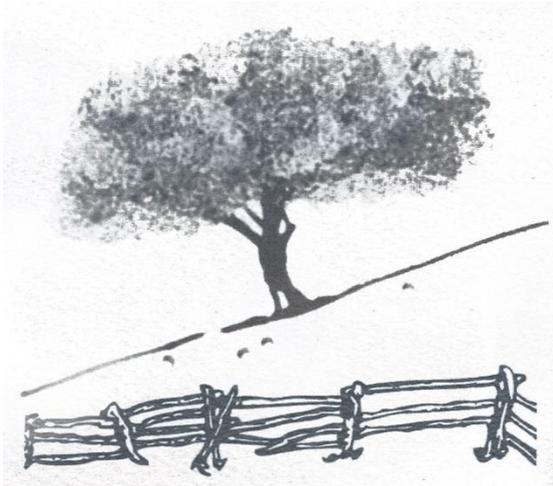


Emma Field

Book Three

A novel by

Carol E. Williams



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CHAPTER I



RETURNING TO KINGSTON

EMMA NO LONGER KNEW where her heart belonged. She once had, but now the certainty was gone, replaced by the same sort of loss that comes to every living beast in the coolness of autumn, when it knows that the warmth and light of summer are behind it. But for now, with nowhere for her heart to call home, Emma did know where she needed to be and that was right there on the shoreline of Lake Ontario where the raw, late autumn wind had stripped the very last of the leaves from the trees. She had taken the next lake steamer from Picton back to Kingston, hoping that Jessabelle-Rose, the fugitive girl whose spark had been consumed by typhus, might still be clinging to life in the immigrant sheds where Emma had so hastily left her.

The nun who answered the door of the make-shift hospital explained in broken English that Emma was not to enter the building, that the sister who could help her was dead and she must inquire at the cathedral if she was to learn anything more about the girl. With chapped hands and stained sleeves the nun had pointed across the frost-bleached grasses to the central spire of a limestone cathedral.

“L’*église*, voyez-vous? Père Pierre speak the English,” the nun had said.

Emma ran through the muddy roads leading to the middle of town. She clung to the name Pierre, just as guilt and shame and fear clung to her. She hadn’t meant any of the harm she

had done in the last few weeks. She hadn't intended to depart from her husband in New York State with little explanation. She hadn't intended to remove a thirteen-year-old from the reaches of the Fugitive Slave Act. She hadn't intended to lose the girl, then upon finding her, abandon her amongst the sick and dying. She hadn't intended to let her heart be drawn toward another man who had shut the door upon her. But she had done all of that and there she was, her skin feeling prickly with fever and her lungs heavy with congestion, running through the muddy roads, hoping that Pair Pee Air at the cathedral would tell her that Jessabelle-Rose was well, she could settle her in Canada West and return to her desperately ill husband in New York State. Then, she was certain everything could begin again.

Emma reached the steps of the cathedral just as the wind began to drive raindrops against her back. She heaved on one of the massive wooden doors. It didn't budge. She tried the next, a bigger, central door and it opened. As she stepped through the stone arches she began to cough, first with her hands over her mouth, then with such ferocity she leaned forward, gripping her knees. She steadied herself on one of the massive pillars and stepped into a cavernous space that seemed strangely more light-filled than the outdoors.

"Hello," she called, holding her breath to hear the reply, but the only sounds were the coursing of her own blood in her ears and the splattering of rain against the windows. She coughed again and the sound reverberated off the walls as she walked toward the front of the sanctuary, the palm of her hand grazing the top of each polished wooden pew she passed. At the altar she stopped and dropped to her knees.

The muddied hem of her dress was wet against the back of her calves.

“Please forgive me,” she said. “And please, please, please may Jessabelle-Rose be alive!” She began to cough again.

A man’s voice, with the rhythm of a French accent, echoed from the corridor off the side of the sanctuary. Emma heard the priest doing his best to appease the two finely dressed gentlemen who had stepped through the doorway with him. The men appeared to be parishioners. They explained that the residents of Barrie and Emily Streets were taking legal action against the Board of Health and the Emigrant Agent. They wanted the sheds that housed typhus victims torn down and the French Sisters of St. Joseph and the English Female Benevolent Society to cease tending the diseased so close to their fine brick and stone homes.

All three men stopped in their tracks as Emma coughed again, this time as though it were coming from her dirty boots.

“Un moment,” said the priest, fearful that this young, unkempt woman at the altar would undo every argument he had tucked up the sleeves of his black cassock.

“Qu’est-que vous-? Away from the altar!”

Emma stood up. “Please excuse me,” she said, between coughs. “I am sorry. I am looking for a girl-” She took a breath. “I am looking for a girl I left in the sheds across the fields.”

The priest, certain Emma too was afflicted with typhus, looked nervously at the men in the doorway.

“The cathedral is not open,” he said in a scolding tone. “I don’t know how you got in here. You must leave at once.”

Emma turned to depart and straightened her back so as to not let the priest know of the shame and all of shame's companions who had rushed in to feast on the last of her pride and hope. She walked what seemed like an eternal distance to the back of the church. Once outside, she half ran, half walked, toward the sheds. The driving rain cooled her hot face.

"Teachah Emma," said a voice as weak as a lamb still wet from its mother's womb. "Teachah Emma!"

Emma looked up from the mud puddles to see the object of her search leaning wearily under the eaves against the rough wooden wall. Her hands were cupped around her mouth. Emma stopped in her tracks. Her own hands flew to her mouth in disbelief.

"Oh - my - goodness! I am so happy to see you!" She ran to the girl, wrapped her wet arms around her and kissed her tight curls. She had never been so happy to see anyone. She coughed again.

"That's twice," grinned Jessabelle-Rose. "That's twice you've tol' me I was the best thing in the whole world!"

Jessabelle-Rose had heard Emma at the door when she first arrived but the moans of the woman lying on the bunk beside hers had drowned her own voice. By the time she had struggled to the door, Emma was long gone.

"And I couldn't chase you all the way to the big church," said Jessabelle-Rose, still wearing the woolen shirt and trousers she'd been given across the lake in Oswego.

"He evicted me! The priest evicted me from the church!" Emma's face still burned as hotly as if the Father had slapped her face with all his might.

Jessabelle-Rose waved her hand to dismiss her former teacher. "That's no problem at all," she said before pointing toward the dozens of sick on the other side of the immigrant shed's rough walls. "They are the ones with the problems!"

