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WHERE
IT ENDS

A NOVEL

CINDY K. SPROLES

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Dedicated to Linda Bambino, Wendy Smith,
and M. D. and Elvera McCue.

Your love for the elderly has changed
and continues to change lives for the better.



O N E

SHOAL MOUNTAIN, KENTUCKY, 1872

My eyes focused as best they could. “Stately!” I shouted. “Stately!” In our fifty-some years together, I hardly ever caught the man sittin still. Something was wrong.

I’d swear the man was growin deaf. That, or he just chose to ignore me. Momma used to call that selective hearin when she was talkin to Daddy. I just never dreamed it would happen to me. But that’s been Stately’s habit through the years. Dragging me to this blessed mountain and stickin me here without a body outside of himself to talk to.

“Stately Jenkins, you getting hard of hearin? Answer me!”

I inched my way down the bank to the fence line. A blurry shape hunkered over by the water trough never budged. My eyes were weak, and it was hard to tell if it was a person or just something leaned against the barn.

“Stately!” I hollered again.

My heart raced as fear seeped into every pore of my body. Surely to goodness, that couldn’t be my husband, but the closer I got to the barn, the clearer things become. Stately was on his knees, one arm rested on the trough, and his chin hung to his chest.

“Lawsey mercy.” I grabbed hold of his shoulders, and he fell

into my arms, graspin hold of his chest. His eyes were glassy, but I could feel his hard gasps for breath. “What happened?” I tried to pull his arms from his chest, but his hands were stiff. It was like he’d been struck by lightning and the surge still raged through his body.

He finally grasped my hand. “Too late,” he whispered. “Keep the secret. It’s up to you.” His words were weak yet stern.

Panic shot through me. “What happened? Did your legs give? Is it your heart?”

He nodded. Stately’s legs were weak from bein hurt in the war. He’d fall at the drop of a hat.

“Oh, lawsey, lawsey.” I pressed one hand against his. “Stately, open your eyes and answer me.”

He stretched his hand to my face. “You promise me. Keep the secret?” His voice grew soft. “Promise to keep the box a secret?”

“Secret? I ain’t worried about no secret, and why would you? I’m frettin over you.”

His skin grew a pasty grey. All I could think to do was talk. Momma always told me I could talk a blind man off a ridge. I’d use this gift, or curse, to talk Stately outta dyin!

“Don’t you die on me! Don’t you dare die on me,” I squalled. “Stately Jenkins, you hear me? Now ain’t the time to ignore me.”

His body grew heavy, and his arm dropped to the ground.

“Oh lordy, what’ll I do? Stately. Open your eyes. I married you fifty years ago, trustin you’d always be with me. I followed you up on this mountain where there ain’t a soul within miles. You ain’t about to leave me here alone. There’s work to be done. The garden fence needs mendin. How do you suppose I can see to do that?”

His lips took on a blue tint. His mouth gapped open.

Tears commenced to slip off my nose. “Stately, you know I ain’t a woman that cries over spilt milk, but I need you. You got responsibilities here. You blessed ole stubborn hound dog. Don’t you die! Stately, please don’t you die on me.” I pulled his head close to my chest and gently brushed his long, white beard. “I’ll not tease you

no more about the skin that shows on top of your head. Hear me? Stately, you hear?”

My talkin wasn't doin no good. I couldn't guilt him outta dyin.

“Promise me?” His voice hissed like steam from the coffee kettle.

I felt his chest heave, and a groan seeped from his mouth. His fingers wadded the tail of my apron into his palm. His hand balled into a fist, and his lips opened.

“Promissssse.” The word pushed out of his mouth.

Even with my poor sight, I could see his pupils shrinking. I was losin the one thing I depended on.

“I promise.”

Stately's head rolled loosely into the bend of my arm—his life gone from him.

I wrapped him tight in my arms and bellered loud as I rocked him. The only person in my life was gone. Gone.

The mornin breeze brushed over me, blowing strands of hay from the barn floor. They took to spinnin like a windstorm, then as quickly as it come, the wind died. It was like they swirled around his body and lifted his soul right out. Just like that, Stately died. A slow sigh melted into a breeze. It wrapped around me, then vanished.

In the distance, the peaks of the mountains lifted toward the heavens. There was a peace about the quiet here, a lovely peace, but it seemed to come with a price. Hardship. Loneliness. A streak of lavender pulled across the deep blue of the sky, and I wondered if that was Stately's soul makin its way to heaven. Could a greedy man even make it to heaven?

There ain't a soul alive that's found their happiness in the almighty dollar. Money, gold, possessions—all act like a coiled snake. They build up their fire, strike, and then they're spent. A body's happiness, the real prize, is found in the folks they befriend. Stately had been caught on a barb—some sort of secret—and the irony was, it only served to cause me grief.

