Yankee Doodle Daddy

Cole Family Saga Book 1

Leanne Bright Cloudman

Golden Seal Publishing, LLC

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Acknowledgements

For my Daddy who instilled in me, my love of books and the written word, thank you.

For my late husband who I hope is watching from heaven. He will be pleased I finally finished writing this book.

Content notice: The following story contains descriptions of domestic violence that may cause issues for some.

The story also contains references to violent death and child abuse.

If you have been or are currently living in a situation that is abusive, either mentally or physically, help is available. Contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800 799-SAFE.

If you are in immediate danger, please call 911.

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Chapter One

Carrie Beth

Carrie Beth Cole stretched her overworked muscles and dusted off her hands. Looking down at her youngest daughter, she allowed herself one of those half smiles only familiar on the face of loving mothers. Taking a deep breath, she called the other children and scooped the toddler up from the barn floor, where she'd been trying to entice a kitten from the hay.

"Sammie Lou, quit dawdlin' and come on. You've been with your critters long enough for one day." Feeling a drag on her work dress tail, Carrie Beth looked down to see five-year-old Jessie El hanging on.

"Jessie El, you hold Crissy Lee's hand. I can't tote you and Jenny May both." Carrie Beth laughed. Walking up the dusty gravel road, Carrie Beth called to her eldest. "Crissy Lee, take your little sister's hand before she pulls my dress plum off of me."

"Mama, look!" The warning in nine-year-old Sammie Lou's voice stopped them all dead in their tracks. Running to catch up to her mama and sisters, Sammie Lou pulled her long black hair out of her face, dark eyes fixed on the cloud of dust moving up the mountain toward them.

For a brief moment, the ever-present breeze cleared the dust cloud and confirmed all their fears. Barreling up the mountain road was the rattle-trap pick-up that belonged to Carrie Beth's husband and the man who fathered all her children: Sam Cole.

Carrie Beth's face paled, washing out her summer sun-kissed complexion. "Come on, girls. We got to hurry. That's Sam Cole coming up the mountain, and he's way early. That ain't never a good sign."

No one argued. Crissy Lee, the oldest of the girls, stopped and knelt so her little sister could climb onto her back. Sammie Lou grabbed her older sister's hand and squeezed it. A look passed between the little girls, declaring in no uncertain terms a common fear and their loyalty to protect each other.

"Reckon we ought to cut 'cross the field, Crissy Lee?" Sammie Lou whispered.

"Mama, can me and Sammie Lou take Jessie El and Jenny May and cut 'cross the field?"

"That's a good idea, Crissy Lee. Better yet if you run. That way, Sam Cole won't catch you out here on this road," Carrie Beth said.

Carrying their younger sisters, the girls disappeared into the river bottom. The young mother watched until the purple-tinted rye swallowed her daughters, concealing their escape route, then she hurried on.

Trying to calm her racing heart, Carrie Beth slowed to catch her breath. She scanned the rolling countryside of their home, focused on the river, and followed its trek. The water curled its way around and down the mountain, meandering through coves, then rushing across the near-flat areas of rich bottom land. It was all so random and peaceful. Long before her marriage to Sam Cole and the birth of so many children, this mountain and the river had given her strength. They had been her home and her refuge.

Vowing to herself she would find a way for her girls to have a better life, her lips moved in silent prayer. Her girls deserved a life where hiding was only part of a game, not a way to stay alive.

Stiffening her back against the dread in her heart, taking a deep breath that came out as a weary sigh, Carrie Beth quickened her pace. Breaking into a full run across the yard, she took the porch steps two at a time.

When the screen door slammed shut, she was already in the kitchen, adding finishing touches to the meal Sam Cole would demand as soon as he came through the door.

The sound of the rattle-trap pick-up roaring around the last curve slammed into her through the open window. She watched long enough to see the tail end of the truck slide sideways, spewing gravel and dust in protest to Sam Cole's obviously drunken attempt to maneuver the switchback turn up the driveway.

