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The leaves turned to shades of scarlet and gold as the crisp fall air settled in the Big Woods. Laura could feel the turning of the seasons and anticipated the early nights spent with Pa, sitting in his lap listening to his many stories in front of the fire.

She would miss the long days of summer, running barefoot in the grass with her sister, Mary, but there was something special about nights together as a family when the days became shorter and the family spent extra time together in the one-room cabin.

“What story tonight, Half-Pint?” Pa asked one night, as Laura perched on his lap. Ma was rocking Baby Carrie, and Mary sat at Pa’s feet, listening intently for Pa’s tale.


“Can you tell us about the mad dog, Pa? And the haint that saved you?” Laura begged.

Pa chuckled while Ma reprimanded, “There’s no such thing as a haint, Laura, and you know it,” even as she smiled softly to herself.

Laura knew that ghosts weren’t real, or at least that she had never seen one, but Pa’s story always made her doubt that fact, at least a little.

Pa’s tale began with his first trip to town on his own. It was a quiet morning, peaceful and still, and Pa had the eerie feeling that it was a bit too quiet for his liking. Usually, the sounds of the birds twittering in the trees and an occasional squirrel or rabbit scurrying by would bring the woods to life on a long walk. This morning, however, not even the wind could be heard sweeping through the trees. A cool shiver wracked his shoulders, and he wrapped his winter coat around himself snugly.

Nevertheless, Pa hurried to reach town and made good time, arriving by early afternoon. His visit to the store was uneventful, and he gathered the supplies his family needed for the upcoming turning of the seasons. After eating a quick lunch, he set out on his journey home.



It was only a couple of miles into his walk that the familiar ominous, prickling feeling returned. Goosebumps raised on his arms, and the hairs on the nape of his neck stood at attention. He slowed his pace, peering into the trees ahead, expecting to see a panther crouched in the branches or a bear in the brush.


A high-pitched howl echoed through the trees, a sure sign of a coyote lurking nearby. *Why is it howling during this time of the day?* he wondered, for it wasn't quite dusk.

Nearby, the sound of branches moving and leaves crushing underfoot guaranteed an animal of some sort approaching, and it was getting close. Pa grabbed for his buckskin knife and braced himself for what was coming when out of the nearby trees scrambled a dog. It was ambling toward him, snarling and spitting with a fury he had never seen before in his own dog. He had heard of dogs like these, sick dogs from which one bite could spread the illness to humans. Locking eyes with Pa, it lunged toward him, and Pa prepared to cut him with his knife, even though he didn't want to harm the animal, sick or not.

"No, Charles!" came a shout from the trees, its voice a familiar one but not one Pa recognized. At the sound of the mysterious voice, the dog whimpered as if in pain and scrambled away, turning tail to run back into the woods. As its footsteps receded, Pa peered through the branches near him, searching for the person who had shouted his name and frightened the dog. He saw and heard nothing but the low rustle of the wind through the leaves.

"I never saw the being who called my name, but I know they saved me that night from getting bitten," Pa concluded his story as Laura and Mary listened, wide-eyed.

"Your guardian angel," Ma suggested.



“Maybe so,” Pa murmured, but Laura thought otherwise. *Even if ghosts are real*, she thought, *at least I know they take care of us*. And with that lingering thought, she comforted herself that night as she fell asleep, dreaming of cozy nights with Pa and his never-ending stories.