

PURPOSE ON ALGOMA

BY LEAH GOOD

## Chapter One

### “Visitors”

It's the nicest thing I've ever owned. I mused, fingering the silky material of my new dress. I wish that Marcus was here so that I could show him. Before my brother ran away from one of our relatives, I forget which, he always told me that I looked better in my old hand-me-downs than any of the other girls looked in their new dresses. Still, he would be please to know that I finally owned something new. He always watched out for me.

Someday, I told myself, I'll find him. I'll tell him about this island and bring him back. We'll be together again.

I sighed and pushed back a strand of hair that fell into my face. I think I'll go see Mistress Gray and do some embroidery work on this dress.

Standing, I folded the dress and started downstairs. I lived in this house with Faith Cartwright, the seamstress who was my friend as well as my employer, her husband Kelvin and their daughter,ayah.

No one was in the kitchen, but I could hear Faith humming in the sewing room.

“I’m going out,” I called.

“Okay,” Faith responded, then started humming again.

I went out the door and started down the street. Mistress Gray lived a few houses away. Actually, everyone on the island lived a few houses away. Mistress Gray’s was only three doors down though.

Children played and laughed near the end of the road.

I was passing the apple tree that marked Mistress Gray’s house, when they spotted me.

“Maria!” They pelted down the street and instantly surrounded me. They chattered and jumped about, competing for my attention. I smiled and laughed with them but held my new dress away from their grimy hands. I was backed against the apple tree, the only tree in the town. They wanted me to play with them.

A boy and girl raced up and the noise calmed for a moment as the children watched the newcomers. Tom andayah ploughed through the group. Reaching the middle, they doubled over, gasping for breath. Tom spoke first, “A whole bunch of row boats are comin’ toward the island, all full of men!”

Tom was famous for his imagination and pretending. He often dragged me, the other children or one of the adults into a world of his own making. Because of this, I did not believe his news. Actually, I felt irritated, for he grabbed my free hand.

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“Come and see, Maria!”

“Not today Tom, I have things to do,” I pulled away.

“But there are three of them, and they’re all full!” He looked up at me, his face earnest.

“I’m not pretending.”

“Not today,” I shook my head.

“I saw them too, Maria.” Feeling a tug on my dress, I looked down to see Mayah. Sweet, serious Mayah who rarely pretended anything.

I sighed. “I’ll come, but only for a minute. I want to work on embroidering this.” I folded my dress and tucked it under my arm.

The group of children cheered and shot down the road before me.

At the end of the road stretched “the beach.” In truth, the steep, muddy ground could hardly be called a beach. It took a diligent seeker to find sand resembling what I expected to be on beaches.

Standing at the top of the incline, I shaded my eyes and peered in the direction Tom and Mayah pointed.

Three rowboats were approaching the beach! One pulled in-front of the rest. It would land within minutes.

I swallowed. The five men crammed onto each of the vessels looked like rough characters. They were huge and muscular. Their faces were grubby and in need of shaving.

“Why don’t they smile?” Mayah asked.

I could feel the gazes of a dozen children on me. They too could tell that these men were not like the gentle inhabitants of the island. Tom tugged on my skirt again. “What do we do?”

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Lord, keep us safe, I prayed.

Looking down at them, I said, “You all run home and tell your family about this! Hurry!”

They sped away, fright lending speed to their feet.

I took one last glance at the men pulling their boat onto the beach before turning and fleeing down the dirt road myself.

I raced past the house where I lived with the Faith, the seamstress, her husband Kelvin and their daughter, Mayah. I did not slow till I reached Mistress Gray’s door. Opening it, I darted inside and called my friends name.

“Mercy, child, what’s wrong?” She bustled down the stairs. Every strand of her snow white hair was in place. It always was.

Gasping for breath, I tried to find words that explained the problem. I did not know for certain that trouble was afoot. The men in the boat looked menacing, but there was no proof that they meant us harm.

“Three boatloads of men are landing on the beach! They don’t look too nice,” I told her.

“You shouldn’t judge people before you meet them.” She clucked. Then she frowned, “Three boatloads? That’s a lot of people.”

“Rowboats,” I amended.

Her eyebrows rose, “That’s strange. It’s rare for anyone to try to come from mainland in something so small.”

I shrugged. Having lived on the island for a year, I did not know the usual way visitors came to Algoma. Isla Gray, on the other hand, was respected as the island’s eldest citizen and longest resident.

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Moving to the door, she opened it and looked out.

“No sign of any strangers yet,” she reported, and then added, “Actually, there isn’t anyone on the street.”

“I sent them home to warn their families,” I swallowed. Fear gripped my heart. “Do you want me to stay?”

“Why don’t you go upstairs?” Mistress Gray glance back at me and smiled. She was trying to reassure me, I could tell. “If you’re worried about our visitors, you could put your new dress in the attic.” She turned back to the door. As I started up the stairs, she said, “Kelvin and some of the other men are coming out of the houses.”

Knowing this made me feel safer, for I trusted Kelvin Cartwright. An honest, kind man, he would do his best to protect the islanders as a whole, but especially his household. My job with his wife, Faith, made me a part of that household. I smiled to myself.

“Here they come,” My friend murmured as I reached the top step. “Please, God, protect us.”

Adrenaline rushed through my body. Closing the bedroom door, I ran through her room to the sliding panel leading to a crawl space. The panel, custom made by her late husband, was hidden so that it would not detract from the beauty of the room. I told myself that the dress would be safer behind that door than anywhere else on the island.

A crashing sound broke the silence that covered the island. It was followed by a woman’s scream.

## Chapter Two

### Mud

The men did mean trouble!

My heart pounded and my head spun.

I can stay hidden here.

What about Faith and Mistress Gray? You'd abandon them to save yourself?

It seemed like two people were arguing inside my head. I took a deep breath and tried to quiet both voices. The islanders had given me a place to belong. What could I do to help them now? I didn't even know what the problem was.

BANG, BANG! Fists pounded on doors. Coarse male voices added to the mounting noise outside. There was nothing I could do by revealing myself. A slender, fifteen-year-old girl could not defend anyone against a group of rough men.

So far, no noise came from downstairs. Mistress Gray probably still stood by her door.

What is going on out there?

Quietly, I crept to the curtained widow of the bedroom and looked out, pushing a strand of brown hair from my face. The sight made my stomach clench. Some of the islanders stood in the street. The men from the beach banged on doors. They demanded that the people come out. Algoma's street was flanked, on each side, by ten houses. The men were about halfway down the row. They approached the Cartwright's home now. Kelvin stood before the delicately painted door; his arms crossed, feet planted and blond hair blowing in the gusting wind coming off the sea.

One of the strangers walked up and barked something in his face. Kelvin answered and the man shook his fist. Fear for him made me feel sick. Unselfish and devoted to his family, Kelvin would try to defend them, I knew.

Unable to tear my eyes away, I watched as the stranger tried to shove Kelvin out of the way. That did not work. Muscular from working on his fishing boat, the islander could have beaten the smaller stranger in a fair fight. Fair, however, did not seem to be a concept understood by the rough newcomers.

A second man stepped up beside the first and yelled at Kelvin. I could hear the noise of the shout, but the wind snatched the words away. Shaking his head, Kelvin did not budge.

How bravely he behaved! Watching from the window, my legs felt weak with fear, yet he stared danger in the face and never flinched. The quiet strength of the peaceful fisherman seemed to bolster the crowd. As he remained in the doorway of his house they drew closer together. While the invaders were preoccupied watching the scene unfolding before the door, the island men formed a ring around the women and children. They wore expressions of determination.

My heart swelled with admiration and love for my island friends. I knew each of the people below; the men, women and children. They lived quiet, Christian lives. There was no malice in them, yet it seemed that they did not lack courage in the face of danger.

To my surprise, the two men threatening Kelvin backed away. I felt like singing. But a moment later they rushed back with yet another man. Grabbing the islander's arms, they jerked him forward, dragging the man from his small porch.

Kelvin struggled against them. It looked, for a moment, as if he would break free from his captors. I clenched the windowsill till my knuckles turned white.

He drove his elbow back and one man stumbled backward, losing his grip. Now, only the two, original assailant remained. In the excitement of the moment, I forgot the other thirteen members of the gang. But as a man strode toward where the three men struggled together, my heart sank. He was a commanding figure. There could be no question that he was the leader.

The men around the women and children wavered, looked at each other and back to Kelvin. Why didn't they help? As if in answer to my thought, two stepped forward. They were too late.

The tall man came up to the struggle. He grabbed Kelvin's hair, pulled back and delivered a stunning blow to the side of his head. The islander dropped, unconscious, to the ground.

Without a second glance, the assailant turned to glare at the crowd. The two islanders hurrying forward hesitated, and then fell back to their place protecting the women.

I stared in horror at the fallen figure.

CRACK! The noise filled the air. Jerking my head toward the sound, I saw Kelvin's two attackers push through the splintered remains of the Cartwright's door, barging into the family's home, my home. Moments later, Faith scurried out of the door, holding Mayah's hand. They were followed by the two invaders. The woman and child's faces were pale. Faith looked about her as the men herded them toward the rest of the group. No doubt she looked for Kelvin, but he had fallen some distance from the house.

The sound of voices below forced me to retreat from the window. Men were demanding that the widow come out of her house and join her neighbors on the street.

Careful to make no sound, I hurried to my hiding place. Inside the attic, I eased the door shut. As the latch clicked quietly, darkness closed in around me.

Unable to see my hand an inch from my face, I could still hear the confusion going on. Hearing it, without being able to look out and know what took place made the situations seem even more desperate.

With terror growing inside me, I closed my eyes and began to pray. Mistress Gray had led me to the Lord a few weeks before, and she told me that God would always hear my prayers.

I clung now to the hope that he would intervene on our behalf, for it seemed that only divine intervention would help. To me, Kelvin's defeat seemed to be the defeat of hope.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs. Trembling, I listened to them tramp through the other bedroom. Then the door to Mistress Gray's room slammed against the wall.

"Look here," A gruff voice grumbled, "mud all over."

Mud? Had I left footprints?

"So? Someone came in the room."

"Well, we should check it out. Arnold won't be happy if we miss someone."

"Well, they stop here." The voice was inches away.

"That's strange." Now the second man came close too.

"They don't go anywhere." He sounded puzzled.

"Maybe the person got into bed."

"Yea, sure, the bed's two yards away."

A scream lodged in my throat, trying to force its way out. Struggling to hold it in, I pulled my hand up to cover my mouth.

*Ouch!* I hit my hand on something. It scrapped across the floor for an inch. I froze.

"Did you hear that?"

"No."

"Something moved."

"A mouse."

"No..." The voice stopped. "That's funny."

"What?"

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“A hole...”

The sliding panel moved a centimeter. I held my breath.

Then light streamed in and I was blinking into a grizzled, startled face. The scream broke loose.

“It’s a girl!”

The man grabbed my arm and dragged me from my hiding place. My head struck against the low opening. Gaining a standing position, I stared down at my feet. Mud. My feet were covered with the stuff.

“Try to hide will you.” The man shook me, “You’ll soon learn better.” Shoving me forward, he kept pushing me toward the stairs.

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“You are our hostages! This island is now ruled by us.” The voice hesitated, and a familiar voice jumped in. Turning my head, I saw the speaker. It was Jack Walsh, our next-door neighbor. “What are you going to do with us?”

A bark of crude laughter snaked through the air. The sound raised goose bumps on my arms.

I waited for the answer. The question burned in my mind also. I was sure every islander wanted to know the answer.

The band’s leader waited for his men to quiet before saying, “Why, my friend, since we do not want the burden of watching you all, I believe we’ll dispose of you.” His voice carried a tone of amusement. I could detect no hint of remorse.

Killed? All of my friends? Me?

“Why? Why would you do that?” It was Jack again.

“Why?” The new voice was colder, more sinister than the first. “Because the last thing outlaws need is law-abiding civilians getting the way.” The voice belonged to a black-haired man. A gun dangled from one of his hands.

A spark of hope sprang up within me. I could help my friends! Strength, I was convinced more than ever, would not help against these men. Giving them an advantage might.

“May I have the pleasure of starting this little party?” The man’s hand tightened around the gun as he raised it. The click of the hammer being pulled back carried to me. I shivered. The islanders all looked in the same direction. Each face wore the same expression of horror.

Making another attempt to open my mouth, I found that the noise had freed my tongue. I took a deep breath and gathered my thoughts.

The black-haired man raised his pistol and pointed it at Jack Walsh’s head.

## Chapter Three

### Watched

“STOP!” I cried.

All heads swung toward me. The man with the gun swung toward me.

“You’ll make things harder for yourself if you kill them!” I shouted.

I focused on the man’s index finger. It rested on the trigger. A wave of nausea swept through me. I forced my eyes to focus and saw the man I had identified as the leader striding closer to the group of people.

“Explain,” he demanded, “and if it isn’t worth the interruption, you’ll be the first to go.”

The threat helped to clear my foggy brain.

“We could be useful to you,” I said in a reasoning tone, “If you keep us alive, you can use us as hostages to keep off whoever you’re fighting. We could cook your meals and do your laundry too.” My male relatives always had a weakness for food.

The man frowned.

“Come forward!” He commanded, shifting from foot to foot. His voice was gruff.

I pushed through the women and children, through the protective band of men, closer and closer to the tall man.

“Stay there, don’t come a step closer.” I froze. The gunman’s pistol still pointed at me.

“She’s just a girl Faylon.” An outlaw behind him drawled, “Not exactly dangerous.”

“It’s being careless that brings trouble,” The black-haired man, Faylon, spat the words.

“You’d do well to remember that Kidd.”

The leader motioned to the two men. They walked over to the group. The men huddled together, listening to their leader. He spoke quietly, but I was close enough to hear snatches of the conversation.

“They might have a plan...”

“Impossible...”

“Might work...”

“Try it for a few days...”

“What about the fishing boats?” The leader strode back to stand before me. He scoffed, “Don’t think you can trick me girl.”

I swallowed.

An evil light entered his eyes. Deliberately, he turned to his men. “Men, you needn’t bother to lock them up.” He gave a low laugh, “Why don’t you go have some fun. A hole about this big,” He measured with his hands, about one yard by one yard, “should be enough to sink those shabby boats. Don’t leave any afloat.”

I closed my eyes. Those “shabby” vessels were the livelihood of the island. The islanders sold the fish they caught and used the money to buy supplies on the mainland. Fish made up a large part of our diet and the women had found numerous creative ways to use the bones. Without the boats, survival on the island would be virtually impossible.

As the men moved toward the shore, the gunman, passed close by me. I could smell the stench of his unwashed body as he leaned close. “Don’t think you can trick me. Remember, Faylon will be watching you.”

I bit my lip as he moved off. Fear gripped my entire body.

For now we still had our lives, but the sinking of the boats would bring ruin to the island. And I was the one who brought it upon the islanders. A weight of responsibility settled onto my shoulders. I had to try to get us out of this mess, but again a little voice inside nagged at me. It said...

