

The One above the Bottoms

By Richie Swanson

The river this late afternoon seemed to prove Nathan right, and the pilots, log rafters, and keelboat men wrong. Mid-April already, and the channel looked smooth from up at the cabin, glistening a muddy milk-brown, silvery blue, sunny, rosy-toned from tree-buds, the water spreading and shining across all the islands and bottoms, bleeding green where leaves inched out, gold from catkins, gray from tree-trunks, vernal the way a trader's wife isn't supposed to say—fishy and rutty and musky, swollen with rich-fertile soil—flowing as if it drained every beaver stream and lake of the fur country north—sweeping at us powerfully, humming quietly like a lurking demon, hissing like a mean-tempered Goliath: I conceded those things. But the Mississippi ran dropping already and would not flood Wakasee as many had said, would not wash away the town-site my husband had registered and plotted the day he had learned Minnesota had become a territory. "The furs can't last; the Indians won't be here to fetch them," Nathan had said, the last wistfully, because he had worked the river tribes ever since he had quit sutlering at Fort Crawford, and because he and I spoke both Dakota and Chippewa, and we had seen births, deaths, virgin feasts, weddings, conjuring, and revenge killings both gruesome and heart-breaking.

Erwin our woodcutter drew up our wagon in front of our cabin, ready to load logs at the landing. We got in and he drove us across our new plank bridge and down along the creek where Nathan planned a sawmill. We passed Hiram Johnson's claim-shack and got to the landing, hoping secretly a steamboat would come, Nathan on it. But a piece of a paddle-box painting floated by, and Caleb leaped from the wagon, ran after it, waded in, plunged chest-deep, and his little head moved swiftly downriver, and he came out crawling, breeches and blouse dripping, hands empty, face scarlet from the cold, eyes horse-wild, stampeding. "Mama!" Another piece of the paddle-box's painting shot past, part of a farm girl lifting a bundle of wheat, and Caleb wriggled frightfully. "Mama, it's the *Prairie Belle*! Tell me, where's Father?"

I looked at Caleb sternly—he knew better than to plunge in—yet he strutted toward me like a little man, hitching his shoulders purposefully, pointing at a deck-stanchion bobbing in the river. He was barely five, and Wakasee town wasn't any older than Frances blubbering against my bosom, hardly eight months, though Nathan had built his outfit here three years ago and had always returned safely from Fort Snelling.

"Father's with Governor Ramsey and Chief Wakasee," I said. "You know how treaty-making goes."

"Slow," said Erwin, "a lot of hedging, waiting for bands to come in."

Caleb shivered, staring across the water at barrel staves rushing past, charred decking, a carpeted floorboard, a frock coat—a body! "You think the *Prairie Belle* caught fire?" Caleb asked, and I turned to Erwin, and a musket popped, and Erwin jolted me, falling, smashing Frances against my lap, his shoulder spraying blood. Two Indians rushed from a canoe— then fifty or sixty from a dozen canoes—Mdewankatons with the hostile chief, Spotted Hawk. The first reloaded, raised his musket at Caleb, and the second knocked it to the ground; the first glared wrathfully at Caleb climbing in beside me, my boy suddenly wise and frightened dead-silent.

The second was our old friend Blue Dog, his chin high, his carriage stiff as always, his dark gaze still

heavy with the loss of his wife but beading hungrily like a mink's. The gunner was Day Storm—he caught Erwin's hair, yanked him off the seat, pointed the musket down. *Bang!* Erwin spurted blood from his groin and stomach, and Blue Dog came to the wagon, wearing war feathers and paint like all the others. He yanked the wool blanket from beneath the bench, flung it at Caleb, motioned us to a canoe, and Day Storm yipped as we complied, and he fell upon Erwin, and Erwin shrieked, and Day Storm rose, waving his scalp.

"Don't complain or fuss." Blue Dog leaned close, gripping the canoe, one painted brave in the stern, another in the prow. "Don't get cross. Obey. Look pleased like you like us and trust us."

Our wagon rattled off, Spotted Hawk near-naked and shrieking, whipping the horses, gunshots popping from the settlement—an Indian on land rose from Hiram Johnson's chest, waving a claim stake dripping blood—Indians swarmed our storehouse and cabin, charged on foot from the woods behind all the gopher-house claims, galloped on war ponies from the mouth of Hamilton's Valley.

