

**Part 1**

***Chapter 2***

**The Lily-White Boys, Clothèd All In Green, Ho**

“There he is.” Will pointed to a figure in the near distance.

We focused on a man standing astride a log that he had secured to the logging wagon. He was not more than forty yards from us, driving a team of horses out of the bush.

We squinted and held our hands up to our eyes to watch as man and wagon moved closer and, while we stared at him expectantly, Will swung into action and waved him over and after that nobody said a word.

Denigrating the importance of beauty, a boney-faced Ferguson was always a little starved for it. Gaping at strangers was rude. But perhaps forgivable. Gape

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I did. The man's skin colour was dark. A ruddy brown. I blinked a few times to make sure I was seeing what I was seeing because, truly, the Indian was most comely-featured. He should not have been. He was a man of the forest and I knew my Grimm. He was wearing the loose canvas frock of the lumberman and brought the team into the middle of the sun-dappled bush road. We heard the jingling of the brass bells that decorated the harnesses and, by the Great Scot, I could feel my nerves start up a-jingling too.

The man that they called Squire was busy unhitching the team from the logging wagon and, while we waited for him, Will explained that the native was an axe man, hired by township surveyors. Wilmot's men had started a tradition. They took their chainmen from York and hired Mohawks from the Grand River to do the chopping and axe work but, in spite of all that coordinating and planning, construction was right now at a standstill. Squire had had to take a forced holiday from road building in Reach Township because of the recent flooding. William had told Father only yesterday that Cornelius had hired someone from Reach to haul logs at the mill and added that the kid was only nineteen but skilled and reasonably good with horses and that Poco and Cap'n could perform feats of pulling.

Will beckoned again. Squire commanded his straining, sweating, mane-tossing team to whoa and he sauntered over our way as cool and self-satisfied as Little Red Cap's wolf after eating the Grandmother. The Grandmother, so the story goes, was scarcely able to breathe while she was in the belly of the wolf. I could sympathize. For some reason, although free and uneaten, I was consumed by my own breathlessness.

Will urged Squire to hurry.

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Squire didn't hurry but he wasn't moving slowly either and he drew closer to our group and raised a raven eyebrow to his hairline when he clapped eyes on me.

I was a dishevelled and near-naked apparition, in much the same winded condition as his horses. It occurred to me to curse the fact that Rebecca was generally right in her warnings but at this point one could do nothing other than forge ahead and my head came up in defiance and with difficulty I restrained myself from giving a little whinny because I guessed what Squire might be thinking about women of the Home District. Very homely.

Cornelius looked hunted. He stood motionless, head bowed, hands together like a worshipper of idols. He was the man in charge of the sawmill but such a mollycoddle that he said not a word to anyone as Squire approached and someone needed to break the silence because the four of us stood within chatting proximity and it was embarrassing to act taken aback merely upon encountering a wild Indian.

Finally, my brother took the lead. "Yah, well, Mr. er, Squire, this here's my sister, Miss Jennet Ferguson."

William read a dishevelled mind, whirling under an insolent façade and shook his head in frustration but did his duty. "Jennie, Squire, son of David."

"How are you, Jennie?" asked Squire, son of David, opting to use my family name. It wasn't a greeting. He meant what he said. He had put his hands on his waist. Approving coal-black eyes looked at me from under two pointy brows. He looked serious. "I am on the log. I see you run. Head high. Very fast, very, ah, very nice."

He was just over my height, maybe five-foot eight inches. Not a tall six-footer like our Will. The logging shirt's hem reached to Squire's hips and I could tell that the Mohawk was slight through the hips and strong through the shoulders and had

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the kind of good looks, the burnished blue raven hair, tight-braided, and the broad straight nose and wide forehead and high cheekbones and square jaw that would cause Becky to sizzle. I'd imagined that one day I might meet a woodland dweller and I'd laugh at the Brothers Grimm because the tales had given me bad dreams but I'd never, ever, expected someone who looked like this one to emerge from the forest. At the very least, I expected satyrs in enticing form. With cloven hooves. And erect ... flutes.

