

BLACK SUNSHINE

BY
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CHAPTER 1

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A sudden clap of thunder ripped open the crisp autumn afternoon, banged harsh and loud—but not in the cloudless sky. The boom roared in the tangled roots of Black Mountain, deep in the dark guts of the earth.

In the stunned stillness that followed, time shut down. For an airless, eternal moment, not a bird cheeped, not a dry leaf rattled.

Then the earth groaned, as a man might cry out in his sleep. *Rumbled*. And the rumble swelled, became a grating death rattle like gravel in a blender. The ground shook, dogs howled, kitchen cabinets flew open, glasses, plates, and bowls clattered out and shattered in a tinkling symphony of breaking glass. Pictures and mirrors leapt off walls, clocks crashed to the floor and stopped—all of them at the same time: 12:18 P.M.

But even before she heard that first sound, Ruby Sparrow knew.

She'd been hanging up a load of laundry on the clothesline in the backyard when the knowing of it came to her. She sucked in a ragged gasp and the honeysuckle-sweetened air suddenly turned as thick as creek mud, curdled, so she couldn't catch another breath.

Not much scared Ruby. Not Joe Pritchard's old bull with the broken horn. Not the haints that hid in the graveyard mist. Not the shadow of the mountain that reached out to grab her in the evening. But in that moment, Ruby made the acquaintance of pure terror. A horror beyond her sight—though not out past the knowing of her heart—had dried up all the spit in her mouth and set her hands to trembling so bad she almost dropped her husband's clean shirt in the dirt at her feet.

A scream crawled on hairy, black legs up the back of her throat, a wail as haunting as the cry of lost children wandering in the dark. She didn't give it voice though. Couldn't. She had no air to push the sound out through her lips into the world.

Ruby wasn't the only one who knew. Other wives, mothers, sisters, and girlfriends did, too. Sick dread instantly seized hearts all up and down the hollow. One of the reporters who came later, feeding on Aintree Hollow's grief and misery like crows tearing at roadkill, claimed some of the women had "sensed the first silent movement of the earth." That fool didn't know jack. What the women had sensed was the string break. The thread, delicate as a

moonbeam, tough as a piece of catgut, that bound Aintree's families together, that knit the whole hollow together—they'd felt it snap.

When they did, they froze—breathless. Listening. Straining to hear and begging the good Lord to strike them deaf so they couldn't.

One heartbeat.

Two.

Then the rumble ate up the world and Ruby found herself running down the rocky slope barefoot, her flip-flops lost or torn away. She didn't notice the sharp stones, didn't feel the ground at all beneath her feet. Everything below her waist was numb; the top part of her body bounced along on churning air. Other women ran too and mindlessly dragged small, crying children along with them. Left front doors open, shirts half-ironed, goats half-milked, breakfast dishes in the sink, and stew, soup, or beans on the stove to burn.

All at once, a line of vehicles, like beads on a string, clogged the lone paved road down the hollow, passing Ruby as she ran. All the dirt roads spewed cars and pickups and farm trucks on to it, their drivers as frantic as she was. When Della Mattingly stopped and yelled, "Get in!" Ruby jumped into the front seat. She didn't shut the door, though, left it open the whole way and sat with Bowman's wet shirt bunched up tight in her hands.

Della skidded to a stop where the stampede had pulled up short in front of Harlan #7, an unimpressive hole in the base of the mountain across from the hollow.

The stunned, silent crowd stared at it wide-eyed—watched the mouth of the coal mine vomit a black cloud of dust and smoke into the bright, fall sunshine.

Words were too painful to form and too jagged to speak so nobody said anything, just made little whimpering sounds, some of them, like a baby rabbit run over by a tractor.

The bell on the Baptist church began to ring. *Dong. Dong. Dong.* A mournful cry nobody needed to hear to know disaster had struck. Every man, woman and child for 10 miles around Aintree Hollow had heard the blast and felt the earth shake. All of them understood instantly what the quaking rumble meant—and *who* it meant. The day shift crew was at work at the far end of a maze of dark shafts that stretched more than a mile into the base of the mountain. At least twenty, maybe as many as thirty miners—husbands, sons, fathers, brothers—were bent over beneath a 48-inch roof digging at a coal seam 2,500 feet below the mountaintop.

