

BLUE RIDGE

Daylight broke slow and dogwood pink. Habit said it was time to rest, but Story felt awake enough to go a little farther before quitting. The self-pity gnawed and questions drove sleep away. Too much to ponder, wondering where to go once she found Free country. That rootless feeling didn't help her none. And she lost count again—was it the thirteenth or the fourteenth day since she'd left? She figured she'd gotten far enough away. No one from the plantation nor anyone looking for a reward would come this far in search of her. The thought of going back to Greenway House almost made her retch.

The air felt thick enough to spread. The sky, dotted with clouds already. She spied a rock outcrop the other side of the hollow and thought to take cover there in case it rained later. She climbed through dense brush and over rocks to get to the boulders; gave her a turn when she found a family living in the damp crawl space beneath it. Barely enough room to sit up. Likely, that was the father shivering there on the ground toward the back, a neck iron still attached. The mother with a babe, half-starved and limp in her arms. Light was dim on the west side of the mountain this early, made it hard to see how old the second waif peering from behind its mama was. Faces dark as pine tar. They didn't have life enough to scare her. Story could feel their eyes on her. She opened her grain sack and pulled out cattail root and wild carrots. The bunch wouldn't feed them all but might ease a little hunger.

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“You know cattail? Pick it by the creeks. Or the ponds, it's there, too, sometime.”

The woman grabbed the bunch, held it by the green still clinging to it, and devoured a carrot. Then she bit off some cattail root and turned, thrust it into the child's mouth. A little girl. She chewed a bit, then sucked on the mash she'd squirreled in her cheek. The woman made little wincing noises like she was crying as she bit off more.

Story hoped the woman could find the root on her own. She might be traveling without her husband, maybe very soon. Every one of 'em, they looked beat.

“Sorry. It's all I have.” Story turned, climbed up the ridge. Continued a short while, practicing her invisible walk along the edge of some fields, then across a meadow. No one about yet. She collapsed in the shady scrub. Sun

had already warmed the east side of the mountain. The Piedmont spread out before her. Black swallowtails taking wing all around. Her mother's favorite. She used to weave a special cloth using those colors: black and gold, here and there a dot of sky blue and orange.

The plight of that family burned in her mind—the smell of the crawl space, the feces. She wanted rest, to put them out of her head. She brushed a stem of new timothy grass beneath her nose. For something to do, she named aloud the yarrow, love grass, and Queen Anne's lace coming up nearby. Sleep didn't come. She lay still, thought about her mother, felt that hand on her back. Like she was about to tell some secret.

Mid-morning. Clouds still collecting. The confusion of bleating animals roused her. Reminded her of going to church and the one proverb she knew: *The meek shall inherit the earth*. She gazed at the rolling green hills, trying to banish thoughts of death. Gave up on sleep and climbed the ridge, where she saw a log cabin near the cliff edge. A short way off, two men were shearing a flock of sheep. Most of them huddled in a pen, the naked ones skittish and despairing in the larger meadow, separate from the others.

She avoided landholders except when she found a lone woman and felt safe to ask for food. Wanted to read their faces first, try to guess whether they'd see her papa's white face or her mama's broad nose, surely a giveaway of her blackness. When she tried to see inside the house, the windows were too high. A room at the back seemed to be the kitchen. Every once in a while, she heard a woman inside say something, her tone not quite sharp but ever so direct. Couldn't understand the words, but she heard footsteps crossing the floor with the pride of ownership. Logs with one edge skinned and planed created high steps, led up to the half-open kitchen door. The smell of baking bread teased her, made her mouth water. She made sure she saw a way out that wasn't near those men shearing sheep before she stole the nerve to ask at the door.

"Beg pardon. Hello? The missus in?" Didn't dare climb the steps.

A girl, maybe twelve, with stringy blond hair came to the door. Already a scowl pressed on her greasy face. Her dress too short, her apron filthy.

"Whatchyou want?" Story couldn't help noticing the brownish-purple mark near her eye. A birthmark or a bruise? Couldn't help it, she stared a second too long.

"Come to see if you've got anything to eat—what you can spare."

"Whatdya mean 'we can spare'? We sell our bread. You got money?"

A pale woman wearing a kerchief came to the door, looked over the girl's shoulder. Story couldn't read her face. Not a scowl, but suspicious. They towered above, set her fishing for a better story. A pause.

"I—I'm a missionary, here to help a family in need."

"Missionaries, those're in new territory. You doing church-planting?"

