

The Unraveling of Wentwater

Prologue

Iris stepped out onto the creaking stoop of her cottage as a chill breeze wafted down the mountains and bit her cheeks. She sniffed the heavy air of a lingering winter. “Snow? This late?” The thought sent a shudder through her bones. She called back to the house. “Justyn! Make haste. The sun is coming up. Rouse your brother.”

She humphed and bent over to lace up her boots, grunting as the waistband of her smock dug into her bulging stomach. Out of the corner of her eye she spied a feather—burnt red, streaked with amber—lying on the dirt. “Oh my . . .” She straightened and clomped down the steps to her front yard with cursory glance to see if any neighbors were astir, praying no one was watching from behind curtained windows. She swept up the feather and stuffed it into her apron just as she heard the door open behind her.

“Iris, the porridge. What in creation are you fuddling about in the yard for?”

Sweat trickled down the sides of her face as she hurried back up to Fen. She hid her trembling hands in her pockets. “Nothing. Just erasing the chicken tracks is all.”

“Well, you can do that on your way out. There’s time.” Fen nodded to the kitchen. As Iris rushed to the stove to rescue the pot of porridge from the heat of the crackling fire, Justyn came to the table, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

“Where’s Fromer?” She scooped a dollop of pasty oats into Justyn’s wooden bowl as Fen lifted his coat from the hook by the door. She eyed her husband. “What? No breakfast this morn?”

“Had a biscuit. Can’t let them lie around too long. It’s Tuesday.”

“Oh, I forgot.” If she crumbled up the remaining biscuits and fed them to the chickens before noon, that would do. With this strange weather, no sense taking chances.

“Fromer,” she yelled. “Come to the table. We can’t be late to the baby naming. It’s bad luck.”

“Everything’s bad luck,” Justyn muttered, spooning steaming oats into his mouth.

“What’s that, lad?” Fen asked, stuffing big arms into his coat sleeves.

Iris threw up her hands. “Heavens, child. Don’t say such words. Here,” she said, handing him a small bowl of salt. “Toss a pinch over your shoulder. Your left shoulder.” Her stern voice made Justyn sit straighter. Her eyes bored into his until he slumped and with a sigh took a pinch of salt and did as she directed.

“You’re just askin’ for trouble, lad.” Fen threw open the door and the aberrant wind blew in, fluttering the tablecloth and sending another shiver up Iris’s spine. He scanned the horizon stretching beyond the village’s rooftops. “I don’t recall snow coming this late in the spring. Something’s amiss.”

“What do you think it portends?” Iris asked, her voice quavering. She did not like the way this day was starting out—not at all.

“Did you lock all the hens up last night?” he asked, his stern glance lingering on her face.

“Of course.”

She stood by the table and waited. Fromer shuffled in and took his seat, his hair askew like a plowed-over field of wheat, still in his nightshirt. Fen pursed his lips and swung his carry bag over one shoulder.

“I’m off then, to the shop. Have three sets of boots to finish by the end of the day. And a delivery of leather coming in first thing. Don’t forget the straw.”

Iris nodded; words failed her. The straw! She had almost forgotten that too. Her forgetfulness would be their undoing if she wasn't careful. The door slammed shut behind Fen. She made a mental list as she scraped the last portion of porridge into her younger son's bowl. Seven sheaves of straw, tied in twine. Brings good tidings and fast recovery for the mother. A potato with no eyes—to keep the mother's milk from turning sour. Let the chickens out of the coop; first erase any of yesterday's scratchings. But—that feather! Where had that come from?

No time to ponder the implications. She led Fromer into the washroom, tidied his hair, and helped him dress. Justyn's scowl appeared in the mirror as she looked up from tying the neck string on Fromer's tunic.

“What?” she asked.

“Why do we have to go to some stupid baby naming? Can't the mother just name the baby without the whole village there?”

“Of course not. And if we don't show up, you're the one that will suffer. You're the firstborn. You wouldn't want an accident to befall you, would you, Justyn?”

“But we've already been to two of these this month. I'm missing school.”

“And so's the rest of your class. It's only for a short time. And then off you'll go. So stop your whining and pull on your boots. And help your brother with his.”

Iris fretted as she hung up her apron and gathered her things. As she put on her heavy woolen coat, she noticed a loose button. “Oh dear, oh dear,” she mumbled under her breath. She fingered the button and gave it a little tug. “Should hold, and there's no time to restitch it.” She thought longer, mulling over the consequences of losing a button along the road. She dared not take the chance. A lost button would make the hens stop laying eggs for a week.

