

THE
PATH
FINDERS
BOOK ONE

The WOOD'S EDGE

A NOVEL

The background of the cover is a painting of a woman with long, wavy brown hair, seen from behind, wearing a long, flowing, light-colored dress with white lace on the sleeves. She stands in a field of tall, golden-brown grass. In the distance, to the left, a man in a light-colored shirt and dark pants, holding a bow and arrow, stands in a wooded area. The sky is a mix of blue and white clouds.

LORI
BENTON

AUTHOR OF *BURNING SKY* &
THE PURSUIT OF TAMSEN LITTLEJOHN

Praise for
The Wood's Edge

“Meticulously researched. Alive and engaging. *The Wood's Edge* is a journey through the footsteps of America's formative years, with characters so wonderfully complex and a story of redemption so deep, only Lori Benton could tell it. I was transfixed from the first absorbing page to the last.”

—KRISTY CAMBRON, author of *The Butterfly and the Violin*
and *A Sparrow in Terezin*

“From the opening scene to the last line of the book, I was captivated by *The Wood's Edge*. Rich in history, with characters to weep for and to cheer for, this is a novel that will linger in my heart for a long time to come.”

—ROBIN LEE HATCHER, best-selling author of *Love Without End* and *Whenever You Come Around*

The
WOOD'S
EDGE

BOOKS BY LORI BENTON

Burning Sky

The Pursuit of Tamsen Littlejohn

The
WOOD'S
EDGE A NOVEL



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AUTHOR OF BURNING SKY &
THE PURSUIT OF TAMSEN LITTLEJOHN



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All Scripture quotations and paraphrases are taken from the King James Version.

This book is a work of historical fiction based on many recognizable persons, events, and locales. Content that cannot be historically verified is purely a product of the author's imagination.

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*This book turned out to have much to do with fathers.
It is dedicated to mine, who is loved and missed.*

*Larry George Johnson
August 24, 1943–December 22, 2013*

Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways,
and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the
good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find
rest for your souls.

— JEREMIAH 6:16

Thou wilt shew me the path of life . . .

— PSALM 16:11

NEW YORK & IROQUOIS COUNTRY, 1757-1776

LEGEND

□ FORTS

▲ INDIAN SETTLEMENTS

● EUROPEAN-AMERICAN TOWNS



1757

FORT WILLIAM HENRY — LAKE
GEORGE, NEW YORK



August 9, 1757

A white flag flew over Fort William Henry. The guns were silent now, yet the echo of cannon-fire thumped and roared in the ears of Reginald Aubrey, officer of His Majesty's Royal Americans.

Emerging from the hospital casemate with a bundle in his arms, Reginald squinted at the splintered bastion where the white flag hung, wilted and still in the humid air. Lieutenant Colonel Monro, the fort's commanding officer, had ordered it raised at dawn — to the mingled relief and dread of the dazed British regulars and colonials trapped within the fort.

Though he'd come through six days of siege bearing no worse than a scratch—and the new field rank of major—beneath Reginald's scuffed red coat, his shirt clung sweat-soaked to his skin. Straggles of hair lay plastered to his temples in the midday heat. Yet his bones ached as though it was winter, and he a man three times his five-and-twenty years.

Earlier an officer had gone forth to hash out the particulars of the fort's surrender with the French general, the Marquis de Montcalm. Standing outside the hospital with his bundle, Reginald had the news of Montcalm's terms from Lieutenant Jones, one of the few fellow Welshmen in his battalion.

"No prisoners, sir. That's the word come down." Jones's eyes were bloodshot, his haggard face soot-blackened. "Every soul what can walk will be escorted safe under guard to Fort Edward, under parole . . ."

Jones went on detailing the articles of capitulation, but Reginald's mind latched on to the mention of Fort Edward, letting the rest stream

past. Fort Edward, some fifteen miles by wilderness road, where General Webb commanded a garrison two thousand strong, troops he'd not seen fit to send to their defense, despite Colonel Monro's repeated pleas for aid—as it seemed the Almighty Himself had turned His back these past six days on the entreaties of the English. And those of Reginald Aubrey.