Apprehension returned in a wave. Adrenaline coursed through Carrie Beth's body. Jerking her apron from the back of the kitchen chair where she'd dropped it earlier, she wrapped the ties around her tiny waist, knotting them in the front on her way to the stove. Lifting the lid from the pot of stew she'd left simmering on the stove, she began to add the finishing touches to the meager fare that would be his supper. She stirred a bit of coffee leftover from breakfast into the pot. Sam Cole hated light gravy.

Grabbing the meal tin from the pantry, she turned it up, dumping the hand-ground cornmeal into an old wooden dough bowl. She added a spoonful of bacon grease and folded it into the meal with her hand. Glancing out the window over the kitchen sink, bile rose in her throat. She shook her head, fighting the nausea, and added a little more water to the meal.

She watched Sam Cole kick in the door of his truck before he abandoned it to its all-too-familiar resting place in the ditch. He staggered and stumbled, then amazingly regained his balance without falling flat on his face. Tears burned her eyes. "Caroline Elizabeth Cole, you don't have time for that nonsense," she scolded herself out loud.

Pounding the meal, she worked the mush until the texture suited her, then dumped the batter into a large cast iron frying pan that spit and sizzled from the heat of the wood cook stove.

Rinsing the gritty meal from her hands, she dried them, then used the towel to wrench open the heavy oven door. Lifting the large cast iron pan with both hands, she slid the cornbread into the oven. She tucked the hand towel into the waistband of her apron. *Nothing was left to do but light the lamp and set the table.*

She cursed Sam Cole in her mind, then thought better of *it. "Forgive me, Lord."* Her hands trembled so, she wasted three matches lighting the lamp on the table. They had electricity run to the house, but Sam Cole wouldn't let them use it for anything but the icebox, the freezer on the back porch, and his radio.

Returning to the kitchen, she checked the cornbread and took a plate from the shelf. Hearing the dog yelp as it was kicked off the back steps, Carrie Beth took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Sam Cole was home.

Chapter Two

Sam Cole

Sam Cole jerked open the screen door with way more force than was needed, then just turned it loose. It slammed back against the wall, squeaking closed behind him with a smack. Seeing the empty table through the open door into the dining room, he started in on Carrie Beth before she had a chance to speak.

"Why ain't my supper on the table, Carrie Beth? You know I want supper as soon as I come through the door."

"Evenin', Sam." Trying to ignore the tone of his voice, Carrie Beth tried to make her own voice sound welcoming. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the girls sneaking around the house toward the side door. She began to chatter nervously, in an effort to keep Sam Cole's attention. "We got a new calf and it took me a little longer in the barn than usual. You ought to see it. Spittin' image of its mama and a heifer to boot." She busied herself straightening a tablecloth that didn't need straightening. "Figured that might make your day. Ain't you a bit early?"

"What if I am?" Sam Cole growled, suspicion sucking at the edges of his mind. "You doin' something so's you don't want me comin' in early, Carrie Beth?" His voice grew louder, his fingers curling into fists.

Carrie Beth didn't miss the warning sign and her voice trembled. "Course not, Sam. It just means you might have to wait a minute or two before your supper's on the table, that's all." She hurried back into the kitchen.

The subtle indication of his power over her fed the rage that always simmered in him. Swaggering into the kitchen, he jerked open the icebox, causing the gallon jar of fresh milk to explode at his feet, peppering the kitchen and his legs with shards of glass.

"Now look what you made me do," Sam Cole roared.

Carrie Beth darted from the kitchen calling back across her shoulder, "I'll get the mop and the dustpan. It's okay. I'll get more when I milk in the morning." Carrie Beth began whistling as she half-walked, half-ran down the hall.

"And quit whistlin' that infernal tune. Why don't you learn something besides Yankee Doodle?" Sam Cole fumed. He popped the cap off a bottle of beer, leaving it where it landed on the floor.