Our canoe started and shot past a dead-floating white woman in a fanned-out dress, and Caleb leaned slack in the blanket, staying mute and brave like Nathan would, and I decided neither he nor Frances would die, and I would surrender to the mercy of the Master Above, His will, and I thought I would do anything I must, no matter the desperation or sin.

The fools at Washington and Fort Snelling! They might have paid Chief Wakasee fairly and moved the Dakota west fifteen years ago, but they had haggled over missionary money, logging laws, tribal fights, half-breed homes, trader debts!

We turned into Blackmouth Bottoms. Warriors lay armed beneath buttonbush, guarding the cut. Squaws bustled along interminable sloughs, boiling maple sap in kettles, unloading more canoes, putting up lodges on high ground beneath oaks—they were not just the river Mdewankatons, Wakasee's band at their usual camp, but Sissetons, Wahpetons, Wahpekutes too.

We landed, and Blue Dog's mother Jay Woman hurried us into her lodge, and a gasp clucked viciously from the darkness inside—Day Storm's wife Morning Fire sat behind little flames, glowering us fiercely away from her side of the floor-robos. "*Pa Baksa*," she said, eying Caleb and Frances, meaning they would lose their heads. "Spotted Hawk and Day Storm will want you for a wife. Blue Dog will too."

"I can cut and dry meat and fruit," I said. "Sew, carry water, wash clothes. Chop and carry wood."

Morning Fire scowled so hideously I contrived a new plan—slitting Frances' and Caleb's throats cleanly in their sleep, then my own.

Jay Woman brought bowls of hot-sweetened corn mush, marbled steaks from some settler's cow, gum drops stolen from a trader's store, and Blue Dog came in and would not eat; he looked so fretfully at my skirt and its hoops, my bonnet and bodice. He had Jay Woman bring us Indian clothes, and she rubbed iron-stained mud into us, making up Frances in a papoose bundle. And at dusk hundreds of the men returned, shooting, screaming whiskey-screams, and Jay Woman strapped Frances on her back and took us out the rear of the lodge and along dimming banks. She paddled us across sloughs to a giant dead cottonwood fallen halfway across a swollen swamp-pool, and she laid our blankets down in the dark beneath the tree's upturned roots and trunk.

"Wait until morning, and I will be back," she said. "Spotted Hawk has become the war chief, and Wakasee and all the other chiefs have decided to kill all the whites on the west side of the river. The Great Father still will not sign the treaty. He still pays no money for our land. He still says we must go only to one reserve, only up the Saint Peter by steamboat, but we will not own the reserve; we will move again. He says every chief must sign papers to give treaty money to traders—your husband gets ninety thousand dollars! Ninety thousand! Other traders get the same, and the treaty gives us ten pennies an acre, and the pennies do not come! Many chiefs wanted war right away, but Wakasee said no, and then the chiefs started home on the steamboat, and Spotted Hawk saw how to stop up some pipes and get off before the boat exploded. Now we have killed whites all the way downriver from Olive Grove, and we will die proud, not out-talked by whites, not cheated or swindled."

Jay Woman vanished in the dark, and Frances sobbed from the cold, and I put my hand across her mouth, and her eyes bulged moist and shiny, asking Mama why she was suffocating her. And Caleb lay wrapped against me, biting back shivers, and he peered up into the blackness, each of us rubbing knees against bark-ridges above us, feeling cold air seeping from the swamp's floodwater. "Mama, can Father and Erwin see us from Heaven?"

"Shush!" I whispered, and then the Wise One Above gave Frances and Caleb sleep, and He brought me faith, the cold-misty dark of my first night on the river, my first sight of Blue Dog, the Indian rolling barrels down the plank onto Nathan's keelboat, the shore tinkling crisply with thinning ice, Nathan's arm solidly warm against my back, his gaze burning toward the open channel and the sky of infinite stars.

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"Good signs," Nathan had said, "we'll get up to Mendota in good weather and trade before the first steamboat," and I had thrilled, tingling from Nathan's deep-low tones of confidence, the gumption in his brown-bearded grin.

