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# WOLF WORM

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NIGHTFIRE

# CHAPTER 1

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The rail station was very new, the paint still bright on the lettering that read SILER STATION. An enormous cloth banner proclaimed that it was HOME OF THE WORLD-FAMOUS CHATHAM RABBIT. I stepped off the train, clutching the cardboard suitcase that held all my worldly possessions, and wondered what, exactly, was special about the rabbit.

*Unusually colored fur? Immense size? Third eye in the middle of the forehead?*

Activity swirled around me as men hastily unloaded freight from the train cars. There was only one small passenger car, and I had been the only person to disembark, so I moved to one side, looking for the person who had come to meet me. My employer had sent the train ticket, and while I did not expect him to come himself, presumably he would have sent someone to collect me.

I craned my neck, but did not see any likely candidates. The anxiety that I had kept at bay threatened to rise up into my throat and I told it sternly to get back down where it belonged. *There is nowhere here to wait. Perhaps they have only just seen the train arrive, and are coming now.*

*You have been here for less than five minutes. There is no reason to assume that anything has gone wrong.*

The sky overhead was a blue watercolor wash, the clouds picked out in white gouache against it. Some skies look hard, but a Southern sky is usually soft, almost thready. If you pressed against it, you'd expect it to yield like cloth, or a soft network of roots. The upper edge was just starting to darken a little, a

second wash of color to indicate that the afternoon was growing late.

From the station platform, I could see a warehouse and what looked like a general store. A mill poked up from the surrounding countryside, but once the town proper ended, there was nothing but a sea of thick trees in every direction.

A half dozen small boys came pelting up the station steps and rushed the passenger car's windows. They were all brandishing furry objects, which were . . . yes, those were indeed dead rabbits. From what I could tell, they were the usual color and had the usual number of eyes. "Chatham rabbit!" a small boy shouted into the passenger car, waving a limp body in the air. "World-famous! Only three cents!"

My fellow passengers on the train from Wilmington had all been reasonably polite, and the worst of them—a middle-aged man passionately in love with both President Cleveland and the sound of his own voice—still didn't deserve having rabbit carcasses waved at him. I wondered if I should intervene.

One of the boys glanced over at me, sized me up as unlikely to be prosperous enough for a dead rabbit, and turned back to the windows. While I'd had students that age, they had all been girls, and I wasn't entirely certain of my ability to enforce discipline on strange boys. I abandoned the passengers to their long-eared fate and looked around again for my employer's representative.

*It's been almost ten minutes now. Has something gone wrong?  
(he thought better of hiring you and didn't bother to send a letter)  
(he died and nobody knows you're coming and you'll have to  
turn around and go back)*

*Stop that, I ordered myself. You're catastrophizing again. They've just been delayed. Or possibly the doctor lives right by the station and if you ask for directions, it's a five-minute walk.*

This seemed possible. I shifted my handbag on my shoulder

and approached the small station office, where an exasperated-looking man with a pocket watch was muttering to himself, or perhaps to the watch.

"Pardon me," I said. "Can you direct me to the home of Dr. Halder?"

He blinked at me. Apparently, whatever he'd expected me to say, it wasn't that. "Halder?"

"Dr. Matthias Halder, yes."

The stationmaster rubbed his hand through his thinning hair. If I were painting him, I would use layered washes of red across his face, and a few thin lines of umber for his hair. "Halder lives south of here. About ten miles, give or take. Outside of Goldston."

*Ten miles!* My heart sank. Surely Dr. Halder didn't expect me to walk there? But there was no sign of anyone coming to greet me either.

*(he doesn't expect you because he decided not to hire you, you came all this way for nothing)*

"What do you want with Halder, anyway?" I felt the stationmaster's eyes flick over me curiously. At thirty-three years old, I made an unlikely chambermaid, and no one would expect a doctor to have a female colleague. *What does that leave? Distant relative? Mail-order bride?*

"He's hired me as an assistant," I said. "I thought he'd send someone to meet me, but perhaps I was wrong."

"Doubt he even thought of it," said the stationmaster bluntly. "Old Halder's not one for practical details."

I sighed. Naturalists, in my experience, tended to be that way. My father would have stopped in the middle of a burning forest if he happened to spot a rare orchid, and if he was ever on time for a meeting, it was purely by accident.

