Kentucky, 1936

The librarian and her mule spotted it at the same time. The creature's ears shot up, and it came to a stop so sudden its front hooves skidded out, the pannier slipping off, spilling out the librarian's books. An eddy of dirt and debris lifted, stinging the woman's eyes. The mule struggled to look upward, backward, anywhere other than at the thing in front of it.

The book woman couldn't keep her eyes off the spectacle as she shortened the reins and clamped her legs against the mule's sides. Again, she prodded her mount. Baring tall, sassing teeth, the beast lifted its muzzle into the balsam-sweetened air, the quavering brays blistering the sleepy mountain.

The woman stiffened, drawing the reins in tighter. In front of her, a body swayed back and forth below the fat branch from which it hung. A rope, collared tight around the neck, creaked from the strain of its weight. A kettle of turkey buzzards circled above, dipping their ugly, naked heads toward the lifeless form, their tail-chasing shadows riddling the dying grass.

From the scorched earth rose strange cries, and the librarian pulled her stunned gaze away from the corpse and toward the ground.

Beside a large toppled can, a baby lay in the dirt, the tiny face pinched, scalded with fury.

Mountain breezes dipped lazily, shifting, carrying the stench of death and its soiling. The weighted branch crackled, groaning

under its burden. A bloodied sock inched down from a limp, cerulean-blue foot. The librarian gawked at the striking blue flesh and cupped a hand over her mouth. The stocking slipped off, landing beside the squalling baby's head.

The wind rose higher, then plunged, skittering across the sock as if trying to lift it, but it stayed stubbornly put, rooted to the earth—too heavy to be sent off by a mere summer breeze.

The book woman looked up, lifted one darkening hand in front of her own blue-colored face as if comparing her color to that of the hanging corpse. She examined her cobalt-blue flesh, then dared to peek back up at the dead body, bound, eternally rooted like the black oak to the hard, everlasting Kentucky land so many tried so hard to escape.

One

The new year was barely fifteen hours old in Troublesome Creek, Kentucky, when my pa adjusted the courting candle, setting it to burn for an alarming length of time.

Satisfied, Pa carried it out of our one-room log house and onto the hand-hewn porch. He was hopeful. Hoping 1936 was the year his only daughter, nineteen-year-old Cussy Mary Carter, would get herself hitched and quit her job with the Pack Horse Library Project. Hoping for her latest suitor's proposal.

"Cussy," he called over his shoulder, "before your mama passed, I promised her I'd see to it you got yourself respectability, but I've nearly gone busted buying candles to get you some. Let this stick hold the fire, Daughter." He hoisted the old wrought-iron candleholder higher by its iron-forged rattail and once more played with the wooden slide, moving the taper up and down inside the spiral coil.

"I've got a respectable life," I said quietly, following him out to the porch, taking a seat on the wooden chair, and huddling under the patchwork eiderdown I'd dragged along. The first day of January had brought a skift of snow to our home in the cove. Pa set the candle down and struck a match to light a lantern hanging from the porch.

Two winter moths chased the light, circling, landing nearby. A clean wetting mingled into woodsmoke and umbrella'd the tiny cabin. Shivering, I buried my nose into the coverlet as a

cutting wind scraped down mountains, dragging soft whistles through piney boughs and across bare black branches.

In a minute, Pa picked back up the courting candle, raised a finger above the wick, and jutted his chin, the approval cinched in his brow.

"Pa, I have me a good job making us twenty-eight dollars a month delivering books to folks who's needing the book learning in these hills."

"I'm back to work now that the mine is running full time." Pa pinched the wick.

"They still need me—"

"I need you safe. You could catch your death in this cold, same as your mama. You're all I have, Cussy, all that's left of our kind. The very last one, Daughter."

"*Pa, please*."

He reached down and brushed a lock of hair away from my eyes. "I won't see you riding that ol' mount up and down them dangerous passes and into dark hollers and cold creeks just because the government wants to push their foolish book airs into our hills here."

"It's safe."

"You could be struck ill. Just look what happened to that book woman and her mount. Foolhardy, and the poor steed was punished for her temerity."

Snow gusted, swirled, eddying across the leaf-quilted yard.

"It was along in years, Pa. My rented mount is spry and surefooted enough. And I'm fine and fit as any." I glanced down at my darkening hands, a silent blue betrayal. Quickly, I slipped them under the folds of fabric, forcing myself to stay calm. "Sound. *Please.* It's decent money—"

"Where's *your* decency? Some of the womenfolk are complaining you're carrying dirty books up them rocks."

"Weren't true. It's called literature, and proper enough," I tried to explain like so many times before. "*Robinson Crusoe*, and Dickens, and the likes, and lots of *Popular Mechanics* and *Woman's*

Home Companion even. Pamphlets with tips on fixing things busted. Patterns for sewing. Cooking and cleaning. Making a dollar stretch. Important things, Pa. Respectable—"

"*Airish*. It ain't respectable for a female to be riding these rough hills, behaving like a man," he said, a harshness rumbling his voice.

"It helps educate folks and their young'uns." I pointed to a small sack in the corner filled with magazines I'd be delivering in the next days. "Remember the *National Geographic* article about Great-Grandpa's birthplace over in Cussy, France, the one I'm named for? You liked it—"

"Dammit, you have earned your name and driven me to nothing but cussing with your willful mind. I don't need a damn book to tell me about our kin's birthplace or your given name. Me and your mama know'd it just fine." He raised a brow, worrying some more with the flame on the courting candle, resting the height of the taper to where he wanted. And as always and depending on the man who came calling, how long he wanted the old timekeeper to stay lit.

Pa looked off toward the creek, then back at the candle, and set his sights once more over to the banks, studying. He fought between raising the timekeeping candle and lowering it, mumbling a curse, and setting it somewhere in the middle. A taper would be cranked up tall to burn for a lengthy visit, or tamped down short for any beau Elijah Carter didn't favor as a good suitor.

"Pa, people want the books. It's my job to tend to the folks who are hungry for the learning."

He lifted the courting candle. "A woman ought to be near the home fires tending that."

