

A Black Mountain Mystery

Chapter One

I broke a heart or two, burned some bridges, and made Pa mad when I left home years before, so after my long absence I hesitated when I got the word about the accident and I'd have to visit Black Mountain. Knowing the appearance of his little sister would be expected I swallowed my pride and made the trip into the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains to bury my big brother, Early Shaw.

I arrived in the midst of a welcomed Indian summer that descended over the dark hills to break an early cold snap. A spectacular scene of the season greeted me as fall leaves covered the forest landscape in orange, yellow, and brown blends. An occasional red hue crowded in the oak foliage, nature acting like a mad painter working from half a palette, finding only earth hues staring up at her.

After the long drive I sat in my Jeep in front of the house of my brother's new widow, delaying the inevitable, hoping that if I waited long enough maybe I'd awake from the bad mountain dream. My whole life the mountain seemed to call to me and I tried my best to ignore the voice. I escaped the persistent cry several times, first going away to college with the thought of maybe after graduating I'd move to New York to be a photojournalist, but like an old hound dog that follows a raccoon in the night, the incessant howl followed me no matter where I went, so there I sat, back home.

Becky must have heard the Jeep's tires on the gravel drive that led up to their house nestled in a clearing in the woods abutting the Pisgah National Forest. Coming out on the porch she stood waiting on me.

Becky had followed Early to college, but she made him wait before she'd agree to marry the wild man. They'd been going with each other since high school and she knew him like a book, so knew he needed time to settle down. She graduated then stayed over a year and got her teaching certificate. She took her time moving back home, ignoring the call, teaching a year in the city. In the meantime Early started work at the Black Mountain Town Police, but she gave in after he asked her for the hundredth time, maybe wanting Early more than wanting to stay away. I was doing a tour in Afghanistan when they ran off to Myrtle Beach to get married.

I climbed out of the Jeep and walked on a brick paved path toward her.

"Girl," she said to me, "what took you?"

"I came on as soon as I could," I answered, climbing the porch steps. When I got within a few feet she surprised me and rushed into my arms. "Not like you live around the block." I told her feeling uncomfortable in the arms of my brother's widow, wondering if we would still be some type of sisters without Early to bind us.

Becky and I were never close. Her star just shown too bright in that town to try to match, so I resented her and her hold on my big brother. Short like me, she kept her dark hair long and more times than not like me, braided and hanging long down her back.

Everything she wore looked neat and trim on her whereas I favored the jean, boots, and frumpy look of the local mountain woman, but I can clean up okay if needed. Unlike me she carried a face full of freckles and even though the years added a few lines to her face, she somehow maintained a trim figure without the aid of a gym membership whereas I jogged semi regularly to keep the extra pounds at bay.

“I can’t believe it,” I told her, pushing back from her, tears filling my eyes.

“I know,” she said her voice steady, her dark blue eyes dry and focused straight on me. “Like a bad dream that sucks the air out of your head and forces you awake.”

She let me go and turning about in the entryway said, “A real nightmare.” Walking through the short hall toward the kitchen and family room beyond she added, “I feel like he’s going to come home any minute and sit down and pour a cup of coffee.”

“How are the boys?” I asked, following, taking notice of a faded red energy aura trailing behind her, a sign I knew for an unsettled soul.

Mama explained to me about my ability to read energy auras when I turned five years old, up until then I just thought everyone could see them. Mama told me they are a result of a problem birth I went through and the treatment from Louise Looking Bird, an old Cherokee woman midwife, from Laurel Ridge. Louise and her family farmed an old homestead on a narrow bluff overlooking the southern bank of the Swannanoa River. People say Louise and her people been living up there since before the first settlers came into the valley and everyone knew Louise knew the native magic of herbs and potions.

I use my gift of aura reading in my portrait photography. I learned to capture the essence of a person in a photo by clicking the shutter of the camera right at the moment of the aura’s brightest glow. The resulting image of the person pulses energy, almost alive, like they are about to take a breath and move. My newspaper editor thinks my photos of erstwhile interesting farmers and the down trodden area citizens sell enough papers to justify the meager salary they pay me. He says my photos captured the real essence of a person’s soul. I wouldn’t go that far. I mean, I love my work, but there are other things important about being able to read auras. One of the side results of my gift is being able to see the familiar dark pink aura of a person. When I see that I know people are lying.