"Fine, oh yes, fine, fine, Squire. Thank you sae much for asking." Drawing room conversation was not beyond my reach and I repeated to Squire more or less what I had told Cornelius and Will. "It's our Mam who's hurt. By the burn near our house. Rebecca's with her. She has a dislocated shoulder for sure. Maybe broken limbs."

"Ah. Too bad."

Squire turned back and said over his shoulder that he intended to unharness the team and declared we'd make quick time to our house if we rode the horses.

Corny cleared his throat to speak. "I'll come too." Forgetting he was even there, Will and I both started.

In the end, all was well. Squire treated Mam tenderly, cooing and shushing and tut-tutting as though she were one of his horses. Mam calmed down. Stress and pain and helplessness had made her rely on the Mohawk. Who was she to question him or his methods? He told her that in her fall she had cracked a couple of ribs and dislocated her right shoulder. Mam smiled. The shoulder was not a big surprise. Squire said she had bruised her right elbow too, but nothing was broken.

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What did Mam think as she looked into the onyx eyes of a man so uncommon in her European world? She never said. What would she say, anyway? Compassion reads the same whether it comes from acquaintance or stranger. The Indian saw animal suffering. Mam saw divine relief. You find yourself at the beginning of the world and you need help and you aren't about to pull rank and start branding people who don't look like you because, truthfully, you don't have the option. Squire secured Mam's bruised left elbow in a sling filled with moss and poor Will and Cornelius stood out of the way and likely felt as out of place as they looked.

The Mohawk was at home on the forested side of the burn and he was precise and disturbed nothing too much and found everything he needed at hand. Mam was thankful. Her ribs and her elbow were steadied with material from my old petticoat and her eyes cleared as the shocks of pain receded from her body. Her oft-dislocated right shoulder had required from Squire the usual jolt of unpleasantness. We all knew what the stretch, pull and twist meant. Squire stretched and pulled Mam's arm and twisted it and the shoulder slipped itself into the right position, back in the socket. Squire was quick. Old Doc Wallace could take lessons.

Mam looked radiant. No doubt a fever was setting in. Or the cannabis smoke had saturated her brain. It was Becky who was in bad shape. She'd hunkered down at Mam's side and was behaving more like Cornelius than Cornelius. Her face was suffused with serenity and her eyes had the vacant staring look of the impaired. She started to coo at Mam just like Squire had done because, I suppose, she actually was impaired. Her cooing must have amused the Mohawk because he paused in his examination of Mam's elbow to give Becky a crooked grin and say to her, "Good, good."

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Good? Great! I thought. She will be mortified when this news gets back to her. A frisson of resentment shivered through me.

Mam needed to move from the creek bank and get to the house and the move would require strength and the moment of truth was upon us. How could we shift her and get her sore body back to the house without renewing her pain or further damaging her ribs and innards? "Gently, mind her shoulder." Will, Cornelius and Squire lifted Mam and crossed the stream. The men were not as neat as we had been and they waded through the water and in the main were indifferent to the soaking they gave their boots and trousers and Squire's high moccasins and fringed leggings turned black. They transported Mam into the house and deposited her on the bed in the downstairs bedroom. A whiff of her dress brought a look of serenity to my face but I had no time to enjoy it because I wanted my mother safe in her bed and then Becky was making hot tea. Finally I had a minute to catch my breath.

The nerve-racking rescue gave me time to remember how furious I was with William because he'd abandoned me on the mill road and not taken me but picked up Cornelius instead. Squire had unhitched the horses and rapidly rubbed the dust off them and put ratty blankets on their backs, Poco first, Cap'n afterward, and he'd handed Poco over to William. William, a natural rider, even an excellent bareback rider, had scooted aboard Poco and dropped his arm down for Corny, who'd jumped up behind him. The black horses, panting and balking scant minutes ago, jumped for joy. Poco gained a speedy second wind and she pranced and was eager to be running free or as free as she could be with a couple of heavyweights on her back. Squire was already on Cap'n and half a mile down the road.

