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Neely's Bend, The Americas, 1780

Mary Neely was a mere slip of a girl; folks liked to say they could read the Book of Psalms clear through her. Her shoulder-length hair was as fine as cornsilk and changed colors with the seasons: in winter it was light brown with streaks of copper when the light hit just right; the copper would then turn to gold in the summer, as if the sun had kissed it. Now she pushed a strand of it off her forehead with the back of her hand, exposing beads of perspiration across her brow.

In the small clearing in front of her was a large iron cauldron suspended over a fire by four sturdy wood poles. It was filled almost to the brim with water that had just begun to simmer, which meant she would be standing over it the better part of the day, stirring it and stoking the fire until all that was left was salt residue.

She was a mix of Irish, Scottish, and English, which resulted in fair skin, sea green eyes and a rugged spirit despite her slight stature.

With one hand on the stirring stick, she used her other hand to grasp the end of her apron and wipe her face. It was an unusually hot August day, the air so thick even the flies didn't have the energy to move. It was even more scorching standing

over the large black cauldron near the banks of the Cumberland River.

The bend in the river was known as Neely's Bend. Situated close by was Neely's Salt Lick, which consisted of a spring surrounded by rocks over which sulfur water would flow year round. The odor took some getting used to, as it smelled of rotten eggs, particularly when Mary was boiling the water as she was doing now.

Mary was the fourth of ten children. She'd be nineteen years old in less than three weeks; her oldest sister, Jean, was six years her senior and the youngest, Jane, was not yet four years old. But it was her brother Sam with whom she was closest.

Most of her sisters and brothers were at the homestead now, working to harvest a garden that had been woefully neglected because of the Indian threat. Elizabeth, who was three years older, had just become engaged to Jacob Spears and Mary knew she'd be talking up a storm about her anticipated change in status.

Part of the reason Mary wasn't with them was because she'd taken a liking to Jacob's brother, George. And George was right on the other side of those woods yonder, along with men from Mansker's Station, taking advantage of the animals' propensity for visiting the salt lick. They hoped to bring back enough meat to feed their families for several months.

The sound of footsteps on brittle twigs reached her ears and she turned to peer through the woods as Sam and George made their way into the clearing. George tipped his hat in greeting.

Mary glanced at him with a mischievous smile. His father was of German descent and George had inherited his thick, sandy hair and gray-green eyes. He was taller than most and had wide, sturdy shoulders and beefy hands. She knew she affected him. It was widely rumored they would marry someday and with two older siblings married already and a third betrothed, she would soon be expected to follow suit.

Sam dropped some dead rabbits near Mary's feet. "Hunting's good today," he said with a grin.

Mary tore her eyes away from George. "You need me to skin them?"

“Yep. We’re leaving them for you and Pa. We’re about to take them deer” —he nodded his head toward two bucks they’d shot this morning—“and head back to Mansker’s Station.”

“Leaving already?”

“We’ve got work to do, woman,” Sam said with a sideways glance, a grin breaking out on his handsome face.

George led two pack horses to the deer, and Mary watched as they slung the carcasses over the horses’ broad backs, the two muscular young men lifting the heavy deer as if they weighed no more than a sack of potatoes.

“Everybody’s leaving except you and Pa,” Sam said, growing somber. “The others from Mansker’s are trying to talk him into letting you come back with us. I sure don’t like the thought of you staying here.”

“We’ll be fine,” she said. “I’ll finish up this salt making and we’ll be headed home first thing in the morning.”

He didn’t answer but his brow furrowed and he appeared to be chewing the inside of his lip.

“Where’s Pa now?”

“Down by the river,” he said as he mounted his horse.

Mary had a vision of her father toiling away, his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his black hair shining in the sunlight, his sharp green eyes scanning the horizon for meat befitting the Neely table. He was only forty-two years old, still a man in his prime.

George tossed the reins of one of the pack horses to Sam. They watched as the horses started along the old trail, their tails swishing in the still air.

