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Opening extract from
Roll of Thunder Hear my Cry

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CHAPTER ONE

‘LITTLE Man, would you come on? You keep it up and you’re gonna make us late.’

My youngest brother paid no attention to me. Grasping more firmly his newspaper-wrapped notebook and his tin-can lunch of cornbread and oil sausages, he continued to concentrate on the dusty road. He lagged several feet behind my other brothers, Stacey and Christopher-John, and me, attempting to keep the rusty Mississippi dust from swelling with each step and drifting back upon his shiny black shoes and the cuffs of his corduroy pants by lifting each foot high before setting it gently down again. Always meticulously neat, six-year-old Little Man never allowed dirt

or tears or stains to mar anything he owned. Today was no exception.

‘You keep it up and make us late for school, Mama’s gonna wear you out,’ I threatened, pulling with exasperation at the high collar of the Sunday dress Mama had made me wear for the first day of school – as if that event were something special. It seemed to me that showing up at school at all on a bright August-like October morning made for running the cool forest trails and wading barefoot in the forest pond was concession enough; Sunday clothing was asking too much. Christopher-John and Stacey were not too pleased about the clothing or school either. Only Little Man, just beginning his school career, found the prospects of both intriguing.

‘Y’all go ahead and get dirty if y’all wanna,’ he replied without even looking up from his studied steps. ‘Me, I’m gonna stay clean.’

‘I betcha Mama’s gonna “clean” you, you keep it up,’ I grumbled.

‘Ah, Cassie, leave him be,’ Stacey admonished, frowning and kicking testily at the road.

‘I ain’t said nothing but –’

Stacey cut me a wicked look and I grew silent. His disposition had been irritatingly sour lately. If

I hadn't known the cause of it, I could have forgotten very easily that he was, at twelve, bigger than I, and that I had promised Mama to arrive at school looking clean and ladylike. 'Shoot,' I mumbled finally, unable to restrain myself from further comment, 'it ain't my fault you gotta be in Mama's class this year.'

Stacey's frown deepened and he jammed his fists into his pockets, but said nothing.

Christopher-John, walking between Stacey and me, glanced uneasily at both of us but did not interfere. A short, round boy of seven, he took little interest in troublesome things, preferring to remain on good terms with everyone. Yet he was always sensitive to others and now, shifting the handle of his lunch can from his right hand to his right wrist and his smudged notebook from his left hand to his left armpit, he stuffed his free hands into his pockets and attempted to make his face as moody as Stacey's and as cranky as mine. But after a few moments he seemed to forget that he was supposed to be grouchy and began whistling cheerfully. There was little that could make Christopher-John unhappy for very long, not even the thought of school.

I tugged again at my collar and dragged my feet in the dust, allowing it to sift back onto my socks

and shoes like gritty red snow. I hated the dress. And the shoes. There was little I could do in a dress, and as for shoes, they imprisoned freedom-loving feet accustomed to the feel of the warm earth.

‘Cassie, stop that,’ Stacey snapped as the dust billowed in swirling clouds around my feet. I looked up sharply ready to protest. Christopher-John’s whistling increased to a raucous, nervous shrill, and grudgingly I let the matter drop and trudged along in moody silence, my brothers growing as pensively quiet as I.

Before us the narrow, sun-splotched road wound like a lazy red serpent dividing the high forest bank of quiet, old trees on the left from the cotton field, forested by giant green-and-purple stalks, on the right. A barbed-wire fence ran the length of the deep field, stretching eastward for over a quarter of a mile until it met the sloping green pasture that signaled the end of our family’s four hundred acres. An ancient oak tree on the slope, visible even now, was the official dividing mark between Logan land and the beginning of a dense forest. Beyond the protective fencing of the forest, vast farming fields, worked by a multitude of sharecropping families, covered two-thirds of

a ten-square-mile plantation. That was Harlan Granger land.

Once our land had been Granger land too, but the Grangers had sold it during Reconstruction to a Yankee for tax money. In 1887, when the land was up for sale again, Grandpa had bought two hundred acres of it, and in 1918, after the first two hundred acres had been paid off, he had bought another two hundred. It was good rich land, much of it still virgin forest, and there was no debt on half of it. But there was a mortgage on the two hundred acres bought in 1918 and there were taxes on the full four hundred, and for the past three years there had not been enough money from the cotton to pay both and live on too.

That was why Papa had gone to work on the railroad.

In 1930 the price of cotton dropped. And so, in the spring of 1931, Papa set out looking for work, going as far north as Memphis and as far south as the Delta country. He had gone west too, into Louisiana. It was there he found work laying track for the railroad. He worked the remainder of the year away from us, not returning until the deep winter when the ground was cold and barren. The following spring after the planting

was finished, he did the same. Now it was 1933 and Papa was again in Louisiana laying track.

