

barbed wire heart

tess sharpe



GRAND CENTRAL
PUBLISHING

NEW YORK BOSTON

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2018 by Tess Sharpe

Cover design by Jarrod Taylor. Cover photograph © Paul Taylor/Getty.

Cover copyright © 2018 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Grand Central Publishing
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
grandcentralpublishing.com
twitter.com/grandcentralpub

First edition: March 2018

Grand Central Publishing is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Grand Central Publishing name and logo is a trademark of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to www.hachettespeakersbureau.com or call (866) 376-6591.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sharpe, Tess, author.

Title: Barbed wire heart / Tess Sharpe.

Description: First edition. | New York : Grand Central Publishing, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017041580 | ISBN 9781538744093 (hardcover) | ISBN

9781478975717 (audio download) | ISBN 9781538744109 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Fathers and daughters—Fiction. | Organized crime—Fiction. |

Vendetta—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Suspense. | FICTION / Crime. |

FICTION / Contemporary Women. | FICTION / Action & Adventure. | FICTION /

Coming of Age. | GSAFD: Suspense fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3619.H356655 B37 2018 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017041580>

ISBNs: 978-1-5387-4409-3 (hardcover), 978-1-5387-4410-9 (ebook)

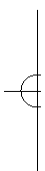
Printed in the United States of America

LSC-C

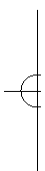
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my mother,
who sank my roots in the red dirt.*

*And for my husband, who
chose to grow with me.*

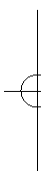


barbed wire heart



Part One

the trailer in the woods



one

I'm eight years old the first time I watch my daddy kill a man. I'm not supposed to see. But those first few weeks after Momma died, whenever Uncle Jake isn't around, I'm just running wild.

I spend a lot of time in the woods, playing up in the deer blinds or seeing how high I can get in the trees on my own steam. Sometimes I cry over missing Momma. Sometimes I can't help it.

I try not to do it around Daddy, though.

I like the woods. They're loud and quiet at the same time, the soundtrack and lullaby of my life for as long as I can remember. When I climb the big oaks, pulling myself up with all my might, reaching and jumping and swinging my body along branch and bark like a squirrel, I have to pay attention or I might slip and fall. When I climb, I don't have to think about Momma being gone. Or about how all Daddy does now is storm around in a whiskey cloud, cleaning his guns and muttering about Springfields and blood.

Momma's been dead for three and a half weeks, and already the skin on my palms is worn rough from climbing. My knees are scabbed over from the time I fell out of the tall redwood near the creek. My fingers are stained with blackberry juice, and my arms get scratched from the thorns. My pockets bulge with the treasures I find in the forest—things she would've liked: blue jay feathers and smooth rocks perfect for skipping, a cracked acorn that looks like a face.

TESS SHARPE

I stash my gifts from the forest in one of the deer blinds. Uncle Jake promised he'd take me back to Momma's grave even though Daddy glared at him when he said it. I want to bring her my presents, because Uncle Jake says she's in heaven looking down on us.

Sometimes I stare up at the sky and try to imagine it. Try to see her.

But there's nothing but branches and stars.

Daddy doesn't notice how much I'm gone, warm in the forest's hold. He's got other things on his mind.

That night, after I watched the sunset, looking for a trace of Momma in the night sky, I'm still perched in the oak near the edge of the garden, the one that has a good straight branch for sitting. It's getting late and I should go inside, but I hear the sound of truck tires crunching on the gravel road that leads through the woods to our house. I tuck my feet up and out of sight before the headlights of Daddy's Chevy round the curve and flood the garden.

With my bare feet pressing up against the trunk for balance, I stretch myself belly down on the limb. I wrap my arms around it in a hug and crane my neck to get a better view.

If he's drunk again, I don't want him to see me, because I look like her. It makes him sad. Sometimes it makes him angry, but he tries to hide it.

Instead of pulling up next to the house like normal, he drives right under the tree, toward the rough road leading to the barn, parking right in front of the doors. The light on the barn flips on, the sensor detecting the movement.

I watch from a distance as he cuts the headlights and gets out. Daddy's not stumble-down drunk, but it's too far to see if he's covered in his own sick like last week. I'm about to swing down from the tree, but instead of heading toward the house, he walks over to the passenger side of the truck and pulls the door open.

I squint in the darkness. He's almost completely hidden by shadows as he drags something big out of the cab. He yanks the barn door open and the light shifts, just for a second. A beam illuminates the doorway, and I catch a glimpse of a man's feet being dragged across the barn floor before the door slams shut.

