

## **Hell's Half Acre**

In the morning, the sun had long since risen above the horizon, casting stark, foreboding shadows over the Yampa River. We stood at the edge of the water, my wooden boat bobbing gently on the surface. The wind whispered secrets through the cottonwoods and I felt the weight of my history bearing down upon us. We had married, and this handsome kind man had promised to spend the rest of his life with me, knowing I was doomed to run this river every two weeks for all time.

We pushed off from the shore.

The river's current quickened, pulling us into a swirling vortex of churning water and churning souls. This was where John Wesley Powell had lost two of his boats during his famous expedition to explore the Colorado River Basin. I had willed myself invisible and helped him save the flour and three boats. I had used the wood of the wrecked ones to patch my cataraft.

The air was thick with an otherworldly energy as if the fabric of reality unraveled around us because my husband and his father had blessed our union last night.

"Hell's Half Acre," Captain said, his voice barely audible over the gusting wind. "I've heard that only those who are pure of heart can make it through this stretch of river."

"I've rowed through these rocks thousands of times and my heart is anything but pure." I nearly puked. "It is filled with hatred for that medicine man who cursed me to run this river for all eternity." I thought about the oar flapping into the only runnable slot in a

couple of hundred yards. "We can make it if you can catch that unbreakable fiberglass oar and hold it up."

I navigated the twisting currents, the boat buffeted by the current. The water churned and foamed around us, threatening to slam us into a rock at any moment.

Ominously, a dark figure emerged from the water ahead. Its eyes glowed like embers from a fire long extinguished, and its presence seemed to draw light from the surrounding environment. We felt our hearts falter as it loomed closer. "We're not alone," Captain said, his voice trembling with fear.

My gaze burned with determination. "We have each other and we will catch that funnel passage and miss the fiberglass oar at the right moment." With a burst of adrenaline, I rowed harder, my own wooden oars biting into the water as I fought the current.

He used a tough branch to push my heavy boat away from boulders. The shadowy figure drew closer still, its presence suffocating us with an unblinking stare. It was a man my new husband's size.

As we approached the pinned dory boat with its oar flopping into the only runnable slot, I felt my boat being pulled by some unseen force. Captain sat on the extreme front of the left pontoon, waiting anxiously to lift up the fiberglass oar.

The current picked up as we approached the narrow passage. My heart jumped each time that horrible oar rose and fell.

But at the perfect moment, he caught it and we slipped past, but he lost the dangerous yellow fiberglass oar right as my left oar lock approached. The dory boat oar

snagged my oar lock, spinning us backwards. I had no control, and the cataraft swung completely around.

Somehow, we were in the only run between small and large ragged boulders. "We made it!" We yelled at the same time.

The rest of the run was easy since I had made this trip thousands of times. I pushed the boat into an eddy, and we looked back. I saw Étienne wave, then he dissipated, leaving only his smile. We stared in amazement.

Captain called out, "Dad!"

"My husband!"

Captain Étienne de Bourgmont had helped us make it through Hell's Half Acre. He had been with me before on other dangerous runs. He would be with us when needed. I heard his voice, "Paloma, you may love my son, he is me."

As we floated back out into calmer waters, exhausted and shaken, we looked at each other and started laughing hysterically. Captain ran down the pontoon to me and we hugged and kissed. "We made it with my father's help." He grinned. "You know what they say."

"What?"

"When you make it through Hell's Half Acre," he replied, "You are married for life."

We sealed our marriage once more with a kiss as the canyon walls inhaled and recorded our journey.