

Chapter One

Oregon Country – Shoshone Lands

January 1814

Marie Dorion stood over the steaming cook pot. Despite a light snowfall, she felt warmed by the pot and the fire crackling below it. The smell of gravy, wild onion, and elk meat wafted to her nose. She breathed deeply while stirring the pot, then spooned some of the liquid for a small taste. *Needs salt.* A few snowflakes floated down around her. As she worked on the pot, she kept an ear perked for sounds of her children's laughter and glee, which told her they were playing nearby. *It's when I can't hear them that I need to worry.* She turned toward the joyous sounds, and finding the children snowball fighting, she smiled. All their lives in the snowy wilderness, and they could still find joy in the bitter cold playground of the Oregon Country wilderness.

She turned her gaze from her boys to the edge of the tree-lined meadow, looking for the return of her husband Pierre and the men who were out trapping with him. They'd been away for two days, and she expected them any time. She also kept a watchful eye towards the woods for any incoming threat. A day earlier, a Nez Perce warrior had come into camp. His words were ominous. The Shoshone were talking war against the white invaders. They were in Indian country and the Shoshone and her people, the Ioways, were not friends. A century before, the Ioways had clashed with the Shoshone over the contested hunting grounds on the Great Plains.

The first booming report of gunfire rang out. Her head swung in the direction of the sound. *Sounds of gunfire traveled for miles. Maybe they've shot some meat. One more squirrel and I...* She looked down into the boiling pot.

Then another BOOM! Then another.

Maybe a herd of elk.

More gunshots sounded. The hair on the back of Marie's neck stood up.

That's not right.

She dropped her cooking spoon and broke into a run toward the boys. She slid on the snowy surface and dropped to her knees before them. Their faces showed surprise at her sudden appearance. "Boys!" She grabbed their arms to get their attention. "Jean." The little boy's eyes drifted. She shook him, her voice raised. "JEAN! PAUL. LOOK AT ME! LISTEN!" She took a breath to steady herself. "We're going to the woods." Her voice quivered. "We're going to the woods." She rose and, tightening her grip on each boy's arm, she took off in the opposite direction of the gunfire.

"Mama," little Paul whined. "Mama, stop." He stumbled as she pulled him across the uneven, snow-clad surface. Every time he started to fall, his mother pulled him upright. The four-year-old's little legs churned as fast as they could.

BOOM, BOOM came from behind them. Her head jerked a glance over her shoulder. No one was following.

Reaching the woods, Marie moved between the trees until she finally found what she was looking for. Underneath the root ball of a mammoth fir tree was an opening to what she surmised was a coyote den. "Get in." She pointed at the opening. The boys hesitated. "GET IN!" She pushed them forward. The boys stumbled down the cratered depression left by the roots when they were pulled from the ground. Once both boys were in the den, she covered the opening with branches strewn around the forest floor. Down on her knees, looking between the branches, she said, "Wait here. Don't make any sounds. I'll be back soon." She began to get up.

"Where are you going," asked her seven-year-old son.

“Jean Baptiste.” She hesitated for a bit, cutting off a rebuke. Taking a deep breath, her countenance calmed, she began again, “I’m going to find Papa. Those gunshots. They’ve got some meat down, and I need to go help.” She got up, hoping they’d accept her lie without question. Walked a few steps. Checked to make sure the boys were not visible. She saw Jean’s little face peeking between branches, “Stay.” She put a finger to her lips. “Shhhhhhh.” Then she broke into a trot, careful not to slip on the snowy ground. She stopped at their tent in the meadow. Hanging from the center pole was a pistol, sack of mini-balls, and a powder horn. She stuffed the mini-balls and powder into a satchel and swung its strap over her head, positioning it on her left shoulder, then grabbed the rifle leaning on the pole and ducked through the flap of the tent. The fire sizzled as the pot boiled over.

Marie melted into the forest, moving through the stand of pines, the branches had blocked last night’s snowfall, leaving only a pine needle carpet to walk on. She floated over the landscape like a ghost, carefully eyeing the ground to make sure not to snap a branch with a careless step. She had not gone far when she saw the hulking, staggering figure. He was leading a horse. The light was dusky, but she recognized the shape of Giles Le Clerc. She ran to him. “Giles! Where is Pierre!?”

Le Clerc leaned against a tree. “Shoshone. Back that way.” He pointed to his left.