What can a girl like you do against hardened criminals?

I didn’t know, but something had to be done.

A soft hand on my shoulder pulled me from my gloomy thoughts. Looking up, I found Faith’s brown eyes looking gently at me. “You are a very brave girl.”

I dropped my gaze to the ground, “Not really.” She didn’t know how I hid in the attic. She didn’t realize how scared I was now.

Her strong, slender fingers gripped my shoulder, “Yes, you are. You saved our lives.”

I shrugged, “And lost your livelihood.”

Mistress Gray walked over just in time to hear the last exchange. “You saved our lives.” She repeated. “Let’s thank God for that and let him take care of the boats when the time comes.”

Remembering Kelvin, I pulled away from Faith. “Where is he?”

“Who?” She looked confused and I realized that she andayah, hidden in the house, did not know his fate.

“Kelvin,” I wrung my hands. “They knocked him out.”

“Praise God!”

“What are you thankful about?” I stared at her in confusion. It was often difficult to understand the islander’s constant outburst of thanks.

“I was afraid, when the men broke in, that he had been killed.”

“I don’t think so,” I hurried over to where I had seen the man fall. He was still sprawled on the ground. Now that we were closer, I could see blood trickling from a large lump on the side of his head. The outlaw leader must have hard knuckles.

Faith fell to her knees beside her husband. Her long, blond hair hung down as she bent to check his pulse.

I glanced up. Several islanders surrounded us, watching. Beyond them, one of the outlaws stood guard, his hand resting on the handle of his pistol.

“He’s alive!”

At the sound of Faith’s voice I turned to see a radiant smile on her face. She reached up to touch my hand, and then turned back to her husband. Here, in the midst of tragedy, she found reason to be grateful. In that moment, I knew that I wanted to be like her. She and Mistress Gray were faithful to friends, family and God. Somehow, they found joy and hope in the darkest moments.

The sound of breaking wood cracked through the air. I winced. The boats were being sunk. Faith noticed the movement and hurried to reassure me. “Maria, God used you to spare our lives, don’t worry.”

“I can’t help it.”

Mistress Gray put an arm around my shoulder.

Mayah ran up. Tears made two paths down her cheeks.

“Mama, where were you?” She sobbed. Then she saw her father on the ground. The tears stopped. “Papa?”

“I’m sorry I let go of your hand, dear. I’m right here.” Faith hugged her daughter.

“Now, would you please go and get me some water?”

Mayah ran off.

Biting my lip, I looked over Faith’s shoulder to watch Kelvin’s face. She stroked his forehead, whispering words that I could not hear to him.

Mayah returned with the water minutes later.

“Will he be okay?” Her mouth puckered and tears threatened to spill down her cheeks again.

“He’ll be fine.” Faith took the bucket and, moistening her hand, sprinkled the water on her husband’s face. He moved his head. She spoke gently and continued to water his face.

I almost squealed with joy when the man’s lids fluttered and his eyes opened.

“Where did they go?” He looked about dazedly.

“Don’t worry about that.” Faith said instantly. “Can you stand?”

“Oh, my head,” he grimaced as he sat up. “Give me a moment.”

By now, most of the islanders had gathered around to make sure that he was going to be alright. I marveled at how unconcerned they all seemed about their boats. A few of the younger men flinched at the sounds coming from the waterside, but no other sign of worry showed. A few of the islanders even came forward and patted my shoulder. Their thanks embarrassed me. I was sure that no one on the island would have hesitated to do the same.

They took no heed of my mumbled protests however. I felt relieved when Faith called me to help Kelvin inside. He would be back to normal in no time, but at the moment looked dazed.

Remembering the wave of nausea I had felt earlier, I could sympathize with the feeling.

Leaning on me and Faith, Kelvin walked toward his house. The group of islanders followed us.

“Stop!”

We all froze, our heads swiveling toward the speaker. It was one of the three men left to guard us.

“You cannot all go in there,” He yelled at us. “Only five people who don’t live in a house may enter it at a time, no more.”

Faith, Kelvin, Mayah and I started forward again.

Behind us, the group milled about. They murmured together.

Footsteps crunched on the pebbles behind us as we started up the stairs. I guessed that it was the five islanders allowed to come with us.

We entered the house.

“The outlaws are coming back.” Someone whispered.

Leah-Purpose on Algoma-20

## Chapter Four

### Kin

Kelvin sank into a chair, a sigh escaping from his lips. Mayah darted to his side and touched his hand, her gaze puzzled, “Papa?”

“I’m okay.” He reassured her, “Just a little dizzy.”

She smiled in return, but did not leave his side.

Gliding to them, Faith placed one hand on her daughter’s head, the other on her husband’s. Tenderness shone in her eyes.

The peaceful moment did not last long. A moment later one of the outlaws stomped in, not bothering to knock at the broken door. He strode by me and faced the chair. “Who lives in the big house down the road? The one with the tree?”

“I do,” Holding her head high, Mistress Gray stepped forward. “Why do you want to know?”

Her manner gave the impression of a noble woman speaking to a subject. The man, who was the youngest of the gang, seemed flustered by it. I bit my lip to hold back a grin, not that he could have seen it with his back to me.

“They’ve picked it.” He stammered.

“Who?” Mistress Gray arched an eyebrow.

The man shifted his feet, “The boss and Faylon.”

A shiver ran up my spine at Faylon’s name, his threat fresh in my mind. Mistress Gray, however, did not seem ruffled. “And what did they pick it for?”

“To live in, Ma’am.”

How ludicrous! Here, one of our captors was calling Mistress Gray, Ma’am, as if he were a school boy! But the giggle died on my lips as the meaning of what he had said sank in.

Outlaws live in Mistress Gray’s home?

Concern for the elderly widow made the breath catch in my throat. But, if she felt worry, she hid it well. I, who had spent many hours with her, could not see any.

Brushing past the uncomfortable outlaw, she bustled toward the door, saying as she went that they had better not knock in her door. The four islanders around Kelvin hurried after her. I could see them splitting up and heading to their own homes through the window. As the messenger turned to follow them, I caught a glimpse of his face and a jolt went through my body. I didn’t know I gasped until he turned to face me. There could be no doubt as to the young outlaw’s identity.

Recognition showed on his face as he glanced at me. For a second he paused, mid-stride. Then his face hardened and he hurried on.

Only Kelvin saw the exchange. Faith and Mayah still bent over him, their backs to me.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

Unbidden tears welled up in my eyes, whether from shock or disappointment, I did not know.

Turning, Faith saw them and hurried to me. Placing an arm about me, she guided me to the couch opposite Kelvin’s chair.

“It’s okay,” she crooned. “Isla can take care of herself. God’s in control.”

“There’s something more,” Kelvin said. His eyes held a question. “What was it? Who was he?”

I hesitated, glancing at Mayah. Though I loved the girl, she chattered to her friends incessantly and, at her age, could never keep a secret.

Faith noticed the look and guessed its meaning. “Mayah, dear, would you run upstairs and find Honey for Papa?” Honey the stuffed rabbit. The worn out toy was the girl’s favorite and she always asked for it when she did not feel well.

Thrilled that she could help Papa, Mayah raced for the stairs.

Faith and Kelvin turned to me the moment their daughter left the room.

“That boy,” I drew in a ragged breath, “is my brother.” Covering my face with my hands, I broke into sobs.

“What?” Faith’s voice was shrill. Hurrying to the sofa, she sat down beside me, drawing me to her. “You have a brother?”

“I left him out of the stories I told you of my past.”

“Why?” Faith asked. “Why didn’t you tell us of him? How does he fit into your story?”

“After my mother died and Father disappeared, we went to live with my relatives. None of them wanted us. We were always moving around. Marcus became bitter. Not toward me. To me he was always tender. He always cared for me. He was my friend and protector as well as my brother. But his bitterness toward others made them push him away more. When he was fourteen, he left.” I bit my lip. Faith squeezed my shoulders.

“I was so lonely that I left three years later when I was fourteen. Then I found Faith’s wanted ad for embroidery help and came here. Embroidery is the only thing I’m truly good at and even in Miami I couldn’t find a job.” I began sobbing again.

“I don’t know what to say.” Kelvin shook his head.

“Nor I,” Faith sounded dazed.

“I have dreamed of seeing him again.” I whispered, trying to quell the tears, “But never did I imagine finding him this way. How could he?”

“Perhaps there is a reason for all of this happening.” Kelvin’s murmured, “Remember, Maria, God does not make mistakes.”

“There’s a Bible verse that I always remember when things go wrong.” Faith patted my hand, “It says, ‘all things work together for good, to them that love the Lord.’” She smiled, “So we have a battle plan.”

“We do?” I wasn’t following her, but at least my tears were forgotten.

“Love the Lord,” She responded.

I paused a moment to think that comment over. Love the Lord. Then, shrugging my shoulders, I stood up. “I’m going to talk to Marcus.”

Faith’s brow creased, and I was sure she would argue. Instead, she simply said, “Be careful.”

“I will.”

I marched out the door and turned toward Mistress Gray’s home. Thoughts jumbled about my head. Most didn’t make sense. One stood out, pushing to the front and demanding attention.

My brother is an outlaw.

Everything had changed so much in the past hours. The streets, usually full of the island's children, lay bare before and behind me.

"Pssst."

I jumped. Looking about me, I could see no one.

"Here, between the houses."

Turning toward the voice, I saw Marcus, crouched behind a large bush.

"What are you doing?" My voice seemed to echo in the deserted road.

"Quiet," He hissed. "Get out of the road!"

"What..."

"We'll both be in trouble if one of the men catches us. Come here," He urged.

I obeyed.

"What are you doing?" I whispered the question as I crouched down beside my brother.

"Meeting you."

"How did you know...?"

"I didn't grow up with you for nothing, Ria."

Tears stung my eyes again. It had been so long since I heard that nickname. Growing up, Marcus often told me that my father always called me that. It made no difference to me. I considered Ria to be Marcus's special name for me.

I studied him. He had grown. He was no longer a lanky boy. His face was older and his once awkward body was now muscular. Looking at him, love surged through me. He might be an outlaw, but Marcus was still my brother. Impulsively, I threw my arms about his neck.

His body stiffened, but then I felt his arms go around me.

“Why?” I didn’t sob, but tears streamed down my face. “Why did you leave me? Why did you choose to live like this?”

He untangled himself from my arms and stared into my face.

When he said nothing, I repeated my first question. “Why did you leave me?”

He shrugged and looked at the ground. “I wanted a place to belong.” He pulled up a blade of grass that poked through the pebbles. “They always liked you better. You were cute, you were obedient, and you never acted up or yelled.” He shrugged, “I was the sullen boy who wasn’t good for anything but helping with the chores.”

“I helped too,” I said quietly.

He nodded, never meeting my eyes, “I know.”

“Why did you turn to outlawry?” I asked the question more gently this time. Still, I could not help but feel a sense of betrayal.

“They found me on the streets one night when I hadn’t been able to find a job and took me to their hideout.” He ripped the piece of grass in half. “I didn’t know they were outlaws at first. When I found out, I already liked them. They seemed to want me. I wanted so much to belong...” He trailed off.

“Will you help me?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” He met my gaze.

“I have to help the islanders,” I gestured at the houses. All the shutters were fastened. The town looked lifeless. “They’re all innocent people.”

“You want me to help you get my friends put in jail? You want me to go to jail?” His eyes hardened.

The words hit home, all but knocking the air from my lungs. The thought had not occurred to me that trying to keep the islanders safe would now mean working towards ruining Marcus.

Could I work against my brother? He was the only true family left to me. The person I loved most in the world. But he was guilty and the islanders were not.

“Maybe if you help save us, they won’t bother you.”

“Not likely,” He snorted.

“Marc, they’re my friends,” I pleaded. “Don’t you see? We need the boats that were sunk to get fish. The fish are the staple of the islander’s diet and without them, we can’t trade for food. The island gardens will only last so long. When they run out, something will have to give, and we’ll be the first to go.”

“The gang men are my friends, Ria.”

I nodded, acknowledging the fact. “But they’re guilty, they’ve broken the law, they wouldn’t think twice about killing someone. The islanders never kill anything bigger than a fish.”

“I’ve seen some pretty big fish,” He grumbled. “Look, I’ll try to help you, Ria, but I won’t hurt any of my friends.”

A rough voice cut off my words of thanks.

“Where are you, boy?”

“That’s Faylon,” Marcus stiffened. His glance darted around. “Maria, slip behind the house. Don’t come out unless you’re sure we are gone, no matter what.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. I recognized the voice.

“Over here!” Marcus called as I raced for cover.

“What are you doing?” Even with members of the gang, the man sneered.

“Scouting around, getting the lay of the land.”

I marveled at how cool my brother held his voice. I had seen his face. He was terrified of being found out.

“You notice that girl?” Faylon didn’t seem suspicious.

“The loud-mouthed one?”

“Yeah.”

“Hard to miss her.”

“What do you think?”

“About the girl?”

“Don’t act dumb.”

“I don’t know,” I could see Marcus shrugging in my mind’s eye, “she’s just a girl.”

“Maybe,” Faylon didn’t sound convinced, “I’m going to keep an eye on her though. She seems too smart for her own good.”

“You always suspect the strangest people, Faylon,” Their footsteps crunched away. “The boss doesn’t seem to think she’s too dangerous.”

I heard a grunt. The last words that reached my ears came from Faylon, “People have said that before. Some of the people who seem harmless are the most dangerous to us though. Remember that.”

Memories

I leaned against the wall, exhausted. The urge to go to Faith and Kelvin and tell them about Marcus surged within me, but his warning held me back. More than the warning, I remembered the look in his eyes.

I did not doubt Faylon's cruelty. The obvious fear that my brother felt made me certain that a cruel end awaited anyone caught plotting against the gang. I feared Faylon even more than the tall leader of the gang.

Tipping my head back, I rested it on the weathered wood of the Walsh's house. Why did Marcus join a bunch of outlaws? What did he say? About being only good for chores?

"You ungrateful boy!" An aunt slapped Marcus. He glared at her as a red hand-print formed on his cheek.

I stood in a corner of the room and watched. Why must Marcus always get himself in trouble?

"You didn't have to hit him," I said that night as we walked out to the lean-to we slept in.  
"I don't really mind him calling me an orphan."

"He shouldn't," Marcus shrugged. "These people don't care about us Maria. I have to watch out for you. Mama would want me too."

I bit my lip.

In our lean-to, Marcus sat down on an overturned bucket and pulled off his shoes. He grunted.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothin, just a little sore. Jim went to a friend’s house today and I got stuck with his chores.”

“That was nice of you.” I patted my brother’s hand.

A bird’s call pulled me from the memory. I hadn’t realized just how tired Marcus was that night. His chores were hard enough for a boy of twelve; it must have been exhausting to do an older cousin’s work as well. Maybe if I had been more understanding he wouldn’t have left. Then he wouldn’t have fallen in with the outlaws. But how could I know? I was too young.