A cart pulled up and two men in clothes stiff from human juices gone dry disappeared inside the building. "Them too," she said. "They come every day and take all the bodies to a pit on the other side of the English hospital. It must just be one big hole they dump them all in - all except for Sister Bourbonnière, the Mother Superior - they took her over to the big church and buried her in the cellar."

"Oh, they do not bury people in cellars, Jessabelle-Rose!"

"Do so. Now let's get out of here or they'll be burying me, too."

They began to walk as slowly as molasses in January back towards the wharf.

"I ain't never been so tired and I ain't never been so determined to see my momma!" Jessabelle-Rose said. She'd heard from the nursing volunteers of a white minister who had bought land in the furthest corner of Canada West so that freed slaves could own their own farms. "I know Momma would hear about that," she said. "And I know she'd go there. She's got a good nose for good people."

"Just like her daughter," said Emma, smiling, despite her own exhaustion.

Jessabelle-Rose wanted to head out immediately. "It's late in the season," she said. "I heard the ships will only be sailing for a few more weeks because the ice will soon be on the lakes. I'd feel so much better if we were on our way."

Emma knew that neither of them was healthy enough to make the passage across Lake Ontario and the length of Lake

Erie so she insisted they take the steamer to Picton. There, she knew that Elizabeth Bowerman, the cook at the Quaker boarding school, would care for them until they were well enough to continue their journey.

“Teachah Emma!” said the girl, suddenly gripping Emma’s arm. “I’m free, ain’t I!” She’d been too sick when Emma had carried her from the ship to Kingston’s limestone shoreline to notice or care, but now in the realization of it she closed her eyes and put the palm of her hand over her mouth. “Watch this,” she said as she took a slow, solemn, deliberate step forward. She looked up at Emma. “Woo! That step, Teachah Emma - that step is my first known step of freedom. Why’s it so hard?” she asked in astonishment. “Why is my throat so tight and a whole lake of tears right there ready to-”

Jessabelle-Rose stood still, thinking. A squirrel bounded past with an acorn in its mouth. Ca, ca, ca, a crow atop the nearest bare tree called, cutting across the sound of waves tumbling rhythmically against the shore. “Oh... I know why. It’s ’cause this may be a step away from everyone I ever knew and loved - everyone of my family, all the way back the line. Whew! Well, I’ve done it now. Teachah Emma, let’s just get going. If Momma’s in Buxton, I need to get there right away!”



Emma and Jessabelle-Rose slept that night in the storage room off the kitchen of the West Lake Boarding School. Three days later they stepped aboard another steamer bound for the Welland Canal, which connected the two lower Great Lakes.

“You still don’t look good,” said Jessabelle-Rose to her former teacher.

“I don’t feel well,” said Emma. Small beads of sweat collected on her brow despite the cool breeze. “I don’t feel well at all. Let’s stay here in the open air.”

The steamer lurched forward and Emma tumbled onto a nearby bench.

Jessabelle-Rose sat beside her and they both leaned their heads against the wall and watched the gulls as they accompanied the ship along the long reach of land splashed with the last browns, oranges, yellows and reds of the oak and maple-covered hills. The wind began to rise and the boat began to pitch. Emma closed her eyes to steady her stomach. She opened them again as they approached a waterfall cascading from the top of a cliff to a tidy, solid stone mill on the edge of the bay.

“Don’t that mill just make you want to go inside?” said Jessabelle-Rose.

Emma nodded. She would rather feel the steady rumblings of the mill than the unsettling waters she knew were ahead of them on Lake Ontario. Her eyes followed up the waterfall to the small, deep lake she knew to be at the top of the hill. Some thought it was bottomless. Some thought its waters came from an underground stream flowing from Lake Erie. “There are love stories about that lake,” said Emma, her eyes glassy with seasickness. “Iroquois love stories.”

“Are you talking just so you don’t empty your stomach, Teachah Emma? ’Cause you sure don’t look good!”

Emma nodded. She’d been doing her best to distract her mind from the roiling in her stomach, but she could feel the waves getting larger the closer they got to the open lake.

“Oh, Jessabelle-Rose – I’ve got to go below or I am going to-” Emma started for the passage leading to the lower cabins.

“Stop!” commanded a small chirp of a voice. “You are not allowed in here!”

Emma and Jessabelle-Rose halted. Their palms flew against the swaying walls to steady themselves. A young boy, clad from head to toe in buckskin, his eyes as dark and glossy and his cheeks as pudgy as a chipmunk’s, stood scowling in the shadow, both hands gripping what looked like a small wooden axe.

“Do not come any closer!” he said, his eyes squinted in threat.

“We will not,” Jessabelle-Rose said earnestly. “But I must ask special permission to pass. My teacher isn’t feeling well and she won’t hurt you none, I promise.”

The boy gave his permission with a nod.

Around the corner, curled against the railing, lay the object of the boy’s protection – a woman who retched and vomited down the side of the steamer. Beside her lay a baby so snugly wrapped and bound on an intricately carved and painted wooden baby carrier that Emma could only see its round, serene face.

“Is she your momma?” asked Jessabelle-Rose.

The boy nodded and lowered his weapon.

“Well, when she’s emptied her stomach, bring her and the baby below.”

She swung herself down the ladder behind Emma who took to the corner of the sitting area and curled herself up into a tight ball.

“Don’t lie down yet,” said Jessabelle-Rose. She took Emma’s wrists in her hands and pressed into the flesh further up the

arm. "My momma used to do this when our bellies were all stirred up."

Emma winced, then belched. "That feels better already," she said, surprised. Jessabelle-Rose pressed her thumb into the inside of her own lower arm and the two burped in unison and smiled. "I wish you could do something for my headache, too," Emma said, squinting to see who had followed them through the light-filled hatch. It was the boy, the bent arch of the cradleboard hanging from his left hand, the length of the ladder sliding through the inside of his right elbow. He had tucked his weapon into the bands of cloth that bound the still-sleeping baby to the cradleboard. His mother followed, the embroidered and beaded hem of her red underskirt swaying with each careful placement of her moccasined feet.

"Ma'am," said Emma as the woman sat beside her, "Jessabelle-Rose can help your stomach by—"

"Someone's coming!" said the boy as he yanked the tomahawk from the cradleboard and dove behind his mother's back. The baby started to cry.

