

“Masterfully written, evocative and atmospheric, *Coal Black Lies* is a story of pain, love, hope salvaged from grief, and the triumph of redemption. Filled with main characters as human, hurting, and hopeful as the rest of us, read it for the story and come away inspired.”

—Tosca Lee, *New York Times* best-selling author

“Whew! I highly recommend that you make sure you can read this in one sitting. There’s so much I loved about this book, from precious Aughtie to the heroes who fought for those who couldn’t fight for themselves. This story is a beautiful example of how God can use ordinary people to do the extraordinary. Looking forward to the next book.”

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“I’ve never been to Appalachia, but Sproles makes the impoverished coal miners come alive in this third (and best) of her Appalachian novels. It’s a story about greed, murder, and revenge. It’s also the story of a mentally challenged child who brings forgiveness and grace into all the lives on Barton Mountain. Each time I read Sproles, I think, This is how Christian fiction ought to read.”

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or ghostwriter of 140 books

“Breathtaking. Heart stopping. Soul searching. Redemptive. *Coal Black Lies* draws you in from the opening line and doesn’t let go, even when you’ve reached the stunning conclusion. I’ll be thinking about this story for years. Cindy Sproles transported me not only into a different culture but into transformative reflection on my own life story. This is simply a masterpiece.”

—Lori Stanley Roeleveld, speaker, coach, and award-winning  
author of *Graceful Influence*

“The dialogue. Whoa. Cindy Sproles had me at ‘No, it ain’t bad . . . It’s just a sign you’ve moved on. You ain’t stagnant in your heart.’ *Coal Black Lies* isn’t just a story, it’s an experience, a pull-up-a-chair, sit-awhile, and take-a-listen experience. Every page turn reveals another gut-level layer of

life in the Appalachians. Unexpected loss. Unexpected discoveries. Unexpected deception. And hope . . . always hope. Make room on your shelf—this is a keeper.”

—Linda Goldfarb, award-winning author, podcaster, and actress

“To be asked to endorse *Coal Black Lies* was a true honor. I’ve read other books by Cindy Sproles and have been touched and often changed by the words she’s penned. Her stories have depths that make you think, and the pages of *Coal Black Lies* are no exception. Keep tissues nearby, and be prepared to be challenged—you’ve been warned!”

—Tammy Karasek, speaker and author of *Launch That Book*

COAL  
BLACK  
LIES

APPALACHIAN NOVELS

*Mercy's Rain*

*Liar's Winter*

*Coal Black Lies*

*An Appalachian Novel*



# COAL BLACK LIES

CINDY K. SPROLES



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*Dedicated to Chase Smothers, Casey Eckert, and  
Kaitlyn Moffitt. Three who know the sting of  
disabilities, as well as the victories.*



*Them little lies we tell ourself come on us right quick. They don't waste no time catchin' up to us either, and the consequence ain't the least bit afraid to rain down over us. We all lie. Try to cover 'em, and worst yet, pay the price for conjuring them.*

—JOSHUA MORGAN

## ONE

*Barton Mountain, Kentucky, 1899*

I STOOD RUBBING the cool gun barrel over the stubble on my jaw. The metal slipped over my skin like the turn of a well-oiled wheel. An early summer breeze snagged the barn door and whammed it against the outside wall of the barn. It was another harsh reminder of the slam of the coffin door over our girl. I pondered how Raney'd feel if she knew what I was planning. *She'd be better off. She's a strong woman. Good Lord knows she's stronger than me. I'm just Joshua Morgan, the man who killed his daughter.*

I loved Raney enough to put her outa my misery. She didn't deserve a guilty husband.

I pushed my back against the splintered slats of the barn. The early morning sun seeped through the cracks and drew shadows of bars on the ground. That's how I felt—jailed by the memories. Raney'd be hurt. Naw, once the shock wore off, she'd be madder than a hound that missed the coon, but Raney . . . she'd be fine. Summer was here. The early rye was up. She'd manage.

