

Captured *by* Love

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To my wonderful mother

Your solution to every problem has always been
prayer and plenty of it.

Thank you for praying without ceasing for me
and for all your family.

We couldn't ask for a greater gift.

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Chapter 1



MICHILIMACKINAC ISLAND, MICHIGAN TERRITORY MAY 1814

The dawn mist swirled around Angelique MacKenzie and shrouded the forest trail. She didn't need the light of day to guide her. She knew every path of her beloved island and could run them blindfolded if need be.

Even so, something in the damp foggy air sent a shiver up the back of her neck and forced her bare feet to move faster. The cold mud oozed between her toes, squishing and squelching with each step. She glanced at the dark tangle of bramble surrounding her as if a *loup-garou* would leap out at her and bare his sharp wolf's teeth.

She knew nothing of the sort could happen. Werewolves belonged only in tales, like the one she'd overheard the *raconteur* tell the night before. But she couldn't keep from seeing the hairy hunched back, long tail, and pointed ears in every flitting shadow.

Her heart raced, its pounding rivaling one of the duty calls of the fort drummer.

Her secret early-morning deliveries were becoming riskier with every passing day. Especially now that nearly all the islanders were on the brink of starvation. The British soldiers living in the fort were faring even worse. Over the long winter they'd butchered all their horses. And now they were growing desperate.

And dangerous.

But danger or not, she had to make her delivery. Her dear friend depended on the meager food gifts she brought every morning.

With one hand Angelique pressed against the threadbare linen of her skirt and steadied the delicate lumps in her pocket. And with the other she dangled two of the trout she'd caught.

A crack of a branch and a low, raspy call pierced the silence, startling her.

She halted and sucked in a breath of the cool May air that hinted of newly bloomed spring beauties and trailing arbutus. She cocked her head to listen, peering through the mist.

Another raspy call came from overhead, and this time she recognized the sound. It belonged to a red-winged blackbird.

A breeze of relief whispered through her. The migratory birds were returning now. And if the birds had made it to the remote northern island, then maybe the supply ships would be able to reach Michilimackinac Island too. At least she would pray the ships would arrive soon, and put an end to their misery.

A twig snapped, and her gaze jumped back to the path. At the sight ahead, she froze.

There stood a loup-garou—the werewolf—half hidden by the mist, blocking her way, feet spread apart, tail poking out behind, and one ear pointing high.

Her blood turned as frigid as the lake water she'd waded in earlier when she climbed out of her birchbark canoe.

The loup-garou growled with a hacking cough. And then he took a swaying step toward her. "Give me your food."

Everything within her screamed to retreat, to disappear into the forest. With her knowledge of the woods, she could easily escape the beast. But fear planted her feet in the mud and refused to release them.

The werewolf lurched forward. With each step he took, his tail strangely changed into a long sword and his ear into an officer's hat that sat at an odd angle, as if he'd put it on backward.

"I know you have food." The words came out slurred. "And I command you to hand it over." He staggered nearer, and the mist seemed to evaporate, revealing an all-too familiar red coat.

This was no loup-garou. This was a menace even worse.

It was one of the British soldiers. The enemy. The *starving* enemy.

In fact, he was Lieutenant Steele, the quartermaster. And he was exactly the kind of danger she'd hoped to avoid.

She lifted her hand away from the two eggs in her pocket, not wanting to bring attention to her hidden treasure. And she resisted the urge to lay her hand protectively against the thin slice of ashcake and the few acorn shells tucked into her bodice. She could give him the fish if she must, but the eggs and the bread were her prized hoarding of the day.

His hollow gaze fixed hungrily on the trout. In the fog his gaunt face was more like that of a skeleton rising from the

grave rather than the werewolf she'd first imagined. "The fish, lass."

"Yes?"

"What would Ebenezer Whiley say if he discovered you were withholding some of your catch for yourself?" The question held a threat.

Everyone knew how stingy her stepfather was. Even the British soldiers who came to his tavern and store had learned he dealt a hard bargain. If Ebenezer found out that Angelique was holding back even a few small fish out of her morning deliveries, he'd do his best to stop her, and punish her harshly. Then what would become of Miriam?

Lieutenant Steele's lips twisted into a grin. "Ah, I see you don't want Mr. Whiley to learn about your cheating."

The soldier took another unsteady step. "As quartermaster I've been instructed by the general to help the commissary collect more food for the garrison this morning."

She didn't believe him for a second. With his bloodshot eyes and untidy appearance, she guessed he'd spent the night drinking and was on his way to the North Sally Port, hoping to sneak into the fort undetected.

