoped that Ghyslaine would not return for a while. She was always glad to have time alone in the store. She smiled as she remembered a story her father used to tell when she was a child. After supper, her parents always had tea, and they had all grown accustomed to Fleurette leaving her parents during this time, to go play or watch

television. Even then, she knew that they enjoyed those moments alone together, could remember the smiles and the soft conversation that went along with the tea. Sometimes, though, while the tea was brewing, she would stay at the table, attracted by those smiles and soft words. She would ask her father for a story and he would talk about the old days, about how things were when he was a boy. She liked imagining how the village was back then, when strangers lived in her place. She especially liked it when the stories were about the store.

“In the winter of 1915, my grandfather, Honoré Leduc — your great grandfather — was sick with pneumonia for the third time in a year. He had spent twenty days in bed in early November, and ruined his chances of getting any *chantier* work that winter. Like a lot of men, *dans c’temps là*, he usually left for the logging camps farther north for the winter. He would leave the running of the farm to his wife and children. They only had to take care of the animals. For my grandfather, leaving the farm was a big relief. When the days grew shorter and the weather got cold, there was not much to do on the farm outside the house. So, the whole family spent a lot of time indoors. There was old Honoré, his eight children and his wife, who had a very sharp tongue, my father always said.

“*C’était pas endurable*. Honoré couldn’t stand it. The *chantier* didn’t only provide an extra source of income, but the opportunity to work hard with men who spoke little, other than for the entertainment of the others: they told stories, they sang. They worked hard all day and in the evening there were *chansons à répondre*, fiddling, dancing, and stories. Some of the men drank, though it was against the logging companies’ regulations. They withheld the men’s pay until the end of the logging



season and those who were caught drinking were fired and sent away without any pay for the work they had done. Old Honoré sometimes took off through the woods with some of the others to go to the nearest town, to a dance hall or a saloon, but he wouldn't do it if there was any risk of getting caught. He didn't want to get sent home.

"On Sundays, if the camp was close enough to a town, the *bûcherons* would head to *la Grand' Messe* and Honoré would think about his family with nostalgia and longing. I've always thought that of the things he liked best about going logging was that there, he could remember his wife as the girl he'd courted, and his children as the neatly dressed, straight-standing children staring solemnly at him in the photograph he kept in his bible. He liked them better when they weren't there.

"After his illness that winter, the doctor told Honoré that the condition of his lungs might never allow *chantier* work again and he took to drinking. In the evenings, after everyone had gone to bed, he would sit at the kitchen table and drink, even though his two eldest sons slept just a few feet away from him in cots next to the wood stove.

"The children kept out of their father's way. When they weren't in school, they played outside, or they played in the barn. When it was too cold, when it got dark, and they were confined to the house, Honoré's temper would smoulder darkly, then suddenly ignite. His wife, my *grand-môman* Clothilde, didn't wean the baby that winter—that baby was my father, Honoré *fils*—even though it would have been time to wean, because she wanted to have a sure way to keep him quiet when her husband was in one of his moods.

"One weekday, when the five eldest were in school, and *Grand-môman* was preparing the three youngest to go to her sister's house, *Monsieur le Curé* arrived at the farm, unannounced. Père Gendron looked like a great big bear with his beard and his

big body all wrapped in furs, as he sat in his cutter pulled by his chestnut horse, *Moïse*. Honoré went out to meet him and helped him put the horse in the barn.

“ ‘Stay for lunch,’ he offered to the priest.

“The priest smiled but didn’t answer. When he walked into the house, my grandmother met him at the door, flushed. She spoke quickly, ‘*Ça tombe mal, Monsieur le Curé*. I was just on my way to my sister’s house to help her do some Christmas baking.’

“Honoré’s voice rose, ‘Well, surely baking can wait so that you can make lunch for our guest. For *Monsieur le Curé*.’

“ ‘*Non, non!*’ the priest said with a smile. ‘I’ve already had my lunch. I really came here to speak to you, Honoré. So, go, go, Clothide!... I’m already thinking about your *tourtières!*’

“After she had gone, Honoré invited the priest to smoke a pipe with him.

“ ‘Sit down, *Père!*’ said Honoré.

“Père Gendron had come to speak to Honoré about his temper, about his drinking, and about the omission of these in Honoré’s weekly confession. In the shock of the moment, Honoré was torn between rage at his wife because surely she was the one who had mentioned these things to the priest, and shame that the priest had come to intervene in his family life. After a few moments of the priest talking about displeasing God and the responsibilities of a father for his children, of a shepherd for his flock, Honoré’s anger was replaced by terror that he was going to burn in hell.

“ ‘I don’t know what to do,’ he finally admitted to the priest in a low voice, as though to avoid the very walls of his house from being witness to his sin. ‘*Ma famille va me rendre fou*. The children scream, they pull each other’s hair, they want stories, *La*

*Mère* starts yelling at the lot of them to be quiet. It feels like the winter will never end and it's only December. I can't imagine every winter for the rest of my life being like this. I'm already doing all the children's chores because I need to get out, even though I'm afraid that's going to spoil them rotten, more rotten than they already are. I've repaired the barn, the shed, the equipment. I don't know what to do anymore.'

"The priest said, 'I see,' and slowly rubbed his beard a few moments. The moments turned to minutes and Honoré sat with his head hanging down, glancing at the priest out of the corner of his eye.

"Finally, the priest spoke. 'Think about selling the farm.'

"Honoré's head jerked up but, before he could say a word, the priest's hand rose in admonition. He listened quietly while Père Gendron told him about a property being put up for sale just down the street from the church, Léveillé's house. Léveillé had told the priest he was going to sell and move to Sturgeon Falls but no one knew about it yet. If Honoré wanted to, the priest would talk to Léveillé.

"Honoré knew this house, of course. It was a big, brick house with a porch on two sides; it had a large shed for horses and Léveillé's garden was known throughout the village for its size and its near-miraculous yield. And the house was big. It was big. So much space...

"Honoré protested that though he might have enough money to buy the house with the sale of his farm, how would he support his family. 'I'm a farmer. My father was a farmer, and his father. What else do I know?'

"So it was *Monsieur le Curé* who first suggested turning part of the house into *un dépanneur*. Perhaps Honoré would find life more interesting in town, especially

since his health was weak. 'We take what the Lord gives us,' the priest said. '*On fait c'qu'on peut.*'

"In Honoré's mind, a picture formed, of him sitting around a barrel with three other men, playing cards. Honoré was dressed in an apron. A woman walked in and Honoré got up to stand behind a counter. He handed her a bag of sugar and a cake of soap. She handed him some money, hard and cool in his hands. He smiled and she smiled sweetly at him. His store.

"He did what the priest had advised. Within months he had sold the farm, moved his family to the village and had held a grand opening for *Leduc et Fils*. Unfortunately, Honoré died of pneumonia the following winter. It was his wife and the children who ran the fledgling store, barely making enough to support themselves, since there were already four other general stores in the village. One by one, the children left the house and business to find a living. In the end it was the youngest, Honoré, *fils*, who took charge of the store. In 1930, when the house and the store burned down in a spectacular fire, Honoré *fils*, borrowing heavily, built a bigger, more modern store that also sold hardware. It was an immediate success. Within a few years, Honoré *fils* had paid off his debts and was able to buy the big house across the street as a wedding present for his bride."

Fleurette reached for her apron hanging on a hook beside the door. The white apron, embroidered with *Leduc et Fils* was in need of a wash. She made a mental note to bring it home to wash it. She smiled. She had always liked the story about her great-grandfather. She enjoyed the fact that the place where she had stood almost every day of her life, and the fact that the store was hers, were the result of a conversation

eighty years ago between a surly boozier and a meddling priest, smoking pipes by a wood stove in a farm shack. The actions of these men, their motivations, their pipes even had so little connection with her everyday existence, and yet she was their result.

She was tying her apron when Binou Coutu emerged from the aisles precariously carrying a dozen items in his arms. "We have carts you know," she teased him. He laughed.

She began the baking feeling cheerful. This was, after all, where she belonged, this place, this store, this bakery. As she looked around, she realized that, with all the confusion of the previous day, she had forgotten to take the frozen bread dough out to thaw. It took a whole night for thawing. She could take the dough out now, but she would have to wait until the next morning to bake.

Maybe I'll bake some pies once the dough is out, she thought. She got the frozen loaves from the freezer and placed them into the large, blackened metal pans. She greeted customers as they entered the store, and, once they were done shopping, wiped her hands on her apron and went to ring up their purchases. She was standing at the cash register when Ghyslain strode in, still wearing his suit. Without greeting her, he walked into the back room. Fleurette glanced around nervously to see if anyone had noticed that he hadn't greeted her.

Marcel walked in immediately afterward, carrying a cardboard box. He grinned at her and the customers, and tipped the box slightly, so they could see egg cartons lined up inside. "Got 'em!" he said, triumphant. He walked toward the dairy case in the back.

Fleurette watched him bend over to stack the eggs in the case, then put his hands on his lower back to straighten up with a slight groan. He straightened a display of cereal boxes that had tipped over, then walked off to the back room.

Fleurette went back to the bakery. A door connecting it to the back room stood half-open. She had forgotten to close it earlier, after bringing the bread dough out from the freezer in the back room. She quietly moved beside the door, picking up a bread pan to make it look like she was baking.

She heard her father's voice first; it was the louder of the two, its tone shaped by years of being both cheerful friend of the public and bullying businessman when he needed to be. "There wasn't anything else you could do," her father said.

She tried to tune into Ghyslain's voice. Her husband's voice was a quiet baritone. It was one of the things that had first attracted her to him. She remembered this with surprise and found that, while she remembered the fact of that attraction, none of the feeling remained. Père Côté had once told her that the feelings of warmth and tenderness for her husband would return. "Just a matter of time," he'd said. She had waited. She wondered why she was still waiting.

She just made out Ghyslain saying, "funeral arrangements," and the store's front door opened. Octavie Lelièvre, red faced from her morning walk across the village, looked around and, spying Fleurette at the bakery counter, waved, cheerful as ever, "*Bonjour Fleurette!*"

She waved back and moved to pick up a frozen bread loaf from the counter.

Octavie called out, "*Avez-vous des oeufs?*"

She nodded, smiling, and pointed at the dairy. When Octavie had walked toward the back of the store, Fleurette moved quietly back to the half-opened door, and

heard Ghyslain, "Apparently Adèle Denis said she wanted the house, but the lawyer checked it out and she doesn't have any money to buy it. I'm not going to give it to her. Why should I? That's just bad business. We can use the property to expand the store."

Business? That's it, Fleurette thought. That's it. I can't believe you, you son of a bitch. You are talking to my father about business. He is the business man, and sure he has his stingy side, maybe he even takes advantage sometimes, but what you are talking about is taking a house away from a widow. A kind of widow. That's just evil, Ghyslain Deschamps. And I won't wait any more.

Her heart racing, she pushed open the door and walked into the back room, ready to say out loud what she had just thought, but when she saw Marcel sitting at the desk, a sad look on his face, her rage melted and she felt sorry for her father. For a brief moment, she was embarrassed that she had brought Ghyslain into this family.

His back to her, Ghyslain was on the telephone, saying, "OK. Thanks, Estelle. Stop by at the store for the key. If you could get that house cleaned up in the next couple of days..."

He hung up and turned to look at Fleurette quizzically.

"Take the cash," she said. She took off her apron and walked out, brushing past a frowning Père Côté in the doorway.

She walked without thinking about where she was going, headed toward Fleur de Lys Cabins. She wanted to see Cécile and her cabin. There was something enormously attractive about the idea of Cécile living alone, of being in charge of the lodge, with all that space, all that quiet. In charge. When Fleurette arrived at the lodge's entrance, she trod quietly on the gravel drive, and before she turned the curve leading to Cécile's cabin, hid among the trees. Cécile was sitting on the steps of the house, knees

drawn up, clutching a cup in both hands. She was dressed all in black and wore a red bandana over her dark hair. Cécile was staring at the tops of the trees. She looked so small, so compact. She reminded Fleurette of a bird perched at the edge of her nest.

Fleurette knew she was intruding. She could see it in the lines of Cécile's body, arms curved around herself, withdrawn, self-contained. She could almost imagine the feeling of the bird trembling against the thin skin of her palm, the tiny pointed beak touching her wrist, a small pain that made her want to cry out for real, overwhelmed her with the desire to touch, to be touched, to have someone stroke her hair. *Again. Don't stop.*

She blushed, and found she couldn't walk forward. When Cécile got up and went into the cabin, Fleurette turned around and went home.



## Chapter 6 Ghyslain

Ghyslain left the house Monday morning when the sun was still low over the horizon. He closed the door quietly behind him, even though Fleurette hadn't woken up when he'd turned on the light in their room and rifled through the closet for his suit. She must have taken a pill. She'd been quite upset yesterday. Rosa's death had shaken him up too, he thought, as he backed his car out of the driveway.

He drove down the *rue de l'Église* and, at the stop sign, turned left onto the *rue Principale*, heading toward Highway 81. Along Pointe-Mouillée's main road, lights were shining in most of the houses. He glanced at his watch; he would be in Sturgeon Falls very early; time to have a cup of coffee at the donut shop before his meeting with Marc Chapdelaine.

As he accelerated on the highway, Ghyslain told himself he didn't feel a personal sense of loss. He couldn't, since he had never really thought of Rosa Lefebvre as his sister. She hadn't even played the part of a distant relative, but had remained a stranger.

As much of a stranger as anyone is in the village, he thought.

And now her will. He was baffled by it. Perhaps Rosa had thought of him as a brother all this time. Perhaps blood meant something more than he'd previously acknowledged. He was equally baffled by his own reaction to her death. After Rosa's death the day before, he had been working with his father-in-law in the back room of the store, doing the books and preparing the orders for the week, and twice, he had found himself frozen, muscles clenched, in the grip of a memory, always the same one, the delivery and death of his son. Blood.

Later, at home, when he'd answered the telephone, and Chapdelaine had told him he was the sole beneficiary of Rosa's will, he'd balked. "What about Mlle Denis?" he'd said, trying to keep his voice calm when he felt like running, like telling Chapdelaine he didn't want anything to do with this. His palms had been so sweaty he'd had to wipe them off on his corduroys, because the telephone was slipping out of his grasp. His father-in-law who was sitting across the room in the recliner, had looked at him, frowning, over the top of his newspaper.

It's a natural reaction, he was telling himself now. Death reminds us of other deaths. As he thought it, his eyes darted to the side of the highway, past the gravel lining the asphalt, past the grassy ditch, to one of the wooden fence post delineating the Ménard property. There was a cross decorated with plastic flowers, nailed to the fence post at the spot where Marco Ménard died in a car accident two winters before.

Death all around me, he thought. Layers upon layers of memories of deaths in this place. He thought of Fleurette's face, different since the baby's death. He was certain that the shade of her eye's blue had altered, was darker. Her gaze never seemed to settle, darting, searching for someone to blame. When it did settle on him, he found her gaze difficult to meet.

He slowed the car down as he approached the bridge over *la rivière du Prétendant*. The highway was lined with orange road construction signs marked "Caution." During the previous week's storm, the water level had risen so much that railings on both sides of the wooden bridge had been partly torn off and one had been washed away. The asphalt on the road above the bridge was cracked and uneven. Ghyslain drove slowly and cautiously over the bridge, casting a wary eye at the brown water now swirling only a few feet below the bridge. The river's name had never

seemed so apt. It was named for a man whose name no one remembered, but who, local legend had it, had surprised his beloved with another, *un prétendant*. In a cold rage, he had lured her on a walk to the riverside, where he had thrown her in. Then, suddenly repentant, he had jumped in after her. She had managed to swim to shore, but he had not. To Ghyslain, at that moment, the river looked both desperate and malignant. He wondered if the woman had married the other man, and if any of their descendants were his neighbours, his customers.

Ghyslain's car bumped slowly off the bridge onto a section of smooth asphalt. He was about to accelerate, when he spotted the cross to the left on *le rang* St-Amant. The cross was at the junction of the highway and the dirt road, on part of a rock outcrop that had been blasted to let the highway pass through. Twenty years ago, the highway had swerved around the outcrop, past the *croix de chemin*. Now the white wooden cross was barely visible from the highway. Ghyslain wasn't sure when he had last looked at it.

He turned onto the road, heard the gravel crunch beneath the tires as he drove around the outcrop. He parked the car on the road below the cross, where he could see it through the front windshield. The outcrop was on Poirier's land. There was a fence around the whole *rocher*, and along the road right up to the highway. The cross had been freshly painted and for that Ghyslain was glad. In the centre, in the heart of the cross, where its two beams met, there was a cut-out in the wood. Behind a dusty square of glass or plastic, there was the Sacred Heart, crowned with thorns, also freshly painted in a glossy brown-red that looked a little too much like blood, Ghyslain thought. He wondered what had happened to the statue of the Virgin Mary that used to be in the cut-out.

He remembered the first time he had noticed this *croix de chemin*, the first time he had heard its story from his grandmother. He would have been seven or eight years old at the time and what he remembered most vividly was the stiffness of his shirt, and a squirmy, surprised feeling that his grey flannel pants were too short. He knew, was sharply aware that they hadn't shown as much ankle at his first communion that spring, and he was awed and a little afraid of how his body had changed without his being aware of it.

His socks were black with a single line of red diamonds on the outside ankle. He was leaning over, looking at his feet dangling from the back seat of their old rumbling Chrysler 300, as his father drove to Sturgeon Falls. Mémère was sitting in the back seat with Ghyslain, as she always did.

"So you're not sitting back here all alone," she would say with a wink, every time they got into the car.

Ghyslain wondered now what was behind those winks. Did his grandmother feel sorry for him, motherless boy, no siblings, or was she conspiratorially indicating how preferable she thought his company to that of his father, the sullen, brooding Ernest.

He didn't remember where they had been driving, only that he had been thinking that he would have preferred to stay at home to work on training his new dog called Monkee. He was using a technique described in a book from the school library.

Mémère muttered something. Ghyslain looked up from his ankles and saw her cross herself. He followed her gaze out the car window and saw the *croix de chemin* at the corner of *le rang* St-Amour and the highway. Trying to escape the mood of brooding emanating from the front seat, he asked his grandmother why she did that.

She started explaining, speaking as she did when she was asked to tell a story, eagerly, happily, not hesitating.

*"Mon père faisait toujours le signe de la croix.* He always crossed himself when he drove past here. Of course, in those days, we weren't in cars, but in horse-drawn buggies. He told me and my brothers to always cross ourselves when we passed the *croix de chemin*, that it would keep us good."

She chuckled, as though her goodness was a joke and Ghyslain wondered what kind of naughtiness his grandmother might have been capable of.

"During the month of May," she continued. "We used to walk to this cross from our house every day to pray to Mary. It wasn't a very long walk. We used to live in this *rang*. St-Amant was my mother's *nom de fille*. May is the month of Mary. Did you know that?"

Ghyslain did know. At school, *l'école Immaculée Conception* in Pointe-Mouillée, they made them say the rosary every morning during the month of May. Everyone had to take a turn leading the prayer and he always got so nervous that he would forget the words to the prayer he'd known by heart since before he started school.

Ghyslain sat in his car, his hands on the steering wheel, remembering how his grandmother would talk, going off into layer after layer of memory, saying each out loud. His father usually complained about these ramblings, cut her off, but that day, he had been in one of his silent moods. Ghyslain had always liked listening to his grandmother, liked the stories, liked the strange world they conveyed, a world completely alien to him, but that was, wondrously, at the same time, peopled with those most familiar to him. The cast of characters in his grandmother's stories were the people he knew best, but in roles barely imaginable. He had no trouble imagining a young girl

in a wagon praying as she went past a cross, but couldn't quite accept that the girl in his imagination was the same person as his Mémère sitting next to him in the car, and that the cross in the story was the same cross they passed every time they drove to Sturgeon Falls.

Ghyslaine now felt some of that wonder at himself, sitting in his car in 1998, and his other self sitting in the back of that Chrysler in the late 60's; the same character played by two different actors. The cross, he knew, had remained the same, though sometime in the interval, it had received a fresh coat of paint and the statue of Mary at its heart had been replaced by a heart.

"I remember," his grandmother was saying, "the day they put that cross up. I was just a little girl. I was only four years old, but I remember it well. My grandfather, Horace St-Amant, had moved his whole family to Northern Ontario from Québec in 1897. Some of his married children and their children came with him too. They built this road. We were some of the first settlers around here. That was the same year that the church in Pointe-Mouillée was finished and we got our own priest." She smiled proudly.

"*Grand-père* settled this area with his sons-in-law, because he'd had no sons. *Grand-môman* had fourteen daughters. Can you imagine that?" She laughed again, as though this was the funniest joke she'd ever heard. She grew serious. "Though one of my mother's youngest sisters — she would not have been much older than me — died in the first few years they were here."

"Now, let me remember. *Grand-père*, my father, and *Mononc' Albert*, *Mononc' Théophile*, *Mononc' Joseph*, and *Mononc' Gédéon* and who else now?" She paused...

“They were seven who came together. They split up the land all along this road into narrow farms, all along here.” She waved her arm at the car window, but they had left *le rang* St-Amant behind minutes ago.

“They all helped each other build small houses. We moved in with *Grand-môman* because my mother was expecting my sister Armelle. Then, a few months later, little Armelle was born and it almost killed my mother. While she was in labour, she promised *la Sainte Vierge* that if she and the child were saved, she would dedicate a cross to her on their land, and that every May, she and her family would stand before it in prayer. My mother didn’t tell me that part until I was much older and I was in labour with your father!

“When she was *relevée* from the birth, my father built the cross and painted it white. He had painted *Sacré Coeur de Marie* in red on it, but that’s been painted over now. But if you go look at the cross closely, in the centre, there’s a hole carved out with a statue of the Virgin Mary in it that the priest ordered from Montreal for my mother especially.

“One day, my father and my uncles went up on the rock and put up the cross. They pulled it upright and held it over the wet cement, and on the count of three—‘*Let’s go, les boys!*’—they lowered it into the cement and held it while it hardened. Some of my brothers and cousins piled rocks around the base to make it more stable. All the girls kneeled on the *rocher*, praying. That morning, *Monsieur le Curé* had given all the girls little medallions of *la Sainte Vierge* and I could feel it against my chest...” She reached around her neck and tugged at a chain until a small medallion appeared. “See I still wear it,” she said proudly.

"I could feel the stone through my stockings and I was worried they would tear. My mother's eyes were closed and she was holding little Armelle. My sister Armelle, that's your great-aunt, *Matante* Armelle, the one who lives in Timmins. You know her don't you?" she asked Ghyslain.

He visualized the long table of his grandmother's brothers and sisters at the church hall the previous New Year's. He'd stood there while his father, in a rare buoyant mood, had introduced him to all the uncles and aunts he rarely saw.

"*Oui, oui*," his father had said, shaking Ghyslain's shoulders. "*Celui-là, c'est mon Ghyslain. Mon bras fort. My right hand man.*"

His father had introduced him to *Mononc'* Donat, *Matante* Aldéa, *Mononc'* Gérard, *Matante* Rose-Yvonne. "This is the other *Mononc'* Gérard, Gilberte's husband...." All of them were called *Mononc'* and *Matante*, even those who weren't directly uncles or aunts. A litany of names that were vaguely familiar, heard only in stories and at family gatherings, among them, *Matante* Armelle's. He wanted to remember her face, to be able to place it in the context of this story, of the child who almost killed her mother in childbirth, of the twin sister to the *croix de chemin*, but he could not attach the name to any one face.

"Um... I don't know," he replied.

Mémère's dark eyes were sharp, expectant. "Don't you know your *Matante* Armelle? She's the mother of Arthur and Henri and Gaston..." She slid forward, rested her cheek on the front car seat and asked Ghyslain's father, "Which comes next? Is it Marthe or Rodolphe?"



Ghyslaine sensed his father's hesitation. He wasn't sure whether he was reluctant to embark on one of these discussions with his mother, or if he was searching his memory for the answer.

Ernest Deschamps sighed, "Marthe is my age. Rodolphe is a quite a bit younger."

"Aha!" Mémère exclaimed. "I thought the girl was the youngest. Armelle had the two babies during the time they were living up north, near Timmins. When they came back, she was holding a baby. I remember her stepping off the train *avec toute sa marmaille*. All those kids! I thought that the girl was the smallest baby, but it must have been the boy. Yes, yes, I remember now, the little girl was wearing a white ribbon around her head. I must have remembered that she was the youngest because, poor thing, she hardly had any hair at all, even at that age, and she must have been at least four years old."

His grandmother paused as she recalled the scene. Her eyes narrowed, as though she were trying to focus on the little girl with the white ribbon tied around a sparse head of hair. Mémère licked her lips. Ghyslaine heard the sound of her tongue against her lips, a sound that reminded him of his dog. He waited for her to resume her story.

"It was very sad. Her husband, your *Mononc'* Edouard, was killed doing *la drave*. They said he just slipped under the logs and that was the last anyone ever saw of him. His poor wife with five children, and one just a few weeks old. We don't even know if he knew that baby had been born, if he'd received the letter my sister sent to the camp. Poor little... which one was it? Oh yes, the boy, little Rodolphe."

"You know Rodolphe." Ghyslain's father's voice startled Ghyslain; his father was half-turned toward the back seat, hands still on the wheel. He spoke as though he was only taking part in the conversation grudgingly, as though he were being forced to speak. "He's the one who drives the truck for *Leduc et Fils*."

Ghyslain did know him, the tall, thin man with the leather face and the hook nose, the one who sat in the truck, parked in the yard of *le Magasin Général*. A permanent fixture, who talked to men who would come stand around his open window or lean on the door, while Rodolphe remained inside. Ghyslain's father never leaned on the truck, but always waved and politely said, "*Bonjour Dolphe*" as he walked past.

Ghyslain had also seen Rodolphe alone, when no one was standing around his truck. The radio was loud, tuned to a Country and Western station. Every few minutes, Dolphe spat out the window. Every time Dolphe spat, Ghyslain's father grumbled, "*Ça, c'est mal élevé*."

To his knowledge, Ghyslain had never seen Dolphe outside his truck. In his mind's eye, he imagined him without legs.

"Is there anything wrong with Dolphe?" he asked his grandmother.

"Nothing that can't be fixed by going to confession," she answered tartly.

Ghyslain stared at the window. He couldn't wait to see Dolphe again, to look at his face while mulling over these new facts about him, to compare the orphaned baby whose father died not knowing he existed, and the sinning, spitting, truck delivery man.

Ghyslain slowed down, guided his car into the right lane, turned into the doughnut shop's drive-through, his gestures automatic, as though the car itself knew the way. Years later, after Dolphe had moved to Toronto, when Ghyslain had seen what

he thought of as Dolphe's truck, and even now sometimes when he drove the *Leduc et Fils* mini-van, or caught a glimpse of it parked in front of the store, he would wonder: if one man had not slipped beneath the logs in a river near Timmins, would another have ended up spitting out the window of the Leduc delivery truck in Pointe-Mouillée? He struggled with the seeming randomness of events as the drive-through's brown speaker crackled to life, "Can I help you? *J'peux-tu vous aider?*"

"One large coffee, double-double," Ghyslain spoke loudly. He watched the cars driving past on the highway toward a junction that led either to Toronto or Ottawa, and beyond. He wondered how many travelled lightly, fearlessly.

He placed the brown paper cup of coffee into the car's cup-holder and drove to the large brick house that had been Chapdelaine's house and office for over thirty years. He parked on the street across from the house and tore open the lid of his coffee, watched the steam rise from the opening. He took a sip. Across an empty field, he could see the highway; a hitchhiker with a backpack stood with his back to Ghyslain, holding a cardboard sign whenever a car passed by. When his father died, he'd made his mind up to leave Pointe-Mouillée. He'd decided on going to Toronto, with a vague plan of looking up his cousin 'Dolphe. He'd told himself that he would go as soon as the inventory was done. But, Mr. Leduc had offered him a raise and a free place to live, then more responsibility. The urge to leave had waned, become less sharp.

Over twenty years ago and I am still here, he thought, sickened by his own inertia. Ghyslain took a sip of coffee. He tried to concentrate, to prepare for the meeting with the lawyer. He wanted, above all, to remain calm during the meeting, not to lose his composure with Chapdelaine. If he concentrated on the facts, perhaps he could gain some distance. Across the field, he watched another car pass the hitchhiker by. The boy

held his cardboard sign high above his head turning, following with his body the movement of the car, until he was sure it wouldn't stop. The hitchhiker put his sign down, let it hang in one hand. Ghyslain took another sip and put his coffee in the holder. He got out of the car.

As he carried a tray of coffee into the office, Chapdelaine said, "There's no mention of Adèle Denis, or anyone else. The will was made right after her husband's death. I remember it clearly. It was one of my first cases. At the time, I advised her to make a will right away and I told her if she remarried she could change it."

"Strange. I guess I just think of the two women as a family," Ghyslain said.

"Probably most people did," the elderly lawyer replied, sitting at his desk. "But they weren't exactly family, you know." Chapdelaine absentmindedly stirred his coffee, the spoon chiming delicately against the china. He stirred for what Ghyslain considered to be an excessive amount of time. He wondered why the lawyer was uncomfortable.

Chapdelaine cleared his voice. "Adèle Denis was Paul Lefebvre's half-sister, if you can call it that. She was adopted by the Lefebvres. My father handled the adoption. It was quite a scandal, apparently. She was the daughter of one of the nieces. Unmarried, of course."

Ghyslain took a sip of his own coffee. Despite the fine china, the coffee was insipid. He thought of the donut shop coffee rapidly cooling in the car. He sighed. "I guess since Rosa never remarried, she probably never thought to update her will... though by rights, it seems to me that Mlle Denis should inherit. Not me. If Mlle Denis moved in with Rosa around the time that Rosa's husband died, that would be only a few months after I was born. That's thirty-seven years."

“Well...” Chapdelaine spoke slowly, carefully. “You are the executor and heir. Everything that belonged to Rosa Lefebvre now belongs to you. The house. The cash. You may do with it as you please, of course. But I would advise you not to act rashly.”

The coffee in the car was cold, but he drank it anyway on his way to the Coopérative Funéraire on *la rue Main*. Its sweet bitterness cut through the dryness coating his mouth and tongue. He was thinking inheritance tax, funeral costs, property tax, maintaining another property. He felt the burden of owning another property heavily. He wondered how Adèle Denis would support herself without Rosa Lefebvre. In Pointe-Mouillée, she’d given piano lessons to local children. Did she have any assets? Is that woman my responsibility now too? he wondered angrily.

Ghyslaine arrived at the funeral home early. He sat on a leather sofa near the door, under a brass plaque reading, *Henri Lecompte, Funeral Director*, but just as the sofa had stopped sighing under his weight, the door opened. Henri Lecompte emerged, frowning, hands fluttering more than usual. Half a step behind him, was Adèle Denis.

Lecompte was saying, “*Mes sympathies, mes sympathies, Mademoiselle*. I’m not sure what to say about all this...”

When he noticed Ghyslaine, Lecompte stretched out his arms toward him and said desperately, “*Ah, voilà Monsieur Desrosiers*. I’m sure everything will sort itself out. *Ça va s’arranger*.”

Mlle Denis looked as though she had been crying, though her eyes were dry. She looked at Ghyslaine, and said only, “Ghyslaine.”

Ghyslaine had never spoken to Mlle Denis outside polite platitudes in his role at the *Magasin Général*, and then, she had called him Monsieur Desrosiers, he was sure of

it. But then, their roles had been clear. Now, he was trespassing on her grief and felt she was reproaching him. He bitterly wished he could disappear.

“Mlle Denis,” he said, as formally as he could.

The funeral director ushered them into his office, and they sat uncomfortably close to one another in the matching leather chairs, with Lecompte far away behind his massive wooden desk.

“Now,” Lecompte began, “I’m afraid we will have to delay the funeral arrangements for a few days. I’m sure you will understand, there were several untimely victims of last week’s storm in the area, so there are mourners using the *salon* for the next several days. However, we are only looking at a few days’ delay. If we can make the arrangements now, that will—”

Adèle Denis interrupted him. She spoke quietly, “I think I should determine the arrangements. She was my sister-in-law and my best friend and, with all due respect to you...” She paused and nodded at Ghyslain. “She didn’t really have any other family.”

Ghyslain was stung, his discomfort turned to anger. “*Écoutez*, Mlle Denis...”

But she kept talking. “Rosa and I have been living together for almost forty years. You may say that we’re not really family because we’re not related by blood...” She stopped there. The words, “or by marriage” were not spoken, but they hung in the air as tangibly as if they had. Ghyslain, startled by their omission, realized that if he had thought of Rosa Lefebvre and Adèle Denis as family, it had been as sisters, not as... He glanced at Lecompte who looked down at his desk.

“*Deux vieilles filles*. That’s all we were. But we were all the other had. Ghyslain, I don’t know why Rosa left everything to you in her will.”

Her dark eyes looked at him with challenge, did not waver. He squirmed. He opened his mouth to speak, but she raised her hand imperiously. "I don't care about the money. I guess she just didn't feel as I did, but I loved her. And I would like to honour her by arranging her funeral the way she would have liked. I think I'm in a better position than you to know what she liked. But I want my house back. I think I'm entitled to that much."

Ghyslain sat looking at his shoes, bewildered by his own rage. He remembered that in his first week working for Marcel Leduc, he had undercharged customers for gas for several hours because he had not noticed that the posted price had been put up overnight. When Leduc had noticed, he had rebuked him in front of the customers in the store.

He felt ridiculous. He forced himself to remember who he was now, Ghyslain Desrosiers. Manager of *Leduc et Fils*. Marcel Leduc's son-in-law. Executor and heir of Rosa Lefebvre's will. All the power was his.

He spoke in a voice low with contempt. "As sole beneficiary of the will, I have a vested interest in how much money is spent on these funeral arrangements. As for the property in question, I don't think I want to discuss it right now. I'm grieving for my sister."

Adèle Denis's eyes grew wide, but Ghyslain raised his hand to silence her, as she had done him a few moments before.

"I will arrange a figure with Lecompte here," he said. "And after that, you may feel free to purchase whatever services you think my sister would have preferred. She should be buried with honour."

He stood and, with an exquisite feeling of control, extended his hand toward the door. "If you would excuse us, Mademoiselle." He waited for her to leave.



## Chapter 7

### Library

Cécile came back to her table carrying another book. She'd found a twenty-volume series of French-Canadian folk tales and started out reading the stories about the *loup-garou*, which was what she'd come to the Pointe-Mouillée library to seek out, but had forgotten about the *loup-garou* when she came across a story entitled, *Ti-Jean et la bête à sept têtes*. When she'd looked through the index, she'd found a whole list of stories featuring Ti-Jean, a wily, or magical character, often with superhuman strength. She'd even found one called, *Ti-Jean et la princesse Cécile*. She'd smiled at that.

Aside from Anne-Marie Caron, Cam's mother, the town's librarian, who was working at a desk behind the counter, Cécile had been alone in the library since a noisy book club had gone about an hour before. Cécile had half-listened to the conversation of the five middle-aged women while she'd read and wandered through the stacks of the library, which smelled of new carpeting, dust, and bookbinding tape. The book club had been discussing a new thriller by Nella Neal, which Cécile now felt she would never have to read, having heard the plot dissected, the steamy scenes chuckled over, the heroine's nerve admired, and her lover compared advantageously to several Pointe-Mouillée men.

Cécile read. The book in her hands was a slim paperback published by a Francophone Sudbury press. The image on the cover was of the painting of the head and shoulders of a wiry adolescent boy, painted in shades of orange and red. He faced outward at a three-quarter angle, the look on his face was amused, defiant. His skin seemed textured like wood, his eyes, black, sparkled with spots of light. From his

shaggy red hair, donkey ears emerged on both sides of his head. The book described the Ti-Jean myths that were common to France and the areas it colonized: Canada, West Africa, and the West Indies.

Cécile had known, of course, about the mythic Ti-Jean, but the stories she'd read that morning, phonetic transcriptions in French-Canadian *joual*, had gripped her. They were told in a language that was similar to the one spoken in Pointe-Mouillée now, but without the English influence. It seemed to her that these stories showed what the world was like when French-Canadian was something people just *were*, when they did not have to choose an identity, and struggle to retain it, but when that identity held them close within it. A kind of belonging she could only imagine.

She started when Mme Caron touched her on the shoulder. She had not heard the librarian approaching. Anne-Marie Caron was a small, smiling woman, in her sixties, who always seemed happy for conversation, for a break in her quiet days in the Pointe-Mouillée library. When Cécile had first come here to get a library card, three years before, Mme Caron had told Cécile the history of the library, which the woman herself had been instrumental in inaugurating. Mme Caron had been the one to propose, in the 1970's, that Pointe-Mouillée open its own library. She had secured the funding, she had chosen the site over the fire hall, and had purchased and catalogued all the books that now filled the stacks in the small library. Cécile had sometimes seen her take a book that was being returned by a patron, and say, "Ah yes. This one. This is a lovely book." Cécile wondered if she'd read all the books in the library, if that were possible.

"Sorry, Cécile," Mme Caron said sheepishly. "I'm making some tea. Would you like to join me?"

Cécile followed the older woman behind the desk, where an electric kettle was hissing. She sat on a metal chair, across the desk from Mme Caron, who poured steaming water into a teapot. "Are you finding what you are looking for?" she asked when she'd placed the lid on the teapot.

Cécile nodded. "I'm reading about Ti-Jean and the *loup-garou*." She gave a short laugh.

"Ah! *Les contes et légendes*," she replied with a glowing smile. "Why are you interested in that, now?" She poured some tea into a cup, then frowning at its pale colour, poured it back into the teapot to steep some more.

Cécile looked down at the teapot, thinking back to her night fears. She'd been reading books on the *loup-garou*, hoping to quell those fears, hoping to give herself enough of a rational understanding of wolves and *loup-garou* that she might be able to silence her irrational imaginings. She longed for a night of peaceful sleep.

"No reason really," she lied. "I was thinking about a story Ti-Jean told me once, about a *loup-garou*. I guess I just wanted to know more about it... Then I found some Ti-Jean stories and I was intrigued."

The librarian poured the tea again, and this time seemed satisfied with its appearance. She passed Cécile a delicate china cup, white with a rose pattern on the outside, and painted a creamy pink on the inside. Through the tea, Cécile could see fine cracks in the paint

"Milk and sugar?" Anne-Marie asked, pushing the milk carton closer to Cécile. "I like all those old stories," she said. "My father was a farmer, but when he stopped working, he was a great story teller. One of his stories is in that collection of folk tales that's on your table. *Le veau du diable*." I remember when he used to tell me that story

as a child. It used to scare me and my sister to death and we were too afraid to go to the outhouse at night after that." She laughed. "Then, my mother would scold him!"

"You were scared of going out in the dark?" Cécile asked, sipping her tea and watching Mme Caron pour a generous portion of milk in her tea, until it was pale grey in colour, then add three teaspoons of sugar. "But you lived on a farm. You must have known your way around outside with your eyes closed."

"We did. We practically lived outside. But, at night, there were animal encounters you didn't want to make: wolves and coyotes, bears, skunks. And everyone told scary stories about scary things and they always happened at night. That's because the day belonged to the Lord, but the night... well..." She laughed. "You should have seen how fast we went to the outhouse when it got dark."

"So are you still scared at night?" Cécile asked with a smile she hoped looked playful and casual.

"I usually read at night," Mme Caron replied simply, smiling, thinking of the night before when she'd put her book away and turned off the reading lamp at the head of her bed. As the darkness enfolded her, she remembered how she'd watched death come for Rosa Lefebvre. She'd been shocked, once again, as she'd been many times in her life, at how this visit could be unexpected and unwelcome. Fear sat like a demon on her chest, as in a painting of nightmares she'd seen in books. When the sound of her own furnace starting up startled her, she'd turned the light back on and picked up her book again. Mme Caron slurped her tea noisily. "So which tale of the *loup-garou* did you remember? "

"Well, it's a true story... apparently." She grinned. "Ti-Jean told it to me." As she described the Gareau werewolf story, she saw the librarian grow animated.

"Ah," Mme Caron said, smiling. "I know this one. My father used to tell this story to us."

"Ti-Jean seemed to think it was true—or at least, partly true."

Mme Caron took another sip and looked at Cécile over the rim of her teacup. "Most of the stories my father told were supposed to be true stories, or at least they involved real people. That's why they were always so frightening. He told us that the story of *Le veau du diable* happened to his uncle. And the *loup-garou* in Pointe-Mouillée took place a few years before my father was born. But his older brother, my uncle Alfred, went hunting for the werewolf with the men. He was about twelve years old at the time. And he swore that the story my father told was true."

