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Illinois Country *1778*

He heard it again. Coming upstream and upwind, deep in the dark shroud of forest trees, the unmistakable crunch of autumn leaves. Samuel Holt crouched low over the tiny fire-pit of birch bark, hoarding the last wisp of warmth before the inevitable flight about to be demanded of him. He had discovered this means of keeping warm while giving the locals few clues to his presence. Now, after many a night's practice, he could sleep while squatting over a hole that gave off little smoke but enough warmth to keep a man through the cold, dark hours of night. His deerskin jacket hung tent-like from broad shoulders, trapping the heat. His position was small and blended into his surroundings, but his body held the easy suppleness of finely tuned muscle that could explode with power at a moment's notice. He knew with a fair amount of humble acknowledgment that he could spring up on legs that would carry him for miles at a run if need be; and judging from the tingling in his scalp, this might be one of those occasions.

Allowing himself some small movement of his head, he looked to the predawn sky, still and pregnant with the possibilities of any new day. He felt the last tendrils of sleep fall away and sucked the cold, damp air into his lungs to enliven him. In a matter of seconds, he had gone from sound sleep to full alert, every sense straining for advantage and, with it, survival.

His gaze scanned the tree line for movement. Mentally, he took quick accounting of his accoutrements. He could feel the steady weight of his knife sheathed at his thigh, a weight to which he was so accustomed that he had to think of it to realize it was there. His tomahawk hung from his belt, hidden by the fringed jacket hard won in a game of hazard and comfortingly close to his belly. His long rifle, loaded and inches from his right hand, lay on the forest floor, hidden among the brown curl of the leaves.

The buck he had killed at dusk the night before was stretched out next to the rifle, it too blending into the ground where all creatures eventually return. He hadn't wanted to gut it in the dark, so he had decided to camp during the deep part of the night and then, in the morning, clean the animal and carry it back to Fort Harrod where the people were in dire need of fresh meat. The wilderness fort had been under constant siege, forever at the mercy of native raiding parties. It had been four long days since anyone had ventured outside the skinny poles that formed the stockade—skinny poles that nonetheless meant the difference between life and death.

Samuel had come upon them yesterday, having returned to Kentucky and the Illinois country after traveling from Williamsburg with George Rogers Clark to drum up support and ammunition for the campaign. Theirs had been a mission of desperation, but Clark had his plans and the wherewithal to convince others that those plans were not only right and sound but

just short of God-breathed. After hearing him speak, Samuel had been convinced as well. Convinced and ready to follow a man like George Rogers Clark to hades and back, which might be required by the campaign outlined in his leader's red head. Samuel was one of the few who knew the full of Clark's bold plan to take the British forts of Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes. Success would mean much to the American cause, opening trade routes, the rivers, and the western frontier. What few others knew is that Clark also had his eye on Detroit, the well-fortified British stronghold of the Northwest. It was a bold plan all right. A plan to change history.

They were elated finally to receive permission from Patrick Henry to recruit a militia worthy of Clark's plan. Yet getting permission turned out to be the easy part. Clark and Samuel scoured the countryside, riding long hours on horseback through the backcountry of Virginia, talking to scores of farmers and tradesmen, stopping fathers and sons in open fields where the scent of tobacco reigned. They then traveled the cities and villages, from one smoke-filled tavern to another, then on to the docks and quays of the coastal towns. They soon discovered that recruiting men who were not already engaged in the Virginia militia was harder than finding seed in a chicken coop. It had taken them weeks to scrounge up even a few dozen men—and these were the most ragged, hard-bitten lot that even someone as toughened as Samuel had ever seen.

Finally, and though Clark had hated to, he'd sent Samuel back to the frontier to watch over the vulnerable forts. They had agreed to meet back up in May at the Falls of the Ohio River, just close enough to British-held Kaskaskia to spy and train. In the meantime Clark had commissioned Samuel to do just what he was doing: check on the forts, spread good news of support from Virginia, and keep his scalp attached.

It was a job Samuel had a knack for.