The hammer of my gun clicked into place. My hand quivered. A coward could never pull the trigger. This was more than I could take. The last five years had dragged past, and I'd tried to put my daughter's death behind me with all my soul. Then watching Manny and Hettie bury their girl was the final straw. Another youngin. Barton's scrip wouldn't pay a doctor in Cumberland. Another innocent child died at the hands of the Bartons. Another murder thanks to the stronghold of the Bartons' power, control, and greed.

No matter. The memory still haunted me like the cold whisper of the wind seeping through the barn slats. Slats I shoulda fixed long ago . . .

I dropped the gun to my side. Once a coward, always a coward. I didn't have it in me to pull the trigger.

Our Anna'd been just a child. Too young for the hand of death to swoop in and steal her away. Still, after five years I walked the path every week to visit my girl's grave—like that'd bring her back. Like she even cared. *Dust from whence she came and dust she shall return.*

My mind went back to a few weeks ago when Raney and me made our way to Anna's grave. A chill run down my spine every time I see her tombstone. It was enough to grieve with my guilt, but watching Raney grieve all those years had doubled the pain.

"Joshua, tears don't fall no more. Is that bad?" Raney had asked as she pulled a handful of grass from around the stone marker.

I'd eyed my wife as she scratched away the ivy from our girl's tombstone. She pulled a fist of flowers to her nose and took in the sweet scent of lavender. I guessed she'd forgiven me, but things was never the same betwixt us after Anna died. Before, Raney'd always talked things over with me, but after Anna died, she pulled away from me, quit talkin'. She walked alone around the farm lookin' to be in deep thought instead of doin' her chores. It was like she was as dead as our Anna.

"No, it ain't bad," I said, surprised she'd asked. "It's just a sign you've moved on. You ain't stagnant in your heart."

I guess I'd hoped Raney had moved on, or at least the best I could see from her. Movin' on didn't mean there wasn't no sadness though. And I suspect it didn't really mean lettin' go either. Neither of us could loosen our grip on Anna's soul.

I reckon there'll always be a hole burrowed out in our hearts, but it wasn't the grief eating me alive. It was the guilt, and I couldn't take it no more. It was like a fresh burn—stinging and stinging. Never easing, no matter how hard I blew at the burn.

I blinked away the tears. Had her death really been my fault? I wasn't sure anymore.

Nobody leaves the coal mines. Nobody. The Company Store owns you. They pay you in a worthless scrip, work you until you can't stand, and toss

you out to die when you get the cough. And a worthless pay meant a body had to keep going to the Company Store and asking for money against their pay just so you could buy the necessities your family needed. Worst yet, owing the store meant a man couldn't ever quit his job 'cause that scrip weren't no good anywhere but the Company Store. The Bartons had you over a barrel, and you worked until you paid the debt. If your debt ain't paid . . . well, they come after you and take what little you do have. My debt was owed, and I was looking for a way out from under it—sooner than later.

When the Barton boys had stormed off the mountain and tore across the lower field, they didn't care what or who was in the path.

Them horses sounded like thunder comin' through the valley. Raney had looked up from the porch and squalled, "Anna!"

I took out from the barn to get our girl outa the way. She was pickin' daisies on the lower side by the rye field. My feet felt like they had big rocks tied to them. The harder I tried to run, the heavier the rocks grew. I couldn't reach her before them. They plowed over her like a clod of dirt in the cornfield.

There wasn't time to scream before she'd twisted up under those horse hooves and spit out broken and busted.

I slung my head from side to side tryin' to shake the memory. There wasn't no getting rid of the ghosts in my mind, and the memories was killin' me—sucking the life outa me. Pullin' the trigger surely wouldn't be so hard. Put an end to the agony. Another child's death, my friend's youngin, thanks to the Bartons, made the weight too much to bear. "I'm sorry, Raney. Sorry, Anna. I'm sorry. I'm a coward and a failure." I was sorry it had happened. Sorry I'd caused it, and even more—I was a pathetic excuse for a man.