"But if I marry, the WPA will fire me. Please, I'm a librarian now. Why, even Eleanor Roosevelt approves—"

"The First Lady ain't doing a man's job—ain't my unwed daughter—and ain't riding an ornery ass up a crooked mountain."

"People are learning up there." Again, I glimpsed my hands and rubbed them under the quilt. "Books are the best way to do that—"

"The best thing they need is food on their tables. Folks here are hungry, Daughter. The babies are starving and sickly, the old folks are dying. We're gnawing on nothing but bone teeth here. Not two weeks ago, widow Caroline Barnes walked nine miles for naught to save her babies up there."

I had heard the poor woman staggered into town with the pellagra rash and died in the street. Many times I'd glimpsed the rash set in from starvation. And last month a woman up in a holler lost five of her twelve children from it, and farther up in the hills, a whole family had died the month before.

"But folks tell me the books eases their burdens, it's the best thing that could happen to them," I argued.

"They can't live off the chicken scratch in them books," Pa said, flicking the wick and hushing me. "And this"—he rapped the candleholder with a knuckle—"is what's best for you."

Jutted up high like that, the candle's nakedness seemed desperate, embarrassing. I caught the unsettling in Pa's gray eyes too.

It didn't matter that for a long time I'd shared Pa's fears about what might become of his only daughter, until the day I'd heard about Roosevelt creating his relief program called the New Deal to help folks around here during the Depression. We'd been depressed as long as I could remember, but now, all of the sudden, the government said we needed help and aimed to do just that. The president had added the Works Progress Administration last year to put females to work and bring literature and art into the Kaintuck man's life. For many mountainfolk, all of us around here, it was our first taste of what a library could give, a taste to be savored—one that left behind a craving for more.

I'd seen the flyers in town asking for womenfolk to apply for the job to tote books around these hills on a mount. I snuck an application and filled it out without Pa knowing, applying to be a Pack Horse librarian a month after Mama died.

"They gave *you* the job?" Pa had puzzled when I got it last summer.

I didn't tell him I'd bypassed the supervisors here by picking up my application at the post office. The job application said you could turn it in to the head librarian in your town or send it to the Pack Horse libraries' manager directly by mailing it to Frankfort. It didn't say anything about color, and certainly not mine. But I'd taken my chances with city folks I'd never meet instead of trusting it to the bosses here in Troublesome.

"Did no one else apply?" Pa had questioned me. "You can't work," he'd added just as quick.

"Pa, we need the money, and it's honorable work and—"

"A workin' woman will never knot."

"Who would marry a Blue? Who would want me?"

I was positive no one would wed one of the *Blue People of Kentucky*. Wouldn't hitch with a quiet woman whose lips and nails were blue-jay blue, with skin the color of the bluet patches growing around our woods.

I could barely meet someone's eyes for fear my color would betray my sensibilities. A mere blush, a burst of joy or anger, or sudden startle, would crawl across my skin, deepening, changing my softer appearance to a ripened blueberry hue, sending the other person scurrying. There didn't seem to be much marriage prospect for the last female of blue mountainfolk who had befuddled the rest of the Commonwealth—folks around the country and doctors even. *A fit girl who could turn as blue as the familiar bluet damselfly skimming Kentucky creek beds*, the old mountain doctor had once puzzled and then promptly nicknamed me Bluet. As soon as the word fell out of his mouth, it stuck to me.

Whenever we'd talk about it, Pa would say, "Cussy, you have a chance to marry someone that's not the same as you, someone who can get you out of here. That's why I dig coal. Why I work for scratch."

And the disgrace would linger in the dead air to gnaw at me. Folks thought our clan was inbreeds, nothing but. Weren't true.

My great-grandpa, a Blue from France, settled in these hills and wedded himself a full-blooded white Kentuckian. Despite that, they'd had several blue children among their regular white-looking ones. And a few of them married strangers, but the rest had to hitch with kin because they couldn't travel far, same as other mountain clans around all these parts.

Soon, we Blues pushed ourselves deeper into the hills to escape the ridicule. Into the blackest part of the land. Pa liked that just fine, saying it was best, safer for me, the last of our kind, *the last one*. But I'd read about those *kinds* in the magazines. The eastern elk, the passenger pigeon. *The extinctions*. Why, most of the critters had been hunted to *extinction*. The thought of being hunted, becoming extinct, being the last Blue, the very last of my kind on earth, left me so terror-struck and winded that I would race to the looking glass, claw at my throat, and knock my chest to steal the breath back.

A lot of people were leery of our looks. Though with Pa working the coal, his mostly pale-blue skin didn't bother folks much when all miners came out of the hole looking the same.

But I didn't have coal to disguise me in black or white Kentucky. Didn't have myself an escape until I'd gotten the precious book route. In those old dark-treed pockets, my young patrons would glimpse me riding my packhorse, toting a pannier full of books, and they'd light a smile and call out "Yonder comes Book Woman… Book Woman's here!" And I'd forget all about my peculiarity, and why I had it, and what it meant for me.

Just recently, Eula Foster, the head librarian of the Pack Horse project, remarked about my smarts, saying the book job had given me an education as fine as any school could.

I was delighted to hear her words. Proud, I'd turned practically purple, despite the fact that she had said it to the other Pack Horse librarians in an air of astonishment: "*If a Blue can get that much learning from our books, imagine what the program can do for our normal folk… A light in these dark times, for sure…*"

And I'd basked in the warm light that had left me feeling like a book-read woman.

But when Pa heard about Agnes's frightening journey, how her packhorse up and quit her in the snow last month, his resolve to get me hitched deepened. And soon after, he'd shone a blinding light back on my color and offered up a generous five-dollar dowry plus ten acres of our woodland. Men, both long in the tooth and schooling young, sought my courtship, ignoring I was one of *them Blue people* when the prospect of land ownership presented itself. A few would boldly ask about my baby-making as if discussing a farm animal—seeking a surety that their Kentucky sons and daughters wouldn't have the blueness too.

Why, for all Pa cared, it could be the beastly troll in "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" who wanted my hand. Lately, he'd been setting the timekeeping candle uncomfortably long for *whoever* was keen on calling.

But I couldn't risk it. The WPA regulations said females with an employable husband wouldn't be eligible for a job because the husband is the logical head of the family.

