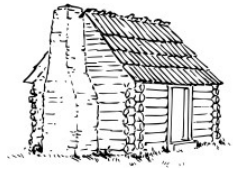


APPALACHIAN JUSTICE

Cedar Hollow Series, Book 1



by

Melinda Clayton

Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC
USA

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Dedication

First and foremost, to the three loves of my life: Donny, Caleb, and Isaac.

And to my grandpa, with a new appreciation for and understanding of the sacrifice he made in the mines.

And to my mother, who explained what it was like to wait by the side of the road, praying her daddy would make it home safely.

“Ain’t nobody got the power to destroy you but you. Don’t you never forget that.”

~ Billy May Platte

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Prologue

Cedar Hollow, West Virginia, 2010

The stairway was much steeper than she remembered, dark and narrow, and the railings were not secure. Some of the anchoring bolts were missing and the banisters wobbled under the slight pressure of her hands. In the stifling humidity, paint was peeling off the walls, the same dark green paint she remembered from seventy years ago, the first and last time she had climbed the bell tower.

She was a slight woman, stooped gently by age, fine wrinkles mapping out a face that was still pretty in spite of the passage of time. One trembling hand gripped the unsteady rail and she paused to catch her breath, faintly dizzy from the exertion. She felt claustrophobic in the tower, as if the surrounding mountains were closing in, pressing down on the little hamlet, squeezing the very air out of the narrow access. From a distance, she could hear disembodied voices floating outside in the late spring evening. The funeral was over, but people still mingled, reluctant to leave.

Leaning against the rail, she smoothed flyaway strands of silver hair away from her face, tucked the wayward tresses back into the low bun she had worn nearly the whole of her adult life. In her memory, the locks were blonde, and it was pigtails into which she tucked them.

She had just placed her foot on the next step, preparing to resume her climb in spite of her misgivings, when she heard movement below.

“Good God almighty, woman. Have you gone plumb crazy?” The voice echoed in the narrow stairwell. “What in the hell are you doin’ up there?”

Recognizing the voice, she glanced down to see the worried faces of two old men peering up at her through the shadows, their expressions nearly comical in exaggerated concern, what was left of their remaining hair mirrored in identical shades of gray. Seventy years ago one had had hair as black as the coal that was mined throughout the mountains, while the other had been shaved bald, a consequence of a recent lice infestation in the village. She smiled to herself as she remembered that even then, both had been afraid of the bell tower.

Facing forward again, she surveyed the steep climb ahead before responding. “I have to ring the bell,” she answered finally, irritated that they hadn’t known. “It’s the right way to end it.” Resolute, she tightened her grip on the rail and coaxed her stiff knee joints to advance another step.

At the bottom of the rickety staircase the two old men looked at each other. One shrugged and the other sighed, adjusting the straps of his oxygen tank. Without a word they, too, began to climb, muscles quivering with the unexpected exercise. They paused

often to rest; after a lifetime of mining, the coal dust made breathing difficult. Slowly but steadily they followed her up the precarious passageway, praying the steps would hold all the way to the cupola. In spite of the difficulty of the climb, they were determined to make it to the top.

She was right, of course. It was the only way to end the story.

Chapter One: The beginning

Crutcher Mountain, West Virginia, 1975

In the chill of the encroaching evening, the girl ran, heart pounding with the effort, lungs gasping for air. Her bare feet, cut and bruised, left bloody smears across the rocky outcrop but she didn't notice, intent only on escape. Panting and gasping, chest heaving, scrawny limbs pumping, she ran down the treacherous wall of the briar-choked gully, tripping over the uneven ground. Clumps of her dark, knotted hair caught and remained on branches that seemed, in her terrified state, to reach towards her, conspiring against her, using their gnarled wooden fingers to hold her hostage.

She was young, certainly no older than twelve, balanced somewhere on the precipice between childhood and adolescence, and painfully thin for her age. The threadbare t-shirt she wore did little to camouflage the xylophone of her ribcage, the knobs of her spine a fragile zipper down her back. She was filthy, too, her battered feet nearly black from the coal dust soil of the mountains. Under normal circumstances, she would have been pretty, her almond shaped eyes a stormy shade of green, her limbs long and supple. But the girl didn't live in normal circumstances, and as such, any prettiness she might have possessed was eclipsed by the ravages of fear and despair.

It was dusk in the mountains, the last warm rays of the sun shining upon the girl's chestnut colored hair and creating momentary sparkles of light among the tangles as she crashed downward through the gully. Ahead of her, squirrels raced for trees, scrambling for higher ground, abandoning the nuts and berries for which they had so determinedly foraged. Snakes raced away from her path, slithering through the impenetrable brush before taking refuge in the cool recesses of the damp rock walls. Even the songbirds fell silent, blue jays and mockingbirds halting their never-ending arguments in the wake of the girl's flight.

