

MEDIA EXCERPT

What Happened in Beulah

a novel by Christy Scott Cashman

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PROLOGUE

My name is Barrett Childress Owens. People in the South love to give their kids two last names. Mama was a Barrett and Daddy's mama was a Childress. I'm fairly certain that if I was a boy, my name would've been the same.

I was raised in Beulah, Tennessee. But saying I was raised sounds funny because there wasn't much raising going on. My life unfolded there. An even better word might be unraveled.

In Beulah, late summer is my favorite time of year. That's when the Great Smoky Mountains really do look smoky. A silver veil of fog lifts by ten every morning, revealing deep blue-green layers of rounded peaks in the distance.

Mama says there's something mysterious about these mountains that pulls people to them. The way the fog is usually hiding part of them, swathing their middle like a wide sash, draping across them like a shawl over rounded shoulders or settling just at the base of them, blurring the sight of their peaks from the foothills, where Beulah is nestled like a baby in a hammock. In Beulah, the fog has always been the topic of a lot of conversations. How thick it is, where it settles, when it lifts, how it looks different from season to season.

So it's no wonder that even my dreams were filled with fog when Lacy Gunderson, the new girl from New York City, disappeared my sophomore year. It seeped and swirled into every corner, covering the cluttered images of me, Mama, and Daddy and every stitch of harebrained memory my mind was sewing together. Mama wearing her Miss Kudzu crown. Daddy like he is now, old and tired. Me as a five-year-old living in the wrong house. Sophomore me, watching dream fog pour into that house so thick and fast, everything was going white. Then, slowly, as the fog lifted, I began to see. But I wasn't at home anymore. I was in the woods. Mama and Daddy were gone.

Then I saw a body.

Lacy's body.

Mangled and motionless on the brown leaves of the forest floor.

CHAPTER ONE

The mountain fog made Beulah famous. It's been photographed, painted, described in poems, and mentioned in novels. It was even written about in magazines, like when *The City Person's Guide to Outdoor Living* called Beulah a hidden gem type of place—an undisturbed, unaffected town with a Main Street just five minutes from the forest entrance. The perfect place to lose yourself. Hikers, campers, and mountain bikers began to flock to the trailheads. By August and September, the campsites were full.

If the fog was what Beulah was clothed in, then the storms were her personality, especially that time of year. They were another thing that made Beulah famous. How they rolled in every afternoon like clockwork; how a low, dark cloud would move across the sky, cover the sun, and drop the temperature by twenty degrees. Thunderclaps could be so loud they'd shake the ground beneath your feet. Lightning struck so close it stood your hair on end. When the skies opened up, you'd swear it was raining the devil and the pitchforks too.

Sometimes hikers and bikers got caught together briefly, waiting for the storm to pass. They'd duck under the cover of some old moonshine shed or under the ledge of jutting rocks, huddling together in muddy, sweaty groups while the rain beat down. They'd share their love for the smell of the woods after the rain. They'd talk about how these mountains are so special—the rain forest of the Smokies! It's why the wood anemone and the crested iris and the swamp milkweed thrive here. It's why it's home to some of the largest moss and lichen colonies in the country.

When the rain eased up, these die-hard outdoorsy types held out their hands, palms to the sky, and looked up as the sun winked through the clouds again. They shook themselves off, not unlike Labrador retrievers, and forged ahead up the trail to some mountain laurel ridge or gushing waterfall or magnificent bald summit. Maybe one of us should have warned them: Sometimes the storm you thought was over turned tail like a hound running back on a scent.

The mountains tell us we're foolish to think we know what's next. So all we can do is watch them. Learn from them. Listen to the secrets being told by the lament of the tree frogs, the stridulation of the crickets, or the teakettle, teakettle, teakettle call of the wrens.

The storms and the fog make these mountains more than just rolling peaks in the distance. The mountains give us calm, like they're protecting us, looking over us. But the next minute, a storm tells us they're hiding something, and the fog tempts us to search for what we didn't know we'd lost. The hikers and the campers and the bikers come here looking for clean air and unspoiled water. They think they'll stay just a week. But even if they get trapped in a storm or disoriented by the fog, they don't want to leave. Instead, it's like the rolling thunder and the hazy, foggy views cast a spell that makes them stay.

Long before the newcomers read about Beulah in magazines and talked about it at cocktail parties, long before they bought our houses and bare land and moved their families here with their expensive mountain bikes, before they dug pools and landscaped, there were the McCalls,

the Grays, the McCrarys, the Fitzpatricks, and the Owenses—the families that settled here after the Cherokees were forced out in the early 1800s. They worked at the lumber yard or the tobacco plant or the turkey farm.

There were surefire ways of knowing you were from these parts, even if you didn't admit it. Like if you cooked with lard, fished with your bare hands, or put roadkill in your slow cooker. If at least one time Jesus saved you, or you swore on your meemaw's grave you'd seen a ghost. If your family home was now in the shadow of a neighbor's McMansion, or you'd been pushed to the outskirts of town.

If you're called hillbilly, redneck, bumpkin, hick, clodhopper, yahoo, booner, rustic, or a boor.

But mostly, you're called yokel.

I am a yokel.

CHAPTER TWO

Everyone in Beulah remembered what they were doing the moment they heard the news about Lacy Gunderson. It was the fall of 1985, the beginning of my sophomore year. You couldn't go anywhere without overhearing conversations in the grocery store, or on the sidewalk outside the hardware store, or in line at the post office. Just about anywhere you went, every conversation was the same. Everyone wanted to share their disbelief that something so horrific could have happened while we were all just going about our business. Like our uninteresting facts made the story even more unbelievable. Like it was important to tell each other right where we were and what we were doing when we found out Lacy—the newest girl in town, the coolest girl in my class—went missing.

"I was in the middle of making a peanut butter sandwich."

"I was fixin' to do my homework."

"I'd just finished hanging the laundry."

"I was cleaning the gutters."

And the gist of every story was the same: How could this have happened in our sweet little town, right under our noses?

Everyone in Beulah said their lives were changed forever then. People locked their doors for the very first time. Mayor Duke Hawkins strongly suggested a 9:00 p.m. curfew, even on the weekends. Parents only let their kids go out in groups.

All of a sudden, Beulah wasn't safe anymore.

All of a sudden, I wasn't the only one walking around afraid.

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