



## Eyes of a Soldier

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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## The Eyes of a Soldier

Right, left, step by step in the sucking mud, Logan watched the patched toe of one boot move in front of the torn toe of the other. The trousers of his Union blues were coated with the red clay of the South. The once shiny boots were red too, stained by blood and clay. Each step forward sucked him deeper and seemed to drag him back. What would happen if he simply gave in and stopped moving? He might fall face down in the muck, let it fill his lungs and put him to sleep. God, he would welcome sleep at any cost right now.

He dragged his gaze up. He'd been marching with other stragglers, men from different companies, the remainders of destroyed units. Now all of them had disappeared around a bend in the road. If he curled up right over there on that soft-looking patch of grass underneath an oak tree would anyone even notice his absence? Probably not.

He slogged over to the side of the road and up the slope then collapsed. The fresh scent of grass filled his nose as he took a sip of the tepid water in the bottom of his canteen. Leaves rustled overhead. A bird whistled and another answered. Strange bird calls in this foreign land. Tennessee was a world away from his home in Wisconsin. He didn't belong here. He just wanted to go home and, with the war finally over, he could— if he could just keep his boots moving until he reached a functional train station.

Logan closed his eyes. Through the lids he watched the play of sunlight and tree branches, a dance of light and shadow.

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Mae pulled a bucket of water up from the well, heaved it over the edge and set it on the ground, then lowered another. Two buckets. One for each hand, both so heavy they strained her shoulders as she carried them to the shanty. After all this time, she should have developed more muscle in her arms, but she hadn't been raised in the

country. The hardest labor she'd done, up to age sixteen, was ply a needle and thread or sit behind the counter of her father's store, ringing up sales on his brass cash register. Back then she'd worn a clean dress every day and bought new shoes whenever she needed them. But with the impetuous nonchalance of youth, she'd thrown away that life to follow Gray Pike up to his mountain home.

Mae stumbled over a stone and half of the water sloshed out of one of the buckets, wetting her skirt. She straightened her aching back and continued trudging through the mud. So much rain this spring at least her garden would grow—if only she could afford the seeds to plant it. But even if she had the biggest yield ever she didn't know if it would be enough to see her through another winter here, not with the last of her chickens and goats gone.

Not with her husband, her provider, gone. For two years of marriage, this rough mountain life had been almost bearable because of the moments she'd shared with Gray. She'd truly loved that charming man, but Mae wasn't cut out for backwoods life. Cooking, cleaning, caring for animals, carrying wood, and constantly fighting mud became the endless rhythm of her days. Then her husband marched off to war and she was alone in the tiny cabin in the hills. Alone at night when darkness filled her soul and alone in the days as she learned to do his chores as well as her own. To seal her fate, both her parents died of a fever so she had no other home to return to.

Surviving and waiting for Gray became her life. When the news came that he would never return, Mae still lingered here not knowing what to do next in her life.

For right now, she would carry two buckets of water to the cabin.

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Logan woke to the sound of an owl hooting overhead and the woods rustling mysteriously all around him. His body ached. His feet were swollen and his spine seemed fused to the ground. If he lay there all night, hopefully he'd be dead by morning. But such lazy, selfish behavior wasn't right. He'd lost too many companions to cannonball and rifle fire. Succumbing to despair would dishonor their memory.

He dug his rifle butt into the earth and hauled himself to his feet. Using the weapon like a cane, he prepared to hobble down to the road he could barely see in the faint starlight. Up the slope, a glimmer of light came from between the trees, the windows

of someone's home. In these parts, a northerner knocking at the door would hardly be offered hospitality. But, oh, that light looked inviting, and he wasn't an enemy soldier anymore, only an exhausted, wandering stranger trying to get home. Some merciful soul might offer him a Christian hand of charity. A fool could hope.

Logan climbed slowly up the hill, fighting brambles and branches. At last he discovered a trail leading to a clearing in the woods. A ramshackle shed was larger than the little shanty from which the light came. A plume of smoke rose from the house's chimney. Fire. Hot, wonderful, life-giving fire. An icy breeze rattled the tree branches and cut through his woolen uniform. He shivered and walked toward the house, not stopping until he stood on the drooping front porch with a fist raised to rap at the door.

In case he was being presumptuous about Southern hospitality, Logan drew his revolver and hid it in the folds of his coat before knocking.

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Mae was deeply involved in the story of Tristan and Isolde from the book of Arthurian legends that had been her only companion through the long winter. A sharp knock on her door brought her to her feet, a scream catching in her throat. She dropped the book to the floor and clapped her hand to her chest to still her pounding heart. Terror raced through her, stealing her breath and urging her to run and hide.

Who would come to her house in the night? Her neighbors lived some distance away. The chances she'd see a friendly face on the other side of that door were small. Scavenging strangers, ex-soldiers and thieves marauded over the countryside these days. If she opened that door, she'd be inviting the devil into her house. Mae remained silent, frozen, anticipating another knock.

It came, followed by a voice. "Hello. Is anyone home? I need help. I'm out of water, the night's cold, and I'd just like to sleep in your shed for the night. Please."

Mae dimmed the light, crept to the window and peered out. It was too dark to see more than the shape of a man on her porch. But she could tell from his flat accent he was a Yankee. She'd wait quietly until he went away. If she didn't open the door, he couldn't harm her.

The man's hands were braced on either side of the door frame. He bowed his head, waiting for a response. "All right then. I'm going to draw some water from your well, then go to the shed. Sorry to steal your hospitality but I'm desperate."

The shed was locked. Would he break in? For that matter, could he break into the house, and if he did, what might he do to her?

As the man's footsteps creaked off the porch, Mae went to the wall and took down Gray's hunting rifle. She'd learned how to fire it, although she hadn't yet shot game with it. As long as this stranger lurked around her yard and house, she'd keep the rifle by her side.

She moved to the window again, straining to see through the darkness. She would keep watch there through the night and pray that by morning the intruder would be gone.

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Did the woman imagine herself invisible? Logan clearly saw her silhouette in the window. She watched him and he knew she could hear his voice, but of course she wouldn't let a stranger into her house, no matter how piteously he begged. She was clearly living alone, her man off to war or maybe dead. He couldn't blame her for leaving him out in the dark, except he was freezing and that made it hard to be sympathetic.

There was no bucket in the well so he couldn't draw water to slake his thirst. The shed was locked so he couldn't enjoy even that minimal shelter from the cold. He was no better off than if he'd stayed on the road.

Logan returned to the cabin and knocked again. "Ma'am, sorry to bother you, but will you please at least give me a dipper full of water and maybe a blanket. I could sleep on your porch. I promise to be gone by morning. I'm not a dangerous person. I wouldn't harm you. My name is Logan William Albertson. I'm from Wisconsin. My father owns a store in Green Bay. I'm on my way home. I'm not out to hurt anyone. I swear you can trust me."

He hoped offering the details of his life would make her think of him as a person instead of a dangerous enemy, so he added more as he sat down with his back against the door. "I used to think I couldn't stand to work in my dad's store. I couldn't think of a worse way to spend my life. I dreamed of adventure and traveling the world. Now I've had enough adventure to last a lifetime. I want to go home and lead the dull life

imaginable. I want to buy a house down the block from the store and walk to work every day. I want a wife and children and a dog. I want a life so average I'll never have to guess what the next day will bring."

He ran out of words and closed his eyes, picturing his parents and his home.

A small voice came from the other side of the door. "What kind of store?"

