

## Text 1

# Carter's Holler

by Kimbra Gish

**T**rouble was a-brewing. I'd been feeling it for days, an uneasy, restless feeling, like fire shut up in my bones. I couldn't put a name to what ailed me, except that Tom Lynn, my dearest friend, who'd come over to eat at our house whenever I cooked and sit in the porch swing with me these past three years, ever since I was ten, had disappeared. Nobody knew what had happened to him, though they'd searched and searched.

"Didn't scare him off, now, did you?" Pap had asked with a chuckle.

"I don't reckon," I replied. But I was worried.

One morning, after Tom had been missing more than a week, I was making sop and biscuits for breakfast when all of a sudden, I didn't see the cast-iron skillet filled with sop. In my mind, I instead saw a clearing in what looked like Carter's Holler, which lay back in the Kentucky mountains. Folks didn't go up there if they could help it. Some said a boy had disappeared up there, and whispered other bad things.

In my vision, I saw dogwoods all around, and in the clearing, a circle of pale people with large, pale eyes. In the midst of them lay Tom Lynn, fast asleep. One of the strange pale folk bent over him, and her white hair fell about her face.

Pap interrupted my reverie. "Jenny Carter, what's the matter with you?" Pap demanded.

I jumped. My hand had stopped stirring the gravy. I couldn't explain the visions I had.

All day long, I kept thinking about Tom, lying there in a death-like sleep, trapped in Carter's Holler. I had to rescue him. I resolved that as soon as my family was in bed, I would go out in the dark alone and find Tom myself.

\* \* \*

After Mam and Pap had gone to bed, I took a lantern and matches and snuck out. I could only see a little ways in front of me as I headed in the direction of Carter's Holler.

I'd gone about a mile and a half when I felt a rush of icy air kiss my cheek. Something cold knocked me to the ground and my lantern went out. Every time I tried to find the matches, the cold would knock me to the

ground again. But after a few minutes, my eyes adjusted to the dark—and a pale gray form took shape.

“Reckon you’ve had enough, Jenny Carter?” it asked.

35

“I don’t reckon I have.” I pushed myself up on my knees. “Who—what—are you?”

It laughed. It was a boy’s voice, a boy who was past the age of being a child but not quite a man yet.

“Who *was* I, you ought to ask,” he said. “Been gone since your pap was a boy, and nobody ever comes out here to talk to me. Stay here with me. Soon you’ll be what I am.”

40

A haint! Outsiders called them ghosts, or spooks. “I can’t stay here with you,” I said firmly. “I’ve got something I have to do, and I need to get on.”

“No, no, no!” cried the haint. “I’m so lonely!” Then his voice sharpened like the edge on a good knife. “I’ll *make* you stay,” he said in a voice so fierce it chilled the very marrow of my bones.

45

If I died and became a haint, what would my family do? And who would save Tom? Nobody else even knew where he was. I had to get him. I had to find him somehow, rescue him, DO SOMETHING. Right about then, I got an idea.

50

“Can you eat?” I asked the haint, who stared at me with hollow eyes.

“I don’t know,” he said. “There’s nothing to eat out here but berries and roots. No biscuits, no cornbread, no dumplings, NOTHING.”

I reached into my bag and drew out a biscuit spread with my homemade apple butter. “This is for you,” I said, “if only you will let me go on my way.”

55

The haint stared at the biscuit, then took it from my fingers and took a bite. His eyes closed, and a smile crept across his thin face.

“Go wherever you’re going, Jenny,” he said. “But if you come back home, come out here some night and see poor cold John again. And bring another biscuit if you can!”

60

\* \* \*

I’d gone a ways further when I heard a rustling in the tall grass. Before I could think, something SPRANG out before me. It was a strange creature, about the size of a large dog, and covered in thick black fur. Its tail was long and bushy—and it had long, sharp-looking claws.

65

I’d heard enough stories to know what this was. Once a mountain man met a terrifying critter, and he managed to cut off its tail. It ran off, and since he didn’t have any salt pork or ham for his soup beans, he used the

70

tail for flavoring. But it came back after its tail that night, and tore the man to pieces.

