

HARD COUNTRY

Chapter 1

Mary Alice Kerney spent the late afternoon hours of a dry September day cleaning the one-room cabin her husband John had built two summers ago. They had settled on the land soon after the U.S. Army had defeated the Indians in the Red River War and the buffalo herds that once roamed the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation had been mostly wiped out.

It wasn't much of a place; half-cabin, half dugout, with a low ceiling, a sod roof, a hard-packed dirt floor, and no windows -- just slat openings on both sides of the door wide enough to aim a long gun through. The only sunshine that penetrated the cabin came when the door was open during warm daylight hours. Even then, without the kerosene lamp lit and a fire going in the fireplace, the light inside was always dim. It felt like more like a dungeon than a home.

Keeping it clean took hours out of her day. Dust from the packed-earth floor, wind-blown sand from the West Texas plains, dirt that seeped down from the sod roof, and fireplace soot coated every crack and cranny. She dusted constantly, otherwise an inch of grit covered every surface within hours. She hated the dirt, the dust, and the never-ending wind.

She had little furniture in the cabin. A rough plank table with four stools sat in front of the squat stone fireplace. Opposite the fireplace against the sloped wall stood a sturdy cupboard traded to her husband by a family traveling west. It protected her foodstuffs from the mice and rats that found their way inside the cabin no matter how many tiny holes in the walls she plugged up with mud. The cupboard was one of the few things in her life on the prairie that made her work easier and she was grateful to have it.

She'd prepared a stew with fresh vegetables from her garden and meat from a steer John had recently slaughtered. It simmered in a pot over a bed of embers in the fireplace. The chimney John Had built drew poorly, adding to the soot that accumulated in the cabin

She glanced uneasily at the ceiling as she wiped down the stools with a damp cloth. Soon after they'd moved into the cabin, at supper time a small rattlesnake had fallen onto the table from above. John had quickly crushed the rattler's head with his supper plate, most of his meal splattering Mary Alice's face and dress. She ran outside and refused to go back in until he searched the roof for more snakes and told her it was safe to return. From that day on, she feared a rattler would fall on her while she slept, or strike her without warning. She frequently woke up in a panic after dreaming about it.

She stirred the stew pot and added a pinch more of salt and pepper to the beef, turnips, potatoes, peppers and onions. John liked his food far too salty for Mary Alice's taste. Like clockwork at meal time, he sat, took one bite from his plate, grumbled about her cooking, added a handful of salt, and then ate everything in front of him.

He worked hard to keep the ranch going and needed more than one big meal a day, so Mary Alice was constantly cooking, filling his plate at breakfast, dinner, and supper, with seconds to be had for the asking, if there was food enough in the house. On summer days when the cabin was unbearably hot she cooked over an outdoor fire pit she built herself, carefully lining the hole with rocks she'd dug up from the plot that became her garden. But today she wanted nothing to do with the world outside the cabin door, even though the heat from the fireplace drenched her in sweat and soaked her dress.

Feeling faint and unsteady, she stopped cleaning and sat on the narrow bed at the back of the cabin. The bed was scarcely big enough for the two of them, especially when John tossed and turned in his sleep, which he did most nights. But even when he lay quiet, she squeezed herself against the rough mud wall and prayed to be released from her life.

She ran her hand over the cradle at the foot of the bed. John had built it during a late winter blizzard that kept them inside for three days. He spent his time working on the cradle until the storm broke and the weather cleared, joining the wood perfectly and rubbing it smooth to the touch. He wanted no splinters or rough edges to harm the baby boy he hoped see sleeping there. Never had he made anything so nice for her.

When the storm passed, it took days to count their losses. In the bone-cold days that followed, harsh northern winds blew across the vast West Texas plains exposing the dead animals buried under snowdrifts. To Mary Alice, the grotesque, frozen carcasses scattered across the land was like a scene from Hades. As the carcasses thawed, the wolves, coyotes, vultures, and crows congregated to feast. The screeching and squealing of the feeding animals, their howls, yips, and caws, made her uneasy and fretful.

Outside the cabin, the stray dog John had found on the open range started barking again. Mary Alice didn't bother to get up and see what had set it off. It barked all the time at nothing. John let it sleep in the cabin, and most mornings it left a mess that had to be cleaned up before she started breakfast. She kept hoping a coyote or wolf would make a meal of it, but it stayed close to the cabin, barking, barking, barking. She hated that dog. John had given it a name, but Mary Alice refused to remember it. More than once, she'd considered shooting it, burying it far away from the cabin where John wouldn't find it, and telling him it had run away.

