



The Mevrouw Who
Saved Manhattan

A Novel of New Amsterdam
Bill Greer

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A Novel

Excerpt – First Fifty Pages

Bill Greer

**MANHATTAN
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This is a work of fiction. Though the story draws on people and events found in the historical record, its characters are products of the author's imagination.

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Bon Voyage

1624

1

I blame it on the pegleg. He's the bastard who ran me off to the wilderness. Naturally I was on my hands and knees when he stomped across the threshold, and after scrubbing the entryway to the shine of a *burgemeester's* buttons, I didn't need his clodhoppers dirtying it up. Clodhoppers, two of them. He still had both feet planted on the ground at the time.

The Dutch family I was maidservant to lived in a big house in Leiden, three stories plus the garret I slept in with a silver knocker on the front door showing off the master's money. That knocker wasn't status enough for my mistress though. "Every day," she told me, "every day you scour the front entrance or the neighbors will think I was born a fishmonger."

So I was nose to the cobbles when those feet stamped dust in my eyes. I reached out and polished one of the toes.

"Number seven?" he asked.

My eyes followed up his trousers, baggy at the knees and sagging in the seat, right up to the hick's face beneath the floppy brim pinned against his hat. "They teach you to count in Friesland?" I said.

He sputtered, his bulbous face turning the color of a beet. His words caught in a knot clogging his throat. My guess was right, he was just off the boat from Friesland, that bucolic backwater across the Zuider Zee from Amsterdam. If you can't spot a Frisian by his costume, you'll know him when he opens his mouth.

"The house, *meid*," he said. "I counted from the corner. This is the seventh?"

“*Ja*, number seven.”

“I’m the new boarder.”

I got to my feet and curtsied. “My name is Jacqueline. What’s yours?”

“Petrus.”

“What kind of a name is that?”

“It’s a Latin name like an educated man should have. I’m entering the university.”

Well those big feet sure fooled me. They looked like they belonged on a puppy dog, for though he was tall, everything between them and those bulbous cheeks was gangly, like both ends grew ahead of the middle. “Petrus the scholar. That’s a swallowful for a simple maid like me. I’ll call you Peter.”

He scowled down his long nose, his beady blue eyes sizing up the saucy tart before him. I was a comely lass, though not likely to his taste, being small of frame with my paps barely budding and my bottom fitting through the door a couple of times over and my hair darkened by the Frenchified blood my *moeder* gave me, sort of like chestnuts burned in the coals. A Frisian girl would fill a barrel with her buttocks, and she couldn’t wash her bosoms without overflowing the tub. I’d learned that because everybody called Freda a Frisian when they teased her, though I was nice to her myself, her being my master’s daughter.

Who waddles through the door at that very moment? Freda herself, with her bodice pulled so tight she was like to burst her seams. She stuck her chest out and said, “Welcome to our home, Mr. Stuyvesant.” She looked him up and down with a smile like she’d swallowed the canary.

He took one glance and pointed his nose back in my direction. She jiggled her paps but that lure didn’t distract him from where he’d fixed his eyes. He bobbed his head from the burned chestnut hair escaping my cap to my toes wet from washing, bobbed twice and paused in the middle each go-round. He still didn’t smile. His expression was more like he’d spied an unusual jewel in the marketplace and was figuring how to swindle the shopkeeper into giving it away cheap.

I wanted to crawl under the shop counter before the customer

picked me up to fondle.

Peter moved into a third floor room beneath my garret. Every evening he came home from the university before dusk. He and the master drank a tankard of beer while Freda attended her embroidery and stole furtive glances. Not getting a glance back most nights, she'd prick her finger and squeal. She'd wiggle that finger at Peter till he looked up, then pop it into her mouth and pout. He never cracked a smile.

Now anybody who's been in a Dutch house knows it's a pretty drab affair, and a master's money doesn't change that when taste is what's lacking. Our living room was over-furnished, meaning it had about three pieces. An oak table took up the center, a cupboard held the pewter and crockery and a few cracked volumes stood along the shelves of a bookcase. The Bible rested on a lectern apart. And the master had his armchair and the rest of us a straight-back apiece and one left over for a guest.

When I carried the *butespot* to the table, we all stood behind our places. The master and Peter took off their hats, Peter still wearing the floppy-brimmed number that marked him the hick he was. "Praise God for providing the generous bounty we are about to partake," the master prayed.

"Amen," Peter said so quick and loud the rest of us never uttered a peep. He was either hungrier or more devout or both.

"What's in the *butespot* this evening, dear?" the master might ask.

"A special cut of mutton the butcher held for me," the mistress might answer. "And the grocer had prunes." Those items were in addition to the onions and peas I threw in before dousing the mix with vinegar and boiling it up.

"Especially delicious this evening," Peter always said. I choked down whatever I was chewing at that lie. Most nights the stew was indigestible and gave Freda gas.

While I cleared the table, Freda disappeared like she had to squat on the chamberpot. When she came back, a few greasy blond curls popped out her cap and she'd tugged her bodice and her bosoms in opposite directions. Sidling over to Peter, she'd say, "Petrus, shall we enjoy a game of *Roemsteken* tonight?"

He'd say, "Cards, tankards and petticoats have ruined many young men." She'd laugh, thinking he was kidding since the middle of those vices was his favorite pastime so long as beer filled the tankard. His favorite pastime besides pontificating from the Bible, that is. The master nodded approvingly as Peter walked to the lectern. "Matthew, Book Four," he began, or Luke or whoever. He bored us till the light grew dim, then slammed the book shut and sneezed at the dust raised.

The master looked up like he was hanging on every word. "Please, another passage, Mr. Stuyvesant."

"*Nee*, the university does not allow reading by candlelight. I am retiring."

That was Freda's cue. She'd leap up and say, "Inspiring, Petrus," then aim a good night kiss at his cheek. A time or two she hit the target even if he never returned the favor. Fortunately her *pater* was in his cups by then, having uncorked the brandy and drunk the share Peter refused as well as his own.

Every night when I climbed the ladder to my garret, I got this creepy feeling two eyes were staring at my backside. One night, I stopped halfway, glancing over my shoulder at Peter's door to catch out his spying. But while open, that doorway was empty. Leastways I thought empty till a shadow crept across the hallway floor. His shadow, gangly, thrown by the candle he wasn't supposed to read by. I climbed another rung. The shadow took another step into the hall and tilted its head higher, trying to figure where I hid my bum under the skirts. That was easy enough with a girl as broad abeam as Freda, but it was nigh impossible with a slender thing like me. I jumped past the last rung and slammed my hatch.

The next morning I was in the kitchen scouring the floor by the hearth, which was blazing to heat the scrubbing water. Scraping the mold off floor tiles is tedious work, and with the steam rising out of my bucket, hot work. Naturally a girl loosens her clothes under such conditions, and takes off her stockings to keep them dry, and maybe whistles to entertain herself while the mistress is out of hearing range.

A crab claw clamped onto my cheeks, and I don't mean the

rosy ones either side of my nose. A yelp slipped between my lips and my hand reached back to smack that crab. My knees slid on the wet tiles and flipped me over. I'm sitting there spread-eagle staring into that hick face beneath the floppy hat brim.

"You pinched me!" I hollered.

"You asked me to," Peter said.

"I never!"

"Temptress!" Lust filled his eyes, their dark centers widening for a better look. He was taking in the sights, my ankle and leg and what all because a poor girl couldn't afford much in the way of knickers and there's some things you don't want handed down from Freda.

Whatever I was lacking in hips and bosoms didn't temper his excitement. I crawled under the table and breathed easier when he didn't crawl in after. Instead he helped himself to a tankard of beer, pouring from the jug like it's molasses so it doesn't get a head. He took a long draught and smacked his lips, then left whistling my tune.

The matter ought to have ended there, but late that night, another yelp erupted through the darkened house. I scrambled down the ladder to clean up whatever mess had sprung it.

The yelp had died by the time I got down a floor, but a ruckus was rattling Peter's room. I peeked in. There's the hick flat on his back and Freda straddled across him and gyrating like a mad bull chasing the cape. Peter was squirming plenty himself but that gangly boy couldn't throw a bull weighing in at two hundred pound.

As steps came up behind me, Freda finally did it, popped the strings she'd stretched so tight. Her paps shot out like cannonballs. Peter grabbed hold to keep from being knocked senseless. That's the first thing the master sees, and the mistress too. In any respectable family, the *moeder* would faint dead away and the *pater* would draw his sword. But not my master, his brain started calculating. He wasn't about to miss the opportunity to move that merchandise. And the mistress was sizing up her prospective son-in-law and getting ready to congratulate her daughter on the catch.

Then they came back to their senses and realized somebody's got to get the blame. Freda saw it too and asked herself who better than the maidservant. Plenty a master's son had accused the serving girl of bringing seven devils into the house to ensnare him. So why couldn't a daughter claim the servant bewitched her? Freda shouted, "You slut! You're trying to wrap your legs around my man and steal him from me."

"*Nee*, I never," I said.

But does the son get the blame when the serving girl turns up pregnant? *Nee*, families stick together.

So the mistress picked up the refrain. "You trollop, soil your skirts in the street."

And the master looked at me like I was Jezebel. "You've brought devilry into my household. Out with you, whore. Bed a beggar on the cobbles if you will. You'll not snare a respectable man in this house."

The next thing I know, I'm in the street with my backside against the cobbles crying my eyes out.

2

Maybe I was to blame. That pole Freda vaulted onto was standing to attention in memory of my bum, no doubt, and it must have been rigid as steel to bust through that big girl. My fault or not, it happened like I say, no matter people later on claimed the university in Leiden would never admit Peter, that he had to settle for one closer to home being he could hardly add two plus two. I got a bruise on my bum to prove it.

Ja, maybe seven devils had followed me into that house, aiming to steal it from under me like every place I'd called home. Like every piece of family who'd ever loved me.

My poor *moeder*, she was widowed before the midwife pulled me from the womb, then chased out of house and home by a poxed Spanish duke, and me still gumming at the breast. A Spanish devil, I should say, because if a devil ever jumped inside a man's soul, it was that bastard's while he danced around the fires his soldiers lit to burn us Protestants at the stake.

My *moeder* and me were all alone with nowhere to sleep but the ditch. *Nee*, not alone, not yet. We had our people, Walloons fleeing the Low Countries north of France that the duke turned into an inferno. We were headed for Leiden dragging everything we owned, which wasn't enough to fill a handcart between a half dozen families. But Leiden was the Promised Land, filled with rich Dutch burghers who'd beg us to work in their factories. All those Dutchmen were rich, that's what we thought, and we learned why soon enough. The cheap bastards wouldn't part with ten stivers for a day's wage, no matter a girl started sewing when the cocks crowed and was pricking her fingers in the dark before she set down her needle. My *moeder* bled her fingertips dry keeping a roof overhead and food on the table. No matter rain leaked through the thatch and the porridge didn't fill our bowls, our room brimmed with love even if we had no family to share it but the pair of us.

