

## Just One Bullet

I had asked Charlie Applewhite for the bullet long before he put a baby inside Sarah Jo. She was supposed to pee right after, but it was the middle of a blizzard and the piss pot was full. Plus, I didn't tell her, so she didn't do it. And now, with winter looming again, and John Jack won't stop hollering even when he's on her tit.

"Make 'im shut up!" I yelled at her. I raked the coals again to see if there was something red left among the ashes. "You can't let the fire die, Sarah Jo! It's the one thing you can't do right now!"

I sounded meaner than I wanted to, but that baby, screaming and screeching was rattling something loose in my brain, making the hairs on my arms stand, making me spit all my anger out on poor Sarah Jo. I stomped back into the cold, my boots quickly heavy with wet mud. I pulled up my skirts, headed for the barn.

The wind made it impossible to see the barn, so I leaned in the barn's direction. The wind stung my eyes, flung pieces of snow into the slits where I allowed my eyes to open every couple steps. I liked the woosh of the wind against my ears, even though it was a blade against my skin. At least I didn't have to hear that damn baby cry anymore.

I sat on a stump in the barn, three socks with holes for my fingers on each of my hands, a lantern in the corner. Betty neighed at me, pumped her long black head up and down.

"Not yet, Betty. If'n I give it to you now, you're still gonna want to eat at dark."

I raised the little hand ax, WELLS, carved into the side and tried to hack a piece of sugar pine into smaller pieces. The wood felt like stone; the ax handle hurt my hand after slamming it again and again. Old Mr. Wells left a lot of his tools, all of them, to be clear when he left Mrs.

Wells the year before. Every time we turned around, there was WELLS scrawled into the bottom of a bucket, stamped on a bridle, scratched into a rake, reminding us that this wasn't our home.

Everything hurt more in the cold. Like last winter, snow so deep, I thought we'd never make it to spring. Every time I opened the front door, the white just piled higher and higher, and I'd hike up my skirts and climb on top of the snow pack, crawl my way out to the barn every couple of days to make sure Betty and Eve had enough hay and water. Course, back then, little Wiley was alive then too. But he didn't make it out of that winter; his lead hung on a nail now.

One time, after the snow was fresh but not long settled, I tried to crawl my way across its shelf to the barn, but it was too fresh. And about fifteen feet from the house, I fell down, sunk four feet down, for a moment it was the most comfortable pillow I had ever laid upon. No Sarah Jo kicking at me, stealing the covers, no stress of having to take care of my idiot sister, just peace. White all around, white in the sky, a white casket that perfectly wrapped around my body. Had this been what Mrs. Wells felt, I wondered. But then the snow started to melt against my dress and longjohns, and I knew I had to crawl out of there before I got too soaked. Men had gone crazy in the cold. Stories of them feeling hot, taking off all their clothes, running around, piss frozen to their peckers. Days later, they find their bodies stiff and blue; they had to break their arms to get them into a pine box.

The wind howled against the barn, made the lantern flicker. The storm rolling in had turned afternoon into twilight, soon we'd be locked into winter again. Just me, Sarah Jo, and now, John Jack.

I carried loads of wood to the bin beside the front door. Back and forth I went, thinking thoughts about how I thought Charlie Applewhite had come for me, how I thought when he came several weeks in a row, bringing apples, bringing a basket of gooseberries, bringing me the one

bullet. I thought, maybe, he was doing it for me. How'd I know by fall's end, he'd get stuck in a blizzard and end up getting Sarah Jo pregnant.

These thoughts consumed me, made so full of anger and sourness, that I never heard anyone walk past the barn, knock on the door, and let themselves in. Not until I punched through the front door, and there was Sarah Jo, nursing John Jack while a man in a tattered uniform stood in front of the fire. A smile spread over Sarah Jo's face, her eyes dark and sparkly.

"Mary Beth, this here is uh, Mr. Johnson." The man pulled his mouth apart, revealing yellowed teeth in a nest of red beard.

