

The
Umbrella
Mender

A NOVEL

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A Buckrider Book

TWO

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THEY HAD ANOTHER HOUR OF LIGHT if they were lucky. Lachlan stood beside her and squinted upstream as if by force of will alone the HBC *Mercer* could be made to appear on the horizon. The hospital dock dipped with the irregular rhythm of every impatient shift of his weight. It wasn't the first time the survey boat was late, but that wasn't it: he was not, by nature, an impatient man. The restlessness Hazel knew well, and it was born of a genuine appetite for the work they'd both come here to do. The boat they waited for carried more than a dozen Inuit patients, every one of them with disease-clouded lungs, from Great Whale and a few posts further north.

Yesterday she'd stood at his office door and watched him lift one spectral x-ray film after another to the light box, saw him shake his

head in disbelief, heard the repeated catch in his throat. The swaths of gauzy clouds on this lot of chest films, flown in from Great Whale for him to examine, seemed to choke the air out of his own lungs. The rate of tuberculosis infection was worse than he had expected, worse than he'd seen in any other Inuit community, and she knew that this reality would cast doubt on all of his preparations. Even now he'd be recalculating dosages, recounting beds and rewriting requisitions, an endless series of minute adjustments to the running tally in his head. Only the boat's arrival would slow this constant computation, and then only temporarily. His agitation came off him like smoke.

Hazel had done everything she could do. Extra beds were ready, the kitchen was preparing broth and bread, a dispensary inventory waited on his desk. She was beginning to wonder whether she should check in with Cook when she heard the boat. There it was at the bend in the channel, skimming the north shore of Sawpit Island, mainsail down. The light wind was a hand run the wrong way against the surface of the water and the sound of the boat's hull skipping across it was a drum roll. She checked her watch. Nine forty-five. It would easily be ten-thirty by the time they were settled in the wards.

“How many children this time?”

“Four for certain, three others for a closer look. With any luck we'll be sending those home tomorrow.” Lachlan slid his hand through uncombed auburn hair that was weeks beyond a haircut. “We've got to have better equipment. Three blurry films is three too many.”

She could make out movement at the bow and along the side, black-haired shapes of varying sizes lined against the railing and leaning toward shore. Curiosity was fine, better than reluctance by a long shot and easier to deal with.

The boat cut the engine and the grinding mechanical chug stopped. Lachlan set his clipboard down and caught the rope

that Henry threw, then wound it around the post nearest him. He moved with surgical elegance and tied the knot as though he was a career deckhand, not a tuberculosis specialist from southern Ontario and chief of staff in the new hospital behind them. He was utterly without pretense, as though there was nothing unusual about the way he was disregarding the social hierarchy by performing this simple labour. Not a single doctor she'd worked with before Lachlan Davies would have dreamed of doing the work of a deckhand. But she wouldn't have followed any of them to a remote northern outpost, either.

Hazel stood near the gangplank and held out her hand. A young woman stepped forward first. Oil-black braids snaked down her white wool parka and she wore several southern dresses under it, layered for warmth.

"*Aye*," she said. Her calloused grip of Hazel's hand was firm. "*Nakurmiik*."

"She says thank you," Lachlan said, unnecessarily. Hazel knew she had much to learn of the Inuit language, but these were words she'd understood for months. He motioned for the woman to stand aside so the others could disembark. "Check them as they come off the boat. See if any need help getting up the hill."

The back door to the hospital was less than a hundred feet from the dock, but by the skeletal touch of her fingers, Hazel knew that the next patient wouldn't make it on her own. She was a sparrow of a woman, no more than eighty pounds. Her skin was bloodless and translucent as tissue paper and her cheeks were hollow and flushed with the fire of the disease. In her two years of TB nursing Hazel had only seen a handful of patients as far gone. They'd do what they could.

The woman's knees gave out as her feet touched the dock. Hazel caught her under the arms and leaned against the railing for support. Henry stepped deftly around the other patients on the

boat and gathered the woman into his arms. He was no taller than Hazel was, and ordinarily she would have insisted that she could carry her own weight, but she let him do this.

The woman's head lolled and her dark eyes were fixed, staring. Her delicate arms hung from their sockets. Nothing of the struggle for life remained in her emaciated body. Lachlan pressed two fingers to the side of her neck and swore under his breath.

"Get her to a stretcher, Henry. Now." He took one long-legged stride up the ramp for every two of Henry's and yanked the hospital door open. "Oxygen, stat! Where are you people?"

The door slammed behind them. The rest of the patients on the boat shuffled into a nervous, crooked line in front of Hazel. She picked up the clipboard and began to check her list against the government identification discs that hung on leather cords around their necks. Charlie Wilcox, pale with seasickness as always but uncharacteristically dishevelled, made his unsteady way off the boat. "Nineteen by my count, Doctor Wilcox. Your list says twenty?"

"Yes, twenty. Count again."

Still nineteen, and only six children. The deck of the *Mercer*, a forty-five-foot Peterhead on loan to Indian Health Services from the Hudson's Bay Company for the summer x-ray survey of the northern communities, was small enough to take in with a glance, and the hold was empty. She scanned the deck again. There, in the pile of canvas pooled around the base of the mast, the slightest twitch. Aha. She stepped on board. The canvas was motionless now; the vibration of her steps on the deck must have done it. No matter, now that she knew where the child was hiding. She crouched beside the mast and lifted a corner of the sail.

The child appeared by degrees, the fringed shape of the mukluk, the smooth tan of the leather legging, the eggshell white of the wool parka. Her need for comfort was clear and urgent and Hazel reached out instinctively, but the child shrank from her. Hazel sat

back on her heels. She'd still not even glimpsed her face; the girl faced the mast and clung to it. Hazel let the sail settle around the two of them, closed her eyes and listened to the uneven rattle of the girl's breathing. The fact that she wouldn't make eye contact left Hazel with few options. Her grasp of Inuktitut was stronger every day but couldn't be considered anything more than fledgling, wholly inadequate for negotiation, and she refused to add to the trauma of the trip by taking the sick child off the boat by force.