BARBED WIRE HEART

My breath comes quick and fast, so hard my belly's scraping against the rough bark. My fingers tighten on the branch as my heart hammers and the world spins. I want to dig inside the oak like the woodpeckers and squirrels do. I want to burrow and hide.

I try to tell myself my eyes are playing tricks on me.

But deep down, I know better.

A few minutes later—it seems like forever, my breath and the chirp of the crickets echoing in my ears—the outside barn light snaps off, and darkness creeps through the trees, spreading across the property.

I should climb down and run into my room and shut the door and pull my quilts over my head. I should pretend I never saw those feet being dragged across the ground.

I don't, though.

Instead I climb down the tree and head toward the barn.

I could say I regret the choice, looking back, but that's just foolishness.

I had to learn somehow. What he was. What I would be.

This was how for me.

I sneak 'round the back of the barn, where the cedar planks are pock-marked with holes. They give a terrible view into the barn, but it's the best I can do. Kneeling down in the dirt, I push my cheek against the wood, angling my head to peep through the biggest hole I can find. I'm breathing too quick still, my heart rabbit-fast under my skin, my mouth dry from the air whooshing in and out.

At first, I can't see Daddy at all. All I see is the old tractor he has stored in here, and the smashed-up quad he crashed last summer. A bare bulb strung up from an orange cord swings gently back and forth from one of the beams and that's when I hear it: his voice.

"You're going to tell me what I wanna know," Daddy says. There's a rummaging sound, like he's going through the red toolbox in the corner. And sure enough, after a few seconds pass, he finally comes into view, a screwdriver in his hand. Shadows lengthen across Daddy as he moves away from my hiding spot, turning the screwdriver in his hand

TESS SHARPE

over and over as he walks back behind the tractor, disappearing from view. A groaning sound fills the air.

It's not Daddy.

It's whoever he brought in here. And they're hurt.

Daddy hurt them.

It's strange to think of Daddy's hands, big and strong and calloused, so good at hugs and tugging at the end of my braid, doing that.

"You're gonna tell me what I wanna know," Daddy says. "We can do it easy or hard. Your choice, Ben."

"Fuck you," a second voice—Ben—slurs.

"Tell me," Daddy says.

"Not gonna tell you shit." There's a wet, rattling sound, like he's coughing up more than spit.

"Okay then," Daddy says. The shadows stretch above the tractor, a blurred glimpse of his arm as he shoves forward, sharp and fast. The sound that comes next, a gritted-out groan that punches out of Ben, makes the hair on the back of my neck raise.

"That's going to stay in there until you tell me what I want to know," Daddy says, and I realize he means the screwdriver.

Black spots crowd along the edges of my vision. I have to plant both palms in the dirt and concentrate, slow myself down so I don't faint. My eyes feel like they're about to pop out of my head, and my cheek presses hard against the pecky cedar siding. I want to run away. I have to stay and see what happens.

"Tell me," Daddy says.

"No."

Daddy straightens, coming back into view, and from this angle, I can see he's digging in his back pocket. He comes up with the antler-handle knife he sharpens every Sunday without fail. He flips it open, eight inches of deadly steel shining in the barn light and tests it on his thumb-nail. "Let's try something different."

Daddy kneels again, disappearing; the shadowy blur of his arm comes up and then down again. Ben's sound is even worse this time, no gritted teeth, no effort to suppress the scream.

BARBED WIRE HEART

I don't close my eyes or hide my face or do anything that I should.

I keep my eyes wide open.

It feels like it's the first time they've ever been.

"Tell me," Daddy says, when Ben finally quiets to a whimper.

"I can't," Ben gasps out. "I can't. He'll kill me if I do."

"You Springfields, your momma didn't pop you out too bright, did she?" Daddy asks mockingly. "What do you think I'm gonna do if you don't tell me where he is?"

"Please. I'll do anything—money, whores, drugs, you name it, Duke, and I'll do—" His words dissolve into a yell, though I can't see what Daddy's doing to him with that knife.

I press my lips together to hold back the nausea as Daddy says, "Tell me," again, like it's the only words he knows.

"Unnggghh," Ben gurgles, panting. "Please. Please."

"Tell me."

"I can't. Carl's my brother."

Ben's left foot keeps twitching, like it's trying to make a break for it. It's the only part of him that's not blocked by the tractor, and I keep staring at his boots, because Daddy has the same pair. Momma bought them for him last year for Christmas. I'd helped her wrap them.

"Tell me where Springfield is," Daddy says. "Or I go find Caroline. How does that sound? That worth protecting your brother for? Last time I saw that wife of yours, she was looking mighty fine. Maybe I'll take my time."