Ruby's husband was down there! Her brother, Ed, was too. So was Will, and her son-in-law, Jody. And the youngest of Ruby's four children, her only son, Ricky Dan. Just turned 25, Ricky Dan had finally popped the question and planned to get married before Thanksgiving. But that was before Harlan

#7 exploded on a sunny October afternoon and blew him apart. Or Black Mountain crushed him under a million tons of rock and dirt. Or buried him alive, maybe, left him to gasp for breath down there in the dark until there was no air left.

Twenty years later

Will Gribbins is pretty sure the creature inching on little clawed feet up his pants leg is a rat. It has to be. What other animal hangs around a dumpster behind a pizza parlor—a squirrel? That rheumy-eyed old man in the bunk next to Will's at the shelter hated squirrels. Said once, "Squirrels are nothing but rats with good PR."

The remark strikes Will as riotously funny and he roars with laughter—which doesn't appear to sit well with the rat in his pants because it bites him, sinks its sharp teeth deep into the boney flesh of his thigh. The lightning bolt of pain momentarily sobers him and Will pummels the wiggling lump with his fist as he struggles to leap to his feet so he can shake it out of his pants. But he can't stand up, is only able to rise far enough to stagger backward and collapse on a pile of black plastic garbage bags that overflowed from the dumpster.

He flops around on his back, shrieks in agony, and tries to roll over on the rat, using his weight to crush it. The animal fights back and bites him again and again. The struggle rips open one of the garbage bags and a choking, putrid stench rises from it, but Will is too drunk and in too much pain to notice. He writhes in rotted food. Pieces of pizza stick to his hair; grease and lettuce slimy with Italian dressing slather goo on his back.

Then his hand lands on something solid—a stick, a pipe! He grabs it and slams it down on the lump in his pants. The creature takes a hunk out of his leg before Will can hit it again. Then he hammers the beast over and over until it is still.

Will finally drops the pipe and falls back in the garbage panting, sobbing, his leg ablaze in pain. As soon as he catches his breath, he holds on to the side of the dumpster to steady himself and pulls slowly upward until he's standing—on one leg. He sways like he's on the deck in a rolling sea. With the stink of cheese gone bad and rancid marinara sauce in his nostrils, he tries to shake the dead rat out of his pants. But it's jammed in there, stuck. He leans against the dumpster, unsnaps his filthy jeans, and eases them down toward his knees until the bloody rat carcass plops out on the pavement. In the dim glow of the streetlight at

the end of the alley, Will examines his leg. It's covered in blood, his and the rat's. Puncture wounds up and down his thigh from his knee to his crotch pour streams of warm liquid, black in the sickly, yellow light. Each wound is a separate agony. It's like they're on fire, like each one is a red-hot coal—

Will freezes.

"Coal," a voice whispers in his ear.

"Who said that?" Will whirls around, almost falls and has to grab the dumpster to keep from losing his balance. He peers into doorways, dark recesses and shadows, and asks again, his voice trembling, his words slurred. "Who said that?"

A breeze scatters the trash at his feet, rustles newspapers and sends them scurrying along in the darkness. An empty soft drink can rolls noisily down the alley; the clinking sound echoes eerily against the brick walls until it clunks into a fence.

And the wind sighs, its voice haunting, "Coal."

Will reached down unconsciously and massaged his thigh to ease away the shadow pain he still felt from the rat bites nine months ago that had gotten infected and almost killed him.

"Hurt your leg, didja?" the bearded truck driver asked. Will looked over at him, startled. "I seen you rubbin' it's all. I's workin' in a dog hole mine once, seen a man get his leg mashed plumb off by a scoop."

A dog hole mine was exactly what its name implied—a hole in the ground no better than a dog could dig, a dangerous pit operated outside all the boundaries with no regard for the safety of the coal miners inside.

Will knew about dog hole mines; he'd worked in one—had barely escaped dying in one.