"Albertson's General Store. We sell everything from penny nails to bolts of cloth, headache powder to fruits and vegetables. Maybe Albertson and Son, after I get back. But perhaps that's too many 'sons' in the title."

He waited and held his breath. *Please let me in.*

"My father owned a general store too. I used to work behind the counter," the soft voice said. "I miss it."

"Me too. The ring of the cash register, wrapping up a parcel, chatting with a longtime customer. I never would have believed I'd long for that," Logan replied. "So, how'd you end up way out in the middle of nowhere?"

"My husband is from here." She paused then corrected herself. "Was from here. He was killed in the Battle of Chickamauga."

A volley of rifle fire, thunder of cannons, images of destruction and agony, and muddy, bloody trenches flashed through Logan's mind. Those gray uniforms had become only targets. Think about the men inside them and he'd lose the nerve to pull the trigger.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, offering the apology for much more than one woman's dead husband.

"You know I can't let you in, Yankee."

He heaved a sigh. "I know. Just a drink of something warm and a blanket?"

Another long silence.

"All right," she said.

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Mae kept a tea kettle over the fire. It was a simple matter to brew a pot of tea and pour a cup, easy to get a quilt from the chest at the foot of her bed. But it was much harder to open the door and give them to the man. What if he forced his shoulder against the unlatched door and pushed his way in? She pictured the invasion as clear as day.

He might pin her down and do things to her that only her husband had ever done. He could *force* her. Shamefully, tension tightened between her legs at the thought. She should be more terrified than she was, but Logan William Albertson's voice had calmed her fears. He sounded so normal, like a person she might actually have liked if she'd met him in her old life in town—if he wasn't a murdering Yankee. Mae was so starved for company she wanted to talk with him more.

She unlocked the door and opened it a few inches. The beam of light illuminated a pair of dark brown eyes in a gaunt, pale face. The man's mouth was lost in a tangle of brown moustache and beard until he smiled, showing even white teeth. "Hello, ma'am." He tipped his awful blue cap with the crossed swords on the front. "Pleased to meet you."

Mae thrust the blanket through the crack then the cup of tea.

"Thank you"—she shut the door in his face—"ma'am." His voice was muffled by the thick wood.

"What are you doing here anyway? Why aren't you with your regiment?" She yelled, suddenly hating him so much she'd as soon shoot him with the rifle as look at him again.

"I got separated from what was left of my platoon. Got injured and laid up for a bit. Now I'm just trying to get back where I belong."

"The war's been over a few weeks. Even I heard about it clear up here, so why didn't the army send you home by train?" she demanded.

"Tracks are blown up. I need to catch the main trunk out of Knoxville but the troop wagons are full, so I decided to walk. I can get there in another couple of days. If I don't freeze to death first," he added quietly.

Mae stared at the fire flickering down to its last embers. There was no wood in the box. She'd intended to go outside and bring more in. She couldn't make it through the night without building the fire.

She swallowed, hoisted up the heavy rifle, rested it against her shoulder and opened the door. Maybe she'd gone temporarily crazy. Or maybe she'd just spent far too many nights alone. "If you fill my wood box, you can sleep on the floor by the fire. You try anything and I'll blast you."

"Yes, ma'am."

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Logan moved slowly as he handed back the teacup, awfully fine china for this ramshackle cabin but he supposed it came from her storekeeping family. He backed away, hands up, and went to gather logs from the woodpile he could barely find in the dark.

Carrying the first load, he crossed her doorstep. With one glance he took in the poverty of the house and the little touches she'd attempted to make it homey. Crocheted doilies covered a side table and the back of a chair. A colorful braided rug warmed the floor. He was careful to step around it with his muddy boots as he filled the box.

Logan nodded at the thin woman who watched him like a wary cat with its claws barely sheathed, then he headed out for the next load. His hostess bristled with antagonism. Logan doubted she'd actually shoot him, but he wouldn't put it past her to club him with that rifle.

As he plodded back and forth from the wood pile to the box several more times, his injured back began to ache.

"That'll do." The woman's voice stopped him in his tracks. "Take off your boots and sit down at the table."

Logan obeyed, dropping heavily onto a tipsy wooden chair. He worked to unlace his boots with icicle fingers. At last, the irritated woman crouched and removed his boots herself. He gazed down at the crown of her head, the neat white part and wings of brown hair on either side, so pretty and feminine. After all these months of being around men, he'd forgotten the softness of women.

She set his filthy boots beside the door and wiped savagely at the muddy prints he'd tracked in. Logan watched her busy flurry, but was too exhausted to apologize. His head drooped. He was scarcely aware of her tending the fire, heating something and setting a bowl in front of him. But the smell of hot food woke him. He took the spoon she gave him and emptied the bowl in several greedy bites. The glass of well water was finer than wine.

"Thank you, ma'am. That was good soup and sorely needed."

Without a reply, she whisked away the dish and washed and dried it. Without turning from the sink, she said, "You may bed down in front of the fire."



Logan took the blanket and did as he was bid. He removed his jacket and rolled it up for a pillow, then stretched out on the rag rug like a dog and wrapped the blanket around him. "I appreciate your hospitality."

She folded her arms and looked down on him. "What's wrong with you anyway? You don't appear to be injured."

"Back trouble. With all those bullets flying, I get injured by a tree branch that fell and knocked me out cold. When I woke up, the fighting had moved on. Medics came by and took me to a field hospital."

"My husband wasn't so lucky." Her voice was acid, shriveling him with its accusation.

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

Logan might have reminded her it was a war and no one's fault, but reasoning wouldn't cool her anger. She'd lost her husband. Any man in a blue uniform might have been his killer.

"Sorry," he repeated then fell silent, lying on his side, staring at the crackling fire.

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The Union soldier was well spoken, had nice manners, and sad eyes. If she didn't hate him so much, she might have asked questions about what life was like in Wisconsin. She might even have told him a little about herself and how lonely she was up here on this mountain. But he was her enemy so such cordiality wasn't possible.

Mae studied the shape of his body beneath the blanket, the long legs, the hump of a shoulder and the back of his head. His hair was unshorn, nearly to his shoulders, and fell in brown waves that looked soft to the touch. She recalled how Gray's hair had felt sliding between her fingers when she gave him a haircut, or when she combed it with her fingers just for the pleasure of it. Her hands itched to know that feeling again. And her body ached to feel the heavy weight of a man upon her once more.

Terrible yearnings to have as she stared at this stranger! Was she even the same well brought up young woman she'd been before she came here? Four years of survival living had honed away the niceties of society. The hard woman left behind was more practical and probably more honest with herself than naïve little Mae McCreedy had been. Mae Pike was as tough as the mountain she lived on.

With the fire banked to last for the night, there was nothing left to do but go to bed. She'd burned all the lamp oil she could afford for one day on her nightly reading. But how could she sleep with a stranger in her home? She certainly wouldn't be changing into a nightgown, and even if she lay in bed, she wouldn't relax.

Mae remained in her chair watching the man's silhouette against the fire. His steady breathing told her he slept. Likely it would be safe for her to do the same now. Bit by bit she relaxed. She wasn't certain when she drifted off, but a loud noise jerked her awake.

The man on the floor thrashed around as if in pain or fighting off an invisible assailant. He didn't cry out but gave a low groan. He needed to wake up, but Mae was not about to get close enough to shake his shoulder.

"Hey!" she called. "Mr. Albertson, wake up!"

He bolted upright, gasping for breath.