I brushed the barrel over my lips and slipped it into my mouth. The taste of singed metal drew my mouth tight. Like I'd bit into a raw persimmon. I leaned one hand against the barn door to keep my knees from bucklin'. My finger rubbed across the rough edge of the doorframe, and a coin dropped at my feet. Anna's coin. The penny we'd placed there so long ago.

I recalled when my little girl and me had talked. "Papa, you remember the day Reverend Posey give me that penny? You 'member?"

“I remember.” I pushed her long blond curls away from her cheek. Anna took my hand, pried open my fist, and laid that coin in my palm.

“It’s our good luck charm. You keep it safe.” She kissed the bristly whiskers that lined my jaw. “Keep it safe, Papa. That way you will always remember there is hope.”

“There is always hope, ain’t there?” I kissed her head. “I’ll put it right here on the barn doorframe. Snug as a bug in a rug.”

I’d slipped the coin onto the flat edge of the doorframe years earlier. And there it had stayed. Outa sight and safe—until now. A chill climbed my spine. The gun slipped from my mouth. I dropped to my knees, scooped the penny into my hand, and then tossed the gun into the hay. Takin’ my life only meant a temporary fix. I’d still have to face my Maker. Then what?

Sobs poured from my soul. And then I coulda swore I heard her whisper.

*There’s always hope, Papa.*

I twisted that coin between my fingers and pulled it to my chest. It’s funny how a body’s memories can twist reality. I ain’t never believed in ghosts. I still don’t, but something made that coin drop at my feet. And just in the nick of time. Be it the ghost of my child or the hand of the good Lord. I supposed that my dead daughter saved my life—even when I couldn’t save hers.

“Hate will eat you from the inside out.” That’s what my momma used to tell me. Lord bless her soul. She did her best to teach me the good Lord’s will was not always what we wanted. Momma ground in the love of the Lord, but right now, I was findin’ loving Him hard. Hate teetered on the edge of every belief I knew. My blame was aimed upward.

I shook the hay from my trousers, and my knees went to shaking. I didn’t know what scared me most—the coin falling at my feet or the fact I’d gained the courage to put that gun in my mouth. It took more guts to pull the trigger than I could muster and even more guts to keep on living. I was ashamed the thought of taking my own life had even crossed my mind. Still, the lies I spoke to myself about me I believed.

I hated Barton, and I hated the guilt that followed me. I reckon the two mixed together was a potion for disaster. The coin pressed tight in my

palm. Opening my fist, I stared at the piece of money. *How'd this penny show up now? Divine intervention? An angel? A ghost?* I'd bumped that doorframe with tools more times than I could count—yet it had never dropped. Till today. Now. Right at this minute, a broken man was saved. Funny at the twists of life.

I dropped the coin at my side. It sank into the fine dirt of the barn floor. Memories the money held took my breath, and I knew I had a choice to make. Pick up the penny and cherish the fact my girl saved my life, or let the cobwebs cover it and go on livin' like a dead man. This way of life was too much. Too hard. Too . . . sad. My girl was a joy. Would she want this for me? For her mother?

I drew a circle in the dirt around the coin. I couldn't make my fingers grasp ahold and pick it up. Leave it lay and drown in self-pity or take hold and move ahead? *Make a decision.* Grasping it between my forefinger and thumb, I blew away the dust. I held it up and eyed the coin, then rubbed it on my shirtsleeve.

"Anna, I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?" I rolled it between my fingers. It come to me that the memory of that day had halted my livin'. Truth be known, it did the same for Raney. The few times she'd said anything about it, she'd tried to make me feel better, saying that Anna's death was an accident. But I knew better. I could see it in my wife's eyes. Her pain. How she only tolerated the sight of me. The blame showed in her stare. I knew in my heart she hated me to some extent.

How could she not? It was my fault our youngin was dead. I'd been the one to challenge the Bartons to a fight I couldn't win. After a good amount of time had passed, I'd hoped that Raney would come around. I used to love wakin' up in the morning to hear her singin' some sweet song. Raney hummed like I whistled—without even thinking about it. The music left Raney's soul when Anna died, and her mouth grew parched and tight. She rarely spoke unless she had to, and she'd smile from time to time. But when she turned away, the smile left, and her face returned to pinched and painful. Raney never recovered, and I could never give her another child—the one thing she lived to have.

