

QUEENSTON

October 1812

Hooves splash toward us and I step off the road. Father glances at me to make sure I'm safe, then squints into the telescope. His conversation doesn't skip a beat. "How many do you figure are beyond the trees over there?"

"Hard to tell," Mr. Secord replies. "Thousands?"

"Any artillery?"

"Up those cliffs, I'd think."

Father shifts the telescope and scans the cliffs on the other side of the river. Another rider gallops from the other direction. He splatters mud on our best Sunday clothes. Maybe we'll have to go back home now to change. Father steadies the telescope and scans the far shoreline. "Have you seen any boats?"

"I thought I saw some hidden downstream." Mr. Secord gently guides the position of the telescope. "Try over there."

Father grunts in agreement. He snaps the telescope closed and passes it back to Mr. Secord. He

rubs his chin and contemplates the far shore. It's swarming with bluecoats. I've never seen so many soldiers. Too far away for a musket shot, but well within cannon range. We don't have many redcoats on this side, but we're scrambling to action. A squad of a dozen marches past double-quick up the road to the Heights.

"What can you see from up top?" asks Father. He nods up the cliffs to our right.

"There's a redan about halfway up," says his friend. "Want to look from there?"

Mr. Secord starts to lead us up the path, then stops and turns to me. "You'll have to stay here, young man."

"But — "

"Can't have children running around."

Who's he calling a child? General Brock himself sent me on a secret mission last summer. I look to Father for support. He gives me an apologetic smile. We must defer to our host.

"Go down to the house," says his friend. "You'll find the children there." The two of them climb up the slope to where the cannon points across the river.

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"Eighteen . . . Nineteen . . . Twenty." Then I call out, "Ready or not, you're going to get caught." But I don't search among the gardens and houses. I head down

to the dock. The children could be hiding there, couldn't they? I scan the far shoreline. Father and Mr. Secord are looking for cannons and boats — any signs that this is the place where the enemy plans to attack.

“Jacob . . . ” a small voice calls from beneath the planks. Another voice giggles. To my right, the river rushes out from the cliffs. Upstream, it plunges over Niagara Falls. If I listen carefully I think I can hear a deep rumble. “Jacob,” the voice whines, “you're not playing.”

From this dock, longshoremen load supplies onto wagons to be hauled up the road past the Falls. On the other side of the river, another road leads up from *their* dock and men push at a wagon that is stuck in the mud.

“Jacob!” A girl's head pokes out from beneath the planks. “If you're not going to try to find us,” Harriet scolds, “then maybe *you* should hide.”

“Yes, Jacob,” adds Charles. “You hide.”

“Look! What's going on over there? They're trying to move that wagon.” I try to interest them, but little Charles keeps tugging at my coat sleeve.

Harriet says, “You two hide and I'll count. One . . . Two . . . Three . . . ”

“Look! Now there's a fight!” It's like watching an anthill from a great height, but even from across the water I can see two men punching at each other.

They've stripped off their blue coats and are swinging wildly.

"Four . . . Five . . ."

"Come on." Little Charles takes my hand. "I show you where hide."

And as if someone has kicked the anthill, men hurry down the road and swarm around the fight. Now an officer in a bicorne hat runs toward them. He's trying to push his way through the crowd and . . .

Someone has pushed the officer back! The officer raises his hand and . . . I can't believe it! Someone has just punched an *officer*. On our side of the river, he'd be stood against a wall and shot for that. Or at least flogged until he wished he were dead.

The fight has turned into a brawl. Everyone swinging at everyone. No, not quite everyone. One fellow backs toward their wharf. He turns and shakes his head and walks away. Even from this distance, he moves like Eli — that easy, lanky, loose-limbed stroll, as if nothing could bother him. A mop of black hair. Too far away to tell, really. But what if it's him — my blood brother, Eli McCabe?

"*You gonna write to me?*"

"*Of course. You?*"

"*Yeah. Reckon.*"

That was four months ago, when Eli's family had to leave and go back across the river. Eli never was

one for writing, but maybe he never got my letters either — not after the war began.

“Nineteen . . . Twenty! Ready or not, you’re gonna get caught.”

I wave to the figure on the far side of the river, but he’s not looking this way.

“Jacob! Papa told you to play with us.”

I give our secret call: a loon cry followed by three hoots of an owl. But the figure doesn’t respond. That doesn’t necessarily mean it’s not Eli. Maybe he’s too far away and can’t hear me over the noise of the brawl. But whoever he is, he stands on the wharf, apart from it all, looking on. That’s probably what I’d do too. Someone actually struck an *officer!*

“Eli!” I call out. “Eli McCabe!” Can a voice carry better than a loon call?

Bang!

A new sound in the distance — a pistol shot. The brawl stops. A man on horseback rides down the road. The smoke drifts away from where he holds a pistol in the air.

“Eli!” I call again.

But the boy on the wharf watches the horseman ride down their road, a horseman wearing a cocked hat with feathers. No ordinary officer. The soldiers begin to move up the road. I look back to the wharf. The solitary figure is gone, disappeared into the crowd.

“What’s wrong, Jacob?” Charles looks up at me.

Harriet adds, “You feeling poorly? You want to sit down? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

* * *

“Father?”

“Yes, Jacob.”

“Is there going to be a battle?”

“It certainly looks like it.”

The wagon rolls as our horse, Solomon, pulls us along under a canopy of yellow leaves. The sun is high in the sky but rain clouds gather again.

“Did you see cannons from up there on the redan? Boats?”

He shakes his head. “Just soldiers.”

“How will they cross the river?”

“They would have boats hidden somewhere.”

A raven soars ahead of us, lands in the trees and watches me.

“Did you see the fight?”

He shifts in the seat. “Very strange,” he says.

“They’d never get away with that,” I say. “Not in our army.”

“Indeed.”

“I think I saw Eli.” Father looks at me. “I couldn’t tell for sure. It was too far away.” Solomon’s footsteps suck through the muck. I pull my coat closer. The temperature is dropping ahead of the storm.

“Do you think he might be with the army?”

“He’s not old enough,” Father says. “And neither, young man, are you.”

“So . . . if there’s going to be a battle . . . ”

He waits a moment for me to finish, but finally he says, “Yes?”

“Well . . . then . . . Shouldn’t we turn around and go back home now? The militia will be expecting you.”

He looks at me and laughs. “Have you been praying for a miracle?”

“Well, it’s just that — ”

“No, son. We’ll stay in St. Davids tonight as we planned.”

I fall into silence. I’d rather face the enemy army than what waits for me up the road. And the first drop of rain splatters on Father’s top hat.