



A Moonbow Night



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Laura Frantz, *A Moonbow Night*
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In memory of my hero,
Daniel Boone.
From one true Kentuckian
to another.



I remember the devotion of your youth,
your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown.

JEREMIAH 2:2 ESV

1



Come to a turabel mountain that tried us almost to
death to git over it.

—WILLIAM CALK, HIS JURNAL
MARCH YE 25TH 1775 SATTERDAY

APRIL 1777

What cannot be cured must be endured.

There was no cure for the whirling April snow, the cold seeping through thin, trail-worn moccasins from the frozen forest floor. No cure for the tender back of his favorite mare now courting a saddle sore or the dog fight that had just occurred over the paltry remains of a winter-starved deer. No cure for the beef-and-biscuit Englishman at the rear of their small party whose every labored breath was an epithet.

Sion Morgan's own breathing, honed on numerous forays, was heavy. But he reckoned it was more the beauty that stole both his wind and speech. Underfoot was a tangle of cress and purslane and clover. On every side redbud and dogwood

were blossoming, breaking through the avalanche of greens with blazing bursts of purple and cream.

Ahead was the saddle of the Gap, the gateway to Kentucke, a whirl of windy white. They'd come three hundred miles since Fort Henry. Only one hundred more to go. The crude maps Sion had pored over, crafted by Walker and Boone and the few men who'd gone before, blurred in his weary brain. A few details lured him.

A sandy cave . . . a seasonal waterfall . . . a staggering vista. All to be had but a few rods more.

"Morgan! Will you drive us like livestock?" Cornelius Lyon paused to spit out another curse, this one the most colorful by far. "By all that is holy, this mountain's the devil's own stairway and naught else!"

Setting his jaw, Sion pressed ahead, shrugging aside his aggravation. He couldn't fault Cornelius's logic. The climb *was* brutal, each step so steep, so treacherous, one dared not look down or pause or speak.

But Cornelius wasn't done with his bellowing. "Why such haste? Surely the savages wouldn't be out on such a day!"

The clipped, bitter words bore a challenge. Heat rising, his gait unbroken, Sion shifted his rifle to his other hand and squinted as a stinging wind slapped his face. He was glad six packhorses, two chain carriers, and a marker separated them, lest he give vent to his temper and send Cornelius Lyon over the cliff.

The uncharitable thought had barely cleared his head when a commotion arose from behind, sudden enough to chill the blood. He'd seen Indian sign farther back but had said nothing, the snow obliterating the Warrior's Path. Now he swung round to see a packhorse lose his footing and tumble from the trace. Down, down, down the big bay went, skin-

ning hide and hair in a vicious descent against jagged rock. Its anguished whinny set the dogs to howling, a mournful chorus that carried on the wind.

For a few dizzying moments Sion felt woozy. Seeing the animal's deathly struggle, he shouldered his flintlock and sighted, firing down past rock and brush to where the horse lay bleeding and broken. When the animal stilled, he gritted his teeth against the jarring impact as he leapt from the trace onto a slick ledge of limestone below, gun held high in his right hand, all in an ungraceful attempt to rescue the provisions the bay had been carrying.

Reaching bottom, he looked up to find eight wide eyes on him—all but Nate Stoner, who kept his back to the chasm, his rifle trained on the hills above in case of ambush.

Fingers cold and cramped, Sion set his rifle aside, took out his hunting knife, and sliced free the precious stores of gunpowder and bullet lead. Once they were secured to his back, he began the slow uphill climb. Twice he nearly tumbled backwards, his footing unsure, gaze clouded with snow. By the time he reached the top and his chain carriers rushed to lighten his load, he was bruised and bloody-knuckled, the earth driven deep beneath his fingernails, the mournful weight of a lost packhorse pressing down with a vengeance.

A warm, wet nuzzle to his hand brought comfort. Smokey, his collie, leaned into him before bounding ahead with a sharp yip to spur him on. The trace couldn't climb much higher. The tree line was thinning, the snow miraculously slowing. His muddy moccasins sank into sand, a strange sensation after so much rock. Overhead was a cavern.

Sand Gap.

The tumult of falling water met his ears, the mist of the

falls like ice. He looked back to make sure all was in order. All was, yet he was unable to shake that shadowed feeling. Truly, who would be out on such a forbidding day? Other than a bunch of witless surveyors bent on Indian territory?

Facing forward again, Smokey beside him, Sion crossed the cavern, eyes west, the cave's dimness offset by a startling burst of light. Years earlier he'd heard of this place. But Boone and Walker hadn't done it justice. Their tales of its grandeur seemed tattered and lackluster.