I peeked around the corner. I could see no one. Remembering Marcus’s hiding place, I strained to see any sign of movement in the bushes and grass that grew between the houses. The setting sun cast shadows that I struggled to look into.

The plants themselves swayed, seeming to have a life of their own. After a few minutes, I decided that no one hid among them.

Scarcely daring to breath, I slipped onto the road and hurried back to Faith’s house. The last rays of light glowed over the horizon.

A blanket hung over the shattered door, no doubt put there by Faith during my absence. Pushing it to one side, I stepped into the house. Only when I stood safely out of the sight of spying eyes, did I breathe freely.

“Maria? Is that you?” Faith called from the living room.

“Yes,” I went to the room and stood in the doorway. “I’m back.”

“Thank God you’re safe!”

The scene in the room appeared so normal, that it did not seem to belong to the same world I had just come from. Kelvin still sat in the chair, the stuffed rabbit wedge in beside him. Mayah was curled in his lap, her head resting on his shoulder, fast asleep. Faith sat on the sofa.

The exclamation of thanks had come from her lips. I could see lines of worry about her eyes. My absence must have caused her anxiety.

I walked to her and sat down on the firm cushion, "I'm fine."

"I'm so glad that you're back." She smiled.

"Did you get to see him?" Kelvin kept his voice low, careful not to wake Mayah.

I nodded, not sure where to start.

"Why did he leave you?" Kelvin demanded. "He must have known you needed him!"

"He couldn't bear being pushed away anymore, I guess." I replied softly. Though Marcus had not worded it that way, his meaning was clear to me.

Faith sighed.

"I never would have met you if he hadn't left me." I smiled, gripping her hand in my own.

Silence fell on the room for a few minutes. Then, I broke it, speaking softly. "He'll help us as long as he brings no harm to his friends."

"I doubt they're very reliable friends," Kelvin snorted.

"Maybe not," I shrugged, picking at a strand of horse hair that poked out of the sofa.

"But he feels like he belongs with them."

Shaking his head, Kelvin sighed. He did not understand how terrible it felt to be shunned. The islander's were a big family and everyone belonged.

“He’s made poor decisions.” Faith murmured. “We must pray that he finds the error of the path he’s chosen before it’s too late.”

“I’m afraid it already is,” I replied. “He warned me that if anyone found out we were planning something, there would be terrible consequences.”

Faith opened her mouth, but closed it without speaking and stood. “Mayah, dear, come with Mommy.”

The little girl’s eyes were half opened. She yawned and slipped from her father’s lap, mumbling, “Night-night, Papa.”

“Sleep tight.” He patted her as she stood before him.

Faith bent to take her daughter’s hand and lead the child away.

“What are you going to do?” Kelvin asked when they were out of earshot.

“I, I don’t know.” My voice broke and tears threatened. It felt like a great weight pressed onto me. I wanted to be alone with my confusion. I needed to think. “I’m going to bed,” I sprang to my feet, “Good-night.”

“Maybe things will look better tomorrow,” Kelvin said softly. “God knows. He cares. And Maria? We care too.” I knew they did and I realized that he knew I was struggling. He realized that Marcus’s appearance stirred up carefully avoided emotions.

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I pulled the covers around myself and sat on the bed. Resting my head on drawn up knees, I gazed out my window. It was a dark night.

Marcus is in a house right up the road. I told myself. The thought felt strange. Seeing my brother again, hearing his voice, feeling his arms about me brought memories flooding back...

“Mama,” I jumped onto the bed. “Mama, are you feeling better today?”

“I always feel better when my sunshine is with me.” Mama’s voice was weak, but cheerful as ever. She patted my cheek. Her hand was cold.

“I’ll make you warm, Mama.” I grabbed her hand and held it to my cheek. She laughed.

“Breakfast’s ready, Ria.”

“Coming, Pa!” I squeezed the bony hand. “I’ll be back after breakfast Mama. Do you want eggs?”

“No, no sweetheart.” She patted my leg. “Off with you. Don’t let Pa’s eggs get cold.

“Yeah, Maria!” Marcus yelled, “I’m hungry.”

I dashed away a tear that trickled down my cheek. The only time I actually remembered Pa calling me Ria.

“Maria,” A hand brushed my shoulder. I opened my eyes and peered up at Marcus.

“Leave me alone.” My voice slurred with sleep.

“It’s Mama.”

“What?” I bolted up, sleep forgotten.

“She, she wants to see us all.” My brother’s voice cracked.

I looked up to him. My big brother, my protector. In the eyes of a seven-year-old, he was an able man at age ten. He could take care of me.

“What’s wrong, Marc?”

“Just come along.” He muttered.

I started to cry.

Footsteps creaked outside my bedroom.

“Children?” It was a woman’s voice, a neighbor.

Marcus grabbed my shoulder. I slid out of bed to stand beside him. The door opened.

The woman’s eyes shimmered in the moonlit room.

“Children, I’m, I’m sorry.” She knelt down. “Your Mama, she, she went home.”

“No!” Marcus shouted.

“But she is home,” I stated.

“No, honey, to her home up in heaven.”

“No, no!” Marcus yelled.

“Marc,” I pulled on his shirt. “Mama says that heaven’s a nice place. Isn’t it a good thing she went there?”

“No!” He cried. He grabbed my shoulders. “Don’t you understand? Mama’s dead.”

Dead?” I whimpered. “But she can’t die. She’s Mama.”

Marcus shook me again. My tears turned to sobs. And then he stopped shaking. I felt his arms go around me. Hiding my head in his nightshirt, I cried. He held me to him fiercely, but I could feel his sobs.

Tears streamed down my cheeks now. I slid down in bed, pulling the covers up to my chin.

“Mama,” I whispered, “Mama, what would you do? What would you do?”

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Sunlight crept through the shades of my window. My face felt stiff. Raising a hand, I rubbed at the tight skin. It was tears dried onto my cheeks.

“I cried myself to sleep.” I murmured. “Marcus is here, on the island.”

God doesn't make mistakes.

I smiled. Maybe it was not chance that bought me to this tiny island. Perhaps I didn't find Faith's advertisement in the paper by accident. After all, what were the chances of finding that particular scrap of newspaper in the middle of Miami? And now, maybe Marcus was here for a reason.

I padded downstairs to find Faith already in the kitchen. “How's Kelvin feeling?” I asked.

“He still has a bit of a headache, but nothing serious.” She replied, cracking an egg into a bowl.

Moving to a window, I pushed the curtain aside and looked out, “Still good weather.”

Algoma occupied a place near the coast of California that was famous for hurricanes. The storms usually hit their hardest during this time of year. I had learned about them the hard way the previous year.

“I don't like it.” Faith frowned. “Calm weather this time of year usually means a truly enormous storm is working up.”

“We’d be safe enough in the storm shelter though, wouldn’t we?” The shelter beneath the chapel was designed to protect its inhabitants from the fury of any storm.

“Safe from the storm,” Faith agreed, “But we haven’t stored away any food. A bad storm could ruin our regular supplies and the store of food in the shelter is pretty low.”

A movement outside caught my attention. A male figure hurried down the road. He kept glancing over his shoulder as if afraid of being followed. Squinting, I tried to make out the face as he came nearer. It was Marcus!

“Maria?” Faith touched my shoulder.

I jumped and turned to her. “What?”

“Did you hear what I said?”

Searching my mind, I remembered her comment about the need for food and water, “About storing food?” I glanced back out the window. My brother was no longer in sight. Pushing him from my mind, I forced myself to focus on Faith.

“Yes, about the food,” She said.

“Why not stock-up stuff in the shelter?”

“We usually do,” She pushed a hand through her hair, “I was going to stock it yesterday, but then our visitors arrived.”

“I’ll bring whatever we need over.” I offered.

“I don’t know.” She hesitated before saying, “Do you think it’s wise to let the outlaws know about it? With the door in the back room, they might not find it and you never know when we might need to hide.”

I considered this, agreeing with her that it would be better to keep the storm shelter hidden from the outlaws. “I could put things in a pack and try to get into the church without being seen. If they catch me, I’ll say that I’m going on a picnic on the mountain and was going to get a napkin from the chapel since I forgot one.” The “mountain” was actually a steep hill that ended in a cliff. The nickname seemed appropriate on such a small island.

“It sounds dangerous.” Faith fretted.

“Everything’s dangerous now,” I rocked on the balls of my feet, clenching my fists. “You and Mistress Gray tell me that nothing is too great or small for God. Maybe if we pray, He’ll keep me safe.”

“Nothing could keep me from praying.” She whispered. Her voice caught as she said, “I guess you’ll have to, but please be careful.”

“While I get dressed, why don’t you pack up a bag for me? Just a little, though. If I’m caught, they’d be suspicious if I had way too much food for a picnic.”

Faith nodded and I hurried upstairs to get dressed.

By the time I got back downstairs, my heart was threatening to break out of my chest. I hoisted the pack to my back and started for the door.

“Maria!” Faith rushed after me and flung her arms around me. “Be careful.”

“Of course.”

Anxious to be on my way before I lost my nerve, I pulled away from her embrace and pushed through the blanketed door.

The morning sun bathed the street in its golden rays as I stepped out. My heart lifted as I realized that Faith’s prayers were already working. The street still lay empty. I wondered if the

islanders were able to sleep better than I, or if they were too afraid to come out of their homes. But the islanders were no threat. A few of them on the street would pose no problems. The outlaws were a different story. It only took one of them to ruin our plan.

Forcing myself to appear casual, I turned toward the mountain. Our small chapel did not occupy a place on the road, but sat apart from the houses at the base of the incline.

Walking down the empty road, I felt conspicuous. I considered what I'd do if someone stopped me. The excuse of going on a picnic suddenly seemed ridiculous. Who would think of going on a picnic in such circumstances?

I glanced around without moving my head. Nothing suspicious greeted my eyes, but the feeling of being watched clutched at my stomach. Annoyed at myself, I whispered, "Stop being such a coward."

Soon I would be inside of the church, away from prying eyes.

The islanders never locked the church doors. Inside the women kept a collective store of herbs used as medicine. In the storm shelter, men kept extra fishing gear.

Opening the door, I slipped inside. Pushing it shut, I walked forward and dropped into a pew. Off the street, the tension drained from my limbs, leaving them weak. I took off the pack and set it on the floor before my seat.

As I sat back up, an object near the front of the chapel caught my eye. Something brown sat on the stairs leading to the pulpit.

Curious, I stood and walked forward. As I drew nearer, I realized that the brown shape was a rectangular box. Thinking back to the previous Sunday, I felt sure that the box was new.

Bending over, I picked it up and opened the lid. Inside laid my dress! How had it moved to the church? Closing the lid, I frowned in confusion.

“You’re up early.” I spun around at the sound of the catlike voice, chills racing up my spine. The voice was unmistakable.

Faylon lounged against the doors.

How long had he been there? Did he know about my mission? What did he mean to do?

“Surprised to see me, eh?” He gave a low chuckle. “I told you I’d be watching you. I always keep my promises.”

My wits scattered, I could think of no response. I stood, frozen to the ground, the box in my arms.

“What do you have there?” The outlaw asked.

He did not move from his position, but I could sense an increased intensity in his voice. Fear pounded through me, but I did not want to give up my dress. For years I had worn outgrown and cast off clothing from my cousins and their friends. This was one reason I held it so dear. Also, it was a gift from Faith. I saw it as a token of love and friendship.

“What is in that box?” Faylon repeated his question. The calm attitude shed, his voice cracked through the silent building. He stood, poised. I did not know what he thought I held or what he believed I would do with it, but he clearly suspected a trap of some kind.

My brain cleared and I jumped off the stairs.

If he came forward, he might see the pack of food. To keep a valuable secret safe, I would sacrifice the dress.

“What is it?” He demanded yet again.

“A dress.”

“Show me!”

I opened the lid and showed him the silky material inside. I walked past where the pack lay.

Jumping forward, he jerked the cloth out of its box and shook it out. There was nothing.

He was suspicious. “You came here to get this?”

“Yes, sir,” I prayed that my face would not betray me.

“Fine dress,” he grunted, turning his gaze to it. “You like it, huh?”

I didn’t say anything. A knot of remorse lodged inside me and I fought to keep tears from spilling over.

He eyed me. A laugh came from him, though his mouth did not open. It made goosebumps raise on my arms.

He turned the dress about in his hands, never taking his eyes from me. Deliberately, he gripped either side of the dress and pulled.

I stared in horror as a tear darted down the center of the dress. The noise of ripping fabric filled my ear, pounding against the walls of my mind. Something caught my eye. Something inside the dress that was never there before. Something the same white as the fabric, a piece of paper.

I opened my mouth, not sure of what to say, but desperate to distract Faylon. I had to get the dress back before he saw the slip of paper. But before I could say anything, the chapel door opened again.

Seeing the outlaw, Mayah stopped in the door. Her glance darted between me and Faylon.

We both turned to the child. Her face was pale.

“What is it?” I held out my arms to her and she flew into them.

“It’s Tom!” She cried.

“What about Tom?” I picked her up, holding her trembling body close to mine.

“He’s hurt!”

“I’m sure he’ll be okay.” I comforted her. No sooner were the words out of my mouth than Faith came through the doors. She hesitated also, but after a moment came forward. I could tell from her expression that something was wrong.

My heart skipped a beat. “Is he hurt badly?”

She glanced at Faylon before answering. “We’ll be hard pressed to save him.”

“What happened?” I asked.

Shaking her head, she kept walking. “Come with me. I need to get herbs.”

“Faith, what happened to Tom?” The dress forgotten, I raced after her.

“We don’t know.” She took a shuddering breath, revealing how badly she was shaken.

“Jill sent him out to the garden to pick some mint for tea. He took longer than usual, so she went out to tell him to hurry up and he was sprawled in the garden with blood pouring from his head.”

“Was anyone else around?”

“Jill didn’t see anyone.” Jill was Tom’s mother.

My blood went cold. I had looked out the window that morning.

A male figure hurried down the road. He kept glancing over his shoulder as if afraid of being followed. Squinting, I tried to make out the face as he came nearer. It was Marcus!

Faith snatched a look at me and whispered, “Don’t say anything.”

I put my forehead on Mayah’s hair, hiding my face, afraid of what I knew. No doubt Faith believed that Faylon was the culprit. Trying to find out what she thought I asked. “Do you think...?”

“I’m not thinking anything yet.” She cut me off, “Tom’s my first priority. It doesn’t matter who hurt him. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

I bit my lip. Did she know?

Marcus wouldn’t do that! I tried to convince myself. He might have made some bad decisions, but he isn’t a murderer. He wouldn’t kill an innocent child, would he? What reason could there be for it?

Faith gathered the needed herbs swiftly and turned to leave.

Faylon still stood by the door, but Faith brushed by without looking at him. Copying her, I could feel his gaze following us.