I wanted my life back. I wanted my wife back, and I wanted my daughter. If a body could have a wish, I'd wish that day away.

All me and Raney had done was bury the pain. Instead of us grieving together, we hid the pain deep to protect each other. It was senseless because we still wallowed in the sadness—only alone. When you suffer alone, things fall apart. You draw away from one another, and that's what we'd done. We'd grown apart instead of looking to each other for comfort.

I slid the coin between my fingers. The longer I held it in my hand, the more determined I was to make a change.

“It ends today, Anna. I'm gonna do my best to let this guilt go.”

There was something freein' about making a decision. And I chose to live.

## TWO

I'D PONDERED PUTTING that gun in my mouth for weeks. Momma used to say regret is an ugly bedfellow, and I couldn't remember the times I'd quoted that remark to others. Still, she was right. I regretted every thought of puttin' an end to things, but that was all I could do—ponder. Until today. I was reminded of that coin every time I walked past the barn door. It was a good thing work around the barn never seemed to end. I stayed busy.

The leather tack needed to be oiled, so I took down a half-empty lard can from the shelf and commenced to grease it up. I caught a brief sound in the breeze—the cry of a child. I cocked my head. There it was again—that sound. I couldn't figure out if it was an echo in the wind or if I really heard something. Either way I'd heard the sound off and on for several days. Flippin' the leather reins over my shoulder, I wiped my hands clean of the lard and leaned out the barn. Listened. Nothin' but rye swaying back and forth in the breeze and the crow's caw. I shook my head. It was nothin'. My hat caught in the morning breeze and flew toward the rye field. I chased it a bit before I snagged and planted it back on my head. Maybe what I heard was the wind singin' around the barn. It would whine through the cracks in the slats when the wind caught it just so. I shook my head. It wouldn't surprise me if I was losin' what little sense I had left.

Makin' my way back into the barn, I laid them reins down on the wooden table and wrapped the rag tight around my index finger. I dipped it in the lard and then rubbed the greasy mess into the leather. It wasn't something I enjoyed doing, but a necessity on the farm to keep the tack

soft and workable for the horses. Leather was too expensive to let it dry and crack, so I spent a few hours at the mindless task.

“La laa maa ma.” The sound caught my ear again. This time, for the first time, it sounded like the faint voice of a child. Anna had weighed heavy on my mind all week, and I pushed the sounds off as my mind playing tricks on me. I heard the voice of a youngin, but I didn’t see a thing. Should I mention this to Raney? She was already frail. She’d probably think I was going stark raving mad. Still, I was thinking of our child. Grievin’ her. Try as I might to let go, I was still holding on to the guilt that took her.

The breeze puffed through the barn, grabbing ahold of the rye stalks on the ground. It twisted them into a circle before carrying them out of the barn and into the field. I walked to the barn door again and gazed out over the rye to the place we’d buried our baby. A little head bobbed over the edge of Anna’s gravestone, and my heart stopped. I did a double take. My knees grew weak. I didn’t believe in ghosts, but I saw a girl. Clear as a bell.

“Anna?” I whispered. I wasn’t sure I wanted to leave the barn. That’d mean I believed what my eyes showed me, and I know there ain’t no such thing as ghosts. Though I’d heard tales from the miners about seein’ dead workers roaming the mine shafts, it was just hooley. That’s what it was. Still, I couldn’t stop my feet or my curiosity. My heart went to racin’, and as I started through the barn door, I snatched my shotgun and cocked it just in case something went awry.

I walked to the edge of the barn and surveyed the fields. Nothing. A deer stood in the brush just at the edge of a stand of trees. Shoving the butt of my shotgun under my arm, I dug into my pocket for the small leather tobacco pouch. Unlacing it, I squeezed two fingers into the bag and pulled out a pinch of tobacco. I never much liked the taste of the mix, but George Hogan ground up teaberry leaves and added them into his mix. It give a bitter leaf a tender, sweet taste. My lip pooched to one side, and my mouth filled with saliva. I spit, and when I looked up, a form floated in the distance. Ghostly-like. Moving up and down along the tree line. My eyes had to be playing tricks on me.