Carrie Beth hurried back to the kitchen and made short work of the mess, retrieving the bottle cap from the floor at the same time. Disgust filled her and made her grit her teeth together while she allowed the fear to replace it that would keep her and her children alive. Preoccupied with the dread that followed her like a second shadow when Sam Cole was around, she grabbed the still damp towel from the waistband of her apron and used it to ease open the oven door. Wrapping the towel around the handle of the pan, with both hands she lifted the pan from the oven. The heat from the cast iron pan, minutes away from glowing, soaked through the damp towel before she had the pan all the way out of the oven. Thinking of nothing but getting rid of the burning chunk of metal in her hands, she turned to find Sam Cole between her and the counter.

"Sam, this pan's hot, move." The words tumbled from her mouth, out of control. She knew her fate was sealed. Sam Cole dodged back and forth, mirroring her every move and laughing, his eyes wide and wild.

"Please, Sam, let me set the pan on the counter," she begged. Tears borne of fear as much as pain rolled down her cheeks. Unable to hold the pan any longer, she pushed by him. The edge of the hot pan brushed the bare skin of his arm.

"Damn it to hell, woman!" he roared. "Can't you do nothin' right? Now you've gone and burnt my arm. You done that on purpose, didn't you?"

Carrie Beth dropped the hot pan down on the counter, angrily rubbing away the tears that coursed like little rivers of liquid fear, dropping off her chin and staining the front of her apron. Turning her back to him in the hope of avoiding anything more, she traded the damp cloth for a pot holder.

"It ain't bad, Sam. I'll cut some burn plant and fix it right up. Your supper's on the table." Her voice broke despite her attempts to hide the terror.

Carrie Beth never saw him coming, but she felt him. She stopped pumping water over the blisters on her hand. Listening for a sound that would tell her how close he was, she felt the whoosh of air the cast-iron pan made just before it slammed into her right shoulder. Near to collapsing from the pain, she lowered her chin to her chest and closed her eyes, gripping the counter till her knuckles turned white. Shuddering, she bent her knees and waited for the darkness that threatened to pass.

"You ought to be more careful, Carrie Beth," he spat at her through gritted teeth, his alcohol-laced breath hot and sticky on the back of

her neck. She swallowed hard against the bitter liquid that rose in her throat.

"Somebody could get hurt bad with that hot pan, couldn't they, Carrie Beth?Where's them girls? They not eatin'?" He mumbled, walking to the table. He sat down and tucked the napkin into the front of his shirt, smacking his lips together, as though the visit to hell had never been.

Carrie Beth knew if she didn't answer, he'd be back at her. Stealing herself against the pain, she spoke. "They ate a bite before we went to the barn. They're playin' in their room now," Carrie Beth answered, her voice sounding weaker than she'd intended.

"Sam!" he bellowed. "Sam, get down here." Silence answered him. "Sam, I said get down here. Don't you make me come up there after you." Sam Cole yelled, twirling the butter knife through his fingers in what he considered one of the ultimate displays of masculinity.

"I'm here, Daddy," a small voice echoed from out of the darkness at the top of the stairs.

Rushing to the dining room with Sam Cole's plate, Carrie Beth pleaded. "I need Sammie Lou to help Crissy Lee to get the little ones ready for bed, Sam. Leave her be."

Sam Cole turned an anger-twisted face to his wife. "Don't cross me, bitch. I said I wanted her down here and I meant it. Sam, don't make me call you again."

Sammie Lou padded into the room to stand in front of Sam Cole, defiant without uttering a word.

"You do what I told you today? You wash up all them jars in the shed?"

"Yes, Daddy," she whispered. Her eyes trained downward, she focused her interest on a spot of dirt on her big toe.

"You break any?"

"Sam, don't torment the child. She said she did what you told her to. Sammie Lou, get on back upstairs and help your sister now. Do like I told you."