"Can you tell me his version?" Cécile asked.

Mme Caron laughed. "*J'me l'rai pas prier!*" She set down her cup, folded her hands in her lap, and began telling the story. While she told her tale, the tone of her voice changed. She spoke in a higher pitch, in a more stylized way, and while she talked, she looked from Cécile to a point behind her on the ceiling, as though the story was written there and she was reading it.

"My grandfather, Samuel Papineau and his friend, Théophile Desrosiers were the first to settle in Pointe-Mouillée. The two men had been working in the United States—*au Michigan, j'pense*—but they wanted to return to Canada. So when they were told that there was land for farming in Ontario, they came. They bought land near the lake, where *le rang* Desrosiers still is, and started clearing their farms together. After about two years, they decided that they would be a lot better off—more comfortable—if they had women with them." She laughed.

“So my grandfather sent for my grandmother, who was living in Montreal at the time. They had known each other since childhood and I guess they’d been engaged for a long time. She came by train carrying her little suitcase. I imagine she must have been mighty shocked at the difference between Montreal and what there was of Pointe-Mouillée at that time.

“My grandmother tolerated the hard work and the solitude. She gave birth to her first child by herself. Desrosiers only got married the year after... What *ma grand-mère* couldn’t stand though was the fact that they could not go to church every week. At some points of the year they would be months without going to Mass, because they couldn’t cross the river when it wasn’t either frozen solid, or flowing water. One year, they missed the Easter services because the river was still half-frozen. *Ma grand-mère* was a very religious woman. She was afraid that one of them would die in a state of mortal sin without a priest nearby and they would burn in hell. She said that if you missed Easter Mass seven years in a row, the devil would come for you and turn you into a *loup-garou*.

“She decided that what they needed was a priest in Pointe-Mouillée. There were several families settled in the area at that point so she wrote to the Bishop or someone and asked if a priest could be sent. She told them that they had a small church and a house for the priest, and that they were planning to build a larger, more permanent church once a priest had arrived.

“There were no such buildings... My grandmother used to tell us, I’m telling you this story so you will see how your very own grandmother did a terrible thing by lying. But I went to confession and I repented of my sins. When they were told le Père Fex had accepted to come help start up a parish, she had to admit her lie to her husband.

The men were also glad to have a priest come to live in Pointe-Mouillée, but they could have done without the extra work. But they got together and built a small chapel and a cabin in time for the priest's arrival.

"These events took place around the time the settlement was just starting up. There weren't a lot of people living here and they spent their time trying to push back the wilderness that would take over as soon as a piece of land was neglected. Back then, there were a lot of animals *qui rôdaient alentour*, especially wolves, coyotes, bears. The farmers' animals attracted them, I think.

"One winter, the wolves were bolder than ever. They could hear them at night outside the walls of their houses and my grand-mère would kneel down and say *son chapelet*. Despite all the rosaries, a lot of animals were taken. Finally, one day, someone saw a huge wolf – twice as big as a normal wolf – take down a sheep in broad daylight. So the farmers got organized and went out hunting together at night, with torches and hunting rifles. My *Mononc'* Alfred went with the men.

"He said they hunted every night until they found the prints of a lone wolf and the prints were huge, big like my hand." Despite the delicate size of Anne-Marie Caron's hand, Cécile had trouble imagining a wolf track that large.

"They followed the tracks, which headed right into Gareau's farmyard, and there, they disappeared. Now, Gareau hadn't been coming along on these hunting trips. And he hadn't lost as many animals as the other farmers. So they got suspicious.

"One night, they left their torches at home and hid in ambush in Gareau's field. Not long after midnight, they saw a huge animal lumbering toward them in the dark, heading away from the barn. They shot at it, but the animal kept running. It took several shots before the animal went down. At that point, Mme Gareau came running out of the

house, screaming and screaming and they all ran out to help her. When they looked back to where the animal had dropped, it had disappeared, but there was a trail of blood heading into the fields, toward the woods. The men crossed themselves and went home, because they figured the animal—if that's what it was—had gone off to die.

"The next day, they heard that Gareau was dead, that his shotgun had gone off while he was cleaning it. Apparently Mme Gareau showed everyone a hole in the wall of her kitchen, but still, no one believed her. Everyone was sure that the death of Gareau and the death of the big wolf were one and the same. "

The librarian lifted one hand palm up and gave a little embarrassed laugh. She lifted her teacup to her lips and made a face. "Cold," she said.

Cécile said, "But someone must have seen the body. If he shot himself, he would have had one wound. If the whole town was shooting at him, he would have been Swiss cheese."

"Oh yes. A lot of people wanted to see the body, but Mme Gareau and her son, Alphonse, had already buried him."

"So there was no funeral?" Cécile asked.

"Not as far as I know."

Cécile shook her head. "But surely, these people didn't really believe that this man was a werewolf. That's unbelievable. It wasn't that long ago." She put down her empty teacup. It clattered against the melamine desktop.

"A hundred years. And remember, they were scared. They were isolated, and being terrorized by wolves; a little band of humans on the edge of a huge forest. They were vulnerable."



“And superstitious?” Cécile asked almost belligerently. When Mme Caron didn’t answer, she added, “I’ve been reading about wolves. They’re not aggressive.”

“All animals are aggressive if they’re hungry enough,” the librarian countered, taking Cécile’s empty cup and getting up. The conversation was over.

“Thanks for the tea,” she said, getting up.

“Anytime,” Mme Caron replied with a smile.

## Chapter 8 Encounter in the Woods

Cécile put her pile of books in the back of her 4x4 and closed the hatch. She was thinking about her conversation with Anne-Marie Caron. In her version of the *loup-garou* story, there had been no funeral, and Jean-Baptiste Gareau's wife and son had buried him themselves, possibly in the dead of night, since the next morning, there was no body to show for it.

As she climbed into the driver's seat, Cécile frowned. She thought, I didn't grow up with a mother who watched soap operas all day and not learn something. If there's no body, then they're not really dead. However, this wasn't a soap opera. It was supposed to be history. Or legend, she told herself. Or some uncertain territory in between. It seemed clear to her that something had happened a hundred years ago, involving a wolf hunt. And that, as a result, Jean-Baptiste Gareau had... "Let's say 'disappeared,' " she mumbled.

She started up the engine and pulled away from the curb in front of the fire hall and library, and drove down *le chemin Fex*. At the T-intersection, instead of turning right on *le chemin du lac*, in the direction of the lodge, she doubled back and crossed the village. A quick walk through the cemetery confirmed that Jean-Baptiste Gareau was not buried there. However, his wife's grave was there, Béatrice Gareau, born 1867, died 1941, as well as another couple, who must have been Julien's parents: Alphonse (1885- 1919) and June (1892-1919). She remembered Ti-Jean telling her that Alphonse and his bride had died of la *fièvre espagnole*. As far as she remembered, the date on the grave confirmed this.

She drove through town again and turned onto the highway leading toward Gareau's farm. As she turned onto the highway, she caught, in her rear-view mirror, the last glimpse of the Lake Wabigwani, its blue water reflecting a sunny sky. Where would Mme Gareau bury her husband? she wondered.

She could have buried him on the farm itself, she thought. And surely, she would have marked the grave.

When she neared *le rang* Gareau, she slowed down and examined the Gareau farm, which extended a short distance up the road from the intersection with the highway. From *le rang* Gareau, a driveway led to the farmyard. The house and barn were located at roughly a quarter of the distance of the lot from the highway. The bright yellow house and the large, old-fashioned wooden barn, were neat and well maintained. Behind the house, she could see two sheds or garages, one large and new, covered with yellow siding like the house, the other old and leaning, made of grey, weathered wood. Behind the barn was a fenced-in, narrow strip of land, that ended at a *rocher* and a wooded area. In this pen, cows were grazing next to a large pile of manure. On either side of the house, the fields were tilled, long mounds of turned, dark soil. After considering a moment, Cécile thought she could get a look at the farmyard from the *rocher* behind the animal pen.

She was almost at *la rivière du Prétendant*, and there was nowhere to turn. She drove over the broken bridge carefully, then, waiting for a break in the traffic, used a side road to make a 180-degree turn. She passed over the bridge again, and past Gareau's farm. At the next road, *le rang* Desrosiers, she turned and parked. From her parking spot, she could see the Desrosiers farm, where Ti-Jean's parents still lived, with his youngest sister. Before heading into the woods that would lead her to the back of

Gareau's property, she grabbed her backpack. She remembered that, inside, was the lunch she had packed to eat at the library, but had forgotten in the car. She could take a break to eat during her hike, she thought.

She jumped over the ditch. Before walking into the stand of trees along the highway, she looked back at the Desrosiers farm feeling guilty. Soon, she would have to get up the nerve to go visit them. She knew they would be welcoming, but she wasn't sure they would be glad to see her. She would surely reopen their wounds. She knew they would reopen hers.

Cécile thought back to her early teens, living in *le Moulin à Fleur*. She'd hated her house, the back entrance apartment with the dark panelling in the staircase, and her mother, always there, always quiet, doing her knitting, watching her shows. What does your father do? What does your mother do? These had been the nightmare questions of her earliest childhood when her refuge had been at home where she could hide from the answers: Nothing. I have no father.

But, as an adolescent, the quiet life she lived with her mother grew hateful. Her best friend was Chantal Meilleur who had two sisters and a brother. Their house was noisy, disorienting, always warm and brightly lit. They lived in a big house on top of the hill, near the English and French private schools. Cécile spent as much time there as she could. There was conversation and noise and music and noisy meals and a stereo. They danced, they talked about boys, and giggled when Chantal's older brother came in. He would blush and leave quickly.

On weekends, sometimes the Meilleur family took Cécile to their cottage on Lake Wabigwani, in the town of Ste-Adèle. She'd loved these weekends, especially when the mother's family, or the father's, would gather and they would sing *des chansons à*

*répondre*, and drink. She drank her first liquor there at the age of twelve during the 60th anniversary party of Chantal's grandparents. Drunk, she'd necked with Chantal's cousin Paul. Elation and excitement. Compared to that, her life with her mother seemed like a crypt.

The Meilleur family was really French-Canadian, Cécile thought. Her own father had been French-Canadian, but she'd never known him; he'd died before she was born. Her mother was English but knew French. She'd sent Cécile to French school so she would at least have that of her father. Her mother had also stayed in the same apartment in the French ghetto, where she'd lived with Cécile's father, either out of loyalty and memory, or lack of momentum, Cécile did not know.

When Ti-Jean started taking her home to Pointe-Mouillée, she'd loved his family immediately, felt a remembered sense of desire for noisy conversation and laughter and song.

*Le violoneux tape du pied.* His fiddle is crammed beneath his chin. His upper body jerks in time with his tapping foot. His balding head, with its fine dark hair turning grey is covered with perspiration. As his right arm works the bow furiously, he bites his upper lip and half his moustache disappears, when the tempo slows, his face relaxes into a smile. It's hard to imagine that face frowning. It's hard to imagine him making a pact with the devil.

The guitar player accompanies the violin. *Il accorde.* Along with jeans and a white cotton shirt, he wears a *ceinture fléchée*. He wears the belt without politics now, without the defiance with which he first wore it. Now, it is simply part of his wardrobe. His hair is dark and his left leg is crossed over his right. His left foot in a white sweat

sock hangs in the air and moves to the beat of his strumming. He looks up at the fiddler, as though to see where he is going with this tune, to follow him into the music, and Cécile wonders what he is seeing: his uncle, history, or just music. His face is intense with concentration, but calm at the same time, not as spirited as the old men.

The one who plays the spoons on his knee sits by the corner of the table. His hands move fast, and he is smiling, his beer on the table next to him. He doesn't look serious. He loses the beat once, and snorts a laugh. Those sitting near him roar with laughter along with him when he exhales dramatically — *Phew!*— reaches for his beer and takes a long drink. He wipes his forehead on his hand, wipes his hand on his pants. He wears green canvas work pants, the kind the men wear to the mines in Sudbury. After winking at a child sitting nearby, he takes a breath, as though he were about to jump into icy water on a warm summer day, then resumes his percussion.

*Mononc'* Bill is singing the one about the fiddler who makes a pact with the devil. He sings loudly. His voice is baritone and has the expressiveness of someone who knows he's funny. Tonight, he's singing all the funny ones, the bawdy ones, the dancing songs, the drinking songs. He sings the lead, and everyone choruses, laughing at the jokes, raising their glasses of beer, or rye and cola. It's the way he sings that makes them laugh, because everyone already knows the songs.

*Mononc'* Edouard usually plays the accordion, but tonight, he forgot to bring it. One of the nieces has gone to fetch it from his house. He stands near the musicians. His body leans into the music. His muscles twitch. He does a little dance. Une *p'tite jig*ue in his thick socks. The door opens and he cranes his neck to see who is entering, but it's someone coming with a cooler.

*"Maudit!"* he exclaims. *"Where's my accordion?"*

He struts over to the table where his wife, *Matante* Maria is sitting quietly. He takes her hand and tugs her to her feet. She does a quiet jig with him while he hops around her, his breath coming loud, and his face red framing his toothy yellow grin. He swats her on the behind.

She tells him, "*Mon vieux maquereau, toé!*" but she is smiling and her cheeks are spotted red.

The children come to dance around him, they hop around like crazy and throw themselves on the floor in laughing hysteria. Adults join in and suddenly, Cécile can feel the floor of the living-room moving under her feet where she sits. When his wife plops down on her chair with a loud breath, *Mononc'* Edouard struts across the floor toward Cécile.

She considers running to the kitchen, but *Mononc'* has already crossed the room, and is taking her hand. She looks at Ti-Jean with alarm and, from behind his guitar, he smiles at her. She capitulates and stands. She feels warm, as though Ti-Jean's family has managed to integrate her, swallow her, as Edouard dances her through the crowd, around the living room, in a crazy polka.

*Mononc'* big hand holds hers tightly, and he leads her forcefully and quickly, so fast she is dizzy and panting. She starts to laugh and as she laughs, loses her breath. She steps on his feet. He laughs and keeps pushing her around the floor until the grinning niece walks in brandishing the small, red accordion above her head. *Mononc'* Edouard stops in mid-step and shouts, "*Mon accordéon.*" He rushes over and kisses it. He unfastens its buckles and starts playing while pulling the straps over his shoulders.

Cécile goes back to her chair and takes a long drink of her beer. Ti-Jean is looking at her with a half-smile on his lips; his head is moving to the beat and a heavy

lock of hair on his forehead bounces up and down in his face. He blows upward to move it off his forehead, but it doesn't budge. Cécile runs to him. Standing next to him, she gently lifts the lock back. The hair along his forehead is wet, as it is when they make love. She leans down and, letting her dark hair hang in a curtain to shield her face, kisses him on the cheek, then gives his earlobe a tug with her lips. He plays a discordant chord and everyone laughs. He reaches for her and gives her a long, probing kiss while everyone catcalls and hoots. She knows she ought to feel embarrassed, but she tingles.

Cécile sighed. The memory had stopped her dead in her tracks. She was standing below a rocky outcrop that was clear of the trees and in full sun. She was almost at the Gareau property. She wondered if she could see it from the top of the rock.

The *rocher* seemed to be the edge of the Gareau property. A fence ran parallel to its edge on either side. The rock itself was not fenced out, but acted as a natural fence for the animals she saw in the pasture. She wondered what Gareau did to keep predators out, if there were still predators left in this area. There were maybe a dozen cows at the other end of the pasture, near the barn. Otherwise, the farmyard seemed deserted. Beyond the older shed, she could see part of a large garden, then the house. She could not see the newer shed; from this angle, it was hidden by the barn.

She could not see anything that looked like a grave marker, either, though she would have to get in closer to be certain. She wasn't sure how she would do that. Mme Gareau could have buried her husband in the farmyard, Cécile thought, but surely, she wouldn't have wanted a dead body underfoot. She couldn't imagine a woman burying her spouse in an unmarked grave in the cow pasture. Perhaps in this stand of trees, she thought, looking around. Perhaps if she looked around here, she would find a marker of



some sort. But first, she thought, I need to eat something. She sat down and pulled the sandwich and water bottle from her bag.

Gareau realized he was frowning before he realized the reason for it. This was happening to him more and more often lately. It felt like suddenly waking up, and realizing he hadn't been asleep. He would find himself standing in the field, or on the porch of his house, and wonder how he'd gotten there. Sometimes, if he tried to think of the place he thought he should have been, his mind went blank. Like trying to put your finger on mercury. Like trying to remember a dream: the more you try to look at it directly, the faster it flees. He was left only with what his senses were supplying him at the moment: his farm around him, the uneven ground under his feet, the smell of grass and machine oil, the sounds of his animals. But these things, which he knew so well, seemed unreal, unfamiliar, and frightening.

He rested his shovel on the mound of dirt, and looked around. He whistled. He waited, quiet, but all he heard was the wind, the swishing dance of plants and trees, the twittering of birds. From far away, he heard the call of migrating geese.

He whistled again. This time, he had difficulty making a clear sound. His mouth had gone dry. He plunged the blade of his shovel into the dirt and walked noisily toward the farmhouse. When he had reached the door, and the dog hadn't come loping out from behind a shed, or from the fields, he went in for his twelve-gauge and came out again.

He walked quietly now, heading beyond the barn, and through the empty field, his shotgun pointing upward, finger on the trigger, as he'd carried it since his father taught him to hunt years ago. If he'd thought about it, he would have known why the

gun, and why he was walking in the direction of the wooded area at the back of the fields. He did not think about it because he had long ago learned to trust his instincts about these matters, without questioning the reason for them. Perhaps, while he was spreading dirt over the *potager*, preparing his garden for the coming spring, and his mind entirely tuned out to the activities of his body, he had seen the dog run off, chasing some small animal, or heard it barking from behind the barn.

As he walked, his emotions ran the gamut from paralysing fear to acceptance to the quiet focus of stalking hunter. The dog had been with him for almost twelve years, and had learned, like the dog before him, to accompany Gareau on his rounds, to keep a companionable presence nearby, at all times. He trained his dogs to stay nearby, not to wander off beyond the reach of his call. One after another, since he was a boy, he'd had a dog companion. When he thought about it, he could remember each one distinctly, though most times, he treated the dog with him as a kind of amalgamation of all the previous dogs, all of whom he thought of simply as "Chien." There was no need for names; he didn't talk much. He had been alone so long, he found talking unnatural. It twisted his thoughts and ideas in ways that were unfamiliar, threatening. In silence, his thoughts were well-ordered and broad, like a field, open to the sun. When he sought words, he found his ideas twisted like a vine forced to grow up a trellis, or a tomato vine that is forced to grow up its stake.

As he walked, he thought about fox. He'd seen a lot of fox this year. And he'd been worried about rabies. He'd lost one dog to rabies before, years ago.

When he heard a sound, it was not the one he'd expected, not the growling shrieks of fighting animals, not the whimpering of an injured animal left to die, but the quiet murmuring of a human voice. Female. He stopped in his tracks and would have

changed direction, but he heard a short bark and recognized Chien. He moved more quietly in the direction of the sounds.

He was approaching them from lower ground, and from the shelter of the trees so he had a moment to watch them before they noticed him. The woman was sitting at the top of a sunny granite outcrop, feeding a sandwich to his dog. The dog sat at attention at her knee, rising up on his haunches impatiently while she tore off pieces for him.

He gazed at his dog with something between irritation and amusement. In all the years they'd been together, Chien had never once run off, but he had no doubt been lured by the smell of food. He considered the woman. She was short and dark-haired. Gareau did not know who she was, though he thought he'd seen her before. She was looking at the dog and speaking quietly. Gareau could not make out what she was saying. It was only when she stopped eating and took a drink from a water bottle that the dog turned and barked. He bounded slowly toward Gareau, with the barely discernible limp in his gait that he'd developed over the past winter.

When she saw him, she stood. Her water bottle rolled down the rock. He could tell she was afraid by the way she held her shoulders high, muscles clenched, body prepared for flight. Her gaze darted from his face to his shotgun to the dog who had run off to sniff at the fallen water bottle.

The wide-eyed, frightened look she was giving him reminded him of where he'd seen her before. At the *Magasin Général* some time ago, he'd noticed her staring at him with so much fear and loathing that he'd felt shame. He'd felt judged, like she could see no common humanity between them. The feeling was familiar; he'd experienced it many times before.

*"Bonjour,"* she said tentatively. "Your dog?"

Gareau nodded, but did not respond, fighting off a wave of anger that threatened to blind him. She *should* be afraid of me, he thought.

She continued nervously, "I was hiking back here and we found each other. I thought he might be lost. He's a nice dog."

The pain she was causing him felt like a cramp tight along the back of his neck and on his spine. His throat was closed up with anger. He wanted to hurt her. Like bloodlust, he craved to see her recoil. He knew how, but the price was high. The personal cost.

He cleared his throat and spoke, his voice gravelly and hostile, "You should be careful. There's wolves back here. Aggressive. They'll kill you." Then he grinned at her, full-toothed and wild-eyed.

Whistling for the dog, he turned and strode away, leaving her alone in the wood with her fears. He savoured the release, felt the blood pounding on his temples. I am an animal, he thought.

Cécile's foot leaned on the gas pedal. The 4x4 accelerated too fast on the gravel shoulder; the wheels spun, sending a spray of gravel against the bottom of the car. At the highway, she turned right instead of left, heading back toward Sudbury instead of the lodge. When she realized what she'd done, she was almost at *le rang* Gareau. She could see Julien Gareau followed by his dog striding into his yard. Was he looking this way?

She pressed on the accelerator again, looking at Gareau in her rear-view mirror. When she looked ahead again, she had already come up on *la rivière du Prétendant*.

Shit. Her right foot automatically shifted to the brake pedal and slammed. She steered hard right, and the car careened slightly over the gravel shoulder. For a moment, the car rolled toward the edge of the bridge without railings, headed right for the river.

She pressed on the gas and corrected her course, got back onto the asphalt. There, she put on the brakes, slowed down. Her heart fluttered in her chest. Dead slow, she guided her truck onto the bridge. The vibrations of the broken asphalt compounded the shaky feeling in her muscles. She caught the movement of the dull brown waves in sunlight, and suddenly she was seeing herself driving over the edge, the truck diving into the water, death coming for her. Ti-Jean's face as they put the body into the ambulance, bluish in the flashing lights, a drop of blood on his cheek. Ti-Jean, waiting for her.

She gritted her teeth. "No." But the vision came again, and again: she saw herself driving over the bridge. She gasped. Not enough air. Dizzy. Dizzy. Can't drive. It will happen. I'll go over. Can't drive. In the rear-view mirror, she saw a car right behind her and imagined it was Gareau, but caught a glimpse of a mop of blond hair. Can't stop. She forced herself to inch her way over the bridge.

As soon as she was back on the highway, she pulled the truck over to the shoulder, and jumped out as though the car were electrified. She stood next to the highway, waiting to die, for her heart to explode. Can't get enough air.

The blond woman drove by slowly, gaping.

The air was icy on her body. She was covered with sweat. She took quick shallow breaths, trying to calm down. She considered her options. She could not face getting back into her 4x4, turning it around, and driving it back over the bridge. This

time, she was sure, she would go over. If she never drove that thing again, she thought, that would be fine. She watched cars drive past her slowly, heading to or from the bridge. They stared at her. Walking back to town was not so far, but she would have to walk past *le rang* Gareau. She shivered.

A truck pulled in. Cam. He parked his truck in front of hers and walked around to meet her.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Something wrong with my truck," she lied. "The brakes." The fact that she could concoct such a plausible lie calmed her. She inhaled deeply and admitted, "I thought I was going to drive over the side of the bridge."

"I can take a look." He crammed his hands into his pockets with a shrug.

"Nah," she replied. "No way I'm getting back behind that wheel. Will you drive me home though?"

"What'll you do with the truck?" he asked, turning to look at a mini-van that was slowing down next to them. The passenger window of the van slid down with a whirr. The van had the *Leduc & Fils* logo on the side.

"Need help Cam?" someone called out. Cécile couldn't see the man's face clearly from where she was standing until he leaned over. Ghyslain. Fleurette's husband.

"*Merçi*, Ghyslain." He waved and the window went up with the same hum.

"I guess I'll send a tow truck for it," Cécile said when the mini-van had gone.

"Danny Vincent's got one at his garage. Maybe he can take a look at it too."

"OK. Thanks," she said lamely, unable to say more. Before getting into Cam's truck, she got her backpack and her books from the hatch of the 4x4. She sat in the passenger side of Cam's truck, the books piled on her lap.

As they drove away from her 4x4, Cécile began to feel foolish for having left it parked by the side of the highway. What's Cam going to think, she thought, then Gareau's farmyard came into view. She turned away.

Cam said, "Probably best that you didn't drive it away if it was the brakes. The hill going into town is pretty steep. Wouldn't want to find yourself parked in the Lelièvre's living-room."

Grateful that he didn't think she was crazy, she turned to smile at him. His hands were on the steering wheel, he was chewing on his lip, the top button of his shirt was undone and she could see the smooth skin there. She turned away.

"So when do you think you can start work at the lodge?" she asked.

"Day after tomorrow, I figure. I'll be done this job by tonight. I was thinking of taking tomorrow off to go hunting."

"Where should we start?"

"Cabin Nine, I figure. We should fix that roof before we get more bad weather."

"That makes sense," she said, looking straight ahead. "I'll set up a credit line at Rochon's Hardware, so if you want to get the supplies..." She couldn't manage that without her 4x4.

Cam nodded. They drove in silence, until he pulled the truck into the lodge and stopped in front of Cécile's cabin. She picked up her armful of books and opened the door. She was about to thank him for the lift, but when she turned to him, he was staring at her. "Are you gonna be all right?" he asked, his voice so gentle that, for a moment, he sounded just like Ti-Jean.

“Yeah, thanks,” she mumbled and was about to jump out of the truck, when an idea struck her. “Hey Cam, if you have a minute, can I ask you a couple of questions about Ti-Jean’s guns?”



## Chapter 9 Companions

Cécile found Fleurette in the bakery, placing fresh-baked bread into bags. The smell was warm and inviting, and Fleurette smiled tentatively at her. Cécile smiled back, determined.

“How’s the cleaning going?” Fleurette asked, putting a loaf into a clear plastic bag, which immediately steamed up.

“I’ve got my cabin mostly under control, except for the mice.” She grimaced. Fleurette mimicked her grimace and they both grinned. Cécile relaxed. She said, “I need some information. I was hoping you could help me.”

“Sure. I’ll try.” Fleurette put down the bagged loaf of bread onto the counter.

“I want to get a dog,” Cécile said.

Fleurette frowned thoughtfully. “That’s probably a good idea. It’ll be company for you out at the lodge by yourself.” She blushed and looked down, then added quickly, “I don’t know. When people have puppies, they usually put a sign by the door, or tell us about it. But there’s nothing right now that I know of.” She paused, then said thoughtfully, “Sturgeon Falls has an SPCA. You could try there.”

Cécile looked down at the tips of her sneakers. She still hadn’t recovered her 4x4 and had no desire to get back behind the wheel yet, but she knew she couldn’t manage out here without a vehicle of some sort.

She looked up at Fleurette who was looking at her, frowning. “I had a little accident. My car’s at the garage.”

“I’ll take you.” Fleurette said without hesitation. “I need to go to the hardware store. If you don’t mind.” Then, she added, lowering her voice, “Anyway, I need a

break. I just need to finish bagging the bread. Wanna help?" She didn't even give Cécile a chance to decline. Over the counter, she pushed a plastic container of twist ties and a pile of stickers printed, *Pain maison*, with a list of ingredients. "The stickers go on the bags," Fleurette said. "You can wash your hands in there." She pointed at a sink.

After washing her hands, Cécile said, "The bakery smells absolutely amazing." She took a loaf from the counter and twisted the bag shut. Through the plastic, the loaf was warm on her palms.

"Yeah, I love this smell," Fleurette replied. "I love this place." She added, "Bring a loaf along when we're done."

When they were done, Fleurette took off her apron. As they walked past the cash, Fleurette said to Ghyslain, "I'm going for the day. I'm taking the van." Cécile saw Ghyslain's eyebrows rise in surprise but before he could say anything, Fleurette was out the door.

Once in the car, Fleurette sat gripping the wheel for a moment. She stared in front for a long minute before turning to Cécile. She smiled tensely. "Ready?"

Fleurette drove very slowly out of the parking lot and through the village. On the highway, she said, "I know I'm a slow driver. I don't like to go fast."

"This is OK with me," Cécile said. They were approaching the stretch of highway along Gareau's farm, leading to the bridge over the river. She squirmed on her seat and closed her eyes, as though her worst fears would rise from the highway or from the river.

They drove slowly over the bridge. Fleurette said, sounding casual, "Good thing your brakes didn't give out on the bridge. The water is so high since the storm. The current must be pretty fast."

Once over the bridge, she sped up. In a cheerful voice, Fleurette then told the story of a classmate of hers from high school who had died one winter when her car crashed over the railing. The car had gone through the ice and the girl's body had been found in the lake in the spring, about thirty miles away.

Cécile looked out the window. In the front lawn of a white bungalow, next to the river, a dog stood next to a double swing, barking at them as they drove by. She saw again the look on Gareau's face, as he'd looked up at her, teeth bared. She thought about the heavy chests of hunting weapons that Cam had helped pull out from under her bed. She'd picked out a small Remington rifle that had been given to Ti-Jean when he was sixteen. She told Cam she wanted it around for security. He knew she was a good shot; they'd gone hunting with Ti-Jean a few times. She'd asked how it was possible for someone to kill himself accidentally while cleaning a rifle. "Show me how you would have to be sitting for that to happen," she'd said. He'd looked at her as if she were crazy. Gareau's grinning face again.

Cécile heard herself sob before she realized she was going to cry. They drove past a stubbly field, a house and a barn, another stubbly field with a tractor working on it, a wooded area. She struggled to make herself stop crying. When she turned to look at Fleurette, she saw her hands, tight on the wheel, her eyes wide open, tears running down her face.

Cécile wiped her eyes on her sleeve and glanced over at Fleurette, "*Es-tu correct'?*"

Fleurette smiled a crooked smile and said, "I should be asking you that. It's just that I remember what it feels like... to lose someone." She took one hand off the steering wheel and reached over to touch Cécile's arm.

The warmth of Fleurette's hand on her sleeve stayed even after she'd put it back on the wheel. Cécile, suddenly exhausted, didn't say anything.

Cécile emerged from the SPCA with a large, long-eared, light-coloured dog on its new leash and a big bag of supplies.

Fleurette, who stood waiting by the van, whistled through her teeth, "He's huge. What kind of dog is that?"

"The girl at the SPCA said he was part Irish wolfhound."

Fleurette grinned and asked, "How old is he? I hope he's full size."

"She said he was almost a year old and he outgrew his last home. The people lived in an apartment. But he's very well-behaved. Apparently."

"Why did they get an Irish wolfhound if they were living in an apartment?"

"I guess they didn't know. They got him at the SPCA. Maybe they didn't know what kind he was," Cécile said. Looking at the van, she added tentatively. "I didn't get a cage or anything."

"Let's hope it doesn't get carsick," Fleurette replied, laughing.

At first, the dog refused to get in the van. It sat on its haunches outside the car shaking its head from side to side as though stubbornly saying no. Not much progress was made while Fleurette and Cécile stood laughing at the dog's antics. Cécile finally enticed him in with a small handful of food. Once he was inside, the dog seemed comfortable and remained at the back of the van, crunching his food noisily.

"He may not get carsick, but I might," Cécile said, once they were inside the van with the doors closed. "He stinks." She opened her window.

As they passed by the hardware store, Cécile reminded Fleurette that she'd wanted to stop in.

"That's all right," Fleurette said. "I'll get it another time. Now let's just get this monster home and clean him up. But let's stop at the Beer Store for a case though."

Back at the cabin, by the time they were into their third beer, they had washed the dog, and Fleurette had insisted she help out by cleaning the kitchen shelves and putting up the shelving paper Cécile had bought on Sunday. Fleurette had become talkative. While she stood on a chair by the kitchen cupboards, she told Cécile about her child, telling it as though she was telling herself a story she had rehearsed many times. Cécile sat on the kitchen floor with her beer, and listened.

"I've often thought about why my child died. I've thought that maybe it was a mistake, that it was never meant to live. But I knew her. She was a girl. I could feel it. And I could tell by the way she moved in my womb that she was impatient, headstrong, stubborn. I've thought about how maybe it was my fault somehow, my body was not strong enough, or pure enough. Because it wasn't a girl in the end, and he was weak. Feeble."

Fleurette closed a cupboard door and opened another. The dog crossed the room and put its head in Cécile's lap. Its ears flopped on either side of its head and rested on her leg. Cécile had decided to call it Barbaro after the long-eared mythic character. Cécile had read *un conte* about Barbaro at the Pointe-Mouillée library. In it, Barbaro emerged talking from his mother's womb— "*Bonjour sa-mère! Bonjour son-père!*"—and went right to work, chopping trees. With supernatural strength and wiles, he subdued a

seven-headed beast, the devil, and a deceitful king in order to solve his parents' financial problems.

Cécile took a sip of her beer and looked up at Fleurette. There was a small burr caught on one of the legs of her leggings. Fleurette's arms were lifted above her head; she was smoothing the shelving paper down. Cécile couldn't see her face, but her movements seemed calm and deliberate, incongruous with the story she was telling.

"My water broke in the entrance to the hospital. I had a cramp that made me stand still for a moment and it came out, not like a tap or like pee, the way I had imagined it would, but like a warm trickle down my leg that seemed to have no source, and just kept going until there was a puddle on the floor, pink with blood. A beautiful pink. I hadn't known it could be pink. I thought, Someone is going to mop that up with a dirty grey mop and a plastic bucket of water reeking of disinfectant and it will be dumped down the drain.

"It seemed so wrong. It was the water that my child had been breathing and swimming in for the past nine months. It was precious. It should have been collected carefully with a clean cloth and rinsed in Lake Wabigwani.

"That's all I could think about, as they brought me into the delivery room. Until the labour got so intense that I couldn't think of anything at all. Then, when they told me he was dead, I thought that if I had had some of the amniotic fluid, that beautiful pink water, I could have washed his face with it, and maybe she—he—would have come back."

Cécile gulped down the rest of her beer and waited to see if Fleurette would say any more. After a long silence, Cécile said, "I'm so sorry, Fleurette."

Fleurette turned, started at her and said, "*You* know."

Then, in a voice of a different pitch, she added, "Hey get me another beer, will you? Though, I must admit that if I drink more, I may drop all your dishes."

Cécile twisted off the cap and handed it up to Fleurette. "How did Ghyslain take it?" Cécile asked.

Fleurette, reaching for the beer, made a sour face. She got down from her chair and sat on it. Cécile returned to her position on the floor and waited for Fleurette to answer. "After I lost the baby, he got polite. It drove me nuts. When we were first married, he used to get really polite when he was angry. He would say, '*J'te demande pardon,*' instead of 'What did you say?' And it used to bug me then, because it meant we were fighting. But after the baby, suddenly he was polite all the time. Like it was my fault. For a month, I couldn't even talk to him.

"But then, my father asked the priest to come by. When he was there talking to us, Ghyslain made out like there was no problem. Like he had no problem with it at all. It was just me. Ever since then, we just don't talk about it."

Fleurette took a long drink and muttered, "We don't talk much at all."

They drank in silence until a growl like a rumble emerged from Barbaro's throat and, as they heard the car pull up in front of the cabin, exploded into barking. Fleurette asked, "Are you expecting someone?"

Forcing a smile to lighten the mood, Cécile said, "Let's peek." She crawled to the door and Fleurette, giggling, got off her chair and followed her across the floor on all fours. The dog stopped barking and licked their faces. They stood on either side of the window next to the front door and peered out.

A dusty grey mini-van drove up. Cécile recognized the vehicle before she recognized the driver. Before Cam had gotten Ti-Jean's truck, he used to drive this

mini-van. She wondered if it still had, hanging from the rear-view mirror, a dream-catcher and a bookmark with the serenity prayer printed on it. She said to Fleurette, "It's Estelle Caron."

Estelle got out, cradling something in a paper bag. Her daughter, whose name Cécile didn't remember came around from the passenger side. Fleurette and Cécile stood, brushed themselves off, smiling sheepishly and stepped out onto the front porch. The dog stayed behind Cécile, growling slightly, until the women had stepped into the door of the cabin.

Fleurette spoke first, "*Allô Estelle. Comment ça va, Reina?* Enjoying your holiday from the chip stand?"

Reina grinned and replied, speaking only in English. "Ha. I'll take the chip stand over school any day. Hey, nice dog."

Estelle offered her package to Cécile. "I brought you some *ketchup vert* and a frozen lasagna I made. It looks like you girls might be getting hungry right about now, pointing at the empty beer bottles cluttering the kitchen table. "

Cécile offered Estelle a beer then, hesitating, offered one to Reina too, though she wasn't sure of her age. Reina, grinning at her mother, accepted the beer. Estelle frowned at her, then winked at Cécile.

Estelle put the lasagna in the oven. They cleared off the table and sat together to drink their beer. Amidst the beer bottles, Cécile's library books attracted Estelle's attention. "Folk stories, history books... Why are you reading all this stuff?" she asked.

Cécile shrugged, "I'm trying to find out about the history of Pointe-Mouillée, what it was like to live here in the old days."



Estelle said, "Cam's mother knows all about that stuff. She collects all kinds of information about the old days." She grinned. "Speaking of old, we went to *la maison des vieilles filles* this afternoon. I brought Reina in to help me clean it, like Ghyslain asked.... Oh!" Estelle fished in her pocket and handed Fleurette a key. She explained, "I didn't make it to the store before it closed to give him the key."

"What was the house like?" Fleurette asked.

"It was pretty clean already." Estelle replied. "I have to admit there wasn't much for us to do, but I washed the windows and the floors." She glanced at her daughter. "We dusted the spots that needed it and vacuumed, though truth be told, I'm sure that vacuum didn't suck up much dust. They were pretty tidy ladies. You'll have to tell Ghyslain that I couldn't get into one room because it was locked."

The daughter said, "And contrary to popular belief, they had two bedrooms."

Estelle snapped, "*Tais-toi donc toé*. Have some respect."

Cécile could smell the lasagna starting to heat up in the oven. Feeling warm and happy, she smiled and asked, "What's that about?"

"Well," Reina said, obviously pleased to be asked. "They had to have been lesbians, living together like that, all that time. Don't you think so?"

"*C'était pas pareil dans l'autre génération*," Estelle replied for Cécile. "It was normal in those days for women to live together like that. Nobody thought twice about it. Besides, they went to church every Sunday. Rosa Lefebvre went almost every day."

"Big deal," Reina said, rolling her eyes. "That doesn't mean anything."

"I'm sure it did to them," Estelle said, replying to her daughter in French, even though the girl spoke only English to her mother.

"How do you know what it meant to them?" Reina asked, indignant.

"I'm just saying that things were different for the older generation. Their religion was a real big part of their lives. Look at your grandmother. She believed she could make blood stop and..."

"She could what?" Cécile interrupted.

Estelle sipped her beer. "She has the gift to stanch blood. Cam has it too. Haven't you ever heard of that?" She looked at Cécile curiously for a moment. "Cam inherited the gift from his mother, and she had gotten it from her father. It's passed down from generation to generation, from man to woman or woman to man. When I was just a few weeks pregnant for Reina, I haemorrhaged and Cam went to get his mother and brought her to the hospital. She laid her hands on my stomach and stopped the bleeding."

Cécile glanced at Fleurette who was sitting quietly, looking at the tabletop. Estelle must have interpreted the look as scepticism because she exclaimed, "I swear it's true. I saw it with my own eyes."

Fleurette said quietly, "I didn't know Cam had that gift."

Estelle nodded. "When I told Cam's mother I was pregnant for the second time, she said, '*Mon Dieu! J'trop vieille là!* I'm too tired to look after any more bleeding.' So she passed the gift on to him. Later, she told me that she picked him because he had always been tender-hearted. You have to have a good heart to take care of people."

Reina rolled her eyes and Estelle glared at her. Estelle added, turning to Cécile, "It's too bad he wasn't around to help Ti-Jean."

The smile froze on Cécile's face. She heard Fleurette quickly say something and the conversation continued uninterrupted, though she could not have said what they were talking about.

