

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

*presents*

### BUILD MAMA A COFFIN

#### Episode 1: Mama Tried

*Build Mama a Coffin is a new story set in the same world as Old Gods of Appalachia, and I figure y'all know what that means. I mean, hell, you get what you pay for.*

The shadow of the coal fields spared much of the great state of Virginia, but that dark smolder skimmed low and landed deep in the heart of the plateau. Around 3,000 feet shy of the highest peak of Stone Mountain in Esau County sits the town of Glamorgan. The county seat and center of prosperity, it was where hands were shook, deals were made, and by all rights was an upright and respectable place in the light of day. Land and mineral rights were going for high dollar, and the folks selling out and moving on? They were almost as plentiful as the men moving in, looking for work in that dark underneath.

Agents of Barrow and Locke, or B&L Mineral Resources, had gobbled up much of the county in terms of those mineral rights and land leases, and if their way was to be had, the whole county would sit under the Barrow & Locke marquee 'til there wasn't nothing left to dig from the earth. To the company's consternation, though, there were some long-standing holdouts, notorious families that had refused B&L's exceedingly generous offers in favor of keeping their land: the Salyers, the Stanleys, the Collinses to name a few. But none had held out longer than the family Boggs.

Boggs Holler lay to the northwest of town, almost dead even between the town proper and the community of South Fork right on the Kentucky line. B&L had been bending over backwards and sideways and frontways to try to acquire this particularly juicy parcel of property since the first mines cracked the hide of old Virginnie 40 years prior. The holler had been populated by the Boggs family longer than anyone could remember. A mulish people, the Boggses never had too much but also never went hungry. Self-sufficient and probably a bit self-righteous, the patriarchs of the Boggs family would have sooner died than given up that land.

Now when Waylon Boggs, the current elder of the clan, run off and left his family in 1905, B&L thought to call upon his poor, abandoned wife and relieve her of all her suffering with a steamer trunk full of money and a new place for her and her three children to live. Now this was a standard and common practice and should have been an easy victory for the oldest coal and railroad compact on this side of the country.

It was not. Because the poor grieving wife in question was one Glory Ann Boggs. And they were not prepared.

The women counted as true daughters of mother Appalachia were seldom gentle flowers, as flowers only lasted a season but women born in the shadow of the mountain stand and thrive through all four without complaining. Wouldn't do no good, anyhow. The greatness of mountain families are built on the bones of such women. Rocks, fine matriarchs, and mamaws who survived the bad times, bad weather, and bad men like it was their job because frankly, it was.

And Glory Ann was the walking, talking embodiment of old Appalachia. She was tall, broad shouldered with a strong back and stronger hands. Her hair had once been a honey gold and had gone silver young, and she wore it long and braided and proud. She did not need your help. She could split her own wood, plant her own garden, raise *and* slaughter her own hogs — thank you very much — and provide for her family better than anyone else could. When Waylon... went away, well she just kept on like she had been. It's not like he'd pulled his weight or anyone else's weight in a long time. She did what she could and raised her kids. Saw them each off to a trade or a life outside and off of Stone Mountain.

And it's also worth mentioning that, like most of the women that make their way into our stories, she was also a witch. A moon-following, book-reading, garden-tending remedy-brewing, poultice-making, baby-birthing witch. A holler witch, a granny witch — whatever name you'd stick on her, she'd wear it proudly and not blush a bit. Her blood ran rich with the ways that had found fertile ground in these mountains. Even more notably than all that, she bore the true gift, the Sight that let her see and hear what others could not in the night and stand against it as needed.

See, her line was known by the Things — Things that would claim her blood — and she feared them little. Standing against things was what Glory Ann Boggs did very well. She'd walked this earth for almost 80 years birthing and raising babies — some hers, some not — and standing in the night against haints and spirits and black-mouthed dogs. She'd seen and knowed what the man from B&L was the first time he called on Waylon. She managed to hide herself right good so he wouldn't see her.

Now she knew Waylon's family wouldn't sell because that particular branch of the family hadn't held land since they left the old country, and once they got their name on it here they weren't letting it go. And she'd hold onto that line in Waylon's... absence... as the land adjacent to the holler was sacred to her. Had been sacred to her ma and her nan over in South Fork. It was a peaceful place by the river, full of the Green and full of life. When she passed, she would be

buried there so that the gifts she held could be returned to the Green and passed on to other women.