Logical. I liked my sensibility just fine. I liked my freedom a lot—loved the solitude these last seven months had given me—and I lived for the joy of bringing books and reading materials to the hillfolk who were desperate for my visits, the printed word that brought a hopeful world into their dreary lives and dark hollers. It was necessary.

And for the first time in my life, *I* felt necessary.

"Right there'll do it." Pa fussed one last time with the slide on the courting candle, then finally placed the timekeeper on the table in front of my rocker and the empty seat beside me. He grabbed his carbide-lamp helmet off a peg and looked out to the dark woods across the creek that passed through our property.

The snow picked up, dropping fat flakes. "Reckon he'll be showing up any minute, Daughter."

Sometimes the suitor didn't. I hoped this would be one of those times.

"I'll be off." He dropped a matchbook into the timekeeper's drip tray, eyeing the candle one final time.

Frantic, I grabbed his sleeve and whispered, "Please, Pa, I don't want to marry."

"What's wrong with you, Daughter? It ain't natural to defy the Lord's *natural* order."

I took his palm in mine and pressed the silent plea into it.

Pa looked at my coloring hand and pulled his away. "I gave up my sleep to ride over to his holler and arrange this."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he held up a shushing hand.

"This harsh land ain't for a woman to bear alone. It's cruel enough on a man." Pa reached for his hand-carved bear poker with the razor-sharp arrowhead tip. "I've been digging my grave since the first day I dug coal. I'll not dig two." He tapped the poker against the boards. "You will take a husband so you'll have someone to care for you when I no longer can."

He buttoned his coat and grabbed his tin lunch bucket off the porch boards, ambling off to his night shift down at the coal mine.

Hearing a horse's strangled whinny, I turned toward a rustling in the trees, straining to listen above the prattling song of creek waters. The courter would be here shortly.

I leaned over the wood railing and peered out. When I could no longer see the flicker of Pa's miner's lamp and was sure he'd disappeared into the woods, I reached over, adjusted the wooden slide on the timekeeping candle, and lowered the taper to where the wax would touch the old spiral holder's lip within a few minutes of being burnt—a signal to this latest suitor that a prompt and swift departure was in mind.

Raising my hands, I watched them quiet to a duck-egg blue.

Two

Barely another gray week had passed when Pa sent a new suitor to our porch. Gradually, the man got down off his mount and tied it to a tree. He was just one more hungry troll out there hunting, and one more I needed to run off.

Racing a thumb across my fingers, I ticked off the number of courters who had come calling. It had to be over a dozen, maybe higher, closer to two dozen if I counted the ones who'd never showed, who'd turned back at the mouth of our woods.

I watched the man lumber up the steps, eager for him to take his spot so I could burn the courting candle and be rid of him.

Fumbling, I picked up the box of matches and pulled one out. This particular chore of lighting the wick was always mine after Pa's hopeful intended arrived, and was done as soon as the suitor sat.

Hewitt Hartman plopped heavily into the rocker, nearly busting the planked seating as I lit the short taper. He hunched over a ripe belly, twiddling his hat, working his coated tongue around a big chaw before sputtering a greeting I couldn't understand. Looking down at his knees, he asked to see the land deed.

Silently, I went inside and brought it out, placing the paper beside the courting candle. I caught a whiff of shine from Mr. Hartman and moved over to the rail, laced my hands behind my back, watching the flame quiver, the wax melt ever so slow.

The man grunted several times while reading the deed. The

ten-acre dowry was more than generous. The land could be cleared for farming or timber, or even sold if a man wanted. Pa never wanted neighbors, never had those means, that mindset, or the money to do anything. But as his illness set in and his determination to see me wedded persisted, his thoughts had latched on to other ways.

Mr. Hartman leaned in toward the taper and studied the deed over the yellow light, a greed flickering in his dull eyes. Squinting, he snatched a glance at my face, then another back to the paper, and once more at me. Snapping the old document, he took a dirt-stained finger, running it down the page, his lips chewing over the fancy script. Again, he pinched off a flurry of peeks at me.

Finally, he cleared his throat, stood, and spit a wad of tobacco over the rail, the brown spittle painting his bottom lip and a few droplets speckling his chin.

Hartman picked up the courting candle, shoved it toward my face. Cringing, he dropped the deed and, in one weighty puff, blew out the flame.

"Not even for all of Kentucky." His old, rotted breath whisked through black smoke, taking mine.

Weren't a week later, Pa set back out my timekeeping candle, raising the taper to its longest burn. By the end of January and three courters later, he'd made sure he wouldn't have to again.

The man showed up in the early afternoon wearing a worn hat. He took his time reading the deed, then sat tight-lipped, raking his fingers through his thinning hair, snatching glances at the courting candle's flame. Several times he shifted, smacked his limp hat against stained britches, each move sparking a new plume of rancid odor. After two porch visits with the suitor, Pa gave his blessing the last week of January and signed over the deed, snuffing out my last courting candle. The old squire shot

up from his seat and grabbed the document. Avoiding my face, he leered at my body, his eyes lingering on my breasts, taking stock of his new possession.

I clung to Pa on our porch. "I don't want to marry," I'd said, afraid. "I don't want to leave you." My eyes flitted to the old man waiting out in the yard beside his mule. He stared back, tapped his leg with the hat, each smack growing louder and more impatient.

"Daughter," Pa said, cupping my chin in his calloused hand, "you must take a man and live your life. Be safe." He turned away, took a ragged breath, and coughed several times. "*You must*. I have to make sure you won't be alone when I'm gone—keep my promise to your mama." His tired lungs wheezed and he coughed again, the coal mine thieving his time.

"I have my books!"

"It is a foolishness you have, Daughter." A sorrow clung to his stick-throated voice.

"I'll lose my route, my patrons. Please, I can't lose them." I gripped his sleeve and shook. "Please, not him."

"You'll have yourself a big family. The Fraziers are an old clan with kinfolk all over these hills."

