

An Appalachian Novel



LIAR'S
WINTER

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Liar's Winter: An Appalachian Novel

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The first time I ever seen that girl she was squalling like a banshee. Her whole face was beet red so I didn't notice her mark right off. She was such a tiny thing. Before I could think twice, I'd picked her up.

Her screams was what brought me to the door of the shack. The door wasn't latched. I poked my head in and hollered, but there wasn't no answer. Probably couldn't hear me over the racket of the baby. I'd been squirrel huntin and left my catch on the front step.

The baby was wrapped tight by its momma's side. It's momma laid real still. "You alright?" She didn't wiggle so much as a finger. If she didn't hear that baby bellerin, she sure wasn't gonna hear me. When I grabbed aholt and tugged that baby outa its momma's arm, her arm flopped and I about jumped outa my skin.

That baby commenced to nuzzle at me and quieted to a whimper. Then I hightailed it outta there. I was smart enough to know I couldn't talk a body back to life. Momma would know what to do with the baby. She needed a new youngin anyway, to replace the ones she'd lost, the ones that kept on dyin when they was born. Momma just sit and stared these days. Hardly ever talked. Havin this youngin would make her happy again. I smiled just thinking about it. This baby would do just fine. And Poppy would be proud I'd done such a fine thing for Momma.

I forgot my squirrels on the step though. And it was a ways back home. I'd wandered farther than I'd figured. Long before I made it home, I was right tempted to just leave the baby lyin in the woods. My arms was tired.

Wasn't till I got home I realized I'd left my gun leaning against that shack.

It goes without sayin that Poppy wasn't happy I'd lost my gun. And Momma wasn't happy when she laid eyes on the mark that spilled down one side of that baby's face. That marked baby for my gun, worst trade I'd ever made. Right from the start, that girl brung me nothin but trouble.

ONE

Summer's Mountain, 1893

“Come on, Devil’s daughter. Let me see that demon.” Gerald rested the point of his knife just under my eye. I didn’t dare twitch. “That Devil marked you when you was born. Burned his mark on that cheek and neck.” He eased the knife down my cheek and settled at my throat. “You know, Lochiel, I’ve often wondered if that mark would cut off. Wonder if we could skin you like a rabbit. What do you think?” I couldn’t stop the tremble that crawled up my spine. Gerald often goaded me, taunted me. Sometimes I lashed back with my tongue, other times I just never opened my mouth, never sayin a word. Can’t be sure which way made him maddest, but he’d never drawn a knife on me. “Come on, let me see that demon. Show me!”

I could feel the fear in me turning to anger. I could taste the bitterness like bile crawlin up my throat and into my mouth. If the Devil really was in me, he was hankerin to get out. My mark burned hot.

Then Gerald laughed and flicked his knife away, slid it into his belt. My hand flew to my neck and came away with a tiny drop of blood on my finger.

“That red ’bout matches your face.”

One, two, three. Walk away, Lochiel Ogle. Just walk away. But I couldn’t. Seems I’d spent so much time listenin to everybody tell me what to do that I couldn’t even hear myself no more.

Without me giving it a second thought, one hand clutched his arm and squeezed and the other struck out and clawed his face, scrapin away skin. I gasped and drew back.

Poppy wasn’t gonna like that I’d laid a hand to his boy. Never mind that his *boy* was a grown man.

For a second, Gerald’s eyes glassed over. He looked confused, hurt. Like he was a youngin again. Then they turned icier than the wind whippin round us. He wheeled around. To go tattle, I reckoned, just like a youngin. Might as well finish gathering the laundry before Momma started hollerin for me. The clothes was done froze solid.

“Come on. Turn around, devil girl.”

I spun on my heels. A rock the size of a melon smashed into the side of my head. My knees grew weak and a curtain of darkness slowly covered my eyes. I felt my head droop to my chest and the cold bite of the winter snow as my cheek hit the ground.



My jaw ached and I could only open my right eye. Overhead hung a boulder just wide enough to shelter me. A small fire smoldered a few steps away. I raised myself up on my elbows, but that small movement made it feel like the ground was spinning under me.

I come into this world with this purplish-red mark coverin the side of my face and neck, and there was nothin I could do to change it. I knew from the time I bent over the edge of the riverbank and seen my reflection in the crystal-clear water, this curse that covered my face would be my death. Creamy-colored skin, long black curls, golden eyes, and that . . . that horrid mark.

The Devil'd marked me. Leastways, that's what Poppy and Momma told me. Satan burned his mark on me before I was born, so they called me the Devil's daughter.

"You shoulda died. Shoulda been kilt." Momma never missed a chance to remind me I was a stray picked up outa the woods. I'd been left there to die by my real momma. Left there to be eaten by wolves.

A blanket laid heavy on me. Heavier than any I'd ever felt before. I pushed it aside. My head throbbed. I put my hand to it and yelped. A shot of pain was a hard reminder of the rock. My hair was plastered to my head. I took my hand away and saw red on my fingers, remembered the knife. Even with the cold, a trickle of blood dripped over my marked cheek. Blood never seemed to clot over that mark. Was it the heat of hell that seeped from it? I felt a pang of sorrow over what I'd done. I didn't mean to hurt Gerald. He and Momma and Poppy was the only family I knew. And now here I was, left out to die again.

The ground slowly came to a standstill. "Poppy? Poppy, where are you?" The wind whipped and danced around the ledge, whistling an eerie melody.

I crawled to my feet. Not a soul in sight. Nothing but the tips of the summits lifting like fingers through the foggy mist.

"Poppypyyyy!"

My voice echoed off the summit.

"Aaghh!" I beat my fists against the rock ledge. The pain in my chest felt like someone had ripped me clean down the middle with a knife. And my spirit broke. Shattered into little pieces all over that mountainside.

TWO

Momma's words dug into my soul like a dog scrabbling at the ground for a rat. They was nothing but an echo, coming back at me over and over. *"You oughta be grateful Poppy saved you. You woulda been killed. So, you pray hard the Devil hisself don't come lookin for you. 'Cause from the day you was born, your soul belonged to the Devil. We tried to save you even after he had done marked you as his."* She was relentless, wavin a cross all 'round my head. Over and over sayin them same words.