Story knew nothing of missionaries. Just knew the pastor. "I seek to do good right here, ma'am, helpin' a family in need. Can you give something?"

"What church you with?"

"His Holiness, the Church of God." Didn't know where she got that from. Hoped she wouldn't be cursed for it. Glanced toward her place to run, case they chased her off.

"Like ma girl said, we sell what we make."

Story reached into her pocket. She could see the filth under her fingernails as she held up her pretty gold coin. "What would this get me?"

The coin said 5D. Though she knew her sums, Story had no idea how much it could buy. It had a woman's head on it, with a turban that said LIBERTY; thirteen stars around it. Story thought it was lucky, was loath to spend it.

"Don't have that much to part with."

"I'm trying to save a life. What's a life worth to you?" She couldn't believe she'd said this, either. Sure sounded like the preacher. Must be divine inspiration.

The woman sighed. "We could spare a loaf or two, I s'pose."

The daughter stamped her foot. "Ugh! Then I need to make more! I'll never get done."

"Might you have a blanket you could part with?"

"Hush," the woman said to the girl. And then, to Story, "Who are these people? We know ar neighbors."

Story paused. "Some feel shame to go hungry, miz. Not successful like you an yours. Might like their sovrenty, that what you call it?" She searched for some nicety to offer. "Nice flock you got there."

The woman turned. Story couldn't see what she was doing. The girl leaned against the doorjamb, gripped the handle like she'd slam the door in her face.

"You're just a beggar. Whatchyou doin' dressin' like a man?"

Story couldn't hear the woman; thought she might've left the daughter in charge. The way her jaw was set, mouth turned down, seemed like she was in a foul mood most of the time. Could feel heat in that stare. Story looked

at the pretty grain of the wood on the side of the house; couldn't think what to say.

The woman returned with two loaves in a flour sack and a boiled wool throw, same color as the sheep. Some moth holes in it, but warm enough for winter. Handed them down to Story.

"I'll give these to the family," Story said. "Might you have some day-old for me?"

Her look was begrudging, but the woman reached behind the door and thrust half a dark loaf in with the others. Sounded hollow and dry.

The girl stepped down one stair and put her hand out. Story reached in her pocket for the coin. The woman cuffed the girl across the back of the head, made her cry out. Story heard the thud, and her own ears rang in sympathy.

"Get outta here. We don't charge for God's work."

Story bowed her head, wanted to quote a little saying, but the only thing she could think of was the one about the meek. Didn't seem fitting.

"Thank you, ma'am. This a blessin'."

Story had a mixed mind as she retraced her steps to the west side of the ridge. Going back was the right thing to do, her mama would've said. But Story knew it was foolish to lose ground like that.

When she climbed down to the crawl space, she saw the man still on his back, rasping in his sleep. She figured the mother went to scavenge grub. Water maybe. Story crawled over to him. Started to unroll the blanket over him before she realized the baby, its face blue-gray, lay tied in a rag next to him.

Not breathing.

Abandoned. Both of them. Could she blame the woman? How could she survive with one dead, one dying? The man snorted, flinched. It spooked Story. She had a sense of being sucked down, like the time she almost drowned in the Rivana.

Here she was, already up to her neck in it. Dark was all she saw.

The dead baby weighed almost nothing when she picked it up. Crawled out the cave and downhill until she found a spot with soft earth, a flat rock she could dig with. Scooped out a hole for the little body. Wished she had a hankie to cover its face with. The babe looked so dreary. Smelled bad, too. Story felt something heave up inside her as she closed the lids. Tears welled up.

"I'm sorry, little one. Sleep well. Go back to where you came from."

With her bare hands, she scattered earth over the baby; then, once it was covered, she shoved the mound of dirt back into the hole. Fixed the flat rock atop it, tried to clean off some of the mud. The clay stuck to her hands; she couldn't wipe her nose or eyes. As she neared the shelter, panic shot through her when she saw the baker's daughter sitting up above her on the ledge.

"That yer baby?"

"No." Story looked away, rubbed her dirty hands against the bark of a tree. When she came closer, the girl held up Story's book, volume one of Lewis and Clark's journals.

"This ain't no Bible. That much I know."

"Give it here," Story said, annoyed to have to look up at the dirty little wench again.

The girl held the book behind her back.

"Give it here, I said. Please? It's the only thing I have from my daddy, and I beg you to let me have it. You can take your bread. The family's not gonna eat it."

"You didn't say it was a nigger family you was helping. That your man?"

"No."

"Then how come you helpin' him?"