Then on my fourteenth birthing day, the plague carried *Moeder* away, or the devils chasing us did. I begged the orphanmasters to take me in. They cried, "Too old. To the factory with you." *Ja*, the orphanage was too good, the other orphans too close to brothers and sisters I might call family. But at the factory, the burghers cried, "Times are bad, we have no jobs." I'd have been scavenging scraps from the gutter but for the Domine I listened to Sundays, a Dutch Reformed preacher but a Walloon like me. He found me the house with the silver knocker and the mistress who taught me to scrub the entryway. While my knees grew knobs, that house was home and the master and mistress and Freda were family. Better to be the maidservant in the family than to have no family at all.

Or so I thought till I landed backside against the cobbles. As I lay in the filth that had built up since my last scrubbing, it hit me, this time I wouldn't escape the gutter. God didn't want me to have a family, family wasn't in the predestiny the Domines taught us God chose for each child born. Devils were in mine. I couldn't deny the truth, not after losing a *pater* who'd never held me, then a *moeder* who loved me dearly, and now a master and mistress who tossed me out like yesterday's rubbish.

When the sun popped over the rooftops, I was contemplating throwing myself into the canal, which nobody could have argued with if that's what God chose. The only other path I could see led to the red house beyond the gate. Any family I found there would involve spreading my legs for one man after another, and that's a lot worse than no family at all.

I stood at water's edge staring at dead fish and rotting offal and a reflection so pathetic it belonged in that sewage. Only the stench was too putrid to jump so I decided to give God a chance to change his mind. My feet backed away and of their own accord trod the road that had brought me to this point, the road to the Walloon church. The Domine who helped me when *Moeder* died was getting another chance too, him being God's instrument.

Now I wasn't exactly on familiar terms with the Domine after three years. A servant goes to church with the master, and my master wasn't about to listen to a Frenchified service, Dutch Reformed or not. *Ja*, Frenchified like my blood, French being the language our *moeders* sang us Walloon babes in the cradle and our reverends put the fear of God into us with. Though frankly, I'd lived under a Dutchman's roof so long I'd forgotten the words to every tune and sermon I'd heard.

So the Domine was mighty surprised to see me pop up on the doorstep. The black habit and the grimace he always wore make it hard to picture him more dour than usual, but that's what he turned when I started my story. His mouth scrunched up and his lips wrinkled and I think he swallowed his tongue because he looked about to vomit.

"I obeyed the mistress," I pleaded. "My knees have knobs to prove it. I scrubbed the cobbles in the street and changed the bed linens every Tuesday, and emptied the chamberpots . . ."

"You've dishonored your household," he said.

"*Nee!*"

"*Ja!* Who will hire a maidservant who dances and cavorts?"

"I never cavorted."

"You've soiled your skirt!"

"*Nee!*"

"You've lured Freda to your vice."

“*Neel!*”

“You’ve probably left the cheese to go moldy and the butter to melt! No one will take you in.”

The canal was looking pretty good again, which was evidently what the Domine intended because next he said, “I have men who need women.”

Now I know a Dutchman will do anything for money, and while the Domine was a Walloon like me, he’d been in Leiden long enough for bad habits to rub off. But I never thought a reverend would offer to become my procurer, as if my feet had carried me to the red house beyond the gate. So I said, “My hymen is not for sale.”

The Domine’s mouth popped open and scrunched back shut. Let him choke on his tongue, I’m thinking, what he deserves propositioning a virgin. Then he wallops me hard up the head. “Satan’s taken you, girl!”

Hearing he agreed devils followed me around was the last straw. My bawling soaked my blouse and bodice before the Domine decided the tears were real and handed me a handkerchief.

“Do you know the story of Noah, girl?” he asked.

“And the ark with the animals?”

“Pairs of animals, girl. A bull and a cow, a goose and a gander. Do you understand?”

I put this quizzical look on my face because it sounded like he was headed once again down that road to fornication.

“The men are going to Virginia, girl. They must have mates or they will cavort with savages.”

“Mates?”

“Wives, girl. You could have a husband.

“A husband? I could be *mevrouw*?”

“*Ja*, girl.”

A husband? I didn’t dare hope for that. Another situation maybe, in a poor house who’d accept a turned-out servant and settle her in the cellar, that I could hope for. But a husband? Who’d shelter me in the house he built, in the arms he wrapped around me? Who’d fill me with babes who’d laugh and run and

tumble in the dirt? Who'd fill our home with joy and love, with a family sharing dreams and troubles, hunger and plenty? *Nee*, the devils were teasing me again, in the guise of a preacher no less.

"Well?" he said. "Will you have a husband?"

I stared at that Domine, searching for sign of treachery, searching for the hand that would slap me down just as my imaginings got the better of me.

"I have no dowry," I said.

The Domine's pale pink tongue popped between his lips. He blew along it as he dipped his hand into his purse and laid a gold guilder into my palm. "For your husband."

The metal burned my hand, which had never held a dozen stivers at once. I studied the profile of the man minted on one side. His nose hooked and his chin jutted. The one eye I could see was none too kindly. *Nee*, I told myself. But the man in the coin turned his head. His eyes, the pair of them peering at me now, softened up, beckoned like the barker in a traveling show. He nodded, urging me.

"I could be *mevrouw*?" I asked that man in the coin.

"*Ja*, in Virginia," the Domine said.

I snapped my head up. The Domine was peering at me as intently if not so friendly. "*Mevrouw* Lambert?" I said.

"If you obey your husband."

Mevrouw, it's Dutch for Madame, the clean kind, the French kind, not the procuress who runs the red house beyond the gate. *Mevrouw* Lambert, it sounded right, maybe that's why I turned a deaf ear to the warnings screaming in my head, why I nodded back. Or maybe I just wanted so desperately to believe.

Mevrouw Lambert. *Nee*, Lambert wasn't the name of the man the Domine expected me to obey, he hadn't chosen for me. Lambert was my family name. You see, the Dutch held some strange customs, the women most of all. Promises to obey notwithstanding, a *mevrouw* wouldn't let her husband wear the only trousers in the family. And she wouldn't take his name.

3

Ja, I let that gold guilder convince me. Surely a gold guilder was dowry enough to buy a husband.

A week later found me in Amsterdam cowering under a building that made many a cathedral look like a beggar's shack. The West India Company was barely two years old and was still waiting to cash in breaking the backs of hardworking souls like myself. But already their Honors the Nineteen who ruled it were hiding behind a facade that touched the clouds with its pediments and turrets. That palace stirred up more trepidation than ever worried a sinner stepping through the church door.

Step through the door I did with a few dozen others joining up. Naturally the men went first. I'd like to say it was because they wanted to clear the lions' den for their womenfolk but one look at that crew would bare the lie. Some of those men would be cavorting with savages, no doubt, because we females were outnumbered three to one. Their Honors weren't likely to delay though, not with money waiting to be made.

Nigh everyone standing on the floor of that cavern was a Walloon like me. A row of men perched on a bench above like we were in court. I counted them one to nineteen, the Assembly that ran the company. Each one was draped in black with a pointed white collar and a thick pointed beard on his white cheeks. Not a one doffed his hat to greet a lady, them probably thinking none of us qualified for the courtesy.

One of the more kindly looking ones introduced himself as Dr. Peterszen. "You colonists have been engaged by the West India Company. You will be sent to New Netherland to take up abode at such places as the Commander shall assign. Today you will hear the Provisional Regulations which you swear to obey. Article 1."

With a gold guilder burning a hole in my apron, I had more important things to worry over than promises to obey. That guilder needed to be spent and the merchandise was lined up for inspection. At the front of the line stood a handsome man, graying around the temples but not looking too beaten down by life. Hard to tell if he had a trade and not worth worrying over since he'd

been bought and paid for years before. His *mevrouw* clutched two tykes to my right.

Marriage took the best candidates out of the running but it didn't cut the competition. The other single girls were built like prize breeding stock vying for first prize at the farmers' fair. There wasn't a set of hips that wouldn't fill the master's armchair or a pair of bosoms that couldn't hold a bucketful.

I turned my eyes to a broad-shouldered boy. Those shoulders could wrestle a bear, probably a useful skill in the wilderness we were headed for. Problem was he looked dumb enough to try. Behind him stood another growing a paunch around the middle. That gut most likely meant he didn't know when to leave the tavern.

Meanwhile, Dr. Peterszen bound us to do anything the company ordered, to worship only in the Reformed Church though we were entitled to freedom of conscience, and not to fight the natives till we were ordered to. He was up to Article 6. "Colonists shall receive lands to be cultivated according to the size of their families and their industry." All the single women looked at the men and all the men looked back. Each woman was sizing up how much industry she could wheedle out of each man, and each man was sizing up how many babes he could plant in each womb, all in the name of a larger farm.

My eyes met those of a ruddy boy with raw hands. I'm thinking that face has been baking in the sun and those hands digging in the dirt. While I never pictured myself laying with a farm boy, I never wanted to starve in the wilderness either. He flashed a sheepish grin before his eyes darted away. I didn't know whether he was bashful or I didn't show enough matronly promise.

Dr. Peterszen went on to say the Company would sell us whatever we needed at prices it set, and we could hunt for ourselves so it didn't have to feed us, and we could trade whatever goods we wanted on condition we sold only to it.

All of a sudden the married man I dismissed right off piped up. "Your Honor, sir, we'll need seeds to sow and axes to clear the fields and hoes to till the ground."

Dr. Peterszen spoke up before any of the other eighteen could

reprimand the effrontery. “If you’ll be patient, young man, you’ll let me get to Article 17, which designates the crops you are to plant. As for implements, Article 7 clearly stated such items would be available for purchase at the Company storehouse.”

“But, Your Honor, sir,” chimed in the boy with the ruddy skin, “we have no money.”

“You didn’t listen, young man. Article 7 went on to state that if you cannot pay at once, the Company may advance credit. You may enjoy that privilege so long as you do not become prodigal or neglect your property.”

“Prodigal, sir?”

The question revealed a lack of schooling but at least the boy had a pair of pomegranates hanging between his legs. “So long as you are not extravagant, young man, and keep up your payments,” Dr. Peterszen explained.

Another of the married men worked up his nerve. “Your Honor, sir, the fields we clear and the houses we build, they belong to us?”

“Certainly not,” snapped one of the other eighteen.

Dr. Peterszen shot him a look. “Article 16, Article 16,” he shouted before an uproar could spread through the bench. “I’m getting to it. The question is not one of title, which cannot be granted. However, you are bound for six years, after which you may be compensated for your efforts.”

“You mean we can sell our property, Your Honor, sir?”

“You may sell that which you have built.”

That concession hushed things up so I figured it was a good time to impress the boy I’d set my eye on. “Your Honor, sir? We’ll need a cow, sir, for milk for the children.”