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The early November air is cold and Cécile has wrapped herself in blankets on the sofa. She's decided to stay in after supper and watch television. There is a special on CBC about wetland ecosystems. She hears Ti-Jean on the telephone asking Cam to help him carry the boats, which are still outside on trestles, into the shed. Ti-Jean says, "Yeah, yeah. I know. Next year, I'll do it sooner... OK. I'll meet you out by the shed."

He walks over to the couch, his boots thumping on the plank floor, and bends over to kiss her hair. He says, "*Bye, Princesse!*"

She doesn't listen to the screen door hinges squeak open, then shut behind him because she is listening to the narrator on the television. After the wetlands programme, there is a historical drama that bores her. She considers going out to help Ti-Jean and Cam, but she is warm under her blanket. She falls asleep.

When she wakes up, the news is on too loud, as though the anchor were shouting at her. After a moment, she realizes that it is the silence that seems to be pressing down on the cottage from the outside, as though the weight of the air charged with this silence is heavy enough to make the walls collapse inward. She turns the television off with the remote control and that silence deafens her.

With the blanket still wrapped around her, she stands on the porch. The moon is almost full. *Susurrement*. Pine branches sibilant in the wind, casting shadows on the walls like arms waving, arms reaching. Small animals run over the ground making leaves rustle. Night birds call to each other overhead, nested in darkness, but all Cécile hears is silence. She stands still for a minute, two minutes, listening, but hears nothing like the sounds of Ti-Jean working nearby.

*Affolée.* Crazed, she runs back into the cottage and calls the number on the bulletin board. It rings twice.

Cam answers, "*Allô?*"

He does not ask any questions, but arrives at the lodge ten minutes after Cécile's call.

It is Cam, carrying a big flashlight pulled out from under the seat of his truck, who finds Ti-Jean, chest pinned under the boat.

"Cam? Cam? What is it?" she screams. She is three steps behind him.

"Go back. *Va dans' maison.* Call an ambulance."

She retreats into the cabin, heart pounding, a monster fear clutching at her throat. Later, she will not be able to forgive herself but she does not go out to Cam, to Ti-Jean. Still wrapped in her blanket, she sits on the couch, waiting for the ambulance. She tells herself the ambulance may call if they cannot find the place. She is listening to the noises outside.

Then, they are putting Ti-Jean into the ambulance. She shivers under her blanket at Ti-Jean's skin, cold and blue when she cups his cheek in her hand for a moment. A trace of dried blood on his cheek, serpentine like a vein with its source in his mouth. In the ambulance, she is the one who comforts Cam, who sobs, "I was too tired to come out. I just changed my mind."

The beer in Cécile's hand felt so cold, she shivered. She wondered, If Cam had been working with him, could he have saved Ti-Jean? Why wasn't he where he was supposed to be?

She heard her name.

“Well, Cécile, what do you think is in that room?” Reina was asking her.

“What?”

“The locked room at *la maison des vieilles filles*. If it’s not some big secret, then why is it locked?” Reina asked.

Feeling suddenly sober and cold, Cécile said, “I don’t know.”

## Chapter 10

### The Old Maids' House

From the window in her bathroom, Fleurette could see the store van parked in the driveway. Across the street, the *Magasin Général* parking lot was full of cars. A group of people stood near the door, talking. No one waiting for gas. Ghyslain and her father were nowhere in sight. Her mouth was dry. She smiled and turned on the shower.

When she had walked into their house that morning, Ghyslain had been waiting for her on the sofa, cup of coffee in hand, a look of amazement on his face. She'd stood by the door for a moment, waiting for him to ask where she'd been, then, when he hadn't, she had walked through the living-room to the stairs. She'd made it halfway up before he spoke.

"I was worried," he'd said.

"Right," she'd replied, turning on the step to face him.

"What do we do?" he'd asked, putting his cup down on the coffee table. His hair was uncombed and he hadn't shaved. He looked, Fleurette thought, younger than he had in a long time. She pushed her hand into her pocket and touched the key Estelle had given her the night before, to *la maison des vieilles filles*. She turned it between her fingers. "We could go talk to Père Côté," he added, tentatively.

"I'll get back to you," she'd told him, loving the hard edge in her voice.

She'd turned to go up the stairs and shot down, "By the way, I won't be going to work today. Someone else will have to go to the bank."

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After a shower and a quick breakfast, Fleurette left the house again, this time by the back door, leaving the van in evidence in the driveway. If Ghyslain or her father glanced at the driveway, they would think she was home. There was a door in the fence of their back yard that led to the *rue du Couvent*. She followed the quiet street to the highway and walked to the lodge.

Cécile, still dressed in her flannel pyjamas opened the door. The cabin smelled of coffee and, slightly, of sour beer. Some of the bottles from the night before were standing on the kitchen table with some books and the case of empties was next to the door. Cécile stood aside to let her in. "You want some coffee?" she asked.

"Great," Fleurette said cheerfully. Cécile poured then returned to her seat at the table in front of the pile of books. She closed the book on the top of the pile and pulled her fingers through her hair. "Did you sleep okay last night?" she asked Fleurette.

"Oh yeah," Fleurette smiled. "That couch was a dream. I sank into it and slept like a baby. Thanks for letting me crash here."

She took a sip of her coffee. Too hot. She watched Cécile tip her cup back and drain it. Fleurette heard a flock of Canada geese. She listened quietly to see if she would hear shots. After a few moments of silence, she said, "Um... I don't know if you're busy today, but I was wondering..." She tried to sound casual. "Do you want to come with me to look at *la maison des vieilles filles*?"

"Really? How come?" Cécile asked, turning.

"Just curious. I have the key, remember? Maybe we can find the key to that locked room."

"Right now?" Cécile stood and put her cup in the sink. "I do have cleaning to do at the lodge, but I guess it doesn't matter when I do it."

Fleurette said tentatively, "I thought I could probably get in there without Ghyslain noticing this morning."

"You don't want Ghyslain to know?" she asked.

Fleurette coloured as she replied, "I didn't tell him where I slept last night and he's..."

Cécile turned. When Fleurette remained silent, she asked her, "Where does he think you were?"

"I don't think it matters where. It just matters that I didn't come home."

They walked around the town. They headed down the point and past the boat launch. From there, they took the path that led around the back of the hall to the church, then walked the short distance on the *rue de l'Église* to the house. As they walked up the porch quickly, Fleurette glanced over her shoulder. No one in the street, but in the house directly across, she could see Alma St-Amant staring at them from her kitchen window.

*"Elle mange le p'tit chassiss comme d'habitude,"* she muttered.

"What?" Cécile asked, turning to look.

"Alma St-Amant," Fleurette replied, nodding her head in Alma's direction. "She sits at her kitchen window looking at everything going on. She's a big gossip... Well, there's nothing we can do about it."

Fleurette turned the key in the lock and opened the door. It smelled as she remembered it from her piano lessons as a child, like floor polish and soap, with a



slightly perfumed air that could have been flowers, and that reminded her of a type of tea they sold in the store. The floor in the entrance was made from wide, varnished planks of wood. An old-fashioned floor, like her grandmother Sarrazin used to have, a farmhouse floor.

The gleaming plank floor extended into the parlour on the right, which was where Fleurette had taken her piano lessons as a child. The living-room was on the left and the kitchen straight ahead. With Cécile right behind her, Fleurette walked past the parlour, glancing at the upright piano and the table with chairs where, until last week, children still waited, doing homework or reading, for their lesson with Mlle Denis.

She whispered to Cécile, "I used to have piano lessons in here. I've never been in beyond this room... I don't know why I'm whispering." She giggled, then added, "Keep your eyes opened for a key ring of some sort that will let us into the locked room."

The living-room also reminded Fleurette of her *Grand-mère* Sarrazin's house, with its heavy oak furniture and dark-panelled walls. The television was in the corner, opposite a large window that looked out toward the church, but the window was heavily draped with *plein-jours*—sheer curtains. On the coffee-table in front of the sofa, there were magazines and a newspaper, neatly folded, perhaps unread. There was a pile of newspapers beside the sofa stacked messily in a wicker basket. The room had an air of privacy, of intimacy disrupted.

Fleurette walked across the room to see the date on the unread newspaper. Saturday. She had given Rosa Lefebvre that newspaper herself. She must have, though she didn't particularly remember. She briefly wondered what would happen if she touched it. Would time rush back to the last time she had touched it, and bring Rosa Lefebvre back too?

But, if she comes back... she thought, then stopped herself from completing the thought, feeling selfish. She bent over and rubbed her finger lightly over the headline. Nothing happened.

Of course not, *niaiseuse!* she told herself.

She turned to Cécile who was standing with her back to Fleurette looking at a large bookcase that took up the whole wall between the living-room and the hallway in a way that made it invisible from the hallway. The bookcase was built into the wall and its shelves went up to the ceiling. Every shelf was covered with books.

"There must be a thousand," Cécile said. "Who read all this?"

"I have no idea," Fleurette replied. "Maybe they both read. Although, I do remember seeing Rosa Lefebvre sitting in the back yard with a book on summer days. And she got the newspaper everyday. Mlle Denis was always busy. She was always running around, going somewhere in a hurry, or fixing things, gardening, cleaning..."

"You know, I spent most of my life so close to this place. From my front door, I can see most of the house, the part that's not hidden behind the store. And the store is probably only thirty yards from here and I had no idea that there was a library like this here. I had no idea that anyone here would own these books."

Cécile pulled a book from a shelf and looked at it. Fleurette recognized the author's name; it was a popular Quebecois author whose books sold at the store, but she was sure she had never sold a book to either Mlle Denis or Rosa Lefebvre. Some of the other books on the shelves were paperbacks that looked recent, others were older with yellowed spines. Most of the books had French titles.

Fleurette walked into the kitchen. After a few minutes, she heard Cécile put down her book and follow her. The kitchen was bright and clean, but somewhat bare,

except for a small bookcase that stood in one corner next to the table. The shelves were filled with books. More books had been laid on top of the neatly arranged rows of books. Otherwise, the room was immaculate. In Fleurette's own house, the kitchen always showed signs of activity: a dirty dish or cups left lying in the sink, bills stuck to the refrigerator, telephone messages on the kitchen table, baskets of clean laundry waiting to be folded. Here, the refrigerator was bare and sparkling, the sink and the counters were wiped clean, the table was bare. The only thing out of place was a grey cardigan hanging on the polished wood banister leading up to the second floor.

Cécile said, "This doesn't look like the kitchen of someone who died suddenly. The living-room looks more surprised."

"Well, Estelle cleaned up here. And, maybe Mlle Denis had tidied up before that. My father told me yesterday that she has taken a room at a motel in Sturgeon Falls. She must have come back here to get her things. Maybe she cleaned up then.

Cécile looked perplexed, "Why didn't she just stay here?"

Fleurette blushed, "The house belonged to Rosa Lefebvre and she left it to someone else in her will."

"That must have been a shock," Cécile said carefully, moving toward the stairs. She climbed, then paused, touched the grey cardigan. She looked at Fleurette, "Who inherited the house?"

Fleurette's face was flaming. "My husband."

At the top of the stairs the corridor, carpeted in wine, was flanked at the front and the back by a window looking out over the street, and another looking out over the back yard, the vegetable garden, and the clothes line. Fleurette remembered seeing,

once, a row of underpants on that clothesline. She had stared from the window in the employee bathroom in the back of the store, then looked away, thinking she had no right to look at other people's underwear. But she'd never forgotten the image. Over the years, it had often flickered in, then out. Two sizes of women's underwear sharing the same clothespin in the corners. Some were flowered and some were beige, but they were obviously different sizes. Rosa was such a small woman. There had been pantyhose too. They had hung the underwear closest to the house where, Fleurette supposed, they thought no one could see them. But you could see their entire backyard from the bathroom window of the store; perhaps they had not thought of that. She thought, Perhaps they meant for me to see.

She shook her head and turned to Cécile, "Let's look in the bedrooms."

The first room, with a window looking over the street, was immaculate. Its double bed was neatly made, pillows carefully tucked under a blue bedspread with a white flower pattern. On a chest of drawers, there was an old-fashioned mirror and brush set, gold with black silhouettes of a man with a ribboned tail of hair and a woman in a hoopskirt and bonnet. She sat, one leg extended, the other folded back, on a swing that Fleurette imagined must have hung from a tree in a manicured garden. The man stood behind her with his arms extended, almost touching her shoulders. The brush was bristle-side down. On the dresser there was also a picture frame with a black and white wedding photo, showing a small woman in a white dress with a tall, dashing man. Rosa. She was beautiful.

On the bedside table, there was a Bible, a newspaper, and a pair of reading glasses beside a porcelain lamp. Next to it, the closet door stood half-opened, and they could see the shadowy forms of clothing hanging and, on the floor, stacks of books.

Cécile came to stand beside Fleurette. Fleurette could hear Cécile's breath, in out in out. The sound was loud and made her self-conscious of her own. What if her own breathing was not so regular, so calm? Fleurette walked out into the corridor.

Mlle Denis's room was almost directly across the hallway from Mme Lefebvre. Fleurette glanced at it from the corridor, but didn't want to go in. She could convince herself that looking at Rosa's things was an act of remembering, but looking at the possessions of Adèle Denis, who was still alive, dispossessed somewhere in Sturgeon Falls, and, as her father had put it, "spitting mad," was a travesty.

Cécile joined Fleurette in the corridor and said, "Wow, what a mess!" In Mlle Denis's room, everything was cluttered and showed signs of hasty packing. The bed was unmade, there were clothes on it, dresses, underwear.

"Looks like she thought she was going for a while, but not forever," Cécile added.

Amidst the clothes on the bed, there was a small suitcase nested inside a much larger, matching one. The medium one was missing. The room had been emptied of everything personal. There were no pictures on the walls, no photographs, nothing at all on the dresser and on the bedside table, only a lamp that matched the one in Rosa's room.

Cécile stepped into the room and commented, "There are nails and hooks on the walls. Something's been taken down."

Fleurette put her hand on Cécile's shoulder, stopped her, "I don't think we should look at her stuff. I feel like a Peeping Tom."

The door across from the bathroom was closed. They tried the doorknob. It was locked, though not with an old fashioned *clé anglaise* lock, as she had imagined. She

had somehow thought that if they didn't find the key, she could still look through the keyhole or try to pick it with something. But the lock was shiny and new. It resembled the lock on the front door of her house.

Cécile crouched down to look at it, and rattled the door. She looked up and declared, "Solid. You need the key. Unless you want to break the door down with an axe."

At night, *les Feux Follets Motor Hotel*, whose roof, doors and windows were framed year-round in blinking Christmas lights, was a luminous landmark, but in daylight, it was an unremarkable bungalow motel. Fleurette stopped the van in front of the long narrow motel with its row of picture windows looking out onto the parking lot. She switched off the motor and sat in silence for a moment. There were two other cars parked in front of the motel. Adèle Denis's car was parked in front of the only window that had its curtains open.

She found herself trembling from a remembered anticipation. She and Ghyslain used to come here before they were married, to get away from her father. She thought now that the thrill had not been so much from romance, nor even sex, but from deceiving her father. She looked at herself in the rear view mirror. Her hair was a bit dishevelled from driving with the window partly open, but her face was still carefully made up. She told herself her face still looked young, maybe twenty-five rather than thirty, but she knew that her body betrayed her. She had the body of a woman who has borne a brood of children: wide, thick hips, rounded buttocks, rounded belly, large breasts.

After Fleurette had knocked on the door of Room 4, the muted sound of a television stopped, then Adèle Denis's face appeared in the window. A moment later, the door opened. Adèle smiled wanly, and spoke up before Fleurette could say anything. "*Ben bonjour ma fille!* Come in. Come in."

When she had shut the door, Adèle Denis leaned in to hug Fleurette, pressed her papery cheek against Fleurette's. Awkward, she pulled away quickly, sure that in all the years they had known each other, Mlle Denis and she had never touched, except perhaps hands brushing across a checkout counter. But now, Mlle Denis's flowery smell clung to her. It was so like her house that Fleurette, remembering how she had gone through her house just that morning, guiltily squeezed the older woman's hand and said, "I came to see how you are doing."

If Adèle Denis found this premise for her visit suspicious, she did not acknowledge it. She said, "Oh, I'm OK. Not too sure what to do with myself, but we can only move forward in this life, you know. Are you staying? Sit down." She pointed to a single upholstered chair in a corner, next to a small round table with remnants of a take-out dinner on it. The air in the room was close and stale, smelled of institutional roast beef, or perhaps chicken, blended with the odour of coffee.

The smell, along with Fleurette's sudden awareness of her empty stomach reminded her of a friend's wedding supper, which she had attended while she was pregnant. Sylvie Legault. She'd been waiting to congratulate the bride in the reception line, feeling the smell of the banquet supper clawing at her throat and making her head spin. The line had been moving very slowly, but she had clenched her teeth, held it together. When she'd finally arrived at Sylvie, and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek, the smell of her perfume mingled with sweat had made Fleurette's controlled posture

unravel. She'd made an audible gagging sound and run toward the ladies room to be sick. She hadn't quite made it. Of course, everyone had seen this and speculated on her condition, which Fleurette had considered unlucky since she and Ghyslain had decided not to announce the pregnancy until they were safely into the fourth month. Sylvie Legault had been angry at Fleurette, and had avoided coming to the store for months, until Fleurette had lost her baby.

When Fleurette made no move toward the chair, Adèle Denis said, "I'm sorry. I've left all this garbage out. My lunch." With a swift movement, she collected the foam tray and cup, the plastic cutlery. Fleurette picked up a napkin that had floated onto a chair, then sat down.

The room was dim, though the curtains were partly open, and Fleurette looked around while Mlle Denis sat at the foot of the room's neatly made up double-bed. Reclining against one of the pillows, as though taking a nap, was a small plastic statuette of *la Sainte Vierge*.

Fleurette pulled the chair away from the table, a bit closer to the bed, into a position that seemed more intimate and friendly. From this position, she could see out the window. A single leaf fluttered past the glass. While Fleurette was deciding what to say, she remembered she had brought something for Mlle Denis. She reached into her purse. "*Oh. J'veus ai emmené quelque chose.*" She pulled out a large bar of chocolate with nuts and held it out to her.

Mlle Denis looked at the chocolate without taking it. Hands on her knees, the old woman's eyes blazed. Fleurette was suddenly shocked that she had dared to do this, to



bring the kind of chocolate that Rosa Lefebvre had bought every day when she had no idea what her action would mean to Adèle Denis.

Fleurette stammered, "Every day, Mme Lefebvre came into the store and bought a chocolate bar with nuts. I thought if she liked them so much, it might give you a happy memory of her."

The old woman sighed and reached for the chocolate. She said nothing, just held it in her hands, turning it over.

Fleurette changed the subject. "So, how do you like this place?"

"*C'est pas chez nous,*" she said sharply, as though reprimanding Fleurette, who was, after all, Ghyslain's wife and he was now owner of Mlle Denis' home.

"I guess that's what I came to talk to you about," Fleurette said tentatively.

"*Ma maison?*" Adèle Denis's voice was suddenly hopeful.

Fleurette dropped her eyes. "Ghyslain says you don't have enough money to buy the house from him," she said. She thought, *Ast'heure!* There, I've said it.

"He won't give it to me," Adèle Denis said, nodding. "I don't blame him. People don't just go around giving things away for nothing, and I don't have anything that's worth anything to him. "

Fleurette waited a moment, took a breath, and said, "I've been in the house."

Mlle Denis looked suddenly fierce, protective, angry. "Why?"

"Ghyslain said you didn't have the money to buy it from him..."

"Yes. You said that already," she interrupted drily.

"I want to buy the house," Fleurette said suddenly. Before she'd said it out loud, Fleurette hadn't believed it was even possible, but now that she had heard it in her own voice, she believed it, knew it was right.

Mlle Denis frowned, "You want to buy the house from your own husband?"

"I'm leaving him," Fleurette said, feeling breathless, liking the way the words sounded. She sounded so brave and firm. She coloured with emotion.

Adèle Denis stood, walked around the bed, still holding the chocolate bar in her hand. She placed it carefully on the bedside table, which was built into the wall, and remained silent, her back to Fleurette. Fleurette fidgeted in her chair.

After a moment, Adèle Denis turned to face her and said, "She bought them for me every day... Well, almost." With a sigh, she sat on the other side of the bed and asked gently, "You're going to live in the house?"

"Yes."

"Alone?" she asked with a wry smile.

Fleurette hesitated, "Yes, I think so."

"Well, I'll admit I'd rather have you owning it than your husband... than Ghyslain."

Fleurette thought about how unhappy she would be if she knew Ghyslain's plan to tear it down to expand the store.

Mlle Denis considered her coldly. "You have the money to buy it from him?"

Fleurette thought of her father and said, "Yes."

"I see I don't have much choice in the matter. Apparently I wasn't wanted in that house. I will need to come pack my things. I think you'll agree that it's my right to do that." She seemed to hesitate for a moment, then asked, "Why did you come to tell me this?" Then added with a bitter voice, "Surely you don't want my blessing."

Fleurette coloured. "I was wondering about the room upstairs."

“Ah.” Mlle Denis smiled bitterly. “The key. You want the key that unlocks all the secrets.”

Fleurette didn’t respond.

Mlle Denis turned away and said quickly, “I don’t have it. I don’t know where it is. It was Rosa’s room and I’ve never had access to it.”

## Chapter 11 In the Attic

The trap door opened with a groan. Père Côté hoisted himself up through the hatch. He could feel the thick dust under her palms. He'd remembered that it was dirty up here but had been enthusiastic about looking through the church's attic anyway. Now he had a flash of doubt. He sat on the edge of the entrance to the attic with his legs dangling and rubbed his hands to brush off the dust. Good thing he'd worn jeans, he thought. He looked around. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the partial light in the room that was lit only by a small window in the east wall.

The attic was much smaller than he'd remembered but, as he looked around, he realized that only the sacristy had an attic; the church itself was open to the ceiling. He ought to have remembered that, after the leaks in the roof that he'd suffered last spring, rain coming in during the service, drip drip drip into a series of buckets in the chancel, in the aisles, and in the loft. He'd had a patch job done, but he really hoped that with the centennial celebrations, he could raise enough money to have the thing re-roofed completely. He dreamed of a spectacular red roof, like the one the parish in Verner got.

And that's why I'm here, he said to himself with resolve. His plans for a centennial play had died with Ti-Jean Desrosiers and, on Sunday, he'd lost Rosa Lefebvre, who'd been one of his most active volunteers. Now, he was looking for historical memorabilia that could be used for an auction or, at worst, he thought, some sort of exhibit.

There were piles everywhere. When he'd first come to the parish of Sainte-Catherine-d'Alexandrie, in October of 1994, this was where he'd found the Christmas decorations. He had taken what he'd needed and never returned it to the

attic. Instead, he'd cleared out a cupboard in the sacristy and kept his decorating supplies in there. He thought, Well, the dust hasn't miraculously gone away since I was here last.

He walked across the room. Under his weight, the wooden planks creaked and moaned. He looked for signs of water damage, but it seemed that the roof had remained watertight in this corner of the building. He walked between cardboard boxes, wooden crates, old furniture and a pile of clothing. He stepped closer, wrinkling his nose and kicked at the clothing with the toe of his sneaker. Cassocks of various sizes, all black, probably used by choir boys before the Synod of '62. After that, choir boys had worn white. The clothes smelled like rot. The thought of organizing volunteers to clean this place up occurred to him, but he quickly dismissed it. There were so many other things to organize, and he had to struggle to do all of them. He hated delegating. He much preferred it when there were volunteers, and in this parish, there never were.

He rifled through some crates half-heartedly, daunted by the dust and the musty odours, and by the fact that he didn't quite know what he was looking for. He found a pile of missals from the 1960's, some old church furniture, some prie-dieux, the door from a tabernacle, broken off its hinges, its brass surface tarnished to a dull, dark brown, and some cardboard decorations from recent liturgical years, made with various degrees of limited inspiration, he thought. There were bundles of old church bulletins, but none dating back further than the 1980's, some ledger books from the 1950's, containing financial information that he hoped might make interesting reading for someone. An old-fashioned radio attracted his attention for a moment: wooden, with two large knobs, the grille cloth still intact. It probably didn't work, but it certainly had an antique look about it. He placed it near the exit and returned to his search.

For the most part, he ignored the cardboard boxes, reasoning that the oldest stuff would not be packed in cardboard, but rather in the older, wooden grocery boxes. Some of the crates themselves were stamped with brand names of products from the past and might attract some buyers. Several held the imprint of soft drink labels: Coca-Cola, Wilson's Ginger Ale. These, he remembered seeing in his childhood in the early sixties. But other brand names were more obscure, and the plain style of lettering in which they were rendered suggested a greater age, perhaps even dating back to the early part of the century. Père Côté grew excited when he saw three square pine boxes with the name of a brand of butter printed on the side in a semicircle. These reminded him of butter boxes he'd seen in a television movie. He was sure others would make the connection and want to buy them.

After looking in the crates, it occurred to Père Côté that the attic had most likely been cleaned out many times before, and that things might have been shuffled around. In a medium-sized wooden crate with a stencil on the side that said *Seneca Falls Mfg Co 1904*, he found some slightly mildewed textbooks that had been printed in the 1950's. He decided to examine the contents of the cardboard boxes in the hopes of finding more interesting objects. It didn't take long for his hunch to be borne out. In the first cardboard box that he opened up, he found piles of black-and-white photographs. He picked one up and examined it. The image had that spectral quality of early photography. One side of the photo was washed out with light; the woman who stood near the edge of the photo seemed to be almost transparent, like she was materializing, or dematerializing. The other two women in the photo were clear. They stood, arms linked, smiling, standing in their high-heeled shoes in the mud. By the cut of their dresses and by their hairstyles, he guessed the photo was from somewhere around the

1920's. He rifled through the photos quickly and saw that they were all from that period, perhaps even before. "Bingo," he said softly.

More rifling in the cardboard boxes yielded a box camera that possibly could have taken all the photos he'd found earlier, a box full of child-sized mittens and slippers, never worn—they smelled unfresh, but they could be washed and sold, he reasoned—an exquisite porcelain nativity doll of baby Jesus, complete with a slightly deformed wire halo. He decided he would use this in the *crèche* at Christmas and placed it near the trapdoor along with the other things he was salvaging.

He decided to give up the search for now. The late afternoon light had become grey and flat, and his eyes had to strain to see in the darker corners. Were those paintings leaned up against the wall? He would come up tomorrow morning, and bring some sort of light, he thought. He felt gritty and the smell was beginning to give him a headache, but he felt otherwise hopeful that he could find materials to help his fundraising efforts up here. He thought about how good a hot shower would feel and turned to leave. But the number 1898 caught his eye. It was written in black marker, in a small but clear hand, on the side of an old cardboard box that was buried under two other cardboard boxes. His curiosity was piqued and he removed the boxes on the top.

The old box contained only a book and a small, faded painting of a priest. The priest stood knee-deep in snow in his black *soutane* and a fur coat. His arms were crossed in front of him and his hands were hidden in his sleeves. He was smiling: not an austere or even a dignified smile, but an almost silly grin. Père Côté wondered how long this person had stood like that, waiting for the artist to capture him. The priest in the picture seemed surrounded by luminescence. Behind him, the snow extended back to a dark line of trees. The painting was unsigned. Côté turned it over and held it up closer

to his face. In a faint hand, he read, 1898. Excited, he realized that the person in the painting must be Michel Fex. Père Côté knew Fex's story from the plaque erected near the grotto. Fex was the Jesuit who first took charge of the parish and began the building of the church. Unfortunately, he hadn't lived to see the completion of the building, but had passed away peacefully in his sleep.

From the box, Père Côté picked up the slim, leather-bound book, and leafed through it. The stitched spine was deformed in a way that suggested that some sections of the book had been torn out. The last portion of the book—two thirds of it—was blank. At the beginning, were pages of hand-written script. He opened to one page and squinted to decipher the writing. The handwriting was terrible, irregular and inelegant, like the handwriting of someone with a shaking hand. It took him a moment to realize that it was a journal, with entries headed by a date. He brought the book closer to his face and smelled the dry, dusty smell of old paper. July 12, 1898. Père Côté flipped quickly to the front of the book. On the front page, an inscription read, *Journal intime 1897 Père Michel Fex, s.j.* That was the year before the church was built. This must be, he thought with mounting excitement, an account of the beginnings of the parish.

Père Côté whistled under his breath. If so, a printed version of this might sell not only in the village here, but might have a broader historical interest. He sat with his legs dangling from the open trap door. Leaning forward, holding the book in the light coming up from the sacristy, he read.

The book described the priest's arrival in Pointe-Mouillée. Written in a formal, European French, it contained exactly what Père Côté expected, details about the original settlement here, about the building of the church. He read on; it seemed that the old priest was impatient to have the church built and was meeting with some



opposition. There was a lot of talk about the glory of God and the temptation of the devil, which was not surprising. But, as he read on, Côté began encountering some details that were irregular. Frowning, he flipped through the book, looking for more of these odd moments in the journal.

A half-hour later, he had scanned quickly through the journal. He felt agitated, like he'd had too much strong coffee. He tucked the book in his pocket and lowered himself quickly through the trap and swung down the ladder. In the sacristy, he looked around, alarmed and distracted, searching for a place to put it, his mind reeling from what he'd just read. Outside the window, the last of the late afternoon light had gone, and through the glass, he saw only black. He was thinking about the library at the University of Sudbury. There were books he wanted to consult.

He sighed. He would have to make a decision on his own. He would pray, though reading was his favourite method of meditation. When he read and arrived at an answer, he always felt a certainty that the answer had come from without. With prayer, he had never learned to trust the solutions that suggested themselves to him. It was too difficult to separate the True from the many voices and urges that clamoured in his brain.

Still holding the book, he walked through the door that led into the darkened church, lit only by votive candles on either side of the altar. The sacristy door swung shut behind him. In a pew bathed by the flickering red and golden glow of the votives, he sat, eyes closed. After a long time, when the silence in the church grew oppressive, he got up and walked into the sacristy's glaring light. There, he pushed the book deep into the garbage bin.

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Early the next morning, while Estelle Caron was doing her usual cleaning of the church and the presbytery, she came across the book. She had been thinking about Cam, who'd been in a terrible temper that morning. He hadn't wanted to stay home with the babies, though he usually did on Wednesdays, so she could clean the church. It was regular work, and well paid. He'd stormed around the house slamming things around while she'd gotten ready, saying he wanted to go hunting in the morning, not the afternoon. That wasn't like Cam, Estelle thought, and felt a wave of weariness. She felt too tired to try to figure it out, figure him out, and irritable that she should have to.

She'd vacuumed around the small room, distracted, the vacuum cleaner brush hitting roughly against the walls, the cupboards. When she'd done, she turned around and accidentally knocked over the thrash. Cursing, she went to get a garbage bag to pick up the mess. She picked up the spilled can, and that's when the small, leather-bound book tumbled out from beneath a mess of papers and wrappers, and even a slimy banana peel.

Estelle looked at the book with annoyance; it was distracting her from her thoughts. However, after the annoyance passed, she was curious. What kind of book would the priest throw away?

She picked it up. The book was obviously old. It smelled a little musty, but that wasn't surprising since it was in the garbage. She opened the cover and saw on the overleaf, *Journal intime 1897 Père Michel Fex, s.j.* Like everyone in Pointe-Mouillée, she knew that Père Fex was the founder of the parish, the one who'd built the church.

Why was it thrown out then? she wondered. She shoved the book in the back pocket of her jeans and went back to cleaning, deciding that even though Cam's

behaviour showed there was something bothering him, she knew it would pass.

Whatever it was. It always did.

## Chapter 12

### Cam

Cam's booted foot stepped with care on the damp leaves, testing the ground for branches that would crack under his weight. He shifted forward. Silence. Only the muted sinking of his foot. The ground in the forest, still wet from the previous week's rain, gleamed with slick browns and muted yellows in the morning sunlight. There were broken branches scattered across the forest floor, more evidence of the violence of the storm that had passed through.

He held the stock of *sa vingt-deux* in his right hand, the barrel resting lightly on his shoulder, soldier-fashion. He preferred the twenty-two calibre rifle for hunting grouse because it required greater marksmanship, and because the old Browning had belonged to his grandfather and he liked the soft, worn feeling of the wooden stock. Besides, this way he didn't have to pick out a load of buckshot from a dead bird. Cam inhaled deeply that particular autumn mix of crisp, clean air and moss, musty, rotting leaves. The smell reminded him of other hunting trips with his father, his brothers and now, sometimes, his children. And his friends. Ti-Jean. Since Cécile returned to Pointe-Mouillée, he found himself thinking about Ti-Jean more often. That, and Rosa Lefebvre's death. Ti-Jean chasing him.

His eyes darted left to right, sweeping the ground systematically, then moving upward into the canopy of leaves, then back to the ground again. His ears were like open palms, like dogs' ears perked when they are cautious. They didn't register the continuous sound of wind and birds, nor even the occasional crow or scurrying of squirrels and chipmunks under the leaves, but when a branch suddenly fell, he held his breath for a moment, held his weight balanced in mid-stride. In the vacuum silence of

no breathing, he heard his heart, then the whirring of a grouse. That way. Not far. He shifted his weight, changed directions, lowered the barrel of his rifle into his left hand, positioned his finger near the trigger.

He is seven years old. Sweaty-palmed, he watches his father carefully placing a glass soda bottle on a tree stump at the edge of the farm.

That morning, without looking up from the couch where he sat carefully cleaning his rifle, his father mumbled, "Time you learned how to hunt."

Now, his father paces back to Cam and places a *vingt-deux* into his hands.

"Shoot," he says.

The weight of the gun in his hands, the wooden stock still warm where his father held it. The bottle seems impossibly far, small. The cold air carries a faint smell of smoke. He holds his breath and pulls the trigger.

He and his father had hunted grouse that fall, and the following years until his father had died. Later, when Cam had taken up deer hunting, with Ti-Jean and their friends, it had been exciting and furious. He'd felt his heart pounding when he spotted prey, elation like a rush of cool air when it fell, and the swell of pride at his buddies' grins. But it was different with grouse hunting. He liked to go grouse hunting alone. The rich calm order of the forest gave him a feeling that reminded him of walking into church at Easter. Awe. Yeah, that's what he would call it. Awe.

Sometimes when he walked and walked and found no birds he would get home and his kids would run up and say, "*Papa, Papa*, did you get anything?"

When he said no, they would laugh.

Then he would say, "There aren't as many birds as there were when I was a boy. Back then, we would go out and be sure to come home with something, enough for your grandmother to make a good *ragoût*. But now, it's not the same. Too many hunters."

He smiled as they laughed at him, all of them happy in the repetition, happy in the security of repetition, knowing somehow that they were all safe as long as the stories remained the same.

A slight tremor on the periphery of his sense, Cam wasn't sure if it was a sound, a movement, or both. He spotted the grouse. Though it was easily thirty feet away, Cam could see its crest raised in alarm. It sat immobile in the shadow of a tree, half sunk in dead leaves, trusting its speckled brown and white plumage to provide camouflage. But it was too late, Cam had seen it. He knew it wouldn't move.

In one deft movement, he swung his shotgun up with his right hand, disabling the safety with his thumb, index finger sliding expertly into place on the trigger while the left hand slid down the cool hardness of the barrel, supporting it. He braced the stock against his shoulder. His eye looked down the length of the gun, traced a line to the bird's nest, calculated how the bullet would go through the bird and hit the tree trunk. His index finger squeezed, tracing the completion of that line back toward his own body. It seemed his finger was still tracing the line back when he saw the bird fall. Only then did he hear the ring of the rifle, like a tear in the fabric of sound of the forest, a sound like rock ringing, the echo reverberated down to the soles of his boots, then quiet. He exhaled.

He inhaled cool air with something like a smile. Then he heard the frantic sound of wings beating in the leaves and his stomach knotted up. He hoped the grouse would not be able to fly away. If it did, he might spend hours looking for it in the dense carpet

of leaves and not find it again. He moved quickly forward toward the sound, realizing as he did that the continuation of the sound meant that the bird was too wounded to fly. He found it under the tree, flapping its wings.

As he reached down, he smelled blood and metal. He grabbed its feet, intending to swing it against the tree trunk, to break its neck. Finish it off. It squirmed and swung like a pendulum from his hands. He heard a quick breath, a wheezing, frightened sound and, for a moment, didn't realize the sound had come from him.

*"Assomme-la."* Do it, he said to himself.

The black glassy eye of *la perdrix* looked at him with reproach. It reminded him of Cécile's dark, fringed eyes, her troubling gaze.

A voice in his mind, remembered, "Forgive them. They know not what they do." The blood pounded in his temples. Before he could stop it, the memory of Ti-Jean's death. He had been heading toward the boathouse, swinging the beam of flashlight over the ground. Cécile was behind him, "Cam? Cam? Cam?" He had turned and saw her, framed in the light spilling from the house's open front door, a pink blanket wrapped around her shoulders, not following him. He hadn't known if she was calling him back or looking for him. He'd kept going toward the boathouse, toward a dark shape that, even from that distance, he could see was all wrong. Silhouetted against the moonlit water, there was a boat half on, half off its trestle. The dark angular shape reminded him of a bear standing on its hind legs.

The bouncing beam of light found Ti-Jean under the boat, as though the boat were feeding off him. Ti-Jean lay on his back, his head turned to the side, eyes open, looking at Cam. For a shattering instant, Cam thought Ti-Jean was awake, grinning at him, waiting for Cam to get him out from under the boat. As he drew nearer, he saw the

dried blood on his chin and cheek, and his eyes. Ti-Jean's eyes, but with no spark of life in them. Dead matter. Meat.

Cam put the bird down, squatting next to it, one knee resting on the ground, wetness seeping through his jeans. He placed his hands on its warm quivering feathers where its heart still beat. The bird's head twitched from side to side. Cam strained to remember the instructions, willing the wound to close itself up, willing the bird back to life.

"But I don't know how to do it," he protests.

"It's a gift. I'll give it to you," his mother replies, leading him into her bedroom. Cam has not been in his mother's bedroom in years. The room is dim. Anne-Marie Caron always keeps the drapes closed, to keep the heat out, to keep the cold out. The air smells stale, like perfume and sleep, an intimate smell that reminds Cam of the smell of his mother's skin and makes him feel both uncomfortable and inexplicably sentimental. His mother's double bed is covered with a synthetic duvet printed with large roses. On the night stand is a photograph of Cam's father proudly holding up a string of fish. There are also wedding photographs of all six of Cam's brothers and sisters as well as portraits of his son, his nephews and nieces. On the wall, there is a faded colour family photograph taken when Cam was six or seven. His teeth are huge, out of proportion for his small face. Next to it, a large wooden crucifix that had belonged to Cam's grandmother, an image of *la Sainte Vierge*, and a wood-framed mirror with an oversized rosary hanging from the corner. There are piles of books from the library on the floor and on his mother's night stand. On the wall is the large bookcase filled with piles of paper, all filled, he imagines, with his mother's spidery script, her notes on their



genealogy, recipes, old stories. Everything should be familiar in this room, he thinks, but time has made it strange.

His mother closes the door behind them. Cam wonders what it's like to be his mother, to lie here alone and look at these photographs of her family, husband, dead, her children moved out. Is she ever lonely, he wonders, or is she just relieved to be alone, quiet, finished with the work of raising a family?

Perhaps guessing what he is thinking, she says, "This is the place where I come to think about all my memories... and to read my stories." She smiles and waves her hand in the direction of the photographs, or perhaps the books. "*Tous mes amours.*"

"Now sit," she tells him and perches on the edge of her bed, hands in her lap. Her feet barely reach the floor and she looks like a little girl. She pats the bed next to her.

Awkward, he sits on the bed, feels the mattress shift under him and his mother lean in closer to him. He is self-conscious, like on New Year's Day when, on his knees in the living-room, he waits for his mother, who has taken over the role from her late husband, to give the family the traditional, solemn *bénédiction*. With his mother standing above them calling down God himself in a blessing for her children, Cam is always disturbed by her power, no longer just his everyday mother. The first New Year after Cam's son was born, his mother asked him if he had blessed his wife and son. He had been embarrassed at the thought. It had not even occurred to him that he could. He'd imagined Estelle kneeling before him, holding their son, and burst out laughing.

His mother takes his hands in hers and, lowering her voice, tells him the secret to stanching blood.

Afterward, he does not believe it will work. No, he does not believe it can work for him the way it does for his mother.

The bird's head stopped twitching and came to a stop, resting on the ground.

He stayed next to it, his hands on the bloody feathers even after he had stopped feeling the heartbeat, stopped hearing the laboured breathing, even after his own arm muscles, tired of being extended in that position, had started trembling.