She absent-mindedly caressed the cradle again, trying to remember what she'd been thinking about. Ever since the fifth month of carrying the baby, she'd felt deathly tired. Her legs ached from morning to night and she had constant pains in her back. The heat of late summer days, with not a trace of rain for weeks, had worn down her thin, small-boned frame even more.

The baby had kicked hard all day, but suddenly shifted and stopped moving about the time she'd started dusting. Although her water hadn't broken yet, earlier she'd sent John to fetch his sister-in-law, Ida, to help with the delivery. The angle of the sun through the open door told her they should arrive soon.

She wasn't looking forward to having the baby. She had tried hard to match John's happiness over the prospect of a son, if it was to be a boy, but secretly she felt no attachment to it. Living on the empty, lonely Texas plains had carved a hole inside of her. She forced herself to act glad, but it was all make believe.

She didn't fear childbirth. She'd seen her mother and an older sister go through it and knew what to expect. The baby would come when its time was due. It would be painful, bloody, and she would be sore for days, but that was simply the way of it, and nothing could be done to change it. What she fretted over and feared the most was the stark reality that she had no interest in the child at all. Was she mad? Daft?

She dreaded the rest of her life. The dark cabin, the empty world outside, the endless work with little sleep, caring for John and the baby day in and day out, the possibility of more children. She had tried repeatedly to make the baby real in her mind in the hopes that she could learn to love it. She thought about nursing it, caring for it, dressing it, playing with it, teaching it, but her indifference never went away.

She closed her eyes and tried to picture a happy baby, but all she could think of was how big and uncomfortable her breasts felt, how alien her body had become. She didn't like it at all.

She opened her eyes and looked through the door at the small barn John had built after he'd finished the cabin. She'd begged him to put it in front of the cabin so she would have something to look at that broke the emptiness of the West Texas plains and enormous horizon.

The dog suddenly stopped barking. She stretched out on the bed remembering the blindingly hot, early April day when John stopped their wagon near a clear, shallow pond fed by a live spring on the pale green, windswept plains. On a hillock behind the pond small bushes with tiny yellow flowers waved in the breeze.

John jumped down from the wagon, spread his arms wide, spun around on his heels, and declared it was here they'd build their ranch. "The Running Springs Ranch we'll call it," he said, his eyes sweeping the landscape.

He dropped to his knees at the edge of the pond plunged his head into water, stood up with his face dripping wet, hair plastered against his forehead, grinning from ear to ear. She laughed at the sight of him with such a boyish look of happiness on his face, and he took it to mean that she approved, when in truth she did not.

At thirty-two, John was twelve years her senior. She'd married him three years ago, herself barely a year off the boat from Ireland. He was an energetic man with little use for words, who got pleasure from hard work and seemed content with his life. He'd fought as a bluecoat in a volunteer Illinois regiment during the Civil War, tried farming afterwards, lost his crops to floods, and traveled west to Kansas with his brother to seek a new life. Other than that, she knew little about his past. Neither John nor his brother Tom, a veteran himself, talked about their childhood, and as far as Mary Alice knew their parents were dead and buried somewhere back in the old country.

It was in Kansas that John had met her, living like a servant in the farmhouse of a cousin who told her mother back in County Mayo he would take good care of her. Within a month John had won her hand solely on the promise of a life away from cousin Charles, who looked at her with greedy eyes, tried to fondle her when his plain, pious wife wasn't in the house, and would beat her for the slightest hint of disobedience.

Although John could find fault with her for not working hard enough, not seasoning his meals properly, or not having his food ready the moment he walked in the door, he'd never raised a hand against her, not even after a nip or two of whiskey. In bed, when his needs arose, he wasn't rough and finished with her quickly. It was more than she had expected from marriage, yet it didn't serve to end her misery.

At first, the wagon trip west had been an adventure, and Mary Alice had high hopes for a bit of happiness. But when they reached the vastness of West Texas, a haunting feeling of loneliness settled over her that never went away no matter how hard she tried to shake it off. Even after John had started to build the cabin next to the spring, she hoped that he would give in to the isolation and decide to move on, perhaps to New Mexico where there were mountains, forests, fertile river valleys, and villages like Santa Fe. But John had little need for other people, and the open plains suited him.

Mary Alice coughed and turned on her side to ease some of the pain in her back. The dryness and the dust had worked into her lungs, and her throat was parched and raw. Too tired to get up for a sip of water, she closed her eyes again and tried to think pleasant thoughts. But frozen in her mind was the image of the land she'd come to hate.

