

*An Appalachian Novel*

---

# MERCY'S RAIN



CINDY K. SPROLES

# Mercy Roller knows her name is a lie

Married and widowed at thirteen, a mother and childless at fifteen, Mercy has spent her life under the authority of her abusive father, the Pastor. The Pastor rules both her family and the community around Wadalow Mountain, Tennessee. Not a single person seems capable of standing up to the man who calls his sinful actions “righteous,” that is, until Mercy takes matters into her own hands.

Kicked out of her home by her grieving mother, Mercy finds her way to the other side of the mountain where she slowly learns that true righteousness has nothing evil about it—and that there might be room for her own stained and shattered soul to find shelter, and even love.

An unforgettable story, *Mercy’s Rain* transports readers to nineteenth-century Appalachia, revealing the thorny path from bitterness to forgiveness.

“Cindy writes from the heart about the people she knows, in the place where she lives, all on journeys of faith and ultimately redemption.”

—ADRIANA TRIGIANI, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Big Stone Gap*

“A beautifully written story of man’s depravity and God’s mercy. Its pages are filled with memorable characters and gripping scenes, and at its heart is a message you won’t soon forget.”

—ANN TATLOCK, Christy Award winner and author of *Promises to Keep*



**CINDY K. SPROLES** is an author and speaker. Her devotions are published in newspapers across the country. Cindy is a teacher at Christian writers conferences and women’s conferences nationwide. She spent her formative years showing off her beloved Appalachian Mountains to others, and she and her family still live in the mountains of East Tennessee. Visit Cindy at [cindysproles.com](http://cindysproles.com).

FICTION / Christian

ISBN 978-0-8254-4361-9



9 780825 443619

 **Kregel**  
Publications

“Cindy Sproles is a beloved public speaker who focuses on matters of faith. Now, she writes of the Appalachians and its people with sensitivity and devotion. This labor of love is Cindy’s opus. Cindy writes from the heart about the people she knows, in the place where she lives, all on journeys of faith and ultimately redemption.” —**Adriana Trigiani**, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Big Stone Gap* and *Big Cherry Holler*

“At once chilling and compelling in its honest portrayal of nineteenth-century mountain life, *Mercy’s Rain* is a beautifully written story of man’s depravity and God’s mercy. Its pages are filled with memorable characters and gripping scenes, and at its heart is a message you won’t soon forget.” —**Ann Tatlock**, Christy Award winner and author of *Promises to Keep*

“Cindy Sproles writes an authentic Appalachian tale of grit and mercy. Her voice is lovely, her story captivating. Cindy Sproles is an author to watch.” —**Gina Holmes**, best-selling and award-winning author of *Crossing Oceans* and *Dry as Rain*

“Like Francine Rivers’s *Redeeming Love*, *Mercy’s Rain* is a story of betrayal and suffering and a woman-child’s anger facing the world as a means of survival. It is a story of one man’s use of the Word of God to damage and distort, and another man’s expression of God’s love and grace and, yes, mercy beyond measure. Don’t let the hardness of Mercy Roller’s life stop you; read to find the hope at the end.” —**Jane Kirkpatrick**, best-selling author of *A Light in the Wilderness*

“I was blown away by *Mercy’s Rain*. There are two things I look for in a good story: unique, interesting characters I come to care about and an author’s ability to transport me to the time and location of the story. Cindy Sproles achieves both. Her prose is fresh and captivating, the kind you want to take your time with and savor. And the characters she’s created come to life and hang around in your head long after you’ve finished reading. I’ll definitely be looking for more from her.” —**Mike Dellosso**, author of *Darkness Follows*, *Darlington Woods*, *Scream*, and *The Hunted*

“Author Cindy Sproles takes the concept of Mercy and crafts an unforgettable story. Her authentic Appalachian voice rings with simplicity and sincerity, as she explores issues as relevant to today’s readers as those of yesteryear.” —**Edie Melson**, codirector of the Blue Ridge Mountains Christian Writers Conference and author of *Fighting Fear*

“Like the Maker’s great grace, *Mercy’s Rain* never stops falling, not even at the book’s end. Sproles’s rich historical is a balm for the rent soul and a testament to the animating power of His great, all-consuming mercy.” —**W. C. Bauers**, author of *Unbreakable*, book one in the Chronicles of Promise Paen

MERCY'S  
RAIN



*An Appalachian Novel*

---

# MERCY'S RAIN

CINDY K. SPROLES

 Kregel  
Publications

*Mercy's Rain: An Appalachian Novel*

© 2015 by Cindy K. Sproles

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc.,  
2450 Oak Industrial Dr. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by  
any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or  
otherwise—without written permission of the publisher, except  
for brief quotations in reviews.

The persons and events portrayed in this work are the creations  
of the author, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is  
purely coincidental.

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

ISBN 978-0-8254-4361-9

Printed in the United States of America

15 16 17 18 19 / 5 4 3 2 1



*Dedicated to my dad, Sherman C. Frady  
and my niece, Erin Frady Thomas*



# ONE

*Spring 1897*

*Wadallow Mountain, Tennessee*

MARRIED AND WIDOWED at thirteen, a mother and childless at fifteen. Ain't nobody should have to learn life like I did. No soul should have to claw their way back from the bowels of hell, scared and scraped up like I was. I hate these memories.

“What don't kill ya will make you better.” I reckon them was the only words from the Pastor that stuck. “Don't you make your Momma late to the river. Don't look right for the Pastor's wife to be late to a baptizin'.” My arms weighed down from the pile of kindling the Pastor stacked on them.