Sion stood in the Gap, wordless, barely aware of his surveying crew fanned out around him. The wind had ceased its bitter sighing. Before them was pewter sky. A bluish haze of mountains and then . . . endless, untrammelled, unredeemed wilderness.

Sion hated that Cornelius broke the spell. "Here we shall rest, surely."

"Here, aye," Sion answered. "For a quarter of an hour or so."

Shooting him a black look, Cornelius retreated into the cavern with his manservant, Lucian, and the two chain carriers.

Nate stood shoulder to shoulder with Sion, gaze unbroken. "I misdoubted I'd live to see such a wilderness. But I'm glad I did." He drew in a ragged breath. "'O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all; the earth is full of Thy riches.'"

The Scripture chafed, intruding on Sion's appreciation. Tearing his attention from the view, he began to reload his rifle, distracting himself with powder and shot.

"This here Gap's the best—and the worst of it, I reckon," Nate mused, still agape.

"You reckon wrong." Sion poured powder down the barrel

and rapped it with his hand to set the charge. “There are three choke points on Boone’s Trace. The Narrows are next—and a spring-soaked river to ford farther down.”

“Don’t sound so gleeful.” The gleam in Nate’s eyes eclipsed his worry. “I know you’d like to get shed of us and go your own way, just like you been doin’ thirty years or better.”

Sion grinned and drove the ball home. “The way I figure it, I’m saddled with the lot of you till the surveying’s done.”

Nate scratched his silvery chin. “You see any sign back there at the spring?”

With a nod, Sion closed the gun’s frizzen. “Shawnee. Six or so. Mayhap a couple of Wyandot thrown in.”

Nate’s shoulders convulsed in a shiver. “Outnumbered, then.”

Meeting the older man’s gaze, Sion decided against confessing his certainty they were still being watched, even as their frosted breath plumed between them. “We’ll make a cold camp. Stand watch through the night. Indians don’t usually care for a wintry fight.”

“Well, they do like horses. And we got some fine ones left.” Nate darted a wary eye at the woods. “I’ll be glad to get to Boone’s and Harrod’s forts.”

“A hundred miles more.” Again Sion looked square at Nate, unwilling to withhold a last way out. “It’s not too late to turn back.”

“And leave you without a marker?”

Committed, then. Despite Nate’s Scripture spouting and hymn singing, the graying borderman was the only member of the surveying party Sion was sure of. Still, he felt an odd twinge. An old man should be at home, surrounded by life’s last comforts. But Nate Stoner had little to return to in Virginia. He was a widower of ten years, and his only daughter

had died in childbirth, leaving him without family. Sion was the closest thing to kin Nate had.

“No need to worry about my old hide. I’ll keep. ‘And even to your old age I am He; and even to hoar hairs I will carry you.’” Nate gave Sion a reassuring grin. “It ain’t me I’m fretted about but you. We’d best head down and make camp.”



Sion admired the camp, the way it nestled against a rocky ridge near a spring just below Sand Gap off the Warrior’s Path. He could hear the hobbled horses foraging, free of their loads, somewhat protected from the northwest wind by a stand of pine. The snow had left off, leaving a miserable cold, everything muddy and damp. Sion craved the smell of wood smoke and browning meat. A fire to warm his backside. A dry bed.

But comfort might bring calamity.

As it was, their party sat hunched in saddle blankets, rifles near at hand, and partook of parched corn and jerked meat, warming themselves with a dram or two in battered tin cups and aiming for camaraderie at least.

Once again Sion was struck by their mismatched party. An old man. A dandy and his servant. Two gangly-legged boys. As many dogs as horses. He was most gladdened by the dogs. Mostly foxhounds and curs, they were ever alert to danger. Smokey rarely left his side, nose in the air, tetchy to a fault.

Weather permitting, they’d soon be running the line below the Gap, chaining through dense forest, using the levels on the steepest inclines, always recording measurements and computations in tattered field books.

But for now the talk shied away from the work ahead.

Leave it to Cornelius to turn fanciful, the lot of them hanging on his every word like coons after pawpaws. The dark soon masked their rapt expressions if not Cornelius's crisp British tones.

"A gentleman by the name of Johnathon Swift, some fifteen years past, is reported to have had a secret silver mine within these very mountains." Cornelius was gesturing now, adding to the drama. "A revered Shawnee chief led some white traders near the mine only to become ill and refuse to go farther, saying the Great Spirit was displeased."

Spencer Rankin's eyes went wide. "Why would the Great Spirit get riled up?"

"Why, indeed," Cornelius replied coolly. "Because of their greed, boy. Even the Indians' god abhors selfishness. Silver."

"We ain't any better than them nosy traders, the way I figure." Spencer elbowed Hascal Mullins, whose hand rested uneasily on his gun. "We're chain carriers and axemen for you surveyors, all of us paid in land. I reckon the Great Spirit ain't too happy about that neither."

