

AN OLD LOG CABIN

Following the tree line to a clearing in the woods, he saw the form of a picturesque log cabin emitting a smoky mist from its stone fireplace. Derrick Hamilton had agreed to let him cross the threshold of its front door on that cool autumn day, as had generations before him. Then they would sit down and take a journey through history.

The crisp morning air filled his lungs with exhilaration. The sweet smell of autumn surrounded him. The crackling sound of the gravel driveway added another dimension to the sensory delight. As he came to a stop in front of an old horse trough, a tall man with a long gray beard waited for him on the front porch.

“Good morning, Derrick.”

“Morning, Roger. Any trouble finding us?”

“No. No trouble at all. You gave good directions ... what a beautiful place, Derrick.”

“Yeah, we kinda like it,” said the man with a slight drawl.

“You’ve lived here, what, forty years?”

Cocking his head to one side, Derrick gave him a questioning look.

“Now, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were gonna try to sell me something.”

“Why, what do you mean?” replied Roger.

“You know I’ve lived here all my life, and I know I look at least two or three years older than forty.”

“Okay, what is it, really?”

“Sixty-eight years, Roger.”

“Sixty-eight good years, right?”

“Oh, I reckon we ain’t had it much different than anybody else. Following what the Good Book says, we set aside enough from good harvests to carry us through the lean ones. Besides, if you consider the alternative, the good years far outweigh the bad.”

“Yes, they do, Derrick. Yes, they do.”

“Before we get started, let’s go around back. I’ve got to feed the chickens.”

When they got to the chicken coop, Derrick went inside with a bag of grain, and Roger remained outside. As he took in the view across the field, Roger noticed something very odd.

“What in the world?” Roger said aloud. “That’s one of the strangest things I’ve ever seen.”

From inside the chicken coop, Derrick said, “What did you say, Roger?”

“Those trees, Derrick. I ... are my eyes deceiving me?”

Coming outside, Derrick answered, “No, your eyes aren’t, Roger. That’s the Crooked Forest.”

“The Crooked Forest?... Well, I can see how it got that name.”

The distorted pine trunks twisted and bent horizontally near the ground and then came back up in the form of a “c” shape. Roger had seen enough oddities and mutations in the plant world to understand one or two trees growing that way. But this was a large mass of pine trees that were basically all the same. Despite their odd, deformed

shape the trees seemed healthy with a dense canopy.

“Any explanation, Derrick?” asked Roger.

“No one knows for sure why the trees have that shape. My daddy didn’t know, and his daddy didn’t know, or at least never said. The two most common rumors involve someone planting and training them that way. Either an Indian ritual or superstition or someone wanted the crooked trunks to make some type of furniture.”

“What a great way to start our historical exploration.”

They went inside the log cabin and pulled up two rocking chairs in front of the crackling fire. Before Roger sat down, he tapped his fist on the log walls.

“Still as solid as the people who put them up,” said Roger. “You’ve lived here sixty-eight years, Derrick, but how long has it been in the family?”

“I can’t be sure of the exact year, Roger. My daddy and his daddy both lived here. Before them ... there was a man by the name of Red Dawkins.”

“What was his background?”

“Okay, this is what I learned from my daddy

...

Red Dawkins had traveled the mountains and streams around the area for several years. He didn't have to because he wasn't on the run or anything. No bounty hunter ever had him in the sight of his gun. Traveling light, he learned to live off the land. His saddlebags always contained a few essentials – a bag of beans, some jerky, two extra canteens, and a Bible. On one side of his saddle, he carried a shotgun and on the other, a long rifle. A gun belt on his hip held a heavy Colt 45. A leather sack draped over his shoulder held lots of spare ammo. Despite his impressive arsenal, Red was a gentle man. He never started a fight in his life. He walked away whenever he could. Not particularly fast on the draw, he could drop an acorn from an oak at a hundred yards.