“Yes, Pastor.” I turned and walked fast to the porch, daring not to drop nary a piece of wood. “We'll be on time with a basket lunch.” Nothing had changed since I was a youngin. Even as a woman, I still cowered at the sound of his voice. But I was never the same after the morning Pastor took on judge, jury, and Jesus.

Life ain't much different on the mountain than it is in the valley. A man's lucky to have a horse and wagon, lucky to have a shack with a tin roof. There are sinners on the summit and sinners in the foothills and I reckon Pastor Roller planned on washing every sin from every man.

They was no washing my sin away. I made a mighty harsh decision. One I'd grow to regret. One I'd have to live with.

I spread a blanket over a stand of grass and brushed down the wrinkles. "Over here, Momma. Bring that basket over here. I got us a spot laid out." Momma carried an apple pie in one hand and a basket full of chicken in the other.

"There you are, Mercy." She lifted the basket and wiggled her fingers in a half wave.

The aroma spun in the breeze, meshing with Mrs. Taylor's fresh sour-dough bread. "It couldn't be a prettier day for a man to repent and then go down to the river for baptizing, is they, Momma? Ain't it a wonderful mornin'?"

I turned my face to the sky and let the sun draw out the mess that seemed to fill my mind. Best I can remember, I was happy for once.

I knew Stanley Farmer and what he lived with. When he mustered the courage to go to the Pastor and ask to be forgiven of his sin, be cleansed, I began to understand what forgiveness meant. It took a big man to fall on his knees before the Pastor instead of beating the tar out of him. Especially knowing what Stanley knew.

The Pastor scowled when he stepped into the water. He yanked Stanley to his side, raised his hand into the air, and started to preach on the sins buried in his soul.

"Pastor, be careful. Stanley's legs ain't strong. That cold water will wash more from him than sin," I said. I tinkered with the pages of Pastor's Bible. The rough edges of worn leather snagged the flesh on my fingers.

"I'll be up on the rocks when you get settled. Come on up." Maddie's hair flailed in the breeze like a sheet hangin' on the line. She'd been my friend for years. She stayed my friend, even though.

"I'll catch up in a bit." I winked at Maddie as she headed toward the rocks that jutted like fingers over the river. We spent a fair amount of time on them rocks tellin' secrets. She knew things not another soul knew.

"In the name of the Lord, I baptize you." The Pastor's voice boomed over the noise of the river water. He dunked Stanley Farmer by the forehead deep beneath the icy waters of the Indian River . . . held him under the rushing wash, all the time shouting for God Almighty to bring the man redemption. "Sin will kill a man. Take the soul right out of him.

Even the sins a man ain't got the guts to name." The Pastor growled the words like a grizzly bear on the hunt.

My stomach turned and the feeling in my gut forced me closer to the river's edge. "Let him up, Pastor," I shouted. "Let him up." Elsi Farmer, Stanley's wife, stood on the bank crying for Stanley's salvation and when the Pastor finally let Stanley catch a breath, he had the fear of God written all over his face. As fast as Stanley caught a gulp of air, the Pastor shoved him under the water again.

Stanley's hands stretched from beneath the cold wash, knuckles tight and bent. He grabbed for anything to save him.

"You ain't cleansed of your sin yet. Hell awaits your soul. I offer you back to the water and back into the hands of the Savior."

I raced to the edge of the riverbank. My shoes sucked into the mud and held me tight. "Stop, Pastor. You've done baptized him. Let him up. It's not for you to pass judgment." I grabbed my knee and tugged my leg. The mud popped when my foot pulled free. "Stop, Pastor. Stop. Let him go." The Pastor shot a glare at me that stopped me dead in my tracks.

"I'm the Lord's servant. Here to serve. Don't take neary another step. I'm doin' the good Lord's biddin'." He yanked Stanley up by the collar. Stanley coughed and gasped for a precious breath and before I could get close and into the water, the Pastor commenced to press Stanley down again.

Stanley dropped to his knees in the river, clasped his hands around the Pastor's wrist and pleaded not to be dunked again. "Good Lord has forgive me. He has. Don't put me back under, Pastor. I'm a changed man. I can't take the water again." His legs, weak from polio, couldn't hold his weight and once he got chilled in the Indian River, all he could do was plead for his life.

"Let Stanley up. God in heaven, don't let the Pastor kill him." The men on the bank splashed into the water to help.

Pastor Roller grabbed Stanley by the hair, yanked him backward, and placed his knee in the middle of Stanley's chest. "A weak body is a weak soul. Come out of this man, demon. God save his soul."

"Oh Lord, no!" shouted Elsi. "He's gonna drown Stanley." She dropped

her Bible and lunged into the water with me. I fought at the current of the river surging against me. “He’s changed, Pastor. Let him up.” Her four children screamed in terror from the bank.

Stanley’s feet and arms thrashed around—but Pastor Roller wouldn’t give in and by the time me and Peyton Simmons got to the man, his body had stilled. A man riddled with polio wasn’t strong enough to fight the cold water and the Pastor. Peyton shoved the Pastor off Stanley and pulled him from the clutches of the river. He tossed Stanley over his shoulder and carried him to the bank while Charlie Macon and Tom Boy Ralston dragged Pastor Roller out of the water.

I looked square into the Pastor’s eyes and said, “What have you done in the name of God this time?” I lifted my hand to slap him but he caught my wrist mid-swing.

Tom Boy grasped both arms around the Pastor in a bear hug. “I never know’d you to be a murderer, Pastor.” Tom Boy gritted his teeth as he fought to get the Pastor to the riverbank and tie his hands. “But you just outright slaughtered a man and a sick man at that. They ain’t no mercy for that.”