Why standest thou afar off, O LORD?

Ringling silence lengthened before Reginald realized Jones had ceased speaking. The lieutenant eyed the bundle Reginald cradled, speculation in his gaze. Hoarse from bellowing commands through the din of mortar and musket fire, Reginald's voice rasped like a saw through wood. "It might have gone worse for us, Lieutenant. Worse by far."

"He's letting us walk out of here with our heads high," Jones agreed, grudgingly. "I'll say that for Montcalm."

Overhead the white flag stirred in a sudden fit of breeze that threatened to clear the battle smoke but brought no relief from the heat.

I am feeble and sore broken: I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart—

Reginald said, "Do you go and form up your men, Jones. Make ready to march."

"Aye, sir." Jones saluted, gaze still fixed on Reginald's cradling arms. "Am I to be congratulating you, Capt—Major, sir? Is it a son?"

Reginald looked down at what he carried. A corner of its wrappings had shifted. He freed a hand to settle it back in place. "That it is."

All my desire is before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee—

"Ah, that's good then. And your wife? She's well?"

"She is alive, God be thanked." The words all but choked him.

The lieutenant's mouth flattened. "For myself, I'd be more inclined toward thanking Providence had it seen fit to prod Webb off his backside."

It occurred to Reginald he ought to have reprimanded Jones for that remark, but not before the lieutenant had trudged off through the mill of

bloodied, filthy soldier-flesh to gather the men of his company in preparation for surrender.

Aye. It might have gone much worse. At least his men weren't fated to rot in some fetid French prison, awaiting ransom or exchange. Or, worst of terrors, given over to their Indians.

My heart panteth, my strength faileth me—

As for Major Reginald Aubrey of His Majesty's Royal Americans . . . he and his wife were condemned to live, and to grieve. Turning to carry out the sentence, he descended back into the casemate, in his arms the body of his infant son, born as the last French cannon thundered, dead but half an hour past.



The resounding silence brought on by the cease-fire gave way to a tide of lesser noise as soldiers and civilians made ready to remove to the entrenched encampment outside the fort, hard by the road to Fort Edward. There the surviving garrison would wait out the night. Morning promised a French escort and the chance to put the horrors of William Henry behind them.

All thy waves and thy billows are gone over me—

Reginald Aubrey ducked inside the subterranean hospital, forced to step aside from the path of a surgeon splattered in gore. The balding, sweating man drew up, recognizing him. "Your wife, sir. Best wake her and judge of her condition. If she cannot be moved . . . well, pray God she can be. Those who cannot will be left under French care, but I'd not want a wife of mine so left—not with the savages sure to rush in with the officers."

"We neither of us shall stay behind." Reginald turned a shoulder when the surgeon's gaze dropped to the still bundle.

He'd been alone with his son when it happened. Spent after twenty hours of wrenching labor, Heledd had barely glimpsed the child before

succumbing to exhaustion. She'd slept since on the narrow cot, the babe she'd fought so long to birth nested in the curve of her arm. Craving the light his son had shed in that dark place, Reginald had returned to them, had come in softly, had bent to admire his offspring's tiny pinched face, only to find the precious light had flickered and gone out.

A hatchet to his chest could not have struck a deeper blow. He'd clapped a hand to his mouth, expecting his life's blood to gush forth from the wound. When it hadn't, he'd taken up the tiny body, still pliable in its wrappings, and left his sleeping wife to wander the shadowed casemate, gutted behind a mask of pleasantry as those he passed offered weary felicitations, until he'd met Lieutenant Jones outside.

How was he to tell Heledd? To speak words that would surely crush what remained of her will to go on? These last days, trapped inside a smoking, burning hell, had all but undone her. And it was his fault. He'd known . . . God forgive him, he'd known it the day they wed. She wasn't suited for a soldier's wife. He ought to have left her in Wales. Insisted upon it. But thought of being an ocean away from her, likely for years . . .