A child. Dirty. Half-dressed. My rifle slid from under my arm. It was

pure luck it didn't fire when it hit the ground. I balled my fists and rubbed both eyes. My mind had just gone by the wayside. *This ain't real. It ain't.* When I opened my eyes, she was gone. She couldn't vanish that quickly. Then, sure as shootin', there was that little head again. Her hair knotted and hanging strung around her face and shoulders. The tail of her night-shirt tossed in the breeze. Her hand climbed up her face and shoved the strands of hair to one side.

I fell against the barn, unsure if what I saw was real. I longed to see my girl. Wanted to hold her on my lap and bounce her just to hear her giggle, but this was about more than I could take.

I squinted hard and focused on the headstone across the field. I was sure I could see movement. Of course I saw movement. I saw her swipe her hair. This was me trying to convince myself what I saw was real. She popped up like a rabbit outa its hole. That did it. I picked up my gun and leaned it against the barn, then snagged an apple outa the barrel by the trough. Maybe she'd take an apple as a lure if it *was* a child. If it wasn't, then I'd eat the apple. She had to be hungry. If she was real, I'd been seeing her off and on for days. If she wasn't, I was losin' my mind.

I eased through the waist-high rye, pushing a path across the field. Fear took hold of me, and I shook. What if this was an angel? Or worse, what if I was truly losing my mind?

It was like a tease—that child's head come up and over Anna's grave-stone again. This time I acted on what I saw.

The child climbed onto the tombstone and dangled her bare feet. I stopped. Waited. Scaring her was the last thing I wanted to do. *Where did this youngin come from? Is she alone?* I eased up right slow. She could have been a child from the camps, makin' her way down to play in the field of daisies where my own girl had died. But I got a good look at her, and something wasn't right. I inched closer for a better look. Her face showed she wasn't right. I stopped just short of her.

I pulled my knife from the sheath in my boot and ran it around the apple, scoring it so it would split in half.

Easin' up real slow, I extended my hand with the apple. "Hey there, little girl."

She cocked her head. A sideways grin come across her face, and her

hand went up. Her short, pudgy fingers spread open, and her palm twisted back and forth on her wrist as she waved. She seemed right sweet. Innocent. And oddly content.

I curled my finger toward her and motioned her to me. She eyed me and slipped one foot over the stone, straddling it. *Don't you bolt and run.*

"Easy does it. It's alright."

She froze and covered her face like she thought I couldn't see her behind them dirty hands.

"It's alright, little one." I slipped up to her and squatted down. "I ain't gonna hurt you. My name is Joshua. Joshua Morgan." I tapped my chest gently with one finger, then stretched my hand toward her. "You got a name?"

She stared, never saying a word.

She had no other clothes, no shoes, just one sock balled up in her left hand, her nightshirt, and her bloomers. I reckon she was about six or so. Coulda been a hair older. The girl had dirt caked along her upper lip like old man Thompson's mustache. I moved like I was stalkin' a squirrel. I spit my chaw on the ground, cut a slice of apple, and eased it into my mouth, then cut another piece. The sweetish-sour taste of the green apple mixed with the leftover amber juice stung my jaws and made my mouth water. I felt like Eve in the Good Book, tempting the child with the fruit.

"You hungry? You like apple?"

The girl reached toward my hand, snatched the slice, and then leaned back.

I reckon since she took the apple, I knew for sure. She was real.

"What's you got all over your face?"

She swiped her arm across her cheek.

I reached the apple slice toward her. "Want another bite?"

I'd heard her in the distance. Thought I'd got a glimpse. Convinced myself I was nuttier than one of Raney's fruitcakes, but now . . . here she was. Skin on bone—real. But where'd she come from? None of my neighbors, short of Manny's boys, had youngins within a two-mile stretch.