“Stately, open your eyes,” I sobbed. But he didn't crack an eyelid.

I rocked him and screamed curses at the birds that soared so effortlessly overhead. It felt like ever part of me ripped into pieces.

“Don’t you die. Stately, don’t leave me alone on this mountain. Please don’t die.” He wouldn’t hear, for he was done gone. Still, I tried to convince him to come back. “I got soup beans stewin. You love soup beans and corn bread.”

I grasped his hand, and his fingers relaxed, openin so I could see his wedding band. The one thing we owned was wedding bands. They weren’t much, but it was never taken off his finger over the years. Lifting his hand, I kissed his fingers, then pulled the band over his wrinkled knuckle. I knew better. No amount of talkin could keep his stubborn soul here.

It took me a right good bit, but I pulled Stately into the barn and closed the door, then I commenced to walk the five miles down the mountain to Barbourville. It like to have killed me. I squalled and cried every step of the way. There were times I cursed even though cursing wasn’t something I usually did. I felt like I earned the right as I mourned. The one man I’d loved since I was a youngin . . . was gone.

“Minerva? That you?” A voice come to me from across the path. “That you? It’s Robert. Robert Blessing.”

It wasn’t no secret on the mountain that my eyes were poor. Most folks, what few I saw, was good to tell me their name if I couldn’t make them out. Despite my eyesight, a body manages. They do what they must to get along. But when Robert took hold of my arm, my legs give and I went to my knees. He wrapped his arms around me and eased me to the ground. The two of us set there huddled like a storm was comin.

“What in the Sam Hill has happened?” Robert asked. “Nerva, talk to me.” He pulled me tight against his chest. His hug was like a sweet, warm blanket. I buried my face into that blanket and wailed. There was a comfort in his hug, in his presence—one that twisted at my heart.

“Stately’s dead.” The words dripped outta my mouth like mo-

lasses. “His heart, I reckon. It took him,” I muttered into his shoulder. And that was all I needed to say. In his kindness, Robert sat there holdin me whilst I cried.

Before long, Robert’s wife, Mary, come runnin. Somewhere betwixt the tears, she helped me stand and walked me to her cabin. Robert gathered some of the men in town, and soon they brought a wagon round to take me home. Mary rode by my side, never once lettin go of me. She cuddled me like a momma cat snugglin her kittens.

This mountain can be a godforsaken place. Folks is spread far apart. Visitin ain’t something that happens a lot, but folks, they know one another, and they never fail to come together when they need to. They buried Stately. Even made him a headstone, which was right kind. The women brought me food, and after a couple of weeks, they were all gone back to their lives.

Except for me. I was left on this mountain alone. Broken and sad—angry. Partly because I’d lost the only man I’d ever loved and partly because I was left here to tend a pea-sized farm dug out of the side of the hill. All for a box that held a secret.

What Stately called gold, even if it was gold, was nothin more than a burden. I never laid eyes on it and had no intentions of ever doin so. Only asked once what was in it. Never again. It was nothing but a curse to Stately Jenkins, and now he made it my burden, my curse, my chains, by forcing me to promise to keep his secret. What kind of man does that to the woman he loves? Just to guard a secret. A secret that was never mine for holding to start with. A secret I wasn’t right sure was real.

TWO

SPRING 1902

I set up straight in the bed. The dream. The one of Stately's dyin. It hung in the back of my mind. Early on, it haunted me every night, but as the years passed, only occasionally. I reckon that's our way of healin the hurts—livin them over and over in our dreams until time puts a patch over the emptiness, keepin the hurt at bay. Every once in a while, the ache seeps through when the heart lets its guard down. You'd think after thirty years, it would vanish like his soul did. Still, his presence haunted me every now and again.

I pushed my face into my palms. The memory of his hand graspin hold of his chest like he could pull out the pain and toss it over the ridge hung in my memory. I reckon his heart give out and he fell. That quick, his soul left the shell of a man he was and seeped over the ridge into the clouds.

It galled me that in his last breath, all he could think of was that secret. A secret I was plagued with now. What was I to do with it? Keep it from who? Why? It wasn't ever my secret, and I never wanted a part in it. A secret ain't nothin but a dishonest seed layin in wait. Somethin just waitin for the right soil, the right water, the right amount of sun to make it sprout its roots. When it does . . . Lord, help us. There ain't no sucha thing as a good secret. Nary a one.

There's times a body ought to think before they speak. I reckon that day was one of them. I should have thought before I made Stately that promise. But I didn't. The agreement just fell outta my mouth, and I promised him. A promise is something to be valued, so I reckon I've made my bed and now I have to sleep in it. I'd keep his secret, be it right or wrong in my eyes.