Without a second thought, she stripped off the coat and rummaged through the trunk by her bed. Only last week she had put away their winter things. But now—perhaps she'd have to pull them all out again. And what did this erratic weather portend for the crops and gardens? A late frost would kill the early buds and ruin the first harvest. Had one of her neighbors done something unthinkable? What about old Lady Denton? Her mind was so addled, no doubt she was to blame. Probably broke a bootlace or planted seed on a new moon. The possibilities were beyond count—and worrisome.

As she uncovered a thick gray shawl from the mounds of clothes, she heard a noise outside. The sound froze her heart. She rushed to the window and threw open the shutters. To her horror, the rooster stood on the ramp to the hen house, his head craned back, exposing his ruby throat.

“No, don't, please—”

But the rooster paid her no mind. He opened his beak and crowed loudly—for all the world to hear. Iris's gaze darted from the rooster to the horizon, where sunlight dripped over the rooftops of the cottages like warm honey. Iris clutched her heart and felt a tug on her dress. Fromer looked up at her, worry in his eyes.

“Mum, are you sick?”

Justyn pulled Fromer away from Iris, taking his hand and leading him out the bedroom. “It's just the dumb rooster.”

Iris's jaw slacked. She spoke in a whisper, as if afraid someone would hear. “When a rooster crows after the sun comes up, it means, it means . . .”

She shook the thought from her head. In the kitchen pantry, she tossed potatoes until she found the right one. With the bundle of straw in one hand, and Fromer's little hand in the other,

she marched down the steps of her cottage—resolute and confident. A baby naming was a blessed event, she reminded herself. All the women of the village would attend to give the child gifts and well-wishing. The ceremony was the oldest tradition in Wentwater, dating back before the Great Flood. The eldest woman of the village bore the responsibility for the name, and the name given portended the babe's future.

She chuckled thinking back to Fromer's naming. How old Gladys, with only a few teeth remaining, had announced the name, hovering over the cradle and waving her sheaf of straw. "Fromer," she had called out, leaving a crowd of puzzled expressions in her wake. What kind of a name was Fromer? But no one dared question the name or what it meant. Only hours later, after Fen walked the old woman back to her cottage, was the mystery clarified. Gladys had meant to say "farmer," that her son would find his gift in raising flocks and crops. But the words had become tangled in Gladys's mouth, from age and lack of teeth. And with her poor hearing, she hadn't realized the word had come out wrong. A silly misunderstanding. But, once spoken, the name was cast. So, Fromer it was, and would stay.

Iris gave the yard a once-over, and when certain all the hen scratchings were swiped away by the soles of her boots, she let the chickens out of the coop. Justyn dipped the cup into the feed sack and scattered seed over the ground, which sent the birds cackling in a flurry over the food. If only Fen had tarried longer this morning; he knew how to read the patterns in the feed. She caught a glimpse of the rooster as he rounded the corner of the house and the sight sent a stab of pain to her gut.

"Hurry, lads," she said, rushing out the gate and down the lane. As they passed the row of cottages, Iris looked up at the cliffs in the distance. Torrents of water poured down the sluices in the dark green rock, thick and swollen from snowmelt. Lake Wentwater shimmered at the base

of the mountains as the sun rose over the village and cast its pastel light upon the wind-ruffled surface. Fields of new grass spattered with creamy buttercups and purple lupine wrapped the lake and fragrancd the air. But, the beauty of the countryside failed to still the frantic beating of Iris's heart. A few fat flakes of snow landed on her eyelashes and set her to muttering again.

“Mum, slow down,” Fromer said, tugging on her hand.

She looked down at her son, took in his bright blue eyes and sweet face. “Sorry, Fro. We're almost there.”

Justyn shuffled his feet, lagging back a few steps. Iris studied him. His brooding manner was just like Fen's. The lad was growing more like his father each day—thick brows and dark straight hair, serious and intense. Wanted more to study books than play with his mates. And so difficult.