"Nice to make your acquaintance." He didn't move from the fire, but carefully placed his gaze back on Sarah Jo. John Jack sucked, bawled fists raised in the air.

I threw down the armload of firewood down by the fireplace. Mr. Johnson stared at my face, took a step away from me. I knew he was thinking what everyone thought. Wet crawled up his wool trousers, his boots dark with mud.

"Terrible time to be out. Where you headed?"

"Jackson." His voice was scratchy, dry. I rubbed my arms where the wood had just dug through Wells's jacket and into my arms.

"Jackson, from here? Wrong time of year to be traveling." I rotated a log, threw another on. Sarah Jo pulled her long black braid from her shoulder where it hung like a rope. She shifted John Jack to her shoulder and gave him a few slaps on his back. He whined.

"Yes, well." He coughed and returned to the large stone fireplace while I walked over and lit the stove. I felt his gaze crawl over the back of me.

"What do you want?"

"Well, aren't you forward?"

I shot Sarah Jo a look, she shrugged in the smallest of ways and continued to pat along John Jack's nightgown made from Mrs. Wells's nightdress. I could hear the shift in John Jack's moans, the small animal-like noises that would eventually give in to full grown howls. That baby cried to eat, cried when he wasn't, cried when he just finished.

"Mr. Johnson I am neither more forward than you barging in to my house."

"I didn't barge. Your sister let me in."

"Yeah. Well, she's a halfwit." I walked over to Sarah Jo and stuck out my arms. "Give 'im." She placed him in my hands; he felt like a small sack of sugar. I pulled him to my chest and started pounding on his back. His whimpers grew to cries. Sarah Jo looked at me, pleading for me to smack him softer. The front of her dress was wet. I tossed a rag hanging over a chair at her.

"Mr. Johnson, I do not have time for this or any conversation. I got a baby, a sister, and a farm to take care of." With that John Jack let out a small sharp howl. Then, just as he was fixing to open up his lungs, I felt a bubble of air, rise up through his back and out came a little burp. "Good." I kissed his soft head folded into my shoulder.

"Miss-uh-uh—"

"Wells."

"Miss Wells, I am not here to waste your time. I am simply a passerby, and am looking for lodging for the night."

"I ain't got no room, Mr. Johnson. I handed John Jack back to Sarah Jo who bounced him lightly in her arms while rocking in the chair.

"I won't be a burden. I can stay in the barn if that's agreeable."

"I suppose'n you'll want food too," I said and put the kettle on the stove.

“If you’re offering, then yes.”

“Feed the horse and cow before you blow out the lantern.”

Every night I have the same waking-dream while Sarah Jo and John Jack snore and breathe lightly beside me. I stare at the ceiling, watch the fireplace shadows on the wood, try to draw my mind away from the place I know it will go.

Charlie Applewhite is a twig of man, boy-really, tall, skinny, his dark facial hair is coming in uneven. But those cornflower blue eyes just sink me every time, pull me to the bottom of the creek inside my head. Each and every time he wanders off his father’s farm, a few miles away, he ends up in my field.

“Hey, Mary Beth,” he says in the waking-dream, but it done happened so many times in real life too. This is how Charlie always said my name, Mawry-buth, like a hymn. In the waking-dream, he’s usually on his daddy’s draft, Joseph. The sun is burning right through me, the sweat licking down my spine as I stand up from the rows I’m straddling, trying to pull weeds from the tangle of my wheat stalks. I have to shield my eyes from the sun to look up at Charlie Applewhite, but of course, I know it’s him, can hear him come a mile away, whistling. He is only a black shadow, but I know every inch of that shadow enough to know it’s him.

I want to say, hi, I want to say something cute and sweet like Sarah Jo does like, “Hey yourself, Charlie Applewhite,” or “Charlie Applewhite, you done forget to tip your hat to a lady.” But because I’m me, I say, “Don’t go stepping on my wheat,” and just like that I bend over and start pulling ragweed from the stalks again.