I steadied the mast while he and Blue Dog rigged a square-sail, a south breeze suddenly popping the cloth. We skimmed the dark-blue channel and its banging ice goblets without dipping an oar, flew past Wakasee's village at nine by the Great Bear and Cassiopeia, approached Lake Pepin near midnight, and then La Frac jumped cussing from the tiller, the sinewy Frenchman wiggling like a weasel in a trap. Cloud-fleece raced south atop the sky, waves punched from the east, and the lake looked frozen ahead, only a narrow channel open, chopping, sloshing, churning with ice. The boat heaved sideways, banging against a sunken floe, listing, and Blue Dog grabbed the mast, his buffalo robe blowing, the sail flapping, and then he was gone, blown overboard, and the boat slammed and rocked against a shelf, and Nathan put the mast in my hands. "Get out on the ice!" he cried. "Shove the mast beneath the hull!" I did, and he stripped and dove, and a roar erupted, all kinds of ice-forms crashing against one another, racing our way, and wind gusts blew the boat onto the shelf.

La Frac and I raced around ice thick enough to hold horses, looking desperately along the narrow channel, and Nathan yelled my name, his head above a hole behind us, Blue Dog in his arms and pressed against the rim, looking dead, sinking in his robe.

We hauled Blue Dog out and into the boat's cabin, opened his mouth, knocked water from him, threw our bodies around him, and La Frac hoisted sail, and we flew across the ice to North Pepin, found an empty Indian lodge, firewood ready. Blue Dog slept in robes for a day and one-half, and the storm blew all the ice from the lake, and the *Otter* and *Dandy Joe* went past, beating us to market, and then Blue

Dog's lips quivered, his eyes opened, he sat up, and Nathan breathed easily, crying tears of joy, thanking the Lord, patting Blue Dog's knee.

"He who loves us saw in you another reckoning," said Nathan. "He saved you for a goodness only He can see."

Blue Dog had sipped my hot broth dully, glazing his eyes, doubting the One Above like most of Wakasee's band, but as night-critters swam in the swamp pool and stirred leaf-litter behind the giant dead cottonwood, they sounded like warriors, and I relived the story many times, letting God give me strength against my fears, waiting for Nathan to call my name again.

* * *

"Trader woman, where are you?" We were so cold we could hardly stand when Jay Woman returned. "You must lie beside Blue Dog!"

I ran weak and wobbling, Jay Woman carried Frances again, and Caleb bloodied himself as we smashed through briar and bush like panicked deer. Caleb kept pace, and they let him sleep in the lodge, and Morning Fire took Frances, and I slid beneath robes with Blue Dog, his skin wrinkled and greasy, smelling like muskrats, swamp-mud, and gunpowder. But he breathed evenly, closing his eyes as if sleeping, and Day Storm came in, still celebrating, smelling of whiskey. He stepped as deftly as a panther, circling around our robes, and I hid beneath the furs, my mind seeing his small-pox scars ugly on his face.

"You are drunk!" said Blue Dog. "Get away or I will shoot you!"

"Your wife is still looking down, watching you from the spirit world!" said Day Storm. "I want the trader woman to lie over here!"

"Have you seen her husband dead?" said Jay Woman.

"I saw the trader on the *Prairie Belle*. By now he must be like a rotten fish bumping against a snag, shedding chunks of flesh."

I nearly resigned myself, nearly shook the cringing from my skin, nearly showed my face, but braves whooped outside, boasting about plunder—Samuel McKennon's anvil and tools.

Spotted Hawk went to see about making balls and bullets, fixing gun barrels, and Jay Woman got up to flee again, taking Frances in her cradleboard from Morning Fire—Morning Fire was childless, you see; she had bathed Frances, had fixed her snugly, had made her a diaper of cattail down and birch chips. She was only jealous, only counting the days until her life changed or ended completely, like so many other squaws those days.

Chief Wakasee came in. He stood above the robes Blue Dog and I had risen from, and he fumed silently, his nose thick, chest broad, eagle feathers on his pigtails, bear claws on his necklace.

I longed to ask him about Nathan and suggest I write a letter to soldier chiefs, a negotiations for him, but Chief Wakasee growled abruptly, "Do not sit up at night and show your shadow. Keep your boy dressed Indian. Let him play with others."

"She will cut poles for travois, logs for rafts," said Blue Dog. "She will scrape and tan hides, will interpret when you want."

"Her trader man robbed us when he spoke for us," said Wakasee. "There is only one thing left for the Great Father to do to us—gather us up, surround us and shoot us!"

He left sucking in his face with new hate, new disgust, and then Jay Woman handed me Frances, and I grew faint, nursing her, and Blue Dog lay with me again, so I might safely rest, but a brave named Cut Chin came in, defying all Indian courtesy, entering without announcing himself, and he threw our robes aside, tottering, flourishing a knife drunkenly, and Blue Dog rose, aiming his pistol. "You would kill my wife? You who are married to a half-breed? I will toss you half-alive to wolves!"