“The boys are over to Mama’s,” Becky explained about her and Early’s four boys. Becky looked as much the pert teenager she used to be. She wore black slacks, black flats, and a black sweater, but her beauty transcended her attempt at mourning. She took a seat in one of the high stools that surrounded a long white granite topped island that separated the kitchen from the new family room addition. The kitchen sported modern stainless steel appliances and white cabinets with matching granite tops and I wondered if the granite came off the mountain and how did Early pay for the addition on his small town salary.

“I didn’t want them in the middle of this,” she explained about her boys, looking over my head, maybe looking back into the past. “Growing up I loved the farm. You know it’s peaceful there and Little Earl has been the adult man around here for a while, so he’ll talk to the others.” Snapping back to the present she smiled wide at me and said, “I’ll go over

there again tonight. We've been sleeping down in their basement, on the foldout in sleeping bags, in front of a fire, it's been fun."

Book shelves lined the family room and housed a vast collection of their four son's photos; boys in football uniforms and holding baseball bats. Assorted trophies, plaques and medals rounded out the display. A gun cabinet with glass door stood in a corner of the room, its contents bursting. Memories of Early settled over the room like left over clouds from a winter storm.

"So," I said, getting to the question that had been bothering me since I heard about Early, "What all happened?"

"Well," she began, getting up and moving to the counter where a drip machine held a pot of dark coffee. She picked up the pot and waved it at me. I nodded my head and she pulled a clean mug down from a cabinet and filled that one and another on the counter. "Well, like I told you, looks like Early drove his cruiser off Moore's Curve."

"I don't know how."

"Just an accident." she said and returning to the island put my coffee mug down in front of me.

"No, ma'am, I don't see Early driving through that curve just like that. I'm sure Early drove that curve twenty times a week since his teenage years."

"Well, you know it can be tricky at night."

"Not for Early."

"What else?"

What else indeed, I thought, what else could it have been, but an accident. Still...

My brother Early Shaw fit the image of the southern "good ole boy". He smiled bright and wide, showing off a full set of teeth. He kept his hair buzzed like some Marine; although he didn't serve because of his busted knee he earned playing football. He took after the Shaw family men, tall with piercing gray eyes, his body big and heavy with muscle, though with age he softened up some. Early liked to joke; he liked to joke a lot. He thought of life as a game; like football, like college, like love; just games and once you knew the rules you could play to win. Early smiled easily and laughed his way through trouble and I loved him, more than I should.

"Well, I'd like to find out a bit more about this so called accident. In the meantime, is there anything I can do?"

"No, not much, town fathers are taking care of everything since he died on city time and all."

"You mean, Granddaddy Shaw!"

"Who else?"

The Shaw family ran the lumber mill in Black Mountain and most everyone worked for the mill, did business with the mill, or somehow served employees of the mill. As far as mill people were concerned, your life began and ended at Shaw Mill. There are Shaws all over the valley, my pa included. Folk in town call the head of the Shaw family,

Granddaddy Shaw, although for most it is not a term of endearment. Back during the depression a lot of folk moved up to Black Mountain to work at the Shaw's lumber mill. Soon all the men who worked at the mill became Shaw men. I guess taking the Shaw name was just easier than trying to explain a past that didn't exist anymore.

"So, what's happening with the investigation?"

"Well..."

"Well what?"

"Well, like I said, they figure Early got to driving fast, faster than he should have, so there's nothing to investigate. Besides, there are only two other officers and they can't investigate anything."

"What about the other officers?"

"There's only two others."

"Two?"

"That's right. The town cut the department's budget last year and let the four oldest officers go, leaving the two newest. Early kept one in the office and one off, rotating them, but he performed the real leg work."

"How does the town expect to run a department with three men?"

"I don't know, Emma, but seemed like the town budget director kept on Early's back, like trying to make him quit."

It took a few years but Early moved up the ranks at the BMPD and got to a level where it paid enough to start a family. He used a home design package to build their rancher, hiring a dozer to blaze a road connecting the house site to the paved frontage. He situated the front of the house west so he could watch the sun set in the evenings. The kitchen took up the back of the house and Becky could see the sun rise over the mountain through the sliding doors from her breakfast table. When Chief Harold Shaw retired after his 30 years Early took over, although it didn't pay much.

"Okay, okay," I said, somewhat agitated, storing that information for later but trying to stay focused, "I just don't understand it," I said, "Early was too good behind the wheel to have an accident like that."

"Well, he hadn't been himself for a while now, I guess not as sharp."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, his work and all, and lately he'd been getting these headaches. I tried to get him to see the doctor but he'd just laugh at me and take some aspirin."