I'm too young to understand what he means. Later, it'll horrify me.

Later, I'll tell myself it was a bluff. That he isn't that man.

But the possibility is there, right in front of me: He might be.

"No," Ben says weakly. "Not Caroline. Please."

"Then tell me," Daddy demands. "And I won't touch her or your boys. They'll be safe from me and mine. All I want is Springfield."

"Shit, shit... Carl's in Manton. Exit thirty-four on the old highway. House at the end of Hell's Pass. Don't you fucking touch my family!"

Daddy gets up off his knees, straightening, finally in full view. "Thank you."

TESS SHARPE

He moves so fast—the motion so familiar as he reaches. His hands—and then gun—are almost a blur.

It's loud—the gunshot hammers in my ears, and there's this squishy sound that makes my stomach lurch.

I clap my hand over my mouth, but it's too late. I throw up, vomit staining my shirt, a wet splat against my skin. The smell of sour bile makes me gag as I try to get up, my legs refusing to cooperate.

I have to get into the house before he realizes what I've seen. But my legs are like rubber and there's dried salt on my cheeks when I push my messy hair out of my face.

I want Momma with an ache that never seems to get smaller, and just thinking about her makes me clumsy, stupid. When I get up, my foot hits a rock, sending it skittering against the barn, making a loud *thunk*.

I freeze on the spot.

"Who's there?" Daddy's voice thunders through the walls of the barn. I hear his footsteps, swiftly crossing the ground, and then the creak of the door opening as he peers out.

Oh no. My stomach tightens horribly. I feel like throwing up again.

"Harley, if that's you, you've got three seconds to let me know. Otherwise, I'm shooting. One..." Daddy says.

My mind's racing. I'm trying to understand.

Daddy killed him. Made it look easy. Like it doesn't matter.

Like it wasn't the first time.

"Two."

What's he going to do with the body? Will he bury it? Where? The woods?

"Th—"

"It's me!" I yell out, scrambling to my feet. My jeans are covered in dirt and my shirt's damp with vomit. My legs are still shaky, but I dart forward, around the corner and to the front of the barn.

He's standing in the entryway, the light spilling out, his arm still holding the door open.

Beyond him, in the barn, I can see the blood pooling, fast and dark

BARBED WIRE HEART

on the ground next to what's left of Ben's head. It lolls to the side, his open eyes facing me. He looks confused. Like he expected Daddy to let him go.

I swallow hard.

It's way worse up close.

Daddy looks at me, his 9mm still raised. Then he looks over his shoulder at Ben and the expanding puddle of blood. Daddy steps to the side, blocking my view of Ben's face. "Baby," he starts. "How long..." He stops. "Sweetheart," he tries again. "I—"

I keep staring at the blood, because even though I've helped Daddy field-dress deer, it's never been this much. It's dark and thick, like paint. But it smells sharp, like copper, like life, soaking into the ground.

"Harley-girl," Daddy says, gentle, the voice he uses when he reads me stories in bed.

I'm going to throw up again. I grit my teeth and manage to swallow the bile down this time, my throat working furiously, sweat popping out on my face. I sway on the spot, and then Daddy's hands are picking me up around the waist and I go limp, I don't even try to fight.

I'm too scared of what this new—no, this old, *hidden*—Daddy will do if I try.

He's silent the whole time he carries me up to the house, up the stairs. He sets me on my bed and pulls my boots off, and I just sit there shaking and let him. He swaps my vomit-stained clothes for one of my sleep shirts before pushing me gently on the shoulder so I'll lie back on the bed. I think about Ben's blank eyes, and for the first time in my life, I shrink from Daddy's touch, but he doesn't notice. I expect him to leave after he tucks me in, but he stays sitting next to my bed for a long time.

It's only when he stands up after what seems like hours later when I get the nerve to say it. Daddy's silhouetted in the doorway, about to shut the door, when I blurt it out: "He told you what you wanted. You didn't have to."

I hear his sigh, but I can't see his face, hidden in shadow. He leans against the doorway, his shoulder pressing against the frame. "A life for a life," he says. "Only way, Harley-girl."

TESS SHARPE

A life for a life. Ben's life for Momma's.

"Does that mean you're not going after Springfield?" I ask.

Daddy shifts from foot to foot in the doorway. "I have to," he says.

"But—"

"He took your momma away from us," Daddy reminds me gently.

As if I could forget.

"But you said you wouldn't hurt Ben's family."

Daddy straightens, rising from the doorframe. He looks huge, like a shadow himself. I still can't see his face, but when he speaks, just two words, it's like gravel: "I lied."