Born an only child on a prosperous Breconshire estate not far from his own, Heledd had been raised sheltered, privileged. Reginald had admired her from afar since he was a lad. She'd taken notice of him by the time she was seventeen. Six months later Reginald, twenty-three and newly possessed of a captain's commission, had proposed.

When it came time for them to part, Heledd had begged. She'd pleaded. She'd made all manner of promises. She *would* follow the drum as a soldier's wife. He would see how brave she could be.

She'd barely weathered the sea voyage. The sickness, the filth, the myriad indignities of cramped quarters had eaten away at her fragile soul, leaving behind a darkness that spread like a stain, until he barely recognized the suspicious, defensive, unreasoning creature that on occasion burst from beneath her delicate surface. Nor the weeping, broken one.

But always she would rally, come back to herself, beg him not to leave

her somewhere billeted apart from him, love him passionately, sweetly, until he lost all reason and caved to her pleas.

Then had come the stresses of the campaign, the journey from Albany to Fort Edward, then to Fort William Henry, Heledd scrubbing laundry for the regiment, ruining her lovely hands to earn her ration. Brittle smiles. Assurances. Clinging to stability by her broken fingernails while his dread for her deepened, a slow poison taking hold.

Then she'd told him: she was again with child. After an early loss in the first months of their marriage, she'd waited long before informing him. By then they were out of Albany, heading into wilderness, she once more refusing to be left behind. Would that the babe had waited for this promised safe passage to Fort Edward. Maybe then . . .

How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart?

Why standest thou afar off, O LORD?

Providence had abandoned him. He alone must find the words to land what might be the final blow for Heledd, and he'd rather have stripped himself naked to face a gauntlet of Montcalm's Indians.

Shaking now, Reginald started for the stuffy timbered room where his wife had given birth—but was soon again halted, this time by sight of a woman. She lay in an alcove off the casemate's main passage. He might have overlooked her had not two ensigns been coming from thence supporting a third between them, dressed in bloodied linen. They muttered their *sirs* and shuffled toward the sunlit parade ground, leaving Reginald to peer within.

The alcove was dimly lantern-lit. Disheveled, malodorous pallets lined the walls, all vacated except for the one upon which the woman lay. A trade-cloth tunic and deerskin skirt edged with tattered fringe covered her slender frame. Her fair sleeping face was young, the thick braid fallen across her shoulder blond. No bandages or blood marked any injury. Reginald wondered at her presence until he saw beside her on the pallet a

bundle much like the one he carried, save that it emitted soft kittenish mewls. Sounds *his* son would never make again.

He remembered the woman then. She'd been brought in by scouts just before Montcalm's forces descended and the siege began, liberated from a band of Indians a mile from the fort. For weeks such bands had streamed in from the west, tribes from the mountains and the lake country beyond, joining Montcalm's forces at Fort Carillon.

How long this white woman had been a captive of the savages there was no telling. She'd no civilized speech according to a scout who had claimed to understand the few words she'd uttered. One of the Iroquois dialects. She'd been big with child when they brought her in. Reginald vaguely recalled one of the women assisting Heledd telling him she'd gone into labor shortly before his wife.

Heledd's travail had been voluble, even with the pound and crash of mortars above their heads. But he hadn't heard this woman cry out. Had she survived it?

He looked along the corridor. Voices rose from deeper in the casemate, distracted with evacuating the wounded. Holding his dead son, Reginald Aubrey stepped into the alcove and bent a knee.

The woman's chest rose with breath, though her skin was ashen. A heap of blood-soaked linen shoved against the log wall attested to the cause. He started to wake her, thinking to see if she knew the fort had fallen—could he make himself understood. That was when he realized. The bundle beside her contained not a baby, but *babies*. One had just kicked aside the covering to bare two small faces, two pairs of shoulders.

