

she lived, she hoped. So often, Papa had told her, when one house in a neighbourhood burned, so did others nearby.

But the ladder wagon did not come. Nor did a steam wagon. Perhaps the hose wagon was not on its way to a fire at all. It was odd that two firemen were riding in the wagon on top of the hoses.

A sudden unease gripped Marie-Claire. She crawled out of the snow fort into the street. The hose wagon was turning a corner—in the direction Marie-Claire lived. “Come, Emilie. We must go home. Hurry.”

“Can’t we play a little longer?”

“No. Come.” Marie-Claire reached into the fort and yanked Emilie’s sleeve.

“What is it?” Lucille said. “If you are worried your maman will be cross about your wet skirt, it is too late for that now.”

“Something is wrong, Lucille. I know it.”

Lucille and Bernadette ran to keep up with their cousins.

The fire wagon was parked in front of Marie-Claire's house, but the only smoke in the street came from chimneys. Marie-Claire ran up the stairs and, out of breath, pushed open the door.

The big shapes of two firemen filled the room. They were standing over Maman, who sat weeping in her chair. In Maman's hand a wooden spoon dripped gravy onto the floor.

Marie-Claire turned quickly to her sister. "You go with Lucille and Bernadette. I will come and get you later."

"What are those men doing here?" Emilie asked.

Marie-Claire pushed her sister out the door. "I will explain later."

In the cradle, Philippe was wailing. Marie-Claire picked him up to quiet him.

"Where is Papa?" She was afraid to ask, but had to know.

"Your papa is a brave man," one of the firemen said.

"I know that." Marie-Claire swallowed hard.

“But I asked you, where is he?”

“It was a very bad fire,” the other fireman said, “up in Saint-Jean Baptiste village. A burning rafter fell, your papa could not get out of the way in time.”

“He is dead?” Marie-Claire ran to Maman’s side. “You are telling me Papa is dead!?”

“No, no, not dead. No.” The fireman crouched down. Marie-Claire looked into his soot-streaked face. The smell of smoke was heavy in his woollen uniform. “But he is badly hurt. He will be in bed for some time. Your maman will need your help to take care of him.”

Marie-Claire cradled Philippe in one arm. “My papa, may I see him?”

“He is sleeping,” Maman said. “Don’t wake him.”

Marie-Claire peered into her parents’ bedroom. Papa’s face was soot-black. His neck and one cheek were red, blistered, and shiny where someone had applied grease. One arm, tied to a board with white bandage, lay on top of his blanket.