But Fromer . . . Her heart warmed at his adoring eyes and trusting heart. He'd be a good lad, this one. Grow up to be a farmer, tend a flock, live a good quiet life, marry, raise a family. But, would Justyn be all that had been foretold of him? Iris thought of the noble tasks outlined in Justyn's future: a leader, a fair and just voice for the people, a righter of wrongs. But none of these qualities seemed to suit his temperament. Yet, there was no fighting fate. He would become the man he was named seven years ago. Time would tell how her older son would bend to his destiny. Bend or break, as they say. Hopefully, Justyn would soften in time. Not be so serious and . . . doubting. Doubting was dangerous.

A crowd had already gathered on the large porch outside her neighbor's cottage. Dineen's firstborn was a girl, and Iris had heard the labor went without a hitch. Long, but with the lass born before the moon set, and that was a good omen. Iris didn't know this woman or her husband. Fen had made boots for the man, and Iris sometimes saw the wife at market and heard

she planned to open a bakery. But they were quiet and fairly new to Wentwater. Iris wondered what had brought them all the way from Sherbourne to their village, but it wasn't her business to ask. Sherbourne was a sprawling city—or so she'd heard—and who in their right mind would want to live in such a place? Wentwater afforded all a peaceful undisturbed life—as long as everyone abided by the traditions.

She had to admit—most of the rituals and practices followed no clear logic. But, who was she to question the wisdom handed down from one generation after another? Time-tested and true, they were. She'd seen what happened when someone overstepped or failed to respond with the proper remedy. Disaster struck—that's what came of such behavior. And every once in a while, a fool would recklessly ignore tradition, resulting in banishment. Perhaps outsiders would think such a punishment harsh, but there was no getting around it. Their village would suffer the consequences—just as in the days of the Great Flood, when all was swept away, leaving little more than a handful of ruined cottages and barns. The few survivors'd had to rebuild the village from the pieces of broken timber and downed trees, having suffered the loss of family, friends, and all their possessions. All because someone ignored the traditions. Or so the story went. The old ones who rebuilt Wentwater had long passed away, but their warnings still rang out afresh in the hearts of the villagers.

A drumbeat signaled the commencement of the ceremony. Iris wiggled through the crowd, greeting her neighbors, leaving the boys to stand with the other children on the porch. Dineen's husband, coaxed outside by flapping hands, positioned his hat on his head and made for the center of the village without a glance back. Iris watched him walk down the rutted lane until he turned the corner a block before her husband's cobbler shop. Only women remained inside the cottage, crammed to the corners, spilling into the farther rooms. Iris added her bundle of straw to

the growing mound on the table. The scent of straw and wildflowers blended with the sweet and smoky aroma of the beeswax tapers burning on the sideboard.

Iris recognized Arlynnna, the current matriarch of the village, standing beside Dineen. With her gray hair twisted in a bun atop her head and pinned with irises, she signaled the women to silence and began her oration. Iris half-listened as she looked at the tiny baby buried under blankets in a finely crafted wood cradle, the mother standing by with adoration in her eyes. How many times had Iris heard the words to the ceremony recited in stuffy, crowded rooms such as this one? For nearly thirty years she had witnessed the naming of every baby born in Wentwater—although those born in the Heights, up above the lakes and waterfalls, didn't count.

Iris huffed. Those descended from the noble eight families—or so they called themselves—rarely showed their faces in the village. And Iris herself had never ventured up to their houses, perched high in the crags and carved into rock. Why would she? Rumors warned that those living up there disdained the traditions, ignored the rituals and ceremonies. Surely, doom awaited those with such reckless disregard of tradition. And associating with such naive folk would only bring trouble. No, it was a good thing the Heights were a grueling days' climb up the mountain, a place of moaning wind, and freezing ice and sleet most of the year. Let the nobles live in their lofty crags—as long as they kept their noses out of the affairs of the villagers.

As Arlynnna droned on, wax dripped down the tapers. As tradition dictated, the three eldest of the village approached the infant. Sharla, the fishmonger's wife, bent over the first of the three candles and walked around the sideboard, studying the way the wax slid in rivulets down the taper.

“She is given the gift of beauty, a simple but striking beauty. Hair as white as snow, as graced by the unexpected wind from the north. Eyes dark as coal, and just as warm, as the embers on the hearth testify.”