Outside, Faith gathered her skirts and raced toward Tom’s home. Setting Mayah down, I hurried after her. We cut through Mistress Gray’s yard to get to the next house, Tom’s house.

Deborah Walsh opened the door for us. Many islanders were gathered in the living room, talking quietly among themselves.

Faith paid no more attention to them than she had to Faylon. This convinced me more than ever that the boy's condition was serious. The islanders always paused for a few words when passing their neighbors.

I hesitated to follow her up the stairs. Deciding that I should stay out of the way, I turned to join the group in the living room.

“Maria.”

Looking up, I saw Faith paused on the stairs.

“What?”

“You can come up if you want.”

Wordlessly, I retraced my steps and followed her. My heart pounded. Why did I go? I was scared of what I would find.

I could hear Faith's whispers and Jill's replies as Faith entered the bedroom.

Reaching the doorway, I stopped, twining my fingers together.

The two women looked up.

I smiled at Jill. She attempted to return it, but failed, her eyes drifting to the bed.

Following her gaze I saw the little boy. Blood seeped through bandages swathing his head. His dark lashes lay on white cheeks. He looked so peaceful.

Tears sprang to my eyes.

Marcus held my hand so tightly that it hurt. Tears ran down his cheeks. I bawled, more because it scared me to see him crying than because I understood what was happening.

“Can you be brave?” Marcus looked at me and sniffled.

“Yes,” I reached up my arms, pulled his head down and kissed him.

The neighbor woman that told us Mama was dead was with us again. She led the way into our living room. My eyes immediately went to the bed she stayed in. She was still there, lying as she always did!

“Look!” I pointed, “Look, it’s Mama.”

He just nodded and walked over to the bed.

“I knew she’d be okay,” I prattled. Then I frowned, “Only, why does her face look like that? It’s pretty, but she never looked like that before, not even when she was asleep.

“That’s because she’s dead,” Marcus whispered. His eyes never moved from Mama’s face. “People only look like that when they go to sleep for good.”

“You mean she’s not going to wake up?” I pressed closer to Marcus.

He shook his head.

“Is he...” I couldn’t finish the sentence, just looked at the little boy’s face.

Jill did not move her gaze from her son. Her voice low she answered, “No, not yet.”

“Pray that God will spare him.” Faith bent over the bed.

“Amen,” Tom’s father, Steven stood on the other side of the bed. His voice trembled.

I watched her slipping herbs between the boy’s lips. Unable to bear the sight, I turned and fled from the room.

The islanders looked up when I raced down the stairs, but I ignored them. Never slowing, I rushed through the kitchen and onto the street.

The Mountain, I thought.

Leah-Purpose on Algoma-46

My toe caught in the hem of my dress and I stumbled. Catching myself, I regained my balance, pulling at the skirt. The fabric ripped.

Tears blurring my vision, I ran on, up the steep hill behind the chapel. My breath came in ragged gasps. Finally, I reached the top. Before me, the ground dropped away. Below, waves pounded at the base of the cliff.

Finding the flat rock I always sat on, I sank down and buried my head in my arms. Tears poured down my cheeks.

## Chapter Six

### Purpose

My sobs drowned out all other noise. I did not know that someone was near until a hand touched my shoulder.

“Ria?”

My head snapped around. Marcus crouched beside me, his eyes questioning.

“What are you doing here?” Fear that he was the murder hardened my voice.

“What’s wrong?” He looked confused.

I shrugged. Maybe I was wrong, I told myself, but deep down I knew that I did not want to know. I didn’t want my suspicions confirmed.

“Did someone get the dress?” He settled down beside me.

“How did you know about the dress?” The words came out hard again.

“I put it in the church.” He sounded hurt. “The gang found the attic and they were rummaging through it. Your friend, the old lady, told me you would be upset if anything happened to the dress so when they tossed it out I grabbed it and took it to the old lady. She put it in the box and asked me to take it to the church.”

“How did she know she could trust you?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged, studying my face. “Are you mad at me?”

“Why should I be mad?” I turned away.

“I don’t know. Maybe because I’m part of the gang,” he touched my shoulder again.

“Ria, I’d be mad too if I were you. I’m sorry.”

“Then why do stay with them?” I was distracted from my original fear. I had not been angry, but now I was. Looking up, I glared at him.

“It’s too late. They wouldn’t allow me to leave. I’m trapped, Ria. I know what they’re doing is wrong, but I can’t do anything about it.” He turned away from my glare and looked out across the ocean. His body stiffened. “Look!”

He pointed and I followed the direction of his finger. Sails billowed on the horizon.

“They’ve found us!” He exclaimed. His body stiffened.

“What?” I asked, slower to understand.

“It’s the military!” I could hear fear in his tone. “They’ve tracked us down! They’ve come to get the gang!”

“They can’t,” I sighed. “If they attack, your friends will kill the islanders. The military will feel responsible for our safety as civilians.”

“Do you believe in God?” His expression was earnest.

“What?”

“Do you believe in God?” He repeated. “The widow whose house we’re living in was telling me about God last night, after the rest of the men went to bed. I couldn’t sleep all night for what she told me.”

“Yes,” I smiled, “I became a Christian a few months ago. You won’t be surprised that Mistress Gray led me Christ.”

“Mistress Gray?” He sounded puzzled.

“The widow,” I told him.

“Do you think He cares about us?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think He cared about us while we were growing up?”

I hesitated, “Yes.”

“Then why would He let Ma die? The old lady, Mistress Gray, said that he’s a loving God, but why would He let that happen? Why would He let Pa just leave? Why would He let everyone treat us like they did?”

I bit my lip, searching for Mistress Gray’s words of wisdom. But it was Kelvin’s words that sprang to my lips. “God has a plan for everything. The things that we have been through, the trouble we are in now; He must have a purpose in it.” I realized that I was trying to convince myself as well as Marcus.

“What?” A bitter edge crept into his voice.

“Maybe,” I was speaking quietly. “Maybe because I would not have become a Christian if I hadn’t come to this island.”

Silence fell as we both thought about this.

“Why would God let an innocent child be hurt?” Marcus asked abruptly.

My head jerked up, an accusation ready on my lips, but something within me held the words back. Instead I said, “I don’t know.” My voice caught as emotions welled up, “It says in the Bible that all things work together for good to them that love God.” I looked down, tears spilling down my cheeks. “I can’t see the good in Tom’s death though.”

“He’s dead?” Shock reverberated in the words.

“He wasn’t earlier.” I tried to dry my cheeks, but fresh tears wet them again. “I don’t think they’ll be able to help him though. Maybe if we could get him to a doctor on the mainland, but here...” The words trailed off as my throat constricted.

“We have to do something!” Marcus leapt to his feet. “We can’t just let this happen!”  
Surprised, I looked up at him.

“Do you want to just watch and do nothing?” He demanded.

“No,” I hesitated, “but what can we do?”

“I don’t know.” He sank back onto the rock beside me.

“Look.” I pointed back toward the ships. They were much closer now. A small boat was rowing away from one of the larger ships, a white flag on it.

“They probably want to find out what’s going on here.” Marcus groaned. “Arnold will never let them get back to the ship alive.”

“Arnold?”

“Our leader,” my brother said.

“Won’t he see the white flag?”

“Do you think that the outlaws care?” He asked with a snort.

“But I thought you liked them.” I frowned. “You said they were your friends.”

“They are.” He whispered.

My heart tightened in sympathy for my brother.

“What can we do about them?” I nodded toward the boat approaching the island.

Marcus shrugged.

“Do you think anyone else has seen him?”

“I know at least one person has.” He did not hesitate in his answer.

“How do you know?” His response surprised me.

“Arnold set out guards last night. Whoever is on guard right now has probably already taken word to him.”

“So,” I pondered, “If we can get down to warn the men in the boat before the guard gets back, we might not be seen.”

“Maybe,” Marcus frowned, “but I doubt it would work. He’s probably already back.”

“We can at least try.” I jumped to my feet. “You’re the one who said we can’t just sit around and do nothing.”

“I meant about the boy.” He stood.

“We can’t do much about him, but we can try to prevent it happening again.”

“Go,” he sighed, “I’m right behind you.”

Grabbing up my skirt, I ran down the steep hill. His footsteps pounded behind me.

Reaching the street, we slowed our pace. Haste was necessary, but if we were stopped, our plan would be ruined.

To my surprise, the islanders were on the road.

They could not have picked a worst time to overcome their fear of leaving their homes. I thought.

“Maria.” I turned to see Faith hurrying after us. One look at her face, and I knew that the worst had happened. I knew what she would say before her mouth opened.

“We lost him, Maria.”

I glanced at Marcus and saw a pale face. His mouth hung open.

“Marc...”

His eyes widened and he stared over my shoulder. Then, he turned and darted away. I frowned, watching in confusion.

“Maria, come with me.” The urgency in Faith’s tone caught my attention. “Don’t look at him.”

“What...” I began, but she strode away.

Running to catch up with her I started again.

“It’s the man who almost killed Jack.” She whispered. The scene flashed through my mind. The outlaw pointing his pistol at Jack Walsh’s head, ready to kill an innocent man.

I looked over my shoulder. Faylon trotted down the steps of a house behind us. Resisting the urge to make sure Marcus was out of sight, I swallowed. We had nearly been discovered!

Trying to act like nothing was unusual, I asked, “What are we going to do with Tom?”

“I hope that the gang will allow us to proceed as we normally would.” She was not simply playing a part, the words were heartfelt.

“Me too,” I prayed they would, but didn’t think it likely.

Reaching our home, we pushed through the blanket and stepped inside.

“Faith, there are ships coming around the island!” I turned to her the moment we were indoors.

“What?”

“Ships, chasing the outlaws,” I gestured toward the mountain. “Marcus and I saw them from the cliff. A rowboat is coming right now.”

A shout came from outside.

“Or maybe it just landed.” I added. Hurrying back to the door, I stuck my head out. Two sailors were being herded down the street. Behind them, a young man was being hauled toward Mistress Gray’s by Faylon and another outlaw. The man’s uniform showed him to be an officer. He put up a struggle, yelling, “We are under the protection of the white flag! You can’t do this!”

“You forget we’re outlaws,” Faylon tightened his grip as the man wrenched backwards. “We are accustomed to breaking rules.”

“You can’t do this!” The officer repeated, but no further reply was given.

The party stopped outside Mistress Gray’s house.

“What do we have here?” Arnold stepped onto the porch.

“A party from the ships we saw.” One of the men answered. I felt sure the leader already knew this.

Arnold turned his attention to the officer, who now stood stiffly between his captors.

“You are the leader of this group?”

“I am,” The young man glared at the outlaw. “We came to make an attempt at reasoning with you, under a white flag, and have been grossly mistreated.”

As he spoke, Marcus walked by me. He stalked toward Mistress Gray’s house and the group before it.

“I’m so sorry to hear that.” Arnold said in an unrepentant tone.

“I demand you tell your men to release us.”

Arnold allowed his lips to twitch upward. “Faylon, Kidd, release your prisoner.”

When the two men began to obey he growled, "But keep your guns on him." He stared coldly at the officer. "Not another word of protest from you sir, or my men will shoot you."

The man opened his mouth, but quickly shut it as the guns clicked ominously.

"That's better." Arnold chuckled. "Now that you seem to realize your place, we can continue this conversation more comfortably."

Perhaps Arnold was happy, but the other man certainly did not look comfortable. He held himself erect and continued scowling at the outlaw leader.

Arnold laughed again and leaned back against the door. "So, what's your message?"

"The captain is willing to allow you to come off of the island without being fired upon if you surrender yourselves." The man responded.

"I'm sure I'm very grateful." Arnold's eyes hardened, "No."

"What are we going to do with them?" Faylon sounded bored.

"This officer and one of the men we keep here." Arnold said, "The other sailor we send back to the ship with our own offer."

"Sir..." The man's protest ended abruptly as the outlaw called Kidd put the gun barrel against his head.

"You," Arnold gestured to the smaller of the two sailors. He paid no attention to the exchange between the officer and Kidd. "You will go back and tell your captain that unless he leaves us alone, we will kill these two men, and if he fires on us, we'll kill the islanders."

Spinning on his heel, he opened the door, but stopped in the doorway. Turning his head he said,

"Let him go and make sure he leaves. Tie the other two up and put them in the cellar."

One of the men reached out and pushed the sailor, “Get moving.” The sailor stumbled, then began running down the street. As he passed by me, I could see the terror on his face.

The officer’s shoulders sagged.

I knew how he felt; helpless, unable to do anything against these cruel men. Kidd followed Arnold inside. While he was gone, Faylon jeered at his charge.

“We know how to give a warm reception to guests. I hope you get along with your captain, because if he doesn’t like you, I’ll ask for special permission to serve as executioner!”

The young man gave no response. When Kidd returned with ropes, he offered no resistance, allowing his wrists to be bound. The remaining sailor followed his example and both were pushed into the house.

Moments later, Marcus stepped away from the side of the house and followed them.

## Chapter Seven

### Triumph

“I’m going to Mistress Gray’s.” I looked at Faith who watched the scene through a window. “I need to talk to her about Tom and Marcus.”

Starting, she spun around. “Isla’s house is not safe!”

“She’s there. So is Marcus. My brother won’t let any harm come to me.”

Or he’ll try not to. I added to myself. Who knows what the outlaws would do if he tried to defend me.

Without waiting for Faith’s response, I left, jogging toward Mistress Gray’s house. For an instant, I wondered if I should knock, but pushed the idea away. Pulling the door open, I slipped inside.

The door to the cellar stood ajar and I could hear Faylon’s taunting voice. I tried to shut the sound out and called Mistress Gray’s name.

No one answered.

“Mistress Gray?” I called up the stairs. A few of the outlaws, sprawled on the living room furniture, scowled at me.

“Ssst!”

I looked back up the stairs. Marcus stood at the top, one finger pressed to his lips. With his other hand, he waved at me.

I jogged up the stairs.

“What...” I started. He grabbed my arm and dragged me into Mistress Gray’s bedroom. I stopped short. The old woman lay on her bed. A bandage was wrapped about her head. Her face was white.

“What happened?!” I cried. I pulled free from my brother and ran to the side of the bed.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “I came in and all the men were out. Then I heard her groan and went into the living room. She was on the floor. She kept trying to tell me something about Faylon.”

“Do you think that he did it?”

“Maybe”

“What should we do?”

“Do you have a doctor on the island?” He asked.

“Just Mistress Gray, Faith, some of the other woman,” I shook my head. “They know about herbs.”

“Go get Faith.

“Won’t you get in trouble?” I hesitated.

“Maybe,” he grunted. “Just go.”

I turned and dashed down the stairs. Faylon and Kidd were just coming out of the cellar as I reached the bottom. I shoved by them and out the door, ignoring their oaths.

“Faith!” I yelled her name before reaching the front porch, “Faith, hurry!”

We collided as she hurried to the door and I ran into the house.

“What’s wrong?”

“Mistress Gray!” I gasped, “Something...happened...”