"Tickets! Have your tickets ready," a man called as he descended. His boots, his knees, the rolls of his waist, then his hat, not unlike a thick cookie, came into view. "You aren't allowed in here," he said to the boy's mother. "This is a ladies' cabin!"

"But she's a lady and she's real sick, too," said Jessabelle-Rose, standing in defense.

The agent's forehead creased in a scowl. "She's an Indian. She's not allowed down here!"

"Are coloureds?" Jessabelle-Rose asked.

"Is she with you?" the agent asked of Emma, who stood and steadied herself against the swaying wall.

“They all are.”

“That’s not what I asked. Is the girl with you? Is she your servant?”

Emma suddenly felt as though a cloud of butterflies in her belly were looking for a place to escape. “You have tickets, do you not?” she said to the woman who was hastily unbinding the baby from the board.

“Wahhhhhhh!” the baby wailed, its mouth formed in a square, its head thrashing from side to side.

“She couldn’t have a ticket to this section! They don’t sell those tickets to Indians,” the man said. Thrown by the women’s disobedience of the rules, the pitch of the baby’s cries and the certainty that this red woman would start to feed the baby in front of him, the man looked at them with bulging eyes. The ruddiness in the rolls of his neck shot to his cheeks.

The baby’s hands, now released from the bindings, clenched in tight little fists. Its chest heaved as it cried all the louder.

“Give her your ticket, Teachah Emma,” shouted Jessabelle-Rose above the wailing. “Your belly seems to be feeling a whole lot better than hers. Ma’am, once the baby’s fed, you just press into your arms like this.” Jessabelle-Rose demonstrated on her own arm. “You’ll feel a whole lot better then. We’ll take your son upstairs.”

“We can’t have this!” the agent said. “More passengers are getting on in St. Catharines and we can’t have them travelling with spewing Indians – or niggers!”

Emma could do nothing but hold herself up against the wall. She couldn’t move. No words would come. It was Jessabelle-Rose who said, dropping her voice so that it had the steady force of the sun rising on the horizon, “Well, sir, you

just get us to St. Catharines and we'll get off there. The woman has a ticket and she'll stay here as long as no one else needs the room. I'm sure she'd promise to clear out as soon as someone else comes, wouldn't you ma'am?"

"But the smell will still be here."

"Sir," said Emma, finally able to find her tongue, her face as crimson as the man's. "The woman has a ticket. The rest of us are going up above. Shall we follow you or would you rather help us up the ladder?"

The agent responded by heaving himself up the ladder and through the hatch as the baby quieted. Its cries became a near-chortle and its mouth and jaw began to move as though the woman's breast were already pressing against its face.

Up above, the fresh air loosened the tightness in Emma's chest. She coughed from her belly, then breathed deeply as Jessabelle-Rose and the boy found a corner near the baggage room. They sat upon the floor to escape the cold westerly wind.

"My name's Jimmy," said the boy. "The baby's name is Onatah, which means 'Daughter of Earth and the Corn Spirit'. My name just means 'Jimmy'. Our mother's name is Caroline Pierce and it doesn't mean anything special either. We got on the steamer at Tyendinaga. That's before Picton." His fingers made the feathers dangling on the rawhide thongs of his weapon dance. "I don't understand what that man was saying about my momma's smell. He smelled like milk gone sour in the summer."

Emma smiled and the boy returned, as rapidly as a chipmunk, to his cache of information. "We live at Tyendinaga, but most of our cousins and aunts and uncles live at Six Nations. Our grandparents do, too. There are a few

folks there who even look like you, miss,” he said to Jessabelle-Rose.

“Me?”

“Yes. Hm. You ever been on a big river called the Grand River? It’s past the Great Falls – Niagara Falls. Have you ever seen it?” He laid his club on the shiny wooden floor boards and leaned forward, his hands curled around his moccasin-covered toes. His eyes widened.

“I have not. It is a fine sight, is it?”

The boy took a deep breath. “There is nothing finer, miss! Nothing so big and fierce and noisy – no, nothing I can think of. Do you want to play a game? I have some peach stones here in my pocket.”

CHAPTER II



ST. CATHARINES

WAKE UP, TEACHAH EMMA. Wake up. That man says we're arriving at St. Catharines and Mrs. Caroline and her children need to get off. Oh my, are you feeling sick again?"

Emma sat up and coughed. Her hot cheek was lined with the markings of the floor boards. She opened her eyes a crack, then closed them again to block the sunlight. The inside of her head vibrated as though a woodpecker were incessantly drilling for bugs. She opened her eyes again to see Caroline standing erect in front of her, swaying the baby from side to side. A flash of light from the woman's sun-shaped brooch penetrated Emma's sore eyes.

"You are feeling well again, ma'am?" she said as she rubbed her eyes. "I wish I could say the same. Jessabelle-Rose, we must stop here for the night. I promise we'll continue on our way tomorrow."

All five of them descended the swaying gangway with wobbly legs.

"There's a coloured over there!" said Jessabelle-Rose of a woman who slept against the nearest four-by-eight-foot stack of cord wood, piled as fuel for the next ship of The Canadian Inland Steam Navigation Company. The woman's head was tightly bound by a brilliant indigo cloth. From her open mouth drained a thin line of saliva. She jumped straight up, wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve and stared at

Jessabelle-Rose with a look as vacant as a barn at the end of June.

“Does your mistress have any work?” the woman demanded of Jessabelle-Rose, her voice husky with sleep. “Woman’s work, man’s work. Don’t matter. I can cook and clean, fell trees. Don’t matter.” It was like she was reciting words she’d brought with her to the wharf.

“We don’t live here,” Jessabelle-Rose began to explain.

“Well I’ll take money - food, too!” she said, turning her vacant look on Emma.

“We do not have much of that either, but we need a place to stay the night, something very nearby. Do you know of -”

“All of you? You’re travelling together?” She nodded her head at Caroline Pierce and her children. “Well now, you’ve got yourself a problem, Can’t think of anyone who would take y’all in, except for the folks at Bethel Chapel AME. How much food do you have?”

Caroline dug into the soft leather pouch slung over her shoulder. “Not much but-”

“Enough for twelve and four - sixteen people?”

Jessabelle-Rose had crossed her arms. Her eyelids squeezed in concentration. She was certain she had seen the woman in Maryland. “Your name Harriet?” she interrupted.

The woman stepped back. Her eyes widened. “What if it is?” she asked.

“You come from Dorchester County? You married to John Tubman?”

