

## INTO THE FOREST

By Ivy Rutledge

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MOURNING WATCHED JOSEPH as he walked into the cold April night, their connection broken as easily as a spider web being torn by a child's waving stick. Trees formed a thin layer between them, getting thicker and thicker until she saw nothing but the forest, lit up by the full moon.

Alone now, in spite of her pleadings for him to stay with her for one more night, she turned back to the cabin to join the children in their sleep. The Great Spirit had blessed Joseph and Mourning with five children, all born with his blue eyes and her dark skin. Joseph often spent weeks at a time in the Appalachian Mountains, hunting and trapping. On the mornings the children woke up to find their father gone, they sulked and dawdled. Mourning expected that this next stretch of time without him would be worse than usual due to the worry in the village.

Word was spreading that the grace period allowed by the New Echota treaty would be ending in May; the Cherokee people were expected to remove themselves voluntarily before then. Joseph was headed north to the War Department to file the papers to keep his family and property safe. He promised to be home in time for the Green Corn festival in the spring, but he never returned, and as promised, the U.S. soldiers came to herd the Cherokee people off their land.

The mystery of Joseph's disappearance haunted her dreams. Mourning and her children were forced along, climbing steep and winding trails through the forest and across the mountains to the stockades in Tennessee. They endured the hot dry prison bravely while the soldiers continued to pick the land clean of the Cherokee. Three moons passed, and Mourning didn't think she'd ever see Joseph again. Her quick thinking during the roundup had led her to pack her herb sacks and special measuring cups, and she used her skills as a healer as people fell ill from the heat and hunger.

She spent her days circulating among them, doing what she could to ease suffering. Her tall body wove through the crowds, bending side to side like a tree bearing stormy winds. Her oldest daughter Priscilla served as her apprentice, while her younger daughter Alvira looked after the three young boys, William, Allen, and Andrew. On any given day Mourning could be seen kneeling in her faded red dress, offering comfort.

One day it was her own sister's child. An infant, cradled by his mother and aunt, he faded to a gray that matched the cloth that wrapped him and drew his last small sigh. Soft crying filled the air around the three, and they rocked back and forth for a long while.

With each death Mourning grew increasingly angry. With each meal of putrid meat and pasty bread she was reminded of the theft of their comfort and safety. That theft left them without dignity, without freedom and without their full strength, although Mourning held reserves deep down the way a frozen pond harbored shimmering fish in the slow deep.

At night her family came together. She could hear a creek flowing outside the stockade, and each night as she fell asleep with her children, holding them tight as they lay on the dry, hard ground, she listened. She imagined herself to be as strong as the water flowing. She knew that the only way forward was to flow as the creeks and streams do, and in her dreams Joseph stood in the water with her.

One morning she was startled out of her dreams by Priscilla, who soundlessly pulled her up to look through a knothole in the fence. From where she stood with her body flattened against the wooden fence, Mourning saw a sight that made her mind spin. A man strode right into the circle of United States soldiers. At first glance, he looked like Joseph, and her heart raced at the sight, then sank when she realized that it wasn't him. She looked again and saw that he had a flame-shaped birthmark licking up the side of his face, just the way Joseph had described his brother Samuel. As the truth of his identity dawned on her, she couldn't take her eyes off of him. He was tall, and it was comforting for her to see those friendly blue eyes and that same bold manner, but to see them in this other man, her husband's brother, was disorienting.

There were three soldiers around the fire that morning cooking their breakfast and joking around. The joking stopped abruptly as they all saw the interloper, and they

stood up to look at him. Mourning watched as Captain Spencer stepped forward and stretched his short frame up tall to try to match Samuel's size. No amount of stretching would make that small man seem big, she thought. Especially not compared to this man over six feet tall. Her loathing of Captain Spencer had grown large as he had shown her people how small his heart was, starting with the orders to raid and set fire to their home.

Captain Spencer put his hand on his gun, and his dark brown eyes flashed a warning. His freckles glowed under his flushed skin.