Now every one of the single women wished she had thought that up to demonstrate her *moederly* tenderness. Their Honors weren’t so impressed, however, more at the end of their rope. The meanest and nastiest of them sneered. “Young lady, we’ll send another ship with cows and sheep and whatever livestock we think you need. Until then, most *moeders* can feed their own.”

Lord, I wish he’d been lecturing me on how to be a good *moeder*, like how a nurse’s nipple will corrupt a child, or a cow’s

milk can choke the babe if it doesn't sit right in the belly. But he wasn't teaching me lessons everybody knew or he wouldn't have been staring at my bosoms and wondering how they could possibly fill a babe.

A bunch more eyes swung from him to me, chest high. A rumble started from those around me, whether from outrage at the insult or sympathizing with my humiliation or agreement with the observation is anybody's guess.

"Article 20," shouted Dr. Peterszen, deciding to skip a couple rather than risk the gathering getting out of hand. "Colonists shall take an oath of obedience to the High and Mighty Lords of the States General and to this Company, and shall in all things comport themselves as good and loyal subjects are bound to do."

Our comportment was off to a sorry start, but we all swore the oath.

Five days later we climbed the gangway of the *Nieuw Netherland*. The ship had three masts and brass fittings I couldn't have worked to a brighter shine myself and cannon for fending off Spanish pirates. A hundred and thirty lasts, Commander Cornelis May informed us proudly, acting like we would have plenty of room. He introduced Adriaen Thienpont, who'd conduct the trade when we reached our new home. Thienpont assigned us quarters, a tiny square on the planks below deck for all us single women.

We lolled on deck waiting for a couple more of our party who we guessed had second thoughts. Finally Catalina Trico strutted up the plank. Joris Rapalje trailed behind. Catalina's smile screamed the pair had tied the knot. They were a matched set all right, a big-boned, broad-bottomed girl and a strapping youth sure to rut like a stag.

"You lucky girl, Cattie," I said.

"Thank you, Jackie," she said. "Don't worry, you'll get yours."

Soon we were waving good-bye at the rail. I figured now's the time to introduce myself to the ruddy boy. But he was so surrounded by a fortress of bosoms I couldn't get near. I was left talking to Broad-Shoulders and Paunch and wondering whether I'd rather lay with a moron or a drunk.

Come nightfall, us single women bedded down. Every time a

wave bounced the ship, Nanne's bosom rammed my one side and Judith's hip the other. That womanly flesh was crushing my skinny bones like a pill bug under the thumb, *nee*, not my bones I realized, my dream that I should never have let that man on the gold guilder revive. A husband and family? Who was I kidding thinking I could compete with prize breeding stock? About midnight a yelp rattled through the hold, Catalina becoming *mevrouw*. That girl would probably be in a *moederly* way come morning.

With the confidence that gold guilder gave me shattered, I muffled sobs in my cap. The planks beneath me creaked and cracked and I took my last breath before the ocean swallowed me. When the waves didn't break the ship apart, I figured not until the gale hits, and if the gale fails, a Spanish pirate will plow a cannonball between decks. And if the ball goes wide and we reach our new home, what then? Boiled and eaten probably, and if cannibals don't get us, lions and bears will. The notion of finding a husband and filling a home with giggling children had blinded me completely. As if God would reconsider the predestiny he chose for me.

Hearing Catalina's yelp opened my eyes. I wouldn't have that farm boy with the ruddy face to protect me from the dangers, no matter how many times his sheepish grin tickled my fancy. My gold guilder wouldn't buy better than the runt of the litter.

For the first week out, the hens flirted with the farm boy. He laughed, playing the field. I might get the runt, but Martin Moreau, that was the farm boy's name, he'd choose the pick of our litter. Whenever I got near, he hid behind the bosoms surrounding him. Well after the ship didn't sink that first night, I decided I wasn't going down without a fight. So one day I elbowed Nanne's ribs and broke through. Martin fled up the mast, climbing like a monkey. The wind whipped his hair that was a shade rustier than his skin, and his shirt billowed like a flag fluttering. Watching him turn his hands loose and clutch that pole with only his legs, my heart fluttered too and not from the danger. Sure I wanted his arms to clutch back around that pole but mostly I was imagining them clutched around me.

Martin shaded his eyes and peered ahead to spot our new

home. The girls on the deck oohed. He glanced down and winked, then loosened his legs and slid, landing with a thud and that sheepish grin. I swear that wink and that grin were pointed in my direction. But every girl rushed his way, sure she was the target.

One afternoon, Nanne ran over grinning like the cat that got to the canary before Freda.

“You’re marrying him, aren’t you?” I said.

“I am.”

All the girls hustled over to hear the news. I slunk off to the bow thinking I could get bounced into the waves. Why wait for gales or pirates or cannibals or bears? The ocean swallowing was as good a way as any. No sense agonizing in suspense when the end is inevitable.

I was leaning against the bowsprit when another crab claw pinched my cheek. I turned to see the ruddy face with the sheepish grin.

“You’re barely betrothed one hour,” I screamed. “Keep your dirty nails off my backside!”

Martin adopted this puzzled, hurt expression. The pretending angered me all the more. I jumped away and fell over the bowsprit. He reached like he’s going to help me when all he aimed was to spy up my skirt.

“Get away. Grab ahold of Nanne if you want a piece.”

He glanced over his shoulder thinking his beloved’s about to catch him out. Seeing he was hidden, he reached into his trousers.

“Nanne!” I screamed.

When he pulled his hand out, it held a single stiver, and not a shiny one at that.

“You’re promised already, don’t offer me gifts. I’m no whore, and if I was, I wouldn’t be a cheap one!”

“It’s a troth-penny,” he said.

“Then give it to Nanne. She’s the one who got the pledge.”

“I’ve been saving it for you.”

“I told you I’m no cheap whore!”

“I guess you want a man with a thick purse.”

“I want a faithful husband and I’m not stealing another’s, Nanne’s or anybody’s!”

“Then take my troth-penny.”

“It’s Nanne’s.”

“*Nee*. I refused her.”

“What?”

“I refused her. So I could marry you.”

“What?”

“But you won’t have me.”

Martin’s sheepish grin was fading fast. I felt a little ache in my heart watching it go. Him so disappointed, me missing that grin already, it might not be fireworks but it was a spark that had never passed between me and another boy, and that’s more romance than I’d ever dared dream of. I planted a kiss on his ruby lips before one of the other girls could sneak over and steal him, then on his ruddy cheek and his nose and back to his lips.

He laid that troth-penny in my hand and a girl never appreciated an engagement present more. I rustled in my apron and laid my gold guilder in his palm. His jaw dropped so far I had to smack it shut for another kiss.

The next day we stood up in front of Commander May. Nanne cried her eyes out and the other girls sniffled, but within a week every one of them stood in front of the Commander and hardly one stooped so low as Shoulders and Paunch. Every night for a week a yelp rattled through the hold as we girls became *mevrouw*. Except for Nanne. She didn’t let a peep out of the wedding bed, the little slut.

Wild Hops

1625

1

“Jackie, get off your hands and knees,” Catalina Trico said. “You’ll dig yourself a grave if you scrub that floor anymore.”

Catalina’s admonition didn’t stop me longer than to glance at her belly blocking the light shining through the door. A *mevrouw* has to keep her floors spic and span, and living in a barked-over hole in the ground is a sorry excuse. Over a year already with filth raining down from my roof and still the mistress’s voice rang in my head: “Every morning, young lady, we shine the entryway or the neighbors will think a family of fishmongers lives here.”

Catalina lifted me up like I was as light as the mice that skittered across my floor, which compared to her I was. Her belly had been swelling for seven months. “I swear, Jackie, you’re stirring that dirt into a muddy morass. Sit here with me. A girl has to rest in your condition.”

“You think so, Cattie?”

She cocked her eye. “You’ve missed your rag twice now and Marty’s singing about it to everybody. Have you been sick again?”

I nodded. I had tossed up breakfast, and while the gruel of maize was none too tasty, it’s not what unsettled my stomach. The tiny life sprouting inside me was responsible, and while I’d expected more of a warm glow than roiling guts, I was no less joyful for heaving every morning. And Catalina was right about my husband. When I told Marty the news, he whooped louder than when he found hops blooming wild in the woods behind our hole in the ground.

More excited than over hops may not sound like much for a

first-time *pater*, but I knew. You see, Marty was the farm boy he looked. He'd learned his farming on his family's land before the poxed duke chased them off it. His *pater* planted wheat and his *moeder* vegetables. His tender personality didn't take to either. He grew hops, little green flowers bunched along the vine. He nurtured the plants along his trellises, checked that the buds didn't burn in the sun, and when they ripened, gently tugged them off and laid them out to dry.

Then he sold them to the brewer. And asked for a premium price because he raised quality. And demanded the brewer teach him brewing because it was the only schooling he was likely to get and he didn't plan on tending the farm his whole life.

So when he found hops blooming wild, he tumbled out of the woods with a fist full whooping.

I tore myself loose from Catalina's grip and hobbled outside. The fresh air carried a chill. Beginning of October already, the harvest in. Soon the river would freeze, the North River, the one the Englishman Hudson had discovered for us. We'd been dumped forty-four leagues up from the mouth, from Manhattan Island.

Well the ice would fend off Spanish pirates better than eight families and another ten men could, and that's all we had to man the fort we'd built. Fort Orange we'd named it, in honor of the Prince of Orange, but if the prince ever laid eyes on that miserable pile of logs, he'd wipe his name clean off.

Ja, Spanish pirates. Here we were dumped in as foreboding a wilderness as civilized man ever set foot in, surrounded by a forest filled with wild beasts and wilder savages, with trees so thick the sun's rays could hardly slither through, and we feared Spanish pirates. Us girls felt mighty lucky they hadn't caught us on the voyage out. They liked nothing better than to bend a girl over the rail and lift her skirt before they toss her into the sea.

Nee, every one of our babes would be born of a conjugal union. The race was shaping up to be a tight one between Catalina and Adrienne Cuvellier. Catalina had youth on her side, but Adrienne claimed experience. She and her husband Guillam Vigne had pumped out three daughters back in Leiden. The rest of us

girls were back in the pack if we'd even jumped the starting line.

And every babe was likely to be spilled out Indian style, squatting in the woods. Because that's the way we were living.

Not that I'm saying anything against the savages. Frankly I've come to admire them, no matter people said they were stupid as beanpoles, and stunk like the rancid bear grease they smeared all over, and both sexes whored like they were raised in Sodom and Gomorrah. Not a whit of that's true, nor the bit about being noble either. Innocent they weren't, just human, and while they held some ideas pretty strange to us settlers, I've already mentioned the Dutch shouldn't point fingers on that score.

The Mahicans who lived along the river were plenty friendly when we sailed in. A sachem named Una led a crowd to the shore to greet us. Sachem, that's a chief, but the title doesn't mean anybody will stand up and salute when he strolls by. I admit, at first glance we looked to our sailors to unloose a broadside at them. A couple dozen naked savages were waving and whooping and for all we knew firing up the kettle to boil us for dinner.