I asked him once why he had to go away, why the land was so important. He took my hand and said in his quiet way: 'Look out there, Cassie girl. All that belongs to you. You ain't never had to live on nobody's place but your own and long as I live and the family survives, you'll never have to. That's important. You may not understand that now, but one day you will. Then you'll see.'

I looked at Papa strangely when he said that, for I knew that all the land did not belong to me. Some of it belonged to Stacey, Christopher-John, and Little Man, not to mention the part that belonged to Big Ma, Mama, and Uncle Hammer, Papa's older brother who lived in Chicago. But Papa never divided the land in his mind; it was simply Logan land. For it he would work the long, hot summer pounding steel; Mama would teach and run the farm; Big Ma, in her sixties, would work like a woman of twenty in the fields and keep the house; and the boys and I would wear threadbare clothing washed to dishwater color; but always, the taxes and the mortgage would be paid. Papa said that one day I would understand.

I wondered.

When the fields ended and the Granger forest fanned both sides of the road with long overhanging branches, a tall, emaciated-looking boy popped suddenly from a forest trail and swung a thin arm around Stacey. It was T.J. Avery. His younger brother Claude emerged a moment later, smiling weakly as if it pained him to do so. Neither boy had on shoes, and their Sunday clothing, patched and worn, hung loosely upon their frail frames. The Avery family sharecropped on Granger land.

‘Well,’ said T.J., jauntily swinging into step with Stacey, ‘here we go again startin’ another school year.’

‘Yeah,’ sighed Stacey.

‘Ah, man, don’t look so down,’ T.J. said cheerfully. ‘Your mama’s really one great teacher. I should know.’ He certainly should. He had failed Mama’s class last year and was now returning for a second try.

‘Shoot! You can say that,’ exclaimed Stacey. ‘You don’t have to spend all day in a classroom with your mama.’

‘Look on the bright side,’ said T.J. ‘Jus’ think of the advantage you’ve got. You’ll be learnin’ all

sorts of stuff 'fore the rest of us ...' He smiled slyly. 'Like what's on all them tests.'

Stacey thrust T.J.'s arm from his shoulders. 'If that's what you think, you don't know Mama.'

'Ain't no need gettin' mad,' T.J. replied undaunted. 'Jus' an idea.' He was quiet for a moment, then announced, 'I betcha I could give y'all an earful 'bout that burnin' last night.'

'Burning? What burning?' asked Stacey.

'Man, don't y'all know nothin'? The Berrys' burnin'. I thought y'all's grandmother went over there last night to see 'bout 'em.'

Of course we knew that Big Ma had gone to a sick house last night. She was good at medicines and people often called her instead of a doctor when they were sick. But we didn't know anything about any burnings, and I certainly didn't know anything about any Berrys either.

'What Berrys he talking 'bout, Stacey?' I asked. 'I don't know no Berrys.'

'They live way over on the other side of Smellings Creek. They come up to church sometimes,' said Stacey absently. Then he turned back to T.J. 'Mr Lanier come by real late and got Big Ma. Said Mr Berry was low sick and needed

her to help nurse him, but he ain't said nothing 'bout no burning.'

'He's low sick all right –' cause he got burnt near to death. Him and his two nephews. And you know who done it?'

'Who?' Stacey and I asked together.

'Well, since y'all don't seem to know nothin',' said T.J., in his usual sickening way of nursing a tidbit of information to death, 'maybe I ought not tell y'all. It might hurt y'all's little ears.'

'Ah, boy,' I said, 'don't start that mess again.' I didn't like T.J. very much and his stalling around didn't help.

'Come on, T.J.,' said Stacey, 'out with it.'

'Well . . .' T.J. murmured, then grew silent as if considering whether or not he should talk.

We reached the first of two crossroads and turned north; another mile and we would approach the second crossroads and turn east again.

Finally T.J. said, 'Okay. See, them Berrys' burnin' wasn't no accident. Some white men took a match to 'em.'

'Y-you mean just lit 'em up like a piece of wood?' stammered Christopher-John, his eyes growing big with disbelief.

‘But why?’ asked Stacey.

T.J. shrugged. ‘Don’t know why. Jus’ know they done it, that’s all.’

‘How you know?’ I questioned suspiciously.

He smiled smugly. ‘’Cause your mama come down on her way to school and talked to my mama ’bout it.’

‘She did?’

‘Yeah, and you should’ve seen the way she look when she come outa that house.’

‘How’d she look?’ inquired Little Man, interested enough to glance up from the road for the first time.

T.J. looked around grimly and whispered, ‘Like . . . death.’ He waited a moment for his words to be appropriately shocking, but the effect was spoiled by Little Man, who asked lightly, ‘What does death look like?’

T.J. turned in annoyance. ‘Don’t he know nothin’?’

‘Well, what does it look like?’ Little Man demanded to know. He didn’t like T.J. either.

‘Like my grandfather looked jus’ ’fore they buried him,’ T.J. described all-knowingly.

‘Oh,’ replied Little Man, losing interest and concentrating on the road again.