The girl, however, noticed none of this. Her sensory perceptions having condensed into little more than animal instinct, she knew only that she had to run.

From the top of my mountain, I seen that girl runnin'. It was them hawks that told me to look. I was just finishin' my chores for the evenin' when I heard 'em squawkin' the way they do when somethin' worries 'em. Broad-winged, they was, and there was a passel of 'em, all spiralin' up in the currents over them mountains. They wasn't happy; somethin' had their attention and I remember hopin' it wasn't nothin' serious. A fox maybe, or even a bear would be fine. I didn't pay no mind to the animals; it was the people I feared. Give me a bear any day over a man. Bears is predictable; men ain't.

More than anythin' else, I was just curious about whatever was botherin' 'em. There must have been ten or twelve of 'em, all gathered together for their winter's flight south. Smart birds, I remember thinkin'. The cold on these mountains can kill a person quick, if they ain't careful. The cold, and any number of other things.

I gave the axe a final swing and planted it securely in the choppin' block. Last thing I needed was to trip over my own axe on my way to feedin' the animals. If it didn't kill me right away, I'd be dead of exposure soon enough. It wasn't like nobody was goin' to come lookin' for me, and even if they did, they wouldn't know where to look. I bent down to gather the last piece of firewood and headed towards the cabin, wipin' the sweat off my brow with my shirtsleeve. Fall was comin' but the evenin' was a warm one, and I was a forty-four year old woman swingin' an axe.

I was filthy, soaked through with sweat, but who was to know? I lived alone, had for years, and that was the way I planned on keepin' it. I had no illusions about myself and never had. My thick, black hair was cut short for ease, and thirty years on a West Virginia mountain summit had taken its toll on whatever good looks I may have once enjoyed. I was as brown as my Cherokee momma, my skin as creased as old leather.

With the sweat out of my eyes, I looked up to see the reddish brown underbellies of all them little hawks, flyin' up high above the range and hollerin' to beat the band. I dropped the split wood into the wood box by the front door with a clatter and shaded my eyes against the lowerin' sun, gazin' out over the gully and tryin' to see what had caused the commotion. And that's when I seen her. There she was, Roy Campbell's girl, it had to be, headed for the creek and runnin' as if her life depended on it. I hadn't never met the girl, but there wasn't no one else livin' this high on the range. Keepin' my eye on her, I took off my work gloves, shoved 'em into the back pocket of my dungarees, and felt in my shirt pocket for a cigarette.

Findin' what I was lookin' for, I struck a match along the front of my little cabin and, usin' my hands, sheltered the timid flame while I lit up, sighin' with pleasure as the nicotine went to work. I don't like to admit to vices, but nicotine has been mine, nevertheless. I reckon we all got some sort of weakness, and nicotine was it for me, at least after I took up residence on the mountain. My lungs full of smoke and the cravin' thus satisfied, I leaned forward over the splintered railin' of the cabin's west facin' porch, proppin' my elbows on the weathered wood, danglin' my hands over the edge. This was how I spent nearly all of my evenin's after a hard day's work, but this was the first time I'd ever seen another person so close to my mountain. I drug hard on the cigarette and squinted through the smoke, watchin' the girl's frantic flight down the neighborin' hill.

The sheer desperation of the girl's flight troubled me. I hadn't seen Roy Campbell in nearly thirty years, but I doubted he had changed much. Judgin' by the frightened, filthy state of the girl, he hadn't changed at all. I watched the girl until she cut left around a boulder and disappeared from my view.

Takin' a final drag, I flicked the last of the butt over the rail and into the dust, scatterin' the chickens and causin' a flurry of agitated cluckin'. The sun was just beginnin' to dip below the summit of the mountain, spreadin' rosy streaks across the western sky the way it does on clear mountain evenin's. A cool breeze kicked up sudden like from the north, causin' the dust to dance in miniature tornados and sendin' an involuntary shiver down my spine. The universe has a lot to tell us, if we're listenin'. For thirty years, my survival had depended on listenin', so listen I did.

I still had work to do. First and foremost, I needed to gather them chickens into their coop before the spiralin' hawks decided they'd make for an easy dinner. But I found myself drawn to the girl, unwillin' to leave my perch. Distracted from my chores, I raked my hand through my hair, the calluses catchin' and pullin' as they always did, and gazed down the holler. Truth be told, I was afraid; I ain't ashamed to say it now, and I wasn't ashamed then, neither. The universe was talkin', and I didn't much like what it was sayin'.