

Prologue

May 1772
Sleepy Hollow, New York

Gold eyes observed her; a beast tracking its prey. Elizabeth van Tassel had thought the tan body was a curved boulder, but the slide of pebbles from the ridge above told her otherwise. She froze, her already labored breath from the half-laced stays now ceasing. She instinctively laid her hand across her protruding abdomen, fingers spreading wide over the buttercream homespun. She held the creature's gaze, unable to turn her head to determine a place to hide. But there would be no hiding now that it had seen her. They were locked in this moment, gold eyes lazily blinking every now and then while her own grew dry without the luxury to blink. The creature had her and it knew it.

Sweat beaded on her forehead, atop her upper lip. It trickled down her back and past her hips. A sudden gust knocked a loose branch from the tree overhead, nearly catching her shoulder on the way down. She lost her footing and slid down the cluster of rocks behind her. Gasping for breath, palms clutching wet earth and sharp stones, she redirected her gaze to the spot on the ridge above where the gentle sway of greenery revealed the eyes had gone. Somewhere above her, a guttural and rippling growl.

Using a nearby sapling, Elizabeth pulled herself upright. The basket of mushrooms and wild onions lay discarded some ten feet away. The forest could have it. It was about to have her.

She took as deep a breath as her stays allowed, then ran. One arm clenched around the child in her belly while the other pushed aside errant branches and thorny bushes. Her hand stung from the bite and slash of sharp objects. Her skirt caught and she ripped it free, bits of fabric left behind. Somewhere deep in her mind, a passing acknowledgement there might at least be some trace of her left behind when Baltus came looking for her.

Her heart pounded in her temples as spots of gray and black clouded her periphery. A clean snap of a dry and deadened log made her turn in time to catch the creature—a cougar, she was sure of it now, jumping with chilling grace to the branch above her. Their eyes connected once more. Talon-like nails dug into bark like butter, tail flicking with annoyance, eyes narrowing with a confident hiss.

Elizabeth ran. Baltus had told her something about making a lot of noise should she see any large creatures, but the tightness of the stays and her loss of breath prevented any noise from escaping her lips. She shouldn't run, but the blazing instinct to get as far away as possible had lit the fire within her and birthed a new rush of energy.

Her foot rolled over an amorphous rock, sending her flat on her bottom with a dizzying blow to her tailbone that rippled over her belly. The crumbling earth around her gave way and the rock in question tumbled down to the forest floor. Grasping at anything, hands caked with dirt and blood, she slid. Powerless, she clasped her arms over her belly and fought to remain upright so she would not fall upon the child. Flashes of color above, like mixing cream in coffee, as she jostled between jagged rocks and protruding roots.

Finally she was still, flat on her back with the canopy of the forest swaying above. She was trembling, but her hands remained clasped to her abdomen. A tight, sharp pain shot through her tailbone and into her pelvis. She grit her teeth against it; a vague awareness of rustling bushes.

The sleek, golden body dove at her. She pressed her eyes shut, curling herself around the child.

A sharp crack rang out above her, followed by an acerbic scent. The beat of wings above. A great thud to her left; the distant call of voices. She slowly opened her eyes to find the cougar only a few feet away, a smoking hole between the open amber eyes.

She screamed. This time, she was sure she could hear herself now. It echoed through the forest, bouncing off tree trunks. Pain followed hot as she tried to roll onto her hands and knees. Moving now, she became aware of the wetness between her legs.

"No, no, no..." She pushed her skirts aside. Blood bloomed vivid on her petticoat and smeared her inner thighs. Her face was wet, tears and sweat blurring her vision. Her shaking hands fumbled to unlace the stays. She ripped them off, then took a gasping breath as if cresting the surface of water. But when her lungs filled with the crisp air, darkness closed in around her.

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A gentle, crackling fire and warmth upon her cheek. She dwelled somewhere between dreams and awareness, nuzzling the blanket up around her face. The bed felt harder than usual and with half-consciousness, she shifted to her side. Her eyes snapped open at a stabbing pain below.

There was a fire, but beyond it—a place she didn't know. She blinked several times, and with great effort, pushed herself up on one elbow. She squinted, unable to discern the room, yet was met with a distinct scent of damp earth and the metallic tang of her own blood.

A pressure against her shoulder caused her to collapse back. The fire was blotted out, replaced with the silhouette of someone. A woman. Long braid over one shoulder, the scent of crushed herbs and fresh earth on her hands.

"Je bent nu veilig," the woman whispered. You are safe now.

Dry air slipped through Elizabeth's lips and the woman quickly pressed a horn cup of warm liquid to her lips. She drank without question; letting the unknown, bitter substance slide down her throat and coil in her belly. Her belly—

"Mijn baby?" she croaked. "Baby," she said again in English.

"Your baby is safe."