She saw his hand holding his stomach and his blood-stained shirt. “Oh my God, you’re hurt! Put your arm over my shoulders.” Grabbing the hand draped over her shoulders and wrapping an arm around his waist, she let out a small grunt as she lowered Le Clerc to the ground into a sitting position. Then kneeling in front of him, she lifted his shirt. Seeing a gash oozing more blood than she could remember ever seeing flowing from a person still alive, she let out a gasp.

Le Clerc spoke in hushed tones just above a whisper. "I'm hurt bad. Done in. Get to Reed. You know the way?" His head hung down.

With a hand, she lifted his chin until his eyes met hers. She saw fear, confusion. Caused, she assumed, by his terrible wound. *He sees what's coming. I need to distract him from his bleeding and the pain.* She wondered what he had been through. *It must have been terrible.* Then, smoothing his hair, she said in a lowered voice, "We'll all go back to John Reed's post together." She noticed he appeared to be caving in, probably from the massive blood loss. "Here, lay down." Using all her strength, she helped Le Clerc lay down.

"Leave me. They're everywhere."

"What about Pierre?" she asked again. She looked at the wooded surroundings, expecting Pierre and his trapping partner Jacob Reznor to come walking up at any moment. *Maybe they were pursuing the attackers.*

"Do me a favor."

Marie nodded. "Of course."

"Tell my wife how I died."

"You're not going to die. I won't let that happen." Marie rose and began gathering moss from the trunks of nearby trees. She used the moss to pack the gash in Le Clerc's abdomen, hoping to staunch the bleeding long enough to get him back to camp.

Le Clerc spoke, his voice just above a whisper, "They're dead."

"Who's dead?"

"Your husband is dead. Reznor too." Le Clerc swallowed. "I saw them die. Clubbed down and scalped. Shoshone."

Her chest tightened, breaths came in gulps. Her eyes watered, but she stifled the desire to sob. *Not now. Later.* She sniffled and rubbed at her nose with her sleeve. Marie pushed these thoughts from her mind and continued packing the wound, trying to save Le Clerc. Mostly the moss was stemming the flow of blood. There was little left to do but wait and hope he would regain his strength enough to walk. “Where does your wife live?”

“Red River colony. We’ve got a small farm.” He coughed. Blood bubbled around his lips. His breath was ragged, and he wheezed when he exhaled.

“Do you have children?” Marie realized she didn’t know much about the man lying in front of her. He had closed his eyes, and she leaned in close to his face. He was still breathing. She patted his face lightly to wake him up. “Do you have children?” There was no response. Marie grabbed his hand. “Giles! Giles!” There was no response. She checked for breathing again. There was nothing. He had slipped into death.

Marie got to her feet. Looking down at the man, “Adieu,” Marie whispered. *Go to God.* Then looking through the pine boughs above to the sky, she said the Prayer of Commendation. She crossed herself and walked toward where she had left the boys, rifle slung over her shoulder.

She hadn’t gone far when she heard the sound of voices, men’s voices. Their words were unintelligible. They were likely Shoshone. She’d heard the language before, talking with Sacajawea in St. Louis. They had mostly communicated in French mostly but occasionally the Shoshone woman had used her native tongue when she didn’t have the words in French or English. The men were coming from the direction of her camp. She felt her chest tighten, her heartbeat pounding. If they’d found it, they could be looking for her and the boys. Kneeling, she raised her rifle to firing position. Her hands were sweating as she gripped the cold steel barrel of the rifle and fingered the trigger. She could hear Pierre’s words to her when he taught her to shoot, “Aim for

the heart. Squeeze the trigger, don't pull it." She was aware of her breathing and slowed it with a deep breath. *Aim for the chest. Don't look in the eyes. The eyes are life. The chest is a target.*

A figure stepped into a small gap in the trees. Marie put the bead at the end of the barrel onto the chest of the figure and squeezed the trigger. The rifle butt bucked hard on her shoulder, and a cloud of smoke belched from the barrel. Marie, stood, moved to her right and clear of the smoke. She could see a figure crouching over a crumpled body on the ground. She began to reload when the crouching man saw her. He rose to his feet and broke into a run toward her, spear raised, his war cry filled the air.

No time.

Marie dropped the rifle then grabbed the pistol from her belt. Turning her body to present a slender profile, she raised the pistol to eye-level. The gap between them was narrowing, enough that she could see his craggy features formed into a snarl on his face. The man raised the spear and planted his feet to make the throw. Marie aimed the pistol and fired.