A lullaby she'd heard Cree women singing to their children came into her head just then, and she began to hum it. The rattle of the girl's breath quieted for a few bars, then resumed. If only she'd thought to pocket some raisins or candy before leaving the hospital. It had worked before. She backed out and replaced the canvas.

"Is the child's mother here, Doctor Wilcox?"

Charlie thumbed through the papers he was carrying. Before he could answer, Lachlan strode back down the ramp. Hazel couldn't read his expression. Had he been able to revive the old woman? He faced the group of new patients. "*Kinnaup paninga?*"

The woman nearest Lachlan frowned and spoke at rapid pace. Anyone could have deduced what she was saying by the keening rhythm of the words. The girl's mother had been left behind. It was not uncommon in this situation. Sympathetic murmurs moved through the group.

"Your vocabulary has improved," Charlie said. It wasn't a compliment.

Lachlan blinked. "Not by nearly enough, but now I know that this child's mother isn't in the group. Can you tell me anything else about her?"

"Of course I can. I was checking my notes to be sure I had the right child." His curly hair seemed to stand on end and his blue-green eyes had gone flinty. It was common knowledge that Charlie

had also applied for chief of staff when the hospital opened, and he'd never really been able to let it go. Why he'd agreed to come as a staff physician was a mystery. "Her mother was absent. Dead. Who knows. Just missing and no time to waste searching for her. It was a job persuading the father to let her come with us."

"When you say persuade, what you mean is . . . ?"

A familiar chasm opened between them. Charlie's shoulders stiffened and Lachlan's head tilted aggressively toward him. Hazel was not optimistic that they'd be able to sidestep their differences. The hours they'd been keeping were long and she knew, now, what the edge in Lachlan's voice meant. She'd known it from the minute she'd taken the old woman's hand in her own, but the Inuit elder hadn't even made it inside the hospital. It was their first loss. Even if he'd expected it, Lachlan would be counting it as a personal failure. It wasn't so much that his perfect record was broken as the unalterable fact of a death on his watch. She'd never known him to accept it easily.

"I mean that I did what was necessary, Davies, as you would have. The x-ray said what it said. You read it yourself and judged her in need of treatment, and that is why I brought her back. You know as well as I do that this is a war. We can, at least, agree on that." The ends of his words had become clipped, staccato like gunfire. "Extraordinary times, extraordinary measures."

The height difference between the men was something she rarely noticed, and though Lachlan was a full head taller he would not normally have emphasized it. But now he took a step closer to Charlie so that the shorter man was forced to look up at him. The men had a slim build in common, but where Charlie's height made him trim, Lachlan was a sapling reaching for sunlight. "Families aren't to be casualties, Wilcox. We have discussed this, have we not?"

"The hospital is over capacity, as you are no doubt aware," Charlie said, backing up the slope until they were eye to eye again.

“Would you have me bring the healthy population, too? Where, exactly, would you like me to put them?”

The group of patients behind the doctors had fallen mute, watchful; the edge in the men’s voices was independent of language. The familiarity of the scene didn’t make it easier for Hazel to stomach. These people had made a long journey and were not only ill but exhausted. Both men knew that there was work to be done, sick to be healed, a country to be rid of disease. The cure had been a long time coming and now they held it in their hands. This grappling for power was an indulgence they couldn’t afford.

She cleared her throat and nodded toward the boat. “Gentlemen.” Before either could react, the woman who had come off the boat first stepped between them and back onto the deck of the *Mercer*. She ducked her head under the sail and then lifted it over her body. Hazel strained to hear what she said, but there was no further sound until the woman worked her way free of the canvas, holding the child’s hand. They walked together past the doctors and stood with the others.

For several moments, no one moved. The water lapped the shore like a second heartbeat. Hazel became aware of the slow, rhythmic thud of the boat’s hull against the dock and wondered who would break the silence. If she’d been a betting woman, she’d have laid her money on Lachlan: of the two, he was likeliest to back away from conflict first, if only to clear away the detritus of untidy emotions. Henry pushed up the sleeves of his plaid work shirt and dropped a pair of rubber mooring buoys over the side of the boat.

Lachlan slid his wire-framed glasses from his face, closed his eyes and massaged his temples. His struggle with the volley of his conflicting emotions was brief, betrayed only by a twitch of an eyebrow. When he put his glasses back on, the tension was gone.

“Well then, Doctor Wilcox, miles to go before we sleep. Shall we?” If she hadn’t known them both so well she might have assumed

he was having a pleasant conversation with an old friend. He waited for the other man. Charlie frowned and hesitated a moment, then picked up his bags. “We should have a look at those x-rays you sent.”

Lachlan turned to her. “Nurse MacPherson, take the women and children and get Joseph to help with the men. Check for anything obvious and let them settle in. We’ll start proper exams first thing tomorrow morning.”

He and Charlie led the way up the ramp behind the hospital. The sun had set and the only sound from the new patients was the loose rattle of their coughing. Most knew they were sick and wanted help. Success in persuading them to board the white medics’ boat depended on that; Henry Echum’s presence on the *Mercer* was no real consolation where the culture gap was concerned. His mother tongue was Cree and he knew only a smattering of Inuktitut, only slightly more than Lachlan did. The hospital’s only Inuit orderly wouldn’t go out on the survey boat no matter what Lachlan said. Hazel had chalked up Joseph’s refusal to a fear of water, but after the old woman’s death, she began to consider another possibility.

She reached into her pocket for paper handkerchiefs, miming the way to cough into them before handing them around. They were only steps from the hospital, but the journey from Great Whale had been long. They shuffled up the ramp as though chained together at the ankles.