She'd play along with his game. "Oh, I beg your pardon. In all my hard work this morning, I must have missed the sounding of reveille."

She knew for a fact the drummer and fifer hadn't woken the troops yet. She always listened for reveille. Even though it was played within the fort, the islanders used it as their clock. Ebenezer would expect her back shortly after the sounding.

But if Lieutenant Steele wanted to threaten her, then she'd do the same to him.

They both knew she could report him for being outside the fort. All the soldiers were restricted to their quarters

once the fort musicians played tap-too in the evening until reveille the next morning. Breaking the curfew could result in severe punishment.

Only the week before, a soldier had been caught outside the fort after hours. His sentence had been one hundred lashes with the cat-o'-nine-tails. The captain had reduced the lashes to seventy-five when the soldier had pleaded that hunger had driven him out to look for food.

“If you give me the fish,” the quartermaster said more soberly, as if he too remembered the recent whipping, “then we can pretend I never saw you and that you never saw me.”

She loosened her grip on the string of fish, hesitated only a moment, and then tossed them at his feet. Every muscle in her thin body tensed with the need to escape the moment he bent over to retrieve the fish.

But instead of going after the trout, he lunged at her with a quickness that belied his vulnerable state. His bony fingers circled her arm, and he yanked her against his emaciated frame with surprising strength.

She was too stunned to react.

“I think you’re hiding more food.” His sour breath fanned her cheek, making her want to retch. The hard bones of his ribs pressed against the thinly wrapped ashcake in her bodice.

She pushed at his chest. His red coat had become threadbare after the harsh winter. His hair was overlong, his face scruffy, and his eyes sunken into what at one time had been a handsome face. He was a sorry sight now.

After two years on the island, *all* the soldiers were a sorry sight. The winters on Michilimackinac were hard on even the most seasoned islander, much less a thin-skinned, poorly clad British regular.

“We’re all hungry,” she said quietly. “Please take the fish as my gift. Then let me be on my way.”

His grip wavered, but only for a second before tightening again. “Give me the rest of what you have. Now.”

“I can’t do that.”

He grunted and slipped his hand around her neck. His fingers coiled, cutting off her breath.

With a burst of panicked energy she kicked at him and plucked at his hand, trying to free her neck from his choking hold. But in his hunger-induced delirium, his strength was unshakable.

Her throat began to burn, and desperation dragged at her lungs. She needed a fresh breath, but no amount of twisting or grasping would loosen his clutch and allow the air through.

She could feel her eyes loll back into her head, and a wave of blackness crashed over her.

Was this how she was destined to die? On her beloved island, while fighting over the food she was determined to deliver to her starving friend?

A loud thwack came from behind the lieutenant, and instantly the deathly chain around her neck fell away.

Lieutenant Steele stared ahead blankly and then crumpled to the ground at her feet, sprawling into the mud with a splat.

She stumbled backward and gasped for air, wheezing through her bruised airway and staring at the motionless form.

At a sudden flash in the early morning mist, she ceased breathing.

There behind the lieutenant stood an even bigger apparition, another loup-garou, this one looming fiercer than the last. His long cloak swirled around deerskin leggings and a

loose leather shirt. He held an Ojibway Indian club that he'd obviously used on the quartermaster. A single strike with the dangerous round ball on its top often proved lethal.

The apparition toed the lieutenant with his moccasin boot.

Lieutenant Steele groaned, yet he didn't move.

Her rescuer stuffed the club into a belt tied around his waist. It was no ordinary belt, but the special woven sash belonging only to a voyageur.

Angelique's heart gave a rapid burst of excitement. Besides the sash, he also wore weather-worn buckskin, a red worsted cap, and a cloak that was really more of a capote—an Indian blanket coat.

He *was* a voyageur. There was no doubt about it.

But if he was one of the canoe-paddling fur traders, why was he here now? So early in the morning?

She glanced around the woods that lined the path. Usually when the voyageurs arrived back on the island every spring, they came in great numbers with laughter and singing.

But she saw no evidence of anyone else. The island hadn't had any communication with the outside world since the end of last fall and the onset of winter, when the ice had isolated them as it did every year.

The voyageur started to retreat as silently as he'd approached.

"Thank you for saving my life," she said, unwilling to let him leave just yet.

He nodded but continued to move away.

She had to know where he came from and whether the rest of the voyageurs were on the way. "Wait." She started after him, forcing her feet to move finally.

He held out a hand to stop her from coming any nearer.

"Who are you?" she asked.

