

The Life and Times of Rowan Daly – Excerpt

By Rex Owens

Chapter 1

The June morning promised to be another smothering day. Rowan rubbed her sore back muscles. Since Eli left for the mine, she had been hoeing the garden in her relentless battle of weeds versus vegetables, which required daily attention. Suddenly, like summer lightning, the heavy morning air was pierced by the warning bell from the Hope mine.

“Eli!”

Rowan dropped her hoe and ran the two miles to the mine entrance as fast as she could; it felt like twenty. As she got closer Rowan was joined by other wives and children all with glazed-over eyes and the look of impending doom on their faces. Outside the mine Rowan bent over, gasping for air and saw her feet caked in blood and dirt. She looked at all the familiar faces of the women who lived in the company houses next to theirs.

“What is it, Hattie?” Rowan screamed.

“I don’t know girl, but it ain’t good. Never is when they ring the bell. I don’t see the supervisor, do you?”

Rowan clawed through the crowd toward the man pulling the bell and found Jed Morgan, the manager of the company store.

“Jed?” Rowan stammered in disbelief. Jed didn’t hear Rowan; the clamor of the bell was deafening.

Hattie came up beside Rowan and shook Jed by the shoulders. “Jed, where is Earle?”

Jed glared back and Hattie and noticed the crowd surrounding him for the first time. “Earle’s in the hole. Something happened, I don’t know what. When I saw Earle scurry down the mine shaft, I started ringing out the warning. It’s my job.”

Rowan felt faint and grabbed for Hattie so she wouldn’t fall. Hattie held Rowan up with one arm and gathered her three children around her. “Grab my waist.” The women shouted out names: Howie, Chester, Robbie, Walter, Darnell, Floyd, as they inched closer to the mine

entrance. Earle Calhoun appeared at the entrance knowing there would be a crowd of terrified families there.

“Listen up, I only got time to say this once. There’s been a cave-in. I don’t know what happened so don’t ask. We’ve got to start digging – now! The veins in Earle’s neck throbbed as he blurted out orders. “I need every man in town, every one of them. Grab a pick, grab a shovel, grab a damn hammer.”

“Is Eli in the pit, Rowan?” Lena, a neighbor, asked.

Rowan was still clinging to Hattie. “It’s his week on the morning shift. What about Frank?”

“I left him at home asleep – he’s on night shift this week. I heard the bell and had to find out what’s goin’ on.” “For the love of God, Lena, go get him up. We need him digging. Oh please, please,” Rowan pleaded.

Lena took Rowan by the shoulders and looked directly in her eyes. “All the men will come, you’ll see. I’ll get Frank and then pound on the door of all the houses in our block. Stay with Hattie.” Lena ran off with the speed of a deer to find help.

“Get back, ladies; the coal dust will kill ya,” Earle shouted.

All together the women stepped back.

“Farther, damn it, farther.” Earle waved his arms until the women were at least thirty feet from the entrance.

Rowan shut her eyes and held her hands over her ears, trying to stop the shouting. *Is it an explosion, a cave-in, a flood? This is a new mine; how can this happen in a new mine? Eli must be alive – he must.* Her mind raced with questions that had no answers – not now, anyway – soon. She was proud of Eli for having one of the most dangerous jobs. He punched holes into the rock, shoved in the dynamite sticks, then ran like hell when the fuse was lit. He was good at it and eager for the extra pay every week. It bought meat twice a week and milk every day.

Rowan recalled the morning. It was like every other June morning. Rowan kissed Eli full on the lips when he left for the hole and handed him his lunch bucket with a biscuit, two pieces of fried chicken and a few of his favorite sweet pickles. “Meatloaf and potatoes for dinner,” she hollered as he trotted off to the mine. Eli waved goodbye without looking back. Six mornings a week this was their life in New Hope. Eli wasn’t a church person and Rowan was a lukewarm Christian so most Sundays they cuddled in bed until mid-morning, sharing their dreams for the future. In the summer they would go on a picnic next to the Red River. Rowan made egg salad sandwiches with sweet pickles and lemonade. Eli would spend afternoons fishing for small mouth bass while Rowan read Life magazines. With any luck Eli would catch their dinner. Life was good in New Hope. Even in the Great Depression they had steady income that provided for their daily needs and a roof over their heads, all that could be expected in 1936.

This isn't happening. It can't happen. Eli is good at his job. He wouldn't let this happen. Something went wrong. An icy shiver went up Rowan's spine and it shook her to the quick. Oh God, what if he's dead? No, No, No, No. Not again. Eli would never abandon me, he promised – he promised.