One day he encountered a narrow rocky path up the mountain. Too steep to ride, he got off his horse and started to walk the path. About thirty yards up. He heard some agonizing moans. Off to his right, he saw an Indian brave sprawled out on

the rocks with his head resting in a pool of blood. Red carefully made his way down to the man. Obviously, he was still alive because he continued moaning. When he reached the brave, he slowly turned him over. The gash on his forehead was long and deep, but Red had seen worse. With the Indian not responsive to his voice, it would be tricky getting him out, but he had to try. He cut the sleeve off his shirt and bandaged the man's head to see if he could slow the bleeding. Slowly, he worked his way back up to his horse, carrying the man over his shoulder. Red tied him onto the saddle and headed back down the mountain.

Coming across a recess under a rocky overhang, he decided that it would be a good place to set up camp. But then he caught a glimpse of a building in a little clearing about a quarter mile away.

As he approached the front of a log cabin, Red hollered out to see if anyone was around. He got no answer, so he knocked on the front door. With no response there either, the mountain man opened the door and walked inside. Somebody had been living there, but judging from the dust

buildup, not recently. The cot would have to do to lay out the brave.

A cautious man, Red tied the Indian's wrists to the cot. If he woke up, it would be hard to know what he might do, and Red needed to sleep. Two days later, the patient gained consciousness and wearily pulled at the rope that bound his arms to the cot.

"I'm sorry, my friend," said Red. "I didn't know how you would come out of it."

"Who you?" asked the brave.

"Red. Red Dawkins. Do you speak English?"

"Little," said the Indian. "I Running Bear."

"Here, let me cut those ropes. You took a nasty spill off that mountain. What were you doing?"

"I look for little brother... Lost."

Running Bear eventually regained enough strength to continue his search with Red by his side. Five days in the surrounding woods proved fruitless. Then one day, Red walked behind a thicket of wild elderberries behind the cabin. He

called for Running Bear to come quickly. They found two small gravesites with white wooden crosses. The graves didn't look very old. Draped over one cross, they saw a metal crucifix with a tarnished chain. Draped over the other cross, they found a small leather eagle. Running Bear pulled out a leather eagle from around his neck and said, "Brother". The two leather eagles were identical.

Red and Running Bear remained close, even becoming blood brothers. Nobody ever came back to the cabin, so Red called it home and settled down. He married an orphan girl who wandered into the mountains, and they had four children. Two of the children died while very young, and they buried them near the other gravesite. A couple of years later, Red's wife and the two remaining children just up and left the mountains. My granddaddy met Red when he was on life's descent. When Red passed away, he gave the cabin to granddaddy.

The cabin survived a devastating fire on the mountain in the 1850's, a Civil War battle, and marauding outlaws after the war. A fierce winter storm drove many of the other settlers off the

mountain in the 1890's. I reckon you could say the cabin fit my daddy and granddaddy just right. They remained as sturdy as these old logs through it all. Some in the family called them "stubborn", but I prefer "sturdy".

"So, who's after you?" asked Roger.

"You mean living in the cabin?"

"Yes."

"Well, my wife and I will stay as long as we can, but we ain't got any kin around anymore, so I'm not sure. I know these old walls still have a lotta life in them. They've been such a fortress for living all these years ... There was this one time, though. Come on outside and let me show you something."

Walking out the front door, Derrick turned right and then stopped near the corner of the cabin. He pointed to a spot on the edge of a log about three feet up. Roger saw a small cross carved into the wood just above a small hole. Derrick tapped lightly inside the hole and Roger heard a slight metallic sound.

"A bullet?" asked Roger.

“Yeah. The scar of death on the cabin.”

“What happened?”

“One day a deputy sheriff came riding up to the cabin. He asked my granddaddy if he could feed and water his horse. Just as my granddaddy told him sure, a shot rang out. The deputy fell and two men came out of the bush. They took aim at the deputy to put more lead in him to finish him off. Granddaddy said stop and when they turned their guns on him, he returned their fire and killed them. The deputy sheriff didn’t make it and what we’re looking at was my granddaddy’s memorial to his death.”

“A lot of history here, Derrick,” said Roger.

“Yeah.”

“And how time treats the rest of these logs’ history is left to God.”

“Yeah, but you know what’s interesting. Running Bear’s descendants still come down every winter and visit Little Brother’s gravesite.”

“Life is precious despite all its hardships and trials,” said Roger. “History often blazes a trail for the future to follow.”

“I reckon this old log cabin could attest to that,” said Derrick.