And so it went day after day, men bursting in with weapons, and women visiting, seeing for themselves the arrangement, and I thought again and again I would kill my children and then myself.

And one evening while I was hiding beneath bed-furs, Morning Fire carried in a forty-gallon barrel of white alcohol, more plunder—she and Jay Woman filled kettles with ducks and potatoes; they fried piles of bread. Men crowded the lodge all night, smoking, gambling with pebbles and mussel shells and cards, losing and removing their clothes. They danced in breechclouts, pounding chests, screaming, boasting about the *Prairie Belle*, and Spotted Hawk thumped sharply against me, falling, sitting upon my head, and I bore his weight silently, clasping Frances against my stomach.

"What about those who will not cross the prairie with the Sisseton?" he asked.

"Kill them, so the whites will not use them to find us! To name us!"

"Whites will hunt and kill us anyway!"

"Not if we reach the Ogallala."

"Or the Teton."

"Or the Queen's land."

* * *

In the morning Blue Dog dug pits beneath the robes, hiding-places, and I told my boy, "The Indians will flee west soon—remember, you were born Caleb Nathan Miles at Miles Outpost in Iowa Territory in eighteen hundred forty-seven, and Frances Matilda was born in Minnesota Territory in eighteen hundred fifty-one. Never forget your names no matter where you live, or who claims to be your people."

"Is Father dead?" he asked.

"Yes. I am Blue Dog's wife," I said, for I wanted his friends to believe it, the Indians in Blackmouth Bottoms to consider us their own, though I knew nothing of Nathan.

"Yes, Mama!" said Caleb, and off he ran, joining other boys, brandishing little spears, yelling in

Dakota, and then he shouted suddenly near the food bundles on the bank. "*Mato!*" A bear!

All grew quiet, and Caleb came into the lodge, holding a hand over a small cut deep beneath his eye, a puncture from his own dirty stick, and I forgot myself. No antiseptic, and I called out loudly to the One Above, and Jay Woman and Morning Fire pulled me away, and they heated water, dabbed Caleb and put on stanch weed.

How quickly the puncture closed! How cleanly the proud flesh bulged around it! But the scar grew purplish and unsightly, and Caleb's eye twitched as if my lie about Nathan had cursed him, causing him to prove himself recklessly, charging the bear, tripping.

And finally Blue Dog's hand came to me in my sleep, his eyes shiny and wide in the dark, his fingers on my cheek, his breath short and tight, and I wondered how the Master would judge me.

But Frances gasped roughly, her sobs stifled now by Jay Woman as she bent above Caleb, rousing him—I realized the rest of the lodge yawned vacantly black, smelling of stirred-up dirt—no robes on the floor, nothing else.

Feet rushed around outside, Indians brushing past together, breaths huffing amid croaks and trills of night-frogs, every shuffle-sound suddenly racing through frog-peeps, frog-clacks, frog-grunts and groans, splashes, paddle-sounds, bundles thumping into canoes in water.

"Armies coming!" whispered Blue Dog.

"Where's Chief Wakasee?" I asked. "I'll write a dispatch to a general."

"Wakasee's already west with the Sisseton. The *Sentinel's* upriver. The *Warrior's* downriver. A mounted militia's east, they say. Our horses already wait across the river."

"My son has saved you many times," said Jay Woman.

"I will vouch for you," I said.

"You will write it?"

"Yes, but stay with me."

Jay Woman put on her head-strap and hoisted Frances upon on her back again, taking the lodge-furs and pots I could not carry, and we moved with a throng hurrying toward the slough, and it seemed we would flee with the Sisseton, though Blue Dog would not say it, and I followed him, keeping Caleb in front of me, and the throng headed up the bank, some Indians grabbing ropes, pulling rafts of bundles and people toward the channel.

A man stumbled, Cut Chin. He glared at us, rising, drawing a gun, and the throng kept moving, and Cut Chin fell sideways, and Blue Dog followed Indians fanning across vacated lodge sites. We veered into woods and turned around behind trees. We left the throng-noise behind, came out beside more vacant camps, thousands of lodge-rings and smoldering fires, the frogs ear-splitting again, their peeps outnumbering the stars, the bald-dark bluffs of Wisconsin towering above us—deadly vantages for militiamen with long-barreled rifles at dawn.