"But he's kin to Pastor Vester Frazier." I pressed a palm to my galloping heart thinking about him, his hunt-hungry congregation, and their deadly baptismal waters down at the creek. "Pa, you know what the preacher does to folks like us, what he's done—"

Pa laid a hand on my shoulder and shook his head. "He doesn't associate with the likes of the preacher man, and he gave me his word that he'll protect you. It's growing late, Daughter. I must get ready. The Company has several cars they're expecting me to load today, or I'll lose my job. Get on now to your new family," he gently urged.

I'd looked at the man in the yard twisting the floppy cake-like hat in his hand, coiling our old Carter land deed, nervously shifting to one short muscly leg and then the other, small eyes

darting between us and his bone-ribbed mule, anxious to leave. Gusts of wintry air tore across the brow of the woods, shaking branches and whipping his stringy gray-flecked hair.

"But, Pa, please, I'm…I'm frightened of him." I searched for my hankie, gave up, and wiped my runny nose on a coat sleeve.

"Mr. Frazier will give you his name and see that you have a roof over your head and food in your belly."

"I have a name, the *only* name I want! *Book Woman*."

Pa's eyes filled with turmoil. His face crumpled. I was sure he didn't want me to go, but he was more afraid not to let me. I was just as frightened to leave him, and more, for the likes of that out there in the yard.

"Please, Pa, you know'd how Mama loved the books and wanted them for me." *Mama.* Her absence ached in my heart, and I was desperate for her comforting arms.

"Your mama wanted you safe, Daughter."

Frazier moved closer to the mule, drawing in his shoulders, bracing against the bitter cold.

"He don't look safe, and he scares me something awful." The old cabin creaked, moaned like it were true, like it was trying to keep him away. "And he don't bathe… Why, his britches are strong enough to stand themselves up in a corner. I-I don't want to marry. Pa, please, I don't want to go anywhere alone with him, I—"

"Daughter, I would see you knotted right and give you a proper send-off if I could, but the Company ain't allowing nary a second off in a whole month for the likes of us miners—unless it comes with a gravedigger's notice or boss man's pink slip. In the morning, I'll rent Mr. Murphy's ol' horse, Bib, and bring your trunk on over to him. Make sure you're settled in. Go on, Daughter. He'll take you to the officiant, and you'll be Mrs. Charlie Frazier by tonight. Get on to your man. Go on, it's getting late." He flicked his hand. "Don't keep your man waiting."

His words landed like rocks on my chest.

Pa fished into his pants pocket and pulled out a clean handkerchief I'd just washed for him this morning, passing it to me.

I balled it up in a damp, trembling fist, unrolling, squeezing, rolling.

Pa's shoulders drooped as he turned to go inside. Gripping the latch, he paused at the threshold. "You belong to Charlie Frazier now."

"I belong here with my job! Don't take my books away like this. Please…Pa, no, don't let him take me away." I sank to my knees and raised begging hands. "Let me stay," I whispered hoarsely. "Please, Pa? *Pa?* Almighty Lord, please—"

The door shut tight, swallowing my prayer, taking my light with it. I wanted to run, to fold myself into the dark, rotted land, disappear under the cold Kentucky ground.

I raised the twisted handkerchief to my mouth and pressed, watching my hand grieve to a dark azure blue.

Radish red, he was.

What he did was worse than a rattler's bite, or what I imagined the snake's strike to be when my sixty-two-year-old husband, Charlie Frazier, first tried to plant his fiery seed inside me. Bucking, I knocked off the pillow he'd cloaked over my face.

"Be still," he hissed. "*Still, you blue devil.* Ain't gonna suffer the sight of your dead face." He pressed his other hand over my mouth and eyes, shielding himself, pumping inside me.

I wriggled free from his grip, bit and clawed at him, choking on my fear and fury, struggling for air.

He pummeled my stomach, pinched my breasts, and punched at my head until a blackness took hold.

The second time he poked me, a gray leeched into his dogpecker-pink face.

When I came to, I was lying on a cold dirt floor. A voice floated above, and I tried to speak but nothing came out. Someone placed a cover over me, and I fell back into a shifting darkness until another voice roused me once more.

I struggled to lift my lids, but could only open one eye partway, barely making out Pa's face.

"*Pa-ah.*" The word broke in my throat. I stretched out a hand. A deep pain struck and I cried out, cradling my swollen arm.

"Daughter, don't try an' move." He lifted my head and brought a mug to my mouth. "Just sip this." Part of my lip had swelled to my nose, and the liquid dribbled out, down onto my chin. Pa dried my wet skin with his coat sleeve, tilted the cup, and tried again to give me a drink. I tasted the shine and spit and coughed, the liquid setting me on fire, burning my tender gums and split lips.

A different ache lit, hot and knifelike, and I sucked in a breath, pushed Pa away, clamping a hand to my ear, only to jerk it back and see the sticky blood that had leaked out the eardrum and covered my palm.

Pa dug out his handkerchief and pressed it against my ear. "You hold it there a minute." He placed my hand over the hankie and held up the mug. "Try and get all this down now." Pa raised the liquor back to my mouth, and I took a bigger gulp.

"That's it. Have just a little more, Cussy. It'll help some." When I finished, Pa set down the mug, folded me carefully in his arms, and stroked my hair.

"*Mama*," I whimpered and slipped my hand between his shoulder and my ear, pressing, trying to stop the stabbing pains. "*I want my mama.*"

"Shh, I've got you, Daughter." He rocked. "Doc's here now, and we're gonna get you home and rested."

I squinted at the man standing beside the bedpost. "*Doc?*"

"You'll be fine, but his ticker done broke, Bluet," the mountain doc said over the sagging marriage bed, covering Frazier with a thin flannel sheet before tending to my broken bones.

Pa buried him out in the yard under a tall pine along with my courting candle.

Three

Somewhere between that first poke and the unfolding of spring, my bones mended, and I got three things: my old job with the Pack Horse librarians, an old mule I named Junia, and sign of Charlie Frazier's seed. Weren't but a few days later, I pulled up Frazier's devil-rooting with a tansy tea I'd brewed from the dried herbs Mama'd kept in the cellar.