Next, Nettie, the beekeeper’s widow, examined the second candle, and when satisfied, smiled at the baby in the cradle. “She is given the gift of voice. Songs will emerge from her heart that will soothe and inspire. A nightingale that turns dark night to dawn, singing—”

Nettie gasped as a blast of cold wind threw open the door, snuffing out the flickering candles as if a divine hand had pinched the wicks between two fingers. Iris spun around, as did all the women, with an audible cry of fear. Never before, at any ceremony, had naming candles been extinguished. They were to burn to their trays, to signify a long, full life. Now, what could this mean, other than a terrible fate?

Iris strained to see through the open doorway, where roiling black clouds invaded the skies. Terror bit at her heart and a whimper escaped her lips. The crush of bodies blocking the entry parted in a murmur, sounding like water rushing over rocks.

Arlynnna raised her voice over the din. “Who has disturbed the ceremony? There will be a price to pay for this outrageous travesty—”

Iris clutched at her heart at the recognition of the tired, gravely voice. Such a voice could belong to no other.

“Well, a baby naming! Such a sight to bring tears to the eyes.”

A smothering hush fell over the women, as if the marsh witch’s simple words bespelled them. Iris knew it was fear that clenched tight her throat. Ursell—years ago banished from Wentwater and said to live in an abandoned castle half sunken in the muddy marshes. No one had seen her in years. Why this day, of all days, had the witch decided to make an appearance?

The marsh witch turned in a slow circle, studying faces with her one good eye, while her glass eye remained unfocused and haunting. “Ah, are you so surprised to see me? Surely, I was meant to be invited.”

Arlynnna dropped her clenched fists to her sides and gathered breath. “Ursell, tradition calls for all women to attend the baby naming. Had we known you were . . . still in Wentwater . . . why, of course, you are welcome.”

Ursell smiled with her mouth, but her glass eye glared cold. “Of course . . .”

A chill inched into Iris’s bones, making them brittle and stiff. She wiggled fingers and toes to force out the tingling. The quiet in the room grew thick, a coating of uncertainty and trepidation that nearly made Iris swoon. Stories drifted into her mind, tales of woe surrounding this witch that her own mum had woven under her breath. Iris had sometimes thought her a fabrication, this stranger from the forbidden marshes. A glass eye that could see beyond and between. Beyond this land and between kingdoms. Beyond appearances and between truth and lies. Hands that stitched misery and suspicion into the fabric of the village, turning neighbor against neighbor, turning kind hearts into bitter ones. Iris recalled some rumor claiming Ursell’s magic had even wrought the flood, although how could that be? Could this witch truly be hundreds of years old? The thought crept up Iris’s neck and grew into a stranglehold around her throat. She choked and clenched at invisible hands, trying to loosen her breath.

Ursell turned from Arlynnna and locked her glassy gaze on Iris. She tipped her head to one side and studied her, the way Iris often studied the signs in the skies.

Iris sucked in breath that found little entrance into her throat. “Please . . .” she begged, fearful to look into the witch’s eye, praying for mercy, for relief. Her heart hammered in her chest the way Fen pounded nails into leather. Had the witch somehow read her thoughts?

With a slight raise of an eyebrow, Ursell released her. Iris grabbed at her throat and sucked in air, then backed away, pushing through the fear-stricken crowd of women. With effort, she fumbled to the back wall and willed herself invisible behind a coat rack, wobbly knees giving way.

“Let’s see what we have here . . .” Ursell uttered in a singsong voice that grated on Iris’s ears. Iris dared lift her head and peeked past her neighbors, then stifled a cry as she caught a glimpse of the witch’s gnarled hand reaching into the cradle. The room of women gasped as one. Iris craned her head and saw horror on Dineen’s face. Oh, this could only herald something terrible, something wicked. Why oh why had that rooster crowed after dawn? And the feather! Iris’s head spun in self-recrimination. The feather was still in her pocket! Surely, Ursell’s appearance wasn’t her fault—was it?

Iris tried to wrench her gaze away, but she could no more turn her head than she could utter a cry when the marsh witch pulled back the downy soft wool blanket and exposed the baby’s tiny body. Perhaps it was Iris’s imagination, but the smoke from the extinguished candles seemed to whorl around the witch, wrapping the cradle in gloom and obscurity, a pall of darkness filled with unease and mischief. Ursell leaned in close to the babe as Dineen clutched at the collar around her throat. Even from where Iris skulked, she could see the mother gulp and her hand, partway lifted, tremble as if longing to snatch her child and whisk it to safety.

