

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

presents

SPRINGTIME IN BOGGS HOLLER

Chapter Three: Briar Vine

“Springtime in Boggs Holler” is an all new story set in the same world as Old Gods of Appalachia, which is a horror anthology podcast and therefore may contain material not suitable for all audiences. This story takes place following the events of “The Scenic Route” in Season 2 and precedes the events of *Build Mama a Coffin*.

Chapter Three: Briar Vine

Esau County, VA

1927

Cowboy woke up in the smokehouse out back of Miz Boggs’ house. The room was dark and Miss Ellie and Miz Boggs had moved aside cuts of meat hanging from the rafters to prepare a space in the middle of the small building. The ceiling, while not tremendously high, vanished into a heavy shadow that seemed to loom about the space. The air that filled that old wooden box of a building was heavy and cool. Even folks without a lick of a gift would feel unease in this place — the veil here was just that thin. If death itself had set up a homestead in Boggs Holler, it would be here on the site of the smokehouse built by the Boggs clan in the early days of the settling. Cowboy stretched and sat up, but before he could stand, Miss Ellie hurried over and sat on the ground beside him.

“Oh don’t get up sugar, take it easy now. How are you feeling?” she asked softly.

Cowboy’s head swum just a little, and he was grateful he hadn’t tried to stand. He gazed into the face of the woman who had kept him safe since they’d left the gap, had taught him more about their shared world and the things in it, and was even more grateful for her. Miss Ellie had the kindest eyes of anybody he’d ever met, Cowboy thought. Miss Marcie come a close second.

“So Miz Boggs and I have been talking, and she’s gonna help you with—” she stammered, looking for the right words, but not looking away from the boy. “With what you got going on.”

“So you saw it,” Cowboy said quietly, casting his eyes away from her. “You saw what’s inside me?”

Ellie lifted his chin. “I seen what’s been done to you, sugar. I seen you save Mr. Blevins’ life, and I saw you fight that thing that got put inside you when you was little, and keep it on a leash til Miz Boggs could lock it back up. That’s what I saw... and I’m so proud of you.”

Cowboy’s vision blurred as he blinked away the tears that rose, unbidden, to his eyes. “You ain’t scared of me?”

Ellie Walker wiped tears of her own and hugged the boy tight. “Little man, it takes a lot more than a couple of monsters to scare me away from family, and we are family, ain’t we?” Cowboy hugged Ellie Walker tight, burying his head in her thick red hair, nodding wordlessly. And Cowboy cried then. For the first time in a long time, he cried for his lost family and the new one he’d left behind. He cried like a little boy just being held by someone who promised to love and protect him, and he let himself believe it.

GLORY ANN: All right now.

Glory Ann interrupted them gently. The pair looked over at the older woman who sat on a stool, sleeves rolled up and her long gray braid thrown back over her shoulder, drying her hands on a clean white dish towel. She was ready to get to work.

GLORY ANN: Mister Cowboy, would you come over here please?

Cowboy looked at Ellie, who nodded and wiped his face. With Ellie’s help, Cowboy walked over to Miz Boggs, who in her seated position was eye to eye with him.

GLORY ANN: Miss Walker here had told me that you’ve been very brave in the face of some really scary things. Now, I believed her just telling me, but then I saw you today, and I know it to be true. You have been given more’n your share to carry, darling. You done real good, better’n most grown folks I know. That being said, this next part ain’t gonna be easy. I aint even sure it’s

gonna work. I've never met nobody like you before, and I want to do right by you. And I want to tell you I won't do nothing you ain't ready for, but I do have to warn you though, once some doors are open, closing them ain't easy. Now Miss Ellie done the right thing bringing you to this place, but this is dark business we gotta do today. So if you'll trust me, I need you to lay down right here in front of me, arms at your sides, and close your eyes. Miss Ellie will be right here with us the whole time to help keep us safe. Do you think you can do that for me?

Cowboy looked back at Ellie, who nodded again.

COWBOY: Yes'm. I can do that.

