

Appalachian Elementals One

CLEANING HOUSE

AN APPALACHIAN CONTEMPORARY FANTASY

JEANNE G'FELLERS



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A Note from the Author

The Appalachian (properly pronounced Ap-pa-latch-un) people are a complicated mix of Scots-Irish, British, German, and Native American traditions blended with a whopping-big serving of Protestant Christian beliefs.

We're often misunderstood and commonly stereotyped by outsiders who know very little about our culture. That said, *Cleaning House* embraces the queer Appalachian experience, a unique blending of resistance, acceptance, and perseverance. We, like the rest of Appalachia, are as hearty as they come, and, yes, it is entirely possible to get our red on or dander up (pick your poison), though generally in the liberal sense. Again, we're unique and complicated. We're rainbow pinpoints in a red, mountainous sea, but we live here happily because we're Appalachian folk. Some of us will never leave these mountains. Some leave and never come back. But many of us, like myself, leave only to return because our lives aren't right once we leave the mountains. Something is missing. We're lost. Part of us dies when we leave because our roots run from the bottom of New River Gorge to the top of Mount Mitchell.

We're poor and middle class. We're educated and high school dropouts. We're coal miners, teachers, convenience store employees, doctors, and nurses. We're able-bodied, disabled, multi-faith, and multi-hued, but we all have one thing in common— our traditions.

Cleaning House is primarily set in Washington County, Tennessee,

where I was born and raised. While Washington County rests in the Southern Appalachian foothills, I have also lived and worked in the more rural and mountainous settings of southern Carter County, Tennessee, and McDowell County, West Virginia. Neither of those locations is for the faint of heart, but the people there are amazingly resilient.

In short, I am an Appalachian woman and proud of it.

I would also like to mention the use of Appalachian Granny Magic alongside European and neopagan witchcraft in *Cleaning House*. While Appalachian Granny Magic has its beginnings in both European and Native American traditions, it is firmly rooted in Protestant Christian beliefs. The characters in *Cleaning House* embrace both Granny Magic and witchcraft in the form of paganism because their family lineage has embraced both paths, creating a unique belief system that is on the rise in Appalachia. Many, but by no means all, Appalachian witches are as likely to call on the Holy Trinity as they are to call on Gaia or the Goddess, a seeming conflict, but it isn't to the practitioners. They plant by the signs, use natural means for both medicinal and magical purposes, and practice water-witching as a means of finding a viable water source, so why wouldn't they pray to the God of their raising alongside the gods of their path? With this knowledge, the reader should also realize that the herbal remedies and medical procedures described in *Cleaning House* are in no way a recommendation for their usage. Medical care should be obtained from a qualified medical professional and never be based on something you read in a work of fiction.

As for the non-human characters in *Cleaning House*— please

remember that this is a contemporary fantasy novel, a work of fiction, so the liberties are mine, the author's, to take. But if you don't believe in fey or wee people, find a quiet, wooded spot somewhere, relax, and open your eyes to the possibilities. You might be surprised by what you find.

The Cleaning House Playlist

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nu55xS1TdoU&list=PLlfRTJ_vkiJfDcaJxPWts4wq_dSeqZBEe

About the Cherokee Language

A phonetic form of the Cherokee (Tsalagi) language is used in portions of *Cleaning House*. The written form of Cherokee is polysynthetic, meaning a single word may well represent several words or even an entire sentence. Written Cherokee also employs a syllabary that was first created in the early nineteenth century by Sequoyah. Each symbol represents a syllable instead of a letter sound. The written form would not be recognizable to non-Cherokee speakers, employs a unique font setting, and would generally confuse readers.

That said, the unfamiliar terms used are, indeed, the Tsalagi language, and not wholly created for the Appalachian Elementals series. The author of *Cleaning House* encourages readers to explore the history of the Cherokee people and their language through competent online and print sources.

Here are two such sources that were used for *Cleaning House*.