In a sudden movement that startled all, Ursell spun to face Dineen and pointed a finger at her, only inches from her face. “This child will be the undoing of Wentwater. Before she turns eighteen, the village will unravel and all will be lost.” She searched the room, peering over heads, until her eyes lit upon a spinning wheel in the corner. “I see the thread of life tangling, her

fingers spinning the spindle, stitching with thread, thumbs bleeding as she sits at the wheel, undoing, undoing . . .”

She cast a sideways glance at Arlynn, whose voice had fled the room. “You must send the mother away. And the babe . . .”

Ursell reached down and, with something akin to tenderness, stroked the child’s forehead. Iris grabbed the doorjamb to keep from fainting. She strained to hear the witch’s words, which came out barely above a whisper.

“. . . must be put to death. Before Wentwater comes to naught.”

Ursell’s words dropped like stone into a deep waterless well, rebounding off the walls of the room and draining hope from the hearts of all in attendance. As the witch pushed through the crush of women and disappeared from Iris’s view, chaos erupted. Voices unleashed gave vent to fear and hysteria. Arlynn stepped over the voices around her and summoned attention.

“There is little time. We must act quickly!” With her eyes, she signaled to the two older women who had blessed the babe. They grasped Dineen’s arms on either side as she protested and wriggled to get away. Cries rose up in a chant to Iris’s ears, although her own voice still wandered lost in the stifling room. A whirlwind of irrepressible fury howled through the hallway.

“Banish her! Banish her!”

Iris watched as more women latched on to Dineen, as another scooped up the babe from the cradle, as Dineen flailed for her child, her agonizing screams melting Iris’s heart. But Iris knew there was nothing to be done, no way to stem this tide that must rush in and sweep away such a curse. If the babe was indeed destined to bring destruction to Wentwater, who were they to ignore such warning? Iris didn’t allow herself to think of the pain and terror the new mother must be feeling. Never in her own life had she witnessed such portentous omens. Had Ursell seen

the future in her glass eye—or was it her malevolence and bitterness at her own banishment that had drawn her from her marsh and set her feet toward the village? Iris would never know. And she gave herself no time to ponder such inscrutable thoughts.

A voice yelled. “Burn that spinning wheel!” Another cried, “Burn down the cottage, burn everything!”

Like an errant wave, the crowd of women rose and lifted the mother and swept out the cottage, rumbling down the front steps as the gathering of children, toddlers to teens, parted to make way for the chanting and raving women. The mob, led by Arlynn, dragged Dineen down the center of the lane as snow fell thick and hard and dark clouds obscured the sunlight. The cottage emptied behind Iris, disgorging its remaining contents, and as she skittered off toward the far neighbor’s yard, where the children stood huddled in the growing drifts of snow, she smelled smoke and turned.

Flames licked windowsills and inched up to the thatched roof, which ignited in a whoosh of bright fire and loud explosion. Sparks and ash carried on the wind as the flames whipped and devoured the house like some fearsome beast tearing at its prey. Pockets of heat drifted and warmed Iris’s chilled cheeks. She lifted her numb hands toward the heat and watched in silence, pulling Fromer and Justyn close, her heart pounding hard against her sons’ small bodies. Had they left the babe to suffer in the flames? She didn’t dare let her imagination tread that path. As quickly as her sorrow swelled, she squelched it. She could not allow herself to feel for this poor woman. No doubt Dineen and her husband had done something terrible, something secretive and forbidden, to merit this tragedy. And now, whatever they had done—the whole village would pay for it.

“Why, mum,” Justyn asked. “Why’d they burn her house? And chase her out of town?”

Iris looked into Justyn's eyes and saw anger burn there, mirroring the fire gobbling up the house before her.

"It's too complicated to explain, luv. It just had to be, is all."

Justyn grunted and turned away. Iris sighed.

She could only hope that banishing the parents and destroying the poor babe would prevent the foretold destruction. But a murmur in Iris's heart berated her reasoning. Such a pronouncement could not be so easily swept under a rug. She wanted to believe that by following Ursell's directive the town was now safe. But was it? Her hand drifted to her pocket, where her fingers touched upon the feather. What small thread of hope still held, snapped.

With a sigh, heavy with consternation, Iris took her sons' hands in her own and led them out the yard and into the lane leading toward Justyn's schoolhouse.

She hoped she would not have to wait long for the teacher to arrive and class to start. She had to get home and crumble up those biscuits before noon. It was Tuesday, after all.