

# THE CABIN



Smoky Zeidel

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by Smoky Zeidel

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## **Dedication**

For my family, those near and dear as well as those far flung across the country.

## Chapter 1

1846

There was a deep connectedness between mountain women in the Allegheny Mountains of Virginia, a connectedness that transcended the tangible, yet was as real as the forest itself. It was a part of the mountain magic her grandmother had taught her when she was a young child, and it was particularly strong between Corrine and her sister, Catherine.

For this reason alone, Corrine never doubted her sister would know when it was time to come, would know when her baby was about to make her entrance into the world. Whatever distance lay between them, with Corrine living in the cabin on Hoffmann Mountain and Catherine in the valley below, one always knew when she was needed by the other. Just as Corrine, gifted in the healing properties of herbs, had arrived on Catherine's doorstep with willow bark tea and a soothing slippery elm elixir hours after Catherine had taken to her bed with fever and cough, Catherine, blessed with a midwife's knowledge and skill, had swept into the cabin as the first pains of labor gripped Corrine's belly.

The childbirth had been difficult, far more difficult than what she'd experienced when her son was born three years prior. But Catherine had remained calm, her voice soothing, encouraging Corrine through every contraction while William, Corrine's husband, fretted a trail of footprints from the bedroom door to the hearth and back again as he tried to console Cyrus, who, bewildered by his mother's screams of pain, wailed with equal intensity.

"I'm going to die," Corrine whispered to her sister. "I saw it in a dream. William, and Cyrus, and the baby, but I was gone." She let out a gasp as yet another contraction wracked her body. Catherine took her sister's feet in her hands, pressing firmly on the soft pad of her heel and the inside corner of her ankle until the pain eased and the contraction passed.

"You aren't going to die. I'm not going to let you die." Catherine dipped a rag into a pitcher of water, and mopped the sweat from Corrine's face and chest.

"Promise me ... Catherine, look at me!"

Catherine put down the rag.

"Promise me, if anything happens to me ..."

One last contraction and with a bloodcurdling scream, she pushed her daughter into the world.

Corrine could hear the forest calling her, whispering her name as the soft winds of spring warmed the mountain. She'd never gone so many days without walking through

her beloved forest, along its streams and game trails. Since Elizabeth's birth, she had been too tired and weak to do more than walk to the creek and back. But with Catherine insisting on staying on to help out with the children, she had finally regained her strength and at last was free to escape the stifling confines of the cabin and roam the mountainside once again.

True, it made her husband nervous when she went off by herself. She wasn't sure why; William was a circuit rider preacher, and often was gone for months at a time, preaching the gospel at every home and village in the Shenandoah Valley that would have him. Perhaps when he was gone he simply imagined she stayed tucked cozily into the mountainside cabin, never venturing beyond the gardens, small pasture, and barn. And while she didn't wish to cause him anxiety with her forays away from the safety of the cabin, he really did worry needlessly. She felt as at home walking through the woods as a bear or bobcat might. Corrine was raised in the mountains. Mountain women were both strong and intuitive. She was confident William knew in his head she was as capable of fending for herself and their two children, but she recognized his heart often told him something different.

Today she was headed for the mountain's lower elevations. The family was running low on slippery elm, and with both a toddler and a baby in the house, Corrine didn't want to run out of the magical bark that eased everything from sore throats and teething pain to scraped knees and constipation. It was also mushroom season, and with any luck she'd come home with a bucket of morels to fry up for supper.

She'd have to walk and work fast. Elizabeth was small, but she had a voracious appetite. Corrine had, at best, three hours before her breasts would fill, sensing her daughter's hunger even before the tiny girl cried out. She felt sorry for Catherine if she wasn't back in time to appease the baby's squalls.

After kissing her children goodbye and thanking Catherine at least a dozen times, Corrine grabbed a pail and a basket and danced out the front door of the cabin and into the forest.

The first thing she noticed was the smell. It was the same scent she had breathed in every time she walked in forest, but this time, she could break down the individual essences perfuming the air: rotting rhododendron blossoms mixed with moss-covered granite and cold, crisp water. She had never noticed granite had a scent, like the air during a thunderstorm, right after lightning struck, or that water could smell cold. The discovery delighted her.

Corrine instinctively knew where to turn off the trail to find the slippery elm grove, for she had been harvesting bark from these same trees for years. She said a quick prayer of thanks to the trees before taking the sharp knife she had packed in her basket and starting to work.

She peeled the tough outer bark from several branches, then peeled the tender inner layer of bark, cutting the strips into pieces small enough to fit in the basket. She was

careful to select only a few branches from each tree before moving on to another. William laughed at her belief that trees had spirits, but she knew better. Her grandmother had been part Cherokee Indian, and had taught Corrine that everything in nature had a spirit. To dishonor these spirits by taking too many limbs from a tree or girdling its trunk was unthinkable.

