Adult Story

New Beginnings

By Heather McNichols

Molly stretched, stepping from her car into the parking lot. She was excited for an autumnal adventure in one of the most visited National Parks. Her friend wasn’t expected for another day, so she was taking a solo hike.

The forecast promised sunny conditions, but a damp fog coated the landscape as Molly started up the trail. It gave the forest an eerie feel as it swirled through the trees. Shivering, Molly hurried along. Deep in thought, she failed to notice, the fog thickened. She was surrounded by walls of white, unable to see further than her outstretched hand. “Stay calm,” Molly breathed. She stepped back and the soft ground gave way. She was falling, then rolling, with a fierce momentum. She came to a sudden stop, remaining still, eyes closed, and assessed if she could feel any injuries.

“You took quite a tumble” a voice proclaimed. Molly peered up at an older woman standing over her, her silvery-grey hair in a thick, disheveled, braid hanging over one shoulder. Her face was streaked with mud.

“Looks like you suffered the same fate as me. Are you okay?” Molly asked as she struggled to sit up. “Oh, I’m fine the woman said. Here” she commanded, thrusting a damp cloth at Molly with her left hand. “This will get some of that grime off your face.” “Thanks,” Molly breathed, taking the cloth, “that took me by surprise. I’m usually more aware of my surroundings.”

“Got to be,” the woman responded, “hiking alone can be dangerous.” The name’s Greta.” I’m Molly.” Rummaging through her pack Greta produced a small, drawstring pouch that contained a thin, waterproof blanket that she spread on the ground. Sitting down, she pulled out a water bottle. “Now, since we’ve already been interrupted, rest with me. What brings you to these mountains?” She passed the bottle to Molly.

Molly sat across from Greta and accepted the water. “I’m meeting a friend; we’re hiking to Mt. LaConte and staying at the lodge. She doesn’t arrive until tomorrow, so I thought I’d explore. I’ve never been to this part of the country.

“I see, Greta mused.” “I’m exploring some new country and making a new start of sorts myself.” She proceeded to unbraid her hair and produced a wide toothed comb from her pack. She looked at Molly intently as she combed through her hair. “You know, she said.” There have been people that have gone missing in these parts, never to be seen again.” Molly nodded. “This isn’t my first time hiking.” Greta gave Molly a pointed look and produced a small, round object that Molly realized was a compact mirror from her pocket. Greta handed the mirror to Molly.

A dirty face gazed back at Molly when she looked in the mirror. Her curls were tangled with twigs and leaves. Greta laughed as Molly struggled to pick bits of forest debris from her hair. “Why didn’t you tell me?” Molly groaned. She took a sip from the bottle Greta had handed her. The water was cool. It sent a rush through her, the sensation of falling into the depths of an icy pool. Momentarily breathless, she grasped desperately for something to hold. “Easy there”, Greta cooed, scooting closer to Molly. “Maybe you hit your head.”

Molly reached up and her fingers became tangled in her matted hair. “Let me help, Greta said softly.” “You have such beautiful hair. I can comb it for you.” Molly tried to protest but couldn’t speak. She felt heavy, and as if she was drifting to sleep. “There now,” Greta murmured. “Sit while I comb your hair.”

Molly felt a rush of dread as Greta touched her. Trying desperately to stand, she gasped in pain as something slashed her side. “Hold still,” Greta demanded. Molly ignored her and rolled across the ground. She could feel her mobility return as she evaded Greta’s grasping hands.

There was a shrill scream. Molly started, as something landed beside her. Another hapless hiker had fallen off the trail and lay sprawled at Molly’s side. Molly launched herself to her feet and took off, running wildly. She ran in blind terror until she found herself standing by the side of the road. The world went dark, and Molly collapsed.

Molly opened her eyes. She tried to sit up but was immediately stopped by a firm hand. “You need to relax and rest, “the woman beside her admonished. “You’ve had quite an ordeal. It’s lucky someone saw you lying there by the road.” “Where am I? Molly groaned.” Her head was pounding, and the last thing she remembered was checking in to her hotel room. “The hospital,” the woman replied. “You don’t have any serious injuries, although that gash on your side is nasty. You’ll be able to go soon.”

That evening, Molly sat wearily in her hotel room. She reached for a glass of water on the nightstand, knocking a stack of books to the floor. She picked up one that had fallen with the spine facing upward, open like a tent. Using her finger as a bookmark, she glanced at the cover, turned the book over and settled in bed to read. It was a book of legends and mountain stories of the region. The story she read was a Cherokee legend about a witch with a spear-like finger she used to remove the livers of her victims.

Molly trembled. She carefully placed the book on the night stand next to her. She needed to get some rest. As she reached for the lamp, a vague, eerie feeling washed over her, like there was something she needed to remember. “On second thought”, she muttered to herself, and turned over, leaving the light softly shining in the quiet room.