The sun was low in the sky when, at the edge of the forest, by the side of the dirt road, Cam pulled his hunting knife from its sheath on his belt. He watched the feathers and guts fall into the leaves in the ditch, browns and reds mingling, almost disappearing into the autumn leaves. It had been an automatic gesture, but before he had finished cleaning the bird, he knew he could not eat it. Instead of putting the meat into the ice cooler in his truck, he threw the bird down in the ditch and covered its carcass with dried leaves.

He wiped the knife carefully on his jeans, and before putting it back into its sheath, he said, "I'll make it up to you." He was covered with blood.

## Chapter 13

### Barbaro

There was blood all over her hands. Cécile felt her stomach heaving. She disliked this part. Barbaro stood nearby, whining and quivering with trepidation. "All right, all right," she muttered to the dog and threw the fish guts on the ground. She carefully put the bones into a plastic bag and tied it shut. "This part is not for you!" she admonished, placing the bag out of reach on the filleting counter next to the boathouse. Holding the fillets in one hand and her knife in the other, she walked to the dock to rinse off the blood while Barbaro wolfed down the offal.

The surface of the lake was unbroken, calm in the late afternoon light. After cleaning cabins most of the day, she'd dragged the aluminium canoe from the boathouse, and spent a few hours fishing in the mostly quiet company of Barbaro. Now, flushed with fresh air and exercise, she was hungry. The day had been sunny and exceptionally warm. Cécile found it hard to believe that the week before the whole area had been wracked by the spasms of a hundred year storm. She immersed her hands in lake water that felt almost warm enough for swimming. But, she knew, the sun would be down soon and the chill would return. She stood and shook the water from her hands and the fish.

In the cabin, while the bacon was frying, and the beans were cooking, she mixed the flour and spices, and beat the eggs to coat the fish. Nothing was cooking fast enough; she was ravenous.

It was only when she'd heard the sound of an engine drive up to the cabin and come to a stop that she realized that Barbaro wasn't growling. She frowned. The dog hadn't followed her back from the lake. She stepped out onto the porch and watched

Estelle jump from the truck, smiling. Cécile looked around for the dog, but did not hear him. She thought that, if he'd heard the truck, he would have come running and barking. Where was he?

Estelle stopped at the foot of the stairs. "What's wrong? she asked.

Still frowning, Cécile replied, "The dog's not here..." She shook her head. "I'm sure he's just out exploring somewhere... Come in?"

Estelle said, "No thanks, I have to go make supper—yours smells great by the way—I just wanted to give you something." She reached into the back pocket of her jeans and proffered a small leather-bound book.

"What is it?" she asked.

Estelle told Cécile about the book and how she'd come across it. "I put it in my pocket and accidentally took it home with me. I just went to the presbytère to give it back to Père Côté, but he wasn't home. Fleurette, at the magasin, told me he's gone to the library in Sudbury. He won't be back until tomorrow." She grinned. "People and their books!... So driving back, I remembered your pile of books on the table last night, and I thought, since I can't give it back to Père Côté right away, you might like to take a look at it."

"Sure," Cécile said, looking at the date on the front page. 1897. "Thanks Estelle."

Excited, she began reading Fex's journal while she ate her supper. After she'd done eating, the silence began to get to her. She looked up from the book and suddenly remembered Barbaro. She put the book in her sweater pocket and went out onto the front porch again. Outside, it had become dark. Beyond the halo of light emitted by her light on her front porch, all she could see were the dark, indistinct shapes of trees,

buildings. Frightened now, she called for the dog, “Barbaro,” but her voice was small as she remembered another night standing on the porch, calling out into the darkness.

She went back into the cabin and closed the door. A number of possibilities presented themselves to her in a rush: Barbaro dead, Gareau’s grin, her striding into the dark with her rifle and a flashlight, her cowering in her cabin, listening for the sounds of barking, growling, howling, Barbaro returning in an hour, hungry, wet, covered with burrs, Barbaro choked by the bony fish carcass that she remembered forgetting on the filleting counter, Barbaro sprayed by a skunk, hurt by a porcupine, bitten by a rabid fox. She’d read in the *Sudbury Star* that the number of rabid animals handled by the Ministry this year had been high. She walked into her bedroom and took the rifle from the bed. She held it in her hands, felt its cold weight, unfamiliar but reassuring. While she wondered what her next move would be, she thought she heard a sound. Barbaro, she thought.

The sound came again and, this time, she identified it as a soft knock on the door.

She hurried to the kitchen window, still holding the rifle, and moved the curtain aside. She felt her heartbeat in her throat. A dark-haired man stood in the shadows of the porch. He was turned sideways, looking into the dark thicket of maple trees at the end of the porch. She couldn’t see his face. Gareau, she thought. *Loup-garou*.

Without taking his eyes off the thicket, he took a few steps back until he stood in the dim light of the bulb over the door. She frowned. In profile, Fleurette’s husband looked much harder than she had previously thought. From this angle, she could see the shadow under his eye, and the lips that curved slightly downward. His chin jutted

forward, and she supposed that he looked like he was steeling himself for something unpleasant.

She opened the door slightly.

“Your garbage is overturned,” he said, smiling. When he smiled, his lips lost their attitude of discontent and his square jaw jutted forward even more. The combination rearranged his features into a goofy grin.

“Yeah, I’ve got a raccoon problem,” she said, still not opening the door. “Among other things,” she added.

His smile faded and he sighed, and Cécile was struck now at the fatigue that now showed in his face. The expressions on his face shifted easily and quickly, like the sky on a day of sun and cloud. How extraordinary, she thought. He must be an easy man to read.

“I don’t know if you know but I grew up in this house,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“My grandfather built it in 1915.”

“I didn’t think this place was that old,” she said, tentatively. She had thought Ti-Jean’s uncle had been its only owner. She had assumed he’d built it.

“Part of it burned down when I was fifteen. That’s when my father sold it. This *terrain*—this lot—was his farm before Desrosiers turned it into a lodge.”

“I didn’t know anyone had owned this before Ti-Jean’s *Mononc’* Louis.” Cécile shivered. “Come in,” she said decisively. “It’s too cold to stand out on the porch.”

In the kitchen, Ghyslaine stood by the door, staring at the rifle in her hand.

"I was just about to clean it," she said, putting it down on the kitchen counter, and leaning up against it. "Do you want to sit down?" She motioned toward the kitchen table.

Ghyslain looked at the kitchen table and took a step toward it. He ran his fingers on the scratched wooden surface. "My father also sold this table and some chairs—not these—to Louis Desrosiers. We rescued them from the fire. After, he couldn't afford to rebuild the house." Ghyslain sat heavily in one of the chairs then added, "Or maybe he was just too tired. He died the year after we left here."

Cécile remained standing. She wasn't sure what Fleurette's husband wanted here, though she didn't feel threatened by him. Curiously, she felt as though she should be reassuring him. She watched him absentmindedly rub the table and waited for him to speak.

It was as though Cécile's silence had startled him and Ghyslain suddenly recalled why he had come. "I'm sorry to disturb you. It's late..." he began, his voice trailing off. He looked out the window and said quietly, "Today, I saw my wife's car parked at a motel in Sturgeon."

Cécile raised her eyebrows.

He raised his head and his eyes looked directly into Cécile's. His gaze was lit up with a fierce light, a kind of hunger that almost made her take a step backward, but then he spoke. "I want to ask you a favour."

"Me?" she asked.

He smiled mournfully and Cécile thought that the lights in his eyes were tears he was trying to hold back. "When we sold the house, my father and I moved into a flat

over the *Magasin Général*. Before we left, I hid something. In my bedroom. The one at the back." He pointed. "I'd like your permission to see if it's still there."

Cécile hesitated, "There's only one bedroom. I've been cleaning in there. Where..."

He interrupted. "Behind the moulding around the bedroom window."

As she followed him into the bedroom, it was as though he were giving her a tour of a house she couldn't see, but was underneath her own. "Where the bathroom is, my father had his room, but it was bigger than this bathroom. The bathroom was a tight space walled off between the two bedrooms. I guess the bedroom was expanded... Yes. I see. We had a wood stove between the kitchen and the living room, in a space right here. That's where the fire started. Stovepipe fire."

To her, the house had always belonged to Ti-Jean. To him and his family. Now that history had opened itself up beyond them, Ti-Jean and she were on equal footing. Both newcomers to this place, this patch of land, she could belong here as much as he had.

In Cécile's bedroom, Ghyslain walked past the bed and made his way to the room's back wall while she waited in the doorway. He leaned in. His movements were hidden by the breadth of his shoulders, the dark swing of his coat.

When he turned back toward her, he was crying in earnest, holding something like a small coin between his thumb and forefinger. She moved aside. He mumbled, "Thank you," as he passed her. For a moment, he held up a small medallion. In the kitchen, he wiped his eyes with his coat sleeve. He sniffled and said, "Thank you. I won't bother you any longer." He left.



After he'd gone, she wondered what to do about Barbaro. The darkness outside was oppressive. She knew she would not go look for him. She felt her own cowardice settle on her like a weight. She took her rifle and went to the bedroom. When she undressed, she found the priest's journal in her sweater pocket.

**Chapter 14**  
**“Journal intime 1897 Père Michel Fex, s.j.”**

*le 19 mars, 1897*

I finally arrived in Pointe-Mouillée yesterday after a long journey from Montreal, and an even longer journey from Europe, which seems impossibly remote now, though I was there a mere month ago. As the train neared Sturgeon Falls, I reflected on the impossible distance, in terms of culture, of civilization even, between my brother's new *patrie* in Britain, and Northern Ontario. As the train drew up to each village, my discouragement increased. One would think oneself in the dark ages, small cottages huddled together against the elements, and surrounded by mud. Even the train journey was long and uncomfortable, as my car was cursed with about a half-dozen children under the age of five. Notwithstanding the Lord's opinion on children, I hope never to have to spend such a long time in such tight quarters with so many infants again. To add to my burden, there were men of doubtful character who seemed to be imbibing spirits, though I was never able to catch them at it. They must have been hiding it in their coats, or perhaps drinking in the bathroom. It was clear to me what they were up to, as I could smell it from my seat. Their laughter got progressively louder and more boisterous as the journey wore on, so I know they were continuing to show disrespect to my status. How humiliating. I could not meet the eye my fellow passengers, who were surely ashamed for my impotence.

Fortunately, I was met at the train station by Samuel Papineau and his son, Alfred. They had arranged a room for me in *le presbytère* of the church in Sturgeon Falls and I spent a comfortable night's sleep before continuing on to Pointe-Mouillée the next morning.

If the first leg of my journey was crowded and noisy, this next one was silent. The air was crisp and cold, but I was wrapped in furs and therefore quite comfortable in the back of the sled. Papineau and his son rode up front and no one said much during the travelling. I was able to observe the natural surroundings here. It does not differ much from the forested land around Montreal except that here, all seems stunted, smaller and sparser.

We had the opportunity to speak when we stopped for a frugal luncheon of dried meat and bread and apples. We lit a small fire, and made tea in a small kettle. We did not tarry, since we wanted to make Pointe-Mouillée before sunset. There are, it seems, bands of marauding coyotes or wolves, and the area is not safe for a lone horse and three riders at night. This made me uneasy, but I noticed that Papineau had a gun and this made me feel better.

The weather, Heaven be praised, co-operated. It was neither too cold, nor too warm and the condition of the snow was perfect for the horse and sled. Papineau explained that my arrival was timely. Had I waited until it was slightly warmer, the river we had to cross to reach the settlement, would have begun to thaw, and it would have been impossible for them to retrieve me until after the river was flowing. He said the settlers have built a ferry raft that, in summer, can be used to ferry both horse and cart safely across the water. He also mentioned that they plan to build a bridge before too long so that the community is not so isolated during the months when the river is neither frozen nor thawed.

We arrived in Pointe-Mouillée at nightfall. The air was chill and damp. Someone had made a fire in my cabin. I am hesitant to call it a *presbytère* but that is what it must be, at least for the time being. It is newly constructed, and consists of one room. All the

necessities are there, but not much else. In that, it is much like the church, or *chapelle*, which I visited this morning. It is not much more than a cabin itself, with approximately twenty or thirty straight wooden benches, without backs; there is a wood stove, and a small space for an altar, the setting up of which shall be my first task. Papineau told me that there are fewer than one hundred people living in the area that the church will serve, but that newcomers are arriving every summer.

I was gratified to find that one of my new parishioners, a Mrs. Gareau, had painted a fresco on one of the walls of the chapel, depicting the holy scene of the Annunciation. Though the matron's artistic accomplishments are rudimentary, if I compare them, for instance, to the remarkable *Ecce ancilla Domini*, by Rossetti, which I saw in the collection of that associate of my brother in Belfast—McCracken was his name. However, this Mrs. Gareau has managed to create a truly beautiful face for the youthful Virgin Mother. What the work lacks in technical merit is made up for in spirit, a mood that exudes from the painting. In this, hers is not unlike Rossetti's work though, obviously, there is a difference in overall accomplishment. Here, the mood is peaceful, ideal, untroubled. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord." Hers is perhaps more suited to Rossetti's title, whose work is troublesomely vivid. I must remember to thank her and to enquire about her artistic background.

For now, my most pressing task is to begin the construction of a real church, a permanent monument to the Lord in the wilderness. I knew when I accepted this posting, this missionary post, so soon after my return from abroad, that there would be hardships, and hard work. I accept these humbly and willingly. I look forward to taking my flock in hand.

*le 21 mars, 1897*

I said my first Mass in the chapel today — I have decided not to call it a church; it is not a permanent, or a worthy tribute to the greatness of God. I'd had time to fabricate a makeshift altar table, but had to bring the chair from my cabin for me to sit in. I had to kneel on the floor (like everyone else for that matter) and it was quite cold. There were approximately sixty people in attendance.

Afterward, a breakfast was held for all at the Papineau home, which though rough, is much less so than my own, and also much larger. All the ladies had brought *des tourtières* and *du ragout*, as well as cakes and pies. They explained how they have to stock up on food before the river freezes up, because until it is solid, no one can travel to Sturgeon Falls to get sugar and tea and many sundries. They have advised me to stock up for, when the ice on the river starts to break up, we will all be cut off from civilization once again, for an indeterminate period of time. Fortunately, on the advice of Papineau, I had bought much that I will need, when I was in Sturgeon.

The meal was quite noisy — it would seem that three-quarters of my one hundred parishioners are under the age of ten. After the meal, however, the children were sent outside to play and the adults were able to speak more easily.

I was able to meet most of the families who farm in this area. There are a few other young families, similar to Papineau's: the Gareau, Desrosiers, Lefebvre, and Mousseau families. It seems that a certain proportion of the women is *métis*. There are also a number of young bachelors who have come, hoping to settle in the area. But the largest group by far is the awesome St-Amant clan. Horace and his wife, Albina have moved here from somewhere near Sorel, along with several of their fourteen daughters! The older daughters who have accompanied them are married and have children. The

lot of them have settled near each other, on the other side of the river, which means they are cut off from the other settlers and my ministry at certain times of the year. They are an admirable example of what the Lord intended for the institution of marriage. It is my hope that the St-Amant girls will grow up to marry the local men, so that the population will not become unduly influenced by the ways of *les sauvages*.

I was able to meet the woman who painted the tableau in the chapel, the wife of Jean-Baptiste Gareau, who is hardly a matron. I would have guessed she was perhaps twenty-five years of age, but their son is already almost a man. The Gareaus have only one son, she blushed to tell me. Perhaps I should make a visit to their home and see if all is well there. It would be interesting to speak to her more about her painting as well.

After meeting my parishioners, I fear that the wilderness in which they live has taken over their lives to a certain extent. I believe the building of a real church will rally them together, give them hope of achieving a measure of civilization here. I have called a meeting for next Sunday after mass to discuss the plans for the building of the church. Mme Desrosiers has offered to hold it at her home. I also announced a special collection on that Sunday for the church fund.

*le 28 mars, 1897*

The meeting was a disappointment. They tell me it is too late in the year to begin quarrying for rock to build the church since the summer's farming work will begin soon. It will have to wait for the fall. I fear my task will be even more difficult than I had imagined. These farmers seem to have no financial surplus, if today's collection was any indication. The building of the church will have to be done frugally, perhaps even by hand. I have spent the week trying to make my cabin and my chapel more comfortable

since it seems that these conditions will go on for an indefinite period of time. I am striving to swallow my disappointment and make plans for the future.

*le 29 mars, 1897*

In his wisdom, the Bishop has seen fit to send a small sum that may pay for windows for the new church, when it is built. I wrote to him as soon as I arrived to encourage him to make a contribution to the building of our church.

He has informed me that the parish is to be called *Sainte-Catherine-d'Alexandrie*, though I had requested *L'Annonciation*, inspired by Mme Gareau's artwork in the chapel. *Monseigneur* is right; it is not for me to suggest a name. I respect authority, and this decision rests on his, only. I dare say that Mme Gareau will be disappointed. Perhaps she could be persuaded to paint another tableau.

*le 2 avril, 1897*

One of our settlers has decided to return to Québec. I have purchased his land, as well as a few small animals, his horse, a small cutter for travelling over the snow, and a small wagon for when the snow has melted. Papineau and Desrosiers and some others have agreed to come help me raise a quick barn in a few days. I hope to resell the land to another settler in a short while, with any profits to go to the church's building fund.

*le 4 avril 1897*

I have commissioned Beatrice Gareau to paint a portrait of the venerable *Sainte Catherine*. I spoke to her after Mass today. At first, she was reluctant because she said she did not know much about *Sainte Catherine*, and would not know where to begin.

She agreed after I told her I would be happy to instruct her further in the story of that early saint who was, in a holy vision, wedded to Christ Himself. Our Lord placed a ring of alliance on her finger, in the presence of his own Mother and the Tower of Heaven.

Catherine later refused the advances of the emperor of Alexandria because she considered herself already mystically married to Christ. The emperor employed fifty philosophers to attempt to convince her of the nonsense of her belief but her faith held fast and they were converted to Christianity. The emperor had the philosophers burned at the stake, and ordered Catherine tortured on a spiked wheel that miraculously broke before it injured her. She was finally decapitated and her body was carried away by angels.

I tried to describe to Mme Gareau some of the famous paintings of Sainte Catherine that I have seen in books, and on my travels on the continent. Most frequently, she is represented with a sword or a broken wheel. I did describe to her, to the best of my recollection, the portrait by Bernardo Strozzi, where Catherine is shown seated, holding a very shiny, curved scimitar, representing her own decapitation, as well as Raphael's depiction of a young woman with sinewy grace, who leans on the wheel of her *supplice*, while gazing over her shoulder at a golden light in the heavens. I also told her of Michelangelo Carravaggio's haloed Catherine who kneels on a cushion, while holding a sword in one hand, and leaning the other on a spiked wheel. This one looks steadfastly, almost defiantly before her.

I did not tell the poor woman of some of the more gruesome images depicting her martyrdom, like that of Gaudenzio Ferrari, which shows her kneeling, naked to the waist, her modesty covered only by her hair, with her tender naked flesh so close to the iron spikes of the wheel, waiting, ready to be torn to shreds.



Some artists have attempted to show other scenes of her life. There were also two paintings I saw while in Belgium at Sainte-Catherine's monastery: one was a copy of a work by Johann Kracker depicting the discussion between the young woman and the philosophers. In this one, her arm is upraised in earnest entreaty, carried away with speech, while all those around her hang on her words. The other, by Correggio, depicts her mystic marriage: the Christ child, sitting on Mary's lap, is placing a ring on her finger, while *St-Jean-Baptiste* looks over her shoulder, smiling. I have also seen, as a plate in a book, a depiction of her reading a book, representing perhaps her link with the great library of Alexandria.

There is another image that I recall, though I do not remember whose work it was... perhaps it will come to me... it was an Italian, of the Renaissance I believe. In it, Catherine stands like a crowned statue on a pedestal, but she is flesh and blood. (She holds, as ever, her broken wheel.) Behind her, the blue sky and the clouds add to the startling contrast of statue and flesh. She stands like a holy warrior in that one.

The spring is long in coming. There is still snow on the ground, and today more is falling. There have been some raids by wild animals on the herds of my parishioners. I am worried about my own little mixed herd.

*le 13 avril, 1897*

It is exasperating. Nothing moves. True, the ice has begun to recede. In patches it gives a view of the ground below it: mud. There are still almost two months until the *Fête Dieu* procession. How we will ever have a procession without a road, with only mud, without a single *soutane*, and without choir boys, for that matter? With only a log chapel to proceed to? I could order supplies from Montreal or from the *Diocèse* here, but

there is no mail going in or out, no one travels as the river ice swells and cracks. It will be a few weeks, perhaps a month before we can travel to Sturgeon Falls.

*le 18 mai, 1897*

I paid a visit to the Gareau household today. The husband and the son were out cutting wood and I was alone with Mrs. Gareau, which was awkward but perhaps it was the Lord's design since I had the chance to broach some delicate subjects, which I would not otherwise have had the opportunity to do.

Mrs. Gareau had been occupied with making some paints out of egg yolks, as she says the cubes of aquarelle in her paintbox are almost depleted. She showed me her paintbox, a delightful case of mahogany with a sliding lid, which bears an inscription reading something like, "Given to Beatrice Woods in 1885 when she was 16, a student at Such-and-such academy, Chicago." She did mention that her aunt had given it to her. Inside, some dozen or so colour cakes were held in rows. Most of the colours were indeed almost depleted, and some cubes were missing altogether.

She said, if I did not mind, she would finish making the egg-yolk medium while we spoke, and she would finish making the paints at a later time. I was agreeable, and in fact watched the operation with great curiosity. She carefully broke the eggshell and separated the white from the yellow by repeatedly transferring the yolk from one half of the cracked eggshell to the other, while the white dripped into a large bowl. Once this was done, she would carefully place the yolk on a piece of cheesecloth and roll it around to remove any remaining white. Then, holding the yolk daintily between her forefinger and thumb, she would prick the yellow sac with a pin and let the yolk run into a glass preserves jar. Once she had done this four or five times, she strained the yolk through a

clean cheesecloth into another jar. Once the operation was done, she added some water. She said all she would need to do when she worked on her painting the next day, was to add pigments. She has, apparently, been making pigments from local plants and stones. For certain, hard-to-find colours, however, she must use the aquarelle pigment, which is running dangerously low. I asked her where she acquired her knowledge of painting methods and she laughed. She said she'd learned much from her late aunt, who'd been an accomplished artist, and that she'd invented much of it since her arrival to Northern Ontario in her efforts to stretch out her paint supplies.

I believe talking about art, and the making of the paint medium made her feel at ease and she opened up to me. I learned a great deal about the Gareaus in our conversation. The most surprising of all was that Beatrice is American. Her mother is *Canadienne* but her father was a Yankee. She grew up in Chicago, and it was there that she met Jean-Baptiste Gareau. They married very young, she told me, and I understood, from her downturned gaze, that she married without her family's blessing. Shortly afterward, they decided to come to settle in Northern Ontario.

Of the more delicate matters I had come to broach, she did not say very much, but blushed a deep pink. I told her that there is no need for shame, that my ears are a conduit to the Lord. She said that she'd met with an accident at the birth of their son and that, consequently, there would be no other children.

To change the subject from such a painful one, I asked her what she would do with the remaining egg whites. She replied that she would bake an angel cake. As I had never tasted such a cake, she invited me to stay for supper. The cake was a delight—so airy a confection that it is aptly named—and what a sensible usage of her leftover egg whites. I must comment however that the company was less than agreeable. The meal

was tense and silent. I did not stay late after dessert, but returned to my cabin with relief.

My heart goes out to Beatrice Gareau. She seems like an orchid in the snow. Next to her, her husband looks like an animal, hulking and thick and hairy. She resembles the style of women in some modern portraits in London, a style fashioned after the Pre-Raphaelite Brethren: her delicate features, her pointed chin and elegant neck like a flower stem, her sad eyes, and her thick mass of hair, which must surely hang to her waist when it is let down. Most of all, I was reminded of a portrait I saw of Dante's Beatrice, done in pastels by Rossetti. In the portrait, Dante's Beatrice, eyes closed in an ecstatic vision, receives in her upturned palms a white poppy, a symbol of her own death. Surely it is because they are namesakes that I have conflated the images of the two women and, in my memory, Beatrice Gareau now stands, eyes closed, in Rossetti's work...

Perhaps I could write my brother and have him order some paint cubes for her box. I noted that the makers of the box were Reeves & Sons, London. It seems only fitting since she is to paint for the church.

*le 20 mai, 1987*

The people have begun to busy themselves with farm work. I know that it is a great chore, that the farming of this land is thankless, but do they not know that the virgins must always keep the lamp lighted, waiting for the master? The building of the church will wait until harvest season is done, they say, but they have time, however, to work on a road to Sturgeon Falls and a bridge over the river. There is time for that. It

seems that Gareau, who is foreman of that *corvée*, has a great authority over the men here.

*le 8 juin, 1897*

I have purchased a couple of calves from St-Amant. Despite the difficulty of ferrying them across the river, they seem to be thriving. I shall keep them, then resell them next year, or perhaps the one after, to pay for the supplies we will need for the church.

I am pleased to report that Beatrice's painting is almost completed. She grew discouraged with the painting of Sainte Catherine. I believe that the act of imagination was too great for her. She is now working on a tableau of the ten drowsy virgins with their lamps, waiting for the bridegroom. I had pictured them sitting around a table, but she has resisted that configuration and has them seated on a porch like, she says, those on some of the houses in Chicago. In truth, the porch resembles that of homes I have seen around Montreal and Québec. The scene, while biblical, retains something of the local. I think that may prove a fruitful tool for meditation in these parts.

Construction on the road progresses nicely, while no work has yet been done on the church. It seems that, after sending for a priest, the people here have given up rendering unto God, and are occupied rendering unto Caesar.

On Sunday, I will call a meeting.

*le 13 juin, 1897*

The meeting went better than expected. During Mass, I exhibited Beatrice's painting and spoke eloquently, if the Lord will forgive my vanity for saying so, about

remaining vigilant to our spiritual work. Afterward, the men gathered outside the chapel, near the grotto. After I had spoken, Gareau harangued his colleagues, saying that the settlement needed to be connected with Sturgeon Falls for the well-being of the town. He says they need the outlet to sell their produce in the fall, and to be able to go for supplies in the winter. He wants to begin work on a bridge over the river.

I agreed that these were all noble enterprises, but that the Lord will provide. They have managed without a road or a bridge for several years and I do not think, on the whole, that a year more will change things so desperately. I pointed out to them that they requested the presence of a priest here to minister to their spiritual health, and that they must accept me as their spiritual leader. I told them I could see how their lives were consumed by the change of the seasons and by the yield of their fields. That they were no better than the pagans who worship nature, the witches who were hunted down so righteously by our Mother Church. In the end, they voted to suspend work on the road and bridge until the foundations of the church have been dug. Perhaps my pessimism was uncalled for.

*le 5 juillet, 1897*

The *villageois* have begun to dig the foundations of the church. *Loué soit le Seigneur!* I have not seen Gareau since the meeting. He has not been here to help. He has not been attending Mass, though, thankfully, he has not stopped Mrs. Gareau and her son from attending.

*le 16 juillet, 1897*

The digging of the foundations continues. I am tired, but the pains in my body remind me of the joyful work I do for the Lord. I received a letter from my brother in France today that warmed my heart.

*le 25 août, 1897*

Since the digging of the foundation, there is nothing to report, as the farmers are all too busy with their farm work. I myself have been busy with my little plot of land.

I have once again begun to work with Beatrice on a portrait of Sainte Catherine, this time with the assistance of an illustrated book about her glorious life that I obtained through the post from my brother.

*le 13 septembre, 1897*

*J'ai tout compris, maintenant.* Since midsummer, the Sunday collections have been slim. I had assumed it was because everyone's budgets were stretched tight while waiting for the harvest, that the farmers were heavily invested in their crops. But I discovered today, from Beatrice, who mentioned it accidentally, in all innocence, during our painting lesson, that all the farmers have been paying into a collective fund for the building of the road and bridge. This co-operative is, naturally, headed by Jean-Baptiste Gareau, who, it seems, has been put in my path to create obstacles to my holy purpose.

I am afraid that my anger alarmed poor Beatrice, who became quite agitated and made me promise I would not reveal who told me about the co-operative. Of course, I gave her my word. I did my best to comfort her.

*le 5 octobre, 1897*

They have begun to cut the stone for the church at a quarry on the other side of the road to Sturgeon.

*le 11 octobre, 1897*

Work in the quarry is progressing slowly. I am disappointed to say that I will have to spend the whole winter saying Mass in that glorified cabin. When I think about telling *la Grande Messe de Noël* in that shack, it makes me furious.

*le 14 octobre, 1897*

Gareau's diabolical machinations have brought work to a halt. The stones that were quarried last week have been used to begin a foundation for the bridge! When I spoke to Papineau, he told me, sheepishly, that Gareau has a point. That without a bridge, they are cut off from the world from the time the water starts to freeze until January when the ice is thick enough, and that they are again isolated in the spring. They thought they might manage to build the bridge before the winter sets in.

I said again that they'd managed quite well for how many years before this. I have never seen so much resistance to the authority of God's will. So much dissent. Why must this project happen right now, when we are trying to build a temple for the Lord? The only explanation is the interference of Satan.

*le 17 octobre, 1897*

I gave a sermon today that shook the foundations of my flimsy chapel. I have obtained a solemn vow that the stones cut will first be reserved for the church. The



bridge will wait. The Gareau family was not at Mass again today. It has been two weeks now. I must assume illness is responsible. I know he has turned away from God and from me. I fear his soul is lost, but he must not jeopardize the immortal soul of Beatrice in his pride or... Heaven help him.

*le 8 novembre, 1897*

I had thought more men would leave the area to go work in the lumber camps, but only a few of the younger men have gone. It seems that most of the *pater familias* have remained on the land: Papineau, Desrosiers, St-Amant, Gareau. However, the single men have gone, as have three of St-Amant's sons-in-law. They left last week, just in time, because the river has already begun to freeze up. Fortunately, I made the journey to Sturgeon Falls in time to stock up on supplies as there will be no *ravitaillement* until after Christmas. I had not thought of it, but there will be no post coming or going until then.

*le 16 novembre, 1897*

Desrosiers has agreed to organize the cutting and the squaring of the timber for framing the church.

*le 23 novembre, 1897*

That man is a demon. He came here today, with his wife next to him in his wagon— she stared at her feet during the whole exchange—to tell me that my workers have been cutting timber on his land. That the lumber they have cut is his, by rights. I

feel like the Lord with the merchants in the temple. If I only had the strength...and a big stick.

*le 22 décembre, 1897*

The preparations for Christmas have been tiring. I have tried my best to make the chapel festive, to make it glow with the light of Christmas, but there is only so much I can do. The Lord will have to be content with the poor vessel we have created for him.

During my last trip out, I did not think to buy candy to bless and give out during the holidays. We will have to make due without that tradition this year. Fortunately, the rest of my supplies seem to be holding out. Several families (not the Gareaus, naturally) have invited me to share in their holiday celebrations. I have accepted, of course. It is important that I maintain strong relations with the families in my parish or the balance of power may shift... It is also not good for me to be so much alone, although I must admit that I am melancholy. I do not much feel like keeping society. I often think of the St-Amants, unreachable across the river, isolated, though they may travel to Sturgeon Falls to attend Midnight Mass.

Happily, Beatrice has painted a beautiful Nativity tableau to hang in the chapel. I hope she will have the opportunity to work on her painting during the holidays. I am sure not to see her.

*le 19 janvier, 1898*

Holidays are finally over. Work can again begin on the timber. They have successfully made a river crossing with the horses. At last! Several sleighs of villagers

will be going to Sturgeon Falls on Monday, if the weather is fine. What a joyful procession that will be!

*le 21 janvier, 1898*

I have spoken to Beatrice about her husband's past. She refused to speak of him at first, as though she were afraid of him—I am afraid he rules his household with an iron hand. But, after a while, she seemed to decide to take me into her confidence.

Gareau met Desrosiers and Papineau in Chicago, where they all worked at the McCormick factory, that famous producer of agricultural machinery. While they were factory workers, Gareau got involved in a worker's movement and tried, unsuccessfully I believe, to enlist Desrosiers and Papineau in their operations. Beatrice was not sure of the details, but she said that the men went to many meetings and, sometimes, met in her parents' home—her father also worked for McCormick. She did not know what the meetings were about, exactly, and for that I am glad. We all know the tragic events that occurred in front of that factory a few years ago, when some cowardly protesters threw a bomb that killed a policeman. I am grateful that Gareau at least kept his wife innocent of his participation in these *infamies*. After the incident at Haymarket, Jean-Baptiste, Beatrice and their young son left for Québec to stay with his family, though Desrosiers and Papineau remained in the United States. The next year, these two contacted Gareau about a project to colonize Northeastern Ontario and they all left together and came here. Eventually, Gareau sent for his wife, and until Papineau returned to Québec to marry, she was the only *Canadienne* woman here in the wilderness.

It does not surprise me in the least that Gareau was involved in a labour dispute, and I am certain that his involvement was not innocent. I only pray that the life of that

poor policeman is not on his hands. I believe that the participation of Desrosiers and Papineau was innocent since they remained at the McCormick plant for almost a year after the riots.

*le 24 janvier, 1898*

It is too cold to travel to Sturgeon Falls. I can hear the trees crack from outside. The cold penetrates through the walls of my cabin. I am comfortable nowhere. The talk in the town is of the animals that are disappearing. At night, I can hear the wolves howl. It is a sound that chills the soul, the sound of the devil himself. I worry for my cows even in their little barn. It seems such weak protection against such bone-chilling evil.

*le 26 janvier, 1898*

I am out of sugar for my tea. I could use a new book to read. I have read everything I had brought with me, several times over. I need to unburden myself with confession. I had not thought how, isolated like this, I would be barred from the Lord's pardon.

*le 3 février, 1898*

They came to get me to go to Sturgeon on Monday morning. What a delight the trip has been. What a refreshing change to get away from Pointe-Mouillée. In Sturgeon, I am staying at the *presbytère* with Pères Legault and Beaudoin. I have been to confession. I have exchanged some books with the good fathers there. They serve meals on fine china in a warm dining-room. It is heart-warming. Before I wrote this, I lay in my warm bed, by the light of a fireplace, and read from Augustine's *Confessions*. I also

had the opportunity to pick up a pile of post that had accumulated over the past months. Some welcome letters from friends in Montreal, and, from my brother, a paintbox of aquarelle cakes, along with two fine brushes.

*le 5 février, 1898*

I was told today that Gareau and his son left a few days ago for a lumber camp. Not clear how long...

[Pages torn out]

*le 17 mars, 1898*

The devil's work is afoot. I can hear it. My walls are paper thin. I can hear my animals in the barn braying for help. The lambs. I can hear the demons trying to open the barn door, claws scraping on the walls. Gareau has returned from the logging camp.

*le 20 mars, 1898*

Yesterday, the St-Amant farm was attacked in broad daylight. One of their grandchildren, a tot by the name of Bibiane, says she saw a wolf of gargantuan proportions hulking the fields, then saw it take a large animal by the throat and drag it into the woods. I questioned the little girl and had her repeat her story several times and, though she is very young, I believe she is telling the truth. I fear that God has forsaken us. All that is good and decent and right seems so far away. There are happenings here that cannot be explained away naturally. I have spoken to several of the *habitants* about this. I fear they seem sceptical.

*le 21 mars, 1898*

Today, while I was chopping wood for my stove in front of my cabin, Gareau drove up in his sleigh and came to a halt. Beatrice was with him. He did not come down. He did not say a word, but sat there glaring at me, while he reigned in his horses. Beatrice stepped down from the sled and handed me the paintbox. She kept her eyes lowered. During all of this, he did not say a word. He did not say a word.

*le 26 mars, 1898*

No one will attempt to cross the river. They say the cracking of the ice may be heard all night in the farmhouses along the river. The weather has been unseasonably warm, like the breath of hell is upon us. It has been raining. There is a crust of hard ice over the snow that will not bear the weight of any man or animal. When I walk, I break through. The animals have been cutting their legs on the ice. Everywhere you can see traces of blood on the edges of hoof prints. The smell of blood is upon us. We have been marked. I fear I have brought this upon us.

*le 27 mars, 1898*

One of my calves and a pig have been mauled. *Les pauvres! Les pauvres!* My heart is sore about it, to think how they died so gruesomely. The door to the barn was open. Either someone opened the door, left it open deliberately to sabotage me, or else the wild animals wreaking havoc are able to open doors. The thought of it chills me. I cannot bring myself to write the word, or even to let myself think it. There is evil here. There is so much evil.

I would like to see *un père confesseur*. Heaven help me. I am afraid of dying in a state of sin.

*le 28 mars, 1898*

One of St-Amant's children has disappeared. There is no other possible explanation. Today I will attempt to visit the Gareau household while the men are away. She must be warned.

*le 29 mars, 1898*

The child has not been found. We have looked as much as we could but travel is difficult over the crusty snow. The weather remains warm, but does not thaw. The damned river will not thaw. A thick, wet, clumping snow fell all day today, obliterating all tracks.

On Sunday, it will be Palm Sunday. I cannot feel within me any inspiration from the Holy Story. I feel mired in death and fear. After Mass, I will hold a parish meeting. This time, they shall listen to me. This evil must be combatted. There is nothing else to be done. I will bless the hunters and their guns.

*le 31 mars, 1898*

The past two nights, we have gone out, a well-armed band of men: Desrosiers, Papineau and some others. St-Amant and some of the men in his family – including the father of the child who saw the attack on the animal – crossed the river on foot at great peril to join us. The moon, whose face seems warm and golden in the summer, was cold with apathy. We saw the tracks in the snow. One set of tracks was different. It was

larger and deeper. I had not truly believed that evil could take shape. I had always thought it was merely vapour, the stuff of our mind, of our lusts and wilfulness, not something that could make tracks in the snow. If I must, I will lead the men to destruction of this evil.

Oh Father, let this cup pass from my lips...

*le 1er avril, 1898*

A perfect night for the work of *le Malin*, if ever there was one. There is soft, thick snow coming down again. First, the winter was too mild, now the spring will not come. The men will come for me later. Yesterday we tracked the animal to his barn. I will not say that name. That loathed name. I will eradicate the evil that plagues this place. If I cannot leave, I shall civilize it and turn its face to the Lord. It is the least I can to do make amends.

[Remaining pages are torn out]



## Chapter 15

### Missing

On the morning of Rosa Lefebvre's wake, Cécile woke up at dawn. She had slept badly again. She dreamed that she'd become tiny and was lodged between the running board and the wall next to the bathroom mirror. She watched as Ti-Jean entered, calling for her, "Cécile? Are you in here?"

She tried to reply, but he couldn't hear. "I'm here, I'm here."

He stood above her, enormous, looking at himself in the mirror and said mournfully, "Where is she? I need her. I've got to find that book."

But then a knocking made him turn away and, as he strode out of the bathroom, she cried out, "I'm here. Don't go. Don't answer. It's only Ghyslain at the door."

For a moment, Ti-Jean stopped and she thought he'd heard her, but when he turned to look behind him, it was no longer Ti-Jean standing there, but Julien Gareau, covered with hair, grinning wildly.

Cécile sat up in bed, face hot, heart racing. Slightly disoriented, she looked around her. A pale light entered the window. It was still early. On the bedside table, the clock read ten-to-six. Next to it, lay Michel Fex's journal. The barrel of her shotgun was propped against the bedside table. She remembered reading the book before falling asleep, Ghyslain's late-night visit, Barbaro's disappearance. She pushed the blankets off. She would go look for the dog. She would have to do it on foot since her 4x4 was still at the garage, where she'd had it towed, and since she had no intention of picking it up anytime soon. She got dressed and slung the strap of her shotgun over her shoulder.

The first place she looked was by the boathouse, where she remembered leaving the fish carcass. She pulled on her gloves. Predictably, the fish was gone; she found the

plastic bag in which she'd put the bones, lying on the ground a few feet away from the filleting counter. The bag was torn open. She pried it open with the toe of her sneaker. It was empty. She hoped a raccoon had taken it. She walked onto the dock, felt the wetness seep into her sneakers as she checked to see if the dog had curled up and gone to sleep on a lifejacket in the canoe. The sun had barely risen over the lake, and the air was cold. She shivered.