Sometimes, I can will my thoughts to make Charlie dismount Joseph and come walking over to me. He gets so close, I can smell the cornbread and onions his Mama made the night

before. I watch sweat slide down his throat. I drop the ragweed because I think he's going to kiss me, but that never happens.

Mostly, I hear Mrs. Wells, she screams from the other side of the field. Daddy is with her, shotgun in his hands. She screams again, points. Daddy shoots into the sky and starts hunting me.

I run harder than I've ever run, even though one leg has to work a little harder because it's short, and I'm able to lock myself inside the cabin. In the dark, I lie on the bunk, waiting for Daddy, but I hear Sarah Jo giggling, Charlie Applewhite kind of talking but moaning. I can see their shadows on the ceiling; they ain't got clothes on. They's so naked that even their shadows are naked. I can't unhear them moaning and grunting. And neither can I move from the bed. I am stuck, my eyes can't look away from the ceiling, watching their heads pressed together, and then it's morning and John Jack is screaming an awful shriek.

"Hope you like coffee and dry corncakes, Mr. Johnson." I opened the barn door, let the bright fall morning light into the barn. I expected him to be sleeping, still under the wool blankets I handed him the night before. But he stood there, stroking the space between Betty's eyes, the blankets folded on a bale.

"Good morning, Miss Wells. I hope you had a good night's rest." I pulled a square flake of hay from a bale and went to toss it over to Eve. Her big brown head pulled up from the pile of hay on the ground.

"You fed?"

"I did." He pulled a pipe from his coat pocket and stuffed tobacco into the end. "I also couldn't help notice that your horse is in desperate need for a trim." Betty's hooves were long grayish bits starting to flake into edges like knives. I couldn't afford to have her feet done after

we got fixed, and I hadn't yet figured out how to do them myself; I was still learning, still faking that I knew what I was doing. That was something Daddy always did himself.

"Tell me," he pulled a match up the wooden gate separating him and Betty and put the flame to the end of his pipe. "How is it two young women-folk end up a farm like this? How old are you? Fifteen? Sixteen?"

Immediately, the heavy woody smell of the pipe reminded me of Daddy. I turned, put the square of hay back on the pile for tonight's feeding.

"Seventeen," I lied. "And it ain't that strange. This was our aunt's place."

His yellow teeth clenched the pipe and then let go. "Your aunt." He inhaled, exhaled, smoke circled above him then ringed around Betty's ears. "Because, about a few miles back they told me that a Mrs. Iona Wells lived here, a widower they said, farm going to rot. She was waiting on her son to come."

"Well, I don't know who you heard that from, but they wrong."

He seemed to think about this for a long while, putting the pipe between his teeth, sucking in the wood of the tobacco leaves, letting its heat back out into the cold.

"Tell you what, I'm going to trim this here horse for you."

"I don't have any money, Mr. Johnson, if that's what you're asking."

He waved off my sentence. "Please, *Miz* Wells, it would be my pleasure to help you."

"He gone?" Sarah Jo asked as I came through the door. She pulled on the ends of her hair, plaiting them into the same braid. John Jack must have been down for a moment because if he was awake, Sarah Jo had to hold him.

"He's gonna trim Betty."

“What he want in return? You know we ain’t got no money!”

I wrapped a rag around the handle of the coffee pot and poured it into my cup. It came out black and thick, grounds like dirt.

“You burned the coffee.”

“Sorry,” she said and went back to staring out the window by the door. I pulled the coffee through my front teeth. It was bitter, thick. I shook a few crystals of sugar into the sludge. We didn’t have it to spare, but neither did I have coffee to waste.

“You ain’t afraid he’ll tell.”

“Nah.” I shook my head and the whistle inside my ear sung loud and sharp. “No one cares about girls like us long as ther’s a man around.”