“What if I were? Who are you, girl?”

“I’m Jessabelle-Rose Matheson. My momma is Miriam Matheson on Jones’s near Bestpitch. John Tubman’s her cousin.”

“Well, I’ll be!” the woman exclaimed, slapping her muscular thigh. “There are lots of coloureds in this town, but the only ones from as far away as Maryland are all at my house. You need a place to stay but you’ve got some food. You got any money, miss?” she said, nodding at Emma, who had taken hold of the hitching post.

Emma nodded.

“We don’t have anything other than what the folks at the Chapel gave us. Well, honey,” she motioned at Jessabelle-Rose. “You’re staying the night with us. Didn’t ever expect to see family who’d made it here all on their own!”

Jessabelle-Rose introduced her travelling companions to Harriet as they followed her up the hill leading to town. Harriet talked as quickly as she strode.

“You’ve got to slow down, Cousin Harriet!” said Jessabelle-Rose. “We can’t hear a word you’re saying and we’re all sick, ’cept for the children. Here, Teachah Emma, you put your arm around my shoulder.”

Harriet turned to wait for them, her hands on her slight hips. As soon as they were a couple of paces away she began to talk and stride up the hill again.

“All of us grew up like neglected weeds, Miss Emma. I had two sisters carried away in a chain-gang, and every time I saw a white man I was afraid of being carried away myself. We were always uneasy, weren’t we Jessabelle-Rose?” Then she began to talk of how the Fugitive Slave Act, which returned runaway slaves to their owners and fined and imprisoned their accomplices, had made even the cities of Philadelphia and Boston unsafe for coloureds.

“Not even Syracuse is! I hear they took a fugitive girl off the streets there but the Liberty Party-”

“We know!” said Jessabelle-Rose, quite out of breath. “You gotta slow down, Cousin Harriet. We can’t keep up! That was me they picked up! That was me the Liberty Party rescued!”

Harriet stopped. “You! Well, girl, I just heard about you a couple of days ago!” She sucked air through her teeth. “And welcome to Canada West, girl. You’re safe here. Queen Victoria’s a whole lot nicer to coloureds than Uncle Sam! She’s not perfect, but she’s a whole lot nicer. I knows a lot of escaped slaves and ain’t one of them wants to go back to slavery. You’re gonna like it here. Won’t the others be climbing over themselves to meet you? Miriam’s daughter – God Almighty!”



Jessabelle-Rose was the honoured guest in the snug two-roomed cabin on North Street in St. Catharines that November evening.

“We’ve all only been here a month, so we don’t have chairs or the likes, Miss Emma,” explained Harriet of the room which served as a kitchen by day and a bedroom by night. A table stood squarely in the centre of the room. A stack of neatly folded blankets reached the window sill inside the adjoining room. “You hot or cold? If your bones are cold you can sit over there by the stove,” she said pointing to the potbelly woodstove at the far end of the room.

Emma sat on the floor inside the door. Jessabelle-Rose leaned into the wall and slid down beside her. Both yawned. Caroline followed, placing the cradleboard on the floor beside her. Jimmy climbed into her lap, his peach pits in his hand,

waiting for the moment when someone would want to play his game of chance.

Harriet continued, “We don’t have chairs but we have our freedom. We’re not niggers any more! We’re free coloured folks and three of us have work.” She explained that no one had been paid, but for folks who’d been slaves only two months earlier, they were doing fine. “Twelve thousand dollars worth of slaves in this house – thirteen, if you count Miss Jessabelle-Rose here – but we haven’t a penny to rub together!”

The sunlight faded and the kitchen began filling with warm, tired bodies and the smell of stewing chicken. As each member of the household returned home for the evening, Harriet repeated the story of Jessabelle-Rose, ending it each time with the question: “And you know whose daughter she is? She’s Miriam and Jonah Matheson’s girl from Jones’s near Bestpitch!”

Jessabelle-Rose grinned with each congratulatory slap on the back and returned to playing the peach stone game with Jimmy. His mother leaned the baby in the cradleboard upright against the wall, then took first a loaf wrapped in large orange heart-shaped leaves and then a pouch of corn from her bag.

“What’s that?” asked Jessabelle-Rose, lifting her head from where it rested on her palms.

“Pumpkin, corn and blackberry loaf and ‘burnt corn’, as my people call it, or ‘parched corn’, as the Mohawks, who are also Haudenosaunee, say.” She stood and placed both upon the table. “The corn needs to be soaked before you cook it, but the loaf can be eaten tonight.”

Emma coughed. "Is that not all the food you have, Caroline? Should you not save some for your travel tomorrow?" She coughed again.

"The Great Spirit will take care of tomorrow," said Caroline. "Today I want to thank our hosts for their kindness." She smiled at the baby, whose bright eyes were now following her every move.

"You're more like us, Mrs. Caroline - you're not all quick and jumpy like the white folks in this town," said Harriet.

"You're quick and jumpy," Jessabelle-Rose told her cousin.

"Only when someone wakes me up! Normally, I'm more like Mrs. Caroline here."

"I'm not so sure about that!" said the latest man to enter the room. He tipped his hat at the women and children before hanging it on the peg on the back of the door. "You've been nothing but jumpy since we left Philadelphia, Sister!" He kissed the woman at the stove and pinched her bottom. "Smells like heaven in here, Mabel!"

Emma grimaced. She had never seen such unseemly behaviour, yet it seemed to go unnoticed by the others in the room. She shimmied down the wall toward the Pierces to escape the draft that had blown across the floor.

"I was only jumpy because I didn't know the countryside between here and Philadelphia. I'd never been here before," said Harriet.

"That's true, you've been everywhere else, but not here," said her brother. "We're calling her Moses 'cause she led all of us just like Moses led his people out of slavery in Egypt--"

"Yes," grunted Harriet, "and you were as happy about it as the Hebrews were, too, moaning and complaining...."

Harriet's brother continued: "-only difference is, I don't think the real Moses would have shot his own brother!"

"I didn't shoot him," Harriet explained to her guests. "But I would have if I had needed to and I told them all so! Once you take that first step toward freedom you either act like you're free or you're dead. I've got a right to both - Death and Liberty - and I don't want nothing in between! And as far as I can see freedom's not bought with dust. No, ma'am."

"You'd have killed your own brother?" asked Jimmy, his eyes wide.