The brisk morning nipped at my face, and I buried my chin deeper into Pa's oilskin coat and nudged the mule ahead to the home of our first library patron. We crossed over into the fog-soaked creek before sunrise, the dark waters biting at the beast's ankles, a willingness to hurry pricking Junia's long ears forward. Late April winds tangled into the sharp, leafy teeth of sourwoods, teasing, combing her short gray mane. Beyond the creek, hills unfolded, and tender green buds of heart-shaped beetleweed and running ivy pushed up from rotted forest graves and ancient knobby roots, climbed through the cider-brown patches of winter leaves, spilling forth from fertile earth.

Hearing a splash, Junia paused in the middle of the waters and gave a half-whinnying bray. "Ghee up, girl," I said, spotting the frog. "*Ghee*." I rubbed the mule's crest. "Ghee up now."

The beast flicked her tail, still unsure, looking over into the trees toward the trail that led to Frazier's place. "Ghee, Junia. C'mon, we're on our book route." I pulled the reins to the

left, tugging her head so she wouldn't look—wouldn't have to remember him too.

The mule was my inheritance, the only thing Frazier had owned, that and three dollars, some loose change, a tar-blackened spittoon, and his name. Before Frazier married me, I'd rented my mount for fifty cents a week from Mr. Murphy's stable, same as most other librarians. I had been satisfied riding his horse or small donkey for my book routes, but I just couldn't leave the poor animal tied to Frazier's tree to die.

The mule's coat had been blood-matted, and her open wounds oozed out of flesh that sagged toward the cold winter ground. But one look at the beast told me she had a will to live, could fight with a fierce kick and big bite. And I'd seen something in her big brown eyes that told me she thought we could do it all together.

Pa'd said, "It's trouble. Sell it! Ain't worth two hoots—a horse or donkey would serve you better, Daughter. You tell a horse and ask a donkey. Yessir, horses will gladly do your bidding, but a mule, well hell, that beast is just an argument, and with that one"—he shot a finger to Junia—"you're gonna find yourself wrestling a good deal of just that, negotiating with the obstinate creature." Then Pa'd turned away, grumbling, "That mule's only fit for a miner's sacrifice."

I'd balked loudly at that. If a mine was shut down overnight, a *miner's sacrifice* had to be made. Mules were sent in at daybreak before the shaft opened because of the fear of gas buildup overnight. The men would strap a lit candle or carbide lamp onto the beast and send it in alone. If they didn't hear an explosion, or see a smoking, flaming mule hightail it out of the shaft, only then did the miners know it was safe to go in and start the day's work.

Reluctantly, Pa let me bring her back home. I bought a bottle of horse liniment, a used saddle, and soft horse blankets for the old mule. It had taken a month for me to nurse the starved, beaten beast back to health. Another month to stop her from kicking and biting me. Not Pa, nor any man, dared stand beside her still, or

else the ol' mule would sneak out a leg and sidekick them, stretch her jaw and take a hard nip of skin. But despite her temper with the men, I'd ridden her into town and marveled at how gentle and agreeable she was around the young'uns and womenfolk.

Junia lifted her muzzle, and once more I followed her stare, bent my good ear to the breeze, stroking my lobe. Doc said the other ear might never heal, and so far he'd been right. The muddle stayed put when I tried to test it by closing a palm over the good one.

Across the creek, a rafter of turkeys and their poults scratched for food. "He can't hurt us no more, ol' girl," I soothed the mule, patted her withers. "C'mon now, we're on official duty for the Pack Horse." Junia prodded the breeze with her nose. Quietly, I waited, letting her decide it was safe to journey on to our book route.

To my relief, she cast her eyes away from Frazier's path and moved toward the bank. Today would be busy. My Monday route was a long one. Some days I only had a few folks scheduled for drop-offs, but today I'd been given a new patron on top of the seven homes and mountain school I'd visit.

Climbing up the brush-tangled bank, we topped the hill, leaving behind the scuttles of squirrel and rabbit. The mule raised her muzzle and nickered, remembering we'd checked out the route last week to prepare for our first day back.

A train whistle lost itself over the rows of blue hills to the east, slipping rail song into the coves, hollows, and pockets of old Kaintuck. I let the sound fill me with its tune. Soon, my mind turned to the train passengers the big steel cars carried past the woodlands, through these old mountains cut with untold miles of rivers and creeks. What fine places the locomotive toted them to. I'd dreamt once of a train full of Blues journeying. Blues like me. Someone, somewhere who looked like me—

Junia snorted as if she'd heard my far-fetched thoughts. "It could happen," I told the mule. "There could be others out there like me."

In the distance, the Moffits' homestead peeked out of the morning light. Eager now, Junia pressed on, breaking into a fast trot when she saw the girl.

It was my first book drop since my January marriage, but seeing my library patron up here and waiting like that felt like I'd never left.

Spring had finally come, and I shed the dying winter, the death of my marital bed, and returned briefly to my ten-year-old child of yesteryear. I leaned into the raw spring wind feeling the spirit of books bursting in my saddlebags—the life climbing into my bones. Knocking my heels against the beast, I kissed my teeth in short bursts, urging her into a full gallop. Being able to return to the books was a sanctuary for my heart. And a joy bolted free, lessening my own grievances, forgiving spent youth and dying dreams lost to a hard life, the hard land, and to folks' hard thoughts and partialities.

Four

Sixteen-year-old Angeline Moffit stood barefoot in the mud-carpeted yard, hands on bossy hips, waiting, her tired orchid-pink dress billowing, whipping around long legs to Jesus, the tattered hem snapping a harsh whisper under a thin, holey housecoat, the bother set plain on her mouth.

"*Blu-eeet.*" She waved. "'Bout time, Bluet. It's April already! I missed ya. You got yourself a new mount. What's its name?"

"This is Junia."

"Oh, Junia's a fine name. Get over here, Junia. C'mere, you ol' apostle gal."

Angeline, one of my youngest library patrons, remembered me reading to her from Romans 16:7 about Junia, the only female apostle. The same Bible verse Mama'd read to me, and the reason I had given Junia the fitting name. I'd found out quick how clever the animal was, how you couldn't make her move along if she sensed danger ahead. At sixteen hands tall, a protector, a prophet, Junia'd already saved me from a bobcat attack, another time from a pack of mean dogs, and most recently from a slippery moss slope that was caving in.