“Calm down!” She shook me gently, “I can’t understand what you’re saying.”

Forcing myself to speak intelligibly, I started again. “Something happened to Mistress Gray. Someone did something, like with Tom.”

Faith closed her eyes, weariness spread across her face. Her lips moved. I bowed my head and offered a prayer of my own.

“Come with me.” She touched my shoulder, “Isla will need us both.”

I hesitated.

I couldn’t deal with Tom. I couldn’t stay with him.

I pushed the thought away.

Mistress Gray needs you. How could you think of not going? I hurried to follow Faith.

Neither of us spoke. Opening the door to Mistress Gray’s house, we walked in. I felt relieved that Kidd and Faylon were nowhere in sight. I’ll probably be in trouble for pushing by them like I did.

Marcus stood from his seat on the edge of Mistress Gray’s bed when we entered the room. I read a disheartening message in his eyes.

“She needs a doctor.” He said.

“Maybe we can help her hang on till that’s possible.” Faith moved to the side of the bed.

“Isla, Isla can you hear me?”

The older woman made no response.

“Maria, I need you to fetch herbs.” Faith turned to me. “See if there is any Yarrow left. It might keep the bleeding down.”

I bit my lip. My knowledge of herbs was limited. I often struggled with identifying them.

“I’ll go with her,” I jumped when Marcus spoke. “I know a little about herbs. Faylon taught me when some of the men were sick or injured.”

Faith nodded.

Turning on his heel, Marcus strode out of the room. I followed. He paused at the edge of the stairs. Without looking at me, he murmured. “It would be safer if you didn’t follow me too closely.”

“Right.”

I held back, staying in the doorway of Mistress Gray’s bedroom as he continued down the stairs. The door creaked as he swung it open, then clicked shut.

I counted to sixty. *That must be enough time.* Glancing downstairs, I made sure that none of the outlaws were nearby, then tiptoed down and opened the door, wincing as it creaked again. If anyone is paying attention, they must figure out what is going on!

Marcus ambled along near the end of the street. His casual pace made me realize how obvious my creeping must be. I forced myself to copy his bearing as I stepped off the front stoop. Glancing toward the beach, I could see the silhouette of a guard. No one else frequented the road.

I was just stepping off the road when the door of the chapel closed behind my brother.

Just a little further.

Reaching the last few yards I could hold myself back no longer. Darting forward, I snatched the door and darted in.

“I hope you didn’t scramble down the middle of Algoma like that.” Marcus glared at me.

“No,” I flushed, trying to come up with an excuse.

“No changing anything now.” Marcus dismissed the matter with a wave of his hand.

“Where are the herbs?”

“This way,” I started down the aisle.

Something on the floor between the pews flashed in the corner of my eyes. Turning my head I saw my pack!

“Oh!”

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” I bit my lip. Could I trust him with our secret?

“Yes, there is something.” He frowned and looked around. His gaze fell on the backpack. Striding to it, he picked it up, opened it and peered inside. “Food,” he arched his eyebrows at me. “What is this about, Maria?”

I looked at the ground. It seemed that I would have tell him.

He loves me. I can trust him. An inner voice insisted.

“They’re supplies for the shelter.”

“Shelter? What shelter?”

“We get hurricanes during this time of year,” I took a deep breath. “There is a storm shelter beneath the church for us to take refuge in.”

“And it’s hidden?”

“Yes.”

“Show me where the herbs are. After I get them, bring the food down there. I want to know where the shelter is.”

I continued down the aisle.

I'll have to show him. This is the test. Does he truly care for me, or is it all an act. Is he hiding a heart of stone?

“Who did it?” I spun around.

“Did what?”

“Who killed Tom, the little boy?”

Marcus dropped his eyes to the floor. My heart sank.

“Ria...” His voice trailed off.

“Did you?” My throat tightened and I barely got the words out.

“Me?” His head snapped up. “Do you think I would do **that**?”

“I don't know what to think.” I whispered. “I wouldn't have believed that you would join a band of outlaws, but you did.”

“Ria, I would never kill a child in cold blood like that.” Tears began trickling down my brother's face. It was so strange to see Marcus cry. “I know I don't deserve your trust, but I beg you to believe me.” He met my eyes. “Everything is so wrong!”

“Jesus can make it right.” The words startled me. It was as if someone else spoke through me.

“That’s what the widow said.” He looked up at me. “Last night, when I couldn’t sleep, I went downstairs and her Bible was on the tea table. I read some of it. It says that you have to believe on Jesus to be saved.”

“Yes...” I wasn’t sure where the conversation was heading.

“I need something. Or someone,” He bit his lip. “Every since Pa abandoned us I’ve had an emptiness inside me. It hurts, Ria.”

“I know,” My voice was choked. “It is so good to finally have someone to turn to.”

“How do I do it? I know I need it from what I read, from what the widow told me, from my heart... but how do I do it?”

My heart leapt. For a moment I could not even speak. Then I remembered what Mistress Gray told me the night I was born again.

“All you have to do is believe that Jesus died for you, and that you are a sinner and that his blood can cover your sin and forgive you.” I said.

“That’s all?”

“That’s all,” I nodded.

And there, in the chapel, with the last rays of light streaming through the window, we knelt on the stone floor.

When Marcus ended his prayer, he looked up. His eyes were glad. I wondered if the same look of relief had shown in my face after I accepted Christ.

“Let’s go get those herbs.” He looked at me. “Faylon killed the little boy. Mistress Gray told me she saw him do it, before this all happened. She gave me a note that I put in your dress.”

“That’s what the paper was!” I groaned.

“What’s wrong?”

“Faylon got the dress. I saw the paper. I was going to try to get the dress back so I could get the paper, but then Faith came and...”

“Faylon must have...” Marcus didn’t finish. He squared his shoulders, “We can’t worry about that. Right now we have to make a plan to save Mistress Gray and the rest of the islanders.” A smile crept onto his face. “I think that the storm shelter might be the perfect tool for making it happen.”

## Chapter Eight

### A Plan

In that moment, I barely heard his comment about planning. The purpose of everything that had happened to us snapped into view. Being unloved and pushed away in our childhoods led to us leaving and seeking our own way in the world. My longing for acceptance opened me to the warmth of the islanders and to Christ’s love. The bad luck of the outlaws coming to

Algoma was, in truth, the hand of God. He knew from the beginning that only seeing the gentle islanders suffering would bring Marcus to accept Jesus.

“Maria?”

“What?” I realized that I had missed a comment.

“I said I’m done with the herbs. Where’s the storm shelter?” Marcus frowned questioningly at me.

Turning, I led him past the pulpit and into the back room. The room held a small desk and little else. It was a place designated for quiet study of God’s word, but it was rarely used. Normally the islanders preferred to study the Bible in their own homes.

The heavy, oak door was cut into the back wall.

“Close the door.” I nodded to the door opened into the sanctuary.

After Marcus pushed it shut, I grasped the oak handle and revealed wooden steps leading into the storm shelter. The steps were little more than a wooden ladder, descending into the darkness.

“Perfect,” Marcus nodded.

“What are you thinking of?” I closed the door.

“Can you get word, secretly, to the islanders?”

“I can try.”

“If they could all get in here, then they would be safe for a few hours at least. That door is too heavy for the gang to batter down quickly.”

“So?” I scowled in confusion, “What does that do for us?”

“Maybe nothing,” His face became serious. “We would have to stay out.”

“What?!”

“If they could get down there, preferably without the gang knowing, you and I could use one of the row boats we came on and go out to the big boats.”

“Ohh...” The idea was slowly forming in my own mind. “We could let them know that it was the right time to attack.”

Marcus nodded.

“But, Marc...” I studied him, frowning.

“What?”

“You said...” I hesitated. “I mean, aren’t they your friends? You said you wouldn’t hurt them.”

“I don’t want to.” He sighed and hung his head. His voice was broken. Then he looked up. “But whatever I do to them, I’ll suffer myself. Don’t forget Maria, I’m one of them. Those ships carry my description as being one of the gang.”

“What about the young officer and the sailor?” Problems were popping into my mind at an alarming rate.

“I didn’t say the plan was perfect.” Marcus shrugged.

“What will happen to them?” I whispered.

“They’ll probably be killed.” He said it bluntly, not knowing how to soften the cruel fact.

I closed my eyes.

“Maria, you think about it. It’s up to you.” He opened the door out to the main part of the church and started away. “Right now we have to get these herbs to the widow.”

“Right,” I closed the door behind us, than watched him exit the building, remembering not to follow too closely.

While I waited, I sank into one of the pews. My mind spun, not focusing on anything for more than a few seconds. How could I weigh the possible outcome with the problems that would surely happen? Without medical help, Mistress Gray could die, but if we tried to put our plan into effect, the two sailors would be murdered. If we managed to save the islanders, Marcus would, at the very least, be imprisoned. And what would happen if we failed? What if I was caught telling one of the islanders of the desperate effort? What if I decided to try and someone refused to go along?

The church was dark. I realized that I had been sitting on the bench for quite a while. Faith and Marcus would be wondering what happened to me.

“Dear God,” I cried out in mental anguish as I rose, “please show me what to do. You’ve shown me that you have a purpose in everything. Please, use your power to help us.”

Slipping out the door, I stood on the grass before the chapel and looked up into the sky. The stars above shone brightly and the moon illuminated the village and its street. It all looked so peaceful. Perhaps it had all been a nightmare.

I smiled up at the moon. No, it wasn’t a dream and I didn’t wish it all away. My brother was a Christian.

“We’ve got to try.” I announced to the night sky. And I knew that no matter what the outcome, someone bigger than us all was in control.

With a feeling of peace in my heart, I tiptoed across the grass and onto the road, breaking into a run.

Faith is probably still with Mistress Gray.

I turned at the tree that marked the widow's house, slowing to a walk. The night was calm. I could hear the waves splashing against the shore.

"You're out late."

I spun. The sound seemed to have come from the trees. Its branches rustled in the gentle breeze. The dappled pattern cast on the ground suddenly seemed eerie. I tried to peer through the shadows.

Yes, there was a darker, irregular spot leaning against the trunk.

"Remember, I said I'd watch you."

My stomach clenched. Had he seen everything? But surely he would not have waited all the time I sat in the chapel, struggling with the decision.

"What were you doing?" The man straightened and his dark form separated that of the tree's.

What could I say?

"Well?"

"Thinking," it was true.

"Ah, you were thinking." He chuckled softly, "About what?"

"God," My confidence mounted.

Lord, you are in control.

"Why do you come here instead of to your home?"

"To visit a sick friend," I hid a smile. He could not find fault with my explanation for a nighttime stroll.

“Who?”

“Mistress Gray, the widow.”

“Is she conscious?” His voice was harsh.

“I don’t know,” I said. “She wasn’t last I saw.”

“Go on then,” He grunted. His silhouetted hand waved me forward.

What a strange man. Thank you, God, for getting me through.

I hurried up the steps and into the house.

A few outlaws sprawled about the living room, playing cards, but I only glanced at them.

They did the same to me as I slipped up the stairs. I breathed another prayer of thanks when they went back to their game without stopping me.

My guess was correct; Faith sat in a rocking chair by Mistress Gray’s bed. Her head nodded on her chest. Her face showed signs of weariness.

I hesitated in the doorway, not wanting to wake either of them.

Mistress Gray sounded awful. Something deep within her chest rattled as she breathed. The sound stirred a faint memory. Mama. The icy clutch of fear squeezed my heart. Mama’s breath had rattled like that before she died. Oh please God, don’t take her too. What purpose could there be in that?

“It might not be like Mama’s illness.” My eyes widened. For the first time I noticed Marcus. He stood at the other side of the room, hidden in shadow.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“Watching, being available if I’m needed.” He nodded toward Faith, “She’s exhausted.”

Padding across the room, he took my hands in his strong ones. “Ria, what was it you told me earlier? About God having a purpose for everything? Maybe...”

I hung my head, my eyes burning with unshed tears. The silent prayer passed through my mind again. I felt guilty. God had just shown me how his plan was perfect and yet panic still gripped me when I heard that terrible rattle.

“Oh, Marcus,” I sobbed, struggling to keep my voice low. “Why is she breathing like that?”

“Shh, it’s okay.” Faith was there, putting a hand on each of our shoulders. Her lips brushed my forehead.

“Faith!” I lifted my tear-stained face to hers. “What’s wrong with her?”

“She has a fever now,” Faith said.

“Will she...”

“Only God knows.” She replied. “Does Mistress Gray love the Lord?”

We both nodded.

“And does God lie?”

New Christians we might be, but neither of I nor Marcus hesitated. We shook our heads.

“Then remember; all things work together for good, to them that love God.”

I remembered my earlier decision. I turned to Marcus. “I’ll do it.”

“What?” Faith and Marcus said it together.

“The shelter,” I met my brother’s eyes, “I want to try.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“What are you two talking about?” Faith broke in. Her voice, though still soft, was insistent.

I looked questioningly at Marcus.

“It’s up to you.” He held up his hands.

“But it’s your plan.” I responded, “You explain it.”

He turned to Faith. She wore an exasperated, but curious expression.

“The storm shelter,” He began. “Maria showed it to me and we think we can use it to help you.”

“Oh?” My friend looked as confused as I had been.

“Yes. If we can get all of the islanders into that shelter without the gang catching on, they’ll be safe for a while. Then Maria and I will try to get a row boat out to the big boats surrounding the island to tell them to attack.”

“It sounds like it would work, if carefully planned.” Faith frowned.

“How would we distract the outlaws?” I asked.

Marcus crossed his arms, furrowing his brow in concentration. Then he looked up, “I know, I’ll run in and tell them to all go to the beach because a bunch of boats are coming.”

“What if they decide to shoot us all before they go?” Faith didn’t look convinced.

“It’s risky,” Marcus frowned. “I don’t think they will though. They’ll want to get down as soon as possible in order to make sure they don’t get caught undefended.”

“What about you?” I demanded. “They’ll be suspicious if you don’t go with them and if you go with them...”

“If you go with them,” Faith concluded, “they’ll know you’ve turned on them and kill you.”

“I’m willing to risk it,” Marcus rubbed a hand over his brow and sighed. “We’ll have to hope...” he paused and corrected himself, “We’ll have to pray that they are so excited they forget about me.”

“They’ll still know you’ve crossed them.” I pointed out.

“Yes, but while they are gone, the islanders can get into the shelter. I’ll slip into the bushes along the road and wait till they go by. You’ll hide by the beach ahead of time and I’ll meet you.” He hesitated, biting his lip. “That way if they do catch me, you can still try to get to the boats.”

“Okay,” I sighed. “But do be careful, Marc. I would be devastated if anything happened to you.”

“I’ll pray for you both the whole time.” Faith promised.

“Don’t forget,” Marcus broke in, “First we have to tell all the islanders without getting caught,” He smiled sadly at me. “Well, you have to.”

I nodded, glancing over at Mistress Gray lying on the bed.

