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The Choice

by Michele Charles

Peering through the darkness three pairs of eyes strain to see in the dark of the cool, damp root cellar that has been dug deep down into the rich Texas farmland soil. Eight-year-old Molly's trembling hands grip those of Anne, her older sister by 16 months. Huddled in the corner, they try to make themselves as small as possible and hope not to be discovered. The two sisters shiver with chill but mostly from fear. They know not to utter a sound as they stifle their tears. Dressed in sack-cloth dresses, their hair done in bow-tied braids and faces smudged with dirt, they look small and vulnerable.

Thirteen-year-old Missouri, named for her father's beloved home state, grips the shotgun so firmly that her knuckles turn white beneath the brown of her slightly soiled skin. Standing with her back turned to her younger sisters, she doesn't even raise a hand to wipe away loose strands of wind-blown hair tickling her nose. A cold sweat begins to seep across her brow. Her body remains rigidly at attention as she rests a finger on the trigger.

Her face tenses as she listens to the sounds of chaos coming from above. Chickens squawk and scatter across the farmyard as war-painted Apaches race to scoop them up. A horse whinnies in fear. His hooves pound and scrape the ground as he

nervously and erratically trots around the corral searching for an escape. Shrill and angry screams from the throats of vengeful attackers pierce the night air. Furniture crashes and splinters atop a pile of burning objects from the pioneer family's sod home. Each piece crackles and hisses as the bonfire's orange and yellow flames dance higher, licking at the clear starlit sky.

Strange utterances of a language unknown to the girls come from voices nearing the crude, board-covered door of their hiding place. A dim glow from the bonfire of cabin furnishings breaks through the gaping cracks of the root cellar door, casting lines of eerie light across the faces of the frightened girls. Missouri raises the heavy shot gun and secures it against her shoulder. Like her father taught her, she rests her cheek against the smooth wooden gun stock as she sights down the barrel. Slowly turning to face her sisters she decides Molly will be the first because she is the youngest, Anne next, and then, finally, she will turn the gun on herself. Her chin quivers with fear and desperation as she silently prays not to hear creaking hinges of an opening door. For if she does, it will leave her with no choice.