“The new streptomycins are working.” Lachlan’s voice had become uncharacteristically shrill. There was colour in Charlie’s cheeks again and he was nodding slowly. “But we have to get to them sooner. We need two boats, not just one. I’ll draft the request tonight.”

Hazel watched Lachlan and wished that she could share what he felt, wished that somehow the past six months of proximity

to him and distance from the familiar might have awakened the kind of zeal she wanted to find here, twelve nautical miles south of James Bay, doing this kind of work. A year of nursing in Toronto had been long enough for her to know that she had no desire to spend her career wiping noses and weighing babies. She'd been a TB nurse at Mountain Sanatorium in Hamilton for a year when Lachlan announced he was going north to open a new hospital in early 1951. Good nurses were needed, he'd said. Why wouldn't she have gone? The five hundred miles separating Moose Factory Indian Hospital from the tuberculosis wards at Mountain San might as well have been a galaxy. The rates of infection were the highest anyone had seen. That the new medicine was untried on the native population made the prospect more appealing, not less. They'd be the vanguard, armed with the new cure for a disease that had dogged mankind and confounded healers from the beginning of time. They were going to save them all.

IT WAS UNLIKELY THAT CHARLIE had tried to impart even the most basic facts about their illness or where they were being taken. The language of treatment was the best they could offer the new patients; their bodies would heal with or without an intellectual grasp of the disease's workings. She'd heard him advance this philosophy often enough. Making themselves understood in the time they had to get the sick on board was at best a lost cause and at worst a waste of precious resources when they had none to spare.

As he passed Hazel at the back door to the hospital, one of the Inuit men covered his eyes with a visor carved from antler. Snow goggles. A slit for each eye bisected its smooth surface. It struck her as a logical response to the overlit interior, which made a snow-blind contrast to the soothing dark they were coming from. He'd have seen the survey boat coming into his community from a long way off, then. The *Mercer* had been visiting Inuit settlements for

a few summers by then; he would have watched some of his loved ones leave on it. He must have had a sense he'd be on board this time and gone home to pack a few things. There was no other explanation for the presence of such a precious belonging in mid-summer.

Once they'd been found to be sick, Charlie granted no returns to the community, not to change clothes, pack a bag or make preparations for those staying behind. He simply did not have the manpower, his argument went, to allow such a thing, and in any case they were all familiar with the resistance white medics encountered from time to time. What if, after diagnosis, the patient went home to collect his belongings and never came back? What then? It was vital that they take all of the sick to Moose Factory for treatment, and if even one went missing, he'd be responsible for allowing a confirmed case to return to the community to infect others. That wasn't something he could live with.

Hazel had heard his justifications often enough and turned the problem over and over in her mind. With or without an explanation the Inuit could understand, the sick needed to be brought to Moose Factory. That was the bald truth of it. It was the reason that cultural sensitivity had taken a back seat, even with Lachlan Davies at the helm of the campaign. The disease could wipe out entire communities, already had in some places. Charlie's logic was hard to refute, and if it had been her own call, she wasn't sure she could have made a different decision. After watching them come from the boats with only the clothes they stood in, motherless children among them, she'd examined it from every angle. With more time, more hands to do the work and a dedicated translator, they might have been able to allow new patients to put their affairs in order, pack a few things. But they had all the resources they could get. It wasn't ideal, but it was the best they could do.

The carving on the snow goggles was remarkable. By then she had a pair of her own, a gift she'd been given in the small hours of

the night by a young Inuit man who thought he wouldn't last until dawn. Hers were smooth and serviceable, but the ones this man wore were adorned with a delicate spiderweb tracery and were the obvious mate to the parka the man wore. In six months she'd seen a great number of parkas made from a variety of skins, but this was the first she'd seen made of ptarmigan. Dozens of the small bird's plumed skins were quilted together. The man's hands were partially hidden by the feathers on the sleeves. He must have felt her stare. Henry caught up with her and nudged her across the threshold.

With no goggles of their own, the rest of the group rubbed their eyes and squinted against the glare as they made their way down the short staircase to the main hall. Some of their faces were rigid masks; they were saucer-eyed, slack-jawed impersonations of the people they'd been. Many were laid bare with exhaustion and gave over to every shock, their tears silent or barely repressed. Conversation dwindled to almost nothing beyond the soothing murmurs of the women to the children that walked beside them.

Early in her stay on Moose Factory Island she had felt a dull ache in her chest at this spectacle, knowing that most of them wouldn't see their communities again for years, if at all, but by June she hadn't felt that for months. She wasn't hardened to their suffering, but she had learned how to channel the emotion into scientific curiosity by watching Lachlan. She'd begun to notice patient types – the introverts, the extroverts, the worriers – and had found some success, and satisfaction, in locating the rehabilitative activity that would settle or draw them out. She'd also been around long enough to watch the drugs do their healing work. She told herself that this parade of unhappiness was expected as they settled into hospital routines. If she could see it as temporary, if she could resist being drawn into their sorrow, she'd be better able to help them adjust.

The lights dimmed as they made their way along the hall and up the stairs to the TB wards. Hazel would ask the aides and orderlies to distribute flannel gowns and put boots and coats into outside storage. Tub and sponge baths could wait until morning. Tonight they could have broth, bread and as much tea as they wanted. She'd make them as comfortable as she could.

Earlier that day, she and the matron worked out the patient master list. It made sense to keep patients from the same community together for emotional reasons, and they did that wherever possible, but it was also important to place new arrivals with existing patients. Language lessons had begun a couple of months earlier. The most basic translation from a countryman was superior to the makeshift sign language the hospital staff concocted to supplement their own imperfect attempts at Inuktitut.

The double doors to the maternity ward banged open. "Finally made it, did they?" A fresh spray of tawny curls cascaded from the loose coil at the back of Ruth's head. The hospital's nurse-midwife fell in step with her. "We're going to need more beds."