For her sake, Lord, help us to succeed

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“It’s Maria. May I come in?” I stood at the front door of the Walsh’s home.

“Oh, Maria,” the door opened. I could see the relief on Deborah Walsh’s face. “Do come in. I was afraid...”

“That’s okay.” I assured her, glancing over my shoulder before stepping inside. The only outlaw I could see was the guard on the beach.

“What brings you here?” Jack sat on the sofa across from the door.

I checked to make sure that the door was closed. When my gaze returned to the man, Deborah stood beside him.

“Do you know about my brother?” I asked.

They both frowned. Apparently they did not.

“My brother, Marcus, is the youngest outlaw of this gang.”

Starting, they wore expressions of shock.

“I didn’t know you had a brother.” Deborah was the first to speak.

“Yes, I do.” I held up my hand, stopping the inevitable flow of questions. After explaining the situation to three families before this, it was beginning to get frustrating. “After my mother died, Marcus and I lived with different relatives. He ran away when he was fourteen and three years later, when I was the same age, I left too. That’s why I came here. I needed a job and the only skill I could do well was embroidery.”

“So...” Jack started, “why are you telling us this now?”

“Because Marcus has agreed to help us,” I took a deep breath. Now we reached the heart of my mission. “We have come up with a plan to bring in the military ships that are waiting. If it works, none of the islanders will get hurt.”

“How do you know we can trust him?”

“I trust him.” The first family had also been suspicious. I shrugged, “I can’t know for certain, but he’s accepted Christ. Mistress Gray told him about God and he realized that he was wrong. I believe that he wants to do the right thing.”

The husband and wife glanced at each other and I could tell that a silent message was being passed between them. When they looked back to me, I continued.

“I won’t try to make you think that the plan is fool-proof because it isn’t. It is risky. But we must do something soon. Mistress Gray will die without medical help and eventually, when the gardens run out, we’ll probably be killed by the outlaws. Then there are the two men that came from the ship.”

“I’ll hear you out.” Jack nodded to me. His face was serious, even stern. The men of the island felt a great responsibility to protect the women and children. I knew that the threat hanging over us weighed heavily on them. They would not take any unnecessary risks but if I could persuade them, they would do their best to make it succeed.

I began to explain.

I could tell that Jack and Deborah were concentrating on each word.

When I finished my explanation, I folded my arms, waiting for their response. Silently I prayed that they would agree. It would take only one family to ruin the plan.

“What about the children?” Deborah whispered. The two glanced at each other again. Their two children were two and four years old. “They might refuse to go down the ladder; you know how Emma is afraid of the dark.”

“The lanterns would be lit as soon as the door went closed.” I put in.

“Yes, I know.” Jack frowned, “But Emma might start screaming about going in and draw unwanted attention.”

“It’s one of the risks that are necessary.” I shrugged, “Hopefully Marcus will have the outlaws running for the beach.”

“We’ll do it,” Jack reached up and took his wife’s hand.

“Thank you.” I let out the breath I had been holding in.

“When should we be ready?”

“Seven o’clock tomorrow,” I replied. Marcus and I had decided that the end of dusk would be the time the outlaws would expect the military to attack. It would make Marcus’s story more believable. Also, the sinking sun would conceal the islander’s movements.

Deborah’s face was pale, but she stepped forward and hugged me. As she held me tight against her, she whispered into my ear, “Be careful. I’ll be praying for you all the time.”

“Thank you.”

“Tell your brother that I’ll be praying for him too.” She let me go.

“I will.” Gratefulness rose up within me. In her own way, she was telling me that she had faith in Marcus.

## Chapter Nine

### Darkness

I glanced at the clock hanging on the wall. Half-past five. Soon it would be time for me to creep down to the beach and hide in the bushes, but first I had to go to Mistress Gray's and check in with Marcus.

"Kelvin, I'm heading out."

He came down the stairs. Gazing steadily into my eyes, he put a hand on my shoulder.

I returned the gaze, reading worry and hope in his face. Then, wordlessly, I turned and pushed through the blanket.

An oppressive silence blanketed the island. A gentle rain muted my footsteps.

The knowledge of what I was about to do made my spine stiffen.

I shivered as I started up Mistress Gray's front steps.

Marcus met me at the top of the stairs and pulled me into the sick room. Glancing at the bed, my spirits soared. The widow's eyes were open!

"Such a brave child," she smiled weakly at me.

"You're awake!" I rushed to her bed and grasped her hand.

"Did you get it?" She squeezed my hand. "The note in the dress?"

"No, but Marcus told me..."

"He was burying money in Jill and Steven's garden." She cut me off, "That's why he killed Tom, to keep him from finding it. I just told your brother. He didn't know before." I realized how cold her hand was as she squeezed mine again, "Go with him. Do what you can. Keep them from hurting more people. Pray."

I turned my head toward Marcus.

He waved me toward him.

I smiled at her and then stood and walked toward him. I looked a question at him.

“Into the attic,” He spoke before I reached him.

“What?”

“I can’t be caught with you,” He took my arm and propelled me toward the hidden panel.

“We need to hide.”

I bent and slid the wall back to reveal the low opening.

Taking a candle from a nearby table, Marcus lit it and followed me in. Faith, who had not yet left Mistress Gray’s side, closed the door behind us.”

“She’s awake!” I beamed at my brother.

“Awake, yes.” He frowned, “but she’s still very ill. Faith thinks that, if anything, she’s gotten worse over the last few hours.”

I dropped my gaze.

“Maria!” Marcus’s voice demanded my attention. “You have to focus on the job before us. You can’t allow yourself to be distracted. The success of this whole plan depends on you!”

“Right,” taking a deep breath I forced myself to focus. “What was she talking about?”

“Faylon. Apparently he’s been taking money from our supply, stealing the gang’s stolen money.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing. Telling about it might cause a fight among the gang, but then they would be suspicious. It’s better to go on with our plan.”

“Okay,” I took another deep breath.

“At exactly seven o’clock, I’ll sound the false alarm and try to get away from the gang. You will be hidden down at the beach. We’ll have to assume that the islanders reached shelter. I’ll meet you down on the beach and we go.” He stared into my eyes. “What will you do if I don’t come?”

“Go alone.” I swallowed, “but please come, Marc.”

“I’ll do my best.” He gave me a crooked smile.

“Do you think Faith and Kelvin will be able to get Mistress Gray away?” This was my chief worry. A childless couple had agreed to take Mayah while the girl’s parents helped the widow to safety.

“Don’t think about it,” Marcus ordered, “You can’t do a thing about it.”

I sighed.

“When are you going to get down to the beach?”

“I could go now,” I looked at my brother questioningly.

“Good,” he nodded. “That way if someone does see you, they won’t be thinking about it later, when I sound the alarm.”

“Oh,” I remembered Deborah’s messaged. “One of the island women asked me to tell you she would be praying for you.”

“For me?” His voice showed his surprise. “Does she know I’m one of the outlaws?”

“Yes, she knows.”

“I must have a lot to learn,” He sighed. “I wouldn’t pray for someone who disrupted my peaceful life and put me in danger.”

“I learn something from them every day.” Then, bringing our attention to the rapidly fleeing time, I said, “Shouldn’t I be going?”

“Yes.” Raising his hand, he knocked softly on the panel.

Footsteps padded toward us and the door slid back.

I crawled out, and wordlessly hugged Faith. She squeezed me tightly and kissed my cheek.

Moving to the bed, I leaned over and brushed my lips against Mistress Gray’s forehead. Then, glancing around the room, I turned and left.

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A steady rain pattered down on me.

It was dark. I shifted again. The seat of my britches was wet through from the mud. I folded up the cuffs, wishing for the hundredth time that I had not worn them; my usual dress would have been far more comfortable. Marcus had told me that pants would be more practical for the work I must do.

I squinted into the sky in my fourth attempt to tell the time. Clouds covered the night lights. The wind that dashed the rain into my face still had not blown them away. It must be seven by now. Had something gone wrong?

The burden of not knowing was nearly unbearably. I longed to race back into the village and find out what was going on.

Don’t lose your head. Everything depends on your staying hidden, remember? The inner warning spoke with Marcus’s voice.

Leah-Purpose on Algoma-80

What was that?

I peeked around the edge of the bush I sat behind. It sounded like men yelling. Yes!

There it was again.

Now the sound drew nearer and I could hear the pounding of feet. I strained to see the road, but only the tip of it was visible from my place.

It must be the outlaws! Would Marcus be with them?

There! The pack of them raced onto the edge of the beach and slid to a stop.

I could not make out their faces. My heart pounded. I couldn't tell if Marcus was with them.

As I watched, the men began to mill around. An angry shout reached my ears, but wind snatched away the words. It was followed by others. Almost as soon as they arrived, the band turned and raced back down the street.

Closing my eyes, I breathed a prayer. "Please God, let them all make it."

Now it was my turn.

Standing, I scanned the area for Marcus. It was so dark; the bushes lining the shore were swathed in shadow and blanketed by driving rain. No sign of him. My heart sank. He must be there somewhere.

The next gust of wind nearly knocked me forward. I regained my balance and drew in a shuddering breath. Where was Marcus?

If I don't come, go without me. His voice spoke in my head.

Come! I cried out inwardly. Please, come.

The whole plan depends on you. I could hear him speaking to me.

With a heavy heart I jogged down the beach, slipping down the steep slope. Mud pulled at my feet. The wind whipped my hair about my face. Waves pounded onto the beach. Where were the boats? It was so dark. There! The dock appeared before me. The boats were tied to it.

As I jumped onto the pier, the wood groaned.

I could see one of the row boats careening up and down on the giant waves.

I don't know if I can row through this.

Bending over the ropes, I began untying the knots. My hands shook, making the job harder.

A roaring sound filled my ears.

Jerking my head up, I looked across the ocean.

The water churned. The sky was black. A black line of clouds raced toward me, pushed by the wind. A hurricane!

Dropping the rope, I sprang to my feet and raced down the dock. How had I missed it? The silence earlier had been the strange calm before a storm. I had experienced it before. I should have known. And then the growing wind as I hid. But my mind had been focused on what I must do. I had shut everything else out.

I scrambled back up the beach. The mud kept sliding backward, carrying me toward the water.

Bushes and other debris tumbled down the road as I ran.

Where should I go? It would be too dangerous to try to make the storm shelter. Please, let the others be in the shelter, God.

Mistress Gray's cellar! It was the next best place to go.

Her tree bent double as I flew by it. The front door of the house slammed back and forth. I started through the doorway, but the door, caught by the wind, slammed into me. Gasping for breath, I shoved against it and fell into the house.

The darkness of the clouds seemed to absorb the whole island. Black, everything was black.

A big one lasts days, and food and water could be a problem. Faith's voice spoke in my mind.

Food. There would be some in the kitchen.

No, I needed get into the cellar. The storm outside sounded like it would rip the house to shreds at any moment. She keeps cans in the cellar. I remembered.

I groped about for the door to the basement. There it was. For a moment, the handle stuck. I wrenched it around. It gave. Dragging it shut behind me, I plunged down the narrow stairs.

"Ah, so nice to have a visitor," a sly voice crooned the words.

I froze. Soft light glowed in the dank cellar. The noise of the raging wind was shut out. My gaze riveted on the man illumined by the candle. What was Faylon doing down here? Taking shelter from the storm? No, something about the way he spoke, something about his stance made me discard the idea.

I saw something stir in my peripheral vision. I shifted my gaze to it. Two figures huddled in a shadowy corner. Who were they? Then I remembered, the men from the ships!

My gaze snapped back to Faylon. He held a gun in his right hand.

“Come to rescue your friends, eh?” He sneered. “I knew that you bothered your pretty little head about too much. I’m just awaiting word from a friend and then I’ll shoot them.”

“Shoot them! Why?” I gasped.

“We’re being attacked.” He snorted, “Or haven’t you heard.”

“No, you’re not.” I said, quickly.

“Don’t take me for a fool girl.”

“No, I mean it.” I pointed upward. “Any attack has been forced off, can’t you hear the storm?”

“Storm?” Faylon frowned. “You better not be making things up girl.”

“Take a look for yourself.” I put my hands behind my back, twining them together.

“You’re friends might need your help.”

“Maybe I will,” He glared at me.

I made no response. He must hear my heart. The close call with the hurricane had sent it racing. Now, with the added shock of the outlaw, I felt sure it would break my ribs.”

Faylon backed toward the stairs, his hand curved around the pistol. He disappeared into the black. For a moment, the howl of wind filled the cellar, and then stopped again as the door slammed shut.

Hurrying to the base of the stairs, I peered into the blackness. Faylon had left the cellar.

Turning, I rushed to the two men in the corner.

“Are you okay?”

“Can you help us?” The voice that replied was faint.

I snatched the candle from the box it sat on and held it up over the men.

When the light fell across them, I closed my eyes against the sight. Their hands and feet were tied together so that they could not move. But that was not all. Both men were covered with ugly bruises and cuts.

“Those wicked men!” I gasped. Setting the candle on the floor, I began untying the young officer. He bonds were tight. “Why?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” He shifted and nodded toward the other man. “Please, do my friend first; he’s had the worst of it.”

The two men looked about equal to me, but I didn’t argue. The man murmured his thanks as I untied him.

“What’s going on out there?” The officer asked as I worked on the sailor.

“A hurricane,” My reply was brief.

The ropes binding the sailor dropped off and coiled onto the ground. He gasped and began massaging his wrists. I moved to the officer.

“My name’s Maria.”

“My official title is Lieutenant Bernard,” He replied, “but being stuck in a basement and rescued by a girl doesn’t seem like a situation for being official.” The knots finally loosened. He bit his lip and rocked back as blood returned to his hands. When the pain lessened, he held out his freed hand. “I’m Joel.”

I shook his hand.

“When do you think that outlaw will be back?” He massaged his wrists and ankles.

“I don’t know if he will be back.” I glanced toward the stairs.

“Lieutenant, what about our ships?” The sailor spoke for the first time.

Turning my head, I studied him. He was older than his commander, probably in his mid to late thirties. The thick, brown hair that curled atop his head carried flecks of gray.

“A hurricane...” The lieutenant shook his head, “I don’t know Chad.”

“Maybe they saw the storm coming and got away before it hit.” I suggested.

“Maybe,” He nodded, “I pray they did.”

“Are you a Christian?” I jumped on his comment.

“Why, yes, are you?”

“I am!” I smiled, “It’s always nice to find a fellow believer.”

“God knew that we both needed a fellow believer for support.” He grinned. Then his smile faded and he studied me. “I hesitate to ask this,” He paused, “but where are the rest of the people?”

“The islanders?”

“Yes.”

“I pray that they reached the storm shelter,” I replied.

“Storm shelter?”

“There is one beneath the chapel. They were all supposed to get into it while the outlaws were distracted.”

“How could you distract them from finding shelter?” Joel frowned. “It would be the first item on my mind.”