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Never in my life had I experienced such anger. Becky irritated me but this was a hundred times worse. How could Will have reached for Cornelius and left me there, his own sister, and the one who had run two miles to get him because I had known with a heart full of the purest trust that he would help our Mam? How could he have jumped so cavalierly on a horse, old incredible Poco or whatever her name was, and forgotten me? “Goddam it, Will.” I shouted after him.

My gut heaved in the remembering. On the Gould’s mill road I was alone, as dowdy as Dobbin’s straw hat, as clear as naked, frazzled from running and worried sick about our mother.

And I was seething. Blind with rage, as they say. Because I did not see them double back. In an instant there was a shuffling next to me. Hail, the wolf prince. And Cap’n. What a staggeringly fine horse.

Cap’n put his small black velvet nose forward as though to nuzzle my arm and Squire greeted my burst-lung sighs of relief and furious eye-wipings with a shake of his head and a sardonically lifted eyebrow that was feathered like a raven’s quill and as black as India ink and I imagined he was thinking in Mohawk, something like, “Ugly woman should run home.”

“Hop up,” was what Squire said. Just as William had reached for Cornelius, Squire lowered his arm for me. Squire pulled and I scrambled up and Cap’n shuddered as he felt my extra weight come barrelling down on his back but the horse took off like an American musket ball because it was better to run like hell than haul logs.

We galloped down the Gould’s mill road. We said nothing. Not a word. The race home made me forget everything. I was airborne and clinging for dear life to the body of a ridiculously attractive man and we were riding Cap’n, hell-bent for

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laurels. The possibility of adventure had not entered the picture of my life, hours ago, when the quilts had needed wringing out. My senses were alive to more than bluing and potash.

The ride has lived with me throughout my life because when you are young, you can inhale happiness. I was aware of the way the man smelled and I wondered how it was possible that the scent that permeated my being was so fine. He smelled like a man who smoked too much and rode too fast. He was a creature of the forest but he was as agreeable as horses and maple sugar and corn silk. Hanging on to his body and inhaling his beauty was heady stuff for the poor Scottish woman with the frizzled hair and the big nose whose sole claim to fame was that she could run like a steeplechaser.

After all the kafuffle of dinner had died down and the men had returned to the Gould's sawmill, Rebecca and I started in on the washing up. "Oh, yes. You cooed like a carrier pigeon. You imitated him just so. Mmmm-mmmm." Becky was shocked. Rubbing salt in her open wound was my pleasure. Well, infatuation is a wound, is it not? The fact that Squire and Becky would like each other occurred to me on the ride home and scorn was my usual recourse with my sister because she was as dear as a fox kit and beat me at everything except running and reading and Will teased me about it, saying that I could run faster and farther than Becky could throw a cookbook.

"No. Tell me I didn't." Becky was in low spirits and I nearly relented because her face had fallen just like her missionary cake. The cake was dribbling sugary plum preserves on her hands and she carried it from the dining room table into the summer kitchen and gingerly put it down on the sideboard.



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Squire had stayed for noon dinner because Mam, who was still happy for one reason or another, had called out an invitation to him from her bedroom on the main floor, right off the dining room. Yesterday, being Sunday, we had had fresh vegetable chowder, beef loaf, cold baked ham, lettuce tips, applesauce, tomato relish, and potato bread, with Becky's flat and soggy plum-filled missionary cake for dessert. My sister had insisted on using Mam's three-legged cast-iron spider and she'd baked the cake batter in the spider over the smouldering coals of the wood stove and for some inexplicable reason the result was a fiasco. Today, with Mam out of commission, we had much the same thing as we'd had yesterday, even the awful cake.