She paced across the grounds, occasionally calling out and whistling, trying to recall where she and the dog had walked the day before, when she'd cleaned the cabins. Perhaps he'd retraced their steps, she thought hopefully. Two of the cabins had gaps under the porches where, two years before, they'd found raccoon dens. She and Ti-Jean had stopped the gaps with chicken wire, but the day before, she'd noticed that the wire, at both cabins, had been torn away at the edges. Now, she looked into the darkness beyond the wire cautiously, worried about raccoons and skunks, and wished she'd brought a flashlight with her. She called out softly, "Barbaro?" Though she knew it was impossible for the dog to have opened the doors, she entered each cabin and glanced into each room.

She returned her shotgun to her cabin, then walked off the grounds. She turned onto *le chemin du lac*, her stride gradually lengthening, her body warming up. Though the road was paved, it was in a state of disrepair. The asphalt was badly cracked, eroded by too many winters and too little maintenance. She stepped over *un nid de poule*. The deep pothole still had a thick film of slick mud, leftover from the previous week's rain storm, even though the last few days had been sunny. The *Sudbury Star* had called this a hundred-year storm, referring to the improbability of that much rain. But, there had also been high winds, thunder, lightning. From the way Cam, the other day, had

described fingers of clouds reaching down to the trees, then drawing back up, it also sounded like an aborted funnel cloud. She remembered reading in a magazine somewhere, perhaps a year before, that the designations of rainstorms and floods as “five-year,” “thirty-year,” or “a hundred-year” was becoming meaningless with global warming. Climates were undergoing such a change that, in recent years, there had been a proliferation of hundred-year storms, five-hundred-year storms; some systems had even been called “millennial storms.” Yet, all the experts agreed that it was likely that such a storm would reoccur well before another thousand years had elapsed. As fundamental climatic conditions shifted, categories and probabilities were no longer valid.

A storm as severe as the one that battered Pointe-Mouillée was caused by a particular chain of natural occurrences: an accumulation of warm air, then a sudden, rapid updraft of cool air. Normal forces that, when combined in an improbable sequence, in a particular rhythm, like a sudden coming together of all the necessary puzzle pieces, unleashed an extreme reaction. With a shift in climatic building blocks, the likelihood of such a sequence of events increased. While the building of structures like bridges and storm sewers used to be designed to withstand the “hundred-year storm,” now the exact parameters for safety and for comfort were unclear.

Cécile walked past a stubbly field, breathed in the odour of earth, rotting leaves, and, faintly, cow manure. Near the edge of the field, a large pine tree had fallen over, half its torn roots pointing straight upward, its branches still covered with green needles. In time, she knew, the tree would die. Someone would remove it or leave it, and it would become a moss-covered part of the landscape. But for now, it seemed an obscene and violent reminder of the force of the storm that had blown through. She

wondered if people's perceptions of their homes would change when such storms were an accepted part of the climate? Would their lives change, or would change be so gradual that not much notice would be taken.

As she walked past the uprooted tree, in the distance beyond the field, she heard a dog bark and wondered if she would recognize Barbaro's bark if she heard it.

At the T-intersection, where *le chemin du lac* abutted the highway or forked off toward the village, a solitary car turned onto the highway, running the stop. Through its closed windows she could hear the bass of the radio. She turned toward the village, walked up and down its streets, looking for her dog. The town was still, slowly waking up. At Fleurette's house, a single light burned at ground level, but many of the other houses were lit up already, families living on farm time. She walked past Vincent's garage, and saw her truck sitting in the front yard. She wondered if she should sell it. Danny Vincent emerged from the garage and started walking across his yard, carrying something wrapped in an oily cloth. He grinned at her and waved his chin toward her truck. She hesitated, unsure of his meaning. Did he mean he was working on the truck, that he'd fixed it, or was he simply acknowledging the link between her and the truck. She waved and kept walking.

As she walked, she looked into people's yards, wondering if someone had found Barbaro and decided to adopt him. If they'd brought him to the SPCA, she thought, they would have called her. It was strange how the dog had disappeared. Almost like he wanted to stay away.

Too many things going missing, she thought, remembering Père Fex's journal. Two sections were obviously missing. The last, it seemed to her, would clearly have dealt with the killing of the werewolf or, she checked herself, what Fex thought was a

werewolf. And Jean-Baptiste Gareau's death or disappearance. Something had happened to him and it would have been described in those pages. She walked faster. Who had torn out those sections of the book? Was it Fex himself, or someone who'd found the journal after his death? It could have been Père Côté who'd done it only recently, she told herself and felt a thrill of excitement to think that the pages could have been so close by, so recently. But, she thought, if he had torn out some pages, she assumed it was because he wanted to hide them or destroy them. But then, why didn't he destroy the whole book at once? If the remainder of the journal was worth saving, why would he then discard it in the garbage? Cécile suspected that Estelle was wrong about the book having fallen into the garbage accidentally. The priest would not have handled a piece of valued local history so carelessly. Père Côté must have thrown it away because its contents suggested that Fex had done things that were inappropriate or embarrassing. If he threw it away, she reasoned, he must not have seen the torn-out sections. She felt devoured by curiosity about the ending of Jean-Baptiste Gareau's life, and the answer was in those pages. The first section that had been torn out of the book, she was less curious about, since she was sure it would have described an affair between the priest and Gareau's wife. After a childhood steeped in soap operas, priests having affairs held no surprise and not much interest.

She'd walked up and down the village streets, and found herself at the edge of town, where another highway eventually led to Toronto. There was no sign of Barbaro. She was about to give up, to turn back toward the lodge, when she noticed flashing lights a short distance along the highway. A police cruiser was parked in the driveway of the Guy farm. Police were a rare sight in Pointe-Mouillée, since the nearest station was in Sturgeon Falls. Not far from the house, Cécile could see the burned-out remains

of the Guy family tractor, which had been struck by lightning during the storm. All that remained of where the barn had stood was a pile of charred rubble in a black rectangle on the ground. The black stood out starkly against the browns and tans of the barnyard. Cécile wondered what was going on.

By the time she'd walked back to town, the *Magasin Général* was open and inside, people were already talking about Maxime Guy, the three-year-old child who had disappeared from his parents' home during the night.

Fleurette, standing behind the checkout counter, looked haggard. In response to Cécile's unspoken question, she said in a quiet voice. "The little one. Maxime. When they woke up this morning, he wasn't in his bed. Just like that. Gone."

Fleurette's eyes opened wide as she spoke, as though taking in more light would help her take in the events. There was no trace of the missing boy. When the parents had gotten up in the morning, the child was not in his bed. The doors and windows were closed. No one had heard a thing. A search of the area had turned up nothing. Cécile thought of Gareau, his teeth bared.

Fleurette added in a whisper, "And on the same day as Rosa Lefebvre's wake too, and... There's too many bad things happening all at once."

It was the same room of the same funeral home in Sturgeon Falls, where they'd held the wake for Ti-Jean. In the hallway outside the room, a black letter-board announced, "Rosa Lefebvre," in interchangeable white plastic letters. As Cécile waited for Fleurette to come in from the parking lot, she wondered if any of these exact same letters had been used to display Ti-Jean's name. At the intersection of Rosa Lefebvre and Jean Desrosiers were O, S, R, A, E. Both their names needed three E's. Cécile wished

she'd thought to ask for the letters after Ti-Jean's wake. So she wouldn't have to share them with anyone. Maybe soon, she thought gloomily, one of those E's might be used to spell Maxime Guy's name.

Fleurette entered, flushed, walking quickly. She was wearing a long turquoise coat made from an old-fashioned textured fabric, which she said had belonged to her mother. Cécile thought she looked much better than she had that morning in the store. She'd looked so stricken that, when Fleurette asked Cécile if she wanted a ride to the funeral, Cécile had agreed to come along.

"Ready to go in?" Fleurette asked. "We should hang up our coats first." She stopped, turned and squinted at Cécile as though examining a small speck on the end of her friend's nose. "Are you going to be okay?" she asked.

"Are you?" Cécile replied.

The room was full of people, and, at a glance Cécile recognized several faces—villagers of Pointe-Mouillée—some whose names she knew, but most who were merely familiar faces.

At the far end of the room, the casket stood, adorned only with a few bouquets at the head and foot. Cécile remembered that, at Ti-Jean's wake, there had been flowers all around the casket, and throughout the room. That was the way she remembered it, all those flowers, so bright they seemed to be emitting light, and the dark heaviness of the casket where Ti-Jean lay, eyes closed, not sleeping.

At the left of the casket, in the place where families usually sit to welcome visitors and receive their condolences, Adèle Denis sat alone, her chair drawn up as close as she could to the side of the casket. In a black dress, she sat, legs crossed at the ankle and tucked beneath the chair. Her hands, folded in her lap, were the only part of

Mlle Denis that were not immobile, as she pulled and squeezed at her own fingers. Back straight, she looked almost defiantly at the people around her, her eyes bright and watchful. Cécile saw her notice Fleurette, and watch her move across the room to the casket.

After Fleurette had knelt on the *prie-dieu* before the casket, Cécile followed and stood beside her. She looked down at Rosa's face while images coalesced and dissolved in her memory: Ti-Jean's face in the casket looking like a wax dummy of himself; Ti-Jean's eyes in the dark, his face close to hers, laughing with her; Rosa Lefebvre's house, her bed, her books; a small child, disappeared; Barbaro, gone. Cécile leaned forward past Fleurette's shoulder, and brushed Rosa's hand with her fingers. Rosa's skin was like cool wood. Where did she go? Where did they all go?

Fleurette was still kneeling, her eyes closed. Cécile backed away, giving Adèle Denis a smile, which was not returned. She looked around the room for someone she knew and saw Cam and Estelle Caron standing by the sofas.

Relieved not to have to stand alone, she walked over. "Hi." They both smiled thinly, their mouths a straight line, and Cécile was struck by how husband and wife resembled one another. Estelle leaned in close to Cécile and, with her, came the smell of perfume. Musk. Estelle whispered gravely, "Did you hear about *le p'tit Guy*?"

Cécile nodded.

"It's terrible. He disappeared right from his bed. I tell you I won't sleep *à soir*!"

Cam said quietly, "The kid must have gone outside himself in the night and gotten lost. They said his jacket and boots were missing. He must have put them on."

Estelle shook her head. "Kids are afraid of the dark. They don't wander out alone at night. Besides, they said that the doors were closed and locked. Do you think a



kid wandering out of bed into the night would put his coat and boots on, then close the door behind him? Our kids don't even shut the refrigerator door. He was just three years old, like our Louise. No. Whoever took him took his boots and coat with them."

Cam shrugged. Estelle looked away.

Cécile said quietly, "Has this ever happened before?"

"What?" Cam asked.

"People disappearing... I mean, around here," Cécile said, suddenly feeling uneasy. Cam and Estelle were standing close together, staring at her, and she felt outside, again.

They both frowned, as though trying to remember something, but after a moment, simultaneously shook their heads. "Nah," Cam said. "Nothing like this. Boating accidents sometimes, people disappearing into the lake. Or the river. Nothing like this. The Guys don't even live near the water."

Cécile wondered how many people had disappeared into the lake. She could not shake the image of Gareau loose from her thoughts.

Cam said, "I was thinking of starting on that cabin tomorrow..."

"Guess we'd better to do it before it gets too cold. Where do we start?"

Estelle interrupted, "If you two are going to talk shop, I'm going to get a cup of coffee. Do you want anything?" When they shook their heads, she strode away.

Before Cam could start talking about the cabin, Cécile said, "There's something I want to ask you."

Cam looked around quickly as though to see who could hear.

"What was it like when you found him?"

Cam's face slowly registered shock as he realized what she was asking him. He looked around again, this time as though searching for a way to escape the conversation. She waited. He caught her gaze and looked down at his feet. He stuttered, "He was under the boat. He was blue. I knew he was dead. I pushed the boat off. I put my coat on him. I waited for the ambulance to arrive. I just waited..."

"I didn't come with you."

"I told you to wait in the house."

"Cam?" She wanted to ask about his ability to stop blood. She wanted to know if he could have stopped it, stopped that trickle of blood coming from his mouth. Then she looked at him, at his stricken face, and knew that if he could bring Ti-Jean back, he would. He wanted him back just as she did.

She said "Nothing. Forget it, Cam. Let's try to forget it, OK? Forget everything.

*On n'y pense pu."*

Estelle returned, clutching a thick china cup of coffee. "The coffee is terrible," she said. "As usual. Maybe they think that we're all too busy grieving to notice."

They stood in an embarrassed silence while Estelle took a loud sip and grimaced. Out of the periphery of her vision, Cécile noticed Père Côté talking to Fleurette's father. Ghyslaine had arrived, and was also standing with the two men. Estelle must have been looking in the same direction. She said, "I guess I should tell him about the book."

Thinking fast, Cécile said, "Can you hold off until tomorrow? I haven't finished reading it yet. I can bring it to him, if you want."

Estelle shook her head, and said sheepishly, "No. I'd rather do it myself... I guess it can wait until tomorrow."

Cécile looked around the room. As Ghyslain moved toward the casket, Fleurette, who had been standing with Adèle Denis, now moved away. She walked past her husband without a glance and went to stand with her father. Marcel Leduc's hands folded and unfolded elegantly before him. Fleurette put her hand through his arm. He smiled and patted her hand fondly. They stood together, obviously watching Ghyslain, who now stood next to an empty chair, next to Adèle Denis's. She did not look up at him, and he remained standing, as though unsure of his right to sit on the chairs reserved for the immediate family, but unwilling to forego that right altogether. In her casket, Rosa Lefebvre lay, eyes closed, her mouth frozen in a tight-lipped smile.

## Chapter 16

### Room

Hands folded in her lap, Fleurette sat on the porch of *la maison des vieilles filles*—inside the house, she still felt like an intruder—waiting for Cécile and for the locksmith to come open Rosa's room.

Though she was deliberately not looking in that direction, she could sense Alma St-Amant watching her from her window across the street. She prickled with defiance. “I’ll sit here if I want,” she said through her teeth. “Let her watch.” Fleurette smoothed her skirt over her knees.

That morning, Rosa’s funeral and burial had taken place at the church and the cemetery located directly behind it. Fleurette had not attended the service, but had remained at the store so Ghyslaine and her father could attend. She’d served the few customers that had come in and listened uncomfortably to the bells ringing when the funeral was over. She’d stood at the door to watch the hearse and a row of cars, with their headlights on, drive down the street, around the village, then back again to the cemetery.

Afterward, she assumed Ghyslaine had gone home because only her father had come to take her place in the store. She’d gone to meet with Adèle Denis who had arranged to come pack up the rest of her belongings. She had taken little. Fleurette stood awkwardly in the front hallway, watching her pack up her car with suitcases, some clothing on hangers, a few boxes. Adèle had emptied her room of all belongings, and had taken a few things from Rosa’s room. Though Fleurette hadn’t accompanied her upstairs while she packed, feeling the moment was too private, she later walked through the rooms and noticed that the hairbrush, mirror, and photograph were gone

from Rosa's dresser. Adèle had hardly taken a thing from the living-room, but, from the kitchen, had taken most of the pots and pans, dishes, cutlery, and small appliances.

Adèle had refused Fleurette's offers to help, and Fleurette had had to watch while Adèle carried her things out alone. It was Adèle who had insisted that Fleurette come to open the door for her, an unnecessary ceremony, since Adèle had a key, which she handed back to Fleurette before crossing the threshold. The day before, at Rosa's wake, Adèle had insisted on this arrangement, and this morning, had telephoned before coming, to make sure Fleurette would be there. "I don't want to be accused of taking anything that's not mine." Fleurette had asked her if she wouldn't prefer to move out another day, but Adèle had said, "No. I want to bury everything at once."

Fleurette wondered if, behind the aggressive formality that reminded her of Ghyslain, Adèle Denis was not simply afraid of being alone in the house that had been home to her and Rosa Lefebvre for over forty years, afraid of the pain, the loss. Easier to focus on anger and on a feeling of injustice, Fleurette thought. The memory of Ghyslain's face as they returned from the hospital after losing their baby made her physically squirm in her place on the porch of *la maison des vieilles filles*. She remembered sitting slumped in the passenger seat watching him drive the car, his back straight, eyes focussed on the horizon, jaw set and hard. "Are you too warm?" he'd asked politely.

Fleurette stood. She thought, It's too cold to sit outside like this. Her thoughts wandered again to the missing child and she wondered if Maxime Guy was lost, somewhere, alone and cold. She shivered, and walked down the steps of the house. My house, she thought, and once again, the words gave her an uneasy thrill.

She looked up at the house. The window to the locked room was on the second floor, its heavy drapes closed, its secrets protected even from sunlight. For now, she thought.

She walked down into the yard. There would be work to be done in the front garden, she observed. The two peony bushes that flanked each side of the cement walkway to the sidewalk, had overgrown their wire holders and were drooping over the walk. Did you cut those back in the fall or spring? She hadn't worked in a garden since she had helped her grandmother as a child. The Leduc family house across from the store did not have much of a garden at all. She looked across the street and saw how it must have always looked from the point of view of the other *villageois*. Not much of the original building remained. Over the years, her father had been as relentless about modernizing the inside of the house, as he had about making the outside look rustic in an expensive rather than authentic way. Elegant, he called it. While most houses in the village were frame houses, covered in pastel-coloured vinyl or wood siding, and some older, large brick houses remained with shady front porches painted grey or white, the exterior of the Leduc home, originally also a wood-frame house, had been recovered in local stones. To contrast with the muted stone in shades of grey, Marcel Leduc had torn down the porch that his father had built on the front of the house, and had added a glassed-in living-room that shimmered with light at night. The driveway had been enlarged to accommodate the three family cars, and its surface covered with cobblestones. Thus, the front garden had gradually been encroached upon and what was left was a tiny patch of lawn that a local boy mowed every two weeks. The back yard was mostly taken up by a cedar deck on which they rarely sat since Marcel had moved to his cottage. The family house, for all of the family history it contained, stood

out from the brick and wooden houses around it, which were surrounded by flower and vegetable gardens.

She would have to learn to garden, she thought, as she looked at the flowers growing along the fence on either side of the property. She identified a patch of daylilies, with dried flowers still on the stems, and remembered how vivid the flame orange flowers, visible from the sidewalk, had seemed in the summer. The other plants or flowers, she could not recognize or name. The garden seemed almost like a single entity. She could not see the detail of the different plants within, their various needs and idiosyncrasies. Probably the way people look at a shelf of the *Magasin Général*, she thought, not seeing the cereal box that had been misplaced, the single remaining package of sliced cheese that should be reordered, the volume of tomato soup on the shelf compared to other kinds. She smiled. She would learn. And the large patch of garden in the back, where vegetables had grown every year for almost a hundred years, would also have to be conquered.

The house would be hers. She remembered how, the morning before, she'd heard Ghyslain rattling around in the basement, and had run out of the house before having to speak to him. She'd wanted to get to the store before it opened to talk to her father. She'd arrived breathless and had spoken quickly, aware that Ghyslain would be coming to work shortly.

“Pa, I think Ghyslain and I are separating. I wanted you to hear it from me.”

Her father had looked up from the stack of delivery slips he'd been studying, and raised one eyebrow.

She looked away, talking rapidly, "I know this will be complicated to sort out, I mean the store and everything, but I guess I wanted to talk to you about something before we even get to that."

When she was ten, Fleurette had decided to ask to work in the store. She had been so nervous that she had thought she would throw up, but when she'd heard the sound of her own voice making a case for herself, she'd been thrilled.

"I'll tell you what I want," she said now, feeling the same thrill. "I want *la maison des vieilles filles*. I want to live in it. By myself. I want my own place. I want a quiet place that is all mine. I've lived in our house all my life and it's not that I don't love it, but I want something different. Something for me. That house was something Pépère and Mémère chose. I want to choose something for myself."

Her father still said nothing.

She grew impatient. "So what I'm asking is for you to co-sign a loan for me. So I can buy the house."

Her father exhaled loudly, then said quietly, "The store."

She wasn't sure if it was an exclamation, or a question. She said quickly, "I don't know what Ghyslain will want, but I want the store. It's mine. It's always been mine. I'll fight him for it... When you're ready to retire," she added nervously.

Her father smiled a tight smile. He said, "Ghyslain came to see me last night, and made a similar speech to the one you're making. I guess he wants something for himself too."

She tensed.

"He wants out of the store. He's leaving Pointe-Mouillée."

"Wha? Where?"



"He's leaving. That's all he told me. I would have thought he'd tell you.... Maybe not." Marcel tapped the pencil's eraser end on the ledger book. He was quiet for a moment. "It's almost too easy," he said, then. "We'll buy Ghyslain out of the store by buying his house. I think he'll go for that."

"My house," Fleurette said grimly.

Her father hung his head. He looked tired. Fleurette realized, with a pang of jealousy, that he would be sad to see Ghyslain go.

Fleurette had been relieved to hear that Ghyslain wouldn't be staying on in her father's house. Having him live there, across the road from her, would have been too much to handle. Secretly, she hoped that her father would move back into the house. It would be odd to have strangers living there.

Fleurette heard footsteps behind her on the path, and turned.

"Sorry to interrupt your daydreaming," Cécile said.

"I'm glad you came. You weren't too busy at the lodge today?"

Cécile shook her head. "Nothing's happening there today. Cam and his cousin are helping the search for the little boy, so we put off working on the cabins." Cécile grimaced. "I hope they find him."

Fleurette added, "I hope they find him soon...." She changed the subject. "Come on. Let's go look at my house."

The locksmith had to be persuaded to open the door to Rosa's room. It hadn't occurred to Fleurette to prepare a plausible explanation about why they needed the door unlocked and had started to tell the truth. When the locksmith understood that

neither Fleurette nor Cécile owned the house, and that, in fact, neither lived there, he refused to open the lock. But after Fleurette had explained that she was buying the house and wanted to see all of it before committing to it, and that the previous owner had passed away, he considered for a moment, looking Cécile and Fleurette over with suspicion, or perhaps simply with curiosity, then shrugged and went to work.

After he'd opened the door, the two women paid him and escorted him to the door. For Fleurette everything moved so slowly. In the moment that the locksmith had swung the door open, they'd seen nothing; the room was shrouded in complete darkness, with heavy drapes blocking out all daylight. Once he was gone, Fleurette followed Cécile up the stairs, almost giddy with anticipation.

They stood together in the doorway of the room. Even with the light from the hallway, Fleurette couldn't see much, but the room seemed mostly empty. There was some sort of desk or table against the far wall. Fleurette stepped in and felt along the wall next to the door for a light switch. "I can't find it," she said after a moment.

"Maybe it has one of those hanging chains from a light bulb in the ceiling. Like in the cabins at the lodge."

Fleurette stepped into the darkness, moving tentatively, arms raised above her head. She heard Cécile say, "I feel like Bluebeard's wife." Fleurette hesitated. She told herself, I have every right to be here. It's my house. But, she realized that Bluebeard's wife must have thought something similar.

Fleurette waved her arms about slowly until cold metal slid against her forearm. She thought, Cécile can't see me. I could pretend I can't find it and leave. Come back by

myself later. Suddenly, she wanted to be by herself and wished she hadn't asked Cécile to come. What if the contents of this room were personal, somehow about her?

From the doorway, Cécile said quietly, as though she had read her thoughts, "Are you sure you want to do this, Fleurette? Are you sure we should look like this?"

Fleurette sighed, "I don't know. I'm curious to see, but I also feel nervous. Like I'm spying. I feel badly for Mlle Denis, but you know, this isn't really her house anymore. She's gonna live somewhere else from now on." In an undertone, she added, "I live here now."

"Right," Cécile said, and Fleurette pulled on the light switch.

A desk and chair next to the window were the only furniture in the room. Cardboard boxes were piled against the far wall. Fleurette took a step over to the desk and touched its polished wood surface. The desk was bare.

She hesitantly pulled a drawer slightly open; it was empty. The next one held a tray of pens and pencils, scissors, glue. Behind the tray, she could see a pile of notebooks still wrapped in cellophane. She was about to open the next drawer when Cécile whispered, "Look."

Fleurette turned. On the wall, she saw their shadows thrown by the central light bulb, and the oscillating shadow of the pull-string, still swinging.

"Look at the wallpaper," Cécile said quietly.

The walls were covered with bits of paper, hand-written, some evidently old and yellowing, some fresh and recent. A few were complete pages, but most had been torn in an attempt to peel them from the walls and, in some places, all that was left was irregular bits hanging.

Fleurette reached up to one, tugged on its corner. "They were pasted on," she said. "Just like wallpaper."

Cécile walked quickly around the room, "And then they were torn off. Do you think Rosa tried to rip them off herself? Maybe she knew she was going to die."

Fleurette thought about Adèle Denis and her hasty departure from the house after Rosa's death, her insistence that Fleurette come with her to the house that morning. "Maybe someone else did it."

Cécile looked at her. "For a town that says it's proud of its history, there's an awful lot of mystery here."

"What do you mean?"

Cécile started to tell her something about a journal she'd found but Fleurette was unable to concentrate. More than anything, she wanted to look at the fragments of paper left on the walls and see what they said, to hear what they said to her.

She leaned in to look. "Same handwriting," she announced, and did not notice Cécile stop talking. "Rosa must have written them." Fleurette touched one yellowed sheet—she could see the date at the top, *May, 1954*. Part of the text was intact, but the signature was missing. Though in large part, most of the pages had been torn off, some sections had remained stubbornly stuck to the wall in pieces that were large enough that they contained sentences or even paragraphs. All the writing seemed to be in French. After throwing a quick look at Cécile, she read. After a moment, she sensed Cécile moving behind her, then stop, and she knew that Cécile too had begun to read.

*May, 1954*

My father picked me up at the train station in Sturgeon Falls. I hoped he would not recognize me and that this would humiliate him. Everyone would see that he didn't know his own daughter. But I found him easily enough. He looked exactly like his wedding photograph, but not dressed in a suit, a big man, with a moustache and dark, moody eyes. His mother was with him, my Mémère, and another man who was driving the car.

I said the line I had rehearsed on the train. "*Bonjour mon père,*" as though I were talking to a priest.

"*Bonjour, ma fille,*" he replied sternly, and I wondered if he was being funny or if he had also rehearsed that line on the way to the train station.

In the car, my father sat in the front seat with the other man and I sat in the back with Mme Deschamps. She told me I should call her Mémère, but that would have been betrayal of my own Mémère. She chatted the whole way, pointing out landmarks on the road between Sturgeon and Pointe-Mouillée: a road, a river, a farmhouse. I kept thinking, "Where am I?"

I wanted to cry. I wanted to look out the window and take in the darkness, the dismal trees and fields, but her incessant commentary required me to look at her, smile graciously, and murmur an occasional, "Oh really? How interesting."

We drove into Pointe-Mouillée and, for a moment, I felt better. The houses were lit up and there seemed a great number of them, though the road was quite bumpy. I saw the church steeple in the moonlight and I was comforted, until we had driven out of the town again.

We didn't drive a long way, but we turned onto a gloomy side road that led into pitch darkness. There was no electricity at the farm. I thought about demons and *loups-garous*. This must be the kind of place they haunt.

I got out of the car; the muddy ground shifted beneath my feet. I heard night birds and animals, and the sound of water nearby. At that moment, I thought to myself that it didn't matter that this man wanted help on his farm. He was my father in name only, and I was not spending another moment in Pointe-Mouillée, not if I could help it...

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*Pointe-Mouillée, December 12, 1954*

"Ma chère Rosa,

"Thank you for your letter. I was so thrilled to know that you remember me as fondly as I do you. What a surprise it was to meet you à *l'épluchette* chez Albert. I've gone to Albert's corn roasts every August of my life, and this year I wasn't sure if I would make it from Sudbury. I am glad I did. You are such a good dancer. That must be what people do all the time in Rouyn. You must get lots of practice.

"There is something serious I want to bring up. I would like your permission to get my father to ask your father for your hand in marriage for me. I'm not sure if this is the way to go about it, since you are in Rouyn and I don't know your people there, but your father is one of my father's neighbours. They see each other at *la Messe* every Sunday.

"As you know, I have been working at Stobie mine in Sudbury. I have volunteered to work the Christmas shifts so I will have enough money in the spring to

buy a small farm just outside Pointe-Mouillée. You said in your last letter that you would like to live on a farm. I have been living in town for a year now, and I agree. The city is not as rich as I had thought, and when you are poor here, it is much harder. Our little farm wouldn't start out as much, but I am sure that together we could do well.

"I already think of Christmas, of you dancing at parties in Rouyn, without me, and I feel desperate. If I could do *la chasse-galerie* to go see you in Rouyn between my shifts this Christmas, I believe I would. Without you, I feel that my soul is not worth much. No, please don't think I blaspheme. I am sure that a love like ours will be blessed by God.

"By the spring, I can send you a train ticket from Rouyn for you and your grandparents. I think we should get married here, since your father and my family are here.

"I wait impatiently for your answer.

*"Tendrement,*

"Paul "

\*\*\*

The photograph is black and white and has been folded so that it looks like there are white lines where age has scratched the image. There is a young girl and two adults standing on a wooden porch. Below them, the ground alternates dark and light, patchiness of melting snow.

The girl is perhaps six years old, the adults are elderly. The girl is Rosa. There is no mistaking her beauty, the prominent cheekbones, the light hair in curls. Rosa wears a black woollen coat that is a bit too large, with a fancy trim around the arms and around

the neck. Emerging from under the coat, her legs in woollen tights and laced boots. The grandparents—they must be grandparents, too old for parents—stand behind her, still as oil paintings, the man in a white shirt with a dark vest.

The woman wears a long dark coat. Her face is severe, her mouth pinched, as though they had been arguing before the photo.

Behind the people, she can see the clapboard house and an edge of white sky, flecked grey, with what looks like static.

Rosa stands with one foot ahead of the other, as though the camera caught her about to walk away. She is smiling, a bright smile, her mouth slightly opened to laugh or talk.

\*\*\*

...while Paul was out, the priest stopped by to ask if I am stopping myself from getting pregnant somehow. I didn't answer and he seemed to take this as an adm...

...want children but I hate it. Is that enough to stop them from coming? If it is, then I am guilty. That's why I said nothing...

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But, this is what my father told me: One morning, he came into the kitchen where his mother-in-law was sleeping on a cot by the woodstove. He cleared his throat and said, *"J'men vas chercher le docteur."*

From the kitchen, he could hear my mother thrashing on her bed, sobbing, *"J'vas mourir. Mon Dieu. Aidez-moé."*



My father heard his wife's mother go into the room, telling her it's the baby coming, "That's how they come."

And my mother screaming betrayal, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"There was no point in making her nervous about it," my grandmother told me later, when I asked. "I gave her a paper image of Sainte Anne and told her to chew on it."

She ate it. She chewed on it slowly while the pains made her delirious, made her crazy, made her spirit gather itself, as though at the exit of her body, ready to leave, ready for death. She felt her mother's hands on her stomach as if her skin were somewhere very far away. She grasped her mother's hand, felt the bones of her knuckles move under her grip.

And the taste of the paper, she ground it with her teeth, mashed it into pulp, sucked it and held it in the pocket of her cheek, until it was almost dissolved to nothing. Periodically, she opened her eyes and glanced to see how much of the little image was left, telling herself the agony could not outlast the paper. Since her mother gave it to her. With a prayer she swallowed, fought the nausea to keep the paper down, and said the whining prayer of a child, Save me Mother of Mary.

When the doctor arrived, I was already half out of my mother's body, head cradled in my grandmother's rough hands. My father was out in the barn. His place.

The next day, my feverish mother, my grandmother, my father, the doctor all found out that my mother's initial diagnosis had been correct. She had been dying after all.

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...my grandmother about it, she said that my mother hadn't known much about childbirth. She said I had the knack for asking the most impossible questions. She became embarrassed and said, "It was like that then." As though the time separating the 1940's from the 1950's was a river too wide to see...

\*\*\*

*Rouyn, July 1956*

*"Ma chère Rosa,*

"I received the letter from your father saying that you are well. I wrote to him because I was worried. I have not heard any news from you since you left for your honeymoon. It's been over a year!

"Your father told me that they discovered silver on your husband's farm, that he had sold the land and you had moved to the village. I can imagine that with this move and being a new wife, you must be very busy. Are you too busy to think of your poor old grandmother?

"Please write and give us some news. The house is very empty since you left. Your grandfather says hello. His hip is making him suffer *le Calvaire* these last few months. He can barely walk.

"Étienne is no longer working with him at the shop. They had one of their arguments and Étienne went and found himself a job at the wood mill. They eat their meals together but neither of them talks.

*"Ta grand-mère,*

*"Mme Dubois "*

\*\*\*

*1960*

It was early spring and I was coming home from shopping in Sturgeon Falls with Adèle, who had just moved in with us to help me care for Paul.

Paul met us at the door. He was pale, but looked cheerful. The visit with Dubuc, who had come to the house that morning to play cards and entertain Paul had been a good idea.

“Your father,” he said calmly. “He’s sending for you.”

I felt a rush of...

...was shocked. My father was forty-five. He had been a bachelor since my mother died, almost thirty years before, and had never shown any interest in...

...a fitting tribute to my mother. My only image of her is from the black and white photograph that has been mine as long as I can remember. My mother stands in white, a band of fabric stitched with flowers around her hair; her hair looks soft, like feathers. She looks directly at the camera with tenderness and love. I always imagined that the look was a message she was sending me into the future, telling me I am in love, I am happy, and when you are born, I will love...

\*\*\*

*June 19, 1962*

Adèle brushed my hair this morning. I heard her shuffling around in the corridor. I called her, “Is everything all right?”

Footsteps to my door, then stopped. She said, “Yes.”

But I could tell there was something. I asked her in...

...breathing behind me. I half closed my eyes, tempted by a daydream, but, though I searched and searched for a subject, I couldn't find anything to fantasize about. That made me unaccountably sad and I...

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*...967*

My father's second wife has died. He is left alone with the boy. I know I should offer to help. Perhaps even offer to take him, like I was taken when my mother died. He won't ask me. I saw it in his eyes when he came by last night to tell me the news. He left the boy sitting in the car, ...

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*... 12, 1972*

...eau came by again this morning. Ostensibly to sell some eggs, but when Adèle answered the door, he asked for me. I...

...though he is still limping from his accident with the axe, we managed quite imaginatively to...

...he gave it to me, it was hidden in a perfect, hollowed eggshell which I immediately...

...great scene about it, refusing to cook supper though it is none of her affair what I wish to do with my...

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*September 12, 1978*

This afternoon, I found Adèle crying in the pantry. I had heard a small sound and I was afraid it was a mouse. Every autumn, it seems a field mouse finds its way into the house. Adèle checks the traps because I can't bear to see their little broken bodies.

I found Adèle standing there, *les bras balants*, staring at the rows of jams and *ketchup vert*, and pickled beets, sobbing quietly.

I might have stolen up behind her and touched her on the shoulder and said, "*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*" But I knew all too well what it was about. I thought to myself, are we destined to dance the same dance, the same steps, cover the same ground, the rest of our lives. Is that what marriages are like? Two lives spent circling around one problem that never changes, examining it afresh from every new perspective, and ultimately disappointed to find it to be the same problem.

I walked away and left her there. I know she was aware of my presence. I saw her head hang ever so slightly lower as I turned.

I went to sit on the back porch and looked at the garden. Everything has been picked, and the earth had been turned over and was black with moisture. I could smell the fall in the air, the smell of earth and damp leaves, steaming in the sunlight. For a long time, I sat and thought about leaving. I tried on several scenarios unsuccessfully before, once again, realizing there is nowhere to go. I had to laugh. Despite myself, I too had circled our problem today.

Sometimes I wonder why she stays. Sometimes I know the answer. We will never be what she wants us to be. For that matter, we will never be what I would choose. The alternative is to part.

Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that Adèle and I have built a life together here that I don't want to give up. What would I say? "Adèle, my sister, shall we get married?"

\*\*\*

...Chyslain. *Mon petit frère*, my little brother with the great ambitions. I have watched him try to gather enough speed to escape, but like the rest of us, he can't. I sometimes think I see, in the slump of his shoulders that is so like my father's, resignation. He surely doesn't even know what he's mired in since this marriage will surely sink him more. Like quicksand. They say the more you struggle, the more you sink.

If he only knew that the moments are few when conditions are exactly right for escape...

\*\*\*

...turned off my light, listening to her muted footsteps in the carpeted hallway, moving between the bathroom and her room, and back again, each time pausing at my door. This morning, I feel like the widow...

\*\*\*

*August 1, 1987*

Chyslain married Fleurette this morning. They invited me, of course, but they didn't invite Adèle. I sent my reply saying that I would certainly be there, but I stayed home. Adèle and I baked cinnamon rolls. I will tell them I was indisposed.

There are some sins one can never confess. I suppose we are to...

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...Gagnon. Angina pectoris. He's given me nitroglycerine, but if I understand, I could just drop dead anytime: while stepping out of the bath, while sitting on the toilet, while tying my *soutien-gorge* with my arms stretched awkwardly behind me, in my night-gown, in my bed, not in my own bed. The humiliation is too great. I want the opportunity to lay myself out in my best clothes, in my own bed, with objects that I love. My death will have no dignity. I have told Docteur Gagnon that, in the event of an attack, I do not wish him to resuscitate me. I haven't told Adèle yet, because I can imagine how she will cry and flap around me, her nervousness contagious. I need to be calm. I need to think. I need to prepare.

\*\*\*

*June 14, 1992*

I have told Adèle about my cond...

...selfish of me not to tell her. What if something...

...right to prepare for an emergency, she asked...

...but I am the one facing death, not her. I have made my p...

...Those who want to escape shall have their chance...

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I want my newspaper. That will calm me. Writing does not make me calm. I will sit outside and think about the world out there, rather than the one in here. I think I will not buy her a chocolate today.

\*\*\*

*November 5, 1998*

Wake for Ti-Jean Desrosiers last night. Exhausted me. I wonder how many funerals I have attended in my life, how many more I will have to attend. This one was no different from the others, I suppose. People standing around the salon, holding their thick china cups with coffee slurping over the rims into saucers, talking about the crops and the weather, about the hunting and the babies, whispering about the secret love affairs that everyone knows about, but still, they lower their voices when they speak about them. Because they are secret. Because they are not meant to last, to challenge the order of this place. They will shamefully be denied, discarded, forgotten, fingered in the dark like prayer beads. And everything will remain the same. I rant.

I rant, because of the widow, Ti-Jean's widow, her eyes were wild, crazed like an animal, and it made me remember Paul and what it felt like to have him abandon me. No. I can't still be angry after all this time. This anger makes me tired. But, I stood in the salon, clusters of people knotting and unknotting around me, conversation enfolding me, then letting me go, and I felt so much rage, I wanted to go up to the coffin and beat the dead man with my fist. Beat his empty chest until it echoed in the room and they all stopped their chatter. It must have showed. Because Adèle put her arm under mine and steered me to the cloak room and drove me home. I couldn't say a word, I was trapped



in that image of me beating the corpse, I was trapped in the desire to experience that feeling, that release. All the way back to Pointe-Mouillée, I told myself that after Adèle had gone to sleep, I would sneak out of the house, drive myself to Sturgeon, and what? Break into the salon? I don't know. I don't know what I thought I would do. Thankfully, I fell into a stunned torpor almost as soon as Adèle turned off my light, listening to her muted footsteps in the carpeted hallway, moving between the bathroom and her room, and back again, each time pausing at my door. This morning, I feel like the widow. This morning, I am bloodless.

## Chapter 17

### Conversation with the Priest

Cécile left Fleurette in Rosa's room, still reading. It was clear to her that Rosa's memories were meaningful for Fleurette. There was an expression on her face that made Cécile feel as though she was intruding on a significant moment. Cécile had tried to decipher a few of the pages that had suffered the least amount of damage but had found little of enough interest to warrant her efforts. Mostly stuff about the daily lives of two old women.

What she'd found distressing was the destruction of the pages on the wall. They had been torn, and scraped off. She wondered who had done it, whether Rosa herself had done this before she died, or if Adèle Denis had tried to destroy her friend's journal after her death. To Cécile, the destruction of this journal and the destruction of Fex's journal seemed too similar to be coincidental. It almost seemed like there was something being covered up.

Cécile stepped out of *la maison des vieilles filles*, and into the dusk and felt the cool air sharp on her skin. On the stoop, she stood looking out, wondering if she should go talk to Père Côté. If she did, she would be walking back to the lodge in total darkness. After a moment, Cécile realized she was being watched. Across the road, she could see a figure silhouetted behind lace curtains in one of the ground-floor windows of a white frame house. That must be the woman Fleurette mentioned last time, she thought. The invalid who sits at her window. What was her name?