I washed my face, scrubbin hard enough to take the memory, then dressed for the day and made my way to the garden. My eyes were no better now than they was the day Stately took flight. Things were blurry, but I could see good enough to take in the blue of the heavens dotted with an arrow of ducks. I sucked in a breath of cool mountain air—cool as the river water when you scooped it into your palm to drink.

It wasn't the mountain or the beauty nestled in her crevices that I despised. She was always kind to oblige my frustrations or to hold me close in the bend of her river like a momma caressing her baby. What I despised was the loneliness. The seclusion. The emptiness of no sound.

I pushed open the gate and took hold of a broke hoe. Droppin my basket at my feet, I went to pluggin at the dirt, searchin for taters.

Ain't been no stranger worth their salt make their way onto my land in years without an invite. Short of that sweet couple that brings me smoked meat ever now and then, even neighbors are sparse. So when old Satchel crawled beneath the fence and cocked his head toward the path at the end of the garden, I knew someone was close. His nose went up in the air, and that mouth twisted into a rounded shape just as he let out a howl.

I glanced toward the split-rail fence, then patted my sweater, feelin the revolver tucked beneath. I got the perfect "friend" to send a stranger packin. Come on. Just a little closer. I'd give him a few more steps whilst I dug up some fresh taters. I might blast his backside and I might not. That was to be determined.

"Minerva! Minerva Jane Jenkins?"

A tall, dark-haired man clad in a fancy suit and bowtie dodged his way through clots of red clay and into the garden. His jaw was lined by a thin, neatly trimmed beard, and his shoulders were broad. As he grew closer, I could see he was lean and skinny. Dressed right fancy. A city fella, without a doubt.

“You Minerva Jane Jenkins?”

I ignored him, pickin up a tater with my hoe and droppin it in my basket. Diggin taters was getting harder with every birth year that passed. I’d done made my way to ninety-four, and the hunch on my back wouldn’t straighten up these days. Still, Stately made good and sure his woman could manage for herself. He taught me farmin and, better yet, how to wield a weapon. I smiled and patted the revolver again. Don’t reckon my age mattered, just so I made my own way. I could do what I needed to do to get by.

The man inched closer. “Ma’am?” He pushed a dinky round hat away from his face. “I suppose you don’t hear me, considering your age and all.” He cleared his throat and raised his voice a notch. “Minerva Jenkins, I’m Delano Rankin. I’ve come here all the way from Lexington. You are Mrs. Jenkins? You have heard of Lexington? Right?”

I stabbed my hoe deep into the soil and yanked up another tater. Once I dumped it in my basket, I straightened as best these old bones could and pressed my finger into his chest. “Listen here. I’m old. I ain’t stupid. Not deaf either. No need to shout!” I shouldered him as I snagged my basket from the ground. He took a step back. “What the Sam Hill does a fancy-clad man like you want with me? I’m an old woman livin on the side of a mountain.”

“Well, are you Minerva Jenkins?”

I stopped at the edge of the garden and faced the man, shakin my head in disbelief. Was he slow? “You look like a right smart man, bein from the city an all. I’ve lost count of the times you’ve called my name. What do you want me to do? Tie a ribbon around your pinkie so you can remember? Reckon you got me unless you feel the need to call my name . . . again.” I pulled

my sweater back and showed Mr. Rankin the outline of my best friend through my apron. I winked so he knew I might be serious and I might not.

The color of his face went from pink to white. I went to chucklin. *City folk sucker ever time.*

I balanced my basket on my hip and motioned the man toward the house. It was hard to talk for my laughin. “Don’t get many folks up this direction. Makes for a little fun to mess with a body when they show up.” I set my basket on the porch and dusted off one of the three pine rockers Stately had built years ago. “Take a load off.” I winked again and grinned. I figured I might as well be polite despite his makin light of my age.

He hesitated, so I egged him on by pattin my best friend. Just when I didn’t think a man’s face could get any whiter, his did.

I slapped my leg and let out a loud laugh. “Oh, hogwash. Pull up a rocker and set down,” I said, and he did.

“Delano Rankin.” His hand shook as he gingerly extended it.

“Is that hand a peace offering?” I cocked my head.

“No, ma’am. Just trying to be friendly.”

I eyed his hand, then spit on mine and swiped the dirt onto my apron. Grabbin his hand, I shook right hard. Stately always told me a strong handshake shows a body you are right confident. And confident I was.

Mr. Rankin stared at his hand. I wasn’t sure if he stared because I had a little dirt on my palm or because I spit on my hand. Either way, he went from a right pale color to green around the gills.

“Mr. Rankin, what brings you to my mountain? What do you want with me? I’m done well past the marryin age by seventy years or so.” I batted my eyes and straightened the strings of hair that dripped down my face. Then I let out another laugh. “Lordy mercy. One thing is for sure. You done made me laugh more than I’ve laughed in the better part of thirty years.” I leaned closer to him. “What’s a man like you want with me?”