"Yes, boy - 'cause one betrayer would mean we'd all be hunted down and sent back to slavery. It would have been no choice at all to kill off one!"

"Tell them about the time the paddy-rollers thought you were an old woman chasing a chicken," prompted the woman called Mabel. She stood with her arm around Harriet's brother's waist.

"We're not telling any more stories of our travels," Harriet replied curtly. "Some things should not be told!" She tugged on her scarf to cover up the shiny scars on her forehead.

Jessabelle-Rose leaned forward and wrapped her arms around her knees. "Your voice always sound like you was just waking up?" she asked with tiredness dulling her own voice.

"Nope. Not when I was about your age. Back then it sounded like yours, but I was taken away to work for poor folks. They had me inspecting muskrat traps." Harriet had been forced to wade through water so cold she'd become so sick she'd nearly died. "My momma got word about me and asked her master to bring me home. He liked my momma so he gave her permission and she made everything right but my voice." She shook her head as Emma coughed again. "God

Almighty, look at us all with a white woman sitting on our floor. Don't seem right! You have some chicken broth now, Miss Emma. That'll stop you from coughing so."

CHAPTER III



ON TO SIX NATIONS

THE NEXT MORNING Emma awoke with the sickening feeling that she needed to move forward into a day she was incapable of moving into. The breeze that blew across the floor cooled her sweaty forehead before it sent shivers down her spine.

“It’s time you got up,” said Jessabelle-Rose, cradling baby Onatah on the floor by the fire. Bands of firelight that escaped from the cracks in the woodstove fell on them and the wall beside them. “We’ve already finished our breakfast – it’s as watery as soup – don’t worry – Harriet said it was, too. She’s out chopping wood. Jimmy is, too, and Mrs. Caroline, she’s at the privy. Oh, you don’t look so good, Teachah Emma.”

Harriet hurried in, followed by Jimmy, whose cheeks were rosy from the cold. Harriet dropped the wood with a clatter by the stove, then passed the heavy, iron porridge pot to Emma. “We’ve got one pot and one spoon,” she said. “The sick one eats last – at least that’s what my momma always said – so you can eat now. The next boat heading south leaves at sunrise.”

Minutes later Harriet rushed them out the door and down the hill, past the horses already drawing wagonloads of timber to the wharf.

“Aren’t we just the sight!” said Jessabelle-Rose as they struggled to keep up and hold their footing. “Me as weak as a 90-year-old, and you, Teachah Emma, still coughing and

hacking like we should have left you in the immigrant sheds. How far is it to Windsor, Mrs. Caroline?”

Caroline didn't know. She had only ever travelled the eastern elbow of Lake Erie as far as the Grand River. “Six Nations is much closer,” she explained. “If you stop there with us, I am certain my grandmother will make you well enough to continue your journey.”

Emma shook her head in protest, but Jessabelle-Rose interrupted: “I don't care what you say, Teachah Emma. Mrs. Caroline, we're stopping and getting her fixed up.”

Too tired to disagree, Emma followed Jessabelle-Rose, Caroline and the children aboard the canal boat. The sky was turning an icy yellow in the gaps between the banks of clouds on the horizon. Emma leaned her throbbing head against the window frame of the cabin. There were no words in her head, no thoughts worthy of expression as the mules pulled the canal boat south through pancake-flat countryside, then west on a narrower canal to Dunnville, where the Grand River spilled over a dam. There, they changed boats and began sailing up the river, between the willow-lined banks that seemed to hold back the gentle hills.

As Emma sat her suitcase upon the bench and laid her head upon it, she felt Jessabelle-Rose's warm hand upon the middle of her back.

“Close your eyes and sleep, Teachah Emma. Mrs. Caroline says we're in Indian territory now. She says it won't be long before we're there.”

Emma felt lulled towards sleep as Caroline's voice, like gentle waves on a pebbled beach, washed over her.

“...over seventy harvests,” she heard Caroline say.

“Seventy?” said Jessabelle-Rose, yawning. “I thought you Indians were as old as those hills.”

Emma drifted off as Caroline explained why the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, had come to live along the Grand River in the first place:

During the first two years of the Revolutionary War, she said, the Haudenosaunee had remained steadfastly neutral under the agreement that their trade, travel and land would not be impacted. When this was broken by the patriots, four of the six nations sent their warriors to fight in a civilized manner under the British. But what was reported of their warring practices was anything but civilized. Rumours of Indian atrocities created panic throughout the whole country until George Washington ordered that the Iroquois would not merely be overrun, but destroyed. In what was to be called Sullivan’s Campaign, 2,500 American soldiers spread throughout Haudenosaunee territory, flooding land, slaughtering cattle and burning orchards, hundreds of miles of crops, some 160,000 bushels of corn and all but two settlements. Many starved, succumbed to illness or froze to death that winter. Those who survived scattered to either the two undamaged villages or new territory in New York and Canada.

“Only here on the Grand River did all six nations of the once mighty Haudensaunee settle together once again,” said Caroline.

Her touch to Emma’s arm pulled the sick young woman back from dreams of owls and spruce trees and nests. “Wake up,” said Caroline. “This is where we get off. Are you feeling well enough to walk the last mile?”

Emma raised her head and closed her eyes until the willows on the shoreline appeared to stop spinning around her. She nodded her head and gingerly stood up. Jessabelle-Rose linked arms with her and Jimmy tucked his weapon in the back waistband of his trousers and took her suitcase with both hands. "I am very glad we are stopping here, Mrs. Pierce," said Emma, coughing. "I hope we aren't a bother. Keep talking."

"Yes, keep talking," said Jessabelle-Rose, who had never before thought of Indians being homeless. "I always thought you were the only folks who had a home wherever you went!"

Caroline swung the baby and carrier to her back and directed Jimmy toward her family's new home. The boy ran ahead carrying the suitcase first in both hands, then switching from left to right and finally stopping at the bend in the road. All about them were tree stumps and cabins made of freshly-hewn logs.

Jessabelle-Rose's face was twisted in puzzlement. "Have all of you been living in tents for seventy years? 'Cause it sure don't look like you've been living here," she said.

Caroline Pierce laughed, for the Haudenosaunee had never lived in tents at Six Nations. Many generations before they had lived in villages of longhouses but since they had settled on the banks of the Grand River their homes had been made in log cabins. First they were erected in clusters of independent nations closer to the Erie shore.