Maddie stood on the rocks, her hand over her mouth. “Mercy, stop. Wait for me.” Maddie was always my redeeming grace. Any time I was ready to do something foolish, she was the voice that reasoned with me. Not this time.

“Not this time,” I shouted. She come tearing down the hill toward me, pushing her way through the crowd hunkered around Stanley.

I looked into the eyes of my momma and saw fear. My past fell into place and she saw that it did.

I was just nineteen years old when Pastor murdered Stanley Farmer, and every one of them years I bore the Pastor’s pain and righteous indignation. All the shouting, all the condemning—the punishments in the name of the Lord—all came together. It’s funny how it takes a spell for a body to figure what’s happening. But when it sunk in, when I finally figured out what was going on, my redemption went to hell in a rush and come back with a fury.

A blue tinge stained the outline of Stanley’s lips. His face a slate grey, tinted with red. His eyes were wide open, his stare empty. Water pooled

in the dimple of his chin and his jet-black hair lay strung across his face. Elsi bellowed like a cow giving birth and Momma pulled her away from Stanley's lifeless body.

"Help me, Mercy," Momma said.

"Help you? What about Elsi and these youngins? What about poor Stanley?" How could Momma ask me to help her? I'd helped the Pastor far too many times and now my eyes were as wide open as Stanley's.

"He was saved, Pastor. You killed my husband." Elsi fought to lay across the dead man's body. "Murderer." She sobbed into Stanley's chest.

"A weak body is a weak soul. The man was dammed to perish," shouted the Pastor. "It's the will of God Almighty."

Pastor Roller lifted his hands into the air and claimed the good Lord ripped the soul out of a sinful man. "What's done is done. Some men can't be saved. God have mercy on his soul."

I heard my name. Mercy. *Mercy on his soul*, and I wondered why Momma gave me that name. My guess, it was her cry to the good Lord to have mercy on her.

*Mercy. Mercy!* I heard my name echo through the angry crowd.

I was ashamed as I watched those four little girls smack at their daddy and cry for him to wake up. I was ashamed that this man of God . . . this pastor, was *my* daddy. He never was a father. He was a monster clothed in a high-collared white shirt that hid behind the Bible and served up his justice. Justice in the name of God.

Between the screams of Elsi, her girls, and the numb realization they'd just witnessed the murder of their father, the men in the crowd riled in a hurry. Justice on the mountain is quick. It's like a tornado, swirling and ripping a man's desire to make things right, pressing his anger to a point of no return—leaving a trail of twisted righteousness in its path.

Up here, men live by a code. They protect their own and when somebody takes a life, especially in front of a slew of witnesses—it isn't long before theirs is took away in return. It's just the way of the mountain folk. We see no need to drag things out. *Just hang the devil and pray for his soul later.* Charlie Macon and Tom Boy were hotheads anyway so justice would be served swift and heavy on the Pastor for outright killing a man who sought forgiveness.

The mighty stirring winds of revenge began. It swirled and whipped like a tornado tearing its way through the valley. The angry crowd only took a split second to accuse, convict, and serve the sentence.

The Pastor struggled to get free and when he couldn't he hauled off and belted Charlie in the face with his head.

"Let me go. Hell hath no fury like the wrath the Lord will bring down!"

Tom Boy winched the Pastor's hands tight behind his back. I knew what was coming. So did everybody else and not one of us took a step to climb into a storm shelter and let the tornado pass. We all stood headlong into the turmoil.

"Mercy, bring me God's Word. Bring me my Bible," the Pastor shouted as the men dropped a rope around his neck then tossed the other end over the limb of the giant elm tree.

"Mercy," the Pastor shouted. But the cries of Elsi and her youngins nearly drowned him out. Momma stood behind me, handkerchief clutched against her mouth while the Pastor spouted Scripture verse after Scripture verse.

"Mercy, you have to stop this. Don't let them hang your daddy," Momma screamed.

The men heaved the Pastor onto the back of Stanley's horse. Their shouts of revenge for an innocent and deformed man but loved by his family, stirred a vengeance in the crowd.

Edom Strong, a colored man who found his way up the mountain after becoming a free slave, raised one hand to quiet the crowd. "Don't you think we's oughta think this through? Takin' a man's life don't seem right, no matter what the crime."

Tom Boy shoved Edom backward. "Git on outta here if you don't agree. This here is a cold-blooded killer."

Folks knew Elsi looked past the draw in Stanley's face and the limp in his walk. She looked deep into his heart and though she'd admit to anyone who'd listen he needed to get his soul right, snuffing his life out like a candle was not what she had in mind.

There he lay, soaked to the bone in his ragged overalls and worn boots. Stanley had given it all.

"Mercy, stop them. Stop them. Don't let them do this."



Momma's screams faded into the background and at that very moment, my heart grew colder than the river. "It ends here . . . today."

Maddie run alongside me, grabbing at my arm. "Listen to me. This ain't the way to handle things. Mercy, please." I slapped her hand off my arm. The look in my eyes was louder than words.

"Mercy, I'm beggin' you. Let's go up on the rock. Ain't nothing you can do here. Come on."

"Git outta my way, Maddie. If you call me your friend, git outta my way." I regretted them words as soon as they come out of my mouth 'cause Maddie dropped her hands to her side and walked away.

"Mercy. You bring me my Bible. Read to me before these men commit a sin. Read the part where Jesus cried from the cross, 'Forgive them.' Mercy, now. Bring it, now. You people ain't to judge that which cannot be judged."