Fear crawled under my covers at night and nearly took my breath while I waited for Satan to slither into the loft and eat my soul, layin claim to me.

I scooped a handful of snow and pressed it into an icy ball. *Cover my eye or bite into it?* I was thirsty, so I bit. The dampness of the snow quenched my thirst, icy water runnin down my throat. Despite the cold, I sweated under my threadbare coat.

A neat pile of sticks and arm-sized branches lay to one side of the tiny fire. Shoved into the crevice of the rock overhang was a bag.

On my hands and knees, I made my way to the leather bag. Maybe Gerald had an ounce of conscience after all. Leavin me somethin. But it seemed odd the one who wanted me dead would leave me a nibble of hope. Maybe Poppy left it.

I grabbed hold and opened it. Bread and potatoes. I wanted to cry, but considering the cold, I decided it was best to keep my eyes dry lest they freeze shut. On the ground, a set of tracks, boots bigger than my feet, marked the mud. I wondered if Gerald had hauled me up here. He surely wouldn't have built me a fire though, seein how he wanted me dead. Poppy, most likely.

Maybe Poppy felt bad for what Gerald had done and felt some shame. He wouldn't want me dead. Poppy cared some, or I thought he did.

The breeze cut across the gap, tearin clean through me. That's the way it is on the mountain unless you're lucky enough to be on the side that turns its back to the wind. Them hills can shelter a body or open them up to be froze solid.

I fingered the spotty portions of ankle-deep snow. *Another month till spring.* The clouds hung heavy. I remember Poppy tellin me these mountains was called Smoky for a reason. On days like this, a body could look across the pass and see a smoky mist of clouds risin so thick you could scratch lines in them.

I pressed my hand over my good eye and shaded a clouded sun. If I could just get my bearings and figure out where the sun sat in the sky, I could get a good idea of the time. From where I stood I couldn't tell east from west but I knew from the sun hoverin overhead it was midday.

“Looks to be close to noon.”

The voice boomed from behind a stand of trees and I jumped like a scared cat.

A tall, lanky man stepped into sight, his arms filled with firewood. Jet black hair streaked with silver hung to his shoulders and the weathering in his face put him about Poppy’s age. He leaned and spit a stream of amber juice long as his arm.

“You tryin to figure the time? That’s good. Good to see you’re up and about.” The man came closer. “Cat got your tongue?”

He eased the wood to the ground and untied a dead rabbit from his belt.

I stared as he worked his way around the fire, jabbing sticks into the gaps between the logs. Close to noon. It had been drawin on supper time when I was takin down the wash.

“You was out for a spell. I was beginnin to figure you wouldn’t never come round.”

He heaved up a large log and placed it in the center of the flame. Embers jumped toward the greyish sky. The fire gnawed at the bark, sparking and rising high enough to warm my numbed hands. “We need to build this fire up. Get plenty of hot coals to last when night falls.”

He took hold of a branch and brushed away the snow. “Don’t just stand there starin. Clear the snow so the ground will heat and dry a bit. Lest you wanna be sleepin on a froze ground again.”

Snow spotted the dirt and the midday sun teased us with just enough warmth to fool us. *Liar’s winter*—the time when the mountain fights with winter and spring not knowin’ whether to warm the ground or chill a body to the bone. More times than not, a spring rain would eat up a winter storm and the sky would spit both at the ground. When them storms come, the elements fight till one wins out over the other. If the snow won, it would be a deep, wet snow—heavy on the trees, dropping limbs to the ground just to show its might. If it be rain, then it would be a toad choker.

“I see you and your brother had a brawl.”

“How d’you know about me and Gerald?”

“Whole mountain knows the legend. A family raising the Devil’s daughter. Keepin her hid away. Course that’s just legend. Never knew it was true. Least not ’til I seen her with my own eyes.” He kicked a lit log closer to the fire. “I was passin by with my goods when I come upon your little brawl. Kept outa sight. Family feuds ain’t none of my business.”

“You ain’t screamed and run yet. How come?” I crossed my arms and tucked my hands in my armpits. “Poppy always told me if folks saw me they’d either run or turn to kill me.”

The man pushed his hat back, his smile as warm as the fire. “You seen many folks?”

“A few.”

He nodded. “*A few* ain’t many. Don’t give a body a lot to judge on, now does it?”

I wasn't sure what to say.

"Well, I reckon everybody has a story." He added a new log to the fire. "Ain't my place to judge. Leastways, that's what my momma always taught us youngins. I figure every soul deserves a fair treatin."

I stepped closer. "You ain't blind are you? I mean, you can see this here mark that plagues me?"

"My eyes is pretty crisp. I can spot a doe huddled in a thicket." He laid down an armload of brush under the overhang, scattered it out a bit.

"Well, ain't you scared? Afraid I'll hex you? Maybe you ought not come too close. I don't know my powers yet."

"I ain't too bothered by you. Don't got much to be scared of." He continued to pack and spread brush on the pile. Then he lifted his foot and stepped into the center of it, crushing it and pressing it down.

"This will make you a warm nest tonight, and we'll pray to the good Lord for rain and not snow." He nodded toward the black cloud hovering over the summit.

I didn't know him from a hole in the wall. He coulda been a bootlegger for all I knew. A murderer. Rustler. Poppy warned me against the dangers in the world. Especially harborin this mark and all. He said strangers'd just as soon slaughter me as wait for me to conjure up the Devil. That's why I had to hide whenever someone happened by, watchin 'em through the cracks in the shed.

"You got a name?" He tinkered with a stick in the fire.

I pressed a handful of snow against my swollen eye. "I reckon I can ask you the same question. But seein as how you know all about me, I figure you already know my name."

The man stuffed a wad of tobacco between his lip and jaw. He wasn't ignorin me, but he wasn't answerin either. He worked the chaw around a bit, then spit. Still nothing.

I gathered another handful of snow. His silence rankled. My fist squeezed around that snow and I whipped it at his head. "Low-kill. That's how you speak my name. You got it? Lochiel."

