

WHAT
MOMMA LEFT
BEHIND



CINDY K. SPROLES



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Dedicated to my mother,

Velma Frady

Mom mothered more children who didn't belong
to her than any other woman I know.

She took them in her arms and loved each one exactly the
same. I am grateful to have a mother who, with Christlike
faith and wisdom, loves and cares for so many.



And to my niece and her husband,

Erin and Devin Thomas,

who willingly listened, prayed, and trusted until God laid
a special little girl in their arms. We witnessed a miracle.



Historical Note

Though the isolated life in the Appalachian Mountains was hard, for many years it protected the people from many of the illnesses that ran rampant in other places. Rivers and streams were clean and clear, the air fresh, and illness at a minimum. During the 1800s, as the industrial age entered, isolation became the enemy. As railroads and coal mining made their way into the remote areas of the Appalachian Mountains, woodlands were cut, streams were polluted, and the air grew dark from black smoke. The purity and protection of isolation turned deadly. Typhoid fever, dysentery, tuberculosis, and influenza spread through the valleys and hollows, taking lives by the hundreds.

With no records kept until the mid-1900s, there is no way to estimate how many lives were lost to these diseases. Given that, we draw our history from the stories given to us by our grandparents and great-grandparents. We know influenza ran wild and spread quickly. With few doctors, isolation, and the lack of trust in modern medicine, the mountain people seemed doomed.

According to local historians, influenza spread through the Smoky Mountains and across Cumberland Gap, killing more adults than children, with the only reason being that adults had

more interaction with one another than the children. This, of course, is only speculation since records were scarce. However, the theory makes sense.

This story is loosely based around two diseases that plagued the mountain people—typhoid and influenza, both referred to as the fever. Devastating and deadly, they changed life in the mountains forever.

But Jesus said, Suffer little children,
and forbid them not, to come unto me:
for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 19:14

CHAPTER

ONE



1877—SOURWOOD MOUNTAIN, TENNESSEE

“They was nothin I could do for her. Her eyes was fixed on the sky and she never moved again. Despite me shakin her, she was gone.”

Ely slipped his worn hat from his head and pressed it hard against his chest. “Miss Worie, thangs is what they is. Ain’t nothin you coulda done.”

The spring breeze whipped my hair around my face, brushin the clay trail of tears from my cheek.

Just the day before Momma was hangin clothes on the line and singin. She didn’t seem to have a care in the world. Today she was dead. This didn’t make a bit of sense. “Like you said, Ely, it is what it is.” I swallowed hard, tryin to be strong.

Ely shoved a flat rock into the soft clay. “This’ll mark her till we can make her a cross like your daddy’s.”

“I never knew what a chore it was to bury a person.” I dropped to my knees and gingerly swept the clots of dirt to one side, smoothin the mound that covered Momma. I wasn’t sure if I was to be angry or hurt. Either way, my heart was achin.

Ely grunted. “Uh-huh. ’Tis a chore. But you was smart to drop

that quilt over her. Kept the buzzards away whilst we dug that hole.” He placed his hat back in its spot, pushin his dark, tight curls from beneath.

I stared at Ely, his skin blacker than the rock coal Daddy would bring home from time to time. He was a good friend. Stood by Momma and Daddy through thick and thin.

The sun peeked through the newly formed leaves of the old oak tree, castin a shine on ever one of those curls that boasted around Ely’s ears. “You’re startin to look a little shabby there, Ely.” I smacked at a curl.

He busted into a guffaw that shook ever bone in his body. “You always make a man laugh, Miss Worie. Even now, in the shadow of your own troubles.”

“Lordy, lordy. Like you said, it is what it is. Ain’t my fault. Leastways I hope not. But I don’t understand, Ely. I did everthing Momma ever told me. Never give her no reason to pull such a stunt. I thought my bein good would make up for the boys.”

“You stop right there, girl. Ever man makes his own choices. Calvin chose his swindlin and connivin. Justice made his bed with a bottle of hooch. Them ain’t your doins. And I feel right sure Miss Louise was proud of you. Ain’t many young girls would choose stayin home to help their momma over bein a wife and mother.”

I laid across the mound of dirt and commenced to sob. Long, hard wails. Ely stood solid by me, bendin down ever once in a while to pat my shoulder.

It wasn’t long before the buzzards went to squallin overhead. “Get way!” I hollered. “Go on. Can’t you see we buried Momma?”

Ely took my arm and lifted me to my feet. “She’s safe. We buried her deep and covered her with stones and more dirt on top of that. Ain’t nothin can get to her.” He tugged me toward the house.

“But I’ve seen them beasts peck at the ground until they dig up what’s buried. Buzzards don’t care what the meal is, just so it’s fresh.”

“Like I done said, she’s safe. She’ll sleep unbothered.”

I clapped my hands together and knocked the red clay loose.

“You need to get yourself cleaned up.” Ely yanked a dress off the clothesline as we passed. “You stoke that fire in the fireplace and hang the pot. I’ll pump some fresh water for you to boil, then I’ll send Bess along after a while to bring you some supper.”