All right, they weren't quite naked. Each man had pulled a duffel cloth between his legs and wrapped the ends around like a belt. Their long limbs bristled with muscles, and their bodies were painted red and black swirling like tornados. Strangest of all, each one had the hair on one side of his head shorn off, leaving a braid hanging down the other and a coxcomb standing upright in between.

Their women brought up the rear, showing how little distance separates civilized from savage. They weren't painted like the men and their hair hung more sensible, long on all sides with a band of beads holding it off the forehead. They wrapped their duffels like a petticoat and tied a second over the shoulder. Beaded patterns decorated both pieces.

The tribe burst into song, guttural like a chorus of frogs. "That's their welcome song," Adriaen Thienpont said, claiming to have learned the savages' customs when he traded here some years before. He jumped over the side and waded to shore.

Marty said, "Solid earth sure will feel good beneath our feet, Jackie." He hoisted me up and tickled my ribs to stop my

wrestling. Over the rail we went.

When we had assembled on shore, Una shook a mantle of turkey feathers he wore to distinguish his position. He said, "We will give you a place to make a town, from here to the stream and up the hill." Leastways that's what Thienpont claimed he said, pretending to know the words and signs as well as the customs. Una took a second look at our pitiful condition and added, "You are a small people now, but you will multiply and fill the land we give you." Then the Mahicans took us under their arms. While we cringed, we learned to appreciate the shelter.

Learned fast because the Company wasn't offering much in the way of protection. Commander May no sooner unloaded provisions to make space for beaver pelts than he hoisted sail. "Take charge, Thienpont," he yelled from the stern. "Buy up all the furs you can lay hands on." Then he skedaddled downriver in a rush to get back to Holland and sell those beaver at a profit.

The season being summer, we didn't freeze the first night. The next day the Mahicans showed us how to bark over a lattice of saplings for a house. Our men got right to work, scraping a pit for floor and walls, which is how I came to live in a hole in the ground.

Una offered us fields lying fallow. Thienpont handed out hoes and seeds and told the men to plant. Then he disappeared, searching out beaver. Meanwhile, the Mahicans stood around the fields laughing. The Mahican men, that is. Which was not good news for us women, we'd learn soon enough.

We women got used to Indian life mind you, living in holes, eating maize, treating every malady with beaver oil, swaddling ourselves in skins during the winter and going around less than modest come a heat wave. I even learned a few words of the Mahican tongue because plenty of them hung around the fort. Their idea of giving us land didn't involve them moving off in the bargain. Come August, I danced the *kinte-kaye* at the harvest bash they threw, though I never could caterwaul around the bonfire like an Indian.

Nonetheless, I was nervous about heading into the woods come my ninth month. October now, seven to go. At least spring

would arrive before my babe.

I turned to Catalina, who'd followed me out to the cool air. "Cattie, do you think we'll be like these savage women, watering the trees when our sacks burst?"

"Quit worrying, Jackie. I'm going first to show you how easy it is. When your time comes, I'll be holding your hand, and Marty will be waiting."

"Marty? He'll be in the woods himself gathering hops. That's what he loves."

"He loves you, Jackie, and that child you're giving him. Hops is just his way of providing."

Well, I couldn't deny it, Marty did love me as much as his hops. He treated me just the same. Didn't I say he nurtured his plants and guided them along the trellis and tugged them gingerly? A girl likes the same things, to be touched tenderly, and that boy's fingertips were as soft as down when they pulled my petals.

And the beer he brewed was as tasty as any served in Leiden's finest beer hall. Which is why Nanne came out of her hole in the ground at that moment, bucket in hand.

Nanne's waist was thickening up, though Catalina and I weren't sure whether she was joining our *moederly* condition or tipping that bucket too frequently. "Brew ready?" she asked.

"Fresh in the barrel," I said and took the bucket inside.

I brought her beer out with no more than a finger's width head. Nanne stuck her nose in the foam, thinking she could complain about being shortchanged. She hit liquid sooner than expected and snorted beer up her nose. That convinced her it tasted too good to resist. She put her lips to the brim.

"Better save some for Thomas," Catalina said, Thomas being Paunch's real name and Nanne's husband.

"He gets more than his share considering how much work he does," Nanne said. "Jorie and Marty in the fields?"

"In the woods," Catalina said.

"Jorie chasing furs again?" Nanne said. "Can't eat a beaver less you're an Indian. At least Marty's collecting hops to help quench the thirst."

"The harvest is in, Nanne," I said.

“That’s right, I saw you and Cattie cutting wheat. I told Thomas to get off his duff and help. He said he would as soon as Jorie and Marty showed up. But then he started laughing like an Indian, so hard he choked on his beer.”

She smiled. I turned the color of a beet.

Laughing like an Indian, didn’t I mention that before? And how it wasn’t good news for us women?

You see, we of the gentler sex weren’t the only ones who had taken to Indian life. Our menfolk had turned to it right nicely when they figured out what so amused the Mahicans around the fields. Men turning the soil? That wasn’t the Indian way. Women are the ones who bent their backs pulling corn cobs, picking beans, and gathering squash and pumpkins. And they did everything else that could remotely be called work, from tanning skins to sewing clothes to . . . well the list could go on nigh endless.

Their men would sit around and pontificate. If the conversation lagged, they’d light a pipe and smoke the day away. If the tobacco ran low, they might get off their haunches and hunt a deer. And if they really wanted fun, they’d go warring against the neighbors.

But work? Not on your life, not in the fields.

After our first harvest, our menfolk thought they’d taught us women as much farming as they knew. Living in the wilderness, they decided they better adopt the model proved to work in this environment, that model being Indian. Hence the combination of layabouts like Thomas and woodsmen like Marty and Jorie our men had turned into.

Now we had our own sachem named Thienpont to straighten them out how the Dutch do things, wilderness or not. So what did our men do? Treated him like the Indians treat their sachem, that’s what. They’d let Thienpont call them together, so long as my barrel was spigoted. The men would listen politely while Thienpont lectured, most often about how they weren’t supposed to buy beaver on account of the pelts were reserved for the Company. Seldom would he talk about something more fruitful, like how they ought to help us women. When Thienpont shut up,

each man had his say till they finished the barrel I'd tapped. Then if the topic was simple like we needed more beer, they'd pass a resolution like the Indians, unanimous being the only way the savages decided anything. Or if not, everybody would go off and do whatever he pleased, which is what any Indian would do if he didn't see eye to eye with the sachem.

Us women, well, we got on with the work. If we needed help from our men? Any woman who got me to slow up serving the beer could wheedle enough work out of her man to keep us alive. But no more than that.

2

A warm snap followed that early October chill so a few Sundays later, Marty planned a celebration of my *moederly* condition. Our best friends Catalina and Jorie were joining us along a stream that ran into Hudson's river. Adrienne and Guillam were bringing their family. Nanne and Thomas too, they'd never miss the chance to guzzle Marty's beer.

I was filling a third bucket of beer when foam sprayed out the spigot. "I got to tap another barrel," I called out my hole.

Catalina peeked in. "Hurry up. Marty and Jorie took two buckets and went ahead."

Damn my husband, this day was supposed to celebrate the precious gift growing inside me. You'd think Marty could resist the woods' siren long enough for another bucket to fill. Well I wasn't tagging farther behind than I had to. I carried my quarter-full bucket outside. Not even Nanne and Thomas had waited.

The wall of forest loomed within arm's reach of my hole. It stopped me dead in my tracks. Dammit, Marty knew this would happen. Trailing him into there was like following Jonah into the belly of the whale.

"Go on," Catalina said. She shoved me ahead.

Two steps in, a Satan's symphony burst forth, bugs chirping like they'd plucked every string of an out-of-tune harp, birds screeching like a thousand Huns pillaging, limbs creaking like they'd break under the weight of Heaven. I clapped my hands to

my ears, but my nose sucked in the dank mustiness of rotting wood and decaying leaves. The dank tasted like sour black water. When it worked a ways down my throat, I heaved.

Catalina pulled me onto a log. “We’ll never catch them now,” she said.

“Let’s go back before we’re lost forever.”

Catalina’s eye cocked. “And disappoint your husband, Jackie? What are you sick for anyway? Three months done, your belly ought to be settling down.” What did she know about it, as easy a pregnancy as she’d had?

Catalina let me rest a minute longer, then we stumbled along in shadows gloomier than the hold of the ship that dumped us here. Lord, I’d take a roiling ocean over the confinement of this forest any day.

From up ahead, a belch echoed off the trees like a bass horn playing along with the Satan’s band. “You dribbled out this last bucket so slow Thomas will drink the first two before we lay out the food,” Catalina said.

A welcome sound to my ears, that belch. We weren’t lost, though Catalina misidentified the gullet it burst from. “That’s Nanne,” I said. She sat in a patch of dappled sunlight beside the stream, not a hundred paces distant since the forest never allowed you to sight that far ahead. The dinner basket spilled across a duffel cloth. “She’s broken into the larder. Hurry, Cattie.” I skipped but a root grabbed my foot and sent me sprawling.

Catalina bent to hoist me up, leastways that’s what I thought till a hand squeezed my arm tighter than the strings of Freda’s bodice. I whimpered. The hand flipped me over.

The hand of a devil gripped me, a devil with black vindictive eyes and a tongue salivating at the meal before him. His greasy black braid dangled in my face, growing on one side like he shared a barber with the Mahicans, likewise the artist painting the tornados that swirled over every scrap of skin. But he wasn’t any savage I recognized. He snarled, revealing two rows of choppers, not a one chipped but every tooth stained with blood fresh from breakfast.

None of that’s what made him a devil though. The second

head did. *Ja*, he was a two-headed devil, one perched atop his neck, the other on his shoulder. That second one stared hungrily out of eyes so dark they were turning red, with skin stretched so tight every bump of the skull showed through, with jaws pried open to expose bits of meat clinging to the eyeteeth.

I howled. If a sound came out, the Satan band drowned it. My poor babe, never to feel the comfort of its *pater's* arms, its *moeder* eaten while it was carried off to serve Lucifer himself. All that flashed in my head during the seconds before I was gobbled up for dinner. How familiar that story sounded to an orphan girl like me.

Only the devil with two heads didn't chomp into my flesh, he hoisted me over his empty shoulder. Four devils behind, single-headed ones, held bundles of their own. One of the bundles was Catalina. A paw clamped her mouth shut. Without so much noise as crackling leaves, off we went, swallowed by that forest like we slid down the devils' throats.