"Done," Hazel said. They'd become fast friends when she arrived in January. Ruth was as solid in character as in build; Hazel found that she could depend on her to speak her mind and know her work. "Before I went out to the dock."

"Where'd you put them? Last I checked, the ward was full."

"We rearranged things a bit to squeeze a few more in. Only a few in the hall this time."

"You can't be thinking of keeping them all here." Ruth counted heads. "Mountain doesn't have room?"

"They're close to capacity, but they'll take some in a few days. These people have to rest before going further south, anyway. And so do you." There were dark shadows below Ruth's green eyes. Hazel had heard Ruth's familiar step on the stairs just after dawn, and by the time Hazel went to the kitchen for coffee, Ruth was

already gone. “Why don’t you go. There are enough of us here and these people are exhausted. I expect them to fall into their beds. We’ll deal with details in the morning.”

“Ach, I’m alright, Captain.” Ruth’s freckled hand tapped out a melody on her thigh. Hazel had watched her bake a dozen loaves of bread at midnight in this adrenal state. “Pair of lovely girls, big healthy ones, this morning. One with the cord twice around the neck. There were a few moments there. But they’re all resting comfortably now and the mum is happy.”

“Good. Let’s get these people into bed, then.” There was no sign of Lachlan. Hazel assumed he was on the ward already and expecting her to be there, too.

SHE HAD ALMOST FINISHED SETTling the children. A few nurse’s aides worked with her, rubbing backs, offering sips of milk or apple juice, smoothing blankets. Three toddlers shared the crib in front of her. Two of the three were curled like cats against each other, asleep, but the third was the girl she’d found clinging to the mast of the *Mercer*. She lay quietly on her back, body rigid and eyes staring as if she was afraid to close them. There had been no time to talk with Charlie about the scene of her departure from Great Whale, but it was easy to guess what had happened. Hazel checked her watch. She’d already spent nearly half an hour with her; she should go to the dispensary now. She tried the lullaby again and wondered if she had the right tune.

There was a shout. Agonized and shrill, it moved unimpeded through the quiet hospital corridors. The girl’s eyelids, which had only moments earlier given over to her fatigue, sprang open. She looked up at Hazel from the crib with a dark, serious stare. The last half-hour of soothing was undone. Hazel patted the girl’s hand and pulled the blanket up to her chin. Now she did have to go.

As the reality of their situation sunk in, protests of this kind weren't unexpected, particularly among the men, but they were unusual this early in the stay. Fatigue, disorientation and the added malaise brought on by a long journey in cramped quarters usually sapped a patient's energy for all but critical functions. Tomorrow morning, after a good night's sleep and breakfast, staff would be on alert for something like this. But to see it on the night of arrival, this late in the evening? It was without precedent in her six months here. As she hurried along the corridors, she checked her mental catalogue of the men who'd come in tonight for likely candidates. There were a few possibilities. Whatever the source, this needed to be brought under control before the commotion spread like a virus to the other wards. The protocol required all hands on deck, everyone who could be spared. Lachlan would expect her.

She rounded the corner and opened the door to the men's ward. There was a popping sound like rifle shot. Broken glass chimed as it hit the bare floor. Whoever was responsible would need close monitoring: if he was resisting this early and this violently, they might need to put him on suicide watch.

Joseph emerged from the room she'd just passed. Without a word, the broad-shouldered Inuit orderly fell into step beside her. The line of his mouth was thin and flat. They'd both been through this before.

"Have you seen Doctor Davies?"

He nodded. "He's in there." His high cheekbones seemed more pronounced since he'd shaved the moustache he'd been trying to grow. The door to the next room was partially closed, but she glimpsed the back of Lachlan's white coat. No one was talking. Joseph stopped and faced her, all business. "Stay here. I will check first."

She opened her mouth to protest and the door swung fully open. A metal water pitcher soared through it, hit the opposite

wall and clanged to the floor. Joseph turned and walked into the room. She stayed where she was.

Besides Henry, who knew – or claimed to know – very little of the Inuit language and rarely entered the hospital anyway, Joseph Weeltaltuk was the hospital’s only translator. He’d been an orderly since his recovery a year ago. It wasn’t uncommon for former patients to stay on as staff after the long convalescence that healing demanded, the hospital having become home and family, but she’d wondered if he’d lost his family in the Belcher Islands to disease before being brought here, if that was why he stayed. His community had been particularly hard hit. Before this group of patients, his had suffered the highest infection rate of any community they’d surveyed, eight sick out of every ten. Lachlan wrote about it for one of the medical journals.

There was murmuring inside the room in the rounded, gentle syllables of Inuktitut. She could easily distinguish Joseph’s voice from the other man’s by its evenness. He never raised his voice. He didn’t have to. At six feet he was an imposing silhouette in any doorway, and he’d have been an asset on a football field.

The other voices had softened. Wood scraped against bare floor and bedsprings complained. She inched closer to the room. Two beds, one pushed against the other, were still blocking the doorway. Glass crunched underfoot.

“Now,” Lachlan said. “Tell him we can talk now that he’s calm.”

Joseph spoke in soothing tones. A taut thread of sorrow ran through the other man’s reply. “He says he sleeps in his *tupiq* with his wife. Not in this hot box with men that are not his kin.”

Lachlan sighed. “Not here, I’m afraid. It’s against hospital regulations. You know why. Explain it to him.”

Joseph spoke long enough to make Hazel wonder what else he might be telling the man. For some time, there was no response. Had she missed something? She inched closer.

“Tomorrow,” Lachlan offered. “Tell him that he can see her tomorrow during visiting hours.”

There was another silence. “This man does not want to visit his wife. I will only anger him if I tell him that,” Joseph said, finally, enunciating with a controlled, parental pace that told her how vexed he was. “He is calm now. We must leave.”

She stayed in the hall while the beds were rolled back into place. The ward was quiet and dim again except for a stray cough here or there. Was there anything for her to contribute? She’d already sent the other orderlies away. Lachlan switched off the light as he left the room and didn’t seem surprised to see her standing there.

