

Part I

Fall 1897

Chapter 1

HER PAW WAS DRUNK AGAIN ... happy drunk, but that would change. It always did.

Not quite thirteen years old and already life battered her, brutal cycles stretching as far into the past as she could remember and as far into the future as she could imagine. In her mind she began her week on Tuesday, sorry-day for paw. He apologized for everything he had done since Saturday, promised never to do it again and tried to make his family as happy as poor white trash with empty bellies could be. Wednesday was find-an-odd-job-day and, with luck, not-so-hungry-day. Thursday was work-or-hunt-day and usually full-pot-at-dinner-day. Friday was complain-day; never-had-a-man-worked-so-hard-for-a-family-so-ungrateful-day. Then came two-jug Saturday--anxious morning, agonizing afternoon, appalling night. Tomorrow the horror of Saturday would continue until her paw could only snore and drool, sleeping straight through until Monday, vomit-and-be-sick-day.

"Come here, ya vixen."

She heard her paw's liquor-slurred words and her momma's shrill, nervous laugh in reply, both firmly fixing their exact position in the demon's repertoire of brutality.

He always calls momma vixen 'fore he takes her the first time.

The child knew that had she been peeking through the cracks in the cabin's clapboards instead of hiding at the edge of the clearing where their shack stood, she would have seen her paw roughly undress her momma, then be quick about his business with her. All the while the woman praised the wonders of her husband, holding him close as he had his way with her and staring vacantly at the roof of the dilapidated hovel the four of them called home.

"Oh, you're a wonderful man," her momma always said as her paw, walking away unsteadily,

pulled up his pants and went for his jug again.

Then the brief interlude in which the demon sometime actually bared his fangs and smiled would end; not all at once, but slowly, inevitably, like the Mississippi rising during spring flood. She had watched this ritual so many times through the chinks in the cabin wall she knew exactly what was happening inside. Today, huddled at the edge of the woods, she saw the minute details of each abomination in the archives of her memory, sounds from the cabin moving the images in her head toward their inevitable conclusion.

Her momma, dressed now, would be going about her chores as her paw sat in the family's only chair – a rickety, old ladder-back – pulling on his jug.

She waited. Without a breeze to stir them, the tall pines where she hid seemed carved from the cloudless blue background and painted in earth tones. In the grass at her feet, a spider ran the tightropes of its web, worried by the water collecting on the strands. *Where'd it come from?* she wondered, then realized she was crying.

After a while her paw's loud demand carried to the trees. "Where's m' woman!"

In her mind's eye the child saw her momma trudge to where he sat, putting on a forlorn smile as she came into his view, herding wisps of ornery, broom-straw blonde hair into place, uselessly smoothing the wrinkles in her apron. "Here I am, Herman. Can I get ya somethin'?" she always asked, anxious brown eyes flitting around the shack as if looking for some minor household god to make this Saturday different from all the rest.

"Got me an itch needs scratchin'. Takes a real woman. Think the likes o' you can do it?"

"Oh, I'll try, Herman, I surely will," her momma always said as she helped her husband out of his clothes, then undressed herself, frantically attempting to be erotic. But the poor woman never succeeded.

In all the years she watched her mother's inept, almost comic, efforts to be seductive, the child did not know liquor diminished a man's prowess, that the failure did not belong to her momma. She only knew her paw's manhood would not peak and he blamed his wife.

Waiting for Saturday's inevitable tragedy to play itself out, the child hunkered to insignificance in the scrub. Haunches to heels, she squatted, hugging her knees to her chest, barely breathing the pine-scented air. Cramped thighs, calves and arms ached; a muscle under her right shoulder blade knotted. She bit her lower lip until tiny drops of blood seeped through the skin. Tears fought against the pain in her body and the agonizing images in her mind. *Daren't cry out, daren't move, lest the demon catch me up in his nettle-cloth.*

"Damn you!" her paw yelled. "If I had me a real woman, I'd be all right. But I'm stuck with

you. A real woman'd put me in fine fiddle, wouldn't she now? Not a cow, though. Not a floppy-titted bitch!"

"Oh, Herman, I'm trying. Don't you think ... Well ... M-Maybe if you didn't drink so –."
"Leave my drinkin' out o' this!"

The sound of an open-palm slap and her momma's scream reached the child, made her shrink further into the undergrowth.

Then the demon called for her. "Sarah Beth!"