"Pastor, you done been the judge of Stanley. You sayin' you're God?" Tom Boy spit amber juice at the Pastor's feet. "Seems like cockeyed thinkin' to me."

My hand shook as I bent and picked up the Pastor's Bible. Mercy was the last thing he deserved. After all the wicked things the Pastor done to me, it was almost funny he'd call to me for help. Ask me, of all people, to read from his Bible. I felt the blood drain from my face and my cheeks turn icy. So did my heart. So did what little feeling I had for the Pastor. Suddenly the veil of naivety dropped from my eyes and I realized, like Elsi, all I'd lost at my daddy's hands.

The Pastor's Bible was worn. Its leather cover frayed and the edges tattered. Yellowed pages were dog-eared and ink smudges blurred some of the words. I looked at the Pastor. Looked at the men and their rage. Glanced at Elsi and her children. Remembered the bruises and slaps I'd taken over the years . . . all in the name of God. Memories of hearing Momma plead for leniency from her sin just before the Pastor beat her with a horse whip. Her cries . . . my cries as he carted off my innocent infant. From that minute on, I wasn't his daughter. He was nothing to me.

"What kind of man are you?" I shouted. "You call yourself a pastor? You claim to be a man of God. What kind of God do you serve?"

The Pastor glared at me, rope tight beneath his chin. "I serve a righteous

God who punishes sinners. Now read to me out of my Bible, girl." My eyes drew into a squint, the sun glared behind the Pastor, turning him into a black outline, faceless and empty.

Even now, his tone never changed. He never seemed sorry he'd drowned Stanley. He just kept shouting for me to bring him his Bible.

I licked the end of my thumb and pressed it against the dingy pages, turning them to Exodus. My rage boiled. "You want me to read to you?" I scanned the words, then closed the book on my finger and held it high in the air. At that moment, *I* was judge and jury. The crowd quieted.

"You want me to read to you? How 'bout I read your favorite Scripture. How about this one, Pastor. *An eye for an eye.*"

I stuffed the Bible under my arm.

The Pastor opened his mouth, but no words came out this time. I didn't let them.

I drew back and slapped my hand, hard, against the rear of Stanley's horse. I watched the animal bolt.

The Pastor slipped off the horse's back and I heard the sickening crack of bone snapping above my head. I stared into his lifeless face, an expression of disbelief froze into place. Somewhere in the breeze, the scent of honeysuckle floated by.

The Pastor's feet dangled inches above the ground. There was silence all around me.

"An eye for an eye," I said. "An eye for an eye."

## TWO

I DIDN'T BIND the Pastor's hands behind his back or drop the noose over his head, but I was the one who drew it tight. I was the one that killed the man.

Stanley Farmer wasn't the first person the Pastor condemned to hell in his ungodly judgments. There was a bunch. When I was seven, he made me carry his leather saddlebag to the Widow Starling's house.

The old woman was half dead and nearly starved because she was too weak to get out of bed when Reburta Owens come to visit her. Reburta found her naked and lying in a puddle of her own vomit, a bottle of hooch clutched tight to her chest. The Pastor slammed open the door, yanked the Widow Starling up, and began to rant.

"The Lord has sent me to teach you His wrath. You're a disgrace to womankind and a drunk. Your tongue is evil."

"Girl," he demanded. His forefinger crooked as he pointed toward me. "Stoke that fire. Hang me a pot of coffee to heat." I inched to the fireplace and pulled the cast iron hook toward me. I pumped the billows and the fire roared. The smell of hot ash twisted and curled into the air and I coughed when I sucked in the suet. I was horrified at the sight of the Widow. She muttered things like, "Pastor, your hands are unclean. You ought not touch the goodness of a woman." The Pastor slapped her across the mouth and when the coffee was nearly to a boil, he commenced to pour the scalding liquid down her throat.

"Dear Lord in heaven," she cried. "Save me from this man." Blisters bulged on her lips as she pleaded.

There wasn't a thing I could do except run onto the porch and huddle

against the side of the cabin. Her screams echoed through the valley and through my hands pressed against my ears. Her cries for mercy taunted me. The sound of a battle raged inside the cabin as the Widow kicked and clawed. Dishes fell to the cabin floor and chairs thumped across the room. She fought hard to escape the messenger who delivered a deadly message. "You'll be the one burning in hell," she screamed.

"For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: but the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." The Pastor spouted Scripture at the old woman. "Your tongue is your sin." The Widow gurgled for the Pastor to stop. I pressed my hands tighter against my ears and my legs began to quiver with fear. A puddle formed between my ankles.

The Pastor preached his hell-fire and brimstone message, all the time pouring hot coffee down the old woman's throat until finally her house was silent.

I heard the taps on his boots clank against the rough cabin floor. A thump rang out as he kicked a chair into the wall. The latch on the door jiggled and clicked.

"Mercy," the Pastor said opening the cabin door. "Get in here and clean up this woman. Put her in her Sunday best and I'll fetch the undertaker. The good Lord has took her."

"Yes, sir. Is she . . ."

"Dead?" He grabbed my arm and tossed me toward the cabin door. "I told you, child, the good Lord took her. Now, clean up the mess. All of it. Start with the floor, then the old woman." He shoved me into the cabin and slammed the door. Dishes were strewn in every direction. Both cane-bottom chairs toppled. I picked up a tin cup from the floor and walked the edge of the room trying not to step in the pools of coffee mixed with blood. The fire, embers now, barely shed enough light to see. Widow Starling laid long-ways across the bed, naked—her skin glowed as red as hot coals and a huge handprint was burned into her neck. It was like the Pastor's hands were hotter than the coals, but I knew it was where he held her down. I pulled a blanket over her body and tried not to look at the horrible twisted expression on her face.