"But the whites began settling in the land between the nations," Caroline said. "So, three harvests ago, like swarming bees, our people gathered together and moved here. There are now no national villages. We all live together, though it's not difficult to see what part of the original settlement the families come from." She pointed to a tidy cabin and sheds

surrounded by a herd of cattle and a half dozen wooden-slatted corn cribs on the far hill. “See that farm? It likely belongs to someone from the upper nations. Our family first settled with the nations on the lower part of the river – we call it ‘down below’.”

Just as fate had forced the Haudenosaunee to relocate to smaller and smaller portions of their homeland, fate had also forced them to reshape their customs and redefine their roles. Many generations before, their men had travelled in order to hunt, fish, fight, trade and talk in council. On the reservations of the United States and the reserves of Canada East and Canada West they had turned their warring, nomadic spirits to the plough and scythe. Their women, who had once communally farmed their own fields, governed the inheritance of property and genealogy and made many of the significant political decisions of the community, had been forced to hang up their hoes and take to the isolation of their individual households. They no longer owned their own dwellings, their own person and the work of their own hands. Their children, once members of their mother’s lineage were now, in the eyes of European law, the property of their fathers. The leadership of the clan mothers was also challenged.

Each nation of the Haudenosaunee had adapted to these changes in their own way. When they first emigrated to the banks of the Grand River in 1785, they settled nearest the nations sharing the same values. Those on the upper part of the river, or ‘up above’, made up the largest part of the reserve. They wove their customs with the threads of prosperity that had been spun by external economies. Men, not women, employed the latest agricultural practices which

yielded tremendous crops of wheat. The tongues spoke English. Their souls prayed to God, the Son and Holy Ghost.

Those who had originally settled 'down below' accepted little of these practices. They instead held safely in their hands the tattered and treasured ways of their ancestors which had been both revived and revised by the Seneca prophet, Handsome Lake. Their women continued to farm crops of Indian corn, potatoes, peas, squash and beans. Their men continued to harvest the fruits of the forest, and their religious ceremonies honoured the bounty of both.

The Pierce family was Seneca. They had settled amongst the lower nations. "And to this day membership and position throughout the whole Seneca nation is decided by our women," Caroline said, touching the brooch at her breastbone.

"Seneca? Did you hear that?" said Jessabelle-Rose as her hand cupped her teacher's. "You've been to Seneca Falls, haven't you?"

"I have," said Emma, who was walking along as though she were listening to their conversation from another room. Jessabelle-Rose's question had sent her thoughts to the sweltering days of the women's rights conference the previous summer.

"Lucretia Mott - you know her?" said Caroline, remembering the Quaker who along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and three others of her faith had gathered together men and women, coloureds and whites to begin mending the inequalities between the sexes. Lucretia Mott had been an advocate for the downtrodden her whole life and had also turned her influence to assisting the slave and the native American. She had visited Six Nations in September just as

the community had begun its five-day ceremony to mark the harvest of the corn.

Emma held up one hand and coughed uncontrollably into the other as she nodded her head. She had met no one quite like Lucretia Mott. “She is a fine person!” she said when she stopped coughing. “I am very fond of her!”

“Grandmother will be so happy to hear that. Mrs. Mott is as pure and sweet as the call of a meadowlark, but she moves mountains with her little voice. She and the other Quakers helped us regain some of our homeland in New York State...” Caroline’s voice trailed off as she stared at a figure draped on the steps of a low, log building hugging the edge of the road. “That looks like my little brother,” she said. “And it looks as though he has been drinking again. Randall! Hello little brother,” Caroline called. “Randall Pierce!”

The young man looked up and a broad smile spread across his leathery face.

“Sister!”

“Have you been drinking already?” she said as she stooped and pulled him to his feet. “You smell like you have!”

“No. No, I haven’t,” he said defensively. His eyes were blood-shot, his eyelids and his cheeks in front of his ears swollen. “I am waiting here for Lewis Kennedy. We are going to clean the tavern. Hello Jimmy! And the baby I have not met.” He ran his finger over the baby’s cheek. She turned her face towards it and her lips began to suckle in response. “This is a surprise,” he said. “I didn’t know you were coming. Do Mother and Grandmother know?”

“I sent them a letter, but I am certain Grandmother already knew.” She laughed for they both knew that their

grandmother always had a sixth sense about events that were about to unfold.

As Caroline Pierce introduced Emma and Jessabelle-Rose, Randall diverted his gaze to the ground and reached over to scuffle his nephew's hair then take Emma's case from him.

"Well, welcome to the newly consolidated Six Nations," he said, sarcasm nipping at each word. "It's ever improved, just the way the white man likes it! Lewis can wait for me - I'll show you to our new house, Sister. It's up there on the hill. Run ahead, Jimmy. We're going to the cabin this side of the woods. The one with the fence around it."

"Mother?" Caroline called as they followed one another through the gate, past two mounds of stored potatoes and squash covered with long grasses.

They entered the kitchen of the house. It was filled with the smell of baking, the musical pinging of the hot woodstove and the quiet bubbling of the pot upon it. Two women sat at the kitchen table, and Jimmy had already climbed into the lap of the younger one. Both women had pulled back their black, waist-length hair with identical strands of leather and had rolled the sleeves of their print dresses to their elbows. Between them sat two wooden bowls of tiny purple and white beads and the needlework they had laid upon the table. Both women beamed with the same wide smile as Randall's.

Emma glanced around the room to find a place to sit. She wanted to stay for a long time. Randall pulled the door shut behind them and leaned against the door frame.

"Grandmother said yesterday that you were coming," said Caroline's mother, patting the old woman's hand and hugging her grandson. "And I must have believed her

because I started boiling an extra batch of cornbread this morning!”

“You are just like the dog,” Caroline said as she leaned down to embrace the wrinkled woman. “You both are the first to know someone is coming, aren’t you, Grandmother?”

“Yes,” she replied, her jet-black eyes sparkling as brightly as her great-grandson’s. “Yes, we are.” She patted Caroline’s hand and laid her head against her granddaughter’s chest, stiffly pushed herself up and kissed the baby who had been placed in the cradleboard upon the kitchen table.

“Welcome, daughter’s daughter’s daughter and son. Welcome, guests. I’m glad to see you survived another night, Grandson,” said Orenda Pierce, as she held each person’s face in her soft, work-worn hands. She took hold of both sides of Emma’s warm cheeks. “You are not at all well,” she said.