"You had a nightmare. You're all right. You're safe." She filled a tin cup with water from the bucket and knelt beside him.

He took the cup with trembling hands and drained it dry before handing it back. "Thank you." His voice was low and hoarse.

"Nightmares of battle?" she asked.

He frowned. "No. Something else. But I can't remember."

Mae nodded. Plenty of dark creatures chased through her dreams too. Fears and sadness she was able to control by day haunted her nights.

"Are you in any pain?"

"My back aches some, but I'll be all right." He slipped his suspenders off his shoulders and straightened the shirt that had twisted around him.

"Well..." She rose and put the cup back in its place. "You should try to sleep some more."

"I'm sorry I woke you, and sorry I disturbed your evening. I'll leave first thing in the morning."

Mae said nothing. Her feelings of sympathy for this stranger gnawed at her. But it would be over soon. He would be gone and her life could return to normal. She hesitated before lying down on her bed at last—keeping the rifle by her side.

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Logan couldn't sleep again. His heart still raced even as the shadowy danger filling his dreams faded. The thin rug covering the wood floor was no cushion at all. Lying on his back, his spine ached. Lying on one side, his shoulder and neck hurt. He was restless and very aware of the pretty woman with big gray eyes lying only feet away.

She shifted and the bed creaked. His body responded as if that tiny movement were an invitation for him to join her there. His cock began to stiffen and ache for something forbidden.

He'd been too long without a woman's touch but it wasn't mere lust that stirred him. He desired the warmth of that soft bed and an even softer body pressed against his. Human connection was what he craved. And even though he didn't yet know this woman's name and she'd looked at him with hatred, he couldn't help feeling if only for a moment their minds had met. He'd recognized the empathy in her nod. She suffered from nightmares too.

What would she do if he spoke to her now, asked her to stay awake and talk with him for a while? What would she do if he rose and climbed into bed with her, an unspoken plea for comfort?

No doubt she'd wallop him with that rifle and drive him out of her little cabin. He smiled at the thought and turned over to the other side, warming his back for a while.

When he opened his eyes again, Logan sprawled face down on the braid rug. His mouth was dry and his eyes bleary as he tried to focus on the figure moving around the room, making an ungodly clanging of pots and pans.

He dragged himself upright and looked out the window. It promised to be a wet, dreary miserable day. He'd be slogging through red mud soon enough, but it seemed his hostess was at least going to fill his belly first.

The woman glanced at him over one shoulder. "Grits'll be ready soon. You'll find the outhouse around the north side of the cabin."

"Thank you," he offered for another scrap of kindness.

Logan dragged on his boots and clomped across the porch, but icy rain drenched the yard so he stood at the edge of the porch and pissed onto a rosebush. Then he stared

up at the flat gray sky. The thought of walking on such a day was unbearable. Surely she wouldn't force him out into it.

Back inside, a steaming bowl of grits drizzled with molasses waited for him. It wasn't his mother's raisin-studded oatmeal but it would do. Logan offered yet another thanks as he sat down to eat.

"Rain's turning to ice," he mentioned as he greedily scooped hot cereal. "Pretty slippery out there. I could do your outside chores for you, if you want. Take care of your livestock or bring in more wood."

"There is no more livestock and I can fetch my own wood. Best get on your way," she answered shortly as she made up the bed.

Logan glanced out at the freezing rain. This was even worse than last night. To prolong his stay, he rinsed his empty bowl at the kitchen basin and dried it with the piece of a flour sack.

Meanwhile, his hostess had put on her coat and boots and stood at the front door looking out at the rain. He walked over to stand beside her. Hard, icy drops pelted the ground.

"Please allow me to help you with the chores, Mrs...?"

She remained silent for so long he thought she wouldn't fill in the blank.

"Pike. Mae Pike," she finally answered. "All right. You can bring in another few loads of wood, then I suppose you might stay until this rain lets up."

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While her house guest trudged through the icy rain, Mae did what little straightening there was to do in the cabin. Her chores were minimal now that there were no goats or chickens to tend. She'd survived the end of the winter on some dried pork a kindly neighbor had given her. Mostly she didn't eat meat at all any longer. She wouldn't survive another winter here unless she learned to hunt. This wilderness living was too hard, and now that Gray was gone, she didn't know what kept her here.

Albertson finished filling the wood box, took off his wet coat, and shook it outside the door. His boots stood in the entry, taking up a lot of space. They invaded her small cabin and seemed to claim it. Her own clunky overshoes appeared downright dainty in comparison.

Mae wiped up muddy footprints again, before glancing at the man kneeling at her hearth. Steam rose and flames spat. Smoke puffed out into the room.

She hurried over. “Take that damp log off. Use the wood that’s had a chance to dry overnight. Don’t you know anything about tending fires?” She nearly pushed him out of her way as she crouched to fix the struggling fire.

The man was right beside her, his presence as overwhelming as the pair of boots by the door. “I’m sorry. I haven’t had much practice. I grew up in town and we had a coal furnace.”

“Don’t soldiers have campfires?”

“I’m embarrassed to say I never had to build one. A private usually did that.”

She’d already noticed the lieutenant’s insignia on his coat. Of course he was a commissioned officer. A wealthy merchant’s son wouldn’t enlist as a foot soldier.

“Artillery?” She identified the red bar.

“We hauled the big guns until ours sank in the mud and we had to abandon it. Lost the cannon, then I lost my platoon. Every man.” His voice sounded as hollow and empty as her livestock shed.

“I’m sorry,” Mae blurted automatically, then clamped her lips tight. He didn’t deserve sympathy for his loss. He was her enemy.

She rose and brushed soot off her hands. For a moment longer, she stood beside the man who didn’t belong there and warmed herself. What was she going to do with him in her cabin all day? If only the rain would end, she could send him on his way.

“There’s a book if you care to read something.” She pointed to *Tales of the Round Table* sitting where she’d left it on the arm of the chair. “I have some tidying to do.”

She moved past him to make the bed a second time. How could she fill the long, empty hours?

Logan Albertson sat in her only upholstered chair and picked up her favorite book. “The tale of Sir Gareth is one of my favorites. It isn’t one of the better known stories, but I admire his relentless chivalry despite the Lady Lynette’s constant verbal abuse.”

Mae looked at him sharply. Was he teasing her about her rudeness?

But if he was, Albertson gave no sign of it. He opened to the right page and began to read aloud.

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“Thus the honorable Sir Gareth met his end upon Sir Lancelot’s blade and the mourning for his passing echoed in the great hall of Camelot.” Logan closed the book and looked up at Mae Pike. His throat was dry from reading, but at least he’d passed a few hours of this awkward day.

Mae sat in the chair he’d gallantly surrendered to her once she’d stopped flitting around the cabin, pretending to be busy. She appeared finally relaxed, staring into the fire but seeing knights and ladies.

“You must get lonely living here by yourself.” Logan regretted the words as the woman visibly tensed and straightened and lost that lovely dreamy look in her eyes.

“I haven’t much choice. My husband was taken from me.” She glared at him.

Logan nodded. Reading the Gareth tale he used to admire so as a boy, he’d realized the exploits of noble knights no longer inspired him. He’d had his fill of killing and death—even in fiction.

“What about your own people? Your father with the store?” he asked.

“My parents both died before Gray was killed. They left behind little. I have no place to go home to. This is my home now.” She spoke dully as if the cabin were a prison cell.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Logan said. “Surely you could sell this place and move into town, perhaps find a job working in a store since you have experience.”