“You plan to keep ‘im, Mary Beth?” John Jack fussed on the bed and Sarah Jo leaned over him and rubbed his back.

“Course not, dimwit! I just thought it might buy us another day. What if’n Daddy come up here? He see that man; he gone.”

“No one cares ‘bout us, Mary. You said it yourself. When Daddy done blinded your eye and cracked your skull ain’t nobody said a word in church. Ain’t nobody care what he did to me.” John Jack started to shriek. Sarah Jo shushed him and picked him up.

“When womenfolk belongs to a man no one cares what happens to them. But when they on their own, everyone cares because they want to make sure that they soon belong back to a man.” Even in death. It wasn’t gonna be long before Mrs. Wells’s son would claim his mama’s life, or what was left of it.

It was the same for the Negros and the Chinese down on the backside of town. Everybody left them alone unless they wanted to snatch something from them poor folks.



Supposedly, the cabin we'd be born in belonged to a Negro family until Daddy showed up waving a shotgun up everybody's nose and a piece of paper he claimed was legal authority.

“We'll take his help if it gets him on his way.”

Sarah Jo was always the prettiest between the two of us, even the three of us, when you count our older sister May Belle. Course May Belle took off when she was fourteen, and it took us a few years to figure out why since she was so much older than us. But Sarah Jo being the youngest, hair like a horse's mane, her smile as pretty as a row of neat fence posts. Where Sarah Jo was soft and pale, I had skin like cow hide, thick and browning, yellow in some spots from the last few years of working in the sun. My hands were so dry, so caked with mud most days that it was hard to tell what was my skin and what was the orange color of the ground I dug my hands into. But it was my face that most people stared at, lopsided, my mouth constantly hung open, one eye dead, forever roaming for things it couldn't see.

Even Mrs. Wells, when we arrived, nothing more than a dress on our backs and an empty revolver, said how striking Sarah Jo was. “Why, you could nab any boy in Virginia City with those eyes.” And then later, because she either felt bad or was trying to be honest and fair said to me, “And you, Mary Beth, will make someone a nice wife with that undeterred work ethic.”

We told Mrs. Wells about Daddy, so she let us stay. But he never really came after me in that way. I was the one he beat until my face went crooked. Sarah Jo was the one he'd reach for his eyes, swollen and wet with drink. For a second, he'd hold my gaze, assess whether or not I was going to fight him for her.

But I never really thought I was unlovable until Charlie Applewhite. This was after he put the baby inside Sarah Jo, but before we knew she was pregnant. It was spring, things thawing out

around us. I had gone into town to grab the mail and supplies, and there was Charlie Applewhite sitting on that draft horse with Alma Louise of the Barrilleaux family. He gave me a look of surprise, like he didn't expect me to be riding into town so soon after the first snow melt.

“Charlie Applewhite, why is Alma Louise holding you so tight when you know you know you done promised yourself to my sister?” I could almost hear him moaning in the firelight again. The sweat started to gather under my arms; I could feel the rage boiling inside me. I jammed my hands in Wells's jacket, the revolver, the one bullet tucked in there heavy and cold.

When I said this, his eyes just about popped from their holes. Alma shrieked and just about fell off the back of Joseph, trying to get down, her skirts got all hung up behind the saddle, and Charlie had to lean over and pull her skirts out. He kept saying, “She lying, Alma. She lying. I ain't never had nothing to do with Sarah Jo.”

He turned back to me, spat on the ground near my feet, reins still in his hands.

“Why you do that, Mary Beth?”

“Why you come over to our place, Charlie, and be all sweet on me and Jo?”

“Your place?!” He laughed, and the brown strands of hair fell from his hat over his eyes.

“You mean, Mrs. Wells's place. Your daddy know?”

At the mention of Daddy, I was done with him. I pulled up my mud-heavy skirt and trudged on to the post office.

“You know, it was never you I went to see! Your daddy beat too much ugly into you!”