This, the most recent vagary in the savage cycles of her life, had begun a few months ago. After her bout with yellow fever, Sarah Beth first noticed how strangely her paw stared at her, but dismissed it. *Just another puzzlement.*

"Oh, Herman, no. Please. *PLEASE!*"

Her mother's terror plain in the woman's voice, the child did not understand it.

"You don't need her," Sarah Beth's mother continued in a plaintive voice. "Ya got me. Let her be. She's so young. She's –."

"You surer-than-hell ain't no good f' me!" A slap and scream for punctuation. "That's just what-alls I need ... A young 'un ... *SARAH BETH!* Git yourself in here, gal! Ya old paw's got somethin' sweet f' ya ... Somethin' real sweet!"

"No, Herman. Oh, God, Herman, no! Leave her be! You got me. You don't need –."

Her paw hit her momma again.

Sarah Beth wanted to run into the cabin and make him stop but could not, frozen by fear and promises.

"Listen t' me good, Sarah Beth," her momma had said time after time. "No matter what all happens t' me, promise you'll never get next to ya paw when he's drunk. Understand me?"

"Yes, 'um." But Sarah Beth only understood her momma took beatings meant for her.

"Swear it!"

"I swear, Momma."

The loathsome sounds of her mother being knocked into the cabin walls, the poor woman's

screams and pleas drove Sarah Beth deeper into the woods. The scrub pulled at her, knotted in the thick mass of her scarlet-gold hair. Vines tripped her. Branches and brambles tore her clothes, ripped her skin. Captured in a hell gone green, she twisted; stumbled; fought the thicket; thrashed; punched her leafy, insubstantial captor; sobbed; saw her paw's face in the tree trunks; ran on legs that would not, could not move; gulped for air; lost her sight to tears; fell; split her knee; ripped her palms; pounded her forehead on the ground to banish the terrible sights trapped forever in her head. But nothing could release her from the scenes playing endlessly in the cabin and her mind. Eyes squeezed tight, every angle of her consciousness, like mirrors in a fun house, reflected her momma's plight to the far-off crannies of her brain. She had to find a way to stop the beatings meant for her. *But I promised!*

Lying in the undergrowth, bleeding, out of breath, the image of her paw's face, twisted and leering, came into view behind her closed eyelids. Bit-by-bit the bead of a gun sight assembled in her mind's eye and nestled between his thick eyebrows. She imagined the rifle's smooth, wooden stock against her cheek; the cool, metal trigger under her finger.

Fear and confusion suddenly gone, Sarah Beth knew how to keep her promise and still save her momma.

Chapter 2

ON TUESDAYS HER PAW DOTTED on her momma. From the loft of their one room cabin where she and her ten year-old brother slept, Sarah Beth would hear her parents do tenderly on Tuesday night what had been done so viciously just a few days before. And, surprisingly, her mother enjoyed it. Yet, Sarah Beth knew the cycle. As sure as harvest followed planting, the violence would come again the very next Saturday. She had never known her momma without a bruise blooming or fading on her face.

In the dark of the following Tuesday's midnight, Sarah Beth stole from the loft leaving her brother curled up on the old moss-stuffed burlap sack they shared. She crept to the mantle and lifted her father's lever-action carbine from its wooden pegs. On many previous sorry-days he had showed her how to use it, taken her hunting now and again. He had even remarked in his thick Southern drawl, "You a tolerable good shot for a girl."

Now she would show him how good. In the quiet, one-room shanty, the clatter of metal on metal sounded like freight cars coupling as she chambered a bullet. Despite the noise, her paw continued sleeping in a death-like trance of satisfied exhaustion. She leveled the rifle at a spot on his forehead below his thinning, brick-red hair.

"What ya doin', Sarah Beth!" Her momma's demand came in an urgent whisper.

"He ain't never gonna hurt ya no more." Rage made the child almost luminescent in the gloom.

The specter shape of her momma floated from the bed and the tall, gaunt woman snatched the rifle from the child's hands. "That ain't the way," the older woman hissed, taking her first-born by the shoulder and hurrying her out of the cabin. On the porch, her momma asked, "How we gonna eat with him dead?"

"Don't eat much no how. 'Sides, I know how t' hunt."

Her momma bundled Sarah Beth into scrawny arms and hugged the child to her through a threadbare night dress, wincing as love tangled with the pain in her side.

