CHAPTER 11

June 28, 1903

The main topic of conversation in Rockville this summer is Seth's Sunday crop. That is until the covers are thrown back from Bobby Lee's abode shamefully exposing all the heartache and poverty that takes place in that little house.

Agnes Preston is awake early. It isn’t daybreak, but in the purple-gray light filtering into the room, she can see the Emporium's calendar hanging from a nail on the bare wall, and make out the date and the store's motto: "We sell everything from needles to threshing machines." It is the 28th. She is eight weeks past due.

"I'm only 25-years old," she thinks to herself, "and I have six children."

Quietly, and without a sound, the tears begin to flow. She looks at her husband, arms and legs stretched out taking up most of the bed, the soft light of early morning reflecting on his face. No marks of time or worry show on the youthful face of Bobby Lee Preston. He still looks as young as when she met him – a barefoot country girl comes to town to live with the Prestons and attend school.

She paid for her room and board by doing light housework that over time turned out to be hard work, including barnyard chores. As a result, she didn't get to school very often and by spring, she was in love and pregnant.

When the baby whimpers. She reaches out rocking the cradle until he quiets and then leaves the bed, carefully stepping over little sleeping bodies on the attic floor.

Without stirring, B.J. watches his mother wipe away her tears. When he was ten years old and finished fourth grade, he could quit school and get a job. Ten-year-old boys were expected to work.

He looks at his pa, who had quickly taken up the whole bed, and was on his back and snoring. His pa is a dreamer of whom little is expected.

Downstairs, Agnes studies her daughter asleep on the cot, a baby brother snuggles in the curl of her body. Precious Amy has never slept alone. When her mother had the next baby, this one would move to a straw tick on the floor upstairs, and the one in the cradle next to her bed would join Amy on the couch.

Unlike the boys, Precious Amy did not inherit her father's good looks. She is plain like her mother with pale skin and straight brown hair. She does have her father's blue eyes and long black lashes, but her eyes aree set too far apart in her face to be attractive, and there are times when she is shy to the point of seeming stupid. Still, at the age of eight, townspeople can see signs of the woman she is destined to become.

The boys, on the other hand, are always into things, up to boyish pranks. Their mother's anxieties and fears have not translated to them, only to Amy.

The children know their mother cried because of her red eyes and blotchy face, but they never see her cry. Their father cries, however. He sits at the kitchen table or on the cot and cries just like they do when hurt or hungry.

Agnes had a dream – just one – a better life for Precious Amy. Her dream was to see her daughter married and living in a nice house with billowing white lace curtains at the windows. She wished she had time to teach Amy to embroider, but she needed mending. So, Amy often sat on the cot sewing patches on worn-out clothes in the dim light coming from the small window overhead.

Agnes sat at the kitchen table waiting for the stove to heat and boil the chestnuts in the coffee pot, and struggled with her dilemma. Her cracked red fingers traced the holes in the oilcloth covering. When new, it had been white with red geraniums and on the kitchen table of her mother-in-law. Now it was yellow, and the geraniums faded to a sickly pink.

By the time the coffee is perking, Agnes' mind is made up. She gets to her feet and, taking a paring knife from a kitchen drawer, steps outside. Cutting a willowy branch from the tamarack tree that grew close to the outhouse; she grasps the slender tip of it in her left hand, and with her right thumb and forefinger strips the feathery green leaves from the length of the stem, and returns to the house.

Before drawing the faded cretonne curtain across the bailing twine that stretched between the doorjambs, she again observes the children making sure they are sleeping.

Hiking up her nightgown and squatting, she separates the lips of her vagina and holding them open with one hand, feeds the limb into her body cavity until she feels pressure from the stick. Gritting her teeth she makes several jabs at whatever was preventing the branch from going in farther.

Somewhere a child cries. Agnes stands up and taking a clean dishtowel from a drawer of the cupboard pushes it between her legs. Over her gown, she puts on an old wraparound apron hanging on a nail beside the door, builds up the fire, and feeds the bloody stick into it. Upstairs the crying baby begins wailing.

Amy pushes back the curtain, stands and rubs her eyes, one bare foot scratching at the top of the other and says sleepily, "The baby needs fed."

"Oh!" Agnes cries out bending over, a terrible cramp tearing through her abdomen

"Mama, Mama," Amy reacts holding onto her mother. "What's the matter, what is it?"

"Get everyone up and down here," Agnes says.

Agnes never went to bed during the day. But, after feeding her family flapjacks from the last of the flour, and frying up one with a strip of fatback folded inside for Bobby Lee's lunch pail and seeing him off to a one day job at the Harrison's farm, she went to bed.

At noon, she calls Amy and in a weak voice tells her to bring her a jar of water, that she was thirsty and to bring the quilts up from the cot down below.

Even though the covers from the children's straw pads pile on top of her, Agnes is cold and abnormally thirsty.

B.J., the oldest boy, is worried. He goes to see his mother in the attic. Her naturally pale skin bleached to whiteness and her eyes with dark circles beneath them seem buried in her face. The younger boys are too scared to cry for their mother and remain on the couch, not fighting for a change.

B.J. went to his Grandma Preston's house and told her their ma was sick. She said she was busy and sent him home with a loaf of bread and a pail of milk but first made him remain long enough to chop wood and stack it on the kitchen stoop.

Mrs. Preston didn't like her daughter-in-law. She claimed Agnes tricked her son into marriage and was a lazy, uneducated girl.

Amy returned to the attic after feeding her brothers bowls of bread and milk. When Agnes saw the tired little girl, she tried to get out of bed but was too feeble to do so. She asked for clean towels and a bucket of water.

Amy, thinking her mother was going to wash, brought warm water and a towel, but cowered when her mother dropped a blood-soaked towel into the wash basin and watched with horror as swirls of dark red clots roiled the clear water.

"Amy, you have to go and fetch Aunt Em."

Amy shrank from the request by backing away. Her mother's voice, slurred and difficult to understand, commands her, "Amy, this is no time to be scared. Get Aunt Em."

Aunt Em was not home, and Amy brought Dr. Townsend instead.