Cowboy laid down on the level floor of the smokehouse where Glory Ann had indicated. The boy took a moment to settle in, making himself as comfortable as he could. Ellie helped by placing a small cushion under his head, fluffing it to his satisfaction. "Are you cold?" she asked, fussing over him a little. "Miz Boggs says we can cover you up with this quilt if you're chilly."

COWBOY: No, ma'am, I'm fine.

As he closed his eyes and settled his arms at his sides, just as Glory Ann had asked him.

Ellie settled back on her heels, then moved aside, giving Glory Ann room to work. Glory Ann stood up and passed her the three-legged stool, and Ellie carried it over to the far wall, where she settled on the low seat with her ankles crossed in front of her to watch the older woman's preparations.

Glory Ann squatted down next to Cowboy, fished a chunk of clear, polished quartz from her apron pocket, and held it in her left hand. She closed her eyes, and began to move her right hand slowly, methodically through the air, her hand hovering a few inches shy of touching the boy, tracing a path from the top of his head, over his face, down his chest and arms and legs. At certain spots, such as over his eyes, neck and heart, she would pause for a moment, moving her hands in gentle circles, before moving on. The whole examination only took a couple of minutes, and then Glory Ann rocked stiffly back on her heels, frowning.

GLORY ANN: I've not seen anything like him before. I've seen littl'uns hollowed out and plum full up with the dark. I've seen things that pretend to be sweet little boys, then show you their teeth when you let 'em close, but... he's still in there, ain't he?

ELLIE: Yes'm. Whenever he gets scared or something threatens him, it's like whatever she put inside him jumps up to protect him, but without any regard for whoever else might get hurt in the process.

GLORY ANN: It's like a tripwire, or a snare trap. She set him out as bait. Think about it, Miss Walker. You put a pretty little rabbit like him out there all by himself, and some mean ol hunter's gonna try to take his hide. When they do, it springs *her* trap — kills the hunter, his family, and all their kin, and hell, probably anybody else it can get its teeth into.

ELLIE: His family lived out in the middle of nowhere, across the way from... the nameless place. She did this to him, and then sent him into Baker's Gap. She *sent* him. There's all kinds of rough folks that come through on the trains. Shoot, some of the other boys in town are just mean enough to want to hurt a littl'un like him. If this got turned loose in town...

GLORY ANN: I'd wager that'd be a lot of dead folks offered up in her name or some such. I don't pretend to know what she is or what she wants, but she likes killing on a grand scale, from the stories my mama told me.

ELLIE: If he'd gone with his Daddy to work on the railroad eventually — or if he ended up working in the mines...

GLORY ANN: Best not think no further on that. I'm gonna do my best for him, Miss Walker. Are you ready?

ELLIE: Ready as I can be, ma'am.

Glory Ann took two silver candlesticks from a shelf on the wall opposite Ellie, and placed them on the floor to either side of Cowboy's head, where neither of them was likely to knock them

over by accident. Then she pulled two white candles from her apron pocket, and stuck one in each holder. Next, she fetched a small cast iron pot with a handle from the same shelf, along with a small cloth bag. She reached into her apron pocket again, and pulled out a small box of charcoals and a book of matches. Glory Ann turned back to the shelf a final time and took down a box of salt — nothing fancy, just the big blue box of Kosher salt you'll find in just about any kitchen — and slowly, carefully poured a ring of salt around herself and the boy. Her movements were automatic, speaking to years of performing this exact action, and her circle was all but perfect. She settled her aching bones down carefully on the floor — sitting criss-cross applesauce, as the children always said — and reached for the charcoal. She placed a single coal inside the heat-safe pot, and struck a match to light it. With deft movements that spoke of a lifetime of practice, she coaxed the coal to a glowing, cherry red. Then she reached into the cloth bag for a handful of incense. She'd raised and dried and ground the herbs herself, and tested and rebled for months before she deemed it fit for use, then tinkered with it over the course of many years to perfect it. It had a bittersweet, floral scent that was at once bracing and soothing. It produced a mildly soporific effect that was useful in this sort of work. Finally, she struck another match, lit the candles, and was ready to begin.