Even at seven years old, I knew what the Pastor had done. Terrible

things he didn't want told. I knew the old woman got loose-lipped when she got moonshine in her and the Pastor didn't like his antics being spread across the mountain. I wasn't stupid. I knew and I was horrified it could have been me. So I kept quiet about what I'd seen and what I'd heard. Still, in the back of my mind, I was storing up these things. One day I'd put the pieces together.

A peck come at the door and startled me. "Mercy. Mercy, you in there?" It was Maddie.

"Go home Maddie. Go home before the Pastor comes back."

"Won't do no sucha thang. Open the door."

I did as she asked. When the door swung to the outside, I fell into the arms of my best friend, my only friend. I felt her shiver as she looked at the Widow, but she never whimpered.

"I'll help you. Get the old woman's dress off the line."

And I did. The two of us dressed the Widow then cleaned up the cabin and when we was done Maddie twisted a strand of my hair around her finger. "Just remember to be better than this. My daddy always says to be better than what's bad." Maddie squeezed my hands then took off toward the ridge.

*Be better than what's bad. Be better than what's bad.* I sat on the porch step and closed my eyes. *Be better than what's bad.*

---

The roar of the river was as loud as the cheers of the crowd while the Pastor wallowed like a fish on a hook. His feet jerked and that same gurgle came from his throat, what come from the Widow Starling all them years earlier. Justice was served for the Widow. And it was served for Stanley too.

Momma wouldn't look at me when I passed her. I dropped the Pastor's Bible at her side then leaned and kissed her head. She never flinched. Never spoke. Never acknowledged me. Her way, I guess, of showing the people around her, she was disgusted at my actions and theirs.

There must have been twenty congregants at the river to see Stanley baptized. Twenty folks who witnessed the Pastor murder an innocent man. I stared at the palm of my hand, still red from the slap. No one

seemed to care it was me that sent the Pastor to his death. All that mattered was the sound of a rope creaking against a tree limb while it sawed an impression of death into the branch. All that counted was the crack of my hand against the horse's rear and the wild flailing of the Pastor as his body jolted and bounced in the wind. When there's a crowd of angry men, it doesn't matter who fuels the rage just so it gets stoked. But I knew. I'd figured out the sickness the Pastor had. That didn't excuse his actions, and for the time, I was content with the peace I'd felt with the justice I'd served.

Elsi Farmer cradled her girls, one on each knee, and one under each arm. The least, was Bet. Her long black curls twisted and fell around her shoulders. They plastered tight with tears to her cheeks. I wrapped my arms around Bet and brushed her hair from her face. "It's alright, baby girl. It's alright." Elsi pulled Bet by the dress tail away from me. Three of the men crossed Stanley's arms over his chest. It must have been an hour before they sliced the rope that held the Pastor. His body dropped limp and twisted to the ground. Ben and Tom Boy grabbed an arm and a leg and tossed him into the back of a wagon.

"I ain't usin' my last quarter to press his eyelids shut," one man argued. "Money is too hard to come by. It ain't worth wastin' on a murderer."

Jess Macon, Charlie's boy and the town tattletale, ran down the mountain path to tell Undertaker Whaley. Stanley would remain laid out in the back of the wagon for three days while the neighbors kept watch shooing away vultures and wild animals.

I hated wakes. Never saw the point in watching a dead man rot before shoving him in a hole. But it would give Peyton time to build a pine box sturdy enough to hold Stanley.

I stopped at the river's edge and stared at the water washing over the boulders. In our parts, boulders are bigger than ten men put together and the water pushes so hard across the rocks that you can walk beneath the spray without getting doused. The Indian River was a thing of beauty; I could see where the Pastor thought it might wash away a man's sin. I put my hand up to shade my eyes. The sun glared off the wash so bright it warmed my cheeks.

They say the Lord is a good and gracious God, but I just couldn't believe any God who was worth a hoot would stand for ripping a man's

soul from his body. Especially one on his knees. I rolled my eyes to one side then to the other, never moving my head. I took in the scenes around me. Elsi loaded her children into Peyton's wagon. A few of the men prayed over the lifeless body of Pastor Roller. Tom Boy hauled off and spit at the Pastor's feet a second time. "Take that you lowlife."

Before long it was just me and Momma.

I walked toward her. She knelt on the ground sobbing into her hands. I wasn't sure if her tears were tears of sadness or tears of joy since I'd just set her free from her prison. Guess only her heart would know the truth. Momma might mourn on the outside, but my guess is, her insides rejoiced. "The devil's gone to hell," I said.

I couldn't bring myself to look at the jagged rope hanging from that elm tree. It was enough I'd been the cause, and enough I'd have to live with the slap of a hand the rest of my life.

"Momma," I shouted over the roar of the river. "Go home. Start a new life. You ain't sayin' nothin', but I know what you're thinking. I'm thinkin' the same thing."

"You can't know what I'm thinkin'. You can't know what I'm feelin'. I lost my whole family today."

"No, Momma. You're wrong. You didn't lose your family today. You gained your freedom at the hand of your daughter."

"Oh Lord, forgive Mercy, she don't know what she's sayin'."

"No Momma, there ain't no need to plead for mercy. I am Mercy, and you've been set free." I knew as sure as the words left my mouth, I was the Pastor's daughter.