He put a finger to his lips. As he did so, for the first time, he faced her directly and the shadows fell away.

She stifled a gasp.

It was Pierre Durant.

Even with the heavy layer of winter scruff that covered his chin and cheeks, she had no trouble recognizing the face beneath. His features hadn't changed much in the five years he'd been gone from the island.

He still had the same dashing good looks he'd always had. The deep, rich brown eyes that had always done funny things to her pulse, the unruly wavy dark hair, and the swarthy skin he'd inherited from his French father.

His legs were long, his shoulders broad. And beneath his Indian coat, his muscles bulged against the seams of his shirt.

Wonder tangled her tongue and made her shy and speechless. She waited for recognition to dawn, for his face to light up at the sight of her as it had so many times in the past.

But his eyes darted to the quartermaster lying prone in the mud and then to the woods that led to the west shore. A flicker of urgency crossed his face. When he glanced at her again, there was nothing in his eyes but irritation, as if she were an interruption he hadn't anticipated.

"I'm sorry, *mademoiselle*," he whispered tersely, "but I must ask that you speak to no one about our encounter."

Didn't he recognize her? She hadn't changed that much in five years, had she? Her fingers fluttered to her face. She rarely took the time to wash the grime away. She dressed plainly. And she always wore her long auburn hair tucked under her cap, the way Ebenezer required.

But couldn't Pierre see who she was anyway? She was still the same Angelique who had raced him along this very path more times than she could count. The same friend who had

climbed trees, and fished together with her, and gathered wild strawberries, and swum in the pond.

The quartermaster gave a groan and stirred.

Without breaking his stare on the soldier, Pierre began creeping backward through the dense foliage, climbing over windfall and tangles of branches.

“Where are you going?” She couldn’t possibly let him leave. Not yet. Not without knowing where he’d been, and why he’d come back to the island after so many years.

Once again he held out his hand to stop her from advancing. “Please, mademoiselle. You must pretend you never saw me.”

At the coldness in his voice, she halted. So he really didn’t know who she was? She fought back a wave of disappointment.

Part of her wanted to blurt out her name, to inform him that she was his childhood friend, that she hadn’t ever stopped thinking about him in all the years he’d been gone. And part of her wanted to tell him that since Jean had been forced off the island, she was the one keeping Miriam alive—that if it weren’t for her sacrifice and help, his mother would have died by now.

But Pierre was already disappearing into the mist. From the furtive glances he was casting, she had the suspicion something wasn’t right, that perhaps he was in some kind of trouble. Why else would someone come to the island before dawn and then attempt to slink away undetected?

She strained to see him and the red of his cap, but the fog swallowed him completely until he was gone. She had the urge to shout his name, but behind her the quartermaster moaned again. She spun and ran from the soldier, hastening down the path, needing to put as much distance between herself and Lieutenant Steele as possible.

In spite of the danger that lurked everywhere, she loved early mornings on the island, when everyone was still asleep, when she could pretend all was well and they weren't in the middle of a war, that they weren't slowly starving to death.

And she loved the spring, with the sweet cool air that came after the ruthless winter, the warmer temperatures that finally melted away the layers of snow and nurtured the island back to life.

If only she had time to linger and enjoy the beauty as she'd done so many times with Pierre and Jean when they'd been younger. But she couldn't dally or Ebenezer would suspect that she did more than fish every morning.

By the time she reached the clearing, the misty meadow, and Miriam's log cabin beyond, Angelique was breathing heavy. Pink tinted the fog, indicating the sun was rising and would soon chase away the mist.

Angelique took a deep breath and tried to steady herself before entering the small home that belonged to her friend.

"Good morning, Miriam," Angelique said, slipping through the doorway of the one-room home.

"You've been running." Through the darkness of the interior, Miriam's reply came from near the hearth. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine." She prayed Miriam would believe her.

From the rustle of straw, Angelique knew that Miriam was already hard at work weaving the hats she would sell to the visitors that came to the island during the summer. Thankfully, hat weaving was one thing Miriam could still do in spite of her failing eyesight.

Angelique loosened the string of her pocket, holding her breath, willing Miriam to share the news, to tell her she'd seen Pierre.

The rustling stilled, and silence filled the room.

“Something happened,” Miriam finally said quietly.

Angelique slipped the eggs from her pocket and placed them on the table. If only the dear woman weren’t so perceptive. “Did you have any visitors this morning?”

“Was I supposed to?”

Angelique reached into her bodice and pulled out the ash-cake she’d wrapped in a rag. She laid it on the table next to the eggs, then crossed the room and knelt before the dying embers.

