

CHAPTER *N°* 1



Marie-Claire felt a tugging on her skirt as she cut lard into the flour.

“Can’t you *please* leave me alone?”

She was tired of André’s constant demands for attention. She was tired of the whole Linteau family. Madame Linteau’s shrill voice grated on her nerves. The oily smell of the factory clung to Monsieur Linteau’s clothing when he came in from work, and his sweat didn’t have the pleasant earthiness of Papa’s. The Linteau children’s endless tugging on her skirts made it almost impossible to get chores done. And the baby . . . well, he

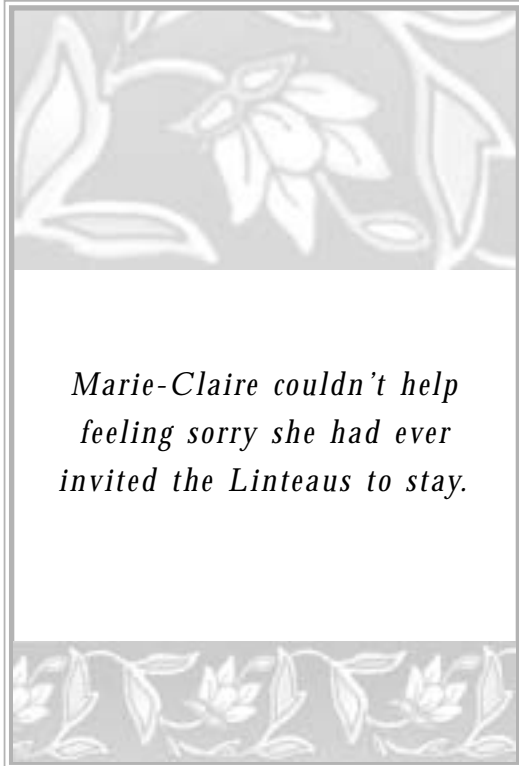
couldn't help it if his skin was sore from where his wet diapers rubbed, and who wouldn't cry with pain like that? Still, Marie-Claire couldn't help feeling sorry she had ever invited the Linteaus to stay that day their house burned down. Why couldn't they just hurry up and find a new home?

Such selfish thoughts. Marie-Claire scolded herself for them immediately. She left the pastry she was making for the next day's fish pie and wiped her hands on her apron so she could help little André with the string game he had managed to get tangled up in knots.

"Marie-Claire," Maman said, helping Madame Linteau with the washing and drying of supper dishes, "when you have finished there, will you please put on some more water? Madame Linteau would like the children to have a bath tonight before bed."

Another bath meant filling the *big* kettle. Had Priscille and André not bathed last week? Surely they did not need to wash again already! But Marie-Claire knew better than to argue. She





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handed André back his untangled string. “What do you say?”

“Not like that,” André whined. “You were supposed to keep the end tied up.”

Marie-Claire snapped, “The answer I was looking for was *Merci!*” Keep the end tied up? Why did nothing this little boy said ever make sense? With her little sister, Emilie, there had always been instant understanding, even at times when Emilie had trouble finding the right words.

Marie-Claire emptied what was left of the water in the bucket into the big kettle on the stove and took the bucket to the door. As she wrapped her shawl around her shoulders, Papa said, “Let me do that, Marie-Claire.”

“I’ll help too,” Monsieur Linteau said, fetching another bucket from behind the curtain, where such things were stored.

“Thank you.” Marie-Claire went back to her pastry while the men went to fill the buckets from the tap in the back lane and Maman and Madame Linteau finished putting away the supper dishes.

When Madame Linteau began to stoke the fire in the wood stove, Priscille tugged her skirt. "Let me put a stick in," she pleaded, "let me!"