"He could be stubborn."

"Like all the Shaws."

"I guess..."

Early and I grew up with the Shaw name and although I tried to ignore it, Early embraced it. Though older than me, Early and I got along fine, more than a brother, he looked after me dragging me all over the mountain. I think he wanted to prepare me for life when Mama and Pa wouldn't be around.

We grew up poor but loved in the backward little town, running in the mountains, fishing, playing. Early and I used to run with the local Cherokee youth, tracking, camping out. I learned to shoot a rifle from Early, learned to fight back when needed, and learned to be independent, be distrustful. Unfortunately, being wary made for a lonely life, made me miss opportunities at love that I maybe regretted. I'd find it hard to admit that to anyone, anyone in Black Mountain.

When I got old enough, I plotted my escape from town, to something else, anything else. Black Mountain released its native progeny begrudgingly, smothering them in tradition, hoarding them like a hound dog stockpiles bones for gnawing on later.

Mama wanted me to go to college. I think she thought I'd meet a rich boy and get married since I'm cute and all but that hasn't worked out yet, although I came close one time.

I interrupted my college years following a boyfriend and joining the Army Reserves and deployed twice with my unit to Afghanistan. I know, I know, but you know how love works. My mama said on a list of dumb things I could have done it stood pretty high up the ladder, but you know how mothers think. I think Pa was right proud of my service since he served in Vietnam, although he didn't like to talk about it.

After my commitment ended I'd seen enough death so didn't re-enlist and went west. I worked traveling between all the national parks taking pictures, enjoying the peace and quiet of nature again, and trying to forget everything I saw while serving. I sold a few photos to nature magazines to finance my gas, and living out of my Jeep managed to stay away from my home state for several more years. About ten years ago I surrendered to the mountain's call and moved home to finish up my college degree. I discovered there was more to growing up than just running off.

After graduating I split the difference between the mountains and the sea and took a gig at the big newspaper in the Piedmont where a friend of mine worked as an assistant editor. Assigned to the sports department I shoot stills of the big games, video for the paper's web site, and on occasion I fill in on the crime scene beat. I wasn't entirely clear of the mountains but far enough away I didn't hear the incessant sound.

"So," Becky asked me, bringing me back to the present, "are you thinking about looking into it?"

"I might, I just don't see it, an accident I mean."

"You'll have to deal with Granddaddy you know."

"I know."

"Well, I guess you been told."

After we both stayed quiet for a minute she asked me, "So, how's your pa taking it?"

"I don't know," I confessed, returning my thoughts to the present, feeling guilty. "I haven't seen him yet."

"Emma!"

"Now, I came here first thing."

“Well, you need to look in on him.”

“I know, I know...I’m going over there next.”

“Look, he’s cleaned up now.”

“Has he?”

“He has, last time he came over to visit the boys I think he even took a bath.”

“That is a change.”

“You know he’s gone back to the Church.”

“I think I heard that.”

“Yep, he’s even doing some preaching.”

That I hadn’t heard.

Chapter Two

Home

The mountain where we grew up stands at the southern end of the Blue Ridge range, holding grand along the horizon, and dwarfing the little town. The mountain's southern exposure is covered in thick laurel, crowding out any other plant growth, leaving its face a dark green, masked sentry over the town.

The big interstate connector bypassed the town back in the late 70s, leaving the town residents in a blissful time warp, back before the internet brought the world crashing onto Main Street like a parade you weren't invited to but still had to sit and watch. To tell the truth the town folk liked it that way. The night sky filled with stars as the evening hue turned from gray black to pitch. The mountain filtered out the ambulant light and folks living on the north side could view God's nightly heaven in its entirety, lighting up eternity.

It'd been some time since I'd been to Pa's. On a previous visit to town I stayed with Becky and Early and didn't even see the man. Since Mama died I just couldn't bring myself to visit. Her memory hovered over the house and me. Pa let himself go, stopped bathing, letting the house go to decrepit. I couldn't stand the mess and dirt, and this from a gal that doesn't know one end of a vacuum from another.

I approached the dirt road that marked the beginning of the family land, and from the bend in the road at the top of the little rise, I could see a bright light coming from the kitchen window at the front of the cedar slat sided small house. I pulled up the drive and stopped next to his beat up brown truck. I pulled my old back pack with my personal stuff from the back seat and walked up the gravel path to the wooden steps that led up to the narrow front porch that Pa built for mama when we were young. Pa opened the door before I knocked.

