

29

Mary remained at the door, her musket still clenched in her hand. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she registered the sweat rolling off her palm, greasing the barrel of the musket, even though the air was frosty.

“They’re not behind us anymore,” she said to the children.

Meg began whimpering. Her soft sobs did more to Mary’s heart than Jane’s earsplitting cries. It wasn’t fair, she thought miserably. Poor, sweet Meg, who could never even bear to step on an insect, was curled into the darkest corner of the cabin, her body heaving as she cried.

Now that she had declared their safety, Johnny’s bravery was renewed and he fought against Meg’s embrace to leave the cabin and fight alongside his brothers. Meg relinquished her hold on him, and he flew to Mary’s side.

A rising conflict was raging within her. She felt obligated to go to Meg’s side, to comfort her and Baby Jane, to dry their tears and reassure them, but she was unable to drag herself away from the partially open doorway. With Johnny pummeling her legs, she remained wedged between the door frame and the door itself in order to block the children’s view.

“Ma’s gonna wear your hide out,” Mary admonished. “You’re supposed to protect your sisters, and here you are, trying to run away from the cabin!”

The pummeling stopped and Johnny grew quiet behind her. Thank God, Mary thought as she turned her attention back to the scene unfolding behind them.

The Jennings boat was outdistancing the Indians, but only barely. They were still too close to the shoreline, Mary thought with rising panic, and there was too great a distance between them and the remaining fleet.

The Stuart boat was even worse. The Indians had continued gathering along the shoreline. And now with the boats pulling further away from them, it left them to look back to the east—where the Stuart's lone boat was hobbling into view.

It was like a gauntlet, Mary thought, her throat so constricted she could barely breathe. The boatload of sick and suffering men, women and children would have to outrun the Indians who were now amassing on the shore, departing in canoes that were advancing upon the ostracized boat. Hannah, she mouthed as she watched them. God help her!

“Mary, the children!”

Ma's frantic words came rushing at her and she tore her eyes away to look into Ma's worried face.

“They're fine. They're scared, is all.” She let the hatch swing open as her mother brushed past her. She could hear her consoling them and urging them to be brave but her voice sounded distant, almost distracted.

A moment later, Ma was back at the door. She motioned for Mary to step just outside, but she kept the door partially open so the children could still see her. Little Jane was trying to escape Meg's clutches and run after her mother, but Meg was holding onto her despite her own sobs.

“The scouts have been by,” she said. “We're past the Indian villages, but they told us to stay to the north shore. There are no Indians on that side. We're moving downriver a few more miles and then stopping.”

Mary nodded.

“Keep the children in the cabin until we've put some distance behind us.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Ma squeezed Mary's shoulder. “You done good, child. Let's hope the worst is behind us.”

Mary nodded. Ma patted her on the shoulder before walking away. Mary watched her as she moved from one to the other, making sure everyone was okay, and everyone knew what to do.

The river was narrowing now and as Mary stepped out of the cabin and peered around its side toward the bow, she could see a bend in the river up ahead. Soon, the Indians would be out of sight—and so would the Jennings and the Stuarts.

She returned to the cabin door. “Meg, there are some biscuits in the basket over there,” she said. “Can you fix a snack for you, Johnny and Jane? Put some strawberry preserves on them.”

As Meg dried her eyes and dutifully trudged to the basket, Mary turned back toward the stern. With her body wedged once again between the door frame and the door, she peered at the two boats behind her.

The Stuart boat was more than a mile behind them, but their screams and cries were carried across the water as they fought their way through the gauntlet. The Indians were converging on their boat like a disturbed beehive, surrounding them and boarding them even as they desperately tried to outmaneuver or outrun them. One shot after another rang out; it was impossible to tell the difference between the Stuarts’ rifles and muskets and those of the Indians. There were too many shots, Mary thought, as she realized the Stuarts would have to stop and reload. That many shots meant the hordes of Indians were firing upon them.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Neelys converging on the deck, watching the Stuarts fight for their lives. It was silent on board the Neely boat, eerily silent, Mary thought. Deadly silent. Even Sam knew they could not come to their aid.

Mary prayed for God to help them. She pleaded with Him silently as she watched the Indians boarding the boat and swarming over the deck. The boat was foundering now; it had stopped its forward progression and was spinning slowly in the water as all hands fought for their lives. The air was filled with their screams, horrific screams that pierced Mary’s soul. There were more shots fired amid the Indians’ spine-chilling war cries and gleeful whoops of victory as more of the savages joined in the wild rampage.

Then the Neely boat was around the bend and the horrific scene behind them was replaced with the craggy trees that bent from the north shore over the river's edge, their trunks seeming to bend toward the water in a final act of sorrow.