Sammie Lou hesitated, then ran for the stairs and safety, her mind racing. They'd only broken one and Crissy Lee had buried all the glass back behind the pigsty. There wasn't no way he could know.

"Sam, I asked if you broke any, now answer me." Sam Cole spit through clenched teeth.

Sammie Lou stopped halfway up the stairs, poised to run, and closed her eyes. "No, Daddy," she lied. "We was real careful. Just like you showed us."

"Good," Sam Cole mumbled. "Now git on upstairs and do like your mama said."

Afraid Sam Cole might change his mind, the child vanished into the safety of the darkness that concealed all beyond the top of the stairs.

"I'll be up soon, Sammie Lou," Carrie Beth called after her.

"Alright, Mama."

"You want dessert? I made pie."

"No. Bring me another beer. I'm gonna listen to the radio. That alright with you?" he snarled.

"I'll get your beer. You go on and get comfortable."

Chapter Three

Blessed Sleep

Carrie Beth carefully sprinkled the powdered herbs into Sam Cole's beer, offering a silent prayer of thanks for Granny Squirrel's recipe for sleeping powders. Her shoulder was throbbing. Her hand was tingling and weak, causing her no small effort in prying the cap off the beer bottle. Tears threatened again, and she added a touch more of the powder and waited for the beer to stop fizzing. *Well that's settled then*.

She carried the beer to the front room and set it down on the table next to his chair.

"I'm going up to check on the girls now. There's your beer. Nice and cold just the way you like it."

Sam Cole never acknowledged his wife's presence by more than taking the beer from the end table. He turned it up, guzzling half of it at one time. Carrie Beth slowly climbed the stairs; the closest thing to a smile she had in her, shadowed her lips. She needed rest. Thanks to Granny Squirrel's recipe for sleeping powders, she would get some.

At the top of the stairs, she heard the faint murmur of her girls talking. She opened the door to their room and closed it softly behind

her. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, and she found herself standing in an empty room.

"It's alright now, babies," Carrie Beth called quietly. "You can come out."

A loose board in the wall moved, and the girls crawled out of their hiding place. Each time she watched them appear from that secret room, Carrie Beth was thankful her mother had offered the house to them when she'd decided to take a place closer to town.

The white two-story antebellum house, almost a hundred years old, was a far cry better than the broken-down shack Sam Cole had provided for them when they were first married. Carrie Beth and her younger sister, Maize Rose, whom everyone called Sissy, had hidden in that very place when they were little.

Her Granny Squirrel had the secret room put in when the house was built. There was a hidden staircase too. It ran from the closet in the bedroom upstairs, where Carrie Beth had been sleeping since Doc said no more babies, to the closet in the hallway that led to the side door. Eliza Squirrel was a little girl when what she called *the Yangees* came. Till the day she died, she feared they would come again. Carrie Beth and the girls didn't need protection from the Yankees anymore, but a hiding place was just as important. They lived with Sam Cole.

"Are you hurt bad, mama?" eleven-year-old Crissy Lee asked. "I can put some liniment on it for you."

"Not too bad. A little salve might keep down the soreness, though."

Sammie Lou ran to the bed and pulled a box out from under it. She returned with a burlap sack that held the closest thing they had to a first aid kit. She handed the liniment jar to her sister.

"One of these days, mama, I'm gonna be big enough to stop Sam Cole from hittin' anybody," Sammie Lou announced.

"Now, Sammie darlin'," we've talked about that before. Hittin' ain't right," Carrie Beth winced as Crissy Lee's small hand found the area of her shoulder that was already turning an angry purple.

"The only reason Sam Cole does the things he does is because I make him mad when he's drinkin'. You all know that, don't you?"

Four little voices answered her. "Yes, ma'am."

"Now into bed, all of you. Say your prayers good so you'll rest easy. We have more to do tomorrow than we'll get done."