<http://www.cherokee.org>

<http://www.native-languages.org/cherokee.htm#language>

Acknowledgments

While I can safely say I am familiar with many of the cultural and magical traditions of Appalachia, I admittedly had help with a few of the finer points. As such, I would like to acknowledge the following people for their input:

-Ian Allan, Mountain Witch, provided the information concerning snake bones and their power that I used in Chapter Thirty-Four, the tradition of blackbirds foretelling death that can be found in Chapter Thirty-Seven, and the information concerning what I call witch-nailing which appears in Chapters Thirty through Thirty-Four. All this information derives from Ian's workshop "Introduction to Appalachian Granny Magic" and the provided handout. Readers can find out more about Ian Allen, Mountain Witch, via the following source:

<https://www.facebook.com/AppalachianWitchery>

- Anne G'Fellers-Mason, my sister, historian, and the Special Projects Coordinator for The Heritage Alliance, for her contributions concerning the Civil War era in Northeast Tennessee. Readers can find out more about The Heritage Alliance via the following source:

<http://www.heritageall.org>

-Jake Richards (Dr. Henny), Conjure Doctor of Jonesborough, Tennessee, provided information concerning rolling stones for answers (a Tsalagi tradition) as used in Chapter Thirteen and dividing herb bundles and placing them in the water to see if they'll be effective as used in Chapter Thirty-Two. Readers can find out more about Jake Richards (Dr. Henny), Conjure Doctor of Jonesborough, Tennessee, through his blog: *Holy*

Stones and Iron Bones.

<https://littlechicagoconjure13.wordpress.com>

-Information concerning the Cherokee presence around Embreeville Mountain and their use of mineral deposits derive from “A Historical Overview of the Bumpass Cove Landfill Controversy, 1972-2002” by Robert Clinton Marsh III available at:

<https://dc.etsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1848&context=etd>

Thanks, Ian, Anne, and Jake, for your vast knowledge, and an appreciative nod to Clinton Marsh III for his hard work and to East Tennessee State University for giving public access to such valuable information via its Digital Commons.

This is but the first novel in the Appalachian Elementals series, so I’ll probably be referring to your wisdom again.

-Jeanne G’Fellers

Prologue

“**H**ave you seen him?”

Wailing Woman walks Long Man’s banks every night in search of her son. She asks the catfish, the bears, the Yvwitsunastiga, and the ever-watching spirits then screams up the mountainside and cries into the river, begging for answers, sending grief-filled bubbles downstream so others can hear her pain.

“Have you seen Dustu Usdi?”

“Have you seen my only child?”

“Have you seen my son?”

The catfish stare, the bears shake their heads and lumber away, but the spirits...

“Forget, Mother. It is the only way.”

Wailing woman walks from Summer to Winter then back again, leaving no more tracks in the river sand than Dustu Usdi had, becoming just as lost. A shadow of what was. A cry from the past.

Have you seen him?

Have you seen my son?

Can you bring him back to me?

His life has just begun.

Chapter One

Everything You Thought You Knew

July 17, 2017

“**F**ourteen. **F**ifteen.” Centenary Rhodes counted the bills in her hand a second time and shoved them back into the front pocket of her cargo pants. She had fifteen dollars left after she paid her rent. Fifteen dollars for food and the bus. She sighed and turned away from the hamburger joint whose door she’d darkened. “Beans and rice it is... again.”

She skipped the bus— too much money— and walked the two miles back to her shabby one-room North Chicago apartment, opting for the alley that shortened the last six blocks to four, ignoring the catcalls from the construction site at the far end.

Short, dirty-blond hair styled into an undercut, black, heavy-framed glasses that hid soft blue eyes, and baggy pants that masked what little curve her large-boned frame had managed to achieve. She wore a loose t-shirt over her top-half and a ball cap with a brim bent much like her current attitude. Cent was skinny but strong nonetheless, a tough-as-nails Appalachian woman, a concept no one in North Chicago seemed able to grasp. *Those idiots will whistle at anything on two legs.*

She turned on her size twelve sneakers to jog across the street, down the block, picking up her pace the last two blocks to her apartment when it began raining, closing the progression of bolts and chains on her front door before she leaned against it to stare wearily at her dingy apartment. The marble flooring and Art Deco lighting in the corridor were still pretty, but they didn’t match the cracked plaster walls. The old bank had once been grand, but now...

“What a dump.” Still, it was all she could afford on two part-time jobs. Cent threw her coat over the single dinette chair and flung herself, face-down, over the sheet-draped, worn plaid couch that served as both her living space and bed. Not even a fold-out. She’d finagle one eventually, but until then she’d sleep solo. Always solo. “Who’d want to come back here, anyway?” Her romantic and job prospects had been abysmal since she’d lost her full-time accountant job in a corporate down-size. For the past year, she’d divided her time between a local bodega and a small computer repair shop. Both bosses were pricks, and the bodega owner’s

wife kept telling her that she'd find herself a good man if she'd try.

“You're a smart girl, too smart to attract a man, so dumb it down and pretty yourself up. Put on some makeup. Grow your hair. You can't find gold without putting a bit of polish on yourself.”