Marie-Claire wanted to scold Priscille for speaking so rudely. Emilie, who had been no older than Priscille, would never have spoken to Maman like that. Maman would never have stood for it. But once when the Linteaus were out, Marie-Claire had commented to Maman about Priscille and André's poor manners, and she had just said that different families had different ways of doing things, they mustn't judge, and Marie-Claire most certainly must not say anything of the children's manners to Madame Linteau.

"Ow! Ow!" Priscille jumped up and down, waving her hand madly in the air.

"Oh, my darling." Madame Linteau rushed to console her daughter.

"You should never have let your *darling* . . ." Marie-Claire began.

With a sharp look, Maman stopped her from finishing. "Seeing as you are the oldest, Marie-

Claire, perhaps you would like to have the first bath tonight.” Maman set the tin washtub on the floor by the stove and moved the privacy curtain into place.

As the water heated, Monsieur Linteau gathered his children—one under each arm—for a story. Madame Linteau discreetly settled Michel to her breast for a feeding. Papa and Louis played a game of cards, and Maman took up some mending. Marie-Claire wrapped her finished pastry in a cloth and set it on the windowsill. December was cold enough not to have to put it in the icebox, especially at night.

But beside the wood stove it was cozy-warm. Marie-Claire tested the water and emptied the heavy kettle into the tub. She got the bar of soap from the shelf in the pantry, and a washrag. She stripped out of her clothes and stepped quickly into the ankle-deep water.

Such a luxury to get the first bath, before the water cooled and grew scummy with soap. It was kind of Maman to suggest it, before Madame

Linteau got to it first with her *darling* André or Priscille. Just the same, Marie-Claire washed in a hurry, not trusting the Linteau children to leave her alone once their story was finished.

“I hear that the Saint-Jean Baptiste Society is planning a special mass at Notre Dame for the repose of Louis Riel’s spirit,” Papa said as he shuffled the deck of cards.

“We should go early,” Louis said. “It is bound to attract quite a crowd.”

Marie-Claire stepped from the tub. Another good thing about getting the first bath was that the towel was not yet damp, as it would be for those who followed. She heard Maman say, “Let’s hope the crowds do not spread smallpox again, as it is said they did last spring.”

“Not too much danger of that,” Louis said. “Few new cases have been reported this week except at the insane asylum and in one of the outlying villages.”

Drying herself off, Marie-Claire noticed smallpox marks on her arms that had not yet

completely faded, in spite of it being almost three months since she and poor Emilie had had the horrid disease.

“Are you finished back there, Marie-Claire?” Maman asked.

“Yes. I was just about to get into my nightgown.”

“Here.” Maman passed her another around the privacy screen. “I mended your clean one today, if you would like to wear it instead.”

“Thank you.” Marie-Claire pulled the clean nightgown over her head. It smelled fresher than the one she’d been about to put on, but its sleeves barely covered her elbows. Squares of material—cut from an old nightgown of Emilie’s, Marie-Claire could not help noticing—patched places that were so thin the fabric was starting to shred.

Back in the main room, Maman poked her darning needle into a heavy woollen sock. Madame Linteau placed her sleeping baby into the cradle and began to undress Priscille for her bath. Marie-Claire stared out the black window into the night. Why did she so resent the Linteau

children, feel so irritated by almost everything they did? She stroked the Emilie-nightgown patches on her elbows. How was it, she wondered, that they had escaped getting smallpox when so many other children, including herself and Emilie, had not? Had André and Priscille perhaps been given the awful vaccination that some doctors said could keep you well? Louis said people who hadn't yet had smallpox now *had* to get the needle, or else pay a fine.

At the far end of the room from the wood stove, Marie-Claire crawled under the blanket on her bed. But with Madame Linteau's shrill voice still filling the house, and Priscille and André soon crowding her for space, it would be some time before she would sleep. Realizing she had forgotten to say her prayers, Marie-Claire climbed out of bed again. The floor was cold on her knees.

"Please God, help the Linteaus to find a new home soon." Scrambling back under the blanket she added, "Tomorrow, please, if you are not too busy?"