“Wise decision. I assume you heard everything?” Joseph walked past them to the supply closet down the hall and then back again, carrying a broom and dustpan. He didn’t make eye contact and his expression was difficult to interpret.

“Enough of it.” Lachlan started down the hall. She had to hurry to keep pace with him. “What’s his name?”

The words were out of her mouth before she’d properly thought it through. Of course he didn’t yet know the man’s name. Other matters had been more pressing. In his sharp, annoyed glance, she also read self-criticism. “Time for all of that tomorrow. I have other patients to attend to.”



In the soft grey light of early morning, only the stray shard of glass on the floor and the cardboard in the window told of the night’s explosive grief. None of the new patients in the room seemed fit to throw a chair through the window, and she might have described several of them as weak, even docile. When she entered the room, their conversation stopped. It was a space designed for four beds that now held seven, three against each wall and one in the centre,

headboard against the window. She assumed that this was the reason for the funk in the room, and that the baths today would take care of it. Now that they were sharing bedside tables, the sputum cups also needed labelling, and she made a mental note to remind one of the aides to do it. She moved with care between the beds to give the streptomycin shots, bracing for the unhappy patient to object the way he had the night before. She finished the left side of the room without incident and realized that she'd underestimated the value of stoicism among the new patients. A needle's sting was nothing.

She recorded the doses in their charts and tried to remember whether she'd heard Joseph use the angry man's name last night. New patients were identified by tag number in the first couple of days, and none of the new charts she'd seen so far listed anything more than that. She could be looking at him and not know it.

The snow goggles lay on the table beside the next bed, and the man's pale-feathered parka lay under it. Of course. This was the source of the rich odour. She was surprised he'd been allowed to keep it with him. She lifted his chart from the nail at the end of the bed. In the top right corner, *Suujuq* was scrawled in Lachlan's loose, looping hand. He'd already been there, and it was barely seven. She wasn't surprised. Even before she'd asked about it last night, he'd probably planned to make early rounds.

She lifted the man's sleeve and found what she'd been looking for in an angry pink scratch that ran from his forearm just below the wrist to the centre of his palm. So he'd been the one. There seemed no trace of rage left in him now. She daubed his shoulder, gave the injection and set the needle back on the tray. On impulse, she picked up his hand. She'd been treating Inuit men in this hospital for six months and on the surface this hand was much like the others, sun-dark and wind-tough, scarred by hunting and skinning and hauling and building. But this hand had also ranged over the

surface of a pair of snow goggles with a carving tool, seeking beauty. The delicate line it found changed them utterly. She picked up his other hand and brought it to meet the first, as if she was checking for swelling. There must be something that marked these hands as capable of such artistry, some unusual physical feature or occupational callus.

When she reached for a fresh ball of cotton and dampened it with alcohol, he pulled his injured hand away with a jerk and tucked it under his opposite arm. “Come now,” she said. She held her hand out and waited the way a schoolteacher waits for a disobedient student. “Let me fix it up for you. Won’t take a minute.”

“Don’t.” The voice belonged to a man, but Suujuq’s mouth hadn’t moved. She dropped her hand and he turned to face the wall. The voice came again, the single one-word command. Joseph stood in the doorway, arms folded over his broad chest. “You are only embarrassing him. It will heal without your help.”

Of course it would. It was a surface wound that wouldn’t have warranted a moment’s attention out on the ice, in the bush or, ordinarily, here in the hospital.



If Lachlan understood his effect on a room he didn’t show it, but, at his side for rounds, Hazel knew it well. That he radiated a specific energy was obvious from the first time she met him. If she stayed close, learned what he had to teach and kept working hard, surely she’d begin to feel it herself. Surely the work would claim her the way it had claimed him.

He had recently begun speaking to her as an equal, or as much an equal as a nurse could be to a doctor, which she sensed had not gone unnoticed among the other nursing staff. There were conversations that seemed to end abruptly as she rounded corners, for

instance, the kind of behaviour that indicated guilt, envy or deception. She wasn't sure which it was. Lachlan was demanding but fair and never condescending or inconsiderate to any of the nurses, but even from her own perspective she was being favoured, if greater responsibility and more work could be considered preferential treatment. That day, for instance, she'd arrived well before the start of her shift, and, seeing her in the hallway, he'd invited her to join him for rounds. But if any jealousies existed, they'd been concealed.

As for Lachlan's intentions, she wasn't naive. There was a limit to what she could expect. Nurses weren't groomed to become doctors, not even in a northern outpost, nor did she detect even a flicker of chemistry between them. He was just that absorbed in his work, and she was always there. She saw the beginnings and ends of shifts as guidelines, and then went back to the nurses' residence to read anything she could lay her hands on about the treatment of the disease. She'd begun, even in her own modest estimation, to hold her own in a conversation with him.

"We're flying blind here, Nurse MacPherson," Lachlan said, as he breezed along the hallway to the women's ward. She hurried to keep up. "The disease shows itself differently in these people. Its entry point doesn't matter. Once the bacteria enters the bloodstream, the disease moves without resistance. We're seeing it everywhere in the body. These people seem to have no natural immunity. That being the case, how can we assume that the streptomycin will have the same effect it has in the Caucasian population? We're nearing the maximum dosage period in that new group from the Belchers, and they're still not cured. Some of the new arrivals are worse off." He stopped and patted his coat pocket for a pen, leaned against the wall and wrote in the file. "There are no studies. We're it. But we have no choice if we're talking cure. And we are. No turning back." He closed the file and started walking again.

Until that point she'd assumed that the conversation was one-sided, as it so often was, and that if he wanted anything from her it was attentive listening. But now he seemed to be waiting for a response. Her mouth dried, and the back of her neck beaded with cold sweat. She swallowed. "I'm sure you're right." Her voice was a tense, maddening squeak. Now she was flying blind. She'd been studying all she could, but was it enough? She hoped she wouldn't embarrass herself or disappoint him. "We have to use any means we can, and watch them carefully."