She found the first morels under the second tree, growing along the south-facing slope. Using a firm but gentle hand, she sliced the mushrooms about an inch above the ground.

Mushrooms are interesting, she thought. Cut a tree or a shrub down to the ground and it might or might not grow back. Morels, on the other hand, always sprang back up, even when you harvested every one you found.

She worked for thirty minutes, peeling slippery elm bark and harvesting mushrooms. She left half the morels she found for the bears, skunks, and raccoons that called Hoffmann Mountain home, for she knew they favored mushrooms, especially in the early spring before the berries ripened.

The last mushroom cap hid a treasure unlike any Corrine had ever seen. It was a small stone, about the size of a chestnut, in the perfect shape of a cross. She tried to pick it up, but something was rooting it firmly in the ground. Using her knife as a spade, she carefully excavated the stone from its place. At last, it broke free.

To her surprise, the stone was not one cross but three, each one perfectly formed, each anchored firmly in the smooth, rounded stone she now held in her hand. They looked like they had simply grown out of the stone, like corn sprouting from the ground.

She carried the stone to the stream to wash away the dirt still clinging to it. She knelt on a smooth, flat boulder and plunged the stone into the creek. The water was cold, and her fingers soon grew numb, but Corrine barely noticed, so intent was she on cleaning the stone. At last, satisfied she'd removed every last trace of dirt, she lifted the stone from the water and clamored to her feet.

Wet and clean, the rock was slippery, and before she realized what was happening, it slipped from her numb fingers and crashed to the rock on which she stood. The stone broke neatly in two.

Corrine picked up the pieces. She was thankful to see the crosses themselves hadn't been damaged. Two of them were still firmly attached to the rock. The third cross, however, had been neatly severed from its base.

The solitary cross felt surprisingly warm in her hand, not cool as she would have expected. What a wonderful gift to take William, she thought.

But only the one, solitary cross. Her grandmother had taught her that not only the plants and animals but also the stones and the Earth itself had spirits. She would leave the two crosses still clinging to the stone here in the forest.

She looked around for a suitable place to put them, a place where animals and wind

and rain wouldn't disturb them. She decided on a mossy crevice in a large granite boulder midway between the creek and the path that led back up to the cabin.

Satisfied the crosses were in a safe place, she pocketed the solitary cross, then retrieved her basket and headed back up the mountain. Her breasts were starting to tingle, and she tried hard not to think about her daughter, knowing the consequence of such thoughts. But it was no use trying not to think of her precious baby, and a moment later the front of her dress darkened as her milk flowed.

Cyrus was waiting for her on the stone steps leading to the cabin's front door. "Mamma, Mamma!" he screamed when he saw her. He ran across the clearing as quickly as his short legs would carry him. Corrine dropped the basket to the ground and gathered her son in her arms.

"Were you a good boy for your Aunt Catherine?" she asked, carrying him back to the cabin.

The little boy nodded his head. "Listbeth pooped." He turned up his nose in disgust.

Corrine smiled. "Elizabeth does that a lot, doesn't she?" She pushed open the cabin door and carried Cyrus inside. "Catherine, William, I'm back," she called.

"We're out here," her sister answered from behind the house. "I've made tea."

Corrine took a few steps toward the back door, then remembered the basket she'd set down out front. "You wait here, Cyrus," she said, setting him down and turning back to retrieve her basket. "Mamma will be right back."

Despite his father's gentle cajoling, then firm insistence that Cyrus tell the truth; despite the promise of licorice, then threat of being sent to bed without any supper if he didn't say what really happened to his mother, Cyrus did not waver from the story he told William and Catherine when they came inside, looking for Corrine: his mother had stepped out the front door and simply disappeared.

Corrine awakened to find herself lying on her side in the grass and staring at a sea of pink blossoms cascading down the slope away from the house. That's odd, she thought, I don't remember the roses being in bloom. Her head hurt, and when she rubbed the sore spot discovered a lump the size of a walnut near her right temple.

"I'm okay, Cyrus," she called. "Mamma just tripped and fell." She stood, shaky and unsteady after her fall. Where was Cyrus? She'd just set him down when she tripped on her way out the door. He must have seen her fall. Why hadn't Catherine or William come to her assistance? Surely she had screamed when she fell. Or hadn't she? She couldn't remember.

"Catherine? William?" she called, taking a few unsteady steps toward the cabin. She winced in pain. Her left ankle was badly bruised.

The sight of the cabin caused her to stop cold in her tracks. The stone steps leading to her front door were moss-covered and crumbling. One windowpane was broken; the rest were clouded with dirt and covered in spider webs. The place looked like it had been abandoned for years.

"William?" she called again, fear choking her voice. She hobbled around to the back, where her husband and sister had sat drinking tea just minutes ago.