And that's how I spent the only bullet we had on Charlie Applewhite. I fired right at Joseph's big hooves. The draft reared up, and dumped Charlie into the mud and snow. I was so proud of myself in the moment, but then I remembered we still had Daddy to defend ourselves from. Plus, it confirmed that Charlie Applewhite ain't never had no eyes for me. It's also how I

figured, everyone else in the world saw me. Some hideous monster, hands and arms like a man's, face of the devil.

The mail made me nervous. I knew that a letter for Mrs. Wells's son, James, would be arriving sooner or later. And sooner or later, I was going to have to write him back and tell him that his mama done passed. And maybe I shouldn't have been so anxious to check the mail, but it was not checking it that made me more anxious.

So not long after breakfast, after Mr. Johnson was busy sawing away at Betty's hooves, I set out for town, all four miles. Most of the roads at least had wagon wheel tracks I could walk in, where the rainwater hadn't pooled. "Be careful, Mary," Sarah Jo pleaded. So I wore Mr. Wells's trousers and jacket and even the old man's hat. I told Mr. Johnson farewell, and I set out for town under a lemon sun though I could see my breath with each step.

As I neared town, I looked out for Daddy, his large lumbering frame, the way he drug his feet when he was drunk, the way he'd holler at anyone in his way even if he was in theirs. It wasn't likely that he'd be in town the exact same moment I was, but it didn't stop my heart from drumming up thunder inside my chest. I wished I had the revolver, empty or not. I pulled the brim of the hat down, kept walking past the saloon, past the general store, the livery.

When I got to the telegraph office, there was no mail for Wells, and I was relieved.

"That's the happiest I've seen someone about not getting mail," the clerk said.

As I came out of the office, back into the spilled afternoon light, I ran smack dab into someone I never saw coming, just felt the crush and weight of being slammed into the wood porch of the telegraph office. I was ready to yell, to stand back up and shake my fist, but before I could even tip my head up, I saw him.

“You stupid son-of-bitch!” He yelled down at me, his eyes swole with whiskey. He smelled sour, like something about to die. I glanced back down, pulled the hat low, so that he wouldn’t recognize the slant of my eyes, my features sliding off my face. He kicked my boot.

“Get up, you bastard, so kin’ teach you a-lesson!” He kicked my boot again, a sharp pain shot through the leather and spread over my foot. “Goddamn fool!” He leaned over, his shadow swallowed me. I started to feel the rise in my throat, the swell of fear and shame, the fists pounding over my face. We’d have to go back; he’d make us go back to him. He’d take Sarah Jo at will, and he’d probably kill me the next time I tried to pull him off her. The tears gathered in my eyes.

“Hey, don’t I know you?” He asked the top of my hat. I froze. “Aren’t you Wells? William Wells?” I lifted my head enough to stare at Daddy’s boot, the toe almost wore through. If I was quick enough, I could sprint out of here, at least faster than him. He’d be too drunk to follow me. But if I wasn’t quick enough, if he caught me, even by the back of my neck, I’d be done for. He had the strength of ten men, and he would spare none of that on letting me know whose daddy he was. I shook my head.

“You ain’t Wells? I heard he’s keeping my girls. You hear?” Again, I shook my head and prayed he didn’t see the tears falling on my trousers, turning the gray to black.

“Out of my way! And if’n you see Wells, tell him I’m a’coming for mine.”

I was out of breath when I came bursting through the front door. The sky had turned as black as the river bottom, and I could no longer feel my feet. I expected to see Sarah Jo in the rocker, John Jack at her breast, the fire white but alive ‘cuz I wasn’t there to tell her otherwise. I didn’t

expect to see Mr. Johnson in the rocking chair, stroking little John Jack's cheek. The baby didn't stir.

I could hardly breathe, so I stood there, my breath fogging up my face.

"Goodness, Mary Beth! Shut the door!" Sarah Jo chirped at me from the stove. She stood over a pot, wooden spoon like she knew what she was doing.