The snow crumbled against his shoulder. "Well, Miss Lochiel. Name's Grubbs. Walton Grubbs. I live across the gap."

THREE

“You know, there is a lot in a body’s name. My momma is part Cherokee and so she give me the Indian name Blue Water. Means free movin. So I reckon my name set me in life, bein as I’m a peddler and all.”

“Your momma is Cherokee?” I’d heard Poppy talk about Indians. He told me stories about them campin on the other side of the ridge.

“Part. Her momma’s womanhood was shared with a slave. That made my momma a Melungeon—Indian and slave mixed. And so it’s passed on. Been called a half-breed the biggest part of my life. But seein as I carry a wagon of goods, ain’t many folks who turn me away. But you, on the other hand”—he pointed a finger at my face. The skin around his nails was cracked and rough from hard work—“you got a mark to contend with.”

A burst of heat from within flamed from my face. The Devil in me trying to work out. I tried to shoot fire from my eyes—that’s what Gerald woulda called it—but I reckon my swollen shut eye stopped that from working. “I’ve heard Poppy talk about half-breeds. You don’t look no different.”

“Blood that runs through the veins is still blood. It’s the man that makes it different. I reckon you know about bein different, though. We’re a lot the same.”

“How do ya figure that? People call you the Devil too?”

Walton went to wagging his head from side to side. “Lawsey, no. Ain’t nobody ever called me a devil, ’cept maybe my brother when I poked at him as a kid.”

“There’s two of you?” I raised a brow.

“Was. Not no more. My brother died of the fever a few years back.” He hung his head.

I leaned toward the fire, facing my palms near the warmth of the flame. “Then I ain’t seein no likeness betwixt the two of us.”

He cocked his head and sighed. “If you have to know, the Cherokee ain’t exactly the ripe pick for a neighbor. With a name like Blue Water, a body can’t exactly hide from who they are. That’s why I took on Walton. Folks can’t tag me like a deer.”

If there was one thing that held true amongst the mountain people, it was givin their youngins names that held some meaning. Momma said as much. She given Gerald his name ’cause he come out of the womb demanding to be king.

But my name—my name was meaningless. Like Momma just walked out on the mountain and made up a word to call me. *Lochiel*. Empty. Lost. Nothing. Alone . . .

I’d been cryin as Momma, Poppy, and Gerald climbed into the wagon to ride into Etowah. I reckon I was about five or so. Poppy’d roped me to the porch post so I couldn’t wander off.

“This here is for your own good.” He looped the rope around my waist and knotted it several times. “Don’t you dare take that off,” he’d said. “This way you don’t wander off where you ain’t safe.” Poppy always made it his business to keep me safe.

I’d never dared mess with them knots either, not that time or any other.

“You stay close to the cabin,” he’d said. “This here rope is long enough for you to get to the outhouse and water trough. You can get in the house, and bar the door if you stand on the chair.” Eventually I didn’t need to stand on the chair. “You’ll be safe tied to the house. Momma left you biscuits. You’ll be fine. Remember this is for your own good. People won’t take to you bearin that mark.”

I’d sobbed into the air and wailed like a wolf at the moon, but Poppy’d just pressed his finger against my mouth real gentle-like and shushed me.

“Now, Lochiel,” he’d said. “You get in that house. And remember, they is folks who has things a lot worse than you. You remember that. You got a roof over your head, clothes, and food.”

So maybe this was one of them folks that had it worse than me—bein a half-breed an’ all. I stole a glance Walton’s direction. The Devil in me cooled. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“And now that you do, does it change your mind about me?” He handed me a chunk of hard bread.

“Course not.” How could my mind be changed when I didn’t hardly know him at all? He was acting gentle. But maybe he was just plumb crazy. Either way, he wasn’t the least bit scared.

I’d finally figured it was Walton who’d drug me to shelter and built me a fire, not Gerald or Poppy.

He ran his finger between his gum and jaw then scraped out the chaw of tobacco and tossed it to the edge of the fire. The coals sizzled as they ate the damp spit.

“There you have it. I think no less of you because of that mark on your face. We are alike.”

I bit hard into the bread, my eyes fixed on the fire’s flame. I still couldn’t figure on how we were alike but the idea had a kindness in it, so I didn’t disagree again.

Walton cleaned the rabbit carcass and hung it on a stick over the flame. The scent of fresh-cooked meat made my mouth water.

He grabbed his knife and swiped it clean against his trousers; then in one swift motion, he split the rabbit in half.

“Here.” He handed me the stick with my portion. “You need to eat, put some meat on your bones.”

At home, Momma’d feed the meat to the men. I got taters, kale, and bread. As I held that stick, I felt the weight of the man’s kindness. It felt burdensome somehow.

“See them clouds over the ridge?”

I nodded.

“Looks like rain. A body would have figured for more snow, but them is black clouds. Spring’s easin over the mountain. We need to get us some shelter set before the rain comes.”

So we ate. Said little. Then Walton burrowed out a spot deep under the rock's overhang. He carried hot coals over and dropped them in.

"In case the fire gets rained out" he said. "Now, you spread your blanket over that brush so it stays dry. Lay on that. You'll need it once it starts to rain."

"Where you goin to rest?" I did what he said.

"Oh, you don't worry 'bout me. I got me a camp just down the mountain a bit."

My chest hurt and it was hard to grab a breath. I clutched the front of my coat. What if Gerald come back? As many times as I was left alone as a youngin, I couldn't bear the thought of being alone out in the open. Didn't feel safe out here in the open spaces.

He was gathering stones and making a ring around the coals. "Now, Miss Lochiel, I'll be within earshot. Don't you worry none." Walton smiled. "You ain't scared are you?"

I stared into his eyes. "No, I ain't scared." It was a lie. But he didn't need to know that the dark got me shakin like a newborn pup.

He patted my shoulder as he walked past and quick as a wink I slapped his hand away.

He paused and looked me in the eye. He didn't look angry. "Now, you listen good to me. We ain't never alone. That's a promise the good Lord made us. We ain't never alone."

I wasn't sure what he meant by that 'cause he was fixin to leave me.

I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out.