Glory Ann closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. She let it out slowly, and then began taking deeper, measured breaths. She counted: 1, 2, 3, 4 in, and 1, 2, 3, 4 out, letting herself relax, her bones sinking into the floor, rooting her in place. She let go of the irritation she'd first felt at this unexpected visit, the sense that it was a distraction she just didn't have the time for. She let go of her growing fear for her family, that nagging intuition that something was brewing, something bad, that someone or something was coming for her blood. As the influx of stray thoughts lessened and the rhythmic flow of her own breathing drew her in, she felt her fingers slowly begin to dance, tapping out a simple, steady beat. She let her focus shift to the beat, and let herself sway along with it, her body growing relaxed and supple as she let go of the last of her tension. She let it all go, and she felt herself sink into the place between worlds, outside of body, outside of thought, outside of time.

When Glory Ann opened her eyes, her gaze fell on a world that was not the one into which she'd been born. The smokehouse, Ellie Walker, even the boy were all gone. She stood in a clearing carved from the corpse of a wooded holler. Long dead trees leaned into each other like mourners at a graveside service. Skeletal poplars stabbed their bony fingers into a spoiled sunset, while

diseased oaks and black walnuts spread their arms like rich men begging for a drop of water from Lazarus' finger. The ground was littered with the fel fruit of the latter, smoldering like coals, a pale smoke leaking from their blistered and ruptured hides. Woven up and around the trunks and lower branches of these leering sentinels was a growth of thorny briar vine. In the waking world, Glory Ann would know this particular menace as green briar, but there was nothing green about the ashen plague that wreathed this place like Calvary's crown.

Glory Ann breathed in and tasted rotten fruit and floorboards gone soft. She turned her head and followed her nose. The earth groaned under her feet as she traced the briars to the north end of the clearing, where the towering throne of these cursed woods loomed over all. A hawthorn tree the size of a silo thrust itself toward heaven like a bloodied dagger punched through the back of a martyred saint. It jutted into the sky black and wet with gore. From its nightmarish boughs, thorns as long as hunting knives rose. Torn flesh and skin dangled like ripe fruit. Its broad arms spread wide, claw hooked barbs sprouting from the tip of each barren branch. The thing's roots rolled like an ocean of thick-bodied serpents, pus-slick and rife with the venom to test the faithful. This was the source of the sickness in this place. This is where she had staked her claim and built her house.

That thing had planted this tree, watered it with the blood of the Gibson family, and fed it with Caleb's fear and shame. Glory Ann knew there was no tree, knew that her body was sitting with the boy back in the smokehouse. She knew that the green and her gift were giving her a vision that she could understand and work with. She knew these things. Still, she was unprepared for what she saw as she drew close to the trunk of the great dark tree. Her mind knew the child was safe on the floor of her smokehouse, and that Ellie Walker was standing by ready to die for him if she needed to, but her heart still broke and nearly stopped as she took in the horror before her.

Caleb Gibson, called Cowboy by those who loved him, was bound to the bloody tree by blackened strands of the briar vine that wrapped around his tiny frame like barbed wire on a fencepost. The strands had mockingly woven themselves into chains in some places, the links criss-crossing the boy's chest, circling his back and binding his arms to his sides. And as she approached, the binding constricted, thorns dug deep into his skin and muscle, and he bled openly from his neck and shoulders. A tendril of the foul vine had erupted from his right cheek — right at the spot a mama might place a loving kiss — and wrapped around his head and eyes

like a cage of black brambles, blinding thorns perched inches before his precious eyes, insuring that he could not look away, that his vision would be steered through this halo of death. A thin braid of the wretched weed sat about his middle, constricting his belly. From the waist down he was unbound, though his legs hung an inch or two off the ground as his bindings chewed him, bled him, and pulled him deeper into the tree as she drew closer.