I stuttered out my words. "What are you doing here, Mr. Johnson? I thought you had business in Jackson?" He smiled a thin-lipped smile beneath his big bushy beard.

"Did I say I have business? I said, I was on my way to Jackson, Miz Miller." He pursed his chapped lips at John Jack and made a sucking noise. I shot Sarah Jo a look. She shrugged her shoulders like this was no big deal. I shook out of my coat, stomped my boots before pulling them off.

"The baby crying. And Mr. Johnson said that he could stay a couple more days. And seeing how we needed someone to help with that hole in the barn roof, I thought it'd be just fine."

"That so?" I dropped my boots before the fire and threw in two more logs. Again, Sarah Jo just stood there a blank look on her face.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Johnson, as I said, we don't have extra here."

He stood with the baby who was beginning to fuss. "I was perfectly comfortable in the barn last night, Miz Miller." How did he know our names? I looked at Sarah Jo for an answer, she unbuttoned the front of her dress and pulled out her swollen white breast. She put John Jack right on it; he sucked away. She sunk into the rocker and began humming and rocking like nothing was the matter, like she wasn't the one to unlock the door.

“Your sister and I have been talking.” He leaned his face down toward mine; he smelled like manure. “And she said it was nice to have a man around.” I burned a hole though the side of Sarah Jo’s face. “And she said that you was Frank Miller’s runaway girls.”

“Is that right? Sarah Jo said all that.” I wanted to scream at her, slap her perfect lips, pull on the black braid until she screamed.

“She did. And what’s more that she said that Mrs. Wells died some months back.”

I stared at him hard right into the yellow of his mouth. “What do you want?”

He walked around the small kitchen table, pushing a chair squarely under the table.

“Want, Miss Miller? I don’t want nothing.” He smiled, his eyes as small as a snake’s. “But I do feel bad for Mrs. Wells’s family. They probably don’t know a thing about her death, do they?”

“Leave now, Mr. Johnson.” I turned to face him squarely, show him I wasn’t afraid of him even though everything inside me felt like I was folding like cloth.

He gave a little chuckle. “I’ll leave when I’m good and ready.” He took the kitchen chair and knocked it on its side. The smack of it hitting the floor, startled John Jack who began to fuss. Sarah Jo pulled him closer; shushed him.

“If’n you don’t want me to run to your daddy and tell him where you’re at, and if’n you don’t want me to get the sheriff and tell him that you done away with Mrs. Wells, then I suggest you start acting like it!” he roared, his voice seemed to make the flames tremor.

I served him soup in a bowl, handed him the last of our whiskey. He pulled long and hard on the bottle, hardly drank the soup. Behind his back, I stared at Sarah Jo, who was mouthing, sorry over and over.

Later when he was good and drunk, head rolling around on his shoulders, he grabbed Sarah Jo's arm, just about snatched her arm off. She fell on her knees, her braid coiled on the floor. He stepped on it; her face twisted up in pain but was still pretty somehow.

"I'm gonna have you." He spat toward the fireplace and wrenched Sarah Jo's arm. "Get!" He shoved her and she fell back onto her backside.

I exhaled, tried to do the figures, figure out how we could get out of this. One, we let him have the farm. We had lived here more than a year, Mrs. Wells had kindly let us stay on last year when we told her about our daddy. Our luck had simply ran out. Once Mrs. Wells died, we knew it would be a matter of time before her kin would come claim their property. I blamed myself for not having a better plan. Why hadn't I asked Charlie Applewhite for two bullets? Why had I only thought to ask for the bare minimum?

But we couldn't stay in Tragedy Spring, not with Daddy hanging around. If anything, the trip to town had proven that he was still out for vengeance. Thankfully with his lame leg and appetite for drink, he wasn't able to come chase us down. But it was coming. And clearly, we had traded in one type of man for the same.