From her bed, Mam gave the orders for our meal and insisted that we serve Becky's cake to finish the dinner with something sweet.

William and Cornelius would eat sawdust. The cake went down fine with them. "It all goes to the same place." William gave a shrug of indifference and he sounded like our old Grandpa Graham, who'd made this gastronomic comment as regularly as he ate.

From the bedroom, Mam sighed and pushed away her chowder.

Whatever my brother said was all right with Cornelius. William made an assertion and Corny, an old chip in the porridge, nodded. Hearing that all food goes to the same place made Corny laugh but his open mouth was full of plum preserves and his teeth were as purple as the ribbon in Becky's hair and my innards flipped. I shook my head.

Squire noticed. He noticed because he was attentive to the family and the food and our customs. He didn't seem to miss a thing but perhaps he mistook my

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glower at Will and Cornelius as a plea to respect Becky's feelings and not hurt her about the gluey cake.

Squire drew his eyes away from me to look at his own plate, heaped high with yellow goop and plum preserves, and he started to eat his portion of dessert. He looked up and smiled at Becky. She shook her brown curls and smiled back. Oh, puke, I thought.

"Cornelius says you're an Indian doc, Squire." William spoke while he scooped up the remains of his cake with his spoon and his thumb. At the mere mention of his name, Cornelius, evidently with a whole orchard of colours at his command, blushed like a snow apple.

"Naw. Horse doc more like. I make do." Squire drank his tea and was unfazed by the many-hued Cornelius and the grating noises of cake-scooping William.

William and Cornelius would abandon us to our own plans after dinner. That would be cleaning up after them, they agreed, and beamed at each other because they were so clever at dumping the chores on us. They called out to Mam that they were returning to the Gould's mill because they wanted to finish the boards for the dormers on our new house.

Squire thanked our Mam for feeding him and he gave her arm and shoulders another quick check and pronounced her on the road to recovery and was up on Cap'n and away.

Off down the road the Cap'n galloped and William and Cornelius followed on Poco as fast as the over-laden horse could go. Squire's image disappeared in a puff of road dust. The prince returned to Froggie Land.

Becky and I watched them ride into the distance. We felt glum and leaned on the hefty trunk of the chestnut tree beside the house and were too lifeless to

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talk and too hot to budge and took a moment to pull ourselves together because the magic had gone out of the day. We stayed in the yard until we could not loiter about for another minute without feeling remorseful about the dinner dishes. We cleared the table and washed and put away the china that had once belonged to Granny Graham in Cummertrees. Mam had wanted us to use her good set for our honoured guest. We stacked up plates on the white pine hutch and argued and bickered. My score on the dartboard of our thin skins was the cooing comment. Becky'd felt bad about being forced to serve her cake and, to get even, she'd had another go at my dire costume and severe hairbun.

The early-afternoon sun was searing and our fading into silence seemed best. Mam slept. We knew we shouldn't disturb her. A white-throated sparrow perched on a branch of our rock elm tree. The sparrow's song and the odour of lilacs converged and drifted into the kitchen through the open back door. A couple of wayward darning needles, locked together in amorous display, rasped against the screen. Other than that, it was as though the heat was a bell jar that had descended upon us.

Once the noonday chores were done we tackled the fallen bedding. We picked up the soiled stuff, piece by piece, and carried it to the yard and it seemed a lifetime ago that we had heard Mam's call for help and a million years ago since I had sat on the back of Cap'n, hanging on tight to Squire.

Not speaking, Becky and I took the wood pegs off the quilts, stacked the bedding in the basket, and prepared to start the backbreaking process of washing the entire tangle all over again. We needed enough hot water for soapsuds and enough cold water for rinsing. We set up a rack over the outdoor fire pit and heated the water in our metal washtub. I took the laundry stick and started to stir

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the bedding around and around until it looked as though a giant turbaned jinni lived inside. Then I scrubbed. The washboard slipped. Water splashed us.