Glory Ann stopped, and the bindings slowed their torment and stopped as well. She took another step, and the vines rustled and tightened again, making the boy whimper. If she got close enough to try to help, it might just tear him to pieces before it let her.

GLORY ANN: Oh you poor, poor boy.

She felt her heart break again and fresh despair flooded through her. Glory Ann's knees buckled, and she thought she might lose her balance. She'd failed this little thing, just like she'd failed her own babies — Vernard and Dale and Mercy, just adrift out there in the world with nary a gift among them. And who was she to say a dat gum word about how other people kept their houses, when she couldn't keep her own family safe? How long would it be before she was gone and something like this happened to her own flesh and blood and—

No. No, damnit, this wasn't real. No, ma'am. No dead old bitch was gonna take her off her feet on her own land. She reminded herself that the boy, the real cowboy, was safe. She looked back over her left shoulder, and she could see the smokehouse behind her — her own form slumped forward but still upright. Cowboy lay stiff and tense now in the floor before her, and Ellie Walker sat, alert and vigilant, on her stool in the corner. Satisfied that all was well, Glory Ann turned back to the problem at hand. What stood before her was the curse — or at least, her gift's attempt to make sense of it — and it had been built to scare away anyone who could get close enough to try to unravel it. Well, she didn't scare easy. This thing might have its teeth in the boy, but she wasn't gonna let it have him.

Glory Ann closed her eyes and opened herself fully to her gift and to the green. As gifts go, most grannies who bore them were like creeks and streams, bringing the power of healing and midwifery to their people in trickles and gentle flows. Some might stand as great calm lakes, providing a barrier between their kin and the things in the darkness. But at this stage in her life,

Glory Ann Boggs was a river — a river that had carved whole ass hollers out of the sides of mountains and planted life there; a river that had borne rafts of babies into this world and into the heart of these hills; a river that had thundered and risen to wash all manner of h'aints and things back to where they come from. She was the great river that emptied into Boggs Holler like divine judgment upon those who would harm those who could not protect themselves. Just as her mother and her mother before her had stood against the darkness, so she had and so she would.

GLORY ANN: Mama, if you're with me now, guide my hand to help this child. Help me bring him back to the family that loves him, whole and untouched and unmarked by this... this cursed shadow. I'll see y'all soon — just... just help me get this boy home.

And then Glory Ann moved — slipping faster than she ever could in the waking world, into the shadow of the tree proper. With three great strides, she came face to face with the vision of Cowboy. She resisted the urge to speak to him, to comfort him, as she needed all of herself focused on what she had to do next, and she knew he wouldn't likely hear her anyway. With a dexterity that had left her hands years before, she snapped the thin strand that had begun to tighten around the boy's belly. *A growing boy's gotta eat, after all*, she thought, remembering what Ellie Walker had said about the boy's trouble with food. The vine clenched like a muscle in her hand, trying to tighten as she pulled it free. But Glory Ann pulled on her gift, and felt her hands suddenly grow hot — hot as the coal she'd lit back in the smokehouse — and the vine simply turned to ash and fell away.

Next she reached for the thick mass of vines that bound the boy's shoulders and neck, a tangle of layers, winding up the column of Cowboy's tender throat. Glory Ann felt the thorns reach for her, to try to tear into her leathery old hands and fill her with their darkness, and she chuckled as they broke and splintered against her palms as she yanked and tore at the roots of the binding like she was weeding her own garden. Bits of bone-brittle detritus flecked her as she worked, finding their way into her apron and her hair, and she brushed it away as best she could. As she dug deeper, she could see that the roots went further than she could reach. As she stopped to catch her breath, she saw Cowboy's shoulders had slackened a little, the tension around his neck lessened. The skin she could see there was raw and abraded, but clear of the binding. She

couldn't get it all out of him without doing more harm than good, but maybe that slack might give him some room to grow on his own.