I wanted desperately to whisper to Sarah Jo that I was figuring it all out, but I was so terrified that Johnson would hear me and jump into a tirade, take it out on Sarah Jo or John Jack, better for him to hit me. So when I walked by Sarah Jo, holding a sleeping John Jack, I kissed the top of his head and gave her a wink. Her brown eyes were glassy, tears she was holding back. "Don't," I mouthed forgetting to add the word worry.

I had said the same things months earlier when Mrs. Wells had finally had enough of us. She had offered her place to us a year ago, knowing our daddy was a drunk. She didn't know

what all Daddy had done to Sarah Jo. “You girls can stay here and mind things while I visit my son for a few months. Mind the stock.”

And we did. For the first time in our lives, Sarah Jo and I could breathe. We smiled at each other for no reason, simply because we could sleep without terror mostly. And then Charlie Applewhite started coming around, and goddamnit if’n I didn’t start dreaming about being a wife, Sarah Jo our little practice child. And then Sarah Jo was pregnant and Mrs. Wells was back before the spring melted the snow off the roof.

We couldn’t keep Sarah Jo’s pregnancy a secret forever, so eventually I had to spill the salt, and when I did Mrs. Wells said that we were done. “Can’t have two whore girls living under my roof.”

“We ain’t whores, Mrs. Wells.”

“I know you ain’t, Mary Beth, on account of your face. But I can’t have no unwed mother living here. It’s bad enough everyone knows you’re here except your daddy.”

“Daddy did it, ma’am.” And no sooner had I said it than I was immediately congratulating myself on outsmarting the goose-necked Mrs. Wells. She wouldn’t put us out knowing what she knew. She was a Christian, and if anything, I thought, she’d be outraged at Daddy, pity-stricken for Jo and me.

Her pale skin was so thin, I could see the blue of her blood running through her neck. “Well, in that case, you really can’t stay here. You’ll leave tomorrow.”

The ground was so hard, still frozen in the deep layers. I dug and dug and dug until the night broke off into a gray morning. Every bone in my body hurt; I couldn’t feel my hands. I kept hearing Mrs. Wells gurgling in my hands. After I buried her, I told Sarah Jo it happened in



the night, I knew it'd be a matter of time before someone came asking, before her son James sent a letter announcing his arrival, before Daddy showed up, before our luck dried up.

The fire had gone white and Johnson snored between letting out gurgles between dreaming while drunk. The rocking chair tipped forward every now and again. John Jack was asleep in the bed, Sarah Jo a slim shadow beside him. As silently as I could, I pulled Daddy's revolver from the little dresser in the corner. I unwrapped it, slid open the barrel and eyed the fire from six empty chambers. Maybe an empty gun would be enough. I had defended us with less.

I had shot jealousy with a borrowed bullet. At the time, I honestly thought the only bullet we would ever need was for Daddy and somehow I had never needed it. I cursed myself.

Maybe he would fall asleep, I wished, sitting on the edge of the bed near Sarah Jo's feet. Daddy used to get so blind drunk that he would just fall down and stop functioning, piss the floor. Even when he promised to give us the beatings of our lives, if he was that drunk, he'd just stopped. Half the time, he'd be so tuckered out the next day, he wouldn't even remember the night before. Maybe Johnson would just fall down too.

But I must have nodded off, when I heard the legs of the table screech across the floor. The fire was nearly dead; the room cold. I fingered the gun in my lap.

"Get!" He grumbled, slammed into a chair. A dark shadow moved across the room, passed in front of the red coals. Sarah Jo inhaled and sat up. I patted her leg.

"Where is she?!"

"She gone," I said, my voice surprisingly calm. But I heard the familiar scratch of a match and then his face was near mine, teeth orange and bared.

“Take the baby and get over there,” he snarled and dropped the match on the floor. I could hear him, feel him rustling around. Sarah Jo gripped my arm. I cocked the gun in the dark, aimed it at him.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” He struck another match, this time holding it up to see the revolver near his face. I didn’t blink, didn’t breathe. He held the match for a second, long enough for me to see that he had undone his pants, the mouth of his longjohns hanging open. The orange match fell to the floor.