No one was there. Gone were the pine rocking chairs William had so lovingly crafted when she was expecting Cyrus, chairs made so he could sit and read to her while she nursed and rocked their child. Blackberry brambles blanketed what should have been the freshly cultivated patch of earth that was her vegetable garden. Her massive black iron kettle was gone. The barn was a crumbled pile of rotting wood.

Forgetting her injured ankle, Corrine flew to the back door and threw it open.

The cabin was empty, save for a thick labyrinth of cobwebs and sprinkling of mouse droppings on the floor.

With one gut-wrenching sob, Corrine sank to her knees. The world grew dark as she collapsed in the back doorway of what had once been her home.

It was dark when she awoke once again, but a glow in the eastern sky told her morning was creeping up the mountain, and that soon it would be light. She shivered. How long had she been asleep? Had she slept in the doorway all night? And what did she do now?

The cabin was empty; her family was gone. Surely those two events could not have happened in the brief period of time she had lain in the front yard, after her fall. She didn't even remember falling. She had set Cyrus down in the cabin, turned to go back in the yard to retrieve her basket, and ... nothing. She couldn't remember anything between that moment and the moment she opened her eyes to see the roses blooming.

Slowly, she pulled herself to her feet. Her ankle was horribly swollen, and she winced in pain when she tried to put her weight on it. She had to walk, though. She couldn't stay here. She had to find her family.

She limped around the side of the cabin to the front yard, hoping she'd find her basket of mushrooms and elm bark, but it was gone, too.

She'd have to walk down to the valley. She'd find her family. Perhaps they had gone to Catherine's house. Maybe they'd be back, looking for her. If she stuck to the trail, she'd be all right. She'd find them, or they would find her.

She turned and took one last look at the dilapidated cabin before setting off down the mountain.

Corrine hadn't walked ten feet into the forest before she realized something else was desperately wrong. The trail William worked so hard to keep clear was nowhere to be found. All that remained where the path should have been was a narrow animal trail,

the kind deer cut through the forest.

She followed the deer trail. At least it was headed in the right direction. A catbird mewed from overhead, scolding and chattering as she limped along. She smiled at the little gray bird, glad to have some company.

She walked another ten minutes. The forest looked different. The majestic chestnut trees that had towered over her the day before were gone. In their stead were rotting stumps, looking like so many gravestones in a chestnut cemetery. Hemlocks, witch hazel, and tulip trees now dominated the landscape.

Even the creek looked different. It seemed to have changed its course, cutting slightly to the south at one point where she was certain it once flowed straight east.

After an hour, she could walk no farther. She was terribly hungry, and the pain in her ankle was becoming unbearable. She made her way over to the creek and slipped her throbbing ankle into the icy water. Five minutes later, her foot was blue, but at least the pain had dulled.

Exhausted, Corrine leaned against a mossy rock. She reached in her pocket; the stone cross was still there. Clutching it tightly, she closed her eyes and uttered a quick prayer.

Ten minutes later, the stone fell from her limp hand.

Bright whirls of light flashed through Corrine's mind. Her head hurt terribly, and she was burning up with fever. She was in the forest. Why was she sleeping in the forest? It was nighttime, and she could feel the sky ablaze with the light of a thousand stars.

*"Corrine, Corrine ..."*

She was in a dream, that was it. A dream that smelled of damp earth and decayed leaves; a dream where she was sitting by the creek, searching for something she could not name, but knew was important.

*"Corrine, Corrine ..."*

*"I'm here, Grandmother."*

*"Corrine, open your eyes!"*

She opened them. Standing before her was her old Indian grandmother, glowing like foxfire. Trembling, she bowed her head to the ancient apparition. "Am I dead?"

The Grandmother chuckled. "No, my child. You are not dead. But you have stumbled upon the ancient fairy magic, and your life has been forevermore changed."

*"William, my children ..."*

*"What has become of them I cannot say,"* the Grandmother said.

*"Cannot, or will not? Do you not know?"*

*"Alas, it is not within my power to speak of things that have transpired,"* the Grandmother replied. "I cannot tell you what has happened. This you must learn for yourself. But this I can say to you: believe what you see."

*"But I don't understand, Grandmother! Everything is wrong; everything is*

changed!" A tear slid down her cheek.

"Everything has changed," the Grandmother agreed, "and changed forevermore. But listen to my words, grandchild of my heart, and remember. What was torn asunder must be reunited; only then will this grave wrong be righted."

"Remember what? Grandmother, you're speaking in riddles, and I don't understand!"

The foxfire began to flicker and fade. "What was torn asunder must be reunited; only then will this grave wrong be righted."

"Grandmother, don't leave me. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Grandmother!"

"Remember, Corrine. What was torn asunder must be reunited ..."

She was gone. Corrine sobbed herself back to sleep.