

Prologue

In the chilling silence of a December morning in 1937, deep within the forest beneath Arnott's Ridge, Margery O'Hare braves the harsh winter elements. Surrounded by a dense, snow-covered landscape where wildlife takes refuge and the environment stifles all sounds, she navigates through the snow with her trusty mule, Charley, contemplating the discomfort of her frozen toes and the long journey ahead. Their destination lies beyond the Indian escarpment, through pine tracks and hollows, to where old Nancy eagerly awaits her next installment of stories—a journey made every fortnight to deliver tales that stir the hearts of isolated residents like Nancy and her bedbound sister, Jean.

Margery, a woman accustomed to the solitude and rigors of her path, finds solace in her duty, providing not just company but an escape to those like Nancy, who lives for the tales of romance and adventure she brings. The bond they share goes beyond simple delivery; it's a lifeline to a world beyond the rugged mountains of Red Lick, filled with hopes, dreams, and the occasional whimsy of a handsome cowboy named Mack McGuire.

Yet, as Margery makes her way, a sudden encounter disrupts the stillness. Clem McCullough, a man with a cocked rifle and a drunken stance, blocks her path, challenging her presence with a menacing demeanor. Despite Margery's attempts to diffuse the situation, McCullough's aggression escalates, revealing his disdain for what Margery represents to him and the community—a beacon of change and a challenge to their isolated existence.

Margery, no stranger to the dangers of the mountain or the men who inhabit it, realizes the gravity of her situation. She stands alone, miles away from help, facing a man too inebriated to reason with but sober enough to pose a deadly threat. The standoff, with McCullough demanding her submission and threatening violence, encapsulates the tension between the old ways of the mountain folk and the new ideas Margery and her ilk represent.

As the scene reaches its climax, the solitude of the forest underscores the isolation and vulnerability Margery faces, a poignant reminder of the struggles endured by those who dare to traverse the unyielding landscapes, both physical and cultural, of early 20th century America.