My legs grew weaker with ever step to the house till my ankles finally twisted and I sat on the ground with a thud. They was no quiet in my stomach either. My gut twisted and churned until I couldn’t hold it no more. Ely held my head while I vomited.

“Miss Worie, you been through a lot today. Help me get you inside, now. Come on. Let’s go. Get your feet under you. Come on.” He slipped his arms under mine and lifted.

I tried to stand but I couldn’t. Ely hung the clean dress over his shoulder, then scooped me in his arms and carried me. He turned his head to one side, tryin to get a good breath. They wasn’t nothin to say. I knew I smelled like sweat and blood. And I knew the only reason them buzzards was circlin Momma’s grave was because they caught the vile scent from my clothes.

Ely stood me by the screen door. His face said everthing his mouth wouldn’t. Like what happened here to rip the screen outta the door frame, but in his kindness, he didn’t ask. He pulled open the broken screen door and pushed his shoulder against the heavy inside wooden door. It sounded like a wildcat screamin as it swung open on its rope hinges.

“I’m gonna set you in this here chair while I stoke the fire. You ain’t in no shape to mess with a fire.”

“The pot is already filled. Momma was ready for me to wash clothes.”

Ely nodded and headed into the back room. I heard him movin and stackin wood in the fireplace, then they was the puff of the billows. The smell of hot embers filled the house as the fire caught and went to burnin.

Ely laid the dress he'd yanked from the line on the table, then he squatted at my side. "Miss Worie, I'm goin on home. Get yourself cleaned up. You reek of blood. Your purty skin is tainted red." He brushed my hair from my eyes, then kissed me on the head. "Me and Bess will be back later on. You hear me?"

I heard him, but words wouldn't work their way out.

"Worie. You hear?"

I nearly jumped outta my skin. "Yeah, I hear." The words quivered as they come out. He squeezed my shoulder and left.

It didn't seem real. None of it. Worse, it made no sense. I'd gived up everthing—a husband and a new life—to stay and help Momma. She couldn't count on the boys after Daddy died. Half the time Justice was laid out drunk, and Calvin spent his time bein what he called a slick businessman. Daddy called him a liar and swindler. Momma, she called him lost. I couldn't bear her tendin the farm alone. With Daddy dead, it was just me and her.

I ain't sure when I laid down on Momma's bed, but I did. I suppose it was somewhere betwixt exhaustion and agony. I dozed a spell. When I woke up, nothin had changed other than the wet blood all over me had dried. The hope that this was a horrid dream vanished and reality set in hard.

I scrounged up one of my own skirts and an old shirt of Daddy's, then headed to the creek. Despite Ely's best intentions, Momma was smaller than me and her dress wouldn't cover one of my legs. She was a small woman. Tiny in height compared to most folks, but despite her size, she could move mountains when she was riled.

A while back Momma had the boys dam up the creek so we had a clear pool of water. It would fill to the brim of the stacked rocks and spill over. The water Ely set to warmin over the fire woulda been nice, but dried blood washes better in cold water. My clothes was stuck to me, and when I went to pull them off it was like I was tearin ever bit of the hide off my legs. I stepped into

the icy waters of Tender's Creek and my skin went numb. It was just one more callus, cause my heart had numbed earlier in the day. Slipping under the water, I opened my eyes to see the streaks of sun and deep blue sky through the clear glassy ceiling.

It would be easy to just take in a breath of cold water, close my eyes, and never see the light of day again. Was it that easy for Momma? What was she thinkin? How could she pull the trigger?

My lungs went to burnin, longin for the spring air, and despite my thoughts to breathe in the creek, I found I didn't have the courage. My head popped above the water and I took in a gulp of mountain air. I wasn't good enough for Momma to make her want to live, and I was too much of a coward to take my own life. "What use am I?"

I scrubbed the blood from my face and arms. My teeth went to chatterin like a squirrel gripin at its mate. Easin out of the pond, I pulled Daddy's shirt over my head, then slipped on my skirt. My skin now harbored a grayish blue. I run my fingers through my wet, curled strands of hair, then quickly braided them. The damp from the braid soaked the back of my shirt.

How does a person do such a thing? How do they get in such a dark hole that they can't see the light of day, the sun bouncing off the summit, or even hear the soft song of the mockinbird? How can they possibly want to let go of the tender smell of honeysuckle or not want to savor its sweet nectar?

Ely's words echoed in my head. "*This here ain't your fault.*" And he was right. If I was one thing, I was strong. Momma raised me to be just that. She always said, "Take a day to mourn your lot, then shovel it over your shoulder and move ahead."

I'd missed my chance to be a wife and a mother so I could help her. That was water under the bridge, as Momma would say. But I was no quitter. Never had been. At seventeen, I'd manage just fine.

The longer I pondered the choice of givin up so much, the madder it made me. Momma was always a givin woman. She always

took others over herself, until today. Today she turned selfish and greedy. Today she took ever dream I ever had. All my hope. All my desire. And she bled it out on the ground with one pull of the trigger.

I wiped the tears from my eyes, straightened my shoulders, and walked to Momma's grave. In one swift motion, I drew back my foot and kicked the stone Ely had stood at the head of her grave. It toppled over. As I walked away, I spit.