Well. It was substantially after noon already. If I started walking now, assuming I didn't get lost, it would still be dark by the

time I got to Dr. Halder's. And I'd be footsore and sweaty and covered in road dust, which was not the impression I wanted to make on my new employer.

Still, there was no help for it. I had less than a dollar wrapped in my handkerchief, which were all my funds in the world, and even if I was willing to squander money hiring a coach, Siler Station did not look like the sort of town that had coaches simply lined up and waiting.

I hefted my suitcase. It was extremely heavy, although most of that weight was my sketchbooks and paints. I had only a single change of clothes and an extra pair of shoes. I would rather have my arms give out than abandon my sketchbooks, and it seemed unwise to leave my shoes. *Footsore, sweaty, covered in road dust, and listing to one side because my back has given out from lugging my suitcase. Also late. This impression gets better and better.*

"Could you give me specific directions?" I asked. "It appears I have a walk ahead of me."

"No!" said the stationmaster, almost yelping. "You can't—I mean—it's a long walk, particularly in the dark. Let me see if I can find someone going that direction."

"That really isn't necessary."

"Believe me," he said, "it is."

Torn between gratitude and embarrassment, I sat down on the single bench outside the office while he hurried down the platform to the men unloading. I smoothed down my skirt. It was late April, and not as punishingly hot as it might be later in the year, but I already missed the sea breezes of Wilmington.

A few minutes later, the stationmaster returned and beckoned to me. "Phelps will take you," he said. "He's going more or less that way."

"More or less?" I asked wryly.

"More or less." And then, dropping his voice, "Phelps won't give you any trouble either."

"Thank you," I said gravely. My face and figure were not the

sort generally held to incite lust—a scarecrow was among the kinder comparisons I'd heard—but a certain type of man requires only that a woman be in their power. It was kind of the stationmaster to be concerned, since the only weapons I possessed were a hatpin and a palette knife, and I would have had to dig through my suitcase for the palette knife.

The man I was to ride with was tall, gaunt, and looked as if he had last smiled sometime before the war. If I had known then what kind of role he would play in my life, wild horses could not have dragged me onto that wagon, but I suppose that's hindsight for you. At the time, I was simply grateful that I wouldn't have to drag a suitcase ten miles in the dark.

Possibly there's a moral here somewhere, but if so, it's buried deep.

The man nodded to me as I climbed up beside him on his wagon, introduced himself as Asa Phelps, then clucked his tongue at the horses and proceeded to say nothing at all for the next few miles.

The road was rough, and as far as the wagon was concerned, most expense had been spared. It was probably just as well that my backside was already numb from the long train ride, because otherwise rattling on the wooden seat would have been agonizing instead of merely horrific. We passed several fields where tobacco was just beginning to come up, then entered the woods I had seen from the station platform. Pine, sweetgum, and hickory dominated the edges, but as we went deeper in, oak and stately chestnut began to spread their branches overhead.

When the silence had grown so excruciating that I had to break it, I said, "I appreciate you giving me a ride. I know this is somewhat out of your way."

"It is my Christian duty," he said.

It is extremely difficult to make conversation with someone who uses the phrase "Christian duty" with utter sincerity. I lapsed back into silence, watching the trees on either side of

the road. The leaves were the hot green of new growth and the redbuds were blazing pink, even in the fading light.

*Hooker's green*, I thought, studying the trees. *Sap green too. Flicks of gamboge yellow for the light, and a wash of Prussian blue through the shadows. But mostly green, in all the shades that I can mix. Though I'd have to do something to keep the pink for the redbuds from mixing in with the rest.* The usual way to separate a color out that sharply is to use frisket on the paper to cover all the spots you want to keep unpainted, but that requires a great many extra steps and the watercolor must be absolutely bone-dry before you try to peel up the frisket. It's much easier to ruin a painting than to save one with the stuff.

Dr. Halder probably wouldn't have me painting redbuds. He studied insects. I'd painted insects before, usually in proximity to the flowers they haunted, but I couldn't say that I had a great deal of experience with them.

*(he'll see your work and turn you off immediately you'll have to go back to the school with your tail between your legs it was foolish to think you could ever do this)*

*Stop that.*

"The woods are beautiful this time of year," I offered, trying to drown out the voice of my anxiety.

"Do not be fooled," Phelps said, to my surprise.

"Beg pardon?"

He glanced over at me, his jaw working like a horse with a bit in its mouth. "The Devil walks these woods, Miss Wilson."