“Everyone around here is barely scraping by. There’s no one to buy my land and no one who would hire me.” She rose and shook out her skirts. “But what do you care? You’re going home to a victory parade.”

Logan set the book on the table and stood. “There is no victory here. No one is gloating. Every man I know just wants to make whatever life he can from what’s left behind.” He moved close to her and looked down into her eyes. “Don’t think it’s any different on the other side.”

Rain pattered on the roof of the cabin, quiet, hushed, and the cabin was dim and intimate. For several moments he and Mae Pike stood face to face, staring into each

other's eyes. Hers were a pale gray but the pupils had dilated so they seemed very dark. Her lips parted and it was so quiet he heard her exhalation.

Logan tentatively reached out a hand to touch the side of her face. So soft. Her cheek felt like satin beneath his callused fingers. He caressed the strong, stubborn line of her jaw, and held his breath. Any second now she would slap his hand away.

But she didn't. Instead, her tongue swept out and dampened her lips.

Magnetically drawn by that tiny movement, he inclined his face toward hers. At that moment a kiss seemed more important than fire or water, food or shelter, or even air. He *had* to have it or die.

Logan stopped a breath away from her mouth. What would Sir Gareth do? That noble gentleman would never take advantage of a lady. He would fall on his own sword first.

But Logan wasn't feeling so honorable. He touched his lips to hers.

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Mae couldn't move, couldn't breathe, could barely think. It was as if some other force had taken over her body and especially her mouth, while she sat at a safe distance and observed.

The soldier's eyes bored into hers, holding her as inexorably as his voice had when he read to her. His hand touched her cheek, stroked it, and the rough pads of his fingers scraped her skin leaving heat behind.

She focused on the shape of his mouth, a pretty mouth for a man, nestled between moustache and beard. His lips parted. His head tipped closer. And he stopped. He would move away now and all this would be over. Or she would come to her senses and tell him to leave her be. But neither of those things happened. Instead, his mouth pressed against hers.

His kiss was hard and soft at the same time. His whiskers tickled her upper lip and his beard scraped her chin. Was this truly happening? Was she allowing it to happen? Her will appeared to have flown away and instead of pushing him back she clutched the front of his shirt and leaned into him.

The inner voice warning her to put an end to this faded farther away until it was entirely silenced. All she could hear was rain drumming on the roof.

*So lonely. So alone,* her heart sobbed. She slid her hands up Logan's chest and around the back of his neck. His hair brushed softly on the backs of her hands and his neck was hot beneath her palms. She felt where his collar ended and skin began and desperately longed to touch more skin—his shoulders, his arms, his chest...

His kisses were gentle at first, tentative and seeking as his lips plucked hers. The light stroking felt so good that her lips parted, and soon she was kissing him back, seeking the comfort that had been denied her for too long. She knew little about this man, nor he about her, but in that quiet moment, they shared a common need and some unfathomable deeper connection.

Had she invited trouble into her cabin? Would he stop when she told him *no more*? Logan Albertson seemed to be an upright man who would not force himself on a woman, but Mae felt he wouldn't have to do much forcing. She was on the cusp of loosening the buttons on her dress. Beneath the homespun fabric her body burned hot and a languorous heaviness possessed her muscles.

The fact that she was nearly ready to drop onto her bed like ripe fruit woke her from her haze. Mae leaped away from the man in her arms as if she'd been burned.

"No. We must stop."

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Logan heard "no" but at first his brain couldn't interpret it. He still reached for the warm, willing woman who had suddenly vanished from his arms.

*Just one more kiss. Just one more embrace.*

But then he opened his eyes to see the petite woman with the wide gray eyes staring at him as if he'd grown two heads. He sort of had. His cock throbbed and pressed heavily against his belly, trapped beneath trousers, yearning to burst free and enter a different sort of tight space.

Logan took several breaths and stepped back from Mae. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I lost my head for a minute."

She nodded curtly and turned away, face flaming. She moved around the kitchen, clattering pots and pans, measuring cornmeal and molasses.

"I've got no eggs left to cook with," she said abruptly. "Nor any sugar or flour. So don't expect much."



“Anything you make will fill me up fine,” he replied.

But *fill me up* was an unfortunate choice of words because all he could think of was what it would be like to do that to her. He imagined her body beneath his, thin and wiry yet curving in all the right places and soft where it needed to be soft. He closed his eyes and swallowed, willing his lust away.

“Excuse me. I believe I’ll step outside.” He nearly raced to the door, jammed on his boots and stepped out into the damp air beneath the porch awning where he gratefully sucked in a breath of cold air.

A skim of ice crunched beneath his boots even on the porch. Too icy to walk anywhere and thank God for this kind woman who’d let him into her home. He would not take advantage of her, even if she *had* seemed to respond to him and even if it had felt wonderful to hold her and kiss her.

They were both lonely and adrift. That’s all this was. Two bodies with needs and two souls which ached from loss. That’s why it felt so easy to come together and try to heal in the most natural way human beings could.

Married human beings. His Christian upbringing forbade such contact outside of matrimony and certainly Mae’s did too. But the war had changed everything, hadn’t it? In this ruined world shouldn’t a bit of happiness be seized wherever one managed to find it?

Logan leaned from beneath the narrow porch roof and let cold rain bathe his face. The baptism washed away his indecision and made everything clear. He was only here for one night. To get close to this lonely mountain woman only to leave her behind would be wrong. Unchivalrous.

He would take a page from Sir Gareth’s story and enter the cabin with a firmer resolve.

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Mae’s mouth tingled from his kisses. She pressed her fingers against her chin where his beard had roughened her skin. Her body shivered and not from the cold. Her breasts felt heavy, the nipples sensitive and taut. A hungry throbbing beat pulsed between her legs. She was treading a dangerous path, too close to giving into desires which could leave a woman pregnant. She should bar the door, shut the Yankee out and force him to go on his way.

Innocent virgin Mae McCreedy wouldn't have hesitated to do the right thing. That good girl wanted to live a godly life. But Mae Pike had experienced things that made her doubt the existence of the Supreme One. If he existed at all, he was a casually cruel god.

Who would be harmed if she allowed her attraction to this stranger to play out to its inevitable conclusion? Was sin even real?

Maybe not, but the fear of unwanted pregnancy was. She would have to guard against that, but there were other things besides the sex act a man and a woman could do. And was she actually standing with her forehead pressed against the door while imagining Logan Albertson in her bed doing those things with her?

"Foolish woman," she snapped and went to poke at the fire again though it needed no tending.

The door opened and Logan's heavy tread echoed through the room. "I apologize again, Mrs. Pike. That should never have happened."

"We needn't discuss it, Mr. Albertson." She put the poker back in its place.

"All right. Well..." He cleared his throat. "Is there anything else I can do for you while I'm here? Something that needs fixing perhaps?"

"No, thank you."

"It must be difficult living alone. Home repairs and tasks such as chopping wood require a man's strength."

"I get by. I've learned to be quite self sufficient."

"I can see that. But wouldn't it be better, if you can't sell it, to simply abandon this place and try your luck someplace else? Maybe Knoxville?"

"What would I do there? Clean houses or work in a factory? I'm better off cleaning my own house and working my own land. At least it's mine." She folded her arms and stared at him. "Or perhaps you see me as a barmaid or something worse?"

"Of course not. I simply meant life might be easier and safer for you someplace more civilized." His earnest eyes implored her forgiveness. "Perhaps teaching school or clerking in a store."