He poured an extra cup of coffee into a leather water pouch. "Keep that close to the coals, and it'll stay warm." He gave me another blanket and a knife.

I watched as he packed up to leave. Like Momma and Poppy readyin the wagon. Only there wasn't no rope on me this time.

"Let's have that question, girl. Spit it out."

I stuttered as the chill in the air set my teeth to chattering. "Wh-where will I go? What do I d-do?"

He leaned against the rock and shoved his hat to the back of his head. He scratched at his chin.

He pointed to my feet. "You start here." He lifted his hand and pointed over the mountain. "Then go to there. And you never stop till you find what feels like home. My best guess is, you'll know it when you find it."

Walton dug into his pouch. He held out the rest of his bread until I took it from his hand. "Stay up under here till the rain passes. That little flame has warmed the cliff rocks. That should keep you snug as a bug in a rug." He knelt at my feet. "Lord, I ask for your protection over this young woman. Guide her to the name you have give her. One that has meanin."

I looked around. "Who you talkin to?"

He raised his head. “That’s not talkin, that’s prayin. Walton Grubbs prays over everthing. I figure you got some smarts about you. It’ll come to you. But I’ll tell you this. My momma always told me the good Lord is a person you find. But for Him, He’s done found you. And you best get to figurin, ’cause you’re gonna need the help of the Almighty.”

That made about as much sense as a fly in hot butter. He stood and brushed his knee with his hat as if what he’d said settled the matter.

“Since you seem to know it all, you reckon Gerald thinks I’m dead? Or do you think I oughtta sleep with one eye open?”

There was no answer. Walton fed the fire and stacked the extra firewood under the ledge.

“Figures,” I said, pushing a rock closer to the fire.

A cold wind rushed around the side of the bluff, causing the blaze to flicker. I watched as the flames licked at the bark. I pulled the extra blanket tight around my shoulders.

“I reckon you was right. The rocks are warm from the fire.”

“Yep. Well, my momma raised a wise old bird. Now you get you some rest.”

Over the mountain, the clouds bumped and rumbled. An echo to the throbbing in my head. As drops of rain commenced to fall, Walton’s lanky figure vanished into the thick woods.

FOUR

I ain't right sure when I nodded off. But it was the smell of smoke blowin in my face that woke me. The wind had taken an upturn. Its gusts were like hands fanning at the base of the flame, spitting water into the coals and causing the fire to struggle. Smoke billowed and hung under the rock ledge.

I grabbed a stick and poked the bowl of coals, tossing on a small log to kindle the fire under my ledge.

I could only hope for some mercy from the gusts. My eyes burned, but I managed to clear the white fog from my shelter. I'd never, in my whole life, been off the homestead. Didn't have no idea what laid beyond what I could see from the porch of the cabin, and I was torn between fear and anticipation. Lost is what was and what was to come. Right this minute, in the midst of this mess, my lips was wetted with a drop of freedom and it made me thirsty. Real thirsty.

I looked out into pitch black. No stars. No moon. Just the dark. For all them times I'd swallowed loneliness at Momma and Poppy's, this beat the tar outa them.

My teeth chattered from the cold, and though what was left of the snow seemed to have melted around me, it didn't stop the nippy dampness from seepin into my bones. Odd thing was, outside of the rain, there was no sound. It was like every animal on the mountain had burrowed into a hole to beat the nip.

And here I was. A sorry sight. My hurt eye cracked open just enough for me to peer through. I run my fingers up my cheek, and the tips dropped into the clotted gash above my brow. Walton had tossed me a rag, told me to press it to my head, but it hurt too bad.

I don't reckon I'd ever hated a soul before, but I guess there was a time for everthing. Every throb of my head made me hate Gerald just a little more.

The dirty dog was sly and conniving. I reckon it happened little by little.

Once we got in a brawl and Gerald was sitting on me, holding me down. He was already a man, but still set out to pester me whenever he had an inkling.

"Let me up, Gerald," I screamed. But he pushed my hands harder against the ground. Poppy stood on the porch, smokin his pipe. I squirmed enough to draw my knee up hard, between his legs, forcin him to holler and turn me loose.

Poppy purt near cried over him. "Lochiel, you hurt my boy."

"Aw, Poppy." I'd sat up and brushed my hair back from my face. "I knocked the wind out of the demon. He ain't dead."

That's when Poppy turned on me. "He ain't no demon. Gerald's a good boy. It's you that carries the evil." Poppy gave me up right then and there.

Up to that point, Poppy had kept an eye out over me. Momma made no bones about my place, but Poppy—he kinda kept Gerald at bay. He protected me some.

Poppy gently patted Gerald's scruffy cheek. "Come on, Son. Open your eyes."

Gerald pulled open his lids and, for a minute, I was the one disappointed that they opened.

"Wipe that smile off your face, Lochiel!" Poppy shrieked at me as he pulled Gerald up into his arms. "What's happened here ain't funny."

"I never said it was funny, Poppy." I tried to lay my hand on Poppy's shoulder, but he shrugged it off like I'd burned him.

"Don't you never lay a hand on me or my boy ever again." That was the last time I touched another person, until yesterday.

It took a good many years before I boiled over and struck Gerald again. Now, here I set, alone on the mountain in a downpour. Maybe Poppy was the one that set me out to die this time.

My stomach begin to rumble as I stared into the yellow blaze of my little fire, my face growing hot from the warmth. I pulled Walton's bag off the stick where it hung and fingered the tie. Inside was two hard potatoes and a towel with some fatback rolled in it.

It didn't take long for me to get a hankering for one of them taters. Sticky juice dripped from the tater as I scraped away the peel. That knife'd sure come in handy. I stabbed into its flesh like I was gutting a squirrel, then balanced it against a log at the edge of the fire. I never got good at peeling taters like Momma. She'd start at one end and trim the peel like a snake shedding its skin—twirling and twisting one long cord.

The tater sizzled as the flames brought its juices to a boil. The scent of the potato spun around my head. Peeled or scraped, it set my mouth to watering.

I slowly twisted the potato to warm it through. Tears welled in the corners of my eyes. When Poppy shoved my hand away, it broke my heart. I reckon I broke his first by hitting Gerald.