Reginald glanced round, half expecting another woman to appear, come to claim one of the babes as her own. They couldn't both belong to this woman. They were as different as two newborns could be except—a peek beneath the blanket told him—both were male.

That was where resemblance ended, at least in that dimness. For while

the infant on the left had a head of black hair and skin that foretold a tawny shade, the one on the right, capped in wisps of blond, was as fair and pink as Reginald's dead son.



The ringing in Reginald's head had become a roar as he bent over Heledd to wake her. His heart battered the walls of his chest like a thirty-two pounder set at point-blank range, waging internal war. Despite his mistakes with Heledd, he'd still considered himself a good man. An honorable man. For five-and-twenty years he'd had no indisputable cause to doubt it. Until now.

How could he do this thing?

With a groan, he backed from his wife. He would set this right, return things as the Almighty had—for whatever inscrutable reason—caused them to be. There was time to undo what ought never to have entered his thoughts.

Only there wasn't.

Heledd's eyes blinked open. A slender, reddened hand felt for the infant gone from her side. With a cry she heaved up from the cot, hair flowing dark across her crumpled shift.

"Where is he? My baby!" Panic pinched her voice, twisted her fine-boned face into a sharp mask.

Reginald's heart broke its pummeling rhythm, swelling with love, aching with shame. "He's here. I have him here."

With grasping hands Heledd took the swaddled babe. The child's features were scrunching to cry, but the instant it settled in Heledd's embrace, it calmed.

Reginald's hands shook as his wife stared at the child in her arms. She would know. Of course she would. What mother wouldn't? In another

heartbeat she would raise those brown eyes that had claimed his heart, sear him with accusation, unleash the darkness that he knew bedeviled her, and he'd have lost more than a fort and a son and his honor this day.

Heledd's narrow shoulders heaved. Like a mirror of the babe's, her face calmed, softening in a manner Reginald had never seen. Not even on their wedding day when she'd looked at him as though he'd lit the moon. It was as though, in the face of the child in her arms, she'd found her sun.

"Oh . . . it is well he looks. When I saw him before I thought—was his color not a bit sickly? But do you look at him now, Reginald. Our son is *beautiful*." With a bubble of laughter she raised her face to him, joy shining from her porcelain features, her beautiful eyes alight in their bruised hollows.

He couldn't see the darkness.

For a fleeting moment Reginald was glad for the thing he had done. "He is—" The catch in his voice might have been for reasons purer than the truth. *He was beautiful, Heledd. As I lay him beside the dark child, I saw he had your eyes . . . my mouth . . . and I think my father's nose.*

"Major?" a hurried voice hailed from the doorway. "Ye've but moments to be on the parade ground, sir."

Reginald nodded without looking to see who spoke. Grief and guilt swallowed whole his gladness.

For mine iniquities are gone over mine head . . . neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin—

As footsteps hurried away, he tore through his soul for refuge, even the most tenuous—and found it in Heledd and what he must now do to see her safe across fifteen miles of howling wilderness. He clenched his hands to stop their shaking. "Quickly," he told his wife. "Let me help you dress."

Heledd wrenched her gaze from the babe to echo vaguely, "Dress?"

"Aye. You must rise, and I am sorry for it, but we have lost this ground. We're returning to Fort Edward."



Good Voice of the Turtle Clan woke to the screams of wounded men being slaughtered in their blankets. The fort had surrendered to the French. This much she knew, and for it she had given thanks to the Master of Life, telling herself she need only gather strength, bide her time. Soon she would be free to return to Stone Thrower, if he still lived.

None of the *a'sluni*—the whites—not the women who tended her through the birthing, not the soldiers who questioned her, knew how much she understood their talk. English traders came often through her town. Many of her clan sisters spoke to them and passed on their words to Good Voice. But since being hauled a prisoner into this fort, she'd let none of those words pass her lips.