"Exactly," he said, nodding. The pace of his speech kept time with his accelerated stride. "We cut our own path. It's the only way."

The overnight lights went off, though the rising sun had made them redundant more than an hour earlier. The women's ward was a hive of early morning activity. Sally Cheechoo bustled from hall to bedside, balancing trays of eggs and hot cereal. "Good morning, Doctor Davies and Nurse MacPherson," she sang. "They've had their pills."

"Good, good. Everybody in good spirits this morning?" It was not an idle question. Lachlan genuinely desired that his patients maintain an optimistic outlook; he'd told Hazel more than once that emotional upsets caused increased respiration, upsetting digestive and metabolic processes, and he'd written passionately on the subject in an article she'd just read in *Canadian Nurse*. From the time they entered the san, he felt that they needed to know they'd recover and be useful in their communities again.

"Oh-uh-yeah," Sally said. Hazel loved the lilt of Cree-inflected English. "Morning is always good as long as I bring coffee!"

"Let them have as much as they like, then." He stopped in the doorway to the first room and waited for Hazel to enter first.

Hair that hung straight or braided past their shoulders was a telltale sign of a new patient. Those who had been in the hospital

awhile wore southern styles, cut to chin length and set to dry on curlers, then combed out and tied with bright bows, the work of a nurse's aide trying to fill the long hours of their convalescence and assuage their boredom as well as her own.

Hazel stopped at the sink and rolled up her sleeves. Lachlan continued to the centre of the room, still talking. She should have called to him, but she was curious. How far had his train of thought taken him? Would he notice that she was no longer at his side? She'd almost finished scrubbing when he appeared at her elbow.

"You might have said something."

"It seemed rude to interrupt."

Their exchange would have been more grist for the rumour mill if any of the aides had been in the room to overhear it. Hazel was aware that such a conversation, so lacking in the kind of deference nurses were normally expected to show doctors, would have been an anomaly in any of the other hospitals she'd worked in, and, in some places, a flirtation with dismissal for insubordination. But Lachlan gave no indication that he thought it was unusual, and, carried away on the subject of rehabilitation, it probably didn't occur to him. She dried her hands, reached for their gowns and held his out for him. He waved it away.

"I won't bother. I'm only here a few minutes."

It wasn't the first time he'd ignored the hygiene rules for a TB ward, and with the recommendations changing every few months anyway it was pointless to push it. She slipped her arms into her gown and tied the sash. Lachlan scanned the room and fished a wrinkled cloth mask from his coat pocket, tying it loosely to his face as he made for the bed closest to the window. All eyes in the room followed him.

The woman in the bed had arrived on the *Mercer* from Great Whale, and she was now the eldest of the Inuit women on the ward. Whether she was serene or resigned was unclear. She lay

unmoving in the centre of the bed, her arms at her sides, not looking at him. Lachlan lifted her chart off the nail at the end of the bed.

“Aye, Annie. *Chimo. Qanuippiit?* Did you sleep well? I trust the bed is comfortable. They gave you the best seat in the house, you know. The sunsets out that window are spectacular, aren’t they?” He tried to catch her eye and spoke as if she could understand every word. The warm smile behind the mask showed itself in his eyes. He seemed to expect charm to carry the conversation, but when Annie lifted her chin an inch and fixed him in her gaze, she didn’t blink and the line of her mouth was flat. The erosion of Lachlan’s confidence was slight, but Hazel saw it in the wane of his smiling eyes. He cleared his throat. “Let’s see if we can’t get someone to help us out. Nurse MacPherson?”

What the old woman had conveyed in that simple gesture seemed clear enough, but Hazel did what he asked. Finding a translator in this room wasn’t difficult. Some of the younger women were enthusiastic about the language lessons and they’d already absorbed smatterings of English. Of them all, Caroline was keenest. She’d been here since before Hazel arrived and was recovering well, always a willing participant in any activity brought to the ward. She had an ear for languages and spoke the English words she knew with only a trace of an accent. She swung her legs over the side of her bed.

“Easy now, Caroline.” She’d picked up more English since Hazel had last spoken to her, obviously. “No rush.” She was wearing a garish pink cardigan over her flannel gown that Hazel was sure she hadn’t seen before. The shipment of clothing they’d been expecting from the Lion’s Club in Toronto must have arrived. She read Caroline’s chart and nodded to Lachlan. “You’ve been practicing your English?”

“Yes, ma’am. Every day.”

“Good.” Hazel paced herself to make sure the young woman could follow. “You can help Doctor Davies. Come sit here and tell her what the doctor is saying.”

Lachlan moved to the far side of the bed and slid an x-ray film from the manila envelope he’d been carrying with him. He lifted it to the window and then took it down again.

“Where’s that film we took yesterday?”

“Which one?”

“The normal one. Has the patient been discharged yet?”

“This morning. But I doubt they’ve put the file away yet.” She exchanged a glance with him, trying to guess at his motivation. “I’ll go get it.”

She heard Lachlan tell Caroline a knock-knock joke as she was going out the door, heard her girlish laughter. The film was where she expected to find it at the nurses’ station, and she assumed he wanted to show it to give Annie hope. That she was here and accepting treatment wasn’t enough; Lachlan wanted more than acquiescence. If she understood the goal of treatment, she’d take a more active role in her recovery. Caroline was still smiling when Hazel walked back into the room, but Annie’s expression hadn’t changed. Lachlan was writing in her chart.