The coal truck bumped down into a pothole the size of a bathtub and Will grabbed the old leather seat to keep from being dumped into the floorboard. Some things hadn't changed in twenty years. Two decades' worth of weight restrictions and highway regulations obviously hadn't made a lick of difference. The huge coal trucks still tore up the roads.

"I didn't injure my leg, break it or anything. It just aches sometimes where I got bitten by..." Will edited his response at the last second, no need to gross the guy out, make him ask even more questions. "...a squirrel."

That was dumb!

"A squirrel? How in the Sam Hill'd you get bit by a *squirrel*?" The man moved to one side the plug of Skoal swelling his lower lip like a wasp sting and spit a stream of brown liquid out the window. A considerable amount

didn't make it past his beard. "Musta had rabies. In these woods, you mostly got to worry 'bout rabid skunks and foxes—not squirrels."

Will looked out the dirty truck window. He knew what you had to worry about in these woods.

The steep, tree-lined Appalachians rose around him like giant ramparts protecting a castle, their autumn splendor set against a blue sky dotted with cotton-ball clouds tethered like hot-air balloons to the treetops. The medley of color splashed on the hillsides—claret-wine red, the gold of a Spanish doubloon, smiley-face yellow, the deep russet of a chestnut foal's coat or an auburn-haired toddler, cloverleaf green and an amber shade of brown—reminded Will of Scottish clan tartans. No, it was the other way around. The clan tartans he'd seen in tourist shops on the Isle of Skye had reminded him of autumn in the mountains.

Will soaked it all up, warm oil on chapped skin. There was profound comfort in the mountains' agelessness, as if time itself had been so taken by their velvet beauty it was reluctant to move on—and profound delight in the everlasting newness of crisp, clear images, their edges sharp as sabers, a wet oil painting still glistening with morning dew.

As the empty coal truck bumped deeper into the paint-splattered mountains, each twist and turn opened up a view more hauntingly familiar than the last.

They passed Pine Mountain Taxidermy Shop—"You rack it, we'll pack it." Pine Mountain—God's practical joke on the coal companies. The rock strata in that one mountain had been pushed upward so the coal seams ran vertical instead of horizontal. No way to mine vertical coal without ripping the whole mountain apart, and Will didn't think even King Coal could get away with strip-mining Pine Mountain.

The farmhouse/office of Joe Tungate's Used Cars flew past the truck window. Five vehicles, half a dozen birdbaths and a flock of concrete ducks sat in the front yard there awaiting adoption. A hand-painted sign nailed to a nearby fence post offered HAND-PAINTED SIGNS for sale. The Convenience Store around the next bend promoted Kentucky lottery tickets: "Somebody's got to win; might as well be you!" along with the Kentucky Fried Chicken Restaurant in Hazard: "Eat supper with the Colonel tonight."

The sign out front of the Four Square Full Gospel Pentecostal—pronounced Penny-costal—Church proclaimed: "You not believing in hell don't put the fire out!"

Trailer houses, alone or in small herds, were affixed to the hillsides with round white stickpins. Will had heard they'd declared the satellite dish the official flower of West Virginia and it was plain the seeds had blown across the state line.

The road hugged Stinkin' Creek, that spilled in a white cascade back the way they'd come. The sides of the valley rose so sharply on either side in some places there was room only for the creek, the road, the railroad tracks and the shaft of sunlight that shone down between the ridges.

Five hours of sun.

Will had grown to manhood in more shadow than light, in a hollow so deep the mountains only granted it direct sunlight 5 hours a day. The sun cleared the top of the mountain to the east of Aintree Hollow about 10 o'clock every morning and then dropped down behind the one to the west by three in the afternoon. Of course, it didn't matter if the sun was shining and it was 100 degrees in the shade, or if it was raining like a big dog or snowing a blizzard. Down in the coal mines, it was always the deepest dark ditch of midnight. Fifty-eight degrees and dawn never broke there.

Will forcibly shook off the image of headlamp beams shining out like pallid light sabers into dusty blackness and concentrated on figuring out why he wasn't moved in some intensely emotional way by what he saw. The splendor of the mountains folded protectively around the hollows was the canvass on which his dreams had been painted every night for decades. Every night the nightmares didn't mug him, beat him senseless, and leave him bloody and broken—reaching out for the blessed comfort of oblivion.