How we circled I don't know, or for how long though it seemed that devil toted me forever. The shadows grew darker, the trees thicker. Finally we entered a patch of light with a stream gurgling through it. The devil carrying me stopped. He gurgled out his mouth and waved hands that loosened their grip on me. Another voice answered back, speaking gibberish too. Only this voice I recognized, Jorie's. While I couldn't see his face, the shadows of his hands gesticulated furiously. Then a third voice spoke words I understood, about price and money and furs, and Jorie answered my husband, the two of them arguing with me draped over this devil's shoulder. Why didn't they point their muskets and shoot? If they killed Catalina and me, well wasn't that better than their unborn babes carried off to serve Lucifer?

The devil holding me jabbered out words no one knew and tore the second head off his shoulder and rattled the jaws, and got madder every time Jorie answered back. Negotiating, I finally realized, no doubt threatening to have his way with me like Spanish pirates if Marty didn't fork over a ransom. Damn my husband, what was taking so long? Weren't me and my unborn babe worth any price?

Finally the other devils threw down their bundles and took whatever payment Jorie and Marty agreed to. Only then did the devil with two heads lay me down with my head on one of the bundles. Stiff hair scratched my cheek, hair that stunk of fresh musk. Not till later did I realize all the negotiating was over the price for that pack of beaver, not me. The devil didn't want me or my babe but he was a shrewd bastard who knew you drive a hard bargain when you're holding the other man's *mevrouw*.

3

That devil with two heads was an Indian, of course, if not of any ilk I'd run across. His tribe was the Mohawks, sworn enemies of the Mahicans. The Mohawks ruled an area further west along a river running into Hudson's, rich beaver land we'd learn. This group had floated pelts down looking to do business. When that root grabbed me, they were sneaking through the woods so as to circumvent a falls on their river and Mahicans who'd fall on them like wolves on prey for interloping into Mahican territory. So long as the wolves outnumbered the prey a couple of times over, that is, because Mohawks would rip their enemies' guts out in an even fight.

"Ja, *Jougtuckcha Otbkon*," Marty said that afternoon as I raved about devils chasing me. "That's what Mohawks call themselves, cunning devils in their tongue. That warrior wears the bear skull on his shoulder to gain the power of the devil. Eats his enemies for the same reason. He said so with the signs."

Damn my husband again. All that gesticulating was sign language. He knew the signs and words too, and all this time he let me believe he roamed the woods to collect hops and either trapped the furs he carried home or bought them off the Mahicans.

"Can't make much profit on Mahican furs, Jackie," he said when I yelled. "Got to intercept the Mohawks before they reach the fort to earn a margin worth your time."

"Margin that'll get you killed when you get caught between those tribes," I said. "And leave your babe with no *pater* to provide

and comfort. Don't you know how that hurts a child?" But of course he didn't, he'd had his *pater* to teach him farming.

If I'd known a tribe of devils waited in the woods, I'd have swum after the ship that dumped us here. Hearing from Marty that the Mohawk held one end of the Covenant Chain didn't ease my mind a bit. He claimed the Covenant Chain is what the Indians called the peace treaty the first Dutch traders forced on the tribes by building a church atop the savages' weapons so they couldn't fight anymore.

"If that chain isn't rusted through," I asked him, "how come those Mohawk carry hatchets and sneak through the woods to avoid getting punctured with Mahican arrows?"

Marty carried me home without answering the question. For the next month, I worried the fright those Mohawk devils gave Catalina and me would scar our babes for life. But Catalina popped out her daughter as easy as a needle sews through duffel. Precious Sarah had blue eyes and golden locks. Adrienne birthed her boy Jan a week later. Seeing those healthy bundles eased my mind. Meanwhile my belly rounded out like a small barrel, and Nanne's did too a size larger. The only thing still troubling me was that every time I held Sarah, the girl pawed my chest like I was her *moeder* and squawked at how little she found.

So when we heard ships had landed at Manhattan Island named the Cow, the Horse and the Sheep, I sang out, "Hallelujah, milk for the babe."

Catalina cocked an eye. "Stop that nonsense, Jackie. I'll suckle your child before I let you chance sickening a babe with cow's milk. Not a newborn, not till the child is properly weaned."

Our leader Thienpont hustled downstream to meet the new boss a fourth ship brought. Willem Verhulst titled himself Director of New Netherland, no wonder the way our colony was growing. Along with a hundred cows, horses and sheep, the ships packed in another forty-five settlers.

That's the last we saw of Thienpont. He hightailed it back to Holland with enough furs to buy himself an Amsterdam mansion. Director Verhulst sent Daniel van Crieckenbeeck up to keep us in line. His friends knew him as Beek.

The air was cold and the sky gray when Beeck and his entourage of five men stepped ashore near the end of November. A sharp nose could detect snow would drift down from the mountains in a couple days more. Our new commander was a confident little Dutchman, so short the sword hanging from his belt scraped ground on every stride, and so fair his skin had peeled off from being burned aboard ship. “Cocky,” a couple of people muttered.

“Where’s our new neighbors?” Thomas yelled, my beer having loosened his tongue at the noontime meal.

Beeck frowned at the words slurring between Thomas’s lips. But seeing the rest of us so eager, he addressed the question. “The new colonists are settling on Noten Island in the bay.”

“Noten Island isn’t big enough for three families to farm,” said Guillam Vigne, Adrienne’s husband, displaying his attentiveness as we’d sailed upriver. “And too filled with nut trees to be worth farming.”

“Trees can be felled,” Beeck said. “That’s the decision Director Verhulst made, following instructions from their Honors in Amsterdam.”

“Sounds like one of the horses you brought blew that decision out his arse,” Thomas shouted. Nanne proceeded to demonstrate the process, her arse now approaching the size of a horse’s.

Beeck stepped closer to Thomas, though out of arm’s reach, maybe knowing the danger in provoking a drunk. “Disrespect for the officers of the Company. I’ll fine you a day’s wages for that impudence. And I warn the rest of you, Director Verhulst has been instructed to report to Amsterdam on the behavior of our people here. I’m ordered to pay special attention to idlers. Anyone not performing his duty shall be left to suffer want.”

“You mean to starve, sir?” The voice squeaked out of Christine Vigne, Adrienne’s eldest, a skinny fifteen year-old who looked like she’d already missed a few meals.

“If that’s the result of fending for yourselves, you’ll soon find the Company’s work more to your liking,” Beeck said.

That got my dander up. I thrust out my belly and stepped forward. “Officer, sir, with all the respect due Your Worship, we

got this girl and her two sisters, and two babes already born and two more on the way. Our children need milk and butter and cheese.”

“*Mevrouw*, what’s your name?” Beeck asked.

“Jacqueline Lambert, sir, *mevrouw* of Martin Moreau.” My husband put his hands on my shoulders, readying to thrust me behind if I needed protection.

“*Mevrouw* Lambert, please reserve Your Worship should a Domine arrive. You may call me Beeck.”

“*Ja*, sir, Mr. Beeck. We heard the ships carried cows. Did you bring one here, for the children, sir?”

“Certainly not. The cows are reserved for the Company’s *bouweries* which we’re building downstream.”

“But the children, sir.”

“Out of the question, cows are much too valuable. I will see if I can requisition a sheep.” Beeck looked at my belly. “There appears to be ample time.”

“Until spring, sir.” He had already looked away. The Company’s business was a lot more important than a few mouths to feed.

“Men,” he called. “Listen as I want no misunderstanding. The Company has devoted an enormous quantity of funds to give you a new home. It is your duty to ensure it earns a return commensurate with the risk it bears. Accordingly, the Company is promulgating a new policy governing the fur trade.”

Our menfolk sucked in their breaths because most everyone dabbled in furs.

“From this moment forward,” Beeck said, “all furs are to be sold only to the Company’s representatives.”

The men let their breaths out in relief because that was Company orders ever since we got here. They already intercepted Indians bringing in beaver and otter, though I’d learned most avoided the Mohawk devils. Indeed I’d forced Marty to teach me a good deal about the fur trade since he was risking his life and thereby the *pater* of his child pursuing it. Other men were satisfied with the smaller profit they earned on Mahican furs, or else furs brought from the north by the Hurons, relatives of the Mahicans

and therefore allowed to pass freely. Our men swapped duffel cloth and kettles for pelts, or paid with sewan Marty explained, the white and purple shells the Indians used for money. They resold the pelts to the Company at a markup, which Thienpont was willing to pay since he still earned fifteen stivers commission on each pelt and it saved him the trouble of dealing with every ornery savage.

But the men sucked in their breaths once more when Beeck kept talking. “You will receive the same price we pay Indians who bring pelts directly to our post here. And we will not tolerate bushlopers venturing into the wilderness to intercept the Indians’ furs at a discount.”

Well our men weren’t stupid even if some needed their fingers to count. “That leaves us nothing,” Jorie said.

“It leaves you free to catch your own,” Beeck said.

“The beaver’s trapped out near here.”

“That is the policy. Perhaps you should look for another line of work. The Company will pay strong men eight stivers a day for felling timber and sawing lumber.”

“Eight stivers?” Thomas roared. “A dike digger in Holland gets ten and free beer at the end of the day.”

“Eight stivers, a good wage. We shall be offering the savages half that. For those of you wishing to farm, I shall review the allotment of lands to ensure you have adequate fields. Employment and land are contingent, of course.”

“Lord, here comes another oath,” I muttered to Catalina.

“All must solemnly swear that they shall look after the Company’s interests, manage their farm and perform their labor to the greatest profit and least expense, and conduct themselves as faithful servants and obedient subjects are bound to do.”

4

“Damn Thienpont, that son of a poxed whore!” Beeck kicked a pile of kettles. Iron clattered across the storeroom inside the fort.

Just my luck arriving as Beeck discovered Thienpont had carted off all the furs and depleted the trade goods to boot. The

storeroom was empty except for the scattered kettles and a couple bundles of duffel cloth. Well I couldn't wait till the beer I was carrying went flat. "Sir, Mr. Beeck, my husband is a brewer. I brought two buckets to welcome you and your friends." And to spy out what you're up to, I didn't add.

Beeck sniffed the air. "Beer? Does it taste better than cow piss?"

"I wouldn't know, sir. We don't have a cow."

"No cow, *mevrour*, but you've got a sharp tongue. Leave the buckets. If it's cow piss, we'll give it to the savages. When they get drunk, we can steal their furs."

The man didn't know the first thing about Indians or the fur trade, just like Marty guessed. Well, maybe someone told him Indians couldn't hold their liquor, but evidently not how vicious it made them even when you weren't stealing their furs. I set down the buckets.

"I'll collect the empties in the morning," I said backing out. Before I got three paces, the entourage was lapping up the brew like sailors on payday before they went searching for whores.

When I got back to my hole, Catalina was pouring beer for Jorie, Marty and Guillam and avoiding Thomas's tankard. Nanne was filling a stool with her bottom. Baby Sarah was asleep.

"Bastards steal the cap off your head, Jackie?" Thomas said.

"They would if they could trade it to the Indians. Beeck cursed worse than you over what Thienpont left him. The duffel is red."