“No, ma’am. No, I am not, and your granddaughter thought you might be able to help. Could you please help us, both of us, because Jessabelle-Rose is still not well either.” Emma steadied herself against the table.

“First you need sleep and then I will do what I can. Caroline’s father is outside preparing the lodge for a healing sweat. It will be ready when the sun begins to—”

“Don’t make her sweat!” protested Jessabelle-Rose. “I sweated so much when I was sick I nearly went mad. I was certain bugs were biting me and my momma was burning a Christmas log underneath me! No, please give her something, ma’am. You must have some leaves or roots or something stashed away up there,” she said, pointing to the opening that led to the room’s attic.

“I can do that, too,” said Grandmother Orenda. “I can make a tea of cowslip root, but when our people are sick it is far

better to do something than to take something. Medicine sometimes helps. Nature and other humans most often do.” She laughed and shook her head as she saw in her mind’s eye hideously masked members of the False Face Society lurching, crying and shaking their turtle rattles in an effort to drive out an illness. She knew that the ways of the Society were too bizarre to be of help to the young woman. “If you wish to be well,” she said, “then a healing sweat is the best I can offer you. Are either of you on your time?”

“Come with me, Jimmy,” said Randall, knowing what the question meant. “We will help your Grandfather Blue tend the fire.”

“She’s asking if you have blood between your legs,” said Caroline, responding to the confusion on Emma and Jessabelle-Rose’s faces.

“No!”

“No!”

“Good. We can do a sweat late this afternoon,” said Grandmother Orenda. “Now you must rest.”

She opened the door to the tiny bedroom beside the woodstove and folded back the woolen blankets on the bed. The dry corn husks of the mattress crunched as Emma lay down and pulled the scratchy heaviness of the sheets and blankets to her chin.

“Emma,” said Orenda Pierce. “When did you stop singing? When did your voice go silent?”

Emma looked up at her as though to say, “How did you know?” Instead she said, “The summer before last.”

Orenda Pierce nodded and sat on the bed beside her. “And when did you stop listening to the wisdom of your body?”

“Shortly before my voice went silent.” Emma could feel sadness welling up in her as the memory of the sweaty smell of the pig-eyed, pot-bellied Edmund Franklin closed in on her.

“When did you lose your connection to your fire, or your heart?”

Emma lifted her head to look at Grandmother Orenda. She smiled as much as the throbbing in her head could allow.

“I don’t think I ever lost it,” she said. “But I did protect it by bringing Jessabelle-Rose north.”

Orenda Pierce nodded. “And when did you stop trusting the mystery of life?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

“Then go to sleep and ask your dreams to tell you what is needed for wholeness and balance.”

Emma nodded. She was too tired to say another word. She felt more tender than she had since the day her father had died. Her eyelids felt leaden.

Caroline’s mother appeared in the doorway and by the time Grandmother Pierce took the cup of tea from her daughter and placed it on the windowsill Emma was breathing from the depths of sleep.

Late in the afternoon as the sun set and the bank of mountainous clouds in the southeast turned wispy pink, Emma, shivering with fever, crawled behind Jessabelle-Rose, Caroline, her father and grandmother through the low opening into the searing heat and moist, cedar-fragrant darkness of the sweat lodge. The small dome, located further up the hill between the house and the woods was just large enough to seat six or seven people. It was constructed from saplings bent into circles. Cedar boughs lined the entire structure, blocking out all but tiny slivers of light. Cedar also

lined the ground surrounding the coals of a fire on which a collection of rocks had been heated.

“Uuuuh!” said Emma with a rapid breath in. “It’s so hot!”

Orenda Pierce instructed her to sit near the wall where it was cooler. “You have left your burdens outside have you?” she said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Emma wiped the sweat from her brow. She could barely see Grandmother Orenda who picked up a shell filled with smoldering leaves and began to wave smoke over her face, her chest and thighs. She passed the shell to her son-in-law who repeated the dance-like moves with his hands and passed it on to Caroline. By the time Emma cupped the shell in her hand, the tiny dwelling was thick with pungent smoke. She coughed, mimicked what she thought she had seen in quick, halting movements and then passed the shell to Orenda who held it in silence for what felt like an eternity. The tiny dwelling seemed to grow as large as a Quaker meeting house before the old woman said with a soft certainty, “The rocks in the fire are the seven Grandfathers. They share their breath and words of life.”

“They sure do!” said Jessabelle-Rose, “but I don’t care what you say, Mrs. Pierce, this feels all crazy-like again.”

“What is crazy-like, Jessabelle-Rose?”

“I know those are just rocks and that’s a fire, but I’m seeing my momma. She looks like she’s right there, like I could touch her,” she said, pointing toward the thin blue flames dancing on the top of the ashen logs of the fire. “And there are lots of women with her - all of them coloured and they’ve all got their heads down and EVERYTHING AROUND THEM IS MEAN AND ANGRY!” she began to shout as the

women in her mind's eye quietly began lining up behind the vision of her mother.

Grandmother Orenda put her hand on Jessabelle-Rose's thigh. "Slow down," she said. "Slow your breathing down and let them do what they need to do."

Jessabelle-Rose took a deep breath. Her lips moved as she slowly and silently counted: ten, eleven ... forty-five ... seventy-two... She shook her head. "It's getting quieter now, Mrs. Pierce. All those women are raising their heads and my momma is looking at me. She's telling me I'm the hope of the family." The whites of Jessabelle-Rose's eyes rapidly clouded with tears. "They say I carry the family into a better life. That's true, ain't it, Mrs. Pierce? I am the hope of my family. Oh, that feels good - real good." She rubbed her belly under her rib-cage. "I feel strong." She gave her eyes a quick wipe, straightened her back and nodded toward Emma.

"Please make her feel this way too, Mrs. Pierce. It feels so good I don't think I'll ever be sick again my whole life long!"

But Grandmother Orenda Pierce held up her hand, "Wait," she said. "Wait until you feel the ancestors standing behind you, helping you every moment of every day."

The call of a wolf rose and faded in the direction of the river. Finally Jessabelle-Rose nodded her head and as she sat back against the wall of cedar branches, tears began to well in Emma's eyes.

Orenda Pierce nodded at Jessabelle-Rose and Jessabelle-Rose nodded back. Grandmother Orenda turned to Emma.

"Your tears are opening the way to your healing," she said gently. "There is no need to rush. Did you dream while you slept?"

A tear splattered on Emma's hand.