Despite what they was, I loved them. I needed to love, and they was all I had.

There ain't much worse than the dark. The kind of dark I was staring into now. My mind can conjure up some horrible things from the dark. And them times I laid in the corner of the loft as a youngin and tried to hide, the horrors never went away. They just grew bigger.

When Momma and Poppy left me at the house whilst they went into town, I dreaded nightfall most. Alone in the loft, the darkness of night pressed down on me so hard I could hardly breathe. There wasn't a thing I could do but cry. Cry and plead that the Devil wouldn't sneak up the ladder and eat my soul.

In the log and the flame, I could see the face of the Devil hisself, his hot tongue lashing out, trying to get me. My tater shook on the end of that knife, and I raised my face to the sky.

“Poppy, I’m sorry!” My words quivered and disappeared in the dark. “Please don’t leave me up here. Please, Poppy. I’ve learned my lesson. I won’t never hit Gerald again.” That taste of freedom turned on me. What I had wasn’t much, but it was better than freezing to death.

I called out across the mountain. “I’ve learned my lesson.” But there was no answer, just the sound of the rain. And then my heart broke open. “Don’t leave me.” I dropped the potato stick and hugged my knees to my chest. Sobs rung out over the ridge as I let loose the wails that ached inside me. “Don’t leave me. Don’t leave me.” My pent-up sorrow spilled on the already wet ground. Tears made their way down the side of my nose and over the busted lip. The salty water burned the cuts, a different pain to ponder on.

My squalling shifted to humming with each jagged exhale.

And then, after a time, shuddered to a stop.

I wiped my nose with the tail of my skirt and opened my good eye. The devil’s face was gone and just the firelight remained. I picked up the potato. Steam curled and danced in the cool misty air as I gently blew across the vegetable. I twirled the tater and stared into the darkness, waiting for someone to take it from me. No one did. Proof I was alone. For the first time, alone, scary as it was, wasn’t the worst thing that could happen to a body.

As I bit into the tater, through the rush of the rain I caught a glimpse of something.

“Who’s there?” I pulled the knife from the tater, clenching the handle in my hand. “I saw you. Show yourself.”

My heart raced like a runaway wagon. I eased back from the light of the fire. If it was Gerald, at least I had a knife.

A child—a boy soaked to the bone—peeked from around a tree.

“What do you want?”

The child froze like a squirrel spotted by a coonhound, and then he inched toward my fire.

“What do you want?” I repeated.

I ain’t sure which of us was the scardest. He craned his head to one side, looking me over.

“Ain’t you got nothin to say? Sneakin around here like a fox.”

The boy moved closer, close enough to see me clear, then lifted his hand and gently touched the mark on my cheek. I flinched and shoved him away. There was a minute when the Devil pushed at me to jump at him and scare the whiz outa him, but I remembered what it was like to be scared.

“It’s true.” His words sent chills down my arm. The boy gasped and, like a shot, tore into the darkness.

Gone. Alone again. Poppy was right. My mark had scared him off. My heart split open. Was this what the rest of my days was gonna be like?

The night drug on, endless as the running river. I glanced around the small camp Walton had set up. I’d never had such a thick, warm blanket before, much less two. Momma’s quilts was thin and small, never really coverin a body good.

Nobody ever built me a fire. And they certainly never allowed me a full potato to myself. Everthing at the table was divided. Poppy and Gerald getting the most and Momma and me getting less. And bread, well, I got good at sneaking a biscuit from the skillet.

Yet there I sat. Rain dousing the ground, and I was pretty dry. I had a blanket under me, and one around my shoulders, food to myself, and not a soul naggin at me about the mark on my face.

I was alone—a good alone, I think. There was something freein about just cryin it out. When a body's done, it's like a weight is lifted. I was on my own with no promise of how long Walton would be around. I'd best pull myself up by the bootstraps and take charge.

I unlaced my shoes and leaned my feet against the warm rocks around the fire. They tingled and twinged. For a minute, I wasn't sure if it hurt 'cause they was gettin burned, or if it hurt 'cause they was gettin thawed. I decided on thawed.

I can't say I begrudged Momma and Poppy. After all, I wasn't their child. They was good enough to pick me up and keep me from dyin. And I ain't ungrateful. They protected me from people who might've killed me.

But this here man, Walton, he was different. What was in it for him? Why'd he feel the need to help me?

There was more questions than there was answers. I didn't understand his kindness or his reasoning. And as much as I wanted to run from this old man, there was somethin about him that drew me in. Maybe it was because he said we was alike. Him bein a half-breed. I reckon he knew what it felt like to be shoved away. I pulled the blanket tighter around my shoulders.

I can't figure this. I can't make out how come this man wants to help me. Better yet, he don't seem to want nothin in return.

I slipped my feet into my boots and tied the strings. For the first time since fall, they didn't ache from the cold. The rain picked up and thunder rumbled through the valley. By morning, there'd be little snow left on the mountain.

I stoked the fire once more, this time dropping on two good-sized logs. *That oughta last till mornin.* With my belly full, my feet warm, I was dry under the ledge.

Walton had done me a favor. I reckon I owed him. My eyes grew heavy and though I was wary of falling asleep, my head was telling me to rest.

A howl echoed off the summit. Then a second, and a third. Darkness outside the glow of my fire closed around me like a fog. The wolves called to the wind. A crack of lightning lit up the mountain and I could see the outline of the wolf standing, rain washing over his fur, head arched and nose to the sky, howling, calling out to the pack. Waiting.

Waiting for me to close my eyes.

FIVE

“Git up! Now, Lochiel! We ain’t got no time to tarry. Lochiel. Git up!”

I come off the pile of brush like I’d been stung with a branding iron.

My heart skipped. “What’s goin on?”

“They’re comin. Help me. Quick.” His voice was a hoarse whisper as he kicked at the coals. “Grab your things. Get anything that looks like you was here.”

“I ain’t got nothin. They ain’t a thing somebody could hook to me. Who’s comin?”

Walton grabbed a handful of tater peels and mud, then waved it in my face. “I said get anything that looks like you was here. I mean *anything*.”

