

“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

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*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."