Finally, Glory Ann came to the most delicate work, which she had saved for last. Ellie Walker had told her about the boy's visions — how, unbidden, his eyes would show him how all living things would eventually die, forcing the poor child to carry the knowledge of how everyone he loved would pass. As she examined the cruel cage of vines that constrained his sight, she saw that she couldn't take it all away — not without the risk of blinding him entirely — but she could do her best to mitigate the damage. First, Glory Ann reached out and snapped off the larger thorns closest to Cowboy's eyes. Two more quick twists cleared away some of the vines that impeded the boy's vision. Then she looked closely at where the cursed thing broke the skin of the boy's cheek and wrapped around his head.

Now this was a deep and powerful binding. This vine was a rust-colored spiral laden with jagged, sharp spines that visibly bristled as she came close. The old girl had done her worst here, it seemed. Even Glory Ann's considerable gift safely couldn't dig out such a thing, not without killing the boy. Glory Ann reached out tentatively to test its firmness, and the vine twitched, sinking one of its thorns into her hand, her skin tearing. Glory Ann jerked away, startled, and felt the little barb of the vine break off, worming its way deeper under her skin.

Then the whole world began to come undone. The great black hawthorn tree was growing. The ground shook as it swelled, its trunk thickening and limbs stretching to fill the sky until it was all there was. Glory Ann clutched her bleeding hand and felt how small she was, so insignificant in its shadow. What could she have hoped to accomplish here? It would devour them both. And her fear became certainty as the blood dripped from her hand, soaking into the dark earth, feeding the monstrosity before her. They were as good as damned. If she could only—

"Miz Boggs!" Ellie Walker's voice cut through the growing haze of doubts in her mind, and Glory Ann's head snapped up. The vision of the tree and the boy and the briar vine fell away, and the next thing she knew, she found herself back in the smokehouse. Ellie Walker was on her feet, helping her onto the stool she'd given up earlier, wrapping her in the simple quilt she'd offered Cowboy before. It was one her mama had made the year she passed. She clutched it tight about her as the girl knelt beside her and held her close. She heard Ellie ask someone to go fetch Mr.

Blevins and tell him to bring the special coffee she'd made from the house. Then her body told her she had to sleep for a while. And so she did.

The next morning, Glory Ann watched from the front steps of her house as Ellie Walker, her driver Mister Blevins, and a seemingly whole Cowboy Absher prepared to get back on the road. The boy had made it through the ritual intact, at least so far as she could tell. He'd slept hard afterwards, much like herself. When she woke, she found her right hand cleaned and bandaged. Ellie had told her the hand had just started bleeding during the previous afternoon's shenanigans. Upon examination, Ellie had pulled a right nasty piece of what looked like diseased wood out of her hand. She had thought that Glory Ann had been holding something when she entered into the rites and must have squeezed it so hard that it broke, but when she'd opened her hand, there'd been nothing there but the wound. She left the offending object in a small wooden box in the smokehouse for Glory Ann to dispose of herself, since it had her blood on it. Glory Ann had relayed the entire vision to Ellie, from the tree, to the vine, to what she had done for the version of Cowboy she'd encountered in the dream.

Glory Ann's efforts appeared to have had at least some positive effect on the boy, as he'd woken in higher spirits than Ellie had ever seen him, and proceeded to drag Melvin around to visit every animal on the farm so he could make proper introductions. Ellie had even seen the boy sniffing, and then cautiously nibbling, several slices of bacon when he thought no one was looking. For her own part, Glory Ann could feel the Green stirring in the boy, growing and stretching. He no longer felt like a dead thing to her gift. That sense of cold — of the grave — that had lingered about him, while not entirely gone, was no longer all-encompassing.

ELLIE: Are you sure you're ok, Miz Boggs? You brought something back from that place. That can't mean anything good for anybody.

GLORY ANN: I'll be alright, Miss Walker. I seen more before I had my first boy than you have in your whole life, darling.

ELLIE: Yes, ma'am. Please, just be careful. We don't need anything to happen to you. I don't know what we would have done without you.

GLORY ANN: I'll be just fine. Don't you worry none.