My eyebrows shot up. Well, really, what are you supposed to say to a thing like that? I wracked my brain for anything that might live in the woods that would merit such a description. There were no longer any pumas in this part of the state, and indeed, there were those who said they had been wiped out completely. The Klan had similarly been stamped out a decade prior, though God knows hatred is more resilient than wildlife. "Are you . . . ah . . . speaking metaphorically, sir?"

"I am not." Phelps worked his jaw again, then lifted an arm and pointed past me. The shadow of his beard made a Payne's gray wash across his cheeks. "We're only a mile or two from the Devil's Tramping Ground. Are you familiar with it?"

I shook my head.

"It's a bare circle of ground on which no grass will grow. It's said that the Devil walks there at night, plotting wickedness. Do you believe in the Devil, Miss Wilson?"

This was a difficult question to answer, since the truth might get me thrown off the wagon, and I wasn't certain how much farther we had to go to Halder's. "I don't *dis*believe," I said cautiously. "Though most wickedness I have seen has come from men."

"Mmm." Thankfully Phelps showed no sign of stopping the wagon to make me walk.

Emboldened, I added, "I don't know that I believe that the Devil has a physical body, or that that body is in North Carolina though."

"Might have answered the same, once." Phelps clucked his tongue again and slapped the reins, urging the horses on a little faster. "But then I saw her. I saw the Devil in these woods, Miss Wilson. And that is why I cannot let a woman walk these woods at night, regardless of how far out of my way it may take me."

## CHAPTER 2

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It was full dark when we arrived at my employer's house. Conversation had faltered after Phelps's revelation. It may be difficult to follow up the phrase "Christian duty," but that's nothing compared to a claim of having seen the Devil in person. *And calling it a her?* I desperately wanted to ask what she had looked like, if she had two legs or four, hooves or hands, and if there had been any other witnesses, but these all seemed likely to end up with me walking the rest of the way to Halder's. Small talk was entirely out of the question.

I didn't know what Phelps had seen, but I definitely didn't believe it was the Devil. Father had been raised Quaker but had acquired Unitarianism in his boyhood in Boston, which he passed down to me, mixed with occasional bouts of transcendentalist philosophy. He'd then compounded the issue by sending me to a Methodist school. My faith was perhaps best described as "vague idiosyncratic Christianity," but it definitely did not allow for Satan to be wandering North Carolina in the flesh.

Our pace slowed as it grew darker, as Phelps let the horses pick their way along the road. *Is he not worried that the Devil will get us if we go too slowly? Does Satan not bother wagons? Or is she simply not very fast? Then again, if she isn't that fast, it probably isn't dangerous to walk in the woods. Unless the Devil is an ambush predator?*

It occurred to me then that the station master had been unexpectedly alarmed about the prospect of me walking through the woods. At the time I'd put it up to chivalry, but what if it had been something else?

*Perhaps he and Phelps go to the same church.*

I could hear frogs calling around us, the finger-on-a-comb call of chorus frogs and the shriller notes of tree frogs. They, at least, were not concerned about the Devil. A lone whippoorwill repeated his name off in the distance. My father always said that whippoorwills were polite birds, because they told you exactly who was calling.

If my father had still been alive, he would have been proud of me for finding work as a scientific illustrator. *Of course, if he were still alive, I wouldn't have needed to go looking for work in the first place, so there's no point in getting maudlin about it.*

Eventually the wagon turned onto a long drive that looked as if it had once been very wide. Greenery had begun to creep in around the edges though, until it narrowed into a gloomy tunnel. Brick pillars flanked the entryway, both with lamps, but they were unlit.

*Did they not expect me this evening?*

Apparently they did not. As the wagon rolled up the drive, wheels crunching loudly, I saw the house in the dim moonlight, a grand confection of windows and pillars, but with only a single small lamp lit in a room on the second story. I swallowed hard.

*(they didn't expect you. you clearly aren't wanted. you're in the wrong place)*

A side door opened, spilling light onto the ground, and a woman emerged, carrying a lamp. She turned toward us, lifting the lamp high. "Now who's coming around at this hour?"

I slid down from the wagon, anxiety curdling in my stomach. "My name's Sonia Wilson. I . . . err . . . I was hired as an illustrator? By Dr. Halder?"

"Lord help us," the woman said, coming closer. I could hear her feet crunching on the gravel. "He said something about hiring one, but he never said any more than that. If I'd known, I'd have made up a room." She frowned, though I don't think it was at me.