The truth was she'd planned to make such a move during the unending winter months when she'd feared she might freeze or starve to death. But her education had ended at age sixteen when she'd fallen for the handsome mountain man who'd walked

into her father's store. She doubted any good employer would hire her without proof of a more advanced education.

"I'm quite content where I am," she snapped.

He dipped his head. "Pardon me. It was presumptuous to discuss such things when I know nothing of your life."

"Yes. It was." She turned her back on him, resuming her pot banging and skillet stirring to keep the man and his nosy questions at bay.

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The long afternoon dragged by mostly in silence. Logan asked if he might wash out his clothing mostly because he needed to do something to fill the time.

Mae offered him some old clothes of her husband's to wear and set water on the fire to boil. She left the cabin while Logan changed into the homespun shirt and pants. He added soap flakes she'd given him to the wash water and shoved in his ragged uniform. After stirring the smelly stew of clothes until he judged them clean enough, he rinsed and rung them out and hung them in front of the fire to dry. By the time he was finished, puddles of water had soaked into the braided rug.

Mae returned, pink-cheeked from the cold and regarded the mess he'd made.

"I'll mop this up if you have a rag." Logan straightened and braced the aching small of his back with both hands. He'd worn himself out stooping and squeezing out heavy woolen trousers.

"You'll be lucky if that wool dries by morning," she observed as she fell to swabbing the floor herself.

He wanted to retort that she might have mentioned that before he got started washing, but he was here on her goodwill.

They sat down to a skimpy meal of cornpone and molasses and boiled potatoes. He felt guilty eating any of her scarce provisions.

After supper they were back to loose ends again, two people sharing a small space and trying to ignore the very large elephant in the room with them. Impossible to understand what made attraction flare up and take hold, but the feeling was undeniable. Maybe it was simply the fact he was a man and she was a woman and nature called, but this felt like something more, like a hot, fire-breathing dragon coiled around them both.

“Would you care to read a bit?” Logan asked. Anything to fill the silence.

Mae picked up the book. Her voice was lovely to listen to, rather husky and breathy. Entrancing. He scarcely heard the words of the story he was so caught up in the sound and in the sight of her face gilded by firelight.

Perhaps twenty minutes slipped by before she glanced up to see him watching her. Her voice faltered and stopped. Their gazes locked and the dragon stirred. The coils around them grew tighter, binding them together. Silent messages—*Do you want? Yes I want*—volleyed through the air between them.

Mae put down the book, rose, and came toward him. She held out her hand.

Logan took it and climbed to his feet.

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If she didn't speak, if he didn't, then neither of them need acknowledge what they were doing, Mae thought as she took Logan's hand.

When he stood, he towered over her, his large, masculine presence making her feel small and delicate. She liked that feeling. For so long she'd had to be tough in order to survive. It was a pleasure to temporarily surrender that strength and allow herself to be fragile in his embrace.

His arms went around her, holding her close. She inhaled his aroma—like Gray because Logan was wearing his shirt—but different. He inclined his head toward hers and she lifted her face, rose on her toes, reaching for his kiss.

Base and primitive, desire calling to desire, their mouths clashed together. The kiss was wild, harsh, deep and made their earlier kisses seem like a polite handshake.

Mae clung to Logan, melted into him. She unfastened the buttons on the front of his shirt, while his hands roamed up and down her back, as if seeking an entry through all that fabric.

Logan broke away, gasping, “Are you sure you want this?”

Mae answered with the utter truth. “Yes. Now hush.”

Shedding their clothing seemed to take forever. Impatient hands worked buttons from holes and hooks from eyes, peeled off shirts and skirts down to their undergarments. To strip any farther was not done. Even married men and women were rarely completely naked even when they lay together.

Yet Mae found her hands slowly removing her chemise and drawers. She *wanted* him to see her, needed to show all of herself to him. Desire pounded through her like a relentless drum. She could barely inhale as the last of her clothes fell away and nervous fear seized her.

Logan gave a small nod, as if coming to an agreement with her. He removed his long underwear to stand naked before her, knots of muscle under smooth skin, a dusting of hair over his chest and down to his groin where... Mae swallowed hard at the sight of his manhood standing upright, thick and red and thrusting toward her.

“May I...?” Logan reached out and uncrossed her arms hiding her bare breasts. His eyes feasted on her naked form from head to toe, the heat of his gaze making her tremble. No one had ever seen her this way except for Gray. A heavy burden of guilt fell upon her. Gray had been in his grave for less than a year and she was giving herself to his enemy. To *her* enemy.

Whose enemy? The reasons behind the war seemed pointless now. Had the fighting been about preserving the union, slavery, or economic gain? None of that mattered to her daily life here. Why should she hate people she’d never met?

“Beautiful,” Logan murmured, and his hands followed the contours of her body, lightly tracing her shape from the shoulders on down.

Mae exhaled and released her guilt and her fears. There was only this moment, the two of them here and now, and she would enjoy it while she could.

She took his hand and led him to her bed.

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Logan could scarcely believe this was happening. All his good intentions popped like soap bubbles beneath the onslaught of longing that roared through him.

And through her. There was no doubt the lady wanted him too. He would not deny her for some antiquated notion of chivalry, not when her hands were all over him, touching him everywhere. Not when her body was so demanding.

Mae tossed back the covers and lay on the bed. He gazed down at the beautiful sight of her nude form before finally sitting gingerly on the edge of the bed.

He’d never done this before. The girls in Green Bay whom he’d courted went no farther than kissing. Then the army had taken him away from his home. During those

years, he'd relieved his desires with his own touch or that of an occasional willing woman of questionable virtue. But he'd chosen not to end his virginity with a prostitute.

As a widow, Mae was clearly more experienced than Logan. He felt that all the power was in her hands. She would dictate how they moved forward.

Logan lay beside her and rested his hand on her arm, feeling the amazing texture of her silky skin. His body quivered with excitement like a racehorse ready to run. He looked into her eyes and the clarity of their pale gray staring back into his made his chest tighten.

"We'll only go so far and no farther," Mae said. "I won't take the chance of having a child."

He bobbed his head. "Of course." His erection ached to be sheathed inside her, but he would happily take any scrap she wanted to give.

She stroked the side of his face. He pressed his cheek into her palm, grateful for even that small kindness. How long since he'd hugged a loved one or felt the benediction of a kiss? Simply to touch, to hold, would be a marvel. If it went no farther than that, he would be content. Or as content as his cock would allow him to be.

Mae slid her hand around the back of his neck and pulled him down to her. She kissed him softly, a gentle press of the lips which quickly grew deeper and stronger as her mouth opened and...glory be, her tongue entered his mouth. Warm, wet and sinuous, it flicked over his.

Logan followed her lead, swirling his tongue around hers. He'd never experienced this sort of kissing before. It was decadent, unbridled and enflamed his raging lust even further. He groaned and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her as close to him as he could. His mouth sought even more of hers and his cock pressed hard into her belly. She was so close and so eager, how could he not enter her?

Lost in a haze of desire, he nearly reached down to guide his erection to her. But before he did, Mae's hand slipped between them and grasped him. Her fist wrapped around his cock and moved up and down his length.

Oh, Christ! Too much sensation, too powerful for a young man's body which had been restrained too long. Mae stroked him a half dozen times and he was already finished. He moaned into her mouth as he released, spurting over her fist.