Ellie would have insisted, but she knew when an elder was done with a topic, so she let it go. It wasn't her place to tell Glory Ann Boggs, of all people, her business.

Glory Ann stepped off her porch into the warm spring sunshine, and called over to Melvin Blevins.

GLORY ANN: Y'all be careful! Roads round here get a might treacherous after dark. Don't talk to nobody you don't know, and don't stop less'n you have to.

MELVIN: Uh, yes'm. We ain't stoppin til we cross the state line if we don't have to. Ain't buying no local produce neither.

Ellie had told Glory Ann they planned to head up to Hazel County to see some family, rather than taking Cowboy straight home to her own place nearby. After Mr. Blevins' encounter with them folk out from Esserville way, Glory Ann figured that was probably the wisest course of action. Those fools had been getting mighty bold lately. She didn't like it, and didn't like the thought of young Cowboy being anywhere near that business. Best to keep moving for a while, see how things shook out.

Melvin and Cowboy climbed into the truck and waited as Ellie threw decorum aside and locked Glory Ann in a tight hug.

ELLIE: Please, Miz Boggs, take care of yourself now, ok?

Glory Ann gave her a tired smile, and touched Ellie Walker's face.

GLORY ANN: Green keep you and hold you, daughter.

Then she looked over Ellie's shoulder to the bright-eyed boy bouncing in the truck cab and called:

GLORY ANN: Mister Cowboy, you take care of Miss Walker now. And if Mr. Blevins gets tired, you take the wheel.

COWBOY: Yes'm!

Cowboy giggled.

Glory Ann watched as Ellie climbed into the cab of the truck, and the folks from Baker's Gap headed back down the mountain and off to Hazel County or wherever else might call to them. With a heavy sigh, she walked back out to the smokehouse, leaning heavily on her walking stick. She came to the shelf where Ellie had placed the box containing the thing she'd removed from her hand. Glory Ann suspected it might be similar to the other two she'd found in her apron pocket when she shook it out. Her hunch was verified when she placed the two other long, jagged thorns she'd carried back from the Dead Queen's tree beside their sibling in the warded box. They looked just the same, and more importantly, they *felt* just the same — the death magic radiated from them like heat off a stove. She could clearly remember how the barbed hooks had chained that poor baby in between life and death, and knew he was far from free of that particular binding just yet, though perhaps, in time, Cowboy could manage to wiggle the rest of the way free of that curse on his own.

The thorns were dangerous, sure enough. But it could be useful to be able to bind yourself to the land of the living for just a little while. Could be right handy indeed if one needed to stick around for a little while after they was supposed to be gone. Yes indeed. Glory Ann looked down into the box, knowing she should throw the three slivers of wood on the fire right here and now and cleanse the whole dang holler just to be safe. Instead she shut the lid tight, and locked up the smokehouse on her way out.

[Build Mama a Coffin by Blood on the Harp]

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

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

Well hey there, family. And thus concludes “Springtime in Boggs Holler,” a very special trilogy that we’ve put together for you in between seasons two and three. And I hope you have enjoyed finding out what became of young Cowboy as he rides into the sunset. And it almost breaks my heart to tell ya that that’s the last you’re gonna see of that little feller for a goodly while. But he’s in good hands, and wherever he ends up, I think he’ll be just fine. I’m not saying you’ve seen the last, it’s just gonna be a goodly while. However, if you’d like to hear what happens next with Glory Ann Boggs and you’ve never been a patron on our Patreon, well the very next chapter of her story’s in the events of *Build Mama a Coffin*, which is waiting for you over at patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia. Ten dollars or more a month — you can pledge a whole year and save ten percent up front if you want to — and all seventeen episodes of what happens to that powerful and complicated granny will be laid at your feet like a bounty of dark treasure. [Patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia](https://patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia).

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And as always, Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Our intro music was by Landon Blood. Our outro music this time around is by Blood on the Harp. Today’s story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins and narrated by Steve Shell. The voice of Glory Ann Boggs, Spine of the Mountain, was Allison Mullins. We’ll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.