If I didn't want the Tailypo tearing ME to pieces, I'd have to talk fast.

"Go back!" it said. "Get off my land, or I'll tear you to shreds!"

Tom's face flashed before my eyes. I couldn't abandon him. "Let me pass," I begged. "I won't cause any trouble." 75

The monster growled again. "NO," it said. "You just want to steal my Tailypo."

"No, I don't. I'd rather season my pinto beans with salt pork or ham." Then I had an idea. I'd made some biscuits with ham and put them into my bag! I reached in and pulled out two. "Do you want some ham biscuit?" 80

Well, if that didn't beat all I'd ever seen! The Tailypo came up close to my hand. It opened its jaws, and I saw its rows of razor-sharp teeth, and I feared it would bite my hand off! But it gobbled up the ham biscuits, and then it stepped back, out of my way. 85

"You're welcome to come and go as you like," it said, "after a treat like that."

And so, my heart still hammering in my chest, I went on. Tom was waiting.

I walked on for miles through the dark and the cold, until at last I saw a fire up ahead. This was the clearing in the holler I'd seen in my vision! And there was a ring of pale figures, and in the midst, a woman with long white hair. Beside the woman lay Tom, who looked fast asleep. I walked straight up to them and cleared my throat. 90

Everyone whirled around. The woman's pale green eyes blazed, but her lips curled up in a smirk. My heart pounded. 95

"I'm Jenny Carter, a friend of Tom Lynn, and he's wanted back among his own kind," I said, hoping my voice didn't sound as shaky to them as it did to me.

All of them laughed. But Tom stirred just then, and after a moment, his blue eyes opened. 100

"Jenny?" he asked, in a voice so hoarse it sounded like a rusty gate.

I ran to him. The lady smiled, but it was a cruel smile. "If you hadn't come," she said, "he would have slept a hundred years."

"We're going HOME," I said firmly. 105

"We are the Dogwood People," the woman said. "What makes you think you can take him from us?"

I'd heard stories about the Dogwood People. If you didn't cut down dogwoods, they'd grant you favors. But sometimes they showed a mean streak. "He doesn't belong to you!" I replied. 110

The woman laughed. "Do you really believe, little girl, that you have what it takes to hold a man? You have my leave to try!"

I held tight to Tom, but before I could even take another breath, he had turned into a giant copperhead snake!

I heard the woman laughing, but I kept my arms tight around Tom. 115

And then—the copperhead turned into—a BEAR! I could barely hold him, but I held fast, as tight as I could!

Before I knew it, the bear had changed, and I held in my arms the Tailypo, scratching at my arms and face, biting me with its sharp teeth! But then it was Tom in my arms again, only he was in a death-like sleep. 120

"You can hold him," the woman said, sounding amused, "but if you have to carry him a while, I think you will weary of him."

My heart sank. But I was tall for my age, and strong. I gathered Tom in my arms and hoisted him over my shoulder. And then I started off, wobbling my way down the hill. Already I felt exhausted, but I didn't dare rest. I had to keep going. 125

\* \* \*

I walked with the death-like weight of Tom's body on my shoulder for what seemed like a long way. But when we crossed out of the holler itself, I felt movement, and heard a soft groan. And then I heard his voice. 130

"Jenny? Why are you carrying me?"

I stopped and eased him down onto the grass. "What do you remember?"

"I . . . I remember chopping wood. There was this old dogwood. I thought . . ." He blinked in the dawn light. "You came for me. You found me." 135

I smiled. "I did. You were worth finding. You're always worth finding."

He smiled back, and then he reached for my hand. "Let's go home," he said. "And you can tell me everything. I hope I didn't put you to a lot of trouble." 140

"Some trouble is worth taking," I said. I didn't want to let Tom disappear ever again. "I've got an apple stack cake at home," I added.

"That'd be nice, Jenny." He squeezed my hand. "Thank you."

And on we walked, back toward home, hand in hand, as the mountains changed to goldenrod and morning sun above us. 145