Cornelius cleared his throat. "Be that as it may, our mission is more benevolent. We're marking land for soldiers and settlers. Not merely ourselves."

"Is it true what they say about the Indians? That they call surveyors *land stealers*?"

Cornelius reached into his waistcoat and withdrew a pocket compass, holding it aloft. "*This* is what they're referring to, yes. The savages have no concept of ownership, I'm afraid. Kentucke is their hunting ground and has ever been. We're trespassing, in their eyes. Uninvited guests."

"Seems not even the king can keep us out with his proclamations," Hascal said. "We be comin' over the mountains, like it or not."

“Daniel Boone—a God-fearing woodsman of solid Quaker stock—has come before us,” Cornelius replied. “Others will follow. I see no stopping the land-hungry masses.”

All quieted. They were shadows now, swallowed up by pitch darkness. A lone wolf howled and Sion tensed. But the sound rang true, like a woman’s cry, the last haunting note an eerie echo. He eased, assured no human throat could make that noise. Still, someone was out there, waiting. Watching. He sensed it sure as his blood ran red.

Nate shifted. “Whereabouts exactly is this here silver mine?”

“Somewhere between Piney Mountain and the Big Sandy River,” Cornelius answered.

“Swift’s journal states that the richest ore is to be found in latitude 37 degrees minus 56 minutes north.” Sion studied the sky, intent on the North Star. “By astronomical observations and calculations, the vein is just a little west of the longitude of 83 degrees.”

“Ha!” Cornelius’s smirk defied the dark. “So you *have* been listening, Morgan.”

“He’s always listenin’,” Hascal put in. “He just don’t say much.”

“So I’ve gathered,” Cornelius replied.

Nate chuckled. “My guess is that we’re better off findin’ the Moonbow Inn than the Swift silver mines.”

Cornelius made a scornful sound. “What? An ordinary? In the wilderness?” His contempt knew no bounds. “And just where would this bastion of civility happen to be?”

Nate bristled. “I ain’t sayin’ it’s real or anything better’n a fleasy station. I just recollect somethin’ Daniel—that’s *Captain Boone* to you—said about a place near the falls of the Shawnee River. A mighty big falls, bigger’n any waterfalls you ever saw, I’d wager.”

“We’ll soon be crossing the Shawnee.” Cornelius pocketed the compass and withdrew his pipe, its white clay a beacon in the last of daylight. “By heaven, what I’d give for a tavern and smoke and a pint.”

Nate saved Sion from cautioning. “Best save your vices for the hearth’s fire at the Moonbow Inn.”

“And why, pray tell, is it called the Moonbow?”

“On account of some magic that occurs at night beneath a full moon. A sort of rainbow in the mist of the falls.” At Cornelius’s second snort, Nate shrugged. “Since Dan’ll said it, I’d be inclined to believe it.”

Spencer and Hascal were chuckling and elbowing again nonetheless. Ignoring them, Sion stroked Smokey’s velvety ear absently as the collie stretched out beside him, warming his buckskin-clad thigh. The appeal of an inn, however paltry, seemed more woolgathering. But buried in the back of Sion’s conscience was hazy confirmation. “I recollect something about a woman innkeeper and her daughter being a part of Boone’s first try at Kentucke in ’73.”

The chuckling ceased.

“You mean that time when Boone’s son was killed just shy of the Gap?” Nate’s face looked as gray as his hair in the twilight. “That was a mournful time, to hear tell of it.”

“Aye. Somehow a few people in their party made it into Kentucke later on and ended up along the *Wasioto*—the Shawnee River—and started being hospitable.” Sion paused, dredging his memory for details. “Likely this so-called inn is no more than a fortified cabin or blockhouse with a few pickets and loopholes, something along the lines of Boone’s and Harrod’s stations.”

“A woman innkeeper and her daughter?” Cornelius made a sour face. “Surely you jest, Morgan.”

“Likely there are some menfolk around too,” Nate speculated, “if only trappers and traders and the like. More settlers are coming over the Gap than you think.”

“Sounds like a curious operation to me.” Cornelius stuck his pipe between his teeth as if pretending to smoke. “Though I would warm to a pretty petticoat if one should materialize.”

“Best shut your yap and hie you to bed, then.” Nate stood slowly, retreating stiffly to a pile of dry leaves he’d gathered beneath a rocky overhang. “The sooner we see sunrise, the sooner we’ll be downriver and mebbe learn if there’s somethin’ to this whole moonbow affair.”

“I’ll take first watch,” Sion said, shouldering his rifle as the dogs about them bristled and the wolves’ hair-raising howling began anew.