The ol' girl had made us wait until I saw the bobcat and let it slink away, heard the dogs before any human could, and made me turn back to a spot where the wild dogs dared not enter. And she just refused to go up the mossy slope until I got off and saw the trouble with my own eyes, made a fool of

myself testing it and tumbling down, landing hard on my tail. Junia wasn't skittish like my old horse or stick-legged like the donkey. She wouldn't dither over a problem none, but she'd defend and battle if it came down to it. Folks said a good trail mule was far better than a horse, that riding a mule was just as good as packing a shotgun across these dangerous hills. But Pa still weren't convinced of Junia's worth, nor trusted her cantankerous ways.

Junia nuzzled the girl's shoulder, took an instant liking, letting Angeline grab her reins and tie them to a tall, turkey-tail-covered stump. "*She's here.* The Book Woman's here with them books," Angeline yelled back to the cabin.

I eased myself off the mule and opened the saddlebag, digging. "Sorry it's been so long, but the winter was…and…" I let the unspoken words fizzle in the air, not wanting to talk about the marriage.

Angeline graciously brushed it off. "I heard. And it don't matter none. You're here now, and I sure have missed ya."

I wondered just how much she'd heard, and I felt the blue rise on my face as I pulled out *The Young Child's A B C, or First Book* and handed it to her. She clutched it to her chest and murmured a soft thank-you.

Digging some more, I found her a church pamphlet and a magazine. "Mr. Moffit's *Popular Mechanics*," I said.

"*Pop…Pop-a-lur Ma-mechanics*," she read and traced the title with a dirty nail, inspecting the photograph on the cover. "That's an airship, Bluet."

Fearfully, she looked up to the sky and whispered, "Hain't never seen it, but the mister swears he saw one floating over the hills. That aeroplane passed right over him, and he up and threw hisself to the ground."

I'd never seen one either, but I believed her.

"And"—Angeline shook a telling finger—"I know'd the president's wife climbed into one too, when she came to Kaintuck."

We both stared to the heavens, trying to imagine Eleanor

Roosevelt up there in the gray belly of a machine flying across our mountains.

"Hard to believe folks can reach our hills like that." Angeline barely breathed and cupped a hand over her eyes, searching the skies. "Pretty soon a fellar hain't gonna need his mount, or feet even. Them big machines jus' gonna pluck you up and do it for you."

She slipped her hand into mine, and I stiffened. No white ever touched a Blue friendly like that. No one but Angeline. And no matter how many times she'd reached for my hand, it still felt strange, and I'd quietly tuck it back to my side, feeling I'd somehow left a sin on her.

Still, I liked her soft touch, and it made me yearn for Mama and wish for a sister, maybe even a baby, a little. But there would never be a babe, nor another man for me. If word had reached way up here, I was certain the townsfolk had rumored that my color somehow killed Frazier—gossiped that a Blue devil had murdered a man in his marriage bed. It was a blessing, I reminded myself. No one would have me now, and I'd never be forced to marry again. My breathing slowed, and a small relief anchored that surety.

"Aeroplanes and trains," I said to Angeline, shaking a little inside from that thought and those darker ones I'd just tucked away.

"The world's a'gettin' so big, Bluet. Makes a fellar feel too small," Angeline barely whispered. "It's growing too fast. Right when you're looking smack at it, but you hain't really seeing it neither. Hain't natural." She tilted her head down toward the dirt, plugging her toes into the earth as if to root herself from being carried off.

"Sure is a'changin', Angeline." It gave me hope, though—hope that those big, loud machines might one day bring another of my kind. "I best be getting inside to Mr. Moffit."

"Oh, Bluet, he'll be happy to see ya. He's been in the bed. Done went and got his foot busted the other day." Her cheeks pinkened.

Eula Foster told me he'd been shot in the foot for stealing another man's chicken. "Maybe the new loan will ease his discomfort," I said.

She caught my hand again and led me up the stacked stone steps and onto her stick porch, grinning. This time I carried her warmth in my heart, savored a sisterhood I'd never had.

I ducked past an old hornets' nest hanging under the sagging eaves. Inside the one-room cabin, a house mouse darted under the black potbelly stove packed with a rotted smoldering stump. Daylight slipped through the curled paper coating the walls, dusting the shadows out of the home's corners.

A pan of wild ramps and turnips simmered atop the cast iron, filling the room with stinky steam. Yellowed newsprint lined moldy walls, with a smattering of Angeline's words dotted across the peeling pages.

"Let me get ya a seat," Angeline said and fetched an old, empty tin of Mother's Pure Lard from over by the stove's feet, dragging the big can loudly across buckled pine boards.

Splitting at the seams, a stained featherbed mattress that had been stuffed partly with straw butted up to a spider-cracked windowpane. Angeline's husband lay there by the sill dozing, the pain tracked across his face. With no money for a doctor, the wound wouldn't heal. The thirty-year-old looked scrawnier than the last time I'd seen him. His face had aged like craggy rock, and he had gray patches under his eyes.

A splintered ax handle poked out from under the bed where Angeline must've placed it, hoping there was truth in the old superstition that it would cut a person's pain.

Angeline put a hand on her husband's shoulder and gently shook him awake. "It's Monday and she's finally back, Willie. Right here she is."

He grimaced.

"I brought you a *Popular Mechanics*," I told him.

"Didn't expect you back, Widow Frazier." Mr. Moffit squinted up at me.

"Yes, sir, it's me, Book Woman, and I'm back now." I cringed at my new title, having realized as soon as Eula Foster had addressed me that it would stick. A week ago when I returned to the Center, Eula had crossed her unwelcoming arms and called out my new title, a mixture of disappointment and loathing sliding over her snipped greeting. The despair had knotted tight in my gut, leaving me to lower my eyes, afraid to witness the disgust in hers.

Mr. Moffit tilted his head to the bucket for me to sit as Angeline tucked a threadbare crimson counterpane up closer to his chin.

Angeline smoothed the covers, tucking him in a bit more. Satisfied, she slipped out the door.

I pulled the lard can closer to his bed, sat down, and opened the first page, holding the magazine high in front of my face. He turned his head toward the window.