"That spot still hurt, Momma? Been three whole weeks –."

"Killing him won't make it no better." Tears brimmed in her momma's brown eyes.

"How can ya say that, Momma? After all them lickin's he gived you. And little Jeremy, too. Now he wants t' beat me, too. And would, if ya let him. He's been callin' after me on a Saturday lately. I can't let ya take no more beatin's f' me, Momma. I got to do *somethin'*!" Though her voice did not waver, tears ran from Sarah Beth's green eyes and made diamond trails down her cheeks, rivulets that sparkled in moonlight bright enough to cast shadows.

Her mother began to cry, too--but softly, not to wake the sleeping monster just inside. "That still ain't the way, my Honey Girl. Soon ya'll have an age t' leave on out o' here. Ya nigh on old enough right now, if ya've the mind t'. Sure ya could. Get a job somewheres, maybe down t' Baton Rouge, and wouldn't never have t' worry 'bout him wantin' ... Well, ya just wouldn't never have t' worry 'bout him no more."

"But what about you and Jeremy?" Sarah Beth argued, not understanding what she had almost been told. "I love ya both s' strong it aches me t' see what he does ya. I can't leave on out o' here with the two of ya --."

"Well," her momma said in her soft, slow drawl, "don't rightly know 'bout ya brother and me. 'Cept when ya get settled, maybe Jeromy can come meet up with ya."

"What about you, Momma?"

"Me? Well ... Ma'be I can come meet up with the two of ya later on." Her momma's plain, care-worn face creased even more as the woman looked to see if the child believed her.

"Why we can't do that now?" Sarah Beth, excited by the prospect, bounced on the balls of her bare feet. "It'd be real easy. Sunday when he's drunk asleep, we'll --."

"He'd come after us, Honey Girl. And he'd be s' mad --."

"But he wouldn't never find us," Sarah Beth insisted. "Not if we done it right. We'd go somewheres he wouldn't never think of. N' Orleans maybe. Take a packet boat on down. He couldn't never --."

"That all takes money, child. Money we ain't got."

"I'll get money, Momma. Just ya wait and see. I'll get money and a job and send for you and Jeremy. Then the three of us won't never have t' put up with him no more."

"That'll be fine, Honey Girl. Just fine," her momma said with a sad smile as she caressed the child's beautiful hair, a sleep-tossed mass that glittered silver-blue in the brilliant moonlight. "But there's one thing, Sarah Beth." The woman's smile fled as quickly as it came. "Don't hate ya paw too

much. He's a good man down deep. Remember that. Maybe ya can't see it, but he is. I knowed him a long, long time and why he's like he is. He had dreams once, just like you. But his ain't come true and it ate up his innards. Remember, child, he was a good man once."

"Oh, Momma, I love you so much . . . And Jeremy, too," Sarah Beth said, truly adoring the woman. *Who else but momma could find good in a man like paw?*

"Oh, my Honey Girl, I love ya, too."

The woman hugged her daughter again and sent Sarah Beth back into the cabin with a gentle swat on her backside through the thin cotton of her hand-me-down night dress.

At the cabin door, Sarah Beth turned. "After I get me settled, how I send for you and Jeremy?"

Her mother knitted her brows, wrapped a wiry strand of broom-straw blonde hair around her finger and twisted it, then gave a wry smile. "Get somebody t' write a letter for ya and –."

Sarah Beth, slightly taller than average for her age, drew herself up to her full height. "I'll write it myself. I *am* gonna get me t' school, ya know."

The older woman's smile said she knew Sarah Beth would accomplish whatever the child put her mind to. "Just send that letter on down t' the general delivery in St. Francisville. I'll pass by from time t' time lookin' for it."

"But how ya gonna –."

"Addie Thompson ... Ya know, the lady down to the General Mercantile. She and me go way back. She'll read me it."

The idea of running away had lurked in Sarah Beth's mind for a long time, buried between the crevices of other thoughts. She had taken it out and examined it several times, always putting it away because it meant deserting the people she loved. Now her momma coaxed it into consciousness again.

Must be the thing t' do. Momma wouldn't say so if not.

Her momma's approval and her paw's incessant savagery gave her the courage to act. The rage that first led Sarah Beth to her paw's rifle became a fierce determination to face the unknown for the sake of her beloved mother and brother ... and for her own sake, as well.