Upon reaching Fort Harrod, Samuel had found men with sunken cheeks, the women and children starving. The inhabitants were half frozen from lack of decent shelter and in a state of fearful paralysis, unable, mentally at least, to venture forth for fresh meat. He had been greeted by children with eyes as round as walnuts, women looking at him as though he was their savior, and men wounded or burying the latest dead. Samuel had immediately set out once more for provisions. They said it often enough: It was men like him who kept the territory open. Men like him who made it possible for brave souls to etch out a living on the frontier. And Samuel knew, deep in a place that stirred to life when on a mission of meat or war or peace even, that this was his place in the world. At least for now.

Now, with every fiber alert, he waited for the inevitable, anticipated it even. Suddenly, and with heart-stopping shrillness, a scream pierced the stillness of predawn. Samuel leapt up, rifle in hand, swung the massive buck unto his shoulders, and began to run. He was fast, had been fast since his boyhood days on a Virginia plantation where he raced and won against friends and foes, and that quickness had kept his scalp attached to his head for his twenty-four years. He knew, as sure as he knew his eyes were blue, that it would stand him in good stead now.

An arrow whizzed by his ear, and he turned, aimed, and fired. In the time it took him to turn back around, dodging trees and forest bramble, he had assessed the situation. Six warriors, two mounted and hot on his trail, one now dead, lying with a bullet lodged in his heart. Samuel had learned long ago the disadvantages of merely wounding an Indian, so now he left them little chance to plead vengeance oaths from their brothers. Not that his head wasn't held in high regard as it was. He knew of several chiefs who would give a daughter's hand in marriage

for a bloody swatch of Samuel's golden hair. The Glorious One, he had heard them call him.

Reloading as he ran, Samuel cut a jagged path through the dense undergrowth where hidden roots and bramble might cause the warriors to slow. He shifted the heavy weight of the deer, wondering if he would be forced to abandon it. No, the fort needed this meat; he had to make it with the provisions intact. Otherwise, this excursion would only be a footrace.

He turned to the left where the pounding of the ponies hoofs were beating heedlessly into his ears, like the drumming of a nightmare, but a nightmare so familiar it no longer held any terror, only a sure outcome. He took aim with instincts deeper than his sight and fired again. Moments later he heard a sound behind him. Unable to reload fast enough, he paused, grasped his tomahawk with a tight-fisted grip, and swung it around. The head of the tomahawk lodged in the throat of a man whose fierce eyes would be added to the others that haunted him. As he whirled back around, ready to sprint the last distance to the fort, Samuel marveled at the excitement in his blood.

The Village of Vincennes
May 1778

Isabelle tapped her foot, up and down, up and down, on the church steps, waiting for Father Francis to join her. Whatever was the old priest up to now? She twirled a lock of long black hair around one finger, jerking on it in her agitation. It wasn't as if this was the first time. She should have known better than to wear rouge to Mass yesterday. But it was spring, and in the spring she always became so restless.

And that dress! He was sure to comment on the flame-red dress that she had designed herself, saving every cent for months to buy the fabric and then conniving old Josses, the local tanner, out of a nice bit of fur for the trim. She had looked like a gypsy, she knew. And she knew what arguments the good Father would use—so worn in the grooves of her mind that she feared she would go to her grave feeling guilty for the ostentatious bent to her nature. Why couldn't they understand that she had tried to tame the wildness beating inside her? That she had tried to conform to their notions of right and wrong but felt ready to burst within the steel cage of her own will. And her will was very strong. If she wanted to, she could do it. She could let herself drown in the nothingness and live out a life that conformed to the expectations of her friends and neighbors, but everything within her rebelled at the thought. Besides, when she tried, she was miserable and made everyone around her miserable. So here she was again, irritated but resolute that she would take her punishment, if a lecture from a gentle priest—and more her father than her real one—could be truly called a punishment. She would muster up some humility and listen, and then she would go on to the next infraction, and onward it went.

A clearing throat behind her caused her to spin around.

"Father Francis, how do you fare today?" She gave him her sunniest smile, not to manipulate but because it always made her heart glad to see him. His bald head was covered in brown age spots, and his skin wrinkled in soft folds when he spoke. But his clear eyes held a dear place for her that she always found solace in.

He smiled now, a bit distracted, and motioned her to sit on the wooden step next to him. He let out a sigh as his pale hazel eyes looked out at the village that was Vincennes. "My dear girl, I must say I have been better. The rheumatism, it does plague me

today.” His eyes found her face and he frowned slightly. “You have too pretty a face to paint, you know.”