"Are you in charge here?" the man asked. Mourning was riveted by the sight as he stopped at a respectful distance and waited.

"Yes, I'm the commanding officer of this post. Who are you and what is your business with us?"

"My name is Samuel Medley, and I've come for my brother's family. I have papers from the Department granting permission for the transfer of their custody: one woman, five children."

"Show me your papers," Captain Spencer said.

While Captain Spencer looked over the papers, Mourning watched Samuel check out his surroundings. The two other soldiers hung back from the exchange and looked apprehensive. Compared to Samuel, though, they both looked clean and well-rested; his clothes were worn and dirty, his face lined with wrinkles and worry.

She was entranced by the scene unfolding in front of her, but behind her, noisy boys and their reckless play reminded her where she was as one of them ran by and shoved her up against the fence. Her face scraped the wood, and she rubbed small beads of blood off her cheek, barely holding back tears, and went back to her looking.

"Name them." Captain Spencer's sharp request startled Samuel, and he seemed to be fumbling through his mind to remember their names.

Too much time was passing. He didn't even know their names, she thought as a large teardrop spilled over onto her red cheek. Come now, say it: Mourning, Priscilla, Alvira, William, Allen, Andrew, just say it, just like that. She bit her lip.

"Name them," Captain Spencer repeated.

“Mourning, Priscilla, Alvira, William, Allen, Andrew,” Samuel gave back in a staccato. Mourning was relieved to hear the list repeated correctly. Her tears began to flow and she didn’t stop them.

“Private James, gather them and bring them here. Then we’ll talk.”

“Yes sir.” Said one of the soldiers.

The gate opened, and from seven families away a soldier called out, “Mourning Medley! And five children, come forth to the gate.” She bristled as she heard her name.

Crossing to the soldier, she said to them, “You are calling for me? And my children?”

“Yes. Captain Spencer has requested your presence at his camp.”

“I will get them.”

“I wouldn’t dally if I were you, Captain Spencer is not the kind of man who likes to be kept waiting.”

She returned to her family, gathering the children and bringing them to the gate. They made their way through the makeshift cooking areas, buckets of human waste and children scratching the dirt with sticks.

The soldier ushered them out. As the gate shut behind them the low-pitched moaning sound of the rusty hinges sounded like the final notes of a bittersweet song. He led them along a well-worn path that circled around the fence to the camp where Captain Spencer held court.

The children looked around the camp and the soldiers while clinging to their mother’s skirt, then they noticed Samuel and stared at him in vague recognition.

“Like Papa!” Allen said. Mourning reached down to shush the boy, reassuring him with a hand squeeze.

Captain Spencer said, “I have a few questions, Mr. Medley. Let’s start with this: where is your brother and why is he not here to claim his own family?”

Samuel responded with a deep strong voice. “My brother’s whereabouts are unknown. If it were possible, I’m sure he would have seen to their safety himself, but I am here in his place to claim that responsibility. You will see that I have been to the War Department. My paperwork is in order to release these people from your custody.”

“So you are taking them to your family homestead. Where is it? Who is the landowner? What is the grant number?”

“It is my father’s land, grant number 2959. His name is John Medley.”

“So the Medley family will be responsible for this woman and her children, their food and shelter?” Captain Spencer asked.

Mourning kept her eyes on the ground, being too all familiar with the lowly place she held in this white man’s world. She stared at her feet, wiggling her big toe round and round the edge of the hole in her shoe, distracting herself from their being negotiated for as though they were cattle.

“Give me your money,” Captain Spencer said abruptly.

“But we’ll need our coins for the trip home. Perhaps if I just gave you some of it, that would satisfy you and leave us some for our own needs?”

“I’m not concerned with your needs. You owe your support to the United States government. We’re doing all of this for you and your people. Hand over all your coins. And leave us your horse.”