But now she had new reason to fear. She could hear that Montcalm's Indians were already inside the fort, killing the English. Though in her heart Good Voice was *Onyota'a:ka*—Oneida—with her light hair and blue eyes she looked as English as any woman in the fort. More than some. And now she had Stone Thrower's sons to protect.

On her knees, Good Voice yanked aside the blanket to lift the nearest baby, the second-born—the brown one—alarmed by the weakness of her arms. She'd lost much blood. Willing her bones to be like iron, she reached for the firstborn, marveling afresh that her sons had not in the usual way of two-born-together shared their parents' blood in equal measure, but one taken more of hers, the other more of Stone Thrower's. It was a thing that would be much talked of once they were all safe away, back home at Kanowalohale.

A yipping shriek curdled down the corridor beyond the recess where Good Voice had pushed her sons into the world. It raised the hairs on her scalp, even as she felt against her cradling arm the light-skinned baby's stiffening chill.

A more visceral panic gripped her. Holding the brown child to her shoulder, warm and solid, she laid his brother on her thighs and bent over his tiny face. No breath! For a moment her own breathing ceased, her throat clutched by shock, then choking grief. She had let this happen—let Stone Thrower's firstborn slip away while she slept.

More screams rent the dank, earth-tanged air. Good Voice pressed the dead child to her shoulder. With the living clutched to the other shoulder, she staggered to her feet. The blood rushed out of her head and from her womb. Earthen walls and timber frames and lantern light spun. She braced herself with feet planted wide lest she spin, too, and fall.

Other feet pounded the earth. A warning shout rose in the passage behind her. She whirled as an Abenaki warrior fell across the blood-stained pallet where she'd lain, war club falling from open fingers, a hatchet buried in his back. The one who'd shouted came up behind the Abenaki, relief in his eyes as he looked at her. Lizotte, a Canadian *coureur de bois*—a woodsrunner, as the English named them. They served the French as interpreters for their Indian allies. Lizotte snatched the hatchet from the Abenaki's back and caught Good Voice as she staggered, nearly dropping her dead son.

Lizotte took the body and steadied her, eyes fierce in a face narrow and sharp like a bird's. "Stone Thrower sends me for you. He did not know whether the babe had come—two of them! Can you walk? Montcalm's Indians have slipped the leash, but I will take you out of this."

"I must walk," Good Voice said in his French language.

Sparing no more words, Lizotte swept her out of the recess, seeming not to notice the child he now held was dead. There was much else to demand his attention. Along a dark corridor, past scenes of slaughter, he led

her, deeper into the earth, finally up again into daylight, where Good Voice blinked and squinted until her eyes could bear it.

Lizotte had spoken true. The fort's interior swarmed like an anthill kicked over. Indians were coming over the broken walls, through the gun embrasures, taking prisoners of the English left behind, stripping some of clothing, tomahawking any who resisted. They raced about, shrieking, angered to find so little baggage to pillage or rum to drink. As Lizotte pulled her along in the shadow of a barracks wall, she saw a big Huron pick up a broken barrel and hurl it in anger.

Lizotte made for the gate, hatchet ready to defend them both, though with his stocking cap and quilled leggings he looked too French to be mistaken for English. Halfway to the gate his stride faltered. He looked down at the child he carried, then at her. "Dead?"

Good Voice wanted to release the keening trapped within, but she had one son still living. For him she must be strong. "Yes. Dead."

Another Huron came loping past, lofting high a fresh scalp. A black-robe priest rushed into the fort, long skirts flapping, face pinched in fury at sight of the Huron's prize. Behind the black-robe more French came. Soldiers. More Indians. Good Voice couldn't tell who meant to join the slaughter and who—besides the black-robe—meant to stop it. She didn't think anyone could stop it. The warriors needed scalps and plunder, or who would believe their boasts of victory? But this . . . it was very bad.

Outside the fort, Indians were digging up the soldier graves so they could plunder them. There had been no time for the English to bury their battle dead. These were spotting-sickness graves. Could those warriors not see what horror they touched?