I was wrong and I knew it, but I didn't care.

I kicked at a stone then stepped on to a boulder. The river's water curled and rolled in front of me. "Tell me something, Momma. Ever wonder where the river begins? Ever thing has a beginning. I wish I knew mine, 'cuz up to now, it's all been a lie. A lie!"

My voice faded into the white noise of the water and when I turned Momma was gone. Buzzards circled the carcass of the devil on earth, and I knew what they wanted. I glanced over my shoulder at the Pastor's twisted body hanging half in the wagon.

I spit and walked away.

## THREE

AFTER UNDERTAKER WHALEY hauled the Widow down the mountain, I knew the Pastor wouldn't be home. Once he'd give out his idea of the Lord's righteousness he'd go away for days. "It's when I pray for that soul that died. It's when I rassel with God." My best guess was he rassled with a bottle of hooch.

They was times I remember good things. Times I felt the warmth of the mountain sun against my face. And oh, the times I smelled them daisies blowin' back and forth in the wind. Maddie Holmes stayed my friend too. Even when the Pastor was hateful to her.

"Let's sneak up to the woods behind the shack. Think we could balance some of them hooch bottles on that elm branch and bust them with rocks?" Maddie loved to throw rocks. She'd lean back and let out a giggle that would make a dead man grin. "Come on Mercybug. Let's grab them bottles and sneak off tonight. The Pastor will be gone and we know your momma won't pay no mind."

"I get first sling."

"First sling? No fair. It was my idea."

"Might be your idea, but it's my bottles. We'll throw them rocks so hard, they'll sail clean to Chattanooga."

That night after Momma went to sleep, I crept out of the cabin, crawled under the porch, and got out the Pastor's empty liquor bottles. I could hear Maddie snickerin' as I pulled myself from under the porch.

"How many you got?"

"Enough. Can't take too many. The Pastor will get wise."

"Chicken," Maddie whispered. She grabbed the bottles and took toward the woods.



We climbed the side of that mountain, gatherin' all the rocks we could tote in our pockets. Maddie balanced the bottles on a low, long limb of the big elm tree. I drew back and spun a stone that would have skipped the length of the river had it hit water. It cracked against the side of the tree. Me and Maddie laughed and giggled until we about wet our pants.

"I thought you was a good shot." She dug her hand deep into her pouch.

"I am. But it's dark, you idiot. Let's see what you can do in the dark." Maddie pulled a candle from her pouch.

"Hey, wait a minute. That's what I call sneaky."

She grinned, her tongue slipped through a hole in the front of her mouth. She clicked the flint stones together and lit the light. "Now it's my turn."

She drew back and flung a smooth flat stone with all her might. It hit with a thud. "What in the Sam hill?" A voiced boomed from nearby the tree. "Who's there?"

Maddie squealed and I hollered. We high-tailed it down the hill. I don't reckon we ever figured out who was sleepin' near that elm, but the not knowin' gave us lots to pretend about.

Yeah, I remember good times. They was few, but I remember them. So when Maddie dropped her head and walked away from me at the river . . . when she looked at me with eyes that welled of sadness, I knew my friend had give up on me. And I become lost.

---

The wind whipped through the mountain pass and howled like a hound on a hunt. Black Rock Mountain sat on the eastern side of the Appalachians and winds from the south managed to work their way into the valley and tear up jack. Wadalow Mountain was square in the middle of the pass; about three miles as the crow flies. Burying day in the gap was no different and the wind had no sympathy on a family who'd lost its daddy. Instead, the draft just danced around folks, piercing them with a wicked chill.

Elsi Farmer pulled the tail of her black dress between her legs and squeezed it tight with her knees to maintain a shred of decency. Her daughters, all dressed in black, huddled close to their mother. The Colton

boys had dug a hole beneath a weeping cherry tree that would hold Stanley until the good Lord come to take him home, and there I stood. Wondering why on earth Elsi Farmer would ask me, of all people, to say a few words over poor Stanley. It seemed to be just another twisted sort of blame. Intentional but unintentional. Make the daughter of the monster preach a funeral. Or, maybe it was Elsi's way of showin' me she didn't hold no grudge against me. Deep down she knew what I'd lived through. Either way, I'd guessed we were kindred spirits, each knowing what the other had suffered at the hand of the Pastor, and neither saying a word.

There wasn't no peace in holding the Word of God in my hands and speakin' over a dead man. The Bible seemed to burn the palm I'd hit that horse with. I know it was all in my head. Maybe it was an ounce of guilt. I ain't rightly sure. But all I knew was that book was like holding hot coals.

My finger held its place on a verse in Hebrews—the one about running the good race. I figured since Stanley was crippled from childhood by polio, it might be appropriate to remind folks that running a race ain't necessarily a physical race. And even though he'd run to the river to be saved and died, didn't mean he'd lost the race. Stanley was the winner and his win was our celebration.

The pages of the Pastor's Bible flipped in the wind, and I pressed my palm into the center of the page to settle them so I could read.

"I ain't no pastor," I said. "I'm just a friend. And Stanley Farmer was a good man and Elsi is a forgivin' woman. She ain't blamin' me for the devil's doing. Thank you, Miss Elsi."

The wind twisted my hair in circles, then shoved it into my mouth. I felt like a hungry rat with its jaws stuffed full of corn. That or God Himself was trying to choke the words back down my throat. I slipped my finger between my cheek and hair then pushed the mess of strands behind my ear. Elsi *was* a forgiving woman. Most folks would have hated me for the wrongs of my father, but not her. It was Elsi who pressed her hands against my face and smiled as a tear trailed down hers. She took time in her own grief, to comfort the daughter of the man who killed her husband.