"The savages won't trade for that," Guillam said. "The color scares the game away."

"Nothing else?" Marty asked, which is what he'd sent me to find out.

"Cracked kettles. The Indians will never take them."

"You sure, Petal?"

My husband wasn't asking about kettles or duffel or what else Beeck had, or he wouldn't have called me by the nickname he trotted out late at night when the fire burned low. He was wondering if I had second thoughts about the investment we'd agreed to make. I did, you don't turn outlaw without thinking twice.

“It’s for our child’s future,” I said. My trembling hands reached into the straw we slept on and pulled out our savings. Our babe’s school fund, that’s how I thought of it, collected for the furs Marty sold Thienpont and the beer I served. We’d gathered a good-sized lump of sewan, the shells the Indians strung on strips of leather and wove into wampum belts. The belts were their version of both a bank and a history book. We had the Bible for a book, but sewan is how we stored our savings.

“You’re in, aren’t you, Cattie?” I asked.

“For Sarah.” She pulled a lump out of her skirt. Guillam reached into his pouch too.

“Nanne?” Thomas said. Nanne opened a palm mostly full.

Our contributions added up to a few belts worth. “Ought to be enough to buy the furs the Mohawks bring if Beeck’s too short of trade goods to bid against us,” Marty said.

“Let Beeck deal with the Mahicans,” Jorie said. “The furs they bring are thin. Besides, we’re doing the Company a favor. The Mohawks will go home mad if they carry beaver all this way for nothing. They’ll take their furs north to the French, or east and let Englishmen steal them from under our nose.”

“Pour, Jackie,” Marty said.

I sloshed beer over the floor. “Settle down,” Catalina said, reaching for the bucket.

I shook her off. “For our child’s future.” The words steadied my hand enough to pour.

“To the Cunning Devil Beaver Guild,” Marty said, tankard raised.

Beaver Guild, that was a nice way of putting it. A smugglers’ cartel is what I’d just joined. Me, who’d never stolen anything except the bread and cheese I slipped from under the mistress’s nose. How would our babe learn its letters when *moeder* and *pater* were jailed for smuggling?

Who was I kidding? Smugglers’ cartel was the least of it. I’d just signed onto a deal with devils. *Jougntuckcha Othkon*, cunning Mohawk devils. I better pray it didn’t cost me my soul.

5

The Mahican sachem Una and his band showed up outside our fort four days later, having manners enough to let our new sachem Beeck settle in. Snow had fallen a foot deep overnight. Una lit his pipe, an Indian's way of being friendly with the neighbors before jumping into a bout of speechifying. When Beeck opened his trap, Una stuck the pipe stem in so as to spare his host the embarrassment of being rude. Then hoping this pair of sachems would bond, Catalina and I dished out beaver tail, the food you serve an Indian if you want him to remember the occasion.

After dinner, Una laid four beaver pelts before Beeck and said, "Fifteen winters ago, the Muh-he-con-new had a castle on this river. A giant fish floated upon the water. It was filled with pale-faces. We welcomed them as brethren."

The opposing sachem is supposed to return the gifts and the compliment. Beeck stood there with empty hands and the only words he could think of were prompted by the pelts. "Beaver, you keep the supply flowing, we'll be good friends."

Jorie and Marty had stashed away a few trade goods themselves, which contributed considerably to our guild's capital and might partly account for the storeroom being so empty when Beeck arrived. To help Beeck out, they plopped down duffel and a skinny belt of sewan.

Una laid out more furs, otter this time. The otter emptied Beeck's mind of everything else, or he might've noticed how well-versed his colonists were in the business he planned to monopolize. But greed grips a man and won't let go. Being a Dutchman, Beeck couldn't stay satisfied with a swap already in his favor.

"Our fort is cramped something awful, Chief," he said. "You have to quit being so stingy with the land."

Una's expression didn't budge as Jorie translated. Like all Indians, he'd sweep the table clear if he took up cards, no matter what hand he was dealt. Finally he said, "The Great Spirit gave our ancestors this land. Ever since the Muh-he-con-new have made it their home. From the lake where the waters turn north to the salt

swept in from the sea, we have welcomed friends to our land. But our enemies have not dared to cross. If a Mohawk entered our land, we hunted him down like deer and elk.”

“I don’t doubt you’re mighty warriors,” Beeck said, too ignorant to keep his mouth shut when another’s talking.

“We gave you a place for your village and fields to feed you. We brought you furs that your ships carried away.”

“Exactly, the relationship is working out to everyone’s pleasure. We’ve got to expand operations.”

“But you made our enemies your friends. You invite Mohawk to bring furs to your fort. They trespass on our land, insult our women, bloody our men if ten find one of us alone in the forest. You give them trade goods that you should give to us.”

“Well trade goods are short right now,” Beeck said.

Una almost smiled as Jorie translated. Except he would never have been so foolish to let on. “The pelts we bring are thicker, and we do not go back on the bargain. The beavers’ tails are fat when we seal our friendship.”

“Like I said, trade goods are short right now. If you cooperate, we might reserve all we have for you.”

“When the snows melt, we will look at our land. We will see if Mohawk dare trespass. We will bring beaver with their winter coats and smoke the pipe and share the warmth of the sun. We will judge the fields you need to feed the babes that have come.”

That’s as direct a promise as an Indian makes. And as Dutchmen are used to stealing their land from the sea, Beeck probably judged it as secure a land grab as he’d seen, no matter Una hadn’t pledged a thing.

The outcome pleased the leaders of our guild most of all. Hearing Beeck promise all his trade goods to the Mahicans, Jorie and Marty grinned like drunken Indians. Anyone who’s watched an Indian stumble around in his cups might have noticed a little mischief and a lot of menace.

6

A drunken Indian never displayed so much menace as the sober one who showed up the next week, the second head on his shoulder snapping its jaws with each stride. *Ja*, that Mohawk devil who'd kidnapped Catalina and me waltzed into our fort. No need to sneak through the woods with a band of nine trailing behind. He'd greased himself with bear fat to keep out the cold, probably thinking a cunning devil wouldn't wear skins till the river froze thick enough to cross.

Nor would he bother with manners like a Mahican. He marched up to Beeck and said, "My name is Tolo Quatho. From where do you come?" The question itself wasn't impolite, any savage would ask it. But he'd smoke a pipe of tobacco beforehand.

"How do you do, Tolo?" Beeck said after Jorie translated. "Your boys look like they're burdened with quite a load of beaver. Maybe we can do business."

Forsaking his promise to save his trade goods for the Mahicans? Well I wasn't surprised. Beeck was a Dutchman, and money comes ahead of friendship.

Beeck ruffled his hand into a bundle of pelts, the fur so thick he could barely retrieve his fingers. "Thin skins like that won't keep a man's head warm," he said. "This whole pack might fetch a kettle. Maybe I can offer two."

Tolo Quatho eyed the paltry pile of red duffel and broken kettles Beeck's entourage laid out. He sniffed like he'd run across a mound of bear dung in the wilderness. He banged his hatchet against a kettle. It rang tinny. "Your kettles leak."

"Nothing clay won't patch," Beeck said. "Tell you what, I'll throw in a length of duffel for every three packs of fur. But you got to offer up a bundle of otter as a friendly gesture."

"Your duffel is the color of blood."

"Right pretty, isn't it?"

Tolo Quatho spit.

"Your throat feeling dry?" Beeck said. "I could rustle up a barrel of brandy if you want to leave the duffel behind."

Now the Indians had been tasting liquor since the day Henry

Hudson sailed up his river. Some liked it, some didn't. I was sure hoping Tolo Quatho stood on the dry side of the divide. He looked plenty mean without the sauce firing up his orneriness, and the swill Beeck was about to tilt out would be three-quarters water with gunpowder and animal entrails stirred in for flavor.

"We want sewan," Tolo Quatho said.

Beeck whistled. "Sewan? Those shells are only good for dressing up your girls. Plenty ladies here could entertain me without that fancy stuff."

"Sewan."

"No way, Tolo, not for second-rate furs. Take these kettles and I'll toss in the brandy without you throwing in the otter."

"Sewan. Or we'll take our furs to the Frenchmen."

Beeck's lip curled. "Frenchies? The Frenchies don't like you is what I hear. They'll have their friends the Hurons fry you for dinner."

Tolo Quatho didn't bother to sneer back. "Have your teeth bitten the flesh of your enemies?"

"Don't you call me a cannibal, you godless savage."

"Look at my teeth." Tolo Quatho bared his blood-stained choppers. "Look at them. They know the flesh of a man tastes like bear's meat. It's sweet, except for the hands. The hands we throw to our dogs."

"You savage, you're lower than a dog."

Beeck's entourage leveled muskets at the Mohawk. Tolo Quatho swelled his chest, stretching the swirls painted on. "We are *Ongve-honne*, surpassing you and Frenchmen and Hurons and the rest of mankind."

"The master race, eh?"

"You will flee before us like rabbits before wolves."

"A backside full of lead will send you packing."

Right then, Jorie jumped between the Indians and the entourage, dragging Marty behind and fluttering his hands in the Mohawks' direction. I was about to scream, *nee* Jorie, don't leave me widowed and Catalina too, and our babes never to be held in their *paters'* arms. Before I could utter a peep, Tolo Quatho turned on his heel and the Mohawk band vanished into the forest.

Beeck roared. “Chickenshit savages, we’ll boil them up and toss the meat to the Mahicans’ dogs.”

He strutted in a circle, then turned my way. “Jackie, bring an extra bucket of beer tonight. Humiliating savages makes me thirsty.”

I stumbled to and from the fort in the dark, the extra bucket weighing me down. What did I find when I got back but devils filling my hole in the ground, ten of them with eleven heads. Plus Marty, Jorie and Guillam, and little Sarah, and Catalina serving beaver tail. It was a tight fit when everyone lay down for the night, which is what an Indian expects in the way of hospitality after he finishes his supper and his business.

Ja, whatever Jorie signaled to those Mohawks, they understood he meant business. After everybody filled up on beaver, the Mohawks unwrapped one of their bundles. Sarah rolled onto a beaver pelt and gurgled, as happy as a princess on silk sheets. That fur had grown in thick for a winter that must’ve been colder in Mohawk land than here by Hudson’s river.

Tolo Quatho inspected the girl, like maybe he’d find three toes to explain why pale-faces ran so slow. He fingered the hole in her belly. Sarah cackled, a wonder with that bear skull staring at her. The cackling raised smiles from the Mohawks, the first sign anything could penetrate their stony faces. Tolo Quatho tickled more. Sarah lifted her legs and shot a stream across the beaver skin.

“We’ll take her to our women,” Tolo Quatho said. “She will marry a brave warrior.”

“Sewan, two hands,” Jorie said.

“She’s a daughter,” Tolo Quatho said, outraged at the price.

“She’s not for sale,” Catalina said, knocking Jorie on the head as she scooped up Sarah.

“For the pelt,” Jorie said.