“Hold it against the window for me, would you?” He picked up the other film. “This is the picture that Doctor Wilcox took on the boat, Annie.” He glanced at Caroline and waited. She sat straighter in the chair beside Annie’s bed and said a few words. “This is a picture of your lungs from the inside. Can you see the clouds there?” He pointed to the cumulus masses on the film and waited. Annie’s nod was barely perceptible. “These are disease clouds. They make you cough and struggle for breath.” He paused when Caroline frowned. “They make it hard to breathe. But we have good medicine. See this picture?” He pointed to the one Hazel was holding against the glass. “No clouds. This is

how your lungs will look after we make you well. Then you can go home.”

Annie stared at the films as Caroline spoke. Lachlan’s tutorial made the disease clouds on Annie’s film seem obvious, but as she looked at them Hazel wondered if she’d be able to spot them on her own. She examined the old woman’s face for slight shifts in expression, but Annie gave nothing away. She turned her head from the window and closed her eyes. She breathed deeply and seemed to have nodded off.

Lachlan waited and Hazel tried to catch his eye. How had he failed to reach her? A few tense minutes passed before Annie opened her eyes again. She slid one arm from under the covers and placed it, open-palmed, an inch above her chest. Her hand moved in a slow, clockwise circle. Her voice was steady and low. “*Silatsiaq?*”

There was a silent exchange between Lachlan and Caroline. Every molecule of the young woman’s face seemed alive. “She ask, Clear sky?”

Lachlan pressed his lips together. He sighed and shook his head. “Not yet, Annie. Not yet. But after rest and medicine, your lungs will be clear. *Silatsiaq.*”

LACHLAN STOOD IN THE CENTRE of the room, head bent over a small notebook he’d fished from his pocket. Of course he’d want to record the new Inuktitut word in his makeshift dictionary, though it seemed unlikely that he’d forget it. Hazel expected to hear it on the wards again, or read it in one of his papers. She made a few mental notes of her own. There were always calls for submissions from the field in *Canadian Nurse*. Lachlan checked his watch and started for the door, head down and still writing, and looked up just in time to avoid a collision.

“Morning, Doctor Wilcox.” Charlie’s trouser creases ran in unbroken lines to his shined shoes and his wooden posture suggested

he'd been standing in the doorway for some time. The attitude in his stance was almost laughable. Lachlan closed the notebook and slipped it into his pocket. "What can I do for you?"

Charlie's smile was tight. "We should consult about the new patients, Doctor Davies." He emphasized Lachlan's title. "I've already seen to the children this morning. You're finished here?"

"Almost. One more room."

Charlie made a show of checking his watch. "Late start?"

Lachlan ignored the question. It was clear where this was going and plain that he'd been watching long enough to have marked the time Lachlan had spent showing the films to Annie. They had exchanged words on the subject before. This exercise was foolish and a waste of time, Charlie believed. Doctors spent years learning to read and interpret x-rays. How could patients, untrained and lacking a proper translation, possibly decipher ghosted marks on the film? The first time she'd heard him argue with Lachlan this way she'd held her breath, waiting for the verbal slap that would have come from any other staff chief she'd known. But Lachlan had only frowned, as if he'd been presented with a new and unexpected symptom, and let Charlie continue.

"You're giving them false hope," Charlie said now, with more force and less deference than seemed prudent. But Lachlan was unflagging, calm and resolute. Patients had a right to know what was going on inside their bodies. Even if they didn't fully understand what they were seeing, it was a way to make concrete what they were doing here. He was giving the most basic of explanations anyway, didn't Charlie agree?

"Don't you open the clinic right about now?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." There was no reproach in Lachlan's voice. The man was a paragon of control. "But if it's already nine I suppose they'll have to wait, and so will you. If you'll excuse me, I'll get on with it."

Charlie stepped backward stiffly and let Lachlan pass. He called to him once Lachlan was several paces down the hall. “We should meet today.”

“Of course. I’m available to do that around noon.”

The line of Charlie’s jaw became hard, visible. “Fine. Cafeteria at noon.”

“I’ll be there as close to noon as I can, Doctor Wilcox. Get us a table, will you?”

Charlie didn’t answer. Hazel watched him for a few minutes, but it couldn’t be helped, certainly not by anything she could say or do. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides, and he turned down the hall in the opposite direction with a clipped stride. She caught up with Lachlan, who was already entering the next room on the ward.

“Doctor Davies.” Lachlan seemed almost surprised to see her standing here. “Why did you tell her the medicine will work?” The question seemed disingenuous even to her own ears, but that wasn’t her intention. She was confused. She’d watched Lachlan use a range of means to achieve his purpose, but never an out-right lie.

“Because it will.” No hesitation.

“But you said we were flying blind.”

“The streptomycin has been working miracles,” he said, fiddling with the mask ties again and finally pulling it below his chin. “We can finally talk cure, Nurse MacPherson, after a long history with a disease that’s been with us from the beginning. I assume you know that First Dynasty Egyptian mummies showed tubercular bone lesions. And now the end of it is within reach. We’re the last generation of medics that will have to deal with it. The puzzle is in the dosing, but we’ll do it. Look, Hazel.” His use of her first name was rare. “Annie’s stay here will be long. I need her to believe in what we’re doing.”

“So that she’ll cooperate.” The conclusion seemed obvious now, and also only the beginning of what she felt she needed to understand. It was not her habit to mollify patients with partial truths, and she’d never seen Lachlan make that decision, either.

“More than that.” The uncharacteristic slow pace of his speech called her attention like the sounding of a bell. “The medicine can only do so much. If she can’t see herself going home again, there’s no chemical cure in the world that can help her. It’s going to be hard for her here, much harder than it’ll be for the younger ones. Her case isn’t advanced but her body will be slower to heal, she won’t learn the new language easily, if at all, and she’ll have difficulty adapting to the rhythms of hospital life. If we’re to cure her, we have to use any means possible to keep her spirits from flagging.”

“Because the younger ones will be watching her.”