George remained still, the reins to his own horse and the other pack horse still in his hands. They appeared to hold a great deal of interest to him.

“George,” Mary said by way of parting.

He stood with a fixed smile on his face, his eyes glancing up beneath a stray lock of hair to find Mary’s face, and then quickly dropping to peer at the reins again.

“What is it, George?”

“I was wondering,” he began, his voice barely audible.

“Wondering what?”

“I was—I was wondering if you’d—if you’d go with me to Saturday’s dance.”

“Why of course,” Mary said coquettishly. “I was figuring all along on going with you.”

A broad smile graced his face from ear to ear before he visibly subdued it. Mary held back a smile of her own as she watched the color rise in his cheeks.

“I’ll be leaving on Sunday to go back to Virginia.”

She lowered her eyes and kept them focused on the boiling water, hoping he would not see the disappointment she felt welling up inside her. She swallowed. “You planning on coming back this way any time soon?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him shrug. “My pa doesn’t want to part with his tobacco farm in Virginia...” he started, his voice trailing off. “But I aim to come back, soon as I can.”

She stirred the water in silence.

“Won’t you go to Mansker’s Station with us?” he asked as a group of men entered the clearing.

She glanced up as one of the men shook his head. “William won’t leave,” he said as they approached.

“Then I’m staying, too,” she said, squaring her shoulders. “We’ll be back tomorrow.”

George hesitated until the men had passed through the clearing, leading horses burdened with game. “Bye, Mary.”

“Bye, George.”

“I’ll be seeing you then on Saturday.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“Yes, ma’am. Me, too.”

She thought he would trip over his own feet as he rushed to mount his horse and catch up with the others.

Mary turned back to the water. Humming, she reached to the pile of kindling beside the fire and tossed more under the pot. It wouldn’t do to have the fire go out while she stood there chatting.

Her mind wandered to this Saturday’s dance. There would be at least forty in attendance—maybe even more. She’d have to pull out her fine cotton dress, the one with the blue pattern on

it. She'd borrow Elizabeth's hair pins and pull her hair into a top knot, and she'd probably even use some of Ma's flower water to make her smell especially nice. As she day-dreamed about the evening, the settlers in attendance, and the music provided by Daniel Norman and his fiddle, she broke into song. The hours crept by as the afternoon began to wane. Mary loved to sing and she listened to her own voice wafting through the summer air as she sang the hymns she'd memorized from the one church hymnal that everybody shared.

Musket fire pierced the air, sending a flock of birds above the trees, their panic-stricken wings beating the air in their hasty retreat.

Simultaneously, she heard the Indians, their distinctive cacuminal cry at once harmonious and terrifying, the sound growing in escalating intensity.

Mary felt the adrenaline course through her veins as she dropped the stirring stick and raced to the edge of the clearing, where she grabbed the musket they always kept loaded and primed.

She stopped abruptly at the edge of the woods. The Indian warriors seemed to be everywhere at once, their faces obscured behind grotesque red and black paint, their bodies clad only in breechcloths.

Her eyes fell on a lone Indian at the edge of the water, kneeling over Pa's still body. She leveled the musket and aimed.

The air was filled with the dust from hurried feet, momentarily blinding her. As the dust settled, she spotted Pa lying on the bank in a pool of blood that flowed to the river.

In the next second, she fired, the smoke blast momentarily blocking out her target. Then the air was filled with a deafening war cry. As she turned, she glimpsed another warrior as he rushed her, his arm raised high with his club held tight. She grabbed the musket by the barrel and swung it with all her might into his torso. As blood erupted from him, she was struck from behind by yet another Indian.

The world blurred around her as she tumbled backward. She was surrounded by warriors, their faces otherworldly in their red and black paint. She fought with all her strength, kicking and

screaming, pummeling those who came near, while they continued to encircle her.

Her last memory was a lone war club sailing through the air, the perpetrator's face devoid of expression, catching the side of her head and slinging her downward. Her body hit the ground with such force that her breath was knocked from her. The last sound she heard was her own desperate gasp for air.