The girl snatched the slice of apple from my hand and giggled.

The slap of Raney's broom against a rug echoed across the field as she hung it to beat out the dirt. Turning, I waved my arms in the air to get her

attention without scaring the youngin. I jumped up a couple of times and waved harder, and when I looked behind me, the child had hopped off the headstone and was doin' the same thing.

"You mockin' me?" I smiled at the girl. She reached her hand and wiggled her fingers. A grunt seeped from her lips as she pointed at the apple.

"You want another slice?"

Her head bobbed up and down, and I sliced her another piece. I knelt and cut the rest of the apple into pieces. She scooped them from my palm and then sat down, sinking deep into the waist-high grass.

"Where's your momma? You ain't surely here by yourself?" I walked behind Anna's tombstone and into the edge of the woods. "Anybody with you?" *Where on earth was her momma?* Makin' decisions hadn't been my strong suit up until I decided to live. That was a good decision, but now, right in front of me, stood another to be made—leave the youngin on her own, or help her. There'd be consequences to both.

## THREE

“YOU STAY HERE, and let me see if I can find your momma.” I wagged my finger at her from the stand of trees. “Don’t move. I’m goin’ a little deeper in the woods—see if I can find your momma.”

The child sat leaning against Anna’s tombstone, crunching on the apple. I searched a good distance, fighting thorns in a thicket several hundred feet away. I couldn’t go too far for fear that the youngin would disappear again. There was nothing. Nothing at all. Surely to goodness this little one hadn’t wandered from the coal camps. That was a good three miles up the mountain.

A shot rang out in the woods. I took out in a run to see if someone was shootin’ at the girl or me. I rounded some bushes and stumbled over a man in the grass. “Manny? What in tarnation are you doin’ laid out in the grass? Are you hurt? You been shot?”

“I’m fine,” Manny grumbled. He lay propped on his elbows, rifle resting on his shoulder and pointed toward the foot of the mountain. A buck darted toward the bush.

“I didn’t expect you out so soon after losin’ little Mary,” I said.

“That *was* our supper. I reckon somebody spooked the animal right as I took my shot,” Manny snapped. “And just cause my youngin died don’t mean I stop feedin’ my family. I got a wife and two other children to tend. I didn’t think you’d mind if I inched over on your woods to hunt. So much for our supper.”

“You scared the devil outa me,” I said.

Manny stood and dusted the dirt from his clothes. “Sorry. What brings you out here? I’m surprised to see you down this far, knowin’ Anna’s grave and all being here.”

I raised my hand and shushed him. “I don’t usually.” I pointed in the direction of Anna’s headstone. “Through the woods, just a ways back. I saw a youngin over there.” I headed toward where I’d seen the girl. Manny slipped his gun over his shoulder and followed. The girl was gone.

“She was right here!” I said.

I ran to the front of the grave, only to find bits of apple peel. “At least I know she was real. A ghost don’t leave apple peels,” I muttered under my breath. This youngin could vanish faster than a coyote on a rabbit’s rear.

Manny eyed me. “There ain’t no girl, Joshua.” He patted my shoulder. “I think I see our Mary from time to time. Guess when you lose a youngin, you never really lose sight of them. It’ll be alright.” He bumped me gently. “Y’all come see us,” Manny mumbled, and he walked back into the woods toward his homestead. I stood motionless. *She was just there.*

Every step I took huntin’ that youngin, I asked myself if I was crazier than a fritter. How could I lose a child that quick? But when the summer breeze caught the rye and pressed its fluffy head downward, there she was. Teetering from side to side and heading toward the house. *Lordy mercy—Raney!*

I ain’t rightly sure why I broke into a run. Reckon it was memories I was runnin’ from. Maybe it was a tinge of guilt. Fear someone might think I’d took a child when I hadn’t. But I run past that child, hollering at Raney. I glanced over my shoulder to see if she was following me, but what I saw was a mess about to happen.