He commenced to heave the brush and limbs he’d collected for the fire over the side of the mountain. I stood staring, dazed.

Walton grabbed my arm and shook hard. “Lochiel, lest you want to meet your maker in the next few minutes, hop to it.” Gerald must be on the hunt. And the prey was me.

Walton put the leather bag filled with food in my hand. Then he pulled his knife from its sheath and yanked up the tail of my dress.

I screamed but couldn’t force my legs to run.

“Hush. I ain’t gonna hurt you.” He rammed the blade into the material and cut until the dress that hung to my ankles now dangled just below my knees.

“You need to be able to move fast.” He pressed the scrap into my hand. “Put that somewhere.”

I stood gaping at him.

“Look at me.” Walton clapped his hands in front of my face, his voice sharp. “You stop this manure. Pay me some mind. I’m tryin to help you. Now listen to me.”

“Alright.”

“There was a youngin on this mountain last night. Did you see him?”

“I talked to him.”

Walton slung his head from side to side. “Ay, law.”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“He was a sentry for Gerald. Sent up the mountain to see if you was alive or dead. I reckon you failed the dead part seein as you’re still standin.”

“You mean Gerald wasn’t sure I was dead?”

“Well, are you?”

“Of course not.”

Walton worked like a beaver gnawing at a tree to clear the campsite. “He needed to be sure you was dead. Cover his tracks. So he sent a youngin up to do his dirty work. I followed him a piece till I saw him meet up with Gerald. You was lucky the rain was heavy last night. Held him off a bit.”

Fear crawled up my spine like a spider.

“Gerald has convinced a posse that he’s found the Devil’s daughter and for their families to be safe they need to hunt her down. Put an end to her. They’re headin up the mountain. They’re lookin for you. I done seen you knocked silly once by him. Got no plans of seein it again.”

He glanced around the camp. With a piece of bush, he swept away any signs of fire.

“You *saw* Gerald hit me?” Walton glared and motioned for me to help.

I stuffed the blankets under my arm. The mud on the mountainside would easily fill in our footprints.

“That away.” Walton pointed to a dense stand of trees. “Go!”

I’d never felt like an animal before. Leastways not a hunted one. Is this how a buck felt to be hunted? It wasn’t the time to ask questions.

Now I ran.

Briars snagged the skin around my ankles, tearing shreds of flesh from my legs. Warm droplets of blood oozed from the nicks and poured down my calves.

The woods on top of the summit were thick. Limbs—even after the storm—still hung low, bent downward from the weight of the winter snows. Evergreens scratched at my face as I plunged through the thicket.

“Don’t slow down.”

I didn’t argue. Whatever Gerald had in mind, I didn’t want to stick around for it. He was none too nice last time. The gash on my head proved that. My lungs ached for air, but I pushed through the forest. In the back of my mind, I was makin a list of things that didn’t add up. Things like why this stranger was helping me. Why he wasn’t scared of me. Why he cared that someone was tryin to kill the Devil’s daughter.

Walton wrapped his giant hand around my elbow and edged me around a large boulder. The strings of my boot hung up in a stand of thorns, taking my feet out from under me. What little wind I had in my lungs was shoved out.

“Get up. Come on.”

I tried to stand, but the giant thorns were like a bear trap. They dug into the leather of my boots, holding me tight while the trappers made their way to the catch. Fear bubbled in my gut, forcing me to panic, but Walton come behind me and grabbed under my arms.

“When I pull, you shake them feet with all your might. You ready?”

I nodded, my chest heaving and my lungs burning.

“On three. One. Two. Three.”

I kicked with all the might I could muster. The prickly vines snapped and I was free.

“Now, come on. Ain’t much farther.”

As fast as we’d run up and over the summit, we headed down the other side, grabbing at saplings and small pines to hold steady.

“Where we headin?” I wrapped my arms, blankets and all, around a tree to keep from slipping over the edge of the mountain. My foot dug into the wet ankle-deep pine needles. As I hugged a sapling, the sun came peering over the edge of the mountaintops. “East. We’re headin east?”

“Yep.” Walton hesitated and took in the morning sun. “Good Lord paints a new picture ever mornin. It’s a sight, ain’t it?”

“You got time to look at the sunrise?” I snapped.

“A body has to catch a breath. Might as well look at somethin beautiful.”

Walton stooped a bit, hands on his knees, breathing heavy. So I looked back toward the east.

Clouds strung across the sky melting from purple to pink, and then streaks of orange and yellow bled in—just like somebody had dipped their fingers in the sun and dragged them across the sky.

I took in a deep breath of clean air.

“Let’s go. Move. The good Lord will forgive us for not gawkin any longer.” Walton stepped around me and lifted his finger. “There. Behind them trees there’s a clearin. I got my wagon and horses hid down there.”

We worked our way down to the clearing. Though I had not yet heard Gerald or his posse, I found myself, for a second time, relyin on this stranger. I couldn’t put my finger on how that made me feel.

Walton’s chest heaved from the long run and his voice seemed to stick in his throat when he spoke. Still, he never slowed and he didn’t let me tarry neither.

“I reckon you managed to make an enemy yesterday.” Walton pushed a dead limb to the side.

“I think we was enemies long before yesterday. I just never stood up to Gerald before then.”

“You believe that story, don’t you?”

“What story?” I grunted as I tripped over a hidden stump.

“You believe the legends. All that mess about bein the Devil’s daughter.”

I stopped. “I carry the mark. Had it when I come from my mamma’s loins, so I was left out to die fresh outa the womb.”

“Hogwash.”

“My mamma feared for her life. Said she thought if she didn’t kill me, I’d hex everone on the mountain.”

“How do you know what your mamma thought? All you know is what you was told.”

We broke through the dense forest into a field. The tall grass had browned through the winter snows. I stepped into the foliage.

“No. Stop.” Walton huffed, motioning toward the clearing. “Walk the edge of the woods. Don’t get in the field. Your prints will hang on. The horses and wagon are on the lower side.”