Four shiny black heads lined up on their knees by Crissy Lee's bed, with a space left between Sammie Lou and Jessie El. They'd been doing that for a while now. It was the only way they had to remember the baby born between Sammie Lou and Jessie El. Sam Cole refused to tell anyone where he'd buried her.

Sammie Lou closed her eyes and silently asked God to forgive her for lying to Sam Cole about the broken jar. She had to protect her sisters, and if she hadn't lied, Sam Cole would have beat them all to a pulp.

Crissy Lee thanked God for keeping them safe. Jessie El thanked God for everyone she knew, except Sam Cole. Jenny May, her little hands folded, mimicking the other girls, chattered nonsense followed by a very confident "AMEN." She smiled, turning her face up for her mama's approval.

"That's fine, Jenny May. Sammie Lou, you not thankful tonight?"

"I said mine silent, mama," she whispered. "It was kind of a secret prayer."

"Alright then. Into bed with the lot of you."

Each of them took their turn for a goodnight hug and kiss. "Night, night."

"Don't let the bed bugs bite," Jessie El giggled.

Carrie Beth paused for a moment before blowing out the lamp and gazed across the room at her young daughters, love warm in her eyes. They were like stair steps, ranging in age from three to eleven. Each one a head or so taller than the next, all four of them little beauties with black hair, crowning round light brown faces that took on a hint of red maple leaves each summer from the sun.

Carrie Beth closed the door to the girls' room, waiting in the hallway long enough to hear Crissy Lee's feet hit the floor and the lock turn before she opened the door to her own room. Closing the door, she locked it just in case and collapsed onto her bed. It was good she was so tired. With her shoulder hurting so, she'd never be able to fall asleep if she wasn't. *Well, I guess that's settled then.* She closed her weary eyes to restless sleep.

Chapter Four

First Blood

The throbbing ache in Carrie Beth's shoulder shot pain into her neck, waking her when she tried to turn over in her sleep. It was still dark out, but she was sure the pain would not ease enough to allow her to fall back to sleep. Rolling carefully over to the side of the bed, she groaned and struggled to sit up.

Shivering in the early morning chill, she dressed quickly but carefully. Fire shot down her back when she tried to lift her right arm, so she stepped into her dress instead of pulling it over her head the way she usually did, stiffly buttoning it up the front. She eased on a sweater and straightened the covers on the bed.

Though she made her way carefully down the stairs, her shoulder throbbed with every step. Gathering kindling from the basket by the back door, she perched on the footstool in front of the wood stove to light the fire.

"Mama?" Sammie Lou tiptoed into the kitchen. "Are you okay? I heard you up."

"I'm a little sore, Sammie Lou. Could you get me some wood off the back porch?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Returning with the wood, Sammie Lou placed the smaller split pieces on top of the kindling that crackled and popped. The smell of wood smoke filled the room before the old stove started to draw the smoke up and out the chimney. Squatting beside her mother, Sammie Lou took a deep breath. "I love that smell. The way it's so quiet just before the sun comes up."

"It's one of my favorite times too," Carrie Beth agreed, smiling.

"I'll start the coffee, Mama, then go get Crissy Lee to help me with breakfast. Why don't you get in your rocker and just rest up a bit?"

"That's real sweet of you, Sammie Lou." With a soft moan she was unable to prevent, Carrie Beth eased herself down into the comfortable old rocker and pulled the throw from the arm of the rocker over her legs.

"Mornin', Mama," Crissy Lee mumbled, stretching and shuffling into the kitchen in her very own morning fog. "I heard you talking, Sammie Lou. Figured I'd save you a trip up the stairs." Seeing her Mama sitting in the rocking chair, Crissy Lee's eyes opened wider. Her Mama didn't sit in the rocking chair this time of day unless the baby was fretful and wanted to be rocked. "Are you okay, Mama?"