They had settled south of the Canadian River on the Panhandle where the land was mostly tabletop flat; an in-between country of neither plains nor desert, where until recently buffalo herds and warring Comanches and Kiowas had held sway. The land was covered with a ragged

carpet of grass, and there was good water from underground springs that bubbled to the surface. In some of the shallow vales near water, stands of cottonwoods or groves of scrub oak flourished, freshening the view, but it was never enough to make it seem like a place where people should live.

In their first spring after a wet winter, countless flowers blossomed, many Alice had never seen before, and for a brief time the plains burst with color that lifted her spirits. But the scorching sun and dust storms of summer baked out the color and blew it all away.

There were still dangers. Old timers had warned John against settling too far west. Yes, the land was there for the taking, but the Comanche and Apache still considered it theirs and weren't too friendly about intruders. And a stampede of what was left of the buffalo herds could wipe them out in an instant, as could a thunderstorm or a wildfire. Or they could lose their livestock to bands of rustlers passing through.

John had taught Mary Alice to use the shotgun for protection when he was away, and it stood loaded next to the door in case trouble came calling. But more often it was nature that threatened. There were blinding snows, fierce lightning storms, prairie wildfires, raging tornados, torrents of rain that turned the earth into mud and the gullies into brown rivers. And the endless, ceaseless wind that drove her to distraction.

Even the best autumn days of soft light and cool breezes were poor by comparison to the rich, green farmlands of Kansas and rugged shores of County Mayo. Nothing seem settled or rooted to the land. They were a hard three days ride from any settlement, a half day ride to the neighboring ranch where John's brother, Tom, his wife, Ida, and their son, Timothy lived.

Surrounded by the absence of almost everything comforting to her, Mary Alice lived in exile. She rose each morning determined to make the best of things, but her longing to leave only grew stronger.

The first year, before an early winter set in, she saw only a few people other than her husband, all of them on their way to somewhere else, looking to water their horses and bed down for the night. In early spring, a few more travelers stopped by, in a hurry to move on while good weather held.

Lacking the company of others, Mary Alice began talking to herself, letting her mind wander and her thoughts spill out whatever way they came to her. Mostly what she mumbled was idle chatter, but sometimes a word stuck in her head and she would whisper it over and over again as she went about her day. Other times her hatred for her life in this God-forsaken place made her hiss out loud like a snake. When John was around she carefully guarded her tongue so as not to upset him.

Today she had repeated the name John had picked for his baby, murmuring Patrick, Patrick, Patrick, in the hopes it would improve her disposition about the infant. But if it was to be a girl, he'd refused to pick a name, leaving that to her. She'd given it no thought until now, suddenly deciding the name Margaret would do. When he came home, she'd tell him Margaret.

The dog started barking again and she looked out the open door hoping John had arrived, but there was still no sign of him. Thousands of bits of dust floated in the air on the shaft of light that shone on the dirt floor. Her skin felt dry and dead. All she wanted was the baby to be born and the aches and pains to stop.

Last year they'd made a wagon trip for supplies to the army cantonment on the banks of the Sweetwater River. In spite of her urging him to remain at least a couple of days before returning to the cabin, John had started them home the following morning. Over her shoulder, the sight of

the tidy rows of military buildings fading in the distance as they rattled over the ruts of the wagon road chilled her heart.

Soon after they'd returned to the cabin, John's brother and his family arrived, and for a time she enjoyed their company. But as time passed, she found Ida dull, Tom more boring than John, and their half-wild son, Timmy, a loud little devil. When they left to start a ranch of their own, she didn't miss them at all. Yet, who was she to be so highfalutin? She was no better, was she?

The dog's constant barking agitated Mary Alice's mind. Hadn't she killed it with the shotgun and buried it? She got up, walked outside, and stared at the animal, chained to a post ten yards from the cabin door. The dog returned Mary Alice's stare as it barked frantically. The day was blinding hot with not a bit of shade and no cooler outside than in. The sun pounded into her head while the dog snarled and yanked at the chain as if to attack her. She could feel something wet running down her legs. She raised the hem of her dress and saw dark red blood dripping onto her shoes. She sunk to her knees and hugged her belly as pain seized up inside her.

She felt sleepy and wanted go inside to lie on the bed. She tried to raise herself up, but the pain came again, stronger, holding her down. She could feel the blood against her thighs.

The dog howled with excitement.

The contractions came faster and faster and she wondered if both she and the baby would be dead before John arrived with Ida.

She decided it didn't matter. She lay back and let the sun blind her open eyes.