Mortified, Logan broke off the kiss. “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to…”

“It’s all right,” she whispered. “We’re here to give each other pleasure. And likely you’ll be able to do it again real soon.” She calmly wiped her hand on her discarded camisole.

Logan wanted to let her know how grateful he was. *Thank you* didn’t seem strong enough. He took her hand and pressed a kiss to the palm. “Now what can I do for you?” he whispered. “Show me how.”

He’d been told women didn’t feel the way men did or possess the same needs, but apparently he’d been misled.

Mae took his hand and brought it down to her moist, warm sex. She guided his index finger to a hard nub just above the damp folds. When he touched her there, she caught her breath in a quiet whimper that sent a fresh wave of hunger thundering through him.

“There. You feel that? Rub lightly,” she said.

He obeyed.

“Yesss,” she hissed. “Like that. Right there. Oh!”

Gaining confidence from her powerful reaction, Logan dared to experiment. He slid his other fingers lower, and found her slippery, wet entrance. He pushed inside, his fingers going where his cock was not allowed. Oh, the heat was incredible. His erection began to swell again as he imagined the delight of being encased in her heat. But, no, this was about giving *her* pleasure. He resumed his stroking of the spot she’d shown him and marveled at how it made her twist and moan.

Mae’s eyes closed and her lips parted, her face lovely and vulnerable and completely open to him, her enemy. His chest ached at the sight. Overcome with emotion, he bowed his head to kiss the hollow of her throat where her pulse throbbed.

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Sweet molasses drizzled on a stack of hotcakes. That was how she felt between her legs, all wet and sticky.

Once she’d shown him what she liked, Logan handled her body with loving attention. He spurred her ever nearer to release with his insistent stroking. Mae rose and

fell on glorious waves of sensation, each one tossing her higher and closer to some foreign shore.

It was easy to simply enjoy the sensations. For a moment, in the darkness behind her closed eyes, she could pretend it was her husband touching her this way. But no, she didn't want the lie. She opened her eyes and looked at the man lying with her.

Logan gazed at her awestruck, as if she was the most amazing sight. His eyes were open and clear and honest. No guile in them. No hint that he was merely trying to push farther and have all of her. He seemed content to give her pleasure. When Mae couldn't hold back a whimper, he whispered, "Yes. Yes."

She flew then, her hips bucking as bliss pounded through her. All the labors of her lonely days, her silent fear-filled nights, all the loss and sorrow of the past years exploded and released and drained away, leaving her breathless and shaking.

"All right?" The gentle voice of her visitor brought her back to the moment. His hand rested on her rising and falling stomach. A furrow carved between his brows. "You're crying."

"No." She wiped a hand across her eyes and they were wet. "I'm fine."

He rubbed her belly as gently as a mother soothing a child with an ache. Such kind yet haunted eyes looking down at her and intimately understanding her feelings. They had both suffered and shared that bond.

Now Logan turned her on her side and pulled her against him, sheltering her back with his body. Strong arms held her close, offering comfort. Hard once more, his cock rested between her buttocks, but he didn't move or push.

"It's all right," he murmured. "Everything will be all right."

A lie. Nothing was all right any more. Her life had gone down a road she'd never imagined. She had little to live for. But for the moment, she would accept his assurance, cling to the make-believe with childish fervor.

Mae sighed and closed her eyes. For a long while, she listened to the drum of the rain on the roof and the breathing of the man behind her. She began to match her breaths to his. Soon even the beating of their hearts would be in sync. Their bodies were already so close, she would melt into him and become one. Then she could stop thinking and worrying and getting by. What a relief that would be.



“We’re not so different, you and I.” The clipped Yankee voice disturbed her drowsy thoughts. “I think both of us are at a loss for what to do next.”

She continued breathing and matching her heartbeats to his.

“You don’t want to stay here, do you?” he asked. “This isn’t really your home.”

He was right. She’d only gone up into the hills because of Gray.

“You could leave if you wanted to. I don’t think you can keep on surviving here. Maybe you simply need to go and start over in Knoxville, or...”

“Or what?”

“This will sound outlandish.” His breath tickled the back of her neck. “But, if you wanted to, you might come to my home town. I could help you get settled there.”

“You’re right, that’s outlandish! I don’t even know you.” Yet something that felt ridiculously like hope flared inside her.

“I can’t abandon you here to struggle on alone. Not if I can help.”

“I don’t *need* your help. I do just fine on my own.” Her stubborn tone hardly convinced herself, since she knew she was down to her last cup of cornmeal, scraping of lard and trickle of molasses. There was absolutely nothing here for her to live on. Not any more.

“I can imagine how well I’d be received by your people, like some war trophy you’d brought home. And we don’t know each other. The idea is crazy.” Mae stiffened in his arms, trying not to melt against him any longer. She had to remain strong. That was the only way she could survive.

“Knoxville then,” Logan said. “I can escort you that far, and I don’t have to catch a train home immediately. I could wait to see you settled.”

Mae frowned at him over her shoulder. “I’m not some pathetic creature you need to care for.”

His eyes widened. “No. I don’t think that. I just like you, Mae. In this very short time”—he shook his head and laughed as he repeated—“*very* short time, I’ve begun to feel as if I know you in some way. Please, allow me to take you away from here, to travel with you and keep you safe on the road.”

Too tempting. Too easy to give in to such a sweet entreaty, to set her burden down at last and lean on a man who offered nothing but kindness. Could she let go of the hard, tough shell of Mae Pike and take a step back into being Mae McCreedy again?

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This tiny slip of a woman who was as tough as oak, she had no idea how much she moved him. But peel back the rough bark and she was tender and delicate inside. An overpowering desire to nurture that vulnerable side swelled through Logan. Mae shouldn't have to live so hard, and if could bring her someplace better, by God he'd do so.

All he needed was her consent, but because she was stubborn, pushing was the wrong thing to do. He cajoled her instead with nuzzling kisses on her neck and shoulder, stroking her skin and all her soft places with one hand.

She shifted and moaned.

He kissed the edge of her ear and whispered, "Thank you for giving me shelter. You saved my life."

"Not likely. You only would've been cold and wet for a night or two."

Logan squeezed her tighter in his arms, relishing the feeling of her pliant body in his embrace. "I don't mean physically, but something more. Being together like this restores my will to keep living."

"Such foolishness. Do you always go on so?" Her Tennessee twang made it a tease rather than a scold.

"I'm serious. I've been having a hard time since..."

In his mind he woke again from the blow to his head, saw the remains of his platoon, his friends, strewn around him like so many broken dolls. "Being with you has made things a little better."

Mae's downy breast rose and fell beneath his hand as she breathed.

"Me too," she finally admitted. "I've been a little lonely."

Logan bit his tongue and waited. The next move must be hers.

"Knoxville," she said at last. "I suppose I could find some sort of work there."

"Yes."

"I reckon there's nothing holding me here any longer."

“No.” He smiled, knowing he’d won this round at least. He would see her safely to the city.

Whether he would get her to accompany him to Green Bay was a question for the future. The north would be foreign to her, and Mae was a proud woman. He didn’t know if she’d relinquish her pride and completely entrust herself to him.

He didn’t know if what they felt was the grasping of sad hearts or the beginning of true feelings of love. Too soon to know if they were made to be together.

But in his mind’s eye Logan saw a vision set far in the future. He saw Mae dressed not in faded calico but in a blue silk dress with matching shoes. She was dancing and laughing and every time the steps of the dance brought her back to Logan’s arms, she wore a smile meant only for him.