I realized how dumb about the world I was. I could cook up a mean mess of collard greens and onions, but I had hardly been past the river. If a body tried real hard, they could throw a rock to the riverbank from our house. My smarts on the world outside stopped at the end of that rope Momma and Poppy tied me with.

We edged along the tree line, spotting the wagon in the lower field.

“Where’s the horses? There ain’t no horses.”

“Simmer down. You don’t think I’d leave my team out in the open, do you?”

He bobbed his head toward the patch of wild hay where two black horses grazed.

“They’re beautiful.” I inched toward one mare, my head just to her shoulder “I ain’t never seen a horse this big.”

“Them’s workhorses. Built to pull logs. Now stop gawkin and untie them reins.”

I untied the horse’s reins and led her through the woods to the wagon. Walton walked the other one along and lined the horses up side by side. Puttin the leather straps in his mouth, he leaned and heaved the yoke upward. It was a sight to watch as he flicked his head to the side, tugging on the reins. The horses slowly backed into the yoke. He hitched the leather straps to the harness and slipped the bridles into the horses’ mouths. He motioned me into the wagon.

“Ain’t you plum useful? Hitchin them horses up all by yourself.”

“Body does what a body has too.”

Walton smacked the reins and the horses groaned as the wagon loosened from the mire. Sweat beaded in the deep crevices of his forehead. He hauled off and spit as the wagon pulled free.

It seemed the time to ask some questions. How did Walton happen to see the boy? How’d he know to follow him to see what he was up to? “Didn’t you sleep at all last night?” I asked.

“Lochiel, you ask more questions than a youngin and all at the worst times. They’ll be time to answer questions, but right now ain’t it.”

“You’re sweatin.” I offered him the scrap he’d cut from my skirt.

He took at and swiped his face with it. “Did *you* sleep?” he asked.

“Them wolves howlin didn’t give me much chance.”

“Rest ain’t all it’s made out to be. Especially when a body’s on the run.”

“Poppy always likes it when it rains. Says it gives him a good night’s sleep. I reckon all it gives me is cold hands.”

Hounds howled on the upper crest of the mountain. Their voices calling out to the hunted. The hunted, meaning me.

Walton slapped the leather reins against the horses. “Haigh there, horses. Haigh!” The wagon jarred and we commenced to rumble across the bumpy field and onto a backwoods path.

The dogs howled again. I could tell by their bark, they’d picked up my smell.

Walton reached over the seat into a wooden box. He pulled out a shirt and overalls.

“Crawl over and put these on. Do it now! We got to rid them dogs of your scent.”

I bounced into the bed of the wagon, ripping my dress over my head. I pulled on the shirt and overalls.

“Stuff them old clothes in this bag. When we cross the shallow of the river, you throw that bag as hard as you can into the rush.” Walton drew the team to a halt and jumped onto the ground. Snagging a good-sized rock, he shoved it at me and crawled back into the seat.

“Put that in too, so the bag will sink.”

We rounded a sharp bend and there in front of us lay the river. The horses splashed into the water, and the wagon jumped the riverbed like skipping rocks.

Halfway across the river, Walton squalled. “Do it now! Throw out that bag.”

I spun the strap of the bag and let it fly over my head into the hard rush of the river. The rapids swallowed it like a hungry bear.

For the time being, there was no sign of me to be found.

SIX

The horses' backs shined as flicks of perspiration caught in the wind, dampening my face as we raced along the gap. Walton pushed them hard to put some distance between us and Gerald. My rear was sore from all the bouncing around on the wagon bench.

"That there turn is Sul-ton's Bend. It's a hard turn. Hold tight. We ain't slowin down til we get to the other side." Walton was right. When we took the turn at Sul-ton's Bend, the wagon tipped up on two wheels. The goods in the wagon rattled and clanged until we come upon a smooth path. We'd made the turn in one piece.

"Whoa there, team. Ho." With a lurch that nearly slid me from my seat, the team slowed to a halt. "You did me good, mares. I reckon you earned a rest."

Walton climbed from the bench and gently patted one horse's rear, working his fingers up her back. His arm slipped around her neck and he pulled her head close to scratch her nose. I could hear him whisper praise as he stroked her.

"You love them horses," I said, standing to stretch my legs.

"Man can't have a better friend. Both these gals have been better to me than a house full of wives."

I wasn't sure if I was supposed to laugh. It sounded like Walton was being funny, but then it didn't. My curiosity got the best of me.

"Ain't you got no wife?"

Walton eased around the second horse. "I try to love on my gals equal. They're hard workin."

"That tells me you got no desire to answer." I rubbed my sore hip.

"I reckon you figured that about right." He scrubbed his hands together then shoved them into his pockets, making his way back to the wagon. "We got a minute before we need to make our way across the gap. There's some sourdough bread in that box behind you."

I twisted and heaved open the heavy slat lid. The tart smell of yeast crept from the box.

"Woowee, that makes my mouth water."

Walton swiped his blade on his shirt, then sliced a thick piece of sourdough. "Sorry they ain't no time for coffee. We need to put as much betwixt us and Gerald as we can."

"Where we headed?" I bit into the tough crust.

"Thunder Mountain, thereabouts. I have some friends who might take in a couple of misfits."

"I'm much obliged for your help." That's the kind of thing Poppy would say when someone would come our way to help patch the roof or lend a hand layin fence. Whenever someone come by, I knew I was to hustle

out of sight, into the loft, the shed, or the root cellar—whatever was quickest at the time. But I found spots where I could still peek out or at least listen.

“Not to worry. I saw a need and stepped up.”

“It’s mighty kind of you. Takin a woman under wing who’s all busted up.” I eyed him to get a hint of what he wanted.

Walton dug the heel of his boot into the ground and burrowed out a hole. He cracked open a rimmed barrel in the wagon and ladled out some water for the horses.

“We’ll let the girls cool down and then be on our way.”

From the narrowed-out holler where Poppy’s cabin stood, there was little else of the world we could see past our homestead, yet I could look up and see the mountains were beautiful. The air was fresh, like the smell of clothes off the line. Sunshine and river water add a scent to a shirt that, when a body closes their eyes, draws a picture of white, puffy clouds. And if Momma had a fire brewing close by, them shirts would have a hint of applewood.