"I wondered when you'd come," he said. The night shadow engulfed him, a silhouette between the past and present. I couldn't mistake his voice, deep like a country music singer that somehow found a range below base, or his unique orange aura that claimed his troubled soul.

"Hey, Pa!" I greeted the man, going into his arms.

"Well," he said after we held each other for a short spell, wiping back his own tears. Stepping out on the porch and to the side so I could pass him through the doorway he said, "Come on in if you're going to."

The sitting area and adjacent kitchen appeared as I remembered with a host of memories of bright, happy days filling the space. The rooms stood spotless which surprised me since as far back as I could remember Mama did all the house cleaning. Fact is I don't recall Pa did anything in the kitchen besides eat.

"Crazy thing!" he said closing the door after I entered and then leading me to the

kitchen table where a coffee mug stood on a checkered place mat. The bare bulb light above shone down on a small Bible sitting open. I sat opposite his place as he retreated to the short counter.

Used to be Mama carried the only Bible in the family. People knew if you met her on the sidewalk in town then you'd better be ready for a mini revival on your life of sin and the forgiveness that awaited those who confessed. People knew in town that if mama prayed over you good things would happen, if you believed that kind of thing. Oh, she could drag us off to preaching Sundays, even get me to put on a dress, but more times than not Pa would find a way to be off somewhere, hunting or fishing.

Mama would tell him, *"You know, the Lord is fishing for men, I'm sure if he caught you he'd be keeping you."*

Pa would say, *"He better bring a strong net then, Darling, because I'd like to wiggle out if not."*

"Too late for coffee," he offered me, breaking my reminiscing.

"No, I'm so tired nothing could keep me up."

He filled a heavy mug with a dark brew from an old percolator and placing it in front of me said, "I'm glad your mama wasn't here to see this."

By the color in his face I could see Pa had been taking care of his self and by the red in his eyes I could see he'd been crying. "I know," I said, sipping from the cup, holding back my own tears, "it would have broken her heart for sure."

"You pretty as ever, girl," he said with a slight smile. He wore a shirt that though clean, appeared as wrinkled as possible. I could see his white sock covered feet and worn bedroom shoes beneath his faded, drawn up blue jeans. A belt, taken in a notch or two, attempted to hold up his pants. "Life in the city okay with you?" he asked and tried to smile through a weak grin, grown taught I imagined with the worry over Early's premature demise.

"Sure, I love my work, but you know me and the next job opportunity are only an adventure away."

"Just remember, next time you run off, try to stay closer to home."

"I will ... I'm not against you Pa."

"Just the Mountain?"

"Is doesn't hold me like before."

"You and your brother used to like the mountain camping out," he said taking a seat. "It used to worry your mama sick, you two by yourselves, you a girl. Do you know," he said laughing, "she made me follow you out first few times you two camped overnight by yourselves?"

"What?"

"Yes, ma'am, oh, I stayed a ways off each time, close enough to keep an eye on you all but not so close you would know. She didn't worry about your brother but she worried over you. One time it took to raining and I about come down with pneumonia staying out

in it all night.”

I didn't know that although I knew Mama worried.

“Yes sir, she loved you two alright and did her best by you. This would have killed her, losing Early.”

Of course Mama's memory still rested heavy on the little house, like a birthmark you might wish away but reality keeps it planted deep. Mama sewed the cover for the chair cushion I sat on and wove the area rug underneath my feet. The china hutch held her collection of plates she brought up from her mama's house and two rows of photo albums crowded the lower shelves. A bunch of framed photos of Early from his playing days, a couple of others from our graduations, and one of me in uniform crowded any vacant spaces. An assortment of framed needle points filled the lone inner wall, one read, *“You Only Live Once So Live in the Mountains!”*

The pretty roll top desk she loved stood where it stood for 25 years. Made of oak it belonged to her father and she kept books and writing stuff in there for our school work.

One spring evening during high school, after the night cooled the air, we were sitting at the kitchen table. Darning an old pair of socks and drinking coffee, Mama asked me about my homework. I told her about the assignment our English teacher gave us.

“What assignment?” she asked.

“We're studying a dumb play.”

“What play?”

“Romeo and Juliet.”

“Now Emma Louise,” she said putting down the socks. She liked to include my middle name when addressing me on something important, “That's a wonderful story. You know, undying love between man and woman. How they love each other so much that they can't bear the thought of living without each other so they would rather not live at all. Now that's real love.”