Now, she doubted her own daughter, Mercy, would ever show the gift. Lord knows that girl was too full of her own self and the ghost of her daddy to be full of anything else. Mercy had never forgiven her mama for making her daddy leave — and Glory Ann had in fact made her daddy leave, but not in the way that Mercy thought. Mercy could never know why her daddy had to leave or how he went or in how many pieces. You didn't need to love your mama to bear a true gift, but having a heart choked with resentment and bitterness did not bode well.

Glory Ann had raised all three of her kids as best she could, all healthy and whole. Vernard had gone off to cut 'baccer in North Carolina and done well for himself. Dale had a whole lumber business a county over, and with the exception of his boy being a... little bit off... well, he was doing just fine. Now Mercy had married young and had a girl of her own, but her husband, Craig, had gone off to the Great War and never come home. She'd met her second husband Carter a year or so after, and he provided well for her. He traveled for his work with an industrial sales company and left her alone out there in Pineville with her little girl Delia. But she was gonna be alright. They all would. Or so she thought.

The dreams started a week before Glory Ann died.

In the first dream, she saw her oldest boy, Vernard. He stood in front of a great temple, like something out of the Bible, and his eyes were pale glowing white with no color in them at all. In his hands he gripped a black spade like you'd dig in a garden with, and beneath his feet was a freshly-filled grave. Her grave. The sky was starless black, and there were screams and thunder as the ground shook and the temple erupted in great tendrils of shadow and fire, and there was laughter. And she had woke up in a sweat, panting for breath.

The next night she dreamed of Dale, her second boy, and saw him building a long wooden box that wouldn't fit together at first. Frustrated, he tried to force the pieces together, and then she noticed the rope. It was thick and shiny wet and wrapped around her middle child's neck. The rope had been thrown over a branch of a massive oak. The tree seemed taller than God and radiated a sick heat as Walleydale — or Dale, he hadn't let anybody call him by his given name since, well, ever — fumbled with the parts of the box. As he did the rope grew taut, as some counterweight pulled it over the branch and began to pull Dale into the air. Then the box snapped together. It was a cold thing, carved and plain from a dark, empty-looking wood. Dale regained his footing and seized the rope and pulled hard, sending the unseen counterweight sailing over the branch and tumbling down into the box where it crumpled into a mass of old skin and breaking, dry bones.

She'd looked down into the box in time to see her own face crumple as Dale fastened the lid of her coffin shut, his eyes empty and radiating that same cold dead light. Her own scream had woke her that time.

The last dream was less elaborate but just as awful. This time she could see Mercy and her little girl, Delia, tossing scraps to a mangy old bunch of dogs off her own back porch. The dogs were a dirty white, blind empty eyes, and they tore at the chunks of the old meat the girl threw to them. Mercy's face was slack and dead, her eyes beginning to glow with that same hollow light the more meat she threw to the dogs. And she watched as Delia began to twitch and change her shape, her body contorting and bones breaking and cracking, dead white hair breaking through her skin, hands curling into black padded paws, until she had become the biggest dog in the bunch. But where her eyes should have been, there were tiny, toothless mouths that murmured, "Good girl, Mercy, good girl," until Mercy fed her the last chunk of the rancid meat, which was a woman's hand. Glory Ann recognized her wedding ring on it just as the dog that had been her granddaughter wolfed it down in two bites.

She woke up and she knew. The Things knew who she was. They were already working at her children, and it might be too late to save them. She needed more time. So she consulted the signs and she threw the bones. Word came back pretty quick. She had three days until Death came for her like he did for everybody. She wasn't everybody. She needed more time and she'd have it. The charm was complicated, and it cost. It would not keep her from dying — in fact, she would have to die for it to work — but it would give her three days to be sure and to do what needed doing once the kids come home.

*Let 'em come, she thought. Mama's here waiting.*

[Build Mama a Coffin by Blood on the Harp]

*Gonna build Mama a coffin, I'm gonna make it out of pine*

*There'll be tears from sister to make those hinges shine*

*Gonna build Mama a coffin, I'm gonna make it out of spruce*

*They can all act broken when they hear the news*

*That Mama's dead and gone...*