Deep in his heart, he knew the pair of them were going to march out of the red clay mud of battlegrounds into a brighter, better day.

The End

A Note from Bonnie: Whether you're a fan of contemporary, paranormal, or historical romance, you'll find something to enjoy among my books. I'm interested in flawed, often damaged, people who find the fulfillment they seek in one another. To stay informed about new releases, please [SIGN UP FOR MY NEWSLETTER](#). Help an author out by leaving a review and spreading the word about this book among your friends. You can join [my street team at FB](#). Learn more about my backlist at <http://bonniedee.com> or find me [on FB](#) and [Twitter](#) @Bonnie\_De.

If you liked the short story *Eyes of a Soldier*, you might enjoy my full length novels with a similar style: *A Hearing Heart*, *Bone Deep* or *Scarred Hearts*. Read on for an excerpt from *Scarred Hearts*.



Two wounded souls find salvation in each another.

At the close of WWI, moonshine and bootlegging rule the night in the Kentucky hills, but two damaged souls manage to find light and love amidst the darkness. Nearly destroyed by a grenade blast, Shadow Robeson returns home from war only to be trapped by family expectations he has no energy to fight—until a secret romance with a loving woman sets him on a new course.

Bound by poverty and a ruined reputation, Lettie Calloway seems destined to spend her days serving at the local tavern. It takes a kind and gentle man entering her life to expand her dreams to the horizon.

Shadow plans to escape the backwoods with Lettie for a new start, but his violent family threatens to destroy the fragile growth of new love. As the couple struggles toward freedom, will they escape this dangerous country before their lives explode?

**Excerpt:**

Shadow walked with a rocking limp and always trailed behind his older brothers, like his name suggested. As she carried pitchers of beer, Lettie watched him drop heavily

onto a chair beside Pernell. He set his leg straight in front of him and rubbed either side of the knee. Six months he'd been back from Europe, and whenever he came into the tavern, lines of pain grooved his face.

Lettie's heart ached in sympathy. But she startled from her soft thoughts when a hand landed on her rear and squeezed. She seized Art McGuffin's wrist and squeezed back hard enough to make him yelp. The hatchet-faced farmer rubbed his wrist and cursed while his buddies laughed. Lettie slapped the pitcher of brew on their table hard enough to make it slosh, collected the coins to pay for it, and moved on. Best she quit watching Shadow Robeson and focus on keeping her body away from grabby hands.

Exploring hands and rude comments were part and parcel of serving at Shatner's. The more men drank, the louder and more cantankerous they got. Lettie had taken to carrying a knife in her apron pocket that she could pull out if things ever got out of hand. Problem was she had a reputation for being easy because of things she'd done when she was younger. Didn't matter how many times she turned men down or smacked their hands away, they still thought of her as a whore. Her mama used to say, *Facts is facts, but gossip becomes gospel.*

Lettie went back to the kitchen for more of the corn pone and beans they were serving up tonight. Coming out, she almost ran into Shatner, who stood talking to Cutter Robeson. Didn't take hearing any of their conversation to tell her Cutter was selling more moonshine to Shatner. Used to be most every dirt-poor farmer ran a still up in the hills, but now the Robesons were the only moonshiners around. They'd stomped out all competition. For a county that was supposed to be dry of hard liquor, more alcohol flowed in Russell than anywhere in Kentucky, and now that new amendment had been voted in, the Robesons were set to take over more territory.

She walked past the two arguing men with her head down and delivered the pone 'n' beans, then went to the Robesons's table to take their order. The brothers smelled strong of the whisky they'd drunk before coming to the tavern.

"Git you some beer?" She was careful not to make eye contact with Tommy, focusing instead on Clay.

He sipped from a silver hip flask before answering. "Sure. Two pitchers."

"And some of that grub. I'm hungry," Pernell said.

“You’re always hungry,” Clay teased. “Belly like a bottomless mine.”

“Say, girl, got any cherry pie back there in the kitchen? I love me some *cherry*.” The way Tommy hit the word “cherry” made it filthy, and his gaze flicking up and down her body made her skin crawl.

She ignored his tone. “Not tonight. Some applesauce cake, though.”

“Girl’s got no cherry. A course not. I shoulda knowed better.” Tommy howled with laughter at his own dumb joke, and Pernell aped him. Clay rolled his eyes, leaned back in his chair, and took another sip of whisky.

And Shadow... Lettie looked from underneath her brows at the youngest Robeson, who sat staring at his own boots as if he hadn’t heard a word. She wondered what his missing eye looked like under that patch and thought it was a shame he’d lost it. The other one was so pretty and blue. Not a sunny-day blue, more like the big purple thunderheads that built up on the ridge before racing across the hills and hollows. Storm-cloud eyes. Or eye, now.

Shadow flicked a glance up at her, and Lettie hurried away from the table.

Making it through the crowded room without getting stopped by a dozen other customers wanting something was impossible. By the time she returned to the Robesons with their pitchers of beer, nearly five minutes had gone by. Five minutes too many.

Clay scowled. “What took you so long?”

“Where’s the grub?” Pernell demanded.

Lettie apologized as she set the foamy pitchers on the table. “Sorry. Cook’s mixing up a new batch.”

Cutter had resumed his place at the head of the table. When Lettie tried to collect for the beer, he gazed at her with cold lizard eyes. “On our tab.”

Which meant they weren’t paying at all. Richest family for miles around, and they took everything they wanted like highwaymen. Nobody dared cross a Robeson.

Lettie nodded. “I’ll be right back with fresh pone,” she promised Pernell. She started to walk away, but a tug on her dress held her back.

Tommy Robeson’s grubby paw gripped a fistful of her skirt to drag her down to his lap. Lettie took hold of the fabric and pulled hard. Tommy let go, braying like the

jackass he was when she stumbled backward. She hit her elbow hard on a table as she fell to the floor.

Tommy lunged up from his chair to grab for her again. "Let me help you."

"That's all right." She resisted the urge to scuttle back crab-style to get away from him. Damned if she'd let him know much he scared her.

"Come on. Give me a smile. You're kind of a pretty little thing when you're not frownin'." Tommy probably meant his smile to calm her, but he looked like a snarling dog as he came at her.

From her spot on the floor, Lettie saw Shadow deliberately move his injured leg in front of his brother. Tommy tripped over Shadow's boot and went down like a tree toppling.

Lettie popped up. For a moment, before she hurried back to the safety of the kitchen, Lettie met Shadow's single eye. She gave a tiny nod of thanks.

He blinked.

She rubbed her elbow, heart pounding at the close call. Hard to say what Tommy might have done once he got hold of her—maybe just squeezed her tits and rear, but maybe more. Even if she'd yelled at him to cut it out, nobody in the place would stop a Robeson no matter what he did to a woman, especially a girl with a bad reputation.

But as she continued working, it wasn't Tommy Lettie kept thinking about but Shadow. She hadn't imagined it. He'd tripped his brother on purpose, stopping him from getting to her. It was about the nicest thing a man had done for her in longer than she could remember.

And didn't that say something about her miserable life?

\*

Shadow's leg hurt like a sonofabitch, worse than normal because Tommy had kicked him in the shin after scrambling to his feet.

"Bastard! You did that on purpose," Tommy shouted, giving another blow to Shadow's calf with those steel-toed boots.

Shadow carefully drew his leg out of his brother's way, folding it back by his chair even though bending his knee sent sharp pains shooting through him. He didn't

fight back or say a word. Too much effort. Even though he no longer took morphine, he still felt like he floated in a fog.