I ran hard toward the house. I needed to warn Raney, not let her be took back. She had pulled the rug she’d been beatin’ off the clothesline and was wrestlin’ it to the porch. She’d think I’d lost my ever-loving mind.

I had no intention to get in somebody else’s business, but the circumstance forced my hand. That little youngin, poor as dirt, had twisted at my heart. She didn’t look right, and she didn’t talk neither. The youngin cooed and grunted. Still, she had to belong to someone—she was someone else’s business.

Raney looked up from her rug and shaded her eyes with her hand. I come running, waving at her and shoutin’ for her to come quick. I didn’t find a soul with that youngin. Course I couldn’t just pick her up and drag her home, but the minute she saw Raney across the field, her arms had

reached out, and I guessed she decided that was where she needed to be. I reckoned I was about to stomp into a hot pile of somebody else's business and splatter it like manure. But helping that little girl was the right thing to do.

"Raney! Raney, honey." My voice broke as I tore across that field. I was in no real shape to run. Bad lungs—a result of working the mines. Nevertheless, I took out across the field as hard as I could go. I'd run a good distance when I looked over my shoulder, and that girl was right behind me. "Raney," I shouted. A cough raised from my chest as I spit out the words. "Raney!"

Raney met me, takin' hold of my shoulders to help me balance. I stretched my arm and pointed behind me. There come that ragamuffin of a youngin. She carried a slice of apple in one hand and a grin like a cat that had just eat the bird.

Raney stood starin' at the child coming across the field. "Anna?" she whispered.

"No, it ain't Anna. I thought the same thing as you. A ghost of our girl, but I think this youngin has been out by the grave for days." I coughed, trying to catch a breath.

"Days? Why didn't you say something?"

"I . . . I . . . I thought I was seein' things. She'd be there one second and gone before I could get to her. I . . ." I stopped, and the child run past me.

Raney knelt to the ground, and the youngin stretched out her arms, wrapping them tight around Raney's neck. She pulled the child onto her hip and stood.

"Lordy mercy. She's a mess. Look at her." Her legs stretched to Raney's knees.

The girl tightened her arms around Raney's neck and never made a peep. It was like she knew we had good hearts. Her dirty fingers looped together under Raney's hair.

I stood speechless as the girl hung on Raney like a baby possum to its momma. I shrugged and searched for the words to explain.

"I kept hearin' something out in the field. I . . . I . . . thought she was a ghost. One minute she was there. The next she was gone." I rubbed my face with my handkerchief. "I thought I was losing my mind. You know

how Anna weighs on my mind, and I . . .” My mouth run faster than my legs had coming across the field. “The child finally come out where I could see she was real and not in my mind.”

Tears welled in Raney’s eyes, and her arms inched tighter around the little girl. She buried her face in the child’s shoulder and hugged her, rockin’ back and forth.

“Lord have mercy. Joshua Morgan, who is she?”

“Child needs help.” I tore up on the porch and went to pacin’.

“Where did you get her from?” Raney asked.

“I didn’t *get* her! Let’s be clear about that. She was out at Anna’s . . .” I couldn’t bring myself to say *grave*. “Down in the lower field,” I snapped. “I told you. I thought I was seein’ things. One second she was there, the next not, and I didn’t bring her home. When she saw you beating that rug, she headed this way. She saw you across the field. I tried to get here first to warn you. The youngin needs help.” I huffed.

Raney eyed the ground, ponderin’ what I’d said. After a minute, she nodded her approval. The girl’s thick legs dangled against Raney’s thigh. She propped the little one on the table and swiped her stringy hair to one side.

“You believe what I’m telling you, don’t you?”

Raney pressed her hand against my cheek, something she’d not done in ages. A tender touch at that. She smiled an old familiar smile. It was like seeing the sun rise after days of rain. At times, Raney was that different.

“I believe you. And I’m sorry for accusing you. I know better,” she said.

I took in a breath and sighed. “Child is nasty.”

“No clothes worth a penny.” Raney loosened the girl’s hand that held a dirty sock.

For a minute I drifted off, thinkin’ of Anna’s penny—the one that saved me.

