

THE OTHER SIDE OF CERTAIN

by Amy Willoughby-Burle

EXCERPT

Mattie

“You’ll be needing to mind the grizzly at the top of your route tomorrow though,” Ruby said, sitting down hard in the chair and pulling off her man-style boots. “I might would have taken that leg, but I try to stay clear of Devil’s Jump.”

“Where?” I questioned.

Ava brushed the comment off. “A little branch along the creek that’s more folklore than anything worth bothering over.” Ava looked at Ruby thoughtfully. “Are you ok, you seem like you’ve been on a hard day’s work, not headed in for repair and report.”

“Molly threw a shoe right by a nest of yellow jackets and let’s just say, neither one of us fared all that well. I called it a day and had to finish the rest of the route on the way here.”

Ava made a pained face and then looked at me with raised eyebrows. “The least of the reported injuries. Do you think you’re up for this?”

My mind was spinning across everything as I took it in. Really, all I’d come to do was teach. Not get stung by yellow jackets and fight off bears.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my mind catching on a word and needing to clarify. “Did you say there is a bear along the route I will take up? Isn’t that rather dangerous?” I looked quickly back and forth between Ava and Ruby.

Ruby winked at me. “A right grizzly indeed.”

Ava looked at me with concern. “He’s nothing to fret over.”

“So, there is a bear?”

A creek called the Hell for Certain with a beast along the route. I’d been a sucker to take this job. I feared they’d given me the teaching job just to distract me from the worst of my duties.

“Ava has a soft spot for the wildlife around here,” Ruby said as if joking, but then a more serious tone found its way into her voice. “You of all people, Ava, should be the last to care about the fate of one lone grizzly.”

“You know better of him, Ruby,” Ava said with a soft scold.

I quickly surmised that this was not a bear, but a person. One of a dubious nature.

“Tread lightly, Mattie,” Ruby said to me and it seemed like a genuine word of concern. “He’s a grizzly bear indeed, and he won’t take kindly to strangers coming up to his place.”

“Maybe I ought not go. He sounds like a bit of a beast.”

“He wasn’t always that way,” Ava said and patted my shoulder. “Let’s get you ready for your route tomorrow.”

Suddenly, I felt extremely unprepared. “So soon? I don’t even know the lay of the land.”

“I have maps for you,” Ava said. “And Opal knows the way. She’ll be a big help.”

“Who is Opal?”

“Your horse. You ride, don’t you?” Ava asked, seeming suddenly concerned that perhaps I didn’t.

“Best in show for three years running,” I said proudly.

Back in the parsonage that evening, I curled up on the couch to study the hand drawn maps Ava had made for me. There was one for each of the two routes I’d take. I could see right away why they called these ladies pack horse librarians and why the school system had not made arrangements to send their kids to the city or even other county schools. My father’s Studebaker would be of no use out here, and a motorbus would have been laughable. There were a few houses I would visit across the lengths of my routes that had roads leading to them, but most called for me to ride along the creek bed and up and around what I hoped would be visible paths like the ones Ava had marked. “Road” was a relative term out here.

I looked at the end of the route where Ruby had taken the map and circled the last stop, writing the word “grizzly” before giving it back to me. My first day would be a challenge. I traced my finger along the mark that indicated the creek. The name loomed ominous to me—Hell for Certain. I sure hoped it wasn’t.