Forget that. Take me as I am or not at all. Cent kicked off her shoes and rolled so she faced the cracked, plaster ceiling. She'd graduated top of her class at the University of Chicago and knew account management inside and out. Cent could do absolute magic with numbers and tell you exactly where things were going right or wrong in your financial life. But, even so, the ability to manage her own numbers now evaded her. She was in over her head and nearly bankrupt. Her monetary life was in shambles, and she knew you had to have good credit yourself to manage other people's money. “If I can't be myself then—” She startled when something struck the door four times. “What the—” Cent rolled off the couch and plodded to the door in sock-feet. “Who is it?” She peered through the peephole.

“Delivery for Centenary Rhodes.” The messenger held up the envelope that'd been tucked under their arm. Ruddy-brown, almost earth-toned skin, hair that went everywhere but was short enough to go nowhere— this messenger was, well, different on so many levels. And, their, yes, their. She'd learned long ago not to make assumptions about anyone, especially those she found herself attracted to.

Interesting. “Lemme see your ID.”

“Sure.” The messenger held up the card tethered to their waist. “I need your signature.”

“Gimme a moment.” Cent opened the locks and chains slower than she'd closed them.

Another summons. It has to be. She'd been sued three times in the last two months for debts she accrued during her good job. A ten-thousand-dollar judgment for the car. Another thousand for breaking her lease before she was evicted. She'd been forced to adopt the blood-from-a-turnip method of dealing with her debt spiral. *You can't get what I don't have to begin with.*

“Sign here.” The messenger held out an old-fashioned, lined-paper signature board. “Nice neighborhood.” Their voice held a muddled accent. Maybe European, but Cent couldn't be certain. “I would not want to be here after dark.”

“You and me both.” Cent took the envelope when the messenger held it out. “Thanks.” Her heart fluttered when she peered up into their face to see piercing dark brown eyes that were inquisitive, seeking but easily humored by the way one brow over those eyes cocked.

“Make certain you lock up tight.” The messenger lingered at the door to stare back at her. “Can I do anything else for you?”

Are they flirting with me? Cent looked down then back up, startling when she saw the messenger’s eyes were still on her. Taller than she was, which was unusual, a bit thick at the waist, but it was clearly muscle. A puzzle, and an attractive one at that. There was something calming about this person’s eyes. Something familiar Cent couldn’t quite place. *They’re damn-near twice my size.* The realization that such strength stood so close made her skin prickle in a way she’d come to miss. *No wonder they’re on this route.* “No, um, thanks.”

“Have a good day.” The messenger turned down the hall, leaving Cent to watch their floor-gliding strides until they reached the stairs.

“You too.”

“Cute accent, by the way.” The messenger stopped at the stairhead to smile at her then descended without saying more.

“I thought you were into men.” Mrs. Donright, 3J, stared at Cent from between the chains securing her door. “That was a woman, right?”

“Mind your own business.” Cent slammed her door closed and turned to press her back against it. *Was that a man or a woman or...?* Hell, she didn’t care. They were hot, and they’d flirted with her. That was enough. She looked out her peephole and sighed, securing every lock and chain before she turned to stare at the envelope. The messenger had left soft-dirt fingerprints along its edge. *They must work in a plant nursery or something, too.*

Maybe I should take up gardening.

Being close and sweaty, their hands touching as they worked side-by-side. Cent shivered as she scrutinized the envelope. “It’s too thin to be a summons.” She went to the kitchen for the scissors but couldn’t find them, so she opted for a paring knife, sliding it beneath the taped flap to open the envelope, pulling out a single, handwritten page.

Dear Centenary,

I need you to come home to help me clean up the homestead for sale. I’ll keep you fed, and you can stay there or at my house until it’s sold.

Mr. Jones at Dryler’s said he could use you ten hours a week, so that’ll give you some money too.

And some collections service man came by the other day to serve you papers. I gave him a fake address in Carter County so he'd go away.

Never mind him or what your mama said last time you spoke to her.

Just get yourself home.

I need your help.

Love,

Aunt Tess

P.S. Quit changing your phone number.

Cent read the letter twice more, smirking when she realized she'd read it in Aunt Tess' thick, Southern Appalachian accent.

"I'm not going back to Hare Creek, Aunt Tess, but I'll give you a call just the same." Cent pulled her phone from her pocket and clicked the contact list, praying her mother or another family member didn't reach the phone before Tess did

END EXCERPT