We were hotter than before and supremely irritated and Becky pulled the lightweight quilts out of the soapy container and threw them in the cold-water tub. I pondered aloud about getting another rinse tub to make sure we'd got out the lard soap. Becky refused. She grabbed a cover and announced imperiously that there was no residue. We hauled a quilt over to our wringer. Our new wringer had rollers and a crank that would turn the rollers and squeeze the rinse water out of the blankets.

Our attention was on the wringer but the sound of hoof beats made us stop cranking the rollers. The flattened coverlet bent dangerously earthward and Becky picked up the squeezed-out, rolled-up quilt and threw it around her neck.

William, riding on Poco, ripped through the white gate into the farmyard. He was sweaty, dripping like a glass of cold water, but, for once, I noticed, he was without that slug, Cornelius. He was mad about something and jumped down from the lathered horse and threw his straw hat in the dust all in one angry move.

Becky, draped like a damp, colourful but impecunious Roman senator, looked up from the folds of the bedding. "Why're you here? What's wrong?"

I snatched at the quilt swinging from Becky's back but missed and I said to Will. "How come you have ... what's her name ... Poco?"

"Your cake is what's wrong." William glared at Becky and grabbed Poco's reins and started to lead her to the barn but then he turned from Becky and looked at me. His voice was leaden. "Squire loaned her to me, Jennie."

"What do you mean, my cake is what's wrong?" Becky was close to tears and stumbled after our brother and she tripped on the quilt every time she moved.

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“Give me that.” I ran after her and made myself sound calm but my mood was as tart as cider because it would take two weeks of monumental scrubbing to get the mud out. I lunged at the gingham and sacking coverlet but put my arm down when I heard what William said to her.

“Shit, Beck, your cake made Squire ill.” William pursed his mouth at the memory. “He’s back there.” At this point, Will waved his thumb over his shoulder to indicate the bush land, “Honking up his insides, sick as a wolf.”

“Oh good God.” I said, disgusted. Our brother was some graphic, even for a Ferguson.

Becky reacted to William’s news too. “Blessed King Billie,” she said and put her hand over her mouth. There was little doubt in my mind that she didn’t care a fig for Squire and was merely feeling sorry for herself because then she moaned and doubled over and held her own stomach but her sudden bellyache was surely in sympathy with the news she’d just heard. She’d been fine two seconds ago.

“Wait a minute.” My mind was skipping over the people at the table for noon dinner. “Will, you’re not sick. I’m not sick. Becky’s cake was mushy but Corny loved it and he’s not sick either, right?”

“Cornelius isn’t sick, no. So what does that prove? Squire IS sick. Without his help with the horses we can’t haul the logs. The horses won’t work and our Father’ll be right riled up at me for not havin’ the boards ready for framin’ the dormers. Your cake has wasted a whole half-day for us, Beck.” Will was angry and not about to see reason in the loop of events he’d shaped to his advantage and he bent over and picked up a pebble and tossed it at the white fence around the corral.

I was ready to hit him but I didn’t because defending Becky never came easy. “HOW can you blame Rebecca’s cake?”

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“Squire says he can’t eat wheat.”

Becky straightened up. “What? Who ever heard of someone who can’t eat wheat?” We could see she was ready to defend her cake. Her tone had changed because she knew that the plums in the filling were not full of rat poison.

Will stood in front of Rebecca and put his hands on his hips. “Lots of folks can’t eat wheat. Maybe especially them that’s grown up on a diet of taties. Or meat. Or beans, corn and squash. Indians call ‘em the three sisters.”

“Three sisters be damned. No wheat? Why didn’t he just say so?” Becky grabbed him by the arm and yanked hard. “Did Squire eat that horrible cake to make a fool of me?”

In the face of Becky’s indignation, Will didn’t seem cross any more, only beat. “Dunno, Beck.” He answered her first question. Then he answered her second. “Guess you could look at it like that.”

“Maybe he was trying to impress us.”