“Have mercy.” Raney spit on the tail of her skirt and wiped around the child’s mouth. “Is that coal dust or dirt?” Raney pressed open the girl’s lips and looked at her gums. On the mountain even the dirt held a black color from the coal.

“Joshua, this baby looks like she’s been eatin’ coal dust. I reckon that’d make her sicker than a dog. She must be starving to death.”

“She didn’t have no trouble eatin’ that apple I gave her.”

I was never know’d for my smarts, but I did work the mines on the mountain for the better part of ten years. I know what the black dust does to your lungs. I know how it is to open my lunch pail and eat with the coat of dust that hangs in the air.

I know the taste and how it dries your mouth and makes your tongue feel thick and your lips draw tight. And if this here youngin was wallowing in coal dust, there was only one place she could have come from—Barton’s mining camp.

“Draw me a pail of water. Pour it in the pot over the fire, and don’t bring that water in until it’s tempered. It oughta be warm to the touch. And use your elbow to test it.” Raney barked orders like a general. She stood that youngin on the outside table and gave her the once-over. She’s a good momma . . . always was. Still was. For a short time, a remnant of the old Raney returned. I reckon mothering ain’t something a woman forgets. It’s part of them. Their little ones might grow up and marry. They might die like our Anna. But being a momma ain’t something a woman just up and forgets.

Seeing her dote over that little girl brought back memories—sweet memories. They overtook the horrible ones. I was happy to obey every command just to see her back. My wife . . . I thought I’d lost her too.

I stoked the fire outside under the laundry pot and heated water while Raney grabbed a big washin’ bucket from the porch and stood the girl in it. She soaked a rag from the wash pail and pressed one finger against that youngin’s jaw, forcing her clenched mouth to open.

“She’s so nasty. We need to try and rinse her out here. That warm water ready?” Raney dipped a rag in the bucket a second time and tried to wash a layer of soot off the child.

“Joshua, she’s a purty little thing. I believe she’s got a red tint to her hair. I’ll need that lye soap to cut the soot.”

I poured up a pan of warm water from the heatin’ pot.

Raney carried the youngin into the cabin and readied her to bathe. “It’ll take two or three washings to get her clean now that we got her rinsed. Keep heating water.”

That’s when we really took notice that this girl was one of them “sick

children.” You hear about ’em. Eyes shaped like almonds, forehead wide, mouth small, round face, thick tongue. Chubby and odd little fingers, pudgy legs and feet. Not right bright. She was the kind folks kept locked up outa sight. The ones they was either afraid of or ashamed of.

Raney didn’t have to say a word. It was obvious the child was abandoned. It was up to us to make things right.

“Can she talk?” Raney asked.

The youngin sat on the edge of the table, legs danglin’. Raney rolled the lye soap in her rag and rubbed it hard against the girl’s legs to scrub the soot.

“Don’t reckon I can tell yet. She ain’t uttered a word. Just hummed and ate every bite of apple I gave her.”

“Get me one of your shirts off the line.” Raney stood the girl in her big laundry tub and poured water over the child’s head, soaking her, clothes and all.

Beads of water stood on her eyelashes like the dew waiting to fall from trees. Soot streamed in streaks down her skin.

“If I can just get this youngin wet, then we can use the warm water to scrub the soot.”

I offered them some privacy whilst Raney stripped her naked. I could hear them wet, nasty clothes make a peelin’ sound as Raney pulled them away from the girl’s tender skin. I walked to the clothesline and pulled down a shirt. Only had three. Wasn’t much choice, but I was happy to give one to the youngin. It was certainly more than what she had.

I didn’t know that girl from Adam, but there was something familiar about her. Something special. I tossed the shirt over my shoulder and picked up a pot holder Raney kept by the firepit. I rolled up my sleeve and touched my elbow to the steeping water. Perfect.

“More water’s ready, Raney.” The muscle in my arm ached as I lugged the cast-iron pot of water onto the porch. Just as I reached the door, I heard Raney singing.

The music had returned.