"His wife was here a little bit ago. Beside herself. I didn't realize the little one was gone already." Shouldn't've said that; the girl could set the law after the poor woman.

"She a nigger, too?"

"What if she is? Don't she deserve to eat?"

"Not if she on the run."

"You ever been hungry? Ever need someone to help you out?"

"No."

"Hope you never do. Looks like he could use some water." Story nodded toward the wheezing man. "Could you give him that?"

The girl shook her head.

"Too heavy to lift?"

"Ain't many niggers 'round here."

Story noticed water seeping out of a crack in the rock. Climbed over to it, balanced on two boulders and cleaned her hands on the moss growing around it.

How difficult the girl was. A little like she herself had been at that age. No one to take her grief out on. Didn't even know her, but already Story knew too much. Wondered if she could get her to say yes to anything.

"Hand me that gourd, would ya?"

She was surprised when the girl did. Story collected some water above where she'd cleaned her hands. Little ferns were starting.

"You ever seen a dyin' man?"

"No."

"You want to?"

"No."

"I saw one not so long ago. It ain't pretty."

"What happened?"

Story crawled over to the man. "A lech took holda him; did him in. Seized right up, couldn't breathe or even talk... I suspect a hant didn't care none for what he's up to."

"It make you sad?"

"If he'd a been acting right, I mighta cared." Story lifted the man's head with one hand, held the gourd to his mouth. "Can you drink, mister?"

He groaned; the water spilled down his cheek and onto the neck iron.

"How come you cried for that baby if it weren't yours?"

Story let the man's head rest but didn't turn around. "'Cause it never had a chance."

"If you found me like that, would you help me?"

"A'course. Anybody would... Your mama know you followed me?"

"She ain't my mama."

Story glanced back at her, softened.

"She my daddy's new wife."

"Still. You prolly should get on home. Wanna take your bread with you?"

The girl paused. "I guess you can have it."

"Mighty nice of you." When the girl didn't move, Story thought to keep on her good side. "What's your name?"

"May Belle."

"Pretty. You born in May?"

"Yep."

"You have a birthday coming!"

"It's June already," she scolded.

"Oh, my. I musta lost track. How old are you, then?"

"Thirteen." It was quiet a moment, then the girl asked, "Why you wear them trousers?"

"Cause it's easier sometimes if a man thinks I'm a man. He don't instantly get fresh with me. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah." May Belle slid off the rock.

Story turned to look. Her book was still there.

"Nice chatting, May Belle. Thank you for the bread."

"You gonna taste it?"

Story crawled over and broke off a piece of the dry bread.

"Don't eat that one. Try today's."

Story tore a chunk of the fresh bread. A rich maple color, it smelled of hickory.

"Mmm. That's better than anything I ever tasted." She washed it down with a gulp of water.

"Holy jeez!" May Belle near shouted. "You drank out of the same dipper!"

"He din't drink none. I tried, but he din't take nothin'."

May Belle's face twisted. "You're givin' me the yucks!"

190 "We all made the same way. You see a difference 'tween a black horse and a white one?" Story gathered her things, slipped her book in the grain sack. Left one of the loaves on the man's chest under the blanket. Saved the other for his wife, if she found her. Gave him one last look, whispered, "You can let go now. You done what you could. Everything's all right." Then she crawled out from under the shelter. "Best be going now. Can't do no good here."

"Where you going?"

"Charlottesville. Ever been?"

The girl made a noise Story took for *no*, then followed her through the scrub up to the ridge. Much as she hated to, Story turned south. Looked back.

"Bye, now. You gonna follow me again?"

"Prolly not." Story didn't trust her.

"Don't want your daddy thinkin' you been nabbed. Best be gettin' on home."

Story picked up the trail. Felt strange, acting white, walking along in daylight. Folk out in the field; nobody bothered to look. She looked over her shoulder. May Belle stood in the middle of the trail, watching. Story tipped her hand. Kept walking.

When she passed a curve and thought her whereabouts would be hidden, she headed down the mountainside into the brush. She needed sleep, but that girl had her mind spun tight. Story sat against a fallen elm, ate some of that bread. Hadn't swallowed her third bite when she heard shouting. She slunk down behind the tree trunk. Listened.

"Hey! Where are you?" A pause. "Let me come with you! Hey!"

Story didn't move. Didn't even chew till the shouting got further off and faded away.

After a while, sleep finally came and lasted till late afternoon, when the clouds turned dark and rain pelted Story with reminders of all the things she wanted to forget.

Time to walk.