Cécile stared in her direction, hoping to make the woman look away, but the woman didn't shift her gaze. Cécile tried to shrug off the strangeness of being so openly watched, telling herself that perhaps the woman couldn't move easily, but after a

moment, sought the quickest way out of the watcher's line of sight. She walked out of the yard, and turned up *la rue de l'Église*. After she'd turned the corner, she knew the woman could no longer see her, but Cécile was unable to shake the sensation of the woman's eyes on her. Half a block later, she found herself next to the presbytery. She made her decision and walked up the cement path that led to a painted grey porch with white columns, fronting the two-storey, brick house where Père Côté lived alone. She remembered Ti-Jean telling her, when they'd come to meet Père Côté before their wedding, that the current presbytery had once been a convent for nuns. He'd been vague about when that had been exactly — *Avant mon temps*, he'd said — when the town's population had been large enough to require a house full of nuns. They had run a school, given music lessons, organized the choir, helped the priest in the parish, and helped take care of the resident priests — there had been two and sometimes three back then — cooking their meals, and even organizing the cleaning of the presbytery, which had stood next door, between the nuns and the church itself. When the nuns had left Pointe-Mouillée, the priest — by then there was only one — had moved into the larger convent, and the older presbytery had been torn down to make some extra parking space for the church.

Père Côté answered the door. His frown changed to a tired smile when he saw her. "Cécile. Welcome back. I saw you at the wake, but I didn't have a chance to come chat." With a gesture, he invited her in. "I was just making some tea," he said.

As she sat down at the kitchen table, the kettle whistled. While the priest busied himself with the teapot, Cécile looked around. The kitchen of the presbytery, like the rest of the house, was large and now old, a relic from days when the parish of

Sainte-Catherine-d'Alexandrie had been bustling with activity. The kitchen was large enough for a whole staff of nuns to have been cooking at one time. A stainless steel sink had recently been installed in the old kitchen counter. Gaps where the old, much larger sink had been removed had been filled in with unpainted pressboard. The room had a determined air of unstoppable deterioration. The walls were badly in need of some paint. Over the stove and the sink, the white paint had bubbled off the walls. In other places, she could see long cracks where the paint was beginning to lift. The vinyl flooring needed to be replaced. Its gold and brown pattern was faded and stained. In several spots, between the door and the table, and between the table and counter, the flooring was worn through, revealing the wooden floor underneath.

However, the room was surprisingly clean. Where the wood showed through the flooring, the gaps were free of trapped dirt. Cécile remembered that Estelle cleaned the presbytery every week. Estelle was an energetic cleaner. Even with the paraphernalia of five children spread throughout it, Cam and Estelle's house was always spotless. Père Côté's kitchen, with its shabbiness and cleanliness, gave the effect of a Spartan life. Not inappropriate for a priest, Cécile thought. Adding to this effect was the fact that the room was plain and undecorated, except for a simple crucifix hanging over the wall next to the table.

Père Côté returned to the table carrying a tray. Along with the tea, he'd brought crackers and cheese. "I haven't had time to make supper yet and I'm starved." Cécile realized she was hungry, too. Père Côté explained that he'd been helping the search parties look for Maxime Guy most of the day. He sighed. "It seems unlikely that the child, if he's still alive, if he's out there somewhere, could survive another night in the cold."

He looked defeated. Cécile hesitated before speaking. She was certain he would not want to talk about the journal. He'd tried to get rid of it, hadn't he? He would not be happy she had read it, and would not want to talk about it. She could still tell the priest she had simply come to say hello. If it hadn't been that Maxime Guy was still missing, she might have had her tea and gone home.

"I read the journal of Michel Fex," she said.

He coloured. "Wha-? How?" He shook his head as though he had not heard her properly.

Cécile explained quickly how Estelle had found it in the trash and brought it to her. The colour remained in his face, but his expression shifted to anger. Cécile realized that she had just jeopardized Estelle by bringing her into this. She lied. "Estelle found it in the trash. It was garbage. She didn't know what it was. She thought it was garbage and she thought I might like it."

"I would have expected her to be more discrete with what she comes across in my garbage can."

Cécile said, "Listen. I'm really sorry I brought Estelle into this, but I need to talk to you about what's in the journal. It may have something to do with Maxime Guy's disappearance."

Côté sat back in his chair and folded his arms. "I'm listening."

"Right near the end of Fex's story, a child also disappears."

"Yes?" He uncrossed his arms and folded them again.

"Have you seen the missing sections of the journal?"

"No," he said. "They were missing when I found the book."

“Well, it looks like Jean-Baptiste Gareau was responsible for the child’s disappearance.”

“Whoa! You’re going too fast for me,” he said, raising his hand. “How do you figure that?”

“Well, Père Fex talks about a wolf on a rampage and he talks about Gareau being responsible...”

“Are you saying you believe Jean-Baptiste Gareau was a *loup-garou*?” he said loudly. He leaned forward in his chair and leaned his hands on the edge of the table as Cécile has seen him do on the edge of the pulpit during his sermons. Before she could answer, he began speaking rapidly. “That’s ridiculous. It’s untenable. There are no such things as werewolves. Or witches. *Ou les feux follets*. Or whatever... The belief in werewolves comes to us from the Middle Ages when werewolves were just witches who’d taken an animal form. People were prosecuted as werewolves, just as they were charged of *maleficium*.”

Cécile looked puzzled.

“*Maleficium* was the charge... It means harm through magic. Do you know that up to a million people were tortured, mutilated, burned for participating in supernatural encounters with the devil, when you know as well as I do that they were innocent because that’s impossible.”

Cécile said nothing, but her face must have registered shock because he said, “This is my position, not my Church’s. Before I went to the seminary I studied history at the university. I was obsessed with the witch-hunts because the idea of joining the priesthood had been with me since I was a boy. I was resisting it. The witch-hunts are easy territory for someone who is looking to vilify the church.”

“You became a priest anyway?”

He said simply, “I’m not sure we can blame the church now for what happened then. And even if I could, in the end, a calling’s a calling.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“So there’s no such thing as a witch?” she asked, curious, now. “As a werewolf? What about the devil?”

“Let me be clear. The devil exists. But I don’t think he is a monster in a red suit with horns and a pitchfork. And I don’t believe he contacts people or makes deals with them or gives them powers. But the church in the Middle Ages did believe that. And Europe was facing a crisis the magnitude of which we can’t even imagine. The first epidemic of the Plague killed something like 25 million people. And that was just the first round. For a period of 300 years, it came back every so often. And the plague was a horrible, unimaginable death. People with the plague reeked. They vomited blood, they peed blood, their saliva smelled like their mouth was the aperture to hell. In the mornings, people would drag their dead out of the houses and leave them in the street, too afraid to give them proper wakes, afraid of contagion.

“There were so many dead that they couldn’t bury them all. The Rhine was consecrated and they just threw corpses in there. In some places, entire towns disappeared. The economic infrastructure broke off. There were so many dead, there was no one to do the work. No one to take charge. There were famines. People were starving to death. At the same time, there were epidemics of ergotism that make people act like lunatics, like rabid dogs. In the face of this chaos, of this social rupture, the church stepped in and took up the reins. They interpreted what was going on as Armageddon, as the work of the devil, and they went on a witch... and werewolf hunt.”

“Well, as for the witches, I thought they’d really existed. Not the black-pointy-hat kind, but some sort of pagan religion. People who were found guilty must have done something,” Cécile said.

“There’s no evidence that there was a pagan religion of that scale in Europe at that time. People were persecuted for being poor, sick, marginal. People with epilepsy or diabetes, or schizophrenia, or poisoned by ergotism. It’s also possible that in the face of so much horror, a large segment of society was taking drugs as a form of escapism.” He was speaking rapidly now. “Surely that’s something that we, in this day and age, can understand. The endless talk of witches’ brews always documented the use of the same ingredients: mandrake, belladonna, datura, others... Powerful hallucinogens. People may even have said they were taking part in the devil’s sabbats because they were given that framework to interpret their drug hallucinations.

“So there were no witches at all. It was all a big mistake?”

Still flushed, Père Côté took a deep breath and sat back in his chair, almost sullenly. “No witches. But maybe it wasn’t a mistake. If the church hadn’t stepped in, taken control, what would have happened to European society?”

Cécile frowned. “But if you think we can’t blame the church now for what happened then, why did you throw out Fex’s journal? You’re the historian. Surely, even if Fex was a lunatic, there is some historical value in the document?”

He reddened. “If that document came out, what do you think would happen? People would condemn him, would condemn the church. He’s dead. I think his mistakes are best forgotten...” He looked down. “Look,” he added, “I’m not sure I did the right thing. That was my gut feeling. I don’t think this is the version of history people want to hear.”



“What do they want to hear?”

“That Fex was a pioneer. That he and a few farmers erected a church out of stones with their bare hands, here in the middle of the forest. That he was courageous and strong and chaste... Not a lascivious, mentally unstable whiner.” He smiled wryly.

“Not to mention a murderer. ”

His eyes narrowed. “Are you suggesting that Jean-Baptiste Gareau was really a werewolf? ”

It was Cécile’s turn to colour. “I’m not saying Jean-Baptiste Gareau was a *loup-garou*. Not really anyway. But people can be far more vicious than animals. I think maybe that’s how legends get started. To account for terrible human behaviour that can’t be accepted as human.”

Père Côté pressed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. He said quietly, “I don’t see what bearing all this has on the disappearance of *le p’tit Guy*.”

“Well, what if Gareau — our Gareau, Julien Gareau — is like his grandfather?”

“Cécile, what are you saying? Think for a minute.”

“I have thought about it. Listen... “She told him about her encounter with Gareau in the woods. “I’m saying that maybe Gareau thinks he is a werewolf. Or maybe he’s just a lonely and angry man. He must know what happened to his grandfather. What if he has it in for this town? What if he’s just now grabbing an opportunity for revenge? What if he’s gone round the bend or something? I’ve seen him acting strangely. Aggressive. Scary. And now this child is missing, just like in the journal. What if he’s replaying history? Not the way it really happened, but the way everyone believes it happened. What if he’s playing out the legend?”

He looked up at her without surprise and it occurred to Cécile that, despite his arguments, he must have had similar thoughts. She added, "And the kid is still missing. How far could a three-year old go by himself?"

The priest said quietly, "What do you suggest? We call the police and tell them this wild story based on the hundred-year old fragment of a journal written by a priest who had, it seems clear to me, gone round the bend." He added quickly, "By the way, I would like that journal back and I would appreciate it if you did not mention it to anyone."

Cécile felt a rush of anger. "No way," she said. "This is part of the town's history. People have a right to know what really happened here. As it is, it seems that everyone knows a version of this story. They should know that it has a historical basis." She stood up. "I don't know what should be done about Gareau, but it seems to me that ignoring the truth isn't right. I thought you, Père Côté, would know what to do."

She got up to leave, and said darkly, "Thanks for the tea."

He nodded wearily.

The walk home in the dark was not as frightening as she'd expected. She was still fuming over the priest's attitude. After what seemed a few minutes, she was surprised to find herself home. She stepped inside the cabin, and stopped at the threshold, heart pounding. After a moment, she realized that what she was hearing was the radio in the living-room. She had forgotten to turn it off before leaving to go see the house with Fleurette. As she stood by the door, she gradually became aware of an unfamiliar scent. Musk. Where had she smelled musk recently? With relief, she

remembered Estelle leaning close to her in the warmth of the funeral home, saying, “Did you hear about *le p’tit Guy*?” Estelle. Had she come here looking for her?

Suddenly, she understood. Fex’s journal. She’d come for the book. Cécile closed her eyes and remembered that she’d left it on the kitchen table. She strode across the room. She lifted dirty dishes and shifted newspapers around. The journal was gone.

She ran to the telephone, and just as she was about to lift the receiver, it rang.

“Estelle,” she said, sure it would be.

“*Um... Non. Cécile? C’est Père Côté.*”

He said he’d thought about their conversation, and didn’t think there was anything official he could do, but didn’t feel right doing nothing. “*J’veux en avoir le coeur net.* I think the kinds of thoughts you — we — are having are dangerous. If they spread, well... history shows us what can happen.”

He proposed that they go have a look at Gareau’s property right away, while it was dark. “If you can guide us back to his farm, where you walked the other day.”

She could not refuse now, though the thought of returning there, near Gareau’s place, at night, made her scalp tingle. She would want a shotgun instead of her small rifle. The .410 with pump-action, she told herself, thinking quickly, but she wasn’t sure there was any ammunition for it in Ti-Jean’s gun chest.

The priest said, “I want to ask Cam Caron to come too.” The priest cleared his throat. “As a witness. And a chaperone. I don’t want to leave any room for misinterpretation of what we are doing. I know he was a friend of Ti-Jean’s. We can trust him to be quiet about this, and I know he hunts...” In an embarrassed voice, he added, “Not that there’s anything to hunt.”

“I’ll need about an hour to get ready,” she said.

## Chapter 18

### Night

Fleurette glanced at Cécile sitting next to her on the back seat of Cam's truck. Cécile's face was reflected in the darkened glass of the window she was looking out of. In the reflection, her skin shone a milky white. Outside, the sky was clear, dusted with stars. Framed in the window, in front of Cécile's forehead, a crisp moon, not yet full, hovered over the line of dark trees beyond the fields. Cécile must have sensed Fleurette's gaze because she turned to her and smiled thinly. She licked her lips.

In the front seat, Fleurette could see Père Côté looking out the window, much as Cécile had been doing a moment ago. She could not see his face. In front of her, Cam Caron drove his truck quickly over the highway. The air rushed around the vehicle, the only sound other than the engine. No one spoke. Fleurette wasn't sure if it was because they were all nervous or slightly embarrassed at what they were doing.

When Cécile telephoned her from the cabin earlier, she'd been happy to hear from her, because Cécile had left hurriedly from *la maison des vieilles filles* earlier. Fleurette had barely noticed her going—she'd been so absorbed in piecing together the bits of Rosa Lefebvre's life—but later had wondered if Cécile had been upset about something.

On the phone, Cécile asked if Fleurette would open the store for her, because she needed shells for her shotgun. "I hate to ask, you know," she'd said, sounding embarrassed. "But this is important."

Baffled, Fleurette had asked, "You're going hunting in the dark? That's illegal, you know. Cécile, what's going on?"

When Cécile had told her she would explain when she got back to the village, Fleurette found herself too curious to wait. “I’ll come pick you up,” she’d offered.

In the van and, later, in the store, Fleurette had listened to Cécile put together a story about Gareau, about the *loup-garou* legend, about the missing Guy child.

In the darkened store, Fleurette hadn’t bothered to turn on the lights. She didn’t want anyone to know she was in the store. Even when the store was closed, if the lights were on, people would often knock on the door, knowing they would be let in to buy *juste une p’tite chose*. Fleurette knew her way around the store like her own home, even in the dark. She loved being in the store at night, the heavy, amorphous shapes of merchandise resting on the darkened shelves. If she stared at them long enough, the individual packages began to take shape, since she knew exactly what should be in that particular spot. Often she fancied she could read the name brands on the packages, even though the darkness on the shelves was near total. Cécile had not followed Fleurette into the obscurity of the aisle, but had nervously remained near the counter, where moonlight shone through the window. Fleurette had opened the locked case with the munitions and was rummaging on the bottom shelf for the right kind of shell, while she listened to Cécile talk, in a high thin voice, about Père Côté’s plan to prowl around the Gareau *terre* tonight.

In the store, in her familiar surroundings, Fleurette had thought that Cécile—and the priest for that matter—was mad. Now, however, in Cam’s truck, with its four silent passengers, it all seemed possible to her. The existence of a *loup-garou* seemed possible. She revised all she knew about Julien Gareau. She remembered stories her grandmother used to tell, about *feux follets*, about pacts with the devil and haunted houses. Had all of that been made up or did the stories have some basis in fact? Fleurette believed in

miracles, in saints and in people with a gift for healing. She even believed in the devil. She had always discounted the dark tales like the ones her grandmother told as superstition, as legends and stories, but when she thought about it, believing in the *loup-garou* was not so different from believing in someone having the power to heal the sick.

Cam turned onto *le rang* Desrosiers, and parked the car on the gravel shoulder. As Fleurette stepped out of the truck, the night air seemed thicker, a murky soup fomenting the unpredictable, the impossible. What was she doing here, she wondered. She'd insisted on accompanying Cécile, even after Père Côté's look of disapproval when he'd seen her. She stood away from the truck and watched the others emerge. She watched their feet, Cam in his work boots walking to open the back of the truck, Cécile light in her sneakers, Père Côté in fancy hiking boots.

She heard Cam explain, "Cécile's shotgun is better for shorter distances because it has more spread. My rifle is better for a long range shot because it has a more accurate aim." She wasn't sure who he was supposed to be talking to.

I'm wearing the wrong shoes, Fleurette thought suddenly. I can't go tramping through the woods in the dark like this. She looked at her feet, still clad in the shoes she wore to the store that morning, thin leather loafers that were slightly stretched out of shape, and that easily slipped off her feet. If there were any danger, she could not run far, or fast. She was not in shape to do it. And not with these shoes.

She looked up. Near the truck, Cécile was taking her shotgun from its case. Cam opened the chamber of his rifle with a metallic crack. Père Côté, one knee on the ground, was tying the lace of his boot.

"I think I'll stay in the truck," Fleurette said. The others turned to look at her. "It would be safer I think. I have a cell phone in my purse. I'll listen for the sound of a shot. If I hear one, I'll call for help and I'll move the truck over toward *le rang* Gareau." She pointed in the direction of the highway.

From the truck's front seat, she watched them walk off, Cécile, her shotgun strapped to her shoulder, walked first, with Cam a half-step behind her. He carried his rifle pointing upward. The priest, a few steps behind them had both hands stuffed in the pockets of his down parka. They jumped over the drainage ditch, then climbed a short grassy incline, and a few moments later, they reached the border of the trees. Fleurette thought she saw Cécile look back at the truck before walking into the darkness of the tree cover, but she wasn't sure.

After the first few steps into the forest, Cécile was blinded. She stopped. "Who has the flashlight?" she asked. She was breathing shallowly, and feeling light-headed. Around them, the forest was alive with sounds of crickets, night birds, rustling leaves.

She heard Père Côté digging in the pockets of his coat. The movement of his hand rubbing against the nylon seemed obscenely loud. When he turned on the flashlight, Cécile saw metal flash in his other hand. As she watched him put a silver crucifix on a chain, around his neck, he gave a wry laugh, "Ridiculous. I know. But you two had guns, so I felt the need to bring *something*."

Cam whispered, "Keep the light down. Shine it on the ground right in front of us. This light makes us visible."

The beam of light went down to the forest floor and illuminated a swath of brown leaves, rocks, branches.

"This way," Cécile said.

It took them almost half an hour to walk to the rock where Cécile had encountered Gareau and his dog the other day. In the dark, their progress was slower than hers had been. Once they were standing on top of the rock, Cécile stopped. What had been, a second before, a whisper, the suspicion of another presence in the woods, now gripped her like a certainty. She took a step backward, and taking the flashlight from Père Côté, shone it on the spot below the *rocher* where Gareau had made his apparition. She moved the light around slowly, stopping at the movement of a small stand of cedars, then continuing. They stood in silence, listening, peering into the darkness. A whippoorwill called out. A branch cracked, then the ordinary sound-filled silence of the night forest resumed.

Cécile whispered, "This is as far as I got the other day. But the farm must be this way." She pointed with the flashlight. They followed the beam of light down the other side of the rock where they encountered a rough trail. They stopped and looked at each other. "This trail must lead to Gareau's farm," Cécile whispered. But why would there be such a well-worn path in the forest, she wondered. What did he do when he roamed in the woods?

Cam nodded and, since Cécile wasn't moving forward, gently took the flashlight from her. He took the lead.

Cécile followed, with Père Côté behind her. A dog barked in the distance and Cécile wondered if Gareau's dog would give them any trouble when they got to the farmyard. She stuck a hand into her jacket pocket, remembering how the dog had been docile when fed sandwiches. With her fingers, she located one of Barbaro's dog biscuits. Perhaps that would help.



Afterward, though they repeatedly went over the sequence of what happened next, the three of them could never agree on what really took place. Cam stopped and Cécile walked into him. She felt, or perhaps saw him shouldering his rifle. In order to do this, he dropped the flashlight to the ground. Cécile stepped aside with a loud intake of air and began to lift her own shotgun into position. Just beyond the flashlight's beam, slightly to the right, she could see the paws of an animal, half-crouched behind some bushes. Its eyes reflected light from the flashlight along with the outline of an ear and snout, an impression of fur. It was some sort of dog, but none of them could tell whether the animal was a dog, wolf, coyote, or even a fox. In the dark, it was impossible to determine its colour or its exact size, since it was partly crouched.

Cécile and Cam stood aiming their weapons at the animal waiting for it to move so they could identify it and decide on a course of action, but the animal remained motionless, waiting.

Cécile was trying to imagine how long they could all be frozen in this position when the animal coiled itself backward and leapt toward them. Or perhaps, it only moved toward them slightly. Perhaps its teeth were bared and it growled aggressively, or perhaps not.

Cécile would later remember Cam telling her to shoot, though Cam would remember her saying, "I can't shoot." Père Côté would be certain that no one spoke.

Two shots rang out almost simultaneously, followed by the sound of Cécile pumping the shotgun — *chikchik* — and the muffled sound of the empty shell falling on the ground. Only Cam's hand on her arm kept her from firing again.

At once, the animal yelped, an eerie sound, part growl, part scream, but then it ran off, perhaps in the direction of Gareau's farm, or perhaps in the direction of the

highway. Still shaking, Cécile shouted something. They ran forward. On the spot where the animal had stood, they found a splatter of blood on the leaves, a lump of bloody flesh. They had no idea which direction the injured animal had taken and argued about which direction to take. Cécile, heart pounding, wanted to continue toward Gareau's farm. "We've come this far," she said. Cam remarked that the gunshots would have been heard all around and that someone might call the police. Père Côté reminded them that Fleurette would wonder what had happened and would be taking the truck onto the highway to look for them. Thus, they decided to head in the direction of the highway.

In the truck, Fleurette sat in the dark thinking about Cécile. Had she really turned back before entering the forest? Was that glance back meant for her and, if so, what had it meant? She opened the window to make sure she would hear a signal shot if one were fired. The night sounds reached her inside the car and seemed peaceful. It wasn't long before she began to shiver. Her jean jacket was not warm enough to be sitting out at night. She was looking for something to do to distract herself from the cold, from the waiting, when she remembered about the cell phone.

Important to be prepared, she thought. In case of an emergency. She felt in her bag and found it. Of course its battery wasn't charged. She hardly ever used it since it didn't always work in this area. Not enough repeater towers. She plunged her hand into her bag again and came out with the DC adapter. In the dark, she couldn't see Cam's lighter to plug into. She tried to turn on the interior lights, but they did not seem to be working. She turned on the parking lights. Not long, she thought. She didn't want to burn out the battery, but a few minutes wouldn't matter. She leaned over and searched.

It was still dark, but she was reluctant to turn on the headlights at full power since that would make her visible for a distance. She felt along the truck's panel, looking for a protuberance that felt like a lighter. On the floor, her hand hit something that squeaked. A child's toy. She smiled. After a moment, she found the adapter socket without a lighter. Aha. She plugged in her phone, which lit up and beeped once, then sat up.

She started. A wolf. There. In the glow from the headlights, an animal trotted across the gravel road. Just in front of the truck, it stopped and looked at her. The light glowed white on its fur and reflected in its eyes. Then it shook its head, as though it were emphatically saying, No! and Fleurette recognized Barbaro. Heart pounding, she opened the truck door, and called out, "Barbaro, Barbaro." She whistled but the dog kept walking. On the other side of the road, it sat for a moment, shaking its head at her, as though waiting, before disappearing into the ditch. She stepped out of the truck onto the road. The gravel crunched under her feet. She called out, tentatively, "Barbaro?"

A bark. Not far, but the dog definitely seemed to be heading toward that wooded area, on the opposite side of the road from where Cécile was. Fleurette didn't even have a flashlight. She hesitated. "Barbaro?" She tried calling authoritatively, "*Ici! Viens!*" The dog barked again. Then, faintly, so faintly that she wasn't sure she'd heard it at all, a tiny voice called out, "*Maman?*" She felt the goose flesh rise on her arms and her body felt a wave of simultaneous hot and cold. That voice was from the nightmare she's had for years. She shivered.

Barbaro barked again. She made a quick balance sheet: missing child and missing dog vs. nightmare voice, darkness, werewolf, wild animals. Skunks were her personal terror. In her mind, the image of her own child gripped her, her son, his tiny face inanimate. She thought again, If only I'd had the amniotic fluid, that wonderful

pink stuff, I could have revived him. I know it. She knew then exactly what she would have given to have her child back. She crossed the road and stepped into the ditch.

Immediately, her right foot in its flat leather shoe, sank into four inches of mud and water. Damn. She clambered up the other side of the ditch, getting her other foot only marginally wet. She shuffled through a grassy stretch toward the trees, listening. Every time she stepped on her right foot, she heard, squish. She had to curl her toes to keep the heavy shoe on. At the border of trees, she stopped. She called out again, "Barbaro." The sound of her own voice was frightening, too loud. She was giving herself away. She listened until she heard the bark. Before stepping into the trees, she looked back at the truck, and, as she made the gesture, she understood that Cécile had not been looking at her, but had been wishing she were safe, back in the truck. Fleurette made a fist and stepped into the darkness of the forest.

Under the trees, it was much darker. She stopped and screwed her eyes shut, like she used to do when she was a child. When she opened them again, her eyes would be used to the darkness. She waited a moment, then opened her eyes. It was almost as dark, but the trees here were sparse. She could make out some shapes. She called out again, "Barbaro?"

It didn't take her very long to find them. They were not too far into the woods, and she felt her way slowly forward, hands ahead of her like the caricature of a blind person, her feet sliding over the ground, feeling for bumps and obstacles. She let herself be guided by Barbaro's barking, until she found the amorphous shape on the ground where the dog was lying almost on top of the child. The dog barked again, but this time it was almost a whine, a plea. She knelt. The child was shivering. She wanted to scream, "He's alive! He's alive!"

When she was near them, the dog moved away from the child. She took off her jacket and wrapped the boy up. She picked him up. He was heavy, dead weight. He moaned. She whispered to him, "Maxime, Maxime, Maxime." The boy whispered, "*Maman?*"

She thought, He is delirious. Is he dying? Asleep? She had no idea. He was very cold.

She kissed his forehead and said, "*Oui Maxime. C'est Maman. Oui Maxime, c'est Maman.*"

She carried him breathlessly through the woods, stumbling, but, somehow, never falling. She lost her right shoe, let it go. She did not feel the cold. Her entire attention was focussed on walking and on the sound of Barbaro's dog tags ahead of her.

Once she emerged from the trees, the night seemed so bright, she could not believe she'd thought it dark before. She walked more quickly. When she reached the ditch, she wondered for a moment, how she would jump across, while holding the child. She looked at the truck and thought, I just have to get there. It was so close. She stepped into the water, taking small, sure steps.

In the truck, she placed the boy in the back seat of the truck, and covered him with her coat. One of his legs was bent at an unnatural angle. It must be broken, she thought. She closed the windows, and started the car, turned the heater on maximum. As he warmed up, Maxime Guy began to wail loudly. She picked up the cell phone. With a finger in one ear, she explained the situation to the 911 operator. Thus, Fleurette did not hear the gunshots that rang out of the forest.

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Silently, they emerged from the forest near the edge of one of Gareau's fields. Behind Cécile, Père Côté turned off the flashlight. The highway was deserted and silent. No sign of Fleurette anywhere. As they began walking back toward *le rang* Desrosiers where they had parked, Cécile tried to relax, but she still felt like she'd been charged with electricity. Her skin seemed to tingle. On their way out of the woods, they had not seen any sign of the wounded animal. That meant it had headed further in, toward Gareau's farmyard, toward his house. She'd been right. They should have gone in that direction; they should have gone all the way into Gareau's yard.

As they approached *le rang* Desrosiers, flashing lights became visible.

"Shit!" Cam said. "Must be the cops."

They stopped, considering their next move. Thinking fast, Cécile said, "We need to stash the guns. We'll come back for them later."

They took the unused rounds from their firearms, and, while Cam ran back to the forest to hide them, Cécile and Père Côté walked hurriedly back toward the truck. Cécile wondered if Fleurette was okay. Was she the one who'd called the police? As Cam, running, caught up to them, they neared the intersection of the road, and realized that the lights were from an ambulance. They broke into a run.

They were a few meters from where the truck and the ambulance were parked side by side when Cécile saw Barbaro standing by the door on the driver's side. For a moment, she mistook the dog for the animal they'd been tracking, and thought it had attacked Fleurette. As she called out, "Fleur!" the impossibility of that scenario dawned on her, and Fleurette emerged from the back of the ambulance. She walked toward them, accompanied by Barbaro, and said, "Maxime Guy is alive."

*"Dieu merci!"* said Père Côté, as a police car arrived.

As Fleurette recounted what had happened, Cécile squatted down and petted her dog. She remembered the dog biscuit in her pocket as he licked her face. As the two police officers got out of the car, another car pulled up and Suong Guy emerged, pale and grim, and headed toward the ambulance. Everyone silently watched her enter the back of the ambulance and close the door.

Gareau awoke with a start. Gunshot. Was it a dream? He got up to go to the window, which looked onto the back of his property. Chien trudged behind him. When he walked, the pain in his leg was almost blinding. He bit down hard and looked out the window. Outside, everything seemed calm. The moon had risen above the line of trees. He went back to bed but was unable to sleep. When he heard the first siren go by on the highway, he wondered, but could not face walking across the house to look out the front window. Slowly, he limped to the bathroom and filled the tub with hot water. In the cupboard next to the toilet, he rifled around until he found an ancient box of salt. The cardboard on the box was deformed from moisture and the salt inside was congealed into one big cake. He knocked the box against the wall and opened the lid. When he soaked his leg in the salty water, the pain made his hair stand on end.

## Chapter 19

### Cécile and Cam

Cécile sat on the edge of her bathtub, watching the steam rise invitingly from the surface of the water. Her hands and feet were still numb with cold. After the ambulance carrying Maxime Guy and his mother had gone, they had stayed behind to give statements to the police. The two OPP officers, happy that the boy had been found, had not asked them too many questions about their reasons for a night search in this area. They'd asked Fleurette to lead them to the spot where she'd found the boy, and she'd gone off into the woods with them, this time wearing a pair of Estelle's winter boots that Cam found in the back of the truck. From the warmth of the truck, Cécile watched as, flanked by police officers carrying flashlights, her friend disappeared into the woods on the other side of the road. When they re-emerged a short while later, Fleurette was carrying the shoe she had lost.

Barbaro moaned. The dog, coiled on the bath mat in front of the toilet, was breathing heavily, eyes closed. There were burrs caught in the fur on his side. She would have to brush those out. She remembered the child lying on the stretcher at the back of the ambulance, his small face bathed in the flashing red lights. Did he have burrs caught on his clothing? She wondered again what Barbaro had been through. How long had he been with the Guy boy? She shivered and pulled her terry cloth robe closed around her throat.

It seemed that Gareau had not been responsible for Maxime Guy's disappearance, though Cécile still wondered if it was a coincidence that they had found both the child and the dog near Gareau's farm. Had the child walked that distance? She wasn't sure how far the Guys' farm was from the spot where the child was found, but it



was certainly a couple of kilometres through the woods. When Maxime Guy is well enough to talk, she thought, we will find out.

Cécile turned the taps off and poured sea salt into the water. That would take the ache out of her right shoulder, which still felt sore from the recoil of the shotgun. She felt uneasy when she remembered that animal they'd shot at in the woods. She couldn't, with any certainty, say what it had been. When they'd first seen Barbaro with Fleurette, Père Côté had affirmed that Barbaro was the animal they had seen and shot at, but Cécile was certain that wasn't possible. How could Barbaro have gotten back to the truck and led Fleurette to Maxime, with enough time for her to call the ambulance before they'd walked back to the highway. It just didn't add up. Besides, when she remembered the scream the animal made after they'd shot, she was sure it was wounded. She'd checked and Barbaro did not have a scratch. The memory of that almost human yelp gave her shivers. But, she told herself, surely, all animals, including humans, make similar sounds in distress. She closed the bag of sea salt and placed it on the shelf over the toilet.

As she untied her robe, she wished she could reread Fex's journal. She had been sleepy when she'd read it. Perhaps, she'd let her judgement become affected by a priest's morbid imaginings. As she slipped the robe from her shoulders, she remembered that Estelle had taken the book back earlier. "Damn!" she said loudly, and the dog raised an ear. "I'll call her first thing in the morning," she mumbled. Perhaps Estelle would not mind stopping by for a coffee while Cécile checked the sections mentioning the wolf terrorizing the community. She wanted to read it again, editing out everything that could reasonably be assumed to be the priest's hysteria, to see what bare

facts, if any, were left. Also, she wanted to double check that the missing child in the journal was not found, or even mentioned again.

Cécile was about to step into the tub, when Barbaro lifted his head and growled. She heard someone driving up to the cabin. Where was the gun she was using earlier? As she tugged her robe back on, she remembered that she'd left her shotgun in the back of Cam's truck.

She padded barefooted out of the bathroom with Barbaro at her heel, still growling. The kitchen was dark. Pressing herself against the wall, she glanced out the window. It was Cam. His truck was idling in front of the cabin, but he was still sitting in the driver's seat. Cécile turned on the kitchen light, then, with a rush of affection, watched him open the truck door. He went to the back of the truck to get her shotgun, and bounded up the porch stairs.

"I drove all the way home before I remembered the guns," he said when she opened the door. "I thought you would like yours back tonight," he added, taking off his cap and running his fingers through his hair. He made no move to come in or leave.

"You want a coffee?" Cécile asked, feeling awkward. "Or some tea?"

"You got any hot chocolate? *J'ai encore frette.*"

Cécile was suddenly aware of being half-dressed. "Sit down," she said, putting the kettle on. "I'm a little cold too. I'm gonna go put some clothes on, OK?"

When she returned to the kitchen, wearing jeans and a sweater, Cam was kneeling on the ground, rubbing the dog's belly. Barbaro was lying on his back with his legs up in the air, panting, looking blissful. She pulled the can of instant hot chocolate mix from the cupboard. "This is leftover from last year," she said. "We'll have to see if it's still good."

"OK," Cam agreed, standing up. "Great dog," he said, coming over to the counter to get his cup. "Looks like he's a hero too."

"I wonder what happened out there. I do know I will be keeping a closer eye on this one." She waved her chin at the dog. "I thought dogs had a good sense of direction. He was pretty far from home tonight."

Cam shrugged and sat down at the kitchen table, "You're not his first owner, right? Maybe he was trying to make his way back to his other home."

"Well, he made it about a quarter of the way to Sturgeon!" she laughed, sitting down opposite Cam. Barbaro came to sit next to her and put his head on her knee. She petted him and added thoughtfully, "I wonder."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Cécile feeling uncomfortable in this situation that felt almost domestic, almost intimate. She thought of Ti-Jean sitting across from her at that table on cold evenings having a warm drink, talking, talking. She couldn't even remember what they used to talk about, but in her memory, they talk constantly.

Cam cleared his throat. "The hot chocolate is good. Thanks."

"Yeah," she said. "It's fine. I guess the stuff keeps."

After their cups were empty, Cam put his coat back on, saying, "It's late." He opened the door then turned back. "Should we start on the cabin tomorrow?"

She said, "Yeah, sure. But let me sleep in a little, okay." The open door was letting in a draught of cold air along the floor, icy on her bare feet.

Cam gave a little laugh, then, more seriously, said, "I wonder what we saw tonight. What we shot at. A wolf, a dog?"

"I don't know," Cécile said cautiously. She didn't know what Père Côté had told Cam about tonight's outing. Conceivably, he could have omitted the story about the *loup-garou*. She wasn't about to bring it up now.

Cam shrugged. "I wonder if we'll ever know." Then moving forward slightly, then back, then forward again, he awkwardly leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "*Ben bonsoir! Sleep tight!*" The roughness of his cheek grazed hers. He smelled like wood smoke and something clean. Soap?

After he'd gone, she stood looking at the closed door, her cheek feeling the imprint of where his had made contact, her whole body jolted by a sudden rush of adrenaline.

She was wide awake now. Her bath water was surely cold by now. She looked distractedly around the kitchen for something to do, and noticed the flashing light on her answering machine. She hadn't noticed it before. When she pushed the button, Estelle's voice materialized like a reprimand. "Cécile, did you come and take the journal back? I had left it on the kitchen counter and I can't find it. The kids swear they didn't touch it. But, who knows with them. I'll talk to them again." Dial tone. Beep.

Later, in bed, Cécile thinks about Cam.

He is standing near Cabin Nine with a hammer in his hand. When he sees her approach, Cam flings the hammer onto the ground and takes off his cap. He wipes his forehead with the back of his sleeve and holds her gaze.

Cécile walks to him. She kisses him. She smells his skin, wood smoke and soap, tastes the salt on his lips. She puts her hands on his chest beneath his jacket, palms rubbing the softness of his cotton shirt. Her hands fumble with the zipper on his jeans

and Cam places his hand on her breast. She tugs at the waist of Cam's jeans, pulls them down over his thighs.

Cam kicks off his jeans, then kneeling in front of her, pulls hers down. He wraps his arms around her thighs and stands, lightly lifting her, backing her up against the cabin wall. Cam's tongue darts into her.

She moans.

Cécile sat up in bed and turned the light on. "This is crap." Guiltily, images of Ti-Jean and Estelle flitted through her mind. What hope would she have of ever rebuilding her life in Pointe-Mouillée if she had an affair with Cam? What would happen to her friendship with Fleurette?

She sighed and turned the light back off. She stuffed her head deep into the feather pillow, and said loudly to herself. "Change the channel." On the floor next to the bed, she heard Barbaro's collar jingle as he raised his head. He whimpered questioningly.

Cécile is watching the folksinger walk up onto the black plywood stage of the Coulson Tavern in Sudbury. She's there with Huguette, the only other single teacher at *L'Héritage*, the high school where Cécile teaches Geography. Huguette, who teaches French, insisted that a reluctant Cécile come with her to hear this *chansonnier*, Ti-Jean Desrosiers, because she was required to teach her kids about folk songs. "I need some inspiration. And you can't let me go to the Coulson by myself!" Huguette had exclaimed, with a panic-stricken look, until Cécile had agreed to accompany her.

The *chansonnier* puts his papers down on the tall stool stationed in front of the microphone and takes a sip of beer. He wipes the foam off his lips with the back of his hand and turns to face the crowd, which doesn't notice he is there. Cécile sees him swallow. He looks off into the distance, toward the back wall, as though he's not sure what to do. He takes another sip from his beer. Cécile takes a sip from her own beer. Next to her, Huguette is talking to a guy sporting a big brown moustache and a bolo tie.

Cécile turns her attention back to the stage. The performer is still staring at the back wall. Later, Ti-Jean will tell her that, through the door in that back wall, he could see into the bar across the hallway, which had a stripper on its stage. The stripper was squatting and gyrating around a metal pole in a shower of coloured lights. On-stage, he was telling himself that he could take it in stride, that it was cool, though the truth was he'd never really watched a stripper before and was completely mesmerized and folk songs were the farthest thing from his mind.

Ti-jean picks up his notes and licking his lips, starts to read in French.

"We think of our ancestors as coarse. *Des vrais farmers*. Nothing artistic. But every day of their lives they danced intricate steps with the soil, with the seasons. Their work was their art. It was everything. It was everyday. And they inlaid their work with gems of song. Individuality asserted itself though the intricate details in a particular interpretation of a song everyone knew. Fewer of us remember these songs, the words, the tunes, but so long as one remembers, they live on. If you know the words to these *chansons à répondre*, please join in. That's what they were intended for."

Cécile is fascinated and jealous of the ease with which he talks about his ancestors, and his ownership of the folk songs stored in his brain, easily retrieved. She has no such concept of heritage, or race. At the same time, she stands back sceptically,

thinking that this concept of heritage is antiquated, that culture is either vital and moves forward or it stagnates and dies. There is no possible rescue for a culture in decline.

After his set where some of the patrons, including Huguette and her bolo-tie'd companion, sing along loudly, and many others leave to go to the strip bar across the hall, Ti-Jean comes to stand at the bar. Cécile introduces herself. He flirts. She flirts back. Later that evening, after he has told her about the stripper, she takes him across to the strip bar. While the woman dances on stage, Cécile presses herself against Ti-Jean and kisses him.