“Oh no, none of us knew the storm was coming.” I explained, “We were trying to get them to a safe place so that I and my brother could tell your ships to attack.”

“I don’t understand.” It was the sailor, Chad, who spoke.

“You see, we were trying to free the island of the outlaws....”

I told them everything. I told of Marcus’s involvement in the gang, what I knew of Tom’s death, about my brother’s salvation, about Mistress Gray’s injury and illness and finally, about the plan.

At the end of my tale, they both eyed me thoughtfully.

Chad broke the silence first.

“What a daring plan!” The brawny man looked like the type of person who enjoyed adventure.

“Daring,” Joel repeated, “but it just might have worked.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” I rubbed my toe against the dirt floor, “but it’s ruined now. We’ll just have to wait and see what’s left after the storm. Now I’m just worried about Marcus. He never came to the beach. At least, I never saw him.”

A crash broke the silence in the basement, and the noise of the storm howled above us.

“I wonder what is happening to the outlaws.” I murmured.

“Depends on if they found shelter or not,” Joel said.

“I wish we were able to bury Tom before this,” I bit my lip. “I wonder if he’s still on his bed.

“Who knows,” Chad said.

“Only God,” Joel studied me. “I’m sorry about the boy, but he’s already dead. He won’t care.”

“Yes, I know.”

Leah-Purpose on Algoma-87

“Wish we could get out and find out if those people made it to the shelter.” Chad rotated his shoulders.

The candle light flickered and then guttered out

“As soon as that wind up there calms down, we will.” Joel voice came from the darkness.

Chapter Ten

Debris

The handle stuck. Locked! Faylon had left us trapped in the basement!

“What are we going to do?” I turned to my two companions.

“I was afraid of this,” Joel sighed. “We’ll have to break out.”

“Let me try.” Chad stepped past me and attempted to wrench the handle into obedience.

It didn’t work. “This dark is driving me crazy!”

“We have to get out,” Joel’s said. “There must be a weakness somewhere, Chad.”

I heard the whisper of fingers against wood.

“Here’s one!” The man’s voice rose in excitement.

“Can you break out?” Joel asked.

BAM, BAM, BAM! Chad slammed into weak spot again and again. He grunted.

“Are you okay?” Joel sounded worried.

“Sore,” Chad panted. I remembered that they had been beaten. Both must be in pain, but neither had complained. “It’s breaking,” He added, before renewing his efforts.

CRAAACK! A sliver of light broke through a crack in the door. I cheered. After what seemed like days in the dark, the bit of light seemed like a miracle. The crack rapidly grew as Chad kept smashing into it.

CRASH! The door crumpled. Chad nearly sprawled forward, but caught himself in time. Joel and I were close on his heels.

I froze. Joel ran into me from behind.

“Maria, you shouldn’t...” His voice trailed off.

I stared at the doorframe before me. The front-door was missing. Holes gaped in the walls.

Stumbling forward, I ran my hand around a ragged hole in the wall. The wood tore at my fingers.

A hand rested on my shoulder. Turning, I met Joel's earnest gaze.

"I'm sorry."

I nodded, unable to speak.

Looking around I noticed that the stairs still remained, though debris made them impassable. I doubted there was much of an upstairs left to go to.

Turning again, I walked through the door-less frame.

Where were all the bushes? Where was Mistress Gray's tree? The only thing left of it was a gaping hole in the ground.

Turning, I tipped my head to look up. The roof was gone. The walls looked like giant moths had eaten them. Something protruded from one of the holes.

Mistress Gray can't live here, I worried. Well, one of the islanders whose house is in good condition is sure to take in. I reassured myself with the thought. Or, perhaps we can get her to a hospital and fix the house before she comes back.

At least all of the houses still stood. Most of them were damaged though. There were missing roofs, hole filled walls and shattered windows. The beach! I reached down to grab up my skirt only to discover that I still wore britches. How had I forgotten the uncomfortable things?

I picked my way around broken glass, strewn bits of wood and uprooted bushes and hurried toward the beach. That was where Marcus was supposed to meet me. What if he did make it to the beach but couldn't get out of the hurricane's path?

The two men walked on either side of me. I glanced at Joel and noticed that he was favoring his left leg. Both he and Chad looked battered.

"Your leg..." I began.

He stopped, staring ahead. I turned my head. The beach was gone, covered by water. Next to the road, one of the row boats lay, overturned. Amazingly, it seemed unscathed.

Marcus must be dead. Why are my eyes so dry? Why won't the tears come? I want to cry.

"Look," Joel's voice was subdued. Chad and I looked in the direction he pointed.

At first I could see nothing, but then I made out the remains of a ship.

"I was afraid of that." Chad let out a long breath.

"But only one?" I frowned, "I saw three ships."

"They were around the island, remember?" Joel replied, "They're probably grounded up somewhere else." He shrugged, "Or maybe they got away."

"What about the shelter." Chad turned to me, "We should go and see if there are any survivors."

I don't want to go. I want to be able to keep believing they're all alive. I'm afraid of not finding them.

"We should," I said aloud.

"Let's go then." Joel turned and started back down the littered road.

A moment later he jumped backward, “Aggg!”

“What’s wrong?” Chad pushed by me to reach his commander.

“That!” Joel pointed to something in front of him.

I pushed a bush away with my foot and started forward.

“Stay back, you shouldn’t…” but it was too late. I had already seen it. A body lay on the edge of the street.

My stomach churned and I felt like vomiting, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away. It was Arnold, the leader of the outlaw band. His legs were twisted at an odd angle and he stared at us with glazed eyes. Those eyes held an expression of terror, even in death.

“Let’s go,” Chad muttered.

“We, we can’t just leave him there.” I stammered.

“Come,” Joel took my arm and pulled me away. “We can’t help him now, it’s too late. If any of the islanders’ are still alive, we can help them.”

The tears that had refused to come now flooded my eyes. I choked on them.

“Go ahead and cry.” Joel soothed.

“I just want to find my friends,” I pulled free of his gentle hand.

Please, God, let them be alive.

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The chapel’s roof was torn off. Chunks of it lay about the building. The big doors were splintered, the pews inside strewn about like playthings.

I weaved my way through them, leading the two men toward the entrance to the shelter. The pulpit lay on its side, blocking the door to the little room. Chad stepped up and heaved it to the side.

Pushing open the smaller door, I stood to the side and let them pass.

Joel tried the oak-door's handle. It opened.

"Is anyone down there?" He called.

No answer.

Unable to bear it any longer I pushed past him and started down the wooden ladder.

"Faith, where are you? It's Maria, it's okay."

"Maria?" It was a women's voice. Faith's voice!

As my feet touched the ground, she hurried to me.

Sobbing with relief, we embraced, holding on to each other as if we would never let go.

"I was so scared for you!" She cried.

"I'm so glad you're safe!" Looking over her shoulder, I peered into the shelter.

Everything wobbled because of my tear filled eyes. The light of two lanterns showed a group of islanders.

Drying my eyes, I stepped back and looked at my friend.

Then we were surrounded by the rest of the group. Everyone seemed to talk at once, laughing and crying at the same time.

"Joel, Chad! Come down here!" I called over the noise. Chad came down first. He reached up to help Joel. The islanders made room for them to come to the center of the group and I introduced them.

“Maria!” Faith’s voice cut through the noise of the people. The tone made me turn to her instantly.

“What?”

“Have you seen Isla?”

“Mistress Gray?” A hollow feeling cut into my stomach. “Isn’t she here?”

“No.”

“What do you mean?” I was getting hysterical.

“That outlaw, the man with the black-hair, he came in when Jack and I were starting to help her up. He threatened to shoot us. Isla told us to leave. She wouldn’t let us keep helping her.”

“Where did you leave her?” Joel asked the question firmly. His manner seemed to calm Faith.

“In her bedroom.”

“Did the outlaw stay with her, or follow you?”

“He...” She paused, trying to remember.

“He followed us.” Kelvin said.

“Let’s go and look for her then.” Joel moved toward the ladder. Chad was already starting up it.

“What about,” One of the women spoke up. Her voice quivered. “What about the outlaws?”

“I don’t think many of them, if any, made it through the storm.” I replied, remembering Arnold sprawled by the street.

I don't think Mistress Gray made it either. But I held this thought inside.

It was a long stream of islanders that poured out of the storm shelter and into the devastated chapel. All around me, my friends and neighbors gasped at the sight. Some began sobbing, some stared mutely. Many began praying, their words choked by tears.

“Let's go.” Kelvin touched my arm. “None of this is important. Isla is.”

“I'm coming,” I whispered. “But Kelvin, I don't think it's possible that she made it. Her house is destroyed.

“Destroyed?” He hesitated, then the firmness returned to his voice. “Nothing is too great for our God.”

Please, God, let her be alive.

But deep down, I did still didn't believe she could be. The first floor was ruined. How could she have survived on the second?

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Sweat poured down the three men's faces as they struggled with the debris that filled the stairway. It seemed that the hurricane still defied us, even after it died out.

“I don't think there's an end to this stuff.” Chad panted.

“Just keep going,” Kelvin begged. He studied the other men. “Unless...”

“We'll be okay,” Joel braced a foot against the stair and bend to grasp a section of roofing. “If that woman's alive, we have to get to her.”

The stairs groaned.

Jumping forward, I found a lighter burden and picked it up, trying to help. I wasn't strong, but every bit helped. The wood squealed like a protesting pig.

Before we could react, a pile of debris tumbled down on top of us.

Coughing and sputtering, we pushed the assortment of garbage, wood and bushes off our laps.

“The stairs are open!” Joel started forward but Kelvin put out an arm to stop him.

“Go slow, they might be weak. It wouldn’t do any good to have you fall through and get hurt.”

The young man stopped and let Kelvin go in front of him.

The stairs groaned under his weight.

Keep him safe Lord.

Behind me, Faith breathed a similar prayer.

The next step seemed to bend under his weight. He moved one foot to the next one, testing it. In a flurry of splinters, his foot crashed through the stair.

“Kelvin!” Faith cried, rushing forward.

“Don’t go up there Ma’am!” Chad caught her before she began mounting the stairs.

Kelvin threw a glance at us, and then carefully removed his foot from the hole. “Skip that one.” He tested the stair above the broken one. It held.

When he finally reached the top, he motioned to me.

“You come next, Maria. You’re the lightest.”

Biting my lip, I headed up, avoiding the broken step.

When I reached the top, Kelvin waved. “Come up one at a time.”

I turned and began digging through the littered doorway. Kelvin stood beside me. Wiping away the sweat that trickled into his eyes, he too began to work. I glanced up and saw a scrap of blue revealed by the parting clouds.

Joel moved in beside me. He joined the effort to move the pile away from the door.

When Chad and Faith also joined in, the work went quickly. Finally, the way opened.

“You go first.” I looked to Kelvin and we all moved out of his way.

## Chapter Eleven

### Farewell

Forming a single file line, we followed Kelvin into the room. Our eyes turned immediately to the bed, or, rather, to the place the bed should have been. Mistress Gray's four-poster bed did not occupy its usual place against the wall.

I rubbed my toe against the wet floor. Mud. It was everywhere now. The carpet was obscured in a layer of grim. A bush lay in one corner and scraps of wood lay scattered about the room.

“Isla!” I whipped around to see Faith rushing to the other side of the room. And, yes, the bed was there. It was wedged into a hole in the wall; the bottom quarter of the bed pushed through to the outside, hanging out over the ground below.

The three men rushed forward and, grasping the headboard, heaved back. With a splintering noise, the wood around the bed crumbled. The bed slanted downward. Now that the wood no longer held it, the heavy piece dropped forward, ready to plunge to the ground.

Faith jumped to the bedside and clung to something or someone.

“One, two, three!” Kelvin shouted. Grunting with effort, the men hauled backward. The bed came further into the room.

“One more time!” It was Chad’s voice. They pulled again. The rest of the frame came onto the floor.

Now I ran forward. Yes, there was a form in the bed.

Faith bent over it, rubbing a white hand in her own.

“Is she alive?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Mistress Gray?” I knelt beside the bed, taking the woman’s other hand, “Mistress Gray, can you hear me?” Tears trickled down my cheeks.

The pallid lids fluttered, and then opened. Her gaze wandered aimlessly before finding my face. With a tiny smile, her gaze locked with mine.

Leah-Purpose on Algoma-99

“Mistress Gray, your safe now, it’s all over.”

She opened her mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. “I was safe the whole time.”

Her voice was weak and hoarse.

I looked at her, puzzled.

“God was by me through it all.” Her hand tightened on mine. “I don’t have much time left child.”

“Yes, yes you do!” I cried. “We are going to wait for the ships to come and bring you to a doctor.”

“I’m not going to make it.”

“Don’t say that!”

“Listen to me.” She freed her other hand from Faith and put it over mine. “It’s okay. I’m ready to go.”

The tears streamed down my face now. “You can’t.” I whispered. “I need you.”

“You’ll find others. God will be with you,” She searched my face, “It’s time for me to go home now, Maria. I’m ready to go to my Savior.”

“I need you.” I repeated.

“Let her go.” An arm moved about my shoulders. It was Faith. “You have to let go.”

“No!” My voice rose, “She can’t go. The people who love me always leave me!” I leaned closer to Mistress Gray, whispering again. “Please, don’t leave me like Mother did.”

“Your mother didn’t want to leave you, but it was her time.” Mistress Gray swallowed, “I’ll be waiting for you.”

I let my head sink down onto blankets beside my friend.

“How is she?” A woman’s voice questioned.

“She’s leaving,” Kelvin’s voice replied. Moments later the stairs creaked.

“Say good-bye Maria.” Faith knelt beside me.

“I can’t.” I shook my head. My voice broke. “I can’t say good-bye again.”

“Do it for her.” Faith murmured, stroking my hair.

I can’t say good-bye again. I just can’t. The thought pounded inside my head.

Do it, do it for Mistress Gray. She’s done so much for you.

Dear God, help me.

My tears joined the moisture already soaking the blankets. I raised my head.

The widow met my gaze. Her eyes were gentle, understanding.

“I can’t say good-bye,” I choked, taking her hands in my own again. “So, till we meet again.”

“We’ll see each other again.” She smiled. “Don’t forget, Maria, God will never leave you. He’s always there.”

Her grasp tightened for a moment. Then her hands went limp. Faith leaned over the bed and brushed her hand over Mistress Gray’s eyes, closing them for the last time.

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“What was that?”

“What was what?” Standing, I wiped my cheeks. I felt exhausted.

“Listen.”

We all looked at Joel, listening intently for whatever he had heard.

“The attic!” I ran to the sliding panel and leaned down, listening. Was it my imagination? No, there it was again, the soft, irregular rap.

“It’s Marcus!” Faith raced to me. “When he was helping me take care of, of Isla, we created that knock so I could tell him when all was clear.” She slipped her finger into the knot in the wood that held a button. The catch popped open and the door slid back. I stepped away, my heart pounding. I was afraid to hope. A figure moved in the doorway. I closed my eyes and turned away.