We crossed a high little island of thick-wet prairie weeds, descended a slough-bank, sank in glop to shins. Blue Dog raced one way for a canoe, and Caleb the other, ducks booming up noisily, quacking. Suddenly Jay Woman moaned at my feet, lying on her back, rolling, sinking, slipping, and I pulled her up and felt her pack and cradleboard. No Frances. No rustle. No gasp.

A goose blared, the frogs screamed. I started to shout, imagined a gunshot, motioned Jay Woman to sit, don't move. I scrambled down the bank, felt around, sank in goop, and slough-water rushed into my mouth. Blue Dog came in a canoe, voicing a sound like a pump handle, a jay noise, and his mother answered, and Caleb came, knowing their secret call, and I grabbed his hand and refused to let go, dragging him over roots and deadfalls, trying to see into the goop and water. We went back across the thick-wet weeds, groping for our previous steps, and when we returned, Jay Woman was weeping, despairing, and Blue Dog was poling the canoe, feeling along the water's edge.

I had one child alive in my grip in the dark, you see, and I thought God had taken the other, for He had foreseen some misery she would undergo, and He had given her His mercy, saving her from a savage death, or growing up savage, or marrying a demon like Day Storm.

"I will die here," whispered Jay Woman.

"No, the whites will jail you—or worse—if they find you," said Blue Dog.

"Mama, let us go back all the way," said Caleb. "Maybe Frances is on the ground, or some squaw picked her up, and she's already across the river."

"The Indians across the river may kill you and your mother," said Blue Dog. "They may keep or trade you. I cannot promise."

"And you, Blue Dog," said Jay Woman, "what will they do to you?"

He stared down in the dark at our packs. "Everyone has gone bad." He grunted for us to load, and I started lifting my pack, and Caleb shoved it angrily into the canoe, slamming it loudly. I cuffed his head, bustling him into the boat, and he looked back as we started off, eyes shining tearfully, and then he hunkered and then sat up high, seething, wagging his head like a target, and *whap!* A beaver slapped its tail, shaking us both, and wolves howled, arguing over something back around camp.

Blue Dog pulled beside an otter run, and we portaged, squashing frogs, feeling them brush our legs, jumping in frenzy, and we paddled against a back-flow, winding beside more empty lodge sites, entering inky black woods, ducks flying up, squealing, advertising our presence.

We came out to the channel, the water dawning, holding neither sight nor sound of any boat, still moving fast, and my hands clasped instinctively for Frances, and there down the current was our landing—and Nathan! I clasped Caleb before he could shout, afraid a bluecoat would fire, and then Jay Woman lifted a white-flagged paddle. The river pushed us. The brown-bearded man in the black frock coat and slouch hat was indeed my husband—flanked by officers standing and talking with Indians chained ankle-to-ankle, surrenders who had not fled west.

I pointed Blue Dog directly to two guards on shore, and they drew beads as we landed.

"I'm white, Nathan Miles' wife!" I cried, and Nathan turned wearily, his face bleached and strangely gaunt, his big blue eyes glassy, and he came with a speedy limp, Colonel Wilkenson beside him, both grinning, eying in disbelief our black-muddied Indian clothes. Nathan lifted me, whirled and kissed me, nearly flexing, falling backward, and he bent and grasped Caleb's shoulder, his voice cracking, "My boy, oh, thank the Lord, my boy! My God! Look at your eye! What did they do to your eye?"

Nathan looked into the empty canoe. He stared at me, and I sank, suddenly crumpling, weeping, and then Blue Dog fell, a bluecoat's fist crashing across his head, and Jay Woman knelt, a bluecoat tying hands behind her back.

"No!" I cried.

"Father, Mama was Blue Dog's wife," said Caleb. "She said you were dead, and she hid beneath his bed-furs. Jay Woman said you cheated the treaty, and she always carried Frances. She dropped her last night."

"His wife?" Nathan trembled fitfully. "This filthy squaw dropped Frances? Where?"

Boom! A blast ripped suddenly up the river—another! Another! Another! Cannon shots! A dull-sounding churn followed—the *Sentinel* with her twin smokestacks moving at crawl-speed. *Boom!* *Boom!* *Boom!* Puffs rose from her hurricane deck, grapeshot sprayed tree-crowns, and another round exploded farther downriver—the *Warrior*. Troops cheered behind us, and gunshots blasted deep inside the bottoms—soldiers after stragglers.