Later, when they are sitting in her frozen car, waiting for the motor to warm up, Ti-Jean says to her, shivering, "Lust is lust. What I really want is someone I can belong to. Someone who can feel like home."

## Chapter 20

### Departure

It was almost ten o'clock when Ghyslain woke up. The house was quiet. He was in the double bed where he no longer slept with Fleurette. He sat up, momentarily disoriented, then saw his things packed and lined up beside the bed. "*Shit!*" he said loudly, pushing the covers off. He went to the bedroom window. In the distance, he could see the sun blazing a trail over the waves of Lake Wabigwani. He tasted disappointment. He'd missed his opportunity.

The night before, Fleurette had left the house suddenly, without saying where she was going. From the window of the living-room where he'd been watching television, he'd watched her get into the van and drive toward the junction of *le chemin du lac*. She could be going to Sturgeon, he'd thought. He remembered seeing the van when he'd driven past the *Feux Follets* motel a few days before. A spasm of fear and loss had gripped him. At the time, he'd thought the feeling was probably akin to contractions, a kind of reversal of giving birth: giving up. Last night, as he'd watched Fleurette's van slow to a stop at the T-intersection, he'd turned away not wanting to see it turn toward Sturgeon. He told himself he should feel jealousy or even grief, but the truth was that the only thing he could feel was a burgeoning excitement at the thought of leaving Pointe-Mouillée.

He'd turned off the television in order to better tune in the feeling. He'd fingered the medallion on a chain around his neck and let the emotion swell. It was familiar. Something he remembered from his youth, before he'd taken up with Fleurette, before she'd seduced him into believing he could come to stand in the line of *Leduc & fils*. The



feeling had been rekindling within him in the past few days, like a muscle flexing after a long injury. It was tender but exhilarating.

During Rosa's funeral that morning, he'd had a strange feeling that his half-sister had not merely *neglected* to update her will. For forty years? It was unlikely. He'd begun to think that Rosa had been trying to send him some sort of message. Not a regardless-of-circumstance- we-are-flesh-and-blood-after-all message. No. Something more essential. Her will had shaken things up. For him. For Adèle Denis. Maybe she'd wanted to give him an opportunity: to make the decision to change his life, to leave Pointe-Mouillée. She'd forced the same decision upon Adèle Denis.

As Ghyslain had walked to the stairs, he'd suddenly thought, I will start packing now. He knew where he would go. Toronto. He had plenty of money; he was sure his father-in-law would give him a good reference. He could find work and a new life. He felt the possibility of escape singing in his blood. Buried deep within his plans was the image of finding his cousin 'Dolphe. Though, surely, he'd said to himself, he must be dead by now.

Halfway up the stairs, he'd turned back to the couch and picked up the old blue afghan. In recent years, since his marriage with Fleurette had soured, he'd come to think of the couch as his bed, this afghan as his nest. He would bring it with him. He would not bring much. He would need his clothes. What else? If he hurried, he could even go in the morning.

He'd run up the stairs. It had seemed suddenly urgent that he be ready to go in the morning. In the bedroom, he'd flung open the closet door and begun piling clothes on the bed. He would need more suitcases, he'd thought feverishly, then decided to pack everything in plastic trash bags. He'd skipped down to the kitchen to find some.

Perhaps, he'd thought, as he heaped his belongings into the plastic bags, if he slept a few hours, he could leave very early and watch the sun rise behind him as he drove past *la croix de chemin*. Yes, he'd thought, that's the very thing. A symbol.

Now, Ghyslain got out of bed and walked slowly to the toilet. As he pissed, he mused on how he'd missed the chance for a poetic escape. He turned on the shower, unsure of his next move, hesitated before stepping in. He put his head under the hot spray. The sting of the water on his face felt good. Perhaps it could scour away the numb feeling of disappointment that felt like it coated his skin.

After a time, he thought, Well, there will be another sunrise tomorrow. I guess I could leave tomorrow morning. He shook his head, spraying water all around him. He felt clarity returning. A sense of purpose. Tomorrow would be too late. If he waited too long, inertia would take over and he would not leave. He would not make the decision to remain here. But, his clothing would stay in their suitcases and bags for months perhaps, and he would pull out what he needed, putting them on a heap on the floor. Perhaps, after a time, he would decide to hang some newly-pressed clothes in the closet. For convenience only, of course. Then, finally, one day, he would realize that the only things left in his suitcases were those things he didn't need, and his out-of-season clothing.

No, it would not do. He would leave today. He turned off the water. He thought suddenly, There's always sunset. The sun would set in front of him as he drove over *la rivière du Prétendant*. From there, he would see the top of the *croix de chemin* silhouetted in the sunset. He would say goodbye to his Mémère and his father. Goodbye to Rosa... And thank you.

“Even better!” he exclaimed. An ending. A curtain dropping. He would drive in the dark and arrive in Toronto at night, when his new life would be illuminated and exciting. He grabbed a towel and rubbed his skin hard while he made plans. I’ll book myself a nice hotel room. Take it easy for today. But first, he would make himself a big breakfast. He suddenly had a huge appetite.

## Chapter 21

### Wounds

Standing behind the counter, Fleurette rang up a jar of instant coffee, a bag of apples, and a bottle of vanilla extract for Mme Lelièvre. This morning, the store's Saturday morning routine seemed anything but routine so tired was she from the previous evening's excitement. After she'd gotten home from her outing with Cécile, Père Côté, and Cam, she'd found the house quiet and dark. Ghyslain was not sleeping on the living-room room couch with the television on, as he had been the past few nights. She'd looked for him in the kitchen, and thought, This is really it. He's gone.

But when she'd climbed the stairs to get into bed, she'd found Ghyslain asleep in their bed with the bedside lamp still burning. He was wrapped in the blue afghan from the couch. She was about to stride in and demand that he sleep elsewhere when she noticed that, next to the bed, were four suitcases standing side by side in a neat row, and, next to that several full garbage bags. The top of Ghyslain's dresser was emptied of its possessions and the opened door of his closet showed the empty space within.

Fleurette handed Mme Lelièvre her bag of groceries. The elderly woman smiled and said softly, "*Merci. Et félicitations!* I heard how you went looking for Maxime Guy last night. It was a very brave thing. I would never have had the nerve myself." And before Fleurette could say anything, she added, "I'm so glad to hear everything is back to normal."

As the old woman left, Fleurette thought to herself how very far from normal things seemed. That morning, after a night in the spare room, she had left the house before Ghyslain woke up. She expected that he would be going that day. Perhaps he

was gone already. She was glad. She had half believed that he would not leave. That they would never be rid of each other because they would not have the nerve or the strength of will to end it in any definitive way. That she would not move into *la maison des vieilles filles*, that they would go on being housemates, working at the store together for months, then for years, she waiting for him to make a move, he waiting for her.

She wanted him to leave Pointe-Mouillée. If he stayed, she would always feel that something remained unfinished, an end not tied up. She would hate it. It would feel, she told herself with a grimace, like dragging a weight behind me. Like wearing a wedding dress outside, the train snagging on rocks, on branches, on everything in my way.

The bell, indicating that someone was pulling up to the gas tanks, chimed loudly. From somewhere in the store, her father materialized and went to answer the call. He passed Dr. Gagnon who was coming in. The doctor walked up to the checkout counter and loudly slapped both palms on its surface. "Wonderful news!" he exclaimed. "Fleurette my dear, you're a hero! I spent the night at the hospital and —" He paused for effect. He picked up a copy of the Saturday paper, unfolded it and made a great show of scanning the headlines. After a moment, he put the paper down.

"Looks like the boy will be fine! Ha ha! I call that some sort of miracle. A little frostbite in the hands, and right now, he won't talk at all, but probably nothing permanent. I tell you, *ma belle*, I had a rough night. I'm not young enough for these *nuits blanches* anymore. Ah! I tell you! But at least it's good news."

"That's great," Fleurette said, not mentioning that she too had had a sleepless night. When she'd lain down on the spare bed, in the room that had been hers as a child, she'd found herself unable to sleep, her mind busy trying to assimilate the fullness of

recent events: her finding Maxime Guy in the woods, Ghyslain's departure, her own moving plans. Eyes open, staring at the ceiling, she'd spent the night moving from discomfort at the thought of losing Ghyslain, to a giddy freedom at being self-contained.

Dr. Gagnon was still talking. "Then, when I got home at three o'clock in the morning, the phone was ringing off the hook. Julien Gareau needed some medical attention at home. I'd never been into the Gareau farm. The place is so old. It looks like it could have been here a hundred years." He lowered his voice. "You know, there really is a bullet hole in the wall of the kitchen. I looked. Couldn't help it. Too much a part of local legend not to check." He laughed.

"What was wrong with him?" Fleurette asked, suddenly feeling wide awake.

"Leg injury. He had an accident with the axe. Took a chunk off the side of his leg so he couldn't drive himself to the hospital. Looked like some infection there too. I gave him some pills."

Fleurette felt a wave of excitement. Gareau's leg was injured. She thought of the conversation in the van the night before, Cam and Cécile and Père Côté describing how they had shot a large dog, how they had injured it and found some blood. It all fits, she thought. *Mon Dieu!* Gareau is....

She stepped out from behind the counter, rushed past Dr. Gagnon, mumbling, "Sorry. Be right back."

Fleurette closed the door to the back room and dialled Cécile's number. She listened to it ring once, twice. After four rings, as she heard the answering machine click on, Fleurette hung up. What would she say on an answering machine?

As she shot out of the back room, Fleurette smelled the bread in the oven of the bakery. She'd almost forgotten. She checked the timer. Still fifteen minutes left to bake.

She couldn't leave now. As she neared the counter, she saw two customers queued up at the checkout. She glanced outside. Her father was next to the gas tanks, looking into the back of Danny Vincent's truck, where a row of red plastic gas holders was piled up. Her father was laughing. As she watched, Binou Coutu drove up next to the truck and got out, joining the conversation. Fleurette sighed. It would have to wait. She stepped up to the till and tried to smile, "*Bonjour!*"

The store was busy until close to lunchtime. Her father, who'd spent the morning pumping gas, stocking shelves, and selling lottery tickets, came to ask her if she wanted to have lunch now. "With Ghyslain gone," he said, as an aside, "we'll have to look into hiring regular help. "

Fleurette was glad to go. All morning, something had been nagging at her. The mention of Gareau's accident with the axe had triggered a memory of another accident that she couldn't quite recall. She knew she had read about something similar in one of the texts on the walls of Rosa's private room, but could not recall exactly what it was.

She walked quickly down the sidewalk and into *la maison des vieilles filles*, oblivious of Mme St-Amant staring out her window. Upstairs, she opened the door to Rosa's room and began scanning the walls for the mention of the axe. She knew approximately where she would find it, in the corner by the window. She remembered this because the mention of the axe came at around the same time that she read something about eggs being sold door-to-door. That had caught her attention, because she had wondered if all farmers had sold produce then, or if the *Magasin Général* had acted as a market for local goods. Now, all the goods sold in the store came from suppliers, even goods that local farmers produced, like dairy products, eggs, grains,

vegetables. Farmers sold their produce to large companies who then resold them to the suppliers who supplied retail stores. *Leduc et Fils* didn't buy anything directly from Pointe-Mouillée's farmers.

It didn't take long for Fleurette to find the scrap of paper she was looking for, approximately at waist level, exactly where she remembered it. The axe was mentioned on the same page, a small piece of lined notebook paper, which had been irregularly torn along its left margin. The narrow portion glued to the wall remained of a piece. The torn edge was glued close to the window frame, making it seem as though the paper had been torn before being glued, and not afterward, like the others.

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... eau came by again this morning. Ostensibly to sell some eggs, but  
... swered the door, he asked for me. I asked him into the parlour, then later  
... till limping from his accident with the axe, we managed quite imaginatively  
... he gave it to me, it was hidden in a perfect, hollowed eggshell which I

immediately

... great scene about it, refusing to cook supper though it is  
... ne of her affair what I wish to do with my

The first word, "reau," had been torn in half, but it could be Gareau. He was limping from an accident with an axe! Fleurette exhaled loudly. Another accident with an axe. And it must have injured his leg, since he was limping. How likely was that?

Fleurette read it again, heart racing. He had come here to sell some eggs, then... what? Rosa had asked him into the parlour. He was limping but they had done



something imaginatively. She paused and looked out the window. The sky was a serene blue, as it had been since the passing of the storm, as though a great emotion had spent itself, and the sky was left feeling expansive and calm. What had Rosa and Gareau done that required imagination to compensate for his lame leg? She rejected her first thought. They could not have been lovers. She couldn't put together her image of the beautiful Rosa Lefebvre and the monstrous Julien Gareau. She wouldn't. He could have been helping her fix a fence. Dig a ditch. Put up a clothesline. Surely there were many things that two women alone could not quite manage to do themselves. She looked around the house. What would she need help doing?

She kept reading. Something was given inside an eggshell. Gareau gave something to Rosa inside an eggshell. A perfect eggshell. Perfect. Gareau's big, hairy hands delicately breaking an eggshell, washing it carefully and placing something inside to give to Rosa. A lover's gift. Fleurette had no doubt about it. And Adèle had been angry. Jealous? Had refused to cook dinner. Fleurette looked at the word affair on the last line. Affair. Could it be?

She sat on the floor and tried to absorb the conflicting images of Rosa and of Gareau that emerged from this tiny piece of paper. She had come to believe that Rosa and Adèle were a couple, though not without their share of problems. Had Rosa been Gareau's lover? Yet, had remained with Adèle. Why?

And Gareau, what was she to make of his recent accident with the axe? How could she think that a man who had placed a gift in a perfect eggshell could be so clumsy...

She paused. The day before, while looking through Rosa's drawers, she'd noticed an egg carton. She'd noted it with mild curiosity, but hadn't pulled it out. She

walked to the topmost drawer and pulled it open. Behind the holder brimming with pens and pencils, erasers, and behind a pile of new, shrink-wrapped notebooks, she found a cardboard egg carton. To pull it out of the shallow drawer, she had to empty the contents of the drawer onto the desk.

She lifted it out. It was light. Empty? She placed it on the desk, and opened it carefully. Inside, in the centre of the box, there it was. A perfect eggshell, broken in two halves, held shut with two small pieces of tape, yellowed with age. Fleurette removed one of the pieces of tape and opened the half-shell. Part of it broke when she touched it. Inside, on a bed of cotton, was a ring. She lifted it out through the fragments of eggshell.

The ring was small, gold, with a cluster of stones: three opals surrounded by six tiny, round diamonds. As Fleurette picked up the ring, the opals flashed green, yellow and blue. She placed the ring on her baby finger, where it fit too loosely. She struggled to push it onto the ring finger of her right hand but the ring was too small. She noticed with surprised that her own wedding rings were still on her finger. She would stop wearing those she thought. She took off the ring. It was Cécile-sized, she thought with a flush of warmth. She returned the ring carefully to its eggshell container. She would replace everything until she could show Cécile, she thought, placing the egg carton at the back of the drawer. But she would have to go back to the store first. Her father would be waiting for his lunch break.

As she replaced the pile of blank notebooks in front of it, she noticed that the bottommost notebook was different from the rest. She examined it. Like the rest, it was a half-size child's school book, of a kind they sold in the store, but this one was older than the others. The others seemed to have been bought at the same time and were wrapped five per package, but the bottommost one was wrapped individually. She felt the

difference in the plastic immediately. It was kitchen wrap. Rosa had wrapped that one herself. Eagerly, she took the cellophane off the book.

As she opened the cover, a small pile of papers slid out from between the pages of the book. She let the pages fall on the desk and looked at the writing in the notebook. She recognized Rosa's handwriting immediately.

## Chapter 22

### The Lodge

Early in the morning on Saturday, Cécile hears Ti-Jean whispering to her.

*"Cécile... Tes cheveux sont si doux."*

The feeling of his hand on top of her head, the weight of it, the warmth, the feeling of it fitting over her forehead, a match.

*"Viens ici, ma princesse."*

The line of his arm, muscle curving outward and down, brown skin, dark hair on the forearm, the welcoming line of the arm traced in the air, drawing her in, inviting her to move closer.

Behind him, she sees bluesky greenleaves, the white splash of birch trunk. The taste of the air, the feeling of it drawn into her mouth, on her tongue, air cooling in the evening after a hot summer day. The motion of her body forward, toward him. Her own weight tangible, not a memory but real, toward him. Right here.

*"Viens ici..."*

When she awoke, she was left with an ache, like after a sudden impact, aftershock, that made her breath ragged, made her bite her lip. She heard the buzzing of a chain saw. Its scream made the rock face ring. She sat up in bed. It took her a moment to piece it together. Cam. She hadn't even heard him drive into the lodge.

It was 10:30. She'd slept in. She dressed quickly.

Even before she and Barbaro arrived at cabin number nine, Cécile smelled wood. She heard the knock and scrape of hammers, and a loud voice coming from the roof, *"Look out below. J'garoche ça en bas!"* As the cabin came into view, she recognized

Bâtard, Cam's cousin, on its roof. Below, Cam's reply was lost in a gust of wind that loosened leaves and sent them somersaulting through the air around her.

She watched them while Barbaro went sniffing down the road. Bâtard was sitting on the roof, near where the top of the pine tree had lain, and where there was now a hole in the roof. He was pulling shingles off and flinging them off onto a pile on the ground where they landed with a clap. The tree had been removed and quartered. A pile of large sections of trunk and branches rested nearby. The largest segment of the trunk still had branches reaching skyward, and looked like an overturned beetle with long, straggling arms, and a chain around its belly.

With the chain saw at his feet, Cam stood, cap high on his forehead, looking up at Bâtard on the roof.

As she got closer, Cécile called out, "Hey!"

Cam turned and walked toward her. "It doesn't look good," he said immediately.

Her heart sank, "What doesn't?"

"The roof. The tree broke a couple of rafters and the truss at the hip of the roof is cracked. Rotting, I'd say. Lots of shingles missing or damaged. Water's getting in. Were people complaining about leaks in there before the tree?"

"I don't remember," she admitted.

He shrugged, "Maybe it's recent. How old are these cabins, now? Twenty years old? Maybe the job wasn't done well to begin with. We might want to look at the other cabins' roofs. Eventually. But, now, I'm thinking that, while we're repairing this, we might as well put in a whole new roof. New frame, new board, new shingles. The lot."

Cam stopped talking and looked at her, and it took her a moment to realize that he was waiting for her to make the decision. She looked over her shoulder. Barbaro bounded into view. There was no one else to give the go ahead.

"Let's do it," she said.

After they finished tearing off the shingles, they removed the roof's plywood covering, then the rotting frame. By early afternoon, the sun was warm, making the leaves glow amber, and they were ready to start building the new frame. Cécile's hands smelled of tar and mildew and wood. While Bâtard made the run to Rochon's in Sturgeon Falls for lumber, Cécile and Cam loaded up Cam's truck with old shingles and rotten wood. With each piece she was tossing away, she felt like she was taking charge. Action. She breathed deeply and let it fill her lungs. She liked the feeling that physical work gave her, being outside, doing. Just doing.

"How's your car?" Cam asked.

Cécile leaned over to pick up some shingles. "Vincent looked at it and said everything checked out."

He was quiet for a moment. "I didn't see it parked by the house."

She stood and tossed the shingles into the box of Cam's pickup. "I'm not driving that thing again. I'm going to tell him to sell it."

"What will you do?"

"Maybe I'll get a bike," she said. Then added, shrugging, "I guess I'll buy a truck or something. I'll need it for this place."

From the corner of her eye, she saw Cam's eyebrows rise but he made no comment.

When Bâtard returned, Cam asked him to drive the refuse to the dump. While Bâtard was gone, Cam would start building the rafter trusses and when he returned, they would carry them up to the roof.

“Looks like I’m the driver today,” he said, laughing, as he took Cam’s keys.

After making measurements along the roof ridge, Cam started shaping a series of V’s that he carefully placed next to the cottage. As she watched, Cécile remembered that she had heard Ti-Jean say many times that Cam had the best eye in town for *charpente* work.

“Get me another box of nails?” he asked Cécile, not looking up from his work.

Before she even asked, “From where?” he said, “The back of Bâtard’s truck.”

Bâtard’s new black pickup was parked near the fallen behemoth of a tree. There was fresh lumber tied to the roof rack. It looked slightly obscene to Cécile, like a plate of steak next to the carcass of a cow. In the back, she found boxes of nails, paint, shingles, a couple of tool chests.

When she arrived with the nails, he sent her back for the level. She held, while he sawed, marked off angles. She watched him.

His hands were wrinkled and hairless, brown and freckled from a summer of work. His fingernails were round, light as full moons against his dark skin, and flecked with white spots. She could tell that if she touched his palms, they would feel hard, like her heels. He didn’t make small talk, seemed to barely notice that she was around and to take for granted that she, or someone, would hand him what he needed. The top of his face was hidden in the shadow of his cap, but he breathed like someone praying,

someone playing music. He breathed deeply and evenly. He did not pause, but moved steadily ahead.

Once she began to look at him fixedly, she realized how much grace and foresight and skill there were in his movements. His whole being was engaged. His legs pushed his torso forward, motion fluidly pouring into his biceps that then stirred the muscles in his forearms. His hand extended into the hammer. The hammer was elastic, bent like rubber in an arc from his wrist. He hit the nail without fail.

The fingers of his left hand wrapped around the nail from Cécile; he reached without looking, knowing where the nail would be. The nail swooped down into place on the wood, without hesitation, a small, sure sound. Toc. Then bang. The hammer came down on the head, drove it in with one hit, rarely two. Without skipping a beat, the left hand would reach for another nail. Toc bang. Toc bang. Toc bang.

As the hammer came down, Cam would exhale forcefully and a tiny hiss would escape his lips, one that only he and Cécile could hear, like the release of the tension in his body, a recoil. Toc hiss bang. She became immersed in his rhythm; she felt part of it. She remembered working in such close rhythm with Ti-Jean. There was something erotic about it. The sharing of breath. She breathed silently in time with Cam's breath.

As she handed him a nail, she understood that the reason she'd been attracted to Cam since her return was, in part, her need to have someone to share the workload with. Someone who would face running the lodge with her. She wanted Ti-Jean back. Before she could stop it, she'd sobbed out loud.

Cam looked up at her, surprised. Surprised at her distress, or perhaps surprised that she was there at all. Then the hammer came down on his thumb. His cap tumbled onto the ground as Bâtard drove in and parked the truck next to them.



*"Sacrament!"* Cam shouted, holding his left hand in his right.

Bâtard jumped out of the truck. Cécile took a step backward, away from Cam whose pain seemed compounded by the confusion of one deep in thought who has been interrupted.

"What happened?" Bâtard asked.

Cam looked at his own thumb, dumbfounded. The blood had risen in a bubble under the nail. Bâtard looked at the teary Cécile quizzically.

Cam said, "Break." Cradling his injured hand in the other, he went to sit on a tree stump.

"If you're all right, I'll go make some tea," Cécile volunteered and rushed off down the road to the cabin.

"You got any coffee?" Bâtard called out.

Inside her own kitchen, as the coffee maker hissed and spat, she clumsily rifled through cupboards for a thermal flask. Embarrassed at her outburst, she squatted and rifled through the cupboard below the sink, where they had kept an assortment of things seldom used: a crock pot, a stir fry pan, an electric knife, still in its box, and — *aha!* — the thermos flask Ti-Jean had bought for hunting trips. She had pulled the stainless steel flask out and was frowning at the amount of dust on it, when the telephone rang. From under the table, Barbaro half-barked. Flask still in hand, she ran to answer.

*"Allô Cécile."* It was Estelle. "I've been trying to call all morning."

"I've been working on the cabin with Cam."

Estelle shrieked with laughter. *"Ben maudit!"* I forgot he was there today."

Cécile smiled. "Hey, Estelle, did you come here to get the book yesterday?"

Estelle sounded sheepish. "*Oui*. Sorry for barging into your house like that. I walked in cause I thought you might not be hearing the door or something. All the lights were on. Then I saw the book on the table... I felt really bad and I wanted to go give it to *le Père*. I drove over to *le presbytère* straight away, but, of course, he wasn't home either. Cam told me you were all out together last night. By the way, it's great you found the little Guy boy. I know I'm relieved."

Cécile murmured assent.

"The reason I'm calling, actually, is to ask... You didn't come to my house and take the priest's book back, did you?"

"You left a message on my machine last night."

"I know. I wasn't sure if you'd gotten it. I asked the kids and they all swear — *j'te jure Mom, j'te jure* — that they didn't touch it. I looked everywhere...."

"I haven't seen it since yesterday. I don't know what to suggest."

"I'm really nervous about Père Côté," Estelle replied. "I don't know what I'm going to tell him. When he finds out the book is missing, he'll fire me."

Cécile wasn't sure whether or not to tell Estelle that Père Côté already knew about the missing book, that she'd told him about it. She wasn't sure how much Cam had told her about the previous night's outing. Before Cécile could say anything, she heard a car drive up to the front of the cabin. With relief, she said, "Can I call you later Estelle? Someone's here."

At the front window, she saw the *Leduc's* van coming to a stop. Behind her, the coffee-maker sputtered as the last drops of water went through the percolator. Cécile opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. She waved and smiled. She would ask

Fleurette to bring the coffee up to the cabin site with her. That way she would not have to face the two men alone.

When the van was stopped, Fleurette jumped out, flushed with excitement. She was holding a notebook in one hand. "Cécile, come see what I found!"

Inside the cabin, Fleurette handed Cécile the notebook. As Cécile opened it, the set of loose pages slipped out from behind the cover. She glanced at them, heart beating faster. They were pages from Michel Fex's journal.

"Fleurette! These are..."

Fleurette interrupted, "I thought they might be part of that journal you told me about."

Cécile sat down at the table. A quick glance told her the pages were the ones missing from the centre of the book. She was disappointed that they weren't the book's final pages.

Fleurette said, "You'll want to read what's in the notebook after you're done... Can I get myself a cup of coffee?"

**Chapter 23**  
**Section of Michel Fex's Journal**  
**(Insert in the Notebook of Rosa Lefebvre)**

...they will be gone. Papineau told me when he came by today to help me do something about the chapel. It is as cold as the ninth circle of hell in there. Everyone wears their coats and furs during Mass, and the small stove is stoked, and yet we can see our breath. By the end of the service, my hands are numb and my nerves frayed from the fidgeting going on in front of me. This is no way to serve the Lord. Papineau and I spent most of the afternoon stuffing rags and paper into the chinks of the cabin. We shall see how we all fare during Mass tomorrow, but I have no hope that it will change much.

*le 6 février, 1898*

Many absent at Mass today. Several children and some adults have cases of whooping cough, chickenpox, and many coughs and colds. Beatrice was at Mass. Now that her husband and son are away, I imagine she feels free to attend the service. Her husband will burn in hell for keeping his wife in a state of mortal sin. She is, after all, his sacred responsibility, as is the boy, of course. He will have to answer for their souls before the Lord at the Judgement.

After Mass, I asked her to stay behind to talk about a new painting. I suggested that, if we could find a surface large enough, it could be transported later into the new church. At first, she seemed shy and did not meet my gaze directly, but, I asked her to accompany me to my cabin where I gave her the new paintbox I had ordered through my brother. She was immeasurably pleased. Before long, we had re-established the easy

rapport we had established on a few occasions before. I quickly realized, however, that there is no use in speaking to her of her husband. When I bring him up, her whole countenance closes up like a cloud passing before the sun. She shakes her head and refuses to speak.

We made an ambitious plan to paint a tableau of Jesus being taken down from the cross by the holy women. I shall advise her on the composition, in order to ensure that a great truth shines through the work. I am looking forward to this collaboration as I have not looked forward to anything in such a long time.

*le 8 février, 1898*

Yesterday, I met with Beatrice at the chapel. She said she was honoured that I think her work worthy to display in the new church, when it is built. She was genuinely *flushed* with pleasure. She also said that, after reflecting on our discussion of Sunday, she felt that she would like to do a study before embarking on such a major project. And, as it was a relatively fine day, she sketched my portrait, standing in the snow behind my cabin. As I stood there, I felt radiant, giddily happy. I have been so isolated here. Most of the people here are good and humble, but rough and uneducated. In Beatrice's company, I can explore ideas of refinement, of promise. Discussing art with her, planning a project is a pleasure. I feel our minds are kindred.

As I stood posing for her, sometimes, a gentle wind would shake snow from the branches in the stand of trees behind me. The snow would land on the ground with a quiet thump like footsteps and I fancied... what?

The weather promises to be fine again today and I expect Beatrice. She said she would do a study of colours in *aquarelle*, for my portrait.

*le 9 février, 1898*

She surprised me by bringing a finished watercolour of me in the snow. She plans to rework it in oils later. She said she painted well into the night, that she had been unable to sleep, afraid of the night sounds around the cabin. Indeed, there were bluish circles under her eyes. It is not right for her husband to take the boy with him, and leave his wife alone so, for months at a time. I told her she must take care of herself and be sure to sleep. Secretly, I was thrilled at the great fervour with which she is approaching our project. Our new church shall be graced with as fine a work of art as any large urban church. My portrait pleases me. I see in it, I think, something of the pleasure the collaboration with Beatrice has brought me. In the portrait, my robe and coat make a stark contrast against the blue snow. Behind me, the trees form a dark green line against a pale sky. When I look at it, I am reminded of the sound of the snow falling from the branches.

Ah Beatrice! My soul rejoices. It is like seeing the first signs of Spring. There can be no sin in the pure admiration I have for you.

Whatever her sweet eyes are turned upon,  
 Spirits of Love issue thence in Flame,  
 Which through their eyes who then may look on them  
 Pierce to the Heart's deep chamber every one  
 —after Dante's *Vita Nuova*, as memory serves...

*le 15 février, 1898*

The weather was cold today. Despite this, we worked side by side in the chapel, I, writing my next week's sermon, Beatrice, working on a sketch of the Lord's Descent from the Cross. While we worked, we alternately chatted and were companionably

silent, and I felt a fullness of feeling, a sense of completion that I imagine must be the daily fare of married men. For a moment, I must confess I envied them that sense of being accompanied along life's journey. But covetousness is a destructive emotion, and Beatrice and I must continue our entirely separate journeys. But I am grateful for the respite in the loneliness of mine, as I am certain she is happy for company in her solitude.

I have learned a great deal about Beatrice and her life in these past several days. Her father was one of McCormick's associates in the Chicago manufacturing plant that was a victim of worker violence. I had previously thought her father was one of the workers involved in the workers' movement with Jean-Baptiste Gareau, but it seems I had misunderstood. Her father is well-off, yet he seems to have involved himself in the affairs of the workers, for what reason, I know not.

Beatrice had a privileged upbringing, and travelled to Europe with her mother and her aunt on several occasions. She attended a boarding school, where she learned to draw and paint. She says she also plays the piano, and speaks French, English and Italian, accomplishments of little use here in Northern Ontario. It is not clear to me how she ended up here, though it is amply clear that she is withering here, like a hothouse flower in a snowstorm.

*le 18 février, 1898*

Furious. Papineau was helping me with the chapel today. Stuffing more rags. He was almost shuffling his feet wanting to tell me. The women—he claimed it was they—are gossiping about my association with Beatrice. The nerve. The nerve. It is unthinkable that... I must write a new sermon to address this lack of respect.

*(later)*

I cannot do it. How can I deliver such a sermon with Beatrice in attendance? It would shame her. She would know what everyone thinks. It is possible she already knows, that someone has approached her, spoken with her. I have not seen her for two days now. The thought of abandoning our project distresses me greatly.

*le 20 février, 1898*

Mass today was unbearable. I could not bring myself to give the sermon I truly wished. Instead, I gave the sermon I had originally prepared, on Jesus in the wilderness. I had hoped, when I wrote it, to compare the season of Lent to the wilderness in which we all find ourselves, to inspire *les gens* not to give into the temptations of sin that loneliness can engender. I did, however, alter the text to give a subtle, but hopefully unmistakable emphasis on the sins that can result from gossipry. I hope my message was received.

I fear I, myself, am battling against the dual sins of pride and anger. The insinuations of this community have incited me to think about leaving Sainte-Catherine-d'Alexandrie in the spring, as soon as a suitable replacement for me has been found. I do believe I am not suited for the rugged work of colonization. Amidst these feelings of desolation and uncertainty, I must prepare the Ash Wednesday celebrations, and prepare myself for another Lenten season.

*le 24 février, 1898*

I must recount all that happened yesterday without sparing myself the memory, though to live it all again brings me only agony. Beatrice arrived last evening as I was



preparing my simple Lenten supper. I had not seen her since Mass on Sunday. She had not attended yesterday's Ash Wednesday service. I went out to greet her, meaning to remind her of her Christian duty to attend all religious services. She sat in her cutter, wrapped in furs, holding the reigns of her horse tightly, her eyes wild. She looked terrified, or mad. She said she could not stay alone in that cabin for one moment more. I should have foreseen it all then. I should have helped her to a neighbour's where she could have spent the night in peace. Her soul is my responsibility. I should have foreseen it all, and organized for her to live with a family while her husband is away, but I felt she would be as uncomfortable in the riotous house of one of these *habitants* as I would be. I invited her to supper. I helped her with the cutter and the horse. I invited her into my home.

She looked dishevelled, pale. The circles under her eyes were more vivid. She had not slept these several nights, she said. She sat at my table before a bowl of *soupe aux pois*, but did not eat as she claimed not to have much appetite. She removed her opal ring and placed it on the table. She rubbed her fingers violently, as though cleaning them. First one hand, then the other. In the silence, they made an obscenely loud sound. I felt, in that moment, that I did not know her at all, and I swallowed hard.

She has nightmares, she told me, where her husband tries to kill her. He changes into a wolf, she told me and, for a moment, my heart stopped beating, as I did not know whether she meant in her dreams. But then I understood I had been taken in by the strangeness of the mood. She described how, in the dreams, while he stands looking at her, his teeth suddenly grow over his lips and he bends forward until he stands on all fours. By then, he is covered with hair. Jaws open, he pounces on her, or on her son. She wakes screaming.

She was sobbing wildly. She said she is afraid to fall asleep. Afraid to dream. She fears she is going mad.

I did not know what to say. Her hands persisted in their infernal rubbing. I wanted more than anything to return things to what they had been before. I got up from the table to kneel by her side. I held her hands to stop their furious work. She leaned her head toward me. Her mouth... it found mine and... it was voracious. She was voracious. I felt like she was the one who was trying to devour me.

Today, my fingers are stained with the scent of her. My skin. Though I have washed. And the stain on my soul is surely more insidious because I do not feel remorse. I feel only the desire to see her again, to taste her, touch her. I feel an appetite most unbecoming to the season.

*le 28 février, 1898*

We must be discreet since the farmers were already suspicious. Beatrice says it does not matter what they think. She assures me, "You are the priest. They shall listen to what you say."

*le 2 mars, 1898*

We cannot stay here. We must go away, but she refuses to discuss it with me. I would renounce everything. Why should she wish to stay here? When I think of his rough, hairy body defiling her smooth white skin, something inside me loosens, and I feel as though my body, my mind could fly apart, shatter into tiny fragments.

*le 5 mars, 1898*

The weather is most unseasonable. A farmer from the other side of the river said he saw a bear the other day on the edge of the forest. It is too soon for them to come out of hibernation, he says. They will be hungry and desperate for food. Some say the river may become impassable in as little as a few weeks. I wish, at least, to go to Sturgeon Falls for a day, two days... Beatrice will not come. She says with fear, what if Jean-Baptiste returns?

The thought brings me a desperation I cannot express. An abyss opens up before me when I think of that man returning. How should I see her then? And she will be with him. She will not leave with me! Lord, Lord, why will she not leave?

*le 8 mars, 1898*

I have tried to get her to explain why she will not leave him when she is afraid of him, when he controls her and keeps her locked up in a cabin in the forest like a fairy tale princess when she would be so much happier in a cosmopolitan society, mistress of a city home, able to further her painting talents. What unholy bond unites her to that man? She begins to explain that she has made a vow but, as she is alone with me, she stops because it is clear that there is something she is holding back. I suspect there is something in their history that is not lawful. I ask her questions. Why would she would marry a worker from her father's plant? Was the match approved by her parents? What were the meetings she told me about in her father's house? Were they related to the bombing of the protest meeting? Why did they leave Chicago? She answers nothing.

*le 9 mars, 1898*

In my dream, an angel descends over my bed. I cannot move. She puts a hand on my head and says, "You have nothing to fear." Her hand is warm on my skin and I am surprised. I had always fancied an angel's touch to be cool, like rainwater from a barrel on a warm day. I begin to sweat as her touch becomes hotter and heavier. I feel as though my head will be pushed through the bed, through the floor, through the ground, into the depths. As I look into her eyes, her lily-white skin turns incandescent red, like heated metal. Suddenly I understand that she is not an angel. Her hair falls away, and her robe, revealing a nude devil with blistering red skin. She hisses, "Shall I tell you who first taught me about pleasure?"

Heaven help me. I am burning.

*le 11 mars, 1898*

The farmers had a meeting today at the chapel to discuss measures to protect their flocks from the wild animals that have been so aggressive recently. I attended. I tried to play my role as the leader of my human flock. But I think everyone could see that I am not in command of myself. I cannot be considered responsible for the souls in my charge. I should get away from here, but I cannot leave her.

*le 14 mars, 1898*

Yesterday, she fell asleep while reading and awoke screaming. I took her in my arms and asked her why she had these nightmares. She told me things about Jean-Baptiste. She said, "Sometimes he disappears. He has told me that he does not know where he goes. That he suddenly wakes up somewhere and he had no memory of

having gotten there. That sometimes there is blood on him. Sometimes, it is his own blood and he is injured but he does not remember how he came by the injury. He swears he shall never hurt me, but how do I know? How do I know? He will be back soon. What shall we do?"

I suspect her husband of unnatural doings. I told her so. I warned her, "We must leave now. Now, Beatrice. Do you hear me? While the river is still frozen."

She looked defeated. Her face was that of an addict of laudanum, such as I saw on the Continent, and to whom you have just suggested they should quit it. She said quietly, "My husband has said that no matter where I should run, he would find me."

I suspect she is lying. She wants to see him, wants to feel him, taste him. I am only a dalliance, an unoccupied moment's fancy. She yearns for his return.

**Chapter 24**  
**The Notebook of Rosa Lefebvre**

[In small script on the inside front cover of the notebook]

*August 12, 1998*

People keep disappearing, their memories, their stories disappear. But you can watch the same television programme again and again. It doesn't erode. It doesn't change.

They made an audio tape of my grandmother. Years ago. I don't remember when exactly. My cousin Renée's daughter had to do an interview for some sort of school project. I don't know the particulars but after she died, the tape was in the things they sent me, the things she had left for me in a shoe box with my name written in black marker.

I didn't listen to the tape for years. I kept it in a box like a jewel. I thought I'd trapped her in there. I told myself it was a talisman, that as long as that tape was in there, my grandmother was with me. But I never listened to the it. I just liked knowing I could if I wanted to. I remembered many things about my grandmother, things she told me, stories about her. Eventually, I had come to believe that all these stories, that her very presence, were on that tape.

This afternoon, on a whim, I listened to the tape. It is a hot day and Adèle was downstairs giving piano lessons. I was lying on my bed with the fan on, feeling too wilted to move. I was listening to the broken melodies rising from the first floor, and to my own heartbeat, whose melody seemed similarly halting. I remembered the tape. I thought of it quite hard as though it were incandescent, burning a hole through the

jewellery box, through the air, through my closed eyelids. I got a tape recorder and I listened to it.

I heard my grandmother and recognized her voice. It was her voice and yet it was not. It was formal; it was strained. It was the voice of someone being interviewed with a tape recorder. Perhaps she was thinking, My granddaughter is taping me so she can listen to my voice after I die. Perhaps she was thinking of her own death, perhaps she was weighing each word in the balance of eternity.

On the tape, she speaks slowly and quietly, not loudly. My grandmother was a loudspeaker. She would yell through the house, "*Les enfants. Souper. Tout de suite.*" But here, she speaks softly. She speaks in black and white, not in colour. The girl asks her questions and she answers them. A few times, she starts on a tangent and, in those moments, the colour returns to her voice. I can imagine colour coming into her cheeks the way it would when she told a funny story. She would be flushed with the anticipation of laughter, the holding back of laughter. But, on this tape, she always seems to rein in her own speech. Before the laughter, she stops talking and waits for the next question.

I cried bitterly. I cried as hard as when she died. For me, she died all over again. I threw the tape out. I hated it as though it had been the cancer that killed her. As though it had contained everything that made me push her away in life.