I stared straight into his eyes. The sight in my right eye was just

plain poor, but what good sight I had in my left eye went by the wayside years ago when my old rooster spurred my face. I hated the old bird, but I did try to give him the benefit of the doubt. The old cuss doubted his way right into my stew pot. Wasn't a thing I could do about it except take it as an apology for messin up my eye and appreciate his sacrifice to make dumplings. To this day, that eye bears a white cloud over the pupil. I reckon it looked a bit queer, but I didn't have no husband to look at me day in and day out anymore, good Lord rest his soul. Beauty was the least of my worries.

Mr. Rankin cleared his throat. "I've been doing some research, and you and your husband surfaced."

I cocked my head and twisted my mouth to the side. "Research? What is there to research on me? If you'd done very much searching, you'd know Stately passed on several years back."

"Uh, yes. I knew that. I'm sorry for your loss." Mr. Rankin wiggled in his seat.

"Whatta you need to know about a peaceable woman like me?" I let my sweater pull back just enough that my revolver peeked out. The stranger could see I might tease with him, but overall, I meant business.

"Well, it's about, uh . . ." He pointed at my revolver. "Can we put that away? I mean no harm."

I scooted closer to him. Looked him up one side then the other and covered my friend. "Just so you know, I got this little friend that takes right good care of me." I patted my apron and grinned.

"Yes, ma'am. I can see that."

"So I'm askin you once more, and it'll be the last time before I send you hightailing it back down the mountain. What sort of research are you doin on little ole me?" My eyes fluttered like a butterfly in spring just to make him antsy.

"Actually, it's more your husband I am interested in." Mr. Rankin swallowed hard, then coughed whilst he choked on his spit.

"Reeally? Well, Stately's been gone the better part of thirty

years. I never was right good with arithmetic. And just so you know, on the mountain, we don't talk raw about the dead."

Mr. Rankin pulled out a small pad of paper and pencil from his coat pocket. He touched the lead to his tongue and commenced to write. I could see he was a nervous sort, for he pressed so hard on that pencil, he snapped the lead. "Oh, I'm sorry. I have a knife. Let me sharpen this real quick."

He fumbled around in his pocket for a bit before I grew weary of his huntin and yanked the pencil from his hand. I pulled a knife from my boot and scraped the wood down to a new point. Showing it toward him, I grumbled, "Can you go any slower? Get to the point. Are you a youngin or a man?" I nudged his knee, teasing him.

He eyed me, lookin a little confused. "I'm thirty. I think that qualifies me as a man. Is it different on the mountain?"

I shook my head. Poor city boy, didn't know how to take this old mountain granny. I snickered. Momma always taught me it was best a stranger couldn't cipher the difference betwixt teasing and serious. I could see I had the gentleman puzzled.

"The point," I said. "Don't you catch it, or did it fly over your head like a hawk after a squirrel?" I rolled my fingers into a gentle fist and tapped his head.

He touched the pencil tip to his tongue again and scribbled the number one on the page. "I'm tryin to get some facts on a story about a box of gold."

"Gold?" I raised my brow. "Well now, ain't that just something. You come all this way to ask *me* about a box of gold?" I pointed at my rickety house. "You can see I've spent it well. The holes were a gift from the woodpeckers." I grinned, right proud of my comeback.

"I can see you're quite the character. Real sense of humor." He grunted out a fake laugh. "About the box. I know this gold came from a vein of gold on the Ohio River, down by Lexington. It was claimed by the Bishop family, who said a box went missing after your husband and a friend worked their land."

My nose flared. “Well, Mr. Rankin, I’m born and raised a Kentucky girl, and the truth be known, if I was ever caught lyin, my daddy woulda horsewhipped me. I got no idea what you’re talkin about. That’s the truth as I know it. And you still ain’t answered my question about why you come here.”

“Yes, I . . . I’m getting to that. I have information that your husband and his friend might have taken that box of gold and stashed it away for safekeeping. Keeping it for themselves would have been tempting, especially since the Bishops were not known for being good to their farmhands. There are all sorts of tales about what happened to the gold, but only this one seemed to have any worth.”

A snarl twisted my lip. “Worth? Ha! Like I told you, Mr. Rankin. Just look at my cabin. Does it look like I have a box of gold? Stately’s been gone long enough that if they were even a hint of gold, don’t you think I’d have spruced up my place? At least fixed the holes, bought me some frilly pantaloons. Looks like common sense has left you.”

“No, ma’am. But my research shows me that one Stately Jenkins”—he flipped through his pad to a page of notes—“turned up missing along with one Allan Gumble, and that they were last seen in Lexington bragging about their worth at a tavern.”

I furrowed my brow and come close to Mr. Rankin’s face. My mouth twisted, and before I could stop myself, a puff of air and spit flew out. “Bull!”