We did this for our comforts. Mr. Moffit wouldn't have to stare at my face, and I wouldn't have to worry about making him uncomfortable. I didn't fault him, reckoning we both had disfigurements, some that didn't have a color.

Mr. Moffit knotted the covers closer to his chin, and I caught something I'd never seen before: odd-colored nails, not odd to me, being a Blue, but odd on a white folk.

His nails were a light blue, every single one of them.

I looked at my own, the blueness nearly the same. I snatched a peek at his face and ears, white like new milk teeth, and again glanced back at his nails, scanning the length of him.

At the foot of the bed a single toe stuck out from under the covers, his toe I'd never seen before. It weren't white neither. It was like the blue-eyed Mary in the hills, the two-colored bloom that nature painted lavender-blue on one side and white on the other. *Blue*, I puzzled.

Long ago, Mama'd said there had been some of us Blues who'd been born blue-eyed Marys like that. And others with the color who'd outgrown it in their youth. Those Blues who only showed their color on their nails easily escaped the affliction by keeping hands and feet hidden inside mitts and socks.

I wondered if Mr. Moffit had some other condition, or maybe it was because of the ailing from the bullet wound on his foot.

Mr. Moffit turned partway, his eyes closed. "Ready."

"Yessir. This'll be a fine article, Mr. Moffit."

He crooked his head back to the window.

"'Understanding Our Airships,'" I began. Mr. Moffit was never taught, and he liked me to read a few pages to him. "An aeroplane's engine is…"

I read five minutes more than what I intended, then peeked over the top of the page and saw him asleep. Quietly, I laid the magazine beside him. He'd pore over the pictures, then return it to me on my next visit to exchange for another.

Out in the yard, Angeline pointed to words she'd scratched into the dirt with a stick. "You learned me good. Look here. *Garden. Horse. Home. Angeline*," she said proudly, and then gave me *The Little Red Hen* book she'd borrowed in December. "Sorry, Bluet. It got busted some when Willie had hisself a fit and threw it outside. I'm glad you're back 'cause he lit at me good for not being able to read him his own loan. Said a colored shouldn't be able to read better than me. Real sorry…" She latched on to my hand and laid the apology with a firm grip. I looked down at us bound together like that, tried to draw back, but Angeline squeezed tighter and whispered, "Hain't no harm. Our hands don't care they's different colors. Feels nice jus' the same, huh?"

It did. But Mr. Moffit didn't like folks who weren't his color. He used to demand that I stay put in the yard. But his longing for the printed word soon weakened his demands, and he eventually allowed Angeline to bring me inside to read at the small wooden table, so desperate was he for the books to help him escape his misery, misery at never having enough to fill his belly, not even enough spare coins to buy himself a couple of bullets to maybe shoot a rabbit, and now the misery at the poison inching its way deeper into him from his gunshot.

I'd seen it in his face, in his bony slumping shoulders, that he'd given up long ago, wishing every night that there wouldn't be

a next. There weren't nothing sweet Angeline could ever do to help him that wouldn't bring on a bigger anger.

She caught the concern in my eyes and said, "Sometimes he gets so riled it scares me something bad. Has a meanness. Hain't no reason to always grumble like an ornery bear."

I loosened Angeline's hold and examined the spine on her old loan.

"Hope it don't rile Miss Harriett and Miss Eula too much, Bluet."

I stuffed her book into my bags. "Reckon it's nothing I can't get bound." I know'd Harriett Hardin, the bookbinder and assistant librarian supervisor, would preach a sinner's funeral, rile a'might indeed. And head librarian Eula Foster would pinch her mouth in dismay.

But it was too precious not to fix, what with the demand for books so high and the reading material so scarce.

The last time I brought in one of Angeline's busted loans, Harriett had wrinkled her nose and warned, "You tell Mrs. Moffit the government pays the Pack Horse librarians' salary. *And only that*. We don't have enough books nor the money to be replacing them. If she can't see fit to care for a library book in her possession, I will deduct the cost from *your* pay and suspend her from the route!"

The government men didn't supply books and printed materials to the Pack Horse service. They were donated by bigger libraries, in bigger towns and richer cities—from the women's clubs, and the Parent-Teacher Association, and Boy Scout troops even, their members spreading across Kentucky and Ohio.

Most books sent in were damaged, tattered, and castoffs. The government didn't give us a proper place to hold them neither. Troublesome Creek's post office offered its back room to the Pack Horse Library Project to use for housing, sorting, and repairing the materials.

"Hope it can be fixed," Angeline whispered worriedly.

"I'll take it home and bind it myself." I smiled.

"It won't happen again." Hesitant, Angeline held up the new book I'd brought her. "Read it to me 'fore you leave?"

We went over her new book, and she read the words without trouble. Angeline had a strong hankering to read and write. When she was done, she pulled a shriveled half carrot from her pocket and looked at me for permission. "For Junia."

Junia shot up her ears.

The country's despair had dug its roots into Kentucky and spread like ugly knotweed, choking spirits, strangling life. I didn't want to take from Angeline, what with the small scraps they lived off. But I also didn't want to offend her gracious offer.

In the side yard, toppled rows of dead cornstalks from the last season were scattered where the young girl tried her best to coax a decent crop from the tired clay and thin air. Beside it, a postage-stamped garden of spring carrots, beets, and turnips scratched for survival against weed, briar, and wild onions. Beyond, a mustard patch grew thick.

"Thank you, Angeline. Junia is much obliged." She fed it to her, knowing the twenty-year-old gray mule was smart and would eagerly keep toting me back to her. Greedy, Junia nosed inside the girl's pockets for another carrot.

Angeline pulled out something else, grabbed my palm, and pushed a tiny cloth package into it. "Can you get these to the doc for me? There's twelve of my granny's Bloody Butcher seed for him to come tend to Willie." She rolled my fingers over them.

I doubted the doc would come for corn. Wouldn't pay a visit for less than four dollars since he lived a good three-hour ride away from here by horse or mule.

"His foot's getting a bad sickness now, an' the nails a'turning blue. I don't want to bury him, not with a babe coming," she said.

"A baby?"

"In the summer."