"Good morning, sweetheart. I'm a little sore. Sammie Lou offered to help make breakfast. I'm sorry you're having to get up so early just to help me."

"It's all right, Mama. I was almost awake anyway. Sammie Lou, you go get the eggs and I'll start the bacon."

"Okay." Sammie Lou grabbed the egg basket from the shelf and headed out the back door.

Crissy Lee moved the coffee pot to the back burner where it began to sizzle. Carrie Beth watched as her daughter mixed the dough for biscuits and laid the bacon out in the frying pan.

"You're gonna be one more good cook, Crissy Lee."

The young girl beamed from the praise.

"What's all the banging and flailing about in here? Well, looky here. I got me a new cook this morning," Sam Cole declared, stumbling into the kitchen. "Damn, I got a hurtin' in my head."

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I was trying to be quiet," Crissy Lee apologized, her eyes never leaving the stove.

"Long as I'm getting breakfast soon, I got to get ready to go."

"There are some headache powders in the jar there by the sink. When they start to run the mill on Friday?" Carrie Beth asked.

"Well, look at the lady of the house, would ya? All bundled up waiting for somebody to fetch and carry for her," Sam Cole drawled, his voice dripping with acid sarcasm. He filled a glass with water and washed down the bitter headache powders.

"My arm's real sore and stiff this morning. The girls are helping because they wanted to."

Sammie Lou came through the back door with the eggs. Seeing Sam Cole in the kitchen, she slammed the door.

"Here are the eggs, Crissy Lee. I cleaned them up," she said, ignoring Sam Cole.

"Thanks, Sammie Lou. Break them into the bowl there and I'll take up the bacon."

"I'm gonna get packed. Tom Miller'll be here to get me shortly. Y'all just fix me up some biscuits, and I'll eat on the way." Turning to Carrie Beth, Sam Cole snarled. "The mill ain't running, Carrie Beth; I'm going fishing. Won't be back till Sunday night. I got Wayne gonna keep an eye on you, though, so don't be making no plans to run wild."

Carrie Beth ignored Sam Cole. She despised his cousin, Wayne. It never ceased to amaze her that one of those shine-running Coles was a deputy sheriff. The news that Sam Cole was gonna be gone for three

whole days made up for it a little. She could sense the excitement that sprang up in her girls.

"Your biscuits'll be ready by the time you get packed, Daddy," Crissy Lee answered, almost brightly.

Sammie Lou's steps were much lighter than when she first came to the kitchen that morning, and Crissy Lee was humming to herself. The news had even made Carrie Beth feel better, and she moved to pour some coffee into a thermos.

"Don't nobody say nothing to him to make him change his mind now," Carrie Beth whispered.

"We won't, Mama," Crissy Lee promised, picking up the tune Sammie Lou was humming.

Fifteen minutes later, Carrie Beth, Crissy Lee, and Sammie Lou were standing on the back porch watching Sam Cole load his fishing gear into Tom Miller's truck.

"You remember what I told you, Carrie Beth. Don't you be running wild. You ain't to leave this mountain, you hear?"

"I got no plans to go anywhere, Sam Cole. You have a good trip."

"You sound like you're happy I'm leaving," Sam Cole turned to face her, his voice cold. Anger in each step, he headed back toward the house. "I'll be right back, Tom. Got to make sure business is took care of before we go. Carrie Beth, you come back in the house."

"What do you want, Sam Cole? You're making Tom waste his gas."

Sam Cole grabbed Carrie Beth's injured right arm and jerked her through the door and into the house. Carrie Beth bit her lower lip to keep from screaming in agony. Slamming her up against the rock chimney that divided the kitchen from the dining room, he inched toward her until his face was near touching her own. She turned away. She knew it was a mistake as soon as she did it, but she couldn't stop herself.

He slapped her hard across the face. "You trying to embarrass me in front of Tom Miller, ain't you, Carrie Beth? Telling me I'm wasting his gas. That's my business, not yours. Then you turn your face away from me when I'm trying to take care of business before I leave."