If Tolo Quatho was disappointed, he didn’t let on. “Black,” he said.

Black means purple when it comes to sewan. These Mohawks weren’t asking for the dark stuff on account of their nature, black being the color they strung into warbelts. They were bargaining

hard. The dark shells were worth double the light.

“White,” Jorie said.

“Five hands,” Tolo Quatho said, improving on his own terms.

“Three,” Jorie countered.

“Four.”

That Mohawk hadn’t moved a stiver from his original offer once you take color into account, except for realizing the price referred to pelts for sewan, not sewan for Sarah. But he knew one supplier controlling the inventory gives leverage. He waited stone-faced till Jorie agreed. “White, four hands.”

“And the girl.” Tolo Quatho reached for Sarah.

Catalina yelped with her babe in her arms. Asking twice, Lord, this Mohawk was serious. I grabbed for the knife Marty hung on his belt. I was about to hurl myself at his throat when Tolo Quatho broke his straight face. Whoever said Indians don’t have a sense of humor?

Business concluded, I served cups of beer, which is the strongest brew anyone ought to give an Indian and not much of that when he’s staying the night. Everybody dozed like a baby, Sarah included on account of the Indians considered it good luck if she slept near. Everybody dozed except Catalina and me, that is. We lay either side of that girl and not once did we shut our eyes together. Not with devils in the house.

Come dawn, the Indians slipped into the woods, Beeck none the wiser.

7

Word gets out even if it’s a mystery how. All winter long guests came and went with the dark.

Come spring we had two of a different variety, though they didn’t slip out so easily. Well, Nanne’s did, a girl named Eva. The Mohawks had to help with mine.

Tolo Quatho and his warriors were delivering another load of furs when my pains hit. This trip he’d dragged along his woman to cook dinner and wash up afterwards. Catalina hustled them over to her hole in the ground. Like all Indian men, that bunch wanted

to steer clear of a bleeding woman. They would wait till the babe was washed clean, slapped on the rump and bellowing before they'd offer congratulations. And I sure didn't want that Mohawk woman around telling me to drop my babe on the forest floor.

I lay atop a bearskin suffering in silence. Catalina boiled a kettle of water and wiped my brow. About midnight, waves started breaking over me, small waves not very close together. The waves grew higher, like a storm at sea was gathering strength, hurling waves one after another. Before I knew it, breakers were pounding ashore, pounding the inside of my hips to pieces like a ship cast aground in the gale. "Cattie, the babe's coming. Right now, the babe's coming."

Catalina peeked under the duffle covering my loins. "Calm down, Jackie. Your water isn't even broke."

She was as calm as the eye of the gale. I could have killed her for it. Water, broke or not, couldn't account for the pressure ripping my insides, not unless the waves were carrying rocks and shells and fish carcasses to puncture my innards. Lord, water? What would the babe feel like when it wanted out?

I learned soon enough. The monster gnashed at me, getting angrier and angrier the more it searched for an escape. One foot kicked me in the bladder. "Now, Cattie, the babe's coming right now."

She peeked again. "Your water will break soon."

Maybe if I had her hips I could be that calm. But I didn't, and my babe wouldn't squirt out my skinny pair without splitting them into kindling. Right then I'd have ripped Catalina's heart out to steal that broad bottom of hers. Only the bucket of water gushing between my legs saved her.

"Thank God," I said.

Catalina cocked an eye like whenever I uttered what she thought was nonsense. Hardly a second later I realized why. Another wave broke. The monster inside me jammed the exit like an oversize cork in the brandy bottle. "Now, Cattie, tell me it's so. Please, tell me."

She peeked again. "Pretty soon."

If only she'd been right.

The waves broke and broke, each one wedging that monster in tighter. Catalina peeked each time I yelped, and each time her eye cocked a little less and her brow creased a little more. With each wave, I yelped a little louder and she worried a little harder till she would have traded her hips for mine, I know she would have as good a friend as she was.

I yowled, a yowl so loud it echoed off the impenetrable forest outside my hole, echoed like an Indian war party whooping in for the massacre. Beeck jumped out of the bearskin keeping him warm in the fort. He ventured as far as the gate and hollered. “Savages! Hightail it in here, all of you.”

Catalina broke off from holding me to holler back. “We’d all be hatcheted by now if we were counting on you for protection. Jackie is suffering more pain than any man could bear up.”

Catalina was right about a man bearing pain, and I couldn’t bear it any better, not without my hips cracking apart and my babe’s skull crushed between them. But that Mohawk woman had heard enough war parties whooping and *moeders* birthing to tell the difference. She ran in barking orders, spotted me lying on the bearskin and scowled. I yelped louder.

The Mohawk woman ripped open the sewn skin she carried and flung a handful of herbs into the kettle. She kneaded my sides, maybe for a minute, maybe for an hour, how could I know in my state? What I do know is the waves kept pounding and bouncing back, only to pound again. But finally they pushed through. Pushed like they’d broken through a breakwater.

My new nurse heaved me upright. I was afraid she’d haul me into the woods. She didn’t care about the location though, so long as I was squatting on my haunches. She barked at Catalina to pour her brew, then tilted the cup to my lips, forcing down swallows till I drained it dry. The brew tasted like codfish oil, pungent with a greasy residue that lingered on my tongue for days. Maybe that was the point of spilling it into me because it greased the monster inside too, I swear. A round ball shoved between my legs. The hurt was as intense as ever but I stopped yelping. It felt right. The Mohawk woman held my shoulders so I couldn’t lean back. I didn’t have strength left to push and I didn’t need to. Tumbling

down, the babe fell like an acorn off the oak.

My son hit the ground. *Ja*, my son. Seeing I wasn't going to bite the cord, my nurse did it herself. Catalina soaked a rag to wipe the child. Realizing her intent, the woman scooped him up and ran out the door. Imagine, she goes to all that trouble to kidnap my babe!

Catalina chased after her, but the woman only ran as far as the north side of my hole, where snow had melted into a hollow. She scoured my babe in the puddle. When he came out of that filthy bath, he bellowed like the savage he'd half become in the birthing.

Fortunately my babe's bellow didn't call Beeck back out, just Marty, Jorie, Nanne and Thomas, and a half dozen savages, one with two heads. Tolo Quatho was fastest. His shoulders towered over me and my babe. Imagine a new-born opening his eyes to that, one head with hair braided long on one side and shorn clean off the other and a coxcomb in the middle. And a second head with blood-stained molars snapping. That sight would spread anyone's eyes wide, even a new-born not supposed to see when he's minutes old.

Luckily Marty was only strides behind. Marty cuddled his son. You could see how he would guide the boy through life, with as much care as he trained his hops along the trellis, protecting every step of the way while letting the vine find its course. Leastways I could see it being the *moeder*, even in that first hour of life.

"Pierre Maurice," Marty called his son, holding the boy up for everyone to admire.

"Pierre Maurice," everyone repeated, only the name came out six different ways, most indecipherable.

The boy blinked at the faces surrounding him. He didn't take much notice of any particular one, white or Indian was the same blur to his young eyes, one as friendly or as frightening as the next. Till he got to the man with two heads, that's the blur my son locked on. He gurgled.

"He's a little savage," Nanne said. I guess she was right because he grabbed for that bear skull. His tiny fingers threaded through the eye sockets and got tangled up. Tolo Quatho seized the boy away from Marty before the child tore the bear off his

shoulder. Tolo Quatho and my son stared into each other's eyes, and if that Mohawk's face was as stony as ever, his eyes betrayed him with a sparkle. As soon as I saw those two clinging to one another, I knew the boy had chosen his *godpater*. Lord, a cunning devil.

Pierre Maurice. "*Atinion Bettefon*," Tolo Quatho said to Marty, said to me. "Steel Bear." We garbled the name worse than a Mohawk spitting out Pierre Maurice. So we took to calling the boy Battie.

8

True to his word, Una came by a little after Battie's birthing day. My boy was growing strong, though he suckled me dry and looked up hungry.

This time Una wasn't leading the Mahicans. A younger fellow named Monemin stood at the head of the band as we gathered outside the fort. He towered a head taller and wasn't graying yet.

The Mahicans had delivered pelts to the fort over the winter. But the season had turned into a mild one, with the river hardly freezing. Beaver anticipate such things and shed hair in the balmy air or never grow it in the first place. The good news for Beeck was that a boatload of trade goods was able to plough upstream before Christmas. It carried inferior goods, matching the Mahicans' beaver skins, and too few for the skins delivered so the Mahicans advanced credit.

Now they'd come to call in the debt. Monemin laid down a belt of black sewan daubed with red in the outline of a hatchet, and beside it sticks dipped in the same blood color.

Being Indian, the new sachem wouldn't rush into things. He nodded at Una to examine the babes. The old sachem reached for Sarah resting in Catalina's arms. Drool dripped down the girl's chin. Una turned away, not on account of the drool but because a daughter didn't warrant more than a glance. Eva got an even quicker look. Jan too because his three sisters standing by must have convinced Una that Adrienne couldn't conceive a son.

Which left Battie, nursing in my arms.

Una pulled him away. The boy resisted something fierce, refusing to release his bite on the nipple. He kicked at the duffle swaddling him. Una held him at arm's length in appreciation. That display alone couldn't satisfy an Indian though. Una unwrapped the duffle to see first hand what kind of man the boy would grow into.

"A fine boy, isn't he?" Beeck said. "Four babes our women have borne and they eat like horses. That one's likely to starve with nothing to wrap his lips around but Jackie's paps."

Una grunted and handed my son back to me.

"Four babes, and I bet four more are in the womb before the harvest is in," Beeck said. He was digging himself a hole. Indians don't cotton to conjugal relations with a nursing woman. Poisons the child they think. "We'll be needing that land we agreed on."

Monemin put a flame to the pipe and held it out. He refused to utter a word till Beeck sucked his chest full.

Finally the new sachem spoke. "One boy who can grow to be a warrior. Three girls." No one corrected the error. Poor Jan, he did look like a girl.

"Those girls can work the fields you promised us," Beeck said.

"You let Mohawk stomp on your crops. On our land."

"Not true, Chief. We sent the only Mohawks who wandered by scampering into the woods like fox before the hounds. Thought about boiling them up and feeding them to your dogs."

"No Mohawk cross the fields?"

"Not a single since we sent that troop scampering. We wouldn't tolerate it."

"You must prove it."

Monemin laid a bundle on the ground. He said, "We give you three beaver that you remember the furs we delivered through the winter and reward our favor." He moved one of the red sticks forward.

A tall bundle passed forward and landed beside the first. "We give you a plant of maize that your new fields bear fruit."

"Now you're getting the idea, Chief," Beeck said. "This is how civilized men conduct business."

"And a stone to mark the boundary you swear to defend."

Monemin moved another stick forward.

“We give you a calabash of oil to cleanse your ears that you hear the voice of your friends.” Another bundle and another stick.