“And that too.” He smiled. “Exactly.” The creases she’d noticed around his eyes a moment earlier were gone. He lifted one eyebrow. “Would you like to see something remarkable?” He leaned close enough that she could smell the coffee on his breath. “Won’t take a minute.” He didn’t wait for a reply, just turned and walked out the door. She found herself following him down the corridor toward his office at the official start of her shift without once wondering who’d cover for her.

THE DOOR TO THE CLINIC waiting room, next to his office, was already open and she could hear voices, but Lachlan stopped at his office door and unlocked it. Every horizontal surface – his oak desk, the shortwave radio, the metal table in the centre of the room – was stacked with papers and books. The walls were bare except for the light box and a map of James Bay held there with several layers of tape. Lights blinked on the radio and she could hear static and tinny dispatches coming from the headphones.

“Come in, come in.” He closed the door behind her. To her eyes, the office was a disaster, but he went directly to one of the stacks of paper on his desk and pulled out a manila x-ray envelope from the bottom of it, exactly the one he wanted. He clipped the film to the light box and flipped the switch.

The wing-like embrace of the ribs was distinct, but apart from that she wasn't sure what she was looking at. Were these normal or diseased lungs? Without a second film for comparison, she couldn't be sure. Even if using x-rays to diagnose the disease wasn't still so new, nurses weren't trained, or allowed, to read them. And yet he seemed to assume that she could follow. She wanted to.

“Six months on the plain streptomycin.” She took this to mean that the x-ray was normal. “If we're vigilant, we can get it all. TB will be over, done, even up here among the natives, after all of these years.” He folded his arms in front of his chest. “The next generation won't know its name. Can you imagine? Places like this will be empty!” He was almost giddy. She didn't know this side of him. “What will they do with the space?”

He turned his back to her and sifted through some papers on his desk. “Do you know how we used to control the disease? Have you read a history of treatment yet?” In spite of the extra reading she'd managed to squeeze into her schedule, she felt a sliver of panic at the ignorance her answer might reveal, but he flipped through a book he'd finally found on his desk. “By the time you started at Mountain we'd stopped doing collapse therapy, hadn't we? Here. This is it. Take a look. Bedrest was fine if you didn't have to work for a living. Scar tissue did the job nicely, held the growth of the tubercles in check. But if bedrest wasn't an option, if the lungs were in constant motion . . .” He turned the page and pointed to the photograph there, a woman naked from the waist up, her back to the camera, arms lifted over her head. Where her lower left ribs ought to have been, there

was a hollow. “We had to make it rest. See, they moved four sternal ribs, front and back, to force the lung to collapse. I oversaw a few of these myself.”

He paused. On the facing page was a front view of another woman. “Thank god we don’t do that anymore. Seems barbaric now. See the way the skin sinks below her clavicle in this one? She’s young in the photograph, but she’s been marked by the disease. She’ll carry it to her grave.” He stifled a yawn. “We don’t have to disfigure to cure anymore. See for yourself.” He motioned toward the light box. “Some minor scarring in the lung tissue, that’s it, and that’s only because it had gone untreated for the better part of a year. Now he’s back in his community.” He leaned toward it, closer to her, searching for something. She became aware of the warmth of his body. “Incredible, isn’t it? You know, you really ought to go out on the survey boat sometime, see a patient from start to finish with your own eyes.”

She couldn’t speak. To her enduring but unspoken frustration, she hadn’t even been as far as James Bay. Women didn’t go out in the survey boat. The bigger boats were gone for months, and even the smaller ones like the *Mercer* were usually away overnight. The men pitched tents, huddled around campfires, bathed in cold streams.

He was animated now. Instead of the loping awkwardness that usually characterized his gait, he was moving like a boxer, light and sure on his feet. This sudden shift, and the mention of the survey boat, propelled her to act.

“Could I see that again?” It wasn’t the right question. “I mean, could I borrow it awhile?”

Lachlan wasn’t an unhappy man, but it was rare to see the kind of unguarded smile he offered now. “Sure, of course. It’s a good one, just came out last month. Keep it as long as you like.”

“Thanks.” Their hands brushed. The shift in their relationship that a loan suggested made her suddenly awkward. Fine, then, she’d make sure she was worthy of his attention. She’d study this and teach herself to read TB films. She did a few quick calculations. With a little discipline and slightly less sleep she’d be able to find at least two hours in each day. Most of the conversation in the nurses’ residence bored her anyway. “I’ll have it back by the end of the month.”

“Fine, good. As I said, no hurry.” His tone seemed cooler, almost dismissive now, as if it was of no consequence when or if she finished reading it. Well, then. She’d push herself to read and understand it, and she’d have it back when she said she would. He sat at his desk and began to leaf through pages of test results. This meant their conversation was over, she assumed.

“One more thing,” he said. Her hand was already on the door. He tipped his head in the direction of the waiting room. “Sounds like a crowd in there. I’m going to get started. Finish rounds for me, will you? There’s only that one room left on the women’s ward.”

On her own? Nurses didn’t do rounds. Even if she’d come north for that possibility, the distance this strayed from nurse-doctor protocol was significant. Was this the beginning of a greater scope of responsibility? Where might it lead? It was impossible to imagine this kind of thing happening at Mountain, where most doctors were minor generals who jealously defended territory.

“Not much to do, really.” He held out a stack of files. “Just make sure the new ones are comfortable. I’ll check on them later.”

“Of course,” she said. This made more sense. “I’ll see who’s on for the strep shots.”

“Fine.” He stood and reached for the door that led from his office to the waiting room. A crowd of sounds invaded his office. “Come back as soon as you’re finished, will you? I think I’m going to need some help in here.”

Twenty minutes later, walking back toward the clinic, she went to check on Annie. The elder Inuit faced the window. Her diminished body made a slight ripple in the bedcovers. The window laid a lozenge of sunlight across her face, her arm and half the bed. Her eyes were open but staring. She was there in bed, in a hospital ward far from her home, and she was also somewhere else entirely.