"You've lost your father too. I'm so sorry," Elsi said.

That got the best of me. I struggled to look Elsi in the eye, much less speak over poor dead Stanley. *God, is this my punishment or the Pastor's?*

"Every man has his day. And Stanley had his. He went to his knees pleading for mercy and God Almighty, being the God He is, offered him that grace." I fought the wind to keep the pages of the Bible from turning, but the fingers of the breeze won out and opened my Bible to Ezekiel. I nearly lost my breath when I read:

*The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.*

It was like God Himself tried to comfort me. Thing was . . . I didn't want comfort, and I didn't want God—not now anyway. I wanted to be left alone in my fury. I made up my mind, right there over Stanley Farmer's grave, that I'd make things right. Where the Pastor failed, I'd succeed. I'd fix it. Somehow. I'd teach the sins of the father were not the sins of the son or the daughter, and it could be different if the son understood.

Elsi dabbed her handkerchief against her eyes then swiped it under her nose. "Hallelujah, Lord, he was saved," she whispered. "Praise the Lord."

"I can't speak for the Pastor, but I can, I think, say the good Lord forgave Stanley for whatever iniquities he might have had, and my guess is, he's walking on air today."

To one side of Stanley Farmer's grave was a fresh mound of red clay . . . a cross jabbed upside down into the dirt covering the Pastor—some kid's joke protesting the Pastor was hung out to dry, and too good to be buried with the cross turned the right way. I couldn't disagree. And I can't lie. I'd wished the old man's death 'cause he was the furthest thing from holy that a man could be.

The Colton boys lifted Elsi's girls into the wagon. Bet's tiny fist wallowed her eyes as she tried to dry the tears. How could a tyke like that understand what was happening? Stanley had his share of problems . . . being crippled and whatnot. He had a weakness of a short temper, but he

was a good father. It was not uncommon to see him toting one or two of those girls at a time, even when he could hardly walk himself.

I remember when me and Momma helped Elsi deliver Bet. Stanley had come running to the cabin, as best that Stanley could run, early one Saturday morning to fetch Momma. “Reba, it’s Elsi. She’s been driving at havin’ that baby since up in the night and it just ain’t comin’. Can you help her?”

Everybody has gifts and Momma’s gift was helping to nurse those who were sick. She had helped a slew of the women on the mountain birth their babies. It was only natural for Stanley to run to her, despite what he knew. That, and the fact we were the closest neighbors to their homestead. Momma didn’t hesitate. She grabbed her shawl and a handful of rags then roused me out of bed. “Mercy, get up. Elsi’s havin’ her baby and things ain’t goin’ right.”

The Pastor dropped his feet over the edge of the bed and slid one foot into his boot. “Youngin’ ain’t born after this long . . . usually means Elsi’s bearing some sin she won’t let go of. I’ll go.”

“You’ll do no such-a thing. Babies come when they’re ready and sin’s got nothing to do with it. You’ll keep your distance and let the women do their work this time.”

“I’m the Pastor. It’s my job to bless a newborn, to pray over the mother.” He towered over Momma, but she put her finger in his chest and shoved.

“I done told you. This ain’t none of your business. Stanley didn’t come to get you. He came and roused me. Now, Elsi’s in distress, and I’ll thank you to get outta my way so I can go to her.”

I can’t remember many times Momma stood up to the Pastor, but when she put her foot down, she meant it. She’d pay a price later, and that didn’t seem to matter to her. After all, it wasn’t her fault—the things the Pastor did. Her eyes were set on the need of the person, not the beatin’ she’d get when she got home, and she certainly never thought of the whipping I’d get by going with her.

The Pastor’s hot breath bellowed over me and Momma. The smell carried the scent of something dead. He took a step closer to her and jutted his chest like a rooster, but Momma stood her ground. She dug her heels into the crevice of the wooden slatted floor, then shoved him to the side.

“Elsi needs me. Get outta my way. You can do what you need to do later.” Momma took me by the shoulder and guided me past the massive man. Her hands trembled in mine. “Mercy, run down the path and get Pactol and Edom. They can get us down to Elsi in a snap.”

I hung my head and looked at the cabin floor as I slipped past the Pastor. His toe tapped against the wood. Momma pushed open the door and I run like a mad person down to Edom's. I couldn't remember a time I'd run so hard, and when I stepped up onto their one-room shack's porch, I fell face-first, my palms smacked flat against the door.

The door opened and I dropped inside. Edom picked me up while Pactol brushed away my tears. “Momma needs help. Elsi Farmer is birthin' her baby and it won't come. Stanley come running to get Momma to help, but the Pastor won't let her come.” I gasped for a full breath to fill my lungs.

Edom pressed his hat over his head, and headed out the door. He dropped the yoke over his horse and latched it to the wagon. Pactol and me loaded into the back as Edom rolled past. In minutes we were in front of the cabin. Momma stood in the yard while the Pastor blistered her with his words. “The Good Book says, ‘Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands.’ I'm tellin' you it's not you who needs to be going to Elsi.”

Edom pulled the wagon between Momma and the Pastor. He didn't say a word. He just motioned to Momma to get in. Stanley stood at the side of the cabin bent over, trying to catch a breath. Pactol slipped her shoulder under his arm and helped him to the wagon. All the time the Pastor was screaming Scripture about obedience and submission. Edom nodded to the Pastor, then smacked the reins against the horse.