“We give you a red-handled tomahawk that our enemies are your enemies.” Another and another.

Four sticks. Terms of the loan so to speak.

Monemin stood silently. Figuring out it was his turn to reciprocate, Beeck motioned to his entourage. They plopped down leftovers, broken kettles and torn duffel.

Monemin displayed his contempt without a change to his countenance. Which is what he’d planned all along. He knew these Dutchmen had nothing to bargain with except the one thing he wanted. “The voices of our dead echo through the woods,” he said. “They demand we avenge their blood. We fill our quivers. We paint our faces. You bring your guns. Together we will devour our enemy the Mohawk.”

There it was. Pick up those sticks and storm off to war. Or let the gifts lay and don’t plant that stalk of corn in the new fields. All or nothing, that’s the way the Indians do things.

Beeck hesitated. “Don’t get embroiled in quarrels between the Indians,” their Honors the Nineteen had ordered. “Remain neutral to reconcile the respective parties.” On the one hand, he’d pledged to earn the Company every stiver he could lay hands on. On the other, he’d sworn to obey orders like all of us were bound to do. Now he couldn’t figure a way to dissemble the words to avoid giving up furs and acreage.

What’s a Dutchman to do? When you worship Mammon, profit washes away all sins. Beeck knew which God was front and center on the Company’s altar. “Prime the muskets,” he shouted and scooped up the gifts.

A day and a night passed while the Mahicans danced the war dance. Jorie and Marty came back from trying to talk sense into Beeck and shook their heads. What’d they expect, hadn’t we pushed Beeck into the arms of the Mahicans while we jumped into the straw with Mohawks? Sleeping with the devils, where could that lead but hellfire? This conflagration would consume us all because what raging Mohawk would care which Dutchman he

massacred when he came avenging. And come they would. Dutch guns or not, Mahicans couldn't defeat cunning devils, I'd stake my soul on it.

The Mahicans and seven Dutchmen from the fort set off. They were aiming at a Mohawk village a day's march up the Mohawk River. A league from the fort, arrows flew at them thicker than a flock of carrier pigeons. Beeck and Monemin tumbled. All told a couple dozen Mahicans died with their sachem.

Two more Dutchmen fell with Beeck. The Mohawks grabbed a third alive. He was roasted and carved up like deer meat, and it was the Mohawks who did the devouring. Except for an arm and a leg. They carried those pieces home so others could enjoy the delicacy. The first we heard the news was the three surviving Dutchmen tearing back raving about hellfire.

We holed up inside the fort, the women wailing over their babes, the men arguing over defenses. I couldn't see much point in either. I sank down on my haunches, rocking Battie. By now I knew better than to run from devils, I knew they'd catch me sooner or later.

Ja, that's what I was thinking, that the devils who had stolen every place I'd called home, every piece of family who'd ever loved me, were on my trail again, this time disguised with braids and coxcombs and swirls of paint. They'd seen me scrubbing my hole in the ground. They'd seen me tingle at my husband's tender touch, cuddle my son. Home and family, they asked, how'd she get those things again?

Before dusk, Marty squatted beside me. "Listen, Petal, I got to go for help."

"Go? Go where?"

"Downriver. The Mahicans will paddle me and Jorie. To get help on Manhattan Island."

"*Nee*, Marty. You'll get roasted the moment you step out the gate." My eyes filled with tears. "You got to stay here and protect your son. The devils are coming for him."

"Devils? You mean the Mohawks? They helped bring him into this world."

"So they could eat him probably."

“You know that’s a lie, Petal. Tolo Quatho’s sworn to protect him.”

Battie’s *godpater*, he’d come for our son and if it wasn’t to eat him, the only protection he’d offer was to raise Battie savage and teach him to eat flesh too.

Marty and Jorie were gone by dawn, hardly another word spoken, just buckets of tears spilled. That quickly Battie was orphaned because if my husband wasn’t roasted, the Mahicans would slice his entrails for trading with the enemy. My poor son, just like me, never again to cuddle in his *pater’s* arms. Soon the devils would tear him from my breast. Every day I listened for their bloodcurdling whoops, their pounding on the gate. Every evening too, don’t ask me how many before I heard their footsteps getting closer, their gibberish getting louder, loud enough to hear over Catalina and Nanne wailing beside me.

Loud enough to make out words and voices, and then to realize the words were Dutch and I recognized the voices, Marty and Jorie alive and tromping ashore with a party of armed Dutchmen under Pieter Barentsen.

Catalina and I flew out of the fort and into our husbands’ arms, about crushing our babes between us and them in the excitement. Which lasted about an hour. Then I was like to kill my husband myself.

“You’re not going into the wilderness again,” I screamed. “You’ve done your duty.”

“Petal,” Marty said, sheepish if not exactly grinning.

“Don’t Petal me. You don’t care about me, fine. You got a son to raise.”

“Me and Jorie know the Mohawk best, Petal. How are we going to make peace if we don’t lead Barentsen?”

Catalina had been bearing up till she heard her husband’s name. I guess Jorie wouldn’t broach the subject himself, afraid he’d get walloped. He just turned away when Marty turned from me. Catalina and I were left blubbering in each other’s arms. Sarah and Battie were tangled up in one crib, oblivious to being orphaned for the second time in not two weeks.

Our men crept out of our fort, aiming for the Mohawk

stockade a day's march away. As dusk settled in, Marty and Jorie led Barentsen up to the Mohawk gate without so much as a thought for the babes they'd never again cuddle in their arms.

The Mohawks threw their gate open like the jaws of a baited beaver trap. Marty and Jorie jumped feet first into the trap, dragging Barentsen behind. The Mohawk warriors closed a circle around them like the jaws snapping shut.

"Your people meddled in a dispute that does not concern whites," the Mohawk sachem charged. "That is why we killed the Dutchman Beeck, the way we kill Mahicans and any who join them."

The circle of warriors closed tighter. "The Mahicans are women," the sachem said. "You see how they stalk like women? We forced the skirt on them, bound their legs with it so they could not run away. They dare not throw it off. They know we will wipe out every one of their tribe."

He spoke to the Mohawk warriors. "Tell these Dutchmen about the Mahicans."

"Women, we turned the Mahicans into women," the warriors roared.

"Into women who cannot chase the deer," the sachem said, "who cannot flee from the wolves with skirts binding their legs and jewelry dangling from their ears. Women we hunt like beasts of prey. Do not doubt us. If real war comes, we will exterminate every one. For we are but one finger of a five-fingered army." That's the first we heard the Mohawk belonged to a bigger confederacy called the Iroquois.

The sachem held out a belt of black sewan, the color for war. Even Marty admitted his throat went dry looking for the red hatchet painted on. Thank the Lord he didn't find it. This belt was just a warning, not a declaration. "Black, a special courtesy," he said to Barentsen.

"Worth double," Jorie said. "Take hold of it."

"And hand out the presents, everything we brought," Marty said.

Being more diplomat than Beeck, Barentsen followed the advice. The warriors opened a gap in the circle. Their women

carried in beaver tail.

“Let us renew our covenant that Mohawk and Dutchmen live in peace,” the sachem said. He bit a chunk off a tail and handed the remains to Barentsen. Barentsen sniffed.

“Eat it,” Marty said. “The whole piece.”

Barentsen chomped down and if he’d gagged chewing, I’d have been widowed and my son orphaned for real. Thank the Lord he swallowed one bite and then a second, hardly crinkling his nose.

After Marty and Jorie strutted home and related the story like conquering heroes, Barentsen said peace or no peace, Director Minit was ordering us down to Manhattan Island. We women shouted Hallelujah. We’d seen more killing and savagery than we could stomach. But I have to admit. While I never wish a dead man ill, I wasn’t sorry Beeck couldn’t ask how we collected all the furs we were ferrying.

The Spotted Cow

1626

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Director Minuit, that's who was ordering us to Manhattan Island. Hearing he was in charge, we wondered what happened to the first man who titled himself Director, Mr. Verhulst. I worried the Indians down south had gone on a rampage of their own. But shortly after I heard church bells ringing, I learned it wasn't that kind of rebellion that brought down the man.

Ja, church bells perched over a horse-mill were welcoming us to Manhattan Island. Real houses of sawed timbers stood along the shore. In the distance, a windmill turned. Hallelujah, civilization. So what the fort behind the houses couldn't keep out a one-legged Indian swilling watered-down brandy mixed with animal entrails?

A hundred or so people greeted our boat. With hardly a howdy-do, they swept us over the mound of rubble that was supposed to be the fort wall. Benches were set out in the yard. A row of men filled chairs up front, as solemn as judge and jury in court. I hooked Battie up to a pap to keep him quiet, though he'd suckle the pair dry in a quarter hour.

Judge and jury those men turned out to be. The culprit sat to the side wearing a cape of a dozen or more beavers sewn together. He looked haughty enough to be one of their Honors the Nineteen.

"Verhulst hasn't broken a sweat," said a woman behind me.

Verhulst, our former Director? In the dock?

A pasty man in black velour rose from the chairs. An egret feather stuck out of his hat and a silver rapier glittered as he

pranced between the jury and the defendant. "Shall we proceed, Director Minit?" he said.

"Recite the indictment, *Schout* Lampe," Minit said. Our new Director was handsome, with graying around the temples revealing enough years to maybe keep an unruly bunch like us in line. His face didn't wear the permanent scowl so common to the high and mighty. Give him a bucket of Marty's beer and you might enjoy a friendly evening around the hearth.

The *schout*, which is a combination of sheriff and prosecutor in Dutch officialdom, sneered at the defendant. "Mr. Verhulst, you are charged with violating the instructions of the Company."

"How dare you!" Verhulst leaped to his feet. Our former Director was a head shorter than Lampe but his gut gave him more heft. He stalked toward his accuser and would have bowled him over if the tip of Lampe's rapier hadn't raised up. The crowd jumped up too. A rotten cabbage flew past Verhulst's head.

"Order, order," Director Minit shouted. He pushed the rapier aside. "Sheath your sword, Mr. Lampe. Resume your place, Mr. Verhulst. You will have ample time to present your case."

"Director Verhulst to you, sir," the defendant said, "appointed by the Company in Amsterdam and no one here has authority to override the decision. You are bound to obey my commands." The strength of the statement was weakened a bit when Verhulst sat down.

The *schout* began again. "Violating the instructions issued by the Company in Amsterdam. How do you plead, Mr. Verhulst?"

"I violated nothing, and you have presented no evidence."

"State your case, Mr. Lampe," Minit said.

"First, the defendant has been careless with the Company's business. As testament, look at the cape of beaver resting on his shoulders. Look closely, gentlemen, sixteen skins sewn together, all told. Half that number would suffice were not all but the thickest fur along the backs trimmed and discarded. Waste, gentlemen. It's a sin."

The murmur from the crowd signaled its agreement. Not one of us on the benches wore fur that day and it was an occasion for the Sunday best.