“Even if you’re a good shot, Miss, I doubt you could see in the dark enough to shoot me.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” I said. “Jo, lantern.” I held the gun on him while I heard Sarah Jo slide out of the bed. Her feet smacked against the floor, but then I heard a scrape and a thud, the sound of Sarah Jo’s body falling to the floor in the dark corner. I lunged sideways in the dark, ready to help her. But no sooner had I done that, then my gun was wrenched from me.

“Shit!” I felt my way along to my sister, careful not to fall over the same chair. “You okay?”

She was crying softly. “Sorry, Mary. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said and pulled her head to my chest.

“Get over here, girl!” He roared. Sarah Jo’s body tightened. I squeezed her shoulder as I stood up and walked to him.

His breath was like a dead fish, and I was glad for the dark so he couldn’t see me cry. His hand smacked against the back of my head, wrenched my hair.

“Not you. Where’s the other ‘ne?”

“You ain’t getting her. She done just had a baby.”

He chuckled in the dark, my eyes watered. I wanted to tell Sarah Jo to grab the baby and head for the barn. But I was sure that my dumb sister was sitting on the floor. Why did I have to tell her every move to make?

“What if I shoot you first then have her second?”

“Fine,” I said. “Except, it’s not loaded.”

I heard a click and then a snarl from his horrible mouth. The gun, sailed across the room and landed with a loud crash. John Jack started to scream. Sarah Jo crawled along the floor trying to reach the baby.

Something else swung through the air and landed with incredible force against my ear. I fell on my knees, my bones cracking like lightning. My ears rung hot. I couldn’t inhale.

“Smart mouth! You’re gonna pay. I don’t care if’n you ugly.”

His whole body pressed down against me, pinning me with enormous weight. A boot drove into the back of my knee. Another boot kicked my other leg from my body. One bulk of him pinned my arms above my head; a hand wriggled under my dress, trying to push through the layers of skirts. I screamed, flailed my arms. But the harder I flailed, the heavier he got, pressing my face into the floor; so much weight against my neck that I couldn’t breathe. I kept sucking and sucking in air, kicking and kicking, but nothing filled up my lungs, nothing pushed him away. Oh god, this is it, I thought. I will live long enough to be raped and murdered.

But just as I started to allow this thought into my mind, his whole body slumped against my back. I thought for sure he was trying to stick his pecker somewhere between my skirts, but he sputtered and stopped moving. His hand released my hands. I slid and wiggled, tried to get out from under him. His body rolled to the side.

“Mary Beth?” Sarah Jo called in the dark. Johnson gurgled. John Jack screamed. I rolled away from him and into the bed post.

“What happened? Something happened, Jo.”

Her footsteps moved across the space and she dumped a log onto the coals. It took a moment, but when the orange flames started growing, I could see the handle of the skinning knife in the back of Johnson’s neck.

“You killed him?”

“What would you want me to do?” She stood over me. John Jack a silhouette at her breast. Suddenly, I could exhale.

“No, it’s fine. I’m just saying.”

Neither of us slept, the body growing stiff on the other side of the room. I would need her help dragging it out tomorrow night. Today, I’d dig a hole, but not next to Mrs. Wells. That seemed disrespectful somehow.

“What happened to her, Mary Beth?”

I sighed trying to figure out if it was better to keep the lie I’d been telling her alive, that she’d died in her sleep. John Jack let out a little whimper. She’d kill now too, so I guess we were even in that way.

“Stifled her,” I whispered. I could see the shadow of the barn out the little window. The sun must have been moments from coming up.

“How come we never did that to Daddy?”

I shrugged. “Maybe cuz he kin?”

“Or maybe cuz we didn’t have to?” Which was the smartest thing she had ever said.