"That soon?" I ran my eyes quickly over her scrawny body, tight cheekbones, and the bluish cast circling her pale eyes,

wondering how she could possibly bear the punishment of pregnancy. The greedy land had dulled her youthful looks.

She seemed soft and more suited for the fancy living in the cities I'd read about, what with her delicate heart-shaped face and long flaxen hair. Though I know'd Angeline worked harder than two stout mountain women and was tough as a pine knot, despite appearances. Still, I worried the young girl wouldn't be strong enough for child birthing, that the old mountains would steal more from her.

Angeline said, "July 18 it'll come. I've been counting."

"That's…uh…" The goodwill died on my tongue. "I'll get these seeds to him."

Angeline picked up a stick. "I know'd its name I'm giving it. Want to see?"

Surprised and curious she'd already given thought to the baby's name, I sputtered out *yes*.

She crouched down with her stick and scrawled carefully in the dirt, working each letter on her lips, scratching out two, and then trying again. Satisfied, she stood and pointed. "*HONEY*." She poked her stick at the name. "I know'd it when I made myself a tea and read the leaves, and they said it'd be a girl. I want her to be real sweet like that." She rubbed her tiny belly.

"Honey. That's a fine name," I said, because it reminded me of Angeline's sweet nature.

"Willie don't. He said it was a colored's name, and he won't have it." Angeline swiped her hand down her dusty skirts and looked off like she was counting the sunsets until she gave birth. Tiredness and disappointment spread across her face. "Here Willie'd promised to take me to the summer hootenanny to hear the men with the fiddles. Don't reckon there'll be any dancing now."

I studied on the baby-care pamphlets back at the library that the health department had dropped off and reminded myself to bring one to her.

Angeline shook her skirts and placed a hand over her belly. "Here I'm already sixteen, knocked up and about to get withered

from the seed, and hain't even danced myself a proper jig." She rubbed a bony fist over her eyes.

I lifted an arm. "I reckon you don't need a hootenanny to have dancing. Or a fancy fiddle even. It's free as rain and here for the taking."

Angeline brightened at that. "I know'd lots of songs, and I can dance some." She sang an old, lively ballad, twirled around once, twice, until she was laughing, her sweet musical voice filling the air.

"You have a fine voice," I said.

"I got lots more, Bluet." The girl sang another cheerful one and spun again. She glimpsed my feet tapping the ground, my hand bouncing off the side of my skirts. It was as if they had a mind of their own, and I stopped at once, fearing I'd made a spectacle of myself.

When Angeline finished her tune, she said, "Be sure an' tell Doc them seeds are from Minnie's lot. God rest her. An' her corn… Well, it's worth twice his fee if a man could pay in money. Three times, even."

She looked proud, like she had given something as big as the moon and worth all the heavens.

I dropped them into my pocket. "I'll be going to town in May, and I'll make sure he gets them."

"You can give 'em to Jackson."

I looked at her blankly.

"Jackson Lovett," she said. "Hain't seen him yet, but he's come home now. He settled in the ol' Gentry homestead an' Willie said he's always running to town for supplies. Hain't he on your route?"

"Mr. Lovett?" I touched the saddlebag, suddenly remembering there was a new stop today, though I hadn't heard who it was and only that it was a man Eula Foster had told me about, and that there would be *another* added to my already long route. "Yes, I think he is." I mounted Junia.

"He went and built a dam out west for the president, I heard." Angeline squinted up at me.

"Hoover Dam," I marveled, recalling the wonder I'd read about in magazines.

"*D-A-M*," Angeline spelled. "You ride her home safe, Junia." Angeline scratched the mule's ears, sneaking glimpses of me, and then said quietly, "I heard. Heard about that book woman, Agnes, losing her horse trying to cross Hell-fer-Sartin Creek. Heard the way it up and laid down in the snow and… Well, it passing on her like that was real bad."

I wondered how she'd found out about Agnes's accident, then realized I'd seen Mr. Moffit outside the Center in December. Or maybe the news came with the mail delivery that traveled the hills every two weeks. Though I never recalled seeing any mail in their home. Weren't no other visitors but me and the mail courier in these hills, except for Doc, when a fellar couldn't right himself with his own homemade tonic and could afford the physician's services.

"Willie used to have hisself kin planted up there in Hell-fer-Sartin. I did too," Angeline said. "Hain't never met any of 'em, though."

The small town of Hell-for-Certain—uttered and spelled as Hell-fer-Sartin, what an old preacher called it when asked about his visit there decades ago and what stuck to folks' tongues ever since—sat two counties over. Steep rocky inclines, twisty devil land, and one of the most difficult book routes a Pack Horse librarian could have.

Agnes's old rented horse, Johnny Moses, snapped a leg at the mouth of Hell-fer-Sartin Creek. Agnes pulled off Johnny Moses's fat pannier and packed all the reading supplies onto her back, leaving the dying animal in the snow. She stopped at the Baxter cabin and sent the man off to end the poor beast's suffering. Ol' Mr. Baxter was bound to make good use of every ounce of that rented meat and every inch of its hide until the owner came and fetched whatever was left.

Agnes had journeyed onward a good sixteen miles on foot, up and down ravines, coves, and passes, along the dangerous trails, missing not one patron on her book drop, somehow

making it home with nary a scratch to show for her two long, troublesome days.

Angeline continued, "Never been to Hell-fer-Sartin neither. Most of my folk come from Cowcreek, where I was born. Where my Willie first met me." She shot me a soft smile. "But Mamaw always said some of our kin stayed put in them ol' hills of Hell."

We talked a few more minutes until Junia sounded a warning, shaking off my worrisome hand combing through her mane.

"See you Monday," Angeline said.

"Ghee up, ol' girl." I waved goodbye.

Angeline picked up her stick and dragged it through the muck, a lost lullaby spilling, calling up the long day. She paused. "Hear that?"

I strained my ears. Somewhere, a rain crow rolled out its gravelly whine. The bird sang again, and once more, this time longer, and I searched the skies for storm clouds. *Bright blue.*

"That's three times now," Angeline fretted.

Mountaineers thought the crow's calling came as a death warning. Angeline's eyes sought mine, and I saw the fear in them that the bird had sung it for her. Again the bird stuttered its mournful song.