There it was. Straight to the point, and not without a certain amount of censure. Isabelle sighed. “Yes, my mother said as much, but . . . well . . . I thought Father might be back from Detroit. He has been gone longer than usual.” She shook her head defiantly. “He would have liked the effect.”

Father Francis nodded, laughing a little. “Yes, no doubt of that. You are peas in a pod, the two of you.”

Isabelle’s father was a French trader, a *voyageur*, with a charismatic flare that had blinded Isabelle’s mother, Hope, to the darker side of him until well into their marriage. He traveled often and when at home could mostly be found singing songs and telling outrageous stories to the French inhabitants and a fair amount of Indians around a bottle of some sort of imported spirits. He was well liked—no, loved—by his neighbors and friends, and there wasn’t much they wouldn’t do for him or at his bequest. But when it came to settling into family life, there was a restless energy that kept him forever gone, both physically and emotionally.

A DEEP UNDERSTANDING came into Father Francis’s eyes as he looked down at the pretty girl of nineteen beside him. He knew her motivations, but he hoped to temper them, to teach her the modest tact and taste that would compliment her so well one day.

“I have an idea . . . another way you might impress your father when he returns.” He heard the slight hesitation in his voice belying his sure expression, not able to help his reservations. Was he loosening a fox in the henhouse to give her this job?

She looked curious but wary. "I'll not try teaching school again. You know those children won't listen to me, and it gave me headaches."

Father Francis laughed, slapping his thigh at the memory. Yes, that was certainly true. It had given him a few headaches too. "No, no child. This is quite different and much more to your liking, I think."

He saw the rush of anticipation in Isabelle's face and relished it. "Tell me," she demanded.

He hid his smile, fingering the folds of his cloak. "I have an errand that needs to be accomplished in the next few weeks. A letter arrived from Father Reginald in New Orleans. He writes that my books are on their way to Kaskaskia." The priest clasped his hands together in excitement, then looked down at her. "They are so close—at last."

"How wonderful, Father Francis! I know you had practically given up hope that they would ever come. But what can I do?"

He leaned toward her, as if to share a great secret. "I was going to go myself, but these legs do not travel as well as they used to. I want you to go, take Julian and a pack horse. The adventure should take a few weeks and provide you with a much needed outlet, yes?"

Isabelle's eyes grew round with disbelief. "Mother will never let me go, and she will certainly not allow Julian to go. You know how protective she is of him."

The priest winked at her. "I've already spoken with her. After a little persuasion, she agreed."

Isabelle stared at him, then gave out a whoop of joy and threw her arms around the old man's neck. Leaning back to look into his eyes, she said with conviction, "I won't let you down, Father. Truly. You shall have every last yellow-paged, dusty volume before summer is out. When do we leave?"

The old man paused, enjoying the radiance on her face. “Soon, child. Now tell me, how are your shooting lessons?” He had given up encouraging her in the gentler arts, as had her mother. Except for her clothing designs, Isabelle had little interest in feminine pursuits. She thrived in the woods. And seeing as how she always escaped into them at any opportunity, the family had finally decided it prudent to allow her to learn to shoot, not that they’d had much choice. She and her brother spent many an afternoon hunting the swampy woods near Vincennes, and Isabelle knew those trees like an infant knows her mother’s face. Many times Father Francis had gone with them, yet he hid from Isabelle the jolt of admiring joy that flared in his heart when she displayed her skill. She was a wonder with a long rifle.

Once she was proficient with the rifle, she had begged a musket with bayonet from one of the British soldiers currently occupying Vincennes.

“The musket is heavier, but I am getting used to it, though I’ll always prefer my long rifle.” She gazed at the priest, warming to the subject. “The tomahawk, though, I should like to tackle that next.”

He laughed and shook his head. “You are a blood-thirsty wench, my girl. What need have you of a tomahawk?”

Isabelle stood. Taking an imaginary weapon from her bright red sash, she leaned her weight into one leg and poised gracefully. Suddenly she spun around, “throwing” it with a dance-like movement. When she turned to face him, he inhaled sharply. There it was—that look in her eyes of fire and certainty and something else that always made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

Father Francis looked heavenward.

For what purpose did you fashion this one, my Lord?