Samuel complied, reaching into his satchel and pacing a bag of coins in Captain Spencer’s outstretched hand, while looking him squarely in the eye. “I expect that we’ll be going now. Come on,” he said. As they turned to walk away, Captain Spencer made a nasty sound like a hissing bug and spit on Mourning’s heel. Trying to contain the contents of her stomach, she shook her foot and hustled a little faster, rushing the children along.

The children were silent as they walked, the sun shining on the backs of their heads in jumping stripes as the hot rays poked through the trees. Mourning could see flashes of Samuel up ahead, and each one reminded her of the man she wished were leading her family through the woods. When they had gained a safe distance from the camp, Mourning gathered the children to go to the water. Once the creek flowed among their ankles, they thanked the Great Spirit.

After hours in the cool forest, they all began to breathe easier. They set up camp and cooked supper. Darkness settled, wiping the day away, and the fire glowed. Priscilla yawned, and the three boys fell asleep in a pile. Alvira wasn’t long to follow, and before long Mourning and Samuel could talk.

“Thank you for what you have done for us. Can you tell me of Joseph? Did he send you? Where is he?” She longed for the answers to these questions.

“No, he didn’t, we don’t know where he is. I’m sorry to tell you this. He sent me a message in the spring asking me to prepare for his arrival with you and his children. Your existence, frankly, was a surprise for us to learn of, and we anticipated your arrival for weeks.”

“What happened?”

“I wish I knew. He never arrived. Then the news spread that Jackson’s army was starting the removal, and I knew that I needed to step in.”

“So he’s out there somewhere? This was spring?”

“Yes, April was when he wrote the letter I received.”

“So it has been four months,” Mourning said. After a moment she added, “This disappearance is not in his nature.”

It was quiet as they both pondered Joseph’s absence and the situation they found themselves in. Mourning counted her blessings that she was safe, that her children were safe, and as she drifted off to sleep, she hoped that Joseph rested someplace safe too.

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Running water made a smooth sheet over the rounded stones in the creek and onto Joseph’s leather boot. He thought about his predicament: his desperate need to get to his family before the soldiers did. The sand cradled his head, and his hair was damp with sweat. From where he lay, he could see only one break in the dense canopy above. The smells of soil and animals and the smell of blood lingered in the still air.

Facing him was the steep ravine where he had fallen the night before. The leaf litter on the ground was thickly layered and slippery, and his attempts to grasp and hold onto roots and rocks on the way down had failed. He found himself resting in the creek with his limbs splayed in odd directions and a spreading aching pain inside his belly. He kept himself calm as he tried over and over again to move his arms and legs. Seeing the world through a hazy woven screen, he fought the sleep that was wresting thoughts from his mind. Darkness began to settle in, and night ensued.

The small blue Quaker Ladies growing in a clump of moss on the bank became clear as the sunlight began to shine through its one hole in the canopy. Those same delicate flowers grew in the holly grove where he had first courted Mourning all those

years ago. Light bounced off of the beech leaves that covered the ground, leaves the color of pages from old stories. His heart ached at the thought of his wife waiting for him, day after day, looking out across the line of trees and into the sky that they both saw. Every day, telling the little ones that Papa would be back soon. With each passing day that he didn't come home their worry would grow.

The sun pierced through the diamond-shaped opening in the trees, shining directly into his eyes and forcing them closed. He retreated from the cool forest into the glare of the thoughts swirling in his mind. The running water lulled him, and again the images of his wife and children came to the forefront with their gentle eyes and lingering hugs.

He prayed for their safety, and he berated himself for so recklessly running home without a travelling partner. Forty-three years on this earth, and he had believed he was invincible. His anger mixed with sadness and regret as his tears ran in dirty streams down his cheeks. The day stretched ahead for the creatures of the forest, and in the moist earth, ferns unrolled themselves in preparation for the release of spores into the thick air.

A brightness of the understory greens pulsed, and the chirping and shuffling and spinning all came to a sudden stop. His spirit slipped away quickly, then the life of the forest carried on.