Now I sit in my writing room. Downstairs, there is silence, but still, my faltering heartbeat seems to occupy more of my attention. I write. Adèle disapproves of my writing. She disapproves of this room. Though I do not let her in, she has stood in the doorway and seen. She wonders what will happen to it when we are gone. She says she worries about strangers reading about our lives, our secrets, but what she really worries

about is that they will not be strangers. They will be the people who surround us and from whom we've managed to isolate ourselves.

From here, if I pull the heavy drapes just a little, I can see Alma St-Amant sitting in her chair by the kitchen window. Watching, always watching. Before she went to the hospital, at least, there was some respite from the scrutiny, but now that she has trouble getting around, she just sits, unless someone comes to visit her. It makes Adèle nervous and irritable to see Alma in the window. I think Adèle thinks a lot about this room and about what the heavy drapes conceal: my life splayed open. Perhaps she thinks about her own life's secrets, which are here also, like a nut in the shell, waiting to be cracked open.

Sometimes, hidden by the drapes, I watch Alma. I see the way her hand reaches up to fuss with her hair when someone walks by in the street, even though they do not look at her. I see her shoulders heave with sighs, perhaps of boredom or pain, or some remembered emotion. She plays with her necklace. I imagine it must be a cross or a medallion of some sort from the way she fingers it a long time. She turns her head to look around her own kitchen. Perhaps the clock has chimed the hour, or perhaps the house shifts and breaks the silence. Perhaps she is listening to the radio or the television. Sometimes her lips move. When you stop and watch someone who is doing nothing, you quickly realize how much they are really doing. I think I am a lot like Alma. If my life had been different, I might have enjoyed sitting on her porch with her, on a summer day, talking about our neighbours.

I like the idea of someone finding my papers and looking at them as they would animal tracks in the snow, having to acknowledge that an animal has been here, has lived, having to acknowledge the enormity of my life. Having been so close to this much



life but never suspecting it. Being embarrassed by the intimate thoughts of Rosa Lefebvre.

But I will certainly die soon and Adèle will do what she will. She will find the key on the chain around my neck. I hope she will not destroy everything. I dare not trust her completely, even now, and I feel a kind of storm brewing. So I seal up this notebook with a kind of fanatical hope...

[first notebook entry]

*April 27, 1972*

For two weeks, we have been seeing each other secretly. It started on a Thursday, while Adèle had gone to Sudbury to buy seeds and plantings, things for the garden. I let her go alone because the weather was so suddenly summery, so delightful and soft on my skin that I did not want to be hunting for gardening supplies. I went to Leduc's for lemons and made lemonade. I sat in my chair in the backyard. Adèle had warned me that Gareau was to deliver some eggs so I'd left the front door and back doors open. That way, he would see right through the house and into the back yard. When he arrived, I was stretched out in my chair with my eyes closed. I did not hear him approaching. He cleared his voice when he stood next to me, and I opened my eyes, not startled, but feeling as though I had known he was there all along. He was holding a carton of eggs, looking down at me. The breeze had lifted my skirt over my knees and my legs were bare. I felt like a siren on a rock. He was looking at me as though I was. It's been a long time since a man looked at me like that! But I am only thirty-nine. Not so old. I offered him a glass of lemonade.

We sat together and I admit I thought to just let him linger for a moment—I was so enjoying his attention, but then we began to speak of the weather. He told me about his farm awakening in the spring warmth. He spoke in grunts and great pauses, but it was like a puzzle: lovely once you put it together.

I, like everyone, had always suspected he was a kind of idiot. Retarded, maybe. Not completely dysfunctional, of course since he runs his farm. But sub-... I don't know. Subhuman, I guess.

I listened to him speak. He was struggling. I felt so moved by his effort to reach me with words. I wondered how many people ever really listen to him. Here, in Pointe-Mouillée, he is simply Gareau, the village outcast, the village idiot. Our version of Boo Radley.

And here we sat together and his words were reaching me and the breeze was so soft, unearthly soft, caressing my legs. I was overwhelmed. I reached out and touched his hand and stroked it. I don't know exactly what possessed me, but a mood had come upon me like this place and this time were—I don't know—right. Just right. I felt I had been expected here, in this moment, that this was the beginning of great things.

Poor thing, he seemed so surprised that his hand twitched when I first touched it. I stroked it for a while and he let himself fall to his knees beside me while I petted him like a large dog beside my chair. I saw his eyes, an icy blue. His black hair was tumbled over his forehead in a great heap of curls and he looked so bashful, so grateful, yet so intense that I felt he was trying to see *into* me.

I am not sure if I leaned over to kiss him, or if he leaned to kiss me, but we kissed. I felt... I cannot say what I felt. Like Gareau now, I do not have the words. To be sure, it was desire. I have felt desire before, but this was so strong that I felt I would

decompose and fly off into the wind like a dandelion into seed, if only he would touch me.

I led him upstairs to my bedroom.

His skin was as warm and moist as the wind had been before. Except his hands, which were hard and calloused, but still gentle. I struggled not to cry out, but I think I did. I know he did. I do not know how long we had been there, in my room, under my regular, white-flowered quilt, when Adèle came home and called for me.

I made him remain silent and still. He was still on me, inside me, and the strain to keep from moving was terrible. I knew Adèle would doubtless decide I was napping, and go to the garden to start working. First, she came up the stairs and stood at my door, listening for a moment, during which I held my breath, hoping she could not hear his.

She went down to the kitchen – I heard pots and pans rattling. We moved very gently now, careful not to make noise. After a time, the back screen door's hinges squeaked and the door banged against the frame. I made Gareau dress and I hurriedly accompanied him to the door. I had to whisper a promise that I would see him again soon before he would leave.

Adèle came into the kitchen and called me. I rushed to her, looking over my shoulder to make sure Gareau had gone. Adèle was holding the carton of eggs. She scolded me for having left the eggs outside. I apologized with a blush that I am sure was disproportionate for the circumstance. I may have been dreaming, but I fancy she gave me a sidelong glance as she passed by.

*May 2, 1972*

I have never felt so happy. I had read stories where desire moved men to desperate acts, but I had never imagined that it was real, something I could feel too. This is nothing like what I experienced with Paul. I hated it when, in the night, he would roll on top of me, and I would smell our dinner in his mouth, and the bed would cry its insistent bird calls. I was so naive when we married. On our wedding night, when Paul began to take my clothes off, I pushed him away. "What are you doing?" I asked him.

He smiled, "Undressing you. I can't wait to see you naked. I've imagined you so many times."

I couldn't imagine why he would want to take my clothes off. Why would anyone would want to see my body? I didn't know what we would do once the clothes were off.

"Didn't your grandmother tell you anything about your wifely duty?" he asked finally, baffled by my rejection.

I stopped pushing him then. What hadn't my grandmother told me?

I let him show me. I thought, how ridiculous, how ugly.

Afterward, Paul sobbed into my hair, begging for forgiveness and saying he loved me and he hoped it wasn't too awful. I stroked his neck, between the ear and the hair, where the skin is baby-soft and I said, "It's okay. It's not your fault."

After that, I did my wifely duty, but Paul did not require it of me very often.

What I have felt these past weeks is not even akin to that duty. It is of an other order, entirely. It makes me a little sad that Paul and I were never able to share this, that the only thing coming close to this feeling has been... a mistake.

*May 10, 1972*

We talk about marriage in a cooing kind of way, like children, flirtatiously. But always, after a time, he pulls back. Gareau. I cannot bring myself to call him Julien. It does not seem to suit him at all. I asked him if he minds my calling him Gareau and he did not seem to understand my question. "Whatever you like," he said, shrugging.

I do now know why he pulls back when we speak of marriage. Is it that I am not marriageable somehow? Is it that this kind of desire is only meant to be a game, played for a short time?

I cannot imagine myself a farm wife now, but when I married Paul, I expected to be a farm wife. It was only because of the mine that we ended up in a large house in the village. Could I start over?

*May 12, 1972*

I asked him why he so seldom goes to church. If I understood what he said, if I can paraphrase, he attends when he feels a need for human companionship even though people never say more than a few words of greeting to them. He listens to the word of God and lets his solitude be moulded into something finer than he is capable of saying: something decorated and pointing toward the heavens like a well-wrought steeple. He says his own thoughts remain flat and opened to the sun and wind. He says he will never leave his farm, that he is part of it, like *le rocher* behind the barn.

His thoughts are like uncoloured drawings. I can fill in the colour and they become beautiful.

*May 17, 1972*

Adèle suspects. “All these outings in the car!” she says. Since when do I like driving so much? She knows something has changed. At night, she comes to my door and listens, and I pretend to be asleep. I must find a way to cover it all up.

*May 19, 1972—Good Friday*

I did not see him today. Adèle and I are celebrating the Easter Holy Days like a proper family. I went to the services today, but he was not there. I cannot stop thinking of him. The smell of him, something warm and alive, wild and fresh. Like the smell of a rock in the sun.

His house is a wonder. From the outside it seems like a plain farmhouse, but once you step inside, you can immediately see how old everything is, though it is curiously neat for a place cared for only by a man. The floors and interior walls are made of painted planks. The walls are covered with paintings done by his grandmother. Most have a religious theme, but several are of a woman floating down the river. Perhaps she is Ophelia. I could not account for it. When I asked, he said his father, Alphonse, once rescued his mother from drowning in the river.

He has spoken a little before of his grandmother who raised him since his parents died when he was a baby. He has said that she painted—one of his earliest memories is of watching her make paint from egg yolks—but I had not realized that she had been so serious about her work, or so prolific.

It is a strange house. Comfortable enough, I suppose, though the kitchen has an old-fashioned woodstove instead of an oven. However, the place is heated by a new furnace, which he showed me. I suppose he thought he needed to prove to me that his

house was comfortable. In the basement, where the furnace is, the floor is made of packed dirt. There is a rock outcrop in the corner opposite the furnace. I took in all the roughness, and wondered, could I live here? Could I live like this?

*May 20, 1972*

He is a strange being. Sometimes in the afternoon sun of his room, he falls asleep. And while he sleeps, sometimes, he stops breathing. I lie next to him and wonder if he will die this time. Or next time. Then in a great gasping breath, he inhales.

*May 21, 1972—Easter*

I want to see him. I must risk it.

*May 22, 1972*

Adèle is threatening to leave. She says I do not need her and she will go. Where would she go? I am all she has left in the world. The truth is I am afraid. I am afraid of losing her. Of being wrong and being left alone. Or worse: not alone and miserable. Of change. Even though I know some parts of our friendship have been wrong and shameful, she does take care of me. Together, we are *les vieilles filles*. I have been comfortable these past ten years. If I have not been shielded from the doldrums and the storms of marriage, I have at least been shielded from the horrors of childbirth.

What would be left when the passion Gareau and I have for each other is spent? Now, I cannot imagine its end, but I know it must be so. Why, then I would be a wife. The wife of Gareau. Can I bear it?

*May 24, 1972*

He gave me this journal. I have read it. It seems that the writer of these pages was a priest! It is incredible. Well, perhaps not so incredible, really. Gareau wanted to warn me. He says he also has these spells. I told him that they must be caused by something rational, epilepsy maybe, or perhaps it is related to the fits he has when he sleeps. A doctor would know. When I told him this, he wept! He wept! He said he had been so afraid of what I would say. Afraid I would reject him.

I held him, and my hand found that patch of smooth skin behind the ear and I remembered the tenderness I felt for Paul. For a brief instant, I felt the lure of tenderness and passion coexisting.

If I made an attempt, would someone in this town believe otherwise about him. Who can I trust enough to try?

*May 27, 1972*

I see it is not possible. The force of history is against him. Us. Adèle is right. I cannot marry him. The town would think me mad. She is right and I should have listened to her all along. She has my well-being at heart. I would be ashamed to walk into the *Magasin Général* with him. People would take me for an idiot also. Oh! I know he is not! But everyone thinks...

Who would come to our wedding? They would surely be there to ridicule me, or pity me for marrying an idiot.

*May 29, 1972*

What I feel is only lust. It must surely be lust. With prayer, lust can be overcome?



*June 5, 1972*

My menses are two days late. I cannot. I will not. Not now. I must speak to someone. Adèle will know what to do. Perhaps there is some herb I can take.

*June 12, 1972*

This morning Adèle confronted me with a page from my own journal. Where I had written about Gareau giving me his grandmother's ring. She demanded to know whether I intended to marry him. How could she, of all people, ask that? I pulled at the page, and we tore it in half.

I cannot believe she would break my trust now. She called me irresponsible for lighting a match so soon after having put out a fire. She accused me of toying with him. It is none of her affair.

She read my journal! She tore a page from it! I cannot forgive her. I cannot keep writing in these notebooks and leaving them about. She is not to be trusted. What am I to do? Until I find a safe place for me to write, I will not write again.

## Chapter 25

### Losses

It was dusk when Fleurette walked out of *la maison des vieilles filles* and toward the store alone. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cécile heading toward the presbytère, where she was going to show Père Côté the documents. After reading them, Cécile and Fleurette had come to *la maison des vieilles filles* to look at the ring. Fleurette had wanted Cécile to see it. She had not wanted to tell her before coming what she had to show her. Cécile had been speechless before the ring in its eggshell case.

“All the weird things I’ve thought about him in the past few days evaporate at the sight of that eggshell,” she’d said.

Fleurette, who had not read Fex’s journal, except the few pages that had been tucked into Rosa’s notebook, told herself she could not imagine what could have led Cécile—and Père Côté!—to think that Gareau was a real *loup-garou*. She dismissed her own suspicions of him as part of a game she had been playing. “Of course there is no such thing as werewolves. The whole thing is ridiculous. We must have all temporarily lost our minds.”

The two women had laughed uncomfortably.

Cécile had looked at the ring and said, “Well, now that you’ve found the treasure, what will you do with it?”

Fleurette locked the door to the house. From the sidewalk, she saw Mme St-Amant in the window of her house, looking out. Fleurette saw her with such precision that she understood what was happening to her. When events overwhelmed her, her mind seemed to narrow what was allowed in. As a result, her vision seemed

clear and focussed, one image succeeding another in an orderly way, rather than the usual jumble of emotion and impressions it usually was. In the background, however, the same film clip played over and over.

They are in the room. Fleurette's face is burning. She is watching Cécile try the ring on her own finger. Watching her slip the opal over her skin, Fleurette suddenly understands she doesn't just want to live in this house. She wants to live with Cécile. The room smells like dust, a faint odour of powder, and something acid. Perhaps a ghost of coffee. Cécile is standing next to her, so close that if Fleurette leans slightly to the left, their shoulders will rub. Fleurette lets herself sway slightly, touch, to prove it is true, then sways back. "Sorry," she mumbles.

Cécile turns to her concerned, then puts up a hand on her arm, as though to steady her. Cécile's eyes are dark with a point of light in them, like the night sky with stars, Fleurette thinks, and imagines she feels the coolness of night on her face. Cécile is beautiful. Fleurette leans in and nuzzles her soft skin with her lips, inhales her. She smells like sweat and wood, and strawberry soap.

Cécile pulls back, frowning. Around her, Fleurette sees the walls covered with Rosa Lefebvre's handwriting swim. In a flash of clarity, Fleurette understands she is in danger of becoming Adèle Denis. That, if she could, she would find a way to trap Cécile in this house and keep her. She finds herself frightened before a force that seems to want to return everything to the way it was, a force that perpetuates patterns. She feels her own individuality pale next to the force of history. She feels like her small voice is screaming into a wind that drowns its sound out to all ears but her own.

Cécile pulls back, frowning.

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From her window, Mme St-Amant waved at Fleurette. It took all of Fleurette's concentration to wave back. She was focussed on considering how useful her brain shutdown could be, how peaceful it made her feel, when she turned the corner into the parking lot of *le Magasin Général*.

The lights on the police car had been left on and left an intermittent red slash of light on the glass door of the store. Like a mark, she thought. Here.

She entered the store. The chimes on the door tinkled. When she saw her father talking to the two officers, she sighed with relief. Accounted for. My father is safe. Her father's head turned slowly away from the officers toward her. The lines were etched deep in his face and she thought the word, "Stricken." The word reminded her of the slash of red light striking the door of the store repeatedly. A house stricken.

She saw it clearly laid out like a childhood sum in her mind: strike and house equal – what? Ghyslain. She said his name out loud. Her father nodded. She listened to the account the police officers gave her when her father told them she was Ghyslain's wife. She would not object to being called his wife, this last time, she decided rationally.

Their story tumbled at her chaotically so her mind only grasped every few words. It examined a word, then accepted another. "Car. *Rivière*. Body. Missing. Empty. Diving. Current. Not much hope."

She accepted this and accepted her father's hand under her arm as he walked her home. She remembered her wedding rehearsal, when her father had held her arm like that and how, at the time, she had remembered him holding her mother's arm. It had made her sad. It made her sad again, and she cried.

Her father held her arm more tightly and, at the door of Fleurette and Ghyslain's house, asked if she would rather go back to his cottage. The dark water of the lake, reflecting autumn leaves, would be visible from the living-room window. *La rivière du Prétendant* eventually tumbled into Lake Wabigwani. She imagined Ghyslain, eyes closed as they had been the last time she had seen him sleeping on the bed, blue afghan wrapped around his shoulders, gliding quietly along the bed of the river into the lake, toward her father's house. "No," she said.

## Chapter 26

### Memory

Anne-Marie Caron lay on the floor trying to think what she should be doing. Though she had awakened a while ago — she could not have said how long — confusion, like grey static in her mind, would not lift. How long had she been there? She did not feel any pain. Rather, what she felt was *un relâchement*, a slackening, a giving way. She knew that if she tried to get up, she would fall. She could not think of any reason to get up.

In the dim light of her bedroom, she could see photographs around her, some in brilliant colour, of people wearing garish colours, some in muted blacks and grey tones. She felt a nameless warmth toward these, though she did not recognize any of the people, nor could she have identified that they were photographs, or personal mementoes. It did not matter.

She moved her head slightly. One wall was lined with a row of shelves stacked with notebooks and papers. Prior to this morning, she had ceased to notice them, and when she had noticed them, they'd inspired in her a helpless feeling, like noticing that the autumn leaves were beginning to change colours and wishing the summer back. Over many years, she'd collected these papers, among which, she felt, were important artefacts of a way of life that was disappearing. However, she'd never had very clear ideas of what to do with the documents. Now, she lay on the floor enjoying the texture of piles of dusty paper. She had only the vaguest sense of something needing to be remembered.

Next to the shelves, on her bedside table, she saw the dark shape of a stack of books, silhouetted in front of the lamp clipped to the head of her bed. If she had lifted

the top book, entitled, *Le Veau du diable et autres contes*, she would have seen the journal that, on Friday evening, she'd found discarded on the kitchen floor of her daughter-in-law, Estelle. Estelle had not been home, and Anne-Marie had heard the kids arguing over video games in the basement, so she'd guiltily taken the book home, intending to read it and return it. She hadn't gotten around to returning it.

The book had disturbed her. She'd immediately recognized it for what it was: the journal of Michel Fex, the founder of the parish of Sainte-Catherine-d'Alexandrie. The text itself was distressing and challenged her perception of this historical figure. How could he be remembered as one thing when he'd clearly been another? Anne-Marie had attempted to make peace with this aspect of the text. After all, historical revisions were common. She'd simply never thought that the history of Pointe-Mouillée was formal enough to be revised. However, it seemed that its legends were strongly rooted.

What caused her the most disturbance was that the journal reminded her of something she'd read before. She'd seen that hand before, read that voice. She'd always been proud of her remarkable memory when it came to books. But, this time, she hadn't been able to place where she'd encountered a similar text before. So she'd taken it. And since, she'd been struggling to link it with something known, something in her memories. She'd begun reading a book of French-Canadian myths and legends, hoping to trigger a memory, without success.

Then, sometime in the night, the connection had occurred. She'd remembered some pages, buried in the piles of paper on the shelves, buried amidst piles of stories from the old days, memories of family events, *contes*, and recipes. For many years, Anne-Marie had had an interest in chronicling but, several years ago, had given it up,

finally admitting to herself she did not have the patience for cataloguing tiresome details that did not fit together, and for sifting through scraps of paper filled with other people's spidery scrawl. What Anne-Marie craved were stories, fully-fleshed and complete.

In her sleep, in her dream, she'd recalled with a sense of relief that had pulled her out of sleep, the document that Rosa Lefebvre had brought to the library one day, long ago. She'd been surprised. Rosa was an avid reader and a frequent visitor at the new library, but Anne-Marie hadn't known she wrote stories as well. While Rosa waited, Anne-Marie had read it, and had concluded that it was another variation on the Gareau *loup-garou* story. She'd kindly, but firmly, told Rosa that it was fairly well-written, and interesting, but lacking in historical veracity. Père Fex had died in his sleep, after construction on the church had begun; this was common knowledge. To soften the blow, she'd asked to keep the document as a record of this version of the local legend. In Anne-Marie's dream, Rosa's devastated face appeared to her, though how she had failed to notice it at the time, she could not have said.

Anne-Marie had turned on the light and risen quickly from her bed. If it was real, then... She'd started rifling through her papers on the shelf when a sharp pain shot through her and she'd fallen to the floor, unconscious.

That was hours ago. Now, all was forgotten save the sensation at one side of Anne-Marie Caron's mouth, which she tried to identify. She lay on the floor attempting to work it out. A puzzle. What is it? she thought. Cold? Wet? That's it. She must be drooling. Wet. Like water. An image burned, sudden and bright, into her consciousness: Lake Wabigwani, seen through childhood eyes, the sunlight reflected so brilliantly in



the water that she has to shade her eyes. She stands looking at it. It is delicious. The most beautiful thing she knows. There is someone behind her. Maybe several people. Perhaps the whole town. Her body is all lightness. Her mind is entirely present in the moment. She giggles, and, hand still shielding her eyes, she lets herself fall forward, trusting, into the cold of the water. On the way down, her arm traces a graceful arc from her brow to the surface of the water, where it breaks the luminous surface a fraction of a second before the rest of her body is immersed.

How beautiful, thought Anne-Marie Caron, her mind holding onto that impossible instant when she hung in the air, horizontal, just above the water, her mouth closed, eyes half-shut, with only one hand breaking the surface of the water. With only one hand feeling the cold, the wet.

Yes, she thought. Wet.

**Section of Michel Fex's Journal**  
**(In the Papers of Anne-Marie Caron)**

*le 2 avril, 1898*

Last night, I went out with a band of men. We dispersed around his farm, ready for ambush. In my fatigue, I believe I had begun to doze off when Papineau, who was behind *le rocher* with me, touched my shoulder. Gareau had materialized next to his barn. He stood looking out at the forest as though he could sense our presence. Papineau and I drew our weapons, waiting for him to move. He glared at us, then walked around and around, in a tight circle, as certain animals do before lying down.

Then, he disappeared behind his barn so quickly that we hardly saw him go. I was wide awake now.

We waited. After a time that seemed an eternity, there emerged from behind the barn a great wolf. It was clear, from the animal's gait, that it was aggressive, intent on killing. Papineau stood and shot. The animal fled and disappeared into the woods where some of the men were posted. Later, they reported that they had not seen a thing. Not Gareau; not a wolf; nothing. They had, however, heard our gunfire, and they emerged, shouting.

Beatrice must also have heard the gunfire and the shouting, because she came out of the house wearing only a light night-dress. Her long hair was held in a loose plait in the middle of her back. She was sobbing and screaming, "What is it? What is it?"

When she saw me, she turned to me. She called me by my given name in front of all the men. "What is going on, Michel?"

My face flamed. How could she not call me Père Fex, there, where everyone could hear? Some of them looked down, some turned away, so I faced her alone. I asked her where Jean-Baptiste was. She replied, sobbing quietly now, "I don't know. My husband has gone out."

I asked her where, but she said she did not know. I believe she was afraid for her life and perhaps also for her son.

The men said nothing about her indiscretion and I do believe that they will forget my own transgressions if I am able to lead them out of this darkness. If only we were not trapped here, between river and lake, unable to leave or go for help.

We will wait in ambush again this night. I hope that, tonight, she will sense my watchful presence and feel reassured.

*le 3 avril, 1898*

I write this in the early hours of morning. We have just returned from another ambush. I cannot sleep and must report all that has taken place.

We returned to the Gareau farm, and waited. We were not there very long before I believe I saw the movement of a large animal by the barn. However, I now know I must have been mistaken. I shot at it.

Again, like on the previous night, Beatrice came out of the house. This time, she was dressed all in black. She called out to me—by my given name again.

I walked toward the house to meet her. The men followed, but stayed back a distance. She spoke loudly, so all could hear, but she was calm. She said, "You should all go home now."

"But I saw..." I started to tell her I believed I'd seen the beast, but she interrupted.

"He is dead. Jean-Baptiste died this morning, cleaning his rifle," she said, taking my hand and leading me through their kitchen door. Near the entrance, she showed me a small hole in the wall. She put her finger into it.

By this time, the men were gathered behind us in the doorway. She told us how the bullet had blown off the back of Jean-Baptiste's head, and the trouble she'd had cleaning the mess. She said she and her son had buried the man themselves. The boy joined her in the kitchen and she stood next to him with a hand on his shoulder.

When I suggested that the boy might go out and leave us, she quickly said, "No. He should hear all you have to say. His father is dead. He is the man of the house now." I looked in those well-loved eyes for some clue of grief, or horror, or even relief that she was free of Jean-Baptiste, but I saw none. I saw nothing. Perhaps she was in shock.

“Why did you not come to me... to someone for help?” I asked.

She said, “My dear, I did not need help. He was dead. We buried him in the forest. It is what he would have wanted.”

“But without a proper blessing, a proper funeral? Beatrice, what were you thinking?”

“I did not think Jean-Baptiste would have wanted a blessing or a funeral from you,” she replied with a small smile.

I am ashamed to say it, but at that moment, I thought only of the men who were nearby to witness what she’d said. Everything is out in the open now.

*le 7 avril, 1898*

She came to my cabin today. She asked, “Will you offer me some tea?” Then, she told me her story.

She loaded his rifle when she saw he was about to clean it. She says she and her son are free to go away with me now, as soon as the ice on the river is melted.

Lord! What is this feeling I have? My entire body feels like it is burning in an ice-cold wind.

*le 8 avril, 1898*

How can I blame her if I was prepared to do the same? He was evil; he was in league with evil. Is it so different to hunt a demon than to murder him? I want simply to touch her again...

*le 12 avril, 1898*

I have managed to conduct the Easter services as though nothing was the matter. Much of the congregation did not attend. I worry that they will advise the Bishop. We cannot bring the boy. I am not assured of his discretion. He may be his father's son. I must speak of it to her.

*le 13 avril, 1898*

Why has the killing of cattle not abated? What if we were wrong? Beatrice looks at me with wild eyes, with suspicion. She will not allow me to touch her. "When we are all safely gone..." she promises, and pulls away. What if ...

*le 14 avril, 1898*

Papineau and Desrosiers have shot a wolf. Enormous. Weighing almost one hundred pounds. I see now how we are set upon a course to hell. I feel myself becoming less...

*le 16 avril, 1898*

Now, she will not see me. After all I have given up for her. The Beatrice I see now, clinging to her son, feral, is not my Beatrice. I long for her past self with my every breath. I burn in my own memories of her ivory skin by candlelight, and her long hair, cascading down her back. I cannot remain here. But I cannot leave. The damned river. I dream of the river all night. I see myself flinging myself into it again and again, until I believe I shall go mad and do it.

*le 17 avril, 1898*

The river is breaking up. In large sections, the ice becomes unhinged and floats away. It was there, against one of the banks, still trapped in ice, that they found the body of the missing St-Amant child. Oh God! I was wrong. We were wrong. The river. If only we had built a bridge. If only there had been a way out, would any of this have happened? I shall not be here much longer. I will see Papineau today to recommend that they begin, as soon as possible, the building of a proper bridge over the damned river. It is truly the least I can do.

*le 18 avril, 1898*

I cannot perform the funeral of that unfortunate child. I go to meet my destiny. I will bring Beatrice to the river with me. She shall come. I leave this book as my testimony. Whosoever will discover it may judge us as they will. I know we are damned.

## Chapter 27

### Expiation

Sunday morning, Cécile woke at dawn. There was something she wanted to do before *la Messe*. Not much time, because she'd promised Fleurette she would go to Mass with her that morning. The thought of Fleurette made Cécile uncomfortable as she remembered how she had suddenly embraced her the day before. But, as Cécile pulled her jeans on, the discomfort was replaced by sympathy as she remembered Fleurette's stricken face the night before.

The night before, after leaving the presbytery, Cécile had seen police cars pulling out of the store parking lot. From up the street, she'd recognized Fleurette and her father crossing the road, arm in arm, heading toward their house. She'd called out and waved, and they'd waited for her at the entrance to the Leduc home. When they told her about Ghyslain driving off the bridge, Cécile had gone cold, remembering how she'd almost done the same thing. Or had she? She was no longer sure if that had really happened.

Her eyes swollen, and looking somehow contrite, Fleurette had said something strange like, "We are all being punished for trying to change things."

Cécile had gone in with Fleurette and her father and had fixed them some supper, which they would not eat. Shortly afterward, more and more people had started arriving at the house and Cécile had gone home.

She's a widow now, Cécile thought, buttoning a clean shirt. A strange word. It changed her concept of Fleurette. Not a married woman, not a separated woman, a widow. After feeding the dog, and getting herself some toast and juice, she left the cabin on foot and, with Barbaro loping ahead of her, walked down *le chemin du lac*. There was a feeling in the air of autumn. It was cold, really cold. The wind was blowing the

leaves around, though the sun is shining. The air was full of sound and movement.

After the storm, after the warmth of the past week, the weather felt right, welcome. As though everything were returning to normal, to its normal pace.

The town was still and dark. She glanced at the town as she walked. The windows of the Leduc house were all still dark, but many houses were already lit up. As she walked she wondered how many of the families in the houses she was passing would be affected by what she and Fleurette had found in Rosa Lefebvre's room the night before. How many would find an echo of their own lives, a sense of kinship with Rosa and Adèle as outsiders, people with a secret. How many would reject them for being different?

When she reached *le rang* Gareau, she turned right. She stepped over a mud puddle and reflected that, in the same way that a whole chain of events is necessary to create a storm, the same could be said about the creation of Pointe-Mouillée. A sequence of events brought the population together and created a force that tends to keep people in place. Until the next storm.

When she spotted the house with the yellow vinyl siding, she slowed down. The windows were dark. She wondered if that meant Gareau was asleep. She thought of him lying in a bed asleep, his lips curled back, teeth bared, his hairy hand on a dirty sheet. She shivered.

The house was lacking the quaint touches that Cécile had noticed in the other farmhouses in the area. This one had no tire swing, no children's toys discarded in the driveway, no wishing-well, no sign reading, *Oeufs Frais*, no wooden ornaments in the shape of bent-over ladies in petticoats. Surprisingly, however, the exterior of the house was neat and trim. The lawn was mowed. The porch and the window frames had



recently been painted white. She looked at the roof of black tar shingles and wondered if Gareau did all this maintenance by himself. She hesitated.

A dog lying in the driveway barked at her lazily, barely raising his head from his paws. Barbaro bounded ahead. She stopped in her tracks. The dog and Barbaro sniffed at each other. From the side of the house, Gareau emerged, coming from the barn. He was wearing knee-high rubber boots and a hunting coat, and walking with the help of a cane. Even from that distance, Cécile could see that the cane was made from a branch. She wondered how often he'd used it before. Even with it, he seemed formidably strong despite his age.

She saw him now as solitary. Outcast. His life had been affected by the actions of his ancestors. His grandfather had been the political and romantic adversary of the local priest and he'd died for it. Jean-Baptiste Gareau had obviously suffered from some neurological condition that Julien had inherited. Jean-Baptiste had died one hundred years before, and the consequences of his actions were still being felt.

Gareau stopped to look at her, but his face registered no recognition or emotion. Cécile wondered what he did when he was lonely. As they stood considering each other, the morning's silence became filled with birdsong and wind. He's survived it all, Cécile thought. He is an outcast, but he's survived. She took it all in, Gareau's house, his barn, his farm. She was filled with admiration.

She walked toward him. Pointe-Mouillée is full of outcasts, she thought. For an instant, she considered what it would be like to live with Fleurette in *la maison des vieilles filles*. Could that be a role she could play into in this town? She quickly dismissed it. She suspected that the time for such arrangements had passed, that they would not be so readily accepted. Who believed in old maids anymore?

While she approached, Gareau stood still and waited. Cécile fingered the item nestled in her pocket. She'd conceived of this plan almost immediately after Fleurette had given her the ring. "I don't feel right having it," Fleurette had said. "It's not rightfully mine. But I want you to have it." Cécile had asked to have the last remaining portion of Fex's notebook, the love story of Gareau's grandmother and the priest.

Cécile had thought the moment would be a silent one, but as she approached, she suddenly found herself speaking. She told him about reading Fex's journal, about Rosa's journal. She did not tell him that, even now, with all she'd discovered, she still found him a little frightening. She listened to her own voice speaking with a kind of detached surprise. She told him about finding the ring and feeling that, really, it ought to be returned to him.

While she spoke, she handed over the ring and the pages from Fex's notebook. He looked down at the ring, and his face contorted into a grimace of what looked like anger, but that Cécile understood must be pain. He looked at Cécile with more curiosity now. He wordlessly placed the ring in his coat pocket. He looked at the portion of Fex's journal more carefully. He said in a gruff voice, "Where's the rest?"

That had been the one question Cécile had decided she would ask. She stammered, "I don't know. I thought you..."

He said again, "Where's the rest? I gave Rosa more pages."

Cécile shook her head. She said, "I read this section and the main part of the priest's book. But the main part's disappeared."

"Grandmé kept two parts. She said they were hers."

Cécile frowned, struggling to understand. "She kept the middle part and the end? What did she do with the book itself?"

He frowned. "In the church. That's where it belonged." Cécile understood then that Fex's journal had been put in the church's attic by Beatrice herself. Perhaps she'd wanted people to know what Michel Fex had really been like, but had held on to two sections in order to protect her own privacy.

She asked, "Have you read the main part of his journal?"

He shook his head, "Don't read."

"Do you know how your grandfather died?" she asked, desperate to resolve the mystery.

He shrugged his shoulders and walked away. She watched him disappear into his house. His dog, pausing on the step to look back at Barbaro, after a moment, turned and followed him.

In church, Fleurette sat between her father and Cécile, waiting for the service. In the loft, the choir rehearsed. Fleurette could not believe that a week before, she had been sitting in this same pew between her father and Ghyslain. Ghyslain's absence felt like a gap in her teeth, which she would probe with her tongue. She was trying to get used to it. Just a week ago, and my life is completely different. Widow. I am a widow now.

She looked at her father. He seemed much older. Maybe it's the light, she thought. Surely, he cannot have aged that much in a week.

A woman turned from the pew in front of them and leaned back. "*Mes sympathies, ma pauvre Fleurette,*" she whispered.

Fleurette mouthed a quiet "*Merci Mme Lelièvre.*"

The woman gave Cécile an appraising look, then whispered, "Did you hear that *le p'tit Guy* has started talking again? His mother told me this morning. They live right

next door to me, you know. She said the boy saw a big dog from his window and wanted to herd the dog into the pen with the other animals. She says the little tyke saw his father do that when the barn caught fire. *Il voulait juste être de service!* Poor little soul." She pursed her lips sympathetically.

Cécile found herself fascinated by the lipstick bleeding into the wrinkles around Mme Lelièvre's mouth as the woman explained how Maxime Guy had followed the dog into the forest and gotten lost. When he'd fallen down a *rocher*, the dog had turned back and stayed with him until he was found. Cécile looked down. Barbaro was a hero.

Behind them, the priest closed the doors and the choir began singing the entrance hymn. Cécile stood and turned. In the last pew, by the central aisle, Gareau was looking at her. She smiled. He looked away.

After *la Messe*, Gareau was already gone by the time Cécile reached the doors. The priest stood at the entrance, greeting his parishioners. Cécile remembered how, two nights ago, they had sat in his kitchen discussing werewolves, Gareau. She could not quite account for their behaviour. How could they even have thought such a thing? As Cécile shook his hand, they looked at each other sheepishly, almost with embarrassment.

Outside the church, people stood on the porch and the stairs. Cécile heard snippets of conversation, about Maxime Guy, about Ghyslain, about the Ministry of Transportation, and a rumour that repairs on the bridge over *la rivière du Prétendant* would begin on Monday.

Cécile saw Estelle talking to a woman whose name Cécile could not recall. While she spoke, Estelle's eyes darted to a group of small children running on the lawn. When she saw Cécile, she waved and walked over. She stood close and Cécile smelled musk. Estelle shifted the baby from one hip to the other; his little fist grabbed at her hair.

"Cam," she told Cécile, "had to go to the hospital in Sturgeon with his mother." In an animated voice, she told how Cam and the children had gone to have breakfast with his mother, as they did every Sunday, and found her lying on the floor of her bedroom. Anne-Marie had had a stroke. She would live, but right now, could not move the right side of her body, and had lost much of her memory.

"The children were pretty upset," she said, looking over at the screeching band of children, "They seem to be dealing with it." She laughed. "Kids!"

Fleurette joined Cécile and Estelle, and cooed at the baby. She had left her father by the door, where he was talking to Père Côté about the arrangements for Ghyslain's wake and funeral. She was grateful that her father would deal with all the arrangements. The relief she felt at Ghyslain's departure from Pointe-Mouillée mingled with the grief she felt that he had died. She had not wanted him to die. Around her, people leaned in and touched her on the shoulders, on the arms. They frowned and offered condolences. She smiled bravely. No one knew they'd been about to separate.

When Estelle saw that Père Côté had done talking to Marcel Leduc, she said hurriedly to Fleurette, "Can you hold the baby?" She handed the child over, and rushed to talk to the priest. She stuck a hand deep into her jacket pocket. She didn't want to lose

her job cleaning the church. She had never recovered Fex's journal. She would have to admit everything.

She said, "Père Côté, can I speak to you privately for a moment?"

Fleurette bounced the baby while Cécile kept an eye on Estelle and the priest. She watched them walk to a deserted corner of the church *perron*. Estelle looked sheepish. When they stopped, Estelle had her back to Cécile, but she could see Père Côté's face. He was frowning, looking both serious and compassionate, a look Cécile recognized from his pulpit manner. For a few moments, he spoke, making broad gestures with his hands, while his eyes looked at Estelle, looked away, looked at Estelle again. Estelle was looking down at her shoes.

When Père Côté tapped her slightly on the arm, she looked up. He gave her a tight smile. As Estelle turned away from the priest, she grinned at Cécile and made a discreet thumbs-up sign. Absolution.

Suong Guy waited by the door while her husband stood with a group of men. They were discussing the *bi*—the work party to rebuild the Guy barn, planned for the following Saturday. She was impatient to get to the hospital to see Maxime. The doctors told her he could come home in a day or so. She glanced at her children running on the lawn.

Mme Lelièvre walked up to Cécile, Fleurette and Estelle, and asked if they would come cook at the community centre on Saturday. There would be a communal meal to feed the *bi* workers.

"What time should I be there?" Estelle answered brightly.

Fleurette gave the baby a kiss on the cheek. "I'm not sure what I can do, but I'll try. I can't speak for the store, of course..."

Mme Lelièvre patted her arm. "Of course. Of course. *C'est compréhensible.*"

They all looked at Cécile. She was thinking that she would rather be at the *bi* site, helping with the construction, than in a community centre, cooking beans.

She hesitated, then smiled at Mme Lelièvre. "I'll be glad to help." The other women smiled approvingly.

As Cécile walked from the church to the lodge, she remembered what she'd experienced when Ghyslain had told her about his memories of her house. She'd felt as though a layer of history had suddenly been superimposed onto the visible. She felt that way again as she walked through the town. The church steeple meant something different now, as did the roads she walked on. The lake, the river. Even the names of the people she recognized now had a new resonance. For a moment, she almost understood what it meant to belong somewhere, but this quickly dissipated as the memory of Ti-Jean intruded on her thoughts and she felt a pang of grief. She walked faster.

The day was a beautiful, genuine autumn day. The sun was bright, but the air was cold. Tart and refreshing as a bite in a September apple. Later, she told herself she would go canoeing. As she walked into her cabin, Barbaro emerged from his spot beneath the kitchen table, and stretched in greeting. She checked the answering machine. No messages. Perhaps soon, she thought, the phone would ring and a hunting party would want to rent a cabin. "Yes," she rehearsed. "I've got one ready. A boat? Yeah, I've got some available."