William shrugged. “Maybe.” He kicked at a clump of quack grass. “More’n likely he was trying not to offend you.”

Without much success, I thought. Rebecca held the clammy quilt over her shoulder and appeared to have decided that she was the missionary-cake baker of the week.

“Give me that quilt.” I took the wet coverlet from my sister. “You go with Will to the barn and I’ll hang it on the line.”

At the trough, Poco lapped up water and William left her there to drink and headed to the barn and Becky marched alongside, proclaiming her innocence. The horse’s head drooped and she drank again. Poor girl, I thought to myself. Poco could use a rest and no doubt her master could too.

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Squire's being sick at the stomach reminded me that crossing the ocean to come to British North America was vile, just as vile as you can imagine. After what seemed like years on the ocean, but only seven weeks after all, we'd arrived in Quebec. From Quebec, we'd travelled in a Durham boat to Montreal, then on a schooner from Montreal to Prescott. From Prescott we'd proceeded to York on the steamboat Queenston. We had come to the earth's drop-off point. We were at the very rim of the planet and still had more journeying to do.

We had to go deeper into the bush. Tired, dirty and all talked out. We'd continued by wagon to Home District where we were to locate a certain Mr. Ritchie in the Township of Medonto to purchase our Crown land. We arrived in Uxbridge to take up our homestead and our old-world currency was all but spent, but so what? Our new-world education was on the rise. We had bought and tried our first taste of fresh baker's bread and fresh butter. Father had claimed an unsoiled copy of the *Cobourg Star* from the cast-offs of another traveller. We had dodged the cholera epidemic. We'd survived our new-world experience with fingers and toes intact and it did not occur to our parents or any of us that we Fergusons were not pioneers or that the land was anything but empty, give or take the wildlife. Yes, we'd arrived, oh, how did the American columnist put it? We'd arrived at "a fresh green breast of the new world." The writer believed the lily-white boys had found a new home "commensurate to our capacity for wonder" and, in the main, the Fergusons agreed. We were members of the immigrants' survivor club. We never once imagined it might be difficult for Indigenous people to survive us. The presence of the Mohawk should have served as a reminder that the land we occupied was the same fresh green breast that had been nourishing millions and millions of people for many millennia. New white fences around new

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corrals and new European manners and new ways and new stock animals and new parasites and new diseases did not make the green breast any fresher and certainly not just because we said so but, quite frankly, who'd want to let an uncomfortable thought like that fully sink in? So we didn't. At least, I didn't. Not then.

Had Squire eaten Becky's cake to make an impression? Probably not.

Squire was that attentive. He doubtless had tried to spare our sister shame because Becky had a teasing manner and she knew it and he knew it and he'd not wanted to embarrass her. Will was put out because a common labourer, who, incidentally, had saved his mother from agony and injury, had taken sick and cut short the working day.

It was too bad that Squire was "honking up his insides" and I hoped he wouldn't hold a grudge against us for giving him bad food and he would never learn his act of generosity had angered Will and caused discord in our family.

I was as sentimental and soft in the head as an old pumpkin and Father often decried the stubbornness in me that refused to see reason. We should try to live our lives to best advantage, Father told us.

Fine with me. Even so, some of our neighbours called us stiff-necked. Were we stiff-necked? Were we such unpleasant people, so insufferably narrow-minded and full of high and mighty prejudices that we didn't know how to express our gratitude? Didn't we know we carried an obligation to the Indian who had placed himself at our disposal?

Will and Becky vanished into the barn. I pegged the rinsed and wrung quilts on the clothesline and went into the house to check on Mam. Perhaps she was awake. I wanted to tell her that I had remembered a childhood dream and ask



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her whether she felt well enough to hear it again because Mam was sure there were many kinds of knowing. Some knowing we were born with and some we got from experience and some came to us in dreams but it didn't take anything metaphysical to tell me that Squire must have a poor opinion of the young Fergusons.