Her eyes burned with tears. "Sam, please," she begged.

"You're a slut, Carrie Beth. I'll make sure ain't nobody gonna want to look on you while I'm gone." Before Carrie Beth could react to the threat, his fist smashed into her face, driving the back of her head into the rock chimney. Sam Cole stood glaring while Carrie Beth's limp form slid to the floor. Without a word, he sauntered out the back door.

"Girls, you get in there and clean up the mess your Mama's made. I'll be back Sunday." Climbing into the truck, Sam Cole waved to the daughters that had disappeared into the house.

"Oh Lord, dear Lord," Crissy Lee wailed at the sight of their Mama slumped onto the floor in a quickly forming pool of blood.

"Has he killed her, Crissy Lee? Mama, say something!" Sammie Lou screamed.

Jessie El came running down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Mama's bleeding! Crissy Lee. Mama's bleeding!" Jessie El screamed.

"Sammie Lou, you run to the Millers and get Miss Liv to call Granny Lou. Cut through the woods; it's quicker. Jessie El, I need your help now. You got to be a big, brave girl."

Sammie Lou ran out the back door and into the woods behind the house. Choosing the quickest route over the easiest, she crashed into the thick underbrush instead of going around. Hoping she wouldn't step on a rattler in the pale light, Sammie Lou pushed herself harder and harder. She was afraid if she didn't hurry and get help back up to their place, her Mama might not make it this time.

Sobbing, Jessie El knelt by her mother.

"Jessie El, I need you to take a biscuit and some milk up to Jenny May. We don't want her to see Mama like this and get all upset."

"Cris... Lee?" Carrie Beth fought to speak.

"Mama?" Jessie El sobbed.

"Mama, you gonna be all right. Sammie Lou went to get help. You lay still so you won't bleed so much." She began wiping some of the blood away that drained from Carrie Beth's nose and oozed down her cheek.

"Sam Cole?" Carrie Beth mumbled, struggling to stay conscious.

"He's gone, Mama. We're safe."

Carrie Beth's eyes closed. Her body went limp. Crissy Lee held her hand up to her Mama's mouth. Feeling the warm air escape her Mama's lips, she realized she'd been holding her own breath. "It's okay, Jessie El. Mama's just resting now. You go do like I told you with Jenny May so I can get up some of this blood."

"So much blood, Crissy Lee," whispered Jessie El, her eyes wide and still teary.

"Mama's gonna be fine. Now you get."

Jessie El grabbed a biscuit, poured some milk into a cup, and started for the stairs. Hesitating, she looked back at her Mama.

"Mama?" Jenny May was awake and crying.

"See, I told you. Jenny May's awake. Hurry now," Crissy Lee prodded. "She ain't gonna understand this."

Out of concern for their baby sister, Jessie El turned and scampered up the stairs.

"You just hang on, Mama. Sammie Lou's the fastest runner on this mountain. Help'll be here soon. You just rest now."

There was no response.

Crissy Lee pulled the throw from off the back of the rocking chair and covered Carrie Beth's legs. She filled a bucket half full of tap water,

added hot water from the warming pan on the stove, and set about cleaning up some of the blood. She watched her Mama's chest rising and falling. She didn't know what she'd do if it stopped. She dumped the bloody water and refilled the bucket. Lifting her tear-streaked face to the open kitchen door, she shook her head in disbelief. The first rays of the sun tickled the tops of the pines and began its daily duty of burning away the blue mist. She clasped her bloodstained hands under her chin.

"God, please don't let my Mama die," Crissy Lee whispered. "I know you saw Sam Cole hit her, and now there's so much blood. Please God, don't let my Mama die. Amen."

Opening her eyes, Crissy Lee took a deep breath. Plunging the rag into the bucket, she stained the clear mountain water red with her Mama's blood.