“You ever feel that kind of love, Mama?”

Her elbows were resting on the table top and her hands held her chin. She looked pretty as a teenager with a hint of starlight in her eyes and a lavender aura enveloping her.

“Yes, Emma Louise,” she said with a smile, sipping from her cup, and getting back to those old socks, “about your pa, you bet, since we first met, but just don't tell him or he might get a big head.”

When we were young Pa worked up at the mill at night and by day farmed the land for corn and soy bean we used for feed for the few cattle we kept. Mama scratched out a vegetable garden in season and took in laundry year round. She liked to grow tomatoes and in season she combined the slices of a red Cherokee Purple with leaf lettuce on white bread for her favorite sandwich. I'd forgotten how quiet the night could be around the house. A memory rushed at me. A memory of Mama, humming some tune, as she worked at the sink, a contented smile on her face as she stared out the window at the sunset and the end of another hard but successful day of just living.

“So did you hear what happened?” Pa asked me, breaking my memory tour.

“Some, Becky told me. Have you talked to the Police?”

“No, I can’t get anyone to return my calls, like they’re not interested in explaining it.”

“That’s kind of what I gather. What have you heard around town?”

“Just that he went off Moore’s curve and drown.”

“I can’t figure it like that,” I said sipping coffee, “I sure don’t see Early just going off that curve on his own.”

“I know, Early been driving that curve his whole life. I bet he could drive it blind folded.”

After we both stewed for a while over the circumstances of Early’s accidental death Pa asked, “You talk to Becky about the arrangements?”

“I talked with her before coming over here but she said the town is handling the details.”

“The mayor?”

“Him and Granddaddy,” I said getting up from the table and stretching my arms out and up over my head. “I’ll be going down to town to talk to the mayor in the morning, got a few questions for him, but for now ... now I’m ready for bed.”

“I doubt you get much out of them.”

“Why’s that?”

“Early and the Shaws been at one another for a couple of years now.”

“About what?”

“Well, sometime ago, two years or more now, Granddaddy Shaw up and shot a fellow up at the mill.”

“He what?”

“That’s right, shot him bad. They caught this shop manager up there with his hand in the petty cash and Granddaddy Lawrence confronted the man in the office. Hear tell the man, high on drugs and pills, charged Granddaddy. Well, Granddaddy pulled down the old squirrel gun they keep in the office, you know for the coons and those coyotes we been seeing the last few years, and anyway, when the man came at Granddaddy he shot him once in the chest.”

“Kill him?”

“Not right off, but the man up and died few days later.”

“What happened?”

“Well the man’s people put up a stink and called on Early to investigate. Early looked into it to please them even though he knew it wouldn’t amount to anything. The mayor didn’t like it, Early going around asking the family questions and interviewing everyone up at the mill. Things turned bad between the Shaws and Early that day and stayed that way till now.”

“Till now?”

“Yeah,” Pa said, getting up from the table and leading me down the short hall to my

old room, “looks like the Shaws won’t need to worry none about your brother anymore.”

My room looked like it did the day I left for State, only smaller. Several shelves lined the walls and held an assortment of my high school memorabilia. A red State bed spread covered the bed and a quilt of many colors that mama made lay across the foot of the mattress.

“I put clean sheets on your bed, Emma,” Pa said moving in front of me and switching on a small light sitting on a narrow table by the bed, “I thought you might stay over.”

I reached out to my pa and we hugged again. It’d been a while since he hugged me like that. For years I couldn’t bring myself to come back up to visit, not since Mama died.

“You know, Pa,” I told the man, “you can’t blame yourself for Mama’s dying. It wasn’t your fault. Don’t take it so hard.” Mama and Pa told me a thousand times I was the biggest and best surprise when I came along. I think Ma and Pa liked having a daughter, sort of a balance with Early, so loved me more than they should.

“I know. I’ve been trying harder and Pastor Bennett’s been helping.”

“Say,” I said to him, using the sleeve of my sweat shirt to wipe tears from my eyes, “what’s this I hear about you taking to preaching?”

“I speak a spell now and then. Pastor lets me lead our Sunday school class. You know the old people group.”

“I’d like to hear that, Pa, I’d like to hear that for sure.”

“Well, maybe Sunday next.”

“I don’t know about this week, Pa,” I told him. “With everything going on and having to deal with the Shaws and all, come the end of the week, I might be up to my neck in sin.”