The silhouette disappeared for a moment as Elizabeth pushed herself upright again. The woman returned, a peaceful bundle wrapped in fur in her arms.

"She is healthy," the woman said. The fire caught the edge of her face, illuminating high cheekbones, honey-colored eyes, and dark hair shot through with a single white streak at the front.

Elizabeth's heart dropped for a second before she quickly regained herself. The woman relinquished the baby into her arms.

"You've a sprained ankle. Some cuts and bruises, but otherwise I'd say you were lucky my cousin was already tracking the *posees*." She sat back on her heels and crossed her arms.

"Posees indeed." Elizabeth let out a long, trembling breath. And some cat it was.

The baby stirred, the tiny slits of her eyes creasing. She rubbed her cheek against Elizabeth's shift.

"She wants to drink already," the woman said.

"Oh!" She half turned, drawing her shift aside and angling the baby to her breast. She felt the woman's eyes on her, though her face was still cast in shadow. After a few fumbling attempts, the baby finally latched. Elizabeth sighed, relief draining from her in more ways than one.

The woman had turned now to tend a kettle over the fire, the light now fully revealing her face. Elizabeth bit back a gasp. It was the half-Mohican woman who lived in the forest. The woman people in Sleepy Hollow whispered about.

“Are...are you the one they call *witte heks*?”

The woman stilled without looking up, then let out a small laugh. “Yes, but I am no witch. You may call me Hulda.”

“Forgive me.” Elizabeth flushed. “I am Elizabeth van Tassel.”

This time Hulda looked up and met her eyes. She smiled. “I know.”

“Ah.” She looked down at her baby. Her daughter. Baltus didn’t even know.

“You are the new tenants at the farm on the edge of the forest, yes? My cousin has gone to tell your husband you are here and safe—and delivered of a baby girl at that.”

“Oh...well...thank you.” She pressed her eyes shut, her mind playing back the game of cat and mouse with the cougar. The moment she and her daughter had almost become prey.

“Hendrick may still be a boy, but I’d not wager against him in a shooting game. An inch or so to one side and you’d be...well.”

“I daresay.” Elizabeth shuddered.

Hulda poured the contents of the kettle into the horn cup and passed it to Elizabeth. “More raspberry leaves and chamomile.”

The baby had fallen asleep at her breast. She carefully extracted the child before nestling her upon the pallet of furs. She peered around, her eyes adjusting to the space—the *cavern* around them.

“Where are we?”

“My home.”

“I know, but—”

“A cave, yes. We are still in the forest.”

“I didn’t know there *was* a cave.” She marveled at the cathedral of stone around her. The drying herbs strung overhead, the stumps of old trunks that had been fashioned into tables and chairs. Bottles and pots nestled in natural indents serving as shelves. An oak chest stood open, revealing a few well-worn books.

"That's the point," Hulda said. "We are at Raven Rock. Well, beneath it, I should say."

"Oh!" Elizabeth said, eyebrows raising. She'd heard stories of the great rock face shaped like its avian namesake, but had never ventured there. Many didn't, given the superstitions of witchcraft and evil attached to the place.

Elizabeth studied the woman; young, perhaps a few years older than herself. Just a woman, no evil or witchcraft here so far as she could tell. "You live here, alone? Have you children? A husband?"

Hulda stifled a laugh. "Surely not."

"You are not scared here, all alone?"

Hulda tilted her head. "I quite like being alone. And when I don't, well, my cousin Hendrick and my uncle visit often enough."

"Aupaumut," Elizabeth said, pieces of recollection finally fitting together. "The father and son who come to trade in town?"

"Yes, that's them."

Elizabeth regarded her for a moment. "I've not seen you about the hollow. You are a healer, are you not?" She gestured to the herbs hanging above them.

"Many don't take kindly to my...skills. And a woman healer at that." She raised a finger in mock anger. "I leave baskets and parcels at doors, when Hendrick or my uncle tells me if someone has taken ill."

"I had no idea," Elizabeth marveled.

Hulda shrugged, almost exasperated. "You wouldn't."

Elizabeth bit her tongue. Had she offended the woman? She looked down at her child and stroked her cheek, soft as silk. The rosebud lips puckered. Elizabeth couldn't help but smile. "Katrina," she whispered to herself. She frowned then, casting her mind back.

"I don't remember her birth," she said suddenly. An unexpected tear rolled down her cheek.

"You were in and out. I suspect the tumble you took brought on labor." Hulda moved closer. "There was a lot of blood. You will be on a daily regimen of yarrow, Mrs. Van Tassel." She took a breath, expression grave.

"Today could have gone very different for you..."

Elizabeth held Hulda's dark honey gaze—amber, like the creature, yet she felt no foreboding or malice.

Only gratitude. Only tenderness.

“I don't know how to thank you, Ms. Aupaumut.”

Hulda reached out and touched her thumb to the baby's forehead. “I require none.”