It won’t be him. Don’t believe it’s him. Every time there’s hope it all goes wrong! God, do you really care? Why did you let Mistress Gray die? I needed her. I need her.

My eyes burned.

A scrapping sound came from behind me.

I stared at the form on the bed. Someone had pulled one of the sodden blankets over my friend’s face.

A hesitant footstep made the boards creak behind me.

No, don’t hope!

My heart was screaming. The pain of losing Mistress Gray robbed me of reason. I had already resolved in my heart that my brother was dead.

“Maria?” A hand touched my shoulder. My heart seemed to stop. My thoughts stopped. It was his voice. How could it be? “Maria?” The hand pulled me around. I let myself be turned. I opened my eyes.

Such deep brown eyes. They searched my own, asking a question. Why is the hair that color? It’s usually brown. The face is so dirty. There’s a cut on the forehead.

I felt detached, as if I were observing a picture.

“Maria?”

I felt tears again. They shook my body. A hiccupping sob broke free and I flung my arms around the young man before me.

“Are you mad at me?” He stroked my back, my head.

“Yes!” I sobbed, “You didn’t meet me at the beach!” I clung to him. I used all the strength in my body to hold him close. Never, never again did I want to let him go. “I thought you were dead! Oh, Marcus, I thought you were dead.”

“I’m sorry.” He murmured.

I didn’t answer, only hung on to him harder.

“So touching, what a tender outlaw indeed.”

That catlike voice. My joints locked. I stood motionless, like a statue. Marcus’s arms stiffened. Gently pushing me from him, he turned. Reaching back he searched for my hand. I put it into his. Against his warm skin, I realized how cold I had gone.

Marcus’s grip tightened as someone moved in the blackness of the attic, and then, bending through the door, stepped into the room. I sidled closer to my brother.

I searched the outlaw when he came into view. I could see no weapon. He must have lost the pistol in the storm.

“Remember, Faylon will be watching you. I always keep my promises.” He leered, his eyes fastened on me.

My brother squeezed my hand.

“Don’t threaten her!” Joel stepped forward.

“So, you managed to get free.” Faylon narrowed his eyes. “I figured that girl would try to help you. She has a bad habit of meddling in my affairs.”

“No,” I was surprised when Chad stepped forward. “That girl has a good habit of trying to do her best for others.”

“Oh, really,” Faylon switched to a pitying expression. “This is a tough world; every man for himself.”

“That’s the worst thing you could do for yourself.” Joel said.

“I don’t like lies.” Faylon sounded disgusted.

“I’m not lying.” Joel stated.

“Spare me your sermon,” The outlaw rolled his eyes. “Or preach to your friends here. I’m sure they’d appreciate it.” He spun on his heel and strode from the room.

Marcus pulled his hand from mine and walked through shattered glass to the window. None of the windows in Algoma had survived the hurricane.

“He’s headed for the beach.” My brother reported.

“Let him go,” Faith sighed. “At least he isn’t bothering us.”

Kelvin moved to the widow and looked out. “We should go tell the others about Isla.”

“Maybe,” Walking to her husband, Faith hung her arms over his shoulders. She looked over his shoulders. “It’s gonna be a tough year.”

“God will provide. He always has.”

“Yes, I trust him,” She rested her head against his back.

“At least the boats are safe.” Kelvin commented.

“What?” I was incredulous. “The boats are sunk!”

“Yes, God takes care of everything. He knew that hurricane would come without warning.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

“The storm would have destroyed them.” Kelvin explained. “Remember last year when the hurricane caught us by surprise? We had to rebuild the boats almost from scratch. If we have time before a huge storm, we try to sink the boats. Then we can use ropes to haul them out after and all we have to do is patch the boat. God knew the storm was coming and led the gang to sink them for us.” He smiled at me. “Remember? I told you all things work together for good for those who love God.”

I nodded, amazed.

“What about the widow?” Marcus’s voice cracked as he nodded to the blanketed form. I realize that he too felt a close bond to her.

“She loved God.” Faith said gently. “All has worked out for good with her. She’s with her Savior now. That’s the best she could wish for.” I noticed the glisten of tears in the young woman’s eyes.

“Oh, Marc,” I went to my brother and put my arms around him. He rested his cheek against my head.

“Kelvin,” Faith whispered. They left the room. The stairs creaked again.

“We should go down too.” Marcus said. “There isn’t anything more that we can do up here.”

“Did you know?” I asked.

“Know what?”

“That Faylon was in the attic.”

“No. He never made a sound that I could hear.”

“But he left the basement after the storm.” Joel put in. The puzzlement in his voice matched my own.

“So did I,” Marcus told us. “I couldn’t get down to the beach. When the gang went down to look for the boats Arnold told me to stay here with Faylon. We were to wait downstairs for word to kill the prisoners. When Faylon went down, I stayed up. I told him I’d wait at the door for news. Then I slipped out and started for the beach. Like a dummy, I stayed on the road though. I heard the gang coming back and was forced to turn and run in the other direction. I hid behind a house far down the street. They didn’t stop at Mistress Gray’s, they kept going. I don’t know why. By that time the sky was black. I started back down to the beach, but Faith and Kelvin stopped me. They were headed for the church. They told me Isla was still in the house. I told them to go to the shelter and promised to try to help the widow. Then I got caught in the storm.” He ran a hand through his hair. His fingers did not get very far. The hair was stuck together with drying blood. “Things were blowing all around me. They kept slamming into me, knocking me down. Finally I made it to the house and up to the bedroom. Mistress Gray was awake. She told me she wasn’t going anywhere. She’d stay in the bed and let whatever might happen, happen. She told me to go downstairs, but the way was blocked. Then she said that the attic was framed with strong wood and would be the safest place upstairs.” Marcus put a hand to his face, shielding his eyes. “I didn’t want to leave her. I tried to pick her up, but she yelled at me. I would have thought she was delirious, but her eyes were so clear. She kept insisting that I

go where it was safest. Finally I did as she said. Faylon must have already been there. She didn't say anything about him."

"It isn't your fault." I touched my brother's arm. "She was ready. Maybe she knew she wouldn't survive her illness and wanted to go. I guess we'll never know."

"I'm sorry about all of this." Joel said, stepping toward the door. "Come on Chad. Let's leave them alone."

"No," Marcus let his hand slide across his face. "We'll come with you. The storm made a mess of everything. Everyone will need to help. We might as well start now."

Joel nodded and started out of the room. At the doorway, he turned back. "You know, I think you're both brave."

I stared at him, startled, but before we could answer, he was on the stairs.

"Us, brave?" I turned to Marcus. "He's the one who was beaten by Faylon." I peered into my brother's face, seeing the gash on his forehead again. "Are you okay?"

"What?"

"Your forehead. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he reached up and touched it. "Something must have hit me on the street."

"Well, maybe he was right about one of us being brave." I smiled.

"He was," Marcus patted my shoulder. "But not about me."

"Let's go." I bit my lip. My brother's eyes danced. Turning, I led the way downstairs.

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“Joel!” A man in ragged cloths ran up to our new friend as he stood before Mistress Gray’s house. I didn’t recognize him. “Joel...”

“Nilsen!” Joel cut the man off, grabbing his shoulders. “Nilsen! Where did you spring from?”

“The boat!”

“What boat? The only boat we’ve seen was wrecked.”

“That’s the one.”

“You made it ashore!” Joel’s voice rose in excitement. “Have others?”

“Yes. Ten of us in all.”

“Praise God! The Captain?”

“No sir. You’re the senior officer now.”

“What about the other two boats.”

“Probably coming back now,” Nilson said. “A small boat came from the mainland to warn us that a big storm was probably coming our way. The captains decided to send two ships back and leave one to keep watch.”

“They’re not all ruined!” The lieutenant turned to Chad, “Do you hear that?”

“Yes sir.”

“Lieutenant?” Nilson’s voice was urgent.

“What is it?”

“We’ve caught one of the outlaws. The men picked me to come up and see if you survived. They’re waiting for your orders.”

At these words, I suddenly recognized the man. It was the smaller sailor who'd been sent back to his ship with the outlaw's message!

"That would be Faylon." Joel scratched his chin. "Bring him up here."

"Yes sir." The man ran back toward the beach.

"I don't know what I can do with him." Joel admitted, turning to us. "Not until those two ships come back."

"You could tie him and put him in the basement." I suggested.

"Yes, we could do that." Joel nodded. "We'll probably have to."

By the time the ten sailors arrived with Faylon, a small crowd of islanders had formed.

"You have no authority to arrest me!" Faylon yelled before the band even stopped.

"No?" Joel stepped forward. "Until our other ships arrive, I am commanding officer. As such, I do have authority to do with you as I wish."

"You cannot." Faylon insisted.

"Do you think we should just tie him up?" Joel turned to Chad.

"Why do you ask me sir?" Chad's manner had become more formal since the storm abated.

"We've just been through a kidnapping, a beating and a hurricane together!" Joel exclaimed. "You're my obvious choice for a temporary second mate."

"Yes, sir," Chad flushed. "I think tying him up would be a good idea, sir."

"Let me repeat myself again," Faylon jerked free of his captors. His voice was silky again. "You can do nothing to me."

"Yes, I can." Joel said.

“Sir,” A sailor stepped forward. “He was carrying this.” The man handed Joel a canvass bag. My eyes were drawn to it. It must be the money; the stolen money that caused two deaths.

Joel took it, glancing at me. I had told him and Chad the story. He too guessed what it was.

He opened the bag. Tilting it, he showed me. It was the money.

“You can’t arrest me,” Faylon said yet again. “And I’ll tell you why. I’m not the only outlaw here. Anything you do to me, you must do to all other living members of the gang who are within your authority. He,” Faylon pointed past me, “is an outlaw.”

I turned, slowly, knowing before I did who he indicated.

Marcus stood stiffly, as if at attention.

“There’s a rowboat washed up,” Faylon continued. “If you’d rather not condemn the boy, I’ll take that boat and be away.”

I glanced at Joel. His shoulders sagged. He looked at his men. They watched him, waiting for his command. He met my gaze.

“You saved our lives,” He said. “Would you let them go free, or have me arrest both?” He leaned closer, speaking softly so that only I could hear, “I must be even handed before the men. Fairness an unbreakable rule for these sailors.

My mind spun, all reasoning jolted from it. I looked at Marcus. He met my gaze steadily. His eyes gave no suggestion of which path I should choose.

All things work together for good, to them that love God.

God, where is the good in this?

I felt guilty. Over the past week, He had proved his faithfulness to me over and over again. Why did I still doubt?

They've both broken the law. But Marcus has made it right. If he went to prison, I'd lose him again!

Do what is right in the sight of God.

I looked up, my heart pounding.

"Arrest..." I stopped. It felt like my vocal cords were knotted. I choked out the rest of the sentence, "Arrest them both."

A few of the sailors had ropes from the boat slung over their shoulders. They pulled these off and moved to the two men.

I ran to Marcus.

"I'm sorry, Marc! I'm so sorry! I didn't want to."

A man was behind my brother, binding his wrists. Marcus shook him and the ropes off and put his arms around me. I hid my face against his chest.

"It's okay, Ria." His voice trembled. "It wouldn't have been right to let Faylon go and hurt others. And I've done wrong too."

"I don't want to lose you," I sobbed.

"I don't want to lose you either." He held me close. "But maybe they'll let you visit me. And, I promise, when I get out, I'll find you."

"It might not be a long time," Joel spoke behind me. "When the court date comes, I'll put in a good word for him. Perhaps the judge will see how young he is, realize that he's mended his ways and give him a light sentence."

Leah-Purpose on Algoma-111

“Thank you.” Marcus said.

I didn't speak. I couldn't.

These tears, they must have an end.

## Chapter Twelve

### After

Two row boats approached the island. They carried men from Joel's ships.

I dug my toes into the dirt. After three days, the top of our beach showed again. The excess water dumped by the hurricane was receding.

The breeze caught my hair and pulled it around my face. I pulled my shawl around my shoulders. The air was cool. Fall had come in a day.

Faith stood beside me, watching.

"What do you feel?" I asked.

"Peace," she responded. "Now we can fix our houses, pull up the boat and return to our normal life. Hurricanes have come before. We know how to repair the damage. It was the outlaws we didn't know what to do with..." She trailed off and glanced at me. "I'm sorry, Maria."

"It's okay." I bit my lip.

"Are you," She hesitated. "Will you be alright?"

"I don't know." Tears stung my eyes.

Saying good-bye, life seems like one long good-bye.

Footsteps behind us crunched on the pebbles that lay on the road. Lieutenant Joel Bernard stopped beside us. I looked into his face. His bruises were turning yellow.

“Marcus is in the widow’s sitting room,” He said. “There’s a guard, but you can stay and walk to the ship with him if you like.”

“Thank you.” I murmured. I turned to go.

“Wait,” his word stopped me. “The captain will be coming ashore and will, most likely, wish me to stay with him. In case I don’t have a chance later, I want to say good-bye.”

“That word,” I looked at the ground.

“No, I won’t say good-bye,” He said. I looked back up. He smiled, “Till we meet again.”

“Yes, till we meet again.”

## Epilogue

I stood by my widow, looking out and nervously playing with the ring on my finger. A few weeks earlier, a letter from Faith had arrived. Inside the envelope, however, was a second envelope. It was addressed in Marcus's hand.

Dear Maria,

My time is almost up. Have you moved to that new home you told me of yet? I am looking forward to seeing it if you have. I look forward to seeing you even more.

With Love in Christ,

Marcus

I returned the letter, giving him my new address, telling him that I was married and that he was to be an uncle.

Glancing up, I checked the wall clock. 2:55. He should be coming any minute. I looked back out the window. A man walked up the sidewalk. A bag was slung over his shoulder. Yes, it was Marcus!

Flinging the door open, I raced across the lawn.

“Marcus! Marcus!”

He looked up to see me flying toward him. Dropping his bag, he opened his arms. I threw myself into them.

“Maria,” His voice caught.

“Oh, Marcus, I missed you!” Tears of joy streamed down my cheeks.

“I missed you too. You don’t know how much I missed you.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t visit more often.”

“It was a long way,” He squeezed me tighter.

“Hello, Marcus,” A male voice spoke behind us. “I’m glad you’re finally here. I’ve heard nothing but ‘Marcus this’ and ‘Marcus that’ since your letter came!”

Pulling free from Marcus, I smiled at my husband.

“Marcus,” I grinned, “This is my husband. Do you remember Joel?”

Marcus’s eyes widened, “You could knock me over with, well, with just about anything!” Then he grinned and held out his hand, “I do remember you. How could I forget? You’d better be good to Ria.”

“He is!” I exclaimed. They laughed and Marcus took my hand. I squeezed it and grinned at Joel.

“Do you want to show him Clara?” Joel said.

“The baby’s here?” Marcus exclaimed.

“A beautiful little niece.” I tugged on his hand. Joel followed us toward the house.