“Dumb son of a bitch.” Tommy slammed back into his seat, picked up the mug of beer Pernell had poured for him, and drank it down.

Good idea. Shadow took a long swig of his too, but the brew was too weak to help much with the pain. He beckoned to Clay, and his brother handed him the flask of whisky. Shadow sipped, liquid fire trickling down his throat and sanding off the jagged edges in his leg and his head. Better.

He looked up in time to see Lettie disappear through the swinging doors into the kitchen. The girl reminded him of a sparrow or maybe a wren, small and brown and quick, the sort of bird nobody noticed because it didn't have bright feathers. But she was brave and tough and would fearlessly drive a much bigger bird away from her nest before returning to snuggle her young under her downy breast.

Good God, he was drunker than he'd thought, making up stories about a girl he'd seen around all his life but never talked to. There were a lot of people like that in Lorena. It wasn't that big a community, but Shadow could about count on two hands those he'd had any sort of conversation with. Make that one hand. Chatting about the weather didn't count.

When he was in the army, he'd found a couple of guys he considered real friends. The first ones he'd ever made, since he wasn't counting his brothers. Both got shot dead that first day in France. Now he tried not to remember their names or faces.

Shadow closed his eyes. He was dead tired and wished he'd stayed home. But Robesons traveled in a pack, and Tommy had hounded him until he'd agreed to come along for a little while—which would end up being till sunrise or until a brawl broke up the place, if Tommy had his way. God forbid they sit quiet around a campfire passing a jar of 'shine. His brothers liked to swagger and make noise someplace where people could see them and show them the respect they craved like Shadow craved silence.

A hard elbow jabbed his side. “Hey, dummy, wake up. See that girl over there? I'm fucking her tonight.”

His eyes shot open. The first thought that popped in his head was that Tommy had better not be talking about Lettie Calloway. But it was a peroxide blonde twirling a short



curl around her finger who made eyes at Tommy from across the room. No accounting for taste. Some ladies liked his brutal, loud brother. Others went for Cutter since he was the leader and his power attracted them. Clay's handsome face drew pretty much every woman who came around like flies to honey, and even though Pernell was childlike, his brawny muscles earned him a share of female attention.

But quiet Shadow had always receded into the background. Since he'd returned from Europe scarred, girls shied away from him with a shudder. Just as well. He wouldn't know what to do with a woman if she plopped down on his lap right now. Couldn't imagine flirting or pawing like Tommy did. He mostly just wanted to be left alone to drink himself numb. Someday soon he'd have to rouse himself and make a plan for the future, but right now he felt like a fly stuck in honey.

As the night got later and the crowded tavern hotter, Shadow grew more miserable and bored. His brothers were occupied with arm wrestling and bets and floozies who fawned over them—or the free drinks. Now would be a fine time to slip out and get a breath of air. Dragging himself to his feet, he leaned on his walking stick and shuffled toward the door.

Outdoors was heaven. He could breathe again, and his aching seemed to ease. Leaning against the wall of Shatner's, he tipped his head to look up at the stars. He inhaled the scent of pine and cedar, dirt and grass, the familiar smells of home. When he'd been at training camp and then overseas, he'd hardly missed his family but *had* missed these hills. No land more beautiful in the world than Kentucky. He'd find his own piece of it, but maybe on the opposite side of the state, far away from his family.

Shadow closed both eyes and saw black, opened the right one and stars shone in their familiar patterns. He closed the right and saw black again. Even if he took the patch off, he would never see stars from his left eye again. Only black. Always black. If anything ever happened to his right eye, he'd be blind. Helpless. Useless. And useless didn't go over too well in his family.

Again he mulled over moving someplace where he wouldn't have to be a Robeson. He'd joined the army as much to escape them as to fight the Germans. But his injuries had brought him right back to the howling center of his boozing, cursing, violent family.

If he left here, what would he do exactly? Work at a saw mill or steel mill or any job that didn't require a formal education. But with his leg so lame, he couldn't do much heavy lifting, and having one good eye also limited his options. He sighed and rubbed beneath the band that held his eye patch in place.

“Are you all right?”

The quiet female voice practically right beside him made Shadow spring away from the wall. His leg buckled, and he started to crumple, but strong hands and a sapling-thin body caught and supported him, keeping him from falling.

For a moment, he stayed with an arm around Lettie Calloway's sparrow shoulders, then he pushed himself upright and got his balance. Shadow stared at the small woman, hardly more than a girl, standing in front of him. Her plain brown dress covered her from chin to toe but couldn't hide the curves beneath. She wasn't as much of a straight little stick as she wanted people to think. But with men like Tommy bothering her, he understood why Lettie covered up.

Lettie jerked her thumb at the noisy tavern on the other side of the wall. “Thanks for helping me in there.”

Shadow nodded. A civilized man would say something like *Glad to do it, and I apologize for my ape of a brother*, but Shadow had been silent for so long he almost couldn't form words even when he wanted to. He'd never been much of a talker, but after Europe, he'd given up almost completely. In his family, it was easier to let everyone else do the shouting and arguing and to simply follow Daddy's orders.

Lettie cocked her head, more birdlike than ever, and studied him. “Your throat get hurt in the war? There's another fellow comes in here, Billy Ransom—you know the Ransoms from up Pike's Ridge?—who breathed in that mustard gas. Wrecked his voice too.”

Shadow shook his head. No. Not mustard gas. Sheer cussedness kept him from talking, but once he'd started the habit, it became easier to let people think there was some medical reason for it.

Bright eyes skipped over his face like pebbles on a pond, trying to leave a ripple behind. Lettie slowly nodded. “I get it. Sometimes... Heck, most of the time, I got nothing to say to people either. Don't know why I'm jawing at you like this.”

He didn't either, but didn't mind it. He liked the sound of her soft but sort of rough voice, like a cat's rasping tongue.

"You know who I am, right? I mean, what they say about me?" Lettie asked.

He gave another nod. Everybody knew everybody else's life story around here. Lettie was a little younger than Shadow. She'd dropped out of school even before he had. When she was thirteen, she took up with a married man, the general store owner, Herbert Whitlow. The truth came out one day to the entire community when Whitlow's wife dragged the girl out of the store by her hair and screamed at her in the street.

There'd been other men and boys after that, and by the time she was fifteen, Lettie was following in her mama's footsteps. Everyone knew the Calloway women living in the shanty in Bullfrog Hollow were whores.

Except, Shadow thought, Lettie didn't dress like she wanted men to notice her, and she probably wouldn't wait tables at Shatner's tavern if she was earning money on her back.

"Well, some of it's true and some ain't, but I never took money for anything I did." Lettie laughed nervously, a breathy puff of air, and shook her head. "Not that you keered to know. I best get back to work afore Shatner fires me. I just wanted to catch a breath of air."

She waved a hand at the firefly-lit night, flickering dots of yellow thick in the deep shadows under the trees. "When I'm stuck indoors, I forget sometimes how pretty it is out here."

Shadow nodded slowly, feeling like an idiot for pretending to be mute. Why was it so damned hard to form words? "I like the smell of pine," he muttered.

Her teeth flashed in the dark, brighter than all the fireflies put together. "Me too."

Simple words of no account. And yet the exchange felt like something much more meaningful. That made Shadow nervous. He moved back a couple of steps and felt the solid wall behind his back once more.

Lettie raised a hand. "Well. Good night."

He waited until she'd disappeared back inside the tavern before answering. "Good night."