“Walton?”

He raised his head from between the horses. “Yeah?”

“I don’t mean to seem hateful toward Momma and Poppy.”

“What in tarnation are you talkin about?” He stepped over the guide board and leaned against the wagon.

I glanced toward the footrest. “I know Momma and Poppy did their best. And well, me and Gerald has always been like melted lard and water, never mixing. But they always give me what I needed, protected me from strangers, never raised a hand against me.”

Walton commenced to pace along the side of the wagon, like he had something on his mind that was achin to get out. He took in a breath and wheeled around with his fingers curled into a fist.

“You feel sorry for them?” His fist thumped the side of the wagon, and I jumped.

“Rumors was they was a marked child, hid away, made out to be a slave. I hear folks down near Chattanooga talkin ’bout slaves. That’s what it sounds like you was—a slave. Then that Gerald nearly kills you and he drops you off on the side of a mountain like a dead animal left to rot. There ain’t nothin for you to feel grateful about.” Walton’s voice rose. “Good land! Their son is huntin you like an animal. You need to toughen your hide.”

I stared eye-to-eye with Walton. His nose flared. He seemed pretty sure of what he was sayin. But I couldn’t say as I agreed. They saved me from bein killed as a baby. Took me in, give me a home. They was the only family I had—despite their fear of me.

I pressed my hand into my hip. “Who told you rumors about me? Ain’t many ever come around the homestead. I was always real careful not to be seen.”

Turning away, Walton edged around the front of the horses and readied them to move.

“I asked you a question.”

"I heard." His voice sounded hard.

He swiped at his eyes with his kerchief, and then snatched up the reins and scooted onto the wagon seat.

I had to decide what to do, quick. Didn't seem I had much choice. I clambered up next to him.

"You best be holdin on, this ride's about to get bumpy." I sensed his anger with me. Maybe I seemed ungrateful.

Walton was hidin something. He knew things I didn't know. Yet he was harboring them details to hisself. Why would this stranger help me unless I had something he wanted? I couldn't guess what that would be. I hardly owned the clothes on my back.

Walton cracked the reins and the horses bolted.

"Haigh there, horses. Haigh!" He whistled and the horses took to running.

"Where we goin?" I slipped my fingers through the slats in the seat and gripped tight as the wagon bounced over fresh clots of red clay.

"I done told you. Thunder Mountain. They're a different breed of folks over there."

Bein as I'd never seen the trees past Poppy's homestead, it ate at my soul not knowing where we were. Now that's somethin that'll gnaw at a body.

There was times I could hear Momma and Poppy talkin as I huddled against the warm stones of the chimney in the loft.

Momma's voice rose a bit. "Can't nobody know. Not a soul."

I'd wondered what Momma and Poppy was connivin. They never said my name, but then they didn't have to. I guessed they was speakin of me. Their voices softened, the words become whispers. It seemed my life was nothin but hiding and secrets.

From a fog I heard Walton say it again. "Hey, Lochiel. You with me?"

His words give me a start, woke me from my daydreaming. I nodded, not daring to share my thoughts.

"They're different on that side of the mountain. Good folks."

"Different from what?"

"You'll see."

Walton slowed the horses as we headed through the gap. Oak trees leaned in from the banks of the mountain, a shaded tunnel for us to cross through. The farther we traveled, the darker the path grew. The trees soon became the forest, filled with odd sounds echoing into the shadows. The last of winter hung tight in the trees.

My teeth clattered together like woodchucks tittering.

Walton pulled the reins to the left and the horses turned up a nearly hidden pathway. The yellow eyes of a deer gleamed in the brush.

"You gonna tell me where we're goin or not?"

"Edna's place."

“Who’s Edna? Is this Thunder Mountain?” I pulled my arms tight around my body.

“It’s one side.” He swatted at a willow branch poking into the trail. “Edna’s kin. I’m sure she’ll take you in. I stop around to her place three or four times a year. She’s a good woman.”

Take me in? Once again, I found myself lost. A soul with no home.

“Reckon this Edna will stand in judgement of me? I *am* marked. Maybe she oughta be afraid I’d hex her. Maybe you oughta be afraid.” My words seeped out snide-like.

“Edna don’t see nothin but the heart. She cared for me when I needed it and when I didn’t.”

At last, a tidbit of information about hisself slipped out.

“She don’t mind that you’re a half-breed?” I felt a twist of spite as I uttered the words.

Walton leaned over the buckboard and spit. “Ain’t quite got you figured yet. One minute you’re feelin all guilty and mush-mouthed about the Ogles and what they did for you. The next, your tongue is like a snake.”

I reckon he was right. My heart was close to the surface. There was so much I didn’t know. So much I couldn’t understand. Things kept from me. I didn’t even know how I was supposed to feel. The Devil in me come to a boil and when I lashed out it was like tossing a pot of steamin water.

“What does a half-breed stranger want with a marked woman? You plannin to peddle me?”

I wanted my words to sting and burn. I wanted to hurt. And I reckon I had managed that. Still I was sorry as soon as the words left my lips.

Walton shook his head.

“I walked away from Edna once. Anger can do that to a person. Blame will too. She loved me despite myself. And when I come to my senses, she took me back in.”

I wondered if Edna was his wife.

“She took you in?” My heart went gentle. “Was you injured?”

Walton rolled his eyes. “No, I wasn’t hurt. Leastways, not my body.”

“What then?”

“Ain’t none of your business. All you need to know is Edna is a good woman. She don’t hold no judgement over nobody. She taught me about the good Lord. Set me on the right path.” A smile come across his lips. “I ain’t sure she can heal nosey.”

The wagon rounded the bend and a field of tall grass opened. Sun-warmed air hovered over jonquils peeping out of half-frozen ground. At the back of the field sat a tiny cabin. A woman stood hanging clothes on a line.

“Blessed be the tie that binds. Our hearts in Christian hmmm . . .” Her voice, a sweet high pitch trill, carried across the field.

“What’s the old woman got that can help a child of the Devil?”

Walton turned to me and reset his hat. “She knows your real momma and daddy.”