Spots danced in Good Voice's vision, a mockery of the sickness that had stalked the fort, an enemy within. She stumbled on, her insides raw, aching in protest. She should have spent this day in a birthing hut, cared for by the clan mothers—more days still, until her bleeding stopped.

They were nearly to the forested hills to the west when her arms

sagged. At her cry, Lizotte turned back to take the living child, trading it for the dead one, which seemed to weigh nothing in her weakened arms, its spirit flown. Lizotte hurried on, but paused at the wood's edge to wait for her.

"Stone Thrower was wounded when you were captured. He was taken to the French at Fort Carillon to heal. He waits for you there."

Good Voice knew about the wounding. They had come with a party of Oneidas in answer to Montcalm's call for aid, but Stone Thrower had decided not to take up the hatchet for the French. They'd been heading home when the redcoat soldiers burst into their camp. Before she was dragged away from him, Good Voice had seen Stone Thrower take the thrust of a bayonet in his side, had feared he'd died of it.

She rejoiced that he lived, but what her eyes were telling her, now that she saw their dead baby in the light of day, wiped the gladness from her heart. This was not her child. She looked back in bewilderment at the detestable fort. Indians and woodsrunners poured from its gate, making for the entrenched camp into which the redcoats were marching.

"Good Voice! *Hanyo, hanyo.*" Hurry, hurry, in the tongue of her people.

She gaped at the dead baby she held, then at Lizotte. "I do not know this child. It is not mine."

Lizotte's sun-weathered hand splayed over her second-born, cupped to his shirt. "What are you saying? Did you not birth two?"

"Yes. *Tekawilake.*" Two babies. "But I would know the son out of my own body, even dead. This is not him!"

How could this be? Whose child was this? Where was *her* son? A scream of sheer panic swelled until it threatened to tear out her throat with the need for release.

She must have appeared ready to bolt, and not for the safety of the forest. Lizotte put himself between her and the fort. "What are you thinking? You cannot go back."

"I must find Stone Thrower's son!" But as she spoke, knowledge of what had been done burst inside her head like one of the big fort guns exploding.

Another woman in the fort had given birth. As Good Voice's sons raised their first cries, she'd heard that woman screaming, seen the two English women cleaning her babies wince, heard them speak of that woman's husband—how he worried for his fragile wife, for the babe taking long to come. Then one had given the other a sly look and their talk changed to how good that woman's husband was to look at, so tall in his officer's red coat.

In desperation, Good Voice latched onto the one bit of importance . . . *his officer's red coat*. That one whose wife had given birth was a redcoat officer. Had those women named him?

"Good Voice!"

Ignoring Lizotte, she closed her eyes, summoning memory of English words spoken heedlessly in her presence. *Aw-bree*. One of the women had called him that. She opened her eyes.

"I know who has done this." She hadn't heard anyone say that other woman's baby had died, but this child, newborn as her own, must belong to Redcoat Aw-bree. *He* had done this. She could see it in her mind. While she slept he'd come, taken her living baby, light-skinned like his, and left behind his dead one.

As certainty engulfed her, she almost flung the strange child to the ground. She wanted to do it. Meant to do it. But her arms would not obey.

Lizotte slid the hatchet into his belt and reached for her, strong fingers closing over her arm. "Save *this* son. Save him to place in Stone Thrower's hands. Then you will tell him of the one who has taken his brother. It is for Stone Thrower to make this right."

She didn't want to accept Lizotte's words, but what use was there in going back, trying to find one man in that chaos? One whose face she didn't know. Even if she found him, who would speak for her against a redcoat?

Turning her back on that fort was harder than being torn from Stone Thrower's side. Harder than the tearing of her body as her sons were born amidst strangers.

Good Voice's heart tore in two as she slipped into the forest, weeping at last for her firstborn. Each tear was a prayer to the Master of Life to guard that son and watch where he was taken, so that one day his father could be led to that place. And take him back.