I ain't never seen nobody tame the Pastor like Edom. And he did it without saying a word. “Thank you, Edom. Thank you for getting me out so I can help Miss Elsi,” Momma said.

“Find forgiveness, Missy Roller. Just find forgiveness.” Edom didn't utter another word about the Pastor. Though I could see his disapproval in the Pastor's ways, he managed to find something good to hold on to—something I'd not found when it come to the Pastor.

Edom dropped us at Stanley's, and him and Pactol gathered up the

Farmer youngins. “Stanley, these kids will be with us. You and Missy Roller do what you need to do for Miss Elsi.” They loaded the Farmer girls into the wagon and left.

“Oh Lord in heaven, bring this baby. It’s killin’ me,” Elsi cried. Sweat beaded on her brow and a single tear slipped down her cheek. She grabbed Momma’s arm and her eyes spoke louder than the thunder in a storm. Momma knew. I knew too. It was that unspoken secret about the Pastor. One we was either too scared to speak of, or too ashamed.

“I’m sorry, Reba.” Elsi gritted her teeth through a pain, but Momma kept quiet.

Momma and me spent six more hours working on Miss Elsi. Momma took spoons and held open the exit for that baby while I pressed against Elsi’s stomach. My stomach ached with every pain of Miss Elsi’s. I knew her hurt. I understood the work of pushin’ and not seeing no return for the labor.

“Push, Miss Elsi. We gotta force this wee one out. Push.” When the little thing’s head plunged into the world, Momma gently twisted it to the side. The child’s nose was mashed flat, and its eyes were swelled. I started swiping gunk from its face, trying to clear the youngin’s mouth and nose for a breath. But there was nothing.

“Elsi, you gotta push this little one out. It ain’t breathin’ and I can’t help it if it’s still lodged in your belly.” Momma’s voice was calm, but stern. Perspiration formed on her forehead, and I braced my knees behind Elsi so she had some leverage.

“Push. Hard.” Momma patted Elsi’s knees. “Let me hold this baby in my arms.”

The blood vessels in Elsi’s face bugled, and I thought of that Scripture the Pastor used to preach about Jesus sweating blood. Elsi strained. Her fingers dug into the flesh of my arms as I cradled her. That baby dropped from her body, and Elsi fell limp against my chest.

Momma prayed the whole time Elsi pushed that she wouldn’t break the baby’s neck pulling her free. We worked until we got that little thing a breath of air, then Momma gave the credit to the good Lord—I wasn’t so sure He deserved any credit when Elsi did all the work.

“What a glorious sound,” Elsi whispered as Momma laid the infant on

her chest. "Listen to her cry." Tears welled as I stared into the eyes of that little one.

*My baby mighta looked like that.*

Momma looked at me and smiled. "You be strong now. You be strong." There it was again . . . that unspoken understanding that all this mess tied back to the Pastor. Still no one uttered the words. It was just a glance, a look, an understanding between the women. The Pastor's secrets weren't really secrets at all, and little Bet, she had dark curly hair, just like his.

Elsi thought Momma was talking to her, telling her to be strong, and she was, but she was mostly talking to me. We both knew what waited for us when we got home. Vengeance.

That was the beginning of a weeklong penance. The pastor made Momma cook his meals and then forced her to fast and pray while he ate in front of her. He wouldn't just ask her to cook regular vittles, he'd insist on smoked turkey . . . something with a mouth-watering scent. I followed Momma out to the coop as she kicked open the flimsy door, grabbed a turkey, and loped off its head.

"How'd you learn to do this, Momma?"

"Do what? Survive?"

"No, kill a turkey."

Momma smiled. "Granny Dodge taught me and her granny taught her, and so on. Now keep quiet. The less is said, the less we pay. Stay away. Outta sight."

She plucked that turkey's feathers, dressed it, and built a stone-lined pit that had to be stoked all day with hickory wood. Worst part was, the sun beat down on that pit with a vengeance. Water dripped off Momma's nose and her neck shined with perspiration. The Pastor wouldn't let her drink any water, either. But Momma kept at it. She held her head high.

"Momma," I whispered from behind an old oak tree. "Pssst. Momma." She wouldn't look up for fear the Pastor would see her talking and accuse her of speaking in evil tongues. She walked toward a stack of wood, knelt down, then answered.

"I hear you."

"They's a wet cloth behind that stack of wood. I soaked it heavy. You

suck the water out of it then bury it back under the stack. I'll get it when I bring you a new haul of wood."

Momma smiled. "Mercy. Sweet, sweet Mercy."

"Just do it, Momma."

The next several hours I split more hickory wood and carried it to the stack. I hid the soaked cloth under a slab of wood. Momma sucked on the rag a little, covered it, then loaded her arms full of kindling until the Pastor noticed she wasn't drawing weaker as the day closed.

When he caught me rinsing the rag out by the pump, the last thing I remembered was Momma pleading to him. Screaming.

"Don't you hurt her. Don't you hurt my baby."

I could hear her screams with my head shoved deep into the trough of water by the pump. I didn't even fight him. I'd learned a long time before, fighting him just made dying harder.

"Leave her be. Pastor, she's your daughter."

"She's disobedient and I won't have a child who disobeys me." The Pastor's voice was muddled—distant.

My lungs burned for a taste of humid mountain air, and as the Pastor's hand pressed against my cheek, I pushed floating hair away from my eyes. If I died, I wanted him to see my face when he brought me up out of the water.



Buy *Mercy's Rain* on Christianbook

Buy *Mercy's Rain* on Amazon

Connect with Cindy Sproles