Why didn't he feel...well, *something*? The ragged ache of homesickness had throbbed like a rotted tooth in those early years, took his breath away as he stood on the deck of some ship in some ocean and stared at flat blue water all the way to the horizon. How he'd longed then to swing on a grapevine over a creek, or go sangin'—hunting for ginseng in the woods. How desperately his soul had yearned to hear his own sound, the one-of-a-kind Eastern Kentucky dialect it had taken years of concentrated effort to erase from his own speech.

So why couldn't he manage to conjure up a single emotion now?

Maybe he had mourned so long all the feelings had finally bled out of him.

No, that wasn't it. It wasn't that he didn't feel *anything*. He did, just not what he'd expected. He felt—normal. The sights that greeted him looked sublimely ordinary. Everything else he'd seen in the past 20 years—that was foreign. This was reality, like waking from a dream and seeing the walls of your own bedroom, the curtains stirring in a breeze perfumed by wisteria, honeysuckle, and the ancient outhouse in the backyard.

He'd been screwed up to feel something big—euphoric, maybe. More likely some razor-edged emotion that would slice him open if he got anywhere near it. So he gladly settled for what he felt instead. Peaceful. For these few moments as he lumbered along the rutted road back into his world, the warring factions inside him declared a truce. The weight of pain he carried

every day lifted; the fear that consumed him abated; the guilt that was his constant companion faded. And the compulsion, the itch that screamed every second to be scratched—even that eased.

His eyes filled with unexpected tears and he turned his face toward the window, his own reflection in the dirty glass superimposed on the view he could see through it like one of the haints Ma Sparrow teased would slither up out of the graveyard when the moon was full. And for an instant, he could see the faint image of a ghost in the reflection—the ghost of the shattered young man who'd run away from his whole life, fled everything and everybody he knew or cared about. Then it was gone and what stared back at him was the ruin of a face. All hard lines and sharp edges—haggard, drawn, and gaunt. Eyes once a bright, arresting ice blue were now the color of faded denim, sunk deep in hollows, underlined by dark shadows. Way-too-early furrows in his brow and around his mouth, a thick scar on his chin, skin ashen, thinning hair almost as gray as brown that hung limp over the tops of his ears. Will needed a haircut.

“Where was you at when that squirrel gotcha’?” asked the coal truck driver who'd offered to “carry” Will up the mountain when he saw him walking along the roadside of the Kingdom Come Parkway with everything he owned in a borrowed turquoise-and-black gym bag. The irony had struck Will as he climbed up into the rig—he'd left these mountains two decades ago hitching a ride on a coal truck; it was fitting that he came back the same way. “They cut its head off and test it? 'Cause rabies can stay in your guts for years, sleepin' like, then one day it'll whup up on you and you'll start to foamin' at the mouth. Wait that long, though, and it'll be too late and they cain't do nothin' 'bout it.”

“Can't” pronounced so it rhymed with “saint.” Welcome home, Will.

“I had great medical care,” he told the driver with a smile. “Matter of fact, these bites saved my life. If I hadn't gotten bit, I'm sure I'd be dead by now.” Before the man had time to question further, Will waved him off. “Complicated story and you'd be welcome to hear it, but this is as far as I need to go. If you'd pull over up there at that dirt road, I can walk the rest of the way.”

The driver eased the truck to a stop. Will thanked him, sincerely touched that the generous mountain spirit he remembered hadn't faded with the years. He climbed down out of the rig and watched the big truck lumber away, dribbling little pieces of coal out the back as it bumped along.

Will heard the driver grind the gears as he double-clutched up the steep incline around the next bend. Then it was quiet. In the silence, the familiar knot-in-the-belly dread returned. But now that he was actually here, this close to it all, his dread morphed into a fear as cold as a shark cruising dark currents in a night sea. Will Gribbins harbored no illusions, understood with absolute clarity what was at stake. It was simple when you got right down to it.

Unless he could do what he had come here to do, he'd be dead before Christmas.