“I didn’t dream this afternoon, but I did this morning – on the boat. I dreamed of owls and a nest.”

“Yes.” Grandmother Orenda knew from the tears that Emma had been provided with a personal connection to the spirit world. She knew that if the young woman were to fail to heed the dream, her soul would become angry. Illness and misfortune would only mount, so she invited the young woman to tell her more.

In her dream Emma had seen an owlet perching alone in a nest atop a spruce; and across a river so wide it could not be crossed flew two full-grown owls.

“Your parents?” Grandmother Orenda asked.

“Yes. How did you know?” said Emma as the images of the owls swirled and blended until they became a vision of her mother and father standing with their arms around one another, staring at her with all the hope, pride and vulnerability parents have in the presence of their newborn. Emma stared into the last of the red coals still glowing beneath the grey ash of the fire. The wolf called again and the barren woods echoed with the answer of another to the east.

“Tell them how hard it has been for you since they left,” the old woman said quietly. “Tell them.”

Emma suddenly snorted and mucus propelled from her nose and sizzled in the coals. “It’s been very hard,” she said, almost unable to breathe. “It’s been very, very hard.” She cried until the coals no longer glowed.

“I need to go forward, don’t I, Mrs. Pierce?” she said at last. “I need to turn around and know they are always behind me – just the same as with Jessabelle-Rose.”

“Don’t rush. Does it feel finished to you?”

“No.”

“If you were to place something at their feet and leave it with them, would it then feel finished?”

Emma shot a glance at Grandmother Orenda that once again said she did not understand how the old woman could know so much.

“They had a child who died?”

Emma nodded. Both her mother and an infant brother had died in childbirth.

“Then you leave the child there with them. You need carry it no longer,” said Orenda, her face now barely visible in the low light.

Emma nodded her head slowly.

“The child is happy to be with them and they are happy to hold it so that you may remain here in Life. You understand that, Emma?”

Emma nodded her head again.

“I do.” She touched her breastbone and took a deep breath. She felt clean and steady inside. The arrows of pain that had pushed against her tender flesh for most of her young life were no longer present.

“I am thankful they gave me life,” Emma said softly.

“Yes, I can see that. Emma, your parents will never leave you. From now on they will be your constant source of strength. Do you know that to be true?”

“I do,” replied Emma, flattening her hand so that the whole of her palm steadily rubbed her breastbone. “My dizziness is gone and I feel like I can breathe again.”

“It is impossible to breathe when the ancestors are not in the right place. Can you now go outside and tell Grandmother Moon what you know now and forever? Can

you give thanks to all your relations, the earth, the sky, everything?”

In the darkness Emma straightened her right leg and hesitated, waiting for an explanation to come to her.

“You will know what to say when you get there. Go on.” The old woman reached over and patted Emma’s leg.

“Thank you,” said Emma. “Thank you with all my heart.”

“Yes, Mrs. Pierce. Thank you from me too! Do you want me to talk to the moon too?” asked Jessabelle-Rose.

Caroline and her father laughed. They had remained as silent, steadying witnesses through the whole ritual.

“Certainly!” she said before the two young women crawled through the opening into the jarring, cold darkness outside the sweat lodge.

“Oh my goodness - have you ever felt more alive?” said Emma. “My breath, my skin - everything feels tingling and alive.”

“No, I haven’t,” said Jessabelle-Rose quickly. “And I haven’t needed to get to the privy so badly either. I’ll say my thank yous there!”

Jessabelle-Rose ran off. The clouds, lit from the mere sliver of the moon, seemed as bright as the sun to Emma as she stumbled into the woods. There the wind first swept through the tops of the trees, then rattled the last of the dry leaves still clinging to the branches, brushed her face and went on its way.

“Thank you, Father!” she called. “Thank you, Mother!” She strained her ears to hear beyond the wind what she imagined to be the hoot of an owl near the river. From the southwest blew the last remnants of the wolf’s mournful cry.

“Thank you,” Emma whispered again, before making her way toward the light pouring out of the cabin beneath her on the hill.



“What happened last night, Mrs. Pierce? It don’t make no sense to me at all, but I feel better and you, Teachah Emma, you only coughed when you first sat up in bed this morning,” said Jessabelle-Rose to the old woman as she poured a river of maple syrup on a golden mound of cornmeal porridge. “I haven’t felt this free since I was floating sticks down creeks in Dorchester County.”

Emma nodded her head in agreement as Jessabelle-Rose, caught the drip on the pitcher with her finger, then passed the syrup.

“We are all asleep,” said Grandmother Orenda. “Every one of us. We are asleep and living the harm of the past over and over and over again. Jessabelle-Rose, your people have borne pain since shackles first went about their wrists and ankles generations ago. And they have borne the pain of families eternally ripped apart – generation after generation – husbands and wives – parents and children – children and siblings. It all gets passed down. It all controls our very breath and the breath of our children and our children’s children until we are able to wake up to it. And now you have woken up, Jessabelle-Rose, and the Spirit world has undone the harm for you. It does that for us. It provides us with great help. Great help.”

“Well,” said Jessabelle-Rose. “I didn’t think I needed any of your spirits, but I feel so free this morning, I guess I did.”

“What about you?” asked Emma, resting her spoon upon her lap. “What about your people?”

“For us it is a time of great change. Many have lost their way or are becoming lost. They have forgotten the old ways that kept our people strong. But all things travel in circles. It will not always be this way. Some say that the great change will happen between the seventh and the eighth generation. I hope we don’t have to wait that long, but we may. You, Miss Emma, are things right with you this morning?”

“Yes,” said Emma with certainty. “My fever is gone. I am a little weak, but I feel very well – better than I have in a long, long time.”

“The hope of the ancestors is that life is easier for us than it was for them. That is all they want,” Orenda said quietly as the sunshine poured in through the small window and onto the pine of the kitchen table and floor.

“Yup,” responded Jessabelle-Rose. “I know that in my bones! At first I thought you were just going to tell me what was wrong with us coloured folks, Mrs. Pierce, and sometimes I get the littlest idea that maybe white folks don’t know after all what is best for us!”

“And I don’t think they always know what’s best for the Haudenosaunee either; especially when they themselves are never satisfied and always wanting more.” The weathered skin around her eyes creased and her eyes suddenly twinkled, “But we know what’s best for us, don’t we, Jessabelle-Rose?”

“We sure do, Mrs. Pierce! We sure do!”

End of sample.
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