Pierre was a louse. Why hadn’t he taken a few minutes out of his busy life to visit his mother? That wasn’t too much to ask of anyone, was it?

“You can tell me the truth, Angel,” Miriam said.

Angelique grasped a scant handful of the shavings and crumbles of bark that covered the bottom of the woodbox. “You’re almost out of wood. It’s a good thing the nights aren’t so cold anymore.”

“Who did you see this morning?” Miriam persisted.

Angelique sighed. She should have known she wouldn’t be able to avoid Miriam’s probing.

What should she reveal? That she’d been attacked by the fort’s quartermaster? Or that she’d seen Pierre? Which would cause Miriam less distress?

Telling her about Pierre would be much too cruel. What mother could bear the news that her long-lost son had returned but neglected to visit her?

“It’s nothing to worry about.” Angelique added the pieces of wood chips to the embers. “I ran into one of the soldiers on my way here this morning, and he demanded that I give him my catch of fish.”

Miriam’s chair scraped against the wooden floor. Through

the dim light beginning to filter in through the east window past the faded yellow calico curtains, Angelique could see her rise. “Did he hurt you?” Miriam’s voice was breathless.

Angelique pushed herself up and started across the room toward Miriam, wiping her dusty hands against her skirt. “Please don’t worry.”

Miriam grasped for Angelique. Her trembling fingers skimmed Angelique’s face, sliding over her cheeks, her nose, her eyes. In spite of her near blindness, Miriam found the chafed skin on her neck where Lieutenant Steele had nearly choked her. “He hurt you, didn’t he?”

“Only a little.” Angelique lifted her hand to Miriam’s cheek and caressed it with all the love she had for the woman who was more of a mother to her than her own had ever been.

In spite of Miriam’s age, her cheeks were still smooth and unlined beneath Angelique’s fingers, which were as scratchy as the sandstone cliffs along the shore.

Angelique blamed her rough skin on the daily ice fishing and the exposure to the frigid temperatures and icy water that often left the skin on her fingers cracked and bleeding.

“You must stop coming to me,” Miriam whispered, gently tracing the swollen skin around Angelique’s neck. “It’s too dangerous for you.”

“I’ll be more careful tomorrow.”

Miriam’s fingers fell away, and Angelique helped guide her friend to the table, to the eggs and the ashcake. “Have you given me your own breakfast again?”

“No. It’s for you.” The sight of the food gnawed at the lining of Angelique’s stomach. But she turned away from Miriam before the woman could sense the truth—that she had indeed given up her meager fare of coveted bread, part of her dinner from the previous evening.

“At least eat half of it, Angel,” Miriam said.

“I’ll have my breakfast once I return to the inn.” Angelique crossed the room and knelt in front of the hearth again. “Betty will have fried fish.”

At least she hoped Ebenezer’s new wife would give her something for her breakfast.

“Please eat it, Miriam.” Angelique bent near the embers, blew on them, and was rewarded with a glow of orange, a few sparks, and a waft of smoke.

Miriam never complained about her hunger or the scanty rationing. But the thin shoulders, bony arms, and loose bodice were testament to the constant struggle with starvation.

“I have a few acorn shells too,” Angelique said. “I’ll start the fire and then you can steep them for tea.” She hated to leave Miriam alone with the fire and any form of cooking. The blisters from the last burn on the back of Miriam’s hand had only recently healed.

“God is with us, Angel,” Miriam said. “Whatever problems may come, He’s our unchanging, solid rock. If we’re standing on Him, nothing will shake us.”

Angelique wanted to believe Miriam. But *unchanging* and *solid* were foreign words to her. There had never been anything even remotely solid about her life.

“We’ll just keep praying the war will be over this summer and that Jean will be able to return to us soon. That you’ll be able to marry him finally. And be safe.”

Jean—kind, considerate, steady Jean. He might be Pierre’s brother, but he was nothing like him. And even if Jean was away fighting with the Americans, they knew without a doubt he would return when he could.

A renewed stab of frustration sliced through Angelique. Why hadn’t Pierre stopped to visit his mother? If he had, he

would have seen how poor she'd become, how little she had without Jean there to take care of her, and how desperately she needed help.

But as much as she wanted to believe that Pierre would have stayed to help his mother if only he were aware of her hardships, she also knew Pierre was wild at heart and forever dreaming of adventure.

He would never be the steady source of help either of them needed.

Yes, it was for the best that Pierre had not visited Miriam, that he'd not gotten their hopes up.

In fact, it was probably better for all of their sakes if Pierre didn't come back at all.