Nathan's cheeks pulsed angrily through his beard, and he glared at me, at Blue Dog on his knees, and the guard twisted Blue Dog's braids and yanked them up, stepping on Blue Dog's ankles.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

I stepped to Nathan, slid his knife from his belt, knelt and cut the ropes binding Jay Woman's ankles, her wrists, and I kissed her brow and cheeks.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

I stood nose-to-nose with Colonel Wilkenson, shouting about the bottoms, feeling a mad-surgings hope, and he inhaled as if I were hysterical.

"Colonel!" pleaded Nathan. "They lost Frances right in there where—"

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Wilkenson beckoned to the private now pawing inside Blue Dog's shirt. The private leaped. He and Wilkenson launched a canoe toward the *Sentinel*, and I shoved Caleb toward Jay Woman's guard. "He needs white clothes, breakfast," I said, and Nathan and I dragged two dugouts to water's edge, and as the *Sentinel* ceased firing, Blue Dog stood glancing nervously at the surrenders-in-chains, the canoes, the remaining blasts inside the bottoms.

"I am not afraid to die," he said, "but who will take care of Jay Woman?"

"Neither of you will die," I said, and Nathan and I paddled upriver after Blue Dog and Jay Woman, Nathan laying his revolver beside his knee.

Later Nathan would tell me how his fingers had clung freezing and throbbing to the neck of a floating dead horse while Joseph Kritzer had lost hold of its leg—how a blind scalded boy had rolled log-like beneath him—how people had thrashed, moaned, and drowned amid body-parts—had screamed and prayed, clinging to barrels, crates, doors, cows, mules, hay bales floating—how the burning *Belle* had lit up the pre-dawn river like a blazing desert—how he had known instantly that those who worshiped only painted sticks and heathen stones had blown up the steamship, creating a wanton hell of murder.

Yet now as Nathan paddled straining, he aimed his rage only at me, glancing back, narrowing his glare reproachfully. *A filthy Indian, Sarah! A wretched old brave! Let one tempt you, so you would not lay with others?*

Nathan paddled so weakly we dropped behind.

"I swear by Christ Blue Dog did not violate me!" I said. "He never thought of it, though he held others at gunpoint! Now he and Jay Woman have no home, no people! Yet both are proof God's truth can enter their race!"

"Quiet, Sarah!" he bellowed. "How can we hear Frances?"

"We are not close enough yet!"

"You know where she was dropped, yet you left her?"

"No! I swear before the eyes of God! Let Him strike me if I lied or sinned!"

We swung into bottoms suddenly silent—no cannons, no ducks, no frogs. The back-current swept us beside Blue Dog, and Nathan coughed, his fingers raw-red, white-splotched and peeling, clinging to his paddle, and he spat blood-specked spittle as we portaged the otter trail.

"You can get the tea leaves of mullein on the prairie island," said Jay Woman. "Behind your cabin too—with slippery elm."

"Our cabin?" said Nathan. "Our cinders, you mean."

We approached the black-goop bank, and it clearly showed our steps along with many others, how we had come down the bank away from the beaten path. We saw no bundle in any mud, none in willow-stems, none in the sun-flooded water, and I swung our dugout to the bank, and Blue Dog stayed out in the slough, pausing his paddle, craning his gaze, and Nathan rose, cocking his revolver.

"Help us look!" he ordered, and I knew no thought. I merely swung my paddle against Nathan's knee, and he fell backward, his revolver delivered as if by God, flying, landing in mud, and I snatched it, standing, and Blue Dog and Jay Woman in their dugout glided past a goose nest and turned into a gold-glittering channel that ran swiftly downriver behind oak and maple trunks—the last I ever saw my earthly saviors.

Nathan wallowed on all fours, and I pulled him to dry ground. My face stung from his slap. I fell and

fired. I emptied six chambers into water, and Nathan spun away. He leaned slowly back to me, and Frances cried.

She lay beneath a patch of prairie-smoke blossoms, her skin as cold as slough-ice, but she wiggled, and her eyes blinked and widened and glistened as she took milk, and Nathan sat uneasily beside me.

"Caleb and I stepped right over her," I said. "A wolf might have eaten her, but—"

"The One who loves us saw in her another reckoning," said Nathan. "He saved her for a goodness only He could see."

Steps came heavily, rapidly. Bluecoats fanned across the island, and a sergeant barked, "Indians?"

"No," said Nathan, "we started out with two, but they got away before we entered the bottoms. We fired out of desperation, trying to find our baby."

"Two of them?" said the sergeant.

Nathan nodded, pointing *upriver*. "We lost them at least several miles that way."